

The Book of Fire

Brought up in London, Christy Lefteri is the child of Cypriot refugees. Her novel *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* is an international bestseller, selling well over a million copies worldwide and published in over forty countries. *The Beekeeper of Aleppo* won the Aspen Literary Prize, was runner up for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize and won the Prix de l'Union Interalliée for Best Foreign Novel in France. It is currently being performed as a play, adapted by Nesrin Alrefaai and Matthew Spangler for Nottingham Playhouse, and touring the UK. *Songbirds*, her follow-up novel, was a *Sunday Times* and international bestseller.



The Book of Fire

CHRISTY
LEFTERI

MANILLA
PRESS



First published in the UK in 2023 by
MANILLA PRESS
An imprint of Zaffre Publishing Group
A Bonnier Books UK company
4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square, London, WC1B 4DA
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

Copyright © Christy Lefteri, 2023

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the
prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Christy Lefteri to be identified as Author of this
work has been asserted by her in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and
incidents are either the products of the author's
imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, or actual
events is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978-1-78658-156-3
Export ISBN: 978-1-78658-157-0

Also available as an ebook and an audiobook

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Manilla Press is an imprint of Zaffre Publishing Group
A Bonnier Books UK company
www.bonnierbooks.co.uk





For Evie







1

THIS MORNING, I MET THE man who started the fire.
He did something terrible, but then, so did I.
I left him.

I left him, and now he may be dead. I can see him clearly, exactly as he was this morning, sitting beneath the ancient tree, his eyes blue as a summer sky.

The man I left to die was never the type to come to the Kafeneon for a Greek coffee and bougatsa. He kept himself to himself, so I'd only ever greet him in passing, usually as he walked from his massive villa down to the sea and I went up to the top of the mountain with Rosalie, our greyhound. Even then, he hardly made any effort. He smiled with distracted eyes and didn't bother to say a word.

He was a property developer who had moved here from the city. None of us in the village liked him that much, even before the fire. And we have been justified, really.

Was it Aristotle who said that man is a political animal? Not that we are all born to take an active interest in party politics, but it is in our nature to live in a *polis*, a community. So, as a joke, we called this guy Mr Monk, because he seemed to live like the monks in the monastery in Olympia, except that he was rich and very well dressed. I can't even remember his real name.

In mythology, Zeus gave Hermes two gifts for humankind: shame and justice. When Hermes asked if he should distribute these gifts to some and not others, Zeus said no. Every single person should possess these gifts, so that they could all learn to live together. Even in the distant past, people understood the importance of community, so they infused their stories with these morals. Zeus even said to Hermes that if someone was without a sense of shame or justice when doing wrong, they should be put to death by their community.

But that was centuries ago, and we've come a long way since then, right?

Mr Monk stole the world. At least, the part of the world that I call my own. He obliterated beautiful mornings.

For many years, I was in the habit of waking early as the sun rose over the firs. I'd open the window, summer or winter, to take in their smell, to watch them stand so tall and silent. In the winter, they appeared like ghosts through the fog, and in the spring, they were green and fresh and bright, and heather bloomed by the thousands in their shadows. In the summer, light fell upon them so peacefully. At such an early hour, everything was soft and harmless. I used to make a cup of tea and stand for a while, looking out of the window.



My husband was nearly always still asleep. He was the type to work into the night. Only the birds could be heard. Nothing else. Autumn was my favourite season, the way the trees looked like flames upon the hill and the air was crisp. I loved sensing the coming cold, the whisper of it on the wind.

He took all this, the man who started the fire.

The point is that Mr Monk lacked humanity.

To live our lives with a sense of justice in our hearts would inevitably mean seeking fairness in the way people are treated by others – or indeed by us. It's not that Mr Monk hasn't acknowledged what he's done; it's just that he has been trying to get away with it. As for shame – shame is a tradition in Greece! But perhaps Mr Monk would not feel bad for doing wrong had he not been caught in the act. My question is, does he feel guilt? Is he suffering for what he has done to us all?

Then, there's this: yesterday, ash rained down from the sky. My daughter and I both saw it. It is January now, five months since the fire. We were standing at the window that faces the forest. All you can see from that window are the endless skeletons of pines, some taller, others merely stumps. Over this fell the ash.

'It looks like snowflakes,' I said to Chara, who was standing by my shoulder; I could hear her breathing, but she said nothing. My lovely, sweet Chara, too old for her age. Her name means *joy*. Chara with a silent C. She loved it once, loved how its happiness was a secret kept from all who didn't know its origin, like a secret summer garden. There are many secret places in her mind, even at such a young age, and



some are not full of light or colour or ancient trees: some are dark; some are empty; they are stark.

The ash began to settle on the fig tree in the garden, the only living tree, where my husband, Tasso, sat quietly, staring out towards the slope of the mountain, his bandaged hands resting on his lap, palms facing up, as if he were waiting for something to fall from the sky. I saw him shudder from the cold, but he did not move to come in; instead, he inclined his head and looked up. Rosalie sat by his feet, as always. His protector.

‘The ash is settling,’ I said, as if Chara couldn’t see it herself.

‘It’s snow, Mamma,’ she huffed and walked away.

I heard her footsteps along the old wooden floor, then silence.

Was it really snow? I looked more closely, strained my eyes. Indeed, it was. It glimmered, sparkled beneath the midday light. It brought new life. Of course, ash would not be falling from above months after the fire. But my mind was playing tricks on me.

I found Chara in her bedroom, sitting cross-legged on the bed, her back facing the mirror, naked from the waist up, her tiny ten-year-old breasts just appearing, round and soft, egg-like, brand-new. She doesn’t pay them any attention. At her age, I was dying to buy my first sports bra from C&A. But Chara doesn’t want to focus on her future; her eyes are on the past.

She was peering over her shoulder, eyes fixed on her reflection.

‘I can’t really see it,’ she said. ‘How does it look now?’

We do this every day: record the changes with words. In the last two weeks, less has changed.

I sat down beside her and ran my fingers along her scar, which stretched from shoulder to shoulder and down her spine.

‘It’s such a beautiful tree,’ I said, ‘almost exactly like the ancient chestnut tree in the forest. Can you feel the bark?’

She nodded.

‘And the branches?’

‘Crooked and long,’ she said.

‘Without leaves,’ I added.

‘And no chestnuts yet.’

‘It’s a bare tree,’ I said. ‘You can see its bare beauty, its grooves and curves and all its potential for new life.’

Chara was no longer looking over her shoulder; her gaze had settled on the magnolia flowers on the duvet cover. She was lost in thought. Then she said, ‘Thanks, Mamma,’ and turned to give me a kiss on the cheek. It was the most tender kiss. A whisper. It held secrets of both love and resentment, hope and fear. It was so soft, as if she was afraid to assert any of those feelings too strongly.

Since the fire, her love has become delicate: she lives life as if she is holding a butterfly in her palm, afraid that it will die. Before the fire, she was fierce, yes, with everything out there – or at least as much of it as she could already understand; her love was wild and ruthless. If she believed something, she would make sure she was heard. If she felt something, she expressed it with passion. This was how I had taught her.

Now, she is as quiet and subdued as our surroundings.

I thank the heavens that my daughter is alive. But she is a ghost of herself. The fire has stolen her, too.

So, this morning, I was out for a walk, as usual. Rosalie must have smelt him, because she ran off the dirt-path, panting; I followed her paw prints.

Mr Monk was leaning against the ancient chestnut tree, staring up at the sky. His blue eyes.

No. I can't think about this now.

Seeing him has brought it all back. It's pressing in on me, the fire. It's seeping in around the door-frame of my bedroom; it's making the necklace around my neck tingle with heat, turning the whites of my eyes red, filling my lungs.

But I won't cry. I have cried too much.

Maybe I can write it down. Maybe, that way, I can allow myself to remember without burning. Remember it as if it is a story from long, long ago. A fairy tale with a happy ending, like one of those in the beautifully illustrated books on the shelf in Maria's Kafeneon.

I will call it *The Book of Fire*.



The Book of Fire

Once upon a Harry Lime.

This is how my dad started every story, even if the story was as true as the nose on his face. Once upon a Harry Lime, once upon a time. Because he was Greek and far from home, he wanted to belong so much that he used cockney rhyming slang whenever he could slip it in, even when it sounded ridiculous. Yes, I remember those days when he came home from playing the bouzouki in smoky London tavernas, wearing that tattered fisherman's hat and reeking of cigarettes. He went out and played music all night, so that he could soothe people's souls and bandage their hearts – people who wanted to be reminded of home, because none of us ever want to forget where we came from. That's what he said. I would hear the key in the lock and wake up to get a hug, and he would tell me a story so that I could get back to sleep.

He would never return to live in his homeland, but I would go in his place, following the man I loved because it already felt like home.



Once upon a Harry Lime, there was a beautiful village inside an ancient forest.

How I wish I could start the story like this and tell you that it all took place a long time ago.

Once upon a time, before the fire, there was an ancient forest.

Before the fire, there were pines and firs that reached up to the sky and a thousand-year-old chestnut that my great-grandad sat beneath at the end of a hundred-day journey. Story goes, he was so exhausted that he stayed beneath the gigantic tree for days, leaning on its twisted bark, in the cool shade. So he rested there among rock lizards and dormice, white-breasted hedgehogs and beech marten, rabbits and deer, red foxes and jackals. He ate juicy purple figs and blackberries. At night, he listened to the howl of the wolves as they roamed the highlands.

Once upon a time, *mia fora ke ena kairo* – *don't forget your Greek, young lady*, my father would say to me – there was a beautiful village inside an ancient forest on the slope of a mountain that looked down upon the sea.

In this village, there was a bungalow surrounded by fig trees, olive trees and a wildflower meadow. Over the decades and centuries, there were many joys and many losses that could be peeled back like the fine translucent layers of an onion.

There lived a woman who was a musician; people said she was a very good musician, but she didn't often believe it. She taught children how to read and play music, and when school was over for the day, they would visit her house one by one, a book of songs tucked beneath one arm and their instrument in the other.





Her husband was an artist. He had the darkest eyes in the world, which twinkled whenever he looked at her. She lit up his darkness, he often said, and this was true. His eyes reminded her of a clear night sky with a million stars. He loved to paint the forest; in fact, he *needed* to paint it, and – if it was up to him – he would have painted it forever.

They had a young daughter whose name meant joy, who had grown up playing in the woods. Through the seasons and the years, she spent so much time there, climbing trees and getting to know the brooks and the creeks, that she was almost like one of the creatures who lived there.

One summer's day, once upon a time, long, long ago—

No. One summer's day – in fact, one day in the summer – a scorching dry day, early in the morning, they all sat at the round table in the garden, having breakfast: yoghurt and honey, cereal and fruit and a big loaf of crusty bread from the bakery. The woman drank tea with milk in it, like her mother used to back in England, and the man drank Greek coffee in a tiny cup, and the girl downed a huge glass of milk. In a while, the man would take his daughter to a roller-skating party in the courtyard at the centre of the village, and the woman had a student arriving: a ninety-three-year-old grandma who was learning to play the drums. They owned a drum set, which they kept in the shed with some of the larger instruments, like the double bass and the harp.

There was quite a wind that day, and it blew the napkins from the table, and they fluttered to the ground.

'Look. Like birds!' the girl said, for she noticed everything, like her father.





‘You know, I was brilliant at roller-skating,’ the father said. The girl raised her eyebrows and dunked a piece of bread into her father’s coffee.

‘If you don’t believe me, watch this.’ He stood up and did some moves. ‘And this is how you brake. Are you watching? You need to learn. Come and try!’

‘Let her finish her breakfast – you’ll be late to the party,’ the mother said. ‘Show her when you get there.’

The dog, a beautiful greyhound, was at their feet, waiting for crumbs to fall.

‘I had no idea you could roller-skate,’ the mother said.

‘I’ve never mentioned it before?’

The mother shook her head and smiled. ‘Unless I wasn’t listening.’

‘I was on them every day. I would even go to the city so I could use the ramps.’

‘This is so unlike you! You’re so ...’

‘So what ... ?’ the girl said.

‘I don’t know. Your pappa is so gentle, I guess, and quiet – it’s so unlike him.’ She glanced at her husband, and his eyes twinkled, and her long fingers tapped on the table as if she was playing something in her head.

‘Well, I guess we all have a side to ourselves that doesn’t seem to fit into the rest of us. Like an extra jigsaw puzzle piece. I even used to make my own roller-skates.’

‘Huh?’ the mother said.

‘Huh?’ the girl said.

‘Woof!’ the dog barked, and they all glanced at each other and burst out laughing.



‘Oh my god,’ the girl said. ‘I reckon she understands everything we are saying.’ And she ruffled the dog’s head and kissed its nose.

And then the dog changed. It was very sudden, as if an invisible person had whispered something disturbing into its ear. Its ears went back, its tail down, and it whimpered. Something had frightened it.

A shiver went through the mother’s body, and she stopped tapping her fingers on the table.

‘What is it, my love?’ the man said to the dog.

The dog ran to the end of the garden, where the forest began. It lifted its head and sniffed the air, then came back to the man and whimpered again, looking into his eyes. Then the sounds began: the sounds of the animals. Birds screeched, wolves howled, and the forest seemed to crack and pop.

‘What’s happening?’ the girl asked.

‘Don’t worry, sweetie,’ the man replied.

But the mother began to worry, especially when she saw that her husband looked frightened. They could not soothe the dog. They rubbed its ears and gave it some bread, but it would not take any. Then the birds flew over, in hundreds and thousands – a black mass like a huge cloud, filling the sky as they fled.

The family all looked up towards the slope of the mountain, which was covered in trees, and saw a tower of smoke.

‘Oh my ...’ the man mouthed, unable to even speak.

And that was when they saw the trees alight, glowing orange and red as the cracking and the popping became



louder. And the sound of the animals became louder, too, coming down the mountain.

They all froze, in exactly the way we imagine we would never do: their limbs stiff, their eyes wide and full of fear. It happened so fast: in a few moments, the smoke was thick and black – a wall, rising high, consuming the sky where the birds had been, swallowing the blue.

They began to feel the heat. They felt it on their skin, in their eyes, in their lungs. The mother even felt the tingle of the gold necklace around her neck.

Then came the sirens, like the sirens of war.

‘Let’s go,’ the mother said, and when the others failed to move, she called, ‘Now!’ to wake them from their stupor.

They ran out of their bungalow, holding nothing, black smoke blanketing the sky above their heads. And as they ran, the mother looked back, one last time, to see a tall fir light up like a giant candle as it swayed and tipped towards the house. She felt herself swaying like the tree; she felt like she was alight. Her husband pulled at her arm, and they ran, the dog ahead, turning to make sure its family was following. They ran down towards the sea, down down down.

They were suddenly stopped by a police officer, who held open his arms and stood in their way.

‘What’re you doing, man?!’ the husband said. ‘Get out of our fucking way!’

But the man was like a robot; he didn’t move and didn’t listen.

Police cars flashed around them. The officers had herded around fifteen people into a circle, like sheep, and there they stood, some hugging, some alone, all stunned.



‘What are you doing?’ the husband said again, sweat dripping down the sides of his face. He held the girl’s hand on one side and his wife’s on the other.

‘You need to stay here,’ the officer said. ‘Instructions are to stay put. It’s safer.’ The officer was young and frightened, the whites of his eyes red.

A plane flew overhead through the smoke, low, and they felt its rumble in their chests.

‘Don’t be ridiculous – the fire is coming! We need to get to the water,’ the husband said. ‘Let these people go!’ And he pushed past the officer before anyone else could stop them.

But after just a few yards, the husband stopped in his tracks and let go of his wife’s hand. ‘Keep going! I have to go back. I have to look for my father.’

‘You can’t!’ the mother cried. ‘It’s too dangerous!’

The girl became more frightened and clung on to his arm.

‘I have to. Please keep going – you have to get to the sea.’

And he prised his daughter’s hands from his arm and went back up, veering to the east where the smoke was less dense, where his father lived alone.

The mother and the girl and the dog could do nothing but continue to run down towards the sea, the greyhound leading the way, until they reached a dead end. A huge white villa blocked their path.

The sky was black now, like a black sea above them.

They had to turn back and run up the path they had taken; then they continued along the road, running parallel to the sea, and took the next path that headed down. But that, too, was blocked by high locked gates – the garden of another house.



The mother stopped now. Her lungs hurt; she could taste the smoke. She leant forwards and coughed, hands on thighs. The girl began to cry, and the dog pulled her skirt, urging her not to stop, not to give up now.

The wind was so strong, igniting the fire and pushing it down the hill, ever closer. Their skin felt hot, their eyes running. They followed the dog and ran back up to the main road, where a house was aflame and a car was aflame, where birds lay dead in the street. People in cars were trapped along a narrow road – at least five cars, bumper to bumper, blowing their horns. One woman jumped out of the driver's seat, dashed to the passenger side, where she took a child into her arms and abandoned the car. Others stayed put. Animals ran past, also heading down to the sea. The mother saw a couple of rabbits, a lone jackal and, in the distance, she was sure she saw a wolf dashing between one garden and another.

They had paused for too long – only a few seconds, but it felt too long. The girl was taking long gasps of air, preparing herself to run again.

‘Come on!’ her mother said.

They kept running and saw some people taking the next path along – a family, an old man with a young boy in his arms, a woman holding the hand of an older woman, two children gripping each other tightly.

The mother and the girl and the dog joined this group, and without words, they all headed again down the path and reached yet another gate. This one was not as high as the previous one.

‘We can climb over,’ the old man said. ‘We have no choice.’



The mother turned to see the fire was about to reach the house they had just passed; the electricity pylon behind it was falling on the roof.

‘Mamma,’ the girl said, ‘the fire is so fast – it’s too fast for us.’

‘No, it’s not,’ the mother said.

The old man was strong; he was a machine. He steadied himself and used his hands to help each person up and over the gate. One by one, they placed their feet in his palms and heaved themselves over the gate.

‘Grandad,’ the little boy called, reaching up with his hands.

‘Go, my boy. I’ll follow. Go with this nice lady here.’

And the lady took the boy’s hand, and the boy went with her reluctantly, crying as he ran. The people ran as fast as they could through the garden of this villa, while the mother stopped to help the old man over the fence, but without something to climb on, he was stuck.

‘Grab something!’ the mother said.

‘There’s nothing here,’ the old man replied.

The mother scanned her environment. There was a rock garden close by, and she tried to lift one of the rocks to throw it over the fence, but it was far too heavy. The girl was helping her mother, the dog panting, urging them to run, when they heard the old man’s voice.

‘There’s no time,’ he said. ‘Please, young lady, go. Please leave me.’

And she looked through the fence at the old man’s eyes; they were severe and true and full of tears. She reached out her hand, and he did, too, and she touched his fingers through the gate.

‘Go,’ he said.



And so they continued, and as she ran she cried, for there was something about this old man, something about the sincerity in his eyes, that reminded her of her own father. They ran through the green garden, trampling over the flowers, until they reached, on the other side, a gate. This time it was not locked; they pushed it open, and a path led them down to the sea.

But the fire had now reached the house whose garden they had just run through; it had happened so quickly. The fire had opened its mouth and swallowed it up, and the windows glowed, and the walls began to fall. The dog ran ahead, looking back every few seconds, barking whenever they wavered even a little. The girl was coughing as she ran, but they could see the sea now, shining. They just had to reach it.

They went down down down as the heat pressed in on them, a colossal monster breathing flames just behind them, and at the point when they reached the edge of a low cliff, the girl began to scream. The heat had penetrated her skin, and later, much later, she would tell her mother that she felt as though she were melting.

‘Jump!’ the mother called and held tight to her daughter’s hand.

They jumped at once into the water, the fire a massive wall along the cliff.

Once upon a Harry Lime, once upon a time, there was a mother and a father, a girl and a dog, who lived in a bungalow, in a beautiful village, in an ancient forest that looked down upon the sea.

