

Two Trees

That old maple tree leans and curves now like a giant C in the front yard, but it survived the storm. Two weeks of snow and freezing rain had nearly crushed the thing, and when we awoke one morning and discovered that the partial thaw the day before had resulted in sheets of ice forming around every branch, telephone and power line, we figured the tree was destined for the wood chipper. We thought for sure it was going to succumb to the weight of snow and ice and topple over like so many other trees in the neighborhood. In the end, it lost only a single branch. Of course, it'll never stand straight again, now bent like a victim of winterized scoliosis, but that tree has proved to be as resilient as our marriage. I didn't always think such luck was possible in my life, because the same good fortune had not been a part of my childhood.

James, Jr. married young. Him and mom were high school sweetheart runaways, running from their parents, running from small town rules, growing up fast in the '70s. They smoked cigarettes and pot, drank considerably, and tried mushrooms a couple of times. Once, shortly after he joined the Air Force, the condom broke. Three months later they were Mr. and Mrs. James Sanderson, Jr. and six months after that, there I was. Mom called me Little J. I was a surprise gift and the weighted burden of responsibility. Mom and dad didn't work out, the marriage annulled before I could crawl. Dad got me, and I grew up being told she didn't want me. Dad—James—Airman Sanderson—was rash and short tempered, so when his commanding officer wouldn't grant him special leave to square away his family life, Dad punched his commanding officer in the face, spent some time in the brig, and was ejected from the Air Force with expedience. And a dishonorable discharge. You might see how to him, this was the shortest route to getting what he wanted. A couple years later he started dating one of my babysitters. They got married, and along came baby Martin a few months after.

Our dad thought of himself as an outdoorsman, the type of man who enjoyed fishing, camping, yard work and beer. There was no good fishing without beer, and no good man set up camp without a case in his cooler, and you boys don't worry about what I'm doing, you get back out there and finish the yard work. Those were the things he used to say. When I look back on it all, I see the irony in how unaware he was of his self-identifying, self-fulfilling prophecy. After I left, Dad became comfortable with not having the money to afford living indoors, and having just enough change to buy another bottle of Old English 800 premium malt liquor from the 7-Eleven. Beer provided everything a man needed in his liquid diet. That's what he used to tell me when I asked why he drank so much.

No matter where we lived, my dad always made the attempt at planting something. Sometimes it was flowers, and he tried to grow tomatoes once. I recall a grand idea involving a home garden that was going to enable us to stop buying so many groceries at the store, but it never came to fruition. The tools needed to put that plan into action cost money, and money always seemed to get in the way of his better ideas. I remember one spring when dad brought home tree saplings for Martin and me. A couple of maple trees. Even at ten years old, I was smart enough to know we'd move a few more times in my childhood, so I chose to keep my baby tree in a small pot of fertilizer. Martin was six, and didn't know terms like "temporary residence," "lease" or "eviction notice." His understanding of rent was that it was that one thing that always kept our parents from being able to buy the things we wanted. He insisted on planting his tree behind the mobile home in the barren dirt patch that we called a yard. He believed the Fleetwood single-wide our dad and his mom rented was home. We soaked the ground—hard-packed orange clay that weeds couldn't set themselves into—for half a day before it was soft enough for us to dig into with the spade. My stepmom hated when we played in the

yard, said it ruined every piece of clothing, but most of all the whites. Our socks, underwear, t-shirts, always ruined when we'd come back inside. Neither one of those trees was given much of a fair chance for growth at the time.

That summer we went on a trip to a swimming hole. It was a creek that had an eventual connection to the Sacramento River. We spent the day there leaping off the small rock cliffs, eating sandwiches and burning our bodies in the blessed sun. The bits I do remember of that day were fun. Martin and me swimming and splashing and chasing each other back and forth across the creek. Me running and jumping off the rocks and swimming like the fish I thought I was meant to be. Dad and Tara bathed in the sun, drinking and smoking and smiling. Before I knew it the sun was going down and there was a chill in the air, and it felt like time to go. At some point in the day Dad and Tara had met a couple of guys who'd been there at the swimming hole. Both of them were lanky, long-haired and tan. One them had been wearing jeans with the legs cut off for shorts. I hadn't paid them much mind. Turned out they didn't have a car, and when they asked for a ride into town, my dad invited them back to our place for a beer. I don't remember much about the drive home, except that they wanted to stop to get more beer. Dad was more than willing to let them buy.

What I've always remembered about that night is falling asleep while Dad, Tara and the two guys drank and listened to music and "partied." And then I remember waking up to strange noises in the dark. It sounded like people outside my bedroom window, but when I looked I didn't see anyone. All I saw was the black world of a moonless night. I could hear something, though, against the side of the mobile home. Like someone or something crashing into the side of the trailer. I could feel the thin metal-and-sheetrock wall shuddering. There was groaning, and for a moment I thought there were voices, but I knew it was probably just the wind in the trees. I

don't know what I thought it was, but I couldn't fight the growing urge of a curious boy. I had to find out. Was it burglars? Animals? Monsters? I crept out the front door and inched around to the back of the trailer. I could see shapes, bodies, and for a moment I thought it *was* burglars. I was going to save us from a home invasion! My heart was racing and my ears were ringing to the pulse. I crept closer, tip-toeing in my socks, crouching close to the trailer, praying to God they didn't see me. There was moaning and laughter and grunting. My eyes adjusted to the dark, and I moved close enough to make out the black shapes in the dark. They were too involved to notice me. One of the guys we picked up was leaning with his back against the trailer. Tara was naked and kissing him, her hand down his shorts, while the other guy stood behind her with his shorts around his ankles, pulling her hair and thrusting his hips against her. She moaned and jerked her hand in the guy's shorts. I screamed bloody murder, and they froze. I could see the teeth in their smiles disappear in the dark and their glistening eyes searching for me. I shouted whore and bitch and cunt the way I had heard my dad use those words when they fought. The three of them moved toward me, the one with his shorts around his feet falling and tripping up the group. I bolted around to the front, rushed in the front door and slammed it shut behind me, locking it, leaping out of my skin when something lurched up from the couch and reeled toward me, grabbing my arm and swinging me around as I tried to run. Hot rancid beer breath was carried on the assault of slurred questions spewing forth from my dad's fuming mouth, *Whaddafuggs wrong widyew? Whaddufuggeryew doin' ou'side? Whydafuggeryew scrimmin' like a lilgurl?* I told him Tara was outside with those two guys and they were all naked doing something and I don't know what. I told him she was a whore and that I hated her and that I wanted to leave, I wanted to go to Grandma's. They banged on the door. Tara was asking to come inside. I screamed *NO! NO! NO! You fucking whore!* Dad reached for the deadbolt and I

pushed his hand away. I begged him to call the cops, begged him to not let her in, screeched for him to kill those guys. He told me to get out of the way, go to my room, shut the fuck up. He shoved me aside and swung the door open. I got myself up off the floor in a hurry, run-stumbled into the kitchen, grabbed the phone off the wall and dialed 9-1-1. I remember dad punching one of the guys, and Tara shouting for him to stop, and red and blue lights illuminating the darkness, and those guys leaving in the backseat of the cruiser.

We stayed in that trailer together during the court proceedings because nobody had anywhere else they could go for the time being. The friction in that narrow space melted the walls and singed the carpet. The air was always hot, everything always on the verge of spontaneous combustion, my perception as warped by the friction as my surroundings. When their divorce was final, and the custody battle over, Tara was granted full custody of Martin. Dad worked a minimum wage job cleaning houseboats for a resort on Shasta Lake and collected food stamps from the county welfare office to feed the family. The judge didn't think our dad could give the proper care to the both of us boys on his own, but he did believe that my dad could afford to pay child support, and so he ordered it to be so. Tara stayed in the mobile home because she didn't have a job, didn't have the money to move, and due to some issue with my dad's credit report (something I didn't understand until much later in life), she had signed the rental agreement as the primary occupant.

The day of the judge's decision, dad packed our clothes in black trash bags and stuffed them in the trunk of the Datsun while I tried to decide which toys were most important to me and which I wanted to leave for Martin. Dad took the television and the VCR and padded them with pillows in the back seat of the car. When dad shouted for me to hurry the fuck up I left it all behind. For me, it felt like playtime was over for good. I might have forgotten my tree if it

hadn't been lying in the driveway, the shards of the clay pot and the fertilizer scattered, as if someone had punted it from its home on the porch. There was no way for me to know if it was the result of a malicious act or not, and no time to ask questions. I ran back inside, tears of frustration blurring my vision, my cheeks flushed and hot. Tara's eyes burned holes through the back of my head from the living room. I wanted to grab the knives from the kitchen drawer and throw them at her face. Instead I grabbed another trash bag and ran back out to the driveway, placed my tree in the plastic with the care of a paramedic tending to an accident victim, scooping as much of the soil as I could gather with my hands and dumping it into the bag. Tara watched from the porch, holding Martin by the wrist as he sobbed and struggled to break free. He couldn't understand what was happening. Tara would just tell him time and again as he got older that I didn't want anyone to be happy and that's why we left. My dad glared from the driver's seat, shouting for me to hurry the fuck up or leave it. I hurried the fuck up, and then we left.

Tara managed to hang on to that mobile home for five years. In that same period dad and I moved like a pair of nomads around Northern California. First, we stayed in a motel in Lakehead because it was close to his work. One day while I was wandering through the brush behind the motel, hitting trees with sticks and throwing rocks and glass bottles in a stagnant pond, I came across a discarded planter. It was green, sun-weathered, cracked and perfect. The find was exciting, and I rushed back to the motel room to replant the maple. The poor tree was on the verge of expiring, its three small branches sagged and the leaves were a sickly yellow-green and spotted brown. I packed the soil tight, realized I didn't have enough to stabilize the tree in the pot, and raided the motel flower bed outside the room for more fertilizer. I watered the tree each day, carried the planter outside to get the tree some sun as an after-school routine, tending to it like a pet.

When the resort laid my dad off, he found a job painting houses in Anderson. After a few months, he had a disagreement with his boss over what type of beverage a person is allowed to consume during a lunch break. They let him go. We had just moved into an apartment when he lost that job. He pawned the television and VCR, some tools, the car radio. Some weekends we would spend whole days driving along I-5, from Lakehead to Red Bluff, collecting cans and bottles to recycle. Back then, you could exchange a pound of aluminum cans for \$0.87. On school days, we would spend a couple hours each evening driving from store to store cashing in food stamps. My dad would go in and buy a can of soup or a couple cans of vegetables, and then he'd send me in, telling me to be sure to cash out at a different register. I would find a can of soup priced at \$1.07 and buy it with two one-dollar food stamps so that he could collect the change. That's how he paid for beer and gas when he didn't work. After a couple months of my dad being home every day when I came home from school, I came home to a white paper that read

Sheriff's Department

Court Services Division

NOTICE TO VACATE

Case No. 0805XXX

taped to the front door. Dad wasn't home. When he came home that night, covered in the sour-stale odor of beer-cigarette, he helped himself to the leftovers of mac and cheese with sliced hotdog that I had made for dinner. He told me that he found another job and that we were going to have to move soon, and then he passed out on the couch.

We lived in a motel again for about a month, maybe longer (memory has a habit of blending things sometimes) in downtown Redding. During that time my dad got hired on to

work with the Department of Fish and Game. Something having to do with monitoring the salmon fished out of the Sacramento. We moved into a duplex in Redding. When he changed jobs again, working in a grain mill, we moved to a townhouse, and when he got another job cleaning houseboats and performing maintenance for another Shasta Lake resort, we settled into a rundown house in City of Shasta Lake., but back then the town was named Central Valley.

During those rather mobile years I did my best to keep my head up, but it was kind of rough sometimes. I never stayed in one school long enough to make friends or build social circles. I was the kid with the shoes off the discount rack at Payless Shoe Source (in the third grade I wore a pair of MacGregor soccer cleats) and last year's clothes from Ross, Goodwill or Salvation Army. I experienced the double shun of being unknown and uncool in middle school, never mind the fact I was dirt poor. Adolescents all need to have the same brand of shoes (Nike) and backpacks (JanSport) to be accepted, and as a kid, fitting in was an important part of life. I tried hard to fit in, any way I could manage. I shoplifted candy from convenience stores and supermarkets, and then I sold it on the playground. I bought sports cards with the money I made and learned to never keep any of my money because if I had money and my dad found it then it was his money and we needed groceries, we needed gas, we needed this, he needed that. My stolen candy sales became lucrative, but my risk was my reward and I wasn't going to share. I bought a JanSport and a couple of No Fear and Quiksilver t-shirts, a skateboard. Dad believed the money came from doing odd jobs for the neighbors, thought everything I bought was on clearance sale. He didn't know the neighbors, so I didn't ever need to worry about my story checking out. I bought a new resin composite planter for my tree when we were living in Redding, peeled the price sticker off of the bottom and scraped it on the pavement a few times while walking home with it. I told my dad that I found it on the side of the road. He said to just

plant the tree outside already and stop getting water on the damned carpet. He regularly checked the pockets of my dirty clothes, checked under my mattress, went through my drawers when I wasn't home. He'd find and take the few dollar bills I planted for him under my socks without ever saying a word to me. When I'd ask where my money went, he'd tell me he thought I didn't have any money, and I'd pretend to be upset. On his drunkest nights—payday—I'd sneak into his room after he passed out on the couch and lift a twenty from his wallet. Either he never knew, or he didn't believe I had the balls when he realized money was missing. I always just assumed he couldn't keep track of his own money. He never paid me an allowance, anyhow.

During the summer break between my sophomore and junior years, dad and I had an argument over something. What it was, I still don't remember, not the words that set it off or the words exchanged between us during the altercation. My memory consists of the smell of his rank sweat and the alcohol on his breath, and the physical connections he made that resulted in our permanent disconnect. I recall trying to push past him to leave after we argued over who knows what, my one-forty versus his two hundred. I just wanted to go outside, to be away from him and his alcohol-fueled temper. I was shoved back, slammed against the wall. My head whipped hard enough to make me dizzy. I slumped to a sitting position and a slap drove me to the ground. I cursed him and he kicked me in the gut. When he kicked at me again I grabbed his foot. He yanked it back hard enough to drag me across the carpet. I stood and he grabbed my throat in one hand, balled the other into a fist, threatened to smash my face in and demanded that I go to my room, guiding me with his hand still clutched around my throat, releasing me at the door. I backed in, never broke eye contact with him, and closed the door on his stare. I grabbed some clothes and stuffed them in a pillowcase. I wanted to take everything, but didn't know where I was headed. As a teenager everything seemed important. I left the bedroom with the

bulging pillowcase and headed for the backdoor. He shouted for me to go to my room, told me I was grounded. I told him to fuck off, that I was leaving. He ordered me back to my room, I hurried to the backdoor. He stomped across the house toward me, yelling and cursing. His insults followed as I burst out the backdoor and broke into a run across the yard and bolted out the back gate. I looked back and saw his dark figure looming in the doorway.

I stayed with a friend for a week, and then moved in with a couple who had been friends with him, until they took me in. Mike and Laura offered me a home for as long as I needed, and I lived there until I finished school. They called my dad once to let him know I was okay, and asked if I could get my things. He said if I wanted my stuff I could try to come get it, but that everything that was mine was his. He claimed that my sports cards were sold, my shit thrown out. I visited the house twice, in hopes of recovering some of my stuff. In my first attempt, a walk-by, I saw his shape through the living room window. I kept walking. The second time was about a week later. I didn't see him in the living room, so I walked around the side of the house, trying to spot him through each window. He wasn't home, and as I looked through my own bedroom, I saw there was no reason for me to attempt to break in. The mattress was bare. The drawers were emptied and left on the floor in disarray. There was nothing of me left in that house. I wandered into the neglected backyard. On the eastern corner of the house the maple tree sulked in the shade, unaware of its fortune in being forgotten. It was as tall as me, red and golden leaves full of vitality. I touched a leaf and it seemed to fold around my hand. I drug the planter around front and down the street, staged it alongside a neighbor's yard while I went to call Mike to pick it up.

After high school I enlisted in the Marines and it was a lot like living with dad. Somebody else in charge, dictating how life is lived. On someone else's order I was forced to

move—numerous times. After completing my enlistment I used my G.I. Bill money to go to college, became the first person in my family to get a degree. Life on your own isn't easy, but if you can identify who and what you don't want to be, it can make it easier to find the path to what and who you want to be. While I was in college, I met the person that made whole all of those incomplete pieces in my life. Every day she fills in the blanks of all those things I didn't and still don't know, the things I didn't understand or never learned. She's showed me a better way to deal with all the anger my dad had passed down but never taught me to handle. We settled in to a place we could call home, and finally the tree that had never been allowed to set roots was planted in fertile soil.

I did get curious about that other tree—Martin's tree—from time to time, but to this day I don't know what happened to Martin, so I should back up a little. Dad had weekly visitations, but he only exercised those rights for a few months. When Tara moved, she didn't give our dad the address, and he didn't try to make contact for fear of having to continue providing child support. After I had graduated from boot camp in San Diego, I returned to Redding to visit Mike, Laura, and the few good friends I had made during the last couple years of high school. On my last day in town, Mike asked if I would be taking my tree with me. Explaining that I wouldn't be able to keep it with me at my duty station, I asked him to care for it until I could take it off their hands. Mike said he'd be happy to, and then, out of the blue, asked if I had heard from Martin, or if I knew anything about where he was. I replied that I didn't, but talking about my tree got me thinking about his tree. On my way out of town I decided to stop by the old place where he had once planted his maple.

The mobile home was gone. In its place was a small, pink house with a detached garage of matching color. Even with a house on it, the property wasn't much. I didn't want to disturb

the tenants or be caught trespassing, but I was curious about whether the tree was still alive, so I parked in the driveway and left the car to idle. I walked between the garage and the house around to the back of the home. The tree I remembered was gone, replaced by a well-manicured yard of fresh sod surrounded by a waist-high, white picket fence. Tulips and daffodils were planted in an alternating sequence at each fence post around the yard. My heart sank. I turned to leave, and was startled to find a woman watching me.

“What you come here looking for?” she asked in a curt, suspicious tone. I replied that I wasn’t entirely sure, which was a lie of course, and then I explained how I had lived on the property before a house had been built. I asked her if there had been a tree there when she moved in.

“Yup, before the landlord hired a landscaper to come out here and put down this grass, there was a scrawny little thing right over here. Couldn’t tell what kind of tree. We figured it was dead since it never sprouted leaves. Why you asking? Did you plant that thing when you lived here?” Hands on her hips, head cocked to the side and eyes squinting against the sun, she asked this last part with genuine curiosity.

“No ma’am,” I replied, “my brother wanted to plant it, so I helped him loosen the dirt. I was just curious as to whether it was still alive is all. I never thought it stood much of a chance in this ground.”

“Well if you’d been a good brother, you wouldn’t have let him plant it out here. The ground around here’s all clay. Ain’t nothing but manzanita that survives in it, usually. If you don’t mind, I need to get back inside to the kids. I’d appreciate if you left my property.”

“Yes ma’am. Thank you.” And with that she turned and walked back inside, and I made my way around the house and got in my car. Fighting back the tears that welled up, I back down

the driveway. Her words echoed in my head: *if you'd been a good brother, you wouldn't have let him plant it out there—if you'd been a good brother—if you'd been a good brother—if you'd been there if you'd been there if you'd been there if if if...*

I searched for him on the internet once, typed in his name and birthday and “Redding.” I found a picture of him on ShastaMugshots.com. He had violated probation, again, and was rebooked. The dark rings around his brown eyes told me that he had lived a hard life. The report told me that he had made more than a couple of bad choices. If I had been a good brother, maybe I could have done more for him, helped him, taught him to get out as soon as he could. But finding out that he was travelling a path closer to dad's than my own, that was something that made me hesitant to reach out. After discovering his tree was gone, I half-expected to be reading an obituary. I considered writing him, but didn't want to leave a return address. When he was a small, not even in school yet, I helped him plant a tree. The report under his photo said burglary, assault and probation violation. The boy I remembered was as dead as that tree. I was satisfied knowing he was still alive.

My old maple's still standing, and it's aged well over the years. Every fall I rake the leaves, using them for compost in the spring. Generations of birds and squirrels have made their homes among the branches. My kids used to play in the tree's shade on hot summer days and take turns climbing its sturdy limbs. Until this winter, the tire that I had hung for them was still there, albeit unused for years. Perhaps if I'd taken it down, the tree would still be whole. But then again, maybe losing a branch was exactly what was needed for the rest of the tree to survive.