

## Rooted

By ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~

You see others like me every day. I'm a Valley Oak, towering majestically over the land. I have thick grayish bark which protects my soft trunk. My roots dig deep into the hard earth, sucking up water to keep me growing. But my pride is my branches, which reach up and grab at the sky. Children climb my limbs, swinging and giggling. My many glossy leaves sway gracefully in the wind. I sit alone on top of a hill, a perfect place to watch life go by.

Whoever said being a tree was easy, they're wrong. In fact, it's quite challenging. It seems as if everything is out to get you. Bugs munch at your leaves and burrow through your bark. Animals eat buds and nest in your branches. Plants climb up your trunk and try to choke you of life. Oh, and the weather is constantly changing from hot, dry summers to frosty, hard winters. But, worse of all are the humans.

I remember when I had my first encounter with man. The earth was still and untouched. Animals ran about the brush and birds flew freely through the crisp air. Life was wonderful, but too soon everything began to change.

I didn't hear them coming. For humans, they moved softly, but as they crept into the clearing, I got a good look at them. They wore tattered buckskin clothes and had feathery headdresses. Some held sharp stone axes in their tan hands, which I didn't like the look of one bit. A few smaller people ran toward me, their jet black hair flying in the wind and their leather slippers pattering over the dust. They scaled up my trunk, which was spindly at the time, and swung from the few branches I had.

I watched with curiosity as they gathered dry sticks off the ground and set up little pointed houses. They built small fires, which produced little smoke, and cooked over them. As the moon rose high, they threw water on the smoldering logs and crawled into their makeshift tents. The following morning they moved on, like a breeze swept them away.

I saw no other humans for a long time. The seasons changed, I lost my leaves in the fall and gained them back in the spring. I managed through the hard droughts, where the sun drank all the moisture out the ground. I powered through the raging flames that tore through the forest. My trunk bulged with years of age and my branches rose high into the gaping blue sky.

The light-skinned settlers rolled into camp on a gray, cloudy day. These people, very different from the first, drove heavy animals pulling large, wooden wagons. They formed a circle, and then started a fire. Men unpacked the wagon and women prepared supper. I curiously observed the youngest humans played with cornhusk dolls and practiced with their slingshots.

After the meal, everyone gathered around and danced and sang, and I thought what strange creatures they were.

After a long, noisy night, dawn broke over the hill. Before they continued their journey, to my utter horror, a small boy swung a hatchet and took down a sprouting oak. Smiling eagerly, he loaded the wood into the wagon, and pointed over a set of hills. The others shared his joy.

More followed, soiling the nearby fields with ashes, animal bones and some old wood chairs that had grown too heavy as they went on their way. Some didn't move far, though, as I could hear them a couple of miles away.

As years passed, the humans drew closer. A small town appeared on the horizon, and more trees were massacred. Settlers cleared the meadow, ripping out the soft grass and sweet wildflowers. A man purchased the hill on which I perched, moved his family there, and planted corn. He attempted to saw me down, but my thick bark led him to give up. Instead, he constructed a cabin, using the dead bodies of trees near me. I was forced to watch, pondering my own fate.

The young girl in the family decided that my dependable branches were the perfect spot to fasten a swing. She knotted a solid rope, and tightly tied it to one of my lower limbs. She spent hours swinging on my branches and climbing up my trunk to observe birds. I watched her as she grew up, and developed new interests. One day, as spring was giving way into summer, she and an adolescent boy carved AK + MB into my bark, marking me forever. Eventually she left, thirsty for the adventures the world had to offer.

Soon after that, that family sold the farmhouse to a rancher, who brought hundreds of huge cows with him. For generations, a farm was managed around me. They were too lazy to bother cutting down a massive oak tree. Besides, I provided valuable shade to the cows.

The world continued to buzz around me. Horse drawn wagons were replaced by smelly cars. The windy dirt road was paved into a wide tar highway. The barn gave away to a large cement factory. Before I knew it, I was alone on the hill.

A couple decades went by, and my canopy was no longer full. I lost one of my largest limbs in a lightning storm and my roots began to recoil. The world was declining, along with me. The air was sour with chemicals. Roads twisted all around, ridden by thousands of commuters. Wild animals became a rare sight.

Finally, the day came when my fate was marked. A squirrel ran off with a prized acorn as a sign was stuck in the dry earth, announcing a new mall. Then a large, sweaty man carelessly slashed my peeling bark with red paint. Off in the distance, a chainsaw whined as it tore apart its latest victim. No one acknowledged the death of another tree. After all, who really cares?