

WHEN THE CENTAURS CAME DOWN FROM PELION

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I MUST HAVE been the first to see them.

My mother had taken me along with her to the weekly market, held on the outskirts of our village, near the station. The train passed twice a day. We children would gather to watch it rush down from Salonika, from Larissa, knowing that it had come all the way from Europe and would be hurtling on to Athens. Our eyes would strain for a glimpse of those wonderful beings who traveled from so far away.

One time the train had actually come to a halt and someone stepped down from it. He turned out to be a distant cousin—half the people in the village were our cousins in one way or another. All the time he remained he sat outside the coffeehouse in his striped suit and European felt hat. I was too much in awe to go up to him. I just stood in the square and stared. Once he caught my eye and smiled. I darted away, pretending I was on some urgent errand. What could I say to someone who had come to Greece from so far, from beyond the frontier, perhaps even from America, and who had seen so much?

My mother got to the market early that day. She was convinced that all the best things would be gone if you didn't get there when it opened. A customer of my father's had just paid for some farm machinery he had bought a year before. My father, who had given up any hope of seeing the color of the man's money, had given some of it to my mother, who was not going home before having put it to good use. She had made up her mind to buy a shaggy woolen rug, a flokati.

It was for my eldest sister. Katya was still too young to think about anything like marriage, but on Sundays the boys had begun to glance at her surreptitiously as she walked with the rest of us on our way to the bakery in the main square. And now my mother had decided that it was time to collect things to fill the trunk for her dowry.

The spring morning was filled with the smell of thaw and muddy earth. Mist rose from the green Thessalian plain, cross-crossed with the lines of tall poplars that marked the roads. I was bored. My mother had been bargaining for what seemed like hours. Clutching her patent leather purse in her palm, she still fingered the wool of the rug, worrying about the color.

The air around us was charged with bargaining, the shouting of wares, the banging of copper kettles. Just beyond were the animals, rearing and bleating. If only my mother would finish!

It was then that I glanced up.

There, in a pale green field beyond the railroad tracks, I saw him.

I can see him still: his square-cut beard, wide shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist, muscular torso curving to join his horse's body. He was even taller than my father, who was one of the tallest men in the village. No matter how hard I try, however, I cannot recall what he was wearing on his head. Was it a broad-brimmed straw hat that shaded his eyes? Or a fringed black kerchief, like a Cretan's? He stood there motionless. What I remember best is the expression on his face, and his eyes, grave and thoughtful.

I tugged at my mother's skirt.

She asked impatiently, "What is it?" She didn't like being interrupted. The flokati peddler, having learned who my father was, had come down to her price and was throwing in a second, smaller rug for goodwill.

"Look!" I said. "A centaur."

It was as though she hadn't heard me.

The flokati peddler, without even bothering to glance up, said, "Sometimes, this time of year, when it's been a hard winter, they come down from the mountain, from Pelion." He shrugged. "Like the gypsies."

Then I caught sight of the others.

There were women and children and a few young males, all standing very quietly and remaining at a distance, looking toward us, at the market, at the bustle, at the buying and the selling.

No one else seemed excited at the sight of them. Someone near us said, “Oh yes, the centaurs are here again,” in an indifferent voice, as though they had come like beggars.

But the centaurs were not at all like beggars, and not at all like the gypsies that used to come strolling, dark and bold-eyed, through the cobbled lanes of the village.

I was astonished that no one seemed more interested, but then I had never seen the centaurs before.

So while the others went on with their haggling, I stood there with a catch in my throat. By now the mist had risen. The centaurs were so proud and beautiful, much more beautiful than any of the passengers you could glimpse through the windows of the train. I could make them out very clearly now, but I kept hoping they would come closer so that I could see them even better. For a moment I thought they would. Then the first one, the one with the dark beard, raised his arm in a kind of signal.

Was it a signal to me? Had he spotted me personally out of all the others at the market? How could I possibly feel any shyness with him, as I had with that distant cousin from America? And so, since my mother was busy paying for the flokati, I raised my arm in return and smiled, hoping he would notice.

My hand was roughly yanked down. My mother was frowning. I was being conspicuous, a target for talk in the village, something my mother did not care for any member of our family to be.

So I was never sure if he had seen me wave. When I looked up again, they had all veered in a wide circle and were racing off across the green-washed meadows. He galloped away, and the others galloped after him on their slender legs, their long silken tails streaming behind. I watched until they were out of sight, until they disappeared among the trees of the great plain.

My sister Katya’s shaggy rugs are long gone. She cannot recall whether they vanished during the German occupation or whether they were sold when we moved to Athens during the civil war. Anyway, as she says now, what would she do with them in her apartment in Kallithea? They were so heavy and they really collected far too much dust.

But the time I saw the centaurs depart remains in my mind’s pocket like a piece of unflawed crystal. I am told that they never appeared in our village again. Indeed, of

those who still live there, only a very few know that there was a time not long ago when, after the hard winter was over, the centaurs used to come down from Pelion.