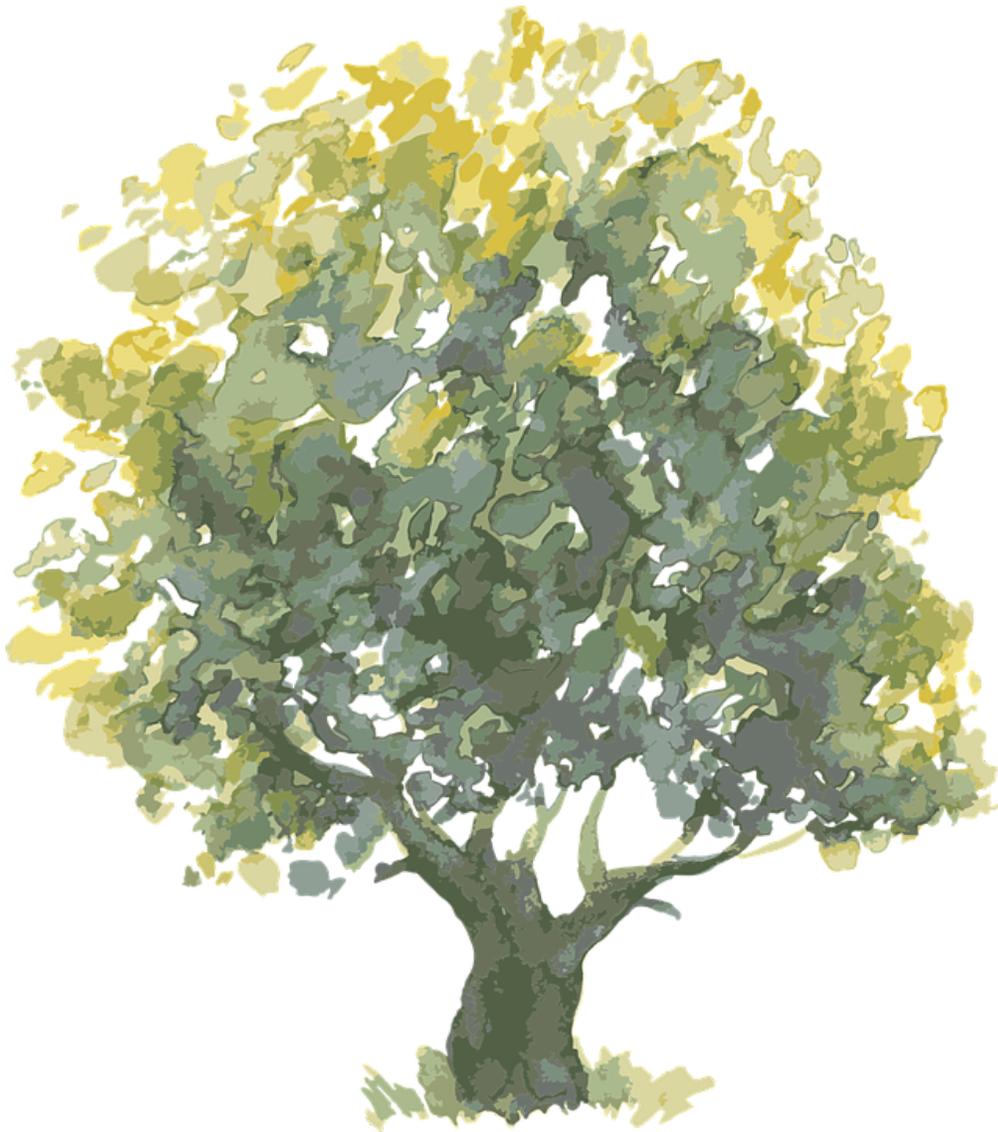


Heartfelt

By Annika Thakarar



Chapter One

Lidya knew she should come down soon. But for what? The tree made her feel safe. And secure. The cluttered, hot cottage of old Liz Denger did not.

Lidya had four siblings, all of whom had moved in with Mrs. Denger. They all seemed comfortable and at home in Mrs. Denger's house. But Lydia wasn't. And Mrs. Denger knew it.

Chapter Two

Lidya's only friend was the tree. It listened, and talked sometimes, through the rustling of the leaves.

"Lidya!" Mrs. Denger called.

Hunger forced the girl out of her nook in the branches and into the cottage.

The food was cabbage and wheat bread, old and unappetizing. But that was all there was to eat when you lived with Mrs. Denger.

Chapter Three

The tree had enough leaves to be comfy. More comfortable than the straw that Lidya's siblings slept on. It was cold, but Lidya's mother had knit her a blanket when she was still alive. Lidya had not taken the blanket off since she arrived at Mrs. Denger's house.

The smell of sap awoke Lydia. Men in bright yellow shirts were putting up tape around the tree. She scrambled to sit up.

"Hey! Whatcha you doing up there, girl?" One of the men was shouting at her.

"This is my tree," Lydia replied.

"Not for long," the man said. 'Cause we're cuttin' it down!"

Chapter Four

Lydia clung to a branch, not letting go, but the man hoisted her down and pulled out an ax.

There was a loud *crack* as the ax hit the tree.

The wood splintered. The great tree fell down, hitting the ground with a booming thud.

Behind the fallen tree, Mrs. Denger stood, hands on hips. She had a smile that suggested she had known exactly what would happen that day.

Epilogue

Lydia stared at the shabby cottage. Cracks ran along the brick walls. It had been 14 years since she had last been here.

Her gaze dropped to the tree trunk.

Poking out of the severed wood was a tiny trunk, ending in a tangle of branches and leaves.

Lydia smiled. Then she turned and disappeared back into the woods.

The End