

The Eyes Of The Sun

by Erika Byrne-Ludwig

Tall ladders extended by tanned legs and arms reached for the crop. The orchard had replenished itself with summer sounds and baskets teeming with cherries. Each year the same people made their pilgrimage up on the ladders. Freely handing out its fruit, the orchard seemed to summon its pickers to relax. It had perhaps finally come out of mourning.

Trees had been pruned, watered and weeded. Leo and Lara had looked at the vaporous clouds of blossom opening up in front of them and fluttering on the lowering sky at the end of the rows. The air was almost palpable. In the white, lime-rimmed enclosure they had heard a call. Their arms outstretched, ready to catch him on the jump, they had watched their young son leap through the blossoms, his yellow boots and his curly hair radiating in the spring day.

Work had then started as usual. Leo took the tractor out. Lara walked back inside. She recalled having touched the lace curtain and humming a melody. The window was open, letting in a subtle fragrance that had journeyed up from the orchard, losing on its way some of its essence. She thought of a trivial incident that made her smile but immediately after made her teary. She decided to go back to the orchard to let her tears wilt in her child's presence.

The orchard was choking. As she drew close to it she failed to hear its heart-beat. Darkness had fallen on the blossoms. The child's yellow boots had slipped. On his chest the tractor's back wheel had carved its zigzagging tyre. The boy was lying peacefully on the grass. A flower had dropped on his chest. Like a third eye, white with yellow lashes, it was staring at the sky. The small boy with his golden lashes was also staring up as if he had been curious about the little rose's enchantment. Out of his pale mouth flowed a thin coulis of cherry.

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The tractor had been put away. His elbows on his knees, slumped in a chair, like a large bulb, Leo had begun his hibernation. "A tragic accident," people said. Inside Leo's shirt the drumming of his guilt muffled the consoling words.

The harvest came and left swiftly. Lara dragged her ragged shadow around the silent house where doors opened and closed with whispers. When the winter settled in Leo shivered on his chair. He lifted up his underground body and carried it to the window. Shriveled up on the sofa, Lara watched the crisp air awaken the large sprouting bulb.

Her own shadow had shrunk. She carried it into the shed where she prepared tea and coffee for the workers, trying somehow to reconnect with the minutiae of her daily life. Her dark curls and her dark eyes had nibbled at her face. In the middle of it her nose seemed now pathetically long.

One day dawn saw her sitting on the sofa. The curtains hadn't been drawn. The sun was pushing through the window. She walked to it, quietly, in some sort of a daze, and looked at the eyes of the sun. They led her to the orchard where the white clouds had burst. She filled her hands with blossom and rubbed her face in it.

On the grass where the boy had lain she had dug a hole and planted a cherry-tree. It was now a princely five-year-old. Untouched, it had grown higher and denser than its styled cousins, feeding flocks of rosellas as the pickers worked on. In their minds the memory had subsided; only in two hearts a small child still danced his blossoming dance.

To the left on the slope Leo was hoeing a field. In his checked shirt his wide back wallowed in sap and sun. To Lara he was a tree, a field, a hoe. She could have been a lump of soil. As his square ruddy

hands turned the tractor's wheels, the soil was opening up behind him, warm and moist. So was her wound.

She was curious about many things. His eyes hadn't been ready for her to ask. One of the questions however had been answered. From her attic window she had watched him walk uphill past the stretch of cherry-trees. In the hot afternoon where the willow rested its shade Leo had sat on a white stone. Presuming he was grieving she had backed him up with a song.

It was that same night that she had drawn her body close to him. In the dark room she would have liked him to work the soil with his hands, hoe it, dig a hole and plant a seed. The soil had turned into clay.

