

JUNE 2017 IN CEFALLONIA

The writing on the wooden sign hanging from the metal gate is faded but legible: ο κηπος του παππου, the garden of the grandfather. The letters, painted with a brush dipped in black paled by the sun to a faint tan, are neatly formed and evenly placed, as though in a child's first exercise book. The sign is decorated with the weathered outlines of vegetables: an oblong aubergine, a bulbous tomato and a green pepper.



“Go in, go in,” urges Daniel, an old man in a blue shirt who has been attracted by the sight of Peter sketching at the gate.

It was the little hut built high at the back of the garden that attracted Peter. The magenta flowers of a bougainvillea frame its roof against the soaring background of Mount Ainos. The hut stands on stilts. A white-painted balcony with a crisscross railing like a chain of giant kisses invites a visitor to share the view over the wire-fenced rectangle of land towards the gate, the road, and the sea.

The padlock on the gate allows a rusty bar to be pulled back just far enough to slip through. Dried, bleached and cut grass lies on the stony path that leads to a stone-built well. A bucket would have hung from the shaft, ready to be let down into the water gathered from the mountain's winter rains. The path leads across a cement base – for a future dwelling? – towards the little hut. Roughly carved on the beam that holds up the balcony is the name Κλειω. Clio must have been the wife of the gardening grandfather, and named after the Muse of history, the very Muse I need for this book of memories.

In grandmother Clio's day, the people of the old village high on the mountainside would have owned a piece of land down by the shore in which they could grow vegetables. Now only a few perivolias remain. The rest have disappeared under villas, apartment blocks, café bars and restaurants. The buildings are not yet thick on the ground. They stand among trees - cypress, olive, orange, lemon and fig - and are bordered by roses, bougainvillea, oleanders, sweetly scented jasmine and gardenia. There are palms, too,

and flourishing banana plants.

In the well-tended perivoli next door to the apartments where we're staying, an old man in a pale pink baseball cap starts his morning's chores. He's come down from the old village to work in the garden before the sun has reached its full intensity. In singlet and shorts the colour of the pebbles on the beach, he moves about the garden at a slow, deliberate pace. He carries a bundle of scythed weeds from here to there; fetches his mattock from its hiding place behind the clipped oleander bushes which protect his oblong of garden from winter waves; unravels a length of green hose; lays it beside rows of tomato and green pepper plants. He uses his mattock to dig a channel for the water running from the hose. It's Sunday. The day stretches ahead. He has lots of time.

A distant radio relays the liturgy. Male voices chant in Byzantine harmony: rhythmic, insistent statement and response. Crickets scrape away at their own violins in monotonous accompaniment, the very sound of heat. Further up the hillside cypress trees stand upright and motionless, sentinels of the landscape. Every so often the silent scene is ripped apart like torn paper by the screech of a jay admonishing a neighbour encroaching on its ground.

The sea, constantly and feebly, pulls at the pebbles of the beach, rolls them over and returns them to their place. The sun grows hotter. A jogger in a crimson shirt and shorts draws a staccato line along the shore. The holidaymakers' day begins.

Past and present blend in Lourdas bay. Friends made in Athens in the winter of 1962/63 are with us in the summer of 2017 for a few days on Cefallonia. While Vaso and I hobnob in the sea, Yiannis takes a video of Peter sketching Clio's little hut against the background of Mount Ainos. Later, Peter tears the sketch from his sketchbook and gives it to Yiannis, fulfilling a request. In the night, a title arrives in my head like a blessing: The Garden of The Grandfather.



A banana plant is a usual sight but rarely do bananas ripen enough to eat.

Our book begins - as all books must - with its creation in the present moment. A combination of pictures and words, it is our present work together as artist and writer. Its pages show our path from the moment we decided to see if we could spend a lifetime painting and writing. That path began in 1959.

For Christmas Peter Barrett gave Susan Withington three presents: a book, “The Innocents Abroad” by Patrick Kinross; a flimsy, mauve garment known as a shortie nightie; and a pair of lions carved out of a single piece of earthy-red soapstone. I was as alarmed by these presents as I was pleased with the attention. We barely knew each other. Now, as I write, I am struck by their significance. Books have been our life and our married life, like the single carving of two lions, has been a working partnership lasting 57 years - so far, so good.

We'd met in the library of the creative department of McCann-Erickson advertising agency in London. Peter was a graphic designer. I was a copywriter. We knew from the first that we shared similar aspirations.



The cypress-clad headland at the eastern end of Lourdata's long beach, glimpsed through the olives of the hinterland.

Peter wanted to give himself the chance, one day in the future, to see if he could paint. I was determined to write a novel. With these shared dreams, we married in June 1960. Two years later, we decided to stop dreaming and try reality.

This meant leaving London, where all our time and energy was spent earning money which disappeared entirely on daily life. We wanted to go back in time to a simpler way of life. We must go and live in a Mediterranean country, where the cost of living was low relative to our possible income. If we could find work as a graphic designer and English-teacher in the capital city of Spain or Italy or Greece, then we could have time 'away from it all' - an expression bandied about at the time - to paint and write. We'd been to Spain and Italy but never to Greece. A good friend of Peter's was out there. We could take enough money for a few weeks' exploration. If at the end of that time we hadn't found work, we'd return to London.

¹ Περιβολία, perivolia, a fenced enclosure, garden.