

My Arlington

by Cammie Corlas Quinn

God rarely answers in ways I expect. I seek answers that follow the pattern of His most recent answer or that provide a motion-picture happy ending. I seek obvious signs of His presence—a rainbow, a meteor, or a spectacular sunset. Instead, He shocks me with something completely off the map of my expectations.

Years ago I was my mother's hospice caregiver throughout the final weeks of her cancer journey. Because she was the undisputed pillar of our family, her death stole away our home, too. Even worse, God seemed absent at her death. I prayed for a sign at the moment of her home-going, but there was none. Heaven was silent.



One steamy August night five months after her death, I ventured into my field, still feeling the drag of grief. Death burdened my mind—death of relationships, of traditions, of generations. Feet tend to tire in middle age, and mine were log-heavy. Even getting to the front gate of the field posed a challenge. Dirt clods and potholes from a city-wide sewer project had transformed the street into an opportune setting for a sprained ankle or a bloody nose. The field itself teemed with tall weeds, ticks, and mosquitoes. Not much promise here. Not much hope.

Just then I spotted two sets of tractor-tire tracks, wide enough to mash a path through the tick-infested grass. A vivid orange sunset drew me onward. I climbed over the gate and followed the tire grooves, yearning for a much-needed meteor, venturing deeper into the field than usual, over a gentle rise into the back acreage.

There I found the reason for the tractor tracks. Hundreds of plastic white tubes opened before me in a long valley, running half a mile along the Mackinaw River. I'd never seen this type of tube. They were knee-high, spaced evenly apart. They struck me with the same awe as the symmetrical rows of gravestones I'd seen at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. I found it hard to believe that a farm town in Central Illinois could boast anything on such a grand scale as this. But here it was, hidden in the lowlands by the river where no one else but me could see it.

In the looming dusk, I touched the first plastic tube. It was tied to a stake, and I discovered it was hollow. I peered over its lip to the bottom. Tiny green leaves of a tender oak seedling waved up at me. I peered into another and found another baby tree. And another and another. Inside every tube was new life. The white tubes, I suddenly realized, forced the seedlings to grow vertically to reach the sunlight at the top. They would also ward off the munching habits of deer and rabbits.

I drew back and took in the monumental significance of this off-the-beaten-path tree-planting project. This "Arlington" was not a graveyard at all. It abounded with new life, with hope, and with a powerful message for my burdened heart.

Perhaps no one but me would interpret a forest of newly planted trees as a reminder of resurrection, but I've learned that God speaks in private whispers to yearning hearts. He can astound, or He can dawn upon. On this night, He did both, just for me.

He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him. (John 14:21 KJV)