

An Inconvenient Growth

by Elizabeth Lahti

At first the students were oblivious, but the teacher noticed right away. In the middle of the lecture hall, a shoot sprung up through the tile floor. She could see how the students could miss it—their heads filled with acid-base equations, loops of Henle, and countercurrent transport systems. But there it was. At first the teacher thought it was a crocus, a delightful sign of spring, but on further examination she saw the shoot had a woody character.

After three weeks it poked up six inches. One, then two, then all the students noticed, but they were on to the three clinical indicators of severe aortic stenosis and couldn't be bothered with an inconvenient growth in the medical student lecture hall. The teacher called Physical Plant and explained the situation.

"You have to open a building complaint ticket," they told her. And so she did.

Tree growing in lecture hall 3B, she wrote.

By the time Physical Plant came to investigate, the tree was three feet tall. Students moved their desks to the side, and although it wasn't yet tall enough to obscure the view of the lecture slides, it was an nuisance. No one wanted to sit next to the tree.

"You are going to have to call Landscaping & Maintenance," the man from Physical Plant told her.

In the meantime, the teacher watered the tree because that's what you do when a tree is trying to grow. When it sprouted leaves, she was delighted to see it was an oak. In between lesson plans and lectures she was reminded of the great oak at her childhood home, and how on crisp fall days she had raked leaves with her father.

Several weeks before finals, a small group of students started a campaign to cut down the tree, and another group formed to save the tree. There were meetings and a friendly debate, then assurance from the Dean that the matter was "being looked into."

By the day of the final exam, the tree had grown to full size and its branches stretched out to fill the lecture hall. Students had adjusted desk placement over the last several weeks while they took notes on luteal phases, zygotes, and implantation. Great, heavy limbs bent, dropping acorns that students brushed aside while identifying cranial nerves and drawing the braches of the brachial plexus.

When the teacher returned to grade the exams, she saw that someone had tied a wooden swing with thick ropes to the highest branch. She finished grading the last paper, and when she raised her eyes skyward she saw that the leaves had turned a fiery orange and red. She gathered her belongings, picked up an extraordinary leaf that had fallen onto her desk, and as she walked out of the classroom, the door closed gently behind her.