

GHOSTS IN A SANDSTORM

An Experimental Literary Novel

By

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(Greek/Albanian mountain border)

Donkey looks at you as donkeys have looked at man for generations, eyes blank, thoughts inviolate.

There is a pause. What is about to happen is all too clear.

You wait.

He waits

Then with a great flourish he throws back his head and shrieks obscenely. His father's genes have demanded this of him, a braying expression decrying the servitude of donkeys down the millennia. The sound loses itself amongst the wild surroundings, diminishing in the vastness to just a pinprick of noise reaching for the horizon.

Your sole companion stands, rigid with expectation. The years have etched upon his mind the absolute certainty that action will result in counter-action. He affects that indifferent insolence that the breed has perfected, an antidote to countless harsh donkey-floggings. No pain that can be inflicted upon him will bend him to your will.

Ever.

You glare at him trying to shatter his insolence. Then with an abrupt movement you throw back your own head, open your mouth, and howl with all your heart directly at the ugly grey beast.

Equals now.

He shouted.

At me!

Well, he looked me in the eyes and made a pretty feeble attempt to bray at me. He wasn't very successful and I was sorely tempted to give him a further demonstration, but then we could just go on for ever making loud noises at each other. That is hardly civilized behaviour, especially for a well-educated donkey.

(Lake District, England)

Your study window looked out across the somewhat bosky garden to the hillside beyond, where the year's crop of young lambs would play tag with each other, each one vying to beat its fellows and stand at the top of the rock. There was a small white chapel, a Friends meeting house, half hiding behind a stone wall and beyond this cloaking the lower part of the hilly ground stood a thinned area of English Larch. It was the iconic Lake District scene.

Once he starts to reminisce, he is away with the fairies, not that looking back is a bad thing, but he should be careful that it doesn't become a habit. As for me I don't like to dwell too much on the past, indeed I find myself pretty well incapable of doing so. I find it best to live in the present, where I can keep a close eye on him and chip in from time to time with some pithy remarks

And this it is that you have left. A life that many would consider idyllic. You have a decent pension, you are passably well known in the area, you sit on various village committees, ring the church bells, and are part of the Crown Green Bowling team. Are you a fool? Probably, but the die has been cast now and whatever happens you will not be returning to this place.

Melody, from Sonnet's last litter, would be sitting beside you. Like so many Flatcoated Retrievers she suffered from cancer. In her case nasal cancer. In the very near future, you would perforce have to arrange for the vet, Jonathan, to put her down. You had discussed this a good three months ago and asked Jonathan when the decision should be made. "She'll tell you when." The vet had advised. Melody had not yet done so.

You have of late been much given to reminiscing. Your life has turned itself upside down and part of you at least is searching for a bit of stability. You are not recalling your past in the way that old people tend to do; sitting and staring into the fire and mumbling tales of a bygone world, but more in the nature of a client stretched upon a psychiatrist's couch recalling seminal moments dating from both recent times and from your childhood. Moments perhaps that have been formative of the man that you now are.

One problem about recounting past scenes in your life is that they are, of necessity, episodic with little connection save timescale and self. They could most aptly be described as a series of life-incidents, each one almost a story in itself, and whilst you are experiencing those recollections in the present, they did of course occur in the past.

On occasion, I have to admit, he says or thinks something that I would class as interesting. Yes, his life was indeed 'turned upside down', but of course you must realise that he did this himself – to himself. I am not sure if what he is saying is clear and understandable. What he is talking about is his 'Great Schism' when he gave up in physical terms all that he had worked for during his busy life and wandered off to the far right hand bottom corner of Europe with just a couple of large suitcases and a computer. Of course, he gave up more than just tangible things, but more of that anon.

Melody has had her way. Abandoning your comfortable chair, you headed in the direction of your walking boots.

(Porta Osman on Greek/Albanian border)

“Things were different before this journey started,” you say to Donkey, “Now the light is harsh. There is no subtlety to it. Wherever the sun strikes the brightness is intense, whilst the shadow is not just a contrast but an alien world, a world without light. And the boundary between the two is sharper than the edge of a razor.”

You pause for a moment, reflecting on your situation.

“It is so with rain. It is either drought or deluge. For days, weeks even, not a drop falls from the sky. The land is parched, plants shrivel, dust kicks skywards with every footfall. And then it breaks, almost without warning. Lightning slits the sky, ears resound with thunder and the rain hoses down turning roads into rivers and rivers into torrents. Then it is over. An unapologetic sun restores sodden land to baked earth, and the drought resumes. Where is the gently misting drizzle that lasts the day and breathes a kindly life into the English countryside of boyhood?”

Donkey, whose grasp of the English language amounts to about twenty words, looks decidedly unimpressed.

Hey, whoa there! Stop! This is calumny, we need to sort it, statements like his last can give a very bad impression regarding the abilities of donkeys. I admit that we do not say things using words, but that does not mean that we do not understand words or that we cannot ‘speak’ in a non-verbal manner.

Anyway he is right about the climate here. A number of his friends have said that they envy him the Greek climate. That is nonsense, the climate here is, on the whole, bloody awful.

“And another thing . . . the days and nights switch on and off with abruptness. It is ether one or the other, daylight or darkness. No creeping in of the dawn or a gentle sighing out of the evening light. No gloaming. No compromise. No subtlety.”

The pieces of recent memory have fallen into better shape. This journey started on the Albanian side of the mountain at Korçê, although quite what you were doing there is a mystery. Clearly you must have journeyed from England, perhaps via Italy? You intended perhaps to experience the vibrancy in the long-suffering land of southern Albania and the people who made their living there.

A great rush of memory sweeps over him, bewildering in the intensity of its recollections. It is not just the vividness of these visualisations in his mind’s eye, but also the noise and the smell. It is as if he were transported back along a road that had recently been travelled.

So this was Korçê. There were substantial buildings strung out discretely along a wide boulevard, good solid foursquare houses constructed rather more than one hundred years ago. Surely, built for the prosperous merchants of this town, and its well-to-do regional administrators. Not places dreamed up upon the drawing boards of fancy architects, but rather individual constructions that were designed ‘on the hoof’ with all the solidity of Master Builders of a bygone era. There is also a sprinkling of dreary high-rise blocks, showing the signs of

early dilapidation, built perhaps in the 1960's in the aggressively utilitarian style of the communist era. These modern aberrations only serve to confirm the substance and the suitability of the older dwellings.

It had seemed to me that there was little point in visiting the Korçé, not that it was an unpleasant town, on the contrary it looked charming, apart from a few scattered 'communist era' buildings – grey and prison-like. However I had overlooked his interest in religious buildings.

As an aside I should just say that he is not one of 'the faithful', he fills in forms that ask for his religion with the word 'Anglican', but frankly that means bugger-all. I don't want to get ahead of 'his' story but he has a bit of a downer on the post-war architecture of the Orthodox Church and I don't blame him for that.

You continued along the tree lined avenue towards the centre of this well-proportioned town. There, in the otherwise pleasing square, surrounded by substantial but appropriate buildings, a great church squats in its own smugness.

It is appalling.

It oozes kitsch architecture and bad taste from its step-infested rotunda to its twin turrets and multi-domes. Such an excrescence could only have been the result of a symbiosis of the religious arrogance and appalling taste that defines the architecture of the modern Greek Orthodox Church. The interior is nearly as

awful. Inside all is gilt and candelabras and a huge iconostasis. Nothing is arranged with any kind of artistic empathy, let alone in an aesthetic manner, such as might please the eye. Instead, the whole exhibits just a riot of superficiality, a jumble of extravaganza. It totally fails to aid any form of contemplation, let alone religious observance, rather it serves to jar the psyche. All it does is display the outward manifestation of the richness of The Church. A wealth garnered over the centuries from the poor of the land – perversely those that are its most ardent devotees.”

You wonder how such a rich, powerful and well-established religious organisation as the Greek Orthodox Church can employ such terrible architecture in its bid to entrap its faithful and such transient souls as might be drawn in its direction. On the contrary such pre-1900 Orthodox churches as are in existence are, almost without exception, delightful. They are built of local materials in the vernacular of the area, and because of that they form an integral part of the landscape and the social cohesion of the village. Yet here is this architect-designed carbuncle that has no relationship at all with the townscape, the country, or the people that it purports to serve.

You turn from this monster of misplaced religiosity towards a minaret guarding a simple square building, a mosque. A flight of steps leads up to an ante-chamber.

In accordance with custom of the place, you remove your shoes and place them on one of the neat racks designed for the purpose. There is a thick red carpet on the floor that is a pleasure to walk upon with bare feet. It is interwoven with strips of red and yellow, presumably delineating where the faithful should kneel to pray. The place has such a feeling of calm and a quiet confidence. It is not

trying to prove anything; its role is to serve the people for whom it was constructed.”

There is a small information plaque attached to one wall with a description in Albanian and English. It reads ‘The Iljaz bej Mirahori Mosque is now a ‘Cultural Monument’ so it is protected from the State.’

Despite you having been brought up as a Christian, an Anglican, your unexpected preference is for the mosque. It is distinctly disturbing to find such resonance within a different culture, that of the middle East, The feeling of such an undermining of long-held convictions is distinctly unsettling.

This religion thing seems to be the most elaborate of con-tricks. I am not talking just about the Orthodox Church, not just the Christian Church, but almost all of the major worldwide religions.

I accept that it provides security and comfort, particularly for the sick and the less well off, but so do other places and organisations. These Churches are incredibly wealthy having been left fortunes from rich benefactors who paid what amounted to ransom money in order to save their immortal souls. The whole concept of immortality is a sham. In the Christian religion it seems to revolve around a group of guys who were cowering in the upper room of a hostelry terrified of being discovered. These misfits came up with the resurrection story and, to give them their due, they promoted it well enough to, eventually, have the world

not just believe in it, but hold it as the central tenet of their faith.

You were drawn to the sound of the bazaar. Crowds of people jostle. You do not really need to buy anything, but temptation is there, it is like an auction room, so difficult not to bid. The market place resounds to the shouts of vendors. You are enticed into pushing along amongst the stalls with the smell of food, spices and leather forming an olfactory record of progression. There was a lady selling ribbons. She was dark-skinned and wore a red and yellow headscarf. Her eyes glittered, as sharp as the reflected sun that sparkled off her ear-rings. The noise, the smell, and the tradition of the market place were overpowering. There was no way out. It was a trap; not a physical one – but cultural.

It is imperative that you should purchase something. It would be the height of ‘bad form’ not to do so. You liked a piece of green ribbon that would look good on Donkey.”

Bollocks! How can he possibly think that I will look good with a piece of green ribbon wrapped around my ears? There is a very fine line between making animals look smart and playing kitschy games with them. A harness decorated with brasses may be acceptable, but look what dogs have to suffer in the hands of so-called adults – at Christmas they don't just put red hats on their pets, they strap cardboard antlers on them and call their dog ‘Rudolf’ – Ugh!

It is essential to haggle over the price. Not for the few Lek that this might save from the modest sum that the lady was asking, it was just the way of the bazaar.

An offer needed to be tendered, a counter-offer made, a bargain struck. This way both parties would be satisfied. The ribbon-seller smiled at your attempts to talk to her in Greek, for although this is Albania many of the inhabitants of the northern towns, like Korçê, speak Greek. It had been so throughout the Ottoman rule – and indeed in Byzantium prior to that.

It is unusual to find Greek as the lingua franca rather than English. It is a salutary reminder of English imperial arrogance. For millennia prior to the dominance of the Anglo Saxon it was the Greek language, the Koine Greek, that linked the trading centres of the known world.

Back in that far-off world of England there was a place where certainty, stability and responsibility were the order of the day. The land was lush and challenges were non-existent. A time and place where compliance with the system brought the probability of great reward; albeit financial.

It is true that I tended to be less obvious in the tangible sense when we were in England. I know that this sounds odd to those who are well acquainted with Newtonian physics but I have this ability to be in a place without my physical presence interfering with that of others. This is not something that I control. I do not have an Aladdin rubbing a lamp to make me appear, it just happens. I am of course mentally there (wherever 'there' is) all the time. I think he understands this, but most people would throw up their hands in disbelief.

He was content in England, but content is such an uninteresting state to be in. Discontent at least has some

sort of handle that you can grab and hang on to, but 'content' is, to me at least, a sad word. It is like 'adequate' or 'mediocre'. He knew that as well. For most of his life he had been pushing himself to achieve. Not, I hasten to add, in any financial or power-play sense, but to finish anything he turned his hand to. Having said that he was always in a hurry to finish, so some of the artefacts he made, or reports that he wrote, were only just acceptable.

He was kicking his heels. He had decided he would have to sell his bosting business because he knew that the alternative of putting a manager in would never work. Not because the manager might not be up to the job, but because of him. He knew himself well enough to realise that he could never give any manager freedom to operate – he would want to be involved in every small detail, and no manager would be able to put up with that. So he sold the business, well enough, and wandered rather vaguely into retirement.

He pruned his roses, he planted his onions, he chopped his firewood, and he toasted his slipper-clad toes in front of the fire. It simply wasn't good enough. He was bored, he was irritable, and had little doubt that he did not have long to live. Something had to be done. And that is where this story takes us.

You are walking down from the watershed, Korçê just a memory. Donkey has been looking relaxed since we started going downhill. You like watersheds. A single raindrop falling on the Albanian side of the border will eventually find its way to the Adriatic, whilst its fellow, falling just an inch further South, on the Greek side, will end up in the Aegean. That is how it can be with decisions. Just a slight nuance, hardly a serious choice, and you are set upon a wildly divergent path.

Not that you yearn for your earlier life now, which is just as well. There is no returning, for you have partaken of the apple. There will be moments in this journey of yours when you hark back to that other earlier time before your personal schism. Such flashbacks may induce a degree of anxiety, of loneliness, or just downright nostalgia. There will be places that you visit, some physically in real-time, some in retrospect, some that may be flights of imagination. Such places will have at least a modicum of significance. They may embarrass, may comfort, or may inspire. A proportion of these will seem insubstantial, a fleeting glimpse of something vaguely recollected.

*I am never distraught. I am capable of almost anything.
This is not what They want to hear, so I shall not tell
Them my truth. I will fake my emotions so that they
conform with Their expectations, and as for my ability to
do things – why I am a complete dunce at anything
practical and never quite manage to follow an intricate
conversation. In this way I will survive to a ripe old age,
and furthermore will not be shunned by my fellows.
Expectation is an interesting phenomenon, in that if it is
played with and nurtured it can live almost indefinitely,*

whereas if it is dashed from our grasp that may well will lead to disillusionment, and perhaps fury.

It is not easy to gain an understanding of this country of Greece. Many in the West have studied its ancient history, but that was a different time, and a different people. You have enjoyed exploring its modern history. Perhaps 'enjoyed' is the wrong word for much of it is bloody and brutal. It goes a long way in explaining the characteristics of the Greek people, their fears, their attitudes, and perhaps their politicians.

You resume your one-sided conversation. "There must, at some stage, have been at least a half-formed intention of coming to this place, but for the moment the 'why' seems to have vanished."

The journey is destined to be both long and possibly arduous, physically and, particularly, mentally. Donkey professes no interest whatsoever in your musings. He is picking his way carefully down the scree, something that seems to require his full attention.

The thing that puzzles me is almost too simplistic to ask. I am embarrassed by my own naivety. The thing is 'am I an entity in my own right'. Well at one level of course I am. Most people see me as a Donkey and certainly it is easiest to think of me thus. However what gives the lie to this is that I am a thinking Donkey. I don't mean that other Donkeys – do I mean real Donkeys? - cannot or do not have thoughts, of course they do, but without putting too fine point on it I consider myself to be something of a cultured and intellectual Donkey.

Such home as England offers us is far away, physically, temporally, and mentally. It would be comforting to become used to living here in Greece, able to understand the beach culture, to learn to share dishes at taverna, and to kiss male friends twice upon the cheek when saying hello. Yet you are all too aware that with a snap of the fingers and a translocation of some 1600 miles all such aspects of a foreign culture could vanish as swiftly as melting snow from a sun-drenched roof.

“Would that there were no borders, Donkey, and no personal restrictions on travel.”. For a few fleeting years, prior to Brexit, that was the case; for now we have regressed.

I suppose that it is incumbent upon me to find a way to speak to him when he addresses me directly, as he just has. However even if I were to rearrange my vocal cords so that I could make the right sort of noises I am not sure that he could be assured of his sanity if he possessed a talking donkey.

In any case I tend to agree with him about nationalism and this Brexit thing.

This Hellenic sun burns with a fierce intensity even this early in the year, encouraging escape through recollections of a much-loved homeland. Scenes and practices that are no more, conspire to ensure a deep thankfulness for having known that old rural England which has now passed into history.

It is reasonable to be emotionally attached to birthplace, and thus country. Pride in that is entirely acceptable as a form of gentle patriotism. But all too often such patriotism becomes an aggressive and unmannerly jingoism. Albania, isolated itself from the West for some four decades after WW2 and along its borders placed innumerable pre-fabricated concrete domes from which the territorial integrity of this die-hard communist state could be defended. Such intense nationalism, be it communist, fascist or anything in between, is contrary to peaceful co-existence. Those that build walls around their country do not in the end defend themselves against outsiders, but their isolationism leads to a nihilism that eventually destroys them from within. This building of defensive walls might equally well apply to individual humans; with the same result.

Seduction. That is what it was. Ten years during which the European club wooed this southern outpost of the continent with an abundance of cheap money and the promise of international nirvana. And then, quite suddenly, it was over. The vanished spending spree left behind a legacy of empty echoing Olympic stadia, of deserted factories and offices along every highway, and of National Roads that run out into dirt tracks. The money departed whence it had come, sucking with it salaries, pensions, jobs and houses.

Then came the aftermath of the betrayal, it was the time of abandonment, and austerity. But what is new in that? This is the story of Greece throughout the history of the modern state. Money had been offered, and money had been spent, without any great fiscal planning or thought for the consequences. That might seem a feckless

approach to living, but in a country where foreign invasion has been frequent and brutal it is the only way to ensure survival.

There was a growing realisation that the country had taken a wrong turn. Only thirty years ago every yard in Crete boasted a lemon tree, and yet today citrus fruits are imported from the Netherlands. Greece was due for a 're-set'.

The grey beast has one ear pricked forward in your direction, it is almost as if he has some understanding of these issues. "You know, Donkey, my life has changed beyond recognition, but not by my clear intent. Things sort of stole up unbidden, and then just slotted neatly into place, causing some surprise in the process. This journey was never intended in the sense that I did no planning for it, there was no route map, and very little anticipation. That it came about at all was a matter of chance circumstances that happened to combine."

He writes nothing but the truth, but he has been known to blur that slightly, and often leaves out whole portions of his life that might give you, the reader, a much better idea of what is going on his mind.

These 'chance circumstances' that he mentions are slightly more than that for, truth be told, he had a vivid, tempestuous and brief affair with a Greek woman on the island of Evia. The relationship did not last, but it was a catalyst in spurring him on to come to Greece. The affair was one of several prior to his finally settling down in this country.

Donkey is neither a first-rate listener, or nor does he make any sign that he has understood what you have been saying. Nevertheless you have a suspicion that he understands more than he lets on.

You continue, "It was not that having what polite society calls 'an affair' would have been in itself startling, or irremediable, for the architects of such peccadilloes can be easily re-assimilated, and returned to a pre-existing lifestyle. No, it was something beyond that. A more visceral thing than mere sex, and a clutch of emotions that had little to do with romantic love. An unrelenting force that stripped away your civilised, settled and somewhat privileged existence and replaced it with a multitude of interrelated challenges that opened up a whole new existence. Resistance, if any, was feeble."