

A ñ
é ß

STARTER STORY • ENGLISH • B1

The Second Key

The Second Key

In April, Maya moved into a small flat on Birch Street. It was her first flat of her own, on the third floor of an old brick building. The rooms were empty and bright, and her boxes stood in the middle of the floor like little towers.

On her second day, while she was cleaning the kitchen, she found something strange. A small brass key was taped to the bottom of a drawer. It looked old, and someone had tied a paper label to it. On the label, in careful handwriting, was the number twelve.

Maya turned the key in her hand. Her flat was number eight, not twelve. The key was too small for a front door anyway. “What do you open?” she asked it. The key, of course, said nothing.

She tried the key everywhere. It did not fit the mailboxes in the hall. It did not fit the door to the cellar. It did not fit the old cupboard in the bathroom. In the end, she put it in a bowl by the door and forgot about it for a while.

Two weeks later, Maya met her neighbor from the second floor, an older woman named Mrs. Costa. They talked on the stairs about the building, the noisy pipes, and the spring weather. Then Maya remembered the key and described it to her.

“Number twelve,” Mrs. Costa repeated slowly. “That is not a flat, dear. That is a garden.” She explained that behind the building, past the car park, there was a row of small gardens with wooden gates. “The man who lived in your flat before you had one. Mr. Novak. A kind man. He grew the best tomatoes on the street.”

“What happened to him?” Maya asked. “He got old,” said Mrs. Costa simply. “Last winter he moved to the care home on Mill Road. Nobody has touched the garden since.” Maya thought about the little key in the bowl, and about a garden waiting all winter behind a locked gate.

That Saturday, Maya walked past the car park and found the gardens. There were about a dozen of them, each with a low fence and a wooden gate. Some were neat and full of spring flowers. At the end of the row, she found a gate with a small metal plate: number twelve.

The key turned easily, as if it had waited for her. Inside, the garden was wild but beautiful. There was a small shed, a bench under an apple tree, and beds full of weeds. On the shed wall hung tools, clean and in perfect order, each one on its own hook.

Maya knew almost nothing about gardens, but she did not want to leave. She pulled some weeds, swept the path, and sat on the bench until the evening. The garden did not belong to her. Somehow, that made her want to take care of it even more.

On Monday after work, she took the bus to Mill Road. The care home was a quiet building with big windows. She asked for Mr. Novak, and a nurse led her to a sunny room where an old man sat with a newspaper he was not really reading.

“Mr. Novak? My name is Maya. I live in your old flat.” She put the brass key on the table between them. The old man looked at it for a long time. Then he smiled, and his whole face changed. “The garden,” he said softly. “I thought about it all winter.”

They talked for two hours. Mr. Novak told her about the apple tree he had planted thirty years ago, about his tomatoes, and about his wife, who had loved the bench in the evening sun. “I hid the key in the drawer,” he admitted. “I could not give it back to the landlord. A garden should not go to a stranger.”

“But I am a stranger,” said Maya. “You came here with the key,” said Mr. Novak. “That is different.” He looked out of the window for a moment. Then he asked, a little afraid: “Is the tree still there?” “It is,” said Maya. “And this year I will bring you the apples.”

All summer, Maya worked in garden number twelve. Mr. Novak told her what to do, week by week, and she visited him every Monday with photographs. Slowly, the weeds disappeared. The tomatoes grew tall, then heavy, then red. Mrs. Costa gave advice over the fence and took some tomatoes home.

In September, Maya picked the first apples and carried a full bag to Mill Road. Mr. Novak ate one slowly, with his eyes closed. “The same taste,” he said. “Thirty years, and the same taste.” The nurse said later that he told everyone in the home about his garden and the girl who found the key.

In October, Maya had a small wooden sign made for the gate. It said: “Garden 12. Novak and Maya.” When she showed him the photograph, the old man laughed and wiped his eyes at the same time. “Next spring,” he said, “we plant something new.” And that is exactly what they did.

OQOU STARTER LIBRARY

This story is from oqou's free starter library, graded at B1 for English readers.

Read it interactively in the oqou app: tap any word for an instant translation, listen with natural narration, and carry your saved vocabulary into every story you read next.

oqou.app

[Download oqou on the App Store](#)

oqou •