

The Cottonwood Tree

A cottonwood tree, deeply furrowed, stood watch over a small white house, well-kept garden, and bright red barn, all of which anchored one hundred acres of lonesome farmland. The picture-perfect setting belied profound sorrow, which descended like thick fog when the lilacs were in bloom and remained for the blossoming of the daisies.

In the distance, two heads bobbed up and down amongst neat rows of compact potato plants. The brothers, shirts stained with sweat, paused to guzzle from army surplus canteens.

Rugged mountains to the north, misty and splashed with a palette of blue and green, took pity on the boys and exhaled. The cool breeze traveled down a scree strewn ravine, wound through a basalt rimmed canyon and surfaced like rainbow trout on the valley floor.

The oldest, Danny, was the first to hear the rattle of the cottonwood's leaves. He stood and let the wind caress his somber face and tousle his wavy, blonde hair. In the distance, a dust devil took shape and pirouetted around the immense tree.

“Jimmy, look over there. Do you see that?” Danny asked.

Struggling with a stubborn thistle, the younger boy, grateful for the distraction, replied, “Holy smokes, that’s a big one alright!”

“Rats, I think it’s spinning backwards,” Danny groaned.

“So?”

“Jose says it’s bad luck.”

A toothless old man from a village outside Juarez, Jose helped their father with odd jobs. Sometimes, before the boys’ bedtime, he spun ghostly tales of evil spirits that haunted a desert plateau above his town. Danny would listen, spellbound.

“He’s pulling your leg, Danny,” Jimmy explained. “A dust devil is nothing but a harmless vortex which forms when warm air rises through cool. The dust inside spins according to the wind’s direction.”

Danny turned to study his little brother. “Where’d you learn that, professor?”

“In a science book Miss Kathy loaned me for the summer.”

She was the boys’ schoolteacher. Jimmy, just ten years old, had bested even the older kids with words like *disoriented*, *lugubrious*, and finally, *dysmorphia*, at their spring spelling bee. Miss Kathy was astounded by her star pupil, but vexed too, since finding assignments to challenge the boy was a constant problem.

“Any chance that book can do something useful?” Danny asked, as he pulled thorns from his gloves.

“Like what?”

“Like help us build a machine to pry these prickly weeds from the ground?”

“Then what would you grouse about?”

“Your big mouth, for starters.”

The boys sized each other up, paused, and exploded with laughter. Before long, both rolled on the ground and giggled.

“Alright, we’d best get back to work. Otherwise, a devil of a different sort is gonna skin us alive,” Danny said, as he slapped dust from his clothes.

Imitating skittish quail that paraded in single file around the farm, the boys took a quick look over their shoulders. Thankfully, their father was nowhere in sight. However, like a tire that’s encountered a sharp nail, Danny’s slender frame sagged. Startled by his brother’s reaction, Jimmy considered the horizon, interrupted only by the cottonwood tree. The smaller boy instantly understood, and his big heart deflated, too. Jimmy reached out, hoping to comfort Danny, but then thought better of the gesture and concealed his hand instead.

“Mom’s making buttermilk biscuits for supper. How bout whoever finishes first gets the other’s share?” Jimmy suggested. It was a tactic their mother often used to divert her husband, David, from his worst impulses. Danny, familiar with the game, flicked up the brim of the boy’s straw hat to reveal a pale, freckled face and curly red hair.

“You’re on,” he replied. Danny always ran too slowly or struck out at bat so he could witness the pure joy on his brother’s face. If their father disapproved, he only shrugged, as if to say, “What can I tell you, I did my best.”

With broad shoulders and intense blue eyes set in a face made of stone, David seemed taller than their mother’s measuring stick suggested. He was prone to fits of anger and had no qualms with corporal punishment.

Hidden within the tree’s heart-shaped leaves, the brothers often talked of being grown-ups. Danny dreamed of becoming a fighter pilot, strafing enemy planes, or a stuntman like Buster Keaton. Jimmy pictured himself a slide-rule-carrying engineer, who built dams and bridges, or the first mathematician to solve the greatest problems of all time. They spit into their hands, shook, and promised to be kinder fathers when they had children of their own.

Newspaper headlines at the time were bleak. One in four Americans was out of work, and many of these poor souls lived on the streets. Under the circumstances, the cottonwood, which

shaded twenty square yards of arable land and guzzled from the canal, seemed to David like one more freeloading thistle.

“Good climbing trees are scarce as cool springs in this godforsaken desert, and one sourpuss around this place is one too many,” Alice often grumbled. So, each time her husband threatened to fetch his axe, she plied him with his favorite strawberry-rhubarb pie, and even sweeter desserts after bedtime.

Being a capable farmer, David had no need for additional land. He rotated his crops annually and idled a quarter of their acreage every year. The practice maximized his farm’s production and preserved their precious soil at a time when other farmers watched their own brown gold get carried off by a relentless wind.

In the spring of 1932, despite no letup in the Depression, David gave half his fields to the north a well-earned rest. So, the brothers spent more time on the other side of the canal. To get there, they treaded east to a lonesome country road, walked a few hundred yards, and crossed over a rickety bridge.

“If we keep at this, we’ll wear a path deeper than that old road,” Danny would complain.

Overgrown with knee high grass and wild roses, the Oregon Trail was two farms distant. The boys trekked its yawning ruts, on the lookout for odds and ends the travelers had lost or

discarded. Sometimes they stopped to skip smooth stones across a meandering river which ran silver with salmon in the heat of summer.

When he was in a rare, good mood and the workload was light, David took the boys fishing. He always carried his most cherished possession—an antique fourteen-foot fly rod made of ironwood. The pole sported his father’s initials.

Danny, a born angler, typically caught the most. At only twelve years of age, he could cast into the farthest pools where the biggest fish congregated, safe, they thought, from other anglers on the sandy shore.

Alice, a fair skinned, auburn-haired beauty with sparkling eyes and a stout but gentle heart, encouraged their outings. “You can’t work these children to death, David,” she’d lecture her husband.

Boise’s annual Independence Day fireworks were a tradition, as was the Christmas parade followed by hot chocolate topped with thick whipped cream at a local cafe. Years earlier, David surprised Danny and took him to see Charles Lindbergh, who made a pit stop at Boise’s fledging airport to celebrate his record setting transatlantic flight. *The Spirit of St. Louis* and the aviator’s firm handshake made Danny’s spirits soar and his mind race. He lay awake for nights on end and contemplated how he too might someday master the skies.

That winter, with Jimmy's help, Danny made his dream a reality. He attached canvas wings to his bicycle and christened it *Sparrowhawk*. On a crystal-clear morning, as the sun glinted off powdery new fallen snow, Danny flung open the doors to the hayloft, climbed aboard, and pedaled like mad. Jimmy, who stood a safe distance below, watched his brother shoot from the barn and yell at the top of his lungs, "Geronimo!"

Danny's flying contraption plunged to the ground with a loud thud. The deep snow and soft pillows (Jimmy's idea) tied to the handlebars saved a costly visit to the doctor's office that would have put the cottonwood on notice again.

With an IQ of 160, Jimmy would have flourished anywhere, except on a farm, where endurance and brawn were required for hog slopping, cow milking, and weed pulling. Small for his age, Jimmy often struggled to complete his chores. Danny lent the boy a hand. He never once complained, not even later, while he did most of the cooking and cleaning during their mother's prolonged illness. Jimmy was Danny's best friend and enthusiastic collaborator on exploits he forever dreamed up, and which always profited from his little brother's supernatural intellect.

The rope swing was Jimmy's idea. Danny wanted to build a boat to ferry them from one side of the canal to the other. He sized up the hog trough, but abandoned the idea, since their father would notice its absence. Out of ideas, Danny enlisted Jimmy's help. It was Sunday afternoon in the middle of May. Their parents were captivated by an episode of *Amos n' Andy*, which squawked over a secondhand, walnut encased RCA radio they displayed proudly on the mantle. So, the boys stole away to inventory the contents of their barn.

Jimmy, who'd read stories of the *Titanic*'s tragic demise, was intent on making their boat watertight. He shuddered at the thought of being in the same predicament as the ship's doomed passengers, and without even the life preservers they'd worn.

As he surveyed the barn, Jimmy clutched a rope which hung from the rafters. Feeling its texture and reminded of the cottonwood's rough bark, Jimmy exclaimed, "I've got it!"

"Got what?"

"We'll attach this rope to that long branch, which spans the ditch and swing from one side to the other!"

"Like Tarzan!" Danny exclaimed.

While Jimmy preferred to read science, math, and history books, Danny's nose buried itself in adventures like *Robinson Crusoe*, *Treasure Island*, and his most beloved book of all, *Tarzan*. Their school had only the first in the series, so he read the tome over and over until its tattered pages barely clung to the binding.

Wasting no time, Danny scampered up to the hayloft and navigated the rafters. The rope soon landed in a pile at Jimmy's feet.

“It was your idea Jimmy, you should have the first go,” Danny magnanimously offered, after he’d secured the rope to a sturdy branch.

Jimmy, who chewed on the inside of his mouth, handed the rope back to his brother. “No, the lord of the jungle had best show me how to do this. In case you’ve forgotten, I can’t swim.”

Danny, who grinned like a boy about to take his first rollercoaster ride, required no more encouragement. He climbed into the tree’s crook and readied himself. Ready to let go, Jimmy blocked his way.

“Change your mind?” Danny asked, surprised.

“No, I’ve got another idea. Let’s tie a double knot to the bottom of the rope so we can secure our feet.”

“A trick from one of your books?”

“More like common sense, actually.”

“Whatever,” Danny replied with an exaggerated eye roll.

After he'd tied a sturdy double knot to the bottom of the rope, Danny climbed back into the tree's crook, pulled tight, and said, "Here goes nothing!"

The older boy sailed through the air like his loincloth'd hero and skidded to a stop on the other side. Jimmy gave a loud whoop. "That was a rush! Now you try it," Danny yelled after he'd sent the rope back across.

Jimmy situated himself in the tree, shut his eyes, counted to three, and lifted his feet. The boy, hair thrown back, imagined himself a majestic bald eagle as he swooped down from on high, skimmed the canal's surface, and rocketed skyward again.

Opening his eyes, Jimmy wished he were a duck or penguin instead.

Danny lunged for his brother; hands outstretched. Jimmy, though, swung back the other way, until, like a pendulum, he came to a stop, and dangled over the canal, its sun-dappled water only inches below his small bare feet. While but fourteen feet separated the brothers, the distance felt like a mile. "Got any brainy ideas, Jimmy?" Danny shouted to be heard over the rushing water.

Eyeing their barn in the distance, the boy replied, "Yeah, but you won't like it."

"Well, Mom and Dad won't like you drowning either, so let's hear this idea of yours."

“By my estimation, Dad’s fishing rod is long enough to reach me. You could fetch it and pull me over.”

Danny groaned. “Dad will beat us senseless if he finds out we touched that precious rod of his. Besides, can you hold on that long?”

“I can’t say for sure, but the more we wag our tongues, the chances only get slimmer.”

With no better ideas of his own, Danny took a deep breath and sped off in the barn’s direction. “Alright, hold on,” he yelled over his shoulder.

“As if I have a choice in the matter,” Jimmy grumbled. He realized that despite his best efforts, he was in the same abysmal straits as the *Titanic*’s terrified passengers who’d peered down at the freezing, black waters of the Atlantic and wondered when help would come.

Despite having watched his parents slaughter their farm animals, Jimmy had never considered his own mortality. Local kids had lost their fingers and even hands in accidents, but no one had perished, at least none he knew. Jimmy was confident their Sunday school stories with an ark, parted sea, and resurrection were mostly hogwash. But now, under the circumstances, he hoped there was a little truth to them, no matter how small.

After what seemed like an eternity to Jimmy, Danny emerged from the barn. He looked like Robinson Crusoe being pursued by an angry horde of bloodthirsty cannibals.

As he struggled to hold on, Jimmy screamed, “Hurry, Danny!”

The older boy shifted into a higher gear. Dust trailed him.

Jimmy, who slipped on and off the rope, felt his overalls become waterlogged. His trembling hands could barely hold on. After a while, it was too much. He plunged below the surface and popped back up like a corked bottle.

Danny decided he needed a new plan, and fast. He eyed the distance to Jimmy and hit the brakes. Fortuitously, the line still had a fly attached. Wasting no time, Danny sent the streamer soaring toward his brother.

Jimmy, who felt the hand of God reach out and grab him, decided there was some truth to their Sunday school stories, after all.

Fearing the rod would break, Danny jogged alongside the canal and reeled his brother in. Once the boy was in spitting distance, he yelled, “Grab hold of the rod, Jimmy!” The boy lunged, and the ironwood, despite its name, yielded. To Danny, the sound was like the crack of a whip. His right hand was thrown back. He looked up and where the top half of the fishing rod had once been, Danny saw only clear blue sky. Fortunately, his other hand gripped Jimmy’s overalls. Danny used his last few ounces of strength to pull Jimmy onto the bank and then collapsed down beside him.

After he coughed up what seemed like a quart of water, Jimmy lifted his head, turned, and looked at Danny in awe. “I thought I was a goner. How’d you hook me?”

“Just lucky, I suppose,” Danny frowned, as he studied the broken remains of their father’s rod.

“We’re gonna be in a heap of trouble when Dad finds out,” Jimmy muttered.

“You can say that again.”

Seeing the sun low on the horizon, Danny added, “And now we’re late for supper, too.” Like condemned men getting ready for their last meal, the boys rose to their feet and trudged toward home. While its windows glowed in the dusky remains of the day, the image offered no solace.

Hearing Jimmy’s teeth chatter, Danny put a warm arm around his brother’s shoulder. Overhead, a red tail hawk circled on convection currents. Hearing the bird’s shrill cry, both boys looked up. Danny envied the raptor’s carefree life. Jimmy, reminded of his feathery imagining as he sailed across the canal, shivered even more.

Danny opened the door and stepped softly into the mudroom next to the kitchen. Jimmy followed close behind. Attuned to the sound of her boys, Alice said, “Well, decided to come home, did you? And just in time for supper. Now, isn’t that a coincidence?”

The aroma of fried chicken and freshly baked bread was intoxicating. Famished, the boys’ noses led them to the kitchen where they were greeted by their mother, red hair in a smart bob, smudges of flour on her face. Danny noticed something else—Alice was exhausted, her countenance drawn, as if she too had just run a race against time. Danny worried their latest mischief would only fatigue her more.

“What in God’s name happened to you, Jimmy?” Alice asked.

The precocious boy, seldom at a loss for words, was tongue tied. Danny did his best to sound blasé. “Jimmy fell into the canal. But he’s okay, just wet is all.”

Alice’s eyes opened wide as the apples she’d been slicing. “He’s more than a little wet, looks like a drowned kitten! I’ve warned you both to be careful around that treacherous canal.”

The brothers grimaced, looked down at the kitchen’s weathered hardwood floor, buried dirty hands in their pockets, and shuffled grimy feet.

“Lord, how these boys test my faith,” Alice muttered, as she shook her head. “Jimmy, get into dry clothes before you catch a cold. Danny, you stay right here.”

Danny watched his brother slink away. Alice crossed her arms. “What’s that behind your back?”

Danny showed his mother the broken rod.

“Please tell me it’s not your father’s.”

“He’s gonna kill me.”

“How on earth did you break it?”

“Hoping to make the south fields more quickly, we strung a rope over the canal. Jimmy fell in and I fished him out.”

“What do you mean by *fished* him out?” Alice asked, puzzled.

“Jimmy was floating away, so I cast a line, caught hold of his overalls and reeled him in.”

“So, you *literally* fished your brother out of that canal?” Alice asked, incredulous.

“Yes, Ma’am, and Dad’s rod broke,” Danny said, eyes downcast.

Alice suppressed a smile. “Okay, off you go now, cleanup for dinner, but you’ll need to sing for your supper tonight, Danny boy.”

As he washed his face and hands, Danny considered his defense strategy. Had his plan succeeded, they’d have spent more time working and less time walking. Didn’t Dad always say a penny saved was a penny earned? And sure, the idea was a bust, but wasn’t his brother’s life worth the price of one old fishing rod?

Looking in the mirror, Danny’s hopeful face transformed into that of a half-eaten apple left to rot in the midday sun. Dad’s going to chew me up and spit me out, he thought.

After she said grace, Alice considered her oldest. “Danny, you ready to explain what happened today?”

David, lost in thought, looked up and peered over his reading glasses.

Danny told their story in a monotone, head bowed, like when he’d been called on to recite a sappy poem in class. He saved the broken fishing rod for last and took the blame. As their father listened, David’s face progressed from curiosity to disappointment, and finally, fury.

“Jimmy, is this true?” David asked, fuming.

Glancing sidelong at his father, the boy swallowed hard. “Danny’s covering for me, sir. The rope and the fishing rod were my ideas, not his. And were it not for Danny, I’d be fish food right about now.”

David let out a heavy sigh, appraised his boys, and tapped his index finger on the hard oak supper table. Danny was reminded of the clock on a time bomb...tick... tick... tick...like he’d once heard on a scary radio show. The wait was so long, the tension so palpable, the brothers were actually thankful when their father cleared his throat.

“I appreciate your honesty, boys. Still, I don’t think you fully understand what a stupid stunt you pulled. Danny, this was clearly another one of your harebrained ideas. Until now, your adventures, or shall I say, ‘misadventures,’ have been yours and yours alone, so at your mother’s urging, and against my better judgment, I’ve turned a blind eye. But today you almost got your brother killed. What do you have to say for yourself, son?”

Danny’s face grew hot. He threw himself on the mercy of the court. “Sir, I couldn’t be more sorry for everything that happened today. Jimmy, his wet clothes, your rod. I’ll never do anything like this again, cross my heart.”

David, who harbored a deep reservoir of doubt, grumbled, “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Danny.”

The grandfather clock in the parlor struck eight, its baritone chimes echoed throughout the house. The boys practically jumped from their seats.

“Now, where are the remains of my fishing rod?”

Danny gently handed the broken rod to his father, who studied the fragments. As he caressed the polished wood, David’s mind was drawn back to a time when fathers left home to cheering crowds and bands playing “Yankee Doodle Dandy,” and returned to three-gun salutes and a lone bugler playing “Taps.” Grief flashed across his face. He glanced at Alice, who offered her husband a tender look.

David pressed his meaty, calloused hands to the table, stood and said, “Danny, you and your brother will go without supper tonight. Follow me, son.”

With a look of resignation, Danny trailed his father outside.

The boy’s ears registered the rod’s swish first. While he’d been beaten before, Danny finally understood what their plow horses endured. He counted fifteen blows, wincing at first, then grimacing, and finally squeezing his eyes shut. Despite the agony, Danny held his tears in check. He couldn’t bear to give his father the satisfaction.

More tired than appeased, David flung his broken rod to the ground. “Go on, get to bed now, Danny. Tomorrow we’ll turn that old nuisance into kindling.”

Assuming his punishment would begin and end with the whipping, Danny looked up at his father, shocked. The cottonwood was more than a place of refuge. It took hold of their dreams and extended them skyward.

David locked his black eyes on the cottonwood, as its long, craggy branches swayed in a gentle breeze, and commanded, “Not a word, if you know what’s good for you, Danny.”

The next morning, Danny handed a pail of warm milk to his mother, who plucked feathers from a chicken. Seeing the glum look on her son’s face, Alice sighed. “I tried my best, Danny. I’ve got to say though, a part of me agrees with your father this time. I was up half the night tossing and turning, imagining what might have happened were it not for that remarkable cast of yours.”

Unbeknownst to them, Jimmy was eavesdropping in the next room, horrified.

As he dragged his feet in the cottonwood’s direction, Danny thought he saw the tree’s limbs tremble. The imagining put a lump in his throat.

Hearing his son approach, David offered an axe. “We’ll alternate swinging.”

As they positioned themselves, Danny spied Jimmy, who ran toward them. Oblivious, David raised his axe like a Louisville Slugger and said, “Come on son, we haven’t got all day.”

“Dad, stopppppp!”

David frowned and shook his head. “Ignore your brother, Danny.”

The older boy readied his axe, too. “

Danny, hold on, will you?” Jimmy shouted.

David grimaced and turned to confront his youngest, who pulled up too winded to speak.

Using his axe as a pointer, David said, “Jimmy, I have no idea why, but you boys have an unhealthy fixation on this tree. One that almost sent you to a watery grave. Now, you’ve got two choices. Go home or help us chop it down. What’s it gonna be?”

As he gulped for air, Jimmy implored, “Dad, I saw the hurt on your face last night. We couldn’t feel worse. But don’t you see? This tree means to us what that rod did to you. We’ve been climbing it since, well, since we could climb. It’s where we dream of going places, seeing things after we graduate. Please don’t cut her down.”

David, who'd assumed his boys would stay on after high school, was far from moved. In fact, Jimmy's plea for clemency only strengthened his resolve. "Jimmy, either lend a hand or get out of the way. Choice is yours."

The boy crossed his arms and pursed his lips.

David turned around and commanded, "Danny, how about a little less dreaming and a little more working for a change?"

Then, to both boys' surprise, their father did something out of character. He addressed the cottonwood. "I should have done this when you were but a sapling. Would have been a whole lot easier on the both of us."

Whether from a gust of wind or a settling of the earth, the boys couldn't say, but from somewhere inside its multi-ringed girth, the cottonwood replied with a deep, agonized groan. Even David was surprised.

Jimmy seized the opportunity and stepped between his father and the tree. Danny couldn't believe his eyes. David saw red splotches on his own. "I don't know what's gotten into you, Jimmy, but you're asking for a whipping, too. Get out of the way, God damn it!"

Their father had never taken the Lord's name in vain. Alarmed, the boys stepped back.

Hoping to protect his brother from the punishment he'd endured, Danny offered a compromise. "Jimmy, there are plenty of good climbing trees down by the river. We'll find an even better one tomorrow. Please, do what Dad says and go on back home, okay?"

Jimmy's face fell. Rebellious against their father was one of the bravest things he'd ever done. Going against his big brother, however, was out of the question. The morose boy studied the ground for a few moments, kicked at a few pebbles, and finally turned in the direction of home.

Danny exhaled. David, fuming mad, took hold of his axe and swung. Jimmy, oblivious, spun back around and reached out as if to protect the tree. "Wait, I've got an idea..." His thought stopped there because the axe hit its mark.

Everything happened so fast. The swing of the axe, the terrible sound of Jimmy's screams, bloodstains on the boy's blue overalls, a small thumb on the ground, white bone, pink tendons on display. Danny watched David let go of the axe, tear off his shirt, and wrap Jimmy's hand in the white cotton fabric.

Fighting off panic as best he could, their father yelled, "Danny, get over here! Put pressure on your brother's hand like this, see? I'm going for the Ford."

Moving in what seemed like slow motion, the older boy did as he'd been instructed. Jimmy slumped to the ground and vomited. Danny dropped beside him.

Feeling the need to say something, anything, Danny whispered, “Everything’s going to be okay; I promise, Jimmy.”

Recalling their father’s words from the night before, Jimmy whispered, “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Danny.”

As Danny cradled his little brother, the cottonwood reached out, wrapped its branches around both brothers, and held them in a warm, comforting embrace.

The cottonwood survived that day and many more, until almost seventy years later, a noisy bulldozer, coughing black smoke, sent the tree crashing to the ground with a boom that echoed for miles around.

The brothers made a pilgrimage to the cottonwood annually to mark their mother’s birthday. They would have honored her passing instead, but the memory of Alice as she bled to death from colon cancer, when they were boys, hurt too much.

Danny and Jimmy preferred to remember Alice as she’d once been—vivacious, quick with kind words and a sympathetic hug. By scattering her ashes around the tree, they made the cottonwood a memorial to the mother they loved.

Every year, like rising flood water, housing developments encroached. Still, the tree endured until the summer of 2002.

The brothers pulled up in a rented white Ford Taurus. To their dismay, where the cottonwood had once stood tall and proud, a cookie-cutter home was under construction by the Crenshaw Brothers. Off to the side was a pile of dirt and rock. The mound no doubt harbored their mother's remains.

As he considered the house, Jimmy muttered, "Looks like that old bastard finally got his wish."

Danny sighed.

"I don't know, Jimmy. He could have felled the tree after Mom passed. There was nothing standing in his way."

"Why do you suppose he didn't?"

"Seeing into Dad's heart was like peering into dark storm clouds. But, if I had to guess, I'd say he worried Mom was watching."

Jimmy nodded. "I hope she was. Can you imagine the smile on her face as you soared over Europe?"

“Hell, that’s nothing compared to those dams and bridges you built. Never expected to see my little brother profiled in Time Magazine.”

“Yeah, if only Mom...” Jimmy’s voice trailed off.

As they remembered their mother, the brothers, gray and stooped, who stood amongst the construction workers’ discarded candy wrappers and crumpled pop cans, grabbed hold of each other and wept. They cried not just for the cottonwood and the woman they adored, but for the innocent children they’d once been, and for a time long ago when a tree, on the edge of an irrigation canal, was a safe place for dreaming.