

THE ISLAND OF THE RIGHTEOUS

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ISBN-13: 9789998785816

Chapter 1

Lying in bed, he stared at his grandson, his eyes weak, drawing sustenance from the afternoon August sun and the solace of his long kept secret that he was about to confess so that it would not die with him.

“In the shed, you’ll find a box. I’ve hidden a treasure there...”. His voice tinged with agony.

Twenty-eight-year-old Pantelis, named after his grandfather, listened patiently. Almost a week earlier, Old Pantelis had said something similar. For a minute, Young Pantelis had let his imagination run wild, thinking of spoils from the war: gold coins, silver brooches, necklaces studded with rubies and other precious stones. Then, he had heard his grandfather questioning whether he was his son or his brother. Alzheimer’s was at the helm again, tooting the horn without rhyme or direction.

Now that the old man had brought up the treasure again, Pantelis could either ignore it or slip into his grandfather’s fantasy world, floating there with him. He chose the latter, same choice as whenever his grandpa wandered off his path and strayed from reason. He liked listening to the old man’s voice, that grating sound that sweetly reached the deepest part of his ear, ringing in childhood memories. He became that curly-haired eight-year-old boy who perched eagerly at his grandfather’s knee, entranced by rich stories from that raspy voice, and indifferent to whether they were real or imaginary.

“What’s this box like, grandpa?” he asked, feigning impatience.

“It’s big, wooden. I’ve carved a symbol into it, and I’ve locked it up.”

Before his grandson had time to ask what symbol that was, the door opened, and Dionisia came in.

“Pantelis, food is ready,” she said to her son while looking at her father’s bowl, still full of chicken soup. “Father, why haven’t you eaten your soup?”

Old Pantelis flashed her a look, puckering his eyes. “*Father?* You’re too old to be my daughter.”

“Yeah, you wish!” Dionisia said and nodded her son into the kitchen. Young Pantelis realised, once again, the treasure turned out to be fool’s gold.

Dionisia turned again to her father. “At least, get some rest since you haven’t eaten anything. I’ll wake you up in the afternoon to have some coffee together.”

Old Pantelis gave her a blank look and nodded in a docile way. He wasn’t convinced she was his daughter, but he would follow her advice; he leant his head on the pillow and drifted off to sleep. He wanted to close his eyes and never open them again. He was so world-weary, he didn’t even have the strength to hold on for one last cup of coffee with his daughter.

When Young Pantelis popped by his room after lunch, his grandfather slumbered peacefully next to the pot that was home to his favourite violet plant. Ever since his Alzheimer’s had grown rampant, that little purple flower was the only thing that seemed to keep any kind of rein on his disease.

When he first became ill, he would often look around, searching, and squawk, “Where is my *Violetta*!”¹ The doctor assumed the old man had associated some fond memories with that flower, and his mind found solace in it. The only explanation Dionisia could think of was her father had missed the wild violet flower that grew in his home in Zante—the island where he was born. Perhaps it was a way to remember his childhood—the years the mind always maintains as a shelter from life’s storms.

The next day, she bought him the small pot of violets. The moment he saw it, he gave it a silent look and, although everyone thought he would start shouting again, a smile cracked his face.

Now, with his secret finally shared, Old Pantelis felt relieved. He could hear cutlery clinking against dishes coming from the kitchen, cars honking in the distance, and from afar he could also hear his end approaching. He could sense

¹ *Violetta*: The Greek word for “violet”, both the flower and the name.

it, it was time to go.

He took the pot to his hands and stared at the violet.

He leaned over the plant. “My Violetta, how much I loved you.”

Those were Old Pantelis’ last words, heard by no one but the violet’s stamens and petals. Shortly afterwards, the plant withered away.

His funeral would be in two days in Zante. He had sworn never to go back. For sixty years, he had been fighting the beast that had chased him away from the island. He never managed to beat it, although he had learned all its secrets.

Chapter 2

Travelling parallel to the Gulf of Patras to Kyllini, bound for Zante, Pantelis was wrapped up in his makeshift movie in the back seat of the car. The bright August sun put a damper on the colours, but with a bit of patience, he had managed to turn the arid and rocky terrain of Paliouvouna into a movie landscape. On the wild mountain that glowered over Antirrio, he had been trying to project from his mind all the memories he had from his grandpa.

The first scene showed Old Pantelis' first gift to his newborn grandson—a small cross of woven bay leaves. On Bay Sunday—*Kyriaki ton Vayione*, as it was called in Zante—in 1983, he had returned home from church and found no one. He gathered they must have gone to the hospital to welcome his grandson. He grabbed some of the bay leaves he had ordered from the island and hopped into a taxi.

Little Pantelis had given his parents quite a fright with his frenzied kicks, as if he couldn't wait to meet everyone. When he heard the doctor's voice, he changed his mind and decided to wait a little bit longer.

Old Pantelis walked into the waiting room and sat next to his son-in-law, Dimitris. He hugged him, proud of his grandson, his eyes welling up. Dimitris gave him a puzzled look, his stare fixed on the bay leaves in the bag on his father-in-law's lap.

"I've brought them to weave a cross for him while waiting." He took some leaves out of the bag and took to the task.

It was an art passed down from his own grandfather. Pantelis hoped he would pass it down to his grandson. Unfortunately, this notion was doomed.

As it turned out over the years, Young Pantelis never stayed put for more than a couple of minutes, changing his mind constantly as to what was more interesting around him. Only during fairytale time did he keep his head down. His grandpa turned off the lights, sat next to his bed, and began: "Once upon a time..." He told stories no one had ever heard or recorded, apart from him.

They were stories he had experienced himself. Young Pantelis wouldn't exactly fall for them, as he figured his grandfather made sure they were sprinkled liberally with magic dust.

When he went to school and began doing homework, his grandpa leaned over him, saw the symbols of his equations, and shook his head. "You know all this, but if I take you out in the field, you can't tell your arse from your elbow!" he said, only to hear, "Leave me alone, grandpa!"

But they adored each other. Young Pantelis was the only grandchild, and Old Pantelis the only living grandpa. He indulged his grandson, both on the sly and openly. The kid's whim was his grandpa's command, and if he didn't grant his wishes, he thought he had committed a dreadful sin.

"Dad, why are you always meddling in our affairs? Let us bring him up the way we see fit," Dionisia would protest whenever she uncovered a conspiracy between grandfather and son over something she had previously forbidden.

"Why? Didn't I bring you up the right way? I've lived too long to hear that!" he said and ran out of the room, pretending to be annoyed. Deep down, he knew Dionisia was right, but he hadn't yet found a way to say no to his grandson.

When manhood began to tickle young Pantelis and the shade of a moustache bristled his peppy face, he would often whisper in his grandpa's ear: "I've got a date with a girl, but I have no money."

"What? You're seeing another girl, now? Didn't I tell you not to waste yourself? Women are like flowers, but we are not like bees that try them all," he began to tell him. "That's why I loved only one woman in my life ... although I lost her early on."

"Oh, please, grandpa! Don't start lecturing me about Grandma. I never even met her!" Young Pantelis' patience was wearing thin. He needed money. He was a beggar in love who wouldn't take no for an answer.

Old Pantelis was, once again, disappointed that his lecture on love fell on deaf ears. He was deeply hurt, not by the callousness of youth, but because he still hadn't found it in his heart to tell his grandson the truth. He stuck his hand into his pocket and gave him whatever money he could lay his fingers on, not because young Pantelis had asked him, but mainly out of guilt for not telling him about the only woman he had really loved.

"Make sure you find a lady for me, too," he whispered, almost conspiratorially,

to lighten the atmosphere and make his grandson laugh.

He wasn't laughing anymore. The memories were weighing heavy on young Pantelis. The moving car felt like a cage, and his tears were probably visible through the rear-view mirror. He couldn't wait to be alone and able to cry, the same way he had cried when he saw the stage set by Alzheimer's disease, a few years ago. Pantelis had stormed into the room to wake up his grandfather, who was startled when he opened his eyes.

"Who are you?"

Thinking Old Pantelis was in the mood for jokes, Young Pantelis burst out laughing and sat next to him. The old man rolled his eyes and recoiled from the unknown man that had invaded his room. When his grandson realised what was going on, he nearly burst into tears.

They wasted no time. They took the old man to the doctor and had an official diagnosis. He was still hale and hearty in his eighties, but Alzheimer's had tightened its stranglehold on him. Pantelis' parents didn't take long to face up to the new situation, but the reality didn't quite fit into the young man's head. No matter how hard he tried to squeeze it into his mind, there was always some hope squeezing back out.

At first, he told his grandpa stories of what they had been through together, in hope of jogging his memory. Old Pantelis had listened attentively, but seemed to enjoy them as a stranger plunging into the wavy sea of senility, just as young Pantelis had dived deep into the tranquil waters of childlike sleep during his grandpa's stories.

The disease eroded the old man's mind, whisking him off to places neither real nor imaginary. From somewhere out there, seated in the shade of a tree in the middle of a field, bordering reality on one side and Alzheimer's on the other, old Pantelis began recounting stories about Zante. The same man who had once kept mum when someone mentioned the island now broke his silence, narrating stories he had never told before. The people he referred to were real, but Dionisia doubted their truth, feeling they must be a figment of his imagination. After all, her father was a dab hand at the art of storytelling.

With time, when the same names kept cropping up again and again, and events confirmed one another, everyone started to think that his narrations

might not be completely unfounded. He spoke of pre-war Zante and the adventures of his parents, Spiretos and Dionisia Kokkinis.

It struck everyone as odd, knowing that Pantelis had never mentioned the island before he fell ill. He had stubbornly avoided it all these years. And, if he ever happened to talk about it, he only referred to the years before the war, when he was still a little child. When asked about the Second World War and the period after, he'd say, "Don't remind me of those years." He had left the island with his mother in 1948, in the middle of the civil war. His mother kept on returning, mainly for the summers. She couldn't stay away; her sister and daughter-in-law lived there, and she would not forsake them. Pantelis though had never returned. His grandson was now determined to uncover the reason.

Chapter 3

On the island, the only one left alive from the family was old Pantelis' sister-in-law, Elpida, still residing at the village of Pigadakia, where they had both grown up. She was the granddaughter of the once reputable Conte Vardas.

Young Pantelis called her "Aunt Elpida," but she saw him as her grandson, as she was childless. She was saddened by the fact that she didn't get to see him very often. Since old Pantelis didn't visit the island, young Pantelis didn't either, except for some summers when he was still young enough that his parents could force him to go. After he finished school, he had never again set foot on the island, until now, preferring to stay with his grandpa in Athens.

When they arrived and got out of the car, Pantelis looked around. Not much had changed, but everything had grown old. Aunt Elpida's mansion still stood, imposing. It looked as though it wanted to shout about the aristocratic times it had experienced, about the visits of the nobles of the island, the New Year's dances, but it only let out the cough of old age. Still, older than a century, it was well built and solid, not a single wrinkle in its stately facade. It had been built on the ruins of another mansion that had collapsed in 1893's big earthquake.

Conte Vardas had stood among the ruins, filled with indignation. He swore to himself, and to a portrait of his parents, to restore the mansion to its former glory. He was the only heir to his family's fortune, a former landowner, and a producer of currants—Greece's black gold in the 19th century.

He brought in architects from Florence, engineers from England, stonebreakers from France, and he handed them the best builders on the island. Every day he had musicians performing for them, during their breaks he offered them coffee—an expensive commodity at the time—and at night he deluged them with his homemade wine. When the construction finished two years later, an elegant three-story mansion stood on the foot of Mount Vrahionas, looming over the interminable vineyards of the island.

The mile that separated it from the main road was not enough to lessen its glow. From the meadow, one could marvel at the imposing facade of the house, with its two columns of solid marble framing the entrance and supporting the main veranda. Those with a reason and a right to visit the interior could only see from the entrance a corridor with doors to the servants' rooms and the big marble staircase leading to the piano nobile. That was the main floor, consisting of the dining area, a library, a study, a smoking room, a large guest room, and a small drawing room. On the second floor were the bedrooms and baths, meant exclusively for the Vardas couple, who spent many years in despair for the lack of descendants.

The rear of the mansion overlooked the village, separated by a long and tall stone wall that hid a fruit-tree grove. Passers-by could only see the Vardas family coat of arms, above a gate always shut, and the rooftop of the mansion. Inside the property, on the other side of a vast courtyard that sprawled around a stone well stood a much smaller, single-storey house, which was just as elegant and well-built. It was the caretaker's house, where Pantelis had grown up as the son of Spiretos Kokkinis, the loyal caretaker of the Vardas family from 1906 to the day he died.

"My dear Pantelis, how you've grown!" Aunt Elpida welcomed him, standing on the veranda. She held her walking stick in one hand and with the other, she tried to hug young Pantelis.

He moved closer, timidly, and hugged her even more hesitantly.

"You've been away for years, just like your grandfather," she told him and gave him a pat on the back.

He nodded with a smile but remained silent. He looked at her and realised how little she had changed, as though she'd bribed Time. Only a few wrinkles furrowed her face like she had made sure they didn't grow, or she concealed all those that were the residue of human woes. She must have been around eighty-seven, but she didn't look older than sixty.

As Pantelis watched her, he caught a glimpse of a young girl that had unexpectedly come out of the mansion. He didn't know her, but he had an intense feeling that he did, from somewhere, that he had met her before. His parents, though, knew her very well and greeted her cordially. She was pretty, but that

wasn't the reason he was looking at her. He was trying to understand how she related to Aunt Elpida. His mother, Dionisia, would give him the answer he was looking for a little later, saying, "That's Vayia. I've told you about her. She is the great-granddaughter of the Dalmedikos family. Aunt Elpida and her mother once hid them in their house during the war. She comes here almost every summer. You would have met each other if you came more often."

Pantelis gave the girl another look. He couldn't make out who she reminded him of, but he already regretted not coming with his parents in the summers.

Chapter 4

When Dionisia had come out of her father's room with teary eyes and announced his death, young Pantelis didn't cry. He didn't shed a tear, even when he held his grandpa's soulless hand. Not even at the church, when he looked at the photo on his coffin amid the chrysanthemums. But he did cry, his insides writhing in pain when he saw the coffin lowered into the grave. His tears trickled down in rivulets to wash away the cruel realisation that he would never see his grandpa again.

A while earlier, they had opened the coffin for the family to take one last look at him—a morbid keepsake that wouldn't fit in anyone's mind. They'd put the lid back on and began to lower it into the open grave. One by one, people came over to wish him a good journey to eternity, dropping some flowers or a handful of soil. What a strange custom. As though they wanted to bury him as quickly as possible under the dark ground, never to see the daylight again.

Pantelis refused to bid him farewell at that time. How could he tell his grandpa what he wanted in front of all those people? How could he hear his grandpa's answers amid all those sobs? People's prying eyes pierced like a needle the black balloon he blew up with his sighs.

A while later, the same people filled the mansion and the caretaker's house. Coffee, brandy, rusks. Some with a cup in hand, others holding a plastic glass and eating, they expressed their condolences again, as though once weren't enough. Pantelis wanted to run away from all those who pretended to feel sorry for someone they hadn't seen for more than sixty years. He wanted to break free from those who had never met him. But he was patient. He remained polite and proud like his grandfather had taught him. He looked them in the eye, said thank you, and pretended to remember them from long ago.

His mother would make the rounds with a tray. The custom and tradition wanted her as a waitress on such a hard day. She had no right to sit on a chair and weep for the death of her father. She had to serve her guests who, when out of

earshot of the relatives of the deceased, gossiped, commented on current affairs, or giggled at funny stories.

Aunt Elpida told them such stories, seated in an armchair with her walking stick next to her, in the middle of a large company of men and women.

“If I had known I would be the last one left, I would have set up a funeral home to make money!” she said, and everybody burst out laughing.

Even Pantelis smiled.

Elpida had seen so many people die, she had become strangely accustomed to death. She had defied her own and made fun of others’. After all, that’s what his grandfather did when he attended funerals. He wanted to see people he had lost touch with for years.

Perhaps this sense of cynicism over human death came with age. What else can you do when you are perched on the edge of the inevitable precipice? Any attempt to escape is futile. Fear is pointless. Indifference is boring. That means all you have left to do is laugh. And wait. And the longer you wait, the stronger the laughter, for the time you earned. The extra days you lived. That’s what Pantelis thought, and this allayed his sense of guilt for smiling. He didn’t know if his grandpa had died happy, miserable, or impassive. He surely died full. Full of troubles and joys.

That very afternoon, when the guests walked away, leaving behind some empty glasses and cups in the garden, Pantelis went back to the cemetery. Alone, this time. He wanted to have a word with his grandpa, to bid him farewell the right way.

The graveyard sprawled across the side of the mountain over the village. Walking toward his grandpa’s new home, Pantelis gazed at the flatland below. It was in full bloom. The harvest would begin in a few days.

“May brings the cherries, June the cucumbers, July the watermelons, and August the *talara*,” his grandpa would tell him when Pantelis was a little boy. Only when he was grown did he realise that *talara* wasn’t a kind of fruit or vegetable, but the oodles of money that currants brought to the island back then.

Basking in the tranquillity of this memory, he squatted before the grave. Two woodcocks flew over him toward the meadow.

“Don’t tell me you’re still suffering from Alzheimer’s there on the other

side! I hope you recognise me now,” he whispered and smiled. He was sure his grandpa would smile, too.

He began a solitary dialogue, whisking them both back in time. He reminded his grandfather of fragments of what they had lived together. The hot afternoons in the park, the handiworks made of bay leaves, the *sowlakia* they ate on Mondays after language school, all those hours his grandpa wasted trying in vain to teach him the secrets of carpentry, the mornings when they went fishing in Varkiza.

“You remember that day you were catching white sea bream one after the other, and I was throwing them back into the water when you looked the other way? I can still hear your screams ringing in my ears.”

He told stories for a good half hour. Some of them were funny, others moving or instructive, some he remembered for the first time, realising how lucky he was to have grown up with such a grandfather by his side.

When he felt it was time to leave, he stood up, wiped his tears, and said goodbye, saying that he was going to miss him a lot, that it would be hard for him not to hear his whines again, not to see him doze off in front of the television, or never to get any pocket money from him. He summed it all up in a single I love you.

Upon seeing the grave, his knees buckled at the very thought that he would never hug his grandpa again. He had died a couple of days before, but it felt as though he was alive that very moment. Like he had risen from the dead and, invisible as he was, stood on the gravestone, looking at his grandson. For an instant, Pantelis lost his mind—he saw his grandpa talking, but he couldn’t hear him. He always spoke in a low voice, like he didn’t want to disturb anyone. How could such a voice reach his ears from the underworld?

What a weird feeling! It was even weirder that Pantelis had to go through all this again and again—after nine days, forty days, three months, six months, a year. How strange and inconceivable those memorial services were. Like people couldn’t get their fill of pain. Like the deceased doesn’t know whether you still remember him unless you get a priest to chant over his grave, or you light a candle. Like you show your love only when you mention his name, eating *koliva*.

As he turned around to leave, he accidentally stepped on the edge of the adjacent grave. Poor but neat, with a bouquet of fresh flowers on the pebbles that

covered it, the grave awaited Pantelis' gaze. On its marble cross, timeworn and blackened by the sun, it read in faded letters: Konstantinos Kokkinis.

His grandfather's brother. Aunt Elpida's husband. He tried to make out the date of death but to no avail. Time had begun to wipe out the numbers, just like it erased the dead from people's memories. The same had happened to the other names he could read on the gravestones: Spiridon Kokkinis and Dionisia Kokkinis, his great-grandfathers. Maria Geroulatou, Aunt Elpida's mother.

As he was the only one still living in that neighbourhood of the dead, he felt the ghosts come alive through the stories of his grandpa's Alzheimer's. Names that, up until then, had lived only in memories, began to take form as time ran backwards, spanning an entire century.

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