

The simple life

We have been happy in Horio. The house is much the same, despite minimal upkeep. Over time the mortar in the roof reverted to its natural state. Every day a dusting of red sand drizzled down from the reed ceiling. Getting into bed was like slipping between sheets of sandpaper. If you were not careful to cover food, lunch tasted like a picnic on the beach. The only person who didn't mind was Harry, who was weaned at Klimaki and had a taste for gritty food. We woke up one morning like Bedouin in a sandstorm and decided to replace it, using more cement this time.

An earthquake left a crack in a wall. Arfa and I were asleep when it struck. An express train roaring through the bedroom woke us up. The bed shook, pans fell off the shelves, melons rolled round the floor. Arfa's earthquake drill was to put her pillow over her face. I watched the beams above our heads and prayed they would fall diagonally. We should have done what the rest of the village did: run into the square in front of the church. Apparently the range of nightware and bedtime hairdos was a spectacle not to be missed.

The mule paths up to the Old Place have been bulldozed into dirt roads and the old stone walls used for hardcore. The sky is strung with telephone and power lines. Old Yannis now calls his coffee-ouzo-everything-emporium a minimarket. We have a new taverna, which we call the easytav because of its bright orange plastic furniture.

Jack is now a film director, Jim a surgeon, Kate an artist, Harry a legal headhunter. Seven grandchildren relive the experiences of their parents and add their own. I patched up the Mirror dinghy for them, so red sails adorn Klimaki beach again.

Arfa is a renowned human rights lawyer. For thirty years I have been privileged to listen to a breakfast lecture on the lawyerly topic of the day. Once I came to Horio alone on the pretext of pruning the mulberry. I was eating yoghurt and honey in the early-morning sunshine and enjoying the guilty pleasure of missing my customary tutorial. I flicked on the transistor for the BBC World Service. Who should I hear putting us right on Article Five of the European Convention on Human Rights? In my haste to turn her off I knocked the tranny on the floor, where it broke into pieces. We haven't had a wireless in the house since.

It was never our intention to drop out and grow olives or rear sheep. The rustic life can get pretty boring and there's just as much hard work and worry in Arcadia as anywhere else. Homes are for leaving as much as for going back to. But Horio has always been a place to hold in our

hearts, not because of the pile of stones we dug up but because of the generous people who became our friends. Some of them have taken the low road to the cemetery and then to the bone house. The door is unlocked. The air is musty like a charity shop. Dust swims in the beam of light from the open door. They say household dust is mostly human skin, but in here it's bone. On the shelf are Iphigenia who rhapsodised over the fireplace, Barba Petros the cigarette pioneer, whom I saw die, and Barba Christos, whom I saw dug up.

Nektarios was rushed to hospital with vomiting and yellow eyes, where they gave him a year to live unless he gave up the booze. He went back to work, but his hands shook so much with sobriety that he lost his grip and fell off the school roof. Haralambos's heart gave out among the bathroom fittings. His father-in-law Spiros the carpenter lives on in the four-inch gap under our front door, gaps in the windows and cracks in the floor, lovely in summer with plenty of ventilation but a devil in winter. He obviously did not make his own perfectly rectilinear bone box. Elpida and Mitsos are next to each other, as they were for seventy years except for the couple of months between their deaths. Mitsos lives on in our cess pit. It has never given us any trouble, though I shudder to think what it looks like inside. Aristotle the water diviner, Aussie Alekos, Fedon with the comb-over, Konstantinos the priest, Maria the dirge singer, Vassilis the stylish shepherd – all stare from the other side through their fading photographs.

The children and grandchildren of our old friends have become truly European. One of Ajax and Eleni's twins is an aeronautical engineer, the other a software designer in California. Mitsos and Elpida's granddaughters studied in Sweden. One is a biochemist, the other a cardiologist. Dyspeptic Dimitri went into intensive goat rearing to keep his granddaughter at Essex University.

In the early 1990s I suffered the delusion of being stalked by Kevin Keegan, the famous footballer. I stroll along a mule track in the mountains or down to the village and out of the corner of my eye catch a glimpse of a curly perm popping up over a wall or peeping through a bush. I turn to look and it disappears. I stop. I watch. I listen. Nobody. The first time it happens I blame it on a trick of the light. The second time on a breeze ruffling the leaves. It gets worse. I see two Keegan mullets at a time, then three. They were my first Albanians. In 1991 the Communist regime in Albania collapsed, swiftly followed by the economy. Tens of thousands of people crossed into Greece looking for work. Ethnic Greeks were given visas. Ethnic Albanians walked over the mountains. Within three years about a quarter of a million were living illegally on the mainland and in the islands. This is only a rough estimate, as Greek ability to manage a coherent immigration policy was then, as now, lamentable.

The Keegan coiffure, a periwig of curls at the front and a mullet at the back, was as fashionable in Albania as it was among English footballers and fans in the 1970s. Urban sophisticates of Tirana disparagingly called it the Kosovo Haircut. It lingered on in the ditches of Evia until the owners twigged that they might as well put a placard round their necks: I am an illegal immigrant. Even with a short back and sides it was possible to pick them out. They looked stunted and ill-nourished, as if they had been incarcerated in the peculiar little concrete mushrooms that dot their native landscape, which metaphorically they had. A few months of a wholesome diet worked wonders.

With no papers they hid from strangers. They lived in ruins and sheep pens and scavenged for food and work. A favourite place was the rubbish dump on a cliff overlooking a ravine. Nobody braved the stench and rats and seagulls unless they had to and there were deliveries of refuse to pick over for scraps of food or clothing. At night, cooking fires glittered among hillocks of decomposing garbage. The police rounded them up as well as that dysfunctional force was able. Those they managed to catch were fingerprinted and robbed of their pitiful earnings before being driven back up north to the border. They went home to see their families and in a few days walked back over the mountains.

Our house was broken into. They took single mattresses, blankets, big pans, ladles, spoons, bowls, a bread knife, the gas hob and a bottle of gas. They left the rest. It was difficult to be angry. We would gladly have given them these things. In Athens, Albanian gangs stripped houses and shipped their loot north. Our Albanians just wanted to keep warm and make soup. As soon as a work permit system was put in place, the break-ins stopped.

The authorities were hampered by the willingness of Greeks to employ the Albanians at rock-bottom wages. They were cheap to feed on bread and water and soup. Nevertheless, they were generally reviled, *kakoi anthrophi*, bad people, dirty and unreliable and dishonest. If a tool was lost or a chicken went missing, Albanians took the blame. "Johnny, they're bad people. They aren't Christians even if they say they are. Make sure you lock everything up. And don't leave your keys in the car..." warned Vitalis.

"What about your Albanian, Vitalis?"

"Sami's a good man. Aren't you, Sami?"

Sami was sitting with us at the easytav tucking into a kilo of panzetta, a staple of the Mediterranean diet, grilled strips of juicy pork belly. Vitalis grew tomatoes and melons on the drained bed of Lake Dystos, fertile soil and water near the surface. Sami did the heavy lifting. He ignored us, used to the vilification of his race and the patronising of his boss.

To have a personal Albanian to do the dirty work was as essential an accessory as clickety worry beads and a gold cross nestling in the chest hair. They were borrowed and

lent by the day like donkeys and tractors. Women cleaned houses, looked after children, nursed the demented and the dying. Men worked in the gardens and the fields and the workshops. My Albanian was honest and hard working, your Albanian slacked when you were not looking, his Albanian was a thieving rascal. The unattached sat outside the café waiting to be hired for a day's work.

Sami lived in the humming and clicking of the new Telecom sub-exchange outside the village. He could now appear in public with whatever hairstyle he liked. Although Albanians were not yet given residence or work permits, they were no longer rounded up and deported. Over the following years Sami became the first Albanian to buy a plot of land, build a house, marry a local girl, send children to the village school, own a car, set up his own building business. Any spare money he spent on buying land, little plots here and there, on which he planted olive trees. After twenty-five years he became the first Albanian to be buried in the village cemetery, as far from the rest as possible, since he was not Orthodox. After three years his bones were dug up, as is customary, but not put into the bone house. Perhaps they were deported to Albania. Most of the living Albanians have now gone back too because there is no work.

We also borrowed some cut-rate Albanians: Mikis, Panos and Takis. These were noms de travail. Their real names were Viktor, after Victor Mature who was popular in Albania before the clampdown on everything western; Memet, brave of his parents in the self-proclaimed World's First Atheist State; and Traktor, whose father had ambitions on his collective farm. When we rebuilt our house the art of stone walls and schist slab roofs had been lost by all except old men, who no longer had the strength to heft the material. In Albania building technology had not moved on and their builders were much in demand by proprietors like us and owners of sheep pens.

They lived in fear of a police raid. I went down to the village to buy bread and run errands for them. We joked that every Greek has an Albanian and every Albanian an Englishman. Money was the main problem. They soon learned not to keep it about them in case they were arrested. Yannis our cafetier became their banker. He looked after their money and went to the Post Office to send it back home. They did a good job on our terrace and I invited them to dinner. I thought of treating them to shepherd's pie. When Traktor translated the invitation, Viktor and Memet looked embarrassed and uncertain.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

"They don't know what food you eat. They have heard English food is very bad."

"Don't worry. I'll get meat from the taverna. No English food, I promise."

I bought roast chickens and lamb chops. The trio came at sunset, freshly shaven, hair slicked down and perfumed,

best clothes. I served up the food and expected them to dive in. Instead, they protested they were already full and I had to force every morsel on them. They would only drink wine with a toast, in unison. At the end they they left food on the plates and dishes, wine in the bottles and glasses, and refused to take anything back with them. It wasn't only their technology and their skills that were old-fashioned but their manners.

Finally, over glasses of Glenhaggis single malt, Traktor spoke for them all.

"Mister Johnny, please explain to us. We do not understand. At home we are poor. We have no money for meat.

No money for clothes. No money for cars. Our houses are old like this. Every Albanian dreams of the life in England. Why do you live like a poor man in these ruins?"

"The simple life" was all I could think of, the stock answer I gave to Greeks. I hated the question because it made me wonder the same thing.

We continued to leave the keys in the car, despite the warnings. I wished anybody luck with our fifteen year-old VW Jetta with UK plates and right-hand drive. Or rather it was two written-off Jettas, the front of one welded to the back of the other by the father of a friend who had a fish and chip shop in Derby and rebuilt cars on the side. It endured the snows of winter, the downpours of spring and the baking sun of summer. It spent the winters in the chicken yard at the back of Yannis's café covered in a tarpaulin, which did not not deter nesting creatures, from chickens to mice to spiders. Rust had done for the window winders. To facilitate opening and closing them I took off the inside door panels, so you could lift the windows up and down by hand and wire them in position on various protrusions of the mechanism. The bodywork was rusted and scratched and dented. Chrome peeled, rubber perished, hubcaps absconded. Tattered wipers flailed at a windscreen that became more chipped and blue-mottled with the years. Passengers in the back could admire the road whizzing along under their feet until I refloored it with bits of chipboard. As a precaution, children were told to sit well back in their seats.

The most inconvenient reminder of its various collisions was when I ran into a bollard and bent the wishbone, part of the mechanism that connects the steering column with the wheels. My mechanic, George, straightened it as best he could, but left it with an inability to turn right in more than a gentle curve. The driver was advised to overshoot a right turn in favour of making a series of left turns, and never to park in a place that required right-hand-down-a-bit to get in and out. Fortunately there are no hairpin bends on the way to the beach or to Aliveri and we were careful not to venture further, to the airport for example. An added disincentive for hitting the high road was that it had been in the country five years and the time limit on imported cars

was six months. My passport was stamped to this effect, but since I had lost that, along with the registration papers, and got a new one, the vehicle was undocumented. A thief taking our illegal-right-hand-drive-no-right-turn-ventilated-rust-bucket off our hands would be doing us a favour.

After our first disastrous shepherd's pie and crumble dinner party, it was some time before we dared to invite neighbours again. Greeks are keen to embrace many aspects of American and European culture. When we moved to Athens in the 1970s, Christmas was celebrated with pork and Saint Basil brought presents on January 1. By the 1980s, Santa Claus had taken over along with Christmas trees, turkey, reindeer, artificial snow and other seasonal clichés. We have been to weddings where the bride and tuxedoed groom cut a three-tier wedding cake and danced the first dance, all new traditions gleaned from American films. But the element of foreign culture that is resolutely resisted is food.

A young friend from Horio studying in London witnessed with horror our honey glaze on a roast turkey. To this day he has never let us forget it. Word went round the village. For years relative strangers sidled up to us and asked quietly if it was true that foreigners put sugar on meat. Every dish bears its dogma of ingredients and woe betide the cook if she apostasises. Pepper on tomatoes, fruit with meat, lemon juice on a Greek salad, any herb except dill with lettuce are greeted with the brusque anathema then vazetai, 'you don't put that'. Heresies like rare-cooked meat, curry, fish with pasta are shunned. To minimise the risk of being served such abominations, our invitations to come to us are subtly and politely turned to invitations to go to them. To which we make only token resistance.

One way we can reciprocate is when our neighbours come to London. They arrive on shopping trips or for hospital consultations. Our first service is to give them a list of Greek restaurants. Some years ago we were introduced to a family who lived in Skourta, a small village in the Parnitha mountains north of Athens. Mikis and Voula had three young sons and her parents living with them. At the first fall of snow Grandpa went to bed in the 'cellar', a separate barrel-vaulted building mostly underground where wine and olive oil, hams and sausages and a stove were kept, and staggered out in spring, pale but well nourished. They kept sheep and goats, not the hobby flocks of Horio, but over a thousand of each. Yannis had sous-shepherds and kept an eye on them all from a white horse he rode bareback. The EU decided that his flock was too small and gave him grants to get rid of the animals and grow things. They spent the money on a Toyota pick-up and a massive two-storey house with marble bathrooms, flock wallpaper and gilt furniture. They kept their flock and continued to live in the little stone house that her great-grandparents built. The big

house was for special occasions like the baptism feast of their youngest son, when Mikis and his brothers rattled the chandeliers with shotguns fired from the balcony.

The reason we were introduced was that their second son, Yannakis, had something wrong with his foot and couldn't follow the sheep or, more importantly, play football. He came to London for an operation followed by six weeks of physiotherapy. The medical treatment was paid for by the Greek health service, but where would he and his parents and his grandmother live? In our sitting room, was the answer. For two months we lived the Horio life in London. Voula and her mother took over the cooking. They plucked up courage to buy bread and potatoes locally and the rest they brought over from Skourta in massive suitcases. Rustic sausages dangled over our faux-Georgian fireplace. Sheep dangled nose down in the cellar. Fifteen-kilo tins of feta dribbled cheesy brine over the laundry-room tiles. Tomatoes, peppers and aubergines filled the fridge. Every ten days or so Mikis flew back for more provisions, including plastic jerry cans of retsina and sheep's milk. We had a spit on the lawn, an airing cupboard full of yoghurt, buckets of fizzing beans and chickpeas. Only one British staple took Voula's fancy. She rhapsodised over ketchup, which she emptied into stews and soups in preference to fresh tomatoes. She stocked up for a year and sent it back in the empty suitcases. As for putting it on chips and sausages, then vazetai.

Mikis was in his element cantering up the mountain on a white horse, roasting a sheep on a sapling spit over a fire of twigs, loosing off a shotgun at scuttering quail. He floundered in a South London suburb, ill at ease and awkward. I took him for a drive in the country. As we potted along B roads marvelling at England's green and pleasant land, or rather yellow and pleasant as rapeseed was in bloom, we came across a rare patch of green dotted with sheep. Mikis's face lit up for the first time since he arrived. He leaped over the gate and strode up the hill, keen and lithe and in his element again. He brrhed at the sheep in Greek, which they understood, and examined them closely. His interest attracted their farmer, who charged up on a quad bike. Hoping he didn't tote a shotgun and think we were rustlers, I explained and introduced them to each other. Houses on fire doesn't begin to describe how they got on, despite the barriers of sign language and my interpretation. It severely tested my ovine vocabulary as they discussed the difference in price between hoggets and theaves and the merits of different kinds of pour-on as a prophylactic against scrapie and the intricacies of EU subsidies. Both surely came away with a distorted idea of sheep rearing in each other's country, but Mikis was happy for the rest of his stay.

Since joining in 1975 Greece had done well out of the European Union. Grants for agriculture and infrastructure transformed the country and the personal finances of politicians and bureaucrats responsible for allocating

them. The little fishing village of Limanaki was corralled by a massive breakwater and a wharf for a score of offshore fishing boats. Development opened up the coast to foreign tourists, especially Germans – and why not, their taxes paid for it. Windmills nag at our environmental consciences with their ugliness and thrumming. Just outside Horio we admired a state-of-the-Australian-art winery with shiny refrigerated fermentation tanks that put Kyria Dimitra's brick vat out of business.

The real bonanza years started when Greece joined the euro and money was plentiful and cheap at German interest rates. Modest houses in Horio became suburban villas with lawns and satellite dishes and air conditioners in the windows. The countryside was pocked with white concrete and blue swimming pools. One place even had a helipad. Then came the debt crisis of 2009 and the continuing catastrophe of bailouts, elections, referenda and increasing austerity. Last summer I went into Sofia's bakery for a loaf and our daily wine ration. The modern winery is now a litter strewn, broken-windowed ruin, bankrupted by poor management and a failing bank. Sofia did not resurrect her mother's brick vat, but sells her cousin's wine that he makes in a concrete shed next to his house. It comes in handy twolitre bottles and is the same price as water. Like all great estates, he has a photo of his winery on the label. We call it Château Garage. Sofia was upset.

"Alekos just graduated from the Polytechnic. In the top quartile."

"Congratulations." I meant it. The Athens Polytechnic, the National Technical University, is the most prestigious Greek university.

"Bah. Engineering and business studies. What does he do with that? All the money we spent on his education. Now what? Nine months wasting his time in the army and back here making bread."

"I'm sure he'll get a good job. He speaks good English."

"We don't have contacts. In any case, the government isn't hiring."

"I meant companies."

"For Greek companies you need contacts. Foreign companies you need experience. He has no future. What can he do?"

I was too considerate to give her the obvious one-word answer. It would upset her more. She knew it anyway. Emigrate. Another reason for not saying the word is that I couldn't remember what it was in Greek. You would think that after forty years in Greece I would be fluent. Some hope. Not long ago I was standing in the line for a cash machine in Aliveri. To avoid panic withdrawals and capital flight, there is a limit of €60 a day, £45, on how much you can take out of a Greek account. We are in Greece, so the daily queues are social events. I joined in the chat.

"I've been standing in urine for twenty minutes... fortunately I have a foreign table map... I need to pay Achilles

for painting our beetroots.”

Ah, the subtle differences between óuro (urine) and ourá (queue); trapézi (table) and trápeza (bank); chártis (map) and kárta (card); padzária (beetroot) and padzoúria (shutters). But foreigners are funny and I am happy to contribute to the entertainment.

So I sit outside the café with other white-haired old codgers and make a coffee last for an hour, until the sun goes down and I can have an ouzo with an easy conscience while Arfa is up at the house doing interesting things with beans. I plan my next road trip with my old travel buddy, Harley Davidson. Harley is a twenty-year-old Yamaha 50cc step-through. In motorcycle years that would make him about my age. We have made several trips together round the island and I have almost enough material for a book. My working title is Zeno and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. My friend Nick prefers Harley and Me, also a rip-off but snappier. I have a hankering to bike up to Mount Athos, the ancient monastic community and spiritual home of Orthodoxy, where women are banned and you have wine for breakfast.

There is still so much to see. And Horio is still our home to come back to.

