

Dante's Well

In Dante's Divine Comedy, the opening lines of the first Canto read: "In the middle of my life's journey, I found myself in a darkening forest where the way forward was obscure." I was to have just such an experience, but in a literal sense.

I had just turned 40 and, having sold my business well, found myself without immediate employment and in the throws of a minor mid-life crisis. I had just enough money saved to consider embarking on a new career and moreover one not tied to earning a living. I had studied prehistoric archaeology at Cambridge and a part of me was attracted to the idea of becoming an academic. Once again, I took up the study of archaeology and signed-up to work on an excavation. The dig I chose was a Bronze Age archaeological site in southern Cyprus, at Moroni, a village close by the sea.

I didn't find my companions on the dig particularly congenial; they were earnest sandal wearers who smoked incessantly and had no personal style, nor any appreciation of aesthetics, food or clothes. They were younger than me and inhabited a different world to which I couldn't relate. Our sole point of contact was our subject and that was reduced on a daily basis to talk of occupation levels and pot typology; subjects as dry as the earth we were digging. There wasn't even a whiff of sexual intrigue to leaven the heavy mixture. I was driven into myself and spent most evenings after dinner alone in contemplation or with a book.

Those of us on the dig were permitted one day off a week, a Sunday as I recall. I decided to head off on my own to explore the interior on my hired motorcycle. As I left the coast road I headed into the hills, my thoughts still full of Maecenean chariot *kraters*. Once I had passed the low line of pine-clad hills, a dry and dusty plain lay before me dotted with the occasional olive tree; it could have been Africa. The air was full of the dry scent of aromatic herbs, thyme, cistus and rosemary. A heat haze blurred the distant prospect and one fully expected to meet a lion at the next turn in the road. The Cypriots are a religious people and this was a Sunday. There was no sign of a house or of any person.

The sun rose high in the heavens and by midday the sun overhead was fierce. I had badly overheated and dehydrated having eaten the two sandwiches I had brought with me and drunk my only can of, by now lukewarm, soda. Due to my inability to read the infrequent and confusing Greek road signs, I was thoroughly lost. My tourist map proved to be equally useless. Again and again I found myself retracing my route, back at crossroads already passed. The twists and turns of the road disorientated me. I had only the southerly position of the sun to guide me. The road had by now petered out into a dirt track. I was starting to panic.

I sat down in the shade of an ancient and spreading fig tree to rest and ponder my predicament, my bike thrown on its side in the dirt. My head in my hands, I

was reduced to tears of frustration and fear compounded by a mighty thirst. My fuel tank was nearly empty; there had been no sign of petrol for sale at any point on the journey. I knew I had to make the right choice in order to find my way back before the tank ran dry or I fainted with thirst. It could be that the searing heat of that August day affected my judgement, but I, an unbeliever, prayed for deliverance.

Suddenly and softly, I heard the distant tinkling of goat bells approaching from behind. As if from nowhere a flock materialised followed by an elderly, bearded, goatherd. I greeted him in my few words of Greek. I tried to ask him the way, of course, he did not understand: my Greek is non-existent, and he certainly knew no other language. I mimed my thirst. That he readily understood.

Not ten feet from where I was sitting, the goatherd lifted the gnarled, camouflaged, wooden cover of a well. Attached to the underside of the well lid was a rope tied to a bucket. He threw it down the deep, dark well shaft. As it hit the surface of the water below, it made a satisfying splash. He drew up a bucket brim full of ice-cold well water; I slaked my thirst and poured the water all over my face and torso washing away the dust of the trail and clearing my head. No glass of the finest chardonnay could have tasted more delicious than that drink of well water.

I managed somehow to retrace my steps and arrived back at camp with no more than a cupful of petrol in my tank and an Englishman's desire for a nice cup of tea.

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