

Dear Corinna ... A Love story

By Stanley Adair

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I stepped out onto the balcony of our rented villa into a wall of pulsating heat and walked to the edge of the balcony, resting both of my hands on the warm railing.

Hundreds of feet below me, the sleepy Aegean waves lapped gently against the rocky shoreline and a cruise ship, looking no bigger than a toy a child would play with in the bath, gleamed white and sparkled in the bay. I watched as tenders ferried excited passengers back to a small jetty where the next part of their journey would be by cable car, or for the more adventurous, or foolhardy, by donkey. Whatever transport they chose would see them emerge literally and triumphantly at the top of the world. The spectacular Greek island of Santorini.

On a high backed cane chair festooned by soft cushions of blue and white sat my wife, Corinna, looking totally relaxed in her bikini while I looked out of place in my white short sleeved shirt and long trousers. But then she always did 'cool' so much better than me. Corinna's long black hair seemed to move almost sedately in a breeze that lacked the stamina to work itself up into something more energetic, while her eyes, of the deepest blue, lay hidden beneath expensive sun glasses.

"It's so beautiful," I said, my voice barely audible. I didn't have to look back at Corinna to know she would be nodding her head in agreement with me. We had been married eight years before we discovered the magic of Santorini which was, to both of us, like falling in love all over again. It also meant that for the last nine years we had gone nowhere else, but for all its enchantment its fascination and allure ended for me three years ago on this very day.

We can forget all too easily how fragile life really is. How the path we walk along is not of the same duration as the person beside us even though, every now and again, we are callously reminded that our allotted time is something that is beyond our control. But we choose to ignore these sombre notions in our belief that when we plan for tomorrow we will actually be around to enjoy it.

This is why when death slips silently out of the shadows with that insatiable appetite for misery we are always caught out. He'll stand beside you and you'll know nothing of his frightful presence until his pitiless hand reaches out and takes away from you that most precious of gifts, life.

Corinna died of a massive heart attack in front of me on this very balcony. She had been laughing and telling me of her plans for that morning as she sipped wine from a long stemmed glass. Then she just crumpled. There were no warnings, no signs of pain and all I could do was watch her fall as my mind failed to comprehend just what was happening. It was the breaking of the glass, an agonizing sound that will forever haunt me, and the ripple of cascading red wine sweeping across the smooth white tiles that snapped me out of that awful moment. But even as I bent down to try and help I could see I had lost her. We held her funeral back home on a day where the sun shone just as brightly as in Greece but it still couldn't remove the chill that I and my family were experiencing. My fifteen year old daughter, Lynn clung tightly to me, her tears mingling with my own while our sorrow was matched equally by our despair.

The next few months proved completely unreal to me and as I moved about our home trying to come to terms with her death I was aware that it seemed unnaturally cold and desolate even though Corinna's touches were everywhere. I instinctively knew her spirit was not here giving me the impression that the house had purged her from every corner of its structure. I couldn't understand this and began descending deeper into my despair when my daughter said something that at first just seemed ridiculous.
"Maybe she is somewhere else."

I returned to Santorini the following year and found her waiting for me when I walked out onto the balcony again, still wearing the same bikini and that captivating smile of hers. It proved too unreal for me and I found myself reliving her loss all over again. I dropped onto the cane chair with my eyes tightly closed, trying to hold back my tears, knowing this just couldn't be true. But when I opened them again she was still there and, as she took my hand, I felt all the pain that was trapped in my heart slowly release itself. Gently she pulled me to my feet and hugged me close to her heart. I don't know how long we stayed there holding each other like this, but it was long after the sun had slipped beneath the horizon.

I quickly discovered that the only time we had together was in the villa, but what was really baffling me was why Corinna has chosen to stay here? Could it be that in death time is different? For me three long agonizing years have now passed, but maybe to my wife we are still enjoying our last hours together. Anyway, I have stopped theorizing about the complexities of the situation and have just embraced it.

Until now I have never believed in the supernatural, but if somehow I've crossed a line that takes me from this world into the next then I'm not going to argue about such matters, but just accept this unique opportunity that the great unknown has favoured me with.

Invariably my mind would always take me back to another time when Corinna and I walked these lively streets together, spending hours checking out the shops for bargains, resting outside a cafe to enjoy a leisurely coffee while watching the world go by. Then, in the cool of the evening just sitting together over a romantic candlelit dinner.

Corinna never spoke to me, yet somehow I could hear her voice. She just seemed to know when my resolve was beginning to fragment and would hold me again, soothing me, while pushing the pain of my reality into a room whose door I never wanted to open again. But no matter how much I accepted this situation I know it is not enough. In every given scenario there are options- some good and some bad- with the equally bizarre case that none of them is right and none of them is wrong. It is just trying to find the one that suits you.

Suicide was my first option and I know that is to be condemned by all right-thinking people, but when your body is racked with terminal pain it can appear to be the only solution. The one and only time I had decided to end my life was several months after we had buried Corinna. I was on tranquilizers prescribed by my doctor and in a moment of weakness had decided taking them all. I had already poured my drink and was heading to get the tablets when my daughter came home unexpectedly.

The first thing she did was throw her arms around me, hugging me tightly while shedding soft tears. But in that moment I realised someone else was suffering and my plans to join my wife suddenly just seemed selfish. Although I still needed Corinna, my daughter needed me more.

My next option was expensive and that was just to buy the villa. I certainly could afford it, however I quickly dismissed that idea in favour of the one solution I desperately wanted, to simply try and persuade Corinna to come home with me.

Leaving my wife in this far-off place is always a mixture of misery and happiness, but the former is overcome by the latter when I know she is somewhere free of any pain and is content. As I turned to face Corinna she got up out of her chair and walked silently over towards me, putting her arms around my neck and kissing me lightly on the cheek. Her closeness felt so real while her perfume invaded all my senses leaving me light-headed and confused. For a few agonizing seconds I tried to hold on to our embrace in an almost desperate attempt to keep our only link together unbroken, but I knew Corinna had, once more, chosen to stay. She gave me one last kiss before sitting down again, her gaze transfixed on the distant Aegean.

I forced myself to walk into the living room and picked up my suitcase. I didn't look back nor attempt to wipe away my tears. Stepping outside I made my way down the few steps to the waiting taxi.

Maybe next year.