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QUEEN OF THE ALMONDS

Honorable Mention

BY CATHERINE GRUEN

8th grade - Signum Crucis Academy

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Carmelita had been only five, but she was the Queen of the Almonds. She could dance like a fairy and sing even sweeter, and she was the Queen of the Almonds. She would sit between the orchard trees, the soft pink petals kissing her tender face. The rolling wind-swept Spanish hills smiled down on her.

Others would have said she owned nothing. But Carmelita had owned everything. She had Mamá and Papá. She had a beautiful orchard of almonds. She had a home.

This was her life. This was what made her happy, what brought her up when she fell down, rubbing dirt off her knees, wiping tears from her eyes. She had loved each tree. Each branch and leaf and flower. She couldn't imagine anything different, or anything better. Then her Mamá died. The trees seemed to mourn, shredding their fiery leaves with fervor.

Overcome with grief, her Papá sold the house, the orchard and all their land. Gripping his daughter's hand, they left Spain and flew to America, where it touched the Pacific Ocean.

California. A fresh start, her Papá called it. There were no almonds in the city.

Carmelita grew up. Her teachers praised her fast learning, her ability to grasp a subject and conquer it with the strength of Beowulf. However, nothing could make Carmelita feel as happy as she was when she was the Queen of the Almonds.

“Almonds are sensitive souls,” her Mamá used to tell her. “The trees won’t like it if they’re placed in the wrong conditions. They must live in a hot, dry climate. Only someone with patience can coax an almond from a shy sprout.”

Now Carmelita felt like the shy sprout. A flower closed up, refusing to show what could be beautiful petals. Her Papá noticed. The summer after middle school finished, he took her in their old car, and they drove until the cities disappeared, giving way to farmland.

Entering Stanislaus County, they saw rows upon rows of almonds. The familiar pink petals rained down. A smile spread across Carmelita’s face. The cool breeze washed over her like Mediterranean waves. They parked at an empty plot of land.

“I quit my job,” her Papá said suddenly. Carmelita stared at him shock. “We’re moving,” he explained. “Here. Your Mamá wouldn’t have wanted us to waste our lives in a smoky city. We belong here.”

It was hardest to start from scratch, but here Mamá had always told her that hard work and care made even the poorest place beautiful. They cut down the weeds and prepared the soil first. Then they connected the plow to the tall dirt-covered tractor, and plowed the land so it became a hedge orchard, with horizontal lines running between each row of trees. Each row would alternate varieties so there could be cross-pollination.

The almond trees love the sun, Carmelita remembered. In the sweet California sun, they got an excess of that. They cared for the orchard as it grew. When the first frost came, they kept the irrigation system going so the water would release enough energy to keep warmth in the trees. When squirrels came to eat the nuts, they painted the fence in hot sauce, which worked to repel them. Then the orchard

flowered. Soon, it was ready to harvest. When the drupes began to peel, it was time to harvest. Carmelita, her Papá and some neighbors did so together, going through each row with a “shaker.”

Now, Carmelita is getting ready to leave for college. She will be working toward a major in agricultural engineering, so she can help her Papá keep their orchard forever, and help others have their own. Her bags are all packed. There are tears in both of their eyes.

Her Mamá once told her, “Sometimes, las almendras, the almond trees look like they are dying, when the autumn comes. But they always come back, every time spring comes again.”

Immortality is not living forever. Memories keep a person alive. Carmelita’s Mamá is alive. The winter had come, but the winter had passed. Now the petals of the shy, closed-up flower are unfurled, strong in the warm spring sun, held up with memories of her beautiful Mamá.

And now Carmelita is Queen of the Almonds again.