Remembering

I
n the summer of 1988, while I was a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, I traveled to Greece with my friend, Steve, to stay with his grandmother, Efstathia Adamopoulou. Steve, and everyone else, called her by the Greek word for grandmother, yiayia. After a brief visit to Athens, we made our way to Gargaliani, a small town near the southwestern coast of the Peloponnesse, where we moved into Yiayia’s house. It was an old, typical—but now rather rare—stone and plaster cottage with large wooden shutters and a roof of red ceramic tiles. I was given the roomy front bedroom, which by day was airy and bright with two large windows, but at night a bit gloomy, lighted only by the small electric lamp in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary. There were two other bedrooms in back, one for Yiayia and the other for her unmarried, eldest son Spyros. Across the hall from my room was the saloni, or living room, which had been converted into a bedroom for Steve. Underneath the kitchen, with an improvised spigot for cold running water and a hot plate fueled by propane. The toilet was just out the back door, in an outhouse on the patio.

On the night of our arrival, Yiayia set us down in the saloni and served us a spoonful of sweet vanilla in water. Then she asked about our families and about us. The order of events—hospitality, then questions—followed an ancient custom for the proper reception of a guest. The sweets were refreshing, and the questioning friendly but thorough. Where did I live? Who were my parents? How old was I? How many siblings? Where did I work? After that night, I never again felt like a guest. Although I had no history with her family, from then on Yiayia treated me as another grandson.

The house was primitive and the lifestyle humble, but I’ve never lived better. Yiayia shared her limited means with great generosity. She, with her daughter-in-law and neighbor, Despina, gave us a share of everything they had, which included the daily meals. Yiayia’s specialties were eggs with tomatoes and plenty of sea-salt, a meal as delicious as it was simple.

But her most valuable gift was her parea, her company. Almost every evening, an hour or so before dusk, we would pull wooden chairs out of the kitchen and sit in a circle on the pavement outside her front door, talking until well after dark. This is a tradition among the older generation of women all over Greece, but Yiayia graciously included us young men. Over the course of the summer, she recalled for us the story of her life: her parents’ home in nearby Chora; raising a family during the depression; the second world war and the subsequent Greek civil war; her trips to Australia and the United States (she loved the fresh fruit in Australia and found the squirrels of America to be quite odd). She would ask about our experiences, too, inquiring about our neighborhoods, our families, and our friends, but never about matters of national or global importance. Our discussions were about people we knew, places we had been, and things we had done.

As the summer nights passed, I began to see the world from a new perspective. I found that this illiterate, small-town woman was offering insights that I had not encountered at the university. Yiayia was interested in character, not political positions; in relations between neighbors, not between nations; in retelling a humorous story, not watching one on television. These were the things that made life real and livable. Yiayia’s world, though it contained more than its share of hardship and disappointment, felt safe and even insulated from the complex and synthetic world that we had left. It was real, to be sure, but also manageable.

Some nights it would be just the three of us, but we were frequently joined by Yiayia’s sister-in-law, Penelope. Those were the best nights. Penelope was witty and wise. We had our most serious and also our most light-hearted conversations when she was there. Early in the summer, before they moved out to the countryside with their grandparents, Pepi and Natassa, teenaged girls from the neighborhood, would join us, too, adding their youthful attitudes and ideas. All of these women were incredibly patient, including me fully in the conversations even as I struggled with my basic but improving command of Greek. There were no men, of course,
because gossiping at home is a woman's pastime (the men gossip in the cafes). But fifteen-year-old Takis, a neighbor boy still young enough to avoid reproach, would often come, though without his older sisters. They were good girls, Penelope told us while at the same time indirectly admonishing Pepi and Natassa. They never ventured alone beyond their father's balcony.

We made several excursions during the summer, leaving Gargaliani and our nightly gathering, but never for very long. Back in Wisconsin before our departure, I had prepared maps and travel guides in anticipation of our trip, worried that three months would be barely enough time to visit all the ruins, battlefields, and museums. But that was before I knew Greece, before I had met Yiayia. For both Steve and me, Greece had become something greater and more tangible than the ancient stones and cold statues. It had taken on a warm human form; we could talk to it, and it would respond. For us, Greece was Yiayia and our circle of friends. We had very little desire to go anywhere else.

Steve and I both were students, and so when August came, we had no choice but to say goodbye. It was difficult to leave a place that had come to feel like home. However, we had made real friends, and we carried that friendship away with us.

Back in the United States, life was more complicated. We were struggling to finish school and to start careers and families. There was little opportunity just to sit and talk away an evening, but even so, we held fast to our memories and frequently recalled our favorite conversations. It was reassuring to know that there was a place where an old chair, a starry sky, and a good story could bring contentment.

Over the years since 1988, I’ve been able to return to Greece several times, though without Steve and without extended stays in Gargaliani. On visits in 1993 and 1999, my wife, Lisa, and I spent several evenings sitting with Yiayia and Penelope, but our tight schedule did not allow us to stay long or to become immersed in their world. And the circle of friends was no longer intact. As is natural, the neighborhood kids had grown up and had been drawn away by the responsibilities of adulthood. The new crop of youngsters did not seem interested in taking their place. Even Penelope, after she lost her husband in the early 1990s, was less enthusiastic about socializing. Still, the memories of that first summer were revived temporarily as we sat in a smaller circle, and even the brief time we spent together was wonderfully refreshing, for all of us.

I kept up with Yiayia through Steve and his mother, and I learned that soon after my last visit, she began to grow weak and forgetful. By the summer of 2002, when Steve’s brother, Nick, visited with his family, Yiayia was bedridden. She passed away February 17, 2003, after living about 100 years. (I don’t think anyone—including Yiayia—knew her age exactly.) She died in the same home where she had lived her married life, raised her six children, and received me as if I had been her grandson.

An era has passed along with Yiayia. Today, the women of the neighborhood are busy with college, work, and families. They no longer pull the old chairs out of the kitchen. They lead different lives—better lives—than Yiayia did. But with her passing, I’m struck by the feeling that something valuable and irreplaceable has been lost. I often wonder if Pepi, Natassa, and Takis think about that place and if they feel the loss as well.

I can still recall many conversations from that summer twenty years ago, but one stands out in particular. One night, as I was sitting outside with Yiayia and Penelope waiting for Steve to finish his bath, we wondered why he was taking so long. “He must have fallen asleep!” I said, making the best joke that my limited Greek would allow. Nearly half an hour later, Steve finally returned, and Penelope immediately asked him where he’d been. When he told us that he’d fallen asleep, we all burst into laughter, and Penelope almost fell off her chair.

That’s a simple story. In its retelling, it might elicit a polite grin. But in that place, at that time, nothing could have been funnier.