

A short story by Nigel Coates

# In Bloom

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Esben walked into the icy stream to fill two pails with fresh water. He smiled as he thought of the melting snow high in the mountains. As he looked towards them his thoughts were freed, and they soared like an eagle on the thermals over the distant range.

The gentle breeze that brushed his face felt like the touch of his father's hand. He always felt a stronger connection to his father when he waded into the shallows. Although several years had passed since he'd last been the object of his father's loving gaze, Esben would always remember his piercing blue eyes with exact clarity.

His father Torrin was a man connected to nature. He had lived each of his days in admiration of its wonder and majesty. Besides his love for his beautiful wife and energetic son, who reminded him of himself at the same age, exploration of the wilderness was his passion. He had created the most accurate and detailed maps of the known lands, and he was considered an authority for those seeking direction, or explanation of the wild.

His father's ever-held desire had been to climb Mt. Florence, the highest mountain of his known world. It towered above the others on the far western horizon, often the only summit to remain white-capped through the seasons. This cherished quest of his life would be his last.

Esben had begged his father to take him on the expedition, just as he'd accompanied him to many other mountains, and forests, and lands ... but Torrin insisted he was far too young for such a demanding adventure. Even with the passing years, Esben was still only ten years of age.

He wondered each night before sleep if things would have turned out differently if he had been by his father's side. He wished in his dreams that he would have made a difference, and been able to save him. He missed his father more than words could convey.

Torrin had always spoken of Mt. Florence with reverence. Esben did not fully realise the respect he gave it until he did not return – then it all became clear. His father had trained harder, planned with greater focus, prepared with more attention to detail, and packed his gear with caution – not excitement. It was so obvious in retrospect. But Torrin was a smart man. Although he'd also taken extra time to say farewell to both him and his mother, never did he let on the extent of the challenges he would have to face. If Anika had known, she would never have allowed his departure.

But Torrin had been torn. He had to weigh the expected dangers of the journey against his dedication as a husband and father. But exploring Mt. Florence had been his life's dream. If he had chosen to live a protected life on the farm, he would have wilted inside as a man. To be true to himself, there was no choice. Mt. Florence was his destiny.

And with the words, "I love you both dearly," he turned his back and walked from their lives, as the winter frosts started to melt and the songbirds again took flight.

Several months after Torrin should have returned, on a night with a full moon, Esben sneaked from the cottage and climbed his favourite elm. From that height, he felt he could grasp the moon. The stars reflected in his eyes. Esben made a promise to himself and the world. One day, when he was able, he would climb to the summit of Mt. Florence and plant a flag of his family's crest proudly into the ice. Esben longed to make his father proud, and he knew that would make him smile down from heaven. He was certain his father was in heaven. Torrin was a good father. He was a good man. And he had a kind heart.

For just a short time during his grief, Esben hated his father for leaving him behind. He wished he'd gone to Mt. Florence. He wouldn't have minded. He could have held his father's hand to explore heaven, just as he had through the forests that surrounded their cottage. But the anger passed as he thought more of death.

Death was ever present in nature – that he knew. It was just one part of the cycle. Trees, plants, animals died ... sometimes naturally, sometimes for need. His father had first spoken of death before him as they felled a tree to be used for fencing. Before he swung the axe he told the tree of his intentions and gave it his thanks. It was the same for the hares and ducks they would trap for food. Their lives were taken with gratitude and respect. And Esben learnt that death came to everything, in the time of death's choosing. Want, desire or need would not change its way.

Of all the lessons Esben could remember, he favoured his father's message of respect. "Cause nature no harm without need. Take no life without purpose." He hoped with his whole heart that those words meant that death had a purpose. And he hoped they applied to his father. He was sure they did – but could never imagine a greater need than his desire to be with his father. What greater purpose could there be, that would leave such a space in his world?

But Anika did not believe Torrin was in heaven. She refused to believe he was dead. She held onto the hope that Torrin would return, and waited each and every day for him to walk through the door of the cottage and look to her with his loving smile. Even with the passing of years, she would not accept his death.

Anika was no longer the mother that Esben remembered. He could remember times of laughter, love and happiness. He could imagine her smiling face, rosy cheeks and loving eyes. Her touch was soft and tender. She could be gentle and caring when he was injured or ill, or excitedly chase him around the yard and up a tree if that was the game of the day. She was so full of love and life.

One of Esben's favoured memories was his mother and father walking hand in hand through the forest, looking deep into each other's eyes and smiling. They did not mind his continued interruptions as he ran back and forth to ask his father for information on the things he found. Torrin knew so much of all the plants and animals and was always pleased to share his knowledge to an enquiring mind. The three of them had lived in total harmony, with each other, and their surrounds.

Esben wriggled his toes in the sand. The icy water was numbing his feet. He wiped the gentle tear on his cheek and smiled as he remembered better days. His mother would cook delicious stews that would catch the breeze and fill the valley with the scent. She would sing as she mended their clothes on the veranda, and her joyous voice would catch his ear as he climbed the surrounding trees. He truly believed that if he fell, her love alone would carry him softly and surely to his feet. She would tickle him playfully in the morning to get his day started with a smile, and tenderly kiss his forehead at night, to assure him of their love as she wished him the sweetest of dreams. Anika had been a wife and mother driven purely by love ...

But those days had long passed.

Esben stood tall with a full pail in each hand. He looked upstream and gave a tender smile towards Mt. Florence. He gave thanks for the water, and wished it could fill the hole in his heart.

He looked to the sun overhead – another day half passed. Sure, times had been better, but who was he to complain? His father had taught him that every situation could be viewed in many ways, so he turned and walked back up the rocky path with a spring in his step. Not everything was bad. The sun warmed his back and his shadow was strong. The season had turned. Esben knew summer had arrived, and his wildflowers would be in full bloom.

As he walked up the path towards his joy he planned his afternoon. He would have to cut brushwood and set it to dry, for the roof was leaking in two places. He would have to muck the cow's paddock and spread the manure in the garden. He would have to mend the fence as a branch had fallen during the night. He could saw and chop that branch for the fire. He took a deep breath as he thought of the never-ending work before him. There were so many chores!

But fetching water was Esben's favourite duty. For a short time he was without burden. It was an escape from his true world. His reality was not an easy place in which to live. He did the best he could, but the farm and the cottage had slowly fallen into disrepair. He did not wish to dishonour his father, but he didn't have the strength or skills of a man; he was just ten. Surely his father would understand.

He remembered his home was once such a beautiful sight to behold. It had been freshly built from the pines of the nearby forest. A chimney of slurred bush-rock rose from one end, and smoke would gently billow on the breeze. The cottage sat alone on the flat grasses of the upper valley. When sitting on the swinging chairs on the veranda, everything looked so green. The lush vegetable garden was bursting with produce. The young trees of the orchard were spaced neatly in rows. The cow chewed her cud as she watched Torrin, Anika and Esben all picnic in the top corner of her paddock, lying for hours in the shade of the giant fig trees, whose mighty branches were perfect for climbing.

Torrin had spent all of his junior years exploring the forests that surrounded his village, and had many years previous chosen the site as the perfect place to live – and raise a family of his own. The village was now home to nearly one hundred people, and was a half-hour walk to the north. It could be ridden in a time far shorter, but they were still to buy a horse.

The nearest neighbours were Esben's grandmother and Aunt Kailey. They lived quite close to town. Anika's mother suffered from arthritis, and her sister Kailey gave her care. Kailey wished more for herself, but was still to find the right man to marry. She spent her time keeping the house, and teaching at the school. Anika and Kailey had seen each other most days, depending on the weather, taking turns to do the walk. When Anika would venture to town, she would always take the best selection of their fresh produce. She was so proud of all she had: a loving husband, a beautiful boy, and the home of their dreams. The farm was close to self-sufficient.

All they did not have at hand was fresh water. Torrin was still to dig a well, and had planned to do it shortly after his return from Mt. Florence. Esben spent the early days of his father's absence wishing he had the knowledge and strength to do it himself, as the closest source of water was the stream. Now, he did not mind at all. It was just a short walk through the orchard, over the ridge, and to the bottom of the next valley. As the path had been walked each day for many years, it was now a defined track. Esben knew it well.

He continued up the path with the pails, already knowing exactly where he would place each foot. He could have nearly walked the path with his eyes closed and still not spilled a drop. He smiled as he thought of quenching the summer thirst of the wildflowers and looked up, as the clearing was in sight.

Not far from the ridge was a natural clearing to one side of the path. Without reason, the larger trees had never grown there, so the sunlight could land softly on the forest floor. In this clearing grew the most beautiful wildflowers Esben had ever known. And he and his father had ventured far and wide through many different forests! The wildflowers before him were more beautiful than anything he could imagine.

He placed the pails carefully on the rocky path as he did every day previous. He turned to look at the rich palate of brilliant colour before him. Each time he gave the wildflowers attention he was truly amazed. The open blooms swayed in the breeze and Esben could not help but smile. As often happened, his smile turned into a laugh. The wildflowers filled him with joy as nothing else did. They were a blessing. The real world fell away.

Without care, he raised his arms to the sun and swayed in the breeze just as they did. He felt connected to the wildflowers, and to all of nature. He felt loved. The sun, the breeze, the colours, the smell ... The wildflowers were his love. Even when he dreamed, it did not compare with the glory of his summer blooms. The clearing was his heaven.

When Esben stood amongst them, he was filled with an ineffable happiness. He ran excitedly along the forest path and turned over his shoulder to see his father looking lovingly at his mother. Life was perfect. He did not wish for one thing more.

It was in the spring of three seasons past when something first caught his eye. It had not long become his responsibility to fetch the water, which was just another dreaded burden added permanently to his list, now that his father was past his expected return. The water was freezing, the pails were heavy, and the walk was long. He would often return to the cottage

with wet legs and pails half-filled. On these days he would have to return to the stream, and this would pain him further.

And his mother offered little assistance, as she did not want to leave the cottage in case Torrin returned to find it empty. The doctor and Aunt Kailey encouraged Esben to oblige and perform the chores without a questioning word. They believed keeping her comforted would aid her transition and stop the sickness taking hold.

Esben grudgingly kicked a loose stone along the path and only looked up from his feet as he noticed the changing light. He had walked into the clearing, and for the first time paid it mind. He noticed a single stalk pushing through the knee-high grass to one side of the path. On top was a tight green bud. His immediate thought was to ask his father what it would be, but ... that could no longer happen. Esben gently held the bud in his hand and bent in close to study it. He sighed deeply as he realised he would have to wait patiently for nature to take its course.

To ease his drawn suffering just a little each day, Esben splashed some water at the base of the stalk. And to his amazement it grew considerably each day. With the passing of just one moon, it had grown to his height.

And then it bloomed – seemingly before his eyes. A brilliant flower as bright as the sun! Esben had never seen such a flower before, but recalled one of his father’s descriptions and knew it was unmistakably a sunflower. And right by the path to the stream! He had been told they only grew in distant lands, Torrin promising to one day take him on a great journey to show him a sunflower with his own eyes. It was another promise his father would break, but Esben now held no regret. He knew it was not his father’s will to leave him alone in the world.

And each day Esben would stop on the path and stare at the sunflower. And for just a short time he would lose himself in wonder. The weight would lift from his shoulders, and his imagination was released to fly as a child’s should. He would think only of happiness and adventure. Both his father and mother loved him.

Esben would share some water from the pail and walk back to his mother with a smile. Excitedly he wanted to tell her, and to walk her down the path to show her the discovery, but the doctor had made him promise not to push. The doctor was sure time in contemplation would bring her to the true realisation – that Torrin had passed, and life would go on without him.

But Anika just sat inside by the window and stared through the orchard to the path from where she expected Torrin to return. It became seldom she left the cottage at all. She would rock on her chair and hum the tunes from her memory. But the happy songs now sounded lost and forlorn. Her sombre mood was a constant, and it brought pain to Esben's heart. Less frequently he interrupted her daze for conversation.

The joys he experienced while fetching water became his private pleasure. It was Esben's only pleasure. He was the only person in the world to know of the sunflower in the clearing, and he valued the delight. The first spring, summer and autumn were not nearly as hard as they would otherwise have been. Once each day he felt truly free.

But the days grew short and cold and the sunflower returned to the earth. The winter snows lay thick, but the season did not drag. Esben walked the path in expectation. He lived each day in promise. And in the first warm days of spring, not only did another sunflower stalk emerge; several other wildflowers also grew by its side! He gave them all care.

The sunflower was first to bloom, followed shortly by the others. Esben knew the purple of lavender, the violet of thyme, and the white lilies, but there were other amazing wildflowers of varied colour and shape he had never before seen. He wondered if even his father would have known them all.

And one splash of water was no longer enough. Esben eagerly watered the blooming flowers with two full pails, before returning to the stream to fetch more water for himself and his mother.

And in the spring just past even more wildflowers had appeared. More flowers, more varieties, more colours, each with a different fragrance. The small clearing was now filled with wildflowers. It was Esben's haven. He could not imagine a thing more beautiful. Walking to the stream to fetch water was his only cherished desire. It was the only thing to bring warmth to his heart.

He would gather the pails from the corner of the kitchen and head through the orchard. With his back to the cottage, his mother's sickness lost weight. It was the only time of day he was not conscious of her care. Not that he minded the rest of his day, and not that she asked for attention – but being the sole care-giver of a woman drawn of strength, a woman who had faded from the life-filled mother he had known just three years previous, and a woman who was now without sight, was a demanding responsibility for a boy so young.

There was milking the cow, pulling the weeds from the orchard, pruning and picking the apples and citrus, maintaining the soil and health of the vegetables in the garden, chopping the wood, mending the clothes, preparing and cooking all of their meals, repairing things worn, fixing things broken, and trying to understand the readings and homework left by his Aunt Kailey by the light of the lantern just before sleep. Each and every day was filled with duty. The only respite was his time with the wildflowers.

If Torrin were still alive, Esben would have attended the school in the village with the other children of the district. His father would have done many of the chores, and his mother ... his mother would have been well.

The doctor had long stopped coming to visit. He said there was nothing more he could do. There was nothing that could return Anika to the wonder-filled young woman they had all known. She had become a stranger to love.

Esben was always sent from the cottage when he gave an examination, but he could clearly see her deteriorating state. He did not care for the doctor's opinion. He knew with his own mind that it was not possible to live with a broken heart.

When the doctor would leave for the village, Esben would sit helplessly on the wood pile and listen to his frustrated aunt plead with his mother. She tried every way to make her see sense, but would always lose the fight. She would beg Anika to face reality, and to accept that Torrin would not return, but Anika would not. She did not want to live in a world without Torrin's love. She could not, and would not, emerge from her depression.

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Anika first met Torrin in her early teens. Her childhood previous had been none too favoured. Her father often strayed from home, leaving without warning and returning without an informed word. He could be an abusive drunk and had a wandering eye. He had never wished to be a father and showed the girls no love. Both Anika and Kailey saw how it pained their mother's heart to be forever at his mercy – but they were too young to know of a better way. Their father did not support his family with either love or money, and for both they were often left wanting. It was a hard life.

On a day no different from many others, as he ran out of whisky and stumbled towards the tavern to continue drinking, her mother called the girls close. She told them their lives were to change. She had finally found the strength within to quest for a better life. They emptied the

house of provisions and their possessions – and in the darkness of early night, she hitched her husband’s horse to his cart and ventured at full speed into the unknown.

They pushed the horse to travel for many days without rest, as the law would see his cart returned and punish her reckless action. Of greater worry was the back of her husband’s hand.

For several weeks they continued in the direction of the morning sun. In the hands of the gods they searched for a better day. But their old horse, tired from the continued walking, tripped on a raised stone. As it skipped to find its footing its other front hoof landed on a sharp stone, instantly sending it lame. It could not walk another step, especially pulling a family and their wares. The family was lost in the world. For two days they lived from within the cart, in a land they did not know.

By chance, Torrin had been exploring the forest a half day’s walk from his village. He carefully approached the cart in case trouble was at hand. As he cautiously called hello, Anika pulled back the canvas. His concerns fell aside. Never before had Torrin seen such beauty. In that one skipped heartbeat, he knew he had met his true love. As he offered his hand to help Anika from the back of the cart, never had she felt such salvation. For the first time she saw admiration and honesty in a man’s eyes. She forever wanted to be looked at in such a way.

Torrin walked the family to the village, organised their accommodation with the innkeeper, and rode a fresh horse to fetch their cart. He begged of Anika’s mother to stay in the village while their horse found its feet, and in that time he planned to convince her it was a good village in which to live. He did.

The shared connection of that first day is how their love continued. Torrin lived in awe of her beauty, and Anika in awe of her saviour. Less frequently were they from each other’s sight. As a couple, they grew inseparable. Torrin promised to stand beside her for life, and within a few years they were married.

But as concerns grew, when Torrin did not return from the mountain when planned, the fears of the townsfolk turned to murmurs. But Anika would not hear it. She continued to await his return. She could not realise their fears. Torrin had promised to return in good health, and she would not see him break a vow. Of all men who gave their word, Torrin would be true. She was consumed by sorrow and partnered by loneliness, but would not mourn his passing. All else fell to nothing.

Esben held hope for his father's return slightly longer than those from town, but he soon accepted the reality. He knew his father would have already returned if he were able. There was only one thing would keep him away: death.

His father had shown him repeatedly in nature the cycle of life and death, and he knew it was the way of the world. Life, death, rebirth, life, death. And his father was a part of nature, just as all who lived. Everything was in the cycle.

Kailey and her mother had repeatedly begged Anika to move in with them near the village, but she refused. If Torrin were to return, she did not want him to feel abandoned on seeing an empty cottage and a cold hearth. Kailey asked her to consider Esben's wellbeing, but Anika indifferently gave her permission for Kailey to give him care. Kailey explained to Esben he was not living the life of a child, but Esben would not leave his mother. He knew she was unable to look after herself and would do all he could to stop her from fading to nothing.

In the darkest part of his heart, Esben feared that is what his mother wished for. He truly believed that if she now had the strength, she would herself set to venture for the summit of Mt. Florence, to be with Torrin ... in eternity. He knew he would again be left behind.

When the first year passed, Anika could no longer look from the window to the orchard. She had cried a thousand tears in failed expectation. She would jump excitedly from the chair and squint through the trees, only to fall back down drawn more of love. She began to wish the outside world would fade away ... and slowly it did. Without sunlight, without fresh air, without exercise or good food, her body began to fail ... including her sight.

The darkness of her mind crept into the real world. In her real world she felt abandoned, just like her dreaded childhood, and she would not live that way. Torrin had promised to stand by her side, and she was holding him to his word, even if that meant her passing. Each day she faded further from life. When Esben looked at his mother he saw his wildflowers well into autumn. He knew the nature of the following season.

Even though most nights he silently cried himself to sleep, Esben laughed loudly as he stood before his symphony of wildflowers. They set him free. He swayed in the wind to mimic their way. He stood close to each bloom to appreciate its distinct scent. He pulled away the long grass from their bases, removed the withered leaves from lower on their stems, and caressed the fresh buds yet to bloom. Tending to his flowers was a gift of love. Although he gave of himself, he received so much more in return, as each wildflower came to life and coloured his world with magic.

He wished he could live amongst his wildflowers. They filled him with the joy of life. They made him feel as he had when he lived in a home full of love. But the cottage had long become dull. It had not been cleaned for some time and was in need of repair. But Esben was always so busy with his other chores. Most of his day was spent outside – but he did not mind that terribly. He had begun to feel bound by duty and had started to question his love. Esben was being drawn into his mother’s depression. He too felt alone.

It now saddened him to lay eyes on his mother. Her gaunt features and frail frame pained his heart. He was glad she could not see his tears as he encouraged her each night to eat just some of the vegetables he had boiled. She had become a stranger before his eyes. He wished for the mother he once knew. There was very little conversation. His mother just sat by the hearth with the shutters drawn and door closed. He once tried to air out the house but could sense his mother felt great unease. He stopped, for his true desire was her happiness.

If she still loved him, it was not apparent. But Esben loved her as best he could, and with all of his will he wished her well. He prayed to be reunited with the mother who showed him love. He had long asked his father in heaven to pull her from the darkness of her depression.

Esben often wished he could show his mother the pure beauty of the wildflowers. But she would never be able to walk the path, and even if she did, she could still not see them. Just a few years ago she would have loved them beyond words. She would have raced Esben along the path, laughing as he scurried past. She would have walked among the flowers and sung aloud to the heavens in praise. She would have been radiant. She would have held him tight and lifted him from the ground, spinning in delight. Then they could have sat by the edge of the stream, and chatted about the wonders of life while trying to catch a trout for their supper.

But Esben was scared. The clarity of his memories was starting to fade. When he thought of his mother and father together, her face would sometimes turn from the healthy, joy-filled, rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed and smiling vision he wished for, into the pale, grey eyed and frail woman she had become.

Esben sighed as he watered the wildflowers while lost in his thoughts. He wiped his brow. The day was warm. The flowers were in full bloom, but he was not. He gently shed a tear of sorrow. The wildflowers had never seen him paired with sadness before. The clearing was his place of joy. It was where he would rejoice in his life. But reality was encroaching on his sanctuary. His mother wanted to die. She did not want to live without Torrin, and soon they would be reunited.

And Esben thought of being all alone. He knew he would live with his Aunt Kailey ... but he would be without both a father and a mother. And they had both chosen to leave him. These thoughts became too much. The bucket fell from his grasp and spilled to one side. Esben fell to the ground amongst the wild-flowers and cried without reservation. His tears rolled freely from his cheeks and fell to the earth.

Esben wished it were not so. He banged his fist on the ground. He wished his mother could have found his love enough. He begged for his mother to be happy and healthy. He wished to hear her laugh. He wished she had the strength to walk the path and gaze upon the wildflowers – for he knew they would make her smile. But he continued to cry. He realised he would never again see his mother smile, and feared his memory of it would fail him. He prayed to his father. He did not want his mother to leave him alone, and pass on the same pain that she'd had to endure. Never had Esben felt such despair.

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He waded into the shallows of the stream. His heart was lost. His hope could not spread its wings. His tears had dried but eyes were stinging and red. He squinted as he looked to the mountains, and was struck by the clearest thought. Why could he not take a wild-flower to his mother? And for a second it all seemed so simple and clear.

But who was he to take the life of a wild-flower? His father had taught him to only take what was needed from nature, and never more. He had no right to steal such beauty from the world.

The chilled water ran over his feet. The breeze carried the scent of his flowers, and never before had he smelt them from so far away. The mountain haze seemed to lift from the horizon, and Mt. Florence appeared so clear. And as if his father had taken him aside to explain, he was filled with knowing.

The wildflowers had only grown – to see him bloom. They were only so beautiful, because of the love he had given them. They were a gift from nature – a reflection of his prayers.

If he were to pick one, it would not bring its death. He would be setting it free. If it were lucky ... it would be appreciated by others, and would live in their memories far longer than it would have bloomed on the stalk. Esben was giving the flower a chance to bloom forever. And he was sure.

He walked quietly to the edge of the grass near the cottage. He gently lowered the pails, making sure the handles did not rattle. He moved slowly closer to the only window slightly ajar. Without sound, he placed the single sunflower on the sill and walked back to sit on the fence.

He looked around the yard and thought of times past. He remembered instances of his parents together and smiled. He could hear their voices and laughter, and feel their touch. He wished again for happiness and love. He placed both hands over his heart.

Anika rocked gently on her chair by the heath. Her mindful thoughts had long faded to nothing. She was without care or earthly desire. All feeling had been suppressed, all sense. The time of day held no importance, but she wished for time to pass. She wanted just one thing. She was waiting for death. She was again expecting Torrin to reach out to her, and help her into another world, just as he had from the back of the cart.

And then he did. A distinct fragrance turned her head. Torrin had returned.

For in the days just before they were married, Torrin had ventured to a distant forest, where he had once seen a beautiful wildflower brighter than any other he had seen. It was a flower that gave the promise of a fresh start; a flower that conveyed thoughts of pure happiness and love; an eternal flower, forever giving life, through the warmth of the sun. He returned to the church just hours before the ceremony and decorated both the altar and the room with the light of the new day.

But as the scent captivated her attention, Anika was unsure if she had passed. Had she missed slipping into another world? She could feel Torrin near, but where was his hand? Anika carefully found her feet and balance. Her neglected body was fuelled only by hope. She shuffled her feet towards the scent. She slowly made her way across the room with her arms reaching into the darkness. The scent grew stronger as she could feel the slight breeze from the window against her face. Her nostrils filled her body with the sweet air. Her stretched arms pushed the shutters open.

She was washed by the wave of fresh air. She could feel the sunlight land on her skin. It had been so long since she had been kissed by the sun. She faced the outside world, but Anika was not afraid ... Torrin was close. Her time had come. Salvation.

She patted her fragile hands along the sill and found it – the stem of a sunflower. Was it Torrin’s hand? She was expectant. Her only desire was death. She had long searched for it in her mind, and now, it was before her. But as she lifted the bloom close to her face and took a deep breath, she was consumed.

Anika was overcome with emotion. Tears ran freely for all that she had cherished. Her senses were enlivened, her thoughts raced. She caressed the petals and continued to breathe the scent – her memories flooding with happiness, her body with joy. Was it death that felt so nice? She thought fondly of Torrin, their love, all they had, all they shared, all they had created. All they had created ... She stopped on that thought. Most clearly, she thought of Esben – their boy. Her heart screamed to be heard.

What was she doing? On which path had she walked? What was her desire? What would become of Esben if she took Torrin’s hand?

And everything changed. She pressed her face against the sunflower, for she wanted to merge with the power of the sun. She breathed deeply to fill her body. Each new breath brought life, each new thought brought life.

The tears continued, but for a different reason. She cried only for Esben. She just realised all that he’d had to endure. It all became clear. She was appalled to realize she had closed him from her life. She had shut him from her heart. She felt guilty of terrible sin and wished for a chance to repent. She begged for death to leave her be. She drew her hands close, away from Torrin’s reach. And the tears that had once washed colour from her life – began to slowly wash away the darkness.

Anika released her pain. Her heart accepted what her mind quietly knew. Torrin had passed. He died on Mt. Florence three years previous. Life had continued – but she had not. She had missed so many sunrises and sunsets, the beauty of each season. She laid the flower back on the sill and thought fondly of Esben. Loving him was now her only desire.

Esben had been watching quietly from the fence. He was used to shedding tears without sound. He was unsure of what had passed through his mother’s mind, but as she placed the sunflower back on the sill, she took one slow breath and smiled. Esben filled with the warmth of love. Triumph. The fire of his heart ignited. His wish had come true.

Just one smile from his mother and all of his pain fell away. He could not stay quiet. Energy jolted through him and he tried to catch his gasped breath through his tears.

And then Anika looked up ... His mother looked directly at him! Esben nearly fell from the fence as he realised she had vision. It had been so long since he had been looked at with loving eyes. He had forgotten just how beautiful it felt. For the three years past he could only guess if his mother loved him, and he had grown unsure. But her warm smile now melted every doubt. He wanted to laugh and cry. He did both.

She reached out her arms through the window and called his name. Esben felt as though he would explode from the inside. He jumped from the fence and ran to meet her at the door. He wrapped his arms around her in a loving embrace, to convey his love of all the years past. For the first time in years he felt like a child. It was now okay for him to be a child ... for he again had a mother.

Through his tear-filled eyes buried into her chest, he could not see her frail body, malnourished and gaunt. He could feel the strength of her spirit returning with each breath. Esben was hugging the mother who would chase him, laugh with him, and sing. Anika could not believe how her boy had grown. He was taller, stronger, and as he pulled back to again check her smile, his eyes reminded her of Torrin's.

She had missed the years. Esben had missed his mother. They stood for a long time, locked in a loving embrace. Anika picked up the sunflower from the sill to again breathe the sweet scent, and wonder at the marvel of nature. The family was reunited. The cottage was again home to love.

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Aunt Kailey feared the worst as she walked the last stretch through the orchard. Her heart ached with sorrow. She had seen Anika rapidly weaken with each recent visit, and did not know how many more weeks she would pass. But as she looked up towards the cottage she was surprised. A brilliant bloom of red grew at the foot of the fence. "What was it? What had happened?" And as she approached, she saw by the path swayed white flowers like none she had ever seen. She looked around in astonishment. Brilliant blooms of colour and fragrance were scattered throughout the yard. Esben was on the far side of the garden digging a hole, with amazing yellow blooms by his feet, ready for re-planting.

The cottage looked beautiful! Kailey was dumbfounded. She did not understand. The shutters were latched open, the front door swinging wide. And then she thought the worst. The bread she carried fell from her hand. Maybe her sister had died during the week. Surely it was the only way the house would be open. Esben must be decorating the house for death, to mark her passing.

But as Esben looked up he smiled. Kailey could see his inner joy shine. Esben glowed with the same radiance as the wildflowers. She dropped the books from her right hand and ran toward him for explanation. But Esben could only laugh as she hugged him and asked questions. The blooms of all the wildflowers slowly turned towards them. Kailey looked to the cottage. Was that the smell of fresh stew!? Yes.

“What has happened?” She continued to ask without an idea. Esben looked to the cottage and smiled. And Anika walked onto the veranda wiping her hands on her apron. She smiled lovingly as she looked their way. Aunt Kailey would have fallen to the ground if Esben did not hold her.

Anika walked towards them. She was still a shadow of the woman she had been, but her eyes were bright, her skin warm and red. She would fully return in a short time.

Anika looked around the cottage at the beautiful wildflowers in full bloom, and was thankful Torrin was by her side. “Would you like to stay for dinner?” she asked as she hugged her sister and her son. And Kailey was without words.

And Esben continued to laugh.

*The End*