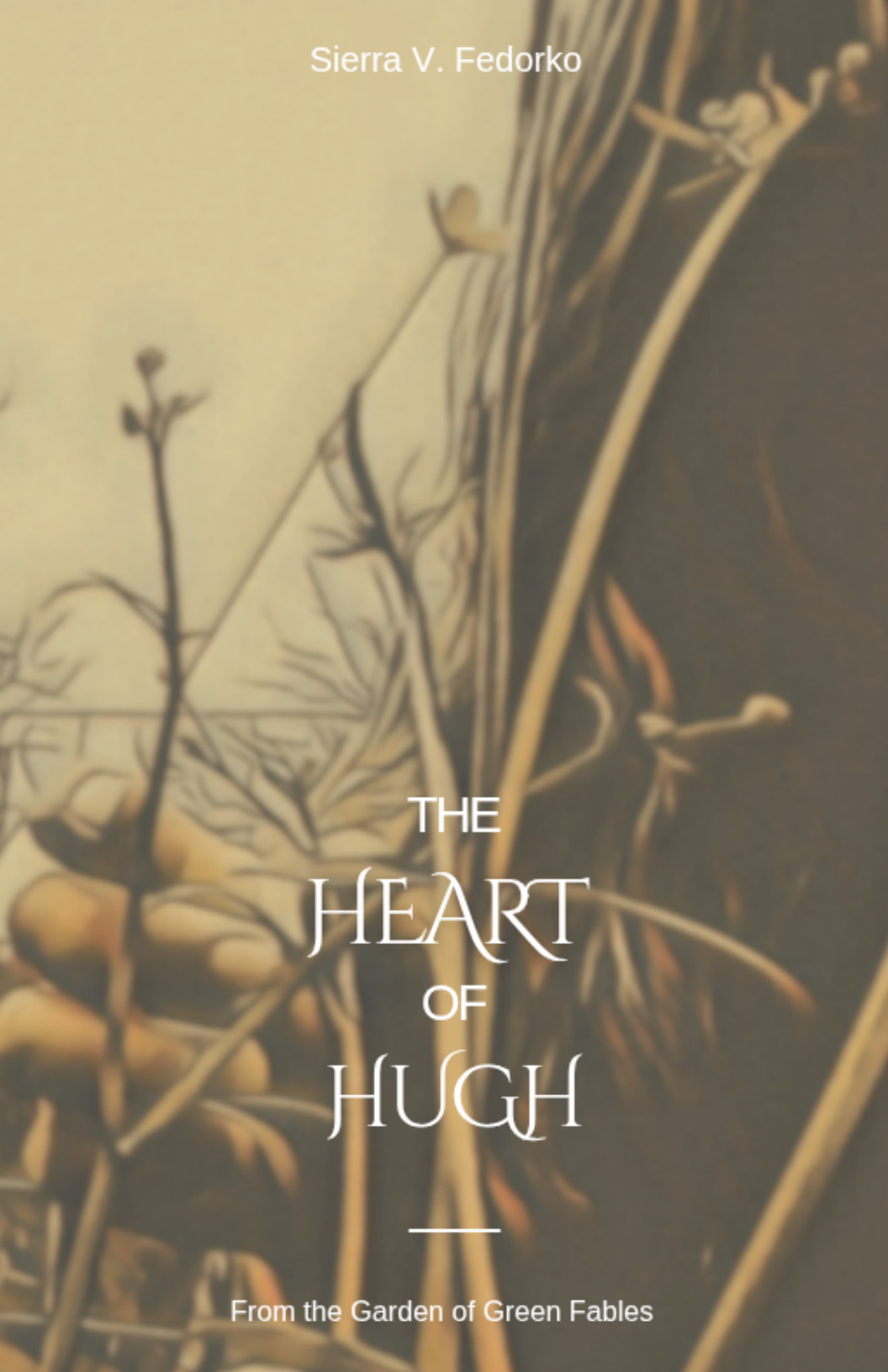




Sierra V. Fedorko

THE
HEART
OF
HUGH

From the Garden of Green Fables

THE HEART OF HUGH

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*To anyone who has loved with their whole heart and
has lost more than they can possibly bear.*

You are held by Jesus.

And we need you.

Introduction

It felt like the most beautiful thing the first time I watched the baby swing sway back and forth by the breeze in the garden. And I was inspired to write about the oak tree standing at the edge of my garden and that baby swing swaying from it.

I wrote a poem called *I Learned to Love the Wind* which is published in my second poetry book, [Swan Song of a Scarecrow](#), but over time, it became apparent I wanted to write more about this oak tree. There was more to the story. It was just waiting to be told.

As I wrote more about this oak tree, the story itself took on a path all its own. Suddenly there was a depth of life to the page.

There was so much to say...

Since Ben and I moved into our little blue house in Spring 2016 (which wasn't bright blue until we chose that color), I've watched us and everything else grow.

It's a beautiful time lapse in my mind with terribly hollow seasons that always left an aftermath of God's hope and healing in their wake.

All the moments—like watching the baby swing sway in the breeze—and all the stories just keep going, and this garden could be a book, and this life could fill its pages...

So, I'm on a mission to write about it and *The Heart of Hugh* begins it all.

While there is plenty of fiction, folktale, and fable throughout *The Heart of Hugh*, it's been wonderful to weave in real bits and pieces of my timeline with Ben, our love story, and our life together.

However, my hope is not that you see my story playing out as you read *The Heart of Hugh*, but that you would find your own story peeking through the chapters in profound and meaningful ways that bring comfort, cause a smile, or make you look twice at something you hadn't thought about before.

The dreamer, Harriet, or even the Oak Tree itself may be where you see yourself while reading *The Heart of Hugh*, but I simply hope that you stumble into your own story while reading this one.

I Learned to Love the Wind

Like her, I was tired. Time bent me slowly, but it was lack of joy and the story I wasn't living that cracked and edged me out. Arms held open, hollow. I'd lived a life before her, or at least the one they gave me, but she moved in, carefree. And I thought, now, maybe.

And I don't blame her for the years that passed. Her shoulders bent like mine, curled around her aching heart. I knew that pain too well! So, I resolved to wait. I learned to love the wind right through me. Learned to house the life that chose me. And soon I saw she did, too.

And it was marvelous.

The garden crept in closer, and hope felt like spring. But life fell like leaves. And though the breeze felt lovely, and I smiled as she scattered seeds, I longed for the garden story.

Instead I felt the pain knife sharp. Lightening in my skin. Is this the end of me? Where they decide I am done. They don't need this tree.

The wind I loved felt bitter. The life in me cracked open. I creaked and groaned and wondered,

Can gardeners hear trees?

But pain lifted its fingers. In its wake, her laughter. And the wind rushed through like life. And I realized the garden had reached me. I danced alongside the flowers. Whistled, so nice to meet you!

And every now and then, I see her gazing up at me. She's happy, all admiration. Her joy is mine. Here we are! Both in the garden. And maybe we always had been.

But the thing I love the most is swaying to the happy rhythm I finally hold in my arms. Not made by breeze or wind, but by a woman who became a mother, pushing her child in the swing hanging down from me.

-S.V.F., [Swan Song of a Scarecrow](#)

PROLOGUE

The secret was I wanted to be in a garden. The catch is nobody expects trees to have dreams. And why should they? Trees aren't known for having a life. Or for having a heart. So when I saw them move into the little house on the hill about one-hundred yards from me, I didn't expect much to happen at all. Certainly not a garden. Or a swing. Or Harriet. Or a lifetime worth being awake for.

Now, this isn't a story with magic. There's no magic. It's important you know that.

I think, in the end, it's simply a story about a *story*. And what it means to have a story and how it feels to find yourself right in the middle of a story when you had forgotten about your story and what it feels like to hold stories again when you didn't think you could possibly hold any more love. Or loss. Or when you were sure you couldn't truly live anymore at all.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let's start from the beginning. Or a kind of beginning. I've been around a long time.

CHAPTER ONE

Oak Tree

I've been standing here for hundreds of years, and I hold the ache of it all.

Knowing so many things, seeing so much, and cataloging joy and pain without feeling known yourself is a kind of suffering that breaks you.

I'd grown tired of facing the seasons by myself. It's true there is plenty of camaraderie to be found in nature, but the stories moved around me and I went on watching life unfold while mine stayed stiff.

I felt doomed to my existence.

With a creaking in my limbs, another thin snowfall filters through my branches. I am cold, but I'd like to be numb. And so right then and there, I decide to forget.

I forget who I am. I forget anything I've ever known. I forget everything except my dream to be in a garden. I long for a garden. I wanted something beautiful and all around me. *Just for once.* But I was a plain old tired oak tree and who cared! And there would never be a garden!

I forget as much as I can as fast as I can.

I can't carry any of this anymore. I am my sorry existence. I am held by nothing. I am a tragedy under this sky. I repeat these things until my heart gets lost.

I turn with the seasons but force myself into listlessness, and it takes about a decade to grow stale and lose my heart. But I do what it takes.

All the stories I ever knew, all the ones I ever loved—forgotten. The only thing I let stay is the garden dream so I can turn my back to it angrily.

At last I relinquish myself and sink into a stupor. And it suits me just fine.

Who am I anyway?

Five Years Later

I slowly wake up to an old truck bumbling up the hill. *Humans.*

I couldn't remember much, but I feel my gnarled roots suffocating where I stand. I am a tree. A sorrowful, existing oak tree.

Why had those humans in their loud truck jostled me awake? I had spent so long forgetting.

That stupor was my sanity!

It's been a long time since any humans had taken up residence near me, and I couldn't remember any of the humans who ever had before.

I tried to shut myself to the noise of their laughing and their crusty truck and their youthful voices. But

I couldn't and the sun was getting in my eyes and the birds were singing and I wanted to jam my heart into the ground, but that's probably where it was anyway and it was lost but it still beat just fine.

The audacity!

The early spring softened the ground below. It would be perfect for flowers, and I'm shocked by this sudden thought. Angry I even had it! How many seasons had I spent sleeping so I wouldn't have to think things like this? And why couldn't I return to sleep!

The girl looked happy enough. She was probably just past twenty, so a young woman, really. But for all the years I had been around, she was just a girl.

Why was I still alive?!

The girl and her husband unpacked the boxes from their truck, a menagerie of items that looked like two people starting a life together—a

hand-me-down couch, books of all kinds, pristine kitchen appliances, and mismatched decor.

The two humans smiled and laughed, shut the door and lived in peace. Or a semblance of it. No matter how hard I tried to fall asleep again, I couldn't. Because every glimpse of the girl after a while was like looking in the mirror. Whatever that might be like.

At any rate, she was in agony like I had been before going numb. I am still in agony, that old garden dream taunts incessantly and I can sense my emptiness, but the aftereffects of my stupor lingered and I can no longer *feel* the depths of my anguish at the moment. Or remember all the pain from the ages I had lived.

But this girl didn't have the luxury of not feeling.

Oh, I heard them laughing, heard them living (I forgot what that was like), saw all the people coming in and out, watched the Christmas lights and small Thanksgivings, and even saw the love she

and her husband held for one another, but she was sad all the same.

A bit of my numbness slipped away the more I watched her sadness, because she was living anyway. Or at least trying. And I was mesmerized by that.

I found myself waiting for her front door to open, waiting for her to come home, watching her look at the sky with her spirit crushed, but the sun shining on her face. *And her letting it.*

All this watching and waiting meant I grew more awake every day. I was sick of such alertness, but when I realized she was walking around with a lost heart and an impossible dream, I didn't mind being awake as much.

What would this girl do with her empty dream and her sad life? I wanted to know.

Spring turned to summer turned to autumn turned to winter. This it did three times over at least.

With the dreamer in and out of my study, I slowly came into my surroundings.

Soon I was not just awake but fully aware.

Squirrels gathered acorns I dropped then scurried home in their cheerful flurries like I had just hosted a great harvest feast. And you know what? Maybe I had.

The light drenched me even in the dead of winter, and I slowly realized that the sun softly held all my inches in its piercing gaze. I couldn't look away. Much as I tried.

The finches danced and I slowly began to make out their little tips and taps. I heard their noise which eventually translated into birdsong—happy were they. *Could I ever be?*

I still stood there rooted, unmovable, with a longing in my lost heart. But maybe being alive was okay.

I had, at the very least, met a dreamer-girl who could understand the agony of life. Of course, she didn't know I was there at all, but it was still enough to know at last that the heart of this old tree wasn't alone in its brokenness.

Lost, but not alone.

I hear their old truck laboring up the hill—a sound I had come to anticipate. Against all odds. But that truck meant those humans coming home with their loud, vivacious, aching life

The dreamer girl—about twenty-three now—hops out of that graying truck holding flowers. Her eyes are glistening. April showers bring May flowers. Grief has had its way. But they choose a garden with their tears.

What would I do if I could ever cry mine?

CHAPTER TWO

Porch Garden

When they unload the flowers and groceries from the truck I see a mishmash of daisies, geraniums, and snapdragons. Identifying the flowers feels like coming home in a way. I wonder why it feels so wonderful to know the names of the flowers. It seems like *knowledge* might be an important part of me, but I had spent so long forgetting I couldn't tell you why this might be.

The dreamer-girl is unsure how to transfer the flowers from the thin plastic pots to more colorful ones. I watch her clumsily work at it and wish I was close enough to ask the daisy what it felt like to be held by a gardener. How must it feel to be so easily seen and cared for and tended to!

My thoughts are interrupted by the girl laughing. Her husband is showing her the way of gardening, helping her feel something other than all that sadness brimming behind her eyes. How I knew

that sadness. Felt it every spring with my heart broken but my branches taking no notice, oak leaves blooming anyway.

But her deep laughter ripples through me like a skipping stone on terrifying depths and my pain is disturbed by hope.

That evening I hear the front door open and shut then look up to see the girl staring at the last of the daisies they hadn't planted yet. She looks so unsure of herself. She musters up courage, or maybe just a carefree resignation, grabs a hand shovel and one of the last remaining colorful flower pots.

Walking over to a mound of dirt she kneels and scoops it up. The clay-like soil is rough, unruly. I know because I've lived in it all these years.

Nothing feels very promising about it, but it holds roots, can drain water, soak up the rain. The girl doesn't know any of this yet, and I can tell by her slumped and hesitant shoulders she isn't convinced anything bright or beautiful will come from this.

But broken-up clay can hold a story. I remember this like a knee jerk reaction in my soul, and I try my best to tell her when the wind rustles my spring leaves. She smiles in my direction. I wonder if she heard. Somehow I think she knows.

Funny how I'm trying to tell her the story is *real* and *there* and *coming* when I still feel so lost. Many parts of me are still numb from my decade of going mad and driving myself into a stupor. It is a long way back. And I think I do want to go back. All the way. Maybe. If I even can.

The dreamer-girl fills the flower pot with lumpy clay and a small smile pulls at her sadness. Perhaps she does sense that something good is coming. Winds of change, if you will. Pun intended. It holds up.

There is no certainty in her posture as she walks back to their small Porch Garden and finds a place for the newly potted daisies.

But there is hope in her step.

Her pain disturbed, too.

CHAPTER THREE

Mr. Squirrel

These were good years watching the girl with her garden. It was a cacophony of their front door opening and closing, the girl filling up her watering can, the truck door shutting while the couple carried armsfuls of flowers to their Porch Garden every Sunday afternoon it seemed.

I caught a glimpse of every flower, naming them as they passed into her garden or as a wildflower bouquet to her kitchen table. I saw the wisp of a fairy lantern. I saw a spindly buttercup. But most of all, I saw the girl.

Spindly—a wisp of bloom.

Something she couldn't put her finger on yet. Something I kept turning my gaze toward.

Seeing the girl with her garden was almost enough to placate my own garden dream—the one thing I

really remembered about myself. Yet watching this girl pierced my heart with a sort of hope for life I hadn't felt since before falling into my stupor. Watching her made me think there was more to me than just a mere dream.

If only I could remember.

Still I longed to be in a garden. To be known and held and seen. I just couldn't shed that garden dream. It was the only part of me I could really grasp right now. The stupor had been so complete.

"You gonna have acorns for me this year, Oak?" I scrunch with frustration, feeling annoyance in every branch, my afternoon plans of enjoying the dreamer-girl's burgeoning garden thwarted by Squirrel's exuberance.

"Don't I always, Squirrel! When have I not?!"

"I told you, Oak, it's *Mr.* Squirrel."

“Yeah, sure, sure. Whatever you say.” I grit out my reply having no idea why Squirrel needed the *Mr.* attached to his name. Probably wanted the feeling of importance in the same way I wanted the feeling of being held in a garden. So, I couldn’t properly fault him. I wished I could.

“Okay, *Mr. Squirrel*, when have I let you down? It’s not even summer yet. Acorns are set for September. No sooner, no later. Maybe a sampling in August. You know all this.”

Waking up to life meant knowing stories again whether or not I wanted to. It meant meeting others against my will. And it meant maybe even making friends even when I tried my best not to.

But I couldn’t look away from that dreamer-girl and her porch garden.

And in order to watch the dreamer-girl defy the odds, I had to live against all odds. Despite my best efforts in the beginning, Squirrel insisted on

chatting with me and hanging around. So of course, he is the one here now interrupting my day.

Mr. Squirrel does a few little jumps, hops, and runs in his excitement and I have to remind him I said *maybe*. After all these seasons handing down my acorns Mr. Squirrel is still coming around asking me things like this!

“Right, right, right. *Maybe*. Got it. I just really have to be on top of things this year. Mrs. Squirrel will be having babies soon! Extra mouths to feed and all that! Can you imagine me as a father?! Me!”

I assume he doesn't want my real thoughts on the matter. Because *no*. No, I cannot imagine him as a father. Mr. Squirrel as a dad feels as unusual as me pulling myself up by the roots and walking somewhere. I'm lucky Mr. Squirrel has a bit of an ego when he responds to my lack of reply by saying,

“I can assume by your silence you are speechless in my presence having this new knowledge of my

great fatherhood-to-be and thank you for your congratulations!”

I’m tempted to shift my branches just a tilt so he falls and gets some sense knocked into his head, but Mr. Squirrel is my friend for better or worse. I feel my heart getting nudged again. Life had been seeping through me every day since being woken up by that loud truck, and every time Squirrel came by I could sense his friendship breaking all my barriers and searching for my heart with persistence.

But like I said before...

It’s a long way back.

I harumph at Mr. Squirrel and decide to let inevitable life experience do all the talking. Mr. Squirrel will eat his words as soon as experience has a say. He’s not quite as important as he wants to be, but more valuable than he thinks he is. My own life experiences which I can’t rightly remember assure me of this.

Mr. Squirrel runs away leaping with his cheerful *“goodbyes! Thanks! See you tomorrow! Early September, okay! But maybe August! I’m coming, Mrs. Squirrel!”*

When I hear the last of his exclamations my gaze swings up to the bird’s nest in the rafters of the girl’s Porch Garden. I can see three small eggs nestled close, a mama bird expectantly waiting.

What must it be like to hold and nurture life like that? I used to hold life, I think. But all I can grasp in this moment is memories of time going on endlessly and longing for life itself, and my old empty garden dream.

Why did I want to be in a garden so badly anyway? The garden dream itself made sense. It would be a relief to be held for once. But my desperate longing, my near madness for the garden was a mystery to me. My stupor had been so effective at washing out whoever I was.

If friendship with Mr. Squirrel wasn't enough to prod my heart, watching this Porch Garden grow would be. *I did love it.* Small and hopeful...

That dreamer-girl with her healing soul and her blue watering can and her growing smile. There was joy in this. I felt myself and all my roots lodge free a little more.

I was crowded by spring yet *ached* for it. I was meant for life. Even my lost heart couldn't repress the truth.

I see the mama bird whispering softly to her young though none of the eggs had hatched yet. She looks up unexpectedly and catches me staring. The mama bird nods her head in a friendly hello.

When had she moved into the porch rafters? Was it before the girl and her garden? Or after? How many seasons have I missed her nesting right there?

By her comfortable nod and smile, I must have missed her arrival by a few seasons at least.

I nod back, suddenly hoping all goes well for her three little ones. Suddenly feeling a sense of anticipation for the day when those baby birds might perch high on my branches while playing games and learning to fly.

Maybe it is possible I could hold life again. Like I was meant to. I am suddenly certain I was meant to!

Still a decade of forgetting makes it hard to remember who I am now or what about my past made me want to lose my heart.

But I am trying to remember.

For the first time in the years following my stupor, I'm going to really try remembering.

I'm here somewhere.

CHAPTER FOUR

Flowerbed

I could tell there was something different about the girl. And just before she began to show I knew it to be true.

She was going to have a baby.

I felt the joy like it was mine just by witnessing it. Over the years her dream became overwhelmingly clear. You could see it everywhere about her but there were no babies anywhere for her. I watched her cry and fill her arms with life anyway. I saw how she grew whole without her dream the longer she went without it. Impossible, I know, but there she was...*whole*. Undeniably so.

Still it was lovely to see her filled with her realized dream nonetheless. Spilling her world with lightness. A *baby*.

She had yet to see me at all, but I was standing tall these days. I had even begun counting again like I did in the years before I forgot my life.

I counted down the days until the baby birds would hatch. I counted down the days until I could provide acorns for Squirrel's family. (Excuse me, *Mr. Squirrel*.) I even counted up the sunrises because they were just plain beautiful to look at. I'd count the months until this baby arrived, too.

I hear the girl laughing again who seems more woman now than she ever had before. Not because she's with child, but because she has let the years fashion her heart so beautifully, the Hope in her soul worn in the wrinkles of her soul. I want to grow *worn* with hope and life as she has. Watching this girl all these years has my heart feeling closer than it has in ages.

When the woman and her husband stand in the hard-packed earth, more near to me than they had ever been, I can feel my garden dream slipping past

the surface again. It had never fully disappeared but it didn't always show itself so plainly these days. I'd been preoccupied with the whole world surrounding this little blue house.

The dreamer-girl's husband has a shovel. She has stars in her eyes.

Throwing aside the "Raised Bed Gardening" book, he takes his shovel to the earth and she goes back to her cup of coffee. I hadn't taken much time over the years to study the woman's husband. Mainly because he started the garden for his wife and I was caught up watching her learn to fly with a hole in her chest.

And she did fly in that impossible Hopeful way as she chose life relentlessly. It became apparent her own heart was situated in that hole in her chest, soaking up all the Light. I was mesmerized by the Light holding her, shining through her.

But this man, her husband, was good. He was kind. I could tell right off and he proved it often and in

many ways like how he had handled those daisies all those years ago, how he had so often helped his wife breathe when her heart was unresponsive, how he'd pull her beneath the stars when she didn't want to look up at all.

This man *loved* his wife.

It was evident everywhere you looked, every time he left the house and came back to it. By the fact flowers were about to spill off their front porch.

The man presses his shovel into the earth breaking up the ground, then makes a few measurements and marks four corners. Placing old and weathered wood together, he fastens a flowerbed.

As the evening sun settles, his wife hands him a glass of water and they sit in the dirt surrounded by rocks and thistles and an empty flowerbed standing where it hadn't been before. I watch them laugh at how lopsided the flowerbed turned out.

I smile way down deep.

The flowerbed is crooked, after all, and it has no determinable shape. Their abandoned gardening book had little-to-no say in this flowerbed. Such is the way for this man and his wife. Wildflowers, those two. And I am delighted by this, by *them*.

“Now what is that?” I hear Mr. Squirrel guffaw as he leaps into my branches.

“That, my friend, is a flowerbed. Of sorts.” I replied.

“Funny place for it, don’t you think? Sloped on a hill like that? How are they gonna manage a garden here?”

But I don’t share Mr. Squirrel’s doubts.

By watching this dreamer-girl and her husband, it has come rushing back to me—something I used to know quite well.

The way of wildflowers.

“They’ll manage just fine,” I grin.

CHAPTER FIVE

Harriet

It didn't take long from that first nod and wave to meet Harriet. She flew from her nest and greeted me cheerfully.

"I am sorry it has taken me so long to meet you. Life doesn't ever really stop does it? That's still no excuse to have never met you, however! Forgive me for being your neighbor so long and never coming over to say hello.

I'm Harriet."

"I'm Oak. It's nice to meet you. I could have waved much sooner. I've got an awful lot of branches to do so."

Harriet laughed at my reply and friendship was easy from then on. She told me about the three eggs tucked away in the nest. She told me whenever there was a new flower blooming in the Porch

Garden. She told me about the blue watering can which now had a leak and how the white snapdragons were in their heyday having multiplied since their very first spring in the Porch Garden.

Harriet could never visit long, of course, those three baby birds needed their mama. But I found myself enjoying every conversation and looking forward to meeting three new little birds any day now. If they were anything like their mama, days were only going to get brighter upon their arrival.

I heard the wee chirping just as the sun peeked over the hillside. If joy was a sound there it was! And I suddenly remembered how to laugh.

My laughter would have filled the whole world at that moment if it could have!

Harriet would tell me the happy news when she could, and I would be waiting. I filled the time with thoughts of young birds learning to fly among my

branches and telling Mr. Squirrel of the whole joyous thing.

I can feel the old garden dream beating on quietly, but louder than that I could hear my heart. It was beating most of all. It felt as though my heart was getting found at last, and it so badly wanted to house the life I was already living.

“Harriet, they are beautiful!” I shout across the way, the lopsided flowerbed now filled with fledgling flowers, and the nest in the porch rafters burgeoning with life.

Harriet waves and gives me a look which is to say,

“These babies are tiny, bald little things and you can’t see them!”

But I pay no mind at all. Those babies are beautiful. I needn’t see them to know it.

Harriet shrugs her wings and smiles. So we are both agreed; *they are beautiful*. Tiny, bald, perfect things.

Happy Birthday, small and beautiful ones.

I can't wait to watch you fly.

CHAPTER SIX

All My Love

Harriet comes flying to share her news, and I stretch as close to the Porch Garden as I can to make the distance shorter. I can't reach very far, but my branches make a good show of it and catch the late May breeze.

"Ned and Flora!" She exclaims before settling in the oak branches. "I can't wait for you to meet them."

Harriet is out of breath and happy, but I can hear what she isn't saying.

I can see it on her face.

"Ned and Flora, how wonderful! I feel like a youthful sapling with this happy news."

Tremendous joy fills the air and I can see Harriet's eyes shining with that joy, but with a well of

sadness too. The unspoken words sit heavy between us until I venture the question.

“Harriet, weren't there three eggs?”

“Dottie.” Harriet’s reply is rushed and immediate. Like she can’t wait to say the name and can’t bear how it sounds knowing Dottie can no longer hear her mama’s voice.

I sag with the news, an ache splitting my heart from the roots, demanding I feel the love and the loss. Insisting, I hold this tenderness.

And I do.

“Dottie.” I repeat quietly with all the love in the world hanging in that one word.

“Dottie was smaller than the other two, weak upon arrival. I knew within her first hour it would likely be one of her last. I-I-love her so much. I got to tell her and hold her close. My beautiful Dottie!”

Harriet cried now, sitting on my old branches, my limbs bearing both the weight of Harriet's loss and the love I had in great magnitude for Dottie.

The little hello I never got.

Silence stretches.

"Harriet, I have so much room all around me. It's held nothing all these years. Can I be the resting place for Dottie?"

I'm not sure how to say those words or how to offer my heart as a place for Dottie's memory or how to make sure Harriet knows I want to honor Dottie's life and hold it always with love.

Harriet breathes at last—the emotion of joy and sorrow having taken everything out of her until just this moment.

"Yes. I-I—" Harriet pauses.

Silence again.

I wait softly.

“I could not imagine anywhere else for Dottie.”
Harriet finishes and slumps with relief. She
wouldn’t have to bear this loss alone.

After the small mound is made in the earth
surrounding me, I cry.

I cry as I haven’t done in years.

I cry for Dottie. I cry for Harriet. I cry for the
dreamer-girl who spent so many years treading her
own life. I cry for the years I missed the joy of baby
birds and every baby dead like Dottie. I cry my lost
heart clean out. It must only be my roots holding
me here at all.

And then I cry without tears at all.

I spend June crying.

And in between my weeping I meet Ned and Flora.
I adore Ned and Flora. They call me Grandpa, and I
laugh. For the sheer joy of this life I laugh.

Instead of trying to remember myself, I spend all
my time laughing and crying. I begin to feel life in
great measure, living in the heart of it. And so my
own heart comes undone, breaking toward the
light.

Like the dreamer-girl who chose life with her
aching tears I choose life with mine and my whole
self is displaced and put back into place by the
hour. I can't keep up with the turmoil, but I can
decipher my lost heart in the ebb and flow of it. It is
freeing to feel so much again. Remnants of my
stupor sloughing away by every tumultuous second.

I go on crying and laughing and living.

All my love, Dottie.

All my love.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Through & Through

I have to peek through the sunflowers to even catch a glimpse of the dreamer-girl watering her small bunch of zinnias. But she has outgrown the dreamer-girl name in the same way her garden outgrew the porch.

I look at her and see a Gardener through and through.

She had tended to the thistles and tears, letting Light wash over her, and then sank into her lot in life with flower seeds and water. I watched a garden grow but it was the transformation of dreamer-girl into flower gardener that urged me to remember *life*.

Looking after Mr. Squirrel with tenderness, meeting Harriet and finding myself a kind of Grandpa for Ned, Flora, and Dottie were just a few

instances in which I had begun to live again and my heart became unearthed.

Life was worth being awake for. All my tears told me so. All my laughter proved it.

Even my self-induced stupor could not suppress my heart forever! I was not just an oak tree; I was a Caretaker through and through. I was right in the middle of the story where stories were happening everywhere. By my immovable, impossible roots I was held in place to hold life. I was cradling entire lifetimes. And it was terrifying. And joyous. And my heart was in my throat!

I am a Caretaker.

The revelation is equal parts startling and freeing and my heart settles into place. *Found.*

I couldn't point to where my heart settle after it lurched into my throat. But I could tell with a certainty that my heart had been found.

I am a Caretaker—looking after animals and flowers, and holding life in the irrepressible way that trees do, and knowing the Gardener's story so that I could tell it to myself and to the wild things desperate to hear it, and maybe even to the Gardener herself if she ever does look up to see me here.

But no matter, I had always been and would always be a Caretaker whether I was recognized or valued or even seen.

Somehow it was enough to be what I was even if it never amounted to anything more.

When had being in a garden consumed me totally? And why? At what point did that garden dream become my bitter wound, my madness?

I had never felt so light, the weight of years gone by still present and still aching but no longer suffocating me.

I remembered.

I was not just an oak tree somewhere by chance with an unfulfilled garden dream but a Caretaker there on purpose aware of so many dreams and so much life.

The Gardener places her hand on her swelling stomach, smiling. A small pile of fresh-cut zinnias by her bare feet. I still feel the pain of Dottie. I always will. But I feel excitement brimming over somehow. That stirring heart of mine was beating like a Caretaker's again, and I began to remember its rhythm.

I was in the story. I had a story. I was holding stories. It felt so good to know again. It was just plain wonderful to *feel*. And it wouldn't always be wonderful to feel. I understood that in ways I couldn't put into words. In the name I still couldn't quite remember. In the lifetimes I still couldn't recall.

But I was glad for how far my heart had come.

When the Gardner shuts the front door behind her and places her bouquet of zinnias on the kitchen table I expect her to be in for the evening. But she comes back outside laughing and grimacing, her husband beside her. They've exchanged the blue rumbling truck for an old clunky town car and though I miss the truck's crankety old chokes and sputters, the car has its own charming creaks. I'd grown to love the sound of it, too.

It feels like ages and no time at all when they drive back up the hill and park in front of their house.

I see no baby. My heart stops, and it begs to get lost again. I would like to forget everything right this second. *Can I? What would it take?* The thoughts are invasive and not entirely unwelcome, but I try to fend them off.

Dottie's mound is nearly invisible in the way only time can quietly pat something down unceremoniously.

It hurt to see the earth flat where she was laid to rest. I still feel my love for her and the loss of her in the erratic cadence of my heart scavenging for good things but expecting the worst of everything. I wrestle my heart and its desperation to disappear again.

The Gardener smiles from her soul, face shining, and I exhale. She and the baby are well. The birth will be soon, just not quite yet.

Dusk finally settles over the zinnias on the Gardner's kitchen table and a warm light glows golden and soft through their window.

Any day now.

Maybe tomorrow.

The summer air is brimming with blackberries and I feel fragile with life. Absolute wonder and the great unknown float undeterminable with the quiet breeze.

I am shaky. It has taken a lot to be found. I am unseasoned. It's been a long time since I lived as a Caretaker. But I am also settled and soaring. I rest my heart as best I can.

I will be holding more soon.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Quest

Like all those years ago when they climbed out of their old vehicle holding flowers, they stepped out once again holding life. But this time filling up their arms is a baby boy. I have never seen the Gardener shining so brightly or her husband so overcome with such joy and emotion.

Walking up the porch steps they settle themselves into their new life. Harriet flies over and I burst with the good news.

“A boy! The Gardener gave birth to a baby boy.”

Harriet smiles with her whole being.

That’s the beautiful thing about Harriet—her generous open arms for the joy of others regardless of facing her own losses many times over. After Dottie I soon discovered just how many babies Harriet has had to bury much too soon. But no

matter the depth of her loss or the length of her suffering, she lets joy take up residence and doesn't hold back her heart.

Harriet was as wise and kind as they come. If I could be like her! I was learning!

"Well, tell me about him already," Harriet nearly bursts and wastes no time peppering me with questions. She has been just as excited for the Gardner's baby as I have been.

"Well, he's got lots of hair! Definitely not featherless." I wink at Harriet and she laughs. "He looks like he can't wait to jump and run and play," I continue.

"Oh, that was my Ned alright! My sympathies to the Gardener and all my congratulations, of course. She has no idea the kind of fun she's about to have."

Harriet is beaming.

As if on cue, Ned comes flying toward his mother and situates himself on one of my highest branches. “Hi, mama! What are we talkin’ about? Did you see that little creature the Gardener was holding? That man and his wife sure looked tired. I thought they were never gonna get back! They were gone for days!”

“That *creature* is a little human, a baby boy to be exact.” Harriet answers her son who has given up sitting and is flitting through the oak leaves as though playing a game of tag with himself.

I smile at Ned and think how I counted down the days for this kind of day. The one with little baby birds flying among my branches. And here I was! Only Ned wasn’t quite so little anymore. I loved him dearly.

“A human boy, huh?! I’ve wondered what little humans might be like. I’ve heard they are quite curious about us, always pointing and gawking and stuff like that. Might be fun to finally have someone who will want to watch all my sky tricks.”

The words tumble out of Ned almost as fast as he's flying around me.

"You know I love watching all your sky tricks, Ned." I say to him when I finally get a word in edgewise.

"Well, you're basically my Grandpa, Oak. You *have* to like my tricks! It's practically required by law. There's no challenge there. And thanks for always being impressed. I mean, it's great of you. I love ya, Gramps!" Ned zooms away to the sound of my hearty guffaws.

Okay, he got me. I *am* impressed. And not because he is some bird prodigy, because he's not. (Don't tell him I said that.) But I love him and must fulfill my duties as his honorary Grandpa and think much more of his talents and skills than reality requires.

Harriet rolls her eyes at the entire exchange between me and Ned, but I see how happy she is that Ned is so loved and cared for by the big old oak tree who is dedicated to watching over her son.

Harriet turns to me, "I'm thrilled to hear about the baby boy. Brighter days are here, don't you think Oak?"

"Yes. Yes, indeed." I agree with her quietly.

I never expected life to be quite this bright. Even my unrealized dream of being in a garden or my lingering confusion about the details in my past couldn't dim the shine of the present. Like the Gardener who many years ago let the sun shine on her face anyway, I'm letting life shine on me until it gets all the way in, uncovering not only the exact location of my newly found heart but everything else too.

"Tell Flora I still want to see the fattest blackberry she can find. The last one she brought me was a record-breaker, for sure, but I've seen 'em even bigger than that so her quest from Oak is still on."

Harriet laughs in her cheerful way. "Okay, Oak, I'll let her know!"

Harriet begins flying away but I can hear her words, little pinpricks to my heart, but the good kind...

"And while we're at it, Oak, you're still on a quest, too. The one where you remember your real name."

"I'm close," I reply.

But Harriet can't hear me. She's off to blackberries and evening chores with her young. And I'm off to the uncertainty of ever knowing and the hope of all I have remembered so far. But it's in my old heart somewhere...

My real name.

CHAPTER NINE

Garden Tour

The Gardener walks outside cradling her baby boy. She nuzzles her face close to his and breathes him in the way only a mother can. I have never been more mesmerized by a moment.

“These are the sunflowers...” I hear her say. “I think sunflowers might be my favorite. Don’t tell the roses though. Speaking of roses, they are over here.”

The Gardener walks soft and slow telling her baby boy all the flower stories, and I marvel at how many of those same flower stories I know too. I had been awake for each one. My decade-long stupor couldn’t stand a chance against this dreamer-girl turned gardener.

I would never have been able to shut life out of my heart for good, but how glad I am that it was this woman and her husband who came clamoring into

my life all those years ago with their truck and empty arms, their grief and will to live!

The whole glorious scene of mother and son and flowers is washed in the evening glow of the August sun, and I realize the Gardner is standing closer to me than she ever had before. After all these years!

I catch her in the middle of a sentence,

“And I think we are going to put a fence right about here and that will be our garden. What do you think about that?” The Gardener pauses as if her little boy will respond, but I’m lost in the discovery that this fence means I will be in a garden. Just shy of the garden’s edge, but in it all the same.

My dream, without any of its past bitterness, shoves its way into my heart again. And my heart, no longer buried at all, lurches somewhere in my chest.

A garden.

And even though I couldn't tell you exactly why the garden matters so much to me, I still feel the longing for it. The difference is all this time awake in my own life has drained the garden dream of its wounding power. I don't feel desperate for the dream anymore.

I rather like my life already.

The Gardener starts talking to her boy again, but it almost seems as if she's talking to herself.

"I used to only have flowers on the porch and then that little garden just kept spilling over with life until it bloomed out of bounds. And I think I did too in a way. Isn't that something?"

She mulls over the years and smiles at her son.

"Then you came along after all."

The Gardener kisses her newborn and presses her cheek to his. "Now isn't that something," she

repeats quietly before turning up toward their house perched on the hillside.

I had never cried so much in one summer, but the tears began falling again.

Silent, peaceful tears.

Tears for the sheer beauty of what I had just witnessed, and all the years I stood awake that brought me to this moment, and the possibility I may get to be in a garden after all.

My tears wet the earth and reach down, down, down. I feel the tears like water washing away the cobwebs mangling my roots. Like a cleansing that scours every long-lost part of me that is aching for the light.

Hugh.

I remember my real name at last. Whole lifetimes come rushing back to me. And I don't know where

to start. All I know for certain is I'm blooming out
of bounds, too.

Somehow.

CHAPTER TEN

Hugh

“Hugh was the name I was given when I was just a sapling. I remember being Hugh. I remember my life then. The first people to rest beneath me, the first squirrels I’d ever met, the first birds I’d ever had as friends, the first fledglings to ever fly between my branches. I can remember all their stories, although there are some names that still escape me. Someone planted me, though I can’t quite remember her name at the moment. Still, there are so many stories and moments flooding back to me now. That’s the life of an oak tree—a Caretaker...”

I talk to Harriet as though in a stream of consciousness and she sits with me quietly, listening.

“I miss those friends and that life. It hurts to love. To be alive this long is painful. Beautiful too, I suppose... how good it is to remember them. *How*

good it was to know them! How good it was to have had those days.

The gaping hole of every loss has stayed with me but the goodness of those days, those friends, those seasons is locked in my memories too. My stupor had been complete but not final. Oh Harriet, I remember! How do you think it's possible to be so full of joy for the good things even when they are gone?"

Harriet lets the question hang between us, knowing I don't really need an answer; I just needed to ask the question aloud.

After a lengthy pause that feels like comfort with Harriet right beside me, I continue,

"I think my dream of being in a garden began when I stood there for so long caring for others and their stories, holding so much and watching it all die and die and *die*. Everything and everyone would eventually disappear. And this would go on

repeatedly. I wanted something beautiful and *around* me, something holding me for once.

A garden.

All I could think was being in a garden would be that thing holding me. But there was no garden. There was never a garden. There was just caring for things and watching things die. And being stuck. And feeling like everything happened around me, but nothing happened in *my* life. There was no story, after all. That's how it felt. And did I even want a story at all with death always running through!

So, I wanted to forget. I made myself forget. I spent ten years trying to forget everything I knew and everyone I'd loved. I worked to forget all the loss but tangled that empty garden dream around me until I had no air to breathe or any will to live. I ached to be numb. And I succeeded. I finally fell into a stupor."

My sigh reverberates and echoes, the pain of my choice peeling back every limb. Layer by layer.

I had lost more than a decade, after all.

Having met Harriet and Ned and Flora and Mr. Squirrel assured me that I had missed the entire lifetimes of others I was *supposed* to love, of hearts I was *meant* to hold. It is in this shattering I see the impossible, and I think it aloud,

“But Harriet I-I think I am held. I think I have always been held. By the Light, of course. But also by the change of seasons. I would surely break if winter never turned to spring right at the very moment it always does and I would wither and die if late autumn rains never came after the long hot days of summer.

I am held.”

Without rushing, Harriet begins to speak, and I hang on every word,

“Oh Hugh, you are surely held by the Light—*by the Light-Maker Himself*—the One who turns the seasons. You are also held by me and by Mr. Squirrel, by Ned and Flora. Even Dottie.”

Harriet chokes back emotion before continuing,

“But I understand you wanting a garden and how pain drove you mad. When Dottie died you told me you had all this room for her, but I could see that you were so full of stories and memories and love, but still you offered your heart to my Dottie, and I didn’t know how in the world you could have room for one more loss or for more love.

And you didn’t.

Not really.

But like you said you’ve always been held and even though you were numb for so long to that embrace and to life at all, you still let light in. You still turned with the seasons, and with nothing left you gave everything for just one more story—Dottie.

And then you cried, Hugh.

Because you loved her and you loved me and you remembered that you could love at all. And that maybe you were actually alive. Thank you for loving us, for *living* again. I know you have risked your heart for ages. And I don't know how to make that better or different or easier, but I love you. I love you, Hugh. You are the friend of a lifetime."

Harriet frames my face with her small and aging wings and looks straight into my heart.

"I see you, Hugh."

She flies up to her favorite oak branch and perches there quietly. The silence between friends wraps around me like the most comforting hug.

Held.

In every way I needed most I had always been held.

"I hope that Gardener and her husband do make that garden around you, Hugh. I'd love nothing more than to see that. It's a beautiful dream. And you can still have the dream. You can have the dream without going mad. We don't want to lose you to another stupor, Hugh. We need you too much. And more than that we just love you."

Harriet flies away before I can reply to her, but I'm smiling.

If ever there was a time I could pull myself up by my roots and walk away from everything, it was now.

I was lighter than ever.

But as it turns out, I wanted to stay put. I wanted to be alive *right here*, after all.

And Harriet is right.

With bitterness stripped away that old garden dream of mine *is* beautiful. I turn it over in my heart

loosely, softly. A wonderful, powerless dream, I confirm. For I was already alive, and I was already held.

Garden or not.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Baby Swing

“Seems you were right. They managed that crooked flowerbed. Not only that, they've made a whole garden!” Mr. Squirrel is filling his arms with acorns as he speaks.

I'm beaming.

In a garden at last!

The thin wire fence stretches down from the Gardener's porch steps wraps around me and goes on a ways until it travels back up the hillside finishing at the other end of their porch.

I didn't expect my dream coming true to feel this way. It's beautiful, there's no denying. But it's not my heart and soul. I had my heart and soul already.

“They did manage quite nicely.” I replied to Mr. Squirrel with a grin.

“How is your passel of kids these days?” I ask, marveling at how it’s been a couple years since that day Mr. Squirrel first told me about becoming a father.

“Rambunctious!” Mr. Squirrel pushes the word out with hands and cheeks full. “But I rather enjoy it. I’ll bring ‘em by sometime! We’re due for a long visit with you, Hugh!” Mr. Squirrel hobbles away as best he can, bringing home a great feast for his family. I loved being his first and primary stop in September.

I don’t expect the day, or my life, to get any better when I see the Gardener and her husband walking my way. She’s holding their boy—who has grown like a weed—on her hip and her husband is holding what looks to be a baby swing. But I can’t be sure. Even in all my years, in every story I lived or knew, I had never seen a baby swing for myself.

The Gardener shifts her boy to her other arm and with her free hand she places her palm directly on my heart.

So, that's where it was...

My heart.

At last, I could feel exactly where my heart was beating. Oh yes, I knew I had a heart; the years watching the Gardener and knowing Harriet and everything else that brought about insured my heart had been long found. But now I could point out *exactly* where it was placed.

I was so opened up to life that nothing could conceal my heart any longer. I could see it for myself. As impossible as that sounds!

But right here. Where the Gardener rested her hand....*my heart.*

"This one." I hear the Gardener saying to her husband.

"This is the tree." And then she looked right into my face and I saw a whole lifetime in her blue eyes.

And hadn't I been awake for it after all!

How *beautiful*.

"I think this is the perfect tree for the baby swing,"
the Gardener says to her husband.

And the boy is clapping his hands, not knowing
exactly why he is, but feeling the happiness of his
parents regardless.

The Gardener's husband pulls out his tools and
everything he needs to hang the baby swing.

My joy for the baby swing is unmatched, but the
pain of it being secured in my branches is
undeniable. And it is all worthwhile and all kind,
but I am still pulled and stretched and poked as
sunshine dapples through every branch, lands softly
on my face and limbs. I feel a sort of wisdom grow
itself around my roots. I think I must remember
this...the ache that love can hold in this life but the
Light holding me.

With the baby swing hanging from me, the Gardener buckles her boy in the seat, pulls the swing back, and lets him soar with the autumn breeze.

I had never imagined this. Not Harriet. Not a baby swing with a laughing little boy. Not a Gardener grinning with the joy of it all, looking up and seeing me.

And me seeing my own heart...

But here I am in the middle of the story, holding stories. Having the time of my life.

I sway lightweight with every push of the swing. Back and forth, I move. Blooming out of bounds again. I was alive by the entire length and depth of me.

My heart couldn't stay lost, what a relief! I lean evermore into the light. Oak leaves flutter away as my chest heaves in laughter, my heart rustling with all my stories.

It is always worth it all to love. I know this now, feel it in every painful ache that throbs endlessly, in every joyous moment—both past and present—pressing down into my heart. I feel it all, not held back from either joy or sorrow in any measure for I am held by the Light-Maker Himself!

And so I hold this lifetime with my whole being.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Held

As she had for a few years now, Flora is showing me her heap of blackberries. It's quite an impressive collection for how late it is in the season.

"And this one, I think, will be the sweetest," Flora is saying to me. With a barely a breath she continues her blackberry monologue,

"And this one really wasn't ready to be picked, but what am I gonna do...not pick it? The blackberry doesn't have much chance to get much better so maybe I'll hide its tartness in some sort of fancy dish."

Flora talks as fast as Ned flies. I love to hear her chatter.

The cheerfulness of this exchange and the fullness of my whole life suddenly pierces me. It is a familiar ache, but today it lingers.

When Flora hops away clumsily with her trove of blackberries, Harriet catches my somber gaze.

“What’s wrong, Hugh? I haven’t seen you look this way in a while.” Harriet is observant and I’m more than happy to share my burden.

Harsh as it is.

“I’m going to have to watch you die, Harriet.” I say just above a whisper.

“And Flora and Ned and, and so many others...” I trail off.

Harriet flies close and replies with one word.

“Yes.”

I wished Harriet had denied that terrible reality and at the same time I was relieved and comforted that she acknowledged it.

After a few beats Harriet says softly,

“And you will be held then, too.”

There was nothing more to say. Losing Harriet was a pain I could not fathom. Losing the others was a wound I could not imagine bearing.

But Harriet was right.

I would be held.

Like I was right now. Like I always had been. Even if I went numb again, I would be held.

Held by the Light-Maker who turns the seasons.
Held in a garden now, too.

With nothing left to say Harriet and I sit in that comfortable silence between friends.

“Here they come, Hugh.” Harriet is smiling with the words.

Oh Harriet! This mama bird just keeps letting joy reside so fully while the aches of her world and her life beckon and it has my heart returning to a more peaceful rhythm once more.

“Here they come, indeed.” I grin as the Gardener lifts her son into the baby swing as they had done for many days and many times over.

The boy is bathed in the autumn sun, laughing delightedly, and squinting at the sky through my oak branches. I hold him fast. Back and forth. Back and forth. For as long as he needs me to. For longer because I will remember!

I tuck away the sound of mother and son in the good old days, in the joy of the present, as gold to carry into the future.

My heart is doing what it was made to do. It skips a beat. It falls into rhythm. It rises and falls. But the Light stays steady.

I hold stories and memories and love for a living.

And what a wonderful life.

EPILOGUE

As Mr. Squirrel scurries away with his last armful of acorns for the season, all of them piled up to his chin, I call out,

“Hey Mr. Squirrel! What’s your real name?”

Looking back, he replies, “Ugh. Tom. Just plain Tom.”

“That’s a good name. Tom. Mind if I call you that from now on? I ask.

“Naw, go ahead. My wife likes my real name better and insists I’m too old for the Mr. Squirrel nonsense.” Tom rolls his eyes but they are twinkling.

I laugh.

“See you later, Tom!”

“You too, Hugh. Thanks for the acorns. It’s sure nice knowing you.”

I see Tom disappear down the old path made golden by the November sun.

“Nice knowing you too, Tom,” I say, but he can’t hear me.

But I do.

I hear.

And I believe it.

It’s sure nice knowing.

I never want to forget.

Note to Readers

Writing from an oak tree's POV sometimes feels like a bit of a risk, but having begun Hugh's story, there is no turning back...

And there is so much more to tell! There are risks worth taking, don't you think?

On my Substack, [Green Fables](#), you can keep up with each story as they release. On the next page, I have shared a list of characters who are regulars in the [Green Fables](#) series. I hope to see you there. It's quite the reading experience and one I hope to contain in a novel someday...

Soon.

Beyond the list of characters, you can find links to my indie-published poetry books and other free downloads.

Thank you for being here!

Characters in the Green Fables Series

Present Day

Hugh - the oak tree who found his heart again and is the primary narrator of the stories in [*The Garden of Green Fables*](#).

The Gardener - a grieving woman who learns to live again... And in the beautiful unraveling of her heart, the Gardener & her husband will grow a garden that eventually reaches Hugh in more ways than one.

Harriet - a finch with a heart of gold who befriends Hugh as he wakes up to life again. In a literary sense, she is the Samwise to Hugh's Frodo.

Flora - Harriet's daughter who is cherished by Hugh like a granddaughter. Flora hasn't quite set course yet, but will soon. A tender and soft-hearted finch with an affinity for blackberries.

Ned - Harriet's son (and therefore treasured as a grandson to Hugh) who has flown off on a great adventure with great confidence and ease, a spirited & happy finch.

Tom - Otherwise known as **Mr. Squirrel** and Hugh's first reluctant acquaintance turned great friend in the very early days of Hugh waking up to life again.

Ages Ago

Essie - a gentle-hearted gardener who plants seeds and tends to flowers for a living and finds her hope and rest in the Light-Maker.

Hugh - the oak seed that Essie plants after great wrestling and doubt in the Light-Maker's heart for her.

Maryn - tenacious woman and friend of Essie who first found herself on a season of Ocean and then found herself in the dust of the earth, wandering the woods, while learning (and re-learning) to trust the Light-Maker.

Bert - a kind man and long-time friend to Essie who he eventually weds beneath the oak tree - *Hugh*. Bert writes about the stories happening in the woods and all over the hillsides threading the goodness of the Light-Maker through every tale.

Mary & Elle - Daughters to Bert & Essie. Still growing up. Stories yet to unfold.

Light-Maker - the Creator of the earth, Green Fables, and everyone in it both present day & in ages past. In other words, the Light-Maker to Green Fables is Aslan to Narnia.

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