

NO GOOD DEED

Edmund (Mike) Keeley died last February 23rd.

I have to admit that I feel guilty for not staying in touch with him these past few years, especially now that I know a friend of a friend had spoken with him by phone on the 22nd, and he told her that he was in the hospital, about to die. And another friend wrote that he and his wife had tried to visit Mike several weeks earlier, but because of Covid they had to settle for a phone call. On the phone Mike said that he was lonely. He died at 94.

I first knew him as Edmund Keeley, the ground-breaking translator of modern Greek literature. After I traveled to Greece in the late '70s, it was his translations of Cavafy, Seferis, and other Greek poets that I turned to, works that so inspired me as a young writer that, in 1980, I pulled up roots and transplanted myself to this country. *Just for a while*, I was saying to myself back then.

I got to know him as Mike here in Greece. When he'd come for his annual visit, we'd meet at Filipou's in Kolonaki for lunch or at his apartment on Loukianou.

I often felt small, like a boy, in his presence. Barrel-chested, with a hearty laugh—that's how I remember him when we first became friends.

A couple times he invited me to visit him and his wife Mary on Aegina. I remember drinking wine with them one July dusk on the patio of their island home. I was

waxing enthusiastic about a poet I'd recently discovered, Takis Sinopoulos, when Mary leaned over to Mike and said, in the sweetest of voices, "He could be our son."

In 2002, he recommended me for a fellowship in Princeton's Hellenic Studies Program. I saw him and Mary frequently the two months I was there, usually in their house on Littlebrook Road. One evening a well-known Greek poet had joined us. We were sitting in the living room, half its walls lined with books, talking about Yiannis Ritsos. The other guest refused to concede that Ritsos was a good poet. Mike got up, took down a hardback from a nearby shelf and read us "Penelope's Despair," first in Greek, then in English, then made a superb argument for the brilliance of that poem and Ritsos' work in general.

Later, when I became dean of the American Farm School's university program, Mike and I added a new dimension to our relationship. As a member of the Farm School's board, he was an important adviser to me. When he came to the school for its annual board meetings, we would get together in Cincinnati Hall, the campus visitors' lodge, sitting in the big living room with its mix of Greek and Midwestern decor, including a big throw-pillow on the couch with an embroidered message, "No good deed goes unpunished."

Over wine and snacks we'd discuss poetry and the state of affairs at the Farm School. I loved to get him to talk about his childhood years living at the School in the 1930s; then he'd usually move on to the war years in Greece, the time of the Junta and more recent historical events in this country he always held close to his heart.

The last time I saw Mike was in 2015, a few years after Mary had died and he had moved into an assisted-living facility in Princeton. Though he had stepped down from the board, he still made regular visits to the Farm School, staying as always in Cincinnati Hall. This time he came with Anita, his new companion, also a resident of that facility. Sitting yet again next to that big pillow with its embroidered adage, he asked me if I would do them a favor.

It seems that they were ready to leave for a trip to Halkidiki, and were having trouble adjusting the rental car's steering wheel. I was glad to help, whatever the punishment, so wound up kneeling on the gritty pavement just outside Cincinnati Hall, my head twisted up under the steering column, fiddling with various knobs, trying to figure out which one would enable me to raise that column a bit and so accommodate Mike's hefty body. All the while, he was standing beside me, telling his inamorata how often he used to play tennis, well into his 70s, and bemoaning the fact that now, in his eighties, he can't even get into a rented car.

But soon they were on their way.

Thinking about it now, I guess that was my punishment: losing touch with my friend because I preferred remembering him as he was that last time I saw him. Driving off with his new companion, two lovers exploring Greece.

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