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Opening Extract from...

Cartes Postales from Greece

Written by Victoria Hislop

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HELLAS
GREECE
CARTES POSTALES
FROM GREECE

By Victoria Hislop

The Island
The Return
The Thread
The Last Dance
The Sunrise
Cartes Postales from Greece

Victoria
Hislop



Photography by
Alexandros Kakolyris

headline
review

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CARTES POSTALES FROM GREECE

They arrived dog-eared, always torn, often almost illegible, as though carried across Europe in a back pocket. Once or twice the ink looked as if it had been washed away by rain, wine or even tears. Sometimes they were bleached by sunshine, and the faded postmarks showed that their journey had often taken many weeks.

The first of these postcards had appeared at the end of December, and after that they came with increasing regularity. Ellie Thomas began to look forward to their arrival. If she did not receive one for a week or more, she would sift twice through the mail, just in case. The content of her pigeonhole, one of twelve in the large communal hallway, was mostly bills (or reminders of unpaid bills) and junk mail for junk food. Much of it was addressed to previous tenants who had long since gone, and she assumed that the intended reader of these postcards, S. Ibbotson, was one of these.

Apart from the colourful images, always of Greece, she tossed the stray mail into the postbox on the corner of her street with the words 'Return to Sender' scrawled across the top. They were probably binned by the post office.

The postcards could not be returned to sender. The sender was unknown, always signed off simply with an 'A'. 'A' for 'anonymous'. And whoever S. Ibbotson was, nothing else had come for her (or possibly him) in the three years Ellie had been living in the gloomy Kensal Rise flat. It seemed a waste to throw them away.

On a large corkboard, for which she had no use except the occasional shopping list, and a scrap of paper with her National Insurance number, she began to pin the cards. As the weeks went by, they formed a colourful mosaic of mostly blue and white (skies, sea, boats and whitewashed buildings with blue shutters). Even the flag that appeared on some of them was in the same pure colours.

. . . Methoni, Mystras, Monemvasia, Nafpaktos, Nafplio, Olympia, Sparta . . .

There was a touch of alchemy in their names, and she allowed them to cast their spell. She longed to be in the places they depicted. They spun around in her mind, like any foreign words with musical sounds but unknown meanings: Kalamata, Kalavrita, Kosmas. On and on they went.

The tableau of images brightened up the basement flat, putting colour into her otherwise dreary home, something her Habitat throws had failed to achieve.

In neat, slightly 'arty' (if occasionally illegible) script, the writer conveyed little information but plenty of enthusiasm.

From Nafplio: *It has something special about it.*

From Kalamata: *It has such a warm atmosphere.*

From Olympia: *This picture gives you just a glimpse.*

Ellie began to let herself imagine she was 'S', to dream of the places that this 'A' seemed to be calling her to.

The sender often gave insights into a way of life she had never imagined.

It seems that people here don't understand solitude. Even while I was writing this postcard someone came up and asked me where I was from and what I was doing here. It was not easy to explain.

For the Greeks, the worst thing in the world is to be alone, so someone always comes to talk to me, to ask me or tell me something.

They invite me to their homes, to panegyris, even to baptisms. I have never encountered such hospitality. I am a total stranger, but they treat me like a long-lost friend.

Sometimes they might invite me to share their table in a café and, invariably, they have a story to tell. I listen and write it all down. You know how old people can be. Memory can make truth a bit soft around the edges. But never mind about that. I want to share these stories with you.

But they all ended sadly:

Without you this place is nothing. I wish you were here. A.

The sign-off was simple, sincere and sorrowful. 'S' would never know how much the anonymous writer wanted them to be there, together.

One day in April, three cards arrived all at once. Ellie found her old atlas and began to locate the places. She tore the page out and pinned it next to the cards on the corkboard, marking all the places and tracking the writer's journey. Arta, Preveza, Meteora. All of them magical and unfamiliar names.

This country that she had never visited was becoming part of her life. As the writer was keen to point out, the pictures could not convey the scents or the sounds of Greece. They merely afforded a snapshot, a glimpse. Nevertheless, she was falling in love with it.

Week by week, and with each *carte postale*, Ellie's desire to see Greece for herself increased. She longed for the luminous colours and sunshine the postcards seemed to promise. Throughout the winter, she had left for work before dawn and got home at seven, so the curtains had remained permanently closed. Even when spring arrived, it made no difference. The sun could not find a way in. It did not seem much of a life, certainly not what she had expected when she had moved here from Cardiff. The lights she had hoped for in London seemed far from bright. Only the cards were able to cheer her: Kalambaka, Karditsa, Katerini were added to the montage as soon as they arrived.

Her job selling ad space in a trade magazine had not thrilled her, even from the first day, but she had been persuaded by a recruitment agency that it was a way into publishing. The route must be a very indirect one, she had realised. Clients seemed susceptible to her sonorous Welsh voice, and she easily met the targets set her by the Head of Telesales. This left her a few hours a day when she could earn extra commission or, as she was now doing,

while away the time on the internet, looking at images and information on Greece. Among the ranks of other people in their late twenties doing the same job, many of them were 'resting' actors or singers, wanting to be somewhere other than where they were. For most of those in the anonymous rows close by, the dream was to be on stage. For Ellie, it was to be somewhere much further away than the West End.

The postcards had become an obsession. The idealised images that she was gathering were becoming more and more important to her. With the summer came postcards from islands. They were impossibly beautiful images, with shimmering blue seas and skies: Andros, Ikaria. Were these places real? Had the pictures been airbrushed?

A few weeks passed, and no postcard arrived. Each morning throughout August, she checked her pigeonhole and, when she saw that none had arrived, she felt a stab of disappointment. Every fruitless search was a dashed hope, but she could not stop herself. For the bank-holiday weekend, she went to see her parents in Cardiff and spent the Saturday night visiting old haunts with old schoolfriends. They were all now married and beginning to have children. One of them, to whom she had been a bridesmaid, had asked her to be a godmother. She felt obliged to accept but, at the same time, was mildly disconcerted by her sense of separation from her peers.

Wales had been cold, but London looked greyer than ever as the train drew into Paddington. On the Underground back to Kensal Rise, her mind strayed to the postcards. Would

there be one waiting? As soon as she was in the hallway, the vacant pigeonhole gave her the answer. She calculated that it was more than a month since the one from Ikaria.

Back inside the flat, she realised that the cards had begun to curl on the pinboard, though their colours remained as vibrant as ever. They tormented her a little. Was it finally time to see if the blue skies they depicted were real? To see if the light was as translucent as it appeared? Were postcards always an exaggeration? Or did they have an element of reality?

She checked her passport (last used two years ago for a hen weekend in Spain) and found a flight to Athens that cost less than the cheap boots she had just bought in Cardiff. She was not an adventurous traveller. In her entire life, she had been four times to Spain, twice to Portugal and a handful of times to France (on childhood camping holidays). It was coming to the end of the season, so it was not hard to find a reasonable hotel. She researched on a few sites and finally clicked on a name she recognised. Nafplio. A week's half-board in a nearby beach resort would cost one hundred and twenty pounds. At least she would see one of the places that A had visited, and perhaps some more, if she had time. The decision was utterly spontaneous, and yet she felt that the idea had been planted months before.

The following week flew by. When she told her smooth-talking boss that she would like to take ten days' holiday, he seemed unconcerned. 'Get in touch on your return,' he said. It was an ambiguous response and left her wondering if she had been fired.

Even as the printer clattered out her boarding pass, she was thinking that she would not miss the windowless room

with its banks of telephones.

She couldn't wait to get away from the half-hearted warmth of an English summer that would soon seamlessly elide into autumn. The last postcard A had sent was of a beautiful harbour with pretty houses and boats. She could almost hear the water lapping against them. It looked peaceful and, most of all, inviting.

Ikaria: *It's from another age.*

It was high time to see this new country, and to see if what A said was true. Did people talk to strangers? Invite them to places? She had lived in London for three years and had never received an invitation from anyone she worked with, and certainly not from a stranger in a café. All these things she wanted to experience.

The night before her journey, she was almost sleepless with excitement. Then she slept through her alarm, and only the sound of some drunks in the street woke her. For them, it was the end of a long evening but, for Ellie, the beginning of a new day. She sprang out of bed and, without showering, pulled on yesterday's clothes. After a last-minute check of locks and lights, she let herself out of the flat.

Wheeling her case towards the outer door, she noticed something sticking out of her pigeonhole. Even though she was an hour later than she had intended, she felt compelled to retrieve it. The package had more than a dozen stamps stuck on it at different angles and was the size of a hardback. The name had been obliterated by the franking machine, but the address was legible enough. She recognised the writing straightaway and her heart beat a little faster.

There was no time to open it so she unzipped her handbag

and stuffed it inside. For the next two hours she thought of nothing but catching her plane. She had a twenty-minute walk to a night bus (ten minutes at jogging pace) that would drop her at the coach station for Stansted. The rush hour had not yet begun. Most of the people travelling were on their way to work at the airport.

The woman at the check-in was brusque.

'Only just in time,' she said. 'Your flight is about to close.'

Ellie grabbed her boarding pass back and ran. She was the last to get on the plane, and sank into her seat, hot, stressed, exhausted and already regretting that she was wearing her winter coat. It had been lying on her chair at home and, at four o'clock in the morning, she had not had time to think clearly about what she would need on her travels. It was too late now. She struggled out of the bright red duffel, rolled it up and stuffed it under her seat. The steward was already checking that seatbelts were safely fastened, and the plane was rolling away from its stand.

Even before take-off, Ellie was asleep. She woke three hours later with a stiff neck and a raging thirst. She had not had time to buy even a bottle of water and hoped that the trolley would come by soon. Glancing out of the window, she immediately realised this was unlikely. They were already in the final stages of descent. She caught a glimpse of sea and hills, rectangular fields, rows of trees, houses and some larger buildings, even the familiar Ikea logo. In Athens? Just as she was taking this in, the wheels hit the runway hard. A few people applauded the landing, which seemed strange to Ellie. She had always thought it was the pilot's *job* to get his passengers safely to their destination.

The moment the doors opened, a warm breeze entered the cabin and a new smell that she could not identify. Perhaps it was a mixture of pollution and thyme, but she found herself inhaling it with pleasure.

When she reached into her bag for her passport, the first thing she found was the package. The queue at border control was slow, so she had time to tear off a corner of the brown paper and peek inside. It was a notebook with a blue leather cover, and she could see that the edges of the pages were slightly yellowed. She put it back in her bag.

A coach from the airport took her to KTEL, the central bus station. It was busy and confusing, with the roar of engines and the shouts of the drivers announcing departures above the noise of passengers, who were coming and going by the thousand, dragging bags and cases. Ellie almost choked on the pungent smell of diesel.

Eventually, she found the right ticket booth for her destination, handed over fifteen euros and, with a minute to go, managed to buy a cold drink and some biscuits before boarding.

As she settled into a seat by the window, looking out at the teeming confusion of the bus station, she already knew that A was right about one thing. People here did not like silence. The woman next to her didn't speak a word of English but, in spite of this, they communicated for at least an hour, before the old lady dozed off. In that time, Ellie learned about her children, what they all did and where they lived, and had eaten two stuffed vine leaves and a piece of fresh orange cake (a second slice lay on top of her shoulder bag, wrapped in a napkin). She caught a glimpse of

the parcel nestling beneath her cardigan. She had planned to look at the notebook on the journey, but the warmth of the sun coming through the window and the steady rumble of the bus lulled her to sleep.

It was only when the bus reached Nafplio nearly three hours later that she noticed she did not have her coat. It must still be on the plane. As she waited in the sunshine for her case to be offloaded from the belly of the bus, her annoyance with herself began to evaporate. With the heat on her back, she realised that heavy clothing would be an encumbrance here. She felt like a snake that had shed its skin.

There was a row of taxis at the bus station, and her guidebook suggested that she needed to take one of these to reach her hotel in Tolon. Before doing so, she was impatient to see a little of Nafplio. Wheeling her small suitcase behind her, she set out towards the old town, following signposts which were, helpfully, written in English.

She was soon in the main square, which she recognised immediately from the postcard. The sense of déjà vu made her smile.

Well used to being alone, Ellie did not feel self-conscious as she took a seat in the first café she came to. She was served quickly and her cappuccino arrived promptly, along with a glass of iced water and two small, warm walnut biscuits. For the second time in a few hours, she experienced the Greek hospitality that A had mentioned so many times.

As she sipped her coffee, she looked around her. It was a Friday, early evening. The square was thronging with people of every age, pushing buggies, riding bicycles, showing off on rollerblades, or just strolling, some arm in arm, older

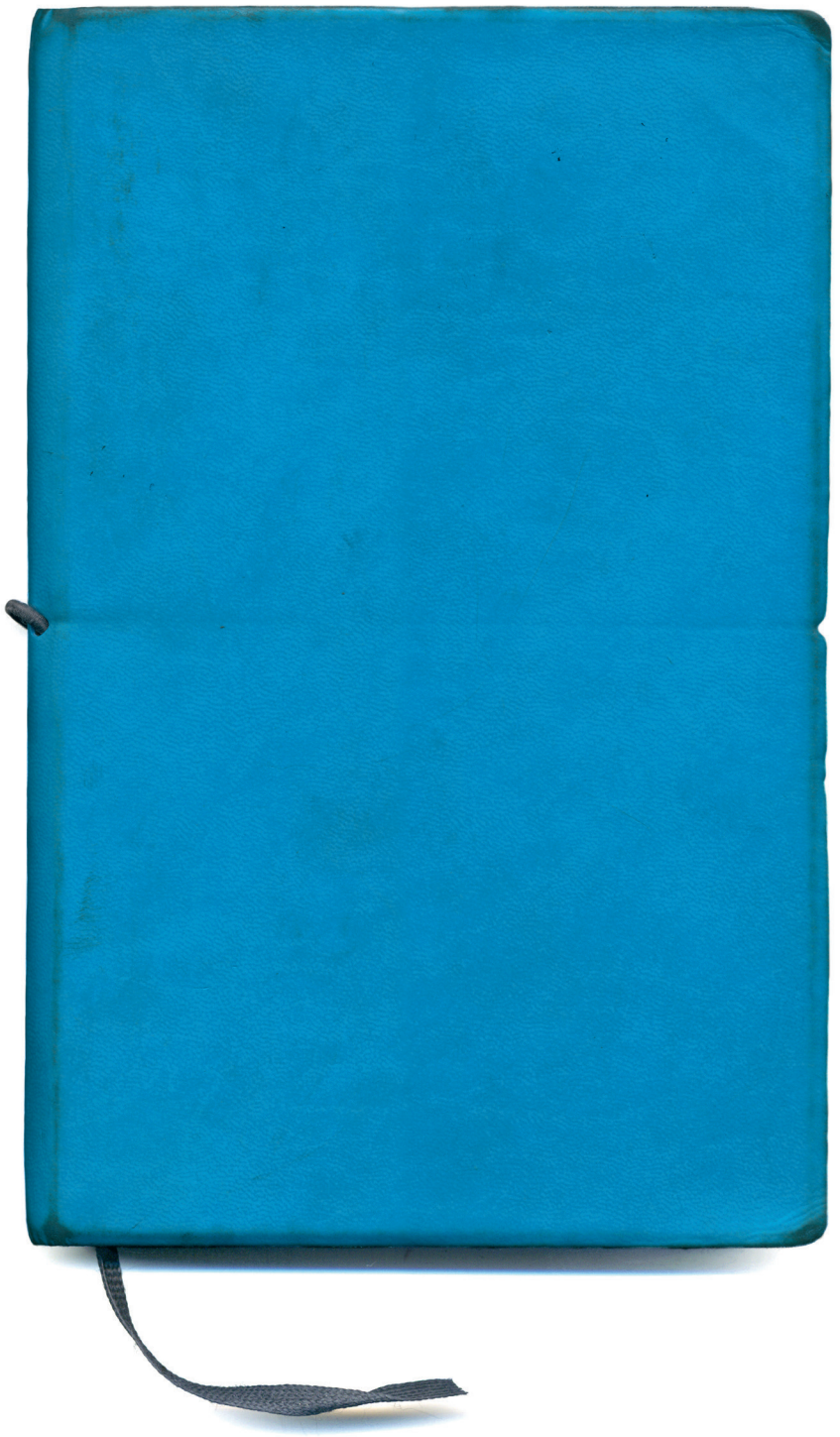
ones relying on sticks. The dozen or so cafés around the perimeter were all full. The mid-September evening was balmy.

The package lay on the table in front of her. Putting her finger into the slit she had made earlier, she made a tear right across the top and pulled out the notebook. Stuffing the brown paper into the side pocket of her handbag, she turned it over in her hands. Postcards were somehow public, on show to anyone that picked them up, but a notebook? Was it like reading someone's diary? Was it an invasion of privacy? It certainly felt like it as she nervously opened the cover. Flicking through, she saw that every page of the book was filled with the familiar black ink of A's meticulous but sometimes indecipherable handwriting.

With her forefinger, she absent-mindedly traced an S in the biscuit crumbs on her plate and gazed out across the square. The addressee was never going to have a chance to read any of this and so, with burning curiosity and only a little guilt, she turned to the first page.

After the first few words she stopped, realising that it would be better to wait until she reached the hotel. Clutching the notebook to her chest, she got up and walked to the taxi rank. 'Tolon,' she said, uncertainly. 'Hotel Marina.'

Later that evening, on the small balcony outside her bedroom, she began once again.



When I went to meet you that day at the little airport in Kalamata and you didn't appear, I waited for twenty-four hours in case I had made a mistake and you were coming on the next plane. Or perhaps you had missed it and couldn't get in touch. I suggested all sorts of reasons to myself. That night I slept on a seat behind the luggage trolleys. The cleaner swept the floor around my feet and even brought over a piece of spinach pie that his wife was about to throw out. She ran the kiosk and their son was the person at passport control – and, of course, it was a nephew at baggage security and then a cousin at the gate to check boarding passes. 'Small airports are a family business in Greece,' the cleaner told me with great pride.

Early morning on the following day, I had to leave the Arrivals area. Even the word seemed to mock me. It was mid-September and there would be no more charter flights coming in from the UK, and no possibility that you would suddenly appear, as I had allowed myself to fantasise. You didn't pick up when I phoned, but I knew that if something terrible had happened to you, then one of your friends would have called me.

I sat for a while on a bench outside the airport, not

knowing what to do or where to go. A few moments later my phone buzzed. There was a message. I was shaking so much as I reached into my pocket that my mobile fell to the ground. Through the spider's-web mess of the shattered screen, I could just about make out the words: 'She can't make it. Sorry.' I suppose you had dictated it to some friend. I stared at it in sickened disbelief for a few minutes and then rang the number. No reply. Several times I tried. Of course with the same result. 'Anger', 'fury', 'rage'. Those words don't get close to describing what I felt. They are just words. Puffs of air. Nothing.

There were no further messages. Just a 'Bon Voyage' from my brother later that day.

I could have gone straight back to Athens, but I couldn't face driving back – along the same road that I had just travelled with such anticipation and excitement. I was numb, almost incapable of getting the key in the ignition. I had no real idea where I was going. I didn't care. I have no idea how long I drove, but when I got to the sea I stopped. Right on the beach, where the road ran out, there was a sign saying 'Rooms'. This was where I would stay.

I did almost nothing in the days that followed except sit and gaze out at the Ionian. The waves were wild, endlessly rolling in and crashing on the sand, their mood reflecting the turmoil that I felt inside. It did not seem to subside. I could not eat or speak. Men are meant to be the stronger sex, but I have never felt so powerless. I think the sea would have dragged me in if I had got too close. Some days I would willingly have disappeared beneath the foam.

I could not stand the torment of looking at my phone, over and over and over again, and seeing the blank and broken

screen. So I took it out of my pocket and threw it as far into the ocean as I could. It was liberating. The moment I saw the splash, I had to accept that I would not and could not hear from you. I was cut off from you now, and cut off from the world, too.

God knows what the nice couple who ran the place in Methoni thought of me, but they left me a plate of cold food each evening and took it away each morning. The wife put a bunch of fresh flowers in my room one morning and changed them when they wilted. All I could register was their kindness, but not much else. I did not feel hunger or thirst. Even temperature did not register with me. One day I stood under the shower until the water ran cold but realised I could feel nothing on my skin. My watch told me that an hour had passed. Despair had deprived me of all my senses. They were dark days. How I passed the time I don't know, but somehow the hours went by. I had no awareness of how many days or weeks it was since my wait at the airport but, one day, the owner of the pension greeted me as I was on my way out to the beach. 'Kalo mina,' he said cheerfully. 'Octomvris! It's a new month!' I had been there almost a fortnight.

The schedule that I had mapped out for us seemed ridiculous now: a tour of the Peloponnese, then a ferry to Kithera, and from there another ferry to Crete before we flew back to Athens and then to London. You said you had exactly two weeks' holiday to spare, and my meticulous planning would have made sure you were back in time. I had bought a ring while I was in Athens, a solitaire diamond from a shop called Zolotas. This is how much I had deceived myself. I had planned to propose to you against a blood-red sunset in the west of Crete. Even now, I sometimes find myself replaying a scene that never happened.

I hope one day that it will fade from my mind for ever.

That evening in Methoni (where I closed my shutters against the sunset), I had to make a decision: to return to London, or to travel alone. My research in Athens during the two weeks I was there had gone well. The curator at the Museum of Cycladic Art had been wonderful, opening up so many parts of the archive for me, so I had plenty of material to start writing my book. I could do this in a hotel room as easily as at home. The thought of London slightly chilled my blood, as I knew I would be looking for your face in every crowd. Another good reason for staying in Greece for a while would be to avoid the melancholy of a British autumn.

So I packed my bag and checked out. I was in no hurry now. I called my brother from a phone box in the village and asked him to pick up my post once a week and deal with any bills. I did not know how long I would be away. The advance from my book contract would last me a year, if I was careful. Before going into the general store to get chocolate, chewing gum, some water and a few other things I needed for the road, I paused at a rusty carousel where a few desultory postcards were displayed. The shopkeeper was probably not expecting many more tourists now, so he had not bothered to replenish his stock. I picked out one of the Venetian Castle (which, in all those days there, I had not even bothered to visit). Why did I do that? I didn't imagine that you cared about where I was, but I had a sudden desire to communicate with you. Perhaps it was simply to break through the silence that now existed between us. Or was it just to alleviate my loneliness? I couldn't be the person playing with a mobile and appearing to have friends and arrangements, but I could be the man busy

writing a postcard and needing to find a stamp.

It would be a way to 'talk' to you without expecting any reply, a one-way conversation. The idea pleased me. Perhaps you might even regret that you had not come.

The man in the shop put several stamps on the card for me then packed up the other things I had bought.

'Kalo taksidi.'

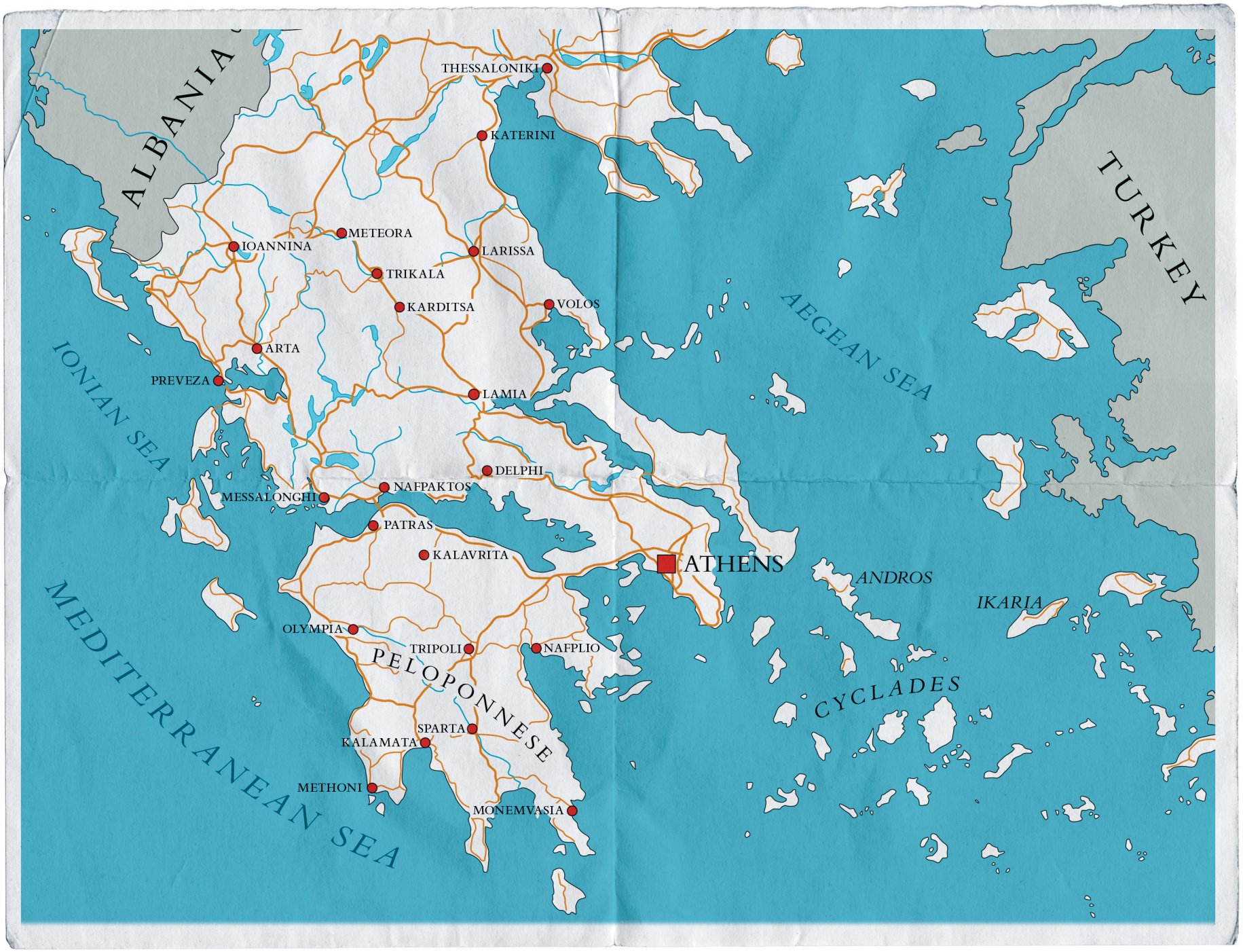
'Thank you,' I replied. It was one of the few phrases I already knew. He was wishing me a good journey.

I rested the card on the roof of the car, scribbled a few lines to you and tossed it into the nearby postbox.

I was totally at liberty to go anywhere I pleased, but it is strange how discombobulating such freedom can be. I sat in the car for at least an hour, staring at the map, and it took all my will to put the car in gear and drive. I knew I was heading east because the sea was behind me, but I had no fixed destination and no idea where instinct or fate would take me. It was the beginning of my travels. This was all I knew.

In the following weeks and months, everywhere I stopped people talked to me. Most were warm and kind and, if they were not immediately so, then my attempts to speak Greek would often break the ice. Many of them told me stories. I listened and noted it down, each day learning surprising things about this country, and new things about myself. The voices of strangers poured into the void, filling the silence you'd left.

You will recognise some of the locations in the stories from the postcards. Who knows if the tales people told me are true or false? I suspect that some of them are complete fabrications, others are exaggerations – but perhaps some of them are real. You can decide.


ALBANIA
THESSALONIKI
KATERINI
METEORA
IOANNINA
LARISSA
TRIKALA
KARDITSA
VOLOS
ARTA
PREVEZA
LAMIA
DELPHI
NAFPAKTOS
MESSALONGHI
PATRAS
KALAVRITA
ATHENS
OLYMPIA
TRIPOLI
NAFPLIO
SPARTA
KALAMATA
METHONI
MONEMVASIA
PELOPONNESE
IONIAN SEA
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
AEGEAN SEA
TURKEY
ANDROS
IKARIA
CYCLADES



October 2015

The beauty of the Peloponnese, where my travels really began, did not soothe my pain. It only made me ache all the more. I felt scorned by its fullness, its lushness, the way that nature herself seemed bursting with life and health. The landscape was the very opposite of my mood, and nothing distracted me from the longing I felt. I had nurtured so many hopes about our future and it was impossible to stop myself returning to them. I learned over the following months that trying to forget can only make you remember all the more. In the evening, I drank to anaesthetise myself and to help me sleep, but soon I even began to dread going to bed. Sleep was like a deep, dark well where nightmares pulled me ever downwards. The owners of the guesthouse in Methoni had rushed into my room at four one morning. My screams had led them to believe that I was being murdered. You were in every dream. But they were bad dreams. Sad dreams. My subconscious was not going to let me forget you. At least, not yet.

It was not a mistake, though, to embark on this journey. Wherever I was, my unhappiness would have followed me. If I had returned to London, it would have been worse, since

my friends would be looking at me with sympathetic death-in-the-family eyes but within a few weeks would be expecting me to have gone back to my usual self. Here, I could be with strangers and, if I moved around enough, people would never know what that 'usual self' looked like. I could reinvent myself completely with people who knew nothing of what had happened. Away from home, I could at least pretend to be a man in control.

People always want to direct a visitor to their favourite place, and my hosts in Methoni had been insistent about Nafplio. 'It's the most beautiful city in Greece, and the most romantic,' they told me.

I forced a smile as they pointed out its location on a map.

Whether or not Nafplio is the loveliest city in Greece, it captivated me. Its platia is the most glorious town square I have ever seen. Think of an enormous ballroom open to the sky. The marble paving stones are smooth and gleamingly clean and, even on a cool autumn evening, beautiful buildings on all four sides protect you from the slightest breeze. The walls of this 'room' are a montage of Greek history: a former mosque from the sixteenth century, a Venetian arsenal, graceful neoclassical buildings and some reasonable twentieth-century architecture. Situated on the sea, with three castles and a history that stretches right back to ancient times, Nafplio was the first capital of the modern state of Greece, from 1829 until 1834, and it feels like somewhere that matters.

I spent many hours there, watching the world go by.

I was glad of some conversation on one of my evenings in Nafplio, but the couple that spoke to me could not help commenting on the fact I was alone.

'Your wife . . .' asked the woman. 'Isn't she with you?'

So many assumptions were made in this question, but I did not bother to address them. Fortunately, her husband stepped in, sensing that his wife had been a little blunt.

'Ever since the Adamakos affair,' he said, 'people in Nafplio have been a little wary of men who sit all on their own.'

'The Adamakos affair?' I asked.

'I don't suppose it made the English news,' he said.

He was right, of course. Stories about Greece in the British press tend to be about the economy or, nowadays, the refugee crisis. They don't take much notice of anything else.

'Well, there was a man who frequently sat here alone,' he said.

'For twenty-five years!' said his wife, to emphasise the point.

'It was a big story here . . .'

'He didn't like people?' I suggested.

'There were certainly people he wasn't fond of,' said the wife cryptically.

'He was from the Mani,' the husband added darkly, leaning forward in case anyone overheard.

I had never been to the Mani, the remote area of land south of Nafplio, but I knew that in former times Maniots had a reputation for pursuing vendettas if their honour was disrespected. I had read something just that day about a dramatic event that took place in the early nineteenth century, close to the café where we sat. Ioannis Kapodistrias, the first head of the new state, had arrested members of an important but rebellious clan from the Mani. In revenge, two of their

relatives lay in wait for him as he was going to church. A first gunshot missed. Kapodistrias was then stabbed, and a second bullet hit him in the head. Violence bred violence. The assassins were executed shortly afterwards.

'You know that the bullet is embedded in the church of St Spyridon, just round the corner?' he said, pointing to a stone staircase leading to the street above us.

'I saw it today,' I answered.

'Well, never disrespect anyone from the Mani,' he said. 'There are plenty of blood feuds that have lasted into modern times.'

Then he told me this story. By the end of it, I knew I would follow his advice.