
THE LOBSTER WALTZ

Her father has hired an actress to play her. He was threatening to do so right up until her departure, and since she left, he has been texting her updates such as:

'Actress has hair very like urs. But she's not as sarcastic! Better attitude. X'

She does not feel particularly sorry about the situation as she sits on the roof of a fifteen-storey building in Downtown Los Angeles. The sky is blue, the pool bluer, and her legs are prickling in the sun. She repositions herself on the lounge, feeling the hot plastic of the armrests melding to her skin, and considers the swimming pool. The surrounding buildings are reflected in its surface, over which swirls the oily sheen of sun lotion left behind from her swim. It is Tuesday morning, and the friends with whom she is staying have gone to work. She has been alone since she came up to the roof an hour ago.

'What's her name?' she asked him yesterday.

'I call her ur name,' he responded. 'Have to keep in character! When r u home again? X'

So much is made of LA traffic that prior to her arrival she had not even been aware the city had a subway, but it does. Yesterday, she took it to Hollywood, sitting in a carriage full of young, poor, beautiful people scanning scripts, taking loud phone

calls from their agents. Once there, she traversed the Walk of Fame, dipped in and out of the multitudinous costume shops, gift shops with life size Oscar statues.

Regular chain stores she had visited a hundred times before seemed more exciting in Hollywood. She found herself surprised, when looking at the palm trees lining the streets, to observe the zephyr among their long leaves. She had unconsciously assumed that everything here would be made of plastic.

She spent a long time in a second-hand bookshop which sold books about film stars and the history of Hollywood, and was taken with one about The Source Family, a 70s cult which sprang up around an LA-based chain of vegetarian restaurants beloved of celebrities like Marlon Brando and Greta Garbo. The Source Family was headed by one James Baker, alias Father Yod, a man armed with the key combination of charisma, vision, anger and delusion necessary to lead a cult, but who later grew bored of cult life and left his fourteen spiritual wives, leaping from a cliff in a hang-glider.

The book would suit her father, if she was bringing him a gift, but he wouldn't have time to read it, anyway. He is busy filming his new reality TV show at home in Dublin. This is why she is in LA, staying with her college friend Casey, however counterintuitive it might seem to come to LA to escape reality television. She didn't move back in with him after college, however once his show was confirmed, he tried relentlessly to convince her to do so, insisting he wanted her by his side, threatening to replace her were she to refuse.

'Now, Ireland's most beloved chef welcomes the nation into his home and his heart,'

reads the initial press release. His books are all bestsellers, his many faces adorn the covers of TV guides, home and lifestyle magazines and food packaging the country over. While an actual cult has yet to form about her father, it often feels to her as though it could, comprising the middle-aged women who queue for him to sign their books, their faces layered with makeup it's obvious they seldom wear, the young people who apply relentlessly for jobs at his restaurants, eager to merge their names with his, the powerful older men who often make her father's home feel like a commune, emerging from spare rooms after heavy nights, fights with their wives, public disgraces. She imagines that if her father had been a celebrity chef in 70s LA, he may well have counted Hollywood's rich and powerful among his followers. But as it is, he is at home with *the actress* and a camera crew from the national broadcaster.

She wonders what she will do with her own day, eight hours behind them. But first, another swim.

Sitting at the bottom of the pool, looking up through the water, she catches the blur of green glass. Christoph waves as she breaks the surface, pushing her hair back with both hands.

'Morning,' he says. 'You been up here long?'

About an hour, she tells him. He walks around to the other side of the pool and sits on the sun lounge next to hers. He holds the green pipe to his mouth and a light above its end, taking short, stilted breaths as the herb crackles, then sits back,

exhaling a trail of smoke into the air and closing his eyes. She imagines him in reverse, inhaling the plume of smoke, moving smoothly back around the pool and through the door to the roof, until he is gone.

She resents Christoph for following her up here, after she deliberately did not wake him when climbing out of Casey and Bernard's spare bed this morning. He has moved his baseball cap down over his eyes, the pipe hanging loosely from his hand draped across his stomach. He has big hands; she doesn't remember noticing this in the haze of the night before.

'Don't you have work today?' she asks him.

'I work for myself, so I'll work later,' he says. 'I like to chill on mornings after nights like last night.'

If they were in a movie, she thinks, or even just an episode of reality TV, this would be the moment at which he'd remove the cap from over one eye and look at her to gauge her reaction to his assertion that last night was in any way special or deserving of acknowledgement. But he remains still, because, despite being in LA, this is real life and Christoph, in true Angeleno style, never says anything of which he does not 'feel the truth,' or so he told her last night. Then again, maybe he's just referencing the fact that alcohol was consumed, and so he wants to take it easy today.

Yesterday, when she had finished up in Hollywood and Casey was off work, she got

an Uber to Echo Park to meet Casey and her boyfriend Bernard for dinner, after which they walked to a bar where they met Bernard's friend Christoph, had more drinks and watched a band play. Christoph had been drunk after three beers, laughing at himself and explaining that he doesn't drink much.

'I'm more of a ganga kind of guy.' She is pretty sure the only reason they got together was because she kissed him to stop him saying more things like 'ganga.'

She surfaces again and notices that Christoph is wearing different clothes from yesterday.

'I end up staying here so often that now I just keep spare clothes in my bag like, all the time,' he explains when she asks him.

She pulls her head under water, feeling it fill her ears, a comforting roar. She likes this better than listening to Christoph or to her own inane thoughts about him. In bed, he had slurred that she was his dream girl. He hadn't had the wherewithal to say much more on the subject, but the phrasing has stuck with her, and she wonders if now, the morning after, he 'feels the truth' of it, still. As she gets out of the pool, she tells herself she is relieved that Christoph's cap still stays firmly in place over his face. She doesn't want to be his dream girl, anyway, emerging from the swimming pool, skin glistening in the Californian sun. She lies down on the lounge next to him, smoothing the towel out beneath her.

'So, do you know what you want to do today?' he asks.

'No,' she says. 'Do you want to drive me around?' She is surprised at herself, spending as she has much of the time he's been up here willing him out of existence. But he says 'sure' before she can pretend she was joking. Her phone buzzes.

'Good morning, or good evening as it is here. Filming started today. Crew r shite. Actress is gr8 though. Luvs cooking! No lobsters yet. Saving that for finale! Hope ur having fun. I always hated LA. When r u home again? X'

Once, when she was five or six, she had been helping her father unload lobsters from the colourful plastic crates in which they were delivered to the house. As they placed the lobsters one by one into the tank her father kept in the kitchen, it occurred to her that these were the lobsters' final hours, and that perhaps they could sense their impending demise. What if they were sad about it? What if they still had things they wanted to do?

'Like what?' her father asked.

'I don't know, like singing or dancing?'

At this, her father had stood up straight, taken the lobster he was holding in both hands, and begun waltzing around the kitchen with it. As he waltzed, he sang:

'Oh lobster, won't you dance with me?

Crabs are no good and bats can't see

Dogs are too hairy and snakes are too scary

It must be you, lobster, who dances with me'

He proceeded to take all of the lobsters, one by one, on a dance, and when they had all had their turn, he scooped her up, and twirled her around, faster and faster until she shrieked. After that, the lobster waltz became their tradition, every time her father was serving lobster at one of his parties, they would give the doomed their final dance. She is sure the nation will love it.

Later, she and Christoph ride the elevator down the twelve storeys from Bernard and Casey's apartment, and walk out into the tiled lobby, passed the bored doorman in his navy shirt. In the carpark at the side of the building, Christoph balances his pipe next to the gearstick of his car which he parked before heading to Echo Park last night. As they set off, he switches on music and she tells him that she loves this band, which is true, and he says exactly what she expects him to say.

'These guys are buddies of mine.'

Last year, she paid twenty-seven euro plus booking fee to see them live in Dublin.

'They're pretty tight,' he continues. 'They're recording their new album in Brentwood right now.'

'That's cool,' she says. She wants to ask how he knows them, but then, she thinks, the right people know the right people who know people in the know, and if you

know, you know and all that. This is LA, after all, and in addition to the apps he builds, Christoph is also a musician; the type, she assumes, who goes to the right parties. Growing up, she often felt as though her whole life was a big, sad party. A gleaming house that looks like a birthday cake, pretty dresses, drunk guests, people she didn't want to talk to. She hates the way they act around her father, like dogs rolling on their backs. It's made worse by the fact that she knows it will all come out one day, about his friends, the men of the commune, the powerful businessmen, the ones he protects. Too often she would see them turning up on the doorstep, haggard, saturated, oozing, swaying, not sure what they'd done, or who needed to be shut up, paid off, and she would watch from the stairs as her father brought them inside, kept them safe. Sometimes she would meet them in their underwear in the kitchen, red stomachs and spiky chins, eating things from jars in the fridge. They would introduce themselves, but she'd know who they were already, having seen their grinning faces in the newspapers next to headlines featuring deals, stocks, investments; enormous sums of money.

She wonders if her father ever noticed that, throughout her teenage years, he swapped her for these men; that when some friend of his was laying low in the family home, she would leave, spending days and nights at other people's houses. One time she slept on the beach and was awoken in the morning by dog walkers, kind older ladies who thought that she was dead.

The roads are wide and made for driving fast. The houses are white with rippled, rustic roofs, the trees on corners gnarled and blooming, patterning her vision as they drive. *White house, orange roof, green tree, pink flowers, white house, orange roof,*

green tree—

The types of parties Christoph attends are probably also attended by cool musicians with cult followings, like the band they're listening to now. Maybe she should join a cult while she's out here. They stop at traffic lights and Christoph lights his pipe. She rolls down her window. Christoph probably knows people in cults. Perhaps he is driving her to a cult right now, unbeknownst to her. Cults are hard to come by in places as small as Ireland. You really must go abroad to find anything substantial or original. The only person she knows with significant cult experience is her friend's mother who lived in America for a while and did a brief stint in the Moonies, but she escaped with her sister in the dead of night and now lives in Raheny.

It would hit the headlines were the wayward daughter of Ireland's leading celebrity chef to run away to join a Los Angelean cult. She thinks of Angela Lansbury moving her family to Cork when her daughter Deirdre was being courted by the Mansons. Would her father have to come and rescue her and then move to a rural location to avoid media scrutiny? Probably not. He could simply hire the actress full time to replace her.

'Where are we going?' she asks.

'I want to show you Sunset, Mulholland, the hills you know?' Christoph says. 'After, I'll take you to the best view in the county.'

Soon, they are passed the endless freeways, cars glinting like strings of beaded

jewels, and have made it to the hills.

'This is where it all went down,' Christoph gestures to the winding road down which they are sailing at full speed. 'James Dean, the whole crew.'

'Wow.'

'Yeah, it's super dangerous up here,' he says, exhaling a plume of pungent smoke. She holds tighter to the sides of her seat. After a few more minutes, Christoph pulls the car in to the side of the road where there is a clearing and a view of the city. They get out and walk to the edge of a steep slope. She looks out at the horizon.

'Are you having a moment?' Christoph asks. 'Most first timers do when they come up here. You can see them mapping this view over everything they've seen in movies.'

A moment, honestly. She wants to say, well I'm not. She wants to say, stop looking at me. She wants to say, I'm not your dream girl, you don't know me. But she says nothing, and looks back out at the city, muted, sun-washed in the afternoon light, and then down to the ground at her feet.

'Come on,' Christoph says. 'There's still an even better view to see.' But she doesn't move quite yet, instead transfixed by the shadows cast by the turquoise leaves of eucalyptus trees, flickering across the dusty soil.

They climb back into the car and speed off. Her hair is wild from the wind, but she

keeps the window rolled down. They pass enormous houses, nestled behind trees and gates, peeping like actresses about to take to the stage, but still she is thinking of the shadows.

She is eleven, and her father is throwing a dinner party. A dozen lobsters are delivered to the house. She doesn't want to be there, but it's a school night, and therefore she has nowhere else to be. She has not yet been officially sent to bed, and she can't quite bear to keep away from the action; she is still a child after all. The kitchen is large and white and opens on to the dining room. The guests mill about, white wines in hand, laughing loudly at jokes which she does not find funny. Every so often, one of the wives will kneel, stooping unnecessarily low, and ask her how she likes school. 'Do you like your teacher? What's your favourite subject?' School is seemingly the only thing adults remember about being children. Still, the women are glamorous and she likes looking at them. She once heard her father describe someone as 'very put together,' and she thinks she knows what he meant. She imagines the women's heads in separate pieces, white teeth clipping into tanned faces, red lips stretched and shined, the eyes popped in, the eyelashes attached one by one, and then topped with immaculate hair.

Several young waiters hovering near the table, ready to top up glasses and clear plates. In the kitchen, they take turns spinning her around so that she can practice her pirouettes. The kitchen is bright, but lights in the dining room are low, the candles not yet dripping. The guests dip their spoons in the chilled lemon soup starter and talk about things she does not understand, taking what feels like hours over their shallow bowls. Then it is time for the lobsters. Her father stands as the servers clear

the table.

'We have a tradition,' he says, gesturing to her. 'It's going in the next book.' He strides over to the kitchen where the lobsters, their claws wrapped in rubber bands, shift lazily in their tank. One of the servers is bringing a pot of water to boil on the stove.

'It's called The Lobster Waltz,' he announces to his audience. 'She loves this. You want to explain it to everyone?' She does not want to explain it to everyone, but if she is to be uncooperative here, it will break the shining plate on which her father is serving this evening and so she does. As she speaks, her father lifts the first of the lobsters from the tank and holds it to him, the water bleeding through the breast of his shirt. The guests laugh as he spins around the table, singing the song, and she claps because she doesn't know what else to do. Then her father asks, 'Who wants to join in?'

Suddenly the guests have all risen, napkins falling to the floor and they begin to swarm the kitchen where the waiters hand them each a lobster. Drunk, they start spinning, the lobster antennae tickling their faces, distorted figures casting long shadows on the walls. They waltz in circles, her father with his wet shirt keeping time. The room feels hot, and behind them, the waiters prepare the salad beds. She stands among them, unsure what to do, until her father grabs her, scooping her up with one arm. While they spin, she and the lobster are the same for a moment, two creatures to be danced with in the shadows. Sweat beads scintillate on her father's forehead, his white teeth mask the sour white wine sheen of his breath, the jolts of

his movements hurt her ribs.

Then the waltz is over and everybody is laughing, the lobsters hurled back in their tank, the waiters handing the tea towels to the guests to dry their hands. Her father puts her down but keeps his arm around her shoulders. He asks one of the waiters to set her a place next to his at the table and then he closes the sliding doors between the kitchen and dining room while he cooks the lobsters. When the lobsters are served, she watches the guests crack their red backs open and dig into the flesh of their dance partners. Her father carefully cuts meat from his own lobster and lays it on her plate. The candles on the table have begun to melt. From then on, there is always a place for her at the grown ups' table.

They pull in and park at the base of a small hill. Above them looms a cement lookout station. A sign at the bottom reads:

LA96C

RESTRICTED ACCESS

Before they get out, Christoph looks at her and asks 'You okay? You good? You've been pretty quiet.'

'Oh yeah, I'm fine!' she says breezily. 'Just, you know, taking it all in. Having *moments*.'

'Rock n' roll!' he smiles. 'You're gonna love this place.'

They get out of the car, and she follows Christoph up the path towards the tower.

'Right now, we're on San Vicente Mountain,' Christoph says over his shoulder.

'What you're looking at right here is LA-96. During the Cold War, it had ground-based radar and computers to track enemy aircraft and guide missiles from the Sepulveda Basin, which is right over there. This is the old, original radar tower.' He points at the structure looming ahead of them. 'It's got a 360 view of the Santa Monica Mountains, the Encino Reservoir, San Fernando Valley, the L.A. Basin. It's sick. This was a high security area back then, 'cause the computers had all the info on enemy targets. But now, all that shit could be done on, like, your cell phone.'

They reach the tower and begin climbing the three flights of rickety stairs up to the hexagonal lookout pad. At the top, the view of the wide, endless landscape is astounding. Crows dip in and out of view, their caws echoing.

'When you grow up in LA,' Christoph says, 'it's easy to forget.'

She knows he means it's easy to forget how beautiful it all is, and how lucky you are to bear witness to it, but it's easy to forget a lot more than that. She's been here just a few days and already she feels prepared to leave everything behind for a non-existent cult, perhaps a glamorous death.

'Thanks for showing me this,' she says. Maybe she and Christoph could start their own cult up here in their Cold War palace, above the smog, above everything, the

crowd their first initiants, cawing their cries of allegiance.

'Do you know any cults I could join?' she asks. He looks back at her.

'I can get you a job at Facebook, if that's what you mean?'

'No, like actual cults. I crave a guru, a commune. Maybe some crimes... Maybe we should start a cult, Christoph!'

He laughs. 'Maybe. Not sure I really have the time though. Or the charisma. Maybe you could start one, and I'll be like, the social media manager.'

'Do you know what would be really good?' she says. 'A reality TV show set in a cult. Just like, the day to day of cult life. It'd be enlightening, could be super dark, terrifying, could eventually have to be cancelled because they all get arrested. It'd be next level entertainment.'

'It would be!' Christoph says. 'Definitely! But only if it was actually real and so much of that stuff is like, 100% fake. So much of it is just actors.'

'Actors join cults all the time though, don't they? So it could become real.' She turns to him. 'If they tried hard enough, it could actually be real.'

She thinks of the actress at home now in her place. Does she sit, if she exists at all, napkin in lap, wine in glass, gazing at her father with the utmost admiration? Do the

hairs on her arms stand up a little under the camera's gaze, like flowers facing the morning light?

Her phone buzzes.

'Change of plan. Doing lobsters with actress 2morrow. Think audience will luv it!

Shame u decided not 2 take part. Actress is gr8 dancer! When r u home again? X'