

The Islands Between Us

The gardener was at work outside, and the smell of fresh cut rosemary came through the bathroom window. Here she had come to take a break from the house that was too full of icons and self-regard.

“Do you like it?” he asked, when they’d first arrived. But she couldn’t find anything to say. The house’s sense of importance precluded her. If he hadn’t asked directly, if it had been a modest house or modestly presented, she could have found much to say about the rattan furniture, the paintings, especially the blue one of Penelope, the terrace, the apricot tree, the capaciousness.

“I like the color of paint on this wall,” she managed to say later.

“Finally, a compliment,” he said.

A few days in she also admitted to the pleasure of being in a second home without all the family.

“It’s nice we have the whole place to ourselves,” she offered. Then why did she keep wanting to hide away, to find a place in the house that was not the house?

After they’d met on that same island two years earlier, there followed a time of emails, filled with possibility and the magic of typing words and sending them through fiber optic cables as

light pulses, the kind of letters the writer loves as much as the receiver, loves the feeling of beginning to fall in love in writing without any commitments.

They drove around the island, one of the largest in Greece, where the people are a little touched, a little hard-headed, according to her Athenian friends. They heard the hollow tinkling of bells on goats that reared up on rocks and nuzzled tamarisk trees and chewed. They drove by island cats, small demur cats with high pointy ears that hid behind giant mint-green Dumpsters.

The radio came in and out as they drove along the high mountain roads and went through highplaced vineyards where they made the sweet-tart local Robola wine, and they passed fig and carob trees, cypress, olive, oak, and walnut.

The radio would suddenly come in loud with a sappy summer song. “There’s no reason to live alone,” Antonis Remos crooned. “I am like the wave that the rock breaks. You gave me life. *Ela*, take it back, pleee-ase.” Then it would crackle away again. Further on, they caught a Rembetika station and heard Tsitsanis wailing, “Cloudy Sunday.”

Normally she loved the light, frothy Greek pop music piped out at beach bars in summertime. But it was the Rembetika, the blues songs, that soothed her now and fit the growing cold undercurrent between them.

A sexy-voiced DJ came on. He swirled his words around like a really nice Scotch and introduced some great old bitter Rembetika songs. “So many mothers have cried. Mine may as well too.”

Two years earlier in August when they’d met, he’d been at the village café. He was pale and reserved in a panama hat and barely seemed to clock her existence. But when she started talking, he glanced quickly at her and brightened like a plant that had just been watered.

On the sixth day, they left the car and took the ferry to Lixouri and almost missed the last ferry back and she looked for the good restaurant she’d found two years earlier but it wasn’t there anymore, and the food at Mimoxa, a fava with grilled veggies and balsamic vinegar and a roast chicken over roasted potatoes, seemed good until the waiter began making anti-immigrant comments, and there was that impulse again to hide or go quickly away from this world that was not her world like turning over a rock in a lovely place and finding it crawling with potato bugs.

It was cold and tense on the boat, and there was, it seemed, no love between them anymore. She had a brief impulse to snuggle up close like she used to and soothe the pain, but the frisson between them was stronger. And she wanted to stay up late and watch movies, but he couldn’t keep his eyes open, and she thought they should be more understanding of each other instead of serving each other a last meal.

On the fifth day, they went swimming at the famous Myrtos beach and watched the light on the water turn a meringue color, and the waves were quite exciting, the sound the white pebbles made when the waves crashed like a rave party. And he’d put his hand on her back in the water, and it seemed real, and he had finally put on the Vilebrequin shorts she loved instead of the

Speedo swimsuit. But he had no comments about her clothes ever that were not judgmental, and what seemed to please before didn't anymore, and she felt that to be with him was to enter an intolerant palace of beloved things.

On the fourth day, they drove to the top of the island and hiked to the castle at Assos. The footpath was beautiful with wide paving stones that made her think of the entrance to the Odeon of Herodotus Atticus in Athens. Once inside the archway of the fortress, they were on large grounds with dirt paths in different directions. Wasps and butterflies darted among the thistles and cat o'nine tails.

They walked north to see an old cannon which he pronounced *ka-noon*, and on the way back, they veered off the main road, taking a footpath cut into the hillside like a mezzanine floor above the sea. The path pulled them on separately, and they walked in silence winding up to a peak at the tip of the peninsula. The perfect half-moon beach below, the water in stripes of tortoiseshell aquamarine and amulet blue, pulled their eyes but did not pull them closer together.

This is my beach, she thought, and if the day had been a different day, if she'd had the right shoes, she would have loved to climb down to it. It didn't look too steep, but it was hard to tell from above. She would have liked to try anyway and said as much, breaking the silence.

"No, it's impossible," he said. He was always saying things like that.

Back in the bathroom, she went pee, and it came out almost as clear as the water she drank all day. She pushed back her hair to see if the roots were showing. She checked the dryness of her face and dabbled on some more Avène. She liked the private realm of this unshared bathroom.

Here she didn't have to pretend she was still having a good time or carry on conversation that now seemed banal no matter what they said. She could just think about being a guest on this island once at the beginning and now at the end, the way it bookended their relationship.

What had seemed like a ribbon between them in the beginning now seemed ephemeral and frayed. There had been a love for different times and places, for a more tangible world, old things, the touch of books and pens on paper, landscapes seen slowly like six months earlier when they'd pulled away from Napoli by train and the hills close to the train were already dark but the sky above Mount Vesuvius in the distance was a rococo of blue and pink, and they seemed more than themselves together.

She had loved his sartorial flair. Every Italian worth his salt, she knew, even one with roots in a Greek island, had to cut a *bella figura*. Especially in Milan, especially in the art world. But to wrap his clothes in tissue paper and then wrap himself in clothes as if he were an object himself? To talk about others as if he were a lord surveying his domain? *No one cares if your family has aristocratic roots*, she wanted to say.

Just outside the bathroom was the painting of Penelope in blues and greens that made her think of the beach at Antisamos, a beach in a cove ringed by green hills not broken by a single rock or

telephone pole. Just green straight down to the beach, and beyond those watery stripes, watermelon-rind green, jade, marine blue, and underwater rugs of black.

The painting showed the singularity of the Greek myth, this archetypal faithful wife, she and the island Odysseus kept trying to return to forever linked as one. He travelled all of the Mediterranean world, had complete lives in other places with other lovers, but none of it mattered. Only getting back to Ithaka even if it took the time of his infant son becoming fully grown for him to return, the island within him its own lodestone.

The painting made her think of his mother, who had painted it, and how much she genuinely liked his mother. She was both simple and elegant and classy, even if her thoughts always seemed to be on a distant horizon.

Ithaka was the closest island to them but so different. Perhaps this had been his mother's inspiration, perhaps she also hadn't felt completely at home in this house, coming from another country. Perhaps she felt she belonged more on little Ithaka, not this masculine show-off island. Because although Ithaka was Odysseus's destination, his name was associated with his journey, with all his feats and ruses, his odyssey, whereas Ithaka is Penelope's.

On the third day they'd ventured to a small beach on the southwest coast with a little taverna draped in vines, a cool overhang above the cove. She'd gone swimming and he'd put on his flipper hands and did laps, and she'd thought how out of place he seemed doing pool laps in the

sea. But that night the dinner of grilled fish, village salad and roasted eggplant dip had been truly delicious, and the mood had lightened with the wine and the effervescence of summer days.

Maybe there was nothing wrong after all, she thought as they drove home.

That night had been cinema night in the village, organized by his cousin, so they'd gone and sat on the grass and watched *Mountain*, a documentary that she enjoyed for the breathtaking scenery and adrenaline and the life message to keep the flame of discovery alive, but it was not for him.

"Too American," he had said.

The nights were surprisingly cold for a Greek island in summer, and she noticed this cold feeling, this feeling of eroding, even while there was a familiarity. Even when a relationship has gone off, she thought, it has inertia which makes it hard to stop.

The second day, he had some business to attend to in the capital Argostoli, so they'd walked around in town and stopped for coffee at the café built around the big plane tree, and she saw that the Archeological Museum that had been closed two years earlier was still closed, and seemed to be indefinitely closed, falling into ruin. Argostoli is situated across from a part of the island that swoops around to face the rest of the island, and there's this long bridge that people can cross to walk into it, and from there, you can also take the ferry to Lixouri on the other side and it's almost like going to another island. Of course, she had loved Lixouri, his least favorite part of the island. It seemed more like a simple Greek village, with kiosks and café-bars and tavernas filled

with families lining the *plateia*, kids with scooters and bikes zipping around squealing in the big open square.

On the first day, they had not gone far, only going to Alpha Vita for groceries and then to the closest beach. They swam and she took her first color and they walked to where his cousin was beached on the rocks and then to the taverna above Avalos Beach and ate baked eggplant, *horta*, and grilled octopus and drank the local white wine, and because it was his island, the island of his childhood, everything had to taste superlatively.

She didn't want to offend, it was good, but not as good as she remembered the food on other islands in other summers in Greece, Amorgos for example, or Crete. And they argued about the state of immigrants in Greece and Italy, just as they had when he visited her in New York when he'd finally come after promising for two years, conquering his fear of flying: they'd argued at an elegant bar when they should have been getting tipsy and making out, and he got overly heated and passionate, spitting out his words in English.

She thought about how they drew their ideological lines, how the political and physical always overlap in the end. He was closed about immigration, closed about her, all the countries she'd lived in and travelled to, the languages she'd studied, her translation work. He was more of the inland in *island*, she thought, more circumscribed. What did that make her then, like the water flowing around, in different directions? How could two people descended from Greek islands be so different?

This home ghettoed him. Always he returned to the same place. Here in this village, there was something fossilized, as it was mostly populated by people that had left Greece and returned from their diaspora only in summer, Greeks from the 50s and 60s and their children, like black figures on pottery.

Kefalonia had lost something after it was rebuilt following the big earthquake in 1953. Moneyed Greek emigres put up big modern houses that looked like California in the 50s. To her eyes, through her Athenian relatives' eyes, they looked wrong here. Stucco mansions with landscaped lawns in the Ionian Sea.

In the end, the islands are what divides us. She loved the entire archipelago of Greece and tried to go every summer, and other times of year if possible. They were both full of and divested of their Greek lives, what brought them together in the first place now kept them at bay, the missing link they each held, a negative space, not enough to hold them together.

She longed for the Aegean, the elemental, the essential, the white houses and blue water, a minimal landscape that pared down everything. Her skin turned brown as she felt emptiness fill in and bloom. In New York, she was pale, she worked all the time, she was like millions of others. This secret Greek life, this DNA not activated until the sunlight of a Greek summer hit it, was hardly seen but longed for.

She had to admit that he'd had more access to his Greek roots. She'd been coming to Greece for years, but he'd been coming to this island literally all his life, the journey from Italy by car so

much easier. He had grown up speaking Greek with his father, her parents had always spoken in English.

They were better in Italy, she also admitted. An American with an Italian in the end was better than two half Greeks. The dozen or so trips she'd made to visit him had been an encounter, starting with the first one in Florence in spring that brought an end to the months of correspondence. Walking in the hills above Florence, seeing the marble confectionary of the Duomo in the distance, walking along the Arno and stopping for spritzes, eating at restaurants overhanging the water, going for coffee at Gilli, and then saying a goodbye at the train station till she would join him again in the north.

Then there were all the trips that followed to Milan, Bologna, Parma, Porto Venero, Venice, Naples, Ravenna, Verona, storied places in her mind from art history and Shakespeare. They went to Greece together too. Beyond this island where they'd first met and where they would leave each other, there was the summer in between when she had persuaded him to try a different island and they had gone to sleek Kea. They had a wonderful eco-tourist home of whitewashed walls, a stone terrace with a long stone table, wraparound views of olive trees and acorn trees on the surrounding hills, the nearest beach a short walk away. They lived well on this neutral island, this borrowed time, but it was still not as well as it should have been, even then.

Still she marveled how they could have moved so far away from when she saw him as an exception to the rule, not afraid to be his own person, to follow his passions, to break the mold. How was it that now he seemed like someone quite molded after all, narrow and closed, someone

who measured life in permanent contracts and collections, more in love with art and photographs than with the subjects, and actually quite hateful of certain groups?

How did they get from their first Athenian weekend together when he shot black and white photos and they'd walked in the late spring rain to Seychelles taverna and they'd shopped for posh clothes in Kolonaki? How did they go from that to now when she felt he held her openness and tolerance against her?

She thought all of this in the bathroom, and of the cocoon that couples can be in on the beach, each ensconced on their own sunbeds behind dark glasses and hats, the sun baking them in a soporific silence. He was probably wandering in his own thoughts far away from or close to her too, scrutinizing every one of her flaws, every life choice. Maybe he too was sifting through old relationships, wondering where they had gone wrong, how they compared.

In *contratiempo*, maybe she thought about the time she lived in Crete and the boys on the beach in their shorts and tattoos and beards before they became so popular, before smartphones became omnipresent but everyone was with their little Nokias that fit so easily in the palm of the hand, and she got so good at texting she could do it without looking, and she had her local boyfriend who welcomed her into his family, who took her all over Crete, and everything was “dialed in” as her best friend would say. Or maybe their thoughts went ahead to the bedroom, and how they would pretend, and it didn't matter that the relationship had ended before the holiday was over or had even begun, they still carried on like everything was fine.

How did they get from there to here? That they could live all these beautiful things together, and then she'd wake up on an island in a strange house, with her keys in hand and bags packed? Cold inside and out waiting in the airport for the plane to arrive from Athens and the light gone suddenly, the dark so absolute, and she felt like a library full of books inside no one wanted to read. That's where she would live now, in one of the books of his past, and he would live now in one of the books of her past, along with so many others.

His friend from Paris that had been visiting when she first arrived was not like her friends from Paris. Hers were mixed race and gay and designers and improv artists. His friend talked of "his pure white skin," and she could not tell if he meant it ironically.

He was there her first night when they shared that awful glass of wine together on the terrace, and she felt chilled and like a stranger in this place she'd been invited to, until his awful friend had gone, and she wanted to ask if he was being serious but didn't have the stomach to. She only wanted to not be there anymore, only believed that no beauty or elegance or art is worth intolerance, that it only makes what *was* beautiful and sought after ugly.

On the last day, the seventh day, they went to Antisamos Beach of the white sand and green hills. They were both tanned now, had fresh water delivered to their table, the chairs were free, the music not too loud, and the temperature a perfect 30 degrees. Everything was perfect. They were lovely and everything was lovely but so cold inside and out.

In spite of him, she had that feeling again of familiarity, of the place knowing her and seeing her come back, and she remembered driving that road alone on her first trip to the island and swimming in that silky water before she went to Ithaka and stayed at Kioni and picked up the book *Under the Sheltering Sky* not having any idea at that time that she would be moving to Tangiers, after the end.

All of it was seemingly sweet but had been growing more and more bitter. It took time for the feeling to crystallize, it was hard to reconcile with the beauty of the island, but then it was there, impossible to ignore. She knew it and sat up to process, and he must have sensed something, knowing that she knew at that moment because he tried to ask her something in a roundabout way.

Then she realized he did not want her to know that it was over, didn't want her to be ahead of him, wanted to claim it for himself. Even so, he could not do it out loud. In the end, she was a possession too, and he had a hard time letting go. But it was so obvious, how could he possibly think she would not know? It was like swimming out of warm shallow water and suddenly feeling the cold layer of water at the bottom, as clear as truth.

The last evening at the Waterway Restaurant, a throwback to the 70s with green lighting and terrace rock walls, drinking Robola wine and looking over the little harbor and beyond that to Zakynthos island which lit up the horizon even at night, little waves lapping below, it all became garish. She reviewed the irritants, how when he didn't hear or understand something she said he wouldn't tell her, how sometimes he didn't listen at all, how he would say *actually* all the time

even when it didn't actually fit and used present perfect when he wanted simple past and made his s's z's and said *asked* with two syllables and said, *He asked to me* and *He said me* and *He listened me* and he would always say, *Look this old building*, *Look this tree* and continue pointing long after she'd seen it when he only needed to say it once as she had nothing else to do but look out the window at everything as they drove. And she was irritated with herself that they didn't speak Greek together more because then she got less bothered. All of these things built up but were nothing like this ideological line, this hard break, this sinking weight now.

That night at Waterway, she'd finally asked him pointblank and he told her, and the end was like picking fruit that is already ready to fall and it comes away easily in the hand. How easy it ended all of a sudden. Now that they were saying it, she had no idea why she had come in the first place, why she was there at all. Why had he invited her? She had opened her questions as a discussion but quickly saw there was no reason to discuss anything anymore. It was already over, prepared like a stage set just for her to exit left. All his things were packed already in his mind and she was living in his past.

The only saving grace she felt was in that she had stopped pretending and had spoken things as she saw them, as they were. Like this she could leave him behind and take the island with her.