

KONSTANTIN'S BIRTHDAY



A HISTORICAL SHORT STORY
Ben Douglass

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AUTHORS INTRODUCTION

This story was first conceived sometime in the summer of 1998. It started out as three short descriptive paragraphs on the pleasure of drinking red wine, reading Homer and lunching on cheese, bread and fruit while sitting somewhere in modern day Greece at some of the ancient ruins. Strictly speaking it was an experiment in mood. The next year I went on a reading binge concerning the events of Nazi Germany's airborne invasion of Crete on May 20, 1941. I was so touched about reading the bigger-than-life heroism of the Greek Resistance that I knew I would have to someday write about it. I did some further historical reading on the Battle of Crete plus everyday life on the island at the time so that my facts would be correct. I finally imagined how I might feel as a bookish, romantic older gentleman that just so happened to be caught up in circumstances beyond his control while trying to do something as ordinary as celebrating his birthday. I wrote a one page synopsis with several pages of historical notes and filed it away. One month ago I decided to finally write my historical short story!

Ben Douglass

April 16, 2008

The early morning sun was strong, warm and inviting. Off in the distance fluffy white clouds, driven by light trade winds from the Aegean sea, paraded across the intensely blue horizon like so many misshapen animals and hulking mountains. It was the kind of morning that invited picnics, kite flying and squealing children. It was one of those mornings that could be talked about over a late evening meal with good food, wine and a table filled with the laughter of family and friends. And so it was this kind of morning, on the Messara plain located between the Psiloritis and Asterousia mountains, in the south on the island of Crete.

It was June 20, 1941 and Konstantin Koutroulis was celebrating his fifty-third birthday today. If he had had anything to say about today it would have been so very different. But like he use to admonish his two sons, Lexi and Alejo, sometimes you have to accept what life throws at you, bite the bullet and be a man. It was now Konstantin's turn to take his own advice for once.

Konstantin's feet and legs ached profoundly and his neck stiff and sore from too much walking, coupled with an overwhelming fear that kept him in a state of continuous vigilance. Every ten minutes or so he would look back and then around nervously. He whispered out loud to no one in particular, "A man my age should not have to go through this."

He finally came across a small, pleasant looking meadow that sat up against a hillside. The area was free of rocks and short green grasses supported wide swaths of pink cyclamen like so many area rugs thrown about. In the center was an incredibly huge, old and gnarled olive tree. Surveying the area Konstantin deemed it safe. The hillside offered protection to his back and he had a clear view before him to spot intruders.

Falling to his knees under the olive tree, Konstantin took off his heavy pack and leaned his out-of-date Mannlicher-Schonauer 6.5mm mountain carbine against the trunk of the tree. He sat there cross-legged for nearly an hour gazing at the beautiful blue sky dotted with white fluffy clouds. Every few minutes he would turn from the sky, squint his eyes and stare intensely towards the path he had just come from. The fear was starting to ebb but nonetheless still present.

The warm rays of the sun washing over him put Konstantin in a drowsy mood. Once again he thought about his two young sons Lexi and Alejo. They were among the 5,000 that surrendered at Sphakia twenty days earlier. “How were they coping? Were they thinking of their old father? Did they remember it was his birthday? Or were they simply just trying to survive?”, thought Konstantin. He also thought about the many hundreds of British Commonwealth soldiers and Greek resistance fighters like himself, who fled to the high hills in a mostly chaotic fashion.

Konstantin was never asked to be part of the resistance, nor did he want to be. He was a poet and a romantic at heart, not a fighter. Fate had clearly ordained his role in these events, where in his wildest dreams he thought he would never be. On the morning of May 20th Nazi Germany launched an all out airborne assault on Crete. Greek rebels and allied forces defended the island and Germany suffered appalling casualties that day. But it wasn't enough to stop the German machine.

What made that day even harder to live with was the fact that he had clubbed to death a German paratrooper with his hiking stick before the soldier could disentangle himself from his parachute. It was a bad memory, an evil and sickening memory that he wished he could forget. When he dreamed at night it was always about that soldier who was just as young and vibrant as both his sons. He also dreamed about the young soldier's family still waiting his return but not knowing that they will never see him again. Even now the words of Constantine Cavafy's poem, *Prayer*, haunted his lips: “A mother waits/for a son that will/never come back/from war.”

Konstantin decided to stop thinking now—it was too much of a luxury at the moment. He grabbed the green canvass pack and started removing the contents: one compass; a map; an unfinished letter to his sons; a knife; a tin plate; a canteen; a very worn copy of Cavafy's collected poems; and a bag of food. He left the other heavier items in the pack. He took the cotton bag of food and spread out the contents before him as if he were on a picnic. He gazed with pride at the supper before him—it was to be his birthday feast—and it took some daring to obtain the ingredients. There was a fist size piece of dried anthotiros whey cheese, six nafplion green olives that had been brine-cured, crusty flat bread, raisins, a tin of Dolmas, walnut meats, and last but not least, a bottle of red wine.

He took his knife and very carefully cut a slice of the bread and did the same with the cheese. He put them together and ate with great gusto. The cheese had a very rich and salty flavor—which reminded him of good times around the family table. He then inserted the knife into the top of the wine bottle and very systematically and with somewhat of an effort finally got the cork free. He held the wine up and read the label. It was a red bordeaux-style wine with 60% Kotsifali and 40% Mantilaria grapes. The vintage year was 1938.

Not having the proper drinking glass for such a good wine bothered Konstantin a little bit, but yet men were dying by the scores every day and all they had was hardtack and barely enough water to quench their thirst. He tilted his head back and poured a stream of the red juice into his mouth until it dripped down his chin and neck. He felt guilty about having such a bountiful feast while his sons languished in a prison camp. He hoped that they might find it in their hearts to forgive him on this special day of his. He hoped that they did not think poorly of him for running away and not trying to rescue them and keep them safe. He hoped that they understood that he was just a common man with ordinary ways and this is all that he would ever be, or really want to be. He took another generous drink of the soothing red wine which made him sleepy. As he lay the bottle in his lap, all of his fears subsided completely, and he closed his eyes for what seemed like hours and relived the upbringing of his two sons.

Konstantin finally opened his eyes and raised the bottle once more to toast his sons and all of the other brothers under German watch. As the warm red juice cascaded down into his mouth the bottle suddenly exploded, raining glass and wine all over everything. As he turned his head to the side a magnificent pain ripped through his rib cage. He pitched forward slightly, groping for his carbine but ended up rolling onto his side. His chest was on fire and he could not move. He never saw or heard the two German soldiers approach. As the soldiers ate the rest of his food and dumped out his pack, looking for valuables, they talked loudly and laughed in a boisterous manner. Konstantin's world was slowly turning a very fuzzy gray when one of the soldiers kicked him very hard, spat upon him and cursed. Shortly after this there was a blinding explosion and Konstantin's world went dark.

The late afternoon sun was surrendering to the subtle pink, burnt orange and soft red colors of dusk. Off in the distance fluffy white clouds of all different shapes and sizes now took on a grayish hue and seemed to hang there frozen in time like a painting on an ancient vase. It was the kind of evening that would invite silence, reflection and staring at warm hearth fires. It was one of those evenings that would make hearts yearn for the light of a new day. And so it was this kind of evening, on the Messara plain located between the Psiloritis and Asterousia mountains, in the south on the island of Crete.

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