

Windblown Clouds

EXCERPT No. 3

To the Coast

After having lived in the monastery atop the Mountain Pantokrator for some time our larder grew thin. So I took a trip to Corfu Town along the coast to buy food. I decided to walk down the slope of the mountain to the coast because there was an abandoned village on the way I wanted to explore. The following excerpt begins while I was in that village.

I aimed toward the church on the knoll, which had once been the center for the villagers who lived in the now silent and abandoned streets. But as I neared where the land rose to meet the church's door the way became so thick with brambles that I became entangled; thorns scratched my arms and brought blood. I gave up. The church had been the center of the villagers' existence. Perhaps now that the villagers were gone it was best if this center remained obscured and seen from a distance only, crumbling slowly under the hand of nature.

I walked to the edge of the village and climbed into the terraced fields so I could pick a route to the coast. Though I still couldn't see the coast I did see a stream that ran below the village, and I knew it would take the most direct route to the sea. I followed the contour of the land to where the stream dipped into a shallow ravine. There I turned to take one last look at the monastery, which loomed high on top of the rocky slope.

For so long I had been looking down into the scene I was about to enter; I had seen the road snaking along the coast toward Corfu Town like a ribbon of black rising and falling over the land's gentle undulations. I had seen Corfu Town itself, its white buildings changing hue in the light of the many-hued sun. I had watched boats docking and departing at the port, and I had watched as they slipped over the horizon toward Italy in the west and Patras on the Greek mainland in the south. I had watched the comings and goings of people on the island and I had seen the towns and villages in which they lived and worked. The whole while I had taken note, but not taken part. I had thought the thoughts of one in a clarified and more rarefied atmosphere. My feelings must have been close to those of William Butler Yeats when he wrote,

I have always sought to bring my mind close to the mind of Indian and Japanese poets..., lay brothers whom I imagine dreaming in some mediaeval monastery the dreams of their village, learned authors who refer all to antiquity; to immerse it in the general mind where that mind is scarce separable

from what we have begun to call ‘the subconscious’; to liberate it from all that comes of counsels and committees, from the world as it is seen from universities or populous towns...and [I] have put myself to school where all things are seen...

Following the stream until the ravine became too narrow to continue, I climbed the riverbank. There I came upon a small trail. At first the size of an animal track, it quickly widened as it followed the slope of the mountain toward the coast. Soon I saw donkey tracks and knew I was nearing a village.

Rounding a corner, I came upon an elderly peasant woman clad in an old and patched dress. She was picking wild greens and stuffing them into a cloth sack. When she saw me her mouth gaped in toothless wonder at one the likes of me descending the mountain. She asked where I had come from.

“From the mountain,” I said, “I came from the monastery. I live there.”

Her face lit up. “You are a monk?”

“No, but I live with the monk who lives there.”

“The monk is a very good man,” she said as she tied the sack with a piece of rope. “He is generous and wise.”

She threw the sack over her shoulder and walked with me down the path.

“You are not Greek,” she said. “Your words come too slowly.”

“I am from America.”

“Ah, America! It is very good there, no?”

“Yes, it is; but it is good here too.”

“Yes, it is good here,” she said after thinking it over. “I have my house and my family. I have olive trees and a donkey, and I can pick greens. My life is good.”

I saw that she was feeling the strain of the sack on her back. So I took it from her and put it over my shoulder. “Thank you,” she said. “You are young and strong. I am old now. When you are old it is hard to carry heavy loads.”

As we passed the first house at the edge of the village she called out to a woman sitting under a grape arbor surrounded by young children. “Anna, look what I’ve found! He’s from America, and now he lives at the monastery on top of the mountain.”

Anna came to take a better look. The children hid behind their mother’s dress, giggling, peering out at me from time to time. Never addressing me directly, Anna asked the elderly woman some questions about me, and the old woman answered, beaming as if I were a new possession. As we took our leave, the children, who hadn’t yet dared to say a word to me, called after us, “Yassas, yassas,” good-bye. They ran back to their veranda giggling the entire way.

Soon we came upon a low, whitewashed house surrounded by fruit trees. “This is my house,” she said. “Come, I will give you coffee.”

I deposited the sack of greens by the front door. She brought out a chair and put it in the shade of a mulberry tree. She told me to sit while she prepared the coffee. Soon an old man appeared at the door. He was bent with age and his face was deeply wrinkled. His whiskers were thick and long, almost like a cat's. He dragged a chair next to mine and letting out a long sigh, he sat. Then he said, "You are from America, no?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good, very good," then he stared through the olive grove on the other side of the dirt track as if he were trying to remember something. Then his eyes lit up and he raised his hand, forming it into a make-believe gun. "Bang-bang!" he said. "Chicago? No?"

His wife brought out a small table, covered it with a tablecloth, and carefully smoothed out the wrinkles. She then brought a tray with two small cups of Greek coffee, half a loaf of homemade bread, and a plate of olives and feta cheese. Occasionally someone passed the house, old women leading donkeys laden with sticks gathered on the mountain, or children returning from school in blue uniforms dirty from a day's wear.

"Look, he is from America," my hosts called to these passers-by. "We found him on the mountain!"

I finished my coffee in the shade of the mulberry tree then thanked them warmly for their hospitality. Promising to visit on my next trip down the mountain, I bid them good-bye. Then I walked down to the coast and hitched a ride to town.