



## The Fall

The loud, brisk noise forced a heavy silence. The infernal chainsaw clatter had finally stopped. Everyone took a deep breath before the tree fell on a lay of dry leaves. Everything kept still for a moment then life burst again as a flock of birds flew away, their wings clapping loudly. A lumberman laughed. Stefania eased her grip on Markus' shaky hand and looked away from his swollen wrinkled eyes. 'At least, we were around to hear this one fall' she said quietly, slowly walking away from the stone paved esplanade.

Stefania did not look back. She wanted to keep the olive tree standing in her memory. There, it was still quite impressive with its twelve feet width and thirty-six feet height. From the center of the piazza, it had been projecting its shadow over her neighbourhood for as long as she could remember. The two-storey slightly slanting old houses with dirty white and blue façades seemed to have grown all around it and the narrow streets twisted, leading to it.

The night before, she had sat one last time on the cement bench under the great tree and had gazed at the night sky through its heavy branches. As the night grew darker, the stars shone brighter, enfolding the tree leaves in a lighted garland. Stefania smiled as she noticed that her linen was still stretched out on the piazza and remembered the little girl she was, some seventy years ago, chasing her brother Markus around the same piazza, who hid behind the spread out laundry. Then, she thought of her children, who had played the same games and who were so far away now. She sighed. Her entire life had revolved around that tree.

Now, it would slowly burn in Ivo Mihail's stove and he would undoubtedly enjoy it, Stefania thought furiously. A rich businessman, Mihail intended to build a residential complex on the neighbourhood's grounds. He was doing fairly good as he had just destroyed its core. He delighted in tormenting poor people. For Stefania, he was truly evil. She could not imagine that maybe, he was doing some good, giving those people what they were desperate for: money. Or maybe, he did not really care about how good or bad his actions were, as long as his business was doing well. And it genuinely was. The inhabitants easily sold their houses leaving only a dozen families standing up against the businessman. Stefania was determined to resist as long as possible, as long as her frail legs and treacherous knees supported her, for the sake of those few households but also for the sake of her and her people's pride. Perhaps they were the poorest folk in town, but they were definitely the proudest and the most attached to their history of humble merchants living in their ancient neighborhood. Now most of the youth had left in search of a better life, just like her children did, but she had stayed there to prove her point with a touching stubbornness.



That day, the olive tree had fallen. But it was also the day Stefania had found a gathering of neighbours at her doorstep after she had taken a walk to clear her mind. ‘We can’t live like this anymore’ ‘We have to do something’ ‘Don’t you see what they’re trying to do ? What he’s trying to do ?’ ‘They want to destroy us !’ ‘They don’t want us’ ‘They think we are a burden’ ‘They act like we don’t mind, like we don’t exist’. Words were hitting her eardrums, finding echo in her chest. Yes, they had to act. They would call on higher authorities. The town council was high enough. Stefania headed inside to gather some papers.

Stefania’s stopped. Her heart stood still as well. Inside the tidy small living room she shared with Markus, and on her couch sat Ivo Mihail. He greeted her with his brightest smile. In return, Stefania who was getting back to her senses, gratified him with her thickest spit. But it did not stain his cheerfulness, which made Stefania grow alarmed by the minute. Before she could say anything, Mihail stood up, threw a stack of papers on the couch and walked out, still wiping his face. Behind the couch, leaning on the wall and looking at his feet, was Markus. ‘I can explain...’ he started, his voice shakier than ever.

Stefania grabbed the papers. *Deed of sale*. All of a sudden, she understood. Stefania felt a cold hand grasp all of her throat and spine. It was like all the oxygen in the room had been removed. She was dizzy and it seemed like the ground she was standing on was tearing apart. It was as if someone had pushed her from a cliff. That someone was her own brother. And now, she was falling, endlessly falling.

‘...Stefania, you have to understand.’ Markus continued. ‘We are old, we needed this money. And you know I’m ill...’ ‘Oh, I understand completely ! But it’s not our house you sold, it’s that tree under which you grew up, it is that piazza, those people’s hope you just sold. It is your history, your memory, your childhood... Oh, Markus, Markus, what have you done ?’

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Stefania was tired and sore. As she turned her back one last time to the piazza, it started to disappear, as well as the ancient houses. Suddenly, it did not matter anymore. The olive tree had fallen, and with it, all of Stefania’s spirit and energy. She realised that she was after all, old and feeble. The world was changing too fast, too fast for her or perhaps she had hanged on too long to an outdated way of life. Maybe she just had to let go, let the flow of events overwhelm her. For what it was worth, perhaps she just had to stop going against the current. Perhaps she just had to adapt.

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