

My Tree

I found the tree my first week on campus.

Among the myriad challenges of that week—living away from home for the first time, having a roommate (who needed the radio to fall asleep; I lay awake each night until it automatically turned off after two hours), choosing meals at the dining hall, finding my way to classes, remembering the names of the dozens of new people I'd met—one of the hardest was having no privacy, ever. At seventeen, I tipped the far end of the introvert scale. In my room, there was my roommate. Down the hall, the lounge was full of cheerful voices, the television laugh track, and the buttery smell of microwaved popcorn. The dorm's bathrooms were never empty. I was used to hours of solitude to think and dream, and by the end of that week, I felt like a rat in a sleep-deprivation experiment, so tired that I was falling asleep in midair, but it was alone-time I craved, not sleep.

Then I found the tree—a huge, beautiful old oak with a wide spreading crown. I saw it from a distance and beelined to it, as though it was calling my name. It stood on a ridge near the university chapel, overlooking a long grassy slope. I came close and laid my hand on the hard furrowed trunk, and imagined I could feel the life coursing through it.

In high school, I'd done much of my daydreaming in a favorite tree, a tulip poplar at the far end of our yard. I'd perch up there for hours with a book; sometimes I even took a nap, lying on a wide branch with my legs down either side so I wouldn't roll off. That first week of college, I missed my family, my cockatiel, my friends from home—and my tree. How can you miss a tree? But I did.

The wind stirred the oak's branches above me, a thousand voices whispering and enticing. *Come up.* So I clasped my hands over the branch and swung up, as easily as climbing into the rigging of a ship. The branches spiraled up above me like a staircase. I went as high as I wanted, then found a good perch and settled in. The joy of knowing that I was alone in this leafy cathedral, that no one knew I was here, was just what I'd been craving. I leaned back against the broad trunk and felt it swaying, very slightly, in the wind. Far below, knots of people moved along on the sidewalk, chatting. The life of the campus went on around me.

After the first discovery, I went back as often as I needed. Being high in the tree was my form of meditation. Nestled into the branches, I could feel the stress and buzzing excitement of my new life draining out of me, replaced by calmness and awareness of a larger world—so much bigger than I was.

One day, in my biology seminar, I read about Julia Butterfly Hill, who lived in a tree to protect it from logging crews. Her tree, which she named Luna, was a giant redwood estimated to be 1,500 years old. Barely twenty years old herself, she signed up for a week in the tree that turned into months, then years, as an agreement could not be reached with the logging company. She scrambled around the branches for exercise, endured fierce storms amid the wildly swaying

boughs, and survived harassment by the loggers, who strafed her with helicopters and bull horns to try to force her to surrender. I wondered how many people would have shown her courage. When an agreement was finally reached (a ransom payment of \$50,000 to the logging company), she came down and stood on solid ground for the first time in two years.

My tree was only a youngster compared with Luna, around 75 years old, but to me it had power. When I was high in the branches, I couldn't help wondering if the tree knew I was there—and feeling that it did. It's not as strange as it sounds. Trees do communicate with one another all the time, through chemical messages released from the leaves and through the fungal networks on their roots that interconnect them underground. They can sense when they're touched; they can detect chemicals in the air and sound waves—in other words, they can smell and hear. The tree's cells could probably register my weight pressing down on the branch. I felt that it knew I was there, anyway, and that it accepted me as one of its many inhabitants: chickadees, woodpeckers, jays, and other birds; squirrels scrambling up and down the trunk; and insects of all kinds.

After I graduated, I came back to campus from time to time for special events. Then one day when I drove past the chapel, my tree was gone.

Just gone.

It was like a physical blow. I felt overwhelmed by a wave of sorrow, colored with outrage that the university had cut it down. How could they do that? My tree.... and seven decades of history on campus, a landmark for generations of students. Surely the connection I'd felt was nothing compared with the bond Julia had felt with Luna, but I still reeled from the loss. The place where the tree had stood was like a bloody socket where a tooth has been pulled.

Years passed. My life moved through a kaleidoscope of changes—jobs, homes, people—and settled into a pleasant new configuration: motherhood and work that I enjoyed.

One day, I loaded my four-year-old into the car and took her to a nature center for the afternoon. It was a blazing hot day at the end of summer, with the cicadas in full shrill in the trees. We'd been to this nature center many times before, but this time I noticed a new piece of artwork outside the visitor center. It looked like a giant beehive composed of tiny strips of wood glued together, hollow and big enough for two people to fit inside. My daughter and I went in and she instinctively tried to climb the inside wall, scrambling and slipping back down. I put my hand on the wall and felt a sense of thrumming, the wood speaking to me.

Then I went back out and read the plaque about the artwork. The piece was called Chapel Oak Vessel, and it was my tree. The artist had used wood salvaged from the oak after it was cut down. I went back inside and touched the wood again, just as I'd placed my hand on my tree so often, and there was the thrumming again.

“Why are you crying?” my daughter asked curiously. I couldn't have said whether the tears were joy or sorrow. “It's my tree,” I told her. Just the wood, just pieces of it, but still. My tree, living on in this small way, and speaking to me years after I'd thought its voice was silenced forever.