

## Conversations with my yiayia

*This story was born on the first Corfu Literary Festival walk – the foodie walk – where a young Greek writer told us of her conversations with her yiayia (Greek grandmother). These clearly were intimate conversations about recipes, young woman to old woman and that became the basis of this story although there is no cooking in it. It is another story of thwarted love, a theme I write about a lot since I seem never able to nail down what makes a successful relationship. I so love Greek artisan honey there are bees in this story too.*

“Unlovely? No, not unlovely,” my Yiayia says, the trusted voice of ancient wisdom.

“A little plain perhaps. Quiet, yes,” she adds.

I stare, looking for the faint wisps of gentle mockery.

I see only black in the eyes. Gently stroking the angular cheekbones with my thumbs, roughened from daily toil, I feel her strength pass into my bones. We are so alike, my Yiayia and I, yet generations apart.

When darkness shrouds my dreams, my Yiayia lights my way.

When hope falters, my Yiayia soothes my fears.

Respect.

Honour.

Within a honeyed dreamscape, surrounded by spring quickly sprouting, we share a low stone wall, the remains of a village which sang happy songs before war brought pain and despair to our island and to a small carefree girl in pink dress and pigtails.

Over the wall, down the hill away, a bee swarm clings sloth-like to the underside of the sturdy branch of a tree planted in a bygone age of serenity and elegance. I imagine a child's swing hanging on ropes beneath such a bough, but the wish quickly vanishes. The olive grove stretches its grasping, gnarled fingers across the gentle slope above the sheltered sea. As a good man might lovingly encircle his woman's waist with the strength of a warrior's arms, so the bees encircle their queen, as they have done since mythic times when Eros' honey-tipped arrows filled hearts with ardent desire.

My heart swells with desire, though it is heavy with foreboding too.

The yellow sail which had long since faded into the mist did not see the mountain tops lose their ermine cloaks of winter snow. White cotton wool clouds now drift and roll, shrouding tall Cypress and Pine which are as blades of grass around their feet. Across the springtime meadow, dappled by the rising sun, sweet flowers abound, their rainbow heads bobbing in the westerly breeze. Carven stones from broken homes provide lop-sided homes for young fragrant herbs. These are more than mere names to the bees who call this hillside home. They are the individual, distinctive and signature essences of the sweet honey which fills their honeycombs to bursting; a natural bounty upon which a younger yiayia raised a family.

When the scouts have fulfilled their quest to find a hollow tree with space enough for the muffled cocoons in honeycomb galleries to form, they will return for their queen. They are faithful loyal and true.

I already fear that I am not so blessed.

The tips of the olive branches are heavy with flower, waiting for salt-tinged winds to blow through, pollinating the waiting legions of blossoms. Boy and girl within the perfect flowers and within imperfect flowers, boy alone. A vital congress to take flower to fruit. Not all are blessed. A thousand blossoms will feel a fleeting caress upon their velvet petals but fail in their union. A few will be fulfilled.

Ofttimes the bees will be their saviour when the inconstant wind fails in its duty. The bee gathers, wetting the pollen lightly with concentrated nectar. Sticky pollen, blowing upon the winds, to another tree where it fastens to an expectant flower. And so, in return for his ardent attention, some might say greed, the bee receives the bounty which the flower willingly offers.

My yiayia says, the brightest flowers sing to the bees who reciprocate the love with songs of their own, desirability intensified. In my younger mind I was a pale,

unscented blossom, singing a dull song to no-one, over-looked in the cycle of fruitfulness. A bloom slowly fading until the miracle comes and warm winds carried my song to willing ears. For a fleeting time, I was desirable.

As the olive fruit develops from the fertilized ovary of the olive flower, bringing strong and healthy fruit to bear so I have been blessed as some would say.

My yiayia warned, the yellow sail will leave these shores for other pastures.

I stared into her eyes, and I did not believe. Then.

A sacred trust betrayed, the warmth inside me growing daily. Afore long the warmth will become a kick and there will be no denying the truth which thwarts all attempts at disguise.

Now, as I look once more into the blank, empty sockets of the smooth whitened skull of my yiayia, lightly and lovingly set upon a rough blanket over the grey stone, I hear her sigh and offer me pity, for to bear fruit in this way is to bear an eternal shame.

No respect.

No honour.

A sacred promise that was easy to make and now I fear easy to abandon.

I gaze out over the blue sea, as I have done from this place each day, feeling the warmth inside me grow. One day soon that warmth will become a kick and then there will be no disguising the truth with loose clothing and false words hidden behind laughter.

This day, as I talk with my yiayia, he comes, a small boat set with yellow sail, skipping lightly from crest to crest, tacking on the breeze and coming to rest upon the shingle of our sheltered bay. He has returned, but he is not alone, and the chill hand of the graveyard grips my breaking heart.

Better perhaps that his ghost had not returned. He glances to the hillside as he secures the craft, then begins to climb, leaving his companion in the small craft, her pale dress vivid against the deep blue stripes of paint upon the boat.

I think Yiayia is smiling, perhaps mocking my desperate, forlorn hope.

Some say that conversation with the spirits of the dead offers intuition and sense, perhaps even magical powers.

I have no magic.

I have no more tears, only sharp revenge hidden in the folds of my rough woollen shawl, clutched in my fist turning white with rage.

Tomorrow the bees will have moved on.

Tomorrow I will have conversations again with my yiayia.

I will remain.

We will survive.