

## The Garden of Lost Stories

A rush of kids crowd the exit as they traipse down the bus stairs. I engulf myself in the fresh air that blows through my thin hazel hair and across my freckled cheeks. I take my phone out of my pocket, fingers frantically swiping across the screen until I've opened the maps app. I'm used to walking the streets of Melbourne with crowds of people walking briskly. This new terrain is unfamiliar; it's immersed in canopies of trees and the ground is lumpy and uneven. I look at the spiraling blue trail that my phone has created for me to follow. My parents insist that I use it to find my way home from the school bus stop, but I'm yet to explore my new town. I stuff it back in my pocket and decide to follow my feet.

As I begin walking, I glare intensely at the ground, watching out for all the tree roots that are entangled between leaves and dirt. The towering gum trees continue to show me the way as they create a tunnel shaded from the sunlight. The path trails down a hill and around the back of houses where shirts dangle from rusty clotheslines. I pass a sign with the words *Sunshine Reserve* engraved into peeling wood. Behind it is a tiny bridge painted in a subtle eucalyptus green. My feet begin to wander across the bridge which continues to lead on to a dusty path. I watch as a tiny bird swoops down from a tree and lands on a stubbly hedge. It's barely visible from the path but I can just make out its unkempt figure. A tiny doorway is carved into the middle of the hedge and it's just large enough for me to climb through. When I step inside I'm surprised to see an enclosed courtyard. A trail of entwined vines embraces the brick wall that surrounds the courtyard. Soft streaks of sunlight dapple upon paper-thin leaves. Tiny seedlings cautiously sprout from garden beds like butterflies emerging from their cocoons and petals dance in the subtle breeze. I go to take a step closer before I glimpse a young boy leaning against the tallest tree.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't realise that this belongs to anyone. I'll leave now if you want," stumbling upon the cobblestones under my feet as I begin to back away, but the boy doesn't hesitate to step closer. He looks about 14, the same age as me. His big brown eyes are swimming with happiness and dark curls hang down his forehead.

"There's no need to leave, this is a community garden. Please, I will show you around. I'm Elijah by the way, who are you?" he smiles and beckons me to come closer.

“Um, ok. Thank you. I’m Evelyn,” I mumble, embarrassed by my ignorance.

“It’s rare that I encounter visitors. You see, my great grandma was first to come across this courtyard, she even planted the first seedling. She used to tell me that as she was gardening, she talked to the plants, describing my great grandpa and all the enjoyable moments they shared together. He died in the second world war and my grandma didn’t have anyone to support her during the time. So she used the garden as a safe place to share all her stories,” Elijah ushers me over to the tree he was only just leaning against. “Now he stands tall and strong in the garden, a figure that all the other plants can look up to,” he gazes at the tree with awe before he focuses his attention on me. “So, would you like to plant a seed?” He looks at me with such hope and I nod my head as he holds up a rusty brown box filled with seedlings.

“Which one do I choose?” I study each seed with care, gazing at the features and colours inside.

“That’s up to you,” he holds the box closer and my eye catches a vibrant blue seed that stands out from the rest. I reach my hand into the box and carefully pull it out.

“Good choice. Now you are ready.”

I go over and bend down underneath the tree.

“But I don’t have a story?” I exclaim.

“Everyone has a story. Why did you come here, for instance?” he asks.

“I mean, my family just moved down here from Melbourne. It was my first day and I just wanted to process my thoughts, but then I found...this place. I just want my friends back, but they’re too busy at home to reach out,” Elijah stares at me with sympathy as a hot tear dribbles down my cheek.

“I know how it feels, to not fit in. I’ll be your friend, if that’s ok with you,” he scuffs his shoes against the stones and I nod.

“Thank you. I’ve just thought of an idea,” I hold my seed close and whisper softly as I dig a hole in the soil. I lower it down so that it fits perfectly, before I cover it once again.

“What was your story about? ”

“I told my seed about all the memories with my friends and family from Melbourne. So that I’ll never forget.” Elijah smiles and bends down next to me.

“You know, your old home is just a place. I’m sure it’s not the four walls that are so special to you, it’s all the memories you created within it. It’s those people who give you joy, and they're

not going anywhere. But if you're open to making new friends, I'd like to catch up again tomorrow, maybe after school?"

"I'd like that too."

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Today when I walk past the rusty clotheslines, over the bridge, into the courtyard and under the tree, I see a tiny seedling sprouting from the ground. I know that this is not a completely new beginning, just a chance to turn over a new leaf.