

The gunfire stopped at dawn. Nephele had been listening to it all night, eyes wide open in the dark. Rattle of automatic rifles, followed by shots from the insurgents' old firearms, followed by machine guns. What were machine guns doing in the middle of the night? The dawn was their usual time. You could hear them almost every dawn from the side of the cemetery.

Nephele was shivering in the darkness. She would always shiver at those sounds, because she had seen and she knew exactly what was happening outside the cemetery wall beyond the big barracks every dawn. Barracks and cemetery, linked inextricably for the last four years.

Little Lina came to her bed and wrapped her arms tightly, very tightly, around her neck.

'Are they fighting?' she asked, her little hands icy cold.

Nephele pulled her little sister next to her under the old blankets, the last remaining ones. They had sold most of their possessions over these four years of War and Occupation.

The little girl's tiny body nestled comfortably in the big sister's arms. 'Do you think they are leaving?' she asked.

'Hush. Yes. They're leaving.'

Nephele's hands were frozen, too. If only Mother were here with them! But Mother had gone out the night before. She heard that the crowds had broken open the military warehouses at the other end of town and were taking whatever they could carry, and she ran there, taking along their eldest sister, Marina.

The battle stopped briefly at night, giving way to a muted commotion, a hushed turmoil created by people scurrying about with bowed backs. Everyone had been walking around with bowed backs during these years, but today there was something different about it. The fighting had stopped. But even if it hadn't, Mother would have gone out just the same. She had done even more dangerous things to save the family from starvation and certain death. Nephele was never sure what frightened Mother and what didn't.

‘Look after the little one,’ Mother said before leaving.

There had been a time when Nephele was the little one. It now felt like a hundred, a thousand years ago. There was a photograph on the dresser in the front room from that long gone time. Nephele was wearing an all-white dress, trimmed with lace and bows. Father and Mother were holding her between them. They were all smiling at the photographer, or rather they seemed about to burst into laughter at some joke he was telling them.

This is how Nephele remembered Father; always merry. Even when she saw him in that horrible wooden box they put people in when they die, even then he looked jovial. As if he didn’t want her to be frightened. Father knew how much Nephele feared the dead.

Little Lina was not in that photograph. Well, not exactly: she was inside Mother’s belly, a round little bump under the flower-patterned dress. Mother had never worn a flower-patterned dress since. She only wore black now. Father’s death, then the war, then the occupation took over their lives. There was no time for the pain from Father’s absence to soften, no time to wear a white lace dress again, no time to smile. Nephele often wondered if she would ever want to smile again, after all those deaths she had witnessed, even though Marina said that once the worst is over, one forgets.

‘Do you think they are leaving?’

‘Yes, they’re leaving. They’re leaving for sure.’

Nephele knew. She would have known, even if Angeliki hadn’t told her in a jubilant whisper, for the Mug hadn’t turned up for three days. Surely things had changed if the Mug had vanished all of a sudden; he and his black uniform and shiny big boots tyrannising the tiles on their front room floor. If Nephele could ever forget the Occupation, the hunger, and the fear, the one thing she was sure she would never forget was the tall German’s boots battering their little house. There were only little houses in their neighbourhood. The Germans wouldn’t find large ones for their SS officers there.

Nephele would never forget the stony faces of the soldiers either. Their boots pounded all over the acacia-lined street, as they patrolled the barracks, guarding the Mug. That nickname was Angeliki's creation; she was more inventive with nicknames than anyone Nephele knew.

But now the Mug hadn't been seen for three days in a row. And the soldiers guarding him had vanished, too. But the barracks across the road were still full of Germans. Nephele could see them bustling about as she stood behind the gate at the patio of her house. The bustle lasted until nightfall. Then the gunfire started. It sounded distant at first, but as the night progressed it seemed to be coming nearer and nearer, from the side of the dried-up river, just two steps away from the house. This is where the fighting seemed to be now. The dried-up river was at the edge of the small town. Beyond it lay the road north and further up the mountains, crawling with insurgents...

Nephele had seen the insurgents many times when she and Angeliki went to gather firewood. Angeliki usually had something to hand over to them, otherwise Nephele would never have seen them. Her friend trusted her at least. That made Nephele proud.

However, Angeliki had been very angry when Nephele had refused to join the EPON<sup>1</sup>.

'Shame on you, to fear your Mother at your age,' she had said. Nephele wasn't sure she wasn't paid a compliment: the truth was, she feared the Germans more, and that would have been much worse to admit.

For a while Angeliki wouldn't even speak to her, until one morning she said:

'It's all right, you're helping us in your own way, so we won't stick to formalities.'

Angeliki never mentioned the organisation again, but Nephele knew in her heart that she was not really forgiven, no more than Mother was for not joining the EAM<sup>2</sup>, unlike most grown-ups in the neighbourhood. But Nephele's reason for not wanting

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<sup>1</sup> EPON: [Elliniki Patriotiki Organosi Neolaias] Greek Patriotic Youth Organisation was one of the major resistance organisations during the German Occupation of Greece (1941-1944) in the Second World War. Left-wing, it was the youth branch of EAM - see note 2. (Translator's note)

<sup>2</sup> EAM: [Ethniko Apeleutherotiko Metopo] National Liberation Front was the largest, left-wing organisation in the Greek Resistance. Many of its members went on to fight as insurgents against the Government forces after the liberation, in the Civil War that ensued. (Translator's note).

to get involved had nothing to do with her mother's decision. She was just confused by the situation between her two best friends, Angeliki and Athanasia.

Angeliki and Athanasia, slightly older than Nephele, had been friends for as long as she could remember. They had been born in the same part of town, in the same spring. She remembered them always being together, going to school, or chatting at the door of the one or the other's house, or taking a stroll in the main street on a Sunday afternoon, arms linked, whispering into each other's ear. They were already in high school when Nephele was in primary.

Then Nephele too went to high school. On her first day there she found herself returning home from school with the pair of them. It was a hot September day, and the girls stopped to have a drink of water in the spring under the plane tree at the street corner.

'So hot!' Angeliki said, pulling her long hair up and away from the water.

'Too hot,' Nephele agreed. Both girls stooped to drink at the same moment and their heads bumped together. Athanasia, the third in the company, burst out laughing. 'Serves you right for keeping your hair so long!' she teased them. She wore her own hair fashionably short.

That was the beginning of the trio's friendship. It was funny, Nephele thought, that the three of them had become inseparable after an incident relating to something as insignificant as hair. But all that seemed so distant now. There was a definite coolness between the two girls, her oldest neighbours and best friends. When had it begun? There hadn't been a fight or a quarrel or anything as straightforward as that. The three of them still walked to school together and queued together at the student relief mess; but in the evening Angeliki went one way and Athanasia another and they each tried to pull Nephele along with them, as if they were in a competition with each other about who would make Nephele her *only* best friend.

Perhaps Nephele wasn't sure about when exactly the coolness had begun, but she was certain it was after Odysseus and Lukas, Angeliki's twin brothers, had left to join the insurgents on the mountain. At about the same time Orestes had kissed Athanasia for the first time as a fiancée, and afterwards he too disappeared. It was then that Angeliki had asked Nephele to join the EPON, but Athanasia took her

aside and whispered: 'Don't you get involved with that lot. They're all communists. Once the Germans leave, they will do here what they did in Russia.' Athanasia's grandmother had been a refugee from Russia in 1919. The communists had done terrible things there, Athanasia said, they had killed the Czar and his poor children...

Nephele could remember a time before that, a short-lived one, at the early days of the Occupation, when they would all gather together at one house or another, sharing their hunger and terror as they had always shared all their joys and troubles before the war. Mother, Marina, Angeliki, the twins, Kyra Eurydice their mother, Orestes, and even Little Lina, would huddle together around the little brazier like one big family. Orestes would roll up a single cigarette with his long fingers and he would share it with Odysseus and Lukas, each taking puffs in turn...

But even then they would quarrel about politics. Would the conservatives or the leftists be better for the people? Their quarrels hang in the air above the cigarette smoke and the sage tea Kyra Eurydice or Mother prepared for them, trying to make them forget their hunger.

It was the fault of the war, the fault of the Germans, Nephele thought. It was because all the boys had left. It had nothing to do with the Czar or the communists, who were so far away from them all. No, once the Germans left, once the boys were back - Odysseus and Lukas from the mountains, Orestes from the Middle East - things would go back to what they were before the war.

Wrapped up in the old blankets, Nephele pricked up her ears to listen. The noises of battle were still near. Surely the insurgents were approaching. But the Germans seemed to be holding on, and the path of blood they had opened up when they arrived was becoming even wider as they were beginning to take the road back to their faraway homeland. But this was also a path of return for our boys. 'They are retreating everywhere,' Athanasia had said, quoting information from her Middle East connections. And Angeliki was counting the days on her fingers: 'Today or tomorrow at the latest, the insurgents will be here.'

Just before dawn, Nephele could not stay in bed any longer. The windowpanes were rattling. Grenades were falling over the dried-up river like confetti at a wedding. She got up and went to the window, barefoot on the freezing cold floor. She stuck her face at the narrow strip between windowpane and dark blue blackout paper. The barracks across the road looked empty, she could have sworn there was nobody there, although she could not see much beyond the barbed wire fence. Perhaps the insurgents were there already, behind the barbed wire, inside the dark building. She knew freedom would come from behind that barbed wire.

A stooped shadow separated itself from the wall next door and darted down the road. Elias! So he had not gone away with the Mug. He must have been hiding in his house; nobody had seen him around in the neighbourhood for days. Where was he going? Where could he hide now? He reminded her of Cain under the eye of God: 'What have you done to your brother Abel?' 'Elias, what have you done to your brothers?' Where could Elias find a place where nobody knew him, where people wouldn't be asking him about what he'd done to his childhood friends, to his neighbours, to his compatriots, to all those people who had been arrested by the Mug for hiding weapons in their houses, for sending messages to the mountains, for writing Freedom or Death on the walls?

Elias was now leaving like a rat abandoning ship. He was obviously frightened. His eyes darted here and there, perhaps guessing all those other eyes that were watching him behind the louvres of the shuttered windows. But eyes alone cannot hurt, and Elias quickly vanished behind the pile of rusty irons outside Barba Yiorgis coal shed.

'Nephele.'

'Hush!'

Little Lina had come to the window, too, barefoot and shivering in her threadbare nightgown.

'Nephele, who was that?'

'Elias.'

They were both whispering as if somebody was standing outside the window and could hear them.

‘Elias?’

‘Yes, he’s leaving. He’s afraid of the insurgents and he’s leaving.’

‘Are we afraid of the insurgents too, Nephele?’

‘Of course not! We’re not traitors!’

She lifted the little girl up in her arms. Although she was seven years old, Little Lina weighed much less than a child of that age. But she was alive, and they were all of them alive, Mother and Marina and herself, and they had not betrayed anyone like Elias had, and that was what mattered. They had not actively fought against the Germans, but they had harmed no one either.

Nephele hugged the little girl tight.

‘We are not traitors, Little Lina,’ she repeated. As she cuddled her little sister, she felt a swelling inside her breast like a balloon expanding to bursting point. It was joy. She could barely breathe for it. She wanted to shout out loud with joy. All night long she had been listening to the noises of war, and now the gunfire had subsided. But she knew the war was finally over, because Elias was leaving.

Now the gunfire sounded infrequent and remote like the last echoes of a ceasing tempest. The explosions flaring up in the distance looked faded like a rainbow after the storm. A bird, emboldened by the sudden hush, began to sing somewhere in the trees outside the barracks. It had rained the night before, and the sweet smell of wet earth and tree and fading war filled Nephele’s nostrils pleasantly.

A milky light was spreading over the acacia-lined dirt road, and the dark buildings of the barracks emerged from the mist like enchanted ships in a white sea, finally freed by the witch who had been holding them captive.

Out of the white mist came men, as if gliding on that sea. Nephele watched them as they walked, spreading out across the dirt road. A tall man with a beard that reached down to his breast was walking one step ahead of them, his hand on the trigger of his gun, peering among the acacias, scrutinising the houses before making a silent go-ahead signal to those who followed him. He reminded Nephele

of Odysseus and Lukas and all those insurgents on the mountain; but there was something different about him. As he emerged from the mists in the drizzly dawn, his long beard the colour of ripe wheat, eyes the deep green colour of a stormy sea, he looked like a Byzantine icon come to life, a saint of a strange, foreign religion.

Nephele stood at the window, transfixed, staring at him and at the shadows following him, the men with mismatched military clothes and blazing eyes. They seemed like angels heralding the paean of victory in the silent town waiting with bated breath behind shuttered windows. Yet it was hard to believe the war was over.

Now they were so near that she could perceive their sleeplessness and fatigue, and the careworn expression of their leader, the Byzantine saint. The town was waiting for them. But where was Angeliki? Where were her EPON comrades? Nephele could wait no longer!

She opened the window.

She only realised what she'd done when she saw the captain stop in his tracks. She froze. *He'll shoot at me!* The clang of the opening shutter was still reverberating in the stillness as far as the end of the tree-lined dirt road. He was aiming his gun at her, his finger almost on the trigger. For a split second. Then the care and worry left his eyes and turned into relieved laughter.

'Don't you ever do that again,' he said as if he'd talked to her before, as if he was taking up an already begun conversation. His tone was serious but he was still laughing. Nephele noticed that he was very young. It was his laughter that betrayed his youth.

Little Lina emerged like a frightened kitten, her little nose barely above the window ledge. Nephele felt now that perhaps she wouldn't die of the bullets, but she might just die of shame. She must present a ridiculous spectacle standing there in her flannel nightgown (which was too long and big for her, being Marina's cast off), looking like a chastened child. Oh, she had done it again. She'd made a fool of herself on the day everybody had been dreaming of for the last four years, the four long years of the German Occupation. She wished the captain had shot her instead.



She blinked and tried to find something to say, but there was no time. As if the laughter had been a signal, shutters and windows and doors began to open with a crack, one after the other, and a flood of people rushed out of the houses. The dirt road was soon filled with women and children and hollow-faced men. Civilians and insurgents all mingled and became one in the neighbourhood.

Nephele looked for the captain's head bobbing above the human waves, now seen, now gone. Her eye finally caught Odysseus and Lukas, hugging Angeliki and Kyra Eurydice, their mother. She kept looking as the tall, thin, ascetic figure moved away from the crowd and vanished behind the empty barracks.

Over the mountain that cast its long shadow over the small town and beyond to the sea, the sun had just risen.