

Rootblossoms and Branchburners

By the P5 Class of St Margaret of Scotland Primary School
with Mike Nicholson



**RE
IMAGI
NATION**



Chapter 1

Escape to Breathe

The row had made her want to be alone. And when Milly wanted to be alone it was space she looked for. Sometimes she felt boxed in where she lived. Little cube houses all lined up beside each other like LEGO bricks. The argument with her Dad had made home seem even more claustrophobic. It was as though she couldn't breathe.

Everything he said seemed wrong. He was saying how more things needed to be built and how not even trees should stand in the way.

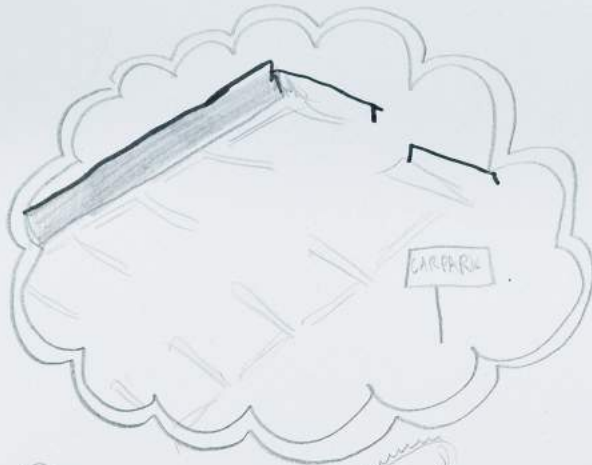
"Better to have a factory than a field," her Dad said as he looked through one of his many construction design magazines. "I'd rather have a bigger carpark than another playpark." That comment had made her really angry.

"I don't think you even know that trees give us oxygen," Milly had said. "We've got more than enough roads and shopping centres."

"Building is progress," said her Dad. "You need to think of the future not live in the past."

"I am. It's just looks like a different future to yours," Milly retorted.

"I'm a grown up," said her Dad grumpily. "I know better than you." He'd told her to go to her room, but Milly had slipped out instead.



DAD

TREES
MAKE
OXYGEN



seeds



MILLY

She set off from Abronhill and walked along footpaths between houses, and crossed a bridge over one of Cumbernauld's fast roads, trying to block out the traffic noise as she did so. She didn't really know where she would end up when she strode off like this. She made it up as she went along. Sometimes the compass circles set into the paths gave her ideas, suggesting directions and destinations. Today she knew what she wanted. A big open space. There was only one place to go; Cumbernauld Field.

Some people felt happy when they went to places like Fundamentals but Milly preferred to get away from it all. She had more fun rolling down a hill and getting covered in grass than jumping around in a soft play. Her favourite time of all here was when it snowed. Cars ground to a halt, buildings closed their doors and even the grown-ups started playing outside again.



Today though was just cloudy and breezy in a way that Cumbernauld often served up, and there was a hint of rain in the air. Some people thought that Cumbernauld was always wet. “It’s miserable here,” they complained. “All grey and ugly.”

But Milly saw it differently. There were beautiful wild places like Cumbernauld Glen and even in the grey houses she had neighbours who were really kind and looked out for each other. If only she could get her Dad to see things differently.

As Milly arrived at Cumbernauld Field she already felt a bit better just from being outdoors. The wide open hillside, the line of trees in the distance and the dip beyond there towards the Glen where the river hid. Milly walked towards Cumbernauld House and chose a tree to sit at. The oldest, crumpliast one. She pulled up the hood of her top and sighed a deep sigh. The breeze surrounding her sounded like an echo.

Then it happened again. It wasn’t the wind at all. Someone had sighed, copying her sigh.



Chapter 2

Rootblossoms and Branchburners

Milly looked around but there was no-one who could have made that noise.

“What’s the matter twigstick?”

She whirled round. Where had that come from? It sounded like an old person speaking. Someone was walking their dog but they were so far away it couldn’t have come from them. She leaned back against the tree again but felt unsettled.

“A little mossnest would be comfier for you.”

This time she jumped up. “Who said that?” Again there was no response. “I’m either hearing things or going insane,” she said to herself uneasily, sitting down again.

“What you need is a nice cup of applesap,” the low voice crackled again. Leaping up this time she tripped over a tree root and sprawled on the ground. “You fell over my groundbranch,” said the voice with a crackly chuckle. There was no doubt. The voice came from its chipped bark. She reached out a hand towards the ancient tree. “Scratch me just there. That’s nice.”

Her hand shot away. “A talking tree...?” she exclaimed.

“You’ve got good see-eyes for a scallywag,” rumbled the tree.

“What...who....how...why are you talking?” said the girl.

“Every now and then I just chooses to. Especially to little twigsticks like you who are feeling like a weeping willow.”



Milly was open-mouthed. It should have been scary to find this giant gnarled lump of a tree talking, but its voice puffed in and out like a friendly inhaler. Somehow it seemed normal. Within a minute she was happily chatting to the tree and feeling a lot better having told it how she felt about arguing with her Dad.

“Life is like that,” said the tree. “There are highs and lows. When I was a tiny seed I was scared of being pecked up by a flutterbird. Then I got buried and felt a lot safer, all nice and warm and compact in the soil. When I was ready to sprout I was all fragile again. But after I grew a few more tree-rings I was taller and stronger and happier. You’ll be the same twigstick.”

“How old *are* you?” asked Milly. The deeply lined bark looked like a wrinkled face of a great great grandfather, and Milly wondered just how many tree rings there were in inside its enormously wide trunk.

“Well it was Mary Queen of Scots who planted me here,” replied the tree. “1561, I think they call the year.”

“You’re hundreds of years old!” Milly exclaimed.

“All right all right. No need to hoot like an owl,” chuckled the tree.



Remi Lee James

Milly



daddy



Mary Queen of Scotland



“How have you survived so long?” asked Milly.

“Just by minding my own business,” said the tree. “Although that hasn’t always worked. I’ve had folks cutting bits off for firewood in the old days. There have been dark times too; people hung and buried here. You’re probably sitting on top of a few stump-skellingtons.”

Milly looked at the ground beside her. Was she really standing on a grave?

“I keep quiet mostly. I’ve only ever spoken to a few twigsticks like you over the years,” said the tree. “There have been little ones who lived on the old farms near here. They’d be wearing clothes what they weaved. Then I’ve talked to grubby little twigsticks who’d been down the mines - black as the underground and coughing coaldust. I’ve wept with the ones who’d lost their dads in the wars, selling flowers to get some pennies. But when the happier crowds came I kept myself to myself.”



“What happier crowds?”

“When the new town was built. All these people came with their little twigsticks like you or even smaller baby acornbuds. They moved into new brickboxes which ate up the farms and people started moving around in cars. I’d hear about it all as they had their picnackeries on the hillside here. They would talk about their new houses in Carbrain or Kildrum or Seafar and Abronhill and rattle on about the old days in Glasgow. People don’t talk like that now. They’re just here.”

Tree

Dad ↙



↙ Millie ↘



↙ Millie ↘



“So what do they talk about these days?” asked Milly.

“Well I don’t like it. It can be a bit scarysome and gets me in a state of worrybother to be honest.” The tree grumbled in a low voice and its branches shook slightly as though it was shivering. Leaves rustled above Milly’s head.

“I hear some people saying I’m a waste of space – old and ugly they call me – and say I should be got rid of. Some of them swing on me and try to snap bits off, or carve me with knives or light fires. Out to get rid of me they are. Branchburners I call them.”

“That’s terrible,” said Milly.

“They don’t understand how the world works,” said the tree. “I’m breathing out what they breathe in. I’m home to thousands of insectybugs and that’s why the flutterbirds come. I’ve been here all through their grandparents’ days and way beyond. I’m part of their history. Any branchburner hurting me is hurting themselves.”

“My Dad’s like that,” said Milly. “He would tarmac everything and build on top of it. I keep telling him he’s wrong.”

The tree chuckled. “We need more people like you Milly. Twigsticks with their feet on the ground, who know they’re connected to it. I call them rootblossoms. You’re a rootblossom Milly – standing firm and bringing colour to the world.”

“If you talked to more people they would be on your side,” said Milly encouragingly.

“It’s too risky,” said the tree. “There might be more branchburners than rootblossoms out there. I think I should keep quiet.”

“No really you mustn’t,” said Milly. “Talk! People need to hear what you say.” She was getting excited, and forgetting what a girl speaking to a tree must look like. Then she realised she was being watched.



Chapter 3

Everyone Wants to Meet a Tree

The woman walking her dog looked at Milly with a very strange expression. Meanwhile her dog sniffed around the tree and had one idea in mind. It raised its leg to pee. “Oi!” said the tree gruffly. The dog yelped and cowered away. The tree whipped one of its longer branches back and a stick snapped off and flew through the air. “Fetch!” shouted the tree. The dog barked and chased after it. The dogwalker’s mouth fell open.

“There you go,” laughed Milly. “That’s a four-legged branchburner who now appreciates you!”

“Maybe you’re on to something twigstick,” said the tree. At that moment there was a noise of crackling wood as a football flew into the tree’s upper branches. “Oh no!” shouted a voice. A boy ran up to where Milly was and looked up. His ball was far out of reach. “Stupid tree,” he said picking up a rock to throw at his ball.

“Here you go,” said the tree bending its branch down. “Climb on.”

“Whaa.....?” said the boy looking at the branch which had lowered to the ground. “Go on,” said Milly. “He’s friendly!”

The boy grinned and climbed on. “Woooah!” he said nervously as the branch rose up. Within seconds he was level with his ball, but as he stretched and reached for it, he slipped and began to fall. “Watch out!” cried Milly.

“I’ve got you twigstick,” a branch curled round the boy’s waist, holding him firm, before gently placing him back on solid ground. “So cool!” said the boy. “Wait till I tell my friends.” He sprinted off.

“You’ve just stopped another branchburner! I think you’re about to get very busy,” said Milly.



Sure enough, later that day, the first of many, many curious visitors came to the tree. Milly heard their conversations as they came away. “It really talks!” “Unbelievable!” “Centuries of stories.” And every person who went away told another, and another, and another.

Soon there were high school pupils getting help before their history exams, children scratching the bark where the tree had an itch. There were even stories of older people who hardly ever left their houses any more, making a special trip to the Field they hadn’t visited in years.

Milly sat up on the hillside each day and watched the crowds roll in. She felt a little bit jealous at first but when she saw how happy people were, enjoying the outdoors and loving the tree she knew it was a good thing.

A week later as the crowds were leaving for the day, Milly turned to head home but then she saw a familiar figure approaching the tree. Her Dad - the biggest branchburner of them all. They had been cross with each other all week and he had dismissed any discussion about the talking tree. She watched with curiosity. He seemed to be having a long conversation with it. She could see the tree’s branches twitching as it talked. Then her Dad got out a measuring tape and a notebook which he scribbled in. He paced out on the grass, so many metres one way and so many metres another way.

Milly felt *very* nervous.



Chapter 4

Building

Back at home Milly asked her Dad what he had been doing that day, not mentioning that she had seen him.

“Just sizing up for a new building job,” he said.

“Whereabouts?” asked Milly.

“You wouldn’t be interested,” he said.

Milly lost sleep that night, worried about her Dad’s latest construction project.

The next morning she watched from her bedroom window as a Council van came and collected her Dad. She knew where it was heading and was determined to stop whatever was happening. Milly slammed out of the front door and sprinted as fast as she could through Abronhill, her feet pounding on the tarmac paths, exactly the sort of surface she knew her Dad would have been measuring up for. She passed a building site with men constructing a new house. Hard hats and noise and another pocket of green covered up. It would be Cumbernauld Field next.

As she reached the hillside she saw a small crowd down by the tree, clutching clipboards and taking photos. The tape measure was out again and they were signalling to each other about distances. Her Dad stood at the back of the group watching as they worked.



“I knew it. I knew it,” she said before tearing down the hill shouting. “Stop! Stop! You can’t do it! It’s wrong!” Everyone in the group turned and stared at this crazy child sprinting towards them at top speed. Milly’s Dad looked surprised and embarrassed. “How could you?” shouted Milly at her Dad. “How can you build here? This is the worst thing you’ve ever done!”

“But Milly,” he said. “This is for the best.” But she wasn’t listening and carried on shouting. Until the tree spoke.

“Hold up twigstick,” it said. A branch reached down gently and touched her on the shoulder as if to settle her. “Don’t lose your leaves. You were right twigstick. You were right to get me talking to other people. You’re a real proper rootblossom. It’s all going to be bark-rubbingly trunky dory!”

“But how can it be?” said Milly. “They want to build!”

“Do you want to see?” said a woman in a high-vis jacket. “It’s your Dad’s great idea.”

“Go on twigstick,” said the tree. “Have a look-see.”

Milly was confused. The woman unrolled a large roll of paper.

On it were plans for a building. A picture of a wooden roofed shelter, open on one side. On its walls were carvings of leaves and branches. Inside were beautiful polished wooden benches. They were grouped in curved rows facing the tree as if it was the actor on a stage in front of an audience.

Milly looked at her Dad. They smiled at each other for the first time in ages.

The name of the project was at the bottom.

“The Rootblossom Storytelling Centre - No Branchburners Allowed.”



THE ROOTBLOSSOM STORYTELLING
CENTRE

NO CUTTERS

NO BRANCH BURNERS