

## The Doorkeeper

Their linked bodies, arm in arm, swayed up the narrowing path between white houses towards the crest of the village. Ducking beneath the weight of the sun as if it were a sudden physical blow, they stepped away from the navy shadows of the walls and trees and entered a bright courtyard. Within was a white church, so simple in its shape that it could have bulged out of the rock. An olive tree stood in a circle of whitewashed stones. A wooden door was set in walls that seared their eyes with sunlight. High above their heads, a small bell hung from a hump of belfry. The heat of the morning had grown sheer and unrelenting, dazzling them, squeezing them as they paused, trying to breathe and maintain the banter that had characterised this holiday.

Then, as their eyes adapted, they saw her: a formless shadow in the doorway. No, blacker than shadow, shadow made substance in cloth; shawl, bodice and skirt. Unblinking eyes were watching them. Only the hands moved, soundlessly, like lizards skittering in her lap, forming patterns of crochet. Now that they could focus they could see that she was small and frail. There was nothing here to stop them enjoying the mood that had sustained them through the hectic bars and nights of their holiday. They felt reckless: young, eternal, in contrast to her decrepitude.

She watched them as they moved towards the door. So many came like this, in their semi-nakedness, in the blotched peeling of careless sunburn, the over-loud laughter and uncertain footsteps. They carried with them the salt and sweat of the night, the drinking ended late, begun early. Later today they would throw themselves onto the beach and give the secrets of themselves to each other, to be forgotten and discarded later. Regretted, perhaps. She felt a huge pity for them, a heavy grief coiled around her heart. In the past, she would

have found their careless indifference to her traditions violating. Now she saw only the hectic rush and turmoil of their lives, and the gasping compulsion of their pleasure-seeking.

They stood round her, laughing, leaning against one another. 'Hey, let's go in,' said one of the girls. 'It'll be cooler in there, anyway.'

She looked at them patiently. The other girl stepped forward, smiled awkwardly. 'Kalimera,' she said, pointing to the door.

The old woman continued to look at them. 'Ohxi, ohxi,' she answered them, letting her crochet fall in her lap, and raising her hands.

'She said "OK",' said Marcus. 'Look, she just wants some money.' He pushed forward and dropped a note in her lap, not seeing the shake of her head. He grabbed the bell rope and swung it: 'Tong, tong', shaking the sunlight's rigidity, the empty air. 'Come on,' he urged, grabbing one of the girls by the elbow and they all followed him, urgent in their need to stay close.

Inside it was chill and dark. Two shafts of sunlight entered high above their heads, twirling with motes of dust that flew upward in the draught of their entry. They felt their way forward, stumbling and giggling at first, and slowly as their eyes adjusted, they could see the altar and some sparse seats. Then, dim, unrecognisable pictures on the walls and gleams of silver. A primordial stillness overtook them: each aware of the jumping of their own heart, the surge of their blood on its restless journey. They clattered against the candle stand, and fumbled for coins to buy a candle, striking Sophie's cigarette lighter with little rasps and spurts of flame. 'I don't know why we do this,' she said.

The woman stood behind them. She crossed herself and came to the candles, pushing the note they had given her into the little collection box and then took a taper to light her candle from theirs. She laid a hand, cool, gentle, dry and light as a leaf, on Sophie's arm. She stayed to watch them as they stood hesitantly, peering about in the half light. Then, they left the church, and the sunlight was waiting to probe them and drive their diminishing shadows in front of them as they returned to the village. A little while later their voices came back to her, uncertain, then clamorous as they made their way down the steep lane to the crowded beach.

The visit remained an awkwardness between them. Only in the evening, as they sat together blurred with food and wine, muzzy with the cicadas' chirring, could they recover the easy carelessness of their holiday and joke their way to bed.

Sophie woke very early, in the pearl freshness of the morning, hearing, from far hillsides, goat bells and birdsong. Her head was hurting and she knew she must get up, drink some water. She wriggled away from Pete's outflung arm, smelling the staleness, the rankness of last night's drinking, as she disturbed the bed. She splashed herself with water then drank plenty, and dressed: a sarong, a blouse. She tied back her hair, knew that she must get out, find astringent air and space to allow herself the thinking that she had denied for many months. She thought, 'I need a cigarette,' but knew that she must first try this sharp air, this loneliness, unsupported.

Her feet took her up through narrow lanes away from the main street that would soon be clustered with holiday makers. The baker was carrying a tray through the village. Already the small supermarket was flinging open its doors: beads and bags, flip flops and sandals, beach mats and towels would soon be pushed out. It would spring to life, and this moment,

that belonged to her alone, this moment would swiftly go from her. If she were honest, she would be glad to let it go, to avoid what it might bring.

She pressed on up the hill. She found herself wondering about those first weeks of university life. Looking back she saw how stale it had been, a time of experiment and often forced hilarity. She'd just managed to keep up with work, she'd all but lost touch with home, and she and Pete had become an inevitable twosome, like Nicky and Marcus. This holiday was a great idea agreed between them. What could go wrong with such a combination of friends and sun? And then suddenly, in this blinding heat and light, in the otherness of lives that she glimpsed behind the shop fronts and the nightclubs, it had started to unravel. She now recognised but struggled to find words for a different rhythm of life, a pattern of enduring significance. Constant, unending. Men and women struggled with weary poverty in the fields; gaunt donkeys bore heavy loads; taverna owners stayed polite and cheerful long past all reasonable hours; quiet, dignified women cooked and cleaned: and a silent woman had waited for them, waited for her, she realised, at the door of an ancient church.

She was breathless as she reached the top of the lane and came into the courtyard. The woman was there, waiting. 'Kalimera,' Sophie said, and lingered, facing the woman, who looked up at her gravely, and nodded.

'Kalimera,' she replied, and they regarded each other steadily, gazing at each others' lives.

The old woman's face was incised with lines, wrinkled and parched with sun. Sophie thought, 'It's all written there,' and the thought of her own face, smooth, bland and puffy, somehow troubled her.

‘Ela. Ela,’ said the woman, rising and laying again her light hand on Sophie’s arm.

‘Ela.’

She led her into the church, holding first her arm and then her hand, opening the door to her, and leaving it open so that the early sun could wander inside and illumine its treasures. Sophie felt the almost weightless touch of her fingers, dry and knotted like twigs, as the woman led her towards the altar, reverencing dimly glimpsed pictures on the way. She lit a candle, holding it high so that Sophie could see the mystery of the interior and catch glints of silver and gold. Then, as other candles were lit, the whole cavity sprang to life, its pictures stepped forward. The woman paused, her worship palpable. The light disclosed a form to Sophie. A figure of burnished gold, ancient with residues of time, the features simply outlined in black, hints of red clothes, a cloak, a book, a hand raised. The face held her. A timeless comprehension, not aloof, not serene: aware, engaged, focused.

After a long time, she must have stirred, and the woman patted her hand, speaking words that she did not know, but that enabled her to return to herself. She responded to the woman’s touch, holding her hand as they left the church. Sophie struggled for words, holding both the woman’s hands. Out of the phrase book: ‘Efkaristo,’ she remembered. ‘Efkaristo.’

‘Parakalo,’ said the woman, and smiled, and searched her face, and there were no more words that they could say to one another.

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When she returned, she found them agitated. ‘Sophie, where have you been? We’ve been looking for you everywhere! There’s been a phone call, the Rep came round. You must phone home, something has happened. An accident. Your brother, I think. God, Sophie, I’m so sorry, we tried to find you.’ Nicky was breathless with distress.

‘I’m so sorry, babe,’ said Pete, reaching out to hold her, though she was numbly unresponsive.

‘I must phone home,’ she said, grabbing her mobile from her bag, vaguely aware that she had left it kicked under the bed last night. A log of missed calls as she switched it back on. Looking out to sea, she spoke to her uncle. Her brother. Serious injuries from a traffic accident. Sophie knew how hard this was, for her mother especially. Never admitted, but it was always her brother who was the favourite. ‘I will come home straightaway,’ she said.

Later, crowded together in the taxi, Pete asked, ‘Where on earth did you go?’

‘I went back to the church,’ she answered, simply.

‘What for? That old witch outside, I thought she had put a curse on us. What made you go back there?’

‘Not a curse,’ Sophie said. ‘Something else. I think she knew.’

‘What?’ asked Nicky. ‘Knew what? You mean, knew about this?’

But already, they were fading from her. She knew that in the autumn their relationships would have an awkward reconnection and then drift apart, hopefully without acrimony. As she stood in the queue at the airport desk she saw them differently. With affection yet regret, because there was no bond that could hold them in the face of pain and anxiety like this. Pete had struggled to hold her, but they spoke a different language now that the scribbled shorthand of sex had ceased. Marcus was fidgeting at edge of the group. Nicky perhaps? Maybe they could stay in touch.

Ticket in hand, she turned, hugged them all, shouldered her bag, moving towards the signs for the flight to Gatwick. ‘Don’t worry. Just have a great holiday – you’ve still got four

days left!' She attempted to lighten the parting for them even though her own heart was clenched with fear for her brother.

Nicky stayed alongside, trying to help with her bag. 'What did she know? What did she tell you?' She asked, struggling to comprehend.

'She didn't speak. She showed me.' Sophie tried to take a timeless experience and give it to Nicky in words. She held Nicky's hand, trying to speak. Then, 'She showed me that it can be borne.'

In the manuscript of the woman's face, and in the Icon of ageless expectancy, she had been shown what can and must be endured, though there were no words to explain the patient hope of such fortitude.

'Thanks Nicky', she said, looking at her and aware that she was puzzled, distressed. 'I know you care. I'll be in touch, just as soon as I know what's happening.'

She moved through sliding doors into the excluding vacuum of passport control, leaving them in a world that she could no longer share. In her heart she knew with certainty that her brother had also gone beyond similar, excluding, timeless, doors.

What now remained for her to bear was her own grief. And worse, her mother's inconsolable preference for him, which she could neither reach, nor comfort.