

The Tree

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Brief Candle
Press

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Cover and book design: Brief Candle Press.

Cover image based on "Irvington Woods," Albert Bierstadt.

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Fonts: Allegheny, Doves Type, and IM FELL English.

First Brief Candle Press edition published 2019.

www.briefcandlepress.com

ISBN: 978-1-942319-35-1

Chapter I

Abimeal Sawyer crouched alongside the creek, scowling. He knew that he had to get water for the house, and all the way out to the creek, he'd been crunching through frozen grass, his frown deepening with every step, anticipating the sight he now beheld.

It had been cold enough overnight to freeze the slow-moving creek, and now he had to clear ice from the surface before he could dip out enough for his father's morning tea and their gruel. He missed his mother's cooking almost more than anything else, though of course he would never say that aloud.

He'd had to fill in where he could for the work she did around the house, while his father threw himself into his work with more fury than he had even through the long months of his mother's final descent into weakness and death. At least she could rest in the little graveyard just beyond the boundaries of the village.

As for those she left behind, there was always more work to do. With a resigned shake of his head, Abe crouched and used the bowl of the old dipper to crack the ice. He tossed the shattered bits out onto the ground, watching them settle and begin melting as he waited for the mud to clear from the hole he'd made in the surface of the stream.

When the water again ran clear, he lifted one dipper full after another up to fill the wooden pail. Its worn and loosened sides

seeped some of the water right back out again, but he knew from experience that once he had it filled up past the top band, he'd be able to get enough water back to the house to fill the kettle and stir into the pot with a precious handful of meal.

Nearly every day started the same way, and by the time he got back, he knew that his father would be grumbling about how long it had taken him and chiding him to hurry, always hurry, so that the day of work could begin in earnest.

Despite their family name, Abe's father worked not as a Sawyer, but as a lumber cutter, selecting and felling the trees that were then sawn into boards and sent over to England for building the fine houses and warehouses of London and beyond.

Cyrus Sawyer had managed only a few years past to persuade a surveyor to come out to his grant to mark which trees had to be kept for the King's Navy, and which he could cut without further limitation. Having gotten that boon, he had set himself the task of extracting every shilling he could from the grant, and this focus had driven him to only hire assistance when he could not otherwise get the work done, while working himself ragged day after day.

Abe remembered the grim set of his father's mouth when his mother had started coughing harder and harder with each passing day, taking longer to get her work at the hearth done, and having to pause frequently as she labored for breath. The day that she had brought a handkerchief away from her mouth after a particularly prolonged fit, and Abe and his father had seen it stained scarlet with blood, his father had said only, "Mind you help your mam, boy, and do as she bids you."

The first morning that she had been too weak to rise from her bed, Abe's father had pushed the dipper and bucket into the

boy's hands. "You know what needs doing."

And when his mother had coughed her last, her rattling breath falling silent and her skin waxen and cold, his father had grimaced outright, reaching for his cash-purse and measuring out the coins to hand to Abe. "Go and fetch the pastor, and bid him hire the grave-digger."

Abe had slipped out, unwilling to let his father see the hot tears that threatened. The last he saw of his mother, his father was bending over her corpse, closing her sightless eyes with uncharacteristic gentleness. The pastor's wife had kept Abe in her warm, bustling kitchen while her husband attended to the necessary tasks for a burial. The loaf she'd offered him, fresh from the fine bread-oven alongside her hearth, should have been ambrosia, but it tasted like ashes in Abe's mouth.

The winding-sheet had seemed to Abe like too little to shield her from the soil that the gravedigger began shoveling into the grave after the pastor had finished with his part of the ceremony. The clods fell with a muffled sound, and Abe looked away, willing himself to think of something—anything—else.

He'd noted a raven standing upon one of the gravestones, crooking its head at him and uttering a low croak of a call. The bird seemed to be looking at him almost in sympathy, but Abe knew that it was beyond the simple creature's ken to understand the pain and loss that he was feeling.

Later, Abe had fled the house and his father's unyielding silence, seeking instead the comfort of the woods. He walked at first, and then broke into a run, his feet finding their way along the familiar paths without conscious effort on his part. The part of the family grant that his father had already worked fell behind,

and he slowed as he entered the virgin forest where his childhood footpaths had become overgrown and tangled.

He had stopped finally in a small clearing where he had spent many a quiet afternoon in his younger days. Surrounded by soaring pine trees, it felt more like a sacred place to him than did the village's small church, and certainly more comforting than the graveyard would ever be again.

He'd leaned his back against one of the great pine's trunks and slid down to sit on the soft ground. This tree, like all of those around the clearing, was marked with three hatchet slashes into the bark, forming the King's broad arrow. Abe's father had explained to him that this signified that it was reserved to use as a mast for one of the Navy's great sailing-ships, chosen for its size and apparent soundness.

It had struck Abe as odd to consider that these seemingly unmovable boles might someday travel the globe under the Crown's broad pennant, but for now they formed a firm, solid, comforting cage for his wild and uncontrolled thoughts.

What could possibly drive his father to strive for riches even as his wife lay dying? What kind of world was it where a mother could be parted from her child by rough cloth and mounded earth? How would Abe find his way into a future without her, and with only a rare glance from his father?

The dim light of the forest had darkened into evening before Abe rose from the ground and made his way back to the house. There, his father was scraping something burned and blackened out of the spider, his habitual frown deepened into an outright scowl. "Supper's ruined," he'd said, and jerked his head to the small barrel beside the hearth. "Have an apple."

Abe had nodded and taken one of the last of the hoarded fruits. He'd retreated to his pallet in the corner and bitten thoughtfully into the apple, chewing slowly and trying to ignore the redness he'd glimpsed around his father's eyes, a hint that the man might be anything but as emotionless as a stone.

Chapter 2

The kettle was steaming and the meal had softened enough to eat before Abe's father spoke. "Working out at the edge of the big clearing today. You'd best stay clear. Plenty to do here."

"Yes, sir," Abe said, hiding his irritation. While he had no desire to work on his father's crew, he didn't like being treated as though he was his father's housewife, responsible for all of the household chores in his mother's absence.

He spooned out his serving of gruel and sat down at the heavy table to eat. The pail sat beside the hearth, leaking the last of the hard-won water out onto the floor. He'd have to clean the mess that left, in addition to the rest of the ordinary daily work.

Slurping at his gruel, he looked over at the sack that held the dried beef he'd bought a fortnight prior. While he knew that his father would scowl at the extravagance, he decided to make a stew with it for supper. There were a few onions left, and he thought he might even be able to shake a bit of flour out of the cask to thicken it. It would be nice, though, to have a few other staples.

It was too cold to bathe in the creek, and he was just as glad for that. He ran his fingers through his hair, thinking that it might be time to cut it again. Or, he thought, he could just keep his hat on his head when he was out in public and let it go a bit longer.

"Might I have some money for eggs?" His old aunt—his

father's sister—kept an unruly flock of chickens in town, and had offered him a handsome price the last time he'd passed by. He thought he might be able to get her to go even lower, if he sweet-talked her enough. Like her brother, though, she was usually taciturn and dour, so it was hard to predict.

His father grunted, "What for?"

"Thought they'd be a nice break from the gruel. The meal's mostly gone anyway, so I should get some more soon, and flour besides." Abe marveled at his boldness, even as he cringed inwardly in expectation of his father's inevitable explosion.

Instead, his father sighed. "I suppose. You ain't getting any smaller. Got to eat; soon I'll start showing you the trade, need your strength for that." He passed over a handful of coins.

"Tell my sister hello for me."

Abe took the money, saying, "Yes, sir." He didn't think that the old woman would much care whether he conveyed his father's greetings or not, but he also knew that there was every chance that if he failed to do so, his father would learn of it somehow, and that would be just yet another failure for which he could be berated.

Cyrus Sawyer stood from the table, slurping down the last of his tea, and dashing the dregs into the fire, where they hissed and popped. He set the cup down on the table, swept his shaggy hair back, and slipped his work hat firmly over his head.

"Mind yourself in town, son," he said, pausing briefly at the door to look at Abe. Already taking his father's cup from the table to wash it, Abe nodded and didn't even look up until after the door had swung closed with a bang.

He finished tidying up, deciding that the water by the hearth would dry by itself. He banked the fire and donned his hat and

jacket, picking up the pail and dipper again. The air had warmed as the sun climbed the sky, and birdsong along the track toward the village made it seem almost more like springtime than the early days of autumn.

The first hint of fall's riotous colors on the hills around the house, though, revealed the season too clearly for any mere birds' singing to overcome. He returned to the stream and dipped out enough water to soak the beef in, shaking his head at the degree to which the ice had already melted away from the edges of the hole he'd made.

Pouring the water into the raised spider and setting it over the banked fire to just warm it, he pulled out the dried beef and dropped it in. Satisfied, he swung his rucksack over his shoulder and went back out into the bright sunshine and started for the village. He jingled the money in his coin purse and wished that he could afford some squash, but that was a battle for another day. Today, he would get just the flour, meal, and eggs, and he knew that his father's flinty figuring would leave him no money for any other luxuries.

He decided to go first to the mercantile for the meal and flour. No sense in chancing the fragile eggs to more travel than was strictly necessary, and he knew, too, that there was always a chance that his aunt would be in a rare talkative mood, and he wanted to be sure that he wasn't held up so long that Mister Harper at the mercantile was already gone for the afternoon.

On the porch at Harper's, there was one of the usual pairs of bored old men, perusing the same old broadsides from down in Boston or Philadelphia, and arguing over their content. As Abe came within earshot, he could hear that the perennial topic was

Governor Wentworth's unwelcome energy of late in regard to surveying and inspecting lumber. He stopped just within earshot, interested in hearing the inevitable argument.

"Those accursed surveyors little Johnny has been sending around to lay a measuring rod on every plank and log have been threatening to put the mark on any lumber they like," one old man said, spitting onto the street for emphasis.

"Nay, not just any," said another, holding his hands up in a placating gesture. "The timber or boards must be plainly in violation of the King's Mark."

His interlocutor spat again. "And once the mark is set upon the lumber, the sheriff seizes it up, and the owner of the sawmill must pay whatever fine he cares to assess, else say farewell to their lumber and their profits, easy as kiss your hand." He lifted the back of his hand to his lips and tossed it by way of demonstration.

Again the other man shook his head. "Now, Ephram, you know that ain't true. The fines are assessed according to the law, which states what fine should be laid on what size timber, all orderly and reasonable-like."

Ephram grumbled, "All I can say is that I liked Governor Wentworth's uncle better, when he were Governor over this colony. He was a right reasonable fellow and tended to his own affairs. Up here in the woods, I like swamp law better'n any mast law, and it troubles me to hear you argue against that, Amos."

"Have a care, Ephram. If we push the governor too far, it will give the Parliament cause to tighten the screws even further."

"Let them try," Ephram exploded. "What good is it to grant a man a parcel of land, and then deny him the blessings of that soil?"

“Tis but a condition of that grant,” Amos said calmly.

“That condition should be set upon the grant, not changed at a whim later. And when we must beg for the surveyor’s deputy to find the time to come and tell us what we may and may not use from our own land, while fallen timber rots and is wasted, I suppose that you call that but a condition as well?”

Ephram scowled at the other man, glaring at him until Amos finally shook his head and said, “We are here at the sufferance of the King and Parliament. If you like a grant that you may do with as you please, why not prove out a nice farm instead? I’m sure that you could get Governor Wentworth to make you a nice offer, given enough of an inducement.”

Ephram said nothing in reply, but only spat a third time, rounding on Abe. “You, there. Your pap, he works that grant of his and has to leave whole stands of trees be, even when experience shows that no more than one out of every twenty will ever be fit for the King’s purposes. How does he like that?”

Abe was startled and alarmed to be drawn into the argument. “Well, uh, to be honest, he hasn’t said, at least not anywhere that I could hear him.”

“Aye, well that one don’t say much where anyone can hear him. You got business with Harper, then?”

“Yes, sir,” Abe said, walking around the two men. He thought he saw Amos giving him a sympathetic look as he passed.

The merchant was glad enough to see him, though he didn’t seem in much of a mood to dicker over prices. In the end, though, Abe was able to purchase the flour he wanted, and even a little more meal than he had anticipated. Perhaps he could make somewhat bigger servings of gruel than usual, and his father would be well

enough satisfied that Abe had made a good bargain.

By the time he came out, his rucksack bulging with the supplies he'd purchased, the old men were much more amicably discussing the shortcomings of Governor Clinton over in New-York. On that question they apparently had no significant disagreement.

The sun had risen high into the sky, and he was feeling warmed through for the first time since he'd left the kitchen that morning. The songbirds were still out in force, calling back and forth to one another, telling stories of love and desire, possession and warning.

One tree in particular seemed laden down with their tiny bodies, the noise almost deafening as Abe passed underneath. He skirted around the outer boundary of the canopy, not wishing to become as decorated as the ground under it was.

From the other side of the road, he felt a chill come over him as he heard the deep croaking call of the raven. As he spotted the fell bird sitting on the branch of a tree there, he almost wished that he had chanced the songbirds instead. The black-feathered creature regarded him as he passed, its head cocking from side to side.

When Abe had passed by without acknowledging the raven, it hopped into the air and perched on the next tree along his route, again uttering a hoarse croak at him. Abe glared at it now, and while he couldn't be sure that it was the same animal that had been present in the graveyard when his mother had been laid to rest, something made him feel certain that it was.

The creature's repeated calls and bobbing head seemed almost provocative to him, daring him to respond. He stooped and picked up a pebble to toss at the unwelcome creature. The bird clearly understood what his intention was and flapped away, calling

out disapprovingly as it went. Abe let the pebble drop back to the road and continued, shaking his head at the creature's antics.

The rest of the walk to his aunt's house was without incident at least, and he was soon walking through the crowd of chickens that stood like guards before the gate to the house. He knew from experience that there was no point in trying to avoid the birds—they would get out of his way on their own as he walked through the flock.

These birds, at least, threatened neither his hat nor his calm, and he was at his aunt's door without delay. As he raised his hand to rap at the door, it flew open, and his aunt stood there, weeping openly, and Abe just stood there dumbfounded at the sight.

She gathered him into her arms, sobbing so hard that he could scarcely understand her. "Oh, you poor boy. You poor, poor lad. I don't know how we're going to make it all work, but I will do what I can for you."

Abe pulled away, bewildered. "Aunt Rosanna, what are you talking about? All I need is some eggs for my father's breakfast tomorrow."

She wailed aloud and dragged him back into a damp embrace. When she could speak somewhat coherently again, she said, "Oh, my poor Abimeal, you don't know yet, do you? Your father was struck down by a falling tree, and died instantly. You are an orphan, and will be in my care from this day forward."