

Letter from Greece July 2014

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LETTER FROM GREECE#21: The Waves on Rhodes "Nothing shall be named lest by doing so we change it." Virginia Woolf, *The Waves*, (all quotes unless indicated) Mirella's reading of Jacob's Room, teen zI-LE-vo her text. Envy, zI-LE-vo, is a commonly discussed emotion in Greece. It is often mentioned as a primary motivation. We like to exaggerate the foibles and passions of Greeks; but envy is common everywhere, yet in the Anglo-Saxon world it is considered poor form, a peccadillo best ignored or restricted solely to love affairs and sexual warfare. Then it can be mentioned as a regrettable failing, but integral to the human condition. But Greeks discuss and admit to it freely, and apply it to a multitude of experience, as though jealousy and envy were intrinsically woven into the fabric of life. In Greek mythology the gods are in a constant jealous lather, not only of each other but of mere humans as well. Same in the old Testament of the Christian Bible with an very thin-skinned angry vengeful god who appears to be intent on increasing human suffering. Then Jesus arrived to introduce the new jolly god. Didn't stay jolly very long, Christians saw to that. So when we drove to the airport and boarded a flight to the island of Rhodes, Virginia Woolf's modernist classic, *The Waves*, was in my bag, to salve my envy. I first read it nearly forty years ago. I remember being dazzled. And as the plane swooped low over the blue, towards the sere island humped up against a backdrop of Turkey, the churning froth of the waves dazzled and flashed and echoed the rhythmic pulse of Woolf at the top of her form. And there's a chap with a card with my name on it. Lovely to be met at the airport, you just get in the back seat and forget about it. As we near Rhodos town, we swing along the beach which is flanked by vast hotels, thousands of rooms regurgitating sun-starved northerners eager to fry underneath the Aegean burn. Blimey guv'ner, them Brits burn awful bright. You could practically read in the dark off some of them bums, or perform some type of transfer art from the heat of those cheeks. "I burn, I shiver," said Jinny, "out of this sun, into this shadow." Under the Aegean sun you pay much attention to where the shadows are. You seek them out, they draw you in with their soft caress. Fortunately, we're staying in the old medieval center, where the monolithic hotels are, thankfully, out of sight and the shade is plentiful. Down the narrow cobbled streets is the Gustav Klimt Guest House where we are met by our host, Jutta, a thin Viennese woman in her early sixties dressed in black with a severe demeanor. Very Viennese, if you get my meaning. Smoked extravagantly. Place is beautiful with lots of stone and wood and we hit the streets. "Here are hate, jealousy, hurry and indifference frothed into the wild semblance of life." It's a heaving warren of shops for all fucking tastes. Well, maybe not the high end, I suppose, but I don't know shit from that. The result of my consumerism is meager and plebian in inspiration. I managed to cop some cooking utensils carved out of olive wood. Damn, Greece won't bounce back this way. "Who and what are these unknown people?" I ask. I could make a dozen stories of what he said, what she said—I can see a dozen pictures. But what are stories? Toys I twist, bubbles I blow, one ring passing through another." The stream, the human pour. Socratous is the main drag of old Rhodos and nary a centimeter of possible retail space has been wasted. From all over Europe along with North America, (oddly, Asians in short supply), they have come for the sun, let's not forget, but also to get their portrait painted, their tired feet piscinely nibbled, the opportunity to buy rings and flip flops, leather coats and frail objects that spin in the wind and drip a rush of hollow notes with the merest whisper and we are tired of castles and plop ourselves down repeatedly at cafes when the mere notion of fatigue has flitted past our consciousness, for it is the species itself that draws us. Sit long enough, you see everyone more than once. The passersby repeated grow solid, fill out their forms, inhabit national identities and reveal cracks in the nature of their relationships. Two graying weathered rockers, scraggy pony-tail and shaved head, burnt thickening tank-topped flesh tattooed from shoulder to wrist, Reg and Alf haven't missed Glastonbury in thirty years but have managed to fry themselves a mere 24 hrs into their six day and seven night Aegean junket. They don't appear to have purchased anything but lager, though a little Aloe Vera lotion wouldn't hurt, on the contrary. Brits have earned the reputation as the worst tourists in Greece through innumerable drunken brawls spread liberally throughout the islands. The cliché is that they are drunk when they board the charter flight in Manchester or Birmingham and remain that way until they stumble back off the plane only to discover they are back in the U.K. and can't remember a fucking thing. Especially the fucking, which might have occurred, but bloody hell, who can dredge up an erotic memory from the sun-stroked staggering debauchery Greeks are only too happy to provide. But Reg and Alf, they're veterans, know their proper measure and how to maintain a pleasant buzz through the day and deep into night. And if they err, eh, that's what the pills are for. Reg, says Alf, fancy that one up ahead in the, a, yellow? Reg snorts, the one grinding it out, ya mean? "Our differences are as clear cut as the shadows of rocks in full sunlight." A wiry Austrian couple in their sixties, grey on beige, sturdy hiking sandals, desert hats and little back packs and maps, stride up the avenue with purpose, giving the deluge of merchandise displayed the briefest disinterest. They're off for the temple of Pythian Apollo and then the Palace of the Grand Master. They're carrying bottles of water. They're in vigorous health and enjoying it. Frans, you were so tender last night, I could hardly believe it. Frans nods, Ja, it must have been the wine. As the tourist slogan goes: Greece: live your myth. Some texts do not bear up under renewed scrutiny; others shed the dust of time as a rock ignores the waves of the sea and remains, so too Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* continues its existence as a seminal high modernist document of exhilarating imagination and peerless technique. A short dense book, it covers the lives of six different but synchronized characters, three female and three male, from childhood to middle age across nine episodes. In this it precedes Michael Apted's *Seven etc Up* series by forty years, although Woolf's characters are sublimely articulate. In a sense, they form one personality in a revolving prismatic fashion, one soliloquy after another, flashing out in yet another direction but reflecting on all, always and continually reflecting on all. A Russian family, all kitted in new brilliantly colored sportswear and baseball hats comes down the boulevard. The girls all blonde and needy swoop upon the cheap jewelry rack, beaded bracelets and Colossus of Rhodes necklaces. Dad, a thick trunk of a man, pulls out a roll and peels off a couple of bills while admonishing his daughters to practice frugality. Fat chance of

that. They didn't fly down here from St. Petersburg, with a detour around Ukraine, to celebrate austerity. OMG, a Colossus of Rhodes Pok©mon carved out of olive wood! Speaking of the Colossus, there are no remains, just a lot of silly drawings of what various hack artists wanted to believe he looked like, bestriding the opening to the harbor. All of them have him swathed in a silly dhoti, but this was ancient Greece and we can rest assured that the big guy was naked and sporting a shlong too long; something to give pause to visiting sailors as they sailed beneath. But only briefly, then they went looking for whores, confident that his female equivalent would not be encountered. In 305 BC the town came under siege by Demetrios, a Macedonian King who desired Rhodes' advantageous position in Mediterranean trade. The siege failed, as most did in those days, and the enterprising Rhodians sold all the siege machines left behind and erected the enormous statue of Helios, the sun god. 100 feet tall on a fifty foot high pedestal, he was completed in 280 BC. But in 226 BC an earthquake brought him down. There's was money to rebuild him but the Oracle at Delphi, high on ethylene gas, they say, gave the Rhodians the impression that they had pissed off the sun god, so he never got it up again. "Are there modes of destructiveness that can't be explained by the pleasure principle?" Judith Butler, LRB

Mixing pain and pleasure was the calling of perhaps the most famous Rhodian, a boxer named Diogoras, who was the Muhammad Ali of his day. Ancient Greece didn't just have the Olympic Games every four years but Games of a similar nature in Nemea, Korinth and Delphi the other years, so you could essentially have a career as an athlete. He won in all the games, including Korinth four times, a span of 12 years, which is an awful long time to be top fists. "I'm still pretty!" Pindar even wrote an ode in his honor. (I love used books and the marginalia they often bear. In my copy of Pindar's Odes, given to me by Walt Curtis, a previous owner had scribbled in the introduction "An aristocrat, a quisling, a friend of tyranny—what other great qualities did he have? Alas, not the only 'immortal' artist to be the lick-spittal of power. And he is a great artist.") And Diogoras was stud supreme, passing on this toughness to his offspring: three sons, a grandson, and a nephew were champions as well. Pausanias tells us that his daughter, Kallipateira (she of the beautiful father) was the only woman to enter the Olympic Games. Women were banned, save for the priestess of Demeter, but Kallipateira snuck in disguised as a man. Discovered and put to trial facing the death penalty, she declared that she alone, amongst all women, should be allowed because the men of her family had been victorious eight times in these very games. Whoa, that is lineage, said the judges, you can walk but from now on everyone has to nude up before entering. The first strip search was gender oriented! We went to the Valley of Petaloudes (Butterflies) but June is too early. They don't really show until late July/August. A beautiful wooded area, a respite from the sun, but really, we have more interesting untouristed terrain minutes away from where we live. On foot. Lakonia spoils us. But the insects bring up an anecdote from Vitaly, my young German friend. He's on the streets of Brussels when he encounters a couple of young Flemish lads. Ah, they say, we love the German language, it's so aggressive! Consider the words: butterfly, French: papillon, and then with clenched fists they spit out the Deutsch: das Schmetterling! Hmm, das es gut, das es sehr gut. After being part of the Athenian, Spartan and then Alexandrian empires, Rhodes was forced to welcome the Romans. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss. Later the island was sacked by that old conspirator/assassin Cassius, he of the lean and hungry look; as Shakespeare has Caesar saying, "He thinks too much: such men are dangerous." No shit, Jules, but an emperor always has more enemies than friends. Die, Caesar. After the Romans came Byzantium, then the Knights of St. John, the Ottomans, the Italians in the first half of the 20th century and Rhodes finally joined Greece in 1947. Remarkably, through all of this the island, due to its advantageous position in the Mediterranean and the industry and pliability of its citizens, has been prosperous. And judging from the scene on the streets, still is. Mirella was suffering from a virus or something our first days on the island and sometimes I was wandering solo but still intrigued by the human wave. I ordered another beer and considered more closely. What a shabbily clad mob adorned with ill chosen and badly fitted garments. Now this is an international middle class tourist population. I say that to impress the idea that they're not poor, merely burdened with bad taste and or, fuck-all attitudes. I return to the room and relay this critique to Mirella. She, who is never badly dressed, looks me up and down and begins to laugh. What? Moi, ego? I look in the mirror. Oh, I see. I truly am incognito, blending in with the hoi polloi, as my mother would have had it. What you need, my good wife says, getting out of bed and throwing on a dress, is some nice cotton linen shirts. Down to Ippocratous Square we go where a shop specializing in just such items awaits. Hell, I buy three, they're great in the heat. They breathe, doncha know? Are they cheap? No, but not so bad as long as you don't convert it into dollars. I must add, that near everyone goes back to their rooms and changes for evening and then the boulevard less resembles a suburban Topeka, Kansas mall on Saturday afternoon. Especially the women, who are teetering on platform sandals while tugging down on their mini-skirts, which keep riding up, because that is their nature. So, I don't think I impressed anyone with my shirts. We rent a car and circumnavigate the island and pay the obligatory stop at Lindos, famed as a bohemian enclave in the late sixties for the likes of R.D. Laing and Germaine Greer. Poor place was overrun by commercial interests long ago, its streets of trinkets far more claustrophobic than Rhodos town, its beach a dense village of umbrellas, castle above still beautiful against the blue. But we gotta have lunch. It's late afternoon, so we are between dinning times but find a place where we can sit in the open air and order up. One of the seaside specialties of Greece are mah-REE-thess, smelt. Wee fish maybe three inches or so long they fry em up and you eat them whole, head, tail and all. Yum. We discover our waitress doesn't speak much Greek, not unusual on the islands, but we get our order in. They bring us a platter of little fried fish, but they ain't mahREEthess, they're little silver fuckers for one thing. We call the guy in charge over. What are these, cause they ain't mahreethess. Oh, he says, we call any little fish mahreethess. The more tourists a place gets, the farther from a Greek experience you get. No mystery there, but I keep looking at the little fish, which, I admit, I'm eating, when suddenly it comes to me. These little fuckers look just like the poor fish entrapped in glass boxes feeding off tourists feet! When this thought hits me I pull up short. Damn, imagine eating a creature that's spent its short life eating dead skin. Too late. You are what you eat, and now I'm dead feet. "The sun fell in sharp wedges inside the room. Whatever the light touched became dowered with a fanatical existence. A plate was like a white lake. A knife looked like a dagger of ice." Turns out there are plenty of beautiful

places, mountain villages and isolated beaches, on the southern part of the island and we enjoy our cruise. It also must be said, we found quite good food in the evenings in Rhodos town. And every morning Jutta, who warmed to us over the days and we to her, whipped us up a lovely breakfast of yogurt with a sprinkling of pistachio nuts, fruit, a bit of toast, fresh squeezed juice. I could see her in the kitchen, no juicer, she was hand squeezing. Mostly we were her only guests, she only has three rooms, so we got all her attention. She was full of all the same foreigner complaints about doing business in Greece, inefficiency, lack of ambition. Her Greek husband died five years ago, his picture adorned the bar, and she stayed on and built this guest house. Said the mutual friends she shared with Yianni, her husband, abandoned her soon after his death. But she has two huge gentle dogs who sprawl about the place. Max and Sweetie. They were both street dogs once but found their way into human care. Sweetie lives elsewhere but comes by everyday to visit Max. They lie beneath our feet while we breakfast, very homey. I look across the table at Mirella, who came around during our stay, and hear Woolf's Rhoda. "Like a ribbon of weed I am flung far every time the door opens. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in this room." Our last night the guest house became Klub Klimt as Jutta had a singer and accompanying guitar player in the bar playing traditional Greek songs and we drank strong liquor and enjoyed it immensely. Late morning our driver arrives and we lug our bags through the narrow streets to where he's parked. Despite what I've said above, Rhodians have done a lazy crappy job featuring and maintaining much of the archeological ruins within the old town. Garbage strewn, no organization or lighting, we've seen the same all over the country. Everyone's more interested in selling knick-knacks. We're departing from Diagoras International Airport. The pugilist again. In the 448 BC Olympic Games one of his sons won the Pankration, the ultimate combat of the ancient world (no biting or eye gouging), and another son the gold in boxing. The victorious sons raised their pater to their shoulders and paraded him around the stadium to thunderous applause. One spectator shouted: *Kaitthane, Diagora, ou ka-es lympon anab s ia* or Die, Diagoras, you will not ascend to Olympus besides. Meaning, dude, it doesn't get any better than this, so go. And so he did, dying upon the shoulders of his champions and was known from then on as the happiest mortal that ever lived. "It is curious how, at every crisis, some phrase which does not fit insists upon coming to the rescue—the penalty of living in an old civilization with a notebook." 24 July 2014