

Circumnavigate

Kiah wakes to the weight of the idea in her limbs, rolls from her back and lifts thin sheets that smell of the breeze and Marko's sweat. When she bends at the waist to pull on shoes, tie laces, small folds of skin ripple at her waist – a fleshy accordion.

She slips a water bottle into the crocheted bag that her mother made years ago; runs her fingers across threads and tries to read the patterns. Cannot decide if the beads might be full stops or commas.

Food and warm clothes shoved into a pack, she pulls a cap onto her head, threads her ponytail through the opening in the back. Marko's half-finished coffee pot on the stovetop. A cloudless sky framed by the kitchen window. She clicks the door shut.

Marko will be on the scaffolding by now. His narrow tipped chisel pressed into the old mortar, small hammer in his right hand. Chipping away at damage. Mid-morning he will stop to drink coffee from his thermos – sit on the scaffolding, legs dangling, or he will climb down the ladder and walk to the café.

At the end of the cobbled lane Kiah turns left, away from the square. They have walked this way many times, arms linked, laughter spilling from their mouths, or in silence, the need for words having slipped into the sea. Light touches, firm flesh. Connected.

Her shoes scuff the dusty path as she walks on, past the beach where they swim, past the houses where the locals are beginning to stir, beyond the last falling down cottages that almost tip into the Adriatic.

Small uneven stones, boulders. The breeze pushes under Kiah's cap and she lifts her hand to hold its brim, leaping, scrambling. One-handed. Afraid to lose the protection of her hat to the sea. She has grown up in a place where everyone is afraid of the sun. A strange dichotomy of lifestyle: worship and fear. Days spent bathing, baking, swimming, coated in a layer of water-resistant sunblock. Vitamin D deficient – all of them. A way of life. Impossible to change.

She has the measure of that place but here on this island – anchored only to Marko – she remains adrift. Without substance.

Houses far behind, Kiah stops and pulls a burek from her pack. Sits her backside into a hollow in the rocks. Sluiced by sea, sanded by wind, curved perfectly at the edges to contain her.

'If you work at it, it will feel like work.'

She wonders if Marko came to this himself or if he was quoting someone. She pictures him, shrugging his shoulders, smiling as she tries to move her mouth in the shapes of foreign words.

She sits for a long time.

Walks on. Barely noticing. Begins to wonder if the clues to this life might be in the tight soreness spreading through her feet, up into her legs. Wonders if she could learn the heartbeat of this place more easily barefoot.

By evening, when the only way on leads away from the sea, Kiah pulls on warm clothes, tucks herself under a canopy of white stone and curls an arm beneath her head. Intermittent winds carry the song of bleating goats. She listens hard for the nuance that will tell her where she is, for their accent. But she cannot hear it.

She left a note. Marko will know which way she has walked. He could shut his eyes and know which track to take, where to veer away from the roads, past the lanes. Where to trust the contours of the coast as it slips into the sea. Where to follow tightly woven tracks around cliff tops. The imprint of this island is fixed in his being: the sweet, crumbling soil, the rhythm of the sea. He is bound to this place. Made solid.

A haze rests in the morning air and she cannot see the mainland, only green water, the tip of the next point – a cartographer’s outline. Kiah looks to the point beyond and knows this is enough.

On the way back she moves quickly, searches briefly for the stone carved seat but she cannot find it – not with certainty.

The courtyard is bathed in buttery afternoon light. Marko looks up from the hammock, places his book on the ground.

‘Good walk?’

‘Da,’ she says. And smiles.