

The Way of Zoë

*Methought the billows spoke and told me of it,
The winds did sing it to me,
And the thunder, that deep and dreadful organ pipe. . .*

-William Shakespeare,
The Tempest

Once, in a little mountain hollow, there lived a young girl by the name of Delores. She was not specially beautiful, except in the way that a kind heart is beautiful, and she was not witty, nor charming, nor rich, nor any of the other things that men seek after. She seldom laughed (for she had known much sorrow in the world), but her smile was as warm as the sun on the bright yellow daffodils that grew in the meadow in springtime.

Her father had died long ago and left his family quite poor, with only the little plot of land and the little white house in the dell. Her mother sold sachets of herbs in the town, and this was how they lived.

And so it was that Delores would often walk alone through the fields and the forest in her little bare feet and her old blue print dress, to gather flowers and herbs for her mother. And often as not, her tears would fall freely to water the bouquet she carried.

"What is it that hurts you so much, Delores?" her mother would ask sometimes, for she was a tender and gentle old soul.

"Oh, mama, I wish I could tell. . . but all I know is how sad all the pretty things seem," Delores said. And this was true (for she was a truthful girl), but there was more to the ache in her heart than that.

She *wished* for something. . . but she never could see what it was. A formless and bittersweet longing possessed her, which nothing seemed to satisfy; it was a hope with no object she knew of, but still she couldn't let it go. And when something appeared, like the golden spring flowers, to remind her of this unknown thing, the tears welled up with a life of their own.

She could not have found words to explain any of this without feeling very foolish and (even worse) distressing her mother with a burden that no one could help. So Delores kept her thoughts to herself, and let her tears fall only in solitude. And if now and then people noticed her sadness and silence, they had the good grace to say nothing about it.

Years passed in this way, and then one day while she walked in the woods on a cool early morning in March, with a little clutch of daffodils clasped in her hand and a

light breeze tickling the nape of her neck, she came upon a dove lying still in the path. She saw feathers scattered round, and his wing bent back at an awkward angle, broken. Perhaps a cat had been after him, she thought. She felt an instant pity for the poor thing, and if her cheeks had not already been wet they soon would have been.

Delores carefully picked him up, feeling his heart beat so rapidly she feared it would burst. He trembled in her hand, but her tears washed the dirt from his wing, and in a moment he stretched it forth, unbroken after all, and flew to a nearby bush. Delores was so startled by this that she forgot to cry.

"What happened?" she wondered out loud, staring at the bird curiously.

"With your tears you have healed me," the dove said to her in a piping little voice that reminded her of whistles. Delores had never been spoken to by an animal before and didn't know quite what to think, but she smiled timidly.

"Come follow me!" the dove urged her, and turned to fly away. Delores took a small step after him, then another, and after that it was easy to go on.

She had lived in the hollow all her life, but the dove soon led her into places she did not recognize at all. After a long time they came to an old stone wall, weathered and crumbling in places. There didn't seem to be any way to go on, so Delores stopped in front of it.

"Come on, come on!" the dove called to her from a perch atop the wall, bobbing his head encouragingly. Delores looked up at him, frowning.

"There's no gate, and the wall is too high for me to climb," she told him, a little crossly.

"You have to find a way to go on, child, and when you do you will be glad," the bird promised her. Delores considered it, and with a sigh began piling loose rocks against the wall. Soon they were high enough to let her scramble up on top, and what she saw on the other side astonished her.

A wild and weedy garden stretched as far as she could see, full of flowers and trees and little rock paths that seemed to lead nowhere, with stray blades of grass pushing up between the stones. One of the trees grew quite close to the wall, and after a moment Delores gave in to curiosity, climbing down the trunk to the ground.

Now she could see that of all the flowers in the garden, no two were alike, and every tree was a different kind. And there were butterflies, too- a thousand colors and shapes, that danced in the sunlight all around her. She held out her hand and a bright blue one settled there, tickling her finger. Delores smiled with delight, enchanted.

She took another step on the little rock path, more confident now, and looked for the dove. He was nowhere to be seen, but Delores soon spied something much

more interesting.

Not far away grew a Tree so magnificent that it immediately made everything else in the garden seem dull and ordinary in comparison. Its bark was silver-gray, and upon it grew the reddest, most perfect apples you ever imagined. Delores didn't stop to think how strange it was to see apples ripe in March. The beautiful Tree attracted her powerfully, and she set out to reach it at once.

It was not as close as it had looked, but as she walked Delores began to observe that everything in the garden was arranged around that one Tree. What had looked like wild ruin from the outside began more and more to reveal a kind of order she had not suspected was there. And there was something else, too.

It was so subtle that she did not notice it at first, but the closer she came to the Tree the stronger it became, and when she touched the smooth silver bole even her sad young heart could feel it. There was joy in the garden, so full and so deep that it was simply impossible to have a sad or a fearful thought while you were there. There was no room for those things any more; the joy had washed them all away. She who had so often wept at the bitter longing in her soul now felt her heartache fulfilled, and all her sorrow dissolved away like salt in cool water.

Delores might willingly have basked in the sweet and loving shelter of the Tree forever, but after a little while she remembered her mother, sitting at home in her rocker, waiting patiently for Delores' return. It was long past time to be home.

The garden was very, very quiet, except for the faint rustling of the wind in the leaves and the grass, and when her hand left the trunk of the Tree the thought of leaving seemed suddenly unbearable. Tears filled her eyes when she took the first step, though the honey taste of joy still wrapped her about. The idea that she would never touch that happiness again filled her with desolation sharp as splinters, for she knew she would never find the way without the dove.

Before she had gone another step he was beside her.

"Don't cry, beloved child. No good thing is ever lost. I would never have brought you here otherwise. Someday I'll come to you, and lead you here again. But go now, take an apple from the Tree, and as often as you hold it in your hands, then sadness will never touch your heart any more," he whispered.

Delores thought of that, and smiled through her tears. She reached out for one of the bright apples, and plucked it from the Tree as the dove had told her.

At once the garden vanished from around her, and she found herself standing alone, high up on the mountain, with the hollow spread out like a green pool of velvet at her feet. The wind was blowing, and the faint scent of pine needles wafted up from

below. She could almost believe she had imagined the dove and the garden, but when she looked down she saw that she still clasped the red, red apple in her hand.

Delores smiled, softly, and set off down the mountain with a spring in her step and fresh color in her cheeks. And she began to sing as she went, in her high clear voice, the merriest tunes the old hollow ever heard. She was beautiful then, with all the sweet beauty of goodness and joy.

Many years passed for Delores in happiness, and sorrow could not touch her, nor anyone she loved. The apple stayed fresh, and red as the cardinal's breast, and whenever she touched it the joy of the garden surrounded her again.

And when she had grown to be a very old lady, and lived all alone in the little white house, with fingers she barely could clasp in prayer, there came one night in March a slight sound at her door. She opened it slowly, and there in the warm spring night was the dove.

"I've waited for you, always," Delores whispered, and picked him up tenderly in her frail old hands.

"Will you come with me, child, to the garden again?" he said to her softly. Delores smiled quickly and said "Yes. . . oh, yes."

And the dove led her off through the sweet woods and meadows, where the pines and the daffodils grew, and somewhere a path began that led far away.

And behind them, unnoticed in the little white house, the red, red apple faded slowly to nothing.