

# If Trees Could Talk

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Caren and her father celebrating Passover in 1990

For centuries, man has tried to bend nature to his will. People plant rows of arborvitae to serve as yard barriers, like the government puts up cement walls along the parkway. The shrubs are forced to stand in a line all day long, shoulder to shoulder like soldiers, hiding all of the illicit goings-on in a person's yard. The arborvitae are willful and don't always stand for it. In some yards, the row of bright green shrubs is dotted by a few that have turned brown and crispy, as if to say to the homeowner, you're not the boss of me.

Perhaps the noisiest war of will involves the leaves. Lawns in towns like mine are cleaned several times a week to rid them of every leaf that may have fallen down in the night. From now until Thanksgiving, armies of landscaping trucks roam the streets like Russian tanks. They stop every couple of houses, open up the back gate of the truck and dispatch a platoon of men, each one wearing a machine on their back and

carrying a large hose. The men disperse to all corners of the property blowing the leaves into piles and then into bags, where they are carried off the premises like spent uranium and disposed of in some leaf facility far far away, possibly in South Jersey.

I, too, have tried to bend nature to my will. I've pinned ivy to the lattice in my backyard with a staple gun so that it's hanging like Jesus on the cross. I've planted shade-loving plants in the sun and sun-loving plants in the shade, not caring a lick about their needs, simply because that's where I wanted them. And I once planted a maple in a concrete planter in New York City, knowing it would grow up to be a full size tree. The maple would have had every right to kick off the shackles of the container and give me the finger as it ran down the street.

But in the end, like a dog that cannot be tamed, nature does what nature does. We live across the street from

a small park, and two years ago, my husband and I paid \$1,000 each to have memorial trees planted there for our deceased fathers. I was very close with my father, and I'm more determined than my husband, so I told him I wanted my father's tree to be in the front row of the park, where it could easily be seen from our front porch. My father-in-law's tree would be clearly visible as well but in the second row, about 10 feet behind. I thought a tree, with its height and gangly limbs, would feel almost human-like, like having my father standing there in the park, watching over us on warm summer nights as we sat on the porch having cocktails.

A tree can do that, almost become the person with whom you associate it. During COVID, my son and I went to a local nursery known for its discounted plants and trees, and as we went to pay, I saw the line to the cash registers was about 30 people long. I told my son I would wait in line, and he could go pick





Caren with her son Eddie in front of his cherry tree



Caren's dad, Edward "Eddie" Chesler

out a tree for our front lawn. He came back 15 minutes later with a cherry tree, though its flowers had already bloomed so we didn't know what color they would be. The following year, we saw they were white, like a spring bride. But long after my son moves out to start his own family, I will associate the tree with him so strongly, it will be as if a piece of him is still at home.

Late last summer, I noticed my father's tree felt dry to the touch and didn't have a lot of leaves. It looked like it was dying. I looked over at my father-in-law's tree, and not only wasn't it dying but it was almost flourishing, standing erect, green leaves on every branch, almost like my father-in-law looked in real life. My father withered away from cancer at 62. My father-in-law lived until about 94 and was healthy almost until the end.

I reached out to the councilwoman who had helped us purchase the trees. She arranged a meeting with an arborist, and we met with him in the park. "We've had a drought this summer," he said, bending a few branches of my father's tree where buds should have formed. "It doesn't look good."

Apparently, the Department of Public Works had put bags at the base of some of the trees to make sure they remained moist during the drought. My father's tree wasn't among them. He'd been left out to dry.

I took the arborist over to my father-in-law's tree. "How about this one? It's fine. Even in a drought," I said. "Well, if you look down on the ground, there's a line here where the grass is green and growing. There must be some water under the ground there," he said.

I couldn't help but feel that if there is a God, he may have seen the zeal with which I pushed to have my father in the front row of trees, and I was being punished for it, like a greedy child having his hand slapped for taking candy.

The councilwoman said they would put a watering bag on my father's tree and give it extra water, though she couldn't guarantee any of that would actually happen, given that the public works department had limited manpower. In the

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meantime, she was going to order me a new tree, to be planted not far from the old one.

I felt a heavy sadness. Losing my father was devastating. Losing the tree felt like I was losing him all over again – not quite like an earthquake but an aftershock.

The next day as I was running, I spotted a public works employee putting a bag around a tree and watering it. I stopped to alert him about my father's tree in the park a few streets away. "It's dying," I said and started to cry. "I'm sorry," I said, wiping my eyes. "I'll make sure it gets watered," he said.

The next morning, I saw his little white truck by the park, and he was standing at my father's tree putting a bag around the base of it. He then put a hose in the top of the bag and filled it up with water.

For the next few months, the little white truck would come twice a week, and the man would get out and refill the bag with water. I couldn't help but think my crying had made him more diligent.

During those months, I would inspect the tree periodically, and I saw there were small green and red buds on some of the branches. When a landscaper came out in early November to plant the replacement tree nearby, I brought him over to my father's tree to take a look. "See these buds? There are some here, and here, and here," I said. "That's good, right?" "That's good," he said.

And all it took was water. I would have paid another thousand dollars for vitamins and fertilizer, for grafting and splints, if it would have extended the life of the tree.

If only I could have extended the life of my father, just a bit, long enough for him to have met my son. Funny, though, that they've never met, and yet their trees are just across the street from each other, close enough that if my father's tree whispered, my son's tree would hear it. Maybe one night, after the sun has set and the park is lit by the moon, my father could read my son a bedtime story. I wouldn't tell.

**Caren Chesler writes an essay column on Substack called "Suburban Diary." She is also working on a novel.**



The tree Caren planted in memory of her father in Puzosia Park.



Caren and her dad while visiting Israel circa 1978