

Treva Rodemaker
220 B Dee Road
North Aurora, IL 60542
630-764-9177
Ts.rhodes107@gmail.com

Friends

I met the tree when I was four years old. My parents and I had lived in Florida, amidst palms and scrub palmetto, but I had never spent time with trees. This one was *our* tree.

It had been planted by my father, a gift to his wife's parents. Once a tiny sapling, by the time of our first visit north it had grown into a spreading maple, smooth-barked and sturdy. And though my father assured me that it was one tree, two trunks sprang up from the ground, joined only inches above the sprouting grass. Searching for adventure, I wedged myself between the two trunks and shinnied up a foot or two, excited that I was climbing a real tree.

As we visited again and again over the years, the maple tree became my friend. I greeted it every time my family came north, and when my parents were busy and the local children not interested in playing with me, the tree listened patiently. And I traced patterns in the bark with my fingers and marveled how each leaf was so alike, and yet so unlike every other.

As I grew older, my father used the tree to teach me science, explaining how much of the tree's life lived underground. Crawling through my grandmother's lumpy, half-tended yard, I verified that the tree's roots really did spread as wide as its branches, and let my mind imagine the deep earth, and the roots digging down to draw up water and nourishment.

Eventually my grandmother passed away, and the house was sold. It's no longer "our tree," and yet in some ways every maple is that maple, a relative or a friend of my old companion. I often say hello to them, and ask them to pass it on.

TREES IN MY LIFE

My childhood home in the Philippines had a garden lushly planted with fruit and flowering trees, with only the roof of the house visible from the street. There was always fruit to eat, such as papaya and bananas, and others whose Western names I do not even know—*aratiles*, *santol*, and *kamias*. When I looked out my bedroom window in the summer, I could see an abundance of green and purple *caimito*, with its white, sweet flesh and black, almond-shaped seeds.

There was a plumeria tree from which my grandfather had hung a wire birdcage that he had planted with mosses and ferns. This was a magical place, inhabited by the fairies and spirits of my imagination. Also special to me was a playhouse built by my father with bamboo and coconut fronds.

Now that I live in America, I love the four seasons and the changes they bring. I love autumn with its colors, and taking walks while scouring the ground for perfect leaves to press between the pages of a heavy book. It ushers in the holidays, and is when apples are ripe for the picking. It means cider donuts and hot, fragrant coffee or mulled cider on a crisp day.

In a few weeks an aunt and uncle are moving to warmer climes after living in the same house for 35 years. In their backyard is a Golden Delicious apple tree that was planted by the same grandfather who tended the garden of my childhood.

As I say goodbye to this tree, I realize trees have fed my body, my mind and my spirit. They dwell in my memories and, as I make pies and bread from our last harvest from that tree for my daughter, give me a link to the future.

By Caroline Wilfong
213 Prairie St., St. Charles, IL 60174
Tel. # 630-549-6246
Email: oline1966@yahoo.com

ARBOR DAY WRITING CONTEST: ADULT SUBMISSION

Julie Fisher Robertson
1317 Fox Glade Ct
St. Charles IL 60174
630-584-9204
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William and Wiley Willow

“OH NO! OH NO! Wiley – here they come! This is the one thing I hate about spring. The Fisher Sisters will be swinging on our branches, and they look a lot bigger this year! This is going to be terrible. I tell you terrible. Last year I lost a lot of branches because of all the swinging they did on me. And I ached for days.”

“Cut it out, William. Those branches were ready for thinning anyway. And the Fisher Sisters are such sweet little girls, and they love us. They love swinging on our weeping willow branches, and I look forward to spring because of them.”

“Easy for you to say, Wiley. You are five years younger than me.”

“Yes, but you are only 15 years old. So relax and enjoy. Stop getting upset. That makes your branches tighten up. Just take a deep breath as the little sisters swing back and forth. Listen to the swishing of our branches. Listen to the Fisher Sisters’ glorious giggles. We are creating memories for those little girls. Remember that, William. We are creating wonderful memories.”

“OK, OK. Deep breaths, deep breaths, deep breaths. I guess it doesn’t feel so bad after all. I guess you’re right, Wiley! They are cute little things, and their laughter is delightful. I feel myself relaxing, and, by gosh, my branches aren’t falling off!”

“See, I told you so!”

“YIKES, Wiley! OH NO!!”

“What is it now, William?”

“The Fisher Cousins have arrived, and they both look a foot taller!”

“William – remember what I said.”

“I know...RELAX, DEEP BREATHS and remember we are creating memories. But egad!! They are at least 10 pounds heavier! Ouch!! Oh, my poor branches! Deep breaths, deep breaths, relax, *SWISH*, memories, wonderful memories, *SWISH*, glorious giggles---- worth every aching branch.”