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Journal #2

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JOURNAL #2

by Trisha Fontan

I awoke on a cold wet January morning earlier this year to the sound of a telephone ringing. It was so early that my first instinct was to turn off the alarm clock. It instantly occurred to me that something terrible must have happened. The conversation seemed amazingly short for the magnitude of its purpose. My aunt and uncle had been killed in a car crash just a few hours earlier. I neglected to ask a single question other than to have the caller repeat the simple statement. I hung up the phone. I vividly remember turning away from the side table and reaching for my boyfriend to be sure that I was actually awake, to be sure that this was, indeed, real. After sharing the statement of their passing I realized that I craved information. I needed to understand what had happened, how it had happened, and where it had happened, as though, somehow, the brutal facts surrounding their death would bring it validity and purpose. Perhaps these would allow me to understand why it had happened.

In the modern age of instant gratification on the worldwide web, I was able to find the details of the accident within minutes. My aunt had been driving south on Highway 101 just north of Santa Rosa when she seemingly swerved to miss something in the slow lane of the freeway and lost control on the rain-slicked surface. She slammed into a redwood tree along the embankment. They both died instantly. Although I had the answers to my questions, the real question – the "why" – was, of course, still unanswered. My aunt made one simple and instant decision and it changed the entire future of my family forever. It just seemed so ridiculously unfair, for there was open pasture on either side of the redwood tree. Had she acted a second sooner, or later, they simply would have skidded off the road and ruined a barbed wire fence.

In John Steinbeck's novel *To a God Unknown*, Joseph's wife dies instantly after making a spontaneous decision to climb a slippery rock. As Steinbeck described Joseph's reaction, it was as though he read my mind: "It was too simple, too easy, too quick" (Steinbeck 132). It is ridiculous to think that I would have wanted their deaths to be any other way, yet somehow the reality that something as final as death could occur instantly is equally ridiculous.

I find myself thinking often about the redwood tree. Long after my family and, most likely, my future children's families have left the earth, the tree will still be standing. The gruesome scar of where the metal of the car tore the bark from tree will be a long forgotten battle wound of one of nature's true giants. But I wonder if the tree will have forgotten, if the tree has any idea of the pain it unwittingly inflicted on my family as it firmly stood its ground against the onslaught of an out-of-control vehicle. For most, the single tree is simply one of many redwoods planted to create a majestic fence to separate the highway from the open pastures it divided on its course to connect Northern and Southern California. However, for me, it is the marker of the needless end of lives that I miss everyday; the tree is a constant reminder.

According to Steinbeck in *To a God Unknown*, "Life cannot be cut off quickly. One

cannot be dead until the things he changed are dead" (Steinbeck 136). I cannot help but find it ironic that their deaths are now entwined with a tree that will live for thousands of years. I can't help but wonder, long after those who know about the history of the tree are gone, if the tree will still somehow tell people. I wonder if a child aimlessly looking out the window on a long boring stretch of highway will have a moment of clarity to understand that life is precious; if someone will suddenly understand that when you die it is not really you who is affected but rather those whose lives you have forever changed and left behind to suffer.

My aunt had no children of her own, and she was the closest in age to my mother of all her three sisters; she was, without question, my mother's best friend. They spoke multiple times a day and so, by default, so did we. She called to find my mom when she didn't answer the phone; she called to ask me what I was making for dinner when she didn't feel like cooking; and she called just to see what I was doing, because she loved me that much. I was as comfortable in her home as in my own, or in that of my parents. I entered without knocking, I raided the fridge without asking, and I laid aimlessly on the couch with the remote to avoid going home to my own household chores. Yet now she is gone and her home is no longer comfortable and I think I may hate a redwood tree.

In reality I think what I really hate is that the tree is alive – and will be for thousands of years – and my aunt and uncle are dead. I also know that there is more than a single redwood tree that affects my life. There are two redwood trees in the yard of my childhood home that represent the opposite of death: they mark my birth and the birth of my sister. They were planted by my father. According to Steinbeck in *To a God Unknown*, "Everything seems to work with a recurring rhythm except life. There is only one birth and only one death" (Steinbeck 137). Now in my life I am faced with these live pillars that will forever mark these two events and two of the most important days of my mother's life – the day that I was born and the day that her best friend and sister died. More importantly, I am faced with the reality that my soul is now divided between two redwood trees that will live far beyond my own life here on earth.