

## Fruit Trees

By: Lucas DeGraaf III

To: The man in downtown La Verne at the real estate office who gave me paper to write when I had none.

There was once a time when Mr. Beckett had moved in next to Mr. James. Mr. Beckett was a doctor, a very good doctor. He was wealthy and had grown tired of his old home. He felt the walls closing in on him. He favored a larger house in the suburbs with a decent sized yard, even though it would be a longer commute. Mr. Beckett arrived at his new home with his things. As he began to furnish his home, he noticed an old man tending to an apple tree. "Hello sir, my name is Connor Beckett. It's nice to meet you." They shook hands over the mid-sized fence. "Good afternoon, I am Mr. James." "I must get back to unloading my things, but I will see you around." As Mr. Beckett hung up pictures of his many travels, he began to think of the fruit tree. It was beautiful; he loved the way it looked. He thought he ought to have one himself.

A week later, after he had settled himself, he made his way to the nursery and bought an apple tree. Mr. Beckett was excited about his tree. Mr. Beckett rarely got excited; his experiences as a doctor had conditioned him to keep his emotions in check. He also thought that was what he ought to do. He was naturally a cynic, something he picked up in early adulthood. His father was a brilliant man; an engineer who had worked for many major corporations and taught as a professor. His work consumed him. Whether it was true or not, Connor learned early on that his dad loved books and work more than him.

His mother was reserved. She was a mathematician who also taught as a professor. Connor and his mom were close, but they rarely spoke. They exchanged pleasantries and every so often they would have a moving conversation about the erosion of the family. For his father spent more time studying than either of them could imagine one would wish to spend. Honestly, he did not want to spend as much time in his studies, but he knew his family was waiting for him, counting on him. His work was nearly perfect, and he had amassed a fortune. Connor's grandfather had walked out on his father when he was a child.

When Connor had turned eighteen and graduated high school, he was sure he wanted to be a doctor. As he packed his things he saw his parents standing on either side of the rose bush discussing something. The rose bush was an interesting thing. Though never taking care of it, Connor's father would gaze at it for long periods of time. He seemed to admire it. He never saw his father look at anything the same way. His mother took care of it. She watered it weekly with the other plants. It was also one of his mother's favorites.

"Stand back please," Connor muttered. Connor preceded to pour lighter fluid on the rose bush. "What are you doing?" "You better not light that!" they interjected. Connor struck a match

and threw it into the bush. Everybody lunged backwards as the bush went to flames. They all watched in amazement as the bush burned to a crisp. His father was furious; he didn't have words to say. His mother asked, "Why would you do that?" "I don't know," he replied. "Get out," his mother said. Connor was shocked. He was confused. He wasn't the type to make poor decisions sporadically. He grabbed his things and left. His mother watched him closely and his father stared at the remains of the bush. Connor never saw his mother again. She died of a stroke ten months later. Connor saw his father at the funeral and then decided he would rather not see him again. His father wrote to him occasionally; in fact, he still does.

Mr. Beckett spent the afternoon digging and preparing the ground and then he planted his tree. He took a step back to admire it. He looked forward to the apples; he looked forward to seeing the tree outside his window, standing tall and strong. He continued in his weekly rhythms. Mr. Beckett wondered why it had been several months, and his tree hadn't grown an inch. It was a grafted tree, so he expected at least some growth by now. He was still enamored by the beauty of the tree next door. Mr. Beckett was willing to be patient because he knew his tree would one day share its beauty.

Mr. Beckett returned home from work to an increasingly rare letter from his father. It read,

"Dear Son,

Teaching has been going well. I have a student named Alex that reminds me of you. It seems I can't finish a lecture without several questions poking and prodding at everything I teach. He is bright and will do well in the future. I've been reading many good books recently and I would love to share my findings with you. I miss you, son.

Love,

Dad"

Mr. Beckett folded it up and dropped it into the recycling bin. He looked out his kitchen window disappointed that his tree had not begun to grow. Rather, it seemed to be dying. He made up his mind to get a different tree at the plant nursery on the weekend. Mr. Beckett, after bringing a new tree home from the nursery, uprooted the old one and prepared the ground. He had even bought the expensive soil in hopes of success. After planting his tree, he peered over the fence and watched Mr. James. He moved very slow, even for an elderly man. He pruned the tree with care and complete attentiveness. Mr. Beckett thought he could stare at him all day without Mr. James paying him any mind.

As the years passed by, Mr. Beckett continued to receive infrequent letters from his father. His work was painfully consistent, and consistently unfulfilling. Mr. Beckett, having been almost twenty-seven when he planted his second tree, was now almost thirty-two. There is nothing worth mentioning other than his tree had grown to full maturation. Although, by now it

was supposed to be bearing fruit. One other thing is worth mentioning. Upon receiving a letter from his father on his thirty-second birthday that particularly irritated him, he decided to write back. Mr. Beckett's father had wished his son a happy birthday, included a list of sixteen of his personal favorite books and engineers, and told him that he missed him and loved him. Mr. Beckett was furious. No letter was more indicative of his father's myopia. He thought that this letter was special enough to warrant a response. His letter entailed thirty-two "F you's" all caps of course, and below this it read, "Out of all the things we could talk about you insist on beating me over the head with that which I despise, yours truly, Connor." Nonetheless, his tree grew.

Mr. Beckett noticed something very odd. It was late summer nearly fall and Mr. James's tree produced many healthy, ripe apples. Although, Mr. James was nowhere to be found. Mr. Beckett would see him taking care of his tree throughout the week but recently he hadn't seen him at all. There was a young boy that would climb the fence and hop over the gate to pick some of the apples. He thought that he ought to alert Mr. James until one day he heard the boy say goodbye to him through the window as he left. He would also see a couple different middle-aged women enter the house a few different times during the week, but there was no sign of Mr. James. Mr. Beckett, being consumed with his work, hadn't given it much thought. A week later, on a Saturday morning, he heard his doorbell ring. He opened the door and saw a short woman smiling at him. "Hello, my name is Mrs. Mason. Unfortunately, Mr. James is very ill and needs help with his daily activities. I am going to be out of town and Ms. Jen will be as well. I know you are a doctor and more than capable of taking care of him. We were wondering if you would be kind enough to take care of him for the next few weeks?" Mr. Beckett sighed, acknowledging the nature of his situation. He recognized the devotion of the women. If he said no, he would seem like an ass. If he said yes, the old man might die on his watch. A lose-lose. "Yes, I will."

"Hello, Mr. James." "Hello son, how do you do?" "I'm doing well, and you?" "I'm feeling better. I've been able to move around more recently." "That's good, sir." "Can you help me up and out to the chair in the backyard? I would like to be outside." "Yes, I can help you." Mr. Beckett delicately helped Mr. James up, stabilizing him with his walker. They both made their way outside and Mr. James sat down in a chair on his patio. Mr. Beckett stood there silently for what felt like an eternity before asking, "You know that boy picks the fruit off your tree right?" "Yes, I do" he muttered. "That's Ms. Luna's boy. It keeps him out of her hair for a while. I can't pick them anyway, so I tell him he can pick as many as he wants, if he gives me a few. It's been difficult taking care of the tree you know." Mr. Beckett glanced over at the decrepit old man. "I bet. It's a beautiful tree; I've always admired it. That's why I've grown one myself." "I've seen. It's a nice tree and it seems you have been doing well taking care of it." "I don't really know how." "Neither did I, my wife taught me. She passed away a few years before you moved in. She had leukemia. We planted this tree less than a year before we found out. It is her tree really. I honestly didn't care much about it. She grew up with many trees on her family's farm. She loved them and she loved to take care of them. She would spend hours pruning it, and I would help sometimes, but I knew she liked being alone. She was introverted and reserved but

she would talk to anybody about the tree. She would let Ms. Luna's boy pick the apples. She would give some to Mrs. Mason so she could bake pies. She would give some to Ms. Jen because she liked to make cider. It was how she gave. I think often we like our generosity to be linked back to us in some way or another, but her giving was always a celebration of the tree. She had a way of orienting the gratitude of the gift received to the beauty of the tree, not the one that picked its fruit. It was a living symbol for her; she grew up real poor. She didn't have a lot of the privileges her peers had. Often, she wondered why she had to be born into this situation. She watched the leaves fall and the trees get bare and then she watched the trees grow lush again and produce fruit. She would say that it taught her everything was going to be alright. I still think about that." Mr. Beckett stood still listening intently. Mr. James grew quiet, but he had nothing to say. "That's how I began to love the tree."

About two weeks had passed and Mr. Beckett returned home from work on a Friday evening to find a letter from his father. He was honestly surprised to have received one so soon after the special letter he sent. He chuckled thinking about it as he opened the letter. It read,

"Dear Son,

Your letter hurt me. I was so glad to have received a letter from you. I know I was never a good dad. I know my pride ruined so much and we had so little. Son, I failed as a father and the reason I share, so intently, my passion for engineering is because I wanted you to see something I was good at. I wanted to join in something we could bond over that would inspire you. I couldn't do that in our relationship. I loved you the only way I knew how and I refused to learn. I was seeking validation from you instead of being a man you would admire. All I have is these letters. Son, I'm getting old and I'm realizing the only meaningful thing I have is you.

Love,

Dad

Mr. Beckett was taken aback. He had never received anything so blunt from his Father. He thought it was about time he realized this though. He went outside to attempt to prune his tree. Something he was still learning to do. It was dusk and an orange-pink sky sat behind the tree. It was a warm summer night with a cool breeze. He heard the gate open and watched Ms. Luna's boy stroll over to the tree to pick apples. The boy noticed him but watched out of his peripherals. Along with the subsequent nervous glances that are typical of children. The boy seemed to be picking his apples awfully fast, probably nervous in his presence. He continued to glare at him though; Mr. Beckett thought that he ought to at least greet him. "Hello, how are you doing?" "Good," the kid said quickly. "I like your jacket." "Thanks" he muttered. "Supposedly it was my dad's." "I used to like to wear my dad's clothes too," responded Mr. Beckett. "Not anymore?" "Well, I'm older now and I have my own clothes... plus I don't see him." "Did he leave?" the boy asked. "Ummm.... Sort of." "My dad left before I was born." "I'm sorry, that must have been difficult." "He still sends me birthday cards" the boy mentioned, trying to be

optimistic. “Do you talk to your dad?” “Not really, he sends me letters though.” “That’s nice. My dad doesn’t write in my birthday cards.” Mr. Beckett had no idea how to respond to that, so he simply resumed his work. “Have you ever seen your dad?” “Yes, I lived with both of my parents growing up, but I haven’t seen my dad in about ten years.” The boy looked at him inquisitively. “I always wonder what my dad looks like. What would he look like at my basketball games.... Why do you think he doesn’t come back?” Mr. Beckett lowered the shears and met the boy’s gaze. His expression was blank, and it was almost unsettling. The question was already difficult to answer, but further complicating his response was the fact the boy had sat with the question for years. It was no longer met with a flood of feelings, but an even more desperate yearning for something that would make sense. The boy was accustomed to the way suffering necessitates answers but offers ambiguity.

“I don’t know. I think he’s afraid to see you.” “Why would he be afraid of me?” Mr. Beckett looked at the ground for a while before answering. “Because then he would have to think about himself. He would wonder whether the fear or whatever was driving him was worth not seeing you. He would probably have to change, and the older you get the less you want to change. “You don’t think he would change for me?” the boy asked with the same blank expression. “No, I think he would.... I think that’s why he doesn’t come back. I’m sorry this sounds harsh; I’m not a tender person and I don’t know how to talk to you. To be honest kid, I think his not coming back to see you has less to do with you and a lot more to do with him. “What do you mean?” “I’m sure he wants to see you and to talk to you. I think he might be afraid. You know fear is a dangerous thing. He thinks that he must be all put together and have things in order to see you.” “I just want him to come back.” Connor smirked; his eyes watered as he stared at the ground and then a few tears hit the bottom of the tree. “So do I.” “My mom says.... Why are you crying?” “I’m not crying.” “Yes, you are.” “No, I’m not. What were you going to say?” “My mom says he doesn’t come back because he’s not responsible. “That’s probably true, but I think that’s just the surface. I think even if he was irresponsible, he would still come back. I think the real issue is he’s ashamed.” “I don’t know what you are saying.” “Me neither, sorry kid, I’ve never been good at talking to children. It’s hard for me to talk about stuff with my father because we’ve never been close.” “At least he writes in the stuff he sends you.” Mr. Beckett looked at the boy and a tear ran down his cheek. I ought to be going now. “What’s your name?” “Morris.” “Nice to meet you” they shook hands. Mr. Beckett started to walk towards his back door and then he turned around. “Morris! Come back next week and let’s have a chat.” The boy nodded.

Mr. Beckett laid awake in his bed alone, the way he did every night. He had read his father’s letter one more time before getting ready for bed. Two sides of the same coin, though both being different. Nonetheless, fear, anger, shame. No wonder he could relate to the boy. Except that boy had never seen his father. Couldn’t have burned his rose bus even if he wanted. Mr. Beckett chuckled to himself. It’s ironic that an abandoned or neglected child will process the grief in the same way it was caused. He hated his father. Resented him with all that was in him,

but he couldn't succumb to him. To be reduced to a piece in the cycle. He would become him, his grandfather, the family. Mr. Beckett got up to get a drink and he looked out his back window. His tree looked good in the moonlight.

It was a Saturday afternoon and Mr. Beckett had nothing planned. He thought he ought to visit Mr. James and check up on him. He knocked on his door and got no response. He knocked again and waited patiently. He started to worry. Mr. James was up in age you know; maybe it was his time. "Mr. Beckett." Maybe he was right, and he was calling him from the afterlife. "Mr. Beckett, I'm over here." He turned to see Mr. James standing by the gate to his yard. "Come, join me." Mr. Beckett accompanied him to the backyard where Mr. James had gone to sit by his tree. "Pull up a chair." Mr. Beckett grabbed a chair by the patio and sat down next to Mr. James. "I was thinking about my wife." Mr. Beckett wondered why he was always thinking about his wife. "Do you have anybody to keep you company?" asked Mr. James. "No. I used to want that until I became accustomed to being alone." "What is your purpose?" "I'm sorry?" "What is your purpose?" Mr. James asked again. "I don't know that's a difficult question. I'm a doctor." "So, is it to save lives?" "I guess so. I thought it was what I wanted to do but it's not as fulfilling as I thought. Why did you ask that?" "It's difficult to grow in love and relationship without purpose. You know, after my wife died, I hated this tree. Despised it. Wanted to cut it down. It reminded me of my wife, so when I looked at it, I tried to picture her young, vibrant, and healthy. I couldn't; the image of her confined to a wheelchair because she was so weak is burned into my memory. The way she stared at it, deeply saddened by the strength of the tree reminding her what she lacked. But she would smile because it taught her everything would be alright. I couldn't do it, it was unbearable. So, I decided to cut it down. I went out to take one last look at it. Then I started to talk to my wife as I looked at the tree. I experienced something new. I started to see the health and the vitality of the tree as something more. Her living symbol. I thought of the winter and when the leaves fall off. When the tree is barren and ugly. But its leaves grow back and then it produces fruit. I realized that Mrs. Mason and Ms. Jen still come for the apples and they keep me company. Ms. Luna's boy still comes to pick the fruit." "His name is Morris." "Yes, Morris. Even after she passed the tree keeps giving. So, I stopped trying to find her, she was gone. Instead, I learned to love the tree and then I learned to love her in a way I never had before. Through her symbol of hope. It transcends me and you; it transcends her. I realized that she loved it because it transcended her upbringing. The pain of hunger and the fear of missing out on the life she thought was for her. So, when I come out here to look at the tree, I don't look for her. We tend it together and that's where I find her. My only regret, Mr. Beckett, is that I learned this too late." "I don't know what to say. I guess I need to find someone who loves my tree." "That's right." They shared a laugh. "Discover her symbol of hope. You two will be artists working on different aspects of the same painting. If you do it right, it will transcend both of you. So, learn to love her inspiration.

Mr. Beckett looked at Mr. James and then at the tree; it was a beautiful tree. Suddenly Mr. James got up and walked over to the fence dividing their property. Mr. Beckett had planted his

tree a little too close to the fence so that a section of it had grown over the fence into Mr. James' yard. He had told him he didn't mind. Mr. James admired his tree. "It's come along way." "Yes, it has. I always wanted my tree to look the same as yours. Your tree is the reason I wanted to grow one," said Mr. Beckett. "Well, that's nice of you to say. It's impossible though. "What is impossible?" "For your tree to look like mine. That's not how it works. Plus, it's a pear tree." "You can tell just by looking at it?" "Yes, but also because it grew a pear." "What?" Mr. Beckett quickly walked over to Mr. James who handed him the first piece of fruit from the tree. "Congratulations." "Thank you, but I would rather you keep it." "It's okay to eat the fruit of your tree you know?" "Please give it to Morris and tell him I will be back next week." "Where are you going Mr. Beckett?" "Call me Connor... and I'm going to see my father."