

## IT'S AN ILL WIND...

A chill, eerie wind whipped up and around the car, whistling and whining through the open windows as we reached the summit. The desolate rocky outcrop, dotted here and there with scraggy long-stemmed grass and weeds seemed to stretch endlessly along the backbone of the mountain, twisting and turning at random and then tumbling blindly into a dark and tempestuous sea.

I sucked in my breath and shuddered, it was the bleakest place I had ever seen. “For the intrepid traveler”, the guidebook had said, it looked more like the gate to hell.

Negotiating the steep and dangerous road that had brought us here was bad enough, but the stark contrast to the sensuous and languid Mediterranean coastline that we had left behind, pinned the oppressiveness even deeper. I was overcome at once with a terrible and unfathomable sense of foreboding. There were secrets here; I could feel them as tangibly as the icy breeze that whipped my hair, demonic badlands jealously guarding their secrets.

We followed the narrow road that pitched steeply downward towards the town; both secretly hoping that the next turn would reveal the ‘magical’ fishing village the guide book had shamelessly described. Instead, squat, silent and ugly sprawled the town that appeared suddenly around a vicious bend. It seemed deserted at first, but on second glance a few shapes could be discerned, moving darkly behind the glass windows of shops, and here and there tourists picked in a decidedly desultory fashion at the assembly of wares.

Cruising along the dilapidated roads that formed the arteries of the town, we scanned each establishment in search of accommodation that had any sort of appeal. At the very end of the second road, a surprisingly modern building came into view, with ‘Hotel’, in large letters emblazoned across its frontage. My spirits rose, perhaps this would work out after all. Once inside, our hopes were again dashed. The interior, furnished in a cold austere fashion, complemented the manner of the motley assembled staff, who made no attempt to hide their sullen insolence. Tourists were obviously a necessary

evil, to be tolerated at best, and certainly not very welcome in this seedy enclave. I shot a glance at Chris, forever the optimist, and even he seemed to be echoing my thoughts: the sooner out of here the better. Still, one day and one night had to be endured, and we would do our best to enjoy it.

Our room was small, but to our absolute surprise, quite reasonably furnished, with a decidedly unappealing view of the seething black sea, which in the darkness now boiled like a witches' cauldron. We showered away the dirt and sweat from the painfully long trip, dressed and picked our way down the cobblestone street in search of a restaurant that might offer a reasonable meal and a few drinks to drown our sorrows. Under the cloak of night, the town had taken on a more festive air, with lanterns hung from every conceivable stand along the way. The shops were all open for business, with an array of wares that ranged from dried fruit and nuts, to small handcrafted pieces of jewelry, and antique artifacts from a bygone era. We soon came upon a pleasant-looking establishment, from which emanated wonderful aromas that conjured up images of mouthwatering dishes, and to our astonishment and delight, found we weren't to be disappointed. Two bottles of red wine later, we wove our way back to the hotel and collapsed into a dreamless sleep.

I awoke with a shaft of penetratingly bright silver sunlight spiking the sleep from my eyes. I rose and padded to the window, my feet feeling cold on the rough-hewn tiles, despite the rising heat of the day forcing its way, like a rough suitor, into the room.

I looked out across the sea that had ceased its boilings, but had now assumed an uninvitingly harsh shade of angry blue. It looked resentful, like a sullen innkeeper who has no choice but to accept his paying guests, but takes exception to them all the same.

I felt needles of unease prick at my neck and shoulders. This place gave me the creeps, but I couldn't explain why. It was one of those feelings, perhaps a throwback from primeval ancestry, warning us of unseen, unsuspected dangers.

Chris was still dozing, his eyes heavy with sleep, when I decided the best thing I could do to conquer my fears was to take a swim in the morose and cheerless sea, whether it liked it or not.

I was waist-deep in the impossibly cold, clear water when I felt it. A sharp stab of pain in the soft under part of my foot. Cursing the rough-edged pebbles beneath my toes, I peered into the water to find the offending specimen. I prodded the surrounding area with my big toe, sending whole glaziers of stones into orbit in the current, as I did so. And then, suddenly there it was, gleaming malevolently at me, like a period piece from the 'Omen'. I reached down and snatched it from its rocky bed. It was a ring, a heavy, ornate silver one, with strange carved images worked into its face.

"Digging for sunken treasure, are you?" a familiar cheerful voice called out. There was Chris in his swimming trunks, with a smile as wide as a watermelon slice on his face.

I called him into the water to show him what I had found, and immediately regretted my move, as I watched his smile quickly turn to a wince of pain as the combination of icy water and sharp beach pebbles proceeded to spoil his mood.

"Looks exotic and interesting", he said, fingering the thick, gnarled features of the unknown creatures staring back at us.

"Exotic, ha!" I cried, pointing to the tiny blossoms of blood still seeping from the cut in my foot. "It was waiting for me, I think it's charmed, you know.... Unlucky..... It scares me..."

"O come on ...don't get superstitious on me again.... Put it on.... It's pretty heavy, maybe it's quite valuable. Here, let me help you..."

He rammed the monstrous ring over my protesting knuckle and beamed with satisfaction,

“There now.... smile...and let’s go get some breakfast !.

All the way back to our room, and all the way through breakfast, when Chris wasn’t watching, I struggled with the gargoyle mounted on my finger. In the bathroom I tried soap.... In the bedroom I tried hand cream... No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t get the wretched thing off my finger.

I was still twisting it round and round my finger as we climbed into our hire car again, possessions loaded into back, on our homeward journey. With a jolt I realized that I’d become so obsessed about the ring, I’d forgotten to worry about all the other things that I’d found eerie about the place.

As we again reached the rocky summit from which we’d first surveyed our destination, Chris unhitched the toggle of the camera bag with one hand, saying he wanted to capture the wild and untamed sea from the peak. Boy, I thought to myself, this is one photo I’m going to tear up when he’s forgotten that it exists.

He pulled over into the scraggy bush beside the road and walked out to the point, squinting into the harsh sunlight that bullied his eyes.

Sitting alone in the car, the noonday heat turning the tiny space inside into a mini-furnace, I glanced over for my last look at the sea. No, I wasn’t imagining it - there **was** something demonic about it, even the white-edged foam that crashed onto the pebble beach seemed to bubble sideways and curve into a long, slow, grotesque smile.....

Ow! The blasted ring was cutting into my finger again, and a pink, raw, raised area bore testimony to the continuing struggle.

“Ok, let’s check out the map”, Chris had returned, and was busily digging in his backpack. Soon the map was splayed out on his lap, and our anticipated journey charted out by a spiderous finger-trail across the tiny lines of the paper. I took one last look

over my shoulder as the engine kicked into life. And then I saw it, clear as day, a small, brown, dappled owl was drifting towards the trunk of a fallen tree. Flapping its wings effortlessly, it poised to settle, and stared right back at me.

“O no!” I almost froze with fear, as my hand shot up to my mouth.

“What **is** it?” Chris’ eyes were wide with alarm.

“Look, over there, the owl on the tree stump!”

Chris’ look left me in no doubt that this event had no significance for him whatsoever. His eyebrows shot up and formed the unspoken question.

“It’s terribly, terribly unlucky Chris! To see an owl in the daytime is supposed to be a very bad omen; it means something bad is going to happen!”

“O, for God’s sake! Will you stop it! You’re going to spoil our trip with your obsession with paranormal. It’s raw and wild out here, look around you, what do you expect to see perched on a tree stump, a 747?” The annoyance was very clear in his voice, and I knew there was no point in belaboring the issue, and I felt bad as well. My mounting hysteria over the past day and a half couldn’t have been much fun for him. I squeezed his hand in silent apology, and got a smile back in return. If only this damn ring would budge.

I reached into my backpack for some Vaseline to ease the chafing, just as we were beginning the steep and dangerous decent, and in the split-second that I took my eyes off the road, the undreamed of and dreaded, happened.

All I heard was Chris’ hoarse shout, and almost in slow motion, I caught a yellow blur from the corner of my eye. An enormous impact followed, smashing my head onto my knees, and enveloping my unconscious mind in blackness. Then, slowly, slowly, through

what felt like layers of cotton wool in my head, my subconscious mind fought furiously for survival. I became aware of light filtering into my vision, followed by a drip, drip, dripping sensation.

“Say something, for God’s sake, **say** something!” Chris’ voice was on the edge of hysteria.

But, try as I could, no words would form. My lips twisted and trembled with the effort, but nothing came, their silent movement a frustration for my tortured brain.

I remember little else, save being helped out of the tangled wreckage of hire car, and then regaining consciousness on the backseat of a strange motor vehicle. I remember calling out for Chris, and the spontaneous acceleration from the driver, who must have been wondering whether I would expire on him, before he could make it to the hospital. I remember arriving at the hospital, the white heat of the day, and the attendants rushing out with a trolley to carry me inside. Each time I regained consciousness, it would seem that I had just been roused from a particularly hellish nightmare, but then to my absolute despair, I would realize that it was all, in fact, really happening to me.

The worst thing I remember was the vicious pain inflicted by an examining doctor, who was casually manipulating the three sections of broken nose I had sustained in the accident. I later thanked my lucky stars that I had been so severely concussed and shocked from the crash, that the entire procedure had retained an unreal quality for me throughout. Chris had suffered two cracked ribs, but had emerged otherwise unscathed from the incident. It appeared that the other vehicle, which was traveling much faster than it should have, had swung wide to negotiate the narrow bend, and smashed head-long into ours. Nevertheless, an eternity of questions and statements followed, with the local constabulary struggling with their scant command of the English language.

Waiting for it all to end, just to be able to get away from there, seemed an eternity of waiting. Waiting for Chris to finish with the police enquiry, waiting for my addled brain

to accept the shock and heal, and waiting for the moment I could walk out of that terrible place. The plaster cast they had set over my face and nose felt heavy and uncomfortable, and when I'd awake from a restless sleep, it would take all my powers of selfcontrol not to rip it off.

Towards the end of my second day there, I awoke from one of these sleeps, with the same feeling of helplessness and desire to escape, as before. But this time, I became aware of the ring biting painfully into my hand. I looked down at the loathsome thing. The grotesque carvings seemed to be mocking me, and in a desperate effort to be free of its malevolent spell, I tore and ripped at it until my knuckle was bleeding and sore. Still it would not move.

By now I had lost all sense of reason, my eyes frantically scanning the austere room for a tool that could help me. In the framework of the window, I spied four roughly-cast iron bars, obviously crafted as crude burglar guarding. In two strides I was at the window. I forced the one iron rod between my finger and the silver ring, tearing skin and tissue in my frenzy. I worked it and worked it until the silver band stretched and loosened with my labors, and then finally, I ripped the thing from my now-bloody hand, and hurled it out of the window. It bounced with a clear 'phunk, phunk' onto the ground and blurred into the grimy dust-bed it had found. A sense of relief flooded over me. It's over I thought. It's over at last.

Four days later we were safely home. The accident had left us in no mood for further holiday fun, and after a tedious flight, and a longish car journey, we were happy to settle back into the familiar surroundings we had left behind. We were sitting in the garden, under the shade of our favourite bottlebrush tree, sipping a wonderfully refreshing cup of tea, and reminiscing over the trip, when Chris' eyes suddenly lit up. He sprung from the wicker chair with an impish grin and bounded back two minutes later.

"I've got a surprise for you," he said, the impish grin still flickering on his boyish face, "close your eyes and hold out your hand,"

Obediently I did so, wondering what delight he had in store for me,

“You nearly lost it,” he said, “it must have fallen off when they carried you inside,”

With a pounding heart, I opened my eyes, and there it was, the now-familiar, grotesque features staring back at me, the silver band dented and scarred, with just the faintest brownish tinge of blood still clinging to its face.