

TRAVELLER

The port of the Brindisi ferry lay stretching like a wide concrete beach, white, reflective, and uninhabited, along the bright and complacent sheen of blue sea in the hot sunshine. The salient sunlight arose, in whiffs, a faint odour of humidity, and spilth, along the shore. In the middle of a long journey, jostled from an overcrowded night train, Justin had come rather directly from the train's arrival at the demure Brindisi station, having no other immediate plans in the village and not wanting to dawdle there where he could neither remember how the streets were laid out or where else to procure easily a taxi for the unknowable distance. The great level plain of the flat concrete expanse of the port was eerie and empty at mid-afternoon, surrounded by a saggy solitary cyclone fence and a vacant carpark fronting a lone low concrete and glass building now sitting empty at the far side. The taxi man looked at Justin quizzically, unloaded the heavy suitcase; then sped away. The ferry was already moored there, serenely white and sleek, rising mirage-like from the edge of the placid blue water, waiting, but would not admit passengers until shortly before set to depart at eight p.m. The

crystal Italian sunshine at mid-afternoon was piercing hot. Justin, determinedly rolling while noting the aggravated sounds of the clumping echoing suitcase across the rough concrete, paced to the vacant curb of the empty terminal. He must wait. There was no other option—not even the chance of a refreshment—but to wait patiently, for the time. For a while he meandered, checking somewhat gloomily the empty spaces, wandering slothfully toward the wall of window where the sunshine from the outer world beyond the eave warmed the shade of the gray floor; but the wide pane of windowglass seemed to harshly reflect the heat back toward him. He checked his watch; surely the slow minutes would tick inevitably by. No one appeared to be about. It was a relief from the frantic bustle of the overcrowded nighttrain, the lengthened distance from Rome with its' holiday atmosphere. The sun was slowly slipping down the afternoon, and Justin moved from its' glazing warmth into the shadow of the sloping roofs' shade. He had nothing to read, but the few schedules on the wall. There were not even posters with pictures. Inside, at least, there were a few chairs. After pacing with indecision, wondering if the heat might dissipate, at last, Justin went into the terminal building, and took in its' desolateness with a glance. Waiting with patience was the only option. No one appeared. At least, the inside was

shaded by a ceiling, though holding down stifflingly toward the floor the oppressing heat.

He took a seat in one of the desolately empty chairs. Justin was restless. In the twist of impatience that hovered in the stillness all around he could only fidget, and yawn. But there in the grey solitude was time, while waiting, to allow his mind to wander, his glazing eyes roving to the years of the past. As he sat in the hard chairs recollecting those years, all fragmented—the horrific, the good, the damned, the lost, the jubilant, the tedious, the opulent and exciting—clumping by, as if strung on a wire, placards of memory. After all this time, accumulated, all the memories, the collected horrible memories inflicted by others of rejection and refusal, the constantly drip-dripping time had now finally come, though temporarily stilled for a moment, to this tense place of anticipant forward movement, these blessed steps on the long-awaited journey. What a strange world, but not so very strange as the people who live in it! Incessantly the past recedes, and the future seems a mirage, a distant horizon. How many roundabouts—detours, even—scattered among the meanderings of the past?

Since New York, that long ago and wonderous conglomeration that had moulded Justin into the person he became, since that eruption into the center of

being a “one”, there had for him been many steps along life's pathways, some vaguely direct, some mistaken, some many sidling. The roads taken, or those not taken; they added up. The most numerous of the many intersecting journeys of the one huge journey were past now. How long ago the years of the innocent Texas childhood, from which the first tentative step sprang.

As the waiting-room time ticked by, the sun lowered toward the flat dry land beyond Brindisi deliniating the horizon. Justin was tired of the hard chair; he was still sweating from the leftover heat of the high afternoon. He rose, and stomped through the empty building. Time had dripped down to the filling bottom of the hourglass. As the end of this fine clear day approached he noticed that at the farthest side of the gravelly car park the beginnings of a queue of automobiles was forming to await the boarding of the compliantly waiting ferry. Someone official appeared from the depths back of the door to position themselves behind the counter, but Justin already had his reservation tucked into a pocket. When he noticed the queue of autos begin, one at a time at the consulting instruction of a ferryport and another on-board ferry official, to enter the hold he thought it time, wheeling his clattering suitcase and carrying his travelpack, to begin the rather long gravelly walk past the gate and along the fenceline to the distant ferry. The line of automobiles was growing as he slowly passed them, but

at this still early hour pending the departure he was on foot alone. The clanking wheels of his luggage hesitated, and the dry dust-bedeviled distance seemed to grow. Perseverance. The journey from the left-behind world, the other world—the journey was about to move forward again, cross the Adriatic, across the Ionian.

After, alongside the autos, entering the ship the auto hold was in deep shade where Justin, eyes wavering, made his way across the large space to a compact elevator that would take him up top, above the sleeping cabins, to a large deck surrounded by windows where the light was bright still, then up a flight of stairs to the passenger's top deck where there were in sections blocks of seats arranged. It, too, already glowingly lit, was bright still with the light from late day outside. The ferry, clean and utilitarian, pleasant but functional, not like the plush luxury of the other liners on which Justin had past been, in this late afternoon still nevertheless moored floating as white and resplendent as froth on the blue water of the harbour, waiting for the embarkation and voyage. It gave a sense of forward efficiency, of purpose—of sought pursuing voyage to a hoped-for embracing. Justin chose a seat—near the glass doors that lead to the outside deck above the stern—and placed his luggage there. Several other people were beginning to arrive, and chose seats. They were a usual motley assortment.

Justin explored some, hoping to pass the time with refreshment, but found this early only an automated machine vending prepared coffee. He bought a styrofoam cup, and returning up the stairs and seeing that more people with various valises and equipment had arrived he carried his cup out to stand aloof in the occasionally rising cooling breeze on the outside deck. The sun was dipping low, and about to descend its' tip into the horizon. Some seabirds wheeled in the air; a scent of warmed salty water rose up from the deepening blue of the sea. Calm was everywhere, and even descending slowly into the eddies of Justin's mind.

What a marvel—a marvel the world is. Behold its' glory—the beauty of the world—so beautiful, filled with light and sunshine, especially in June. Justin's mind drifted. So much of the beauty of the world, when lost, namely the family one had when you were young but and now gone, diminished the world, but the flashily affecting natural beauty assuaging the tired eyes remains. Exquisite June. Timeless. Damp May. The obstinately reticent loves that had gone awry, sometimes beautifully, too, and the one that faithfully tried their best, continuing to be a shore beacon. That lone beacon's radiance remains—beautiful. Constant, though moving as the tides of the sea.

Suddenly as a low thunder there was a rumbling whirr as the engines were started, more of the last passengers boarded, and the ship readied to be cast off. The whirring of the engines seemed to vibrate Justin with excitable anticipation, the rotors turning, the ship slowly, incrementally, pulling away from the dock. Justin watched from the rail as a churning flume of sea spewed from the stern. The sight of the foaming water anticipated excitement, surging exhilaration, activating a heartbeat, but at the same time was soothing to Justin's mind like the flow of the tides. Movement—now again, at last, forward movement, Blue and white—the colours of Greece. Clear azure blue, heavenly blue, blue of sea, and, white, blazing pure sun-drenched white. Placid, steady movement forward—the seaport calm. Soon Italy fell from sight, its' wayward village life no longer visible, and the ferry, riding into the dusk, was on to the open sea. Justin surveyed the genteel water that surrounded them, darkening blue into grey. He paced the perimeter of the square gray-painted deck of the stern; the wind rippled about him. The old days flowed back and away into the vessel's wake.

Returning to the inside seating Justin noticed the ferry was not tonight crowded, but some few people were sparsely settled into their seats, headed finally for destinations beyond Patras. Justin's, and the others', disembarkment would be Patras, but Justin's sought destination was to be at last longed-for

Athens. He would take a coach with wide windows in order to soak up the views of the passing countryside, alive with the sparkling warm sunshine bright with vivacity for which the ancient country was known. The anticipation presaged giddiness. Justin's journey would conclude with a settling aura of home, his hope—of a dream, in peaceful comforters on a wide firm bed.

Curious, and with the comforting movement forward, and looking about, now Justin noted a group, young lithe girls and university-aged boys, up from the stair companionway, and greatly animated, settling a few seats ahead of him in the rows by the wide aisle. Extremely modern casual in dress and lugging duffels and backpacks as students on a holiday would do, they pointed and cajoled and flopped about choosing their seats and companions and various arrangements, all joking and exhibiting lively good spirits. Justin, impatiently, assailed by the noisiness, watched them frolicing and waited until they settled down into bantering conversations. Justin was meticulous, somewhat in awe, in his attention to the lively group. How lively and young they were, how fresh-eyed and energetic, bound for holiday times. Oh, thought Justin, what a state of grace...to be young, giggling, carefree; although Justin considered now himself to be most carefree—returned somewhat to a semblance of youthful exuberance. He had longed on this passage to wave to sunny indolent Corfu, where previously

he had spent happy days...but this night ferry's route did not come close, to even see the island in the distance across the waves, an opportunity obscured in a misty memory. However, the future ahead beckoned with a merry wave. Other memories were waiting to be made, realized, growing full in unfolding dreams...on the horizon. How like life was a sea voyage, a sea voyage like life—each day's sun rising into pink fluffed refreshed clouds. Ports of call were intrinsically unknown until landing, unknown days and unfamiliar pathways, but in stepping onshore an exploration of new unrolling and often unexpected adventures was begun. Ahhh—life. Life was hard; but it was wonderous.

Justin's reverie propelled him to wander once again to the outside deck where the dusk had settled into a velvety blue night with only a serene glow coming from the deck below and casting faint illumination on the white streaks of water propelled foaming away from the stern. He watched the foam subside into the dark flat sea, a dark faintly perceptible sea that stretched seemingly endless in all vistas; eventually he turning to look upward, trying to capture a distant twinkle of stars, softly irresistibly winsomely blinking. He could stare dreamily for countless ages, at winking stars peeping out of the navy-blue night.

At last returning to the saloon, bright still but somewhat dimmed at this hour near lateness, it seemed quieter now. People were beginning to settle into sleep, propped or stretched into the stiff chairs of the rows confronting them. The students had quietened; one was strumming a guitar and softly singing, a sort of gentle longing in the tenderness of a love ballad. Justin could barely remember such memories from long-ago excursions on similar youthful times; but they could be retrieved with searching and a diligent dive into the murks of nostalgia. Easy was that dive, and then a few laps around the depths of the lagoon.

The now-familiar longing, so persistent and nostalgic, to see the impetuous images of stunning youth and vitality float up to the bright misty surface of the tiring eyeballs and burn there with a flame, a flame fed with the energy-fueling wax of the young. How brightly—hotly—flickeringly—guttered those days. However, those days inevitably led to others, and still others, and more others; and time's candle melted down more used with each flame. But as intervening days brought more successive daylight interludes, time moved on and would not stand aloof. Oddly incoherent to youth, but at any rate regularly consistent, time ticked on.

Justin had come to the point of decision that he would blithely finish that race, would advance into a hoped-for future, would reach out for the happy security of comfort for which he wished—had wished for so long. Greece—it lay in Greece. There he would reach a shore, to see an old companion, to enfold a sought destination—to live contiguous lives, in the same adjacent space, together...to lie in the luxuriant and cozy warmth of Athens, to lie in the arms of a companion, blissful and warm and dozey.

How uncannily tragic that people die, people we love and know and even those we do not know in this huge vast world; sometimes—or even often—alone, they, at some point, cease—as will we. Some day. Little wonder that at some point, someone thought “*carpe diem*”. Then time moves on.

Considering these thoughts at the rail Justin let reverie lull him. He could recite his favorite passage:

“Vanity, all is vanity...It is like trying to catch the wind.

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die,

a time to plant, and a time to pluck that which is planted,...

a time to weep, and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn, and a time to dance from joy,..."

* * *

Soon, Justin, waking from the tidbit of a dream, found that the light of day, with its' radiant promise, was seeping into the saloon's gray sleepiness. He stirred, beginning slowly, the fitful night spent partly twisted in the hard cushion of the chair impeding him. That lavenderish light lured him once again, tiredly yet content, to the outside deck, where the wind was breezing fresh and the luminousness was rising from the sea. The clouds were gently touched with rosy coral glow brightening their undersides and outlines. The beauty of it—that beauty of the world—made one gasp for breath, to live, to see it for eternity. Sun rising, the sea brightened into its' azure rhythmic placidity. Indeed, all is right with the world. Justin marveled. And now, people began to stir, and troupe to the little cafe for a pre-landing breakfast. It would not be too long now. Soon the ferry would pass into rising sight of landfall, the brown hills of the mainland, where the *bouzouki* would be fervently played and the town of Patras would be

astir. At the announcement of proximate arrival Justin, and the crowd of others, gathered luggage and their belongings and went below to the main deck to eagerly gather, standing in the area for waiting at the gangway. Once again Justin quivered with excitement and anticipation. Greece, blue and white and sun-bold Greece—rather like “Home”. Soon now, he would step forth—forth to put his questing feet on this ancient land.

–J. F. Lowe