

Family Tree / The Birches

The birches were more than just beautiful. They were treetop castles, twig-flinging giants, and tutors of resilience. They embraced our home and our lives.

By Mary Beth Winkowski

As we drove up to the house for the first time, the towering birches motioned to us. “Come on,” the grounded sentinels beckoned. That big one, the one anchoring the corner, spoke loudest. Its canopy was raging yellow that October day.

In 1975 we bought our first home, a modest ranch house in the middle of town. Over the next 48 years the white birches would lift us up with their pulsing beauty, inspire us with their toughness, and irritate us with the catkins they dropped in our drinks, and the myriad leather-smelling leaves that swelled the gutters and grass in the fall.

The birches became a lofty playground for our three children and their neighborhood friends. There were days when that big corner clump was draped with little monkeys screeching from their perches, eager to scale a leafy castle and do battle in the branches. Our oldest gave the sturdiest joints names – there was “Coffee Room” and “Crotch Breaker” among others. Squirrels found hidey-holes in the aging trunks, and children found secret spaces for plastic eggs and little toy cars.

The birches were reliable backdrops for our family photos. Here are two little boys sitting in front of tree with their Easter basket. There is our little girl nestled contentedly between two strong branches. There they are standing in the yard, all dressed up the day of Grandpa’s funeral.

Over the years, the trees talked back. They flung irritating twigs all over the grass in high winds, provoking grown-up games of “pick up sticks.” At night, a thud on the roof signaled one of the bigger black and white limbs had succumbed and fell to earth. Still, we tried to protect the trees. We shooed away kids who thought it fun to pick off the papery skin. We sprayed the trees with potions to kill bronze birch borer and leaf miner until a friend said stop, and the trees said, “We’ll be OK.”

Folks next door told us that in the 1950s the former owner of our house had uprooted the trees in a swampy area only blocks from here. I suppose that made them natives of the neighborhood. They had roots here, they knew how the wind blew, and when to expect snow. That must have made them hardy and long-lived.

One day the lovely birch framed by our picture window called out “Swing me” to our oldest son

and he did, suspended happily upside-down on a supple outstretched limb. Suddenly he fell and landed on the ground in pain. Tests showed the fall had revealed a longstanding back injury. Years later, a storm cracked open that clump birch and we had to remove it. It was the first of our nine white birches to go.

It was the Ice Storm of March 1–4, 1976, that sorely tested our trees and our family. It began quietly, as many bad things do, with a foggy mist coating the trees. Through the morning, freezing rain built layer-upon-layer and encased the branches in a glassy skin that crackled then burst. We heard the eerie, tinkling sounds of glass shards raining from the trees.

Everything seemed to crumble in the sleet and high winds. The burdened branches covered lower and lower under the icy weight and bowed to the ground. “No more, no more,” they pleaded. Even the largest trees sighed low, giving up twigs and stout limbs alike.

Over four days, utility poles snapped, and live electric wires lay in the streets. A state of emergency was called. The National Guard warned motorists to stay away. A nearby school became a shelter. Inside the frigid house, with no heat or electricity, we huddled with our two boys in front of the living room fireplace.

The birch trees lent their previously downed logs to our survival. Husband John spent hours outside chopping logs, then stoked the puffing fireplace day and night until our eyes teared up from the smoke. Tired of heating baby’s meals in the fondue pot, tired of the ice-cold bathroom and the smoke, after three days we gave up. We crunched our way over the crispy lawn to the car and escaped the city for warmer climes 32 miles to the south.

Shackled to earth, the birches remained frozen until warm air kissed the ice away. When we returned home days after the storm, we were surprised to see the trees slowly stretching awake as from a long, cold sleep, reaching their limbs to the sky, the debris of their ordeal strewn on the grass below. “We’re back!” they said.

Today only three of the original nine remain. The big climber on the corner is still there, its low, leafy branches tickling the heads of passing middle schoolers. The one at the far southwest corner still tempts fate as it arches over utility lines. The one outside the kitchen window has bark patterns that look like a face peeping in. But we long said goodbye to Frankenstein on the west side – its wandering wobbly trunks once bolted together to prevent their fall. The northwest tree that took the brunt of winter winds is gone, as is its modest sister to the east, where we took that first Ester picture under its watch. The runt of the nine next to the garage was least mourned when it passed, and the ungraceful one-trunk “flagpole” on the southeast met its natural demise.

The white birches were always home; they were members of the family. When people wanted to know where we lived, we’d say, “It’s the house with the big birch trees.” The trees gave us roots and watchtowers. They taught us that to be bent is not to be broken. For all that, we are thankful.