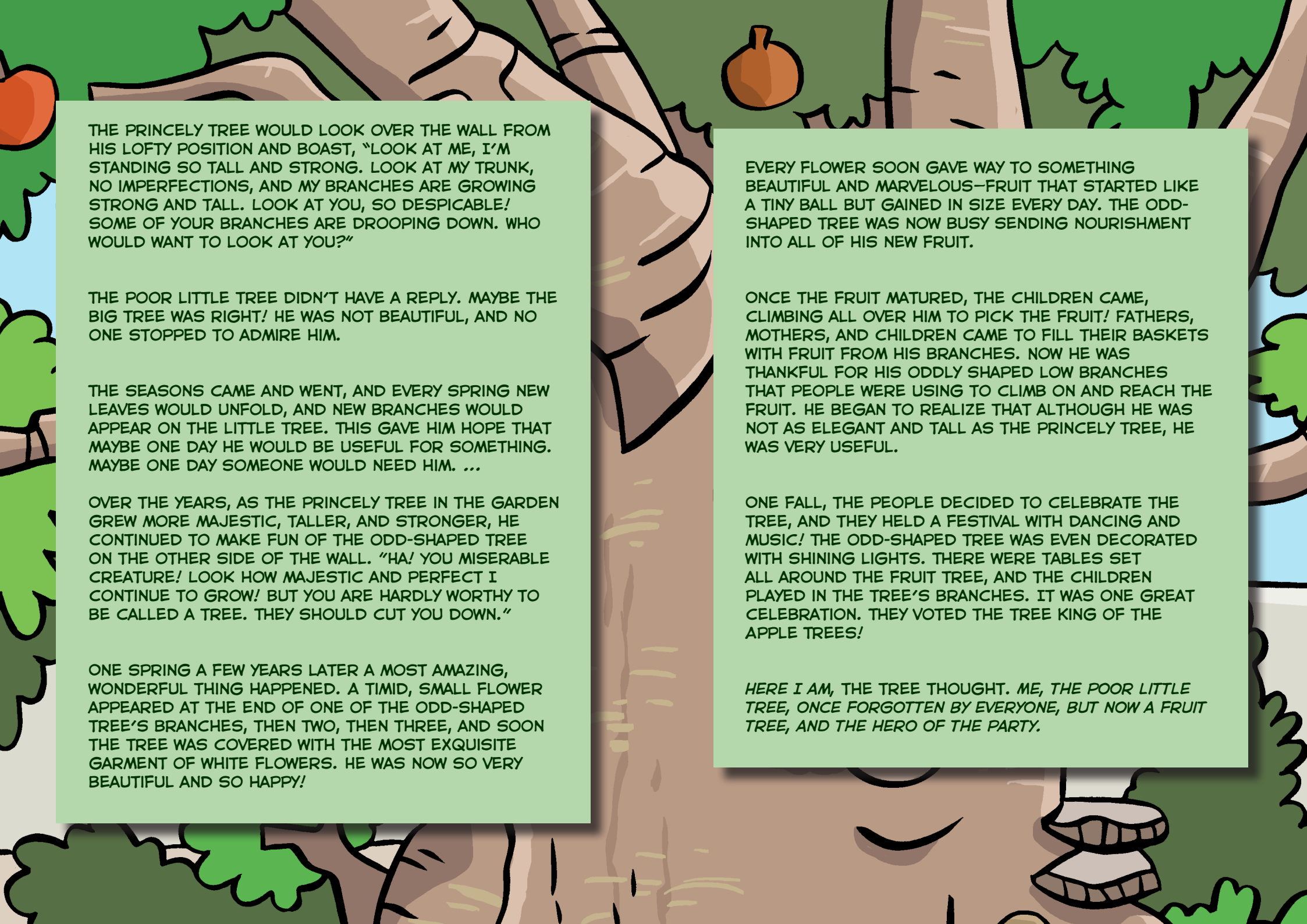


The Old Gentleman

IN A WELL-CARED-FOR GARDEN STOOD A BEAUTIFUL TREE, POSSIBLY THE MOST PERFECT TREE YOU WOULD EVER SEE. ITS BRANCHES REACHED UP TO THE SKY AND WERE COVERED WITH BEAUTIFUL SHINY LEAVES. HE STOOD STRAIGHT AND TALL, LIKE A PRINCE, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LOVELY GARDEN. EVERYTHING WAS PERFECT: THE GARDEN WAS WELL TENDED, THE GRASS WAS CAREFULLY CUT, AND EVERY DEAD LEAF WAS ALWAYS QUICKLY REMOVED.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL BORDERING THIS GARDEN STOOD AN UNTENDED, AWKWARD TREE. HE DIDN'T HAVE A GLORIOUS LOOK. HIS BRANCHES WERE GROWING IN ALL DIRECTIONS; NO ONE HAD TAKEN THE TIME TO TRIM THEM. HE WAS OFTEN MADE FUN OF BY THOSE WHO PASSED BY. SOME PEOPLE THOUGHT HE SHOULD BE CUT DOWN, WHILE OTHERS SAID, "HE MIGHT BE USEFUL ONE DAY."



THE PRINCELY TREE WOULD LOOK OVER THE WALL FROM HIS LOFTY POSITION AND BOAST, "LOOK AT ME, I'M STANDING SO TALL AND STRONG. LOOK AT MY TRUNK, NO IMPERFECTIONS, AND MY BRANCHES ARE GROWING STRONG AND TALL. LOOK AT YOU, SO DESPICABLE! SOME OF YOUR BRANCHES ARE DROOPING DOWN. WHO WOULD WANT TO LOOK AT YOU?"

THE POOR LITTLE TREE DIDN'T HAVE A REPLY. MAYBE THE BIG TREE WAS RIGHT! HE WAS NOT BEAUTIFUL, AND NO ONE STOPPED TO ADMIRE HIM.

THE SEASONS CAME AND WENT, AND EVERY SPRING NEW LEAVES WOULD UNFOLD, AND NEW BRANCHES WOULD APPEAR ON THE LITTLE TREE. THIS GAVE HIM HOPE THAT MAYBE ONE DAY HE WOULD BE USEFUL FOR SOMETHING. MAYBE ONE DAY SOMEONE WOULD NEED HIM. ...

OVER THE YEARS, AS THE PRINCELY TREE IN THE GARDEN GREW MORE MAJESTIC, TALLER, AND STRONGER, HE CONTINUED TO MAKE FUN OF THE ODD-SHAPED TREE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL. "HA! YOU MISERABLE CREATURE! LOOK HOW MAJESTIC AND PERFECT I CONTINUE TO GROW! BUT YOU ARE HARDLY WORTHY TO BE CALLED A TREE. THEY SHOULD CUT YOU DOWN."

ONE SPRING A FEW YEARS LATER A MOST AMAZING, WONDERFUL THING HAPPENED. A TIMID, SMALL FLOWER APPEARED AT THE END OF ONE OF THE ODD-SHAPED TREE'S BRANCHES, THEN TWO, THEN THREE, AND SOON THE TREE WAS COVERED WITH THE MOST EXQUISITE GARMENT OF WHITE FLOWERS. HE WAS NOW SO VERY BEAUTIFUL AND SO HAPPY!

EVERY FLOWER SOON GAVE WAY TO SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL AND MARVELOUS—FRUIT THAT STARTED LIKE A TINY BALL BUT GAINED IN SIZE EVERY DAY. THE ODD-SHAPED TREE WAS NOW BUSY SENDING NOURISHMENT INTO ALL OF HIS NEW FRUIT.

ONCE THE FRUIT MATURED, THE CHILDREN CAME, CLIMBING ALL OVER HIM TO PICK THE FRUIT! FATHERS, MOTHERS, AND CHILDREN CAME TO FILL THEIR BASKETS WITH FRUIT FROM HIS BRANCHES. NOW HE WAS THANKFUL FOR HIS ODDLY SHAPED LOW BRANCHES THAT PEOPLE WERE USING TO CLIMB ON AND REACH THE FRUIT. HE BEGAN TO REALIZE THAT ALTHOUGH HE WAS NOT AS ELEGANT AND TALL AS THE PRINCELY TREE, HE WAS VERY USEFUL.

ONE FALL, THE PEOPLE DECIDED TO CELEBRATE THE TREE, AND THEY HELD A FESTIVAL WITH DANCING AND MUSIC! THE ODD-SHAPED TREE WAS EVEN DECORATED WITH SHINING LIGHTS. THERE WERE TABLES SET ALL AROUND THE FRUIT TREE, AND THE CHILDREN PLAYED IN THE TREE'S BRANCHES. IT WAS ONE GREAT CELEBRATION. THEY VOTED THE TREE KING OF THE APPLE TREES!

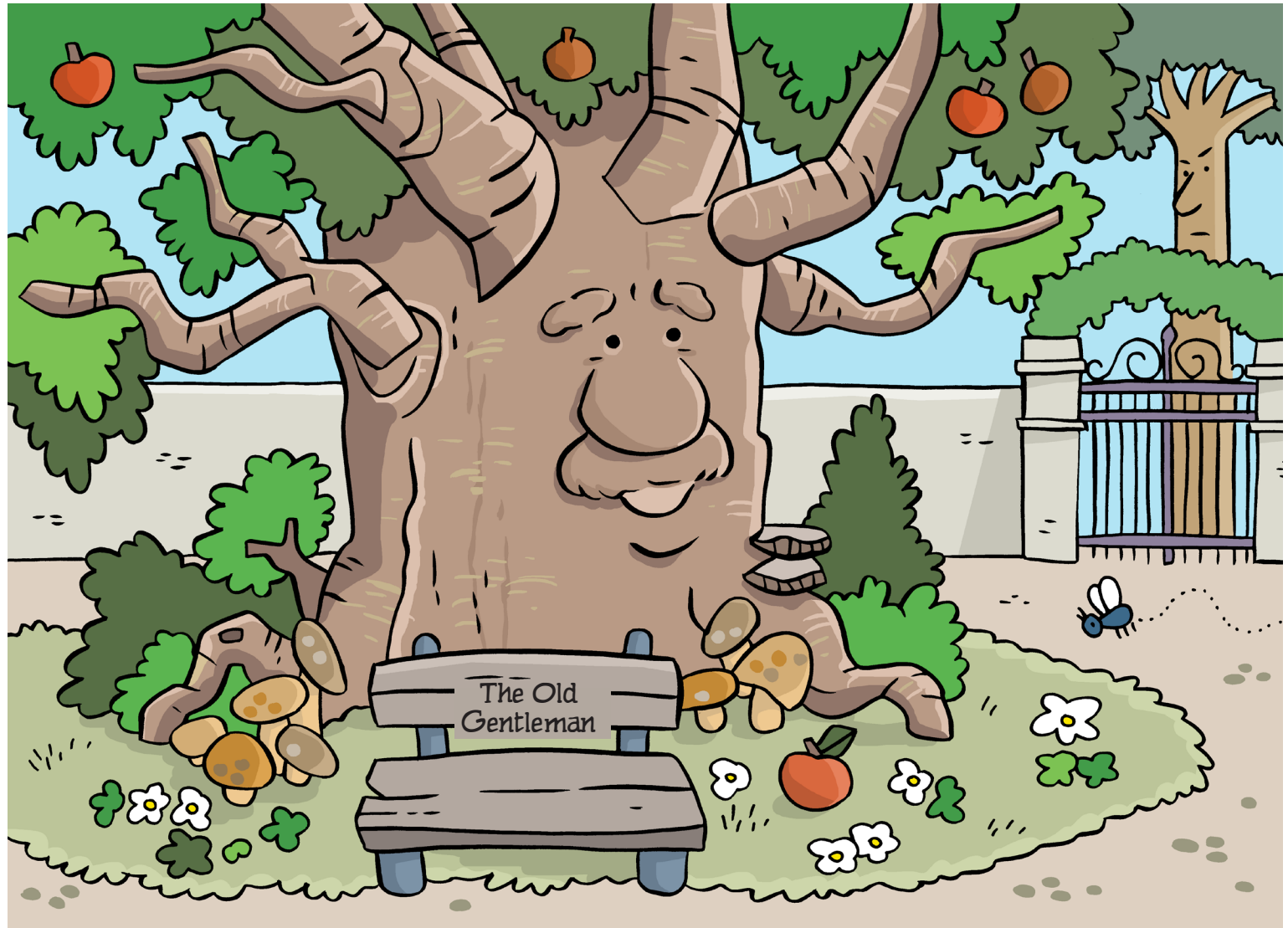
HERE I AM, THE TREE THOUGHT. ME, THE POOR LITTLE TREE, ONCE FORGOTTEN BY EVERYONE, BUT NOW A FRUIT TREE, AND THE HERO OF THE PARTY.

HOW THE APPLE TREE WISHED TO SHARE HIS JOY. HE THOUGHT OF THE TREE OVER THE WALL, AND WISHED THAT HE WOULD ALSO BE ABLE TO ENJOY THE FAMILIES AND THE FUN CHILDREN, BUT NO ONE BUT THE GARDENER WAS ALLOWED TO GO INTO THE PRINCE'S PERFECT GARDEN.

ONE DAY, LARGE EQUIPMENT WAS BROUGHT IN TO PREPARE THE GROUND FOR BUILDING NEW HOMES, AND THEY DESTROYED THE OTHER TREE'S PERFECT GARDEN. SOON THE ONCE PRINCELY TREE WAS CUT DOWN AND CARRIED AWAY.

BY THIS TIME, THE ODD-SHAPED APPLE TREE WAS GETTING OLD AND COULD HAVE ALSO BEEN CUT DOWN, BUT INSTEAD THEY PUT BENCHES AROUND THIS FAVORED FRUIT TREE AND MADE HIM THE CENTER OF THEIR NEW SQUARE. THEY EVEN GAVE HIM A NAME AND WROTE IT ON A PLAQUE FOR EVERYONE TO SEE: "THE OLD GENTLEMAN."

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF THIS? MUSED THE APPLE TREE. ME, A POOR LITTLE TREE WITH MY BRANCHES GROWING ALL OVER THE PLACE, NOW THE HONORED CENTER OF THIS NEW VILLAGE SQUARE!



MORAL: IF YOU WONDER WHETHER YOU HAVE ANY TALENT OR PURPOSE, BE PATIENT; ONE DAY YOUR LIFE WILL BLOSSOM AND MATURE, JUST LIKE THE BRANCHES OF THAT APPLE TREE, AND YOU WILL DISCOVER YOUR OWN UNIQUE USEFULNESS AND TALENT. YOU CAN'T JUDGE SOMEONE'S USEFULNESS OR BEAUTY BY OUTWARD APPEARANCE, SO TAKE TIME TO DISCOVER THE BEAUTY INSIDE, AND YOU'LL BE SURPRISED AT WHAT FRIENDSHIPS AND JOY BLOSSOM AS A RESULT.