**The DIY Grief Resources of a Child**

Fran Mason

Lots of trees, even ones that grew in Chicago, could live as long as a person; so, I thought our neighborhood trees would always be there. The biggest tree near our apartment building was a tall, chunky cottonwood tree that swayed and rustled over the playground swings. My mother had liked to push me in that swing when I was little, and she made sure I noticed the tree. The fun of swinging, the peace of being with my mom all day long, and the beauty of the rugged tree were one.

We moved to a house three blocks away. The street of small brick houses was shaded by two rows of giant catalpa trees. The trees, with their big heart-shaped leaves, were the reason my mom felt lucky to find a house for sale on that particular block.

When she was so sick, and I was ten and eleven years old, I liked to sit on our small concrete porch and smell the fresh air even if it was cold out, or to walk along the street by the railroad tracks. It wasn’t the tracks I was interested in, but the steep-sloped embankment they ran on top of. The wild milkweed at the bottom fluttered with monarchs at certain times of the summer. And the sight of the tall grass up at the top of the slope made me happy. The harsh city had bits of nature in it. It was my mission and my gift to spot them. The tall prairie grasses up by the train tracks, silhouetted against the sky or shimmering in the sun, made me relax and breathe slowly, concentrating. The feeling reminded me of our visits to my mom’s original home in northern Arkansas, in the remote Ozarks hills.

My mom had been joyous there, being with her mother and dad and her sister’s family, when we visited during vacations. I had learned to swim in their creek under sycamore trees. A tin dipper hung on a nail in an old, falling-down spring house, and we drank the cold water that welled up and filled its lumpy concrete basin. My mom and dad and the family relaxed in lawn chairs in the shade of the oak trees, and I searched the bark for stick insects and other bugs.

I never wanted to go home. I’d absorbed my mom’s love of the rural Ozarks without understanding the complexity of her choice, as an adult, to live in Chicago.

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My mother died when I was eleven, in 1976. Nothing was the same after that, including my and my dad’s relationship with her Arkansas family. In the next couple of years our visits to the family tapered off. I felt marooned in Chicago. My dad gave me opportunities to have fun, with gifts of a skateboard, a clock radio, and occasional musical theatre tickets. But he was too sad and too tough and lacked the resources to support me emotionally.

I walked to the old playground and found that cottonwood tree had been cut down. Even its stump was gone. A neighbor, who remembered me, told me she’d been sad about the tree too—she’d loved it because of my mom’s enthusiasm, just like I had.

I didn’t know any of the reasons why trees are removed when still living. Until I got used to knowing the tree was gone, I didn’t walk to the old neighborhood again. When I did, I saw that someone had planted a maple sapling. I knew I’d be old before it got big.

Back at home on our catalpa-lined block, I woke up one summer day to the cruel roar of chainsaws as workers cut branches from the trees. I rallied my friend from next door and went out to yell at them. “Don’t cut our trees down! We like them the way they are!” I was twelve.

One of the workers explained that they were only removing limbs that were weak. Well, they didn’t look weak to me. My mom had told me about people who chained themselves to trees to keep them from being cut down, and I wished I could do that. Trees felt personal. Seeing them cut or removed felt like a wound to my own body. I couldn’t articulate that and had no one to help me discover the feelings that drove me.

Without knowing why, I went again and again to a wide-open vacant lot two blocks from home. I walked across it, or I sat on the landscape timbers around the edges. I watched the changing sky and looked at the weeds and wildflowers, or I threw snowballs. I wrote in my journal that if I went to the vacant lot every day, I would see so many interesting things that I could fill a notebook in no time.

When I read my journals recently, I started to wonder why that vacant lot, as well as the railroad tracks, had fascinated me and pulled at me. I knew the answer. My child self, too separated from caring family members, relied on what was reliable: the changing of the seasons, the tall grasses and the milkweed, and the blue-eyed grass flowering in the alley. I was finding solace in nature before I knew what solace was.

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Today, I often dream about the spring house and the creek. The swimming hole in my dream is craggier than it really was, even more full of fish and turtles. It seems to invite me to float and look down, into the calm depths, for clarity and inspiration.

I’ve spent my fifties writing memoir. The process has shown me the magnitude of what I lost at eleven. And it has shown me that my ability to see nature protected saved my inner life when it was fragile. It’s a gift from my mother that I’ll never lose.