

**LANE ASHFELDT**

### **Dimitria and the Magic Palace of Elefsina**

Her husband would have put a stop to the after-dinner stories. But one day when their daughter was three years old her husband had bought himself a ticket to America. 'I don't ask much of life,' he said. 'Just a stable currency and the knowledge that the shops will be open tomorrow, filled with good things to buy.' Dimitria was half shocked, half admiring. Her husband was always convinced he had a right to whatever he desired; this had been part of his attraction, initially.

'Come with if you like,' he offered.

'Maybe later,' Dimitria said.

That was it. She never saw him again.

After he'd gone, she and the little one played so many childish games that Dimitria felt almost a child herself. On summer evenings, long after dinner was over, they sat out in the garden with its unusual view, and Dimitria invented stories for her daughter about the Magic Palace of Elefsina. At night, its turrets lit by naked flames, it was a sprawling elfin citadel that humans were forbidden to enter. By day any grown-up could see that the 'palace' was really a petrol refinery, yet to Dimitria, watching at sunrise while her daughter lay sleeping, it remained a magical sight, its petroleum torches burning, the sky behind it fried orangey-green by the fumes.

Children do not stay little for ever, and soon Dimitria's daughter started school. All day long, while the little girl learned to spell and count, the refinery trailed smoke plumes across a cloudless sky until the air took on a dark heaviness. Dimitria grew used to this thickness in the air and stopped tasting it, but on the motorway drivers raised their windows and shut off the air-con until they were safely past Elefsina.

Years went by. Capacity at the refinery grew and much else changed besides. Dimitria's daughter finished school and went away to study, and each month that she was away from home felt to her mother as if it were a year. Then one day in early September, big changes came to Elefsina.

It rained throughout Attica that day, maybe throughout the Aegean. A hard, driving rain that filled the gutters and made the downhill roads into rivers. Each year at summer's end a rainstorm like this blew in from the sea, and each year the people cursed it as if they'd never seen the like. Driving around in the wet were a dozen pick-up trucks with megaphones, the kind that roused people from siesta on sunny afternoons with calls of *Today, today: fresh watermelons!* Only this time the drivers had no fruit to sell; this time they called: *Today, today: everyone must leave!*

Later that day when the fruit trucks were quiet, the army arrived in a thunderous convoy. Dimitria answered the door to find six teenage soldiers

facing her, rainwater dripping from their ears and darkening their jackets.

‘Are you ready, ma’am?’

‘Maybe next year.’

‘Haven’t you heard? There’s a general evacuation.’

They stared at each other, she in her flowery dress, they in their guns and uniforms. When she looked at their faces she could see that most of the soldiers were younger than her daughter, even. Babies.

‘I heard alright. But until my daughter returns from America, I’m staying put. And that’s final.’

Dimitria went to close her front door but the soldiers blocked it. Two of them grabbed her by the arms and dragged her outside. Furious, she spat in their faces. The young men made a swift animal movement, ready to mash her into the ground right here on her own doorstep if they must, but their commanding officer held up a hand and stilled the baby gunmen.

‘Go and deal with the next house, lads. Let me take care of this lady. I’ll catch you up shortly.’

When the men were gone the officer smiled, removed his cap and introduced himself, as if hoping for a fresh start: ‘Panos. May I trouble you for a small glass of water, please?’

This she could not refuse. She fetched a glass and set it before him with a stern, ‘Oriste.’ He drained it in seconds.

‘Sorry about the disruption, ma’am,’ he said, ‘but the refinery is a strategic target. We have orders to occupy it and make an exclusion zone all around, to prevent attacks.’

‘But I am not a terrorist, so why should I leave?’

‘For your own safety, ma’am. You can come back later.’

‘What later? Tomorrow? Next week?’

‘We don’t know.’

‘And who will care for my animals?’

‘You must bring them with you, somewhere safe. Have you no relatives you can stay with? Maybe on a farm?’

‘My family are locals. Or were.’ She showed him a photo of a girl in a black cloak holding a scroll. ‘My daughter won a scholarship to America. I haven’t heard from her since the phones went dead. If I leave now, she may never find

me.'

In the street outside a slow procession of cars, trucks, mopeds and sidecars headed out of town. Each family had been provided with petrol for the evacuation and had loaded up what belongings they could fit. Those without cars travelled on the fruit-sellers' trucks. The shuttered buildings left behind looked ominous, as if a war was coming. Even the local shop was barred and locked.

Dimitria shivered.

'I have the perfect plan,' Panos said. 'That new hotel with the golf park? From up on that hill you could keep a safe lookout for your daughter's return.'

'I don't know what hotel you mean. Anyway, I can't afford to stay in a hotel.'

'Don't worry about money. The hotel is closed for the duration, but I can put you there as emergency caretaker. It's perfect. And it has ample supplies of power, water, and food.'

The officer's enthusiasm was contagious. Dimitria looked around her, wavering.

'But you have too much to carry... May I offer you a lift?'

True to his word Panos returned that night with three men and worked through the night to load Dimitria's belongings, including her goats and chickens, on to two trucks. It was dawn when they reached the hotel. Dimitria remembered this park, set high on a hill overlooking the bay: as a girl she had climbed these slopes each year at the start of Lent to fly her little red kite for Clean Monday. As they pulled up at the hotel she pointed to a nearby hillside with ruins perched on it.

'Over there is the real Eleusis.'

Panos shrugged. He had grown up surrounded by antiquities. Golf was more his thing. 'Keeps the tourists happy, I expect.'

After living some weeks on the hilltop, Dimitria began to feel truly old, so old she had an inkling what immortality must be like. Not that she felt she had a right to live forever, or even wanted to. But each morning as she scanned the silvery sea for approaching boats, some synapse in her brain zoomed right back to her ancestors who had lived on these hills, long before the Magic Palace existed.

All this time later here she was, close to where they had once been. Even if 'here' was a timeshare hotel with desalinated seawater pumped up the hill and sprinkled over its golf course. Even if her family was gone, leaving her no one for company but a crazy old English who could barely say 'hello, how are you' in Greek. At least they weren't hungry. The goats ate their fill from the golf course, and she survived on tourist food. Frozen kalamari, pork chops, canned

gigantes. And baked beans, though these last Dimitria left for the English. Perhaps he liked them.

Most weeks, on a Sunday, Panos showed up and said, 'I'm afraid the exclusion zone continues.' Then he congratulated the goats on trimming the putting greens, took out his clubs and played a round of golf. Afterwards, he and Dimitria ate together. Only then did she ask,

'What news? Any sign of my daughter?'

'Nothing. I checked. But don't worry: if there's any news you'll be first to know.'

And so the winter progressed.

The English also played golf, but rarely. Mostly he stayed in his apartment and read on his computer or napped on the sofa. At the pool one evening, Dimitria heard him speaking his language with someone else. Curious, she peeked in his window to see the visitor. But the English was alone by his computer. A boy's face on the screen was speaking to him.

Dimitria watched, amazed. When the conversation ended she tapped on the window. The English started. Seeing it was her, he opened the glass door. Indicating his computer Dimitria said, in Greek too fast for him to follow,

'Please-can-you-help-me-speak-with-my-daughter-in-America?'

He gave her a pen to write with, then typed the Greek words into his computer and translated them.

Afterwards he translated his own reply, *We can try.*

*Now is a good time*, he added. *It may be days before we get so good a connection again.*

He wrote questions on the screen for her. *What is your daughter's name, birthdate, email address? Where in America did she live? What did she do there?*

His last question troubled Dimitria: *Where do you think your daughter is now?* Privately she worried the girl was with her father. Her daughter was good with a computer and when she first went to America she could easily have found him. But to the English, Dimitria wrote, *After she left, phones stopped working and planes stopped flying. Only governments and armies could travel. For this she never came home.*

The English opened many windows on his computer and scanned them. Then he typed and translated: *I'm finding only entries a year old. College records, a yacht club swim-a-thon at which she won a silver medal, her Linked-In page. No recent updates.*

Dimitria sighed.

He typed and translated some more.

*Don't worry. The fact she is offline does not mean anything bad has happened. The connection is so erratic these days. Probably this is true in America also.*

Dimitria thanked him, but her legs were soft and unsure where to take her. Her daughter was gone. Stumbling to the pool she looked past it, far out to sea, as if the moonlight making a pale causeway to the islands might offer clues.

Maybe it did help, because within a few days Dimitria was busy with a new project. She got up early and breakfasted by the pool, at her usual table overlooking the gulf. Since the Magic Palace had gone silent the skies had lost their green tinge, and oil tankers were now a thing of the past. She was surprised to see a dozen sailboats headed for the refinery. Scientists perhaps, or rich Italians on a jaunt. Dimitria resolved to ask Panos when she saw him next.

She was sorting through seeds from her old garden when the English reported for duty, clinking metallically, a trowel, fork, and other tools dangling from his belt. Bored with tourist food, he was glad to help out. He wanted to plant carrots and potatoes which he knew how to grow, and vines which he did not. Dimitria drew a carrot on the relevant bag to tell him she'd found some carrot seed.

'Kah-loh,' he said shyly with atrocious vowel sounds.

She smiled. '*Kalo, akrivos.*'

They set out for the golf course while the morning was young, hens trailing behind them.

By afternoon they had turned the soil and had the sprinklers on full blast to water the ground in readiness for planting. The soil gave off a rich, pleasant scent. Birds skimmed through the sparkling water. The English was weaving branches into a barrier to keep out the goats. Lulled by the sprinklers, Dimitria dozed under an olive tree. A voice roused her.

'You've been busy.'

'Panos, what a nice surprise. I hope you don't mind about the putting greens.'

'Long as you've not destroyed the seventh. It's the one I play the best.'

'Then we'll keep it safe for you.'

Panos flopped down next to Dimitria, and she noticed that for once he hadn't brought his golf clubs. Also, now that she thought of it, today was not a

Sunday. Perhaps this indicated a crack in the army's regimen. Perhaps the strategic significance of Elefsina had been downgraded?

'Speaking of surprises,' Panos said. 'Well, one big surprise, and two small ones...'

'Whatever do you mean? Do tell.'

'If I told you it wouldn't be a surprise, would it? Come to the hotel. You'll see.'

It was only a few minutes' walk but it seemed longer. To shorten the distance Dimitria enquired about the flotilla.

'Oh that?' Panos said. 'Just a few solar powered boats.'

'From where?'

'Various places. But I shouldn't say too much...'

A face was watching from one of the hotel windows.

'...since you can ask your surprise about it.'

Before they reached the hotel, the person in the window hurried outside. A young woman, carrying a baby on each arm. Twins. About six months old by the look of them. Dimitria felt an excited leap in her stomach and her legs began to work faster. She whooped and hugged her daughter, the babies; she even hugged Panos.

While Panos fetched the English, they sat out by the pool in the slanting afternoon light. Here, Dimitria learned about the weeks her daughter had spent sailing home, the storm that capsized three boats as they drifted towards the Azores, the leisurely final leg across the Mediterranean. She also learned about her daughter's man. He sounded hard to please.

'...we do care for each other, honest. But I'd go crazy if we lived together all year round. He's been single so long, he has strong views on... well, everything really. We'll visit him if that gets easier to do. But most of each year we plan to spend here with you — if that's fine by you, of course?'

Dimitria, dazzled by the glittering light reflected up from the sea around the Magic Palace, was thinking that tonight it might be warm enough to eat outside. She rubbed her eyes and said, 'How would it not be? It will be perfect. Perfect.'

***Lane Ashfeldt** is an Irish writer who lives in Wales. Her stories have been published in Ireland, England, the US and Greece, but she has not yet had a book length collection of her own fiction published. Prizes for her short fiction include the Fish Short Stories Prize for 'Dancing on Canvey'.*