

## The Worst of Two Choices or The Forsaken Olive Trees

by Najwa Qa'war Farah

*Born in Nazareth, Najwa Farah studied at the Women's Training College in Jerusalem and worked as a teacher. She married a religious minister in 1950 and lived with him and their four children in several cities in Palestine, as well as in Beirut. She now lives in London. Her life has been dedicated to serving the cause of her people through her short stories and her many articles and talks. Her work is known not only in the Arab world, but also in such countries as Australia, Sweden, and the United States where she and her husband were invited for the purpose of acquainting audiences with the Palestinian issue. She published her first collection, A PASSER-BY, in 1954, and has published at least five other collections since. The following story was chosen from the collection FOR WHOM DOES SPRING COME (1963).*

Recently, Salim abu-Ibrahim had withdrawn from other people. The villagers only saw him at dawn, when he went to his olive trees. Women got a glimpse of him when they opened their shutters to let in the morning air, or when they went to the chicken coops to feed their hungry broods. "We've seen Abu Ibrahim going to his olive trees," they would tell their husbands as they brought them their early morning cups of coffee. The men would shake their heads knowingly: "There is no strength or power except in Thee, O God! . . . He was a lion, a pillar of strength in the village . . . A man of few words and much dignity . . . Tall in stature, with strong features that commanded respect . . . A worthy man..."

The withdrawal of his wife, Imm Ibrahim, was another matter. She dreaded most those moments when he would break his silence and give vent to his pent-up feelings: "Your constant grumbling and nagging has wrecked our peace! . . . You want to see our children, and your heart is torn apart. Is it easy for me to leave, to become a refugee in a strange land, at my age? How can I abandon everything here? You don't care, because you haven't worked on the land as I have, and you forget the long years of toil it's taken to build it up, by my father and his father before him . . . You just want to see the children. Of course, you're their mother, but are you the only mother here whose children are across the border? The man who listens to a whining woman is a fool -- and I more than anyone else!"

"Please, listen to me, Abu Ibrahim," she implored. "I haven't asked you to move . . . If you think it's a mistake, well, don't go! . . ."

He let out a sigh that was almost a groan. Rising to his feet, he began to stride up and down the room, while his wife murmured faintly, "It's true, I do long for the children. Aren't they *our* children, a part of *us*? Ibrahim, 'Abla, Jamil, and Sami . . . Little Sami, who left when he was four years old . . . It's as though they were dead! One year passed, then two, and now seven, but we're still saying, 'This year we'll see the end of it. Peace will come and we'll see them again . . .' But it's no good. Will life begin again for us? Isn't it truer to say that the end of our life is getting nearer all the time? Have you forgotten how ill you were last winter? Won't death catch up with us before we see them?"

"That's enough!" shouted Abu Ibrahim. "I told you to stop!" To escape his wife's voice, he wound his *kaffiyeh* around his head and left the house . . . The olive trees were still there, waiting for him. Imm Ibrahim breathed more quietly. She had begun to look forward to Abu Ibrahim's visits to his olive trees. She wanted to cry for her lost motherhood, but she didn't dare cry when he was there, watching her every thought and action, listening to what she said to the neighbours. She wanted to dream about the children and the carefree past. She longed to talk about Ibrahim and his young wife. They said she was pretty. She wanted to talk about 'Abla, who was still looking after her unmarried brothers. 'Abla was a motherly child, and truly devoted to Jamil and Sami. She had refused offers of marriage so she could care for them. But Jamil -- poor Jamil! . . . He had lost a hand, sliced off by a paper-cutting machine at the printing press. The thought was too painful to Imm Ibrahim. And little Sami . . . She remembered how he'd used to sit on her lap after the noon meal: soon he'd be unable to keep his eyes open, they were heavy with sleep, and he would doze off with his eyelids half open. In the village they called this "deer-sleep." He'd had a habit of drawing in his lips when he slept, making a strange little noise like the ticking of a clock. His small body would grow warm as he lay curled on her lap. Later she would carry him to his cot and lay him

down. Imm Ibrahim held out her arms . . . No, he wasn't here! they were empty . . . The breeze that was coming through the open door felt cold.

It was summertime. The trees in the garden were heavy with fruit, but the children were not here to see them. Summers used to be so happy . . . She would prepare for their return from school, and the house would ring with their laughter. It had seemed that Imm Ibrahim was always making coffee, and cooking, and their house had been bright and cheerful. But now that joy was gone. Night provided no welcome rest. She spent its long hours dreaming of the past, and when she came back to reality she sobbed out loud.

"What?" shouted Abu Ibrahim angrily. "Crying again? . . . Crying during the day is bad enough. Must you also cry at night? You'll be the death of me! . . . What in the world are you weeping about? Your children? -- Why? Are they sick? Are they dead? Are they in trouble? What do you think the refugees feel like, who have to live in caves and in shacks?"

"Don't say that! God forbid! . . ."

"Then what are you crying for?"

"Oh, please, Abu Ibrahim! . . . I didn't know you were awake. I've stopped. I've stopped crying . . ."

"You've only stopped because I'm awake . . . Just like a woman -- so unreasonable!"

But he couldn't go back to sleep. He got up, sat on the couch, lit the lamp, and began to roll cigarettes, smoking one after the other. Imm Ibrahim also lay awake, though she did not get out of bed until morning.

The dawn was gloriously unaware of their pain. It broke suddenly through a bank of rose-tinted clouds. The stars withdrew bashfully behind their veils. The moon, pale but serene, dutifully awaited the arrival of her lord the sun, then slipped away unseen.

Abu Ibrahim put out the lamp and hurried to the kitchen. Imm Ibrahim was already preparing his coffee. The comforting smell of the newly-ground coffee beans quieted him. This was a moment he had always looked forward to, even long ago, when he was a child and his grandfather sat cross-legged on his mattress on the floor, murmuring through his long beard as his fingers moved slowly from one bead to the next on his yellow *misbaha*. The house would fill with relatives and friends. The village elders would sit on couches along the walls, sipping hot coffee with loud slurping gulps, piously reciting their beads, and discussing the crops and the condition of the olive trees. Coffee was a gentle friend, that took him back to other days and made him feel at one with his people and their traditions. Its warm odor held deep, old, and very dear memories.

Did he really, in his inner heart, blame Imm Ibrahim? Wasn't he annoyed because she was putting into words his own pain, which he dared not face? Of course he longed to see his children; he could hardly bear to mention them, or to look at the photographs that hung high on the wall in the sitting room, or to set eyes on their clothing, which still hung in the wardrobe. Even Sami's slingshot was there, that he'd tried to hit birds with in the summer, when they were all at home together and the house was full of their chatter. Sometimes at night Abu Ibrahim dreamed about them, and woke up choking down his sobs. He remembered the day his neighbor's wife had stopped by to say, "I've got good news for you! Ibrahim is married!" He and his wife had been stunned. Ibrahim, married! . . . He had only been eighteen when he left, a fine young lad . . . And now, he was married! Although his mouth felt dry, he had asked the woman, "How do you know?"

"Sa'id's son, who works in Cyprus, wrote to his parents and asked them to pass the news on to you and Imm Ibrahim . . . Well? Aren't you happy about it, Abu Ibrahim? You can give them your blessing, even though they are far away . . ."

But instead they had wept, because the house was silent and empty. They didn't even slaughter a sheep to celebrate the wedding. The shuttered windows of the sitting room had remained closed, and no bride came for Imm Ibrahim to welcome with an earthenware water jug, a piece of freshly-kneaded dough, and a sprig of fragrant basil -- tokens that she might bear children and that there might always be enough to eat and drink in her home. Instead of singing wedding songs, Imm Ibrahim had sobbed and felt faint, and the women had gathered around to help turn her mind to happier thoughts, coaxing her to give them the sweetmeats that are offered at weddings.

The house became so full of women that Abu Ibrahim had felt compelled to go out. He had gone to his olive trees. They consoled him, but they also gave him pain. He felt personally related to each of them. He loved their graceful beauty and faithful generosity. The grove was a holy place for him. He was intimately acquainted with each breeze that rustled the shimmering leaves. Weren't they the children of last summer's winds? . . . These olive trees had witnessed the era of the Turkish sultans. They had survived the British Mandate. They remained now unperturbed and strong,

combating time itself with their silent endurance and devotion. Why couldn't he be like them? Why must he desert them? Why could he not endure steadfastly, as they endured? Why did he have to be a leaf driven before the wind? Life had placed him here. Why should he leave? . . .

He'd been bowed beneath the weight of his inner conflict. Here, was the message of the trees . . . but at home the voice of Imm Ibrahim would depict their children across the border, reminding him that they were part of their parents' bodies, that life without them was desolate, endless deprivation, and that death, which surely lay ahead, might overtake him at any time. Hadn't he had heart trouble last winter? The olive trees spoke to him about the land, his beloved earth that belonged to his ancestors who had plowed it, worked on it, gathered its generous yield of fruit, and died content. It was his heritage to guard and cherish. He must be loyal to their loyalty to it. How could he leave it for an unknown, unloved town, where he would be a stranger, a burden on his own children? He thought of his married son whose new wife might not like him. He could imagine her saying, "why have you burdened me with this old peasant, your father?" He also shrank from the thought of an unfamiliar house and an unaccustomed climate, a strange bed and an unfriendly pillow, a window that opened out onto an unexplained world . . . He would not be able to hurry to his kitchen every morning as he had done for so many years. The familiar jars of oil and grain, which filled up much of the room, would not be there; nor would the copper trays and pans his mother had used. Even the coffee cups would be of a different size and shape. He pictured himself going into a small, cramped kitchen with complicated electrical appliances. It might be modern and clean, but to him it would be cold and bare . . .

He had become aware once again of the trees surrounding him. Glancing about to make sure no one saw him, he had flung his arms around one of the trunks, letting the leaves caress his face, and given way to tears. Some spirit within him went out of him and entered the trees. Their voices converged upon him, telling him they belonged to him forever. Lifting his head, through the leaves he'd seen the sun setting behind the violet hills. Its fiery glow warmed his heart. Night had come, hiding the world from view, and the stars had lined up into protective ranks. At their head had risen a full moon.

Abu Ibrahim allowed the tedious travel arrangements to proceed, and the day of departure finally came. It was a sad day for the entire village. The neighbours gathered outside the house to share in the grief of parting. They had always known Abu Ibrahim. They had often gone to him with their problems. The fact that he had not left the village had given them courage to remain. Their disputes had been settled in his house, and they felt it belonged to them too. The place would now seem silent and empty. Was not a home made by those who lived in it? As they bade his wife farewell, the women wept.

"May God bring you success, but your departure leaves us desolate!" cried one.

"Take us with you, Imm Ibrahim!" implored another.

Old Imm Bakr stepped forward: "Give this *mandeel*' to Bakr," she pleaded. "Tell him that his mother embroidered it with the last sight of her eyes . . . Tell him that I have kept his land safe, but, if God should take me before I see him, may he think well of me. And, if my body should turn over in its grave when the oil and the olive are being enjoyed by others, it will be because they were not enjoyed by Bakr and his descendants."

The women glanced at each other. "Bakr!" they cried, "Where is he? No one has heard of him since '48. Can he still be alive?" Everyone doubted it but Imm Bakr, for she believed that every person who went away was bound to meet her son. For her, he lived in all the lands beyond the border. The women shook their heads in resignation. This faith alone gave meaning to Imm Bakr's life.

Abu Ibrahim and his wife got into the car, while a truck moved off ahead carrying their belongings. As the car started forward, the villagers clung to it, and their farewell blessings echoed around the couple long after they had departed. Abu Ibrahim felt that life had gone out of him, and that his friends were mourning his death. It seemed as if he were attending his own funeral. Surely, his funeral procession would have been like this -- the black car his hearse, the weeping and calls of farewell, the slow moving line . . . These were the friends who would have come to his funeral . . . Pain numbed his senses, so that he scarcely felt any physical reaction.

When the car passed the olive grove, he felt like his heart was about to leave its cage. Before the car moved off, he turned towards the grove. The trees seemed to be bowing their heads and drawing him to them(selves). Was this really his funeral? Was he at one with them at last?

Alone. Even after he crossed the border and saw his children, who had been waiting so long to embrace him, he was alone. It was not that the reunion had been cold -- even the police who

guarded both borders had been moved by it. But he remained a stranger, unknown even to himself. His daughter-in-law proved to be kindly, and made every effort to make him feel at home. But nothing lessened his inner pain . . . It was unbearably strange. He yearned constantly for the land, the olive trees, the village, his daily life. He had hoped to make a new beginning, but he lacked the vigor or desire to do so. Slowly he began to die, as each day bore him further away from what he had loved. His fears had come true. Around him were high, steep hills, like minarets with *muezzins* that craned forward to make sure he was hearing their call -- so different from the gentle, friendly hills at home. The new kitchen, also, was as he had feared it would be: white, small, all-electric, and sterile. His mattress was hard and unyielding, even though he used a bolster from home. When he first woke up he would often feel he was back there, with returning consciousness he would numbly try to remember how he'd come to be *here*. He lived in dread that the jars of oil and olives he'd brought with him should all be consumed, for it was only when he tasted them that his misery would leave him briefly.

One night he sprang up in terror. He had dreamt that he was dead and was being carried in a coffin to his funeral, with all his friends following. Even during the day, the memory of the dream would not leave him. "This is the second time I have known death," he mused. "I was right about what would happen if I left home."

Soon his family realized he would not see many more days. One morning, they found him still and cold. The doctor said his heart had failed him while he slept. But his daughter said she had seen the shadow of death on his face the day he crossed the border. He alone, could have known that now he had died for the third time.