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Heavenly's Child

Written by Brenda Reid

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Heavenly's Child

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ANGEL

It was in the heat of a midsummer day that I came home. I smiled all the way from Heraklion, simply because I was here, and I ran up the steps from the little square to our house, still known all these years later as the old Orfanoudakis house.

There was the vine springing through the cracked stones of the threshold, the dusty red geranium still clinging on with very little dignity, looking as though the slightest breeze would bowl it over.

It was the afternoon, so most of the village was sleeping after a morning spent in the fields; taking goats to pasture, collecting honey from the hives on the hillsides or, if you were a woman, cooking, sweeping and cleaning the house as well.

My brother Will was coming up the steps behind me, carrying my trunk; a battered old leather one my parents had used travelling around the world. Will is so strong that he swung it along as if it were a bag of feathers.

As she heard us, Will's girlfriend Lucy came running out, her face rich with a lovely smile, pink from the sun and probably the heat of the kitchen. That's what Lucy does; she cooks. I was happy to see her. I love her and I'm so glad for Will that he found her. But as she hugged me, still I wished it were my mother here to greet me.

I ran around the house from room to room checking that nothing had changed.

The pile of many-coloured cushions in one corner of the long living room was the same as ever. I knelt down, my hand brushing across the soft, aging silk, the brilliance of the

scarlets, lavenders, greens faded long ago but there was a faint perfume rising from them releasing a million memories for me. All of them happy.

My scaggy nails caught on a delicate thread and pulled a magenta strand free.

In the other corner, ranged around the stone circle of the old winepress, were the dried fruits – apples, plums, grapes, pomegranates and the prickly browning leaves of artichokes – that my mother and I had collected walking on the hillside last year and the years before. They gave off musty sweet scents, filling that great room with the hunger for fresh-picked versions of the same.

Everywhere reminded me of my mother. I longed to see her, have her hug me to her. I needed her to help me understand and explain to my father the things that had gone wrong for me recently.

This house, this village, Panagia Sta Perivolia, in the far south-east of Crete, is where Will and I grew up, and everything then seemed to be perfect. My father was in Athens, a diplomat at the embassy there, and visited us only for the odd weekend or holiday. I'm afraid I always felt a great sense of relief when he left each time. He's a stickler for good behaviour, brushed hair, neat clothes and all the other things I struggle to get right.

I knew it was him who made me go away to a boarding school in England and I remember dear Will trying to make it better for me; telling me of his time in our father's old school.

Lucy cooked us a wonderful dinner. All my favourite things: a mix of tiny dishes of olives, anchovies, crispy rings of squid – a *meze* it's called here – and then lamb roasted in the oven with lemons and herbs. Lucy has a column in one of those glossy women's magazines you see in dentists' waiting rooms. She's a little bit famous.

The mothers of girls in my school read her recipes and their daughters told me. It didn't do much for my popularity even so. I always felt I was a misfit. There is the problem of my name for a start, Angel. I gave up ages ago trying to persuade

English people to call me Angeliki (Ann-gell-ee-kee), my real name. They always just laugh.

'It's Greek,' I say and off they go again, as though I had told some great joke.

Actually, I was supposed to be named after my mother's best friend, Anthi, but my father never liked this friend much so Angel it is. I'm very tall and clumsy. Mother says she was too but it doesn't help, because she's certainly very graceful now. Worst of all, I think, is that my hair is curly and frizzy and sticks out all over the place and it's sort of brown with red bits, conker coloured. Will says I look like our mother, who's got rather wild reddish hair but he's got to be joking, *she's* beautiful.

And of course I was totally hopeless at all those English games; lacrosse, hockey, netball, tennis. I'm a whizz at backgammon though – I can beat Will and my father.

After I helped Will clear away I said, 'Can I go to see Chrissi now?'

Chrissi was my very best friend in the world and I had missed her more than anyone except my mother and Will.

There was a sudden silence and Will said, 'Of course, but I'll have to come with you.'

'Lovely, but why? I do know the way.'

'There's a curfew now in the villages. No child to be out at night without a parent.'

'What? Why? It's 1971 not 1871! And anyway, I'm sixteen. Not exactly a child.'

'No one really knows why,' Will said. 'It's a new government rule.'

'Girls get married here at fourteen – are *they* allowed out alone?'

Lucy said, 'Stay here with us just this evening, why not? Will has missed you so much and he's off again in a week or so and won't be back for ages.'

I stayed; of course I did. Will is my super-hero. He's ten years older than me but he's always looked out for me. When I was little, here in the village everyone was mostly really nice to

me, I think because of Will. That was then, now he's this brilliant filmmaker. He makes documentaries. Last year a film he'd made about the Amazon River was on the BBC and he was interviewed on the Greek television news. He was so young to have spent months making the film alone. Here in the village there is a television set at the Piperia and everyone crowded in to watch and cheered when he came on; I know it's true, because Chrissi wrote and told me.

Will's really handsome. He's tall too, of course, taller than me, but he moves like a lion – smooth and easy. He has the same hair as me, but all black, and on him it looks great, like Mick Jagger. He's better looking than Mick, even Chrissi says so and she says she's saving her virginity for Mick – as if!

I remember when that television set was put in. It was 1965 and Greece was trying to qualify to get into the World Cup the next year. They didn't; they only came third in their group, so we were all fed up. Lots of people here were supporters of Panathanaikos, and eight of them were in the Greek side, but even so, no luck. I remember it well; probably because it was the following year, 1966, that my whole life changed.

Father was sent off to a different embassy; this time in Thailand, a million miles away, and he absolutely insisted my mother went with him. She told me as gently as she could, but it meant I was going to be sent to a school in England, a girls' school at that. The village school here is mixed, of course, and although I know we are English underneath, in my opinion I'm really mostly Greek. Actually Cretan, that's what I am.

The only good thing about it was that my mother took me to England herself, just the two of us. And she made it into a treat. We went a bit early and had two whole days in London. We stayed in a really grand hotel, one that Father's secretary arranged for us and we had a whole suite of rooms just to ourselves. Even two bathrooms – one each!

You could stand on the silk couch in front of the window and see all the buses going down Piccadilly – hundreds of them; one after another, after another.

First we did all the boring bits like getting my uniform.

It was grey, grey and more grey, with just the occasional tiny bit of miserable burgundy red. Even a grey hat.

We went to several museums, but only the really interesting ones. We looked at the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum. What a cheek they have, calling them that! Years ago, this old Englishman, Lord Elgin, hacked them out of the Acropolis in Athens, broke lots of bits off and shipped them any old how over to England. Most people in Greece – and Mother and me – think they should come back and be the Parthenon Marbles again.

For the rest of that day we just walked around London looking at people and what they were wearing.

It was like stepping into a different world! No, another planet. All my entire life I had lived in a place where nothing changed for hundreds of years. There were no shops, because nobody needed them. Everyone grew what they ate and ate what they grew. All the scrappy bits went to the chickens or the goats. But in London you can buy baked potatoes and roast chestnuts on the street. Or ice cream; all different flavours.

Not much grey there. There were girls with skirts that stopped just below their bums. I said, 'Imagine Chrissi and me walking around Panagia wearing those?'

'Would you like to?' And this was my mother!

We went to somewhere in Chelsea she said she had lived in for a while when she was young. And there the girls were not just wearing these weeny skirts; they had long white boots as well. White! What would happen if they walked through rain or mud? I said, 'Maybe we should take a pair back for Yorgo to wear instead of his black mountain boots.'

And we both found the thought of Chrissi's father in white boots so hilarious that we almost fell over giggling.

'They are for women,' Mother said, 'so we should get a pair for Aphrodite.'

That was Chrissi's mother; she is sixty and as wide as a London taxi, so we giggled even more.

The second day we went to Liberty's where my mother bought some clothes for very hot weather – embassy-lady frocks, swirly and floaty and silky with lots of flowers on them. Then round the back of Liberty was the most amazing place of all – Carnaby Street. There were boys singing Beatles' songs in the street and people dancing and everyone wore brilliant colours and had hair rather like mine, sort of wavy, and long ponytails – even the men.

'This is where the Beatles come shopping.'

After that I was looking for them everywhere, even just one. John especially – he's my favourite. There was suddenly a noise like goat bells on the Panagia hillside and I spun round to see a little group of people, I think they were men, walking down the middle of the road. They were all wearing orange togas and chanting.

'What are they saying?' Mother asked a man.

He laughed. 'Harry Krishna,' he said.

I caught her eye and we shrugged at each other, no wiser.

There were girls in long cotton frocks with their hair in plaits – hundreds of plaits, and necklaces, beads. They handed out flowers to people and smiled. There was a lovely smell in the air, sort of musky and sweet. Like cigarettes but not cigarettes; something else. We went into a restaurant in a basement nearby, called Jimmy's, and we had Greek food! The walls were all curved over into the ceiling and tiled like a bathroom.

In the afternoon we went to a cinema called the Academy and saw a French film with English subtitles and the girl in that was wearing a black polo neck sweater. I loved that. And when we came out into the light of the afternoon we went to a shop near Piccadilly, a French shop called Galeries Lafayette, and Mother bought me one just like it. It's my favourite thing, and even though I've now almost grown out of it, I still wear it a lot.

Then suddenly it was Friday morning and our last lovely breakfast in the hotel and even the delicious frilly scrambled eggs couldn't make me smile. The waiter bent towards me and

whispered, 'Cheer up. It may never happen!' But I knew it would.

Then it was time to get the train to Surrey to this school. I was almost counting the minutes, our last time together.

My mother was smiling as we walked around the streets of Greenbridge. She kept pointing to places and telling me stories of when she'd been a nurse in the hospital there. That was where she had met my father.

And then she was gone and I was there in that school on my own. And I was so absolutely determined that I wasn't going to cry that I could only walk about with my face all screwed up so that girls, hundreds of them looked at me and giggled and moved away. And that night was probably the worst night of my entire life so far. It was the first time I had been away from my mother for all night. When she hugged me and said goodbye, I thought her face looked all screwed up too and I wondered if she was crying that night. And if she was and she was miserable without me and I was miserable without her, then why the bloody were we not together?

After that I knew that nothing would ever be the same again. It felt to be a time of nothingness; an endless trail of days, not to be remembered, all filled with meaningless hours with people I scarcely even knew. Some were teachers, some were pupils. Everyone seemed to look the same. Everyone was grey. There was a lot of laughter around me, but I never understood, never learnt how to join in.

And I did try, I really did but every single thing was different to the village school in Panagia. There, there were just three classrooms: one for the babies, one for the middling ones and then a small one for the seniors. Chrissi and I were just about to go into that one when I had to leave and I'd looked forward to it so much. The Greenbridge school was called The Oaks; but I never saw one oak tree anywhere near and there were fifteen classrooms – fifteen! Everyone looked the same in those horrible uniforms and it took me months to learn all the names.

Anyway, now I've been thrown out of that school, expelled, and my father is going to be completely outraged.

Will jumped up. It was twilight already and we were sitting on the terrace, and the stars here, even though they are the same all over the world, are brighter and shine more glowingly than anywhere else. Certainly more than in England. Lucy was yawning, and trying to cover it up. Will stood up and said, 'You go to bed, and Angel and I will go for a walk.' I was not at all tired, just happy to have a chance to be with Will on my own.

We followed the path around and up and past the Piperia where some of the village elders were sitting under the great branches of the pepper tree playing cards. They paused as we passed and waved a greeting. I couldn't help but smile. We crept past; disturb the game at your peril. They are here every night playing a complicated game called *prefa*, which seems to have no ending. Chrissi and I play it sometimes but we're rubbish. It seems mostly to consist of banging the cards down hard on the table and anyone who didn't know would think they had stumbled upon World War Three, so passionate did it sound.

We joined the mountain path winding up and up and passed some villagers coming home with their goats and they all shouted '*Ya*' to us, 'hello'.

There was the cluster of houses forming Pano Panagia – the upper village. Below there was Mesa, the middle part with our house at the edge and further down is Kato, the lowest part tucked snugly in at the bottom.

The air was heavy with the animal scent of warm fur and that curious goaty smell that echoes the taste of goats' milk or cheese, which is one of the main parts of their food. I sniffed it in. It's one of the things I've missed, being in England, that smell.

The whole of Panagia sits near the top of a mountain, all the houses seeming to cling to the side of it. If you shut your eyes and listened you could mostly hear just silence and then

slowly a bird will start to sing, cicadas will clatter and the bells of the goats will ting ting. With every step I saw the dying rays of the sun sinking in the still warm sky. I felt such a surge of happiness to be back. Looking around me I saw the two great arcs of mountains enclosing and seeming to protect this little heaven. The slopes fell gently away beneath. Every curl in the land is like a caress, and every turn seemed framed like a painting in the cypress trees.

We left the last houses behind us, even those crumbling into the hillside with their tiny windows. In front of one of them, fresh washing told of the life inside. Darned white sheets, denim overalls, two head kerchiefs, under-drawers (extra large size) and a pink brassiere so big you could swing a pair of fat twins in it.

The old couple that lived inside ran out to call to us.

We waved and smiled and Will said, 'Did you hear that? She called you Heavenly.'

We stopped to pick some of the herbs that fill the air with perfume up here; sage, thyme, wild garlic and lavender and the pungent *rigani* that seems to be in every Greek thing I've ever eaten. I know all the names – Lucy taught me.

Will sat, his back against a rock. The sky was turning rapidly into night. That's how it is here. We were sitting on one of the goat tracks that pepper these hills and I could no longer see Will's face.

'I guess that couple remember Mother when she first came here. You and Heavenly they called them. Couldn't quite manage Hugh and Evadne.'

'He never liked her being called that, did he? Everyone calls her Heavenly now.'

'Probably not in Thailand, though.'

'Oh I do wish she didn't have to be there. I miss her so much. You're all right, you've got Lucy.'

'Father said after the war, when she lived here in the village on her own for years, he'd never go through that again. "A wife is a wife," he said to me once, "not someone who does up an old ruin five hundred miles away." '

‘She told me about that. She worked on it, didn’t she? With Chrissi’s father and his nephew who came from over Sitia way. That was brave for a woman in those days.’

A slight breeze riffled through lavender, brought the sweet scent in our direction.

Will took out a cigarette. As he lit it, I said, ‘Can I have a drag?’

He passed it to me and said, ‘Are you telling me you’re smoking now, is that it?’

‘The odd puff; it was the only thing to look forward to – a ciggie at the weekend.’

‘Nothing else? ‘

‘Well, sometimes a glass of sherry as well.’

‘Sherry? No one under sixty drinks sherry, do they?’

‘I drank it here, with Chrissi, last year. It was in the drinks cupboard. I think Mother bought it to try to wean Father off the *raki*.’

‘About the school, being expelled, and the barn,’ I started. ‘I was just doing an experiment.’

‘And?’

‘And, well, it is true. It was only a little bit of straw, and it was a sunny day and I just happened to have a magnifying glass with me. What I didn’t know was how fast it would work. And it spread to the barn and well, it was sort of burning a bit.’

‘A bit? How much is a bit?’

‘I didn’t know it would go up like that. Honestly.’

‘You’re going to have to tell the parents, you know that, don’t you?’

‘Do we have to do it straight away? Can’t we just—’

‘No, Angel, we can’t just anything. I promised Dame Rachel, whatever-her-name-is, your headmistress, we would do it when we left. That’s already two days ago. You never know, Hugh might just decide to ring you up there. Then what?’

‘He’s never rung me up, not once. Anyway, I thought it would be good to have a plan when you tell him.’

'Did you? What plan is that, and since when do I have to tell him for you?'

'I thought it would sound better coming from you.'

'There's only one way it's going to sound.'

'I know, I know. But the plan is: I thought I could go to the *gymnasio* in Tres Petromas. Finish there.'

He laughed, 'It's not exactly known for its excellence academically. Father won't accept that. You've obviously worked hard at The Oaks; all your exam results are top grade.'

'There was nothing there to do except work.'

'Well, Father is going to be very impressed with that; he's going to insist you finish at a similar school: if they'll take you. You'd better come up with one that doesn't have any barns.'

'You mean if I hadn't worked hard, if I hadn't done well, he'd probably let me go to school here?'

'I know it's tough, but in a way, yes.'

'That is so unfair.'

'I'm sorry, Pickle, but where would you live?'

The moon was out again and lit up his face, he was smiling. He hasn't called me that since I was a baby.

'With Lucy.'

'She may stay on for a bit, but then she will have to get back to London.'

'I could stay with Aphrodite and Yorgo. I'm sure they would have me.'

He jumped up. 'You can ask Father, but don't get your hopes up. Come on,' he said, 'you must be tired; it's been a long day.'

Slowly we walked back through the dark. Will was slightly ahead of me.

I said, 'What will happen to me now? Where will I go?'

But he was busy pushing aside gorse and brambles and I don't think he heard me.

I caught up with him.

'Where are you going next? Lucy said you are only here until next week.'

'Afghanistan; I'm making a film about the lapis lazuli

mountains there. Not many people know that there are great caves in the mountains lined with that brilliant blue stone. Almost a wonder of the world, I think.'

Again I was stumbling along the path downwards, following in his giant strides.

'Do you have to go so soon? I feel I've only had you for such a short time.'

'I must. I have to go to Athens and sort out my visa. Things like that.'

Lucy was asleep on the terrace in one of the big steamer chairs there. Will crouched down and stroked her forehead where little tendrils of hair clung. She smiled without opening her eyes. I felt a pang of jealousy. I walked to the edge of the terrace and looked at the lower village where the houses were clinging to the mountain. I could smell the deep lavender scent of the dark. Some windows glittered with light; bright and sharp. Of course, that was what was different. Some of the houses now have electric light. We do, in the Orfanoudakis house but my mother always preferred the soft glow of the oil lamps and Lucy had lit them. Mother would be pleased by that.

The air was hot and still. Only the call of a lone falcon broke the silence around me. A moment and then the high shrill screech of some small rodent told me that his hunt had been successful this night.

It was our neighbour Irini's cockerel that woke me the next morning. I was about to stuff my head under the pillow and ignore the world for a bit longer, but then, within moments the church bell started to call for some worshippers. Bong bong bong, bong bong bong – the triple chimes of a Greek service, so much simpler than the great clangs of English ones.

And then I thought of Chrissi, probably already up. It was June, so school was out, and this was the time to see her. I was up and away, leaving Will and Lucy still sleeping. They'd know where I would be.

But I didn't get even to the path leading down to her house

when she appeared, running along towards me. We shrieked as we collided and grabbed each other in a hug and a dance.

'I knew you'd be here now. I couldn't wait. Aphrodite wants me to go and dig in the *gypo* but I had to see you first; it's been ages and ages.'

'I know; so much to tell you!'

We could hardly stop hugging each other. I just wanted to laugh and shout and dance up and down. It's a year since I've seen her.

'You've grown,' I said and she looked at me and said,

'Guess what? So have you.'

We walked back along the path, arm in arm, matching our steps together.

I do seem to tower over her a bit. I wouldn't say it to her, but Chrissi is stocky and she has definitely got bulges under her top – breasts.

We practically spent our entire childhoods together on the floor in Aphrodite's kitchen or ours. Hers always smelled gorgeous. Aphrodite was a wonderful cook and there were usually big pots of mysterious and delicious things bubbling in there.

'Do you want to tell me about your school?'

I shook my head violently.

'No I absolutely do not. I've been chucked out so I never have to go back there.'

'We heard that.'

'Tell me what's going on here? Have you been over to Aghios Demetrious much?'

'A bit.'

'Any trouble?'

She shrugged. 'You might have to help me out with a bit of a problem I've got from there.'

Aghios Demetrious was three kilometres away around the mountain. Everyone in Panagia reckons they are really descended from Turks round there. We are sworn enemies and there have always been a few fights on Saturday nights. Usually it's all blown over in a couple of days.

'Why? What do you mean?'

'I got myself into a game of truth or dare.'

'And?'

'Thing is, I've got to . . . I can hardly tell you, it's too awful.'

'What, Chrissi, what?'

She turned her back to me and said over her shoulder, 'I've been dared to hang my knickers on the flagpole in the square.'

I collapsed, helpless with giggles.

'I'm not going to tell you any more than that, so don't even ask.' She was bright pink now. I've never seen Chrissi blush before.

I hugged her. 'We'll do it together. When's it supposed to happen?'

'Saturday night.'

I counted quickly on my fingers – 'That's tomorrow!'

'I just prayed you'd be back in time to do it with me.'

'Of course I will.'

'Do you know about the curfew?' I nodded. 'That makes it even more difficult.'

'Oh pouf, it's nothing. You've climbed up there before haven't you?' She nodded. 'Well, we'll do it together, don't worry. It'll be a laugh.'

We ran on to her house and there was Aphrodite, and she gave me a great hug. She smelt like she always did, faintly of cinnamon mixed with a flowery hint of mimosa and honey. Whatever happened in the wider world, Aphrodite seemed never to change. Chrissi had inherited her mother's build: round but not fat, just comfortable in every way. And nothing seemed ever to surprise her; world wars, drought, hunger and poverty passed around her and her smile was always ready; her kitchen full of comforting food, her arms wide with welcome.

I wouldn't swap all this for anything. This feeling of being in the right place, being back where I belong, being home.