

Locus Grecia

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“Locus Grecia”

The first time we talked was in Programming I. It was a Tuesday, the second week of classes, and I was fifteen minutes early to the latest class on my roster. The latest, two hour lecture and lab, with flickering lights and bright computer screens as she spun into the seat right next to me. She dropped her bag on the floor and I could hear her laptop clank. I winced at the sound. She turned, pointed at my drink, and asked what it was. She was my best friend for the rest of the semester.

Katerina and I got along quickly. She was a local, a Greek student studying in the University of Athens, and she was taking classes in ACG to pursue an IT minor. She was snarky, funny, and she loved to complain, but she loved the class as much as I did. We worked together on everything: labs, projects, we even studied together for quizzes at the local cafe down the street. She taught me about Greek schooling and I shared my experiences from America.

She took me to the best Greek places and I took her to the Japanese restaurant down the street. We tried ‘the best’ fast food joints, from Goody’s Burger House to McDonalds, and I told her every way American food tasted different. She told me every way Greek food tasted better.

One night after classes we sat at Goody’s, a tray of spicy chicken tenders between us, and she asked me “how do they like you back home?”

She was a little dozy at the time, and I was a little confused.

“How do they like what?”

“You!” She pointed at my chest, my hair, and flopped back into the chair. “You know, Greece is very Orthodox. Everyone is straight, and if you’re not, no one believes you. No one believes me.”

I blinked at her and took another bite. “I live in a pretty big city. If someone didn’t understand me, I just found someone else.”

“Well, Greece is not big. It’s not small. But it’s hard to be myself, sometimes.”

I looked at her, at her curly black hair and her shoulder tattoos and her shirt with some English metal band she had told me about. She was always proud, and confident, and loud in a way that felt authentic to herself. She was the first to share her experiences with me, from her Greco-Turkish heritage to her drinking issues in Freshman year. She had lectured me about politics, identity, even art in Greece, and she was never ashamed to share her thoughts. We had spent nights comparing American social issues to Grecian ones, between disagreements and questions and varying states of comprehension. “I get it.”

Then she talked, and I talked, and we shared our most frustrating moments while chewing with our mouths open. I really did get it, despite our lives apart. Despite different cultures, environments, even a language barrier that forced us to overexplain and repeat ourselves. Even after choking on a chicken tender and drinking from her water bottle with tears in my eyes. I felt connected to her and every other Greek kid with the same struggles and shame and bitten down fingernails.

She gave me an honest portal into Greek culture. All the beautiful and ugly and shameful and shameless and similarities as well as stark differences, shaped through her words like hands on clay. I got a front row view into the complicated meld that Greek culture stood as: Turkish influence, Orthodox values, classical art, bustling ports, technological innovations, and so much more. I started eating lunch later, taking midday naps, practicing my Greek to order a coffee. I learned to think from a different perspective, to submerge myself in Greek tradition—the same things she learned from her grandmother.