

A Tree Grows in Longmont

A Play by

Philip Middleton Williams

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CHARACTERS:

ALLEN: Male, late twenties.

PHILIP: Male, mid-sixties.

PLACE and TIME:

A park in Longmont, Colorado. June 8, 2019.

PRODUCTION NOTES:

A Tree Grows in Longmont was first presented on May 3, 2020 by Silver Tongued Stages of Miami, Florida as a part of the Six Feet Apart series of virtual play readings presented on YouTube. The production was directed by Ricky J. Martinez with stage management and stage directions by Sam Menseses. The cast was as follows:

Allen.....Tanner Prace Collier
Philip.....Kent Chambers-Wilson

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A Tree Grows in Longmont

The lights come up on the empty stage. There is a newly-planted evergreen tree center stage and a wooden bench nearby. There are cards and family pictures hanging on the tree branches like Christmas decorations. There is a small placard on a stake in front of the tree.

ALLEN enters. He is an attractive man in his late twenties with an athletic build, nicely dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a short-sleeved shirt. He is wearing sunglasses, but after he enters, he takes them off and replaces them with his regular glasses; 1980's style aviators. He sits on the bench and waits patiently, perhaps looking around. A moment later, PHILIP enters. He is older than ALLEN, probably in his mid-sixties. He is wearing a blue polo shirt and jeans. ALLEN stands up.)

ALLEN: You finally made it.

(PHILIP looks at ALLEN, not quite sure he's believing what he's seeing.)

ALLEN: Yes, it really is me. Well, not the real skin-and-bones me. I was cremated and... well, you know. Ashes to ashes.

PHILIP *(still not sure)*: How long will you be here?

ALLEN: You mean like this?

PHILIP: Yeah.

ALLEN: I don't know. I'm not really sure I know what "this" is. But I guess as long as I need to be here. *(Looks at the tree.)* Oh, but look at this. The family got together and planted it for me. *(Reading the placard.)* In memory of Allen. September 7, 1964 to June 8, 2018.

PHILIP: It's beautiful.

ALLEN: I guess. But dogs will pee on it. Bugs will eat the bark. In the winter the snow will pile up around it and no one will remember to take care of it. And even if it makes it through the winter and keeps growing, at some point it's gonna die.

PHILIP: They all do. That's life. Besides, it's an evergreen. *(He touches the needles.)* And the needles are sharp. You always did like a stiff prick.

ALLEN *(laughing)*: Oh, good one! *(Beat.)* Well, I'm glad you could make it. Even now, a year later.

PHILIP: I tried to get here before you were gone. I spent an hour on the phone with the airline trying to get a flight to Denver, but by the time we got it all worked out, it would have been too late.

ALLEN: Yeah, well, I didn't want you to see me anyway. I looked like hell, I couldn't talk, and with all those tubes... *(He looks at himself.)* This is how I wanted you to remember me.

PHILIP: You look good.

ALLEN: Well, I should. This is how you remember me, isn't it?

PHILIP: Yeah, pretty much.

ALLEN: And that's how I remember you. Except you were younger and more muscular.

PHILIP: This is both our memories, so I'll give you that. But this is what I was wearing when we first met.

ALLEN: That's right. (*Looks at his own outfit.*) But I don't think I was wearing this.

PHILIP: I don't remember what you were wearing.

ALLEN: To be honest, neither do I. But I remember the night and the music.

PHILIP: April twenty-first, 1984. At the University of Colorado Gay/Lesbian Alliance Spring Dance. You asked me to dance.

ALLEN: I danced. You...

PHILIP: Twitched. Never said I was Fred Astaire.

ALLEN: Yeah.

(*Both smile at the memory.*)

PHILIP: Fifteen years.

ALLEN: Twelve years.

PHILIP: No, fifteen years. April 1984 to June 1999.

ALLEN: I meant twelve years' difference. I was nineteen, you were thirty-one.

PHILIP: Oh, yeah, that.

ALLEN: Did it bother you?

PHILIP: Me? No. Not really. I mean, I got some razzing from my friends when they found out, but no, it really didn't.... You?

ALLEN: Hell no. I'd been dating older guys long before I met you.

PHILIP: So, when you told your family you were going out with a thirty-one-year-old grad student from an upper middle-class background from Ohio, they were relieved?

ALLEN (*hooting laugh*): No!

PHILIP: What did you tell them?

ALLEN: Nothing! Not all at once. I let them get used to you.

PHILIP: Like we had to get used to each other. Gotta admit it took some time, right? I mean, you smoked...

ALLEN: You'll be happy to know I've given that up.

PHILIP: Uh, yeah...

ALLEN: Kinda redundant.

PHILIP: I'd say so.

ALLEN: And the drinking.

PHILIP: We both quit that. But it took me a while to notice that it was a problem.

ALLEN: Are you going to go back over all of the bad things? 'Cause if you are, I have other places I'd rather be, okay?

PHILIP: No! I'm remembering the good times. Our room together in David's house in Boulder; your birthday when I got you the unicorn music box that played "Let Me Call You Sweetheart,"

ALLEN (*singing*): "I'm in love with you..."

PHILIP: I love you, too, but you sing like I dance.

ALLEN: Fair enough. But it's a memory.

PHILIP: Our first apartment...

ALLEN: Our first house, the one on Bross Street, with the big yard and the garage...

PHILIP: Where I broke my ankle...

ALLEN: And our fifth anniversary present.

PHILIP: Sam. Ten ounces of Cairn Terrier, nine weeks old. He fit in the palm of your hand.

ALLEN: Sammy-dog. Spud-doggie. Baby doggies.

PHILIP: He was with us from then on. To Michigan and New Mexico. And you let me keep him after...

ALLEN: You took him to Miami. And then... Were you there?

PHILIP: There?

ALLEN: When they had to put him to sleep.

PHILIP: No. I...

ALLEN: I know. You don't do death well.

(*For a moment PHILIP cannot speak. ALLEN stands by, waiting.*)

PHILIP: Is he there?

ALLEN: Is he where?

PHILIP: With you. Where you are.

ALLEN: Right now, I'm in your head. So, if Sam's in there, he's with me. Along with all the other stuff. All the memories.

PHILIP: All the adventures.

ALLEN: Montserrat and the black sand beaches. Snorkeling with the barracudas. Wandering through Paris and Italy. Family reunions in Kansas and Michigan.

(A long pause. PHILIP looks at the tree. ALLEN senses something.)

ALLEN: What? What's wrong?

PHILIP: I didn't come here – and neither did you – to just remember the good times and the “adventures.” We have to remember the bad along with the good and the promises we made – or at least the ones I did – if we're going to really be honest and make this mean something.

ALLEN: I had to fall in love with a writer.

PHILIP: Yeah, you did. So, let's go back.

ALLEN: To when.

PHILIP: You know when.

ALLEN: The Lost Weekend.

PHILIP: October second, 1992. Petoskey, Michigan. It was a Friday. You tried to kill yourself by driving into a tree at a hundred miles an hour. Fortunately, the engine of a 1963 Mercury Meteor gave out before you did. I tried to get you into the rehab center that night.

ALLEN: But they don't do intakes on weekends.

PHILIP: I got you up bed where you spent the next forty-eight hours, and on Monday morning I bundled you into the station wagon. I drove you the seventy miles to Traverse City, checked you in to the Munson Alcohol and Drug Treatment Center, and spent the rest of the day searching the house from top to bottom for any remaining booze. Three huge trash bags of those little pint bottles of cheap vodka you picked up at the drug store. I lost count after fifty. That night I went to my first Al Anon meeting, and when I listened to the other people bare their souls, I realized that alcoholism is contagious and not only was I your enabler and codependent and all the other words that make up the wonderful world of addiction, but in my own way, I was just as much an alcoholic as you were. I just didn't drink as much.

ALLEN and PHILIP *(in unison)*: God, grant me the serenity...

PHILIP: Thirty days later...

ALLEN: Twenty-eight...

PHILIP: Twenty-eight days, just in time for Halloween, you came home clean and sober.

ALLEN: I still smoked.

PHILIP: Yeah, well, you can't have everything.

ALLEN: You really haven't had a drink since then?

PHILIP: That's right.

ALLEN: I'm ... happy for you.

PHILIP: And you? (*ALLEN starts to speak but PHILIP stops him.*) No. Don't tell me. I don't have the right. Not now, at least.

ALLEN: I can tell you now...

PHILIP: Don't.

ALLEN: All right.

PHILIP: So, our lives went on. Three more years in Michigan, then...

ALLEN: Ole! The Land of Enchantment.

PHILIP: I got a new job in Albuquerque and we went from the land of permanent gray skies and the three seasons – winter, July, and August – to blue skies, sunshine, and chile. You got a great job in Santa Fe...

ALLEN: Fifty miles away.

PHILIP: Yes.

ALLEN: But it was a job. And we bought our first house. And we made a garden. We planted a palm tree. We bought real furniture. We took trips.

PHILIP: I thought we had everything we wanted.

ALLEN: At least you did.

PHILIP: And you didn't.

ALLEN: One thing I learned in rehab and after is that when you're an active alcoholic, the maturing process stops. When you go into recovery, it starts up again. So basically, you were married to a fifteen-year-old for the first seven years.

PHILIP: So, after another eight years, you made up for lost time. All that exploring you missed out on as an adolescent came bursting forth. And so, we had Lost Weekend 2.0. Saturday, June 5, 1999.

ALLEN: I met someone else. Mike.

PHILIP: I never knew his last name.

ALLEN: I don't remember it either.

PHILIP (*calmly*): Well, if that's what you really wanted.

ALLEN: I thought it was.

PHILIP: Yeah. And I...

ALLEN: You carried on like your home was in a tree.

PHILIP: For about an hour. But I knew how stubborn you were, and besides, I got to keep Sam. So yeah, I had a good cry, I inflicted the old guilt trips, and then... we got on with it. Besides, I knew that if I waited long enough...

(*PHILIP gives ALLEN a smug grin.*)

ALLEN: That I'd come back?

PHILIP: Well, yeah. Maybe not the same way, not as the way we were before.

ALLEN: You did not.

PHILIP: Well, to quote myself, hope is my greatest weakness.

ALLEN: What's that from?

PHILIP: The novel I started writing in 1995.

ALLEN: Oh, yeah. How'd it turn out?

PHILIP: I'll let you know.

ALLEN: You're shitting me. You still haven't finished it?

PHILIP: Some stories just keep going on. But you did come back, almost exactly a year later.

ALLEN: Mike was cheating on me. (*Beat.*) Karma's a bitch.

PHILIP: So, you moved back into our house, into the guest room. It wasn't like before, though.

ALLEN: No, it wasn't.

PHILIP: You know, I actually liked you better now that we were just friends. None of that...

ALLEN: Goopy lovey-dovey stuff.

PHILIP: Right.

ALLEN: We were over that.

PHILIP: Yeah. We had a good run. Fifteen years.

ALLEN: Three states.

PHILIP: Too many jobs to mention.

ALLEN: A lot of pictures.

PHILIP: And records.

ALLEN: Then you got the job you wanted. Teaching theatre in Florida.

PHILIP: I thought so, but –

ALLEN: Warm climate, decent pay... Maybe you'd get the chance to do more playwriting.

PHILIP: As a matter of fact, I did. Almost twenty new plays between 2001 and 2019. One even went off-off-Broadway.

ALLEN (*jokingly*): So, do I show up in any of them?

PHILIP: As a matter of fact, you do.

ALLEN: Really? How many of them?

PHILIP: A lot of them. Not by name, but you're there.

ALLEN: Really? Sweet! Wish I could see one.

PHILIP (*mulling it over*): Okay.

ALLEN: You mean...?

PHILIP: Yeah, sure. You and me.

ALLEN: Right here?

PHILIP: Why not? You didn't get to see it when it was first done, so...

ALLEN: Um, okay. What's it called?

PHILIP: *Last Exit*.

ALLEN: Sounds scary.

PHILIP: It's not.

ALLEN: Okay, then. It'll be fun. Where's the script?

(*PHILIP pulls a Zip Loc bag with papers out of his back pocket.*)

ALLEN: You just happened to have it with you?

PHILIP: I was going to leave a copy here. With the rest of the memories.

(*PHILIP opens the bag, takes out the pages, hands them to ALLEN.*)

PHILIP: I'll play Malcolm; you'll play Arnold.

(PHILIP turns to the audience.)

PHILIP: Last Exit, a play by Philip Middleton Williams. Characters: MALCOLM: mid-forties. ARNOLD: ten years younger. Scene: An almost-empty living room of a home in New Mexico. There are some moving boxes on the floor; some sealed, some open. Time: Present day, a late afternoon in July. At rise, MALCOLM is standing in the middle of the room. He is in his mid-forties, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. He's a little dirty and sweaty from packing. He has just finished a cell-phone call and is putting the phone in his pocket when ARNOLD enters. He is ten years younger than Malcolm. He enters quickly and a little out of breath.

(PHILIP points to ALLEN as if to cue him. ALLEN gets it, enters as ARNOLD.)

ARNOLD: I'm sorry I'm late; I'm on my dinner break so I don't have a lot of time. I'm glad you waited.

MALCOLM: Yeah, I was just trying to call you. That's okay. I've got a little time. The van just left with all the big stuff; the rest will go in the car with the plants and the computer.

ARNOLD *(looking around)*: Where's Sam?

MALCOLM: Oh, he's out front having a last sniff and pee in the yard. You want me to call him?

ARNOLD: No, that's okay... it'll only confuse him. You have his travel water dish and everything?

MALCOLM: All set. Got his leash and his red toy and his ... everything.

ARNOLD: Just don't give him any Diet Coke. Remember what happened that time when we were going to your folks' place and he had a sip?

MALCOLM: Yeah, it took me a lot of Resolve to get that mess cleaned up. No, I've got some good clean water for him. He'll be all right.

(ARNOLD looks around the room for a moment.)

ARNOLD: I'll move my stuff back in tomorrow. It shouldn't take too long.

MALCOLM: Mike's gone?

ARNOLD *(tersely)*: Yep. Back to St. Louis...or wherever he came from. Glad that's over. *(He pauses as if he expects MALCOLM to say something, but he just nods.)* Go ahead, you can say it.

MALCOLM: No. I'm not going to say anything.

ARNOLD: No "I told you so?" Hey, c'mon, you've earned yourself a good gloat. Free of charge. All yours. I can take it.

The play is not over. To find out how it ends, contact the playwright at pmw@barkbarkwoofwoof.com.