

The  
Beekeeper  
of  
Aleppo



Brought up in London, Christy Lefteri is the child of Cypriot refugees. She is a lecturer in creative writing at Brunel University. *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* was born out of her time working as a volunteer at a Unicef supported refugee centre in Athens.

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*For dad*  
*Also, for S*



# 1

**I** AM SCARED OF MY WIFE'S eyes. She can't see out and no one can see in. Look, they are like stones, grey stones, sea stones. Look at her. Look how she is sitting on the edge of the bed, her nightgown on the floor, rolling Mohammed's marble around in her fingers and waiting for me to dress her. I am taking my time putting on my shirt and trousers, because I am so tired of dressing her. Look at the folds of her stomach, the colour of desert honey, darker in the creases, and the fine, fine silver lines on the skin of her breasts, and the tips of her fingers with the tiny cuts, where the ridges and valley patterns once were stained with blue or yellow or red paint. Her laughter was gold once, you would have seen as well as heard it. Look at her, because I think she is disappearing.

'I had a night of scattered dreams,' she says. 'They filled the room.' Her eyes are fixed a little to the left of me. I feel sick.

‘What does that mean?’

‘They were broken. My dreams were everywhere. And I didn’t know if I was awake or asleep. There were so many dreams, like bees in a room, like the room was full of bees. And I couldn’t breathe. And I woke up and thought, please don’t let me be hungry.’

I look at her face, confused. There is still no expression. I don’t tell her that I only dream of murder now, always the same dream; it’s only me and the man, and I’m holding the bat and my hand is bleeding; the others aren’t there in the dream, and he is on the ground with the trees above him and he says something to me that I can’t hear.

‘And I have pain,’ she says.

‘Where?’

‘Behind my eyes. Really sharp pain.’

I kneel down in front of her and look into her eyes. The blank emptiness in them terrifies me. I take my phone out of my pocket, shine the light of the torch into them. Her pupils dilate.

‘Do you see anything at all?’ I say.

‘No.’

‘Not even a shadow, a change of tone or colour?’

‘Just black.’

I put the phone in my pocket and step away from her. She’s been worse since we got here. It’s like her soul is evaporating.

‘Can you take me to the doctor?’ she says. ‘Because the pain is unbearable.’

‘Of course,’ I say. ‘Soon.’

‘When?’

‘As soon as we get the papers.’

I’m glad Afra can’t see this place. She would like the seagulls though, the crazy way they fly. In Aleppo we were far from the sea. I’m sure she would like to see these birds and maybe even the coast, because she was raised by the sea, while I am from eastern Aleppo where the city meets the desert.

When we got married and she came to live with me, Afra missed the sea so much that she started to paint water, wherever she found it. Throughout the arid plateau region of Syria there are oases and streams and rivers that empty into swamps and small lakes. Before we had Sami, we would follow the water, and she would paint it in oils. There is one painting of the Queiq I wish I could see again. She made the river look like a storm-water drain running through the city park. Afra had this way of seeing truth in landscapes. The painting, and its measly river, reminds me of struggling to stay alive. Thirty or so kilometres south of Aleppo the river gives up the struggle of the harsh Syrian steppe and evaporates into the marshes.

I am scared of her eyes. But these damp walls, and the wires in the ceiling, and the billboards – I’m not sure how she would deal with all this, if she could see it. The billboard just outside says that there are too many of us, that this island will break under our weight. I’m glad she’s blind. I know what that sounds like! If I could give her a key that opened a door into another world, then I would wish for her



to see again. But it would have to be a world very different from this one. A place where the sun is just rising, touching the walls around the ancient city and, outside those walls, the cell-like quarters and the houses and apartments and hotels and narrow alleys and an open-air market where a thousand hanging necklaces shine with that first light, and further away, across the desert land, gold on gold and red on red.

Sami would be there, smiling and running along those alleys with his scuffed trainers, change in his hand, on his way to the store to get milk. I try not to think about Sami. But Mohammed? I'm still waiting for him to find the letter and money I left under the jar of Nutella. I think one morning there will be a knock at the door, and when I open it he will be standing there and I will say, 'But how did you get all the way here, Mohammed? How did you know where to find us?'

Yesterday I saw a boy in the steamed-up mirror of the shared bathroom. He was wearing a black T-shirt, but when I turned around it was the man from Morocco, sitting on the toilet, pissing. 'You should lock the door,' he said in his own Arabic.

I can't remember his name, but I know that he is from a village near Taza, beneath the Rif mountains. He told me last night that they might send him to the removal centre in a place called Yarl's Wood – the social worker thinks there's a chance they will. It's my turn to meet her this afternoon. The Moroccan man says she's very beautiful, that she looks like a dancer from Paris who he once made love to in a hotel

in Rabat, long before he married his wife. He asked me about life in Syria. I told him about my beehives in Aleppo.

In the evenings the landlady brings us tea with milk. The Moroccan man is old, maybe eighty or even ninety. He looks and smells like he's made of leather. He reads *How to Be a Brit*, and sometimes smirks to himself. He has his phone on his lap, and pauses at the end of each page to glance down at it, but no one ever calls. I don't know who he's waiting for and I don't know how he got here and I don't know why he has made such a journey so late in his life, because he seems like a man who is waiting to die. He hates the way the non-Muslim men stand up to piss.

There are about ten of us in this rundown B&B by the sea, all of us from different places, all of us waiting. They might keep us, they might send us away, but there is not much to decide anymore. Which road to take, whom to trust, whether to raise the bat again and kill a man. These things are in the past. They will evaporate soon, like the river.

I take Afra's abaya from the hanger in the wardrobe. She hears it and stands, lifting her arms. She looks older now, but acts younger, like she has turned into a child. Her hair is the colour and texture of sand since we dyed it for the photos, bleached out the Arabic. I tie it into a bun and wrap her hijab around her head, securing it with hairpins while she guides my fingers like she always does.

The social worker will be here at 1 p.m., and all meetings take place in the kitchen. She will want to know how we got

here and she will be looking for a reason to send us away. But I know that if I say the right things, if I convince her that I'm not a killer, then we will get to stay here because we are the lucky ones, because we have come from the worst place in the world. The Moroccan man isn't so lucky; he will have more to prove. He is sitting in the living room now by the glass doors, holding a bronze pocket watch in both of his hands, nestling it in his palms like it's a hatching egg. He stares at it, waiting. What for? When he sees that I'm standing here, he says, 'It doesn't work, you know. It stopped in a different time.' He holds it up in the light by its chain and swings it, gently, this frozen watch made of



**Bronze**

was the colour of the city far below. We lived in a two-bedroom bungalow on a hill. From so high up we could see all the unorganised architecture and the beautiful domes and minarets, and far in the distance the citadel peeking through.

It was pleasant to sit on the veranda in the spring; we could smell the soil from the desert and see the red sun setting over the land. In the summer though, we would be inside with a fan running and wet towels on our heads, and our feet in a bowl of cold water because the heat was an oven.

In July the earth was parched, but in our garden we had apricot and almond trees and tulips and irises and fritillaries. When the river dried up, I would go down to the irrigation pond to collect water for the garden to keep it alive. By August it was like trying to resuscitate a corpse, so I watched it all die and merge into the rest of the land. When it was cooler we would take a walk and watch the falcons flying across the sky to the desert.

I had four beehives in the garden, piled one on top of the other, but the rest were in a field on the outskirts of eastern Aleppo. I hated to be away from the bees. In the mornings I would wake up early, before the sun, before the muezzin

called out for prayer. I would drive the thirty miles to the apiaries and arrive as the sun was just rising, fields full of light, the humming of the bees a single pure note.

The bees were an ideal society, a small paradise among chaos. The worker bees travelled far and wide to find food, preferring to go to the furthest fields. They collected nectar from lemon blossoms and clover, black nigella seeds and aniseed, eucalyptus, cotton, thorn and heather. I cared for the bees, nurtured them, monitored the hives for infestations or poor health. Sometimes I would build new hives, divide the colonies or raise queen bees – I'd take the larvae from another colony and watch as the nurse bees fed them with royal jelly.

Later, during harvesting season, I would check the hives to see how much honey the bees had produced and then I would put the combs into the extractors and fill the tubs, scraping off the residue to collect the golden liquid beneath. It was my job to protect the bees, to keep them healthy and strong, while they fulfilled their task of making honey and pollinating the land to keep us alive.

It was my cousin Mustafa who introduced me to beekeeping. His father and grandfather had both been keepers in the green valleys, west of the Anti-Lebanon range. Mustafa was a genius with the heart of a boy. He studied and became a professor at Damascus University, researching the precise composition of honey. Because he travelled back and forth between Damascus and Aleppo, he wanted me to manage

the apiaries. He taught me so much about the behaviour of bees and how to manipulate them. The native bees were aggressive from the heat, but he showed me how to understand them.

When the university closed for the summer months, Mustafa joined me full-time in Aleppo; we both worked hard, so many hours – in the end we thought like the bees, we even ate like the bees! We would eat pollen mixed with honey to keep us going in the heat.

In the early days, when I was in my twenties and still new to the job, our hives were made of plant material covered with mud. Later we replaced the trunks of cork trees and the terracotta hives with wooden boxes, and soon we had over five hundred colonies! We produced at least ten tonnes of honey a year. There were so many bees, and they made me feel alive. When I was away from them it was like a great party had ended. Years later, Mustafa opened a shop in the new part of town. In addition to honey, he sold honey-based cosmetics, luscious sweet-smelling creams and soaps and hair products from our very own bees. He had opened this shop for his daughter. Though she was young at the time she believed that she would grow up to study agriculture, just like her father. So, Mustafa named the shop *Aya's Paradise* and promised that one day, if she studied hard, it would belong to her. She loved to come in and smell the soaps and smother and the creams on her hands. She was an intelligent girl for her age, I remember once how she said, "This shop is what the world would smell like if there were no humans."

Mustafa did not want a quiet life. He always strove to do

more and learn more. I've never seen this in any other human being. However big we got – even when we had big customers from Europe and Asia and the Gulf – I was the one who looked after the bees, the one he trusted with this. He said I had a sensitivity that most men lacked, that I understood their rhythms and patterns. He was right. I learned how to really listen to the bees and I spoke to them as though they were one breathing body with a heart, because, you see, bees work together. Even when, at the end of summer, the drones are killed by workers to preserve food resources, they are still working as one entity. They communicate to one another through a dance. It took me years to understand them, and once I did, the world around me never looked or sounded the same again.

But, as the years passed, the desert was slowly growing, the climate becoming harsh, rivers drying up, farmers struggling; only the bees were drought-resistant, 'Look at these little warriors,' Afra would say on the days when she came with Sami to visit the apiaries, a tiny bundle wrapped up in her arms, 'Look at them still working, when everything else is dying!' Afra always prayed for rain, because she feared the dust storms and the droughts. When a dust storm was coming we could see, from our veranda, the sky above the city turn purple, and then there was a whistle deep in the atmosphere, and Afra would run around the house closing all the doors, bolting all the windows and shutters.

\* \* \*



Every Saturday we would go to Mustafa's house for dinner. Dahab and Mustafa would cook together, Mustafa measuring every ingredient, every spice, meticulously on the scales, as if one tiny mistake would ruin the whole meal. Dahab was a tall woman, almost the same height as her husband, and she would stand beside him and shake her head, as I'd seen her do with Firas and Aya. 'Hurry up,' she would say. 'Hurry up! At this rate we will be eating this Saturday's meal next Saturday.' He hummed while he cooked, and stopped every twenty minutes or so to smoke, standing in the courtyard beneath the flowering tree, biting and sucking on the end of his cigarette.

I would join him, but he was quiet at these times, his eyes glistening from the heat of the kitchen, his thoughts elsewhere. Mustafa began to fear the worst before I did, and I could see the worry in the lines of his face.

They lived on the bottom floor of a block of flats, and the courtyard was enclosed on three sides by the walls of the neighbouring blocks, so that it was always cool and full of shadows. The sounds from the balconies above tumbled down towards us – scraps of conversations, music, the faint murmur of television sets. There were vines in the courtyard, laden with grapes, and a trellis of jasmine covering one wall, and on another a shelf of empty jars and slices of honeycomb.

Most of the courtyard was taken up by a metal garden table positioned right beneath the lemon tree, but there were bird feeders along the edges and a small vegetable patch in a square of soil, where Mustafa tried to grow herbs. Mostly they wilted because there was not enough sunlight. I watched

my cousin as he pressed one of the lemon blossoms between his thumb and forefinger and breathed in the scent.

At these times, during the quiet of a Saturday evening, he began to overthink things, to contemplate; his mind could never rest, was never still. 'Do you ever imagine what it would be like to have a different life?' he asked me on one such evening.

'What do you mean?'

'It scares me sometimes to think how life can go one way or another. What if I was working somewhere in an office? What if you had listened to your father and ended up in his fabric shop? We have a lot to be grateful for.'

I didn't respond to this. While my life could easily have taken a different turn, there was no chance that Mustafa could have ended up in an office. No, his dark thoughts came from somewhere else, as if he had already become afraid of losing everything, as if some echo from the future was reaching back and whispering in his ear.

Much to Mustafa's annoyance, his son Firas would never get up from the computer to help with the meal. 'Firas!' Mustafa would call, heading back to the kitchen, 'Get up before you become glued to that seat!' But Firas would stay on the wicker chair in the living room, in his T-shirt and shorts. He was a lanky boy of twelve with a long face and slightly overgrown hair, and when he smiled, in defiance of his father, for a moment he resembled a Saluki hunting dog, the type you find in the desert.

Aya, who was just a year older than her brother, would hold Sami by the hand and set the table; by this time he

was three and he trotted about like a little man on a mission. She would give him an empty plate or a cup to hold so that he would feel that he was helping her. Aya had long golden hair, like her mother, and Sami would pull at her curls whenever she bent down and giggle as they sprang back up. And then we would all get involved, even Firas – Mustafa would drag him from his chair by a skinny arm – and we would take steaming plates and colourful salads and dips and bread to the table in the courtyard. Sometimes we had red lentil and sweet potato soup with cumin, or kaway with beef and courgettes, or stuffed artichoke hearts or green bean stew, or parsley and bulgur salad, or spinach with pine nuts and pomegranate. Later, honey-soaked baklava and ameweh doughballs dripping with syrup or preserved apricots in jars that Afra had prepared. Firas would be on his phone and Mustafa would snatch it from his hands and put it in one of the empty honey jars, but he would never really get angry with his son – there was a certain humour between them, even when they were in battle with each other.

‘When will I get it back?’ Firas would say.

‘When it snows in the desert.’

And by the time coffee was on the table, the phone would be out of the honey jar and back in Firas’s hands. ‘Next time, Firas, I will not put it in an *empty* jar!’

As long as Mustafa was cooking or eating, he was happy. It was later, when the sun had set and the scent of the night jasmine engulfed us, especially when the air was still and thick, that his face would drop and I knew that he was

thinking, that the stillness and darkness of the night had again brought whispers from the future.

‘What is it, Mustafa?’ I said, one evening when Dahab and Afra were loading the dishwasher after dinner, Dahab’s booming laugh sending the birds up past the buildings and into the night sky. ‘You don’t seem yourself lately.’

‘The political situation is getting worse,’ he said. I knew he was right, though neither of us really wanted to talk about it. He stubbed out his cigarette and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

‘Things will get bad. We all know it, don’t we? But we’re trying to continue living like we did before.’ He stuffed a dough ball in his mouth as if to prove his point. It was late June, and in March of that year the civil war had just begun with protests in Damascus, bringing unrest and violence to Syria. I must have looked down at this point, and maybe he saw the worry on my face, for when I glanced up again, he was smiling.

‘I’ll tell you what, how about we create more recipes for Aya? I have some ideas – eucalyptus honey with lavender!’ And his eyes gleamed as he began considering his new soap product, calling Aya to bring his laptop outside so that, together, they could work out the exact composition. Although Aya was only fourteen at the time, Mustafa was determined to be her teacher. Aya was busy playing with Sami – how the child loved her! He was always desperate to be close to her, always scanning for her with his large, grey eyes. They were the colour of his mother’s eyes. Stone. Or the colour of a newborn baby’s eyes before they change to

brown, except his didn't change, and they didn't turn bluer either. Sami would follow Aya around, pulling at her skirt, and she would pick him up, high in her arms, to show him the birds in the feeders, or the insects and lizards that crawled over the walls and across the concrete patio.

With each recipe, Mustafa and Aya would consider the pigments and acids, the minerals in each type of honey, in order to create a combination that *worked perfectly*, as he put it. Then they would calculate the sugar density, granulation, tendency to absorb moisture from air, immunity from spoilage. I would give suggestions, and they would accept them with a kind smile, but it was Mustafa's mind that worked like the bees. He was the one with the ideas and the intelligence, while I was the one who made it all happen.

And for a while on those evenings, with the apricot sweets and the smell of night jasmine, Firas on his computer and Aya sitting beside us with Sami in her arms while he chewed her hair, and Afra and Dahab's laughter reaching us from the kitchen, on those nights, we were still happy. Life was close enough to normal for us to forget our doubts, or at least to keep them locked away somewhere in the dark recesses of our minds while we made plans for the future.

When the trouble first started, Dahab and Aya left. Mustafa convinced them to go without him. As his fears began to be confirmed, he very quickly made plans, but he needed to stay a while longer to see to the bees. At the time I thought he was being too hasty, that his mother's death when he was

a child – which had haunted him for as long as I knew him – had somehow made him overprotective of the women in his life, and as a result Dahab and Aya were among the first to leave the neighbourhood and were fortunately spared from what was to come. Mustafa had a friend in England, a professor of sociology who had moved there some years ago on account of work, and this man had telephoned Mustafa and urged him to make his way to the United Kingdom; he was convinced the situation would get worse. Mustafa gave his wife and daughter enough money to see them through the journey, while he stayed in Syria with Firas.

‘I can’t just abandon the bees, Nuri,’ he’d said one night, his large hand coming down over his face and his beard, as if he was trying to wipe off the sombre expression he always wore now. ‘The bees are family to us.’

Before things became really bad, Mustafa and Firas would join us for dinner in the evenings and we would sit on the veranda together and watch the city below and hear the rumble of a distant bomb, see the smoke rising into the sky. Later, as the situation worsened, we started to talk about leaving together. We would gather around my illuminated globe in the half darkness of early evening while he traced with his finger the journey Dahab and Aya had made. It had been easier for them. In a thick leather wallet, Mustafa had the names and numbers of various smugglers. We went through the books, checking the finances, making calculations about the possible cost of our escape. Of course it was hard to predict, smugglers changed their rates on a whim, but we had a plan, and Mustafa loved plans and lists and itineraries.

They made him feel safe. But I knew this was just talk; Mustafa wasn't ready to leave the bees.

One night, late in the summer, vandals destroyed the hives. They set fire to them, and by the time we got to the apiaries in the morning they were burned to char. The bees had died and the field was black. I will never forget the silence, that deep, never-ending silence. Without the clouds of bees above the field, we were faced with a stillness of light and sky. In that moment, as I stood at the edge of the field where the sun was slanting across the ruined hives, I had a feeling of emptiness, a quiet nothingness that entered me every time I inhaled. Mustafa sat down on the ground in the middle of the field with his legs crossed and his eyes closed. I walked around scanning the ground for live bees and stamped on them because they had no hives or colony. Most of the hives had crumbled completely but a few stood like skeletons with their numbers still visible: twelve, twenty-one, one hundred and twenty-one – the colonies of grandmother, mother and daughter. I knew because I had split the hives myself. Three generations of bees. But they were all gone now. I went home and tucked Sami into bed, sitting for a while beside him as he slept, then I went to the veranda and watched the darkening sky and the brooding city below.

At the bottom of the hill was the Queiq. The last time I saw the river it was full of rubbish. In the winter they fished out the bodies of men and boys. Their hands were tied. Bullets in their heads. That winter day in Bustan al-Qasr, in the southern neighbourhood, I watched them pull the bodies out. I followed them to an old school, where they were laid

out in the courtyard. Inside the building it was dark and there were lit candles in a bucket of sand. A middle-aged woman knelt on the floor next to another bucket, full of water. She was going to clean the faces of the dead men, she said, so that the women who loved them would recognise them when they came searching. If I had been one of the dead men in the river, Afra would have climbed a mountain to find me. She would have swum to the bottom of that river, but that was before they blinded her.

Afra was different before the war. She used to make such a mess all the time. If she was baking, for example, there would be flour on every surface, even on Sami. He would be covered in it. When she painted, she made a mess. And if Sami was painting too, it was even worse, as though they had shaken loaded brushes at the room. Even when she spoke she was messy, throwing words out here, there, taking them back, throwing out different ones. Sometimes she even interrupted herself. When she laughed, she laughed so hard the house would shake.

But when she was sad my world was dark. I didn't have a choice about this. She was more powerful than me. She cried like a child, laughed like bells ringing, and her smile was the most beautiful I've ever seen. She could argue for hours without ever pausing. Afra loved, she hated, and she inhaled the world like it was a rose. All this was why I loved her more than life.

The art she made was amazing. She won awards for her paintings of urban and rural Syria. On Sunday mornings we would all go to the market and set up a stall, just opposite



Hamid, who sold spices and tea. The stall was in the covered part of the souq. It was dark and a bit musty there but you could smell cardamom, cinnamon, aniseed and a million other spices. Even in that dim light, the landscapes in her paintings were not still. It was like they were moving, like the sky in them was moving, like the water in them was moving.

You should have seen the way she was with the customers who approached the stall, businessmen and women, mainly from Europe or Asia. At these times she would sit, very quietly, Sami on her knee, her eyes fixed on the customers, while they moved closer to a painting, lifting their glasses, if they wore them, then stepping back, often so far back they bumped into Hamid's customers, and then they would freeze there for a long time. And often the customers would say, 'Are *you* Afra?' And she would reply, 'Yes, I am Afra.' And that would be enough. Painting sold.

There was a whole world in her, and the customers could see this. For that moment, while they stared at the painting and then looked at her, they saw what she was made of. Afra's soul was as wide as the fields and desert and sky and sea and river that she painted, and as mysterious. There was always more to know, to understand, and as much as I knew, it wasn't enough, I wanted more. But in Syria there is a saying: inside the person you know, there is a person you do not know. I loved her from the day I met her, at my cousin Ibrahim's eldest son's wedding, at the Dama Rose Hotel, Damascus. She was wearing a yellow dress, with a silk hijab. And her eyes, not the blue of the sea, or the blue of the sky, but the inky blue of the Queiq River, with swirls of brown and green.

I remember the night of our wedding, two years later, and how she had wanted me to take off her hijab. I removed the hairpins, gently, one by one, unwrapping the material and seeing for the first time her long black hair, so dark, it was like the sky above the desert on a night with no stars.

But what I loved most was her laugh. She laughed like we would never die.

When the bees died, Mustafa was ready to leave Aleppo. We were about to go when Firas went missing, so we waited for him. Mustafa would hardly talk during this time, his mind completely preoccupied, imagining one thing or another. Every so often he would make a suggestion about where Firas might be. 'Maybe he has gone to find one of his friends, Nuri,' or, 'Maybe he can't bring himself to leave Aleppo – he is hiding somewhere so that we will stay,' or, one time, 'Maybe he has died, Nuri. Maybe my son has died.'

Our bags were packed and we were ready, but the days and nights passed with no sign of Firas. So Mustafa worked in a morgue in an abandoned building, where he would record the details and cause of death – bullets, shrapnel, explosion. It was strange to see him indoors, shut away from the sun. He had a black book, and he worked round the clock, writing down with the stub of a pencil the details of the dead. When he found identification on the corpses, his task was easier; other times he would record a distinguishing feature, like the colour of their hair or eyes, the particular shape of their nose, a mole on their left cheek. Mustafa did

this until that winter day when I brought his son in from the river. I recognised the teenage boy dead on the slabs in the courtyard of the school. I asked two men with a car to help me take the body to the morgue. When Mustafa saw Firas, he asked us to lay him down on the table, then he closed his boy's eyes and stood for a long time, unmoving, holding his hand. I stood in the doorway while the other men left, the sound of an engine, the car pulling away, and then there was stillness, such stillness, and the light came in from the window above the table where the boy was lying, where Mustafa was standing holding on to his hand. For a while there was no sound, not a bomb or a bird or a breath.

Then Mustafa moved away from the table, put on his glasses and carefully sharpened the small pencil with a knife, and, sitting down at his desk, he opened the black book and wrote:

Name - My beautiful boy.

Cause of death - This broken world.

And that was very the last time Mustafa recorded the names of the dead.

Exactly a week after this, Sami was killed.