

SLEEP

By Colin Thompson

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AT THE END of a quiet street, at the edge of a large town, stood a beautiful old house. The honeysuckle grew high around the walls, and the paint curled up at the edges of the windows. Behind the dusty glass, dark velvet curtains brushed against a forest of cobwebs, and at the back of the house, a wide lawn led down to a tangle of fruit trees and a forgotten pond.

At the top of the street the traffic hurried by, but in this short road that led to nowhere it was peaceful and quiet.

Around the house and lawn, tall trees and thick bushes grew wonderful and wild with birds and creatures and insects that flashed in the flickering sunlight. Hedgehogs slipped beneath overgrown branches, watched from the cellar windows by dark brown rats. Mosquitoes hovered over the lawn in the misty haze of summer, and from beneath the eaves of the house, swallows swooped down to catch them. At the bottom of the garden there were rabbits and in the tops of the trees there were squirrels.

An old lady and an old dog lived in the house. They had lived there all their lives. The old lady had been born there when the house had been bright and new and full of people. With her brothers and sisters she had run through the rooms, and every corner of the house had been full of sunshine and laughter.

Everyone else was gone now. Her mother and father had died a long time ago, and her brothers and sisters all lived far away in other towns.

She had lived all her life in the house. They had grown old together. Twelve years ago, her nephew, who thought she might be lonely, had bought her the dog. For the first time in her long life the old lady had someone who needed her. And for the first time in years the house was filled with words as she talked to her new friend.

“Shall we go and pick some flowers?” she would say, or, “Time for a cup of tea, I think.”

Every morning the old lady opened the back door and the old dog shuffled out into the garden. He sniffed the dustbin, lifted his face to the sky to catch the smells of the day and then set off around his territory.

“Morning,” said the weasels, as he passed their hole in the wall.

“Morning,” said the dog, as he ambled by. “Nice day,” said the mole.

“It’s raining,” said the dog.

“Yes, but it’s nice rain.”

The dog was always surprised to see the mole. No matter what time of day he went around the garden, she would be there, just coming out of her hole. What he didn’t know was that she was lonely and listened for his footsteps across the lawn. She thought he was wonderful, and as he walked across the grass she scampered beneath him in her tunnels so that she could pop up as he went by.

“Morning,” said the dog to the old chicken, who lived in a box at the bottom of the lawn. The chicken was even older than he was and when he went by, she was usually fast asleep and didn’t answer.

As he passed the dark wooden shed where the lawnmower and the deck chairs were kept, he pushed his nose into the hole where the hedgehogs lived.

“It’s raining,” he said into the dark space under the shed. His daily weather report was usually met with sleepy grunts. Most of the hedgehogs slept all day, particularly if it was raining. Some of the young ones were often about, snuffling in the dandelions for slugs, but it was very rare to see an adult hedgehog before mid-afternoon.

The dog moved on to the bottom of the garden where there was a rusty car that had once taken the old lady to school. Now it was full of ferns and mice who lived behind the dashboard.

“I do wish he wouldn’t do that,” they said, when the dog lifted his leg against the front tire.

“I know,” said a sparrow, who had built her nest in the glove compartment. “It lowers the tone of the whole neighborhood.”

As the dog walked under the tall sycamore trees, the crows that nested high up in the top branches called down to him.

“Good morning, dog,” they cried.

“What? Who said that?” said the dog, looking around. It was the same every day. He never thought of looking up towards the sky, and he had begun to believe the trees were haunted. The crows thought the dog was stupid and shouted to him each day as a joke.

Past the car was the rabbit warren. The dog didn’t know what to make of the rabbits. He was a gentle, quiet animal, and the rabbits were loud and rough, not at all like rabbits are supposed to be. Large eyes peered out of the holes as he went by. Rabbits are supposed to be frightened of dogs, but these laughed and whistled and he kept away from them.

He ambled through the orchard, sometimes eating a fallen apple, before coming out onto the lawn again and wandering up to the back door where he sat and barked until the old lady let him in.

On summer days the old lady opened the French doors at the back of the house and the dog came out to lie in the sunshine. He lay in the middle of the lawn and got hotter and hotter until he was panting like a steam train. Then he would go to the pond for a drink and come back to lie under the bushes.

“You know,” he said to a hedgehog, as they lay together under a gooseberry bush, “My human’s amazing. I’d swear she understands my every thought.” Across the lawn, the old lady was sitting by the open door knitting a blue blanket.

“Yes,” agreed the hedgehog. “She’s almost dog-like.”

“You’re absolutely right,” said the dog. “I mean, look at her now. How does she know my favorite color’s blue? Yet there she is, knitting me a blue blanket.”

“She’s a great credit to you,” said the hedgehog. “You must feel very proud.”

“Well, one does one’s best.”

When people and animals get old, they need to be cared for. Houses are the same. But as gardens grow old, they become more beautiful each year. The less people interfere with them, the better they become. If a tree falls and someone clears it away, it’s gone forever. If it’s left alone, it becomes home to thousands of insects and creeping plants. Fungus grows, and the tree slowly melts back into the earth to feed new trees.

When the old lady and the house had been young the garden was already full of ancient trees. Her father had planted more and now they were fully-grown.

Beneath the trees and bushes, weeds grew thick in tiny jungles. Nettles and dandelions brought butterflies and birds to the garden, and behind the secret leaves mice and frogs lived hidden lives. When the old lady's nephew came he cut the lawn, but apart from that the garden was left to grow its own way. All around, the other houses had neat, tidy rows of flowers, sprayed and weeded in lifeless earth, but here was a complete world where nature lived unharmed.

The lily pond was hidden behind overgrown raspberry canes. The vegetable garden had disappeared under a carpet of grass. When she had been a little girl, the old lady had planted radishes there, in between her father's lettuces. Now even the brick paths had vanished under a coat of moss. Nature wrapped the whole garden in a beautiful blanket and then started on the house.

"That's nice," said the old lady, when she saw little trees growing in the gutters and ivy creeping across the window sills.

The dog was very old now, and as the summer passed he grew slower and slower. He slept more and more, and his dreams of the days when he could jump and play grew faint and quiet. His rubber ball lay behind the armchair collecting dust. The air around him grew still and weary. Nature sighed and waited. The wind slammed the door unheard, and the sweet smells of the garden flowed over him unnoticed. In the garden, the animals passed the open doors and saw him lying there far away in his peaceful silence. The mole waited quietly in her tunnel, but he no longer took his daily walk. As the first gold leaves of autumn began to fall he climbed into his bed and went to sleep forever.

He was buried beneath the red apple tree that the old lady had planted as a child, and when her nephew had smoothed over the sad little mound and put the spade back among the dark cobwebs and broken deck chairs in the garden shed, they went back to the house and packed her bags.

"It's time for a change," she said, and went to live by the sea.

The house stayed behind and went to sleep.

The lawn grew tall and thick and crisscrossed with the tunnels of animals that had grown up in the shadows and now came out into the open. The creatures that had hidden in the cellars moved up into the empty rooms, and as the years passed, the wild garden grew wilder until house Number Fourteen lay hidden behind a wall of green.