

# In Passing

BY MONIKA JONES

THE INTONATION OF THE FUNERAL CRIES below heaves in the air. Yesterday the village priest died. Today the people of this village in the hills of southern Cyprus have gathered to mourn his passing. Black clad, they have come out from the alcoves, from behind the doors of their usually silent homes. They are gathered now at the Orthodox church at the bottom of the hill.

The wind has picked up. I am on a porch overlooking the church in the village center. I hear the rustling of arid green eucalypti leaves, the moans and chants of the villagers walking behind the casket, carried up to this balcony in bursts by the wind. I have been lying on this balcony since morning, in conversation with other students, drinking ice water and eating haloumi cheese, finishing my reading for this evening's seminar.

But I am interrupted by my thoughts during the passing of the funeral party. I cannot seem to concentrate when the midday dust and leaves swirl around the people like dreary confetti. Their heads are lowered as they walk toward the graveyard on the other side of town. Children that were playing tag in the church courtyard have now followed the procession down the street. I watch until they are out of sight.

I am drawn to this tangle of life, death and love of the people in this village. Although I am here only in passing, the depth of a place so unlike my own home fascinates me.

There is the haunting story of the massacre of 1974, when Turkish children living in southern Greek Cyprus were lined up and murdered. Today, there is a high wire wall marking the end of a Greek-Orthodox Republic of Cyprus and the beginning of a much poorer Turkish-occupied, Muslim Cyprus. The people in this village have stories of family members left behind in villages in the north. Now, they can only cross over between the hours of nine and five. All are looking with eager anticipation to the entrance of Cyprus to the European Union. Until then, families remain divided.

Here in Tochni, the villagers do not interact much with us. Unlike other places I have traveled to, there are no persistent vendors or children begging. It is almost as if we are not here, and the villagers go about their daily lives in an uninterrupted silence.

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Their oblivion disturbs me. Our presence cannot go unnoticed- every day we gallop through the streets of this village as if it is ours, running to and from our abodes (which are their old homes, still decorated with their family pictures, rented to us). At night, we gather together and drink while an American and an Egyptian strum an oud and a guitar together, singing. We play games, tell jokes and change location again and again.

Now in this moment of passing, when someone dear to their hearts has left this earth, we watch them from our balconies, witnesses to their sadness. But we are not a part of the village. Why are they silent?

Perhaps I already know the answer. Our stay here is the town's economic livelihood. How unfortunate for the people here, whose ancestors carved out the stones of this village, who slept between these walls that we now are living in, using the ground to break down the ideological walls between us as Arabs and Americans.

Are we buying their silence then? At least they are still here, albeit quiet. I would rather stay in the places of their past, in the lovely cream-colored villas with the old fireplaces, handmade lace doilies and hand-carved wooden beams, for these material things contain secrets and memories of the past, and maintain the integrity of the town. I would rather the villagers watch the stream of people pass through their town as it is than for the bulldozers come to build a fluorescent Holiday Inn.

There is irony in the fact that a depressed village is hosting a group of 30 young ones hoping to save the world and undo the deep division between Arabs and Americans. The tragedy that is life seems more poignant here. All of the yellowed memories tucked away from my everyday consciousness are rustling around, haunting me now.

This village augments the forgotten past of sadness into a vigorous rub with the precious hope of the future, stretched out on the bloodied sheets of the present. Being witness to the passing of this beloved community member, I am also witness to a dense history of pain and exploitation in this village and the economic hardships this community has faced.

And so I feel the fragility of all human life, of my own passage. Soon my travels in Cyprus will be finished. Summer flowers will wilt, dust will settle, and one day life will pass me by. There is madness in this world. This program can help us, Arab and American, to reconcile differences without hand grenades or seeing each other from behind the Plexiglas of a tank.