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THE STAND

Melissa Bates

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THE STAND

By Melissa Bates

Summer didn't always scare me. I remember, as the first rays gently fell over me, I would reach out to them and they'd bend down to meet me. Leaves would gently sway, soaking up their sustenance and we would all commune in quiet contemplative joy, connected in the warmth of midsummer sun. We dreaded the longer, cooler nights but knew that seasons don't listen to wants and wishes. Once the days got shorter, the community would recede and find our own versions of dormancy in the chilly autumn air. This shift never divided us, but instead brought us together. The shorter days meant sharing resources and ensuring that everyone had the support they needed. We survived with each other, until the year that the summer came early.

Fast and hot, and the once nourishing light began to penetrate the earth and fry the soil. Deep under the surface the water evaporated, and the air began to empty. The space between molecules widened, moisture evacuated the air choking us as we wilted with the grass and the shrubs. Rain clouds came to give relief, but they cried down only tiny droplets,

merely moistening the ground. That summer I lost everyone.

There was nothing to stop the flames. The trees in our community were young and frail, planted there by people who didn't understand the roles of each species and looked only at the potential for profit. They went fast to the heat. I could sense the fire licking towards me, beckoning and taunting me but it didn't succeed. I was made to withstand it, others were not. I tried to reach out, but nothing would stop the inferno rolling through the mountains, rampaging against the patchwork blanket that was left to drape the mountainside. The seasons were angry with those who thought they could replace the forest and that no one would notice, no one would care. It was a massacre.

When the rain finally came and reduced my pain to ashes, I was alone. The summer was never the same after that, the heat was menacing and came too quickly. It left me hardened, unable to move and tied to this place. There was no one to lean on, no one to share with and no one to give to. The burns left scars

and the blackened reminders of that summer seeped into my soul. I learned how to be strong on my own and breathe only as the wind blew by, the solitude began to consume me. I began to get angry at my community for leaving me, angry at the dry and the heat. I hated the sun that once nourished me and now left me to stand on my own.

I was beginning to weaken, but was blinded to it by the vitriol I felt. The snow covered up the new ones, any hint of their arrival was buried under the fresh fall. I kept focus on my own survival. The pain of loss kept me from reaching out to them, but they had each other. They found ground, and spread out. I found the young audience kept me on my best behavior. The melancholy that was beginning to make me droop was replaced with a sense of responsibility to find my rigidity and demonstrate the strength that comes with my age. They began to explore, and I could sense their need for guidance and support but the pain of loss caused me to resist their attempts at connection.

In the end, I let them in. It began with the notion that I would only support them, and not grow attached. I didn't think I could learn to rely on anyone again, but I had misunderstood how important their role in my life was. When the solstice came,

I no longer cowered in fear, but instead branched out to provide shade to the newcomers who didn't know the pain of summer's heat. I blocked their calefaction, and they sent me signals of their commitment to our success. I realized the pain I carried was lessened by the connections they were trying to build with me.

My hope was held in our home underground, laying down new roots that stabilized my future and left my fear behind. I began to thank the sun for its feast, and tightened my grip on the next generation that grew around me. Healing came through connection, through the altruistic intentions passed through the earth. I came to accept the change I cannot control by embracing the optimism found in the green saplings. This stand will only thicken, a collection of connections made stronger through each other.



EPILOGUE

The lessons intended in this story are grounded in connection. The Stand is written from the viewpoint of a deciduous, broadleaf tree. In British Columbia, where the author is from, the climate is warming significantly faster than most other areas in the world. This is a portion of Canada that has also relied heavily on forestry as a main resource industry. Typically, broad-leaf trees have been replanted with faster-growing pine that retains less water and burns hotter and faster than their predecessors. The Mother Tree project illuminated what many Indigenous communities have known; that trees communicate to each other through underground mycelial connections. This network is used to warn of risks and hazards like fungal infections and insect infestations, but also to send out nutrients like nitrogen. The project has shown that trees have kin recognition, preferentially sending support to their offspring. It demonstrates how trees act in reciprocity, shading cross-species trees that have previously gifted them subterranean nourishment. The Stand is meant to evoke the feelings of solastalgia - the nostalgia we all feel for the environment in a time marked by the changing climate - from the perspective of a tree. There are lessons in the reciprocity of plants. This story is meant to shed light on a future where wellbeing and healthcare is centered in the more-than-human perspective, integrating aspects of the larger connections that we are all embedded within.

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