

# Tree by Leaf

CYNTHIA VOIGT





TREE  
BY  
LEAF



*CYNTHIA VOIGT*

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*SUMMARY: A father's return home following World War I creates problems for his family, especially for twelve-year-old Clothilde, who struggles to accept his horrible disfigurement and opposes her mother's plan to sell Clothilde's land, a peninsula off the coast of Maine, to help pay the family's expenses.*

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*Peter—Remember walking across the bridge by Robin's house one summer night? Remember what you asked me? I think this is my way of asking that same question; I know it's my way of remembering walking across the bridge with you, hearing you ask it.*

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# 1



**S**ilence. Except for her footsteps, except for the soft thunk of mussels dropped onto the rocks by gulls, except for the wind that moved murmuring through the distant trees above her, there was silence. The tide had slipped out, leaving mud flats bare and mussel beds exposed. Her skirts tangled at her legs. As Clothilde walked on, following the curving beach, her skirts made a weak echo of the sound of the breeze.

At the far end of the beach, boulders lay piled upon each other, great masses of rock abandoned eons ago by retreating glaciers. Clothilde climbed up behind a chunk of granite. The quiet enfolded her. She put down the slatted clam basket and the thick-tined rake. Leaning against the rock, she pulled off her rubber boots, first the right and then the left. She took off the heavy socks Mother made her put

on under the boots. They were Father's socks, too big for her. In a corner of the attic were four trunks of Father's clothes, packed away—shirts, trousers, coats, sweaters, waistcoats, ties, long johns and nightshirts, socks, boots and shoes. Clothilde balled up the second sock in her hand and dropped it onto a flat ledge of rock. She hoisted her skirt to unfasten the petticoat underneath, pulled the petticoat down and off, shook it out and folded it neatly on top of the socks. Reaching through her legs, she took the back hem of her skirt and pulled it forward, tucking it into its waistband at the front. She rolled up the long loose sleeves of her blouse.

Some day, Clothilde thought, clambering up, working her way along the familiar invisible path, she would like to strip down to her shift and drawers. She could do it. Nobody would know. Once she was out of sight of the house she could be entirely alone. Mother could call and she wouldn't hear. Mother could ring the old hand bell until her arm fell off, but Clothilde wouldn't hear it.

Above the boulders, the woods crowded up to the land's end. Once within the trees, Clothilde moved quickly. *Mine*, her bare feet said, landing surely—*Mine*, her heart beat strongly; running around her body her blood said it too—*Mine, Mine*. It was, too, it was hers, the whole mitten-shaped peninsula.

She stayed within the woods. She had marked the way with little cairns of piled stones, but she didn't need markers. Her feet had worn it down until it was as distinct as a deer's path, and her eyes found it easily. If she had gone farther inland, she could have made better time on the dirt road that ran beside the fields, but Clothilde preferred her



own path. Pines, the older ones towering up high, grew thick and straight. Slender white birches clustered together among the pines. A few maples and spruces were scattered through the pines and birches. Underneath, on the soft pine needles, ferns flourished in the shade, and mosses spread out. Sometimes, one of her own cairns, no more than three fist-sized rocks arranged in a way that would look natural to the careless eye, marked the path; sometimes she had used one of the boulders that thrust up through the ground.

She didn't run through the woods. She walked—avoiding branches and prickly scrub growth, her ears hearing the waving of branches in the wind, her eyes seeing the dappled sunlight moving through the trees. She moved through patches of sunlight and patches of shade. Sunlight and shade ran over her, like the water in one of the little falls that cascaded down the rocky headlands after a rain.

When she reached the easternmost point of land, Clothilde sat down on a ledge of rock, with the trees close behind her. Here, the boulders made a steep slope she could climb down, if she wanted, to sit on whatever rock was at the water's edge. Here the tides moved up and down over the rocks, always moving, rising tides or falling tides. Some of the boulders had clumps of seaweed growing on them, long yellowy-brown air-pocketed strands crowded out from the center.

Around here, they called it rockweed, not seaweed. At first, Clothilde had refused to call it that, and then she had changed and called it rockweed, and now she had stubbornly gone back to her old name for it, the name she had first learned. *Seaweed*, she'd say, knowing she was going to be corrected. *Seaweed*, she'd say, wanting whoever she was talk-

ing to to know that she wasn't going to change what she named it even if everybody here tried to make her. They couldn't know that—like a word you learned you'd been spelling wrong so that ever after when you started to spell it you contradicted and confused yourself and never were sure if you were right—inside her head she called it *Rockweed*, no, *seaweed*. Not that she talked to anybody much. Not that anybody cared what she called it.

Away to the east, beyond the two little islands that lay so close to shore that she could make out trees and coves, and the clear, white, round lighthouse, beyond the three dark shapes, which were outlying islands, lay the Atlantic Ocean, and beyond that Europe—England, France, Belgium. The water, so clear beneath her that she could see the colors of underwater rocks and the floating fingers of seaweed out afar, rippled under the breeze into a blue field that struck gold from the sun, rippling gold as it moved. The sky was clear above, with only a few little fluffy white clouds drifting aimlessly across it. The sun poured warm over Clothilde where she sat with her bare legs against the rough stone, with the woods rustling behind her. *Mine*, she thought, her imagination picturing the entire peninsula, *Mine*.

And it was. She didn't know why Great-Aunt Clothilde, Grandfather's ill-liked sister, had left it to her, unless it was her name. She didn't even care why the three-hundred-and-fifty-acre, mitten-shaped peninsula was hers, and only hers. Clothilde had met her great-aunt just once, and she had no memory of the meeting. She had been only three or four at the time, the time years ago when Grandfather had reluctantly asked his sister to dinner, since she had come to Boston to revise her will. That must have been the time

when she decided to give the peninsula to Clothilde, but there was no answer to the question Why. The will had simply said, after everything else, "To my great-niece Clothilde I leave that property known as Speer Point, Maine, and all the buildings upon it." The big summer cottage Great-Aunt had built had burned down, long before Clothilde had gotten there, maybe even before her great-aunt had died. The only remaining buildings were the farm manager's house they lived in, at the curve where the mitten's thumb began, and a dilapidated boathouse across the peninsula, close to where the big summer cottage had stood. Where the cottage had stood, at the knuckle below the mitten's little finger, tall blackened timbers pointed up into the sky like scorched bones, a mass of burned rubble rotted away, and one glass wall, all that was left of the conservatory, collapsed more every year. Nobody knew how the cottage had burned—maybe tramps, maybe children, maybe lightning. Clothilde had gone to look at the ruin, just once. It was too much like war and she never went again.

The whole peninsula was hers, and it lay behind her like a right-hand mitten, a mitten with a terribly narrow wrist where the high causeway road led away to the village. Clothilde would have preferred an island, but a peninsula—almost an island in the Latin Mother made her study with Nate—was good enough. Especially if it was all hers: the acres of overgrown fields, where Queen Anne's lace and black-eyed Susans grew among the long grasses, and the two tilled fields, land they traded to Mr. Henderson for milk and butter; the high rocky blueberry fields at the center of the peninsula; and the woods, acres of timber. The peninsula was her future. Lumber companies always wanted to buy

timber. The woods, felled and transformed, cut into poles for telegraph and telephone wires, sliced into boards, chipped into shingles, cooked into a pulp for paper, or carved into furniture—the peninsula gave her a future.

Clothilde couldn't sit for long that day, much as she would have liked to. The tide was still going out, but soon it would turn and begin to edge up along the rocks below and slide back into the cove. She had clams to dig and she couldn't linger long. She sat for a few minutes longer, even so. She didn't think about anything. She watched and listened and let the sun shine on her bare head and bare arms, with no more will than one of the flat jellyfish the tide sometimes left stranded on the beach. It wasn't really like a mitten, her peninsula, Speer Point. It wasn't smooth edged at all. If there was a hand it had actually been knitted to fit, that was a monster's hand with lots of sharp pointy fingers crowding out of the knuckles and a huge disproportionate thumb, and the scrawny wrist about one narrow bird-bone thick. If there really was such a hand, and you saw it, it would be so bad you'd have to turn your face away and pretend it wasn't there, or look at it and feel so sorry you'd want to just weep. Or get angry—at the mother and father for having the monster, or at the whole world that included it, or at God. The peninsula was really a thick monster hand of land, clawing out into the sea with sharp little fingers. She supposed it was ugly—remote, uncultivated, grown wild—but that didn't matter because it was hers. Besides, she knew it was beautiful.

God had done such good work on land and trees, oceans, mountains, islands, and the firmament with its two great lights, the way the Bible said it, one for the day and

one for the night. He'd done so well with everything else, He could have done better with people. And He should have. If she were God, she wouldn't have made people at all. If she were God, she'd have stopped with everything that creepeth, and she'd have kept the Garden of Eden for herself, and there never would have been such a thing as war. If she were God, Clothilde thought, she'd have known better.

As silent as one of the Indians that used to inhabit the coast, Clothilde got up and made her way back through the trees. Silent as the still water, quiet as one of the Indians from the lost tribes, Clothilde moved through the trees. She climbed back down the boulders.

By comparison, the beach was noisy. Gulls squabbled and the mud made thick sucking sounds at the boots she had put back on, over the thick socks. When she found a group of little air holes, Clothilde set down the clam basket. She leaned her weight on the rake, forcing the tines down into the flat mud. The mud didn't want to be dug up and tried to hold itself together, separating from itself with the same sucking sounds with which it released her boots. The rake was as much a shovel as a rake. It was really a short thick shovel, with heavy metal tines instead of a flat bottom. It was made that way so it could dig efficiently but not cut through any more clams than it had to, as it lifted the mud and dumped it down.

Clothilde stood with her feet set wide apart and dug a shallow pit between them. That turned up a few clams, which she tossed into the basket beside her. Those clams with shells crushed into by the tines of the rake she tossed aside. Maimed and broken, the pale pulpy flesh bared to the

air, they were already dead, or dying. You couldn't tell which, with clams. Clothilde didn't mind digging clams, didn't mind cooking them alive, because they were food. But she minded those clams the rake smashed. There should be a better way to dig clams.

When the trench between her feet was finished, she leaned forward to force the rake deep into the mud, then pulled. The miniature cliff collapsed toward her; she bent over and worked her fingers through the mud, to find the hidden clams. They didn't need all that many clams to make Sunday chowder for the five of them. Cooked on Saturday evening, the chowder ripened up overnight. They would eat it for dinner tomorrow, a soup as thick as a stew with its chunks of potatoes and its clams, a rich milky fishy stew. Clothilde leaned over and pulled, bent down to find out the clams that had backed themselves down into the mud, moved to a new area pitted with air holes and began again.

She was perspiring. Her blouse stuck to her back. Her hands and arms, like the rake and basket, were streaked with gray clayey mud. Clothilde didn't mind that. She liked the sharp, salty smell and the thick streaks of mud. She liked the tiredness. When she had gathered enough clams, she picked up the basket and walked on out to where the water had gotten to, in its rising, set the basket down, bent over to splash water on her hands and arms, and her face too. The water was cool, cold. It wasn't icy, because the July sun warmed the mud flats enough to heat the water as it returned into the cove, but it was definitely cold. Her steps loosened mud from the bottom and it rose like underwater dust, until the moving water cleared it away. Looking at the bottom, Clothilde saw how the waves made wavy diamond

shapes out of the sunlight. Those diamonds chased themselves restlessly over the floor of the cove. There were too many, they moved too quickly, like the little waves on the water's surface.

The water had rinsed the thickest mud off the clams, and Clothilde used her palms and fingers to finish the job. Mother would give the clams a final cleaning in the kitchen sink. The sun was moving along the sky, the tide was slipping into the cove, and Clothilde knew she was already later than she should have been. Picking up the heavy basket, splashing back to the rake to carry it in her other hand, she returned to the beach. She pulled her petticoat back on and shook her skirt out over it, so it would hang properly. She rolled down the sleeves of her blouse. She didn't want to go back.

She didn't want to go back because when she was alone on the beach, in the woods, at the headlands especially, but anywhere in her wanderings over the peninsula, Clothilde was as close to happy as she could ever remember being. Even digging clams or gathering mussels, she felt herself sitting content in herself. Not worrying the way she often worried; not reassuring herself the way she often did, by remembering the peninsula, which was hers. That struck her as odd, because whenever she thought about digging clams and gathering mussels she felt a resentment that burned inside her. Why should she be the one to go out and gather, to get her hands cut on barnacles and sharp shells, her palms callused on the handle of the rake, her fingernails blackened by mud. Nate sometimes brought home fish, because a gentleman could know how to fish. Sailing a boat was something a gentleman could know how to do, so he could sail



out and anchor, and bring home fish for dinners. Dierdre was not quite four, too young to be useful, so it was Clothilde who chopped wood, year-round, for the stoves, and shoveled coal into the boiler that supplied hot water for the house; who dug potatoes out of the garden with Mother; it was Clothilde who—whose future didn't matter. The resentment burned like a slow fire in her. And even while it burned, at the same time and in the same place, contentment washed over her. The sunny silence wrapped around her like arms.

Clothilde walked along slowly, partly because of the weight of the clam basket, partly because she was going back. The clam basket pulled at her shoulder and banged against her leg. She reassured herself: she had her plans, she had her peninsula and her plans.

She could have entered the kitchen from the one door at the back of the house, in the ell that connected the farmhouse to its barn, but Clothilde always went around to the front, where the house faced down the driveway. The driveway was only two shallow dirt tracks, with grass growing up between them. It led away through the long grass and into the trees. Because almost nobody came up it, the driveway was overgrown. But when she looked at it, standing by the house, Clothilde could see as clear as if it hadn't happened four years ago, in May of 1916, but yesterday, in July of 1920, how Father had looked riding away west into a setting sun.

He was in uniform by then, riding off to join his cavalry regiment. He sat Bucephalus easily, carelessly. Father was a born horseman, everybody said. Clothilde had seen him a hundred times the way she had seen him that morning,



except that he hadn't been in uniform before. Father's back was straight and his smile fell over all of them like sunlight, while the big horse moved restlessly, eager to be going. Father, too, was eager. He turned the horse's head and went off at a fine canter, to please them, to show off. Just before he entered the trees, he unsheathed his sword and swung it over his head. He was teasing, Clothilde and Nate knew, making fun of his soldier self, but he was also proud and gallant, as if right then he could hear bugles blowing to call him into battle, where he and Bucephalus would charge through the enemy, smiting right and smiting left.

Life went easily for Father. Even when he made it hard, it was easy for him, because everyone liked him. He was big and handsome and happy, he had a ready laugh and a strong arm, he was always talking, telling stories on himself. When Father, who had only been there for a day and a night, left the farmhouse to ride off to war, he left the rooms cold and empty behind him, as if the house had already gotten used to him being there and wanted him to stay. But Father had gone.

But sometimes, as if time cracked and let a glimmer of light through from the past, Clothilde could look quickly at the driveway and quickly away, and see Father riding off—and her heart would lift. Recently, she could always see that picture, although the figure on the big horse became less distinct every time. Setting down the heavy basket, holding herself still to catch that glimpse, Clothilde almost really saw it.