



Art by OLIVIA WOLFE

## OAK TREE

by LAILAH ARMSTRONG

Memories of my youth are surrounded by the trees that lined the yard of the first house I recall living in. I often sat at the place where their trunks met the Earth while my brother swung above me, crawling from branch to branch, tree to tree. Every so often he'd call my name, reminding me that he was up there and that I was down here.

"Lailah, look," he'd shout, high above me.

"No," I'd respond, because how could I forget? The fact that he could climb so high he nearly touched the sun, while I sat firm in the dirt was never lost on me. He would scoff and continue on his way, and I'd try to find other things around to entertain me. Occasionally, when jealousy and curiosity got the best of me, I'd attempt to climb the trees myself. It never ended well; my footing was rarely right, and the rubber soles of my shoes would slip off the rough bark, the bumps in the branches would pinch my hands and, if I even made it far enough, I'd fall out. Down, down to the ground. So I remained seated at the base of the tree, twiddling sticks and bringing

blades of grass to my lips, hoping to make them sing. I never could, not how everyone else did.

When we weren't wandering through our own yard, my brother and I would spend most of our summers at our great-grandparents. We named the oasis simply: Granny and Granddaddy's. Their house sat at the base of a hill a little more than an hour from the city, in a town called Eminence, nestled into one of many rural regions of Kentucky. Words were spoken differently there, thick accents dripped from the tongue, and every word fell soft yet stern from the lips. My grandparents were like mystical creatures to me, so full of love and knowledge that I often couldn't tell if I was more intimidated or appreciative. Granny had hands that felt like stories; moles littered near every inch of her skin and lines in her face bent softly with her brow. My grandmother, Granny's daughter, said that her aged skin was due to Granny taking everyone in all their states. Family or not, she'd sit you down and listen to your troubles. After Granny's passing—many years later—someone told a story of how she, a Black woman, would quite nearly risk her life by driving a bus through a town known for their hatred towards anyone who didn't share their pale, white skin, just to pick up a little boy with learning disorders and help him read once a week. She lived a life of service, and the cost could be seen on her face. Granddaddy looked aged too—for similar reasons. He was solid in his youth, smart and sturdy, and in his age he grew more so. Granddaddy didn't speak much about himself, but when he spoke it was like an ancient bell ringing. Lessons and words from him rang through the chest and inflamed the mind with curiosity and yearning for more knowledge. But Granddaddy always gave just enough.

"Not too much, now," he liked to say.

The four of us—Granny, Granddaddy, my brother, and I—would sit outside in old plastic chairs and watch cars drive by through the morning into the day. Granny waved to them all because she knew them—the own was only about a ten-minute drive across depending on how slow one goes—and the people in their cars would wave back. Sometimes Granny let me sit on her lap. She would pull me close, tease that she never saw me anymore, and tell me a story or two. A glow, soft and fierce like the sun, would form in my chest and her love would feed the light. In moments like this I theorized that Granny had so much love within her, she had no choice but to give it all away.

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Granddaddy would poke fun beside us and his old, country chuckle would ring into the air. When he laughed, all other noise disappeared. No bugs, no rustle of the trees, no birds, only Granddaddy, his laugh, and his love. The memories of my great-grandparents burn so bright in my mind's eye, even all these years later.

My cousins usually arrived after word got to them that my brother and I were at the house down the hill, meaning we were at Granny and Granddaddy's. The six of them would stumble off their bikes or out of cars and rush to find us, pulling us out to play. We'd always end up out past the barn, avoiding its chipping lead paint and rotting wood for fear of what lurked within. We ran past the barn and rolled down the hill. The trampoline was our source of fun most days. The old, metal thing bounced beneath our weight as we climbed atop it. We played many different games, but their favorite involved me sitting in the middle, reluctantly, while they tried to see who could bounce me the highest; they called it "popcorn." I hated the game, being tossed up and down over and over, and maybe it's why I now avoid roller coasters or any other producer of motion sickness, but I had no choice. There were eight of us in total, and I was the only girl, so my requests to play other games were ignored. Popcorn was the selection. I was the first Armstrong girl in thirty years, my voice was like a whisper during a Sunday hymn.

There were times when I wished my life was different. I swore off pink for years, tried to talk more boyish, learned basketball in the hope of being included in a game, and pretended to care for boy's shoes. But all were to no avail, I was still a prissy girl to them. It was dumb that I didn't like pink, I was bad at basketball so I better just keep score, and there was a ten-buck bet I couldn't even tell them who Jordan was or why he made so many shoes. I was spoiled in some regards, yes. But the isolation soured all pleasure from any special treatment. Yes, I got an extra cuddle from the grandparents and was able to try the food fresh from the pot because the boys were always shooed from the kitchen while the women cooked. But the black hole in my chest swallowed me up every time I was pushed out of a game or couldn't catch up on the run down the hill, making me the rotten egg. Just like the grass between my lips, I couldn't sing the same as the rest; I eventually stopped giving it air.



When the trampoline games became boring, we'd jump off and run down towards the creek. The water always felt just right, just cold and clean enough, so we hopped in. Our mothers hated the mess, our fathers were proud. We usually went searching for crawdaddies, which was more enjoyable for the boys; while they went hunting for the creatures, I watched the water dance gracefully around my fingers. When one found the bottom feeder, I was the first he'd show it to. And when I'd squirm and squeal like a pig in a shed, their laughs would echo off the banks of the creek. I imagined the world laughing at me too.

Some days, the group of us went running into the woods. Our feet beat against the dirt like hands on a drum, chanting a song sung many times before. We weren't the first Armstrongs to run here; our parents and grandparents had christened this ground before us. But there were many who reigned over these lands even further back. Proof of Native presence from years past could be found beneath the thick dirt in the form of arrowheads abandoned many centuries ago, reminding the family of who had loved this land years before our arrival. I laughed as we ran, trying to keep up with the boys, but too often I fell behind. Still, I didn't mind too much; I was happy to be included for a moment. My time with the boys in the woods was always short-lived. Before long, the group stumbled to a stop in front of the large and familiar wooden structure. It was built by my father and his own cousins many years ago and fixed up recently as a task for the boys of my generation. I'd beg them to let me stay, but the rule was unchanging. No girls in the clubhouse. Not ever.

"You have to go back," my brother would say, lacking any sympathy.

"Alone?" I'd ask. He was gone without an answer.

I would stand by myself in the woods for a bit, hoping maybe the boys would change their minds. They never did, and I knew better, so I took the journey back alone. Alone, alone, alone. The feeling drowned me day by day and the word was the rocks at my feet. Alone, why? I couldn't understand why anyone cared that I was a girl. Granny was a girl too and she commanded more respect than anyone. It never made sense. The question itched at me on my travels from the woods to the house. But there, among the trees, I found comfort. Nature lightened my path. The whisper of the wind upon the bark



of the oaks and the tremble of their leaves sent shivers down my spine. I watched the tall, towering plants and they watched me. I wondered silently if they might let me climb upon their wood one day, help me place my feet and join the world that lies up top. Sometimes, I would stop walking and lean up close to them, my cheek pressed firm against their rough edges, my ear listening for a heartbeat. All I found was the ache of their bending bones. The sound alone was close enough to the real thing for me.

The days I spent in the house, when I tired of attempting to keep up with all seven boys or was not welcome to play, I remained with the older folks. Mostly I sat on the old couch or beneath the rotating fan when the heat found its way inside. There were times when Granddaddy and I were shooed out of the kitchen so the women could talk of their womanly things I was desperate to hear. They called me "Nosey Rosie" so much I nearly wondered if Rosie was my middle name. Granddaddy and I searched the channels on their tiny television in silence until a nature documentary caught our eye or he fell asleep. He was a silly, soft man when I knew him, but my father said he was different years ago. Once, after a bad stumble down the gravel hill, he dug rocks out of my father's knee with rusty pliers, said he was teaching him something. Now, he'd furrow a curious brow at my boring stories and crack a grin at some obvious joke he made, or, on the best days, he'd give me a hug and there was nothing else like it. Granddaddy's stories of war-torn Korea quieted over the years, just before I grew old enough to remember. His hobby for growing onions dwindled not long after, but he still never passed the opportunity to bite into one like an apple, and if you looked hard enough you could see the memory of the far-off land in his eyes. I thought about the man he used to be in comparison to the one who sat by my side on hot afternoons and told me jokes over and over for the sake of a giggle. I loved them both, though I only knew one.

When Granddaddy fell asleep in his chair, I'd tiptoe over towards the doorway to the kitchen, the pitter-patter of my feet light as rain. I'd sit upon the step in the doorframe and listen to the conversations I was not allowed in. I never understood who they spoke of or what they said, but I liked to listen to their talks. I'd call it gossip, but gossiping is a sin—they were



just speaking. After a few minutes, I was caught, given a treat or a scolding and shooed away.

I knew that I walked a fine line of existence from a young age. There were moments where I wondered how long I could hide before I was found and others when I wanted to just scream until I was listened to. I did neither, I just moved where I was told. Always out, rarely in. I felt loneliness in the presence of so many at an age where loneliness didn't make sense. A cloud of exclusion shadowed my childhood. Sometimes, in moments of shade, I fear it returns

Today, years later, I sit in the yard out back of Granny and Granddaddy's. My family is gathered around for food and stories. Granny and Granddaddy lie down around the corner in the segregated cemetery, where they put in a bridge a year ago to 'combine' the white and Black side—it's all for show, my grandmother says. We just visited them. As the wind ceases and the trees quiet their rustling, I think of Granddaddy's laugh and the silence it commanded. A car pulls in the driveway, and I remember how Granny used to wave at all of the people, and how they would stop by for a chat, a cold drink, and some love. I feel that same love in the sunshine, most days.

My cousins continue to tease, but I learn to laugh and dish it back. Now their jokes are less about my gender and more about me being too "city" now. I hear the women talking and I join them, not shooed away this time. I have learned what they used to keep a secret from me. I ponder the changes life has brought on and come to realize that the spaces I longed to be in as a child, I'm in now.

It's odd to me that I find myself missing the sureness of my solitude. The strolls among the trees after the boys left me behind. The time cuddled on the couch as Granddaddy slept in his chair beside me. The space in the doorframe upon the step, trying covertly to be a part of conversations I had no real clue about. I miss those moments and hate that the beauty of much of my childhood was wasted on wishing I could be included or be somewhere else. Even the word 'alone' doesn't seem so suffocating anymore. At times being alone is the life raft keeping me above all the crashing waves.

My head turns up towards the large oak towering over my family, and despite my recent revelation, I can't help my smile. There is still mystery and solitude in the treetops. Mystery I

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found as a girl in the yard and the woods, solitude at their wide base; things I now hold dearly as a woman. I no longer wish to figure every secret out, or to be included in every space or moment if I am not meant to be, like I once did as a child. The trees will always be there, watching, inviting, knowing I will never make it through their branches. That is enough. I follow their outstretched branches, like hands raised in prayer, moving my eyes down to their trunk and base. Their roots peek from the green grass like waves upon the sea.

The roots are a funny thing. Hidden, but vital to the tree's existence, to its past, present, and future. No tree's roots are the same, they can only reach so far and stretch so wide, and not all sections of ground are meant for them. Yet, they still grow, still thrive, still have individual beauty and meaning. They are not welcomed by every patch of dirt, but they manage. Though they may seem quite simple to us, we must look a little further to see their complexities, listen a little closer to hear their stories, and humble ourselves in their beauty. 

