

Wild Cherry Tree

by **Gabriella Brand**

Mother hated that tree. The messy wild cherries that fell over our bluestone patio, the undisciplined way that the thin branches spread out like unkempt hair, the crookedness of the limbs.

“We should just chop it down,” she’d say every spring when yellow-white tentacles of blossoms appeared, then gave way to small, pea-sized fruit.

“But it’s beautiful,” I’d say.

“We have other trees,” Mother would insist.

It was the 1950’s. We were living in a historic valley in New Jersey, settled by Dutch colonists in the 17th century, rapidly becoming suburban. Our yard was full of mature maples and oaks, a solid hickory, a couple of weeping willows down by the shallow drainage brook that bordered our property.

In August, when the small reddish-purple cherries ripened, Mother would repeat her threat.

“This year,” she’d say, “we’re going to get rid of that monstrosity.”

Mother liked order. Precision. Cleanliness. Everything that the *Prunus Serotia* was not.

As the wild cherries fell, the air around the tree would smell slightly sour and fermented,

like a child's lunch bag left behind in a school locker.

"Couldn't we eat the cherries?" I once asked.

"Of course not," said Mother. "They're barely fit for birds. It's a totally useless tree."

I found that hard to believe. The cherries looked perfectly delicious. Besides, wasn't Mother always talking about how people back in Europe, starving during World War II, had eaten shoe leather and bread made from cellulose? Animal carcasses? Cats, even?

It was odd that she considered wild cherries to have no value.

But Mother had her firm opinions. I knew better than to try to sway her mind. She could give the impression of being steely or cold, but underneath, she was sensitive and emotional, largely ruled by melancholy, not meanness.

Even as a child, I knew that she struggled with inner ghosts. She was estranged from her far-away family of origin, with its traditional codes of honor and shame. Clearly something had happened, maybe during her childhood. There was the uncle whose name she refused to say, the distant cousin whose letters she destroyed.

Nor did her marriage seem to bring her happiness. Although she tried hard to be a dutiful mid-20th century American homemaker, collecting recipes from *Good Housekeeping*, decorating the house for Christmas, her heart clearly wasn't in it.

"I don't belong here," she'd say.

But where was here? In suburban America? In the comfortable house with the cherry tree? In the big double bed she shared with my father, although she never spoke of loving him.

“If it weren’t for you kids,” she would say, but she would never finish the sentence.

She had lost one of us. One of her children. A little boy, my baby brother. I vaguely remembered his tiny coffin, fitted with brass handles like two half moons and a smooth satin pillow. Perhaps, because of that loss, she held a personal grudge against the wild cherry tree, so prolific and careless with its bounty.

Fortunately, Mother would always forget about chopping down the tree by the time autumn came around and the leaves had turned a lovely, benign shade of yellow. With the arrival of cold weather and the diminishing light, she would no longer go outside. Like a bear, she would hibernate within the thick walls of the house.

I, on the other hand, loved the outdoors in all kinds of weather, even in the grayness of a late winter afternoon. Out in the fresh air, I could breathe freely and sing silly songs and make snow angels and lie on my back looking up at bare branches creaking in the wind.

In summertime, I remember climbing up that wild cherry tree with a cloth bag slung over my shoulder. The pink bag was supposed to hold ballet shoes, toes shoes actually, the kind with small tufts of rabbit fur inside. A delicate, girly-girly bag, it was. But I preferred using it as a mountaineer’s back pack. I’d twist the bag around, depending on how I needed to maneuver as I climbed. Inside the bag would be a few books, maybe some colored pencils, a sketchpad, and contraband candy such as *Necco Wafers* or a *Bonomo Turkish Taffy*. About half-way up the tree, maybe ten feet or so, after scraping my knee against the coarse bark a couple of times, I’d stop and settle into a sort of seat that my older brother had helped me fashion out of hemp lashed between two limbs.

All morning long, I’d keep my nose in the silence of *The Betsy-Tacy Stories*, but I’d be serenaded by chickadees and warblers. They’d grab the purplish fruit and fly off. Sunlight would dapple the oblong leaves. I’d run my fingers along their fine, serrated

edges. The cherry tree was my own cathedral, my sanctuary. Solid, tall, sheltering. Like a protective parent.

Did Mother, burdened with grief and memories, really know where I was? I don't think so. Back in those days, most kids in small towns were largely unsupervised. When I wasn't with friends or at summer camp, I left the house after breakfast and showed up at lunch time. I'd take long bike rides by myself, sometimes stopping at the candy store for fresh supplies of forbidden sweets. Sometimes I'd walk along the brook that bordered our property. But I always made time to sit in the tree, invisible to the rest of the world.

Every day our town blew a whistle at the fire station at twelve noon sharp. The siren would crank up and the German Shepherd who belonged to the neighbors on the other side of the creek would start to howl. That's how I knew to get down from the tree and show up at the lunch table, wiping the traces of *Necco Wafers* and wild cherries off my lips. By then I had discovered, through my own experimentation, that the fruit of the *Prunus Serotia* was perfectly edible.

One night, the year I was eleven, a particularly heavy summer storm blew through our valley. When I woke up in the morning, Mother began talking about storm damage. She had been worried about the brook overflowing and heading towards our house, but now the rain had stopped. I ran outside to explore.

Almost immediately, I saw what was left of my tree.

Lightning had sliced the graceful wild cherry down the middle, leaving a black slash in its wake, like the old movie character, *Zorro*. Higher limbs had fallen onto lower limbs. Branches had flown off, torpedo-like, across the lawn, and ripe cherries had bombed the patio, like small red grenades.

I came rushing back in, breathless.

“But you didn’t tell me about the tree!” I said. “The wild cherry tree!”

Mother shrugged. “Nature accomplished what I had meant to do years ago.”

I could feel myself on the verge of tears, but I didn’t want Mother to see me crying. I ran back outside and stared in shock at the destruction.

In those days our family had a book called *Life’s Picture History of World War II*. Black and white photographs of Normandy beaches. Dunkirk. The London Blitz. I sometimes would take down that book and leaf through it. Mother usually discouraged me from staring too long at the wreckage of war.

“It was a horrible time,” she’d say.

Now I knew, even as an eleven-year old, that a tree struck by lightning was not in the same league as the bombing of Dresden. I knew that I shouldn’t be crying over a tree. A wild cherry tree was not a human being. The loss of one tree was not the same as the loss of a baby or the devastation of an entire city. I wiped my tears and went down to the brook to calm myself down.

A couple of men with chainsaws arrived later that day. They clumped around in their heavy work boots and discussed the best way to clean up the heap of ripped greenery and split bark. Then they started cutting until only a stump remained.

Mother and I never talked about the tree. Eventually she planted herbs where the cherry tree had stood, and the smell of mint and tarragon and rosemary seemed to give her pleasure, but it was hard to tell for sure.



Gabriella Brand's writing has appeared in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The First Line*, *Room Magazine*, *The Citron Review*, and dozens of other publications. Her poetry has been featured in the series "District Lines" from the Politics and Prose bookstore in Washington D.C. One of her short stories was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2014. Gabriella divides her time between Connecticut, where she teaches foreign languages, and the Eastern Townships of Quebec, where she is learning to paddle board on Lac Massawippi.