

BY ATHANASIA GRIGORIADIS

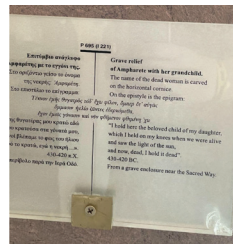
My *Cousin*

AT THE START OF EVERY MARCH, my grandma ties a red and white twined string around each of my family members' wrists. My grandma, or my *yiayia*, told me that this bracelet, called a *martis*, signifies the coming of Spring. By the end of March, we put them on trees for the birds to make their nests. I spoke to her recently and asked, "Did you wear these as a kid?", boisterously, she exclaimed "Yes!". She told me how her *yiayia* would tie red and white twined wool around her wrist, ankle, and fingers. She was told that the string would protect their skin against the sweltering sun while they were farming.



Grave relief of a grandmother
and grandchild in Kerameikos,
estimated 430 - 420 B.C.

My grandparents immigrated to Canada from Greece in the 1960s - my grandma was 21, three years younger than I am now. The village she grew up in, Mikrocambos, translates to "small village", which gives you an idea of its likeness. In pictures from Greece, my grandma has long dark hair that contrasts her now short blonde hair. I picture her walking along the gravel road surrounded by open fields towards the nearest lake to cool down with her long hair braided weighing down her back, sweating due to the dry heat. She walks the same path I would come to walk decades later under similar conditions.



Although I grew up in Canada, I have always had Greek traditions and customs as part of my life. Words that my grandma called me as a child came out instinctually around my baby cousin; "koritsi mou" - my girl. We always keep an evil eye in some form close by. Every Sunday, my family gathers for lunch at my grandparents. We don't eat Mediterranean Greek food but village food. Chicken doused in olive oil and oregan with potatoes and carrots, a side of feta, and home-baked bread, as though we are gearing up to harvest the crops. Growing up in Canada, I associated these moments and experiences with only my family. But two summers ago, I saw how these traditions were not bound by the borders of what we call Greece.

In the summer of 2023, I travelled to Greece with two of my closest friends. This was my first time visiting without any family accompanying me. Consequently, I couldn't rely on my dad or grandparents to speak for me. I tried calling upon the fragmented words of Greek from my memory but quickly realized they were mostly related to food. Near the end of our trip, my friends and I visited the ancient cemetery of Kerameikos in Athens. It was blazing hot, nearly 40 degrees, so we tried our best to walk under the shade of swaying olive trees. Here, in the open expansion of the now-tourist attraction, families are memorialized with great affection through large marble reliefs. One is a grandmother holding her grandchild estimated to be from 430 - 420 BC.

One of my friends I travelled with is Turkish. Her name is Sevda, an archaic Turkish word for ‘love’. Our families date back generations to an area in Asia Minor, or Anatolia - a peninsula of Turkey occupied back and forth between Greece and Turkey throughout history. Our languages vary greatly but overlap when it comes to food. We share our love for baklava and meatballs, which in Greek we call *keftedes*, and in Turkish, *köfte*. Sevda and I call each other cousins. What started as a joke has now become an affectionate gesture, in large part due to this day at the cemetery.

The three of us were walking together but eventually drifted as we each became enamoured by a different grave. When I asked Sevda about this day, she put it beautifully, “[I thought] about how the cemetery we were in is not just a tourist attraction but was once a spot for family and loved ones to come and mourn, to cry and heal, and that their memories are somewhat immortalized by having the tombstones still on display.” It was while walking by myself that I became overcome with grief for people I did not know but, culturally, I could understand. I sat down on a rock and stared at the tombstone of a family without entirely realizing I was crying - feeling the gravity of the ancestors that came before me and the many lives that led to mine. Sevda walked over to the same grave relief and gazed at it for a long time before she noticed me. When she did see me, she quietly joined me on the rock. I saw then that she was crying too. In spite of the centuries between ourselves and these graves, the history of battle and occupation between Greeks and Turks, and this land not being our home - we sat under the shade of the swaying olive trees and cried silently. I realized then she, too, saw her ancestors in this land.



Kerameikos archaeological site and my two friends (Sevda is on the right), 2023



The view from the rock Sevda and I sat on, 2023

To this day, there are Greeks who speak with animosity about Turkish people and vice versa. They claim autonomy over cultural aspects. They draw cultural lines that are as arbitrary as the borders that make up our respective countries. The history of the peninsula our families shared informs us that we are more alike than we know and that these battles for cultural ownership neglect to see the beauty of this likeness. I grew up knowing Greece in words and traditions from my family. Gathering around tables to rip bread with our hands, lamb on the spit, and lemon squeezed on every dish. Before I knew the word for bathroom, I knew the word *karpuzi* - watermelon. That was my Greece. When I went to Greece as a teenager, suddenly it wasn't only my family, but a whole country of people who wore *martis* in March and pretended to spit on you to protect you from evil. Then, that summer with my friends, I saw that my culture was not limited to those within these borders. I had never experienced an intergenerationally connected moment like that day. Even now, as I write this, I feel I cannot fully communicate the revelations of that day. When Sevda's hand reached to grab mine on that rock, it was an acknowledgment. Time, space, occupation, and prejudice have kept Greek and Turkish peoples constantly at odds. Yet in our silent tears, we saw our ancestors in the land, in the trees, and in each other.



There is no direct lineage between myself and Sevda - nowhere and no one to point to as our credibility. All we have are moments that transcend cultural boundaries, such as our shared joy for seasoned rice cooked in grape leaves — *dolmas* in Turkish, *dolmades* in Greek. To us, these feelings and knowledge are our conviction. The land knows no borders, neither does the culture that passes through.



Myself and my parents wearing our martis, 2024

Although today Turkey owns the peninsula where my ancestors once lived, I know that my great-great-grandmother once stood there tying red and white twined wool around the wrists of her children. As the Ottoman Empire collapsed, the Greek government told my great-great-grandparents to relocate to Mikrocambos. The land in this village was suitable for agricultural farmers like themselves. There, they worked for long hours under the blazing sun with their twined *martis* protecting their skin. And when the heat became too much, I picture them finding solace under the swaying branches of an olive tree just as my cousin and I would, decades later.