

(ELPIDA) I AM BUT A DAUGHTER

Greek Folk Sayings Student Name: Elpida

“Whoever does not have brains has feet.”

“Asking questions will get you to Polis {Constantinople}.”

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I am on a journey. I am not alone and yet I am totally alone. My body ends at my skin, my thoughts end in my terror. I journeyed from an outcropping in the Aegean Sea across the ocean to the land of opportunity. What is opportunity? Is it the alarm clock that goes off on Monday and brings me back to the American hot shower, the brewing coffee pot, the velvet wallpaper on my living room wall?

What is a journey? Is it the image I remember before I fall asleep? The small spring in Andros that had a slimy green spout but released the most crystal clear refreshing water God put on this earth? Is it me laughing on my way to Sariza spring with my jug? Filling the jug so high that the lemon I used as a plug on the spout would pop? Was it dancing with Petro? Or was it my first visit to Athens when I looked up at Patision Street and saw the most breathtaking view one could see; the Parthenon.

Everyone takes a journey. Some travel from one end of the globe to the other. Others only walk down the dirt path to take on a husband and keep a life no different than the one they have always had. Others travel and can never find home except in specific moments.

Those tender moments, soft and transparent like soap bubbles floating until the slightest pressure, the softest obstacle makes them pop. Moments which arrive in a lyric, in a line of poetry, in the smell of the earth after the rain. Moments that let me belong.

Springtime comes to Andros like Persephone, shouting her arrival. Goddess Demetra spreads deep red poppies to greet me in the fields. In our village it had been said that the poppies are drops of blood that have fallen from the thousands of battles that have taken place on our ancient soil.

I remember when I lived at my father's house I used to go home hungry from our fields, digging ditches for the watering at night. Around each lemon tree and olive tree, I dug neat strong trenches to catch the town's water allotted for us to use from 3 to 4 in the morning.

I own twelve olive trees, my brothers the sailors own three times as many. Although it was me they had to provide a dowry for, I was worth only twelve olive trees. When asked, my father said he had three children and one daughter. I am but a daughter.

(HOPE) SAD EYED SAINTS

They were all virgins. Some were beheaded or had their skulls pierced with iron rods, others were burned at the stake, skinned alive or boiled in kettles filled with oil and tar. All were

very beautiful, tempting, strong, beyond temptation, righteous. No emperor, magician or king could stop these girls from believing in Jesus Christ.

Learn how these saints were tortured, know all their names by heart, the miracles they performed and maybe, just maybe, I will pass my Greek Religion test.

Learn also about the architecture of Saint Sophia Church in Constantinople-what a feat it was for the Byzantines to build a square church and put a round dome on top of it leading straight to heaven. The dome allowed them to have windows all around, allowing heavenly light into the church. *Sferiko Trigono, round dome on top of a square base*, correct answer on my Greek test.

Mrs. Pisteos, our religion teacher, takes us to church and puts her finger to her lips to tell us to be quiet as the boys in my class push the girls aside so they can sit in the pews first. She points up to the dome so that we can remember God is watching us with his hands extended for a big embrace.

From the church ceiling the painting of God looks down at us in pity for our sorry state of affairs, as we are reminded every Friday in our Greek religion class. We seem forever damned in our church, especially the girls.

My girlfriends and I sit in the back pews. We compare the flowers on our bras. I open two buttons to show mine has a pink rose, Margaret opens hers and shows us a yellow flower, Snot nose Ourania doesn't show us anything because she's still flat as a board. The incense is so strong it seems to come from another world. I want Father Ftinos to stop his preaching; it hurts my heart. I look at the Byzantine icons and wall paintings surrounding me in church. Each one,

hand painted in gold leaf, rich purple and blood red. The angelic faces with soft cascading hair and halos tell me I am not one of them.

All these sad eyed saints look at us from every direction.

The priest stares straight at us, the Saint Fanourios Greek-American students. His voice gets louder and louder. He points his finger out at us as if we were in the middle of a bad fight: “Let me tell you why our society is rotting: this country is in upheaval, our President was shot and killed, after him Martin Luther King, and then Robert Kennedy. Young people today do not obey their elders. They are too lazy to fight a war that is just. They smoke drugs and they demonstrate in the streets with their long, dirty hair without knowing what they want. We must fight communism no matter how far away, whether in Vietnam or Greece. We have to support our Greek leader Papadopoulos now that he is the leader of Greece. Today’s youth is lost. The end is near and worst of all the Greek children of Astoria are following these foreign lifestyles!”

Then comes the part I dread the most, because the “girl” topic always finds its way into Father Ftinos’ speech. We are not obedient Greek girls like our mothers and grandmothers before us who came from Greece and knew what it was like to be good. We are not clean vessels like the Virgin Mary, blah, blah, blah.

Father Ftinos never misses an opportunity to remind us there is little hope for our salvation just because we happen to be girls. For one, most of my girlfriends got their periods this year. And that means we also have to listen to Mrs. Pisteos tell us in front of the boys, “Do not even think about receiving communion today if any of you have your period. Wait here to the left of the line if you girls are dirty. You can’t have Christ’s blood entering your mouth and

leaving from underneath you know where!

“Only boys can enter the narthex. Do not even think about setting foot in there, girls. That is where the Holy Spirit comes down from heaven and appears to the priest. That is where the wine is turned to God’s blood, where the miracle happens, and it won’t happen if you girls step one foot in there. Keep your eyes down. Do not even think of lifting them. There is nothing to see. Miracles happen when you are not watching. Do you hear me girls? No looking, no peeking, no tricks. I know your tricks.”

I try not to listen to Mrs. Pisteos or the priest but the story is the same no matter where I turn. I am dirty, I am beneath God, I live in that lower part of gold painted Byzantine icons where the dragons roam, serpents slide, thieves attack, where dirt and blood become rivers to choke the evil ones, the ones who are lost, the ones who have chosen the road to hell. I am less than, I am negative, I am the weak part of the equation. I am but a Greek daughter.

(ELPIDA) MY CIRCLE IS CLOSING

ENGLISH FOR COMING CITIZENS BOOK

Student: Elpida

LESSON: BECOMING A CITIZEN OF THE UNITED STATES

Mr. Nelson was very happy in his new position; still he felt strange and not entirely at home. His friends and the other workmen in the factory often asked him this question: “Are you a citizen of the United States? He heard many other people answer this question proudly, “Yes, I

am a citizen,” but our friend had to answer truthfully: “No I am not yet a citizen.” One day Fred Stone his neighbor, said: “Tomorrow we shall have little work. Let’s go to the courthouse and get our citizenship papers.”They signed the paper and swore that what they had said was true; then they paid the clerk one dollar and received from him a copy of their declaration of intention. The clerk told them to keep this paper and to attend a night school so as to learn about our government.

Questions: Where were you born? Andros, Greece. At what place did you board the ship which brought you to this country? Patras, Greece.

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I became an American citizen. I learned to take a number two pencil and fill in all the right answers: I am female, a dependent on our American tax form. I am RA in our Ravenswood telephone number; RA6-5604.

Many years have touched this shore where I stand. I tried to be a good wife but I had little to give my husband. I bury him in my heart each night. The immigrant who spent years hunched over railroad tracks in the mid-West, the sailor from Andros who immigrated to America before me. A man who spent all his years trying to comfort me. It is time to relieve him.

I was born in Andros, surrounded by the Aegean Sea. The sea is dark blue. We survive because of the sea. We die because of the sea.

My Halcyon days did not come to retrieve me from these winters too icy for love. There is no place to put my longing for someone who might not have been real, no, not real at all. Perhaps I dreamt up those eyes I once knew. Who remembers Petro, who remembers the wars

that brought misery to my small country? Perhaps those eyes of Petro's never existed--he was a ghost, yes, a ghost ripping into my dreams. I am here with my black and white television box to lull me to sleep. I bury myself every night when I try to close these eyes.

Father Ypokratis from our village sent me a package. It arrived here a few days ago. He should not have done that. Not now, not after all these years. I made Yianni mail it all back to him, key and all. I don't want it. Let Elpida find my story, my traces after I leave. I am unable to continue.

One decade has fallen on top of so many others. I tried to be grateful for the work I had at Silver Palace catering hall. I heard the music from my island. Greeks came in from Andros, from Karpathos, from Thessaloniki, from all over Greece. All of them showed up there dressed so nicely each week. They brought with them their longing, their need to belong, their need to hear the music from a country we were once a part of, but no more.

I never did go back to my island. Petro was not there. I did not want to remember anymore. I sent my daughter. I sent her father. Like searchlights I sent them to find what I was looking for. They came back with stories to fill my afternoons. With jugs of green olive oil, with Uncle Socrati's freshly made wine. They came back to me with empty offerings.

I could have called the steamship company and like the rest of the Andriots I could have booked a cabin on the S.S. Queen Frederiki for a summer rest. I could have gone back like Santa Claus and bought my way back in to their memories with gifts and trinkets from John's Bargain Store, but I did not go.

I am not going to learn to speak and think in English, my heart, my mind thinks in Greek no matter how many pages of this book I read and try to memorize.

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No need to keep asking myself what have we accomplished? The immigrants who washed ashore here with our dreams, our illusions, our pathetic anticipation of finding the streets paved with gold. We pretend. We, “*xeni*”, the foreigners pretend we are close to packing up and leaving. A few more years and we’ll be out of here. Same old song, same old wish. The children are still young, we could move back and they will be able to adjust. They will learn Greek, they will be better off back in our homeland.

Washing dishes at the diner will get us just a few more dollars and then we will be set. Or all those Greek hot dog vendors I pass on my way to work, they are still here no matter what they say. They spread out all over the sidewalks of Manhattan and Queens. They keep saving and saving for the houses they will build when they get back to Greece. They just stand there in the rain asking, ‘Mustard or Sauerkraut?’

My circle is closing. I have gone to confession like the good Orthodox Christian I was taught to be. I married a quiet man, his silence all these years fed my terror. I became a mother. Although the umbilical cord bound my daughter to me, I have been unable to give my Anna her wings to escape the curse of being a daughter. She is defined as her father’s daughter. I am defined as my father’s daughter. My granddaughter Elpida is defined by her father’s name. She is Hope for the Americans, Elpida for me. What is she to herself? Is she embarrassed by her name, her heritage? She has been my *elpida* but even she cannot hold me to this place any longer.

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ENGLISH FOR COMING CITIZENS BOOK

LESSON: TO TAKE A BATH IN THE OCEAN

I go to the seashore. I take along a bathing suit. I hire a bath-house. I pay fifty cents for the bath-house. I undress in the bath-house. I go out to the beach. I play in the sand. I go into the water. The waves dash against me. I enjoy myself very much. I feel cold. I return to the bathhouse. I dry myself. I dress myself. I go out.

Exercises:

What do you hire at the seashore?

What do you take along? Where is the bath-house?

What do you do in the bath-house?

Where do you play? What do the waves do?

How do you enjoy yourself? How do you feel when you come out of the water?

Time has moved on in my village and it cannot take me. I am here with no roots, no history to guide me. I will not be the lighthouse for my granddaughters after all.

I am a small fishing boat that is leaving.

I am leaving.

I am leaving.

The blue Aegean Sea swirls around me.

(HOPE)

LOUSY GREEKS INVADE LONG ISLAND

Uncle Thanasi bought a summer house out in Greenport and Dad bought a used car. The highway has been extended to Riverhead and that brings us closer to the American Andros where we go for our one week summer vacation since going to Greece is still not something we can afford to do.

If you ask me, Mom doesn't go on any vacation at all since she still gets up in the morning before we do to make breakfast then washes the dishes, makes the beds, washes the dirty clothes by hand, hangs them on the clothesline outside our rented bungalow, cooks lunch and dinner like she does at home, washes those dishes too and finally sits down with the other Greek women to chat before the sun sets on another American vacation. She looks like Elizabeth Taylor with her black hair twisted high above her head.

The little blue bungalow we rent on Rocky Point Road has a kitchen, one bedroom and a small sitting room with a couch that turns into a bed for Nikki and me.

Rocky Point Road is now filled with Greek houses. Blue and white garage doors, clarinets blaring from Greek songs on the radio, Greek flags out in front of neatly trimmed lawns and lots of Greek boys and girls for us to keep company with.

Snot nose Ourania from school lives on Rocky Point Road too, as do the GGGs -- short for the Greek Gorilla Girls from Staten Island who live in the four houses at the beginning of the

road. They have more hair on their bodies than boys do, that's how they got their name. Their dads have those long Cadillacs with Greek worry beads hanging from the mirror so everyone can know they are Greek. They have stickers on the car bumpers that say: "Kiss me I'm Greek" just in case the worry beads don't convince anyone.

Today, Nikki, Snot nose Ourania and some Greek boys from the road take a walk to Rocky Point Beach with me. We look for flat rocks to toss into the water to see whose rock skips the furthest. The only thing we hear are waves crashing on rocks, pebbles being pulled from the shore and gurgling sounds they make as they are dragged back by the next wave.

Then a gunshot rings out.

We stop and look behind us. We see a man running down the beach holding a hunting rifle in his hand. He's angry and he's running in our direction. We hear him shouting at us: "Get out of here you lousy Greeks. Get the hell off this land or I'll shoot you. Go back where you came from. You Lousy Greeks are wrecking our neighborhood."

He aims his gun at us and we run as fast as we can into the fields behind the beach to get away from that American mad man.

Nikki and I run home when the coast is clear. I tell Dad what happened. For once he is sympathetic and tells us it is ok if Nikki and I go for a ride with an older Greek boy named Yiorgo who has just pulled up in front of our house in his Dad's Cadillac convertible. He has three, not one, strands of worry beads dangling from his rear-view mirror.

Mom doesn't look too thrilled, so I tell her I'll invite Snot-Nose Ourania and whatever other Greek girl is out on her front lawn trying to get a Coppertone tan.

We pile into the Cadillac with the top down and we head toward town. We drive down to Main Street where a small granite memorial was just placed in honor of so many boys from Greenport who were called for duty in Vietnam but never made it back home. When I do the math, I realize most of them were not much older than 18, a long list of names etched on a plaque in the middle of town. A stray dog pisses at the plaque and trots off.

We make a right by the traffic light and pass the A & P. The corner of the A & P supermarket separates regular Greenport town from the Black side of town. Yiorgo slows down as he drives past some black men sitting on worn out, sagging porches or swinging from hammocks under great old trees. It is a lazy, hot day.

Suddenly Yiorgo floors the gas pedal and makes a u-turn back down the same small street. The two boys next to me stand up in their seats and for no reason, they shout out: “Nigger want a watermelon?”

Yiorgo burns rubber and we are out of there. I start to cry and Snot Nose Ourania laughs at me. So do the Greek boys. I hate them.

The black men do not even react when I look back at them. They just stare at us as we speed off into the safety of Main Street. Not one word gets shouted back to us, not one arm raised in anger. Their eyes just watch us go with sadness and resignation. I know that look. I see it every day in Astoria.

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The next day Nikki and I go down to Rocky Point Beach to swim before Mom gets lunch ready for us. It's our last vacation day. We put our towels on the pebbles. Snot Nose Ourania comes down the stairs with the Staten Island GGGs and Yiorgo with his gang of Greek boys.

Snot Nose Ourania circles around our towels with the Greek Gorilla Girls and says,
“Hope, get the hell off this beach. You don’t belong here, your Dad doesn’t own a house here.
You’re only renting a bungalow for a week from my Dad. You’re not one of us.”

I look at Nikki, tears welling in my eyes. She picks up both of our towels and
says, “Come on, lunch should be ready now anyway, who needs jerks like them?”

I run up the wooden stairs so fast I get splinters in my fingers from grabbing the
banister so tight. Nikki saved me. I kiss her cheek when we get up to the entrance of the
bungalow. Even though she is younger than I am, at times I think she is much smarter
and stronger than I am.

I hate this beach. I hate being Greek. I hate not being anything other than “the other”. I
am on the bottom of the ladder, on the bottom of the world. No better than any Black in Town,
no better than any hairy Greenhorn walking up and down Ditmars Boulevard, no better than any
dead American boy who doesn’t come back from Vietnam. I know exactly who I am; a voice no
one wants to hear.

Dad packs up the car, Mom brings out the last pot she wipes clean to bring back home so
she can use it in our own kitchen again. We wave goodbye to Snot Nose Ourania’s parents and
the Greek kids line up by our old car. They have smirks on their faces. They are the ones who get
to stay on Rocky Point Road all summer long because they own houses here.

We pass through Town to buy some peaches for home. I see little black flags with the words You Will Not Be Forgotten and the initials P.O.W and M.I.A. on many of the houses we pass. Through Town and on to the highway I lose count of all those little flags silently standing guard in front of those American houses located all the way out on the edge of Long Island facing the Long Island Sound and further out the Atlantic Ocean and further than that Greece and then Vietnam. When the sun goes down, the sky becomes a black and blue cloth surrounding us as we join the red taillights of cars stuck in Sunday night traffic on the L.I.E. We are not going to become Americans after all so we keep our backs to the water and drive back home to the Greek world of Astoria.