

## The Way Seasons Change

In the distant past (no one knows exactly when), there was a stone cottage. It was old, with ivy creeping through weathered cracks in the walls. The cottage was tranquil, surrounded by a dense thicket of trees. Lush berry bushes brimming with ripe, glistening blackberries were scattered here and there. One tall oak loomed over all of it, surveying the scene with satisfaction. In that quiet, Mother Nature gave birth to four babies. Three dazzling girls and one charming boy arrived, bringing an end to the serene quiet.

In the mornings, the siblings went their separate ways to learn from the wise woodland creatures. That's how Spring learned to sing. Two songbirds and a *very* patient robin taught her. The songbirds, who sang in perfect harmony, taught Spring the lyrics while the robin perfected her pitch.

And that is how Summer came to be the strongest swimmer among the four. At first, she let her restlessness get the best of her as she joyfully leapt into the water. Soon, she learned that swimming is not as easy as the otters made it look, as she watched them floating in the creek. Summer was taught how to swim by a turtle, who took things step-by-painfully-slow-step, and a school of fish who were eager to help and avoid their own lessons (after all, they were a school).

Autumn, on the other hand, learned how to harvest fruit thanks to a perky squirrel and a grumpy, prickly hedgehog. The squirrel bustled about, rushing from one fruit tree to another, as his high-pitched squeaky voice urged Autumn to speedily pick the pears. The hedgehog, on the other hand, was the image of strictness, but he had an effective method of teaching.

Winter, the only boy, learned to sneak up on people and animals alike—like cold seasons should—from the trickiest and slyest animal known in the woodlands, the Fox. The two made a brilliant team, though both were loners.

After spending the days learning their tricks, the seasons would find their way back home, with Mother Nature. They all loved to sit by the old oak tree and share their stories about the happenings of the day.

All too often though, they would shout over one another, each wanting to be in the spotlight. The old oak, becoming weary, still tried to enjoy their company. Its leaves swayed a little harder when they were near.

But one day, everything changed. In the evening, when the siblings came together to sit by their tree, there was only a stump and tousled mulch left. Mother Nature herself was nowhere to be found. Summer began crying. She almost never cried. As tears streamed down her face, she sniffled and asked “What do we do now?”

As Autumn was about to answer with something reassuring, Winter interrupted. “There is no ‘we’ anymore. The oak tree is gone along with any traces of Mother Nature.” “‘We’ is a thing of the past,” he sneered.

The sorrow and grief of losing their home fueled already-simmering arguments that eventually got out of hand.

Summer and Spring started blaming each other. “Spring, you did it! You were in a quarrel with Mother Nature this morning!”

“Did not,” exclaimed Spring, “I bet *you* did it Summer! Mother Nature was mad that you nearly dried out the snail.” “You’re always showing off your heat,” she yelled.

Autumn and Winter had quietly crept away so as not to give the two girls a chance to turn on them. Soon, their once sacred meeting place was deserted.

Each chose a distant location as their new home. Winter chose the snowy peaks of the mountains. Snow coated everything there and icicles formed on the entrance of his cave. Autumn decided on an apple orchard filled with juicy fruit. The tantalizing, shiny apples were irresistible. Juicy peaches were a sweet treat while the pears were so tasty that not a soul could describe them. Summer's new home became a small bubbling creek deep in the wilderness. She would dip her feet in its water and wade. Spring settled on a field filled with flowers. She immersed herself in the lovely scent of blooming peonies.

They each tried to stay as far away from each other as possible. When they absolutely had to meet, in the transition of seasons, they never made eye contact. Occasionally, there would be a shoulder shove. But they usually ignored each other. They knew it was a petty and childish thing to do and should move past what had happened so many years ago, but none wanted to be the first to make amends.

In truth, they missed each other but felt too proud to admit it. So, as they waited for years and years, avoiding each other became unbearable. Spring and Summer longed to reminisce about the beauty of flowers. Autumn and Winter each remembered how fun it was to play the trick of making the temperatures frigid just as someone stepped outside.

One day, when Summer was sunbathing and swinging her feet in the water, a school of fish appeared frantically flapping their tails against the waves she created.

"Summer! Summer!" the little fish exclaimed, bubbles anxiously popping out of their permanent pout. "Summer, something terrible has happened," they gasped out of breath (don't ask how).

"What? What happened?" inquired Summer in a concerned tone.

"It's Spring. She refuses to pour rain!" The fish were now nervously swimming in a circle, seemingly in a never ending game of Follow the Leader.

Summer leapt up off the rock she had been sitting on, hurriedly thanked the fish and tried to quickly run through the water. It was more of a slow tromp with lots of water cascading off to the sides as her feet sunk to the bottom. The fish washed away, hiding in the murky depths so as not to be stepped on or separated from their school.

After Summer finally got out of the water, she ran through the forest for what seemed like hours, bare feet snapping twigs and rustling leaves. She had no idea where to look, she just knew that she had to confront Spring. When she finally came to a halt, the woods parted to reveal an orchard. Not just any orchard, but Autumn's orchard.

"Summer! I'm glad you are here, something terrible has happened –" As Autumn greeted her sister, she was cut off.

"Spring has refused to pour rain. I know. But how do *you* know?" Summer breathlessly uttered.

Autumn rushed through an explanation while Summer listened intently.

"Grumpy (and prickly) Hedgehog informed me. He also said that is why my trees stopped growing. And look, one died!" Autumn said while pointing to a wilted tree.

"Hey, that kind of looks like our Old Oak Tree," Summer said, deep in thought.

"Yeah. C'mon! We have to find Winter."

They were off! The two stumbled over branches in unison. Oh, it felt so good to have a fellow sister with you after so long. Then they reached a mountain. It stretched as far as the eye could see, no way around it.

“Nowhere to go but up, I guess”, Summer cheerfully remarked, trying to keep their spirits high.

Up they went. Up, up and... up. They hiked so high that the sweltering temperature that they were used to plunged to below freezing. Their short sleeve dresses were not made for this.

Summer’s legs grew goosebumps and Autumn’s elf like ears turned bright red, matching her now rosy cheeks.

Both were relieved when they reached the summit, thick fog thinning.

“Sisters?” a cautious voice asked.

“Winter?” they replied with equal surprise.

Suddenly, the fog disappeared and the temperature returned to its normal level. A tall figure came into view.

After exchanging terse hellos and the sisters catching him up to speed, Winter became upset that Fox had not bothered to fill him in yet on Spring’s tricks. “Spring has caused the disappearance of my snow and icicles. Without water, they can’t be easily created.” With a snap of Winter’s frozen fingers, they were back on the forest floor. The three siblings ventured on in search of Spring.

A lengthy trek in a new direction led them to a field where Spring sat on a picnic blanket and sipped tea calmly, as beautiful as always. With wavy hair, freckles, and a delicately upturned nose she was quite the sight. Spring set her cup down and smoothed her lilac dress. “I have stopped pouring rain to put an end to this nonsense. Haven’t you noticed that throughout all the years we have not gotten along we have caused chaos and destruction. I mean, look at this situation. My action, reckless as it may have been, was meant to stop us all from getting lost in our trance of self-pity and resentment”, Spring said in a dignified manner.

“We have to fix this,” Spring continued, sitting up tall. “We will start with our Old Oak Tree.” And with that, she stood up and strolled into the forest, waving her hand for them to follow. Winter, Summer, and Autumn scurried after Spring.

The siblings arrived at the site of their old home, rubble and all. Winter, Summer, and Autumn immediately froze once they saw the clearing, but Spring walked purposefully to the pile of dirt that was once their dear Old Oak. Spring placed her delicate hand on the stump of the Old Oak and took a second to mourn. She then slowly withdrew her hand and knelt down, for once not caring if she stained her dress. The others watched as she scanned the area around the stump, clearly searching for something. Then she found it. A lone acorn. A single piece of life. An opportunity. She gently picked it up and clutched it to her chest. Spring walked to her siblings to show the tiny acorn to them. It was then that Summer understood.

“Wait, back up... Does this mean?” Summer asked. And it came to her. Their Oak Tree died because of their lack of cooperation. They were each so absorbed in their own worlds that the Old Oak became neglected. They each wanted to be in charge of the weather and for their uniqueness to be seen. The seamless transition between the seasons was gone and it was slowly hurting the Old Oak.

Shovels were passed out and they dug a small hole for the acorn. They each said a few words for the Old Oak and grieved. They placed the acorn in the hole, right next to where its Mother—the Old Oak Tree—had once stood.

As the time passed, they each nurtured and cared for their New Oak. They named it Willow because a willow's leaves look like falling tears, just like the ones they had shed for their Old Oak. Winter took care of Willow by covering her in a soft blanket of snow, to protect her from the bitter cold and provide water to her roots. The frost he created killed all the pests that would otherwise try to hurt Willow. Autumn helped by carefully painting each leaf with beautiful colors. Summer's warm smile and rays of sunshine helped Willow grow. Spring always rained when needed, the refreshing droplets of water a relief to all.

While they each had a chance to shine, they also cooperated. Of course, they still had quarrels, like all siblings do. That's why in the summer it might be a little chillier than usual at times—that being Winter's or Autumn's doing. But they all had learned their lesson about arguments and selfishness.

As for Willow, she grew up to be healthy and strong, and she gave birth to her own acorns, creating a forest, their trunks taking the place of the cottage. From time to time, Mother Nature herself returned to welcome the saplings and to greet her own children. Mother Nature was proud that the seasons had learned to live in harmony.