

“I always thought it was much bigger”, the old man said in his faded voice when he came home.

Seventy years ago when he had left for the New World his village had been alive. Every evening people promenaded along its main street, stopping here and there to gossip with friends, taking time to sit in a kafeneion to sip a glass of Ouzo, or a tiny cup of Turkish coffee. Young men were often seen teasing groups of girls who turned away blushing and giggling amongst themselves. Seeing this, older women dressed head to feet in black scolded the boys, telling them to leave the girls alone or they would put the evil eye on them.

The boys would run down the street laughing. Who listened to the threats of old women?

There was music too; tambours, and violins and clarinets, playing wonderful Epirotic music that lifted one’s soul higher than the mountain tops. And wherever there was music there was dancing, with lines of men, their arms across each other’s shoulders dancing in unison, always led by some high spirited young man who liked to show off.

But that was seventy years ago. Now the village was deserted and dilapidated, almost a ghost town, and the only sound echoing along the main street was the harsh sighing of cold winds that blew down off the mountains.

He stood in the middle of the main street and he might as well have been standing in a creek bed.

The road that once had a bitumen surface was nothing more than a gravel track cut with deep furrows. Scattered along it as far as he could see were pebbles worn smooth by running water that came from rain dumped onto the village by the furious storms that often fell off the mountain tops to lash the valleys below in spring and the lead up to winter. Huge rocks stuck up here and there, as if they had been thrust out of the ground by a giant hand. Tufts of grass grew in little mounds of soil that gathered behind them.

An old woman dressed in ragged black clothes with a scarf covering her head sidled past. She threw a furtive glance in his direction before disappearing into a shadow filled gap between two houses. A couple of men walked slowly along the other side of the street from where the old man stood. They were probably not anywhere near the age of the old man but they might as well have been. Their faces were as damaged and as worn away as the main street. Neither of them spoke to each other. They looked neither left nor right but only down towards the ground ahead of them as they shuffled along.

The old man turned and walked hesitantly past the last of the houses. He had walked the length of the main street staring at the houses of rock and earth. They were so small, the cracked doorways so narrow, the windows so tiny and grimy, that he found it hard to believe he used to live in one of them.

Tears welled up in his eyes as he walked past the end of the last row of houses near the edge of the village because he could not remember which house was the one he had grown up in.

\*\*\*

When I was a small boy there were twelve of us in our family, all living together in the one house.

It was a house of two rooms and a kitchen. My father had four children and my uncle, two. Grandfather and grandmother slept together with my uncle and aunt and my two cousins in one room while Mum and Dad, my two brothers, myself and my sister all used the other room. We were quite happy as long as we had enough to eat. We had no beds, but we had plenty of blankets and we were used to sleeping on the floor. We didn't know any different.

There weren't too many chairs either. All of us kids sat cross-legged on the floor, and at night we used oil lamps to see with since there was no electricity.

We had about ten acres of rocky land, which we didn't own but rented from the Turkish overlords. Ten or fifteen percent of whatever we produced was what they got. We grew wheat, barley and oats, rock melons, okra, and onions. We had two oxen, a couple of cows and a pig.

We made bread from the wheat, the barley and oats fed the cows, and the melons, okra and onions we used to sell. Dad was the only one who didn't work the land. He was a school teacher.

\*\*\*

The land around his village had always been hard and rocky, with mountains cut sharp in the thin air. Small scattered hollows filled with soil were cherished by various families who managed to grow meagre crops of vegetables during the warm spring and summer months. Tiny flocks of sheep were grazed on the high mountain plains, each guarded zealously by a flinty eyed shepherd. There were many starving bandits who were only too happy to steal a sheep because they also had families to feed.

In 1898, when the old man was born, his village was under control of the Ottoman Empire, and taxes in the form of goods were paid to the local Pasha by all of the families living there. If there was anything left over after this tribute had been paid, the people could keep it, but since the soil was so poor there was often nothing left over. Many would go hungry for a time, surviving only through the kindness of others who were willing to share what little extra they had.

Anyone old enough left the village in search of work. They rarely came back.

\*\*\*

Politics intervened when the big European Powers frightened that Greece and Serbia might become too powerful, stepped in and delineated where the borders of each country should be. Albania was created from territories belonging to Serbia, Macedonia and Greece which were added to the tiny tribal area that the Albanians originally occupied. Naturally those Albanians were happy, but all the others

belonging to the annexed areas were upset, furious, even rebellious, but there was nothing anyone could do about it.

Greece lost a good part of Epirus and overnight the old man's village found itself to be a part of Albania instead of Greece. The people were told they were Albanians.

The border was closed, with every known crossing guarded, and the people from all those villages close to the new border with Greece were forbidden to visit friends and relatives only a few kilometres away.

At school their children were forced to learn the Albanian language. No official business in the village, or any other of the villages that had been annexed, would be conducted in Greek or Serbian or Macedonian, only Albanian was to be used.

\*\*\*

While we looked after the melons, my mother and aunt, and my sister, like most of the other women in the village, scoured the hills for kindling. It was needed to start fires in the winter. If the men couldn't gather enough heavy wood during the summer, then it was the women's job to prepare dung for fuel.

No one in our village could afford to buy coal so they used horse and cow dung. The women would soften it with water then mix in finely chopped chaff or dry grass. Some of them would mould this mixture into bricks which they would leave stacked up by the side of the house to dry in the sun. Others would make flat round cakes which they slapped onto the walls underneath the

eaves where it would stick and stay dry even when the weather was bad. My mother did it this way.

In the winter she would chip it off the walls and bring it inside where it would be broken into smaller bits and fed into the fire. She kept the fire burning continuously during the harsh winter months. I can remember, no matter how cold and icy it got outside, even when it was cold enough for the ground to freeze, it was always warm and cosy inside our house.

\*\*\*

I was ten or almost ten when my older brother George went to America. My sister was married off to a man from another village and she moved there to live. My other brother, Christos, who was also older than me, had also gone to America. He did not like it there and returned after only a few months. He turned up unexpectedly after crossing the mountains from Greece, surprising everyone because we all thought he was still in America. He didn't say why he came back but I think he preferred the solitude of the mountains. Being a shepherd, he had missed his sheep, and the wild rugged beauty of the Epirotic Mountains.

That's what he told me when I was older, but in retrospect he probably missed the excitement of smuggling things over the border from Greece. He was one of those who knew the secret ways through the mountains down into Greece.

His excuse for being in the mountains if questioned by Albanian or Turkish speaking soldiers was that he was a shepherd.

Sometimes a sheep went astray and he had to look for it. “No one can afford to lose a sheep”, he would tell them while smiling politely, “especially when the mountains are full of bandits, only too ready to grab anything that they think might be useful.”

\*\*\*

The old man would tell us sometimes how he had helped Christos to guard the sheep. He might have been eleven or twelve at the time. All he could really remember though was how cold it was in those high mountain passes with the wind slipping down off the snow.

“I could never get my hands warm,” he said. “No one in our family had gloves, so I used to wrap old bits of cloth around my fingers to keep the chill out of them.”

“One night it got so cold my blasted fingers stuck to the metal of the rifle.” He clenched his fingers involuntarily as he remembered.

“If someone had come to steal a sheep then, while Christos was over the mountains arranging to smuggle back things we all needed, I would not have been able to shoot him.”

He chuckled at the memory of that rifle.

“It was so obsolete I don’t think it would have worked anyway.”

\*\*\*