

SHENIKA AND THE TREE

By Sarah Suatoni

The words sounded like they were coming from very far away.

“Your dad got a new job. We’re moving.” Moving. Shenika shook her head. “You’ll finish second grade here,” Mom continued, putting her arm around Shenika, “then we’ll move to a new town called Normalville.”

Shenika couldn’t breathe. She felt stony cold. She wiggled free and ran out the front door into the drizzly afternoon and headed across her yard down a soggy path into the woods, to her secret hideout. Move? How could she move? It had taken her three years to make friends. In kindergarten she cried every morning. All the kids called her Shenika Shy. Then in first grade, Amanda and Kelly invited her to be friends. Now in second grade they were best friends. Amanda and Kelly kept

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her secrets, made her laugh and included her in all their games. She could never make such good friends again.

The path led to a small clearing dominated by a single, immense tree. The oak's bumpy trunk wound its way into the soft earth, and a thousand twisted roots snaked along the ground. In the tree's arching branches, birds nested and caterpillars rested, getting ready for their butterfly births. The tree was a city unto herself, a happy community enjoying the splendor of forest life.

Shenika sat down on a cold stone under the tree, hugging her knees to her chest. She imagined what it would be like if she stayed under the tree forever. Frozen like stone, alone, but safe. She looked at the rocks and imagined a collection of frozen girls who didn't want to move, curled up under the tree with her. Slowly Shenika began to sob. Then, she heard a strange sound: a deep moaning. She looked up to see the grand oak sobbing along with her. Tears ran down its trunk and spurted from its limbs. The tree shook and swayed as it sobbed. The tree could cry? Well if that was true, maybe it could talk.

"Why are you crying?" Shenika asked quietly, feeling a bit silly talking out loud to the tree.

"I am crying because you are sad, and I love you," answered the giant oak.

Shenika was stunned and excited. "I didn't know you could talk. Or that you even knew me."

"I did not know you could talk," the oak replied. "You come here and visit me all the time and I love your visits. Just think, we could have been talking all this time. But right now you better start by

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telling me why you're sad."

"That's just it. We won't get a chance to talk much because my parents said I have to move to Normalville."

"Ahh. Normalville." said the tree. "I have some very good friends there. Don't worry. I think you will like it."

"How could you have friends there? You're a tree. You're pretty much stuck here. I wish I could be stuck here like you," said Shenika mournfully.

"That would be no fun for a girl," the tree answered. "And I know Normalville because trees know everyone. We are all connected. Just like you."

"I'm not connected to anyone, except my parents and Amanda and Kelly. I'll miss them so much. I'll never have friends like them again."

"Forgive me for disagreeing," said the tree kindly, "but you most certainly are connected. Stand up and let me show you, please."

Shenika stood slowly.

"Think about your feet," said the tree. "Do you see how they connect you to the earth? They connect you with everything."

"My feet just feel wet and cold," replied Shenika shyly.

"Ah, I see. This is going to take a little magic," said the tree. With that she shook her branches. Shenika felt her arms and hair float up into the air, multiplying into a hundred reaching branches. Thousands of leaves fluttered and swirled around Shenika, finally settling right on her body. Her feet sunk into the soft earth. Roots sprouted right through her sneakers, squirming their way into the dirt. In moments, Shenika stood almost as tall as the oak. She had

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become a strong, beautiful tree.

“How do you feel?” asked the tree.

“I feel great!”

“And how about your roots? What is happening there?” asked the tree.

As Shenika concentrated, she could feel her roots moving. They snaked and twisted, wrapping around roots of the great oak. Then they reached farther, around the roots of other trees in the woods. They kept going, extending far past Shenika’s woods, past her house, past her neighborhood. Deep under the ground they wound themselves up with all the other trees on the earth’s surface. Connected! Yes! Connected.

“I’m one tree, but I’m part of all the trees!” she exclaimed. “Wow.”

“We are all connected to each other,” the tree said lovingly. “We are all wrapped together in the great web of life. We all come from the same place. We all want the same things. So, don’t fear new people. You will always find connections if you look for them.”

With that Shenika turned back into a girl. “But I’m not a strong solid tree,” she realized sadly. “I’m a shy, nervous girl. What if nobody in Normalville likes me.”

“It is true that you are not a tree. But you have the same magic. Your feet are your roots, connecting you. Your body is your trunk. Your spine is your strength. Your arms are your branches reaching out to the world. Stand tall, like me. You will be surprised by your strength.”

She tried to do what the tree said. Feet planted to the ground,

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roots downward, legs strong, chest open and brave. She lifted her arms and face to the world around her. And she did feel better; stronger and lighter all at once!

“I see what you mean,” Shenika said to the tree. “I feel strong. But I never know what to say to a new person.”

“Remember, your words are like my beautiful leaves. They flutter out, getting people’s attention. They plant seeds. Say simple things. Tell someone your name and offer a compliment or ask a question. Like: What is your name? or What’s your favorite game? Invite someone to play. Those little connections build strong bonds. And don’t forget: It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it: strong and clear.”

“But what if I forget this strong feeling when I am there?”

“I will give you a gift to help you remember: one of my branches. It holds the strength and power of all trees. You can hold the stick and feel that power. And you can share the stick with others.

“When you share the stick it is called a Talking Stick. Whoever holds it has the power to speak from her heart and everyone else must listen with their whole being. I promise if you speak from the heart and listen, you will find very special connections.”

The tree bent down and handed Shenika one of her branches. Shenika took the short, gnarly branch. It was brown and bumpy and oh so beautiful. She clutched it to her heart.

Shenika heard her mother calling her to dinner. She hugged the tree. “I have to go,” she said sadly. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“You are welcome,” the great oak said. “And remember, when

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you are lonely, let those feet touch the earth and know that my roots are touching the very same earth. You and I are always connected. And know this, too. You have a beautiful heart. Use the stick to give you strength to share your heart.”

Shenika nodded and ran toward home. When she reached her mom, Shenika stopped. She held the stick in front of her, felt the ground beneath her feet, looked for her courage, and said to her mother, “I don’t want move, Mom. I’m scared.”

Her mother hugged her. “Me, too, honey. Let’s see if we can help each other, okay?”

Shenika held her mom tight. Beneath their feet, their roots wrapped together, joining Shenika and her mom, spreading out to her dad, outward to Amanda, and Kelly, and her neighbors, spreading, spreading, farther, farther, all the way to Normalville, where her new life waited, new friends, new adventures, new connections.