

HOW I SPEND IT



The great Australian novelist George Johnston once wrote a short story in which he ascribes some glorious consequences to a character who buys an Astypalaian knife from a market stall in the Portobello Road: “He was drawn simply by the bright look of the article, for the haft of carved charcoal-grey goat horn was inset with a simple design of little studs, some of brass and copper, others of tiny circles of bone dyed red and green and purple and yellow. Michael paid his two and ninepence and stuffed the knife into his pocket with a queer feeling of guilty pleasure.” Though I’d never seen one like it, the knife became an instant object of desire.

The story was published in 1956 when Johnston and his wife, the writer Charmian Clift, were just beginning their Grecian odyssey, a decade which saw them foster an international colony of artists and writers on the island of Hydra, made famous by the arrival of Leonard Cohen in 1960. I read the story – and everything else they wrote – while immersing myself in this bohemian circle and dreaming my own novel set among them into being.

My lust to own objects that had been touched by my characters began as a necessary gathering of materials – there were many writers: Gregory Corso, Axel Jensen, Gordon Merrick and, briefly, Elizabeth Jane Howard – and

POLLY SAMSON ON THE ASTYPALAIAN KNIFE

ILLUSTRATION BY KLAUS KREMMERZ

their books often featured the island and each other. I have never been much of a collector but, as I tried to recreate their world, things like tracing a lovely inked signature in one of their books would make me feel closer. AbeBooks helped with that. eBay brought me the artwork roughs for George Johnston’s 1960 novel, *Closer to the Sun*. I took them with me to Hydra and imagined him showing them to Charmian Clift, or perhaps presenting these orange daubs with their overlay of handpainted lettering at the café table where they all met. I saw Leonard Cohen congratulating him, or perhaps

concealing a twinge of envy, as he was yet to find a publisher for his first novel.

I’m slightly ashamed that I have a sprig of jasmine purloined from Leonard Cohen’s Hydra garden pressed between the pages of that first novel, *The Favourite Game*, and five little seedlings from the bergamot lemon that I scrumptied from the branch that overhung his terrace wall.

On my writing desk, I have a tiny bottle of Charmian Clift’s scent – Ma Griffe – of the correct vintage, which has been a heavenly prompt for bringing her to my pages

NO ONE HAD EVER HEARD OF THE ISLAND’S EXQUISITE TRADITIONAL KNIVES

and is thanks to my friend the writer Damian Barr, who tracked it down when I was sniffy about the smell of the modern version.

I had to rein myself in after I got carried away at a Christie’s auction and became the successful bidder for a mirror and gold key that Leonard Cohen gave to Marianne Ihlen. The mirror is

Cartier silver and given to her because, Cohen said, no face had ever given him greater pleasure. The key is tiny, presented to him by McGill University as a mark of his time as president of the debating society. He told her it was the key to his heart.

Despite it all, I still yearned for the “queer feeling of guilty pleasure” that finding the knife might afford me. My opportunity came in the summer of 2017, when my husband and I hitched a ride on a boat from a wedding on Rhodes. We were heading back to Hydra, where I had been granted the incredible opportunity of working on my novel in the house where Johnston and Clift wrote so many of theirs. Johnston claimed that the fee he received from *American Cosmopolitan* magazine for *The Astypalaian Knife* had been enough to buy this substantial house. There are still nail marks on the wall where the original knife was displayed between two icons.

Intrigued, our friend agreed to detour to Astypalaia. It’s a rather inhospitable-looking island, without water or much in the way of tourist attractions. There was a general store and chandler but no one had ever heard of the island’s exquisite traditional knives. We walked to the peak, knocked on doors. We didn’t know the Greek word for knife and alarmed one couple with our sign language. It took longer than it should have to dawn on us that, of course, there is no Astypalaian knife, that Johnston had made it up.

His story concludes with a marriage and a whole canteen of cutlery: “Heleni’s tall candles casting a mellow light on the little coloured studs of the Astypalaian knives and forks.” Before we departed the island, we bought a picnic knife from the general store and went on our way, feeling daft but strangely elated. And now this plastic-handled knife, which cost a couple of euros, has become a treasured item. “Darling,” I’ll say, bringing the butter to the table, “could you pass me the Astypalaian knife?” Of such things is happiness made. ■HTSI

A Theatre for Dreamers by Polly Samson is published by Bloomsbury Circus, £14.99.