

GOAT-LEAPS

No one's here.

Hills, stones, paths—all sleep to the breathing

sea. A place, just a place:

no meaning, no wisdom, no secret loves

or unrevealed purpose. You

an absence.

1

Walking the beach, I feel the waves wash over my feet, wet sand press between my toes with each step. In a couple minutes I'll let the waves draw me into the water, knee-high, chest-high, then give my whole body to their warmth. I'll swim out toward that rocky islet beyond Náoussa bay in leisurely sidestrokes, maybe try to reach it, maybe not.

Later, after writing in my journal, thinking yet again about my past, I'll sit on the broad, sun-exposed veranda of my Cyclops Cave (as the locals call this house I've rented), watch my neighbors come and go across the cove in their small wooden boats, hearing the ting-ting-ting of their little outboard motors, or

the slow, rhythmic splash, splash of their oars as they row, facing forward, toward the open sea.

Or I might spend the afternoon on this beach, reading and watching the locals lay out their towels and straw mats. Though it's early July, it's a weekday, so not many bathers will be here. A grandmother with her grandkids maybe. Some boys kicking a soccer ball. A pair of lovers on the low wall near my well, in the shade of a long-needle pine.

Lying on my back, I'll gaze across the sand toward the dozen or so houses on the other side of the cove, all bunched against each other along the rocky shore, some in the traditional Cycladic style, white cubes with red shutters, others just brick and cement, half-finished, with spikes sticking up out of their roofs like insect antennae.

When evening comes, I'll be on my veranda again, sipping *rakí* or wine, letting my mind leap thought to thought, like goats leap along the slopes above this bay. After the sun sets, I listen for the bullfrogs in the cistern, there, where the houses end and the underground spring bubbles to the surface, watering a garden of lemons, pears and apricots. Soon the frogs start their all-night croaking, joined now and then by the high-pitched bray of a donkey tied to the garden gate, Francesco's donkey, which neither he nor anyone else in Náoussa bothers to name.

I feel invisible here, leaping thought to thought, memory to memory. Just the way I like it.

2

In my strongest early memory I'm at a hotel bar in Fresno with my father, several months after he left my mother, brother and sister in Reno but kept me—insisted on keeping me—even though he drives Greyhound busses up and down California, across Nevada. I'm four years old.

A redheaded woman with two Irish setters is sitting next to him. He's leaning toward her, his back against the bar. She's about forty, the same age as my dad. They're talking low, sometimes whispering, laughing from time to time, sipping drinks, lighting cigarette after cigarette. Two overhead fans turning slowly.

I'm on the stool next to my father, turning in slow circles too. The redhead, sitting on his other side, is wearing lots of makeup, red lipstick, smelly perfume. Her setters are well-groomed. They have the same shade of red (almost) as her long, wavy hair. Their leashes clatter on the tiled floor as they get up, lie down, get up again, first one, then the other. Tongues hanging out. Panting quietly.

The bar is dark, though it's late afternoon, black shades pulled tight over the windows, pins of light shining through. "Almost like stars," I say, but no one hears me. No music from the jukebox. Just the sound of voices, Dad's and that

woman's, her dogs' panting, the squeak of my stool, the drone of the two heavy fans.

I hear him say my name now and then, or he's talking about himself. My name is his name. But, no, he's talking about me.

"Gordon's a good boy. Never makes trouble."

I'm not sure why he's saying that, but it doesn't matter. All that matters is that I'm hot and uncomfortable in this place, in spite of the tall Coke the bartender has just put in front of me, my second.

I try turning a little faster on the barstool. Maybe I'll get dizzy; then I can complain to Dad and he'll let me go up to our room.

He's still in his grey uniform, his hat on the bar, shirt unbuttoned. I'm close enough to see, if I squint, the sweat stains along the neck of his undershirt. He and that redhead have been drinking for a while. She has his full attention, though he turns toward me now and then, gives me that fake smile of his, bigger now that he's been drinking, runs his fingers along the part in the middle of his short brown hair, and asks if I like the lady's dogs: "Aren't they beauties? Why don't you go pet them?"

Sure, I like the dogs, but right now I just want to go back up to our room. I'd like to ask, *Can we please leave?* but I know I'm not supposed to interrupt.

Dad knows I don't mind being in our hotel room, by myself or together with him, wherever we might be. He sent me to stay with his sister Greta in Van Nuys

for a few days, hoping she might let me stay with her for good, but she didn't really want me. And I can't go back to Mom; he won't let me. So these days I'm always with him, riding behind the driver's seat when he's on a run, or stretched out on the long seat in the back when there aren't many passengers.

I mostly like the layovers. That's what drivers call them, "layovers," as if all they do when they stay over somewhere is lay around, even if they're in one place two or three days at a time. Dad and I do sleep late most mornings, that's true, eat a slow breakfast at our hotel, or at the depot, surrounded by other drivers, or by ourselves at some nearby diner. We stop at a drugstore along the way so he can get a newspaper and the *Daily Racing Form*, if they have it, and sometimes a *Batman* or *Superman* for me (though I can't read), a story book now and then if I beg him. He rarely reads them to me. He doesn't really like to read, nothing more than the papers and his betting sheets. After we eat, if he has errands to do, he usually takes me with him, whether it's to the laundromat, the bank or post office. We take our time.

Before it gets too hot, though, we're back at our hotel. In the evening he'll shower and shave—how I love to watch him lather his round, chubby cheeks and thick neck, steam coming up from the sink, mirror fogged. He splashes on aftershave when he's done, dabs a little on my chin too, then gives me a wink. When he's finished, it's my turn to shower.

He calls me skinny and a towhead (whatever that means) when he wants to tease me. He doesn't mention my small nose or my dimpled chin. But when I press my face close to the mirror, there they are—that little nose, that dent in my chin.

For dinner we go to whatever diner or coffee shop is nearby. He mostly orders steak and potatoes of some kind, usually mashed. Never talks much while we eat, never leaves anything on his plate, insists that I clean mine too. And he always has coffee, cup after cup, whatever the meal, puts down his fork now and then to have a cigarette, takes a few puffs then lets it burn down in the ashtray as he continues eating.

Some nights, if he's in a good mood, we'll go to a movie. I can't see the picture very well—can't see much of anything really, except from up close—so we always sit near the front. He likes Westerns and war movies. I like cartoons and the fast-paced newsreels. Always soldiers marching somewhere, planes crashing, big floods or earthquakes. And I like sitting there in the dark next to him, just me and him, the smell of popcorn, the feel of my shoes sticking to the floor.

Other nights we just watch TV in our room. He's on his side of the bed, in shorts and undershirt, sitting up against the headboard, sipping a can of beer, and I'm on my side, head propped on my elbows at the foot of the bed. Just as often, I'm sitting on the floor looking up at the screen.

Sometimes, when I'm bored, I think about Mom. Do I miss her? I don't know, I barely remember her. We've been away from her for a long time, since just after my birthday last October. I've talked to her once or twice on the phone, that's it.

The last time all she said was, "You gotta start school soon, Gordon. Kindergarten." Didn't say she misses me.

"She was in a hurry," Dad said.

I miss my brother more. Janet, my bossy half-sister, not so much. We fight a lot, Larry and me. He never shares his toys. Or maybe it's me who won't share, I don't know. I know that he likes to hit me with that brace he has on his leg. Tries to hit Dad with it too when he yells at Mom or throws something at her. Dad just ignores him, gives him a shove and sends him to his room. Sometimes he swats him for no reason at all. Doesn't like hearing the clatter of that brace. But he's never hit me, not once, not even when I'm bad. Won't let Mom touch me either.

Will it still be like that when we go back?

I sleep better in these hotel rooms beside him than I do at home, sharing a bed with my brother. Larry always kicks me in his sleep. And if he doesn't wake me, Mom and Dad do the nights they fight. And they're always fighting, sometimes even before we go to bed, first yelling threats, then slamming doors, then one of them throws a beer can or an ashtray, and my brother and I cower on

the couch or go hide in the bedroom. Janet, who's older and has a different father, never seems to be there.

Yelling at Mom, Dad always accuses her of having guys on the sly, running around with truckers and ex-boyfriends while he's out on his runs. Says my brother isn't his. Larry was born with some disease and has to wear that metal thing. Dad's ashamed of him, can't bear to see him trying to walk with that "clanky appendage," as he calls it. "Someone else fathered that defect!" That's what he used to say, according to Mom, before I was born. So when I came along two years later I was all his, even though I too was defective (a preemie, she says, kept in an oxygen tent for three months). Even named me after him.

He loved to put me on his shoulders and walk through the neighborhood. I was *his*. End of story. Which meant, when they finally split up....

I don't remember what really happened that last night. Did she gather up my brother and sister and take off? Did she kick him out? Did he just up and leave, with me on his shoulders? I don't know. Mom says one thing, he says another. But one thing's for sure: He took me and left the ones "not his" with her.

3

Crossing the beach this morning, I scan the hills surrounding this cove, the rocky terraces that grow only barley, thorny scrub and a few scattered fig trees, except in that crease between the slopes, that ravine where a spring, sometimes above the ground, sometimes below, seeps toward the garden on the other side of the cove, then into the sea. Shading my eyes, I follow the drystone walls angling above that ravine, up past wild fennel and oleanders, past a tethered mule and a few grazing goats, past stands of spindly cypresses, all the way up to the blue expanse of sky.

I take the path toward that sky, on my way to Driopída, the nearest village, to get food for the next few days. Going from shop to shop, I fill my backpack with tomatoes, cucumbers, capers and olives for salad; canned tuna and sardines for dinner; peaches and honeydew melons for breakfast or after a swim; and fresh bread, a loaf for me, one or two for my neighbor.

Descending the slope, my backpack laden with three or four days' supplies, I stop to see if the wild figs are ripe yet, then take a detour along a goat trail to the top of a nearby hill just to walk along the stone walls and stop at an old threshing floor, long unused.

I let the goats grazing nearby stare at me while I sit on a toppled granite slab, imagine the heavy, muffled clopping of mule and donkey hooves going

round and round that abandoned stone floor, threshing barley like I endlessly tread memories in my head.

Turning the days of my childhood over in my mind, all those months and years in California, home to home, moment to moment, face to face—I try to piece together those fragments into whole scenes, filling in the gaps as best I can. The effort, though, is always futile, probably because I don't know what whole is. Can't say I've ever really felt it.

Came close with Patty, though, my first lover after I came to Greece. The two of us almost one, at least in the beginning. But, for reasons I'm still trying to figure out, distance set in. Ten years together with my Italian-Greek companion, three good ones, then seven with things steadily disintegrating. Now, alone on this island, all I've got left from my time with her is more barbed fragments to puzzle over.

In my Cave as night settles over the island, I lift a gas lamp from its nook in the cliff wall of my kitchen and light it, take it out to the window sill on my veranda, enough light to read by if I want, but not so much that I can't see the canopy of stars hanging just above my head. I gaze up at the Big and Little Dippers and the blinking lights of Jumbo Jets on their way from Athens to Cairo, Cyprus to London, glad to be on Kýthnos again, in this cove I escape to, this cave I need.

And here comes my neighbor Stávros. He lives with his wife and son in the only other house on this side of the bay. If I'm on my veranda when he passes, on his way to the nearby chapel or to his boat pulled up onto the beach just below my house, he'll stop by, day or night, whether I invite him or not. He knows I'm alone here, like the other times I've stayed here, so does his duty as a good neighbor and joins me, even though he hates the way I make Greek coffee. He tolerates my coffee and I tolerate the questions he keeps repeating: what are you doing here in Greece? ("I live here, Stávros"); what work do you do? ("I teach at an American university in Athens"); how much money do you make? ("Not much"); how much are you paying to rent the Cyclops Cave? ("Ask Giórgis, my landlord"); do you earn dollars? ("More than I can possibly count"); how come you're not married? (No answer); why are you here all alone? (Still no answer).

Finally I say: "But you have to understand, Stávros, I like being alone." That's my standard response. "I'm here by choice."

"No man likes being alone. You're a *malákas* (masturbator) if you like being alone," he smiles, only half-joking, the sharp features of his tanned face softening, the wrinkles around his big eyes deepening.

I try to explain that I come here for solitude, but there's no word for solitude in his language, not like we mean it in English. All I end up saying is, "I come here for loneliness" (which also may be true), and continue: "Look, Stávros-*mou*, I have

my writing, my books, the sea, the rugged landscape here that I love. All the wild figs I can eat. What more do I need?"

"Are you crazy?" he says. "You sound more like a goat than a man! But you're young, *paidí-mou* (my child), why do you talk like that?"

"Stávros, I'm over forty," pointing to the ample gray around my temples and in my beard. "Not so young anymore."

"*Boúrdes* (Bullshit)!" he retorts. "You're smart, good-looking, well, sort of," and winks, "and probably rich like most Americans."

We both laugh at that absurdity.

"You need a wife, my friend, and kids. Who'll take care of you when you really do get old?"

At that he throws his head back, drinks down the last of his coffee, all but the grinds. "*Ánde geiá* (bye)," he calls out, waving from halfway down the steps. "Next time I'll bring some *rakí*!" he promises, knowing how much I like his homemade liquor, then turns and takes the path toward the chapel at the end of the cape.

Of course I tell him only half the truth, the half I keep telling myself, that I need, I really hunger for solitude. Though that's definitely true, if I were completely honest I'd confess to Stávros (though all of Driopída surely knows) how I hike up to the village some evenings, not for supplies, but to get drunk at a taverna, then stumble off to the town's one bar to imbibe some more, sometimes

drinking until well beyond the point I've blacked out. And somehow, with absolutely no memory of it, I stumble back down the mountain to my Cave at first light, more like the Cyclops than the man I say I am.

4

There are nights Dad goes out by himself, and sometimes during the day, never saying where he's going or who with. He always tells the front desk that I'm up in the room, to please keep an eye on me. They let me play with my cars in the lobby sometimes, but mostly I stay in our room, build stuff with my Tinker Toys and Lincoln Logs, and watch TV.

Like today, a Sunday.

He left me in the room right after breakfast. Bored with my toys, all I can find on TV is some evangelist named Oral Roberts. I don't know anything about him, but I like his voice, strong, like Dad's when he talks to passengers boarding his bus. He's standing in front of a big microphone, Bible open in his left hand, following the lines he's reading with the fingers of his other hand. He can read better than my father. He extends his hand out to the audience, a whole auditorium full of people, hundreds, cheering and clapping, and says softly, "There is no distance in prayer."

When he says that, it feels like he's right here in the room with me. And when he continues, more intensely, "I didn't know that I could stand up and I could say that healing is for everybody," I'm right there with that cheering crowd, wanting to hear more.

“But I learned that Jesus doesn’t do things just for one person. What he does, he does for all mankind.”

Then, “God will heal you. Will bless you. God will save you, no matter where you are. He makes me feel as tall as a mountain.” I’m a mountain too.

Now, as he tells the whole gathering, “Raise your hands up high. Raise them! High!” I’m sitting on the bed, pushing my hands up so high I’m sure I’ll touch the water stains on the ceiling.

When he tells us all to stand, I’m in the middle of the bed, my hand gripping the headboard, legs wobbling like I’m walking on water.

That’s when the healing starts. He calls for all of those in attendance to come up to him, and, through prayer and the love of Jesus, he will heal them. “Even you, in the television audience, you in your room (and of course he means me)—Jesus can heal you if you listen to my words and let Jesus into your heart.”

“Heal!” he calls out, leaning down to the first one in line, a young woman standing shoulder-height to the stage, barely able to move her head. “Heal!” he commands again, “Life is coming into you!” as he stoops to touch her head, her cheeks, then her whole face.

And here I am, four years old, kneeling on the bed, palms pressed tight over my closed eyelids, praying out loud to Oral, and of course to Jesus—“Please, Lord, Oral. Heal my eyes. Make me see like everyone else.”

But there's no miracle for me today. No signs and wonders. When my father returns, I'm already in bed. His weight on the mattress wakes me, then the smell of whiskey and cigarettes. I want to move in close to him, feel the warmth of his body, but he always makes it clear: I'm to stay on my own side of the bed. His loud snores keep me awake, till Oral calls out to me again, puts his hands on my head, and sleep falls over me.

5

Not long after that Sunday with Oral Roberts, there, in that bar, with that redhead and her two dogs, me turning around on a barstool—that was the last time I was truly with my father. If I'd known then that my four-year-old's world was about to fall apart, that I wouldn't see him again for several years, I would've run back up to our room, no matter what he said. I would've thrown myself on the bed, knelt there and prayed even harder to Oral and Jesus for a miracle.

But that day, in that bar, there was no miracle either. There was a sign though, a secret one between my dad and that redhead. I know because, in memory, I can see that woman stand up suddenly and totter toward me, bringing her two dogs with her. At the same time my father, on the barstool next to me, that fake smile still on his face, leans close and says, slurring his words slightly, "Go ahead, Gordon, pet them! They won't bite."

I reach out, though I really don't want to, and pat the head of the one sniffing my knee. Then, leaning in more closely, his smile stiffening, my father continues: "Wouldn't you like to live with this lady and her two dogs? You could play with them, every day."

I'm stunned. What's he saying? We left Mom my last birthday, and already he's gonna marry a new wife? Am I gonna have a new mother? Live here in Fresno? With her?!

Before I can puzzle things out any more, he pulls me onto his lap and keeps going: "You'll like it with her, Gordon. You'll see. She's got a big house, and a big yard. And I'll come visit you often. I promise!" that big, tense smile beaming like the sun at high noon.

"Why?" is all I manage to blurt out, as I look at him, then her, then him again. "Where are you going?"

I grab his neck with both arms, making it clear I don't intend to let go. Never!

With one hand he pushes me away, with the other strokes my head, the back of my neck, trying to calm me. I can see deep into his hard, green eyes. No tears. Not sad, just determined. Like Oral Roberts' eyes as he healed the sick and lame.

And I start crying. "No," I bawl out, startling Dad, the dogs, that woman, the bartender. "I won't go! You're my dad!" my whole body trembling as I push my face deeper into his neck, hungrily inhaling the smell of whiskey and his sweat, my cheek pressed hard against his stubbly chin.

"No!" I shout again, "You chose me!"