

Out of the Woods  
by Kim Switzer

Once upon a time there was a happy little tree in a great forest. Every day, a young girl named Carolyn would visit the little tree, sitting against its trunk, telling it stories about her day or reading to it from books she carried with her.

One day, Carolyn did not come to visit. The little tree fretted, shaking its branches and setting its leaves a-quiver, but still she did not come. She did not come the next day, either, nor the day after that.

Because it missed Carolyn so, the little tree began to droop. Its leaves grew gray and shriveled and began to drop to the ground. The little tree knew it must find its friend. So, with a great heave and groan, it wrenched its roots from the ground and dragged itself creaking and moaning through the forest.

The little tree wound its way around the other trees and across the bushes and underbrush, leaving a wide, clear swath behind it as it went. It inched its way through the woods until finally it reached the edge of the forest. It looked out across great, open spaces with soaring mountains in the distance. Everything was just as Carolyn had described. And there, just a short distance from the edge of the trees, was the house Carolyn had described where she lived with her mother and father and sister and brother.

The little tree crept forward, trying to be quiet, but the rustling of its dry leaves alerted the family dog who rushed up, barking and growling and snapping at the little tree's roots. People came rushing out of the house to see what the commotion was all about. Carolyn's mother was first out the door. She screamed and stumbled backward when she saw the little tree moving toward them.

Carolyn's father stepped past his wife then paused uncertainly. He raised his shotgun, then lowered it again, staring at the tree. "It's a tree," he said.

A voice came from inside the house. "What did you say? What is it, Father?"

"It's a tree," her father repeated, louder this time.

"A tree?" There were thumps and scraping sounds from inside the house, then Carolyn appeared in the doorway propped up on rough hewn crutches, one foot wrapped in layers of cloth bandages peeking out from under her skirts.

"I know that tree!" she exclaimed. "That's the tree I read to in the forest every day." She hobbled across the yard toward the little tree.

"What's it doing here?" her sister asked.

"I don't know," Carolyn said, reaching out to pat the little tree's trunk. "But I sure am happy to see it. I've missed it these past few days."

"It doesn't look so good," Carolyn's mother said, finally recovering from her shock enough to step closer to the little tree. "A tree's not supposed to be up moving around. It's supposed to stay put where it's planted. It needs its roots deep in the soil and a nice patch of solid ground. Look at those shriveled

leaves and dry roots. I think it's dying.”

Carolyn's eyes filled with tears. “It's all my fault! It wouldn't be here if it wasn't for me and my stupid broken leg!”

“Guess it'll be good for fire wood for the winter,” her brother said, shrugging and turning away.

“No!” Carolyn cried. She turned to her father. “Can't we save it? It's come all this way just for me. Isn't there something we can do?”

Her father started to shake his head then stopped. He looked around the yard, his eyes stopping on a half-demolished chicken coop.

“Maybe there is something,” he said. He motioned to Carolyn's brother. “Come on. Help me tear down the rest of that old coop. I've been meaning to do it for months. Now's as good a time as any, and if we get that spot cleared out it will be just right for a little tree.”

Carolyn's mother carried her rocker outside, setting Carolyn under the little tree with a blanket and a book. Carolyn read story after story to the little tree, pausing to offer encouraging words and little anecdotes about her family while everyone worked to clear a space for the little tree.

Carolyn shot worried glances at the little tree. Its branches were drooping more and more, and most of its leaves had fallen off. She stopped reading, tears rolling down her cheeks, and placed a hand against its trunk. “Please don't die. You're my only friend! What would I do without you?” But the little tree didn't respond.

Finally, with the sun hanging low over the mountains, the space was ready for the little tree. Carolyn struggled to her feet and got her crutches settled. She moved a few steps across the yard and motioned with her head for the little tree to follow.

“Come on,” she said. “You've come so far. Only a little way further and you'll be home.”

The little tree's branches shivered, but its roots stayed still. Finally, its branches stilled and drooped toward the ground once more.

“Oh no,” Carolyn whispered, her tears flowing again. “My poor little friend.” She looked at her father. “It's dead, isn't it?”

Her father looked back at her solemnly and put his arm around her shoulder, hugging her close. Then he straightened, squaring his shoulders. “Maybe not,” he said. “Help me move it,” he said to her brother.

Carolyn's father and brother lifted the little tree gently and carried it toward the open patch of ground while her mother and sister fetched water from the well. They settled the little tree gently onto the ground, and Carolyn's mother and sister poured water over its roots, but nothing happened.

“More water!” Carolyn demanded. She limped closer and leaned against the tree's trunk. She started telling the little tree stories of how the sunrise looked as it touched the mountains and how the fields looked when the corn was tall. She talked about anything she could think of while her family brought

bucket after bucket of water, soaking the little tree's roots and the ground around it, softening the earth to make it easier for the tree to settle down, but still nothing happened.

"I don't think it worked," said Carolyn's brother.

"I'm sorry," said her father, hugging her again.

Carolyn wiped the tears from her face. "Thank you for trying," she said. "Can someone bring me the rocking chair and blanket? I'd like to stay out here a while longer."

She sat with the little tree until well after dark, talking and telling it stories as if they were still in the forest. She talked until her voice was hoarse, and she shivered in the night air under the light blanket her mother had brought her, but she couldn't bring herself to leave.

Finally her parents came out with a lantern. "It's time to come in," her father said gently. "Your friend wouldn't have wanted you to get sick sitting out here all night." He helped her to her feet and handed her the crutches.

"I'll warm you up some soup," her mother said, lifting the lantern higher to look at her daughter. She gasped, her gaze going past Carolyn to the little tree.

Carolyn turned and let out a squeal of delight. Tiny, bright green leaves were springing up all along the little tree's branches.

"You're alive!" Carolyn said. She flung herself toward the little tree, letting the crutches fall away as she wrapped her arms around its trunk.

The little tree rustled its branches and stretched its roots deep into the soil, happily drinking in the sound of its friend's voice as it made itself at home.

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