

Must-See

by

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As they inch their way along the quayside, the crowd parts to let them through. Locals and holidaymakers haggling over boat-trips miss a beat, losing ground in their arguments as the couple limp by. Something about the two of them that catches the eye. Their processional slowness, perhaps, or their clothes – darker than anyone else’s – black T-shirts and washed-out black jeans, hacked to shorts. The heads of people sitting at café tables, tucking into eggs and fruit and yogurt, turn. The couple are decked out in bandages. His ’n’ hers bandages, one each at the right shoulder, elbow, knee and ankle, washing-powder white in the morning sun. Parallel injuries, neatly bound.

Two women rise from a table, offer it to them, gold-dust on this hot, high-season morning. They’ve just finished, they say, they’re going. The couple accept, sinking thankfully onto the plastic chairs.

She leans forward, scrutinising the menu; he sits back, looking at the horizon. Her mind’s not really on food. She’s wondering what they can do today to distract them from pain and worry, to make things better. She pushes her hair back behind her ear, revealing a badly-grazed cheekbone. The guidebook says the monastery’s a must-see.

He orders a beer with his breakfast. She decides against remarking that it’s a bit early. The set of his mouth, this mood; she’s come to know it too well. Since the accident he’s been sullen and self-pitying. Irrationally, she reckons it draws more bad luck on them, tempts the gods to send them further disappointments. They’re in Greece, after all, home of capricious deities.

The path to the monastery winds upwards and they're quiet on the way, absorbed in the effort of marshalling bruised limbs into movement, propelling their bodies upwards through the hot air. The sunshine is full-strength, unadulterated. Daft idea, climbing up here in this heat, he starts to say, but for some reason he stifles the words, turns them into an innocuous groan of effort.

They come to a standstill as they round a bend and the monastery comes into view. To build it, the islanders smashed right into a cliff, breaking its ribs, its very heart. The white, outermost wall is flush with the steep, sea-bitten cliff-face.

My God! His sullenness lifts like fog, blown away by sheer astonishment. She watches his face, pleased at the lightening, the melting she sees there. They stand in silence for a minute, looking at the high white façade of the monastery, and down at the lazy swirl of royal blue sea below it.

She reads from the guidebook. The Virgin and Child, the foundation icon of the monastery of the Chozoviotissa, was put to sea in a canoe by a woman in Palestine, in a bid to save it from iconoclasts. The islanders hauled it ashore here and, at a supernatural sign from the Virgin herself, a workman's scalpel stuck in an impossibly high place on the cliff-face, built this sanctuary for it.

In the eleventh century, she says. Imagine. He shakes his head. How the hell did they manage it? It's performed miracles, she says. The icon. Saved people from shipwreck, cured sick children, brought rain when there was drought.

They continue up the last stretch of the path and come to a heavy wooden door. Inside, a cool hallway from which a stone staircase spirals up into the cliff. At the top is a small, dark chapel. As they step in, the powerful musk of the place washes over them. Wood and wax, incense and reverence. It's a long time since either of them had been in a church, and even then it's been only for a brief, dutiful hour or so at a wedding or funeral. The darkness spotted with glimmering lamps seems to seize them now, as they venture in.

The walls are lined with dark, detailed pictures of holy men with impressive names: Basil the Cenobite, St. Theodosius... The place is crowded with a mix of tourists and local pilgrims, Greek matrons mostly, wearing mantillas and Sunday-best dresses. The matrons move purposefully from picture to picture, stopping to kiss each one, blessing themselves profusely. They carry bundles of long, thin, caramel-coloured candles which they light and set in circular metal stands. She is reminded of the pale, stubby candles her mother used to light years ago in a darkened alcove, some saint's lair, in their local church. The shiver shadows they cast, washing up over her mother's hopeful face.

Although people in the chapel seem to wander their own eccentric paths, a subtle but clear pull draws them all, sooner or later, towards the central iconostasis. Fergus has drifted ahead of her in the loose press of bodies and now stands in front of the main attraction.

The child sits high against his mother's shoulder, little feet tiptoed into the crook of her arm. Both their faces are small and pale, dwarfed by huge haloes of elaborately-chased silver, fashioned to protect them from the corrosive devotion of the faithful. Helmets, he thinks, silver motorcycle helmets. The thought of his ruined bike sends a stab of anxiety through him. He doesn't trust the local garage. Progress on the repairs is agonisingly slow and every conversation on the subject festooned with excuses. Waiting for boats, waiting for parts. He sighs, weary of the restlessness that eats at his insides. Weary too, and a little ashamed, standing here, of the torturing, deeper longing that underpins it.

She threads her way through the crowd, catches up with him, aligns herself at his side. Mother and Son regard her, smiling faintly, from their silver swaddling and swampy gold background. Looking out from another time.

What's a miracle anyway, he wonders. A quick fix, a short-cut, an easy way through. Fast relief, like the ads for painkillers say. Something that defies nature,

goes against the slow, thorough logic of seasons and growth, bud, flower, fruit, fall. Unearned rewards.

Or it could be time disrupted, the clock turned back. The accident undone, the two of them still travelling, melded together on the bike. Still following the odyssey they'd plotted during the dark days of winter. No diversion, no dangerous delay on this heady island. Rewind, erasure. Never to have walked into the whitewashed café and encountered Lisa. Would he want a miracle if there was one on the go?

In the way of longstanding couples, she's thinking along similar lines. She's remembering the old teachings from school, stories of walking on water, of healing blossoming from the touch of a hem, fish glittering in nets, loaves piling up. Something you need three of to create a saint. Cold flesh growing warm again.

Need air, he whispers, a hiss in her ear, and turns to shoulder his way through the crowd towards a small doorway of brightness on the other side of the chapel. She checks the impulse to follow in his wake. Don't cling, she tells herself, and lingers on before the icon.

His words from a few nights ago come back to her. Slurred by at least half a bottle of ouzo. What lovely people Joe and Lisa were, how great the evening had been. How lucky they were to have met them. How he thought Lisa was like a gazelle. This last had slipped out and he'd had the grace to be embarrassed. The Yeats poem, you know, he'd said, trying to take refuge in literary provenance. Yes, she'd said, she knew the poem.

Earlier, Lisa's boyfriend Joe, a cheerful, sandy-haired man, had seemed comfortably oblivious to the crackle of energy in their midst. An experienced sailor, it was he who had proposed that they go sailing for a few days. The four of them. Better than hanging around here waiting for the bike to be fixed, he'd said.

The worst of it is, it's true, she thinks. Lisa does look like a gazelle. Long-legged and slender and delicately-browned. She has that startled doe-eyed look that men fall for and women suspect is more contrived than it seems.

There's a hint of tenderness between the two figures – something in the way their heads tilt slightly towards each other, but overall the cool, perspectiveless style of the icon alienates her. A momentary impulse to pray, to petition, flares then peters out. Instead, she finds herself thinking of the woman in Palestine who dispatched the icon.

She imagines her on a beach in the dead of night, water splashing gently on the sand. Putting the picture carefully in the boat, pushing it out.

He's standing on a balcony, a tiny, gravity-defying structure jutting from the white wall in the cliff-face. Smoking, looking down at the sea as if he's trying to fathom it. He looks up as she approaches and gives her that killer smile. It's magic component is a minuscule initial delay, a blankness that lasts a fraction of a second, as if he doesn't quite remember who this person is. Then his eyes register recognition, joy at her presences, and the smile blooms. She hasn't been the beneficiary of it too often lately. Worth seeing, eh? he says. Did you make a wish. It's not a wishing-well, Fergus, she says.

The four of them meet up for dinner that night. Lisa and Joe weren't joking when they said they knew a great place. They've led them away from the crowded waterfront haunts, through labyrinthine streets built to confuse pirates, to an irregularly-shaped piazza on the inland side of the town. there's a big tree in the middle, a small church at one side, and this little taverna on the other. Three or four tables on the uneven cobbles outside and a dark-haired man frying fish at an outdoor grill, sparks flying demonically around him. A waiter brings shots of ouzo and saucers of mezedhes and tells them which fish has been caught today.

They talk about the monastery. A special place, Lisa says, and for a moment it seems to shimmer among them, an almost tangible presence in the nostalgic, sunset-tinged air. Fergus cannot agree enough. He and Lisa lean towards each other as if magnetised by their mutual enthusiasm for the place. Joe rambles on about the course he's set for the sailing trip, the other islands they'll see.

She's getting tipsy from the ouzo, being followed now by the first glass of retsina. She feels as if she's on a boat already, one skippered by the wishes of others. The pull of the current is strong. On impulse, she rummages for her camera and prevails upon an elderly man taking an evening stroll across the square to do the honours. Of course, he says. *Endaxi*.

They shift and straighten, arranging themselves. There's not enough light, Fergus says, but puts an arm around her and smiles obediently, all the same. There's a click, a capturing flash, then they thank the gracious elder and wish him goodnight. So nice, the people here, they're saying, as she drops her camera back into her bag.

He's right about the light; the quality will be grainy, but it will be something to keep, something to save of this evening. The picturesque taverna, the laden, unsteady table, their faces hovering above it. The two of them with the injuries they've acquired on their travels, the two of them eating dinner with their new friends. The four of them. A man with a face full of suppressed excitement, a fair-haired man edged slightly out of the picture. Two women, one with resignation in her eyes, one a gazelle.