

The Color of Skin

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Life was seeping very quickly from George's eyes. The seventy-five year old pensioner usually resisted the changing times in addition to the increasing weakness of his body. However, he had not got used to the death of his wife, although it had taken place seven years ago. He lost his sole companion in life, the one he always believed would follow him until the end. Now the only thing that remained for him was his garden, his closest relatives, his children and his grandchildren. He was reconciled with the matter of life and death, and the idea that his best years had passed irrevocably did not bother him. Even the idea of death did not affect him considerably. He understood that the life that God has created is destined to have a beginning and an end. He was not too religious – at least not as he used to be in past. However, deep inside, he wished to see his Margaret again for one last time. He knew that such hope rose inside him merely out of the power of will rather than logic. He remembered the last time he saw her, and his old eyes were filled with tears.

He had only realized this when the first tear fell heavily on the newspaper and he recovered quickly taking a deep breath. Before he stood up, he had a glimpse of the newspaper headlines: Scandals, swine flu viruses, terrorism and racism. All the front pages seemed the same to him. This was not the world that he had grown up in. Back at that time, there were honest people. At that time, you were not afraid of your neighbors and your fellow citizens. If somebody came from a distant place, people embraced him and asked him to share his stories with them.

In the summer, people slept with opened doors and greeted even unknown people in the streets. He decided not to lose himself again to the trails of the past; he stood up and walked slowly towards the tap in his garden to irrigate his ever-thirsty tomatoes. It is a nice feeling when you have someone waiting for something from you.

In the evening, Mr Anestis, the owner of the corner grocery, visited him. Both of them meet once or twice weekly to chat and play backgammon.

“Mr George, are you there?”

“Yes, Mr Anestis. Please, stay a while with me for a chat.”

“If I sit, will you offer me a cup of coffee?”

George stood up to make two cups of frothy Greek coffee, exactly as he liked it himself. After a while, he served the coffee and sat down next to his old friend.

From the first sip, Mr Anestis felt the boiling-hot drink tickle his tongue and the rich flavor of the coffee fill up his senses.

“Ah! Do you know that you make the best coffee in the neighborhood?”

“I had a good teacher!” said George, meaning his wife, who in the past ran the coffee bar in the neighborhood.

“You have a superb garden! The entire town talks about it.”

George received the compliment with a smile of satisfaction.

“Well, now I haven't anything else to worry about in my life.”

“The little one is here?”

“Yes, he is here. He came to stay for a couple of weeks to get some rest and so did Eleni.” George meant his grandson, little George, and his younger daughter Eleni, who had brought him with her to have a vacation from her husband.

“Listen, you have to check on little George frequently. It came to my knowledge that he keeps bad company. I saw him hanging out with the bums of the street.”

“Oh! Don’t exaggerate! You know how the children are, how can you control them? I don’t think that he will be involved in any trouble, he’s a good boy.”

“Did you hear about Mrs Lena, Lambro’s wife, I mean? The day before yesterday they broke into her house and took everything. They didn’t even leave her a chair.”

“Oh!... I can’t believe it! The day before yesterday I told her that now, as she lives alone, she must have someone at home for her own safety. What did the police say?”

“They said that it’s the gang that broke into the other houses in the same district. If they find out anything, they will let her know – which means nothing. When did they ever arrest anybody?”

“Do you see what would happen to you!”

“They said that the gang got into the house through the small window of the bathroom, then they opened the house from inside. Probably they had a young accomplice with them, as the opening was too small. It’s nice that you have the kid around; if something happened he could shout.”

“May these things be kept away from us,” said George. “Would you like me to get the backgammon to play till the news?”

“Ok, let’s have a round of backgammon,” Mr Anestis agreed and they indulged in a game.

Later, after nine rounds, George was the winner and Mr Anestis shook his hands to congratulate him. At this moment, his grandson came in.

“Wow! Welcome, traveler!” said Mr Anestis saluting him.

“Hi, Mr Anestis! Hi, grandpa!”

“Hello, little George. How was the game?”

“Bad, while we were winning, they called for Stavros at home and we had to stop. But we are going out tonight to resume the game,” little George added in a hurry, hoping that his grandfather would not mind that as he wanted to see Jenny today.

“Are you going out again?! You went out yesterday too!”

“Little George has a romance?” said Mr Anestis smiling and humming to George. “Nice, I have to say good-bye now as my wife is calling again,” added Mr Anestis and he walked towards the door.

“Ok, bye, Anestis!” George replied. He cast an eye over his grandson, who was occupied with his cellular phone while he headed for his room. George turned on the TV for the news on the local channel.

After key reporters had presented political analyses, news about the first fatal case of swine flu in Europe then followed. Later on, a young reporter appeared in the middle of a central road in Athens. The images came without sound and George assumed that it was vandalism due to the recent sporting events. After the first scenes had been rolling, George understood that something else had happened. Many immigrants had been filling the streets of Athens protesting in a demonstration! He had never imagined that there would be such large numbers of foreigners gathered

in the capital. The sound came back and the reporter said that the incidents had occurred following investigations carried out by Greek police patrols regarding illegal immigrants. The foreigners begged the police to set them free; one of them was holding the Koran in his hands asking them in the name of his God to show pity on him to avoid arrest. Then, one of the police officers grasped the well-read book, threw it down on the ground and kicked it, which caused some pages to fall loose from the book's lightweight binding. The immigrants were arrested but, through an unknown source, the story spread leading to indignation breaking out as a spontaneous demonstration by thousands of immigrants. The resentment turned into anger when the protestors saw the police van and the march turned involuntarily into acts of vandalism and arrests. The final result: fear, hatred and violence.

George sighed deeply, understanding both sides. He himself had been an immigrant in the same country, when he left occupied Cyprus. He knew how difficult it was to survive alone in a country without contacts or relatives and without a homeland. He had recently seen a documentary about the life of immigrants in Greece. These people had nothing in this country – or nearly nothing. They had only hope. They lived today hoping for tomorrow. As for tomorrow, they had their faith, their own God, a God not very different from our own. As for tomorrow... God will take care of it.

They have their reasons too; they are trying to survive in a life harder than our own. They have left their homeland for whatever causes; it was impossible for them to lead a life there. They have traveled, taking many risks, to a foreign country and when they arrived there, nobody had

welcomed them. Nobody had helped them; nobody had supported them to establish their lives. Perhaps a project could have helped them; perhaps an organization could have supported them a little bit. Perhaps a movement or a gesture by fellow human beings would be all that these people need. However, who would do this? Governments? The powerful? Us?

Little George interrupted his grandfather's thoughts as he entered the room well-dressed. He had his shirt on together with a neat pair of trousers, the gel glistened on his hair and he wore a rich quantity of cologne.

"Welcome, Mr Dapper!" said George jokingly. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going out, grandpa. I will come back late, you can sleep."

"Ok my little boy, what time you will be back? Does your mother know that you are going out till midnight?"

"Yes, grandpa! She knows. She allowed me to go out... I'm no longer a kid."

George knew that little George was hanging out with Eugenia – the girl who lives across the street. He saw them clasping each other's hands on the street corner and then they separated to avoid being noticed by anyone. Then they continued to look at each other with a lovers' smile carved on their lips. He knew what little George wanted and he did not want to spoil it, so he did not persist any further.

"Ok, my child, but take care. Ok?"

"Ok, grandpa," said little George and he turned to leave.

"Wait! Take this with you!" he said and gave him ten euros.

"It's for you to buy ice-cream on the way and to treat your girl as well," he explained smiling.

“What girl, grandpa?! Leave me now, I’m late,” said little George.

George laughed loudly and embraced his grandson tightly in his arms.

Little George squeezed his grandfather’s hand, thanked him and wished him a good night on his way out.

“Youth... may it come back again!” thought George and he turned on the TV to watch the news.

That night, his sleep was restless. He had to take a tranquillizer to sleep well, but something deep inside kept him anxious. Between sleeping and waking, he heard a noise, then he checked his watch. It was 12.45 am, little George was late today. Tomorrow he will be grounded; he will forbid him to go out in the evening. George got up from his bed and searched with his feet for his slippers to check on his grandson. Perhaps he needed another tranquillizer, or perhaps now that little George had come back he would be able to sleep.

Meanwhile, as he had these thoughts, he heard the sound of one of his dishes smashing into pieces. He was alarmed and he looked through the hall. The outer door was closed and no lights were on. Something was going on. He went quickly to his cupboard and fetched his hidden gun. With a move of his hand, he engaged the magazine holder that fitted in with its characteristic “click”. He heard steps in the hall and someone was tampering with the door. He drew the barrel to load the gun, and then he walked holding it in front of him. He passed the door and saw a short silhouette unlocking the outer door and moving the doorknob. The door opened with a slight blow.

“Now, I’ll show you vagabond!” said George as he turned on the light. The chandelier lights flooded them like a thea-

tre spotlight illuminating the last scene of a show.

George saw the dusky skin of the child in front of him. He saw the fear in his eyes, the fear of someone caught in the act. Someone who dreads the threat that a gun poses to his life. George’s features were full of hatred. Now he knew, he understood. He had seen this kid before, he was the same boy who walked along with the immigrants in his neighborhood. He was the same lad who had broken into the shops. He was the same boy who had stolen from his friend, Mrs Lena. He was the same boy who had tried to steal his wife’s purse, a few minutes after she had collected her pension, seven years ago. He was the one who made her lose her balance and fall down. He was the one who pushed her causing her head to bump on the edge of the pavement. He was the one who killed her...

The boy was also the one who threw a stone at the display case of a shop, as reported on the news. He was the one who shouted slogans against Christians on the march. He was the one who robbed the banks. The one who committed rape. He was *the One*... the immigrant.

George released the safety lock of the gun and pressed the trigger slightly. The door opened and the gun turned to the figure that appeared at the door. The streetlights behind the figure standing at the door blinded him; he was not able to distinguish anything – only its outline. The man at the door raised his hand towards George. George slightly pulled the trigger and the bullet burst out. The sound of shooting and the cry of pain tore the silence of the neighborhood, giving life to the still landscape.

George was startled by the recoil of the gun; he lost his balance and fell backwards. The wounded man also fell backwards at

the doorstep shouting out his searing pain. The little burglar took the opportunity to run away through the wide open door. The lights went on in the surrounding houses. George was still dazzled from the fall. Voices were heard around him. He stood up and had a look at the injured man lying two meters in front of him. He was perplexed; his mind fell victim to the persecution of logic. He did not understand. He could not understand. People were running towards him, but he could not follow. It was impossible for him to react. He was stuck. His eyes were nailed on the face of the injured.

“...Little George?!”

George woke up with pains all over his body. His eyes were trying to focus. His surroundings did not seem familiar. He was in hospital. A nurse approached him.

“How do you feel, Mr George?” she whispered.

“Where am I? What happened?” the old man mumbled as he was trying to stand up.

“You are in hospital, Mr George,” said the nurse and she pushed him gently back on the bed. “Everything will be ok.”

“And little George?” he asked anxiously, while his heart was going to break.

The nurse hesitated to answer.

“God, no!... Not this one!... God, I beg you!”

“Mr George, calm down! Little George is in Intensive Care. His condition is stable. The next days will be critical, but the phy-

sicians are optimistic. There are some gentlemen here who want to talk to you, but first I want you to take these pills.”

George gazed through the door at the two police officers who were staring at him.

He contemplated for a minute, swallowed the pills and prepared himself to tell them what happened.

Much later, after the statements were made, he found out that little George had forgotten his keys that night. He knew that the window of the kitchen was always open and the pass-key was under the breadbox. He could not climb up to the window; his friend Tsouney – who was present at the time – volunteered to climb up and open the door for him. Tsouney was not even a foreigner; he was from the Pomaks of Thrace, they have been living in harmony with their fellow citizens for many long years. Perhaps religion, language, beliefs and the color of skin separated them from the others. However, they are willing to live among the rest disregarding the differences that distinguish them from everybody else. The issue of racism lies in maintaining the differences, at a time when overcoming them is the solution. Racial intolerance can be resolved through adhering to similarities, accepting diversity and feeling that you both belong to the same race... the human race.