

Extract from *Blood and Circuses: An irresponsible memoir*, by Lex Marinos, Allen & Unwin, July 2014, pp 26-28.

School did provide me with some company among the few other misfits- in particular, Martin Johnston. Martin was the first Anglo of my own age to make me feel good about being Greek. We were fourteen at the time (although he was going on forty), and at that stage I had very little evidence that there was anything good about being Greek. Martin was a misfit in a variety of ways – he was bookish, non-athletic, eccentric, kind of foreign and, above all, he didn't give a shit. I envied that about him immediately.

I think we became friends for a number of reasons, but no doubt Greece was the principal one. Martin had just returned with his illustrious parents – the writers George Johnston and Charmian Clift – to Australia, having spent the majority of his life until then living in Greece. On the island of Hydra, in the Saronic Gulf off the eastern foot of the Peloponnese, to be exact. Martin spoke fluent Greek as well as dazzling English. I hardly spoke fluent English, let alone Greek, beyond the milk-bar dialect. He had grown up openly Greek; I, privately so. Nevertheless, it was our respective, albeit antithetical, links to Greece that drew us together. I marvelled at his stories of life on the island, especially the ones about the movies (by this time Hydra had become a favoured film location), which included the time he was Anthony Perkins' interpreter while Jules Dassin shot *Phaedra* (with Melina Mercouri) on the island. Charmian's 1959 memoir, *Peel Me a Lotus*, provides a wonderful record of what life was like on the islands during that postwar era prior to tourism. That was the life Martin spoke about so fondly. I was embarrassed that I couldn't hold a more intelligent conversation with him in Greek (or English, for that matter), although he never made me feel so. He spent his spare time in class translating T.S. Eliot into Greek, when he wasn't also writing his own poetry. After all, he was the son of real writers.

Martin's parents had returned to Australia for several reasons, artistic and financial, and their return had generated a certain amount of publicity. They were celebrities. Because I knew their son, it made me want to read everything they had written. And so much of it was about Greece. It provided me with additional insights into my own culture. I clipped their interviews out of the newspapers and periodicals. I even watched Charmian's regular television appearances on *Beauty and the Beast*.

Once, Martin invited me to their home in Mosman. I was eager to meet people who actually wrote books. The home was rambling and embraced its bohemianism: books and magazines everywhere, empty bottles and full ashtrays. Raddled by years of booze and poor health, the occupants didn't really register my presence, but I was spellbound by them and their easy, alternative lifestyle.

After we finished school, Martin and I went to different universities and only infrequently ran into each other, but always with delight. Later we saw one another more often, when I was doing some occasional work at SBS and Martin was there in the subtitling department, translating Greek television programs. This subsidised his real vocation, writing. A steady stream of articles, reviews, and volumes of poetry poured out of him, as well as a novel, all

of it erudite and sophisticated, the poetry maintaining Martin's own Greek heritage. And not just by allusion and philhellenic sentiment – the soul beneath it seemed to have a feeling of, well, 'Greekness', for want of a better term. By now, however, a sense of despair seemed to have become more evident. His mother had died too young; and then his father. But it was the suicide of his sister, Shane, that I think made him feel that he too was destined to die prematurely, and a belief that there was a curse upon the House of Johnston. A sense of Fate was also part of his Greek heritage.

We were last in touch in 1990. I had filmed a documentary on the island of Kastellorizo, including some footage of a local musician singing some island songs. Martin was the obvious choice to translate them, and I was thrilled that he had agreed. Sadly, it was not to be. His health had deteriorated badly and he was only working sporadically. Fate seemed to be taking its course. A few months later I was having dinner in Athens on a summer's night. It was after a Nick Cave concert my cousin had promoted – at Lycabettos, the spectacular hill in the middle of the city. Among the road crew was Martin's stepson, whom I had not met before, and we discussed Martin and worried about his health. Shortly afterwards, Martin was dead.

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