

Melissa

Andrew Salomon

It was exactly two minutes to ten when Kazantakis and Mastoraki brought him to the station. I remember lifting my head at the buzzing of a bee, which struck me as unusual at this time of night. I couldn't see the bee but I registered the exact time on the clock hanging over the station's front door, followed a moment later by the appearance of my two officers flanking a tall man in a blue linen shirt.

That was the sequence: bee → clock → door. In my job it's important to establish the order of events. If you could work backwards to how an effect was produced by one thing following on from another, you stood a chance of discovering its cause somewhere along those steps. I've been a policeman on the island of my birth for over twenty years and I've seen some peculiar things — perhaps not on the same scale as on Crete or Evia, but we still get all sorts out here in the Cyclades, and I've learned that the more attentive you are, the luckier you are bound to get.

The man in the blue shirt had a bewildered look to him. Mastoraki led him gently by the wrist to a chair against the wall. The man's clothes looked expensive, but also rumpled and a bit grimy, as if he had not bothered to change them for a few days. To be honest, I immediately pegged him for just another tourist who had greatly overestimated his resistance to our Ouzo.

That demonstrates how more than two decades of police work can still leave you fooled by first impressions.

I returned my attention to compiling next week's duty roster. On a paper plate next to the roster was a small triangle of baklava. I took my time chewing the pastry, following it with a shot of black coffee. I closed my eyes, savouring how the coffee tempered the baklava's sweetness.

Someone coughed softly next to my desk.

-Sergeant? I opened my eyes. It was Mastoraki, wearing a sheepish expression, as if he had to establish my rank first before he could be sure it was really me he needed to talk to.

I tried not to sigh. While I disapproved of loudness and aggression from my officers, Mastoraki was so timid he set my teeth on edge. -Yes, Mastoraki.

He pointed at the man with the blue shirt. -He says he'd only speak to you. Something about trusting a man who takes time to appreciate his food.

-Who is a member of the Hellenic Police at this station, Mastoraki? You or him?

-Sir, please, I think he's a bit - Mastoraki leaned in closer, -ó maybe just a bit crazy.

The man locked eyes with me. His were bloodshot and a lighter shade of blue than his shirt. For some reason I shivered, but it was a brief trembling and when I checked Mastoraki's face I could see no indication that he had noticed.

-Why is he here?

-Theft, said Mastoraki, sounding thrilled. It was not often we played host to well-dressed foreigners ó even if they were a bit dishevelled ó who were charged with stealing.

-Theft of what?

-Stamatis caught him stealing honey from one of his hives. Apparently it had already happened twice before during this week, so Stamatis lay in wait for the perpetrator and caught him.ø Mastoraki held up his hand and wiggled his fingers. -Sticky-handed.ø

-Iø surprised Stamatis didnø beat him up.ø I looked at the man with fresh curiosity. -Bring him over.ø

A blank case file lay open on the desk between us. I pulled my pen out of my shirt pocket.

-I am Police Sergeant Lazaridis, the duty officer. Glad you like the way I eat.ø I picked up his British passport. -Your name is Martin Carter?ø

The man nodded. He had the deep tan of weeks in the sun. I noticed a pale band around his left wrist where he must have worn a watch until very recently.

-Where do you live, Mr Carter?ø

He cleared his throat. -I live in London, but Iø from St Maryø. Itø one of the Isles of Scilly, just offó÷

-The Cornish coast, yes,ø I said. -Always a pleasure to meet a fellow islander. How has Kythnos been treating you?ø

-Itø beení ø he rubbed a hand over his eyes. Two of his fingers were swollen, as if he had been bitten or stung by something. -Itø been unusual. Incredible.ø

At this point a less experienced investigator might have asked, -What has been unusual?ø But I kept silent, my face deadpan. The gates had been opened with little prompting. He wanted to talk.

-I arrived a month ago. It was only meant to be a week's break. His voice became strained.
-But I started a project as soon as I got here and it, well, you could say it consumed me. He
dropped his eyes and fell silent.

-Visitors have been known to become infatuated with our island, I said. -Please continue.

-I teach Classics at a university. Some time ago I was working on a translation from
Ancient Greek of a manuscript that originated from this island. A minor text, mostly a trader's
record of transactions. But at the end of the manuscript was something else. He stopped and
took a deep breath. -A description of a rite whereby one can summon a nymph.

-Really? I said, -That may be intriguing, but to be honest not all that surprising. Our
mythology is rich in nymphs.

-I'm well aware of that, Carter said. -But this was different. The rite concerned a particular
nymph. He leaned forward, becoming more animated. -You of course know that the name
Melissa is derived from the Greek for honey bee, which in turn comes from *méli*, Greek for
honey.

For a moment I could glimpse the man he was back in London: an enthusiastic lecturer
who was fond of knowledge and enjoyed sharing it. I imagined he was popular with his students.
I nodded.

-You might also be aware that in your mythology Melissa was the name given to a nymph
who nursed the infant Zeus with honey.

-That rings a bell. So if I understand you correctly, you tried this rite to summon the nymph
Melissa?

-Not just tried, he said. -It worked. The rite worked.

I was thankful it was not Kazantsakis taking his statement. He would have laughed right in the poor man's face. "Whether it worked or not, how does this relate to you being caught pilfering honey from Stamatis's hives?"

"Honey is an essential part of the rite. Along with this." Carter reached into a trouser pocket. When his hand emerged it was trembling around a small glass jar filled with a thick and cloudy amber liquid, along with a crumpled piece of paper with characters written on it in Ancient Greek.

"You eat a bit of the honey and then you read these words out loud," he said, placing the jar and paper on my desk. "And it works!" He slammed his hand down on the desk for emphasis. Kazantsakis and Mastoraki both looked our way but I reassured them with a small shake of my head.

"Still, why steal the honey? You can find excellent jars of it for sale all over the island."

"That's the key," he said, and for the first time he smiled. "You can't use just any honey. It took almost a month of trial and error, combing the island and sampling each cluster of hives that I found, before I discovered that only honey from one group of hives works. And that Kalo Livadi beach at night is the best place to perform the rite."

"Sounds to me like an enjoyable project. One that allowed you to explore all over the island." I said. "And you gained the added thrill of doing something a bit daring and slightly unlawful."

"That too, I'll admit. But there was a lot more to it than thrill-seeking," Carter's tone became serious. "I know this is a personal question and no doubt inappropriate given our present circumstances, but do you have someone special, Sergeant? Someone who makes you feel that their world is incomplete without you?"

-I did,øI replied. And then, for a reason I donøt understand, perhaps because I had not spoken of it for so long, I added: -I lost her.ø

-Did you try to get her back?ø

-Her loss was of a more permanent nature.ø

-Forgive me. Íí ø

-No need to apologise. It was a long time ago.øI was angry with myself for letting my guard slip and I had to work hard to keep the tone of my voice even. I think I managed it.

-Then you know what Iøam talking about,øCarter said, -I thought Iød never have that feeling again. But with her, with Melissa, it was so strong.ø

-And yet, despite your success, you have ended up here.ø

-I made a mistake. The second time I managed to summon her I also tried to grab hold of her. I couldnø help it. She pulled away and vanished. But before she disappeared she gave me such a scornful look.øHe winced at the memory. -I needed more honey to see her again. Even just to apologise, to get her to understand that Iøam not really like that.øHe slumped back in his chair. -Now I might never get the chance.ø

-Being a devotee of the Classics, I imagine you are often immersed in mythology.øI paused for a second, aware that I had to choose my words carefully. -So much so that the myths must sometimes feel almost real.ø

His attention snapped back to me. -Are you trying to say that Iøve become delusional?ø

-Iøam asking you to admit that you set yourself a goal coming to this island. And to acknowledge that this goal embodies significant personal expectations.øI let my words sink in for a few moments before continuing. -Also consider the possibility that a resolute dedication to

something can be almost indistinguishable from obsession. And obsession with one thing always leaves other parts of us vulnerable.ø

Carter sat thinking for a minute before saying: -Thatø some astute psychology for a policeman on a small island. No offence.ø

-None taken. Psychology is something of a hobby of mine. Inadvertent bachelors need to keep busy, donø they?ø Carter did not reply, but I could tell he knew what I meant.

I led him to the storeroom at the back of the station where we kept a semi-comfortable chair and a small table. -Please take some time here to catch your breath,øI said. -When last did you eat? And I donø mean just teaspoons of honey.ø

He dropped a hand to his navel, closed it into a fist. -Iø not hungry.øBut then he opened his hand and patted his stomach. -Iøll admit it has been a few days.ø

I nodded. -Rest here a bit. No one will disturb you.øI left him, knowing a seed of doubt had been planted ó a seed that was being watered by his own yearning to hold on to his sanity.

Back in the main station Mastoraki was busy taking down a vehicle accident report. Kazantsakis was reading something on his phone. I handed him a ten-euro note. -The man Iøve taken to the store room. Get him a bottle of water. And some fassolatha from Angeliki down the road. Thereø nothing like a good white bean soup to knit body and soul back together.ø

His forehead creased into a frown. -Are we running a guest house now? Is that whatø going to make up for our disappearing pensions?ø

-Just go, Kazantsakis.ø

My brightest and most troublesome officer treated me to a drawn out sigh, but he got up and went off on the errand.

The night was warm and windless. Martin Carter's hotel was a five-minute walk from the station. We stopped in front of the entrance.

-What will you do with the honey? he asked.

-It's evidence. We'll keep it for a short while and then return it to Stamatis. Providing there are no more incidents.

-There won't be, he said. I thought I detected a hint of regret in his voice. -Thank you for your assistance, Sergeant. And especially for that soup, it was just what I needed. He held out his hand. -This is goodbye. I plan to be on the first hydrofoil out of here tomorrow.

-Back to London?

-I'm not sure.

-If I were you I'd head for Sifnos. Our fassolatha is of course the best but, I looked around, making sure there were no other ears to hear the blasphemy I was about to utter, -their revithokeftedes are probably without equal. Chickpea fritters with mint and marjoram may not sound like much but believe me, you'll never want any other chickpea dish again.

He gave a smile. It was fleeting but I appreciated his effort at trying to take part in our innocent conspiracy. A moment later he disappeared into the hotel.

I returned to the station. By now it was well past midnight. All was quiet until the shift change at five. Mastoraki waved as he left. Kazantsakis graced me with a nod. I gathered a few things from my desk and headed for my car.

Kalo Livadi was deserted. Across the water to the east, the horizon was a line of pale blue with a streak of orange swelling below it. Dawn would be here soon. Facing away from the beach I

could look through the old stone arch that framed Panagia Kalolivadiani's illuminated cupola. I haven't been inside the church for well over a decade. We were married there.

I held up Martin Carter's file and set fire to it with a lighter. The flames gave the papers a few exploratory licks before consuming them. I took a step back and something crunched under my shoe. Looking down I saw it was a watch, its crystal now broken. I felt sure I had seen the wrist it had been around just hours earlier.

I scooped some of the honey out of Carter's glass jar and touched it to my tongue. A sweet tingle sparked down my throat and all along my spine. I could just make out Carter's scribbled Ancient Greek by the light of the lighter flame. I wasn't sure about the pronunciation of some of the words but I gave it my best. Then I waited.

At the farthest edge of the approaching dawn's reach, the curved lines where the water met sand and pebbles resolved themselves into a shape: an unmistakably female outline. Was she walking this way? It seemed like it, but I told myself it was probably just my mind combining patterns into what I ached to see, instead of what was really there. But still I waited, with the honey coursing through me, my hands clasped behind my back and my eyes wide open. Like I said, if there's one thing being a policeman has taught me, it's that the more attentive you are, the luckier you might get.

Author's note: This story grew out of a chance encounter with the mythic story of Melissa, a nymph who is said to have concealed the young Zeus from his cannibalistic father, sustaining Zeus with goat's milk and honey. My ancestors on my maternal grandmother's side came from Greece and to me it's been a

place of mystery I have longed to visit for as long as I can remember. It's a longing I have somehow not yet fulfilled, but the research for this story allowed me to have an armchair Greek holiday.

I'm hopeful and at the same time concerned that Sergeant Laziridis found what he was looking for. He's one of the good guys and he deserves a break.

Kythnos is an actual island in the Cyclades. Kalo Livadi beach is real, along with the church next to it. As for the nymph, you'll have to go and investigate for yourself.

(If this tale of food and fantasy tickled your literary taste buds I'd like to suggest that you have a look at another titled *Grand Menu At The Hebdomad Society*.)