

Sophia laughed as she ran through the meadow that was in the back of her house. She always thought it amazing that, on one side of the house, there was the bustling city, filled with the crash and rattle of cars and the yelling, talking, laughing, screaming sea of people. But, on the other side, there was just her, the music of the birds, and the whispering of the leaves of the trees as the wind blew through them, talking in a secret language that she could never understand. The meadow, Sophia knew, was a magical place.

Every day, Sophia went outside, through the tall grass, until she got to a tall, tall tree that she called the "Wise Old Oak." Whenever Sophia went up to the tree, and sat down beside it, she wasn't alone anymore. The meadow seemed so much more alive. When Sophia had troubles, Wise Old Oak comforted her. He whispered secret words to her that she could never understand, and the wind played with her hair. Then, before Sophia left, she gave something to him: an offering. She left it for the animals, the plants, and the fairies. Sophia knew they were there, somewhere. Sometimes, her offering was a piece of cake, or fruit. Perhaps it would be a small doll or toy. Maybe a little note, or poem. Sometimes, she sang for her gift. And, sometimes, the tree left her something: a leaf, or a nut, or a flower, or a stone. Small things, common things, but Sophia felt they were left for her.

One day, Sophia told her mother of Wise Old Oak.

"There is a tree, in the meadow, and it is special," Sophia told her, "his name, or what I call him, is Wise Old Oak. He comforts me when I am sad, and whispers words that I cannot understand but are filled with knowledge. He is my best friend,"

"Oh, yeah? The words are just the wind. And just the presence of nature is what comforts you. The name is simply a name, nothing more. Your affection, my dear, is sweet, but the tree is not alive. It cannot speak, and it is not wise. It is simply a tree," she said.

Sophia knew her mother was trying to be kind, to be comforting, but the words stung. They made her doubt in Wise Old Oak's power, that he was real, that he was more than just a tree. But, the next day, when Sophia went to see him, there was a tiny clear stone there, sparkling in the sunlight. She picked it up, and it cut her. It looked, she realized, like a tiny diamond, though it was uncut.

"Thank you," Sophia whispered to the tree, "I'm sorry I ever doubted you. You are real, I know you are."

The wind caressed her face, and she felt better. But Sophia did not tell her mother, or anybody else, about the stone, or Wise Old Oak, ever again.

When it was summer, Sophia found some leaves on the ground. They were a bronzy color, and they were from Wise Old Oak. When she lay next to

him, she felt, somehow, a sense of urgency. Sophia grabbed the leaves, and rushed back to the house.

“Mom!” Sophia yelled. She rushed downstairs.

“What is it?” Sophia’s mother’s voice sounded urgent.

“I found these leaves on the ground. Can you tell me what they are? Why are they this color?” Sophia asked. Her mother picked up the leaves, and turned them over and over.

“These are oak leaves,” she said. ‘I know that! Tell me more!’ Sophia thought, silently willing her to explain.

“This oak,” Sophia’s mother went on, “is sick. It has a disease known as Oak Wilt. It will die by winter. I don’t know of anything you can do.” Sophia felt like she was falling down, down, down, and there was no way up. Sophia walked slowly up to her room. She lay down on her bed, and cried her heart out. The tears rained down, and drenched her pillow.

Sophia couldn’t bring herself to go and see Wise Old Oak. She couldn’t even bring herself to go to the meadow. Her life seemed pointless with the knowledge that Wise Old Oak might not be there to help her, to guide her, to be her friend. Sophia hoped, against everything she knew, that Wise Old Oak would survive, but she didn’t really think that he would. She hoped, though, for that was all she could do, as far as she knew. Sophia didn’t look up Oak Wilt.

She didn't want to know how Wise Old Oak would die. Her mother knew something was wrong.

"What's wrong? Why don't you go to the meadow anymore?" she asked Sophia.

Sophia always came up with some excuse.

"There's a test," or, "I'm reading," or, "I'm growing out of it," she'd say.

Eventually, Sophia's mother stopped asking.

At last, in autumn, Sophia went to the meadow again. A cold wind blew through the meadow. The meadow was silent, waiting. It seemed sad. Sophia went up to Wise Old Oak, and hugged him. He seemed to have been waiting for her, hanging on, so that she could say goodbye. Sophia hugged him some more, and emptied her pockets. Fruit, a little doll, some candy, and so many notes tumbled out.

"I'm sorry I didn't come to see you," Sophia told him. She was crying again. And then the wind blew stronger past her face. Sophia thought she heard some sort of voice, but it could have been her imagination.

"I forgive," it told her, "Thank you for everything." And then, Wise Old Oak was no more. Sophia knew it in her heart. The wind ended, and the birds began to sing. Wise Old Oak was real, Sophia was sure of it. And, even though he wasn't alive right in front of her, Sophia knew that Wise Old Oak would live forever in her heart. And then, for the first time in her life, Sophia heard the

meadow song. It was a lively tune. The birds set the beat, and the wind was the words. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever heard. Sophia promised herself that she would always come back to the meadow, every single day. And she did. Every time, she could hear the meadow song. She always brought a gift for the meadow, for the plants, for the fairies, and for the spirit of Wise Old Oak. And sometimes, she found something from the meadow, right next to Wise Old Oak's body.