

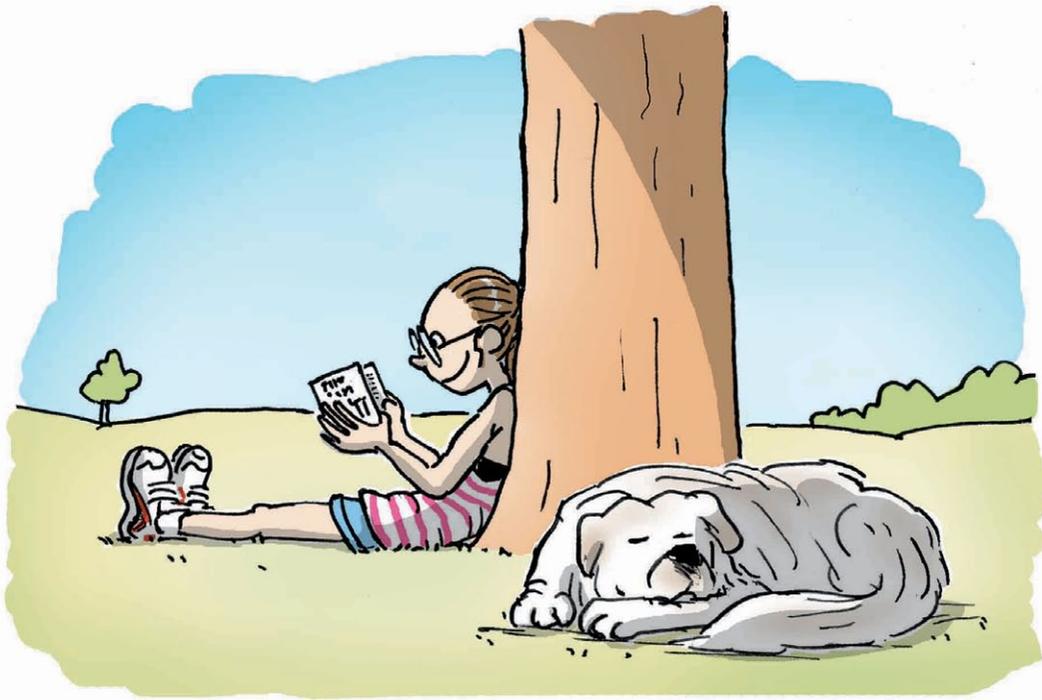
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THE BRAVEST TREE



Marian Hailey-Moss Renata Holt

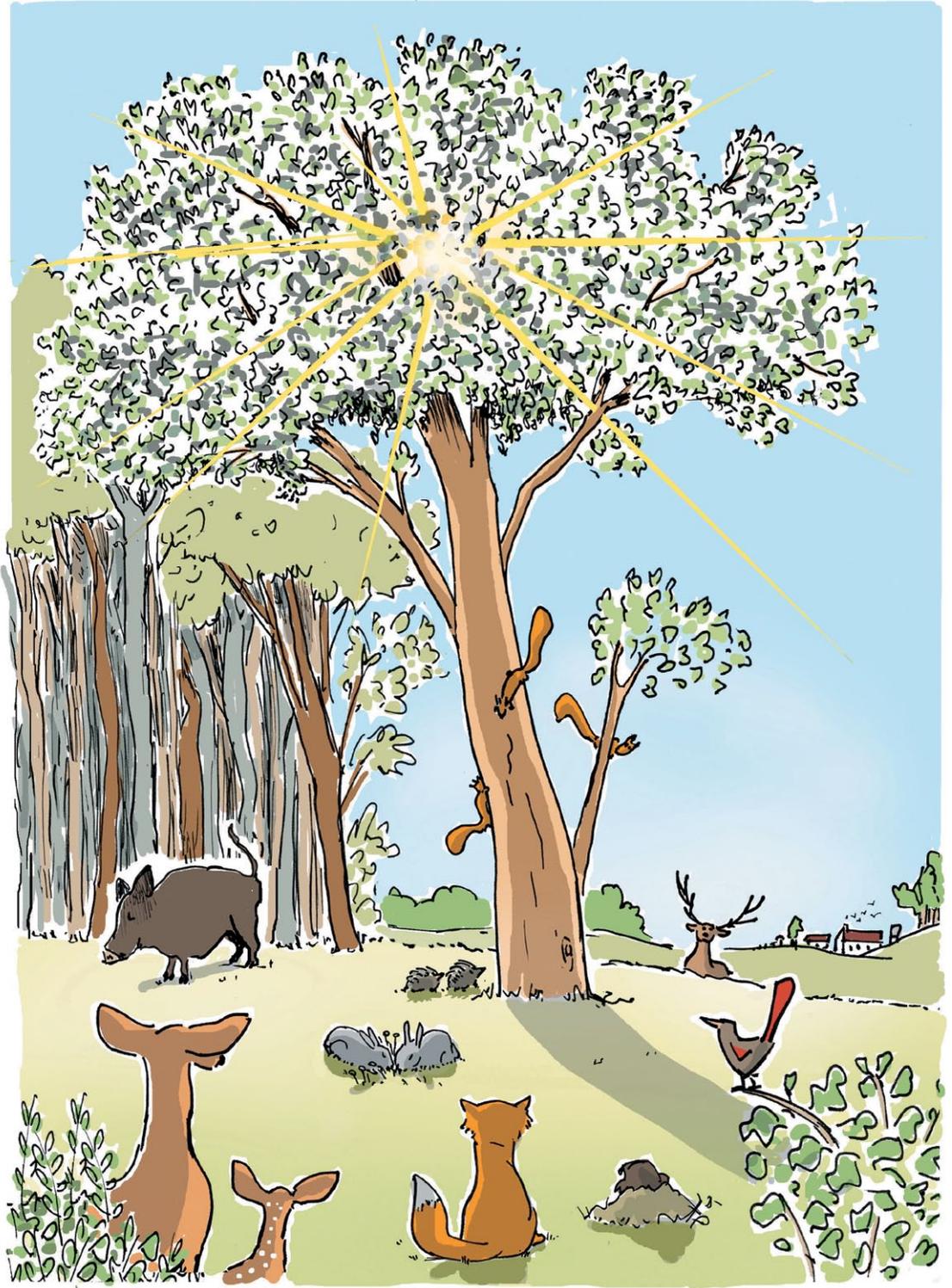
Marc Chalvin

For all the little saplings—may they thrive.



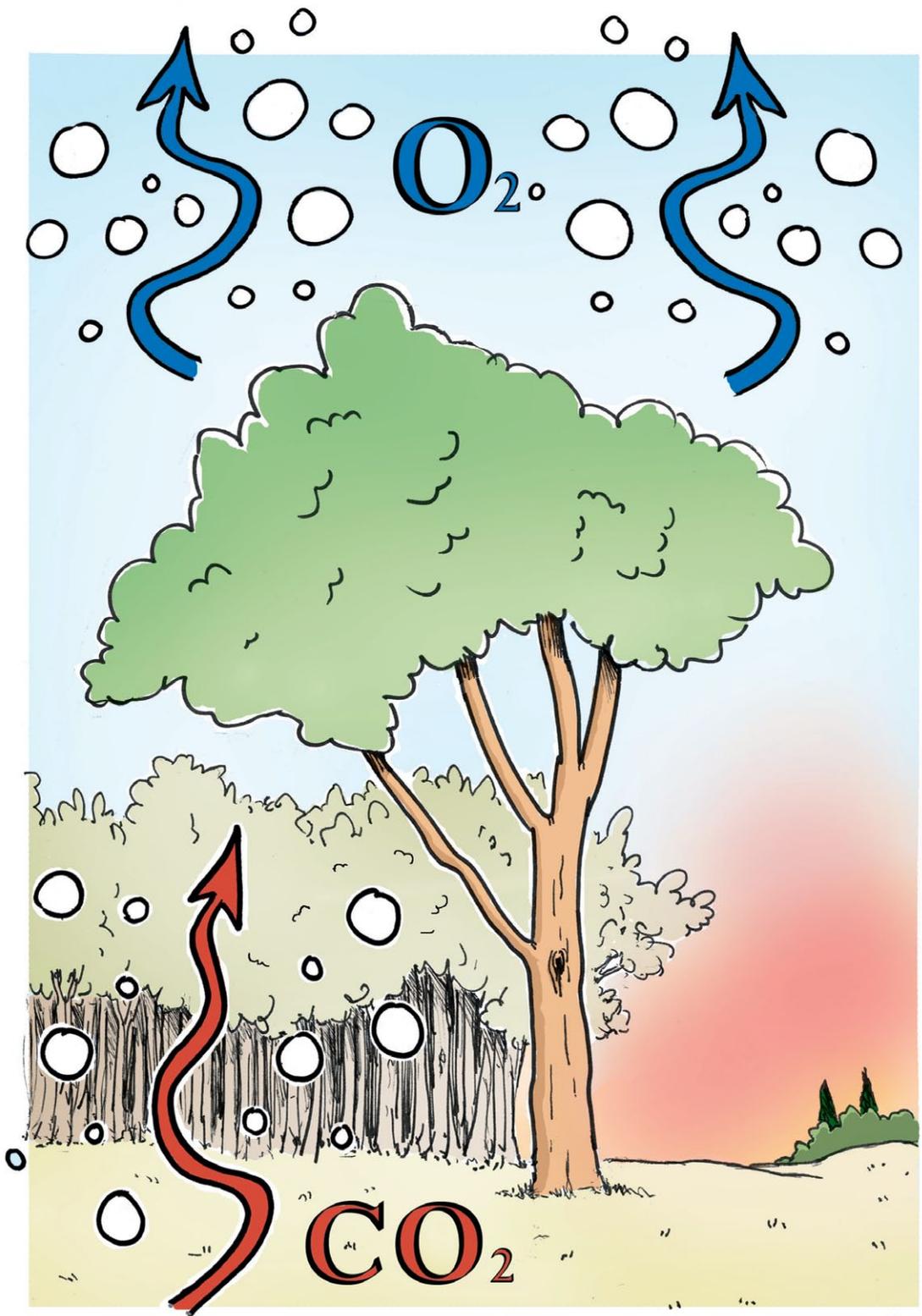
It was in Tree's nature to be generous and kind. From her first days as a little sapling, she used her leaves to recycle the air. Her tiny frame took in the old air and gave out clean oxygen. This made the air healthy and fresh again for all who slithered, walked, trotted, hopped, and flew.

Over many years, Tree grew tall, healthy, and strong. In the daytime, the sun shone on her leafy crown and her nights were lit by the moon and stars. Many creatures sought shelter in or under her and became her friends.



But then the wildfires came.

They were said to be from climate change. Trees help curb climate change by recycling the air. But now, recycling no longer worked. The forests had become tinder boxes. Greedy flames from the wildfires would eat the oxygen as fast as the trees could make it. The air would become thick as pea soup from the smoke.



'Tree could see the signs of a wildfire in the distance. Flames had turned the skies hazy orange and red. There was no chance for 'Tree to escape should the fire come her way. After all, she was rooted in the ground. She felt scared and lonely.

Then she saw Lissa, a young girl, with her dog Echo coming toward her. 'Tree shook her leaves and waved her branches in excitement, glad to see friends. Lissa's family was on the alert, ready to evacuate. But Lissa and Echo had to do just one more thing.

"I've come to say goodbye for now, dear 'Tree. We'll be back when the fire's over. You're our special friend. I know your kindness to all living things will protect you."

'Tree did not feel special. She was just another tree. She could only hope the wind would not blow the flames her way.

Lissa had known 'Tree since she was a little girl. Her hands ran over the jagged bark of 'Tree's trunk. Being close to her majestic friend gave her courage. She had always felt that way, being with 'Tree.

Lissa had her backpack and her cell phone in hand. The alert was at level one; if it went to three, it would be at the "Catastrophic" level.



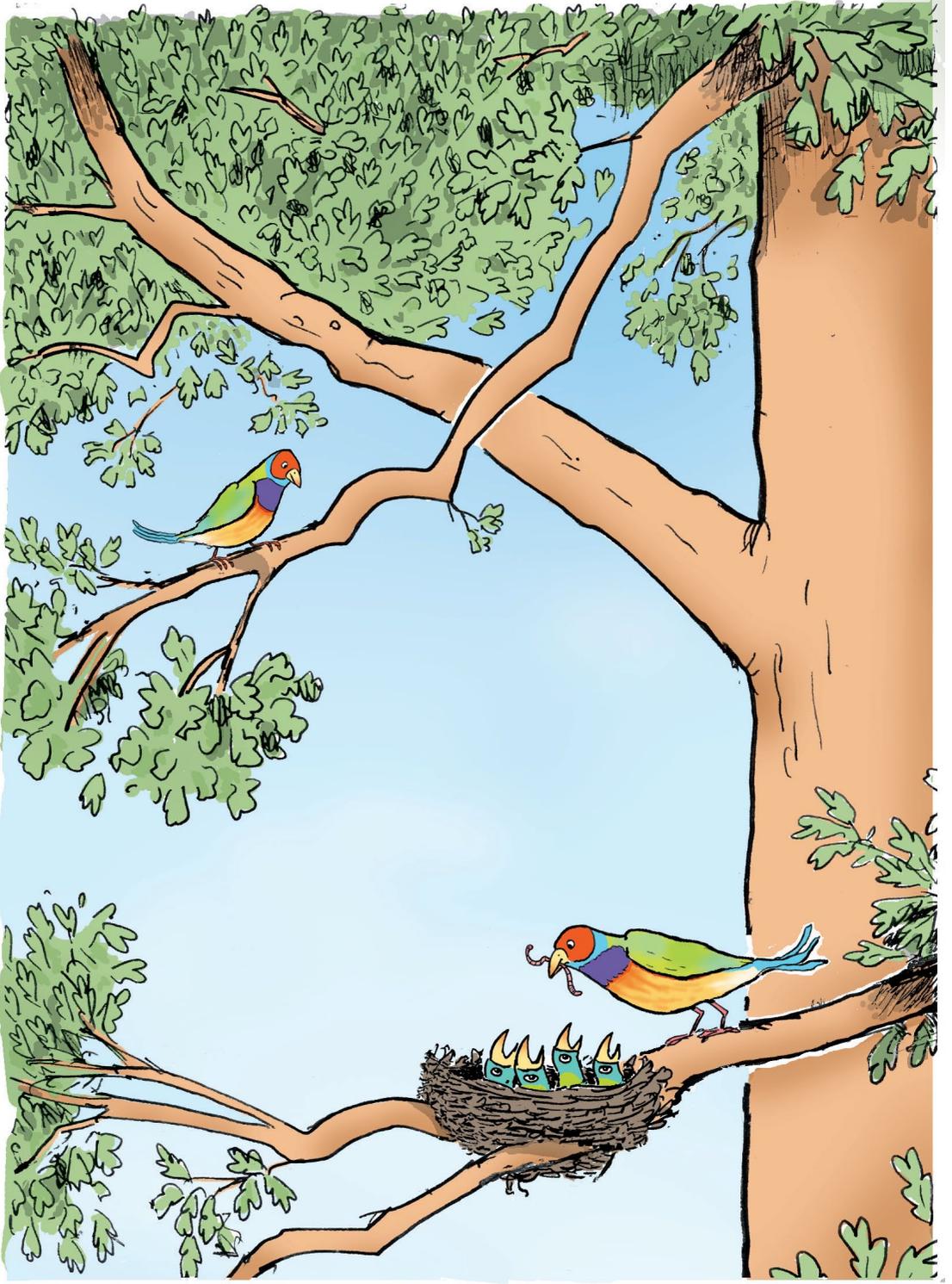
“Echo and I want you to know how much we love you,” said Lissa. “I can’t imagine having grown up without you. I would give anything to take you with us.”

Tree wished it as well, from the tips of her roots to the very edges of her leaves. But that was not the fate of trees. Tree knew her trunk made her seem sturdier than she felt. She was glad she could seem strong for Lissa.

Lissa’s heart and mind flooded with memories. “Oh, dear Tree, we have had so many wonderful times together. Remember when my dad made a swing for us? He hung it on your lowest, sturdiest branch. I could pump high into the sky and always be sure I’d return to solid ground.”



“Oh, and remember that beautiful pair of birds that made their nest in your branches? They were fancy, as if they came from an imaginary land full of castles and knights and kings and queens. The family stayed until the babies could fly. They looked like little jewels. I even stopped swinging so as not to disturb them.”



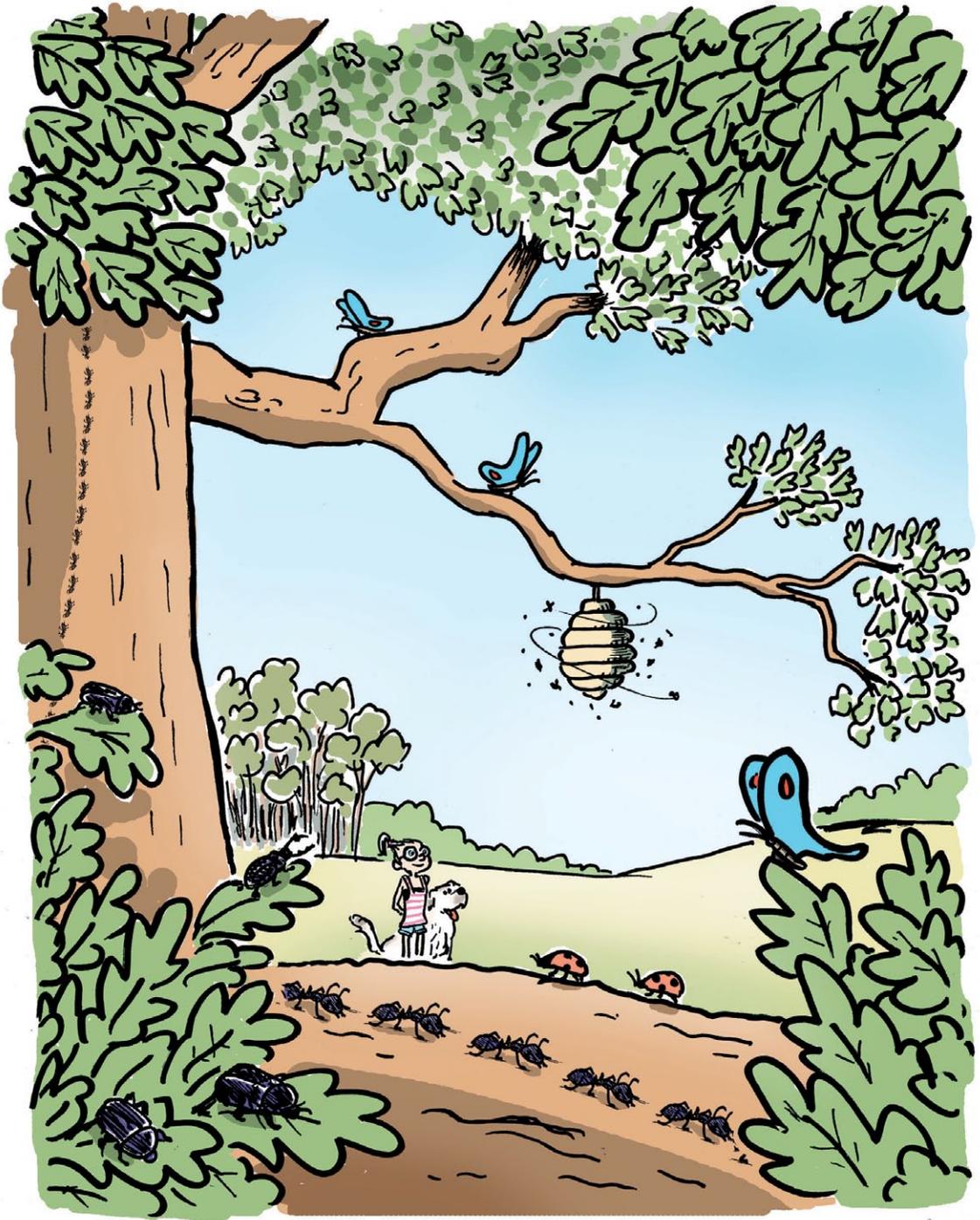
“And the magical fruit you gave us each summer! Everyone who ate them felt better and wiser . . . for a while, at least. The pigs and chickens loved them, too. They oinked and cackled nonstop.

Yesterday, I thought I might be a fortune teller when I grow up. I practiced by putting your leaves in a teacup and reading my fortune. The leaves said, “Plants, plants, plants!” Three times! As if our lives depended on it. It gave me the shivers.”



“And there were the tiny ticklers—the beetles and ants and ladybugs. You gave them a home and a playground. The butterflies fluttered their hellos. And the bees! How could I forget the bees! One year, they built a hive. Echo and I watched them go about their busy bee life from our special place.”

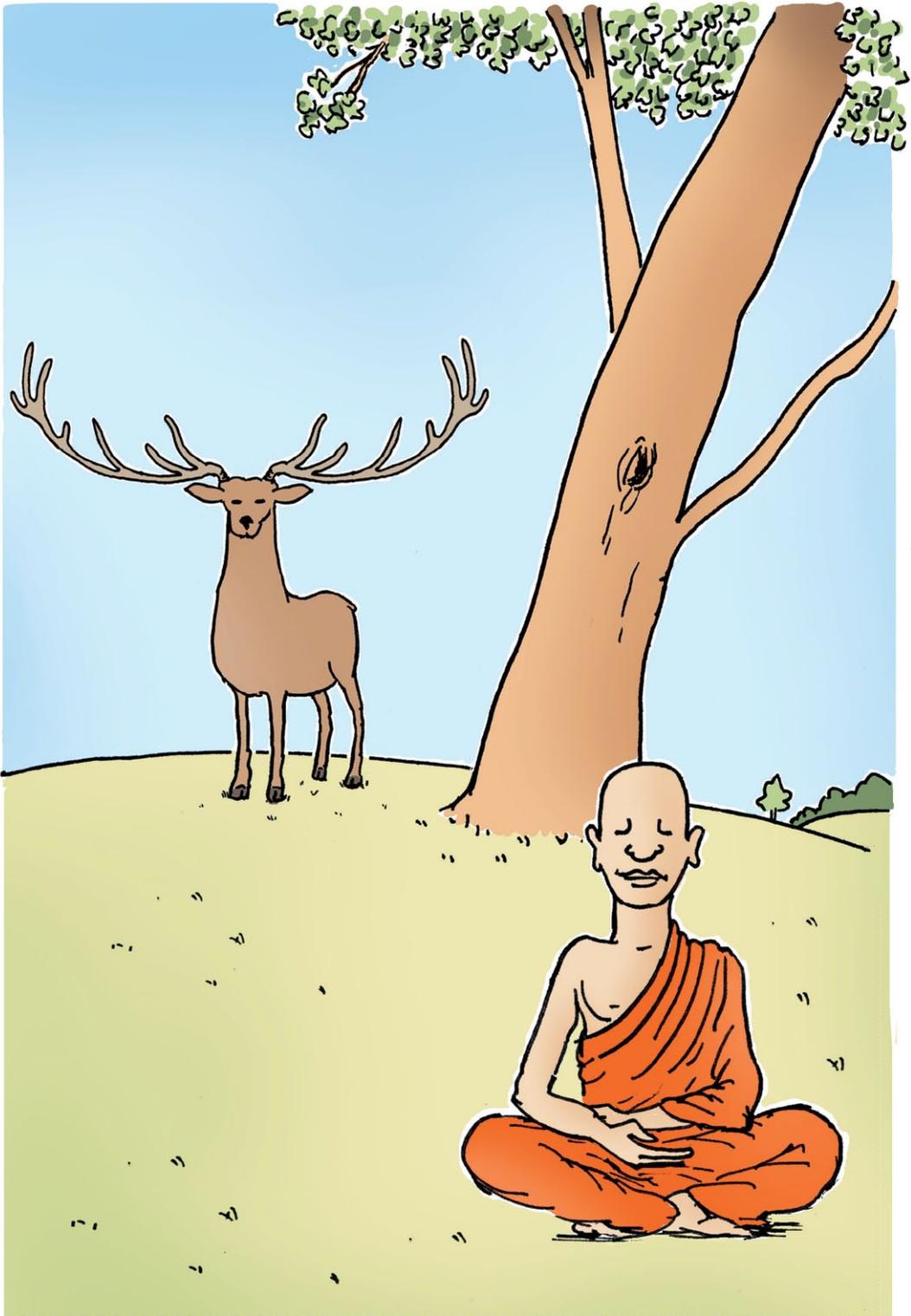
By this time, Tree had forgotten about the wildfires and was happily remembering the better days with Lissa.



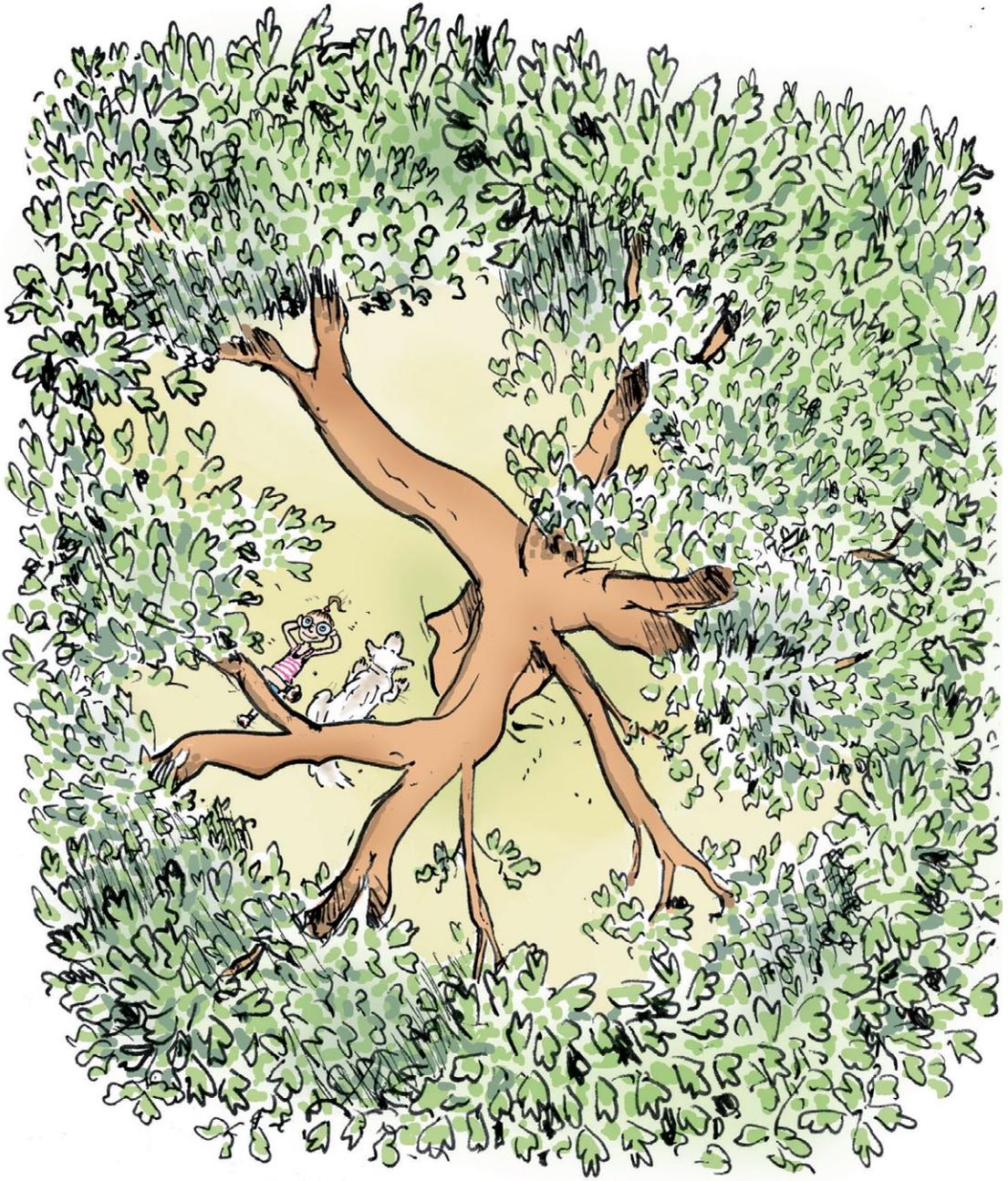
“One night, Echo and I saw from my bedroom window a bear scratching its back on your trunk. A few times, we saw a deer sharpening its antlers. That must have hurt, but you stood strong. The cows took their afternoon naps in the shade under your branches, too.”



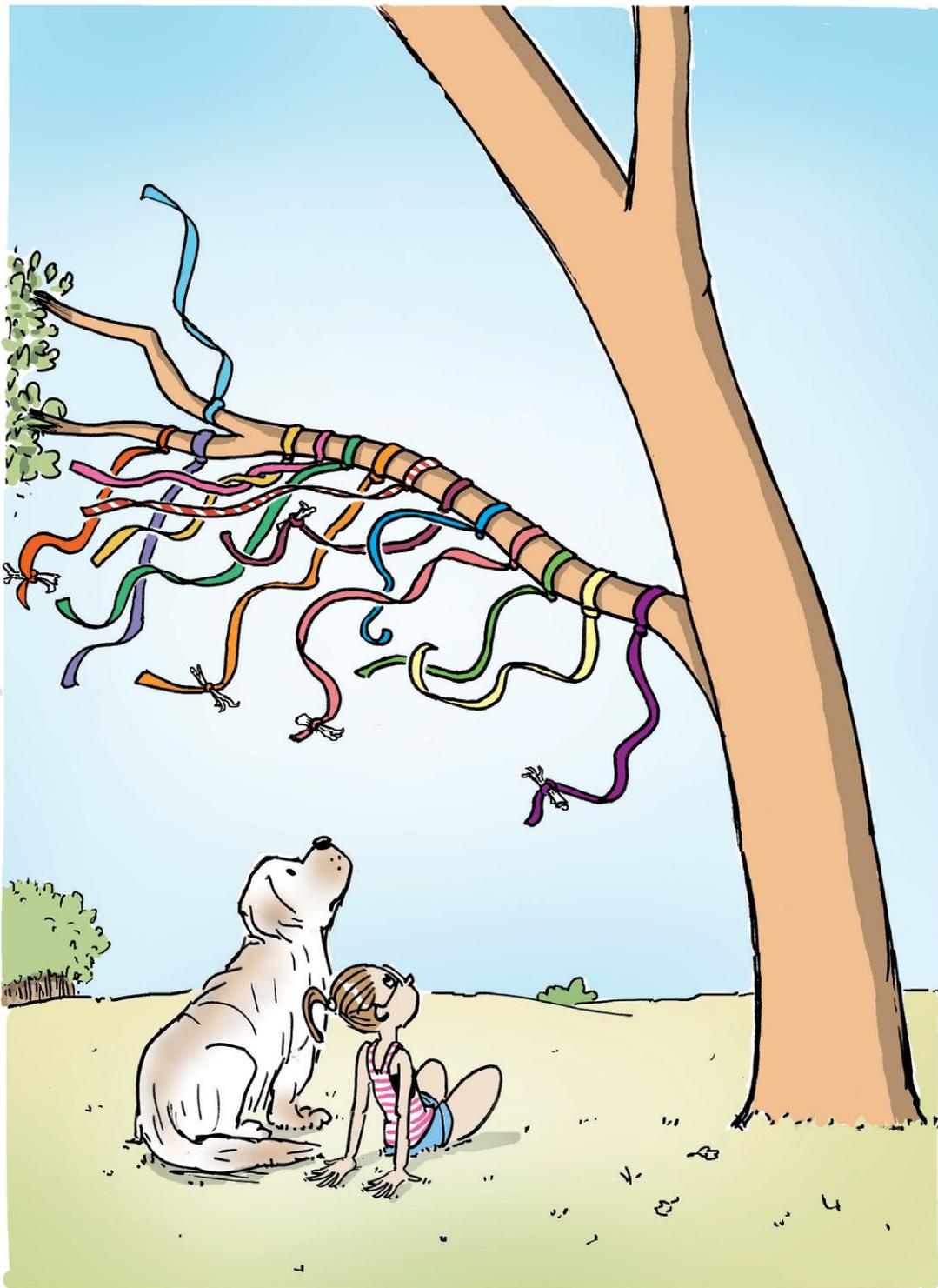
“Even the monk from the monastery loved you. He would meditate all day under your branches. The King of the Woods always quietly appeared whenever the monk was there. As if to receive blessings and to stand guard.”



Lissa kept talking to Tree about the memories. “You gave me the place to hope and daydream under your sheltering branches. The clouds made fun forms in the sky as I lay on my back to tell you everything. I knew you would listen like no one else would, and soon an answer came to my mind.”



“Every New Year’s you became our blessing tree. Our family invited friends and relatives to celebrate. We had a scrumptious dinner with goodies and songs afterward. And then we would write our wishes for the New Year on a piece of paper. We tied them with ribbons to your lowest branch and asked you to bless them. You looked so fine with all the colored ribbons that danced in the breeze until the winter snow.”



Lissa noticed an empty hole in Tree's trunk. "Hmm, Mr. Squirrel isn't here. He must have gone elsewhere because of the fires. I'll just take a peek at his home. Give me a boost, Echo." Lissa called down to her dog. "Ohhhh, it's quite big inside." Lissa brushed aside the leftover shells from the nuts Mr. Squirrel had dined on.



“I have to step over a bit . . . Echo!”



Lissa found herself on the ground under Tree. “That wasn’t nice, Echo! Why did you move? I hit my head, and it hurts. But ...Wow! Everything looks so . . . beautiful!” Tree was shimmering brilliant white. Lissa wondered if that was the way saints and Buddhas saw the world . . . all glorious energy...the building blocks of everything. The vision faded as Lissa stood and brushed herself off.



“But trees really can’t do it all themselves, can they, Tree? We must help. I know why the tea leaves said, ‘Plants, plants, plants’ three times! It’s time to choose plants for our dinner plates. A plant diet is kind like trees are kind when they recycle air. Otherwise, if we choose animals for our dinner plates, the earth gives us back climate change. And climate change brings wildfires.”

“The monk says there’s a little Buddha in all of us that is in harmony with life. Our little Buddha is sleeping. Imagine that! That little Buddha is snoring while the world is burning! Look around us! We have to wake the little Buddha up before it’s too late.”



Lissa picked up her cell phone, which had fallen from her hand. Category Three! She could see flames from the wildfire now. They were coming closer fast. Lissa began coughing from the smoke. “Oh my gosh, Echo! The alert level has jumped to Catastrophic. We have to run. Be brave dear Tree! We love you! We’ll be back!” Lissa gave Tree a quick hug.

Tree waved her branches in goodbye to say that she loved Lissa, too.

As Lissa and Echo ran for safety, the animals appeared from the forest and fields running this way and that for shelter.

Tree faintly heard Lissa calling out: “We’ll tell all the world . . . wake up . . . wake up!”



Then Tree was alone.

Tree felt this might be the end for her. Nevertheless, she bravely held her branches high. She heard the crackling flames behind her and felt the heat of the winds growing hotter and hotter. She braced herself against the horror to come. Her roots dug deeper into the earth. It seemed like forever and ever, and then . . . quiet.



Everything nearby had turned to ash. Yet Tree still stood! Just a few leaves were singed.

She wiggled her branches carefully and shook her leaves just to be sure. Yes! She was in one piece. A miracle! She heaved a huge sigh, grateful for such good fortune. She wept silent Tree tears for her brothers and sisters in the forest who had not been so lucky.

She would not be able to recycle all that air all by herself now. So, in the future, there would be even more wildfires.

Tree suddenly felt very tired. But then Tree thought of all the young people like Lissa who cared about the earth and climate change. Tree felt some hope.

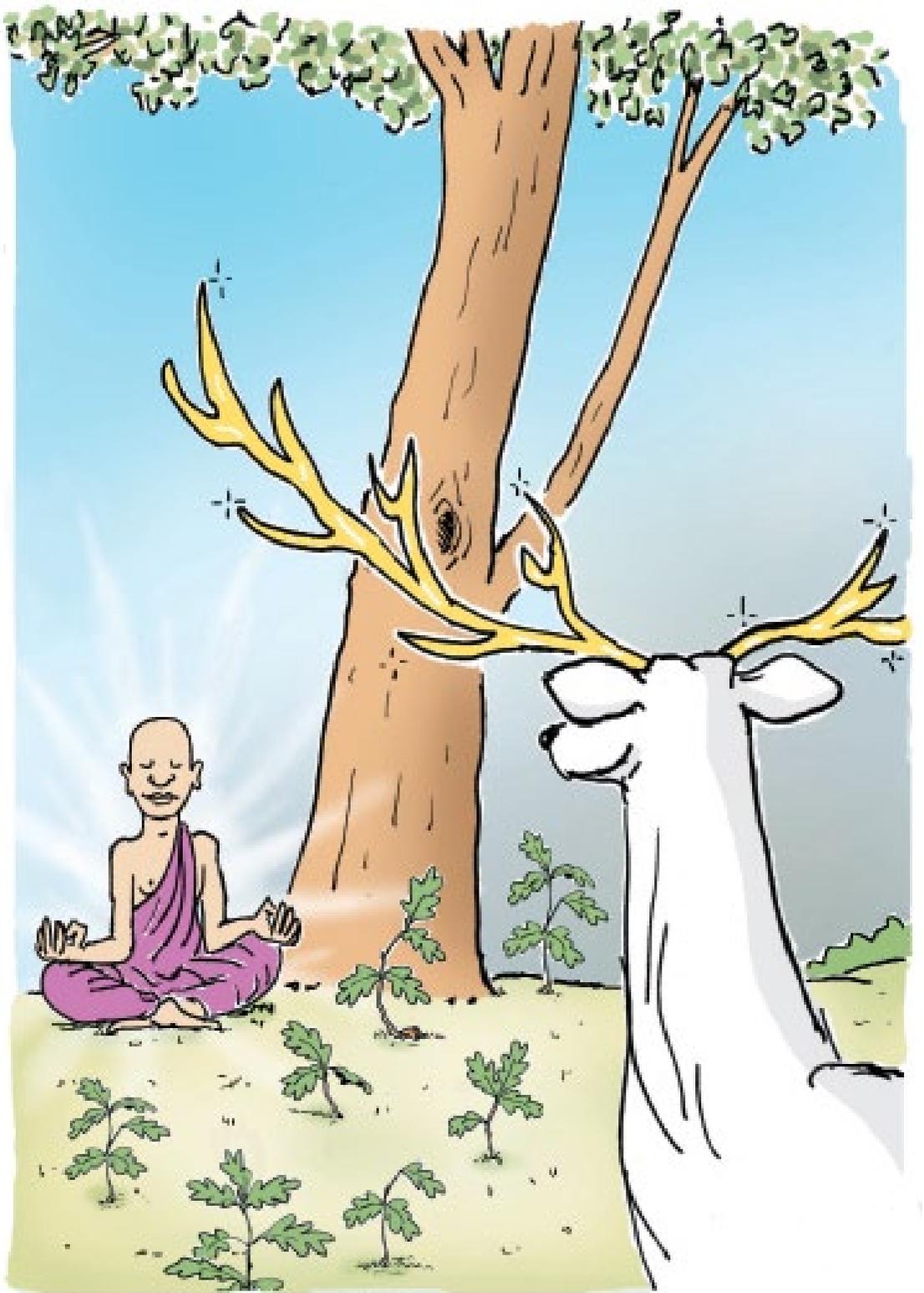
And as if in a dream come true, Tree saw Lissa and her dog Echo far off, making their way toward her. Lissa had not forgotten about her!

Tree felt a thrill of happiness run through her. Her leaves rustled in delight. An image then came to Tree of Lissa and other children planting new seedlings, where now there was only ash.

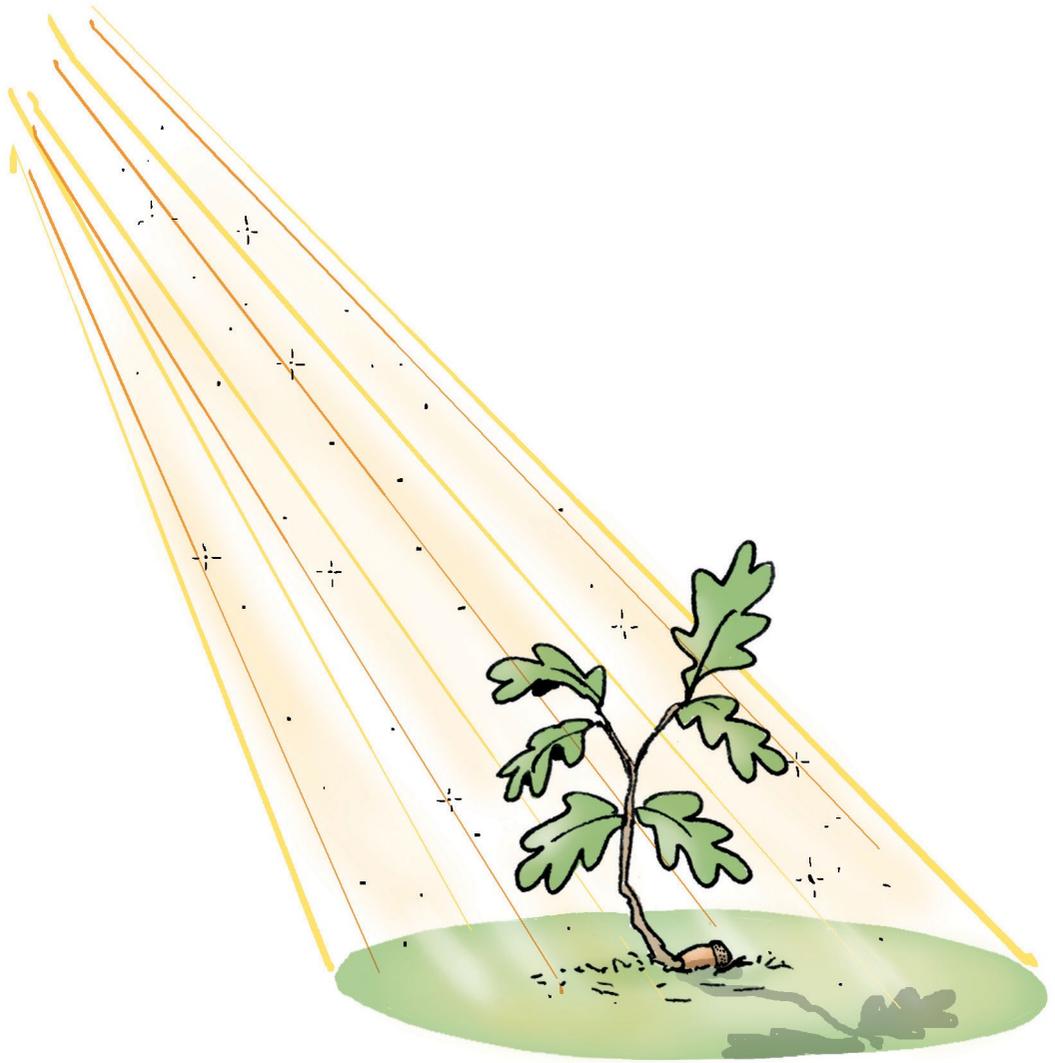


Then Tree felt something gently press against her trunk. She looked down as best she could.

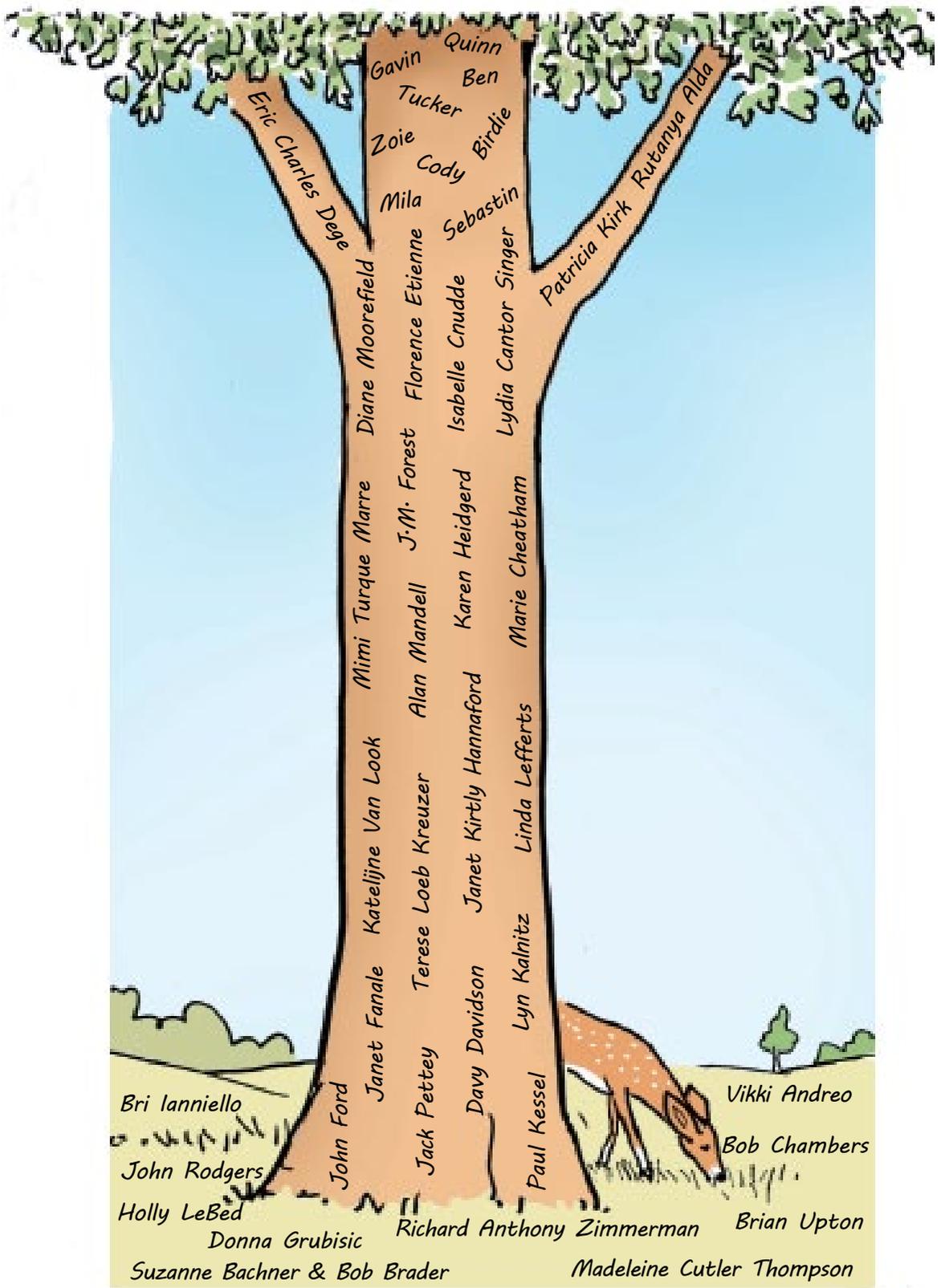
There the monk sat, surrounded by white light, meditating as he always did. Quietly the King of the Woods appeared and stood guard. Each, in their own way, bringing the promise of life back to the forest.

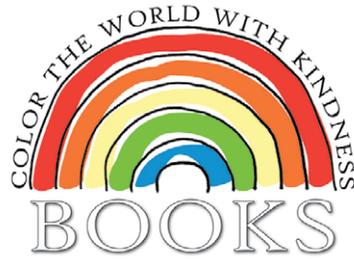


When the sleeping little Buddhas awaken, climate change will be addressed with wisdom, and life will continue in the forest. Plants will grow back. The wildlife will return. And Tree will not be alone.



FRIENDS OF THE BRAVEST TREE





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Marian lives and writes in New York City. She advocates a plant-based diet and compassion for animals.

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Renata Holt

– Author –

Renata is a lawyer and writer who lives in New York City with her husband (also a lawyer) and Catnip, their rescue cat. She is fond of trees.

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