

## Wildfires

*On July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015 several wildfires broke out on the outskirts of Athens. As the blazes scorched the houses resting at the foot of the mountains around the city, strong winds fuelled the fires. A thick plume of grey smoke surged into the Athenian sky. For a few days, Athens was covered in a dense grey cloud, as dozens of other wildfires flared up across southern Greece.*

From the rooftop terrace of the Hotel Stanley, the Acropolis stands out in front of a towering column of smoke, puffing up from behind the temple and drifting south towards the Saronic Gulf. In the dark purple sky, the cloud of smoke looks like a spurt of blood gushing through deep seawaters.

It's 22:43. There are only a few people left on the terrace of the hotel. Half concealed behind shower cabins, the swimming pool is empty. A woman is drinking alone at the bar, attended by the barman and a waiter. In the restaurant, there is a sole couple in their early fifties with their son; they have almost finished their dinner. They sit in front of an assortment of leftovers covering the table: carrot sticks, blobs of hummus smeared everywhere, fried *kalamaria*, half-eaten lamb chops. Their child, a seven or eight-year-old boy, has already left the table and runs around the rooftop terrace, fascinated by the lofty cloud of smoke and by the Canadairs buzzing around it. The man only has a few thin black hairs left on his balding scalp. He wears a chequered blue and white shirt paired with black polyester tracksuit bottoms. He sits comfortably on his chair, fidgeting with his phone while sipping his first gin tonic of the night. The woman, slightly younger and sexier, is dressed with more care, and with comparable taste. Her wavy hair is highlighted with blonde streaks, her nails painted with pale pink varnish, her scent obnoxiously sweet. She divides her attention between her child and the bowl of hummus on the table, which she wantonly eats with her fingers.

The bald man receives a text on his phone and reads it, then he addresses his wife with a few words. She nods and leaves the table, while casting a glance at the huge column of smoke, swollen by the strong winds. She heads towards the staircase followed by the child. The man drinks up and turns to the waiter with a smile, to order a second gin and tonic.

It's 23:07 when two young American men arrive at the bar. They start flirting with the lonely woman drinking there, resuscitating her from a state of lethargic sadness. They drink two or three rounds of vodka. She laughs at their jokes; they laugh with her, venturing their hands over her shoulders and around her waist. Eventually the three leave the bar together. The man sitting at the restaurant table watches them disappear down the staircase, while drinking his third gin and tonic and fiddling with small, pickled cucumbers from a plate of complimentary snacks.

At 23:42, a young man with a dark complexion, short, curly hair and piercing blue eyes, walks onto the rooftop terrace. He wears a baggy wide-neck t-shirt and a pair of blue jeans. He passes in front of the bar, swinging his long arms back and forth, heading towards the restaurant table where his friend has been waiting for him all night. The two greet each other with a hug, before summoning the waiter to order more drinks. They talk for a few minutes, drinking gin and tonics, until the bald man gestures towards the swimming pool. Without saying a word, the other man leaves the table. He approaches the pool and takes off his clothes, unnoticed by the barman and waiter, who are mesmerised by the sight of the distant smoke cloud and news reports on their phones. He slips naked into the blue water, swimming on his back from one side of the tiny pool to the other. The bald man looks at him with eager eyes, sitting back on his chair with his legs wide open. He keeps drinking his gin and tonic, spilling it on his shirt, while he starts caressing his crotch with a hand under the tablecloth.

He finishes his drink and walks towards the swimming pool. He grabs a folded towel from a deckchair and opens it, inviting the young man to get out of the water with a paternal gesture. He dries him well, rubbing the towel on his broad shoulders, indulging on his arms and chest, to feel the muscles of the young body bulging beneath his hands. They look into each other's eyes, illuminated by the blue glow from the swimming pool. The young man, concealed by the towel, pushes a hand in between his friend's legs, grasping his thigh through the polyester trousers. They start making out against the wall of shower cabins, where neither the surveillance camera nor the staff can see them. Their fingers run riot over each other's

bodies, hungry for the details of their skin, squeezing the flesh they encounter with tenderness. The bald man pulls his lover against his own body enjoying the cold wet muscles pressing against his belly.

They both feel the mobile phone vibrating against their tangled legs, from inside the pocket of the polyester tracksuit. The man picks up the call and on the other end, his wife whispers: "It's all ready"; he hangs up. They look at each other for a moment and the young man starts getting dressed behind the shower cabin. They walk side by side towards the bar, to sign the bill. The bald man slips a banknote over the counter, before they both disappear down the stairs, as a Canadair flies low over the Hotel Stanley, advancing towards the surging mass of grey smoke.

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