

## I

## HOMECOMING

In Nauplion, early October is the time of year when the grey mullet run in to the land. After dusk, half the men in town stand along the waterfront dangling unbaited hooks in the water pulling out dozens of fish, while the other half sit at the waterfront cafes and criticize. Every evening after supper we walked the waterfront to watch the mullet catch and then to watch the shrimpers.

There was a strict division of labor: men fished for mullet; small boys went shrimping. Each boy had a small net and a flashlight to shine straight down the side of the quai into the water; the shrimp eyes reflected light like tiny Christmas bulbs and the boys scooped them out, although it might take an hour to collect four or five shrimp. After the shrimp, we walked into the darkness at the end of the quai, past the broken boats, past the football field, and out along the coast road, watching the fishing boats come in, the lights flickering along the road that rimmed the bay, the small soft owls swooping down from the telephone lines.

In the daytime it was still warm enough to swim. We took the bus eight miles over to the great rock of Homeric Asine, spread blankets on the cave side away from the wind, and spent the days with books and picnics of figs and tomatoes and cheese. The children climbed over the ancient stones and searched the thorn and thyme for shards which they threw down to me, shouting. Late in the afternoon, waiting for the bus back to Nauplion, farmers walking home would stop and greet us, as kings to Odysseus, "Welcome, strangers. Where are you from? Why are you here?" and then take us home to give us tangerines or eggs or tomatoes for our supper.

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I had always wanted to live in Greece, ever since I was thirteen and read about Mycenae, read about the shadows of the grape arbor moving in the firelight at La Belle Helene, and Agamemnon pouring the wine. Once in Greece, I reread the book where I thought I had found the image: it had no grape arbor, though La Belle Helene does, over the deep veranda; its Agamemnon is dead, and the Agamemnon who brings wine now is his grandson.

The grape arbor was the first of many images, and finally the desire to come to Greece was as persistent as salt in the mouth, the decision as clear as a gold coin in the hand. There were children to persuade, a house to sell, farewells to make. It was four months between the decision and the oily, suffocating brown dawn when we sailed from a Brooklyn pier, passed under the necklace of lights of the Verrazano bridge, and set out into the fogbound Atlantic.

A month later, there was a bus ride from Corinth to Nauplion on a rainy night: two hours of standing-room-only on a sprained ankle, juggling backpacks, gasping against the accumulation of cigarette smoke and body heats -- an open window apparently meant instant pneumonia -- all of us terrified by our first experience of

normal Greek night driving. The windshield wipers were out of order; the driver extended the life of his headlights by using them only on straight stretches where they could shine the farthest; he otherwise relied on his horn and the icons over his head illuminated by a red light to negotiate passing on the curves.

We swayed down through the mountains of the Dervenakia, passed Mycenae, halted in Argos where most of the passengers got off and we sat down, and then tore along a straight road past the bulk of Tiryns. The night rain was luminous for miles from the lights of Palamidi, the great whale-shaped hill that overshadows Nauplion with an illuminated fortress in the shape of a Byzantine headdress with pendants.

The Nauplion bus stop was closed for the evening. We stumbled into the first taxi, clutching at the phrase-book to find the words for "cheap hotel." There was a pelt through narrow streets under dripping balconies, and we were disgorged at the cheap hotel. Fatigue was washed over with soft color: a white church with a terra cotta roof, a gilded shrine hung with roses, cascades of jasmine and four o'clocks over the yellow walls and white pilasters of the Hotel Otto. Inside, there was a circular staircase, a baby-blue helix floating up to a painted ceiling.

"Of course," said Apostolos, reaching for our bags, "you can stay as long as you like.

The eponymous Otto was, in 1834, the first king of a free Greece, an innocuous prince of the Bavarian royal house, considered by French and Russian and English politicians as unlikely to interfere with their plans, and, more important, the only one of a dozen candidates who had not rejected the position.

We breakfasted in the Otto's minute formal garden. It had orange and lemon trees, arbors of jasmine and roses, basil, and cages of ornamental birds. It also had a house across the street which happened to be for rent. We wandered the town for four days, trudging up and down the slippery stone steps of the hill, trying to make up our minds, trying to assimilate the newness and the strangeness and the beauty.

Old Nauplion is built on a hillside. Half the streets are vertical stairs going up to the castle or down to the harbor, past a thousand shadings of terra cottas and creams and buffs and yellows on old buildings painted so many times that they have had no edges for a very long time. Every yard has a grape arbor, an orange or fig or lemon tree, a window box spilling geraniums. In early fall, Nauplion had the air of perpetual teatime held among sets left over from one of the lighter Italian operas. The Venetians of 1700 built bulky stone mansions; scattered among them are smaller, slenderer plastered houses built according to what the Bavarians of the 1830s insisted Classical architecture ought to have been: graceful houses of creams and blues and buffs and ochres and mauves, all with balconies and architraves and Corinthian capitals and acanthus leaves and tiny sphinx faces. Above the city, the fortress of Acro-Nauplion is rimmed with sharp-edged Venetian walls that blend into rougher Frankish and Byzantine ruins, and all are supported by massive Cyclopean stones.

The streets were full of cats and the air was full of bells. Beside the church bells, rung often but on schedules known only to God, the bell tower on Acro-Nauplion rang the hours and half-hours, each twice, several minutes apart. If it were ever necessary to know the precise time, there was the bank or the bus station, but the only times exactness was needed was when catching a bus, and there would always be another in half an hour, or tomorrow. There was always tomorrow: *Avrio*, the most common word spoken in Greek, possibly because of the silken way it floats through the mouth. Nauplion

offered limitless tomorrows.

Helen landed at Nauplion, returning home from her junket to Troy and her second honeymoon in Egypt where she acquired some expensive gilded gadgets and a supply of tranquilizers. After Helen, nothing happened of the slightest interest to anyone for nearly two millenia, There were the usual famines, Slavic invasions, pirates, Byzantine churches and plagues. Leon Sgouros tried to make it the center of his empire in 1200, French Crusaders under Villehardouin took it in 1210. In 1387, the D'Engheins or Dagheins or D'Eriganos ("And not one of them knew how to spell," said Irene) sold Nauplion to the Venetians who put a wall around it and were evicted by the Turks whom they evicted and who re-evicted them in turn. The Turks, beseiged by the Greeks in a half-hearted way for twenty months and betrayed by their Albanian allies, surrendered Nauplion to the free Greeks in 1822.

The Greek generals, sheep stealers and pirates every one of them, established themselves in the three fortifications and spent considerably more time hurling abuse and cannonballs at each other than any of them did at the Turks. The townsfolk were understandably resentful; the fledgling government was forced for its own survival to sit it out on the island in the harbor. Details were grudgingly worked out and Capodistrias was inaugurated as governor of free and democratic Greece. A week later, he suspended the constitution and tried to dictate, deeply hurt by those who failed to appreciate his motives. Among them were members of the Mavromichaelis family, pirates and brigands, who shot him at the church door. There are still remains of the bullet visible by the door of Ag. Spyridon. ("You see, we have our murdered President, too!" said a schoolteacher to me with pride.) Three years later, King Otto arrived with a fleet of two hundred ships and marching bands.

Nauplion has had no history since Independence, as least as far as tourists are concerned. Swimming here in the harbor, there is no sign of the British naval disaster and retreat of 1941, no hint of the starvation that had Stella and her family living on tangerine peels, no mention of the pit outside town where eighty men and boys were shot in reprisals, no suggestion that the Gestapo commanded from the largest building on the main square. Among the old men who measure out their lives in microscopic cups of coffee and endless games of tric-trac, there is no clue as to who was ELAS and who was EDES, who tortured and who was tortured; who burnt the convent to get at the government troops, and who burnt the convent to get at the Communitists. As far as visitors are concerned, Nauplion dozes between the Argolid and the peacock sea, existing as a stopping place for the million who come every year to buy trinkets and take photographs of the island castle and go on to the next place.

The important thing about living in Nauplion, in Greece, is that the physical facts of life are almost overwhelming. Every sensor of the body is relentlessly beseiged by stimuli as distinct as black olives on a plate. Everything has a scent, a nuance, a color, a texture, and as soon as they are perceived, a breeze passes, a cloud changes, and everything is to be learned anew. The golden-brown mountains multiply, merge, become blue and grey.

It is impossible to look at something only once. Homer wrote as much as he did, Seferis said, only because he was blind. Each street can be identified by its blend of smells -- lemon trees, bread ovens, leather workers, ouzo distillery, fish soup, chestnuts roasting, jasmine, cigarettes, olive pressings, paint, oranges on the quai. Every corner presents another composition -- a blue Turkish fountain, a cascade of pink roses, an old

man stitching shoes, cats in the sun, a Byzantine arch, a pyramid of apples, three children and a priest kicking a ball. There are all the ordinary noises that chart the day -- bells, the "Avge!" cry of the egg man, an angry woman shouting across a narrow street, a priest chanting in the church across the street, the gull-sound of winches, a sudden motor cycle, a piano practiced behind closed shutters, voices arguing politics in a cafe, the dry rattle of the tric-trac board, the sound of oars.

With sensory experience so acute, time blurs. One day I came back from a hike and reported that I had seen an old Turkish fortified house, an old Mycenaean wall, an old woman and an old Byzantine church. With one limited word to speak of two hundred years, thirty-five hundred years, eighty years, and a thousand years, the past becomes a great accumulation of Then, which can only mean whatever is not Now.

Kathleen learned her Roman numerals from Venetian cannon, tracing the sleet-chilled letters with mittened fingers; we swam at a beach from where ships set sail for Troy; we filled canteens from a spring mentioned by Pausanias. On any walk we found shards with red Mycenaean spirals or fragments of amber Byzantine glaze. Our blue-green parrot was quadrupled in a fifth-century mosaic. The same weeks that we went to Epidauros to see *Medea* or *Oedipus*, we read in the paper of a woman killing her children, or of a charge of incest in the courts, and I went to *Elektra* fresh from wrangling with my teen-aged daughter.

We were outsiders, we were guests – *kseni* – the word is the same for both.