

THE LETTER

He hesitated as he took the letter from their mailbox. It was neither from their son, now working for a construction company in the Gulf, nor from his brother who had emigrated to the United States many years back. These letters came in special airmail envelopes. This letter was obviously local. Moreover there were no stamps on it. It must be from some Government agency or other he thought as he slowly tore a strip from the side of the envelope and pulled out the letter. His hands trembled a little as he opened it. Of late they had become less steady. But, for a man who would soon be seventy-five, his health had generally been very good, until the evening a year ago now when he had suffered his first mild heart attack.

He had lost consciousness that evening while in the bathroom, and his wife, who heard the dull thump his body had made against the wall, roused the neighbors, called an ambulance and took him to the hospital. "Thank God, as refugees at least we don't have to pay doctors' and hospital bills", he said to himself when he woke up in the intensive care unit and realized what had happened.

They had kept him at the hospital about a fortnight before releasing him. Some of the doctors and nurses there were from the Kyrenia district and knew that when the North was invaded, in a single day he lost everything he had spent a lifetime accumulating. These were especially helpful and listened with amusement while he argued that he had not really had a heart attack.

“Something I ate gave me the stomach pain that I felt just before losing consciousness”, he would tell them...

Now he was well again though he perspired profusely when he did anything that required physical exertion, like carrying an empty gas bottle to the grocer to have it refilled or whenever he brought home groceries and the elevator was out of order forcing him to use the stairs.

He read the letterhead carefully, pausing briefly to say hullo to a neighbor who was entering the apartment building with a bag of fresh oranges. “Ministry of the Interior, Bureau of Displaced Citizens”; it was from the Government agency responsible for refugee welfare. No small task this with close to half the Island’s population, like them, left homeless and destitute after those fateful days nine years ago. But by now many of the younger refugees had begun their lives anew with a stubbornness and Stoic resignation even the founder of Stoicism, their compatriot Zeno, would have envied...

“With regard to your request for Government support...” He began reading and held his breath. This was the long awaited reply to their application for support to resettle on a small piece of Government property and build a little house there which they could again call their own. His wife and he had stubbornly embraced this dream when, soon after the invasion, they had been forced to move into their cramped

little rented apartment... They were certainly too old now to start from scratch, and all their life's savings had been invested in land currently in the occupied part of the Island. Yes, it was too late to start from zero, but perhaps with this hoped for Government support and some help from their son, they might be able to settle down on a small plot of land, in a home surrounded by flowers - especially jasmine, honeysuckle, roses, and carnations, his wife's favorites, and a few trees, an olive or two, a carob and some citrus trees to remind them of the good times before their bitter uprooting...

On these trees, so their fond dream went, the cicadas would congregate and hold forth in summer, while the ripening carobs and olives would proclaim it was autumn turning on winter. As for spring, bridegroom of the seasons, the smell of the citrus blossoms and the sight of wild poppies would herald its arrival, the return to the Island of Love, of Adonis, Aphrodite's paramour...

So the seasons had promenaded past them when they had lived at their secluded country home halfway between the picturesque, imposing Kyrenia mountain range and the northern coast, and so they hoped it would be once again. Certainly, this new house would not be anyway as roomy or comfortable as what they had been used to; the view hardly as majestic. But even a pale reflection of the past was so much more inviting than the present...

"We have given serious consideration to your request..." Yes, and on the practical level as well it would be ideal if they did not have to pay rent, and could use the little money they received from their son, his pension, and his wife's sewing, just for food and clothing...

"You do realize however", the letter continued, "that you

are only two, without any young dependents. For this reason we very much regret...”

He stopped reading and with the letter still in his hand moved slowly towards the few steps leading to the elevator. Suddenly, he felt a painful sensation in his stomach, similar to the one he had experienced a year ago. He quickly moved his hand towards the railing and hastened to grasp the metal support, but passed out before he could secure his hold...

While his body bumped against the mailbox and slid onto the floor, the letter slowly floated away towards the entrance, only to get trampled over by the small crowd that rushed towards him and saw to it that he was quickly transported to the hospital.

While still in a half-dazed state, his subconscious played an unexpected trick on him. It seemed to him that he was once again walking toward their country home. There was not even a hint of perspiration on his forehead though he had been walking for some time now. All around were almond trees whose blossoms had given way to furry, little green almonds. Further on were citrus trees in full bloom. This promises to be a good year he thought to himself. It had rained a lot all winter and the trees looked fresh and sparkled in the sunlight. He walked on at a leisurely pace through the damp fields reviewing the chores that had to be attended to in the coming days while his son, who had taken a break from his schoolwork, was collecting poppies and cyclamen...

The olive and citrus trees would soon need pruning. But his hands, muscular and strong, were up to this task. Also, the part of the carob tree near the road which had been cracked open by the wind had to be cut for use as firewood. Since the

cold weather had passed he would have all the wood taken to the site of the outdoor kiln where they would next burn limestone. But before lighting it, he would have to order more limestone from the mountain quarry, to complete the pile. He had always enjoyed this captivating spectacle: the bright red flame coloring the evening sky for two or three days before all the stone was reduced to lime. There was in addition the plot of land where they had decided to plant some loquats that needed to be cultivated...

Just then he noticed someone coming towards them who looked familiar. By the Holy Virgin, it was his brother. But what was he doing here? Was something wrong? A long embrace was followed by tears of joy... "Come and kiss your uncle" he shouted to his son. The boy hesitated. He had of course heard about his uncle, but had never met him. Besides, he was holding the flowers he had collected, and felt a little embarrassed...

"But why did you not write us you were coming my brother so we would have prepared for your return", he heard himself say. "Thank God nothing is wrong; that you are okay. You have been an emigrant long enough and did well to turn your back on all the loneliness and frustrations you wrote to us about. You don't have to look for a piece of property. We will give you a plot of land here for you to build a house on, so we will live near each other after all these years we have been separated. Don't worry about the stories in the press. Newsmen have to write something sensational to sell newspapers. All this talk about an invasion, forced resettlement and so on is nonsense. Don't forget we are living in the late 20th century. There is International Law now. Even the Superpowers have to respect Human Rights. How did you get here by the way? Where are your bags? Come we will go home so you can rest. This is a very happy day, and this Easter will be a

joyful one indeed. We will invite all our relatives and friends to a barbecue party under the giant, old carob tree. We will sing and dance again like we used to before you left... and if you happen to like one of the young maidens..."

They were approaching the house. It was late in the afternoon and he remembered that by now the postman must have passed, so he went to check the mailbox. There was a single letter inside, with no stamps on it...

His wife was at his bedside when he recovered consciousness again. "Don't worry my dear", she reassured him, hiding her anxiety and distress.

"You were lucky you weren't hurt more when you hit the letter box. Aside from your ear being slightly bruised the only bit of bad luck was that your eyeglasses broke, but anyway, it is about time you bought a new pair... It's the pressure of living all cooped up in a little flat surrounded by all this concrete that is doing this to you", she continued and with a gesture indicated the buildings around them. "Do you remember how it was when we used to live in the countryside with our son? All that freedom, space and fresh air... Try not to let the present depress you so much. Hold on a little longer. When the Government replies to our application, things will change again, this time for the better..."

He said nothing, clasped her hand in his and sinking his head into the pillow, slowly turned sideways and closed his eyes. Taking this as a sign he wanted to sleep, his wife left his bedside and went to the lounge where some relatives and friends were sitting and discussing the day's events.

He had however closed his eyes and turned sideways for

a different reason. His wife's remarks had reminded him of the letter, and of the resulting bitterness he had experienced earlier that day. They reminded him as well of all the pain his family had been subjected to for nine years now, and he did not want her to realize how very upset he was, and how close to tears.

His brother had gotten engaged that Easter and had started building a house, but on the fateful day of the invasion his fiancée, who was meanwhile preparing her trousseau, was cut off by the first landing... When it was clear there was no hope of finding her, a broken man he left the Island a second time, and had not returned since.

His son had had to leave school and become an apprentice. His hopes of going on to university had had to be abandoned when they became refugees, and instead he was now down in the Gulf putting up with the withering heat and the condescension meted out to foreign laborers.

His wife, his formerly optimistic and carefree lifelong companion, had had to take up sewing for the well-off ladies of the capital to make ends meet... Her furniture, clothes, jewelry, dowry, all left behind for greedy hands to appropriate or destroy, while she, who had loved singing and music, had never sung again after their uprooting.

He did not have the patience to review the fate of their other relatives, friends and neighbors. Instead, he next concentrated on the matter in the abstract and on the unfairness of what had happened to them all. What were they to blame if their political leaders had blundered? Was it their fault if a fratricidal coup had given an excuse to foreigners to invade and displace them, while the Great Powers and various International Organizations watched indifferently at the sidelines?

Alas, all he had believed, trusted and preached had, when put to the test, proved nothing but a sham...

His thoughts went back to his wife's remarks. That she was still looking forward to the Government's reply meant that today's letter had gotten lost in all the commotion after his collapse. If he kept it from her, she would still have something to hope for and look forward to. Indeed to keep this bad news to himself was now one of the few things he could still do for her...

Their relatives and friends had all left, but she would be spending the night in the lounge in case there were any complications, and not having anyone to talk to she opened her handbag and started sorting things out.

In particular she took the letter a neighbor had given her that afternoon and, carefully folding it, hid it in one of the inner pockets. Knowing her husband for so many years now, she had shrewdly assumed he would try to hide this piece of bad news from her for as long as he could, and one of the few things she could still do for him was to pretend there was still hope...

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