

*The Cursed Life of Carl Flowers*

By Geisty Shu

On the Planet of Larutan, everyone grows a tree on their head. At birth, a small sprout is already present on top of every Larutanian's head. So, instead of growing hair like you and I do, they grow trees. Just like you and I compare the clothes of people who walk down the street, Larutantians compare and gossip about who has a prettier tree.

Yes, there are different degrees of beauty in a tree! But enough of that - you might be wondering why such a peculiar thing as trees growing on heads even exists! Well, this is Larutan, not Earth! Larutantians grow a tree roughly the size of a beach ball on their heads, but it's not so inconvenient that it would affect their daily life.

With this tree on their head, they cannot forget anything that ever happened to them since birth, because whenever something happens, the memory is deposited onto their tree in the form of a leaf. Every single life event becomes a leaf; but there is a catch. Leaves have a distinct color: the greener the leaf, the happier the memory, the browner and darker the leaf, the more depressing the memory.

As you can imagine, the trees store a lot of precious experiences! You and I might complain to our parents about how we don't remember what the day of our birth was like, but not so for the Larutantians! They can recall it in an instant, and what's more, if they feel like it, they can just touch a leaf on their tree that contains a memory and re-live it! Yes! They can relive their life experiences by being mentally transported back to the exact time and place of that event to see everything as vividly as it was first experienced. However, that is only if they know how to find the leaf that contains that particular memory. There are a lot of leaves!

Larutantians enjoy spending a peaceful evening replaying wonderful memories. Oh! How warm those memories are on a cold winter's day! But what about sad ones I hear you ask. Oh those! Those are best ignored I tell you, don't mention a thing about them! They are the

Larutanians' nemesis. I assure you, best avoid talking about it with them! They consider those dark and brownish leaves ugly and they fill them with horror, and they try their best to get rid of them. They have classes that teach you how to decrease the number of dark, brown leaves and tell you about home remedies to cure them too, but that's all just quackery.

'How about just cutting them off?' I hear you say. Sadly, Larutanians can't cut leaves from their heads because they'll only grow again even stronger; they can't simply get rid of memories.

As you can see, not all stored memories are happy, yet there is nothing the Larutanians are more obsessed with than happiness...

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"Hey!"

"What?"

"Do you see that boy over there?"

"Ooh, his tree looks beautiful!"

"Yes, I know, right!"

"I bet he's really happy. I wish I could date him. Wait, he's walking towards us—quick, do something to get his attention!"

But as the girl was thinking about what to do, the young Carl Flowers, turned ninety degrees towards a restaurant, pushed open the door and walked in.

"Hey Carl, welcome back! Looks like it took you quite a while to deliver those letters," shouted his amiable boss.

"Yeah, there was a problem—"

"Don't worry about it. Look," his boss motioned to a table, "the man over there is ready to order."

"Ah, I got it!" replied Carl as he walked over to the table where a middle-aged man in a suit and tie was sitting.

"I want mushroom cream soup and rib-eye steak, medium rare!"

"Yes, sir" said Carl.

"Nice tree!" The man beamed.

Since this was the millionth time Carl had heard this comment, he forced a smile, said thanks, and hurried off.

Carl Flowers was one of the lucky Larutanians who had a beautiful tree, and as you can see, people never failed to notice how stunning it looked. But over the course of twenty-five years, Carl had gotten sick of people obsessing over his tree, asking how he could get it that way, what his daily routine was, what he ate, and so on. Even TV shows would invite him for interviews.

In all honesty, Carl knew it was his happy childhood that he could thank for his magnificent tree. His parents were a part of a small group of revolutionary thinkers who shunned societal norms. They believed that people shouldn't buy into the "happiness bullshit" everyone is brainwashed with. Parents in Larutan raise their kids with the intention of making them happy all the time, shunning their sad feelings and thoughts—all in the hope of producing a greener tree. But, Carl's parents had let him explore the full range of his emotions—leading to tears, tantrums, smiles and all. Turns out, when depressing experiences were accepted and learned from, the leaves turned from brown to green—thus, Carl's beautiful tree.

The main way Carl expressed his emotions was through music. The best moments of his life were when he played in a rock band named Brotherhood with his friends. They were particularly wonderful memories that he would relive every night as he relaxed in his armchair.

Larutanians believe that a beautiful tree is their key to a wonderful life. If you don't have a nice tree, people won't like you, you can't get a job, you can't get married, and you'll end up like a hobo on the street. To have a withered tree is to be shunned by society; it's worse than having a skin disease, as people see your tree even before they see your face.

Carl entered the kitchen and handed the order to Chef Simon who read it and tossed the beef onto the grill.

"Thanks for staying past ten. All those lazy bums shot off as soon the clock struck nine," Chef Simon said.

"Wouldn't blame them, it's Friday night after all," Carl replied nonchalantly. "That lot's got a date with their girls."

Simon chuckled, "Haven't you got one yourself?"

"Nah," Carl said looking at his shabby waiter's uniform.

"Really? I bet every girl out there would date you!" said Simon. "You have such a beautiful tree!"

"ENOUGH WITH MY TREE, OKAY?!" Carl burst out in anger. "Why can't everyone just let it be?"

Chef Simon looked astonished for a second and then said "Hey, think happy thoughts. Only happy thoughts, okay? Just because you have a nice tree doesn't mean you can spread negativity around and pollute other people's trees."

"I'm sorry," Carl got himself together, "I don't know why it got to me, it's not like it's the first time. I'm really sorry. I should just go— "

"No worries. Whatever. I'm heading over to the Quag in an hour. Gonna drown my sorrows in a river of vodka."

"The Quag?" Carl had never heard of it before.

"Oh, you don't know it? Best keep it that way then. I don't recommend anyone poking their head around there," Simon whispered reassuringly.

When Carl arrived home that night, he sat down in his armchair and relived wonderful memories. This is the Larutanian style of relaxation. Sitting by the fire in an armchair, sipping a cup of tea and reliving happy memories. Carl's best memories were from the Brotherhood's

band practices. He touched a leaf on his tree containing his favorite memory and then closed his eyes...

*“One, two, ah, one, two, three, four...” Carl shouted as he hit the drums.*

*The sound of the instruments erupted harmoniously in the tiny studio where Carl and his high school friends were practicing.*

*Paul was howling into the mic as he sang,*

*“Dancin’ Daisies*

*Dance till you grieve,*

*For you can’t see,*

*The lies you tell the wind”*

*Rob played electric guitar, while Tim played bass. They jumped up and down to the beat, thrashing violently at the strings while their fingers crawled across the fretboard like spiders.*

Watching himself in his memory like a bystander, Carl saw his younger self banging the drums like a lunatic, whipping his head back and forth.

*Towards the end of the song, the music turned a bit somber as Paul sang. He was singing so passionately, like he was making love to the microphone,*

*“Dancin’ Daisies,*

*You’re a freak work,*

*Fire, fire fireeeee*

*You just wanna start a fire*

*Liar, liar, liaaaaarr*

*But there’s a fire in my heart too*

*That eternally burns for you...”*

As the memory finished, Carl opened his eyes, and smiled. “Dancin’ Daisies” was always his and Paul’s favorite song. He stared out of the window, “Oh Paul, I miss you so much,” he said softly, “I wish you were here.”

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The next morning back at the restaurant, after collecting orders from customers, Carl walked into the kitchen.

“Hey, Carl!!!” Chef Simon exclaimed with arms wide open. “Gooooood Morning!”

“Morning!” replied Carl, looking quizzically at Simon’s overly exuberant welcome, “Looks like someone’s on cloud nine.”

“Oh yeah! You can say that.”

“Well? Good night at the Quag?” Carl asked as he tossed the orders to Simon.

“Yeah, I met a strange guy there,” he explained, cautiously leaning forward. Then, checking that no one was listening, he whispered, “He got me some peniouças.”

“Wow,” Carl said wide-eyed.

Peniouça is an illegal drug that gets you really high, so you feel like a god. To get that in Larutan you either have to be really good at creating herbal concoctions (a rare skill) or find some who knows how to (also, rare).

“I know,” Simon said, grinning from ear-to-ear while chopping some tomatoes.

“How d’you do it?”

“Whaddya mean ‘how d’you do it’” Simon mocked, “It’s the Quag! THE QUAG! You can find anything and everything there.”

Carl still had no idea what the Quag was, even though this was his second time hearing it from Simon.

“Well, I would love to hear more about it, but if I don’t get out here now, the boss will come in any minute and kick my ass.”

“Alright, I’ll keep it short. You know, there are all sorts of weird folk at the Quag right? So, a friend told me there’s a kinda Sorcerer or Wizard sort-of-guy who has his own secret room in the back of the Quag. He’s there from time to time to exchange all sorts of weird goods, or whacky remedies. Not just that, I heard people go there with all sorts of problems - family,

anxiety, depression, madness, whatever—he's got it all. He's like the Jesus of the Quag! It sounds messed up, but people claim that he can solve all their problems and make their wildest dreams come true. For all I know, he can raise people from the dead—No joke! Anyways, I was drinking and ranting on to him about how my wife and children hate me and how I have such a boring life at the restaurant. Then, I told him I was unhappy 'cuz a colleague snapped at me for praising his tree, and then he got really interested and he asked me what I wanted and I—”

“You asked for a stupid bag of penioutas?!”

“Yeah, wasn't so smart of me was it, huh? Could've asked for a better life and career, but the only thing that has been on my mind this whole month is penioutas”

“Jeez Si, you could ask for anything in the world and you asked for drugs? You're a real dumbass!” Carl said face-palming himself.

“Hey, it was the alcohol!” said Simon.

“Carl!”, the boss shouted.

“I gotta go,” said Carl.

“Wait, I gotta tell you about the catch though,” Simon shouted as he grabbed Carl's sleeve.

“A catch?”

“Yeah, the quack always wants something in return.”

“So what did he ask you for?”

“Carl!” shouted the boss, a little louder this time.

“I'm coming!”

“Oh, not much,” Si replied uneasily with one brow raised, “Nothing that important—But you should go and check him out.”

“But you said you didn't recommend anyone poking their heads around there,” Carl said as he turned away to leave.

“Yeah, but you should still try it!” Simon retorted, a little forcefully.

“Maybe I will,” Carl said, waving him off.

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That night when Carl went home, he sat in his armchair again after dinner and decided to enjoy another one of his old memories.

“*Carl!*”

Carl watched his thirteen-year-old-self turn around to face Paul.

“*Hey, there you are!*”

*They had just met up at the stadium where their favorite band, 25<sup>th</sup> Sense, was having a concert that night.*

“*Aren’t you excited?*” Paul asked with his eyes lit up.

“*Sure am! I can’t wait to see Opal!*” - Opal was the drummer in 25<sup>th</sup> Sense.

“*Me too!*” Paul said, arms flailing around as he spoke, “*I hope they’re going to play ‘Dancin’ Daisies’, I love that song!*”

*Immediately, the stadium erupted in cheers.*

“*Oh look! They’re coming on stage!*” someone behind them shouted.

“*Ooh! There’s Opal,*” Carl said excitedly, “*and he’s wearing his pointed hat.*”

*Opal was the only member of the band who wore a pointed hat. The tip was so tall, it was unmistakable; everyone guessed he had a huge tree hidden under it. He never went anywhere without it. It was his trademark.*

*The music blared from the speakers, making Paul and Carl jump up and down. They screamed and whipped their heads back and forth throughout the entire show.*

*When the concert was over, Carl and Paul waited in line to get a photo and autograph.*

“*I wish I could get a hat like that,*” Carl murmured.

“*Same. It’s a cool style.*”

“*Ooh, it’s our turn.*”

*They said their hellos to the band members and got autographs from each of them, one by*

*one. When they reached Opal, Paul and Carl could barely contain themselves.*

*“I’m a huge fan!” Paul said, “Your drumming is rad!”*

*“Yeah! We have a band named Brotherhood and we love jamming to your songs, especially “Dancin’ Daisies”! We have all your albums! I wish I could be like you one day...” Carl was so excited he droned on and one with his arms flailing around.*

*“Sure, sure boys. You can be whatever you wish. For all I know, your band could be the next big thing in Larutan. Just keep working hard.” He said this while looking at Carl’s tree the whole time.*

*“We will! One day, you’ll see posters of our band all over Larutan!” Paul chimed in.*

*“Looking forward to it, have a great day!” said Opal with a smile, not taking his eyes off Carl’s tree.*

‘Ahhhh, the good ol’ days’ Carl thought as his eyes opened after the memory. He felt sleep coming over him, so he closed his eyes again and fell asleep. Then in his sleep, he murmured something almost inaudible. It went something like “Paul...Paul...Paul? Where...aaare... you? C-c-come... back...come...back...”

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“Don’t you ever wonder if you can do much more with your life?” Chef Simon asked Carl during their cigarette break.

“Sure! All the time.”

“I’ve never told anyone this. But it’s something that’s always niggling at the back of my mind.”

“The peniouṭas must have worn off.”

“Yeah, really should’ve asked for some real, concrete change in my life instead of a stupid bag of drugs.”

They both chuckled.

Then Simon asked, “so what did you dream of becoming as a kid?”

"Hmmm...not much...just those normal kid dreams of becoming a rock star and playing music."

Simon took a long drag from his cigarette and, with smoke coming out of his mouth, said "Well, I bet the wizard could help you out with that."

"Who?"

"That necromancer guy at the Quag, remember?"

"Oh yes. You really think he can help me?"

"Yeah!" exclaimed Simon a little too eagerly, "he could make things right. He can make that dream come true."

"No way, Si, you don't understand. He can't do that for me," Carl said firmly, "You don't know what happened that led to where I am now."

"I might not understand, but he will," Simon said with a look of reassurance, "If he can raise the dead back to life, what can't he do?"

Carl was ambivalent. On one hand, he wanted to give this eccentric guy a try; on the other, he didn't know whether he really believed any of it.

"Meet me at nine on Molay Street tonight, alright?" said Simon with a look on his face which showed that he was not going to take 'no' for an answer. He tossed his cig on the ground, stomped on it and got up.

Patting Carl on the shoulder he said, "Trust me. He can fix it."

"Wait, Simon!"

But Simon had already strolled back into the kitchen.

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"I hope this is going to work out" said Carl as Simon pushed open the door into the Quag.

"It will. Chill out."

The instant they stepped in, they faced mayhem. The blaring music, chatter, flickering lights, extravagantly dressed people, and the stench of alcohol and sweat overloaded Carl's

senses beckoning him to retreat.

Carl gasped as a guy with long hair and dressed in drag with makeup touched his chest and tried to lick his face.

“What the heck is this place?” he said, eyeing a woman in the corner with a yellow mamba slinking around her neck.

“Heaven or hell, you decide.”

As they walked deeper into the Quag, Carl saw more unsettling scenes, like a group of men in leather harnesses engaging in a grotesque and bloody fight inside an elephant cage, while the people around cheered them on. They then walked past an orgy and arrived in front of a large black door.

Simon knocked and called, “Hello? Anyone inside?”

The door creaked open opening into darkness.

Simon motioned him inside.

Shuddering, Carl stepped in. The door immediately banged shut behind him.

“Dang it, Simon,” Carl said under his breath.

It was so dark, he couldn’t see anything. But a stern, heavy but oddly familiar voice said, “What brings you here?”

Carl could feel his heart beating out of his chest, but he mustered up the courage to say, “I want a dream of mine to come true.”

“Tell me more about this dream.”

“Well, I’ve always dreamed of starting a rock band and playing music for the people of Larutan. My friends and I started a band named Brotherhood, and it was really taking off until my buddy Paul...died.”

“I’m sorry. But, how did that happen?”

Carl had a lump in his throat as it was painful to connect with his memories of Paul, but he managed to say, “Paul wanted to know how he could write music that would inspire people and

move their hearts. I told him to dive into a wide range of experiences and indulge in all the emotions they entail. He took my advice. He lived life on the edge, experiencing all that there was to experience with no strings attached while digging deep into every emotion in the process. He wrote a lot of amazing songs - a lot of upbeat ones, but far more sad ones. Experiencing so many things, heartbreak, death, and pain were inescapable. Sure, they inspired his music, but they also gave him a lot of heartache," Carl sighed and went on, "But, he was so wrapped up in depressing and painful feelings and as he had never been taught how to face sadness, he couldn't handle it. By the time I found out what happened, it was too late, I couldn't help him...he just...took his own life," Carl had tears welling up in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," the voice said.

There was a moment of silence.

"Alright, let's bring Paul back to life."

Carl looked aghast, "Huh? You can *really* do that?!"

"Yes, but with some conditions..."

Carl recalled the conditions of the exchange that Simon had talked about. "Oh right! What do you want from me?"

"I want the tree on your head."

"What! That's impossible! I can't give you that!" Carl shouted, putting his hands on his tree and holding onto it for dear life.

"Boy. Don't you dream of something more than the mundane life you have now?" mused the voice.

Carl's heart was pounding like a drum, and he was filled with fear, desire, and guilt all at once. He felt like leaving, but his curiosity and desire was getting the best of him.

The voice continued "Or do you just want to become another useless old man who sits by the fireplace reliving the same memories every night?"

"NO!"

“Then will you offer up your tree to me?”

Carl hesitated for a moment. He couldn’t make a choice here like this. It was too fast. Too hard.

But something inside him, a deep desire forced him to say,

“Yes.”

Suddenly, brightness pervaded the room. Carl took a few moments to adjust his eyes. His eyes fell on the man.

“You?!” Carl said, shocked.

A man in blue robes and a tall wizard’s hat smiled.

“Yes, it is I,” said Opal.

Stunned and disoriented, Carl shouted “Why are you doing this? You would never do such a thing!”

“You think you know who I am?” Opal bellowed, “You only know me from my music. You know nothing of my traumatic past!”

Carl stared at Opal, bewildered, and he felt his breathing turn heavy.

Opal started, “My dad was a musician and raised me to be one too. Ever since I was young, he forced me to practice singing and playing the drums for long hours every day. When I refused, he would beat me.” He looked down, closed his eyes in despair, “I sacrificed too much for my music career. And one of those greatest sacrifices was my childhood.”

He looked at Carl with sullen eyes that looked like two dark pools of water staring into his soul.

“You see all my achievements, but you don’t see this,” placing his hand on his hat, Opal slowly took it off... revealing a withered, leafless, dead tree on his head. Carl had never seen anything as ugly before.

“That’s why you wear that hat. To cover up that tree?”

Opal nodded.

"But I still don't understand - why do you want my tree?"

"The moment I met you during my concert, you had the most beautiful and radiant tree I've ever seen. I've always wanted a happy childhood, and the moment my eyes fell on your tree, I knew I wanted *yours*."

"But...it's impossible... you can't...you can't take someone's tree!"

"I disappeared for a long time. No one knew my whereabouts, but during that time, I was an apprentice to a wizard who was also a potions master. He taught me everything, from magic spells and enchantments to making potions with various plants and animals. The most important thing I learnt was how to make a Tree Extractor Potion. And if you haven't guessed already, it was I who secretly told Simon to send you here."

'Tree Extractor what? Wizard? Simon? What? How?' The questions raced through Carl's mind. He was too flabbergasted to put together a complete sentence.

"He came in here the other day wanting some peniouças. In his drunken rambling, he let it slip that you were his coworker at the restaurant. I've been waiting to meet you for ages Carl, you know? So, in exchange for a silly bag of peniouças, which by the way, are fairly easy for me to make, I asked him to send you here. Well Carl, we finally meet again after eleven years!"

Opal said smiling self-satisfyingly.

Carl began to boil with rage, while being consumed by fear, confusion, and disappointment all at the same time. He wanted to kill Opal right then and there, but his whole body was shaking, unsure of what to make of this whole experience. He was still mind-blown by the fact that his childhood hero had turned into a scary wizard.

As Carl regained his calm, he saw Opal take out flasks, eccentric plants and herbs and begin dumping them into a cauldron. He looked around for some sort of escape, but the room was windowless, and the only way out was the door behind him. He silently edged his way to the back of the room. As Opal was putting yet another herb into the cauldron, Carl ran and quickly turned the doorknob, but the door was bolted shut.

“Trying to escape now?” Opal sighed. “You can’t break your promise. Once we’ve agreed on something, the bonds of magic cannot be broken.”

Opal began to recite an incantation as he made his potion-

*“Swirl the pot of kujac beans, burdock and lappa weeds,*

*atropa bugs and salae leaves, basilisk fangs and cyan seeds.*

*Make my childhood a happy one please, undo my past and let it be,*

*full of happiness and glee*

*Make me complete when I finally gain this tree*

*Twiddle-wonk! Wrinkle-tonk! Bittle-little-swittle-lonk!*

*A Tree Extractor Potion concoct from this cauldron’s quality lot!”*

After this, Opal motioned Carl forward. But Carl was frozen still and his feet remained glued to the floor. Seeing that he didn’t come over, Opal flexed his index finger and Carl shot from one side of the room over to the rotten smelling cauldron. Carl felt faint and was about to throw up.

“Dip your tree into the cauldron” Opal ordered.

Carl couldn’t believe his ears, “But—”

“DO AS I SAY!” Opal shouted, but Carl wouldn’t budge. Opal raised his hand and—  
Splash! He dunked Carl’s head into the boiling cauldron. Interestingly, Carl could still breathe with his head in the water, and the water was not hot at all.

After some time, Opal took Carl out of the water. Carl felt his head. Nothing. Was. There. He was bald! Opal now put his head in the boiling cauldron. When he came up, the beautiful tree that was on Carl’s head was on his! He felt the leaves of the trees on his head satisfactorily.

Looking at Carl, he said “You can leave now. Paul is alive.”

“But what will I do with my head now?” sobbed Carl “what will people say when they see

my head like this?"

Opal handed Carl his tall hat, "Put this on, everyone will just think it's a new fashion trend."

When he woke up the next morning, he felt no change other than that the tree on his head was still gone. There was still no sign of Paul. He walked outside. The trees, buildings and cars that normally lined the streets were unchanged. So how did Opal claim that his dream had come true? He felt a sickly feeling in his stomach.

He continued walking until he arrived in front of the restaurant and went in.

"Mornin' Carl!", the boss shouted.

"Mornin'", he replied nervously.

"Simon left us yesterday. Another chef named Nathan has taken his place. Since he's new, you might need to show him where things are."

Work was just like usual. At the end of the day, Carl felt a sense of betrayal. 'I am still a waiter. Paul is still dead. Did Opal trick me?' he wondered.

Closing the door of the restaurant, Carl stared out into the distance and sighed. He walked the down the steps and instead of taking the usual road home, he took the rugged path that led to the mountains. The sky was turning grey and dark clouds were looming over the craggy tops. A couple of raindrops began to fall. Gradually, the rain turned from gentle drops to a torrential downpour. Carl took off his pointed hat and tossed it aside. There was no use wearing a wet hat. He felt his bald head. There were no leaves for him to relive his memories. He tried with all his might to recall something wonderful from the past, but it wasn't as vivid and didn't feel real. The memories were dissolving like smoke. He felt like he didn't know who he was anymore. Tears streamed down his face, but they, like the memories, were disappearing, as the rain consumed them.

Lightning flashed and thunder clapped, but Carl kept walking uphill. He didn't mind the thunder vibrating through his ears and down his spine, or that he might get struck by the jagged

flashes. He bent his head and kept marching on, but then he stopped dead in his tracks and steeled himself. He had sensed rather than heard it: something or someone was standing in the bushes next to him. Carl squinted at the dark gap between the bushes. He saw, quite distinctly, the hulking outline of something very big, with wide gleaming eyes.

Carl backed away, but stepped on a rock and, losing his balance, he fell. As he flung out his arm to break his fall, there was a deafening bark, and a giant white creature leaped out with its vicious teeth snarling at Carl.

"OOOF!" Carl was knocked down as the creature, which looked a lot like a dog, tore at him.

"WHISKEY! DOWN BOY!" hollered a stern voice.

The giant white and grey furred husky dog stopped, sniffed at Carl and then backed away.

A figure loomed over Carl and held out his hand. Carl took it and was lifted back on his feet.

Seeing the stranger for the first time, Carl saw that he had a long beard, a grass knit shirt, pants and sandals; he clearly looked like an inhabitant of the mountains. What's more, he had a magnificent tree that emitted a strange glow in the dark. It was the most marvelous tree Carl had ever seen - better than his own!

The stranger said, "Sorry mate. We don't have much company around here. So my dog, Whiskey, will take whatever chance he has to prance at a stranger. Anyways, how do you do? I'm Paul."

"Paul?" Carl said puzzled, looking at the face. He didn't look like Paul, but maybe it was because of the beard covering his face...He was beginning to see the resemblance.

"Yes. And you are?"

"Carl," Carl said frowning, still inspecting every inch of Paul's face like a detective at a crime scene.

"Carl Flowers?" Paul said quietly.

"Yeah."

"BY GOLLY! I DON'T BELIEVE IT!" Paul said beaming and stretching out his arms, "Old friend, I'm so happy to see you!"

But instead of hugging him, Carl started hitting every inch of Paul that he could reach

"Ouch-OW-geroff! What the--? Carl—OW!" Paul whimpered.

"You—son—of—a—bitch!" he punctuated every word with a punch. Paul backed away shielding his head as Carl advanced.

"You—were—hiding—here—all—these—years—without—telling—me?"

"Wait! I can explain!"

"Explain what?" Carl said panting, "That you're a prick because all these years you had everyone thinking that you were dead?"

"What? No! I wrote you a letter! I left it on my guitar in the studio!"

"What?"

"I left it there before I headed for the mountains. You didn't find it?"

Carl glared at him angrily, but also feeling a bit guilty he hadn't been back to the studio in all this time.

"I'll tell you what I wrote in the letter. I wanted to take your advice about living to the full and exploring all my emotions. What better way to do it than in deep solitude in the mountains? The freedom here is amazing! I can feel, contemplate and express anything and everything. So, I took some time off to live like a hermit. To understand myself. Don't get me wrong, I still want to play music with Brotherhood, but this was the place that called me to reflect and write songs from my heart."

Carl looked away and sank into deep thought.

Paul walked over and put his arms around him.

"I'm sorry."

Carl put his hands on his bald head.

"Oh yeah, I was going to ask about that..."

"I gave away my tree so I could get you back" Carl began, and he told Paul everything that happened from the beginning.

Paul stroked Carl's bald head, and putting Carl's forehead against his chest, he cried too.

The merciless rain never ceased. Their tears were indistinguishable from the rain.

Whiskey yanked Paul by the hem of his grass knit pants.

"Hey Whiskey! Where are you--?" Paul said as struggling to keep balance as he was dragged quickly by his rambunctious dog. Whiskey took them to a sheltered place.

"Ah, thanks Whisk, just what we needed," Paul said stroking his wet fur. He shook the rain off his fur and sat down. Carl and Paul did the same. Out of the blue, Whiskey began howling the tune of a familiar song. Paul began softly singing along,

*"Dancin' Daisies*

*Dance till you grieve,*

*For you can't see,*

*The lies you tell the wind,"*

He took Carl's hand and they started dancing in the rain. The heavier it rained, the harder they danced. Carl joined in, singing,

*"Dancin' Daisies,*

*You're a freak work,*

*Fire, fire fireeeee*

*You just wanna start a fire*

*Liar, liar, liaaaaarr*

*But there's a fire in my heart too*

*That eternally burns for you..."*

They lay down and listened to the rain pattering the rocks. Paul chuckled to himself saying, "Ah Carl, why did it take you so long to realize you had it all within you already?" Carl wondered to himself, 'True, Paul had been here all this time. He was in my heart and tree. All happiness in the world was in reach. Why did I give up something so dear for something I already had?"

"Well, what matters is we're together again now," Paul said grabbing Carl's hand. Carl felt a rush of joy, a euphoric feeling like something he had experienced in his youth—and right then and there, a small green sprout grew on the tip of his head.