

## The Tree Whisperer

A live oak was killing my lawn and my spirit until, one day, a mystical old man showed up on my doorstep.

**T**HE LAWN HAD COME to affect me. It disrupted my equanimity, addled my sense of reason. Green once, it had withered into nothingness, leaving in its place an expanse of hard dirt, crusted and creviced, taunting. I interpreted the asphalt-like terrain of my front yard not just as a mere gardening problem, but as a challenge from Gaia herself, a test of my personal character. Whatever. It was hideous. It was University Park. I needed grass.

First, however, the cause of the condition had to be isolated, agriculturally. I had a few theories. Torrential storms several months prior to the lawn's vanishing, I surmised, formed persistent puddles that rotted the root system that fed the grass blades. Or maybe it was the croquet. Or the horde of Snow Whites on Halloween. The more I thought about it, though, the more I believed it had to do with the tree. For the past 100 years, a magnificent live oak has been sprouting from the center of the yard, framing our house in a massive canopy of limbs and leaves overhead, and an intricate web of roots below.

The experts confirmed my hunch. "No grass will grow," said one. "The roots are in the way."

"Never," said another, giggling. "The tree is stealing all the nutrients."

**HE CAME, HE SAW:** Joe Carrillo was born in a zoo, is half Cherokee, and says trees communicate with him.

Still, I had hope. Such a wondrous presence wouldn't create disharmony beneath it. Impossible. I went to Home Depot and bought some sod. I chopped it up and laid it down, hosed it every hour and stomped on it, like grapes in a Roman bucket. I willed it to grow. And it did. Until it didn't.

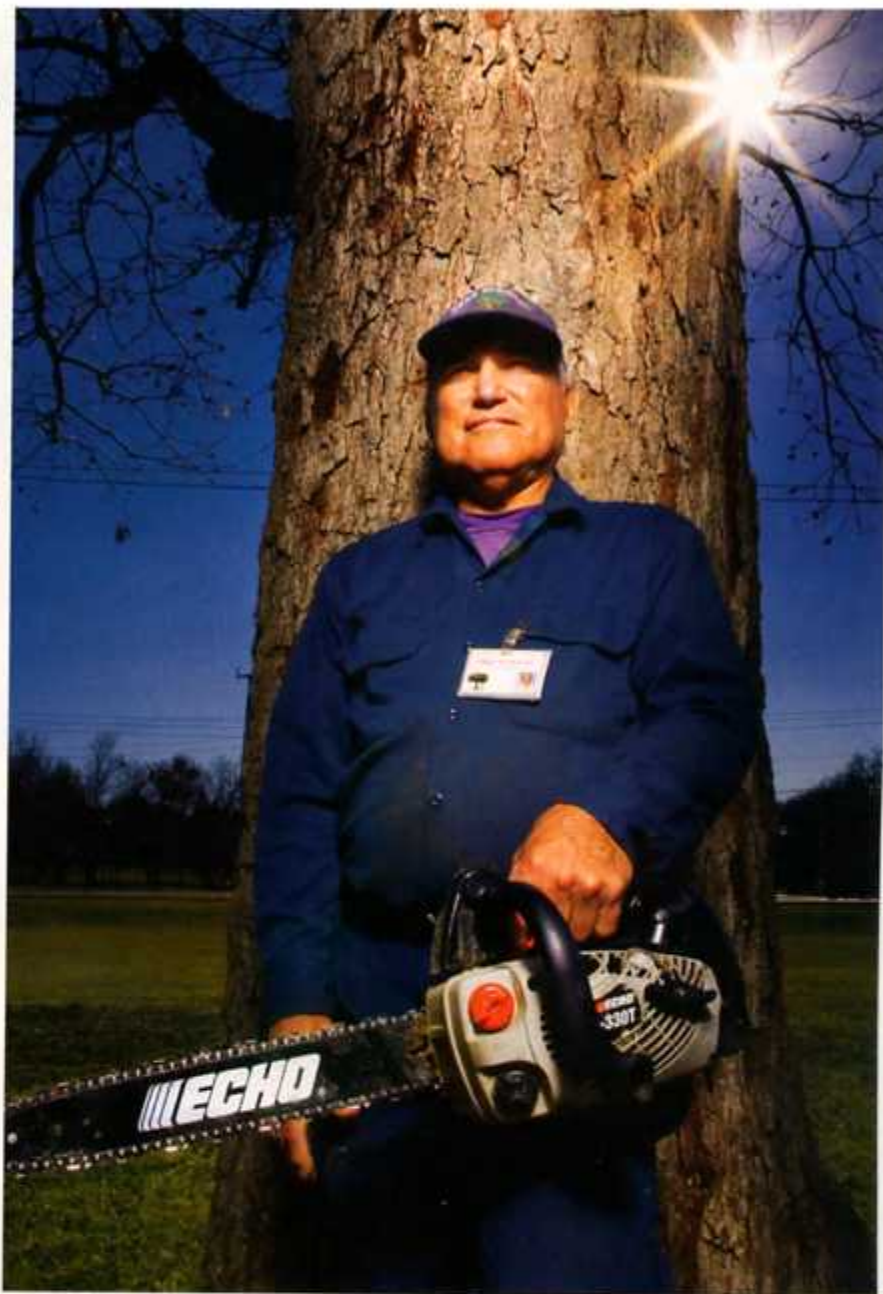
"Put down rocks," said my mother from New York. "It will be Japanese." Dejected, I hung up my trowel and went inside.

Weeks passed. I shut my eyes coming and going. I used the side door. One morning, I was going to order a jar of fake grass seeds. The television commercial at 2 AM said they would grow anywhere. It showed them on concrete.

Then, one day, a knock came at the door. Through the glass, I saw a man, a happy man in a navy hat. He had a badge hanging from a cord around his neck. I tilted my head sideways to read it.

"Tree Surgeon," it said. "45 Years of Experience."

Normally, I do not open the door for happy men whom I do not know. Normally, I wave them off or hide behind the wall next to the foyer or yell through the glass that my parents are not home. But there was something about the Tree Surgeon and the precise timing of his appearance on my porch that made me consider an exchange. I



looked past his shoulder and saw a truck, outfitted with ladders and cones. The man smiled. He had no front teeth. I stared at him, then turned the knob.

"Hello, ma'am," he said. "I can make your grass grow."

Stunned, I was standing on the threshold. How did the Tree Surgeon know my angst? How was he delivered to my door-

step at a moment of decision, at the height of consternation? This is what those self-help books describe, the ones about opportunity existing around you, there for the snatching. I had to employ this man, this messenger, or something dreadful might happen.

"You can?" I asked.

"Yes, I can."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

The next morning, Joe Carrillo pulled into my driveway in his white truck. He set up cones in the street in front of my house. Then, he took out his ladders, a chain saw, and rope. I went outside to greet him.

"It is a wonderful day," he said. Frostbite settled into my ears. "Yesterday," he went on, pointing, "I studied your tree from down there. It is a beautiful tree, but it does not look right. A tree is like a human being. It has needs, and we have to give it what it needs to grow. Nothing grows on its own."

My tree, apparently, had many limbs that were hidden from the sun, which, according to Carrillo, is all a tree needs to live. Also, these limbs were blocking the light from reaching the grass, which is why the lawn died. He explained that he would strategically remove branches in certain places so the sun could hit all of the tree and the lawn from all angles, at all times of day.

"The tree communicates with me," said Carrillo, who I learned was 71 years old and half Cherokee. "From my dad, I learned to appreciate the earth. Everything—people, nature—comes to a state that needs help. I'm the kind of man who can't watch that. I have to be a part of it."

Each morning, Carrillo wakes up in his house near Irving, where he lives with his wife of 26 years, who suffered a stroke years ago. He helps her bathe and get dressed, then cooks breakfast, throws in the laundry, does a little cleaning, chats with the neighbors, and, finally, hops into his truck and drives to where the trees are. Along the way, he might stop and assist at an accident scene, something he has been doing since 1963. A photo from the *Dallas Morning News* shows him on an icy I-30, as a volunteer in a neighborhood crime watch program.

"Now, I do it on my own," he says. "I've got the equipment, and I have cameras, scanners, radios, a big light. If there's a hit-and-run, I take a picture and report the information. Once, a flatbed lost a load of lumber. I stopped, put up cones, and when the police took over, I went on my way. They know me by my truck."

Carrillo does most everything on his

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own. Born at the Breckenridge Park Zoo in San Antonio—"The water broke right there with the animals," he says—he left his family after high school for Northern California, where he supported himself as a farmhand. He took some agriculture classes at a nearby university and, at about 20, returned to Dallas to work for a local tree trimming company. A few years later, he began his own business and has flown solo ever since, regardless of the scale of the project before him. "The ropes are my helpers," he says, wearing no gloves, no support belt, no wrinkles, after decades in the elements.

At my house, he leaned a ladder against a massive limb and went to work. Envisioning the picture at the end, Carrillo deconstructed the overgrown tree, removing parts of it to create a new form. He twisted the ropes into balls and threw them over the limbs to be cut and those to be pulled back, out of the way. Slip-knotting the branches at certain spots, he held the ropes or tied them to the tree itself, weaving an intricate system of lines that isolated the designated chunk, like surgical retractors in the cavity of a chest. Then he sawed, holding the machine with one hand. Typically, three men would tackle this task, not to mention charge about twice the \$300 that Carrillo asked.

"You have to know where to tie the rope, and when to cut it," he told me. "It's like landing a plane. You need skill—and 40 years of tricks."

In three hours, Carrillo shaved two city truck containers' worth of brush off the tree, all of which he carried to the curb, himself, and stacked in tidy piles. A heart bypass patient 10 years ago, Carrillo said the physical challenge is in the hands and arms, not the back. The rest is all concentration.

I put on a parka when I noticed the tower of foliage and went outside to see the result. The tree, which used to droop forlornly, now stretched to the sky in a buoyant new shape, lifted, majestic, grand. The land below was bathed in sunlight. The air between was open and bright. Feeling a wave of optimism wash over me, I looked for the man responsible.

"Mr. Carrillo," I called. "It is incredible. Where are you? Mr. Carrillo?"

Not on the truck, or across the street.

I finally spotted him, crouched, contemplative and entirely comfortable, on the roof of my house. He sat up there awhile, examining his handiwork and all else on the horizon. I waited for him to sense that I was watching him.

"So, what do you think?" he yelled, both arms raised overhead.

"It's wonderful," I told him.

"Give it a little time to grow in," he said. "You do what you have to do, sometimes, so that things can stand on their own."

I thanked him. He stayed on the roof.

A little while later, the doorbell rang. "You happy?" he asked, beaming.

How did he know? **D**

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