WISE OLD OAK

The majestic tree stood proudly in its place, alone and apart, for over two-hundred years.

It had seen Native American tribes, early explorers, pioneers, and other generations come and go, or even stay, here in the bountiful land of central Illinois.

The tree was a white oak. It was eighty-six feet tall, with a girth at the widest part of its trunk of fourteen feet, and a leafy canopy spread of eighty-nine feet. It was home to bird nests, squirrels (especially during its yearly acorn drop), various insects, and even an occasional drilling woodpecker or hoot owl. The old oak had rough, vertical, light ash-gray bark. Its green leaves would turn brown or reddish-brown every autumn and fly away in the swirling winds. The tree's only persistent pests were a scattering of ball-shaped oak galls, produced to protect tiny eggs laid by adult wasps.

The wood of the white oak was highly useful. It was hard, light in color (hence its name), rot-resistant and waterproof -- indeed, it was quite perfect for constructing buildings and making furniture. It was also prized by barrel-makers, because the wood added a special flavor for aging wine and curing Kentucky bourbon.

The white oak was the state tree for Illinois, Connecticut and Maryland. It ranged from eastern Minnesota down to eastern Texas, then all across the eastern United States as far as western Maine and even down to the Deep South. It was a hearty and prolific species.

Our specific tree in question happened to be now situated in the corner of a sixty-four acre farm owned by a balding bachelor farmer named Otis Hummell. Durable and dependable, Otis had been growing feed corn here for more than fifty-one years. His was the last working farm in the immediate area.

Down the road a mile from the farm was the Illinois town of Springer -- population 26, 303. Both the town and the farm were located near busy Interstate 55, the main highway route from Chicago to St. Louis. Springer, IL was currently having a growth spurt, and was expected to continually expand.

Among Springer's residents was the Sylbee family: Trent, a construction company manager; Adele, his wife; and their son Patrick, age 8. They also owned a frisky cocker spaniel named Corky.

Being an only child, Patrick was an independent, contemplative sort. When not in school, he enjoyed exploring the town on his bicycle with his friends, playing games, and building model airplanes. But his favorite solitary activity was reading. Patrick was interested in just about everything to be found in books.

Patrick's special place to read was sitting and resting his back against the trunk of the big white oak tree on the corner of Otis Hummell's farm. He had been granted permission both by the owner and by his parents several months ago. Patrick would either walk over alone or take his bike.

Over time, the old oak became like an old friend.

"Hi, Tree!" the boy cried out whenever he arrived with his latest book. After an hour or two of engrossed reading, Patrick would head back home, always remembering to say, "Bye, Tree...see you later!" He would often give the oak a friendly pat or rub its bark when he left.

The grand white oak had one sturdy branch low enough for Patrick to climb up on or hang from with both of his hands. The tree offered protection from the summer sun with its refreshing shade, and the boy delighted in the Fall when the leaves changed color and fell. Although winter was too cold and snowy to visit the tree, Patrick could see its denuded branches from a distance. Spring would later, of course, bring forth fresh green leaves, warmth, and birdsong, and nature's cycle would be completed.

One Saturday in May, Patrick was back under the tree, reading a book about caterpillars and butterflies. The air sweetly smelled of wildflowers. Farmer Hummell was visibly busy on his tractor in the distance. Then the boy thought he heard a voice.

"Hello, my friend. It is always good to see you," the unknown voice said.

Patrick was startled, seeing as no one was around, after looking in every direction.

"Don't be alarmed. It is only me, the Tree, speaking to you in your mind."

The boy slowly relaxed and asked aloud, "But trees can't talk!" he declared, laughing.

"Not with an ordinary voice like yours, that's true, " the Tree replied. "But trees and all of nature have something to say, if only people would listen," the old oak explained.

The oak went on to tell Patrick many wondrous things during the boy's next three visits.

"We trees, flowers, grasses and other plants have been here long before people appeared. We have kept the cycle of life going, without interruption, for millions of years. We keep our planet healthy, in harmony and balance, along with the other animals on land, in the sea, and in the air.

But mankind is hurting us. Although trees and plants have no nervous system like humans and other animals, we can sense pain and can feel threatened. And what is happening lately makes us very afraid.

Forests are being cut down, the ground beneath us is being cruelly dug up, the air and waters are being polluted, and humans are being foolishly greedy and not thinking about those effects on the future. Man must learn again to work with nature and not against it. Do you understand this, my young friend?"

Patrick said yes. But he was afraid to tell his parents, or his friends, or his teachers what he had experienced at the foot of the wise old oak. They might think he was crazy, he decided. Yet the words he heard in his mind from the Tree began to make perfect sense. One night at home, before going to bed, the boy hugged his dog, Corky, and looked into its brown eyes and said, "I think I understand something very important..."

Over dinner one evening, Patrick heard his father tell his mother that Otis Hummell was selling his farm and was set to retire. The old man was plum worn out and simply had to call it quits, Trent reported.

"But the good news is that the land has been bought by eager developers from Chicago. A huge shopping center will be built, with my local construction company being given the job. It's a bonanza, Adele! We will finally be able to afford to add a swimming pool in our backyard, and to buy that new pick-up truck. The Interstate exit ramps to Springer will be expanded to accommodate the new anticipated flood of traffic too. It's perfect!"

But Patrick was horrified.

"Dad, what will happen to Mr. Hummell's barn and house and corn fields? And what will happen to his big tree?" Patrick gulped.

"Well, son, according to the preliminary plans I've seen, that area will have to be leveled to make room for the new parking lot for all of those eventual shopper's cars," his father replied. "Construction should take about twenty months, I would think, weather permitting of course."

Patrick went quiet and asked no more questions, but inside, he was crushed. This was exactly what the Tree was warning about! he realized. He went out the following day after school on his bicycle to tell the Tree the bad news.

"Oh no...that is not good. You know, not all change is progress, my young friend. I have been here for a very long time, and have seen many things. It is truly sad that I will have to witness my own destruction," the Tree remarked.

Farmer Hummell was allowed to harvest his last feed corn crop that autumn. A huge billboard was then erected on what had long been his land: Coming soon! The all-new Springer Fields Shopping Mall. Construction beginning next Spring!

Patrick went to visit Otis a final time, to thank the old man for letting him visit the white oak tree. Mr. Hummell explained to the boy that all of the furniture and appliances in his house, as well as all of his farming tools and equipment, would be sold at a big Estate Sale in March. His beloved empty home would next be jacked up intact and carefully moved into town, re-rooted, and then sold to a waiting family.

"I'm sure going to miss this place, Patrick. All of those hard but wonderful years I've spent here are chock full of memories. Thunderstorms, snow blizzards, drought, even a few tornadoes too -- I've survived them all. But I have a brother in Billings, Montana, where I'm going to move and live out my days. I'm afraid it's just how life happens, boy," Otis pulled a red handkerchief out of a pocket of his faded denim bib overalls and dabbed his eyes before blowing his nose. "Well, thanks for coming, Patrick." He shyly smiled and reached out to tousle the lad's brown hair. "You be a good boy now, you hear?"

Spring came in, any remaining snow had melted, and the ground had dried out enough for Trent Sylbee's construction company to begin its massive building project.

Patrick had visited the Tree as often as he could over the past few months. Earlier, in October, he had collected a fistful of acorns from his favorite tree as a memento before the squirrels gobbled all of them up. Now came the emotional time for one last encounter.

"I will miss you, my young friend. Try to remember everything I have told you. Don't worry or be sad about my being gone. Other trees in other places will somehow continue. But one day, if man doesn't learn the right way to live and share this world with nature, every one of his once proud cities will vanish over time and the Earth will return to being untamed and without people.

Lastly, I must give you a final warning: tell your father again -- plead with him, if you have to -- and say that he must not be around when they cut me down. If he does, something tragic will happen. You must believe me. Farewell now, my loyal and loving friend..."

The wise old oak went silent. Patrick, overcome with new emotions, hugged its rough, light ash-gray bark and wept. He slowly walked home, heartbroken.

But he was disturbed by the Tree's warning about his father. He decided to break his secret, and tell about his interactions with the stately white oak, and reveal everything that he heard and learned to his father -- even the ominous final warning.

"Well, Patrick, that was certainly an imaginative story that you just told me. But it could never happen in real life. You probably got the idea from reading one of your books. Look, son...I'm sorry that the tree you like so much has to be cut down. The architect's plan for the shopping mall cannot be altered to save it. We can chop up and save the white oak's wood for firewood if you want, but I'm afraid that's all that can be done."

When the hot days of the Illinois summer arrived, the Hummell's barn was finished being demolished, and his farmhouse had been moved off site. Heavy earth-moving equipment moved in, leveling the land for building construction and the eventual parking lot and its paving. The last thing to do was to sacrifice the old oak to the chainsaw, then excavate and cut out its deep remaining stump. Patrick couldn't bear to watch his old tree friend be dismembered and collapse, so he stayed in his room at home, petting Corky in his lap, on that fateful day. He clutched the white oak's acorns in his fist, though, vowing to plant them somewhere secret so the life and spirit of the great tree would grow and live again.

Trent Sylbee was wearing his hardhat as always at the construction site on an already warm and cloudless Monday morning. His crew of arborists were busy climbing up the great tree and tethering themselves for safety, then hoisting up their chainsaws on thick ropes to begin cutting away at the crown of the white oak. They would work their way down from there, cutting away branch after branch, lastly attacking the thick trunk.

As he was supervising the dismemberment of the historic white oak, however, a brittle 250-pound tree limb suddenly cracked off the main trunk and, hurling downward, struck a surprised Trent squarely on his head.

The errant wood portion snapped the man's neck like a dry branch, killing him instantly...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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