

The Water and the Wine

Tamar Hodes

Hookline Books

It is the 1960s and a group of young writers and artists gather on the Greek island of Hydra. Leonard Cohen is at the start of his career and in love with Marianne, who is also muse to her ex-husband, Axel. Australian authors George Johnston and Charmian Clift write, drink and fight. It is a hedonistic time of love, sex and new ideas. As the island hums with excitement, Jack and Frieda Silver join the community, hoping to mend their broken marriage. However, Greece is overtaken by a military junta and the artistic idyll is threatened.

In this fictionalised account of real events, Tamar Hodes explores the destructive side of creativity and the price that we pay for our dreams.

This book is a work of fiction based on historical fact.
Names, characters, events and places are either products of the
author's imagination or used fictitiously.

*For all the maids, nannies, and countless others, often neglected, who make it
possible for artists to
pursue their dreams.*

On an island, eventually, you are bound to meet yourself.
Charmian Clift, *Peel Me a Lotus*

Like its artistic inhabitants, Hydra was creative. It painted the earth with purple orchids, wrote itself into the history books and even made its own music: the hum of chatter in the air; the clink of coffee cups at the harbour café, and the light bells on the donkeys as they ambled along the cobbles. Cocks crowed their rough chorus and the single bell chapel at the Monastery of the Virgin's Assumption added its tinny percussion on the hour.

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Leaving the boat, the Silver family felt as caught in the island's magic as the shiny fish wriggling in the yellow nets. Frieda held Esther's hand but Gideon walked on ahead. Jack, tall and bearded, thanked the boatman, Mikalis, and his good-looking, shirtless son, Spyros, who had tied the rope to keep the boat steady. The family took their luggage and followed signs to Douskos' Taverna, where wicker tables and chairs were arranged beneath a dark pine. A thin wisteria threaded itself through the tree, releasing its subtle scent into the spring air.

Jack shook hands with the owner of the bar, greeting him with *Kaliméra*, and handed over a piece of paper. The publishers had given him an advance for his book and arranged the family's accommodation. Douskos was swarthy and dark, stockily built, his white shirt and trousers immaculate. His wife, Polixenes, was sweeping away dead leaves, broken glass and candle wax from the previous night's revels.

Douskos gestured for the family to sit and ordered drinks for them, while he went outside. Then the family saw her for the first time: The Gardenia Dwarf. A tiny old lady, her body and head cloaked in black, a white bloom just discernible, tucked behind her ear. Like her daughter, she was sweeping the stone floor, but the large broom looked unwieldy. She mumbled something which the Silver family did not understand.

They finished their drinks and went outside where three donkeys were waiting, flat wooden saddles on their backs for carrying loads, the 'mule boys' sullenly at their sides. The cobbles beneath them

bubbled in the sun. Douskos looked expectantly at Jack for some coins; once received, he vanished.

Frieda, short, her long dark hair plaited and wound round her head and Gideon, thin, with wiry glasses, travelled on one donkey: Jack and Esther, small, slightly podgy, mounted the second, and the luggage was strapped to the third.

Slowly, they climbed the hill to Kala Pigadia, passing a skinny, bearded man picking up litter from the side of the path. A goat chewed wild rosemary in his gummy jaws. The donkeys were slow and hesitant, the boys hitting them with sticks when they almost halted. Esther didn't like this treatment of them and snuggled up to her father for comfort.

'It's alright, sweetie,' he said.

It was the second time that day that she had cried. On the ferry boat from Piraeus, a man had come on board, handcuffed to guards. His clothes were tatty and his face unshaven.

'He's a prisoner,' Jack told Esther.

She was unsettled by the sad expression on the man's face and the way he hung his head in shame. She was eating pistachios that her mother had given her, cracking open the brown shells to release the yellow-green nuts. When she tried to feed the prisoner one, he took it. He was like a bird bending his head, and Esther kept on feeding him, the guards letting her. When they stopped at the island of Poros, the man was yanked off the boat. He caught Esther's eye as he left and she started to cry – until her dad told her a story about Peter the butterfly who lived in his beard but who flew off on his adventures around the world.

The trek across the island was uncomfortable, the donkeys swaying as they ambled, the saddle hard beneath Esther's cotton dress, but eventually they arrived. They gasped when they saw their house. White-washed and gleaming, it perched upon a hill. It had a blue door with a bronze lion's head knocker and shutters, which cast broad stripes upon the walls. As they later discovered, there was little electricity (an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening) and no running water, but there was a well in the courtyard as well as some manic chickens and a goat to provide the family with eggs and milk.

The large balcony wrapped itself around the house like a sash. Terracotta troughs of red geraniums perched precariously on its ledge. On one side it looked out onto the harbour – where half-melon boats

bobbed slightly in the occasional breeze – then to the sea beyond, where leather-skinned fishermen drew in their catch. On the other, they could see red-roofed houses clinging to the hillside as if they had grown from it; on the Kamina ridge was an old windmill with a house attached.

Gideon and Esther ran excitedly around their new home. It was simply furnished but bigger than any house they had lived in before. The children fought over which bedroom to claim but finally settled it with Gideon taking the bigger, with room for his rocks and stones, and Esther's having a wonderful view over the town. She unpacked the few clothes she had, together with some books and dollies, which she arranged tidily at the end of her bed.

On the balcony, Frieda served the meal that had been left for them: a Greek salad and warm pitta. They liked tearing it, dipping its spongy pieces into hummus and tzatziki. Grapes gleamed in the bowl, glassy globes bursting with juice. The April sun was warm and gentle, casting a glow over the food, making it shine.

'So what are your first impressions of Hydra?' asked Jack.

'I love it.' Esther was often effusive. Gideon remained quiet as if reserving judgement.

'It's beautiful,' said Frieda, looking out dreamily over the harbour. 'I think we will be very happy here.'

Jack drew his chair nearer. 'I'll tell you the story of Hydra.'

'I thought hydra meant water,' Gideon said.

'Yes, it does as it is surrounded by water but there is also the Greek legend. Hydra was a snake-monster with many heads.'

'Ugh,' said Esther.

'It lived near the Fountain of Amydone. The peasants could not go to fetch water because they were afraid of the monster, but no-one could kill it. Every time a head was chopped off, two new ones grew in its place. Hercules, the great hero, was called in to destroy it and he asked his nephew Iolaus to help him. Each time Hercules cut off a head, Iolaus sealed the wound and so they killed the snake-monster.'

'Good,' said Gideon.

'Hooray!' said Esther.

'And that's why "Hydra" refers to a situation which is problematic and needs clever solutions.'

Jack and Frieda exchanged a silent glance.

Just as they were wondering about taking a walk to the quayside, there was a knock at the door. A large woman stood there, dressed in a pale lemon overall, her dark hair tightly coerced into a bun.

‘Evgeniya!’ she pointed to herself, and Jack nodded knowingly. Yes, she came with the house. She stepped forward and hugged Esther who lost herself in the large folds and contours of the maid’s comforting body. Evgeniya immediately started clearing away the dishes and helping as if she had known the family all her life.

A while later, the door was knocked again. Frieda opened it to a beautiful young woman carrying a baby. Frieda led her onto the balcony and introduced the family. Marianne, a Norwegian, lived on the island with her husband, Axel, and her baby, Axel Joachim. Both mother and son had bleached-blond hair and shiny blue eyes. She put the baby on the balcony to play with his toy giraffe and drew some almond biscuits from her bag.

‘These are to welcome you,’ she said shyly.

‘How kind,’ said Frieda.

Evgeniya brought coffee in tiny gold cups and Gideon had juice. Esther tried the goat’s milk but could not stomach it. They all shared the biscuits. Esther brought out some wooden animal figures and Axel Joachim played with them. Gideon arranged his collection of rocks on the balcony and scrubbed them with an old toothbrush and foamy water until they gleamed.

‘Are there many artists on the island?’ Frieda asked Marianne.

‘Yes, a fair number and it’s growing all the time. My husband is a writer. That is when he is not distracted by his lovers. The present one’s Patricia.’

Jack and Frieda looked awkwardly at each other.

‘I’m also a writer,’ Jack said. ‘I have a commission to write a book about the Jewish-Arab conflict.’

‘That’s interesting. I would love to write but I find it so hard. Trying to express myself truthfully when I am not sure what my feelings are.’

Esther bounced Axel Joachim on her knee. He was chuckling, the wooden giraffe in his mouth.

‘Among others, we have Charmian Clift on the island and her husband George Johnston. They are from Australia and are both writers. Feisty people! Plus, we have Norman; he’s a sculptor. He makes amazing structures from litter he finds on the ground.’

‘Oh yes, I think we saw him on our way here.’

‘That’s him. John Dragoumis, who has shell-shock from the war: he does beautiful charcoal drawings, and then there’s Carl, another painter.’

‘I’m also a painter,’ said Frieda. Just saying the words excited her. On the kibbutz, she’d had to fit her art between caring for the chickens and picking oranges, but here, this would be her identity.

‘What do you like to paint?’ Marianne drained the last of her coffee. Her skin glowed in the soft light.

‘Flowers, fishermen, harbours, anything. I’m hoping to rent a cheap studio on the island.’

‘Ask Douskos. He knows everything and everyone, especially when some drachmas cross his palm.’

They all laughed.

‘Yes. We met him today,’ said Jack.

‘And The Gardenia Dwarf? That is his widowed mother-in-law. She lives a few roads from here. She grows beautiful gardenias, shiny like no flower you have seen. The scent of her garden is so sweet. She will sell you a bloom for a few coins.’

Frieda’s face lit up. ‘How lovely.’

‘Most evenings, we meet at Douskos’ Taverna and drink ouzo and talk about art and life. You must join us. We never arrange to gather. We just turn up and there are always interesting people there.’

‘It sounds wonderful. We’ll come along,’ Jack said.

‘Do you take your baby with you?’

‘Sometimes, or we have a maid, Maria, who watches him. Most people leave their children asleep in bed and check on them every now and then. It’s very safe here. Come and join us any time. I must go now. Axel Joachim needs his nap.’

She scooped up her beautiful boy and left.

As they were unpacking, Frieda said: ‘She was so beautiful. Why would her husband take lovers when he has a wife like that?’

‘We are in an artists’ colony,’ said Jack. ‘You have to forget all your bourgeois conventions now and embrace the free culture here. We aren’t in South Africa any more. There are no boundaries on Hydra. I thought we wanted that?’

‘We do but it frightens me. Letting go of the rules. Being free. And, anyway, I don’t remember your background being so bohemian.’

‘It wasn’t but yours was...’

‘Mine was... what?’

‘Very conventional. of course, you’re going to find it hard to adjust to the creativity, the openness here.’

‘You’re so patronising, Jack, the way you speak to me. My parents were in business, the same as yours. Groceries, shoes, what’s the difference?’ She stormed off, unhappy at how they always used each other’s backgrounds as weapons.

But as the afternoon progressed, a serenity fell on the family home. There were no more arguments, either between Gideon and Esther or between their parents. What they did not know was that the biscuits contained more than ground almonds. Marianne had used an extra ingredient which she often added to her cooking: hashish.

That night, Jack and Frieda made love for the first time in months: cautiously, trying to draw the other close, in an attempt to start again. Their lovemaking was always unsatisfactory: him too eager, her too unwilling to say what she wanted and shutting herself to his demands. But at least they were together, feeling slightly optimistic, marking what they hoped would be a new beginning.

The following morning, the sun varnished the island in a warm, honey glaze and the eucalyptus' smooth leaves shimmered seductively. Marianne, in a striped, pleated skirt, cotton shirt and simple sandals, had left Axel Joachim with Maria and gone to collect her mail from the post office in the Katsikas brothers' store. It was also the day for the *Athens News* to arrive and she needed groceries: olive oil, rice, feta, a string of onions, potatoes, candles.

She swung her deep basket as she walked, thinking of Axel and their lives and wondering in which direction they should go. Every time they tried to live and love, it fell apart. She wondered how long she could stay with him when his heart was with Patricia, and she worried what effect their dysfunctional marriage would have on their child. She thought about her own childhood: problems with money, problems with health and problems in her parents' marriage. She had dreamed of so much more for her own son.

The island had sprung into full beauty as if the flowers had been poised beneath the skin of the earth, waiting for their cue. And when that signal had come, they had burst forth, uncontrollably: the blood-red tulips dotting their random beauty across the ground; the camellias, white and pink, like sugared candy sweetening the air; the gorse bushes, their yellow flowers an antidote to their prickly leaves, and the air, benign.

Inside the shop, Marianne marvelled at the range of products that Nick and Antony Katsikas had in stock: sacks of ground almonds and flour sagged shapelessly on the stone floor as if they had no intention of ever moving; boxes of dried fruit; barrels of retsina stacked sideways to form a pyramid; octopus tentacles and sheep testicles hanging up to dry; tins of tomatoes and bags of sugar along with household items: baskets, brooms and pots. There was also fresh vegetables: potatoes, aubergines and onions, smug and fat in their papery skins.

As she paid for her goods, framed through the doorway of the store into the yard behind she saw Charmian and George seated at a table. They waved to her.

‘Hey, Marianne. Come and drink with us.’

Charmian embraced Marianne as she approached and George drew out a chair for her. He looked thinner than when she had last seen him. As usual, he had a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. His hair looked lank and greasy and he had not shaved. Charmian looked as elegant as ever in a wide-brimmed straw hat and a long white kaftan but Marianne noticed that the hem was edged with dirt. She was drinking whisky. Opposite her was a man Marianne had not seen before.

She sat down, releasing her heavy basket, and feeling her cheeks redden.

The sun lit the stranger’s tanned face and dark hair and he looked casual, in chinos and a linen shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and yet it seemed as if he had always lived on Hydra, was comfortable here.

The stranger felt his body tingle as he saw the beautiful woman, her flaxen hair tied back into a ponytail with an elastic band, her satin skin catching the light, the simplicity of her and yet her otherworldliness as if she had arisen, like a mermaid, from the sea. He found it hard to move his eyes from her.

‘This is Leonard,’ said Charmian. ‘Isn’t he a delight? He’s staying with us until he finds his own place.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ said Leonard, in a husky, growly voice. ‘Come and share the sun and wine with us.’

Marianne remembered her beloved Momo’s words: ‘You will meet a man who speaks with a golden tongue.’ Maybe this was him.

‘Where have you come from?’ asked Marianne.

‘Originally Montreal. I was in London and couldn’t bear the rain so I travelled here.’

‘You just packed your bags and left?’

‘When I went into the Bank of Greece to cash a cheque, the teller looked tanned. I asked him where he had been and he said, “Greece, it’s springtime there,” and so I came.’

Marianne laughed at his impulsiveness. ‘So suddenly?’

‘Of course. What is life for if it isn’t living for the moment?’ Leonard’s voice was velvet gravel and deep. Marianne felt her body burn as if he had lit a fire inside her.

Leonard felt it too. He had noticed her wheeling her son (the same bleached hair, the beautiful eyes catching the Greek light, the same delicate half-smile) in a pushchair around the island and wondered who she was.

‘Len’s a writer and singer,’ said George proudly, coughing and smoking at the same time.

‘Put that fucking fag out before you kill yourself, George!’ barked his wife. ‘No-one wants to hear that racket.’

‘Go hang yourself, Charm!’ he yelled back.

Marianne smiled. She had become used to their fights. She and Leonard exchanged glances as if to say: here we go, again.

‘Charmian and George are kindly putting me up,’ said Leonard.

‘Or you’re putting up with us!’ George laughed.

‘I’ve been doing that for years, sweetie,’ Charmian quipped. ‘Why shouldn’t he?’

‘Shut the fuck up, Charm dearest, in the nicest possible way.’

‘I’ve just bought a house in Kala Pigadia,’ said Leonard, trying to improve the mood, ‘and I’m waiting for the sale to go through. Where do you live, Marianne?’ Just saying her name made him happy.

‘In Kala Pigadia, also.’ Marianne blushed. ‘It is beautiful, near the communal wells and the monastery. You can see the whole of Hydra spread out from there. I think you will like it.’

‘Marianne has a husband, Axel, who is an asshole,’ laughed George, too loudly.

‘Well, we all know how that feels,’ Charmian couldn’t resist. ‘Believe me.’

Marianne noticed that Leonard was drinking water and that he had written in a notepad and even on the paper tablecloth. She sensed his discomfort at his friends’ public spats.

‘You’re a writer?’

‘Trying to be. I’m not in the league of my friends here though.’

‘Nine books in ten years. Forty-three countries covered when I was a war correspondent,’ boasted George.

‘Shame we can’t find a forty-fourth one for you to visit, darling.’

‘How’s your novel going, George?’ Marianne asked.

‘First in the David Meredith trilogy done. He’s my alter ego. Bill Collins is going to publish it. They’re getting Sid Nolan to do the cover. Sid’s great. We’re both sons of tram drivers. Did you know that? The man’s a wonderful painter.’

‘And Cynthia, his wife’s a good writer, too,’ said Charmian.

‘Oh yeah. Cynth. And it was Sid who introduced us to Clarissa Zander who first gave us the idea of living on a Greek island.’

‘No, we heard the islanders of Kalymnos singing on the radio,’ Charmian contradicted him.

‘Actually, Alex Grivas told us about taking Prince Philip round the nightspots.’

‘Well, anyway,’ Marianne interrupted them, ‘we’re pleased you’re here.’

‘It’s been great for my writing. I’m onto the second book of the trilogy,’ George looked at his wife. ‘That’s gonna be explosive.’

‘Just leave me out of it. Your novels are getting more uncomfortably autobiographical as the days go on, George, and I don’t fucking like it.’

‘What else is there to write about but real life, my darling wife?’ He poured himself more retsina. ‘You do it, don’t you? What’s *Mermaid Singing*? Fantasy?’

In the middle of another coughing bout, George drew a cigarette from the pack, threw it to his lips where it stuck, lit it and then blew a series of perfect smoke rings into the air. Charmian rolled her eyes at this much-performed trick.

‘If I’d wanted to be married to a dolphin, I’d have gone to the fucking aquarium.’

George laughed, coughed and clapped his imaginary flippers in the air.

‘Do you write about real life?’ Marianne asked Leonard.

He looked up from his notes. ‘Writing is at once the deepest connection and the greatest escape,’ he said. ‘When you write you are both at the heart of life and away from it. The writer is absent and present.’

‘Len speaks in riddles,’ said George. ‘Jeez, the man’s so deep, only a few people on the planet can understand him.’

‘Better than writing those potboilers that you churn out!’

‘Ouch, that hurt, Charm! That really did!’

‘Good. It was meant to.’ She downed her whisky in one and filled up her glass again.

‘At least my writing covers the bills.’

‘Almost.’

Marianne had had enough. She wanted to be alone with Leonard and find out more about him.

‘I need to go,’ she said.

As if understanding her thoughts, Leonard jumped up. ‘May I help you with your groceries?’ he asked and lifted her basket.

‘Bye George. Bye Charmian,’ they called. ‘See you soon.’

Outside the sky was brazen and it was a relief to be in the fresh air.

‘How do you stand living there?’ she asked, as they perched on the low quay wall and watched the red and blue boats settle after a busy morning. ‘People here call them The Hat and The Skinny Australian.’

‘It’s really hard,’ he said, looking out at the wrinkled water. ‘More than anything it is sad. They are both so talented and they had such a love story. He was married before.’

‘I know. To Elsie, and they have a daughter, Gae, back in Australia.’

‘But as soon as they start drinking, they can’t stop and they are so nasty to each other.’

‘I worry about the children.’ Leonard could see that she was compassionate.

‘Me too. Poor kids. I feel for Martin, the eldest, as he is very sensitive, a good writer himself, and he can see what is going on and he tries to protect Shane and Jason. But the strange thing is, no matter how ugly the night before, seven o’clock the next morning, they are sober and back at their writing again. That’s when I start writing, too, so the house lulls into serenity.’

‘I bet you can’t wait to have your own space.’

‘So true. Peace and quiet and time to write.’

‘Poetry? Novels?’

‘Yes. Both, and songs, too, although of course lyrics must stand on their own. I play the guitar. I was in a band, the Buckskin Boys, when I was at McGill. The name was chosen because we all had buckskin jackets; mine was my dad’s. We weren’t very good, Country and Western, but now I just sing on my own. I haven’t been on Hydra long but I sense something in the air which is creative and dangerous.’

‘Dangerous?’

‘Yes. As if it could both revive and destroy you.’

Marianne nodded. 'I know what you mean. Axel and I came here full of idealism and hope and now our marriage has shattered on the rocks. He takes lovers.'

Leonard shook his head. Why would a man do that if he could have a woman like this by his side? The light caught her eyes and they shone bright blue, as if they had been cut from the same material as the sky.

'He must be crazy.'

Marianne smiled modestly. Maybe she had disclosed too much but she felt so comfortable with Leonard, as if they had known each other for years.

'Who knows?' Her eyes filled with tears. 'Maybe I am to blame, too? Or maybe it is Hydra?'

They sat for a few moments, reluctant to leave the warm wall and each other.

'I have to go now,' she said, rising. 'My son needs me.'

She picked up her basket.

'Can you manage?'

'Yes, thank you. You should come and join us. Most evenings, people gather at Douskos' Taverna and discuss art and life. You would enjoy it. You could bring your guitar.'

'I know about the evenings but I have avoided them. George and Charmian often go and the house is peaceful then. The kids do their own thing, I do mine, but if I know you will be there, I will certainly come along.'

Marianne blushed.

'And do please come and see me in my new home. I move in hopefully next week. I have written my address and slipped it in your basket. Goodbye, Marianne.'

He watched her leave, saw how her dress floated about her legs as she walked, and knew that his life had changed.

She knew it too. As Marianne climbed the hill, she felt her heart flutter and all she could think about was Leonard. She dipped her hand in the basket and there, among the mud-encrusted potatoes, was a piece of paper. Beneath where Leonard had written his address, he had sketched a bird, its wings opened wide. Marianne smiled and rubbed her finger over the drawing. She could not stop thinking about his dark hair, his deep eyes, his chiselled face, the way the sun lit his skin when he smiled.

The island hummed with spring and surely there were more camellias open now than when she had walked down to Katsikas' only two hours before.

iii

Beneath the pine tree at Douskos' Taverna, the friends sat in a circle, their faces lit by kerosene lamps. Loops of coloured light bulbs were draped between the branches like cheap necklaces. Terracotta bowls of shiny olives adorned each table. Some people drank retsina, others ouzo or wine. Most smoked. There was an atmosphere of warmth and animation.

Jack and Frieda felt shy as they approached the circle but to their delight Marianne stood up and beckoned them over.

'Hey everyone, this is Jack and Frieda, just arrived from an Israeli kibbutz.'

There was a sound of welcome, chairs were drawn up and drinks poured for them.

'Let me introduce everyone. This is Charmian and her husband, George, from Australia. Writers also, like you, Jack. And John Dragoumis, a painter like you, Frieda. And Norman, Norman Peterson, the artist I told you about.' Yes, Jack and Frieda recognised him from earlier: he was the man picking up litter at the roadside, presumably objets trouvés for his work. 'Oh, and my husband Axel.' They saw a thin, intense man with short blonde hair and glasses. He did not smile. Marianne scowled: 'And Patricia Amlin, an American painter. Ah and here is Anthony Kingsmill, another painter.'

'How many fucking painters does an island need?' George shouted drunkenly through a smoky haze.

'We can never have enough, surely?' Charmian lit another cigarette. 'We have to balance out the fucking writers here somehow.'

'True, my dear,' said George sarcastically. 'The painters and the writers have to fuck. Just kidding. Hiya, Jack. Welcome, Frieda!'

'And, also, here are Chuck Hulse and Gordon Merrick,' said Marianne. 'Or as Axel always calls you, Chuckandgordon, whichever one of you he means.'

The men smiled. 'We're cool with that,' said Chuck.

'Author of *The Strumpet Wind*?' said Jack, his eyes alight. 'That was amazing. I read it three times.'

'Thank you,' said Chuck. 'And are you the man who wrote that wonderful book about Buber?'

Jack smiled proudly. It was a dream come true to be surrounded by creative people. He saw copies of books by Robert Graves and Yeats on the table, presumably lent and shared among the community.

'I loved the part about the existential test that all individuals face at some stage of their lives and how we are never the same again,' said Gordon.

'Not only individuals are tested but also nations,' added Chuck.

'And what he has to say about responsibility and truth and the I-Thou relationship as opposed to the I-It.'

'Thank you,' said Jack, flattered. 'I am so pleased that you enjoyed the book. Buber was a wonderful man.'

'And this is Leonard Cohen,' said Marianne, trying not to appear too pleased that he had, at last, joined them. He looked up and smiled before bending his head back to his guitar which he strummed quietly beneath the conversation.

John Dragoumis beckoned for the young couple to come closer. Newcomers were sometimes fought over on Hydra. 'Have you heard of the *I Ching*?'

Jack was interested. 'Heard of it but never seen it in action.'

'It's a way of discovering who you are using ancient Chinese philosophy,' said John. He was plump and friendly with a white beard, open leather sandals and dirty toenails.

'That's my copy,' said Marianne proudly, 'with an introduction by Jung.'

George said, 'The *I Ching* insists upon self-knowledge throughout.'

'We know that, thank you, George.' Charmian scowled. 'Throw the coins, would you? You said it was my turn to have my question answered. Here we go. Is Hydra the right place for me?'

'Jeez, Charm. Take it easy.' George tossed the coins and let them fall onto the table. After six turns, he drew the hexagrams while everyone gazed on with interest. 'Right, let's look at the pattern. Okay. So unbroken lines. Chien. The creative. Light-giving. Strong. You need to best develop yourself so that your influence can endure.'

‘What damn chance have I got of that, with you and your bloody books and three children to care for?’

‘You asked me to look it up, Charm, so will you let me finish?’

‘Maybe we should leave it,’ said Marianne nervously. ‘Let’s talk about something else.’

‘No!’ Charmian swung her bottle in the air and it smashed against the taverna wall. The red wine stained the white bricks. From the bar, Douskos and The Gardenia Dwarf looked up but ignored it. They were used to these foreign artists and their fiery tempers. They would sweep the glass up later. ‘It’s my turn to have the limelight, do you understand? I want my damn question answered.’ She belched. ‘Should I remain on Hydra? Is it doing me any bloody good?’

‘Right,’ George continued. ‘Cool it, Charm. The Chinese dragon is dormant in the winter but in the early summer it is active again and is creative and a force for good. So just be patient, will you? Your time is coming.’

‘Well, I wish it would hurry up and arrive. I’m sick of being a nobody.’

Frieda noticed how thin Norman Peterson was, his ribs visible through his creased, batik shirt. ‘I think we saw you by the roadside,’ she said. He turned politely to answer.

‘Yes, probably. I collect objects. Bottles, paper, wire, string. I make sculptures and try to sell them.’

‘I like the randomness of it,’ said Jack. ‘Buber believed, of course, that whatever or whoever we come into contact with is significant.’

‘Even wire?’ Norman smiled modestly.

‘Of course,’ Jack said. ‘It is the little encounters that nourish the soul. I’ll lend you some books about him and also about the founder of eighteenth-century Hasidism, Baal Shem Tov. I think you’ll find him interesting.’

Norman nodded gratefully.

‘We’ve been reading John Cage’s book, *Silence*,’ said Gordon, breaking his. ‘He also uses the *I Ching*, in his compositions. He is fascinated by chance and randomness but in a paradoxical way he puts a lot of planning and structure into his work in order to make it random.’

‘Yes,’ said Chuck, ‘do you remember the talk in New York that we went to?’

‘What was that?’ John put his hands on the table to try and steady them: his tremor was bad this evening.

‘At the Artists’ Club on Eighth Street and what he said was dependent on chance. That meant that there could be – and there was – a lot of repetition and Jeanne Reynal stormed out saying that she loved John, but she couldn’t stand it.’

‘He’s interested in Zen as well, isn’t he?’ George said. Charmian was sulking.

‘Sure.’ Chuck and Gordon always seemed to agree with and listen to each other.

‘Thanks,’ said Norman. ‘I didn’t know my picking up of scrap had such deep philosophical roots. I thought I was just a cheapskate and a thief!’ And everyone laughed.

The conversation rolled along easily: philosophy, art, politics. Norman said he was pleased to read about how President Johnson was trying to end segregation in America.

‘It’s very noble,’ said John, ‘but is it achievable?’

Back at home in the early hours, Jack checked on the children and saw that they were asleep.

‘What fascinating people,’ he said to Frieda, his eyes shining. Below them, Hydra had settled itself for the night, its houses low in the unremitting darkness.

‘It was so stimulating, having interesting people to talk to. I really missed that on the kibbutz, that intellectual debate. So much of our time was focused on how many avocados we’d picked or which goat was dying or whether we should replace the tractor part. All my life I’ve wanted to be among people like these. It’s wonderful. I’m thrilled that we came to live on Hydra, the best decision we ever made. It will be so good for us.’

‘Well, for you, it will be.’ Frieda was unpinning her plait, letting her crinkled hair fall.

‘What do you mean?’

‘No-one asked me my opinion. I couldn’t get a word in, you were all so full of it: Jung, Cage, Buber. The men dominating, as usual.’

‘Rubbish, Frieda. You could have said whatever you wanted to. No-one makes a gap for you in life. You just have to join in. Marianne and Charmian did.’

‘You never gave me a chance. Look how Chuck and Gordon treat each other, with respect. But it’s all about you and your books and never about my painting. Did you mention me? Did you include me? Of course not. The bottom line is that you don’t take my work seriously. You never have. You think I’m just a nice girl from the Cape who paints fruit and flowers as a hobby, but that you are the serious artist in the marriage.’

‘When have I ever said that? You have such an inferiority complex.’

‘You wonder why? Because you don’t admire me. You don’t value what I do.’

‘You’re talking crap, Frieda. You need to discover who you are yourself. You can’t expect me to validate you all the time. Leave your bourgeois past behind. Shed it like a skin.’

‘My bourgeois background, Jack? What was yours – bohemian?’

Frieda suddenly felt a deep longing for her mother and her childhood home: the pale irises and dovecote in the garden, the mulberry trees whose leaves they picked to feed the silkworms.

She thought of Kibbutz Timorim, where she and Jack had met, located on rough terrain in Galilee. There was little there, just fifty young people from all over the world, bursting with enthusiasm and idealism. Together, they started to create a community. The buildings were small and primitive and in those days the youngsters lived communally. They had some goats, cows and chickens and a large terrain. They grew oranges and lemons in shaded groves, avocados and dates, clustered like jewels at the top of palm trees.

It was easy to see why they had fallen in love. They had come from similar backgrounds whose traditional codes they had both rejected. Five years between them, they craved excitement and believed deeply in the state of Israel. Neither was religious: their Judaism was more cultural, social, a strong part of their identity. As the kibbutz thrived, their marriage struggled. They hoped that a year on Hydra would, like the well in the courtyard, refresh and restore them.

‘You’re impossible,’ said Jack. ‘I’m heading for the couch.’

The next morning, Esther and Gideon awoke to find their father asleep in the living room. His large frame was awkwardly angular on the narrow settee.

‘Why are you here, Abba?’ asked Esther.

Jack jumped up and forced a smile. 'It was just a bit hot in the bedroom, sweetie. Now who wants a story?'

'And breakfast on the balcony?' said Frieda, putting on her bravest face.