

When the Silent SPEAK

*Stepping Stones
on the Spiritual Life*

A NOVEL

*by the Sacred Monastery of the Honorable Forerunner,
Mesa Potamos, Cyprus
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the teenagers who carry beautiful concerns in their hearts, as well as to those who are still living a life without direction, hoping that they will be filled with God's grace, which bestows beauty and meaning upon everything. This dedication is also in memory of those who left us too soon: Dimitris, Yiannis, Danae, Christina, Antonis, and Roza.

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PART I

The Tree-dwellers

THE SQUIRREL

With his mind clouded by anger, the youngster marched alone through the forest, striding toward his beloved refuge. He ascended the old, towering pine tree with his usual grace and agility, until his feet touched the surface of the treehouse. Due to his remarkable ability and obsession to climb trees, the boy had earned the nickname “Squirrel” among the villagers. However, his given name was Paraschos, the same name as his grandfather.

The treehouse was a simple construction, made from weathered planks that the twelve-year-old Squirrel, already a skilled craftsman, had meticulously assembled all by himself. The result was a broad platform that resembled a raft, and rested gently upon three sturdy branches emerging from the central trunk of the tree.

From his perch high up in the sky, Paraschos gazed upon the forest, and then looked over to the olive groves. The green of the olive trees was breathtaking . . . A moment later, the blue of the sea filled his

soul and softened his mood. Yet he did not cast even a single glance toward the village. Despite the beautiful scenery all around him, his blood was still boiling, and his thoughts soon returned to their earlier chaotic state. He remained silent for some time, struggling with his emotions until finally they overwhelmed him, and he began to cry. High up and isolated, where nobody could see him or ridicule him, he sobbed until there were no more tears left to shed, after which he slipped into a deep slumber. When he awoke, night had already fallen. It was then that a strange thought entered his mind, and a peculiar joy overtook him as he allowed it to settle in his heart: he would not go back home. Never again!

The small seaside village had a mere hundred houses and a handful of small hotels. During the summer, the locals retreated to their basements, while their homes were transformed into tourist lodgings. But come winter, the village was left barren and empty. Those with the strength to work would run to the olive groves, while the few retirees would lounge around on their pensions, sipping their morning coffee in the square. In the evening they renewed their meetings by drinking beers and tsipouro. Their wives, both in winter and summer, were busy with housekeeping or serving the foreigners, while in the evening they engaged in traditional “neighborly” gatherings. They assembled around a cobbled bench and socialized for a while

before retiring to their homes to watch their favorite TV shows. Both men and women indulged in endless gossip and commentary on the small and big events of daily life. Interest in the lives of others quickly and inevitably devolved into gossip . . .

On that August afternoon, Paraschos' mother, the beautiful Irishwoman Emmy, arrived at the small village square. She anxiously asked the elderly men at the coffee shop and then the elderly women when they had last seen her son, Squirrel. As this was happening, a luxury black jeep raced into the square and screeched to a loud halt. Out of the jeep jumped Alex, a Pontian by origin and now third generation in Greece. He looked disdainfully at Emmy and with an air of rebuke. Immediately, the pair began to argue, yelling and insulting each other. The whole village listened and, like members of an ancient choir, commented on what they were hearing. Alex and Emmy had forgotten that they were not alone, and harsh truths were spoken that evening in front of the crowd. The Irishwoman told Alex that he was nothing but a narcissist, who boasted about the money he made from his bulldozers, money he had earned by illegally building all along the coast and bribing the city planning department and the forestry service.

“Dirty money,” she said, spitting on the ground. “That’s what ruined you! That’s what made women chase after you. Without wealth, you’re nothing but a loser!”

Alex could not bear this insult in front of the entire village and he made a move to slap her.

“Go ahead,” she scoffed. “Hit me! You’ll only make things worse for yourself!”

Then, a slender woman dressed in black pushed her way through the crowd toward them. It was Alex’s mother, grandma Christina, a widow for a few years now. Visibly agitated, she raised her voice at both of them:

“Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves? Instead of searching for your child, you’re fighting here in front of everyone! Where is the child? Has someone kidnapped him? They say children are being kidnapped and abused, even having their organs taken. Or perhaps the child is hurt? Where is the boy? Do you even know?”

Her words shamed them, and the two parents admitted they had no idea where their son was. The police were sent for, and soon the men from the village organized a search party to look for Squirrel.

“Let’s bring Paraschos’ dog, to help find him,” one of the men suggested, and everyone agreed. The dog would surely find the child, if of course he was still close to the village . . .

Anastasis and I, the two closest friends of Paraschos, heard the voices and immediately broke away from the others.

“Has he gone to the new treehouse?” I whispered, not wanting anyone else to hear.

“Let’s go see,” Anastasis suggested. “And let’s take a shortcut, so no one knows. Come on, I know a path.”

We were the only ones who knew the exact location of Squirrel’s new treehouse. He had already built several of them, fairy-tale-like treehouses that he constructed with great care. He had seen his father’s workers make buildings and had access to good wood. He had made the treehouses deep in the heart of the forest, nestled among the higher branches of trees. His latest creation was perched higher than the village, on the slope of a ravine, where there was a spring with crystal-clear water nearby. He had gently placed it in the arms of a centuries-old plane tree. Our ascent was swift, with Anastasis sprinting up the incline while I lagged behind. Against the backdrop of the rising moon, we spotted the Squirrel’s silhouette. With his recent mohawk haircut and his slim build, he appeared like a strange bird nestled in the tree.

“Hey, Squirrel, you scared us,” I called up to him. “The whole village is looking for you. Come down and go back to your home.”

“My home no longer exists,” Paraschos shouted down to us. “My parents have broken up. Now they have two separate houses and put on a fake polite face,

saying to me: 'This Saturday, you'll stay at your dad's house. Next Saturday, you'll be with your mom.' "

"That stinks, Squirrel. But come down so we can get out of here. If they find you, you'll become a laughingstock."

"I'm fine up here," he said. Then, pretending to be no longer upset, he leapt to his feet and said: "Look at me, I'm even dancing!"

Squirrel was, in fact, an amazing dancer. He had inherited this gift from both of his parents. Emmy taught him Irish dances, while Alex, his father, taught him Pontian dances. Squirrel stood on his tiptoes and started dancing as he sang a traditional Pontian tune that his grandmother had taught him:

"Five houses I have built, yet from all I am forced to flee. A refugee since birth, O God, I'm losing my sanity . . ."

The words hung heavily in the air before he suddenly calmed down and sat on the treehouse floor. Anastasis and I remained silent, feeling his pain and offering our sympathy.

"Why don't you go stay with your grandma?" Anastasis suggested. "I've heard of other kids whose parents have split up and they stay with their grandmas."

"That's a brilliant idea," I chimed in.

"So, I'll become a grandmother's boy instead of a mommy's boy? Do children who grow up only with

their grandmothers become spoiled?” Squirrel joked, trying to lighten the mood.

But, exhausted as he was, he eventually relented and climbed down from the tree. We made our way back to the village, with Paraschos slipping into his grandma’s house through the courtyard door that led to the kitchen. As soon as she heard him, she sprang from her chair and hugged him so tightly that he almost couldn’t breathe.

“Don’t tell them anything,” Paraschos whispered to his grandma. “Let them keep looking for me.”

And just like that, his grandma was now a twelve-year-old girl who agreed to partake in a mischievous plot.

Later, when news of Squirrel’s return spread, the men at the café had already drunk three rounds of tsi-pouro and were feeling philosophical.

“Like father, like son,” Mr. Vasilis said, commenting on the collapse of Squirrel’s family. He was a seventy-year-old widower, a regular at the café, and a member of the “elderly club.”

“What can the poor boy do? It’s not fair to place the blame on him. Children have sensitive hearts and can’t stand the constant bickering of their parents,” interjected Mr. Valantis, the retired postman of the village.

“Not poor at all,” said Mr. Vlasis, the former owner of a café in the city and an experienced man whose

eyes had seen much. “The allowance he gets exceeds our pensions.”

“Sometimes, there is poverty among the wealthy as well, but it takes a different form. ‘Feed a rich man!’ my late grandmother used to say. His soul is never satisfied, never pleased,” Mr. Valantis said. “Although his parents are alive, this child is essentially alone in the world.”

“That child needs his father, not his money,” said Mr. Vangelis, the last of the fishermen in the village. “Alex may give him all he needs materially, but he is deprived of love.”

“But why did his parents separate in the first place?” asked Mr. Vrasydas, a thin, well-traveled retiree who had recently returned to the village from Canada.

“My friend, why have people throughout the ages split up? Out of selfishness and sensuality,” said Mr. Vladimiros, drawing on his understanding of the roots of human passions from the books of the Church he had read. “Due to egotism, sensuality, and greed. For money!”

They all fell silent for a few seconds, perhaps remembering the mistakes they themselves had made over the course of their own long lives. But quickly, they returned to the easy path—that is, commenting on the lives of others . . .

“The Irish woman was too harsh,” said the eldest, Mr. Valantis. “The mistake Alex made was a result of

his impetuosity, though she could have forgiven him. We did much worse in our youth. Isn't that right?"

A sudden hush fell over the café, as if all the men had come to the realization that they themselves were accountable for Squirrel's plight. As if they themselves had all raised Alex together.

Paraschos' grandmother laid out a meal for him and then arranged his bed in the room where his father had grown up.

"Grandma, I want to stay with you from now on," Paraschos said. "I can't go back to my parents. Whenever I'm alone with one of them, they insult and blame the other one. I feel torn apart."

"When your father was young, I used to tell him, 'Better marry over the midden than over the moor,' meaning that it's better to marry someone who's familiar and from your own community, even if they're not wealthy or socially prominent, than to marry someone who is a stranger from a far-off place, no matter how well-off they may appear to be. But when he brought your mother home, I said, 'May God bless her!' Besides, do you have any idea how naughty your grandfather was? Alex is just like him. But I was patient. Your mother is independent and won't let any man humiliate her. Maybe it's how she was raised back in her homeland, you see. But I waited for your grandfather to mature. What can you say, my child, it's difficult both ways."

She gently stroked his hair and fell silent for a moment. Then she said in a low voice:

“Make a vow to Saint John the Forerunner!”

“What do you mean?” asked the puzzled Squirrel.

“In the old days, when we saw beyond the rock and the earth, when we wanted something very badly, we would climb to the monastery of Saint John the Forerunner, from the side of the cliff. Our way of seeking the Saint’s help was by going on our knees and making our way to the hermitage, where we would make a vow. You should do the same. Make a vow for your parents to make peace.”

“And did you always get what you asked for?” Squirrel asked simply.

“Perhaps we didn’t always get what we asked for, but we always got something that would benefit us.”

At only twelve years old, Paraschos could believe in miracles. He drifted off to sleep and a faint hope flickered on his face. His grandmother put out the light and went to her room. She lit the oil lamp, sat on a small wooden stool, took out her prayer rope, and, one by one, began to commemorate the names of her relatives and acquaintances who had left this world and its trials. She did this every night before going to sleep.

A Nighttime Excursion to the Salt Pans

A few days passed and the big drama around Squirrel and his parents was mostly forgotten. Yet little did I know, there was more adventure to come. I had just returned home and found my mother eagerly waiting for me.

“Come on, Eirini,” she said, “have you forgotten that we planned a trip?”

Amid all that had happened with Squirrel, I had truly forgotten our plans. I said:

“Oh right! Where are we going again? To Paradisi in the middle of the night? But how will we see anything in the dark?”

“Paradisi” was the name that our villagers had given to a small cove located to the west, where the crystalline waters of the sea revealed the ancient walls and ruins of a submerged city.

“No, my child,” my mother replied. “Your father wants us to go to the other side of the village, to Aponiso, near the Salt Pans. Now, hurry up and help me pack the food.”

My dear mother, anxious and eager for our family's nighttime escape, had prepared enough food to feed a small army. The menu included the traditional excursion meatballs, a recipe passed down from her grandmother who hailed from Constantinople, triangular filo pastries stuffed with feta cheese and dill, a refreshing yogurt and beet salad, and a scrumptious chocolate dessert, crafted with the precision and flair of French cuisine. One may wonder why I am describing our food in such detail, but the answer is simple: like my mother, I adore food! This may have something to do with why I carry a few extra pounds . . .

"Should I invite Anastasis, mom? And perhaps Paraschos as well?" I asked.

"Sure," she replied. "But hurry, because your father will be off work soon and will be here to pick us up."

Anastasis was over the moon with happiness, and even Squirrel, who had been feeling low-spirited, agreed to join us. His grandmother encouraged him, hoping it would brighten his mood.

My father brought along charcoal and a grill for barbecuing. We squeezed into our old car and, after navigating a small dirt road through the woods, arrived at the Salt Pans. We had to tread carefully on a path covered in reeds until we reached a large cluster of limestone rocks, pockmarked with silver holes. The locals used to gather salt from here, which is why the

area was called "Salt Pans." It was pure and delicious sea salt, which now stood uncollected and glistened like silver in the moonlight.

My father ignited the charcoal in a shallow hole he had dug, creating a fire. Once the charcoal was ready, he carefully grilled two octopuses that he had caught the previous afternoon. Anastasis, Paraschos, and I sat a little further away, hanging our feet off the rocks and gazing at the silver path that the moon had painted across the water.

"You're very lucky," Paraschos whispered. "You may not have many luxuries, but you have your family, your parents."

"Eirini's family are great people," Anastasis added. "But I can't say the same for mine," he murmured and then fell silent.

"Let's pretend, just for a little while, that this moment is all that exists," I said. "Let's forget about our troubles and enjoy the moment."

My father's voice took on a joyful tone as he invited us to eat. In addition to the food, Mom had brought a bottle of red wine.

"Come on, you're all grown up now. A glass of wine won't hurt," my father said, grinning.

"Cheers," mom toasted. "Remember to always cherish and support each other. May you have a bright and promising future. Friendship is a wonderful thing."

Anastasis would tease me from time to time about my family.

“You guys must be from a different decade,” he would say. “There are no people like you anymore. You speak and behave very . . . humanly.”

My mother had a beautiful voice and began singing a tune from Asia Minor. Her voice was clear as crystal and filled me with nostalgia. Then Anastasis took out the flute he had brought and started playing. I grabbed my tambourine and we started dancing. My little brother improvised his own moves and pulled Paraschos by the hand, who eventually gave in and joined us. My father watched us contentedly, as if he were in Heaven.

“All right, kids, enjoy yourselves,” he said, beaming at us with pride and love. “This here is my own personal ‘Paradisi!’”

My father . . . my beloved father. He hadn't inherited any material possessions from his parents. His father was a remarkable man, a hard worker who always extended a helping hand to neighbors in need. This often meant that he left his own family without the essentials in order to provide for others. Nevertheless, my dad never once complained about it. He had inherited a wealth of virtues from my grandfather, including his work ethic, his sunny disposition, and his generous spirit.

“Take some time for yourself, dad,” I once urged him.

“I had my fair share of fun in my youth,” he had replied. “Now, as a father, I have a responsibility to care for my children.”

The tranquility of the night, the serenity of the sea, the refreshing breeze, the salty aroma of the ocean, the moon’s radiance, the company of good friends, and the delicious food all offered a sliver of solace to Squirrel’s troubled heart.

“Ah, this is bliss,” he said, perched upon the briny cliffs of the Salt Pans. “My heart has been burdened by my parents’ quarrels, but right now I feel less sad.”

My father caught Squirrel’s words and sought to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“Look at all those stars,” he remarked, gesturing toward the endless expanse of the night sky.

“Yes!” Anastasis exclaimed excitedly. “In this spot the stars twinkle with amazing clarity, free from the light pollution that we have in the village.”

“One night, I’ll bring you all to sleep beneath the stars,” my father said. “As a child, I often slept outdoors.”

“I’ll lend you my dad,” I whispered in Squirrel’s ear, “until yours grows up and matures.”

Squirrel cast me a silent glance before turning his gaze skyward, mesmerized by the vastness of the starry heavens stretching all above us.

“Eirini . . . Hey, Eirini,” Anastasis nudged me from the other side.

“What is it?” I said, turning to him.

“Your dad is handsome and . . . tall!”

“So was my grandfather,” I answered. “But why do you mention it?”

“Because I was wondering,” he said with a mischievous glint in his eye, “if you would ever marry someone who’s shorter than your dad . . . and yourself.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Shorter than both my dad and me? That’s highly unlikely!”

Yet the sight of the nighttime sky with its infinite twinkling stars quickly captured my attention, and soon I dreamed that I too might become a shining star in the boundless sky.

