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The House of Dust and Dreams

Written by Brenda Reid

Published by Orion Books

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The House of Dust and Dreams

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An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 2010
by Orion

This paperback edition published in 2011
By Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Extract from *The Cretan Runner* by George
Psychoundakis translated with an introduction by Patrick
Leigh Fermor (Penguin Books, 1998, 2009).

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permission of Penguin Books Ltd and Sheil Land Associates Ltd.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-4091-3543-2

Printed and bound in the Great Britain by
CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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The Island of Crete, Greece

SUMMER 1936

HEAVENLY

I first saw the old Orfanoudakis house on a warm, sunlit afternoon; the only sound a lone bullfrog and the cicadas. The village around it was sleeping. It had taken four hours here up a narrow mountain track from the Sea of Crete below; in a donkey cart owned by a fisherman, Petros.

Our companions were his mother, two of his six children and a crate of squawking chickens. When Petros stopped in the village square he pointed ahead to the house, Hugh's family's house; a majestic structure dominating a row of tiny white houses, their windows like mouseholes. I raced up the steps of the wide street and stopped in front of it.

It was dilapidated certainly, but nothing that couldn't be fixed, I felt sure. I turned in delight to Hugh, but he was struggling with our luggage; the sunlight caught a flash of a silver coin in his hand and there was much kissing and hugging and welcoming cries of '*Kalos orisate*' from Petros and his family.

I ran down, but my offers of help were waved aside by Hugh.

'Come and see, it's beautiful!' I cried excitedly. He struggled under the weight of the baggage, his face red and sweating.

'It's really old,' I said, 'and just how it used to be, I think, when your grandfather was here.'

'Great-grandfather,' he muttered, gasping for every breath. I was hugging myself with delight and jumping up and down so hard my straw hat fell off and rolled down the street.

And then he was beside me. ‘Christ Almighty, Evadne,’ he gasps, ‘we can’t stay here, it’s a ruin.’

I looked at the shutters along the front terrace. I suppose they had no paint left and they were hanging off rather precariously. But the front door, open on one hinge, looked welcoming to me and there were crimson geraniums blooming happily in a large stone amphora on a second terrace above.

‘Oh, Hugh, don’t be such an old pessimist; a lick of paint, a nail or two and it’ll be fine.’

Hugh sighed bleakly as he set the trunks down. ‘This, Evadne, is supposed to be our honeymoon. We’ve been married for two years and never had a proper time to ourselves and now are you telling me I must start hammering and painting?’

‘Well, Petros said there were no hotels so we’d better make the best of it, hadn’t we? Anyway, I bet it’s beautiful inside.’ And in my eyes it already was.

The steps leading up to the front door were aged and weathered with brown stringy weeds and yellowing grass pushing up through the cracks. Hugh resisted all my efforts of help and, scarlet-faced with exertion, struggled with insistent determination up step by slow step.

As I crossed over the ancient stones of the threshold, an oddly poignant flicker went through me. The day was bright with sun, but inside the large room that awaited me, it was cool and dim. The rays spilling in at the windows on one wall cast an almost romantic light so that, for a moment or two, the room, even with the sagging beams high in the ceiling and the cracked and broken white walls seemed full of all the dreams I’d ever had and, I believe, all those still to come.

I waded through bits of straw, shredded birds’ nests and mountains of dust. Here were all the memories of lives lived to the full and yet only the cicadas outside seemed alive.

This morning it is the mosquito that wakes me; that insistently wretched, whiny buzz. I stretch my arm across the sheet,

still warm and damp from the heat of the night, but there is only space. No body there. I stumble out of bed and up the rickety stairs, hanging onto the rope. From the terrace window I can see the first crack of dawn break the sky.

I can also see Hugh on the steamer chair outside. His head back, his mouth open and with every breath, a small snore rumples the silence. It takes only a moment to slip out of my nightgown and into yesterday's dress. It's lying on the floor with all the others – no wardrobe.

Thank goodness for stone floors: no boards creak as I creep out of the house. I pause every few steps and listen; the snores are quiet but regular. He can sleep anywhere, my husband. I once found him at an embassy dance leaning against the wall of the ballroom surrounded by chattering matrons who hadn't noticed they had lost his attention.

It is ten days since we came up that mountain path and every day for me has been a delight. The villagers here have opened their arms and their hearts to us. I have, I think, for the first time in my life a sense of belonging. At first we were just a curiosity. No one here has met an English person before. They struggled with our names but were quickly defeated by Hugh and Evadne so we became 'You' and 'Heavenly'.

I laughed but Hugh said rather crossly, 'They must know Evadne was a Greek goddess!'

I remembered what he had told me, the daughter of Poseidon, but I had seen the blank look in their eyes. 'Apparently not, in this bit of Crete.'

'Its probably the way your're saying it. And I don't for one moment think they're calling you Heavenly. It just sounds like it. Personally I'd be quite happy to settle for Mr and Mrs Timberlake.'

I think any visitor; even from another island, is a subject for gossip and astonishment. A day or so ago Irini from a house along the street paused as she was sweeping and pulled at my arm. 'Athens?' she asked. 'Have you come from Athens?' When I said I had indeed lived there, she took hold

of the sleeve of my dress and stroked it. 'Like my niece,' she said, 'she went to Athens once.'

Even so early I am not alone out here; as I walk up the path, there are several villagers on the way to their gardens at the edge of the village and they greet me cheerfully; '*Yiassou*', '*Kalimera*'. With one or two I exchange a comment about the weather, although so far it seems it is never anything but sunny and clear. With every step the sky lightens a little and over in the east I can see the first rays of today's sun. It will be warm in an hour and very hot in three.

The road where our house is leads with wide steps up, up and round and round. Near the top is a *kafenion* called 'il Piperia' and its courtyard is shaded by a huge and very old, pepper tree from which it takes its name.

This is the only bit of the village that Hugh seems to enjoy.

He sits with the local men as they play cards or backgammon and, spurning the thick, sweet coffee they offer, drinks the local wine or *raki*. This tastes to me like cough mixture. I once suggested I accompany him there, but this was greeted with derision: 'Men only, old girl, strictly a boys' club.' He then strode off up the road, seeming not to notice that any woman he passed stared in horror at his bare legs, frantically crossing herself three times as if she had just been passed by the devil.

Further on up, the road branches off to the school and winds around to the other parts of the village. Just as Petros described on our journey up here, there is the cluster of houses forming *Pano Panagia*, the upper village; self contained almost, sitting atop the rest as if keeping a watchful eye. There is *Mesa*, the middle part; by far the largest, containing our house at the edge. Further down is *Kato*, the lower, snugly tucked in at the bottom. I look about me with delight. Two great ribs of mountains enclose this paradise, the slopes gently falling away beneath. Every curve in the land is like a caress; every view is contained in a frame of cypress and olives.

By the time we arrived here from the embassy in Athens, I

was already in love with the island. And in this village, Panagia Sta Perivolia, and the old house I have just left, I have found somewhere I want to call home.

But only yesterday, a letter arrived asking Hugh how he wanted to arrange our return travel: by ferry or flying boat? And I don't want to leave.

In Athens and the embassy it seems there is nothing but talk of war and the German Chancellor, Hitler. One minute he's a friend, the next he's the enemy. Here in the village, life is so much simpler; it is regulated only by the sun and the moon, the seasons and the crops. I have tried talking to one or two of our neighbours and I know, given a chance, I could get to know them, be happy here, but Hugh can hardly wait to be back to the endless round of parties and receptions we have left behind. He loves all that.

I am up in the hills now, not even overlooking the village far below, and the sun is already higher in the sky; it is going to be a very hot day. It crosses my mind that I should have brought my hat, but at that moment I catch my foot on a stone half hidden under a great golden clump of briar, and fall. A horrid, clumsy fall that has wrenched my ankle round.

Oh bugger! As I try to stand, I fall again; it's sprained, I think.

I manage to get onto all fours and peer around me. I am on one of the ancient goat tracks that pepper these hills and although I can see for miles, there is no sign of anyone. I have no idea where I am. I try to think how long I've been walking: an hour? Longer? And in which direction is the village?

Birds are singing and somewhere, far away, the bells of a flock of goats tinkle.

'Hello, hello. Is there anyone here?' I call.

But out here who on earth is going to hear that bat squeak of a sound? I call again for help, this time in Greek, '*Atrape mou!*' and again as loud as I can, '*Atrape!*' and then, sinking back in desperation, 'Oh damn and bloody hell, won't someone *atraper* me?'

The sun is high and beating down on me, and the fall has

left me giddy and nauseous. There is a tremor of panic and I feel frightened and alone.

And then a moment later, 'Hello!' comes from somewhere and after a pause, 'Where you are?' A miracle. Someone is near and they've spoken in English! I wave my arm in the air as high as I can. 'Hello,' I call again, 'I'm here!' And I can see her now, running towards me. She stops when she reaches me, and looks down in astonishment.

'*Panagia mou!*' she says. I'm not sure calling on the Virgin Mary is going to help me much. But at least she's here.

She is young, probably the same age as me but tiny. Stocky, sturdy but with a lively, twinkly face; golden from the sun, with the rosy cheeks of one who spends a lot of time outdoors. Instantly I am reminded of one of the junior nurses I trained with who laughed easily and made everyone's day brighter.

We speak in a mixture of Greek and English and, in spite of the giddiness, I laugh.

'I'm sorry, I don't know your name. No one here speaks English, so how is it that you do?'

'Anthi,' she says. 'It's short for Rodianthi. I'll explain about the English later. And you are Heavenly, aren't you? Everyone knows you.'

A wave of giddiness sweeps over me and I press my head down between my knees.

'You stay here,' she says. 'I must leave you for a little and get my horse. He is tethered further up the mountain.'

'You will come back, won't you?'

She stands now, very still. 'You don't know me yet, Heavenly, but when you do, you will know I never break my word.'

'You are an angel, Anthi. I hope you and I will be friends.'

It seems to take forever, but it is probably no more than twenty minutes before she is back beside me. She is on her horse and goats are skittering around her. I have closed my eyes and tried to shield my face from the sun.

'Heavenly?' she says, and I look up.

She pulls her straw hat from her head and tries to tug it over my hair. It is hard; my hair is wiry and wild and in this heat, all over the place.

‘Put the hat over your face if it won’t stay on your head, you are already starting to burn.’ She clears a large bundle of grasses from the back of the saddle, throwing them down any old how.

‘Anthi, I’m sorry but your goats are attacking me!’ And as she quickly moves to shoo them away, one starts to eat my dress and the other is hungrily licking my foot.

‘I’m sorry about them,’ she says as they move away, bells clinking, and we both laugh.

Between us we manage to get me up into the saddle and she jumps up behind me. ‘*Entaxi?*’ she says. ‘You are OK?’

‘*Entax.*’ And I am, just.

And so we travel home, in considerably more comfort than I could have managed alone.