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A Soldier's Tree

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Olympians

Molly Boyce

proud friends, one woman
imitate wild duck waddles
schlepping across shining
satin sheets of tiled water
under cleansing waterfalls

disrobed copper-toned bodies
molted shades, mauve into deft blue,
exposed by time and space,
inches away from their finest hour
or destined great despair

they take their mount, toes grasp edge
eyes steadied on eastern sun
stretch high above exalted heads
ascend skyward, body spirals uncoil
into the rippling tide below



Hippie Hollow Carissa Battaile

A Soldier's Tree

Betsy Giron

In 2005, a soldier left his family for a tour of duty in Baghdad, Iraq, and I inherited the new position as caretaker of his Tree. That soldier is my husband, Jason, and this is the story of the day I began a relationship with the Tree in our front yard. Until that day, it was a relationship I kept at a distance, viewed only from a window and passed by on the front walk.

The Tree began its roots in our family as a gift to us, one that my mother-in-law ordered from a catalogue. We received the gift in a long, narrow box which we opened with interest only to find a four-foot long, leafless, twig. The diameter of the twig was about one and a half inches at its thickest section. As I carefully took it out of the package, the thought occurred to me that I was grateful this gift did not come from my mother! Its pathetic appearance left me doubting its future.

The twig, however, disproved my lack of faith after my husband planted it. Within four years, the twig grew to nearly 30 feet in height with a one-and-a-half foot diameter trunk. I christened it, "the Tree." It was a stunning, willow-type, hybrid and the tallest tree on our street. Neighbors frequently complimented on its appearance. My husband, having always been the sole caretaker of our yard, received these compliments with moderate pride—and rightly so. I never touched yard work. I did not know, nor did I care to know, anything about it. The yard was my husband's territory, and my allergy-ridden immune system happily relinquished yard work to him.

All this changed, however, when my husband was deployed to Iraq for active duty. Before going, he gave me my orders, to care for his yard. He showed me how to use the lawn mower, weed-eater, edger, and sprinkler

system, all weapons for the lawn battlefield. He told me when to fertilize and weed 'n' feed. He finished the yard work boot camp with a reminder to trim the lower branches of the Tree. I took this charge with determined gusto and felt my own ego building over the next couple months as I battled yard work on the front lines and saw imminent success. The yard was looking pretty good, except for a few small weeds.

So I went on a tour of duty to Home Depot, confident that I could find the right solution to the weed problem. I consulted the pros, read the labels (Operations Manual-OM), and decided on Weed B Gone in a spray bottle. The application was a cinch and the weeds would meet their doom, said the OM. But they had no intention of complying with such orders. The day after application, my grass was brown and the weeds were still a vibrant green, alive and waving at me. Concerned that I had consequently killed the grass, I rushed to Home Depot a second time and, again, consulted the OM. This time the procedures involved an application of summer fertilizer which would green-up the grass in no time. I handled this application with mild agitation as I poured around the healthy weeds, still sneering at me. Never had I known an enemy with such confidence and audacity.

After spending \$30.00 to see a few weeds flourish, and assuming the worst was over, my good intentions were again plagued with problems. The third day, I noticed that some of the leaves on the Tree were turning pretty colors of orange and brown-on only one side of the Tree! Over the next couple days, leaves dropped profusely from that side, and I raked desperately. I had at least enough knowledge of plant cycles to determine that in the month of June, leaves were not supposed to fall. I knew that I was, again, being tormented by the Weed B Gone demon.



Cold Shannon L. Williams

I questioned whether my husband was going to believe this story. He would return to no Tree and I had only the prolific weeds to attest to the tragedy, but I wasn't about to radio in this information to him. My neighbor, in sympathy, helped me rake, laugh, and cry over the possible fate of the Tree.

In the meantime, while I was killing the Tree, my husband was growing an army. As a liaison to the Iraqi military, he assisted in the recruitment, organization, and assignment of their soldiers into necessary divisions. Officer Jason helped establish the roots of the Iraqi army from its beginnings, more than doubling their troops from about 60,000 to over 140,000 which earned him a bronze star. He handled the daunting task with order and good judgment.

I, back on the home front however, was not about to give up. The battle was at hand. I grabbed my favorite weapon (checkbook), jumped into my tank (Suburban), and drove back to the base (Home Depot), but not without first consulting the General (a local tree farm manager). He suggested I use a product called Super Thrive, a highly concentrated vitamin-hormone supplement. A mere \$25.00 later, I soaked the roots of the Tree very carefully with a dilution of half an ounce of Super Thrive in five gallons of water over the course of eight applications in 30 minutes. I nurtured and prayed and, a week later, repeated this same process.

Finally, the demon was exorcised and the Tree showed signs of new life. I touched the baby green leaves that sprouted from the leafless side of the tree, and a sense of motherly protection overwhelmed me. I knew then, that the Tree and I would survive anything, including separation from our caretaker. Besides, after all we'd been through, the weeds didn't look so bad. At least they complemented the green leaves on the Tree.

Vagabond

Kathy Davidson

Solitary little stick
blown far from home
bone dry and flaking from exposure.
Thickly layered chunks of bark
peeling and lifting away
like plaster from an old wall.
A short crusty appendage
points upward:
a Hitch-Hiker's thumb.