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*The Island of Missing Trees*

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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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**

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 *melt-emi* 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.

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

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*

## *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.

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