

IRAKLIA

Even with my eyes shut I'd probably recognize its smell, a while before the ferryboat is tied up: this familiar mixture of a bitter, salty, slight breeze from the sea, blended with those indefinable fishy odours that rise on very hot afternoons from the nets that are being prepared for the night catch. Along with a gentle touch of diesel from a small boat tuckering by. Today the wind sleeps. It's one of those summer days that holds this obvious conspiracy of melting heat and complete dryness. You can smell the dust in the motionless air and above all the gorgeous scent of wild thyme.

I'm back and feel like a dry sponge filling up with impressions. Well known faces, hugs, laughter, tears of joy. About a dozen others arrive, a couple on a motorbike, one family with a car. Besides that there's a big hustle unloading boxes of beer and wine, a barrel of raki, water in those inevitable plastic bottles, huge sacks with shining eggplants, giant potatoes and onions, boxes with bright green peppers and thick red tomatoes. Everyone gives a hand, shouting, running, laughing, sweating.

A hand full of backpackers are ready to leave. Content and happy faces show their holiday was a good one. A desperate hug and last kiss of summer lovers that finally have to part, a tear hidden behind sunglasses and a deep sigh. The air fills with a long hoot, the ropes are loosened and pulled back up. Then the Skopelitis – the swimming bus connecting the Small Cyclades Islands – leaves the tiny harbour.

Like everywhere else there's the familiar „Rooms, rooms!“ But it sounds different here, much less aggressive, more quiet and relaxed, friendly, inviting. They all know by now I won't accept their offers, so I put my heavy backpack on to Jorgos' red'n'rusty wonderfully old and dignified pickup. With about forty pounds less in weight I start walking. Happily, my sweat mingles with the dust. All that's left to carry is just the water bottle. I look forward to crossing the hill in my own human speed, to soak up every familiar change in the landscape. It's walking time from now on. I probably won't see the inside of a car for a whole month. On the ferryboat I've already taken off my watch – my annual ritual that changes clock time into something much more elemental: Sun time and moon time, day time and night time, morning and afternoon, twilight time.

The arrival at my favourite taverna starts with a frenetic hug from Stella, the host and one of the best cooks of the Cyclades islands. She welcomes me with a blooming twig of basil with its intoxicating smell. More warm hugs from other people who've become friends over the years. On the terrace overlooking the glittering waves we sit down for a cool café frappé and a small snack: a slice of bread, a few olives, a bright red tomato fresh from the small new garden, salt from the sea and a little olive oil – that's paradise. A short talk follows about the most important changes in our lives since last summer.

After the chat I head for my sleeping place. From the taverna down to the sea on a narrow goat's path, along the coast on flat rocks to Livádi beach, where my rucksack stands waiting. One last time with heavy weight I cross the long band of smooth sand with shallow waves licking at my toes. In the late afternoon sun I see many new faces and a few familiar ones. Some wave their hands, others come running for a welcome hug. It's like coming home into a big family.

Only the last part of my journey is left at the end of the beach and up the mountain. About a hundred paces without a path on coarse ground, between dry plants

and loose stones. Every single step is a challenge for concentration and balance. I love this way of walking, it makes me peaceful, calm and very alert.

It's freedom again, like it has been for so many years. I take off my load and look around. Everything's the same: free view down to the sea and over the small beach with few white houses in the typical Cyclades style. The strangely shaped cut off branch that looks like a jumping dolphin, my old and reliable guardian of the place. On the almost horizontal ground I spread the thin straw mat, the self inflating mattress, and my sleeping bag. Between tree and bush I fix the line for my laundry. The place is surrounded by some dry grass, a few thorny bushes and greenish brown cushions of wild thyme, some still sprinkled with violet blossoms. I crush one between my fingers, inhale the intense scent and close my eyes. My favourite spice! It will last a long time on my hand. Every year I take home some twigs for my personal Greek cuisine...

I share my home with a few locusts and ants, cicadas and small alert lizards. The few shells, pebbles and the bizarre piece of wood are still on the same spot, where I had left them last year. Next to them there's a small heart laid out with conches, that's new. Maybe lovers watched the sunset from here. Maybe it's a welcome for me. Now it's my place again. My one hundred thousand star hotel.

Before I unpack completely, I take flippers, mask and snorkel and walk back down to the beach. I want to say hello to the sea while the sun still shines. The first meeting after a year is always like the passionate embrace of lovers after a long time of separation.

On the surface I taste the salt and let my eyes drown in the vast panorama. It's incredibly clear today and I spot a few tiny, slowly moving hermit crabs. Nothing else at all, only the slowly moving, brilliant net of light on the sand. My eyes love to get caught in that net, and my mind calms down to complete inner peace. I just drift for a long while.

Further out in the deep are huge rocks scattered between sea weed. Nothing could keep me at the surface now, so I take a deep breath and follow my inner call down. With a few kicks I'm there, gliding weightlessly over the soft sand, touching the ripples with my belly, slowly moving through endless blue. I feel like being caressed by a thousand velvet fingers, covered and secure, carried by the warm element we all come from. My perception is switched from mind to body. Slow movements, everything light and familiar. It must have been like this in my mother's womb. I'm one with my surroundings, my origin. After a blissful while out of time and space I drift back up to the surface. Breathe in. I'm back at home.