

The Arbour Artificial

Pietro Genevieve did not know how to feel about his punishment. He supposed it was better than the scaffold, which was what he'd expected on waking up to the rattle and roar of his cell door opening. It was also better than spending years in the palace dungeons, accumulating scars - they had only just stitched up his right shoulder. So he sat down, rested his back against the enormous crate and took calculated stock of his surroundings.

Build a forest, he had been ordered. Turn this dome into a forest, and when you're finished, we shall set you free. It seemed an almost laughably kind punishment for the man who had tried to kill the King.

The dome they had imprisoned him in was as large inside as any ballroom and made of something glasslike. It had been built within a quadrangular courtyard, lost in the higher levels of the sprawling royal palace. Pietro could see every brick in the four pebble-coloured buildings which surrounded him, and beyond them a vast, open scroll of anaemic winter sky. When two silent soldiers had taken him from the cell into the cloudless dawn it had been so cold that his toes had frozen to the soles of his boots, but in here the temperature was comfortably mild. They had washed him, shaved him and given him a painter's shirt and simple but well-made linen trousers to replace his prison sackcloth. There were no shoes.

Inside, the dome was empty except for a small, circular pool of water and the crateful of resources Pietro would need to build his forest. Years of never staying still had exhausted him and he lay down and slept on the canvas that had covered the crate. When he woke, he found an enormous bowl of cold soup and bread and a plate of oranges sitting in a far corner. The dome was so perfectly soundproofed that he could hear the noise of his bare feet in the dust as he walked across to investigate them. Unsurprisingly the bread was stale, but the oranges were fresh and he bit straight into them rather than bother to separate the segments. While he ate, he explored the sinking feeling in his heart. This was not the noble death he had hoped for, and it felt partly like a betrayal of himself not to take the sharp scissors they had given him and ram them through his throat before he could think twice about it.

But, slyly appealing to the former artist in him, they had told him to build a forest. So he began, prising the crate open and embedding long splinters in his callused fingers. Bolts of paper and white cardboard collapsed from where they were stacked inside, along with reams of fishing wire so thin it almost sliced him open as he ran it through his fingers. He

started working then and there whilst his hands still bled, frightened by the stillness of the dome. Old memories of growing up in a tiny olive-harvesting village filled him with longing, the dark green leaves of the olive trees spreading across the ceiling of his childhood and defining it in a certain light. He missed the solidity of black olives, the perfect shape of their stones and how the trees' purple shade would shield him from the early afternoon sun. Outside the dome, the courtyard had been stripped of any trace of the natural world. There was nothing there except gravel and the buildings, hemming him in.

'Can I have some olives?' he called aloud as he hammered iron poles into twisted shapes. He had a horrible intuition that no one was listening.

For the first few days, the idea that he would not leave the dome for years, maybe decades, sent a shock of terror through him at random moments that left him crouching on the floor, curled in on himself and gasping for breath. It quickly became apparent to him that he was a kind of exhibit, because people were almost constantly pressing their faces up against the dome to watch at him. They would shout things, but the dome was so sealed-off from all exterior noise that Pietro found it relatively easy to ignore them. Fixing a carboard tree-skeleton to the outside of his first iron core, he stood on the stepladder which they had provided him and looked down at his observers, wondering. This, then, seemed to be the purpose of his perpetual confinement. It was more effective to display him, diligently making paper trees in an artist's smock, than it was to stick his head on a spike in the street.

It took him three months to finish the first tree, during which time he celebrated his twenty-ninth birthday. It was crooked and white, a tree that had been through the olive press and had all the colour drained out of it. Now, spring was unrolling across the world outside, but Pietro could sense no change except in the stretching hours of daylight. From his dome, the midwinter sun looked almost the same as the spring one. Only, very occasionally a living leaf would make it over the quadrangle by sheer force of effort and plaster itself to the dome. The first time this happened, the leaf had stuck to the curved glass about seven metres off the floor, just out of reach. Pietro balanced on the top of his stepladder, stretching out an arm to try and touch the glass where the leaf had imprinted itself like a luminous diamond. His hand was inches away. He considered throwing himself off the ladder just to touch it for an instant. In the end he did nothing but stay standing there, staring at the veins in the leaf for hours until his ankles ached from holding himself braced in that rigid balance. His old shoulder injury bothered him for days afterwards.

After that, the trees progressed more frantically and bloomed outwards from the first olive imitation. Pietro covered every inch of spare ground with a frenzied network of white roots so that he could not possibly be accused of not serving his sentence properly. Above, to block out the frightening emptiness of the sky - especially on cloudless nights, when it plummeted down on him in an unbearable phantasmagoria of stars - he cut out millions of cloth leaves and hung them on silvery wire from the branches. Each leaf had a beautifully sewn pattern of veins, since a needle and a bobbin of black thread had appeared one day as he slept. Still no olives with his food, though. In response to the invisible refusal, he sewed imitation olives to hang from the leaves. Time made the compensation feel gradually less pathetic.

The first autumn, when dead leaves began blowing against the dome almost every day, he tore up a week's worth of cloth leaves in a mad rage until the air was a flurry of white threads settling between his toes and across his shoulders. The next year, he pressed the fury in him low and calmly watched the stray leaves tumble down the side of the dome and gather at its base until they rotted away. By the third autumn of his confinement, Pietro had realised that there was always a week in which the gorgeous red leaves of some presumably close-by tree all came to invade his peace. He spent a week hiding under the shelter of his trees in one of the comfortable alcoves he had built for himself. Surrounded, it felt like the first snowfall in Eden. The trees whispered to him when he ran his hand down them. His handiwork was perfect; there were no paper seams left to give him cuts and the tiny forest was so dense that he could barely see beyond it.

A year later, he had covered most of the outer edge of the dome. Whenever he threatened to run out of materials, more would appear overnight with his daily rations. No one really stopped to watch him anymore – once, he thought he had seen some of his former friends being led by in chains, but he turned away from them and continued to thread tapered leaves onto an imitation willow branch he was perfecting. At that time, it upset him more than ever that there was no breeze in the dome, because he would have loved to hear the rustle of the leaves like papery wind-chimes. It was also around then that he realised he had long since stopped speaking to himself and that he did not intend to start again. He half wanted to try his voice out, just to see whether it had gone rusty from misuse, but he worried it might break the spell of his trees. He sensed that they would not appreciate the harsh intrusion of a human voice.

The seventh year, though Pietro did not know it, a revolution of the kind he had once almost given his life for was crushed just a few hundred metres from the dome at the foot

of the palace. By then, a strange thing had happened to the glass of the dome. It had become misty, so that passing people were nothing but hurried shapes. Pietro did not bother to wonder why this was happening, or whether people on the outside could see him just as clearly as ever. Rather, it seemed to be the culmination of something he had spent a long time hoping for.

If after nine years anyone had been interested enough in Pietro Genevieve to come and watch him work, they would not have seen very much of him. The dome was crammed with beautifully formed, perfectly white and perfectly dead trees. If they had caught sight of him, they might reasonably have mistaken him for a disappointed prophet. He was still only thirty-eight but his beard and hair, wild and white, had trailed past his waist ever since he had forgotten to keep cutting it. His skin had turned pale and papery, and the colour had bled out of his dark linen trousers. He was perpetually hunched from where he had spent so many nights over a needle and thread stitching ever more intricate patterns by the lamplight spilling from the rooms of the palace. Not that he perceived it as lamplight, since the dome had become almost entirely opaque from within, allowing only the necessary daylight through. On the very rare occasions when he broke through the sterile canopy of his forest and happened to turn his face upwards, he saw only a soft blueish light if it was sunny, or blackness if it was night. The stars could not penetrate whatever had settled into the skin of the dome.

And he was happy.

He was perfectly content.

In fact, he had been delaying the completion of his work for a while because, since half his brain was certain really that there was nothing outside the dome and that breathing, growing trees had been some strange fiction of his, along with the colours purple, gold and bright green, he wanted to stay-