

The Old Oak Tree

Memories, are imbedded into everything. A couch that your dad has been trying to throw out for months, the bones of a family's pet, or a bracelet, given to you by a friend. Anything, big or small has a memory hidden inside of it. Even something as simple as an old, oak tree.

An oak tree, whose branches stretch long, high above the ground. Its trunk has grown wide and tall. Hundreds of generations of leaves and acorns have fallen from its branches. Harsh winters and winds have left scars in its bark. A scrap of rope from a tire swing, rotten and old, is tied on a high branch that was once low. Old homes of owls and squirrels are in its trunk, many bird nests sleep in its branches, and a heart, with the initials A and D is imbedded into its wooden chest.

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It was the summer of 2010, I was eighteen then. I had found the perfect spot for the picnic that Diana and I had been planning. I didn't tell her about it though; I wanted it to be a surprise. I was so excited when that Saturday came. I remember the smell of *Axe* on my chest. Diana was wearing her lilac perfume. Silver hoops were in her ears and she wore a white T-shirt and blue jeans.

My black Toyota jerked as I parked. I gave her a peck on the cheek and grabbed the backpack with our supplies. We tangled our fingers as we began to walk toward the green forest in the park.

“So, where are we going?” asked Diana.

“You’ll see,” I replied with a smile.

“Oh come on, you have to tell me. You’ve been keeping it a secret all week.”

“Of course, it wouldn’t be a surprise if I told you.”

“Then could you at least describe the place?”

“Nope,” I replied.

“Why not? You’re a writer. You’re supposed to be good at description.”

“Yeah, but . . .”

“Please,” she begged.

A surge of guilt pinched me with a sharp pain. I hated when she looked at me with those green eyes when she wanted something. “Fine. The place is good, lovely, and beautiful.”

“Wow. Sounds great,” she said with a voice coated with sarcasm. “Very one dimensional. Are you sure you’re a good writer?”

“What are you talking about? I’m a great writer.”

“Then describe it. Please.”

“Well . . . well, the bees are dancing around sleeping dandelions. The grass is green, fresh, and soft. There is a creek that shimmers like diamonds, that relaxes the land with trickling water. And there’s a . . .”

“A what?” I smiled. “Oh come on. What is it?”

“A surprise.”

“I hate surprises. What is it?”

“You’ll find out soon.” We were almost there. I did not look into her eyes, for I would not be guilted into revealing my secret. We trampled the grass and weaved through the brush before we came to a clearing. It was just as I had described it: the dancing bees, the grass, the creek. But now, Diana could see what I did not reveal—an oak tree. A big, tall tree near the creek’s edge. It was gorgeous with its blanket of leaves that it held in its outstretched arms.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“It’s beautiful!” she replied. “How did you find it?”

“Well, the earth was once again on the verge of a Zombie Apocalypse. Their numbers were quickly growing as the cure for the swine flu transformed people into flesh eating corpses. But I, under the cover of night, took up my metal baseball bat and slayed them all, preventing the apocalypse. The president was so thankful that he said he would give me anything that I wanted. So, I asked for the perfect place to have a picnic with my girlfriend. And before I could snap my fingers, this place appeared.”

“And that’s how it happened?”

“Well . . . no. The truth is, there was this horde of trolls that had captured this unicorn and I heard her screaming for help. So I took my mighty pen and slayed all the trolls. The unicorn was so thankful that she said that she would grant me one wish. So I rubbed her horn and wished for the perfect place to have a picnic with my girlfriend. And before I could blink, this place appeared.”

“And that’s what really happened?”

“. . . Not exactly. I might have gotten a couple details wrong.”

“Wow, only a couple?”

“Yep, why do you . . .” the question was lost in my throat as her lips pressed against mine.

I took the blanket from the backpack and spread it on the ground, as Diana took out our lunch and placed it on the blanket. There was: chicken, mashed potatoes, rolls, two corn on the cobs, and a homemade blackberry pie. Everything was still fresh and warm. She reached for the plates but I took them away from her. Before she could protest, I fixed a plate of her favorite foods (including a big spoonful of pie) and gave it to her. She replied with a, “Thank you.” But before I fixed my own plate, I took out a pocket knife.

“What’s that for?” Diana asked.

“The tree is missing something,” I replied.

“What? I don’t see anything.”

“It’s something. Something important.”

“What? What is it?”

“A heart.” A deep smile stretched across her face. A wide smile that showed all of her pearly white teeth. She left her plate and wrapped her arms around my chest, as I chiseled a heart with an arrow running through it. Then, very carefully, I carved an $A + \triangleright \text{FOR}\leftarrow\text{EVER}$ into the heart.

She said nothing; her face came close to mine. We closed our eyes and our lips wrapped around each other. It felt—

Our lips separated and I began to fix my plate.

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My story takes place one hundred and fifty years ago, in the year 1860. It was a June night when I encountered the oak tree. I had been runnin'. Runnin' as far as I could from the place I called home, but it was no home. It was a prison. I had been a slave for a plantation farmer for twenty-one years. My hands and feet was callused, my back scared from wippin's, and I had an eye goin blind from being punched in the face one too many times.

I just had enough; I didn't want to deal with it no more. So I ran away. I slept in trees and crick beds. It gets mighty cold at night, but I ate more food then I had in a long time: wild blackberries, strawberries, onions, and a couple of crawfish too. I was travelin' north; I had heard that black men was up free there.

It was hard to sleep some nights. Sometimes I heard dogs and men close by. I kept quiet for they wouldn't hear me. There was one night that a dog was so close that I cold smell its breath. I was afraid that it would find me and I would be hangin' from a tree in the mornin'. But I kept quiet and that dog never found my mud covered self.

The day that I met the oak tree was the day that I fell into the crick. It had been pourin' that day; the rain was thicker than molasses. I had been runnin' next to the roarin' crick, away from a pack of hounds. Before I knew what happened, I slipped on the mud and tumbled into the crick. The water had risen greatly and was tryin' to drown me. It pulled and tugged on my skin and clamped my face with a breath stealin' hand. It bashed me on rocks and tried to keep me from gulpin' air. I took deep breaths when I could and choked many times. I thought that I was gonna die; my vision from my good eye was already dimmin'. My lungs were ready to burst.

This was the end. I was waitin', waitin' for the light to take me away. Then, I became trapped on a tree branch. It held me like a friend with an outstretched hand, tryin' to comfort me, tellin' me to not give into the battle, to keep fightin'. I grabbed the branch and tried to pry myself

from the water. Like a cruel beast the current held onto me and tried to drag me under to my grave. I fought, with what strength I had left I fought. I strained the muscles in my weak arms. The cold, numbin' water made my body feel heavier. It chilled my body, makin' me more disoriented. I could no longer feel my legs. I tried kickin' them but—

My stomach was now on the shore. I grabbed the ground; grass broke into my hands as I used it to free the rest of me from my grave. All my weight was carried on my arms as I crawled. My knees was soon on the ground, then my legs, finally, as my feet touched the grass, I collapsed. My arms felt heavy, so I did not move them. I tilted my head. The oak tree seemed to look down at me with a friendly face. I owed my life to it. A white man would have let me drown.

Why is it that a tree has more compassion than another man? Is it because nature's not racist? Survival of the fittest? Or, is it because my Creator loves all, no matter what color skin they have?

A mufflin' of voices touched my ears. Panic pumped through my veins. I looked for safety . . . the tree! I weakly lifted myself from the ground and hoisted myself onto the tree's lowest branch. I clinched my teeth and pulled myself up another. Each branch became harder to climb than the last. I wanted to give up, but I knew I couldn't. I climbed, up twenty branches I climbed, before I could climb no more. I sat there like a perched bird, spyin' on the men below. There were six of em; three of em held lanterns. Their features were hidden from the darkness, but I could hear their voices:

“Aiken, I think I saw somethin' over there,” said Payne.

“What was it?” asked Aiken.

“Don't know. I think it was a person.”

“Let’s go check it out,” said Silas. The men were comin’ closer to the tree. I froze my body and held my breath, hopin’ that they would not find me. My nose started itchin’; it had a bite from a skeeter. I must have irritated it as I was climbin’. It burned, my body told me to itch it, but I knew that I would alert the men if I made the slightest noise. I gripped the tree tighter to try and help me resist the temptation.

The men was now below me.

“It’s just a tree,” said Reuben. *My itch burned.*

“That’s weird, I was sure I saw somethin’,” said a disappointed Payne. *My nose pleaded to be scratched.*

“It’s late, your eyes are just playin’ tricks on ya.” *It stung. It itched. It needed scratched!*

“Late or not, I want him found,” said Aiken. “Keep searchin’.”

The pain from the itch had become too much; I could resist no longer. I tore at my flesh. I felt relief as the pain faded. As I opened my eyes with a grateful nose, my heart dropped. I had bumped the branch above and its leaves were rattlin’.

“What was that?” asked Jasper.

“Just a squirrel,” answered Lewis. “Let’s get out of here.” Relief did not fill me as I watched the three lanterns fade into the distance. Caution filled my senses. I waited, for an hour I waited. I had to be sure that it was safe to flee.

Quietly, I climbed down to the ground. There was no softness from the grass to my callused feet; it felt dull to me as I walked away.

Hands clamped around my neck. I tried to struggle but there were four of them crushin' my throat. I gasped for air. A blow to my stomach knocked my breath from me. Another blow collided into my cheek and sent me to the ground.

"We got em Aiken!" said Reuben. "I told you he wouldn't get far."

"Good work men. I . . . this isn't my slave. It's somebody else's trash. Keep searchin'."

"What about this one?" asked Payne. "What you reckon we do with him?"

"He has the taste of freedom. He ain't no good to us with this breath in his lungs. He'll ruin the others. I say we kill him."

"I hear ya. How shall we take care of him?"

"Lynch em," cried Lewis.

"We ain't got any rope. And we're too far out to get some. I say we just slit his throat."

"Do you have a knife?" asked Reuben.

"Of course."

"Do it then," said Aiken, "and make it quick."

The man Payne stooped down and grabbed my hair. He brought my face close to his and whispered, "I hate your kind." He then spat in my face. "Your people strive on false hope. Because guess what, your kind will never be free. You will always be scum under my shoes." I felt the metal of the blade on my throat. "Now die, as a dog!" My air became lost. The world black.

It was weird. . . . I was in the air . . . and I could see my lifeless body on the ground. I felt tired, but my eyes would not close. My body looked cold and alone. Beaten, starved, and

tortured. I didn't understand why I could see my body from above. Or how it was possible to live in something that looked like death itself *before* the throat was slit.

A black man came out of the brush. He must have been the slave that the men were lookin' for. He looked the same as I had: beaten, worn out, and a thirst for freedom in his eyes, but there was also guilt as he looked at my body. He walked over to it and closed my eyes as he mumbled. I couldn't hear what he said, but it sounded like a prayer. He then grabbed the mushy soil around the tree as he began to dig.

For over an hour he toiled to make me a simple grave. He picked me up and held me like his own child as he placed me in the hole. Once a blanket of earth was above me, he flicked open a pocketknife. In amazement, I watched as he carved tiny letters onto the tree's root:

JUNE 1860

NOW I IS FREE!

I couldn't believe it, a black man that could write! It told me that those words were true. And somehow, I could read them!

I was no longer a slave, I was free! And it gave me hope that one day, my people would be free as well. Not just in death, but before it too.

The man walked away as my body lay slumberin' under the oak tree. I could now rest. Darkness took me. And light—

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I do not know what year it was, only that it was during the year of my seventeenth winter. It was in the fall, with the trees blazing like fire in the branches above. The ground crunched under my moccasins from the fallen leaves. My people can move through these woods without making a sound, but sometimes, it brings joy to my ears when I can hear the crunching leaves.

. . . I needed much joy that day. My baby . . . Abooksigum . . . I know that he is now with the Great Spirit, that he is free to live in peace in the Greet Woods above . . . But I miss him, my little Abooksigum. He will never grow up to be a strong warrior like his father. Never to see Fawn bouncing circles around its mother in spring, or Eagle soaring in a blue, summer sky, or golden leaves in fall.

Usually, the women of my village come to the woods together to forage for berries, nuts, and roots, and to share stories that they have heard. It provides protection, and a chance to gossip, but I had no such company this morning. My time to morn was gone. Women must be strong and accept the life and death of this world. . . . But I still hurt. . . . I came out here to cry alone. To sob alone so that the others would not think that I am weak.

Abooksigum, he had a strong face, and he was still so young. He had hair like ash, and he had the most beautiful brown eyes that I have ever seen. I've had visions of him growing up to be strong like Bear, wise like Owl, and able to laugh like Coyote. . . .

The forest was quite. There was only the crunching of my own feet. There were no birds. No squirrels. Nothing. But I did not notice this at the time, for my grief blinded me to the world. I walked as a stranger in the home that had provided me with everything that I needed. Food, shelter, but I was so consumed with grief that I walked like some demon that can see the world, but is disconnected from it. For everything is connected: trees, animals, my people, spirits, but at that moment I felt lesser than these.

Why did my baby die?! Why did the Great Spirit choose for Abooksigum to die, but not me? I am old and have walked many footsteps on Mother Earth. But Abooksigum did not leave one. The yellow fever killed him before—

I did not recognize this wood. My grief had taken me to strange trees and foreign rocks. Could I die here? Could I die here and not be found by my people? To fade from their memory without mourning. I'll be in the Great Woods, alive again with my baby boy.

I could walk no longer. My legs had become too heavy. They gave way and I fell to the ground. My face was buried in leaves. I lay there sprawled and wept. Tears of pain and envy poured from my eyes and soaked the ground with salt. I was alone. Hurt and alone.

I heard a growl, but it was not like an animal's. It sounded more wild and nasty, and even cruel. I lifted my heavy head. There, standing on four legs was Wolverine, yet it was not Wolverine. It had the skin like Wolverine, but its eyes were like a demon, and foam was seeping from its mouth. It was a mad beast.

I tried to move but I was trapped to the ground, not by grief—but by fear. Was this how I was to die? Eaten by a beast that could no longer feel content. Was I to be granted my wish to be with my son . . . while I still wanted to live? I said I wanted to die . . . but it is easy to say one thing, and hard to see it through.

As I lay there, and looked into those demonic eyes, I understood that life is a gift, a chance to feel the soft wind, and to dance with the stars. It has hardships, hard like hail, but a simple rainbow could not be rightly appreciated without it.

Wolverine walked toward me like a drunkard, spitting and growling. The leaves were crushed under its paws. Still, I could not move. My fear had become my death.

I saw gnashing, foaming teeth before I closed my eyes—

I heard brush rustle, and something *thump* to the ground in front of me. I opened my eyes to see Lynx bravely standing between me and the rabid beast, a cat standing up to a creature that is feared by animals much bigger than itself.

Lynx hissed, warning the beast to back away, but it did not. It only came closer, snarling harsher than what it was before. Lynx leaped on Wolverine's back and dug its claws into the beast's spine. The demon growled and shook wildly to unbalance the cat, but the more it shook, the deeper the cat's claws sunk into fur and flesh. It looked as if the cat would be victorious, but the battle soon swayed.

Wolverine wobbled to a tree and started smashing itself against it. Poor Lynx meowed as it was crashed against bark, but its claws stayed deep in Wolverine's meat. Blood was dripping from both Lynx and Wolverine as they kept smashing into the tree. Bone crunched, flesh ripped, and still Lynx hung on.

Then, the smashing stopped. The heavy body of Wolverine collapsed! Its head was mangled and crushed. Battered and bruised Lynx retracted its claws. I looked into its golden eyes. I tried to speak, but the words just could not come out of my mouth. I was trying to say one, simple word—*Thank you*.

Lynx seemed to understand. It nodded its head and bounded away, disappearing just as fast as it had appeared.

I just lay there.

I was alive! The Great Spirit had saved me in the form of Lynx. He had given me a second chance that I did not deserve. I understood how precious life was. I wished . . .

Abooksigum, knew what a gift life was, but I now understood what a sin it would be for me to take mine to be with my little boy.

In a patch of mud was one of Lynx's footprint, with speckles of blood in its clawed toes. I was unable to tell it thank you, but that would not stop me from honoring the wild cat for what it had done for me. I brushed away some leaves and plucked an acorn from them. My fingers dug into the dirt and made a tiny hole in the center of the paw print. I kissed the acorn, and whispered, "Thank you," before I gently dropped it into the hole. A tear, a tear of joy dripped from my cheek into the hole with the acorn, before I covered it with a quilt of dirt. I patted the soft soil.

"Grow strong," I told the acorn. "Grow big and strong. Be a monument for what has happened this day. Tell the animals, the trees, the stars, and the spirits of brave Lynx who defeated rabid Wolverine. Tell all my child what happened here this day. Grow to be big and strong, and become a beautiful oak tree."

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My story is quite different than the other three. I was sixty-five when I looked upon that oak tree. I was old and withered. Arthritis filled my hands and feet; my bones were brittle and my flesh was as thin as paper. I was nothing but an old man, with not one drop of youth left in my blood, or so I thought.

Snow littered the ground under the bare branches of trees. It was a Tuesday, but the snow had given me the day to spend with my grandchildren. They were bundled in coats, and scarves, and hats, they looked like little Eskimos. Nina was the youngest. She had two, blue, diamond

eyes peeping out between a pink scarf and hat. Strands of blonde hair were peeking out from beneath her cap, and her steps were skips of merriment.

Scott, my grandson, was eight years old. Unlike his sister, he had hazel eyes and brown hair, and he walked with a boyish maturity that comes from being the oldest. They were both growing up so fast. I remember when they were both little, pink things in my daughter's arms.

We came to the top of a hill, which overlooked a wide valley. There were no trees on the hill, and very few on the bottom, making this a perfect place for sledding.

There were only two sleds.

"Are you coming grandpa?" Nina asked. I chuckled.

"I would fall to pieces if I tried going down that," I answered. "No, no, I'm too old for sledding Nina. You go ahead."

"Aw, come on grandpa, it'll be fun," said Scott.

"I'm too old to have fun sledding, but both of you are still young. Go ahead, I'll have fun watching.

My grandchildren weren't happy about my decision, but they were too excited about sledding to stick around me for long. "Come on Nina," said Scott, as he tugged on his sister's sleeve. "Let's go." Nina looked at me with one last glance before she followed her brother.

The two jumped onto their sleds at the top of the hill, and started racing each other to the bottom. I could hear their laughs as snow kicked up around them. Even though Nina was smaller, Scott had the advantage in sled racing. He was more experienced at sledding. He knew when to and where to lean and was more skilled at maneuvering, making him the winner of the first race.

They leaped from their sleds and ran back up the hill to race again. Nina was having fun, but when she made it to the top of the hill, she looked at me with pleading eyes that wished that I

was sledding with her. Those eyes only looked at me for a moment before she was racing her brothers back down the hill again.

Again Scott was the first to the bottom, and again Nina looked at me with her pleading eyes at the top. Every time she came back up the hill, she looked at me with her puppy dog eyes. Each time it made a chip at my heart with a caring chisel, until it came to the point that I could take it no more. “Okay Nina, I’ll sled down the hill with you, but just this once.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Okay Grandpa!”

From the top of the hill, the bottom looked far away and daunting. I was starting to think that this was a bad idea. Why was I doing this? I’m too old to be sledding. . . . But it would mean a lot to my grandchildren. Still—

It was too late to back out now; Nina had wiggled us into motion. The sled started sliding slow at first, but became faster as we picked up momentum. The air felt cold, the snow chilled me and chunks of it pelted me from all sides, and the bottom became scarier as we picked up speed. But you know what? I loved every minute of it. Nina was laughing; I was laughing. I felt twenty years younger from the rush of adrenaline. I couldn’t feel my arthritis or my brittle bones, all I could feel was the fun I was having with my grandchildren.

Scott zipped past us. “We’ve got to catch up to him Grandpa,” said Nina.

“Okay, hang on,” I warned. I leaned forward to try and gain us more speed. I knew that we weren’t going to catch up, I was too heavy, but I wanted to give Nina hope.

Scott was almost at the bottom. The finish line was in his reach—before his sled snagged on the root of the oak tree. He yelped as he was flipped into a pile of snow and we slid on past him. “We won!” exclaimed Nina.

“Not fair,” said Scott. “The tree cheated.”

“Excuses, excuses,” I joked. “We won fair and square. The tree just helped us out some.” The tree was a tall, old oak who just wanted to have a little fun. It was ancient, but like me, it still had some youth left in it.

“Well then I call a rematch,” challenged Scott.

“Can we grandpa?” asked Nina with her pleading eyes. “Please, with a cherry on top.”

“Just-just one more,” I said. “But then I’m done.”

“Yippee!”

Scott had learned his lesson and avoided the root, making him the winner of the rematch. But neither I nor Nina had any regret, for we were having far too much fun!

I would never forget that day of spending that time sledding with my grandchildren. I returned to that spot *several* years later after a big storm to sort of relive that moment in memory, only to make a terrible discovery. The old oak who had joined us in our fun had fallen, collapsed with its roots exposed from the ground. “Is this how you will be remembered?” I asked. “A fallen log who will decay and rot, and be food to the scavengers and insects?”

No!

I sawed off several parts of that tree and took them back with me to my workshop. With my hands I chiseled, and whittled, and carved, and sandpapered, until I had built a crib for my soon to be grandson.

“Grandpa, it’s beautiful,” said Scott as I brought the crib to his porch. “Where did you find such good wood?”

“From that old oak tree that tripped you when we went sledding.”

“Oh great,” he said with a smile. “You didn’t cut it down did you?”

“No, I guess a storm took it down.”

“That’s sad, but the crib looks fantastic! I can’t wait to see Mary’s face. She’s going to love it.”

“I hope she does.”

Even though that oak tree had been torn by its roots, it was not dead, not yet. Not just because it had been reborn into a cradle, but because of the people who were still breathing with the memories of a fun, snowy day, with the oak tree still living in their memories.

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Memories, are imbedded into everything. Even something as simple as an old, oak tree. A tree, who was given a heart by young love. A tree, who offered a home to a dead slave. A tree, who was born by a mourning mother who planted it in the print of a savior. And a tree, who again experienced youth, before an old man gave it a second life.

Memories, are imbedded into everything. New ones are created everyday. Some come then fade, but there are some memories that are so powerful, that they can be shared throughout generations, and generations to come.