

This story **Cafe Memorial** is taken from the book of linked short stories and radio drama:

ONE OF US IS LYING

By Sally Cline.

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CAFE MEMORIAL

The plane is crowded. No empty seats. Despite the air conditioning I am alternately hot and cold, shivering and sweating, as if I have a fever. According to the brisk voice of the pilot, we are only fifteen minutes away from Rhodes airport.

Already I feel the Greek heat rise in the dusty air. I smell the profusion of roses that grow abundantly by the road side. The man sitting next to me is reading his guide book. With the familiar camaraderie of strangers who are never likely to meet again, he turns to me.

“I guess you know the ancient myth that says the sun god Helios fell in love with the nymph Rhodon and named the island after her? Great guy don’t you think? Good place to fall in love eh?”

He laughs in an easy man to man fashion.

Pedantically I suggest that the word ‘rhodon’ probably meant ‘rose’.

“Scholar eh?” He is not deterred.

To myself I acknowledge that the island is a good place to fall in love. As good as any.

I look again at the brief scribbled note I am clutching.

There are drops of moisture on it. My hand is sweating. There are a few drops on my trousers where my hand has rubbed the material. Meticulously I dab at them with a starched white handkerchief.

“Meet you in the Deja Vue”

That is all it says. Followed by the suggested date and time.

Black italic handwriting, slightly sloping. The jolt when I saw it on the hall mat. One forgets words but handwriting seldom. I had remained in the same Victorian house in North London for the last ten years so the letter found me without difficulty.

Will you be there? Will you be at the same table? Perhaps they have moved the tables around, changed the appearance of the restaurant that looks out on a garden of olive trees fronting the quiet street. I know the restaurant is still there. Punctiliously I had made an international call from England just to check. Had you made a similar call from the States? Somehow I doubted it. It was not your way.

After ten years will you look any different? Will you wear purple? I think of the lavender voile dress, falling in folds, on the cane chair, in the Deja Vue, which you wore at our last meeting.

We had grown fond of several Greek restaurants that season but the Deja Vue, for some reason, had amused you. Was it because the fervently loquacious Greek patron enjoyed the nightly exercise of your Americanised Greek? Or was it because he let his discreet British wife do most of the traditional Greek cooking?

Amidst the dzadziki, avgolemono and dolmades, my preferences, and those cheese filled tiropitas to which you were addicted, she served up a superb vegetarian English breakfast to tourists at any time of day. Frequently we ate Greek specialities, at lunch time, on the beach, then fell into

our favoured seats at night for a late evening breakfast.

“Where else can you do that?” you had said. “Only in Rhodes! It is quaint! It is British and Greek and quaint and I love it.”

For that remark you employed your cartoon American accent which you used when you were mocking. Curiously, the rest of the time, your voice was accentless. Born in Baltimore, world travelled, you nevertheless remained a person from nowhere. A woman weighed down by possessions but belonging nowhere, belonging to no-one.

My chattering travel companion, a more obvious American, is reading aloud again.

“In Rhodes, the past is all around you. Ancient Greek remains often come to light when a cellar is dug up.” He pauses before adding the inevitable “Isn’t that quaint?”

Do all cartoon Americans have only one adjective at their disposal? Emily, too, had called me a scholar as if it was less a profession than a problem.

“You would like to dig me up if you could, find out where I came from, discover what makes me collect beautiful objects. Unearth the reasons why I can’t let anything go.”

Any room you inhabited became a backdrop to a series of rainbow coloured collector’s items. A careful hoarding of precious pieces. Precious to you. As you were to me.

Correction. As you *are* to me. As you have been for the decade of your disappearance.

The past is all around me. The day we had thought of sailing for Simi, the small island off the coast of Rhodes.

“We can bring back sponges,” I had enticed.

You were busy, however, increasing your collection. That day, you had collected one carved and jointed wooden fish, threaded with gold, swinging on a blue rope, one pink and blue embossed pottery bowl scrolled with the Greek key

symbol, and one six foot by twenty-six foot ornate rug with the same motif.

“How are we going to get that home?” I had protested. “*We* are not going to have to get it home. *I* am. Remember? Two different planes, two different cities!”

Two different time zones. There would be three thousand miles between us after months of closeness in which I had studied your behaviour as you wandered in and out of antique shops and gold bazaars, entering empty handed, coming out with your blue and purple striped Grecian bag stuffed full.

“Is it about ownership?” I had ventured.

“No!” You were firm and said no more.

Ownership. The legal right of possession. For you it had been something else. To come into your own. To hold your own. Ultimately to be on your own. Single and self-possessed but with your beauties gathered around you. On just one occasion, kneeling by a rock pool, in a lilac swimsuit with a green dragon embellished on it, you had used the verb. Or rather its past passive tense.

“I can’t be owned,” you had said quietly.

I had been asking you too many questions, trying to place you, attempting to pressure you into one of my orderly schemes.

“Don’t try. If you try, I shan’t resist but I shall simply disappear inside myself. You will find me gone.”

“Do you know the city?” the American in the adjoining seat is talking again. “I’ve done London pretty thoroughly and I’d like to do the best of Rhodes sharpish. Know any good tavernas? Bit of bouzouki, local colour, know what I mean?”

Immersed in his guide book he hardly notices my lack of response. The plane is jolting, a slight spluttering sound from the engine. A few more minutes, then the airport

bus then a long slow walk to refresh my memories. I had, as always, given myself plenty of time to stroll through the Knights' Quarter, pause momentarily by the moat, allow for a few minutes in the Turkish Quarter, allot time for a brief wander through Perikleous and Pithagora which enclose the Jewish area.

"Digging for your roots?" you had teased, the first time we had walked there.

The overcrowded plane journey now behind me, I leave the Old Town, and put on speed through the New Town until I reach the Astron on Kazouli Street. A small forty-two bedroomed hotel within easy walking distance of beach and town, the original brochure had said. But for the first five days we had occupied bedroom forty-one and had only moved out of it when hunger or fresh air became a secondary critical need.

Later I dragged you to see the marble head of Helios, the third century statue of Aphrodite and the Mycenaean vases in the Archaeological Museum. Then I allowed myself to be led away to the treasures you really wanted to see, the stones on the beach and the jewels in the bazaars.

Will you still look the same? Long pinkish hair, redder in the sun, that should have clashed with the colours you wore but never did. The hair that entangled the dangling earrings, exotic gold and garnet or gold and amethyst (another mismatch with the hair). I recall your resolute refusal to remove either earrings or bangles which had remained steadfast during the long period I knew you.

"I shan't budge on that one! Don't try and pressure me."

I reflect on the differences in my own appearance. Of course I am older. I must look older. They say men age better than women but I do not know if that is accurate. Assuredly, success, which I did not have when we spent

that summer in Rhodes, breeds a certain smartness. Having moved from the status of pedagogue to that of moderately best-selling author, my style has subtly changed. I no longer wear my old white blazer over garish tee shirts and the white knee length shorts. Television appearances (the writer as performer, the don made accessible) now merit elegant white suits, and pastel silk shirts. You would approve of my cuff links. Thirty-six carat gold with a small blue sapphire set in each one.

Memories have softened me to a standstill. I am not a person who lingers. It is not in my nature. It had become one of the conflicts between us.

“Let’s do it!” I used to say. Impetuous. Impatient. Impulsive.

“I am still thinking about it. Mulling it over,” you would reply.

How different in character and in style we were. I with my need to plan, to organise, to look ahead, to hurry along. Emily with her desire to hang on, hang about, a desire which turned her talent for indecisiveness into a philosophical way of being. She moved all the time but gradually and slowly as if time had only the meaning she set upon it that hour.

Today, however, I have allowed myself a great deal of time. I could linger if I knew how. Unless Emily has transformed herself I doubt that she will be early for our appointment, even though it is one she has fixed herself.

I remember the strange occasion when we decided to visit a gypsy who told fortunes. Well, you decided. You saw the notice: “British visitors particularly encouraged.”

“She will make you feel at home,” Emily had said.

The gypsy assured us that she had two Greek aunties but her voice was decidedly east London. She had pressed into our palms, gazed into her crystal ball and spun her stories.

Most of it was make-believe and erratic but neither of us cared. One thing however she got absolutely correct.

To me she said: "Time is your essence, my British friend. You are always ahead of it, even obsessed by it."

I had laughed and admitted the veracity of her statement. Then she turned an affectionate look upon Emily.

"And you, my dear dreamer, to you, time will always lie in wait. To be late is not a problem. You are too busy with your fantasies to notice the here and now. If you are not careful you may be late for your own funeral!"

"I shan't let her!" I had protested. "I'll be there to hurry her along."

We had walked away from the gypsy's tent, amused by her, enthralled with each other, Emily's hair glinting in the warm reddish light.

That was the day you lost your suntan oil.

I remembered us searching frantically for it. Falling into the hot sand in our restaurant robes. The purple and the white striping the beige beach.

"We can't search properly for suntan oil, we can't scabble in the sand....not in these clothes," you had said, half laughing at yourself (or at me), half genuinely frustrated.

"Let's strip then!"

We stripped down to our pants, unable to keep our hands off each other's bodies. You were the one who peeled away our pants while I fleetingly wondered if anyone else would chance this way looking for something they too might have lost. Their youth? Their craziness? Their tanning gel? The sand began to cool as we clung and stroked and loved until suddenly you interrupted our fever with a triumphant cry.

"There it is! There's the lotion!"

There it was, half buried in the sand beside us. Our wild movements had dislodged it.

I laugh wryly as I recall your excitement. Another possession regained. Your world put back in order.

I screw up my eyes so that I can see you standing naked, the purple folds of voile on the ground, holding aloft the gritty bottle of lotion.

“We mustn’t let it go to waste!” you had said, streaking it over your small firm breasts. I can see the oil glisten on the edges of your tapering white nails.

We were late returning to the Deja Vue that evening but our table had been saved. We walked towards it holding hands.

“If we sit at the same side of the table we don’t have to let go,” you had said.

I look at my wristwatch. It is time to make my way towards 28th October Street. I make a small detour around by Mandriki harbour. Signs show there are sailings every morning for Simi, the heart of the sponge fishing industry, and the monastery at Panormitis, only an hour’s trip from Rhodes. Perhaps tomorrow we could take that trip, the one we had talked of, and return with our sponges, like ordinary tourists. I feel a lift of pleasure at the mere possibility.

The man selling wooden puzzle fishes still has his stall by the quayside. Or perhaps it isn’t the same man, maybe a son or a brother or cousin.

Halfway down 28th October Street stands the ornate wrought iron mansion that is No 72. On the railings that lead into the olive fronted garden, swinging in the slight breeze is the small black and white sign: “Deju Vue Restaurant: English Breakfasts Served”.

I am home.

Inside, the flower clock on the wall reassures me that I am not late for our rendezvous. The cane chairs have been renewed, but the photos of the harbour drawn by the local

artist we had spent time talking to are in their familiar places around the walls. Do the waitresses still earn the Greek equivalent of £9 a day? I am too shy to talk to the girl who leads me to our table with the reserved sign on it. It had always been you who chatted to the restaurant staff.

I order an ouzo and water and I settle down to wait.

Ten minutes pass. Nobody enters. Then twenty minutes, then thirty-five. I order a second ouzo and try not to feel agitated.

Finally the door swings open. A tall athletic looking man, with the kind of bronzed face that sporty Americans acquire playing tennis in the hot sun, walks confidently into the restaurant. He looks around, sees no-one he knows, and his steps falter. A slight air of nervousness mists his countenance. He looks anxiously first at his wristwatch then at the flower clock on the restaurant wall. He gazes intently at the occupants of all the tables nearest to him.

I had never seen him before, nor had I seen his photo, but I know who he is. For a moment I look at him intently, willing his discomfiture, then I half raise my hand in a mock salute.

All confidence gone, he walks over to me. I motion to him to draw up a chair.

“She wanted us both to meet here,” he says. “I suppose it was a place that had some significance for her?”

“Some, yes,” I say curtly.

He fumbles in his brown leather wallet. He takes out a photo. It is slightly faded. Even before he hands it over I know which one it is. Would we look absurdly young? Would our expressions look passé? Ten years shows up on photographs. Does love have a sell-by date on celluloid?

“She told me a waiter took it at your last meeting... well...er...I don't have to tell you that...”

He scurries his words in nervous embarrassment.

Without looking at me, still gazing at the photo, he says as if to himself: "Emily is wearing a purple dress. I never saw her in a purple dress. I thought I knew all her clothes. How funny that she had a purple dress."

He tails off and I wait.

"And you...you are in something white. The only thing she ever told me about you, apart from the fact that you are a professor turned writer, is that you often wore white. I once went into a book shop and looked at your photo on the book jacket. You were wearing white."

His nerves have disappeared. Now his voice sounds smug as if owning that single piece of information means he owns a small part of me. I feel weary of him. How long do the two of us have to wait for her appearance?

Why had she told him that one white fact? Why tell him anything? Or, for that matter, why not tell him everything? She had after all never told me anything about him except his name.

"It's a very Christian name," she had said with a laugh. "Stephen. A very Christian man. Kind in a firm Christian way. Born on Christmas Eve wouldn't you know? I expect when in the womb, he instructed his mother to get it right!"

Suddenly I remembered her dropping a second piece of information. Unexpectedly. Unable to retrieve it after she had let it go.

We had been idling an hour away in the Old City, lurking in leather shops and jewellers, she to touch the goods possessively, me to watch her taking possession. I had offered to buy her a small brown leather wallet.

"Oh no! Not a neat brown leather wallet. That's what Stephen has. Although he is usually a highly self-assured man, if he suddenly feels nervous in some alien's presence, he

will pull out this neat little wallet. Then he will meticulously take out all the dollar bills, fold them carefully, put them in a small pile, count them, then press them into a tiny pleat and put them back in his wallet. I doubt if he even knows he is doing it. I cannot bear to watch him!”

Stephen gives me the photograph of you in the purple dress. He watches me closely waiting for some response. I take it without glancing at it, and put it in my folder, then I gaze at him indifferently. He starts to say something, coughs, then reaches out for his wallet again. From its brown interior he pulls out a pile of dollar bills. He puts them carefully on the small table between us, by the side of my cooling coffee. Then with a swift almost petulant gesture he folds them into a tiny pleat and puts them back into his wallet.

I want to laugh, or tell him he has forgotten to count them. Now both of us can feel smug.

“Is she with you?” I ask finally. I had not realised they would come together.

“Yes, she is in the car.”

“Let’s go outside and join her,” I say.

I pay the check and we walk together through the olive trees in the front garden of the Deja Vue. I thought of the firm black olives we had eaten every day on the beach that summer. They no longer taste the same when you leave the sun and buy them from the supermarket.

He has parked his vehicle at the bottom of 28th October Street at the junction where the area sharply divides, rough and noisy one way, quiet and languid the other. Half a dozen small tough Greek boys are crowding round the bonnet. Two more are pelting the door with tiny pebbles. A flashy American car is seldom seen in this part of town. I stand back, a long way behind the gang, too far away to see inside

the car, sweltering in the heat, wondering whether what is running down my cheeks is sweat or tears.

Stephen unlocks the car and makes some pathetic shooing gestures towards the boys, who laugh and keep flailing the pebbles.

I walk a few yards down the road, away from the car. Let him tell her I am here. A few seconds later he emerges from inside the car, holding a small Greek urn.

He walks slowly towards me.

“In her Will, she said she wanted you to sprinkle her ashes in a place only you and she had spent time in. She said you would know what to do.” He gabbles his words.

More awkwardly than in his dealings with the photograph, he deals out the urn.

I take it and I cannot speak.

Without saying goodbye I walk away from him, moving steadily down 28th October Street. I do not turn until I reach the small church near the corner. Then fleetingly I look back. His shoulders are shaking. Perhaps he is sobbing. Or laughing. He straightens up, and I can just see that on the bonnet of the car lies his neat brown leather wallet. He is pulling out the pile of dollars bills, and with the now irritatingly familiar gesture of petulance he refolds them into a pleat.

I hold the Greek urn with the same care I had last held you and walk slowly through the town to the place on the beach where you had lost your sun tan lotion.

I walk now to what I judge to be the place, the burial site of the sun tan oil, caressing the urn as I move nearer. It takes a few seconds to recreate the small dented pit. A sharp wind has blown up and is urging the pebbles to frisk. I want to scatter your ashes into the hole but I know the wind, now fiercer, will lift and blow them across the beach. I cannot do it.

Irrationally I think how you would hate to see your ashes flying in all directions. You could never bear to let go of anything you had once owned or cared for. You could not bring yourself to give your old clothes to charity, so unused, unworn, they piled up on chairs, on sofas, they hung limply from hat stands, hooks and hangers. You could not bear to burn your ancient files or answered letters. They clung to desk tops, they perched on stools, they littered the piano. You had a hard job throwing out mouldy cheese.

“Oh not that tiny square of Camembert!” you would say with anguish or was it compassion?

No, scattering your ashes wildly to the winds would not be acceptable.

Wherever you went in the world, you took possession, and whenever you left you took something away with you. I suddenly remember that after our last supper at the Deja Vue you insisted we ran down to our special part of the beach. Not the tidy sandy part but the jagged area alive with rocks and stones, where multicolour pebbles were washed constantly in the waves.

“I have to collect something,” you had said. “We need to go back to the Astron first and get the old red rucksack. Come to the beach and help me. Well, you don’t need to help, just sit and talk.”

What were you up to?

We were due to leave, you for the States, I for England, the next morning. Our cases were almost packed. We had between us scarcely a corner left in any of the bags. The only container still empty was the old red rucksack, *my* rucksack, which it appeared you now needed.

I watched in amazement as you walked from the edge of the sand into the water, backwards and forwards, collecting objects, small pebbles, large stones, hefty sized rocks.

You sifted and sorted them by shape and colour.

“The pink are lovely, rose pink, just like a Greek sunset, I’ll stack those first. Then the grey...more like silver than grey, so many silver droplets. There are hardly any black pebbles though. Have you noticed that?”

An hour or so later you were piling them into the red rucksack.

“I can’t just leave our beach. I need some of it to remember us by.”

I thought you were crazy. So I tried to rationalise heaving a rucksack full of stones to the airport by suggesting that we built a Greek island rock garden when we set up home together. You just smiled at me.

Did you build it? Did you sit by your stones? I never knew. There never was a home or a rock garden. After the days on the beach and the evenings at the Deja Vue, after lugging the stones to the airport, I never saw you again.

You kept tight hold of everything you cared for except for us.

How ironic, I used to think, after all my efforts to make contact with you had failed, how ironic, that you should finally let go of something that might have lasted, that might have been of use.

But of course, as usual I am wrong. You were never less than unpredictable. You had not let go at all. You have been lying in wait. To you ten years is hardly more than a pause for dreams. Ten years’ silence, then your letter. Ten years’ absence followed by your seductive invitation.

“Meet you in the Deja Vue”

After ten years that was all it said. A single sentence followed by the suggested date and time. Black italic handwriting, slightly sloping. Ten years then the return trip to Rhodes. Ten years and now the Greek urn.

The urn with your ashes.

I move from the sandy beach over to the part that is shingle and stones. Here we are, I say to you, here we are, treading the same stones. This is the place.

Unlike you I do not know how to linger.

Suddenly, swiftly, I scatter you.

I scatter every last ash. There you are safely at home on your stones.

Then from nowhere the wind races, gets up speed, begins to tug at the ashes. They will move inexorably towards the sea.

Quickly I kneel. Efficiently I start to pick up the stones. First the pink ones, the rose glow of a Greek sunset, then the grey ones, grey like silver droplets, then the black shiny ones. You are right there are very few black shiny pebbles.

I put them one by one...each stone with some ashes clinging to it...into the new red rucksack.

“No, the rucksack wasn’t expensive,” I tell you. I know that in your careful caring way you will ask. “Just a hard wearing economical rucksack that a person needs. You can only wait a few years for a friend to return a bag then you have to purchase another.”

I have no other bag with me. In the last ten years I have been travelling light.

The stones are heavy.

I wonder if the airline officials will put them in the hold.