

Pomegranates

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PAVEL HAD JUST killed his wife. Her body lay on their bed. One hand was tucked up beneath the pillow. The other languidly draped off the side of her body. She had wanted to die this way, in her home. Hospital was supposed to be a place for hope, but there was no hope for Marika. Disinfectant had become the smell of illness. White was the colour of death.

Pavel sat on a chair by the bed. Marika had mostly slept in the days before her death. In those days Pavel had no appetite for food. Sustenance had come from the gentle warmth of his wife's hand in his. But now, as he held her hand, it was different. Though Marika was still warm, she could no longer feed him.

He stood and left the room. In the kitchen sat his daughter. He looked at her and gave a forlorn smile. Lidia breathed in sharply, suppressing tears that would be uncontrollable if released. Pavel sat opposite her at the table.

Neither spoke. Words would be too much effort and have little meaning. Both had heard words of condolence said for Marika's illness by friends and neighbours. Pavel and Lidia had appreciated these words of kindness, but hated the banal politeness of words that must be said. Words would not slow the scythe that shears life. Nor could they look at each other. To acknowledge each other's presence would be to acknowledge the absence of wife and mother. The soft fragrance of Marika's perfume or the heady smell of her stew would be no more.

As they sat in silence, Pavel noticed the sounds of life around him. A car passed by, then a motorcycle. A muffled television from a neighbouring apartment gently filtered through the wall. And the slow tocking of a clock ticked time away.

Pavel looked at his daughter and said, 'When eating a pomegranate, remember not to eat the seeds. Otherwise a tree will take root and grow in your belly. And a tree growing in your belly causes terrible indigestion.'

Lidia looked at her father with mock indignation.

‘I’m not a child anymore, Papa,’ she said. ‘I know a tree can’t grow in my stomach.’

Her father smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Perhaps,’ he replied.

They resumed their silence. Pavel breathed deeply and released a long, slow, sigh. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. After a few breaths he fell asleep. When he woke he saw Lidia no longer sat at the table, and that the morning light had given way to silver beams of moonlight. He heard the soft, melodic tones of a woman singing to herself. Though Pavel sensed the song came from the next room, it was as if carried on a breeze from some distant place.

Pavel listened and felt a sense of relief infuse his body, a lightness of being that would have him float away. As the singing moved towards the kitchen he looked to the doorway and saw his wife enter the room. He knew he should not be seeing his wife standing before him, yet he knew this moment was as real as any he had lived.

Marika smiled sweetly at her husband as moonlight reflected and danced around her body. The room began to fade and through the walls Pavel saw his neighbours living their ordinary, mundane lives. He saw their lives being forgotten, as new lives, ordinary and mundane as the ones before, lived within those walls. He saw the people of the next village, and to the forest beyond. And yet further still, to the other side of the world where foreign people lived their foreign lives that were as familiar as his own. And then he saw himself, sitting at the table watching his wife smell flowers that sat on the kitchen bench.

Marika turned to Pavel and smiled again. From a pouch in her apron she presented him with a pomegranate.

‘Eat,’ Marika said to her husband.

‘Will a tree not grow in my stomach?’ he replied.

‘Of course it will!’ Marika said as she laughed. ‘And what a grand thing it would be for a tree to grow there. How I wish I could have a tree grow within me. How lucky you are! Let it grow so you may climb its branches. I will wait for you at the top.’

Pavel sucked the seeds of the pomegranate into his mouth. He bit down on them and as they popped between his teeth their juice warmed his mouth and cheeks, and the warmth flowed through the rest of his body. He swallowed the seeds and felt them fill his belly. And a tree began to grow.

The trunk of the tree filled his body. The roots spread down his legs and out his toes, and branches flowed through his arms and out his fingers. The tree grew and grew until Pavel was swallowed within it. And then, like a butterfly born of its cocoon, Pavel emerged from the tree and fell to the kitchen floor. The tree continued to grow and pushed through the ceiling to the apartment above. On and on it grew, all the way through the roof of the building.

Pavel looked up into the tree. Rainbow ribbons of sunlight floated softly through the branches and leaves. Beside him stood his daughter. He turned to her and held her tightly as he began to cry. Lidia held his face in her hands and kissed each of his cheeks.

As she looked up into the tree Lidia said, 'I do not want you go, Papa, but you must. Not everyone has a tree grow from their belly, and a tree that grows from one's belly must be climbed.'

Pavel smiled gently at his daughter. From their hearts threads of sorrow and joy streamed forth, and the threads weaved together to make a blanket. Pavel wrapped the blanket around his daughter and stepped towards the tree.

And he climbed.