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COLONIAL TALES — A POINCIANA TREE OF UNUSUAL KINDNESS

Horace Burden and his wife Eliza had an orange orchard at the edge of the town by the sea in the far north. When he first planted the trees times were very hard. They both worked night and day, trying to make a go of it. Eliza was pregnant with twins. She'd be up in the morning before the sun was over the sea, weeding and pruning, running back and forth watering tree after tree with buckets, running herself ragged. She was told to take things more easily but the way they saw it, there was no choice. She pushed herself for the first six months, until one night she had a dream that was dark and foreboding. When she awoke she was convinced that something dreadful had happened to her babies, so she walked all the way from the orchard, through town in the early evening to visit my Mother, who was the mid-wife to that town. Mother gave her an examination and said she had no basis for fear.

Sometimes a pregnancy can bring on fear and that fear multiplies when there is more than one baby inside. Mother told her to maintain a clean and positive attitude. Still, Eliza remained convinced something was not right. Whenever she felt that, Mother told her to walk the distance to the house. Mother would reassure her.

On one of these visits Mother listened for the heart beat of those twins, and when she listened, she only heard one heart. Mother always said there are secrets you should tell and secrets you should keep, and she always used the story of Eliza Burden as an illustration of a secret that had to be kept. If it happened now, she would have done the same thing.

Eliza Burden went into labour, and the first baby, a girl, pushed her way into life. Then nothing. Mother put her hand in, and she had to pull the other twin out. It was a boy. By this time the baby girl was screaming and Eliza was weeping because she said she'd dreamt her little boy was dead. "Why didn't you tell me?" she asked Mother. There was nothing anyone could have done. Horace Burden took the news of joy and sadness in silence. Then he said he would take his son with him, so Mother cleaned the dear little boy up and swaddled him in a white blanket.

Horace held his son and walked back through town, his heart heavy. He walked out to the orchard, all the while talking to the dead baby, telling him how badly he had wanted a son and how he would have loved him. He talked about all the

adventures they could have had, and as he talked his tears fell on the blanket. When he reached the house he took a shovel and walked with the shovel and the baby to the far end of the orchard. He dug a deep hole, and he hugged his dead son and kissed each eye and lowered him into the hole. He howled to the empty field and when he had pulled himself together, he piled dirt over the hole and sat with the currawongs and the magpies until the emptiness in his stomach resonated louder than his grief.

The next day he planted a poinciana sapling to mark the spot. He had to build a fence around the sapling to keep the rock wallabies away. Horace went there every day to check on the tree and remove the weeds that were larger and stronger than the tree. They stuck it out, Horace and that tree. He refused to give up but in spite of this, that tree only just clung to life.

It was not the only thing that failed to thrive. Eliza Burden was afflicted with a melancholia that wound constricting talons around her heart, around the furniture and through the floorboards, so that everyone who visited could not help but watch their ankles in case it wound its way around and started to crawl up. And although that girl, Felicity was perfectly healthy, she was as small as a teacup.

When Eliza finally noticed, she took Felicity into the town to ask for advice. She took her to doctors, nurses, those purporting to be children's specialists and asked all of them for advice. They were baffled. Eliza fed her up as best she could but still Felicity did not grow.

Now travelling through the town at this time was a specialist in woman's matters, a Madam Fillatov. Eliza Burden sought her advice. This old Russian woman took one look at the frail little girl and said,

"She is pining away. Tell me what happened to her."

So Eliza told Madam Fillatov the sad tale of her birth and the death of her twin brother.

"Where is this baby boy now?"

Eliza told her that Horace had buried him at the end of the orchard and had planted a tree which was doing as poorly as the girl.

"Now listen," Madam Fillatov said, "Take this girl to her brother. Take her to that tree, and she must sit there for as long as she will. While she sits and plays, you must tell her the story of her brother, and you must explain that her

brother is there. You must tell her that her brother will always be there. He will always stay close. You must tell her this brother is going to watch over her, and he is going to see that no harm comes to her. You must tell her this brother has not stopped loving her even though he is dead. Do you hear? And you must tell that tree to grow so that it can protect its sister. After these things are done, this girl will grow."

So Eliza Burden, sceptical as she was, carried the basket in one hand and Felicity in the other and walked through the orchard to the place where her son was buried. She set up a picnic and placed the tiny girl under the tree where she babbled and cooed. Her mother wept, and through her tears she spoke out loud the story of Felicity's brother, who shared her womb. Even though he died, she told the little girl he knew her better than anyone ever had, because they had both swum around in that dark womb for all that time. She told Felicity they would never know what he would have looked like, but this healthy tree would be as beautiful as her brother would ever be. She talked of how its red flowers, and strong branches would offer her protection from the rain and from the sun, and that might be hard to imagine but when it grew, they would see her beautiful boy.

Eliza Burden finished, her story cried out. With the weight of her grief lifted from her, she felt a calmness she had not known since before her pregnancy. The mother and her daughter waited there until the sun was low in the sky. Then Eliza carried her back home through the orchard.

From that time on, the girl started to thrive. First she started to sing and then she started to talk, and then she ate and then she grew, and each day Eliza fell more in love with her and felt more at peace. The poinciana tree obeyed its instructions and grew too, perhaps because that baby boy was entangled in its roots. Who'll know? We all know its flowers are the best in the town. It was struck by lightning once, several years later, but that was after it had served its purpose. Mother would say we all have a purpose, and that would have included that tree. I should miss it if it has gone.

