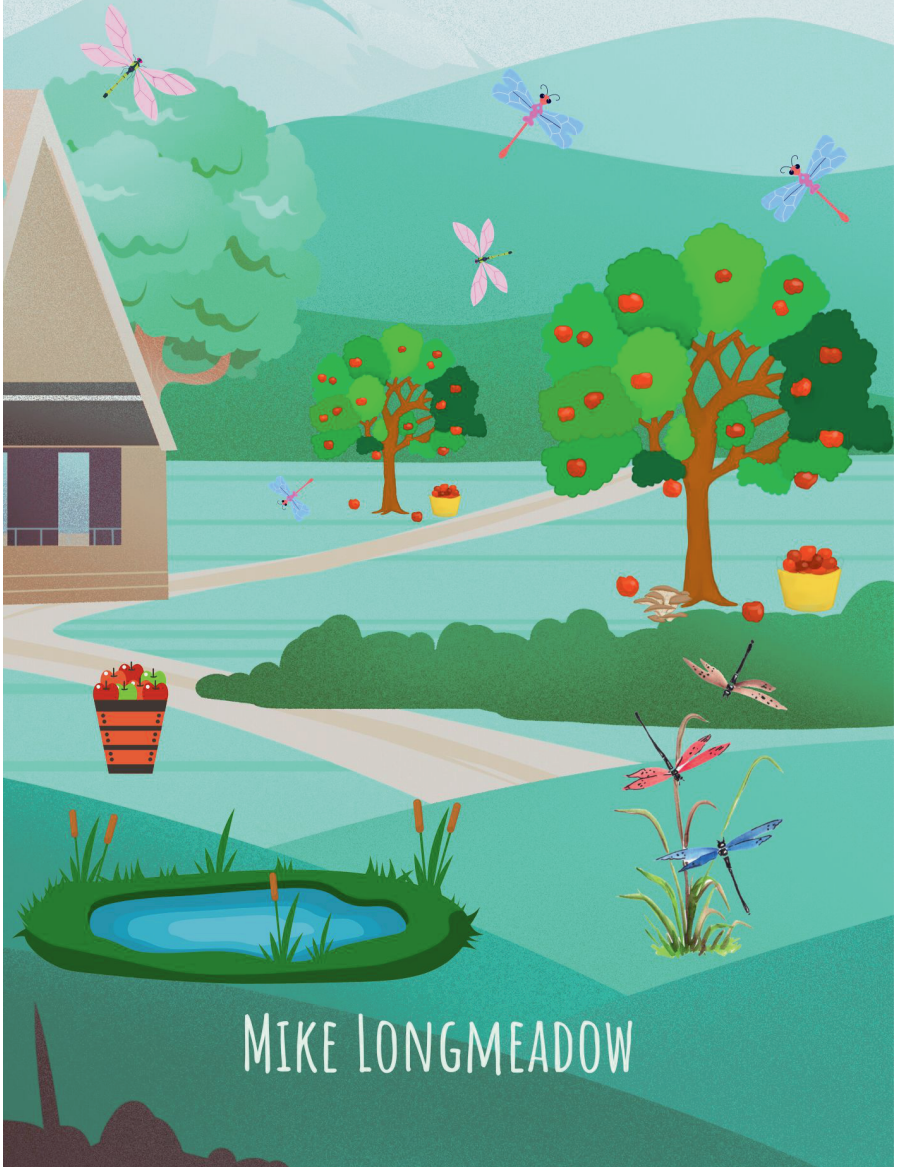


THE ORCHARD

A TALE FROM THE STORYROOM



MIKE LONGMEADOW

The Orchard

A Tale from the Storyroom

Karmic Publishing
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Published by Karmic Publishing

Cover Art by Canva

ISBN: Pending

Discover the orchard where Forrest grows up as he gets closer to finding out what is the promise he must keep.

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The Orchard: A Tale from the Storyroom

a new tale from the Storyroom. It is recommended to read "From Within" to get the full impact of this Tale.

Dedication

To my cat, who continues to supervise the process.

To my wife, who never judges the chaotic process I go through.

To my son and his family, who are true inspirations and fill me with pride every day the sun rises.

Acknowledgments

To all who still believe in a simple dream.

From Mike with Author Academy Elite

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Tales from the Storyroom

Birth of a promise

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The first few months at my uncle's orchard were spent in anxious anticipation. I had been led to a place they called a school, then pulled away from it. I lived in the city, now we were in the country. I didn't know what was coming next, and for reasons that were far too complex for me to grasp, Asteria hadn't shown herself since we got to my Uncle Ralph's orchard, and I felt alone. My heart and soul chose a path that led me to be worried and apprehensive about everything. My answer had been to stay in my room as much as I could to avoid as many uncomfortable situations as I could, which was pretty much every situation. My cousin Claudia was about the same age as me, but we barely knew each other, and she seemed to make a conscious effort to keep her distance from me and keep it that way. Since we've arrived, the only time she spoke to me was when we came face to face at the bathroom door. "Move." She told me. Which I did. It would be years before we spoke again.

My uncle Ralph was fun to be around when he was there, but he spent most of his days in a desolate shack behind the house. No one, except maybe my mother, knew what was going on in the shack, but it was clear no one was allowed in. Death awaits any who enter, said the sign on the door. I felt it was hyperbole designed for effect, and for me it worked. He would sometimes cook things in there, and the smell told me he was cooking mushrooms. I knew next to nothing about them save the fact they can be deadly, hence the sign on the door. I had other issues to contend with anyhow, so for months, I hung out in my room, looking out the window to try and see if I could catch a glimpse of Asteria. The fact my mother left me alone during this time encouraged me to keep doing it. If I was desperate to see her at first, in the end it gave me time to realize that life wasn't so bad around this place.

I slowly came around to the idea this place would be ours for a long time. One of the best things was that the orchard was too far from the school, even for the school bus. My uncle or mother would have

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spent most of their days travelling to and from school, so my cousin Claudia and I were home schooled with a self learning curriculum. The homework contained in the lessons was laughably easy, so we never spent much time on it. Without really realizing I did; I followed my cousin' lead. Her focus was entirely turned toward the orchard and learning how to make it work. Claudia focused her energy on the road-side shop, planning to make it a regional tourist attraction.

“We work too hard on the trees to make them produce; we can't settle on selling it at cost.” She would say. “We deserve the profit.” She would declare. “We need new ways to generate profits.” She would add while speaking of the possibility of turning an old decrepit shed into a preserve production shed. Uncle Ralph let her run with that, happy to let her take the reins of the place.

On my end, I dove in and tried to learn all I could about fruit tree maintenance. How to help them produce as much fruit as possible and keeping them happy and productive. How to keep the soil healthy and the pond clean. The more I learned about maintaining the orchard, the more time I spent outside. This lasted for a few years. I had grown to get to know each tree individually; I instinctively knew which branch to trim to keep the trees happy. It was during this time that Asteria returned. I couldn't say when exactly, but it did make me realize her absence had become a weight I was carrying around. It was mostly by way of my dreams, but I could feel her presence when a group of bees or dragonflies circled around me or sat by my windowsill to chill out. I knew it was her because I could hear music in the background, lazily floating in the air between moments of silence. The melodies she created could be perceived as chaotic and raucous, but they were so profound and mesmerizing at times I found myself unable to do anything else but listen. If I was near the pond and I focused hard enough, I could even make out some spoken words hidden inside the melody.

“We exist side by side. The same air flows through our lungs.” Was the most common phrase she sang to me during her daytime visits with her hive. In fact, it never really wavered from that message, except once, when she sang: “You stand where I stand, I walk where you walk.” At those words, I felt completely reassured and all my

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apprehensions disappeared.

Each spring after her return, I was witness to her call to the pollinators. In those moments, I think back to Jasper and Stephen and feel it would be perfect if others could see what I saw; it was a spectacular event to watch a forest Nymph do her thing. Over time, I learned to understand the intricacies of her method. I was far from being able to fully grasp the depth of her actions, but the more I observed her, the more I saw there was no unnecessary movement. A snap of the fingers, a wave of the hand, a nod of the head, all her actions were orders. It was always fascinating to then watch the trees in the orchard bloom following the bee's passage.

This newfound knowledge helped me get to know the trees even more; I learned how to recognize a good crop before there even were fruits on the trees. Over the years, my life had developed into a state that could be close to perfection. As I got to know the trees of the orchard, I was happy to be alone with the trees and Asteria, as far from people as I could without being lost in the forest. Caludia had told me I would soon be put in charge of finding the workers for the harvest, but that was yet to happen. Then, just as I was beginning to fully appreciate it all, everything changed. Again. It was a day like many others. Light clouds floated lazily in a deep blue sky, a cool breeze tickled the skin to help it stay cool. The orchard cats roamed silently between the trees, hunting the birds, whose songs filled the air while they kept an eye on their predators. On that day, Asteria came to me while I was awake without using her signature melodies.

That day, I took a moment to complete the day's homework, which didn't take long, then walked down toward the pond. My squirrel friend joined me, as it did often, and sat nearby to observe me while I settled in a shallow depression between two rocks to observe the orchard and decide what my next steps would be. I sat watching the squirrel watching me, wondering if it was following someone's orders by following me. I realized I'd never paid any attention to the times he did follow me and wondered if he was there only when Fey Folk activity was present. I promised myself to take notice the next times. That's when she appeared, floating over the pond.

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“Greeting to you, on this wonderful morning.” Asteria said, fluttering above the pond like a butterfly. “Does the surprised look on your face tell a tale of surprise, one that says you were not expecting to see me?” She asked with a playful tone.

I didn’t know what to say, I was elated she would choose to show herself while I am awake. I remember she had told me about her mission, that it was the reason for her capacity to show herself to me. Except she never told me exactly how she did it, and a small part of me still wanted to know how it was done, but still found myself unable to utter a single word. Besides, I was using all my concentration not to reach out and try to catch her. I badly wanted to hold her in my hands and see how the twigs that made up the core of her body were held together. While I weathered my mental storm, she had come closer and stood idly in front of me, waiting. I opened my mouth to speak.

“What should I have expected?” I managed to ask.

Asteria laughed and flew over to my shoulder. I froze, not sure how to react. She never came so close except maybe in dreams. She then dug in with her toes and began to pull me up toward the sky. She lifted me with little to no effort as we rose towards the lazy clouds. I was surprised to see there was no panic, no stress in my mind other than a slight feeling of vertigo. She pulled me towards the pond, and we hovered over for a few minutes.

The pond began to bubble, caused by the released of pockets of air from an underground source. The bubbling was constant, starting in one end of the pond and spreading until it covered the whole surface. Its rhythm was appeasing, and I looked around to see if anyone else has seen this, but I was alone with my squirrel friend. Then a team of dragonflies flew in from the far side of the pond, all landing near and around the sitting squirrel, accompanied by a few butterflies. All of them were focused on the pond, clearly expecting something to happen. A quiet piece of music began to fill the air and I let it come, ready to listen.

I only heard the one word, over and over. “Sleep, sleep, sleep.” I didn’t understand what it meant, “Sleep, sleep, sleep.” Before I could come to any kind of conclusion, I was overwhelmed by an

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uncontrollable urge to let my body slip under the covers of sleep. Then I was falling through the air, yet I didn't feel I was in danger. Asteria was right there by my side, diving directly towards the pond with me in tow. We dove in and found ourselves inside a complex network that was designed to direct the water from the pond to feed the orchard. Suddenly I found myself standing on solid ground, in the middle of a collection of underground tunnels created by the mycelial network with the help of their insect friends that directed the water to each tree, each blade of grass. Asteria was next to me, smiling. It felt as though my body hadn't moved, I could feel my bum getting numb, but I still knew I was in a completely different place. "You have not moved—you are here for a quick visit. Take a moment and look around you. The pond is still in front of you, we are still in the orchard, at the exact location you chose to sit."

I did look around, but what I saw wasn't the pond and the orchard. All I saw were strands of energy flowing where the trees should be. The energy flowed in tiny rivers, following the branches, and changed colors whether they streaming up or down. The crackling I heard as it flowed told me I should stay away. Where the pond should have been was nothing more than a dark abyss that sucked in any energy source that dared get too close.

"The pond is the source of all life." Asteria said. "It absorbs from above and gives back from within." She tapped me on the shoulder. "Reach out and touch the water."

I hesitated, but emboldened by the idea I might get some answers, I went for it. I got up and walked towards the pitch-black darkness of the pond. Barely a few steps in, a powerful energy began to pull at me. I tried to stop but my legs kept going and soon, my feet were wet. I could feel the water rise on my legs, which was strangely reassuring, but I still couldn't stop and kept walking until the water passed over my head. I could still breathe, and before I could understand what was happening, I found myself at the bottom of the pond, getting compressed inside a molecule sized spec of dust. I wanted to resist, but there was nothing my conscious mind could do.

"Let yourself go, you cannot fight the flow, let it take you deeper and

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show you the network.”

Asteria was in my head, speaking as clearly as if she was right next to me. All I could do to stop from losing my mind was to follow her instructions. I felt ready to implode, but I focused solely on her words and remained present in the moment, as she had taught me to do.

“You are invited inside the mycelial network, where you shall travel from deep in the ground then back up, to renew and replenish your mind and soul.”

Her words encouraged me to let go, and before I could muster any coherent thought, I was thrust through the bottom of the pond and began to burrow through the earth. Facing little to no resistance. For a moment, a sense of claustrophobia enveloped me and threatened to take over, but it was quickly pushed aside when a surge of pure energy shot through me, invigorating and overpowering. The energy kept growing, but I felt at ease with it. I couldn't properly see around me, but I instinctively knew I was travelling from one tree's root system to the next; I recognized each one as we passed through. The energy bursts were produced by a heartbeat that came from the Earth's core and by then I was happily basking in its power. Then I hit an underground water well and sank deeper into the ground.

This time, it didn't feel as welcoming. It wasn't soft, muddy earth waiting for me at the bottom, it was hard rocks filled with tiny cracks where water could seep through, one drop at a time. I hit the bottom and slowly felt myself getting pulled towards one of the cracks. The closer I got to the crack, the more my whole being was getting compressed. I started to panic, I couldn't breathe, worried that my bones would be ground to a fine powder. At the very moment I was about to lose my mind, I realized I was already enclosed in a drop of water and felt no pain. A sense of calm returned. If anything, it almost felt like being back in my mother's womb. I let myself get compressed and slipped through the crack with ease only to find more hardground that forced me to travel along thin filaments that were carved into the ground. I was deep inside the Earth. I could feel the weight of the ground pressing down as I continued to glide effortlessly—but slowly—along some

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miniature stream.

The air and the ground kept getting warmer. I could feel the heat rising around me but couldn't see anything as I was held in a ball, with my eyes compressed into my chest. I could only feel and hear my environment.

"Ready?" Asked Asteria.

"For what?" I replied with my mind.

She didn't answer and during the next millisecond of time, a powerful current of energy picked me up and shot up through the ground. I would certainly never know what it's like to take off in a rocket destined for space, but I felt this had to be close. I felt my body thrust upward and the heat kept rising as my body was trying to expand out of the drop of water, which happened rather fast. I was happy to return, but the sense of relief I felt from rising up from the depths was short lived because my body didn't stop expanding after returning to its normal size. I could feel my extremities melting away, turning to steam from the heat, slowly dissolving my body. I couldn't comprehend any part of anything that was happening, but just as I was ready to succumb to the depths of insanity, I reached the surface and was propelled back into the pond, where I found myself unable to swim as I floated up like a plastic toy boat.

"You may awaken." It was Asteria's voice, but I couldn't see her. I wanted to stay where I was for a moment longer, but my eyes opened on their own, and I was back in the orchard I knew. The trees were trees, and the pond was made of clear water. As promised, I felt rejuvenated and fresh. The squirrel that had kept me company was now sitting right next to me and didn't move when I sat up. It just looked at me with a sideways glance, seemingly waiting for me to say something.

"Thank you for staying with me."

The squirrel lowered its head, it somehow seemed disappointed.

"Saying thank you supposes he served you, which he did not. To mark your appreciation, you must say how it makes you feel." It was Asteria's voice in my head, but from a past dream conversation. She had taught me that when a Fey person offers something or their time, one must acknowledge it by way of a compliment or an

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expression of contentment. The squirrel had hung around, so I tried again.

“Your presence is comforting for me.” I told the squirrel.

It perked right up and gave me a quick nod, as if saying “I’m pleased,” before bouncing away happily. I watched it go while I tried to gain control over my confused mind although my heart was filled with joy.

Then a small flat rock skipped across the pond, making at least five bounces before sinking into the water. There was a guy standing across the pond. He was about my age, I think – I was now sixteen – and he ignored me, entirely focused on finding the next good rock. How long had he been there? And why wasn’t he acknowledging my presence? Was I still in some parallel part of the world and he doesn’t see me? He looked up and saw me.

“You look like you have a lot of questions. They’re all over your face.” Said the guy, casual and relaxed, as if we’d known each other forever.

I froze for a second, but he was smiling, and his relaxed demeanor quickly put me at ease. He was right, I had a million questions floating around my mind and I stood there, silent and looking confused.

“My name’s Clyde. I live a few miles that way.” He said, pointing behind him with his thumb. “Mister Ralph, the orchard owner, lets me come here to throw rocks whenever I want. But I saw you were taking a nap, so I waited.”

I was completely lost when it came to meeting new people. I had no idea what to say, what to do, and as I was doing right now, I would usually just stand silently and smile stupidly.

“What’s up? Is there something on my face?” Asked Clyde, while he passed a hand across his face.

His question pulled me back and I wanted to tell him I just visited the mycelial network, that I was the bearer of some mysterious promise given to creatures that were thought only to exist in our minds.

“Hi, I’m Forrest.” Is what I said.

“Nice to meet you.” Clyde walked over to my side of the pond and looked at me, furrowing his brows. He looked like someone who is

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looking for the right way to say something uncomfortable. I wanted to tell him about Asteria, about the homeless men who followed him in Montreal.

“Mister Ralph is my uncle.” Is what I said, muttering almost inaudibly.

“Ok, that’s good to know, I guess.” Clyde said. He was smiling now, which helped me relax a little. “I’m sure there aren’t many people called Forrest around here, you must be the one Jasper and Stephen spoke to me about.”

I was floored. I had given up on ever seeing them again. I wanted to tell Clyde about how I showed them Asteria’s power, that they might know what the promise is. “How do you know them?” Is what I asked.

“They were camped out at the old Fairchild farm. They were alone at first, then they were about ten people, but I haven’t seen anyone there in a while. We didn’t talk that much, but they did tell me they followed you here after you didn’t show up at school some years ago.”

I stared at Clyde, unable to process what he had just said. This meant Jasper and Stephen had been living on the abandoned farm for years. My mouth was open, as if I was ready to speak, but nothing came out. Clyde chuckled.

“They told me you’d be different. Look, just relax, I’m not here to judge. It’ll be nice to have another different person around these parts.”

I took a deep breath and looked at Clyde with intent. He didn’t react to my staring at him other than taking a seat on a small rock. Something told me I could trust him. I felt calm, confident. My mind was focused.

“There’s another world around us. Right here, right now. Most people can’t see it, but I can.” As I spoke, a group of dragonflies arrived and spread out in the trees around us.

“Ok.” Clyde said as he picked through the available rocks on this side of the pond. “You’re talking about Fairies, right?”

“Fey Folk, actually. They dislike the word Fairy, because it was a word born in a time when humans and Fey folk were at war.”

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The dragonflies beat their wings, which sounded like an applause.

“Ok, Fey folk.” He thought for a second. “And what do they do when you see them?”

His question threw me. What did they do?

“Well, it depends.” Was all I managed to respond.

Clyde looked at me sideways with his brow furrowed. It felt as though he was still deciding if he believed me or not.

“I get it, you don’t want to talk about it. I’ll leave you alone for now. Just so you know, you’ve probably had a lot of people laugh in your face, but I’m not gonna be one of those people. Guess I’ll see you soon... or not.” He started to leave, but I didn’t want him to. This was the first real conversation I’d had with a human in a long time—Since Jasper and Stephen, in fact.

“Wait.” My mind was racing too fast for me to put my thoughts together. “Don’t go.”

The dragonflies flew up and gathered around me. A soft melody began to fill the air.

“Be true to who you are, his heart is genuine.” It was Asteria’s voice in my head.

Her intervention was all I needed to relax.

“I am to fulfill a promise, but I don’t know what it is, and won’t know until it’s time.” I yelled out.

He looked at me with a smile.

“You know what, I choose to believe you. In fact, maybe you can help me. Last week, I saw someone near the pond that did not look human. Her hair was navy blue and adorned with red flowers, and her stark white skin had a blueish hue to it that was unnatural. When I tried to speak to her, she jumped and disappeared behind a tree before a giant shadow flew over my head.”

I was beyond excited. This was the very first time in my life that someone else had seen a Fey person—even if he didn’t know it was one.

“That means you see them too.” I said, hoping he had more stories to share.

“I don’t know about that, she could have been someone in disguise and the shadow she supposedly cast was just a cloud passing at the

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same time as she hid. I've never seen anything or anyone like that ever before or after."

I knew that it wasn't someone in disguise, because what he described looked an awful lot like the description Asteria gave me of her friend, A Fey Person she called Zanna. "But why would she hide?" I asked, hoping to pull out more information.

"I don't know, embarrassed would be my guess. Or maybe she thought I would have her arrested for some obscure reason." Clyde said, throwing his hands up.

He could be right, but I dared one more question. "Have your dreams changed in any way?"

Clyde's eyes became round with surprise. "Yeah, but only my nightmares. Since that day, I've had major nightmares that leave me exhausted and drained when I wake up. I need a few days to recover each time."

"Those are caused by something called a Mare. They enter your psyche and pull out any and all fears that are dormant."

Clyde chuckled. "Mares that cause nightmares, that's funny."

"They feast on the fear you produce. When they come to you, your only hope is to try and ignore their presence. They can only enter if you let them, and this happens when you acknowledge they are present." I explained. It felt nice to speak of the Fey Folk without being called out as an over imaginative child.

Clyde looked at me dubiously. "I don't know how I can control what I do in my dream, but I'll keep that in mind." He looked up at the sky, which his way of telling time. "I've got to go, but I'm sure we can talk more soon." Clyde said. He Outstretched his hand to shake mine.

"You're not like the others, I like that about you."

My heart was filled with glee; I had made an actual friend who was my age.

"You're not like the others either, you know. We can meet here if you want." I said, feeling my cheeks turn beet red.

"Good plan, we'll call this our board room." He said before turning to walk away.

I watched him leave, excited to tell my mother and Uncle Ralph that I had made a friend. They really seemed bothered by my apparent

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loneliness, and I knew this would calm them down.

“Still sneaking away from your work, I see.”

My cousin Claudia was standing with her arms crossed, her legs spread at shoulder length at the ready for a fight, and her dark brown eyes glaring at me. Her stance was perfect reflection of her capacity to be the epitome of organisation and efficiency. She had developed the roadside stall without missing a beat with the rest of the tasks of the house. She could work on her planning while doing a laundry run and making the schedule for the fruit-pickers without missing a text from her friends. Once she had something on her calendar, she did it. And there was nothing we could do to help—when I offered to take care of the laundry tasks, she just looked at me and scoffed.

“There’s no way no chance you can do it right, so no thanks.” She said. “Just keep doing what you’re doing with the trees.”

I had taken her last comment as a compliment and she was probably right, I would never meet her cleanliness expectations. No one was as perfectionist as she was, and she knew it. With her furrowed brow perfectly lined up with her bangs, she was giving me her best angry look, except this time I didn’t feel intimidated.

I locked my gaze with hers. “I’m not skipping work, I finished my schoolwork.” I tried to think of something to explain my presence here so she would leave me alone. “I came to the pond to make sure the water was still clean.” I said, trying to look confident.

Claudia sneered. “Yeah, right.” She took a breath. “I appreciate how you’re learning about tree maintenance, and I have to say you’re actually doing a good job. But that doesn’t mean you can just take a nap when you feel like it. Orchard life is hard.”

I wanted to tell her she already said this to me — multiple times — but I had quickly learned to let her talk when her mouth was pursed the way it was at the time.

“Ever since you moved here, you’ve shed your city lifestyle, it’s like you still think life in the country is all bird watching and relaxing. You’ve been here long enough to know this is as far from the truth as one can get. I mean look at you, you’re still so scrawny, how can I trust you’ll do all the work that needs to be done here?”

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Until that day, when Claudia gave me one of her speeches, it would knock me down for a few days, send me into a spiral of anxiety and self doubt. Her attitude towards me drove me to lock myself up in my room for days on end. But that was no longer the case. After meeting Clyde, I now knew there were people that could believe and understand me. And I now knew Jasper and Stephen were just across the field. But Claudia being who she was, she wasn't going to let go so easily.

"That guy you were talking to. Clyde is his name, I think. Stay away from him, he's nothing but trouble. Daddy wants you to take care of the fruit trees, I want to see you taking action, getting results, and doing it right."

"I'm working hard to learn; I promise you'll have bounties of fruit to sell at the stall."

That seemed to calm her, as she uncrossed her arms and started to turn to go back toward the house.

"We'll see about that." She said walking away.

After that day, Claudia let me do my thing and a few years went by in a quiet haze of contentment. I regularly went down to the pond to meet with Clyde. I enjoyed my walks down there, whether my friend was there or not. It was in the middle of the orchard, and armed with the knowledge it was the heart of this place, I knew I had to take special care of it. Despite the strange events that marked our first meeting, conversations with Clyde were generally mundane. I wanted to keep sharing more about Fey Folk, but felt I needed to wait for him to ask about it.

"So, you grew up around these parts?" I asked him once.

"I did, but also spent a few years at my aunt's house in Ontario."
Was his reply.

These were our talks in a nutshell, but still, it felt comfortable being in his presence. Although we shared very little during our talks, what I did understand is that besides Zanna, Clyde didn't see the Fey Folk. Which made me wonder if Zanna was purposefully letting herself be

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seen. And if that was the case, did she have a reason to do that? I would need to ask Asteria. Especially with the fact the Mares were close by, I felt I needed to dig a little more. As if hearing my thoughts, Asteria arrived on cue, riding on the back of a dragonfly, smiling broadly.

“Your thoughts beckon my presence, what ails your soul?” She asked.

“I have a question I need to ask.”

“Please do.”

“Does your friend Zanna ever come by the pond?”

Asteria seemed surprised by my question. The tiny dots that made up her eyes widened, and she tilted her head sideways.

“She does, and often. You require air to breathe, she requires water to exist. What has prompted such a question?”

I hesitated for a moment but felt a pressing need to ask. “Does she voluntarily let herself be seen by humans?”

Asteria remained silent, seeming to mull over my question.

“She does not.” She said, then added. “What did your friend see?”

I told her what Clyde told me, trying to remember as many details as I could.

Asteria took a deep breath. “I must leave, I need to explore your friend’s sayings. Your candor is greatly appreciated.”

Asteria rubbed her hands together, creating a vibration that danced along the air currents, and soon an army of dragonflies arrived. Still riding her own dragonfly, she led them away and soon they had disappeared in the woods, leaving behind only heavy silence. I kept my gaze fixed on the direction they left and decided I would try and follow them. Except I felt an irresistible attraction toward a trio of trees. They were not fruit trees, there was a birch and two oaks.

They were so close together it seemed almost impossible for them to freely grow, yet they did. Claudia had requested multiple times that we cut them down, but for reasons I did not comprehend – and still didn’t – I felt it was important to keep them. Now I had a feeling I would soon find out why I wanted to keep them. I edged in one step at a time, worried that what was hidden there could be a trap set by the Mares, or something as bleak. As I edged closer, there was no

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ethereal music, no magic fog, but I did feel a strong pull towards the middle of the trio of trees. I managed to keep my mind in check, which took all my focus. Just before a wave of panic was to submerge me, I saw it.

There was a small circle of mushrooms at the base of the three trees. A small spore cloud floated just above it, pulsing like a heartbeat. It stayed above the circle, ignoring the air currents, and was seemingly holding some kind of jewel in its midst. I moved in closer and saw it wasn't a jewel. It was some kind of opening. Like a tiny gateway. I could clearly see something on the other side of it, as if looking through a keyhole. I couldn't see much, but what I did see reminded me a lot of the dreams I had when Asteria "took" me somewhere with her. I decided to sit at what I thought was a safe distance and observe.

"Be wary of its lure."

It was Asteria, who was hovering on her mount behind me. To say I was surprised would be a wildly inaccurate understatement. I jumped up and spun in the air to land on my feet, my heart beating out of my chest and my skin breaking out in sweat. She burst out laughing, rolling back and almost falling off her dragonfly.

"A perfect human reaction. I am grateful for the laugh you have provided." Her laughter subsided almost instantly. "Yet my warning remains true, be wary of its lure."

I nodded to acknowledge her comment. My mind was blank, but I felt calm now that the shock of her apparition had passed. Without saying a word, I then turned my attention back to the cloud of pollen, but it had now dissipated. All that was left was a perfect circle of mushrooms, resting in a hollow between two roots.

"Is it related to my promise?" I asked, sensing this was a good moment to pry some information out of Asteria.

"It is, yet it is not." She replied with a half smile, which told me she was amused by my attempt to pry some information out of her.

Giving me no chance to add a follow up question, she changed the subject. "My search for Zanna's whereabouts has yielded no clues. I am therefore unable to see if your friend speaks the truth. In the near future, should you notice groups of butterflies around him, fear

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not, they are but my spies. His heart seems true, but I must explore his mind to ensure he hath no spell clouding his thoughts.”

Her remark made me laugh. “Clyde under a spell? I don’t think so.”

“Why so?”

“I couldn’t say exactly. But he doesn’t strike me as someone who is under the control of some unknown force. He’s too laid back.”

Asteria’s gaze was locked on mine. “My butterflies shall uncover all the truth.” She said.

On those words, she snapped her fingers, and her dragonfly flew up, soon joined by the others that were spread out among the trees.

Asteria raised her hand, and the moment she dropped it, they flew away and caused a burst of wind that made the leaves dance in the trees around me.

Clyde popped out from behind the tree line, and I tried to see if they left any sign of their passage so I could show him. He was looking in the direction the group had flown away.

“Should I have seen something just now?” He asked.

“Like what?” I asked, trying to feel out if he’d seen anything at all.

“Why did an army of dragonflies just disappear into the woods? I mean, the only explanation for me is Fey Folk activity.”

“The only explanation? You disappoint me, Clyde, to only accept one possibility.” I said, feeling rather playful.

He looked at me with a half grin, half sneer.

“Come on, man, don’t leave me hanging. You know I’m on your side, just tell me.”

Before I could push my teasing any further, the bushes moved across the pond and we both turned to look. The bush continued to quiver until it revealed shades of blueish hair that was peeking through its leaves. Clyde reacted by quietly sliding sideways to crouch behind a tree. The bushes moved again, and this time a woman rose to her feet. Her hair was a deep blue that seemed almost black, and they were adorned with flowers of an unusual shade of red—it was as if it was lit from within. The flowers were both dark and vibrant at the same time, with its black stem disappearing in the hair as if rooted on her head. Even from where we stood, we could feel the power of her gaze. I felt one look from her could reach into my soul and

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dominate me with no effort. Yet her facial traits were soft, almost angelic. She carried no trace of anger, and kindness radiated from her, and at that moment I knew I could trust her, this was no Mare. The woman looked around her to ensure she was alone, and when she was confident there was no one else, she stepped out from behind the bush and advanced to the pond. The bush she rose from was left undisturbed by her presence; it was like no one was crouched there a moment earlier. I looked over at Clyde, who looked back at me, his eyes big from excitement.

“That’s the same person I saw before.” He whispered. “I’m sure of it.”

I nodded in approval without saying a word and turned my attention back to the pond, afraid I might miss something. We hunkered down to make sure we were still well hidden. Her skin was draped with ink-colored algae that looked like tribal tattoos grafted on top of the skin. Her walked normally but her feet didn’t touch the ground as she advanced. The skin that was visible stark white and covered in a blueish-white hue that emanated from inside of her. This had to be Zanna, she was everything Asteria told me she would be.

The woman was oblivious to our presence, and stopped once she reached the pond. She started by delicately dipping her toes in the water, completely absorbed in the moment. She moved her feet in a circle but didn’t disturb the water as she did this. Her foot did create a small trail as it moved along the top of the water line, but it disappeared before any rings could form. As her circles grew bigger and bigger, the pond began to simmer. Bubbles rose from the bottom as if someone had turned on the heat underneath. I blinked, and suddenly it was boiling chaotically. Zanna stepped into the pond, letting the water rise to her hips.

Clyde wanted to move towards her and began to rise, his eyes wide from worry. I reached out and grabbed him before he could be seen. “It can’t be heat bubbles, let’s see what happens.” I said forcefully to which Clyde hesitated before slipping back behind his tree, his eyes fixed on Zanna.

We stayed put, our heartbeats the only thing that broke the silence with a synchronized beat that seemed to resound all around us.

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Soon, Zanna reached the middle of the pond, and by now it was frothing. But instead of burning her alive, the bubbles then began to move in an organized circular pattern and converged on her. The bubble mass kept growing both in size and opacity as it approached Zanna. Clyde's mouth was agape. He was clearly expecting disaster to strike. Now surrounded by a large mass of bubbles, Zanna stretched her hand out, reaching for a specific bubble that had climbed on top of the others and seemed to almost float above them. She slid her hand under it and brought it closer to gaze into it. She rolled the bubble around like a marble, handling it with skillful dexterity. It gleamed radiantly from its center. The rays of light rose from the bubble and bounced off her eyes before spreading into the forest and toward the sky.

Clyde looked at me with a confused look—I gave him a shrug of the shoulders. I was happy he could also see this, but it didn't help to explain what we were seeing. Zanna kept doing her thing, and she joined her hands, gently holding the bubble in the palm of one hand and raising it above her head. As soon as her arms were extended, the pond stopped boiling and the water began to swirl around her, following the patterns she has set with her toes. It began slowly, but soon the swirling water quickly became a powerful funnel that started climbing up her back. Inch by inch, her body was entirely enveloped by the water funnel. It looked like it was trying to reach the bubble in Zanna's hand. I couldn't make any sense of what I was witnessing—normally someone would drown under all that water, but I managed to hold myself back. Plus, Asteria did tell me Zanna needed water the same way I need air. Confirming this, Zanna was smiling as she let the water funnel reach the top of her head. That's when I noticed a group of butterflies had come to observe with us, filling an entire tree behind the pond. Some of them were turned toward the spectacle on the lake, while most of the others were watching Clyde. I looked over at my new friend, and he was still fascinated by the entire spectacle, so I kept that information to myself. The butterflies who were observing him looked like they were chilling, munching on leaves as they kept their eyes on him, which reassured me that Clyde was a good guy. I turned my

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attention back to Zanna, afraid I'd missed something important. When the water funnel reached her arms, it slowed down to a crawl, as if it was consciously being careful to reach the bubble with a soft touch. Its crawl was so slow it almost seemed as if it had stopped. After an excruciating few minutes, it finally reached it and leaned on it, an almost imperceptible sound arose from the middle of the funnel—which quickly turned into a deep, powerful cry. Its sound filled my soul with happiness and my heart with pain. I covered my face with my hands and was now looking at the event with just one eye through my slightly open fingers. The cries grew stronger with each second and I became worried that she may be in pain. Can you hear my thoughts, Asteria? If you do, what can we do to help Zanna? I asked with my mind, trying to push my thoughts outward. Getting no answer, I pushed those thoughts away. Even if I Asteria came to me and said I have to get up and help, I couldn't, my muscles were locked in the position I was in.

The cry coming from the core of the funnel now gave the impression there were mountains of speakers hidden in the trees. It was piercing, intense, so loud it forced me to cover my ears. It still carried the happiness and the pain, and it was unbearable to sustain. Then it seemed to spike, and sound wave from the final scream caused a spike in the air pressure that sucked the air out of my lungs and almost caused me to faint.

As suddenly as it had started, the water funnel fell back into the pond in a splash, revealing Zanna with her bubble still sitting in the palm of her outstretched hand. The smile on her face illuminated everything around her. She lowered her hands and the reflections of her smile bounced off the shimmering bubble, spreading rays of light in all directions. She then pressed the bubble against the skin of her chest, and it popped. She began to spread its invisible contents on her, as if she was spreading a cream, making small circles on her skin until she had covered her whole body. I felt my muscles relax and was again able to move. Seeing that Zanna was oblivious to any activity around her, I slid toward Clyde as quietly as I could. I wanted to ask him how he felt? What he thought we saw? I wanted to ask him how he thought this might play into my situation. I wanted to

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tell him I had never seen something like this. I wanted to say I loved how we could share such a momentous event. I wanted to tell him I saw something happening with the mushrooms earlier.

“Her name is Zanna. She’s a Fey person.” Is what I said.

Zanna turned at the sound of her name. She saw us and froze for a moment. She looked at me and smiled. It was clear she recognized me as she bowed her head in a slow salute, her gaze fixed on me. I was elated about this because it meant I had gotten one step closer to finding out what I had to do. All I knew was that Zanna knew who I was, and that didn’t say much, but I was happy to learn something new. Clyde moved silently to another tree, probably trying to flank her, although to do what, I couldn’t say. In response, she began to advance on us, her steps barely disturbing the water. I blinked, once, and she was gone. The only remnant of her presence was a large shadow that cast its long trail far beyond the edge of the pond. The shadow grew, then paused, before hovering above Clyde and me. Glitter streamed out from the middle of the shadow, landing on our heads, and in seconds we laid ourselves down for a deep slumber. My squirrel friend came snooping around. Its tail gently passed near my face and I awoke in a startle, and it jumped at least two feet back, flipping itself around as it flew, landing in a position of battle readiness. The squirrel looked at me sideways with one eye and the little black dot on his forehead was scrunched as if it was smiling. I felt sluggish, my mind was clouded by a thick fog that erased the last few hours. I looked around, part of me hoping Claudia hadn’t seen me sleeping, the rest of me trying to understand why we were laying here. I stayed put, hoping my mind would fight through the fog and reveal what happened. Clyde was still fast asleep, a small trail of drool leaking from the side of his mouth. Everything seemed normal, the sweet perfume emitted by the fruit trees filled the air. There was a constant buzz of bees coming and going. The only thing I felt was off was that the birds were silent, as if a storm was brewing. A memory then popped through the fog, showing me a single image, like a picture. Did the pond really bubble and froth? I must be confusing reality and a dream. I thought, trying to shake it off as imagination. The squirrel, who was now happily foraging nearby,

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stopped and looked at me. He locked his gaze on mine, and instantly, a flood of memories came rushing back—Zanna delicately taking a bubble in her hand, the boiling pond, the scream she made when ensconced in the water funnel. Clyde began to stir and wake up, and the squirrel ran off, leaving me in a confused daze.

“Um... Forrest?”

I looked at him and his confused look told me he was affected by the same fog that shrouded my mind.

“What just happened? Were you asleep just now?”

For an answer, I shrugged my shoulders then nodded. My throat was too tight to speak, barely letting in enough air for me to breathe. He continued.

“I can’t remember a thing from today, except for having breakfast this morning.” He said, sitting up. “I kind of remember fragments, as if I’d had a bunch of magic mushrooms.”

My mind was awash with the memories the squirrel had liberated, but that had left me petrified and speechless. I tried to look him in the eyes, hoping I might transmit my thoughts the same way the squirrel did with me.

“What? Do I have something on my face?” He asked, passing his hand across his face. “Why are you looking at me like that?” He stood up and stretched to break my fixation on him. “I feel like something important happened, but I couldn’t say what.”

“You’re right,” I said, “something did happen.”

“And?” He asked, throwing his arms up. “What happened?”

I wanted to say we witnesses a Fey person replenishing her energy, that we were witness to something no human has seen, ever. “I don’t know.” Was all I was able to answer.

“Ok then.” He said. “So, I’ll be heading back now, see ya soon.” He said walking away.

I watched him disappear behind the trees and felt a wave of gratitude that I could have a friend like him. He never questioned what I told him, or if he did, it was always respectfully. A feeling of pity rose in my heart – I was sad he couldn’t see what I saw. I promised myself that I would share more details about my experiences to help him possibly understand all this a little better.

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I looked around to see if Claudia was waiting to ambush me, and once I was sure she wasn't around, I got up to head back. For no other reason than to take my time, I decided to take the long way back by walking along the outer fence. I rarely, if ever, explored that part of the orchard, and today it felt right to head that way. The moment I popped out from the line of pear trees, I could see something was up at the old Fairchild farm. There were clearly some people sitting on the balcony, looking like they were relaxing with their legs stretched out and their head resting peacefully on a cushion. I accelerated my pace, curious to see who it might be. Was the farm recently sold? Did the Fairchilds return? My heart was beating faster with each step. If it was the Fairchilds, I could maybe find out what happened to my father. The excitement grew as I let a single idea float to the top of my mind. What if the person on the balcony was my father? The hope I could reconnect with him rose as I got closer, but was soon replaced by a different feeling. There were two people on the balcony, and the more they came into view, the more I felt I knew who the two people on the porch were. Then one of them waved at me. It was Jasper. And he still looked exactly the same as he did all those years ago.

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THE END

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EPILOGUE

Following Forrest's discovery that Jasper hadn't changed a bit after all these years, will he be able to stay focused and discover what is the promise he must fulfill?

Mike Longmeadow

About the Author

Mike Longmeadow is an author fascinated by the invisible realities that permeate our lives. He is a curious bookworm who's constantly looking to learn, discover new things that will augment his outlook on life.

This has led him to read and learn about a variety of past cultures and beliefs, which he then introduces into the here and now.

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