When the Wind Blows the Saw Moves

By Joseph Catama

I was a child when I took the first step in the death of my soul.

We lived in the outskirts of Holland, hidden among the vast tulip fields which was our House Karav pride. Mother joined the peasants in the field bending over with delicate hands, picking a scarlet tulip here, a white tulip there, breathing in their savor before carrying them to her garden. Soil lay in the pattern of a triskelion, three spirals interconnected with one continuous endless line. She planted the tulips in neat rows inside the outline of soil.

When my mother planted the last tulip of the first spiral, my brother Charles and I found her strolling between the rows with a childish grin but a hand over her back.

“Why don’t you let the workers help?” I asked. Though we lived in the countryside and never saw him, our father was the Duke of Holland, and the frequencies of messengers, knights and carriages decorated in the gold and silk of nobility reminded us that our family could afford an extra laborer.

Mother bent to our level, wiping off a grain of soil from her apron. She kissed us in turn on the forehead. “A farmer reaps her own harvest.”

“But they’re flowers,” Charles said. “They don’t produce anything!” He stood half a head taller than I and knew it.

“Not in this life, of course. But in the one to come, the one beyond time.” Mother stood and offered her hand to walk. I took it, but Charles refused.

The sun fell close to setting, casting half the path under the tulips’ shadow. But its glow warmed my mother’s face. “The line continues and continues without end, just like our souls. It shows how we will live forever with the Triune God in heaven. That is, if we choose Him, choose a life centered on Him.”

We reached the last of the tulips and stopped. Only soil continued in the outline of a spiral.

“One day, our lines will end in this world.” The sun sank behind a distant hill, and our mother’s face darkened. “And our souls will continue either in endless tulips or in barren soil.”

“But,” she said, raising a finger and giving a warm smile, “if you eat your vegetables, listen to your nanny and sit quiet for a single mass, then you will have endless tulips.”

She spanked us each on the bottom.

“Ow!” we screamed.

“Now go wash yourselves up for supper.”

Charles groaned then ran off, but I remained, staring at the barren soil.

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Half way through planting the second spiral, mother fell ill. A worker found her collapsed in the field. I was in the dusty workshop of our wind sawmill, sanding my wooden sword when Charles ran in to tell me.

She had a brief period of lucidity before passing.

I leaned over the bed. “Mother, you didn’t finish the tulips. Will your soul continue with tulips or...or?” I tried to hold them back but the tears spilled.

With grave effort she lifted her hand and stroked my cheek. “That is for our Lord to judge. But He knows how much I desire His tulips and will suffer for their growth.”

I buried my face in her hand and she held me.

Sometime later, a hand touched my shoulder. “I’m sorry child, but you must leave as I give your mother the last rite.”

Vision blurred, I traced the black silk and center buttons of a priest’s cassock.

I looked at my mother and she forced a smile. I left and propped myself outside the bedroom door. Charles sat in a ball across the hallway, mouth tight with anger. His eyes darted from corner to corner. After some time, he spoke.

“You know, she did this to herself, working to death.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Don’t say what?” He stood and gave a little laugh. “That she wanted to die? All she talks about is her endless garden and God. She could have told any of the peasants to do the work!”

“She’s not dying from gardening.”

“What does it matter? You know she wants to die, be with God, because she never cared for us.”

“I said, don’t say that!” I socked him clean in the cheek.

Charles bent over. He growled then tackled me. “How dare you! I’ll be your duke one day!”

The world thumped and rang to silence as his fists pounded and pounded. Mother would not have wanted this, but there was no father to stop us.

I scrambled for the wooden sword attached to my belt, but Charles grabbed the wrist and pinned it.

Charles kept a short knife at his side. When he lifted his fist for another blow, I drew the knife and raised it to his neck.

We each stared at the knife.

It would have spared us both pain if I had shoved the knife forward that day, but the door to the bedroom opened and Charles leapt off and ran.

“What’s going on here?” the priest asked. He ripped the knife from my hand then sat me against the wall. He pulled out a handkerchief and began dabbing the blood from my face. “Child, spare your mother further pain.”

All thought of Charles dissipated at the mention of her. “Will her soul die?”

He paused. “Die?”

“After she dies, will her soul die too?”

His eyes narrowed. “Child, the first step in the death of a soul is committing mortal sin and by the power of God I absolved her of all sin. She rests in peace.”

The pain in my face dissolved. *Committing mortal sin,* I thought. Charles?

*Me?*

\* \* \*

Some decades passed before I took the second step in the death of my soul.

Following mother’s death, Charles and I moved to our father’s palace in Holland. We lived much the same with maids raising us, seldom seeing father, and my brother and I’s relationship parting further until titles made permanent the divide.

I attended the Gerningen School of Theology, led by monks for the lay education against Calvinism. It was situated along a hillside with cathedral-like buildings towering above a tulip field reminiscent of our countryside home. I strolled the fields between classes and divine hours. On a cool March afternoon, a young woman caught my eye. She wore a silken blue dress and examined the tulip petals like a scientist before scribbling away in a notebook.

I watched for some time, fascinated by her precise hands, lifting and plucking petals with a mechanical efficiency. She was in a bed of scarlet and every so often would pull out a vile, gaze inside a bud and scoop something with a small tool.

“What are you looking for?”

“Pollen,” she said without looking up.

“And what for? If I may ask.”

“A garden.” She examined and skipped several more buds.

“And why not those?”

“Unfit.”

“But they’re all the same.”

“They are *not* all the same. Some are suitable to be parents from my crossbreed and others are not. If the hue is not the exact scarlet, or the petals spread too wide, or the stem flimsy, or any other reason to make the quality unsuitable like interrupting someone trying to focus—then I will acknowledge them no more than a fly.” She seemed surprised to find her next bud worthy of harvest and she pulled out the vile.

“Women aren’t allowed on school grounds.”

Her hand paused before moving to scrape out the pollen. “What is that to you? I am a botanist and have important research on the creation of tulip hues. What combination to achieve a deep violet? Do you know? That’s what I thought,” she said, not looking up.

“I can report this to the dean and say you’re stealing from school property.”

“Is it not the duke’s? What if I told you I had a letter from the lord himself?”

“I wouldn’t believe you.”

“And what jurisdiction do you have? You’re a student. And I’m a scientist. Let me be.”

“I thought the learned ones of the city would *know* their nobility.”

“I do.”

She looked up and her cheeks reddened deeper than the scarlet buds. “Lord...Lord Karav,” she gasped. “I am sorry. I didn’t realize. I will leave these grounds at once.” She began furiously packing her things.

I knelt at her side and lifted her soft chin. “What is your name?”

“Farla.”

“There is no need to run, my Lady Farla. I know a perfect place to produce that violet hue.”

\* \* \*

A year later, father died from a plague, coughing to his death like a sickened crow. He wreaked the smell of a dead body long before he passed.

“Aletta!”

He screamed for his mistress rather than a priest.

I cared less for his death than the peasants who danced in the streets. I recognized a life whose soul would die the eternal death.

Farla and I attended the ball following Charles’ installment as Duke of Holland.

Courtiers twirled between the dancing lords and ladies who each smiled wide and bowed as they passed Charles standing on the marble stairs of the palace, arms crossed under his red fur coat. His tall stature and thick trim beard fit his new crown that made him royalty.

He watched as I danced with Farla, spinning her thin delicate frame between my arms. Her curls bounced and she smiled almost sincerely. Every so often I touched her hand to feel the ring of engagement. Our eyes locked but our minds were on my brother.

He prowled down the stairs and we twirled to bow and meet him. With precious patience he kissed Farla’s hand and grinned lustfully.

“Cersias.”

“Charles, my lord.” Our eyes met. “Congratulations.”

“My thanks to you.”

He poisoned father, of course I helped him and hired the man to stir the concoction. But better Charles be duke than a man who banished our mother for refusal to divorce.

“When did you last receive confession?”

“Such a pointed question, brother. You know I have no sin to repent of.” He spread out his hands from his place on the steps, displaying his newfound power.

To kill him now would send his soul to eternal damnation. Perpetual fire. What a lovely thought for a man who looked at Farla the way he did. “Of course, your soul is clean, white as wool. You are the holiest of us all. If only I could learn to be as holy as you.”

“Then you should be pleased to know you are now honored in my holy court as ambassador to England.”

My face heated. Was this his way to get rid of me?

But he looked on dangerously, eying the vile he held in his hand and tilting his head toward Farla.

I bowed low and retreated to the ball. We blended like two flowers in the field. Two tulips in a sea of tulips.

After the ball, I fled to a priest. But what did I have to confess? Father deserved his death and so would Charles.

I turned from the confessional and took the second step in the death of my soul.

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I spent two years in England, negotiating a helpless treaty with Queen Mary who demanded Holland lift its truce with the Calvinists for any increase in woolen exports or foreign aid in our border crisis with Spain.

*How I wish nothing but to see your face,* I wrote. *I am banished in this land, Farla. Banished to the cellars of imagination. I fear that the picture of you in my head is no longer you. It is limited to the whims of my imagination, separated from the reality of you. Send me a drawing of you. I beg. And please pray for me. Pray my toil is not in vain.*

She sent tulips. But the scent of home faded to the mustiness of paper and ink sitting three months’ time in an envelope. Dried petals crumbled as I opened the letters. They began in a light blue then deepened over the months to a lighter violet.

*I am closer, my dear,* she wrote. *I’ve found that two orange tulips, not scarlet, produce the desired blue hue. But it takes an entire season just to test a breed, and half the time the notes are jumbled and I forget the attributes of the flowers I chose. But your mother’s fields are vast and I have no shortage of options. Her organization was deliberate and precise. I always dreamed of owning such a field.*

*I remember you telling me of the triskelion your mother never finished. Her outline remains. I’ve planted violet tulips in the second spiral. But I’ll wait for you, my dear, to begin the third.*

I fought in the name of Charles, in the name of Holland, bidding the Queen and her advisors with every bit of strength. We were signing the treaty when I received the letter.

*Brother, it pains me to tell you your Lady Farla has passed. To say she died without sin would be a lie. They say it was a mixture of grief and regret followed by a plague similar to father. She spoke words that I would not repeat in writing. Her passing was so swift no priest could give the last rite. But it may comfort you to know I was with her at her leaving.*

*Brother, it seems this negotiation with the Queen is hopeless and distracts her at best. I am afraid your state of mind will hinder your progress. Forgo the treaty. Come home at once.*

The seal of House Karav followed, the dried ink dripping like blood.

A violet tulip of a dark hue fell from within the paper.

I tore it to shreds. My legs gave way as if a ship dropped on my shoulders. I fell to the marble floor of the Queen’s court. Gone. Dead, because of grief? Because of me? And where was I? My Lady Farla.

My Lady Farla. What love we lost! What love was stolen!

Her laugh, gone. Her beauty, dust. Her soul, burning.

How had she sinned? And no last rites? Where was her soul? It couldn’t be. My Lady Farla’s soul was spotless, pure, clean to the end.

The voyage home rivaled all the tears spent for Ophelia.

But the sorrow twisted to anger for Charles as I learned the extent of Farla’s sin.

“Do you not pity your brother?” Charles asked as I put a sword to his throat. “Or pity your wife? If you had cared for her, you would have settled the treaty quickly rather than let her drown in grief. She was lonely and without a child. I was helping her. Do you know the responsibility it takes to lead a province? The stress? There are rebellions daily in opposition to the monarchy.” He eyed his dozen bodyguards who each raised swords to my throat. Charles stepped around and dryly whispered in my ear, “I *am* duke of this province and I do what I will. You understand?”

I ground my teeth.

“And what I say is best for the people it is. Is it not?” He tilted his head, one in power mocking a peasant.

My hands shook as I kept myself from driving the sword through. But then what? It would be mortal sin, then I too would be killed and sent to hell. But God knew I didn’t deserve it.

“Is it not?”

“Yes, my lord.” I sheathed my sword. *For now,* I thought.

Farla died the third death of the soul and so too would Charles, but not at the cost of my own.

\* \* \*

It was on a Sunday morning during the festivities of Easter season when I took the final step toward the death of my soul.

I encountered Charles, stumbling along a stone path in the tulip fields of our family estate. He swayed between a bed of purple and yellow tulips which dripped with the sweat of dew. He wore a white surcoat stained with last night’s drinks, his beard wrinkled and sticking to certain parts of his cheek. His feet dragged and his red eyes traced the cracks of the cobbled stone walkway, and every once in a while, he giggled at last night’s fantasies.

“Brother,” I exclaimed, smiling as best I could and throwing an arm around his shoulder. I could give him no room to doubt my good intentions, an act I had built over the last year. No retinue or courtier was in sight. *All things come in God’s time,* I thought. “What good will that we cross paths on this fine morning. Even the sun shines as if Christ rose today!”

“Christ rose today. Yes, ah. Yes. Good will.” His mouth worked as he suppressed his last fantasy. “Fine morning.”

“And which tavern might have had the honored guest of the Duke of Holland himself? The Jousting Pony? Carol’s Mounds?” I gave a wide smile and stopped him in his track. “Tell me truly. Was it the Maid’s Valley?”

“Maid’s Valley? Cersias, I have a wife if you’ve forgotten!”

“A lady? Yes, the Lady Karav. I know her. A beautiful soul. Spotless and pure. Too good and holy for you, honestly. And where might she be?”

“Mass, I suppose. Praying with her…Legion of Mary.” He gave a snort and shook his head.

“And is that where you be heading, Lord Karav? To mass on Sunday? St. Peter’s is the opposite way if I know my churches. Truly, you should go and be with your lady. It *is* Sunday and would be a sin not to attend.” I turned the hefty Charles and led him the other way. I could not allow emotions to cause me to sin.

“No, no. Not there.” Charles shook off the arm. “I am a sinful man. Sinful.” His medallion clinked on its chain as he sped down his original way.

“As we all are.”

I followed him for some time, the path winding around a small hill. The purple tulips bled to a sea of orange extending far over the hills to the east. The yellow covered the western side, bright like the sun. The clean grassy scent reminded me of Farla. But I suppressed any remembrance of her. She was of the past. Revenge was sin but justice was not.

“Three nights ago,” I said, “a French man from Normandy passed through our town for the festival.”

“Normandy? From a hundred leagues away?”

“The laborer of a gentleman. He says his master plants, grafts and presses in his own orchard. He knows his ciders.”

“Ciders,” Charles mused, rubbing his chin.

“He led a strong mule with two barrels strapped to its side. Each was marked with the script *Invidia Omnium*.”

“Envy of All…a spirit of gods,” Charles wondered.

“Yes. I was with Fechessio at the time. You know the French twig of a man. We each bought a barrel, thirty shekels of silver a piece.”

“…thirty shekels…”

“Thirty shekels. We brought them to Fechessio’s apartment.” I gave a warm smile. “The pathetic man can’t tell the difference between a Normandy cider and our rotten native spirit. What a waste of silver.” I leaned close to his ear. “And some whisper that Fechessio’s taste is better than yours.”

“Better than mine,” he breathed. “Fechessio. And you have the other barrel?”

“Yes, still sealed in fact. It is in the workshop at the mill.”

“We shall go at once.”

“But, Charles. Your lady. You should be at church with her.” I put a hand on his shoulder and tried to turn him.

“No, no. If you have the cider, we must have a taste…we must. *Invidia,*” he added in a whisper.

“If you insist, my lord.”

Beams of sunlight spilled over the sea of flowers. The buds seemed to open their petals to let in the warmth. They leaned east, breathing in their breakfast light. A soft breeze rustled them as they exhaled and relaxed.

Around a hill, an opening of soil appeared in the shape of a spiral. Its ends connected to a second of scarlet and white tulips, and to a third of violet.

“She was a good woman,” Charles murmured, eying the triskelion.

“Indeed, she was."

The path wove round a small hill of now green tulips, and the yellow bled to crimson. Upon a small grassy hill to the north, the windmill stood—its wooden propellor a vast cross spinning to the tune of wind. It was nailed to a conical structure with shingle roofing in the shape of a tall bell. A green framed window stood above a wide door of the same hue.

Charles quickened his step at the sight of the mill, his bells jingling softly. I felt for the short sword strapped to my waist then followed in his shadow. I would never use it, of course, but if the man needed protection, I was prepared.

A series of sharp cut stairs led up the hill. Charles lifted a foot for the first and stumbled. I caught his arm before he gouged his face in an edge.

“Take care, Charles. Your lady wouldn’t stand for a butcher’s block as a husband’s face.”

“I’m fine. I’m fine. Just last night’s spirits.” He tried to shake me off.

“Let me help you, Charles. There’s little pride climbing alone if you stumble all the way.”

He gave a grunt but allowed his arm to be held.

“Just like the old days, isn’t it?”

“What days?”

“When father was duke and we cared little for love or reputation. We were free then.”

“Free as much as mother was.” He tripped a second time. “*Fechessio*.”

“Yes, it is his fault.”

We climbed the last few stairs in silence, Charles tripping a third and last time.

“The cider, it is inside?” Charles asked as we summited. He eyed the propeller that loomed above. The wind had died, and it creaked to a halt.

“Of course. As I said. It lies under the center workshop table.”

His eyes narrowed with lust before shaking free and marching to the green door.

He twisted the brass knob. Metal clicked. The door was stiff. He shoved it open with a shoulder. I followed at his heels.

Inside was the circular workshop. Charles rubbed his nose at the heavy scent of sawdust.

I breathed in deep.

Wood planks lay in neat stacks along the wall. The various saws, chisels and hammers hung on a board at the far end. Unfinished chairs and tables crowded the dark corners. Beams stretched above, wooden gears attached to the propeller outside. They zagged downward in a mechanical labyrinth to a wide table at the center of the room. A long jagged saw hovered above the length of the table. It was connected to gears and pistons on either side. Light from the single window shown boldly on the table. Thick dust swam in its ray.

I closed the door as Charles stalked for the table. He bent over and felt around the shadow beneath.

“Cersias! Where’s the cider?”

“Look and you will find.”

Charles coughed as his sweeping arm stirred up the sawdust. His hands groped then latched to a small piece of wood. “Ah, I found it!”

He crawled backward and stood, yelping as the back of his head hit the table. Rubbing his head, he scowled at the wood. “Where’s the cider?”

I shoved Charles face down on the table. His eyes widened in fear, and his body stiffened with shock. I fastened one wrist to a shackle hanging from under the table. I ran to the other side and shackled the other wrist. The wood dropped from his hand and crackled on the ground.

“What madness is this?”

Charles kicked his legs in a fit. But them too I strapped down with a rope. He twisted his head on the table. “Unchain me! I demand you to release me! I am your duke!”

“A duke indeed.”

I stepped backward and admired the animal sacrifice squirming on its altar.

“A great joke, Cersias! The lady herself might've been amused by this!” He began laughing wildly and slamming his face into the table. “Release me!”

“She may laugh indeed.”

“We can have a great laugh on our march to church. Cersias! What of the cider?”

“There is no cider.” I spun a wheel, and the saw began to lower. It ran the length of his spine and it stopped when it brushed the first of his noble hairs.

“Cersias! You fool! You madman! Ha! What is this for? You murderer! Is this all because of that darling Farla?”

“This isn’t about her! This is about justice!”

I saw Farla walking alongside me in the tulip gardens we sowed, with children we were to bear. She laughed with that innocent tilt of the head, the dimple on her cheek scarlet with love.  A violet just for him.

“I am no murderer, Charles. I am no wicked man!”

She appeared as a mirage of beauty judging me.

*What are you doing?* She seemed to say. Was there something left of her? I knew the lavender her hair smelt of. The warm grassy scent of tulips of which we strolled. Together. Together. Did we ever stroll?

But it wasn't her, merely my corrupted imaginations. “Leave me! You’re in hell! You burn in punishment of sin. You sin again, but with no chance of mercy you continue to burn. Perpetual punishment is the price of your sin. With no repentance in hell, you are punished again. Again. A clockwork of perpetual sin is your justice!”

I smashed my head with a fist and the image vanished.

“And you’ll come with me if you do this!”

“You sent her there!” I screamed half at Charles and half at myself. I turned and moved toward the door.

“Hahahaha! Of course, I did! You think I think I’m spotless? I know I’m not. I used her as much as you did. The only difference is that you thought she loved you!”

My sword was at his neck quicker than God’s justice. The cold tip tickling skin.

“Do it! Kill me! And you’ll have all of Holland as your murderer!” He writhed and spit and blood dripped from his neck. “Then you’ll burn!”

“Yes, I will burn and maybe I’ll see Farla there too. But your death will not be at my hands. I am more than Cain. And you are less than Abel. I will not be responsible. When the wind blows the saw will move and he will be your judge.”

I sheathed my sword and moved to the door. I turned the knob and warm light welcomed. It was soft like the sea of tulips extending over the hills to eye’s end. I stepped out and shut the door.

A strong breeze creaked the propellors to motion. They groaned as if reluctant to move. Muffled screams of hell serenated the wind.

I eyed the rope that hung from the end of one propellor. It rose and dipped. Rose and dipped.

The screams of Charles ricocheted in my head. Or was it Farla’s? Or my own? I clutched my head and took three steps before collapsing.

*I’m sorry, Farla, I have sinned, and no priest can save me.*

Something brushed the top of my head, the rope.

When it passed again, I tied a noose.

When it passed the third time, I snuggled the rope around my neck and prayed for wind. When it came, I closed my eyes and the propellor strung me up then down beneath the earth.

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Six human heads adorned Six beastly horns of the demon that welcomed me. Its size grew to that of six men as it prowled toward me. It had the head of a cow, the body of a cat, wings of a bat and the tail of a snake. Its black skin glimmered red from the fiery chasms that lined both sides of the dark path. Bodies scrambled through the fire, unable to cremate, unable to leave.

The eyes of one of the heads on the beast’s horns blinked. Its face was split in the center with blood as if cut in half and forced back together. A gash wounded its neck.

*Charles.* His mouth opened, but his screams were lost in the noise.

“Is Farla here?” I yelled.

The demon’s mouth did not open, but the words arrived as a corrupted thought. “There are no names in hell.”

“Where is she?”

“You chose *not* the Triune God and you will exist without Him!”

An image appeared through a hole in the ceiling, a triskelion of tulips, one spiral of scarlet and white, a second of violet, a third of gold.

“Your soul is dead and you will look upon what you could have had, the names you could have lived with! Instead, you will burn with separation’s fire!”

Knowledge overwhelmed me and judgment.

The demon threw me into the fire. I became pain and gazed upward at what I could have had.

And I cannot leave.