

THE BIRTH PLACE FOREST of SILVER SPRINGS

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by Kim Hanson

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The grassy green field was alive with energy and vitality. School children, in groups of five or so, squealed with delight taking turns kicking the black and white soccer ball. Dogs barked; their owners allowing them freedom to run and play. The rush of four lanes of traffic roared by, leading in and out of the neighbourhood. Yet, the instant I stepped onto the spongy path of the Birth Place Forest, all outside sound was muffled. I was embraced, instead, by the sounds of nature.

Two prodigious things happened in the year 2002. First, our tiny, healthy, precious grandson, Jacob was born. Second, spawned from the creative minds of community-conscious individuals at BP Canada Energy Group, Calgary Parks/Regional Health and Golden Acres Garden Centre, the Birth Place Forest of Silver Springs was also born. The urban oasis took root on some land originally set aside as a roadway allowance or potential right-of-way. As each baby was born in Calgary, a tiny, healthy, significant tree was planted. Poplar, pine, ash, aspen, bur oak, spruce and Brandon elm began to stake-out their territory. . . roots traversing deep into the soil, establishing new life. The goals of the Birth Place Forest program were simple. To

educate, to establish pride and ownership through connection and to form a deep abiding legacy to the trees planted in the urban forest.

Years passed by. Jacob grew. A visit to his tree became an adventure for us. He rode his bike to the Birth Place Forest while I walked alongside. He always rode ahead – so excited to reach our destination.

“Grandma!” he’d shout. “Hurry. Catch up. We’ve still got a long ways to go.”

We always easily found his green ash tree, right where the map led us. Jacob, upon arriving, would drop his bike on the ground and stand beside his tree or duck under his tree or lay on the ground beside his tree.

“Look how big it’s getting Grandma!” he’d say as I snapped a photo.

“Yes, and look how big you are getting my sweet boy!”

We would sit on the cedar bark cushion beside the ash tree and talk, all the while having a snack of juice and cheese and crackers. The perfect picnic.

The Birth Place Forest in Silver Springs grew in unison. The mass of trees began to stretch high into the sky, offering sanctuary and refuge to all the wildlife in the neighbourhood. On hot summer days, the forest was like slurping a popsicle; cool and delicious. In the chilly winter months, the trees seemed to huddle together, offering shelter from the cold, harsh, north winds. But its best foot forward came in the fall, when the leaves changed from sage green to amber and golden and glorious.

Calgary, with extraordinary prescience, created nine Birth Place Forests in different neighbourhoods around the city - the first of its kind in Canada. Planting trees began in 2001 and continued until 2009 when planting ceased due to a dearth of suitable land and a sudden lack of funding.

“We require about five hectares of land to plant the trees and we need a site that can accommodate at least 3,000 families. Those sites can be hard to find,” said the city's urban forestry coordinator. But in those nine years, the City of Calgary planted 62,000 life-affirming new trees.

Silver Springs volunteers have taken over maintenance and management of the Birth Place Forest, ensuring care continuity. Botanical gardens were created and about the forest, together stretching over 20 acres of land. Strolling the paths is a spiritual antidote to the stress and chaos in our lives.

“I grew up in a forest. It’s like a room. It’s protected. Like a cathedral... it is a place between heaven and earth.”

— *Anselm Kiefer*

Jacob is turning 19 years of age soon. So is his green ash tree. Both are tall, strong and purposeful. He doesn't visit the Birth Place Forest often, but I do. I walk the paths, revel in the sounds of nature and sit on the bench to collect my thoughts or write in my journal.

“And into the forest I go, to lose my mind and find my soul.”

— *John Muir*

It's a space and a place of peace. I reminisce about my sweet grandson, the wonder pooling in his eyes and the excitement spilling out of every pore. Here in the Birth Place Forest, my connection to Jacob is palpable. Here in the Birth Place Forest there is a deep, abiding legacy to the trees that surround me. Here is nature at its very best.