“Sometimes since I've been in the garden I've looked up through the trees at the sky and I have had a strange feeling of being happy as if something was pushing and drawing in my chest and making me breathe fast. Magic is always pushing and drawing and making things out of nothing. Everything is made out of magic, leaves and trees, flowers and birds, badgers and foxes and squirrels and people. So it must be all around us. In this garden - in all the places.”

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For the first ten years of his life, Colin Craven had not shared a single thing with another human being. It wasn’t just spoiledness, not just a thing born of being shut up and shut away, not just of being the only child in a house of worried grownups who all thought he was to die at any moment. It was not just his large room or the many things in it he had no use for or his ample food portions he did not share. It was himself, his thoughts, his ideas. He supposes he had no one to share them with, no one to listen to fears or dreams or every day things, no one to want to hear anything but how his pulse was racing that day. So he kept it all to himself, and it turned a sort of sour and curdled anger.
Mary, the cousin he never knew he had, changed it all in what felt like a minute. She’d made him share by just being there, another child in the house, made him share with questions no one had ever asked before, made him share his home and his father and his servants and himself. It’s been three and a half years, and he’s still not used to it. Sometimes it’s still so strange. Everything about his life is still so strange to him. The whole world has changed, Mary changed his whole world, not just gardens and fathers and walking, she’s given him a future he hadn’t had growing up, and its one they’ll share. He thinks he’ll share the rest of his life with Mary, no matter what happens when they grow up. He’s still not entirely used to sharing.

They’re sharing today. Sharing growing up. Sharing a secret birthday. They’d had a formal party at the manor last week for Colin, a fancy dinner with fancy gifts, and the introduction of a new tutor for Colin, joining the household staff. This isn’t that. This is for them. It’s a thing they do, Colin, Mary, and Dickon, that they have for two years now, a secret night birthday in the garden that’s open to everyone now but still mostly belongs to them. It’s months from Mary’s birthday but they’d settled on the week of Colin’s the first year. (Because Colin’s birthday’s still feel like a victory, like an impossible thing he’s getting to do, even though no one has thought he’d die at any time in three years now.)

It been unplanned the first time. Colin can see Mary in his head telling them that she didn’t much care for birthdays because before, back in India, Mary’s birthdays had not been about her at all, but parties for her parents, that look on her face and hedging in her voice Mary always uses when she talks about her parents, even now. Dickon had been the one to say they should change it, have a little celebration with no adults around at all. The garden had seemed the only choice, the only place to go. It’s a tradition now. Part of the garden and the magic it holds for them. Colin looks forward to it, to sharing.

They sneak out at night still. It’s not as much sneaking as it was once upon a time, but it still feels like a secret. He meets Mary in the kitchen and they grin at each other. Her hair is down and her hands are in her coat pockets, cheeks already flushed. Martha catches them on their way out and smiles at them, shaking her head, eyes a little watery, and she passes them a blanket and a basket stuffed with food, just like she had the year before. She pulls them both into silent hugs, careful not the wake the rest of the manor, before waving them off and watching them run through the backdoor.

“Let’s run,” Mary says as soon as they’re a little way out. She’s still got one hand in her pocket and the other holding the basket from Martha. Colin clutches the blanket to himself and nods.

“I’ll get there first,” he says, and Mary is off running before he even finishes the words, her laughter hitting him as they run.

They’re out of breath when they reach the gate where Dickon is already waiting for them.

“You’re late,” Dickon says, grinning.

“It’s our party, we can’t be late,” Mary says, still laughing. Colin thinks that days ago, with the fancy dinner, that had been a party, but this is something else altogether, really. There ought to be another word, something else for the three of them pushing their way through the old door and down the stairs, building a fire and pulling out food, spreading out on the blanket, talking about one of Dickon’s animals who was ill but is recovering now thanks to time spent in the garden. Dickon thinks- there should be another word, something other than ‘party’ for this, for the tiny bit of magic Colin can’t help but believe in.

“I think,” Mary says after a bit, “that your tutor won’t last.”
“Why?” Colin asks, stretched out on the blanket and warming his hands by the fire.

“He doesn’t seem to like it here,” Mary says.

“Neither did you, at first,” Dickon points out, smiling at her. Mary shakes her head.

“Was different,” she says.

“I don’t see why I need one in the first place,” Colin grumbles, even though he does. It has been explained to him many times exactly why he needs a tutor, exactly what he’ll need to know one day when he’s grown and all of this is his.

“Martha said I might have to get one as well,” Mary says, wrinkling her nose like she’s never heard such a terrible idea.

“What for?” Dickon asks, throwing another stick on their fire.

“Well, she said that I need to learn a talent, painting or piano or French, so I can be married one day,” Mary says. Colin catches Dickon’s eye over the fire and they both shake their head at the thought of Mary sitting still long enough to do any of those things.

“You can plant flowers,” Colin says. He thinks that’s a more important talent than French, he thinks gardens and magic matter a lot more than piano.

“And tend to animals, now,” Dickon adds, laughing a little. It’s true, after so much time in the garden, around Dickon, Mary and Colin have both done more than their share of learning about animals and caring for them. Colin is certain he already knows more about the plants and animals of their part of England than any tutor they could bring in for him. He thinks Dickon is a better instructor than any grownup could ever be. Mary laughs then too, and then all three of them are laughing, at what, exactly, Colin isn’t sure. The whole idea of it all, maybe, because sometimes, on sunlit days or firelit nights the world outside the garden seems laughable, seems something they don’t need to concern themselves with at all.

Dickon pulls out wrapped parcels for each of them, a slow smile on his face as they tug the strings, and seeds from plants he’s found far away, far across the moor, spill onto their laps. He says it’s so they can add new things- more color, more life- to their garden, and again, Colin thinks that’s all they really need. They decide they’ll find spots for them tomorrow, when there’s more light, and then Dickon sings them a song his mother sings on birthdays, that he sings them every year. It’s one Mary and Colin know all the words to because Martha sings it too, separately on the birthdays they don’t share, softly, when she brings in breakfast.

It’s better this way, Colin thinks, it’s better when it’s a song they share, at this celebration that is not a party but something else entirely that they share. His eyes are heavy as he looks at their fire, in their garden, and he thinks about birthdays and sharing and growing up and life. He thinks about animals and Dickon, about songs and Mary, about it all. They’re all laying back, yawning, and the stars are bright as the fire fades. Colin thinks that once he might have made them promise, for his birthday, made them promise that if it ever got too much and too scary, if all those grownup things got to be too much, that they’d hide in the garden where no one would find them. He knows better now, and he knows they’d agree without question if he asked. He thinks that no matter what they do, no matter what, as long as they have the garden at all, as long as they have each other, as long as he’s not alone, as long as he’s still sharing, that it will be amazing. That it will be a lot like magic.
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