

The Worry Tree

"I want you to think of a field. Waves of nameless grass, weeds, tiny flowers glimmering with morning dew. It's an atmosphere of vague familiarity that wraps around you as your world manifests according to your design. There is a forest somewhere, a mile behind you, and the moon is gazing fondly down upon you, nestled in her bed of clouds. Simple, peaceful, quiet."

"Now imagine a tree".

"Any type of tree you want. It could tower above you, stretching across the sky, dappled with mixed starlight and moonlight. It could be the size of your hand, the long rippling grass making it nearly impossible to see. A weeping willow, a giant oak, peeling bark, blue leaves, pink fruit. Imagine you look closely at the fruit. Imagine those fruits are shaped like stars."

"Now I want you to imagine something that's hurting you—a cruel comment, a stressful situation, an overwhelming thought—and give that something to a fruit. Watch as it lights up, holding your burden for you. Take as much time and as many star shaped-fruit as you need. Don't worry, they'll be there when you return."

I always worry that I'm going to fall asleep when I visit Dr. Janette. Her voice feels like a heavy layer of snow on a house, and I sometimes get muffled by it. It doesn't help that my chair shoves the smell of pine needles and cinnamon up my nose, that pungent smell of old furniture in unfamiliar offices. Nevertheless, I obligingly close my eyes, trying to remember the tree I've made up in the past.

It's white, the fluorescent teal sap pulsing just behind translucent bark. The pale green leaves are wisps of clouds, or maybe cotton candy. Specks of golden fruit pepper the branches, emitting a brilliant glow as they bob in the breeze of the evening wind.

I don't like to count how much fruit I light up.

I don't think my great-grandmother did either.

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Nobody says why my great-grandmother left.

My mom was the first one to actually talk about it. She said that Nana had packed her bags, leaving her room empty, and took a little vacation, but she never said where that vacation was. Whenever I ask her about it, Mom bursts into tears and demands why I don't have faith in Nana. Sometimes she'll cry without me even saying anything, and when I ask her why, she shakes her head and says she's fine. It's not nice to keep secrets from people.

I don't think Mom's fruits are lit up. I think she believes she doesn't have them.

My older brother says we shouldn't cry about Nana. He says it's her fault for abandoning us. He tells me that I shouldn't look at pictures of her or wish for her back because she doesn't deserve that. He says she betrayed us. When we first learned that she had left, he punched a hole into the kitchen wall. I know he was angry, but now the wall is broken and that's never a good thing. We're very fond of walls, my family.

I'm pretty sure my brother's tree doesn't even have any fruit. Maybe the only things there are the splattered remains of glowing star-shaped fruit that were hurtled to the barren field ground.

My younger sister has a rock that she keeps under her pillow. Sometimes I'll come into her room and I'll catch her whispering to it. She says it's a wish stone, and if she wishes on it 1,000 times, Nana will come back. I tried telling her that's not how it works, but she never listens to me. No 2nd grader listens to what people say anyways.

I think my sister's tree is shriveled and dried up because she doesn't water it. I think she just hopes for rain.

My grandfather doesn't talk much. Nana was his mom, and as soon as he heard the news, he locked himself in his room and doesn't come out save eating and going to the bathroom. I don't think we've had a proper conversation in months. If you approach his door, you can hear the TV playing the same cartoon, over and over. Grandpa must have it memorized by now. I wonder why he doesn't watch anything else.

Grandpa's tree will get no water, not because he's not watering it, but because he's moved his to an icy tundra. The water will just freeze if it gets close.

"How about your dad?" Dr. Janette asks. I wonder what her tree looks like. Maybe it's a pine tree, and a layer of snow frosting the leaves that do nothing to shield you from the glow of her fruit. I'll bet her branches are strong and broad to counter the weight. She's got a lot of people giving her worries enough for twenty trees.

"My dad?" I ask, pulled out of my thoughts.

"A couple weeks ago during our last session, you said he really liked the idea of the Worry Trees and wanted to try it. What do you think his tree looks like?"

My dad's tree glows, I'll bet. When you stand by it, you can see one large branch with pictures of Nana nestled among the leaves so he doesn't forget what she looks like. If you climb up to the branch, you can hear the whispers of stories about Nana when she was young, stories she's told Dad countless times. There's a tape recorder tucked gently away in a hole in the branch playing a song she wrote. At the base of the tree trunk, there's a notepad with

drawings of trees and fruit and little notes in his scattered handwriting, reminding himself how to make the tree. That's how he knows what to say when I start crying and can't seem to stop, when my world spins and calming down is something that's as elusive as an unlit fruit on his tree. That's why when he wipes my tears away, he tells me to take a deep breath.

And then he tells me to imagine a field.

I love my family with all my heart, and that includes Nana. And I know everyone misses her just as much as I do. I know I may not have as much fruit as my dad, and that he may not have as much fruit as Nana, but I know that we all have some, and I know that it can hurt. I know that we all treat our trees differently.

Sometimes I cry about Nana too. Sometimes I feel like my tree has too much fruit, that the branches will break with a sickening crack from the trunk and topple down upon me. When that happens and Dr. Janette isn't there, my dad asks me what I think Nana's tree looks like.

Her field is full of fairies, of hidden creeks, of floating water lilies. Her tree is laden with fruit to the point where the branches dip and billow, bending close to the ground.

But the branches don't break.

A lot of people that are Nana's age have trees full of fruit, but they don't like to admit it. I think that's a very human thing to do. I think it's very human to dislike the fact that you need to have a tree every now and then. Nana really liked her tree, though. I think that's human too.

Sometimes people don't care for their trees. Sometimes people forget how to.

I think it's important to remember.

I think that's what Nana did.

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