

A Place of Miracles

By Amanda Summer

“Don’t worry,” Yanni whispers in my ear as the old man lifts his hands to me. “It won’t hurt you.”

A small, dark snake with a tiny cross on its forehead writhes anxiously between the folds of his aging, leathery palms. Impatient children press in, bouncing on their heels, desperate to touch the creature. Gingerly, I reach for it with my fingers. No sooner than I am able to feel the coolness of its skin, a woman pushes in front of me. The gnarled hands clasping the reptile are absorbed back into the crowd and just as the throng closes around it I see the snake’s tongue flicker, an infinitesimal red fork in the night air.

They say this is a place of miracles. Even though the idea of traveling to Greece at the height of summer is against everything I believe in, with its lava flows of burnt nosed, brown-shouldered backpackers clogging up the beaches and ferries, not to mention the unrelenting heat, my curiosity has gotten the better of me. I have heard stories of spontaneous healings that occur every August in two villages at the southern tip of Kefalonia, a remote island in the Ionian Sea. The fact that they involve snakes, the Virgin Mary, and hundreds of people willing to lie on the ground from head to toe, while having the remains of a dead saint passed over them, is too tempting to ignore.

Tales have trickled down to me over the years – stories overheard when I worked with an archaeological team excavating on the neighboring island of Ithaca. Centuries ago, residents of the small village of Markopoulo began to notice thousands of snakes mysteriously erupt from the earth on the Virgin’s Feast Day – August 15th - triggering

unexplained healings in those who handled them. When I subsequently learned that the island celebrated its patron saint in a neighboring village on August 16th, where cures have been attributed to his 500-year-old mummified remains, I packed my bags and set off in search of snakes, dead saints and miracles.

I arrive on Kefalonia to vast swaths of charred, blackened earth running from the mountains to the sea. On the flight in, the pilot calls over the loudspeaker for the passengers to look out the window; plumes of grey smoke are rising like sooty exclamation points over the ancient earth. Fires have ravaged Greece all summer – including the village I am now in. With temperatures hovering around 100 degrees, it feels as though this place is still engulfed in flames. Now that I’ve made it here I’m wondering; how will I find my way to this obscure region hidden in the mountains when I can’t even locate it on a map? During repeated phone calls before my arrival I could almost visualize the hotel manager’s exaggerated shrugs as he assured me: *No problem, lady – we help you find*. A lack of directions is just one more thing to add to the uncertainty of traveling to Greece at the height of summer; and with the frequent strikes, overbooked ferries and forest fires, the prospect of witnessing miracles seems equally remote. Yet, after decades of return journeys to this maddeningly glorious land, I shouldn’t be that surprised, for there is one thing about this country I can always count on for certain: behind a landscape of serene temples and predictably blue skies, this is a place where one can expect to be eternally confronted with life’s ambiguities.

The high beams slice the night into golden ribbons as the car bounces over rocks, struggling up the steep mountain road. All I can see beyond the precipitous drop-off are dried grasses waving in the breeze and the lights of houses far below, twinkling along the coastline. Soon I see parked cars lining the road and I struggle to find a space. Spying a possible spot, I back into an opening between cars; turning the wheel, I suddenly feel my tires rolling back over the edge. In the darkness I see nothing in the rear view mirror and I'm suddenly seized with a feeling of terror: I can't tell how far before the road drops off a cliff. With the car at a steep angle, one foot straining on the brakes and the other rammed on the clutch – I jiggle the shift into first, pull up the parking break and time its release. With a violent burst, I floor the accelerator and the car lurches forward, leaping back onto the road, the headlights illuminating a group of elderly villagers. Shouting at me and waving their arms, they usher me to another place a short distance down the road, this time safely rimmed with a guardrail. Pulling into the space, I slump onto the steering wheel. With my fist still gripping the hand brake as if my life depended on it, I wonder if my heart rate will ever return to normal.

After giving me a few minutes to recover, the villagers beckon and I follow them on foot up a steep incline; soon it empties into Markopoulo's main square. The plaza is filling with people and tiny festival lights swing from above like fireflies in the darkness, bathing the crowd in an amber glow. More villagers descend a steep path that zigzags above town, a line of black-scarved heads and white hair bobs behind the retaining wall like shadow puppets. A belfry emblazoned with a placard that reads, "Virgin Mary's Snakes" looms above the square and its bell clangs incessantly, sending deafening waves

drifting into the valley below. The scent of pine and incense mixes in the cool night air – people press against me as the line grows longer, winding up the path towards the church.

The hotel manager, my shoulder-shrugging friend Yanni, finds me in the crowd. As we near the church doors, he encourages me to purchase candles. I choose two sets of medium sized tapers, one for each member of my family, but some people buy candles as tall as they are, wrapped in special paper. Caramel colored light spills out through the doors, bronzing the faces of the faithful. Peering inside, I see gold leafed paintings of saints reflecting the flickering lights and chandeliers hovering over the masses, who pack their way into the small space. Inside, we plunge the candles into sand filled censers; the black-robed priests blow them out and remove them as quickly as they are lit. “They are so cheap they take them and sell them again,” Yanni says, gesturing towards a group working feverishly to collect the forest of tapers.

The sound of men’s voices draws us towards the altar and the iconostasis behind, a painted screen that separates the worshippers from the holy sanctuary. Loaves of bread in all shapes are laid out on tables, along with other offerings. Parishioners do not generally sit in Greek Orthodox churches – they mingle. Unlike my Catholic upbringing with pews and kneelers where people were expected to remain quiet – and stationary - this resembles a county fair. The din is overwhelming and I can barely hear the bishop singing the liturgy, thanks to housewives gossiping in the back and screaming children who run in and out the door.

We push our way towards the front, and I watch as Yanni skirts around the edge of the iconostasis, pulling out his camera. The bishop, regal in his black stovetop miter, is seated on a raised podium covered in a maze of wooden filigree. His beard, an impressive

cascade of silver, flows over his black robe, partially obscuring a heavy gold crucifix. He has a staff in his hand and holds it outstretched, gesturing towards the worshippers. As I look more closely, I realize that the staff is moving; rippling like a mirage, a snake bobs and weaves from his balled fist. The Archbishop continues to orate and gesture to the crowd, their eyes fixed on the undulating serpent.

Just beyond the podium I see people gather around a large icon depicting the Virgin Mary. Drawing closer, it becomes apparent that this is not the Mary of my childhood: a muscular snake marked with a diamond pattern slithers across her turquoise robe. Nearby, villagers sit in rows in front of the iconostasis, as if in a doctor's waiting room. Only men and children are allowed behind the screen, and I watch a father take his son into the dark recess. "He's consulting with a priest," Yanni whispers. Even though we are in a church, this occasion feels more like a hazy intersection of theatre, carnival and psychotherapy.

Desperate for some fresh air, I see a crowd gathered outside and wander out the door. A few steps down, a man stands in a courtyard. He is surrounded by a circle of people who are pressing inwards, their lit candles creating an eerie glow. Moving closer, I see a snake in his hand. People of all ages lean in to touch it, kiss it, or have it placed on top of their heads. A mother pushes her young son forward and whispers to the snake handler, who responds by moving the serpent all around his face and neck.

"Whichever part of the body hurts, they ask the man to touch the snake there," Yanni says, coming up behind me. "They believe it will heal whatever ailments they have." He snaps a few photos, his flash igniting the crowd in schizophrenic bursts, and then pauses for a moment, seeing my reticence. Don't be afraid, he says softly. I touch

the snake – it is cool and clammy. A young girl stands in the middle, her mother pointing to her head. A hush comes over the crowd as the girl’s eyes roll upwards; the snake is draped on her scalp, its tail coiling like an errant tendril of hair around her ear.

I don’t know what cures the snakes will bring to the boy behind the iconostasis or this girl, but for now she beams, unafraid, happy to be the center of attention. Yanni’s camera flashes again, popping and lighting up the night sky as more people press in, eager to have their turn with the supernatural reptile. Pilgrims have come from all over the world, hoping to find cures for everything from blindness to Parkinson’s disease, but many, I learn after my arrival, have come because of mental illness. The nervous, the anxiety prone, the depressed...all find their way to this remote island in mid-August. And what the snakes cannot cure, the islanders assure me, it is hoped that the bones of a 500-year-old saint will.

Yanni’s car swerves and passes a truck, disappearing around a sharp bend as I try to follow him up the winding road. We are headed to the Omala valley, one mountain range beyond Markopoulo, where we will attend the festival of the island’s patron saint, Gerasimos, whose bones are said to possess magical qualities. As I struggle to keep up, his car darting in and out of lanes like a rabbit on amphetamines, I am reminded that Greeks drive like they live; recklessly, but laden with religion. Tamata, the little silver cards with eyes, ears, hearts and limbs etched into them, used to petition God’s protection, are strung over dashboards across the country. If the driver smokes, gestures,

speeds or veers dangerously in and out of traffic, these tiny metal cards will surely keep him safe.

Reaching the top of the ridge I can see the church in the valley below. Rising off the plain and dwarfing the surrounding monastery, its pale yellow walls and dromedary-humped dome reflect the midday sun in sad tones. As we coast down the hill, the earth spits up flumes of red dust like a bloody wind. Yanni pulls into an orchard and we park side by side under the shade of a massive olive tree. Walking through a gateway into an enclosed courtyard, public bathrooms announce themselves with a foul odor. A huge celebration had been held the night before, Yanni tells me, and the monks have not had a chance to clean up in time for today's events. The stench of overflowing latrines hangs in the air like sickness, and tissue dots the ground like a scattering of communion wafers.

The long road leading up to the church is quickly filling with people. Widows in black dresses pull children along by the hand, a teen couple leans on each other, their scantily clad bodies a patchwork of tattoos and piercings. Yanni takes off to shoot some photos of the gathering crowd and I wander into a makeshift bazaar that has been set up next to the church. I anticipate a row of monks selling Bibles, Orthodox *tamata* for the iconostasis, not to mention icons of Saint Gerasimos, the dour faced monk who founded a monastery on this spot in 1560, and whose body, the locals say, has miraculously never decomposed. Instead I pass through a Scylla and Charibdes of trashcans overflowing with plastic water bottles and Coke cans. Bees clot around the sticky remains, oozing into the dusty earth. A man in a white undershirt is deep frying *loukomades*. His body glistening with sweat, he swats away flies with a balletic grace as he simultaneously flips the sugared balls of dough that float like planets in a sea of oil.

Even though it is sweltering, I must have the doughnuts. Cradling the steaming dough between my hands I wander through the stalls, dodging the blistering sunlight beneath a series of tents. A woman rearranges lamb skewers on a grill while her husband smiles at me broadly – his mouth a toothless cavern – waving at me to buy. I show him the paper cone of *loukomades*, a grease stain growing wider by the minute – and press on.

The combination of suntan lotion and stale cooking oil is overpowering. Turning a corner, a sea of neon colored lace appears. An entire stall is devoted to purple negligees, hot pink push-up bras and all varieties of lingerie. This is not what I expected from a monastery. Supposedly pristine enclaves protecting people from the horrors of the real world, I find myself instead in the middle of a post-Bacchanalian rout. As I'm pondering the unfathomable reasons why someone would come to a religious festival to purchase underwear, I hear the thrumming of drums. A procession has formed outside the church; first a brass band, dressed in bottle green jackets trimmed in gold epaulets, parades by, followed by soldiers marching in formation, Kalashnikovs propped sturdily on their shoulders.

A cabal of priests, their robes inflating in the sluggish air like an infant's chest, huddles around an object. I see a silver coffin rise into the air; rickshaw-like, they lift the handles and carry it like a litter towards the crowd. Suddenly, an onslaught of vertigo appears to overcome the masses. Like a wave of cascading dominos starting to fall, hundreds of men, women and children silently drop to their knees and settle on the earth, heads in laps lying end to end, looking up towards the heavens.

Several men run in advance of the priests, lifting errant arms and legs and braiding the line of people tightly together to give the narrow coffin ample room to pass

over. The Bishop glides by next, his brocaded robes ballooning in the breeze like a blowfish. He lifts his golden staff, gesturing and pontificating in recognition of the multitude gathered on the sides of the road hoping to view the spectacle. Carefully, the priests start to pass the coffin over the line of people.

A few feet down the path, I hear yelling. I turn to see a blur of vibrant color and movement - a gypsy family has set up a makeshift camp alongside the processional road. Cooking supplies are hung from a retaining wall and people in bright clothing are spread out on a series of blankets laid on the ground. Older girls sit listlessly in the heat, babies drooling and jostled docilely on their laps. Nearby, two boys engage in a mock battle – one holds a toy pistol, waving it in the air. Chasing each other around the encampment, they shout and laugh giddily, running circles around a woman who is tending to a cooking fire. She waves her arms at the boys, trying to shush them but they continue on recklessly, puffs of dust rising from their bare feet as they run, dirt smeared over their cappuccino colored skin and ragged clothes flapping in the breeze.

Suddenly, there is a struggle. The woman wrestles away the gun from one of the boys; she lifts her arm in the air and I hear a sickening thud as the gun makes contact with his skull. Bleeding from his temple and shuddering like a paralysis victim he collapses, retracting into a fetal position. People stop and watch as the woman stands over him, shrieking and waving the gun in the air; as I look closer, I see the gun isn't plastic, but metal. The rest of the family sits silently, glum – or stunned. The sounds of the boy's wails are agonizing. His thin arms grasp his skull and he writhes on the ground, his feet pedaling the dirt. After what seems like an eternity, the woman tosses away the gun in disgust and returns to her cooking. We watch in horror as no one does anything – the

family resumes its maniacal chattering as if nothing happened, and even the Greeks turn away eventually, craning their necks to see if St. Gerasimos is approaching.

A wave of nausea passes through me and I wonder if I should lie on the tarmac with the sea of pilgrims, collapsed in front of me like the gypsy boy. They are asking for healing, for hope, or perhaps - redemption. I don't know what to ask for. I'm shoved back and forth by anxious hands, pushing in to see the impending silver coffin. Soon the line of worshippers becomes too wide for the litter and the priests abandon their efforts, taking the casket to a clearing in the road and hurrying down towards the end of the processional route.

I decide I've seen enough. Between the clogged toilets, neon lingerie and violence, the festival is not what I expected. The crowd is beginning to disperse; I watch as a couple in their twenties wanders away, arms slumped around one another, dust on their backs from lying on the ground. I look over at the gypsies; a young girl sits mutely, staring at me, her thumb in her mouth.

The shade of the olive tree has long since slipped towards the horizon and as I struggle to open the car door the hot metal burns the flesh on my hand. I follow Yanni out of the valley and when we reach the main road he heads back to work at the hotel, and I - grateful to get away from the crowds and heat - follow the road towards the shimmering gray blue Ionian in the distance.

The waiter brings my beer and I lift it in an impromptu toast to the sea, the cold glass a relief against my palm. While I find myself hoping that some experienced healing in the past two days, the reality is that these festivals don't necessarily bring out the best in people. Yet having lived and worked in this country over the decades, I'm secretly not

that surprised; the Greeks have always understood the inverse logic of the sacred and the profane. Marinated in a mythology rich in possibilities when the field of opposites comes into play, and appreciating the paradoxical forces of Apollo and Dionysus, this is a culture that recognizes godliness dwells alongside the raw underbelly of life. The full spectrum of existence is honored and there are no pristine divisions between things, no neat Presbyterian corners. Perhaps the late mythologist Joseph Campbell put it best when he advocated, “Participate joyfully in the sorrows of the world.”

I’m not sure what kind of healing I expected to observe, thanks to snakes or the bones of a long dead saint. Perhaps the fact that these elaborate rituals bring a sense of comfort to those who suffer is enough. Even so, with Campbell’s words echoing in my head, alongside unforgettable images of mothers and guns, and priests and lingerie, I know I’ve encountered a deeper truth.... maybe learning to embrace the ambiguity of life – a duality filled with pain and pleasure, sorrow and joy - along with humanity’s eternal desire to transform misery into hope, will be the only miracle I witness today.