

The Old Tree

By Sam Neno

Heading north on Auburn Road is an S-curve. On the northern most curve used to stand a great old tree that cars crashed into regularly. The owners of the property, the Gordons, finally tired of seeing cars crash into the tree, so they called upon the Felches, professional tree removers.

When Old Tom Felch and his son, Jeffrey, came with their ladders, ropes, and chainsaws early the next day, May Gordon called to her two sons, Will and Able, to run out to the barn and tell their father that the tree removers had arrived. The two boys, all of ten and eleven, raced to the barn. Will, the elder, won the race, but Able, the louder of the two, did the talking. Their father, Saul, told the boys to tell their mother that he wasn't going to come out of the barn to supervise two professionals to do what he'd paid them to do.

The boys duly delivered their message to their mother, who asked Able to go to the foot of the stairs and holler up to their older sister, Julie, to quit studying—she was attending TC3 to become a nurse—and watch the fellows take down the tree so if they needed a hand, she could see that they got it.

Julie, a tall, athletic sort, was outside in a minute and watched as the two men hoisted a ladder up into the tree.

"So you're going to climb up there and cut the top off?" she asked them.

Jeffrey said that was exactly what they were going to do, and then he climbed up the ladder with a saw and began cutting off limbs. One of them hit the ladder as it dropped. "Yiee!" he hollered, dropping the saw, and grabbing onto the ladder with both hands.

"That's not what you're supposed to do, is it?" Julie asked.

At lunchtime when they sat on the tailgate of their truck eating liverwurst sandwiches, Old Tom said to Jeff, "I never thought it would happen."

"What's that?"

"You've taken a shine to that girl."

"Yeah, right." Of course, nothing more happened that day because Julie had to go

off to her English composition class. When she came home that night, the tree was gone, with nothing but a lot of sawdust around its broad white stump.

"Sure made a lot of sawdust," her mother muttered as the family walked around it.

"Nothing to run into now," Saul said.

Julie found a wrench in the sawdust and shook her head. "No, they'll just tear up the yard now, Dad." She asked where the Felches lived, and her father told her.

"I'll drop this off," she said and a moment later was roaring up to Genoa in her little Nissan.

Old Tom greeted her at his door and thanked her for bringing the wrench. "But it's not mine," he said. "It's Jeff's. He lives in East Genoa, over by Cullen's hardware. He'll find himself handicapped tomorrow without it."

Julie got into her car, muttering to herself. "Why didn't I just leave it on the ground? He probably has three others just like it." She backed out into the road, fully planning to head home, but the thought came that if she didn't return the wrench the whole county would know. She didn't want people to think her a thief, so she drove to East Genoa, where Jeff was living with elderly Mrs. Edsel. He helped her out in exchange for room and board.

When Jeff came to the door, Julie explained why she'd come.

"Not everyone would have returned my wrench," he said. "Most folks would have left it there."

She said she didn't need it banging up her family's lawn mower.

"No, I don't suppose that would do the mower any good." Jeff beckoned her inside to have some soda with him and Mrs. Edsel. "She just made chocolate cookies," he said.

So Julie and Jeff had their first date that night, watching television, drinking orange soda, and eating chocolate cookies. When Jeff proposed two months later on the stump of the old tree, Julie accepted, but only after he carved their initials into the stump. You can still find their initials there today.

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