

THE TREASURE

By Sophia Sifaki

As the ship approached the island I got the first view of the place of my exile. I was born in London but my parents were Greek. At home I had to speak Greek and Greece was the designated place for vacations because of my *papoudes*, the grandparents. 'When are you coming to see us?' They would shout over the phone as if they could be heard from Greece to London. As a teenager, rebelling against my parents, I stopped following them to Greece. Then, Medicine entered my life and that meant hard work, sleepless nights and coffee. I loved every bit of it. Until luck or fate sent me to this Greek island.

A Greek tycoon, Mr. K. nostalgic and homesick in his old age, committed to fund my research if I spent a year in his beloved island, Lemnos.

'I want you to record everything,' He said. 'And I expect a report from you. I will double your funding if you find the *treasure*,' he said lowering his voice.

'What treasure?' I asked.

'Go and find out,' he said and then signaled that our meeting was over.

His last request struck me as odd, but maybe it was a rich man's whim. However, I could not resist his generous offer. This was a unique opportunity, but I would be away from the hustle and bustle of London, from friends, colleagues and worst of all away from my lab. On the other hand, I would have nothing else to do in that remote northeastern Aegean island but study for my research. Getting in touch with my Greek roots was the last thing on my mind. My Greek colleagues in London laughed and shook their heads. They shared their experiences, the horrors of *agrotiko*, the obligatory service for young doctors in rural Greece. 'You have no idea!' they said and nodded knowingly to each other.

The port was full of people awaiting the ship that brought people and provisions to the island. My instructions were that Michalis would be my contact. Michalis was from Lemnos but had worked in Australia and spoke English. I had no idea what he looked like. A heavy hand fell on my shoulder and I turned to look at a huge bushy mustache and a smiling face.

‘You must be, *o Giatros*, the Doctor!’ He said, shaking briskly my hand.

He rushed me to his car, which confusingly he also called *agrotiko*. I really needed to brush up my Greek.

‘These cars, with a carriage in the back, we call them *agrotiko* because they are used by *agrotēs*, farmers, you know?’ He said when he realized my confusion. ‘And for us, the *agrotēs*, they send young doctors to take care of us, so your practice is called *agrotiko*. You see?’ He turned his smiling face to me while driving the narrow, windy road.

The next few hours passed as he took me to the small medical facility and then to the house provided for the doctor. Both were whitewashed and thoroughly cleaned by the women of the village, scented by basil in huge pots.

‘We are always in need of a doctor, especially in the winter when bad weather does not allow the ship to dock and the island is cut off the mainland,’ said Michalis. He then gestured to one of the boys that were following us around to come forward. ‘This is my son, Nikos,’ he said. ‘He speaks English too and he will be helping you from now on.’ A shy Nikos came forward and shook my hand.

‘Now we go to the village to eat. You will see *filoxenia*,’ he said.

I knew that much from my parents. He meant hospitality, the art of cooking a huge meal, lots of delicious local dishes for the honored guest. So we sat in Michalis backyard, under the shade of a plane tree. Villagers, curious to meet the *Giatros*, brought welcome gifts: local cheeses *feta* and *melichloro*, homemade *ouzo* and wine, honey, freshly caught fish and a huge octopus, the famous tasty Lemnos pulses, handmade lasagna called *flomaria*, *trachanas*, and spoon sweets from all kinds of fruits like figs and vegetables like tomatoes and zucchinis, even from rose petals. Stavroula, Michalis eldest daughter explained that they were made from old recipes, a verbal tradition passed down through generations from one woman to another.

‘Before the tradition is lost, we are creating an archive and we will be uploading cooking videos on the internet’.

I asked her what *trachanas* was and she said that it is one of the oldest foods in the Eastern Mediterranean, a tiny, pebble-shaped grain, usually made with semolina. Milk, buttermilk, or yogurt is mixed to form a thick mass and left to dry in the sun; an ingenious way to preserve milk. At sundown, I was exhausted but I could not make myself go, so I sat watching the colours saturating the sky sipping a cup of Greek coffee.

‘Have you ever heard of a treasure here?’ I asked Michalis.

His laughter scarred the cat that was sleeping next to us. ‘Here? Only stones and sea... stones and sea, my friend. No treasure!’

The next day I was busy setting up my practice. In the afternoon a car came honking. Stavroulas’s head popped out of the window.

‘Doc, we have to rush to Theofanis’s *mandra*’.

On the way she explained that Theofanis, an 85-year-old man with history of open heart surgery, had collapsed. We found him on the floor, breathing heavily but conscious. I examined him. It was not a heart attack, but he needed to do some tests. He could not be left alone in that remote location; he had to go to the village.

‘There is no way I am leaving my *mandra*,’ he said. ‘If death comes it may as well be right here.’

So we arranged for his son to spend the night with his father and I promised to visit the next day.

The next morning I was busy preparing a list of all the things I needed. Around 11 o’clock I decided to go to the bank but as I was getting out the door I was met by a long line of patients. Nikos was also there. He was smiling apologetically.

‘We did not knock. Did not want to disturb you, Doctor,’ he said.

So, I began to examine patients, treating all kinds of ailments, of the body and the soul. Nikos was there to explain everything for whatever knowledge of Greek I had was useless. In the local dialect, the first syllable of the word was joined with the last, completely ignoring the middle syllable.

In the afternoon I went back to see Theofilos at the *mandra*. His son greeted me.

‘He is fit as a fiddle,’ he was smiling. ‘After his heart surgery, only days later, he was climbing the mountain! His doctors in Athens were dumbfounded!’ I asked him why Theofilos would choose to live there. ‘My father is a hardcore shepherd,’ he said. ‘They are a resilient, stubborn race,’ he laughed.

He then showed me around the *mandra* explaining its function. He showed me the dry stone walls fencing the area to protect the animals, sheep and goats, the barn, the hut where his father made cheese and then he took me inside the Shepherds Hut. I noticed a variety of dry herbs his father picked from the area.

Theofilos cut us short. ‘These herbs can cure everything. Doctor you need to look into this. There are powers in nature. *They* keep polluting the environment, ignoring the old knowledge. Young people do not want the hard life; they abandon the fields and shepherding. Do you see this plant?’ He opened his palm to reveal small leaves and a root. ‘Not impressive, right? What would you say if I told you it can cure stones?’ I realized he meant gallbladder and kidney stones. ‘These cures were known from the ancient times, they are mentioned in ancient texts, passed by word of mouth from one generation to the other.’ The old man stood up. His eyes lit with excitement. He seemed younger, full of vigor.

I turned to his son. ‘What is the average life expectancy here?’

He laughed. ‘When someone dies at age 90, we say he died young...’ He looked at me teasingly.

Theofilos approached once more and explained why the work of shepherds is important. How the movement of the herds fertilizes the soil, spreading seeds over long distances. The absence of livestock from grazing areas for long periods allows regeneration of the vegetation and the survival of wild plants. Nowadays, migration routes have become fragmented by roads and urban development. This has resulted in overgrazing, loss grasslands, species extinction and wildfires. As my visit approached its end I asked Theofilos about the treasure.

He shook his head. ‘Never heard of such a thing here...’ he said.

Days passed quietly. One morning I went to the pharmacy and there was Stavroula.

'I didn't know you were also a pharmacist!' I said.

'A woman in these remote places has to be many things' she said teasingly. 'Listen, I meant to tell you that tomorrow is the *panigyri*, of St. Ilias. You have to be there. It is much more than a religious feast. St. Ilias churches are always built on the highest places, up a mountain. We gather, cook in open air, and stay all day. We dance, sing and everyone will be there.' She said picking up the phone that was ringing. An old lady from the village needed Stavroula to give her a shot. 'See?.. A nurse too!!' She said as we both exited the pharmacy.

'Aren't you going to lock up?' I asked.

'No need...no crime here,' she shouted already heading up the whitewashed pebbled street.

On St. Ilias's day people gathered around the old church. After mass, several men with traditional musical instruments were singing songs that spoke bitterly of immigration, nostalgia and lost love. On the other side of the courtyard the shepherds were drinking heavily, competing who had more stamina. They were laughing, exchanging jokes and stories from the seasonal movement of herds, a 6,000 year old practice. I was amazed by the verbal storytelling tradition; it reminded me of Homer's tales. Apart from their own stories, they knew stories that dated back generations. Passed down by their grandparents, to their parents and now to their children that were sitting nearby, listening intently, absorbing everything. A close knit cultural fabric, a DNA made of stories and traditions.

There were also tourists, photographing, eating and drinking alongside with the locals.

Stavroula came up to me. 'Come, let's talk to them, I will write an article for the local newspaper,' she said.

'So you are also a journalist!' I laughed.

'I told you! I am a one-woman show!'

Before I could retort she was already questioning them what they made of all this. 'It is amazing! We love it!' Their immediate response.

'Mediterranean warmth!' The German said.

'We need to tell people back home,' said the Chinese couple.

'In Portugal we have similar customs,' said a green-eyed freckled girl.

'In Morocco, too,' said her husband.

We talked about the shared values and experiences of Mediterranean people and about the problems too. The Moroccan was a marine biologist, studying a species of fish that invades the Mediterranean from the Red Sea through the Suez Canal and destroys local populations of fish. A young Greek fisherman joined our conversation with his concern about the traditional *kaiki*, a type of wooden vessel used for fishing.

'They are not there just to look pretty for pictures or for taking tourist boat rides,' he vented with frustration. 'These are works of art, built from memory without any plans, part of a craft which is becoming extinct'. We all moved closer to hear him. 'Greek shipbuilding dates back to prehistoric times. The secret of the shipbuilding craft lies in the skill of the shipwright and the graceful manipulation of wood.' He lowered his voice, 'I know, because my father was one of the few skilled masters and now he is so disappointed...after seeing fishermen destroying their *kaiki*'. But why would they do such a thing we asked? 'About 13,000 thousand *kaiks* are doomed to be destroyed following a law imposed by the EU to prevent overfishing. Ok I understand that, but can't their use be changed? Why do they have to be destroyed?' We all remained silent thinking about his question.

'Did you enjoy it?' Stavroula asked the next day. 'Then you must not miss St. George's day in April. We have a horse race and the winner can go past the entrance of the church!' It was almost noon, so I suggested to grab something to eat. 'We do not *grab something to eat*,' Stavroula said disapprovingly. 'We enjoy food; prepare it with love, patience and *meraki*'. Realizing I did not understand, she said, 'difficult to translate. It means putting your heart in it... but not exactly that... difficult to translate...Come I'll show you,' she said. She took me to a vegetable garden. 'Look,' she showed me some seeds. 'We do not buy seeds. We produce them

naturally. These come from every vegetable indigenous to this island. They are resistant to pests, diseases, adapted to the conditions of this area. Haven't you noticed how tasty the food here is? Most of us have seeds handed down to us from our forefathers. They are valuable!' She looked at me and I liked how determined she looked.

Time passed quickly. Seasons were changing. I had gotten accustomed to my life on the island. I loved my newfound connection to the land. I realized that I could still carry out my research from this remote location and I was actually thinking of staying longer. I came to care for the open, honest, simple people. Their patience and wisdom never stopped to amaze me. From time to time I would think of *the treasure* Mr. K. would not joke about something like that. I began reading local history books. One story was about the pirates of the Aegean and of one that was known to hide a treasure in Lemnos. Another story told of golden coins hidden away during enemy occupation while their owner died. And then there were the still uncovered archaeological treasures. So many possibilities!

One day a large group of people were at the beach. The sun was setting. We were sitting by the fire, eating, joking and then we got into serious discussion. Each talked about the issues that worried them most; the increasing numbers of people leaving the countryside, the loss of biodiversity. A guy from the area of mountain Pindos, in central Greece, discussed the practice of uprooting the whole plant which destroys its chances to reproduce.

Manolis, a ship captain from Crete, talked about the 443 areas in Greece alone included in the European network Natura and God knows how many in the whole area of the Mediterranean. He threw a stick in the fire: 'People!' He said. 'We are the guardians of this richness; we cannot let anyone mess with it,' his face flushed with anger. An approving murmur bubbled up from the audience.

'I agree! And let's not forget the wetlands of Alyki and Chortarolimni, right here in Lemnos,' a voice was heard. She introduced herself as a biologist. 'Alyki is the only natural salt lake in Greece with so large a surface that has not been influenced by man. The wetland supports rare and threatened species. As far as birds are concerned, Alyki and Chortarolimni are some of the few sites where

breeding of *Glareola pratincola*, *Himantopus himantopus*, *Recurvirostra avosetta*, *Falco naumanni* takes place.’ She was breathless.

‘Slow down!’ Some people tried to put a stop to her rant. ‘What are you talking about? We haven’t got any of *that* here.’

She smiled smugly, ‘Oh yes you do! *Glareola pratincola* is the collard pratincole, what you call *nerohelidono* in Greek. *Himantopus himantopus* is the black winged stilt, *kalamokanas*. And *Recurvirostra avosetta* is the Pied Avocet.’

‘You mean that these birds we see around here are rare and threatened? I’ll be damned, I didn’t know that,’ protested someone. ‘I thought they were just birds!’

Maria, the biologist went on, ‘The geographical position of Lemnos is very important since migratory birds use it as a resting place. There are rare kinds of swans, falcons and hawks, all and all about 40 rare bird species. There are also important invertebrate species. Not to mention the sea lily, a typical Mediterranean species of sand dunes whose populations decrease because of the destruction of its habitats. The real threat comes from uncontrolled hunting and human intervention on the habitats. A typical example is the intensive exploitation of Alyki for salt production. The site can be used for educational and biological research purposes.’

And the heated discussion went on until the early hours. People split in smaller groups, discussing how to get organized to take action. I thought of the challenges this small island faced, but not only the island, the Mediterranean as a whole. On the other hand I was glad to see that Theofilos in his disappointment was wrong: there were people, especially young people, interested, passionate, well-informed and ready to claim back their cultural heritage and protect the environment. The future was not bleak after all.

The colours of the sky were gradually splashing in splendor signaling the coming dawn. In a moment of clarity I realized that the treasure Mr. K. had me searching for was every place like this, rich in tradition and biodiversity; the connection to nature. I took a deep breath of the crisp air and felt at peace. I felt one with the Earth and everything on it. I did not have to look far for this treasure. It was all around me.

