

Χριστίνα
Ο Πρασινός Πύργος

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Excerpt from "The Green Tower" ("O Prasinos Pyrgos")

Chapter 6

Neither Christina nor I ever have any spare time, which is why we usually do our shopping in a hurry at the local supermarket. So it was years since the last time I had been at the old fruit and vegetable market. The small square in front of the market is perhaps the most-photographed place in the old part of town and it is certainly the most authentic remaining example of how it once was. The tourists adore it and they crowd out the open-air snack bars to enjoy a coffee or a kebab with chickpea dip. The mainly elderly locals still maintain their old habits and visit the market very early in the morning to buy their vegetables and to have a chat with the traders.

It was Christmas Eve and the streets were packed. I had chosen the wrong day to come here but time was pressing and I had to act.

The combined smells of fruit, humidity and freshly-cut onions, the voices of the greengrocers shouting out their wares ("Come on now, gents, come on, I've got sweet mandarins, tasty bananas, crisp radishes, fresh lettuce...") and the sight of customers loaded with bags and haggling over prices, was like a real treat for us office workers; it was like taking a dip into our childhood years...

My first house was two blocks away and instead of taking the narrow streets on our way to school every morning, my friends and I would go straight through the market. This route suited us for a number of reasons: first of all, as it was covered, it protected us from the rain in winter and the sun in summer. Then, the greengrocers would always have some fruit saved for us – a bruised apple or a ripe banana – which solved the problem of our mid-morning snack. Later, when we moved further away and my parents were forced to buy me a bicycle, I had to go without my daily wander through the market. I was older by then. Chest puffed out like a cockerel, I would ride my blue bike which was decked out with more flags than a frigate, balancing on the back wheel, twisting and turning in front of the girls! I didn't give a thought to the idea of walking anymore...

Ah, that bicycle of mine! It was like my first childhood friend. However many friends you make later, you always remember the first one. I left it leaning against my bed and I would stroke it, eyes closed, during the night in case it should sprout wings and disappear. I cleaned it twenty times a day and woe betide my younger siblings if they dared touch it with unwashed hands! My first bicycle and my first watch. Aged fifteen when I got both of them, I was a real man! The watch was a present from my uncle who brought it from Australia in a black box that locked automatically. I kept that box until my student years, long after the watch was no more, and I used it to keep paper clips in. As for the bike,

I remember how my poor old grandfather held a family collection so as to buy it for my birthday.

Times were hard back then. Things had a different value. We longed for them so much, it was as if they had a soul of their own and they became members of the family. For example, the first book that I was given at the age of twelve: *Ivanhoe*. I treasured it as if it was the Bible. I read it, I re-read it, I knew the dialogue by heart, I covered it with the same paper that my mother used to line the shelves in case it got dirty. Today's children don't have time to really long for something; they are given it at once. They don't even have a chance to enjoy it because we keep filling their lives with more and more of everything. And it's not only the children. We adults are worse. OK, I'll have that, and, all right, I'll take that one too... We pile up things around us and don't give ourselves a chance to breathe. Let's have a new car, let's buy a new television... And we work like dogs so as to have them and life becomes one long pursuit...

"Mr. Andreas, this is a surprise... What are you doing here?"

The smiling, rough-skinned face, the hard, warm palm gripping my hand... Of course, it was old man Vagoris.

"Less of the 'mister', if you don't mind! Have you forgotten how you used to chase me and the other kids with a stick when we were stealing your plums before they were ready for picking?"

"You would have got a bellyache, that's all," said the old man with a smile.

Old man Vagoris lived right next door to us. He had a huge plum tree – half of it overhung our garden – and a daughter called Vasoulla who was my first love. I was four and she was eight. She used to say to me, "You're too young. I don't want you. You suck your thumb." And I would sweat all night trying not to suck my thumb so that Vasoulla would want me.

"Uncle Vagoris, do you know old Thomas Hadjipanayi who had the Green Tower?"

"Do I know him? If there was one person whose fruit you were stealing it was him, you little devils! But you said, 'who had' the Green Tower. Has old Thomas died?"

"About a month ago... He had a gardener called Yiannis who worked for him. Did you know him. He used to bring the fruit to the market..."

"Yiannis Seytan!"

"His name is Karayiannis."

"We call him Seytan."

"Tell me, what sort of person is he?"

"Listen dear Andreas, I never liked him. And his nickname says it all. Seytan is the Turkish word for the devil. I always thought he was a bad sort. How can I put it? He's one of those types who not only puts his finger in the honey jar but licks it clean, if you get my meaning. The old man trusted him, though... So poor old Thomas has gone... Well, it's only natural. How old was he? Over ninety. Just think, I was only a kid when the story about the Frenchman's daughter was doing the rounds. And he never got married, poor chap."

"Do you happen to know where I might find Yiannis?"

"When he's not working he's usually at Periclou's coffee shop in Liberty Square."

"One more thing, Uncle Vagoris... Old man Thomas also had a woman who took care of him. Eleni somebody..."

"I don't know her, son... What's it all about? Did the old man leave her something? All that property..."

"What? No, no, it's for something else altogether. How's Vasoulla?"

"Didn't you hear about it? Her daughter has got married. They took me to the wedding too, you know. They insisted on sending me a ticket. An old man like me getting on an aeroplane and flying off to America. If my dear wife could have seen me... I didn't last ten days. I fell ill, my ears were buzzing, I had dizzy spells, I couldn't sleep a wink. The people there are crazy, son! Rushing around all day... in cars, trains and planes... all in a rush to do heaven knows what. The moment I realized that I was starting to hurry too, I took my things and left. Here, peel yourself a mandarin. Can I get you a coffee?"

"No, thank you. A mandarin is perfect! Tell me something, are you on your own now? I hear that your sons have left."

"Everyone is mad about living abroad, Andreas. What can we do? On my own? No, I don't think so! Take a look around..." With a sweeping gesture, old man Vagoris took in the whole of the market with its greengrocers, its traders and customers and, way beyond them, the whole town, its streets, the sea, the houses and even the apartment blocks.

"My granddaughter is expecting and they want to take me off again to see my great-grandchild. I told them what to do with that idea! He can come here, to learn about his roots. They shouldn't forget where they come from. The young should visit the old, not the other way round."

He leaned forward and, with a conspiratorial look, whispered in my ear, "If only you'd been a bit older so that my Vasoulla had married you and not gone abroad. Never mind... they were good times Andrikos! You wouldn't find a plum tree anywhere these days to steal the fruit... Anyway, off you go, son, and Happy Christmas!"

I walked away, eating one of the mandarins that he had put in a bag and forced me to accept. Liberty Square stands about a hundred metres away from the market square and Periclou's coffee shop – one of the oldest buildings in town – lies right in the middle of it. It was originally an inn, where the villagers and their animals would stop off after their long journey. They brought their wares from the villages and would spread them out on rugs in the street – raisins, walnuts, meat. Next to the doorway of the coffee shop, a built manger for the animals still survives and in the next building there are still discernible traces of the spring that once existed there.

Liberty Square was given its name later, as my grandfather told me, when the national issue was bubbling up. It was originally called Cold Spring Square and it's said that the water came directly from a mountain source and was so cold that it could break your teeth. The ladies at that time would send their maidservants with jugs to fill up with water from the spring which was "digestive

and blessed" since, so they say, it was made holy by Saint Thekla whose chapel was nearby.

How easily we have destroyed every trace of our ancestors in such a carefree and superficial manner! The Cold Spring and Liberty Square were a good starting point for the research project that I had mentioned to my boss. It was a shame that I hadn't brought my camera with me.

Periclou's coffee shop, squeezed between concrete buildings, resembles a village woman wearing a headscarf and traditional dress, lost amid the din of the big city. Two horizontal arches divide it into three spacious areas full of tables. Most of the buses for the villages and the suburbs depart from here so the villagers and the traders have always met, and continue to meet, at Periclou's coffee shop. When I was a boy, my mother would bring me here to catch the bus to our village.

First we would go to Hasanaki's dairy opposite to buy some yoghurt for my aunt in the village who liked it, and I would grasp it tightly, scared in case I dropped it on the street. Hasanaki and Ayse's yoghurt shop, with all those dark-skinned kids of theirs running around barefoot, some of them my age, others slightly older, others a little younger than me... The older ones, already lined up behind the vat, were learning the art of yoghurt making. Where were they now, I wondered? In the North or had their evil stepmother England devoured them?

The moment I entered Periclou's coffee shop, was it my impression or did I really smell that mixture of fragrances – wine, raisins, figs and carobs – after so many years, even if the muleteers of my childhood had disappeared for ever? My own relatives suffered the same fate – grandmothers and grandfathers first and then the aunts and uncles – one by one they each took their place in the small cemetery among the vineyards. And those who remained, that huge family whose members I once counted and reached one hundred, took to the streets – one here, one there...to the towns... some to England, Australia, America...in search of a better life and leaving their beloved land at the mercy of God and the moufflon. Once in a while, at a wedding or a funeral, I still see some of them, unrecognizable after so long. The only person to stay in the village is Augusta, a distant cousin who inherited childless Aunt Thalou's little house. She is the only one who maintains some continuity – she makes must jelly every autumn and traditional cheese pies at Easter and she still remembers us now and then. All the best to her.

As for me, who wanted to spend my whole life in the village, there I was at Periclou's coffee shop, not knowing a single one of the old men and women sitting there waiting for their bus to arrive. The coffee shop owner, a middle aged man with a bushy moustache, stood behind the counter, writing down figures in a notebook. I approached him.

"I'm looking for a gardener called Yiannis Karayiannis or Yiannis Sheytan."

Without raising his head, the coffee shop owner called out:

"Yiannis, there's someone here for you."

A well- built man of about 40 walked towards me. He had a dark look about him...or was it my imagination? He certainly didn't smile, not even when I introduced myself. He simply shook my hand with his. He had a hard, strong grip.

"Mr Yiannis, I'd like you to do some pruning in my garden..."

"On Christmas Eve? You'll have to wait until after the holidays."

He viewed me with suspicion.

"That's fine. I didn't mean today. On Monday or Tuesday, now that I'm off work too.

"Where is the house?"

"It's a bit difficult to find. My car is outside. Do you want me to take you there and show you? I'll bring you straight back. It's not far."

He hesitated for a moment, gave me a mistrustful look and glanced at his watch.

"All right, let's go," he said. "But we need to be back by twelve. The bus leaves early today."

As soon as I had started the car I got straight to the point:

"Young Stathis showed me the exercise book in which he wrote old man Thomas's will. You were a witness. I saw your signature."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Let me out."

His reaction was a violent one. He opened the car door while we were moving.

"Wait! Do you want to be killed? What did you do that for? Am I lying? Didn't you work for old man Thomas as his gardener?"

"Who are you? What do you want from me?"

"I've told you my name. I'm a journalist. I'm the father of Stathis's friend Lakis. You know him. Stathis told me about the old man's dying wish and I want to help. And you'll help us, won't you?"

I drove around the block. Yiannis realized what was happening.

"If you don't stop and let me out at once, I shall start shouting," he threatened me. "I'll call the police."

I stopped the car not far from a policeman who, completely by chance, had appeared in front of us.

"All right, you can call that policeman. If we go to the police, everything will be sorted out at once. Anyway, the case is already in court. Go on then, are you going to call the policeman? Or would you like me to call him? I'm the one who has absolutely nothing to hide here."

He softened up. Now he simply looked scared. The trick had worked. Village people have always been frightened of the police and the courts.

"Let me go to my work. Don't get me mixed up with the courts. Yes, I worked for the old man. So what? He was ill, he'd lost his mind, now he's dead. I don't know anything."

I grabbed him by his shirt.

"Listen to me, the old man's mind was in a much better state than yours. And be careful that you don't say such things in court because you know what you get for perjury. Ten years or more inside."

He turned yellow with fright. The policeman was now very close to us, doubtless to warn me about illegal parking. I greeted him in a very friendly way, as if I'd known him for years. Yiannis noticed this and didn't dare get out of the car. Still smiling at the policeman, I said to Yiannis:

"Tell me something else. Where does Eleni live?"

"Eleni who?"

"The woman who cleaned the old man's house."

"How should I know? Do you think I ever saw her?"

He got out in a hurry.

"We'll talk again, Mr. Yiannis. Meanwhile, think about what I've told you."

As I drove home, I was in a very good mood. I must have been whistling because my wife commented on it with some surprise.

"Stathis's mother has invited us round tonight," she said.

"But don't we go to your sister's every year? Didn't you say that..."

"We're going to my sister's tomorrow, for Christmas Day. My mother can't stay up late anymore. Let's do something different this year..."

"But Sophia, a woman all on her own..."

"That's precisely what she said. 'Come on over, help us open our hearts a little.' She told me that it's been six years since she lost her husband – it was this time of year – in an accident, poor woman. Since then she hasn't celebrated Christmas. This year it will be the first time. 'My poor little boy Stathis will enjoy it,' she said. Lakis and Monica are already there helping."

"Did you buy some presents?"

"What do you think?"

It was good that I had Christina. While I had been running around after Yiannis Sheytan, she was organizing our social engagements.

I spent the whole afternoon writing at my desk. I wrote like a maniac. My visit to the market had provided the inspiration for the article I was preparing.

Christmas dinner with Sophia was a simple but hearty meal. Afterwards we put on music and we danced. Then we listened to songs and joined in singing them. We all needed to let off steam. Around eleven there was a knock at the door. We looked at one another.

"Who can it be at this time?" asked Sophia fearfully.

Monica jumped up, blushing.

It was Nicos, the young man from the farm. He shook hands with each of us and said that he was sorry to be taking Monica away. They were going to a party given by one of his friends. At Sophia's insistence, Nicos agreed to eat some of the turkey. Half an hour later they got up, Monica kissed us all and promised that we would see her the next day. When they had left, we grown-ups commented with smiles on the love affair that had developed right under our noses. But the two boys were no longer in a good mood. Stathis, in particular, was all frowns.

"Come on Lakis, bring the presents now," Christina called.

I admired her once again. She has always had a knack for changing the atmosphere at once. Lakis and Stathis each received a pair of trainers, identical and a famous designer brand too. How my wife, a deadly opponent of the consumer society, managed this was a miracle! Sophia was given a lovely silk scarf while I, expecting the usual pair of slippers, was amazed to find a wonderful pocket tape recorder!

"For your interviews," she said.

"I'll give my presents on New Year's Eve," I said, feeling ashamed.

"Too late!" she said. "I already have my present here. You're going to pay for it though!"

She picked up an envelope.

"What's in it?"

Two days' stay at a hotel on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day. I've not been anywhere to relax since our honeymoon. I think I deserve it."

The boys applauded.

"Lakis can stay here with us, can't he Mum?" said Stathis with great enthusiasm.

"Do you need to ask?" replied Sophia. "It will be a pleasure!"

"But the night before New Year's Eve, you're all coming round to our house," declared Christina.