

## Estrela

### November 1965

The first time she sees him he is ploughing the field alone with a team of oxen. The two beasts yank at the yoke and she watches him fall backwards into the furrowed earth. She smiles walking towards him and stretching out her hand to help him up. His hands are rough and their dirt passes from him to her as he rights himself. She takes a moment to look at the clasped hands between them and glances at his ocean blue eyes, reminding her that the sea is a full day's walk from the village.

“You haven’t gone to vote,” she says.

“No point. There’s only one choice.”

"Oh. Should there be more?"

He laughs. She blushes.

Later, in the kitchen Estrela's mother peels potatoes, her chafed hands dipping each one in an *alguidar* of darkening water. She passes them to Estrela who drops each one into a three-legged pot by the embers of the fire. Estrela’s father walks by stretching his arms into the sleeves of a heavy coat.

“Adélia, I’m going into town to vote for President Tomás. I have to be quick or it will close.”

“Will you be back for dinner?”

“No. I'll stay overnight for market day tomorrow. I need to get *favas* to plant up the bottom pasture. Don't forget to deal with the men in the morning. They'll be hungry after the ploughing today, especially that new

one, the coastal boy. They don't know hard work or hunger," he huffs placing a cap on his head.

"Yes, Donato. Breakfast for the men."

"Tell Emílio to take the cart to town in the morning, I'll need it. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Donato. The cart."

Estrela watches her father leave the house and waits a moment before walking out of the kitchen, opening the shutter and climbing out of her bedroom window. Emílio, the regular farmhand is at the edge of the canopy that covers the straw, smoking. He nods at Estrela as she straightens her skirt by the window. She winks at him, puts a finger to her lips and walks away from the house leaving him behind, dragging on his cigarette.

The coastal boy is waiting for her by the well.

On his return in the morning Estrela's father crashes into Estrela's room before she is dressed, her mother's eyes widening behind him, brow furrowed and hands clasped as Estrela feels her father's grasp on her bare shoulder.

"You filthy little whore! Right under my nose! Well, I showed him there's only one boss round here. He's gone and won't be back, not for the likes of you, you ungrateful harlot."

In the dark of her room Estrela feels her eye swell and throb.

"Laughing at me behind my back; I'll show you. Who'll have you now? You've been broken and used by that coastal upstart."

She blocks the next blow with her hand and feels a shrill pain through her index finger as the bone cracks.

“You’ll stay locked in this room and see no other man ‘til the day you marry. I promise you I will kill the next man who even comes sniffing round!”

She sees her father’s dark hand again coming towards her head and wonders what it is like to love a fisherman, live by the sea, cook fish every day and wait for him to return on the waves.

### **October 1968**

There have been rumours that Salazar is dying. They say he fell off a deckchair and is now in a coma. The official news is that he is recovering well and the other version took some time to travel from the government offices in Lisbon to Estrela's village and even then nobody would believe it.

“To Freedom!” Artur, the not-so-secret communist celebrates the news at a table outside the *taberna*. Estrela watches him down shot after shot of fiery *medronho*, shouting louder with each solitary toast.

“Shut up man! Take your dissent somewhere they might want to hear it,” says Frederico leaning at the door of the makeshift bar.

“We finally finished him off and that’s worth celebrating with a drink.” He slams another glass of firewater into the back of his throat.

“He may be in a coma but he still has more ears than anyone. Anyway, your bunch had nothing to do with it. You’ve been trying to get rid of him for 40 years and now a beach chair has done the job for you. Ha! I don’t want trouble here, so get back home to your wife.”

The news stays on Estrela’s mind. Later from her wooden stool she looks across her kitchen table at the mouth munching and chomping its

way through her rabbit stew. Dark hands pick up the tiny ribs and the mouth sucks them clean.

She looks at the straw-backed chair her husband is sitting on and sees how sturdy it is beneath his bulk.

Her own plate has potatoes and carrots along with some of her dried herbs in a tomato sauce. Her husband likes tomatoes and for as long as they ripen in the fields outside the house they have them at every meal. Tomatoes from April right up to December when the weather holds. It is now early October. She forks a piece of potato into her mouth, her crippled index finger unable to steady the utensil and tastes an empty promise of rabbit gravy.

“There are pumpkins to pick tomorrow,” he says. “You can make soup after you bring them under the canopy.”

“Yes, Emílio. Pumpkin soup.”

That night she listens to him breathe beside her. The flannel sheets weigh her down; pinning her to the bed, keeping her there despite a nauseous feeling in her throat. She coughs and feels him turn towards her. His hand stretches across her belly and she breathes as shallowly as she dares, wondering if he feels two hearts, hers and the other, beating beneath his fingers.

In the morning he reminds her to go out to the fields to drag in the pumpkins. He leaves before daylight to walk to the big *Quinta* to harvest the last of Dr. Avillez's grapes. Estrela watches him walk down the valley, the limp he brought back from Angola making his head bob as his leg drifts out at an angle.

After the grapes are harvested Emílio will stay home most likely until December when the olive trees will need pruning and then she will stay inside and cook the cabbage greens he picks and the potatoes stored back in the summer, while he tends to the vegetables and drinks at the *taberna* with loony António; two years back from the fighting in Guinea.

The pumpkins are enormous and it takes Estrela most of the morning to, one by one, load a dozen onto the hand cart and bring them in under the canopy to protect them from the certain rain in the months to come. With every grunt and shove she is conscious of pressure on her belly and once the final pumpkin is unloaded she feels the expected trickle between her legs and looks down at the blood dripping onto the earth between her feet.

Later, she takes a knife to the biggest pumpkin and slices it for soup.

## **May 1974**

Estrela puts on a black blouse, skirt and tights and pulls her hair back into a bun. She checks her appearance in the mirror and rubs at the darkness under her eyes. She knows people are waiting for her at the church, some of them still there from the vigil the night before.

“*Mamã?* Why are you wearing black? You look funny.” Her son is looking at her legs poking out from the unfamiliar skirt. She reaches out to smooth down his hair.

“That’s what we do when someone dies,” she explains.

“Why?”

“Well... we have to show how dark our souls are from the loss of the person.”

“Should I wear black for *Papá?*”

“Your *Papá* is in France, Rafael. He’s not in Heaven.”

“Is your soul dark?”

“A little.”

“What’s a soul?”

She takes her son’s hand and they walk down into the village to the little church. A crowd of women is already cawing at the door, amongst them Estrela’s mother-in-law and her aunts.

“The priest won’t come, Estrela! He says it’s too dangerous to travel in these godless times. My Lord, what are we to do? These Communists will be the damnation of us all! What are we to do?”

“Who told you that *Ti*’ Piedade?”

“Your *Ti*’ Ângela heard it from *Ti*’ Vasco. He was in town and everything is crazy down there. The mayor has left and nobody knows where he’s gone and the whole town is demanding the place should be run as a cooperative, and now the priest won’t dare move to come for a funeral.”

“We’ll have to bury him without the priest.”

“What?”

“If he won’t come we’ll have to bury him ourselves.”

Inside, the coffin lies open in the church, just as it had during last night’s vigil. Facing the altar she crosses herself and, her son’s hand in hers, walks to the coffin to kiss her father for the first and last time. Estrela feels his smooth greyed cheeks, shaved closer than he had ever allowed her before and smells the rosewater she used to sponge his cooling body before manoeuvring him into Emílio’s best shirt and trousers. She lifts Rafael up over the wooden lip far enough for him to see his grandfather’s dead face.

The two oldest boys still left in the village have dug the grave and now it is left to the women to carry the coffin to the cemetery further up the hill. Four men carried Estrela’s mother up there two years earlier, but in their absence over a dozen women now take turns to heave the encased body to its resting place. It takes over two hours and heat saturates their mourning clothes as they clomp up the track to the cemetery.

At the graveside each of the aunts says a prayer and they lower the coffin into the ground on ropes. It bumps into the earth walls as it goes. Estrela grabs a handful of dirt and throws it down onto the coffin's wooden lid.

"Is it finished *Mamã*?"

"Yes, it's done now."

"What are we doing now, *Mamã*? Can we go to France to see *Papá*?"

"No, my angel it's very far, but how would you like to see the sea?"

## **December 1985**

The first notion Estrela has of Emílio's accident is when instead of receiving his monthly cheque she gets a telegram telling her to meet his bus from Paris. When she sees him come down the steps off the bus her thought is of the rotary blade slicing through his wrist. She wonders how much blood there was; imagines it seeping into the logs at the saw mill as it spurted.

Now, two months since his return, she feeds him, washes him, shaves him. As she changes and checks the dressing of the stump where Emílio's right hand once was she thinks back to when Rafael was born. So helpless.

"My fingers hurt," Emílio says.

"But they're gone, Emílio. They can't hurt any more."

"But they do. I can feel them. I'm in pain, damn it."

Emílio groans and grabs the bandaged arm with his good hand making a fist around the stub.

"It'll pass. The pain will pass," Estrela stretches out her four good fingers to touch his shoulder, but stops short.

“When?”

“Next year,” she smiles knowing that 1986 is just hours away.

The house is quiet and Estrela sets up for the celebration taking out a bag of raisins for the twelve midnight wishes. She and Emílio are spending the night alone. Rafael is in Portimão celebrating the New Year with his friends from the technical school. Estrela sees that he has spent more of his time there since his father’s return.

“We could spend the night in the café Emílio.”

“No. We’re staying here. I can’t stand to hear all that pity from so many women. Bunch of harpies. And you’re one of them when you’re all together.”

“The husbands are home for the celebrations. They’ll be there too. It would do you good to talk to them. They’ll be celebrating us becoming Europeans.”

“A room full of whole men. I won’t stand to look at them. They can all go back to France and Germany. Go and be Europeans there. I’m stuck right here; the EEC won't change that.”

“We can just go for midnight. Start off the year with our right foot.”

She watches his eyes narrow as he looks at her and he holds up his stump in front of his face, waving it.

“I would like to start off the year with my right hand, how about that? Or even a decent right leg. Do you think I can?” Emílio limps into the bedroom and he slams the door behind him.

Estrela goes to the kitchen to prepare the dinner. She arranges two plates, two knives, two forks on the wooden table. As she takes down the rice from the shelf she sees the corner of the bag is nibbled and grains of rice shower the enamelled surface of the gas stove. Tiny brown droppings cover the shelf, outlining where the bag has sat. Estrela reaches beneath the

sink for the box of poison and sprinkles some of the green powder onto the shelf.

Once the dinner is made she calls Emílio to the table. He does not answer so she knocks on the door and leaves the meal of pork, rice and cabbage on the floor outside. As she eats a *chouriço* sandwich at the kitchen table she hears the door creak as Emílio picks up the plate and takes it into the bedroom.

Estrela cleans up by scraping the leftover rice and cabbage into a bag and sealing it as tightly as she can. She scrubs her hands at the sink washing away every remnant of rice. She wraps herself in a red shawl and once outside in the cold night uses a hoe to dig a shallow hole into which she drops the bag of leftovers. The chickens will eat something better in the morning. The wait won't kill them. After stamping down the earth Estrela sets off for the café.

At midnight she watches her friends eat their twelve raisins one by one, comical as they balance on their right legs on the café's chairs and make silent wishes after popping each raisin into their mouths. She listens to the village children banging pots and pans with wooden spoons to welcome in the New Year and frighten away bad spirits. In the distance someone is singing.

Estrela's own raisins are clasped in her fist as she considers her own wishes. Eventually, she pushes all twelve into her mouth at once.