

Asher's Garden

The old man dug in the earth with bare hands. Somewhere off in the distance birds sang greeting to a morning sun. He enjoyed the new day sun, the singing of birds, the sweetness in the air. He always felt peace in his garden. He had lived most of his life here, except those years of the war.

Over there he had helped bury one of his best friends in the same earth, though thousands of miles away. Along with his friends he buried the silver crucifix his friend had picked up from an enemy corpse, a sniper.

Sometimes he thought about it and when he did then would try to push it deep into the recesses of his mind.

He had just let some dirt slide through his fingers when he heard the car doors slam shut. But rather than look toward the direction where the sound had come from, he stayed on his knees with his back turned and reached into a patch of mud. He then brought his hand up and stared at the clinging mud. Then he wiped his hand on his overalls and wiggled his fingers. He could feel the coldness of the mud and thought of wet earth on his overalls that were tattered from years of wear. This he didn't mind, though he figured he would hear a different tune from his wife about his overalls covered with dirt. "Do you always have to get yourself so dirty?" she would ask. She had asked the same question for an uncounted number of years, never in anger, just with a certain reflection.

"For the life of me, I don't understand why you always have to get on your knees all the time. Why can't you use a rake more?" would be her words usually between the stitches of her knitting.

"Hello," said a timid voice. The timid voice belonged to six-year-old Christy McAllister.

"Hello Christy," said the old man. "How are you?"

"Good," replied the girl, peering at the old man, shading her eyes from the brightening sun.

"What's that over there?" asked the child, pointing toward an oak tree.

"It's a grave," replied the man softly. "Your dad had a dog when he was your age. His name was Rusty and that's where he is resting now."

A sad look came to the little girl's face.

"Mama don't like dogs," she said. "They're messy."

Asher gave a sigh.

She briefly looked at her grandfather with disdain. Then after a moment her face lit up.

"Guess what?" She asked and without giving her grandfather a chance to actually ask.

He was just getting his words out when she piped out "Hollywood!"

"Hollywood?"

"Yep. You want to go?"

"Nope."

"Why? Don't you like Hollywood?"

"Can't say that I do."

"You ever been there?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Then how can you say you don't like it?"

"Good point," the man said, as he squatted back down and put his wrinkled hands into the earth. He closed his eyes and let the dirt fall from his fingers back to the ground.

"Where have you been before? Have you ever been anywhere nice?"

"Mainly just here," he said, not caring to remember the war. "This is good enough for me. I have everything I need right here."

Once again he got up and looked around at the land that surrounded them. His granddaughter also looked, but with different eyes.

Though just six, the little girl had the impression that no matter what she said, her grandfather would not change his mind. She squinted when she looked toward the rising sun. After a moment she turned to look at him and then after a few more moments of uncomfortable silence she spoke again. At first she was going to defend that she and her family going to Hollywood and try to see movie stars. Something told her that her grandfather would not be swayed, so she decided to say something else even though it seemed silly and she could easily see what the old man was doing.

"Whatcha doing?"

"Planting seeds."

"What kinda seeds? Magic seeds like Jack in the Bean Stalk?"

"Not exactly," smiled her grandfather. "Not in the way you might..."

"I like magic. Are they magic? Do you believe in magic, Grandpa?"

The old man began to speak, but thought for a moment and instead pulled a red kerchief from his pocket. Slowly, he wiped his forehead as he carefully thought of his next words. The last thing he wanted to do was disappoint his granddaughter. Before any words came from his lips his granddaughter spoke again

"Mommy doesn't believe in magic."

"She does't?" though he already knew this.

As the sun disappeared behind a cloud and they were covered by a momentary shadow, the girl shook her head no. The look on her face was one of frustration, disappointment.

"I once saw a rainbow and wanted to find a pot of gold."

But the girl stopped, looked troubled, and at a loss for words.

"Well," began Asher, trying to say something soothing to ear and soul.

"But mama said it was silly. There's no such thing as a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. That's what she said."

The man raised himself up again and stroked his whiskered chin. Then he reached and pulled off an ear of sweet corn. The next thing he did was to pull some seeds from his pocket.

"You see these seeds?" he asked, holding them tightly in his hand, as though they were valuable.

His granddaughter began to nod, but he slowly reached his opened palm to her.

"These are magic. But not in the way you think. But, they are still magic. They bring life. They bring this," he said holding the ear of sweet corn. "They bring the trees. The grass. All of Grandma's flowers by the house. Almost everything you see!"

At first the child looked at him and thought over his words with a dubious eye. She stared at the old man wondering if he was pulling her leg. As she studied his face, then looked at her surroundings, a smile broke across her face. Above them, the clouds were being blown away from the sun, and morning sky was dotted with flying birds. More sunlight fell down on

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old man and little girl and tree, grass, and flowers.

"And you know something else?" he asked.

And once again the girl look at him inquisitively.

"You see this?" he asked, as he handed her the ear of corn."This is more valuable than gold."

The girl looked at him wonderingly and with some disbelief.

Her grandfather accepted her response, with a slight sigh and frown.

"Do you know why?"

Christy McAllister shook her head no.

"Cause you can't eat gold."

For a moment six-year-old Christy McAllister stood in silence, as a gust a wind blew her hair, absorbing her grandfather's words as if they were air itself, water and earth and nutrients like fertilizer. Then after a few more moments of reflection a look of wonder and agreement bathed her youthful face as the sun rose further in the morning sky. She was just about to say something when she was interrupted by an old woman's face.

"Asher, you and Christy come on. Kettle's on and cinnamon rolls startin' to get cold!"

Just beyond the fence was a dirt road that wound itself around Asher's farm. As the old man and child made their way to the house, a new pickup, going too fast, kicked up dirt and dust as it made its way down the road. From noise and commotion, a flock of birds burst into flight, as the sound of it faded away and the dust from the road settled back down slowly.