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When Susan Johnson was a young woman,

she travelled from Australia to England to Greece.

And arriving on a Greek island in the Aquamarine Ionian Sea,

she felt herself burst open by the light, the colour,

the life on the streets, the taste of lemons and olives

and oil and honey.

Put simply, Susan fell in love.

Many years later, now a woman in her 60s

with two grown-up sons and a career in Brisbane,

Susan realised she had had it with her life,

had it with being told what to do by her boss,

had it with paying the mortgage, living in the suburbs

and the sameness and predictability of everything.

She wanted to be free again, to feel joy and delight.

She wanted to return to Greece.

But she wouldn't go alone.

This time, she'd bring along for the adventure

her 85-year-old mother, Barbara.

And what happened next is told in Susan's memoir,

Aphrodite's Breath.

Hi, Susan.

Hi, Sarah.

This island that you fell in love with,

how did you first end up there back when you were 19 or so?

So I had the great good fortune to go to school here in Brisbane

with a number of girls from Kithira.

Now, Kithira, the island itself, is below the Peloponnese

and just above Crete,

but it's not really on many tourist routes

because it's very hard to get to.

But by chance, falling in with these Catherians

and Maria Komnenos, then she was Komono when I knew her,

and Chris Zantas, who was Chris Sufias.

And the Komono family in particular

lived across the road from the school.

And her parents, Gregoria and Emmanuel,

were just the most wonderful people.

Immediately, even before I got to the island,

I fell in love with the Greek culture first

because Gregoria had this wonderful food.

She was a fantastic cook, spent Spana Kopeta.

All these things that she grew in her backyard in the garden

in suburban Brisbane in Clayfield.

And when I left school,
I went straight to the Korean male
and went to the University of Queensland part-time.
I saved up because I always wanted to go to travel to Europe.
And it so happened that the Komono family
were going to be in Greece.
So I planned the itinerary to get to Greece
at the end of the trip.
So I did start in London,
and then we went to right through Europe,
but it was a particularly cold winter.
And England was freezing, France was freezing,
Italy was freezing.
But then we caught the ferry from Brindisi then to Piraeus.
And then I emerged into what I could just say,
this is the Greek light.
Everything was shining and ablaze and warm.
It was at least 15 degrees warmer.
And so, Maria and I still dispute this,
whether we went to Chisora that time, the first time,
or when I was there again when I was 21,
but she thinks we went that very first time.
And you'd think I'd remember that, wouldn't you?
Well, when you do know that you got to the island,
what struck you about it?
What images are in your mind
when you think back to that first time that you spent there?
Look, now I would say, I think partly it's to do
with being young and free and alive in the world
and everything being fresh and new.
But more particularly, I think the island,
it is exceptionally beautiful.
It is very dramatic.
It's got a dramatic coastline.
It's got all those Azure sort of Aegean waters,
absolutely crystal clear.
But it was very much a place
that wasn't modernized in those days.
They were in the field, still the women,
they still had traditional headscarves,
there were lots of donkeys, there weren't many cars,
and it was just absolutely blissful.
We would take, Maria and I would go down with her donkey
down these perilous routes down to these coves.

There were hardly any tourists,
there wasn't an established tourist industry then.
In fact, there was only one hotel when I was there in 1978.
It was just bliss, absolutely bliss.
Everywhere in Greece has got some marvellous myth
associated with it.
What's Kithara's story?
Well, Kithara's story is that it's called Aphrodite's Island
because Aphrodite was supposed to be born in its waters.
What happened was her father, Zeus,
became cross with his son, Kronos,
and cut off Kronos' genitals.
And the genitals fell into the water
and the foam of the genitals through this up-arose Aphrodite.
Now, that is the story the Kitharians tell.
Cypriots also claim Aphrodite,
so there's a bit of argy-bargy about where she's from,
but according to the Cypriots and Hesiod
in the myth retells it that way,
then she sailed in her shell to Cyprus.
But with every Greek myth, there are many, many interpretations,
there are many tellings, and that is just one of them.
So was it somewhere that you thought much about over the years, Susan,
or was it just this place you'd had this sort of magical experience
as a young woman, or how did you kind of hold it in your mind
as time went on?
No, look, it really did shine in my mind completely.
It was this translucent thing,
my definition of happiness,
because we were all young, we were a group of young people,
many of them young Greek Australians,
some occasionally someone else.
I was there with an Australian of Jewish descent.
There was a young English guy, and we were this young ragbag troop.
We'd walk everywhere, all over the island.
There were dancers down in little hidden valleys.
There were, and to me, one of the things that struck me
was there was no generational gap.
So young people would be at the end of,
and very small children would be at the end of one of these dancers.
A very old person would be at the other.
There would be, there was no clash of generations.
There just seems to be, there was one culture of reverence for dance,
for communal life, for religious piety.

That's certainly a very religious place as well.
So the Greek Orthodox Church has a central role in the community life.
It was just a very intact, to me, village life,
which I had never seen, and I don't, and I think it's pretty rare.
Nevertheless, you know, your life took its own course.
You were married, you had children,
you built this career in journalism and as a novelist.
How did you come to the decision that you wanted to go back
and live on this island?
It's, well, look, it's interesting.
What happened was one of my novels,
The Landing, was translated into Greek.
And so in 2017, I think, I went back to, for the Greek launch,
because it really meant a lot to me.
I had other novels translated into French and German and other languages,
but it really meant a lot to me that I had this novel in grief.
So I went back to Athens, and while I was there, I thought,
look, I'm in Athens.
I hadn't been back to the island for 40-something years.
I actually went back, and one of my old friends from those days
had actually, she's a Greek-American called Tuffy Theodora,
and she had relocated to the island.
And so I stayed with her in one of the old village houses.
And I just thought, oh, my God, it's exactly like I remember.
You know, the square was still the same.
Many of the same people were there.
It really hadn't been destroyed at all.
It was arguably the same place.
It had not been destroyed by tourism.
And I thought, this is just bliss.
And so that was 2017.
And then by then, my dad had died.
My mum had moved down to Brisbane to be with me, closer to me.
She wasn't living with me, but she was close by.
And then what happened to newspapers across the world
was that they were dying.
Newspapers were in extremis, and I was a print journalist.
So I was working for Murdoch, who
was offering around the world voluntary redundancies to people.
So one day I was at a friend's place
in the beautiful area of Stanthorpe.
One of my oldest friends, his two sisters, lives out there.
And I was visiting on this beautiful spring day.
And it was just glorious.

The sky was really blue.
They farmed their own.
They've got apple trees.
And they do a lot of their own farming,
and they bake their own things.
And both the sisters, then there were two sisters there,
had just resigned from their jobs to work on the farm.
And I thought, as I was walking across the farm,
I had to go back to work the next day.
I thought, you know, I'm sort of sick of what I'm doing.
I'm really sick of it.
I would love to be doing it.
So I actually asked Kevin, who's my friend,
to do me a little sum.
And so on, on the back of an envelope, he said, OK,
what would you get in a voluntary redundancy?
So we did all these little sums.
And I've still got the envelope.
And I thought, hmm, at a pinch, I might be able to do it.
Was the idea to go to Greece there right from the start?
Well, then I thought, well, what if I do give up my job?
How will I earn money?
And how will I?
How can I survive?
Because I still had a mortgage.
At that stage, one boy had gone back to London.
My second son, Elliot, had moved back to London
to be where his dad lives.
But my other son, Casper, was still just finishing up
at the University of Queensland.
But then circumstances all kind of happened at the same time.
Casper decided to leave.
Then somehow I got this idea of Greece.
I thought, well, I could actually survive as a writer in Greece
because it's much cheaper to live.
If I took the redundancy, and maybe if I got an advance
or something, and then suddenly this idea crystallized,
maybe I could go to Greece.
But then I thought, I can't leave mum.
I just can't.
How old was she at this point?
Then mum was about 84.
She was turning 85 soon.
And so I thought, look, could I go to Greece and take mum?

And I thought she would just say no.
And then I thought, well, maybe I can't go to Greece.
I'll just have to wait around.
Because I really felt quite responsible for mum.
So what did she say when you proposed to this?
Out of the top of my head, I said, mum,
I've got this sort of hair brand idea.
What would you think if we actually moved to Greece together?
Would you be interested in coming?
And she said, yeah, why not?
If I die, I'll be closer to paradise.
And so I had to obviously check with my brothers.
And I've got two younger brothers,
I'm the oldest child and the only girl.
My brother, Stephen, who's quite well-travelled,
sort of said, well, what else is she going to be doing?
Yes, you might as well.
Take it to Greece.
Yes, take it to Greece.
My youngest brother, Ian,
who had the sort of vague notion of where Greece was,
he said, well, don't eat too much pasta and say hello to the pope.
I don't think he had any idea where Greece was.
And what did your sons think about this plan?
So I asked both of them and they said,
well, I thought it was great that they both wanted to come and see me.
And so then we started the whole process of trying to get a residency visa.
Well, the process of setting up to live in another country is no small feat.
How painful was all of the logistical hoops you had to jump through?
Extraordinarily painful.
It was just, well, and this was pre-Brexit, though.
So I had one great stroke of luck in that I'm a dual citizen.
I've got a UK passport, so I didn't need to do anything.
I could just live there pre-Brexit.
Mum, on the other hand,
needed to do this catalogue of things that she couldn't believe.
She had to get a police check to see that she was wanted for no crime
in any Australian territory.
She had to go through all these medical procedures to prove
that she didn't have any infectious diseases,
including having a syphilis test.
And I just thought that the doctor would just sign off,
you know, and it wouldn't actually do it,
would just assume that she wouldn't have syphilis, you know.

But no, she had to have the whole blood test.
And then that was when I started to think,
watching Mum go in for the pathology test,
I thought, oh, you know, what am I doing?
Am I, is she only sort of saying yes because she thinks I'm going to leave her behind
and that she doesn't want to be left behind?
And so, you know, we had quite a frank discussion about it.
I said, look, Mum, you know, if you don't want to do it, I'm not going to go.
You know, I just won't go.
But she said yes.
And you took off and went together,
travelling from Australia all the way to Kithra,
south of the Peloponnes in Greece.
And you'd found a house before you arrived there.
What were you feeling, Susan, as you arrived at the beautifully named Armand Tree House?
I had found it under really difficult circumstances
because one thing that has changed on Kithra is that there is...
Airbnb has really colonised the island as it's colonised elsewhere.
So it was quite hard to get around the algorithms
to actually correspond with people and say, look,
can we have this as a long-term let?
So it was quite extraordinary difficult to do.
And I wanted to make sure that we...
Because Kithra is very isolated.
Migration happened for a reason.
It's a very rocky, difficult terrain in many ways.
And the people who left after the Second World War left
because it is quite a hostile terrain.
And I didn't want mum to be in an isolated place.
So I wanted her to be near a village, or preferably in a village,
near a cafe, have somewhere where she could walk.
But in fact, when we got this house, I looked at...
I knew that she could be downstairs,
so she didn't have to walk up any stairs.
There was a little garden at the back.
And I loved it.
As soon as I opened the door, I loved it.
What did it look like from the outside?
It's just a classic...
It's in a very ancient...
One of the oldest villages on the island.
And in fact, the former capital, briefly,
she called Aaranyadika.
And I must say, it took me months to learn how to say that.

And mum could never say it.
She didn't even bother saying it.
Look, my Greek is really bad,
but it took me a long time to sort of get that pronunciation.
Mum didn't bother.
She thought...
She put it in the too-hard basket.
But when we got to the house, I ran up the stairs.
So it's the classic white stuff over there.
Classic little white cube house.
Roof on the top.
Overlooking this absolutely amazing view
across the straits onto the Peloponnesus.
And like so white at the particular mountain
that we were looking at, it's snow peaked even in summer.
It's one of the highest mountains in Greece.
And it was just absolutely the most beautiful place
you've ever seen with the tree at the front,
not yet in Blossom,
because it was the end of winter when we arrived,
but technically the beginning of spring.
And just beautifully proportioned Greek stairs
with no handrails.
And I just loved it.
Mum, on the other hand, took one look at it and said...
looked at the bedroom that I wanted her to be in
because she didn't have to go up the stairs
and said, I'm not sleeping in there.
And marched up the stairs with no handrails
and said, OK, I'll have this one.
So I thought, OK, that's fine.
But I was really worried about her.
I mean, she was very physically well,
but there were no handrails on the concrete steps.
And why was she unimpressed by it?
When you say she didn't want that bedroom...
She didn't want the bedroom.
It was too dark, it didn't suit her.
There was a double bunk and she said, I'm not sleeping in there.
And then she looked at the laundry,
which wasn't actually a laundry, it was just like in a cupboard.
And it had one of the...
Well, the French have a lot of them, those barrel sort of machines.
And she said, oh, that's going to take my finger off.

And that's not a bathroom.
So it was two bathrooms.
The second bathroom downstairs was basically a wetter room
and didn't suit her at all.
So right from the beginning, she didn't like the house.
When we think of grace, we usually imagine sunshine and heat.
You were there, as you say, just at the beginning of spring.
What was the temperature like inside this new house?
It was freezing.
Unfortunately, it was one of the coldest winters.
And really, it was freezing.
And poor mum, if only I had realised,
of course, I would have put the trip off till summer.
And in fact, I often now wonder in retrospect,
would the whole thing have been different if we'd gone in summer?
You know, it was really freezing.
There was no proper heating.
They were all like little bar heaters.
And there were a couple of, you know, sort of oil burners
and things like that.
There was a fire.
So I had to learn how to make a fire pretty smartly.
Yes.
What kind of wardrobe had your 85-year-old mum
brought to this little remote village on an island?
She had lived in Queensland for,
she was originally, she grew up in Sydney,
but she had lived in Queensland for many years.
And she really was not used to any temperatures
below about 20, really.
So she sort of complained about the cold
pretty much from the get-go.
And she had, you know, as a lot of Queensland women
of a certain age, you know, I think she only had one woollen,
true woollen jumper.
Everything else was acrylic or track-suity sort of things.
So she was freezing.
You know, and I felt really, really guilty and horrible.
And as well as that, she didn't really enjoy walking very much.
You know, I was thinking that we would do walks,
but she really didn't enjoy that at all.
So how did she spend her days?
So she became very interested in,
well, she's always been an excellent cook.

So she took up cooking.
She always did crossword puzzles.
So she had a big stack of crossword puzzles,
because she wanted to keep her mind active.
We did a lot of touring around the islands.
She was, she was a great reader.
I had negotiated with a dear friend,
she got a kindle that she could bring.
So she was reading and I downloaded a whole lot of books for her.
But, you know, her main thing was, you know, cooking and cleaning.
And she had been a sort of,
my father was a businessman for 3M,
which is in a Scotch tape, Minnesota mining.
And she had been a sort of, I guess, a housewife
who used to do excellent dinner parties and things like that.
So she was very used to cooking.
She was an excellent cook.
So she would do these wonderful Greek meals.
And she did a couple of excellent of lemon-o soups.
And, you know, she was trying out Greek recipes.
We had oodles of lemons.
So there were lemons everywhere.
She was in her 80s, Susan, but a glamorous 80.
Perhaps partly that sort of, you know,
adulthood she'd spent as the wife of a successful businessman
hosting dinner parties.
She brought a kind of glamour to life on the island with you.
That's right. I mean, someone christened her the top model
pretty quickly.
You know, like she was, she was a great beauty, my mother.
She had done modelling in her youth.
And she also had this absolutely wonderful
upswept sort of French roll that was,
she had beautiful silver hair, but it was very, very stylish.
And, you know, she wasn't ever a woman who felt her age.
You know, she was a singer as well in her youth
and sort of given it all up.
But Dad had always said, you know,
she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life.
And she was a great beauty mum.
And so, you know, she really came to the island
with a great wardrobe of clothes
and a fondness for cigarettes.
She never stopped smoking.

She was, you know, liked a cigarette or two
and was absolutely thrilled to learn
that in Greece cigarettes are about two cents a bag.
So there was no way it was going to give you, you know,
and everyone smokes in Greece as well.
You know, like it's still, like they have tried to prevent it
in restaurants and things.
But, you know, she was absolutely overjoyed.
She complained about the cold
but loved the process. Yes, yes, that's right.
You were busy trying to work on a novel.
You were also throwing yourself into the village life
in the way that you'd remembered and loved dancing
and walking and practicing Greek and making friends.
But your mum was pretty isolated there at home.
How did things come to a head between you, Susan,
about the different experiences
that the two of you were having on this Greek adventure?
Look, I think it's really interesting, you know,
mother-daughter relationships can always be difficult sometimes.
I'm the only girl. I'm the oldest child.
I think temperamentally, I'm much more like dad,
but dad was much more of a overly emotional sort of,
I don't know, I mean, I think that he was, yeah, his emotions.
I'm not saying that mum wasn't emotional.
She was and she loved things deeply
and she was a committed Christian.
Both my parents were sort of born again into,
I guess she would say, kind of charismatic faiths.
But mum and I, you know, I was her only daughter.
She was a model in her youth.
She was a great beauty.
And I had come of age in feminism of the 70s.
And to me, the idea of defining a woman by what she looks like
was, you know, not a great thing.
So... So, did you have arguments?
Like, did you have big blow-up arguments as you were growing up?
Was it that kind of dynamic sometimes?
No, I was one who did the silent treatment.
You know, I would just not talk.
And I think I got that from her, actually.
So, we would often do, you know,
we did have a difficult relationship when I was young.
But after my dad died in 2010, we'd become much more close.

And, you know, she had moved down, in fact,
from her, the Sunshine Coast, to be with me closer to me.
And so, I would bring her every single day
and I would do things on the weekend.
And we'd gone on holidays together.
But one night, you did have one of those big kind of blow-up arguments
that can happen even with people who were practised at the silent treatment.
How did that conclude, that big fight you and your mum had in this little house?
Um, you know, mum sort of said to me,
you know, what did you think I'd be doing here?
What am I supposed to be doing?
And I said, well, you, surely you would have thought about that.
You know, what did you think you'd be doing?
I really wanted to turn the question on her, but, you know,
she basically said, you know, this is a terrible house, we have to leave.
And, you know, we'd signed a year's contract on it.
You know, it was extraordinarily difficult to break this agreement
because these people had given us a very good deal.
It was a great house, I thought.
But, you know, she just really took a dislike to it straight away.
So it was extraordinarily difficult.
And then what did you ask her, Susan?
Did you put it to her that maybe this wasn't working,
this whole planet adventure to have this time together?
Did she want to go back to Australia?
I said to her, OK, you know, I said to her, you know,
I'll give the bloody money back.
I'll give the, you know, we had a humding around.
I said, you know, what did you, and then I stormed out, basically.
I was absolutely furious.
I thought, you know, she's done nothing but complain
when she gets here.
You know, the house is wrong, you know, it's too cold.
It was, you know, and I really thought, oh, this is just dreadful.
So I stormed out.
But as the further I got away from the house,
the more I thought, no, you know, I can't do this.
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Or go to abc.net.au.
So, Susan, things came to a head between you and your mum.
It didn't seem for either of you that this adventure was working out the way that you
wanted.
You just wanted two conflicting things about this time in Greece.

So what did your mum decide to do?

So very early on, I would say two months in, several weeks in, she decided she wasn't going to stay.

Now, I was horrified at first, and then she said...

Why horrified?

Well, because I had such hopes.

You know, I knew mum could be difficult, but I had this dream of what it was going to be.

I thought that she would just fall in love with it like I had fallen in love with it.

And I was really quite surprised that she didn't, really.

I don't know why I thought...

I don't know.

I just thought...

It was a lot of travel, but basically she'd done travel as the wife of a businessman really, and she hadn't done a lot of...

They lived in a Tuscan farmhouse once when she did a big trip with my late grandparents, her parents.

But I think that it was all a bit too rustic for her.

Was she one of those people too, Susan, who just likes being at home?

You know, holidays are all well and good, but she liked where she lived.

I think that was true, and I think that really did become clear.

You know, she wasn't as kind of interested in learning about local cultures and local people as much as I thought she would be, really.

She wanted to...

She had a few ideas before we went of...

She was a great cook, my mother, and she used to do fantastic sandwiches, you know, like very creative ones.

And she had this idea, oh, maybe she could make Australian-type sandwiches at the markets.

And I sort of said, oh, you know, that's a great idea.

And I was trying to sort of, you know, encourage her to, you know, to meet some of the local women and men.

But really, she just wasn't...

I was surprised that she wasn't interested in doing that.

And so she did decide, and together you accepted, that she was going to leave earlier than intended.

But before that, you'd accepted this house, was not working for her, despite it seeming to fit the criteria that you wanted.

So you set out looking for a new house, which you found further south on the island.

What was it like?

How did it compare to the first place?

Well, the reason I chose the other house was because Mum could walk everywhere, and, you know, it was much more central.

So we ended up in this other house, was sort of in the middle of nowhere, really.

We were only one of four people in the village.

It's called Manitohori, and it was a brother and sister that we came across who were the most delightful people.

Then they became our dear friends.

This is Maria and Manoli.

Mum loved the house, and she loved, you know, even though it was really, she couldn't walk anywhere.

She couldn't, you know, we had to go in a car everywhere.

And the other reason I chose in the other place was because she could walk, and it was near a shop.

So we're in this.

So what did she love about this one?

Do you think?

Well, I don't know.

I think possibly, you know, what I think it was, you know, if I'm honest, I think it was her asserting her will.

I think that, you know, we got into this power struggle somehow, that, you know, Mum was definitely the one that was used to being in charge, and she didn't really like being dispossessed of her authority, which is what actually happened because I had a smattering of Greek.

I knew the place.

I certainly felt more competent and at ease in my surroundings, and I think it was a way of her asserting her power.

Really that's what I think.

There was a power struggle.

You've also moved just as Spring was finally starting to show itself on the island.

How does Spring announce itself in Githra?

Oh, my God, it is glorious.

It is.

If you want to be anywhere in the world, you want to be in Greece in Spring.

The whole place comes alive, just the colours of the flowers.

There's tiny little red poppies, there's yellow, there's purple, there's sort of wild snapdragons that grow everywhere.

It is the most glorious and the scent of just the flowers and the air.

Githra is the most extraordinarily beautiful place.

It's got coves everywhere.

It's got mountains.

It's got food, sort of pine areas.

Well, Greece is, we know, one of the most spectacularly beautiful countries.

It's easier to feel better about things when the smell of wild flowers everywhere in the air.

Absolutely.

It's unfilled, really, in some ways.

I would say that, you know, with the coming of the warmth, Mum felt much better too.

And also, she felt better because she'd sort of asserted her authority, really, in choosing the house.

I think that made her feel better.

The big religious ritual of Spring is Easter in that part of the world.

How is it celebrated on the island?

What happens at the Easter liturgy?

Easter is so important.

And that was really the turning point for us because we joined Easter celebrations down in a year, a year, which is near.

It's on the sea and where Manolia, Maria, took us for Easter lunch.

And all the tables are laid out.

There's some red eggs, you know, the symbolizing rebirth, they're usually set out along the table.

There's lambs being roasted.

It's a very communal thing.

And it's an absolutely Jewish occasion.

People have music, they'll be dancing.

People come back to the ancestral islands from Athens because many, many Greeks moved from the ancestral islands because of the economy to Athens.

So everyone returns to their family islands.

It's the most joyous occasion.

And what happens in the church at midnight?

At midnight is just so beautiful.

And so I couldn't get Mum to go to the church because she just saw it as not a Christian ritual in the same way that she saw it.

And so at midnight, the lights are dimmed and everybody, the priest goes into the vestry and then emerges with the lit candle, which is then everyone goes up with their candles and lights their candle from the priest, from the papus.

And then everybody precedes, all the lights come up, a blaze, there's flowers, there's a great procession of peeling of the bells and light and everyone floods out of the church in this one wave of light and humanity and greets the next person, wishing them happy Easter, Christ is risen.

And then the bells peel above your head and it's just the most glorious, glorious occasion you can ever imagine.

Another magic time on the island is the olive harvest.

Olive are still such a big part of the economy and the culture.

You participated with your neighbours in their harvest.

What job were you given?

Look, the women generally are the ones that go into the trees.

It's still very much a manual job.

I mean, there are machines now that you can put up into the trees and basically dislodge the olives.

But there are big nets laid out end to end around the trees.

And then basically your job is to move the nets to the next set of trees.

So I was on a ladder with a very old fashioned scraper where you're basically shredding the olives from the leaves and they drop onto the nets below.

And it's just the most magical, just a repetition.

And all the women in the trees, many of them you wear scarves because it protects your hair and face from the...

So it's a centuries, centuries old tradition.

And many old women will still do it.

They'll be up combing the olives from the leaves up on the ladders, chattering away, you know, like birds.

It tends to be a woman's job.

And then afterwards, you'll all gather up the olives from the nets, you know, everyone taking one end to end and drag the olives over to the machines where all the twigs and leaves, any that are on the olives are removed and they're placed into the sacks.

It's the most wonderful work.

It's exhausting.

There are now other modern ways of harvesting olives, but it's still the best way to actually comb out the leaves.

There are other ways of shaking the trees and, you know, other methods, more mechanised methods.

But it's very much a communal thing.

The women will cook for the workers.

There will always be one woman, generally, or a couple of women, mothers and grandmothers who cook and bring out the food for the workers in the field.

And I know that, as I got to know Katherians more and more, some of the women would say to me, you know, the harvest time is the most exhausting time of the year for them because they're up cooking.

They've got to take it out to the field.

And they'll also drink homemade wine out there as well, just have a cup.

But to me, these are centuries-old traditions that have still got a lot of beauty and conviviality in them because Maria and Manoli, they told me they look forward to it.

They love it. It's very much a communal joyous thing.

And, you know, there are jokes.

There are many of their relatives will come and help with the harvest.

And then you take them to the olive processing plant, which is owned by the community.

And I would go with Maria in their old truck, which, it soon became clear, had absolutely appalling breaks.

Because it's a very hilly island and we'd hop in the thing.

And, you know, like the breaks would make a terrible sound and then we'd be sliding down the hill.

And I sort of said, Maria, what are the...

I started to get really panicking.

I said, Maria, what are the... how are the breaks?

And she said, medium.

Medium. I think I've gone the donkey, Susan, if that was an option.

This lovely neighbour, Manoli, took you and your mum sometimes to the beach
and where he would fish.
How would he go about doing that?
Manoli is a joy to behold.
Everything about Manoli I absolutely love.
His tiny came up to my shoulder.
So he'd be lucky if he made five foot.
There are quite a lot of tall Ketherians,
but there are also a lot of small Ketherians as well.
And he belongs to the small Ketherians.
And he is just a creature of the land.
And he's a creature of Kethara in the best possible way.
He knows it intimately.
And so he took us one day to Felotii,
which is a very remote part of the island.
And, you know, I quaked with terror,
going down these absolutely enormously steep cliffs down to this bay.
And he took us to this...
First of all, he took us to this...
It's a cave.
It's a little church carved out of a cave for sailors,
for good luck in the treacherous seas.
And it's just the most wondrous thing.
It's just hand-painted by centuries-long dead Ketherians.
And they've just got these lovely little images of boats on the caves.
And there's little icons to save them from perishing in the seas.
And then when we got to Felotii,
there's Manoli swimming out with his hand spear
and just takes out like a creature of the land and sea
and just swims away.
And Mum and I were left in this beautiful little bay
where Mum bought a little seat.
She was fully kitted out in a rashie, as we call it in Australia, you know.
And it's very hard to...
I gave her a hand over the rocks because some of Kethara,
most of the bays are quite rocky.
And it was the first time she'd swam, actually.
And guided her gently in and she said,
oh, my God, she looked up and said,
this is just absolutely paradise.
Above us was just this glorious blue, these dramatic cliffs,
the green of...
There was a little olive grove kind of behind
and goats sort of wandering around.

It was just exquisite.
And then Manoli, after an hour or two,
I just seem to be away a long time,
sort of swam in, clutching an octopus and an eel.
I mean, you know, this absolutely magnificent squirming eel,
which he then put on a rock
and proceeded to carve up like a master sushi chef.
You know, he was just extraordinary.
I mean, he was just, you know, Manoli...
I love Manoli and I think Manoli loves us as well.
He really, you know, they became very, very dear friends to us.
The time came for your mum to leave Greece
and she flew back to Australia with one of your brothers.
And you were there alone on the island, Susan.
Although it had been fraught at times,
did you miss her once she was gone?
Oh, absolutely.
I mean, you know, the first thing that happened was, you know,
mum was a great cook, as I've said,
and she took charge of all the food.
And I remember the very first time it hit me.
I went into the supermarket where we used to go
and I stood in front of the counter.
I was just about to ask for some cheese.
And I was just...
This is after I put her on the plane
and I was just completely hit by this sense that, you know, she'd gone.
And I had to...
I thought I was going to faint with...
I mean, I know it sounds ridiculous, but it had been so fraught.
But anyway, I just sort of... I was just hit with this grief.
So I had to sort of rush away and then go back into the car
and sit in the car.
And then, you know, when I got to the house, I realised that, you know,
she wasn't, you know...
I wish it could have been different, really.
But, you know, she was so brave to come.
It was incredibly brave to come.
You know, not many 85-year-olds would up their lives
and pack up their houses and...
It's a muck of her trust in you, too, really, to lead this expedition.
Absolutely. Absolutely.
You stayed on another year or so writing a novel,
but COVID helped push you and put obstacles to you,

but you made it back to Australia
and arrived just before your mum's 87th birthday.
You hadn't seen her for a year or so. How did she look?
Oh, I was really shocked.
The first thing to see was she seemed to have shrunk.
She had had a fall.
She'd tripped over something in a pantry, and so she'd fallen over.
And, you know, they say that can happen.
Like, now she was 87.
And, you know, I mean, the common wisdom seems to be that, you know,
like, it can happen.
A fall can, you know, precipitate old age in many people.
And she'd really...
She looked really frail, and the main thing was she'd cut off her hair.
And, you know, she'd always had this, you know, French roll,
and it was such a shock to see her with, you know, with short hair.
And she was building a house next to my brother's house
up on the Sunshine Coast.
You know, so she was, you know, her normal bossy self,
bossing everyone around and changing things.
And, you know, she was very feisty, my mother.
She was very admirable in many ways.
She was an incredibly strong person.
You know, she had to be, you know,
her dad was a very strong character and mum was, too.
But, you know, it was a shock of really seeing her with short hair.
You were staying with her one weekend only a few months later
when she passed away really quite suddenly.
And I guess for all of your travelling and love of travelling,
it must have felt like a blessing to you that you were home and with her.
Oh, absolutely.
I mean, absolutely, because I had been up the weekend before.
And the next weekend, she actually admitted for the first time
that she was struggling.
And that's a big thing for mum, because she's such a strong person.
But, you know, she was much, much frailer, you know, undoubtedly.
And so my much-loved sister-in-law, Janet,
who I'm very, very close to, my brother Stephen's wife,
and I had sat down the night before with her to...
She set up a care plan, you know, so it's a big, long form.
And, you know, we started to fill that in.
And the next morning, she was going to get up for church.
She used to go to, you know, I don't know if you remember, in lockdown,
there were a lot of things that were done remotely.

So I'd set up her iPad for her.
But, yeah, that didn't happen.
She mightn't have appreciated Kithara or the Isle
in the way that you do, Susan.
But I think it's such a beautiful gift that you took your 85-year-old mother
and gave her that experience of swimming in the Ionian Sea
and sharing Easter with those villages.
Yeah. No, I think it was, actually.
Now, I look back and I think it was, you know, a remarkable thing, really,
that we were able to do it.
You know, we had become very close, really, when Dad died.
Dad died in 2010.
And really, the last, you know, 10 years, we had become much, much closer.
We did a lot of things together.
We'd gone on holidays before and, you know, we used to take her out
to restaurants and things.
You know, in many ways, women have really represented our different generations.
You know, Mum was a woman of the 50s who was a great beauty,
who'd given up everything to be to be married and raise children.
But, you know, that had, I would say, I'm a feminist of the 70s
that, you know, grew up in a completely different era.
And, you know, it was kind of when I was younger,
kind of scathing about wives, you know, without jobs.
But, you know, I think Mum and Mum would never have ever said
that she was disappointed or frustrated by her life.
And in fact, she did go back and work as a fundraiser for the Miss Australia Quest,
you know, when she was older.
And it turned out to be an excellent, excellent added.
After she passed away, Susan, you moved into the house
that she'd built in the mountains and were writing this memoir
that you've just published.
Was it a kind of balm to reimagine her?
Or was it the last thing you wanted to do in the wake of your mum's death?
Well, look, all I can say is thank goodness
I had actually written a great deal of it when I had been on Keithra.
I, like, you could say the tone of it was set already.
I'd written probably about 10,000 words.
You know, I hadn't dared tell my publisher until very late
in the proceedings that Mum was going home early.
Luckily, she thought that you thought that'd bring the money back.
You paid her to write a memoir about living in Greece with your mum.
Absolutely. I mean, yeah, exactly.
I mean, we didn't tell them, you know, two months in.
I mean, I did tell my darling publisher Annette Barlow later

that, you know, like towards Mum leaving.
You know, she was there for the best part of a year, essentially.
So, you know, and she was very good to do that because, you know, she could have gone home in a half, but she didn't.
But and so I had, luckily, I had 10,000 words written because, you know, basically what happened after that was pretty much immediately after Mum died, I had a cancer diagnosis. And so, you know, that sort of upset everything.
So all this dramatic stuff kind of had not been expected.
So you might say that the memoir turned out to be something different. But thank goodness I had the tone sort of set.
Do you think it would have been a very different book if your mum was still alive?
I think it would have been.
I definitely think it would have been.
You know, I think that I would have felt, you know, like I love my mother and I am, but I'm also a writer and we know that, you know, writers quite often are seen as betraying their families.
You know, there's a lot of people like Philip Larkin who talks about, you know, the ice pick in the heart.
You know, there's people that, you know, it is a difficult thing. I know that the American writer, David Sedaris, you know, says, you know, he's very funny, obviously.
But he says, you know, your mother's been diagnosed with cancer. Ka-ching, you know, he's terrible.
He's terribly cruel.
But, you know, Mum knew, Mum knew and she knew very much what I was doing. And she she was always my greatest supporter.
But it meant I didn't feel free to, I wanted to write truthfully, but I think it would have been a different book if Mum had still been alive. Was there a weird thing that your brain was doing as you were writing it, even after she'd passed away, that she was somehow reading it?
Or what would she make of what you were writing?
Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.
I didn't want anything that she would, to write, anything that she would be ashamed of or anything that she would, you know, disappear.
And I know that many of my writer friends would say, well, that doesn't make you a writer because writers have to write absolutely the unvarnished truth.
I think I love my mother dearly and I want her to be remembered as a wonderful, strong woman, which she was, you know.
You know, all of us have got faults. I've got faults. She's got faults. You know, who among us is a saint? No one is a saint.
Is a saint. No one is a saint.

What about you, Susan?

Will you go back to this island that's played such a big part in your life over different periods?

I'm going back in July.

I'm going to give personally a copy to Manoli and to Maria, my dear friends.

And I, Manoli can't read English, nor does he speak it much.

Maria does.

I want them to feel that I've honoured their lives in some way, that I haven't been some sort of, you know, tourist, it's sort of just come in and taken and, you know, written some jolly account.

I really wanted to honour their lives and show them truthfully.

And I think the Katherians are a wonderful people.

I think they've had a lot of suffering to put up with.

They've been through world wars.

They've been through the harshness of migration.

If they know about loss of family and the love of family, they know about that.

You know, they are a fine people and they really know how hard life can be.

And what do you miss most about the way you lived there or life there?

What do you miss most about that back here in Australia?

Look, what Katherians have is something that they call keffi.

I mean, it's a Greek word,

but it means something like the joy of living.

What they can do is they can make a story.

They can make a joy out of everything.

You know, like even at a funeral, they'll make, you know,

there'll be food, there'll be coming together.

There will be, they just have a great capacity for joy.

Well, I wish you all the keffi in the world, Suzanne.

Thank you so much for sharing your story.

Thank you so much, Sarah. Thank you.

MUSIC

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