

## Swan Song

Frank Dineen

Babe says, “Ah, here we go,” and starts reading from *To Hellas and Back*, her well-thumbed bible for this trip: *The Antikythera Young Man emerged off that Aegean island in 1901 and is one of the most accomplished classical bronze sculptures to grace the National Archeological Museum of Greece. His outstretched, open hand once held a spherical object, inclining scholars to identify him as perhaps Paris, awarding the Apple of Discord to Aphrodite, or...*

On she goes in her schoolmarm cadence. Sam, befitting this tipping-time in her twelve year-old life, muses that if she were male, and an old statue, she’d for sure want to be a bronze one, because *the things* of all the marble guys were snapped off. When her mother pauses, she jumps in.

“My feet hurt.”

“Well, miss skimpy sandals twined up her calves.” Babe directs this mostly to Rus, because he had let Sam buy them at some cluttered trap in the Plaka.

They permit photos here, just no flashes, so Babe goes to work on hunky Mr. Antikythera. One of them may end up in the travel section of their Philadelphia daily, where she’d done what she considered serious education reporting, before its drastic cutbacks. She tries to see journalism as her lark now, and Sam her vocation, but it’s not always easy. She circles balletically, snapping away. Babe knows the cute verdigris phallus will never see print, but she likes capturing it anyhow.

“A couple of you two,” she says, directing them to stand in front. Sam slips an arm around her father and nestles into his chest. They touch less and less. He wraps his arm around Sam and inhales her, flesh of his flesh. Babe says, “Good,

hold that pose,” but it doesn’t feel like a pose to Rus.

\*\*\*

Babe in the lead, they hop a trolley bus to the base of craggy Mt. Lykebettus. During the ride up in the funicular, Babe whips out the guidebook. The ascent is steep and dramatic. Rus can see that Sam is enjoying it. He blurts out, “Like an eagle riding an updraft!” which, it comes back to him now, Leda, his new-found fellow backpacker, had exclaimed, nearly 30 years ago. Leda had been a student like him. She was from Tarpon Springs, where her dad ran a fish restaurant and her grandfather told and retold grim tales of sponge divers succumbing to the bends off Kalymnos, an island near Turkey. She’d struck Rus as just what he was not—spontaneous, mysterious—and had taught him some Greek, among other things.

At the top, the hot wind nearly makes off with Sam’s jaunty fisherman’s cap, another Plaka buy, and would be whipping Babe’s highlighted hair back and forth like the pages of the guidebook, if it weren’t pulled back so tight. A white chapel to Saint George crowns the terrace. Below, the bleached city smothers the Attic plain like scattered teeth. Babe is gazing beyond it, westward.

“Way out there is the Acropolis of Corinth,” she says. “Says here that on good days you can see it. What about it, Sam?”

“About what?”

“Corinth, Samantha. Can you spot it?”

“It’s not a good day. This old town is polluted, mom.”

Actually,” says Babe, looking at her guide, “ancient Corinth was the place to go for real pollution. As in big wine and gambling parties. As in the one thousand priestesses of Aphrodite’s temple there.”

“That’s a lot of priestesses,” Rus says.

“A lot of *prostitutes*,” Babe says, her eyes on Sam, as if to say: history, boring? “The money they raked in kept the temple looking spiffy.”

“The Vegas of its day,” Rus says.

“Not quite,” Sam says. “What happened in Corinth ended up in your guidebook.” Babe laughs. She likes to think of her daughter as precocious.

They flee the gusts and the screaming everywhere light for the tiny chapel. Inside, they don’t move for a moment, waiting for their eyes to get the message. Gradually, the joined blur of votive candles recedes into discrete points of light. Wood pews appear in shadow, then the ecclesiastical gloss of silver, brass and bronze. As their gleam grows, Sam imagines invisible hands still buffing away, all to please them. Babe informs them it’s customary for visitors to light a candle and to kiss, or at least glance at, the bold fresco of St. George slaying the dragon. Several visitors are queued up to do just that. “I’m not going first!” Sam hisses. Babe tells her don’t be silly, nobody’s going first. The Sproats are not a churchgoing family. Sam’s not even baptized. Rus doesn’t think about this much, but he does now. Since arriving in Greece, he’s found himself ruminating more. It must be the distance from their everyday lives. He sees Sam just now beginning to assemble the person she’ll live and die as. At her age, he was frightened of Hell. At night in bed, worried for saying fuck when he’d missed a jump shot or for trying to see up a girl’s dress, he tried to make what they called a perfect Act of Contrition. *Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell ...* He remembers striving for purest sincerity, chewing on each phrase until he tasted the fear and guilt in it, believing that the more regret he felt, the cleaner his soul became. *But most of all, because they offend Thee, my God, Who art all good and deserving of all my love ...* Babe, the product of a secular home, considers that the telltale residue of such superstitious ardor is a certain meekness in her man—the last trait she wants her daughter saddled with. Rus knows this and generally agrees. He sees the sense in letting Sam find her own spiritual path, if she ever bothers. Nevertheless, standing beneath this chapel ceiling plastered with biblical scenes, at this highest point of

the city of Socrates, that open-eyed questioner, Rus wonders about Sam eventually stepping out into the world minus any sense of tribe, or tradition, or what it feels like to believe in mystery, or to hold something sacred and worthy of awe. Just this spring, she asked what she was—Christian, Jewish, what? Babe told her she could decide later, which had turned out to be sooner: within days, she'd proclaimed herself Jewish and asked her parents to stage a Bat Mitzvah for her, approaching in lavishness the bash she'd just attended for her schoolmate Miriam, the daughter of two radiologists. Not that the matter of Sam's identity is a real big deal to Rus, a monkey on his back or anything. He just doesn't like the thought of his daughter wondering where she fits in or whether she's part of anything. The world can be pretty chilly.

\*\*\*

Sitting across from the Acropolis, Sam has finished jotting down notes of her daily impressions, a chore negotiated with Babe in exchange for a bit of slack about makeup and impulse buys. Sam is featuring Cleopatra-black eye liner, which she imagines fits with the distant, vaguely alluring sound of "Greece." Rus thinks she looks cute, in a raccoon way. Sam had asked that instead of handwriting notes, she take along her laptop and blog to her friends. Babe might have gone along, but Rus wouldn't hear of it. He didn't want her face buried in a screen during this trip. There had been no laptops in his day. He wanted her *present* with him and Babe and all that together they might imbibe from this consequential land.

Their order arrives: ouzo for Rus, retsina for Babe, Coke for Sam. Sam sniffs the licorice and pine of the drinks and wrinkles her nose. "You never drink that stuff back home," she says.

"When in Rome," Babe says.

Sam spreads her arms on the table and lays her head down. Rus cuts his ouzo with a splash of water. It clouds to mother of pearl. Babe sips her retsina, which tastes better

to her in context like this. Around the Acropolis, flood lights come on, imbuing the Parthenon with theatrical magic. “Wow,” Babe says. She and Rus smile and raise their glasses. They’d like to share this moment with their daughter, but she’s asleep already. This impresses Rus, her dropping off so fast, and amid all this racket. Is there a noisier city than Athens? All around them, horns honk, jets scream, motor bikes rip, vendors squawk like kicked fowl. Everybody’s talking as though they can’t be heard, and when they run out of words, they snatch up a newspaper, chewing on the latest political scrap until it strikes a fresh nerve, then ejecting renewed indignation into the warm diesel Athenian air. They enjoy it all immensely, Rus can tell. Their endless fascination with the doings in this small plain of Attica, as though it were the whole world. He wonders whether democracy was born here as an excuse, rather than a sanction, to bicker. Babe opens the notebook and reads Sam’s impressions of the Parthenon. She marvels that even this cultural icon is unable to evoke from her surely precocious daughter any bouquets less insipid than amazing, awesome and incredible. It doesn’t occur to her that Sam’s remarks have been crafted largely for parental consumption, and that in fact, the Parthenon has had a queer effect on her. She’d already had it processed as an image, and the real-life honey marble flesh of it had struck her as not quite right.

Babe closes the notebook. Rus moves Sam’s untouched Coke out of spilling range, then drapes his jacket over her shoulders.

\*\*\*

Sam’s riding shotgun, absorbed in her indigo toenails; they’re splayed on the dash, hot to her touch. Babe’s at the wheel. Rus, in back, has been assigned guidebook duty but finds nothing of note about this endless drab sprawl of Athens. At last, they begin to climb and turn curves until the stony hills of Attica are all around them, starkly *present*, in the most oddly transparent atmosphere. Sam takes her feet down and looks out at the rocks and clinging shrubs and the

lank goats wresting what they can from stingy valleys. They stand out to her like some dioramas she's seen in museums or a slasher movie she watched through 3-D glasses. For a while, the Sproats ride high enough to see water in three directions.

"Okay, we're in business again," Rus says. "The guide's quoting some Oxford lady who says, 'Here in this classic landscape, at a glance, is why Greece could never unite for long. The sullen, sun-baked hills are like brawny sentinels, separating Mycenae from Sparta, Corinth from Thebes. This is a landscape of isolation. A land for breeding the notorious *philotimo* of Greeks then and now, that hyper awareness of themselves as inviolate singularities. On the other hand ...'"

"I could pee all right," Sam says to Babe

"Distract yourself. Try listening."

"... Their separateness made them curious, too. What's over that next saddle in the hills, that next island, next country? What can't we see, what don't we know? So the Greeks went everywhere, and they thought about everything, too."

"Now that is interesting, don't you think?" Babe asks.

"It is," Rus says. This irritates Babe a little. Sam will let dad's answer stand for them both. She does.

They weave down into dreary flatland along the Isthmus of Corinth. Sam says to Babe, "Look for a place, okay?" Rus starts saying that somewhere around here, Theseus, the Minotaur-slayer, did the world another big favor by getting rid of Sinis the Pine Bender.

"Get this, Sam. 'Sinis enjoyed bending the tops of two trees together, tying travelers' arms to each one, then letting go.'"

"Nice. Thanks for sharing, dad."

A few miles on, they approach a jagged headland. Mountains, still white-flecked, even this far into spring, rise above the forested coast. A lighthouse punctuates a graceful inland harbor. The variety in one eyeful is spectacular, but Babe lets it go, knowing no photo could convey it. They pass

fields and meadows and after that, woods of pine and holm oak. Water, never far from view, keeps Sam focused on her bladder. Babe turns off into a tiny red-roofed village with only a single paved street. Rus catches an old man stepping out of his rudimentary home, putting his hands on his hips, and surveying his sky. Babe pulls into a tiny taverna and says to Sam, "We'll try this." They disappear into the tiny place. Rus sits down on a bench by the door. He hears Babe saying "Ghinekon? Ghinekon?" Across the street is a one-story box of a building with a scrubby little yard. In the middle of the yard there sits, of all things, a red and blue fishing vessel, twenty feet long at least. The keel is invisible beneath the ground. It's propped up with lumber arranged flying buttress-style beneath, and there are steps leading up to it on either side. As Rus watches, the building doors fly open and children gush out, all hollers and mad gesticulations. They make a beeline for the boat and swarm all over it. Some use the steps, many others scramble up the sides and then, balancing atop the prow or stern, hold their noses and jump off. They seem to be vying to make the silliest faces while in midair. Sam comes out. Rus pats the bench and she sits down next to him.

"Recess," he says, and they watch the kids.

"A school of fish," Sam says.

Babe joins them. "Boy," she says. "They'd never get away with that back home. Somebody could break a leg."

A bell rings and a mutinous group groan issues from the mini pirates teeming over the boat. The initial scene runs in reverse; they jump ship and drain back through the door of the schoolhouse as quickly as they'd come out, though minus the exuberance. Rus thinks, how beautiful they are. Their obedience, their spunky resignation to the order of things. For some reason, it touches him. He wishes there would be no bell, that these children and his own child would never have to answer to anything less unbounded and joyous than their own natures. Sometimes he feels like an unfit father.

Sam surprises him with a peck on the cheek. "Let's go,

Popsicle!” she says. The Ghinekon has done her wonders.

“Tell mom what you called the kids.”

“A school of fish.”

“Ha!” Babe says.

\*\*\*

At Olympia, Babe has informed them that during the ancient games, women were excluded from these sacred precincts under penalty of death, prompting her, in retroactive nose thumbing, to challenge Sam to a footrace in the excavated stadium. Since no one’s there right then, Sam goes along. At the far end, Rus waits poised with camera. He calls out ready, set, go! and Babe blasts off, her elbows uppcercutting like a boxer’s. Sam, already a decent hockey player, lopes along with easy animal grace. Babe wins by a hair.

“Did I get it?” Babe asks. She leans forward, hands on thighs, sucking air.

“It was close,” Rus says.

“Photo finish,” Sam says, catching her father’s eye. “But I think the gold is mom’s.” Rus winks.

“Yes!” Babe exclaims. She raises her arms and twirls in a little victory jig. Rus snaps this moment, too, and as he does, sees Sam, an old woman, showing it to somebody and saying, That was my mother. My father took it. We were in Greece. It was amazing, awesome, incredible. Doesn’t she look happy?

\*\*\*

They’re on a car ferry, leaving the Peloponnesian peninsula behind, wending their way to Delphi. Rus the navigator, head back and mouth open, has slipped into a doze. Babe is inclined to let him catnap; his sleep in a series of strange beds has been sub prime. Babe has quietly passed their one cell phone to Sam, hand-signaling that she doesn’t want Rus to find her with it. Babe wouldn’t call Rus a Luddite; he just seems not to get that the clock time he and Sam abide by is misleading, that her world is not his, not its present, past, or future.

Sam is texting Miriam, whose first few days at camp have been a mixed bag. Stuck in Maryland's buggy woods with a bunch of lil kdz, she is bordsilE, but her Norwegian counselor, Nils, is gorgES, 2D4. W00t, Sam texts. She's a wee bit competitive with Miriam and tells her that Greece is amazn, orsum and NcreDbI and that she's been sipping retsina wine in tavernas. The placid ferry has floated Rus back to freshman high school math class. Math comes easy but bores him, just as his it's-a-living actuarial work does now. A buff young Jesuit named Father Rosato has unfurled a thorny quadratic equation across the blackboard and ordered Rus to step up and cut it down to size. Rus has not heard him; deploying both pen and pencil, he's whittling down his list of greatest rock groups and is part way through penciling in Fleetwood Mac when a flying stick of chalk explodes against the edge of his desk. Looming over him now, Father Rosato examines Rus's Final 15, nodding with terrible appreciation, then takes up Rus's dense school bag and shakes it out over his head. Rus, in his doze, feels it. *Caesar's Gallic Wars*. Ouch. *Elementary Biology*. Wham. *The History of Western Civilization*: Ka Boom!

He's snoring now. It irritates Babe. So does the clicking of the cell phone's keys. It sounds cryptic, out of reach, like a rodent in the walls, or the course Sam's life will take. She takes a couple of deep breaths. For this little family of hers, she would willingly submit to Sinis the Pine Bender, if she isn't already.

\*\*\*

Babe says, "Rus, turn in here. Photo op, maybe."

It's a bumpy dirt path cutting through an olive grove. Sam has been spreading bottled water onto her neck and arms because her father resists the air conditioning because it shuts them off from the countryside because this ain't no TV travelogue. They stop and get out.

"Nana's hands," Sam says, running her own over a gnarled tree trunk.

Babe is crouched, snapping. "The silver leaves in the

light,” she says.

Three wiry little men appear at a crest up the path and scurry down into the grove. They spread out to form a circle. They're shirtless. They're shouting back and forth. They have knives in their belts. Rus grabs Sam and runs for the car.

“Wait! It's okay!” Babe yells. She takes off toward the men.

“It's a rabbit!” Rus says.

The men are whooping it up. They close in, each in turn heading off the darting brown blur. One lunges and gets hold of a rear leg, which sets them laughing and yelling *Opá!* but when they see Babe coming, they go stony. She waves Rus and Sam over. One of the men stuns the rabbit with a short punch to the head.

“*Yasou!*” she says, pointing at their catch. This delights the young men. She requests photographs. The prospect of their prowess being immortalized delights them more. Rus and Sam watch as they take turns displaying the rabbit stretched out in front of them. In good English, the one with a still eye explains that they're farm hands, that over the crest are fruit trees and corn and tobacco, and would the *Sproats* honor them by sharing this savory gift, prepared by them on their very own spit. The rabbit, all ears, starts twitching strenuously. The *Zhivago* lookalike unsheathes his knife.

“No no!” Rus says, pointing at Sam. “*Efkaristo, efkaristo,* but we must go now. *Kalimera sas!*”

The young men understand. They smile, wave a special goodbye to Sam, and head back over the crest.

\*\*\*

Rus is filling the tank, wincing as the euros pile up on the meter. Babe's visiting the station's unisex head and is unlikely to emerge in a lightened mood. Next to it is an automatic car wash, prompting him to tap the rear window and point it out to Sam. Back home, the two of them used to have a ball as his porous vintage Mustang inched through its bi-monthly bath. It was like a funhouse to her. The *Hidden Serpents* showering venom down upon them. “It's inside, Daddy, get

it!" Sam cried, handing her father the bath towel they were obliged to take along to avoid a soaked dashboard. Then the churning attack of the Whiskered Meanies, Sam hiding her eyes as though at a scary movie, followed by the menacing hula tentacles of the Giant Octopus, sending her diving into the backseat, and the final ordeal of the People Sucker, glomming onto the windshield to inhale them, Mustang and all, into oblivion. The names, the whole fantasy, nearly all Sam's invention, and as they escaped out into the sunlight, a theatrical pressing of her cheek to his, exclaiming, "It's a miracle we survived!"

She was little then. Now, seeing her father pointing at the car wash, Sam shakes her head and mouths, "It's not that dirty."

\*\*\*

In Levadia, Rus has split off while the girls shop. He and Leda had ended up here, very late one suffocating night in 1977. They'd detoured from their own pilgrimage to Delphi, to check out the fabled springs of Lethe and Mnemosyne, Oblivion and Remembrance, which Babe and Sam have just dipped their feet into. The town, aside from its feral cats, had been asleep that night. Following signs, they'd passed over a stream on a fairytale Turkish bridge, then gone part way up a dreary gorge to a little waterfall spilling over from a pond. This is it, Leda had said. It's older than ancient. Bubbles up from Hades, is the tradition—from Lethe, the river of Forgetfulness. We must go in!

She'd undressed then, and directed Rus to do the same. He hadn't seen her like that before. They'd agreed back in Athens that physical intimacy and companionable travel were oil and water. But something had come into her eyes now—a glaze, a pagan fleck. He'd gone ahead and stripped, trying to feel alone, to avoid seeming shy. When he straightened up, Leda had admired him boldly. He was twenty. He'd never felt like a man before. And her ripe perfection simply stupefied him. Leda took his hand and they waded in like God's first couple. The chilly water quickly rose to touch her breasts

and Rus thought, who could blame it? Leda dove beneath for several seconds, and when she emerged, right in front of him, her spiky hair gave her an even wilder look. She pulled him to her and wrapped her legs around him. She felt like a creature of the water, cold, instinctual, enormously vital, compelling the animal in Rus to respond. Not a Herculean task. For several minutes, the only sounds were the tame waterfall, the slap of flesh on water, and a frog. Cheering them on?

They'd spent that night farther up the gorge, in the courtyard of a deserted Frankish castle. Rus looks up at it now, then into Lethe's forgetful, memorable waters. This spot's been gussied up for tourists. He doesn't remember the restaurant over the water, and there are guided tours of the castle these days. He'd woken there alone next morning and looked for her around the town, but she was gone.

Where is Leda now? he asks. She's between my ears, he answers.

He meets the girls on the Turkish bridge, festooned with dense Flokati rugs. Sam's excited to show off her latest: earrings of woven red bead, telling her father they're "after the Minoan style." Babe's eager to show him a small painting she fancies at one of the galleries. She's in a good mood. This detour to Levadia's mythic springs was Rus's idea. She likes him to initiate and wishes he'd do it more often.

\*\*\*

Even from a distance, the first sight of Parnassus and the mountains massed around it strike the Sproats as a realm apart. All at once the imposing peaks are simply there.

"It looks fake," Sam says.

"It would through celluloid eyes," Rus says. He's hungry.

"I know what you mean Sam," Babe says defensively. She takes up *To Hellas and Back: Receptive travelers may sense the extraordinary atmosphere of grandeur and mystery which haunts Delphi. At few other places will they feel so utterly apart from the everyday world and transported to the very center of things that matter—into the navel of the earth, as the ancients said.*

But Delphi doesn't work out so well. The road at the base of the sanctuary is clogged with tour buses, and the crowd of stout Germans at the Kastalian Spring is enough to put them off, weary as they are at this final stop. They poke about in the ruins, where Sam makes a mental note about the Lesbian Wall. She'll tell Miriam it has zip to do with you-know-what, and actually commemorates the freed slaves of Lesbos, which is a Greek island, which will be news for sure to brainy miss bat mitzvah. The Sproats are becoming quieter now. Their real lives are leaking back in. They have a plane to catch tomorrow. In the museum, Babe gamely feigns interest at the size of the fabled stone navel, a massive missile-head of a stone, and Sam has enough left to remark on the sharp sandals of Sisyphus, a general missing his head and arms. After a while, Rus trails off on his own.

Later, in their hotel room, Sam's in the shower, but Rus and Babe can't hear her singing. Sam always sings in the shower. The privacy and the siss and teem of hot, clean water flood her with a sense of animal well-being, and further down than she can tap, with an inexpressible joy at the sublime arrangement of her earthly home, its nourishing air and sky and light and living things. It's a mayfly blessing, worthy of awe.

Rus presses his ear against the bathroom door, and waves Babe over. They can just make out Sam's song.