

PENNY CONNELL / Old Age Comes to the Island

As Sheba stepped off the boat, the donkey men hefted sacks of cement onto their animals. The bank manager threw open the shutters, young gulls mewed from the pottery rooftops. Cats lugged their bellies into crevasses, and gave birth.

In the cafeneions, the ex-pats lounged over metrios and nescafes, hobbled like Circe's sailors, contented pigs. Island life was life suspended.

Sheba liked to return in spring when the Greek shopkeepers were still patient with tourists. She headed for Yanni's shop and the keys to the pensione she'd rented. Had Kent arrived, she wondered. The shop was closed. Sheba dumped herself at Antonio's cafeneion, which offered a view of everybody's business. A terrier raised one doggy eyebrow, then the other.

Under cover of awful tea she updated herself on the island's social life. There was Pan answering his cell phone, its ring the pleasant sound of falling water. Vigorous of course, but weathered. There were Klaus and Ingrid, "the German invasion." They'd aged! No-one greeted her, but Sheba didn't take that amiss: newly disembarked, she was in the amnesty zone granted arrivals.

Eleven o'clock and the first tour boat of the day came round the point, disgorging gawkers. The shops opened like carnivorous blossoms. Yanni materialized to swing open shutters hung with jewellery, and Sheba got her keys.

The big news next morning was a murder. A couple of local fishermen had tied up on nearby Sithas to avoid a sudden wind, and found the body. Victor leaned forward, eager to impart details to his crony Stuart. "We were here for coffee when they arrived."

"With the body?" said Sheba.

Victor leaned back, satisfied. Her horror was a treat. "Rumours abound!"

"Heavens! Where's the body?"

Victor popped a chocolate biscuit into his mouth. "Brian will know."

Close by, four Greeks shouted in conversation. "A local?" Stuart asked.

"A foreigner," Victor translated. "At least, a stranger." He listened further. But the Greeks were all speaking at once.

In came Brian. "I just saw Nanette," he said. "Hello, Sheba."

"What does Nanette have to say?"

"Don't know." And Brian shrugged his shoulders so expressively that everyone followed suit.

In the next few days, reintroduced to the glories of wisteria and lemon blossom, Sheba made up her mind to buy a house. In the supermarket, she hoped to see someone who knew Kevin's phone number. Kevin, a Brit, had made a niche for himself showing houses to prospective buyers. He lived in Piraeus and arrived when he smelled business. A California drawl beyond the cheese had to be Trevor. He would do.

"Supermarket" was not the word for the island's grocery shops. This one was narrow, with a tall shelf down the centre. The aisles swelled with dangerously stacked boxes. So Sheba called across, "Trevor, is that you?"

"Yes, m'am," came back his voice. "Who are you?"

"That's Sheba!" said another voice. "Now, who was looking for you?"

"I'm looking for Kevin," said Sheba. "Yasoo, Maria."

"I know," said Maria. "Jorge."

"Thanks," said Sheba. "I'll lay eyes on you one of these days."

"Come for coffee," said Trevor. "Bratsera's."

As Sheba left the shop, she heard music. In the centre of a semi-circle of foreigners, two scarecrows were conducting a puppet show. One sat on a trunk, a one-man band of cymbal and tambourine, fiddle and harmonica. The companion jiggled the puppet, a plump fellow with brocade pantaloons and the commedia features of Il Capitano. Sheba paused, inadvertently bumping a geriatric couple going the other way.

"Excuse me," she said in Greek, glancing up and then back at the show.

"I should think not!" said the man. "You know my voice but not my face?"

"Good grief!" said Sheba. "Trevor—and Maria!" She looked from one to the other in amazement. How had they gotten so old?

Jorge hunted antiques in Monasteraki, the flea market in Athens, and refinished them for sale in his shop. He had no time for the ex-pats, their gossip and indolence. "Life cannot be empty," he had said once. "So with what do they fill? How they bear to sitting and talk?" Jorge was orchestrating a start-of-season renovation, moving with a director's ease around arriving boxes and a brace of svelte employees. To Sheba's relief his hair was black. "And you? Your father? You make necklaces for me?"

"Your English is getting good," said Sheba. "And your mother?"

Jorge's eyes shadowed. "Two years ago," he said. "Today I know bad news. The Countess Margareta. Her son took her to the home for old."

"The old folks' home here? But she's Hungarian."

"Her fourth husband was Greek. So she is there."

Sheba remembered a splendid giantess, an emanation from the Montmartre of the twenties. "That's terrible," she said. "For how long?"

"One week, two. I no know. Countess Margareta." Clearly it shook him. "And for you also, news. Joseph is here. He dreams of you." Jorge turned his wise, sharp eyes on her reaction.

Oh God.

Ten minutes later, hurrying to take cover in her pensione, she realized she'd forgotten to ask Jorge about the property agent. Well—it could wait. In the meantime she was brought to earth, terrified of encountering Joseph. Seventeen years since their parting scene. Why had no-one warned her? The murder had distracted them.

The tower bell chimed. She avoided a clutter of Brits at a postcard rack. Joseph must know she was there. He would troll the port, even though he loathed milling crowds and ex-patriate meet-and-greet. Awareness of his proximity made her memory sharp. His voice calling across the moonlight in Kamini—"Sheba! Sheba!"—bawling out her name in an agony of abandonment. His love was a sickness. The whole town had heard him, night upon night. He became a community crisis. Some Greeks had begun to treat her with contempt and hostility, others were businesslike. What did she mean to do about it?

What could she do? She packed, in secrecy she bought a ticket. And there he had been at the dock, raving. They tore her from his grip and heaved her onto the boat as it pulled away, men rising from the tables around to help her friends hold him back. Later she heard he'd roamed like a savage, moaning, roaring, until finally the police took charge. The police in those days, some of them trained in the time of the Generals, were much feared. But Joseph had braved them. Or rather, he'd simply ignored them. Which made it easy, in the end, to push him onto a boat.

No friend in view to intercede if he appeared. They must all be at lunch. She reached the street door and locked it behind her, crossed the garden to the tiled patio, with its views north to the Peloponnesus and south up the mountainside to the monastery, a glow of white buildings. She let herself into the hallway, locking that door too. She peeked into her room before she entered. No one. She locked the door. Safe.

But when she bought a house? She stopped short. How could she move here, in view of Joseph?

In the morning she put on a loose dress and a mismatched blouse over top, the closest she could come to camouflage. It looked horrible. From the patio she could only glimpse passers-by as they crossed the street entrance; a broader view was impossible. At a nearby tourist shop, she bought a straw hat to shadow her face. She jumped when Brian put his hand on her shoulder.

"Brian, for god's sake, you didn't tell me Joseph is here!"

"Joseph? He's not. He left before you arrived. I would have told you."

"Jorge told me."

"Jorge works too much. He needs to get a life. Guess what. They found the murderer."

"Great—I can ditch the hat. I'll make it a souvenir for my sister."

"How did they get him?" said Sheba, stuffing the blouse into her bag.

"He turned himself in. There's Stuart and Marthe—come on."

"Well," said Stuart, "the murderer is in custody. He took the police to the body. Pick up your hat, Sheba—a cat will pee on it. Did you hear about the countess?"

"I heard Joseph was here."

"Who told you that? We had a pact not to say. You'd obsess. So boring."

"Jorge told her."

"Someone should prescribe him sedatives."

"This is Sheba's disguise," said Brian, and they laughed at her.

"He wouldn't know you anyway," said Marthe.

"Why not?" But she knew. In Athens, Sheba had told her friend, "Funny—men don't bother me any more," and Helen had answered, "Because your skin is slack!"

"And you wouldn't know him," Marthe continued. "He's got a stoop. And a beard. And it's grey. We don't look like we used to."

A stoop. And grey. What if he'd appeared and she hadn't recognised him? Incredible thought. Victor came up. "They got the murderer, but"—cutting off the general groan—"a woman was attacked right here on the island on the weekend. No information yet." Marthe said, "It's disgusting. You know all about some murder, and nothing about a rape. Didn't even know it had happened until four days later."

"And really, someone should have mentioned Joseph. I had a terrible night's sleep."

“Joseph’s no threat, really,” Marthe said. “It was so many years ago. He’s seldom here. His life is Thailand now. I think he does exports.”

She sat, that evening, trying to picture Joseph. She could see his stubby fingers, but of his face, only the fact of a scar. Like a cowboy, he always wore a bandanna. “You can do anything with this,” he’d said. “It’s a rope. You can make a bag of it, or a strainer. It makes a signal flag. Oh—a thousand things.” He had pure sinew for legs and a bit of bone where the knees stuck through. What could age do to a body like his—it was all structure. It had been more like loving sculpture than flesh. She had not loved it long.

“The worst,” she said next morning, huffing up the mountain after Marthe, “was that he scared off other guys.”

“Really?” said Marthe. Despite her friendship with Sheba, she’d exchanged many a catty remark about that old relationship. “Listen. Funeral bells.” Far below, at the monastery on the port, the clock tower bells were tolling. Two deep, slow rings, then two at a higher pitch, two more at yet another pitch. The wind moved them close, then far, a cosmic door swinging between the women and the port below.

“By the way, when’s Kent arriving?”

Marthe ignored the question. “Lots of cancer lately. Have you seen the posters?”

The Greeks put up death notices when people died. She remembered seeing the candle maker’s face on a notice one day. He had been young to die, a big man who rode his pitiable donkey side-saddle, his feet scraping the ground. Those notices stayed for forty days, until the person’s spirit left for the next world, only to return for Lent, when the oleander and eucalyptus hung heavy with ghosts.

The uphill track was rock and spiny shrubs. Ahead was the pine forest, the only stand of shadow on the island. Marthe sought mushrooms (which Sheba hoped they wouldn’t find), asparagus, orchids. She looked into the trees while Marthe foraged. Was that movement?

“Anyone live up here?” she asked.

“Hunters come here. You find the shell casings.”

“But a house?”

“Albanians, maybe. But lately there’s so much construction work, they all have money and jobs and live in houses, and their children go to school.”

“What else is up here?”

"Big snakes. That's why the snake's on Nalios' flag." Marthe knew her terror of snakes.

They entered the forest. It was cooler, but the ground was just as rough. There was a muffled commotion off to one side of the track. "What's that?" said Sheba, stopping. They looked. Several pigeons were flapping in the trees above.

"Must be Joseph," Marthe quipped. She had found asparagus and was happy. "Let's have our picnic." There was a sound of sheep's bells.

"I used to come here with him," Sheba said.

"You're more obsessed with him than he ever was with you."

"Only because Jorge—"

"Look," said Marthe, "Let it go. You know the island collects warped people. Don't be warped by Joseph. It's been too many years—years when you never gave a shit about him. Why care now?"

This was too good a question to ignore, so Sheba shelved it for a late night reverie. "Why are you here, then, Marthe? What's your problem?"

"Botanists don't have problems. It's social scientists who have problems. Anyway, there's a worse threat. Jorge will trap you into working for him. He's put everyone off because he so obviously thinks we're all lazy."

"Let's face it—the ex-pats of Nalios would make a rest home look like a beehive. I could never stay here all year round."

"So how come you want a house?" She paused at the sound of falling rock close by. "What's that?" she said. "Sheep?" There was a crunch of gravel and trickles of displaced stone, then silence, though birds flicked nervously from twig to twig.

"Someone's there," Sheba said. They stood, waiting. No movement, no sound. The air had thickened with the heat—that combination of heat and shadow that Sheba had always found oppressive. Then a blast of hot wind roller-coasted over the dry ground. Sirocco, Meltemme, she could never remember. They said the red dust it carried came from the Sahara. Sheba reflected that the rock of Nalios was red too—red, ochre, and a strange clay green. The wind lifted quickly, and light prowled the landscape, toyed with it in a painterly way, so that features stood out, throbbed, disappeared. That emanating light.

"Here will do," said Marthe. She spread a towel on a convenient pile of rock and sat. Sheba considered its chinks and fissures. What might emerge at her foot? She seated herself gingerly. Right at her feet there was a coil of scales. "It's just skin,"

Marthe scoffed, bending to disperse it. She opened her pack and handed Sheba an orange.

The town was laid out below, pottery and white, houses crowded onto each other. “Look,” Marthe said, “the Pappadopolous mansion. It’s been opened as a museum.”

They watched miniscule boats cross to the mainland, a funeral procession, a far-off polka-dot of sheep among stones. Above the occasional toll of bells was a faint rushing sound. But the calm was so profound that Sheba felt easy. They were high enough that birds floated below them. They watched a hawk, its wings still, unhurried by the few small birds dive-bombing it. When one of them got close, the hawk suddenly flipped, its talons extending. “Good god,” said Sheba, “it nearly got that bird.” Again the hawk circled, again the smaller birds attacked, it flipped and the little ones angled away.

“You know, I think we should start back down,” Marthe said unexpectedly. Sheba followed her gaze. The pine forest was just below the mountain ridge. And over the top, brackish cloud suddenly flowed.

“Because of that?”

Marthe began collecting their food. “The birds have gone quiet,” she said. Sheba listened. The bells clanged again faintly, but their remoteness only revealed the lack of any other sound. Through the cloud a darkness was rushing. A detonation lighted the mountainside. Before Sheba could draw breath, they were in a deluge.

“Let’s get into the trees. We’re exposed.” A new explosion of light and the accompanying blast. “The gods are taking photographs,” Marthe gasped through the streaming rain.

“Tourist gods or journalist gods?” They scrabbled to the indifferent shelter of the trees, their shorts and t-shirts drenched. Sheba gave a short scream. A donkey was also taking shelter. Its eyes rolled nervously, its great pot belly quivered and rippled.

But five minutes later, the rain ceased. And the three of them, women and donkey, started down the mountain. “What an unpredictable place,” Sheba grumped. Maybe—the thought crossed her mind—maybe she hated Nalios.

Marthe, however, was disappointed. She had a few stalks of asparagus for her pains, no more. “Bad luck we chose today,” she said. “It’s not mushroom season anyway. But—” and abruptly stopped both walking and talking. The donkey had suddenly veered off, to Sheba’s relief; she had feared it would run them down. Marthe put her arm out to stop Sheba. Motionless on the ground before them was a dulled-

green and yellow snake. "Don't make stupid noises," she said conversationally. "This is a viper."

"Oh Jesus."

"Will you look at that," Marthe murmured, the scientist in her taking over. "You never see them. They're really rare. Just back off slowly."

The viper began to undulate. Its body seemed to shorten beside a few small stones where the ground was dry. And then it had dematerialized. "Just follow me exactly," said Marthe, giving the stones a wide berth. Sheba's legs felt like springs. At every step, her feet tingled and ached, as if she were stepping on pins. She focused her whole existence on staying one step behind Marthe, looked neither right nor left. In suspended animation, she simply kept lifting her feet, one, then the other, placing them on dirt, on stone, on gravel, without any sense of moving in any direction. An interminable time passed. "We're fine now," Marthe said. They were on the upper road between the uninhabited scrub and the top-most houses. Sheba began to shake.

"Well!" said Marthe cheerily, "that was an experience! Now, where shall we finish our picnic? Would you look at that—the sky is clear blue!"

"Forget the picnic. I've had it."

Marthe didn't argue. Ahead was the old folks' home, where there were eucalyptus trees and a shaded bench. There was never a soul on it. Everyone knew the door was locked; even if they wanted to, the old ones couldn't get out. Sheba would refuse to stop, Marthe knew. So as they approached, she gave a theatrical groan.

"Damn! My ankle." She put her towel on the bench and plunked herself down.

"I'll just wait."

"Don't be silly. There's nowhere for a snake to hide."

"In the wall."

"The wall is solid," Marthe said, rummaging for bread.

"There's a big chink in it—look."

Marthe turned. "That's pretty strange—the Greeks make good walls." Behind them at shoulder level, a triangular wedge of stone had come out, leaving a space slightly smaller than a child's face. They were so unlikely to find a snake in such a gap that she didn't even bother to say it. But she had often wondered about the other side of the wall. "Can't see much," she commented, and got an unexpected result. The space was filled by a woman's countenance.

"Margaretta!"

"Open the door," said Margareta.

"I can't, Countess, I don't have the key. Are you okay? Look—Sheba's here. Sheba—come and say hi."

Sheba stepped up beside Marthe. "Hello," she said. "Do you remember me?"

"No. Where is my dog? Get me out." She turned her head slightly, checking behind her, and Sheba glimpsed thick grey hair.

"Your dog is fine," said Sheba. She raised questioning eyebrows to Marthe. "Have you heard about Margareta's dog?"

Marthe had heard. The dog was scouring the port for Margareta. The countess' neighbour, Angeline, was so upset to see it that she'd gone to the mayor, begging a dispensation for it to be allowed to live in the home. She was refused.

"Angeline is looking after her for you," she said, her cheek by Sheba's at the chink.

"She hates Angeline. Take me home. They won't let me go!"

"Are they mean to you?"

"It's cold," said the countess, "cold."

On their side of the wall Sheba and Marthe glanced at each other. The rumour was of no heat in the winter, of neglect, old people locked in their rooms.

"That's terrible," said Marthe. "I'm going straight to the mayor. What do you have to eat?"

"It's the war again," said Margareta.

"You'll be home soon," said Marthe. "Just endure for now." She put her hand through the opening. On the other side, Margareta rested her cheek on Marthe's palm; then Marthe felt something in her hand. She closed her fingers. It was a shard of stone.

"Take it away," said the countess. "Is there more at your feet?"

They looked down. Yes—several fragments were tumbled there.

"Take it—scatter it," she said. In mild panic the two women scattered the stone.

"Be patient, Margareta," Marthe said. "We'll be back!" As she picked up her backpack, a man came along the path. He averted his face. No Greek would do that. The countess moved back from the wall.

"Did you think he saw us?"

"Rapist for sure," Marthe said. "Or Joseph."

Now the sun irradiated the town. Canvas taut over open doors, lace on shuttered windows. The paths became street and the occasional cat slept on paved shadow,

refusing disturbance. Marthe swung along with ease, but for Sheba it was hard. Every step was a different height, width, depth; some were slick marble, others painted thick white or sea-green. They heard the bells: one, two... five. Sheba clutched Margaretta's shard of stone.

Far below was the port. A toy Flying Dolphin streaked towards the Peloponnesus, and off to the west they could see a catamaran. It was passing the island where the murdered man had been found. Tiny Sithas's chapel sparkled like a speck of confetti.

"What can we do for the countess?" Sheba said.

"Nothing. I'll visit tomorrow. Her son put her there, can you imagine."

"Why not Athens, where he lives?"

"Who would she know in Athens? At least this way she gets visitors."

"For now she gets visitors. When she's been there six months, will anyone remember?"

"Oh, they'll all remember. But who will go? Nobody wants to see old age." Marthe glanced at her friend. "And you want to live here, as if it's the eighties. You don't know anyone who still goes dancing every night. Kent arrives. Or not. Kent goes. Are you going to compete with his women?"

Kent's women? "It's still beautiful," said Sheba.

"With the beauty of survivors," said Marthe. "And they aren't people. They're rock, stone. They're water."

"They're snakes and rapists," said Sheba, trying for an ironical tone. "They're gossips and layabouts." Her voice hardened. A pinch at her heart told her she was angry.

The steps had narrowed. They came to a three-pronged fork of road, each tine twisting behind houses. A man appeared—Victor, holding something close to his chest.

"Look—my precious burden," he said. "I found it in a construction hole." He opened his jacket carefully. It was a kitten, its eyes too gummed to open, its coat so sticky that they could see the fleas running in it. Victor was holding it in a twist of newspaper, as if it were souvlaki from a roadside stand.

"Good grief. Did it fall in?"

"I doubt it," said Victor, "You know how I got Zeta? Some kids had her by the tail. The last thing I need is another. What will Zeta say? She's ruled the roost for seven years."

The kitten moved its head at the sound of their voices. "I won't show you its bum," said Victor. "But it's lucky. I just happened to see it move. It was standing in rainwater."

"We saw a viper," said Sheba.

"That's what I like about this place," said Victor. "You see life whole."

"And the countess."

Victor winced. "That poor woman. I can't think of her. Well, if you'll excuse me," he said. "I've got to get this one into a bowl of warm water."

"He's a good guy," said Sheba, as they continued down the steps. "You can see it in his eyes."

"Did you actually look at his eyes?" said Marthe. "He's getting old."

