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Pani's Island

a fantasy



Nikos and Lefteris ~ Oil by Tony Brown

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St Keverne Cornwall

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by Tony Brown
Daffodil Cottage, St Keverne, Cornwall, TR12 6LY
tony@grecofilia.co.uk**

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Cornwall

1

We had set sail from Ictis at high tide; it would be my first long voyage. At last I was old enough, and now the time had come for me to join my father and learn his trade. We would be away from our dear Belerion for many months, maybe a year. Father said it would be hazardous but a great adventure that would be the making of me. We would cross the Great Sea, as far as Alasiya, Byblos and perhaps all the way to Hellas. He wanted to strengthen links with the islands and make trade there for fine weavings, linen garments, papyrus, potteries, wine, gold and silver, all in exchange for our precious currency...our cargo of tin. We made our journey aboard a sturdy trading galley, Polias on its way home to distant Kriti.

There was one night, cold and clear, when we huddled together at the stern to keep warm. Amongst us was a man introduced as Pytheas of Massilia, a mathematician, a trader mariner and himself, an Hellene. My restless curiosity caused me to excuse myself and ask of this man to please tell us about the people, his people, those who live in that strange and distant land because I knew very little of the Hellenes except for the usual myths and exaggerations told around the fire at home and I wanted to know the truth. At first he made no reply and I thought he'd missed my words for the wind tore everything away not tied down. My father nudged my arm and slightly shook his head so I'd bear some respect, and so we sat for what seemed like an age in stillness listening to the

rolling sea. Pytheas sat with his face turned toward the moon, his long hair whipping round his head and beard, whilst she returned his gaze, serene and calm, in startled meditation. Then, with the moonlight in his eyes, Pytheas refilled our cups and let out a long slow sigh.

'Well now, where shall I begin? Sit and wrap yourselves warm while I give it some mind.' He looked back at the lady moon, took a sip and smiled before he began to tell, 'My friends, the land of Hellenes is a land to be loved. It is very beautiful. Everywhere you see the lines of its snow-peaked mountains looking at each other across smiling valleys. Through the...'

'Godfrey? Godfrey! You're daydreaming again and there's people waiting!'

Ms. Woody's rasp ripped through my reverie and shook me awake. I shielded my eyes from the bright sunlight outside and glanced at the clock. It was dead on three - might have guessed. It's the same everyday. Why do I always feel so inactive in the middle of the afternoon? And still almost three hours to go before I finished for the weekend.

Ms. Woody lowered her voice as she leaned over me and clattered, 'Godfrey, a man of your age should realise you aren't paid to daydream and waste time.' She spoke to me like I was a naughty child. Why couldn't she leave me where I was? Just two people at the counter so we were not exactly inundated and anyway, I needed my daydreams - they stopped me going mad.

Working in the library during the warmer months was torture and made me feel as

dry and musty as the books, so when I could, I'd slip into Non-fiction, pick up something in Greek Myths and Legends, then with a little imagination and by reading standing up, I would leave this world behind. I'd tried other sections and of course, they all charmed and frightened me in turn, but it was only the Greek legends that sent me on an odyssey of my own and as soon as an image filled my mind, I would quietly slip away to Greece. I think I may have lived there in some previous life; at least that might explain my intense fascination for a land to be loved and for tales that seemed so real. On the one hand I was embarrassed to admit the effect my fantasies were having on me, a grown man obsessed with mythology, and I even began to wonder if I might be going a bit loopy. Things seemed to be getting out of control because I was spending far too much time with monsters, myths and heroes of the Golden Age. On the other hand Cerberus, Scylla and Charybdis made a refreshing change from the everyday monsters I met in the library. My free spirit was suffocating and if I didn't have an adventure soon, I might as well go to the nearest rubbish dump and give myself up.

By midsummer I was crawling up the walls more frustrated with the library than ever and was even thinking of handing in my resignation. It was just a matter of timing; I didn't want to upset Auntie Agnes, after all she had found me the job in the first place and then she allowed me to live at her Lilac Cottage free of rent. She and Uncle Pani lived apart for some unexplained reason, although they seemed to visit each other quite a bit. He lived on a Greek island called Stephanos, in the village of his birth, Sophia, and for the next few days she would be spending some time with him there but when she got back, I'd definitely have to sit down and talk to her about my problem.

On my way home, I was rehearsing what I might say when I ran into old Mr. Kevern, the retired farmer and close friend of the family. He lived down the other side of the hill from auntie's cottage.

He grinned and ambled toward me, 'Lovely day, Godfrey.'

'Not so nice when you're locked in doors.'

'Do you know, I don't think I could do it myself. Work indoors, I mean. Look, why don't you take a corner of my farm and grow a selection of herbs or something for marketing. Make a small business. There are lots of restaurants round here and they'd pay handsomely for fresh herbs. It'd be an outdoor life too - healthy living.'

I looked into his scorched red face and rheumy eyes, 'No thanks. It's just not me.'

'Well, I think you need building up and it'd make you fit.'

'Oh, I don't think I'm built for building up, Mr. Kevern. I haven't got the frame.'

'Rubbish, lad! You were fatter when you were a stripling coming down here on your holidays.'

'It's all a waste of time. I even joined the Circuit Training in the parish hall but had to give that up in the end.'

'Oh, 'ess, how come?'

'Oh, I couldn't keep up with all the circuit drinking.'

'Very funny. Ha! I might have a word with your aunt when she gets back from Greece. At least you wouldn't be so dependent, not that your auntie minds, but you'd be better off self-employed. It makes a man confident, more ambitious.'

'I've never been ambitious in my life.'

'Exactly! And look where that's got you, and at your age too.'

'Oh, all right Mr. K. I'll see what she thinks. She's due back at the end of next week.'

'She still got that black cat? What's it called? Ebby? Yes, 'ess. He's been in the house as long as anyone can remember.'

'He's a permanent fixture. I think he's even mentioned in the deeds.'

'He'll be there when we're all dead and gone too. Yess, 'ess,' he laughed.

'Auntie loves his company. He's better than a member of the family really.'

'Do you know, I used to fancy your aunt like mad when she was a girl - even wanted to marry her at one time. So I hope you don't take advantage of her kindness. Her front garden now is exactly how I remember it when I was a lad. All flowers and cabbages like it should be.'

A knowing wink, a wave of his stick and he was gone. To think he might have been my uncle. I shuddered. The truth was auntie had never done any gardening in her life. I think there was some sort of pact. She let the garden at the front do what it liked and the garden let her do what she liked at the back. Dear auntie had found a certain contentment in her cottage lifestyle and nothing could compare. She loved living on the Lizard Peninsular, the most southerly point in Britain and miles from any city. Often she would say she was out of harms way, rolling along in her own good time; that she'd done enough travelling for a whole chorus line.

As a young boy, indeed even later as a young man, I'd spend hours at Lilac Cottage happily lost in a world of my own, inventing games and adventures. I suppose not having brothers or sisters or even many friends for that matter, might explain how my

imagination knew no bounds but it served me well whenever I was lost or in need of company and I don't think I was that different from anyone my age who held deep conversations with their pets and any other creatures that happened to be within earshot. That, and the suspicion that auntie's village was somehow set in a kind of time warp and quite remote from the city life with all its dross and plastic distractions that I'd been used to in Truro which might well have been a thousand miles away from Trevean. This little village nestled deep in the heart of the Lizard, and once out across her fields you could get lost in some thicket or woodland within ten minutes of leaving home if you wanted. Twenty minutes walk following a stream, over a bridge, across a couple of stiles, through a herd of cows and you were on the secret beach and only the villagers knew it was there. It was primitive and apparently deserted. No road went there, there were no shops or kiosks or buildings there of any sort, and out in the bay, just sly, threatening rocks. In fact, should any visitors ever ask if there was a beach nearby, the locals would direct them along the coast road to the next village, 'Beach? Beach? Now let's see, er yes! Try er, Covevy. It's only a couple of miles down the road.'

Life was full of adventure then and I spent many a summer's night camped on the sand amid the rushes on our beach. Auntie's cottage was over three hundred years old with walls three foot thick that kept out most of the light and noise from the street. It was stuffed with all sorts of creaks and strange noises and I loved it. Once there, my imagination never slept. I don't remember watching the television at all although I know she had one somewhere in the lounge but unlike most houses it wasn't the focal point. Come to think of it, I remember she kept it in the sideboard with the doors shut. It's still

the same today; she'd say it was for Pani when he visits because, 'the Greeks love a bit of telly'.

In the corner of the room was an old oak wardrobe and unless you looked inside you'd never know it had a seat and a shelf for the telephone. Covering its walls hung photos of our family mixed up with several pictures of the showbiz types auntie had been on stage with as well as a few programmes and posters. There was also a hand-painted sign made by Pani that simply read, *grecofilia*, a word he coined to describe a love for all things Greek. And from the moment they met I think auntie felt he was all things Greek to her. She had a Rayburn Range solid fuel cooker in the dining room which she used for everything, even warming her nightgown and socks. It still runs on coal and that leaves a thin layer of coal dust over everything. Auntie Agnes was far too busy with baking, growing things and odd jobs and paintings things than to waste time cleaning or decorating. In fact, I was queuing in the Post Office once when I heard the busybody behind me whisper to her friend, 'Oh and I've heard that Agnes keeps quite a lot of fluff under the couch, if you know what I mean.'

My memories of school holidays were of sandwiches and fruit and long sunny days and early to bed. Whenever I needed help she was the natural person to turn to. Like the day I phoned to tell her my job as a Teaching Assistant in the local school was far too dangerous and asked if it was all right to visit for the weekend and maybe have a chat. She said at the time that she thought I must be psychic because she had been wondering why I didn't move in with her, rent free; find a job and take care of the house when she went off to visit Uncle Pani.

So I resigned, caught the next bus from Truro and moved in within a week. That was over two years ago. As time went by I realised Auntie Agnes had some special qualities. For one thing she was very strong willed and didn't give in easily. She had strong opinions and didn't like losing. Sometimes our disagreements would be cut short with the same simple statement, 'Well, that's what I think so let's not take this any further.' We were like two pieces from a jig-saw puzzle each with one side to fit with another but with others that never would.

Auntie was crafty. If we played cards she had to play the local radio station so she could distract me with her curious show biz memories in between snatches of tortuous singing. Ebby would lie across the back of my armchair and I was sure he gave her clues to my hand. And as sly as a vixen. If we played in silence, she would pointedly clack her dentures. When I first moved in she seemed to like making a fuss of me and we spent most of our spare time together talking or playing board games but once the novelty wore off we began to get on each other's nerves and we'd often meet in head on collision.

After a while Auntie Agnes decided I needed a job, 'I've got two kings with a floating joker - and I think you need a job. Godfrey, pick your cards off the floor and close your mouth for a minute. Now, I don't want to put our relationship under any stress but you are beginning to get under my feet and we can't play games forever. Anyway, I've had a word with a contact from the church who's had a word with someone else and on Monday you'll start as an assistant in the local library. This will give us some breathing space, is that alright?'

I was not prepared for double shock tactics. After all, there wasn't much time left for developing a career after reading, listening to music and strolling through the countryside.

She was bullying me and so I moped about until the beginning of the following week. My only consolation being the thought of some financial independence and access to all those books but after a while, a job's a job and eventually I fell into step with everyone else. Predictably, as soon as I had a comprehensive understanding of all that the library entailed, I became bored with the routine. Mundane rituals like the replacing of books, the tidying of shelves, the erection of displays and the arguments over fines were driving me mad. I looked upon the tedium of my days in the library between sorting and smiling, and stamping and piling as a gradual withering of the spirit and the only thing that stopped me from toppling was the fact that I'd learned to hold my breath for several minutes between the Reading Room with its coughs and splutters, sneezes and strange smells, and the room behind the reception desk where we had our kitchenette and the staff supply of plonk. No wonder the air around Reception smelled like a wine cellar, and no doubt at times most of us could be said to be a little overly complacent. From the counter there, you could see right into the Reference Section and that in itself was good for a minor interlude. For instance, occasionally you might see one of the regulars wake with a start, peer around the room, and then fold forward again. It made me yawn just to look at them, and the heat from outside made it unbearable in there. We'd smell something fetid and draw straws to see who'd go round and prod the sleepers. One afternoon, Miss Megrim found a reader in Reference who could have been dead since opening but we'd been too busy with holiday gossip to notice. And the smell was a blend

of the one you get inside your tent at Glastonbury and the one you get from babies' nappies - not that I'd ever been to Glastonbury, I've never actually left the county, nor ever changed a nappy but the horrors don't take much imagination.

The hill home seemed never ending that afternoon and it wasn't helped by the gnawing sense of unease growing in my belly. It would not go away. There was I, almost forty years old and part-time assistant in a village library. Not exactly Hermes, the Messenger of the Gods, but then it was summer and not difficult to believe that the moment had come to live those long and easy days, well, er, long and easy. Luckily I'd made up a big jug of lemonade before I left for work that morning and stashed it in the fridge for when I got home. According to *The Today* programme on my morning radio, the weather was going to be hot and there's nothing quite like Uncle Pani's home-made lemonade to quench the thirst when you're evaporating. I wondered how Auntie Agnes was keeping cool with Uncle Pantelis. He'd phoned during the week to say she'd arrived OK and although now he seemed to slur his words a little, he'd painted a very colourful picture of them swimming and dancing and dining out beneath the stars. He knew he had me hooked when he started on the open air life and began hinting at the history and the folk lore and tasty morsels to tempt me to visit and, I have to admit, until then I'd resisted all his invitations; the long easy days can stretch into infinity if the weather is right and he certainly had my curiosity growing. He used to say I had skin like *Ouzo* because I always looked so pale. He said his island was enchanting. That the mountains were terrifying and the women had bodies made in Hades. Actually, I began to consider it after all, I could stay for as long as I liked. Have some fun. Get a tan. It would do me good.

But I have to say he was sounding tired. As for the travelling, well, I was never very confident to say the least. It seemed a lot of effort just to get excessive and loose bowel movements.

My ex-wife loved to travel - in more ways than one - and she was quite taken with Pani too, always fishing for invitations to his Sophian home but being a shrewd man he kept her at a distance. And he wasn't slow to voice his opinions either, particularly when he'd had a few. At our wedding reception, we'd been watching her dancing with some of her art college friends when he leaned towards me,

'Daphne likes to be the centre of attention, doesn't she?'

'Oh, she wraps men round her little finger, that's for sure.'

'It's good you don't get jealous.'

'Never. They just want to buy her drinks because she's popular and when she's tipsy, it makes her flirty, that's all.'

Pantelis turned and looked me in the eyes, 'Godfrey, you are my family so just between me and you, please be careful, that's all. But I have to say, anyone that flirty is bound to bring trouble.'

Auntie was appalled by what he said, 'Pani, don't be so cruel. You have no right to make those assumptions about poor Daphne and especially on her wedding day. Godfrey, don't take any notice. There's nothing wrong with the girl.'

But it was true, I knew Daphne could be a little cold at times but then no one's perfect.

'She'll never be short of money, that one. As long as she moves in certain circles and surrounds herself with certain characters.' Now Uncle was inviting trouble.

'Pani! Enough! No more drink for you,' and she slapped him on the head.

After his phone call I began to wonder if I'd ever see Pani's island home. Uncle Pani was my Uncle Pani and I hadn't seen him for ages. I missed his straight talking and after all his invitations and taunts, I began to think that maybe one day I could build up just enough courage to actually go and visit him on his magic island - but not just then; I thought I'd rather stretch out in the garden and watch out for flying pigs.

By the time I'd squeaked open the gate, my legs were definitely not going in the same direction as my mind. I was preoccupied with what auntie might say about my latest disenchantment with a job. Hopefully, she wouldn't be too upset. But there I was, dehydrating about auntie's reaction and hallucinating over visions of ice-cold lemonade dancing before my bleary eyes. Uncle Pantelis had taught her the simple Sophian method of making lemonade that is extremely refreshing, "This drink is a real elixir, believe me, a favourite with the gods. Our elixir is made from limes, oranges and the fattest, juiciest lemons all squashed together to make a drink once tasted, you would long for from Spring Equinox 'til late September."

He loved his rituals and I loved his lemonade. In fact, it gave me such a sense of relaxation and feeling of well-being that sometimes imagination and reality became a blur.

From the shade of the magnolia, Ebby surveyed his domain through half closed eyes and snored in gentle grunts. Being the oldest member of our household, we showed

him all the deference due to one as profound and venerable as he was. Whenever we entered his mystical presence, movements were made with as much care and stillness as possible but lowering yourself into a rotting deck chair whilst rattling a long glass of lemonade was an ice cube too far. The instant that fanfare began, he calmly turned his head and looked me over through barely visible slits, 'Everything all right, Godfrey? Everything under control?'

'Yes, thank you. I think so.' I stretched out and put my feet on the log that served as a foot stool. 'Nice day,' I whispered. It seemed the appropriate thing to say.

'Thank you,' Ebby took full credit. 'You seem a little less tense. Come to any life-changing decisions since we last spoke?' He'd always been tuned in to my moods and knew how restless I'd become in my work.

'I think I've decided to leave my job in the library after all.'

'It's good to be positive.'

'Well, there are still a few things to consider, like having a little less money, fewer books on hand...'

'You can't have everything.'

'...like keeping out of auntie's way. But if my decision is to definitely leave, then I'll hand in my resignation and be free as a bird again.'

'Congratulations.'

'The thing is I'm not sure how auntie will take it.'

'She has your interests at heart, Godfrey. I'm sure she'd rather have you happy than have you slogging it out in some dark, damp slave cave.'

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