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The Summer Valley

The Summer Valley

by

Tannara Young

Jehan ran down the road, his chestnut hair flying in disarray about his dirt smudged cheeks. He loved to run, to feel the wind against his face and the freedom of his speed. The rowan trees, planted in lines along either side of the road, flashed past him as he sprinted with all exuberance of youth newly released into spring after a long winter. As he rounded the bend in the road, he skidded to a stop. Just out of sight of his house an old woman stood under the flower laden trees.

Her hair hung down in a thick, white braid. She wore a gown the color of new spring leaves under a darker green cloak. Her dress hung loosely on her thin frame and her face folded in wrinkles, with laugh lines about her eyes – eyes of a gold-flecked green – which looked years younger than her face.

Jehan skidded to a halt, abashed. He had never seen her before and strangers seldom came to his small, remote village.



Her eyes lit as she saw him and a smile spread across her face. His shyness disappeared and he grinned back, crinkling

up his dancing brown eyes and showing off the lopsided gap of a missing tooth.

"Good morrow, child," the old woman said. "What a fine day for running."

"I run the fastest in my whole village," he announced, proudly. "I can win all the races, even against Simon, who is twelve."

"And how old are you?" she asked him.

"Eight," he said, drawing himself up. "My nameday was just last month."



"Eight," she sighed, wistful. "It's been a long time since I was eight."

He glanced her over, doubtful she had ever been as young as eight.

"Jehan!" his mother's voice came faintly. He danced backwards on the road to wave at her, before looking back to the old woman.

"I have to go," he said. He hesitated, oddly reluctant to say good bye. "Would you like to come and meet my mother? She made current buns this morning. She would let you have one."

The old woman smiled. "No, but thank you. I must go." Her eyes grew sad. "I just wanted to meet you and to say good bye."

He stared at her. "Um... good bye," he said, confused.

His mother called again.

"Good bye, Jehan," said the old woman. "Better not worry your mother." She turned and slipped into the trees, not going by way of the road safely guarded by the rowans, but into the Forest beyond them. Jehan stared after her in astonishment. Within moments her green cloak had disappeared into the shadows. His mother's voice became more irritated. He spun on his heel and sprinted back to her.

"Mother," he cried, "mother – I think I just met a fairy."

His mother laughed as he barreled into her. She hugged him. "A fairy, Jehan? On the road!"

"Yes!" he enthused, "she was as old as the oldest trees except for her eyes. And she knew my name. When she said good bye, she knew my name without me telling her."

"Or she heard me calling," laughed his mother. "What would a fairy be doing on the road, silly? Come on, let's get supper started. Your father is on his way home."

As they went inside Jehan glanced back down the long sunlit road. Nothing stirred there except the breeze ruffling the leaves.

###

Jehan slid quietly through the thick green shadows of the Forest. His bag already held a brace of quail, but he was not ready to return to the village. The sun, climbing toward noon, had only just begun to banish the chill from the early summer morning. He wanted to enjoy the lovely day, away from the noisy village where everybody always had their nose poking into everybody else's business. Here, in the quiet of the Forest, he could think his own thoughts and dream his own dreams.

The other villagers only went into the Forest when strictly necessary and then tried to stick to the well known areas. He knew his mother and father would be horrified if they

knew just how deep he ventured into the green shade. But the unexplored regions drew him, and he loved to search for glimpses of the true wonders of the Forest.

Once he had seen a troupe of little people, no bigger than his knees – their skin a smooth pale green and their hair wild tangles of twiggy brown – dancing with fierce abandon on a bed of moss. Another time he had seen a flock of birds as brightly colored as a rainbow settle, trilling, onto a tree. Once, coming home in the dusk, he had sworn he saw a silvery shape among the trunks, a graceful shape with a long flash of light coming off its forehead: A unicorn.

He had felt moments of terror too. A large black creature had once chased him up a tree. It looked something like a wolf, but with a misshapen jaw, and red, baleful eyes. It circled below him for a time, but then a rustling in the bushes had attracted its attention and it loped off. He had not gone into the Forest for a month after that, but eventually the lure of its wonders drew him back.

Today he slid between the trees, brushing against the new summer leaves, so bright they looked as though they were illuminated from within. His dark hair was pulled into a tail and his stained leather breaches and jerkin camouflaged with the sun-dappled wood. His bare feet made little sound on the leaf-litter.

Ahead he saw a place where the dark trunks opened into a wash of golden sunlight. He ducked around a craggy boulder and stopped, catching his breath in wonder. He stood on the edge of a small valley. The ground fell away, perhaps about fifty feet or so, into a wide canyon where the trees grew in a few scattered clumps. Lush, green grass dotted with flowers shone in the bright sun. Nearby a small stream spilled over the edge of the cliff and fell into a stony pool below, before wandering off into the grass.

Entranced, Jehan climbed down the rough rock wall and landed lithely on one of the green hillocks below. He knelt for a moment beside the little stream and took a drink of

the clear, sweet water. Then he set off, following its winding path into the sunlit valley.



As he rounded a spur of the cliff, he saw that the valley was bigger than he had thought. He had climbed down at the narrowest point and it opened out into a wide flowery field, with copses of trees here and there, and the little stream glinting with reflected sky.

As he stood admiring the view, a movement caught his eye and he froze warily. Then he stared in astonishment. A young woman drifted across the meadow. She wore a wreath of tiny wild roses on her ruddy hair and had tucked the skirts of her leaf-green dress into her belt, showing her calves and narrow, bare feet. Her clothing appeared odd, very simple and old-fashioned, not like the layers of colorful skirts and tightly laced bodices of the girls in the village. Her hands were filled with more flowers and a soft smile flitted across her

lips. She looked ethereal; shimmering against the grass as if she was but a mirage of sunlight and sparkling water.

Jehan let out his breath, and though the sound was whisper soft, she turned suddenly and looked at him. She stood not far away – ten yards perhaps – and he could see that her eyes mirrored the color of the sunlit leaves of the young birch beside her.

They stood frozen for a long moment. Then she began to back away slowly, never taking her eyes off him. Suddenly afraid she was going to vanish, he took a step forward and said, “Wait!”

She stilled, staring at him.

“Please don’t go,” he said. “I’m sorry I intruded. I didn’t know anyone was here.”

She deliberated for a moment, then her shoulders relaxed slightly and she said, “You didn’t intrude – I mean, I was just exploring.”

She had a lovely voice, low and musical, and he thought that he would be happy to stand right there in the warm sun and listen to her speak for an eternity. But she waited for his answer and as he stood there, silent, she began to look nervous again.

“Are you a fairy?” he blurted out. He could have kicked himself, but she seemed like a creature of another world, appearing in this enchanted valley like a dream.

She looked quite startled, and then eyed him cautiously. “No,” she said. “I’m not a fairy. Why on earth would you think I was a fairy?”

He knew his face flushed, but he hurried to answer. “I don’t know. You’re just so beautiful and you seemed to appear out of the sunlight or something. The Fair Folk are said to sometimes look like us, but with unearthly beauty.”

She blushed and looked down at the flowers in her hands.

“I’m Jehan,” he said, stepping forward and holding out his hand. “I was exploring too.”



She hesitated for a long moment. Then she stepped forward and took his hand. "I'm Ysabel," she said. She glanced up at him as she spoke and they stood frozen again staring at each other. He could feel the cool press of her hand against his palm and smell the warm scent of the roses in her hair.

How long they might have stood there he didn't know, but there was a sudden whirr of wings as a small flock of sparrows landed beside the water. They both turned to look and the startled birds took off again, disappearing into a nearby tree.

"Ysabel," he said, savoring her name. "Do you come here often?"

"I only found the valley today," she said. Slipping her hand out of his, she pointed back the way she had come. "I've been

gathering herbs. I am apprenticed to the herb-wife in our village."

"Where is your village?" asked Jehan.

"I live in Sallot," she said, pointing again to the north-west.

"I know Sallot!" he said. "I've been there to sell furs on market day. But it's almost a full day's journey along the Rowan Road. How did you get here?"

"It only took me since sun-up," she said.

"Where are you from?"

"Erivay," he gestured south.

She shook her head. "I've never heard of it."

"It's pretty small," he allowed. "Maybe a third of the size of Sallot. There's only one village farther down the Rowan Road before it ends at Rhyen."



"I have never been to Rhyen," she said. "I haven't ever been farther from Sallot than I can walk in a day. Some of my friends want to go to Rhyen or even to the King's capitol."

"What about you?" asked Jehan.

"I doubt there is anything I can see in even the King's city that is more wondrous than what I see every day in the Forest."

He smiled. "I will never tire of exploring the Forest either." They had begun walking and soon came to the place where Ysabel had left her basket. Jehan picked it up for her as they continued wondering through the rich summer meadow.

The little valley was particularly rich in herbs. She showed him the swaths of a rare mint – dark green with purple stems, and then the fat *elentra* root, also called *bloodstop*, prized for treating wounds.

As they wandered past one of the high rock walls, Ysabel suddenly said "Oh!" and caught Jehan's hand, pulling him toward a young tree that grew in a sheltered nook. The tree's branches hung low and heavy with ruby-red fruit that glistened, translucent in the sun.

"What is it?" Jehan asked.

"Honey-sap plum," she said, plucking one of the fruit. She bit into it and closed her eyes for a moment, savoring. "Try it."

He took the plum she held out and took a bite. The flavor exploded across his senses. It was sweet and tart and tasted of flowers and honey and the heat of the sun, and something else that was the essence of an enchanted summer day.

She smiled and reached up to wipe the juice that had dribbled onto his chin. He caught her hand, pressing it to his face and stared at her.

Slowly her smile faded, but the expression that replaced it made his heart pound and his skin flush. He took a step forward and lifted her chin so that he could kiss her lips, tasting sweet and wild from the plum. She shuddered and closed the distance between them, her hand framing his face. The plum slipped to the ground, forgotten.

That night Jehan lay awake, staring through the darkness. He drifted through the day's memories – as sweet and strange as a dream: straying through the dappled shade under the copses of trees, Ysabel's hand warming in his own; the sound of her laugh; the blush that heated her cheeks, her long lashes brushing against the rosy color. He felt as though he had told her every hope and dream he had stored in his imagination and that now he carried hers as well.

Though he felt he had barely slept, he woke in the pale gold dawn and slipped out of the house and into the dark trees, long before anyone else stirred. She couldn't have come yet, he thought, it was too early. But as he ran across the dew-kissed grass, he saw her passing out from the shade of a huge old oak tree, stepping into the rosy light of morning. In an instant he had reached her and cupped her face in his hands and pressed his lips to hers. The morning birdsong wove a bright melody around them, as her hands came up to catch hold of his shirt, pulling him closer as she leaned into his caress.



She silenced him by sitting up and drawing his lips to hers; he could again taste the sweetness of the honey-sap plum on her lips.

"Of course I want you to come and find me," she said. "Of course I want to marry you."

That summer stretched into a blur of green and gold; the long hazy heat of the days were only briefly interrupted by the warm nights where the stars hung low in the deep indigo sky. Some nights Jehan never returned home, instead sleeping in the long grass on a blanket with Ysabel curled at his side. During the day they explored the valley and sat for hours talking or just dreaming.

He told her about his family – younger and older sisters and his one young brother; the little house that seemed too small for them all, though his eldest sisters lived elsewhere in the village with their husbands and their own children.

She told him about her brother who had raised her when their parents had died in a fever, the skills she was learning as an herb-wife and her dreams of one day planting a garden full of the herbs she gathered in the Forest.



One afternoon, as they lay under the honey-sap plum – with plum pits stacked in a little pile between them - Jehan sat up suddenly, startling Ysabel, who dozed in the sun.

“I shall come to your village,” he said, his eyes alight with excitement. “Ysabel, I shall come to your village tomorrow and ask your brother for your hand. Then you can come and meet my parents.”

A slow smile spread across her face. “Jehan, are you asking me to marry you?”

He flushed. “I’m sorry, I should have said it differently, I should have asked you first if you wanted...”

The journey to Sallot took most of the next day. Jehan paused outside of the town to wash his face and change his shirt from an old patched one to his holiday best. He brushed the dust from his boots, patted down his hair and entered.

Confusion struck him at once. The square was bigger than Ysabel's description. "You will first see a smithy, near an old conker tree," she told him. But his first sight was the inn, called the Sign of the Dragonfly. Once passed the inn yard, however, he saw the smithy and beyond it the ancient horse-chestnut tree spreading over the well.

He found the lane she had directed him to, but paused in more confusion. She had said he would find five cottages, but he counted eight. Hers was supposed to be the last one, with an apple tree in the yard. The second to the last had an apple tree, while the last had huge old roses climbing up to its upper window.

As he wavered, irresolute, a young woman came out of the cottage with the roses, a small child balanced on her hip. She smiled in a friendly way, saying, "Good morrow, sir. Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes," he said, relieved. "Pray, which house does Ysabel Lauru live in?"

She looked confused. "There is none of that name here," she said.

"I came to the wrong lane then," he guessed, puzzled.

She hesitated. "I know of none of that name in Sallot," she admitted. "I was born and raised here. There is a young child, a babe really – Ysabel Farrow – the daughter of the tanner, but I do not know the name 'Lauru.'"

Jehan stared at her with a dawning sense of horror. "You've never heard the name? But she told me herself – she has golden-red hair and eyes green as birch leaves. You've never seen her?"

The young woman looked doubtful. "Bette, the innkeeper's wife, and her daughters have red hair. There's also my neighbor Toman - his hair is reddish. No one named Ysabel."

Jehan thanked her and went dazedly to the inn, where the girl serving the tables indeed had red haired, but was not Ysabel. He questioned her and she shook her head. "There is none of that description here," she said. He asked a few of the patrons at the inn and then a couple of men on the street, but besides young Ysabel Farrow, no one knew the name. He left the town as the sun slid behind the trees, too upset to think about taking a room or even a meal at the Dragonfly. He stumbled through the dark forest, coming into the valley just as the dawn began to warm the sky. Ysabel came to him as the valley flooded with light.

"Where were you?" he cried. "I went to Sallot, but no one there had heard of you."

"Where were you?" she retorted. "I sat beneath the apple tree and sewed all day, but you never came."



They stared at each other. "I asked everybody I met," he said. "On the street, at the Dragonfly..."

"Where?" she said, startled.

"The Sign of the Dragonfly? The inn just beside the town gates?"

She stared at him for a long moment. Then she sat down slowly on a nearby log. Her face showed confusion and a touch of fear.

"Ysabel?" he asked, sitting beside her, taking her hands.

"Robert Wellwood has plans to build an inn. He and the smith talked to the village council for permission. They have agreed that the building shall begin next spring."

"I don't understand," said Jehan. "I saw only one inn in Sallot and it was old and venerable."

She looked at him then and said, "Jehan, what year is it?"

"By the Lorgren Calendar the year is 1432," he said, slowly.

Her face went white. After a long silence, Jehan whispered, "Ysabel, what year is it?"

"By the Lorgren Calendar the year is 1368."

They sat, silently, hands clasped. A lark sang sweetly overhead, fading away into the blue.

"How is this possible?" Ysabel asked finally.

"It is the magic of the Forest," said Jehan. "They say that time runs differently in some parts of the Forest. Those old tales - folks who go into it and come out a hundred years later thinking a day has passed."

"Those are only stories," protested Ysabel. "And we have come out into our own time each night we part."

Jehan thought for a long moment. "I will come with you," he said, finally. "I will come to your time."

"And leave your family?" Ysabel pulled her hand away. "Think of it, Jehan! You might be dead before your parents are even born."

He turned to look at her. "Ysabel, you might be dead before I am born."

They stared at each other in horror.

That night she let him try to come with her, but as they left the southern end of the valley, climbing the faint track up the wooded slope, he felt her hand in his grow insubstantial. He tried to tighten his grasp, but there was nothing to hold onto and her face faded into the shadowy twilight.

"Ysabel," he called, and thought he heard the faintest answer:

"Jehan, my love, tomorrow, come to me tomorrow."

After that night, they seldom talked about the strange twist of time which allowed them to meet. They gathered stones and fallen branches and made a little hut near the waterfall. Jehan made seats from sections of a fallen tree and Ysabel put wild roses and white poppies in an earthenware cup and made them a little stone oven.

The valley turned from green to gold and from gold to amber as the chill of winter began to seep from darkness into the dawn. The grass grew high, producing fat seed-heads. Asters and goldenrod replaced the summer flowers, and wild carrot bloomed, white and lacy. The petals of the roses fell, leaving scarlet hips ripening in their place.



Then, on the evening of Harvestmass, Jehan slipped away from the bonfires and the great

communal feast that marked the autumn equinox and ghosted through the dark trees, along a hidden path that he had followed now so often. He came into the valley as the first stars bloomed against the azure sky. He saw Ysabel, her pale dress covered in a cloak of dark wool, running across the dry grass, silvery in the light of the rising moon.



"Jehan!" she cried, laughing. "I thought you might not come." It was a trick of the light perhaps, but he thought he saw the shivering stalks of grass through and beyond the sweep of her cloak.

"Jehan!" she cried. Her voice melted into the wind. For one brief moment he felt her against him, her lips cool on his, her hair blowing sweetly about them and then he held nothing but the shivering moonlight.

"Jehan..." the wind whispered. "Jehan..."

The valley was empty day after day. Beech leaves fell in silent drifts of gold. The grasses lay their seeds down onto the mat of roots and black earth. When Jehan came in the morning a tracery of frost shimmered on the red leaves of the rose canes. Birds gathered and then flew southward. And Ysabel did not come.

In the darkness of winter, Jehan stopped going. He lay in his bed and imagined the green branches arching over the roof of the

little hut and the heavy smell of the poppies on the rough table. When his eyes shut, he dreamt of the hut covered in snow, whiter than the poppies, whiter than the fine skin of Ysabel's throat and breast.

At long last, spring stirred. The pale blades of grass pushed up through the dark soil and little cups of purple and gold crocus sat among them like jewels on the robe of a king. Jehan's wild irresponsibility of the last summer and dark depression of the winter had mellowed into a new maturity that his parents watched with anxious pride. He began to build himself a little house, nestled into the eaves of the Forest. As the weather warmed, the villagers gathered to bless the new sown fields, which already put forth green shoots into the lengthening days.

Then on the eve of St. Flores' Day, as Jehan was finishing shingling the roof, a stranger came to find him, hailing him by name.

He swung down, wiping the sweat off his face with a rag, and the two men took stock of each other. The stranger was older than he, with threads of silver in his ruddy gold hair. But his eyes were strangely familiar. He held out a callused hand and said, "I am Toman Lauru."

"Lauru!" Jehan gasped. He stared wide eyed at the man, then took in an unsteady



breath.

"What?" he asked. "I mean why are you here? Who are you?"

The man stared at him for a long moment, looking almost as disturbed as Jehan felt. Then he fumbled in his vest and drew out a sheaf of paper. "I am your grandson."

Jehan read the paper

"Jehan, my love," it said. "Come back to the valley. Between high spring and high autumn, in the daylight of the year the enchantment holds. At the moment you read this I am gone these many years. But if you come to me, come this very moment, I am waiting for you in the valley. Please come back to me."

The paper fluttered to the ground at Toman's feet as Jehan disappeared into the Forest at a run. There was the path he had worn through the trees, there the cliff at the edge of the valley and, as he leapt down it, heedless and nimble as a mountain goat, there was Ysabel running across the new spring grass to meet him.

###

An eight-day later, Jehan returned to Sallot. He retraced his steps to the lane that had eight cottages and went straight to the one with the ancient apple tree in the yard. He knocked on the door. An old woman answered. She was tall with silver hair in twisted braids upon her head. Jehan hesitated. He could see Ysabel in her elegant cheekbones and narrow hands, but her eyes were his own clear brown. He stood dumbstruck; she was equally dazed.

"Mother? Who is it?" Toman's voice came from the back room.

"You are my father." Her voice was so like Ysabel's that Jehan swallowed hard, before he could speak.

"Yes, I am."

Toman came up behind her, followed by another woman, small and dark haired with a dark-haired baby on her hip. The child's eyes were green as his father's, green as his great-grandmother's.

Jehan pulled his gaze away from his great-grandson and looked again at his daughter. He held out his hand. "Ysabel says she named you Jeanette," he said. "I'm... I'm so very pleased to meet you."

Jeanette's eyes filled with tears as she smiled, took his hand, and drew him inside the cottage.

###

In a small valley nestled in the Forest, a sturdy hut sat near the waterfall. About it grew a garden, planted with spring onions and broad-beans and the first spiky leaves of poppies sprouting among the vegetables. But for the running water, the scene lay quiet under the pale spring sunlight. An old woman, with a thick white braid and eyes of a gold flecked green, came down a path worn smooth by years of passage. She stood for a long moment, looking at the hut and the garden. Then she crossed to a young honey-sap plum and knelt beside a stone that lay there. She laid a spring of young rowan leaves beside the name upon the stone and traced the letters with her finger.

"Today I saw you in the spring of your life," she said, softly, "running down the Rowan Road. You never told me if you remembered that day or ever knew it was me who stopped you to say good-bye that one last time."