

The Way of Ben

Dear Reader,

Some of us travel for fun and relaxation and when our time is done we return to our routines until the next time. But there are those of us who are changed forever by the experiences, the generosity of the people, their tenderness, the learning, and the warmth of traditional hospitality.

For Ben , his visit to Europe came at a time when he needed some reassurance after a particularly depressing period in his life, a time when everything he valued seemed worthless. He felt stifled with city living and confused. He was lost. He needed to stand back, to find some perspective, to get away from that environment and find himself again.

It was just at that moment a friend suggested he join him and some friends for two weeks in Corfu and it seemed the perfect solution. Yet during the flight he began to have second thoughts. His friends were overdoing the *'let's make sure he has a good time'* routine and two weeks of that would drive him nuts. But from the moment they began their dawn descent over the ancient city of Athens and his eyes settled on the Parthenon, there they stayed, fixed on the centre of the centres of all the centres in the world and it was at that precise moment he realised he was home amongst the unpredictable magic and mayhem that would accompany every future visit to Greece. And it was during that first visit that he had his sparkling moment.

One day, in good humour and beautiful weather, with his friends he sat down to lunch in the garden of a small estiatorio. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, jokes were flying, the excitement grew and since they had almost finished eating, he began to feel just a little cramped so decided to move to one side, to another table. It was when he happened to lean back on his chair and look up through the tall, positive poplars at the open blue sky that slowly he became conscious of something happening to him.

Just as he watched the sun reappear from behind the clouds, he began smiling to himself as an overwhelming sense of awareness, a gentle reassurance and a meditative stillness, just grew and grew and grew. Through him spread a quiet confidence, and with it came a bright clarity, an infinite radiance that he saw as our true nature in the knowledge that there is a positive interdependence between all things.

And then, with a widening grin, he began to realise the unlimited freedom in the entire universe. He realised the reality that everything in nature is one with all there is.

We travellers try other destinations and other ports of call and without a doubt they charm and frighten us in turn, they each have their own distinctive flavours, but it is only when walking in foreign lands that we truly find ourselves, and this awareness is the first step on our journey together.

The Island of Karpathos

Ben had been rambling with his borrowed backpack over the Greek island of Karpathos for the previous three weeks, sleeping without a roof over his head whenever convenient in the hope of regaining that fragile spacious freedom you only feel in natural surroundings. As far as he was concerned, walking through the wilderness is just like wandering through the experiences of your life. The hills, the valleys, the highs, the lows, the stumbling, the dangers, the beauties, the pleasures, the predictable, the strangeness and the unexpected.

'See you tomorrow, Ben. Avrio, OK?' Nikitas was grinning and without looking up, he continued to help with the mending of fishing nets.

Ben looked at him, 'I doubt it. There's no bus tomorrow! What if I get marooned in Finiki?'

'Listen to me, my friend. You spend half an hour in the plastiki village of Finiki and you'll be so glad to leave, you'll walk back! You might even run!' Nikitas shook his head without looking up.

Nikitas owned the Lefkos taverna overlooking the amazing Sea of Crete and the beach in the little cove where Ben had been sleeping for the last few days but now he had itchy feet. It was time to explore a little further down the coast starting with Finiki, which also sits on the edge of the sea, about a dozen kilometres south along the mountainous coastal road.

'It's not far, only a bus ride. But nothing there!', according to Nikitas, Ben's new found friend. He could not understand why on earth Ben would want to leave this idyll and waste time wandering round lifeless Finiki, but as ever, Ben was curious and anyway, he could always return on the Wednesday bus.

At first the bus ride to Finiki was fairly uneventful until Ben became increasingly aware of the fields below becoming more and more distant as the bus climbed and climbed the dusty mountain road. Whenever he looked through the window he realised the old tin can of a groaning bus by then was almost interstellar, ambling higher and higher up the narrow mountain track and pointing into infinity whenever it turned a sharp bend. He had always enjoyed flying through the air

but hitting the ground did not have quite the same appeal, so he put all his concentration on the little plastic number tag on the seat in front and tried to control his negative imagination. But still, every few seconds he was forced to steal a glance through the window at the vigorous Cretan Sea pounding the shoreline far, far below, and listen to the lady sitting behind him chanting, 'Oh, Theus! Oh, Theus! Oh, Theus!' Quite an alarming introduction to quiet little Finiki village for wimps like him. Then, if things were not bad enough, several times the bus reached the point where it stopped climbing and through the front windscreen there was nothing to see for a few minutes but never-ending sky and the occasional cloud. A terrified hush filled the bus as it swung carefully to the left leaving a gaping empty space on their right. For what seemed like hours the driver hugged the rock face until he eased the bus into a steady descent and that was when it was suddenly filled with explosive yatterings and prayers of thanks, even from the locals.

In no time at all they were down on the flat and the bus chugged to a definite full stop. Positively safe and sound in Finiki at last and happy to get its breath back.

From a nearby taverna came the appetizing aroma of someone cooking kalamari, that delightful deep-fried squid recipe that is a staple of Mediterranean cuisine and one of Ben's favourites. Such a dizzying aroma! The passengers thanked their saviour driver and some even shoved money into his shirt pocket in gratitude for safe arrival. Ben was more than ready for a large, restorative lemonade.

Although once a modest fishing settlement, Finiki seemed to be full of flashy plastic furniture like a primary school playground and he could see why Nikitas thought he might prefer something less conspicuous. So, to stay or not to stay, that was the question. Perhaps the next town, Arkassa, would be more interesting, and yet the very naivete of the set-up, the evening light, the sound of the sea, perhaps he should simply let it be.

So he took a look around and found two interesting possibilities for low-key camping. One was a rather obvious leeward cave, its mouth ajar, yawning over the centre of the village, and the other site was an, 'on-the-outskirts-less-obtrusive-very-detached' type encampment on a hill overlooking the sea, as they say in the holiday brochures.

This took the form of a cast-iron double bedstead! Ben found it waiting outside an isolated and abandoned old stone house on the side of a hill and with no traces of footsteps in the sand except his own. On the bed frame itself were three double mattresses, unbelievably clean and dry. Turning over the top one, he spread his sleeping bag to air and stowed his backpack and snorkelling equipment underneath and already it felt like home. It was time to follow the highway south to the

neighbouring village of Arkassa, and have a bite to eat. Everything else could wait.

From the moment he arrived, he felt close to Arkassa. It was an unusual, unpretentious town spreading across the banks of a dried up old river and crossed by a rickety bridge with bow-legged walkways linking each side. The air was clear and everything smelled of stone and coffee and herbs. In the main square alone there were four kafeneia bars and a mini market. The village had a wide beach offering a wide horizon where one could marvel at the raw crimson sun fading to a tiny dot. There were shops and flowers, neat houses and alleyways and the whole place fair bustled with life.

Around the central square wooden chairs were scattered where people of all ages relaxed beneath an orange sunset and talked and passed the time of day and the sound of their voices tickled his mood and all those mountain horrors soon dissolved.

Just off the square stood a taverna, 'The Restaurant Petaluda', and going by the large painting of a butterfly on the wall near the door he guessed it translated into 'The Butterfly Restaurant', and it was while waiting for his dinner there that Ben had the most pleasurable sensation of feeling completely at home. Ben happened to catch the eye of the owner and felt so amused by the whole experience that he had to compliment him on his beautiful town and restaurant. The owner was so delighted that he turned and called over his shoulder into the kitchen, 'Hurry with the souvlakia and potatas for the English!'

Dinner arrived and it was the best souvlakia on sticks he had ever tasted although there was far more meat than chips but still, all was delicious, tasty, tender and very too much. To Ben, the kafeneion, is the heart of rural life in Greece and across the square from the Petaluda was one such haven, the 'Kafeneion Biktoria Kamaratoy'. There, he went to relax and write up his travel notes over a bottle of the local Retsina wine. And also it was there that he sat in the company of wild, romantic Greeks, flaying the very air with their humour and their drama as slowly, he realised he was becoming a little squiffy and smiley and nodding sleepily as he was included in their madness.

Ben did very little writing that day.

Later, in strolling back along the coast road in the dark towards Finiki, its telegraph poles above him glimmering in the same way the columns of the Parthenon do at night, he could clearly see the orderly white houses and buildings sprinkled around the bay and over the hills that edged the shoreline with its boats. The narrow strip of road that peels off the highway and curls through the village stood out in the moonlight like a lustrous silver ribbon, and somewhere towards the left, out of sight of the village and high on the edge of a green and sandy field overlooking the sea, his

bed-camp sat patiently waiting alongside the old stone house and guarded by the lovely white-washed chapel of Agia Nikolaos. He promised not to be too late.

Coming off that road, he fell into a seat at 'O Nikos', the first taverna in the village, with its uncommonly formal atmosphere and unsmiling owner, and yet it was there, whilst sipping his nightcap and reading his notes, that Ben realised that the tiny fishing port of Finiki is timeless and so relaxing at night, absolutely calm, nothing happening, hardly any people about, and with the softest air he had ever known, perhaps the very breath of the Dodecanese. The minuscule beach, crystalline waters, the flower displays, the statuesque cypresses standing above the olive trees, the plain-spoken locals, the old and the new, even the bright plastic chairs, where would he have been without them? He glanced down at his legs and saw how hairy and darker they had become and realised he had not actually worn any long trousers for over two months but more importantly it was not just his body that was changing, but his outlook. He was slowing down into the Finiki pace of life and already looking forward to a daily dilly-dallying to and from Arkassa.

And, not only that! He was very pleased to be actually sleeping on a double bed instead of on the unforgiving sandstone slab that he had hardly grown accustomed to on the beach at Lefkos. Also came the realisation that by stashing his kit under the bed camp at cosy Finiki, walking the modern highway and living the Arkassian hubbub, he might have found the best of both worlds.

Drifting off to sleep, he was back in Lefkos at the gentle Cambio Money Exchange waiting for the pretty lady financier to come and open up. It sits on the rim of the beach and you can't help but be beguiled by the whispering wash of the tide and its foreplay with the pebbles on the shore and all this beneath an open, sunny sky.

In the next second a blood-curdling screech ripped through his reverie wrenching him back to Finiki in a flash! A pride of screaming mad pumas were bickering somewhere down in the depths of his imagination there in the village darkness or, more likely, it may just have been some tomcats, but either way, as soon as the noise died down, Ben returned to a deep and restful sleep.

That first night in Finiki, Ben had one of his best nights out under the stars that he could ever remember. Apart from some vivid dreams of strange, dark-skinned men with angular-shaped features and utterances entirely composed around an 'Urr' sound and images of dwarf-like women dressed in black wearing huge turbans, squealing and scurrying around him as he walked, he did not recall moving once. He woke in the early hours with the words of one phrase running through his head, *'The captain's assessment'*, yet there was absolutely nothing in memory to which he could relate it - but nothing could distract him. He was humming with happiness.

Ben stretched his toes to the bottom of the bag and dozed until the sun came over the cliffs

to warm Planet Finiki with its friendly smile. From where he lay in comfort, he could hear hardly any traffic on the main road and all seemed fairly quiet but he knew it wouldn't last. Standing a little higher than most other buildings on the line towards Arkassa stood a basilica that might prove useful later if the heat becomes unbearable. Also, he could clearly see the signposted, '*Water for Drinking*', fountain on the side of the road where he might be able to perform his morning ablutions al fresco. First, a walk, a wash and a shave, a brush of the teeth, all very healthy, but no hurry, plenty of time.

Eventually he climbed down from his bed and walked over to the fountain in the wall to prepare for the coming day, and to wash in that clear spring water was so stimulating that it made him gasp. He checked his face for stings and bites then wondered who owned the face staring back from the reflection in the old metal travel mirror that had belonged to his Uncle Fred? The face looked dark, and the head tender from the sun which made him realise he needed to get a hat, and the two-day old beard made him look really rough, if not really knackered, and Ben decided he must smarten up, and that was when something caught his eye.

During the ceremonial shaving and washing he had the feeling of being watched. So using the mirror for a rear view over his shoulder, he was staggered to see a host of about thirty goats and rams in a variety of colours from black to blond blending with the scenery, chewing their breakfast and blatantly studying his every move from where they stood amongst the shrubbery on the hillside across the road.

Ben knew exactly what to do. He started singing to them and that made them even more confused. They became cautious, stopped chewing, and stood and stared in silent awe. Then, once the crooning was done, they began bleating noisily again and clanging their bells in wild appreciation. By then, cars and trucks and mopeds were slowing down to see the mad, reborn Pan, god of the wild, stripped to the waist in the middle of nowhere, entertaining an audience of goats.

Modestly, he took a couple of bows, waved the beasts farewell with, 'Same time tomorrow, everyone!', before he returned for his day bag and set off for yoghurt and honey at Biktoria's, or Bikkie's as all locals call it.

Then, just as he was about to begin his promenade, humming something light and jolly, he happened to notice the door lock to the old house was not quite clipped shut. So in he went for a snoop around. The rooms were in an advanced stage of dereliction and the building must have been deserted for years. There were several abandoned suitcases in one corner spilling clothes and other belongings all over the floor and suddenly he had a choice of two hats. Rejecting the baseball cap, he chose instead the Disneyland red and white souvenir, embroidered with the name Kosmas. Once

washed inside and out, he wore it all day, except when swimming.

At Bikkie's, in Arkassa, Ben took his yoghurt and honey into the field behind the kafeneion where she kept a beautiful young donkey, and there he ate his breakfast standing up watching the wind blow the grass like waves across the surface. Old stone walls, gnarled old trees and dry and dusty footpaths; poppies and pippins were flying like swallows all over the place. Before finishing his yoghurt, Ben plucked a few figs from a handy tree and even fed some to Bikkie's donkey. The donkey thought they were delicious and ate them straight from his hand. The donkey even let him take his photograph before Ben took himself down to the beach and tried to snorkel but, unfortunately, the mouthpiece was leaking and he could not see anything anyway because the wind was churning up the waves and the sand and those brown strips of seaweed that grow on the seabed and end up scattered along the shoreline. He did get some more sun though, and by five o'clock he was burning.

Once back in Bikkie's he sat inside. She did not bother to show him the menu. She simply placed before him a plate of Feta cheese with tomatoes and olives and a couple of portions of chicken. He ordered a bottle of Retsina because the local stuff had quite a remarkable after-taste. He asked the daughter, Lena, where he might find a toualetta and she showed him down to the cellar. When he was ready to leave the loo, he realised she had accidentally locked him in by taking the door handle with her. He had to get a broom, walk the number of paces to where he figured she sat above and give a thumping on the ceiling. At first no response then a sudden explosion of laughter told him everyone upstairs had realised what had happened to him. But it was all good fun and in his memory was a lovely summer's afternoon with absolute strangers, and all happily relaxed.

His lemonada was iced. Two pensioners were playing Tavli, or Backgammon, and the TV showed music videos of Hellenic pop. Ben was covered in sand. Outside, it was very hot and windy. A fly strolled across his foot, one sat on the table and, for a change, he was indoors. A breeze blew through the window and since it was more than welcome, he considered buying it a drink.

After his lemonada, he strolled around the town wishing 'Kalimera', to anyone passing and he began to sense a deeper calm. He wandered towards his sanctuary, the empty basilica, and luckily the door was open. Once inside, he climbed its steeple steps and from the top could just make out the track to the beach. On his way to try another swim he dropped in on a beauty of a fragrant mini market packed with all sorts of goodies and bought a tube of chocolate cream biscuits to revive himself. Although he could never remember their name, he seemed to find them on every trip to Greece and they never let him down. They were his version of the Elvin Waybread in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. He munched and crunched as he sang and waved and blinked to goats,

donkeys, cats and dogs. There were several spring fountains all over that town so one could save quite a few euros in quenching the inevitable thirst.

Ben's interest in ancient buildings was amateur but he always felt ruins allow you to touch the past and they take you to places the likes of which you might never have dreamed of visiting, and in the centre of the town, when he came across what appeared to be several white stone walls and stepped onto a sunken old mosaic floor just simply lying in his path, he was a little taken aback until he stepped upon another, then found a temple, or maybe a chapel. He began to think he had stumbled on an early monastery or perhaps a place of religious study because there were several buildings and doorways that led to places of strange silence. It was a time machine with a door latch, old and worn, and who could resist but to press and enter where to his amazement, just before him, crouched an ancient and heavily carved storage chest. It was shiny with pride and cracked with age and old and very, very beautiful and just sitting there waiting to be admired.

Then across an ancient plateia, glaring in the heat and silent except for the creak of a solitary cicada, was even more evidence of mosaic design in an archway with three arches which may have been part of a chapel or crypt or even erected as a commemoration to something distant past. Christian motifs overplayed all traces of any previous relationship between the ancient Greeks and their gods and there, in the 3000 BCE perimeter white stone wall, Ben ran his fingers across a cross, finely etched within a perfect circle. You could clearly see the blade marks of the artist. Next, he came across age-old column rounds and broken stone reused in all sorts of ways with odd-shaped bricks to make up the long white wall.

At the far end stood another chapel where, by venturing down some several worn steps and pushing against the door, you might take refuge from the heat on yet another pebble mosaic floor and inhale the cool revitalising air in the shadowy darkness. That mosaic floor was much older than the actual chapels and he overheard other visitors mumbling, 'Byzantine', but it was obvious these floors were of a different date because the more recent religious buildings had been erected on top of the older mosaic design in an attempt to censor any trace of doctrines non-Christian.

Across the straits from the plateia could clearly be seen the tempting fragile and tiny island of Armathia. A destination for the future, perhaps.

The day seemed more torrid than ever and now, having no sun cream after donating it to a sunburned sufferer, he decided to leave the chapels and, after one more stroll around town, he decided the best place to take refuge from the sun would be within the balcony of his basilica tower. Once there, he took out the towel from his bag and spread it on steps next to some sacks of used candles. He kicked off his sandals and stretched out but after half an hour it was too hot and stuffy

and not very long before the flies found him again so he did not fall asleep. But it was good just to relax lying down out of the wind and out of sight. One thing most precious when sleeping and travelling spontaneously is fresh clean water and privacy. Stretching there in his waxy den, he thought of the kind old man who had approached him earlier as he was leaving Biktoria's. With a warm smile he had touched Ben's arm and said he just wanted to thank him for all the help during the last war. He handed him some bread and carefully explained that he should soak it in water before trying to eat it. Ben was lost for words and deeply moved.

As he walked past The Petaluda on his way back to his village, he waved to the chef, who came over and they slapped hands and Ben complimented him on his beautiful daughters and so the chef called out for an ouzo as a gift for the English gentleman. It arrived on a tray with a few olives, some beans, a piece of dried crusty bread, waves and smiles all round from the staff and the diners grinning, sharing the moment and feeling happily close to one another.

Slowly, Ben woke and peered at his watch. Seven thirty in the morning. In Finiki, during the rest of that night, he woke several times, unable to find deep sleep. Tired of changing position over and over again, he lay on his back there on his luxurious mattresses and gradually became immersed in the wonder of the stillness and absolute glory of the universe in all that space and time above his head. And then something happened. He was returned to his wide-eyed, unbelieving senses by something he would never forget. It was the sudden appearance of the biggest and brightest shooting star that he had have ever seen, silently streaking and arcing a golden tail upward through the sky like some frightening celestial half-speed firework display. Suddenly, in what seemed like a nanosecond, the show was over and all was still again. What a truly remarkable, astonishing spectacle, and after crawling back inside his bag, he no longer cared whether he slept or not. He was unwinding in astonishment.

Early in the morning, after tidying his camp, he went off for a walk down to the old quayside. A fisherman sat resting his back against a wall repairing a huge yellow net surrounded by winding corks and lead lines, his big toe pulling the net taught while carefully he worked on the rips and holes to be in time for that day's fishing. An optimistic cat waited in the shadows of the table by his knee.

Ben went over to the fisherman, 'Kalimerasas. Good morning to you.'

The fisherman returned the greeting with a nod and a muttered, 'Sas.' He looked Ben over, squinting against the brightness and with a faint smile, he asked, 'Last night, on your bed, you sleep OK?'

'Yes, thanks. Well no, not really. I'm not sure if I dreamed it or imagined it but I swear I saw a very big and beautiful shooting star tearing upward across the sky. Did you see it? About two hours before the dawn?'

'You say shooting star? Shooting star! Ha! My friend, that 'shooting star' as you call it, has been coming here for years! Shooting star! Ha!' He gave a short sarcastic grunt and cast a wink before webbing his nets again and whistling some soft tune to himself.

Coming here for years? Was he serious? Surely not. Ben laughed, pretending to appreciate the joke, before continuing on his way up towards the highway wondering if the Minoans really were from Egypt. Or originally, were they from somewhere much more distant?

That morning, Ben bumped into a rather scruffy orange and blonde collie dog while he was meandering along the highway towards Arkassa. The dog had stopped to have a pee and as soon as they made eye contact the stray appeared a little cautious until Ben asked, 'Do you mind if I pat your head?', and when the dog didn't move, Ben patted his head. The dog didn't seem to mind at all. Ben felt they had made friends so he named his new friend, 'Fleabag'.

They walked along together like old chums and whenever Ben stopped to look at something, Fleabag would stop and wait until they joined up again before walking on ahead. On one occasion Ben stopped to have a drink of water from his bottle and Fleabag patiently waited, watching so intently that he had to pour some into a hand for the dog to drink. The dog lapped it up so eagerly and so thirstily that he almost drained the bottle. At one point he disappeared in the scrub, rootled about, then reappeared and presented Ben with a white plastic sandal. Ben snatched it out of his jaws and threw it as far as possible into the distance. Like a really good chum Fleabag retrieved it, dropped it at his feet and waited anxiously for it to be launched again. This became their game as they walked and played towards the turn-off for the 'big town' where it was expected Fleabag would mark his boundary, and so he did, all over the front tyre of a parked bicycle. But he didn't stop there. He accompanied Ben along the road as far as a playground and that was when he turned off and went for a sniff out of sight. Ben carried on up the hill as far as Bikkie's and just before he got to the door, Fleabag reappeared at his side, showing trust and friendship without doubt or fear.

Walking each day from bed camp to Arkassa was perfect for healthy exercise in between yogic lounging. At sunset Ben exchanged usual smiles with the group of 14 year old girlies who sat on a wall displaying their feathers and strutting about. Boys played in the mud and didn't even notice. Once, a cat with only three paws limped by, and talking of injured felines, Ben had never known a town for so many incomplete cats, mostly with one eye missing but some totally blind. And he kept finding little dead remnants on his walks such as petrified mice and birds or dead stiff

cats, and once, even a snake, but the animal community was very busy there and that morning he came across a beautiful donkey, a golden goat and a heron sharing a paddock. Oh yes, and his head was flaking and since it was happening more and more often, next time don't give your sun cream away.

From inside a taverna there was the song of a violin and a cracked old voice duetting to a traditional local melody. Ben was enjoying his use of the odd word or phrase and actually being understood, but sometimes he would rather dance. He walked into the town square and it was full of men sitting around the traditional local kafeneia, or just sitting wherever they liked, creating a buzz of authentic Greek humanity, laughing, arguing, playing board games, cards, drinking coffee and, when the music took them away, they stood and danced. Everything seemed in order so he left them and moved on to the final stop before his last walk home.

Sitting at a table in the garden of the Petaluda, waiting for a dish of kalamari and salad, Ben began to realise that the Mediterranean diet is another form of love for all things Greek, a complete fulfilment. To the amusement of his friends in Greece and at home, once his dinner was placed before him, he had been known to lean above the dish with his eyes closed and simply inhale several times until, after swallowing, there came deep a sigh of satisfaction as he dabbed his fingertips on his beard until it became fragrant with the joy of lemon juice and fish. In the garden of the Petaluda, the table tops were zinc, coloured purple by the reflection of the sky, but deep royal purple. Through the window from the kitchen the chef always asked if he wanted his usual kalamari with a small salata. Delighted by that dream, he would laugh and nod enthusiastically. And then his dinner would arrive. A masterpiece of flavours resting on his plate for his palate. And as usual, he would close his eyes and let the aromas rise from the zinging local salad, the hot kalamari in batter, warm bread and cold Retsina, and he was always charged the same nominal fee, always the same, and he could not understand how they ever made any money.

'You no pay. You English. You pay in the war,' smiled the chef.

Ben spoke to a man who had lived there for three years and when Ben told him he wanted to move to Arkassa, the man made what he considered two strong points,

'First, find someone who knows the Greek, but not a Greek, a Greek will cheat you. Second, don't buy at first, rent for a minimum of one year with an option. You don't just buy the house, you buy the neighbours, the community.'

Perhaps sound advice from Herr Valter's past experiences, perhaps?

Afterwards, Ben returned to the Petaluda for his nightcap and some chat with another waiter

as he ordered his Ouzo. When the time came for him to leave, there was no one to take his money, so after waiting a polite while, he wandered into the garden restaurant to pay the waiter there but by then, the man was busy eating and with a wave of his hand, indicated the payment be made some other time.

Ben's bed camp would be waiting on the coast so he wandered along until he came to a goat track splitting off to the left and along there he walked and stumbled watching the stars all over the sky with dear Fleabag making an appearance out of nowhere and still with that unsure look in his eye until he reached down to pat and stroke him. Just before the turning down to Finiki, Fleabag faded into the shadows. Maybe he had heard the yowling from those needy cats.

A blustery west wind raised his expectations of perhaps another drink while watching the sea crash and splash against the moonlit rocks with some Rembetika playing on his recorder, real pleasures, but when he arrived at O Nikos and flopped into a seat, grateful for the rest, and while ordering a refreshing Ouzo nightcap, the owner brought him an ouzo miniature and that, along with the look on his face, signalled he was closed. Ben apologised and left.

The entire village was in darkness and, in fact, everywhere was closed. He should have realised there was nothing else to do when Fleabag lolloped off. Every night in Karpathos shows you an exceptional sunset. It was time. He had to sleep. He found his bed and said goodnight to the day.

The chapel bells woke Ben and told him it was seven already, and his last full day in Finiki before returning to Lefkos. He felt happy and glad he had made the trip there because life was not about expectations but about accepting things as they always are.

He washed and shaved at the chapel tapple, and with his things all packed and ready for the off, and since being naked appeals, Ben took a walk amongst the rocks and boulders into the wilderness and the scrub; such an indescribably liberating feeling of being naked and strolling about in the warm morning air without any sign of humanity to worry about. The place was as timeless as his nakedness. No sense of past or future, there was only the present moment. A warm wind blew in from the sea, fresh and clean and friendly. The sun was just over the mountains but already the day was golden. Ben had a dry cough. But what a world beneath his feet! He felt welcome. Rocks and stones, soil and sand, lizards, pipits, curlews, wild orchids, plants and shrubs, trees and the stillness of the ocean. All of these things seemed familiar, friendly, however temporary. And he knew he had changed because whatever it was that once motivated him in his youth to pursue wealth and fame, or to escape suffering and danger, had completely disappeared now. He was all he needed.

Suddenly, acute embarrassment! Out of nowhere, about 100 metres to his left, a man appeared, clambering over the rocks towards Ben. He was dressed in waiters' garb of crisp white shirt and dark trousers and waistcoat, and seemed to be on some sort of mission, perhaps collecting rare seafood ingredients. Ben crouched brown behind some boulders, hoping his body in its tan would be invisible against the sand and the man would not notice him. Fortunately as he drew closer, the man suddenly changed direction and stormed off down towards the sea and out of sight. Relief! Whatever his pilgrimage, there was no sign that he saw Ben. For a few moments Ben had felt liberated and confident in his natural simple nudity, and quite sorry at having to return to his shorts and the world of cluttered conditioning.

So up he walked to the chapel where he sat inside in perfect silence and closed his eyes in some kind of fragile spaciousness. He considered that Greece in all her September heat. His metal framed sunglasses, so hot they were too painful to wear; his sun lotion, it came from the bottle as hot as tea; of starry, starry nights and shooting stars and the moon in her charming stillness. And he simply sat and watched his breath.

He opened the chapel door and looked up at the sky, cloudy and dark, but the clouds changed to white as he walked to Arkassa with Fleabag alongside carrying a stick in his jaws. If there'd been any flagstones the heat of the sun would have cracked them but as it was, he just felt tired with the walk where every now and then Fleabag would drop the stick in front of him and look expectantly. He wanted to play just as they did the day before with the plastic sandal. Each time Ben reached for the stick, Fleabag would jerk forward but Ben would beat him to it, picking it up and flinging it into the bushes. Sometimes Fleabag ignored this manoeuvre as cheating, and found a plastic bottle or brought something else instead. Plastic bottles are slippery when wet with saliva and they bob about when dropped on uneven surfaces so Ben had very little to do to keep him playing except kick the bottle in different directions every now and then, but eventually Fleabag grew bored with that and once in the town he joined some kids playing with a ball. They seemed to know him and it wasn't long before they were making a fuss and feeding him and that's when Ben guessed Fleabag had returned to his former life. A little disheartened, he hoped they would meet again sometime.

Ben returned to Bikkie's for a farewell frappe and to read and update his notebook. Kiria Bikkie came over and sat down offering a little plate of grapes and some cactus fruit while insisting Ben understand that there must be several minutes gap between eating the different fruits, to help digestion. He spent a couple of hours in there being fussed over by Bikkie and her daughter until it was time to go.

But the biting heat slowed him down and he just about made it down and up the side of the

creek and some of the steps to the church. A true test of endurance. He sat in the cool of the balcony with his friends, the used candles, for about an hour until the flies found him again and he had no choice but to escape.

The serious sun was blazing and so oppressive he began to feel persecuted and miserable again and really had to find some shade. He remembered the old temples and once down there he took some photos of the floor mosaics and the beach but no matter how he kept himself occupied, he could never remember a day so hot or one when he felt so trapped.

Slowly the searing oppression faded into a beautiful, soft evening that took him for a wander through some shrubs and trees, alive with the business of countless bees, and that well-worn track brought him through to postage stamp-sized vineyards where the vines grow along the ground amongst fig trees, and he passed one secret little olive grove with its wooden shack and kittens feeding from their mamma outside whilst papa kept a wary eye on the human stranger cooling his sunburned head beneath the sprinkling hose moisturising the vegetable patch and the two wooden chairs and the table under the lean-to and all the rest of homely living bits and pieces snagging and bedraggling in a perfect little unpretentious haven. As the stranger left, musing on how it is that bees never fall when flying through a rain shower, the cats did not even twitch and neither did the bees.

Ben stopped at a kafeneion for a coffee amongst the old silent men and when one of them went to pay, he also paid for Ben's Elleniko kafe. So even though they were strangers, they were brotherly strangers. Ben said out loud to himself how much he had loved that visit to Greece and how so much had felt so familiar.

He bade his goodbyes with handshakes and hugs to Biktoria and Lena and to all the friendly waiters of Petaluda and traced his way that moonlit night along the old goat track that led past the monastery along the empty river gorge, the basket ball court, the bee hives and the little vineyard and on towards the scattered stars of Finiki waiting with his his bed and footprints in her sand and all the while he wondered if Fleabag was alright.

Just over twenty minutes later he stepped off the main track and cut down another, winding among the planes into his village, its sawing crickets serenading, but instead of flopping into the first bar off the road as was his custom, something in the smell of pines and sage and thyme on that last night drew him up the little hill and past his bed from where he could see across to the distant wide horizon. He looked up into the night and saw galaxies and somehow felt involved, at one with the energy in the infinite radiance and stillness of space and time.

He undressed and listened to the deep silence over the windless ocean. Half way to climbing onto his friendly bed he stopped, and turned, and once again picked his way in the dark down to the

pebbly shore. He came across an old wooden boat and there he sat and listened to the quiet. The evening air came in naturally with each easy breath, clearing and settling his mind. Everything was calm. He seemed to have left his body and his mind back at bed camp.

After a little while, there came the gradual realisation that whatever it was he took himself to be had disappeared, and that his 'self', the thing, was but part of the one totality from which he could never be divided and that his self-nature was in everything and everything was in his self-nature and that life was dear to all. He was part of a true reality in space without limit, and time without end. He seemed to see his own basic nature as being together with the whole of existence.

The happy and open, vitality of life.

The Island of Kassos

At five next morning, Ben took the ferry from Pigadia, the Karpathos main town, across to the little island of Kassos and that had meant him spending the night sleeping fully dressed in his bag on Pigadia beach and keeping his boots on, even with a blistered toe! And when the friendly church chimes returned him to consciousness early next morning, his eyes slowly opened to the wonderful misty silver smile of the joyful Milky Way. The twinkling constellations of our hemisphere, a vast ever-flowing river, what could he do but wave and smile back? Down on the quay there was already a queue of trucks and people milling about, some with luggage and parcels, and some on their way to bed after the discos. But they have always done this, those who wander. They are a constant transient tribe, searching, visiting, rambling and forever grasping after something or other, and even the simple crossing to Kassos might have faint echoes of their initial migration from Africa.

Back at the beginning of his trip, on the ferry from Rhodes, Ben had made a friend of a German girl, Jutta, then bumped into her several times in Pigadia. When she heard he was planning on making this trip to Kassos, she presented him with a cassette of some music she said would change his soul. Ben had forgotten all about it until that morning, standing in the half dawn, and it seemed like a good way to pass the time. At first there was no sound from his earphones, just absolute stillness and he presumed something must be wrong with the tape but he began to hear a distant grieving cry, gently growing stronger. It was a wail of despair and at first he thought it must be coming from the crowd but it was definitely his recorder. The voice seemed so desperate that he became transfixed and actually gasped. It was the opening to the soundtrack from the film, 'Rembetiko'. There on the crowded quayside, at the point of departure, the music from Rembetiko

was in his head for the very first time in quite a long time and it stayed with him from that moment and ever after. With this new soulful companion he stood and watched the ferry easing forward from the horizon, sensuously, persistent, just like the singer on the tape and as she cruised closer there was the swelling anticipation of the passengers just waiting to explode.

Once on board Ben wasted no time in finding somewhere to make base. He found an empty, comfy seat amongst three travelling musicians, whispered 'Kalimera' and quietly established his bag. The atmosphere below decks was stifling and fragrant with the smell of sweaty human bodies and spices. It was quite likely that they had sailed with that ship all the way from Piraeus. Ben tried to read, but his throat was like parchment. He needed something to drink but the bar was closed so he made his way instead to get some air on deck when, he saw on the floor at the exit, a discarded plastic water bottle and instinctively picked it up, wrenched off the cap and guzzled its contents, not particularly tasty when warm, but thirst-quenching nevertheless. Over the sea an orange sun was tinting the purple sky and the crescent moon looked small and rested. A good omen. He returned to his comfy seat and soon his head was nodding in time with the others and once again he was living, being, in his dreams, in another world and back again, bleary in his seat.

Ben was awakened by all the usual cursing and shouting and protestations from every member of the passengers and crew who thought they had a better idea than the captain for how to dock the huge Apollon Express against the tiny Phry fishing quay of Kassos. The ferry reversed and securely parked its stern ramp upon the quay, and along with Ben, just a handful of fellow travellers strolled off and into the unpretentious, village port. The fishing boats and skiffs looked on, shook their bows and grumbled but the crew had managed to dock, as they always do, and the on-loading of incredulous travellers began. Some nomads, a few students, a vagabond band, one or two trucks carrying furniture and bedding, a motor bike, a car and finally, a small, two-tiered Ute with at least fifty horned goats squashed on board. Of course there were parcels and cardboard boxes, all manner of cargo to be carried forward on a choppy sea to next the next port of call, Kphth or 'Crete' as it is known to some. He walked up the slipway and turned to watch the mayhem in that wonderful entertainment. Suddenly, with a fare-thee-well toot to the island, the ferry ship sailed out of sight, washing goodbye and leaving Ben with a strong sense of Man Friday on the quayside of Kassos. The day was already hot, dusty and dry and under that insistent sun the colours soon fade from everything.

Kassos is a mountainous island with few beaches within a steep, rocky coastline. Its first inhabitants are thought to have been the Phoenicians. Homer mentions it in his catalogue of the Greek cities that took part in the Trojan War in the thirteenth century BCE, over two thousand years

ago. In the eighteenth century, Kassos established its own merchant fleet and grew rich from trade. It played an active role in the Greek War of Independence of 1821, earning the revenge of the TurkoEgyptian Armada, which set fire to the island in May 1824 and subsequently slaughtered its inhabitants. Only a few survived and the present population is just over one thousand.

The harbour front of this old pirate's nest seemed to consist of a house, a steepled church and the Kafeneion Mathaios. Ben flopped into a chair there and stashed his baggage under a big round table before ordering a revitalising coffee which, when it came, had the consistency of toothpaste! In the company of about forty men, loud in talk and loud in Tabla, he asked the Mamma if she would allow him to leave his backpack while he went for a walk. She shrugged and went back to her crocheting.

But behind the port lay a modest village of perhaps five dozen whitewashed houses without the slightest concession to modern tourism. Ben strolled to the right along poetic passageways between romantic homes, amidst aged dilapidated houses of wood and mud and stone. Some with little kitchens, fireplace rooms, wood storage rooms, and courtyards with pebble mosaics in abstract flower designs, ancient gnarled trees still flowering bright crimson and deep blue. Beyond the village he climbed a steep bank to an old windmill and down to an old fallen tree where he sat and let his thoughts of past and future fade away. Time fell still, or perhaps he fell out of time, either way, all that he was aware of was the constant wash of the waves and feel the breeze on his face in the continuity of that living moment. Suddenly, a piercing shout, a single word, from someone down in the passageways and he was back. On the track right before him lay a dead, new-born kitten and trails of giant ants, fright-filled cats, ducks, chickens, cocks already simply meandering in the severe early heat between the graveyard of dead houses.

Closer to the seaport there was a little more modern life. Shiny tiled kitchens, white lace curtains that flapped in the Meltemi and kept away the flies, the smell of cleaning fluids and gentle early morning music.

He spotted an older, lifeless, ruined house, full of character and mystery, and the feeling that, with a little conscious discretion, it might make the perfect place for him to sleep. In this village, it seemed to be a character of two-story houses that any staircase to the second level was almost always on the outside of the building so, after a quick look round to make sure he wasn't drawing attention, he climbed the crumbling stone steps to see what he could find.

There was one large room with just enough sound flooring safe to sleep on and although it looked more secure than the steps outside, he decided it might be more sensible to make his base at

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