

from Dancing with Zorba

I was a *Grekoophilis* long before I knew there was a word to describe my love of Greece. It began with the intrigue and passion acted out on a television drama about an English couple running a bar on a Greek Island that had coloured my lonely evenings in the farmhouse. The Greek character would exude unrequited lust for the female lead. I then retired to an empty bed and imagined sunshine, ouzo and melancholy Mediterranean men with coal-black eyes and lush moustaches. I devoured all of the books of Charmian Clift, the Australian writer who had lived in Greece in the fifties. Her stories of an exotic culture intrigued me as I wept and guffawed at the stories of her Greek friendships and experiences.

I found *Zorba the Greek*, by Nikos Kazantzakis, at the library and fell in love with the hilarious catastrophes and Zorba, the man. I walked a Greek village in my daydreams and lusted after the film star Anthony Quinn who played Zorba in the movie. He flirted with me in my dreams and I would sometimes ask him how he would have handled my problems.

No one lays a hand on the women I love and I love every woman, he might have said.

I imagined Zorba standing tall and protecting me from my husband. I kept my Greek fantasies to myself. In hindsight, it was for the best. No one knew I would one day seek refuge there ...

The second story is about Australian-Liz. (God ... I hope no one gets to read this journal!) She's been slowly working her way through the village men since she arrived four weeks ago.

Her seduction rate is impressive.

She visited yesterday morning, and looked tired and hung-over. Her swagger was less obvious and I was taken aback when she told me that she needed some advice. She's not the type to ask for support. She looked terrible, even ill, but I decided she'd probably been burning candles at all ends.

Once we'd settled over a cup of coffee, she asked me if I'd seen her at all the previous night. I told her we hadn't met up with each other.

"The problem is, I woke this morning in my own bed, absolutely starkers. I can't find my clothes, handbag, shoes or watch."

Liz lives alone, so there was no one else to witness what might have happened. Her lovers were definitely not invited into her inner sanctum.

"It's extraordinary," she went on. "I've absolutely no memory of any of it at all. I've had the odd blank moment in the past, but last night is a complete mystery. I know I went out. I remember what I wore. I know I danced at the Adonis Disco. But that's it. Where the hell are my clothes?"

"I have a feeling I've really done something bad this time, an ominous cloud of guilt is hovering."

We decided that I'd go down to the village to see what I could find out. Liz, in the meantime, would camp at the villa until I returned.

The story, as I pieced it together, goes:

It was two in the morning, the very best time, when all the tourists are tucked up in their beds and the locals can gather quietly for a final

nightcap on the beachfront at the Kanaris Musikal Bar. Australian-Liz, I was told, was in full swing, moving from table to table, a drink here, an overfamiliar pat on the crotch there, as is her wont and what the village boys had come to expect. Suddenly she started to weep and spoke of a friend who'd drowned in the river Seine. She was fired up on ouzo and inconsolable, despite any kindly attempts to calm her. Then she strode to the end of the pier, discarded her clothes and belly flopped into the sea between the fishing boats.

Several men, including the Petros-Polizie, jumped in to save her. Liz cursed her rescuers, the village, all men in general and announced she wished to drown.

The policeman grabbed a handful of her streaming hair, she delivered him a punch and he sank below the waves. Two men rescued him, while others overpowered Liz and dragged her back onto the pier like a beached whale. She'd passed out, her stupendous pendulous breasts silenced the crowd in awe, then with great encouragement from onlookers several men hefted her up onto their shoulders and carried her triumphantly through the village to her rooms at the far end of Valtos Parade. Then they put her to bed and carefully tucked her in.

Drossos, our agent, told me he was very angry. One of his nephews had helped save Liz, he told me, and the boy's watch had stopped forever at 2.42 a.m.

"She must leave our village NOW ... Enough! ... *Arketa!*" he roared.

Australian-Liz's clothes, shoes and watch were in a neat pile at the police station, which was manned by a Petros-Polizei, sporting a yellow bruise on his left cheek.

“Get her out of my village,” he growled as I thanked him profusely, grabbed the clothes and dashed back to the villa.

When I nervously told her it was time for Australian-Liz to leave, her eyes blackened with anger.

“You must be mistaken,” she said haughtily. “Let them tell me to go — to my face.”

She visited Drossos first. She arrogantly demanded an explanation as to his behaviour. I hovered, waiting for the explosion, but Drossos seemed to wilt at her presence and cowered behind his counter.

“No, no, Liz *manari* — friend. It’s not as bad as that. We understand. Please stay,” he mewled. She handed over her watch, to be passed on to his nephew as a thank-you present. All was forgiven. I was suitably astounded.

Then we visited the police station.

“Do you really want me to leave?” she demanded, giving the bruised policeman an unblinking stare.

Petros-Polizei sniggered and put his hand protectively to his purple and yellow face.

“Do you want to go?” he asked hopefully.

“No, I don’t,” she said firmly. “And thank you for saving my life. You are a hero.” She leant over the counter and kissed his bruised cheek. The Polizei’s chest swelled out with pride and embarrassment and that was that.

After midnight she prowled the Kanaris Musikal Bar. At 2 a.m. she ordered a round of ouzo for everyone, raised her glass and offered a toast.

“*Yamas* — for us, *Ee sigēa* — to life.”

“*Yassou malista* — you are very welcome Australian-Liz,” chorused our friends enthusiastically.

Then kataleveni, alithia — I understand nothing.

Thitsa-Via, who the Villa Girls had called aunt, had laughed with delight and slapped me hard on the back.

“What is this love you talk about?” she’d snorted in response to my cynical remark.

“You foreign girls, you’re so funny with your demands. No one man can give you all the love a woman needs.”

Thitsa-Via had played an important role when I’d first arrived in Greece. She and her Kostas owned the Villa Maria. Via was different from the other local women, who mostly rebuffed us seasonal imports and our guests. She had recently returned from six years working in Germany, spoke some English, fluent German and had experienced freedoms her village sisters would never know.

The love between men and women — *eros* — was a fleeting moment of lust and doomed to fade, while *agape* — love — Thitsa-Via explained, as we sat under the tree in the plaka, was something between God and you, what a mother felt for her sons, how sisters thought of each other and their cousins and best friends. I was a best friend and Thitsa-Via paraded my special status by linking arms when we strolled through the village. My inhibited upbringing flinched at first, but I grew to enjoy the cosy affection of our arm-in-arm display. Thitsa-Via told me that all you needed from a man was his good family name, his strong

back or good brain to bring in the money, his protection, his desire for you and his ability to make big fat babies. Our conversations deepened as we became firmer friends. Then one day I commented on what I considered to be the errant behaviour of village husbands. They were out every night at the same table in their favourite taverna or café, I said. Talking, shouting, arguing, sometimes in anger, moustaches twitching. Their legs jumped in unison. Swinging their *komboloi*, watching the foreign girls, but scowling if caught. Drinking copious cups of coffee interspersed by a small glass of ouzo or two. Picking their teeth and spitting to keep the devil at bay.

Thitsa-Via smiled.

“Po, po, po – what else should they do?” she cackled, displaying expensive gold fillings in her teeth. “We women don’t want them at home. We send them out. They return to sleep, to make love and to eat.”

“Don’t you want to be with Kostas, Thitsa-Via? Don’t you want to talk to your husband?”

“How can they talk of things that matter? They are only men.”

I decided that Greece was a matriarchal society. Men were allowed to think they ran the village, the country, the world, but it was the women who owned the family home and the daughters who inherited it. If there were too many daughters, their brothers must buy them a home before they themselves could marry. If a man left his wife, he walked away with only his suitcase. The inheritances, the money, the land, the children stayed in the firm hands of strong Greek women. That is, at least, when a Greek married a Greek. Foreign wives had little status. The Greeks protected their property, so should a *xenis* — foreign woman — be able to purchase a home or land, her Greek partner (without

contributing a drachma), owned 51 per cent of the value of the home. If the partner were her husband and a divorce occurred, both the home and the children remained in Greek custody. I asked Thitsa-Via about the married men that flirted with tourists, including Kostas, her very own husband. It would have disturbed me, if he were my man, I'd said.

"If Kostas went with a tourist, I'd be very angry, but I'd forgive him. If he went with a Greek woman, I'd kill him," she said, drawing her hand threateningly across her throat. "Anyway, I'm safe with Kostas. He knows you would tell me if he looked at a foreign woman."

She smiled.

"That's what women do for each other, *koumbara*."

Then she playfully punched me as a reminder of my friendship and its responsibilities. Her frequent nudges, pushes, hugs and wet cheek-kisses were performed with great enthusiasm and verve. I'd learnt to brace myself most of the time, but sometimes I'd stagger under these affectionate onslaughts, much to the amusement of my hearty friend.

I thought of Kostas and Thitsa-Via now as I toiled upwards towards the hotel glowing against the purple-ink mountain and sky. I hoped they still laughed and fought and that Kostas had resisted the call of summer sirens' enticements in the last decade since Zoe — *koumbara* — the godmother, keeper of romance and protector of the village women, had fled.

Ten years later, I left the well-lit hotel grounds, plunged into the ink-black darkness and walked towards the twinkling lights of the port and

tavernas. I felt free of guilt, but I also longed to recapture the illicitness, to invoke the desire of past walks along this road. My body recalled the sexual ache, the wanting. I thought of Yannis-Ski and those yearning days and nights when I wondered if I could be a little in love. To get the same feeling of bliss today, I thought, I'd need to consume two blocks of chocolate. I know now that those intense feelings for my lover were lust, not love. Lust was a more accurate description of our sexual activities back then, but we had to believe that love lurked somewhere to brush away any lingering moral objections. A flush rose from my belly to my neck and settled on my cheeks, as I remembered that first morning, post-coitus and the many other furtive mornings, when I slunk away from Yannis-Ski's loving arms, keen to return to my own bed before the villa guests awoke.

That morning, I had, like a good village girl, believed I was a fallen woman avoiding the early-morning eyes of the village standing witness to my night of illicit love. Cheeks aflame, eyes down, I'd walked as fast as I could to the shelter of my own camp bed at the Villa Maria. Certain that I was confirming the judgement of the elders of the village that all female tourists were *putanas* — prostitutes. Despite the few stars and the blue-black night, I relived again one of those dawn mornings in 1982.

Ilios — the sun — crept over the mountain and filtered through the lace curtains. I had to be home before the guests demanded breakfast. I was also keen to be innocently asleep when my room-mates Sassy, Jules and Karo woke.

I'd left my lover, banged my head on the ridiculously low front door of 19 Kyriou Street, stumbled onto the rough cobblestones only to be sprung by an army of village elders swarming through the street

cleaning everything in their path. A metal bucket clanged, mops were slopped and splashed on the cobblestones and windows. Old men and women cackled, chortled and revealed flashes of gold, blackened teeth or toothless gums. Palms slapped thighs to confirm some *cous-cous* (gossip), shoulders were affectionately shoved and stories shared as they polished the streets before their loved ones claimed the day. By sun-up the village was scrubbed clean each day of tourist detritus long before their exhausted children and grandchildren reopened the village for the day.

In summer every villager had a role. Young girls minded the babies, adolescent boys worked the boats, older teenagers washed the glasses, maiden aunts and sisters cooked and carried goods to those who managed the family tavernas, shops and hotels. Mothers would wait up to feed their adult sons at two in the morning and wash the one white shirt to be worn again the next day. *Yiayias et papouthas* — old women and men — emerged at dawn and kept the village pristine white and blue.

The old ones shared the dawn with bleary-eyed men of the sea, in port after a hard night of fishing. Unshaven, big-booted, bold-eyed men who locked eyes with me as I clung to the shadows and slid light-footed past them. These were the older brothers, serious men and patriarchs. Senior men of the village who kept themselves aloof and distant from the *xenis* – foreigners. The whole village would have known by noon that Yannis-Ski had seduced the Australian. The thought of being the subject of that day's delicious morsel of *cous-cous* passed from table to table in the tavernas and bars, made me cringe with shame.

There were few secrets in Sanctuaria. The village thrived on *cous-cous*. In vain I hoped the elders and the fishermen might not notice me at

that early hour, but I fooled only myself. I turned the last corner and was grateful to see the sleepy Villa Maria, in the soft early morning light...

Where ... is ... the ... shower? I wondered.

I'd paid scant attention last night to the contents of my bathroom. There was a toilet pedestal in the compact room. Then I spied an ancient looking shower rose dangling ominously above the toilet seat. A shiny new tap sat next to the toilet-roll holder. Stupidly, I turned it on and was drenched as water spewed from above through squealing pipes.

Aha ... it's a toilet with a shower. Not a shower with a toilet.

I needed to think logically — like a Greek. I'd once accused a Greek friend of being illogical. "How can you say that," he'd growled. "It's our word — *logico*."

"Use loo first — flush — put loo seat down — hang sarong on peg on the back of the door — tie rope across door to keep out pirates — sit naked on loo — turn on the shower tap," I rehearsed speaking out loud.

Water bounced off the walls, cascaded, sprayed and gurgled down a convenient hole between my feet. My inner child clapped her hands in glee. The adult in me likened it to a hydro bath in an exotic health resort. I sat comfortably on the loo, shampooed my hair and wondered if I could sell this clever idea to space-deprived Sydney friends.

The last time I'd remembered enjoying the ingenuity of all things Greek had been my first washing day at the Villa Maria. Thitsa-Via, the villa's owner, directed me to her vegetable garden when I asked where I

could wash my laundry. I found a tap above a huge marble basin leaning against the villa wall and suspended at waist-height on a jumble of bricks. Armed with washing powder that looked like dry cement, I'd put in the sink plug, poured in the water and began to wash my clothes. The sun was out, the birds sang and a donkey brayed.

Pulling the plug, I discovered there were no pipes.

The water splashed down over my legs, feet and subsequently onto the garden via a small channel dug to direct the water onto the garden. Doing the washing back in Sydney never matched the charm of washing your knickers and watering the tomatoes in Thitsa-Via's vegetable garden.

Watching the Greek courtship process still fascinates me. Most of the local boys accept rejection with grace. Recently I observed one of my favourites, Yorgos-Bull, being clumsily dismissed by one of our female guests.

"Thank you for having coffee with me," he said as he kissed her hand. He seemed unmoved by her arrogant response to his overtures.

I went to his table after the surprised young woman had left.

"You're not cross or embarrassed, Yorgos-Bull?" I asked.

"Why would I be cross? A beautiful woman has just had a coffee with me," he replied. "Summer love is a game, a sport and a hobby. I win if a girl returns my smile. I'm very happy if she speaks with me. If she accepts my invitation to have coffee, I'm proud. My heart leaps if we dance. If we make love, then I am the luckiest man in Sanctuaria. But if

she doesn't want to dance or to speak or make love, a smile is a prize, even if it's a small one. Some tourists are good girls. If they tell me they love someone at home, or they are pure, or if they say they will dance with me, but not make love, then I'll protect them like my sister.

“Every part of a friendship with a beautiful woman is a bonus. And if we don't make love — well then, there will always be another girl next week to enjoy.”

All rights reserved. This excerpt may not be reproduced, stored or transmitted without the author's permission.