

## Grandma's Trees

by Karolynn Pargo

My grandmother loved trees. Before I was old enough to use words I knew that Grandma loved trees. She loved them not as shade or supports for her clotheslines, although they did serve those purposes, but she loved them the way folks love their friends. Old family photos show me as a baby in her arms with her pressing my tiny hand to the bark of a tree. I am sure she was introducing me to the tree by name. All the trees on her farm had names. Some were typically American like Henry or Martha.

Others sounded human but exotic like Ashram or Benti. Some names I learned to pronounce with clicks and hums but never attempted to spell. Each name seemed to fit the personality of the tree. Sam loved the antics of squirrels and vowed to protect them. None of Grandma's dogs pursued the squirrels that escaped to the arms of Sam. Pressia thrived on the music of the birds and was especially fond of goldfinches who flocked to fill her branches with nests.

Lydia lived near the center of Grandma's orchard. She grew Transparent apples which did not transport well so were not available in grocery stores. I felt I was the only kid that got to taste that subtle sweetness. Lydia loved me. I did not need Grandma to tell me that. My life changed the day I dragged over a wooden apple crate to use as a booster up to Lydia's lower limbs. Before that climb, I thought the horizon was the end. But Lydia showed me that the horizon was just the period at the end of a sentence. There was much more past that: another sentence, another whole new story. The higher I climbed the more I realized that life's possibilities were limitless. I spent many afternoons with Lydia, reading, or napping or looking at the world around me with a new perspective. I saw that life is not divided into light or dark; black or white. I learned to appreciate that beauty lies in the dappled dance of sunlight and leaves. When I was in Lydia, I felt as warm and safe as if I were on Grandma's lap.

I loved spending time with Grandma, and since Mom worked long hours and traveled often, I was with Grandma most of the time. I loved going with her into the village. People always seemed to turn their eyes toward her. Perhaps they were continually surprised that a world renowned poet lived in their midst. When folks would congratulate her for her talent, she would tell them that her only talent was the ability to be quiet and listen. As I grew into adulthood, I realized how rare and wonderful that talent was.

But on her farm she was elevated to the status of goddess. Her housekeeping skills were virtually non-existent. She managed to have clean plates for food and marginally clean clothes to wear, but that was the extent of her concern for the inside of the house. Her home was outside with her friends the trees, and to a lesser degree, the shrubs and wildflowers. Oh, and her vegetable gardens. Being a lifelong vegetarian, she relied on her skills of growing and preserving fruits and vegetables for her nutrition. I spent many a day with her in the gardens, tending the plants and thanking them for giving us food for life. Sometimes Grandma would suddenly drop her trowel and rush to the shade of Shelia or Munshu. She would sit facing the tree that had called to her, pull out the tablet and pen from her deep overall pocket, and become engaged in silent conversation with her friend. Time and time again I would pester her about how she could hear them, and how could I learn to do that. She ignored me. Finally, I learned better than to try to demand attention for myself. So I would chase grasshoppers, or pick wildflowers, or climb into Lydia's arms.

Now as a grandmother myself, I have told stories of Grandma to my daughter and her children. The look on their faces tell me that they think my memories are Fairy tales and that Grandma is less believable than Cinderella. To tell the truth, I wonder that myself sometimes. As a child I believed that she could actually talk with the trees, but I had tried it myself so many times without success. I sometimes wonder if her communication was no different than just the feeling of closeness, like I had felt with Lydia. But when I relax my logical mind, I know the truth. I can believe. I had seen it with my own eyes.

When I look back at my childhood, I am grateful for all the lessons Mom taught me like how to cook and sew and keep a tidy home. She taught me all the skills I would need such as how to apply lipstick and do my own income taxes. It was not in her nature to think of poetry or philosophy. That I gleaned from Grandma. Grandma was poetry. She did not quote the meaning of life in phrases that would fit on a refrigerator magnet. Instead she lived them without any pomp or pride. I learned about love and friendship from watching her relationship with the trees. I remember one night being awakened by a blizzard only to find Grandma in the pelting sleet, her long hair and wet nightgown buffeted by the wind, as she moved from tree to tree, touching each one in calm reassurance. She and her friends taught me how to embrace the sky and celebrate each season and how to respect and love without restraint. I learned that only by becoming fully mindful in the process of looking and listening brings the ability to experience new perspectives and learn from that. Really learn.

I am so grateful that the trees taught me how to be human.