

Maple 11: The Curve Tree

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Time and imagination have transformed the long wound in the side of the sugar maple into an Irish harp. The open space—where the inner wood, gray with age, is still exposed—begins in a vee at the bottom, one side straight, the other bowed slightly to the right, and at the top, a line that dips gracefully in the middle joins them both. The small vertical cracks in the open wood hint at strings framed by the thick roll of bark that holds the strings taut. The illusion is spoiled some by the tiny insect holes drilled into the bare wood; though small, they are more prominent than the tracery cracks. The minstrel boy to the war is gone with his wild harp flung behind him amidst a shower of insect bullets.

The scar is an old one, the result of an injury from long before I knew the tree, but it is not hard to tell how it happened. The scar faces the road, no more than five feet away, and though the tree is on the bank above the road, it is at the lowest point in that earthwork, where it offers the least defense from an assault. More importantly, if you stand with your back to the tree right in front of the scar and look up the road, you are looking up the road in every sense of the word because the road climbs steeply and curves sharply simultaneously. When there has been more than an inch of snow, people without four-wheel drive give up trying to climb our road just here. For a quarter of a mile, they will have twisted and climbed their way up the hill, but this spot that asks them to both climb and turn does them in. They back down the hill, turn around in our

driveway, and slink off. Coming downhill in slippery conditions, of course, turning back is not an option. That's probably how the scar was born one winter day.

That conclusion is not pure speculation. Many a snowy day and night our son, Christian, and I spent time digging and pushing with some stranger hung up in the snow on the bank, usually downhill from the tree where they had slid the side of the car along until the combined effect of the slope of the road to the side as it goes down hill and the accumulation of snow gathered by the vehicle stop the forward motion, though the wheels still spin impotently. Since Christian has left home, I don't get involved as much. His youthful enthusiasm for the emergency rescue had driven us out into the cold, rather than my middle-aged sense of compassion.

Though it stands watch at a curve that twists in three dimensions, the scarred sugar maple is itself curiously binary. At about five feet from the base it splits into two equal trunks; each of them splits quickly and each of those splits in two variously. One binary split at the fourth level is artificial in a way since there was once a third branch that has died and fallen off leaving a circular scar. Beyond that level conditioned by the larger branches, it is possible to interpret a small branch growing from a larger as a binary split. At the most detailed level, the illusion is shattered by the reality that the bud pattern on sugar maples, as with all maples, is opposite: two branches will grow off the central one and the natural inclination of the tree is to think in threes. With this tree it seems to be age that has encouraged it to think in either or. But away with such allegory!

The tree—only about 20 inches in diameter, much smaller than the largest of the sugar maples around our house—seems old not because of its binary structure, but because of the coating of blue-green lichens on the main trunk before it splits. The other

sugar maples around the house host lichens here and there, but this tree is so covered with them that at some points the bark is invisible behind large shaggy patches of curly miniature leaves. They look like they should be soft and springy, but they are as rigid as plaster scallops on picture frames covered in gold leaf.

Part of the explanation for this growth seems to be the tree's location. Sugar maples were planted along our road as it rises from the east, bends around the north side of the house, and then turns due north. The Curve Tree is north of the house, but the road climbs so steeply that the base of the Curve Tree is level with the weathervane on the roof of the barn behind the house. Because the road was cut into the hill, which continues above it, a nearly vertical rise, crowned with red pines, blocks the sun from the Curve Tree on the north. But even from the south, the sun on the Curve Tree is restricted because on the hill below, between the tree and the barn, are three massive white pines. It is hemmed in on the other two sides too because it comes after a gap in the maples, but not an empty gap. Downhill, a forty-foot tall white pine and a thirty-foot tall hemlock rise up, and uphill are three fifteen to twenty-foot tall young white pines planted in a straight line about 10 inches apart. While the trunks of the other sugar maples, surrounded by their naked peers in winter and exposed below the foliage in summer, get some benefit of air and sun, the Curve Tree is shaded and shielded by neighbors green to the ground so the lichens can thrive in the moist bark.

However, the Curve Maple seems to have adapted to its evergreen neighbors, maybe even adopted them. The maples leave open space on the ground around their bases that evergreens do not and in the Curve Tree's space are seedlings: two white pines, a hemlock, and two spruces, none more than three feet tall. The sugar maple offers them

space and protection. Eventually, there may be some conflict about sun rights, but right now the relationship seems almost parental.

That the evergreens surrounding the Curve Maple go right to the ground sometimes complicated our rescue efforts because branches would surround the area where we needed to dig away snow and brace ourselves against the bank. I remember one particular storm when over a foot of snow had fallen and the bitter wind was driving the still falling snow. We did not expect to be helping anyone out that night because conditions were so bad no one in his right mind would be out on a night like that. All of a sudden an old, jacked-up Ford Bronco with a contrasting-colored fender groaned by the front of the house heading up the hill. The Bronco started up the Curve Tree curve and lost heart at the base of it. I joined Christian in the kitchen where he was already watching with anticipation out the kitchen door as the tail lights, glowing bright with the application of the brakes, glided slowly back downhill toward us. The car turned as it slid so that it hit the Curve Tree's part of the bank, but sidewise, so it did not ride up the bank and the tree was spared. As the vehicle slid further down along the bank, the spinning wheels whined but controlled no movement. The car came to rest, doors opened, and three guys in their late teens or early twenties piled out of the truck to assess the situation. The contents of the truck was not a surprise to any of us. Christian already had his coat and boots on and was encouraging me to hurry up so we could go out and help.

We slogged up the hill, said hi, shook hands, and the driver averred that he felt betrayed by his four-wheel-drive. They were heading up to one of their houses on Wolf Run to settle in and enjoy the storm. They were sure that they could make it. We got some shovels and started to dig, on the assumption that if we cleared away enough snow,

the truck could get back up on the crown of the road and at least go downhill. We dug. Christian dug with such energy and effect that one of the guys, who worked as a laborer at a nearby pipe manufacturing plant, told him, “When you’re old enough to get a job you let me know and I’ll recommend you for a job at Ward’s. There’s lots of shoveling to do there and they’d love a hard worker like you.” After some digging, we pushed aside hemlock branches, braced and pushed the Bronco. Then we dug some more and pushed some more. And the snow kept falling and the wind blowing, and it was becoming clear that our effort was not going to yield success.

The driver finally admitted defeat, but indomitable, said his cousin worked at the farm half a mile down the road and maybe he could come up with a tractor and pull him out. In we went, and a call to his house told us that Jim was actually at the farm. So the driver thought he would walk down and ask him for help. When he came into the light inside we could see he was wearing an unlined jeans jacket over what looked like a T-shirt. We told him he needed something warmer than that and found him a down jacket with a padded hood and offered him gloves, but he thought he could just put his hands in his pockets. He staggered off into the blizzard while his buddies warmed up inside and then went out to sit in the running truck. Half an hour later, he was back with Jim on the tractor. In just minutes, with Christian watching intently, the Bronco was chained to the big white tractor and back on the road. The driver returned the jacket, thanked us for our help and he was off down the hill.

Winter threatens the Curve Tree not just because of assault, but also because of salt. Comments like Charles Fergus’s in *Trees of Pennsylvania*--“Salt, used to melt the ice on paved roads, can kill sugar maples”--appear frequently in writings about their care

and fate. It is lucky for our trees that the road they are planted along is cindered not salted during the winter. But some day, in some near or remote place, some person who has never seen these trees may decide that salt will make the road safer. Of course, even the road itself is a hostile presence. Despite their beauty, we rarely see sugar maples lining main streets in towns and cities because sugar maples don't do well in such emission-intense polluted areas. But this dirt road beside the tree has little traffic; the real danger to the tree is from the Midwest, where the towering chimneys of coal-fired plants mix their acidic discharges into the clouds and gently send them off into the prevailing westerly winds bringing them to us. Charles Little in *The Dying of the Trees* notes that sugar maples began to decline in vigor in Pennsylvania in 1912 and that the keystone culprit is acid rain, since acid deposition leaches crucial nutrients from the soil, weakening the trees for drought and disease and insects like the pear thrips. So the direct threat of the assault of the machine, which leaves scars on both the tree and its human cargo, is less than the impersonal, far away danger that may come or go as it wishes and with impunity.

Two more wounds appear on the Curve Tree, wounds whose nature eludes me completely. It is as if long ago someone anticipated that I would examine the tree for omens and that person thought, "Let us create a totem, a symbol to transmit through time to our descendants in this place." On the south side of the tree, facing the road, about five feet from the ground, one end of a rusted, crusted heavy gauge length of wire has been plunged into the tree; the other end of the wire, which is maybe a foot long, has been bent back and twisted around itself to form a loop. I have stood facing downhill in the same direction that the loop faces and I cannot see what might have been attached to it or what purpose it might have served. On the north side of the tree, the side towards the road,

there is a hook, heavier gauged than the loop, and about 6 inches long. While the loop stands out at a 90 degree angle, the hook comes down out of the tree forming a 45 degree angle. I am precise in my description because I do not know what is important, what the defining attributes of these devices are, what they portend. Of course, it is hard not to think of John Muir's "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." And here are the tree's hitching points: a hook ready for its loop; a loop waiting for its hook.

It is hard not to feel connected with that larger world when we can easily trace the stream below our house all the way to the Chesapeake Bay. For many years, as part of a water monitoring program sponsored by the Pine Creek Headwaters Protection Group, our family tested the water in Marsh Creek under a railroad bridge just across Route 6/287 at the bottom of our road. When the children were younger we would drive down with them and together we would measure temperature, take the samples, perform the tests for acidity and nitrates, and record the results. When Christian and Clare grew older, they began to ride their mountain bikes down the hill, cross the highway, and do the testing themselves. The last day we tested the stream, Christian had put the equipment in his backpack and off they went. Not long afterward the phone rang and Clare's small voice redolent with restrained hysteria said, "Christian has been hit by a car."

"Is he OK?" I said.

"I think so," she said. "He talked to me."

When we arrived, firemen were directing traffic around the ambulance, and we found Christian strapped into a stretcher on the ground with an EMT poking at him and talking to him. They had just cancelled the helicopter. He was conscious but a bit

confused, and his left hand was bandaged. Madalene climbed into the ambulance with him to go to the hospital and I gathered Clare into my arms and tried to reassure her and myself. After the ambulance left, I could see the bike, its front wheel twisted and its frame bent, Christian's cracked helmet and backpack on the ground, and the gray Taurus, its windshield and roof caved in.

As the accident happened, the mechanic who runs a repair shop out of his garage right at the base of our road was doing repairs on his roof. When he heard the squeal and impact, he turned and immediately yelled to his wife to call 911, and they rushed over to the kids. The woman took Clare inside to call us, and the man stayed with Christian till the ambulance arrived. When Clare and I thanked them for their help, he told me the story, marveling that Christian survived.

Not only did he survive, but later that day when they released him from the hospital without a single broken bone, he was only achy and a bit dizzy. The scans they did of his head showed no damage and the doctor told us the dizziness should be gone in a couple of days. The most serious injury turned out to be on his left hand, a deep gash that ran along the inside of his index finger. It went right to the bone but did not slice any tendons or ligaments. He is right-handed so he could write and do many of his daily activities despite his bandaged finger, but he could not play his violin. He was concerned, but once the finger healed he discovered he could play, despite the way the thick scar that formed kept him from straightening the finger. When he held his hand out straight, that index finger hooked downward at a 45 degree angle. Eventually, physical therapy would reduce the scar, allowing him to straighten the finger.

Whenever we need a car towed, we always call the folks who helped Christian and Clare, but we did not change mechanics because the mechanic we had was both honest and a genius: when the dealership told us we needed a new clutch, he fixed the problem by tightening a bolt and did not charge us. Once, the night before Madalene was to pick Emily up from college for spring break, our only roadworthy car developed a leak in the exhaust system so that stepping on the gas pedal produced a painful roar. The car was no longer roadworthy. We called our mechanic at home; he said to bring the car in around 6:30am and he'd see what he could do. He discovered the exhaust pipe had rusted away from the muffler. As he welded it together and we talked, I found out that the young Bronco driver we helped that winter night was his stepson, and he was glad to help us out with this early morning repair job.

I remember again my mother's reassurance after yet another boyhood injury that men with scars were more interesting, scars bespeaking experiences by writing messages on the body. Although the harp on the curve tree and the slash on Christian's finger speak of the collisions of bodies, they also remind me of what did not happen, of all those events that turned aside, casually and easily as they wound their way down the hill to town, perhaps to get a bowl of soup and a bagel. And when Christian himself went to college, I would go to pick him up for spring break, often thinking of the arrogance involved in assuming that we would travel all those hundreds of miles without incident.

Once, when his mother and I arrived in northwestern Massachusetts to pick him up, he was not in his room. He had warned us that he might not be back from his phys ed class when we arrived. It had been raining. His phys ed activity that quarter was mountain biking, and when he appeared, almost from nowhere, screeching to a halt in

front of us, he and his mountain bike were spattered with mud and he straddled his bike smiling under his muddy helmet. “You look like you have been having a good time,” I said.

“Yeah. We were riding up and down an abandoned downhill ski run just over the Vermont border. It was fun. Did you have a good trip up?”

“Yes, no problems,”

“Good. Let me shower up and we can take off.”

Afterwards, with his hair still wet, Christian stowed his violin behind him in the car with his dirty laundry and his books and we set off, trying to avoid the trees waiting impassively in our path.