

Autumn of Dying Trees

My fifteenth summer, I mowed Mr. Alfred's lawn each time the grass grew long, once or twice a week and helped him take care of his lawn.

"We don't want any chemicals," he said, "I'll show you how to make manure tea and use it on my lawn and in my garden." He brought a twenty-gallon barrel from his garage and mixed water and sheep manure together in it. We spread the mix over his lawn and garden. It didn't stink. It smelled like soil, fresh soil building strength in sunlight, in cool nights.

I pulled weeds from his garden. I mulched vegetables with hay. I worked manure into soil. After it waited a few days we planted vegetable or fruit seeds or flower seeds in the soil. All summer, he sent vegetables home with me. There was enough food for my family and for him, and still he had vegetable to give to his neighbors. "There's more here than I can eat. I grow them as much for the beauty they are, for seeing the rewards of satisfying labor as for food to eat, for food to eat for many."

In autumn, he sent more vegetables home with me. Leaves fell. He looked down the draw, filled with brush, that wound down the foot of the hill. "All the trees are dying," he said.

"They're dropping their leaves for winter," I said. "They do this every year." I was sure he knew. He'd seen many autumns.

The next afternoon, sunlight filtered through tree branches into his garden. He looked at bare trees and bushes. "All the trees are dying," he said, lost in thought. I didn't say anything. I thought he wouldn't hear me.

Near the end of the week, I sat at our kitchen table. Sun shone onto the end of the table, just past the paper I wrote numbers and letters on, figuring the length of hypotenuses of right triangles from knowing the length of the sides.

Mom walked into the kitchen. Sun shone onto her back and onto the side of her face. She said, "Mr. Alfred died today. Mrs. Mortenson just called and told me."

I couldn't absorb what she said. I repeated it silently several times. "Mr. Alfred died today. All the trees are dying. Mr. Alfred died today."

He was my friend. A quiet friend. We were more than seventy years apart in age, but through the spring and through the summer, we worked together a lot. We talked to each other some of the time, but we were quiet together a lot of the time. We never got around to talking about our histories very much. It didn't matter. Or, even, it was better that way. Our quietness together formed friendship, created a warm and strong feeling inside me.

Sometimes we took a break from working and sat on the ground facing each other in afternoon sunshine. I thought I saw, I was sure I saw the same feeling of warmth in him that I felt. We never talked about it, but I thought we might, someday. It didn't matter if we did or didn't talk about it.

He taught me which plants were weeds, which plants to encourage to grow, about many vegetables I didn't even know existed before I worked for him in his garden. He taught me that vegetables and fruits grown without chemicals, organically-grown vegetables, grown from well-tended soil taste very good, better than anything from cans, anything from the store.

"All the trees are dying," he said.

I couldn't talk to my mother. She stood a long time. Sunlight moved off her face, off her back, to the wall between the living room and the kitchen. She asked me, "Are you all right?"

I looked down at the paper I wrote on, on the table, and I nodded. There were drops of water on the paper and more drops as I watched. The drops of water prised numbers I had written, prised white light into colors that angled into my eyes.

I wrote down the answer for problem number eight. The answer had nothing to do with triangles, with hypotenuses, but it was the right number for this day, for Mr. Alfred's garden, for trees shedding their leaves and presenting bare branches to winter sky, for colors separating from sunlight and soaking into my thoughts.

The trees seemed to be dying. I knew the trees and bushes would present new leaves to sunshine, to the blue sky when spring came to the land again.