

CHAPTER 8

A COFFEE THAT IS NEVER JUST COFFEE

“In Greece, you pay for the coffee, but what you really get is the right to stay.”

A few days after that Sunday beneath the old grapevine in Panorama, I found myself back in Platamonas. I had barely had time to unpack when my phone rang. It was Dimitris.

“Έλα για καφέ.”
Come for coffee.

Just three words.

I looked at the clock. It was noon.

I have half an hour, I thought.

Until then, I had believed that half an hour was more than enough time for a cup of coffee.

A little while later, we were sitting in the traditional kafeneio on the square, not far from the harbour. The waiter looked at Dimitris, and Dimitris simply nodded.

Minutes later, two small porcelain cups appeared before us, along with two glasses of ice-cold water and a piece of loukoumi for each of us.

“He’s known how I take my coffee for thirty years,” Dimitris said.

We had not even taken our first sip when the baker appeared beside our table and set down two warm tiropites — Greek cheese pies.

“Don’t drink coffee on an empty stomach.”

He didn’t wait to be thanked. He simply waved a hand and carried on towards the bakery.

Then Maria, the neighbour, appeared.

“I’ll bring you some figs this evening,” she called out, before disappearing around the corner.

Then came the postman, the teacher and the priest, one after another. Each lingered for a little while — just long enough to leave behind a piece of news, a joke or a memory — before continuing on his way.

With every new face, the conversation drifted in a different direction — from politics to the sea, from olives to children, and then to those who were no longer with us, yet continued to live on in family stories. They were spoken of so naturally, as though they had simply stepped away from the table and might return at any moment.

No one looked at the clock.

When, for a brief moment, we were alone again, I glanced at the barely touched cups.

“How long does a coffee last?”

Dimitris smiled.

“No one knows. Here, coffee is simply a reason to stay together a little longer.”

He picked up his cup and gazed at the thick layer of kaimaki on top.

“Do you know how far this coffee has travelled before reaching us here?”

I shook my head.

“It came from the Arab world, passed through the lands of the Ottoman Empire, and gradually became part of everyday life here. Over the years, coffee houses multiplied. People came not merely to sip from a tiny cup, but to exchange news, discuss what was happening around them, and share their lives.”

He took a slow sip.

“But don’t imagine the cafés you know today. The traditional Greek kafeneio — καφενείο — was an entirely different world.”

His eyes settled on the elderly men at the neighbouring table. The backgammon pieces clicked against the board in a steady rhythm, as though measuring time in their own peculiar way.

“In many villages, the kafeneio was largely a man’s world,” he continued. “They talked about the harvest, politics, and everything happening around them. Sometimes important matters concerning the village were settled around those tables before they ever reached the town hall. Women rarely sat inside. They met in their homes and courtyards, and if a woman wanted her husband, she would send one of the children to fetch him. In winter, all she had to do was tap on the window to remind him that it was time to come home.”

He nodded towards the men beside us.

“In some villages, young men were allowed to sit among their elders only once they had begun to be accepted as equals. And then came the real test — learning the unwritten rules.”

“What kind of rules?”

“They began with the order itself. Older men usually drank sketo — coffee without sugar — because, they said, life had taught them to accept its bitterness. Teachers and merchants

preferred metrio — moderately sweet — while the young usually ordered glyko — sweet — and were generous with the sugar.”

A hint of irony crept into his voice.

“Of course, these were stories more than actual rules. But in a kafeneio, even one tiny cup could inspire an entire story about the person drinking it.”

Then his expression grew more serious.

“Women were judged by similar standards. A woman who drank her coffee sweet was thought to be gentle and modest, while one who preferred it without sugar was considered bold — sometimes even ‘a loose woman’. A single order was enough to set gossip spreading through the entire village.”

I shook my head in disapproval.

“Unfair.”

“And that wasn’t all,” Dimitris continued. “If a man dipped a bread ring or a biscuit into his coffee, the teasing began at once. It was considered a feminine habit, and even something as innocent as that could be enough to provoke disapproving remarks.”

He laughed.

“I don’t know whether all of it is true, but that’s how the old people tell it. And sometimes their stories are remembered longer than the things written in books.”

I looked at the copper briki, nestled in the hot sand.

“Why do they still make it this way?”

“Because good coffee cannot be rushed. The sand heats it evenly, and the kaimaki rises slowly — just like a good conversation. Rush it, and you spoil both.”

Then he pointed to the glass of water.

“Do you know why they always serve it with the coffee?”

“No.”

“Some people take a sip beforehand, to cleanse the palate and taste the coffee more fully. Others save the water until the end. Everyone has their own little ritual.”

He fell silent, then leaned towards me as though about to entrust me with a secret.

“But not all rituals were quite so innocent. Do you know what the most dangerous coffee was?”

“There was such a thing?”

“If we believe the legends — yes. They say that in the old neighbourhood coffee houses, a cup could sometimes carry a hidden message. If someone ordered another man coffee with salt, it wasn’t a joke. It was an open challenge. According to the darkest versions of the story, two men would walk outside after such an order — and only one would return.”

A chill ran down my spine.

“I’m glad those days are gone.”

“So am I,” Dimitris nodded. “But another custom has survived.”

He turned his empty cup upside down onto its saucer.

“Reading the coffee grounds?”

His smile became almost childlike.

“The men pretended not to believe in it, but listened with no less curiosity than the women.”

In many villages, there was a woman believed to possess the gift of reading the grounds left in a coffee cup. People came to her carrying different hopes — one woman waiting for a letter, another for her son to return from abroad, a third for the love that never seemed to arrive.

The woman would study the dark traces inside the cup and tell them what lay ahead, as though the future were already known to her.

Some left reassured, others more anxious than before, but almost all of them came back. Perhaps not because they believed unconditionally, but because sometimes a person simply needs someone to tell them that what they are waiting for will, eventually, come.

The desire to glimpse the future is often stronger than the fear of what we might find there.

Laughter rose from the neighbouring table. The waiter passed by, glanced at our empty cups and continued on his way without a word. He neither brought the bill nor asked whether we wanted anything else.

Dimitris watched him go.

“No one here will ask you to give up your table. You can stay until the conversation is over. And sometimes even after that.”

He looked around the square.

“Do you know the easiest way to spot a tourist in a Greek kafeneio?”

“By the camera?”

“No. By how long they stay at the table. A tourist drinks their coffee in ten minutes and moves on to the next sight. In the same ten minutes, a Greek has barely taken the first sip.”

“How can such a tiny cup keep people at a table for hours?”

“Here, you pay for the coffee, but what you really get is the right to stay. To stay without anyone expecting you to leave. To talk to the friend who happens to pass by, or the neighbour who stopped for five minutes and somehow stayed for an hour.”

He paused.

“In Greece, time loses its meaning when there is someone to share the day with.”

I looked at my watch.

Several hours had passed.

The sun was sinking behind the hill. Children rode their bicycles across the square, elderly people carried chairs outside their homes, and the scent of dinner drifted through open windows. The postman passed by once more and waved to us from a distance.

Someone moved a backgammon piece.

Someone else laughed.

A third person ordered another coffee.

And our cups had long been empty.

The coffee for which I had set aside half an hour had lasted an entire afternoon.

Dimitris stood up and smiled.

“Well, now you know how long a coffee lasts.”

I looked at the table, at the empty cups and at the people around us.

Perhaps, I thought, the loveliest hours are precisely those for which we never made room in our plans.

That evening, I sat on the terrace with yet another cup of coffee, watching the last of the light slowly dissolve into the sea. The day was fading, but the warmth of that long afternoon still lingered inside me.

I could hear the laughter from the neighbouring table, the clicking of the backgammon pieces, and Dimitris’s voice:

“Here, coffee is simply a reason to stay together a little longer.”

Only then did I understand why, in Greece, a conversation can begin at noon and end only with the sunset.

Here, coffee is not measured in cups, sips or minutes.

It is measured in stories told, in silences shared, and in those rare moments when no one looks at the clock because no one wants the time together to end.

Sometimes, it is simply a silence in which you do not have to be anyone other than who you are.

And so, when a Greek says to you, “Έλα για καφέ” — Come for coffee — they are not simply inviting you to sit beside them.

They are making room for you in their day.

And giving you something that, in our hurried world, we offer one another less and less often:

their time.

Without ever having to say it aloud, what they are really telling you is:

“Stay.

The day is better when you are here.”