

Kelly Reffitt
Talking Tree Road

MY FATHER BLAMES HIMSELF FOR WHAT HAPPENED NEXT.

I don't.

Maybe I should.

It all unfolded beautifully, you see. Trick-or-treating was over, and we rode home -- the long way home -- in the back of his truck. My new neighbors, a seven-year-old girl -- a fairy in blue and green and purple -- and her older brother dressed as a pirate, sat quietly. My father turned onto a dirt road and slowed to watch a possum parading in the headlights and then disappearing into the bushes. I remember how my nose burned when I inhaled the cold air of that new-moon night. The wall of black trees hugged the road.

The only lights were from the truck -- red taillights, headlights, dim interior lights -- the people seemed to vanish in the darkness. I heard the feathery leaves from a low limb brush past me as I sat against the metal toolbox, snuggled under a thin blanket. "One more stop," my father said, the back window ajar. The faint smell of his cigarette smoke mixed with the truck's exhaust tainted the unsullied surroundings.

I remember how the air grew colder and damp as we eased around the curve. I knew that we must be near water. Dad turned off the engine, and everything went black, blacker than closing your eyes in the dark. The little neighbor girl screamed. I stiffened and held my breath until my father got out of the truck and shined his flashlight up into a tree, its weighty branches creating a cocoon-like canopy over us.

"What is it? You see something?" called the neighbor boy. He stood up in the back of the truck bed.

"We're on Talking Tree Road. This tree has been here for as long as I can remember, for as long as my own father can remember. They say if you sit quietly, you'll hear the tree talking to you."

"Only if you've had a few," bellowed the neighbor boy.

I stared at the gnarly limbs and thick trunk, its gray bark like snakes creeping down the oak.

They say the tree talks? Who is they? I wondered. Tree, what do you have to say? Talk to me.

I wasn't scared, not yet.

A moment passed. "I don't hear anything. Let's go," blurted the neighbor boy.

I held up my hand. "Wait a minute. Listen." I tilted my head and scanned the still limbs of the big tree but heard nothing.

I whispered, "You know we're here. I feel it."

We drove up the hill behind the talking tree to a small cemetery with unmarked graves. The headlights unveiled the brown quartzite grave-stones peeking through the knee-deep weeds.

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The neighbor girl began to cry, "I don't want to go." She moved into the truck's cab and waited. Her brother walked to the graves with my dad. I drifted down the hill with its dips and ruts, once catching myself when I stepped into a hole, the black sweater fabric of my bank robber costume catching on a briar.

I followed the thin path of my flashlight's beam to the talking tree. The tree was pulling the light – and me – forward.

"Not too far, Annie," my father instructed. Not too far, Annie, reverberated in my mind.

Closer to the tree, I noticed the ground leveled and cleared with a few scattered leaves. I flashed my light at its base where the roots entered the ground, spread around the trunk like a long dress cascading onto the floor.

I smiled.

She was a beauty.

I heard her words in my mind.

My roots grow deep, the stories wrap around me like a cape. My scars, my scars remember. I sing and I weep for I know their tales and their secrets, every one of them. Let me tell you for I am their witness.

I slid the light up and down the trunk and across the limbs. No leaves rustled and no wood creaked. I waited to hear something – an utterance, a whimper, a groan, a laugh. Anything.

Instead, the soothing voice played in my head, as my eyes stayed fixed on the tree.

Yes, listen. There are the good stories you want to hear. Back when this land was pasture and my leaves whistled with joy as I gave the animals' shade all around me. When a road was cut nearby and a young girl learned to drive her grandfather's truck. Now watch out for that big tree, he warned every time they drove past me. Long ago when men, women, and children eased into the cool river for baptism.

I walked around the tree to the road and noticed the deep brown gash, not a fresh mark showing its golden flesh.

Come closer, my dear, but know there are sad stories – the blood of brother against brother, the rope's burn notched into a high branch, the lovers' quarrel after etching their initials, the scrape of the car's metal when the old man didn't make the turn.

I spotted a burnt orange oval with a couple of thin fuzzy vines growing over it. I stood on my tiptoes to remove the vines and saw a face, a woman's face, made of clay. Her blank eyes stared, piercing me. I felt my warm breath rushing from my mouth. I dared to touch her. Her face felt smooth, life-like.

I jerked my hand back and raced up the hill to my father. Winded, I could barely speak. "Daddy, I saw something. A face on the tree."

"What? Annie, slow down and say it again."

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“There’s a clay face of a woman in the hollow of the talking tree. It looks real.”

“Oh, God.” His shoulders slumped, and he looked to the ground. “You weren’t supposed to see that.” He grabbed my hand and led me to the truck.

I could not stop my eyes from looking at the tree as we rounded the curve.