

A Girl in Black, Part II

Michael Cacoyannis , Dir. (1956)

Done taunting, the neighborhood boys stand in a loose circle watching Mitso, who is silent and seems in pain. We see Marina behind the window shutters, her face a mask of grief and deep concern. Entering the house, Mitso screams, his voice ragged, "I'll kill her! Everyone's laughing at us! I'll kill her! I'll kill her!"

Their mother Froso (Eleni Zafiriou) is coming down the mountain. She passes the two fishermen working on their nets, who ignore her. With one hand, she tucks her hair into place.

Dressed all in black, hair tied back modestly, Froso walks past the boats docked in the harbor. As she goes, she adjusts the neckline of her dress, smoothing the lower part of it and passing her hand over her hip in a way that's almost protective.

All eyes are on her now: the fishermen in their boats; a child who stares at her from the stone jetty; the women who stand like sentinels outside their houses.

She greets someone quietly, "Hello, Popi." The click of her heels announces her presence up and down the street. Women on their balconies look down at her, leaning on the iron railings, skirts blowing gently in the breeze.

From a distance, Froso sees a crowd in front of her house, boys massed in the street and some young men on her stoop. She stops, adjusts the top button of her dress again, and then continues on.

Inside the house, Marina is ironing, her left hand smoothing the fabric as the right guides the heavy iron. She's looking down, intent on her work. At the sudden sounds of yelling from the street, she hesitates only a moment before running out.

Outside, Mitso is beating his mother, in front of a crowd of onlookers, young and old. He strikes her and pulls her hair, as she cries out in pain. He yells, "I'll kill her! I swear I will!"

Marina pushes through the crowd and rushes to her mother. Calling out, "No, Mitso, no!" she struggles to free Froso. But he doesn't let up, handling Marina roughly too. That's when Pavlos and Antoni come running up.

Two young men try to hold Mitso back. But he breaks free. Marina puts herself between Mitso and her mother. Furious, he shoves her aside to continue his beating.

The villagers watch silently: old women in headscarves, young men, a teenager in a white dress with braids, our travellers. They all seem subdued, saddened.

Froso is on the ground now. Marina struggles to keep Mitso from her and at last he gives up. Her arms have been around him in their struggle and he stays there now, exhausted, in his sister's embrace. Sobbing hysterically, Froso gets up and runs into the house.

Under the gaze of the villagers, brother and sister stand silently for a moment, before Mitso bends over sharply and begins to weep uncontrollably, face in his hands. He sinks to the ground, still covering his face with his hands and arms, in shame. Marina places a hand on his head to console him.

Out in the crowd, Pavlos and Antoni exchange glances.

Finally, Mitso gets up, sniffing, casts a glance at Marina, then slowly turns and walks away. The crowd begins to disperse.

Pavlos stands at the window of his room, looking down at the street, which is mostly empty by now. Marina remains fixed in one spot, her skirt fluttering in the breeze. As the last stragglers leave, the church bell chimes, and she turns and slowly climbs the white steps up to her house.

Froso is seated at the kitchen table, head down on her folded arms, sobbing. She lifts her head when Marina enters the room. Without speaking, Marina returns to where she left her ironing. She licks her finger and touches the bottom of the iron to be sure it's still hot. Froso looks at her desperately.

Still saying nothing, Marina starts her ironing. Froso continues weeping, head bowed and covered by her hand. After a time, she asks, "What are you ironing?" Marina ignores her. "Why don't you talk to me?" Marina doesn't respond.

For the first time, we see Froso in close-up. We see that she must have been beautiful when she was young. She looks at her daughter and begs her, "Talk to me, Marina, please! Call me names. Say I'm cheap, rotten... Only please talk to me. Marina. My Marina..." But Marina remains silent.

"Oh, God, what am I to do?" Froso exclaims, dropping her head back down on her arms, as Marina goes on ironing and folding the laundry, impassively. "I don't want this. I swear to you, I don't want this. But... How can I make you understand? You... you are different. Me, at your age I was married. I had three children. At times I get so depressed, so lonely... I can't help myself... When your father died, I was still young. I needed a little kindness, affection. I've shamed my own children!"

Finally Marina speaks: "If only I could go away –" Just then, a knock startles the two women. Through a missing panel in the door, we see Pavlos, wearing a white shirt, holding a jug.

"Excuse me," he says, smiling. He opens the door but doesn't come in. Leaning in the doorway, he says, "I'd like some water... and I didn't know where to get it" Marina leaves her ironing. "I'll get it," she tells him and takes the jug.

Pavlos stands awkwardly behind Froso, who doesn't yet realize who he is.

Marina explains, "This gentleman and his friend have rented the upstairs rooms." She pauses for a moment, turns to Pavlos and makes a more formal introduction: "My mother."

"It's a pleasure," Pavlos says politely.

"Likewise," Froso answers.

Froso gets up and leaves the room. Pavlos goes to Marina for the jug of water. There's a moment, as she passes it to him, when they're looking into each other's eyes, close together, their hands on the pitcher. It's almost as if they're touching each other.

He says, "Thank you" and turns, taking a few steps towards the door.

"Sir..." she says.

He turns back. "The name's Pavlos."

"If you want to move elsewhere, we'll understand."

"Whatever for?" he asks, incredulously.

She looks directly at him. "After what..." She struggles to find the words and finally looks down again, silent.

"Do you mean those fools out there? They should mind their own business. I don't know about you, but I have so many weaknesses that I've given up judging others. Don't let me start counting them, your hair would stand on end. Truly, I don't approve of myself at all!"

She had turned away and now turns back to him, with the faintest of smiles on her face.

"Don't you believe me?"

She smiles. "You're very kind."

Then he remembers, "I've got to go. Antoni is waiting for the water. And he's so demanding.

Insufferable." On his way out, Pavlos pauses at the doorway, and then turns back. "I hope we'll be friends, eh?" he says.

He leaves, and Marina looks at the place where he was standing with an expression we haven't seen before. It might almost be hope.