

DIAMANTOULA TRIANTAFYLLOU

sharing
her apples



FYLATOS
PUBLISHING



Copyright © 2023 Diamantoula Triantafyllou

Diamantoula Triantafyllou asserts the moral rights to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events, other than those clearly in the public domain, are either the product of the author's imagination, or, if real, they are not portrayed with geographical or historical accuracy, and are used to accommodate the story. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is purely and entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published, and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN: 978-960-658-197-7

e-mail: contact@fylatos.com

web: www.fylatos.com

Pagination-Design: © Fylatos Publishing

DIAMANTOULA TRIANTAFYLLOU

sharing
her apples

Fylatos Publishing

MMXXIII

AUTHOR'S NOTE

June 2017

The inspiration for this novel came after I read the transcripts of the then trials at the International Criminal Court—the ICTY¹—in The Hague, concerning the war crimes and crimes against humanity committed in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war in the nineteen nineties.

Notwithstanding the local perceptions and ethnic politics that led to the civil war in Yugoslavia, or the extreme ideologies and nationalism that emerged when the Communism era collapsed, I often wondered why the miseries of civil war are allowed, to happen and happen all over again. Who are the sponsors of armed conflicts, if not the people themselves and the ambition of States, all those who intend to promote instability, so, as to gain wealth and influence? Could it ever be possible to decide on an international control mechanism to implement and monitor peace?

I dream that the UN body, for example, be given more powers and budget, and be reformed in such a way as to enable it to intervene early, and 'stop' some of the potent clashes before they can evolve into armed conflicts.

Given the intricate complexity of relations within and between nations, there is a stark reality. It em-

1 The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY)

braces the notion that the prevention of armed conflicts would be difficult, but I'd like to believe it would not be impossible.

Too many differences exist that we need to learn to understand and live with; too many religions to tolerate and respect; too much prejudice and misinformation about our existence on this earth and the transience of life.

It is a matter of education, a matter of broadening and deepening our civilizations, a matter of making our world 'more civilized,' increasing the knowledge and acceptance of the rhythms and diversity of humanity, until compassion prevails and hope becomes a realistic expectation for the majorities to pursue; until we learn to live our finite lives in peaceful ways together, in our finite planet called Earth.

I'd like to be an optimist; to believe we are on the right road to a sort of earthly civilization that embraces all creatures with equal intention and care. To love all things 'great and small' because they are beautiful, as the English hymn goes. A parity of esteem².

2 Parity of esteem (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parity_of_esteem): "Parity of esteem can be used to establish a theory to overcome inter-communal conflict. Promoters of the theory argue that 'parity of esteem offers a language for negotiation of a post-conflict equilibrium.' This negotiation begins with the communities recognizing the stalemate of their position. Rather than continue trying to out-do each other, the communities should attempt to negotiate a peaceful coexistence in a shared physical space, despite their cultural differences."

I'd like to dedicate this book:

To all my former colleagues in the **Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO)**, at the European Commission, who worked there during the Balkan crises in the late nineteen nineties. I'd call them 'invisible heroes.'

Their particular commitment and sensitivity to the aid operations and to the corresponding policy management; their efficient manner in handling all issues which had, at their core, the alleviation of human suffering; and the extraordinary effort they all made to manage an unusually large budget, allocated by the EU as its contribution to humanitarian assistance in the region, deserve recognition. In close co-operation with UN agencies, the Red Cross family and non-governmental aid organizations, thousands of civilians have been saved, and given the prospect and means to build new lives where once there was only war and destruction. In particular; I'd mention:

Emma Bonino, the first European Commissioner responsible for ECHO, who left her indelible mark on the implementation of humanitarian aid in Europe, and was also instrumental in setting up the International Criminal Court (ICC), based in The Hague, to address war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Esko Kentschynskyj, my then Head of Unit, for his sensibility and responsiveness to humanitarian causes, avoiding trade-offs in policies and actions.

And **Mary Teresa Moran**, an ex-EC colleague, for her excellent cooperation in policy matters, and her support during the demanding work schedule I had to face at the time.

Last, I'd also like to remind the reader what humanitarian aid is; how and to whom it is selflessly offered and why. It is part of all of us: the urge to help our fellow men and women in dire circumstances resides

within us, sometimes dormant, but always waiting to be awakened, re-educated and acted upon.

“...to save and preserve life during emergencies and their immediate aftermath and natural disasters that have entailed major loss of life, physical, psychological or social suffering or material damage... and that this aid is accorded to victims without discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnic group, religion, sex, age, nationality or political affiliation and must not be guided by, or subject to, political considerations; ...and that, humanitarian decisions must be taken impartially and solely according to the victims’ needs and interests...” Council Regulation (EC) No 1257/96 of 20 June 1996 concerning humanitarian aid.

A thousand thanks:

To Elizabeth Fogarty, dear friend and ex- EC colleague, who has provided helpful insight and tidied up some of the language in this novel.

To Richie Billing, a fellow author and friend, who recommended to me the services of my editor, Anna, and helped me understand the particulars of publishing.

To my excellent editor Anna Civolani, who has honed the flow and the language of the story. My gratitude for her patience and diligence. It's been my good fortune to have worked with her, and I hope we work together for a long, long time.

Also, thanks, especially to Konstantinos Fylatos and Anna Pappa, for their patience with me to all issues I needed clarification and their team at FYLATOS PUBLISHING for their global support and effort to bring this work to print.

This book would never come to be
but for the whole-hearted support of my sister,
Yvonne, always there for me.

Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night...

W. H. Auden (September 1, 1939)

CONTENTS

| | |
|------------------------------------|------------|
| AUTHOR'S NOTE | 5 |
| I ANNIE, September 2015 | 15 |
| II A MULTI-ETHNIC WORLD | 25 |
| KATARINA | |
| The place | 25 |
| In love | 33 |
| A peaceful, lively province | 38 |
| Relations... | 45 |
| Lust or love | 53 |
| Those adolescent dreams | 62 |
| The break-up | 70 |
| Taken | 81 |
| III ANOTHER "WESTERN WORLD" | 87 |
| HELEN | |
| Happy families | 87 |
| And love will find a way... | 94 |
| Earthly joys | 102 |
| Grief | 106 |
| IV A DARK, DARK PLACE | 115 |
| KATARINA | |
| Relief House No. 8 | 115 |

| | |
|------------------------------|------------|
| When facts sink in | 120 |
| Endless misery | 129 |
| Taking pity on her, or what? | 135 |
| Disclosure | 143 |
| Is it all lust and hate? | 151 |
| V SURVIVING | 159 |
| HELEN | |
| A ride to past and present | 159 |
| More Grief | 168 |
| KATARINA | |
| The baby | 175 |
| Ill-disposed attitudes | 187 |
| Bonds and Loyalties | 198 |
| Devious plans... 1996 | 205 |
| The meeting | 213 |
| HELEN | |
| Sarajevo | 217 |
| KATARINA | |
| A sense of normality | 224 |
| Is it a new life? | 226 |
| HELEN | |
| The decision | 235 |

| | |
|--------------------------------------------|------------|
| VI OF BITTERNESS AND REVENGE | 243 |
| KATARINA | |
| In Rome | 243 |
| Is it one of the same? | 252 |
| Owned | 259 |
| The planning | 269 |
| With Billy at last | 275 |
| VII THE LAST ACT | 289 |
| HELEN | |
| The photograph, London, March 2001 | 289 |
| KATARINA | |
| In prison and at peace, Italy, Spring 2001 | 301 |
| HELEN | |
| Insanity and logic | 311 |
| KATARINA | |
| My beautiful nightmare, June 2001 | 315 |
| HELEN | |
| A cup of tea | 323 |
| KATARINA | |
| Two things to say | 332 |
| Defeating her pain, July 2, 2001 | 341 |
| VII ANNIE 2016 | 347 |

I

ANNIE

September 2015

It had been two years since Helen's burial, and Annie still missed her as much as she did on the day of her funeral. She had always felt dependent on Helen and safe in her presence. How they would laugh together, argue and squabble, then laugh again, most of the time like sisters rather than mother and daughter. Well, Helen was firm and occasionally strict, but also tender, even when she had to tell Annie off, or straighten things out when Annie misbehaved. With Helen, she had learned to be content and happy.

She picked up the letter—a one-page note packed with her compact writing—and sniffed it. It had lost the faint fern scent from Helen's talcum powder, but kept the last words she wrote frozen in time—her last wishes and advice.

Dated November 3rd, 2013, it said:

My dearest, darling child,

Do not grieve. I have tried to spare you. I ought to walk to my peace maker with a clear mind and an open heart. At least, this is what Father Freddy, who heard my last confession, has instructed me to do. I'm sure you appreciate I wouldn't want to disappoint him or God.

I have been sick for almost a year now, and I have always been aware it is incurable. Yet, hope defies logic, and it loves to survive in

us until the very end. My mother was like that, and I scorned it at the time, but I finally realize I am no different from her in this regard.

I had hoped to conceal my illness from you, at least until you would finish your studies, but I've been too optimistic in assuming I would last for so long. An academic degree is something I have always desired for you, even before you had decided what to do with your life – be a writer, as you have so often stated since you were twelve. I had to interrupt my studies once I got married. But God be my witness, I have never regretted any of the life I have lived without it. Only occasionally have I wondered what potential opportunities or career prospects I could have pursued if I had had formal qualification. But none of that is of any importance now.

I shall be gone when you receive this letter; and I will have selfishly avoided the horrors of remorse for the disclosure of long-kept secrets: the particulars of your birth and your biological mother's life. When I had you entrusted to me, I made a deal not to reveal such information before you reached middle-age. I should say, not before you were in the mature years of your life, wise enough to embrace that kind of information. As you see, my disease had other plans for me.

I welcomed you into my life when you were barely four years old, a neglected little girl amid a ruined country and traditions that burdened its people, whose reconciliation could take long, if it ever took place.

You were much loved by Katarina, your own blood-mother, your *first* mother, who knew she would be unable to care for you proper-

ly. Tormented by her awful “ghosts”, she was afraid she might lose her sanity. And I happened to be there, a lonely, wealthy woman, more than eager to love you as I had loved my own child, my Jamie. When I lost him, he was about the same age you were when I met you. You have seen the photographs in the album kept on the shelf above my bed, and you have learnt what happened from my father.

Katarina Fatka Gorovici became my dear friend and belated sister; she entrusted you to me before she went to prison, over a plea to raise you as my own daughter – as if I needed such persuasion. I have done my best ever since.

I leave you her manuscript. She wrote it while in prison.

I now beg you to read it with an open mind, and be tolerant of her “demons.” Do not judge her harshly. She has had a very troubled life, beyond her control. Barely mentioned during her trial, these issues have been unable to taint her heart, but have overpowered her logic. Believe me: she would have sacrificed anything to change that. She had been trying all along, but in the end, she failed to come through unscathed. The erosion in her mind was perhaps too deep to mend.

Read it! I am confident that you are going to understand it, like I did; bear in mind that every so often we are not meant to control all of our destiny. The narrative is written in the third-person, as in her own mind she refused to accept these unspeakable happenings as part of *her* life. Her nature was quiet, gentle, and considerate of people, despite her offense.

My darling child, please remember Katarina always took responsibility for her pains, her battles, and her actions. So, despite everything, your biological mother was a fighter and a winner. And I believe that you are too.

Your loving *second* mother, forever,
Helen

Although Annie had two mothers, she had known only Helen in person.

Katarina was what? Some blurred images that occasionally crossed her consciousness; a kind of sensorial memory of someone warmly hugging her. She vaguely remembered her low, reassuring voice; the sense of security flowing over her; the comfort of holding her hand. Annie closed her eyes, jolting her memory for the hundredth time, but she could not make out Katie's features, nor could she recognize any particular words being said so long ago.

There it was – Katarina's photograph in the pile of paper Helen had received from the prison authorities; a dirty, tatty, black and white snapshot from her teenage days.

She was standing next to another girl, taller than her, at the edge of a clearing in a wooded area, under some tall trees that looked like mountain pines. Both girls were grinning at something or someone unseen; most likely, at the person taking their picture. Her face appeared more undefined and darker than her friend's, perhaps because of the shade of the trees and the poor quality of the photo. Annie could not tell the exact colours of her hair, her complexion or even the clothes she was wearing. Nor had she been able to see much more in the black and white images of a much older Katarina, published by the Italian press on the occasion of the trial.

On the back of the photograph it was written, “Katie and Jana. Best friends always and forever. November, 1991” – the kind of language teenagers used to express an everlasting relationship, perhaps one not meant to be damaged. Annie herself had once written something similar about her friendship with Dona, her childhood playmate whom she now saw occasionally.

Flooded by memories of growing up, she closed her eyes. “Where are you now, Mama?” she murmured. All those happy years had passed so fast; she had taken Helen’s care for granted. Don’t children usually do it? Content in her silky cocoon, Annie had never asked questions about her first mother.

But to her credit, Helen had never kept it a secret that she was her second mother; at least not since Annie was old enough to talk about it and have some understanding of it. She’d say that her birth mother, her first mother, was far away, ill in a hospital, in another country, but that she would get well and “come back to us” one day, maybe quite soon. She’d say that Katarina was good-looking, with striking, almond-shaped green eyes, which cast all the hues of emerald when light reached them from different angles. Also, that Annie looked somewhat like her, except for her round dark blue eyes, which were also beautiful; perhaps, those came from her father. Helen said he was a soldier and died a hero, or something like that.

However, every time the issue came up there was a different setting, and new facts were added, like different whereabouts, or a new twist in the tale about the mother she had never met.

Nevertheless, Helen never missed an opportunity to show Annie that she was loved, and to reassure her that her second mother would always be there to care for her wellbeing and happiness, no matter what.

Annie was her daughter; she was her Mama, as Annie used to call her when she was small.

Katarina was only a name to her. It was registered in her mind as someone who lived far away and was always thinking of them, but too sick or too busy to visit. She had not been curious to know more at that time.



Feeling the draught on her shoulders, Annie stood there, shaking off the stiffness from her desk-bound legs. She strode towards the open window, and spent a few minutes breathing in the mild breeze, filling her lungs with the perfume of damp earth mixed with flowers and grass. She could hear the traffic humming somewhere to the left, at a distance. It was still warm, but the days were becoming shorter and less sunny; the nights, chilling. The clouds were gathering furiously in the sky, forming clusters that hid the stars. Shivering, Annie shut the window and closed the curtains.

Back to her desk, she sat down in front of the PC, trying to put her thoughts together. The room felt peaceful and cosy: it was the perfect time to start writing down her own story. The half-finished manuscript of her second science-fiction novel had been chucked into a drawer, not to be completed any time soon. George, her fiancé, was away for two weeks on a business trip, in Germany. He had always encouraged her to write about her family.

“The story starts with Fatka; or Katie, the short form for her Christian name, like her parents used to call her. Or, it could perhaps start with Helen...” she spoke out loud.

Katie had been unable to imagine a future in which her little girl was present; she had too many “ghosts” to battle with, too much illness eating at her. And Helen, she had raised Annie as her own child in the competitive western world; in a world where tolerance and logic would usually prevail, unlike the place where Katie had grown up. She had been happy as a child, ignorant of her lineage, but happy.

There was no father. There was just Gary, Helen’s father and Annie’s beloved grandfather. He had lived with them in the spacious house she knew as home, in a village called Stone Mount, somewhere in Kent.

For as long as she could remember, Gary had listened keenly to all her childish issues, for hours and hours, always available to discuss her troubles and questions. He was less challenging than Helen, and willing to make sense of her dislikes and preferences; an invaluable ally, counsellor, and nanny. Gary took pleasure in narrating all the family stories, including Helen’s marriage. Of course, he would talk endlessly about Philippa, his legendary love and Helen’s mother. On his death bed, he asked Philippa to slow down her pace, and wait for him so that he could have her again in his arms.

Annie took a paper tissue out of a box on her desk and blew her nose hard. Then she dabbed the tears flooding the corners of her eyes.

“I’ll be all right,” she said to the little cream-white dog lying on the sofa. It pricked up its ears at the sound of her voice. “I’m fine, just fine.” She remembered being eleven or something, reading a children’s tale to another little dog, sprawled on her bed. That was Murky, her first dog, and its fur was black and shiny as onyx. It had been a present from Gary—how excited

and overjoyed she had been the afternoon he brought Murky home.

Annie began to type:

There was that lovely place, a small town called *Villa*, where mountains, rivers and trees combined to create an idyllic habitat that accommodated animals and a small community of people, who lived in harmony together. Once there had been a guesthouse too, a small inn, also named *Villa*, located at the foot of the mountains to the north. It lodged mountaineers in the summer and hunters seeking wild boar and rabbits during the winter. Those days were still vivid in the thoughts and mouths of older people; they told stories about the joys of chasing game across mountainous and woody terrains.

Now, where once had been the old inn stood the Highlands Primary and Secondary schools. They had incorporated some of the original footprint of the *Villa Inn*—rooms that had once housed lovers of the countryside and of the mountain sports, and “sex lovers too,” as school kids enjoyed chanting mischievously.

During Tito’s era, the town’s name was changed to *Jajcenica*, when people coming from Yugoslavia tripled the local population. Its inhabitants, about a thousand families, loved the place. Some of the families who had been in the area for generations still referred to it as *Villa*. Known for its attractions, the town had been a holiday resort for all seasons, where families could relax and spend a few days away from their hectic city lives.

As young people do everywhere, Katie, a local teenager, was looking forward to finishing school and starting her adult life. She was filled with all those dreams, prospects and hopes adolescents harbour in their hearts; contemplating all likely and unlikely great starts and heroic finales.

She would stare at the flowing waters of the Banja River, running through town, and feel confident that she'd overcome any obstacle life was to throw at her. The future seemed to offer only opportunities and pleasure. Optimism was natural to her and kept her smiling. And there was Billy, her Billy; her "golden" boyfriend.

However, changes in her life would come unexpectedly, and they would trample down all those plans and dreams, swamping them with the sludge of a crooked path. Katie was forced to grow up rapidly and apart from her family, with no knowledge of her parents' whereabouts or of their fate. And if they had died, she had never learned where any of her parents or siblings had been buried. Nor had she ever understood why they had perished, or what for.

It all started in the spring of 1992...

Sharing Her Apples is a historic drama that reminds us of the vulnerability lacing women's souls and minds in times of misfortune. It also reminds us of the penalties that love and betrayal impose on women and their family members when the sense of revenge overwhelms reason.

Katarina is an adolescent full of expectations about her future and in love with Billy. A ruinous spell of misfortune, in which war and betrayal play the leading roles, leaves her physically and mentally injured, and with a little girl, Annie, to take care of.

Katie becomes friends with Helen, a widow who loves children, and starts to work for Helen's relief agency, trying to rebuild her life. However, her craving for revenge won't allow her to do so, setting her forth on a task. Will she find salvation? If so, at what cost?

Diamantoula's debut novel is a compelling page-turner, honest and raw; an irresistible blend of intrigue, betrayal, passion and heartache. A gripping, twisting drama about disturbing themes.