

# Seeing with New Eyes

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“Coming out of the sacred enclosure of the holy temenos of the Muses, I will live according to science, exercising...” read out the student who went first, and everyone together, holding up their right hands, said the graduation oath. Graduation day is traditionally a day of great emotion, a day of recompense, and a celebration of the student days that are coming to an end and the new life that is beginning. Nothing of all this affected him at the moment that he was holding up his right hand mechanically. His mind was already on the journey that he would make that same evening to a small country in northern Europe, in less than twelve hours. Casting quick glances into the auditorium, he pinpointed his family and friends again and again, as if he wanted to capture them in his empty glance. In less than twelve hours he was flying to Estonia with the aim of spending six months there, and he looked again and again as if trying to hold on to as much as possible of them.

He had made his application to participate in the EVS project in August. He didn't remember who had told him about this European project for voluntary work, but he did recall that from the outset it had seemed very interesting to him. He could choose which European country he would go to and what field he would work in. He wasn't very selective – his need to get away from the reality of his life was so great that he would have left without setting any conditions. The only thing he wanted was to really escape and he thought that he would succeed in this only if he went to a northern

European country. He thought that the further he went geographically, the further he would go in his mind. Although the sense of flight was very intense within him, the strange thing was that he couldn't explain it. If you had asked him why, he probably wouldn't have known how to answer. He would have said something, but he would have given an answer that he didn't really believe, one concocted at that moment. The few times that he thought about it, he concluded that he was not leaving to escape some oppressive truth, but to find himself. Only if you test yourself in very different conditions from those you are used to can you really understand who you are. That's what he believed and this conviction was so strong that he was ready to give it all up and to go away somewhere where nothing would remind him of who he was.

The results of his application came in October. A foreign language school in Tallinn had accepted him and was waiting for him to agree so that they could start the paperwork. If he accepted, he would work there as an English teacher of children aged nine to fifteen. The initial excitement of feeling that a decisive step towards his aim was about to be taken was succeeded by the fear of the unknown. He realised that the only thing he knew about the place where he might spend the next six months of his life was that it was on the Baltic. When he thought a little more he remembered that one year the Estonian entry had won the Eurovision Song Contest. These two facts, the first the result of geography lessons at school, and the second the product of the

average viewer's basic training in TV, were the only things he knew about Tallinn and Estonia. His feelings were mixed; he felt bad about his lack of knowledge about this corner of Europe, but it was precisely this lack that increased his anxiousness and excitement. Along with everything else, he also had his exams to think about as he still had two courses to pass and could not leave for Estonia without getting them out of the way.

In the end, everything went to plan. He passed his exams, presented his thesis, and here he was today, on the fourth of December, reciting the graduation oath for Biology. The ceremony finished and after the obligatory photographs with each friend separately, and all the congratulations, they went back home to make all the preparations. In his case, the end of his studies meant an instant and very significant turn of the page, something that also helped him to avoid the philosophical types of questions, "And now what?" He got his cases ready early so that he would be able to spend his last hours in Patra with his family and friends without having to worry, as far as that was possible.

They arrived at Athens airport at about three in the morning. His flight was scheduled for five; he had two hours to check in and to say goodbye to his parents, his brother and a good friend who had all come together with him to the airport. He got his boarding card and they all waited for the time to arrive. They didn't say much; partly because of the pervading emotions of the son, brother and friend leaving, partly because of sleepiness, and partly because of the tiring journey to the airport, no one wanted to talk much. The day's events came into his mind in order. His graduation oath in the morning, lunch with his family, coffee with friends in the

afternoon so that they could wish him a successful career and a good journey, and now he was finally at the airport. He thought that never could any day in his life be more full of feelings and images.

Everywhere you could see that spring was on its way. Although it was not yet very warm, the temperature had risen noticeably and the sun came out more. He had already been in Estonia for four months, and he was beginning to feel more at home. He had got into a routine in which he felt secure, with his work, his friends, and Saturday nights out being its most important parts. From his first days in Estonia he had tried to find differences and had filled quite a few pages with things that had made an impression on him. With his own Greek world in his mind, he compared kinds of behaviour, situations, ideas, images, aspects, and whatever he could see or experience in his new reality. If one glanced at those pages, one would see a great variety of notes with some comments repeated from page to page. An observation that one could see on almost every page went: "The people here don't smile."

"The people here don't smile." He had noted down this phrase for the first time one week after arriving in Estonia, in December. From then on he continuously observed people on the street, at work, at the supermarket, and in the buses. His impression was that they did not smile; he felt in them a continual lack of emotion that he found suffocating. As time went by he got used to it, but sometimes he felt unwanted, as if he didn't fit in. Whenever he talked about it with friends on the telephone, he always heard the same stereotypes, which he tried to avoid from the beginning: "The people in the north are not as warm as

we Greeks; we Greeks are good people, we Greeks are always smiling.” He struggled hard against such ideas from the very outset. However, recently it seemed that he could not bear it any longer, and he was ready to give up the fight. Perhaps they were right, after all. Perhaps it was true that where you belonged always said something about you.

Everywhere you could see that spring was on its way. Weekends were opportunities for short trips. Although it was not yet hot, nature had begun to display its spring beauty. At school they had begun to prepare for the May exams. The younger children, from nine to eleven, had to take an exam for young pupils at the beginning of May, and it was already April. In the last lessons emphasis had been placed on preparing them for the exams so that they would feel at ease with the whole procedure. Two weeks before the day of the examination they decided to take the children for a picnic in a park near the school so that they could get away from the atmosphere of revising and preparation, which was quite demanding for their age. They all got on the bus and, after three stops, reached their destination. The children immediately spread out around the park. He and another teacher sat down and discussed some last details of the preparation for the exams. One of his pupils, a girl of ten, came up to him, gave him a key-ring in the shape of a globe, saying, “this is for you,” with a smile painted across her lips. He smiled back automatically, and the girl went off to find her friends on the other side of the park.

He held the key-ring and turned the globe on its axis with his finger. He looked at the globe turning round, and his mind also raced. A world in his hands and he was looking at it going round, turning non-

stop from the movement of his hand. He thought that in the globe that he was holding, Africa, America, Europe, the entire world was turning with the same rhythm. He thought that his pupil had just shown him her appreciation and her love in the sweetest way. He felt such a fool that he had come to the conclusion that there were people with fewer feelings. Such a simple gesture like that of his young pupil caused him to have so many profound thoughts. It was as if a weight had left him. For the first time spring filled him with gladness.

From that time onwards he began to observe people more carefully. He was still trying to compare everything with his own Greek reality, and he saw that the people were not the same. In the supermarket the cashiers did not smile, in the bus he couldn't hear the constant murmur of many parallel conversations. He saw that “the people were more reserved, more careful about revealing their emotions.” He read again the sentence that he had noted down in his diary. “More careful than what?” he asked himself out loud. He read other similar observations that he had made. He realised that in every case he had been making a comparison. He realised that he always judged people and situations based on the criteria of what he knew of everyday life in Greece. He thought that he should try to live the rest of the time he had left in this country without taking anything for granted, detached from his experiences and events, to look at everything with new eyes.

“The purpose of the journey is not to see a new place, but to acquire a new way of looking at the world.” It was with these words of Henry Miller that an article about inter-cultural dialogue in the news-

paper began. He smiled and thought how much better it would have been if he had read those words a few months earlier. But then again, maybe it was better that he had reached the same conclusion on his own. Now in Greece, he looked back longingly on his time in Estonia. He had been back two weeks now and was still having problems adjusting. Here he was seeing his friends after six months but however much he wanted to talk to them for hours on end about everything he had experienced he couldn't, for they soon got bored. So he usually reminisced alone about the last six months, looking at photos and all the objects he had kept as keepsakes.

He put down the newspaper, and began once more to dig through the various different objects that he had kept as mementos of his life in Estonia. His hand fell upon that small key-ring that his pupil had given him. All those memories linked to the small sphere came into his mind like a scene from a film. Thanks to this object his last days in Estonia had given him a great deal. Thanks to this present he had been freed from stereotypes, and had managed to discern the true values that comparisons normally prevent one from seeing. He

realised feelings are not always expressed in the same manner, but that that did not make them less true. He saw how important it is to see with new eyes, and how much you stand to gain if you manage to do this.

Everywhere you could see that summer was already here. Swimming in the sea in the afternoon, coffee on the shore after lunch, and a drink in a bar on the seafront in the evening. Soon he would be going for a walk: he went out with his friends a lot, trying to make up for time, to catch up on their news and to tell them his own. He knew that they would get bored quickly, and that was why he had composed a short version of his six months in Estonia, which summarised the main events and experiences. It was this version he would recount to everyone he saw for the first time after his return, and then they would change the subject to football and their plans for August. Perhaps in the end the most important thing he had gained from Tallinn was destined to be kept only for himself. With this last thought he shut the box of mementos, took a sip of coffee and looked out of the window at the open horizon.