

Looking
for the
Durrells

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Looking
for the
Durrells

Some summers change
us forever

Melanie
Hewitt

INSPIRE

About the Author

After deciding she wanted to be a book illustrator, Melanie went to art college at the age of 18. Halfway through the year, she changed her mind and secured a place at Swansea University to study English. However, after eighteen months, she left, moved home, and started looking for work as a nanny in London.

A local job advert for a reporter changed her life and career. She took up the post at the Doncaster Advertiser, later became Editor, and then worked in PR. She now works in education as Communications Lead for the XP Schools Trust based in Yorkshire, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

Looking for the Durrells is her first novel.

For my family and all the animals we've loved, and love.

In Memory of:

Brian Carlidge, my father (1931–1998). An artist and reader of a million books, who loved the Durrells, Greece, and us.

Nikos Louvros (1947–2021). A Corfiot who shared his beloved island with those he knew instinctively needed its magic and would, in return, cherish it, as he did.



Prologue

The weak winter sunlight squeezed itself through the hospice blinds and fell in pale stripes on the bed. The squeaking wheels of a trolley being pushed along the corridor, beyond the closed door, made Penny pause.

She had been reading aloud. A paperback lay open on the bed, her hand grasped her dad's, until she realized with mild interest that her hand was starting to feel a little numb. Reluctant to let go of him for more than a second, she pulled her hand away, flexed it a few times and then placed it back.

Cold hands, warm heart. She wondered how many times he'd said that to her as he'd helped her put on her woollen mittens as a child. Now, it was winter again, but it could have been any season beyond the confines of this small hospice room. Their roles were reversed too – all the help to put on anything, eat, wash had come from her for a while now.

She winced, feeling the decline of the last months in a single spasm of mental and physical pain. Things had never been the same since the day he had come out of the consultant's room and confirmed, 'It's cancer'.

It had been just the two of them as she'd grown up, but this news had isolated her, as though she was at the top of a high

mountain, looking down on the world below. Detached from the normal flow of life below, elevated from the here and now.

The countdown to Christmas was denoted by the regular delivery of presents, usually tins of biscuits dropped at the nurses' station, and the dusting-off of slightly garish and faded decorations from a dusty stockroom. The hospice existed as a world within a world and Penny and her dad had been citizens of it for over a week now.

The door opened suddenly. Penny looked up and smiled at Carol, the nurse who had begun to feel like an extended family member; a companion in arms in this fight against pain and its inevitable end.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' Carol walked across the room gathering up the plates of half-eaten sandwiches and a couple of untouched cakes, almost apologetic in their overly bright paper cases.

Penny wondered whether the kind and comforting Carol had heard the raised voices, before Bruce, his anger barely controlled, had walked out of the building a few minutes earlier. Her fiancé had, for a few days, been the darling of the nurses' station, but the fact that his casual and sometimes devastating charm had soon worn off, like the rolled gold on costume jewellery, did not surprise her.

How could they actually fall out in a hospice, as her dad lay dying, arguing about . . . what was it? . . . whether it was possible – realistic even – for her to travel to Italy and back every weekend, while Bruce settled in there, if he was offered the new job he had applied for. Why did he always have to almost bully her into submission, win every point or argument? Discussion seemed to be a long-forgotten and abandoned part of their relationship.

'That would be great, thanks,' she answered Carol absent-mindedly.

‘Are you okay?’ Carol paused at the door, looking at Penny and then across at the unconscious, grey and drawn man in the bed.

Penny nodded, afraid that if she used her voice, it would break and then so would she. There was something of the art of brinkmanship about waiting for someone to die; so many moments when the temptation to let go was overwhelming; to stop holding in, holding back, and give in to the hopelessness and pain. To let her heart and all the love trickle through her fingers. But what if it was too soon and there was nothing left to carry her through the days ahead?

She turned back to the book and, remembering that Carol had said that her dad might still be able to hear her, Penny began to read again.

After a while, she paused and flicked the book over, looking for the hundredth time, at the dragonfly on the cover of the old favourite book in her hands – *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell.

As a child, she’d listened in awe to tales of tortoises and tempests, sun-scorched days and star-laden nights. She and her dad had talked then, and in later years, of visiting Corfu for themselves and discovering the magical island where the book was set. School, then university, followed by work and the hurry of life in general, had resulted in other plans.

Twenty years earlier, her dad had read the novel to her. Now he was dying. Only yesterday he had still been semiconscious, rising above the waves for a moment of clarity and connection, before sinking again into the sea of morphine.

He was only 60 years old, but looked ancient in this fading afternoon light. Like a carved, stone Grail knight, coming to life, if only for a brief moment.

As long as there was still a chance that some of the golden

words might reach him, this book had felt like the perfect choice. It had always transported both of them somewhere else, into a world of sparkling seasons and rich anecdotes.

It was easier, strangely, to carry on now *without* Bruce here. When he was around, she had to admit reluctantly that it felt like looking after two people. Bruce had to be managed, his dislike of hospitals palpable and ever-present.

Now, after yet another argument about nothing and everything, he had grabbed his car keys and, no doubt pulling out of the car park too fast in his fury, had left.

The situation was tiresome and tiring. His handsome face, which she had once sometimes watched as he slept, had lost its fascination. His sullen moods muted and soured the impact of the good looks that made people take notice when he entered a room.

They'd been together for three years, moved in together after a year and, for the last six months, as she'd helped her dad cope with a vicious cancer diagnosis and decline, Penny realized she'd begun to dislike Bruce. The knowledge flashed across her consciousness and disappeared just as swiftly, but it left its mark.

Any love and tenderness between them, she thought, was now more about something lost than the reality of something genuine or current.

She shook her head as though to clear her mind, overloaded with too much to compute or resolve, and began to look again at the words on the page. They danced, elusive and jumbled, then suddenly blurred.

A tear fell onto the yellowing page. She swallowed in a vain attempt to rid herself of the lump in her throat, and continued aloud.

Back to a moonlight swim with the Durrells on Corfu, with its balmy air, fragrant with the sea and sun-ripened

flowers, laughter and languor filling the night with memories to catch and bottle.

‘Here we go, Dad,’ she said softly. ‘We’re climbing into the little wooden boat. You can trail your hand in the water. It’s so relaxing and peaceful. All you have to do is be in the moment, let the boat take you to the bay with the silver sands.’



Chapter 1

Six months later

The summer had barely begun. After two days of scudding white clouds, a light breeze, and erratic sun creating a patchwork landscape of light and shade, the promising weather had reverted to scowling dark skies and a stiff breeze seemed to come straight from a cruel Arctic landscape.

Train stations in England felt cold at any time of year. The airport was only a short journey away, thank goodness, and in a few hours she would walk down the steps of the plane and experience for herself the magical transition from the capricious weather of an England in late June to the confident, established heat of a Greek-island summer.

Penny's anticipation of this spontaneous and possibly indulgent adventure was tempered by a heaviness in her heart and stomach. Some days it felt like another era, sitting in the hospice at her father's bedside, watching him slip away. Other days it was as sharp and vivid as something that had happened a moment ago.

The outcome had been inevitable and in a world of narrowing choices, how it all ended – to make the parting the

best it could be – had enveloped everything. Imaginings of what might have been shared and said in the last days were far from the reality of what had happened. But somehow that didn't matter. There was nothing more to say that could have been said.

His passing marked the end of thirty-three years of love, learning, and safety. He had always made her feel safe.

It puzzled her that she was still breathing, making plans, and waking up every morning. How could her heart, mind, and body deal with so much pain, such grief and still work, still function?

Penny checked herself as she pulled her suitcase onto the train. She didn't like the idea of inviting interest or sympathy by letting the pain out in public.

Once wedged into the window seat, and boundaries established with her fellow passengers above and around the unforgiving table between them, she stared passively as the patchwork fields and small towns rolled by. Eyes half-closed, she fell back slowly into the film playing out in her head: the endless dialogue, regrouping, replaying scenes from the last months, years.

This new world would take some getting used to. This planet that didn't have her father on it. She was also now facing whatever lay ahead as a newly single woman, with an ex-fiancé.

The past came back, like a familiar tune played time and time again, as she unravelled how this had come about in the end. The endless back and forth of who had said what in the final days before the packing up and the moving out. It had made more sense for her to be the one who moved, with her childhood home now empty, and the flat they'd shared to go on the market eventually if Bruce got his new post – which he had.

How strange, she thought, that she'd be flying so close to his new home in Italy. So close and yet so far. It was hard to imagine him at a new university she'd never seen or heard of before. It wasn't hard though to think of how he would fit in.

Bruce had always had an innate sense of style and confidence, with the white shirt, the heirloom watch, the hair that behaved. If she was honest, this had sometimes made her feel a little inadequate, if not eccentric, in her choice of clothes. particularly on painting days in the studio, when a large apron with pockets and a baggy shirt with rolled-up sleeves formed her uniform – more nineteenth century than twenty-first.

Penny smiled at herself for a moment, feeling the smooth material of her retro summer dress between her fingers. The old cotton looked a little faded, but for her this only added to its beauty. When she'd found it in a vintage shop a few years before, it had felt like meeting an old friend. The roses in neat rows, and the bands of blue that framed them in hoops around the skirt, enchanted her.

She'd never worn it until today though. There had never been the right time. It was a dress that needed to be taken on an adventure, although wearing it didn't necessarily guarantee the courage she felt she needed. And when her best friend Lizzie had dropped her off at the station, she had, just for an instant, wished she was getting back in the car and going home.

Why am I heading for Corfu, on my own, for a month? Why do I do these things to myself? It had seemed like such a terrific idea at the time, a glass or two into a girls' night in with Lizzie. The conversation had turned, as it often did, to the last days of her dad's life in the hospice and her farewell to Bruce in the days that followed . . . the things she and her dad had promised they'd do – the trip to Corfu, the Durrells' pilgrimage.

‘Why not go, while you can? No ties, no children, no one to stop you.’ Lizzie had got excited about the idea in a heartbeat and became carried away with her own vision of this trip to paradise. ‘I’d come with you if it wasn’t a madly busy time with the business, and then there’s the after-school stuff with the twins, before you even factor in the rest of the random happenings that make up my life.’

As she’d listened, Penny, sitting cross-legged on the floor in the sitting room that she’d known since a small child, glanced up at a painting on the wall.

It was at that moment, noticing for the first time in years the painting of Corfu she’d drawn from imagination as a child, and which her dad had treasured, framed, and put in pride of place, that she realized why she was going, why she had to go.

How many times had she dreamed of walking into that picture as it magically came to life like a scene from a children’s film?

Now, on this packed and stuffy train, rushing almost recklessly towards the airport, she knew that whatever the next four weeks might bring, this trip had to be made. It was unfinished business, a part of the journey to healing, or whatever it was she needed right now. To mend the hollowness of the grief and hurt left by the loss of one man and the departure of another; even if Bruce’s exit had felt, at the time, like a release.

Chapter 2

For Penny, the thrill of flying had always been tempered with a sense of the possibility of something going horribly wrong. As Lizzie had once said to her, ‘It’s not the flying that worries me; it’s the crashing.’

Her dad had hated it. Whenever they flew, he would barely move, as though afraid he would tip the plane if he leant forward or turned his head. He used to say it was like being trapped in a metal corridor at 30,000 feet. This memory made her smile as she moved into the window seat and started to browse through the duty-free catalogue.

The soothing tone of the pilot’s voice told everyone they were on time, no turbulence expected, and in Corfu that morning it was already 32 degrees.

For the hundredth time in as many days Penny opened Gerald Durrell’s *Corfu Trilogy* and started to read. The beginning, the description of the first sight of Corfu, always enchanted her. Now, as the Homeric wine-dark sea, infused with turquoise and lilac, drew closer, there was a warming rush of anticipation and for the first time in a very long time, a sense of peace.



Two hours, a glass of rosé and something that had masqueraded as a goat's-cheese baguette later, the plane, having soared gloriously over the Alps, began its run down the Italian coast. The sea, now crystalline and blue, dazzled thousands of feet below.

Looking to her left at the seat occupied by a stranger rather than Bruce, she felt a pang of regret and arguing inwardly with herself, a misplaced longing. He was somewhere there on the ground, no doubt striding purposefully, but ever so slightly self-consciously, between lectures, the tan leather belt on his carefully chosen casual trousers matching his loafers, the sunglasses understated but making a statement.

It was easy to dismiss him for his ultimate shallowness, his vanity, but even after six months of the single, Bruce-free life, older memories of when they'd first met and all was golden sometimes caught her off-guard. There had been no one in her life quite like him; so vibrant, so confident. She'd tried to paint him once, but hadn't been happy with the result. He wasn't one of her book illustrations, created so meticulously. He was real and even now she could not, as a professional artist, dilute his handsomeness, even though it would have helped her to move on.

Corfu's runway stretched out across the old lagoon at the edge of the sea; a spectacular site reached at the end of a slow, breathtaking descent along a coastline of great beauty. Green, felt-textured hills and peaks, with rocks that appeared white where they broke the surface. Pale houses and white-rimmed island contours appeared and then finally the plane swooped down so close that the sea could be seen rippling in the gentle cross winds.

Mouse Island – in legend, Ulysses' ship turned to stone – and the southern end of Kanoni welcomed the passengers lucky enough to be able to look out of a window. To the west, if one approached from the south, were the Chessboard Fields Gerry Durrell had visited as a boy; a matrix of ancient waterways and home to many creatures.

It was really Gerry's writing, the adventures of a ten-year-old boy recounted twenty years later, that had brought her here. A miraculous experience, which had begun when he'd been lifted from Bournemouth and replanted in the richness of the land and life of Corfu, along with his family: his mother Louisa, Leslie and Margo, all following Gerry's eldest brother Larry, who was already there with his wife Nancy.

Nothing ever stayed the same, whether a person or an island. Would Corfu still smell and sound the same as it had for the Durrells when they had lived there in the 1930s? Would the air shimmer with waves of nostalgia and remembrance, like radio signals bringing the lost past into the present, powerful echoes she might feel travelling through time? Or would there just be sadness for those no longer there, with memory conjuring melancholy on an island saturated with sunshine and sun-seekers.

As the plane bounced down onto the runway Penny hoped that a month would be enough time to find all the answers to the questions in her heart and head. Or would a month be too long? Would disappointment – or the discovery that this was a silly, indulgent idea – leave her morose and lost?

As she stood at the top of the plane steps blinking against the light and feeling the warm, heavy, pine-and-herb-scented air of Corfu for the first time, Penny knew one thing for certain – she wished her dad was with her more than anything in the world.

