

People cry for many reasons. Anger, happiness, regret, pain, the list is nearly endless. Every tear, even the ones shed in hiding, are caught and collected. Where do they go, you ask? They water your garden. Everybody has one. Your thoughts plant the seeds, your tears water them, and your actions make them grow.

I am a gardener. We go by many names; I've been called a guardian angel, oftentimes a conscience. Our job is to watch over these gardens, and care for them as they grow. Sometimes that means stepping in when a soul needs help, guiding them so their garden can flourish. Most times it is a quite job. Occasionally, however, doing our job means breaking The Rule.

Ruby Clement was a rule breaker. Shuffled constantly between Mom's house and Dad's house, marked a "trouble child," ignored, and bullied at school, thirteen year old Ruby took control by losing control. Black clothes and makeup flashed a hostile face at the world. Nameless drugs bought at school gave way to bottles stolen from the liquor cabinet when her allowance ran out. Slamming doors and loud music fell on the deaf ears of her parents because, like many cries for help, Ruby's cry was ignored.

It broke my heart to watch this girl grow so lonely. She hadn't always been like this. She used to be a happy little girl. Tiny green shoots began to grow in her garden, and I had watched them grow with pleasure. But when her parents divorced their little girl became just another chore. Happiness became sadness, and sadness unchecked became bitterness.

Sadness is rarely a bad thing. Every garden needs a little rain. But it can cut too deep and leave permanent scars, and scarred hearts can't feel anything. Ruby's scarred heart grew hard and bitter, and her dry garden grew nothing but weeds.

What seems hopeless isn't always so, however, so when Ruby poured all of her mother's sleeping pills into her small, trembling hand, I waited.

Her mother was out tonight, so there would be no one to stop her. Shaking hands poured those little blue pills all out. She felt she should be crying, but the only emotion was a cold anticipation in her stomach. Even with water, they were hard to swallow. She gulped hard and

stared at her reflection. Without the makeup, all she could see was a scared little girl staring back. *Goodbye Ruby...*

*Ruby...*

“Ruby, wake up.”

Her eyes opened wide and gazed long at my face. “Am I dead?”

I chuckled. “Not quite.”

“Am I dying?” She sat up and looked around. A puzzled expression formed as she took in the garden. Dried leaves and branches littered expanses of overgrown weeds. It was hard to believe growth and beauty was possible here. “It looks like death,” she said quietly.

“It almost does, doesn’t it.” I held my hand out to her. “Come walk with me. I will show you where you are.”

She shrugged as if to say “Might as well.”

“Where am I?”

“In a place of your own making.”

She glanced at me with a cocked eyebrow. “How did I get here?”

“You chose to come here.”

“That isn’t really an answer.”

“You aren’t asking the right questions.” We came to a bench. “Sit with me Ruby. This will take a little while.”

“Who are you?” Ruby was getting irritated. “What’s going on?”

“Ruby, if I gave you the answers you want, you wouldn’t understand. Just listen to me, please?”

She nodded, her brow furrowed with confusion.

“Look around you, Ruby. Really look at what you’re seeing.” She looked around, unimpressed. “This is your garden. Every choice you’ve made, your thoughts and feelings, your whole life has grown this garden.”

“I get it. This is one of those things where your whole life is shown to you right before you die. Well, don’t bother, there’s not a lot to see.” She spoke flatly, pretending apathy.

Should I tell her she was wrong? That would be the appropriate cliché. I should tell her no, underneath the dead plant debris and weeds there were tiny sprouts of life and hope. With the right care this hope could keep growing. But this, of course, would be a lie. Sometimes, when there is nothing left to be salvaged, hope has to begin anew.

“No, thirteen years of bitterness doesn’t produce much. Nothing lives here anymore. But this is a garden. This place is meant to grow. It will just take a bit of work.” I stood. “Come, let’s get started.”

I led her to one of the bigger plots. The little sign was worn and no longer legible. Weeds cracked the brick walkway around it and the soil was dry. It was indeed a sad, sad sight.

“What’s this?”

“Not much. That sign used to say ‘Mother.’ This plot used to be very pretty. It died, slowly at first, then all at once. Gardens do, when nobody cares for them.”

I looked at Ruby. Her disinterested expression was beginning to crack.

We walked to another plot. The letter F was barely visible on the sign. Dry, curled leaves lay scattered all over the ground. “I was so hopeful for this one. I loved to watch the tiny green leaves unfurl and reveal buds, promising such beauty. But one day, it was as if everything was in reverse. Those leaves began to curl back in, and green started to become brown. I looked down, and everything was dead.”

Ruby’s face was turned away. She muttered something quietly, sullenly. I looked up, and I saw clouds gathering. They were dark, full clouds, boding a storm as purifying as it was monstrous.

The next plot was a little smaller. Its sign lay on the ground, as if someone had ripped it from the dirt and thrown it down. “This one used to have a name on it. Helen. Nothing ever grew here but weeds and thorns.” Ruby was scowling now. “You must have been so angry at her.”

“She never should have stayed.” Ruby’s voice was shaking. “Dad never should have married her. He didn’t even ask me. He just brought her in, and now she’s...” her voice caught. “Now they’re gonna have a baby. Dad’s so excited, I might as well not even exist.” She shut her mouth resolutely, as if she’d said too much. Her bottom lip trembled, and I could see something changing. But we were far from done.

We walked down a path lined on both sides with trees. Normally, the trees would have offered a cool, shady cover. But now they were barren, empty branches reaching for each other, and the naked trees looked small and fragile. It seemed dead, but I could feel life pulsing steady beneath the ground, as if waking from a long sleep.

Suddenly Ruby halted. She was staring at a tree with a rope swing tied to its thickest branch. Deep in thought her small face lost its rigid mask, and several emotions vied for control of her expression.

“I remember that swing.”

So did I.

“Dad made it for me.”

He took such care with it.

“He made the seat himself.”

He insisted on testing it first, to make sure the branch would hold.

“When he sat on it the branch broke, and he fell into a mud puddle.” Wistfulness won over her expression, and a small smile crossed her face. “That swing is still up.”

A few drops of rain suddenly fell on my face. “Now we’re starting to get somewhere.”

Ruby looked up at me. “Why am I here?”

“You’re here to make a choice. You’re dying, Ruby. You’re killing yourself, and you have to be the one to save yourself.”

“I’m already dead.”

“Not yet. Come, let me show you something.”

We walked to a flowerbed. Even through the weeds and decay the flowers could be seen, dead blossoms on brittle stems. Beside the bed lay a decorative garden stone, the plaster of Paris kind that children make. Two little handprints lay on either side of the name “Ruby,” scratched into the stone in a child’s proud scrawl.

“You and your mother planted these flowers. Do you remember? You picked an unmarked packet of seeds, and you planted your surprise flowers together.”

“Mom kept that stupid stone. But a storm destroyed all our flowers.” A threatening mist clouded her eyes.

“Not all of them. Your mother saved a few. She pressed them and put them in your baby book. She even saved a few seeds, so you could plant another surprise garden.” I knelt by the flowerbed. “She was looking forward to it.”

“I never knew that. She never told me.”

“You never asked. I broke off one the long-dead blossoms. “You assumed those flowers were never coming back. You closed yourself off and kept everyone out. Your parents never stopped talking to you, Ruby. They never stopped loving you. You’ve just stopped listening.”

“Ruby sank to her knees in front of me. I gave her the flower. For a long time she was silent, just staring at that flower, dead and fragile in her hand. “What happened to me?”

“You don’t need me to answer that.”

Two long overdue tears coursed down her cheeks. Raindrops began to fall a little faster, quickly soaking into the hard, parched ground. Ruby reached out and grasped one of the weeds and pulled. She pulled and yanked and strained, but it wouldn’t move. She let go and her shoulders slumped and she sobbed, completely deflated.

“Ruby, this is the choice you have to make. You can stay here in the garden, but you will not be able to change anything. You and your garden will remain the same.” The rain was pouring now. “Or you can go back and change yourself. Nothing will be the same. You can start over. But it will take work, and it will be difficult.”

Ruby looked up at me. “I want to stay.”

I stood. “Very well.”

“No.” Ruby stood, shoulders squared. “I want to stay, but I have to go.” She looked down at the flower she still held. “I have to go back.”

I smiled. Finally. “Goodbye, Ruby.”

*Ruby...*

“Ruby, wake up!”