ESCAPE TO IKARIA

About the Author

Nick Perry spent his childhood in rural Dorset. He was educated at Parkstone Sea Training School and left at fifteen for a job at ATV Television in London. He then travelled around Europe for a while and moved from job to job back in London until he came into a small inheritance. On impulse, he and his brother bought a hill farm in North Wales, which is where *Peaks and Troughs* takes place. After seven years living on the breadline, he took his family on a new adventure and 'escaped to Ikaria'. He now lives with his wife in Wiltshire.

ESCAPE TO IKARIA

All at Sea in the Aegean

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To Arabella

The events in this book happened forty years ago.
The truth is as accurate as my memory will allow.
The names of several characters have been changed.

Prologue

In 1969, my brother Jack and I inherited a small amount of money and bought Dyffryn, a hill farm in North Wales. It was one of those life-changing moments when a decision is taken and wild youth doesn't give a second thought to what lies on the road ahead. We were in our early twenties. I was married to Ros and we had baby twins, Sam and Lysta. We were blissfully unaware that the theory of farming was quite different from the practice. But we did eventually manage to achieve a life of self-sufficiency, living off the land.

The constant struggle to keep ourselves financially afloat soon had us going to the bank to borrow money. We knew nothing about livestock but bought some sheep anyway, and Jack became a shepherd, helped by his beloved Meg, a border collie. We raised pigs and sold them to the abattoir as porkers, before realising we would be better off selling our meat door to door. So every Friday I drove a Morris van around the villages and managed to start making a living. We found out about farming the hard way, struggling bruised and battered through a comedy of self-inflicted errors.

Then Chicago Vomiting and Wasting Disease decimated the pig herd, the only case of its kind in North Wales. After surviving for seven years, we saw it as a sign to move on. The cycle of our farming days had come to an end. But what to do next presented itself in the most unexpected circumstances when I had to have a tooth filled.

Sitting in the dentist's waiting room, I pulled a magazine from the pile, flicked through the pages and came upon an article called 'Hidden Greece'. The few photographs showed a way of life that I could hardly believe was still being lived. Panniers of grapes carried on the backs of donkeys, past whitewashed houses in a landscape of cypress trees under a

bright blue, cloudless sky. It was probably the endless drizzle of a winter's day in Caernarfon and the ending of a stage in our lives that made those images so appealing. It was such a random happening – the magazine was over two years old – yet it would set us on a very different course.

We needed a new beginning, and the possibility of living on a Greek island seemed real. We sold the farm, paid off our debts and made our plans, which included organising the children's education with their primary school and being given the curriculum and books they would need for the year ahead.

And so Ros and I, with Sam and Lysta and our youngest son Seth, just two years old, set off to Athens on the 'Magic Bus' from Victoria coach station. The tickets were twenty-five pounds each and the journey took three days and two nights, all of which we spent sitting in hard, upright seats. Where we would end up living, and for how long, we hadn't a clue.

1

End of a Journey

If there's such a thing as 'coach lag' then I had it, leaning slightly to the right, having resisted the tight turns of the bus for two thousand miles. I was revved up and exhausted, a part of me still on the journey. I kept seeing sheep blocking roads, shepherd boys walking behind, waving sticks. Not on the Welsh roads where our journey began, but through Yugoslavia and into Greece. We wouldn't try that back home, moving sheep without a dog. The boys just stood and stared, watching us inch our way through the flock, the driver continuously sounding his horn.

And now here I was, wide awake, walking along the quayside of Piraeus harbour, trying to decipher the Greek alphabet. One letter resembled a cactus plant, another a half-eaten sandwich; my favourite was similar to a hump-backed bridge. It was impossible to even guess the names of these boats, but some stood out in English, *Sea Spray*, *Moon Rising*, *Helen of Troy*, poetically named expensive yachts, all swaying gently in the swell.

The seagulls were wide awake too, or perhaps they just couldn't sleep because of the street lamps throwing a fluorescent light over the harbour. The smell here was very different from the mountains of North Wales: a mix of bilge water, diesel and fresh sea air.

I didn't know what I was looking for, maybe a sign to show me the direction we should be taking. It was nearly midnight in February and I'd left Ros and the children sleeping in a room we'd rented above a café, weary from three days of travelling. Ros and I had managed to walk the children up the stairs and watched them collapse on to the unmade bed,

already half asleep, food barely touched. We removed their shoes and threw an eiderdown over them. Ros too was soon fast asleep, still wearing her head scarf.

And here I was, twenty-nine years old with calloused hands, staring at life while it stared back at me. That's how it felt out here in a displaced night, searching for a new adventure. It seemed the only changes I was capable of were dramatic ones.

There was no one about; stars quivering, water lapping, ropes slackening, restless seagulls hopping from boat to boat. But I was not alone. Suddenly someone shone a torch straight at me, the light strong enough to make me put both hands over my face.

'*Poios eisai . . . ti kanis?*' someone shouted.

Whatever he was saying, I replied, 'I'm English. I'm looking for a ferry, the next boat going to one of the islands.'

'*Ochi tora*.' Not now.

'When?'

'*Avrio*, tomorrow morning at nine o'clock.'

'Going where?'

'Ikaria.'

'*Efkharisto*,' I said, thank you, one of the few words I knew.

I'd never heard of Ikaria. Maybe it was just a small island, with only a few people living on it. That would suit us, rather than somewhere overrun with tourists in the summer.

It was too late to try to get any sleep, I'd be the worse for it, so I found an empty bench and dozed, clouds smudging out the white lozenge of a faint moon. My hands were stuffed in the pockets of a woollen overcoat, the same coat I'd worn walking the hills looking for stray sheep. I closed my eyes and shut out the remains of the night, smelling the harbour, listening to the gentle slosh of the water.

Some time after dawn I woke Ros and the children from a deep sleep, all of them huddled together in a single bed.

'There's a boat leaving at nine,' I told them as I opened the curtains to a blurred sun rising in a watery sky. In the window opposite, a man in a vest was shaving, two pigeons on the roof above him fighting over a scrap of bread. Nearly every TV aerial had a resident seagull scanning the waterfront.

We walked to the harbour, all of us, apart from Seth, with rucksacks on our backs, me carrying two suitcases. We sat in a café perfectly positioned to see the closed ticket office with the Greek flag fluttering on its roof.

None of us had managed a good night's sleep, but the emaciated cats under our table looking for food distracted the children from their tiredness. Already dock workers were unloading boats, boxes of fish piled high on their trolleys.

Ros and I tried to wake up on cups of Greek coffee, those small ones with an inch of sediment in the bottom. A couple of sips and you'd finished it. Bleary eyed, we watched the port of Piraeus coming to life. Despite a breakfast of yoghurt and honey, Sam and Lysta, our seven-year-old twins, made it perfectly clear they would rather be back in Wales. Already, whilst on the bus, Lysta had written a letter to her best friend Eleri telling her how unhappy she was. Seth, meanwhile at the ripe old age of two, was happy to be on his mother's lap chewing a piece of rock-hard dry toast, something I later learnt was called *paximathi*.

As we sat there, fishermen and porters smiled at us warmly. They seemed bemused to find a foreign family huddled together in the early morning having breakfast in a workers' café. Some came out of their way to ruffle the children's hair, accompanied by a strong smell of the sea . . . or was it the scent of the morning's catch that wafted over us? I wasn't sure whether it was curiosity or a genuine sympathy they felt; we were plainly out of place on a dockside in the middle of February, looking like refugees in transit.

I had a thousand drachma in cash and five hundred pounds in travellers' cheques stuffed into the money belt round my waist. I preferred not to plan ahead, but wanted to be prepared for the unexpected and hoped it was enough to keep us going for a while, until I found some work and we could make a life for ourselves.

As I paid the bill, I asked the café owner if he could tell us anything about Ikaria. He seemed astonished and, in what little English he could muster, said, 'You go to Ikaria? You no go there. Nothing in Ikaria,' shaking his head in disbelief.

'Dad,' said Lysta, and I could tell straight away that one of her acute observations was coming. 'What haven't you noticed yet, but when you do will make you cross?'

'I've no idea.'

'Look at the suitcase and rucksacks.'

'Oh, bollocks!' They were covered in seagull droppings.

'Dad, you promised you wouldn't swear in Greece.'

'Sorry.'

'We don't have to take the first boat that's leaving,' said Ros, fearing we were going to end up on a deserted island with no electricity or running water.

'I've got a good feeling about the place,' I said, although I hadn't. I just wanted to get the journey behind us. 'Besides, we can't walk around Piraeus harbour all day avoiding seagulls and trying to keep the children occupied.' I could imagine nothing but frayed tempers.

So I went to the booking office, which had just opened, and bought the tickets for Ikaria. It wasn't until I had handed over the money that the heavily mascaraed woman with bright red lipstick and neatly tied neck scarf told me the journey was going to take eight hours. She reminded me of a glamorous nineteen-fifties air stewardess, like those on the old travel posters. When I told Ros we'd be on board until five in the afternoon it didn't go down too well.

'What's the weather forecast?'

'Force eight gale.' I shouldn't have said that. It wasn't funny.

The children had never been on a boat before. 'You know they'll get seasick.'

They didn't, not for the first six hours. We had the whole upper deck to ourselves, apart from a couple of priests whose grey beards swung in the breeze. Unfortunately, every time Sam and Lysta ran past they offered them sweets from a paper bag. At this time of year, the ferries carried mostly cargo, all the necessities the islands had to import from the mainland. There were more crew than passengers, and they broke the monotonous journey by constantly fussing over us and taking turns to practise their language skills. A lot of them had relatives scattered around the world, especially in America and Australia.

It was the petty officer who painted a picture of Ikaria for me in perfect English, describing it as a remote, out-of-the-way place, not on the tourist route, close to the much larger island of Samos near the Turkish mainland. He told us that during the civil war the government had exiled thousands of communists to Ikaria and many still lived there. Apparently, a lot of Ikarians flourished well into their nineties. He wasn't sure why; perhaps it was the fish diet, or the islanders' custom of lining their stomachs each morning with an egg-cup of olive oil.

The crew, when they weren't hovering around us, seemed to spend most of their time smoking and leaning over the side flicking their cigarette butts into the sea, so the children were a welcome distraction. They took photographs of each other holding them, and gave Sam and Lysta a tour of the whole boat.

'Your children are blond like the original Greeks.'

I said to Ros, 'I hope it's not always going to be like this, everyone treating our offspring as if they were young gods.'

The captain, too, must have been at a loose end and invited us onto the bridge. 'British built,' he said, fondly patting the dashboard in front of him. 'Solid and secure.' Then he proudly announced, 'I left my wife for this ship. I fell in love with the engineering.' He was another one who couldn't understand why we were going to Ikaria.

'What will you do there? It is cold in the wintertime. No people, no fun. Yes, come in the summer, lovely beaches, but now no, it is madness.'

I didn't have an answer to that. Instead I asked him if I could steer the boat for a while.

'It's a ship, not a boat.'

But he let me take the wheel, and in the calm waters of the Aegean Sea I took control of the ferry.

I sang 'A Life on the Ocean Wave', but he didn't seem to appreciate it.

Suddenly I found myself alone on the bridge. For whatever reason, everybody had wandered off. Beneath me were thousands of tons of steel; I was overcome with the feeling that I was Jack Hawkins in *The Cruel Sea*. But it didn't last for long, as the captain reappeared, offering me a *souvlaki*.

I was surprised when Ros said we had been at sea for over six hours. Until then the weather had been fine, blue skies, gentle breezes, seagulls following us. And then Petty Officer Ianis, who I was now on first names with, announced there was a storm brewing. Sure enough, clouds started to gather, the wind strengthened, and coffee cups slid across tables as the ferry began to roll from side to side. They told us to go below where the ship's movement would not be so severe.

Already Sam and Lysta were being sick, and Seth, who always had a full belly, was getting ready to shift his lunch. I think we triggered one another off, a chain reaction, bending over bowls amid Calor gas canisters, wheelbarrows, bags of

cement powder, a row of fridges, none of it looking particularly secure, held in place by a single strand of rope.

We were a sorrowful sight, all of us retching, battered by the roar of the engines. We couldn't even keep down a drink of water. Lysta kept trying to get the words out that she wanted to go home. I couldn't blame her; what a few days they had been through. But the storm blew itself out, and they all fell asleep, including Ros, heads on each other's shoulders, like a little group of puppets.

They were still asleep when we arrived in Aghios Kirikos, the main port of Ikaria, which rose up in a semicircle of multicoloured houses, their windows reflecting the cabin lights of the ferry that towered above the quayside.

All the noise of docking such a large boat went on around us: the engines louder than ever; the grinding of the winches as the great steel tailgate was slowly lowered on to the cobbled stones. With the manoeuvring complete and the hawsers tied around the bollards, the ferry gave out one last deafening blast that echoed in the hills.

As we disembarked, you'd have thought we had known the crew for years. Those despairing looks, as if they were saying goodbye to old friends; we embraced them all, including the chef, who gave us a bag of food. The captain shook my hand, saying, 'This is Ikaria. This is what you English call the rush hour, when a ship comes in. It doesn't get any busier than this in the winter.'

There to greet the ferry were half a dozen men in pick-up trucks, a mule pulling a trailer, and a policeman on a motorbike wearing sunglasses. He looked like a cop straight out of an American TV show.

On the far side of the town square were the inviting lights of a taverna. We were all hungry now, having recovered from our seasickness, and made our way there past a group

of tethered donkeys who stood, with their eyes half closed, grinding their teeth.

The first thing I did was take out my phrase book. But before I could order anything, a hand was on my shoulder.

'It's all right, I can speak English. You have come from Piraeus and are tired and hungry.'

I nodded.

'Trust me, I will make you a delicious meal.'

'*Pos se lene*?' I said it in Greek, wanting to show off to Sam and Lysta.

'My name is Stamati.'

Probably in his late forties, he had thinning dark hair, a few days' growth of beard on a dimpled chin. A gold crucifix round his neck hung in enough chest hair to stuff a mattress.

'You speak very good English, Stamati.'

'Yes. My sister, she is married to an Englishman. I go once a year to Manchester, where they have a restaurant. It runs in the family.'

'I think we have just made our first friend on Ikaria,' I told the children. And he became a closer friend when he put on the table for each of them a teaspoon of vanilla paste in a glass of water.

'It is a traditional Greek drink that children love.'

And they did. It put them in the best mood since we had left Wales.

It was impossible to eat all that Stamati placed before us. A huge moussaka, a bottle of Samos wine, and *kataifi*, which looked like shredded wheat, the sweetest dessert that had ever passed my lips.

As we ate, the remains of an orange sun lit the fishing boats within the harbour walls. Lights suspended through the sycamore trees came on in the square. A church bell rang out and, as if summoned, people came from their houses in

groups, some with smartly dressed children; others arrived on mopeds, to mingle with their friends. This social gathering is what happens on summer evenings in the Mediterranean and obviously continues in the winter.

After I'd paid Stamati sixty drachma, he sat down with us.

'Now what brings an English family with such young children to Ikaria on a cold February night?'

'I don't know. We got on the first boat leaving Piraeus.'

'And how long will you stay with us?'

'I'm not sure. Maybe many months, could be longer than that.'

I could tell by the astonishment on Stamati's face that he found this hard to believe. 'Where will you sleep tonight?'

'Do you know where we can find some rooms?'

'For how long?'

'I don't know. Maybe a few days.'

'I have a house here in Aghios Kirikos. It's small, but you're welcome to stay there.'

So ended four days on coach and boat: in Stamati's little whitewashed house, with its blue-painted windows overlooking the Aegean Sea where I stood and stared, while Ros and the children slept in two iron beds.

It was a good time to reassure myself that we had done the right thing, although getting here had been clumsy and uncomfortable. I suddenly allowed myself to feel exhausted. I didn't bother to get undressed, just fell into bed, all of us squeezed in next to each other. I wished I could have drifted off listening to some music. I had a portable cassette player in the suitcase; I'd find it tomorrow.

2

Finding Lefkada

The next day we had our first look around Aghios Kirikos. Despite the thin mattress and broken springs, we had all slept heavily, waking up much later than usual; a cold wind blowing in from the sea did little to revive us. Most of the shops were padlocked, no doubt closed until the summer came. Only the kiosk on the seafront, selling cigarettes and newspapers, was doing any business. In the cobbled back streets and alleyways there were a couple of greengrocers and a butcher, and the smell of newly baked bread coming from a bakery. We stood outside a dress shop with its stripped mannequins, Sam certain he could see their goose pimples.

But Stamati was always open and happy to cook us a meal, so we went to his restaurant for a late lunch. I looked at my family, thinking, what have I done, dragging them out here on a whim, uprooting their whole lives? I'd had this feeling before, coming over me like a black wave after we'd bought the farm in Wales, not knowing what I had let us all in for.

'Mum, have you noticed what's not here, but you would find in Penygroes?' asked Lysta, observant as ever about her surroundings.

'Let Sam guess,' said Ros.

'A fish and chip shop?' he suggested.

'Yes, you're right. Maybe they don't eat fish and chips here,' I said.

'That's not what I was thinking,' said Lysta. 'There are no traffic lights. And no zebra crossings either.'

This game continued as we looked across the harbour, which was crowded with little fishing boats. A donkey passed carrying a woman and child, the mother whipping the animal's

backside with a stick.

'They must be late for school,' said Lysta. 'That poor donkey. He can't go any faster.'

'Dad, can I ask you something that I think is quite interesting?' said Sam.

'Fire away. What is it?'

'If we had donkeys in Wales would they have to stop at red lights?'

'I'll have to check the Highway Code, but they probably would.'

After a slow lunch of minestrone soup and fresh bread straight from the local bakery, the children enjoyed what was now their favourite, vanilla paste in a glass of water. Then Lysta had another bout of homesickness. Stamati brought her a piece of paper and she wrote her second letter home, not to her friend Eleri this time, but to her grandmother Dinah.

'What have you said to Granny?' I asked.

'Most of it's a secret so I can't tell you.'

'What part can you tell me?'

'That I don't know why we're here.'

'Yes,' said Sam. 'Why have we come all the way here, and it's not even warm and sunny?'

'Because we are on an adventure. You wait and see, lots of exciting things are going to happen,' I said. 'Aren't they, Ros?'

'Of course. We'll move into a lovely house and you'll make lots of new friends.'

'And get a television?' Lysta demanded.

'Yes, and watch *Tiswas* on Saturdays like we did at home,' agreed Sam.

'We've only been here a day. Give us a chance,' said Ros.

I told them that after lunch everyone on the island had a siesta. 'It's an old custom. Children are not allowed to talk for an hour.'

'It's impossible not to talk for an hour if you're awake,' said Sam, certain he was correct.

'Why don't you try it this afternoon? I'll give you twenty pence each if you manage it.' Attempting bribery was something I often did.

'But we can't spend English money here,' said Sam.

'Well, I'll give you twenty drachma.'

Ros thought they would never let us have an hour's sleep, but they did, and we all slept, and when we woke again the sun had already gone down behind the mountains. In the twilight we walked a little way out of town and gazed at the sea. We were still acclimatising, not feeling sociable, ending up in Stamati's for a third time. He must have loved us; as far as I could tell we were his only customers wanting food. The others were just drinking coffee or ouzo.

Yet all he wanted to do was ask about our life in North Wales. He hadn't bothered to take our order before he sat down with us.

'I want to tell my mother all about where you come from. She loves to hear about faraway places; she has never left Ikaria.'

'Well, where do I begin?' I said. 'There are so many stories.' Before I could get another word out, Sam and Lysta took over, telling Stamati that I spent most of my time chasing pigs and looking for sheep that had strayed.

'Yes, and once Dad had to catch a pig that had run into a shop in Caernarfon.' It was one of the many incidents that they loved to talk about.

All the while Stamati sat as if engrossed, but I doubted he understood everything he was hearing. It made us sound like a family living from one mishap to the next.

'We're not usually like this,' I said. 'In fact, we're very sensible and well balanced.'

'You were a farmer. Yes, I can see that, with your broad shoulders.' Which he sank his fingers into, causing Ros to raise her eyebrows and give me a wry smile.

In the evening the people sitting under the sycamore trees in the main square seemed bemused by our presence, giving us quizzical looks which gave way to warm smiles for the children. A huddle of grandmothers, all wearing head scarves, beckoned to us. We weren't used to all this attention, but it was the children they were drawn to, stretching out their arms, almost pleading with us to join them.

'Let's go and introduce ourselves,' said Ros.

I got out my phrase book and in a few minutes they knew all our names and that we had come from Wales. From what I could gather, we were the first Welsh people to have visited the island. It caused confusion trying to explain that Ros was Welsh and I was English; I gave up any idea of telling them that our children were half English and half Welsh. But everything I said was met by a row of smiling, nodding heads as if they had understood every word.

'Leesta, Saam, Sarth.' It was close enough, so it was my turn to nod my head. One by one they disappeared and returned with treats: something that looked like Turkish delight, little sachets of coated almonds, cherries dipped in a thick syrup. Sam, Lysta and Seth tried them all, and at about ten o'clock, when normally they would have been ready for sleep, they had the energy to run around the square. Ikarian children didn't seem to have a bedtime, even when they had to go to school in the morning.

'Why are the cats so thin, Mum?' asked Lysta, as we eventually walked back to Stamati's house and to bed.

'I suppose because no one feeds them.'

'It's cruel; they're starving.'

On the second day we woke early. Only Stamati was up,

sweeping the pavement in front of his restaurant. There was no one else about, just a stray dog, a few pigeons under the café tables and two donkeys parked outside a hairdresser's, staring at the photographs of coiffured women.

At last we all felt wide awake. Sam and Lysta skipped along, Seth running behind them, Ros with a brightness back in her face, smiling, her wild, frizzy hair buffeted in the gusts of wind. She had packed a picnic of sorts: not sandwiches, but food from the chef on the ferry, leftovers from Stamati's generous portions, and sweets from the friendly grannies in the square.

For the first time we had the energy to explore. We climbed the hills above Aghios Kirikos and looked out over the Aegean, vast and empty without a vessel to be seen, the distant shape of the island of Fourni like a spined dinosaur sleeping in a deep blue sea.

That morning we walked for over an hour and saw no one, passing only half-built houses perched on the steep slopes. Who were they waiting for, these deserted dwellings that seemed abandoned even before being completed? It was only as we were returning that we met an old peasant pushing his bike, the carcass of a goat strapped around his back. Such had been the effort of his climb he could not even raise a smile. I told Ros the place seemed quieter than a ghost town; even the ghosts had left.

'Maybe we should see if we can find an island with a bit more life,' she suggested.

'No, it's too soon. Let's give it a month.'

That night in the Casino café, where the locals were playing backgammon – *tavli* as they called it – an old priest who had been sitting with them came over to us. I was about to try my first glass of ouzo; it was cold and getting colder, and I needed to warm myself up. Ros was trying a Metaxa brandy.

He spoke English and knew exactly who we were.

'It will snow tomorrow. I have some blankets I can bring you,' he said in the benevolent voice that seemed to go with his calling.

'The children need to be warm. It is not right for you to be in Stamati's house. It is for summer, not now, the middle of winter.'

And sure enough, in the morning the snow was falling, not the large wind-driven flakes of Wales but much more gentle than that, lightly covering the main square. The winter sun was trying to break through the snow-filled clouds. It snowed on the fishing boats and out into the sea, which was not a sight I had expected to see on a Greek island.

Father Antonis brought us blankets and, although he didn't say it, I could tell he couldn't understand why we were here. He was forever stroking the children's heads, no doubt pitying them for having such irresponsible parents.

A week later we moved. It was one of those chance meetings: we were exploring the island, hitching on the coastal road, even though cars were few and far between. Sam and Lysta continuously held out their thumbs, despite my telling them it was only necessary when we could hear a vehicle coming. I think they persisted because they thought it would magically make one appear. We had walked at least a couple of miles, Seth sitting on my shoulders picking at my hair like a baby gorilla searching for fleas.

An out-of-control old Renault swerved to avoid us and stopped just a few feet from the edge, narrowly avoiding crashing on to the rocks below. One of its tyres had exploded.

The driver did not emerge, and when I knocked on his window to check whether he was injured I could see that he was, but not from the incident we had just witnessed. His right arm was in a sling; it made me wonder how he could have been driving in the first place. I opened the door and helped

him out. He had that look I was getting used to: unkempt, stubble not far from being a beard. It appeared Ikarian men fell out of bed and straight into their clothes. Dishevelment was definitely the fashion.

When he saw the shreds of rubber strewn across the road, he exhaled a lot of Greek bad language into the morning air. After fumbling in his jacket for a cigarette, he sat on a boulder smoking, taking long deep drags, completely ignoring us. With his arm in a sling, dealing with the tyre was beyond him, so that's when I stepped in. After getting the spare from the boot, I jacked up the car and changed the wheel. Even Ros was impressed by how I had taken charge.

'It's nothing,' I said nonchalantly. 'God, how many times did I do that on the farm?'

'Dad, don't forget you couldn't change the tyre on my Tonka truck once,' said Sam. I remembered that toy of his, the one he used to fill with earth and push up and down the drive.

But we'd made Dimitri a happy man, and after we got talking I told him we were looking for somewhere to live that had views across the sea and wasn't too far from Aghios Kirikos. He said his brother owned a house nearby at Lefkada, so we walked on while he went ahead in the car, the Renault 4 too small to carry us all. Besides, I didn't want to put our lives at risk being driven by a one-armed driver in what was no more than a tin can. From what I could gather, he had broken his arm when his donkey had reared up while he was strapping a fridge on its back. It was a bit confusing, but I think a ferry had blasted its horn and terrified the poor beast.

After fifteen minutes or so, several houses came into view. This had to be Lefkada, for I could see Dimitri's car parked outside a small, single-storey house. He showed us around it, two rooms with two front doors, so you had to leave by one door to enter the other bedroom. We didn't really like

it, but we would have some privacy and it was quiet, unlike Stamati's place where through the walls you could hear people going to the lavatory. It certainly had lovely views over the Aegean. There was no bathroom; we had to do the business in a hole in the ground, some twenty yards behind the house. Ros grimaced at the thought.

'Look, we didn't come here expecting a five-star hotel.' That didn't go down too well.

'I doubt very much this would get one star,' she retorted.

We took it because it was cheap: a hundred drachma (around £1.50) a week.

Dimitri helped us out by putting three beds for the children in one room, and Ros and I had a double in the other. It was a real luxury for us to be sleeping in our own bed again, and far better to be here than in Aghios Kirikos. We were given too much attention there; we needed to be alone as a family.

There was no electricity, just a Calor gas stove in the kitchen area which began three feet from our bed. The most annoying thing was the cold water tap that dripped into a cracked basin. Every night I had to stick a sock up it, to stop it getting on Ros's nerves. We had candles and plenty of blankets; I was sure we could survive here until the warmer weather came.

Dimitri visited only once to see how we were settling in. I gave him a month's rent in advance, and then he was off to Athens where he sold olive oil to the smart hotels. From then on I was to give the rent to his ageing mother who lived on the waterfront in Therma, a village the other side of Aghios Kirikos. We would see him again in July when the weather, as he put it, would be '*poli zesti*', very hot.

What a transformation had taken place. It was quite remarkable how quickly the children adapted to their sparse surroundings. In the candlelight, they were happy to play a game of shadow-dancing, creating creatures that pranced

about on the walls above their beds. Not once, despite their earlier moaning, did they complain about not having a television. Nor did they demand toys or sweets when we went shopping. They expected nothing and seemed content to draw, or invent their own games to play outside the house.

As for me, I felt we had arrived, that the holiday was over. I was ready to look for work and it was time for Ros to start teaching the children. It was March and our third week here. I wished the spring would hurry up and we could feel a bit of warmth in the wind. Not that this was anything like the harsh winters in North Wales, but at least at home I could smoke a joint in front of a roaring log fire and watch *Match of the Day* on a Saturday night. I didn't tell Ros that was the only thing I missed, though it was a question I knew would come up one day.

I had a coffee with Stamati; I wanted to thank him again for all his help when we first arrived and also to find out whether he had the answer to something on my mind. Ever since we'd been here I'd felt drawn to the sea; I wanted to be a fisherman, out on the Aegean under a huge sky. I asked him if he knew anyone who needed help on their boat. He did, of course, 'but you are so thin, you will be blown overboard. Then what will your wife say? She will blame me for becoming a widow.'

'I need to work. I need to make some money,' I said.

'There is little work to be found here in the winter,' said Stamati. 'But I have liked you since that first day, and I will help you.'

He said this with a look in his eyes I wasn't sure about. Was there a price I was going to have to pay? For a while he stirred his Nescafé in gentle circles; I could see things fizzing through his mind.

'Wait, I will return.' And he disappeared, leaving me sitting there, staring down at my worn-out shoes. Something else we

would have to buy, unless I could glue the sole to the upper, but footwear didn't last long walking up and down the coast road to Lefkada.

Across the main square I could see the Poste Restante where we collected our occasional mail and posted our letters, mostly from Lysta to her school friends. She had sent at least half a dozen to Eleri and received not a single reply, which had upset her deeply. It only took a week for a letter to get back to the United Kingdom, so surely she should have heard back by now. But it was always Lysta who went to see if there was any post and returned disappointed. I knew our PO Box was 57 and, as there was no sign of Stamati, I went and enquired for myself.

I walked back to the café clutching a handful of letters, all but one in Eleri's handwriting. I didn't know why Lysta had never been given the post; maybe she had simply been misunderstood. I opened the other letter; it was from my mother, five pages of news from England, including a cutting from the sports page with the latest football results. She told me Jack was still a shepherd, and that he and Corinna were enjoying life in Gloucestershire. Meg, his old sheepdog, had retired and Moss, my border collie, was now his number one worker. As soon as I read that I could see Moss sweeping in a large circle, gathering up the flock. The letter ended with the hope I was taking all the necessary precautions.

Stamati eventually returned, bringing with him a wild-eyed young man called Stelios, who looked as if he had just walked out of the sea. His thick hair seemed fixed in permanent little waves that rolled across his head in a north-westerly direction. His hands, when we shook, were rougher than a hill farmer's, coarse, the skin dry and cracked. I took to him immediately, he had a dishevelled tiredness I felt at home with. He was another one with several days' growth. Deeply tanned from years of sun and sea, he could not have turned thirty; his

eyebrows were bleached and sparkled with salt crystals above two exhausted eyes. He had enough English, spoken in a gruff voice that came from smoking or shouting into the wind. He leant back and eyed me up. 'You are sure, yes? You have the strength for this work?'

'Yes, I am sure. I was a farmer. I can carry a pig over my shoulders.'

'It is not the same as pulling in the nets. Shake my hand again.'

I did, gripping it tightly.

'All right, that is good.'

'When do we start, and how much will you pay me?'

'You are a man in a hurry,' he said. 'I give you five hundred drachma a day' – he didn't wait for an answer – 'but first we must fish together. I never fish with a man I do not know. It's lonely out there, even lonelier if you don't like each other.'

So a couple of days later we went out into the Aegean in his boat *Panagia*, Mother of God. About thirty foot long, painted blue and orange, it had a small, cluttered cabin I could hardly stand up in, with two cramped berths on either side. Beneath a hatch on the deck was the engine, which bore an oval plaque embossed with the words *Made by Listers of Derby*.

I sat at the bow as we made our way out of the harbour. The sea, a glassy blue, reflected the winter sun as the coastline gradually disappeared behind us. A flock of birds whizzed past, their wingtips no more than a foot above the water. The cold Aegean breeze whistled in my ears. There was a freshness to the air that I found exhilarating, and I took deep breaths as if I were drinking it.

After he'd cast his nets, Stelios came and joined me, letting the boat drift. He told me about his life as an Ikarian fisherman and I told him about my life in North Wales as a farmer. Our two lives, I said, shared a common thread: the

weather. I wasn't sure he understood me; it made me realise how complicated the English language can be. I needed to choose my words more carefully. I told him how I had lost sheep buried in a snowstorm, while he recalled the night with his father when gale force winds blew their boat onto rocks and smashed the rudder. They had drifted for hours before being towed back to Aghios Kirikos.

Any doubts he might have had about me must have vanished, for he simply said 'Do we like each other?' and, smiling, turned the boat back to shore. And so, having made my living from the land, I would now earn it from the sea. Gazing out across the waves at the shoreline of Ikaria, I felt a curious sense that I was returning to something in the past, perhaps of a life I'd already lived.

After we had secured the boat we sat at the end of the quayside, Stelios smoking a Karelia, a Greek cigarette with a curious, musty smell. He wanted to close the deal, just like the hill farmers, who never dragged things out, and we sealed it with a spit into the hand.

'We fish two days a week, five hundred drachma a day. I give you some fish, maybe octopus, squid, sometimes barbunia. Are you happy with this?'

I was, but I wasn't so sure Ros would be.

I suppose the taverna at Lefkada was what you would call our local, since we lived less than a hundred yards away. It was run by a married couple, Yannis and Maria, who had been born in the same mountain village and must have been in their seventies. 'Taverna' was probably too grand a title for the place: a dozen or so tables with rush-seated chairs on the bare earth surrounded by eucalyptus trees. At the top of a

short flight of steps behind this area was a low building with a flaky green door and shuttered windows hiding two rooms that Maria let out to the occasional game tourist, if they didn't mind sharing with the cheeses that hung from the beams. In each room were a couple of old cast-iron beds with mattresses so thin you could roll them up.

The building that housed a small kitchen looked like a converted cowshed made from breeze blocks. It had a corrugated roof and, like everything else, was whitewashed: the tree trunks, a row of olive oil tins used as flowerpots, the low stone wall that separated the tables from the coastal road, even an old wheelbarrow that reflected the winter sun, had all seen the paintbrush.

It was a very basic set-up. One day when I was walking past I saw Maria hosing down the plates people had just eaten from and cleaning them with a worn down scrubbing brush. There were more bristles on her husband's chin.

She and Yannis, I'm sure, barely covered their costs, probably making just enough money in the summer to keep them going through the winter months. She didn't have the strength to lift the pile of plates she had just washed, and Yannis made several journeys to carry them back to the kitchen.

Little did I know then what a pivotal part the taverna would play in our lives as the social centre of our tiny universe, where we would spend our evenings chatting to visitors, finding out where they'd come from and where they were heading. Most just turned up, dropped their rucksacks for a while and moved on, but a few stayed and we got to know them well, talking long into the night under the star-filled skies.

It was here that I gradually acquired a taste for retsina, despite its unfortunate hint of pine disinfectant that lingers in the mouth as if you are drinking lavatory cleaner. Ros wouldn't go near it, and if you wanted to indulge you couldn't

get it by the glass, only in small bottles. But it was a cheap way to get pissed, although it did odd things to your stomach.

I'd just finished my third glass when I said to Ros, 'You know, this stuff plays around with your head. I thought I just saw a nun go past on a moped.'

'You did, and she wasn't hanging around,' as a cloud of dust engulfed the taverna.

'Don't tell me she was being chased by Henry VIII on a Harley-Davidson.'

'I didn't think retsina was a hallucinogenic.'

'You know, it doesn't taste that bad, once your mouth is anaesthetised.'

'Dad's not making sense again,' Lysta butted in.

'What do you mean, again?'

The conversation changed direction, a full one hundred and eighty degrees.

'What's going to happen out at sea if you and Stelios get stuck into the retsina? Can you drink and steer a boat?' asked Ros.

'Well, it's not like driving a car, is it?' I said. 'Anyway, I have no idea if Stelios has a drink when he's fishing.'

I could tell Ros was anxious, and her tone didn't lighten up.

'You promise you'll wear a life jacket? You know you're accident prone.'

'I really don't know what has given you that impression.'

'Well, I don't think I was imagining it when you nearly cut your foot off with that chainsaw, for instance. Or when you had to be rescued from the sea at Dinas Dinlle. Don't you remember the undertow from those gigantic waves that kept dragging you back?'

'All right,' I conceded. 'There has been the odd occasion when I've got into dodgy situations. But that was then. I'm not going to make a habit of it.'

I knew she was right. I had nearly injured myself on the farm several times for no other reason than a lack of self-awareness. I cheered her up by painting a picture of me coming home with the fish I had caught out in the Aegean, bringing them to her with the smell of sea salt in my hair, hugging her in the twilight, laying out on the table the fresh squid that we would eat by candlelight.

'All very romantic, wouldn't you agree, Ros?'

Well she did, not that she admitted it, but she looked a bit dreamy, with the flicker of a smile.

'I'm worried for you, that's all.'