

Autumntime by Anthony Lentini (1999)

I saw my first tree today. Dad finally broke down and took us to East Boston Urban Center after Mom had been harping on it for the past two weeks. I think he was glad we went after all, because he was smiling quietly all during the trip back.

Dad used to tell me stories about the trees that still existed when he was a boy. There weren't very many even then, with the urbanization program in full swing, but most people had seen at least one tree by the time they started school. It wasn't like nowadays, at any rate. Oh, I've seen the plastic trees; practically every street has a few of them. But you can tell the plastic ones are artificial just from looking at pictures in the microdot library.

This morning when we got up, the house was all excited. Mom dialed a light breakfast of toast and synthetic milk so that we wouldn't waste time eating. And when finished, the three of us took an elevator-bus up to the fourth level, where we caught the air track to Brooklyn. From there we took another elevator-bus down to main level, rode the monorail to Intercity Subway Station 27, and caught the second sublevel AA train to Boston. Our expectations were so high that Dad and I didn't mind it when Mom told us again how the tree was discovered.

The O'Brien home was one of the few examples of old-style wooden structures that hadn't been demolished in Boston's urban-renewal campaign at the turn of the century. The family had been able to avoid this because of its wealth and political influence, and the house was passed on through several generations to the present. Old man O'Brien had no heirs, so when he died the family home went up for auction, and the Urban Center bought it. When local officials arrived for an appraisal, they discovered that the house had a back yard, which is forbidden by zoning restrictions.

In the yard was a live tree — an oke was what Mom called it. When the news of the tree's discovery leaked out, quite a few sightseers stopped by to have a look at it, and the local government, realizing the money-making potential, began charging admission and advertising the place. By now it had become a favorite spot for school field trips and family excursions such as ours.

When we arrived in main Boston we rode the elevator-bus up to ground level and caught a monorail out to East Boston Urban Center 3. An air-cush taxi took us the rest of the way to the residence. The home itself was unimpressive. It had none of the marble gloss or steely sheen of modern buildings, but was rather a dull white color, with the paint peeling in places. Dad paid the admission

fee, and we spent the next 15 minutes on a dull guided tour of the house. The rooms were roped off to keep people from touching anything, but there were no windows facing the illegal back yard anyway, so it really didn't matter that I couldn't enter the rooms on that side.

My mind was on the tree, and I thought the inside tour would never end, but soon we were walking through a doorway hidden in one of the bookshelves and into the back yard. The yard was big — at least 10 by 20 feet — and I was surprised to find real grass growing on the sides of the concrete walkway built for tourists. The grass didn't distract me for long, however, because I just couldn't help noticing the tree!

It was located at one end of the yard, and there was a mesh fence around it for protection. It was similar in form to the plastic trees I'd seen, but there was much more to it than that. You could see details more intricate than in any artificial plant. And it was alive. Long ago someone had carved their initials in the bark, and you could see where the wound had healed. But best of all was the smell. It was a fresh, living odor, alien to the antiseptic world outside with all its metal, plastic, and glass. I wanted to touch the bark, but the fence prevented me from doing so. Mom and Dad just breathed deeply and stared up with smiles on their faces. The three of us stood there for a moment, and then the tour guide told us to make room for the next group. I didn't want to go — in fact, I felt almost like crying.

On the way back home, Mom and Dad were silent, and I read through one of the brochures the guide had passed out. When I came to the part that said the O'Brien home would be open only for the rest of this year, I was sad. They intend to tear down the place to make room for some kind of insurance building, and the tree will have to go, too.

For the rest of the trip, I just sat still, fingering the object in my pocket which I had picked off the grass in the O'Brien's back yard. I think it's called an acorn.