

WATCHTOWER

ISAIAH 5

By Lancelot Schaubert

Zeke wanted good grapes. Not the cheap kind we use to make jams or table wine, good grapes. Great wine: the sort you bring out first at a wedding.

Good grapes take time, a good hill, good protection, good soil, good hard work, good hope for good rain. Took forever just to find the plot of land. He felt a sense of pride when he tilled bits of the soil with his fingers at various places on the first two hillocks. The grit of great black grime, centuries of manure, and rancid ichor-sable garbage juice. The sort of spongy, soft, crumbly black soil with granular aggregates as if centuries of worms had eaten each others's dirt poop and some had coagulated and others they had left more recently. So once Zeke bought it he set up shop on the hillside. Fertile: like a womb of vines.

He'd had plenty of time and we needed plenty of time to dig up a hillside by hand and by plow. Tilling, turning, it all takes time with a hoe and an ard. A bow ard's this light plow that has no mouldboard. Of symmetry and balance on both sides of its draft line, we fit it with a symmetrical share that pulls a shallow furrow. It can't flip soil layers like a mouldboard. We have the yoke that we fasten to the oxen, the draft pole, that ties onto the bow of the draft beam, the stilt where we hang on for dear life and direct it, and at the other end of the stilt we affix the share of the ard. It scratches the surface. Scratch plow, some call it. And Zeke pulled that thing behind a young, strong ox all over that field, turning stones and taking those overturned stones to the sides of the field. So, so many stones just to get to his good grapes. It's almost as if the field didn't *want* him tilling.

He felt... as if he wanted to angrily throw up his hands. But he didn't throw up his hands. He tilled on anyways, sure of the goal, at least. "Come, vines," he whispered.

The days wore on and he had piles and piles of rocks all over the hillside and he'd only done the lengthways tilling. After a while, he saw the long heaps of dirt on either side of the furrows and thought: that will not hold seed enough for sowing. So he wanted to till it crossways.

The hillock itself almost scoffed at him: was he sowing wheat or grapes?

He'd need the rows for vines, so he left it alone when it came to tilling it crossways, half ashamed that he'd even thought to do the other thing out of habit. He looked over the hillside and the setting sun and sighed.

"Love you," the hillside said. "Thanks."

He snorted. Did it really say that?

The next day he started to sow the grape seeds he'd preserved, little black pits. Spaced in clusters, like the grapes they would become, lovingly, tenderly by Zeke. He dug out some irrigation channels to flow between them, terraced there on the hillside. Then he waited.

"Thanks," the hillside said to him. "Thanks oh thanks."

And Zeke waited.

Prayed for rain.

And waited.

While he waited, he started building a watchtower with the spare rocks. That took time in and of itself. And it sort of became a joke for the locals: he begged for stones instead of money. The neighbors knew he had money: Zeke didn't need money. But he dug for stones and they didn't want their stones, so they gave it to him. All those free field stones. Thing was, Zeke knew the more the wall and the watchtower fit together like a puzzle in the mortar, the better it'd hold. So he built himself a great spiraling staircase inside the circular tower with a double door, barred and locked. He built it with careful keyhole-like watch slits and with a murder hole in case he needed to pour hot water or oil down on some unsuspecting assailant. Took years to get it built.

And the whole while, the grapes fallowed and flowered and fallowed again.

Takes three years to get viable grapes out of the vines.

Three years.

You can build a solid watchtower in that time.

More: you can dig a winepress.

Zeke dug out and even masoned the winepress so that it fed as would a great gutter—drain at the end down into a vat with a spigot — the way all of us aspire to do but can seldom afford time or resources to complete. Not all of us had great families that patent the way they till and sow and reap, who profit from rentals to buy out the homes of widows and use the profits of their farms to buy out the land of orphans. Not that Zeke came from a great family: he simply invested whatever he had in the place, but especially his own sweat equity and creative imagination. It was sort of a deeper terrace within the dug and bricked terrace that would allow for proper stomping, casking, and other pressing activities. That took a year itself: collecting all the grey stone, and aligning all the proper angles so that it would all drain through and become the blood of the vine, not just the fruit pomace itself.

Then, towered and flowered and winepressed and envined, he looked for the crop of grapes to come.

Year three came, the year for viable grapes. The hillock said to him, "Here you go!"

But that year's crop wasn't viable either. Not even for a tart jam or even for throwing at rotten kids in the neighborhood.

So he spent a year building a hedge maze around it that led up to the actual rows and rows of vines. Hedge mazes take about as long to mature, maybe longer in the case of some hedges. But

that's the best he felt he could do in the year, waiting for the fourth. The hedges would grow up, though, and give plenty for the local kids and families to come and enjoy.

Year four ended.

Grapes came.

He tasted them: sour, brackish, bitter. He spat them out of his mouth.

"Give me another chance," the hillock whispered to him.

He went and built a shed looking for year five.

Year five, they hardly produced.

"Please," said the hillock.

Six they produced, but only junk.

"One more," said the hillock. Seven was the worst set yet — so bad, even the crows keeled over and died.

It went on like that for years and around year twelve — about as long as it would have taken for a good orchard or berry bushes — with the grapes still sour, he decided he'd had enough.

So.

To the screams of the hillock, he hired a judge and put both himself and *that very hillside* on trial to testify before the triumvirate. The judge adjudicated that it was, indeed, about the worst production he'd yet seen. They allowed Zeke to do what he would with the field.

Not that he wouldn't have otherwise, but it felt good to have the permission, as if someone else knew just how bad it had gotten.

He took ax and fire to the hedge row.

Then to the vines.

The hillock screamed, "BUT YOU LOVED ME ONCE."

He went to the wall made out of stones donated from his neighbors and tore it down, brick by brick and pissed on the crumbled mortar. He took cedar battering rams to the watchtower — laid siege to his own fortress — and turned it into little more than a rockslide on the hillcrest. No one could really till it properly, what for all of the winemaking debris left strewn about. He even drained the local single source aquifer and reservoir and cisterns and wells — using flames when drains wouldn't do. It changed the micro weather so that not even rainclouds cropped up regularly over the land.

He looked to the field beside it, did Zeke. Great factory of a farm, really. His face darkened: great families that had patented the way they tilled and sowed and reaped, who used the profits from rentals to buy out the homes of widows and used the profits of their farms to buy out the land of orphans. They left no commons — no common pool resources, no common land — to be shared among the people, no space left fallow to have a wild in which to explore or even a community with whom to do it all.

Those kinds of rich expanders, those kinds of capitalist farmers, they lived alone because they had bought out all of their neighbors.

But Zeke took with him torches. He remembered his desire to have good grapes. He couldn't have them because of a stubborn hillock. Well if he couldn't have them, no one would. So he set fire to the great houses that had grown from the indiscriminate purchase of so much land. He chased rich folks out of their homes and set fire to their mansions. Vineyards like his barely produced enough to fill a single cask. Entire greenhouses — seedbanks — barely produced enough grain to harvest a couple weeks worth of breakfast cereal. Nothing from his labors: nothing to show for it all.

The folks — the neighbors — who had once grown so much alongside him now turned to a form of vagabond wandering and aimless works.

And the hillock looked on and wept, for the land of juice had turned to flame and smoke.