

The Volomandra youth

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The museum guards had become accustomed to the sight of the old woman. She came every day with a handful of flowers, green branches or thistles. Indifferent to her surroundings, she walked to the room where the statue of the Volomandra youth stood. After placing her offering at his feet, and staring into his empty eyes, she would begin an incomprehensible monologue. Sometimes she would gesture, at others, she would laugh, and after a while, she would walk away with light, almost ethereal footsteps, clutching the black scarf which covered her from her head to the hem of her skirt.

I used to go to the National Museum of Athens every day to draw. I generally arrived early, before the influx of tourists could prevent me from working calmly. I was intrigued by the old woman's daily visits, especially because I thought I could distinguish some Spanish words amid her murmuring. My concentration faltered around nine o'clock in the morning, when my gaze wandered from the museum cases, in search of the old woman.

I decided to observe her there in the gallery of the Volomandra youth, near the spot where she always stopped to perform her ritual. I greeted her several times in Greek and in Spanish, but she never responded. Standing in front of the statue, she was in such a state of concentration that nothing around her seemed to affect her. She was like a specter illuminated by the tenuous light of the museum, which fell upon her in yellowish tones.

Her dark face and hands, and the brilliance of her black eyes spoke to me of life under another sun, in other

latitudes. Although she was dressed like an old islander, something in her reminded me of the sempiternal small town Mexican grandmothers who also dress in black. This ancient woman wrapped herself in her scarf in the same way that Indian women wear their *rebozos*, and her movements had the light, dancing grace of the Toltecs, rather than the firm step of the Greek women, firmly rooted to the ground in their fight against the wind. This old woman held her head erect, eyes straight ahead; not like Greek women, who appear to hold their heads to one side, with a shifting glance, perhaps to avoid the island's luminous wintery brilliance or its cutting winds.

My interest was such that I wished to know something of her life, where she lived, how she filled her days. I decided to follow her, and discovered that her routine was the same each day. She walked with a surprisingly spry step through the streets near the museum until she reached the central market, a large building, much like an old railway station, with high roofs and opaque glass insets supported by steel arches.

On entering the fish section, the old woman walked towards the rear, where the fishy odor was most intense. Without saying a word to anyone, she would take a broom from behind some crates of fish and begin to sweep under the marble counter. When she was finished, she went to a barrel of garbage and, without saying a word, took a few fish heads or tails. The first time I followed her, I walked behind her with a packet of shrimp bought from the fishmonger, who did not even glance at the old woman. When I asked who she was, he replied, "A crazy old woman who

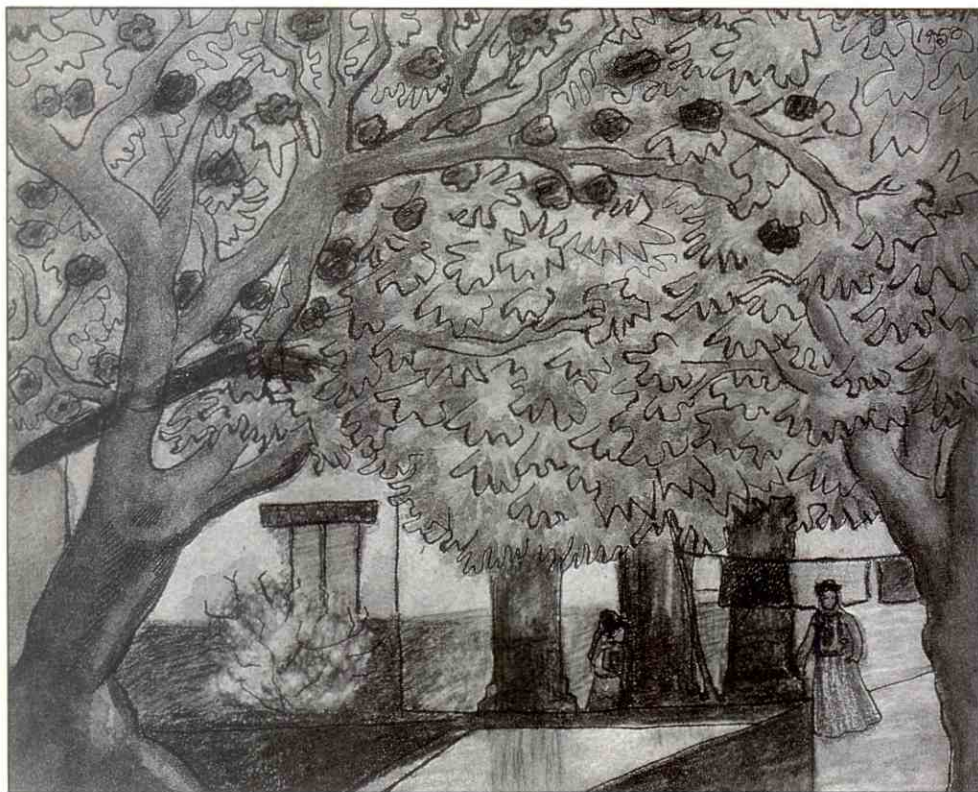
comes to sweep every day in exchange for a bit of fish," and went on with his work with hasty indifference.

The old woman did the same at several market stalls. From among her clothing, she produced a little net bag in which she put tomatoes, fruit and vegetables, all of which were still good but lacking the perfect freshness characteristic of produce in a Greek market. At the last stall she carried away a loaf of day-old bread, all without having spoken one word to anyone in the market, neither with the vendors nor with those who crossed her path. Nobody could tell me who she was.

From the market, she started off towards Plaka, the old quarter of the city. She reached the edge of the less fashionable Monastiraki quarter, punctuated with empty lots and half-crumbling houses. At the end of an alley bounded by a wall of trees there were the remains of a shack. The old woman removed a board which hid a section that still had a roof, and disappeared inside, followed by two striped cats.

Weighed down by the day's heat and surrounded by the silent, peaceful atmosphere which always descends upon Athens during the mid-afternoon siesta, one day I ventured to cross the little alley and peer through the cracks in the wall, inside her shack.

The old woman had removed her shawl and I could see her face framed by long, gray braids. She sat on the dirt floor cutting up the fish heads into pieces to give to the cats, who ate solemnly, each respectfully waiting its turn. She then turned to a pot that was simmering on a tin stove stoked with branches and removed bits of potato, vegetables, and fish which she ate



She was 18 when she meet Kostas, and the ardor of his kisses. Painting by Olga Costa.

between mouthfuls of bread soaked in the stew. When she had finished, she lay down between the two cats, smiling as she did during her monologues with the Volomandra youth, and the three of them slept with a satisfied air.

I was drawn to this woman because I felt a strange mixture of something unknown, but at the same time, familiar. I felt an almost physical pain in my chest when I thought of her there, in winter, with only the tin stove to warm her fragile body, the two cats her only companions.

Without knowing if she would understand me, I decided to speak to her at the museum. One morning, I put my drawings away and stood at the feet of the Volomandra youth at the same spot where she stood every day.

I heard her footsteps and felt her, disconcerted, behind me. Without giving her any time to react, I turned around and wished her good morning in Spanish.

She dropped the flowers, covered her face with her hands, and began to

sob. I felt such guilt and shame for having dared to intrude upon her and having frightened her in this way, that I hugged her tightly; I couldn't think of anything else to do. I told her not to cry, that I was her friend, to forgive me, and other phrases in the same vein. She fled from me that day, scurrying away so quickly that I was afraid for her delicate bones of blown glass.

The next day, she entered the room hesitantly, her eyes fixed on the Volomandra youth. I approached her, told her my name and asked for hers.

"Lupe," she responded, without looking at me, and hurried away, frightened.

Little by little, adding one more phrase each day, by inches, I gained her confidence; until I heard, in bits and pieces, her story.

As a young girl, she had lived with her parents and seven brothers and sisters in Ciudad Madero, Tamaulipas. She was eighteen when she meet Kostas, a Greek sailor who was visiting the area while his ship was in port at Tampico.

Kostas' blue eyes, shining beneath his black curls, burned into her eyes and then into her heart. Her hands trembled when she was near him, and she cried at times without knowing why; not from sadness, but rather because she felt something new and unknown which disturbed her, filling her with happiness and making her want to sing.

Kostas spoke the Spanish he had learned in several voyages to Mexican ports, and his descriptions of the cobalt-blue Greek sea, his words of love and loyalty, all convinced her she should marry him. Her parents were opposed to her going so far away, but between the two of them,

they convinced her parents to give them their blessing. When Kostas returned to Mexico the following year, they were married.

Kostas' arms, and his tender lips, told her more than his Greek-tinged Spanish. Without the least worry about what was to become of her in Greece, that faraway land of many temples, Lupe left Tampico.

They sailed on the *Venisselos*, a freighter of which Lupe's only memories were a hot cabin and an unbearable sea-sickness which only eased at night, when Kostas embraced her and his curly black hair tickled her skin.

The family farm where Kostas had told her they were to live with his mother turned out to be a patch of dirt with six olive trees and a few grapevines. In September, they only managed to fill one barrel of must, squeeze a few liters of olive oil on the communal olive press, and can two or three jars of small, wrinkled, green olives. The house consisted of a living room-bedroom-kitchen where the

young couple's bed stood behind a plastic screen. Kostas' mother slept at the other end of the room on a folding cot. Everything was poorer than in her parents' home in Ciudad Madero, and she missed the cheerful banter of her brothers and sisters.

The blue skies, the calm sea, the sweetness of the grapes and the figs, and the ardor of Kostas' kisses were the only truths she discovered in the Greek sailor's promises.

The most difficult times were when Kostas was absent; he was sometimes away at sea for seven months at a stretch, and the joy of his homecomings was mitigated by the iron control of his mother, Dimitra.

From the first time they went to church together and Lupe had crossed herself backwards, her mother-in-law had called her an ignorant woman. At first, Lupe did not understand the insult in Greek, but from hearing it so often, she learned it by heart. She also didn't understand why the wedding celebrated in Ciudad Madero was not considered valid and had to be repeated in Athens.

She remembered her Greek wedding with emotion, though she was ashamed to wear the crown of white flowers and the white veil which Kostas' mother had worn at her wedding. She spoke to me of the candle-lit procession through the streets and of the lambs roasted under the open sky, stretched on skewers, looking entirely like naked, helpless children; and of the sweets which three hours later still left a candied aftertaste in her mouth.

During Kostas' absences, Dimitra slept in the big bed where her son had been born. Lupe curled up on the cot, or on the earthen floor when she was too tired to unfold it. From the start, Dimitra treated her like her slave. Lupe had to perform all of the household chores, and when Kostas was at sea, she had to work in the orchard and the vineyard. To her husband, all of this seemed normal; it

was only fair that his mother should rest at long last, and her orders were, for both of them, the law.

Lupe told me all this in a fluid Spanish marked with the sing-song rhythm of Tamaulipas, as rhythmic as the gait of the girls from the coast. Her speech became unintelligible as her story advanced through the following years. Her Spanish began to become sprinkled with Greek and was, at the end, a mixture understandable only to someone who spoke both languages.

I understood the reasons behind her isolation, her imprisonment in a linguistic, cultural and emotional bareness.

She missed her brothers and sisters, her mother, always kind and willing to help others, and her father, that strong tree which had always protected the family. Spanish was difficult for her, after having not used it for years, and her Greek was too sketchy to express her sentiments. Thus, she spoke only as much as was necessary, and had no friends. But her eyes, bright and full of lively glimmers, told me much of the fires that burned inside her.

When Yianis was born, Dimitra took charge of the baby and only returned him to his mother when it was time to nurse him. Kostas received her complaints with a mixture of surprise and indignation; to him, it seemed normal that the grandmother should take charge of rearing the boy. She had more experience, and Lupe had many things to do. When Yianis stopped nursing, she was only able to spend fleeting moments with her son. Dimitra never left their side for an instant, and the mother could only caress and play with her son early in the day and in the mid-afternoon.

In the marketplace and on the streets, Lupe slowly began to realize that this was the custom of the country; that the husband's mother was the authority in the family. Given the uselessness of trying to resist

Dimitra and Kostas, she had to accept this tradition without protest. She lacked the courage to fight, and so hid herself away with her son to say tender words to him, singing him the same songs she had heard as a child, and kissing his face until it turned red.

As she told me about her son's childhood, her gestures were those of a mother comforting a child; her eyes were the eyes of every woman who has looked with mingled surprise, incredulity, and tenderness at her newborn child. Many times we cried together, both moved by these images which still fueled her life.

By the time Yianis was twelve, he was tall and slim, and clever, with his father's clear eyes and curly hair, and Kostas was very proud of him. He was a happy, obedient child who got good grades in school and spoke both languages very well. The light which emanated from Yianis erased any shadows which existed in his grandmother's or his parents' lives.

It was then that the *Venisselos* burned at anchor in the port of Piraeus and Kostas was among the victims. Lupe and Yianis went to his funeral. They did not see the body, which, like those of the other sailors in the disaster, was burned beyond recognition. Lupe thought of returning to Tampico with Yianis, but didn't know how to go about it. She had no money, and outside the small circle of distant relatives and neighbors, there was no one in Greece who could help her. Nobody understood her when she tried to explain her intentions.

She continued to live with her mother-in-law, working under her despotic control. Yianis grew, went to school and was the one delight in Lupe's life. When he was sixteen years old, he informed her that Dimitra and he had decided that he would enlist in the merchant navy. He hugged her, told her he would return soon, and when they parted Lupe almost did not see him: her tears blotted out his blue eyes and black

hair, which she kissed fiercely as he said, "Don't cry, mamma, I'll see you during my vacation."

Yianis would return for vacation dressed in his white uniform, and Lupe smiled once again. Ever since he had enlisted, Dímitra's domination over her grandson had ended; he was a man now and as such, he treated his mother with a great deal of tenderness. He always brought her a gift when he returned home. Shawls, dresses, combs, treats: "My son never came home empty-handed," she told me, her face full of pride.

When Yianis was home Lupe could rest, although later she would have to put up with Dímitra. Her mother-in-law died one Easter Sunday when Yianis was home; were it not for him, Lupe would not have known how to manage. Once she was alone on the farm she felt a peace she had not known since she stepped off the boat in Greece.

Lupe's story of her new life after Dímitra's death lasted several weeks, with details about how each grapevine and each olive tree began to bear more fruit, how she re-arranged the furniture and put up new curtains and, above all, she spoke gaily of the happiness which she felt each time Yianis visited.

Until the day when they came looking for her, to take her to the hospital. Yianis had had an accident which destroyed his hands and forearms.

With infinite sadness she visited him each day; she left the farm abandoned for weeks on end. The hospital was far away and, as it was summer, she slept in the park and ate what food Yianis left, since he never finished the food they gave him. She cheered him up, trying to distract his attention from the constant pain of his wounds; she sang to him as she had when he was a child.

One morning they gently led her away from his empty bed. They gave her explanations which she didn't understand, or didn't wish to

understand. She thought that perhaps he had to return to school, for exams, perhaps. She waited in vain at the farm. Every evening she waited at the side of the highway, only returning to the house when night had fallen.

One Sunday near church, she found a group of students wearing school uniforms. She followed them in search of Yianis and found him.

"Ever since then, I come to see him every day," she said, her eyes resting upon the Volomandra youth, a statue with the sweetest of smiles and mutilated arms.

Intent upon the old woman's story, I had neglected my drawing. During our walks through the market and the Monastiraki quarter, I had bought reproductions of some of the museum pieces in order to sketch them later. Lupe was intrigued by my collection, but asked no questions. It was only with difficulty that she could talk about anything other than her arrival in Greece and her reunion with Yianis. Sometimes she would pick up a figure, look at it and return it to me.

"This is the prettiest one," she said once, referring to a small statue of a young man she held in her hands.

Winter was approaching and my concern for Lupe grew as I imagined her walking alone through the city streets swept by cold winds, or curled up with her two cats in a shelter riddled with cracks and chinks.

"Let's go back to Mexico together," I said to her one evening as we walked through the Plaka district.

She stopped, and her eyes searched mine. For an instant I saw them shine with a bright glow of enthusiasm. Then they clouded over. She lowered her eyelids and walked on without speaking. In her gaze I had seen astonishment, incredulity, but, more than anything else, her look was one of surprise at my lack of understanding. I left her with a heaviness born of sorrow and impotence. What could I do to alleviate her utter abandonment?

The morning she didn't come to the museum, my throat was gripped with anguish. I ran to her shack and, between the boards, I could see that she was there, a heap of shawls in one corner. I lifted away the board covering the entrance and immediately the two cats ran whining away, with that peculiar meow of a cat which has smelled death. The old woman seemed to be dying. I ran to look for help, but when we got to the hospital they told me she had died on the way.

I knew that the State would take care of all the formalities. I asked to have her cremated; I wanted to take her ashes back to Ciudad Madero, but at that time there was no cremation in Greece.

No one went to the cemetery. *You lived by yourself, Lupe, and now you will stay here, in this cold cemetery, far from the warm soil of your childhood.* Before they lowered the coffin into the grave, I opened the lid and placed the small statue she had liked beside her. *It will accompany you to another world, Lupe, so that you won't be alone, as you always were in Greece. It will bring you the happiness that, in this land, only existed in your imagination.*

I went to the remains of the shack where Lupe had lived. I thought of looking for an address in Mexico, to locate her family and tell them of her death. Near the entrance were the two striped cats, their intelligent eyes filled with disenchantment.

I found some photographs from her wedding day. A fresh young Lupe smiled at me from the yellowed paper. On the wall above the cot covered with the shawls her son had given her, I saw another photo in a wooden frame: Yianis, a youth of eighteen, whose clear blue eyes reminded me of the hollow eyes of a statue; his smile and his face were strangely similar, almost identical, to those of the Volomandra youth ❧