A Tree Left Standing

(inspired by Walden by Henry David Thoreau)

by Anna Ruta

The sky is jet-black already, leaving me with only two flickering lampposts to expose the damage that’s about to be done. I press my nose up against the window glass, trying to extend the range of my view ever so slightly. The metallic clatter of the swaying lampposts acts as orchestra music, accompanying the piercing whistle of the wind, all in rhythm with the rustling of the leaves, snapping of the branches, and powerful crashing of the waves against the boardwalk. The storm is still premature, but the conditions are escalating swiftly. My entire 12-floor building begins to shake, as if it itself were shivering from the cold. The waves are no longer only cascading over the top of the boardwalk as waterfalls, but their immense force has torn the boardwalk into shreds, allowing them to pour into the desolate streets from beneath. Power instantly goes out; all except for one dim streetlamp that struggles to remain standing. My frame of view is now limited to the outlines of a faintly illuminated, flimsy, six-foot tall tree and two cars, whose squealing alarms have been activated. With these wailing alarms, areas of the street sporadically illumine as the car lights flash at a pulsating pace. Regardless of all this growing chaos stirring in the streets, my eyes keep finding their way back to that meager tree. With every mighty gust of wind, this leafless tree bends further and further towards the ground. I find myself watching it, as I watched the girl gymnasts compete on the balance beam during the summer Olympics, subconsciously clenching my fists and holding my breath, hoping that it doesn’t suddenly give in, snap and fall down. This shabby tree has had to endure the immense wind for hours and now faces the added force of the powerful ocean current, but it remains fixed in that one place, bending more and more until it’s practically parallel to the ground. “What is keeping this
tiny tree from falling?” I ask myself, when all of a sudden I hear a metal clang. The only remaining lamppost couldn’t bear these conditions any longer, leaving the neighborhood pitch-black, as the car lights have long stopped flickering. There’s no point of kneeling by my window anymore, staring blankly into the darkness; the tree was bound to follow the same fate as the lamppost. Instead, I try to occupy myself with something, anything, just to mute the clashing storm noises, so I turn on a flashlight and spend the night trying to finish Thoreau’s “Economy” in Walden.

I clench onto my flashlight, as I slowly make my way down the dark, narrow slippery stairwell to the lobby. The moment my mom opens the lobby door, I can tell that this one storm has forever changed everything. We haven’t even left my building yet and the amount of damage done is beyond explanation. I follow a surprisingly quiet crowd of neighbors out of the building and no one says a word; everyone, including myself, is speechless. I don’t even know where to look. As I stand on over two feet of sand that now covers the streets, I notice the number of cars totaled is endless, the number of lampposts fallen is inestimable, the number of buildings burnt down, collapsed or damaged is infinite, but why does any of this even matter? It doesn’t. None of this is actually here anymore, it’s ruined, gone. Why am I going to write about how seeing a two-block-long segment of the boardwalk crashed into a small house a street away from the beach makes me feel? It’s pointless; none of these things matter anymore. These things no longer provide us with any comfort or with any use; they are futile. They are only burdens, which will cost an immense amount of time, energy, and money to remove and then replace.

What is worthy of mention is what miraculously remains standing. As I turn the corner to get onto the main street, I am even more horrified by this apocalyptic destruction. This is the same view I had from my apartment window for the last fifteen years, the same view I had last night during the storm, and today it feels as if I’m somewhere new, looking out of a stranger’s window.
Nothing remains unharmed by the storm’s malignant force, everything is decimated; but to my disbelief, one thing remains standing. Well, not really standing, but still rooted exactly where it was every day prior the storm: it’s the tiny wimpy tree. I walk straight up to it and see that although it looks deranged and distorted, it is still completely intact and rooted in the ground.

How could this skimp tree withstand the immense force of the wind and water, when so many other, grander and sturdier objects broke and fell? What makes this thin leafless tree any different from the lampposts, skate park ramps, boardwalk railing and even the larger trees that reach up to the second floor of my building? I keep walking around it, feeling foolish about spending so much time thinking about a scrawny tree when there are so many more crucial problems at hand. Looking at the crooked shape of this once symmetrical tree, I realize the difference between that tree and all of the other objects; it’s the tree’s flexibility. While at first glance its thin trunk and gaunt branches appear weak, its ability to endure a storm of this magnitude proves them to be otherwise. While the striking, massive trees with a bounty of majestic colorful leaves are more visually appealing, they got uprooted or even snapped when the wind began to blow because of their great stiffness.

Strength is always measured by an objects’ ability to resist change; however; it is often perceived superficially. We suppose that just because someone has 22-inch biceps or if an object towers over everything else, it’s automatically strong. However, one of the most vital aspects of strength is often overlooked: flexibility. Maybe being flexible isn’t going to help me bench press double my weight, but that’s another misconception about strength: physical strength isn’t the only type of strength. While the tree’s elasticity proved physically advantageous during the storm, this flexibility better applies to humans with regards to emotional and mental strength. Having a strong mental foundation, built upon established morals and principles is important; however, the ability to contort these beliefs so they apply in any unexpected situation while still retaining their
basic meaning is imperative. It is adaptability, the ability to let go of your orthodox ideals and adjust to unknown circumstances, which determines a person’s actual strength. It’s times like this, in which everything that has ever reminded you of home is in ruins and even fundamental life necessities are sparse, when you must embrace that little scrawny tree within you, bending as far as you can to help yourself and those around you adapt to the new circumstances.

I continue wandering throughout my neighborhood, in horrified shock, asking myself how something so atrocious could have happened to my home. The playground where my preschool teacher took us during lunch, the fence to my building with the gate lock I could never open, the little shed with my name etched into the green paint, all of this is gone. Everything is buried under sand, mud, debris. How can this be my home? It isn’t. As the days following the storm pass by, my thought of Rockaway no longer being my home is only reinforced. I hear of how the looters break into innocent peoples’ houses, robbing them of the little bit they managed to salvage. I hear of gangs roaming the streets with weapons, stabbing residents or raping young women, just for mere pleasure, as a game, as a way to spend their free time. This isn’t my home. Not being able to fall asleep at night with the police, ambulance and fire truck sirens lighting up my window as strobe-lights. This cannot possibly be my home.

In every kindergarten classroom, children are asked to draw a picture of their homes. We have all had our own rendition of this drawing – the one with a little square house, with two windows, each with a plus-sign grate, a rectangular door with a circle doorknob, all under a triangular roof, possibly a stick-figure family holding hands in the foreground, and the eminent sun found in the corner of the paper – displayed proudly on our refrigerator. In every foreign language class, you come across the chapter where you have to describe your home, so you write a paragraph describing all the rooms in your house and some key features of your neighborhood with the periodic help of a translator. I look back on these assignments and realize that the love I
once had for Rockaway is no longer there. While my physical apartment is still standing, how can I call a place that is all in ruins, I feel unsafe in, and I genuinely fear, my home? I can’t; it’s no longer my home. But when the possibility of abandoning Rockaway and moving to another unfamilar area, or even a different state, was brought up, an even greater surge of discomfort, anxiety and uneasiness overcame me. Even if my family packs our bags and moves to a different state, far away from any of the hurricane damage, will that new place be my home? No. Just because I move into a new house doesn’t mean that I am at home. A foreign school, no friends, and especially no memories at this new location prevent it from being my home, at least for several tough years. So what’s left? I can’t be homeless forever.

I go out for lunch in Battery Park, trying to empty my mind of everything, to be repeatedly bothered by the pesky pigeons who want part of my sandwich. I keep shooing them away, wondering why they haven’t yet migrated to escape the frigid winter. Birds migrate seasonally, leaving their home once survival becomes tough and conditions become harsh, but return once the conditions ease up. I now see myself in the flock of migrating birds, temporarily abandoning Rockaway at a time of struggle, only to return to it once the major corporations and National Guard transform it back to a habitable place. I realize that although Rockaway may not be my physical home for the time being, it will forever be the place that shaped me into who I am today and influenced the decisions I make. While right now Rockaway may be dilapidated, it’s still the place that closest fits the definition of home, and someday in the future, it will be my home again. Even though it certainly won’t be the same place that I have always grown up in, it’s the adaptability I learned from the skimpy tree that will help me adapt to Rockaway, my renovated home.