

## II

## HOUSE

A house-hunting expedition brought us to a small plateia. A plateia is a public square, though seldom square, and this one had no particular shape at all. At our right was a white church, at the left, a massive fir tree. Ahead, in the position of Tybalt's tomb or Friar Lawrence's cell, was a low door, and beyond it, in the company of a twenty-watt light bulb, an old man binding a book. Above his door was a series of balconies.

We approached Friar Lawrence with a carefully prepared sentence: "We are Americans and we are looking for a house to rent."

He looked up and blinked. He carefully wiped the spectacles which had been at the far end of his nose, and relocated them higher up, and then he wiped his hands. He brushed off the front of his white shirt, and went across the room and behind a wooden door where he took out a grey pullover. He put on the pullover, adjusting the sleeves and neck and waist, all with extreme care, but perhaps because our standards were more relaxed, or because we were drenched with anxiety about the house-hunting business, the pullover seemed unaffected by his attentions. He shuffled to the door, stepped carefully out onto the street, and then turned his whole body around so that he faced the balcony just over the door.

"Maria," he called, very quietly.

After a very long time, a tiny, immaculate old woman shuffled out onto the balcony. He said to her very quietly that we were Americans, and that we wanted to find a house to rent. She peered down over the flowerboxes at us as if we were far, far away.

"You have no husband," she announced.

I was not sure if this was an observation or an accusation. I looked sadly at my children and gestured feebly. She reentered the house and after a very long while, emerged on another balcony, possibly twenty feet away. "Vangeli," she called.

The shutters next door opened, and a head covered with pink rollers emerged. "This woman," shrieked Maria, "is an American. She has no husband and no money, so she has come to live in Greece where we care for the poor. Does your sister's husband have a house to rent?"

A shutter across the plateia opened. "*Yassou, Vangeli,*" called a fat woman. "*Ti kanete?*" What's up?

"Ah," cried Vangeli. "*Afti i keimeni Amerikaniki,* this unfortunate one, the American. She has three children, poor thing, and all girls, and her husband has left her for a cheap blonde, you know how they are in America. She has come here to live quietly with us, and she will work in a tourist shop and perhaps she will also teach at the high school. *Po, po, po,* and three doweries to provide, all alone."

This was immensely moving, and of course, it hardly seemed the time to interrupt with accuracy. Two more women and several children appeared on other balconies, surrounding us like putti in the dome of a roccoco church, all discussing distant relatives with houses in remote villages. No one spoke to us for a very long time. Then it was silent. Maria bent over her balcony and peered far, far down at us. She waved her arm and pointed, indicating a watch.

"Come back tomorrow," she announced. "At the same time. He," she pointed to Friar Lawrence who looked profoundly distressed, "will find you a house. Addio."

"Addio," called Vangeli.

Addios caroled around the plateia, each punctuated by the closing of a shutter, and we left in the dusk. The only light was from the single bulb, dangling over the old man who was once again bending over a book.

After two days of intense anguish, we rented the top floor of the house across the street from the Hotel Otto. Komninou 1 was the address, as it was of the other two doors on the street which was one block long and one Volkswagon wide. Our front door was double, and when opened, sagged inward over a black and white marble floor. The house had been built two hundred and fifty years before: there were pre-Revolutionary graffiti on the flat roof, the window hinges and brackets were blacksmith-made. An addition early in this century had doubled the size of the house; later it had been divided and subdivided at random. The first two floors had stone walls, the third was a wooden frame filled with rubble, mud and straw; the exterior was plastered over and painted in ochre and roofed with ancient tiles. It possessed no straight or parallel lines, no right angles. We had the top floor with four bedrooms, three balconies, a flat roof and no kitchen. It is difficult to write about the bathroom without sounding hostile.

Ostensibly, it was a typical Greek bathroom with a toilet, a shower over the toilet which dripped upon your knees, and a shower drain at the highest point of the floor. When flushed, the toilet erupted like a geyser, making it necessary to leave the room first, and then reach back to grope for the pull-chain. Before we arrived, the house was used as a dormitory for men who came into Nauplion to work during the week, and because men have more options in a bathroom than do women, the plaster walls were covered to chest height with a flourishing orange-green mold.

My daughters rebelled. "We will not use that bathroom." They spoke with exceptional clarity, both as to diction and to purpose, and they did not, crossing the street to the Hotel Otto whenever necessary. "Maybe," I suggested with little confidence, "if it were scrubbed again . . .," but after three scrubblings nothing was accomplished beyond loosening several large chunks of plaster. The oldest daughter analyzed one chunk with tweezers and magnifying glass, discovering discovered there had previously been at least fourteen layers of paint. We decided to buy a fifteenth and sixteenth layer, a new toilet seat, and a hacksaw.

There was a second operatic interlude at what appeared to be a conventional hardware store. We four wore jeans and bulky sweaters. We were greeted by four young men in jeans and identical sweaters. Their hair was longer than ours, their jeans were tighter. They greeted us heartily, we responded. Then one of them yelled at us, with the conviction shared by most Americans that, if you yell at a foreigner or an idiot, you will be understood. "*Ti thelete?*" What do you want?

It was easy. I pointed to a paintbrush, a can of white paint, a mop, a bucket. I drew a hacksaw. I drew a circle and flapped my hands to indicate a toilet seat. We were engulfed in toilet seats: ebony, crimson, pink, gold-flecked, pearly lavender maws flapped around us, and there was some disappointment when I chose the cheapest white one. Then I tried to dramatize turpentine. Years of retrospective thought have failed to suggest a way to dramatize turpentine. I tried to pantomime wringing out a paintbrush.

I was given a broom, a toilet brush, a plunger, another mop, a scrubbing brush, a shoe brush and a tooth brush. The men became exasperated, the children said we could

go home now. Then a small boy who had been peering from the back room, alternately scolded and ignored, pushed his way up. "Naphtha?" he whispered.

"Naphtha?" I mused.

"Naphtha," said a man with conviction.

A chorus of "Naphtha" flew from man to man, who crowed and shook hands all around. Then they all turned ferociously on the small boy and roared, "Stupid, get the naphtha. Can't you see the lady is waiting?"

"How much?" I asked, believing that one should not humiliate a child, at least not in public.

"Bottle," said the boy, not humiliated. Here we learned that when buying a liquid in Greece, the customer provides the container. He went out in the alley, rummaged till he found a bottle, filled it half-full of elixir of naphtha, and stoppered it with a piece of paper. We paid. We left. There was a mighty chorus of "Addio!" as we left, over which a tenor could be heard crying, "Naphtha!"

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Operatic interludes were scarce at first. We had to make the house into something that fit my idea of a Greek idyll, and the children's idea of home. The rooms were all various shades of blues and pinks, several to each room, in patches. Apparently it was not customary to move furniture when painting a room, so each room had several generations of varicolored ghosts of dressers and cabinets. The kitchen – it had a sink, a marble counter and a woodbox – was hung with huge peeling patches of brown and yellow paint blotched over other brown and red and blue and pink patches. We counted twelve layers of paint, all hanging down in garlands resembling brittle leather, and immediately decided not to touch it.

We enamelled the bathroom walls and painted the floor red. I spent a miserable hour wrapped around the toilet trying to wield the new hacksaw to cut the corroded bolts of the old seat. The new hacksaw and the new seat both broke on the first use.

I needed help in painting the large rooms. I went to a restaurant on the waterfront, run by a Greek from Washington, who had offered to be our friend and protector. "Nikos, I need to hire a painter."

"Have an ouzo."

"No, thank you. Do you know a painter I can hire?"

"That house will never be fit to live in. Have an ouzo."

"No, really. I want a painter. Do you know one?"

"Sure thing." Nikos clapped his hands. "Michaelis!"

A man came over to us, moving as if in great pain. He needed a shave, and he giggled. Nikos talked to him. He seemed to be agreeing. "Hey, Michaelis say he gonna come paint for you. When you wanna start?"

"Now, if he can. How much will this cost? When can he come?" This, of course, was idle curiosity on my part. They talked again. Nikos said:

"You meet him here tomorrow at this time. It won't cost much."

This time was ten-thirty. Tomorrow Nikos wasn't there. Michaelis wasn't there. The only person in sight was an old man battering an octopus. We had seen this our first morning in Nauplion. Horrified, I had suggested that there was surely a less brutal way to kill one of God's creatures. He had kindly and patiently pantomined that octopi are

extremely tough, that they are killed by snapping a nerve connection in the mantle, and that the battering tenderized them. So for an hour I sat on the waterfront and watched him repeatedly bring the octopus up into the air by its tentacles, and Thwack! it against the quai.

At eleven-thirty, Nikos arrived, rubbing his head. Michaelis was not his concern. "This is Greece," he complained bitterly. "Never on time. The stupid bastards always do this to me. You know how much money I lost this year? All because those stupid bastards never come on time. I gotta hire waiters. I gotta hire drivers. I gotta find an electrician. They never come. *Avrio*. Always *avrio*. Or *methavrio*." He jerked his head toward me. "You have any trouble?"

I blinked. "Anyone try to cheat you? You watch out, you here, these Greeks will cheat you as soon as look at you. You count everything. Damn bastards. I don't know why I ever tried to come back. You know, in the States, we had it easy. I only go to the shop two-three times a week, we had season tickets to the Redskins' games. I tellya what, I'd give this whole place away, free, just to see Sonny Jurgenson play. D'jever see him play? Anyway, I work here every night, three-four in the morning, and I'm losing money. Damn stupid Greek bastards. What are you doing here?"

"I'm waiting for Michaelis. You said . . ."

"Damn stupid bastard. Michaelis never does anything he says he will. You go home and forget about this."

Late in the afternoon, Michaelis arrived at the door, sleepy and fresh-shaven, wearing a new and matching red sweater and pants. He said, in a tone that suggested he had been waiting for me all day, that we should go buy paint. On the way to the paint store, we passed a friend's bar and Michaelis was thoughtful enough to introduce me to everyone there. Someone suggested we have an ouzo. I did not want ouzo myself, but everyone else did, and I was given the bill so as not to be left out. At the paint store we spent an hour selecting two small cans of white paint. Michaelis seemed to be a friend of the owner who was sitting with two other friends, feet propped up on a smoking wood stove. They, too, offered ouzo. I questioned whether the two small cans were enough paint for two large rooms and two coats apiece. Michaelis said, with a gesture that indicated the solidity of the ground beneath our feet, "Now, here, is Greece. In Greece, is enough paint."

We bought a baby's bathtub in which to mix the paint, a brush, and several plastic drop cloths. On the way home we were fortunate enough to pass another bar. Everyone there knew Michaelis, too. He suggested a drink. I suggested that we continue home. He said he would be there in five minutes. I went on, trusting my posture indicated a certain degree of dissatisfaction.

The children had already prepared the rooms to be painted. They had covered everything with newspapers and the newspapers with the plastic. They had put down plastic and newspapers all along the wall in both rooms. We waited. Finally, at eight, we went out for supper.

The next day, about noon, Michaelis appeared, red-eyed and unshaven, in his matching pants and sweater. He said he would be back, just as soon as he spoke to a friend about something.

He was back at four-thirty. He dumped both cans of paint into the baby's bathtub where they failed to cover the bottom, and hunkered down to read the instructions. The instructions for Greek paint were naturally printed in French, German,

Swedish, Spanish, Italian and Danish. I mixed the paint. Michaelis tossed a brush into the tub and then picked it up with the handle dripping. He slung the brush over his shoulder and walked across the room. He was followed by a row of white splatters. I followed with the tub. He took it back, explaining that now it was equi-distant from all sides of the room. I asked about the floor. "Is nothing, the floor," he said. "Don't worry."

By five he was out of paint and had a headache. On the way to buy more paint, he met friends who offered to help with the headache.

He returned at noon the next day. The stubble on his face was longer, the red pants and sweater had white splotches. He was unhappy at the large size of the can of paint I had bought without consulting him. He began measuring out paint with one of the silver christening mugs. I yelled at him. He looked hurt.

At twelve-thirty a policeman arrived and asked for Michaelis. He stumped down the stairs. We hung over the balcony. Their conversation seemed to center on a motorcycle with no tags or lights. They shouted at each other and circled the motorcycle, looked to see if it showed signs of attacking, and began to circle again. The policeman offered Michaelis a cigarette. "Ah," said Irene. "They always offer them a cigarette before they torture them." The policeman stalked off, ordering Michaelis to follow.

He was back at five, and completed two walls, each dip of the brush shedding more and more paint onto the floor. He cheerfully suggested that the more water he put into the paint, the more money he could save me. By six he was through for the day, waved jauntily, said, "*Avrio*," and was off.

At lunch the next day, he dropped by long enough to say that he had to go to court, but that he would be back. I followed him down the stairs and out into the street, screaming that he should never come back.

The next morning he arrived before we were dressed, still in his painted ensemble which was approaching a fine ripeness. He painted the living room, and then mine, this time dribbling the paint across the living room floor and down the hall. He had brought his own ouzo this time, so he only had to take breaks for aspirin and lunch and coffee and the newspaper. By mid-afternoon he was pleased to inform me that both rooms had received two coats of paint. The floors certainly had. I quietly what his intentions were for the floors.

He drew himself erect, and with a certain air he said, "In Greece does not man scrub floors."

He was right. I took to bed, on the verge of hysterics and pneumonia. My daughters spent fifteen woman-hours scraping paint from the floors. We found paint on my sheets under the bedspread under the books under the plastic. There was paint inside the clarinet case. There was paint inside the books on the bottoms of the stacks under the newspapers under the plastic. There was paint on the floor of the canary cage on the porch. I went to get Nikos. He laughed for an unnecessarily long time.

"What are you upset about? This is Greece? What do you expect?" He walked off, then a thought made him turn back. "Everyone knows Michaelis can't do anything right."

Over the next week the house, like a huge creature turning over in its sleep, adjusted itself and became home. We had a bedroom each. We borrowed four spavined beds and five tables, none of which had two legs the same length. Someone lent us a doctor's examining table which served as a padded buffet. Someone we met on the street came up and adjusted our stereo to compensate for the difference in electrical current.

I bought an antique red and blue rug which we hung on the wall over the examining table, and two large striped nomad sacks which we stuffed and used for floor pillows. I went to Athens where I bought six bamboo chairs and two flokati rugs. All the rooms were large and bare, full of sun and air. They opened into each other and onto a broad hall which opened on a balcony shaded by an enormous tree. My room opened onto a balcony which overlooked the little plateia of Agios Anastasios with the Church of the Panagia and the Hotel Otto.

The living room, the *saloni*, had four tall windows and a door opening onto a balcony that looked down to the Mediterranean. The floor was wooden, miserably thin for the people who lived beneath, but the acoustics were glorious. At night the saloni was illuminated by the street lights and neon signs from nearby shops; we would sit in the pink and blue glow and listen to conversations from the street below and the perpetual bouzouki tunes, natural as breathing.

We had visitors as soon as we were moved in, from Scotland and Washington and Lebanon. The rains followed them. The cerulean, peacock bay changed to dirty grey, the mountains surrounding changed from tawny and bone, to steel and mud. The town's pastels all became a monotonous grey. Rain dribbled down the Venetian ramparts onto the Cyclopean stones and the bare rock and prickly pear, down the slippery medieval steps, across the plateias, and collected in rushets in front of the shops. The shopkeepers covered their sundresses and authentic replicas with newspapers and plastic and the water dribbled on and puddled along the waterfront and around the scrawny dogs that lie in public places.

The water in the harbor blew up onto the quai to meet the water dribbling down. It oozed under our doors and windows, showered through the kitchen ceiling, and made a waterfall down the stairs from the roof. It was clear that we had a roof of great historical interest. We spent most of several days in restaurants. We went over to the Hotel Otto for Elias who seemed to bear responsibility for repairs. He strolled about, counted the number of pans and bowls we had set out, observed admiringly our intelligence in packing towels under the doors and windows, complimented our foresight in bringing ponchos with which we could cover the stereo and books. He pointed out, and it was difficult to refute him, that when it was not raining, it was all right, and when it was raining, no work could be done. He said, "*Po, po, po*. It is a good house for an archaeologist with an umbrella." He repeated it in Greek and in English, and then went away, I suppose, to find someone who would laugh.