

"PORTRAIT OF A WIDOW"

The hot Mediterranean sun relentlessly bore down upon the small tranquil Village of Gryllos. In the distance, there was the faint yet distinct rhythmic chirping sounds of cicadas. A light, airy wind blew over the spindly cypress treetops. From one of the nearby white washed homes, a muffled child's cry could be heard. Located in the rugged mountainous region of southern Greece known as the Peloponnese and almost one hundred and seventy miles south of Olympia, it was a place far removed from civilization, a place relatively untouched by modern technology. Its natural beauty, therefore remained intact.

Of the many colorful villagers, one stands out in mind. She was a woman who had given birth to three sons, buried her only husband, and stillborn daughter. In keeping with the tradition of widowhood, she was draped from head to toe in black. Her once supple and youthful body was now bent and shriveled with age. Her swollen and gnarled hands suggested that she had lived a difficult life. The once loosely tied black headscarf, now fell slightly open to reveal a tired and withered face. To a passerby, she might have appeared as lifeless creature whose spirit had been broken long ago. Yet, her piercing brown eyes revealed a very different story. Looking into them, one could see that they still sparkled with all of the curiosity and intensity of a young girl. She was proud, strong, and fiercely independent woman who lived to its fullest. She regretted nothing.

She had arrived on donkey, from the northern Village of Greca, on the day of her arranged wedding. Riding sidesaddle, upon the back of a brightly flowered wreath adorned large light brown beast, she was greeted with the loud cheers and high pitched whistles from a jubilant gathered roadside crowd who echoed a resounding welcome. She was just nineteen years old, with thick lashed large almond shaped bright brown eyes and waist length long silky dark hair, seemingly caressed by a soft gentle breeze. Her olive complexioned face lit up whenever she smiled, while the corners of her mouth turned up ever so slightly. Several of many men who formed a small side group could not help but stare at this young woman while one asked, "Whose bride is this?" Another replied, "She is to wed George, whose house overlooks the main path." To that, there was an outburst, "He does not deserve such a beauty! How did he acquire someone as beautiful as she?" It was true. She was indeed beautiful but being beautiful would not be an advantage to her here, where neighbors were quick to become jealous over little and life was an endless struggle. Many hard lessons and pain were ahead of her. She would learn not to trust those outside the immediate family, and to keep her deepest thoughts to herself. Survival would depend upon blending in with the rest. Differences were unacceptable. As she would later say, "It is not one but many birds which bring the springtime."

During the summer months, she was blessed with visits from her sons and their children. There she would sit in all her glory sending her grandchildren to fetch and carry for her, to wait on her hand and foot until she wanted for nothing more. *"Yia-yia", they would scream in unison. "We love you so! I know and I love all of you too!" she would chime back. "But I am old and weary. Oh, poor thing that I am. How my bones they ache so", she would say. "Now, **pethya, come sit near me and I will tell you a story." Her grandchildren would quietly gather around her and listen intently, as she told of things from the past. Some of her stories had to do with her early childhood, her later youth, the German occupation of Greece, or the Greek Civil War. They were vivid stories meant to entertain, enlighten, or inspire, but always left the listener wanting to hear more.

At one point, her sons became concerned for her failing health and eccentric ways. Of her three sons, two had left for the United States in search of better lives. Only one remained behind but lived in Piraeus, a small suburb outside of Athens six hours away by car. It was decided amongst them, that she live with this son and his family. So, she did for a while. During the night, when everyone else in the house was asleep, her jealous and petty daughter-in-law's mother would quietly creep into her bedroom, and methodically remove the beautifully patterned woolen blanket from her small framed body. It was a keepsake, a blanket especially woven for the widow. In the morning, she would wake tired and chilled.

After enduring many nights of this, she demanded to return to the village and to the small white house from which she came. So, she did. She returned to the life she loved and to all things familiar to her. True, she was alone but she had her independence. It was here, in the village, where she was happiest and where she felt that she truly belonged.

She died of dementia face down and in the dirt, along the narrow winding unpaved path leading down to the outskirts of the village. Born an orphan she also died an orphan, alone and with no one to ease her pain or discomfort. They say, her faithful dog and only companion ***poneeros, roamed the entire village in search of her. He was able to trace his master's scent to the plot of earth where she lay buried. It was there that the dog was last seen, howling and pawing at the freshly covered earth beneath him.

**children

***cunning; clever; smart

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