

## Roots

I am five years old and we are making scrambled eggs.

I'm sitting on the counter, watching as Martha cracks the shells and pours the yolks into the pan. *Someday, I think, I'll learn how to make eggs.*

Martha is my aunt. I never had a mom, and I didn't need one. I live with Martha, in our apartment on the 7th floor. Martha is my everything. We sit out on our balcony at night to watch the stars. My name is Emma Sallow. I live in Toronto, Ontario with my aunt Martha. She is my whole world.

I am seven years old. I learned how to make eggs, and I tried to surprise Martha with breakfast. It was going well, but I burnt my hand on the stove. Instead of waking up to the smell of toast, she woke up to screaming. I cried and cried. Martha fixed me right up, and my hand was better in no time.

"There you go. All patched up," she says. She's a nurse, so she spends every day helping people feel better. She always knows what to do to help me. I wish I could help her the same way. Martha works long shifts at the hospital. She feels sad sometimes. I want to help, but I don't know how. I give her a hug and she smiles. When I was five, Martha and I were the only things in the world. Now, there are other things. I have school and friendships. I don't love Martha any less.

I am ten years old. I think something is wrong with the sky. We can't sit in our usual spot to watch the stars, because the sky is too cloudy. I began to worry, and Martha

explained what Climate Change is. I felt the pit in my stomach sink deeper, but she explains there are things we can do to help, such as our stove isn't gas powered like grandma and grandpa's was, and how we have moss on the walls of our building and solar panels on the roof. I feel better. For a while, I think Martha does too.

"We can't fix the world, Emma. At least not on our own. There are people working to build a different future, to create a change. The most anyone can do is try to be one of those people working for a change."

I'm twelve years old when I go for a walk with Martha. We walk through our city. I see garbage in the streets, empty bottles and cigarettes littering the sidewalk. I breathe through my mouth, the air is too thick for my lungs. I wish there was a way to change the city. We walk until we reach a bus stop. We wait in the rain until finally, the bus rolls in, two layers with windows like paintings. The people inside the bus are the subjects, the muse, each with their own life and problems. The engine whirs to life, and we board just as the wheels begin to turn. The bus is as quiet as a mouse, but vibrating with energy.

The bus takes us far away from the city. It takes us through dense, bustling streets and empty plazas. We drive and we drive, and after that, we drive some more. until it lets us off at a stop far outside the maze of concrete. I look up to Martha, but she just smiles. This time, it reaches her eyes. We march through empty fields, dry blades of grass extending far beyond my fingertips, like a dream I can't remember. I hear Martha's breathing next to me.

"Close your eyes," she whispers. I close my eyes, imagining tiny lights dancing underneath my eyelids. There isn't a word of conversation, but the silence is comfortable. It's common for Martha and I to communicate without using words.

After what feels like hours of walking, I open my eyes. I couldn't have been prepared for what stands in front of me.

Green as far as I can see. Trees as tall as our apartment building, flowers in more colours than I've ever seen. Smells as sweet as Martha's cookies. A forest.

We dance through the woods until the sun is gone, gone far away and we can see the stars. More stars than I've ever seen in my life. The constellations of my soul and my heart set free, painting the sky like canvas.

I forget all about the city.

I turned fifteen this morning. We stopped by the rooftop gardens. I started planting them a year ago, with Martha and the help of many neighbors, to help grow more food for the rest of our apartment building. In our part of town, a lot of people aren't able to get jobs. Even now, it isn't easy for everyone to get food, and I wanted to help. I can't give all of the people jobs, but I can work for a change.

"You're doing a good job," Martha says. "I'm proud of you."

But I'm still not so sure.

"Is it enough?" I replied. "Will it ever be enough? One garden won't feed all of us, let alone the world. I can't solve poverty or stop discrimination. There are so many awful, terrifying things happening, and I don't know how to help." I felt my throat grow tight, my voice tired. I realise I'm not just talking about the rest of the world. I'm even more worried about who is right in front of me.

"I just don't know how to help."

The lines under her eyes are getting deeper. I'm fifteen, but I feel helpless. I can plant gardens. I work to fix the broken systems. And yet, I don't know how to help her.

I'm turning twenty three. I'm moving to Los Angeles to study climate action. *I'm going to be one of the people working for a difference.* Around our apartment, we had planted a life. Every tree we planted was growing into a pillar of hope, growing roots stronger by the day. Every garden is an oasis of life, every mural painting a future we will someday see in the reflection of the windows. Our block is overflowing with life, but it hasn't begun to seep into the rest of the city. At least not yet. My roots run deep into the ground beneath our building.

*I'm not ready to tear them up.*

How does one pack a life into a suitcase? How can I fit my memories, my stories, my love and my sadness into a suitcase? I can't take my room with me, not the memories of eggs and forests and hugs and warm tea and cold nights and blankets, not brick buildings and smiles and encounters with stray cats, not baking or reading or learning to ride a bike. Not Martha.

Shivering on the balcony, I let out a breath I didn't know I'd been holding. The air escapes my lungs and forms crystals on the glass of the window.

I see Martha's eyes in my reflection.

I wave goodbye to Martha as I board the monorail, and Martha waves back. I can't quite read her expression- her cheeks are lifted in the same comforting smile I've seen a million times, but it doesn't reach her eyes. Two infinite oceans of grey, wind and hail. There is no way to tell what thoughts hide behind them.

Martha's smile wavers as she says, "You'll be alright, love. You can do this."

*But what about you? Will you be alright?*

I turned twenty seven three months ago. On my birthday, I flew back to Toronto to visit Martha. My feet hit the pavement as I took off running towards her, arms wide like wings prepared to give the biggest hug in the world. I'm twenty seven, but I felt like I was five again. Back when Martha and I were the only people in the world, the centre of my universe. Circling the sun together, we walked through our neighbourhood. It was winter, and the city was covered in a sheet of snow. And yet, I hadn't felt that warm in a very long time.

Weeks ago, I arrived back in LA. This morning, I got the phone call.

*I picked up the phone.*

*"Hello?" I suggested. It was early in the morning for a phone call. I still had a mug of coffee in my hand. An unfamiliar, somber voice crackled through the speaker.*

*"Ms. Sallow, I'm very sorry to inform you.."*

*"...Martha Sallow, your aunt, passed away last night."*

*Everything stopped. My heart stopped beating. Instead, I felt a million punches to my gut.*

*My coffee had long since hit the floor, shattering into a million pieces, right along with my soul. It can't be true. It's a prank call. It's not real. She's okay.*

*She has to be.*

*"At her desk, she started experiencing symptoms of psychogenic nonepileptic seizure, a type of stress caused reaction. Earlier, she had told a coworker she wasn't feeling well, but had assumed it was nothing. Her coworker called for help, but by the time the paramedics arrived..."*

*I hung up the phone. I didn't need to hear the end of his sentence. I call Martha, but she doesn't pick up.*

*Because she's gone.*

Martha is gone.

I want to cry, but I don't. The tears won't come. Outside, the sun is shining, mocking us. The sky would be a perfect shade of blue if Martha was here to see it. But she never will be. I wish I could cry.

*I wish Martha was here.*

### **26 years later**

I am fifty three years old. For breakfast, I make myself some eggs, with some fresh oregano from the LA public gardens. I started building those gardens, but they are growing more every year.

Funnily enough, so is the community. When I was twenty seven, I made a choice. I chose to work for a change. I still miss Martha, and I still love her, but If I spent my entire life feeling angry and sad, I wouldn't really live at all. I feel sad sometimes, but I know I don't have to hide it. She always felt she had to hide it. I'm not sure if she ever knew I saw her coming in from long nights from the crack in my door, resting her hands on the counter as she sighed, tears rolling down her cheeks. She always seemed happy when she was around me, but she wasn't always fine. The world taught her that to be strong, she needed to be happy. She wanted to be happy for me.

Over the years, I've done research. The field of healthcare, particularly for women, has been corrupt for years. Nurses are one of the most likely professions to commit suicide. Indigenous women are the most likely to be denied treatment, and experience privatization. Five years ago, I started a campaign to protest for the rights to healthcare. We needed to fix the system. It was a rough start, but many people wanted change. Fewer were willing to work for it. Over the years, we've started to make a difference.

I've learned from what she taught me, and also from her mistakes. I know that I don't need to be happy for her. I love her, and that's enough.

In Toronto, in front of our old apartment is The Martha Sallow garden, a pollinator garden dedicated to her. It brings our community together- just as she did.

She shouldn't have held the weight of the world by herself. I can't fix the world. At least, not by myself. But I'm one of the people building a different future, and there are more of us each day. I'm trying. I'm working for a difference.

*Look at me, Martha. I'm making a change.*