

I prefer to think of my friend as a 'she'. I met her when I was around 19—away from home doing a post graduate course. I remember it was a very difficult period for me then. New place, bad food at the mess, unfamiliar faces, heavy academic pressure...and above all I was trying to recuperate from a relationship I had lost.

I used to get these bouts of depression which I just couldn't handle. One evening when I found myself succumbing to yet another low—I fled my room. I walked into the verdant woods within our college campus. Once inside, I sat under a tree. I just sat there for a long time waiting for the hurt, resentment and anger to ebb.

After a while I began to take notice of my surroundings. The road was a little faraway. Muffled noises of honking vehicles were heard occasionally. Otherwise I was all alone there—with trees, shrubs and other kinds of wild undergrowth around me. My eyes fell upon the gnarled roots of the tree I was sitting under. Some parts of the roots were protruding out. They were a little sun bleached but rock hard. Numerous insects were busily tramping up and down the root. I wondered what the tree had gone through. Rain lashings, whipping winds, searing heat and may be woodcutters.

All along, the roots had been strong. They had not only stood their ground but had also been nourishing and supporting the entire tree and its growth. The extending fingers of the old roots reminded me of my grandma's corduroy hands—feeding, holding or caressing me. Above, the branches held nests and there was insect life in and around the trunk. The tree didn't seem to mind its privacy being intruded. As I looked up, the sky showed in between the foliage like blue paper shreds. The sky seemed to have settled on the tree top. I felt the hard serrated bark—

REMEMBRANCE

A Friend Forever

○ Jaya Madhavan

feeling rough against my palm. But I knew the sap inside was alive and kind.

There were dry leaves all around me. The tree unlike my mother didn't weep while seeing its leaf fall and move elsewhere. As for the leaf itself, it felt quite at ease with the wind, which blew it well beyond the tree's shadow. I contemplated about the tree, the birds which had made its branches their home, the numerous ants, beetles and other small creatures feeling free to explore the nooks and crevices of the tree's main frame. And now it had ensconced even me within a comfortable niche in its trunk. Seated there, my own limitations and shortcomings skimmed up to my mind's surface. My inability to forget and forgive—my incapacity to drop hurt, anger and resentment. It was the first time I had come face to face with my inadequacies and I felt helpless. Hugging the trunk, I wept hard, as I thought of the tree's capacity to give, to accept and maybe even forgive. In that dusky darkness—the large tree looming above me seemed to gather me into its arms.

I still believe that there were some intangible vibrations from the tree which soothed me. Some aura which healed me that day and whenever I went back to it. I know for a fact that many people talk to their plants. But I suppose I am a person who needs plants to talk to me. Each time I visited the tree, I came back a little replenished, a little strengthened and sans pessimism.

At the end of two years I had to come back home to Madras. Before I left, I met the tree and spent a peaceful

hour with it. I had never met such an undemanding friend. Not even a book could match the tree's gentle, unobtrusive affection. Books, though friendly, sometimes demand to be read, or become un-put-downable. But the tree just stood strong, silent and supportive.

Many a time have I thought of the tree whom I decided will be a "she". Mainly because the tree's name was Peepal (which sounds as feminine a name as Deepal). I think of her and wonder what new birds she has housed. Or if any other worn out soul like me comes to her for peace. The last time I saw Peepal was some four years ago. I hope she's still there standing strong and sturdy. I'd like to think that no hail or storm or quake...or man has touched her. I wish she's always there for me.

Recently I met another friend like Peepal in Besant Avenue. This person is a "he" who's called Thoongu Moonji (Sleepy face—because the leaves fold and close at dusk). What I feel for my friends is something beyond the grasp of words. They fill me with a feeling akin to humility, modesty, awe and quietness. I feel a little incompetent to even talk about them. Poet Joyce Kilmore comes somewhat close to expressing what I feel. He writes:

*I think that I shall never see
A poem as lovely as a tree
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing
breast
A tree that looks at God all day
And lifts her leafy arms to pray
Poems are made by fools like me
But only God can make a tree.* ·