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Tales (Un)veiled  
Short Story Collection





## Peace of the vanquished<sup>1</sup>

Her bones always ached when she returned home after tending to the plants in her small garden.

Clutching a tiny bundle wrapped in a checkered cloth of white and red, filled with freshly picked zucchini, she allowed it to tumble out onto the kitchen counter, suddenly feeling weak.

Supporting herself against the counter, she managed to sit down with great effort after pulling back a chair.

The migraines that had tormented her during her younger years had ceased long ago, and her life had since been peaceful... yet, in that instant, it felt as though her life was draining away, bit by bit, from her fingertips.

Alfa shut her eyes and was transported back to her childhood, to a July morning in 1944. Holding tightly to a bundle tied in a checkered cloth of white and red, brimming with zucchinis freshly harvested from Aunt Ines' vegetable garden, she came back to find her home's door flung open. There, her mother was garbed in her celebration dress, the blue one with floral patterns, flanked by two armed partisans wearing a stern and determined expression.

*That morning, Alfa and her mother were supposed to travel to Vercelli to receive their subsidy for military families, as Alfa's father, Pietro Giubelli, was reported missing.*

*"Move it, Margherita! Palmo doesn't like to wait. Stop fussing around and follow us!" These words, yelled by one of the armed men with a*

*high-pitched voice, shattered the otherwise silent atmosphere, punctuated only by the chirping of swallows overhead.*

*Alfa couldn't understand what was happening and searched for her mother's eyes, but Margherita seemed to be avoiding her gaze.*

*"If you need to interrogate me, then I'm bringing my daughter along... I have nowhere else to leave her."*

*At those words, Alfa clung to her mother's legs.*

*"Anduma<sup>2</sup>!" another man commanded, and the odd trio of two armed men and a woman with a child clinging to her skirts began to move. Contrary to expectations, they didn't head to the police headquarters but took a path towards the cemetery, avoiding the center of Crevacuore and prying eyes from the houses.*

*Just before the cemetery stood an abandoned farmhouse.*

*The group halted in front of the small building.*

*One of the partisans forcefully separated Alfa from her mother, holding her in place while Margherita was pushed towards the farmhouse.*

*Margherita struggled against the grip of the two men, shouting, "What do you want from me? What?"*

*Tears welled up in Alfa's eyes, but she kept them fixed on her mother, who, despite her fear, held onto her dignity.*

*Suddenly, Palmo appeared at the farmhouse door, seemingly unarmed, with a beret on his head and his thin lips pressed into a grimace.*

*The man halted in the doorway of the small house, and with inconceivable violence, his eyes seemed to physically pierce Alfa and her mother, who stopped struggling under the weight of his gaze.*

*As the undisputed leader of the partisans, Aurelio Bussi, known as Palmo, instilled terror with his mere presence. Upon his signal, the other men left, leaving him alone with Margherita.*

*Minutes stretched long in a silence filled with tension, each breath seeming to carry the weight of untold words. Alfa kept her gaze fixed on the farmhouse door, a structure she had passed countless times without thought.*

*Occasionally, Margherita's muffled shouts broke through, her words unclear yet heavy with all the gravity of the moment, the fear, the anger, the woman's helplessness in the face of a decision that seemed to be already made even before listening to her.*

*Then everything quieted down, and footsteps were heard.*

*Margherita appeared, stepping out with hesitation, followed by Palmo. Her expression was one of deep distress, yet Alfa ran to her anyway, seeking the comfort of her mother's embrace, which was readily given with soothing strokes to her head.*

*Alfa then glanced over at Palmo, whose eyes narrowed under the glaring sun, and his expression remained unreadable.*

*"Your time has come, dear Margherita. You Ricciottis and Giubellis<sup>3</sup> have always been my downfall. You've always made me run around—you bunch of fascists and criminals!" Palmo's hushed voice sounded merciless, like a cold gust of wind in the open space in front of the farmhouse.*

*Palmo nodded toward his men, and the two partisans closest to Margherita began to push her towards the cemetery. After a few steps, a long grey wall appeared to Alfa and Margherita.*

*What was about to happen suddenly became clear to both.*

*There was no more room for illusions.*

*The men who had dragged her there loosened their grip on Margherita's arms, allowing her to tightly embrace her daughter, keeping her head pressed against her stomach.*

*The barely ten-year-old child felt her mother's frantic heartbeats, thump thump thump, and as she held her tight, she realized what was about to happen.*

*Orlando, another partisan, attempted to separate Alfa from her mother.*

*"Pietà l'è morta<sup>4</sup>!" the others shouted, encouraging Orlando to be forceful and not to be moved.*

*Alfa screamed and squirmed, clinging tightly and kicking with her head down.*

*Orlando forcefully detached her from Margherita, dragging her away as her knees suffered from the harsh scrape against the gravel, yet she felt no pain, her ears only capturing her mother's screams:*

*"No, no, help, no! Alfa, Alfa!!"*

*As Alfa was pulled away, she caught glimpses of her mother being restrained and Palmo communicating with his men, but she couldn't make out his words.*

*At that moment, Orlando, who still held a firm grip on Alfa's arms, pressed her face against his chest, covering her eyes, possibly in a gesture of extreme compassion.*

*The girl, pressed against the partisan, felt the initial blast followed by a machine gun's rapid gunfire.*

*Margherita collapsed silently. At the shots' sound, birds scattered from the trees sheltering the square, the sole witnesses to the tragedy, alongside the deceased in the cemetery.*

*As Alfa's cries ceased, Orlando's grip on her relaxed. For a moment, she stood motionless, arms at her sides, gazing at the armed men and her mother's lifeless and sprawling form before fleeing in terror to the fields. She heard voices behind her.*

*"What should we do with this kid?" Turning at those words, Alfa saw two partisans with guns aimed at her, fingers poised on the triggers.*

*"She's seen too much!" one yelled.*

*Alfa stumbled, fell, rose again, and continued to run.*

*"T'ses fol<sup>5</sup>!"*

*As she ran, she noticed she could no longer hear their voices or the loud rumble of gunfire.*

*She was safe.*

*Since that fateful day, she often wished the bullets had ended her alongside her mother, instead of leaving her as the sole custodian of that overwhelming grief.*

*She hoped the trial against Bussi would proceed.*

*Despite investigations in 1953 into the killings of her mother, uncle, and her uncle's partner, the trial never took place. The judge acquitted Palmo and his group during the preliminary phase, deeming the murders of Margherita, Carmelo, and Carmelo's partner, defenseless civilians like many others, as a mere act of war and thus not prosecutable.*

*Thanks to that never-held trial, the reason for that act will forever remain unknown.*

*Maybe Palmo's actions stemmed from unrequited love for Margherita, envy of a "normal" family, albeit toughened by war, or the subsidy Margherita was due to collect in Vercelli.*

*Perhaps it all stemmed from a single slap, when Uncle Carmelo Ricciotti struck Palmo during a parade commemorating the March on Rome: a slap that might have been retaliated with a slew of deaths, including Margherita's.*

*Perhaps Palmo only wanted to terrorize the town, like other partisans did in Collegno, where innocent seamstresses were killed for merely sewing uniforms for Republican fighters.*

*What was unequivocal was Palmo's cold, calculated decision to sentence an innocent woman and mother of two to death. For that, no earthly justice could ever punish him.*

*For Alfa, the verdict felt like her mother was being murdered all over again. A seething rage surged from her depths, unearthing the darkness she'd suppressed for years, holding onto hope that justice would eventually catch up with Palmo and his men for the heinous acts they perpetrated, even post-war.*

*She married young, to a decent man named Rino, a former Marine of the Decima MAS, who stood steadfastly by her, doing his best to mend her lingering sorrow from an unhealed wound. He was a source of comfort, even when they faced the disappointment of not being able to have children.*

*It appeared that Alfa's life remained ensnared in that fateful day in July of many years ago.*

*To escape their memories, they relocated to Milan, but unfortunately Rino was laid off, prompting them to move to Alzo on Lake Orta, not far from Crevacuore.*

*Perhaps it was this proximity to her childhood village that ignited the lucid madness within Alfa: her fury was further fueled by the fact that*



*Bussi had not only escaped punishment but was also elected mayor of Crevacuore and received the gold medal of the Resistance.*

*Then, on a morning in March 1956, Alfa covertly retrieved her husband's pistol from its drawer, tucked it into her purse, and left their home determined to confront Palmo.*

*The cool morning air caressed her resolute face; at twenty-two, she had spent nearly half her life haunted by the brutal, senseless violence she witnessed as a child.*

*An icy calmness enveloped her as she waited for the bus, the weight of justice in her bag reminding her of her impending action. She got off and took another bus to Borgosesia, then walked the remaining kilometers to Crevacuore with firm steps.*

*Memories ebbed and flowed as she walked, recalling her mother who was violently slaughtered, her father Pietro who was later found at Baggio military hospital, and her brother Italo who had been working in Germany since before the war.*

*Throughout these years, only one conviction had kept her going: not all who are vanquished suffer in silence or mourn their dead quietly, and she refused to be silent.*

*This resolve to confront Palmo and finish that story once and for all had kept her alive, even when her deepest desire was to wind up in her mother's arms.*

*Upon reaching the village, she proceeded to the town hall. The square building was just as she remembered, with the Italian flag hanging motionless above the entrance on a still morning. Alfa inquired about the mayor, but a woman at the reception desk in the town hall's small foyer informed her he hadn't shown up that morning.*

*Resolute, she then made her way to Bussi's house and knocked but received no response.*

*Holding her purse tightly in her right hand, Alfa walked across the town square.*

*A lone man sat outside the only café on the square, a dark cap obscuring his eyes.*

*He had been observing her for a while.*

*Suddenly, he spoke to her sharply, as if responding to a question from her, "A còsa ch'al giba tota? Date n'ande<sup>6</sup>!"*

*Alfa looked at him and offered a weak smile.*

*"Chiel a l'é lontan da cà, adess<sup>7</sup>."*

*"Are you talking about Bussi?" Alfa inquired.*

*"Sicur<sup>8</sup>!"*

*Removing his cap, he showed his face to Alfa. "Cuand ca la merda la munta la scagn o ca la spusa o ca la fa dagn<sup>9</sup>."*

*As she listened, Alfa felt a sense of familiarity with his face.*

*"Chiel l'ha massà toa mare. Chila j'era giovo e dovria vive<sup>10</sup>!"*

*Tears filled the man's eyes, and at that moment, Alfa realized he was Orlando, the partisan who had pulled her away from her mother and shielded her eyes when Palmo ordered her execution.*

*It appeared he had been waiting for her. Speechless and with a dry mouth, Alfa stood before him.*

*Orlando adjusted his beret before pointing her towards the residence of a certain Rina Perolini, who according to him had been Bussi's mistress for more than a decade.*

*With a mix of shock and resolve, Alfa pressed on in the festive shoes she had chosen for the day, reminiscent of the blue floral dress her mother had worn on her final day.*

*Arriving at the location Orlando had mentioned, Alfa glimpsed Bussi through the thin curtains; he had swapped his partisan uniform for a shirt with bold checks.*

*A chill coursed through her as a flood of old agonies and horrors experienced as a child overwhelmed her suddenly and mercilessly.*

*Alfa walked up to the door and knocked firmly using the knuckles of her clenched fist. As the door swung open, she was greeted by a petite woman with blonde hair cascading to her shoulders and lips painted a bright scarlet.*

*The woman looked surprised, scrutinizing Alfa and wondering who she was, possibly confusing her for the new midwife expected in the town.*

*The two women exchanged a silent, probing gaze before Alfa broke the quiet, shouting, "Bussi!"*

*Through the doorway, the kitchen was visible, and Bussi, clearly irritated, abruptly stood up from his meal, shoving his chair aside as he moved toward the door without recognizing her. How could he?*

*Alfa studied him briefly, seeking the cold-hearted cruelty in his eyes that had once stripped her of her mother's affection and her entire childhood.*

*Despite having put on weight, Bussi's expression retained the same arrogance as twelve years ago. In front of this unexpected and unwanted disruption, his freshly shaved face twisted into an expression of displeasure, his thin lips nearly vanishing.*

*When Bussi arrived in front of her, Alfa swiftly pulled out the pistol from her purse, aimed it at him, and declared in a steady, clear voice, "I am Alfa Giubelli, daughter of Margherita Ricciotti."*

*She then fired at him, but that devil was a robust man, and he didn't fall; on the contrary, he closed the distance between them, hitting her face with his fist.*

*Alfa was taken by surprise by Bussi's punch; the man then tried to grab the gun from her. During the scuffle, it appeared he was overpowering her, but suddenly three sharp shots were fired in quick succession, and Bussi's corpse now fell dead onto her.*

*It was finally over.*

*A few steps away, the partisan's lover covered her mouth with her hands, muffling a scream.*

*Alfa got up and returned the pistol to her purse.*

*Her hands shook slightly, reminiscent of her childhood anxieties while waiting for her father's decision on whether to punish her for her naughtiness.*

*She felt no hatred, fear, or satisfaction, just a profound and refreshing peace that seemed to envelope her completely.*

*Leaving Bussi's lifeless body in the hallway of the house, she walked resolutely to the Carabinieri station to turn herself in. A small stream of blood trickled from her nose; the result of Palmo's last punch. She candidly informed the officers of her identity and detailed the act she had committed, explaining her motivations.*

*She never felt remorse for killing Palmo; the five-year prison sentence allowed her to confront and come to terms with the demons that had haunted her childhood dreams.*

Alfa reopened her eyes and snapped back to reality, shaking her head as she emerged from that bubble of the past that hadn't visited her for so, so long.

It all seemed so remote, but if she closed her eyes, she could still feel her mother's loving touch on her face and hair. This was why she always showered her two daughters, born after her time in prison, with tender affection.



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