



## A Tree Story in Three-Part Harmony

*I like trees because they seem more resigned to the way they have to live than other things do.*

—Willa Cather

**P**lants teach us about the human condition, what it means to be fully human. Pets do the same thing. When you grow to love another being, you open yourself to loss. Until plants became important in my life, my emotional bonds had been limited to people and pets. Now I was learning I could include plants, too.

It is easy to become oblivious to the interconnectedness of all life, even if you don't want to. I didn't know I was well on my way until I saw my first tree die next door to an apartment house I stayed in when I first left New York and moved to Santa Monica, California.

The tree was a very old, thickly trunked date palm, a *Phoenix canariensis*, that rose sixty feet into the air, with

about a fifty-foot spread. Even though it wasn't on my property, it shaded me. The light dappled through its enormous fronds recalling Matisse in Nice and luncheon on the grass in Monet's garden.

One day, I heard workmen planning to demolish the other house. A new apartment building was going up in its place. Too bad, I thought. The neighborhood will surely change. It never occurred to me what that might entail and how soon it would happen.

A week later, I came home to find the date palm cut to the ground, lying on its side like a dead elephant, a sleeping Buddha in the Sri Lankan forest. Slowly dying, severed from its core, it sprawled on the sidewalk outside my house, just one block from the busy traffic on Santa Monica Boulevard.

I stood frozen, watching the tree. I swear I saw it heave and heard it sigh. The dismaying sight of the date palm lying in state on its urban deathbed triggered feelings of sadness and powerlessness so disturbing, I instinctively buried them immediately.



Ten years later, in Bishop, California, while living in the house with the garden that produced the late-blooming cosmos, I got to know another tree. A one-hundred-year-old cottonwood tree played palace guard outside my bedroom window.

From my bed, I could contemplate the cottonwood tree. Life was quiet enough to hear the wind's peculiar rustle as

it blew through the cottonwood's heart-shaped leaves. Soon, I noticed the sound came up at the same time every day, and I waited for it as I would the noon whistle. At night, peeking through the tree's silhouette, I saw my first meteor showers. While I paid bills at my desk or carried out business over the telephone, it refreshed me to glance up at the tree and allow its peaceful, reassuring presence to wash my brain so I could continue to concentrate.

The cottonwood provided a soothing reference point from everywhere on the property. As soon as I drove in, I felt welcomed. When I left, I knew it would be there when I returned. It towered over the neighborhood like a living green Sphinx and seemed to impart a peaceful feeling to everyone who came under its influence.

One night, it appeared in my dreams. I was standing underneath it examining its impenetrable form when two very sad brown eyes appeared in its trunk and stared back at me. I reached out to touch its face and the eyes disappeared. When I awoke the next morning, I felt as if something monumental had happened. I had been given a glimpse of the mythical nature of the tree.

I began to look differently at everything around me: the smattering of white phlox over by the side door, the hint of French lilac off in a corner, and the creamy Chinese snowballs gracing the north wall. Because of the dream, I took less for granted. I became more grateful.

The one eyesore, from my point of view, was the landlords' motor home parked on the concrete slab next to the entrance to the vegetable garden. I pretended, as best I could, that it wasn't there. The rest of the view was so pas-

toral. The motor home was my one reminder that the end of the twentieth century was near and I was only one step ahead of it, in my eternal search for a preindustrial landscape in which I could rest, be quiet, and think.

One day, the landlady nonchalantly mentioned she wanted to cut down the cottonwood tree. She was convinced the tree was rotten at its core and needed to be eliminated from the yard so it wouldn't fall onto their motor home or into my bedroom window. I thought she was joking. I even laughed, assuming the very thought of cutting it down was as absurd to anyone else as it was to me. It was inconceivable that she actually believed it was dangerous.

She had just bought the house two years before, having moved out of Los Angeles to avoid the traffic and noise. Others who had lived in the neighborhood a long time said the most reputable tree trimmers in the valley had pruned the tree a year or two before she moved in. They had declared it in excellent condition. All it needed now, the neighbors said, was a good trim so its branches wouldn't fall in undesirable places.

The landlady told me one more time she was contacting tree trimmers for estimates on the removal of the cottonwood tree. Whoever agreed with her contention that the tree was rotten inside won the deal. The company that wanted the task obtained a lucrative job but took on a formidable mission. The roots were so old they spread high above the ground throughout the yard, and so thick they looked like electric train tracks traversing the far reaches of the lawn. There was no doubt in anyone's mind they ran underneath the foundation of the house, as well.

The stupid part of me kept denying the reality of what the landlady said she was going to do. There was no doubt in my mind she would come to her senses and opt for the luxurious green canopy that lowered the temperature in our little pocket ten degrees in the summer.

A month or two passed and I drove to Palm Springs for Easter week to see my mother who was visiting from New York. It was a tiring seven-hour ride home, and I was looking forward to sitting under the breezy green fortress of the cottonwood and sipping a cool drink.

As I drove in, I knew something was wrong. The first thing I saw were gargantuan rounds of tree trunks stacked haphazardly everywhere. There was no yard left. Every inch of it was filled with sections of the cottonwood tree. There was no way these rounds could be moved except by crane. They were perfectly formed with no trace of rot. All that was left of the tree was a giant stump.

There were men everywhere lifting wood and cutting with chain saws, cursing that poor tree with the foulest language for being such a bitch to cut down. One guy told me the tree had put up a hell of a fight. The tree cutters were exhausted and angry.

I stumbled around the rubble in shock as if Hiroshima had just happened in the backyard. I wanted to grab everyone and scream at them to wake up to the senselessness of what they had done. I finally realized there was nothing to do or say. I walked into my house and shut the door, closing all the blinds, and didn't come out for three days.

I bargained for a resurrection. I imagined the magnificent cottonwood tree miraculously pulling itself back

together again, as things did in animated cartoons, and standing whole and vital once more. For a few moments, I actually believed this supernatural event might occur.

Two days later, more men arrived to load the rounds on a mammoth truck bed and haul them away from the scene of the crime. I peeked outside through a slit in the blinds. The landlady wanted them to scoop out the stump with a special power tool so she could use it for a flower bed. She had hoped the men would be able to remove the stump, but they couldn't. It was too huge and the roots too pervasive. Instead, the vestige remained, a sore reminder of its refusal to leave.

I experienced all the stages of grief during those first few days. In the beginning, denial and bargaining were the only way I could cope. Anger and resentment consumed me. Finally, I accepted that the nurturing two-year alliance with the cottonwood was over. I opened the blinds and looked out at the garden.

Breathing in deeply, summoning my courage to deal with the freshly cut stump, I walked outside. After sweeping my hands across the raw wood, I lay down on the stump's massive circumference and mourned for the tree's life, for the messed-up state of the world, and for my loss.

In a few days, friends and neighbors stopped by, proclaiming there was no rot in the wood; the tree had died in vain. I felt worse hearing such pronouncements. People inspected the stump and went away shaking their heads. The cottonwood had shaded such a large area, in its absence the yard now looked like an abandoned lot even though the rest of the garden was still intact.

At the time, I kept thinking, there must be something here I'm supposed to learn, trying to absorb the shock of another big tree felled right outside my house. Although I didn't know what it meant, at least this time I didn't bury it. I felt the blow. Four years later, in Laguna Beach, California, another tree would break through.



Laguna is a place where lush vegetation graces winding, tucked-away streets; homes are perched à la the French Riviera on hillsides; and the rocky coastline teems with hardy native shrubbery. Once the mecca for early California painters during the first few decades of the twentieth century, this beach community has a natural, picturesque quality, strewn as it is with stands of giant eucalyptus and smatterings of old California palms.

As it happened, while I was writing this book I needed to move in a hurry, actually in a matter of days. I didn't have time to look for a place. My friends Joan and Larry offered me their mobile home in Laguna to rent. At first I was snobbish about living in a trailer, but this old one was special. It looked like a boat inside.

Joan and Larry had gutted the interior to make one large studio space, salvaging the old wood paneling and white-washed indoor porch. A brand new kitchen served as the center around which the entire house revolved. Sliding glass doors and big picture windows opened out to a spacious deck and a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view of the Pacific Ocean. From there I had full visibility of the

curvature of the earth. Wherever I looked, there was the horizon, that hazy line between the conscious and the unconscious.

The deck became my garden. A fifty-foot California fan palm (*Washingtonia robusta*) stood directly in front of it. Immediately upon awakening in the morning, I'd go out and make my rounds to check on all the plants, and then sit in a chair and be with the tree.

Several different levels within its giant crown seemed to serve as a bird apartment house. I had a great view of the birds flying back and forth, singing and shrieking, playing tag, and generally having a ball. Watching the interrelationship of earth and sky and birds and sea made me feel like I had roots.

Two months after I moved in, my mother, Nina, came to visit. It was the first time she had ever stayed with me in my own home. We had a difficult history, a stalemated love-hate relationship involving a rift that must have occurred at birth. At that time, I was taken away from her and placed in an incubator for nine weeks, not to be removed for holding or touching. Instead, the medical staff poked, prodded, needled, and cut me trying to save my life. Being a mere two-and-a-half pounds with two external malignant tumors on my head, they attached me to a special tube for air and food; the box became my nurturer.

Naturally, none of this was my mother's fault. It kept me alive, but it must have been the early isolation and sensory deprivation that created a hunger which could never be satisfied. A chronic sense of neediness affected all aspects of my life: my work, my relationships, my health, and the

most far-reaching, my self-respect. I grew up thinking life was pain and pain was life.

My mother seemed perpetually angry, and from my point of view it seemed I was the reason for her unhappiness. We played out a psychic dynamic in which I felt unloved and then, in my hurt and rage, gave her every reason to reinforce that feeling. After working on our ambivalent relationship for many years, we had finally begun to make progress. Even though we were still guarded, at least we were both facing in the same direction.

A few weeks earlier, I had visited my mother in Palm Springs. She traveled out to California each year from New York to vacation in the wintertime. While my stepfather was alive, the desert air helped his emphysema. After he died, my mother kept coming to escape the New York City winters and to see me. Even though we talked regularly on the telephone, a full year had passed since we had seen each other last. We got along so well, I decided to invite her to visit me a few weeks later, for her seventy-seventh birthday.

Five years before, while my stepfather was dying, my mother developed Parkinson's disease. With medication, she had been maintaining pretty well and was still able to take care of herself and get around. But after she arrived in California this year, she started to have a great deal more difficulty with her motor abilities. She lost her balance often, having trouble doing anything with her hands, getting up from a chair, or propelling herself out of bed.

It was painful to watch her being consumed by a rigidifying and progressively degenerating illness. My mother, who had always been strong and capable, who had never

been sick, now could barely perform such simple tasks as putting on her shoes and socks, rifling through her purse for a credit card, or signing her name. Sometimes she would get this blank look on her face—the Parkinson's mask, or flat affect—and suddenly she wasn't there anymore. Her eyes went dead and she just stared vacantly, looking at once belligerent and afraid.

But even though my mother's body was hardening, her manner had softened considerably. She seemed sweeter to me since the onset of her illness. It made me wish the block between us would disappear.

The morning after her arrival, we ate breakfast on the deck and began to hear the sound of a very loud and persistent chain saw, the kind tree trimmers use. I scanned the oceanfront and saw a man high up in a palm tree, way off in the distance, trimming the fronds. "It's spring," I thought. "It's nesting time. He's disturbing all the birds." Later, I would learn that this was precisely the idea.

After I washed the dishes, I looked out and saw men cordoning off the street. I called out to my mother, "Mom, it's going to be really loud in here in a minute." I started to get an uncomfortable feeling. There was bird panic around the palm tree. They were evacuating.

I didn't approve of this random destruction of their home, even though severe pruning of these gorgeous palms is a common practice in California. I recoiled from the deafening sound of the chain saw, retreating to my room to make the bed. I assumed the men would be trimming the fronds. Suddenly I heard my mother yelling over the din, "Look, look at what they're doing."

I hurried outside to the deck and looked up. The tree trimmer was only halfway up the palm. He wasn't cutting the fronds at all. He was cutting deep notches into the trunk to fell the tree. At first, it didn't compute. I looked at the notches and saw that it was too late to stop it. They were already cut too deep. The tree was about to fall any second.

Almost involuntarily, I started calling out, "Stop, stop! What are you doing? You can't do that. There's nothing wrong with that tree. Why are you doing this?"

The man just laughed at me. He obviously thought I was some kind of kook. He said, "Look, lady, I'm just doing what I'm told." The scene became surreal. The next thing I knew, there was a huge cracking sound. The trunk split and fell in slow motion directly toward me. It acted like a laser beam moving through the air, an invisible ray piercing the central axis of my body.

I will never forget the image of that palm tree falling directly into me as if it were going to split me in two. The tree trimmer had calculated exactly how much space it needed to land safely and miss my deck. Just a few more feet and the tree would have felled me.

My chest felt as if the tree had just performed psychic surgery on it, cutting me wide open and exposing my insides to the elements. Symbolically, a colossal wrecking ball had just whacked me to smithereens, and all my parts piled up in a heap neatly at my feet. The tree had cracked my armor, and grief poured out of me like a rising tide of water that had been dammed up for years.

Searching for some sense of control, I remembered the

hamadryads of Greek myth. The Greeks believed that a wood nymph, a tree spirit, lives inside each tree and is bound up with the life of that tree. When the tree dies, the hamadryad's spirit is released. I liked to think it was happening now so I could explain the situation and feel better. In an odd sort of way, it brought some comfort.

The lower half of the tree still stood. The top half, with its bushy head, lay slain in the street. The tree trimmer cut down the rest of the tree, chunk by chunk. This was the part of the process I had missed with the cottonwood. The noise drove me nuts knowing what it was doing.

I called the park office. "Why are you cutting down this tree?" I questioned.

"What tree?" she said.

"What tree?" I gasped, flabbergasted. "The one outside my house." I tried to calm down and put myself in her position listening to some crazy woman overreacting about a tree. After all, she must be thinking, "It's only a tree."

"Oh, yeah," she said. "That one. It's a shame, isn't it?"

"A shame," I cried. "Why? Why did you do it?"

"Well, we were getting so many complaints about other palms in the park. In the spring during nesting season, people complain bitterly about the bird droppings. Sometimes it gets so bad, the ground underneath becomes totally white."

"You mean you cut down the tree to prevent bird droppings?" I said incredulously. "I would have hosed down the street if you had told me." I hung up the phone in a daze.

It was then I noticed something changing in my body. It was an actual physical sensation. My chest tingled as if a

numbness was wearing off. I had the odd feeling that something had been released.

My mother and I left the house and went to the beach to escape the noise. It was hard watching her get in and out of the car in slow motion. Her muscles wouldn't do the job anymore. I had to pull her up to give her some leverage so she could propel herself out of the seat. When she did it, I'd cheer for her and we'd laugh.

She shuffled slowly to the water's edge, her feet swollen and twisted from the Parkinson's. I laid her down on the blanket and she tried to make herself as comfortable as possible. We relaxed for a while, enjoying the waves breaking on the beach and the late afternoon sun warming us. "It's time to take a pill," she announced, as she often did every three hours or so.

Her life now consisted of taking five different kinds of medication and, in spite of great effort, she lost track of what she took when. Everything she did took triple the amount of time it normally might. I noticed I was becoming irritated by her slowness and inability to manage. It was almost easier to feel anger than to allow myself to feel the pain of how sad her decline was becoming for both of us.

She could still tell great stories but she forgot words and phrases. She'd stutter on words and fail to remember what she wanted to say. While we sat on the sand, my mother confided, in a shy sort of way, that the large dosage of medication she was taking caused hallucinations, yet she needed the higher dosage to keep her functioning. She mentioned nonchalantly that there was a very sweet dog-

gie on the edge of the blanket and two large pussycats under the umbrella. When I asked if they scared her, she said, "No, they're company for me."

I had the sense that day, for the first time, that my mother was going to die. Maybe not in the next year or two, but we didn't have all that much time left. My mother had always been an essential part of my life. We may have fought a great deal but at least we talked, we were honest. Our relationship was alive. We even had our moments. Until now, though, I don't think I ever really entertained the idea of her being gone.

Watching her become like a little child, a sweet little girl who needed me to cut the food on her plate, made me see that my mother was shrinking away, both literally and figuratively. Still, a hard wall of stiffness, almost like a tree's trunk, blocked her expression of herself. We both were like tree trunks, she and I. We each had our own hard crust.

When my mother became too uncomfortable at the beach, I lifted her up and held her hand, and we walked slowly back to the car to go home. We ate Chinese take-out by the window in front of the absentee palm and hardly talked.

The next day was Sunday. My mother was scheduled to leave. When I awoke at 6:00 A.M., I felt a pressing desire to be physically close to her. She was already awake, so I walked over and sat on the edge of her bed, not knowing exactly what it was that I wanted to do.

I gave into my urge. I leaned over, pressed my heart against her heart, and started to cry. I asked her to forgive

me for being so mean to her all my life and apologized for tormenting her with my rage.

After spending so many years blaming her for being such a lousy mother, I saw that she had given me everything she had to give. I had been condemning her for having a cold heart, for not loving me, for being critical and harsh, and now I was finally able to admit the part I played in that perception. I had been at least as cold, critical, and harsh as I ever accused her of being.

The spell had been broken. Our lifelong feud was over. We had arrived at the confluence of so many factors that catalyzed our healing: the shock of the tree's death, my mother's advancing illness, the efforts she had made to make our relationship work, the steps I had taken to reach the point of receptivity. We both were ready.

As we packed her bag together, making sure she knew where everything was, I helped her put on her underpants and snap her bra. I realized her helplessness didn't irritate me anymore. As I knelt on the floor by the bed putting on her socks, she volunteered, "The tree gave us a gift, you know. It gave us a new life together." My mother was all forgiveness. She had no rancor and I know she had reason. Her face looked as it did when I was a little girl. She looked young.

Now that my defenses had been cracked and I dropped the baggage I had been lugging around for years, I could see and appreciate the best of my mother. I could give her the same benefit of the doubt that I would afford anyone else. I stopped being vengeful and felt compassion instead. The fan palm had opened my heart. It had completed the work the other two trees had begun.

Trees don't argue or move or fight back. They endure their lot. My mother was enduring hers. We said good-bye, and after the car pulled away, I walked out onto the deck to be with the tree, momentarily forgetting it wasn't there. So, I sat in my usual chair, staring at the water, until the sun went down and the sky turned red.

I remembered in the past I might have been doing something or saying something and suddenly I'd feel I *was* my mother. I'd observe myself with her grimace, look askance with her smile, and I'd be spooked. I didn't want to be my mother. I was too afraid to look at the parts of her that I hated and admit them in myself. Now I know I am my mother, all parts of her. At this point in my life, I don't know anyone I would rather be.

It wasn't until a few days later that I realized I no longer had physical pain. I couldn't remember a day in the past fifteen years when I wasn't battling major pain in my body. Lower back problems, slipped discs, and severe sciatic pain had kept me bedridden and incapacitated, on and off, for years. Now, imperceptibly, the pain had ebbed away. I had let it go.

About two weeks later, I went to a local discount home emporium for some bamboo reed fencing to shade the area around my deck so my plants wouldn't burn up from too much sun. Usually, I don't frequent this certain store because the plants they sell look sick. But I wasn't going for plants this time. At least that's what I thought.

As I walked around the store looking for the fencing, sitting out in the aisle like a lost puppy in the pound, far away from the other plants, I spied a three-foot fan palm

similar to the one that had died. The jolt of recognition was palpable. Bam! It was as if the plant was calling out to me, loud and clear, "Here I am for you. Take me home. A replacement for the deceased one."

Leaping at the chance, I hurried down the aisle and scooped it up into my arms, placing it possessively into the cart. The price tag read \$13.99. What a deal on top of everything else! At this point, I was so overjoyed to see it, I would have bought it for any price.

The woody roots bulged out of the holes at the bottom of the black plastic pot. There was no doubt it had to be repotted immediately. I picked out a simple Italian terra-cotta pot and grabbed a bag of potting soil. Then I found a small wooden platform on wheels with a sliding dish underneath it to catch the run-off water so the carpet wouldn't rot.

I dragged the palm with me all over the store, treating it like I would a young child, not wanting to leave it alone for a minute. I found the bamboo fencing and headed for the checkout line. Bragging to the cashier about the fan palm's fabulous price, I hurriedly left the store, fully expecting her to follow me to say there had been some mistake.

I fitted the palm into the front passenger seat of my car, grateful there was enough room for it to spread out. I talked to it, telling it how wonderful I thought it was that I had been given a fan palm substitute, a sister-brother-child-cousin to the one who died.

When I got home, I excitedly repotted the palm. Its unusually vibrant green fronds spread out like beautiful ladies' hands. You could see the webbing between its fingers. I

went to bed happy and lighthearted for the first time since the demise of the tree.

The next day I awoke to the smell of fresh, clean air, sweetened after a night of rain. I walked into the living room to discover that the fan palm had literally doubled in size overnight. The love, the water, the fresh soil and a place of honor in a new home, all combined to increase the vitality and size of the plant. The palm had swelled to a new height and stretched its arms out languidly in every direction, hanging as gracefully as a Victorian parlor palm.

My identification with the fan palm became clear. I had been a pot-bound root ball, too, stuck in the same childhood pot my entire life. In my case, it took cracking the whole container to set me free. I had been tugging for years, but I couldn't come out until I was absolutely ready. Now I flourished just like the palm.

Here I was, forty-seven years old, and I had finally grown up. At last I felt like a mature woman, taking full responsibility for my life. Inner gardening had become as rewarding as outer gardening was pleasurable. Growing myself was the gift from my garden.

