

THE ENCHANTED TREE

By Camille Allen LaGuire

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THEY CUT DOWN the enchanted tree the other day. It was old—most of the branches were dead, and we all admitted it had become a hazard.

We stood on the sidewalk across the street and sang songs about Coral Simmons and about the people who'd been changed by that tree. We didn't sing about me, but then nobody knows how the tree touched me.

Some say that Coral Simmons was a runaway slave who'd almost made it to Canada when the slave catchers caught up with her. Some say she was just a farm girl chased into the woods by drunken loggers or soldiers or trappers. Some even say her name wasn't Simmons at all, that she was a Chippewa girl running from the French or the English or warriors from another tribe. Whoever she was, she was running for her life when she came upon a young tree. She hid among the leaves and spread her arms along the branches and wished herself hidden. The bark spread over her arms and body, and the tree absorbed her.

So when you have troubles, you go and tell Coral. She knows troubles.

I went to the tree one Christmas when I was thirteen. I was in foster care and was waiting for my mother to come visit for the holiday. There was a terrible snowstorm that year. I kept telling myself that the weather had delayed her. But the day after Christmas a present came. If she'd been coming, she'd have brought it herself. She wouldn't have mailed it. It was wrapped in a grocery sack and postmarked from Las Vegas. She didn't live in Las Vegas, so she must have gone there for Christmas rather than visit me. Still, maybe she got a job, you know? So I opened it.

It was a little kid's makeup kit, the kind with glitter eye shadow, smelly perfume, and red lipstick—all bubble packed to a piece of cardboard. I hated makeup, and she knew it. She even made fun of me because of it. She really liked makeup, though, so I might

have forgiven her if it had been good makeup. I held in my disappointment and started to open it. But then I saw the price tag on the back— “\$2.95” crossed out in red. It had been marked down to fifty cents. She’d gotten it out of a remainder bin.

I just knew she left that price tag there on purpose. She wanted me to see how cheap it was, because I wasn’t the kind of daughter she wanted. I knew it because she’d actually said that to me before. I felt a raging chill inside me and I ripped up that paper with its Las Vegas postmark and threw it across the room. I threw the present, too, and when Mrs. Price yelled at me, I grabbed my coat and mittens and ran out of the house.

It was already dark, but the night was clear, and the snow was bright as a lamp. I plowed through it up to my knees. The tiny crystals flew up like sand and turned my tears into slush. I kept plowing for three whole blocks, all the way to the tree.

It stood there, naked and spidery, stars showing through its dark branches. It looked so cold, I burst out sobbing. I threw my arms around the trunk and felt the rough bark and smooth ice against my cheek.

“Oh, Coral,” I said, “oh, Coral, Coral. Nobody loves me and nobody ought to. I’m ugly and stupid and clumsy. I can’t do anything right. I can’t even get my own mother to give me something I like. She sent me makeup, Coral. And the Home just gave me mittens from the Ladies Auxiliary because I’m too old for toys. Can’t I just come into the tree and be like you and not have anything happen?”

I probably said a whole lot more, but all I remember is that after a while I heard something buzzing and cracking overhead. I pushed away from the tree and wiped the tears and ice and bark dust off my cheek. Just above my head, a little branch, a twig really, was shaking, and it was shaking really funny, like a person shakes down a thermometer—like it was trying to shake something out of itself.

After a minute, I could see a little green bud at the tip. Green in the middle of winter, and it kept shaking and getting bigger. I crouched back against the trunk, my hands behind me, and watched it. When it stopped shaking, it started to open. It was white and then pink, and at first it looked like a lily. Then it seemed fancier than a lily, more like an iris. The color turned red and blue and purple, and the blossom grew more and more exotic. Maybe that’s what an orchid looks like—I wouldn’t know—but it grew to the size of my hand, and the colors were wonderful. Just then I caught its scent—it

was like a cross between roses and raspberry pie. I stood up straight to get a better look, a better whiff.

Then the fruit started growing out of the middle of the flower, and by the time it was the size of a walnut, I could tell it was a peach. Even then the beautiful petals didn't wither and die. The peach absorbed them and grew golden and fuzzy, with a bright red blush. It smelled so good that I reached up and cupped it in my hand.

It was warm. Warm as an August day. It fell off into my hand, so I took a bite. It was soft and sweet and juicy, and the syrup dribbled down my chin and made me all sticky. I ate it down to the pit, and as I sucked the last bit of juice from it, I realized that the pit felt funny. It was cold. I took it out of my mouth and saw that it was brass, or something like that. And it had a loop on the top, like a locket.

It was shaped exactly like a peach pit, except that it had that hoop and a hinge and a hasp. I opened it, and the inside was polished so smooth I could read the inscription by the light of the snow: *Believe in yourself.*

I leaned back against the tree and sank into the snow, holding the locket to my heart and not thinking, just feeling. Feeling that I was worth a miracle for Christmas.

When the tree was too old to survive the cement and pollution, when it posed a hazard to traffic and power lines, the city took it down. A bunch of old friends decided to go and sing, so I went along.

The thing that surprised me was the number of people who came up silently and looked on. Town leaders, teachers, the janitor over at the department store. Some of them took their hats off. Some just looked.

It was the mayor who suggested that we do something more. He stood and watched another branch drop and shook his head.

"Maybe we should make a monument out of the wood," he said.

"No," I said. "We should bury her. Or maybe cremate her." It seemed more respectful. So we rolled the logs into the park and held a bonfire. Everybody in town came. We sang the song about Coral Simmons again, as a kind of service, and then we all stood and watched the smoke rise.

For a moment the haze seemed to form the shape of a woman. She was both dark and light, short and tall. Her streaming hair was both curly and straight, her fluttering

skirt of calico and lace and buckskin all at once. For a moment, as she flickered up, she even looked like me.

“Good-bye, Coral,” I whispered before she disappeared. At least a hundred voices whispered with me, and I knew she’d touched them all. Her shape rose and spread, and she raised a hand to waive. Then she grew fainter and larger, until she seemed to fill the whole sky, to have her arms around the world.

But then she had faded, and we watched the fire burn down to embers, and in the morning we buried the ashes.