

Alicudi, The Place Where Flowers Grow on Water

by

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Alicudi is the most isolated, least inhabited, most inhospitable, westernmost island in the Aeolian archipelago, located north of Sicily in the Tyrrhenian Sea. We came to this rugged land — the truncated cone of a long extinct volcano rising like a pyramid straight from the sea — to release into its clear waters the cremated ashes of my mother Lori.

We came here because Mom's — and our — dear friend Elda, from Padova, had purchased a house here some six years ago. The two of them had long had a dream of doing some sort of business together, perhaps a bed & breakfast, "*per i ricchi americani*," they used to joke. But Mom's illness returned and she never made it to the island, though she talked about it right to the end.

It is not easy even for the most hardy and intrepid to reach Alicudi. Previously, until five years ago, there was no quay for ferries to moor: the ships anchored off shore, and visitors or residents were compelled to land by small fishing or row boats that came out to meet them, Tahiti-style. Today there is a *molo* — a landing quay — so the *aliscafi*, or hydrofoils, can land most days in season, when the sea is not too rough that is.

Our journey was not difficult, but prolonged nonetheless, extending over three days: first by train to London overnight to catch an early next morning flight to Rome; then a long

delay in Rome before flying to Palermo, arriving early evening where we stayed overnight; finally the better part of a day spent hanging out in Palermo until we were able to catch a late afternoon *aliscafo* to Alicudi that arrived in early evening. My sister Michele and her husband George, meanwhile, made their way to Alicudi from Boston, USA, while Italian friend Alder came from Venice. Beppino, another old friend of my mother's from Venice days, who now lives just outside Palermo, was also joining us, but even for him, the journey was something of an adventure, even an ordeal: though a Sicilian merchant seaman, he had never before ventured to any of the Aeolian Islands, so close to his home.

In truth there is little reason to come here. Alicudi is a harsh, isolated island with very little, seemingly, to offer. There is a cluster of houses down by the *molo* — no more than fishermen's huts, used by day or in the summer only. There is a bar, there is a shop, there are half a dozen fishing boats drawn up on the beach, there is an *asino* or two, essential for the transport of goods and materials to the houses above, tethered to an iron ring: there is nothing else. The rest of the island carries on its existence *in alta* — up high above, on the eastern flank of the steep, stony volcano. Ancient paths, made from basaltic stone, lead up, steeply winding, to collections of houses clustered here and there like seaward looking cliff dwellings, hanging on to, or sometimes seemingly carved into or out of the rock itself.

This recalls the time, even present today in the collective memory of the islanders, when danger and devastation came always from the sea. Since Neolithic days, the Aeolian Islands have been a glittering prize, captured and colonised by the Greeks around 580 BC, later invaded by Carthaginians and Romans, raided by Saracens, marauding corsairs from the Barbary Coast, and many other *stranieri*. Danger came always from the sea: thus, in spite of the incredible steepness of the island, its inhabitants were compelled to turn landward and live up high for safety. Indeed, Alicudi's principal church, the now abandoned *Chiesa di San Bartolomeo*, is located at a dizzying 400 metres above sea level, a demanding hour and a half walk or longer up the steep and sometimes precipitous path. Higher still, and on the southwestern, virtually inaccessible side of the volcano, there is a grotto known as the *Timpone delle Femmine* where the women and children of the island were compelled to take refuge

during such raids or risk being raped, massacred, or taken into slavery, as happened on numerous occasions, most recently in 1544 when the ferocious corsair Ariadeno Barbarossa — the Red Beard — terrorised the islands.

Elda's house, the island's old schoolhouse and of relatively recent construction, is fortunately only half way to the old *chiesa*, but it is still a fair climb all the same. A community of Germans have settled even higher, near the summit of the mountain at just under 600 metres, where, apparently, they live in isolation, a self-contained and self-sufficient agricultural community that mixes little in the life of the rest of the island. Great solar panels, carried up in bits and pieces then re-assembled, mark their houses.

Elsewhere, also above Elda but not as high as the Germans, there is a Florentine *contrada* where several families of Tuscans live in a quarter comprised of a steep maze of houses and apartments interlocking one with another: who lives where, whose children are whose, who is living or sleeping with whom, it is hard to decipher. Once, having lost the way, we stumbled onto this neighborhood, came upon a house where three attractive young women were showering on the open porch, completely naked, laughing, singing, soaping each other as the water cascaded over them. "*Ciao!*" they called out gaily to me as I stumbled blindly down the uneven path.

The islanders, meanwhile, about a hundred of them, continue their lives, in a fashion, as they have for generations and millennia: fishing when weather permits, cultivating the land up high, defending themselves from invasions from *stranieri* and other marauders that come always from the sea.

Christ, they say, may indeed have stopped at Eboli: much of Southern Italy — and certainly these islands — seems more pagan than Christian. Alicudi is a land deeply charged with superstition and magic, a place that still places great faith in those powerful conjurers who know the magic spell to break a whirlwind, the formula to keep a storm at bay or to bring good fortune to a new-born baby. Christ, they say, may indeed have traversed the Atlantic Ocean with the *conquistadores* to our American shores. Yet for those of us born in a new age of secular paganism, an age and era even far beyond Eboli, lacking ritual and religion, lacking

even magic and the certainty that conjurors and witches can bring, it is we, from our wealthy but spiritually impoverished mainland, who remain outside the pale.

And so we came to Alicudi, not because Mom wished or compelled us to, but because we *needed* to, not for her but for ourselves. It seemed right to come to this strange and isolated volcanic rock, this island forged from fire: Mom, after all, herself came from a small and isolated volcanic island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and, though she lived in many places, she always remained an island person to the core, only ever felt as if she had truly returned home when she finally came to live in Venice.

We came to Alicudi to release Mom's ashes to eternity. Yet we arrived with no plan as to how we were to achieve this, little or no idea of what or how or where to do it. A burial is literally rooted in time and space, dictated by the nature of the event, the physicality of interment. But cremation, the act of committing the mortal remains of a dearly loved one to purification and consumption by fire, is less precise in its procedures, its rituals, its rules. Indeed, though in Britain cremation is a widely accepted form of dealing with death, in the US, it goes against the American way, the commercialisation, the marketing, the business of cashing in on grief and sadness — the cringing funeral director who tried to sell us coffins costing thousands of dollars “with solid brass fittings” to be burnt to ash: did we love our mother any less for choosing the \$800 cardboard box that none of us would ever see? In Italy, too, cremation is viewed with great suspicion, something that is quite frankly not done, or only ever under special circumstances and in a few limited places. It is even illegal, we found out, to bring human ashes into Italy and to scatter them without a special permit. Yet on Alicudi surely, this isolated, lonely volcanic rock that carries on its existence beyond the pale of mainland Italy, who would care, who would even notice?

To the ancients the Aeolians Islands were the home of the god-king Aeolus, who kept control of all the winds, both favorable and pernicious. When Odysseus stopped here on his wanderings, the king gave him the winds imprisoned in a magic bag; but his men, jealous that their leader had been given a precious gift that he would not share with them, opened the bag,

thus releasing the winds and blowing the hapless wanderer off course when almost within sight of his beloved Ithaka.

In medieval times, the archipelago was settled by Christian-Romans, and Lipari became the site of an important bishopric due to the fact that the reliquary remains of San Bartolomeo — miraculously, so it was said — made their way here after the apostle's martyrdom in Armenia. Pilgrims from near and far came to the Aeolian Islands and this gave rise to other legends which flourished in that period of darkness: the crater of Vulcano (still smoking today) was considered to be the mouth of hell, in whose fiery depths smoldered the souls of the damned. Island legend recounts that on the day the Visigothic king Theodoric died, San Gregorio Magno, the hermit of the island, witnessed his soul being thrown into Vulcano's crater by the Pope.

Today, who else but the very crazy, the deluded — the lunatic, the lover, or the poet — would choose to come to Alicudi? The island lives outside any concept of modern time and space. There are no cars, no mains water (all water must be collected in each house's *cisterna*, and jealously guarded and rationed out until the next rains — hence the happy need for communal showers), and only limited electricity. Everything, from the day's shopping to furniture, tools, building materials, appliances must be carried on the back of man or donkey, up the torturously steep and narrow paths, at great effort and considerable cost. The island's very hardship, however, has the effect of stripping life down to the bare, of causing one to consider what is truly essential and important, and to discard or jettison that which is not.

When we had disembarked from the *aliscafo* with just a couple of suitcases, albeit fairly large ones, Elda, her sister Elia, Michele and George were there to meet us. Elda's face fell in dismay when she saw our two bags, and indeed, she had implored us to travel light, thinking, I imagine of my mother, who could quite happily go away for a week or a year with only the tiniest carry-on. "Don't worry," we said, "We can carry the bags, no problem, there are lots of us," we said. "*No, ci vuole un asino* — we need a donkey," she insisted, and went off to look for Werner, a young German who was the island's donkey driver and general factotum. But Werner was in foul temper. "*Per carità*," he said, angry, sweating, motioning with his hands in

sign of impatient prayer, acting for all the world as he himself were a Southern Italian, an islander, “I have made three journeys today already. It is too much for her. I am now going back up to my house, and I’ve already got a full load of my own.”

“Sì, caro, sì,” said Elda in her sweet, gentle and cajoling voice. “*Ma dai, Werner, ci sono solo due piccoli bagagli* — there are only two small bags.” The sweating, odiferous young man lifted one of them, then snorted in derision (it was, admittedly, outrageously heavy). “If I carry one bag for you, then don’t ever threaten with denouncing me to the authorities for mistreating my beast,” he said, strapping it roughly onto the patient, waiting creature, a doe-eyed donkey named Lisa, already overloaded with crates of wine and water. Then, shaking his head, swearing in island dialect, he whipped the donkey’s flanks with a switch, and urged her, stumbling, up the path.

Another day we met a young Australian woman, Maria, who came to the island, fell in love with a local, and married. They moved to Melbourne and lived there for some seven years, before he got the itch to return: and now there they all were, with two young children, living up high by the old church, trying to find a way somehow to stay on the island, to find a way of existence that they all can be happy with. We sense that he wants to stay, while she is unsure whether she can. We would see her at the end of day, trudging slowly the hour’s walk or longer up to their house, with beach toys, towels, and the children, and she’d smile bravely, perhaps just a little too brightly. We would smile back, exchange a few words — she hungry to be speaking English as she still knew little Italian — but she always kept her distance, and we sensed a slight suspicion and wariness. Did she fear that we thought she was crazy, that we pitied her? Or we were already considered *stranieri* — outsiders from beyond the pale — as she unconsciously adopted the mentality of the islanders?

It turned out, in fact, that Maria’s mother and father were themselves from Alicudi, had emigrated when young Down Under and there raised a family which in a single generation had become assimilated as Australian (the saga of America, our saga, is clearly not unique). The hardship of life on the Aeolian Islands had caused most of the islands’ inhabitants to emigrate earlier this century, yes, to the United States, but also to South America, to Australia, to

elsewhere, anywhere, in search of a better life. Alicudi, we were told, had once supported a population of over a thousand before the war. While it is hard to believe that there were ever so many living here, the now overgrown terraces, painstakingly carved and created out of millennia of man hours of labor, extending over the steepest slopes wherever there is topsoil, now crumbling and overgrown with heather, broom, and prickly pear cactus, are testimony to the indefatigable industry of the island. Today, the ruins of this age — *these fragments I have shored against my ruin* — litter the island: stone-built houses, their roofs collapsed, cactus growing through the gaping windows, the wooden supports of the terraces little more than charred stumps.

When we arrived, the island was in preparation for its annual patronal festival. In fact, two celebrations were to take place, the one official, Christian, centering on the new church above the harbor, the other pagan in spirit, and spontaneous. Its focus was Bartolino — little Bartolomeo after the islands' patron saint — a hermit-like creature, who was the island's resident free spirit, living no one knows where, sleeping often under the stars, or amongst the ruined fragments. With *barba rossa* — red beard — and hair, and an impish, dwarf-like grin, he would, apparently, appear here and there, never for long. When necessity compelled, Bartolino would descend to the relatively civilised lower levels of the island to do odd jobs to earn enough money to survive. When Elda would ask him to help to strip a door, or do some painting, he'd say, "*Sì, sì, vengo domani* — I come tomorrow." But more often than not, he would never turn up. When she would see him some days later, he'd simply grin hopelessly and say, "*Ma signora Elda, tu lo sai, non sono affidabile* — But Signora Elda, you know, I am not reliable."

Once a year, when the moon is full and always in anticipation of the annual *Festa di San Bartolomeo* which takes place on August 24, Bartolino's tomfoolery transcends to seriousness, when he holds court near the summit of the mountain. All the young people of the island make their way up sometime after midnight, bringing with them votive offerings of wine and other mind-changing substances, and the little man entrances all, weaving an apparent spell of

wonder as he plays his *fisarmonica* — accordion — improvises songs and poetry of his own invention. It is an all-night bacchanalian affair with much wine drinking and lovemaking in the bushes (but beware the prickly pear).

We do not venture up to share in this youthful island affair: *I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each*. But when I awake in the early hours of the morning, confused in the darkness of the enclosed schoolhouse, reassured by the noisy exhalations of our two children, I venture outside to have a pee. The moon is full, its light just picking out the pale outlines of the islands of Filicudi and Salina, and I see a procession of flashlights, one after another, streaming down the paths, and hear the noise of people descending, drunken voices, falling, laughing, singing to the stars.

After just days on the island, we sense that even the apparently simple, timeless life of the islanders may not be all that it appears. The islanders, we are told, live up high, above the old San Bartolomeo church, where they continue to cultivate the land. “We have recently planted 5,000 Malvasia vines, trained on metal posts,” one tells me, “to revive wine production on this island. We make the wine in an old *cantina* that has been there for centuries, pressing and filtering the *mosto* and allowing it to run into the fermentation vessels by gravity.” Yet, when, one morning, Michele, George and I get up at 6 am to climb to the summit (it takes a good two hours from Elda’s house), we find, where the volcano top flattens out to reveal a large area of flat *pianura*, no lush or extensive cultivation, but instead just a few patches of vegetable gardens, a plot containing a mere six vines, trained on metal posts. We search in vain for this imaginary vineyard, to no avail.

When Silvio, the island’s oldest and reputedly finest fisherman, appears on the beach one evening with a large *ricciola*, an amberjack weighing about 15 kilograms, nearly a meter in length, islanders and tourists alike gather around him. He hones a huge knife on a whetstone, and there is high drama as he undertakes the bloody ritual of cleaning and cutting the great fish, first slicing off the head, slitting the belly, and pulling out with his hands the guts, throwing them into the sea, then slicing the body into thick steaks. The fish is hard, stiff, glistening with ice, and we are enthralled, mesmerised by this timeless ritual of life and death.

Yet Alder, ever the sceptic, ever the worldly Venetian, ever wary of southerners and islanders and those *furbi* who are always on the make, says scornfully and in a voice that is far too loud, “That fish is *surgelato* — frozen. Look how stiff and hard it is.”

I am appalled, defend the islander as if he were my brother. The fish, I say, has just been landed, it is so fresh that it is still *in rigor mortis*. But later, when I go to Silvio’s to purchase more fish for our dinner, the islander keeps us standing awkwardly for a good twenty minutes while, barefoot and relaxing on his terrace, he sits and chats with his cronies, gets up to make himself a *caffè*, makes his wife a *caffè*, finally deigns to sell us his catch, which I cannot deny is indeed kept in a freezer, even though, he assures me — and I believe him — that “it was landed last night.”

Alder and Beppino, neither overly given to physical exertion of any sort, cannot comprehend why anyone would choose to live here, to undergo the daily hardships of life on this stony rock where even the simplest activities or chores become major obstacles. Both are appalled to learn of the exorbitant sums the islanders charge to outsiders like Elda to perform the smallest services — well over a million lira, or a thousand dollars, for some simple carpentry in her house, thirty dollars for every load carried up by Lisa, the donkey. Of course, the islanders rationalise such excesses, demonstrating the high cost of getting materials to Alicudi, the cost of gasoline to run power generators, the fact that in winter there is no work. And the *stranieri* — people like Elda, the Florentines, others from Rome, Milan, the Veneto — are dependant on their services, cannot live without them.

A plan to construct a funicular has been discussed, not to transport people, but simply to assist in the heavy carrying of goods, building materials, shopping, small appliances or furniture to the higher levels. But the islanders are against it. “It will change the character of Alicudi,” they say. Which means they will lose their profitable monopoly on the transport of goods and services.

We did not ask Silvio to take us out in his boat. Instead, we sought Arduccio, a young, stoutly powerful fisherman of the island, with green-blue eyes and a bushy moustache. He agreed to

take us out in his seaworthy, traditional craft, made from wood, thirty-three years old (the same age as he himself), painted white with bands of red, green and blue. We were concerned not to offend the islanders' own sense of ritual, of life and death and superstition. But when Elda explained our unusual mission, he had only shrugged both shoulders and moustache — price having already been agreed — and said, "*Come volete*— as you like."

We carried with us the stout box that, a year earlier, our son Guy had hammered together in the Berkshires when we went there with Michele, George, and a rented truck, taking with us a few remaining earthly possessions of Mom's life — her favorite records, dishes and glasses, the octagonal dining table around which so many good times passed — to their summer log cabin. Guy had put this box together in an absent, abstract manner out of off-cuts of wood, seemingly for no particular purpose. Later, we found that it was the perfect receptacle to contain Mom's ashes, built to measure precisely: yet how could he possibly have known what volume they (the "cremains" as that ghoulish funeral director in Boston had called them) would reach?

As we toured the island by fishing boat, its darker side, its aspect that faces south and west was revealed. Whereas previously there were clusters of houses here and there, and on even the steepest slope that came down almost to the water's edge there were ancient, now abandoned terraces that gave the land at least some sense of man-made order even if now almost wholly given over to the prickly pear cactus, on the far side of the island, volcanic activity thousands and hundreds of thousands of years ago had twisted and contorted the land into weird and fantastic shapes: rivers of now frozen, once bubbling lava; basaltic formations where hot magna from the earth's core met the sea; twisting, plunging precipices and crevasses.

We came to a well-known landmark even marked on charts known as the *Scoglia Galera*, or '*a Lera* in the islander's language, a weird sun-baked flow of rust-colored lava that extends down the flanks of the volcano, in appearance not unlike the spinal plates of some fantastic prehistoric or primeval creature, extending down to the sea's edge and rising beyond, from out of the waters like an emerging sea beast. This is a land, one senses, that has always

been thus, from the first day of the earth's creation, forged from fire and existing outside of time and space — or at least outside our conception of time and space.

Here, at *'a Lera* we anchored. The sea was about ten metres deep, the waters so clear that you could see the stones on the seabed below. We all gathered on the prow of the slightly bobbing fishing craft. A few words were said, but the collective power and emotion of the moment precluded any necessity of eulogy or sermon, the atmosphere further intensified by the glaring sun, by the sea, and by the primeval power of the twisted volcanic rock that rose from it.

A light breeze had sprung up, which made us give thought to which way to release the ashes. Together, Michele and I poured them over the side while the children and others scattered onto the waters flowers gathered from the island, bougainvillea, hibiscus, and oleander. No one was prepared for what happened: in those crystalline and unpolluted waters, the ashes did not disperse randomly or stay scattered on the surface; rather, they sank quickly, so heavy were they, and in so doing, formed into a sort of *nuvola* or cloud that grew pure white, spreading out underwater with incredible energy and tinting the sea an unworldly shade of luminescent aquamarine. It was as if, strangely, we were looking down from above on the sinking not rising formation of an inverse atomic mushroom cloud, life-energy imploding, cosmic energy returning into the *abisso* of the infinite. The cloud of pure white spread yet lingered, while the fuschia petals of the flowers danced and floated like a musical archipelago on the waters' surface above.

We stood long, watching in wonder this miraculous vision. Then Guy said he was hot, wanted to swim. It seemed the most natural thing for our seven-year old boy of the world to climb onto the prow of the fishing boat and dive into those waters tinted by the ashes of his dead grandmother, whom he loved so well. Suddenly, we were all desperate to be in the water, stripped off, and dove in — even little three-year-old Bella . Afterwards, refreshed, we drank sea-cool wine, toasted Mom, and, ravenously tore into good sandwiches that she would have enjoyed so much, made simply with excellent, chewy bread, sweet *prosciutto*, *mortadella*, *formaggio*. All the time, we continued to enjoy the sight of those flowers from Alicudi, which

could have been flowers from Hawaii, floating on the water, drifting slowly away until they were almost out of sight.

A man in a small fishing boat, totally stark naked, passed slowly by, observing silently the flowers that seemed to grow on the water. Another boat came by. The people noticed the flowers, were clearly puzzled by them, motored over to observe them, even picked out of the water one or two in wonderment, then tossed them back, stupefied at how these beautiful flowers had come to be on the far side of the island. More boats came and went, and all paused to observe the flowers.

Then, as we prepared to leave, an eerie but beautiful coincidence occurred: though there are only slight tides in the Tyrhennian, the current had changed, for the flowers which had almost disappeared now slowly drifted back towards us and eventually surrounded our boat once more. This strange phenomenon, we are certain, is destined to become yet another of the island's fantastic legends.

We returned ashore and waited for the *aliscafo* that would take Alder and Beppino back to *terra firma*, back to the 20th century. They had only come over from Palermo for the day, to take part in our ceremony, and would not contemplate even a single night on Alicudi. It did not matter: we all felt satisfied, indeed exhausted. There was little talk, little more to say. We ate a *granita di limone*, swam once more in the sea, hung out until it was time to say good-bye.

An old barefoot fisherman in shorts and a ragged t-shirt approached Elda. I had noticed him before, unshaven, shuffling along the beach, talking to the younger islanders who seemed to take little notice of him, or sitting red-eyed on a whitewashed wall, drinking beer from brown-glass bottles. He was, it turned out, one of those few conjurers or magicians who can break a whirlwind, turn a storm away from the island, bring good luck to a newborn baby. It was wrong, he ranted, crazy, watery eyes rolling, hand shaking, to have done what we did (word travels fast, certainly, on this tiny island). It could bring bad luck or misfortune to the fishermen, to those who go to that part of the island, he said, voice trembling.

“*Ma no, caro, no,*” said Elda, in that sweet, gentle, calm voice of hers that is so beautiful. “If it brings anything then it can only be *buone cose, solo molte buone cose,*

sicuramente. Non preoccuparti — only good things, so don't go and worry yourself about nothing." But he was unconvinced, shook his head violently, gazed at us, we *stranieri* who had arrived from the sea, suspiciously through half-hooded eyes, as if to say, What right do you have to come and do these things here on our island, what right do you have to invade our order, our peace, our lives? What right indeed?

The current that had brought Mom's flowers back to us was a harbinger of change. The wind was already up, and there were white horses on the sea's surface. The fishermen were now all pulling their boats out of the water, and others — the young, unshaven men who were always drinking beer on the terrace of their huts, even Werner, the German mule driver — were joining in to help. They utilised a simple, timeless system: the boats were manoeuvred to the stony beach, then logs were placed under the prow of each hull, a rope or cable was attached to the boat, which was then slowly and gradually winched up the beach.

As the wind got up, there was a sense of real urgency, even danger: the men shouted to each other in dialect, or stood waist deep in the waters, trying to position or hold the now surging wooden-hulled fishing boats while others on shore turned the winches with great wooden spindles, rhythmically running, hopping over the cables, circling round and round. I rushed in to join them, wanted to help, needed to participate in this basic men's work of the island: I positioned myself alongside the others, hands on the time-worn wooden spindle, and began to circle around with them. But I was stopped by a near hysterical shriek from Michele and Kim: "No, you'll hurt yourself!"

The next evening was the festival of San Bartolomeo, the patron saint of the island. The islanders gathered at the new, lower church below Elda's house, and four strong men carried the wooden effigy of the saint, tottering precariously on a wooden table-like stand that rested on their shoulders. The old priest of the island having died earlier in the year (from lack of work, said some, so infrequently do the islanders attend Mass or even bother with such unnecessary social rituals as marriage), a priest from Lipari had been brought in for the day, and he led the procession, together with a young altar boy, followed by a lugubrious, out-of-tune brass band

(also imported, from the island of Salina), then followed by most everyone, islanders and *stranieri* alike. The procession wound its way up the steep path towards Elda's house, and we watched from her *terrazza*.

"*Benedetto sia Gesù, benedetto il suo sacrificio. Il mio San Bartolomeo, prega anche per noi,*" intoned the priest, sweating in his conjuror's robes, white trimmed with gold.

The rhythm of the music, the chanting of the priest, the slow, laborious, ever-upward pace of the procession, the heat, and the sun, and the light shimmering on the sea far below was hypnotic: somehow we found ourselves tagging onto its tail, like stray stragglers, like beggars, hoping not to be noticed, seeking scraps of solace. The procession continued up to the island's cemetery, where it paused at a shrine to the eponymous saint. There the priest spoke of the harshness of life on the island, of how the people had perforce had to emigrate to America, to Australia, to Brazil. He spoke of *il caro* San Bartolomeo, of his sacrifice, and implored him to pray for the islanders. Who knows. Perhaps *even* for us.

The procession then returned back down the island to the new church to celebrate Holy Mass, but we slunk off again at Elda's house. It was hot, so I took a shower in the outhouse below the schoolhouse, which has no door, but rather looks down beyond the terracotta tiled roof of the lower church to the sea, and across to the pale outline of the islands of Stromboli, Filicudi, Salina, Lipari, and Vulcano, rising out of the haze like the backs of primeval, prehistoric sea creatures. As I stood under the cold waters naked, looking out to sea and beyond, the sound of voices singing in the church rose up to lift me and I realised the water streaming down my cheeks was not only from the shower.

That evening, we went down to the seafront for the popular *festa*. There were the usual stalls, brought over from island or mainland, with trashy prizes for children to try and win; there was music, and crazy communal dancing, and much drinking. Little Bartolino had descended for one of his rare public appearances, even the old islanders buying him drinks as if he were some energetic, living embodiment of the island's vital pagan spirit. He boogied crazily with a barefoot, sixteen-year-old beauty, a vestal virgin with ribbons of silk woven into her hair, sacrificed to the grinning goat-man of the island.

A storm was brewing and flashes of sheet lightning in the distance competed for attention with the magnificent fireworks display. The *scirocco*, a hot wind that blows from Africa, had come up with the change in current, the sea was wild, and there was abandon and danger in the air. The old red-eyed fisherman who had accosted us kept popping up, lurking here and there in the shadows: I could sense those half-hooded eyes following me, could almost feel the scratchy stubble of his unshaven face against mine, the work-hardened calluses of his fisherman's hands as they grasped me in an imagined vice-like grip, refused to let me go. Yet what had I to regret, to feel bad about, to hide from: I knew deep within that we had done nothing wrong or bad; on the contrary, that it had all been beautiful and right. But still his alcohol-shot eyes haunted me like a conscience...

Alicudi, so it proved, can be as difficult to leave as it is to reach. The next day, the day of our planned departure, the morning *aliscafo* was inexplicably cancelled, and we were worried that we would not be able to get off the island in order to catch our flights from Palermo the following day. In the afternoon, just hours from the scheduled time of our departure, the woman in the kiosk down by the *molo* who is the island's representative of the shipping company telephoned to say that all the boats for the day had been cancelled. No explanation was given. This event naturally provoked a considerable outcry, and not only from us. Elda managed to get the name and telephone number of the *capitano* of the shipping company in Milazzo, a town on mainland Sicily. I wish I could have understood everything that she said to him; the conversation was, shall we say, *molto piccante* and after threats of denunciation to the *Procura della Repubblica* (this, after all, is the era of *le mani pulite* or 'clean hands' movement in Italy, when even Big Brother is afraid), the captain agreed to reinstate the evening's sailing.

Thus, some three hours later than scheduled, we found ourselves once more on the *molo* where we had arrived only days earlier, bags in hand, backs to the steep island that rose so dramatically behind us, watching the fast-approaching *aliscafo* carving its way towards us from Salina.

Then, it was suddenly time to go. The *aliscafo* was tied up only temporarily to the dock, and we sensed the urgency to be away quickly. We kissed Elda good-bye, thanked her for all that she had done for us, for her generosity, kindness, and friendship. “*Caro,*” she said to me, holding my face in her hands, “You know, now when I am here on this island by myself, I shall never feel alone again, for my friend will always be with me.”

As we walked up the gangway to board that bobbing, pitching craft, the crazy old fisherman — magician or conjuror or madman — suddenly reappeared out of nowhere. He watched us closely, carefully, and inscrutably as we departed, eyeing us one by one. I paused momentarily on the gangway to gaze directly into his red-rimmed, alcohol-shot eyes that stared at me so intently, but this time found no menace or anger. Just age and sadness. I wanted to shake his hand; I wanted to thank him.

And so we left Alicudi behind us, its steep outline eventually disappearing into the black *abisso* of the night. As the hydrofoil pulled away from the island, accelerated to lift onto its plane and begin its sickening surging motion, my stomach churned and lurched, and I was suddenly overwhelmed by a hollow emptiness like the feeling after you have just been sick yet without any of the relief that follows. And my sense of failure to say to good-bye to Mom, to reach her before she left us, returned now to drown me in a sea of unbearable sadness and hopelessness and loneliness.

The sickening journey to the mainland across that angry, wine-dark sea was not without its apparent dangers as we passed through the eye of a violent electrical storm, the sky constantly lit up by great forks of lightening. I sat out on deck, drenched by the rain and spray, and watched “the quiet passage of the clouds across the moon.” Shades of darkness brought intimations of the infinity that lies beyond and for a brief moment, I felt myself *una docile fibra dell’universo*.

The next morning we awoke in Palermo to the noise and clamor of one of the craziest cities on earth. As the harsh sunlight of the city streamed into our cheap hotel room, and the heat of the city steamed up from the concrete pavements, Alicudi already seemed a million miles and years away. Yet its vision remains starkly clear and focused: an unbelievable land forged

from fire where it is impossible to live, yet where it is overwhelmingly compelling to do so; a land of passion, violent storms, and the calmer aftermath that follows; a land that exists, that survives in a fashion not unlike my mother's life. A vision, yet real nonetheless: Alicudi, the place where flowers grow on water.

Shantih shantih shantih