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### The Cottonwood Tree

Beside the rutted dirt road that leads from our house to open range, around seven miles out, there stands an old, old cottonwood tree. It was immense even when my great-grandparents lived here, back around eighty years ago, and it hasn't changed much since. The tree's massive base is divided into two trunks each too thick to reach around, both scarred with age and drought and sun. Roots as thick as a man's waist sprawl out across the ground like snakes before they claw their way down through the heavy red clay and sink deep in an endless quest for water. In places the tree's bark is torn off, exposing the weathered, graying wood beneath, and far above in the canopy long-dead branches hang like shattered limbs. It is a formidable old tree.

A girl died under that tree. She'd gone out late one night and never came back. No one ever knew what she was doing out there, seven miles from the house and walking into the middle of nowhere. They searched for her all the next day and found her just at evening, when the last rays of dying light shone on her face. She was sitting slumped against the massive trunk, in a place where the humped roots made a little hollow, with not a mark on her. At first they thought she was only sleeping. But she was dead. Her hands were cold, too cold for a September evening, and her heart had stopped. Her name was Amelia, and if she had lived she would have been my great-great aunt.

Something about that story always fascinated me. I'd only seen the cottonwood tree a few times, but I could picture the scene so clearly--Amelia sitting under the tree, head bowed. Amelia, my namesake. Why had she gone so far out into the desert like that? It might have been imagination, but the searchers who found her said she looked like she was waiting for someone. I always wondered who that person could be.

But that evening in September, great-great-aunt Amelia was the last thing on my mind. My older sister Anne and my dad were returning today from a weeklong trip. They'd already been delayed two days, and I couldn't wait to see them both again. Anne was nineteen, five years older than I was, and in a few months she would be going to college in the city. That's what the trip was for--to give Anne a chance to look around the campus and get everything ready before the term started.

It was just starting to get dark when they got back, and the sky was streaked with red. The front door clicked open, and Dad and Anne walked into the living room where Mom and I were sitting. I could tell from their faces that something was very, very wrong.

"What happened?" I asked nervously. For a long minute, no one spoke.

Then Dad sat down on the couch with a sigh, rubbing his forehead. "I took Anne to the doctor while we were gone because she wasn't feeling well. He said..." Dad hesitated. "He said she has cancer."

I sat there frozen, only half hearing what he said next. How could this happen? I felt like I was half-awake, half-dreaming. Anne was my sister, my confidante, my best and only friend. I couldn't even begin to imagine life without her. What if she died?

I only knew one person who'd had cancer, an older woman in town who used to invite Anne and me in for cookies on our way home from school, way back when I was in first grade. She got thyroid cancer when I was about seven and died three months later. I remember going to her funeral. Her grave was just a little mound of red dirt, so small under the immense blue sky. I was terrified that the same thing would happen to Anne.

The rest of the evening went by in a blur. I kept remembering back when Anne and I were younger, when we would play together and laugh at each other's jokes. I remembered how,

one time, when I slipped and spilled paint all over the floor, Anne helped me clean it up and never said a word to Mom and Dad. She was the only person I told my secrets to. When we got older, Anne went with me on hikes to the far reaches of the ranch where we would talk for hours. Everyone in town knew me as Anne's little sister.

I don't remember getting out of bed, but late, late that night I found myself walking along the road that led out to open range. I was trying to escape, to run away from the facts I couldn't face. Most dreams are hazy, nonsensical. Not this one. The moon was a silver bonfire in the sky, and I could see every shadow from every stone in the road. An immense silence seemed to shroud the desert. The only sound in all that stillness was the thudding of my boots as I walked. The cool night wind smelled like sagebrush, silence, and dust.

I walked mile after mile after mile, unwilling to run home and unable to run away from my thoughts. On and on I went, deeper out into the desert. A tiny voice inside my head told me that I had come too far already, that I should just turn around and head back home, that I might run into danger if I kept going. I didn't listen. On and on I walked, further into the night.

After what seemed like several hours, I reached the cottonwood tree. It stood stark and black against the starlit sky, reaching skeletal fingers of shadow across the road. Everything around the tree was shrouded in darkness. But in the area of deepest shadow, where the gnarled roots humped up to make a little hollow, there was a pale, unearthly shape sitting slumped against the tree's massive trunk. Waiting.

I knew all too well what I was seeing, but I couldn't admit it even to myself. Something drew me deeper and deeper into the shadow of the ancient tree, closer to the hunched figure. I walked forward on leaden feet, as powerless to escape now as I had been to escape the

knowledge of my sister's cancer. Closer and closer. Every second was an hour. I could feel my heartbeat, a strange slow pounding deep in my chest.

Now I was only a few feet away from the white shape under the tree, close enough to touch or be touched. Its head was bent--a girl's head, with pale locks of hair falling over the face. The edges of the figure appeared strangely blurred, and it glowed with a faint, eerie light.

Suddenly the figure raised its head, and I saw a face I knew only from a single faded photograph. Amelia. Her eyes were hidden in shadow as deep as the shadows under the tall cottonwood tree, and her expression was somber, almost mask-like. Something tugged at my mind as I looked at her, something I couldn't quite pin down.

Suddenly, she stood up, skirts swirling, and beckoned me to follow. I did. There was nothing else I *could* do. She walked out from the shadows of the tree, out to the moonlight, and started down the road the way I'd come. The night was even quieter than it was before. All I heard was the soft sound of my footsteps. The girl made no sound at all. In the moonlight she appeared dimmer, more unreal, than she had in the darkness under the tree.

On and on we walked, mile after mile. My feet ached with every step, and my legs were numb. It was cold, too cold for September, and I was shivering. The cottonwood tree had faded into the black horizon hours ago. Now the moon had sunk down into the canyons, and the landscape was shadowed and unchanging. On and on we walked, back through the silent desert the way I'd come. The girl stayed a few steps ahead of me, just a pale shape in the dark.

We had reached the cattle guard, a half-mile from the house, when the girl stopped and turned towards me. I saw her face for the second time, a pale shadow against the edge of the horizon. She was almost transparent now, and the sky was turning gray around the edges.

Then she spoke for the first time. Her voice was husky and low, with a strange echoing quality. “Tonight you nearly died because you were afraid of what the future might hold. But neither life nor death is anything to fear. Remember that.”

Something was tugging at my mind again, something that sent a chill down my spine. Then I realized what it was. The ghost girl’s face was a mirror image of my own. With a shiver I recognized the shape of my forehead, the curve of my mouth, the shadow of freckles along my cheekbones, all perfectly reflected as though I was looking at myself. As the first rays of sunlight kissed the horizon, she vanished like smoke on the wind.

I woke up the next morning around 9:00, far later than usual, when the sunlight was painting gold streaks on my pillow. Somehow, the world didn’t seem nearly as dark now as it had yesterday evening. Then I remembered. The ghost girl. The tree. It had to have been a dream--surely I wouldn’t have hiked out seven miles into the desert and been led back by a *ghost*, of all things--but there was just enough doubt in my mind to make me uneasy.

Dream or no dream, last night had changed my perspective. I knew now that I couldn’t escape the future, whether it held life or death. I had to face it, as hard as that might turn out to be. Thinking of the ghost girl’s words, I shook my head. I didn’t agree with her. But being afraid didn’t change what might happen, and it wouldn’t change my actions either. I was done with running away. Slowly I sat up and climbed out of bed.

All my muscles were stiff and sore, and I winced as I stood up. I’d gone to bed fully dressed, and didn’t bother to change clothes. Limping because of a forgotten blister on my heel, I hiked down the stairs to find my family and breakfast. Mom, Dad, and Anne were sitting around the table, the remains of breakfast still on their plates. I went up to Anne and gave her a tight hug. “I love you,” I said.

She returned the hug and patted my back. "I love you too."

After we let go, Mom told me, "There are some more eggs for you on the back of the stove. We weren't sure when you'd be up."

Mom and Dad got up from the table when I was about halfway through breakfast, but Anne stayed. "Do you want to go for a drive?" she asked me.

We walked out to the truck and she handed me the keys. Anne was trying to teach me to drive before she went to college, although with dubious success. I still didn't really understand how to shift gears. I started the engine, and on a sudden whim, turned down the road that led out past the cottonwood tree.

Anne was staring out the window as I drove, deep in thought. Usually she had her eyes glued to the road, making sure I didn't hit anything, but not today. "You know, I wasn't that surprised when the doctor told me. I hadn't been feeling well for a while, but...I don't know." She sighed. "I guess I thought if I never brought it up, I wouldn't have to deal with it."

It seemed like Anne had wanted to run away the same way I had. I hadn't realized that.

Then there was the cottonwood tree, a little way off the side of the road. I slowed down, shoved the clutch in, and stopped.

"Anne?" I hesitated for a second. Telling Anne about which boy I liked was one thing, telling her I thought I'd seen a ghost was another. But I continued. "Something really strange happened to me last night. I dreamed I walked all the way out here and saw Great-Aunt Amelia's ghost sitting under the tree. She led me back home, and--well, I guess I want to see whether it really happened or not."

Anne reached over and turned off the ignition key, and we both got out. What evidence, if any, would a ghost leave behind? It was midday, but the cottonwood's massive canopy turned

the area under it into twilight. As we walked into the tree's shadow, I halfway expected to see a pale white shape sitting slumped against the trunk. I shivered a little, remembering the face so like my own.

Neither I nor Anne could find anything to show whether I'd been out last night or not. The road and the ground around the tree was hard red clay, too dry to take a boot print. I was disappointed by the lack of evidence one way or the other, but felt a flicker of relief. If last night had been real, I wasn't at all sure I wanted to know. The way things had turned out, hard red clay could bury all the unsettling questions raised by my encounter. But further out behind the tree, where Anne was, where neither I nor the ghost had gone, the ground turned from hard clay to soft sand.

Suddenly Anne gasped and I raced to her side. She pointed to the ground, and I saw a pawprint larger than my palm. Cougar. A little ways away, there was a bloody, half-buried rabbit carcass surrounded by more massive pawprints. The tracks were fresh--so fresh that both of us instinctively looked up to the high branches of the cottonwood tree to make sure the cougar wasn't still around. The hot September sun suddenly seemed cold as I realized the full meaning of the ghost girl's words. *You nearly died because you were afraid of what the future might hold.*

Anne shook her head slowly. "If you really had come out here last night..."