



The Mandolin

A Short Story by Anthony Aikman

"Antonio," said the old man, "When I die I want you to have my mandolin." He peered at me, anticipating my response, his pale blue eyes bright within the creases of his weathered fisherman's face. "But I cannot play," I objected mildly, but flattered at the thought of being the proud possessor of his well-known mandolin. The old man smiled patiently. "Antonio, you are a bright boy, you will soon learn to play, for to start I will give you one tune only." And now he hummed it. I knew the tune. I had heard it many times when the old man played his mandolin in the evening outside the village tavern or perched on a rickety chair under the shady carob tree near his stone house facing the sea. "I may forget it," I warned him, but he shook his head. "A tune is like the voice of the soul," he suggested. "Perhaps even it is the soul." He paused, "The instrument is like the body but the tune it plays is like the soul. No, Antonio, you will not forget it. It will float into your mind, into your thoughts and dreams. And once you match your fingers to the frets on the mandolin it will never leave you." He peered at me more closely. "You see it is the tune alone that I really want to pass on to you Antonio, so that you may share it with others. I will tell you the story of that tune. It begins many years ago before the war when I wanted to marry a girl only she was already engaged to someone else who, when he discovered my interest, threatened to kill me." He shrugged, "I suppose that was only natural, but it meant I had to leave the island for a while. Then the war came and turned our whole world upside down. I made that song for this girl. Except it seemed to make itself, for when I serenaded her it was as if my fingers turned to water and the tune came of itself out of the evening, the moonlight, the darting fireflies, the scent of myrtle, the call of the cicadas, the haunting look of love on her face...." "And what happened," I asked rather impatiently, but the old man ignored me. His thoughts were far away. Under his breath I heard him humming his special tune. "The war consumed us," he replied suddenly coming back to the present. "The boy she was engaged to went away to fight and never came back. The warplanes dropped death and havoc, and although she survived, then came the earthquake. It seemed," he said softly, "As if the Gods would never forgive us. Although what was our crime we never knew. They dug her body out of the ruins." He was silent in reflection for a while. Then he looked up, "but you see, Antonio, the song, the tune, that lived on. Take it and keep it for me." That was the last time I spoke to the old man. When the autumn rains lashed our island and the fat black olives were harvested, he died. With my father I walked to the house on the headland to pay our respects and the old man's widow, a tiny, wrinkled, spidery woman took me aside and handed me the mandolin. She did not say a word but pressed the instrument into my uncertain hands and I nodded dumbly my thanks. That was many years ago. More than I care to remember, and our village has changed out of all recognition. Tourism has discovered it. Visitors from the north like migrating birds wanting a place in the sun have discovered our remote headland and the olive groves sprout each year a fresh crop of white-walled villas. Only the tavern is unchanged. Here now I take my place with the elders, sipping coffee, fingering our 'worry beads', talking softly about times past. Now I take my place as the old man did before me. Yes, I still have the, mandolin. I courted a girl with the old man's tune and married her. But our children have long since left home to work in the city. Apart from the tourists this village is only a home for the elderly. The village school has closed. The few children remaining are bussed to the town and I miss the sound of their singing and laughter and games as they used to chase each other around the playground. So who will I hand the mandolin onto when I am gone, and to whom will I bequeath the old man's tune, the song of his soul. I rarely play it now for in the evening the tourists parade our street like a gaudy greedy patrol and music blares from the discotheques. But sometimes when I am alone I play it and the tune seems to soar like eagles over the inland mountains as if on their wings they will bear it back to wherever it once came from.