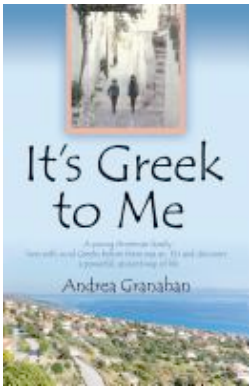
It's Greek to Me

A young American family
lives with rural Greeks before there was an EU and discovers
a powerful, ancient way of life

Andrea Granahan



This is the story of a young American family's pivotal years living first in the mountain villages of the Peloponnesus, and then on the island of Paros in the Cyclades, long before there was an EU. The Greeks embraced the family and the family embraced the Greeks' simple way of life, with hilarious and harrowing moments along the way. Not wealthy, Greece was rich, not just in history, but in daily enjoyment of life.

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Some names have been changed to protect the guilty as well as the innocent!

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First Edition

Chapter 4

The Day That David Invented the Doorknob

The house lacked many conveniences, such as full plumbing and electricity, but the thing we missed most was a doorknob on the front door.

All the houses in Vourvoura had handles and little thumb latches instead of doorknobs. Thia's latch was broken. When it was windy the only way to keep the door closed was to shoot the bolt, locking it from the inside.

We often came back from shopping or a walk and found it locked because when it was left unlocked it blew open and wind put out the lamps in front of Thia's icons, a matter of great concern to her. Then pound as hard as we could there was no way to get any response for Thia was hard of hearing and her room was at the back of the house. Unless she happened to leave her room, which wasn't often, or unless Athena or Yorghia were there, we had to go back down the steps, out the courtyard door, climb a steep hill to get to the back of the house, scale a four foot wall, clamber through a small storeroom window and walk through the house to finally unlock the front door. It was a windy summer and this happened frequently enough to be a real nuisance. One day after we had gone through the routine twice David announced he was going to make a doorknob.

He found a broken limb from the apple tree in back and carved it into the proper shape, with a tongue-like flange for a latch, and installed it. Thia came out to replenish the oil in the icon lamps and stayed for a few minutes to watch David at work puzzled. He tried to explain what he was doing by gestures. She walked back to her room shrugging, sure this

was again proof we were crazy, a conclusion she had reached the day after we had arrived.

Later that day I was sitting in our room which overlooked the front door and saw Adonis come in from the fields. He mounted the steps, sighing when he saw the door closed, prepared to shout for one of us. Then he saw the doorknob and stopped dead.

He looked at it a long time before he slowly reached out to touch it. He pulled it, nothing happened. He turned it and the door opened. He closed and opened the door again and again. He looked at both knobs and the latch very carefully. Then he didn't come in; he went downstairs and out to the street where Soteria was unloading sacks of grain from the donkey.

She followed him back up and he showed her the doorknob. She looked at it suspiciously. Then he opened the door. He closed it again and tried to persuade Soteria to open it, but she balked. He went inside, closed the door, then opened it and came back out. Finally Soteria reached for the doorknob and turned it. When the door opened she threw her head back and screamed with laughter. Her laugh was as hearty as the rest of her. She started shouting for the neighbors.

A few of the women came to see what the fuss was about. Soteria demonstrated the door, and Maria, our milk lady crossed herself. She had been interrupted at her baking and was covered in flour, she wiped her hands on her apron and tried the knob herself. All of the women laughed and went to get Thia. She came out of her room grumbling at being disturbed. Then the crowd gathered to show her the new addition to her house. Adonis opened and closed the door a few times to demonstrate. Thia stepped back and like Maria,

crossed herself, but was finally coaxed into trying it herself. She opened the door and grinned a big toothless grin.

Finally the women left to return to their chores but Adonis returned with all the men he had found in the wineshop. They were all fascinated and played with the door, talking excitedly together.

They found David in his studio, shook his hand, then dragged him down to the wineshop where they all took turns buying him a drink. Every time someone new drifted into the shop some of the men would take him to the house to show him the new wonder. Two of the men fetched the village priest and took him to the house as well, which impressed Thia enormously. He returned and bought David a drink, too.

That Sunday there was a wedding at the church and Adonis proudly showed the doorknob to all the guests. In fact, the doorknob became a tourist attraction and we grew used to having strangers show up from other villages to ask to try it out. Soteria laughed every time she saw it, but all the men were convinced that David was a genius.

Chapter 31

Kalo Nero (Good Water)

One day David came in and exclaimed, “There’s an eel in our well!”

“An eel! How did it get there?”

“Beats me. There must be an underground river or something. Where’s the fish line? I’ll fish it out.”

The kids and I went along to watch the process and looked in the well. Sure enough, an eel about two feet long was swimming around. David tied a hook on the line and baited it. A man rode by on a donkey, looked at us and burst out laughing. I knew we looked a little silly with a fishing pole at a well, but I wanted to get the eel out. I began wondering about diseases one could get from fish-tainted water and I was concerned about how long the eel had been in the well. We were all looking intently in the well to see if it would take the bait when we heard a loud belly laugh. I looked up and saw our landlord, Nikos the Barber

“There’s no fish in there. Try the sea,” he jeered.

“That’s what you think, Nikos, “David told him. “Come look.”

“We have a veritable whale of fish,” I said. I knew my Greek was correct because on the ship I had worked hard to learn the word whale in hopes of seeing one, but never did.

He looked in the well, interested, then laughed again.

“It’s the eel,” he said. “I put him in there two years ago.Good, he is still working.”

“You PUT him in there?”

“Yes, to eat bugs that fall in the well and mosquitoes and such. He keeps the water clean.”

I looked at Nikos askance. "Really? This well is clean? We won't get sick from him being in there?"

"By the Virgin, Andrianni. This is the best well on the island. It is *kalo nero* - good water. I come on Sundays to get water for our dinner."

That was true; I had seen Nikos and Tarsa fetch water from the well many times. David shrugged and hauled up the line. Nikki, too, always stopped for a bottle of it on her way back home from our house.

"Oh, don't you want to catch your whale?" Nikos was still laughing at us.

"Not if he keeps the water clean," David replied.

"Oh, but if you want him for dinner, go ahead. I can bring up another someday."

"No," I said looking at our water purification system swimming below us. "I'm not hungry enough."

Periodically Nikos inquired after the eel, wanting to know if we had eaten him yet and laughing at us. For the most part the eel remained hidden which was fine with me. We had written family and friends about our well, joking that we only had running water when we ran from the well, generally preferring walking water. I thought about writing about our eel but David advised against it thinking we would worry them as I had worried when the eel was first discovered.

I was reassured about the water when I noticed that people frequently did stop to fetch a bottle of it to take home. But I was absolutely convinced when one day I saw a friend, Yorgo Kano, stop his donkey at the well and start to fill a wine flask at our well. He was from an inland valley about five miles over a steep mountain so we didn't see him often. I went out to talk to him.

"*Yia sou*, Yorgo. How's it going?"

"*Yia sou*, Andrianni It goes well. Tomorrow is Eleni's name day and my son and his new wife are coming to visit."

"Tell Eleni *kronia pola*, many years, from me."

He chatted a few minutes then remounted his donkey and started going back up the mountain.

"Yorgo, aren't you going to the village?"

"No, I just came to get a bottle of your water to offer my son and daughter-in-law tomorrow. It is a special occasion after all. *Adio*, Andrianni."

I offered glasses of our water to our guests with more pride after that.

"Kalo nero," I'd say.

Chapter 39

Nikki's Bread

"Nikki, do you know how to bake bread?"

She and I were sitting on our terrace drinking cups of thick Greek coffee that I brewed each day when she came.

"Of course, Andrianni"

"Do you think you could show me?"

"Let's look at the oven and see if it is any good."

I took our flashlight and she and I went out back to the big, round brick oven that was in the back room of our little stone house. She peered in, shining the light around carefully, then approved it.

"Good, no cracks. First, Andrianni, you must take a sack to the windmill and buy flour. Then buy yeast from the bakery. Tonight you will start it and in the morning I will come and show you how to make bread. Also, send the children up the mountainside for brush."

That afternoon David and I and the children took two clean pillow cases and walked to the windmill at the edge of the harbor, the one the people in town called "the new mill". The Meltemi, the summer wind, was blowing and the noise at the mill was overpowering as the sails whipped around outside, and the creaking and groaning of timbers mingled with the flapping of canvas. The whole building shuddered with it.

The miller greeted us with a big grin. Heather and Davidaki were delighted because he was covered from head to toe with flour like a great snowman. He led us up the tiny spiraled staircase and shouted to us over the din.

"You make bread, eh? We'll fill the bags with the best flour."

The wind shifted directions slightly and the miller took the time to readjust the sails by rotating the entire thatched roof until they moved properly again. We knew the miller from the local cafes. He showed the children the sacks of grain and then the fine flour that trickled from the grooves in the big stone mill wheels. He lifted the children one at a time so they could feel the power in the turning of the huge wooden shaft that connected the mill stone to the sails.

"This was the mast of a ship that sunk in the harbor," he told us indicating the shaft.

"When was that?" asked David

"When the mill was built, three hundred years ago."

"But we thought this was the new mill."

"The other is much older," he explained.

At last he took our sacks and filled them grinning all the while.

"You laugh at us?" I asked.

"No," he said "I praise you. The 'moderna' town wives all buy from the bakery. Now the American bakes in her own oven."

We left and he called after us, "*Kali orexi*. Good appetite."

Our next stop was the bakery where Soula, the baker's daughter, was weighing out dough on a balance scale while her younger brother fired up the wood fueled oven. We asked for yeast.

"Ah, you bake. Good Now I have fewer loaves to make," she smiled.

"You are tired of baking, Soula?"

"Yes, with all my heart. In the fall I marry my betrothed when he gets out of engineering school in Athens. Then I will never bake a loaf of bread again as long as I live."

"Oh, the artists will lose their muse," I said.

We laughed together. All of Brett's male art students fell in love with beautiful Soula and spent their time hanging around the bakery buying bread they didn't need. She had a collection of portraits they had done of her. She handed me a lump of dough wrapped in paper.

"This is yeast?" I asked, expecting something in a little foil package.

"Of course," she replied. Then she gave me instructions on how I was to use it.

I took the dough home, dissolved it in a little warm water, added some flour and honey, then covered it with a clean folded blanket.

Early in the morning Nikki came and we uncovered the mixture which was now seething and bubbling. She exclaimed happily over it throwing back her hands appreciatively, and I felt absurdly proud. But she shook her head over our pile of brush.

"Po-po-po-po," she said in disapproval, and sent the children back into the hills in search of more.

In the meantime in lieu of a wooden kneading trough like other people owned, Nikki asked for the large galvanized tub we used for bathing. She planned to make a lot of bread. She scalded it carefully with boiling water. Then instead of adding the flour to the liquid in American fashion, Nikki economically decided how much flour she wanted to use and began adding the liquid to it after first adding the yeast mixture.

She had me heat a kettle of water and started kneading at one end of the tub, asking me to add a little warm water from time to time. More and more water went into the tub and little by little she incorporated all of the flour.

Nikki, in spite of her heavy body, was incredibly light on her tiny feet. She seemed to float as if daring us to see her touch the ground. It was as if she wouldn't leave as much of a footprint as a baby. Her gestures were delicate, too. Her butterfly-like hands worked over the dough, fists darting into it, twisting, then lightly withdrawing.

She did a little dance around the tub. Round and round she went rhythmically moving her whole body as she pushed, punched and cajoled the dough for almost an hour. Magically it began to grow. It glistened and swelled forming a tight, glossy skin. It came to life under her lightly moving, strong hands.

Once she stopped and asked me to try. Instantly the dough turned sluggish. I was exhausted in a few minutes and she scolded me.

"Po-po-po-po, Andrianni I am twice your weight and twice your age at least, and you knead like an old lady."

She took over again and the inert mass seemed to spring to her hands, taking life again from her little dance.

At length Nikki pronounced it ready and began forming loaves. She made them big enough to put her arms around them David and I clumsily followed her gestures but gave up and settled for smaller loaves, although I impressed Nikki by braiding one loaf like a challa. Then at her directions we carried the loaves in and laid them carefully between clean sheets on our bed. She covered them gently with all the blankets we had in the house and some of the rugs.

"In the winter tell the children to get in bed with the bread to keep it warm," she instructed me.

We washed the tub and swept out the oven as the bread rose and found the long handled wooden paddle that had come with the house. We also went to gather more brush for

Heather and Davidaki had returned scratched, sweaty and tired but still without enough brush to satisfy Nikki.

Nikki set fire to a big tumbleweed and thrust it into the oven. She shouted for David and I to work fast and one after another we shoved weeds or brush into the oven as rapidly as possible.

The small chimney in front of the oven could not handle all the smoke and it poured out from the opening, darkening the whitewashed walls of the room and blinding us, but Nikki kept calling for more brush until we used up the entire supply. She closed the opening with the heavy metal door and waited a few minutes. She then glanced inside and gave a crow of triumph.

"Look, David, Andrianni," she pointed to the walls of the oven which had turned snow white with ash. "Now it is ready."

She swept the coals to one side with a stick. We carried the loaves in on the paddle and again she had a touch we could not duplicate. The loaves we carried slumped while hers sat plump and happy on the paddle as if they hadn't been disturbed and were still sleeping in our bed. She closed the oven door and at last rested.

I made coffee for us and we sat outside under the grape arbor.

"And so now, Andrianni, you know how to bake bread."

She and I gossiped and had a discussion about donkeys, and how they do not get gray with age like people. We got philosophical about animals and their relation to people. She agreed with Cross-Eyed Nikos that people were the animals' gods, so we had better behave and be good to them if we wanted our god to be good to us.

We swirled the thick grounds left in the bottom of our tiny coffee cups and turned the cups upside-down for a few

minutes. Then Nikki showed me how to tell fortunes from the patterns left by the dried grounds.

"See? Marks like fire mean passion. Tall shapes are men, round ones women. Tiny drops are children, and this," she pointed out a coin-like mark. "This one means money. You have a lucky future, full of them all."

An hour passed by and she looked in on the bread, calling for the paddle. One by one she removed the great round, crusty loaves, and washing the charcoal from the bottom crust with a clean, wet rag, set them on a stone wall outside to cool.

She nodded happily, "Good bread, Andrianni."

It was all I could do to persuade her to take a loaf of it home with her. She finally consented to take the fancy braided one, and said I could bring a big loaf that night when Agapitos, her husband, was home. We stacked our bread on a bamboo shelf we had made that hung from our ceiling and regarded it proudly.

That night we went to Nikki's house and found she had set up a table in their big room instead of her kitchen, a great honor. She had even spread the table with her fringed cloth that only came out on holidays. She laid out olives, cheese and sardines, and we placed the great loaf in the center of the table. Old Agapitos bragged about Nikki's baking abilities, then, first making the sign of the cross with the knife in hand, cut a slice of bread using a dramatic motion of his long dangerous looking knife. I was afraid he'd cut his face as he swept it dramatically towards himself, but he didn't.

He looked at the slice carefully and smelled it while Nikki looked on apprehensively. I sat on the edge of my seat as he tasted it judicially. A puzzled look came over his face at the first bite. He held the slice up to the light of the oil lamp and looked through it.

"Andrianni, " he said reproachfully. "You bought your flour at the new mill."

I looked at him astonished, "How did you know that, Agapitos?"

"I can see. I can taste."

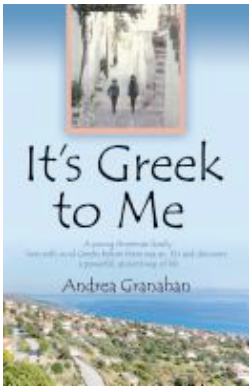
"Is it important?"

"No, it doesn't matter. He gave you his best flour. But our cousin owns the big mill."

"Oh," I apologized. "I didn't know. I'm sorry"

He ate the slice of bread with a gourmet's satisfaction "It is not important. This is very good bread."

Nikki and I smiled at each other.



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