

THE TREE

Melanie stomped out the door of her grandparents' farmhouse and plopped down on the porch steps to wait for Grandpa. She knew she was pouting, but she couldn't help it. She only got to visit Grandma and Grandpa's farm a few times a year. Why did Mom always have to ruin it?

Melanie tucked her long brown hair behind her ears and tried to think about something else. Mom and Dad were probably back in the city by now. For one month she was free, totally free, of her parents' constant nagging.

Grandpa came around the corner of the house, wiping his hands on his overalls.

"Are you ready to go see our trees?"

"I'm ready, Grandpa."

Thinking about the tiny oak trees they had planted at Easter lifted Melanie's spirits, and she hurried to the old green pickup.

Grandpa opened the door and gave her a boost in, then went around to the other side and got in.

"Hold on. This field is pretty rough."

They rode in silence for a time. It took all of Melanie's concentration just to hold on so she wasn't bounced off the seat. At last the field smoothed out and they could talk.

"I heard you and your mother arguing this morning before she left. Anything you want to talk about?" Grandpa offered.

Melanie made a face. "She doesn't like the friends I made at school this year."

"And why is that, I wonder?"

"She says they're a bad influence."

"Are they?" Grandpa stopped the truck and looked at Melanie with eyes that were always kind, but also insightful. Melanie knew he understood more than he let on and tried not to squirm under his gaze.

"No, of course not," Melanie insisted.

She got out of the truck and followed Grandpa to the little brook where they had planted the first sapling. She loved this peaceful little grove. Its

babbling brook and the rustle of wind in the trees made a perfect accompaniment to the melody of the songbirds.

"There it is," Grandpa announced.

Melanie was surprised to see how the young oak tree by the brook had grown in only a few months. It was full of leaves and grew strong and straight.

"It's beautiful," she breathed.

"It's going to make a splendid shade tree some day." Grandpa said, but he was looking at her, not the tree.

"What about the other tree, Grandpa?"

"Let's go see."

They returned to the pickup and drove a short distance through the field. Melanie looked for the tree in vain. It seemed as though the only things growing here were jagging nettles. The small nettles that had grabbed at her ankles when they came here at Easter were now bushes that reached for her hands and arms.

Grandpa stomped down a few of the nettles, and they worked their way in to the tiny tree. It almost seemed smaller than when they planted it. Its branches bravely held a few small leaves, but it was obvious it was losing the battle.

"Oh, Grandpa," Melanie cried in concern.

To her surprise, Grandpa changed the subject. "How were your grades this year?"

Melanie tried not to look at him. She had dreaded the moment this subject would come up. Her grandparents had always been so proud of her grades, and she hated to disappoint them.

"They weren't so good this year."

"Ah. Maybe you were trying to grow with nettles."

Melanie looked at him in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"People are a lot like trees, you know. How our lives turn out will depend a lot on where we try to grow."

He watched her to see if she was understanding, then asked, "Which is stronger: an oak tree or a nettle bush?"

"An oak tree, of course."

"Then why are these nettles killing this little oak tree?"

Melanie considered. "It's too small right now. The nettles are stronger."

Grandpa nodded. "Do you remember what Psalm 1 says about the person who avoids the company of the wicked but would rather spend time in the Word of God?"

Melanie blushed and shook her head. Grandpa was always trying to get her to memorize Scripture, and she hated to disappoint him again.

"It says, 'He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.'"

"Like the little tree down by the brook?" Melanie asked.

She thought she knew where Grandpa was going with this.

"Exactly like the little tree by the brook. It has all the water and sunlight and nourishment it needs to grow into a strong, healthy tree. This one has none of that. Eventually it will wither up and die."

"You're calling my friends nettles, aren't you?" she asked softly.

"What do you think?"

They were silent as they carefully picked their way out of the brambles and back to the truck.

In spite of the care they took, Melanie's legs were soon scratched and bleeding, but she didn't complain. She had too much to think about.