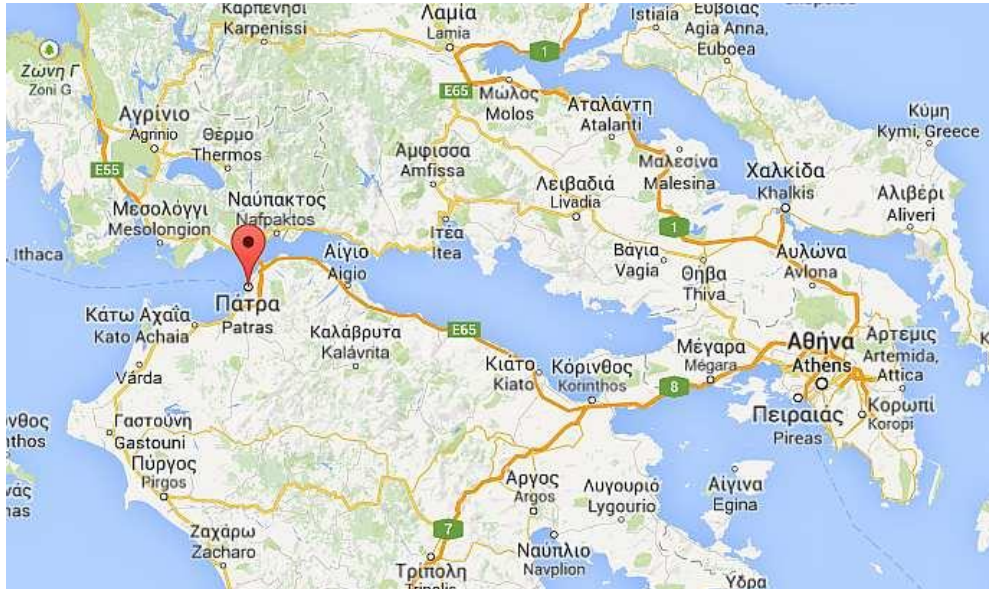


Departure Time



Patras station is tall and yellow with pale marble floors, more solid than the bus station and less crowded; it looks like a grown-up building that could save you. The woman in front of Samantha buys a First-Class ticket and it seems so cheap that she copies her.

5 The seats in First Class are wide and green with three across the carriage not four. Samantha has never travelled First Class before. She looks down at her bitten fingernails and makes fists to hide them. The ticket says 14A but when she sits in it the seat slides and swivels so she moves. The guard comes in and fixes 14A with a kick of a lever, looking at her snottily. You can turn it to face forwards or backwards; that's why it slithered. The old woman with a stick and gold leather shoes across the aisle – the one who'd been in front in the queue – is watching her. Samantha is too embarrassed to move back to her real seat. And
10 anyway she's set herself up in the new one, barricaded by plastic bags. But now she's anxious at every station and ready to leap up and vacate. In her mind she practises the smile and "my mistake" gesture. She tries a little grin but her lip wobbles and it feels like a sneer. She's regretting First Class now but if she moves down the train everyone will stare.

15 Out of the carriage window she sees orange trees like lollipops dotted with fruit. After five years she still can't believe they're real. A line of small children dressed for winter (although it seems warm to Samantha) stand holding hands by the track. When the smallest boy on the end lifts his arm in a wave, she lets her head sink to the table then fumbles a small blue cardigan out from one of her bags.

20 Each station takes her further away which is good and bad. She screws up her eyes and concentrates on the good: Mam and Dad; her sisters; feeling normal; nights on the town with the lasses; home. She rubs out nights on the town and adds an NVQ in hairdressing (if she's not too old now).

25 The bad side is a hard grey lump sitting in her stomach. She sings "All Things Bright And Beautiful" over and over in her head to block it out then lifts the little cardigan to her face breathing in. How long will his smell last? Will she suck it all out? A sudden panic makes her insides lurch and she hugs the carrier bag. It's the first time today she's really felt anything. Since she got up this morning and put on her church clothes she's been doing everything from a distance: catching the bus; getting to the station; changing her clothes in the toilet. She can't allow herself to think too much. She holds on to the idea that when she gets home, Mam and Dad will sort it all out. They'll get Alexander later. But she keeps it in a corner of her mind, skirting

round it because she knows it's fragile and empty like the blown egg on the nature table that she held too hard and then lied about. She hasn't told them she's coming. And part of her is just embarrassed about running home ("tail between her legs" she hears in her Nana's voice) after all that showing off of her tan; starting sentences with, "Well in Greece, we..."; and ordering in Greek in the restaurant in the Bigg Market. But that's too shameful to admit. And too small – a tiny spot on the bigness of it all.

The biggest thing she's ever done before was in a whoosh of romance and wanting to be different from her sisters. She had nothing to lose then but a job on the check-out at Morrison's¹. It didn't even seem like a decision. This one she's gnawed at for ages: hanging it out with the washing; chopping it up with the vegetables; turning it over and over. She's been heavy with it for months. She pictures her mother's face as she walks through the door. A warm thought, spongy with relief, but then she can't stop the next one sneaking in as her mam's voice asks, "But where's the bairn?" She hates it when thoughts jump out of nowhere or creep in behind others. She wants to blank them out but they keep coming back like felt-tip pen under emulsion paint. She pictures a *NEXT CUSTOMER, PLEASE* sign between one clump of thoughts and another. If only. The checkout doesn't seem so hard now. She thinks of those men whose wives have left them, getting seedier every week with their ready meals and cans of Carlsberg. She always chatted to them. Nikos won't go like that. He has his mother and sister and aunts and cousins. Sometimes the same man would come in all smartened up, buying wine and foreign cheese, and you could tell he'd found someone new. She thinks of another woman putting on Alexander's little shoes. He hates anyone doing it, even her, and the blank-faced woman won't know about the boat game. She jumps up; she's got to go back. But the old woman is moving down the carriage like a crab, stick in one hand, the other papery and yellow, fluttering and landing on each seat in turn. And Samantha sinks back down. As the woman's hand settles on the top of 14A, the chair twists round and the woman twirls and crumples, a bundle of sticks, too many arms and legs; her Gucci sunglasses now wonky on the thin pale face. Her paper-bag brown hair splays out so you can see her pale blue scalp underneath. At first all Samantha thinks is "I fucking told you so!" to the guard, but then the woman crashes down, her head catching on the corner of the drinks tray. As she lands in Samantha's lap a thin stream of blood runs down her forehead, disappears under the glasses and trickles out like a tear. Samantha cradles the woman, reaching into her bag for a tissue. Quickly she wipes the wound, all the time whispering words in Greek, hugging the fragile body. A whiff of rabbit hutches pokes through the smell of perfume and talc and hair-spray. When Samantha has helped her back to her seat, the old lady, in a hard, high voice refuses any more help and forbids her from telling anyone.

Samantha flinches at the dressed-in-black voice and knows she can't go back. Not to the house where Nikos's mother sits in the corner like a big spider watching her and making noises that mean she's doing something wrong though she never knows what. Sometimes she rips Alexander out of her arms, making him cry. Samantha cries later. She lies awake waiting for Nikos. If she complains he takes his mother's side now, so she keeps quiet, swallowing the sobs as he turns his back. And it's not just at home. The tentacles slither into every corner of the town. She can't walk down the street without someone shouting, "Where are you off to?" or "What are you up to?" The whole town is his cousin. At first she thought it was lovely.

When Nikos lost first one and then another job they had moved to the mainland to live with his mother. It was very different to when she had first visited. Then she was pregnant and everyone had made a big fuss of her. [...] And after Alexander was born it was like being a celebrity. But it didn't last and the new house with an en suite bathroom that Nikos had promised stopped being mentioned.

A few months ago she'd started going to the English church in Patras. She always dressed in smart clothes and got the bus. His mother accepted it because it was religion. Nikos or Yiannis would pick her up afterwards. The first time she had poked her head in and it smelt familiar, although in England she only went to church for weddings. The vicar had said, "It's not an uncommon phenomenon, Samantha, there's an enormous cultural gulf," and "My door is always open". [...]

¹ a supermarket

75 Samantha was seventeen and on holiday when she met Nikos. At work they said things like, “On the phone again, Shirley Valentine?” After two months of drizzle and relegation to shelf-stacking for being late back from her breaks, she moved to the island to live with him.

80 She’d only been there three weeks when she and Nikos were down in the old port. You couldn’t tell where the sea ended and the sky started. And the door she leant against was the exact same colour. Marriage wasn’t on her mind at all but he begged her. He danced round her in his blue Tommy Hilfiger shirt with a huge bunch of jasmine saying, “Samantha, love of my life, you have to marry me to save me from the sheep.” He meant the Greek girls his mother had got lined up, and she felt superior and sophisticated and thought “Why not?” Nikos is very, very good looking, everybody said so. He’s in a different league to the lads back home though he wears the same clothes and likes the same films. And when they visited his family on the mainland, it was her and him together. He made jokes about his parents’ old-fashioned ways in English in front of them that made her giggle and blush and punch his arm when they got outside. That first year was like one long holiday. Samantha wonders now if she’s spoiled holidays forever. [...]

85 The train is running right along the cliff edge and there’s only blue sea to the right. She thinks of Alexander’s nose pressed against the train window. Breath marks and spit. The road above juts out on stilts. She’s been along it loads of times. No one in the family ever goes by train. That’s why she’s chosen it although it takes longer. She’ll get off in Piraeus after Athens and catch the airport bus from there. She unzips her shoulder bag and feels her passport.

90 When Alexander was tiny and they had gone to England for Christmas, Nikos had put the baby on his passport. He’s got his own now. The photo makes him look like a little boxer. All the family documents are locked in the big trunk upstairs in Nikos’s mother’s room. One day when Samantha was alone she’d crept up and with the bent prong of a fork had picked the lock. She thanked God she’d gone out with Philip Gudgeon when she was fourteen although her dad had banned him. The trunk smelled of the house in the village where they always go at Easter. She’d taken out the boy’s passport, running her fingers over the gold lettering, kissing his photo although he was only downstairs, then slid it back under the embroidered tablecloths in exactly the same place that she’d marked with a piece of red wool. Hers was there as well inside a leather cover someone had given her for Christmas.

95 After that it was like a drug and if there was no one around she’d go up and get the two passports out. Then one day the boy’s wasn’t there. She’d nearly thrown up as she pulled out all the old linen looking for it. She’d sat on the bed with her head on her arms knowing that now she could never leave.

100 But as she put the stuff back, not caring how, she’d taken her own passport out of its case, put the empty cover back in the trunk and slipped it down the front of her jeans. It pressed on the top of her pubes and grew warm as she made the meal and did the washing up and put the child to bed. Later when the men had gone out and the old woman was in bed too, she’d wrapped it in tissues and put it in the box of panty liners with the packets of the pill that Marie sent her. [...]

105 Recently she’d started to pray it would be Yiannis who picked her up from church not Nikos. He’s older and still not married. He was the only one who was kind to her. He did little things to help her that no one else knew about, explained things she didn’t understand, whereas Nikos went out all the time: eating at tavernas when she’d spent ages cooking; gambling on the football; coming home in the early hours.

110 The landscape has stopped being like a postcard now. It’s scrubby and dry, and full of corrugated iron shacks and factories. They pass a field packed with row after row of dusty cars. She thinks of her father with his big cracked hands that smell of soap and oil; the creases that stay black no matter how hard he scrubs. And as she’s explaining it all to him, he strokes her hair and calls her princess. But Marie’s there too and Samantha tries saying, “It’s not an uncommon phenomenon, there’s an enormous cultural gulf.” But the words don’t work. Her sister, who has had five failed IVFs, looks back at her with the eyes of the world.

115 They’re so close to the flats that she can see the OshKosh B’gosh label on a pair of dungarees hanging out to dry. When a voice announces that the next station is Athens, Samantha shifts in her seat looking to see which side the platform is. A group of people appears and the man at the end walks just like Yiannis. With a shock she realises it is him, looking into the carriages, his head going from side to side like a goalkeeper. As he turns towards the other end of the train, she dives beneath the wide double seats and

125 jams her whole body under, face down on the dirty lino. But one foot is sticking out into the aisle and there's nothing she can do to move it. She's wearing the big fluorescent trainers she bought in London that Yiannis always laughs at. She's so tense that she wants to jump out and run to him but she's stuck anyway. She's thinking maybe he won't look in First Class when she hears his voice from the end of the carriage, "I'm looking for an English girl – she's tall with blonde hair..."

130 She's just about to crawl out when the old woman's voice cuts through, clear now like a teacher's, "Well, she's certainly not in here. I've been quite alone since Corinth." Samantha can see the walking stick stretched out between the seats, blocking the aisle.

There is a slow silence before she feels the engine through the floor on her bare stomach where her shirt has risen up and then a little shudder as the train pulls forwards towards Piraeus.

(2013)