

# Lamb

(Excerpt from THE CYCLOPS CAVE: A BRAIDED MEMOIR)

**Don Schofield, Greece**

Yesterday was yet another day I didn't speak to anyone. And the only voice I've heard this morning was while I was still in bed, some woman on the radio talking about Easter (Easter in August?). She was playing various songs while recounting Holy Week as a child, when she and her sisters and their friends would paint eggs red, follow the Good Friday procession through the village and carry a lit candle home from church after Midnight Mass. At one point she beseeched the listeners to remember the innocence and purity of Easter, "a time when all children have only goodness in their hearts."

*Yeah, the innocence of children,* I thought to myself, remembering again how much we kids at the children's home loved to play War.

As I got up and fixed breakfast—a peach, two figs and coffee—and carried it out to the veranda, it was easy to think back as well to my second Easter on this island. It was *Megálo Sávvato* (Holy Saturday) that came to mind, windy and a bit chilly. Feeling as usual like an outsider, I decided to hike up to the village.

It felt good to be walking in the cold morning air, not in a hurry as I headed up the familiar steep path. A few minutes into the climb, I stopped for a moment to look down at a couple small goats in a field above Francesco's garden—two survivors of the Easter sacrifice?—a black one chewing stubble, and a brown one in the shade of an abandoned couch, looking up at me, staring actually.

Then I continued climbing, terrace to terrace, up past twisted stubs of shrubs in the cracked earth, a few dandelions here and there; on the next terrace a wide patch of wildflowers poking up among more rocks and briars; on the next another stretch of brush and stubble; next a blanket of blue wildflowers, cyclamen no doubt, and some poppies; then up along a stone wall, taller than me; then up to another barren patch of stubble, in the far corner a gnarled olive tree, twisted as if knotted around itself.

Once on the paved road below Driopída, I began to see freshly slaughtered lambs hanging from trees and scattered porches. At one point a teenage boy came walking by me at a fast clip, the head and front paws of a skinned baby goat slumped across his chest, the rest in a plastic garbage bag draped over his shoulder, the whole thing rocking in sync with his quick steps. Then I noticed other lambs strapped to the roofs of cars passing by, two or three on each one, or lying across the beds of pickup trucks, stretched out straight, as if diving into the sea or flying through the air, their skinned bodies gleaming. In the yards of some houses men with knives were carving away at dangling carcasses, like Papa used to do to deer he'd strung up in the patio of our cabin. In the back of one truck stopped at a minimarket, I saw three baby goats tied together, faces

side by side, eyes bulging, congealed blood caked along the edge of their open lips. They looked like three singers from the dead crooning into one microphone.

A few minutes later I saw Giórgis, in front of some shed, slicing through the crotch of a hanging lamb. I'd been talking to the owner of a tourist shop who had stopped to offer me a ride up to the village. Suddenly he pointed: "*Ná ton* (There he is)!" And, indeed, there was my landlord, across the road, in a place I would've never expected to see him. I called out a greeting. Standing next to the half-skinned lamb, he waved back, knife in hand, with that broad smile of his, the cadaver grinning too.

Up in the village, after I finished buying supplies, I decided to sit at a *cafeneío* to have a cup of coffee, someone else's for a change, and listen (as best I could) to what the gossiping men were saying. I sat by myself at a table near the door, all the other tables with groups of three or four locals sipping coffee or *rakí* and nibbling at various appetizers. Then a priest came in, with a long, unkempt beard, in cassock and tall clergy hat, one from another village it seemed.

Immediately he started chiding all of us for not fasting before the *Anástasi* (Resurrection)—

“This is a time of abstinence, a time of emptiness, when the child of God, His only Son, has been sacrificed,” and then added, “Who’s going to give a priest a place to sit?”

One of the locals (thin and scruffy, with a patchy beard, someone I’d seen around the village a couple times) pointed toward me and in a vaguely gruff manner said (I think), “We have our own priest. Why don’t you go sit there, with the other...”

When he first pointed at my table, I looked away instinctively, but looked back when he abruptly cut short his sentence. It was pretty clear that he was going to finish with the word *xénos* (both “foreigner” and “stranger”). I figured that the priest must be from Hóra, the main village, on the other side of the island, so was reminded of the animosity between north and south Kíythnos. To the people of Driopída, that priest was a *xénos*, as much as I was, though for very different reasons. But why did that scruffy local not say the obvious word? Did he think that he’d hurt my feelings or make me uncomfortable? That he’d embarrass himself in front of the other men in the village by being rude to a guest staying on their side of the island? Whatever the reason, he never did finish his sentence. The priest sat down at my table anyway, without saying a word to me or anyone else, except to order a coffee. I left a few minutes later.

Arriving back in Náoussa, I was crossing the rocky promontory above the beach when I saw more Holy Saturday activity. There, among the rocks at the edge of the sea, Francesco, Kóstas and Manólís were cutting open a goat they’d just slaughtered and

skinned, pulling out the innards that their wives would use to make *magireítsa*, that offal soup Greeks have after Midnight Mass, right after the barrage of firecrackers and cherry bombs outside the church, the burning of the effigy of Judas (in some villages), and the slow walk back home holding lit candles so they can make a cross of smoke on the underside of their front door lintels. Then they eat that soup, chock full of liver and other viscera, to break the Lenten fast. Later, around midday, each family skewers a slaughtered lamb or baby goat, shoving an iron spit into its anus and out its mouth; then they rotate it slowly over coals burning in an open pit, up in the village or down here, in Náoussa, or somewhere else along the sea.

As I approached my neighbors, Francesco lifted the bottle of *rakí* they were sharing high in the air and invited me to join them. The half-empty bottle, which I gladly accepted, was smeared with blood and grease from animal fat. The carcass they were working on was stretched out at their feet, on a sheet spread across some flat rocks. As we talked and drank, they continued stripping away the organs, along with thin strands of fat white as soap. Standing beside them, I could see the poor animal's lungs and heart; then Francesco held up a little pink sack of skin, brought it close to my face, and, swaying a little, questioned me, "Do you know what this is?"

"The balls?" I asked, laughing as I half-guessed. It could just as well have been a kidney, for all I knew.

He chuckled at my lack of such basic knowledge, the same way he laughed a couple days before, when I saw him with a flock of goats he'd just let out of the pen beyond my bad well. He was trailing a ways behind them as they went up a steep slope, throwing stones to make three younger ones go into another pen (probably headed for slaughter) while the others wandered up to a stretch of wild grass.

It was then that I walked up to him and asked if I could watch the *sfáximo* (slaughter), which made him chuckle and say firmly, "*Ókhi* (No)!" making it clear that that was something outsiders weren't supposed to watch.

That Holy Saturday, though, they didn't mind me being there with them, at the water's edge. Quite the opposite, they were happy to have my naivete and wide-eyed wonder for company, or so it seemed as I watched Francesco pick up a cleaver and start hacking at the backbone, severing it every few inches. (Clearly this one was for the oven, not the spit.) That's when he started in on one of his war stories.

"Not again?!" Manólis growled, then winked at me.

I couldn't follow all he was saying, but understood right away that he was telling us about some event that happened during the Greek Civil War, a couple years after World War II ended. It seems that somewhere in northern Greece Francesco was ordered to

take a prisoner into the nearby woods and execute him. Instead, he escorted him to a hospital on the other side of the trees and left him there. He then jumped to a story that happened sometime later, when he was himself a prisoner in an enemy hospital. He was running a temperature of 40-plus, his head and both his feet bandaged, the soles cut and swollen. It seems that an orderly caught him hiding a knife under his pillow (how he got the knife, I didn't catch) and demanded that he turn it over.

"You can take the knife if you want," Francesco declared, "but I'm getting up right now and walking out of here, with or without clothes." And that's exactly what he did, completely naked, except for the bandages on his head and feet, while the stunned attendant just stood there, watching Francesco's bare backside as he slipped out of the tent and disappeared.

With that Francesco took a gulp of *rakí*, stood up and started circling around us, walking like he supposedly did back then, shoulders hunched, dragging one foot, limping on the other.

Amid our laughter, Francesco went back to work on the goat, cutting off each hoof, as the other men started carving at the legs, separating the red meat from the stringy fat; then they chopped up the leg-bones.

“Why don’t you do something useful,” Kóstas said, looking up at me, “like fanning the damned flies,” and handed me a stiff, bloodstained piece of cardboard. He took a swig from the bottle, then offered it to me. As I drank and fanned and passed the bottle on to Manólis, Kóstas wrapped a long string of fat around his head as if he were making a turban, then started pulling faces at all of us. Francesco threw a clump of meat at him and tossed the rest of what he’d cut from the bones into a box beside the goat’s head.

As the sun dipped behind the mountains, my neighbors put all the organs into a plastic bag and wrapped all the chopped up meat, along with the bones and fat, into the sheet, even the skull.

“You’re taking the skull?” I asked.

“Yeah, why not?” Francesco chuckled. “Never tried it?”

As I made a face that showed both my repulsion and my fascination, he continued:

“Tomorrow we’ll put the skull on the hot coals. When it’s scorched black all around, it’ll be done. Then someone will crack open the forehead and scoop out the brains. Someone else will fork out the eyes and eat them, someone else the cheeks. The cheeks are the real delicacy!”



“Every bit of the goat will be consumed,” Manólis added, “even the bones, tossed to the dogs and cats—all of it gone.”

As we were saying our goodbyes and taking the last swigs of *rakí*, Kóstas reached into the sheet and pulled out two globs of meat and a chunk of fat.

“Fry these up tomorrow, all together, very slowly.”

And Francesco added, “Next year we’ll let you have the cheeks.”

Late next morning, Easter Sunday, my head still woozy from so much *rakí* the day before, I stepped out to my porch and a couple minutes later saw Stávros, my neighbor’s young son, walking up my steps. He handed me a bowl with four hard-boiled eggs dyed red.

“*Khristós Anésti* (Christ has Risen)!” he shyly proclaimed.

Happy as a schoolboy, I smiled and gave the customary response: “*Alithós Anésti* (Truly He has Risen)!”