

There is a place...

by

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There is a place I know.... where the air is fresh and clear, and mist hugs the ground like a thick, aging blanket Grandma used to keep in that dusty old closet next to the bathroom; mist that wisps away each morning, only to return each night as sun falls, and recurring, like clockwork, by dawn...

And in this remarkable field that calms me with simple thoughts of a single, huge, ancient oak tree that towers toward the sky as if not afraid of nature or her wrath... a tree with thick, dark, rope-like veins that reach upwards with strength and power just like my Daddy's arms; thick and powerful, as when he used to pick me up in one fell swoop and sweep me into space with a single arc of that dark forearm—sinewy muscles bulging out as he laughed, and I screeched and swung to claw at his woolly hair...

Now I close my eyes and return to this sanctuary, where the air is fresh and ever clear, to the one magnificent tree that gave me strength, never wavered in her counsel to me, always there when I needed an ear, comforted me after the sheer joy of discovering sexuality, and the pain of losing a friend; that special tree out some three hundred yards from Old Man Cratchet's house. A ten minute walk from my home, five when I ran, down the hill, through dark, scary pine woods and across the meandering, shallow creek and up again, cresting that hill to the place forever emblazoned in my mind.

I first climbed that old thing and made it my friend when I was ten. Old Man Cratchet wasn't around that day to see me maneuver up her deeply etched bark and majestic limbs, finally making it into the confines of her canopy that shielded my sweaty, exhausted form from view. But I do recall with razor-sharp clarity that sense of someone who's come face to face with his maker—the long, twin black bore of the shotgun and the searing buckshot that hurtled past my smooth, dark face and rang in my ears for what seemed like weeks after that crazy bastard fired into the thick foliage, yelling like a banshee. But Mrs. Cratchet, a simple woman whose eyes said everything her small, demure frame did not, shooed him off the porch with a quick wave of her hands and ran to the base of the tree, where she stared up with those sad eyes at my cowering outline.

A few days later I was back, as if testing steaming waters with a toe, gradually allowing the balls of my feet, then ankle to soak, before climbing in with a deep sigh...I'd be damned if Old Man Cratchet would stop me from seeing my new friend.

At fourteen I took Norma, a slender, alluring thing with swelling breasts, and blinding, white teeth up in that tree at quarter past midnight. We climbed in silence, lest the Old Man wake up and come out on the porch. He no longer shot at me; I no longer paid him any mind. Mrs. Cratchet had seen to that. I boldly ate the peanut-butter cookies she would bake and leave for me on the porch; the freshness sealed tight in a brown paper bag.

I took Norma up into that bed of twisting, living limbs and wind-licked leaves that caressed her dark skin that moonlit night as she reached for me, and we kissed, soft and gently.

And when she moved away, I climbed that aging tree and cried; carving her name into its flesh with a sharp penknife I had stolen out of Daddy's tool shed out back.

At nineteen my best friend from college, Randall, died when falling asleep at the wheel of his Father's Dodge Dart, wrapping that rusting, hulking car around a tree not too dissimilar from this one. I took a Greyhound home to grieve—eight and a half hours of restless, agitated sleep until I finally made it back to my sanctuary where I crawled into her arms with every last ounce of strength I possessed, and slept like a baby. At dawn I awoke and looked down, never once burdened with nightmares of sudden falls, somersaults, and horrible deaths because she wouldn't dare let me out of her grip. No. And so, I stared down at the layer of mist that hovered near ground, felt the way pilots must feel when they exist way up high above the clouds; the undulating, pulsating ground cover hypnotizing me and making me feel whole again. Mrs. Cratchet's cookies were waiting for me when the fog dissipated, warm to my throat as I swallowed eagerly.

Years later, I returned to my old friend to seek counsel and comfort. Falling in love and finding my soul mate had me bewildered—feeling utterly warm and wonderful, yet unsure of where to step next. But that old tree helped me see what needed to be seen. And when I returned several months later to kneel at the base of that tree with my woman, I could see both of my ladies' smile.

And later still, after I had moved to the big city to begin my new life, I returned after receiving news of the death of Mrs. Cratchet. I no longer ran down the hill, through the pinewoods and across the shallow creek with the abandonment of a child. I took cautious, calculated steps now that I was middle aged with family and responsibility. But that didn't stop me from meeting the embrace of an old friend that had aged much more gracefully than any of us had. I sat there clutching the rough, mottled bark and thinking about the small woman who had silently let me be.

But now, I close my eyes and return to this sanctuary, where the air is fresh and ever clear—I am transported magically away from the leathery confines of

my sedan—the CD player that skips; the kids who yell incessantly at one another while antagonizing motorists and chirping cell phones make me long for better days. As always, my old friend reminds me of what truly matters. I'm taken back to this extraordinary place under ultra-blue skies, that wondrous tree with enormous limbs like Daddy's that kept me safe and strong for so many years. My friend is always there to stroke my heart and ease my pang. And then, just like that, I'm back in a flash, refreshed, like after a warm, spring rain. I go on, peaceful and serene, with a smile for those in my way...

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