A TRUE STORY BASED ON

_My memories as an 8-year-old personally involved in this story,
_More than 160 interviews with those close to the events,
_Newspaper Accounts of the events,
_Court Records.
PART I

CHAPTER 1:
THE VIRGINITY TEST

From the moment, she blossomed into a beautiful young woman trouble seemed to follow Panayota wherever she went. And that trouble, I’m sure her cousin Thanasis would have insisted, had a name: George Nitsos. Charming, gregarious, slippery—George Nitsos had no regard for the conservative mores of his community. He was the kind of young man who inspired fathers to keep their daughters under lock and key, the kind of young man whose smile said one thing while his eyes said another. After he took an interest in my aunt, it wasn't long before she found herself the subject of village gossip.

Thanasis was serving as Panayota’s chaperone the night she was forced to reveal a terrible secret to her family.

“Are you ready?” he asked after helping her dismount from his horse.

At the moment, his gaze rested on his frightened cousin, who he knew was about to receive a severe tongue-lashing from the rest of the family. Though he didn't approve of Panayota's errant ways, Thanasis nevertheless felt sympathy for her plight. The two had just returned from the nearby bigger village, where she had met with a doctor at his office for her second virginity test. The first test, conducted weeks earlier under nebulous conditions, had yielded unclear results and had earned the headstrong young girl a stern reprimand from her family. This
time, however, the findings were incontrovertible: she was no virgin. 

“Yes,” Panayota said nervously.

Thanasis nodded stoically and turned to secure his horse outside her family’s two-story stone residence. Panayota disappeared inside to face her family.

Thanasis, hoping to spare Panayota the prying eyes and wagging tongues of her fellow villagers, had waited for darkness to fall before escorting her home from the doctor’s office. During the ride, Panayota had admitted she’d indeed had sex with George. She liked him. He had pledged to marry her. There was only one solution, thought Thanasis, still trying to shake off the embarrassment he’d felt at the doctor’s office: George would have to make good on his promise.

Unfortunately, nothing could be done to protect Panayota from her family’s scorn. By the time Thanasis had followed his cousin inside, every adult member of her family—her mother, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents—was looking at her expectantly. Had she failed the test?

Panayota, staring at her feet, spoke in a hushed tone. “The doctor said I’m not a virgin.”

Thanasis found the tension in the home nearly unbearable. Would they chop her into pieces and throw her into the brook, as one of her elders had warned her only a few short weeks ago? He suspected such talk was exaggerated, but he also knew the emotions that fueled it were combustible.

Who would speak first? Skevi, Panayota’s widowed mother? One of her uncles or aunts? A grandparent? A cousin? What kind of invective would they spit at the fearless young girl?

James, Panayota’s younger brother, was the first to react, but not with words. He leapt at his sister, shoving her violently toward the fireplace.

Panayota lost her balance and fell backward into the burning embers.

While Thanasis and the other men rushed forward to restrain James, a screaming Panayota pulled herself from the fireplace
with the help of the women, who were now furiously beating the flames from the girl’s clothing. Singed but not seriously injured, she turned and fled outside as soon as the flames had been tamped out, leaving behind the stench of burnt fabric.

Skevi, still screaming in horror, could barely be heard above the men-folk, most of whom continued to unleash a blue streak of vitriol even after Panayota’s tearful exit.

“I’m going to kill Linatsas!” thundered James, whose curses were now aimed equally at his sister and his best friend.

Known by many in the village as “Linatsas,” George Nitsos had earned the nickname after purportedly being caught red-handed stealing a lamb, which, according to village legend, he had tried to smuggle away in a burlap bag, or linatsa. Although he would deny the story to his dying day, it would nevertheless haunt him throughout his life.

“Why did I let the bastard into my house?” James growled.

One of eight children, George hailed from Kupaki, although his father was often absent, having traveled to America to find work. For a short stretch in the 1920s, the Nitsos family had returned to Greece but on their next trip back to America, George was left behind and returned with a few of his siblings to Kupaki.

“Why did his father leave him behind?” James lamented. “Couldn’t he have taken him to America?”

George’s homecoming had reunited him with James, his old classmate and good friend. Not long afterward, George had met James’s fetching older sister, and Panayota had been courting trouble ever since.

“I’m going to kill him,” James repeated, only with less conviction now and in a much softer voice. As he spoke, he stared out the window to the west in the direction of George’s house, which was only 150 yards away. He was beginning to calm down.

It helped that the women were urging him to keep quiet, lest he be heard by neighbors and add insult to humiliation.

Thanasis and the other men in the room released James from their collective grip, and soon the room fell silent.
Aggelo, Thanasis’s sister, was the first to speak up. She leveled an accusatory stare at James. “Do you know what you have done?”

“I don’t care,” he muttered angrily. “Let her go to hell forever.”

“James, can you hear what you’re saying? What will you do if your sister throws herself down the ravine?”

James flinched visibly. Was he finally coming to his senses?

As Thanasis studied the young man’s round, innocent face for clues, he tried to put himself in James’s shoes. How would he feel if his best friend had shamed his sister? Would he feel duped? Betrayed? He would certainly be brimming with anger. It was obvious that George had viewed his friendship with James as a way to his sister’s heart. Though they were the same age, James clearly looked up to George. His wide-eyed admiration served as silent applause to George, for whom life was a performance. George had always struck Thanasis as the kind of performer whose self-esteem sky-rocketed or nosedived according to his audience’s response. In James, he could count on rapt admiration.

George was the friendly extrovert who knew all about life in the big city, the sophisticate who could tell a seemingly serious story with a straight face until delivering the punch line, which never failed to double over his listeners with laughter. He didn’t boast of his family in America. Instead, he poked fun at their respectability in a good-natured way. He was generous with his friends, often sharing the American dollars that his father mailed to him. For many shy young men, to pal around with George Nitsos was to bask in reflected glory; it was an easy way to earn the attention of the opposite sex without committing to the hard work of courtship or risking the rejection that came with it. The village girls, meanwhile, couldn't resist his boyish charm. He was effusive with his praise, oftenlavishing it on the fairer sex with such hyperbole that it bordered on the ludicrous. The conservative community of Kupaki, on the other hand, frowned when young girls accepted the overtures of this rogue with nothing more than a smile and a blush.

“Oh, my girl, my girl,” Skevi lamented.
“I’ll go and look for her myself,” Aggelo said. “All of you just try to keep quiet. And don’t start another round of weeping and swearing. You’ll have the whole village talking about this for months.”

“Do you need a flashlight, Aggelo?” James asked.

Thanasis’s sister, still clearly peeved, rolled her eyes. “You think of everything, don’t you, James?” she said in a sweet voice laced with acerbic undertones. “Now that you’ve taken care of all the other things, maybe I should just run this little errand of finding your sister before she kills herself.”

With that, Aggelo stepped out into the darkness.

Before beginning her search for Panayota, Aggelo made a mental checklist of all the locations where the desperate girl might go to hide. Every village had places where people could go when they wanted to be alone, and Kupaki was no different. She would start with the village spring, which vibrated with gossip and energy during the waking hours but was a solemn, peaceful haven at night. It was near Panayota’s home, near as well as where she worked, and offered several hiding places beneath the canopy of trees.

First, she needed to catch her breath. She leaned back against the trunk of an ancient maple tree and waited for her breathing to slow down and her eyes to adjust to the darkness, the spring gurgling just a few feet away.

Skevi’s lament—“Oh, my girl, my girl”—echoed in Aggelo’s mind. Not so long ago, Panayota had been an innocent young girl, someone who worked hard at school and at home. Always well groomed and neatly dressed, she was known for her sense of humor. People talked about Panayota as tsahpina, a nearly untranslatable Greek word that encompassed graciousness, efficiency, and elegance. Now she was hiding in the dark, a blot on her family’s honor.

Aggelo listened quietly for an exhale or a sob that would lead her to her cousin. Soon she heard footsteps coming toward her. They were too heavy to belong to Panayota, who was small, slim, and light-footed. This was the heavy tread of a man. Her
heart skipped a beat at the thought of being caught outside without a male chaperone. What madness had inspired this adventure? Why hadn’t she asked her brother Thanasis or one of the other men to set off in search of Panayota?

The answer, she knew, was a simple one: her cousin would be more likely to trust her.

When the man closed to within a few feet, Aggelo breathed a sigh of relief. It was James.

“Hey!” she whispered.

Her cousin let out a terrified cry, clutching his chest. Then, after taking a few seconds to calm himself, he joined Aggelo against the same stout maple trunk. As he did, he launched into a five-minute tirade that made use of every curse in the Greek language.

Aggelo waited for him to finish. “Don’t you think you’ve done enough?” she scolded him. “You’re the last person Panayota will want to talk to if she’s somewhere out here. Do us all a favor and go home.”

To Aggelo’s relief, James did just that. As soon as he was safely on his way, she took a few tentative steps, just enough to escape the noise from the gurgling spring. Then she whistled softly, imitating the call of a nightingale, and waited.

Panayota. Age about 18.
Panayota. Age about 23.
CHAPTER 2: TIRED OF SECRETS

Panayota had found a hiding place in her uncle’s terraced garden, just below the springs, where she sat on a rock and leaned against one of the stone walls, waiting silently. Stars lit up the night sky. Fireflies hovered and danced in the cool night air. On distant hilltops, shepherds stoked fires to stay warm and keep the jackals at bay. Nearly every home in the village had a vegetable patch, not to mention stairs and balconies decorated with potted flowers, vegetables, and basil—all of which filled the air with a heady fragrance. The ripening fruit from trees, too, could be detected in the cool breeze. But nothing compared to the pungent aroma of honeysuckle, which was particularly powerful at night and filled Panayota’s nostrils with its sweet scent.

She was still shocked by the savagery of her brother’s response, still numb from the indignity of being forced to endure not one but two virginity tests. Was it a crime to love George Nitsos? Part of her wanted to answer Aggelo’s soft whistle, but part of her wanted only to run away with her lover, to disappear forever. Then again, sometimes she wished she’d never met George Nitsos. Before he had come along, life had been so much simpler.

She met George not long after going to work for her neighbors, who had offered to take care of her in return for her help with household chores and work in the fields. Her mother,
after mulling over the idea, had consented. Life had been hard since her father’s passing, and Skevi had no doubt thought she was giving Panayota, just thirteen at the time, an opportunity at a better life. And she had been right. Panayota had fit in right away with her neighbors, who never mistreated her.

Then one day Panayota met her brother’s friend, George. Handsome, lean, charismatic, George was a consummate flirt and often said things that made the young girl’s face blush and her heart race. The two began seeing each other secretly, meeting in the vineyards near the village spring, which was perfectly situated between her boss’s house and her home. As the tone and content of their conversations grew more intimate, Panayota suddenly realized one day that she was being courted—and that she was enjoying these clandestine rendezvous.

When word of their affair reached her mother, brother, and her cousins, the Konandreases, Panayota earned an earful. She was called a slut and told she had dishonored her family. When she revealed the truth, which was that she had done nothing to compromise her innocence, she was met with distrust and contempt. James had recommended she be seen by a doctor, who would be able to prove or disprove her claims of innocence. The virginity test, however, had yielded murky results, which the doctor had blamed on poor lighting and a lack of necessary equipment.

Panayota, still leaning against the stone wall in the darkness, flinched involuntarily. The memory of her first virginity test still sent her flesh crawling. She had been so terrified during the test that the doctor had admonished her for her lack of proper cooperation, which he had said had marred the results. Not that anything had changed after the test. George, after staying away for a while to avoid further inflaming Panayota’s family as well her boss’s family, returned at the time of the wheat harvest. During the noonday siesta, he could be heard crooning a love song to Panayota:
BETTER DEAD THAN DIVORCED

Vipers hissing venomous wrath
Keep my love and me apart.
But I'll cross their spiteful path
To be with you, my sweetheart.

Panayota didn't think her family or her boss were snakes, of course. They were merely trying to protect her honor, along with their own reputations as upstanding members of the community. Her boss, intent on avoiding further scandal, had put in place several restrictions to curb Panayota’s behavior and had begun watching her closely. Just like her family, they felt impugned by George’s indecent behavior.

Panayota nevertheless admired her suitor's temerity. She began meeting him again, only now under the cover of darkness, furtively seeking his embraces in the vineyards and vegetable gardens in the neighborhood. After her boss caught Panayota sneaking out one night for another rendezvous, the same drama played out once more: admonishment, followed by denial, followed by a virginity test.

This time, though, the doctor's findings had left no room for doubt. She had dishonored her family.

Panayota, shivering in the cool night air, wrapped herself in her arms. She knew that she had no power to change things. She was a woman. George was a man. They lived by two different codes. While he could prowl the neighborhood with impunity, she could only be seen in public with a male chaperone. Even in the house of God, men and women were segregated. Matches were made by parents and elders, not by young lovers. Compatibility was determined by financial and social status, work ethic, and overall character, not by a meeting of the eyes or the spark ignited by a first kiss. A prospective bride’s value was gauged by how much her family could offer in the way of a dowry, and a groom’s value hinged on his ability to provide for a family. Both were expected to be God-fearing, respectful of traditions, and obedient toward their elders.

George had sullied her reputation, but there was still a chance
he might choose to marry her—as he had promised. The men in her family, Panayota knew, would be duty-bound to make sure he did exactly that. Her only other choice was to recede into the shadows and hope that people might one day forget, or at least forgive, her indiscretions. Otherwise, she would carry the shame of her illicit romance for the rest of her life.

It was nearly midnight when Panayota finally decided to respond to her cousin. Pursing her lips together, she whistled just loud enough to be heard by Aggelo above her.

She was tired of hiding. She was tired of keeping secrets.

See end of book for **Index of Names** of the people mentioned in this story. Also, on pages 68-72 there are useful **topographic photos**.
CHAPTER 3:  
MARRIED OR TARNISHED

Like everything else in the region, the village of Kupaki sat on a hillside and was surrounded in every direction by more craggy hills and mountains as high as 9,000 feet. The village boasted no straight lines, no flat ground. Isolated in a picturesque landscape of rolling hills and rugged scrubland, a lonely outpost above a river far below, it was a world unto itself.

The two main cobble stone paths dissected the village like a cross, the lines converging at the main square in the middle of the village. The houses were made of gray stone and had a balcony overlooking the terraced village, roof tiles the color of burnt sienna, two bedrooms, one or two fireplaces, a living room, and a kitchen. There was no running water and no electricity in any of the homes.

The most important public buildings were the church and school that stood next to each other at the lower part of the village, visible from nearly every house.

News and the gossip for the three hundred permanent residents, who supported themselves by farming and shepherding sheep or goats, were exchanged by the men mostly at the general village stores which stood around the village public square, and by the women at the water springs, the bigger of which was near the middle of the village and several smaller ones at the peripheral neighborhoods.

Kupaki was nearly inscrutable at night, a murky tableau of mystery and shadow, but in the light of day, the tiny village held
no secrets. Everybody knew everybody and secrets, even intimate in nature were nearly impossible to be upheld. A stranger stood out and rumors spread like wildfire.

As Thanasis pondered his cousin’s dilemma, he did so with her family, her neighbors, and the village itself in mind. The men in the family wanted to force George to marry Panayota, but the women thought she should absorb the shame of their illicit affair now and forget about the young man, who would most likely make her miserable for the rest of her life. Better to endure a few whispers and disapproving stares now, they said, than to marry a scoundrel. Common sense told Thanasis that the women were right, but his pride told him something else.

A few days later, when he spotted George walking near the village store, Thanasis hastened his steps to catch up with the young man. George had been avoiding him, but Thanasis was determined to confront him. He would try to make peace, but if no solution presented itself, he was prepared to show his teeth. “George,” Thanasis said, “you know and I know what’s happened with Panayota. I want you to honor your word.”

Before George could reply, much less digest Thanasis’s words, James approached from the nearby vineyards. “Hi,” he said as soon as he joined them.

George acknowledged James and then turned to Thanasis. “There is nothing going on between me and Panayota. Do not listen to the village gossip.”

“Leave that out,” Thanasis snapped. “We know better.”

James spoke up. “George, I treated you as a friend, and you came near me and my home. At the end, you slept with my sister and blemished her honor. All the family is against me now. I’ll give my sister seventy thousand drachmas as a dowry. I don’t want you to feel you’re marrying James’s sister without a dowry. I’ll support my sister and be a very good brother to you.”

George glanced away thoughtfully. “I need to think it over,” he said. “I have sisters who aren’t married yet. I want to be a good, protective brother and wait to marry until after they have married.”
“What do you mean?” Thanasis retorted. “Some of your sisters are several years younger than you. Are you going to take decisions when they are of marriageable age?”

George looked like prey trying to squirm free from a predator’s jaws. “I have no job. I might need to leave the village. I might have to go to America all together. I have not promised anything to Panayota, anyway.”

James’s young, innocent-looking face darkened. “Why, you two-faced fuck…”

Thanasis, moving a step closer, locked eyes with George. “Listen, you had better honor your word to my cousin. I will not let that honor be lost to you. I will see that you forget all these excuses and think hard on solutions.”

Thanasis could intimidate and even threaten George. Panayota, on the other hand, he had to treat far more gently.

He had always felt protective of his cousin, whose family, he felt, had already borne a great hardship. Panayota’s father, had died only a few years after crossing the Atlantic in search of his fortune, one among a million young Greek men to immigrate to America between 1910 and 1920. Already the father of two girls, he had left determined to build a new life for his family. But unbeknownst to him, he had already created a new life, and that life was growing in his wife’s womb. He never met his son. James was just four years old when news arrived that his father, a phantom he only knew through stories, photos, and letters, had died in surgery, the victim of stomach troubles.

From that day on, Panayota’s family had been forced to think about just one thing: survival. The fields they owned in the village produced barely enough food for the family, so, the eldest sister went to work for other villagers in their fields for daily wages. She also found work as a seamstress when no one needed her in the fields. Panayota was hired by a neighboring family, that looked after her like one of their own. James, Skevi’s baby, was doted on by his mother. If he got so much as an upset
stomach, she teetered on the edge of panic. Understandably so, Thanasis thought, given how his father had died.

As the days wore on after Panayota’s second virginity test, Thanasis spoke with her repeatedly, often for hours at a time, but she had a mind of her own.

“What about...?”

Each time she began a sentence that way, Thanasis knew his cousin was about to invoke the name of some young man in the village who had gone from troublemaker to domesticated husband in a few short years.

“Was he a saint?” she would ask. “Was he not immature?”

She would then refer to specific incidents known by all in the village, incidents that revealed the young man’s colorful past.

“Isn’t he a good family man today?” she would ask.

Thanasis couldn’t deny her logic, but at the same time he knew George belonged to a different breed. He was like a wild animal: cagey and unpredictable. Could anyone tame him? Even now, as the village buzzed with the rumors of his tawdry behavior, he regularly walked the path by her boss’s home, singing or whispering little love songs he had composed while Panayota was at work. Or he would stand on the balcony of his home, from where Panayota’s house was visible, and, feigning innocence, invoke an old Greek tune:

_Come to your window_

_And out of sight from your mom._

_And pretend that you are watering_

_The pot with marjoram._

Finally, one day a solution presented itself. Thanasis was just leaving a cousin’s home next door to the Nitososes when George’s mother, called to him.

“Are you just going to stand there in the street, Thanasis?” she asked in a friendly voice. “Or would you like to come in and have a thimble of ouzo with me?”

Thanasis gladly accepted the invitation, and once inside, he
only waited as long as politeness dictated before broaching the topic foremost on his mind.

“Aunt,” he began, pausing to take a sip of the sugary, anise-flavored aperitif George’s mother had given him, “Your family and our family have always had good relations. I don’t want to do anything to change that, but you should know what has happened between George and Panayota.”

“I know,” she answered with a perceptive nod. “I know the whole story.”

“Then you know what that means for a girl in our village,” Thanasis replied. “My cousin is tarnished.”

She frowned thoughtfully. “I know. I have girls myself, but listen, I don’t want you and your family to worry. George is going to do the right thing by Panayota. He was always going to.”

Thanasis cocked his head in surprise. He had no reason to doubt George’s mother. If she was right, then Panayota’s problem—the family’s problem—was solved at last.
CHAPTER 4:
OMEN

Panayota smiled to herself as the little convoy was approaching Kupaki. Just ahead of her were a couple of muleteers. Walking behind them with another mule was George Nitsos, her gallant fiancé, followed by several other muleteers.

Five years had passed since her cousin Thanasis had sat down to sip ouzo with George’s mother, and in that time, George and Panayota had enjoyed a long, uneventful engagement. True, they had never hosted an official engagement party, but they had nevertheless won the grudging approval of their families and village. Soon they would be wed at St. George’s Church.

At the moment, they were crossing a bridge over a river in the heat of the noon-day sun and inching closer to home. They’d left a port by the sea earlier that morning, their dowry packed and loaded by mule drivers in anticipation of the slow trek back to Kupaki, which would cover more than twenty miles and take all day. Weighing down their procession of pack mules was an assortment of bedding, chests, silverware, plates, napkins, towels, and tablecloths—a remarkable haul purchased with their combined finances. Like any other young couple, they had relied on their family’s wealth as well as their own meager resources, including Panayota’s earnings from working for her neighbors. Thanks to Panayota’s savings and the money sent from George’s father in America, they’d been able to spend a princely sum, which in turn had earned them a bonus gift: a magnificent set of glassware from the store owner in the big city near the sea.
The gift, as dictated by custom, had been directly proportional to the amount of money they had spent. Unwilling to trust the beautiful glassware’s fate to any of the muleteers, George had insisted on carrying it on the mule he was leading.

Panayota could see the future already. She and George would entertain often, sharing their home and their bounty with the same people who had once threatened to chop her into pieces and toss her into the river. She would savor the delicious irony of her newfound domestic status as she poured each of her guests a refreshing drink from an exquisite glass pitcher. “More water?” she could imagine saying. “It’s fresh from the—”

A terrible crash behind her—then the sound of George shouting in alarm—jolted her from her reverie. She turned to see him standing beside his mule and staring angrily at the ground where the box containing the prized glassware lay on its side. Judging by the percussive sound generated by its impact, the glassware was in pieces.

“Fuck the fucking box and the fucking glassware!” a red-faced George snarled. His charming smile had disappeared, and his mischievous eyes were no longer dancing. “Fuck its father! Fuck its mother!”

Panayota covered her mouth with her hand. Should she laugh or cry? She wasn’t sure. Finally, she decided to open the box, just to see with her own eyes that indeed her lovely glassware was no more. But before she could take hold of the lid, George jerked her away.

“Just let the fucking thing lie there!” he spat out.

Panayota glanced from her fuming fiancé to the other muleteers, who were looking away in embarrassment. She felt a growing sense of foreboding. Was this to be her future? If so, it frightened her.

On June 2, 1940, as everyone gathered at St. George’s Church, Thanasis glanced from pew to pew and saw that nearly the entire village had come to watch Papazois, the village priest, bless the
union of George and Panayota. Although he’d pushed George to do the right thing by Panayota, Thanasis sometimes wondered if the women in the family had been wiser: maybe he should have let the scoundrel off the hook. Dressed in his best suit and wearing a look of self-satisfaction, the lean groom looked like the proverbial cat that had just swallowed the canary.

A man in his shoes should exercise more humility, Thanasis thought. After all, George Nitsos was about to commit his life to another soul in front of God and everyone he knew. Thanasis knew from experience that such a commitment could not be rushed into—or taken lightly. He himself was engaged now to Polyxeni Gumas, a good friend and former classmate of Panayota’s. Their engagement, he reflected, was the result of patience and negotiation, not hubris.

A year earlier, while still an eligible bachelor, Thanasis had been approached by the village store owner and Polyxeni’s uncle, who had suggested that Thanasis consider marrying his niece. Negotiations, however, had quickly broken down when Thanasis’s father, began insisting on a larger dowry than the Gumas family could provide. Panayota became one of Polyxeni’s most vocal proponents, citing the girl’s beauty, work ethic, and academic achievement. “She herself is the dowry,” Panayota told Thanasis. Thanasis’s father continued to insist on a more substantial dowry. It wasn’t long before he had earned the nickname of “Dowry Konandreas,” as well as the moniker, “Gave dowry, will have dowry,” which was often chanted by the younger generation of Gumases as soon as he was out of earshot and followed by howls of mirth.

There was also the matter of Thanasis’s reputation—and Polyxeni’s view of him. He had made a disastrous impression, years earlier, when he had beaten up another man and the news had reached his father—and Polyxeni and her family—while the group had been talking at a market in a nearby town. Worse, there was his thundering voice. He was loud. His whole family was loud. They had to be in order to communicate out in the
fields. Such rough edges weren’t exactly a selling point when it came to seeking out a potential bride.

Thanasis’s sisters and their husbands had told him that Polyxeni was a very nice young maiden, but since each husband’s family had received a hefty dowry from the Konandreases, they had hesitated to say a dowry shouldn’t be an issue. Panayota, though, had possessed no dowry when she had been courted by George. She had acted on her own and in fact had disregarded many village and family biases. Thus, when Thanasis had all but given up on the idea of marrying Polyxeni, Panayota had reminded him privately that it was his decision to get married, not his father’s. Thanasis had countered that he didn’t want to disregard his parents’ opinions, at which point his cousin had cleverly pointed out that his father only disapproved of the dowry, not the girl. Marrying Polyxeni would not be the same thing as disregarding his father’s wishes. Thanasis had finally presented the argument to his parents in simple terms: “Polyxeni is better than a thousand dowries.” His father, impressed by his son’s earnest plea, had capitulated.

Thanasis glanced from George Nitsos, still looking smug at the altar, to his fiancée. Indeed, Polyxeni Gumas was worth more than any dowry. One of the most beautiful women inside the church, she exuded equal parts dignity and calm. She was a force to be reckoned with, and he could hardly wait for their turn at the altar.

He got it two months later when, on August 23, 1940, they exchanged their own wedding vows. Soon after, his father was singing the praises of his new daughter-in-law, who was hard-working, obedient, and gentle. In fact, it seemed there were few qualities that Polyxeni did not possess for Thanasis’s father. He extolled her virtues with the same passion he had employed while arguing against the marriage.