

FICTION



THE GRIEF GARDEN

I will never forget the day my journey of grief began.
The bewildering loss, the struggle to breathe.
I was left gasping while the world around me
moved on, oblivious that mine had stopped.

by CHRIS FABRY

THEN CAME THE DOUBLE WOUND. The words spoken, meant to soothe and salve my heart but which were salt in the fresh wound. The words that didn't come were hurtful, as well. The name no longer spoken. I believed no one understood. I believed I was alone.

A year into my wandering, my friend Melody called early one morning and asked me to join her. I remember the aroma of freshly brewed coffee in her kitchen. She was 10 years ahead of me on the grief journey, and immediately I knew she saw what others did not. Pain. Struggle. Doubt. She saw my questions and the fear of being wounded again.

"Let's take a walk," she said, and with steaming mugs in hand, we stepped into dewy grass that stained my shoes. She led me on a well-trod path into the wood behind her house, the trees a canopy overhead.

We walked several minutes until we came to a high, stone wall with a weathered, wooden gate. I stared, trying to comprehend.

"This is my garden of grief," she said gently. "Come in."

She opened the heavy door, and I saw early light on forget-me-nots by the entrance. The brilliance of blue and white in sunlight was like a dappled

dream. I noticed some flowers were close to the ground, as if someone had stepped on them and they hadn't grown back.

"I have different sections of my garden, stations, if you will. There are places where I come and remember. Sometimes with tears. Sometimes with laughter. Here by the forget-me-nots, I simply recall what was. The joy I had with my son. The smiles we shared. The warmth of love. And I let the pain and sorrow and joy mingle."

She led me straight ahead to a trellis that hung heavy with brilliantly red roses. The aroma was sweet and heavy.

"This is where I grieve what will never be.

The roses are beautiful, but there are also thorns. My son is locked in time, forever 12. So I grieve that and all that cannot be."

I heard a gurgle of water, and Melody led me to the far corner where a fountain spilled water into descending stone cups. The sound was intoxicating, calming, and we sat on a bench and listened.

"This is where I bring my tears. I used to apologize to God for them. I used to think they offended Him, that tears were like unbelief or distrust. I thought success was getting to a place where there were no tears. But now I believe I worship God with them. He's not offended. He cherishes my



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tears because they tell the truth. Something good is gone. The tears acknowledge that, so I carry them wherever I go.”

“So you don’t get over your loss?” I said. “You never get over the pain?”

“The loss is part of who I am. It’s what I carry. Moving on would mean forgetting someone I loved. And what I’ve found is the weight has somehow lessened. Perhaps I’ve become stronger?”

The water wasn’t the only sound. The birds sang from the trees. There was such life surrounding us in this place of grief. And there was a palpable peace.

“I never wanted this garden,” Melody said. “But God brought it into my life.”

“I want one,” I said. “I think this is what I’ve needed.”

Melody turned and studied my face. “I’m glad. But I have to say something difficult.”

The look on her face unnerved me. “OK.”

“I’ve allowed people here who trampled the flowers. They haven’t been patient with me or with how long it takes to process these feelings. So it’s your job to protect your garden.”

I stood and glared. “I’m grieving, and I’m the one who has to do the work? That’s not right! Someone should be caring for me.”

She nodded, then patted the bench beside her and waited until I sat.

“People who trample don’t always see what they’re doing. The verses they give, the way they try to push you further than you can go — they can’t experience your grief or understand it the way you do. So this becomes your sacred space to manage. And there will be people you invite here who simply don’t belong. They’ll bring more difficulty and pain. You may have to exclude good friends or even family members for a time.”

My mouth dropped. “Family?”

“Not to cut them out of your life, but to put a boundary so you can care for the garden God has given you to steward.”

I stood and wandered a little farther toward the back wall, arms crossed.

Melody followed. Finally, I turned. “How do I know who’s safe? How do I judge who can come here?”

“You won’t be able to at first. But with time you’ll discern who is safe.”

“It sounds exhausting.”

Melody touched my shoulder. “Let’s say you tell someone about the loss. And the person asks what happened. She wants the details of the accident. It’s understandable she would want to know that. But another person hears of your loss, and she becomes quiet. And then she says, ‘I would love to hear more about what you’ve been through. Tell me whatever you’re comfortable sharing.’ That person shows interest but isn’t trying to fix you or uncover details you’re not ready to share. She lets you be in charge of the story.”

“That makes sense,” I said. “The worst thing is having to rehearse what happened over and over.”

“Ten years ago, I was learning how

to walk with this, carry my son who had died. Nothing seemed normal, and people were coming at me and saying things like, ‘God needed him more,’ or ‘Everything happens for a reason.’ And I realized I had to give grace to those who stepped on these flowers. They were just trying like I was trying. But for my own health and healing, I had to keep this space sacred.”

I noticed a break in the back wall and a section accessed only by a small bridge. “What’s over there?”

She took me by the hand, and we crossed the bridge. Sunflowers everywhere, almost as high as the wall and drinking in sunlight that shone in golden shafts.

“Early on, I had a dream. I think it was a gift from God. I stood in an unending field of sunflowers. The sky was perfect.

The temperature ideal. And I saw my son. He ran up to me and said ...”

She put a hand to her mouth. “When I woke up,

I felt the Lord had given that dream to let me know my son was OK. The Lord had him. So I planted these sunflowers and let that dream be part of my garden. I don’t share it with others often. But this is my favorite place to come now.”

I took in the sight. The birds feasting on the seeds of the flowers. “Why did you tell me that?”

“Because I wanted you to feel the hope I have for you. I think you’re someone safe who I can invite into this garden.”

Instead of feeling peace, something twitched inside; my heart skipped a beat.

“What’s wrong?” Melody said.

“I remember now. Ten years ago. Seeing you for the first after it happened.”

Tears welled in her eyes.

“I said something, didn’t I?” I turned and walked across the bridge. What did I say? I hurried past the fountain and the roses and reached the entrance and turned. It came to me.

“God knows best,” I said, my voice breaking. “That was all I could think to say, and it must have ... I wish I had said something different.”

“Like what?” she said.

“I’m so sorry.” I choked on the words but managed to say them again. “I’m so sorry.”

Melody wiped her tears and hugged me, and it felt like being enveloped by grace. I glanced at the forget-me-nots and the space by the entrance that was flattened when I walked in. Somehow the flowers had grown back and lifted their blue heads to the sun. ☀

Author’s note: This concept came from a conversation with Ron and Nan Deal on my program, Chris Fabry Live. Their son Connor died when he was 12. I thank them for allowing me to share some of their journey with you in this story.

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CHRIS FABRY is an award-winning author of more than 80 books, including his latest novel, *Saving Grayson*, available now. Chris is also host of *Chris Fabry Live on Moody Radio*. Find out more at ChrisFabry.com.