



## The Return of Katerina

A Story by Harry Mark Petrakis

In April of that year, Paul Brademas had been dead two years. His widow, Katerina, lived with his father, Lycurgus, in a small apartment above their tavern.

After his son's death, Lycurgus wished to sell the tavern. He was almost sixty himself and wearied of the long hours on his feet. In addition he did not think it proper that a young attractive woman such as Katerina should work in the smoky room of boisterous men.

But Katerina insisted they keep the tavern which brought in a good profit. When she worked hard there was little time left to brood upon the death of her husband. She also felt it provided Lycurgus a meeting place for a few old friends with whom he could sit in the evening.

In the beginning Katerina's grief for her husband

was a wild despair. For a while the memory of their lovemaking was something she could recall at will. At those times she felt her breath become short and her breasts grow taut. And so strong was the love she held for him that she could almost feel again his hands across her body and the strength of his arms about her waist.

But time passed and the seasons changed. In the winter the snow piled in drifts before the tavern. Katerina would rise early to clean the walk before the old man rose. When he came downstairs he would grumble that shoveling was man's work and take the shovel from her hands.

In the spring of the second year after her husband's death, a strange restlessness possessed Katerina. She was no longer satisfied to recall her husband in dreams. She walked in the glittering twilight and felt envy growing in her heart at the sight of lovers in the park.

She visited her husband's grave and placed fresh flowers upon the mound of earth. In those moments under the sighing trees she wept and swore eternal love. She waited for some sign that he had heard and understood but the earth made no gesture of redemption.

In the evenings in the tavern she no longer took pleasure in the wild laughter of the men. She became snappish and cross. Her temper flared quickly and she acquired a reputation for an acid tongue. Lycurgus was concerned for her and tried to ease her labor in different ways thinking that perhaps she was working too hard.

After closing he sent her to bed at once and swept the floor himself and locked the door. The only person left inside was his old friend, Zakinthákis, veteran of ten thousand drinking bouts and three wars. A wise rascal of a man who counted his life of fighting and wenching well spent. Lycurgus disapproved of his friend's morals but enjoyed his company.

After counting the cash Lycurgus took a final glass of *mastíha* to the table for himself and another for Zakinthákis. They toasted each other solemnly.

"I am troubled over Katerina," the old man told Zakinthákis. "Nothing seems to please her. She has grown as peevish as an old woman."

Zakinthákis looked into his glass of *mastíha* and a faint zestful smile curled his thin lips. He admired the fine lush body of Katerina and knew the reason for her distemper. He wished he could still have been the one to comfort her.

"When Paul was alive," Lycurgus said sadly, "she was not like that. They loved each other dearly." He wiped a stray tear from his eye. "It must be her grief," he said. "She still mourns for him."

Zakinthákis sipped at his *mastíha* and marveled at how a man could have lived as many years as Lycurgus and still understand so little about women.

"Grief is a terrible thing," he said somberly, and within him he laughed because he knew that when he died a thousand women would grieve for him . . . but not for long. Then because the long evening of drinking had dulled him slightly, he spoke without thinking. "She needs a lover," he said.

Lycurgus sat shocked and rooted to his chair. His lips moved and no words came. Then he found his voice and let out an angry roar.

"Devil!" he shouted. "Lecher and animal out of darkness! Have you lost your mind?"

Zakinthákis realized his mistake and sighed. He rose heavily to his feet to leave. Lycurgus followed him raging to the door.

"You dare speak of my son's wife in that way?" he cried. "Get out, you stepson of some unholy devil!"

Long after Zakinthákis had left, Lycurgus still paced the tavern and hurled curses upon his friend's head. Each time he considered the outrage, his blood flamed anew.

Finally he turned off the last lights and went upstairs. Outside the bedroom of Katerina he listened for a moment at her door. There was no sound from her room and he went to bed.

For a long time he could not sleep. The murmur of the night came through his window. He was restlessly aware of his age and his inevitable death. The years had swept by so quickly. He had never traveled, never cared for cards or drink, and had been shy with girls. A day came when he married because he could not bear his loneliness any longer. His wife had been a dark and thin woman who wore black for mourning all her life. Rarely would she suffer Lycurgus to caress her and from one of these uncertain, unsatisfying unions their only child had been born. But the child was little comfort to Lycurgus because of the domination of the mother. In the boy's seventeenth year, his mother died, accepting death as gratefully as a suppliant. Lycurgus could not grieve for her and accepted joyously the return of his son. When Paul married Katerina he wept for their happiness and for his own

Harry Mark Petrakis is a Chicago writer whose two novels, *Lion at My Heart* and the *Odyssey of Kostas Volakis*, have portrayed with great insight the Greek-American community.

good fortune. He envisioned the day that grandchildren would scamper around him. But then the young man had fallen sick, and after a short shocking illness had died. As if his mother, dark and brooding from the grave, had called to him to join her.

Lycurgus tossed in helpless despair. Then he remembered Katerina in the room beside his own. Her nearness was a comfort to him, and he slept.

Spring passed into summer. The heat came early in the day and twilight brought no relief. Along the street on which they lived men and women sat before the stores, fanning themselves until long past midnight. The boys and girls ran by squealing to slap one another's bottoms in the dark alleys.

After closing the tavern Lycurgus and Katerina walked for a while in the park. On the grass in long uneven rows, men, women and children slept under the sky. A great sound of whispering, like the drone of countless crickets, rose from the dark and hidden groves.

Back in their flat with the open windows providing no relief from the heat, Lycurgus lay awake in the dark listening to Katerina in her room. He heard her talking to herself, and though he could not make out the words he heard the bitterness in her voice. Once he thought he heard her weeping, and because he felt she wept for her dead, he cried with her, silently, so she would not hear.

On a night in August a group of strangers came to the tavern. They were loud and bold young men, blond Norsemen, and they drank great quantities of beer. Countless times during the evening Katerina carried trays of beer to their table. They laughed and teased her and a bright flush of pink appeared in her cheeks. They finally left, holding one another up, and the bawdy sound of their voices could be heard rioting from the street.

The next night one of them, a blond young giant with big hands, returned alone. He sat in a corner and did not sing or carry on. Katerina served him several times and lingered at his table.

From that night on the blond stranger came every evening. Whenever he could, Lycurgus served the man whose light pale eyes seemed full of menace. Lycurgus was reminded of tales he had heard as a child of the villages raided by the pillaging Turks. The burning of houses and the screaming of women.

An evening came when several hours before closing,

Katerina told him she was not well. He suggested she go at once to bed but she wished to walk alone for a while and he let her go. It was not until she had left that he noticed for the first time in several weeks that the blond stranger was not at his table in the corner. A cold fear enveloped him but he remembered Katerina's sacred allegiance to her dead and suppressed his apprehension.

Summer passed and the first winds of autumn swept the scent of burning leaves along the street. The days grew shorter and there was a strange still beauty in the nights.

With the passing of summer, Katerina took on a new grace. Lycurgus marveled at the change. She had thrown off the terrible melancholia and once again enjoyed the laughter in the tavern. Her black hair gleamed lustrous and alive and her body once more appeared lithe and supple. He heard her sing in her room at night.

In the morning as she cooked him breakfast, he basked in her radiance and marveled at how beautiful she had become once again. He watched her eat with pleasure, the ripe soft lips parting slightly and the small pieces of food going between them. Her cheeks were as soft and unblemished as those of a child and the color of her flesh was the cool, transparent whiteness of the foam on new milk.

When they had finished she rose from the table and carried the dishes to the sink. She spoke softly with her back to him.

"Papa, I am going away," she said. "I am going to the country for a little while. Now when the leaves are changing and the earth is so beautiful."

"Going away?" Lycurgus said in alarm. "Katerina, you cannot go away alone!"

"For just a little while," she said gently. "I am weary suddenly of the city and the noise and the disorder."

"It is not right that you go alone," Lycurgus said. "We will close the tavern. We will go away together so that I can look after you."

"I wish to go alone," she said, and then she added quickly. "You do not like to travel. You would come only because you are concerned for me." She bent over the dishes in the sink. "Zakinthákis can help you in the tavern. I will be gone only a little while."

"Zakinthákis!" the old man cried. "I would sooner ask help of the devil!"

"Then find someone else to help you," she said and there was a firmness in her voice.

She left the following Friday and was gone for almost two weeks. Lycurgus missed her terribly. At night he could not bear to go to their rooms and stayed downstairs in the tavern long after closing. In loneliness and desperation he accepted the return of Zakinthákis and drank with him for hours.

"She could have waited until I died," he complained bitterly to his friend. "She could have taken her vacation then."

Zakinthákis merely sighed.

At the end of the second week Katerina returned. On a night after Lycurgus had closed the tavern and sat drinking with Zakinthákis.

He had turned off most of the lights and when he heard the door he thought he had forgotten to lock it and that some patron had entered. Then he heard her voice speak his name and a great gladness leaped in his heart. He rose quickly from the table.

"Katerina!" he cried. "Katerina!"

It was not until then that he saw she was not alone. Only when his eyes became accustomed to the shadows about the door, did he recognize the tall blond stranger.

A terrible distress ran riot in his body. He wanted to cry out but no sound passed his lips. He stared at the silent figure beside Katerina. Never had he hated a man more. He would not let himself think but only let the hot flow of hate sweep over him in waves.

"Papa," Katerina said, and her cheeks gleamed pale in the shadows. "This is my husband, Edwin Larsen."

Then Lycurgus cried out. A cry of pain and anguish. A cry for his dead son and for deceit and the fiendish heart of a woman. He burned suddenly under a white hot flame.

"Thief!" he said to Edwin Larsen, and smoke and fury curled off his tongue. "Vandal, bastard out of darkness!" His voice rose. "I should have killed you the first night I saw you enter!"

"Papa, try to understand," Katerina said. "I loved Paul very much. You know I loved him." Her voice

rose and broke. "But you cannot love the dead forever."

"Not forever!" Lycurgus said and he spoke to her in fierce bitterness. "Only two years and you forsake his memory."

"I loved him," Katerina said. "When he died I could have died with him. But I lived and in the summer I saw the new buds spring to life on the trees and heard the lovers whispering in the dark groves."

"Silence!" Lycurgus cried. "I do not wish to hear your shame!"

Katerina turned and reached back for her husband and brought him into the light. "Papa," she said, "Papa, do you want me back? Tell me now. If you want me back I will come back."

Lycurgus looked from her to the stranger. "Alone," he said. "I want you back alone."

"I cannot come alone," she said. "I am married now."

"You are married to my son."

"He is dead," Katerina said.

"I do not want you then!" Lycurgus cried. "I do not want you then!"

Through a mist of grief he saw her turn. Slim beside the tall Norseman, she walked to the door. Her steps made a slight fading sound as she reached the street.

When he could hear her no longer he turned fiercely on Zakinthákis. "Get out," he said. "Leave me alone."

Zakinthákis moved slowly to the door. He paused with his hand on the knob. "I am going," he said. "I will tell you something first, old friend."

"Leave me alone!" Lycurgus cried.

"You do not weep for your son," Zakinthákis said, and his voice was filled with pity and sadness. "You weep for yourself."

And in that instant after the door closed and he was left alone, in that moment of dark revelation he felt the tears explode from his eyes. "Katerina!" and he heard his voice cry her name in the silence. "Katerina!" and only the raven-winged vision of his wife heard and returned to comfort him.