

“What if...”

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Echoes of Exarcheia

When I first moved to Exarcheia, people spoke about the square like it was a heart - beating, alive, unruly.

By the time I arrived, the fences were already up. Riot police patrolling its perimeter.

The square felt tense, stitched with metal barriers and unspoken warnings. Democracy, I realized, wasn't disappearing overnight.

It was being fenced away.

Still, you could feel the neighborhood's spirit pulsing through the streets - graffiti on every wall, cafés filled with conversations, stories floating out from the old bookstores and record shops.

There, I heard about the nights when music and protest melted together - summer evenings when people flooded the square, musicians playing rebetika, friends arguing politics til dawn. They spoke of it like a friend they had suddenly lost.

Without the square, Strefi Hill became our open space.

Dry ground. Twisting trees clinging stubbornly to the city's shoulder.

Up there, we would gather - sitting in the dusty shade, watching Athens unfold below, the sea drawing a blue line at the horizon.

Then last week, after a concert on the hill, a small group broke away - smashing cars, chaos spilling into the narrow streets.

The government's response came swiftly and was harsh: concerts banned, riot police sweeping the hill, checkpoints carving up the paths we used to walk carefree.

It wasn't an isolated crackdown, but part of a larger shift – what felt like a tightening of hands.

Days earlier, police had appeared at a student theater festival.

During a play, a student had pulled down a garland of Greek flags - part of the script.

Someone took offense.

Teachers were questioned. Students were frightened. They tell us it is about safety. About respect. About order.

But it feels like something else; a slow, deliberate suffocation.

Someone came out and said; you don't kill the spirit of a place by burning it down. You fence it.



“What if...”

You flood it with uniforms.

You make people too tired, too fearful to gather. And yet - we kept gathering.

Today, we met again.

Despite the patrols. Despite the IDs demanded at every corner. We climbed the hill together - friends, neighbors, strangers.

On the way up, someone passed around small handmade signs; “The hill belongs to all of us”. Another handed out water bottles from a torn backpack, smiling to people.

A little boy sang an old song out of tune.

People were giving food to the stray cats as we walked.

When we reached the top, we stood there, the city stretched out before us - battered, stubborn, still our own.

For a moment, it was as if the constraints dissolved into the Athenian sky. We weren’t just claiming space.

We were claiming each other.

Maybe this is what democracy looks like now; Not monuments, but cracked sidewalks.

Not polished speeches, but music carried up a hill. Not permission, but persistence.

Today, democracy wasn’t something we celebrated. It was something we *became*.



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