

OUR FIRST WINTER IN ATHENS

SEPTEMBER 1962 – APRIL 1963



The Volkswagen Beetle we'd bought secondhand in Stuttgart got us over the Alps and into Yugoslavia, where we bumped over the cobbles of the new road between Zagreb and Belgrade. It carried us down through the main body of the country, past acres upon acres of bright yellow sunflowers and a few scatterings of villages where rows of glistening red peppers were hung on frames to dry.

We grew used to the lack of a petrol gauge. When the main tank was drained, the car gave a shudder. All you had to do was flick a lever on the floor with your foot. The reserve held enough to get you to the next garage. In those days garages were few and far between. A can for emergency supplies of fuel was essential. South of Thessaloniki, the main road faltered. The motorway was in the process of being built and there were many diversions as the old and new roads intertwined. We were led along stony tracks into the countryside. This gave us our first chance of practising our rudimentary Greek.

Before leaving London and our jobs in advertising



Backgammon players, Crete

agencies, we'd started the Linguaphone course. We were three months into the six-month-long course when we found ourselves ordering our first meal in the country. Our carefully enunciated Greek produced plates of food, but more importantly, astonished pleasure. In painfully polite Greek we could say "May I congratulate you on the taste of your chicken." People clustered around to hear us talk. However, we knew little more than the chicken sentence and how to describe the furnishing of Lesson Eight's 'saloni'. We relished enunciating the long words. The separate syllables in the Greek for two soft cushions rolled off the tongue like dice thrown on a table, dhee-o an-a-pav-ti-ka max-ee-la-ree-a.

On the crest of the last heights before Athens the Beetle gave warning shudders that foretold breakdown, rather than lack of fuel. With the city in sight, we limped onwards, urging the Beetle forwards through sheer force of will, and arrived in the city to park outside the Kolonaki flat of a London friend, John Burge.

John had been in Greece for a year, living out his dream of writing a novel. He was due to return to London and his job as a copywriter but before that we spent three weeks together, sleeping on his floor and those of his friends, then travelling to Hydra and Crete. John, being single, liked English-speaking company. On Hydra we left him at the harbour café tables talking with other writers about the novels they were about to write, and painters about the paintings they were about to paint. To escape the feeling of claustrophobia, we climbed the steep hill behind the town. We noticed another figure climbing in parallel. We met at the top. Elizabeth Dun became a life-long friend.

Travelling around with John, we bore in mind the picture of a place where we would, at some point in the future, spend months painting and writing for ourselves. Although this picture was fuzzy, we would know when we'd found it. Crete was full of interest: the traditional way of life permeated the present. Yet we didn't feel drawn to the island. Being long and narrow with a mountainous spine, it wasn't easy to get around. We were limited by time and transport. We depended on local buses. The coastal communities were in a limbo state between the past and the future. Bags of cement were everywhere. Buildings were either falling down or half-built. The Minoan ruins brought tourists to the island but we did not want to live as tourists. The sense of dissatisfaction we had is evident in two photographs I took at Knossos. The first is of Peter and John, twenty yards apart, their heads down, striding up some shallow steps. The second is of Peter and John, the same distance apart, striding down those steps. So much for Minoa.

Peter did, however, find something which totally absorbed him. On a beach near Irakleion he watched someone using a mask to see underwater. This was so unusual that he asked to borrow it. From that moment, fish and underwater life joined the rest of the natural

world as subjects for sketches and watercolours.

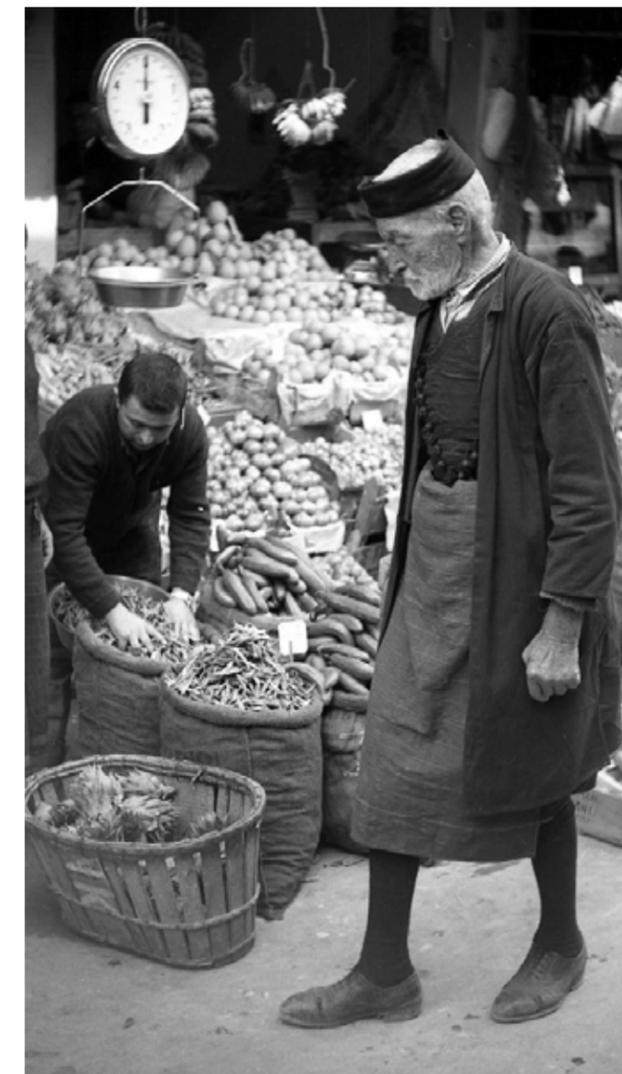
After a couple of weeks of further exploration, we returned to Athens. It was September 1962 and it was the start of our long relationship with Greece: more than a love affair, it's a kind of marriage that has still not ended.



Yiorgo's mother at milking time, Sougia, Western Crete



A back street in Rethymnon, Crete



Shopping in the market, Irakleion, Crete