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Olivia's Tree

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Olivia's Tree Customs

Informant: Jamie Swan is my mother and is the youngest daughter of Jim and Diane Freston. Jason was born and raised in Roosevelt, Utah. She has 3 older sisters, and two younger brothers. She is a life-long devout member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Jamie was an incredible athlete in high school and played both volleyball and basketball. She graduated high school in 1992 and then came here to Utah State to study nursing. She switched her major a few times, and finally graduated in 1998 with a bachelor degree in Parks and Recreation. She married Jason Swan in 1993 and together they have 5 children; 4 daughters and 1 son. I am the second eldest. Jamie is a wonderful wife and mother and now works as a 2nd grade teacher in Arlington, TX. She loves kids and that love has made her the best mother a person could ask for. Her faith and perseverance for her family and loved ones inspires me today and every day.

Context: I interviewed Jamie last week over FaceTime. As she lives in Texas so it is hard for me to visit all the time. She was wonderful enough to agree to FaceTime me to help me collect this piece of folklore. I was in my office at work when we started the call, and she was at her home in Arlington, TX. My mom is one of my all-time heroes, and not for all the usual reasons. She has gone through so much throughout her life and still is so strong. Olivia is my older sister who passed away the day after she was born. At the young age of 20, my mother gave birth to her first child only to tragically lose her the next day. It nearly destroyed her. She is amazing in more ways than one, but to come back from losing a child shows she has more strength than she will ever know she has. The tree in this story is the pine tree that is planted next to Olivia's headstone in the Logan Cemetery.

Text: Me: Can you tell me about the story behind Olivia's tree?

Jamie: hmmm, you gonna make me cry? *long pause* Yeah?

M: Well it happens, it happens. *hesitated laughs*

J: ugh.. I'm already emotional today.

M: aww, you don't have to, mom.

J: *holds back tears* no, it's ok. You'll just have to try to figure out what I'm saying. *laughs*

M: *laughs*

J: Okay. Olivia's tree.

M: Yes.

J: So I guess that would have been.. umm i don't remember was it the spring? Mmm, no it would have been the fall. Yes, must have been the fall.

M: Of '94?

J: Of '94... *hesitates* yes, because I was pregnant with her when we planted it. Anyway. So i was taking a park management classes for my degree and umm, we had to... well one of the of the assignments was we had to actually, we had to chose a park, and we had to go and map it out and, like, label all the trees. We had to draw like a map and... anyway, so we talked a lot about trees in that class. And for Arbor day. Oh, Arbor day! So it would have been... when's Arbor Day?

M: I don't know.. Earth Day is in April. I don't know when arbor day is.

J: Isn't that the same thing?

M: Umm.. Maybe, i'll look it up. One sec.

J: But that wouldn't make sense for the timeframe.

M: Yeah, it's april 26th.

J: April what?

M: Twenty sixth.

J: April 26th?

M: Yeah, well, that's what it is next year. I don't know if it's a rotating day.

J: Well, maybe it wasn't March that year because I think it was for Earth Day. Arbor day and Earth Day are the same thing right?

M: No. Umm

J: Well type in Earth Day 1994.

M: Earth day is always April 22nd.

J: Okay, type in Arbor Day 1994.

M: Wouldn't have been '95?

J: Maybe, yeah. But Friday, April 28th.

M: Yeah, that wouldn't have worked... So i don't know when we planted it, I'd have to look back at her scrapbook. Um, anyway, he- my professor Art Jones, he lived out in Paradise and he actually- and he was friends with the- the caretaker at the cemetery. And he knew that several of the trees had died in the cemetery and this guy had mentioned that he needed to get some more planted. And so he's like, "hey, let me have my class come plant one ,that would be awesome." So he actually went out in the forest by his house and dug it up from somewhere in Paradise where he lives.

M: *laughs* No way.

J: And he brought it to school. And i mean, if you remember the pictures, it was just a scrawny, ugly looking thing, *laughs* it was so scrawny... and anyway, my whole class, we walked over there from, you know, where we usually met in the rec center or the Hyper building, and we just- And at that time, there was nothing. There was nothing on that hill, you know? It was all just grass and open to the valley, and it was really pretty. So we all sat on the grass and we talked about oh I don't know trees or something. And when he planted the tree! So it just kind of like the cool saying it was kind of, you know, anyway, it was just whatever. That's what we did. But i remember being pregnant. I remember sitting on the grass being pregnant? It must

have been like in March, because then in April, Grandma and Grandpa came down to do the adoption- for daddy... [my dad's mother married a new man when he was 8 years old and he was finally adopted by his stepfather (my grandfather) in April 1995]... and um dad and i had always liked this cemetery, cuz it's a pretty cool cemetery. And quite honestly, that's the only cemetery at that point in my life that i was comfortable even going in. I don't know if i ever told you this but i was very freaked out about stuff like that.

M: Yeah, I remember.

J: like crazy freaked out about stuff like that. Like it just sent me into anxiety. I mean, it was just- i hated it. I struggled with it before. Like going into the Roosevelt cemetery. I remember my family, my Dad, you know, every Memorial Day. We would always take flowers... almost every Memorial Day. We did it often, and often enough that i remember not liking going. I just didn't like going to cemeteries. It just freaked me out... anyway. And every time i see a hearse, i would freak- I just felt yucky inside.. I just didn't like it ,just scared me or something. I don't know... anyway, but this- the Logan cemetery I never felt that way. I felt totally- I mean, i liked it! And, you know, we'd gone several times dating, just driving through it. I remember Matt (my dad's best friend in college. He went on a couple dates with my mom before she got together with my dad] and I went once when we were sort of, kinda, not really dating, but sort of. I mean, we never really dated, but we went out a couple times... and one time he actually turned off all the lights in his cop car. It was dark. and drove as fast as he could down the road towards the lights at the entrance... Yeah. scared the crud out of me.

M: What the heck?! I'd have been so mad.

J: *laughs* Yeah, it was scary. Um, anyway, but I felt comfortable with that cemetery, so i was, you know, whatever it was cool. So when Grandma and Grandpa came, we were driving around the valley showing 'em different things, you know, driving by the temple driving by the tabernacle driving 'em through campus and just kind of showing them, uh, Logan, um, I don't remember if it was daddy who first suggested it, or me... one of us. I think it was dad. Yeah, i think it was dad. He's like, "hey, let's go through the cemetery. It's a really cool cemetery." So we did. We just drove through it, and we were clearing the other end, and then I'm like, oh, my gosh, let's go see how my tree's doing. And so i told Grandma and Grandpa the story about my class coming and planted a tree, no big deal, whatever. So we drove over there and, you know, like, showed 'em the tree and then we left. That was about it, you know...

M: Yeah.

J: But then- so they came in april. And what? Three weeks later, Olivia was born. And so when grandma came, um only grandma came, grandpa didn't come. And when we went to the cemetery, i mean, i'd totally forgotten about the tree, hadn't even thought about it, you know... because i was obviously going through other stuff. And, um, when we were driving around trying to find a place for her gravesite- her grave Grandma was the one who remembered... she's like "what about your tree?" And i just knew. I just- i mean, just like a peace came over me- oh, I don't know, like, if I could say it was a peace, but a good feeling, as much as i could be feeling good at the time came over me, i guess i could say. And so when we went, so we went over there. I mean, we told the guy who was driving us around, and he knew exactly what i was talking about. He took us right there, and we just knew that that was that was where she needed to be. That was her spot, I guess. Or our spot. That's why we chose that spot.

M: So how has that been kind of a tradition throughout the years? *long pause*

J: *tries to hold back tears* Well... *said in strained voice* Right after she died, i went up there all the time, like every day, sometimes twice a day. *sniffs* I was trying to feel connected to her, and just grieving. *cries softly* We just had this little marker there, we didn't have a headstone for a whole year, just couldn't buy it, couldn't afford it. *sniffs* and we're still trying to figure out what we wanted on it. *sniffs* I just, you know, it's the only place where I could feel some sort of peace during that time. *soft sobs* so I just spent a lot of time there. You guys started being born. *pained laugh* That sounds terrible. Started being born. *laughs* When i was pregnant with you., um it was a very hard pregnancy because i was so scared to lose you too. And i was so tired of being pregnant. Just being so scared. *sniffs* And um, one day I was up there. You know, the doctors have been telling me "any day, any day", because i, you know, bed rest.. "any day, any day" And you were not coming. *laughs* And so i was just i was so done and i was in the cemetery and i was crying, you know, praying, and crying and praying. And I just had this voice or wherever, something in my head that said, "Olivia is not ready to say goodbye yet", and I just- it was- I mean, it's honestly the only time i have really felt, like something from heaven- *laughs* from god. I just have never felt a connection like that since- or i never had before. And just, you know, very clearly. Olivia is not ready to say goodbye, and so i needed to be patient. And after that, i just totally was like, okay! that was totally fine with it. I stopped being impatient. I was just, like, I was fine- I was fine to wait, I was good. I was gonna let you guys have some time to- your last- you know, your time together before you came... *both of us sniff, cuz at this point we were both crying* I don't know, it was a very strong- *both sniff* i don't know what you would call it- A miracle.

M: yeah... So just a lot of- powerful things happened there I guess and so i just wanted to keep the whole *sniffs* family connected that way. One of my biggest fears was *pause* I didn't want her to be forgotten *sniffs* I didn't want her not to be part of our family? *soft cry* You know it made me so sad when daddy and i were first married? *sniffs* Or maybe- maybe we were dating when he was telling me about his family, and he just in passing said, "yeah, I had a sister who died. Her name was Susan Mary." And I'm like, "well, what happened?" He had no idea. He didn't know anything about any of it. He had no idea- other than she was ten years older than him. And i remember thinking "gosh that's so sad," you know? And then when Olivia died, and I'm pretty sure that's why i felt so strongly about not wanting her to be forgotten, it's because i mean, dad knew nothing about his sister. So I just, you know, and i probably was a little extreme in my grieving, you know, some of the stuff I did. I'm sure it was a little weird, *both of us laugh* but- and then we just started the tradition of - well. The first one was Easter dad and I went up. So the Easter after, so a year later we went up, had a picnic, just the two of us. And then when her headstone was put in, all of my family came up. And they actually had surprised us and paid for the headstone. And so the headstone was put in a couple of days before her birthday. And then we all went up for her birthday and we didn't have a picnic. But we planted flowers. Just kinda had a- It wasn't a ceremony. And i know what you would call it- a moment. And- no, i was still pregnant with you. I was still pregnant with you. *long pause* Yeah. So her headstone was well, yeah, because you were born a month later, okay yeah that makes sense. Um.. And grandma Sam came down. I just remember we all just kind of- I don't know, spent time together. I think some of us oh, you know, kinda shared our feelings. And anyway, and so that kind of started the tradition that every a year on her

birthday, we would plant flowers. And on Easter we always had a picnic. And then at christmas time Grandma Sam actually started the tradition with the tree her first. The first christmas Grandma Sam sent a package with a bunch of christmas ornaments that would- you know, last through the weather. And she wrote a note that said something like, you know, hang them when you're there or hang them and leave them. Whatever, you know, whatever you feel comfortable with, you know, i don't i don't wantvthese back, you know, if they break, it's no big deal. Whatever. But all of the ornaments she gave us we still have, all of 'em lasted.

M: I remember, you had a very special box for them.

J: What's that?

M: You have a special box for them.

J: Well, i did at one time. I think they're kind of all mixed in now. Well, we- we've added to the tree in the different ornaments we put on our tree now.

M: Right.

J: It's not original ones, like the little mittens and I don't care about what the other ones were. It has and see stuff like that just bothered me. You know that. I'm like "how could i forget that?, but you do, you just forget some little- well, stuff like that. *sniffs*

M: Yeah.

J: So when you guys were little, i mean, it was totally a tradition. You guys looked forward to it. You really like doing the picnics at Easter, then at fourth of july, we would go and watch the fireworks. We get candy and, you know, we'd have a little- it was fun. So that was a big deal for a few years until we got kicked out!

M: Yeah, *laughs* [they eventually closed the cemetery to firework watchers on the 4th of July due to previous acts of vandalism on the headstones] and then planting flowers. Then the tree- Christmas tree ornaments, so those were pretty much all the traditions. And then when we moved, well, that was awful. I hated that. But i don't know if you remember. Well, the first year I don't remember if we did anything in that first house we lived in, but the one on McDonald Downs, we cleared around that one tree. I'm sure you remember that.

M: Yeah

J: You remember that?

M: Yeah, I do.

J: And then the tree we packed around here just looks pathetic. It's just so bad. *laughs* Dad said it actually bloomed for, like, two days while we were in Utah this year, he texted me and said "Olivia's trees is blooming!" and it hasn't bloomed for years.

M: Yeah,

J: so... i don't know. I've kind of struggled with it. I'd really like to have a nicer tree but you know, we're not gonna- who knows how we're gonna be here...I don't know, so none of the other trees are really hers. Hers is still at the cemetery.

M: Well it's beautiful to have that memento of her. And to kind of, watch it grow as she would have.

J: Yeah, and it was- eventually i keep saying this everyyear. I just haven't done it. I'd like to put a book together to kinda have the pictures of you guys by the tree and just have it through the years, you know? And then after we left, i don't know if you know this, but jesse would take his family and send us a picture on Memorial Day. You know, of

course, we always went on Memorial Day, too. No, but he would send. So for several years, we had pictures of his family growing *laughs* by the tree. But he couldn't do it last year. But i should know he's busy with his kids. It's fine. I never expected him to do. It just was, you know, nice to kind of have that for a few years, too.

M: Yeah, for sure.

J: And now you guys are there!

M: yeah!

J: that makes me happy.

M: Me too.

Texture: As you can tell from the starred comments, my mom and I both had a hard time getting through this interview. Even though I caught her on an off day, she has always been sensitive to the subject of my sister. As she has the right be, and I often am too. I know they say everything happens for a reason, but I often wonder how our lives would've turned out had she lived. I don't think any of us would still be the people we are today. Her life, death, and legacy has certainly defined our family and our relationships with each other. During this tearful interview I was able to capture the true essence of a mother's love. For Olivia and for myself and my other siblings. My mother lives for us, and we live because of her. She's amazing. As the interview got more intimate and emotional, I wasn't sure I would actually share this. But I think that this tidbit of folklore, the tradition of a tree that has definitely been one thing that has brought the memory of my sister to life.

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