SHORTLISTED FOR THE COSTA NOVEL AWARD

'Magical' William Boyd

'Powerful' Reese Witherspoon

ELIF SHAFAK

The ISLAND of MISSING TREES

Women's Prize for Fiction 2022 Shortlisted @WomensPrize

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'A beautiful novel' *Guardian*

THE TOP TEN *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

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The Island of Missing Trees

'A book to be cherished and savoured' Naomi Klein

'A kind of paean to the beauty and diversity of Cyprus . . . this is a colourful and impassioned work, original in the ways it retells and reconstructs painful pasts' *i*

'A beautiful novel about the broken island of Cyprus and its wounded and scarred inhabitants, *The Island of Missing Trees* teaches us that brokenness can only be healed by love' Bernhard Schlink

'The book explores the lasting impact the war had on Cyprus and the natural world – the displacement, the disappearances and the destruction – while also revealing the tender efforts of the island to heal and regrow' *New Statesman*

'Shafak explores love, grief, war and transgenerational trauma in an elegiac and powerfully rendered novel' *Observer*

'An epic tale about love, grief and memory set in Cyprus and London between 1974 and the late 2010s' *Spectator*

'*The Island of Missing Trees*, for all its uses of enchantment, is a complex and powerful work in which the harrowing material settles on the reader delicately' *Financial Times*

'Poignant . . . [Shafak] knows exactly when to dangle unanswered questions, when to drench our senses, when to offer meaningful musings, elegant metaphors and tug at the heartstrings' *Sunday Times*

'Compassionate and enchanting, it's a transporting tale' *Mail on Sunday*

'The Cyprus setting is stunningly described in this spellbinding story about identity, love and loss' *Good Housekeeping*

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'A wonderful rebuke to anthropocentric storytelling . . . Shafak's extraordinary new novel is about grief, love and memory'
Literary Review

'This is a sweeping, romantic tale about love and loss that's so evocative you can smell honeysuckle and figs wafting from the pages' *Red*

'Shafak is that rare alchemist who can mix grains of tragedy and delight without diminishing the savour of either'
Washington Post

'The wounds inflicted and the search for healing across three generations is explored in the tales of its unforgettable characters . . . beyond the narrative, the author's longing to dissolve barriers between people and the natural world is evident. A beautiful read'
Woman & Home

'If Shafak's subjects are sombre, her magical-realist style is anything but . . . Shafak does not shrink from the reality of violence, but she salvages tenderness – even joy – from the wreckage of twentieth-century history' *Economist*

'Booker-shortlisted Shafak amazes with this resonant story of the generational trauma of the Cypriot Civil War'
Publishers Weekly

'A magical story about nature, humanity and love . . . a beautiful contemplation of some of life's biggest questions about identity, history and meaning' *Time*

'*The Island of Missing Trees* is a magical masterpiece . . . Elif Shafak has done it again with this brilliant novel of the secrets of hearts, the history of Cyprus and the beauty of memory. Truly full of miracles'
Kate Williams

'A truly therapeutic literary meal'
Wole Soyinka, *Observer*, Books of the Year

'Peppered with magical descriptions of Cyprus, *The Island of Missing Trees* by Elif Shafak explores the island's dark secrets and tumultuous history' *Daily Express*, Books of the Year

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The Bastard of Istanbul
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The Flea Palace
The Forty Rules of Love
The Gaze
The Happiness of Blond People
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The Island of Missing Trees

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To immigrants and exiles everywhere,
the uprooted, the re-rooted, the rootless,

And to the trees we left behind,
rooted in our memories . . .

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Anyone who hasn't been in the Chilean forest doesn't know this planet. I have come out of that landscape, that mud, that silence, to roam, to go singing through the world.

– Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*

It will have blood: They say blood will have blood.
Stones have been known to move and trees to speak . . .

– William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

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Island

Once upon a memory, at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea, there lay an island so beautiful and blue that the many travellers, pilgrims, crusaders and merchants who fell in love with it either wanted never to leave or tried to tow it with hemp ropes all the way back to their own countries.

Legends, perhaps.

But legends are there to tell us what history has forgotten.

It has been many years since I fled that place on board a plane, inside a suitcase made of soft black leather, never to return. I have since adopted another land, England, where I have grown and thrived, but not a single day passes that I do not yearn to be back. Home. Motherland.

It must still be there where I left it, rising and sinking with the waves that break and foam upon its rugged coastline. At the crossroads of three continents – Europe, Africa, Asia – and the Levant, that vast and impenetrable region, vanished entirely from the maps of today.

A map is a two-dimensional representation with arbitrary symbols and incised lines that decide who is to be our enemy and who is to be our friend, who deserves our love and who deserves our hatred and who, our sheer indifference.

Cartography is another name for stories told by winners.

For stories told by those who have lost, there isn't one.



Here is how I remember it: golden beaches, turquoise waters, lucid skies. Every year sea turtles would come ashore to lay

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their eggs in the powdery sand. The late-afternoon wind brought along the scent of gardenia, cyclamen, lavender, honeysuckle. Branching ropes of wisteria climbed up whitewashed walls, aspiring to reach the clouds, hopeful in the way only dreamers are. When the night kissed your skin, as it always did, you could smell the jasmine on its breath. The moon, here closer to earth, hung bright and gentle over the rooftops, casting a vivid glow on the narrow alleys and cobblestoned streets. And yet shadows found a way to creep through the light. Whispers of distrust and conspiracy rippled in the dark. For the island was riven into two pieces – the north and the south. A different language, a different script, a different memory prevailed in each, and when they prayed, the islanders, it was seldom to the same god.

The capital was split by a partition which sliced right through it like a slash to the heart. Along the demarcation line – the frontier – were dilapidated houses riddled with bullet holes, empty courtyards scarred with grenade bursts, boarded stores gone to ruin, ornamented gates hanging at angles from broken hinges, luxury cars from another era rusting away under layers of dust . . . Roads were blocked by coils of barbed wire, piles of sandbags, barrels full of concrete, anti-tank ditches and watchtowers. Streets ended abruptly, like unfinished thoughts, unresolved feelings.

Soldiers stood guard with machine guns, when they were not making the rounds; young, bored, lonesome men from various corners of the world who had known little about the island and its complex history until they found themselves posted to this unfamiliar environment. Walls were plastered with official signs in bold colours and capital letters:

NO ENTRY BEYOND THIS POINT

KEEP AWAY, RESTRICTED AREA!

NO PHOTOGRAPHS, NO FILMING ALLOWED

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Then, further along the barricade, an illicit addition in chalk scribbled on a barrel by a passer-by:

WELCOME TO NO MAN'S LAND

The partition that tore through Cyprus from one end to the other, a buffer zone patrolled by United Nations troops, was about one hundred and ten miles long, and as wide as four miles in places while merely a few yards in others. It traversed all kinds of landscapes – abandoned villages, coastal hinterlands, wetlands, fallow lands, pine forests, fertile plains, copper mines and archaeological sites – meandering in its course like the ghost of some ancient river. But it was here, across and around the capital, that it became more visible, tangible, and thus haunting.

Nicosia, the only divided capital in the world.

It sounded almost a positive thing when described that way; something special about it, if not unique, a sense of defying gravity, like the single grain of sand moving skywards in an hourglass just upended. But, in reality, Nicosia was no exception, one more name added to the list of segregated places and separated communities, those consigned to history and those yet to come. At this moment, though, it stood as a peculiarity. The last divided city in Europe.

My home town.



There are many things that a border – even one as clear-cut and well guarded as this – cannot prevent from crossing. The Etesian wind, for instance, the softly named but surprisingly strong *meltemi* or *meltem*. The butterflies, grasshoppers and lizards. The snails, too, painfully slow though they are. Occasionally, a birthday balloon that escapes a child's grip drifts in the sky, strays into the other side – enemy territory.

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Then, the birds. Blue herons, black-headed buntings, honey buzzards, yellow wagtails, willow warblers, masked shrikes and, my favourites, golden orioles. All the way from the northern hemisphere, migrating mostly during the night, darkness gathering at the tips of their wings and etching red circles around their eyes, they stop here midway in their long journey, before continuing to Africa. The island for them is a resting place, a lacuna in the tale, an in-between-ness.

There is a hill in Nicosia where birds of all plumages come to forage and feed. It is thick with overgrown brambles, stinging nettles and clumps of heather. In the midst of this dense vegetation is an old well with a pulley that creaks at the slightest tug and a metal bucket tied to a rope, frayed and algae-covered from disuse. Deep inside it is always pitch-black and freezing cold, even in the fierce midday sun beating down directly overhead. The well is a hungry mouth, awaiting its next meal. It eats up every ray of light, every trace of heat, holding each mote in its elongated stone throat.

If you ever find yourself in the area and if, led by curiosity or instinct, you lean over the edge and peer down, waiting for your eyes to adjust, you may catch a glint below, like the fleeting gleam from the scales of a fish before it disappears back into the water. Do not let that deceive you, though. There are no fish down there. No snakes. No scorpions. No spiders dangling from silken threads. The glint does not come from a living being, but from an antique pocket watch – eighteen-carat gold encased with mother of pearl, engraved with lines from a poem:

Arriving there is what you are destined for,
But do not hurry the journey at all . . .

And there on the back are two letters, or more precisely, the same letter written twice:

Y & Y

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The well is thirty-four feet deep and four feet wide. It is constructed of gently curved ashlar stone descending in identical horizontal courses all the way down to the mute and musty waters below. Trapped at the bottom are two men. The owners of a popular tavern. Both of slender build and medium height with large, jutting ears which they used to joke about. Both born and bred on this island, and in their forties when they were kidnapped, beaten and murdered. They have been thrown into this shaft after being chained first to each other, then to a three-litre olive oil tin filled with concrete to ensure they will never surface again. The pocket watch that one of them wore on the day of their abduction has stopped at exactly eight minutes to midnight.

Time is a songbird, and just like any other songbird it can be taken captive. It can be held prisoner in a cage and for even longer than you might think possible. But time cannot be kept in check in perpetuity.

No captivity is forever.

Some day the water will rust away the metal and the chains will snap, and the concrete's rigid heart will soften as even the most rigid hearts tend to do with the passing of the years. Only then will the two corpses, finally free, swim towards the chink of sky overhead, shimmering in the refracted sunlight; they will ascend towards that blissful blue, at first slowly, then fast and frantic, like pearl divers gasping for air.

Sooner or later, this old, dilapidated well on that lonely, beautiful island at the far end of the Mediterranean Sea will collapse in on itself and its secret will rise to the surface, as every secret is bound to do in the end.

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PART ONE

How to Bury a Tree

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A Girl Named Island

England, late 2010s

It was the last lesson of the year at Brook Hill Secondary School in north London. Year 11 classroom. History lesson. Only fifteen minutes before the bell, and the students were getting restless, eager for the Christmas holidays to start. All the students, that is, except for one.

Ada Kazantzakis, aged sixteen, sat with a quiet intensity in her usual seat by the window at the back of the classroom. Her hair, the colour of burnished mahogany, was gathered in a low-slung ponytail; her delicate features were drawn and tight, and her large, doe-brown eyes seemed to betray a lack of sleep the night before. She was neither looking forward to the festive season nor feeling any excitement at the prospect of snowfall. Every now and then she cast furtive glances outside, though her expression remained mostly unchanged.

Around midday it had hailed; milky-white, frozen pellets shredding the last of the leaves in the trees, hammering the bicycle shed roof, bouncing off the ground in a wild tap dance. Now it had fallen quiet, but anyone could see the weather had turned decisively worse. A storm was on its way. This morning the radio had announced that, within no more than forty-eight hours, Britain would be hit by a polar vortex bringing in record-breaking lows, icy rains and blizzards. Water shortages, power cuts and burst mains were expected to paralyse large swathes of England and Scotland as well as parts of northern Europe. People had been stockpiling – canned fish, baked beans, bags of pasta, toilet paper – as if getting ready for a siege.

All day long the students had been carrying on about the

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storm, worried for their holiday plans and travel arrangements. Not Ada, though. She had neither family gatherings nor exotic destinations lined up. Her father did not intend to go anywhere. He had work to do. He always had work to do. Her father was an incurable workaholic – anyone who knew him would testify to that – but ever since her mother had died, he had retreated into his research like a burrowing animal hiding in its tunnel for safety and warmth.

Somewhere in the course of her young life, Ada had understood that he was very different from other fathers, but she still found it hard to take kindly to his obsession with plants. Everyone else's fathers worked in offices, shops or government departments, wore matching suits, white shirts and polished black shoes, whereas hers was usually clad in a waterproof jacket, a pair of olive or brown moleskin trousers, rugged boots. Instead of a briefcase he had a shoulder bag that carried miscellaneous items like his hand lens, dissecting kit, plant press, compass and notebooks. Other fathers endlessly prattled on about business and retirement plans but hers was more interested in the toxic effects of pesticides on seed germination or ecological damage from logging. He spoke about the impact of deforestation with a passion his counterparts reserved for fluctuations in their personal stock portfolios; not only spoke but wrote about it too. An evolutionary ecologist and botanist, he had published twelve books. One of them was called *The Mysterious Kingdom: How Fungi Shaped Our Past, Changes Our Future*. Another one of his monographs was about hornworts, liverworts and mosses. The cover depicted a stone bridge over a creek bubbling around rocks coated in velvety green. Right above the dreamlike image was the gilded title: *A Field Guide to Common Bryophytes of Europe*. Underneath, his name was printed in capital letters: KOSTAS KAZANTZAKIS.

Ada had no idea what kind of people would read the sort of books her father wrote, but she hadn't dared mention them to anyone at school. She had no intention of giving her classmates yet another reason to conclude that she – and her family – were weird.

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No matter the time of day, her father seemed to prefer the company of trees to the company of humans. He had always been this way, but when her mother was alive, she could temper his eccentricities, possibly because she, too, had her own peculiar ways. Since her death, Ada had felt her father drifting away from her, or perhaps it was she who had been drifting away from him – it was hard to tell who was evading whom in a house engulfed in a miasma of grief. So they would be at home, the two of them, not only for the duration of the storm but the entire Christmas season. Ada hoped her father had remembered to go shopping.

Her eyes slid down to her notebook. On the open page, at the bottom, she had sketched a butterfly. Slowly, she traced the wings, so brittle, easily breakable.

'Hey, you got any gum?'

Snapping out of her reverie, Ada turned aside. She liked sitting at the back of the classroom but that meant being paired off with Emma-Rose, who had the annoying habit of cracking her knuckles, chewing one piece of gum after another although it was not allowed at school, and a tendency to go on about matters that were of no interest to anyone else.

'No, sorry.' Ada shook her head and glanced nervously at the teacher.

'History is a most fascinating subject,' Mrs Walcott was now saying, her brogues planted firmly behind her desk, as though she needed a barricade from behind which to teach her students, all twenty-nine of them. 'Without understanding our past, how can we hope to shape our future?'

'Oh, I can't stand her,' Emma-Rose muttered under her breath.

Ada did not comment. She wasn't sure whether Emma-Rose had meant her or the teacher. If the former, she had nothing to say in her own defence. If the latter, she wasn't going to join in the vilification. She liked Mrs Walcott, who, though well meaning, clearly had difficulty keeping discipline in the classroom. Ada had heard that the woman had lost her husband a few years back. She had pictured in her mind, more than a few times, what her

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teacher's daily life must be like: how she dragged her round body out of bed in the mornings, rushed to take a shower before the hot water ran out, rummaged in the wardrobe for a suitable dress hardly different from yesterday's suitable dress, whipped up breakfast for her twins before dropping them off at the nursery, her face flushed, her tone apologetic. She had also imagined her teacher touching herself at night, her hands drawing circles under her cotton nightie, and at times inviting in men who would leave wet footprints on the carpet and a sourness in her soul.

Ada had no idea whether her thoughts corresponded with reality, but she suspected so. It was her talent, perhaps her only one. She could detect other people's sadnesses the way one animal could smell another of its kind a mile away.

'All right, class, one final note before you go!' Mrs Walcott said with a clap of her hands. 'We'll be studying migration and generational change next term. It's a nice fun project before we knuckle down and get on with GCSE revision. In preparation, I want you to interview an elderly relative during the holidays. Ideally, your grandparents, but it could just as well be another family member. Ask them questions about what it was like when they were young and come up with a four-to-five-page essay.'

A chorus of unhappy sighs rippled across the room.

'Make sure your writing is supported by historical facts,' Mrs Walcott said, ignoring the reaction. 'I want to see solid research backed up by evidence, not speculation.'

More sighs and groans followed.

'Oh, don't forget to check if there are any heirlooms around – an antique ring, a wedding dress, a set of vintage china, a handmade quilt, a box of letters or family recipes, any memorabilia that has been passed down.'

Ada dropped her gaze. She had never met her relatives on either side. She knew they lived in Cyprus somewhere but that was about the extent of her knowledge. What kind of people were they? How did they spend their days? Would they recognize her if they passed by on the street or bumped into each other at

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the supermarket? The only close relation she had heard of was a certain aunt, Meryem, who sent cheerful postcards of sunny beaches and wildflower pastures that jarred with her complete lack of presence in their lives.

If her relatives remained a mystery, Cyprus was a bigger one. She had seen pictures on the internet, but she had not once travelled to the place after which she was named.

In her mother's language, her name meant 'island'. When she was younger she had assumed it referred to Great Britain, the only island she had ever known, only later coming to the realization that it was, in fact, another isle, far away, and the reason was that she was conceived over there. The discovery had left her with a sense of confusion, if not discomfort. Firstly, because it reminded her that her parents had had sex, something she never wanted to think about; secondly, because it attached her, in an inevitable way, to a place that hitherto had existed only in her imagination. Since then she had added her own name to the collection of non-English words she carried in her pockets, words which, though curious and colourful, still felt distant and unfamiliar enough to remain impenetrable, like perfect pebbles you picked up on a beach and brought home but then didn't know what to do with. She had quite a few of them by now. Some idioms too. And songs, merry tunes. But that was about it. Her parents had not taught her their native languages, preferring to communicate solely in English at home. Ada could speak neither her father's Greek nor her mother's Turkish.

Growing up, each time she had enquired about why they had not yet been to Cyprus to meet their relatives, or why their relatives had not come over to England to visit them, both her father and her mother had given her a whole host of excuses. The time just wasn't right; there was too much work to be done or too many expenses to take care of . . . Slowly, a suspicion had taken root inside her: maybe her parents' marriage had not been approved by the families. In that case, she surmised, nor was she, the product of this marriage, really *approved*. Yet for as long as she

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was able to, Ada had retained the hopeful belief that if any of her extended family were to spend time with her and her parents, they would forgive them for whatever it was that they had not been forgiven for.

Since her mother's death, however, Ada had stopped asking questions about her next of kin. If they were the kind of people who would not attend the funeral of one of their own, they were hardly likely to have any love for the child of the deceased – a girl they had never laid eyes on.

'While you conduct your interview, do not judge the older generation,' said Mrs Walcott. 'Listen carefully, try to see things through their eyes. And make sure to record the entire conversation.'

Jason, sitting in the front row, interjected. 'So if we interview a Nazi criminal, shall we be nice to them?'

Mrs Walcott sighed. 'Well, that's a bit of an extreme example. No, I don't expect you to be nice to that sort of person.'

Jason grinned, as if he had scored a point.

'Miss!' Emma-Rose chimed in. 'We've got an antique violin at home, would that count as an heirloom?'

'Sure, if it's something that's belonged to your family for generations.'

'Oh, yes, we've had it for so long.' Emma-Rose beamed. 'My mother says it was made in Vienna in the nineteenth century. Or was it the eighteenth? Anyway, it's very valuable, but we're not selling it.'

Zafaar put his hand up. 'We've got a hope chest that belonged to my granny. She brought it with her from Punjab. Would that do?'

Ada felt her heart give a little thud, not even hearing the teacher's response or the rest of the conversation. Her whole frame went rigid as she tried not to look at Zafaar, lest her face give away her feelings.

The month before, the two of them had unexpectedly been paired up for a science project – assembling a device to measure how many calories different types of food contained. After days of trying to coordinate a meeting and failing, she had given up

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and done most of the research herself, finding articles, buying the kit, building the calorimeter. They had both received an A at the end. A tiny smile forming at the corner of his mouth, Zafaar had thanked her with an awkwardness that could have been a guilty conscience, but which might equally have been indifference. It was the last time they had spoken.

Ada had never kissed a boy. All the girls in her year had *something* to tell – real or imaginary – when they gathered in the changing rooms before and after PE, but not her. This absolute silence of hers had not gone unnoticed, provoking much ribbing and ridicule. Once, she had found a porn magazine inside her school bag, slipped in by unknown hands, she was certain, to freak her out. All day long she had agonized that a teacher might spot it and inform her father. Not that she was scared of her father the way she knew some other students were of theirs. It wasn't fear that she felt. Not even guilt, after having decided to keep the magazine. That wasn't the reason why she had not told him about the incident – or about other incidents. She had stopped sharing things with her father ever since she sensed, on some primal level, that she needed to protect him from more pain.

If her mother were alive, Ada might have shown her the magazine. They might have looked at it together, giggling. They might have talked, cradling mugs of hot chocolate in their hands, breathing in the steam that rose towards their faces. Her mother had understood unruly thoughts, naughty thoughts, *the dark side of the moon*. She once said, half jokingly, that she was too rebellious to be a good mum, too motherly to be a good rebel. Only now, after she was gone, did Ada acknowledge that, despite everything, she was a good mum – and a good rebel. It had been exactly eleven months and eight days since her death. This would be the first Christmas she would spend without her.

'What do you think, Ada?' Mrs Walcott asked suddenly. 'Would you agree with that?'

Having gone back to her drawing, it took Ada another beat to shift her gaze from the butterfly and realize that the teacher was

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looking at her. She blushed up to her hairline. Her back tensed as if her body had sensed a danger she was yet to comprehend. When she found her voice, it came out so shaky, she wasn't sure she had spoken at all.

'Pardon?'

'I was asking whether you think Jason is right.'

'Sorry, miss . . . right about what?'

A suppressed titter rose.

'We were talking about family heirlooms,' said Mrs Walcott with a tired smile. 'Zafaar mentioned his grandma's hope chest. Then Jason said, why is it always women who cling to these souvenirs and knick-knacks from the past? And I wanted to know whether you agree with that statement.'

Ada swallowed drily. Her pulse thudded in her temples. Silence, thick and glutinous, trickled into the space around her. She imagined it spreading out like dark ink on to crocheted white doilies – like the ones she had once found in the drawer of her mother's dressing table. Neatly cut into obsessively small pieces, destroyed, they had been placed between layers of tissue paper, as if her mother could neither keep them as they were, nor bring herself to throw them away.

'Any thoughts?' said Mrs Walcott, her voice tender but insistent.

Slowly and without thinking why, Ada stood up, scraping the chair noisily against the flagstone floor. She cleared her throat, though she had absolutely no idea what to say. Her mind had gone blank. On the open page in front of her the butterfly, alarmed and desperate to flee, took to the air, even though its wings, unfinished and blurred at the edges, were hardly strong enough.

'I . . . I don't think it's always women. My father does it too.'

'He does?' asked Mrs Walcott. 'How exactly?'

Now all her classmates were staring at her, waiting for her to say something that would make sense. Some had a gentle pity in their eyes, others crude indifference, which she much preferred. She felt unmoored by their collective expectation, pressure building in her ears as if she were sinking underwater.

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'Can you give us an example?' said Mrs Walcott. 'What does your father collect?'

'Uhm, my father . . .' Ada said in a drawl and paused.

What could she tell them about him? That he forgot to eat or even speak sometimes, letting whole days go by without consuming proper food or uttering a full sentence, or that, if only he could, he would probably spend the rest of his life in the back garden or, better yet, in a forest somewhere, his hands plunged in the soil, surrounded by bacteria, fungi and all those plants, growing and decaying by the minute? What could she tell them about her father that would make them understand what he was like when she herself had a hard time recognizing him any more?

Instead, she said a single word. 'Plants.'

'Plants . . .' echoed Mrs Walcott, her face twisted with incomprehension.

'My father is fond of them,' Ada added in a rush, instantly regretting her choice of words.

'Oh, how cute . . . he fancies flowers!' Jason commented in a syrupy tone.

Laughter rippled through the classroom, no longer constrained. Ada noticed even her friend Ed was avoiding her gaze, pretending to read something in his textbook, his shoulders slumped and his head down. She then searched for Zafaar and found his bright, black eyes that rarely saw her now studying her with a curiosity that bordered on concern.

'Well, that's lovely,' said Mrs Walcott. 'But can you think of an object he cares about? Something that has emotional value.'

In that moment there was nothing Ada wanted more than to find the right words. Why were they hiding from her? Her stomach constricted with a stab of pain, so sharp that for a few seconds she thought she couldn't breathe, let alone talk. And yet she did, and when she did, she heard herself say, 'He spends a lot of time with his trees.'

Mrs Walcott gave a half-nod, her smile fading from her lips.

'Especially this fig tree, I think that's his favourite.'

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'All right then, you may sit down now,' said Mrs Walcott.

But Ada did not comply. The pain, having darted towards her ribcage, was searching for a way out. Her chest tightened, as though squeezed by invisible hands. She felt disorientated, the room swaying slightly under her feet.

'God, she's so cringey!' someone whispered loud enough for her to hear.

Ada clenched her eyes shut, feeling the burn of the comment, a raw scorch mark on her flesh. But nothing they did or said could be worse than her hatred for herself just then. What was wrong with her? Why could she not answer a simple question like everyone else?

As a child she had loved turning in circles on the Turkish carpet to make herself dizzy and drop to the floor, from where she would watch the world spin round and round. She could still remember the hand-woven patterns of the carpet dissolving in a thousand sparks, the colours blending into each other, scarlet into green, saffron into white. But what she experienced right now was a different kind of dizziness. She had the sense of entering a trap, a door locking behind her, the click of a latch falling into place. She felt paralysed.

So many times in the past she had suspected that she carried within a sadness that was not quite her own. In science class they had learned that everyone inherited one chromosome from their mother and one from their father – long threads of DNA with thousands of genes that built billions of neurons and trillions of connections between them. All that genetic information passed from parents to offspring – survival, growth, reproduction, the colour of your hair, the shape of your nose, whether you had freckles or sneezed in sunlight – everything was in there. But none of that answered the one question burning in her mind: was it also possible to inherit something as intangible and immeasurable as sorrow?

'You may sit down,' repeated Mrs Walcott.

Still she did not move.

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'Ada . . . did you not hear what I said?'

Remaining upright, she tried to choke back the fear that filled her throat, clogged her nostrils. It reminded her of the taste of the sea under a harsh, beating sun. She touched it with the tip of her tongue. It wasn't the salty sea brine after all, it was warm blood. She had been biting the inside of her cheek.

Her eyes slid towards the window, beyond which the storm was approaching. She noticed in the slate-grey sky, amidst banks of clouds, a sliver of crimson bleeding into the horizon, like an old wound that had never quite healed.

'Please sit down,' came the teacher's voice.

And, once again, she did not comply.

Later, much later, when the worst had already happened and she was alone in her bed at night, unable to fall asleep, listening to her father, also sleepless, pacing the house, Ada Kazantzakis would revisit this moment, this fissure in time, when she could have done as she was told and returned to her seat, remaining more or less invisible to everyone in the classroom, unnoticed but also undisturbed; she could have kept things the way they had been, if only she could have stopped herself from doing what she did next.

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Fig Tree

This afternoon, as storm clouds descended over London and the world turned the colour of melancholy, Kostas Kazantzakis buried me in the garden. In the back garden, that is. Normally I liked it here, among the lush camellias, sweetly fragrant honeysuckles and witch hazels with their spidery flowers, but this was no normal day. I tried to cheer up and see the bright side of things. Not that it helped. I was nervous, filled with apprehension. I had never been buried before.

Kostas had been toiling outside in the cold since the early hours. A light sheen of sweat had formed on his brow and it glistened every time he forced the steel edge of the spade into solid earth. Behind him extended the shadows of the wooden trellises that in summer were covered with climbing roses and clematis vines, but were now no more than a see-through barrier separating our garden from the neighbour's terrace. Slowly accumulating beside his leather boots, alongside the silvery trail left by a snail, was a pile of soil, clammy and crumbling to the touch. His breath clouded in front of his face, his shoulders were taut inside his navy parka – the one he had bought from a vintage shop on Portobello Road – and his knuckles were red and raw, slightly bleeding, but he didn't seem to notice.

I was cold and, though I did not want to admit it to myself, frightened. I wished I could have shared my worries with him. But even if I could have spoken, he was too distracted to hear me, absorbed in his own thoughts as he kept digging without so much as a glance in my direction. When he was done, he would put the spade aside, look at me with those sage-green eyes that I knew had seen things both pleasant and painful, and push me down into the hollow ground.

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Only days to Christmas, and all around the neighbourhood sparkled fairy lights and metallic tinsels. Inflatable Santas and reindeer with plastic smiles. Bright, blinking garlands dangled from shop awnings and stars twinkled in house windows, offering furtive peeks into other people's lives, which always seemed less complicated somehow, more exciting – happier.

Inside the hedge a whitethroat began to sing – swift, scratchy notes. I wondered what a North African warbler was doing in our garden at this time of the year. Why hadn't it left for warmer places with all the others that must now be on their way south, and who, if they made a slight change in their flight path, might just as well head towards Cyprus and visit my motherland.

I knew they got lost occasionally, passerine birds. Rarely, yet it happened. And at times they just could not make the journey any more, year in year out, the same but never the same, miles of emptiness rolling out in all directions, and so they stayed, even though it meant hunger and cold and, too often, death.

It had been a long winter already. So unlike last year's mild weather, with its overcast skies, scattered showers, muddy tracks, a cascade of gloom and grey. Nothing out of the ordinary for dear old England. But this year, since early autumn, the climate had been erratic. At night we heard the howling of the gale and it brought to mind things untamed and unbidden, things within each of us that we were not yet ready to face, let alone comprehend. Many mornings when we woke up, we found the roads glazed with ice and blades of grass stiffened like shards of emerald. There were thousands of homeless people sleeping rough on the streets of London and not enough shelters for even a quarter of them.

Tonight was set to be the coldest night of the year so far. Already the air, as if composed of splinters of glass, pierced everything it touched. That is why Kostas was rushing, bent on completing his task before the ground turned to stone.

Storm Hera – that's what they had called the impending cyclone. Not George or Olivia or Charlie or Matilda this time, but

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a mythological name. They said it was going to be the worst in centuries – worse than the Great Storm of 1703, which had torn the tiles from rooftops, stripped ladies of their whalebone corsets, gentlemen of their powdered wigs, and beggars of the rags on their backs; wrecked timber-framed mansions and mud-built slums alike; smashed sailing ships as if they were paper boats and blown all the sewage floating down the Thames on to the riverbanks.

Stories, perhaps, but I believed in them. Just as I believed in legends, and the underlying truths they tried to convey.

I told myself that if everything went according to plan, I would only be buried for three months, maybe even less. When the daffodils bloomed along the footpaths and the bluebells carpeted the woods, and the whole of nature was animated again, I would be unburied. Bolt upright and wide awake. But, hard as I tried, I could not hold on to that sliver of hope while the winter, fierce and unrelenting, felt as if it were here to stay. I had never been good at optimism anyway. It must have been in my DNA. I was descended from a long line of pessimists. So I did what I often did: I began to imagine all the ways in which things could go wrong. What if this year spring did not arrive and I remained under the earth – forever? Or what if spring did make an appearance at long last, but Kostas Kazantzakis forgot to dig me up?



A gust of wind swept past, cutting into me like a serrated knife.

Kostas must have noticed for he stopped digging. 'Look at you! You're freezing, poor thing.'

He cared about me, always had. In the past, whenever the weather turned frigid, he took precautions to keep me alive. I remember one chilly afternoon in January he set up windbreaks all around me and wrapped me with layer upon layer of burlap to reduce moisture loss. Another time he covered me with mulch.

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He placed heat lamps in the garden to provide warmth throughout the night and, most crucially, before the crack of dawn, the darkest hour of the day and often the coldest. That is when most of us fall into a sleep we never wake up from – the homeless on the streets, and us . . .

. . . fig trees.

I am a *Ficus carica*, known as the edible common fig, though I can assure you there's nothing common about me. I am a proud member of the great mulberry family of Moraceae from the kingdom of Plantae. Originating in Asia Minor, I can be found across a vast geography from California to Portugal and Lebanon, from the shores of the Black Sea to the hills of Afghanistan and the valleys of India.

Burying fig trees in trenches underground during the harshest winters and unearthing them in spring is a curious if well-established tradition. Italians settled in sub-zero towns in America and Canada are familiar with it. So are Spaniards, Portuguese, Maltese, Greeks, Lebanese, Egyptians, Tunisians, Moroccans, Algerians, Israelis, Palestinians, Iranians, Kurds, Turks, Jordanians, Syrians, Sephardic Jews . . . and us Cypriots.

Maybe not the young so much these days, but the elderly are no stranger to the custom. The ones who first migrated from the milder climes of the Mediterranean to the blustery cities and conurbations across the West. The ones who, after all these years, still dream up ingenious ways to smuggle across borders their favourite smelly cheese, smoked pastrami, stuffed sheep intestines, frozen *manti*, homemade tahini, carob syrup, *karidaki glyko*, cow stomach soup, spleen sausage, tuna eyeballs, rams' testicles . . . even though they might, if only they searched, find at least some of these delicacies in the 'international food' section of supermarkets in their adopted countries. But they would claim it is not the same taste.

First-generation immigrants are a species all their own. They wear a lot of beige, grey or brown. Colours that do not stand out. Colours that whisper, never shout. There is a tendency to

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formality in their mannerisms, a wish to be treated with dignity. They move with a slight ungainliness, not quite at ease in their surroundings. Both eternally grateful for the chances life has given them and scarred by what it has snatched away, always out of place, separated from others by some unspoken experience, like survivors of a car accident.

First-generation immigrants talk to their trees all the time – when there are no other people nearby, that is. They confide in us, describing their dreams and aspirations, including those they have left behind, like wisps of wool caught on barbed wire during fence crossings. But for the most part, they simply enjoy our company, chatting to us as though to old, long-missed friends. They are caring and tender towards their plants, especially those they have brought along with them from lost motherlands. They know, deep within, that when you save a fig tree from a storm, it is someone's memory you are saving.

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