Teach. Write.

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Birch Tree Stories

I have always loved trees, particularly birch trees. There were many birches in the forest where my family and I used to spend our summers. This forest was a bit of a walk from our cabin, so we had to drive to see it. We drove in an open vehicle on a winding dirt road. Dust would spray over us, coating our skin and clothes. I luxuriated in this dust. I loved everything about it. It felt like war paint preparing me for battle.

I was close to a specific group of birches in the forest. The group stood in a circle, off to the side of the other trees. I could relate. The birches were covered with white paper bark and black streaks. I was thoroughly enchanted by those black streaks. I imagined they were words in code. If only I could figure out the code, I would be able to read the birches' stories.

Each time I visited the forest, the birches would wave to me. I felt accepted and celebrated just for being myself. The trees created a thick canopy that allowed for much shade underneath. This shade was the perfect place for moss to grow. I adored moss. I imagined little villages of fairies living in it. I would press my hands into the moss and listen. I didn't press hard enough to injure the fairies, just hard enough so they would know I was there.

Then I would relax into the birches' tempo. My thoughts and breathing slowed. I became like a tree—entirely calm, not worried about my family. Sometimes I would fall asleep, and the birches helped me dream. They took me on adventures to other forests, where they introduced me to different kinds of trees and animals.

Eventually, I would remember that I had to go home. I didn't want to leave. It was painful to be with my family. But the birches didn't want me to get in trouble. They held me gently, reminding me they would be here when I came back.

I remember one special day I spent with the birches. We were alone together. My family must have dropped me off and left. As I lay under the tallest birch, I heard a voice say, "Go ahead, pull off some bark."

I feel this in my body. I look around to see who speaks. No one is there. It must be the birches. The trees have prepared me for this. My body is a finely-tuned instrument designed to hear the trees' voices.

I want to do what the voice instructs. I know the trees have stories inside. I studied trees in school and decided that tree rings were actually stories pressed into layers. If I can just pull off this bark, I know I will find the trees' stories.

"Go ahead. Pull it off."

I grab the tree's bark and gently pull. I'm so afraid to be wrong about the stories.

"You won't be disappointed."

I pull the bark and my life begins to unwind around me. I see my father standing by a crystal clear lake. He holds a fishing pole in his hands. He is drunk. My mother is angry. I'm angry. But I never say a word or show any feelings. That is not allowed.

The fish flop uselessly in the bucket. I feel sorry we caught them now. Sometimes we throw the fish back into the lake. Other times we don't. Then I eat the fish, just like everyone else—breaded and fried in the pan.

"Go ahead, keep pulling."

I pull off another layer. This time it's my mother. She stands by our cabin. Her eyes are lifeless, like the fish in the bucket. I see that someone has captured her and is keeping her prisoner. She wants to do the same to me.

"Don't be afraid. We're here."

My mother shakes her head and brushes past me. Her sweater feels like acid on my skin.

"Here," the tree says, and hands me a small piece of bark. "Sit down. Rest. This is a lot for someone so young."

I sit on soft moss and lean my back against the tree. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. The birch presses against me. I know I am safe. My eyes close and I drift into sleep. In my dream, the tree and I walk together down the dirt road. We walk as a team. No one can bother us. The fish roll their eyes and I feel like screaming. The tree puts just the right amount of pressure on my back to counteract the acid of my mother's sweater. My mother begins to fade, until it's just the tree and me together, walking down the road.

We make our way back to the forest. The birches wave us in. I tell them about my mother. The oldest birch grimaces. The others do the same. Then they begin to shake their branches in unison. As they shake, pieces of paper fall to the ground. Page after page flutters around me, until there are enough pages to make a book.

When the shaking has stopped, I gather up the pages and settle in for an afternoon of reading. The birches listen intently as I begin to tell their story. Then they lean in close and wrap their branches around me. I decide it might be worthwhile to stay alive just one more day.

Author's Note: This is a work of fiction. Although its form is that of an autobiography, it is not one. The opinions expressed are those of the characters and should not be confused with the author's.