The Island at Noon

The first time he saw the island, Marini was politely leaning over the seats on the left, adjusting a plastic table before setting a lunch tray down. The passenger had looked at him several times as he came and went with magazines or glasses of whisky; Marini lingered while he adjusted the table, wondering, bored, if it was worth responding to the passenger’s insistent look, one American woman out of many, when in the blue oval of the window appeared the coast of the island, the golden strip of the beach, the hills that rose toward the desolate plateau. Correcting the faulty position of the glass of beer, Marini smiled to the passenger. “The Greek islands,” he said. “Oh, yes, Greece,” the American woman answered with false interest. A bell rang briefly, and the steward straightened up, without removing the professional smile from his thin lips. He began attending to a Syrian couple, who ordered tomato juice, but in the tail of the plane he gave himself a few seconds to look down again; the island was small and solitary, and the Aegean Sea surrounded it with an intense blue that exalted the curl of a dazzling and kind of petrified white, which down below would be foam breaking against reefs and coves. Marini saw that the deserted beaches ran north and west; the rest was the mountain which fell straight into the sea. A rocky and deserted island, although the lead-gray spot near the northern beach could be a house, perhaps a group of primitive houses. He started opening the can of juice, and when he had straightened up the island had vanished from the window; only the sea was left, an endless green horizon. He looked at his wrist-watcher without knowing why; it was exactly noon.

Marini liked being assigned to the Rome-Toheran line. The flight was less gloomy than on the northern lines, and the girls seemed happy to go to the Orient or to get to know Italy. Four days later, while he was helping a little boy who had lost his spoon and was pointing downheartedly at his dessert plate, he again discovered the edge of the island. There was a difference of eight minutes, but when he leaned over to a window in the tail he had no doubts; the island had an unmistakable shape, like a turtle whose paws were barely out of the water. He looked at it until they called for him, this time sure that the lead-gray spot was a group of houses; he managed to make out the lines of some cultivated fields that extended to the beach. During the stop at Beirut he looked at the stewardess’s atlas and wondered if the island wasn’t Horos. The radio operator, an indifferent Frenchman, was surprised at his interest. “All those islands look alike. I’ve been doing this route for two years, and I don’t care a fig about them. Yes, show it to me next time.” It wasn’t Horos but Xiros, one of the many islands on the fringe of the tourist circuits. “It won’t last five years,” the stewardess said to him while they had a drink in Rome. “Hurry up if you’re thinking of going, the hordes will be
there any moment now. Genghis Cook is watching.” But Marini kept thinking about the island, looking at it when he remembered or if there was a window near, almost always shrugging his shoulders in the end. None of it made any sense—flying three times a week at noon over Xiros was as unreal as dreaming three times a week that he was flying over Xiros. Everything was falsified in the futile and recurrent vision; except, perhaps, the desire to repeat it, the consulting of the wristwatch before noon, the brief, pricking contact with the dazzling white band at the edge of an almost black blue, and the houses where the fishermen would barely lift their eyes to follow the passage of that other unreality.

Eight or nine weeks later, when they offered him the New York run, with all its advantages, Marini thought it was the chance to end that innocent and annoying obsession. In his pocket he had a guide book in which an imprecise geographer with a Levantine name gave more details about Xiros than was usual. He answered no, hearing himself as from a distance, and, avoiding the shocked surprise of a boss and two secretaries, he went to have a bite in the company’s canteen, where Carla was waiting for him. Carla’s bewildered disappointment did not disturb him; the southern coast of Xiros was uninhabitable, but toward the west remained traces of a Lydian or perhaps Creto-Mycenaean colony, and Professor Goldmann had found two stones carved with hieroglyphics that the fishermen used as piles for the small dock. Carla’s head ached, and she left almost immediately; octopus was the principal resource for the handful of inhabitants, every five days a boat arrived to load the fish and leave some provisions and materials. In the travel agency they told him he would have to charter a special boat from Rynos, or perhaps it would be possible to go in the small boat that picked up the octupuses, but

Marini could find out about this only in Rynos, where the agency didn’t have an agent. At any rate, the idea of spending a few days on the island was just a plan for his June vacation; in the weeks that followed he had to replace White on the Tunis run, and then there was a strike, and Carla went back to her sisters’ house in Palermo. Marini went to live in a hotel near the Piazza Navona, where there were secondhand bookstores; he amused himself not very enthusiastically by looking for books on Greece, and from time to time he leafed through a conversation manual. The word *kalimera* pleased him, and he tried it out on a redhead in a cabaret; he went to bed with her, learned about her grandfather in Odos and about certain unaccountable sore throats. In Rome it rained, in Beirut Tania was always waiting for him; there were other stories, always relatives or sore throats; one day it was again the Teheran run, the island at noon. Marini stayed glued to the window so long that the new stewardess considered him a poor partner and let him know how many trays she had served. That night Marini invited the stewardess for dinner at the Firouz, and it wasn’t difficult to make her forgive him for the morning’s distraction. Lucia advised him to have his hair cut American-style; he talked to her about Xiros for a while, but later he realized she preferred the vodka-lime of the Hilton. Time passed in things like that, in infinite trays of food, each one with the smile to which the passenger had the right. On the return trips the plane flew over Xiros at eight in the morning; the sun glared against the larboard windows, and you could scarcely see the golden turtle; Marini preferred to wait for the noons of the trip going, knowing that then he could stay a long minute against the window, while Lucia (and then Felisa) somewhat ironically took care of things. Once he took a picture of Xiros, but it came out blurred; he already knew some things about the island, he had underlined the
rare mentions in a couple of books. Felisa told him that the pilots called him the madman of the island, but that didn’t bother him. Carla had just written that she had decided not to have the baby, and Marini sent her two weeks’ wages and thought that the rest would not be enough for his vacation. Carla accepted the money and let him know through a friend that she’d probably marry the dentist from Treviso. Everything had such little importance at noon, on Mondays and Thursdays and Saturdays (twice a month on Sundays).

As time went on, he began to realize that Felisa was the only one who understood him a little; there was a tacit agreement that she would take care of the flight at noon, as soon as he stationed himself by the tail window. The island was visible for a few minutes, but the air was always so clean, and it was outlined by the sea with such a minute cruelty that the smallest details were implacably adjusted to the memory of the preceding flight: the green spot of the headland to the north, the lead-gray houses, the nets drying on the sand. When the nets weren’t there, Marini felt as if he had been robbed, insulted. He thought of filming the passage over the island, to repeat the image in the hotel, but he preferred to save the money on the camera since there was less than a month left for vacation. He didn’t keep a very strict account of the days; sometimes it was Tania in Beirut, sometimes Felisa in Teheran, almost always his younger brother in Rome, all a bit blurred, amiably easy and cordial and as if replacing something else, filling the hours before or after the flight, and during the flight, everything, too, was blurred and easy and stupid until it was time to lean toward the tail window, to feel the cold crystal like the boundary of an aquarium, where the golden turtle slowly moved in the thick blue.

That day, the nets were clearly sketched on the sand, and Marini could have sworn that the black dot on the left, at the edge of the sea, was a fisherman who must have been looking at the plane. “Kalimera,” he absurdly thought. It no longer made any sense to wait. Mario Merolis would lend him the money he needed for the trip, and in less than three days he would be in Xiros. With his lips against the window, he smiled, thinking that he would climb to the green spot, that he would enter the sea of the northern caves naked, that he would fish octopuses with the men, communicating through signs and laughter. Nothing was difficult once decided—a night train, the first boat, another old and dirty boat, the night on the bridge, close to the stars, the taste of anis and mutton, daybreak among the islands. He landed with the first lights, and the captain introduced him to an old man, probably the elder. Klaios took his left hand and spoke slowly, looking him in the eyes. Two boys came, and Marini found out that they were Klaios’ sons. The captain of the small boat exhausted his English: Twenty inhabitants, octopus, fish, five houses, Italian visitor would pay lodging Klaios. The boys laughed when Klaios discussed drachmas; Marini, too, already friends with the younger boys, watching the sun come up over a sea not as dark as from the air, a poor, clean room, a pitcher of water, smell of sage and tanned hides.

They left him alone to go load the small boat, and after tearing off his traveling clothes and putting on bathing trunks and sandals, he set out for a walk on the island. You still couldn’t see anybody; the sun slowly but surely rose, and from the thickets grew a subtle smell, slightly acidic, mixing with the iodine of the wind. It must have been ten when he reached the northern headland and recognized the largest of the caves. He preferred being alone, although he would have liked to bathe at the sand beach even better; the island impregnated him, and he enjoyed it with such intimacy that he was incapable of thinking or choosing. His skin burned
from sun and wind when he undressed to thrust himself into the sea from a rock; the water was cold and did him good. He let a sly current carry him to the entrance of a grotto, he returned to the open sea, rolled over on his back, accepted it all in a single act of conciliation that was also a name for the future. He knew without the slightest doubt that he would not leave the island, that somehow he would stay forever on the island. He managed to imagine his brother, Felisa, their faces when they found out he had stayed to live off fishing on a large solitary rock. He had already forgotten them when he turned over to swim toward the shore.

The sun dried him immediately, and he went down toward the houses, where two astonished women looked at him before running inside and closing their doors. He waved a greeting in the void and walked down toward the nets. One of Kliaios' sons was waiting for him on the beach, and Marini pointed to the sea, inviting him. The boy hesitated, pointing to his cloth pants and red shirt. Then he ran toward one of the houses and came back almost naked; they dived together into an already lukewarm sea, dazzling under the eleven o'clock sun.

Drying himself in the sand, Ionas began to name things. "Kalimeria," Marini said, and the boy doubled over with laughter. Then Marini repeated the new sentences, teaching Ionas Italian words. Almost on the horizon the small boat grew smaller and smaller; Marini felt that now he was really alone on the island with Kliaios and his people. He would let some days pass, he would pay for his room and learn to fish; some afternoon, when they were well acquainted, he would talk to them about staying and working with them. Getting up, he held out his hand to Ionas and started walking slowly toward the hill. The slope was steep, and he savored each pause, turning around time and again to look at the nets on the beach, the figures of the women speaking gaily to Ionas and Kliaios and looking at him askance, laughing. When he reached the green spot he entered a world where the smell of thyme and sage were one with the fire of the sun and the sea breeze. Marini looked at his wrist watch and then, with an impatient gesture, put it in the pocket of his bathing trunks. It wouldn't be easy to kill the former man, but there was none, tense with sun and space, he felt the enterprise was possible. He was in Xiros, he was there where he had so often doubted he could reach. He let himself fall back among the hot stones, he endured their edges and inflamed ridges and looked vertically at the sky; far away he could hear the hum of an engine.

Closing his eyes, he told himself he wouldn't look at the plane; he wouldn't let himself be contaminated by the worst of him that once more was going to pass over the island. But in the shadows of his eyelids he imagined Felisa with the trays, in that very moment distributing the trays, and his replacement, perhaps Giorgio or someone new from another line, someone who would also be smiling as he served the wine or the coffee. Unable to fight against all that past he opened his eyes and sat up, and in the same moment saw the right wing of the plane, almost over his head, tilt unaccountably, the changed sound of the jet engines, the almost vertical drop into the sea. He rushed down the hill, knocking against rocks and lacerating his arm among thorns. The island hid the place of the fall from him, but he turned before reaching the beach and through a predictable shortcut he passed the first ridge of the hill and came out onto the smaller beach. The plane's tail was sinking some 100 yards away, in total silence. Marini ran and dived into the water, still waiting for the plane to come up to float; but all you could see was the soft line of the waves, a cardboard box bobbing absurdly near the place of the fall, and almost at the
end, when it no longer made sense to keep swimming, a hand out of the water, just for a second, enough time for Marini to change direction and dive under to catch by his hair the man who struggled to hold onto him and hoarsely swallowed air that Marini let him breathe without getting too close. Towing him little by little he got him to the shore, took the body dressed in white in his arms, and laying him on the sand he looked at the face full of foam where death had already settled, bleeding through an enormous gash in his throat. What good was artificial respiration if, with each convulsion, the gash seemed to open a little more and was like a repugnant mouth that called to Marini, tore him from his little happiness of such few hours on the island, shouted to him between torrents something he was no longer able to hear? Klaios' sons came running and behind them the women. When Klaios arrived, the boys gathered around the body lying on the sand, unable to understand how he had had the strength to swim to shore and drag himself there bleeding. "Close his eyes," one of the women begged crying. Klaios looked toward the sea, searching for other survivors. But, as always, they were alone on the island, and the open-eyed corpse was all that was new between them and the sea.

Thinking about it afterwards—on the street, in a train, crossing fields—all that would have seemed absurd, but what is theater but a compromise with the absurd and its most efficient, lavish practice? Rice, who was bored on an autum nal London weekend and had entered the Aldwych without taking too close a look at the program, found the first act of the play, above all, mediocre; the absurd began at intermission, when the man in grey came over to his seat and politely invited him, with an almost inaudible voice, to accompany him backstage. Not too surprised, he thought the management of the theater must be doing a questionnaire, some vague investigation for publicity purposes. "If it's about an opinion," Rice said, "the first act seemed wishy-washy to me, and the lighting for example..." The man in grey agreed amiably, but his hand kept pointing to a side exit, and Rice realized that he should get up and accompany him without having to be begged. "I would have preferred