



Filling the Parcel

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**First published in the anthology book 'Unbroken Words/Kliem Infinit',
Vision+ Group, 2014, Malta**

I remember my mother telling me just before she closed her eyes forever twenty years ago, as if within a dream, that the life which is offered to us comes in the shape of a parcel. The gift wrapping can be anything from extremely fascinating to utterly ugly whereas the size of the parcel can vary from a tiny matchbox to that of a fridge carton.

'You do not get to choose your parcel. It is a matter of luck what you are going to end up with. But it does come empty, and through the years, you are the one that has to fill it. Keep the good in there, keep the bad, and throw away the useless. Always remember to get rid of the useless ones,' I recall her telling me.

What she failed to tell me though, and it required my whole life to figure it out myself, is how beautiful, how personally satisfying the content of the parcel can be, no matter the circumstances surrounding the experiences you have had throughout.

Here's my little story.

I was born in 1950, in a small city called Kokkini, in Greece. I had a sharp brain and I was good at school. During my final year I won the 1st prize in a school competition. This granted me a scholarship to study advertising at a university in London, UK, and also a job that would enable me to sustain myself while being there. At the time there wasn't anything else I wanted more. I already knew the language and the only thing missing was a signature from my guardian that would allow me to follow my dream*.

My father refused to sign the necessary papers.

'The role of a woman is to get married and bear children,' was his only comment.

He did, however, agree to let me continue my studies at a secretarial school. That would grant me a decent job for a woman, and I would be able to contribute in our household with a much needed extra income. Most importantly though, I would still remain in the family house and under my father's control until the day I would be handed over to a husband.

When I finished my studies, I got a job in a small local company. This is where I met Giorgos, an employee in the cafeteria of the neighborhood where I was working, and who would later on become my husband.

He was a calm, sweet and low profile man, and was eight years older than me. He already had a failed marriage behind him but no children. My father did not approve of

him. Firstly because he was a divorced man, thus a failure in his eyes, and secondly because the man, in order to be called man, he cannot be of a passive, gentle nature.

This was the first time that I stood up for myself and I went against my father's wish.

I would never marry someone that my father would choose for me, someone like him. He did eventually accept my decision and I wedded Giorgos in a small ceremony within the next year and left the countryside shortly after. We moved to the capital, Athens, aspiring to make a new start. There we brought two boys into the world, and alongside Giorgos, I worked hard my whole life making sure that they would never miss anything.

But I missed a lot.

As a young girl I always dreamt of travelling, gaining experiences in faraway lands, studying, feeling free, and achieving to be independent. As a married woman, I craved for some free time to occupy myself with artistic activities such as drawing, writing and embroidering in particular. I wished, oh how I wished, to have had the chance to experience life by following a different path and not the one pre-determined on my behalf, as was the case for most women of my social class and time.

I often wondered whether I did have a choice.

Could I have done things differently? Could I have gone against my father and the rules of a male-dominated society? Could I have caused sadness as a result of disobedience to my mum without guilt? Could I have been "immoral" and have engaged in premarital sexual relationships and get a taste of the freedom that today's girls enjoy? Could I have ever followed such a way of living in the early '70s without the fear that my father would kill me, without guilt and fear that I might be risking my honor and thus my future and survival, since I was simply, just a woman, and in need of a protector?

Giorgos was a good man. He had a heart of gold. And he loved me. But the truth is that I never loved him back, at least not in the way that a woman should love her man. He was the salvation from the oppression of my father, because he was his exact opposite.

However, I did not experience falling in love, the passion, this deep aching love that is described in novels like the ones that I secretly read in English as a teenager - a language which I learned in order to be able to bring home any kind of books I wanted without control and censorship, since my parents only knew our native language.

Giorgos was more like a friend to me. He was my partner in the "job" of "creating a family" which we decided to undertake together. At the same time though, I hated him because I was aware that he could never be anything more than that, a friend. When I looked at his face I saw all the things that I could never feel or experience by his side.

Oh Mother! Now that I am well over 60, and with my husband dead and my kids married and far away, I feel a dense nothing sitting on my chest and crashing me.

In solitude, as a pensioner, I now have the luxury of time to sit down and reflect back on my life...and I cry. I have an aching pain that overtakes my inner everything and I feel the need to apologize to life, my kids, my husband, myself.

I had always so far believed that whatever I was doing was done properly; that I have always been doing the right thing. But, mother, do you know what I now realize? The lost dreams and the suppressed wants were dripping bitterness, anger, sadness and poison in the family that I created.

I now see that I was hurting them, without realizing that although they didn't know what I was thinking, they were capable of feeling everything. All the ills and negatives were flowing like a river from the pores of my skin. I unwillingly became a harsh person. I demanded a lot from all of them. I was getting mad and holding on this feeling for long periods at a time, without giving any explanations, because I deep down believed that they all owe me. They owed me, mother, for the lost life, the other life that I never lived, the life that I sacrificed for them, the life that their existence deprived from me.

Oh Mother! I lived in misery. I failed. I was not selfish enough to fight for my wants when the time was right and now I'm paying the prize.

I thought about what the world would say ... you ... father. The world and all the "must do's".

I did not dare to fill the parcel that I was given the day that you brought me in this world with whatever appeared beautiful and valuable in my eyes. But you also bare responsibility for my misery. You never told me, maybe because you were scared, that selfishness as a concept has been deliberately tarnished because it is harmful to our society and its norms, to a society that so strongly resists and crashes the unit, but that to a certain extent it can prove to be healthy for a rebellious spirit.

You did not advise me that the unit ought to resist, even to sadden those that surround it in order to avoid unhappiness for oneself and for the ones that will find themselves next to it. Maybe because you did not dare to do that either. Maybe you considered it as impossible to accomplish. You wanted my safety in the given world.

But I now know that a man with suppressed dreams and a thirsty ego can only expect to be lead to a life-long misery.

It took me a long time to apprehend that it is only a selfish person, someone who dares to do what he wants and who is willing to go against even to the ones he loves and respects, who can find happiness. It takes a selfish person to fill in its life's parcel with fine things. I have now gained the wisdom I desperately needed back then; that

whatever you put in there, whatever you keep in this parcel, only this is what you are capable of offering to others.

In the end it all comes down to selfishness.

Selfishness: A word that we are even today still scared of pronouncing, because it has always been, and still is, inseparably linked with a concept that carries with it all the ills of this world.

By suppressing my ego, I, your daughter, got stuffed with many bad things and I offered equally as many. This is the lesson that I would like to share with my kids, in the hope that one day they will forgive me.

*During these years in Greece, young people were becoming adults at the age of 21.

