

‘Only you could book a car without air conditioning.’

June leaned out of the window. A dreary landscape of cactuses, stunted olive trees and distant hills. Five days into the holiday and they were stopped on another potholed road, waiting for goats to cross. The heat was oppressive. The constant chirping of cicadas added to her irritation.

She hadn’t wanted to make this trip. They’d already sweated their way round Ancient Olympia, Delphi and another old ruin under a protective tent. She hated the unbooked rooms with their hard wooden beds and primitive showers. She hated the overcrowded tavernas with their oily salads and heavy bread. Alan should have come on his own.

‘That’s the least of our problems,’ he said. ‘We’re behind schedule. I don’t like the sound of the gearbox and there’s a warning light flashing.’

The back door clunked shut. They both turned to look. There was an old woman dressed in black on the back seat: faded skirt, ragged sweatshirt and triangular headscarf. Her face was brown and deeply lined. She smiled and spoke shrilly, jabbing her stick at them.

‘What did she say?’ Alan asked.

‘I’ve no idea, you’re the Greek expert’

‘Ancient Greek, I’ve told you a thousand times. I don’t speak the modern language.’

‘*Yassas*,’ June tried.

The passenger appeared delighted and seemed to think June could understand her. She rattled away, laughing and waving her stick for emphasis.

‘Where are we going?’ June asked Alan.

‘Ancient Messini. The village is Mavromati.’

June turned to the passenger.

‘Mavromati?’

‘Mavromati! Mavromati!’ She repeated gleefully, followed by a string of unintelligible syllables.

The goats finished crossing the road. Alan looked at his watch and pressed his lips together. June shrugged. Alan wrenched the car into gear. It juddered forward. The old woman continued to chatter. June twisted in her seat, nodding and smiling. Suddenly the woman wound down the window, stuck her head out and shouted.

‘Ela, Maria!’

Alan braked hard and June braced herself against the dashboard.

‘There’s another one,’ Alan said.

Sure enough another black-clad old woman, rather stout and breathless, was waddling towards them. She carried a tablecloth knotted into a large lumpy bundle. Before they could protest Maria had opened the door and her friend was shuffling across to make room.

‘Now what do we do?’ Alan said.

‘Don’t ask me, I wanted to go to Sharm el-Sheikh.’

Alan pressed his lips even more tightly as he forced the car into gear.

The cicadas were barely audible now as the passengers shouted at each other as though they were on opposite sides of the village square rather than in physical contact on the back seat of a Hyundai. They talked and laughed, the air was hot and the seat was sticky. June closed her eyes and imagined she was sipping a Pina Colada in a huge swimming pool.

Her daydream was shattered when Maria grabbed her shoulder. Both women were shouting ‘*Pappas! Pappas!*’ Following the line of the stick, waving dangerously

close to Alan's face, June saw a huge man in the long black frock of a Greek priest. He was at a bus stop, holding a small boy by the hand.

'Stop!' Maria shouted in English.

'Keep driving,' June said.

Alan wearily pulled over. 'At least we're full now. There can't be any more.'

The women squashed over to one side of the car. The priest squeezed in beside them, rear first. June moved her seat as far forward as possible. The boy opened the passenger door and climbed on to her knee. She tried to hold the urchin at arm's length, but there was no room.

The gears screamed and the car strained as Alan pulled away yet again. The engine rattled loudly. The car stuttered forward for a few minutes before giving up the effort and with a last cough rolling to a halt. June wanted to cry. She wanted to kill Alan. She wanted to be in a luxury hotel where everyone spoke English. She would even settle for just going home.

Maria took charge, shouting orders, getting everyone out of the car and into the shade of a fig tree.

'Alan, do something!'

'I think my phone's dead.'

The priest was sitting against the tree. The child was pulling things out of Maria's bundle. Alan was looking at his watch. The first woman was gesturing them to sit down, saying what sounded like '*catsy catsy*'. There was a breeze and it felt cool under the tree. June began to regret her bad temper. Alan looked uncomfortable. Maria's tablecloth was now spread out in the shade.

'Let's forget the schedule for today,' June suggested, sitting down and smiling at Alan. Reluctantly he bent his knees and joined her.

From her bundle Maria produced two large plastic bottles. She handed them each a glass of water, which she refilled with wine after they had drunk. The Greek party began chatting merrily. The priest was cutting bread with a penknife. Maria poured dark green oil onto a plastic plate. No one seemed concerned about the breakdown or getting to Mavromati. Maria handed out hunks of bread with some salt in a paper twist and the plate of olive oil. She showed them how to dip the bread in the oil and sprinkle on salt. The boy was clambering in the tree, whilst the adults enjoyed some salty cheese and olives with their bread and wine.

It felt good to be out of the car and in the shade. The wine was potent and the simple food surprisingly good. June began to relax. Even the harsh chatter around her was strangely soothing. Alan undid a couple of buttons on his shirt and removed his sandals and socks. The boy climbed onto his lap and offered everyone figs.

June leaned across and kissed Alan's cheek.

'Sorry I've been such a cow.'

'I've been thinking,' Alan said. 'Maybe we could have a day at the beach tomorrow?'