

My Own Telemachus

by Alizon Robertson

The taverna was famous for its sunset views. On summer evenings the best tables looking over the sea were snapped up quickly. Parents brushing off sandy limbed children came straight off the beach draping damp towels on the backs of chairs and ordering litres of wine and huge plates of chips. Smart couples fresh from an afternoon nap, sipped cocktails while lingering carefully over the menu, while retired regulars nodded at Christos for their usual Mythos and Calamari.

Dimitri closed his eyes. He could hear the sound of the clink of cutlery and the soft buzz of conversation with its backwash of waves; hear his father Kostas call out an order and faintly catch the clink of glass on glass as someone toasted another perfect night in Poseidon—the best fish restaurant in the Mani.

Now, stepping over the threshold, he flinched at the splinter of broken glass beneath his feet. Sand had collected round the door and blown into the cracks of the wooden floor; a shredded cane shutter shivered in the soft breeze and the acrid smell of burned wood hung in the air. Dimitri crunched through the bar weaving through the tables, some still set with their blue and white cloths; baskets of napkins on the side table; dusty forks settling into silty trays. Dark rings marked the absence of wine bottles. He liked to think of his father hoarding up the lees of summer, his last days sustained by the deep, dark red, but he knew that it was really local teenagers drunk on secret socialising.

The taverna was in a bad way. Once it was the final stronghold of his dad's ageing years, but now with Kostas gone, it was Dimitri's and Dimitri didn't want it.

His father had never wanted it either. He preferred to be out on his boat fishing rather than managing a business. He'd seen his life as one of adventure not service and every receding tide had been a pull to push out to sea again.

Here, on a shelf behind the bar, was a photograph of Kostas—handsome with his thick black hair and huge moustache; strong arms holding up a magnificent tuna, a catch that made the news and turned his father into a giant that summer.

Night after night he'd take his little boat out and young Dimitri would follow its light bobbing out to sea, then watching it come closer until suddenly his father was dragging it over the sand and swiftly landing the silver fish. One day his father would take him out to sea and there would be another photograph on the bar of Dimitri's heroic catch, but that day never came—an accident put a stop to Kostas's fishing and, as the man was grounded, so too was the dream of the boy. Land bound his father directed the fish others caught to be cooked and plated and served at sunset to the families, couples and regulars who all agreed Poseidon was the best fish restaurant in the Mani.

So with no prospects save that of headwaiter, Dimitri went off to military service and never came back to live in the village. Later, he settled in Athens, became a mixologist at a trendy bar, married clever Christina and six years later had their own son—little Konstaninos. Every Easter and on his parents' birthdays he returned to visit and then, when his mother died and Kostas began to fail, he came home more often. Each visit there lay between them the unspoken question Dimitri knew his father was too proud to ask and Dimitri too anxious to broach.

As bad luck would have it, but luck nonetheless, covid times came and Kostas no longer had to keep hiding his lack of strength and Dimitri didn't have to mention to Christina that there was an opportunity to leave Athens and run his own restaurant instead of working for bad tempered Panagiotis.

Dimitri put back the photo on the shelf and noticed a bottle of wine tucked behind a giant conch shell. He wiped off the dust, found a corkscrew and stepped out of the taverna onto the soft sand. He headed to an outcrop close to the little pools where he'd fished as a boy. It was from here, at the foot of a tamarisk tree that the young Dimitri had watched for his father's return and it was from the same spot now that he followed the swift dropping of the fiery sun into the darkening sea.

He uncorked the wine and took a deep mouthful, feeling it course through his veins so that every fibre of his body felt at one with the roots beneath him, the rock against his back and the rhythms of the sea before him. The shush and shuck of the waves against shingle lulled him into a gentle doze.

When he woke, the soft dark wrapping round him like a blanket, the moon was high casting a silver path across the sea. In the distance a bright light twinkled and he thought of his father's last voyage out beyond the sunset, the net spread wide, the eager fish leaping to be caught.

A movement close by bought his eyes back to the shore. A dark shape pushing out against the waves, then another and another until the sand was full of tiny turtles tumbling into the sea. One by one they breached the sand and, finding water, swam out towards the pale moon.

That moon, changeable as the flick of silvery fish caught in a net, was the same moon he had sat beneath with his mother all those years ago. Then they had watched the turtles hatch for the first time and she had held him close and whispered, 'they always come back son, they always return.'

He took a mouthful of the deep red wine and raising his bottle to the western stars toasted his father. *Καλό ταξίδι* Kostas. I am home.