Rain and the Wine-Dark Sea

by Jillian Becker (April 2023)

The Dinner, Lamp Effect, Felix Vallatton, 1899

There are thoughts that should not be told to others, Stephanie concludes after lying awake in the dark for an hour considering what Harry told her as soon as their bedside lights were put out. Told her softly, calmly, briefly, an idea he had, then turned away from her and fell asleep. Such thoughts left untold will fade and pass away. Though perhaps, she concedes, if they are spoken quietly to only one person, they are not too dangerous, because they can dissolve out of the memory of both the speaker and the listener, and if both choose to let them go beyond recall they can lose their awful

power.

But Harry repeats loudly in the morning, while—she sees through the open bathroom door—there is still some shaving cream on his face, that he will be gone for a year. He has been granted, he calls, raising his voice higher over the noise of running water, six months leave from the college with pay and another six months leave of absence without pay. There is “ample” in the bank account for her and Penny to “more than manage on.” His own expenses will be small.

The tap is turned off.

“You are going away for a whole year?” she says without raising her voice, or her head from the pillow.

“Yes,” he replies, coming back into the bedroom, “I told you last night. I’m going to Greece for a year. Leaving Friday next week.”

To an island in the Aegean, where a colleague had lived for a year on less than ten thousand dollars. And household bills, he tells her, will be lower. He being away.

His idea of going for a year to an island in the Aegean, now repeated aloud in the bright morning, has solidified into a plan. And changes, for her, the contentment they had seemed to share for sixteen years into a disappointment, a delusion of happiness.

Pushing papers from his desk into a case after breakfast, he asks her to buy him a Greek dictionary. He learned some Greek at school and can still read it, he tells her proudly. She never knew that.

“I don’t want you to do this, Harry,” she says. “You can’t just take off and leave me and Penny for a year. You can take a sabbatical from college, but not from your life, for godssake.”

“Would you please? Buy me that dictionary?”

“I’ll do nothing to help you make this mistake. You’re being impulsive and rash. If you want to go to Greece wait till summer and take us with you.”

“Can’t you understand?” He is putting on his raincoat in the entrance passage. “I need a break from everything—from work, from home, from the whole routine, the whole rut.”

“From me? From me and your daughter? Are we the rut?”

“The forecast is rain today,” he says. “Take an umbrella when you go to the bookshop.”

Soon after he has driven off, the rain begins.

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She did not tell him she would buy the dictionary. She told herself that she would not. Yet here she is in the bookshop buying a Greek-English/English-Greek dictionary. It has a dark red leather or imitation leather cover, is printed on thin silky paper. Semicircles of black on the indented outer edges of leaves are stamped with gold letters of both alphabets. It costs far too much.

She leaves the shop with the dictionary wrapped neatly in strong glossy white paper, and the rain is falling more heavily. Struggling because one of her hands is occupied with holding up an umbrella, she tries to thrust the parcel under the edge of her raincoat, fails because the coat is held against her chest by the strap of her handbag. There is a gust of wind, a squall of rain aimed at her face. She turns into a coffee-shop to wait until the rain stops.

> *“‘Western wind, when wilt thou blow, that the small rain down can rain? Christ, that my love were in my arms, and I*

in my bed again!’”

She had loved poetry at school, knew lots by heart, remembered it well. It was mostly useful now for solving crossword puzzle clues.

“Why am I doing this? Why do I do what I intend not to do?”

She sips coffee through the lid of a carton and tells herself, “If he doesn’t want to be with us, it’s best that he goes.”

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Home again, in from the rain, she leaves the parcel on the table in the entrance passage.

“Mom?”

“Penny! Your hair’s wet. Did you get soaked just running from the school bus to the door?”

Penny, ten years old, forgot to put on her raincoat after school.

“Yes. But I changed.”

“What did you do with the wet things?”

“Miss Charlton’s been a real birch. You know what she said—?”

“What?”

“Where’ve you been?”

“I had some shopping to do for Dad. What’s this about Miss Charlton?”

The story is long. Penny tells it hanging over the back of the sofa where Stephanie sits.

“That does seem a little unfair,” Stephanie says, without knowing what she is commenting on but sure that sympathy is being asked for.

“So you see?”

“I certainly do.”

“But of course there’s nothing on earth anyone can do about it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, what? Can you think of anything? I mean, isn’t it the absolute unbeatable end?”

Not an end, Stephanie hopes. Not even a hiatus. A year without Harry is not necessarily a year lost. Everything, or almost everything, will go on as usual.

“Look,” she says, “the sun’s come out. Look outside, how bright it is, the drops on the yellow leaves all lit up. Listen to the drip. I’ll open a window. It’s got quite muggy in here. Ah, that’s better! Isn’t it wonderfully fresh? Have you done your homework, my angel?”

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People who’ve been there speak of the clear light of the Aegean. Or I’ve read it. Isn’t it Homer’s wine-dark sea? Still, opaque, mysterious. But sometimes it must be choppy. When it is whipped by rain. What do they do, the foreigners convalescing from ordinary life when it rains on the islands of the Aegean?

She opens another window. Casements opening on the foam of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn.

Mourning doves are pecking in the grass out there, and a sparrow, settled on a hydrangea bush, is knocking raindrops

from the bunches of withering pink flowerlets on to its wings striped ginger and black.

Penny appears, walking barefoot on the grass, and the mourning doves take off.

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“You should try this, Mom. It’s a lovely feeling, wet grass under your bare feet. I don’t think I’ll ever get married. It’s not who I am. I’ll be a business executive or a Congresswoman or something like that. I won’t mind having men friends. But marriage would be utterly excruciating for someone like me. Don’t you agree? Mom?”

“Oh I do, yes.”

“Do you really? I don’t think you were listening to me.”

“You said marriage would be excruciating.”

“Yes, but you weren’t really listening or you would have argued with me. You’re supposed to say that it’s not excruciating. You like being married, don’t you? If you had never been married, if no one had ever loved you enough to ask you to marry him, would you care?”

“I suppose I’d be sad.”

“What would you have done instead?”

“I suppose I might have been a business executive or a lawyer.”

“You wouldn’t have had me. But you wouldn’t know what you were missing. What did you and Dad talk about when you first knew each other? Mostly?”

“What did we talk about?”

“I want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the

truth.”

She thinks, “Harry and I talked about Harry, mostly.” Back home in England, in their Oxford days.

She says, “I don’t remember.”

Leaning on the windowsill, she considers when and how she will tell Penny … No, she concludes, he must tell her himself.

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Penny goes upstairs to her room to do her homework. She stands for a minute or so looking at the wet clothes she changed out of lying scattered on the rug. She tells herself she must pick them up and hang them to dry or put them in the wash. But she wants not to. She resolves not to. It isn’t laziness, it’s a feeling against being good. She does not want ever to be good. She would absolutely hate herself if she became good. One day, she promises herself, she will work out why. But until she can explain it she must obey her instinct and not do what she ought.

Yet she picks up the wet clothes and carries them to the basket where dirty things wait to go into the machine.

At dinner, Penny and Harry discuss the question of whether Penny has an obligation to eat spinach for her health. Stephanie does not join in. The talk develops into a negotiation, at the end of which Penny agrees to a compromise of her position and eats three small forkfuls of the helping on her plate.

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It is nearly midnight when Stephanie falls asleep with her bedside lamp still on. She has not yet told Harry to tell Penny his plan and explain why. She was about to when he came into the kitchen with the dictionary in his hand and thanked her for it, but then Penny came in too. And after dinner he

had gone to work at his desk behind a closed door.

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Harry comes up to bed an hour later and is glad to see that she's asleep. He goes in his pajamas to switch off the lamp. But first he stands for a moment looking at her face, the closed eyelids, the slightly open mouth, the chestnut hair lying on the pillow in a bunch above her head.

"Of course I still love her," he tells himself. "She's still a beautiful woman."

He wonders if he will miss her when he's away in Greece.

He feels his way in the dark to his side of the bed. He gets slowly and carefully under the covers hoping not to disturb her. He does not want an argument.

"A break is all I need," he explains to himself. "A recharging of the old batteries. I'm hardly the sort of man who just gives up his responsibilities when they become boring. I'll be living quietly. Learning Greek. Reading Homer perhaps in the original. It's not my intention to break up our marriage. I'll return and we'll be happy again because I'll be happy again. That's what I'm doing this for."

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism

contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published studies of terrorism is *The PLO: the Rise and Fall of the Palestine Liberation Organization*. Her articles on various subjects have been published in newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic, among them *Commentary, The New Criterion, City Journal* (US); *The Wall Street Journal* (Europe); *Encounter, The Times*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The Telegraph Magazine*, *The Salisbury Review, Standpoint(UK).* She was born in South Africa but made her home in London. All her early books were banned or embargoed in the land of her birth while it was under an all-white government. In 2007 she moved to California to be near two of her three daughters and four of her six grandchildren. Her website is www.theatheistconservative.com.

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