

The Vanishing Garden



Yavuz DEMİRKIRAN

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Maya loved her garden more than anything. Every morning she pulled on her yellow rain boots and green overalls with the sunflower patch. She picked up her little red watering can and stepped outside. But today, something strange was happening. The garden looked empty and still, as if all the plants were hiding. Even the flowers seemed to have tucked themselves away.



Maya walked quickly down the path, her boots going thump, thump, thump. She wanted to see the roses and the daisies. But as soon as she got close, the petals drooped and the leaves curled up tight. The garden felt quiet and shy, like a friend who didn't want to play. Maya frowned. Where had all the color gone?



She hurried to the old oak tree and peeked behind it. Zip! A little brown bird with a bright red breast flew away fast. It had a tiny blue feather tucked behind one wing. Maya sighed. Every time she rushed, the garden seemed to vanish. She sat down on a smooth stone and thought. Maybe the garden didn't like fast feet and loud steps.



Just then, she heard a tiny rustle in the grass. Maya froze. Out from under a leaf came a small hedgehog, no bigger than a teacup. It had a round brown body, a soft cream belly, and a single fallen leaf on its back like a tiny umbrella. The hedgehog looked up with shy dark eyes and a twitchy nose. Maya didn't move at all.



The hedgehog took one tiny step, then another. Maya stayed as still as a statue. She barely breathed. The little creature came closer, sniffing the air. Then it stopped right by her boot and gave a soft, happy squeak. Maya smiled very slowly. This was the first animal she had seen all morning. Maybe being quiet was the secret.



The hedgehog, whose name was Hazel, twitched her nose and looked toward the back of the garden. Then she waddled a few steps and stopped, as if waiting for Maya to follow. Maya stood up very slowly, careful not to make a sound. She tiptoed after Hazel, her red watering can held tight. The garden seemed to breathe again as they moved together.



On a low branch, the robin with the blue feather watched them. His name was Pip, and he was the garden lookout. He chirped a warning to the other animals: "Careful! Someone is coming!" But then he saw how slowly Maya walked. He tilted his head, curious. Maybe this girl was different. He decided to keep an eye on her.



Hazel led Maya to a mossy corner where the bushes grew thick. There, a tall figure waited, slender and green. His skin was pale like bark, and leafy hair fell around his amber eyes. Tiny mushrooms grew on his shoulders, and he wore a woven grass cloak with acorn buttons. He leaned on a wooden walking stick and smiled gently. "I am Old Fern," he said softly.



"You have discovered our secret," Old Fern whispered. "The garden hides from rushing feet. When you run and stomp, the plants pull in their leaves and the animals scurry away. But when you are quiet and patient, the garden returns." Maya nodded. She understood now. All this time, the garden wasn't vanishing. It was just waiting for her to slow down.



Old Fern lifted his walking stick and pointed to a gap in the hedge. "Behind those leaves is a sanctuary," he said. "A safe place for shy woodland creatures. They only come out when they feel calm and safe." Maya's eyes grew wide. A secret sanctuary! She had never seen it before because she had always been in too much of a hurry.



Maya took a deep breath and stepped softly through the gap. Behind the hedge, the garden opened into a tiny meadow. Flowers nodded in the breeze, and a small pond sparkled. There, animals were playing! Hazel rolled in the grass. Pip sang from a twig. A family of mice nibbled seeds, and a rabbit hopped nearby. They all looked up, but they did not run away.



Pip flew down and landed on Maya's watering can. He sang a cheerful song, and the blue feather on his wing fluttered. "Welcome," he chirped. Hazel nuzzled Maya's boot. The other animals came closer, curious and calm. Maya sat down slowly and stayed very still. One by one, the shy creatures crept out to meet her. She felt like the luckiest girl in the world.



From that day on, Maya visited the sanctuary every morning. She always moved slowly and spoke in a soft voice. The garden no longer vanished. Instead, it bloomed brighter than ever. Old Fern told her stories about the woods, and Pip showed her where the rabbits hid their babies. Hazel rode on Maya's shoulder, her leaf umbrella bobbing. The garden had become a happy, quiet home for everyone.



Maya learned that patience was like a key. It opened the garden's secret door. When she was calm, the animals felt safe. When she was quiet, the plants stood tall. She never rushed again. And every time she tiptoed outside with her red watering can, the garden welcomed her with open arms. The sanctuary was always there, waiting for her gentle steps.



One sunny afternoon, Maya sat in the meadow with Hazel on her lap and Pip on her shoulder. Old Fern leaned on his stick and smiled. "You see," he said, "the garden is a sanctuary for all who move with kindness." Maya looked around at her animal friends and felt warm inside. She knew she would always treasure this quiet, magical place.



And so, the garden stayed. It stayed because Maya had learned to be patient. It stayed because she had learned to be still. And in return, the garden gave her the greatest gift of all: a secret world full of shy, wonderful friends. Every day, she tiptoed out with her red watering can and whispered, "Hello, garden." And the garden whispered back.