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THE GREENING

One minute they weren't really anything; the next they were born. They knew that because there was suddenly the warmth of the sun and a soft breeze, neither of which they had felt before. Where they were, though, was a mystery; and as to exactly *what* they were none of them had any idea; not until they heard the voice: "Come on, grublets, shake some legs. You can't sit around here all day – there are things to do."

So, according to the voice they were grublets, but who had told them this? A shadow began to creep over them blocking out the sun, and they looked up to see what had done this; then they had to look up and up some more. It was huge, towering above them and the grublets huddled together in fear. Sinking down from its upright position, the thing peered at them with big dark eyes, and it spoke again: "Don't be afraid little ones. My name is Sylvia. I am your cousin and I am just like you."

The grublets looked around at each other; then back to Sylvia, and one of them said: "But you aren't like us at all. You are much bigger and you're a different colour."

"That's because I'm older," explained their cousin. "One day you will be as big and green as me, once you learn about The Greening." It was clear the grublets didn't know what she was talking about. "Never mind that for now. It's time to get going before some bird sees us."

"What's a bird?" asked one of the grublets.

"They fly around in the sky," said Sylvia, "The same way our mothers did when they brought us here; but, believe me, birds are nowhere near as kind and gentle. In fact, what we are to them is food, so if they catch us, they will eat us." The grublets had started to tremble and were looking up into the sky for anything that might be a bird. "Don't worry," Sylvia went on to say, "Come with me and we'll find a place of safety. Once we're deep in the green the birds won't even be able to spot us..." She paused and frowned at the huddled group of little ones. "Well, they'd be able to see you as you are now, so you need to stay out of sight for the moment; but after a while you'll become green like me; and if you look around you'll notice that we are in the middle of the green. Not only does the colour hide us from the birds, but it is what we eat for breakfast, lunch and tea."

Over the coming days the grublets got to learn about The Greening. It was, they discovered, how they were gradually changing to the same colour as their cousin, and all because of what they ate. "Green is best," Sylvia told them, "Mainly leaves which are soft and juicy."

As there were so many of them and they looked pretty much alike, the grublets decided they needed to give themselves names, each choosing their own. The idea was to keep it simple; so they picked short names like Pob, and Bot and Alf; all, that is, except for one. "Why would anyone want to be called Columbus?" queried Daz. "It's so hard to remember."

"Because he thinks he's something special," replied Nub. "Maybe that's why he's always going off on his own."

"I call that stupid," commented Bot. "He's no different to the rest of us, and he's going to get himself into big trouble; maybe even caught by a bird."

One time that was the thought when something came flapping in to settle on a leaf. "Is that a bird?" whispered Pob, shrinking down to make herself as small as she could.

Sylvia didn't seem troubled and said: "No, no, it's one of the mothers bringing in more grublets, just like you used to be before you started The Greening." That seemed to calm the grublets down; although she had to admit that they weren't really grublets anymore now that they had grown bigger and were becoming a lovely shade of green; so she started to think of them simply as grubs. Anyway, they had their own names; not that anyone could tell one from another because they all appeared the same. Well, all but one who was much bigger. Frowning, she looked around. "Where's Columbus?"

"On the wander," said Alf. "I asked where he was going and he reckoned he was off to explore."

And so it continued, day after day, with the grubs eating green and growing bigger; while Columbus went on his usual trek, always returning and looking even bigger than the rest of them. Until one day he didn't come back at all. In fact, they never saw Columbus again. "What do you think has happened to him?" asked Daz.

Sylvia was close by and overheard. "I didn't want to tell you this," she began quietly, "But he crawled out into the open and a bird took him." Some of the grubs started to cry, so she added: "I did try to warn you all; Columbus, however, didn't take any notice. I know it's sad, but it is a lesson that must be learned if you are to carry on unharmed."

"I've been wondering about that," said Nub. "We move from leaf to leaf, eating and growing bigger; and not doing much else apart from sleeping. What I'd like to know is why? I questioned Alf because he's pretty smart, but he didn't know either. Can you tell us, Sylvia? What's it all about? Is that all we'll ever do?"

"I'm glad you asked me that," said Sylvia and she went on to explain: "Now that you are properly green and almost as big as me, apart from eating and sleeping you have a job to do." The grubs' eyes grew wide and they waited for Sylvia to continue: "As your cousin, I told you about The Greening and what to do to stay safe. It's time for you to be the teachers. You are to watch where the mothers land; then you must go to your new grublet cousins and help them to learn everything that you have about life in the green."

Just then one of the mothers flew in and placed some new grublets on a nearby leaf. "There you are Nub," said Sylvia, "You have your first job. As for the rest of you, keep watch for more mothers and go to where they land and teach those grublets what to do."

Nub crawled over towards the new grublets, then paused to ask: "I understand that all of us come from the mothers, but where do *they* come from?"

Sylvia tutted. "Too many questions which I don't have the answers to. All I know is The Greening is what matters, or so my older cousin Charlotte told me when I asked."

"Maybe we could ask *her*?" suggested Alf. "If she's older *she* might know where mothers come from."

With a long sigh, Sylvia said: "I'm afraid I haven't seen Charlotte for ages. If she wasn't picked up by a bird, I don't know where she is. You'll just have to take my word for it: The Greening is our life, and that's all there is; anything else is a mystery."

Days passed, and now that each of the grubs had their own little groups of grublets to look after it was certainly less boring. Although Sylvia still took charge of a few new arrivals, she seemed to be doing it less and less; and Daz noticed something which she mentioned to the others: "Sylvia seems to be getting a lot slower lately. Do you think she's alright?" After a brief talk, it became clear that the others had similar thoughts about their cousin; but none of them

knew why she had suddenly changed. Daz took a deep breath and said: "I'm going to ask her," and away she crawled. It took a while for her to find Sylvia because she was laying perfectly still, stretched out on a stem that was exactly the same colour making it hard to tell the difference between the grub and the green. Moving close, Daz said: "Are you okay, Sylvia?"

"I'm fine," replied Sylvia; but the way she spoke very quietly, that didn't seem to be quite true. "I'm just a bit tired, so I'm resting, that's all." Not wishing to say more, she added: "Off you go now, Daz. You can't afford to leave your grublets on their own for too long."

Leaving Sylvia to rest, Daz went back to her work and that took her mind off her cousin's tiredness for a while. When she returned later there was no Sylvia to be seen. Instead, in the exact spot where her cousin had been was something very strange. Unable to decide what it might be, she fetched the others to see if they had any idea. "It's kind-of fuzzy," said Alf, "And it's white, so it can't be her. I wonder where Sylvia is?"

"It has to be Sylvia," stated Daz positively. "This is where she was and she was too tired to go anywhere. Maybe she's sick. We should keep an eye on her the same way she watched over us when we were grublets. So the grubs did just that, hoping that Sylvia would get well and return to them. One day the fuzzy white stuff surrounding their cousin began to disappear and they were all hopeful that Sylvia was back; but they were disappointed. Instead of the green grub that Sylvia had been, there was a long, brown crusty-looking thing in her place. "Oh, dear," said Bot tearfully, "I think she might have died."

"No, no," said Pob, not wishing to imagine something so terrible. "It's probably because she hasn't eaten for a while. That's why she's stopped being green." Then she had another thought: "And perhaps she was too tired to get her own food, so it's no wonder she got sick. What if we bring her some leaves to eat; then she might get better?" It seemed like a good idea, although not one of the grubs truly thought it would do any good; but they brought leaves anyway and lay them against the long, brown crusty thing that they guessed had originally been Sylvia. Unfortunately, the brown whatever-it-was didn't eat anything. It just sat there, unmoving.

Believing they had done the best they could, the grubs began wandering away, and most of them had tears in their eyes. They stopped short when Pob called out: "Hey, come back! Something weird's happening!"

The grubs returned to watch, and it was pretty amazing. The outside of the long, brown crusty thing slowly began to crack. A piece fell off, then another, and the cracks widened. As they did, a strange creature seemed to be trying to get out; just a little at a time. "I was hoping it would be Sylvia," said Daz, "But it's nothing like her. It looks like..." She gasped. "Oh my word, I do believe it's a mother!" she finished in surprise.

And a mother it was, with big beautiful white wings which she flapped as she sat on what remained of the brown thing from which she had come. "Are you Sylvia?" Asked Alf hopefully; but the mother said nothing in reply, simply flapped her wings for a bit, then took off and flew out of the green and up into the sky.

"I think you have the answer to your earlier question, Nub," said Bot. "That's where mothers come from; and I'm certain this was Sylvia, after she became the long, brown crusty thing."

That had to be the truth of it, and they too expected they would all eventually become mothers. Having learned this, it was suggested that they should tell their grublets about it; but Pob thought they were too young to understand. "Best keep it simple," she said, "They'll find out about mothers when the time is right. In the meantime, let's just stick to The Greening. After all, that's really enough for any of us, grublets and grubs."