

# **Life Comes to Stettos**

by

**Prue Phillipson**

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## Life comes to Stettos

George Omeros stood at the door of his house and looked at the bare street of Stettos and the barren hills. It was only early June but dust was everywhere and the air was heavy with heat. Maria was lying down in the back room. He had lain down too but could not sleep. He was thinking of their son, Demetrios, who had come back unscathed from the war, and had said, "Stettos is dead. I will emigrate to America."

Yes, his body was unscathed, but what had happened to his mind that he should repudiate the peace and timelessness of Stettos and seek America, where everyone rushed about between great skyscrapers and there were shootings on every corner? Demetrios had seen a motion picture in Athens with an army mate and described it to his astonished parents. But their astonishment was the greater when he said he wanted to go and live in this place. And now he had been there four years and the letters came too infrequently for his mother's wounded heart.

Marcos Kontos suddenly came in sight, his thin body with its many scars, slouching in an ungainly shuffle. George Omeros crossed himself and thanked God that Demetrios had not returned like this one. Marcos had got his wounds honourably in a guerrilla attack on a German strong point, but surely in the four years since the war he had used up that honour.

He had not done an honest day's work, though feebler men than him toiled long hours to wrest a living from the thin soil. Indeed George knew that, though twisted and clumsy, Marcos's body was fit enough and his arms strong, for he had been in every brawl since his return and never had the worst of it. But he still traded on the name of hero and there was none would gainsay him when he sat uninvited to a meal or helped himself lavishly to the raw, bitter wine.

"The coach is coming," Marcos called as he drew near to George, standing by his door. "I saw it, blue and white, in the valley. Think of it, coming forty kilometres from Athens and not even stopping here. And I, probably I shall never see Athens again but will die in this hole."

"Why don't you go then?" cried George. But he knew why Marcos would not leave Stettos. Anywhere else he would have to work.

Marcos leant against the doorpost. He ignored the question. "You know," he said, confidently, "those coaches ought to stop here. They do a round tour – places of interest within a hundred kilometres of Athens. Well, how do they choose them? Not for their ruins or their monuments but because they have smart clean *cafās* and souvenir shops. We have our ruin. Why do they not stop and look at it? Because there is nothing else. No ice cream, no postcards. Dead." He slapped out the word with a scowl of disgust.

George looked westward along the naked street and lifted his eyes to the rounded hill that dominated it. Three stark columns rose into the sky. Two thousand five hundred years old. All that was left of the Temple of Zeus at Stettos. "I'm glad they pass it by," he said.

He was turning into the house when Marcos caught his arm. "Here it comes!" The sunlight flashed from the coach as it topped the rise from the valley and purred towards Stettos. "It's slowing down," Marcos cried. "It's stopping. Stopping in Stettos! Well, here's life!"

George, with anger in his heart, stared as the great gleaming thing halted in the empty road, forty metres away. The door slid back and a jabbering crowd in cotton frocks, light suits, sandals and sunglasses spilled out into the road and poked cameras at the hill and the temple of Zeus.

George turned on Marcos as if he were somehow responsible, but Marcos was still staring at the coach. He grabbed George's arm again. "Mr Omeros, look!"

George looked. The driver, a smart, slim young man in a belted grey cloth uniform had jumped down from the bus. George drew in his breath. It wasn't possible. Heart pounding, he stepped forward. Then the young man was running towards him, both hands outstretched.

"Papa, hello, Papa! So you are there. You watched us come in."

"Demetrios!" He took his son in his arms and there was no holding the tears that coursed down his face. Then Demetrios was shaking Marcos by the hand while George stood aside, still dumbfounded, waiting for his unspoken questions to be answered.

"Where is Mamma?"

"I will call her. She is lying down. This is not the hour to be rushing about. Maria! Maria!" But when he had brought her out, still bewildered with sleep, George saw that their family reunion was to have no privacy. The cameras that had snapped the Temple of Zeus were now turned on them, and when Maria, small and withered in her old black dress, clung desperately to her son, the whole crowd surrounded them with the noise of click, click, click and cries of delight.

Demetrios spoke to the people in their own language, and turned back to his father. "They are happy for me. They knew I had not seen my parents for four years."

"Tell them to go away," George muttered. "Are we a public show?"

Demetrios said simply, "They are my friends. Besides, I serve them and when they go I must go."

Maria caught at the word. "You are not going again?"

Demetrios said, "Come inside, Papa. We must talk quickly." He turned to the tourists. "Five minutes."

As they entered the low, dark house, Marcos joined the Americans, admiring their cameras and showing off his few words of English.

They sat at the plain wooden table, Maria unable to take her eyes off her son, blessing the saints for the miracle that had restored him to her.

"Papa, Mamma," Demetrios began. "I have been in Greece four weeks, but I would not come to you till I could show you my idea. I am going to make you prosperous. I have been working on the blue and white coaches but at first I was on another tour. Today I have been transferred to this one and from now on it will halt at Stettos for five minutes at this hour."

"Five minutes!" murmured Maria.

"Yes, but soon it will be longer, if you will help me."

"How?" George asked shortly, for he was wary.

"I want to start a *cafã* here in Stettos and I want you and Mamma to run it while I work on the buses. When it's making good money for us all, I will quit the buses and come home to Stettos."

"Home to Stettos!" Maria's eyes lit up.

"What d'you say, Papa? This is what I came back for. I had a good job in the States and I saved hard to come and visit you, but then I saw posters for holidays in Greece and I thought, there are all those dollars going to my country. Why not go home for good and let some of the wealth come to Stettos?"

"So it was for money you came back?"

"No, no, no, Papa. I missed Stettos. I missed you and Mamma. Come on, what do you say, Papa? I have to rush."

Rush, thought George. Yes, that is the American way. Rush here, snap a few shots, rush there. Throw your money about to show these miserable folks how rich you are. Maria's eyes were fixed on his. He knew what she wanted him to say.

"Well, Papa?" Demetrios had risen, with his eyes on the door.

"No, Demetrios."

His son's mouth tightened. "Very well, Papa, but you will not keep us away. I'll bring life to this place yet. Goodbye, Mamma. Don't be unhappy."

He strode out and Maria leapt up and clung to him. George stood at the door, his mind slowly churning over his own words. The Americans were all back in the coach.

"You see –" Demetrios turned to his father. "There is nothing to do in Stettos." He kissed his mother and ran back to the coach. He was hoisting himself into the driver's seat when Marcos, still hanging about, called out, "Can I come for a ride?"

Demetrios laughed and held out his hand to him. "Come on up. A friend is just what I need."

Long after the dust from the coach had settled and Maria's shrill protests had died away, George stood there, rooted like the timeless hills, yearning for their indifference but with a mind disturbed.

\* \* \*

At the top of the village, at the very foot of the hill, was the derelict cottage where Marcos had squatted since the war. No-one wanted it. People did not come to Stettos, they left if they could or died there. But one day, soon afterwards, George, walking up the village, found his son at the cottage, standing outside and talking to Marcos.

"You are not on the buses today, Demetrios?"

"It's my day off, Papa." He pointed to a motor scooter leaning against the wall. "I've borrowed this from a friend. I must come down every chance I have. Marcos and I have work to do."

George looked hard at the long, twisted body. "Marcos, work!" He turned away, angry at his own anger.

His son called out, "Ask Mamma to bring us some soup at noon. I brought bread from town."

George muttered to himself, "A son should bring his mother bread," but Demetrios heard him.

"I will, Papa. Bread and wine and wealth to all Stettos. You will see."

George walked off down the street. He hated Demetrios to realise their poverty, but worse he hated that Marcos should be there, listening, every line of his body speaking insolence. And this was the one his son trusted as partner in his enterprise!

"Demetrios has come," he told Maria. "He is going to start his *cafã* in the old cottage below the hill. He and Marcos."

"That is a no-good," cried Maria. "That Marcos. And he could have built onto the cottage here. There's wood enough if he pulled down the old shed. I would have served their ice creams and their fancy drinks if Demetrios could bring them from the city. Now he sets up with Marcos and does not even come to our door."

"You're to take him some soup at noon." Then seeing her face light up again he grunted, "Ah woman, you understand nothing of this thing."

She looked up sharply. "Do I not? I know that the blessed saints have sent our son back to us and you have driven him away again." And she went out to draw water, leaving him no time to answer.

Soon George was annoyed to see that Marcos was working hard at the cottage, whitewashing the walls and building shelves and a counter in the front room. Demetrios could work only once a week though he inspected the cottage every day when the coach called. And soon the day came when a lorry brought crates of bottles to the cottage, boxes of drinking straws and crates of fruit.

The next morning Marcos was washed and wearing a clean shirt when the coach arrived and stopped at the *cafã*. He and Demetrios carried from the bus a box of ice cream and they were at once beset with customers.

George stood in his doorway and looked up the street at the bustling crowd. This was Stettos. It was hard to believe. After ten minutes the chatter died away and the coach started up. George saw Marcos, standing under the *cafã* awning, staring after the coach. Presently he kicked at the stones in the road and slouched inside.

“He will not last, that one,” Maria said at George’s elbow and he started at finding her there. “It is Demetrios’s money, but Marcos has the work while Demetrios sees the world. He will not like that.”

“I must watch him,” George said.

\* \* \*

It was a week later that Demetrios was transferred to another route. “I have begged them not to move me,” he told his father on one of the few occasions when he called at his home, “but they need me for the Corinth run. They want to dispense with a guide so they must have the driver who speaks the best English.”

Maria clapped her hands. “And that is my son!”

“Yes, Mamma, and they are giving me a big rise so I must accept. But I am worried about Marcos. If I do not watch him he gets slovenly. At first he was keen but now that the money is coming in, he grows lazy and will not keep the *cafã* clean. He only gets out of bed an hour before the coach comes.”

George growled, “I warned you.”

But Demetrios was angry. “Yes, you have always wanted us to fail,” and he strode out of the cottage.

\* \* \*

The blue and white coach continued to stop every day at the *cafã* and Marcos seemed to be doing a roaring trade.

Maria said, “Demetrios will come down on his day off and that Marcos will have to render a true account.”

“He will be here tomorrow,” George said, “but I think Marcos is too clever for him. He is lazy but he has the brain of the devil.”

They were standing looking out for the coach while they were speaking. For now George always came from his patch of ground and Maria from her baking to watch for it. George would often walk up the street and stand on the edge of the crowd, hating their loud voices, their style of dress, their cameras, but impelled by a sense of foreboding to be there.

This day when he left Maria and walked over to the *cafã*, a square-faced, middle-aged man, typically dressed in a light linen suit and sandals, turned aside from the crowd and addressed George, to his amazement, in Greek.

“You live here, my friend?”

“All my life.”

The man shook him by the hand. "My parents emigrated to the States. They come from the next village. We just passed through it." He mentioned his family name which George knew. "I'm here to see my homeland. Only a fortnight's visit. I came on this tour last week and the driver stopped for me to look at the house my family used to live in. He was a good fellow, that driver. But this one would not stop. Said we were behind schedule."

"The other was my son," George said with pride.

The man was interested. "Didn't he start this *cafã* with his friend there? He told me about it. Enterprising young man. He's managed this halt at Stettos. You've a fine ruin there too and the church is interesting. They'll be doing tours here specially soon. You'll get some shops, perhaps even a hotel. Bring some life to the place."

George sickened at the phrase again and yet he liked the man.

"We do not want that kind of life. I do not like Americans. You, of course, are Greek."

"No, no," the man smiled, "I am American. But my parents were Greek. You see – father Greek, son American. We are all one family. Those people there – you do not like them because they cannot speak your language, nor you theirs, so there is no way you can reach them, no way you can begin to understand why their life is different from yours."

George frowned. "They are too different. Aliens."

"No, no," the man said again, "they all eat and sleep and raise families. They think thoughts and suffer pain and die. Your people are buried from your tiny old church here, full of beautiful icons, mine from a big modern church a thousand years younger, but we go to the same unchanging God. Why do you mind their coming here and being happy for a few minutes in your village?"

George was speechless.

The man continued quietly, "I sat beside your son last week and he talked to me as he drove. He understood this. He said, 'I love people, for what is there in the world to love if you do not love humankind? But,' he said, 'there are so few people in Stettos and they are wrapped in towards themselves and towards the land. And year by year the land grows poorer because only the old are left. It is not money so much that is needed, as vigour, energy, life.' Still, he told me, he wanted to live here. Stettos had pulled him from across the Atlantic. It was then that I asked him, because he hadn't yet told me, if Stettos was his home. 'Indeed it is my home,' he said, 'for that is where my father and mother live'."

"Please, sir, all aboard now," the coach driver called.

The man held out his hand. "I must go." On the step of the coach he turned, laughing, and said, "Oh and tell your son when you see him that his *cafã* will lose trade if he puts the prices up again. Ices have doubled since last week!"

George stared after the coach. Then he turned sharply towards the *cafã*. That Marcos! He had done this thing with the prices. He would be keeping the extra profit for himself, cheating both Demetrios and the innocent travellers.

Marcos came out of the door to bring in the empty bottles. Seeing George, he paused and scowled at him. George thought, I will get nowhere with him. He will deny everything. I will wait till Demetrios comes. He turned on his heel and walked home to Maria and told him what he suspected. But he kept his counsel about the rest of the stranger's words.

\* \* \*

The next morning early, over the sound of the scrawny hens cackling, George heard the pop, pop of Demetrios's borrowed scooter. He waited a few minutes till Maria was at her prayers before the icon, then he walked up the village to the *cafã*. The scooter was leaning against the wall but the two men were inside and as he drew near, George heard their voices from the inner room where Marcos slept, and they were angry voices.

Marcos was protesting, "There are the accounts. The money is right. So what are you going mad about?"

"Oh yes?" Demetrios's tone was sarcastic. "The accounts look right. But how much have you put into your own pocket that you robbed from the customers?"

"I rob!" cried Marcos furiously.

"Well, what is it that Petros, the new driver, told me last night? "Your *cafã*," he says, "charges more than the best hotel in Athens"."

Marcos laughed shortly. "He is a fool, that Petros. When has he ever been in the best hotels? And if we are accusing each other, you can tell me why you send your father to spy on me. Every day he is watching. Do you think that shows trust between partners?"

"My father is here every day?"

"You know he is."

"Then I am glad there is someone I can trust who is looking after my interests. But I never asked him. You know well enough that he doesn't approve of the *cafã*. He hates tourists."

"Ah! At first," Marcos cried, in his most sneering tone, "but now it is prospering he will hope to get something out of it."

"You..." Demetrios cried. There was the sound of a blow and then a heavy thud.

George burst into the room. Marcos was just leaping up from the floor. Demetrios had lowered his hands, ashamed. Both turned as George's shadow fell across them.

Demetrios exclaimed, "I struck him, Papa."

Marcos, white with fury, cried, "Why not? You think I can't fight? I'll take you both on. The precious Omeros, father and son who think they can use Marcos Kontos and then cast him aside. I see it now. A conspiracy. We will let Marcos do the hard work and if the thing makes money we will take it from him. And it was my idea. I told it to you, George Omeros, before your precious son came home. And you passed it to him so you could cheat me of it. Yes and I've seen you watching and spying on me, you dirty lying old man." He gathered himself together and spat into George's face.

Demetrios leapt on him, but as his hands were closing on Marcos's throat, he dropped them again and turned aside with a despairing oath. At that second Marcos sprang, caught the side of Demetrios's head with a ringing blow and, when he fell, kicked him brutally in the stomach.

George felt his whole body tighten and harden with anger. His hands gripped Marcos's arms from behind and pinned them to his body. Demetrios, still on the floor, gasping with pain, spluttered, "Don't hurt him, Papa."

"No," George said, "I won't hurt him. But I can show him my strength. Feel that grip, Marcos Kontos. Those hands have laboured for fifty years. And their labour has been honest."

Marcos struggled. "Let me go."

"You shall go. And you will not come back. Take yourself into the city. Your kind is there. You're not wanted here. If we have new life in Stettos it must be honest life. I know about your cheating. A man spoke with me yesterday who was here last

week and said you had doubled the prices. He spoke true for he was a good man. We cannot give back what you stole from the travellers so take it with you and get you gone. And let us see you no more in Stettos.”

On the last word he thrust Marcos from him and the young man snatched at his things that lay about the squalid room and began feverishly pushing them into a battered bag. He said nothing and did not look at them.

George helped Demetrios to his feet and they left the cottage. When Maria saw them coming, her son leaning on his father, looking sick, she rushed out crying, “Oh, my little one, my baby!” George smiled to see her petting him who stood head and shoulders above her.

“Your mother has it thought out,” he said, when Demetrios had sat down and drunk some water. “We can build an annex to the house here. Do not go back to the old cottage. We will make a new start. If you will teach me first all the prices in English, that will do until I pick up their language.”

Demetrios stared at him. “You will do this, Papa?”

“Yes,” said George simply. “There is much wisdom to be learnt in speaking with other men.”

Maria looked at her icon, crossed herself and murmured a thanksgiving. Demetrios stood up and clasped his father in his arms.

George, feeling the moment too great to bear, gave him a little shove towards the door. “And look, is it not a better snapshot of the Temple of Zeus? Up there you are too close. From here you see it all, reaching into the sky.”

Demetrios gave him a joyful grin. “Indeed it is, Papa. From here you and Mamma will see the whole world.”