

The Olive Orchard

The old woman had lived in the house her whole life. It was built by her grandfather on land that had been in the family for generations before him. At the time the house was built it had been considered quite modern.

Her grandfather liked to tell tales of how his people had conquered the land, thrilling stories of battles that grew more and more elaborate as he grew older. She, her brothers and sister had listened to these tales with wide-eyed pleasure. One by one, as they'd grown they had married and left for other places, other lands.

She had raised her family in that house, four boys, three girls. There had been hard times, there had been good times. Through it all there was always the orchard and the house. The family tended the orchard and repaired the house and were rewarded with the sweet olives and a warm and sheltering home.

Now they were all gone, and the soldiers were cutting down the orchard.

The old woman sat inside, out of the sun on this hot day, chewing on olives and spitting the pits back into a bowl.

Her husband had died years ago, killed in an accident that the soldiers had called an incident. Her children had disappeared, one by one. Four had grown and married and left for other places, other lands. One was in hiding, one was in prison, and the youngest was dead, with his father now.

She spat the pits into the bowl and remembered them each in turn. The laughter, the cries, the tears, the triumphs.

Her face was a mask, wrinkled with years of hardship and hard work. Her eyes did not focus, but looked in toward the past. She worked the olives with her few remaining teeth, sucking and chewing absently.

Her thoughts stopped every time she heard the crash of another tree into the dirt.

It was getting late. The soldiers had come after the midday heat.

Once, her grandfather said, the orchard had spread from horizon to horizon. Once this was a land of wealth and plenty. But the water had gone, and families had grown. The orchard had been divided and divided until the only piece left belonged to her and to her family.

Still it was beautiful, stretching along two hillsides, protected from the wind and near enough to a well so that in dry years a few drops could be spared to feed the trees.

Now, she realized, the sounds of destruction from the orchard had stopped, and she heard no birds. Only footsteps.

The soldier came into the house without knocking, without permission. He told her to come along, and she stood, clutching the bowl. She could bring whatever she could carry, he said.

But she hadn't packed. There was nothing.

She spat a pit into the bowl, and immediately put another olive into her mouth.

The soldier grabbed a bag that she used for shopping, threw some clothes in, and said, Come.

She followed him outside. She blinked her eyes in the fading light. The sun was low, near to setting, and the shadows were long.

All around her, the trees lay on their sides, their roots exposed, their leaves and branches thrown on the ground like litter.

The soldier led her away from the house. She didn't dare look back. If she saw, she would stop, and the mask would fall off.

Still, she stopped.

She bent, set the bowl down, and began digging with her hands. The dirt was hard and dry and immediately wedged itself under her fingernails. She spat the seed she was chewing into the hole, kicked the dirt back on top, and hurried to follow the soldier.

A few paces later, she stopped again. She bent, set the bowl down, and began digging with her hands. A stone cut her finger, but she kept clawing at the earth.

What are you doing? the soldier said.

She picked a seed out of her bowl, dropped it in the hole, kicked the dirt back on top, and did not answer but hurried to follow the soldier. A few paces later, she stopped again. She bent, set the bowl down and began digging with her hands.

What are you doing? the soldier said.

I'm planting an olive orchard, the old woman said. What are you doing?

Don't you understand, the soldier said. You're not going to live here any more. They're going to tear down your house.

I'm planting an olive orchard.

After that, she was quiet and said nothing more.

This story has many possible endings...

Instead of going quietly, the old woman turned to the soldier and said,

Perhaps some day your great grandchild will tell his grandchildren of tales of how your people conquered this land. Perhaps on that day there will be an olive orchard here, growing from horizon to horizon.

And after that, she was silent and said nothing more.

And in another ending...

Without saying another word, the soldier took the bowl from the old woman and, with tears streaming down his face, he got down on his knees and helped her with the planting...

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