**A Gift of Fish Heads**

Dave Gregory

I arrive at Kadir’s Tree Houses the same day as Kate, a blonde Californian who changes lovers as easily as she changes trains. Rounding the final corner, our flatbed trailer bounces across a dry riverbed. Kate holds hands with a clean-cut man in a collared shirt. He holds a bible in his other hand.

Climbing out, we unload our backpacks and are offered work. “Food and accommodation are free in exchange for washing dishes two hours a day,” a staff member advises.

Only Kate and I volunteer. The bible guy holds the book to his chest, front cover facing forward, clutching it like a shield.

He departs the next day, leaving Kate his bible. Speechless, misty-eyed, she hugs him. Completing a mental inventory of the items I carry, it’s clear I’d have nothing meaningful to offer if I were in his place.

Work is miserable – dirty dinner plates and food waste from a hundred economical youths. No hot water. Cockroaches. The kitchen floor is wet and muddy where we stand. Our knees get squirted each time wobbly, stone tiles shift beneath our weight. Chickens peck their way in, looking for food.

Yet we discover paradise.

“Anyone heading to the beach?” someone asks on our second morning as we sip apple tea, sitting on tasseled pillows at a low wooden table, surrounded by trees and mountains.

Kate and I join four others. Along the way, we pass ten sparse establishments – youth hostels, *pansyons* and a campground. Colin, a new friend who’s lived here a month, acts as a guide. “The Turkish government banned concrete in this valley to preserve it and halt development. That’s why you only see tents, huts, and tree houses.”

The dirt road ends. We continue along a thin trail. Colin points out tombs carved in stone cliffs. “Lykians were the original settlers, this is all they left behind but Greeks had more impact. Beneath those umbrella pines are the remains of an enormous amphitheater.” A gurgling stream appears, and Colin informs us we’re passing through the ancient city, now a forest. He shows us ruins of a Grecian temple, Roman baths and Byzantine church, all overgrown, unexcavated.

The stream widens but doesn’t have the power to dig a channel to the sea. It pools at the base of a collapsed, age-old bridge and seeps, through filtering sand, into the Mediterranean. Three backpackers trudge away to find their own spot, but Kate and I remain with Colin. We dip our toes, then spread towels inches from the tranquil water’s edge.

A tall green hill rises to our right, an acropolis looms behind us and miles of uninterrupted white sand stretch to the left, populated only by a small number of sun tanning youths and colourful fishing boats. Watching over all, is far off Mount Olympos, its peak covered in snow.

The thirty-minute walk to the beach becomes a daily routine. The rest of the time we talk with other travelers, read novels traded from hand to hand – and explore. Colin leads us to the Rainbow Wall, a multicoloured cliff face, ten stories high, facing the sea, elegantly stained by leaching minerals. We also hike to the next valley where a mountain stream fills a series of cascading pools.

“I’ve never seen so much beauty,” Kate gasps. We agree.

At night, the tractor and trailer we arrived on hauls curious travelers to the ancient Chimera. As usual, I rely on Colin. “Homer wrote about the natural lighthouse, giving it mythical qualities, though it’s nothing more than gaseous, volcanic vapours escaping through chasms in the earth. Some long ago fire set them alight and they’ve burned ever since. For centuries, passing ships navigated by the flames. Our small bay made the perfect place for bandits to wait in ambush. That means pirates were the final inhabitants before tourists invaded.”

Under the nighttime spell of primeval flames, blazing on a remote hillside, Kate embraces a French traveler who recites poetry. Like many others, his stay at the compound is brief. He leaves two parting stanzas written on a postcard from Kadir’s, which Kate tucks into her bible.

The next day, Kate meets another Californian who joins us in the kitchen. Scott washes dishes the same slow, deliberate way he talks. Once everything is clean, we’re free to sit round a campfire at the rustic bar, where music plays and new friends gather, but his creeping pace prolongs our confinement in the stinking, wet kitchen.

Following a grilled fish dinner, Scott puts a plate on the counter and collects uneaten fish heads. Buzzing flies quickly swarm.

Bewildered, disgusted, I ask: “Why are you keeping those?”

“A gift – for Kate,” Scott replies with trademarked deliberation.

“How – lovely,” I mock, certain he’s mad.

When Kate arrives, her face bursts with joy. I see love in her eyes and warmth in her smile. Taking the plate and its grotesque contents, she kisses him, then makes for the back door. Striding past two pecking chickens, she gets on her hands and knees and crawls under a nearby hut, where she’s greeted by a litter of kittens. Scott and I watch. In the dirt, head on one hand, Kate feeds mewling newborns the tantalizing meal. Glowing with biblical radiance, her poetic eyes flit between hungry, adorable kittens and the languid dishwasher who made this moment possible.

It is the most blindingly beautiful thing I’ve seen in this gorgeous green valley. Wishing I had thought of it, I wonder how the slow-talking Californian knew his humble gift would be appreciated.

He and Kate are still together a week later. Leaving on the same flatbed trailer, they disappear into the Lykian countryside.