

Windblown Clouds

EXCERPT No. 4

Alone With The Mountain

Having left the monastery to buy food in Corfu Town, I took a bus to Strinilas, the highest village on the island, above which loomed the mountain Pantokrator. When I got off the bus in the late afternoon, laden with as much food as I could carry up the mountain, it was storming.

When the bus stopped in the village everybody scattered for their houses, leaving me alone in the heavy rain, feeling wet and forlorn. Hoisting the pack and looping the bags of food through my arms, I threw my poncho over my shoulders and picked up the two jugs of wine. The road that led through the village was deserted except for a few wet dogs curled up together in a doorway, shivering in their sleep. The wind howled, ballooning the poncho behind me.

When I reached the last stone house of the village, whose back door opened to the mountain's wild, untamed slope, an old woman came running out to me. She stood before me in the rain, her face wrinkled and her eyes large and soft with compassion. Her dress was the color of the earth; her apron had flour on it. She stared at me, taking stock of my situation. Then she pointed toward the mountain and said, "Epáno?" Up? I said yes, and she muttered something beneath her breath. A look of consternation crossed her face as if it were she who was going up. She wanted to relieve me of my suffering and discomfort by taking them upon herself, as we stood frozen in time with wisps of fog enveloping us. She held out her hand, caught some drops of rain, and said, "Vroní," rain. I nodded. Another moment passed. She turned. She took a few steps; then she stopped to see if I was really going epáno. Seeing I was, she crossed herself and scurried to the shelter of her house, leaving me alone to face the mountain.

By the time I reached the dirt track that led to the monastery, the wind had risen to a ferocious howl. As I climbed the trail I entered the low clouds. This was the point of no return: I could still turn back—surely the woman at that last house would put me up—but if I continued I'd have to reach the top. Although the wind blew right through me, I heard no thunder; nor did I see flashes of lightning. Uncorking the bottle of white wine, I took some large gulps, and with renewed confidence pushed on through the boulder-strewn landscape. I prayed that the monk was at the lower monastery, and that there would be a fire and supper waiting for me when I arrived. I could just see the kitchen suffused with the fire's warm glow.

But that was all in my mind's eye. What I actually saw I took at first for an apparition. In the gathering darkness, two dark figures emerged from the thick fog. It was beyond my wildest imaginings that I would encounter others where I myself felt like a stranger amid the forces of nature. Panic seized me. I slipped quietly behind a huge boulder. Their wavering forms quickly took shape: one was short and stout and bent almost double against the wind, and the other, taller and more erect, was wearing a long robe that billowed in the gusting wind. It was the monk and a man from the village.

I jumped out from my hiding place, causing both of them to gasp in fright.

“Thomás,” the monk yelled, “eh, Thomás!”

Then he said, “A woman in the village has died. I must go to the church. The lower monastery is locked. Go to the upper monastery. I will meet you there in a few days. May God be with you! The storm is raging upon the mountain!”

And with that he was gone. He didn't even stop to tell me the news. He told me in passing, as he and the villager continued toward the safety of the village. I stood watching the two men dissolve into the darkening night, taking with them all hope of a warm fire at the end of my journey. Instead of the monk cooking chicken while I warmed myself before the fire, I now saw the cool and damp bed that awaited me. I cursed it all. “Eh, Thomás,” I said aloud, donning the monk's raspy voice, “you are a crazy man!”

Ahead of me was nothing but storm and fog-obscured mountain. Putting my hands out before me, I touched the soft limits of what I could discern. The fog deepened. Opacity turned to night.

Nothing of what I knew would be of help here. Darkness had descended. I was alone with the mountain. Much of who I was fell away at that moment. I was both closer to the animal and to the divine. My senses sharpened. Into me flowed the raw forces of nature. The mountain stood solid and unmoving—a mass of bare rock forced to the sky, pounded by rough weather. The air was thick with cloud and cold. Rain was falling heavily now. Everywhere rivulets flowed and merged together. Distant rumblings of thunder sharpened my awareness to a keen edge, and in the distance through the rain-filled fog dim flashes reached my eyes.

I felt strong, as if I too were an element along with mountain, cloud, rain, and lightning. We had all existed before in this heightened tension of warring elements. And strange as it may sound, I now felt completely at home so far from anything human. I came to know myself in elemental simplicity as the warring forces called me into their sphere.

I felt myself as one with every human being who has gone to the edge of the earth, to the bottom of the ocean, or to the roof of the world. My steps were their steps; we walked in a timeless moment of interpenetration.

The thunder came closer and the lightning became more intense. But I was not afraid. I was behind myself, watching my eyes watch the world, hearing my ears listen to the whirl of the wind, and feeling

my body weak from the cold and the weight of my load. I felt what Thomas felt, saw what he saw, and heard what he heard; yet I was behind it all, unmoved and unconcerned.

I would have felt with equal indifference if lightning had struck a tree on the slopes or a rock on the path, smashing it to pieces; I would have felt the same if it had been me who had been struck. It would have mattered little. Would the winds have ceased to howl? Would the rain have ceased to lash? Or how about the mountain: would it cease to expose its rocky face to the pounding elements?

I was walking up a barren mountain road, yet I didn't know how long I'd been on it. As I progressed from one turn of the road to the next, I felt like the sailor whose boat is being dashed by the storm: he cares little of his final destination. The trough of one wave and the crest of the next is as far as his senses will take him

Finally, I heard the clanging of a bell and knew its sound as a fledgling bird knows its mother's call. It was the bell above the monastery gate being rung by the wind. I went through the gate with the sense of relief that a sailor feels when his storm-racked boat comes in sight of land, and he recognizes it as his own harbor as he glides in through the well-known channel, knowing that his feet will soon touch solid earth. I opened the door to my little room, dumped the food and wine on the floor, and lay on the bed, falling instantly into a deep sleep.