

Nicky rushed through the house, looking for Old Nono. Finally he found him sitting in a rocking chair on the back porch, enjoying the warm spring sunshine. "Hello, Old Nono," Nicky said as he went up to his great-grandfather and put his arms gently around the old man's neck to give him a hug. As Nicky bent forward, his backpack slid under his arm and banged into Old Nono's chest.

"Ooooph!" Surprised, the old man gasped for breath, then smiled at Nicky and laughed his rumbly laugh. "That's a heavy bag of seeds you have there, Nicky."

Nicky laughed, too, and let the backpack slide down onto the porch floor. "Sorry." He bent over to kiss the wrinkled cheek. "Are you ready?"

Old Nono smiled at Nicky through his watery, cloudy, 102-year-old eyes. They were kind eyes, understanding eyes that had seen much during his lifetime. "You bet I'm ready!"

By the time Nicky changed into his work clothes and went back outside, Old Nono was already in the garden with the wooden flats filled with the tomato plants that the two of them had started weeks earlier from seeds. "Why don't you build your muscles by carrying the water," Old Nono said, pointing to the metal bucket by the water faucet. He grinned and raised his skinny arms as if he were a muscleman. "My muscles are already too strong."

As soon as Nicky had carried a bucket of water to the garden, Old Nono started forcing his thick, pointed stick into the soft soil and pulling it to one side to form a hole. Nicky poured water into the hole, then held a six-inch tomato plant in it while Old Nono tamped the soil around the plant's roots.

When they finished the second row, Old Nono paused. He picked up a handful of the black dirt and slowly straightened up, a faraway look in his eyes. Some of the

dirt trickled between his fingers. Nicky looked at Old Nono's gnarled knuckles, swollen and misshapen by arthritis, and he wondered if old age hurt. Then Nicky looked up into Old Nono's face and saw that it wasn't pain that had caused him to stop. It was his memories.

Old Nono had been just a teenager when he'd left his parents in Italy and had come to live in Illinois. It had taken many years of hard work before he'd been able to buy a small vegetable farm just outside Chicago. Last fall Old Nono had taken Nicky to the place where, for almost five decades, Old Nono had had a partnership with the land in raising millions of tomatoes and other vegetables. Now that land was covered with streets and lawns and trees and homes.

Old Nono bent over and patted his handful of black dirt around the last small tomato plant.

"I wish I could grow up to be a truck farmer like you were," Nicky said with a sigh.

"Things are different now, Nicky. Farming isn't simple any more." Old Nono straightened up slowly. "Let's hurry and clean up here, Nicky, so that we can go tend our magic garden."

Fifteen minutes later they were upstairs in Old Nono's room. Except for the door, the closet, and the window, all the walls of Old Nono's room were covered with bookshelves filled with books that the old, cloudy eyes could no longer read.

"Your mind is a magic garden," Old Nono often said to Nicky. "It's a magic garden because anything that you plant there grows either seeds or weeds. Every day you choose which one you plant in your magic garden."

Old Nono sat down in an overstuffed chair and used his hands to lift his feet onto the ottoman. From the table next to him he took a small framed picture of his wife and held it at an angle a few inches



M A

G I C



G A R D E N



from his eyes. Nicky had never known Old Nono. She had died more than twenty years before Nicky was born, but Nicky could tell from the pictures and the stories that he'd heard about her that she had been a beautiful woman in many ways.

Nicky sat in his chair on the other side of the table and opened up Old Nono's Bible to the bookmark. The ritual was the same every day, and the first thing was for Nicky to read to Old Nono from the scriptures.

Nicky found the next marked verses, and read aloud: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

"A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted."*

As Nicky closed the Bible and put it back on the table, Old Nono said quietly, "Isn't that beautiful, Nicky? That's one of my favorite passages."

Nicky nodded, although he wondered if he'd really understood what he'd just read. He decided to think about it later. For now, he'd continue with their ritual. "We finished *Huckleberry Finn* yesterday, Old Nono. What do you want to read now?"

"That one," Old Nono said, pointing.

Nicky got the large book, opened it to Chapter One, and started to read: "Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show." Nicky glanced again at the title at the top of the page—*David Copperfield*—then at Old Nono, who had his eyes closed and a happy smile on his face.

Several weeks and 850 pages later, Nicky said a sad good-bye to his friend David Copperfield, a true hero who had planted many seeds of persistence and integrity in Nicky's and Old Nono's magic garden. Their next hero was clever King Odysseus, who shared with them the adventures he faced and the problems he solved while traveling home from the war at Troy.

Throughout the spring, Nicky and Old Nono pulled weeds in the outside garden and supported the growing tomato plants with wooden stakes. By summer the little yellow flowers on them became green tomatoes that grew larger every day. Nicky

and Old Nono bet each other a hot fudge sundae on which of two tomatoes that they were especially watching would ripen first.

The day came when Old Nono's tomato was fully ripe. As soon as Nicky's baseball practice was over, he hopped on his bike and pedaled hard for home. They were going to pick Old Nono's tomato, eat it with their lunch, then walk to the ice-cream store, where Nicky would buy the sundaes. But when Nicky pulled into the driveway, his mother was outside waiting for him.

"Nicky," she said softly, "something has happened to Old Nono. Dad went with him in the ambulance a few minutes ago, and I've been waiting here for you."

Nicky dropped his bike on the lawn and got into the car. As his mother started to back the car out of the driveway, Nicky called out, "Wait!" He got out of the car, ran back to the garden, and tenderly picked Old Nono's tomato.

The hospital was only three miles away, but the drive seemed to take forever. *Maybe it's nothing serious*, Nicky hoped.



At the admittance desk Nicky's mom asked the emergency room nurse about Old Nono. The nurse glanced at a clipboard, then excused herself to go back into the work area. A few minutes later a young, curly-haired doctor came through the metal swinging doors with Nicky's dad, whose eyes were red from crying.

"There was nothing more we could do," the doctor said. "But if it's any consolation to you, Mr. Mariani seemed to die peacefully."

Nicky's mom started to cry, and so did Nicky. Finally, when his tears subsided, Nicky realized that he was still holding Old Nono's tomato. He took it to the nurse's desk. "Maybe somebody here would like to have this," he said, handing her the tomato and trying to smile.

The nurse took the tomato and smiled back kindly.

The morning of the funeral the sun shone brilliantly in the blue sky. *A farmer's day*, Nicky thought as he walked between the rows of tomatoes—Old Nono's last crop. Just a few months ago Old Nono had poured a bunch of tiny seeds into the palm of Nicky's hand. Now those seeds had turned into rows of healthy plants with bushels of beautiful tomatoes on them.

Nicky went to Old Nono's room to wait while his parents finished getting dressed for the funeral. He walked past the bookshelves, stopping to read some of the familiar titles. Books. Hundreds of books that Old Nono loved. Thousands of seeds for their magic garden. He wondered if Old Nono missed these books. Nicky sat in the overstuffed chair, picked up the picture of Old Nono, and studied her smiling face. *Wherever Old Nono is, he decided, he's with Old Nono, and they are happy together.*

He glanced up at the books again as he suddenly understood the real magic of Old Nono's magic garden. The books were still here in this room, but Old Nono had taken the "seeds" in them with him!

A similar thought came to Nicky in the cemetery as he watched the casket being lowered into the grave. It wasn't really Old Nono inside that casket; it was just the body that Old Nono had left behind, an old, worn-out body. And that body was being



placed into the earth that had been Old Nono's partner in life.

As the casket settled into the grave, tears clouded Nicky's eyes, and a dull ache persisted. He was really going to miss Old Nono. But through the pain, some familiar words came into Nicky's mind: "*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven.*" When he had read them before, they were only words. Now those words had meaning. "*A time to be born, and a time to die . . .*" Other seeds that had been planted in Old Nono's magic garden came to Nicky's mind: "*For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.*"**

Suddenly it was all clear to him. Everything has a purpose. Even death has a purpose, and it is not really that scary. When he had been helping Old Nono plant seeds in his magic garden, he had also been planting his own magic garden. And the fruit of his magic garden tasted wonderful.

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-2
**1 Corinthians 15:22