

Spirits in the Night

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The title to this memoir does not at all refer to the 1972 song by Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band. Nor does it refer to imbibing in alcoholic beverages at some evening party or other. I rarely partake of such liquid spirits and have not for well over fifty years. The only times I even consider it now are for some years I will have a glass of wine at midnight on New Year's Eve and some years I will raise a toast with a Guinness to the good St. Patrick to celebrate his holiday on March 17. So what could my title possibly allude to then if not to these two obvious possibilities? Well, in my previous memoir entitled "Greece Is the Word," I made passing reference to the villa on the Greek island of Hydra that I rented from the late Marylander Ted Sullinger from November of 1970 to January of 1971, the one from which I had to evict the male ex-nurse who was using it and its eight bedrooms for purposes that ran counter to what the owners of the then only hotel on the island saw as their prime source of income. To put it directly, he was meeting the daily runs of the ferry boats that came in twice a day from Piraeus and siphoning off his choice of young females by offering them free beds, with "side benefits" for himself. It was also the villa that was even available only because its actual owner, the president of Brandeis U, had a wife who refused to stay there due to her belief that it was haunted. In that previous memoir of mine, I had hinted that I would do a follow-up one in which I would detail some of my personal encounters of the spooky sort with those same spirits. So this memoir is an effort now to make good on that earlier promise.

On that very first night in the villa, I was left all alone with the keys to the front gate and door, or at least so I thought. I had not had any alcoholic beverage prior to going to bed, using the one bedroom on the ground floor. I had secured the gate, the door and all of the shutters before turning in for the night. That bedroom had just a mattress on the floor and a fireplace that did not need to be lit as it was still a reasonably warm November evening. I collapsed from exhaustion, facing the shutters and the fireplace, turning in around 10pm by my watch. At about 3am, I woke up in a pitch-dark room with a soft glow coming from the fireplace. In my groggy state, I saw what looked to be the shape of a hooded man sitting on the edge of the fireplace. He seemed to gesture to me in a non-threatening manner. Still exhausted from my journey to get to Hydra, I just rolled over and looked at the wall and went back to sleep. I thought at the time that it was somewhat curious that an empty house that I had checked five hours earlier should now have someone perched on the edge of the fireplace, outlined in a soft glow. But as there seemed to be no threat from this apparition that I could look right through, I succumbed to my state of exhaustion and by morning I woke up fully refreshed and more than slightly curious about what I had thought I witnessed in the wee small hours. There was no trace of that apparition to be found. I just chalked it up to some kind of dream and left it go.

I was tending to the enclosed area behind the high wall when the first of many female ferry-boat passengers knocked at the large blue outer gate to inquire about "the free room" that she had heard about back in Athens. Of course, I had to inform her that she had just missed her chance by one day and that that policy of the former resident had been rescinded. I locked the doors and the gate and went out to explore the island for an hour. It was there that I found,

across from the cinema, a bakery that made fresh bread and pastries. I became a steady patron of the little old Greek lady that ran the place and soon discovered that her prices were adjusted daily on her whim. On Monday, a loaf of bread was five drachmas, but on Tuesday it could just as easily be three drachmas. At thirty drachmas to the dollar, it never bothered me. But I always went in wondering what the price would be that day. There were stands where I could purchase fruit and vegetables at very reasonable prices as well. So my first meals were rather basic, but at least healthy. My first full meal was consumed at around eight pm, so I found myself staying up late in the kitchen, seated before the huge wooden table under the overhead light and reading some Shakespeare from a copy of the complete works that I had carried along. At about midnight, I felt the room suddenly go cold and it was as if I were being eased out of the kitchen by some unseen force. There is no other way to explain it. Reading in the dim light had made me somewhat tired anyway, so I shut the volume at the end of an act and went off to bed, this time choosing one of the upstairs ones just for variety's sake, after first securing the gate, door and shutters. The remainder of that night was completely uneventful. The nice shower and being able to sleep on a raised bed did the trick.

The next day, I had Lulu's Cafe do a nice meal for me and then strolled around the port, watching the ferry boat arrive in the late afternoon. My repast of a savory Greek salad, a plate of spanakopita, topped off with sparkling mineral water, did me just fine. I got back to my villa just in time to head off another young female seeking a free room for the night. I again locked the place down and settled in for another round of Shakespeare in the ground-floor kitchen. At around midnight, I once again felt the need to leave the room and go to bed upstairs. I consciously knew that I was all alone in the place, so what was it that chilled my bones and seemed to push me out. This same feeling happened again the next evening. Then on Friday morning's boat, the late Marylander speech teacher Jerry Cranford arrived from having finished his Thursday evening UMUC class at the Athens AFB. He brought along some supplies from the base commissary such as oatmeal, peanut butter, jam, a couple of steaks, and a couple bottles of wine to celebrate our meeting. As we sat around the large wooden table in the kitchen that evening, I brought up the strange sensations that I had experienced on my first nights there, especially the apparition on the fireplace. He said, "Let me guess. You were in that downstairs bedroom across the hall." I replied, "How did you know?" He then said, "Well then, you've just met our resident ghost." After a spit-take of wine, I shouted, "What!" He said, "That darn rascal Ted. He should have told you before he sent you here that this lovely villa has an unsavory reputation. Even the locals stay away from here." When I brought up my chilly kitchen encounters, he said, "Don't worry. You can safely stay in here until midnight, but just so you leave until six in the morning or so." I was incredulous!

However, given that I still had over two months left to live in that villa, I was not crazy enough to tempt fate any more than was absolutely necessary. I went along with Jerry Cranford's "suggestion" and avoided staying on the ground level after midnight. As it happened, I had no more strange encounters for the next several weeks. There were plenty of rooms on the upper levels and if a spirit wished to haunt the ground floor for a few hours each night, well that part of the house was all his. I can honestly say "his" now, given the one final occasion where fate was tempted one more time; but at least I was not alone on that occasion. After a round of several parties that took place over the December holidays, where we were invited to other Hydra homes, Jerry Cranford took it upon himself to reciprocate and I went along with that decision. We had had a party at the home of ex-Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista's ex-mistress on Christmas Eve, the one where I was shown her closet filled with a couple dozen full-length

mink coats. We had also been invited over to a very memorable New Year's Eve party at a restaurant in the small village of Mandraki, just a short walk from the main port area on Hydra. What made it so memorable was that the owner, much to the consternation of his wife and children trying to sleep on the upstairs level, and also defying the standing order of the colonels who had led the recent April 21, 1967, military coup, decided to resume a Greek New Year's tradition by locking his doors and then smashing all of his plates, cups, saucers, glasses etc. against the walls and into the fireplace. Once he started smashing his stock of dinnerware, the rest of his guests gleefully joined in, fueled by more than a few glasses of krasi and other stimulants, angry wife and the colonels be damned.

The party at our villa was held on New Year's day and went on well into the night. Of course, our largest room was the ground-floor kitchen. Fate was being tempted, but there is a certain amount of security (or perhaps foolishness) in numbers that made us throw caution to the winds as midnight approached. At that point, someone suggested that for fun we try setting up a Ouija board on the large oak table. In retrospect, this idea should have been vetoed. At the time, it seemed like harmless amusement. What could go wrong? Scraps of paper were used to lay out the letters of the alphabet, the words "yes" and "no," and the numbers 1-9. An overturned glass served as our planchette. The first few questions were the typical innocent ones, such as, "Will I find happiness?" or "Will I get rich?" As midnight hovered ever closer, we began to get a bit more daring: "How long will I live?" or "Will I live to be 100?" The answers were at times satisfying, at times troubling, as to be expected. Without paying attention to the time, our New Year's happy group kept pushing our luck. That was when someone in the group suggested that we check to see if the legendary vampire that some people believed lived on Hydra could be inquired about. Two hands were atop the glass when that question was posed. The glass moved directly to the letter "Z" and then stopped. That did not seem like much of an answer, so we tried again with two different hands. The glass moved right to the letter "Z" and stopped. Placing the glass back in the middle, we were about to ask again when Jerry suddenly yelled, "STOP!" It was then that he said in a trembling voice, "Don't you all remember the recent Costa-Gavras film?" Of course, that movie "Z" had come out just over a year before. Its Greek letter "Zeta!" became a rallying cry for the protest by the director against the current ruling junta over the assassination of democratic Greek politician Grigoris Lambrakis in 1963. That rallying cry letter stood for, "HE LIVES!" in reference to Lambrakis. To those of us gathered now illicitly in that ground-floor kitchen in that Hydra villa, it was also the stunning and frightening answer to the question that we had so foolishly just asked. It was at that point that Jerry and I strongly suggested that our guests call it a night and head back to their own homes. We did not bother to inform them about our villa's resident "spirit in the night." The hair on the back of my neck was stiff as I opened the door and the front gate, locked them back down along with the shutters, and quietly retired to an upstairs bedroom, without even saying "goodnight" to Jerry Cranford.

My final three weeks at this lovely villa were spent peacefully and without incident. I was reluctant to leave this wonderful Greek island with its quaint and curious residents, mostly corporal, but with perhaps at least one exception. I was anxious to return to Kagnev Station where Toni awaited me. Our first son Donato was born just three months later on April 28, 1971, four years and one week after the military coup that had happened back in Greece. I have managed just two brief return visits to my favorite Greek island paradise while shepherding students on travel-abroad programs through my Iowa community college. The villa still stands, now referred to on the island as "the Johnston house." I did not knock on the big blue door to ask if the current residents have ever experienced any strange "spirits in the night." As for how

many readers will believe what I have written in this memoir, I will have to rely on any good faith garnered from all of my previous memoirs to speak on my behalf. I only know what Jerry Cranford and I experienced there over fifty years ago.

