

Black Acorns

A Naxos mystery *with Martin Day*



Vanessa Gordon

Black Acorns

A Naxos mystery *with Martin Day*



Vanessa Gordon

Vanessa Gordon lives in Surrey and spent many years working in Classical music as a concert manager, musician's agent and live music supplier. She has travelled all over Greece and has visited as often as possible over the last fifteen years.

The Martin Day mystery series is set on Naxos, the largest island in the Cyclades. It is an island of contrasts. The modern port of Chora is crowned by a Venetian kastro which is surrounded by an interesting old town. On Naxos you can find uninhabited hills, the highest mountain in the Cyclades, attractive fishing villages, popular beaches and archaeological sites. There are historic towers and welcoming tavernas, collectable art and ceramics. Naxos has produced some of the finest marble in Greece since ancient times.

Now Martin Day has moved in.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Meaning of Friday

The Search for Artemis

Black Acorns

Black Acorns

A Naxos mystery *with Martin Day*

Vanessa Gordon

Published by Pomeg Books 2021 www.pomeg.co.uk

Copyright © Vanessa Gordon 2021

Cover photograph and map © Alan Gordon

Cover image: Agia Tower, Naxos

Illustration of bronze horse by Brenda Ord

This is a work of fiction. The names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the copyright owner. Nor can it be circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without similar condition including this condition being imposed on a subsequent purchaser.

ISBN: 978-1-8384533-5-0

Pomeg Books is an imprint of
Dolman Scott Ltd
www.dolmanscott.co.uk

For Arabella and George



Warm thanks to Christine Wilding, Alan Gordon and Cristine Mackie for their invaluable proofreading, and especially to Mary Chipperfield, my friend and for many years my teacher, for hers.

My special thanks to Robert Pitt, who first introduced me to Greece and the great delights of its past, its cuisine and its wine, and who showed me the Towers of the Mani.

Most of all, thanks to Alan and Alastair for their constant love and support.

Island of NAXOS



Lesser Cyclades

A Note about Greek words

Readers without a knowledge of Greek might like to know about one or two things that they will notice in the book.

Greek names sometimes have changed endings when the person is directly addressed. You will see Thanasis become Thanasi, Andreas become Andrea, and Aristos become Aristo.

Spellings most likely to help with pronunciation are used in this book.

The main town of Naxos is called Chora (and also Naxos). You pronounce the ch in Chora as in the Scottish 'loch'. Similarly, Halki (sometimes written as Chalki) begins with that sound.

Kyrie and *Kyria* are forms of address like monsieur and madame

Mou means my and is often used after a name as a term of affection

Agapi mou - my dear

Kali Orexi - Bon appétit

Efharisto - Thank you

Efharistoume - We thank you

Kalimera - Hello, Good morning

Kalispera - Good evening
Kalinichta - Goodnight
Kalos Irthatay! - Welcome
Ti kaneis - How are you?
Kala. Eseis? - I'm well, and you?
Stin yia sas! - Good health!
Oriste! is a common way to answer the phone.
filoxenia - traditional hospitality
estiatorio - restaurant
Paralia Votsala - bay of pebbles
mikri agora - mini market
periptero - kiosk
Agia Anna - St Anna
Agios Ioannis - St John
maquis - typical scrub vegetation
meltemi - prevailing wind in the Cyclades
elliniko kafes - Greek coffee
kitron - a large, solid citrus fruit famous on Naxos
kouneli stifado - rabbit casserole
gigantes - a dish of baked giant beans
patatesournou - roast potatoes
mezethes - small savoury bites to have with ouzo (sing. meze)
tsipouro - distilled spirit
tzatziki - yogurt, garlic and cucumber
katsikaki - baby goat
horta - green vegetables (leaves)

1

The stylish house in the foothills of the Taygetus Mountains of Greece belonged to an American in his nineties who guarded his privacy so effectively that most people did not even know his name. He had always intended to spend his final years in Greece, the country whose history and art he loved most in the world, and the area he loved the most was this mountainous part of the Peloponnese. Local builders had constructed the house to his own design in an isolated spot that he had chosen with care. The modern town of Sparta was some distance away, near enough to supply his needs, but all he could see from his house was the timeless grandeur of the landscape. The Taygetus Mountains lifted their bulk in beauty around him, and whatever the season their colours were a shifting palette of greys, blues and greens. In spring the slopes were full of wild flowers, the fields and trees alive with birds and butterflies, and in the distance he could see the sea. To the old man, a lover of Greek history, the land seemed little changed since the Ancient Spartans had lived and fought here.

The house was surrounded by an impregnable metal fence that was cleverly designed to impinge as little as possible on his view. There were two serious reasons for the perimeter security, one being the death threats that the old American had received in the past, having once stirred up

the vicious envy of a group of disaffected types whose chances of making anything like his wealth were non-existent. He could never forget it, even though he had left that life behind in America.

The second reason for security was the old man's collection of treasures, once described in the US as the most unique collection of Greek antiquities in private hands. None of his friends had ever seen it. Nobody had. He had acquired his beautiful artefacts over many decades, and they were all the company he wanted now. Having always been locked away before, the collection was now displayed around the house, and the old man regularly cradled an ancient object in his hands, revelling in its loveliness and its history.

For his practical needs, he could afford to pay for live-in help. This consisted of a fifty-year-old German called Manfred. Manfred was employed as companion, cook, housekeeper and head of security. The two got on well enough, and Manfred's presence gave the old man peace of mind. They talked, they ate together, they shared life stories and lived quietly over a number of years. It was Manfred, however, who opened the gate to the thieves who stole the collection.

The American had not seriously expected ever to be robbed. He had believed his valuable collection to have been forgotten about in the busy world beyond the Taygetus, and the local people knew nothing about it. He was not hurt in the robbery, as the faithful Manfred gave him a powerful sedative. There was, however, a casualty: a local man who was taking supplies to an isolated sheep farm in the hills and who saw the robbery taking place was badly beaten by the gang and left for dead on the verge.

After the robbery, there was no sign of either Manfred or the collection. The gang had taken their time, and the German had shown them where all the treasures were to be found. The Hellas Police threw all their resources at what became known in the force as the Taygetus Raid, but although they soon guessed the identity of the thieves, they were unable to make even a single arrest. Even when a few of the stolen antiquities surfaced in Paris, New York and London, it became clear that the gang had acted cleverly so that no item led the police to their door.

Two frustrating years later the case remained unsolved, and the lack of new leads led the police to shelve the inquiry. Of his busy colleagues on the force, only Inspector Andreas Nomikos of the Athens Police, a man obsessed with international antiquity fraud relating to Greece, was never able to forget the case.

2

Archaeologist and TV presenter Martin Day, feeling every one of his thirty-nine years after a long day of filming, stood on a hillside in the Mani region of the southern Peloponnese, surrounded by the awaiting camera team. He was still wearing his sunglasses, and would only remove them when they were about to start filming again. The October sun was now low and right in his eyes. The heat from the stone wall next to him warmed his back, and an amber glow burnished the old tower houses that rose steeply behind him. Day was resigned to the delay, he was used to it by now, but he was keenly looking forward to the moment when the Director announced the end of the session. The next take would be the last, and that was what mattered: he was ready for a shower and a drink.

With a shout the Director gave the go-ahead to resume filming. Day removed his sunglasses and held them in front of him at waist level so that they could be back on his face as soon as possible. He adopted a professional smile and willed himself to make no slips, the sooner to finish the job.

“This place behind me has been called ‘the most photographed village in the Mani’. Its name is Vathia, and it’s one of the best surviving examples of a fortified Maniot town. Most of the houses are now abandoned, and you can

walk round them absorbing a silence that resonates with the memory of more turbulent times.

“As we’ve already seen during this programme, many of the eight hundred or so Venetian towers here in the Mani stand alone in the hills, imposing bastions against invasion, fortified refuges in case of attack. Competition among the clans to have the highest tower was so great that the towers became taller and taller.

“Here at Vathia, we can see that domestic houses were built in a similar style, and it was done for the same reason. These ‘Tower Houses’, as they’re called, were small strongholds, each one an impregnable refuge for members of a single family. A Tower House was built like a small castle, and sheltered people during an age of violent vendettas and bloody feuds.

“To understand the Venetian towers it’s helpful to consider the landed estates of Europe and America. Not only did the estate protect the owner’s wealth and family, it was a symbol of status and respectability. If the family lost ownership of the estate, or the building was allowed to degenerate, there was a very serious impact on the owners’ status and future. So it was with these towers and Tower Houses.

“The Towers of the Mani, whether defensive giants like those we’ve been looking at in the countryside, or domestic houses like these at Vathia, are symbols of an area with a long and often violent history. The Mani is a mountainous and inaccessible part of Greece which has been inhabited since Neolithic times: a human skull discovered in a cave here is the oldest so far found in Europe. Maniots have a reputation for being tough and rebellious. In the 1820s, the mountains of the Mani became the stronghold of the

Klephts, fierce bandits opposed to Ottoman rule. And the fierce spirit of the men of the Mani is not a thing of the past, even though today the area welcomes visitors and relies to a large extent on tourism. If you drive through the region you can still see road signs peppered with bullet holes, target practice for the local young men. The Maniots claim to be directly descended from the Ancient Spartans, and their castellated towers suggest the continuation of the Spartans' combative and indomitable spirit.

"A long and fierce history, then, is embodied in the towers we have looked at in this programme. We have seen towers that are as high as twenty metres, surveying the sea from the crest of a cliff, and a complete village of Tower Houses forming a fortified community. In the next programme I'll be visiting the capital of the Mani, the modern town of Areopolis, where, true to the proud tradition of the area, the famous Petros Mavromichalis led the Greek War of Independence."

"Cut! Thanks everyone. Well done!" shouted Scott Macfarlane, the Director, sounding every bit as thankful as Day felt. "That's us done!"

Thank God, thought Day, and replaced his sunglasses. He smiled at the crew, thanked the sound engineer, and headed for the shade. His height and fair hair marked him out in the crowd and several people moved politely aside to give him access to the refreshment kiosk. He grabbed two small mineral waters and drank one as he walked away. He took the other over to the control tent where Scott was talking to two crew members, trying to bring the session to a close. He turned gratefully to Day and accepted the bottle of water.

"Thanks, Martin. Are you pleased with how it went today?"

“Yes, I think so. We did well to finish filming before we lost that good light. Vathia will look stunning lit by the low sun. Have you got everything you need?”

“It’s all done. The filming we did inside Vathia this morning will provide material to cut into your longer explanations, and the pieces recorded yesterday in Areopolis were excellent. And those enormous stone towers in the countryside where we were last week are really impressive!”

“Good. When I’m in London in December give me a call, we can go through whatever you need me to re-voice. There might be a few takes in the Areopolis section which will need re-recording, I think there were some background noises in a few places, and I should probably record one bit again where I wasn’t very clear. Right, I’m ready to go back to the hotel now. Can I give you a lift?”

“Fantastic, yes please. David can finish up here and join us later. I’ll just have a word with him.”

Scott gave instructions to David Mikos, the Anglo-Greek deputy director, and then joined Day by his hire car. The company had supplied an old Skoda, a much better fit for Day’s height than the Fiat 500 he drove on Naxos, but already he hated it. The Skoda would not have been his first choice for the twisting, mountainous roads of the Mani.

They drove north-west to Gerolimena following the line of the coast, the sun still in their eyes. Scott’s mind was already moving ahead.

“Are you going straight back to Naxos tomorrow, Martin?” he asked.

“Yes, assuming this worn-out wreck makes it as far as Kalamata airport. Only a hundred and ten kilometres

through the Mani, what could possibly go wrong?”

They discussed work until they arrived at the hotel where the production team were staying. It was one of the most beautiful hotels Day could remember, located in a rural hamlet outside the coastal village of Gerolimena. Originally another eighteenth-century tower, it was a luxuriously converted, almost circular stone building, and was quiet just now, the main tourist season being over. Day had a ground floor room in a low-level stone annex, a room so stunning that he could have spent the whole evening in it had it not been for the even more impressive terrace bar and the prospect of good company.

He took a shower in his wet-room using the boutique toiletries provided, chose fresh clothes from the shabby chic wardrobe in his domed, stone-walled bedroom, and opened the door to allow the evening sun to flood through the doorway. He sat on the end of the vast double bed that awaited him later and sent a text to Helen saying he would be back on Naxos the next day, but would take a taxi home from the port. That done, he set out to claim a table on the terrace and await Scott.

He chose a small marble table just far enough from the tower to give him a good view of it. Uplit by orange floodlights that gilded the stone facade, the main building was almost entirely windowless; only a few slits relieved the austerity of the curved wall. An adjacent stone arch invited visitors into an interior courtyard within which a modern wooden staircase led to the hotel reception on the first floor. The stone storeys of Maniot towers were originally connected by wooden staircases, and Day was pleased to see that this style had been followed in the renovation of the building. He sat back in his chair and enjoyed the peacefulness of the terrace. A white cat strode with erect

tail towards him, went straight past with a dismissive air, threw itself down on a warm flagstone and stretched out, tucking its tail round its back legs. Even when Scott emerged from his room at the far end of the hotel and joined Day at the table, the cat chose not to stir.

Like a miracle, a soft-footed young Greek approached to take their drinks order. It was rare for Day to choose anything other than his favourite, gin and tonic, and this evening was no exception; Scott ordered the same. Once they had their drinks, Day declared himself in Paradise.

“So, what have you got lined up next, Scotty?” he asked, when he had savoured his drink for a moment.

“My next job? I’m taking a team to Portugal in a fortnight to film a programme on Coimbra Pottery for the Secrets of Art people. You should look into working with them yourself, Martin. They’d welcome you with open arms.”

“Coincidentally, I think that’s going to happen this winter, in London.”

“Really? What’s the subject? Have you finished the Nikos Elias book?”

“Yes, the Elias biography is with my agent now and should be published next year some time. I had the chance to make some programmes on the art of Greek marble sculpture, but we haven’t managed to secure the rights to use the material yet. Meanwhile something else came up. It’s a commission to do a book for the British Museum on part of their Greek ceramics collection, and there’s been some talk about doing a programme on the same material with Secrets of Art. I’ll be working with Alex Harding-Jones.”

“Alex from the British Museum?”

“That’s right. You know him, surely?”

“I met him a few years ago. Ours is a small world. Give him my best when you see him. So, what else has been happening in your life, Martin? My god, this is the first time we’ve been able to sit down and catch up since we got here ten days ago.”

Scott settled back in his chair and stretched out his legs, prepared to enjoy an entertaining narrative if one was available. His friend was usually good for a story or two.

“Oh, it’s been an exciting year,” said Day, smiling into his glass, taking a sip of the Elixir of the Gods and recalling the unusually dramatic events that had distracted him since he bought his house on Naxos. “Where shall I start?”

The narrative was indeed entertaining, exactly as Scott had hoped. When they finally went to find some dinner, Scott wondered aloud whether that would be the last of Day’s adventures.

3

The ferry *Blue Star Delos* brought Day home to Naxos at six o'clock the following evening. The ship turned neatly just outside the port and reversed into the mooring with only a modicum of black smoke and the required three short blasts on the horn. It lowered its vast metal gangway with a screech and final resounding crash, before emptying its load of cars, trucks and lorries onto the port. Foot passengers dragging luggage shared the gangway with vans and motorbikes. Chaos, in its most good-natured form, once again brought people to the island of Naxos.

Never completely happy until back on dry land, Day's spirits were improving and he was considering a quick stop at his favourite bar, Diogenes, before finding a taxi, when he saw a fair-haired woman standing next to a dirty white Fiat 500. She was waving at him. Helen had met the ferry. A rush of pleasure filled him. Much as he loved living alone and was quite happy to occupy and amuse himself, he had been really enjoying the last few months during which Helen, his novelist friend from England, had been staying with him.

"This is very good of you," he said, forcing his case into the boot of his car and turning to give her a short hug. "I haven't seen an available taxi anywhere. Let's escape this madness and go home."

Day folded himself into the passenger seat and began to relax. As they drove the twenty kilometres to the house, he told her about his experiences in the Mani. The road climbed away from the shore, passing through the villages that lay between the port and the hilly centre of the island. The village of Filoti, where Day had found his ideal house and bought it earlier in the year, lay not far from the island's highest peak, Mount Zas. Day loved its rural tranquility. Anyone who knew him only as a TV presenter, when he was at his most extrovert, would have been surprised to hear that he was something of a loner. Day craved peace and quiet; he enjoyed long periods of solitary research and writing, companionable silences and the gentle conversation of good friends. On the death of his father, Day had used his inheritance to buy the Filoti house, a restored island home which he described as being 'in the middle of nowhere on an island in the Aegean'. He saw it as a place of escape from the studio apartment he owned in busy Athens. He no longer had a home in the UK. Helen had been staying with him since the early summer, the two of them companionable but independent, meeting from time to time over coffee, drinks and meals.

The house smelt good to Day when he walked in: the usual aromas of old polished wood, clean country air, and a faint hint of wild herbs. He opened the shutters and the early October warmth filled the front room. He left his case in the middle of the floor and went through to the back room, lined with his bookcases, and opened the windows and shutters of the balcony. The view across the valley to the further hills was even better than he remembered. October had arrived, bringing the muted ochres of bleached grass, orange-gold lichen and yellow-green, desiccated scrub.

He heard the unmistakable sound of a kettle and smiled. Helen was making tea. Fair enough, he thought. A cup of tea first, and then a gin.

He took his suitcase to his room and took the fastest shower possible before putting on fresh clothes and returning to the balcony. Helen was already sitting with a cup of tea, her brown arms and sun-bleached hair a sign of having spent many months on the island, which had transformed her skin from Hampstead white to Aegean bronze. He settled into the chair next to hers.

“That’s better,” he said, drinking his tea. “It’s wonderful to be back. How have you been?”

“Fine. I sent off the novel to my agent on Wednesday, so it’s off my hands at last.”

“That’s great! We must celebrate tonight with a meal at the taverna. Are you pleased with how it turned out?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” She quickly corrected her tone. “I’m quite pleased with it. I didn’t know what to do with myself after it went off with the courier. Then oddly, just at the right moment, a man called *Kyrie* Tsirmpas rang me, the chairman of the Naxos Literary Festival. He offered me a job.”

“I thought the Literary Festival was already in progress?”

“Yes it is, but somebody had to pull out, Nikos Kounaras, the poet from Thasos, who was going to be their Writer in Residence. His wife went into labour early, apparently! Our friend Aristos at the Museum gave them my name and they asked me to step in and help.”