

GONE

By Maria Dalamitrou

October

Within the lines of the maple leaf, he read about her absence. The long lines expanding at the tip of the leaf should have been continuous. They had to constantly pass through the core to the edges of the leaf. But he, at the beginning of October of that year, was holding a leaf with a dashed line. Alas! This can't be happening. And yet. It happened indeed. He crumpled the leaf feeling an autumn quiver, crushing it into his hands to break up its dashed line and its bad forecast. He took another step onto the sunny veranda and grabbed the next golden maple leaf. He was very eager to read it. It also had an unfinished line, a fruitless course. He had known how to read the maple since he was a child and he knew what it meant to see the same line twice in two leaves. How many leaves had the tree thrown since this morning? He knew what he had in front of him: so many leaves in the empty yard, so many missing lines. Someone will be missing this month. This person will be female.

She.

Two fallow deer ran in front of him while he ruminated. Their horns had just come out, so they'd have them for exactly six months. May would later take them away. Their skin would turn grey day by day, as winter would come night by night. It was their season, they became a little careless, a little aggressive, until they found the female. So careless that, while running under the sunny veranda, they hit the crater. The spilt water soaked the earth and the dead leaves above it. Certainly those leaves would also be missing a few lines. He didn't want to examine them. He turned his back on the world to enter the room, to open the curtains, to close them, to lose the light, to see that his love was suddenly not there. They had woken up in the morning together. And he didn't hear her leave.

'Honey? Love?' He called, but received no answer in the months that came.

November

It makes sense for the tomb to be like this - a corridor that develops into a dome, ending in a room beneath the earth. Since life is a passage and it has certain steps until death, there must be a corridor. In Voudeni, all the tombs were built like this. It is also called Skioessa ('umbrageous'), but nobody uses that word. People who grew up in light wouldn't prefer a name that reminds them of darkness. In this country, people grow, get old and tall under the sun, like greedy buckthorns and oleanders. And if they make the tombs with a corridor to the end, it is for the dead to absorb the share of light that belongs to them, until their final moments.

That's why they don't like November.

With the bucket on his shoulders, he walked between the olives at a steady speed. He walked straight to the road until he found an open space to look at the sea from high-above. Soon the sky and the water would darken and the air would bring more African dust to the dead. Red, muddy, sticky and eternal dust would settle in the corridors of the vault and, over time, erase the tracks of his loved ones in the soil.

He didn't like November one bit.

A drop fell on his face and he knew it wasn't his sweat. Before the flood came, he went to the sanctuary, where he saw his family. All with a single thought inside their brown heads: she had been missing for a month already - she must have died.

She left with the swallows last month. She left as the cormorants and the ruddy shelducks left their place, completely silent, as if courageous, as if she had to leave. As if the earth had opened and swallowed her, that's how his sister left. The girl with brown eyes, brown hair and barley skin. And everyone, including himself, considered her dead.

And he was looking for her in the corridors of the real dead. Did his sister go wrong and move for the underworld before her time? He was hoping to find her on a corridor walking, hoping to find traces of her in the soil. And then the storm started. Thunder began striking and it started raining like never before, for every trace of human existence to be lost.

December

This sea is not bound by ropes, even if it may seem limited. In the past, his ancestors used to say that if you tried to tie the sea from Gibraltar to Syria, the sea would become a lake, it would cease to pour into the ocean and they, the people, would find everything that died inside it. Because the sea has drawn and keeps drawing living people inside it every year, even if neither she nor her gods want it. It's the sea and it behaves as such. People get lost in it and travel through it. But he would go on to tie the Mediterranean with ropes. He would tie firmly the West and East with a loop, not a single drop would fall into the Atlantic, to make the waters swell and let the lost ones come to the surface.

His child. His daughter. Seven years old. A soul of seven summers, now lost for two months.

On a felucca at Astropalia, he greeted his wife and parents and left, as he said, for a peaceful trip. He wouldn't fight with the sea, he wouldn't raise any objections to her, he loved the waters, thanks to them he could find food and make new friends, but he couldn't help searching them, just in case he found her. The one who left quietly, as she was playing and left a ribbon on the sand. Only Poseidon knew where she had gone.

Gelidonya, Ugarit, Avaris, Luna and Antigori. Five ports where you buy compasses, hydras, resin, leathers and textiles. There were merchants like himself, who sail from the Aegean Sea to see the outside world. Aegeus – another father waiting for his child to return.

No, he wouldn't wait. He would also leave to find her. The child had a star-like sign under her right eye. No sea animal would do harm to her, the little one was blessed. Seals, dolphins and sea turtles would hug her and she would smile as her eyes met sponges and red corals in the deep. She would endure deep down, she would not lose her breath, she would endure two months, she would know that her father left his land to try and find her.

This is how Aegeus from Astropalia was thinking. And wherever he sailed for 180 days, he was always seeing his child's eyes. 'Maybe she's hidden inside the

cave?', said someone from the port of Vivara. It was as if he saw something moving under the foam of the waves. 'I'll find her', said the childless father again and again.

January

New Year.

'Merry Christmas'.

'And a Happy New Year'.

'We wish you all the best in your search for the child'.

The table was set by his father and him. It was not the same. How heavy lies the absence on the empty chair - you may think it will break from such weight. Sometimes, on other New Year's Eves, the mother would boil the grass peas for them to eat with olive oil. Next to it, inside the roaster, the lamb had been roasted with the greens and the rice was being softened in the staka. The red wine was flowing and, when that was over, a cup of marjoram drew away its dizziness. Then, some dry rusks for those who could take them and a spoonful of honey for the sweetness and joy to "stick" to the New Year.

Mum.

A word that is hungry in itself and is never fulfilled to its fullest extent. And how would somebody be full of mum, the one who, when being there, is constantly doing something and when she's not, the whole world is empty?

Mum left home three months ago. No one saw her, no one knows where she went; no one heard anything about her. Everyone in the village said that she was kidnapped. A young, beautiful, worthy and strong woman. Someone stole her.

Mum left, leaving the lamb being cooked on the hotplate. Mum wouldn't leave him hungry. But she left.

She didn't take anything with her, not even a cardigan and there was a lot of snow on Mount Ida, didn't Mum see that? With that kind of cold weather, she left as she was, with a pair of hairpins in her hair, a light blue blouse and trousers.

'Don't drink wine, you're a kid. You shouldn't be drinking'.

He wanted to be left alone. Three months without his mother, for no reason. He pulled the tablecloth spilt all the food and drinks. A twelve-year-old kid drank two glasses of wine. The Curetes were making a lot of noise he couldn't handle. He felt drowsy, so he fell asleep and, when he woke up, he vomited. He had a headache all day and talked to his father about the black horseman who got her. They called a doctor and sighed heavily twice - one for the child, one for her.

Where could she be?

February

They were used to it by now. Five weeks of snow, which had become ice in some spots and no one was going anywhere. Vermio was a white lifeless bear and above it, the villages were its sleepy eyes. In addition, there was no work available, so everyone was living on their food that had been conserved since fall. The heavy winter did not find them unprepared, though it came as a surprise, like the sling stone on the egret. If you live on the mountain, you know that every autumn you have to prepare for the worst - for the one meter snow, the broken fountains due to the frost, you need to store wood for the fireplace, prepare the sauerkraut in which you will put your salted meat and cheese to manage during February. They were used to it by now.

They dragged their rain boots in front of the houses, just to clear their entrance and exit, in case something happened. What else could happen other than their exclusion at 750m - and her disappearance?

Four months of absence, she would now have been swallowed up by the wild creatures, people or wolves. The police said it was unlikely for her to be found alive. The police also said that no one should be moving unnecessarily in the snow. Was his movement to go out and look for her unnecessary? Yes, they told him. They told him to trust them, they had been mobilized as a police force, he didn't need to do anything else.

And so he woke up every morning, sitting at the breakfast table, like a lone wolf, weaving stories. He was literally weaving them. He took small beads from the clothes and jewellery of his love and carved words on them. He then joined the beads in a chain and made sentences. He had ruined her things, but had also transformed them into something else. If she returned one day, he would give her all the chains, they belonged to her after all. If she didn't return, as soon as the snow had melted, he would go down to the Vergina plain and there, as a half-dead half-alive Macedonian warrior, he would sell the chains at the feast of August 15th with mournful cries: 'Please, feel free to stop by!'

The chains of his beloved one would be for sale. All of her beautiful ornaments pierced his heart as a sarissa. He was going to sell them. And of course he wouldn't set a high price for his griefs. Otherwise nobody would buy them.

All the chains were talking about separation. The chains were his freedom and his suffering. And they all had the same title: *She Left*.

But now there was snow, snow everywhere, a strip of iced water around him that numbed all feelings and life.

March

You hear the cuckoo's voice first. He puts his chest on the branch and his neck tenses from the song. Then the waters in Malaga become warm, the Alboran Sea calms and you're not afraid to cross the Pillars of Hercules.

A few days, or hours, later, you see the sun rising earlier. It rises with the Oceanids over the black Nile - black in the late winter, due to the latest floods and rains. The sun rises an hour earlier every morning and it sets an hour earlier reaching its other end, to the west.

Soon the eyes of the almond tree are coming out, as it stands and watches the world welcoming summer.

This is what happens when winter passes and leaves. And March is his last month. Wild strawberries come out in the maquis and the beetles are on fire under

the sun. In Benghazi ostriches give births and in Palermo the open-air markets are crowded.

And you sit on one side and watch the joy of others in grief. And you feel twice as sad at this time, because the prolonged day means you have more hours to think about her, whom you are missing.

In winter they were all gloomy, you didn't stand out from the crowd. Now what?

To hell with the spring sun. It is only useful for drying the leaves of papyrus in the sand, thin, like sand dunes and they keep getting crazy next to him during the windy nights, whispering dark words in his ears: *ad nasmati salvahi ata nasmata ilma il kalkabi...*

She's been missing for one hundred and fifty days exactly.

Ra, relentless, rises the spring with no mercy.

April

One day all lost loves will return home. It will be April and the fruits will be happy, under the sun. The light will be poured from a cloudless sky and the juices of the earth will pulse in the grass. And all those we mourned for will be back. Even they will not know well what happened, nor will they be able to promise you that you will not mourn them again. But they'll be back with the first heat waves, you'll see. You will hear footsteps in the sunny veranda, or outside the Treasure of Aktaion, you will see her fasten her ribbon to her little head or feed you food that she made for you, she will come to you and buy one of the chains you sell or answer 'Yahabibi'. She will come. And you, who thought that she was gone, will not have anyone to share your joy. The cicadas will set up a concert above your heads and the fields will be golden in your passage. Because she is here. You will believe in time that she is real, she doesn't lie to you, but she had to leave when she did so. And you know what? She will probably leave again. And you will learn that that's how life goes. You'll look for her when she leaves, you'll forget the pain when you're together. The

maple will grow more leaves and lose them too. Nothing more stable in this world than change.

Just because the world that was handed to you is deciduous, doesn't mean that you shouldn't be happy that April morning when she'll be back. And you'll be happy, temporarily, forgetting every next leave. You are a human being; you will be happy. In this middle sea, in this middle earth, people are optimistic and hopeful, as they are made of light and warm water. And so, for a moment, as a human being, you will believe in 'forever'. You will look her in the eyes and the season will change outside. Lings and bullheads will flounder in the shallow waters and the shells will echo her name. Marbles will sparkle illustrating your story and drums will rumble as you come closer.

A daughter will one day return to her husband, her brother, her father and her child and she will be like all the daughters who return, driven by the necessity of Fortune, to serve one purpose. A daughter who does not fit in the world will come to tell you her story and explain to you the world and everything she saw. And it will all make sense at once, the blossoming of crab apple tree, the shaking of the stream in the canyon. It is time for your grief to be forgotten and for you to fall on her arms. Only you will know how much you mean this 'Welcome back, Persephone'.