

Ride of the Old Maids
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The girls of Sheepshank would not play with Orsina. It was well known that she was to be apprenticed, that she did not need to learn how to work the olive groves, the durum fields or the rice paddies, but in this she was not unique. Jealous children did not throw stones at the smith's son, or the weaver's daughters. The shepherds got no dirty looks when they walked the market, nor did their sons, or their sons' sons. So it could not be simple jealousy that made Orsina a pariah.

She was not the prettiest little girl in the village, this much was true. Her wide eyes had not yet settled in her face, giving a hint of the frog to her countenance. With no work but the keeping of the house she often wandered bored and came home muddy. Her curls fell thick about her face, and her mother had to cut mats from them more than once when the girl had gone chasing through bushes in pursuit of rabbits.

Both children and parents hated her because she knew things that she should not know. When they lay on beds of flattened durum after harvest looking up at the stars, the children would play at naming the constellations. Orsina knew their real names. It spoiled the game.

When Chiarina's parents were arguing and she came to play with red-rimmed eyes, the other girls tried to give her comfort. The same soft assurances children everywhere gave that they were not at fault for the bickering of adults. Orsina took her assurances too far. Of course it was not Chiarina's fault that her father had kissed the blacksmith's wife.

Chiarina's father slept in the chicken-house the rest of that season and had two black eyes the next day. Chiarina was forbidden from playing with Orsina ever again. Where Chiarina went, the rest of the girls followed.

The boys would still play with her for a time. She was as rough and tumble as the rest of them, and they were less inclined to periods of introspection or chatter. It was with them that the rabbit chases began. With them that she learned to climb a tree and rain over-ripened olives to burst on her pursuers when a game turned to a scuffle.

So while her parents worked the fields by day, she was not entirely alone in the world. Just distant. By night they were as warm to her as they could bring themselves to be, but with every word they spoke there was a lingering disappointment.

She was not as they had been, she was not as they had expected. Quick to answer back and stubborn as a mule. Sins compounded by the fact that once her father's temper had cooled and he asked around, the little girl was always proven right and Tobia wrong.

Even her mother caught herself watching the child not as a mother should, but as the hunter eyes a wild boar, always waiting for the pleasant demeanour to drop and the goring beast within to reveal itself. She had not forgotten the night of Orsina's birth, and while the old mothers would not speak to her of it beyond none-too-subtle checks that the girl still wore the medicine pouch about her neck, she remembered some part of their whispers.

Always at the back of her parents minds remained the indisputable fact that someday she would walk off into the woods, never to return, and that inevitability of that future hung over them all, tainting whatever joy they could find with each other.

All these mounting sorrows came to a head on the morning of the funeral.

Old Mother Perlita had been dying for as long as most folk in Sheepshank had been alive. If it was not her dreadful cough this week, it was her aching gut the next. Cataracts milked up her eyes, wrinkles and warts covered her skin, her back bent until she was almost doubled over. She had not two of her own teeth left, but her tongue had never lost any of its edge even until her last day. It seemed to most folk that she would outlive Sheepshank itself, and there were none left who could remember when she'd been born or which family she'd birthed, so everyone shared out caring for her evenly as they could. She had been tucked up under her blankets by a well-stocked fire one night and cold and empty when the dawn came.

This far north, frost would come to lay on the ground through the Brina season's mornings, and once in a moon the rains would turn to sleet. Snow did not come to Espher even this far north, but that did not mean it felt no sting in winter. There were no crops to tend and the sheep, if they could be convinced, would stay close to the town so as to have ready access to the hay and chaff laid down for them. It made the ground hard to dig though, so that all the men had to take turns with sickle, hoe, spade and pick to open out a grave beyond the village walls.

There was no holy man to say words, but stories were shared about. Memories of the woman she'd been. The time she chased a full-grown Smith Segno up a tree with a olive-wood switch after he spoke ill of her bechamel. The time she cared for Mother Velia all through the sweating sickness, even though everyone else was afraid to come into the house. When Orsina stood forward from beside her parents, everyone thought that they were in for a heart-warming tale.

"She isn't gone." Orsina's little voice sent out a ripple of confusion. Death might have been strange to a child in the city, but to a country girl, it was as common as the mud on her feet. It was not possible that she did not understand what had happened. That was when the little girl pointed, not to the grave but to the side of the gathered people. "She's still here. Why are you ignoring her?"

Nella snatched for Orsina, but the little girl darted out of her reach. "Why are you ignoring her? She's screaming? Why isn't anyone listening to her?"

There was a chill in the air and cloaks were wrapped tight around everyone that could afford them, but still a shiver ran through the people of Sheepshank. Tobia had a hand over his mouth to contain his bark of fury. Nella's perfect oval face that so many women envied was flushed with shame. Still Orsina danced ahead of her grasping hands. "She's right there! Why are you all ignoring her? She's right there!"

The social graces of Sheepshank were very different than in the city. When everyone has a hand in raising a child, everyone feels some sense of duty to them. It should have come as no surprise that one of the other farmers grabbed Orsina by the scruff of her neck.

She had never been a wilful child, for all that she knew and said things she shouldn't, and any grown man laying hands on her should have been enough to still her, but in her hysterical state she didn't even notice his broad hands. He gave a fierce tug to put a halt to her cries and ripped the back of her dress

right open. The hand me down cloth, stitched and restitched into so many different combinations through the years was a mass of hidden seams. They opened up to the bottom of her shoulder blades, and the deer-leather strap of the medicine bag had only a moment to choke her before it snapped in two.

Free of his grip, she ran forward to the empty space where she insisted that Old Mother Perlita stood. Her arms outstretched for the same half-hearted embrace that the old woman had granted every child in the village when they met her. She was a hard woman to please, but she was kind to the little ones. That was another story they could have told about her, if her burial had not been interrupted so rudely.

Orsina fell through the empty air, all the way to her knees without the old woman's presence there to support her. She looked around in confusion. All the world had said things were one way, and her own senses had told her they were lying. Now even her senses betrayed her. "What?"

Nella and the ham-fisted farmer were both still hot on her heels, but now it seemed that her outburst was done, they paused, sheepish and painfully aware of the eyes of the whole village upon them.

The little girl in her ripped dress rose back to her feet and turned to face the furious crowd. Tears pooled beneath her wide eyes. "Mama?"

Like a thunderclap the cold wind swept out through the crowd, strong enough to throw back hoods and make the children stagger back a step into their mother's embrace.

Orsina had been almost upright before the impact. The force of it seemed to double her over. The bare stretch of her spine surged upwards in a painful arch, stretching youthful skin until it paled to white. A noise eked out of her, a strangled cry of pain cut through with a guttural wail. Two voices crying out together. "You killed me."

Orsina's sobs could be heard clearly, but the louder voice coming through her throat was unmistakable. A voice the whole village had heard their whole life. A voice they'd never thought to hear again. *"You think I didn't see you slip powders in my wine, no? Poisoning me. Tired of taking care of me? All my years wiping arses and darning socks, and when I needed you, it was too much work."*

Perlita took a step forward, dragging Orsina along like a rag doll. The cold wind whipped out from her, scattering the crowd back. Nella and the farmer caught each other's hands but they did not run, they stood their ground, for the girl. Nella found her courage through wilful ignorance as she always had. "Orsina, my love, what are you saying?"

Tresses that had covered her face were flung back. The girl's head snapped up with a crunch of bones. Her milky eyes fixed on her mother, seeing nothing. "Poison in my wine. Just a little medicine for the aches, no? Liars all. Murderers all."

The farmer knew what he was seeing, even if Nella would deny it. He bellowed the word like a talisman against his mounting terror. "Shade!"

Funereal rites and propriety scattered in the chill wind. Children screamed as their parents snatched them up and ran.

"Murderers!" Perlita's scream swept after them with the force of a blow. All her confusion and rage unleashed now that she had some anchor to the world of the living. Every step she took twisted Orsina's

body further out of shape. Old bones stretching young meat. Life sapping away from the little girl with every moment, bringing her closer and closer to being the haggard old woman who now rode her flesh.

Tobia pushed against the tide of running farmers and shepherds, friends and family all. He searched the boot-churned earth for the midwife's pouch. A knee caught him in the side of the head and set him sprawling. He crawled towards his daughter. Dizzied but still searching.

Nella reached out to the thing that her daughter had become. "Orsina!"

A burst of wind struck the girl's mother down to her knees. Frost rimed her lashes as she wept. The midwife's bag was laying untouched underneath her. Panic and denial gave away to memory. The winds that blew through the cottage in the fearful silent hour of waiting for the midwife. The whispered demand that the baby never be parted from the medicine bag. Nella seized it and rushed towards Orsina once more.

The howling winds grew stronger with each passing moment. Perlita's wrath was stoking itself to new heights. The wind did not slap Nella down this time, it lifted her off her feet and flung her to the graveside.

Pouch and contents tumbled from her grasp as she screamed through the air. Untethered, the dried herbs, fungus and rusty shards came raining down. Tobia's eyes followed his wife as she fell, he saw it all and he knew despair. Always the fear had remained. Always they had known that their peace would come to an end, but never had they considered that it might end like this. He whimpered, "Not like this."

Grass tore up from the ground. Wooden grave-markers half gone to rot with age snapped apart. The farmer who'd stood his ground beside Nella had broken and run, only to be struck down with the same fierce winds that had launched her across the boneyard.

Through the tempest, Tobia could see the rest of Sheepshank fleeing to safety. The coffin of Old Mother Perlita had overturned and her bloating corpse tumbled out by Nella's side. They'd broken her back to get her to lie straight, and now her corpse flopped at the waist like a broken scarecrow in the wind.

Only one person stood against the fury of the winds, forgotten by the villagers even when she was attending the funeral. The midwife strode through the wind with a hand held to the level of her eyes. As splinters and mud spattered off her cloak she took it in stride.

"A tantrum won't bring you back, you daft old baggage."

Orsina froze in place, head swinging from side to side like a startled mare.

"Stop your nonsense now, Perlita. Go take your rest. You had time enough. More days than most be getting."

Orsina's jaw clicked open, tendons distending. "They poisoned me. Killed me."

"They gave you the medicine I mixed for you. Because you were hurting. Would you rather have been hurting?" The old woman had to shout to be heard over the wind.

Locking eyes, Orsina scuttled closer. The eye of the storm moving with her. Pushing her father and mother to their knees. "It wasn't my time. It isn't fair."

“Fair? When’s life or death ever been fair, Perlita? You’re old enough to know better.”

The two old women stood face to face now, nose to crooked nose. The freezing storm dropped. Splinters rained down. Tobia breathed a sigh of relief. At last it was over. Orsina’s blind eyes narrowed. “No.”

The midwife caught hold of Orsina’s face, palms flat against her cheeks as the wind began to howl. The winds that had not touched the old woman before buffeted her now. Only her grip on the girl kept her in place. She had to scream now to be heard, her ancient voice cracking. “Hear me now, child. Perlita be dead and gone. All you’ve got in you now is an echo. A shadow. A shade. It has no hold on this world. It’s got no brain to think. You can push her out.”

Perlita howled, a sickly wet sound, and the wind threw back the midwife’s cloak and shawls, scattering them across the ground and leaving her bare to the chill in her patchwork dress.

“You can beat her, little one. She is weak and this is your world, not hers. Your body, not hers.” The midwife drew Orsina closer, straining as the girl’s bones twisted about beneath her skin. “Push her out, little one. Feel her inside, feel the places where she is holding. She’s barely even a shade. Just a memory. One little push is all it will take.”

Tears froze down Orsina’s face, and even as they watched, her body changed still. It was past her shoulders now. Yet it was her voice that whimpered out, “It hurts.”

“It only hurts until it is over, little one.” The midwife’s sour face cracked into a smile. “Now push.”

The wind stopped and started in stutters. Orsina’s body lurched. “She is *mine*.”

“She belongs to herself. And you, dead or not, you’ve sense enough not to cross a witch, don’t you Perlita?”

Orsina’s spine snapped straight and the scream she let out was entirely human and wretched to hear. “Get her out. Out. Get out!”

Perlita did not want to go. She had clung to her mortal life for decades beyond memory, even when her body faltered and failed she had refused to move on. Even when everyone she had ever loved went into the ground, she lived on. She had more practice at staying alive than anyone in Sheepshank still living, but she was at a disadvantage. This was enemy territory. The echo of the woman who had been was surrounded on all sides by the hostility of the one she had invaded. A shade could not feel. The pain of the body meant nothing to Perlita, for she had no flesh of her own, but the life that was contained within that flesh, it could sustain her.

She had been fading since she died. Less and less of who she was remained. All the memories she’d clung to were abandoning her. The bright, the sweet, the dark and the sour; they all blurred to grey as she faded from the world. With the font of this child’s life to drink from she could hold out a little longer. She had her very existence to fight for, but it still was not enough.

Orsina pushed her out.

With one final shudder, the girl’s eyes washed back to their natural brown and she toppled limp into the midwife’s arms. The cold wind was gone. The shade destroyed.

Nella did not stir at the graveside. Tobia scrambled forward to reach for his daughter, only to catch the old midwife's stare and stumble to a halt.

The girl could barely stand after the racking that she had just suffered. Bruises surrounded her every joint. Yet somehow this old woman had the strength to hold her up. "Fetch out anything you want the little one to have of you. Leave it by the pyre this night. She moves to the forest now."

"What? No? You can't." Even now his mind had not caught up to current events. He was still living in the morning when the high noon sun was risen. "She isn't of age to apprentice yet."

The midwife held Orsina close. The girl's spindly limbs barely thinner than her own. "Look around, lackwit. There'll be no life for her here. Not after this. You want her to burn? You want them to burn you out while you sleep? Frightened fools love their fire."

This was all happening too fast for Tobia. He was a man accustomed to a very different pace of life, where the slow curve of the sun across the sky was his only deadline. If Nella was here, she would have been able to speak. To say some clever thing to keep their daughter safe and well, but Nella was still unmoving by the graveside. So deathly still that it sent a shot of terror through him, and he rushed over to cradle her in his arms.

When he looked up, the midwife and his daughter were gone.

The old woman had not stopped to check if Orsina's mother lived, so she could not tell the girl when she finally awoke. It was a cowardly thing, but one did not live in the Selvaggia without a healthy fear and a streak of practicality. Either Nella lived, and she'd be another hook dragging the child back to the danger of Sheepshank, or she'd died, in which case she'd be a crushing weight on Orsina's conscience.

Sometimes, not knowing was better.