

Shot glasses

Spiri Tsintziras, Winner East Gippsland Institute of TAFE Travel Writing Awards, November, 2010.

A rabbit skin bounces off the rearview mirror; a gun lies under the seat. The man driving us to my father's village has a row of tattoos up and down each arm. From the back seat, I can see little white hairs poking out between the faded pigments on his forearm. His father, long dead, was the village priest.

He guns past the old family home towards the chapel *Prophitis Ilias* on top of the hill. He skids to a stop and my auntie, husband, children and I pile out.

Inside the chapel, thousands of specks of spider poo litter the floor. The icons are water logged and a row of ants zigzags its way up to the damp ceiling. My son walks up onto the platform where the priest would normally stand, and pretends to deliver a sermon, half-singing, half-gyrating his hips: Elvis meets diminutive Greek priest. I tell him that only males are allowed into the pulpit. He thinks that's pretty cool, and lords it over me with hips swinging.

From outside the door, the priest's son calls out, 'The Prophet Ilias was a murderer!' and does not enter. Our guide worships the ancient goddess Artemis. He is a hunter, and *for sure* she better looks after his interests.

This man and my father grew up in this small Greek village together. I see them in my mind's eye, young boys, turning turtles on their backs and shooting sparrows with slingshots. Later, he convinced my father to leave Greece for a new land, for the adventure that was migration. To a place as far away from the rocks and goats of their homeland as they could go. My father died in the *xsenitia*, the foreign land. His friend, the priest's son, eventually returned to the rocks and the goats, to hunt wild game and wreak havoc amongst the handful of locals left remaining.

When we head back down the hill, the kids sit quietly in the back seat, all the while watching the gun, apprehensively. We stop at the first house at the edge of the village; my grandparents' home.

We walk around the overgrown yard, where my grandmother, my *yiayia*, once grew a thriving vegetable garden. Now there are now only rocks and weeds. The outhouse once home to pigs and chickens has collapsed, a pile of stones and wood. The little lean-to where she baked bread is strewn with rubbish, the oven boarded up.

Only the big mulberry tree remains lush, leaves green, its branches heavy with fruit. My kids are delighted and want to know if they can eat the berries. I taste them. Their juice is sweet and rich. On a family visit back to Greece when I was a child, my grandfather used to push us back and forth on the rope swing he had rigged onto the tree's sturdy branches. At that time, my father had built a bed of wooden slats across the top of it, where he slept all summer under the stars. My kids collect berries to take home, quite taken with these stories. Where is the swing? Is the bed still up there?

We go to the back of the house. My eye travels along the field that meets the cemetery up on the hillock where my grandparents are buried. I remember on one visit here when I had returned as a young woman, my grandfather bringing the goats back from where they were grazing, their bells clanging. I had been sitting on an old tree stump, overlooking the dark mountains, and imagined roots spreading out from me, down through the old tree, back into the earth. I was trying to find out where I belonged: where I came from and where I was going. Now, I cannot find that tree stump amongst the weeds, and feel an overwhelming sense of loss, and disconnection. The wind makes a hollow sound as it blows down the slope. I feel that it understands me, dancing and swaying around my mood. Suddenly, I feel my grandfather in it too. He is here, but says nothing.

The old metal door to the back of the house looks settled. My auntie unwinds the wire that holds it shut and lifts it. I fear that it will not open – that we will not see what we have come to see. But it creaks open slowly, a gust of air lifting a cloud of dust as we step over the threshold.

Inside I see a low bed strewn with clothes, plastic bags, dust and fallen wood from the ceiling. The floor is covered in rat droppings, broken glass, dirt. It creaks dangerously as I step into what was once a bedroom. The ceiling is broken, and I can see the old thatched roof. I wonder aloud why everything is strewn in this way and my aunty says that someone has been through the house, looking for things of value.

In the kitchen, there is an old sideboard where my *yiayia* kept her plates and glasses. In the bottom shelf she stored the goats' cheese, and its earthy smell still lingers. Now, only two coffee

cups, a couple of shot glasses and a few dirty dishes remain. I pick up the shot glasses, these little glasses that had no value to the thieves who broke in. A few tears threaten, and before I know it, they have started in earnest. I try to ebb the flow, as my children look on distressed, but I can't stop – the tears come from the pit of my stomach, a place that my head can't control. I feel a deep sadness, an inexplicable loss. So much work, so much careful tending of this simple stone house and hearth, all gone into chaotic decay. I cry for them. I cry for my father who died too soon, in a country halfway across the world. I cry for myself – as my flesh loosens around my body, as the wrinkles form around my eyes and neck, I cry for the inevitable decay that will come. I cry because the struggle to grow up, to partner, to give birth, to work, to achieve, it comes to this in the end – the smell of the earth and the shriek of the wind. I see the look of dismay on my children's faces. I know I can't explain this in soothing tones. I turn away.

I walk into the living room and all the old goats' hair blankets have been strewn across the floor. On top of them is a barely worn shoe, set on its side, along with a bag of papers. I pick these up and pull out a card I had written to my grandfather some twenty years ago, my clumsy Greek letters full of earnest Christmas wishes. It is tucked away in an envelope, with a few of my other letters and cards, as well as a telephone bill from twenty years ago, my grandfather's army identity card and a tally of the acres of land he owned, noted on a sheet of paper. The tears begin again, but this time I compose myself for my children, who look at me, concerned and surprised: 'Please don't cry again mummy.' I reassure them, and they are delighted to be shooed out to pick more mulberries from the overladen tree. I tuck the bag of papers under my arm and carefully put the two shot glasses in my coat pocket, listening to them clink together. I linger a little, and then pull the heavy door behind me.

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