

Then the Almond Tree Smiled

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I am a girl. I am an almond tree blooming in early spring, whose small downy white wings, flutter as they may, cannot bear it away.

There are seven trees in our house and one bird – my twin brother. He and I were the last children my mother bore, or to be more precise, he was the last. Our birthday is his. He was the first to take a step, the first to have a tooth come in, and the first to utter a word that filled the house with joy. I was invisible all along.

He had that little organ between his legs that allowed him to go to school. I didn't have one, so I couldn't go. My mind fixed on that organ as the center of learning, where knowledge and intelligence were stored. I could never learn or understand anything because I didn't have the organ my father and brother had. That was why they were so clever, why they could tell us what they wanted done, and why the rest of us would do it.

I didn't go to school, but I was forever on the lookout for opportunities to sneak out of the house and run to the fields. I loved running, and I found out how fast I was the time I ran away from my father when he wanted to beat me. He had caught me playing goalkeeper when the boys were one player short. After I ran away from my father, the whole neighborhood realized how fast I was too, and from then on I played striker. When I scored, I would raise my arms in the air and the boys would gather around and hug me. Sometimes I would take my shirt off and run some more.

Every time I did that my father would try to beat me, but he could never catch me. I was light on my feet, so I could run faster

than anyone else and hide in one of the far-off fields, among the almond trees. That was as far as I could go. I would reach it exhausted and fall asleep, only to have the terrifying dream come again. In the dream, strange scarecrows sprang up beside every almond tree, giant scarecrows that frightened the birds away. Then my father would appear. He couldn't catch up with me because I was too fast, but he would take out his male organ and it would get longer and longer, like a snake, and he would catch me with that.

I would wake up feeling smothered, my heart pounding. I'd creep home as slowly as the setting sun, only to arrive as fast as the setting sun as well. My mother would quickly wash my hands and change my clothes, hiding all clues so that my father wouldn't get angry when he arrived home. The only thing that made me sad, after those happy days filled with running, sweating, scoring, and shouting, was my mother's still face. She didn't look angry or reproachful, she just didn't have any expression at all. Hers was the eternal face of the passing days. It never changed. No spark ever brightened her somber eyes. I always thought it was because of all the smoke from the bread she baked to sell to the neighbors. She would sit out on the terrace, open the door of the yard and spread her legs to kindle a fire between them, where she would make bread for everyone to eat. My mother was always slapping dough in her big wooden bowl. She would shape a roll of dough, slap it back into the main ball and round it out again. That was what she would do to me and my sisters as well.

She would give us a light but firm slap on our backsides to bring us back to our senses and make us obey each and every rule, no matter how small. It never occurred to us to question their logic. One rule was to heat the water for our father's bath. Another was to wash our brother's clothes, hang them out to dry, and take them in again before sunset. It's not good for boys' clothes to be left out on the line at sunset.

My mother was forever making dough. She would moisten her hands, moisten the dough, and remain silent all the while. Her eternal silence was what I found scary, even scarier than my father chasing after me. Despite all this, there were still days when we all made outings to the edge of the village together. We would go there on the first day of spring to welcome it in, as custom demanded. We would stand still and feel the sweet breeze rustle our dresses. I'd look around to see whether my mother's dress was stirred by the wind or not. I don't know why I thought she was so different, as if her dress were solid, but I'd look around to see her dress rustling, and her face would change. The somber expression shrouding her eyes would lift, and a smile would appear, making me think of trees that stand ever patient yet are happy to shake merrily when the wind stirs them. My sisters and my brother would stand there gazing at the horizon and singing to spring, but I'd stand watching my mother's face. On the way back, when she bent down to pick up some dry twigs that would burn well in her fire, I realized that she was still thinking about her bread, and that tomorrow her face would return to normal.

I well remember the day my brother passed his elementary school exams. Everybody was happy except me. I was sad because it meant that he would leave our village to continue his studies. I would hardly ever

see him, and he wouldn't be able to tell me about all the magical things that happened in school. It also meant that his organ of knowledge would get bigger and bigger, while I would know nothing of all the exciting things he was to learn.

"If I had that organ, I'd be going to school in the city," I told my mother. She laughed hysterically, in a way I saw no reason for. "Yes, you would," she said as she wiped the tears from her eyes. I thought for a long time about my brother and all the things he would learn in the city. It would certainly make his organ bigger, thicker and heavier. He would have to hide it inside his trousers and it would hamper his movements. Maybe he'd have to play goalkeeper for the rest of his life. All because he was going to study in the city! On second thought, I was glad I didn't have that organ. I went out and ran and ran all around the village.

Despite the scarecrows springing up around me, a bird finally managed to land on one of my branches. I found I could no longer take my shirt off after scoring a goal because my breasts had grown, and I knew they were attractive. It seemed I wasn't the only one who knew it, because one day my mother took me to where we kept the clean clothes, and tried my sisters' bras on me. She told me that from then on I would have to be careful. I didn't know how I was meant to be careful, or of what. Besides, how could she expect me to understand what she said, when my whole life she had barely spoken to me more than a couple of times? I was the free prize that had been delivered along with my brother, and like most such prizes, I had been tucked away on a shelf because nobody could see any use for me.

I began to like the other team's goalkeeper. I didn't know what it meant, but I knew he kept looking at my breasts, and

I knew I liked that. When I look back on it now, my reasons for having sex the first time were pretty funny. It was strange, but not scary. Nobody had ever told me to be scared of it; I had only been told to be careful. I couldn't have realized what they meant by being careful, not ever having been told. I wanted to see what happened inside the trousers, how that organ would swell with knowledge and intelligence. I grasped it in my hands, thinking that all the knowledge and intelligence would pass to me just by holding it. Then I felt something strange and new: it was invigorating and at the same time frustrating; expected yet surprising. I was utterly convinced that I'd been infected with boyhood, something no one had ever understood before me. If my sisters and my mother had known, they would have all become boys, given up their endless tasks, and gone to that faraway school in the city beyond the almond grove.

I was able to confirm my theory when the horrible time of the month stopped coming. I was delighted to be rid of my period bleeding, which for a long time I thought was some fearsome disease that would eventually carry me off. I was so pleased I wanted to tell them about it, but I knew it would be hard to so suddenly have a second boy in the family. I decided to wait until my breasts went away, so they'd believe me and wouldn't think I'd gone mad. But then, for some unknown reason, I became pregnant. I couldn't make sense of that. How could I have gotten pregnant? How could that happen to me? To me, the goal scorer? To me, who wanted to be a man when I grew up? How could this have happened?

My mother cursed her luck when I told her that I had turned into a boy, that my period had gone away and now I was storing up food in my swelling belly just like my father. I said now she would have to let me go

to middle school. She started hitting me and asking me who the father was. The truth was that I didn't know. Maybe it was God. Maybe He had afflicted me with this so I would behave better. I'd been naughty and hadn't wanted to remain a girl forever. It didn't cross my mind that the other team's fat, slow-moving goalkeeper could be a father of anything, least of all my child. Nobody had explained to me how these things worked.

When I saw how everyone was taking the news, I decided to keep quiet and pretend they were all invisible. I ran and ran and ran, but this time I couldn't make it to the almond grove. My father caught me. He took off his leather belt, which turned into a snake, and began to beat me and ask who the father was. But of course I didn't tell him, because He was invisible.

I think my father stopped beating me only because his hand got very sore. My brother came home and took over for him. That was just as well, because he didn't hurt me as much. He even talked to me as if I was actually there and not invisible. I told him that God was the child's father and that He might punish them if they kept on treating me that way. I think he believed me, because as soon as I said it, he stopped beating me.

The next day, my father decided to take me to a psychiatrist at the city hospital. I was very happy to see my mother wearing makeup and a silk scarf. She whispered in my ear that it was the first time she'd been to the city. She was delighted, and I thought I'd finally done something good in my life. My father, though, was despondent. He kept looking at me with regret, and eventually said: "We didn't look after the girl properly. Maybe it really is God's child and He wants to punish us."

The psychiatrist turned out to be a woman. It occurred to me that if this woman had been able to turn into a man, I should find out

how she did it. I had tried everything: running, wearing my brother's shirt, taking it off, and even sticking a male organ inside me, yet none of it had worked. I asked her questions, rather than the other way around, and she laughed shyly at them, taken aback by how impressed I was with her. Once I'd finished, she asked me if I liked boys. I told her that I had liked the goalkeeper, but he couldn't be the father of my child, because he was young himself. She laughed again when I told her about the infection I had caught, and how I had seen his knowledge leaping from his male organ. "That organ is about the farthest thing in the world from knowledge and intelligence," she told me to my great amazement.

The psychiatrist was very nice. We laughed together and I began to think it might not be such a bad thing to be a woman after all. She was prettier than my mother, in spite of the silk scarf. She even patted my head, which nobody had ever done before. "Here," she said, "this is where intelligence comes from, and you're a very intelligent girl." Then she explained many other things to me.

She told my father that some kind of genie or spirit had touched me, and that was the reason for my pregnancy. I don't know why

my father was happy about that. He'd been very upset when he thought God had caused my pregnancy, yet when he found out a genie had fathered his grandchild, he hugged me and asked me to forgive him for the beating he'd given me. The psychiatrist warned them that an abortion would be extremely dangerous this far into the pregnancy. My mother began to cry and to say that it would be wonderful to have a child in the family. I felt a profound happiness flow through me. I would be the mother of a little genie. I just hoped it would have a little satanic organ.

When we got back to the village, nobody was surprised to hear about the genie. It had happened before, they said. I realized that the scarecrows were the ones to be pitied. They're staked to the ground, and have plain, ugly faces. But an almond tree can send forth beautiful fruit without ever moving from its place, and every so often the wind, or a genie of the wind, will come visit it. I stood looking at the countless green wings as they fluttered joyfully. Maybe the tree doesn't want to go anywhere.

When the sun starts to set, I run back. My son's clothes mustn't be left out on the line when it goes down!