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My Father, the Spartan

ESSAY BY JOANNA KAKISSIS

My father thought he was a Spartan. Actually, he was a bookish and quiet man who came from a tiny village of farmers in the broad and balding mountains of southern Greece.

When I was a child growing up in North and South Dakota, he told me stories about his life in the land across the sea, where we were both born. He would re-create the scenes again and again, not a detail different, until a fierceness pure and primal would jump out of the words. In Sparta, he said, lived the essence of fury, and it was Greece. This was the Greece that Henry Miller tried to find in Mycenae, where he surveyed the grim and lovely ruins and said this: "Nobody has yet penetrated the secret of this hoary scene. It defies the feeble processes of the intellectual mind."

I would hear that fury in my father's own recollections about death and poverty and how they tried to strangle his life.

I am a fighter, he would say.

For years, though, I couldn't believe him. To me, he seemed soft and vulnerable: a gentle man with a damaged heart and an impossibly awful childhood, an immigrant uncomfortable in a strangely bland land, a man who hated his physical limitations.s; a man, 27, who worked three jobs, went to high school at night and studied and studied until he got into university and into the fringes of the rigid Athenian world of respect.

I have always had to fight, he would say. But his voice sounded husky, and his eyes looked misty. And this was not what I imagined Spartans to be. Spartans had to be steely. They were metaphors for steel - knives, sabers, swords, shields - and they used it to kill enemies and their dinner. Steel to flesh became blood, and the Spartans never flinched when they saw it.

My father had never owned or, to my knowledge, even used a weapon. He didn't like to hunt and cringed when he had to help slaughter lambs for the Easter feast.

He was not ferocious, even though he would spontaneously burst into dance when he heard the low wail of clarinets playing a tsamiko - a southern Greek ode to warriors.

Here was a man who spent his free time reading Nikos Kazantzakis ("An essential for a Greek!") and poring over travel books about Australia, where he had always wanted to go. Who told me bedtime stories about how Socrates drank a cup of hemlock to save democracy. Who could spend hours at the grave of his younger brother, Panagiotis, talking to the headstone.

He seemed so delicate.

When I was a child and I'd watch him mowing the lawn like any suburbanite on our block, I'd

wonder how it could be, this notion that he was a Spartan. I refused to see him as anyone but a typical dad. It didn't matter that he spoke with a thick mellifluous accent or would spend hours searching for the meaning in a routine American joke about chickens crossing the road. It didn't matter that he never had any friends besides my mother and another Greek couple who lived in a boring North Dakota town two hours from our own.

"Come on, Baba," I would say to him. "You're not a Spartan. You're too nice to be one of them!" Then I would giggle before launching into my daily verbal stew of classmates who tormented me, math problems that conquered me, and Duran Duran songs that he never could appreciate.

Soon, we would find ourselves in our familiar roles, the comfortable child and the father who was not who he seemed. Only later would I realize that, slowly, an impenetrable wall was going up, brick by brick, between a girl who wanted her father to be like everybody else and a man who knew he was not.

But all along, he left me clues. I still remember a sunny afternoon in 1979, when my family returned to Greece for a vacation, for the first time since we left five years earlier. My father, his older brother Thanassis, my sister and I had taken a road trip and stopped at a statue of King Leonidas near the site of a famous ancient battle the Spartans had fought against the Persians. We took photographs and as we drove away, my father told us stories of how the Spartans battled with their minds,not their limbs.

"Being a Spartan means owning your faculties and senses, owning your spiritual and physical sense of power," he said, as he drove a shaky rented car and my sister and I looked dreamily at the blue, blue sea beyond the road. "Spartans never cared about owning physical things, like jewelry or gold. They wanted to own their destinies and, because they were strong and furious, they did."

I remember breathing in the salty air and wondering what he meant. Sense is lost on most 9-year-olds. Overwhelmed, I asked my father if he would stop at the beach and go swimming. We both liked to glide under the waves, chasing fish and waving at each other's blurry images.

"The fish will bite you!" he said, laughing, and the talk of Sparta vanished.

The photograph of my father standing in front of the statue of King Leonidas is grainy and hard on the eyes. He is tiny next to the rock behemoth that symbolized the man he admired. For years, when I looked at that photograph, I saw only my awkward and gentle father, his clothes the usual wrinkled and unmatched, smiling like a tourist.

I am ashamed to say the epiphany only came after I lost him forever. He died after a heart attack on a snowy night in March 10 years ago, in Rapid City, South Dakota. He had told me, my sister and my mother countless times that his heart didn't work well, and he could die any day. That was the diagnosis a doctor had given him when he was 20 and found to have a faulty aorta.

When I got on the plane to Rapid City from Minneapolis, where I was at college, I believed he was still alive and I daydreamed about the places we'd go together, the dreamer and his daughter. I talked to him and a vision of him in my head talked back.

"How about forgoing that trip to Greece this summer and going to the Australian Outback, like you always wanted to?" I asked the vision.

And I told him: Imagine you in your worn suit pants and creased polo shirt - Aristotle's unselfconscious essence - and me in my jeans and permed hair, a Greek assimilated. We will

drive past dusty ravines in a jeep, clutching a map we won't read and a bag of bread, olives and Kit Kats. We will drive like demons - the Spartan and his offspring - and find a way out of our mortal shells.

"OK, Yianna," his vision said to me. "We will go. Like we always planned."

Like Spartans, warriors who lived like peasants but owned their destiny.

The vigor of that statement had to wash through my mind many times before I saw my father as he saw himself, as he really was: a poet with a warrior's sensibility.

As a child he had lost his parents and grandmother to illness, his uncle to execution by the Nazis. When he walked the yellowed fields between villages, he saw dead men lying face down: starved, shot, shunned. And he would hear his disfigured heart beat to an unnatural rhythm, always reminding him that he would be the next to succumb.

Yet he dared to fight and believe he would win.

When I consider this incredible feat of will, I wish I could rewind my life and know my father, the Spartan, again.

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