



### Ellie

Ellie's pads were sore, but she continued to rake her claws along the sides of the tunnel. She could feel the heat soaking through the soil high above her, warming her sleek pelt. She pushed the loosened soil into the tunnel and out in front of her. Ellie was a pocket gopher. She lived beneath the cottage garden.

Pull, scoop, push, wriggle. Ellie breathed hard as she skillfully moved the dirt with her claws, head and nose. She shoved then nudged the soil ahead of her. When excess soil blocked her way she stuffed her specially designed furry pockets to carry it up and out to the surface. Her short back legs scattered loose soil backwards.

She nibbled a juicy roots along the way snipping them with 4 chisel-sharp front teeth and chewed them well before swallowing. Roots dangled along the smooth surfaces of her tunnel. Many of them were delicious food for a gopher.

Ellie surfaced for the first time in hours, pushing her curious nose through an opening and out into the air. She pinched her eyes closed at the bright sunlight and opened her ears. She could smell some wheat, toasty and ripe. She heard a rumble as the ground began to vibrate. Her nostrils filled with dust.

She peeked out the slits of her tiny eyes just in time to see a huge tractor moving toward her. She ducked back into her hole, pushing dirt furiously with all four feet and nose. She emptied her pouches and plugged up the hole patting it tight. The tunnel darkened. She opened her eyes and sighed with relief.

She'd rest for a few minutes before resuming her tunneling. Just a short rest, she thought.

But she fell asleep.

When she awakened, she sniffed the earth and remembered where she was. The soil under the wheat field felt cool. She thought it might be night. She'd have to be very careful surfacing. She knew that coyotes, bobcats, snakes and owls hunted these fields. These nocturnal animals crept, slithered and flew about searching for prey. Prey could be a number of things from small worms and insects to larger rodents and mammals. Ellie was their prey.

Besides animals that hunt to eat gophers Ellie was afraid of light. She disliked the bright sun, full moons, headlamps on cars and fire. Light hurt her eyes, and sometimes appeared mysteriously out of no where. There was the time she emerged from her mound in the smooth dark night and was smack in the center of a shaft of light; the light from a flashlight! And snapped her teeth furiously at the human that carried it.

Ellie pushed that memory out of her mind and packed a cache of earth to the surface. She constructed a small mound, popped her head out, and opened her ear flaps to listen. She sat very still; a small brown boulder in the big golden field. She sniffed the air, then darted to the closest stalk of wheat and harvested several nutty kernels.

As she was pushing the seeds into her left pouch, she noticed a small movement and froze. A small bobcat crept close, stopping to listen with cocked ears, wide paws rested inches from her. Ellie made no sound. The bobcat sprang playfully at a wheat stalk blowing in the breeze and walked on. Ellie was not seen.

Ellie exhaled as soft a sound as the flap of a butterfly wing. And hurriedly stuffed her other pouch to the brim with fresh kernels and slipped below the surface.

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**Orion**

Orion left his burrow under the tangled blackberry vines located at the edge of a quiet drive. He hopped forward wriggling his nose in the air; searching for the scent of a ripe berry. One perfect berry was all it took to “hit the spot”, as Grandpa used to say. He had patiently watched as the vine’s small fragrant flowers became tiny green nubs, blushed pink, turned red and finally became the deep purple and tart little fruit he loved more than anything. Orion is a bunny; a small light brown hedge bunny.

A berry is ready to eat when it’s nearly black and smells like a summer day; sweet and sticky. But jays, chippies, robins and the other bunnies also watched the berry thicket for ripe berries. This was a special time of year; berry season. And it never lasted long enough for Orion.

He peeked under the leaves, twisted his head to look way back into the thicket and spied a small dark one hiding near the fence post. He stretched to pull it off the thorny stem with his teeth. And sat up tall with his long hind legs stretched forward holding his sweet treasure in both paws. Orion bit, licked chewed. He dribbled onto his furry scruff. Truly one berry in not enough, he thought, and slipped into the cool dark underbrush to search for more.

Orion stopped hopping, stilled his nose and whiskers. He was as still as a statue. He picked up a rustling sound with his tall, capable ears. The rustle was followed by a squeak. Two beaded eyes stared at him from deep in the brush. His own eyes, dark brown and still, waited. Then he sneezed. And held his breath. The small creature sneezed back. It was his friend Woody the wood rat, gathering seeds and sticks for his

nestlings. They both snorted with relief and went back to gathering seeds, sticks and juicy berries.

Orion was terrified of two things; owls and water. Of course he drank water, but he avoided water deeper than he thought might reach past the ankles of his short stocky legs. Knee-height water (to his haunches) meant danger. If it was cold, it was terrible. Just once he'd gone too deep and never forgot that feeling or the shuddering chill that ran through him.

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### **Shelby**

Shelby lay quietly on a small granite rock at the edge of the flower bed. She'd just eaten a fly that had landed to sip water from a blade of grass on the freshly planted lawn in her yard. With her belly full, she climbed up to warm herself on the rock. Sleepy and satisfied, she dozed off. Her tail stretched out along the rock's edge, her iridescent skin glowed in the sunlight and her tiny clawed feet rested loosely. She was the color of stone, of bark and easily blended into the landscape. Shelby is a western fence lizard, common to California coastal areas.

Shelby was one of the smaller members of the cottage garden. While she lounged, a sprinkler hissed to a start. She jolted awake. But was familiar with the sound of the sprinkler, so she went back to her nap. She had a good life; water was plentiful many insects, spiders and butterflies were available for her to eat. She'd been hatched beneath the rocks that lined the garden flower beds. They providing her perfect hiding places, small warm burrows and dark crevices.

Shelby stretched her right foot toward her mouth and clipped off a long nail. She glanced toward the gate as a human child clicked in and ran past, but spotted her sunning and reached to grab her. Smack, the hot sticky child's hand nearly missed, but clamped on to her tail with two fingers. He squealed as Shelby released it, letting the child keep the tip of her tail. She was pleased she had such a clever device.

With a freshly bobbed tail, Shelby dipped into a crack and out of sight. A big set of human eyes peered into the dark space. But Shelby was safe. She knew she'd grow a new tail in a month or so. And she'd have to watch her diet to include as many fresh greens as possible during re-growth. Tail release had happened to her once before. It was nearly painless. But her fear of humans and sharp-beaked birds continued.

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### **Miley**

Miley resided in the cottage garden where the gopher named Ellie, a bunny named Orion and a lizard named Shelby spent their days; raising families hunting for food and tunneling in and out of burrows. They rarely travelled beyond the garden. Out beyond they was greater danger. Owls, hawks, gopher snakes, coyotes, bobcats and house pets hunted for small animals outside the fence. And the likes of Ellie, Orion, Shelby and Miley were their favorite prey. Miley was a western yard mole.

Ellie and Miley travelled outside more than the other garden animals. But Miley was under the surface most of that time. While out in the world beyond the fence gophers had big adventures and Miley and his family from generations past had gathered their stories. Ellie told of farmers, growling machines, all kinds of animals, some large and harmless called horses who ate grass and plants, not animals. Orion the bunny told stories about collecting berries, dark thickets and other types of rabbits. He had a fear of cold, deep water. Ellie admitted that she feared lights and fire. Shelby talked about small human children with hands and fingers and about seeing the inside of a human's house through a glass-walled jar. Miley wrote their stories with a small jay feather quill pen and bound them into little books. He had stacks and stacks of bound volumes in his underground burrow. And just recently their growing numbers had become a problem.

"I am calling a meeting", Miley announced to his closest friends, "to discuss the fate of the collection." His own borrow had been enlarged several times and now was near

collapse. He had to move. But what would become of the bound stories? The little books full of tales of daily life in the cottage garden and of the big outside world represented the words and experiences of thousands of bunnies, gophers, moles and lizards who had spent many generations in the cottage garden.

The stacks and stacks of books that Miley had collected spanned the length of the entire cottage garden lawn. A new section of lawn had been planted with a wire underlay. Miley's elongated burrow stacked with books was in grave danger of collapse and exposure. And, though small and compact, each of the books were impossible to move with the new wire stretched above them. And because of the great number of them.

Actually, no one but Miley was familiar with the stories, no one else ever read them. The children of this little garden community did not even know that the collection existed. And they would never know the stories that captured their unique histories unless something was done. And it had to be soon. The loss of these stories, these bound volumes, would be a tragedy.

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### **Coming Together**

After stating the problem, Miley twisted his tail into a loop and sat on it. There was a low hum in the crowd. Then finally a bunny spoke.

"I would like to make a suggestion", Orion announced to the a wide circle of creatures. "We must save the books that the moles (and most recently our friend Miley) have been keeping for us for over a hundred seasons. We must commit ourselves immediately to save this collection. We should also start a campaign to read and re-read the volumes of recorded histories. We clearly have been remiss. Our children need to know about their ancestors."

Miley added, "These books have been kept safe from harm. Safe for a long, long time."

## The Book Burrow

“And”, continued Orion, “we must protect the volumes from moisture. Moisture is bad in the wet months and its caused by water. And even in dry months the sprinkler system in the garden seeps down into our tunnels. Water does terrible damage and its very presence frightens some of us.”

“Let’s dig a new burrow to house our books”, Ellie stated, “a big, strong and dry burrow.”

“A Book Burrow”, followed Miley, speaking the name as it popped into his head. All of them clapped and began to chatter at once. None of the animals could actually speak a language that one another could reliably understand. These particular species are a quiet lot, but can chatter, chit, chuck, peep, click, squeak, and even growl on occasion. The moles had translated their stories into a unique written form, quite different from human speech.

“Our Book Burrow is going to have to address safety. But first and foremost we have to protect the books from damage. Just as water will damage them, so will light,” suggested Ellie. “Our book burrow must be strong, dry and dark, too. A place to sit in solitude and read; free from hazardous lights.” she confirmed, rather shyly. “Is that okay?” Ellie looked in particular at the lizard and bunny unsure of her outspoken- ness. Because bunnies and lizards thrive on sunshine, she wanted to be sure they could agree.

After an uncomfortable silence, Louis announced, “Shelby lizard spends much of her time awake and active in the sunlight of the day.”

Shelby repositioned herself to speak. She cleared her throat and sitting on the base of her tail, stood, rather than lay flat, “Our book burrow can be a dark place as long as we can see the print, of course. I hope it will be private. A place just for us. No one else. Our stories must be protected, yes. But so should the readers. It should have warming stones, no bright lights, but pale, Okay? Cozy, free from moisture and also private. Private from humans and other invasive predators. We have to feel safe in the Book Burrow. Or it will sit unused.”

“So it will be.” declared Miley, “Tomorrow we will begin our work together and save our books from ruin. We will collect as many volumes as we can hold, push, drag and roll each across the yard, deep below the concrete patio, under the wire and into a newly excavated burrow, The Book Burrow, it will be. By tunneling to the other side of the garden, burrowing deep then pushing unwanted soil to the surface past the new screened area we avoid moisture and light and will create a private and secure space.” A hullabaloo of clapping whistles and yowls ensued. And a few chits and chatters, too.

A dreamy smile projected across Miley’s face. “Wait until you read this collection. We are all in for a transformative experience.”

“Anyone want some of this zinnia?” Ellie interjected. “I pulled it from the new section of the garden this morning.” Miley bit off a piece from the offering and absently munched.

Orion nibbled at a large stem with an unopened pink bud at the tip. Ellie finished off a sweet, chewy root and passed a few aphids and an ant to Shelby lizard.

Only Miley really understood how a library, this underground Book Burrow could serve to inform their collective intelligence, enrich their individual spirits, strengthen identities and deepen each members compassion for others. They would experience less isolation and more unity among the garden community. Yes, thought Miley, this was truly important work.

### **Construction**

The day lay before them full of promise. Ellie the gopher had no real sense of day or night, so she napped as the others began. All night long she'd worked, her eyes clamped shut for digging, ear flaps shut and claws moved like a bulldozer. She'd begun a significant portion of the new tunnel section on her own. And now was snoring lightly.

For good reason, the tunnel was not drawn as a straight, single-level design, but a complex set of turns and dips. In the case of a water seepage into the tunnel, a turn, a drop into a side cavern followed by a rise would keep the water from rushing through the entire network. It similarly prevented light from traveling directly toward the burrow's main room, invading the dark solitude and frightening Ellie and the other gophers. Several side compartments were constructed for future specialized book rooms, and for now would store food for the workers. They also provided standing room at bunny height for a good stretch and allowed passage should two diggers meet mid-tunnel. These turn-outs and anterooms proved helpful as the books were carted into the main burrow. The design allowed those pushing the heavy cartons to get around and back to Miley's for another load while yet another was heading inward.

Nourishment for the work was provided by each member who brought their own seasonally available foods to share. Ellie brought more of that zinnia she'd pulled into her burrow a day earlier, Miley brought some grubs that Shelby and Ellie liked, too and Orion brought a small cache of dried berries. All of them enjoyed those. Shelby found two dead ants and a few flies and packed in several blades of fresh grass clipped and bundled for ease of transport. Drinking water was readily available above in the garden at any tunnel opening. They agreed to leave all water outside for this project.

The most amazing thing, reflected Miley, is the regard they have for one another. "Louie," Ellie asked Orion, "will this part here work to keep out the water should it manage to get into the tunnel portion?"

"Hmmm. Maybe if we divert it out and down a little deeper. Let me show you." Orion bent low and kicked at the dirt with his back legs, digging a deeper gully, as a catch-basin. Ellie watched him work. The collaboration and respect was truly extraordinary.

After several days of work, they constructed a fully functioning Book Burrow. It was planned to be secure and comfortable for each community member; a safe place to

keep the hundreds of volumes of stories. The volumes had been organized according to the type of animal who'd shared the story. On the shelves, there were stories and recorded events from generations. Each species had their own section. To the North were volumes of stories from gophers. The South housed a mole collection. On the West was a collection from Lizards and a few small snakes. And lastly, to the East was the collection of bunny-told stories. It was an impressive space; filled to the ceiling in many areas. A rich array of words, ideas and animal wisdom were now available to share with the garden community.

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### **Cottage Garden Book Burrow**

A wood rat worked with Ellie and Orion to carve a sign to post at the underground tunnel entrance. Ellie's teeth were particularly well-designed for getting to the deepest parts of the carved sections, Orion refined it and formed the symbols to read "Cottage Garden Book Burrow". Shelby added a light wash of color to the background and dressed up the lettering with flecks of silver. They planned a tea party with invitations spread by word-of-mouth to all of the community members that might benefit from reading the stories of such a collection. Chamomile tea was well-liked so a large dispenser would be set up outside the main entrance. A small sign was posted, "No drinks below", to prevent any moisture from introduced into the tunnel or burrow itself.

Some community members were not invited, of course. They were the predators, the ones that must never find the collection, never discover the readers as they sat in safety revisiting stories of their forefathers and foremothers; as they read to their children and to the other community members who'd not yet learned to read.

The moles reflected about that time, "One of the marvelous things about getting a community together to accomplish this shared goal, is that each member feels they are owners. Each gopher, lizard, bunny and each mole was involved in the book burrow's success. Signs appeared along the network of tunnels leading to the burrow, "No food or drink", "Filtered light only", "No snakes larger than a gopher's tail", "Please keep our location secret", "Do not remove books from the burrow", . These rules developed overtime, some were dropped and new ones discussed as issues arose. Never before had the garden community worked together in this way to preserve one another's safety, well-being and their shared rights as animals.

As for the books, the rich and varied stories within and the transformation the community leaders expected; interesting things began to occur. The bunnies, for example, began searching for roots and seeds in new areas outside the wall. The books had described the area as having a rich supply of nutty-tasting old world tubers.

The lizards learned about mindfulness. And practiced using it as a strategy to grow healthy new tails in just days. Lizards had always been concerned about the length of time they might go without a releasable tail section. They discovered it was not only an

issue of vanity, but actually left them unprotected for months on end. And in one of the volumes Shelby found this spiritual practice increased the rate of growth. They could be seen pushing their upper bodies up, then down like push-ups on rocks around the garden. During this mindful exercise they emitted a low hum, barely differentiated from that of airborne insects.

The gophers quietly shared stories they'd uncovered about dreadful events. And finally understood the reason for generations of gophers fearing light. It seems that farmers used to light fire to rags soaked in kerosene and put them into gopher tunnels smothering entire family compounds. The few survivors were often scarred for life. Many others were incinerated en masse. Flashing lights from the fires were projected on tunnel walls and brought terror to generations of gophers who'd endured such practices. And after that, young gophers were taught by their families to fear light; as it could mean, as it once did, a horrible massacre.

The lizards met together in the afternoon sunning on rocks outside the tunnel entrance discussing what they had read. Some silent as they practiced mindfulness. The bunnies lounged in the field on their back resting their backs, feet in the air. The gophers gathered in a pillow-filled burrow they'd constructed precisely for the purpose of sharing their feelings, thoughts and fears inspired by the collection. The moles were already familiar with the volumes in their section of the burrow, so they pushed up a mound and sat beneath it warming themselves, drinking chamomile tea and considered the impact of all the new information obtained, time consumed in reading and the deepening of species identity.

"I hardly see my friend Shelby anymore", Miley remarked. "She seems to spend her days only with lizards."

"I noticed the same thing about Orion the bunny". Miley's brother added. "I miss our light- hearted chats." Their sister agreed. "Everyone is staying with their own kind."

Miley scribbled an entry in a journal he'd been keeping on the Book Burrow process, "Lizards, bunnies, gophers and moles are hanging out in species groups. They have discovered that they have more in common with one another than their appearance or food preferences. They have uncovered a shared history. They are constructing a rich and shared group identity. This seems to have strengthened their own sense of themselves as part of a unique and particular species. It is an important time in the garden. And could be a difficult time, too." wrote Miley.

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### **Difficulties**

The intelligence of daily conversations grew. The curiosity and adventuresome nature of the garden bunnies blossomed. They organized excursions followed by discussions and planned many more explorations based upon the stories from generations past.

## The Book Burrow

Orion lead a tour of an old farm from a map shared by a tenacious old uncle named Peter from many past generations.

The lizards searched for sandy areas that had been used for sunning and mindful practice long ago. They found a wider variety of seeds and grasses and learned to dig shallow storage tunnels for food for the winter. They secretly discussed ways to store sunlight for more efficient and shorter winter hibernation. They already transported stones for warmth below to the burrow, now they wanted light, too.

The previously friendly little gophers behaviors changed the most. They became reclusive, secretive and mistrustful. They seemed afraid and unwilling to talk.

“What are your stories about?” Orion asked Ellie. She avoided a direct answer instead mumbling a dismissive comment, “the past” or “finding wheat fields”. But Orion sensed that there was something else. So the next morning as the gophers snoozed in nearby anterooms, Orion the bunny headed into the North section where the gopher collection was shelved. He pulled down volume after volume, reading all day long. His mind filled with pictures, some good but many were very, very bad. His heart ached.

Meanwhile, research had lead the lizards to something called solar technology. And together they hatched a plan to direct sun tubes into the burrow. By storing heat for the winter, they’d have more time awake. They had become so fond of the Book Burrow and wanted to extend its use into winter, 24 hours a day. They secretly installed a sun tube from the surface into the West side of the burrow that housed their collection. A sun tube brings the warmth of the sun from the sky to a desired location. In this case, a shaft was constructed using a paper towel cardboard tube and topped with a small glass dome, previously a jar for human baby food. Fanning with their tails would push the air downward and into a “sun closet” which would be re-opened only in the winter. But a sun tube, because it is the sun, after all, also brought bright light into the shaft, the tunnel and the burrow.

The sunlight beamed downward, bounced and reflected off the walls, alighting the titles of the books, lighting the tunnels with daylight and the shimmered on the backs of the lizards. The additional warmth brought them much joy, and they broke into song. But that did not sit well with the gophers, who were moody at best and now faced their greatest fear; light! Ellie was awakened by the singing and wiggled toward the burrow, then squealed in pain. “My eyes!” she grabbed at her eyes with her feet, making opening a small slit just bearable. She saw the lizards basking contentedly. “What is happening here? Who did this?” She demanded.

Orion hopped into the Book Burrow when he heard the squeals. As he entered the tunnel, he nearly smiled at the lovely lighted space, until he saw Ellie’s covered face. “Oh, dear. What happened?” he cried.

“It’s a warmth storage plan for winter. It’s for us lizards. Isn’t it great?” Shelby gleefully stood up and opened her front legs wide, as if embracing the light.

“No-no-no-no.” moaned Ellie. “I told you that light is not good for books. And more importantly, that it is not good for gophers. We do not like light. I am dreadfully afraid of it..” Ellie scrambled out in tears. “I cannot stay here.”

Orion bunny, crying hard now, choked out a message that echoes through the network of tunnels: “Read about the gophers. Read the North collection and you will understand.” Then he pushed out after Ellie.

The lizards were stunned. Unsure of what to do, they began with talking about what bad sports gophers are and how silly bunnies could be. “Did you see Orion’s face? He really liked the sun in the book burrow. Then he changed his mind. Let’s take a vote!” they whined and complained with sureness. “Counting all of us, the small snakes and hundreds of bunnies; we will win!”

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### **Read to Understand**

But that is not what happened. Because Miley brought them together that evening (hours after the sun tube stopped sending its piercing shafts of light into the burrow). And invited the gophers to read from a few volumes in the North collection. But the gophers did not show up that night. So he read. Orion read some sections, too. The stories told of those farmers with kerosene rags, of fire, heat and piercing shafts of light and of the deadly smoke that followed. The story told of death and terror and sadness. When he was finished, the room was quiet. Shelby was the first one to speak.

All she said was, “Now I understand.”

Groups stayed among themselves for days afterwards. They were seen sitting quietly, licking paws, grooming claws, rubbing sore spots and staring into space. It’s possible that Shelby apologized to Ellie, we don’t know. But the sun tube shaft was boarded up and filled with soil, the low lights from before provided a moody quiet solitude in the burrow. It was a worrisome time for all.

But what happened next was amazing. The North collection books were off their shelves more often than on. There was a wait list to read them. On that wait list were lizards, bunnies, and moles. Not just gophers anymore.

The South section became interesting to lizards and bunnies who worked to understand the moles legacy of collecting stories, recording them and saving them for the future. In the East section where the bunny stories were shelved, they read stories about a family of bunnies and one adventurer named Peter. There was talk of water occurrences like being stuck in a watering can, a pond and an irrigation canal. These sometimes ended in drowning. Bunnies could not swim. It seemed that they could not float, not even for a moment.

## The Book Burrow

And in the West wall where lizard stories spanned thousands of generations, others read about shimmering skins stretched onto saddles, boots, belts and hung on the walls. Humans it seemed, liked their skins. And right along with marvelous adventure stories, suffering at the hands of humans was a theme for the lizard collection, too. Given this history, the practice of mindfulness made perfect sense.

Understandings developed. And the gophers slowly returned. It took a long time before they went down into the Book Burrow to join the community of readers. It was only after Miley, Shelby, Orion and Ellie met together and organized a new shelving plan for the collection, that the Book Burrow felt once again welcoming to gophers.

If you are a community member and are invited to visit the Book Burrow, here's what you'll find: A cross referencing of topics and titles allowing for all readers to follow their interests and discover new ones. There are cross-species histories, catalogued by subjects and themes. There are species specific instruction manuals, on topics of interest like grooming and diet. There are recipes, maps, comedies, tragedies, self-improvement and a section for travel and leisure. The science section includes solar technology and directions for constructing sun tubes. (Technology that is now applied to the community food storage areas, spas and dry rooms.) There's a small collection of children's stories, too. And the moles are beginning to research setting up a recording studio to make more it accessible to community elders and non-readers. And each Sunday afternoon enjoy a cross-species class where you will stretch out push your upper torso up with your front legs, release and repeat. It looks a lot like push-ups, but it is an integral part of practicing mindfulness.

Scamper, glide, slither or hop your way into the Book Burrow and stay awhile. Please note the sign that reads:

**“Welcome  
Open your mind as well as your eyes in the  
Cottage Garden Book Burrow”**

## Cottage Garden Book Burrow