

*The Ninth
Acolyte Reader*



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Printed in The Netherlands by Krips Repro, Meppel

First Edition published October, 1993

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Cover design and painting by Mario de Graaf

The Acolyte Press

P. O. Box 12731

1100 AS Amsterdam

The Netherlands

CIP-GEGEVENS KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK, DEN HAAG

Acolyte

The Ninth Acolyte Reader / [ed. Frank Torey]. -

Amsterdam: The Acolyte Press

ISBN 90-6971-048-X

Trefw.: homoseksualiteit; mannen / verhalen ;

oorspronkelijk - Engels.

Sand and Honey

by Christopher Monteriano

[Translated from the Italian by Brian Williams]

He's coming towards me. Passing his hand through his wet hair, pushing it back from his forehead and thus exposing his penetrating gaze even more clearly. No one on the beach is looking at him, except me, and that's astonishing: to me he always seems like an apparition, and I adore while I watch. His body doesn't have any outstanding feature; it's simply perfect. Hairless, the skin lightly browned by this early summer sun, the torso that slims down to the hips, the contours of the muscles standing out strongly on the legs.

He throws himself back into the flow of the waves, putting up a lazy resistance with his legs, which flail up and down in the water. Suddenly he begins to swim, with wide swings of the arms, creating foam, and the child playing in the water suddenly turns into the boy full of strength and courage, challenging the waves, straining every muscle. His head re-emerges from the water, the eyes closed, the mouth open, his body glistening as the water cascades from it as from a smooth rock.

Now he's sleeping here beside me, stretched out on his towel. I look at the supple lines of the back, all those small muscles which divide at the center and flow into the lovely channel which I long to caress with my tongue, slowly, gently, right to the end....

The beach at Elaphonisos is splendid; one can walk far out to sea with the water only to one's knees, and stumble on tiny islands of rock and sand. We arrive here in my car, from Khania, not far from which I have rented a house; I've been there for more than a week already, but this is Crete: the sense of time has imperceptibly disappeared and seems to be nothing more than an imposed pattern, outside reality. I left Rome to take a lone holiday, leaving behind friends and concerns to come to this little house, rented from one of the locals. The idea was suggested to me by a friend who tried it last year. To tell the truth, I wasn't very keen on the idea when I was on the verge of leaving and everything was arranged, but then it did seem to me that a few weeks away from my world wouldn't do any harm.

At the airport I was met by a girl from the agency, so odd-looking as to be comical, with a big nose and two enormous round eyes like an owl, deep green in color. She was clothed in an absurd green dress with blue flowers. And as often happens with such people, she turned out to be very likeable and also quite intelligent. Her name was Virginia. During the journey up to the village, once she had learned that I taught philosophy, she was determined to give me a full prospectus of all her views on life and death, backed up by a surprisingly extensive knowledge of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche.

The first thing that struck me about the countryside, as my mind detached itself from her chatter, was its aridity – those hills covered with rocks and dust, dotted with bushes bright with violet flowers, and here and there with olive-trees. But as we climbed, the land became less austere, and began to merge into an intense green, with low-growing trees and perfumed flowers. The racket made by the crickets was overwhelming and incessant, contrasting with the peace of the place itself. As I got out of the car, I began at once to feel that I would go mad with all the chirruping.

"It's very isolated here; you'll be really undisturbed," the girl said.

"So I see."

"The only company you'll have will be the goats."

"Wonderful!" I answered – not without a touch of irony, though the solitude already invited me to its realm.

In the days that followed, I relaxed, reading and writing, watching the world go by under the luminous sky. I only left the house to go down to the village taverna for lunch and dinner, then climbed back up to my den, hardly speaking to anyone. There was no TV, no telephone. On the fourth day I went to the beach, which wasn't far away; however, this was enough to reduce the degree to which I was shut away from the world. That sea of deep green, which laps gently against the mountains; a calm, unspoilt sea with no hotels, or tourists or frenetic activity... When I went back to the taverna in the evening, it was in a different frame of mind.

I was always served by the same boy, whose name was Yannis; he was the only one who knew some English, having spent a couple of years when he was younger with some relations who had emigrated to London. He made an impression on me even on the first evening, with his ready smile, a little reserved – a very common smile in this part of the world, with something gentle and introverted about it, which lights up the eyes – and Yannis' eyes in particular seemed to have a kind of amber light about them. I was struck by his hair, fair with a tinge of red, carelessly combed and very boyish. His body was neat and its lines were clearly visible through his

clothes, which must have been meant for him when he was younger; instead of hiding, they tended to accentuate certain parts of his body: the well-rounded buttocks, the curve of a thigh, the slim chest, full even so of youthful energy. He must have been thirteen or fourteen. He seemed to be rather a shy boy, and well brought up; he made a good impression on me when, handing me the little jug of the local retsina, he said that he had made it himself. He was obviously very proud of this when he told me, and seemed to be impatient for me to drink it. At the end of the meal, there was not a drop left.

Perhaps flattered by my appreciation of his wine, or perhaps just pleased to speak some English with a foreign visitor, he began talking to me quite a lot after that first evening, telling me about his family, his brothers who had gone to work abroad, the difficulty of envisaging any kind of a future for himself. At this point he lowered his eyes, and although he went on smiling as before, he seemed to want to tell me something with that look: perhaps to indicate a malaise which seemed to have no way of escape. His parents were very poor, in fact, and the taverna brought in very little; it was frequented almost exclusively by locals, and Yannis was in any case too young yet to do more than lay the tables, carry the wine and plates – work which in Greece is done by the young members of the family and never paid. So it was that I did something which I don't usually do: I gave him a sizable tip when his parents weren't looking; he thanked me with his usual grave courtesy, but I saw that he was a little unwilling to take the money, and only did so because it was so obviously useful.

The evening before last, when I finished my dinner rather later than usual, the lights of the taverna were already out, and Yannis' parents were already clearing up in the kitchen, the boy came and sat opposite me and started to cry. Not noisily, but with two streams of copious tears running down his cheeks, and little shudders shaking his whole body. Once he had calmed down, he told me that his parents wanted to send him back to London to his relations, to act as a dishwasher in their restaurant or something of the kind. The idea of grinding work in a big city depressed him tremendously.

"My parents don't care about me," he said, but then gave a smile which suddenly lit up his whole face. At that point I realized all at once that I had hardly been listening to what he had been saying, for I had been for the whole time experiencing a new and pleasing sentiment. Previously, the boy had just inspired me with a friendly feeling mixed with affection, and a touch of the erotic, but it could find no other outlet than the money which would, after all, be very useful to him. Now I realized that things were beginning to change. What I was experiencing suddenly was love; love for the boy had

overtaken me unawares, and I was carried away by it, with a sudden desire to help him and take him away with me, and to express the emotion I felt.

"Yannis," I said, "why don't you come with me to Elaphonisos, to the beach, tomorrow?"

"But it's such a long way," he said, hesitantly. "I'll have to ask my parents. Come by the taverna tomorrow morning."

"Fine – at nine o'clock?"

He nodded assent, then hurried off to the kitchen.

And now, here we are. The sea is like a slab of alabaster, there are not many people; the sun has wrapped us in its warmth and the mountains protect us. And I love him. He's still sleeping, and I don't dare to wake him. His back moves slightly with his breathing, his head is resting on one side on his folded arm; his mouth is slightly open, and his eyes seem almost to be moving.

Who knows what he is dreaming about... I hardly have time to think about it, and he wakes up.

The afternoon sun is hot, and covers everything like a veil. The bedroom in the cottage is bare and cool; every now and then the goats can be heard, giving their strange bleat. I am cradling him in my arms; I fill my hands with the sensual curves of his shoulders. He is feigning sleep, but half-smiling with his child's lips. I can't resist the temptation to place a discreet soft kiss on his fresh lips. Suddenly I change position so that I can look at his body, so flexible and yet at the same time so irregular, a body still in the process of formation. This is the reason that everything seems so precious, every moment. I may never see him again, but I will know that I have witnessed a miracle. I don't feel the sense of restraint any more, and I take his sex, still soft but full of young life, in my mouth and suck gently on it, and hear the moans of pleasure which increase as it gradually hardens. My mouth is full; I can hardly contain him, I seem to be suffocating, so I withdraw slowly, and begin instead to lick the tip and tentatively pry at the tiny opening with my tongue. Then he takes my head in his hands, and pushes me between his legs so that I bury my lips in his warm balls, and he holds me there with his strong young thighs. He lifts his legs a little and I move on down, down, with my tongue, my mouth, my whole face, breathing in the sweaty, musky, boyish scent of him. His pleasure and mine both reach a peak; I can feel his muscles distend and then tighten again, like the waves of the sea. I take his sex with my hand again, and quickly bring him on to come against my face; great drops spurt intermittently, as hot as sand, as

sweet as honey.

July has arrived, bringing with it the powerful heat of the summer. The heat-haze conceals the mountains and the day is like a long afternoon; only the evening brings a little relief as I eat at the taverna, outside beside the sprightly little stream which rushes below amid the tree-trunks and the leafy branches. The perfume from the resin of the nearby pinewood is all-pervading, and the lightest of breezes brushes my cheek and arms like the touch of silk. Even so, the visitors are still few. Some casual tourists ought to be here by now; they sometimes come to eat in the cool of this glade with the water rushing past, animated and invisible. But apart from me there are only the old drinkers. Because of this, the choice of food is very limited and repetitive; Yannis walks towards me carrying a tray almost bigger than he is, but the suppleness of his body enables him to bear it swiftly without upsetting it

"I'm sorry I can't talk much, but, you know, last time my mother told me off because I spent too much time chattering."

"Never mind, tomorrow you're coming to me anyway, aren't you?"

His face clouded over.

"My mother..."

"Never mind about your mother. What's the problem now? She's always let you come so far."

"But she didn't know I was coming to your place. Yesterday an old woman who lives near you saw me and told her."

"Oh... That's different, then..."

I tried to keep calm, but in fact I was frozen to the spot.

"Dear boy, I was thinking of taking you for a ride tomorrow afternoon."

His mother's voice called, and he ran off as quickly as he had come. My heart missed a beat. The sound of the water seemed to become more sinister.

The next day, the girl from the rental agency came to visit me. She wanted to know how things were going, and if there were any problems. She began to chatter, but I didn't listen to what she was saying, until she suddenly began behaving rather oddly, fixing me with a strange gaze and entering into intimate matters, such as the fact that she had never succeeded in finding a man who suited her, or that she was perhaps looking for someone more mature, someone with whom she could talk about philosophy...! Dear God, I thought, and hurried her off rather brusquely, thinking only about Yannis and the question of whether I should go down to the taverna this evening or not. In the end, I decided not to go.

Yannis, I thought, why can't I have you to myself? Why do I have to stay here alone, thinking about your body, the feel of you, the scent of you, your voice? You seem to be smiling at me from a distance to which I can't reconcile myself.

I look at my reflection in the mirror. I see a tired face; all the signs of my fifty years are there. I can't lose any more time, I thought. I know that in a way you do love me. I must take you away with me; take you to Italy; you must live there with me, in my house, be there every day. I'll give you all the freedom you need; I'll watch you grow; I'll admire the miracle of your body in silence, like a witness to an event. This is a pure love, full, made up of the senses and the spirit, of emotion and happiness.

After a feverish night, I went almost without thinking to the taverna at lunchtime. Only his mother was there; she was very polite and friendly towards me and didn't seem either surprised or put out to see me at such an unaccustomed hour. But it's always hard to know what is going through the mind of a Greek; they rarely allow you to see more than a smile. As we talked about this and that, I asked her casually where Yannis was. She said that he had gone to a neighboring village to visit his grandmother. I knew too little Greek to be able to carry the conversation much further, and in fact it was she who brought it to a close, telling me that she would tell Yannis to call in and say hello to me, as I'd asked about him. I was quite astounded for a moment, but she carried away the dishes without any sign of uneasiness. Then I recalled that in Crete courtesy counts before everything, and that it would be normal enough to go and pay a visit to someone, even if the person was not a friend or close acquaintance. Even so, did it seem quite normal to Yannis' mother that he should come and pay a visit to *me*? In that case, she can't have realized anything – but didn't that imply that she was completely stupid, which she certainly wasn't? A mother acting as a procuress? Absurd. But there must be something behind it. I would find out later in the afternoon.

He called to me from a long way off, as if to announce his arrival. I was in the cool bedroom, reading a book. I came out and he appeared to me in the vibrant light of the afternoon. He had been running; I sat him down in the plain little sitting room and gave him an orangeade to drink.

"My mother told me you came to the taverna at lunchtime."

"I did – and of course it was because I was looking for you. I was stupid to ask for you; I should have kept it to myself."

"It doesn't matter. I told my mother I was coming to you so that you could give me some practice in English."

"And your mother believed that cock-and-bull story?"

"Not just that: she wants me to come to you for proper English lessons! She says it's very important for me."

I looked at him with a mixture of sympathy and tenderness.

"So that you can go to London?"

"Yes, because of that..."

His face darkened, but at the same moment we were both seized with laughter at the wry trick which destiny had played in making me accomplice to our future separation. Perhaps behind all this, his mother had a quite specific scheme, which would allow me to have Yannis to myself for a time, but only to prepare him for his departure.

I am writing these last pages in Rome. What happened in Greece comes back to me in the memory of a sky which was even excessively blue, of a white house with blue shutters, of natural surroundings which were austere and calm. At the heart of all these images there is a boy with a shy smile, and I still tremble a little at the sight of his figure.

I am trying to remember...

Yannis' departure, which I knew could not be long delayed, made me feel melancholy and anxious. At the same time there was my own departure, which I couldn't put off because the house had already been booked by other people for the day after my lease on it ended. I saw him again on a windless afternoon. He didn't give me warning. He came for one of those "English lessons", with a great smile on his face.

"Why are you so sad?" he asked me. "We're together, aren't we?"

I gave him a brief kiss on the cheek.

"I teach in a university. I'm not a youngster like you. I can't think of tomorrow as a sort of ray of light waiting for me, far away from my thoughts."

He seemed a bit downcast at these words, and I drew him to me and shared a long kiss with him, taking his head in my hands, lingering on his mouth, with his soft, still slightly reluctant lip between mine. I laid him out on the table and slid down his shorts; his white nakedness lay there amid the plane trees and jasmine and all the flowers of the garden. His sex, from its original tender smallness, grew and swelled, taking new size and form and throbbing with his heart, until it seemed to offer itself without shame to pleasure. Yannis shielded it with a hand.

"They may see us," he said, trying unsuccessfully to calm down his excitement.

"At this time of day they're all asleep."

And I pressed him close to suffocation with a long, uninterrupted kiss, from which we finally broke away, almost anxiously, startled by the force of our mutual desire.

Afterwards we went to lie on the bed and rest, but were quite unable to sleep. We talked and talked, about ourselves, I from my side of the bed and he from his, holding hands, caressing, twining our fingers.

"How marvelous it would be if you could come to Rome with me," I said.

His grip tightened on my hand; my own was tighter still.

"I want to come with you so much, you know that. But I can't even begin to discuss it with my parents."

In the semi-darkness I saw a tear form and run down one cheek. I took him in my arms and held him close. "I love you," I murmured.

The last days dragged past in exhausted fashion. I had no more desire to go touring. I'd already seen the most important sites in Crete and all that was left was to wait for my departure with resignation. Yannis was behaving more and more strangely; he came regularly at the time for his "English lessons", but then I only saw him fleetingly when I went down to the village, and in the taverna it was only his mother who served me now. I'd got used to exchanging a few words with her on the weather and family matters. One evening I mentioned Yannis' departure for London, and she shook her head and looked at me rather suspiciously, as if I were making fun of her. I repeated what I had said in case she simply hadn't understood.

"But what do you mean?" she asked. "That's just some tale that Yannis has been telling you. I'll have something to say to him when he comes back."

She cleared the table in haste and left me speechless, with a bewildered and stupid expression on my face.

So the little bastard lied, I thought, just so that he wouldn't be able to come with me! As if I would have forced him! He could easily just have said no, and that would have been enough.

But then his tears came back to mind, and his real distress when he realized I was about to leave. I no longer knew what to think; I was seized with a moment of real anger, and yet at the same time I really understood: he didn't want to cause me suffering; he invented that excuse, with a sensitivity unusual in a boy of that age. I again saw in my mind's eye his dark eyes, a little sad, and I was brought to the verge of tears by the thought that in fact he probably simply didn't love me.

I was alone now; it was late. The stream flowed on, invisible in the night, and all around the darkness was intense. It created a void filled by

nocturnal presences. And I, once again, was alone.

The sky is blindingly blue now, over the roofs of Rome. The odd gull gives a mournful cry. Yannis is in the bedroom, sleeping, and I am here on the balcony recalling the incredible events of the last days in Crete. Here on the little table I have the notes I scribbled down when we were at the sea, or in bed in my little house. I still have vividly in mind my feelings, my sadness, my foreigner's lack of understanding. And we have only just got back. All that is left me now is to tell the last bit of the story.

I saw him the morning after, a few days before my departure. I didn't go in search of him; in fact I preferred not to see him, so that I wouldn't have to force the truth out of him, or witness him trying to keep up the lies he had told me. It was he who came, earlier than usual, fresh in the morning air. He was rather inhibited; clearly his mother had said something to him, or perhaps even given him a real telling off. He was standing there, near the scented jasmine bush, and I was sitting writing a letter. He kissed me in greeting and I drew him close and fondled his hair.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

"But what for? You did what you did so that I wouldn't be upset. But I wasn't insisting that you should come with me to Rome at all costs. I know you have your family here, and you're still so young... You can come to Rome when you're older."

I felt that he wanted to tell me something but couldn't find the words.

"Well, the truth is," he said at last, "that she made me tell her everything...."

I raised my eyes to heaven, and he grinned.

"Well, no, not *everything*. Only that you had asked me if I wanted to come to Rome with you, and that was the reason I invented that lie, because I knew she would have said no. But then, because I started to cry, she put her arms round me and said I could tell her everything, and that I mustn't be afraid of anything. And in the end she said, "If you want to go to Rome you can go. You'll be provided for, and you'll surely be better off than you are here."

There's no need for me to describe the joy I felt at that moment, which has stayed with me all the time till now like some enchanted piece of music. The main thing is that he's here with me. I'm going to devote myself to him totally; he'll soon forget the places where he grew up, where he was just a burden to a family which couldn't maintain him. Before leaving, I gave his family a sizable sum of money. Perhaps it was a twinge of conscience that made me do this, or perhaps I needed a symbolic act which would

somehow make him more "mine". But now nostalgia for those places is coming back to me; the droning of the crickets, the bare stones, the sea transparent like a plate of glass, the dramatic, isolated monasteries, and the sun which when it fell below the horizon launched a great scattering of stars into the sky to point out the way to us.