

Winner of the 2019 Mani Lit Fest Short Story Competition

A Walk in the Mani

'Oh, we love Greece! Real Grecophiles, aren't we, dear?'

'Dear' smiled in agreement.

'We've been coming two or three times a year for thirty something years. Seen a lot of changes - not all for the best. Mass tourism has a lot to answer for! So now we tend to seek out the smaller, out-of-the-way places, don't we, dear?'

Before 'Dear' had chance to respond, he continued, 'Bit of an exception, this, but there's some good walking in the Mani area, and we thought, out of season it might not be too bad. Anyway, must get on!'

And with that, he strode off, leaving his wife to smile apologetically at the couple on the next table, before following him.

'That poor woman! I tell you, if you ever treat me like that, I might just have to kill you!'

Her husband laughed. 'I wouldn't dare!'

'Robert! Please just slow down a little. I'm not good on these rough paths.'

'Kalderimi, Jane. How many times! They are kalderimi – the narrow tracks used by the goats for hundreds of years. You really need to try a little harder with the language, otherwise people will think you are just another tourist! Certainly when we get our place in Crete next year, you'll need to learn the basics.

'I just wish you had chosen somewhere a bit more accessible. I'm worried I – we will feel very isolated in that little village.'

'We'll be fine! Kalives is only about twenty minutes or so in the car. We just need to get you driving again. Look at that for a view! Marvellous!' He paused and looked across the bay to the coastline north of the village. 'And smell the thyme! That's the smell of Greece!'

There was a time when she had loved his enthusiasm and his apparent knowledge of all thing Greek. He had opened up the world to her.

'My little townie' he had called her when they were first together, laughing at her as she tried to pick her way along muddy paths in clean white pumps. They were the nearest thing she had to the walking shoes he'd advised her to wear on their first outing in the nearby Peak District. 'I cannot believe you've never been to Edale!' he'd exclaimed.

Gradually, she'd learned to love the walks, and him. He would explain the landscape to her, show her the plants nestling in amongst the rocks, and taught her not to be afraid of the animals they encountered.

He went with her to buy proper walking boots, bought her a 'proper' waterproof for her birthday.

'How much!' her friend Sharon had gasped when she heard how much it had cost. 'Bloody hell, Jane. He could have got you a really nice leather jacket for that.'

Sharon was never very keen on Robert, though she only met him a couple of times. Robert always managed to find an excuse to avoid the wedding, engagement party, or birthday party invitations that occurred so frequently in those years.

'You go, though, if you like. I don't mind,' he would say. 'You go and enjoy yourself.'

And at first, she did, but gradually, as her friends paired up, she stopped enjoying going on her own, tagging along with another couple; grew tired of making excuses for Robert not being there.

'Reckons he's too good for us, that's his problem!' said Sharon when Jane tried to excuse his absence from her friend's engagement party. And although Jane denied it, she knew it was the truth.

'I know they're your friends, Jane, but, you have to admit, they're a bit – well – you know! I really don't have anything in common with them.'

After that, the invitations seemed to come less often, and soon, her only contact with most of her friends were Christmas and birthday cards.

Jane had invited Sharon and her husband to her wedding but, days off giving birth to their third, they had declined. Robert had wanted a small wedding; he didn't see the point of 'wasting money' that would be much better spent on furnishing their new home. They spent a few days in the Peak District for their honeymoon. 'A romantic re-visiting,' he called it.

Looking now at her husband as he stood with his eyes closed, breathing in the scent of the thyme, she searched in vain for the young man she had fallen in love with. In many ways he was still there – physically, at least. Blessed with the sort of metabolism that allowed him to eat anything and not get fat, and a regular walker, he looked as fit now as he did then. Even his hair had remained thick and showed little sign of grey, though the fringe that had flopped attractively across his forehead had long since gone. No, the difference was there in his eyes, and around his mouth: a hardness, an inflexibility.

Jane couldn't remember when she'd first become aware of these traits. He had always had firm views, of course. Perhaps she hadn't allowed herself to fully acknowledge them until Stephen reached his teens. The memory of their arguments still made her stomach knot: and now, she reflected, she had a son and grandchildren she only saw two or three times a year!

'Aha! Look! Look, Jane, down there. I'm sure that's wild asparagus!'

And with that, he began to clamber down the slope to the side of the path.

'Robert! For God's sake, be careful!'

'It's fine! It's not far down – I'll reach it easily!'

Jane went as close to the edge as she dared, and watched as Robert, leaning back, and placing his feet carefully, made his way towards the patch of green spikes.

'Robert, please! Come back! It's not safe!'

Ignoring her, he crouched down and reached his hand out to break off a handful of the nearest spears.

'See! I told you it'd be fine,' he called, waving his harvest triumphantly. 'Greek asparagus omelette for lunch!'

Asked afterwards what happened, Jane couldn't say. She hadn't seen Robert's foot slip as the scree beneath gave way. She had heard the rattle of falling stones, and then, his scream.

Leaning forward, she saw no sign of him, just his precious booty scattered on the ground.

'Robert! Robert! Are you all right?' Panic filled her throat, and the words came out as a whisper.

'Robert, where are you?'

Sobbing, she scrambled further up the path to try and find a better vantage point. 'You stupid, stupid man!' she railed. It was only a few days ago that he had been telling her about the number of people who went missing in these hills. And now, this! Again, she inched forward towards the edge, but all she could see were bushes and outcrops of rock.

'This is just so typical,' she thought, anger now replacing the initial panic. 'Always thinking he knows best. Well look where that's got him!'

She sat down on the path and pulled Robert's phone from the daysack. Scrolling through his contacts she found the number for the owner of their apartment. She needed to raise the alarm and his was the only number she had. Her thumb hovered over the small green telephone icon. She stared at the screen, then slowly, thoughtfully, pressed the back arrow, returning to the home screen. She stood up, lifted her arm, and threw the phone down into the dense scrub below. She gasped, and her heart raced.

'My God! What have I done!'

Closing her eyes, she forced herself to take a few deep breaths, to think. She sat back down on the path. She needed to retrace their steps and return to the village, tell someone. She had no idea what might happen then. Presumably there would be some sort of emergency response team.

She checked her watch, realised that she would need to account for any delay. Should she leave something to mark the spot? The daysack, perhaps. While her rational mind was telling her what she needed to do, some other part of her being was directing her actions. She slung the backpack over her shoulder, and began the descent.

When she reached the village, she collapsed; the after-effects of shock, the local doctor said. Police were summoned, the local volunteer group alerted. Stephen flew out to take care of things.

They found the body after five days. It wasn't possible to tell whether he had died instantly, or not. They buried him in the small graveyard at the edge of the village.

'I think he'd want to be here,' she told the young couple who had been so kind to her.

'Of course. And perhaps, if it's not too painful for you, you can come and visit him in a place he loved,' said the wife, smiling sympathetically.

'Oh no, I don't think so. I don't think I'll be coming back.' With that, she gathered up her things, and headed back towards her apartment.

'Poor thing,' said the young man.

'Hmmm. Did you see the book she was carrying though?'

'I didn't notice.'

'Lonely Planet: Grand Tour of Italy Road Trips.'

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