

The Olive Readers

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Prologue

This restaurant in which I am waiting to meet Hephzibah is decorated in a style inspired by the period in which you live – a wash of terracotta on the walls, bare rustic wood, ornate candelabra, elegantly rustling wrought-iron chairs made comfortable with cream linen cushions. The style is restrained, but to my eyes is like a stage setting from another era. To be precise, your era.

I am speaking to you from your future. Imagine you have moved to another star on the edge of the universe. You peer back at your home star through a telescope. Thanks to the equations of time, speed and light you witness events that have already taken place in your absence.

Strange that, as far as you are concerned, these events have not yet occurred, yet can be viewed by you in your present. Before your very eyes they are transmuting into the future.

What does it matter? A story, no matter how fast it hurtles through space, remains a story and the play of electrons does not dilute passion.

I have to keep reminding myself that our universe is expanding. Does this mean we will have further to travel?

JEPHZAT Q, Olea, February 2195

BOOK ONE

*'Don't tell me the moon is shining;
show me the glint of light on broken glass.'*

Anton Chekov

Chapter One

I don't know how long it is since I last saw Hephzibah. It could have been when our country shifted its borders, or when the old woman, Sengita, saw snow for the first time. Measuring time by memory and shifting Hephzibah along its parameters is a meaningless exercise. Memory makes time wanton, fills it with hapless corners and dead ends. To divert myself I turn time into an abacus and try to count the days, months, years that have divided us. It started with the war, but when was that? It wasn't a war that passed us by with faint rumblings and the smell of smoke above the hills and olive groves. It walked into our house and seduced us all even though its cause hardly mattered to us. It was the axis upon which our memories now turn and yet, as with all wars, it solved nothing, merely shifted a heavily guarded border 30 kilometres further south and lined a few pockets. The villagers have stopped weeping for those murdered by the bands of passing soldiers, but are still mourning for the ancient olive trees that were blasted from the earth, their wood dissolving in the air.

I place my fingers on the table to count the summers that may have passed since Hephzibah and I last spoke, and find that I am drumming soft thuds that fall like bare feet on wood as each finger rises and falls in turn again and again, until they pause, and I think, maybe it was then, when she had walked along the jetty watching me step into the small boat alone. I can remember the heartbeat of her footsteps muffled by the hot, still afternoon

. . .

Mercifully, the bright flare of a pre-twilight sun had prevented me from looking up at her, but I knew she was

watching me cast the boat adrift and then row, the oars slicing the estuary's taut sheen. We said nothing to each other and I heard her footsteps again as she walked away from me up the incline above the jetty. She stopped and turned and I saw her shade her eyes against the sun to watch me as the boat moved slowly forwards, its cargo pushing the hull deep into the water. I strained at the oars and felt the evening sun burning the back of my neck. Hephzibah turned to continue walking towards the house and did not look back. I had hardly expected her to. I tried to concentrate on rowing, directing the boat towards the open sea, away from the shore where the village rose pink and white against the feathered silver of the olive trees.

By the time I had returned and reached the path leading through the citrus groves to my parents' house, clouds had moved across the sun and a hot wind raised dust from the path. When I arrived at the huge front door, the shutters were closed and the dogs were barking. Hephzibah and the soldiers had gone.

Chapter Two

And Lomez, what has become of Lomez, the son of Pesh, the fisherman? He should have emptied his net back into the sea that night. Where is he now and does he still carry that nightmare in the pockets of his sleep? His father had promised him his first night's hunt on the first full moon of his sixteenth year, and now the creamy globe hung open mouthed, pinioned to the boat's mast. He thought of the heavy gold earrings, finely wrought, waiting for him on his return. Once a boy had successfully completed his first fishing expedition he was given a pair of thick golden earrings bearing his name which he had to wear at all times; they guaranteed that if he drowned and was washed ashore his incineration and whatever death rituals the parents chose would be paid for.

Pesh had been killed by the soldiers and it was his mother Tulu, who was to introduce Lomez to the whims of the open sea a year earlier than was the tradition. Half the village's fishing fleet had been destroyed by the war – boats had been blown out of the water and half the village fishermen lined up against walls and shot and then gutted like fish on the harbour wall. It took a furious storm to finally clear the lingering tides of the blood and the awful smell. Young boys were taking the places of lost fathers and their mothers were sailing with them, teaching them the art of navigation and the ways of snaring fish. I would watch them sometimes, the women still wearing the white of mourning, hauling their petticoats over the boats' sides, passing on what they had learned from their husband's accounts of their fish hunts. Since they were girls they had sat at the quay with their mothers cleaning and scaling the fish as they came in, watching

their fathers and brothers at work on the boats, tying and untying nautical knots, spreading and folding the nets. As small children they had slept in the hot afternoons curled up in the cool hulls of the boats. Later, as women, they fell asleep at night in their husband's arms, listening to their whispering voices speaking of the sea's mood that day, its textures, its tides, its winds, its fickleness. I heard many women grumble that it was as if the sea was her husband's lover, not the woman who lay in his arms listening to his sea stories. This was how the women learnt the ways of the ocean, just as a woman might know the intimate details of her husband's mistress without having met her.

Barely past childhood, but with the strength and height of a grown man, Lomez thrilled at what seemed to be the weight of a full harvest in the net he and Tulu had cast hours before. It was a good omen for his future. Pedro his friend had pulled his first net on the previous night of the full moon, and hauled in only a scaggle of eels. With a feeling of satisfaction Lomez imagined the peeved look on his friend's face as he unloaded his catch on the quay. His smug imaginings quickly turned to guilt. He loved Pedro and felt sorry for him now his father had refused to take him fishing again. What else could his friend do now but stay at home with his sisters and watch the fishing boats sail in and out of the harbour?

The weight of the net broke his reverie as it hit the hull under water and sank lower. His man's body strained, as it had never done on land, yet his child's heart was fearful. What could it be in the net that defied his strength? He had heard stories of sea monsters that came too far inland, and ensnared themselves in the nets and dragged fishermen from their boats into a watery hell. The muscles in his arms felt as though they were about to split his skin. He bit hard on his lower lip until blood came. He could hear his mother singing to the fish as she bent over the boat's portside bow, pulling them up towards her, grieving

silently for her husband. Her vast white skirts and petticoats billowed over the deck and her headscarf slipped over her brow almost covering her eyes, but she could not push it back for fear of losing the net. The night was warm and she could feel the scarf and her blouse begin to soak with sweat and stick to her skin, but she was happy. Pesh would be proud of her. By working his boat and fishing and sailing in waters he said he knew better than his own body, she felt closer to him. It was as if he stood beside her, guiding her every move. Several times she had felt him place his hand upon her broad back, as he often did, and stroke the nape of her neck in encouragement, and when he did she chuckled to herself. Since his death she had never felt his presence on land, but here in his rocking boat he stood beside her, reminding her that she was not alone.

Lomez was comforted by his mother's deep measured voice that occasionally broke into an unnerving chuckle, but he still wished his father was there to see him, becoming a man, harvesting his first net. The thin coarse twine of the net split his palms and the moon felt cold, hard and heavy on his back. His strength was waning. He felt the net pulling away from him, gaining momentum as it fell. If he could not pull harder it would be lost forever. He called to Tulu who was now busy bringing up boxes from the hold for the fish. She heard her son call and ran over to him. Her fingers, thick as eels, curled around the neck of the net and she fell forward with its weight. 'What the hell is this?' she cried, and would have crossed herself (an old habit that had no meaning) had her hands not been so busy. 'Lomez, what have you caught? It has Jonah in its belly!'

Lomez imagined the full fat fish about to emerge – a swordfish perhaps, worth a lot of money on the market. Tulu wondered why such a catch hung so heavy yet so still upon her fingers. She called to Pesh as she struggled with her son to heave the catch out of the water. The moon was already drifting to the

horizon by the time the net was pulled over the boat's side and onto the deck. Small fish twisted and turned like sequined acrobats. When Lomez loosened the neck of the net, sea snakes, snails and weed poured over their feet in a thick spill of slime.

As they stood gathering their breath, a hand suddenly broke through the net. Its long white fingers pointed at Lomez and Tulu, now both crossing themselves in horror. Tulu bent closer, making sure her skirts did not touch the net, and tried to clear the weed. There was enough blue silk to indicate a skirt and a bodice. Much of the body's flesh had been eaten away, leaving only patches of bone that gleamed tooth white in the early morning light. Even in her decomposed and bloated state – for it was clearly a woman – Lomez could see how beautiful she had been. All of her hair remained and lay dark and heavy upon the deck. The one eye that remained was open and shone iridescent green and blue like a fish's scale.

'She's not one of us,' Tulu said quietly. 'This is an ill omen.'

Lomez begged his mother to return the body to the sea, but Tulu chastised him, saying it had been lifted out of its watery grave for a reason – so that it could be cremated the way any body should. She stood up and wriggled out of one of her petticoats and wrapped it round the body like a shroud. Normally she would have waited for a dawn wind to gather, or would have tacked her way slowly to shore, but this time they needed to get home quickly before heat rose with the sun. She switched on the engine and the boat surged forward. Tulu, normally a lively woman with a fondness for talking, worked the wheel in unaccustomed silence, staring grim faced ahead of her. Lomez busied himself with the fish, packing them into boxes and putting them in the hold where it was cooler. He kept one eye on the shrouded body, wondering if it could be a magical creature with the power to return to life. Then, when Tulu had her head turned away, Lomez bent to kiss the drowned woman's

slightly parted lips. He smelt the thick ancient stew of the sea's bed, and tasted salt and a fetid sweetness. The taste and smell were to remain in his mouth for the rest of his life.