

Kírkē's Diary

I am older now. I was left this now astonishingly beautiful property, like a constellation of abandoned swallows' nests resting lightly on the high cliffs of Santoríni, by an old man who, dying, imagined them to be worth nothing.

To any dying man, little in our analog world seems of value, I admit, but he managed to leave me the one treasure left him to bestow. The old man's two sons had been a great disappointment to him. His wife had been graspingly greedy. His mistress had been well taken care of in advance of his final illness. So, "Let Kírkē have that worthless, falling-down settlement on the cliffs above Arméni, and throw in that property on the road to Ancient Théra, too," was what he decided. He put it in writing and had two priests and the mayors of Oíia, Kamári and even Finikiá witness it. There was some grumbling in the family, but the man left millions to everyone related to him by blood. So, here I am.

When I inherited the *strémmata* outside Oíia, the acreage, it resembled the broad, naked forehead of an immense philosopher, troubled only lightly by half-*faux*-Venetian, half-troglodytic-cave houses tumbled atop it, all in a sad state of decay; home to goats, feral cats, Cycladic snakes and lizards, and wide open to the winds and rain and scintillating Aegean sun, winter and summer. This was just before the obscene, European-Union-funded building boom of the 1990s on Santoríni, when luxury boutique hotels began springing up like hardy,

rose-tinted growths of wild *Allium*, where once there'd been rubble.

Those same heights, situated on the *caldera*, a third of the way from the village of Oïa to Imerovígli, are crowned today with the luxurious villas my German financial partners bankrolled, and which I with my own hands helped resurrect from the humble, if ornately vaulted, Cycladic dwellings abandoned in the island's last, horrific, 1956 earthquake.

To the old man, never one of my many lovers, the site *was* worth nothing, as he himself could do nothing to revive it, and nor could his witless progeny. But I, 40 at the time, persevered: there were still *diaspora* Greeks in Munich with money to spend building beautiful rooms with a view; and I found a cadre of skilled, devoted Albanian men, all in their teens and 20s, all hungry and able, and we brought the place back, like Lazarus, from its dusty tomb.

Now mine, theirs, ours, is a view like no other.

I live just down-cliff from the hotel, which I call The Mala. Well, my six small villas, two restored Cycladic chapels, the vaulted, three-domed staff quarters and my own retreat *are* like white beads of human bone strung on a *mala* (with bright “spacers” of golden-orange bougainvillea; azure and cerulean swimming pools; pomegranate trees and cactus-apple-heavy prickly pear). I live in the sole “unimproved” Oïan house, the only one not to fall in the quake. And I no longer bother to whitewash it, but it is a two-story cave-house with a wide, upside-down, arched smile of an entranceway: the ground floor and story-beneath-ground was once a vast *kava*, where the first residents fermented grapes to make their fine, Santoríni wines. Today, it serves as my cool, dry wine cellar, stocked to the brim.

This villa was the old man's, my benefactor's, birth home, not fine enough for his wife, but where I came to bring him Mountain Tea, *tsai vounou*, in his last days.

Beneath each of the churches, facing one another like martial angels at the very top of the property, the villas spilling down below them like wedding veils, like thrown rice, are deep cisterns, where the water we need for the three bone-dry summer months—high season at The Mala—accumulates and is stored over the winter; and often topped up by itinerant water truckers when our visitors use too much of it.

The chapels are consecrated to Saint Nicholas and Saint Marina, appropriate, considering how deep each stands in water.

In my own mind, of course, heathen that I am, the chapels are also temples to Isis and Aphrodite, a fact known to some on this island.

Childless island women, even before the earthquake, as long as the chapel stood and before, came to the site of Aghía Marina to leave votive offerings—*támata*, in Greek—in hopes of conceiving. The church is always open; the tiny iconostasis is ornamented with so, so many tin and silver and even gold *támata* of infants. Who am I to say who answers these prayers, Marina or Aphrodite?

The church icon, which I commissioned from local iconographer, Katerina, pictures Saint Marina not in her usual guise—immersed in boiling water, earthquakes destroying all around her, the Archangel Michael belatedly wafting her spirit up to God—but, rather, Aphrodite herself on a half-shell, suspended above a stormy sea; her virgin's belly miraculously swollen with child, and clearly visible beneath her azure robes. If anyone has ever had qualms about Katerina's depiction of Marina, no one has let on. The local priests generally give me a wide berth, in any event: The Mala brings them quite a nice little living in wedding and baptismal fees, so they hold their peace regarding our chapel's very pregnant saint, and our older, aethereal guardians, and do not fail to celebrate Marina's Name Day, July 17th, every year, with chanting and pageantry.

So, so many new mothers attend, bringing their babies to be blessed.

On the road to Ancient Théra—on the last piece of property bequeathed me by the old man—the Albanians have been building a sort of eccentric, isolated temple for me, these last ten years, over the winters, at their leisure, finished just this spring.

So, here I am, alone at 70, the proprietress of the most exclusive boutique hotel of the Cyclades, two Greek Orthodox churches, and a pagan temple.

My own sole incarnated guardian, and dependent, is a silent, deaf Dalmatian I call Cerberus—a little joke for the occasional literate hotel guest—and my visitors, primarily honeymoon couples from the First World (or what's left of it) call me Madame Kírkē (Greek for "falcon"), though I'm as American as they come.

I decided, however, after the leave-taking of my last husband, and having moved back to Greece, always my second home, for good, that, with my wild white dreadlocks, and drama-queen clothes of indeterminate origin or age, a classical Greek name might be more appropriate for the chatelaine of The Mala. (I get called Quirky, Captain Kirk, Circe, and whatever approximation of my name the burgeoning Chinese and Japanese and Korean visitors can come up with.) I don't mind. I'm an enigma for these mostly very young people, in any event.

They stay, in their little laps of luxury—the villas offer every imaginable amenity—and I live over here, at a discreet distance from all the indoor and outdoor Jacuzzis, marble sinks and tubs, tile-*tessera*'ed swimming pools, German-goose-down comforters and banks of pillows, and mini-bars stocked with Veuve Clicquot, Heineken, and our house wine, Niktéri. But they're curious and, usually, sometime before the end of their honeymoons, or anniversaries, or dirty weekends, or solo hunting expeditions, they stop by and peer into my arched abode of first editions, kilims, archaeological fragments, silver-framed photographs, LPs of the last century, musical instruments, which I cannot play, suspended from the ceiling like mobiles—including a dented euphonium—oil paintings, my great weaving loom, and dust; vast, fine snowfalls of dust I can no longer be bothered to banish.

They find a pretext to call on me in person, and stay to talk a while.

Whatever their needs, whatever their desires, I answer when I'm called, and send up plumper (or leaner) pillows, or special champagne, or fresh figs at midnight, via my silent trio of Albanian seraphim. There are always three on the premises. My three favorites are the original builders; I call them Ardeas, Telegonus and Latinus. They cook, they clean, they visit the lonely, solitary visitors to The Mala (the men and women here on those solo hunting expeditions of grief and passion) in the wee hours, and, like Cerberus, they are inscrutable. They are my familiars, these skilled craftsmen who, with me, brought The Mala back to life, and who now rest on their laurels, are paid exorbitant wages, and keep fit in the gym-*cum*-dormitory-and-kitchen-building we erected to keep them looking like Adonises into their 40s and 50s.

Naming this place "The Mala" caused quite a stir on the island,

initially. Though I came by my Greek citizenship honestly (if “by injection,” as one local wag, Spyros, who runs the Baglama Taverna, says, because I married two Greek husbands in succession: one gay; one, eventually, schizophrenic; but more about them later), no one on Santoríni called a hotel, or cluster of villas, anything but The Albatross (imagine!), or The Xenia, or The Princess of Oïa, or The Atlantis, till I came along.

There's even a hotel in Firostefáni, run by dear friends, called The Agnádema. Try getting tourists to pronounce *that*, let alone comprehend the purely local meaning of the term.

There's also, in defiance of consonants, The Hotel Aeaëa which, as well as being unpronounceable except by those with toothache, has dark classical associations: Aeaëa was the island where Odysseus's men were turned into animals by the resident sorceress. I doubt the manager put *that* information in his brochure.

But, The Mala still caused much tongue-wagging. Foreign. Un-Christian. Heathen. Sounded too much like *malákas*, the first word any foreign visitor to Greece learns, which translates, roughly, “jerk-off,” or “masturbator,” and is most often used as a term of greeting mixed with endearment, as in, “Hey, *Maláka!* I haven't seen you in ages!”

So, The Mala.

After naming the place, I went a step further, and gave each little, detached villa its own name, now a common practice on the island, but not back when I was improving the property. Now, every little Santoríni villa has its own name, emblazoned on a tile plaque just outside the door. (Ours are hand-painted by a long expatriated artist named Lars.)

My little houses were christened for places in *Magna Graecia* where life-altering things happened to me. They could just as easily have been named for specific old husbands and lovers, but the place-names seemed a bit more subtle, more discreet, if only opaque to the visitors. In *my* mind, each little house contains volumes; each is freighted with history, with stories—my own.

The six villas, the six whitewashed beads on The Mala are, therefore: The Mýkonos House; The Constantinople House; The Cephalónia House; The Kýthira House; The Mytilíni House; and The Délos House.

These six structures, along with the two chapels, where weddings, baptisms (and even an occasional funeral) are performed, the Albanians' complex, and my own house, comprise all there is of our sanctuary.

And, being the eccentric old bat that I am, I added another little fillip of foreignness to the place, something of which few know, except for those visitors who write in them.

Years and years ago, with a former lover, a young man ten years my junior, I visited a cluster of cabins—a beautiful rustic inn—on the Big Sur Coast of California, called Deetjen's.

Deetjen's is not alone in having a "Visitors' Book" stationed in each room—each cabin, in its case. But it was the first time *I'd* seen such astonishing *silva rerum*, to use a term from antiquity, in a humble American "motel." A *silva rerum* (and I have Wikipedia's entry regarding it here at my fingertips, as we have an iCloud in every room at The Mala) means literally, in Latin, a "forest of things." Lifted from the Latin and transported into Polish, the:

"... polonized *sylwa* or/and sometimes described as a *home chronicle* was a specific type of a book, a multi-generational chronicle, kept by many Polish noble families from the 16th through the 18th century. Some authors of modern Polish postmodern literature try to create works similar to the *silvae rerum* of the past.

"In historical Poland it was written by members of the *szlachta* (Polish nobility) as a diary or memoir for the entire family, recording family traditions, among other matters; they were not intended for a wider audience of printing (although there were a few exceptions); some were also lent to friends of the family, who were allowed to add their comments to them. It was added to by many generations, and contained various information: diary-type entries on current events, memoirs, letters, political speeches, copies of legal documents, gossip, jokes and anecdotes, financial documents, economic information (the price of grain, etc.), philosophical musings, poems, genealogical trees, advice (agricultural, medical, moral) for the descendants and others—the wealth of information in *silvae* is staggering; they contain anything that their authors wished to record for future generations). Some *silvae rerum* were of truly enormous proportions, with thousands of pages (Gloger cites one of 1,764 pages) although the most common size is

from 500 to 800 pages. They were written from the 16th century (the earliest entries are from the times of King Stefan Batory) to the mid-18th century (the times of the Saxon kings in Poland)."

At Deetjen's Big Sur Inn, the Visitors' Books in the rooms comprised, taken together, a sort of *Thousand and One Nights* of love, lust, debauchery, spiritual illumination (and dark nights of the soul), all given voice by the hundreds and hundreds of guests, nay, writers, artists, lovers, who left their marks, drawings, confessions, declarations, benedictions, excoriations, novellas and, in some cases, fine pen-and-ink drawings.

One woman wrote in her own blood.

There were visitors to Deetjen's who simply jotted, "Had a great weekend," or "The walls here are sooo thin!" But, for the most part, people burst out of their cocoons, broke silence in uncharacteristic ways, channeled Miller, Nin, Casanova, Dante, Montaigne, De Sade, Jong and Whitman (in no particular order), and I spent my entire week there waiting for each and every cabin to empty so I could creep in and read what was in those beautiful Morocco-bound books.

It drove my former lover and me nearly mad with unrequited desire: we were there to work on a book together, I was then living on The Wrong Coast, with my last beloved husband... and so, we two now-chaste but once aflame hotel guests were doomed simply to read, and burn.

At The Mala, I have duplicated those books, each one tethered by sturdy chain to a beautiful period writing desk set in an alcove off each villa's front room. And Behold, Gentle Reader, visitors to The Mala, like those to Deetjen's, have not disappointed me.

They have come, stayed, and opened their souls on paper like veins into a warm bath.

The one difference between the Visitors' Books at Big Sur and those here, near Oia, is that a great portion of each volume has been written—between the visitors' entries—by the chatelaine of The Mala, herself. I have written my own stories, my own story, between their lines, as it were.

All of those who come here remain here in some small, vivid, passionate way, and I, among them always.