

I lie on the soft, green summer grass and stare up at the tree. Sunlight peeks through its branches, and the wind rustles its leaves creating an ocean song. My hair lies in knots around my head, my feet are bare, and my eyes are opened. The tree's shadow wraps around me, promising to never let go. Its branches spread wide, with leaves glistening of dew. I could stay here forever. For once, the moment is perfect. I feel free and safe.

The once clear sky turns dark. My vision becomes clouded as the leaves begin to whip through me like blades. The wind shrieks in agony and the tree trembles. I urge myself to move... run. My body clings to the ground. I will myself to sit up, but the once soft green grass grows into thorns and wraps around my arms and feet like chains. The thorns dig into my skin like daggers. My throat closes and I cannot scream. The world around me turns upside down.

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The tree stands bare. Its branches begin to grow and morph into images from the past. My breath catches. The wind screams names into my ear. People I have lost and nearly forgotten. The past comes back and hits me with a wave of emotion and pain, unbearable pain. I can't breathe.

My home. My beautiful home. Gone. The tree's branches tell the story. Images flash through my brain. My family. My home. My life. Gone. Memories I had locked away come flooding back. My homework sits on my desk untouched. My blinds are closed with sunlight shining through the small openings, casting shadows on the wall. I lie on my unmade bed exhausted from the day. I clutch my teddy bear to my chest and try to keep my eyes opened. I stare up at the ceiling and see a shadow in the shape of a tree. Its branches cover most of the ceiling creating the perfect picture.

I imagine myself outside on a beautiful day with a blue sky like an ocean above. My eyes begin to water, and the blue sky transforms into a cloudy monster. For the tree on the ceiling had disappeared, hidden by the smoke in my room. Smoke!

I bolt upward. My breaths become coughs and my eyes are raining with tears. I stagger out of my bedroom gasping for breath. I treasure every ounce of oxygen that successfully enters my lungs. My knees feel weak and my head heavy as I stumble down the stairs.

"Mom! Dad! Matt!" I croak.

No response. I enter the kitchen and see Mom collapsed on the floor. I race to her.

"Mom! Mom! Are you okay?"

She doesn't respond.

"Mom! Wake up! Wake up!"

I shake her gently and then violently.

"Mom! Mom!"

The smoke is everywhere now. I press my hands on her heart feeling for a beat. Nothing. I check her pulse. Nothing. Her breath. Nothing. My heart stops. She's not dead. My Mother is NOT dead.

"MOM! Wake up!" I scream.

No answer.

My mom who was always by my side. Who always fought my wars and ended my wars. My mom, my biggest fan. Gone. The one person that would take me shopping and do my hair pretty like a Princess. Tuck me in at night and say my prayers. Drive me to school and everywhere else I needed to be. Gone. She would never see me graduate or grow up or get married. She was gone forever. I scream.

Death has come. He has stretched his malevolent claws toward my mother and taken her. Forever. I scream. Louder than I have ever screamed before. But nobody hears me. Death only hears me. Death. I could die right here with my beloved Mother. I could be reunited. I'm about to let go when dad comes into view and snaps me out of it.

"Mom," I whisper.

He nods understanding and holds back tears that I know are threatening to overpower.

"Run to the front door and get out of here!" He yells.

"What about Mattie?" I scream through tears.

"He'll be out after you. Go!"

I spin around and race to the front door. Things fall and fire crackles around me." The smoke fills my lungs and I choke. I push myself forward. Almost there.

The door comes to view and so does my Mom's face. Gone forever. I lock it away and focus on the task in front of me. The door.

I grab the door knob and muffle a cry. I pull my hand back. The door is radiated with heat. Debris lies around me and more threaten to fall. I have to get this door opened. It has to be opened by the time Daddy and Mattie get here.

I kick the door as hard as I can. Nothing happens. I channel all my fear and loss and kick again and again and again. The door breaks away.

Outside firefighters spray water at the illuminated house. Others try to get in through the windows, but debris prevents them. Spectators line the street, their faces plastered with mocking remorse. I crawl through the doorway. A fireman sees me and gestures others toward me. I turn around dizzy and choking for breath. My vision blurs, but I see Mattie and Daddy through

opening in the door.

The house trembles and my heart begins to beat faster. They need to get out fast.

"Hurry!" I scream.

Mattie appears at the doorway his face covered in ash and soaked with tears. I reach toward him. My fingers brush his. I see Daddy behind him. A fireman throws me back and the connection is lost.

The house collapses and explodes.

My heart is ripped from my chest.

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Countless nights after, I wake screaming, constantly replaying the horrific events. I clutch my pillow and scream into it. Tears flood my eyes promising to never stop. I have to live with a gaping hole in my chest that I continually find myself wrapping my arms around to keep hidden. A horrid beast has befriended me, constantly whispering in my ear, reminding me of what I could of done. I could of went back. I could of died with them. I could of saved them. My life has become one melancholy cloud, that refuses to accept the good things life has to offer.

I wake screaming again. I have moved to countless relatives and schools by now, but I still have the same alarming dreams. It's been three years and I'm still the withered tree struggling for light under the magnificent one. I have to shut it off. If I don't the darkness will devour me like a lion and know one will know I'm gone because they were focused on the magnificent tree. The good. Not the depressing in the shadows the good. I shut it off.

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The tree's branches flourish and it's leaves prosper. For the tree has once again returned to its

magnificent glory. The vines around my arms and legs have disappeared leaving no mark on my wrinkled skin. The sky shines bright and the wing returns to its peaceful hum. The birds sing a summer tune, and I know that perfect day has returned.

I close my eyes and slowly open them. The tree is replaced with the shadow in my room moments before the fire. I blink again and it's gone.

I have never thought about the fire after I turned it off thirty years ago. The painful memories I couldn't bare almost forgotten. I regret locking them away because I also locked a significant part of my life away. I lived a half full life without them when I could've lived a full life with them. I could've remembered them even though they always had a place in my heart.

In these last few moments their place in my heart has resurfaced. I stare up at the magnificent tree, the tree of life, and I'm happy that it's the last thing I see.