

The Goatherd of Naxos

I'm sitting against the flaking bole of a laurel tree, cooling down after hiking up the mountain, when a little man drops from the canopy above. I yell something – I'm not sure what – and scramble away, around the trunk. He lands on bandy legs and follows, chattering and waving his little hands, lurching like he's cramped from perching in the tree. I'm not sure if I should laugh or run. He doesn't look dangerous and he seems glad to see me, but I have no idea what he's saying. He's probably speaking Greek – he looks Greek, a green-eyed fellow in well-worn farmer's garb. I pick up two words: "Zeus," the god and the name of the mountain we're halfway up; and another word, a jumble of discordant consonants and soft vowels, something like "Kithonius." I guess that's his name.

Kithonius's clothes are charmingly oversized – his pants in particular are so baggy he's double-tied a rope around his waist and, though he's rolled the legs up, the cuffs pool on the ground, shrouding his feet. Mirrored sunglasses nestle in the tangle above his tanned brow, their broad, curved surfaces reflecting the shifting leaves.

I say, "Why were you in a tree?"

He pauses mid-chatter, head tipped, then picks back up. He looks like a farmer, but the ground is too rocky for crops. Maybe those are his goats in the field above the tree. I point at them and he nods and that's good enough for me. Goatherd it is. When I pull the camera from my pocket he bobs his head and shrugs.

Kithonius waves his hands around, pointing from me to the mountain, skipping sideways like he's dancing. It makes me laugh, and soon we're bantering back and forth amicably, the meaning of our words lost other than the shared tone of enthusiasm. Our hands and eyes do the

real talking; we understand each other well enough. He knows I'm hiking up to see the Grotto of Zeus, where Zeus was raised in secrecy because his dad had a thing for eating his children. His sparkling eyes and occasional wink suggest he also knows about the Pagan rituals that have been performed there for thousands of years.

Kithonius is hopping and pointing now, wagging his hand for me to follow. Beyond the tree, a stream meanders past the goats. He leads me to the stream where I drink cupped handfuls of cool water. He bends at the waist and sweeps a cluster of grapes from deep in a swirling eddy. The motion is fluid and dramatic, the practiced manner of a magician. I get a great shot, the water a glittering arc, his eyes on the grapes, his mouth crooked with laughter.

"Chrysoprasos!" he says, or something like that, holding out the grapes. They look delicious, ice cold and dripping, glistening like translucent green pebbles.

"Efharisto," I say. Thanks, the only Greek word I know. The grapes are cold, and heavier than I thought they'd be. When I pluck one and eat it, Kithonius shakes his head. He points up the valley, leaning in so I follow his finger to a shadowy crag in the distance. He smells like goat. He shuffles and hitches, pumping his arms, as if he's hiking. He pantomimes the hot sun, fingers spread wide, and sweat, fingers running down his face, popping phantom grapes into his mouth, his bright eyes sparkling.

"Save them for the grotto?" I say.

Laughing and babbling, he shoos me off.

A dozen marble-eyed goats watch me cross their field, heads turning, bells tinkling discordantly. They're wandering around the remains of a small fire. A pair of boots sit by the fire, and what look like blankets or maybe clothes. I imagine Kithonius sitting around the fire at night, eating a simple meal, surrounded by darkness and the soft clank of bells. It would be

strange and fun to camp here with him, sharing food and the fire, miming conversations. It's a fine thought, and I realize how far removed I feel from the summer island-hopping party scene – which is why I came to Naxos.

#

Like most backpackers, I came to Greece to get drunk and laid. Both happened, one with greater frequency than the other, but neither was particularly satisfying once I met Selena.

I was working on Corfu at this pensione, Hotel Dionysus, and she arrived as part of the usual morning throng, scores of backpackers pouring onto the dock from the overnight ferry from Brindisi. Patrick and I usually worked the ferries – it was easier for us to fill the van with backpackers because we spoke English. We were also useless around the hotel until we sobered up around lunch.

“It's a great place,” I was saying to a group of six or eight when she walked up. It was hard to miss her, tall and pale and redheaded. I couldn't see her backpack. “Cheap, too. Breakfast and dinner and shower are included, it's full of other backpackers, and it has a private beach.”

The group shuffled off to see what else was available, and she came forward, followed by a handful of guys. One of them had her pack. She didn't look at the pictures in my three ring binder like everyone else, she just watched me as I gave my pitch. Her eyes were green, unblinking, inviting. And highly distracting.

“Looks good,” she said when I was done. She smiled and the corner of her mouth drew back into her cheek and made a spectacularly deep and inviting crease.

“Really?”

“I'm Selena.”

“Hey. I'm Cliff.”

“Where’s your van?”

I didn’t even have to sell her? Pretty girls meant more people, mostly guys, wanted to stay at the Dionysus, and the owners paid us for each person we brought. I pointed to the van, which ended up so packed we had to strap luggage to the roof and leave the sliding door open so people could breathe.

#

The narrow stone path rises from the far end of the field and runs a few hundred yards before petering out into a dusty footpath. From there it snakes up the valley, twisting between a series of knitted hills. I meander through dense layers of shrubs and wildflowers, here and there passing outcroppings of grayish-white rock that jut like ancient, cracked molars. A lizard flashes between them like the brief lick of an iridescent tongue.

Soon I’m not on a path at all. The trees grow gnarled and hunched the higher I climb, the vegetation hunkering close to the inhospitable rock, until only the sparsest grasses grow. The sun is brutal; I’m soaked through with sweat. The grapes tempt me, still cool in my hand. I wait, dreaming of hungry nymphs. The idea strikes me as so pathetic I laugh out loud. Sure, and maybe one of them will be Selena.

I angle across a shifting scree slope, small avalanches clattering down into the valley each time I slip. Up here, nothing grows except mint-colored lichen, splashed like great loose gouts of bird droppings across the weathered rock. I keep moving, anticipating the shady grotto, a dip in its icy waters, and the sweetness of the grapes.

#

“There’s a party on the beach, you should come,” Selena said. Watching her dance and drink at dinner, it wasn’t one to miss.

“Fuck yeah,” Patrick said, arms loaded with clinking glasses. “We’ll be down after we clean up.” I thought Selena was talking to me, but Patrick was like that, and fun to party with.

It took us an hour to clean the dining hall – there was a lot to clean up after the ouzo shots, table dancing, and plate-breaking, all part of the Hotel Dionysus experience. It was entertaining to watch, the same rituals of alcohol and flirting enacted by a rotating cast of backpackers, but it took forever to clean up after.

Patrick and I headed to the beach, passing a bottle back and forth. He was drunk before dinner.

“I fucking love this place,” he said, legs and shoulders shifting awkwardly as he stood on a low wall peeing. He tucked himself back in his trunks and dropped down onto the wall, holding his hand out for the bottle. I wanted to keep going, I could see the firelight and caught vague waves of noise: singing and dancing. I handed him the bottle and looked for the firelight along the beach below.

“I’m coming back next summer. Fuck no!” he belched. This was Patrick’s fourth summer working at Hotel Dionysus. He shook a finger and declared, “No, I’m not even fucking leaving.” He was a few years older than me, or looked like it. I don’t know if he went to college, or what he did stateside between summers. I assumed he drank. He’d mentioned growing up on the east coast—

I heard a whisking sound, like sweeping broken bits of plates in the dining hall, and when I looked over he was gone. I heard a muffled crunch and glass shattering. It took me a moment to process what just happened. I ran along the wall, scrambled down the embankment. Patrick was crawling out of some bushes, laughing. Bits of glass glittered on the rock. He smelled like puke.

"Fuck, dude," he said, looking up at me. His mouth and chin were bloody, and his shirt was torn at the shoulder. I helped him stand. "I think I fell off the wall."

"Are you okay?" He'd cut his lip, bit through it maybe. Otherwise he looked fine.

"I'm fucking immortal," he said, raising his fists. "Thanks to the Greek god of Awesomeness, Ouzo."

"Can you walk?"

"Think so." He swayed slightly. "Yeah. Let's party. Party on the beach! Wait, where's the booze?"

He'd definitely thrown up, I could smell it on his breath.

"We drank it."

"No way, man. We gotta get more." He started back up the hill, and I followed him. Of course we never made it to the beach. I barely managed to get him back to his room.

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The grotto isn't the idyllic setting I'd imagined. A heavy gate blocks the entrance to a small, dark cave, crude iron destroying what little charm the so-called grotto may once have held. Tucked in a cloudy plastic sleeve wired to a bar is a wrinkled notice on Hellenic Ministry of Culture letterhead. Neatly typed in a dozen languages, including English, is:

SITE CLOSED FOR INVESTIGATION

No moss grows on romantically crumbling statues, no fern-rimmed pool fed by a waterfall beckons. Nothing to suggest Zeus or nymphs or even water, and I'm hot and thirsty. This isn't a grotto, it's a miserable little cave, narrowing as it retreats down into the dark. I hiked

all day for this? I kick the gate and it shudders, echoing deep into the cave. A constant, cool breeze blows from the depths. I lean my head against the gate and close my eyes. At least I have the grapes. I look around for a shady spot to sit and eat them, but there's nothing but rock this high up.

When I look back, the gate is open. I realize there's no chain or lock, just the sign. Kithonius must have known it wasn't locked, but I wish he'd have saved me the hike by miming how ugly the place was.

Twenty steps down the throat of the cave it's too dark to see. I didn't bring a flashlight because grottos are supposed to be sun-dappled places, not dark holes. But my camera flash is strong enough and I navigate along fairly well. Smoke lingers on the breeze. Soon I reach a cavern so large my flash barely reaches the far walls. It's not a grotto, but it is a space fit for a god. The cool silence reminds me of a cathedral. A long, flat slab sits in the middle of the cavern, in its center a pile of dead coals and ash. It looks like the kind of place where Pagan rituals – sacrifices, dances, orgies – would be performed. The floor around the slab is difficult to navigate in the dark, rough and rocky. I imagine the rocks are the accumulated bones of centuries of sacrifices. I hope my battery holds out.

#

On Santorini a week ago, I camped in the low scrub fringing a black sand beach, and woke in the middle of the night to a group dancing on the beach, torchlight throwing wild shadows. I walked toward the party, looking for Selena, who I'd told earlier I wouldn't make the party. I was so hung over I hardly left my tent. I must have looked like hell, but she was cool about it. She'd been wandering among the tents, inviting everyone to the midnight bonfire. I

watched her move off, long pale limbs sliding between shivering fabric walls. I felt like death, but she was still devastating.

People writhe in the firelight, but Selena wasn't among them. Given the male majority and the general absence of clothing, I lost interest quickly. I was glad I hadn't joined them. Walking the beach the next morning, I couldn't find any sign of the fire – the coals were the same dark gray as the sand, and were probably washed away in the tide. Other campers, stuffing their tents and sleeping bags, said Selena left for another island. The hung over faithful clustered around coffee pots, abuzz with strategic speculation. Most were heading to Ios, others planned a preemptive move to Mykonos. Worn out from weeks of partying and tired of the Selena marathon, I chose the more distant and supposedly quieter Naxos.

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I pluck a grape and toss it up, trying to catch it in my mouth. I miss, the grape bouncing off my cheek and away, lost among the rocks. I wonder what lucky denizen will come across it, and if it will find it tasty. I catch the second one: bliss. It's tartness radiates through my jaw. I eat slowly in the cool darkness. I'm half dozing, thinking about Pagan rituals, when a goat bleats. The sharp clack of hooves and the muffled clank of a single bell echo in the cavern. I call out to it but my voice echoes harshly and I hear the goat's scrabbling retreat. I sweep my hand across the raised stone, panicked when I don't feel my camera, imagining trying to find my way without it. I realize it's in my pocket as the sound of hooves grows distant. The flash reveals a small opening across the chamber I hadn't noticed before. The low battery light indicator is on; I can't follow the goat, I'd never find my way back if the battery died. So I eat grapes, hoping if I ignore it the goat will come back, but it doesn't. I feel badly leaving it here, but there's no sense in both

of us getting lost. I use the last of the camera battery to find my way back, whistling as I go in case the little goat decides to follow. I leave the gate propped open.

On the hike down, I watch for the goatherd. His boots and blankets and goats are all gone from his camp site, and he's not napping up in his tree. I drink from the stream and douse my head in the icy water before the long hike down to Naxos Town.

#

Under a vine-covered trellis in a courtyard nestled among the jumble of white buildings and twisting staircases of the hillside town, I eat a plate of steaming seafood and brightly-colored vegetables. The sun turns the whitewashed walls from soft blue to burning orange to fading violet. I sit unnoticed amid the evening bustle, passing the time before the overnight ferry to Ios writing cheeky half-truths on the blank side of 1-hour photo prints. Even a hot hike to a lame cave sounds like an exotic adventure when you're in your kitchen trying to figure out what to make for dinner, looking at a picture of a smiling Goatherd holding grapes by a mountain stream. I'd even managed a couple of goats in the background. Despite the charming picture, I'm ready to leave Naxos, feeling like I wasted my last day here hiking to that miserable cave. In the postcards, I call it a grotto. I'm excited to reach Ios – with any luck, I'll run into some of the other backpackers I've seen around the islands, maybe even Selena.

An elderly man pauses at my table, a heavy knuckled hand resting on the edge. I look up. He's scanning for a table but the taverna is full. Once tall, likely a northern European, time has bent his back into a majestic hump. His parchment-like skin is dappled with brown spots, his head crowned by wispy remnants of hair.

I motion to the open chair.

“You would not mind if I join you?” he says. I wonder where he’s from – if English is his native tongue, his words are either accented by a land I’ve never visited or tainted by his years away from it.

“Not at all,” I say, sweeping up my postcards.

He settles in with a series of groans and mutterings.

“I am Doctor Jørg Bergsen.”

His grip is remarkably strong for such a frail-looking man.

“Cliff.”

The waitress arrives, treating him with familiarity and respect. They chat and laugh, speaking Greek. He holds her hand briefly in his own arthritic claw, shaking it affectionately.

“May I offer you another drink?”

When the drinks arrive, we toast. His glass shakes slightly as he raises it. It tinkles, and I realize his drink has ice in it. The waitress must like him, then, or he’s a regular – ice isn’t usually on offer at restaurants I can afford.

“Did you take that picture?” Bergsen asks.

I nod. “Up on Mount Zeus earlier today.”

“Clever fellow.” He spins his glass, loose-wristed, and the ice cubes clink.

“He was taking a nap in a tree and scared the crap out of me. Those are his goats behind him, I didn’t notice them when I took the picture. He was nice – he gave me those grapes.”

He looks over, mottled brow creasing. A line of bare bulbs strung between the buildings pops on.

“What about you,” I say, “what brings you here?”

“My wife.”

“She from here?”

“No,” he says, in a way that suggests she might be buried here. “Did you talk to the goatherd?”

“He was speaking Greek, so it was mostly gestures.”

“What did he look like?”

I describe him as best I remember – bow legs and oversized clothes, curly hair, green eyes, and his comic pantomime.

“This man—”

“Kithonius.”

“That is not his name.”

“You know him?”

“Yes, I believe I do. He was not a goatherd.”

“How do you know?”

“I have tried to catch him for fifty years.”

“What? I mean – do you work for the Ministry of Culture or something?”

“Those idiots,” he says, flapping his hand, “can’t even keep the gate locked.”

“So you’re looking for Kithonius—”

“As I said, his name is not Kithonius.” Bergsen says. “He was saying ‘chthonios’ – Greek for ‘under the earth.’ It is a dangerous word. It also refers to the underworld, and the spirits that inhabit it.”

“Sure, that makes sense. He kept pointing to the grotto.”

“No.” Bergsen sips his drink. The ice makes that sound again. I don’t know what to say, so I drink, too.

“Cliff, this is probably hard for you to believe, but he was not a goatherd. That was Pan.”

“Pan? The satyr?”

Bergsen keeps his eyes on me as he takes another sip.

“Come on, he was a goatherd. Pan has horns and hairy legs and a big—”

“He has chosen you to join his dance.”

Bergsen leans forward and says, “His sunglasses covered his horns.”

“Of course,” I say. “And his baggy pants covered his hooves.”

“You are mocking me, but it is true.”

I’m about to tell him he’s crazy but he sees it coming.

“I was a tourist here many years ago as a newlywed,” he says. “Your goatherd carried off my wife. She was – is – a wonderful woman. Smart and charming. And a beauty. Red hair, pale skin, eyes that sparkle when she looks at me.”

“What happened?”

“I am not sure. I woke alone one morning. I thought she was up early, walking the beach perhaps. In those days, you could rent a house for nothing and have the beach to yourself. I found the embers of a fire on the beach, her silk dress caught in a shrub nearby.”

“That’s fucked up,” I say, which animates his eyebrows. “Sorry. You never saw her again?”

Bergsen shakes his head.

“I’m sorry,” I say, because it’s weird and sad and I don’t know what else to say.

“I’ve spent my life trying to find him, to join his dance and be with her again.”

“Join his dance?”

“He won’t have me.” Bergsen finishes his drink, the loose skin on his neck stretching as he tips his head back, the brittle clink of ice cubes against his upper lip. Goat bells, that’s what they sound like. “But he is coming for you.”

“He could have just waited for me at the tree. Why would he come for me?”

“You are far from home, no one knows exactly where you are, maybe not even that you’re in Greece. When you are eventually missed, it will be difficult to determine where and when you disappeared.”

“So Kith – you’re saying he wants to kidnap me?”

“Yes. One night he will draw you to a remote place – the grotto, a field, a beach. There will be people there, drinking and laughing, dancing around a fire. Eventually, the dancers follow him from the fire into the darkness.”

Leaves rustle on the trellis, as if applauding Bergsen’s madness.

“Um, okay,” I say. “What happens then?”

“Chthonios.”

“The underworld?”

He nods.

“I don’t want to go there, I might miss my ferry,” I say. What a character. “I’ve got to go – thanks for the drink, it was fun chatting.”

Bergsen stands with me, his hips and knees popping under sagging pants. “I enjoyed meeting you, Cliff. Be careful.”

I weave through the tables, glancing back as I pull on my backpack. Bergsen is sitting there, watching me. I hurry out of the courtyard into the labyrinth of stairs and passages that lead to the docks. What a strange old man. I get lost in the warren, so I just keep heading down

stairs and under archways, past glossy azure doors. When I hear a series of baritone rumbles, the ferry's engine cycling as it maneuvers into its slip, I take the steps two and three at a time, my backpack rubberbanding. I don't want to miss the ferry.

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The ferry rises thirty feet above me, its rust-speckled flank bowing outward, erasing and redrawing the stars with the chipped paint of its tubular guardrails as it gently sways on the water.

A throng of backpackers waits behind a rope as cars load and unload. I look around for backpackers I've met before, but don't see anyone. I'm annoyed with myself for wanting to see Selena. When the porter drops the rope a mad rush surges onto the ferry. The sounds of the shoe stampede blend, a chaos of echoes, as we charge up the stairs.

Deck space is limited, and shelter from the wind is a priority to avoid a cold and miserable night. I find a spot behind a tarpaulined lifeboat. Half an hour out of port it's already chilly and everyone's settled in, shapeless under layers of wrinkled clothing. I watch the other passengers, their impromptu picnics, soothed by the cacophony of chatting and laughter.

#

I haven't been asleep for long when I hear the music. It's not loud, but it's magnetic. Although I'm cold, despite being fully dressed inside my sleeping bag, I unzip and navigate toward the music, passing through islands of sleeping bags and backpacks, their straps in the air like the legs of dead beetles. No one stirs. I walk to the rail, the ocean surging blackly below. The music is coming from the front of the ship, up on the forecastle. A red glow rises there, cut by flickering shadows.

I walk toward the music and see a tall man ahead, standing by the rail. He's looking up at the stars and hasn't noticed me. I stop when I recognize him.

"Bergsen?"

He didn't hear me. As I step toward him, a soft hand runs along my arm.

"Hey you."

It's Selena. Her skin is cool and perfect in the moonlight. She's wearing the same loose dress from Santorini.

"Bergsen—"

"Don't worry about him," she says, pulling me gently. "Come with me."

I find myself moving across the deck. Atop a narrow ship's ladder a fire burns in a broad metal brazier in the middle of the steel deck. The chairs are pushed against the rails. Several dozen people dance around the fire, chanting, casting twisted shadows across the deck. They are beautiful, naked and silent. The satyr is a blur of rhythmic gyrations among them, head and elbows rolling. The music comes from a small row of pipes he's playing. I recognize a lanky Dutchman I stood next to in the packed aisle on the train from Napflion to Athens. I haven't seen him on the islands, and despite his height missed him in the ferry queue. His eyes gleam behind his miniscule lenses as he dances, his taut movements on the train replaced with a loose, puppet-like fluidity.

I'm only half aware that I'm walking toward the fire now, my steps already in rhythm with the song. I look over at Selena.

"I missed you on the beach," she says, her hand slipping from mine. She lifts her dress over her head in a single, smooth motion. Her body is a glory of pale swells and clefts, radiant and inviting. She stands unmoving, pale, and statuesque, as I undress quickly and without grace.

The metal deck is cold on my bare feet; I can feel the engine thrumming. Selena slides her hand back into mine, a warm, fluid promise. Together we join the dance, rising and falling with the others, a circular tide, undulating, beholden to the flames.