

The Tree

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The tree was on the table when I got home from work that afternoon. I couldn't tell right away what type of tree it was, but it was definitely a little sapling. My face was contorted into a questioning frown when Mark came around the corner.

"I know this looks weird, but let me explain." My frown deepened as Mark continued: "I thought we could plant it in the backyard to grow over the next several decades, and by the time we have grandkids, they'll have a tree to climb and swing and play in." He placed a gentle yet well-worn hand on the pot of the tiny thing.

"You think it'll really be that big by the time we have grandkids?" I asked, removing my coat and hanging my work bag on the back of a chair.

Mark nodded. "I quizzed the guy at the plant farm all about it. This here'll grow into an oak!"

I forced my face to soften as I approached the tree. It barely stood a handbreadth from the surface of the soil, and only a few measly leaves had graced its twig-like branches. I tried to picture a huge version of it in our small backyard.

"So, is there much to caring for this thing? Like, what do we have to do to help it become an oak?" I asked, trying to avoid thoughts of constant watering and nurturing. I tried not to glance at the browning bunch of ivy on a shelf in the living room. Would this tree end up the same way, another testament to my failure?

"Nah, Kate, it's just a tree. All you do is stick it in the ground and let it do its thing." He placed a hand on my shoulder, as if trying to create a bond between me and the plant. "Don't worry, it'll be my project. I'll make sure it does okay."

Spring slipped into summer, and it was time to plant the tree. While Mark carefully put the tree into the ground, I stood close by with the hose, trying to water the small vegetable garden we'd also planted. As he stepped back and we observed the latest edition to our lawn, I suddenly felt my body freeze in time, as if the whole world were pausing to take in this moment. Will my kids help take care of this tree? How tall will it become in a year?

"Do you think we should name it?" I blurted out.

Mark shrugged. "Sure, what should we call it?"

I let the hose drop in the garden, and I squatted down to observe the tree up close. Its tiny branches reached like fingers towards me, the leaves fluttering slightly. "What about... Maybe 'Merida?' Like the girl from Brave... Maybe," I looked up at my husband, "maybe she's brave too, to be growing out here, with us?"

"Sounds good to me," Mark replied.

I stood and drew near to him, wrapping my arms around his sturdy torso, surprised and frightened by the fact I was squeezing him tight. "Promise me it'll grow," I said.

Mark's arm slid around my shoulders, and I could hear the smile in his voice when he said, "What else will it do?"

Summer slipped into autumn, and hurricane season began. The sapling had grown a bit, but Merida was still quite vulnerable. I was checking the weather forecast early one October morning to find that heavy storms were forecast that afternoon.

"Mark!" I called.

The sound of rushing water in the bathroom sink stopped. "Yeah?"

"We need to cover Merida! It's going to be stormy later."

"She'll be fine, Kate. She's got good roots by now."

I stared at the colored shapes of the predicted weather. "You sure?"

Mark came out of the bathroom rubbing his clean-shaven jaw. "I'm sure Merida will be fine," he replied, placing a gentle kiss on my head.

I listened to the weather reports on the news all the way to work. I scrutinized the clouds from my office windows all day long. And again, on the way home I listened dubiously to the updated weather reports of severe storms to hit that evening.

"Mark, I want to cover the tree," I repeated over dinner. "The weather is going to be really bad tonight."

He sighed. "Kate, the wind will actually help Merida learn to grow stronger roots. She needs this experience."

"No!" I sat rigid in my chair, spine going cold from fear. "She needs to be protected. I can't have her falling over or getting hurt!"

"Kate, it's just a tree."

"She's *your* tree Mark!"

"And am I worried? No. So why are you?"

"Why *aren't* you?"

"Kate —"

Lightening flickered outside the kitchen windows.

"The tree will be fine," Mark said, then sighed. "Do you trust me?"

I didn't know how to respond to that. I had trusted him through so many other things, and now I couldn't trust him with the well-being of a simple sapling?

"Fine," I mumbled. "We won't cover the tree."

After dinner, I planted myself near the kitchen window that had the best view of Merida. The rain was just starting to trickle down, and thunder rolled in quickly after each flicker of light in the sky.

"Kate, come watch a movie with me. It'll help you not focus on the storm so much."

"No, I want to keep an eye on her."

Mark came and stood beside me. "Why are you so worried about this tree?" He took my hand in his and traced circles over it with his thumb.

"I don't know," I replied. I kept my eyes on the way Merida bent in the gathering wind, but my mind spun in circles with Mark's finger on my hand.

The rain drummed on the roof and windows and sides of the house now. There was a flash of purplish light and a shuddering *crack*. Instinctively my body shrank into Mark's, and he put an arm around me while still caressing my hand.

"She's going to be fine, Kate," he murmured into my ear, and I closed my eyes. More lightning rippled across my closed lids.

"If I fail to take care of this tree, I'll fail to take care of her, too," I finally said. As if aware that she was the topic of conversation, the baby within me squirmed a little, and I stiffened.

"Is she tickling you again?" my husband asked, his breath warming my hair.

I smiled. "Yes, she knows we're talking about her."

"And that's why you're worried about this tree then, huh? You're worried it's a sign?"

"Yes." My eyes prickled.

Mark chuckled and more thunder echoed him outside. "You're going to be just fine, Kate. I promise."

We stayed there together until the storm was over, and then we went to bed.

Autumn slipped into winter, and snow storms replaced thunderstorms. I still watched anxiously from the window as Merida's thin branches collected tiny snow mounds that quickly melted in the afternoon sun. The baby within me was nearly full grown now and kicking to see the world.

Then, she decided it was time. Mark helped me into the car and drove as carefully as he could to the hospital downtown. The following morning, our daughter was born.

We returned home to find fresh snow all over the place, so Mark got me settled inside and then went out to shovel the walkways and driveway. But I wanted to see Merida.

I bundled the baby up in as many layers as I could, then brought her outside to meet the tree. Carefully, I squatted down beside Merida with my daughter in my arms.

“Hi Merida,” I said. “I’d like you to meet your sister, Drew. I’m going to teach her to be brave, just like you.”