

Frisly Socks

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When I was younger, I was fearless. I never crawled. I plunged straight into walking, falling down but standing up so fast there was never time for tears. As I grew taller, the falls got bigger. Getting up got harder.

When I was still small enough that my clothes were all one piece and my mother still brushed my teeth, I spent my summers with Yiayia. We'd sit at the piano and my short little legs would squish next to hers on the bench. I wore white frilly socks and black patent leather shoes. My smooth, new, baby-skinned legs would dangle, waving wildly, next to her dark, lived-in, olive ones resting stable on firm ground.

Seasons changed. My legs grew closer to the ground. I traded my Velcro shoes for Converse, my laces always trailing behind me. Yiayia would chase me through her white plaster-walled palace, picking me up before I had a chance to trip. On Wednesdays, we'd traverse the Huntington Library, spending hours with Blue Boy and Pinkie.

Yiayia never mastered freeways. An immigrant from Greece, she didn't understand why people had to move so fast in America. At Yiayia's house, things moved slow. We would lie in the grass and stare at the leaves on the trees above us, guessing which would fall next. When the grass got too itchy, we'd search for dandelions to wish on. Some days, Yiayia felt more like wishing than others.

Yiayia's fear of fast roads kept our adventures from going far geographically, but we'd travel the world within the walls of that castle on Monterey Road. We'd sit on the green wicker picnic table in her backyard and she'd whisper, "Imagine we're in Nebraska." We'd play cards in the park and she'd stop in between games to tell me, "Look around, *Engona*. Those men over there are Russian spies. The woman jogging is a famous diplomat." Seeing the world through her

eyes, I learned Yiayia's love of devising stories, of creating something special out of the ordinary.

I entered kindergarten. My frilly socks lost their frills. Instead of running through the 'Brary, I ran out of time. As I moved through school, I started staying up late, looking at textbooks instead of paintings. But on the weekends I put my socks back on. I'd go to Yiayia's house and she'd teach me — not of math and grammar, but of *life*. Magic. Laughter. She made me peanut butter cereal and gave me lemons to suck on. They didn't taste so sour with her there.

Yiayia taught me how to make hamburgers when I was seven years old. She stood me on the wobbly wooden step stool so I could see the stove and I flipped the burgers in an old frying pan, so well-loved that the non-stick coating had come off. As I carried my burgers proudly to the paint-chipped picnic table in her overgrown jungle of a backyard, I was pricked by a thorn. An overzealous rose too eager for the world had stuck out in my path. I was naive enough to think I couldn't get hurt.

Yiayia picked me up and kissed me. "Oh my *Baby mou*. It's okay, *Koukla*. It's okay."

And it was.

When I'd lived for another seven years, I still hadn't learned my lesson to be careful. To beware that roses come with thorns.

The day of my first high school cross country race. I flew down the hills of Mt. SAC but the downhill didn't end there. Instead of a proud "Good job," my father presented me with a terse "Let's go." We rushed to the hospital, where I found my hero wearing a hospital gown rather than the cape I was used to seeing.

It turned out Yiayia's love of stories extended to her personal life as well. She'd been living with breast cancer for years. She knew something was wrong, but rather than receive treatment, she played pretend she was well. Always making our lives easier, Yiayia was.

When Yiayia could no longer bear the excruciating pain of walking, she went to the emergency room. There, she discovered that in addition to a strong Christian faith and an English learner's knack for butchering idioms, my grandmother also bore the burden of a broken pelvis and stage four cancer that spread from her breast tissue to her bones, her muscles, her lungs. Her bones were breaking from supporting too much for too long. That day the doctor didn't wear white. He donned black robes and carried a scythe. "Six months if you're lucky." *If we were lucky*. I wished I'd saved one of those dandelion wishes for now. My heart was breaking from carrying too much, too.

I looked closely at my grandmother. Her olive skin wasn't dark. Her legs weren't on the ground anymore. They were propped up on pillows instead of pressing piano pedals. My little fingers reached for hers instead of piano keys. She looked so small. As if the big white bed could swallow her up. The doctor made it sound as if it might. It was the first time in my life she seemed old.

Yiayia squeezed my hand. "Think of somewhere fabulous for us to go. I hear Paris is wonderful this time of year... I always wanted to see France." Now there was time for tears. I tried to wipe them away, to be strong like my hero, but she saw everything. She always did. "Oh, my *Baby mou*. It's okay, *Koukla*. It's okay." But it wasn't.

Yiayia moved into our house, her reclining bed set up in the corner of the family room as if it had always been there. I missed the magic on Monterey Road. Gone were the days of life. Of

playing pretend. Of laughter. The queen's palace was long gone, the monarchy overthrown in a coup d'etat by her own cells. She was now trapped in a tower, bedridden and acutely aware of the world going on — without her. All frills were gone. Yiayia wore sensible socks that wouldn't slip as she learned to walk again. I stopped eating lemons. They'd started tasting sour.

I was now the one making lunch. I didn't have to stand on a stepstool anymore. I could see all on my own. I mowed the grass, pulling out dandelions before they could spread through my garden. Before a child in the neighborhood might get any ideas about wishes. I wondered when dandelions stopped being dreams and started being weeds.

I was now the tall one. *My* legs were now the long ones. They touched the ground and they were steady.

When she moved in, it seemed as if nothing would ever be the same.

But then she walked. Soon, she abandoned the cane. Little by little, I taught Yiayia to walk again. Day by day, she taught me to smile again. She started criticizing the way I mowed the lawn. Began telling terrible knock knock jokes, singing in her special tone-deaf way again. With every mischievous wink and every "trip" to the Bahamas, she breathed life back into our home.

Vases from well-wishers bloomed around us. When Yiayia pricked her hand on a thorn, I pulled her close to me.

"Oh, *Agape mou*," I whispered into her hair. "It's okay, *Koukla*. It's okay."

Because it was.