

The Island by Alain Elkann

When I first arrived on the island I went straight to the Apollo cafe, to have breakfast after coming off the boat. At the beginning of July there are not many tourists and beaches are quite empty. I am always happy when, after a year of absence, I see Yannis, the owner of the Apollo café, sitting in his armchair next to a little round metal table on top of which there is a small basil plant and a glass of café frappé. Yannis gives me a warm hug and tells me the latest news about who has already arrived in the island and who has left. He calls everyone by their first names. When I say ‘everyone’ I mean a few people from different countries who have owned a house on the island for at least twenty years. I have never owned a house on the island myself, but as I have been coming every summer for a very long time I am accepted in Yannis’s circle.

This year the season seems calmer than the previous one, when Greece was struggling with getting out or remaining in Europe. The banks were closed and everything had to be paid for in cash. When I left the Apollo I hired a motorbike and went up to the village of Hora where I had rented a small house just below the monastery. Nothing or almost nothing had changed in the old village. I felt like going to the beach and having a swim. I knew that the water was still cold in early July, but the Aegean sea is so special for me. I went to the so-called ‘T beach’ at the end of the island. During the previous summer I used to see Madina there, but things have changed since then and I

had no news of her. I had thought of her many times and now on the island everything reminded me of her. On the way to the beach I met Giorgos, the local doctor, who told me in his perfect Italian - switching to English from time to time - that he had lost 15 kilos since he had been running for an hour a day. He asked me if I knew anyone who wanted to buy his boat, and then he complained that his wife was working too hard for no money. Then he said that he was annoyed with the mayor of the island who did not want to give him a parking permit, and he asked me, “Tell me. How can I go and visit patients if I do not have a parking permit?”

It was a windy day, and there were only a few people on the beach. The water was clear and limpid as ever, and I swam. Then I went to the taverna on the beach and I saw Hans and his wife having lunch and so I sat with them. Hans is a clever Austrian journalist with lively green eyes, and the conversation turned to politics. “What about Austria?” I asked. Hans seemed pessimistic about his country, he hoped that the Far Right Party would not win the election. Populism is spreading all over the world and things seem to be changing for the worse. Hans was worried, he thought that we might go back to the ugliest moments of our recent history.

I left them and went back to the Apollo café, where I met a couple of Italian friends who invited me for dinner. They have owned a house on the island for forty years. I accepted with pleasure, thinking that if Madina was on the island they would have invited her.

I then went around the port for a walk and everything seemed unchanged, but I thought about Hans' worries. Are we really going back to Fascist Europe? Are we going to see wars again? I thought that on the island there were people from many different countries, and in the last world war it must have been strange that friends who had dinner with you suddenly became enemies overnight and would soon fight against and possibly kill one another. Maybe history was going to repeat itself.

My generation has not seen any European war and it seemed impossible that French, English, Italian, and Germans could fight one another. It also seems as if politicians are so weak and hopeless that people are tired of them. They want something new. But on the island things don't change, the same cafés, restaurants, beaches, and the same people – but just a year older. The same moon and beautiful stars, the same wind blowing. It takes a few days to adjust to the pace of the island, but then you are seized by a peculiar atmosphere of repetitiveness. You see the same people every day, you ask them which beach they are going to or you talk about the weather. Sometimes the outer world is mentioned if something horrible happens here or there. Of course this summer the two main subjects of conversation are Brexit and the possible election of Trump as President of the United States, but ultimately nobody wants to know too much. There will be time, when everyone goes back home at the end of the summer.

I went to the Italian dinner; the food was delicious as ever, pasta, rice, dumplings, meatballs, tomatoes, fruit salad and cake. A local orchestra was playing in a corner. As usual, the conversation was about who was coming or going. An old gentleman was recalling his days in Oxford at Christchurch College. There was also a famous architect with his dog, an English pug, and an Italian lady said, “With my husband, over the years, we had thirty dogs like this one. Can you imagine how old I am?”

Younger people were dancing in another room, and the hostess said, “We must buy the house next door. There is a lot of work to be done.”

And then she said to me, “Why don’t you buy it? It’s great fun to arrange a house. I will help you for sure. I know the workers, the masons, the plumbers. It’ll be great fun.”

She turned to Arabella. “Darling, are you going to sort out the garden?”

“I wish I could help, but sadly I’m too busy these days.”

Then I asked Arabella, “What do you think of Brexit?”

“I love it. I love the British people, they’re so eccentric. My husband is for Brexit. I went to live in England many, many years ago, you know. I couldn’t stand my country anymore.”

Madina did not come, and when I walked back home I felt weird. Every corner, every stone reminded me of her. It had been the previous summer when I had told her, while we were having dinner in

a taverna, that I was in love with her. She immediately went cold, and said, “Why do you say that? I will run away.”

I was embarrassed, and when we were on the motorbike I felt her body close to mine. I cannot explain why I was so attracted to Madina. I liked everything about her: the way she moved her hands, her mouth, her smile, her voice, her accent. In her company I felt insecure, ill at ease. I knew that if we had loved each other it would have meant happiness for both of us. But somehow happiness was not my fate. It was as if my destiny had to be somewhere else, far from Madina. What a mistake it is in love and in life to be impatient. That night on the motorbike I knew that I had lost my chance.

Now I was daydreaming again, about her. What would happen if a new war broke out in Europe, if I could not come to Patmos, if Madina was in Italy and I was in London? How long would a war last? I should have tried to kiss her instead of saying that I loved her, but she would have rejected me. She did not like me. I was not her type. Then why did she agree to have dinner alone with me? Now our destinies were separated. Maybe she was in love with someone else. I envied the man who might wake up in the morning next to her, who could kiss her beautiful lips. When I saw her for the first time on the beach she was wearing a red bathing suit, and I immediately felt attracted to her. But I knew that there was something about me that she didn't like. After the night when I told Madina that I loved her, I had not seen her again. For one reason or another she became

invisible, too busy. During the winter I tried to send her messages from time to time, but I received no reply. Now my only hope was to meet her by chance somewhere on the island. Her family had a house where she had been going every summer since she was a child. But the days went by and she never arrived. I decided to shorten my stay. It was too hard to be there by myself and my holiday had turned into a punishment.

On the island people see each other at the Apollo café, or at the kiosk where they sell the newspapers. On the beach they gossip about last night's dinner, or about this or that restaurant. Sometimes a yacht arrives in the harbour and new people arrive on the island. There are also big cruise boats and pilgrims who come to visit the monastery. They only stay for a few hours and it is as if they are transparent. What I like about the island is that the sky is always blue with no clouds and you can see blue everywhere. The sea is blue with different shades from morning to night. How simple, how beautiful, how indifferent to the horrible things that happen in the world.

I was sad not to see Madina. It was such a pity that I had moved too impatiently and scared her off. Maybe she knew about my misguided life, my sudden changes, my tendency to flirt, to fantasise about different women. Maybe she understood that I was restless, that I did not belong to her world. I had too many worlds, too much nostalgia, too many other women. Madina was right not to trust my word, but when I told her that I was in love with her I was sincere.

When we were together on the motorbike I felt such a strong desire to kiss her, to have her in my arms, to spend the night together naked, to caress her, to kiss her again. I loved the idea of following her after the summer, of going to stay in her city, of being involved. But that was a dream. Madina was a solid woman, she had children, she had her own life, her job, her friends. She probably did not want an affair, and maybe I would not have liked routine with her. As Madina did not arrive, I finally decided to take a boat and go to another island with no memories for me.

When the boat arrived from Athens I saw Madina getting off it from a distance. I had a moment of joy. I hesitated, I thought that I might decide to stay, but I saw that she was not alone and my brief joy disappeared. I took the same boat for another destination.

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