

Sample Chapter for Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul

The Plum Pretty Sister

By Cynthia Brian

"There is a garden in every childhood, an enchanted place where colors are brighter, the air softer, and the morning more fragrant than ever again."
Elizabeth Lawrence

Justin was a climber. By one and a half, he had discovered the purple plum tree in the backyard, and its friendly branches became his favorite hangout. At first he would climb just a few feet and make himself comfortable in the curve where the trunk met the branches. Soon he was building himself a small fort and dragging his tractors and trucks up to their new garage. One day when he was 2, Justin was playing in the tree as usual. I turned my back to prune the rose bush, and he disappeared. "Justin, where are you?" I hollered. His tiny voice called back, "Up here, Mommy, picking all the plums for you!" I looked up in horror and disbelief. There was Justin on the roof of the house, filling his plastic bucket with the ripe juicy plums from his favorite tree.

When Justin was 3, I became pregnant. My husband and I explained to him that we were going to have another baby as a playmate for him. He was very excited, kissed my tummy and said, "Hello, baby, I'm your big brother, Justin." From the beginning he was sure he was going to have a little sister, and every day he'd beg to know if she was ready to play yet. When I explained that the baby wasn't arriving until the end of June, he seemed confused. One day he asked, "When is June, Mommy?" I realized I needed a better explanation; how could a 3-year-old know what "June" meant?

Just then, as Justin climbed with his dog in his arms to the top of the plum tree, he gave me the answer I was looking for...his special tree. "Justin, the baby is going to be born when the plums are ripe. You can keep me posted when that will be, okay?" I wasn't completely sure if I was on target, but the gardener in me was confident I'd be close enough.

Oh, he was excited! Now Justin had a way to know when his new baby sister would come to play. From that moment on, he checked the old plum tree several times a day and reported his findings to me. Of course, he was quite concerned in November when all the leaves fell off the tree. By January, with the cold and the rains, he was truly worried whether his baby would be cold and wet like his tree. He whispered to my tummy that the tree was strong and that she (the baby) had to be strong too, and make it through the winter. By February a few purple leaves began to shoot forth, and his excitement couldn't be contained. "My tree is growing, Mommy! Pretty soon she'll have baby plums, and then I'll have my baby sister." March brought the plum's beautiful tiny white flowers, and Justin was overjoyed. "She's booming, Mommy!" he chattered, struggling with the word "blooming." He rushed to kiss my tummy and got kicked in the mouth. "The baby's moving, Mommy, she's booming, too. I think she wants to come out

and see the flowers.” So it went for the next couple of months, as Justin checked every detail of his precious plum and reported to me about the flowers turning to tiny beads that would become plums.

The rebirth of his tree gave me ample opportunity to explain the development of the fetus that was growing inside me. Sometimes I think he believed I had actually planted a “baby seed” inside my tummy, because when I drank water he’d say things like, “You’re watering our little flower, Mommy!” I’d laugh and once again explain in simple terms the story of the birds and the bees, the plants and the trees.

June finally arrived, and so did the purple plums. At first they were fairly small, but Justin climbed his tree anyway to pick some plums off the branches where the sun dappled near the rooftop. He brought them to me to let me know the baby wasn’t ripe yet. I felt ripe! I was ready to pop! When were the plums going to start falling from that darn tree?

Justin would rub my tummy and talk to his baby sister, telling her she had to wait a little longer because the fruit was not ready to be picked yet. His forays into the plum tree lasted longer each day, as if he was coaxing the tree to ripen quickly. He talked to the tree and thanked it for letting him know about this important event in his life.

Then one day, it happened. Justin came running into the house, his eyes as big as saucers, with a plastic bucket full to the brim of juicy purple plums. “Hurry, Mommy, hurry!” he shouted. “She’s coming, she’s coming! The plums are ripe, the plums are ripe!”

I laughed uncontrollably as Justin stared at my stomach, as if he expected to see his baby sister erupt any moment. That morning I did feel a bit queasy, and it wasn’t because I had a dental appointment. Before we left the house, Justin went out to hug his plum tree and whisper that today was the day his “plum pretty sister” would arrive. He was certain.

As I sat in the dental chair, the labor pains began, just as Justin had predicted. Our “plum” baby was coming! I called my parents, and my husband rushed me to the hospital. At 6:03 p.m. on June 22, the day that will forever live in family fame as “Plum Pretty Sister Day,” our daughter was born. We didn’t name her Purple Plum as Justin suggested, but chose another favorite flower, Heather. At Heather’s homecoming, Justin kissed his new playmate and presented her with his plastic bucket, full to the brim with sweet, ripe, purple plums. “These are for you,” he said proudly.

Justin and Heather are now teenagers, and the plum tree has become our bonding symbol. Although we moved from the home that housed Justin’s favorite plum tree, the first tree to be planted in our new yard was a purple plum, so that Justin and Heather could know when to expect her special day. Throughout their growing-up years, the children spent countless hours nestled in the branches, counting down the days through the birth of leaves, flowers, buds and fruit. Our birthday parties are always festooned with plum branches and baskets brimming with freshly-picked purple plums. Because as Mother Nature—and Justin—would have it, for the last fifteen years, the purple plum has ripened exactly on June 22.

Excerpted with permission from the New York Times best seller, *Chicken Soup for the Gardener's Soul* by Cynthia Brian.

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