



The Geography of Hiding

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My neighbor leans over his deck and tells me in one sad breath that they're cutting down their olive tree because the roots are getting into the sewer pipes. He knows I love that tree and is giving me time to brace myself. I'm out of brace, however. Even words meant to reassure cannot fix a failing mood, one that's been failing for years but hides under my theatrical sunny disposition. That's how I feel today anyway. Before the pandemic, I would've said I'd kicked it, and I roll through the ebb and flow of life with casual acceptance of whatever comes my way. Which I must believe is true, for life promises so much.

I read up on olive trees and learn that they can live over 2,000 years, the leaves have a myriad of medicinal uses, they can regenerate from their roots if the whole tree is destroyed by fire or frost, and they grow easily from cuttings. I grab my pruner and go out in the full moon to take a branch for making tinctures and tea, and to say goodbye. It's hard to feel sad under that bright moon, gazing down on me from the top of the sky. I pull in the serenity of the moon, and keep my sights on practicality, thinking fondly of the olivewood mortar and pestle I brought home from Italy. I bend down to take stock of the trunk. Maybe my woodworker friend Ernesto could get a few serving spoons and picnic-sized cutting boards out of it, I think. I prune off a sucker and a couple good sized leafy branches for making herbal remedies.

I look at the upper branches within the canopy of the tree, and envision a perfect fort, obscured from the sidewalk. I climb in and sit on a branch. Moonlight filters through the leaves, and I wonder if the bright future I long for is strong enough to penetrate the dark canopy of my tangled heart. Peace of mind is all I've ever wanted, and what better place to find it than inside an olive tree, the Greek symbol of peace and wisdom. So I meditate on peace in the dappled radiance of moonlight.

I imagine that I'm part of the tree, while the tree feigns indifference and seems to have no opinion of me or its impending demise. Feeling flat embraces me like an old friend—even with people and trees dying all around me. I feel safe in the arms of this tree. My eyes are still closed, and I turn my thoughts again to the moment; the caress of moonlight, the cool of the night, the stillness of the tree, the beat of my heart. Finally, peace arises.

Dead branches poke at me, so I rustle around to get comfortable and wonder if the tree failed to set fruit in rebellion against the silly aesthetic pruning of it into a ball shape every winter, while the crisp inner branches are left to die of dehydration.

As I move about, lights snap on and I think I've awakened the neighbors and how weird they'll think I am, squatting in the condemned olive tree. I'm hoping they'll think it's just a homeless person in the recycling bin. Then I hear a scuttling sound and realize it's motion lights illuminating the driveway. Is it the black cat that prowls the canyon and digs up my garden? But it's not the feral cat. It's a fat possum, white as the moon, waddling right beneath me, oblivious to my stealthy presence. I'm exhilarated by my secret stance.

It's well after midnight and I stay a while more, feeling the rough branches in my hands, not minding the uncomfortably hard lumpy seat. I feel sleepy, and a thought arises of the misfortune of nodding off and tripping the motion lights by falling out of the tree.

"Goodnight Olive Tree," I whisper, wishing I hadn't grown up so much that I'd missed this perfect climbing tree until the eve of its departure. I walk slowly across the driveway looking for my moon shadow, and only see the buckling asphalt, evidence that tree roots can't hide. I can, I think as I crawl into bed and don my light-blocking sleep mask to hide from facing another day.

Somewhat after sunrise the woodchipper finds me, roughly shaking me from sleep with its menacing prattle. I walk out into the piercingly bright sun in my pajamas and feel glad to find it's not too late to preserve the trunk for an olivewood spoon. And I take a fresh olive branch to root into a new tree.

