

Death Customs

- Constantia Soteriou

Translated by Lina Protopapa

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‘Death Customs’ is a short story written by Constantia Soteriou and was translated by Lina Protopapa. Constantia Soteriou is a writer from Cyprus.

It is a story about the grief and sufferings of mothers and wives in Cyprus. The government had evidence of the men’s death (husbands, brothers and sons) but made women believe that they were missing.

‘Death Customs’ retells the story of the events of 1960s and 70s in Cyprus when Turkey and Greece were involved in war.

Spasoula, the protagonist of the story narrates the events that she had witnessed and experience to the curious listener. Spasoula narrates the sufferings and the struggles she went through while waiting for her son to return during the war time. She had also lost her husband and had been waiting for her son’s return from war for almost 40 years.

The story opens with Spasoula on her death bed suffering. The rest of the story is narrated by the curious listener in a flash back.

The unnamed listener remembers meeting Spasoula in one of the gatherings in the month of September. The people held photographs of the loved ones while waiting for identification purpose. The prisoners of war (POW) around 160 people returned in a bus consisting of students, men, priests and sick prisoners. The people waited for hours and hours and Spasoula’s son never returned. She looked disappointed and miserable.

In the month of October, Turks exchanged 1000 or so captives but Giorgakis never returned.

Spasoula recalled how she would go to clean the graves although no one would pay for her cleaning. She would carry a litre of olive oil, soap and sponge to wash the souls of the glasses. The glasses contained water, olive oil and wick which were placed inside the locked cabinets of the loved ones, next to the graves. The orthodox Christians believed that the wick should be lit all the time because the dead persons' soul would rest in peace. Sometimes she would carry buckets of water to water the graves.

Spasoula spoke about the customs of the Cypriots. The babies as soon as they were born were bathed in brine (salt water). She was worried because she did not have enough salt to salt her baby and there was not enough salt to salt the chest of her baby. Usually the pregnant women would buy coarse and unground salt from the grocer and return without saying a word. The salt had to be ground with a heavy stone. The heavier the stone the smarter the baby. Then the salted water would be smeared on the babies. The women believed the kind women would have kind babies.

Spasoula lamented that Turks came and took over their homes, killed many and made them refugees. Turkish women spoke the death of many people in the year 1963 and 1974 due to inter communal riots. All the dead, both Cypriots and Turks were buried on top of one another in mass graves.

The women believed in the custom of keeping bread near the babies and a pair of scissors under the pillow to protect the babies from evil and 'Kales Yenejes' (good women who exchanged babies at night).

The story ends with Spasoula hearing the news that they have found her son only to know he was dead with face down along with 3 other dead bodies. Spasoula fell sick after this and died.