

## ***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1994**

### GOING WITH THE FLOW IN GREECE (Spiros)

There was no doubt that Spiros was amorous. His sexual arousal and excitement were only too obvious in our dalliance together. But whether he was effectual or not, I never discovered. Greece, I decided was a country where one played it by ear, went with the flow. And the flow with Spiros, rather to my relief, indicated dalliance, but no further.

It was June 1966, and I was on my way back to New Zealand after two and a half wonderful years in London. After tearful farewells to my two beautiful daughters, who had opted to stay for ever and whom I felt I might never see again, I embarked on my last fling in exciting, wonderful Europe. This involved the ferry to France, the train to Venice, and a sea trip down the Adriatic to Corfu in a Yugoslav vessel called the Jadran. Apart from collecting my ticket to New Zealand in Athens, and finally leaving from there in the Greek ship Elenis, I was embarking on an unplanned fortnight in Greece. Travelling alone, and with my luggage loaded on board at Southampton, I was free to go with any appropriate flow that looked interesting.

I shared a cabin on the Jadran with another Dorothy, a Scottish woman on her way to a summer au pair job with a Greek family in Itea, near Delphi. I was the only disembarking passenger in Corfu. the first Greek port of call.

The port for Corfu was then a tiny place. Dorothy and I walked ashore, me with my bag to deposit somewhere, a room for the coming nights to find and £4/10/- worth of Yugoslav currency to change somewhere into Greek money. We found a small tourist office on the waterfront. Spiros, an agreeable, lively chap in his early 40s, was the owner of this establishment. He offered smiling assistance in good English.

He suggested that if I was prepared to return to the ship to buy him a carton of 200 English cigarettes, for which he would give me the money, he would take Dorothy and me for a drive round Corfu until she had to return to the ship. When he saw the Yugoslav money I wanted to change, he told me it was worthless anywhere but on Yugoslav territory (i.e. the Jadran) and I would have to ask the Captain to change it into Greek money for me on board. So that was another reason to return to the ship.

£4/10/- was £4/10/- to me in 1966. I couldn't afford to lose it at the very beginning of my travels in Greece. But I didn't want to ask a favour from the captain.

"Why not?" said Dorothy. "You know he likes you — he took quite a fancy to you on the first night! He'll do it for you."

But that was just why I was reluctant, Huge, handsome creature that he was, he definitely had made advances to me that night, but dropped me like a stone for a

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younger passenger next day. Obviously I had been weighed in the balance and found wanting.

However, £4/10/- being £4/10/- I allowed myself to be persuaded.

I returned alone to the quiet, seemingly empty vessel. First the barman, who sold me Spiros's cigarettes with no trouble. I asked him if the Captain was still on board. Yes, he said, and indicated the companionway to the bridge.

I climbed the steps and confronted two cheeky sailors swabbing the dock. I asked them where the Captain was. Grinning, they pointed to his cabin door. Then they leaned on their mops to watch. I knocked once. No reply. Sniggers from the sailors. I knocked again. Still no answer. I turned away, but was assured, by the sailors' excited reaction, that he was indeed there and I must try again. At the third knock a stentorian voice from within roared something incomprehensible but clearly uncomplimentary. The sailors were nodding vigorously, pointing to the door handle. I opened the door. Lying half naked on the bunk, was the Captain, furious at having been disturbed in his siesta.

"You!" he yelled, hastily pulling a sheet over himself.

I quaked. But having come so far I was not going to retreat without giving it a go.

Quickly I brought out the offending Yugoslav money and asked him to change it into Greek currency.

He was far from pleased. He wanted to get out of bed, so I turned my back while he hauled on his trousers.

Grumbling, he sat down at a desk and opened a drawerful of notes and coins of many kinds. Still muttering angrily, he got to work with an adding machine.

"Don't worry if it isn't exact." I said.

But of course he had to. He could not risk me bruising it abroad that the captain of the Jadran had rooked me. He counted out the Greek money and handed it to me with a wordless glare.

"Thank you very much!" I said sweetly. "I'm so sorry to have disturbed your siesta."

Clutching my booty I opened the cabin door and faced the two cheeky sailors who had been awaiting my return with great interest. When I waved and smiled and looked none the worse for wear they pretended to applaud me.

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Spiros was delighted with his carton of cigarettes, and I with my money. He gave Dorothy and me a splendid drive round Corfu town.

We returned to his office after delivering Dorothy to the ship, and Spiros took me to his cousin's room. There I spent my first night in Greece in a typical Greek pensione-type private house, very clean, with a bed with mattress, pillow and undersheet only and a table holding a huge carafe of water. I would share the family's bathroom and have all meals out.

Spiros left me there to have a rest, promising to return at 7.30 to take me out to dinner, no less. (Those English cigarettes mattered!) We would be going to a restaurant where the King of Greece dined when he came to Corfu. This sounded interesting indeed. Yes, I must go with the flow.

We drove to a country taverna two or three miles out of town, and had a pleasant meal outside under the vines and olive trees. The cigarettes Spiros offered me were Greek, and quite awful.

"Where's your English cigarettes?" I asked him.

"You think I would waste them on you — or me?" he laughed. "Those cigarettes are for a very special occasion!"

I wondered about bribery and corruption.

After dinner Spiros proposed a drive. He wanted to show me where the Durrell family lived when they were in Greece. Who in 1966 had not heard of Lawrence Durrell the novelist and his equally famous zoologist brother Gerald?

It was a perfect night, as all nights in Greece were to be, with a huge chocolate box moon. Spiros drove quite a long way, up and over a mountain and along a ridge which hung over a perfect little bay. Down below, with lights on, was the Durrell estate. As it was after midnight we didn't drop in for a cup of coffee! But it was a lovely and interesting drive in the moonlight. Corfu is so beautiful.

Then we had my second adventure.

On the way back over the steep hill with its corkscrew bends, Spiros put the front wheel on his side over the edge. The car hung over a chasm of several hundred feet. Try as he might, he could not back the car to safety. The prospect looked not only grim, but positively dangerous.

Spiros stopped trying, got out of the car and helped me out too. For the first time even he seemed nonplussed. However, never fear — help was at hand. Out of nowhere on that dark, solitary, empty road a car appeared. As it approached, Spiros flagged it down and it turned out to contain four young people, all known to him.

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They got out, and the two girls joined me at the roadside while Spiros wriggled carefully back into the driving seat and the two boys tried to get a grip on the car's body to raise it. With screeching gears and roaring engine, Spiros tried twice to back the car, without success. The whole operation looked terrifying to me. Both boys as well as Spiros himself seemed to be facing certain death should the car teeter in the wrong direction. At the third attempt I couldn't bear to look. I was so aghast. I covered my eyes and turned away.

One of the girls, who seemed no more than about 18, threw her arms around me and hugged me tight, whispering soothing words in Greek.. What a sweetie.

This time they actually brought it off. The car was once more sitting with its four wheels on the road. I was shaking like an aspen.

The young people took off with happy farewells, and we started down that mountainside. Spiros seemed none the worse for his experience, but worried about the car which was now needing special driving skills. Something had happened to it up there.

We made it back to the port, and after a little perfunctory dalliance (Spiros by now somewhat preoccupied) we parted, arranging to meet for coffee at his office next morning.

I turned up at about 9.30 and Spiros asked me what I wanted to do that day. He himself, he explained sadly, would not be available to entertain me. He had to see to his sick car,

"I need to buy a sunhat," I said. "Something cheap that I can throw in the sea if I feel like it when this holiday is over. And I want to go to a beach for a swim."

Spiros was full of ideas. He showed me a large map of Corfu and pointed out the beach I absolutely must go to, a very special one.

"Right!" I said. "Just tell me where I can pick up the bus for it."

"You will go with Dmetris!" he said. "Dmetris is my assistant, my mechanic. He will take you."

"Well," I said doubtfully (having seen the said Dmetris), "that's kind. But I might feel like staying on the beach all day. Dmetris should just give me a lift there, and leave me — eh? I'll come back by bus."

"There isn't a bus!" said Spiros. "Dmetris will stay all day with you if that's what you want, and look after you. I'll give him the day off!"

But I really didn't want to have a non-English-speaking peasant as my

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companion all day. I protested.

"Don't worry!" said Spiros. "You can teach him English. Look, here's the local paper! It's in Greek. He can show you how to read it."

"Oh, well," I said full of foreboding. "Okay!"

"The only trouble is, with that car we used last night being out of action, I don't have another of my hire cars to spare. You'll have to ride on the back of Dmetris's motorbike. Okay?"

Okay. Dmetris was summoned and ordered to find me a hatshop and then take me to that faroff beach.

What a day for a decaying colonial gentlewoman to remember!

There was a hatshop nearby. Dmetris told the hatshop lady that the "English" lady wanted to buy a hat to throw in the sea. She looked unbelieving, but found me one. Then we started off on a never-to-be-forgotten ride of ten miles or so on Dmetris's bike, with me holding on to my new hat with one hand and grabbing Dmetris's belt in terror with the other.

We passed through several long, straggling villages. Everyone rushed out from their whitewashed cottages to wave us on. Finally we reached a steep hillside hanging over the sea, with steps leading to a foot track down to the beach, not a soul in sight. Dmetris actually drove that motorbike down the steps bumpity-bump. bumpity-bump. When the grade got too steep he parked it against a tree, and we walked on down among the olive trees. We passed above an inlet where a French family was disporting themselves on the beach, and I was relieved to see they would be near. I had no idea what to expect from Dmetris. Not since New Zealand had I seen such deserted beaches. But very beautiful.

During that morning of repeated heavenly swims interspersed with rests beneath the olive trees, various things happened. Dmetris made a shy, tentative gesture or two in case I was willing. I explained with gestures that I was Spiros's lady (not true, but it worked) and he gave me no more trouble. I tried to teach him English but it ended up with him trying to teach me Greek, with the help of the newspaper. After an hour I could read the whole thing out to him correctly, though understanding nothing, and this "skill" came in handy later in Athens. I got stung by a wasp, and Dmetris could not have been more distressed. He cured the sting with some quaint folklore involving a coin being pressed very hard, for about five minutes, on the spot. This was quite painful, but it worked.

At about 2.30 I said I was hungry and wanted to return to civilisation. Dmetris understood the hungry bit only, and took me out to sea once more, where we swam together to a long rocky cliff face from which he painstakingly prised a few tiny

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limpets, shelled them in the water and popped them into my mouth. There were not enough for him, though. On the long swim back he was concerned that I might not be able to make it, and explained that if I felt tired I was to call "Taxi!" When I did, he lumbered up alongside me and made me hang on to his shoulders and float above him as he piggybacked me in towards shore. (I learned later that he had said "taxis", a Greek word meaning "tired" I thought I had discovered Dmetris's only English word.)

At last, on shore again, I managed to explain that I did indeed want to go home. I was ravenous, limpets or not.

The trip back started off with the bike actually climbing some of those steps bumpity-bump — incredible — and the long ride back to town, in siesta time, was uneventful. Such empty rough roads! As soon as we arrived at Spiros's office Dmetris, who I now knew hero-worshipped his master, rushed in to tell him he had delivered his "girlfriend" back safely, and gabbled something that made Spiros look concerned for a moment.

"What about the wasp sting?" he asked. "Are you alright?"

Dmetris was overwhelmed with shame that he had allowed Spiros's "lady" to be stung by a wasp.

What a day! I felt I had had a Greek-slave at my beck and call.

The next night the ferry for the south arrived, and I thought that was the end of my association with the unforgettable Spiros. However, more was to come.

In Patras I spent a memorable night sharing a room in a cheap hotel with two English girls, and in Delphi another, with Dorothy, resisting seduction on the slopes of Mt. Parnassus with two of her importunate local male friends. That evening ended up in me smuggling Dorothy into my pensione bedroom to sleep, going with the flow a bit too fast for my liking. In a cheap hotel in Corinth I had my watch pinched, but managed, with low cunning and fractured Italian, to retrieve it. Then it was Athens, to collect my ticket. And after that I planned to return to the Peloponnese Peninsula for the final 4 or 5 days, to see the famous ruins.

Wandering around Syntagma Square in Athens at siesta time that Saturday, I tried to locate a pensione Spiros had recommended. An attentive stranger, attracted (as he later told me) by my wondrous legs, an artist from the island of Lesbos, accompanied me. Everyone was asleep, he explained. Everyone always is in southern Europe from 2 o'clock till 4.

We found the house and a middle-aged but attractive lady opened the door, grumpy at being disturbed. But at the name of Spiros her face lit up, and she showed me a pleasant room which I took for two nights. Anything for a friend of

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Spiros's, she said!

The Sunday passed happily in Athens with new friends from the pensione, a German architect and his wife, exploring the Parthenon and Plaka area.

Next morning I went to the Shipping Company and fixed things up. I had packed my few belongings at the pensione, prepared to leave at 3 p.m. on the bus for Nauplion after doing this business. When I returned my landlady greeted me with excitement, but reproach. Where had I been? Spiros was in town! The wonderful Spiros was actually here! He had called to see me, -but missed me. But he had arranged for me to be picked up for lunch at 1 o'clock.

I was collected by two English girls in a taxi, and we drove to a rather posh hotel with a rooftop restaurant. And here was Spiros, all smiles, with the big Hello. I was happy to suddenly have old as well as new friends in Athens.

We had lunch at about 2 o'clock. What about the 3 o'clock bus for Nauplion? Don't worry, said Spiros, there's one at 5 o'clock too.

In the restaurant there was one hotel guest, a lady a little younger than me, sitting at a corner table writing letters.

Our lunch was lengthy, boozy and hilarious. The girls were nice and roared with laughter at the animated Spiros and his jokes. Spiros was sparking on all cylinders. The solitary English lady was listening, smiling. finding us all entertaining.

When our coffee was served Spiros came to the point. he needed me, he said.

He had come to Athens to take delivery of three new cars from England for his car-hire service in Corfu. He had driven over in his own car, bringing with him for the ride the two English girls who were holidaying there. They were going to drive back two of the three new cars, over the mountains to Corfu, that night, with Spiros driving his own car. This meant the extra new car needed a driver. Would I please, please be that driver and join the convoy?

I gasped with surprise. Spiros did some fast talking about the wondrous trip it would be, driving over the mountains through the perfect, moonlit night. The scenery, the romance, the atmosphere, the excitement, the fun! I simply must say Yes!

"But what about Nauplion and the ruins?" I cried. "After all, I've already been to Corfu. And I'd have to take a horrid long, hot bus ride back to Athens to catch my ship for New Zealand."

The girls joined him in trying to persuade me. And I must confess I was very,

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very tempted. What an adventure it would be! But my guardian angel kept whispering. "You're not an experienced enough driver! And you've never driven on the 'wrong' side of the road. And remember that horrific mountain road on Corfu where I saved you from catastrophe! And you're already half drunk, you know — and it's tonight!"

I listened to him sadly. I said, No.

Spiros's face fell only for a moment. He turned to the strange English lady in the corner who had been all ears for the past two hours, and called her over. Would she drive the extra car?

"I'd be delighted," she cried.

Everyone shouted Hooray, and she was signed on. I wonder now what adventures she had. I'm still a wee bit jealous, and ashamed of my caution.

At a quarter to five we all climbed into a taxi and I was taken to the bus station and poured on to the bus for Nauplion. As I waved goodbye to those happy, excited madcaps I felt, ruefully, that I had probably turned down the adventure of my life.

I didn't think I would have any more, with Spiros gone. But I did.

At Nauplion there was the Greek Cypriot on the beach, another admirer of my legs, who wanted to give me something to remember him by! There was hitch-hiking on the way to Epidaurus after missing the bus — in a high grader, and on the back of somebody's motorscooter, and making friends with dear old men who showed me wild-flowers and shouted me coffee in rough, working-men's cafés; and there was an episode in Mycenae where an off-duty young guide showed me the hidden, weed-overgrown tomb of Clytemnestra where he suggested we lie down and dally. Yes, it was adventures all the way for a lone female traveller in Greece.

But best of all, for me, was that mad, mad Spiros!