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'AN OLIVE TREE IN DALMATIA'
by A. E. Batistich

The terraces ran down the stony mountain slope. Low stone walls banked the earth to keep it from running away. They followed the fall of the land like a twisting snake, making a patch-work pattern of the Porech field. Between them the young olive trees lifted their tender green like new blessings on the land.

As Stipan worked his way along the rows, setting the trees in place and counting them as he went, he pictured in his mind's eye how they would look when they were grown. He crushed a tiny leaf and it was redolent with the promise of the olive yield. He felt a quiet gladness to be planting olives on his last day home. Tomorrow he was going to New Zealand with his cousin Ivan and his friend Toma. There would be no more struggle with this hard earth for him.

It was Father Ilya who had told them of this New Zealand, quickening their ambition with his stories of the opportunities of new lands. Father Ilya had first read about it in a newspaper in Trieste. In the paper it said that men from Dalmatia were already there, working on the gum-fields. More men were wanted. Young men, strong men, men not afraid to work for English pounds. Everyone always listened to what Father Ilya had to say. He was a man of learning, and in the parish house there was a room full of books. Some said he had read them all. It was Father Ilya who had battled with the government to get the new school for the village, and the new well, and the new road over the mountains; Father Ilya who had sent off earlier emigrants to work in the steel mills in America. Now he talked of nothing but this place, New Zealand.

'Nova Zelanda!' They said the name over, liking the promise that it held. Father Ilya had even got them a piece of the kauri gum from the museum in Vienna. It looked rich and wonderful stuff. They all wanted to hold it, to feel its polished smoothness, to look into its mottled depths for a sign of the future. 'A new kind of gold!' Stipan's grandfather, old *Dida Petar,* the village *stareshina* (patriarch) pronounced, and Father Ilya said: 'It means gold and that's what you'll never get if you stay here. I tell you young men, go. Look for a better life in a new country far from the troubles here.'

'Eh! I'd be off to this New Zealand like a lightning streak if I was a young man!' *Dida Petar* said. 'You wouldn't tell me twice!' Young wives looked at their husbands. Fathers of families looked around at their sons, thinking which to send. Mothers heard, hope and dread alternating in their eyes.

They discussed it in the *zadruga* (co-operative). How would they raise the money for the passage out? Money was something none of them ever had to spare. 'I will go to see the money-lenders,' Father Ilya said. 'We will borrow against the land.'

Three were chosen to be the vanguard of the new emigration. Stipan and Ivan and Toma, because they were strong and fully grown, and their fathers had other sons, and they were not yet close to conscription age.

Up to now Stipan had not thought much about his luck in being one of the chosen three. He was going and that was all. He listened to the older men talking about the new country where you dug money out of the ground, and from Father Ilya he learned some English words. They made strange noises in his ears but he felt important saying them. With the other two he went to the nearest market town to be measured for a new brown suit and to buy the few necessities for the journey across the world. He felt rich already. A man of the 'World' as they called all emigrants. But what that world would be like he never even thought. In all his life he had never been farther

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than six villages away. True he had heard stories from returning emigrants, men who brought back the proof of its existence in the visible signs of fine American clothes, money in their pockets, gold watch-chains. But their stories belonged with *Dida Petar's* much-told stories of his travelled youth—something you heard but only half believed in. If his life was hard he had never known any other to compare it with. All he knew was that when the stones were sharpest under your feet, the wind sang sweetest in your ears. 'Youth!' old *Dida Petar* would say. 'It's a pair of wings for time to clip.' But Stipan only laughed. How would he ever get old? The old man was for ever pouring out his unheeded wisdom to the boy. 'Eh! my lad, it's all right when you're travelling on Franich's donkey, but wait till it's Begov's mule you're riding. That slows us all up!' It was a favourite saying. Once he heeded long enough to ask what 'Franich's donkey' meant. 'It's the ride for the young, my boy!' the old man answered. 'Franich's donkey, that was a mount that could climb the steepest track without a puff! Begov's mule couldn't even go downhill without a stick to push her along.

The row was almost finished. Stipan stood up to straighten his back and look at his day's work. The little trees clung firmly to the soil as if the roots had taken already. He felt a glow of pleasure at the sight of them. Below him he saw the familiar village scene. Above him the stony mountains watched. The late afternoon light washed the stone houses with saffron, giving the village a picture-postcard beauty. The monastery spire lifted its white radiance above a symphony of greens: grey-greens of olives, darker greens of cypresses, blue-green of the spiked aloe leaves sharp against a blue, still sky. Everything just as he had always known it. But at this moment it took on a new meaning because tomorrow he was going away.

At the other end of the field he could see his father working. Never stopping, digging and planting and digging again, his back bent with labour that was at once work and prayer, because, planting olives, a man works for generations and God and man are served by the holy yield.

'Hoy, oche!' (Hey, father!) the boy called to his father, not because he had anything to say to him, but because it was suddenly necessary to see that known face look up in answer, to remember this moment against all the years ahead.

'Hoy, sinko!' (Hey, son!) the father called back to his son, and went on with his planting.

The boy bent to his work again. There were five trees left in his bundle. He came to the last. It was a small sickly tree, and as he was setting the thin roots in place he thought how he would not be there to see it grow, to mark how twisted and bent it would get with the years. Because it was such a little tree he felt an impulse of tenderness towards it. He wanted to leave it something of his own. He thought for a minute, then stamped his boot hard into the soil that covered the roots. 'There, little tree!' he said, 'There's Stipan Kosovich's mark to stay with you for ever.' He smiled down at his bootprint there like a primitive signature on the land. The action pleased him. In all his nineteen years he had never done such a thing. Living was a matter of eating, working, sleep and play. But in each man's life comes a moment when he is a poet, and that was Stipan's moment, his gesture to the past that he was leaving, to the future that he did not know; and it pleased him in the way a man is pleased when he paints a beautiful picture or makes a song. Carefully he covered the imprint, layering the earth gently so that the footprint should remain there undisturbed.

The son and the father walked home together. Mattocks slung across shoulders, each one carrying his *torba* (hand-woven bag) that held the day's food. The father did not speak, but every so often he looked quickly at his son, as if there could be some detail of his face he might forget if it was not bedded in his memory. Finally he spoke. 'Tomorrow!' he said as if the word was enough speech between them.

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'Tomorrow!' Stipan echoed. They did not speak again.

Home. They washed and put on their best clothes because it was to be a special family meal tonight. Afterwards neighbours and relatives would come in to say their last words to the young man about to go into the world. The younger children were excited about the fine dinner they would have. A roast sucking-pig, a special cake of rich fruits and nuts; such food they only had on Christmas and high saints' days. All the afternoon they had run in and out of the kitchen looking for tasty scraps of cooking, and for once their mother had not chased them out. Only Stipan's sister, the next to him in age, was quiet. She was betrothed and would soon leave the house for another, but tomorrow's parting lay heavy on her, too. She worked beside her mother all the afternoon and shared her thoughts.

The family assembled for the last dinner together. They took their places around the big table and waited for the blessing. *Dida Petar* said it. 'For all of us here we ask a blessing, but especially for our young Stipan who goes tomorrow to find his fortune in the unknown world.'

After the meal the guests began to arrive. The kitchen filled. Everyone was aglow with the wonderful possibilities that were opening up for Stipan. The younger ones listened, wonderingly. Mothers sat with their babes on their laps and listened too. 'Grow, little one, grow,' their eyes said, 'and go to New Zealand too!' Family and guests sat around the stove, the big brick *komin* that was their winter warmth, where the women cooked the meals and baked the bread, around which so much of their lives were lived. The older ones re-lived the past in story, telling of this one and that one who had gone to America, to New Caledonia, to Australia, and how they wished they had gone, too. The young ones thought of the future and the opportunities it might hold for them. The women sat spinning and knitting, the girls busy with their dowry linen and dreaming their own dreams of another *komin,* another house. Stipan's mother listened to all the talk and kept her thoughts to herself. Such was life, that you should bear a son and he would grow to manhood and you would see him go off to find the 'better life' they all asked for, where bread was sure, and the Emperor's long arm couldn't reach.

The Emperor was Frane Yozip. The Hapsburgs ruled from Vienna and whispers of their might drifted down to Dalmatia to mingle with darker murmurings. At school the children were taught to say, 'God Save Frane Yozip!' At home their fathers reversed it. 'God curse Frane Yozip!' His face was on their money, his boot was on their necks. 'It won't be for ever!' the more daring promised, and around the *komins* at night they talked of the day when the *Schwabo's* might would break.

Old *Dida Petar* took up his favourite story, his interminable tale of how he had gone to the Austrian wars. 'Even when I was a young man they were talking of emigration. But we were called to the army. I went to fight Kossuth. I never did see this Kossuth. Some said he was a devil, but we gave him a beating, Ban Yelachich and I!' He laughed at his own joke. 'Ay! But the worst one was in 1863. Took my mule and me, and off we go again. Near perished with the cold. A *heller* a day we were paid and I got this into the bargain.' He pulled up his trouser leg to show the hole where the musket ball had penetrated and never come through. It was still there after thirty years and he was lame all his life because of it. 'Frane Yozip!' he spat on to the hearth. 'He sits in Vienna in a castle bigger than a hundred of our churches and smokes a golden pipe and they say he sits on a gold chair, too!' The little ones were round-eyed with wonder. 'Did you see the golden chair, Dida?'

'No, *dusho!* (dear soul!) Frane Yozip never asked me to his palace. Just my leg he wanted.'

'Is Frane Yozip in New Zealand, too?' Little Milenko, the second youngest, looked up from the cat he was playing with.

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'No. They have the English queen there. Viktoria.'

With his clothes neatly packed into one straw hamper, wearing the new suit his father had got for him in Spalato, proud of it and his new brown boots, Stipan boarded the little Adriatic steamer that was to take him on the first part of the journey across the world. Toma and Ivan going with him made it seem not so bad. There was so much talk, so much bantering and good-wishing and blessing that you had not time to think anyway.

The three mothers stayed closest to the boys, eyes searching their faces, hands reaching out to touch a hand, a cheek. They were mothers and the breaking of the natural bond was not, finally, to be achieved without pain even though none would have held back her child from the 'better life'.

The Adriatic shone like blue glass, the sea's edge reflecting the houses along the shore, the spiked aloes, and the cypress trees. The houses in the upper village looked as if they had grown from the stone, and the olive trees could have been painted there. Stipan took it all in. He was excited, eager and reluctant at the same time. He felt himself a man going to a man's life. The five English gold pounds sewn into the pocket of his new coat made him feel rich already. It was more money than he had ever seen.

The buzz of talk stopped suddenly. Father Ilya had come. His monk's skirts swished impatiently after him as he strode towards the boys. They knelt down and he gave them a blessing each and a holy medal. 'It is a great thing for Zaostrog that begins today,' he said to them. 'God's blessing be with you. Do not forget your parents and their need. Work hard. Be good. Remember your homeland.'

Stipan was suddenly impatient for it all to begin. The new life rushed at him, no longer to be held back. But when the steamer's siren blew and it was time for the others to go, and his youngest sister, suddenly aware that he was going, ran at him, and threw her arms around him crying: 'Brother Stipan! Brother Stipan! Don't go!' he felt his new manhood breaking. His mother pressed kisses on his face and her tears wet his cheek. His father put his hand on his shoulder and held it tight. His grandfather blessed him. It was a scene that was repeated with the other two going with him. Tears stabbed at Stipan's eyes. He felt his heart would burst under his new brown coat.

A lifetime later Stipan remembered the little olive tree. He was digging at the roots of an old puriri. It had been split by a storm and had to be cut down. But the puriri was stubborn like the land it grew on. How stubborn that had been, years of back-breaking work told. There was a permanent stoop to Stipan's shoulders put there by work. 'Farm on Tiritiri?' the bank manager had laughed when he had first approached him for a loan to buy the Tiritiri land. 'Mr Kosovich, the only good in that land was the gum that was in it, and you Austrians have cleaned all that up!'

'Austrian!' Stipan scowled at the hated name that had followed the Dalmatian emigrants to New Zealand. He suddenly remembered his grandfather's leg, and the old man's hatred of 'Frane Yozip'. 'I am not "Austrian" *Mis—ter* McDonald' he said in his still accented English. 'And that land can be made good. If you won't give me the money, someone else will!'

The man at the Loan and Mercantile was just as discouraging. 'Never be any good, Kosovich. It's sour land. You'd get bogged in swamp. There's better land a hundred other places.' But Stipan did not give up easily. The land was cheap and he wanted the money to develop it. Work! He wasn't afraid of that, as his hands could tell.

'*Mis—ter* Johnson, you are wrong. Give me the money and I will show you what I can do with this land. Where I come from, in Dalmatia, we make farms on stones!'

'I can believe that, too, the way you Austrians work. I'm not saying you're not a damn good

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proposition as a farmer. Any one of you is and that's the kind of men we want on the land. But Tiritiri's no good. You'd break your heart and your back, there.' This time Stipan let the 'Austrian' pass. He wanted the money. Politics could wait till later.

'If there's anyone can make anything of that land, it's an Austrian will do it!' the Loan and Mercantile man from Auckland said. 'Maybe the man's right and it can be farmed.' They went out to have another look at the block. Five hundred acres of stunted tea-tree and clay bog.

'You know,' the Auckland manager said, 'I've a mind to give him the money. Any man that can look at this land and say he'll make a farm of it is either mad, or he knows what he's talking about. And I don't think Kosovich is mad. Besides,' he went on, 'there's a hundred blocks like this. If he proves he can farm on it, then others can do it, too. We'll give him a go.'

Ten years after he landed in New Zealand, Stipan wrote home to his father. 'Today I am a landowner. Five hundred acres, as much workable land as there is in the whole of the village, and it's going to be mine.'

That had been fifty-three years ago. Stipan had done all that he'd said he'd do. Tiritiri was the show farm of the district. When the Dairy Co-operatives wanted to show anyone a model farm they came to Kosovich's. There were share-milkers on it now, but the old man still saw to everything. He was like a tree that stands up against time and weather. The passing years might be seen in the stoop of his back, in the sharp lines on his face, but he could still work.

Five years after he had bought the farm Stipan had sent home for a wife. He wrote to his sister and she picked him a good, strong girl who was glad to come out to the new world too. Her name was Ana, and she was kind and plain. Like Stipan she had grown into the land, nursing it with peasant skill and love. Together they had watched it grow into the fine farm it was today. But there is always something that is withheld. They had no child.

As he worked at the roots of the puriri, Stipan thought back over those fifty-three years since he had bought the farm. The tree had been there then. A young sapling that had grown with the farm. 'Soon I will be like this,' he mused, 'a tree with no strength left in it, only roots to hold me here.' Over the past few months he had felt a slowing down of his powers. Sometimes he would go out to do a job and forget what it was he came to do. More than once lately Ana had said to him: 'Stipan, it is time to know that you are an old man. You must not work so hard but take it easier now.' But taking it easy had never been his way. He swung the mattock down into the earth and dug at the roots. But the effort told. He stopped to wipe away at the sweat that was running down his face. Leaning against the puriri's trunk, he looked down at the tangled roots and from somewhere in the depths of his memory came suddenly the picture of the little olive tree he had planted that last day and the bootprint he had stamped into the earth around it.

For the first time in all his New Zealand years he found himself thinking back to his young years in Dalmatia with a feeling of loss that disturbed him. Faces came back to him out of long buried memory. Father Ilya with his eagle look. His father looking at him that day when they walked home from the olive planting. His mother, sisters and brothers, all dead now. He thought of the village. How had it fared through two wars and half a century? What did it look like now? Were the olive trees still there on Porech?

He looked up to see Ana coming towards him. She was walking slowly, the light breeze lifting the thin white hair around her face. As if it was something he had never noticed before, he said to himself, 'Ana is an old woman!' And when she came up and smiled at him with her kind eyes netted in a mesh of lines he half-wondered when it had all happened.

'What is the matter, Stipan?'

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'Matter? Who says anything is the matter?'

'I have been watching you from the house. This is young man's work, Stipan. Not for you any more.'

And for once he agreed with her. 'You are right, Ana. I will get young Toki to do it. The puriri's been there a long time. She doesn't want to go.'

Ana smiled. 'Like us, Stipan. We've been here a long time too.'

That night when they were sitting out on the cool verandah, Stipan spoke suddenly of the old country. Ana listened. He remembered people and places, the things he had done when he was a boy. He set Ana remembering too. Like children they went back into their memories… 'the Herzegovinian women that used to come down for the olive picking, I remember how they would climb high into the trees, their black skirts billowing around them like tents and they would sing all day and work. ...' Ana smiled at the picture her memory made. 'I loved it when my mother sent me down with bread for them. I would have stood and listened all day if I could.'

Then it was Stipan's turn. 'I remember how we worked picking the monastery olives for a *banovats* (small coin) a day and a hard bread roll… And suddenly he found himself telling Ana about the little olive tree.

'Olive trees!' said Ana. 'They are what I have missed most of all here. All kinds of trees, but no olive trees to make your eyes and your heart glad with their kindness on the land.' And the picture of the olive trees in Dalmatia came vividly to them both, and they sat there and talked about them, of the yields of the family trees, the barrels of oil stored in the cellars. 'If I could only see them again!' It was Ana who said it, Stipan who heard.

The wind played softly in the pine break, making a gentle music on the night. The sleeping cattle in the paddocks below were folded in stillness. A thin moonlight washed houses and farm buildings with silver. They looked down on their farm. So much labour, so much love was there from the both of them, yet tonight memory stirred longings for another scene.

'It would be good to go back….' It was Ana who put the suggestion to the listening night.

'Go back—?' There was 'yes' and 'no' in Stipan's voice.

'Go back home,' Ana repeated. 'To live out what is left of our lives there and to die where our parents are buried—'

'Old woman, you are dreaming.'

'Dreaming, then, my Stipan. But, why not? What is there to hold us?'

'The farm.'

'In the end we must leave that, too.'

The end. Stipan looked down on his land and his mind went back to the beginning. The first years in New Zealand when he'd learnt painfully that Father Ilya's 'gold' was not so easily got. The sack shanty that had been his first home, with more sacks for a bed. The long days digging in water to the waist. The nights that were never long enough for rest. The sum of it all here, in this land he loved.

But Ana was strangely insistent. 'And when we are gone, Stipan? What then? The farm will be sold and the money will go back home, and we do not even know those who will have it!' She put her old hand on his. 'I have a sudden longing to see my own!'

'But if it is not as we remembered?'

'It is home, Stipan. That will be enough.'

That night Stipan dreamt of his father's house. He saw it clearly, the plain, bare look of it with windows staring from the stone. He was sitting by the *komin* listening again to his grandfather's tale of the wars. The dream stayed with him, and all the morning it haunted him and

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he could not shake it off. He went out to look over the farm, as if he wished to put every acre of it into the balance against this sudden wish for home. When he came back his mind was made up.

The weeks that followed were busy with preparations. Talks with stock agents and solicitors and the bank. 'You are quite sure, Mr Kosovich?' the lawyer asked him.

'I am sure. New Zealand is a good place, but home is home.'

'It will be very different. You know that?'

'Not my place. That is the same for ever.'

The district gave the two old people a fine send-off. Speeches were made. Compliments exchanged. Stipan stood up to thank them all, for himself and Ana, for the years of friendship and working together. His English came haltingly, as always when he was overcome by feeling. He wanted to explain that it was something bigger than himself, this wanting to go back to the old country to die there. But how can an old man really tell why he is driven by a memory to go back and sit under an olive tree he planted when he was a boy.

They travelled home, first-class. It was very different from the steerage passage out. On the way they saw cities to make you wonder. Sydney. Colombo. London. But none of them was of more than passing interest. Home was the driving instinct, and when they took the Adriatic steamer that was to carry them to the last stage, they were like two children, so excited to be seeing it all again. And there it was, lying in its arm of blue sea, unchanged. The same houses crowding the shore. The same cobbled paths climbing to the upper village. Timeless, the mountains watched them come as they had watched them go.

But the olive trees! How they danced in Stipan's eyes, their silver-grey leaves shimmering in the light. Twisted and bent, withstanding time and weather by bowing to both, and, yes! There was the Porech field, and there were the olive trees he had planted that last day. He turned to Ana, watching with him.

'See there on Porech!' And she smiled as much as he, because it was a glad sight for her old eyes, too.

But it is one thing to dream of homecoming. It is another thing to live it. After the first greeting and the introductions to relatives were made, Stipan and Ana felt themselves suddenly shy before these strangers. They looked so like people they had known, looking at them with stranger's eyes. Here was a great-nephew who looked like Stipan's father, another who had the look of his younger brother. A little girl was his sister to the life. Of those they had known, none remained. Two wars, emigration and many years had made a waste that was peopled only with ghosts for them. They began to feel like strangers from another world. Neither would say it, but the homecoming was a disappointment.

For Stipan, the only real joy was to be walking in his childhood paths again. Every stone was a remembered story. Every day he traversed the village to find familiar landmarks of his young days there. He spent hours on Porech, looking at the olive trees, tracing their growth as if it would tell back the story of the years between. And always he came at the end to the little olive tree, stunted and bowed, but still there. Here, where he had left the last of his boyhood, he would sit for hours alone.

But places without people are lonely places. The first interest in the old people's homecoming had settled down. The young ones had asked all their questions. The generation in between was kind, but busy with its own affairs. So the two old people were left mostly to themselves. They sat long hours together under the plane tree in front of the house that had been Stipan's father's, two strangers wandered in from another life. At other times Stipan would go off by himself, a thin, bent figure to sit among the graves, or walk amongst them, going from one to

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another, spelling out the names on the headstones, conning them like lessons from a book.

Ana was afraid for him. 'Better the dream in New Zealand than the truth here,' she would say to herself. She could bear it for herself, but for Stipan she could not. Coming home had meant so much to him. And there was no home to come to. How could it be otherwise? She pondered over it in her acquired wisdom. Home is where you have lived your life. It cannot be any other place.

One day she missed him for longer than usual. She went through the village asking the children if they had seen him. 'He went that way to the upper village,' they told her, and she made the steep climb up the stony path to look for him. She found him resting under the little olive tree. He had a twig in his hand and seemed to be writing something with it on the dry late-summer earth. He was so engrossed in what he was doing that he didn't even look up till she was almost up to him.

'Ana!' he reproached her. 'Why do you come all this way to look for me! Don't you know you are an old woman! Climbing up to Porech is not for you.'

'Nor for you,' she said quickly, and sat down by him, glad to rest.

'You are quite right!' She smiled up at the anxious face. 'We are both of us too old for these adventures. It is a long time since we rode on Franich's donkey, my Stipan!' she said, and laughed good-humouredly at the old saying. 'What is that you are writing there?' she bent forward to look closer at the clumsy lettering and spelt out TIRITIRI. Something broke inside her when she saw it. 'You think of it, too?' she said.

He nodded his head slowly: 'Yes.'

'It is too many years to forget,' she went on quickly. 'A lifetime, against a youth-time.' He didn't speak. 'Stipan...' she pulled at his sleeve.

'Eh, Ana?'

'Let us go back. There is nothing for us here.' She had said it.

Stipan was thinking of the bootprint and that day he had planted the little olive tree. It seemed not a lifetime, but a world away. At last he spoke. 'Eh, my old Ana, you are right. There is nothing for us here. We belong where we have lived and worked.'

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