



E REGINA BYERS

ERegina Byers grew up in the American Pacific Northwest and has lived and studied in Canada and the UK. After enjoying a year in England completing her MA in Writing for Young People, she went back across the sea to New England, where she works on the publication of scientific articles about weather (while not understanding a word of them). She loves trees, mountains, animals, words, cheese and asking questions. When not writing, her favourite activity is wandering, both along city streets and down forest trails.

About A Singing Bird Will Come

Skye can identify any tree in her city's arboretum and shares her treeish love with her artist father. But when Dad becomes depressed, her family move to a small town by the woods. Skye has to leave her best friend behind, and even in their peaceful new home, Dad is as withdrawn as ever.

Lonely and sad, Skye explores the forest, where she makes a new friend, Silvia, a girl truly one with the woods. Silvia carries her own sorrows, and she needs Skye's help. Together, the girls learn how to mend their hearts, finding space to grow and courage to bloom.

e.regina.byers@gmail.com

@e_regina_byers

A SINGING BIRD WILL COME

Chapter One

Leaping Greenly

If I were a tree, I would not want to be planted in the playground of Gretchen Gloor Elementary School.

The playground only had two trees – scraggly birches in opposite corners of the concrete courtyard. I always felt sorry for them, especially right now, because their wilted yellow leaves were dropping from their branches, collecting in limp piles underneath.

‘Skye!’ I heard my best friend, Alicen, calling from the other side of the playground. I ran from the birch by the lunchroom door to the swings, dodging shrieking kids and bouncing basketballs.

I hopped on to the swing next to Alicen’s and we both pushed off. Alicen’s auburn hair swept behind her in the sunshine. We pumped our legs hard and flew higher and higher, up towards the bold autumn sky, in between the grey school walls that glowered over the playground.

Below us, Hilary sauntered up with her gaggle of friends.

‘Hiiii Skyyye,’ she called in her fake-sweet voice. Her eyes were little and mean, like the eyes of our class pet rat, Scissors. ‘Whatchya doing up there? No more trees to hug?’

‘Shut up, Hilary!’ shouted Alicen, thrusting her feet out as she swooped past Hilary’s head. Hilary jumped out of the way.

‘Oooh, Alicen Wonderland, you almost kicked me!’

Hwweeeet! A whistle blasted and a playground duty teacher shouted at Hilary, ‘Stand back from the swings!’

Hilary gave us one rat-eyed glare and turned away, leading her gaggle off to the corner beneath the other birch tree.

‘Hilary looks exactly like Scissors,’ I said. ‘The rat, I mean.’

‘Yeah, that’s just what I was thinking,’ Alicen said. ‘I wish we could put *her* in a cage.’

Back and forth we went, our swings exactly in time with each other.

‘Are you going to the arboretum after school?’ Alicen asked.

‘Yeah, we’re supposed to,’ I said. ‘Dad said he might be too tired though.’

‘Why’s he tired?’

‘I don’t know. Yesterday he slept in really late. And he’s working on a painting but it’s taking him for ever. He just sits there staring at the canvas without doing anything.’

Alicen and I looked at each other as we swung.

‘Do you think something’s wrong?’ I asked.

‘Nah,’ said Alicen. ‘Grownups always get tired. They’ve lost all their energy from when they were kids, or something. I bet he’s fine.’

But worry twisted through my heart like a root growing in the soil. Dad and I always went to the arboretum on Friday afternoons. He’d never told me before that he might be too tired to go. What if he wasn’t there after school to take me?

The bell rang, and we slowed our swings and returned grudgingly to the ground. I stood up, my head and my stomach still swooping with the swing.

‘Quit worrying,’ said Alicen.

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘I know. That means you’re worrying.’

I laughed, and we ran inside.

Our classroom buzzed with clatter and chatter, people talking and shouting and wriggling, Michael stabbing Josh with his pencil, Annalee playing shouty music on her phone. I squeezed behind my desk and took out my book, even though I knew I wouldn’t be able to read in all that racket.

‘All right, everyone, settle down,’ barked Ms Klink, coming in. ‘Annalee, turn that off and put it away or it’ll be mine till the end of the day.’

The noise in the room hushed. Ms Klink moved behind her desk and said, ‘Get out your fall project materials, and we’ll have some *quiet* work time. Michael, if you don’t know the purpose of a pencil by now, maybe I should send you back to kindergarten.’

Everybody looked at Michael, who now had the end of his pencil shoved up his nose. Across the room, Alicen flashed me an *ewww-that's-gross!* look. I scrunched up my nose and gave her one back.

I took out my project, which was called How To Be A Tree, and got to work on my chart of leaves and needles. Dad and I were supposed to do some sketches in the arboretum today. He must remember that I needed those. He'd be there after school and we'd head off just the way we always did. Right?

When the bell finally rang at three o'clock, I shot out of the classroom with Alicen right behind me, dodged two boys scuffling over a soccer ball, and clattered down the stairs. I burst out the big front doors and stood on tiptoe, peering over the heads of the waiting parents and bouncing little kids outside.

'Do you see him?' I asked Alicen. She stretched her neck and looked around. During the summer Alicen had grown a whole head taller than me. We'd been friends since we were six, two saplings growing side by side, only now she was shooting up fast and I was still stubby and short.

'No ... oh, wait! There he is – he's coming.' Alicen pointed at someone running up the pavement from the right, dressed in paint-splotted jeans and an orange T-shirt. My dad.

I glanced around to check that Hilary wasn't nearby, then leapt down the steps, rushed at Dad, and threw my arms around him.

'Whoa, hi!' he gasped as we both staggered backwards from the impact of my hug.

'Hi, Daddy!'

I heard a scoffing noise from behind me, and I turned around. Hilary had appeared out of nowhere with Christina and Annalee. Hilary looked right in my eyes, and I felt even shorter than usual. Then she turned and traipsed away, the other two following, and called back over her shoulder, 'Bye, Skye! Have fun with your daaaaaddy!'

Alicen glared after Hilary. 'Just ignore her,' she said. 'But —' she glanced at me and then quickly away again '— maybe don't say "Daddy" at school.'

I didn't *usually* say 'Daddy' any more – just when I was really excited. I felt my face go hot. Did Alicen also think I was dumb for saying it?

Dad pulled me back into a hug with one hand and put the other on Alicen's arm.

‘We can say whatever we like,’ he said softly. ‘And we don’t have to worry about what other people think.’

Alicen looked down at the pavement and scuffed her shoe against the concrete.

‘Sorry I was a bit late,’ Dad added.

I looked at him more closely. There were dark shadows under his eyes that I didn’t remember seeing before. Was he OK?

Dad looked back at Alicen. ‘Would you like to come with us, Alicen? We’re doing some sketching for Skye’s project.’

‘No, sorry, I’ve gotta go to Bryn’s violin recital.’ Alicen made a face. Bryn was her little sister, and when she played the violin, it sounded like a donkey singing a duet with a squeaky door.

‘Ahhh,’ said Dad. ‘Well, good luck. See you soon.’

‘See you!’ I called.

Alicen waved and turned one way down the street, and Dad and I turned down the other.

Dad took my hand, and we strode down the pavement, swinging our clasped hands between us. Cars and buses rumbled by, and high buildings towered above us on both sides. Along the pavement stood a line of scrawny maple trees, planted in squares of dirt just like the birch trees in my playground.

‘Don’t these trees look sad?’ I said, pointing at the spindly branches and brown-spotted leaves. ‘They’re stuck in their own little squares, and there’s nowhere for their roots to grow, and they have to stand there while people go by and don’t even care.’

Dad looked at me, then at the trees. ‘Hmm. You’re right.’

‘What if we dug them up and took them to the arboretum where they’d be happy?’

‘The other day you wanted to take all the homeless dogs and cats home with us,’ he said, smiling. ‘Now you want to transplant all the city’s trees?’

‘Yeah,’ I agreed. I knew we couldn’t really, but I wanted to help any creatures that were unhappy and alone. I wanted to gather them all up and hug them, dogs and cats and trees. Even if Hilary would call me a tree hugger.

We came to the bus stop, and I looked up into the bright hallway of sky between the buildings lining the street. Suddenly, a scatter of birds burst into the air right above us. I watched their fluttering wings until they disappeared.

Then the bus arrived with a squeal of brakes and a sigh of exhaust, and we got on and trundled away.

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Twenty minutes later, I pushed the button for our stop, and the bus pulled up in front of the JC Lightfoot Arboretum. The tops of the trees peeked above the iron fence, hints of the hidden forest kingdom inside.

‘Come on,’ I said to Dad, pulling on his hand.

And we walked away from the city, through the arched entranceway, and among the trees.

Sunlight slanted over the branches and across the grass and twisting pathways. Fallen leaves lay in thick carpets of red and yellow and brown. Next to the entrance, a chestnut tree stood mostly bare-branched, with a few yellow leaves hanging from it like bright flags.

Dad and I started down a bark-covered path to the left, which led to one of our favourite trees: an enormous beech whose branches curved downward, forming a sheltering canopy. In the summer, its leaves were deep purple-green, but in the fall they turned reddish brown.

Dad and I slipped between two of its hanging arms. The massive silvery trunk rose above us, and the sun shone through the leaves, which glowed copper-bright.

We stood together inside the leafy, shining globe.

Nailed into the beech’s trunk was a sign with its name in English and in Latin:

COPPER BEECH

FAGUS SYLVATICA

F. PURPUREA

All the trees in the arboretum had these signs, so you could learn the name of absolutely any kind of tree. The Latin names sounded like incantations, like saying them aloud might conjure something into being.

‘*Fagus sylvatica*,’ I whispered to the beech. I stared hard at its branches. I wished that, just once, something magic really would happen when I spoke a tree’s name, like fresh leaves unfurling or new twigs branching out.

Dad smiled at the sound of my spell.

‘Do you think it will ever work?’ I asked.

‘You never know. Maybe one day.’

We climbed out from the beech and continued along the path, passing a row of aspens (*Populus tremula*). A breeze swept up, and their dry golden leaves began to babble.

‘It sounds like they’re saying something,’ I said to Dad.

‘They’re telling tree secrets,’ he whispered.

‘What are tree secrets?’

‘Well, we don’t know – that’s why they’re secrets. But if we listen really carefully, maybe we can hear them.’

We stopped and stood listening to the murmur of the leaves. I thought I could *almost* understand what they were whispering about, but every time I came close, the secrets slipped away.

The wind suddenly blustered harder, whirling fallen leaves around us. My hair whipped behind me, my breath caught in my throat, and I danced forward.

‘Race you up the hill!’ I shouted to Dad, and ran up a sloping path to the right. I charged higher and higher, my lungs burning, my feet sending woodchips flying. I could hear Dad puffing behind me, calling, ‘Hey! You had a head start!’

We reached the top at the same time, gasping for breath and laughing. I pulled the smells of just-mown grass and woody bark and mouldering piles of leaves into my lungs.

In front of us, a cluster of vibrant green Siberian firs (*Abies sibirica*) waved their branches in the breeze, as if they were congratulating us on our race to their high-up place. No other trees were planted there, and no other people were around; it was just us and the firs and the sky.

‘This makes me think of an ee cummings poem,’ Dad said. ‘Can you guess which one?’

I shook my head.

He smiled and began:

*‘i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees’*

‘Oh!’ I said, and joined in:

*‘and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes’*

Dad and I grinned at each other.

‘Those,’ he said, pointing at the dancing firs, ‘are definitely the leaping greenly spirits of trees.’

‘Yeah.’ I pointed overhead. ‘And that’s definitely a blue true dream of sky.’

Dad put his arms around me. ‘Definitely.’

Together we turned around and looked out over the trees of the arboretum and beyond them to the buildings and skyscrapers of the city. Dad was quiet for a long time, gazing ahead without looking at me. There was something strange about his silence, but I wasn’t sure what.

I unzipped my backpack and took out my sketchbook and pencil case. Dad also took out his drawing things, and we sat down on a bench nearby. I looked carefully at the firs’ needles, which bristled out all around their branches, and drew them as best I could on my paper. I could smell their scent: spicy, with something sharp and fresh mixed in, like the lemon dish soap my mom used.

When I’d covered a page with sketches, I glanced at Dad. His pencil was still and he was staring into space. In the air around him, I sensed a feeling of heaviness. It made a weight sink inside me, too.

My pencil rolled off my sketchbook and fell to the ground.

‘Dad,’ I whispered, ‘is something wrong?’

He looked at me but didn’t answer right away. Finally, he said, ‘No, my sweet girl.’ He closed his sketchbook and stood up. ‘Shall we call it a day?’

‘But we’ve barely done anything, and I need more sketches for my project.’

‘I know, but the sun’s going to set soon and it’ll be closing time. We’ll have to come back.’

I frowned, but I could see the sun slipping behind the tops of the firs.

We put away our supplies and headed down the hill.