

Behind the Mask

Nothing is more peculiar than a child with the worn face and soul of an adult—a face and soul that gets you thinking about what could have happened in such an amazingly short life to achieve the distinct look of prolonged exhaustion and years of experience far beyond their age. This is the face of young Yiorgos, a fourteen-year-old waiter at my restaurant, *Ároma tou Spitiou*. He's a reserved, quiet boy who treasures his work and his cat, with little else interesting him.

My curiosity has multiplied every time I've seen the depth behind his dark eyes in the short year that he's worked for me. The minimal knowledge I have dives into the mere surface of the chasm swimming with Yiorgos' past, and it isn't near enough to satisfy my wondering.

Not only am I getting restless, customers have started asking about him. And I'm repeatedly forced to reply with my useless but honest answer: I don't know. Time after frustrating time, it's "I don't know."

This is why I've asked him to meet me in the restaurant tomorrow morning: it's for him to finally share his story.

~ June 15, 1942 ~

My brow furrows as the time shows 8:31—a full minute past when Yiorgos was supposed to meet with me. I'm not upset in the slightest; in fact, I'm *worried* about the boy. In all the time I've known him, he hasn't ever been even slightly late to anything. Something must be wrong if he's not on schedule today.

By the time I've made up my mind to check on him at his apartment, he's shuffled through the door to my office and silently sat in the chair across from mine, his black and brown-speckled cat hopping onto the table and gently curling up to join the gathering. Yiorgos' wide, mystifying eyes analyzing mine, he waits for me to speak.

Now that the time has come to simply ask Yiorgos of his past, it seems to be harder than I expected. I look down and start fiddling with the pen I keep in my shirt pocket, turning it over and over in my hand. No words seem to be leaving my mouth, which is interesting seeing as I've opened it several times. My hands have already moved on to cleaning my glasses, and with a final polish to the lenses, I set them back on my nose and examine the boy in front of me. He's sitting quietly, patiently stroking and studying his cat as he waits for me to begin talking.

"Yiorgos," I begin, and he drags his gaze back to eye contact, "I've called you here to ask of you a favor." I'm still avoiding the question because I'm unsure of the consequences. Yiorgos has kept his many secrets well, but it's a known fact that he lives alone. Unusual, considering his incredibly young age.

The next words spill out of my mouth before I can stop them. "I was wondering if you might tell me of your past... your story, if you will."

A long stretch of silence between us follows my previous statement. Yiorgos' face conveys the confusion and anger I've caused perfectly. The internal scuffle between my curiosity of his past and my common sense to retrieve my words has resolved in a draw. The background noise of Naxos

inhabitants bustling by and boats docking at the harbor are all that's filling the empty space where conversation should be.

After what feels like an eternity, Yiorgos speaks, frowning slightly and avoiding eye contact. "My story," he half-mutters with more emotion on his face than I've ever seen. He clears his throat and his usual solemn expression washes back across his face. He looks up, stern eyes latching onto mine. "I guess I'll just have to start at the beginning, then."

~ ~ ~

As you know, I am Yiorgos Galanis. I once lived in a small apartment with my parents. It was a cozy, happy apartment made of stained wood and polished stone. The exterior blended in perfectly with all of the other white and blue buildings blanketing the ancient landscape of Naxos. This apartment was one where you could feel safe: like nothing would ever go wrong. Most importantly, it was *our* apartment, and it smelled of moussaka, briam, and all of the unnamed scents associated with home. There was always a safe certainty that I could return after school and find my mother cooking dinner and my father working on his new designs. They were strong in a quiet way. I always knew that whatever happened, they would help me through it.

Saturday was our family day. No matter what, we'd spend all day with each other even if it meant cancelling important plans. Whether we spent our time at the ocean or roamed about Naxos on an errand expedition, we were together. All of us. I used to look forward to Saturdays.

But one Saturday was different. Very different. I woke up to a silent house and my parents lying sick in their bed. The whole situation just didn't feel right. They were feverish and pale, neither one of them able to form comprehensible sentences.

That family day was entirely spent caring for them. I did everything I could think of to help them get back to normal: retrieved water, took temperatures, supplied cool towels, you name it. Family always comes first.

The next month was spent similarly. I would buy minimal groceries early in the morning for them to eat and had little myself. My own health was infinitely lower on the list of my priorities. All of my energy and effort went into helping them.

And then it didn't.

I came back from the baker's one morning, and they weren't breathing. They were ice cold and didn't respond even when I was screaming for them to wake up. There was no point in trying to wipe away my tears because I had to show them that I didn't have the same strength they did—that I needed them.

But they still didn't respond.

I ran as fast as I could to the doctor and pleaded for him to help. Even he couldn't wake them up.

I don't remember much of the following weeks. My parents didn't have a funeral; I couldn't bear it. Soon enough, I was kicked out of our apartment because I couldn't pay for it anymore. I didn't have anywhere to go. I hadn't ever had friends, and all of my family lived in Athens. I'd never met them, anyway. I had no one.

I spent that first night high in the branches of a tree where no one would see me. It was the first time I'd ever slept outdoors. Sounds of cat fights and red-faced men arguing kept me awake. I was terrified of how much I didn't know about the world outside the one I'd lived in all my life. The unmistakable feelings of isolation and uncertainty had already crept into my heart. I was

completely alone in an unfamiliar land, with no idea of what I would do to keep myself alive. Worries, fear, and grief overwhelmed any other thoughts I had, pressing down on me from all sides. Pure exhaustion eventually forced me to sleep.

The next morning, I took inventory of all of my belongings: almost 5,000 drachmas and the clothes on my back. Rationing was the only way to make the little money I had last as long as possible. I would buy the cheapest, most practical food each day and try to find a dry place for shelter each night. My general location changed daily to avoid being recognized as homeless. It would be hard enough to get a job as a child, let alone a homeless one. Even if I did find some work, I didn't need an extra wall between me and normality.

After buying a fist's-worth of few-day-old bread, I scouted the streets for a temporary residency for the night. It's funny how your situation can flip how you perceive things upside down. Before, the stenos were a beautiful path to get back to the security of home and family. Somehow they'd turned into shadow-flooded alleys cruelly taunting me of my loneliness.

I ended up discovering an inset doorway of an unused building to stay in that night. I used to walk by the entrance on my way home from school every day. The white and blue that was once so clean-looking just reminded me of the home I'd lost. Everywhere I looked was a ghost of the life I had before. Everywhere I looked there was something for me to miss, and as I began to realize, there is no escape from everywhere.

I asked various business owners for a job daily, but as time ticked onward, my status as unemployed and homeless remained. Unfortunately for me, no one wanted a child as an employee.

One night a few weeks into the painfully monotonous routine, I was sheltering under a set of stairs from a crashing storm. For the first time in as long as I could remember, I was satisfied. Not happy, not even content, but satisfied. I'd found a dry place to sleep even during a thunderstorm. While I was sitting under the overhang, I watched stray cats scurry by to entertain myself. A familiar-looking one was sitting exactly opposite me on a cobblestone wall, getting soaked and staring directly at me. It was small and black with brown speckles covering its face. I'd seen it before as I was roaming the streets. It seemed to recognize me, too. After a long while of determining if the other could be trusted, the feline slowly stalked over to the stairs I was under and warily laid down to sleep as far away from me as possible. His green eyes watched my every move. I rested uneasily that night.

Sometime mid-next-morning, when the downpour had finally trickled to a stop and all that was remaining were puddles scattering the ground, the little cat awoke. To my bewilderment, he didn't scamper off as expected. He got up, stretched, and expectantly sat down right in front of me. His paws together and long tail tucked in, he looked properly impatient.

Confusion and fatigue slowed my thought processes, so we stayed in that position for quite some time before I came back to my senses and gave him some food in an attempt to understand his motives. I assume that's what he was asking for because as soon as he'd eaten the stale bread, he flopped back down and returned to watching me.

I, on the other hand, knew I had to get to work finding a new place to stay. It was so important to stay away from the title of a homeless child; I *had* a home. It was taken from me, but it was mine and my parents. Nothing would ever change that.

As I gathered the pitiful belongings I'd stockpiled in the long weeks I'd spent alone, I got to my feet so I could walk a few miles to the next cluster of buildings I would use for shelter. I'd barely walked 50 meters when I realized I was being followed.

There were footsteps behind me. Quick, light footsteps. So quiet I barely heard them.

I'd quickened my pace and turned left to throw off my pursuiter—then right. Then left again. The footsteps kept getting faster and faster to keep up with me. I had to break into a run to escape from whoever was trailing me.

I couldn't look to see who it was because it would give away the fact that I'd known they were pursuing me. But my curiosity had gotten the better of me. I'd abruptly whirled around to confront my stalker—to find no one there. No one at eye level, at least. I glanced at my feet to find a little black cat with brown speckles and bright green eyes staring back at me. He meowed a greeting and majestically held his head high. His tail dragged across my knees before he led the way to the next town, stalking the streets as if he were king.

Without even meaning to, I'd made a friend. My first friend. I couldn't laugh and joke with him like I'd seen my peers at school do, but we stuck together through everything. The little cat made even the darkness of midnight seem brighter.

I was all too aware of the fact that I was running out of money with only 300 drachmas left for food and occasionally milk for the cat. Clearly *something* had to change if I was going to live past my humble age of thirteen. I couldn't keep skirting around the edges of Naxos every day. That was a plan with an inevitable and very unfortunate ending. For me, at least. And my new friend. Even nine lives didn't last forever.

The next few days were primarily spent asking for work and trying to ignore the fact that my drachmas had dwindled into the double-digits. The cat and I kept our moods light to avoid the black cloud of doubt and resignation looming above us. A negative mindset wouldn't help anything.

I eventually ran out of money, as predicted. No more bread for me, no more milk for him. We got through the first few days just fine; I got water from the public taps along the streets for us, and food was something we had to survive without. Everything was basically the same, only now we had a very distinct countdown leading to what we'd always known was coming.

I wouldn't steal. Just because my parents were gone didn't mean their principles were, too. I wouldn't steal. All I needed was a source of money to keep us alive.

Each day my hunger got worse. I will never forget the excruciating pain it caused me. It felt as if a monster inside me was ripping my innards apart. Every step I took spun the world like a top, and I couldn't focus my sight on anything for more than a few seconds. I still can't piece together how the little cat withstood the incredible illness I felt.

I received rejection after rejection from job interviews. No money was gained, which meant there was no food to eat.

I truly thought we would die.

So I'd crumpled against a pristine, white wall, and the cat curled up next to me. The feeling of pure hopelessness mingled with nausea and pain to form a realization even worse than how it felt when my parents died: I was a disappointment. I wasn't good enough. I couldn't keep my parents alive, and I couldn't keep myself alive. The cat, the only friend I'd ever known, wouldn't last long because he relied on me for everything. All I'd ever wanted was to help everyone. But everything was over.

We stayed there for an infinite amount of time. I'd given up. I didn't move, and I barely breathed because of the immense pain I was in...

Until desperation set in. I lifted my head at the delicious scent of a bread cart parked nearby. I staggered to my feet and stumbled to the vender, swaying in place once I got there and blankly turning my head as I'd watched the citizens whirl around me. I quickly snatched 2 loaves of bread and half-ran half-crawled back to the cat.

We were devouring the bread for a matter of seconds before the baker and a policeman were dragging me to my feet by my shoulders. They were shouting at me. Demanding I pay for the bread. Beating me to force me to give them the money they needed. Every blow initiated a matching throb in my head. I was frantically sobbing that I didn't have any money, but they wouldn't listen. A particularly strong blow smashed into my head. I felt myself go limp, and black obscured my vision.

The next thing I remember is waking up in your office, exactly where we are now. I have absolutely no information to figure out what brought me here, but I have to assume it was you. You saved my life, even though you didn't know who I was or what I'd done. I could have been a criminal for all you knew. Thank you for that. Thank you.

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I sat there for more than a moment, stunned by what I'd heard. I study Yiorgos and the little black cat with brown speckles sitting on his lap and find new details on the pair verifying the tale. A scar here, uneven fur there. I'm still turning everything over in my head, and I get momentarily transported back to that day. Vivid memories of pulling the two men off of the boy, paying for the bread, and claiming he was my grandson who simply liked wreaking havoc throughout Naxos flash across my mind.

"May I go, sir?" Yiorgos asks politely after a moderate amount of time, "He hasn't had his breakfast yet, you see." He gestures to his cat as he speaks and smiles slightly when he's finished. It's as if a mask has been taken off. The strangely stoic figure has disappeared. His past must have been tethering him down and he's finally broken the chain.

"Of course, my boy, of course," I mumble distantly, still comprehending the unthinkable story.

The cat hops down from his lap as if on cue, and they depart from the restaurant. I stand to watch them leave from the doorway. They stroll back down the street to return to a small apartment. A cozy, happy apartment made of stained wood and polished stone, blending in perfectly with the rest of the white and blue buildings blanketing the ancient landscape of Naxos. An apartment where you can feel safe: like nothing will ever go wrong.