

The Light Bulb Fragment (Part One)

Clio's masked and snorkelled head broke the surface and she waved. It was a big, slow wave; all the way left, then all the way right, in and out of the water, like the ones people used to do at eighties rock concerts. It made me smile. Sitting up on my sun lounger in the shade of the huge parasol, I was careful to make sure my return wave, when I did it, looked just a little too much like a Nazi salute. I also made sure I held it long enough to get the sideways attention of the old couple with the beach plot next to ours and to make Clio, who was now waist-deep and arms out balancing in the breakers, stop dead, horrified for half a second before looking for an escape route back into the sea.

I've always been better at the long-range stuff.

"Clio!" I shouted, much too loud. The old couple and a handful of other beach people turned to look straight at me and then out to her. "Clio!" I shouted again and waved a big exaggerated wave. I cupped my hands around my mouth, even though she wasn't actually that far away and waited for an all-important three count; "Clio Aames!" Then, I did the other, dodgier wave again. "Clio, I love you!" I shouted, still doing it.

She had a small audience by the time she kicked her way up through the surf, pulling off the mask and snorkel with one hand and smoothing her hair back into a wet unfastened ponytail with the other. She was topless too, although that was neither here nor there in terms of our 'ha ha, everyone's looking at you' game. Clio isn't body-conscious; it's just me she finds embarrassing. It had been almost a week since we gave up Greek island archaeology for beaching and she'd done a day with bikini top on, ten minutes with bikini top off but with beer bottle tops over nipples

‘acclimatising’ and the next four and a half days ‘continentally tits out’.

Actually, here’s something important about Clio; when she says ‘tits’ she sounds smart and sexy and 21st-century – *‘There’s no point fucking around with these things, Eric’* – the way that some women, and I suppose, some guys effortlessly can. When I say ‘tits’, though, I sound like a sleazy tabloid journalist. I’ve tried and tried and there’s no way around it. I used to say ‘boobs’, although I try not to now because Clio laughs and says I sound even worse, like a sex pest in denial. Recently, I’ve resorted to the painfully meek ‘You look great without your top on,’ which sometimes earns me an ‘awww’ and a kiss on the head. She says cunt too.

By the time Clio made it back to the sun loungers, the audience had more or less lost interest. She hung up the mask and snorkel in the spokes of our big shady parasol and took the towel that had been keeping the sneaking-its-way-round sun off my feet. She had a disapproving look that was just a little exaggerated; if you look carefully at that look, you can spot a smile that hangs around its edges and usually draw it out.

“Repeat after me,” she said. “There’s nothing funny about saluting like Hitler.”

“There’s nothing funny about saluting like Hitler,” I said, taking my sunglasses off and squinting up at her. “Everyone thought it was funny when Peter Sellers did it.”

“Yeah,” she said, rubbing her hair. “Except he was funny, wasn’t he?”

“Oh yeah,” I grinned. “I forgot.”

“So,” she said. “What are you going to do?”

“Not salute like Hitler.”

“And?”

“Buy lots of drinks so you don’t get the next ferry off the island and abandon me for being the amoral worm that I am?”

“And?”

“What?” I said.

“And?”

“And what?”

“You’re not funny.”

“And what?”

She finished off with the towel and threw it at my head. “Grab that,” she said, “and take my bikini top off, I need it.”

We went to the campsite bar.

The campsite bar is good because it serves really cold Amstel beer, which we drink in the daytime, and really strong cocktails, which we move onto as soon as the sky gets dusty. Sometimes you’ll have an orange sunset, sometimes though, maybe most times, the blue of the sky will just get dustier and dustier, and at some point in the process you’ll realise the sand and stones you’re walking on are now warmer than the air. Cool breezes coming in from the sea.

Usually, between the Amstel and the cocktails, we’ll go for dinner at one of the *tavernas* along the beachfront. Our campsite is well away from whatever club action there may be on the island, and just a bump-crunch-bounce style unsurfaced road separates the tavernas, the general shop and the campsite entrance from the beach proper.

Clio will usually go as native as she can ordering food. I’ll generally have pizza because I’m a philistine and on holiday and can do whatever I like.

A couple of days before the bikini top/saluting incident, I’d discovered there’s so little light pollution over our part of the island that, if you’re lying on your back on a clumpy little sand dune at 3 a.m., you can see the blues and purples of the Milky Way all across the sky. I’d never seen the Milky Way before and thought there was something quite 1950s sci-fi about the whole thing. *Lost in Space*.

“You’re a philistine,” Clio said.

I nodded, looking back down at her and straw-sucking up a mouthful of high-alcohol campsite bar Zombie.

“This thing you have about always comparing things in real life to things in films?”

“What thing?”

“Well,” she said, “it makes you look shallow, uninteresting and –” lips pushed together, tipped head, strands of her dark hair dropping down, a mock-sympathy smile “– like a bit of a geeky loser, to be honest.”

“Well, I am a geeky loser. You should probably chuck me because you can do so much better and you’re worth so much more.” I crossed my arms. “You owe it to yourself, Clio. And anyway –”

“What? *Mer mer mer*, I was talking about the original *Lost in Space*, the TV programme, not the rubbish ’90s film remake? *Mer mer mer?*”

I looked down at my drink.

“A bit of a geeky loser,” she said again, in exactly the same way, but chasing it this time with a slow, inevitable nod.

I shrugged.

“Awww,” she said.

Clio’s *badness* smile is something else – the edges of her normal smile turn sharp like little blades and her eyes go all shiny and electric. I think, for the half-second it lasts, that mean naughty sexy cruel little smile might be the single and only perfect thing that’s ever existed. A bright warm flash amongst a billion old scratchy stars.

“I love you.”

“Oh, honey,” she smiled. She reached over and laid her fingertips lightly on the back of my hand. “You’re so regional.” When I didn’t respond she leaned back on the back legs of her chair and raised her eyebrows.

Here’s a secret: just the idea that Clio Aames is real and in the world makes me ache.

I fished my foot up under the table and tried to push her over. She caught onto what I was doing and slammed the chair back down on all fours.

“Childish,” she said.

Later that same night, we found ourselves talking to a couple of backpackers from London. We’d been away for almost five weeks by that point and it was only the second time we’d had any kind of extended conversation with *people*. It was odd, talking like that again, in a down-

the-pub kind of way. We had to keep explaining things, backtracking and filling gaps. We realised our own conversations had evolved into a kind of shorthand, a tidy, neat little minimalism. Covering the whole canvas in broad obvious brushstrokes for outsiders felt like a waste of sounds, time and effort. *Speaking with footnotes*, Clio would call it later, as we ambled back towards the tent. Still, they were nice enough and we did have some fun with them. Apparently, they had a flat close to Heathrow Airport.

“You get used to the noise,” the girl, Jane, said. “For about a month we didn’t think we could stand it, but then we just got over it. Now it’s like it isn’t even there.”

“First couple of nights in the tent,” the guy, Paul, said, “we really struggled getting to sleep. Even though we don’t hear the planes any more at home, we couldn’t sleep without them. How weird is that?” He thought for a second. “It was like there was this hole in the quiet.”

“Cool,” I said. “Anti-sound.”

Clio looked at me.

“And Dusty,” said Jane, chipping back in. “When we first moved, I thought Dusty was going to have a nervous breakdown.”

“Dusty?” asked Clio.

“Our cat. She’s an old thing, used to belong to Paul’s great aunt. She’s Siamese and she’s pretty sensitive.” Jane talked about Dusty the cat for a while, a couple of cat anecdotes I don’t remember.

“We’ve just got two kittens,” Clio smiled. “Two boys.”

“Awww,” Jane said, “what are they called?”

I grinned on the inside.

“Gavin and Ian,” Clio said.

Jane and Paul’s getting-to-know-you faces slipped, lost a little coherence. It was rewarding; Clio and I had worked hard at coming up with names to get that response. Un-catlike and inappropriate in a fundamental way, but still confusingly feasible.

“Awww,” Jane said again, just a bit late.

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“It’s tiring not knowing people, isn’t it?” Clio said later.

“It isn’t word-efficient,” I agreed.

We’d been drinking Zombies most of the night. I was amazed we weren’t more pissed. Tomorrow, I decided, we should work harder to get more pissed. We wandered towards the tent in silence for a while.

“Do you know what I think?”

“That we’ve not been getting drunk enough?”

“Hmmm,” I said. “Do you always know what I’m going to say?”

“Yes.”

“Always?”

“Yep.”

“Wow,” I said. “Guess what I’m thinking about now?”

“Filthy.”

“Wow,” I said again. “I’m stunned.”

She squeezed my hand then let it go, hooking her arm around my waist, fingers tucked into the back pocket of my shorts. She tipped her head against me as we walked.

The zip to the front of our tent was a bit broken. Soon it would be all the way broken but at that time you could still get it open if you knew what you were doing, if you had *the touch*. Clio did, I didn’t. While she got us inside, I stood watching a fat moth drum and fluster around the campsite’s weak electric lighting. The night was all about stars, empty space and the greasy smell of bug candles. There was no breeze.

We had sex and when we finished, Clio folded her elbows and lay on top of me, me still inside her, her head on my shoulder, her forehead touching my chin.

It all felt so clear, so in-focus and specific. My fingertips on her wet back, over her ribs. Her body rising and falling from my breathing, the slight stretch in her skin from hers. Our breath moving in and out of synch. The resistance against the fill of my lungs: *Clio’s weight in the world*. Just all

this. I stroked the hair from her temple, followed the arch of her ear as gently as I could, over the ghost hairs that lived there, almost not touching at all. This was everything, at the heart of everything this was a simple, perfect *just-is*.

Clio's arm stretched up under me and her fingers curled around my shoulder. When she finally spoke, I could feel the air coming from inside her and making the words.

"Promise you'll leave me if you ever need to."

"What?" I tucked my chin to the side, trying to see her. "I'm not going to leave you, don't be stupid."

Her eyes came up to meet mine.

I frowned.

"I'm not joking," she said. "If you need to leave me, if I'm making you unhappy, you have to just do it." She propped up on her elbows, curled her hips to move me out of her. "You have to promise, Eric. It's important."

"Hey," I rubbed her arms. "What's wrong?"

She looked down at me for a long time and I really thought she was going to cry. "Hey," I said again and I hooked her hair away from her face.

"Nothing," she said with an unfocused smile. Then another smile, this one was stronger and it came from somewhere more recognisable. "Nothing, I'm a dick."

I linked my arms up around her and she came back down to me. We hugged, her head on my chest.

"Come on," I said. "Tell me."

"You're sweaty," she said, lifting her head up and putting it back down.

"So are you."

We lay like that for a while.

I listened. Outside the tent there was absolutely nothing.

"I couldn't stand it if I ruined you," she said in the end.

"Clio," I said, stroking back her hair, "you're not in charge of the world."

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In Greece, they drink their coffee cold. It's called *frappé*, or Nescafé *frappé*, or just Nescafé. Greek people usually take their *frappé* without milk or sugar, but they tend to give tourists both.

We were outside a coffeehouse in Naxos town, overlooking the harbour, having a day out. They call Naxos the green island even though it isn't particularly green at the moment, but then summer is well underway and the idea of things staying green all year round is probably an English peculiarity. Anyway, it's all relative. Some of the other Greek islands are much more un-green, all rock and sand. According to the guidebook, the ancient Greeks chopped down the native woodlands on most of the islands and replaced them with olive trees. Olive trees just don't have the roots to hold onto soil on slopes, so all that earthy goodness washed away into the sea or dustified and now those islands are just spines of stony bones with patches of brown grass here and there and the odd lizard.

Naxos is beautiful, but it's not really green, not now anyway.

The waitress gave us our *frappés* with milk and sugar without asking, but then I was dressed a bit Hunter S. Thompson – khaki shorts, sky blue Hawaiian shirt with seagulls, big sunglasses and a beanie hat – so that was probably down to me.

When you first get your *frappé*, if it's a good one, the ice cubes are down at the bottom. As the drink settles down, becomes more coffee and less bubbles, the ice fights its way to the top. Like running water, and fire, it's sort of hypnotic.

Clio said something about a half-carved twenty-five foot colossus in an ancient quarry over the other side of the island. It was enough for me to blink up from my glass.

“What?”

She put the guidebook on the table and pulled down her shades. “Wake up.”

“I know,” I smiled. “I think it must be the heat.”

Clio poked her glasses back up her nose and stared at me for a second.

“You might want to work on your stamina, Sanderson. You’re no use to me broken.”

I came over all mock hurt. “Is that all I am to you?”

“Yes,” she said.

Hours after what I’m clumsily thinking of as Clio’s *moment of crisis* the night before, we’d had sex again, at something o’clock in the morning. The second time was sleepy and slow, a drifting almost subconscious thing. Clio speaking so quietly as I moved inside her and me speaking too and the words were from a long way down, not thinking and then saying things, words, at all. Night words, sex words or dream words, I don’t know, not for conversation or the sun. Not the kind of words that can be pinned down with letters and ink. I don’t really know how to explain it, but that’s how it was.

“I love you,” Clio said out of nowhere as I reached across the table for the guidebook.

“I know,” I nodded, taking the book and leafing through it. “And I enjoy spending time with you too.”

“Wanker,” she laughed. “I hate that one.”

“You invented that one.”

“Give me the book back,” she said. “I want to show you the stone man thing.”