

On Earth as in Heaven

by duniazade

Two wanderers ask for hospitality. But gifts from the gods are sometimes strange.

Author's Notes: Written for Cecelle in the 2007 winter round of the SS/HG Exchange, on her prompt "Something that takes inspiration from some part of the story of Philemon and Baucis."

A translation of Publius Ovidius Naso's poem can be found here:
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Ov.+Met.+8.612>

"Theotokos" means literally God-bearer, or the one who gives birth to God. It's the Eastern Orthodox title for Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Illustration by the wonderful Camillo. You can find her other works on her page at deviantART: <http://camillo1978.deviantart.com/>

On Earth as in Heaven

Chapter 1 of 1

Two wanderers ask for hospitality. But gifts from the gods are sometimes strange.

Author's Notes: Written for Cecelle in the 2007 winter round of the SS/HG Exchange, on her prompt "Something that takes inspiration from some part of the story of Philemon and Baucis."

A translation of Publius Ovidius Naso's poem can be found here: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Ov.+Met.+8.612>

"Theotokos" means literally God-bearer, or the one who gives birth to God. It's the Eastern Orthodox title for Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Illustration by the wonderful Camillo. You can find her other works on her page at deviantART: <http://camillo1978.deviantart.com/>

You could hear them coming from the far end of the village. It was the time of the day when the children gathered from the hills and meadows where they had been playing, but loitered in the main street, not being allowed in the houses until their mothers were done with preparing dinner. In that empty moment while they waited for the food to be ready, the strangers had given a most welcome opportunity to relieve the boredom. The excited squealing of the children grew louder as the cortege drew on, stopping from time to time when the strangers paused to knock at the priest's, at the mayor's, at the barber's, at the butcher's door, and resuming again as they were refused and proceeded to the next door.

It was the end of August, and quite hot.

Lenio was in the back courtyard throwing maize to the chickens when she heard the swell of children's voices as they came running from the other end of the village, then saw Vassiliki (Kyria Vassiliki, as she insisted being called) coming out on the porch. It happened so rarely Vassiliki was very fat and didn't like to get out from behind the counter that Lenio couldn't help moving stealthily forward to peep from behind the corner of the shed.

There were two strangers speaking to the mistress, and if they were asking for hospitality, they were sadly deluded. Vassiliki wasn't known for her soft heart, but Lenio herself, had she been the mistress of the house, wouldn't have let them in. They were the worst sort of backpackers, not the shiny ones with the flowery shirts, who might be swindled out of a pack of green bills for a night in the infested back room above the shop. The man had a tattered dark canvas sack on his back, and the woman an even more outrageous small beaded bag. They couldn't have much in those: they'd ask for a drink of water, then for a free night in the barn, and then, having already been twice conceded to, they'd ask if perhaps they could have something to eat, and all for the love of God, of course. Afterwards, you'd find the hay all messed up and a few eggs, or, the saints forbid, even a chicken, missing.

They were covered with dust, which meant that they had come on foot, not just from the last bus stop in Mavroni eight kilometres away, but from farther, probably from the train station in Lycovrissi thirty kilometres away. Had no money for the bus, had they. Maybe they hadn't even taken the train to Lycovrissi. Maybe they had walked all the way from God knows where, Lenio thought with a shudder. And look at them! The man was tall, lean, mean-looking. He walked stiffly, with a slight limp. He was dressed all in black, like a priest or an old woman: long black shirt, black trousers, and a kind of scarf around the neck, all of them nearly grey with dirt. With his narrow face, beaked nose and piercing black eyes, he looked like old Madalenia, the nastiest widow of the village, but the long greasy hair tied at the nape of his neck belonged rather on one of them city biker gangs. Not that Lenio had ever seen one of them, but she had heard stories to make your hair rise.

This one really looked strange. Lenio put her forearm against her belly she was in her fifth month and beginning to feel a bit heavy and leaned over to see better. At the same moment, the man turned his head and seemed to glance straight at her, and though Lenio was sure he couldn't see her, what with the old pear-tree in the way, she felt a stab go through her body. She made a hurried sign of the cross over her swollen belly, and then spat over her left shoulder.

The woman with him wasn't old; in fact she looked much younger than him, but she wasn't quite right either. For one thing, she had taken the initiative of talking to Vassiliki, instead of letting the man speak, as it was proper. Not that he seemed to mind: he was standing three paces back from his companion instead of stepping forward to put her in her place, which increased Lenio's contempt. The woman herself was speaking too fast; her eyes were too bright. She had at least the sense to wear a straw hat, but under it her hair was a wild mass, matted with dust, and she had forgotten the honorific while addressing the mistress of the house. Kyria Vassiliki's slipper beat an impatient drum on the floorboards of the porch, and with a curt jerk of her chin, the bummers were dismissed.

Lenio shook herself. Kyria Vassiliki had told her to kill a young fat chicken for dinner, as she would receive Father Dimitrios. Lenio had intended for the russet young hen whose eggs were a bit on the scarce side; but during the interlude, the rooster had mounted her and was now giving his last thrusts. As Lenio bent to grab, the rooster jumped out of the way with an indignant squawk, but the plump little hen stayed put, squatting in the dust with her wings trailing, her back arched and her eyes closed in bliss. Lenio sighed and moved forward to grab the old white hen. It would have to do.

They stopped at the outskirts of the village, under the meagre shade of an acacia. The woman let herself drop on the dry grass. The man sat on a boulder, removed one black boot and shook a tiny pebble out of it, then put it back on with a sigh of satisfaction. They sat for a moment in silence, the man savouring his relief from pain, the woman playing absent-mindedly with the brim of her straw hat. Then he spoke, without looking at her:

"Wonderful holiday."

"I had planned on being in Grevena tonight. I couldn't guess that the only bus of the day would leave earlier than scheduled because the driver wanted to drink with his pals in Viniani."

"I was referring to the general idea."

"You said you wanted to know what the Muggle parts of my life felt like. I've backpacked with my cousins through Greece since I was thirteen. And you insisted, too, that you didn't want to visit a touristy zone. Well, this isn't."

"Exceeding expectations, as always."

"If you want to give up and Apparate, we are almost out of the village."

The man seemed to consider for a minute, then shook his head.

"Then let's try the last house over there, and if they refuse us, at least we'll have better shade."

The shade was indeed better. A small copse overlooked the lazy stream slithering at the bottom of the slope. The water expanded into a dark, shallow pond before the stream bent sharply to the west. A goose was diving in a leisurely manner, searching for food at the bottom and shaking droplets off its feathers each time it came up. It looked interrogatively at the newcomers.

The hut at the bottom of the slope could hardly be called a house; it was more of a shack, hidden behind a growth of blackberry bushes interspersed with gnarled fruit trees. As the travellers passed the bushes, they saw that the door was ajar. On a bench, in front of the house, an old woman was shelling green peas in a blue plastic bowl. The old man who sat at her left stood as he sighted the strangers and gestured to the door.

Krini gathered her skirts as she climbed cautiously on a stool to get the box of dates from the top of the cupboard. They were a delicacy her niece brought when she visited once a year.

She had chopped some tomatoes and bell peppers while the green peas cooked and had put them on the table with a bowl of luscious black and green olives. Pink radishes, three boiled eggs and the flatbread left from Sunday had completed the offering. The bottle of olive oil glittered with an almost emerald-like fire.

Kostis, after having thrown a blanket on the bench and seated the guests against the north wall, had gone immediately to the outhouse and come back with his cherished demijohn of wine. He had filled two goblets for the strangers and an old chipped cup for himself (Krini herself didn't like to drink) and, after having drunk to everyone's health, had gone to gather some fruit.

The strangers seemed very tired. The man had leaned his head back against the wall, and the woman had closed her eyes for a moment, and her hand had twitched as if she were asleep. They must have also been thirsty, for even before Kostis had come back from the orchard, they had already twice refilled their goblets, which surprised Krini. Kostis might be very proud of his wine, but in truth it was a bit sour. Of course, once Kostis was back, he kept refilling the goblets and trying to chat with the guests, and Krini had leisure to observe them while she busied herself around the house.

They were strange... but they were not bad people. As it was, there was nothing worth stealing in the house; not even their lives, which were almost spent; and they didn't regret anything, except that neither of them wanted to be left alone when the other died. She sighed inwardly: she could do nothing about that, except pray her eyes turned to the icon of the Theotokos offering a yellow flower, maybe a marigold, to the smiling child in her arms and she was not sure it was right to pray for such a special indulgence.

The dark man had hardly said a word, but even when he seemed to rest he was as tense as a bowstring. He was a restless one, never at peace. But then his eyes had lingered for a second on the girl, and Krini had known that as long as she was with him, he was home.

The girl, on the other hand, was chatting animatedly with Kostis. Her Greek was rather good and she tried to answer his insatiable questions and questioned him in turn.

Her Kostis had always loved stories; he loved to hear new things, and ask, and learn. He needed company, even the children that came furtively to steal fruit from the orchard. Kostis always went out to encourage them, tell them they could go at it, call them to the house. But the children scattered, feigning terror, because they fancied themselves to be stealthy warriors avoiding great perils. If Kostis actually enjoyed them stealing, it robbed all the fun from the thing, so they preferred to imagine that the old man was shouting threats and to ridicule him because he couldn't carry them out. "Old madman down the slope", they called him.

If God had given them a daughter but her prayers had gone unanswered maybe she would have been like this girl: bright and curious. And then she would have gone to town, learned things, and come back once a year, maybe twice.

The tomatoes, the olives, the green peas and the bread had long been gone, and the goose had wandered in, hoping to gather some crumbs from the dirt floor, but Kostis still chatted and refilled the goblets.

The dark red peaches, bitter like almonds, were already on the table, and Krini was about to put the dates and a fresh honeycomb on the best plate when she noticed something that sent a chill down her spine.

Even through the wickerwork, one could see that the demijohn was almost full, exactly as in the beginning. Krini knew that the jar could not possibly still hold wine, after so many cups had been drunk, but she sagely said nothing and only addressed a silent prayer to the Theotokos, though she didn't know if it was to much avail. But she stiffened when she saw Kostis' eyes go from the jar to the goblets. He was bound to believe all those stories his great-grandmother had told him, about saints going disguised as travellers to test men's hearts. Still, she was too slow to stop him when he bounded from his stool, shouting apologies to the guests for not giving them a better dinner, and trying to grab the goose by the neck while searching for the knife in his pocket.

The goose, wise bird, dodged, escaped and fluttered right on the bench, crowding herself between the dark stranger and the wall. Krini felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment, and had begun to apologize too, when the stranger stood abruptly. He was no more the dusty, tired traveller; he held himself very upright, and as he stood this tall he was wrapped in the shadows falling from the beams, and he looked majestic and terrible like the Lord of Underworld.

"It is not necessary," said the stranger.

"Don't kill the bird," pleaded his companion. She had sprung up also, and was speaking rapidly, waving her hands. The words rolled from her lips like beads of quicksilver, joyous and bright, and the old couple was so dazzled that they hardly saw the man give a strange flicker of his hand and sit quietly down. "Your welcome was the best we could dream of. We need nothing more. Please allow us to offer something in return."

And she pointed a stick to the ugly calendar on the western wall, opposite the icon.

They lay in the old hayloft, on their hosts' best embroidered blanket, and the constellation of Ophiuchus, the Serpent-Holder, shone above them through a large hole in the roof.

The night was so still and warm that they couldn't tell where their bodies ended and began.

"So much for not doing magic," she sighed ruefully.

"Nifty bit of Transfiguration."

"Thank you."

"Not very discreet though."

"A fifty-inch plasma screen isn't meant to be discreet."

"Of course, you're aware that as soon as it gets known, the others will try to steal or break it."

"You're too distrustful of human nature. Besides, I've put a permanent Sticking Charm on it, and anybody who approaches it with evil intentions will get their hands burned."

"I see. And what about accusations of sorcery? There's no electricity in that house."

"Took care of that too."

"Very impressive."

"What about your own bit of Transfiguration?"

"You saw that?"

"Do you think I wouldn't see it, just because it's set in the future? And I thought you didn't like Transfiguration."

"I don't. It's the Timing Charm that was worth it."

"Why did you link it to that specific event?"

"It was the most interesting part of the spell."

"You won't answer me, will you?"

He didn't speak for quite a moment. Then:

"Hermione... That thing they have between them... Do you call that love?"

She opened her mouth to answer an indignant 'Yes' and closed it again without having uttered the word. No, of course, it wasn't love. It was much more. They flowed together like heaven and earth.

She was silent for a long time. Outside, the lazy water kept dripping; the goose ruffled her feathers; a fish leapt in the pond.

She rolled over him. He didn't move, but opened his eyes, and the stars above glittered in their depths. She fell into the night beneath.

The next morning, the strangers were gone, but the blanket was carefully folded and on top of it was a yellow flower.

As soon as the news got out, the villagers trickled in, at first on minor pretexts. The mayor came to see if they were paid up with taxes, the barber to ask if they were in good health, the peddler to know if they needed something for next month when he'd go to the big town. Then, quite unashamedly, to stare at the big screen. They had heard about such, but even the mayor had only an old rounded TV set, even if it was a colour one. They were quite welcomed by the old couple, who always had some wine and dried fruits to offer, but it was remarked that Kostis always went out of the room to fetch new wine, and nobody could tell exactly where he went to. Though everyone wanted to look at the wonderful images, there were never more than five or six persons in the little hut at the same time, and if someone new arrived, one of the assistants was sure to get up and excuse himself.

Only Father Dimitrios never came in.

Under the pretext of curiosity, much touching of the screen was done. It felt like an absolutely ordinary, if magnificent, screen. But Panayotis the Thief had tried, as a joke, to pull it from the wall and, pull as hard as he could, it wouldn't move by a hair's breadth.

Two weeks later, while the oldies were both in the orchard knocking the nuts down, Mavrommatis the Invidious crept into their house and tried to smash the screen with a hammer. When they got home, the old couple found him rolling on the floor, howling over his burned hands. They dressed his hands and took him to his home, and he was healed after three days.

After that, nobody tried anymore to bother the Hosts, or the Kind Ones, as they began to be called. On the contrary, they became a pride of the village, and people from afar were shown, from a respectful distance, the shabby hut at the bottom of the slope. They always went home shaking their heads, but before that, they stopped to drink at Vassiliki's inn, and slowly the money trickled in. The villagers didn't mind being called odd.

Some three summers after, the goose passed to a better world. The Mayor paid to have it stuffed and offered it as a present to the Kind Ones.

It was to Lenio's son that the honour of witnessing the last part of their story was bestowed.

Yanni was a quiet boy of nine. His mother had told him repeatedly how the gaze of the stranger had set on her when she was bearing him. Maybe he had grown to feel special, for he preferred to be alone, and spent whole days wandering in the woods or just lying in the grass, staring at nothing. His mother worried about him. On the other hand, he was the best berry and mushroom gatherer of the place.

That day, he was in the blackberry bushes about the Hosts' place, and from where he was he could see them both seated on the bench in front of the house, when suddenly, old Krini let fall the blue plastic bowl she held in her lap. The green peas spilled, and Krini began to keel over. Kostis caught her, but even as he held her by the waist, a flicker of greyish brown seemed to rush from the ground up their limbs, and even as their feet twisted and slithered into the earth, bark covered their bodies and branches sprang from the shoulders.

Crouching in the bushes, Yanni had barely the time to bite his knuckles before the transformation was over. Two trees, an oak and a linden, grown from a double-trunk, stood where the old couple had been, and their leaves quivered serenely in the wind.

Yanni ran home, trembling.

This time, the whole village, Father Dimitrios included, came to see. It was quickly decided that it was a true miracle, and that, consequently, the strangers had indeed been saints in disguise.

The Agrafta monastery took charge of Yanni's education, for free.

A pilgrimage was established. It became a habit, when forming a wish, to hang on the trunks of the trees an icon representing the Saints with big golden halos, until the trees looked like twin snakes, gleaming with shiny scales.

When Yanni returned from his schooling, he was a young man of eighteen. He was still taciturn, but already a well-known painter of icons.

He went to the trees at sunset, when the pilgrims and the villagers alike were indoors, enjoying a well-earned glass of raki.

There was no free place left on the trunks, except for a spot the size of a palm at the joint, which was too small to fit anything into.

Yanni bent and placed something on the spot. It was a murky icon, no bigger than his hand. It showed a man, tall, lean, mean-looking, clad in black. He was holding the hand of a woman who had no halo except a mass of brownish frizzy hair. When Yanni straightened, the man winked at him.

The End

