

Prologue

2016

IN A SMALL apartment in Athens, four generations gathered to celebrate a birthday. A diminutive woman with silver hair smiled as great-grandchildren ran giddily around the outside of the group and adults sang:

*Pandoú na skorpízis,
Tis gnósis to fos,
Kai óloi na léne,
Na mía sofós.*

May you spread out the light,
Of all that you know,
So everyone says,
How wise that you are.

Though she had heard them a thousand times, Themis Stavridis listened to the words, and reflected on all the wisdom she had shared. Her family were familiar with her ‘secret’ recipes, her technique for building a slow-burning fire and how to tell an edible berry from a poisonous one. In practical terms, she had taught them all that she knew.

Tightly packed round an old mahogany dining table were eighteen family members, and several of the children had been seated on their parents' laps in order to fit. The meal was over, the cake devoured, and now, in the late afternoon, the younger generations were becoming restless, furtively looking at their phones to check messages and time. The two-bedroomed home could not contain the energies of children, small or large, for much longer, and under their mothers' instructions they formed a queue to embrace the nonagenarian.

In a frayed but favourite armchair sat Themis' husband, present and absent at the same time. Before leaving, the children queued to kiss him, mostly on the top of his head or on a cheek, wherever they could reach. He appeared not even to acknowledge that they were there. His face was like a dark house. In the past five years, the lights had gone out one by one and today his wife's radiance accentuated the contrast between them. Giorgos Stavridis had no idea that most of these people were blood relations who owed their very existence to him. At certain moments, their presence even baffled and alarmed him, now that all were forgotten and unknown.

Kisses and goodbyes and well-meant promises to meet soon took some time but eventually the apartment was quiet. Half-finished dishes of *pastítsio*, *spanakópita* and *dolmadákia* were spread across the table. There was still enough to feed every guest all over again. There was only one empty platter, on which remained a few crumbs and smears of icing from the creamy chocolate cake. It had been deftly divided and parcelled on to paper plates, the last of which now balanced on the arm of the old man's chair.

Two grandchildren stayed behind: Popi, who lived close by, and Nikos, who had come from America to celebrate his grandmother's birthday. Nikos sat in the corner of the room working on his laptop while Popi gathered dirty glasses on to a tray.

‘I’m going to help you with all this, *Yiayía*,’ she said, beginning to pile up the dinner plates and to scoop untouched food into plastic containers.

‘No, no, Popi *mou*. There’s no need. I know how busy you young people are.’

‘I’m not busy, *Yiayía*,’ she said, adding the words ‘if only’ under her breath. Popi was a translator, but her hours were part-time and her salary low. She was looking for bar work to supplement her income.

The chaos created by the party was too much for the old lady and she was secretly glad of the help.

Her youngest granddaughter was long-legged, almost thirty centimetres taller than her grandmother, but she had inherited the same cheekbones and fine fingers. Her hairstyle had upset her *yiayía* when she had first arrived. It was the first time Themis had seen Popi since she had shaved her head on one side. The other side, still shoulder-length, was now streaked purple. She also had a small stud in her nose, but that was a few years old.

‘Look at all this food we couldn’t eat!’ she exclaimed with disapproval. ‘Maybe we shouldn’t be wasting so much in this crisis.’

‘Crisis?’ repeated the old lady.

‘Yes, *Yiayía*. The crisis!’

The old lady was teasing her, but it took Popi a few moments to realise it.

‘I know. I know. Everyone talks of “the crisis”. But today I wanted to celebrate the plenty that we *do* have, rather than what we *don’t* have.’

‘I just feel guilty, that’s all. I can’t help it.’

‘Just for my sake, *agápi mou*, try not to feel guilty. Even if it feels a little wasteful.’

There was just enough space in the tiny kitchen for one person

to wash and dry the plates and for another to put them away. The long-limbed Popi did not need to stand on a chair to reach the high shelves.

Once they were finished with the chores, and the kitchen was spotless, they went out on to the balcony, stepping over Giorgos' legs to do so. Nikos joined them.

Nikos and Popi were in their late twenties but there the similarity ended. The contrast between them was startling, with Nikos dressed in a suit and Popi in leggings and a T-shirt. The pair had met only a few times in the past decade at family events, but usually gravitated towards each other when they did. Popi always wanted to grill her cousin about American politics, and on recent visits Nikos had been full of questions about Greek society. Their childhoods had greatly contrasted in terms of privilege and opportunity, but they had both enjoyed good university educations and talked to each other as equals.

Having grown up in a detached house surrounded by lawns, Nikos found plenty of things alien about Greek life. Several of them confronted him now. Open windows and ill-fitting shutters meant that everyone was familiar with intimate details of their neighbours' lives: raised voices, babies crying, televisions blaring, a radio left playing, the relentless drone of angry teenage music. Silence was as rare as privacy here.

The 'American cousin', as Popi thought of him, was also unused to the way in which personal details were announced by washing lines. The number, age and size of family members was often evident; even the kind of work they did and perhaps their politics too were displayed.

Themis Stavridis caught her granddaughter scrutinising the balcony opposite. An unbroken row of black T-shirts confirmed her own fear.

‘Do you think they’re *Chrysí Avgí?*’ asked Popi, a note of alarm in her voice.

‘I am afraid so,’ Themis answered sadly. ‘The father and all three sons.’

‘*Chrysí Avgí?*’ queried Nikos.

‘They’re fascists,’ said Popi. ‘Anti-immigrant, violent fascists.’

Themis had seen on television that the far-right party had been demonstrating the previous day, and she found it deeply disturbing.

For a few moments the three of them continued to look out. There was always something to watch. Some small boys kicked a ball, while their mothers sat on a bench nearby, smoking and chatting. Three teenagers mounted the pavement on their mopeds, parked and ambled into the café close by. One man stopped another, apparently to get a light for his cigarette, but both Popi and Nikos noticed him taking a small package and sliding it into his pocket.

Themis could not sit down for long. There were dozens of plants that needed watering, then there was sweeping to be done, and finally the tiles of the balcony itself to be hosed down.

While she was bustling about, Popi asked if she could make some coffee.

‘Should I make some for *Pappóú* too . . .?’ asked the young woman quietly.

‘He doesn’t drink it any more,’ Themis answered. ‘It just sits there getting cold.’

‘You know it’s almost twenty years since he last went to the *kafeneío*? It was just after my birthday – which is how I remember it. He came back that day in such a strange mood. I knew he would never go again. I think it was the last coffee he ever drank.’

Nikos looked at his grandfather with sadness. Even he understood the significance of a Greek man ceasing to visit his *kafeneío*.

‘He lives in his own world now,’ said Themis.

‘Perhaps it’s as well. Things aren’t so great in the real one, are they?’ said Popi.

Themis gave her a look of sorrow.

‘Sorry to sound gloomy, *Yiayía*. I can’t help it sometimes.’

Themis took her granddaughter’s hand and squeezed it.

‘Things will get better,’ she reassured her. ‘I am sure of it.’

‘Why are you so sure?’

‘Because over time life just does. Sometimes it gets a little worse again. But on the whole, things improve.’

‘Are you serious? You can say that even now? When there are people queuing at soup kitchens and sleeping in doorways!’

‘I agree that things are bad at the moment. But everyone is so preoccupied with the present day. They should look back and remember how much worse it used to be.’

Popi looked at her quizzically.

‘I know I seem a bit extravagant to you, dear, but I promise you we wouldn’t have thrown anything away when I was your age. I know I shouldn’t now, but because I can . . .’

‘I didn’t mean to be critical,’ said Popi.

‘I know, I know.’

‘You’ve lived for so many years, *Yiayía*. I sometimes wonder how all those memories fit in!’

‘It’s busy in there,’ the old lady said, tapping her forehead. ‘When I look down into the street, I don’t just see how it is now but how it was before.’

‘In what way?’ asked Nikos. ‘Nostalgically?’

‘Not always. Good things happened in the past – but bad things did too. And looking down there reminds me of so much.’

‘Such as?’

‘You know that photograph on the dresser in there? The one on the right?’

From where they sat, Popi could see through the open glass doors that led back into the living room. Silhouetted on the dresser was a row of framed photographs.

‘You mean the one of you and your sister?’

‘That’s not my sister, actually. It’s Fotini. We were best friends at school. And like sisters. Perhaps even closer than that.’

The old lady pointed through the railings to the corner of the square.

‘She died. Right there,’ she said.

Popi looked at her grandmother in disbelief and then turned her eyes to where she had indicated. She had never heard this before and the blunt revelation shocked her.

‘It was during the occupation. There was a famine, *agápi mou*. Hundreds of thousands died.’

‘That’s terrible,’ said Nikos. ‘I didn’t realise things were so desperate here.’

When he was a child, his father had given him only the broadest outline of Greece’s history. All he knew of it then was the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the Greek Revolution in 1821 but he could not name even one prime minister (though he could recite the name of every American president in date order, a party trick since he was precociously small). In his teens, however, his interest had grown and he had even taken intensive Greek lessons, so keen was he to connect with his roots.

‘Yes, Nikos. It was terrible. Really terrible. She was so young . . .’ Themis paused a moment to collect herself before continuing. ‘We were hungry *all* the time in those days. When there is more than enough, as there is now, I like to cook plenty – simply because I can. It probably looks like extravagance.’

‘It feels like it to me, *Yiayía*,’ said Popi, squeezing her grandmother’s arm and smiling. ‘But can I take some home?’

‘You can take all of it,’ replied her grandmother firmly.

Leaving her grandparents’ home laden with leftovers was a ritual. They would see her through to the end of the week and be enough for her flatmates too.

Inside the apartment, her grandfather now snored quietly, occasionally muttering.

‘What do you think he dreams of, *Yiayía?*’ asked Nikos.

‘I don’t think he has many thoughts or memories,’ she answered. ‘So it’s hard to imagine.’

‘I suppose things live on in the subconscious,’ he mused.

‘Sometimes I envy him having space in his mind,’ said Themis. ‘I imagine it might be quite peaceful.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Popi.

‘I can remember too much, perhaps, and it gives me a headache sometimes. Perhaps memories can be too vivid.’

A few minutes passed. The sun had gone down now and street-lamps were coming on. Themis then leant across to touch Popi’s hand.

‘Why don’t we go out for coffee?’ she whispered. ‘Then we’ll go into the little church. There’s something I always do on my birthday.’

‘Pray?’ Popi said with surprise, knowing that her grandmother was not especially devout.

‘No, *agápi mou*. I light some candles.’

‘Didn’t you have enough on your cake?’ teased Popi.

Themis smiled.

‘Who are they for?’ Nikos asked keenly.

‘Come with me and I’ll tell you,’ she said, looking at Nikos, as ever mildly thrown by the strong resemblance to the man after whom he had been named.

During the course of that day, with her family crammed into

the small apartment, Themis had reflected with some regret that she had nothing to bequeath her children and grandchildren. There was little of any worth except the battered table around which the family had been eating for generations.

Or was there perhaps another kind of legacy? She suddenly realised, now that Giorgos was absent in all but body, that there were things she would like to tell them. Her life story was not an heirloom, but it was all she had and she would give it to these two young people. She loved all of her grandchildren equally but had special affection for Popi because she had seen her almost every day since she was born. For Nikos, she had a particular soft spot, even though he only visited once a year.

They quickly got ready to leave, Nikos helping his grandmother into her cardigan while Popi threw on her faded red thrift-shop coat.

Nikos would be getting a plane back to the US the following morning and Themis insisted he have some fresh baklava and proper Greek coffee before he left. They had all eaten copiously at lunchtime, but he could not refuse and soon they were at the local *zacharoplasteío*.

Once they were seated, Themis began to talk.



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