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The Bergamot Orchard

WE WALKED DOWN TO THE orchard from a series of identical grassy hills. The verdant valley had been cut by the stream that intersected the orchard at a point, but it was rocky and shallow and few trees grew on its limited banks. I wondered aloud to Michael whether he thought it flooded, as it was wide, what that meant for the trees. He didn't answer, but he had other things to think about. I had only asked to break the silence.

The path leading down through the hills was scattered with stones and dusty. Though the day wasn't very hot, I think it was hotter than Michael is really used to and the dust we stirred stuck to the wet places above our socks. I thought it seemed fitting that we were making these clouds of dust in the cloudless day. This time I kept it to myself, but looked back up the path, maybe trying to attract attention to what I thought was comically affected interest I was giving to dust. He didn't notice anyway, and I became distracted from that as I looked back up the hill. It appeared much steeper than I had thought it was as we had been descending it; instead of the gradual slope I had imagined, I saw a winding trail that seemed to propel itself straight up. The hills were covered with the lightly golden grass of late summer; on some of the more distant hills were a few solitary Cyprus and, before I stumbled and had to return my attention to the path in front of me, I saw scattered groups of goats with no shepherds as I could see.

The summer was not so advanced as to be no remains of the blossoms—now dried and scattered—sprinkling the edge of the

leveling basin as we entered the orchard. But I could see clearly that the fruit was already nearly ripe, so the petals we saw, or at least the petals I saw, were very few and dry. We stood at the periphery of the orchard briefly and I tested a petal with the tip of my shoe. It crumbled into the dust with a faint crackle. Before that, I had an inclination to retrieve a petal or two. We had been told that there would only be one person in the orchard and I spotted him quickly, seemingly very involved with the inspection of the fruit and trees. Once again, I almost mentioned this to Michael, but he was intent on scanning the orchard so I returned my focus to the stream I had seen from the hill. The hike had not been very long, I thought, and certainly not very hard yet when I first saw from the orchard the trickling water I wanted immediately to cool my hands in it, touch the coolness to my face. Without a word to one another, I went forward to the stream and Michael went off through the trees to the right. I stopped to watch as he went. It seemed his determined scrutiny had no real purpose; it seemed briefly that his concentration was devoted only to the trees as mine was to the stream, though I knew full well this wasn't true.

As I approached it, I saw the trees that were somewhat close to its waters grew different fruit from the rest of the orchard. The grass, which among the trees was well-kept and green, succumbed in patches to the clay and dust of the bank and water-worn stone. On the other side of the stream, almost all of the fruit green, lime trees grew and between and around many of the trees sage brush and what looked like rosemary flourished. Between the orchard and the stream there was hardly any difference in elevation at all, reigniting my curiosity of whether the basin must often flood, given enough rain. It did occur to me that it may well never rain that much, but it might just as well

have been that I was so caught up in the itchy dryness of the day. In fact, the stream was so calm and placid that I was able to sit directly next to it without getting at all wet and was so silent I practically forgot about it entirely if my attention wasn't squarely focused. It simply faded into the background humming of the orchard and would gently startle me when I paid attention.

I don't know how much time had passed when the man in the orchard approached me still sitting on the bank. I stood and at first he looked at me like it seems all men in this country do, but afterwards stopped and casually only looked at my face—I couldn't tell if he ever looked right in my eyes as I never really did his. When I happened to catch those eyes in a passing glance, I thought how unusual that they be so sterling and blue in a dark face likely made darker for a lifetime in the Mediterranean sun.

"You just get here," he half-asked, not surprised and not especially curious. Forgetting immediately that I had been day-dreaming for some time at the side of the stream, I told him we had. He nodded and appraised the far side of the orchard, where Michael now was, in a way that seemed he had been expecting us. Though this apparent expectation seemed strange to me, I didn't ask if he had. It didn't require much thought, though, to realize I had no idea how long the walk that brought us from the villa to the orchard had taken, as I had no idea how long I'd been sitting by the stream. He asked me where my "friend" was, emphasizing that word just so, as shy but proud people sometimes do, and I vaguely motioned to the direction I thought Michael had gone. This satisfied him, nodding, and he squinted—when I did look at his face, never his eyes, he was always squinting—at the lime trees across the river. I made an attempt at small talk, though I don't know if he was in any way

obliged to attend to me nor did I know if I was keeping him. I asked him about the weather, remarked how hot it had been recently, what kind of climate was good for the trees, why lime on one side and bergamot on the other, mentioned football, but in that he seemed uninterested, and I regretted asking. It had become a habit of mine over the months to rely on leading questions about football as it often elicited a lot of conversation that required very little interaction, and that would ease my awkwardness while I was passing time with the men I was often left alone with while Michael was about his duties. But this man in the orchard seemed unconcerned with football and I didn't press.

I returned to my questions about the orchard and the fruit as that topic seemed not terribly boring to him. When I asked when the fruit would be ripe, he shrugged and said they were already ripe enough to use, that he had been pressing oil this morning. He told me of the scent that filled the room as they were pressed and how he set a dish of it with a slow wick in his study so that the scent would be there too, in his books and his paper. He told me how his wife would use it in her compittu which she always made this time of year. He told me of when the bergamot were ripe he and his sons, when they were still young, would pick at least a dozen to add their flavor to bottles of grappa from his uncle's vineyard. I finally asked him about the stream and if it flooded and he said no, that it never flooded, even as far back as the days of his own father, whom I already knew had planted the orchard in his youth. But he did tell me a story: when, after it had rained for some days in a row and he and his sons came down to prune the trees and enjoy the blossoms and check the various traps for vermin, that the stream was flowing very fast and high, much higher than they had ever seen. What more, it

was filled with snakes. His sons came running to tell him about the snakes, and at first he thought that it had been some trick of light from the abundant and swiftly-moving clouds that his sons came screaming for him to see, but the snakes were easily spotted, moving slower than the extremely clear water they moved with. While the year hadn't been particularly bad for vermin, his eldest still suggested they try to capture some and keep them in the garden on the far side of the lime orchard, which he pointed out to me. I couldn't see through the trees, and didn't recall seeing the garden from the hillside, but nodded with understanding anyway, pretending to see the garden there behind the trees. He told his sons that they didn't know what kind of snakes they were so it would not be wise to try and pick them out of the stream. The youngest said that that suited him fine, as he thought the snakes looked particularly happy where they were amongst the rushing waters, and that if they tried to remove them the snakes might become angry which, the young boy had said, he knew would make the rain stop. The man laughed and told me that he looked at his son with such astonishment, unaware that their mother had been telling the youngest stories about friendly snakes and their beloved rain only that morning. He told me that when he returned to the villa that day, he had repeated his tale with such enthusiasm to his wife, speaking amazedly about what the child had said, and he had laughed and laughed much the same, he said, as he was laughing now. The crop that year had been good, but there was a significant vermin problem the next year and they had to give up the garden and move it out of the orchard entirely. "That," he said, "is why the garden is no longer where I pointed it out."

I was embarrassed at how I had nodded understandingly before and I felt my face redden, trying to hide it. I don't think the

man noticed, however, as immediately after finishing he shouted happily to Michael who had apparently been approaching from behind me. He must have seen Michael coming as he was talking and I hadn't noticed, having never looked directly at his eyes, and had even mostly been looking away entirely towards the bergamot trees, though I knew he had been looking directly at me for much of the story. He never looked at me, but I saw Michael was frowning deeply as he does when he's trying to prevent tears. The man and Michael solemnly exchanged some words that I paid no attention to and looked instead at where the stream bent around the edge of the orchard a good distance away. I thought I would like to better see where the stream eventually led when we walked back up the hill, telling myself to remember it; but when we did, I had forgotten. Michael and the man finished talking and Michael said we could go now if I wanted. I thanked the man for his company and he waved at me without turning around as he had started to go back to his business in the orchard as soon as he and Michael had finished speaking. In my mind, he smiled as he had been when he and I finished talking. The hardness of the dust and rocks of the path was so unfamiliar to me when we started back up the hill. I asked Michael if he had found what he had wanted and he shrugged, not wanting to talk about it. When I looked back at the orchard, I was surprised to see that it was much further away and much flatter than I had remembered it being when we walked down. ■