



Vintage Oak An Inheritance

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Louise promised she'd take good care of it, as though I were leaving her with a beloved pet, and, truly, I loved it like a living thing, almost the way I had loved Sandra. After Louise helped pack up my office and the guys I'd hired to move all my boxes arrived, I ran my hand once more across its grainy surface, saying goodbye.

“ARE WE GOING TO GET ARRESTED doing this?” my fiancé Karl asks as we discuss my plot to reclaim the desk I left in my university office when I retired four years ago. “I hope not,” I say.

“You hope not?”

“Anyway, I doubt it.”

I don't have any ethical qualms about taking the desk, believing it is truly mine, whether or not it started out belonging to the university when it was brand new many decades ago. But I do worry a bit that we might be questioned as we remove it from the building where I'd taught and had my office for twenty-five years. And what will I say if I'm asked where I think I'm going with a piece of university property—tell the story of how it came to be mine?



SHORTLY AFTER I WAS HIRED TO TEACH English and start a women's studies program at Mansfield University of Pennsylvania, in a remote, rural area thirty years ago, I went to see Dr. Sandra Linck, the associate provost, for some advice about protocol. As an untenured, assistant professor, I felt on

shaky ground creating a program I'd been warned would be controversial, and I was nervous about stepping on any sensitive academic toes.

I'd met Sandra when I interviewed for my position just months before, and right away I'd liked her smile—a grin, really—conspiratorial, savvy, mischievous. It had been late March, and a steely sky had spit mean little pellets of snow at my feet as I crossed the campus for my meeting with her and the provost. Seated beside her, he wore a charcoal pin-striped suit. But she'd been all spring in a lavender silk suit and amethyst earrings. It was her laugh that assured me we'd become friends. How can a laugh be both warm and wicked? She'd laughed just such a laugh that morning—one that both welcomed and winked. As we discussed the proposed women's studies program and the opposition it would face, that laugh promised I'd have at least one ally, not to mention a mother of the spirit.



THE NEXT SEPTEMBER WHEN I SOUGHT HER advice, I found her in her office sitting behind a boxy, old oak desk—the kind schoolteachers

once used. An attractive woman in her fifties with short blonde hair, Sandra was sturdy herself, in a Mae West kind of way, her professional veneer vanishing into a sultry bawdiness with just a toss of her head. That day she gave me the best advice I think one woman has ever offered another working within a traditionally male field. The best approach—the one that had always worked for her—was to go ahead and do whatever you wanted. “Never ask permission,” she said. “Just go on and do it, and later, if somebody gets in a huff, you say (and here her eyebrows lifted innocently, Doris Day at her most kittenish), ‘Oh, well, I didn’t know.’” Then she gave me her cat-that-swallowed-the-canary grin. After that, I dropped by whenever I was in Sandra’s neck of the woods. Even when I found her desk vacant, I felt greeted and comforted by its warm golden glow in the center of the room as if it was awaiting—and inviting—conversation.

Writing of oak trees in [The Long, Long Life of Trees](#), Fiona Stafford admires their individuality. However many “magnificent specimens” of oak trees exist, each one is unique. Like the oak of the desk I came to associate with her, Sandra stood out from most academics. Although nearing the end of her career, she wasn’t slowing down. She got people from various corners of campus together to discuss things—not the petty stuff we quarreled about in committee meetings or groused about in the coffee room: which colleagues were getting away with teaching smaller classes, which department was getting preferential treatment from the president, etc. She gathered us to talk about how to orient first-generation students, of

whom there were many on our campus, into the culture of higher education and how to make class-taking more possible for nontraditional students. Just so we wouldn’t take ourselves too seriously as a committee, she called us the MUTTs (the Mansfield University Think Tank). Like Robin Hood who lived among the oaks of Sherwood Forest, Sandra looked out for people and protected the underdog. A former home economics professor, she understood how difficult it was for students who had children to attend college without affordable childcare, and she worked ceaselessly to create a childcare center.

Even away from her desk, Sandra exuded traits oaks have been known for over centuries. William Bryant Logan, author of [Oak: The Frame of Civilization](#), notes: “Generosity and hospitality are attributed to oaks” and have been since the Middle Ages. Outside of work, she devised opportunities for women faculty and staff to come together and laugh. She hosted brunches and dinners in her cozy farmhouse kitchen where we huddled near the woodstove, surrounded by her dark rose-colored cupboards and the soft light of votive candles in the windows. She started a book group where scientists, librarians, and psychologists talked about everything—sometimes even the book at hand. Sandra liked to associate with the people on campus she called “the rowdies,” and I was proud to be among them. And there was always food, which wasn’t surprising since Sandra was both a Swede, like me, and a “Midwestern gal,” as we referred to ourselves—she being from Missouri and I from Nebraska—and both cultures prize entertaining and serving guests.

Nor was Sandra’s need to feed and nurture

limited to humans. One night, following an enormous buffet dinner, she followed me to her door. When she switched on the porch light, I saw a ring of barn cats eating from a bowl of kibble, shoulder to shoulder. She wanted to make sure I wasn’t startled by—and didn’t, in turn, startle—the enormous skunk eating among the cats, who seemed to accept him as one of the gang. Laughing at my surprise, Sandra assured me that he was. The oak, too, is famed for its bounteous gifts. In addition to lending its wood to the construction of the first buildings and furniture, Logan names fifty creatures, from insects to pigeons to deer, who feast on its offerings. Indeed, he points out, “[t]he old word for oak in Tunisia means ‘the meal-bearing tree.’”

Stafford also admires the oak because “[t] here [is] nothing flighty or impulsive about these trees, nor [do] they give way at the first sign of trouble.” Four years after I came to campus, Sandra was diagnosed with colon cancer that later migrated to her liver, lungs, and eventually, her brain. Always she took the most aggressive approach. Surgery, chemo, radiation—over and over in a cycle nearly as predictable as the seasons she celebrated with parties and food, whimsical decorations, and dashing clothing. Despite her energy being depleted by these treatments and by her diabetes, which made her blood sugar levels as erratic as a small university’s budget, she kept working for another seven years. But not only that. She kept learning, starting and finishing new projects, becoming new things.

So much is the oak associated with strength, Logan writes, that “the strong and faithful of Britain are said to have a ‘heart of oak.’” If

anyone had a “heart of oak,” it was Sandra in those years. Always the wise teacher, as well as the eager student, she seemed to be instructing—by luminous example—how to live deeply and exuberantly in the face of death. I wonder if some of that strength might have come from her no-nonsense oak desk and all she’d accomplished there over the decades, the way the Vikings’ success flowed from the strong and flexible ships they built from oak.

A gifted writer, Sandra took enough courses from me and my colleague (and husband) Bruce Barton to attach a minor in creative writing to her PhD. I loved to think of her at her blonde desk, keeping an in-process poem or short story on one of the pullout shelves above the drawers to work on whenever she had a few minutes or a brainstorm. After one of her surgeries, she made several exquisite stained-glass pieces in abstract designs and wrote a poem to accompany each one, expressing her experiences with cancer. These we hung in the women’s studies program’s art exhibit that year.

She also studied to become an Episcopal deacon, a term she let her friends know with a devilish grin means “angel,” and her ordination made me rethink my alienation from the Church. If a rowdy woman like Sandra could be admitted to its inner sanctum, maybe there was a place for me along the margins. I loved to watch her before a congregation, her sermons part poetry; part down-to-earth, farm girl wisdom; and party sultry humor. When she offered the wafer and wine of the Eucharist, it was with all the womanly warmth with which she set out a meal and welcomed friends to her table. Yet she never proselytized. It simply wasn’t her style.

When the university administrators moved into new, cushier offices on the fifth floor of the remodeled library, the oldest and most elegant building on campus, it was decided that all the office furniture would be matching pieces in sleek, modern cherry wood. Sandra was dismayed about leaving behind her old friend, the vintage oak desk. It had been with her since she taught home ec, a program that had been eliminated long before I showed up on campus. She asked if I'd like to have it for my office. Of course, I would. I had absolutely no connection to the standard issue gray metal desk I currently worked at. Technically, her desk belonged to the university and she probably was required to return it to physical plant where it most likely would be junked or wholesaled off somewhere. Instead she arranged to have the grounds and maintenance people move it to my office. I anointed it with furniture oil when it arrived, a blessing on our new life together. As I did so, I found two pieces of paper Sandra must have forgotten to remove taped to one of the pullouts. One was a prayer from *The Book of Common Prayer* and the other a list of affirmations:

I am one with the universe.

I attract harmony at all times with my thoughts and my feelings.

I am a friend of life.

I trust the greater forces.

I feel the past and the future as one.

And so on. Of course, I left them there. Pulling them out from time to time, I was inspired, as though Sandra was whispering them into my ear.

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ONE SPRING, KNOWING SHE WAS NEARING the end of her struggle with cancer, Sandra emailed her friends and proteges with her intention to retire. If she had one summer left, she wrote, she wanted to spend it in her garden. And she didn't mean setting out a few annuals and doing a little weeding either. Along with her friend and hired helpmate Heather, a student she'd met in my poetry writing class, she created seven meditation sites with benches and views; a firepit with a hand-built wall around it; a rock beach around her pond; and—the crowning glory—a labyrinth. Being the pragmatic Swede that she was, she didn't fret over it a lot. She just chose a field where wildflowers came up among the grasses, consulted a few diagrams, and she and Heather took turns cutting a path with the lawnmower.

On a golden evening that summer, I was one of eight women who helped Sandra launch her labyrinth. As we walked the spiraling path, we took turns pulling a wagon holding the large, stone Celtic cross Sandra had ordered for its center. Reaching the center, we set it into place, said our prayers for the earth, for each other and those we loved, and then wound back out through the concentric circles. I noticed a black horse from the neighboring field above us watching. She might have been wondering what those crazy ladies were up to, but I think she was our watcher. The first time I walked a labyrinth I'd been told that one person, the watcher, stands outside and prays for those walking it. The horse stood, faithful and still, as we circled, as the sun dropped to the horizon, glowing, like the

eye of God, before it disappeared. One of the mantras from Sandra's desk whispered to me on the breeze: *I am in harmony with all things, seen and unseen.*

I don't know who bought Sandra's home after she died. I hate to think of the grasses and wildflowers overgrowing the labyrinth. But I guess that, eventually, they cover all we have created. Sandra was cremated, her ashes placed in a small drawer in the wall of the nave of her church alongside those of other members who'd died. Without planning it, all her rowdy women friends showed up at her funeral in shades of purple, her favorite color, the color of the Siberian iris that flowed in waves through her gardens. As we left the church, a brass quintet played a saucy version of "When the Saints Come Marching In," and her daughter handed out small packets of forget-me-not seeds. (A lovely gesture, given Sandra's devotion to gardening, but I would have dropped acorns into mourners' palms.) Unlike the oak, Sandra didn't enjoy an extraordinarily long life—or even a normal span of years. But in my heart—and many others—her wisdom, humor, and generosity has taken root and lives on.

The summer after her death, I planted a garden in her honor in my backyard—all pink and purple flowers, her favorite colors—lupines, delphiniums, columbines, irises, roses, and clematis. In early fall, when some were still in bloom, I'd place a bouquet of them on the desk. And when I needed strength on a difficult day, I'd rebel against the rule forbidding lit candles, seeking the comfort of her presence by putting a match to a lavender-scented votive beside the photo of

her in a violet pantsuit taken at the launch of my first poetry book.

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A FEW YEARS LATER, THE ENGLISH Department's building was remodeled, and we too were to receive new matching desks. When the head of physical plant arrived, I told him I didn't need one, that I had a desk I wanted to keep. But I didn't have any more luck with him than Sandra had had when she'd wished to keep it. His orders, he said, were to haul out all the old desks and haul in the new ones, which were, I discovered, a less banged up version of the gray metal desk I'd had before. But Sandra's beloved desk, with its prayers and its history, was sacred to me, like an altar dedicated to all that was best in working at a small state school like ours. Sandra once explained the Episcopalian notion of the "Communion of Saints," which included all believers, thus erasing the barrier between the living and the dead. When I refused to let the workers take Sandra's desk, the vice-president for business and finance marched over and barged into the departmental office, ordering the secretary to find the faculty member who wouldn't cooperate with his people. But I was already there, sitting across from her, talking about the situation. I introduced myself and explained the desk's importance to me. "Sandra was the soul of this place," I said, "and her desk means the world to me." He'd been hired only a few years earlier and had never known Sandra, though he claimed to understand my feelings. Nevertheless, all the building's

offices must have identical desks. “Why should a university be so lockstep?” I argued, rising to my feet. “Aren’t we supposed to value diversity around here?”

“Sit down!” he demanded.

“Why? So you can try and intimidate me?” I couldn’t help wishing Sandra could witness this confrontation. She would have hated the smug bastard with his bulging red jowls. No longer the intimidated junior faculty member who’d come to her for advice in my first weeks at the university, I strode out of the office, shouting behind me that the desk wasn’t going anywhere.

Eventually, they agreed (through my department chair) to let me keep the desk as long as I also took one of the ugly metal ones. No problem. My office was plenty large enough to accommodate both desks, and I threw a paisley tablecloth over the new one and used it to hold ungraded papers.

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OVER THE NEXT TEN YEARS, I PLANNED many a class and read many a student poem and essay on that desk. I met with many a student there, using the pullout with Sandra’s affirmations taped on it to work with a student on potential revisions. The desk faced large windows, looking out onto mountains that were sometimes a lush green, sometimes a tweed of gold, scarlet, and orange, sometimes snow-covered, and sometimes misty as a dream. Sandra would have liked that I wasn’t facing students with the desk between us. Rather, I swiveled to the overstuffed chair (brought from home) beside me to talk with a student seated there about challenges they

were facing in class and in their lives, to offer tissues and advice, and to talk about the possibility of graduate school.

When my turn to retire arrived, I asked my close friend, colleague, and sister writer Louise Sullivan-Blum, who was moving into my office, if she would like the desk. Louise was an out lesbian on our conservative campus and a rowdy woman of the first order. I knew Sandra would approve. Louise promised she’d take good care of it, as though I were leaving her with a beloved pet, and, truly, I loved it like a living thing, almost the way I had loved Sandra. After Louise helped pack up my office and the guys I’d hired to move all my boxes arrived, I ran my hand once more across its grainy surface, saying goodbye.

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NOW, FOUR YEARS LATER, LOUISE IS retiring. She emailed a few weeks ago to ask if I wanted the desk. That had never occurred to me as a possibility, but why shouldn’t I take it? It wasn’t as though the university valued it. Hell, yes, I wanted it. Our department secretary said she’d be happy to let me into the office to get it now that Louise had moved out, even though she knew we’d need to be secretive about it since the university would probably insist on taking it, even if they were going to throw it on a junk heap. As long as the desk had been in loving hands, I didn’t mind someone else having it. But losing it now would feel like dumping the body of a loved one in the garbage. Heavy and hard to budge as it might be (hence, my asking Karl for help), I would take it home and find an

honored space for it. And anyway, I wasn’t asking anyone’s permission.

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THE LATE AUGUST DAY WE’VE CHOSEN FOR the great desk heist turns out to be one of the hottest of the summer. Classes start in just a week, and a few cars are parked in the faculty lot next to Belknap Hall. This was always my favorite part of the academic year, a chance to start over again each year—new classes to teach, new students to meet, reunions with colleagues and favorite former students. I almost feel sad not to be returning to my office to work on syllabi. Retirement is a kind of death, but it also can be an entry into a new life. For me, that new life involves nearly limitless time for writing, and I’m excited about Sandra’s desk becoming a part of that life.

Inside, we run into Jimmy, a good friend and current department chair. He offers to help with the desk, but Karl assures him we can handle it. Louann gives us the keys and we enter my former office, greeted by my old oak friend. The office has been painted a cloudless sky-blue and looks fresh and ready to begin a new year. I caress the desktop that is anything but smooth, my fingers following the wide, wavy grain that swoops through the wood, snagging on a crack or gouge. There’s that tingle of sadness in my chest again. But it’s short-lived as Karl and I remove drawers to load the desk onto the dolly he’s brought. As we do so, I discover a square of printed text Louise had taped to the other pullout. Titled “A Lovely Text from Zoe—2/10/2015,” it’s a note of encouragement Louise had saved from

her daughter, a student at Skidmore and my goddaughter, reminding her of the importance of the work she does at a small state school like ours. “It takes a certain type of person to be able to teach people and make a difference to people who would not necessarily even be in college without a school like Mansfield and who would not know the joys of a book like *Giovanni’s Room* or the incredible nature of writing a story themselves without you,” Zoe had written. “I love you and I want you to understand that any smart person can teach smart, educated students, but it takes an incredible, intelligent person to teach students with less privilege and education.” Apparently, desk pullouts are the places for affirmations, prayers, and pep talks. I’m leaving Zoe’s where Louise taped it. Perhaps one day I’ll tape something beside it, something to inspire the next person blessed to work at this desk.

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AS KARL AND I CARRY THE DESK TO HIS VAN to bring it home, I briefly think of us as pallbearers, the desk bearing a resemblance to another kind of wooden box. But a coffin carries a dead body. “Well into the twentieth century,” Logan writes, “it was still believed in many parts of Europe that a hollow, living oak . . . was the home of living spirits.” Some might say that a tree that’s become a desk is no longer alive. But I sense Sandra’s spirit in the hollows of the desk’s drawers, and the rivers in the grain seem to carry her lifeblood. I decide that, far from hauling bones to burial, we are launching a strong and sturdy ship into new waters. ❖