

DIANA PAPAS

The Fonissa

Esau was a hunter; his wife Pirene, a baker. She baked horta pies, cinnamon rusks and holy bread. He hunted hare and goats, turtle dove and hoopoe, martens and quail, and Father Castani's trespassing hens. His hands were rough and red from skinning and hers from pastry rolling and trimming. She liked to sing the nisiotika songs from the island of Cerigo. She hummed and sang the sorrowful tunes as she layered and rolled the pastry pies with a wash of tears to gloss the top, just before the baking. And all the while, Esau shot, hunted, snared, trapped and skinned to the rhythm of the Hasapiko dance.

They lived in a village called Katahora, in a little white house on the edge of a gorge not far from the spring of Neraida. From the terrace they could hear the waterfall, the Fonissa, or the "murderess" as she was called. She flowed into the deepest grave of the spring's dark green water. Day and night, they could hear her fall. Her scent lived in the walls and across the dirt-swept floors. Pirene filled the shelves with vases of dried yellow sempre viva. And Esau displayed his hunting knives, goat horns and rabbit feet (left hind and pointing south) along the cracked stone walls.

Soon it would be August the 1st 1888, name day of the martyr Saint Elesa. For the mayor, Panoyioti Carydis, this was an important time in the municipal calendar. This year, the breaking of the fast would be celebrated as a feast day, so without a moment to waste, he mounted his wretched donkey Vassilikoula and journeyed his requisition to Pirene's house.

Pirene and Esau were at home caring for afternoon rituals when the mayor arrived. Pirene was placing a large cheese pie into the wood fire oven. Esau was taking the skin off a rabbit hanging by its hind leg under the pergola. His red hairy arms were covered in blood, as red as the hair on his head. He grunted for a bowl of water. She passed it blindly at him with one hand while tending to a pastry gently with the other.

Panoyioti wriggled through the white arched door into the open terrace covered by purple bougainvillea, and as he entered, his nose filled with the smell of pastry and cinnamon-syruped air. His wet smile sliding under a thick black moustache retracted when he saw the hanging rabbit.

'*Geia sas*, my friends,' Panoyioti called out as he side-stepped the rabbit.

Pirene closed the oven door and wiped her hands on her apron. She invited him to sit on a green rush chair under the bougainvillea tree and immediately asked him, 'Would you like a gliko portokaliou and a glass of spring water?'

'My dear, an orange sweet and a glass of water is just what this hot afternoon orders.'

Esau did not look up from his task of skinning as he cut a ring around each leg and sliced down to the tail, working his fingers into the sleeve, only pausing to shake away sweat from his eyes itching down his face like flies.

‘I hope you don’t mind the late intrusion but I’ve come here with a request for our beloved Agia Elesa,’ Panoyioti sat back in the chair prickled by the pulled straw, ‘I hope you will help us celebrate this name day.’

‘I will do whatever I can to help, Kyrio Panoyioti, as you know, I always do, God bless our dear Elesa,’ she smiled faintly as she brushed the flour from her apron. She turned her feet towards Esau, ‘Won’t we dear?’

‘Ehh, *po-po-po*,’ he replied roughly, ‘We do what we can,’ and he pulled the socks from the rabbit’s little feet. ‘*Eh*, water for me too.’

Pirene went inside the house. She could hear their whispers but could not quite separate their words until she heard the name *Fonissa*. She looked through the little window framed with garlic bulbs and two faded icons of the Virgin. She returned to them with a shaking tray of water glasses and a plate of orange peel sweets pierced with a tiny fork.

‘You are a good housewife, Pirene,’ but Panoyioti stumbled over his words before plunging the sweet into his mouth. And he tasted something in the sweetness that was slightly unsweet and lingering which gave him a feeling of heartburn or else, heart pain.

Panoyioti wiped his sticky lips with a handkerchief, ‘I have some ideas for the feast day,’ he licked his lips, ‘Tiropites, horta pies, artos bread, honey diples, lemon rubbed baby goat, a precious lamb for the spit, and who knows, perhaps one of Father Castani’s lost hens,’ he laughed. ‘Of course, you will be compensated. The village will bring what you need. We extend ourselves in hard times for our beloved Agia Elesa.’

‘Thank you, good health to you both, and for many years,’ Panoyioti struggled to his feet, the chair falling backwards and he cried with laughter as he squeezed through the archway and onto the road, ‘*Geia sas*.’

Esau and Pirene stood in front of the house until the mayor was well out of sight, longing for more time to pass before re-entering the terrace together, alone, listening to the *Fonissa* falling. But soon the sun would be falling and the distant hills would be softer. For both of them it was the chosen time of day. She welcomed her husband’s absence and he greeted the solace in his hunting just before sunset when the light across Cerigo was most forgiving.

It was late afternoon when Esau hunted. His hair was a flame on the side of the mountain. In the dark blue mist of the Peloponnese the rock of Chytra rose from the sea, like the barnacled back of a giant sea turtle. He sipped from his bottle of tsipouro beneath the branches of a carob tree. Here in the quiet of his hunting fields, away from the sound of water, he waited for a sign from Saint Elesa. Maybe he would offer her a dove from a snare. He would beg her to weaken his hunting hands and pardon his sleeping wife. Could he ever forgive her? The whispers around her have not. He could hear them in the wind, in the market, in the monastery: *There goes the Fonissa*.

He picked up his traps and dragged his journey home, as prickly as the goose bumps on his arms, passing devotions and deserted chicken coops.

Pirene was sitting on a short wooden stool on the terrace under the bougainvillea tree cleaning horta leaves in a large porcelain bowl filled with spring water. The coldness of the water was stinging her cuts. Beside her was a bowl of red lentils soaking in salted water. She would boil these for dinner with the horta leaves, Esau’s favourite. She started to sing *Tora Ta Poulia*. She could shield in a moment without fetching and ducking. It was now as she looked into her bowl of water, she could float like a

devotional candle down a stream. There she was with her little boy, Adonis, just on six, playing in the spring, as she washed linen on the rocks. His laughter delighted her. He splashed into the water. She smiled and hummed as she threw the linen against a rock.

And only a plain away, Esau was hunting wild goat, taking steady aim with his well-polished rifle. The sun was behind the goat and it cast a perfect black shape for him to shoot at against a burning canvass. One day, he thought, he would teach his son to hunt goat.

Adonis plunged into the cold water and knee-deep waded to the waterfall under the fingers of the Fonissa.

‘Not too far, Adonis,’ Pirene called out but she smiled at his spirit. As adventurous as his father she thought, and a good little swimmer. She sank into a dream away from her chores and Esau’s commands.

Esau moved quietly leaning on the rise of the hill, pointing the rifle up towards the goat. He carefully and silently steadied his arms. One day, his son would learn the way of stillness, he thought.

‘Adonis,’ she screamed, for she lost his shape above the ripples of water. Her bundle of linen fell and she plunged her way into the spring, splashing, screaming, into the showering arms of the Fonissa.

Esau gently pulled the trigger, sweat falling over his brow and in a single shot, the goat fell, rolling down the hill towards him. It screamed and Esau leapt out of the way. It stopped as its head hit a rock and its scream was abruptly ended.

‘Adonis,’ she pulled him from under the force of the waterfall, dragging him to the shore. She held him in her arms, squeezing him, kissing his blue little face, ‘Why my son, you took my son,’ she shook his cold body and called out as people from the village rushed towards the spring.

No. It was too much now as she dragged her mind away from the dark green water, placing her horta bowl to the side, her face falling to her lap. She would start the baking for the feast.

She kneaded and rolled and rested the pastry. She folded in horta, fennel and cheese. She trimmed the edges and cried across the top, to form a gloss. She kneaded and rolled and rested the pastry. She folded in honey, cinnamon and one tear. She trimmed the edges and cried across the top. And this she continued for each of the pastries all night long. It was the early hours of the feast day when she pulled the last of the filo pies from the oven.

The mayor was the first to arrive in the square. The tables had been set with blue and white cloths. It would be a warm day but the arms of a giant carob tree would provide the shade.

Not before long, Pirene and Esau arrived by donkey and a cart full of bread, pies and skinned goats and lambs wrapped in muslin. Pirene set up the banquet table while Esau and Panoyioti prepared the spit.

‘It looks splendid Pirene,’ Panoyioti said, and his moustache trembled slightly as he surveyed the mountains and valleys of pies layered across the table.

‘Thank you, Kyrio Panoyioti, I hope today will show Agia Elesa great honour,’ she was still covered in flour but she was too tired to brush her face.

People of the village tugged at the robes of Father Castani as he led them into the square from St. Mary of the Orphans. And they tussled and grabbed at the pies, still warm and they ate more and more, for there was something in the taste they couldn't quite separate. They wanted more. And the musicians started to play their lyras, lutes and daouli drum. They all danced the Hasapiko dance, holding hands; they circled and stamped, kicked and leapt. Some cried, others fell, the mayor joined in, Father Castani too, and hand in hand, they wailed and rocked to the sound of the Fonissa falling.

Father Castani broke from the circle and crossed his heart. 'In the name of Jesus Christ, be gone.' He spat on the ground and stamped with his boot. Pirene shuddered.

The eyes of the silenced moved across her and she could see their faces asking. Father Castani held up his hands to calm them.

She stumbled back from the circle of icon worshippers who, on a Sunday, kiss the Virgin but steal roosters from their neighbours. If she could find her voice, she would implore them: *Who breaks the fast when goats and lambs have been slaughtered?*

She ran down the path to the spring, her heavy skirt dragging, wild sage and thyme pulling at her arms, where she fell before the Fonissa.

'Dear Lord, open a cave for me to hide in,' she exhaled.

But not far behind, Esau was counting her steps. Crouching behind a rock, he listened for their seclusion.

She crept into the cold green water, shivering, her skirt floating around her waist. She pulled herself closer to the Fonissa.

'Agia Elessa, open the rock for me to hide in,' and there, behind the Fonissa's veil she could see a small opening into a shallow cave. She took a breath, dipped under the Fonissa and crept into the darkness.

Esau was wading across the spring without a ripple behind him. He saw the trail of her skirt and slid under the Fonissa's showering gate. He crept into the cave.