

# THE GOAT HERDER

## 1

It was the year 1970 sometime around June. I was standing in the blazing sunshine looking at the new road. On my left the Adriatic sparkled deep blue with a thousand points of reflected sunlight, enough to hurt your eyes. To the Right, the foothills swept up covered in scrub and stunted dried out grasses. The gnarled sun-bleached carob trees clumped close together as if defying the harsh pitiless glare of the mid-day sun. White crags of limestone shone in the glare of the sun as the hills climbed higher and became mountains; their jagged summits stark against the crystal blue of the cloudless sky.

You might ask what was I doing here? Cutting to the chase, my rusty old Austen J4 Van was stolen in Athens leaving me with my passport and the clothes I stood up in. Tatty threadbare Denim jacket. T-shirt, Jeans and well-worn trainers. The British Embassy in Athens had little time for a scruffy hippie looking for a handout.

*“We can contact your parents and they can send you cash to get home to Scotland.”*

My father had died some years past and my widowed mum scraped by on her pension. There was no way I was going to ask my poor old mum to send money for me. She didn't have any money. Being a proud and somewhat angry young man I more or less told the Embassy official to stuff it I could get back to the UK on my own two feet.

After Hitch hiking up through Greece I found myself in what was then ‘The Soviet Republic of Yugoslavia’

Every village seemed to have a complement of soldiers and armed police who were not particularly friendly to foreigners with long hair and scruffy denims. There was quite a bit of hassle as I hitched North hoping to get to Austria. Somehow being Scottish seemed to help.

Weary, hungry and thirsty, my only possession was an old canvas ww11 gasmask bag. This contained a bottle of water, some grapes nicked from over a wall and some wild figs. However, there were many miles to go until I would see the white cliffs of Dover. It was time to keep moving. Taking a slug of tepid water, I set off. Living in hope you might say.

In the next half hour two cars and a truck passed: none of them stopped for my raised thumb. As the road became steeper I trudged on up this rising incline. The mountains still on the right, and to the left an almost sheer drop to the glittering Adriatic hundreds of feet below. Finally, I reached the top of the rise sweating profusely. With a roar a large black Mercedes powered over the crest of the hill in a blast of hot air and diesel fumes. Then it was gone.

Sitting down for a rest I felt pretty discouraged, there was not a breath of air and the silence was immense. I had another gargle of tepid water from my now nearly empty bottle.

*A faint tinkling sound came from below the edge of the cliff face.*

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### 2.

A pair of large hairy ears arose from behind some of the grasses on the verge as a few goats appeared making grunting noises. Leather collars were attached to small bells which tinkled as they moved. Behind them a little old man appeared with a shock of pure white hair.

*. Jesus, there is another human being on this planet.*

He carried a long shepherds crook in his right hand and a canvas bag slung on his left shoulder. He looked old bent and crooked, dressed in the traditional local garb of the time. Loose floppy black trousers tucked into knee high leather boots with thick wooden soles, black shirt and the ubiquitous brown leather waistcoat. He grinned, his weather beaten face a mass of deep wrinkles probably due to years in the fierce Mediterranean sun. His eyes, a startling blue twinkled at me as he spoke.

*I hadn't a bloody clue, it was probably Serbo Croat.* I answered in English with an inane "Hello" He shrugged with a smile and sat down on a rock by me. We sat looking at each other for a moment not sure where to go from there. Then pointing at me he said

"Englazier?"

I nodded my head and said "British, Scottish"

His face broke into a huge smile "Ah Scotishe goot" He made a kicking motion with his foot.

"Celteec, Rangers" then he pointed at me "You Christian?" I smiled a yes nodding my head.

He pointed at his chest and said "Muslim Allah, God."

I smiled and gave him the thumbs up. This seems to be understood the world over. He said something else in Serbo Croat and opened his canvas bag bringing out a bottle of cloudy wine a half loaf of local bread and a chunk of salami sausage. Breaking a piece of the bread and slicing a large chunk of salami he handed them to me. I could not refuse this hospitality. We sat in silence chewing away then he passed me the wine bottle and made a drinking motion. The wine was bitter sweet. He put his head to one side and looked at me with those sparkling blue eyes. From somewhere he dredged up a bit of English. Pointing at each of us in turn he said. "God, Allah" and thumped his chest with the palm of his hand. I took that to mean that God or Allah was within us.

The old shepherd then pointed with his finger and drew a circle to include us both and he said something very profound, "You are God, I am God, we are God"

I was somehow nearly in tears. I reached out and touched his knobby old shoulder as a sign of understanding.

I have never forgotten that old shepherd breaking bread with me all those years ago.