

Talking to Zeus
Jane Shaw
9781849830188
© Jane Shaw 2010

filed by AScribe v.4.6.378 on 27/04/2010

Prologue

Joy Strataki's Letter

1 August 2007

*Helikion Garden
Attica*

Dear Jane,

I'm pleased to tell you that your application for the job as my assistant has been accepted. Some of the applicants had very substantial CVs, much more experienced than you. However, I was impressed by your references from Hyde Park and Chelsea Physic Garden – they stressed how hard you work, even in poor conditions. Your life as a WREN in the Royal Navy no doubt got you ready for it! Work on a steep-sided five-acre garden such as this is demanding, especially in the heat of summer and cold of winter. I hate to tell you but no UK student horticulturalist has ever managed to last the intern year. I fear a lack of TV/internet, having to wash up outdoors and a generally monastic lifestyle disheartens the lily-livered youth of the UK. I hope you're not inclined to this disposition and will be the first to survive the year.

As you know, the garden has always been a stalwart advert for organic and water-wise gardening. With each passing year water is becoming more scarce. We have an annual rainfall barely more than a desert and now we're suffering from fiercely hot summers, with many fires sweeping the country. It's so hot the agapanthus's leaves have turned white! This has never happened before.

I have enclosed a copy of the American owner's gardening diaries, written when she first started the garden in the seventies. It will help you to understand more about the garden's history, our mission here and the trials and tribulations incurred since we began. She turned an arid, treeless, windy, stony hillside into a garden with little more than a pickaxe and a few seeds. She visits once a year for a month and is due to arrive next February, so you will meet her then.

Now, to the business end of things:

Your wage will be 600 euros a month. Board and lodging is free. Telephone calls are billed. The contract extends from October 2007 to October 2008 and is final, subject to a three-month probationary period. We don't bother as they do in England about health and safety. No need for steel toe-capped boots. But do get health insurance – the occasional poisonous adder slithers around the garden, although they are, unfortunately, becoming a rare occurrence. And bring thermals – it can be like the

North Pole here and there's no central heating or double glazing. You have the use of a small electric heater in the outhouse.

My dear friend Charles, who lives at the top of the hill, deals with the garden's emails and will answer any of your questions. I'm a useless technophobe.

I look forward to meeting you at Athens International Airport. I have enclosed a photograph of myself so you can recognize me.

*With best wishes,
Joy Strataki*

P.S. I have two dogs, a cat and a scarlet macaw. They are all rescued strays and can be a tad too demanding. If you're not an animal lover or are allergic I would strongly suggest that you think twice about coming – if this is the case, let me know promptly.

Queen of the Night

The sun shone low into the arrivals hall. I grasped the straps of my rucksack, eased it off my shoulders and squinted into the crowd.

I recognized Joy Strataki from the photograph she had sent. In the fading print she wore the same taut expression as the elderly lady now tip-a-tap-toeing towards me, lean and vital like a whippet about to bolt the traps. From underneath a battered straw hat, strands of long, grey hair fell to her shoulders. A robust man with a black, swirling beard strode beside her. She tapped his arm and pointed at me.

I felt queasy. Too many free drinks on the plane. One too many last night.

My instinct was to turn and bolt for the flight home. I was an habitual runner, my CV to date a smorgasbord of abandoned jobs. My greatest escape had been from the clutches of the Royal Navy. Having served Her Majesty for a mere nine months of a four-year contract I'd persuaded my father, a playwright, to write a letter to the admiral stating that my patriotism had been compromised by depression brought on by the burden put upon me by my forebears, all brave soldiers of the Queen. The admiral must have reached for his hankie, since I was given an 'honourable discharge' forthwith, my character assessed as 'exemplary'.

Back in 'civvy street' I dosed myself with Seroxat and tinkered with my CV to make it look as if I'd served the mandatory four years. Guilt now all-embracing, I skulked in new workplaces: the darkroom of a photographic agency, then the gardening section of a bookstore on Charing Cross Road. There, one quiet morning, I perused the pages of a book by Monty Don and was hit by a eureka moment – the great outdoors, physical exercise, toiling the earth. Why hadn't I thought of it before?

In a trice I enrolled on a Royal Horticultural Society Level 2 certificate, secured a gardening job in Hyde Park and volunteered at Chelsea Physic Garden.

I told myself that my application to Helikion, which is visited by enthusiasts and plant scientists the world over, wasn't based on a whim, but a way of restoring my self-respect. It would boost my horticultural CV, help me towards my goal of working at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. I was no longer a dreamer who flipped from job to job, relying on my parents to bail me out when the going got tough. No. I was ...

'Welcome to Greece, Jane!' Joy's stentorian tones jolted me to near sobriety.

I shoved a hand out in greeting. She patted it away, grabbed me by the waist and kissed me firmly on each cheek, then reached up to put a wiry arm on the man's broad shoulders. 'This is Pavlos, my knight in shining armour. For a friend, he'll turn over the deepest compost heaps.'

He chuckled. Loose curls of black hair bobbed above warm eyes the colour of dark chocolate. 'Ya sas,' his voice rumbled. 'After digging heaps of Helikion, you eats Joy's cakes of honey.' He enfolded me in a bear hug. 'Heaps not that deep.'

'Thank you,' I mumbled into the soft creases of his denim shirt, adjusting my ear to his lilting English.

‘Cakes take fillings out though,’ he added with a wink as he released me.

Joy raised a hand. ‘Rush hour,’ she said commandingly.

We made a ramshackle dash for the car park. Any lingering preconceptions I harboured about Joy were soon banished when, at the boot of an old Jeep, she suddenly bent from the waist and surveyed her footwear. ‘Will you look at that! My village shoes, scuffed to kingdom come. That wretched Winston will keep masturbating on them.’ Her grey-green eyes twinkled beneath hooded lids, like crumpled tarpaulin over a shop full of secrets.

I glanced at her slip-on shoes, the soft brown leather plucked and stained. Pavlos noticed the bemused look on my face and laughed as he tossed my heavy rucksack into the boot of the Jeep. On the front passenger seat a small, dirty-grey dog sucked on the face of a toy teddy.

‘Say hello to Winston,’ Joy said.

The dog lifted his head and glared at me. A stained incisor poked between bits of frothy teddy and saliva. One eye looked like a plum, a blue bloom over it, the other was dark brown and full of venomous contempt. I reluctantly patted his sweaty dome, and mumbled a greeting. Apparently satisfied, Joy plonked the grumbling dog into Pavlos’s arms. ‘You two, into the back. Jane, in the front.’ She grabbed the teddy, a Greek flag stitched over its belly, and tossed it onto the backseat. ‘The rest of my menagerie are waiting for you at home.’

I discreetly wiped away a clump of Winston’s gloopy debris and gingerly sat down, glancing over my shoulder. ‘I’ve been looking forward to meeting them,’ I replied in what I hoped was a convincing manner.

Pavlos was staring into a clear plastic box, inside which a fat lizard sneered, flicking its forked tongue in and out. ‘This is Gordon,’ he said. ‘Don’t mind him. He’s all gums and no bites. Joy’s looking after him for a friend.’

‘That’s nice,’ I said, pining for a reassuring cuddle from my cat, Bubski.

Joy settled into the driver’s seat, threw her hat towards me and put on a pair of heart-shaped, red plastic sunglasses. ‘Now, Jane. Let’s get you to the garden and settled in.’ She theatrically grabbed the gear stick, crunched the gears and missed the exit twice before finally zooming out of the car park.

Against a rising wind, we were soon speeding along the six-lane Attiki Odos highway, its sides and ditches full of builders’ rubble and litter. Beside the road, large advertising boards touted brands of cigarettes, coffee and sports goods, their tall stilts rooted in the ancient wine-producing land of the Mesoghia.

Joy jabbed my shoulder, jolting me out of my reverie, and pointed out of the side window. ‘Mount Hymettos, Jane. Odysseus used to hunt boar up there. Thank heavens only a few fires. But the poor Peloponnese ... people dead ... ancient olive groves and forests destroyed.’ She looked to the skies. ‘We’ve been praying to the gods for rain. Even drought-tolerant plants need water at some point.’

I sat upright to look at the mountain that loomed over Athens’ urban sprawl, displaying its tarnished crown of twisted metal, radar installations and mobile-telephone masts. As the sun set and a deepening twilight took hold, the mountain’s hue imperceptibly shifted from a bluish grey to a bloody violet.

‘I’m desperate for a cigarette.’ Joy looked in the pocket of the car door, fumbling through its contents. ‘Do you smoke, Jane?’ The Jeep veered into rough ground at the side of the road.

‘No. Sorry.’ My eyes were fixed rigidly ahead.

‘I’m afraid I’m doomed.’ She leaned forward, stretching her long neck upwards, and peered through the rear-view mirror. ‘Stop teasing Gordon, Pavlos. Have you got any cigarettes?’

'I've given up yesterday,' declared Pavlos. 'Keep eyes on road, Joy. Gordon is dizzy with sway.'

I noticed the speedometer creeping upwards and gripped the door handle.

We soon left the highway and sped along a tortuous road. Halfway along a rolling hillside, our headlights illuminated a series of roadside shrines. The last housed lit candles and vases of dried flowers. Soft toys huddled at its base, cards from the bereaved pinned to their synthetic chests.

Joy flicked the indicator and slowed the Jeep down. 'Bit of a dodgy turning, this,' she said.

We waited for a gap in oncoming traffic. Suddenly, back wheels squealing, she propelled the Jeep in front of a lorry. I grabbed the sides of my seat, sighing with relief as we turned up a steep, rutted track, the hard tips of Spanish broom rat-a-tapping over the car's sides. We passed a large gate with CCTV cameras perched above it. Security dogs leapt onto its bars, snarling and barking, as we rumbled by. Joy sniffed and tutted. 'I'm friendly with all of my neighbours apart from that one. A Neanderthal. Expat. Made his fortune out of other people's miseries and ripped off a charming Greek couple to buy that place dirt cheap. Both dead now. Cancer. The beast destroyed the natural vegetation to build terraced lawns. Blasted sprinklers on them all the time. I could quite happily tar and feather him.' She scrunched the gears around a sharp corner. Cigarette ash rolled around the gear stick, dusting my flip-flopped feet.

'Nearly home. I've prepared us some dinner and there's a bottle chilling in the fridge,' she added.

I perked up somewhat and let go of the door handle to rub the blood back into my hand, desperate to get out of the Jeep, eager for another drink.

Above, a long squat house nestled within layers of shadowy vegetation. Spiky black outlines of yuccas and prickly pears punctured the night sky. With a spray of gravel, Joy brought the Jeep to a rattling halt, inches away from a duck-egg blue moped with a leather jacket and helmet hanging off its handlebars. 'Here we are. Home.'

I climbed out of the passenger seat into a pool of flickering light. Hanging from the front door's alcove, two cast-iron holders held a plethora of flaming candles. Cicadas chirruped softly in the undergrowth. Stepping out of the light I caught my head against the branches of a mastic tree. Joy and Pavlos laughed and told me to mind my step. I rubbed my ear and looked down the hillside. Tall cypresses, their jagged outlines imitating offbeat skyscrapers, painted the inky twilight a deeper black.

Pavlos walked towards the moped. 'I go get cigarettes for you, Joy. And a first aid kit for you, Jane.'

'Oh, you lovely beast,' called out Joy. 'Don't go buying that Turkish stuff you *used* to smoke!'

Pavlos chuckled and said he'd see us soon.

'Come on in then, Jane, before you do yourself another mischief.' Joy waved her skinny arms around grandly.

I lugged my rucksack through the alcove and entered the open-plan house. There was a smell of garlic and dusty corners. Opposite, a huge sofa creaked and groaned under the massive weight of a black Rottweiler. Seeing me, he stretched out an iron-clad neck, bared a few hefty teeth and turned onto his back. Offloading ballast, the sofa spewed out yellow foam from its stitching.

'This is Titan, Jane.' Joy went over to tickle his velvet belly. 'He's a big softy ... oh, yes you are ... look at you, all delicious. Come and stroke him!' Titan flexed his breeze-block paws and sighed a rank, meaty breath. Winston, teddy clamped in his jaws, scuttled over my feet and jumped up onto a Zulu warrior stool standing beneath a large framed print of

Hieronymus Bosch's triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Beside it a large birdcage hung from a metal pole and stand, its door open.

'Now,' said Joy. 'Cigarettes. I know there's a packet around here somewhere.' She cast a hand over a cluttered table next to the sofa. 'Ah, found my specs at least.' She held up a pair of spectacles, put them on and scanned the table. Three Arabian hookahs, candles strewn with rivers of wax and an upturned wooden cross sat on its top. 'That pesky macaw.' Joy turned the cross upright. 'I'll hang you upside down one of these days, Wizard!' She tipped her head back searching the thick wooden rafters for any signs of the bird. 'He's mentally ill. Should be sectioned. The Devil long since left his mark on that one. He's probably outside tormenting the bats. Now, where are those cigarettes?'