

The Turquoise Doorway

Bea was very annoyed, maybe even angry. Stuck here, in this dry and dusty middle of nowhere place, alone. What on earth was she thinking, agreeing to meet someone she didn't even know in this isolated place? She had such high hopes of this trip, the rugged beauty and hidden places, from high mountain settlements to aquamarine coastal waters and deserted beaches. She had lived the myths and legends of this place through her grandad's tales of his time here, maybe she would feel close to him here, discover what had fascinated him about this remote and mysterious part deep in rural mainland Greece?

Well his stories had led her here, and here she was. Stranded in Vatheia, a deserted medieval looking village. She had all these familiar sounding names in her head and when grandad had died last May she had spent hours on line looking for the places he had talked about so often. Finding those tiny hamlets on line had proven impossible, weeks of futile research trying to work out a route to retrace his travels. Bea could hardly believe how tough it had been in this age of instant knowledge at one's fingertips, but those tiny places did not appear on any map she had found. Places connected by ancient tracks known only to animals. No metalled roads here.

Bea had begun to think her grandad's stories were a figment of his imagination but a chance encounter with an old school friend had eventually provided the key to organising this seemingly impossible trip. An encounter she was now regretting as she sat pondering how she had ended up here all alone. This village was totally deserted, eerie and unnerving. Her anger was receding to be replaced by the cold grip of anxiety as she watched the taxi that had dropped her off meandering slowly down the narrow road, winding its way further and further away from her.

Why had she left her phone behind? A week of internet free silence seemed a very bad idea right now! At the time it had sounded blissful; peace and quiet, and the best bit; her parents not being able to call. Right now she would have given anything to hear from them, even though she knew there would be hell to pay when they saw what she'd done to their car. She really needed a friendly voice to quell that sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Standing up determinedly she began to climb a jumble of ancient looking stone steps, overgrown with creeping plants, vibrant spring blooms and disturbing the occasional sleepy scuttling lizard. This was indeed an old old place, Bea could feel the vibrations of a tumultuous past full of feuding and bloodshed. She knew these houses, scattered all across the Mani, were built like small fortifications to keep the occupants safe from their neighbours. Her Grandad's stories were coming to life now that she was here and could really sense the atmosphere.

As she wandered through the village her senses were assaulted with the warmth of the sun, sparkling like diamonds it reflected off the towering walls, accompanied by the fresh fragrance of sage, citrus and olives. A sense of wonder and excitement rushed over Bea, it really was a beautifully dramatic place and she longed for someone to share it with.

Clutching the notebook Grandad had given her one Christmas, it was well worn now, she hugged it tightly to her heart and rubbed the rough cover with her thumb comfortingly. It

made a slight scratching noise and Bea realised that this was the only noise she could hear; no birds, no rustling shrubs, no distant bleating of sheep or lazy church bells, in fact she could not recall hearing anything since the taxi crunched away on the gravelly track. She laughed nervously and the echo of her laughter was cut short, absorbed by the solid tower houses with their dead eye windows and unsmiling doorways.

As a distraction Bea opened the notebook and contemplated the drawings she had sketched since her arrival in Greece; a reminder of places buzzing with activity and fleeting images seen from the bus; quick line drawn studies in the chaos of the bus station in Athens; Breathtaking swathes of spring flowers thrown haphazardly across the landscapes of the outer Mani, softer and more colourful than the austere beauty of the inner Mani, with the ever present backdrop of the rugged Taÿgetos Mountains.

She looked back at the last sketch she had drawn of him, a year ago in May, only a few days before he died. He knew he was dying but looked so well and not a word said to anyone, no time to say goodbye. She could see it now though, in his eyes captured in that moment. Maybe that was fanciful but once you know it is easy to imagine things that were not really there. Talking of fanciful Bea was sure she suddenly heard singing. She raised her head and stilled herself. There it was, faint and far off but definitely a woman singing, mournful and full of pain. The only sound in this silent place, she set off with trepidation in the direction of this unexpected refrain, hoping that no one was dead.

The pathways twisted and turned in a confusing maze and under foot the cobbled surface was smooth and shiny from the many thousands of footfalls before her. The village was well kept though, and many of the buildings in good repair but no signs of life; no pots of colourful flowers or tables and chairs occupying the nooks and crannies squeezed between the buildings and providing inviting pockets of shade. As she wandered she imagined this place buzzing with life, and began to plan what colours the shutters should be painted, and where the bakery would be, and the kafenion, which tower house would make the best hotel?

Bea was contemplating her ambitious plans for this incredible little hilltop village when suddenly the singing stopped, followed by a brief silence and then a rhythmic thump began. She turned a corner and saw a tiny hunched over old woman, traditionally clothed in black from top to toe, banging the biggest rug she had ever seen with the smallest ever carpet beater. How she had wrestled that rug over that washing line was a mystery but it told Bea that there must be other people living here and that put a spring in her step. She called out a greeting in her best Greek, "Kalispera" and the old woman turned to peer across the little plateia and put up her hand to shield the sun from her eyes.

Less than half an hour later Bea was settled in the large open plan downstairs room of the tower house, coffee was brewing and she was showing her drawings to Kyria Papadopolou. Trying to explain in her limited tourist Greek that she really needed help, Bea thought about her smart phone with its translate app and again wished she had not been in such a hurry to abandon the trappings of modern technology. She took in her surroundings and relaxed; big cans of olive oil, large baskets of citrus fruits and both dried and fresh herbs were heaped on every surface saturating the room with the heady scent of the Mediterranean. A huge squash perched on an old blue chair and large deep red tomatoes waited upon a board, ready to be sliced. Bea could smell baking bread and realised she was very hungry. She had accepted the invitation to lunch enthusiastically and was glad to have company.

A couple of hours later Bea was off exploring the village again. Fed and watered but worn out from the effort it took to understand the stories Kyria Papadopolou had been so keen to tell. She climbed further up into the centre of the village where the houses crowded together ever more closely creating a myriad of tiny alleyways and dark spaces where the sun could not crawl.

Without knowing where she was headed Bea stared at the old sepia photo and trusted her instincts. She quickly found herself in front of an old door with peeling turquoise paint. It wasn't old in the photo, it looked freshly painted, and flanked on both sides by large pots full of geraniums and herbs. Standing proudly in front was her grandad, a young man but definitely him, and he had his arms around a pretty young woman who was not her grandmother.

Bea recalled the old woman's reaction when she had seen the drawing of her grandad, and the way her finger had reached out to touch the page. Kyria Papadopolou had searched through a box of faded photos until the one she now held was pressed into her hands with urgency. Bea eventually understood that the house was here, in this village. She had seen the house in photos before and instantly recognised it as the place her grandad had stayed most often and had thought of as home for a while. That it was here in this village was a total surprise. Bea was sure the young woman in the photograph was Kyria Papadopolou, the coincidences were really starting to stack up but Bea had no clue what it all meant.

The light was starting to fade and she turned and stared out over the darkening landscape, scanning all the way from the mountains to the sea. She thought about her grandad and felt so close to him, he obviously had deep ties here and she was overwhelmed by this atmospheric place and the memories it held for her through him. In the dusk she caught a faint glow, candlelight maybe, from inside the house. She pushed at the turquoise door and it opened easily, she hesitated slightly but something strong pulled her inside, not a physical strength but tugging on her insides like an invisible string knotted around her heart. The door closed gently behind her and she turned to see who was there, anxious again for a moment. The space was empty but she was not afraid as she moved into the room.

It was a traditional tower house, one big space with large handwoven rugs on the walls and floors. A young man sat at a table by the stove, the room was dim with candle light and the glow from the fire and Bea moved quickly to sit down opposite and looked straight into those eyes she knew so well. Youthful skin surrounded them, and a full head of dark hair sat atop but she knew this was her grandad. They reached out across the table and tightly held each other's hands, no words were spoken. Bea saw the tears falling from his eyes and she knew that she wasn't ever going home.