

The Sharp Edge of the Ordinary

Stories of Peace, Change, and Becoming



WRITTEN BY YPAN
STORYTELLERS

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HOW THESE STORIES WERE BORN?

THIS BOOK WAS CREATED BY THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE YPAN STUDY SESSION – TALES OF TRANSFORMATION, WHICH TOOK PLACE AT EUROPEAN YOUTH CENTER IN STRASBOURG (FRANCE) DURING 18-25 MAY 2025.

IT GATHERED 31 STORYTELLERS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD WHO WERE CONNECTED THROUGH THEIR DIFFERENT NARRATIVES AND WILLINGNESS TO SHARE THEM TO EACH OTHER.

EVERY STORY OF THIS BOOK REFLECTS A GROUP WORK, WHICH WAS COMPLETED DURING DIFFERENT ACTIVITIES OF THE STUDY SESSION.

WHEN THE WAR STARTED, BUT YOUR NAILS ARE STILL NOT DONE

SHE'S IN A HURRY, WORRYING

LOOKING FOR HER SUITCASE

HOMELESS... GLASSES... CHILDREN...

TOMORROWS BELONG TO CONFUSION

ALARM IS RINGING LIKE NOISE OF CHANGE

HOME IS MISSING IN THE MORNING

THE PAINT HAS NOT DRIED YET, SHIT!

BOB'S STORY

THIS IS THE STORY BEHIND THIS NAIL CUTTER. THIS ISN'T AN ORDINARY NAIL CUTTER. THAT'S BOB, AND BOB HAS A STORY.

BOB IS MADE FROM STAINLESS STEEL, AND FOR ME TO DO BOB AND EVERYONE ELSE INVOLVED IN THIS STORY JUSTICE, I MUST START FROM THE BEGINNING. THE VERY BEGINNING. SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE IN BIG BANG, SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE IN GOD OR SEVERAL GODS. BOB, HOWEVER, BELIEVES THAT THE WORLD STARTED WHEN BOB WAS CREATED. WELL I MEAN IT IS BOB'S STORY ALL – ISN'T IT?

SO BOB'S STORY STARTS WITH THE METAL THAT WAS REQUIRED TO MAKE THEM.

BEHIND BOB IS WRITTEN MADE IN CHINA, BUT WHERE DOES BOB REALLY COMES FROM, THE ORIGIN OF BOB COMES FROM PRECIOUS METAL THAT CAN ONLY BE FOUND IN DR CONGO AND THE EXTRACTION OF THIS METAL USES CHILD LABOUR AND EXPLOITATION PAYING THEM 1 POUND PER DAY AND, THESE ARE TAKEN TO THE BIG FACTORIES IN CHINA TO PRODUCE THIS NAIL CUTTER THAT YOU SEE TODAY, AND TODAY THIS COSTS 200 POUNDS.

THE NAIL CUTTER

THIS IS A SMALL, OLD NAIL CUTTER. IT BELONGED TO MY GRANDFATHER, WHO WAS A SOLDIER DURING WORLD WAR II.

HE GOT IT ON CHRISTMAS EVE IN 1943, DURING A SHORT CEASEFIRE. THE GERMAN AND FRENCH SOLDIERS STOPPED FIGHTING, CAME OUT OF THEIR TRENCHES, AND CELEBRATED CHRISTMAS TOGETHER. THEY SHARED SONGS, FOOD, AND EVEN SMALL GIFTS. A FRENCH SOLDIER GAVE THIS NAIL CUTTER TO MY GRANDFATHER.

THE NEXT DAY, THE FIGHTING STARTED AGAIN. MY GRANDFATHER DIED IN THAT BATTLE.

THIS NAIL CUTTER IS THE ONLY THING LEFT FROM HIM. I NEVER MET HIM, BUT THROUGH THIS SIMPLE OBJECT, I FEEL CONNECTED TO HIM – AND TO A MOMENT WHEN, EVEN IN WAR, PEOPLE CHOSE PEACE.

THE ROAD TO PAQE

IN THE ORDINARY VILLAGE OF LUFTË LIVED NORI GRANITEYO. LUFTË WAS A PLACE OF GIGANTIC MOUNTAINS AND SPARKLING WATERFALLS BUT ALSO OF CONSTANT FIGHTS BETWEEN THE 2 TRIBES LIVING IN THE EAST AND THE WEST.

GRANITEYO WAS MISERABLE IN LUFTË. THEY HATED THE FIGHTS, THE FIRES AND THE FEAR. THERE WAS ONE POSITIVE SIDE OF LUFTË HOWEVER; IN THE FOREST TO THE SOUTH LIVED A WISE WITCH CALLED BOSZORKA. GRANITEYO DECIDED TO VISIT HER AND ASK FOR ADVICE ON HOW THEY COULD BECOME HAPPIER. THE WITCH LOOKED INTO HER CAULDRON AND SAID IN HER RASPY VOICE:

"TO FIND HAPPINESS YOU HAVE TO FIND PAQE!"

PAQE SOUNDED LIKE A WONDERFUL PLACE. GRANITEYO RAN BACK TO THE VILLAGE AND TOLD EVERYONE WHO WOULD LISTEN – THEY JUST HAVE TO LEAVE LUFTË BEHIND AND GO TO PAQE.

“YOU MUST LEARN HOW THE WORLD WORKS IF YOU HOPE TO CHANGE IT,” SHE SAID.

AND SO, GRANITEYO SET OFF AN ADVENTURE ACROSS MOUNTAINS, RIVERS, AND DESERTS, ARRIVING AT VILLAGE AFTER VILLAGE, CITY AFTER CITY. AT FIRST, THESE PLACES SEEMED LIKE THE FABLED PAQE – PEACEFUL, COLORFUL, VIBRANT. BUT THE REALITY SOON HIT.

IN ONE PLACE, WOMEN WERE SILENCED AND SHAMED. IN ANOTHER, THE POOR STARVED WHILE THE ELITE THREW GOLDEN FEASTS. ELSEWHERE, PEOPLE WERE JUDGED FOR THE COLOR OF THEIR SKIN, WHOM THEY LOVED, OR THE LANGUAGES THEY SPOKE.

EVERY TIME, GRANITEYO WOULD LEAVE, DISHEARTENED. BUT IN EVERY PLACE, SOMEONE JOINED THEM—OTHERS WHO ALSO BELIEVED IN SOMETHING BETTER. THERE WAS JIN, A REBELLIOUS POET; NERA, A HEALER WHO HAD BEEN EXILED; SAJID, A QUIET ARTIST WITH FIRE IN HIS EYES. ONE BY ONE, THEY JOINED GRANITEYO, AND THEY CALLED THEMSELVES NAPI—NOMADS OF ACTION, PEACE, AND INCLUSION.

NAPI CONTINUED WANDERING, STILL LOOKING FOR PAQE. BUT THEY NEVER SEEMED TO FIND IT. AFTER MANY YEARS OF SEARCHING AND FIGHTING, GRANITEYO SUDDENLY FOUND THEMSELVES ONCE AGAIN IN THE OUTSKIRTS OF LUFTË – SAME BUILDINGS, SAME SMELL OF SMOKE, SAME HOSTILITY. NOTHING HAD CHANGED.

GRANITEYO SANK TO THEIR KNEES. “IT WAS ALL FOR NOTHING,” THEY WHISPERED. BUT JUST THEN, BOSZORKA APPEARED ONCE MORE, HER CLOAK RED AS EVER, HER VOICE STILL AS RASPY AS IT WAS ON THAT FATEFUL NIGHT MANY YEARS AGO. “YOU STILL DON’T SEE?” SHE ASKED GENTLY. “YOU HAVE FOUND PAQE A LONG TIME AGO. IT WAS NEVER A PLACE ON A MAP. EVERY TIME YOU STOOD UP AGAINST INJUSTICE, EVERY TIME YOU BUILT TRUST WITH SOMEONE NEW, EVERY TIME NAPI ACTED WITH LOVE—YOU WERE BUILDING PAQE. YOU WERE CREATING PEACE.”

GRANITEYO BURST OUT LAUGHING WITH TEARS IN THEIR EYES. HOW COULD HAVE THEY MISSED IT? THEY HAVE FOUND THEIR HOME THE MOMENT OTHERS HAVE JOINED THEM, THE MOMENT THEY FIRST LAUGHED TOGETHER OR SHARED A MEAL. THEY HAVE ARRIVED HOME IN EVERY LATE NIGHT CONVERSATION, IN EVERY HUG AND IN EVERY LIFE CHANGED.

THEY WERE PAQE AND PAQE WAS THEM. SIMPLE AS THAT.

NAMES THEY NEVER LEARNED

KRAKOW, 9:30 AM

ALI WALKS PAST THE NEIGHBORS' HOUSES ON HIS WAY TO SCHOOL. HE NOTICES PARENTS PULLING THEIR CHILDREN INSIDE.

***"TERRORIST"* – IT'S THE ONLY WORD HE HEARS.**

CAIRO, 2:00 PM

AHMED CHANGES HIS CLOTHES FOR HIS COUSIN'S WEDDING. HE FEELS UNCOMFORTABLE, LOST IN A VERSION OF HIMSELF THAT ISN'T REAL.

TO SURVIVE, HE ERASES HIMSELF – PIECE BY PIECE – JUST TO BE ACCEPTED.

TEXAS, 8:00 PM

NORA OPENS HER LAPTOP, HOPEFUL FOR A RESPONSE FROM HER DREAM COMPANY.

ANOTHER EMAIL. ANOTHER REJECTION.

THIS TIME, IT READS: *"WE DO NOT ACCEPT APPLICANTS OF COLOR."*

UNTIL WE CONFRONT IT, HATE WILL KEEP REWRITING STORIES THAT WERE MEANT TO INSPIRE.

THREADS OF RESILIENCE

MOTHER WHO LIVES TO GROW UP HER CHILDREN ALONE

AFTER THE CONFLICT, NIA LOST HER HUSBAND AND WAS LEFT TO CARE FOR THEIR TWO CHILDREN BY HERSELF. THE CITY WAS BROKEN – HOMES WERE RUINED, JOBS WERE GONE, AND HOPE WAS HARD TO FIND. BUT NIA KNEW SHE HAD TO KEEP GOING.

SHE STARTED A SMALL SEWING BUSINESS FROM HOME. DURING THE DAY, SHE LOOKED AFTER HER CHILDREN. THE FAMILY LIVED IN A SMALL APARTMENT, SO NIA WORKED IN THE SAME ROOM HER CHILDREN WERE SLEEPING. AT NIGHT, SHE WORKED BY A WEAK LIGHT SO AS NOT TO WAKE THE CHILDREN, USING OLD CLOTH. SHE WAS OFTEN SO TIRED, BUT SHE DIDN'T STOP.

ONE NIGHT, HALF-ASLEEP, SHE MEANT TO SEW FABRIC BUT ENDED UP POKING HER OWN FINGER. BLOOD STAINED THE CLOTH, BUT SHE WIPE IT OFF AND KEPT SEWING. SHE COULDN'T AFFORD TO STOP.

LITTLE BY LITTLE, PEOPLE NOTICED HER WORK. HER CLOTHES WEREN'T JUST BEAUTIFUL – THEY TOLD A STORY OF STRENGTH. NIA WAS MORE THAN A MOTHER OR A WIDOW. SHE BECAME A SYMBOL OF HOW PEOPLE CAN RISE, EVEN FROM RUINS.

THE EDUCATOR WHO RETURNED

SALMA RAN AWAY FROM THE WAR AS A TEENAGER, FINDING REFUGE AND EDUCATION IN A EUROPEAN COUNTRY. YEARS LATER, WHEN THE FIGHTING STOPPED, SHE CAME BACK – NOT AS A SURVIVOR, BUT AS A TEACHER. THE VILLAGE HARDLY RECOGNIZED HER. SOME DIDN'T BELIEVE SHE HAD REALLY STUDIED. OTHERS WERE LAUGHING AT THE IDEA OF EDUCATING GIRLS.

STILL, SALMA STARTED TEACHING UNDER A TREE. ONE GIRL JOINED, THEN TWO. EVENTUALLY, THE COMMUNITY BEGAN TO LISTEN, THEN LEARN. SALMA DIDN'T JUST TEACH LETTERS – SHE TAUGHT BELIEF.

HER CLASSROOM BECAME A SYMBOL OF REBIRTH.

AMZEL AND VAHAB

THIS PLACE WAS ALWAYS RESPECTING TRADITIONS. ALWAYS FAITHFUL TO ITS ROOTS. ALWAYS CONSERVATIVE. TOO CONSERVATIVE FOR PEOPLE LIKE AMZEL AND VAHAB. SO CONSERVATIVE THAT THEY HAD TO LIE EVEN TO THEIR FAMILIES. TO THEIR CLOSEST FRIENDS. AND OH – HOW DIFFICULT IT WAS. STOLEN KISSES IN THE BACK STREETS. HUGS AND PROMISES TO EACH OTHER WHEN NOBODY'S AROUND. TEXT MESSAGES SENT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, COVERED IN CODES AND LONGING. REPETITIVE ANSWERS FROM SNEAKY UNCLES AND AUNTIES BOMBING EACH OF THEM “WHEN ARE YOU GETTING MARRIED, MY DEAR? IS NOT THERE ANY GIRL YOU MIGHT LIKE IN THE WHOLE TOWN?” OHH... IF ONLY THEY KNEW. IF ONLY THEY COULD UNDERSTAND...

TIMES SEEMED TO GET BETTER AFTER THE WAR. THE LIBERAL VALUES SEEMED TO BECOME STRONGER, THE TRADITIONS WERE NOT PLAYING A STRONG ROLE ANY MORE, AND – FINALLY – THE PUNISHING LAW OF LOVING DIFFERENTLY WAS BEING CANCELLED.

IT GAVE A BLURRY PROMISE TO AMZEL AND VAHAB, THAT ONE DAY, ONE BEAUTIFUL SUNNY DAY THEY DO NOT HAVE TO HIDE ANYMORE. THAT THEIR LOVE, NOW WRAPPED IN SECRETS, CAN BE MET IN THE WORLD WITHOUT PREJUDICE AND JUDGMENT.

„WHEN WILL WE BE FINALLY FREE? WE HAVE BEEN STRONG FOR SO LONG... AND HOW MUCH LONGER DOES IT TAKE?“ – VAHAB WHISPERED TO AMZEL ONE OF THOSE EVENINGS, WHEN THE SUNSET PAINTED THE WHOLE TOWN IN ITS BLOODY RED. AMZEL DID NOT ANSWER. NOT BECAUSE HIS HEART WAS NOT CRAVING THE SAME – IT DID – BUT BECAUSE HE DID NOT KNOW THE ANSWER. HE JUST GENTLY SQUEEZED VAHAB’S HAND WITH A TINY PROMISE. PROMISE THAT THIS SOCIETY, WHICH SUFFERED SO MUCH IN THESE YEARS, IS CHANGING; SLOWLY BUT STILL TRANSFORMING INTO SOMETHING THAT CAN HOLD THE DIVERSITY WITH A WARM EMBRACE INSTEAD OF DISMISSING. WHERE AMZEL AND VAHAB DO NOT HAVE TO BE TOO STRONG ANYMORE. WHERE THEY CAN JUST BE. WHERE THEY CAN JUST LOVE AND BE LOVED.

THESE ARE THREE DIFFERENT STORIES. THREE STORIES OF RESILIENCE SHOWING THAT PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS CAN FACE CHALLENGES WITH COURAGE AND STRENGTH. EVEN WHEN THEY FEEL ALONE, THEY ARE NOT. WITHOUT KNOWING EACH OTHER, THEIR ACTIONS HELP REBUILD A STRONGER COMMUNITY – ONE STEP AT A TIME.

BRIDGES OF STONE, WALLS OF SAND

IN THIS LETTER SHE READS: LONG AGO, THE CANDLE MAKERS SON, A BOY NAMED LIOR WANTED TO HELP OTHERS. HE WANTED TO BECOME A KNIGHT BUT NOT FOR THE SAKE OF POWER, HE JUST WANTED TO SERVE HIS COMMUNITY BETTER. HE WASN'T RICH OR POWERFUL, BUT HE WAS KIND. SO HE SPEND HIS YEARS PROTECTING PEOPLE, LISTENING TO THEM, AND HELPING THE COMMUNITY EVERY DAY. THROUGH HIS KINDNESS HE BECAME WELL KNOWN AND RESPECTED IN HIS COMMUNITY "YOU DON'T NEED A CROWN TO BE A LEADER," HE SAID. ELIRA READING THIS FROWNED, A PEASANT? TEACHING HER? BUT AS SHE TURNED THE PAGE HER EYES MET ANOTHER TALE. ONE EVEN OLDER:

IN A DESERT KINGDOM THE QUEEN OF THE SAND, QUEEN MARA RULED BY POWER BUT FEARED BETRAYAL. TO SECURE HER PALACE SHE ONLY KEPT THE ONES WHO AGREED TO HER. ONE DAY, IN A DREAM, A LITTLE GIRL TOLD HER: "THE MORE YOU HOLD THE SAND, THE FASTER IT RUNS AWAY." MA'RA REALIZED SHE NEEDED TO LISTEN AND CARE. SO THE NEXT MORNING SHE TOOK THE FASTEST HORSE TO THE COMMUNITY ASKING PEOPLE THEIR NEEDS. SHE INVITED CRITICISM. SO SHE CHANGED. SLOWLY THE WALLS OF SAND BECAME BRIDGES OF STONE.

FROM MA'RA, ELIRA LEARNED TO BE HUMBLE. POWER WITHOUT TRUST IS JUST ISOLATION ALONE IN A COLD PALACE FROM LIOR, SHE LEARNED TO SERVE OTHERS. LEADERSHIP IS NOT ABOUT HAVING A CROWN BUT HELPING YOUR COMMUNITY AND MAKING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE.

AND FINALLY FROM HER OWN STORY ELIRA REWROTE THE LETTER AND PUT IT BACK FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS TO LEARN FROM HER MISTAKES. NOW, ELIRA IS STILL LEARNING – BUT SHE LISTENS, SERVES, AND LEADS WITH HEART.

CARROT STORY

AFTER THE GREAT TRANSFORMATION, NO ONE'S UGLY AT CARROT'S SCHOOL.

LAST WEEK, THEY SAID THAT THEY SAW SOME PRE-TRANSFORMERS BEYOND THE BORDERS, BUT THAT'S JUST GOSSIP.

SO SHE REALLY COULDN'T TELL YOU WHY HALF OF HER FACE STARTED DISAPPEARING AT THE PARTY.

NOT THAT ANYONE COULD SEE, OF COURSE, BUT SHE COULD TELL. HIDING IN THE BATHROOM, LOOKING IN A MIRROR, SHE COULD TELL.

THIS DIDN'T MAKE SENSE. A GOOD PERSON IS A BEAUTIFUL PERSON.

MOTHER ALWAYS SAID, AS SHE STRAIGHTENED HER RIBBON. SHE FELT TEARS IN HER EYES, BUT EVEN THEY DISAPPEARED BEFORE THEY HIT THE FLOOR.

YOU KNOW WHAT THEY DO TO FACELESS PEOPLE? THEY PUT THEM IN CAGES. SO THEY DON'T HARM ANYONE, SO THEY DON'T HARM THEMSELVES.

CARROT WANTED TO BE GOOD, SHE DIDN'T WANT TO HURT, OR TO MAKE A MISTAKE.

SHE DIDN'T WANT TO DISAPPEAR.

SHE RAN TO HER FRIEND AND TRIED TO TALK WHILE HER MOUTH WAS STILL THERE: "MY FACE, I'M LOSING IT".

HER FRIEND LOOKED AT HER AND LAUGHED: "OF COURSE, YOU ARE SILLY! AND GOOD RIDDANCE. NOW, YOU'RE BECOMING ONE OF US. NOW, YOU GET TO BE BEAUTIFUL!" AND SHE PULLED A MASK OFF HER BELOVED FRIEND'S FACE TO REVEAL A FACELESS HEAD UNDERNEATH.

CARROT STARTLED, HORRIFIED. SHE LOOKED BACK AT THE PARTY. SUDDENLY, THE FACES LOOKED TOO PLASTIC, TOO PERFECT. SUDDENLY, THEY WERE NOT FACES AT ALL, AND FIFTY IDENTICAL MASKS WERE STARING BACK AT HER.

SHE RAN OUT OF THE HOUSE, RAN AND RAN AND RAN. THERE WAS NO DIRECTION, ONLY FEAR, CONFUSION AND AT THE END – ACCEPTANCE.

SHE PAUSED WHEN SHE REACHED THE BORDER. "HOPEFULLY, THAT GOSSIP WAS TRUE AFTER ALL" – SHE THOUGHT AS SHE TOOK THE FIRST STEP.

UNDER THE OLIVE TREE

THE NAMES OF ALL CHARACTERS AND PLACES IN THIS STORY HAVE BEEN CHANGED AND DO NOT IMPLY ANY RELATION OR ASSOCIATION TO THE REAL NAMES.

THE BRANCH FLEW AGAINST THE TRUNK OF THE TREE WITH A FORCE THAT EVEN SURPRISED OLIVER. WHEN HE THREW IT, HE KNEW HE WAS ANGRY, BUT HE COULDN'T HELP BUT BE STARTLED BY THE THUD OF CRUSHING WOOD AGAINST WOOD. UNDETERRED, HE CONTINUED:

– “THEY WERE RIGHT! ALL I HEAR IN MY COMMUNITY ABOUT YOU PEOPLE IS THAT YOU ARE EXACTLY LIKE THIS, THAT YOU ALWAYS DO THIS! I DECIDED TO GIVE YOU A CHANCE, TO TRUST YOU, I REALLY TRIED, BUT YOU JUST PROVED ME WRONG.”

LITTLE WOULD OLIVER HAVE IMAGINED THAT HE WOULD BE UNDER THAT OLIVE TREE, WITH NIL STARING AT HIM, WHEN SIX MONTHS AGO HE WAS LAYING BRICK OVER BRICK AT GRANDMA'S DESTROYED BATHROOM. SHE WASN'T REALLY OLIVER'S GRANDMA, BUT SHE HAD BEEN IN OLIVER'S LIFE FOR AS LONG AS HE COULD REMEMBER. SHE HAD SEEN HIM GROW UP, HAD BROUGHT HIM TO SCHOOL AND TAKEN HIM TO HAVE ICE CREAM ON SATURDAYS AT THE LITTLE SHOP AROUND THE CORNER OF WHERE SHE LIVED, AND OLIVER HAD ALWAYS CALLED HER GRANDMA. IN ONE OF THE LAST DAYS OF THE CONFLICT, GRANDMA'S HOUSE HAD BEEN HIT BY A SMALL MORTAR BOMB, AND NOW THE RAIN CAME INTO HER BATHROOM THROUGH THE HOLE THAT IT HAD LEFT IN THE ROOF.

THIS WAS NOT THE FIRST ROOM OLIVER HAD HELPED TO REPAIR. DURING THE CONFLICT, HE HAD ALWAYS TRIED TO HELP IN ANY WAY HE COULD TO LESSEN THE TOLL THE CONFLICT HAD TAKEN ON HIS COMMUNITY. HIS HOUSE HAD LUCKILY BEEN SPARED, BUT PEOPLE ALL AROUND HIM NEEDED ALL SORTS OF HELP, FROM BEING BROUGHT TO THE LITTLE FIELD HOSPITAL JUST OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE TO COLLECTING FOOD AT THE HUMANITARIAN AID DELIVERY POINT, LOCATED BETWEEN HIS COMMUNITY AND THE “OTHER” COMMUNITY, THOSE WHO HAD DONE THEM SO MUCH HARM. THIS DIDN’T CHANGE AFTER THE GUNS FELL SILENT, SINCE, IF ANYTHING, THE NEEDS OF HIS COMMUNITY BECAME MORE DEMANDING AND TIME-CONSUMING IN THE ABSENCE OF VIOLENCE.

DURING ONE OF HIS REGULAR TRIPS TO THE HUMANITARIAN AID DELIVERY POINT, OLIVER NOTICED A YOUNG MAN A FEW METERS IN FRONT OF HIM IN THE LINE. HE WAS FROM THE “OTHER” COMMUNITY, AND HE KNEW HIM FROM THE DAYS BEFORE THE CONFLICT. AFTER THE CONFLICT BROKE OUT, PEOPLE FROM THE TWO COMMUNITIES HAD STOPPED ENCOUNTERING, EXCEPT WHEN PLACED TWENTY METERS APART AND WITH A GUN POINTED AT EACH OTHER. YEARS HAD PASSED SINCE, AND NOW, SEEING HIM FOR THE FIRST TIME, HE REALISED HE HAD GROWN OLDER. HE ALSO REALISED THAT FOR SOME REASON, SOMETHING IN HIM REALLY MOVED WHEN HE SAW HIM. IT WASN’T THE SAME KIND OF MOVEMENT HE HAD WHEN HE SAW OTHER PEOPLE FROM THE “OTHER” COMMUNITY, A FEELING OF ANGER AT THE PAIN THEY HAD CAUSED TO HIS PEOPLE. GRUDGINGLY, HE HAD TO ADMIT TO HIMSELF THAT HE REALLY LIKED HIM. IN THE NEXT DAYS, HE SAW HIM A FEW MORE TIMES, AND EACH TIME HE WOULD NOTICE SOMETHING NEW, THE WAY HIS HAIR BRUSHED AGAINST HIS EARS WHEN THE AIR BLEW, HOW HE WOULD BITE HIS LIP WHEN HE WAS ABSENT-MINDED.

NONETHELESS, OLIVER DECIDED TO KEEP IT TO HIMSELF AND NOT TALK TO HIM. IT FELT LIKE A BETRAYAL OF HIS COMMUNITY, A SELFISH ACT OF PURSUING WHAT HE THOUGHT COULD, BUT HOPED WAS NOT LOVE, WHICH NECESSARILY HAD TO MEAN HURTING AND TURNING HIS BACK ON THE COMMUNITY HE LOVED TO SERVE AND SUPPORT.

ONE OF THESE DAYS, HE WAS INSTALLING THE WIRES IN GRANDMA'S HOUSE WHILE TALKING TO HER, AND HE INVARIABLY STARTED TALKING TO HER ABOUT THE GUY, WHOM SOMEONE AROUND HIM HAD CALLED NIL. OLIVER DIDN'T NECESSARILY WANT TO SHARE HOW HE FELT ABOUT NIL – HE ONLY WANTED TO SHARE THAT HE HAD SEEN HIM, SINCE GRANDMA ALSO KNEW HIM FROM BEFORE THE WAR. HE MUST HAVE SAID SOMETHING ABOUT NIL OR TALKED A LITTLE BIT TOO LONG ABOUT HIM, SINCE AT SOME POINT GRANDMA LOOKED AT OLIVER, SMILED CHEEKILY AND DRYLY SAID: “YOU REALLY LIKE HIM, HUH?”

OLIVER STARTED PROTESTING, DENYING THAT GRAVE ACCUSATION IN THE STRONGEST TERMS, NOT WITHOUT BLUSHING DUE TO HIS OBVIOUS INABILITY TO HIDE HIS FEELINGS FROM GRANDMA. INSTEAD OF CONTRADICTING OLIVER, GRANDMA SIMPLY STOOD UP, WENT TO THE KITCHEN AND FETCHED AN OLD SHOE BOX FROM UNDER THE DRAWER WHERE SHE KEPT HER BREAD. SHE SAT BACK DOWN NEXT TO OLIVER, WHO STILL DESPERATELY (AND UNSUCCESSFULLY) TRIED TO MAKE HIS CASE FOR HIS INNOCENCE, OPENED THE BOX AND FETCHED SOME LETTERS AND SOME PICTURES.

– “THERE IS SOMETHING THAT YOU DON’T KNOW, SOMETHING THAT ONLY A FEW IN THIS TOWN ARE OLD ENOUGH TO REMEMBER - AND THEY WILL NOT REMEMBER BECAUSE THEY ARE OLD. THESE WERE SENT TO ME BY SOMEONE WHOM I KNEW BEFORE THE WAR. HE WAS A BAKER IN THE “OTHER” COMMUNITY, AND I LOVED HIM VERY MUCH. HE ALSO LOVED ME VERY MUCH, AND SO WE WOULD MEET IN SECRET UNDER THE OLIVE TREE THAT GROWS JUST BEHIND THE CITY. OUR FAMILIES DIDN’T KNOW, OF COURSE, AND WHILE WE OFTEN THOUGHT ABOUT TELLING THEM, IN THE END, WE NEVER DID. AS THE CONFLICT THREATENED TO ESCALATE, WE SAW EACH OTHER LESS AND LESS. AND THEN THE CONFLICT STARTED. A FEW DAYS AFTER THE FIRST SHOTS FELL, A BULLET FROM ONE OF OUR SNIPERS MADE MY BIGGEST FEAR COME TRUE – I WOULD NEVER SEE HIM AGAIN. SINCE THEN, I HAVE ALWAYS REGRETTED NOT BEING BRAVE ENOUGH TO LOVE HIM HOW I WOULD HAVE LIKED TO LOVE HIM. THE SAME WAY THAT YOU WILL REGRET NOT TALKING TO NIL IN A FEW YEARS. NOW GO, AND DON’T COME BACK UNTIL YOU HAVE TALKED TO HIM.”

STILL PROCESSING WHAT GRANDMA HAD JUST TOLD HIM, HE LEFT HER HOUSE, WENT TO HIS OWN LITTLE HOUSE AND WENT TO SLEEP. HE HAD NOT AT ALL EXPECTED TO HEAR WHAT HE JUST HAD, AND HONESTLY, HE DIDN’T KNOW WHAT TO THINK OF IT. THAT NIGHT, HE DREAMT OF NIL.

THE NEXT TIME HE WENT TO THE HUMANITARIAN AID DELIVERY POINT, OLIVER WAS HOLDING A LITTLE PIECE OF PAPER IN HIS HAND. HIS PLAN WAS SIMPLE: FIND NIL, GIVE HIM THE PIECE OF PAPER WITHOUT ANYONE AROUND SEEING IT, AND GO BACK WITH THE FOOD SUPPLIES AS IF NOTHING HAD HAPPENED. AS HE ARRIVED AT THE HUMANITARIAN AID POINT, HE LOOKED AROUND BUT DIDN’T SEE NIL. HIS NERVES STARTED TO SWELL, FEARING THAT HE MIGHT NOT BE COMING TODAY.

AFTER A WHILE LOOKING FOR NIL, OLIVER RESIGNED, CONVINCED THAT HE MIGHT HAVE TO DELIVER HIS LITTLE MESSAGE THE NEXT DAY, AND PUT THE PIECE OF PAPER IN HIS POCKET. HE GOT TO THE DISTRIBUTION DESK, GOT HIS AND TWO OF HIS NEIGHBOUR'S RATIONS AND TURNED AWAY. AS HE TURNED, HE FROZE. IN HIS PANIC, HE HAD FORGOTTEN TO TURN AROUND. AND HERE HE WAS, NIL, JUST TWO PEOPLE BEHIND HIM IN THE QUEUE. MAKING QUITE AN EFFORT, HE PUSHED THE RATIONS ONTO HIS LEFT SHOULDER AND DISCREETLY TOOK OUT THE LITTLE PAPER FROM HIS RIGHT POCKET AGAIN. AS HE PASSED NIL, HE GENTLY PLACED THE PIECE OF PAPER IN NIL'S HAND IN WHAT FROM THE OUTSIDE JUST LOOKED LIKE A BRUSHING, HOPING THAT HE WOULD NOT GIVE HIM AWAY. TO HIS RELIEF, NIL JUST CLOSED HIS HAND, THE PIECE OF PAPER SAFELY IN IT. ON THE PAPER, NIL WOULD FIND THE FOLLOWING: "MEET ME UNDER THE OLIVE TREE OUTSIDE THE CITY. TOMORROW, 9.30 PM. OLIVER".

THE NEXT DAY, OLIVER ARRIVED AT THE OLIVE TREE AT 9.00 PM. HE HADN'T BEEN ABLE TO WAIT ANY LONGER, SO CAREFULLY, WITHOUT ANYONE SEEING HIM, HE WALKED OVER AND WAITED. AFTER A WHILE, HE SAW SOMEONE APPROACHING, COMING FROM THE DIRECTION WHERE THE "OTHER" COMMUNITY LIVED. SUDDENLY, HE REALISED THAT HE COULD BE IN TROUBLE IF THE PERSON APPROACHING WAS NOT NIL. HE HID BEHIND THE TREE, WITH A STONE IN HIS HAND IN CASE HE NEEDED TO DEFEND HIMSELF. AS THE PERSON CAME CLOSER, HE RECOGNISED NIL, AND OLIVER CAME OUT OF HIS HIDING PLACE. THE TWO MEN STOOD IN FRONT OF EACH OTHER FOR A WHILE, NOT SURE WHAT TO SAY OR WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN.

- “HI”, SAID NIL, WITH A MIX OF SCEPTICISM AND CURIOSITY IN HIS VOICE.
- “HI”, ANSWERED OLIVER, STILL UNSURE WHAT TO SAY.
- “YOU ASKED ME TO COME?” NIL ASKED.
- “WELL, YES... I GUESS I JUST WANTED TO GET TO KNOW YOU”, OLIVER SAID. AT THIS, NIL HESITATED FOR A WHILE, BEFORE SITTING DOWN BY THE OLIVE TREE, EXPECTANTLY LOOKING AT OLIVER. HE SAT DOWN TOO.

FOR THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, OLIVER AND NIL WOULD MEET A FEW TIMES A WEEK BY THE OLIVE TREE, AT NIGHT, MAKING SURE THEY WERE NOT BEING FOLLOWED. AT FIRST, THE CONVERSATIONS WERE QUITE HESITANT, BOTH UNSURE ABOUT WHAT TO TALK ABOUT. SLOWLY, THEY MANAGED TO OPEN UP MORE, AND DISCOVERED THAT, IN FACT, THEY SHARED A LOT OF INTERESTS AND TASTES. ONE THING, HOWEVER, THEY WOULD CONSISTENTLY AVOID TALKING ABOUT: THE CONFLICT. BOTH WERE TOO AFRAID THAT IT MIGHT TRIGGER SOMETHING IN THE OTHER, AND BREAK THE BEAUTIFUL RELATIONSHIP THAT HAD BEEN DEVELOPING IN THE LAST MONTHS.

ONE DAY, THEY MET AFTER OLIVER HAD HAD TO DEAL WITH SOME TOUGH SITUATIONS IN HIS COMMUNITY. GRANDMA HAD GOTTEN SICK, AND SOME PEOPLE WERE STARTING TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT WHERE HE WENT ALL THOSE EVENINGS. IT DIDN'T STOP HIM FROM COMING, BUT HE WAS DEFINITELY MORE ABSENT-MINDED AND SENSIBLE. OUT OF A SUDDEN, HE HEARD NIL SAY IN PASSING SOMETHING HE COULD NOT BELIEVE HE HAD JUST SAID: “...WHEN YOUR PEOPLE STARTED THE WAR...”. OLIVER LOCKED EYES WITH HIM, AND WITH TREMBLING VOICE ASKED:

- “WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?”
- “WHAT? I WAS JUST SAYING THAT I WAS COMING BACK FROM SCHOOL WHEN YOUR COMMUNITY STARTED THE WAR, SO I COULDN'T...”

OLIVER STOOD UP, OVERTAKEN BY RAGE AND HIS HEAD SPINNING. FULL OF ANGER, HE GRABBED A BRANCH OF THE OLIVE TREE AND BROKE IT OFF. THE BRANCH CAME OFF WITH A LOUD THUD, AS OLIVER STILL HAD HIS EYES LOCKED ON NIL. “THEY WERE RIGHT”, HE SAID WITH TEARS IN HIS EYES. “I DIDN’T WANT TO BELIEVE IT, BUT THEY WERE RIGHT”. HE TURNED AWAY FROM NIL, AND IN A FIT OF RAGE, HE THREW THE BRANCH AGAINST THE OLIVE TREE’S TRUNK. THE BRANCH FLEW AGAINST THE TRUNK OF THE TREE WITH A FORCE THAT EVEN SURPRISED OLIVER. WHEN HE THREW IT, ALTHOUGH HE COULD FEEL HE WAS ANGRY, HE COULDN’T HELP BUT BE STARTLED BY THE THUD OF CRUSHING WOOD AGAINST WOOD. STILL LOOKING AWAY FROM HIM, AND WITH TEARS IN HIS EYES, HE CONTINUED:

– “THEY WERE RIGHT! ALL I HEAR IN MY COMMUNITY ABOUT YOU PEOPLE IS THAT YOU ARE EXACTLY LIKE THIS, THAT YOU ALWAYS DO THIS! I DECIDED TO GIVE YOU A CHANCE, TO TRUST YOU, I REALLY TRIED, BUT YOU JUST PROVED ME WRONG. ALL THE SUFFERING YOU CAUSED ON OUR PEOPLE. ALL THE PEOPLE CLOSE TO ME THAT YOU KILLED. ALL THE BEAUTIFUL BUILDINGS OF MY CHILDHOOD THAT YOU DESTROYED. AND YOU ACCUSE US TO HAVE STARTED THE CONFLICT??? HOW DARE YOU!”

THE NEXT THING THAT HAPPENED SURPRISED OLIVER. INSTEAD OF CRYING BACK AT OLIVER, NIL APPROACHED OLIVER, SLOWLY, PUT HIS HANDS ON OLIVER’S SHOULDERS, GENTLY DRAGGED HIM TO HIS CHEST AND EMBRACED HIM IN A FIRM, TENDER HUG. BY NOW, OLIVER WAS CRYING, ASHAMED AT HIS OUTBURST, VULNERABLE AND IN PAIN. HE TURNED AROUND, AND HUGGED NIL BACK.

NIL SAID:

– “I BELIEVE YOU, AND I BELIEVE ALL THE SUFFERING THAT YOU HAVE WITNESSED, EVEN ON YOUR OWN SKIN. EVEN SO, YOU MUST BE AWARE THAT I HAVE ALSO LOST MANY PEOPLE TO THE CONFLICT. THE HOUSE WHERE I GREW UP WAS DESTROYED BY A BOMB JUST MINUTES AFTER THE CONFLICT BEGAN. I STILL DON’T KNOW WHERE MY AUNT IS, WHO SUDDENLY DISAPPEARED ONE NIGHT. BUT YOU ARE NOT YOUR COMMUNITY, JUST AS I AM NOT MY COMMUNITY. LET US NOT BE DEFINED BY WHOM WE BELONG TO, BUT BY WHO WE ARE.”

AT THAT, THEY BOTH SAT DOWN, AND STARTED TALKING ABOUT THEIR STORIES. THE RECOUNTINGS OF THEIR RECENT PAST STORMED OUT OF THEM LIKE A RIVER FLOWING TOWARDS THE SEA, A RIVER THAT HAD BEEN BLOCKED BY A DAM JUST AS THEIR STORY HAD BEEN BLOCKED BY THE FEAR OF LOSING EACH OTHER. CRUCIALLY, THEY DIDN’T TALK ABOUT WHOSE FAULT WAS WHAT, WHO STARTED THE CONFLICT, WHO WAS TO BLAME. THEY SIMPLY TALKED ABOUT WHAT THEY HAD LIVED, WHOM THEY HAD LOST, WHOM THEY HAD HELPED. THEY ALSO LET EACH OTHER TALK UNINTERRUPTEDLY, ONE LISTENING AND HOLDING THE OTHER’S HAND WHILE THE OTHER DOVE DEEP INTO HIS PAINFUL MEMORIES.

OLIVER AND NIL CONTINUED TO MEET IN THE NEXT MONTHS, AND BIT BY BIT, THE TENSIONS BETWEEN THEIR COMMUNITIES STARTED TO SUBSIDE. EVENTUALLY, THEY STARTED TO MEET IN PUBLIC, AND TO THEIR SURPRISE, NO ONE SEEMED TO CARE TOO MUCH. THEY MOVED IN TOGETHER IN A HOUSE THAT HAD BEEN BUILT ON THE BORDER BETWEEN THE TWO COMMUNITIES, AND LIVED THERE TOGETHER UNTIL EVENTUALLY THEY DIED OF OLD AGE. TO THIS DAY, A LITTLE PLAQUE COMMEMORATES THE STORY OF NIL AND OLIVER, SITUATED IN THE SHADOW OF THE OLIVE TREE’S SILVER LEAVES. IT RECALLS THE STORY OF HOW THESE TWO MEN DECIDED TO TRUST EACH OTHER, AGAINST ALL ODDS, AND GIFT EACH OTHER THEIR STORIES UNDER THE OLIVE TREE.

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TO SPEAK, WRITE, WHISPER, OR REMEMBER. EACH STORY IN
THESE PAGES CARRIES NOT JUST WORDS, BUT LIVED TRUTHS,
QUIET COURAGE, AND THE HEARTBEAT OF HUMANITY.**

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YOUR TRUST.**

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**TO THOSE WHO READ THEM NOW – THANK YOU FOR CHOOSING
TO SEE, LISTEN, AND FEEL.**

**MAY THESE PAGES REMIND US THAT NO ACT OF RESILIENCE IS
EVER TOO SMALL TO MATTER, NO STORY TOO QUIET TO BE HEARD.
AND TO THE ONES STILL WAITING TO BE UNDERSTOOD.**

**WE SEE YOU, WE HEAR YOU, AND WE BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF
YOUR VOICE.**