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2,000 WORDS  
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# THE GARDENER

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*For [Bridgette Singleton](#), my friend and fellow storyteller.*

For more from Joel Allyn please visit [Th3 Scribbl3r](#)

The tree stumps were well worn and smooth to the touch. They were arranged in a rough circular configuration and upon them sat several anxious individuals. They spoke amongst themselves and one of them, a bald chubby man, poked and fed the fire which danced at the center of the circle. All of the stumps were occupied save for one, a smaller seat than the rest. As they spoke to one another they stole glances at the empty place and the excitement in their eyes was electric. She would be their soon, they knew, and with her, through her, a new story.

In a small unassuming house which rested in a tree, the storyteller paced back and forth before the writing desk where the quillpen and blank page invited and taunted her. Beside the desk on either side lay crumpled white balls like a garden of paper roses. The stories always came to her and she did not question how or from where, only did her best to craft them into the finest specimens she was able before sharing them. Once they were told the stories no longer belonged to her, if they ever had to begin with.

Every day she wrote, even if on that day she was able to write nothing more than mundane lists, still she wrote. After enough time with the pen pressed to the page she would find there was a story there, or at least the seed of a story. So she nurtured it and it grew strong. Some took off like weeds while others withered and died. Yet she felt no feelings of defeat, not really, only a stronger sense of achievement with the seeds that flourished. Sometimes it was as if they were growing all on their own.

No story had come yet.

This had never happened to the storyteller before, and it had been going on for some time now. She ran her slender fingers through her soft dark hair as she paced. She stopped mid-step before the desk and turned, there was a shift in her gaze. A flash of light danced across her vision and she seized the pen and...but it was gone, the same torturous routine which had repeated for two months now. The curses flew and the pen followed, she hurled the bottle of ink at the wall where it exploded and splattered ink everywhere. She collapsed with her back against the wall beneath the dark dripping liquid and began to weep.

There was a time, not long before this, when a man might have placed a hand upon her shoulder or caressed her cheek and whispered that everything would be okay, and she might even have believed him. But that time was done.

She rose, in time. Still though, no story came. Some of the storytellers before her kept notes of plot ideas to draw from when their natural wellsprings of inspiration ran dry. She did not do this. Her philosophy on the matter was that when you didn't write down every idea that popped into your head a sort of Darwinian approach takes place, where the good ideas stick around and survive, while the crap which would have otherwise been immortalized on paper falls by the wayside, where it belongs. So with no new idea, no seed to harvest, she had nothing.

Storytellers are vital figures and can't simply call in sick. The last tale spinner who failed to use their gift in a timely manner foolishly tried to explain his reasons for his tardiness, and

was eviscerated by the disappointed crowd after daring to seek an extension on the deadline. As he found, it was not named in jest.

Truth be told she'd written nothing new for some time now, had just always been so prolific that she'd managed to skate by for quite a while on extra stories penned and then shelved for such a rainy day as this. One rainy day followed another however and they had not let up since. Outside, where the storm did not seem to reach, the sun began to dip below the mountains. Her time was almost done and still, no story came.

After a rough start, the fire was going strong. The things awaiting the storyteller were growing impatient and the drink had started to take hold, so much so that some became disgruntled and their whispers raised to angry grunts, muttering curses and half-cocked plans. They would be entertained, they said, one way or the other. A few even boasted of visiting the storyteller's house and dragging the story from her. As if they could.

The chubby bald man carefully positioned another sizeable log over the flames and then began to finally show signs himself of unrest. This caused the mutterings, threats and empty boasts to cease and for a few moments at least, all but the growing fire was still again.

It was her house in the tree, she had decided. Of course it was what else *could* it be? So she had fled. Gone off to walk through the towering trees, where the only paths were made of places where the scattered light intersected. It was beautiful in the woods at twilight. There is something magical in the places men have not shortened with axes or built up high and in a moment of peace there was a flash of excitement in her eyes again. Sadly it was there but an instant and then it was gone from her reach, carried off on the gentle breeze without so much as a fare thee well. So even there, in the ancient untainted pocket, no story came.

For the first time in a long time, she was afraid. Not afraid for what would happen to her body when she approached them with no tale to tell, but what if she never again felt the joy of crafting a new tale and that sense of astonishing satisfaction and accomplishment after she was able to write *The End*. She missed it all so much, just being surprised by how they turned out was one of her favorite parts. She yearned, ached, for a new story. Beyond a junkie needing a fix, the feeling was that of starving in a dark room, where you can smell the sweet scents of your favorite food but no matter how extensively you search with your hands you find no meal. You're belly moans and your mouth waters, and you are only taunted more by the knowledge that at some unknown time the light above will flicker to life and there, before you in plain sight will be a four course meal.

No light came on, no story materialized. The forest was dark now. She went on.

Whispers rolled through the trees and the birds drew silent. Something was out there with her, something calling her forth with a muted plea. A cry for help, a call to arms, an invitation to rest? No matter. Deeper into the dark she went, following the whispers into the abyss.

## THE GARDENER / JOEL ALLYN

The flames were hungry and the light dimmed more by the minute. Yet the chubby bald man refused to move to feed the fire, he just sat staring into the glowing embers. The things around the diminishing light grew restless and afraid. Each looking from one to the other hoping one would have the answer they all sought. For the fire was tradition, and the fire was warm, but it served another more important function. In those woods where few feet tread there are things that dwell in moving shadows, stalking the borders of the dark, waiting for the light to recede enough that they may come forth and feast.

The idea of another attempting to do so much as fan the smoke of the pyre was absurd and unheard of. There was only one fire tamer left just as there was but one storyteller remaining and they were linked in their fates. The story kept the fires alive and the fires kept the dark at bay, and that eternal hunger within. Without the stories, there would be no light.

One of those sitting around the dwindling fire succumbed to desperation and sealed his fate by darting to toss just one of the tiniest logs on the fading bed of amber. The fire keeper flung the poker with a flick of the wrist and the log fell to the ground along with the thing whose ankle was now shattered, but that was not the end of it. The bald man rose, retrieved the smoldering poker. Then with no visible emotion or strain showing on his face he stepped on the poor thing's chest and slowly, oh so slowly, twisted the glowing end of the poker through its eye with a sickening sizzle and pop. There were no more attempts to assist or challenge the keeping of the fire. The rest all watched the embers dying and waited to see what would enter the circle first, the storyteller, or the creeping dark.

Light and dark devour one another in an infinite cycle like some cosmic embodiment of Ouroboros. A dance which began yesterday and forever ago in some void where they were strangers embracing one another.

The storyteller slid along through the moonless night, no longer afraid, only anticipating what she may find out in the unspoiled shadows. Tale spinners navigate the abyss well but she was taken off guard by the tree which appeared in her path.

The old tree was a new tree. Never before had she felt such bark or twisting limbs, some thicker than your waist, some gnarled, skinny things. Yet when the storyteller's hand fell upon the dried limbs they awoke and seemed to breathe her in. The tree was warm to the touch and seemed to pulsate beneath her fingertips. It made her feel sick and wonderful at the same time. She imagined the roots were either incredibly short or reached into the heart of the world.

There beneath her gaze a single four petal flower bloomed from the tree. It glowed with the faintest of light. She bent forward into that soft glow and breathed deep. It smelled like childhood, and home, and eternity. Tastes, scents of memory flooded her - fresh cut grass, baking pies, a salty breeze – and she raised her hand to wipe away a tear. As her palm lifted from the tree the flower wilted, dried to a crisp and then fell away, blowing into the wind as ash, leaving behind no evidence a beauty of its kind ever existed there at all, in that dark.

## THE GARDENER / JOEL ALLYN

From somewhere nearby she heard the faint rumblings of the excited things stationed uncomfortably on the comfortable stumps around the fire and she started toward them, surprised to find herself there. The whispered scream came then, from the tree figure. It was almost whining, the sound of a great wind through a hollow and a terrible high-pitched squeal like twisting metal. That was only for a moment though, and then the taste of ashes faded and she tasted fresh summer strawberries and heard only silence.

Storytellers belong in the circle sharing tales and they waited there for her, hungry for her. They were hungry, but the thing resembling a tree was hungrier. And she went to it, turning her back on the circle, just a short distance away. As she placed her palm against the odd bark the warm pulse of it sped up and she felt a sense of giving up come over her, and it was wonderful. When the flower bloomed this time there was no faint glimmer but a radiant shine. The girl who had been a storyteller leaned into the glow, inhaled deep of the small flower, and became indecipherable from it. Glowing beauty, a fragile thing locked in place.

Dark rested in the circle. The tree stumps were empty and wet. The flames were extinguished.

The End