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**ATROPOS
or
THE LIFE AND DEATH OF VENETIA DAPONTE**

a novel

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Lachesis, Clotho and Atropos are the three Fates of Greek mythology. Lachesis measures with a rod the thread of life that Clotho spins. Atropos, the smallest in stature but the most of the three, cuts the thread, putting an end to life.

IN MEDIAS RES

Franco Solerti was found dead, headlong among the low bushes of Pera Meria beach, on the morning of September 7, 1943, a Tuesday. A knife –the type used for skinning pigs- was up to its ivory hilt in his bare back.

He was educated at the University of Padua, could read a bit of ancient Greek and was not a fascist. He had become an officer thanks to his father, a loyal and declared member of the regime. Sensitive, a daydreamer, he played the guitar and read the classics in his spare time. He was handsome, honourable, decent. “How could he have enemies so soon?” wondered the military commander of the island, who had held him in great esteem from the time he first saw him, taken him in his service as a private secretary and provided for his accommodations.

The more light was shed on this case, the more obscure it became. A woman’s underwear and traces of high heels in the sand indicated that Franco had been with the woman a little before he died. Yet, the blow was strong and assured. The knife – especially this knife- was not an easy weapon for a woman to use. His open, beady eyes still gleamed ecstatically. “Looks like death struck him in a moment of bliss, and what is a time of bliss if not that of love?” the commander thought. “Only a hand guided by jealousy can muster the courage to stop a man’s life at the time of love”. The bell rang.

“I want the names of all young women, engaged and married, in Chora and nearby villages” he gave his orders.

The commander’s idea, reasonable at first glance yet thoroughly wrong as an investigation, misled the search. When suspicions finally got back on the right track, it was already too late. Only a few days later, Italy surrendered, and command of the island passed over to the Germans. And Franco Solerti’s killer was never found.

PART 1
LACHESIS

Andreas Daponte's hand began to tremble, coffee split out of the cup, the linen jacket absorbed it like wealth sucking people in.

"Who did you say? Logotheti's daughter? Which one? The dressmaker? Good heavens! You with her?"

"Why?"

"Because she is not your equal".

"Was mamma rich when you took her to be your wife?"

"She may not have been rich, but she was the granddaughter of Dimitrakis Kambanis, an elder back in the time of the Trucks. He waved the banner of the Revolution!"

"Yeah, all right! I've heard all this a thousand times; the Revolution, the banner, grandfather Dimitrakis..."

"Don't be insolent, Linardos! You have no say in these matters, you're too young. To compare his mother with Logotheti's daughter!"

Daponte turned around and spat on the ground with disgust.

Apostolis Logotheti may be a drunkard, but in a way he had his reasons. In his youth, he had been a prosperous man back on his island. His caiques brought oak apples from Naxos and Mytilini to the tanneries of Samos. He made good money. At times, he had as many as thirty people on his crew. But when his wife left with the chief of police, he swallowed his pride, took his four daughters and, looking for somewhere else to settle and forget the evil that had befallen him, he landed at Mr. Andreas's island. Here, what with the displacement, his pain and the drinking, his business began to shrink like cheap clothes in the laundry. He wended up a fisherman with a single boat, "Eirini", named after his unfaithful wife.

"I love her!"

"And I'm telling you you'll grow out of it like you did with the rest of them".

Linardos Daponte has lain in many beds. He harrows the women of Messaria and Chora with his friends, picking up everything he finds on his way –daughters of landowners, fishermen, sharecroppers, and boat owners. Name and wealth mean nothing to him, least of all his own. "Boasting" he calls it, when talking with his friends: Diamandis, the barber's son, and Triantafillos, son of Eirini the widow, who mopped all the marble staircases of the island to feed her only son.

Linardos does not care for his father's silk summer suits and tweed cloaks. He despises the monocle over his left eye and his impeccable gaiters. Yet, above all, he hates that expression of restrained goodness Mr. Andreas assumes when greeting people from high up on his single-horse carriage.

Every morning when he wakes up, Andreas Daponte, smug with his resounding name, goes out on the eastern terrace. His gaze caresses the citrus trees as far as the eye can see, with the pride of a man who has learnt to look down at the world from the arms of his good fortune. He feels happy when strolling up to the pigsty and the cow shed, and considers it only natural for everybody to get up when he enters the cafe, even though one chair would suffice for him to sit. But the greatest confirmation of his supremacy is riding to Chora by carriage. There, he is the first to read the uncrumpled newspaper in the Club, not on the stand but sitting down, smoking the hookah with his own ivory tip, kept locked in Constantis's cupboard.

Linardos never goes by carriage. He always goes wherever he wants on foot or on horseback. He does not care about the subdued comments behind his back, and takes no heed of his mother's entreaties to be "respectable".

"If respectable means to be stuck up and walk arm in arm with a woman cold as a tombstone who looks like my mother, fuck respectable" he often thinks, shaking a tuft of blond hair. He hates sleek, well-combed hair with perfect parts.

Daponte, on the other hand, worries about his son's frivolous behaviour. Two years ago, when he got Franca pregnant, the daughter of Nicolas the carriage driver, Mr. Andreas nearly killed him. Poor girl! She got scared, resorted to old village remedies and got sick. Daponte's heart broke when he saw the man who had been working for him for so many years weep like a child. In order to make it up to him, he bought a house in Nicola's name, so that if he died he knew he would be leaving something for his child, who remained weak as a little bird. He then sat his son down to consider his plight. This scoundrel of a son offered to marry her, but Mr. Andreas was not going to accept as much. One day, he put his son on a ship and sent him as a present to his cousin Gerasimos, in Vraila, so the scandal would be forgotten, and hoping at the same time that he would take to commerce. But his wife almost died while separated from her only son. She forsake the marital bed, slept in Linardos's bedroom and wouldn't utter a word for a single day. Mr. Andreas gave in. In just six months he sent a message for his son to come back.

The months he spent in Roumania were good for him. His arms seemed stronger, his moustache grew thicker; he looked like a man now. He began to care about the farm. He recommended to his father that they remove all the bushes –they gave no cocoons anyway after the disease that had destroyed all the silkworms of the land- and to plant vines on the hillside. He also gave him smart solutions for organising lemon export. Daponte was glad for the dramatic change in his son. He planted vines on the hill and held the wax-like juicy beads of the first fruit in his palm with pride. However, he wasn't used to enterprising but rather to preserving what was already there. Thus, he didn't manage to dynamically enter into the wine market –the stronghold of Anagnostou-, he lost a lot of money and swore never to take risks again. His behaviour told his son he held him responsible for the failure, and the latter held a grudge. They didn't speak for days.

Dark and bitter, Linardos followed his friends to the mid-August feast. He sipped his red wine slowly, looking absent-mindedly at the heads bouncing to the sounds of the lute and the dulcimer. Then he saw her. Two braids of hair, as black as water snakes, gleamed on her shoulders, and a bronze face, sweet as grape syrup, with two dimples gracing her cheeks. Aneza saw him too. She blushed and turned around, like she did every time she saw him.

"My God!", she thought, "He is as handsome as Saint George! As blue as the sea and as blond as a cornfield". Feigning indifference, she turned towards him again. His gaze still lingering on her, she left like fainting. "I can't believe this! This god is looking at me?" She went away from the crowd and went to sit under a mulberry tree away from the dancing. The strong and irregular throbbing in her chest echoed her utter excitement.

Suddenly, she felt something touch her lightly on her shoulder. "A leaf from the tree" she said to herself and made a gesture to throw it away. It was his hand. She turned to look at him and felt dizzy. She looked down at the ground. "He's more handsome up close", she thought and gave him a fleeting glance. His gaze, somewhat blue, somewhat grey, piercing like an arrow, shining like the sunlight, entered hers and obliterated it. She closed her eyes. "Lord, I'm dreaming!" He took her hands into

his own. They were warm, her fingers trembling slightly at the tips. She broke out of his grip. She went to hide behind the large plane tree covered in her own tears. She heard his steps approaching. He's there. The smell of freshly washed clothes and dry leaves reached her.

"What's your name?"

It was the first time she heard him speak. "Saint George must have spoken like this so people turned him into a Saint and now they celebrate him". She made a move but her legs, unresponsive, left her motionless.

"Aneza".

"Aneza what?"

"Logothetis".

"The man from Samos?"

She motioned "yes" with her head lowered.

"I didn't know that Logothetis was so rich!"

A puzzled look.

"With a treasure like this in his house!" he said pointing at her.

"..."

"I am Linardos Daponte".

"I know, my lord".

"My lord!" Laughter filled his mouth, spilled out showing his white teeth. Aneza felt even more embarrassed.

"You can call me Linardos. Now that we have met we are friends".

"..."

"Don't you want that?"

If she wants that? He is asking if she wants that! Yet how can this be? He and she, friends? What kind of friends? She opened her mouth, trying to say "what makes you think we could...", two worlds apart; his castle in the plains with loopholes from chipped stone and the seal of nobility above the gates, with land as far as the eye can see; and her house, a clay shed behind the butcher's, two cells for five people, clay dishes on the kitchen table next to the dressmaker's tools –thread, needle and cheap cloth.

None of this was said. Her tongue, tried to her palate, did not move an inch to utter the words. She felt she was about to faint and rested against the tree. Linardos leaned on her, grabbed her by the shoulders. Her face stuck to his chest, and she – inhaling his smell- came to her senses.

The hollow trunk of the plane tree magnified the sound of her beating heart. "Can he hear it?" she worried and lifted her head to see his eyes, to find out. As if he had set a trap and had been waiting for this motion of hers, he leaned and gave her a fleeting kiss on the mouth. Aneza remained speechless. He pulled her close to him, kissed her, kissed her again and she was petrified in his arms. He held her passionately whispering words of love.

"Would you marry me if I asked you?"

She thought she had misheard him. He guessed this much and asked a second time. Aneza was confused, at a loss for what to say. He was surely teasing her, was drunk or frivolous. She strove to break out of his embrace. He held her in his grasp. Her body went numb with pain. Her arms fell like withered weeds.

"I want you, Aneza. I have been looking for you my whole life, you know that?"

"He's definitely drunk, Lord, what should I do?"

"Tell me, will you marry me?"

“Opportune words, air and dream” she thought.

“I want you near me for the rest of my life”.

“Why, Lord, does he want to fool me? Can it be that he wants to have me by his side, like a lady and a noblewoman, in his house, equal to Violando Daponte!”

Linardos’ kisses became wilder and more demanding. She pushed him, but her arms bent. Oh, how beautiful his eyes are, and his head like a sun on her bosom.

“My morning dew” Linardos would whisper from between her breasts, and she would think “I must go, father will be angry and Katina will be looking for me”. Anguished, she could not concentrate on his whispers.

“Do you want me just a tiny little bit?” he said, his eyes filling with tears.

“This can’t be happening to me, I’m dreaming”.

“Tell me that you want me”.

If she wanted him! She, who had been looking at him from a distance feeling nauseous as if she hadn’t eaten for two days!

Aneza, who had been in love with Linardos for a long time, felt the weight of reason crushing every longing that escaped the heart to become a thought. Yet after this first meeting of theirs, so tempestuous and magical, her defences collapsed and she allowed herself to be seduced.

Linardos announced his decision to his father immediately:

“I’m telling you, I love her!”

“When did you have the time?”

“What’s time got to do with it? I want to live with her”.

“You’ll grow out of it like you did with the rest of them”.

“She is not like the others, father”.

“Linardos, come to your senses. You can’t be serious about this”.

“I can marry her without your blessing. Still, like you say, this is worse. What am I asking for in the end? I want to marry her, it’s not a crime! There’s a woman for me just like there’s one for every man”.

“There seems to be more than one for you, but anyway...”

Daponte’s brain is working feverishly. Things seem serious to him. And, because great problems require clever solutions:

“Did you tell your mother?”

“I wanted you to know fist”.

“Tell her, then”.

After an indescribable talk with her son, Mrs. Violando fell ill with fever. The doctor prescribed rest and calm. “Her nervous system is rather shaken up” he said, nodding with emphasis.

They see each other in secret. Linardos’ notes are brought to Aneza by her friend Florezio, Violando Daponte’s dressmaker. Paraporti, the cemetery, the walls; many dusks, noons and dawns have overhead their secret whispers.

“A little patience so that my mother gets well” he mutters to her.

“What the hell”, he’s thinking. “She’ll get used to the facts”.

Aneza lowers her head, submissive to all that’s happening. She knows that his love will never be sanctified by his parents. Every time she dares to think about it, she sees the sapphire diadem of Mrs. Violando next to uncle Apostolis’s pantaloons, albeit clean and ironed, but what’s the use? And her eyes fill with tears.

“I will marry you, Aneza, no matter what happens” he says curtly as if he could read her mind.

He holds her tight. He feels his teeth on her ear, his hands on her breasts. He is overcome by a strange trembling. He rubs his body against her like a cat. The soles of Aneza's feet burn as if the ground below them were on fire. What is this tear in her throat? How her bosom throbs... What is he doing to her? She pushes him away, but he is strong, he is handsome –Christ, how handsome he is! Aneza mellows, but comes back to her senses right away. She is not a woman off the street! She buttons her collar again, looks at him angrily and pulls away from him.

Everyday that passes, Linardos's decision solidifies. He doesn't say anything. He is waiting for his mother to get well, so that he can receive her much longed-for blessing.

Mrs. Violando, her fever gone but still tired, assumes all is over since her son doesn't speak about that penniless woman anymore. Yet, Linardos dreams of Aneza during his sleep and in his walking hours. He strives to come up with a secret, hidden place where they could see each other more easily, where they wouldn't be startled by the sound of a breaking twig, a rolling stone, a snorting animal. Until one morning, on his way out of the house, he sees the caretaker of the estate painting the gate of Saint Andrew's chapel. How come it hadn't occurred to him before? The chapel is the best afternoon hideout while everyone is resting.

The next day, a scarf would cover Christ on the iconostasis, so that he wouldn't see the pagan sacrifice to the god Eros in his shrine lest he should get angry.