

WE wandered among the groves to find a soft spot to eat our cheese, olives, and hard-crust-ed local bread that looks remarkably like a Viking warship. The light beneath the trees is misty and subdued; the air is cool and refreshing. Here and there, penetrating rays of sunlight pierce the leaves like swords. All around us stands a quorum of ancient olive trees bent in submission before their maker—or, then again, perhaps they bow to us in a gesture of hospitality. “Come, my dear friends, enter our sacred space and break bread with us.”

“Hello.” We hear a slight giggle this time. Again, we look but cannot find anyone.

“Hello, hello.” The voice seems to be above us. We look among the branches of the trees, but no one’s hanging on a limb like the Cheshire Cat.

“Ha, ha. You no see me. I see you.”

“Come out. Come out wherever you are and let us see you,” Deborah responds, like Dorothy to the giggling Munchkins.

“Me here, me there, me everywhere.”

“Are you God?” I ask.

“No. Got what? You got? See me up in tree. Head up.”

As Only Love Can

BY MICHAEL S. TOBIN

In a race against the ravages of Deborah’s Alzheimer’s disease, the author wrote a book to celebrate the extraordinary days of their early courtship—and the transformational six-month bike trek that made them a couple for life.

We accept their kind invitation and find a soft, grassy spot at the foot of the most venerable of these kind hosts. With our backs against the Old One’s gnarled and twisted trunk, we begin our picnic lunch. Perfect. Grab the moment; squeeze the juice out of it. Partake of it all: the wine, the cheese, the olives, the bread, the trees, the light . . . the unexpected.

The first book I ever read was *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. To a six-year-old child, especially one who liked to hang out in his imaginary theater where heroes defeated villains and the underdog always prevailed, the Mad Hatter, the March Hare, the Queen of Hearts, and, of course, the Cheshire Cat all were new, wonderful additions to my make-believe cast of characters—especially the Cheshire Cat, that mischievous, grinning devil who talks philosophy and then disappears from trees and reappears as rapidly as a name stuck on the tip of your tongue.

“Hello.”

“Did you hear someone say hello?” Deborah asks.

“I thought I did.”

We look directly above us and there, standing on a thick branch, is our Cheshire Cat—a skinny, little man in suspenders, a flannel shirt like a logger would wear, and pants fit for a short, chubby man. He wears a beat-up Panama hat that leans toward his right eye like Humphrey Bogart in “Casablanca.” He has the lithe body of a nine-year-old and a face as sun-dried as a raisin.

When in Wonderland, do like the Wonderlands, so I say, “Why are you in a tree when you can be with me and she?”

Then, just like that, he jumps and lands feet first with a smile and a bow. “Me Leonidas. You?”

“Michael, Deborah. Leonidas, how do you know English?”

“Know English ’cause worked on beach selling drink to tourist with no clothes. Wife said no good for Leonidas to look at girls all day. I tell her, ‘No look, just sell.’ She no believe. Make me work now in Krini town. Bring grapes and olives to store. Up before sun and work hard. Now day done, and I tink in tree.”

“Was your wife right?”

“No understand.”

“Did you look at girls?”

“What you tink? Leonidas not man? Wife right, but she fat and boss like goat.”

“Why do you need to think in the trees?”

“Olive tree smart. Tree be on Corfu for long time and see much tings. Tree tell me, ‘Leonidas, listen to fat wife. She know.’ Leonidas want to run from her bossy face, but tree say, ‘No go, Leonidas. So, I no go. In tree, Leonidas feel good. Tree tell Leonidas, ‘Talk to people on floor.’ Most tourists hear hello from tree and run. Not you. You no ’fraid. You Leonidas’ friends.”

We invite Leonidas to eat with us. For the next hour, he tells us every Corfu family has a male member named Spiro, after the island’s patron saint and miracle worker, Saint Spiridon. “Much day,” he informs us, “Leonidas go church, light candle, make incense. Me talk to Saint Spiridon. Leonidas know Saint listen. He friend and he watch me, fat wife, and three childrens. When Leonidas not work or be in tree, me be in church. You go church?”

“It’s not our thing,” Deborah answers.

“What mean not our ting?”

“Oh, sorry. We don’t go to church.”

“Why you no go church?”

“This is our church—the beautiful island of Corfu. God is here.”

“God on Corfu, but son Jesus and son Spiridon live in church. God tell them speak to people, so people have mens to speak to, not just air.”

“Then why do you speak to the trees?”

“Because my Papa speak and his Papa speak, so Leonidas speak. My Papa taught me to listen to tree. All on Corfu know Leonidas talk to tree. Peoples come with problem and want Leonidas to ask tree to help. Leonidas do, and people better. Leonidas speak to tree for you?”

I think for a moment if I should have Leonidas ask the tree one of my burning questions. I dismiss it as too complicated. Deborah turns to me and says, “Let’s ask the tree if we’ll have children.”

Leonidas leans his ear against the tree and presumably whispers our question into the tree trunk. In a moment, he resurfaces with a big toothless grin on his face and proudly proclaims that we will have “much childrens, and childrens have much childrens.”

Like so many places around Krini, the area close to the path abounds with a richness of flora nestled within and around the ubiquitous olive tree. Because these august elders create such vivid and direct associations to ancient Greek and biblical times, I have overlooked that enduring symbol of mourning, the tall, dark green cypress that towers above the groves like a needle-shaped spire.

The source for how the cypress became a symbol of mourning can be found in Greek mythology: Cyparissus, a handsome lad and the darling of the god Apollo, accidentally kills an innocent deer. This sensitive boy is so



grief-stricken that he asks the gods to let him weep and mourn forever. In response to his soulful pleas, the gods turn him into a cypress tree whose running sap symbolizes his tears. I make a note to myself to hug this tragic symbol of loss whenever I pass a cypress tree.

Unlike its ravaged urban cousins dying from Dutch elm disease, the flourishing, green-leaved elms of Cyprus—their forked trunks joined at the waist like Siamese twins—shoot toward the sky in tandem like two parallel pillars. On a hill to the right of the mighty elms, the widespread limbs of the smaller Judas trees—known as the tree on which that turncoat Judas Iscariot hanged himself—twist around each other in a spaghetti-like maze of green and brown branches. The last of their bright pink and white blossoms blanket the ground beneath them, reminding us of those glorious days of late spring, when Judas proclaims his shame in a riot of colors.

Along the path, the scent of wild parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme compete for the attention of our olfactory bulbs, those intelligent little centers in the brain that sort and delineate

the multitude of aromas, like the piquant, woody odor of rosemary or the warm and lemony flavor of thyme. Scattered among the wild herbs, the lemon, fig, orange, and tangerine trees offer an abundance of multicolored fruit waiting for us to pluck them from branches bent from the weight of their heavy produce. The figs seem the ripest, so we pick a few for our immediate pleasure. We are not disappointed—ripe to the moment, honeycomb sweet, and as mouthwatering as you would hope a fresh-picked fruit would taste.

The variegated autumn showstopper that sprouts from the cracks and fissures in the rocks, and from the dirt and dried manure on this well-trodden path, is the cyclamen, a spade-shaped flower colored in pink, lavender, and white, and connected to its emerald green leaves by long, olive green stems. Competing with the cyclamens for attention are the wild crocuses that mirror its brilliant tri-colored scheme with a similar, yet somewhat muted, version of those same three colors.

Tossed between the cyclamens and crocuses, left in the spaces separating the fig and or-

ange trees, and abandoned beneath the olive trees, lie the overwhelming evidence of how man communes with nature—those ever-present products of modernity: plastic wrappers, wine and beer bottles, and paper plates.

As we ramble down this footpath, a woman of indeterminable age, dressed in the traditional black garb of a mourner, approaches us. From the spryness of her body to her lined and leathery complexion, this woman could be anywhere between 40 and 60. Given her drab, painful appearance, she may be mourning for her husband, her parents, or any of her deceased relatives from this century or a previous one. I guess the shelf life for grief in this part of the world spans multiple generations.

On her head, she balances a water jug with the same precision and ease that we have observed in the other women in black—eyes focused forward, neck and head straight, shoulders squared. She is an ancient mourner who moves with the grace of a gazelle.

Behind her marches an unruly flock of speckled goats and unshorn sheep. Here and there, a boisterous goat and an unmanageable lamb dart in and out of the row. An ugly mutt nips at their heels to force his undisciplined flock in line. As chaotic as it appears, there seems to be a primordial instinct to follow the leader, namely our water-carrying woman in black.

At the rear of the procession walks a teenage girl of around 16, in jeans and a t-shirt. In her left hand, she holds a long, straight stick that she uses to coax a stray sheep or goat back into the convoy. In her right hand, she carries a boom box blasting the Bee Gees' "Stayin' Alive," from the soundtrack of "Saturday Night Fever." I half expect the flock to form a horizontal row, like in the disco scenes, and like dancers in a chorus line, the flock kicks up its heels and jumps up and down in tune to the pounding rhythm that could bring the dead to life. Picture a goat—say the brown billy with white splotches and large gray horns making moves like John Travolta.

It is impossible to stand still to the pulsating beat of "Stayin' Alive." So, as the girl passes, Deborah grabs my hand and we engage in some serious disco moves on this makeshift dance floor overflowing with fresh sheep and goat crap. I spin her around, pull her toward me, and we pass our arms across each other's shoulders. We separate momentarily, then slide and groove toward one another. The moment Deborah reaches me, I grab her by the waist, and she bends backward. We met on a dance floor in Keene, N.H.; we fell in love moving to the beat of the Rolling Stones' "You Can't Always Get What You Want." I would like us to die together dancing to "Stayin' Alive."

The girl stares at us wide-eyed for a few seconds and then continues on her way, lighting up the trail with the Bee Gees. ★

Michael S. Tobin is a psychologist and author of Riding The Edge: A Love Song to Deborah, from which this article is adapted.