

THE DEVIL'S HOLE

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Greeks gather to socialize. Sometimes, I loathed to attend. Tonight, I overcame my reluctance and ran into a childhood friend, Connie, who was a couple years older. My father died when I was five. Connie's father, years later. As we grew older, we went our separate ways;

Connie married young, and I attended university. We sat at a table occupied by us kids of immigrant parents. After updating each other on our adult milestones — jobs, relationships, children, or not — we covered the awkward silence by recounting stories of our childhood escapades. I wondered how we survived to adulthood. Searching for conversation material, I mentioned how our fathers hunted together and how crazy it was that we little kids tagged along.

"I mean, seriously, I went as young as three!"

"Child protective services would have taken us away today."

I laughed, "would that have been so bad?"

"I craved being a regular American kid sometimes."

Greek immigrants hung out with patriotis, others from their hometowns or local area of the Old Country, as they would call it. Some had made the journey across the Atlantic together; others met for the first time on American soil. Funny thing about immigrants, they cast themselves out from their home countries to find better lives in foreign places, but cling more stridently to social, cultural, and language norms of the country they left behind.

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In our home, we only spoke Greek. It is my first language. When I attended kindergarten and the teacher asked me to write the alphabet, I eagerly wrote the Greek letters. Our food was Greek. Our desserts were Greek. Our drinks were Greek. The family joke is that I learned English in the streets playing with other American kids.

"Sometimes, I was glad I wasn't, too."

Connie nodded. "Still, what fathers take their kids on a playdate while they hunt?"

My father loved hunting. He had a double-barrel side-by-side 20-gauge shotgun. I always thought the over-and-under shotguns were cooler. I could take apart and put together his shotgun with my eyes closed. I'd seen him do it hundreds of times to clean it. He hunted birds, I can't remember what kind, and jack rabbits.

"I remember when my dad killed a jack rabbit," I sighed. "I sat next to the dead body. The rabbit's dark eyes were open but lifeless. I stroked the soft grey fur, tears streaming down my face saying, 'Why, Mr. Bunny Rabbit, did you have to get in front of my daddy's gun? Why?'"

"And?" Connie raised an eyebrow.

"My father continued to hunt until his dying day."

"Psychological trauma of children wasn't on our fathers' radar."

I raised my eyebrows in the Greek gesture for 'no'.

My father hunted with other Greek men. Sometimes his hunting friends would bring their kids, too. One of those kids was Connie. Our fathers met through the Greek community. Her mother, mine, and any other Greek women would stay home, drink Greek coffee, gossip, and prepare food for the hunters' return. We kids preferred to go with our fathers, away from the constraining reach of our old-world conservative mothers. We were fortified with hot chocolate, our fathers with American coffee, laced with something to 'keep the chill off the bones.' I loved the smell of coffee, but not theirs, which smelled like the iodine my mother wiped on my scrapes and cuts. Our fathers lapped it up, loaded their guns, extra cartridges in pockets or in straps across their chest bandolier style. The guns were breeched over their arms as they walked over the fields to their positions. Locking the shotguns on sighting their prey, they aimed high for birds, or ground level for jackrabbits. The bang of shots fired and acidic smell of gunpowder were the background effects we played against. We would run free around the fields; making up games, getting dirty, and running free while our fathers would cull the local wildlife.

We were admonished to stay behind the line of hunters: never in front, never to the side, and never out of earshot.

“I have a reoccurring dream about those times.”

I recounted the dream where Connie and I come across a deep, dark, and dank hole. As she was older, I was the servant to her master, so of course I was sent down into the hole for reconnaissance. She remained up top, peering over the rim as she commanded me to go deeper into the hole.

The hole was more like a crater. A meteorite strike point, dirt exploded outward to form the crater. The middle deep, dark, and dank. The scent of overturned soil permeated around me. Scorched earth assaulted my nostrils. I coughed and my eyes watered. I threaded my way downward gingerly, the soles of my canvas Keds caked with mud, white sides streaked in brown earth.

Each step took me deeper into the hole. Each step became more difficult. Each step squelched in the mud. When I lifted my foot, the mud gripped my shoe, sucking my foot back down, as if stuck to industrial-strength glue. I fought more with each step. As I crept forward, Connie yelled commands from her safe perch.

“What do you see?”

I stopped. “Nothing!”

I wished Connie would get bored and recall me. Instead, she urged me deeper.

“Keep going!”

Connie had the command-the-younger-kids voice down pat.

Compelled to continue or face ridicule as a coward, I glanced at her face peering over the rim. Her head was silhouetted by grey cloudy sky, her face in shadow. She seemed smaller, and further away than I expected. How far had I walked? I was getting exhausted fighting the mud, like fingers gripping my shoes. Sweat started to bead on my forehead. The air I pulled into my lungs seemed warmer. The day had started out overcast and cold.

In the hole, I turned to search the darkness to gauge the distance to the centre. From above the hole had seemed deep, but now it seemed endless.

What was that? I squinted. Was that a fire? When had the meteorite hit? Could we have arrived so soon after? I unzipped my jacket and flapped the sides to let in cold air. I looked down. Red shone through the breaks in the mud. Like the centre of a fire.

Was the mud turning into lava? Would my shoes melt? Would I burn up?

My legs started to quiver; they threatened to collapse under me. How fast could I run back? I couldn't move. The orange glow in the depths of the hole seemed to vibrate like the shimmer of heat waves across pavement during the hottest days of summer. The glow intensified. Was that a darker spot inside the circle of orange? I tried to look away. I tried to move my feet. I tried to shout to Connie. My throat was dry. My voice came out like a frog's croak. My heart thundered in my chest.

Something moved. Something grew. Something came to life.

The heat from the orange glow blurred the edges of a dark form. The dark blotch pulsed, expanding and contracting as if breathing. Slowly the figure unfurled like an origami creature unfolding itself. The dark blotted out the orange glow. My heart raced. I couldn't breathe. My feet were immobile. I tried to look away, but the figure captivated my vision. A voice hammered at my brain.

"Hurry up! We're leaving!" Connie's voice rang out.

They were going to leave me.

In the dark shape, two dots of red formed. Like eyes. The creature had eyes and where there were eyes there was a mouth and where there was a mouth there were teeth. The creature rising from the center of the hole would eat me.

My mother would never let me go hunting with my father ever again.

My brain yelled run, but my feet were stuck, captive in the mire. I pulled, then pulled harder. My feet escaped with a noise like sucking the marrow out of a bone. I hoped it wasn't mine. I lurched forward into the mud. I scrambled to push myself off the ground. I crawled on all fours. I heard a hissing behind me; then a low rumble that formed into an angry growl. I didn't look back. I couldn't look back. I shouldn't look back.

Something rough, something sharp, something slimy slid across the skin of my ankle. I shivered at the feel of it.

I scurried faster. The winding path up to the lip appeared. Tears of joy filled my eyes, obscuring my sight. Connie no longer peered over the edge. Where was she?

No! Don't leave! No!

My heart pounded in my chest.

My father wouldn't leave me. He wouldn't. He would never.

I rubbed the back of my hand across my eyes to clear the tears. I hoisted myself up, pumped my legs and swung my arms.

Something grabbed my ankle. Something pulled me back. Something wouldn't let me leave. My face slammed into the overturned earth. My mouth tasted dirt. My nostrils filled with debris.

I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe!

I was pulled back by my ankle.

No! Let me go! No!

I kicked with my free foot and connected with something solid. I pushed myself off the ground. I ran up and up. The lip of the hole seemed so far away, but I didn't stop. I ran and ran. I reached the lip. I threw myself up and over and landed in a tangle of sheets on the floor next to my bed. My heart pounded and my breathing was shallow, but tears of joy slid down my face. "It was only a nightmare. It was only a nightmare. It was only a nightmare," I repeated to myself.

"You remember the Devil's Hole!" Connie said as I finished my story.

A cold hand gripped my heart. My lungs couldn't inhale deeply enough.

"What?" My voice cracked.

Connie continued without acknowledging my reaction.

“We found a huge hole in a field. More like a crater. I made you go into it,” Connie laughed self-consciously. “I was such a bully.”

“No, that was only a nightmare.”

“You were probably too little to remember, maybe, but it was real.”

“Why did you say, ‘Devil’s Hole’?”

She cocked her head to the side as if trying to remember.

“It was so deep we thought it reached hell.” Then she hurriedly continued, “you said there was something at the bottom. You were so scared.”

I abruptly left the table. Connie said the hole was real and so deep it could reach hell. That’s the mind of little kids. Right? My fear and imagination had created something scary. I wanted to believe that. Connie said that I told our dads that something was at the bottom. No, I was little and I only thought I saw something in the shadows at the bottom of a hole. Of course! But what if the hole was real? No. Nothing was at the bottom. I conjured a creature from my nightmares and exaggerated memory because we called it the Devil’s Hole. Yes, that’s all it was.

I started keeping my father’s shotgun under the bed.