

Like the Blood of the Wine Red Sea

The brow of Stavros Petrachos was perpetually sun burnt, his shoulder and stomach muscles tightened, his hands worn from the rasping of the nets as he hauled his catch from the wine red sea. His family originally hailed from ancient Sparta, where the admonition of the wives to their husbands: "on it, or with it," was more than just a saying. Generations ago, the family moved from the plains of Sparta to the islands of the Cyclades, to pursue the vocation of fishermen. And so, like his ancestors before him, Stavros toiled at his profession in a silent, grim, manner eking out a living from the sea and making a family for himself.

His wife, Aphrodite, was the village beauty, and was attracted to him by his kind smile, dedication to work, and an air of mystery which clung to him like the ancient stories of the seafarers of times long past. With his curled hair, strong frame, and easy smile, he looked like one of the heroes of old, born at the wrong time into the age of bronze. The villagers were proud of their sea-faring tradition, as each day before rosy-fingered dawn broke forth, the fishing fleet left port, like the thousand ships that departed the island of Euboea for the shores of long distant Troy.

The work was dull most times, only to be interrupted by a surge in activity as the sardines, mackerel or tunny arrived in schools and mad scrambles ensued among the boats as nets were let out and hauled in over and over while the clouds of fish lasted. Afterwards, it was back to the dull routine of rowing, floating, and waiting under the watchful eye of Helios as he made his way across the purple-blue sky.

In the quiet times, between the surges of the fish, Stavros looked at the wine red sea and thought of Odysseus and his men as they made their way across the scudding waters; but the time of the heroes was long past. Invariably the reality of catching fish somehow came back to the foreground, and he bobbed up and down on the waves with the rest of the fishing fleet, an insignificant speck amid the vastness of the sea, and of time. Despite the emptiness, or maybe because of it, he looked forward to the slow times: he often thought, sang a song, or planned for his family's future. Sometimes, when the sun turned the waves into crimson fire, he daydreamed of the heroes of old. For the blood of heroes flowed through his veins, and he plied the nets in similar fashion to those countless generations before him as they sailed on the wine red sea.

Gradually, as the years deepened, the tourists to the islands became more plentiful, while the fish became less so, until eventually, the fleet thinned-out. Stavros grimly held on, silent in the tradition of his laconic forbearers, and mended his nets, or varnished his hull; but the fish were never as abundant as on the preceding day. And so, recognizing that the fishing was never going to improve, Stavros and his wife Aphrodite, along with their small son, Perry, journeyed to Athens, where they caught an airplane bound for America.

Before departing his homeland, he and a group of his friends journeyed to the "hot gates" so he could make his goodbye to his land in the company of comrades. There before the monument, lately erected by his people, he silently mouthed the immortal lines of the poet: "Go tell the Spartans, passers-by, that here, obedient to their laws, we lie." Demetrios, his best friend presented him with a hammer as a going-away present.

"What am I to do with this, I'm a fisherman?"

"Not in America, my friend. Learn how to use this, so that you'll have a job to fall back on. When you look at this hammer, think of us back in Greece; now make the journey across the great sea; like Odysseus on his last voyage."

Demetrios' words were not lost on Stavros, for Odysseus did not come back from that final journey. The tears rolled down Stavros' cheeks as grasped the hands of his friends, each in turn, and viewed his homeland for the last time. In the background, the waves crashed to the shore, as the sea turned red with the passing of the light.

There was no tradition here, no sense of the ancient of days; no great heroes, larger than life that greeted you as the rosy dawn broke over the sea. Here, everything was cold, forlorn, grimy, and dingy. Here, everything that mattered happened yesterday, or the day before; there were no old ones to talk to for advice; there was no tradition; the only thing of importance was how much money you made. Here, the houses did not glint white off the smiling face of the ocean, they leered in blanched shades of brown or grey into the cold, sunless skies. America was not the land of dreams.

Yet, it was to America that Stavros, his beautiful wife, and his silent son, Perry, came to live. So in similar fashion to his ancestors,

Stavros picked up his possessions, like some ancient shield – on it or with it- and made the best of this new world.

The family moved in with some relatives that had come to Chicago several years earlier. Here, in a small apartment overlooking a movie theater, Stavros and his family lived with his cousin Alexander, now called Alex, his wife and three children. At first, because he could speak no English, Stavros was given menial jobs at a temporary agency. But gradually, as he learned to speak the language better, he earned jobs of greater responsibility and his years of hard work began to pay off.

In short time, he was made the supervisor of a crew of general workmen, and he earned enough money to afford an apartment of his own in the same building where Alex lived. His days were much like those back home: hard work, silent watching, and waiting for opportunity. His joy was his family, which was augmented by the birth of a little girl, Athena.

Each night as he returned from work, Stavros would watch the children at play; Athena, smiling, laughing and talking in little sentences; Perry, silent and deaf, but always kindly toward his sister as they played together.

Stavros' heart was troubled; the world was not kind to children who were different from others. He grieved for his first-born, as only a father who has known the world, can grieve for his small boy. And yet, this small boy, who could not hear the sounds of the wind or rain, the clanging of the horns on Grand Avenue, or the music of the bouzouki, was happy. He smiled at his mother and sister, and hugged his papa when he came home from work; Stavros' heart ached when he thought of the pain that was in store for this simple child.

At a young age, Perry began to draw pictures of the things that he saw around him; simply at first; stick-figures or scribblings similar to those of any other child. Gradually, the drawings became more complex until the pictures that emerged from that silent witness began to become more life-like, infused with a vitality and vibrance that belied his age. Stavros began to think that Perry talked to the world through his pictures, and his heart was gladdened by his son's accomplishments. But the world is a cruel place, and Stavros prayed at night that the God of his fathers, the God of his homeland, have mercy on his son. And in his heart of hearts, he prayed that his God

would be different from the gods of his ancestors, who were capricious and seemed to delight in the misery of man.

Perry and Athena grew up apace, but in different circumstances. Athena, at age seven, showed promise of developing into a girl as fully beautiful as her mother, and as wise as her namesake. She had many friends, and did well at school; the child was the pride of her mother and father. Perry was no so fortunate. He attended a public school, and because of the limited facilities at the school, was grouped with the "special" students.

The "special" student class at Sayre School was in reality, not very special at all. It was populated with children barely able to function outside a dedicated institution; they were placed at Sayre School because the other facilities were over-crowded. Most of these children had severe mental or behavioral problems, and the over-worked teachers could barely cope with the difficulties presented by their charges. Perry was assigned to this class, and largely forgotten. His school experiences consisted of avoiding punishment, dodging older "normal" students who teased or struck him, and occasionally drawing a picture when he found time at school. His one companion was a large boy, who was severely retarded, but seemed to sense a kindred spirit in Perry. The boy would follow Perry around, head lolling from side to side, and dribbling spittle from his mouth, like a large, overgrown puppy-dog. Perry and the boy, whose name was Bobbie, became fast friends.

One day, Bobbie stopped coming to school, and Perry was once again alone in the large, ominous school, that more and more seemed to Perry like some dark, empty cavern. His days passed one like another in furtive, lonely desperation as he drifted further and further away from human contact, alone on a sea of silence. He would have remained thus, but for the help of one young woman.

Miss Tristano was newly arrived at Sayre School, armed with a degree in special education, a degree that few at Sayre had ever heard of, and a kind heart. Instead of shoving the children in her charge into a corner like cattle or sheep, or giving them crayons and wandering away, she took an active interest in each child's life. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the lives of each of these children brightened as the special education instructor worked with them each day.

She did not expect her charges to be transformed into brilliant, gifted students; she only hoped that they could find their way through their

lives with a little less pain, and somewhat greater understanding of the events that transpired around them. Even then, she was disappointed at times when one of her little ones relapsed back into their own world as the result of some hurt done to them. Still, by deliberate, small steps, they began to make progress and leave behind their dark, lonely worlds.

As part of her training, Miss Tristano learned the American Sign Language, and wondered if she could teach it to one of her favorite pupils, Perry. He was such a shy, patient boy, that she sincerely hoped she would be able to help him communicate with the outside world.

She began his instruction by showing him pictures of animals, and mouthing the words "cat," "dog," or "bird" to him and then associating these word-pictures with the signed equivalents for these objects. Perry grasped the concept of the signs very quickly, and further surprised Miss Tristano by writing the words "cat," "dog" and "bird" on a piece of paper in English and Greek. He then composed short sentences in English, much to her amazement.

She continued to work with Perry on signing, and provided him with several books to read during class and after school. As a result of her efforts, Perry quickly learned the American Sign Language, and was reading several books a night. The boy seemed to be flourishing under her tutelage.

One day, she brought several sets of water colors and small canvases to school, so that the children could draw pictures. She'd read that drawing was a way in which children with disabilities could communicate with the outside world. Most of the children made random scratches or stick figures on the canvas, and gradually lost interest in painting. Some of the more severely retarded children ignored the crayons and pencils, as they did most things, and remained lost in their separate worlds.

Perry stared at the canvas for awhile, and began to outline a ship in pencil. He added waves and clouds overhead, and began drawing the outline of men on the ship. He continued his outline for a few days, adding here, amending in other places, until he was satisfied.

Once the pencil sketch was completed, he filled-in colors, adding browns, blues, greens, purples, whites and grays in profusion. At the end of two week's time, an image emerged of a ship borne on the

wine-red sea, the men on decks with their ears plugged. Lashed to the main mast was a man; his ears also plugged, his face turned toward the shore where women swam, their mouths open in song.

Miss Tristano could scarcely believe her eyes when she saw the completed painting. Here on the canvas was Odysseus and his men, given new life by this strange, silent boy.

Encouraged by Perry's artistic talent and facility with the American Sign Language, she convinced the principal of the school to allow Perry to take a series of tests to determine his abilities. Perry completed a battery of tests over a three-day period. At the end of that time, it was determined that he had an IQ of 185. After the initial euphoria, the principal and Miss Tristano were faced with a dilemma: what would they do with their curious little boy?

The initial reaction of the principal was to ignore the test results, and pretend that everything was the same as it was before Perry completed the battery of tests. "We can't just ignore these tests. This boy is gifted; we can't help him to develop his potential here – I'm in way over my head," pleaded Miss Tristano to Mr. Goff, the principal.

"What would you suggest, then?" asked Mr. Goff.

"I'm sure there must be a facility here in the city that could help him; not only is this boy bright, but he has a remarkable artistic ability. Mr. Goff, he really doesn't have a chance here; the 'normal' kids make fun of him, and he can't communicate with them. Please sir, can't we try to help him?"

Mr. Goff had been a principal at Sayre School for ten years, and had been an educator for over thirty-five years. In all that time, he had never seen a child with an IQ of 185, and with the artistic abilities that Perry had. Although he usually had a gruff demeanor, he was a kind old man and was concerned about the welfare of his pupils as well as his teachers.

"Miss Tristano, I'm afraid I'm in over my head, as well. Until you came here, we didn't even have a working special education department. I don't know how to help the boy, I'm sorry."

"How about if we try to help him together, Mr. Goff?" said Miss Tristano.

For the first time in many years, George Goff remembered why he'd become a teacher. He turned around, looking at the wan sunlight coming in the barred windows of the school, and surreptitiously wiped his eye with his sleeve.

Sometimes, in the night, when the summer heat made work oppressive, Stavros thought of Greece, and the sea breeze that cooled his body after hauling in the nets. It was times like these when his heart was filled with longing for the sea, and his country, and he could not bear the sight of the hammer given to him as a parting gift from his friends. The hammer brought back too many bitter memories, and left him with a dread assurance that he would never see his homeland again.

Gradually, his longing for the sea and the islands of the Cyclades became a dull ache, and he could bear to look at the hammer without a reproach for his departure from Greece. Finally, he developed an idea that he would use the hammer to build picture frames for his son's paintings. By creating these picture frames, he learned to fashion some goodness out of the ache in his heart; like some ancient artificer transforming dross into gold.

Miss Tristano called several of her friends to determine if they were aware of any schools or programs that could help Perry. Finally, she learned of a new program that the city was developing to help gifted children, called the magnet program. She contacted a friend of hers, Richard Kuchinski, who was working at one of the schools.

Rich was initially interested in Perry's test results, but when he learned of the boy's disabilities, he became concerned. "Right now, we don't have the ability to work with a child like Perry. We're not equipped to handle a child with his needs."

"But Rich, he's a brilliant young boy, and he has a remarkable talent for painting. I'm sure he'd benefit from someone who could work with him, and develop his artistic abilities. I've done as much as I can for him, but he's far outstripped my ability to teach him anything but the basics of painting."

"Okay, Liz, I'll see if we can find someone who can help him with painting, and who knows how to use sign language. Please don't set your hopes too high; it might be next to impossible to find someone with an artistic background who can use sign language."

Several weeks passed, and Miss Tristano hadn't heard from Rich Kuchinski. She and Perry spent a great deal of time talking, reading and painting; but she was conscious of her lack of artistic ability, and she always felt as if she were tying Perry down.

It was spring-time and the days were warming; Easter was coming and in the small Greek community it was a time of celebration. Each year, at Easter time, the Greek Church on Diversey Avenue held a feast that was attended by all the parishioners and their guests. This year, Perry invited Miss Tristano to attend the feast. She was Roman Catholic and had never been inside a Greek Orthodox church.

The church, modeled after those in Greece, was white with a blue roof. Inside, golden icons lined the walls, and the altar at the back end of the church was encrusted with gold and jewels. As the light from the surrounding candles glinted off the gold, it harkened back to the ancient myths of the Golden Fleece, or of a road race interrupted by golden apples lying on the road.

After the service, the congregation streamed into the vestibule, and out onto the patio. Here, they were greeted by food vendors; wine, olive and cheese merchants; bakers and pastry chefs; people brewing strong, black coffee; and old women offering hand-sewn clothing, scarves, and hand-made shoes. Everywhere, people were laughing, dancing, drinking or eating, as they threw off their Lenten solemnity and rejoiced at the coming of Spring and the Resurrection of their Savior.

As the dances started, the young girls and boys, outfitted in traditional Greek costumes, began to form lines and accompanied by the clapping of their parent's hands, began to whirl in every direction. Miss Tristano smiled as she watched Perry, unencumbered by his disability, dance and whirl with the other children.

After the dancing was concluded, the priest gathered the community together to auction items that were made by the various members of the church. The auction began slowly at first, but gained momentum as people vied for scarves, items of clothing, bottles of wine, or pastry collections. Finally, the auction was almost completed, when a small icon was presented as the final item of the day.

The painting depicted the angel Gabriel, arrayed in white robe with wine-red sleeves, bowing before Mary to announce her conception of the Savior. Mary's face, a study of serenity and grace, was outlined by

a golden halo that gleamed ethereally against the dark background of her humble home. The painting was the subject of intense bidding, and ultimately fetched a price of \$50, a considerable sum to these Greek immigrants, and a welcome addition to the church coffers.

Father Christos came over to Stavros and his family at the conclusion of the auction, and walking up to Perry, signed a simple thank-you to the boy. Miss Tristano was astonished that the priest knew the language, and asked him if he was deaf.

He replied in English, thick with a Greek accent, that he was not. Sensing her question, he replied "I learned the sign language to talk to Perry. I was just thanking him for the icon, which raised so much money for the parish."

Perry, walking up to his teacher, hugged her and turned his face up to her with an almost beatific smile. She could not help the tears that coursed down her face as she hugged this special little boy, all the while holding the painting that she'd purchased to her heart.

It was later in the day that she learned that Perry and his father collaborated on these icons: Stavros fashioning the frames, like some ancient artificer of eternity, and Perry completed the painting. Somehow, this act of father and son working together to create this beautiful image seemed right to her, just as the Easter celebration seemed somehow to capture a little bit of the magic from ancient Greece, as if the old myths had come to life.

Shortly after the Easter festival, Miss Tristano received a letter from the School Board notifying her that Perry had been accepted in the gifted student program, and that he would be placed in the fine arts academy to receive additional training in painting and sculpture.

Perry's days at the academy were a time of joy and gladness: he was no longer a deaf-mute separated from the other children by a gulf of isolation. Here, he was like the other children: talented, accepted, and possessed of a talent that was manifest in his paintings: paintings that became more luminous as his joy increased. It was as if he had come alive after so many years of enforced hibernation: like a withered fig-tree blessed by the prayer of some long ago prophet, and springing to life unexpectedly.

The years passed, as they are wont to do, with or without our noticing, oblivious to our acceptance or approval. Miss Tristano still taught the

“special” student class at Sayre School, but her budget was now larger, and the reforms that she introduced were now commonplace, and the lives of her students were more fulfilled.

Stavros, Aphrodite, Athena and Perry had visited Greece several times, remembering to bring items from America to their friends and family. Stavros no longer ached for his homeland: over the years he had adopted his new land, and was fiercely proud of his double heritage as a Greek-American. In his veins coursed the blood of his ancestors, along with the blood of his adopted homeland that had taken the principles of democracy first developed in Greece, and used them in this new country. He still carved picture frames for Perry’s paintings, and one, in particular, was intended for his son’s masterpiece.

And what became of Perry? He graduated at the head of his class in grade-school, high school, and college and went on to develop a career as a successful artist, painting in oil like one of the Renaissance masters come alive.

At his first exhibition at the Art Institute, Perry’s friends and mentors were in attendance: his father, mother and sister; Miss Tristano and Mr. Goff. Perry led them through the exhibit, along a path that wended its way, maze-like, from painting to painting. Stavros wondered where the young man placed his special frame; where Perry’s masterpiece was located.

Gradually, Perry led the group through the exhibit, and negotiated the path of the maze until they were standing in front of a painting at the center of the work. Stavros stopped in his tracks, for here was the frame he’d made for his son, outlining, like a halo, the picture of a man hauling in his nets at the end of a day’s catch; his brow sun-burnt, his shoulder and stomach muscles taut from work, his hands rough from the rasping of the nets as he hauled them in from the wine-red sea. And in the background was an ancient boat, a crew full of sailors, their ears plugged against the singing of the sirens adjacent to the rocks near the shore; and a man chained to the mast, his ears unplugged, his face a study in rapture as he listened to the chorus of the sirens and joined with them in their euphoric hymn, alive with wonder and delight. Stavros’ tears coursed down his face as he stared at Perry chained to the mast of the ship, singing in his heroic voice, afloat on the wine red sea.