

III

CHRISTMAS

Every season had its own scent. In spring it was lilacs and and mint and grass. In summer it was jasmine and lemon; in August and September, it was four o'clocks, thyme and oregano; in the winter it was orange blossoms, crushed olives, and woodsmoke from olive and orange prunings. In winter we blamed on Russia and Yugoslavia the cold winds that smelled of snow, on Africa the warm winds that smelled of earth, and a winter rain after a south wind covered the balconies with red Saharan dust.

In December, it rained relentlessly for three weeks, and during those same three, no mail came. There were no Christmas carols played in Nauplion stores, no television with tots cuddled by granpas, no crass commercialization, no blatant attempts to blackmail us into buying presents we did not need, no cranberries, no cider, no fireplace. No anticipating the Abernethy's Christmas Eve party, or Vespers at Washington Cathedral, no driving around the North Capitol Street neighborhood to look at lights. And no Christmas trees. As far as we had been able to learn, they were available only in Athens, and at high prices.

Then Kathleen and Rosalind ran up the stairs crying out that one of the tourist hotels had just brought a tree in its front door. We dashed over to the hotel where the desk clerk said the tree had come from a florist shop in Argos. We were on the next bus to Argos. The florist said to come back after 2:30, when his tree delivery was to arrive. We had lunch in one of the venerable old restaurants on the town square, a cavernous grey room, hung with life-size photographs of early Greek royalties. Its patrons seemed to be very old men who smoked a great deal. We were closely watched. We ate hurriedly and went out to see the newest diggings.

It is the misfortune of the residents of Argos to live on a site inhabited without interruption for six thousand years, and given special attention by the Romans. Every time someone wants to build a house, add an extra room or storage shed, do something to the garage, they dig up another Roman relic. Legally, all such discoveries must be reported to the Ephor of Antiquities and the site must be properly investigated before any more bulding. A proper investigation may not come for years, and the land can then be appropriated by the government at its own evaluation. Anyone with any sense at all, of course, follows the advice of the Duke of Wellington and buries the damn thing immediately. Still, it does happen that something gets embroiled in official attention, and every visit to Argos turned up a dig or two worth looking at.

Just after 2:30, the florist had a load of trees, each of them perfect, each bearing a lead government seal. Christmas trees in Greece come from government plantations; those approved for sale are marked, and possession of an unmarked tree can mean an immediate year in jail.

Last Christmas, Jorn and Erika, fresh from South Africa (they called it Sussafrika) suggested we go in their van to a tree plantation and liberate our own trees. We went to a ski resort down in the Peloponnesos on the slopes of Menelaion. It was a splendid day,

the snow was knee-deep and the children raced about throwing snowballs with Erika, and watching for approaching traffic. Jorn and I, stumbling with saws and implements hidden in our boots and sleeves, slid into snow-covered crevices looking for trees. It was more difficult than we anticipated, and after we had slipped into more crevices taking the trees back to the road, we crouched behind rocks until Erika signalled that it was safe to dash to the van with our trees. Crossing the plain of Tripolis to go back home, we bought large sacks of potatoes and walnuts. That was last year.

Meanwhile, in Argos we selected an elegant silver fir which cost three times what I had ever paid for a tree, and walked it to the bus stop where it waited in line with us for tickets. The other passengers and the passers-by admired it so generously that we began to feel we were performing a social service. The bus driver, however, adamantly refused to put the tree into his empty luggage compartment. Should I have had any doubts on the matter, he explained that he had never transported trees and never would. I shoved the children on the bus where two of them immediately began to cry with a moderate degree of sincerity. Greeks cannot abide seeing children cry, especially blond children. The passengers on the bus began shouting at the driver. He shouted at the bystanders on the sidewalk and pointed at me and the tree. I fancied I bore a certain resemblance to Joan of Arc. The bystanders shouted at each other and the tree and the bus, and I had the general impression that the driver was very close to being lynched. He must have had a similar impression, for he abruptly decided the tree could ride in the luggage carrier on top of the bus.

For the twenty minutes back to Nauplion, I watched the shadow of the tree ripple along the side of the road. The shadow rippled over the reed thatch on the roadside stands hung with bunches of oranges, it rippled across the great stones of Tiryns, and it rippled over the yellow prison walls. In Nauplion, we walked our tree home, supporting it with arms through the branches as if were an unsteady friend, pausing constantly for it to be admired.

We have always collected decorations, each decoration bearing a memory to be recounted every year: a china bell from Irene's godmother's first married Christmas; the gold birds from the Christmas I was pregnant with Kathleen; the straw stars made by my father's German POWs; a glass unicorn made one Midsummer's Eve on the Boardwalk at Ocean City; a Robert Kennedy button. This year Jan sent red paper baskets from Denmark, Diana brought a dozen sugar mice from Wales. We added Greek dolls and icons. Elias, Arete, Apostolos, Evangelitsa, Giannis, Sophia, Michaelis, Costas, Maritsa, all saw the lights from the street and came up to watch. "*Afto ine oreio. Ine kalo.*" It is beautiful, it is good. Strangers knocked on the door, asked if they might bring their children to see it.

The next day we went hiking on the other side of Palamidi to collect armfuls of heather, narcissus and pine. We put tall beeswax candles and crèches in each window alcoves – Irene's from Nigeria, Kathleen's from Mexico, Rosalind's from Germany.

Nauplion prepared for Christmas. In the main square, soldiers from the local army base set up a life-sized crèche with Byzantine-style figures. Beside it they put a fishing boat hung with colored lights; there was always a competition for this, and it was an honor to have one's boat chosen. Agios Vasilius brings gifts at New Year's in his boat. The windows on the main streets were heaped with sweets in shiny colored papers and boxes. The dark, narrow shops on the side streets smelling of chocolate and oranges were

crammed with shiny things piled on the counters and hanging from the ceiling like stalagmites.

The hunchbacked fiddler from across the bay strolled up and down the main streets, fiddling the "Carol of the Three Kings" over and over. We went over to him; he said the children were beautiful, then spat to protect them from the Evil Eye. The gypsies came to town. In a hideous Pieta, an aged woman sat near the post office asking for contributions, her grown idiot son sprawled inertly across her lap. A man led a muzzled bear cub about on a rope. When he bashed its feet with a stick, it lifted them up and down; this was dancing. When it was poked, it growled; this demonstrated ferocity and observers squealed.

A teen-aged gypsy boy leaned against a pillar of the church porch under our window. He played "St. James Infirmary" on his clarinet in a dozen styles and variations. He was an artist. I wanted to know his name, to hear him play more, but the old man near him spoke sharply and set him to playing the Carol of the Three Kings. The old man talked to me for a bit; he was anxious that I know him to be a "real Christian," that is, one baptized in church, unlike most gypsies. He said the boy was rebellious, and did not know his place.

On December 23, the mail arrived. It took three trips to the post office to retrieve all the packages. Phillipa, a graceful Australian, came up the stairs and asked if she could visit a while. She had been travelling alone for a month, she wanted to see someone at Christmas who spoke English.

The morning of Christmas Eve, we were awakened by the fire house band, composed mostly of drums, clarinets and tubas. Rosalind dressed hurriedly and ran to join the horde of small children who danced behind. They went up and down all the streets of the old town collecting contributions of small change and candy. More packages arrived. The children went out to deliver fruit cakes – I had brought bourbon and pecans for this –

and small gifts to our friends. They returned with more cakes and gifts than they had taken.

We made tablecloths from lengths of blue and white material, and set out what silver and blue and white china we had brought with us. The silver had nearly got us into trouble. When we packed to come to Greece, I put household supplies in containers that were carried in the ship's hold, but the sterling I put into my hiking boots in one of the suitcases, thinking we might want to use it before we had access to the containers. We arrived at customs with six suitcases, a trunk, two musical instruments and assorted bags. With stunning intuition, the customs inspector opened the suitcase with the hiking boots stuffed with silver. No one at customs spoke English, nor did any of us speak Greek. After a long period in a smoke-filled room where several men shouted at each other and at me, I tearfully managed to get one of them to notice the scratches, bent tines and tarnish that might indicate the silver had been in our possession for a while.

We hadn't enough plates to set out all we had cooked, and when guests began arriving with their contributions, there wasn't enough room either. Everyone we had invited had found a foreigner who wanted an American Christmas, two Australian families in the campground, an Irishwoman camping on the beach, an American schoolteacher, a German couple, two Englishwomen who had married Naupliots, several Greeks who had lived in America, and they all brought bottles of drinks and more food. As soon as the first guests appeared, the kitchen sink detached itself from all of its pipes

and fell off the wall. We tried to ignore this. We were interrupted several times by shouts from the Hotel Otto for phone calls from the States, and at the hotel we acquired two solitary salesmen who were morosely watching television. At midnight, the church bells rang and the ships blew their whistles.

Christmas morning we woke to church bells and incense from the church and the warm tones of the priest's chanting. Phillipa breakfasted with us on leftover ham and Rocquefort, and then we took the bus to Argos.

Argos has a conical hill crowned with a castle, described in a medieval chronicle as spreading down into the plain like a tent. We climbed up the long way and sat in the arched casements and looked over the snow-covered mountains deep in the Peloponnesos. A troupe of merry little boys joined us. They found great amusement in snatching at sweaters and purses and Kathleen's long hair.

It seemed best to go back down, but we were looking for what the guidebook said was a carving of a Thracian horseman. We had no idea of where to look or what a Thracian horseman looked like. Phillipa asked the boys, but we were saying *hippos*, which was classical, when we should have said *alogos*. Phillipa tried sketching a series of men-on-horseback. One of the boys pointed to one, and showed us, not ten feet away, a disappointingly small, grubby bas-relief of a man on a horse with a snake. The church up on the hill is a Ag. Georgios; Ag. Georgios is always shown with a dragon; centuries ago someone thought this carving of a horseman and serpent was he. Bored with archaeology, the boys threw stones at us the rest of the way down the hill.

Back home at dusk, there was just enough time to start the Franklin stove before we wrapped in blankets and lay across the bed in the firelight to listen to the Queen's Christmas message. We cried a lot and said it was the best Christmas we had ever had. The next morning we were up at six to begin two weeks of being migrant workers.