

## PALM SPRINGS, 1985

These girls across the hallway, I think I like them. I hang out with them lately in the dorm, lying around, eating Pepperidge Farm goldfish and Domino's pizza. One is the daughter of some senator in Virginia. Randolph. Her name is Adelaide Randolph. She's tall and skinny like all the girls who still call themselves cows even though I'm like thirty pounds heavier than they are. What am I supposed to say whenever they sit around saying they hate themselves, that they're disgusting for eating a Frito, calling themselves fat cows? Adelaide has brown hair and green cat eyes. Long nails with French tips. She dresses like Michael Jackson. Completely. The black hat, the black and red leather jacket. The black pants, white socks, black loafers. She even has the gloves. Crazy. And she pulls it off, that's the thing. I'd look like I was smoking something if I walked around USC like that. Even though I'm the black one, she totally owns the look. Some people can get away with anything.

146

Her roommate is this mellow girl named Lavendar. Her actual name. Dar for short. But everybody calls her Nurse, because of her major. Her parents were hippies or something and now they're loaded and living in Berkeley. Nurse always wears her hair in two long braids and a baseball cap. San Francisco Giants. Jesus. Just like Lasorda, I bleed Dodger blue, but I like Nurse, so we don't talk about baseball, except for spring training and who's going to be better this year. Dave LaPoint or Orel Hershiser. Please. Like it's even a contest. You got to let people have their deluded dreams, though.

It's spring break and they want me to go to Palm Springs with them. I don't have any money, though. My work-study job and student loans get me from one month to the next. No extras.

You got credit cards, don't you? Nurse says.

Yeah, Adelaide says. I got my dad's AmEx, so we're totally there. You're going. Don't *even*.

I think about how I've never been to Palm Springs and think about that *Lucy* episode that always makes me want to go to Palm Springs whenever I see it, the one where Rock Hudson tells a sad story to bring Lucy and Ricky and Fred and Ethel all back together again. Rock Hudson in his gingham shirt sitting by the pool. Whistling. Everything looking clean and crisp like all old black-and-white shows.

So I'm going to Palm Springs with them. Driving down the highway, wearing sunglasses in a nice car like I'm in some *Lucy* episode.

I can't believe you've never been to Palm Springs, Adelaide keeps saying. I'm not even from here and I've been like, *so many times*.

I know, I say. I don't know, I say, and shrug. But when was my family supposed to be able to take vacations and lie around swimming pools? One week, my dad gets every year, and every year he drives us to see relatives, all the way to Tennessee on NoDoz in two days. Five days visiting and two days back to L.A. on NoDoz again, if the car doesn't break down on the way back, which it always does.

Adelaide drives her black Jag like it's a toy, with one hand and with her foot out the window. She plays Michael Jackson over and over again. All Michael. Thriller. We Are the World. Pretty Young Thing.

Ugh, Nurse says. Something else, please. Got any Whitney Houston? But Adelaide says, My car, dude. Shut the fuck up. She turns up the music and then yells, We're going to scam on some dudes! Two for me, one for you, Nurse.

Hey, I say. What about me? I'm sitting in the back seat, and I pat Adelaide on the back of her head.

We'll see if there're some hot brothers for you in Palm Springs, Virgin. She always calls me that because she thinks it's funny. She keeps saying, there is no Santa Claus, Virgin. Or Easter Bunny or Tooth Fairy. That's what holding out's like. Like you're waiting for the fucking Tooth Fairy to come and leave you a dollar for your cherry, Adelaide says. And then you're like, That's it? A dollar?

Yeah, Nurse says. Her foot is sticking out the window, too, and I think about how people going in the opposite direction have to look at her dirty feet. I wouldn't want to put my dirty feet in people's faces, even if they're going to fly right past me and don't even know who I am. Nurse jiggles her feet to Beat It and points her big toe every time on the word It. After a while, nobody talks anymore, and we just look out the window. I have never seen this before. Not even on TV, that I can remember. *Lucy's* in black and white. Miles and miles of dirt and weeds and mountains the color of three different kinds of mustard. Dark yellow, almost brown, bright yellow like French's, and a yellow with lavender going straight through it. The rocks on the hills look like Mars, and the windmills look like giant white men with arms waving at me like crazy. Over here. Over here.

What the hell are you, hypnotized? Adelaide's been looking at me in the rearview mirror. I say, Kind of, because I don't want to tell her about how

beautiful I think it all is because I don't want to talk it all away. If I said what I'm looking at, I can just hear it. I can hear Adelaide, saying, It's just Palm Springs, bitch. It's not like it's Italy. But I want to keep it mine so I say, Yeah, all sarcastic like I don't care. Yeah, I say. I'm hypnotized.

I want to get out of this car and run as fast as I can, up the mountains. The sky is blue, like swimming pool water, and the air is hot in our faces and smells good like a shirt that just came out of the dryer, warm and soft against my cheek. This is Palm Springs, California.

Before we get to the hotel, Adelaide stops at a liquor store so we can get some alcohol with her fake ID. She comes to the counter with vodka and beer and Bartles & James peach wine coolers for me because that's the only thing I can think of. I don't drink, usually. But I am. I am this week. Mom and Dad don't have to know about it. Adelaide says, Get this, will you? I'll get the next round of stuff we get.

Uh, I say. Sure. But when the sunburned guy at the cash register adds it all up, it's like thirty bucks, which seems like a lot of money to me. Plus the hotel that we're going to have to split for 150 bucks a piece. This really nice place. Miss? the guy says. And I guess it's OK, since Adelaide and Nurse will get some of the other stuff. Adelaide uses her dad's credit card, and even though Nurse doesn't have to work, her parents will pay her share. As long as we split it, it's fair.

When we get to the hotel, it's all totally worth it. Gorgeous. A view of the hills and green all around the pool with huge palm trees that look like they're sparkling whenever there's a breeze. White deck chairs are on all four sides of the pool, and four bungalows face each other. Sliding glass doors let us out to the pool, and first thing, Adelaide and Nurse are practically naked. Bikinis, even though they're supposed to be cows. I wear shorts and a long white T-shirt that covers the shorts. Grandma, Nurse says. Shit. You don't have a swimsuit?

Damn. Wear some more clothes, Laura Ingalls, Adelaide says. Where's your fucking bonnet?

No, I say. No swimsuit. Not since the fifth grade.

But don't you want to get in the water? Nurse says.

Yeah, Adelaide says.

No. I'm not getting in the water. I don't really like it, I say. Why do they like the water so much? It's just water. It's nice to look at, but after that. It's good if it's hot, but after that. But they keep wanting me to get in the pool.

They won't shut up about it. Even if I wanted to, there's my hair. If it gets wet I have to put all the Jheri Curl spray in it to moisturize it all over again, and I just don't want to be thinking of hair. So I just tune them out. I put on my Walkman headphones and listen to Squeeze, humming tempted by the fruit of another, tempted but the truth is discovered, feeling the hot air blow across my body like somebody's hot breath in my face and on my neck and across my legs. I close my eyes and dream, and sweat runs down the sides of my face and into my T-shirt. I think, I am on Spring Break in Palm Springs, like a regular college girl. The heat makes me sleepy, and I'm in and out of sleep. Sometimes, even if I'm not sleeping, I keep my eyes shut, seeing the black, the red of my eyelids, smears of yellow, feeling music in my ears, feeling like rubber from the vodka and wine coolers. It seems like hours and hours pass, but it hasn't been that long. And then, my eyelids go completely black. Someone is blocking the sun.

Ladies, this guy says. He's got two beers in his hands. Coronas with lime. He holds them out to Nurse and Adelaide. They look at each other and roll their eyes. But if they don't want the beer, I'll take it. I'll take a beer from this guy.

My name is Rob, he says. He puts the beer down on the pavement and crouches down. He balances himself perfectly on his feet, his hands on his knees. His hair is sticking straight up and is white in places, like he streaked it. Or the sun bleached it. His face is peeling a little bit, but he still looks good to me, even though his eyes are covered by Ray-Bans. But then he pushes them up over his head. His eyes are gray, and his eyebrows are bleached too. He looks like he surfs, like you'd see him in a Gidget movie. Some '50s guy, that's what he looks like. The beers are just sitting there. Sweating.

He goes, You guys party?

No, Nurse says. We don't.

Look at me, I'm thinking. Look at me. Ask me if I party. Look at me. Ask. I'll just leave these here, then, Rob says. Just in case.

Uh-huh, Nurse says.

Thanks, Adelaide says, and flicks her hand at his back when he turns away. Like, shoo, you bother me.

You guys, I say. You guys are cold. Why'd you shine him like that?

He talked to us wearing sunglasses, Adelaide says. I couldn't even see his face at first. She sits up and splits her ponytail in two pieces to tighten the rubber bands. She lies back down. She says, I'm supposed to take a beer from

some dude who doesn't even know that he's supposed to take off his sunglasses when he's talking to people? Please. And then he brings two beers? There's three of us. Asshole. No class whatsoever.

He was cute, though, Nurse says. She shields her eyes and looks over at the group of people he's with. All dudes.

Yeah, I say. He was. His eyes were nice. I liked his eyes.

Adelaide sits up again and looks at me. She gets up and stretches, and the lines from the chair make a pattern all over her butt and back. She's wearing a black bikini that's sagging in the ass. But she won't eat anything. Ever. Tasting. She's forever tasting everything and then leaving all this food on the table that goes in the trash. She puts her hands on her hips and points her chin at Rob's group. Too bad they don't have any brothers for you, Ave. We need to find you a brother on this trip. If I was a black dude, I would totally go for you.

Why?

Because, Adelaide says. She squirts some Bain de Soleil in her hands and rubs it all over her stomach and legs. She's getting really dark. She's not even burning or peeling like Rob.

150 Because, she says. I don't know. She pulls her sunglasses down over her face, and I can't see her eyes. She says, You're cute. Nice eyes. Nice smile. Totally mellow. She stops talking, and then she says, You know.

But I don't know what she's talking about. Only black guys like nice smiles and nice eyes and mellow girls? I drink some more vodka and orange juice. Another cooler. I keep my sunglasses on and look at everybody lying around and swimming and drinking. There are no black guys. There are no black girls. There's only me.

I just keep sleeping and drinking and listening to music. Joy Division, Smiths, Elvis Costello, Nik Kershaw. Time goes by fast and it goes by slow. The sun is going down and there's the breeze, and I want to stay out here all night. I can just stay out here in this chair.

But there aren't that many people out any more. The ones out here are quiet and cooling off from cooking all day. And where are Nurse and Adelaide? Nothing in their chairs but damp towels, like they used to be there but melted away. Evaporated. Like I imagined them. Imaginary friends, I say, laughing. That's so funny. I get up and get another wine cooler out of the cooler next to Adelaide's chair.

I take it with me because I'm going to do something. A guy is sitting on the edge of the pool, drinking a beer, so I get up and go to him. I feel good,

like I'm floating. I can feel the hot concrete come up through my feet, travel up my legs and then my face. I sit next to the guy. Close. Put my legs in the water. Look, I say. Isn't that trippy how your leg looks like it's almost in two pieces when you put it in the water? He looks at my legs and then at me. He smiles, but just a little. He's dark. Super tan. Brown curly hair and thick fingers that have hair all over them. What is he? Is he Italian or Greek or Mexican or something else I don't even know? He's not black. That, I can tell. I'm Avery, I say, and put my hands in the water. I pull my hand out of the water and just stare at it. It looks like an old person's hand to me.

Is something wrong with your hand?

No. I'm just looking at it.

Oh.

I put my hand in the water again and when I take it out I dribble water up his leg. He looks at me funny, with squinty eyes and his head turned like James Dean does in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

I'm Costas, he says. He looks at me hard, like he's studying me.

I'm Avery.

You feeling good, Avery?

Yes, I say. I am. I am, Costas.

He nods at my T-shirt. It says Trojans. What year? he asks.

Freshman.

Senior.

Go Trojans, I say, and punch my fist in the air.

He laughs. I *guess*, he says. He peels a little bit of the label off his beer. Drinks some. Puts it back down.

I like Costas. He's golden, I swear to God, and his hair is making these tight waves all over his head, like little shiny brown bows all over. I lean into him and smell coconut. I kiss him on the cheek. He leans away from me.

Man, he says. Avery. You're wasted, girl.

Yes, I say. I like it though! He shakes his head, and I put my hand on his thigh and he looks at my hand for a long, long time. I move my hand up a little bit, just to see what he will do. There's nothing bad he can do to me. Maybe say stop, and that's not going to kill me. I'm feeling too good. I'm not wondering if he thinks I'm cute because I think he is. That's all that counts right now. He doesn't take my hand off. He stares straight ahead at the hills all rocky and orange. I say, the sun's going down, and move my hand up some more. The tip of my finger is underneath his shorts.

Check out my boy Costas, someone yells behind us. Getting him some chocolate! He turns to yell at the guy, and when he does, my hand falls off his leg. You idiot, he says. You fool. He stands up, and then he gets up and walks off toward my bungalow, but then he disappears. I don't want to sit at the pool by myself with those jerks behind me, so I get up too. I walk toward my room. I'm about to pull on the sliding glass door when I hear someone behind me. Hey, this person says. And it's Costas. Come here, he says, and pulls me to the side of the bungalow where it's dark and nobody can see us. He puts his hands to my face and kisses me. He says, You got nice lips. What were you trying to do back there?

I don't know, I say. I don't know. I rub the front of his shorts.

Shit, he says. OK.

OK? Are we going to do it? He sticks his hand underneath my T-shirt. He feels my boob and I slide down the wall. My legs won't let me stand up again. My legs want to be wide open. Let's do it, I say. Let's do it.

Slow down, girl. He kneels down and holds my face again. He stares into my eyes. Fuck, he says. You're just too drunk. I'm not doing that. That'd be fucked up.

152

I'm not that drunk, I say. He's hard and I touch him. He takes a deep breath. I say, I swear I'm not that drunk.

OK, he says. He looks around. You can suck my dick, but that's it. Here, he says, and lies down on his back. He pulls down his shorts. I kneel over him, thinking after this he'll be so into me, after this, even though I don't know what I'm doing. He talks to me the whole time. Don't just lick it, he says. Move your head up and down. Watch the teeth, though. Use your hands, too. Not that hard, though. No, that's too gentle. A little harder. Yeah, like that. He's moaning. He's saying yes and he's coming and I don't know what to do, so I swallow it.

I'm still kneeling over him and I smile at him. He puts his fist to his forehead and stares up at me. He says, You didn't know what you were doing, did you? He's breathing hard. Whew! he says.

No, I say. I never did that before.

He sits up, pulls up his shorts. Looks at me like I'm all of a sudden a pain in the ass. Don't tell me you're some kind of virgin or some crazy thing.

I am, I say.

What are you, crazy? That's what you want? Some guy you don't know? On the side of a hotel room? Drunk?

I don't care about that, I say. It's a bungalow. Not a motel. Yeah.

He shakes his head. Then I'm glad. I'm glad we didn't do that. And be glad I'm not a grade A asshole, either.

You're nice, I say. I like you.

He smiles at me. He slaps my face soft like those Italians in *The Godfather* and then he strokes it. You're a trippy girl, he says. Let's get you to your room.

We walk around the corner, but when I pull on the sliding glass door it's locked. I pound on it and Nurse pulls it open. She looks at me and frowns at Costas.

She's better now, Costas says. But she was kind of trashed.

I'm fine, I say. Fine, fine, fine.

Thanks, Nurse says, and pulls me in. Peace out, she says to Costas. But she doesn't smile, and she slides the door so hard the glass wobbles.

There's some guy in bed with Adelaide, passed out. I can't believe they didn't wake up when Nurse slammed the door. Who's that? I walk closer to the bed so I can see his face. Cute. He's cute. It's the surfer dude from earlier.

I whisper, I thought he was an idiot. I thought he didn't have class.

Nurse cracks open a 7-Up and sits crossed legged in a chair. His dad? Knows her dad, it turns out. Fraternity brothers at SC from a million years ago. He's loaded too. His dad is, anyway.

But what about him not having class? What about the two beers instead of three?

That was before, I guess, Nurse says, and rolls her eyes. True love. Who was that dude? She slurps her 7-Up loud, and Adelaide turns over. She turns over for the slurping sound but not the door. Nurse says, Please don't tell me you did it with him.

No. I didn't.

Good. Thank God.

It was just a blow job, I say.

Nurse slaps her forehead. You're not even going to remember it in the morning. Trust me.

Yes I will, I say. I'm going to remember this for a long time.

She's done with her soda already. She turns the can upside down and taps the last drops on her tongue. I'm the only one with sense in this room, she says.

He liked me, I say. And he wasn't a brother.



Yeah, but what *was* he? Like Turkish or something?

Turkish? I don't know what that is. I shrug. He looks white to me.

Yeah, Nurse says. But not *white* white.

What's the difference?

I don't know, Nurse says. But still. Maybe he's Italian or Greek or a Jew or something.

But that's white, no?

Nurse turns up her palms, like, What do you want me to do about it? OK, she says. Congratulations. He's white. I'm going outside.

She slams the door behind her, trying to wake up Adelaide, I'm sure. But they're totally dead. They look like a little prince and princess sleeping in those sheets, like in one of those Hans Christian Andersen stories I loved when I was a kid. They're in their own special little world. They're a fairy tale.

I have spent so much money on my Visa card. And I just got it. I was walking across campus, and some dude at a table asked me if I wanted one, and I said, Yeah. It took like five minutes to fill out the application, and then I got the card in the mail, and now after a week I've spent four hundred dollars that I'm supposed to pay back with my crappy work-study job stuffing envelopes. I barely even know where all the money went. First we split the room, and then Adelaide and Nurse want to go to these places and eat food I've never even heard of before. And even if I've heard of some of this stuff, why would you want to eat it? They order mussels, which looks like snot on a seashell. They order pâté, which looks like a big square piece of baloney, but for twenty bucks. Which would have tasted good if it was actual baloney. They order three different desserts, just to try them. They're really big on that, ordering food and just leaving it on the table. Who *does* that? And appetizers too. How much food do you need? I order the same thing every time because I don't like spending money on something I'm not going to want to eat. So it's burgers and fries and chicken for me. Stuff that actually makes you feel full when you eat it. But they always want to split everything three ways because it's easier, no matter what everybody orders. And it is easier, I guess. I don't want to sit there counting who has what and how much it costs, and I don't want to look like the cheap one. I just don't want to even know what my balance is, and it's not like I have to pay it all back right away. I can pay the minimum every month.

But it's over now, anyway. It's the end of the week, and Nurse and I have screwed ourselves because we haven't even tried to write papers that are due when we get back. Ugh, Nurse says. I'll get it done. Me too, I say. Me too.

Mine's done, Adelaide says.

What? we say. When?

She turns up Diana Ross singing Ain't No Mountain High Enough. I got it before we left, she says.

What does she mean? I ask. What do you mean, you *got*?

I got it, Adelaide says. She points. It's so pretty here. I don't want to leave. She keeps one hand on the steering wheel and rolls down the window to make waves in the air with her other hand, even though the air coming in is so hot we can barely breathe. Cost me just a hundred bucks, she says. Chaucer. Wife of Bath. Like I'm going to say something new about that. I got better things to do.

Ad, Nurse says, shaking her head. But she's smiling.

I *got*. She *bought* a paper? I have never heard of anybody buying a paper before. Even my roommate, stupid Anika, the Denise Huxtable of our dorm, with all her money, has never bought a paper. She is always working on papers and notes and on and on. But I think about this. I think of Adelaide taking something that is not hers and putting her name on it. Now it's hers. People can buy that. So am I stupid to do the work? What if I could just spend a hundred bucks and get a paper? Right. I can just see myself getting caught and kicked out of school. I can just hear it from Mom and Dad. You mean to tell me you gone get into USC and then not do no work? You gone *buy* a paper and get kicked out when all you had to do is sit your ass down and write a paper? Ain't got to do no real work. Ain't got to punch no time clock. No kids to feed. No real bills. No house note. All you need to do is go to class and pay attention. Write a paper and be one step closer to being better off than anybody we ever knew? Is that what you mean to tell me? That instead of doing that, you decided to go on ahead and get kicked out?

Jesus. Forget it. No. Way. And anyway, I just don't see myself doing that. It's not fair work for a fair grade.

Adelaide keeps looking at me while she's driving. Why are you staring at me, she says. What the hell are you looking at?

Nothing, I say. I don't know. But I do know. I don't think it's fair that she gets to do whatever she wants. She gets to fuck the surfer dude, be skinny, buy a paper, and look like Michael Jackson.

I say, I'm sick of Diana Ross and the Supremes and all that old shit. Why don't you put on some Depeche Mode? I dig through my bag and pull out my cassette.

That shit? She makes a face. What kind of sister are you anyway? British white boys? This is Miss Ross. She says. You hear me? *Miss Ross*.

So we have to drive forever listening to what Adelaide wants because it's her car. Later, when we're almost back home, close to downtown, she asks me, you going to call that dude Costas up and hook up with him again? I think about what I'm going to say before I answer her, because you know what? It's none of her business what I do. Who I'm going to call. Let her worry about her own life, like she even has worries. I focus on what's outside my window. Train tracks and telephone poles and wires and brown air and trash along the side of the freeway. The smog is so bad today, and I think my eyes are burning because of it. This happens every time the smog is thick. It's so much better in Palm Springs, the air and everything, but who knows when I'll ever get to go back there. It cost a fortune. I keep rubbing my eyes and blinking. I go, Are you guys' eyes burning?

156

The fuck you talking about, Nurse says. My eyes are perfectly fine.

So? Adelaide says. She's looking at me through her rearview mirror. Are you?

Nurse and Adelaide have told me a hundred times, Lose it. Just lose it. Nobody wants to deal with a virgin who has no idea how things work. Adelaide's always saying, Darling, sweetie, men want women who are wise about the ways of the world. They don't want some baby who doesn't know a cock from a stick shift.

I give her that. She's probably right. I think I would have to lose it before Costas would be into me, and I'm telling myself that's probably why he didn't ask for my number. Whatever. I got a paper to write, anyway. And I have to get an A. And it's due in one day. All of a sudden, I got much bigger things to worry about than some guy who looked really good sitting at the side of a pool.

Well? Adelaide keeps asking. Are you? Are you?