



The Girl Who Talked to Trees

In a secret valley not so very far away from here, there sits a famous old house. It is a grand sort of place, with tall pillars and lots of chimneys and a clock tower, but that is not what it is famous for.

It is famous for its trees.

The house stands in parkland at the top of a hill. It looks on to a big lawn dotted with beech, an elm and - of course - the splendid tulip tree. The lawn slopes to a river lined with hornbeam, willow and alder. There is a walled orchard in the park too, with a dozen different sorts of apples. Over the bridge, opposite the house, is a wood full of oak, lime, hazel and box. It is a small wood these days, but once upon

a time it was a great forest – the hunting ground of a prince!

Sometimes, if you listen carefully, it's almost as though you can hear voices among the trees.

One day – it is said – they will grant a wish... to the right person.

Which is where our story begins, with a girl called Olive.



Olive was eleven years old, not very tall, with hair in pigtails and little wire glasses which often slipped down her nose. She was clever and kind and extremely shy, and her best friend was a four-hundred-year-old oak tree.



‘A tree?’ you say. ‘How strange.’

But think about it.

When you are so shy you dare not even look at anyone in case they want to talk to you – or worse, want you to talk to them – a tree is a very sensible choice for a friend.

Broad and comfortable, Olive’s oak stood alone in a meadow on the hillside opposite the house. She spent most of her spare time in its company, reading or drawing or simply lying on a branch, watching things. Olive, who rarely spoke to anyone, told the oak tree everything. When she was sad, it soothed

her with its rocking. When she was happy, its leaves rustled with a sound like laughter.

Sometimes she hugged it.

Her family didn't understand.

'Here comes Olive, back from talking to her tree!' her bossy sister Rosa would say, as Olive trudged up the lawn with twigs sticking out of her hair. 'I do worry our Olive is going to turn into a tree,' her mother, Lady Josephine, told visitors while Sir Sydney, her father, shook his head. Even Nana was concerned. 'I like trees too, dear,' she told Olive, 'but you should have human friends.'

The servants secretly called her the Girl Who Talked to Trees.

But everyone loved her, so on the whole they didn't interfere - until breakfast one sunny spring morning, when her father announced that he had a New Plan.

His family looked warily at each other. Sir Sydney often had New Plans, and they always meant Chaos and Disruption.

'I have decided,' Sir Sydney declared, 'to build a new house.'

'But we already have a house, dear,' reasoned Lady Jo.



‘Not to live in,’ said Sir Sydney. ‘A summerhouse! For parties and picnics.’

‘How much would it cost?’ Lady Jo was much more sensible than her husband.

Sir Sydney waved his hand, as if to say, ‘What is money compared to parties and picnics?’

‘I will build it in the meadow,’ he said.

The meadow! thought Olive.

‘Think about it!’ cried Sir Sydney. ‘Summer evenings, the moon, the stars... looking back over the valley, the park all lit up... It would be impressive.’

Sir Sydney was a man who liked to impress.

Olive screwed up the courage to speak.

‘Where exactly in the meadow?’ she asked.

Her father shifted on his chair, and Olive knew, she just knew.

‘Where my oak tree is,’ she said.



Sir Sydney nodded. ‘I’m sorry about that. But there are lots of other trees.’

‘Not like mine,’ said Olive. ‘The oak tree is my friend.’

Everybody stared, even the servants. It was rare enough to hear Olive talk, let alone stand up to her father. And possibly because he was so surprised, Sir Sydney said, ‘Very well. I have to go out now, but I will be back at teatime. If by then you can think of something more impressive than my summerhouse, I will not cut down the oak.’

‘Do you promise?’ asked Olive.

‘I promise.’ Sir Sydney looked at his watch. ‘You have just over seven hours.’

‘I’ll do it!’ Olive vowed. ‘I will think of something!’

She ran out of the breakfast room, down the big lawn, over the bridge and through the woods to the meadow, where all her determination left her and she crumpled at the foot of her oak tree.

She had no idea what to do next.

The wind breathed through the oak tree’s branches. Olive curled up among its roots.

‘I wish you would help me,’ she said.

The oak leaves sighed.

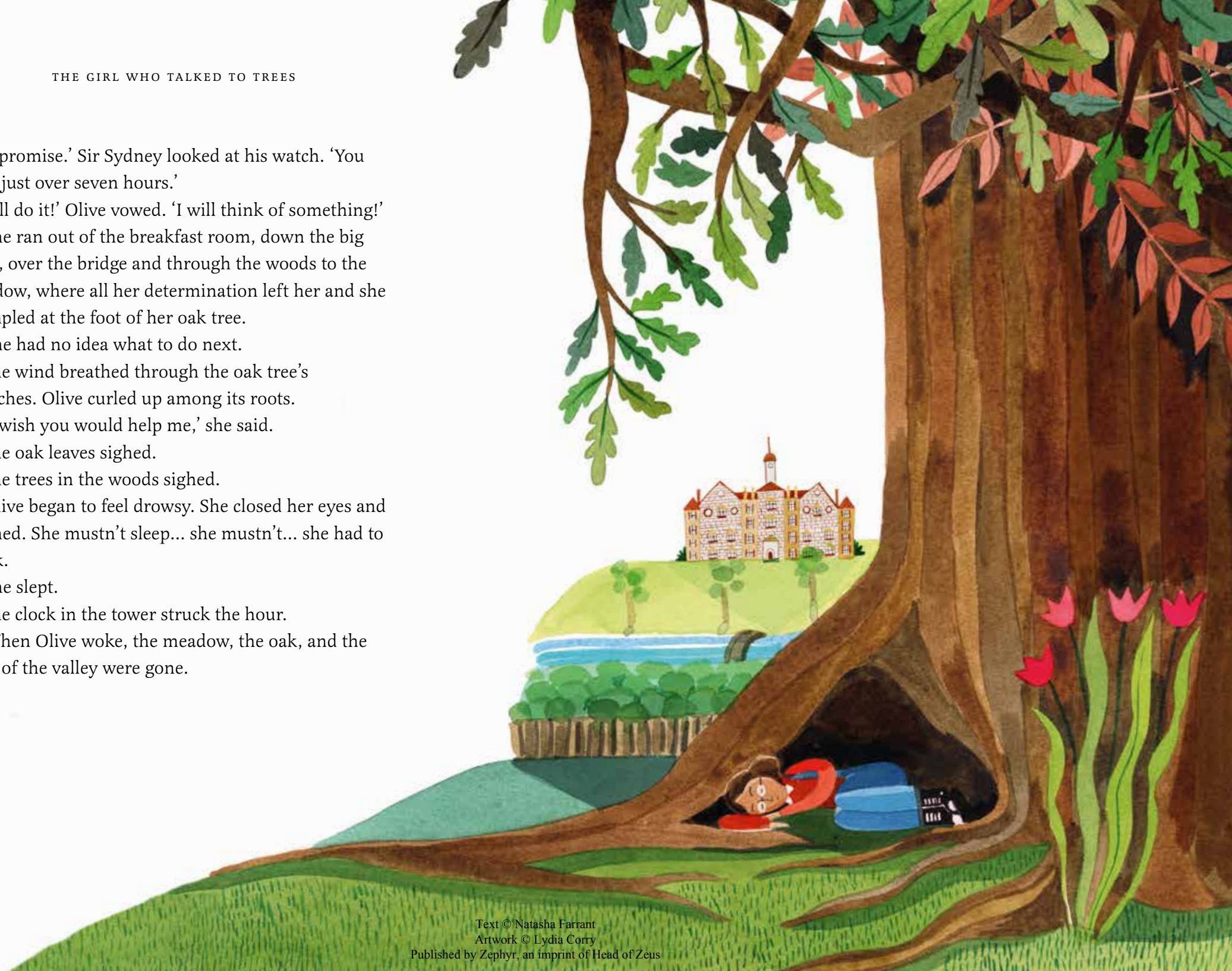
The trees in the woods sighed.

Olive began to feel drowsy. She closed her eyes and yawned. She mustn’t sleep... she mustn’t... she had to think.


She slept.

The clock in the tower struck the hour.

When Olive woke, the meadow, the oak, and the view of the valley were gone.








Oak forests support more life forms than any other forest – over 2300 birds, mammals, insects, moss and fungi depend on them.

There are about 500 species of oak tree.

They grow 20–40 metres tall.

They usually live to between 100 and 300 years, but can live to well over 1000.



Every autumn jays bury thousands of acorns to use as food in the winter – some of which grow into new trees!



COMMON OAK
Quercus Robur