



ROOTS, BLOSSOMS, FRUIT

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I am planting a sunflower in the backyard with my middle daughter, Lilah, who is almost three. Her older sister is turning cartwheels a short distance away, and her youngest sister, only a few months old, is snoozing in her bouncy seat in the shade of the back deck. It is a rare moment of peace.

I'm not sure whether the seeds are still good, but we drop a couple into an impression in the dirt inside a small pot, and then I show her how to gently cover them with soil. Together we water the seeds. Her curls catch the sunlight as she makes a run for the bright, plastic slide nearby so she can yell, "Mama, watch me!" and leap then tumble onto the grass.

When I was pregnant with Lilah, the friend who hosted our baby shower gave out small sunflower seedlings as gifts to the guests. We brought a couple seedlings home with us, but they were quickly lost to the chaos of a new baby and,

shortly after, a move into a new home. Another friend grew hers into mammoth summertime blooms, though, and she has saved the seeds each year, eventually passing along this handful to us this past winter.

I have tried to put down roots. Though I am not always sure I am succeeding, I keep trying.



I got married in my early twenties on a mountain in western Maine. We bought a small house with a few acres of land, and we did our best. I planted rhubarb, asparagus, and a big vegetable garden. We also planted three little apple trees. We swelled with pride as we dug in and fixed up our little piece of land.

Each spring, I waited to see if this would finally be the year the apples blossomed and bore fruit. I followed the instructions and enlisted the help of a friend who had experience

in such things. The trees were healthy, robust even, and they grew, but as each spring came and went, the apples did not bloom.

They did not bloom the spring after my husband's brain tumor diagnosis at age twenty-seven, nor the spring after our first daughter was born, nor the spring of the second brain surgery. They did not bloom the spring after the first chemotherapy failed, nor the spring the proton beam radiation caused my husband's brain to brutally swell against the confines of his skull. Despite my years of desperate begging through dark winter nights, they did not bloom at all before he died, on the second day of spring, many years after those little trees were planted.

Our first daughter was three years old at the time, and I struggled to explain life and death to her, what we could see and what we could feel. Permanence is hard for young children to understand, and so too the delicate line between here and there.

Once the snow receded later that same spring, we planted a cherry tree for Daddy in the backyard. It lived for a year and then, inexplicably, it died. Then I forgot to wrap the apple trunks that following winter, and we lost one to rodents who girdled the bark of its slender trunk. The two remaining apple trees continued to thrive, but there were never any of those delicate pale blossoms, no intoxicating spring scent, no fruit.

Nine springs after we planted them, just as I prepared to sell the little house and leave that beloved land, the apples broke out in bloom. I was grateful . . . and heartbroken.

I had spent most of my twenties caregiving and grieving. I never thought I would get married again or have more children. At first, I thought that maybe it was possible, maybe there was still time, but it just didn't seem to be in the cards. I worked hard to overcome that loss. As I grieved my dead husband, I also grieved that there would be no more babies. Eventually, I came to a place in my grief where I was at peace. But life had other ideas.

As our expanding family settled into a new house, my new husband and I honored my perhaps foolhardy tradition and we planted three little apple trees. He has always taken great care to make space for both my grief and my dreams.

In addition to the apples, we planted rhubarb and blueberries and asparagus. We added elderberries and bee balm. We let the wild blackberries take over the previous owner's ornamental garden. Along the edges of that same ornamental bed, I planted a mint variety rehomed from the garden at the old house.

The new apple trees have been nibbled heavily by the local deer. I had to transplant the rhubarb to a spot with a little more sun, and then to another spot when we decided to put in new raised beds for vegetables. And one of the elderberries had to be replaced after it didn't make it through its first winter. My eldest daughter and I talk about planting another tree for Daddy, but we haven't attempted it yet.

Now, a few weeks after Lilah and I planted those sunflower seeds, I press the trowel into the soil and make a hole. Lilah is helping me plant her seedling in the ground. When we gently turn the sunflower out of its pot into my open hand, I show her the network of pale, thin roots that has amassed throughout the dark soil. We carefully transfer the plant into the ground, and I explain how the roots can expand now, and the sunflower can grow tall and strong.

My life looks very different than I imagined it would fifteen, ten, even five years ago. As I have grown older and life has altered my course, I have had to redefine for myself what it means to put down roots and what it means to succeed.

We have three beautiful girls. We have this earth beneath our feet. I know I'll be patient with these little apple trees, and I'll try to tend them well. But even if they never bear fruit, and even if they never bloom, I will hold these roots close to my heart and be grateful for the dream. ✨