

The Gardener

Helena's favorite flowers were tulips. She had planted tulips of the colors pink, green, yellow, and white. Every year in the spring they would bloom, looking gentle, vibrant, and bold in only the way tulips can. They always gave her +2 points to her mood.

It was on the 12th of March eleven years ago that she started planting flowers. A friend of hers, was the one to tell her that planting flowers was like a good exercise. Because she had had some troubles with her back so the friend told her gardening would make her more physically active and hence good for her back. She started planting a few flowers here and there and also some tomatoes, strawberries, blueberries, and an apple tree. She had a sort of blurry but clear vision of how she wanted the garden to be, the kind of thing that only time and perseverance can tell.

The first spring, was a lovely spring that brought a lot of sunshine and the newly born flowers bathed in the sunlight like they had longed for them their whole lives. Winds only served to make them dance in the company of grass, rocks, and even predators. With overwhelming anticipation for seasons and weathers ahead, it was the only moment there was. Helena often felt that looking at her flowers it felt the same as when she saw a sunset at the sea.

The second year, some problems with the pH level of the soil started to manifest. At some patches it was too low, others too high. It was difficult to measure or understand because Helena didn't have a pH test kit. Helena called her friend, the one who had recommended her to start gardening. She asked,

"My flowers are dying, I read on Google that the soil pH is the problem. But I don't know how to test it. Can you help me?"

Her friend said,

"Hey Helena, hmm.. oh yeah, I don't know about the pH but I think maybe if the soil isn't working just throw it out and get some new soil?"

"But my flowers would also be thrown out."

"Yeah, I don't know, maybe they weren't good flowers. Just get some new ones I'd say. Don't worry Helena, you'll be a great gardener. I believe in you!"

Helena wanted to cry.

And that's what she did for two years after that. She cried and cried, because nobody could help her fix her soil and save her flowers. They withered and died, and she watched petal after petal fall to the ground – she could even hear the sound they made when touching the earth. It sounded like a glass breaking, each one of them, a thousand times. She heard it when she was awake, she heard it when she was asleep, when she was on the train, when she was on the plane, when she was in her bed, when she was in the woods, when she was solving math equations, when she was reading the news, when she was cooking, when she was thinking,

when she was not thinking. It didn't matter. It made her feel like, she should have never started gardening in the first place.

But her friend had told her, that this world was a world with flowers. And she had decided to believe in that.

She went on a journey, to learn more about flowers and gardening. It wasn't a university kind of learning where you read textbooks and such. It was more like walking. Just walking and walking and doing nothing but that. Observing plants and trees around to study the way they grew, what conditions they needed. The soil. She even stopped during her walks to dig at the soil beside beautiful flowers she saw, trying to smell them and feel the touch. It told her some things, but it didn't tell her much about how to fix the pH level. Once a passerby called out to her,

"Hey! What are you doing there?"

"I'm trying to learn about soil and how to make plants grow."

"Lol, what a useless task. Why don't you go do something useful? Don't you see other people around you? Nobody is spending their time smelling soil, taking walks in the countryside. People are busy with their lives. Keeping yourself busy, that's what makes you get by, you know?"

Helena didn't know.

After coming back from her journey, Helena was exhausted. She called her friend once again,

"Alba.. I'm back. Damn, I learned a lot. I think I have an idea of how to make plants grow now. There's still somethings I don't know, but I don't think I want to throw out my soil or my flowers, even though they are dead."

"Yeah, you do what you feel is right for you. I can only tell you one thing, and that is that you'll be a great gardener one day. I can assure you!"

Helena didn't feel assured.

She fell sick. Her back problems came back and this time they were paralyzing. One day walking down the street she felt suddenly like she got knocked over but there was nothing knocking her. Only the wind, the sunshine, the trees, the grass, the flowers growing beside the road. She lay on the ground and looked up at the sky and really wondered if all of it was a bad dream. But it wasn't, because she knew how bad dreams were like and they were not like this. She lay there, and once again the sound of petals falling onto the earth sounded in her ears. Like an orchestra. A never ending orchestra. Alba had told her, gardening would be good for her back, but it seemed like it had only exacerbated her problems. Where was the sense in that?

She lay there for a really long time. Night fell, the orchestra grew slightly distant, though still ringing. A bird came out, it said, “Wooh, wooh” like birds do. But Helena couldn’t hear that because she was fast asleep in a bad dream.

Helena stayed in this dream for about 3 days. Constantly, there was the ringing of the orchestra and occasionally the image of some very complicated recursive code that kept executing and impossible to get out of. A few times Helena woke up with sweat running down her back, only panicking to try to get back to the dream because she needed to fix the code – to debug it and get out of it. So she tried falling asleep again to fix it. That wake – asleep state continued for a few hours. Finally, she was woken up by someone shaking her.

“How long have you been here? What has happened? You don’t look well.”

“I don’t know how long I’ve been here. All I know is that I was a gardener and I failed. I can’t bear it. My friend told me, this world is a world with flowers, she encouraged me to be a gardener. Gardeners care for flowers, don’t they? They are supposed to grow and bloom, not wither and die. I tried, I tried so hard but I couldn’t save them.”

“That’s because your soil’s pH level wasn’t calibrated.”

“Wait what? You know about pH?”

“Yes, I’m a Chemist. Of course I know about pH. When your soil is too acidic, you need to add lime. And when it is too basic, you add sulfur.”

“How do you even know the pH level of the soil?”

“That is a bit more difficult, but I know a specialist that I think you should make a visit to. He can help you.”

So Helena went to the specialist and learned all about pH. She learned that pH level was determined by the quality of the rocks around the soil that existed long before the soil did. If there were rocks that were rotten prior to laying the soil, that would get contaminated into the soil. But if there were valuable stones in the rocks, that could help the soil be more balanced. The way to determine the pH level of soil was to remove the soil temporarily to take a good look at the rocks underneath.

Helena went home, baffled. She had never heard about this ever before in her life. It was not something she had learned in her science books. She doubted a bit. But then she thought about her flowers, the ones she had before they died and even ones she had before that. She remembered that feeling, as if she was looking out at a beautiful sunset. She really wanted that again, so she went and dug up all her soil, making sure to keep the dead flower seeds protected. She looked at the rocks beneath. She saw two worms, three ants and a huge part of the rock that was completely rotten. She was afraid. She wanted to put the soil back to cover it all up but instead she just stared and stared at it, not able to take her eyes off it, because suddenly she understood the sense in what the specialist had said to her. She saw how there were black goo coming out of the rotten rock. She went to the kitchen to grab a spoon, came back and gathered a spoonful of the goo. She put it into a jar, took it to the specialist and said,

“Specialist, I dug up my soil to look at my rocks. I found this goo coming out of the rocks. Can you tell me what it is and how to get rid of it?”

The specialist said,

“That is MegaSuperPlagueToxicJelly. It’s really rare. It’s only found in rocks that have undergone severe earthquake. The earthquake throws the rock’s stability out of balance and instead some rocks turn into jelly.”

“And how does this stupid jelly affect my plants?”

“It has a high acidity level so naturally it will kill all your plants.”

“Wtf, and why has nobody told me about this before? MegaSuperPlagueToxicJelly, that’s a mouthful.”

“Yeah, it’s a shame. Society seems not made to accommodate earthquakes, jelly, or the like. People are afraid of them. Hence people shun them and don’t talk about them. If people did, you might have learned about it much earlier. But instead people pretend like they don’t exist. Many flowers die in this world, not only yours. You’re lucky you found me, because not many people have knowledge about it.”

“I am very lucky, thank you very much, specialist,” said Helena.

Helena went home, ordered 20kg of lime from the internet, and as soon as she received it she poured 5kg of lime over the goo. The goo subsided a bit, but then came back more intensified. Helena got really scared. But then she remembered what her friend had told her, that gardening is a good exercise not only in physical activity but also in patience and perseverance. She decided to take a break, and come back the next day.

The next day, she poured more lime over the goo. The goo subsided a bit, came back a bit, she poured more lime. Eventually, the goo seemed to stabilize. This was when she suddenly saw something shining in the corner of her eye. She was surprised. In that moment, a gentle but strong feeling took hold of her, it was the kind of feeling when you are so keen on looking but almost don’t dare to because it could either make you feel on top of the world or down in your deepest low depending on what you saw. A closer look, and it showed that there was a small emerald etched in the surface of the rock, right beside the source of the goo. She stared at it, and couldn’t breathe for the longest time. At that moment it felt like her whole life washed over her as if it was a film that flashed by her eyes in 3x speed. She saw things she didn’t remember for she didn’t know how long. She saw joy, laughter, bliss, fear, worry, sadness, jealousy, compassion, solidarity, loyalty, desire, betrayal, anger, hope, despair, pessimism, optimism, and immense guilt and shame, but overarching all of the things she saw was love. Love and unshakable faith.

She immediately started relaying the soil. She took a photo of the emerald first with her phone just so that she would have an artifact to remind her it wasn’t a dream. She backed up the photo on 2 different external hard drives. Then she got to work. It took 7 days and 15

nights, but finally she had fixed up all the goo in all the rocks around her garden and laid the soil and planted new seeds. It was the bulbs of the tulips. Pink, green, yellow, and white. Fear gripped her, what if these flowers would also die? What if they never bloom? What if I'm just a bad gardener?

In the midst of these worries, she heard birds singing. It felt like waking up from a bad dream. She listened mesmerized to the birds' song. And that was when she understood, that being afraid even before doubt comes is just a manifestation of love and nothing to be afraid of. She understood, that she will lay her memories and dreams upon those wings, to see what tomorrow brings.

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