

# True Story of and by a Tree

by Iona and John's Norfolk Island Pine

(as told to and through Iona)



## **Dedication**

Dedicated to Connie, Iona's first new friend in her new home, whose eyes gleamed when Iona told her about this book. Connie told Iona she was "getting good vibes from the Universe." This inspired both Iona and me to carry on with this unusual project. And when Connie told Iona, "Trees are the foundation of the world," that clinched it. We love Connie and everyone like her!

## **Introduction**

When this book was started, John had died, Iona had sold their house and moved back to her family in New Jersey. She sat under a tree in the woods behind her new home writing the draft. I feel her love over 230 miles as she prepares to tell my story (and theirs). Humans have learned how we communicate with each other. This book is my effort to tell Iona how I felt and what I witnessed as part of her life with her husband, John. It's my way of sharing her joy of loving and living with a unique man for 30 years.

I understood that Iona's new home was going to be too small for me and I had grown so huge that it was impossible to move me anyhow. I really love my current home. It has a high enough ceiling to allow me to keep growing and plenty of sunshine coming in through the windows. Her little apartment would not have made it possible for me to continue flourishing. I understood. I was just too big.

## Chapter 1

OH! Thank Goodness she bought me. It was so crowded in there, so busy, so bright all the time. I'm much happier in their simple apartment. They love me but don't pay much attention to me. They're busy doing environmental work. That's OK. I'll just sit here and watch them and listen. They seem to be very busy and very much in love. They do everything together.



I heard Iona talk about their environmental wedding to her friends. A month later they started a non-profit organization "dedicated to creating the critical mass of active participants needed to bring ecological justice to this Earth..."



They're not home a lot. They're either off hiking in the woods or organizing meetings in churches and high schools helping them form or strengthen environmental committees. I can see the sign John made to welcome Iona when she moved in with him. It's on a bright yellow poster board with large lettering and hearts. You might think a tree can't talk or read but when my heart is in tune with a human heart, we can communicate quite well, thank you. Anyhow, these words in the center of others:

## **LOVE, JUSTICE AND TRUTH**

**TOGETHER WE SHALL SURGE FORWARD AND UPWARD, OUR ARMS LINKED WITH MILLIONS OF PEOPLE WORKING FOR THE EARTH.**

**TOGETHER WE SHALL TALK AND TOGETHER WE SHALL SING AND TOGETHER WE SHALL WALK AND TOGETHER WE SHALL DANCE.**

**THE ENEMIES OF ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE TREMBLE AT THE PROSPECT OF OUR UNION.**

### **Chapter 2**

What are these two up to now? So many boxes are arriving filled with clothing and socks. What's going on? Neither John nor Iona cares about clothes. But this? The apartment is starting to look like a store. The dining room has bookcases filled with clothes. I hear them talking about "organic cotton, non-sweatshop clothing." Interesting.

John spends a lot of time on the phone making dates to speak at church services while Iona is figuring out pricing, ordering, and doing paperwork. This is a lot different from when they started out just going to churches and high schools to organize environmental committees. I heard John telling their friends that, as long as corporations and governments have all the power and economic strength, the environment will always suffer. He spends lots of time reading and thinking about how to change things. They named their non-profit organization the Grassroots Coalition for Environmental and Economic Justice. And they found a tangible way to teach people about these global issues through clothing.

Uh-oh, they're packing all this new stuff into suitcases. They talk about driving to many places in different states. I don't think they're planning to take me along. They're going to leave me alone for a few days, so I'll just sit here and grow a little more while they're gone.

### **Chapter 3**

I've done such a good job growing that Iona bought me a larger pot. That feels much better!

OHMYGOSH, Iona's putting little red bows on me. I feel like a poodle! Hey, Iona, I'm already a beautiful tree; I don't need bows.

But wait, what's going on now? A moving truck is here. They're moving all the furniture and clothing into it. The apartment is too small so we're going to a larger home, a 250-year-old farmhouse in the country. I think I'm going to like that better than this apartment complex.

John really loves it here. He started a vegetable garden and planted fruit trees. He even moved me outside on the porch for the summer. I *love* being outdoors with all the other trees. Now I have lots of company. Is this Heaven?



Iona's inside with a few women starting a sewing cooperative. I'm in the corner next to her so I can watch and listen. They're looking at her mother's sketches of hand-made dresses she wore when she was a little girl. They are deciding what garments to make with the Grassroots Cooperatives label. Everything is organic. I really like this idea – no toxic pesticides or herbicides sprayed on cotton fields. This is a very interesting life. Iona even got John to model one of the organic shirts from an ethical company they're working with.





I'm worried now. We've been here a few years and the clothing business seems to be going great, but I heard John say that their debt is too high. Even though Iona got a job as a reporter, they can't get the debt down. They're going to a financial advisor.

"Did you ever consider bankruptcy?" she asked.

"No, but that sounds good to me," John replied.

One snowy day they were getting ready for a bankruptcy hearing. Both cars were in the shop. Iona had saved money from a Christmas so they could rent a car to go to the hearing. Suddenly the debt vanished.

#### **Chapter 4** (five years later)

I have another new pot. I'm really great at growing! Now my toes can wiggle around and form new roots to get more nutrients up to my branches.

But I'm worried. I'm looking around. John and Iona are packing up boxes. The landlord told them he needs to do foundation work on the old farmhouse so we're moving again.



Gee, this new home is NEW! Nice, shiny wood floors, nice wood cabinets. Everything is pretty. I like it here just fine. But Iona is sad. Her father died and Cece is very sick. I hear John and Iona talking. Iona is going to Florida. Cece is dying.

### **Chapter 5** (one year later)

You may not believe this but we're moving again. After Cece died, she left her condo to her daughters, Joanie and Iona. After they sold it, John and Iona had enough money to buy their own home.

This time we're moving to Shade Gap, Pennsylvania. I nearly froze on our snowy moving day but they put me in a corner next to a bright, sunny window and I warmed up. I like it here. This new home feels *wonderful!* I'm going to settle in and keep on growing. I'm a happy tree living with two happy humans working hard to make the world a better place.

I don't see Iona or John very much. She's working in her office downstairs and he's in his office upstairs. When they meet in my room for lunch or dinner, I enjoy listening to their conversations. Now they're both working on climate change.

I love evenings because John builds a fire and they sit quietly here with me reading in their armchairs watching flames flicker and keeping warm. This main floor gets chilly during the day because they keep the thermostat at 55 and only turn on the heat when they're about to have a meal here. They have little heaters in their offices so they're warm enough to work.

My favorite days are bright, sunny ones. Lots of sunlight fills the room and it gets warmer. My needles *love* sunlight so I grow quickly. I'm even putting out a few baby trees. We just keep growing and growing. But, my goodness, there goes Iona again trying to pretty me up. Now I'm wearing Christmas lights. I'm not so sure I like these any better than bows. I'm not a Christmas tree; I'm a Norfolk Island Pine tree, for goodness sake. I know they love me, so I'll just keep on growing to show them how much I love them and am grateful for their loving care.



### **Chapter 6** (many years later)

I got so large that Iona bought me a jumbo pot and John made a fine enclosure for it. I have even more room to send out new roots and keep growing.

Iona has finally started the “real” newspaper she’s been dreaming of. She calls it *The Order of the Earth: News, Views and Musings*. It’s a global warming newspaper featuring positive news and scientific articles about what’s happening in the world. She learned how to use publishing software and her friend helped her create a few prototypes before she took her launch issue to the printer.





I heard Iona tell John that she had to get a job to earn enough money to pay for the printing and postage so she worked in a sewing factory for four years until she was totally worn out from spending weekdays in the factory and all her spare time doing newspaper work. She needed a break.

Meanwhile, John kept doing his social and environmental justice work in churches and universities, but Iona no longer went with him.

One day Iona invited some of her close friends to our home to discuss the future of her newspaper. I loved that meeting. I could hear every word and feel the compassion in their voices for Earth. I love it when humans get together to collaborate on making the world a better place. John was there, too. He always supported Iona and helped her think things through.



They decided the newspaper's name was too long and shortened it to *Earth News*. Also, they suggested that Iona focus on natural gas fracking in Pennsylvania. Since expenses were too high, she should try an online publication.

When her spirit recovered, Iona returned to newspapering. I continued to grow, and John maintained his steadfast determination to educate and motivate thousands of people on his ever-growing email list about climate change.

**Chapter 7** (a couple years later)

John has planted or transplanted about 100 trees. They brought many with them when they moved here and he finds little trees in our woods and plants them in the field, where they can spread out better. I'm surrounded by trees. In the winter, birds come to the bird feeder outside of my patio door. Sometimes deer, opossums, racoons, and wild turkeys come to say hello. A black bear even showed up.



I can't tell you much about what these humans do when they're gone. I can only tell you what I see and hear from my stance in the living room, but I can see outside and listen to Iona's phone conversations in the kitchen. Recently, I've had a special friend visit me. A guinea hen comes every morning squawking a cheery Hello.



I even have three indoor plant friends growing near me.



## Chapter 8

By 2013, Iona was so scornful of the American way of life and its superficial, destructive consequences that I heard her talking with John about her new idea, The Go-Back Club. *What?*

These people live extraordinarily simply. Why can't that kind of life become the new American Dream? Stop shopping. Stay home. Use minimal energy. Grow your own food. John created a beautiful and bountiful vegetable garden, so they had lots of fresh organic food.



Here's how Iona described her vision when she came back to action with an online newspaper now called *The Go-Back Club*:

**What is The Go-Back Club all about?**

We want to change people's hearts. Our members live simply (or try to) so that our collective carbon footprint grows smaller and smaller every day. We are working toward a common goal of reducing our individual impacts on climate change to protect future generations and all life.

**What are we trying to achieve?**

Our members are part of the global movement of people who know that global warming is an immediate threat and who want to prevent further harm and even reverse the situation.

One of her friends created a logo with footsteps going back, illustrating how we need to drastically reduce our use of fossil fuels, thereby reducing our carbon footprints. I like how a tree is front and center.



Iona was happily on her way again. I'm always happy when Iona is happy. I keep growing, as we three continue to age. Iona loves John and John loves Iona. He sometimes splurges on flowers for her or plants like orchids or poinsettias. And she picks flowers for him from the yard when they're in bloom.



## Chapter 9

I heard my family talking. Today Iona said she wants to be a tree! *What?*

She's putting herself in Tree School. Hmmmm....never heard of that. She knows she needs to slow down and be calm. She also wants to reach out to the world offering beauty, like we do. Maybe we can help her. Each time she drives out of here, she pauses at the woods and feels peace. I guess that's called Tree School. I know she appreciates our beauty and silence. I know she cries when we are cut down or a tornado blows us down. I also know that her passion is to help save trees and forests. That's why she and I have a silent love affair.

John loves trees, too. He even knows many of our names and made a list of 34 trees he identified on this land. He loves walking in the woods and communing with us. I think we help him feel better when he's having health problems.

## Chapter 10 (September 2018)

WOW! Iona told John she met Gbujie Daniel Chidubem (founder of Team 54 Project) on a trip to his home in New Jersey and then to see her family. Daniel loved *The Go-Back Club* newspaper and promoted it through his gigantic organization of over 200,000 members around the world.

Suddenly, Iona was getting lots more subscribers, mostly wonderful, hard-working, young people in Africa and other countries. She changed the name of the paper to *Groundswell News* to reflect the excitement and growth of the global climate movement. She was working harder than ever on her newspaper and also had a part-time job while John continued his climate change and social justice outreach efforts and wrote fundraising letters. He has boundless energy and is always thinking about improving his process so that millions and millions of people will work together to tackle the root causes of society's ills.

As for me, I just keep on growing.

## Chapter 11 (December 22, 2018)

DEARGODINHEAVEN, JOHN IS FALLING DOWN THE STAIRS!



I see it all! This is the most frightening, upsetting, horrible day of our life! He's bloody but conscious. Iona's running to him from the kitchen where she was washing dishes. He's lying on the landing. He wants to get up. She's dialing 911. John protests. She drags the armchair close to the stairs, puts her arm around him and quietly says, "Take it easy. Take it easy." They get John seated in his armchair. Iona grabs a clean dish towel and wets it with cold water. She's gently pressing it against the gash in his head.

I've never felt so bad in my life. Now the medics are here. They are good, kind men who load him onto a stretcher and carry him out to the ambulance. Iona followed.

They didn't come home till the next day. I heard Iona say that the local hospital stitched his head, took a CT scan, did blood work, and then shipped him to a trauma center. Iona followed.

After they returned, I didn't see much of John anymore. Iona insisted he not do stairs until he was recovered. He stayed in the basement, where Iona's office use to be. Their beds were there, as was a

small bathroom with a shower. Iona brought John's computer and work things downstairs and took hers upstairs to the third floor. Then she created a "dining room table" on a computer table.

I overheard Iona talking on the phone. Concussion. Broken bone in neck. Bruises everywhere.

John continued his social justice work and fundraising; Iona continued her newspaper after a brief pause. John started physical therapy and Iona took over the house and yard work.

After a couple months, John was strong enough to come up to the living room since there were only four steps from the lawn to the deck and into the main floor. I was overjoyed to see him again!

## **Chapter 12**

Things kept getting worse for John. He had overcome numerous surgeries and procedures, but new ailments were weakening this strong, vibrant, robust, energetic man. After seven months with Iona as the only caregiver, John slid off the bed while he was trying to stand up. Iona called 911 again even though John wasn't hurt. She couldn't get him up by herself. Off to the local hospital again for a few days, including their 29<sup>th</sup> anniversary. John continued to decline. The supervising nurse looked at Iona and told her she could no longer care for him alone. Iona was forced to admit him to a nursing home six miles away.

The night after John entered the nursing home, I heard Iona cry when she came into the empty basement and didn't hear John's cheerful voice greeting her.

I never saw John again. Twenty days later he died in Iona's arms. I heard her crying again that day knowing that she, too, would never see him again. If trees cried, I would have cried, too. The world had lost a valiant, dedicated champion of social justice for humankind and Nature.



Iona wrote the obituary using some of John's language. It included an invitation for people to come the following weekend to honor him. She set up a memorial on the mantel. A few close friends came to pay respects and help Iona feel less alone. Others sent food and sympathy cards.



Iona dedicated the October issue of *Groundswell News* to John. She tried to reach the 9,700 people on his email list and got beautiful responses. Here are a few examples, which she published:

John spent his life helping others in need, putting their welfare above his own. He worked tirelessly to inform people of social injustice and in particular of the dangers from climate change. He read extensively, wrote extensively, and traveled extensively, speaking to individuals, groups, at places of worship and schools, of the problems and solutions for a more just world. He is a true hero.

**Tyla Matteson and Glen Besa**, Virginia

I am one of the 9,700 recipients of John's email messages and of his passion for justice. I'm very sad to learn of his death. He was such an unquenchable spirit. I pray for him, but even more so for you. I cannot imagine your heart-break, but I do hope his energy and commitment will sustain you. I pray that God will welcome John with open arms and stand with you as you continue on the important work of peace and justice for all.

In peace,

**Rosemarie Pace**, Director Pax Christi, Metro New York

My profound sympathy to you. My heart has a deep respect and love for John. Your union in doing so much together for the care of creation is a model of what love means.

My prayers are with you both.

**Fr. Ted Cassidy**, Ohio

The library is placing memorial book plates in memory of John in a few books: *How to Give up Plastic: A Guide to Changing the World One Plastic Bottle at a Time* by Will McCallum; *The Future of Packaging: From Linear to Circular* by Tom Szaky; and *The Uninhabitable Earth* by David Wallace-Wells. We are putting his obituary in *The Uninhabitable Earth* as an inspiration to honor John in this way.

Thinking of you,

**Jamie Brambley** and the library staff, Fulton County Library, Pennsylvania



Terry and I were shocked though we haven't seen John for decades but regularly got letters announcing how you two were trying to make this a better world and organize the rest of us to help in your work. He was a blessing in this world where greed and money are too many leaders' religion. May his memory be a blessing for all who knew him, and may his memory and love be a comfort to you in your grief.

*Gwen DuBois and Terry Fitzgerald*, Maryland

### **Chapter 13**

I see Iona scurrying around tidying everything. A new friend is helping her clean the house and wash the windows. People are coming to look at my beautiful home. It's for sale. I heard Iona say she wants to go back to her family in New Jersey.

What's going to happen to me? Iona told someone that it must not be sold as a hunting cabin because nobody would be here to take care of me. Is she going to leave me here?

Everybody who sees me loves me. I hear Iona expressing her love as she proudly shows them how big and beautiful I am. She can't and won't sell the house to someone who does not love me. That, she said, is a contingency of the sale.

### **Chapter 14** (several weeks later)

Iona and her friend have packed up nearly everything. One afternoon she came over to me, gently touched my branches and tearfully said good-bye.



Moving day came. Iona and I spent our last night together in the nearly-bare living room.

He's gone.

She's gone.

The closing is tomorrow. I am sending my forever blessings to dear John and Iona. Thank you for taking such good care of me. I love you both.

I'm looking forward to welcoming my new family soon. They are even going to give me a real name! I know they're going to care for me as I keep growing, aging, and loving life right here with them in my beautiful home.



**Chapter 15** (5 weeks after Iona moved)

While Iona was trying to find a picture of a group of baby Norfolk Island Pines for this book, she was delighted to find several, also crowded together in a huge store. She snatched up my little baby sister and brought her to her new home. I hope this baby enjoys life with Iona as much as I did and will keep on growing and growing. I know she loves this tree as much as she loves me still.

When I heard Iona's friend Glow asking her to give the tree her love, the baby tree felt Iona's fingers gently touch her and announce, "Your name is Gloria."

