Chapter 1:
Enna: Sicily, from out of the Underworld

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On a map of Sicily, put your fingertip on the exact center of the island, the pivot point, the center of mass. You will have found the city of Enna. This modest and remote place is the capital of Enna Province, the highest provincial capital in Italy, soaring on a stone plateau far above the wheat fields. When clouds encircle the mesa, Enna can seem a city afloat on billows. Few tourists bother to drive up the steep road, perhaps few even bother looking up as they speed below it on the Palermo-Catania freeway. If they did glance up, they'd see its buildings as a ragged silhouette of brown façades, like extensions of the cliff itself, sprouting TV antennae like wind-blasted trees. On Enna's easternmost point, where the plateau overlooks the Plain of Catania, an outcropping of rock thrusts out into the sky like the prow of a great ship. This geographical center is also the mythological heart of Sicily. Over 2400 years ago, a temple to Demeter stood on this rock.

There is little reason to spend the night in Enna, not with Siracusa and Taormina each an hour-and-a-half drive to the east, Palermo an hour-and-a-half to the west, and Agrigento an hour south. Once, however, for reasons I've forgotten, I did stay the night, though I had brought no tour clients. In the morning, I was sitting at breakfast on the hotel's back terrace, feeling thick and grumpy. It was the only hotel in all of Enna, which was no surprise since, I had heard, it was Mafia-run and who knows what happened to the competition. Worse, it was ugly, that soul-draining architectural style best-called post-war inhuman. Subsidizing the Mafia and depressing architecture is not why I came to Sicily.

Distracted, lost in thought, I looked up suddenly, surprised I had not noticed that half of Enna spread before me, just beyond the terrace railing. The plateau of the town rose to the west, the morning sun splashing across its face. Brilliant, blinding. Cubism. Braque in Paul Klee North African colors. A silent tumble of blocks of differently shaded sunshine: golds,

pinks, ochres, yellows, and tans. Each block had window eyes in pairs, like old, weathered faces with white-laundry eyebrows. Those eyes seemed to be looking at me, silently expecting something. A bird flashed past, skimmed the terrace railing, and was gone, the only unquiet thing.

Questions hung in the air. I'd been thinking that morning about a recent comment of a tour client of mine, "We did Angkor Wat this summer, and the Alhambra, and next year we will do Machu Picchu." Often I hear the word "do" used in this way, and I always cringe. "What are you looking for?" I wanted to ask, but did not.

But forget what other people are looking for, how could I answer that question for myself? What was I looking for? Why did I come in midlife to live on my grandparents' island? I told myself that I had come to Sicily looking for the ancient Greeks. For half a millennium, Sicily was the center of *Magna Grecia*, the Greek colonial cities west of Greece, and the wealthiest, most mythically plagued region of the ancient Greek world, where an ancient story seems to have taken up residence in every spring and rocky outcropping. Here, I imagined, I might find something to ease a restless hunger, something that would make me complete. I was sure I didn't come here looking for ancestral roots or ethnic connection, at least not consciously, since my grandmother (my beloved "Grandma") rarely mentioned Sicily, and my impression was that she was happy to be out of the place. Still, I recall vividly her mumbled rosaries, her careful laces and precise hats, how solid she was at the heart of our family, how she carried herself with a sense life was old, that we are the sum of our traditions, and that family alone mattered. This way of thinking seemed mysterious to a boy inculcated with an American ethos of limitless possibilities: what I could only sense then, and only now have come to understand, is that she had been born connected to a timeless and meaningful narrative. When I arrived in Sicily, I was only barely conscious of my own very American dilemma: that I was almost dying for lack of a narrative.

Many kinds of narratives inhabit a place, but two forms especially are inclusive of ev-

eryone, even strangers to the place, because they expand beyond the personal, offering up a mirror that illuminates humanity's older patterns within each of us. These are history and myth, two human inventions that express truths deeper than humans can invent. Both of these narratives invite us to see ourselves in a bigger way, and each is equally important.

History at its best attempts to expose the patterns of how we behave. In the writing of history we rewrite what actually happened, imposing on it the templates of our own minds. For example, we arrange what we think we know of the past into coherent narrative; for the past comes alive for most people only insofar as we can weave it into story. One narrative template that many see in the written history of Sicily, and one that has empowered Sicily to change me, is the pattern of a Greek tragedy: the story of a great beauty reduced to desolation and the most advanced civilization in the ancient world degenerating into a people among the most illiterate and oppressed in Europe, into a society that preyed upon itself. Out of this despair emerged my dear Grandma, who, with a million others, fled a Sicily deeply mired in a millennium of unrelieved poverty, futility, and sadness.

The other crucial narrative is myth, the archetypal stories that expose human patterns and in that sense reveal how our instincts, human flaws, and human gifts shape our fates. Today, Sicily still springs to life in ancient myth more deeply and immediately than any place I know. And, with typical Sicilian irony, this land most alertly springs to life in mythologies of death, in stories of the Underworld. A sense of the Underworld rules Sicily. The prehistoric Sikels worshipped the *Palikè*, underworld deities, at a place where hot geysers erupted from below, and the even earlier Sicanians claimed that they themselves came from the deeps of the earth. Odysseus, in the *Odyssey*, descended to Hades to hear how much suffering he had yet to face and was reminded that man must endure whatever the gods are pleased to inflict; the water nymph Arethusa had to suffer a fearful Underworld passage before finding maturity in Sicily; and D. L. Lawrence encountered a snake, "a king in exile, / uncrowned in the underworld", that forced him to examine himself and find himself wanting. Sicily takes us repeatedly to the underworld, a sojourn in darkness that does not leave us happier, but

perhaps, like encountering Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, at best "sadder and wiser".

That cloud-borne town of Enna, where I was sitting at breakfast in that doleful hotel, is Sicily's most famous portal to the Underworld, for from here comes the timeless myth of Demeter and Persephone. If I had no other reason to be there, this story would be reason enough, perhaps reason enough for me to have come here from across the globe, On that morning, transfixed by the blinding yellowed cityscape of Enna, my energies melted away in thought, a breeze brushed my arm with cool fingers, Any breeze in Enna carries for me a lamentation, so I took the hint, got up, and climbed the steep city street to that great outcropping high above the Sicilian plains. Demeter's Rock (*Rocca di Cenere* to the Italians, who call the goddess by her Roman name, Ceres) is where the Demeter stood looking for her daughter, and it is always a great privilege to be standing there, feeling the breezes she felt, seeing what she saw. Ahead spread the full length of the Plain of Catania with its patchwork of beige squares of wheat fields, a view unchanged for two millennia. Beyond, the green fields of citrus, oranges and lemons, and in the distance I could almost glimpse a grey smudge of old Catania on the eastern sea. On my left hovered ever-present Etna, smoking, snow-draped, massive, yet hazy blue-grey in the shimmering heat. And on my right, to the south, the flat plain rose abruptly to the rim of the Hyblean Plateau, the uplands of southeast Sicily. Then, a bit further to the right, over some rolling wheat fields, lay the place where this story began, a silver glint just barely visible: Lago Pergusa.

Thousands of years ago, the myth of Demeter and Persephone occupied the heart of Greek religion, and today, in its basic elements, it remains an archetypal sacred story. Sacred texts gain authority as we repeat them, quietly shaping our understanding of life, and I find myself moved to tell this story often. So, although most people know it more or less, let me tell it again. We know best Ovid's reweaving of the myth for his ancient Roman readership (ca. AD 8). In Book Five of Metamorphoses he brings us to the site with a sure hand: *Not far from Henna's [Enna's] walls, there is a deep lake called Pergus . . . a ring of trees encircles the pool, clothing the lakeside all around, and the leaves of the trees shelter the spot from*

Phoebus' [the Sun] rays, like a screen. Their boughs afford cool shade, and the lush meadow is bright with flowers.[1]

Lago Pergusa is perfectly round and very deep and has no streams serving it, so in ancient times it was obvious to all that it was an opening to the Underworld. Today, it is Sicily's only remaining natural lake, so much has once-verdant Sicily become parched and dry. There have been a few more changes since Ovid wrote: for one, a Formula 1 racetrack now encircles the lake.

Back when the lake was beautiful, a group of teenage girls—Persephone and her friends—were gathering flowers along the shore. Yet, even back then, when there were flowers and Persephone could have wandered the shore without being run over, there still was risk of speeding vehicles. Innocent of danger, naïve Persephone dallied on the shores; *with childlike eagerness she gathered the flowers into baskets and into the folds of her gown*. Suddenly, out of the lake a black chariot arose, with Hades, King of the Underworld, bearded and terrible, at the reins. Hades snatched Persephone and raced across Sicily with greater than Formula 1 speed. As Ovid says, *such is the haste of sudden love*.

An alternative version of this moment has Gaia, Earth, planning the abduction, since Earth understood this crime not only to be fated, inevitable, but also profoundly necessary, like the "Fortunate Fall" of Adam and Eve, a coming to maturity the world had to suffer. Gaia caused narcissi to sprout up near Persephone and when the girl yanked out one of the bulbs a tiny fissure opened into a great chasm, out of which arose Hades.

As the God of the Underworld with struggling Persephone rushed across eastern Sicily, they approached a spring where lived a nymph called Cyane. Seeing her friend in dire distress, Cyane spread her arms wide to block the chariot and demanded Hades release Persephone, reminding him that no marriage is possible without the permission of the girl's mother. Hades was unimpressed. He brushed the petite nymph aside and plunged back into the Underworld right at that spot, Persephone vanishing into darkness. Cyane wept bitterly.

[1] *Metamorphoses*, Ovid, translated by Mary Innes (Penguin, 1955). All Ovid quotations are from this edition.

Ovid notes that she was as upset at Hades' disrespect of her status as proprietor of the spring (respect being a touchy point for a Sicilian) as she was distressed at the abduction of her friend.

I have visited Cyane's spring often—Fonte Ciane on the maps—just outside the city of Siracusa, and it seems too tranquil to imagine a violent event happening there. The spring nestles amid estates of orange groves and impenetrable thickets of the only wild papyrus in Europe, a gift from Egypt 2200 years ago. Languid green water bubbles up from that passage to the Underworld, frogs float in the algae-thick surface, coots swim and turtles lounge about. Yet, all this beauty only bandages a mythic wound in the fabric of Nature. Cyane wept at the rape of Persephone, so grievously that in time her tears dissolved her, and she became the water of her own spring.

Persephone's mother, Demeter, is Goddess of Grains (which in the ancient world implied all agriculture) and she can be identified on many an ancient vase as a woman of noble bearing carrying a sheaf of wheat. After a day's work making the crops to grow, Demeter stopped by Lake Pergusa to pick up her daughter. The girl was missing. No one would tell Demeter what had happened: this is Sicily after all, where a fellow could be shot in a crowded marketplace and no one see a thing.

Alone in her grief, Demeter climbed to the highest nearby vantage point—that great rock projecting eastward from Enna plateau—and scanned the horizon, but Persephone was nowhere to be seen. So Demeter, *with panic in her heart, vainly sought her daughter over all lands and over all the sea. When Aurora [Dawn] came forth, with dewy tresses, she never found the goddess resting, nor did Hesperus, the evening star. Holding in either hand a blazing pine torch kindled at Etna's fires, she bore them through the darkness of the frosty night, never relaxing her search. When kindly day had dimmed the stars, still she sought her daughter from the rising to the setting sun. She grew weary with her efforts...*

As she traveled, the goddess responsible for the success of agriculture grew ever more despondent, ever more miserable, ever more neglectful of her duties. Around the world,

crops began to fail. Finally, she returned to Sicily and happened to pass Fonte Ciane. Poor liquid Cyane could not speak; but to send Demeter a message, she floated Persephone's sash on her waters.

Demeter tore her hair and raged. With no identifiable perpetrator, she punished all Sicily. She visited the people and their cattle with plague. She broke the farmers' plows. She ordered the soil to betray the farmer's trust, so seeds planted in faith rotted without germinating. A land known for its bounty and fertility became barren and a curse to those who tilled it.

Still raging, Demeter arrived on the rocky island-peninsula that would in time be settled by Greeks and called Ortigia, the ancient heart of the city of Syracuse. There she passed a stream flowing from the rocky shore, and out of the waters arose the water nymph Aretusa. Shaking her dripping locks, the nymph said: *I flow through the Underworld and I saw your daughter. She is Queen of Hades, and sits by the God as his consort.*

The ending of the myth is well known: how outraged Demeter flew up to Olympus and demanded that Zeus intercede, how the King of the Gods, typically intimidated by strong-willed women, scurried down to Hades to speak to his black sheep of a brother, and how it was too late: Persephone had eaten food of the dead, seven pomegranate seeds (representing sexual knowledge), and could never again inhabit the world of the living. Demeter remained unconsoled and crops continued to die, so the gods brokered a compromise: forever after, Persephone must remain below as Queen of the Underworld, though in a concession true to the spirit of Sicily, she may return to visit her mom for part of each year.

And so forever after, this story has explained the seasons. As Demeter anticipates Persephone's annual return, she grows happier; Nature begins to bud and crops sprout; when her daughter arrives, spring eases into the satisfied stasis of summer. When Persephone prepares to return to her husband in the Underworld, Demeter grows despondent; plants begin to die; and Nature descends to the winter of a mother whose child is gone. This is how it works in most climate zones. In Sicily, however, summer is the year's most lifeless time, sun-scorched

and dry, so sometimes Sicilians say that summer is when Demeter mourns her daughter's absence. Here, the life-renewing rains of late autumn herald Persephone's return, and winter sees the landscape again newly green.

Most people know the Demeter/Persephone myth as an archetypal story of hope, of Nature always redeeming present suffering by delivering on its promise of joy. Similar stories of death and rebirth are central to most religions, expressing our hopes for a better tomorrow, promising rebirth, if not now, then in the afterlife. In Sicily, however, one remembers that despair inhabits the cycle, because there is a distinction to be made between what nature does naturally and joyfully and what human beings actually can stand.

As Nature takes her annual journey through the dead underworld of winter the individual plant may not survive the cycle. This does not matter to Nature, since in the spring the seeds of the dead produce new plants and bounty is restored. Nature is no respecter of individuality; the cycle of rebirth out of death happens for species or for Nature as a whole. However, rebirth on this level is of little solace to most humans. Trapped within an individual consciousness, we are cursed with the memory of what was lost, pain that does not easily heal, anxiety about the future. So the Zeus-brokered compromise leaves no one very happy: Demeter is trapped in a cycle of hope and despair; Persephone is typically portrayed in ancient Greek poetry and imagery as melancholic, condemned to live among the dead, caught in competition between husband and mother; and the farmer is cursed to struggle, anxious in every season, his ever-fruitful Eden gone forever.

Across the ancient Greek world, Demeter and Persephone worship dominated the religious calendar, with temples to these "Chthonic (Underworld) Deities" erected in most cities. Worshippers, mostly women, held numerous festivals at these temples. Evidence found at Akragas (Agrigento), and elsewhere, show that the specifically Sicilian festival of Anthesphoriae happened in the spring; virgins made flower bouquets and danced, in imitation of the Persephone's innocence before her abduction. The ending of the rains marked spring's transition to summer; the wheat came ready for harvest even as the land began to die.

The Cathagoghes Festival honored this approach to maturity. The Greeks held dramatic re-enactments of Demeter searching for her daughter; women made honey cakes shaped like vulvas and paraded them around, singing choral odes to Persephone; and free sexual license encouraged fertility in people and Earth. The precise moment of opening to sexuality, crossing the threshold to maturity, was called the Anakalypteria, the moment when new brides opened their veils ritually to their husbands, who then gave them gifts. The Anagoghes Festival celebrated Persephone's return as a mature woman to her mother. Maturity and marriage were not assumed jouyful, as seen in the solemn Theogamia rites marking, like an anniversary, the sacred marriage of Hera and Zeus.

The Thesmophoria concluded this annual cycle of events. Held in autumn across all the ancient Greek world, it honored Demeter and was strictly limited to married women, possibly reflecting much older times when women did the planting and harvesting. These rites remained secret—Aristophanes' comedy *The Women of the Thesmophoria*, shows that he knew little of what actually happened—but we can deduce some things from hints in texts and images on vases. On the first day, women processed up the hill to their local Demeter temple, where they built huts and slept on the ground. The second day was given to fasting. On the third day of the festival, pieces of bread in the shape of erect phalluses and snakes, along with many sacrificed piglets, were placed inside caves near the temples or inside a rounded altar. One such, at Akragas (Agrigento), is complete and we can touch it, circle it, and peer into its core as if it might still be for us a portal to the Underworld. Specially chosen women later took the rotted remains from the cave or altar and spread them onto farmers' fields. The Thesmophoria ended with women dancing, sacrificing, parading models of vulvas, and shouting ritual obscenities.

The most important Greek temple to Demeter in Sicily stood on that very promontory at Enna where first Demeter stood looking for her daughter, and where I stood that morning, and where I bring as many clients as I can convince to come. Thousands of religious tourists of the ancient Greek world made pilgrimages to this spot, many of them carrying doll-sized

terracotta Persephone ("Kore") or Demeter statuettes as offerings. Tens of thousands of these ceramic trinkets have been found in and around temples. They were mass-produced in ancient kilns, such as the two found next to the Demeter-Persephone temple ruins at Megara Hyblea, south of Catania. In Montagna di Marzo and Siracusa, archaeologists uncovered a stunning trove of statuettes lined up as if they were on display in a shop for people to buy. They are not fine art, to be sure, but their simplicity has a kind of dignity. The goddesses are portrayed carrying piglets or hens and they wear a wan smile, not a smile of joy but the inward knowing smile of one who understands and has come to peace with what must be. I am moved to imagine individuals carrying statuettes—and some are large busts needing to be cradled in both arms—up to that *Rocca di Cenere*, Enna's temple on the rock, all those thousands of years ago. Here were pious women and men, some traveling from as far away as Athens, seeking comfort from two goddesses who knew the same grief and loss that every human who has ever lived also knows. What redeems is the recognition that some gods also suffer the human curse; in Demeter's grief and Persephone's melancholy, as in Greek tragedy, we are comforted. The recognition that suffering is inevitable and never fair is redemption enough.

Over time, the myth of Demeter and Persephone evolved during the long centuries of Christianity into the cult of the Madonna—Mary being at once both the virginal girl (Persephone) and the mother who has lost her child (Demeter). Easter in Sicily begins in earnest in many Sicilian towns by a procession on Holy Thursday where a statue of the grieving Madonna ("Our Lady of Sorrow") follows the dead body of Christ through the streets. Events conclude on Easter Sunday when the grieving mother leads one procession, while a statue of the risen Christ leads another. I especially am moved by the ceremonies in Catenanouva and Messina, where the two processions wend through town, finally to meet in the town square, uniting mother and child. Thus is spring launched, resurrection affirmed, with Mary and Christ playing the roles of Demeter and Persephone.

Yet, Sicily has lived this myth even more directly, with the island itself as Persephone. Allegorically, Persephone's innocence is Sicily's own imagined innocence before civilization stripped and despoiled her, and Persephone's abduction is the mistreatment and impoverishment of Sicily herself. The Syracusan poet Theocritus in the early third century BCE wrote passionately about Sicily as a heavily forested, abundant land of rivers and streams. In fact, in describing Sicily as he knew it, he invented the aesthetic of the pastoral bucolic. We can thank Theocritus for Poussin, Lorrain, and rooms full of lesser sixteenth to eighteenth-century genre paintings of nymphs and shepherds on Arcadian landscapes that have wearied museum-goers for centuries. Soon after Theocritus, Sicily fell to Rome and Rome's wheat-based agricultural policy proved ruinous in the long term, environmentally and socially. In time, Sicily's green, pastoral beauty became a bony, stark beauty. More often than not over the next two thousand years, Sicily repeatedly was abducted by foreign powers who abused and exploited her, leaving her ever further from grace.

She not only fell from grace, but from glory as well. Until recent generations, education in the Western tradition stood on a foundation of classical history, myth, and literature, and Sicily received considerable attention because she stood at the center of the tradition, through her importance in history and myth, and through her tragic stature. Her example had long been seen in the Western tradition as a tragic archetype, a story that served our need for redemption through the catharsis of heartbreak and catastrophe, an archetype out of the Western lineage, one both epic and personal.

In Greek tragedy, the protagonist is us; he or she is brought to grief by a fault inherent in being human. Also, the protagonist always falls from a great height, to make terribly clear that suffering is no respecter of persons. When Goethe said that Sicily was "the key to everything" he meant that Sicily was the key to understanding Italy and Italy was the key to understanding Western Civilization. Specifically, he was referring to two periods when Sicily stood on a great height, her two periods of glory—the ancient Greek and the medieval

Norman—a millennium apart, when she was cultured, rich, and carried the torch of Western Civilization. So, twice Sicily suffered a tragic Fall, twice she suffered a golden age squandered through the familiar human curses of shortsightedness, solipsism, and greed. Now, Sicily grieves in a melancholy language of ruins that have lost their context, faded frescoes whose spiritual life has fled, a literary tradition of sadness or cynicism, abandoned estates, festivals that emphasize death, and a sense of being a wallflower, that her true worth is unrecognized by a modern Western world gorging on entertainments.

Standing on Demeter's Rock that day, looking out over the dry hot Plain of Catania and asking myself, "What is it that I am seeking in Sicily?" I remembered who I was in my first half-century, the self-images I tried to live by. My urge to come to Sicily was somehow linked to knowing that, in middle age, an old self was dying. Fortunately, however, I had only the vaguest notion of what I needed, so the island could work her magic without my blundering attempts to mine her for lessons. What happened to me in this prickly place was powerful enough to transform me into a professor of Sicilian history, something in my remotest dreams I could never have predicted: over the course of years, Sicily slowly taught me to listen to the deep earth tones of loss and has pulled me gently into her narratives.

I now feel how inescapably we are characters in history, acting within a script very much larger than our will can direct. In Sicily, I've begun to see my own story merging into the great human parade, a parade of both grandeur and disgrace, that trekked across this island. Also, I have come to recognize how thoroughly the classical allegories describe our lives, how inescapably we are characters in the myths, whether we are paying attention or not. Of course, both these points are obvious to many people, and one might come to understand the first by reading history and the second by reading the myths as Jungian archetypes or narrative allegories.

However, these understandings have become engraved in my soul only because I live here, in a place where the past is present and assumed to be prologue. The land can be a

mentor most powerfully in person, telling her myth and history on the sites where legend or archaeology placed them. This is true for the oft-told stories at UNESCO World Heritage sites, but, equally true far from the tourist throng, in local place-names, in nature's local habits and gestures, in the many-layered slowly-evolved towns, in the marriage of limestone architecture and landform; and in the way the small, human-scale, terraced valleys and fields seem to hold quietly our fevered strivings.

The more I have learned how to listen, the more the land itself works on me, deeply, below conscious understanding, illuminating a dimension of humanity that I had not previously valued. My American obsession with individuality has slowly been weathered, and I feel myself merging with the land, like a once-distinct feature of a limestone statue or quarry edge merging into the larger landscape over time. I feel less unique, which is a way of coming home. Part of my rescue is to feel the honor (always provisional) of living with her, a great queen fallen, and the renewed purpose I have found in being recruited into her service.

My life's work now is to awaken hundreds of tourists and students every year to Sicily's importance, if at all possible doing so directly on the land itself: helping them listen to the silent grace of the Temple of Segesta, the whispering Sikel caves of Pantalica, the shattering beauty of the Norman Palatine Chapel, the deafening grumpiness of Etna. I mean that, in a way I have taken Sicily as my Persephone, one whom I must rescue from abduction. Of course, boisterous, secretive, self-contradictory proud contemporary Sicily will be what she will, regardless of me. Rather, I'm trying to rescue historical and mythical Sicily for Americans, those who uprooted themselves from a tradition by emigrating. It is for them, and through them, that I want to bring Sicily out of the underworld and closer to the light, by reminding them what was obvious to previous generations: that for those of us living in the Western World Sicily's myths, history, and tragedy are our own.

It's an uphill struggle out of Sicily's underworld of neglect and disrespect and even as

I toil upwards, Sicily is looking back over her shoulder. Her greatest abductor in recent centuries is herself: her own comfortable pessimism, her default sense of futility and self-defeat, and her (perhaps well-earned) distrust of outsiders. When my tour clients stop being too polite to comment on the general shoddiness of the environment, the lack of civic pride, the corruption of politics, and the Mafia, I wake from my romantic haze to see this stubborn island again petulantly shrugging off redemption, dismissive of our love and praise, scorning our need for her.

But this is as it must be. Demeter won only a partial redemption of her daughter, reminding us that there is no better offer in this life. When Sicily insists on tramping back towards the underworld, with equal Sicilian stubbornness I will keep tramping down to fetch her.

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