

Once upon a time, a boy and a girl lived with their parents at the edge of a beautiful green valley in North Carolina. Their names were Sara and John.

The valley was filled with a vast *deciduous* forest. Its trees towered over the log cabin where John and Sara lived. Sara and John loved the forest. Every day they went exploring. They paddled in the forest's cool streams and made trails under the giant hardwood trees.

They also liked to have picnics at the top of a hill near their home. Up there, they could look down on the tops of the valley's huge trees.

One day when they were up on the hill, they decided to give the valley a name. They called it Tree Tops Valley.

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Then in the middle of a hot summer day, everything changed. A fierce thunderstorm came through the valley and lightning started a fire in the forest. Luckily, the wind blew the flames away from Sara and John's home. But when the fire went out, they saw it had burned their Tree Tops Valley. All the tall *deciduous* trees were burned. The tender little seedlings that had grown on the forest floor were gone. All that was left was the burned remains of trees.

They both wanted to cry. Sara said, "I just can't look at it. Our beautiful forest is gone forever. I never want to sit on our hill again." After the fire, the family moved away to a settlement where other families lived. There were children there, and Sara and John made new friends.

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Five years after the fire, their Sarah and John's father said, "Why don't we visit the valley? It would be good to see it again." Sara and John didn't want to go. They remembered how the valley had looked after the fire. But they agreed, and one day, the family saddled their horses and rode up to the valley.

What a surprise! Things had happened since the fire. Wind had blown seeds into the valley. Birds had dropped them from the air. The seeds had sprouted. Now, instead of bare, burned ground, there were grasses, weeds, vines, mosses and wildflowers growing everywhere. The children rode back home feeling much better about Tree Tops Valley.

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The years went by. Before they knew it, Sara and John had grown up. The settlement where they lived was much bigger now. John became a teacher and taught at the one room school that the settlers had built.

Sara decided to be a prospector. She had heard stories about people who were finding gold farther north. So Sara bought supplies and one day was ready to leave. She promised her brother John she would write him.

John didn't hear from Sara for many months. Then, finally, a letter arrived. In the letter, Sara wrote, "On my way north, I passed through Tree Tops Valley. You would be amazed at how the valley looks now! Our old cabin is still there, but everything else has changed. The whole valley is full many different types of shrubs and blackberry bushes. I had a feast!"

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The letter gave John an idea. He thought, "When I have children of my own, I'll take them berry picking in the valley. That would be fun!"

Soon after that, John got married. When his oldest son was 10 years old, he remembered his idea. He took his family to the valley to pick berries. His children loved the valley. But there were no berries to pick. Most of the bushes were gone. Instead, the valley was filling with pine trees. John wrote to his sister Sara about them. He wrote, "There are lots of pine trees in the valley. And I saw some young *deciduous* trees. The pines are so thick that they have shaded the berry bushes and choked them out. I don't know what type of pine trees they were, but they have made the valley all green again."

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Many years passed. John's children grew up and had families of their own. One summer, when John was 75 year old, he received a letter from Sara.

Dear John,

Remember how we loved Tree Tops valley when we were young? Last month I decided to visit it again, before I got too old to make the trip. It was a long ride, but I made it! You would be happy to see our valley now. It's beautiful!

Remember those pine trees you saw on your last trip there? Well, many of them are gone. Now the valley is full of deciduous trees including yellow poplar, sweetgum, hickories, and many different types of oaks. Who knows? Maybe our grandchildren will see the valley looking the way we once saw it.

Love from your sister ~ ~

*Sara*

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The years went by. It was now 100 years since the fire had swept through Tree Tops Valley.

One day, John's granddaughter, Jennifer, was looking at some old family letters. She found the letter Sara had written to John after her last visit to Tree Tops Valley.

"Look at this," Jennifer said to her husband. "It's a letter that belonged to my grandfather, John. His sister wrote it to him. It's all about a place called Tree Tops Valley. I wonder if we could find the valley. Why don't we try?"

And that's what they did. Jennifer and her husband found the valley. They even found the hill where Sara and John had taken their picnics. From the hill they could see tall deciduous trees filling the whole valley. They climbed down and explored and enjoyed the shade of the tall trees. While the trees were tall and mighty, Jennifer and her husband had evidence from the past that the forest would not always be the same. They wondered if someday, they too might witness the changes in Tree Tops Valley that Sara and John talked of in their letters.

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