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None

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The Richard Cortez Day Award Winner

On the Wind

Wyatt Georgeson

The old tree at the edge of the yard had been there before the house, before the family, and only earned its designation once the children were old enough to play outside on their own. It stood, stunted and slanted, at the bottom of the rise the house stood on. Grass ran from the back porch down to the old tree at the edge of the yard, but beyond that were wilder things. Mud that sucked at small feet and shrubs with thorns that tore young skin. It didn't take long for the children to learn that they were not to go past the old tree at the edge of the yard.

Over time, the tree came to know the children. It accepted the position of boundary post with dignity, though the possibility of refusal never occurred to it. The tree felt the vibrations in the earth every time the littlest came thundering across the yard, all reckless energy and boundless joy. Behind him would come the second, brimming with playful indignation, but also a considerable amount of trepidation and real fear dogging his steps. The tree would greet them with a sending of welcome, a message of shade offered and an impression of gentle wind stirring its boughs. They didn't seem to notice, though, so engrossed in their play. Across the yard, the eldest, a contemplative girl, would look up from her book, only crossing the yard to retrieve her brothers when they ventured past the tree.

On a day in late summer, while the tree basked in the sun, it detected the little one rampaging down from the house. He was a tumult of youthful aggression unchecked. His father had taken the older of the brothers on a day-trip, leaving the little one behind at home. The old tree at the edge of the yard felt the little boy's indignation turn to rage as he approached, and tried to calm him with sendings of what it imagined serenity to be. Sunlight upon its leaves, the slow, steady growth of accumulated years. The little boy, unfazed, leapt up and grabbed a branch in both hands and began wrenching it from side

to side. The tree cried out in pain, sending pleas for him to stop, trying to make him understand the suffering he inflicted.

The elder sister stormed across the yard, and the little one's alarm loosened his hands. He covered the distance back to the house before she arrived at the tree to examine the damage. The tree extended its gratitude to the girl, a sensation of security and bountiful life found deep in the ground where its roots reached and spread. The girl stood at the base of the tree for a while, a flurry of reactive emotions leaping from her as she received the sending. She touched the damaged branch, and the tree felt her sympathy and her frustration with the littlest one. It sent her a wave of reassurance, of saplings growing over many years into a mighty trees. She returned the sending with relief and happiness, and the tree knew she understood.

The girl visited the tree often after that, and the tree welcomed her. It shared with her the swaying sensation of a windy day and the soothing sunlight on its leaves. She responded inquisitively to the first impressions it sent her, closing her eyes and breathing deeply as she interpreted. It elaborated upon the first sending, constructing the sensations in her mind with careful attention to detail. The tree was fascinated by her reactions, which ranged from tranquil bliss when it shared the feeling of birds building a nest in the crook of a bough to a kind of intrigued revulsion at the sensation of worms working between its roots. She was eager to learn, and the tree marveled at the interpretations she sent back, and at the complex spectrum of feelings that it had never known that came naturally to her.

The brothers often interrupted their conversations, and the tree encouraged her to join their games. Sometimes she did, and other times she sat in the shade of its leaves and read, and the tree puzzled over the journey that her mind embarked upon. The girl's imagination seemed to expand beyond the horizon and above the sky. New worlds blossomed and wilted as she read, and the tree experienced an expanded spectrum of emotions and sensations with each new book. Amusement at the portrayals of other trees and bits of familiar natural imagery that often seemed caricature-like to the tree's sensibilities. Astonishment at the notion of lands without trees, or with so many that they choked the earth and masked the sky with their canopies. Oftentimes the stories were about men doing things, and the tree would get lost in the abstractions of human action. Not that human stories were boring, the tree at the edge of the yard simply had a hard time keeping up with their pace. At dusk, the girl's parents called for her from across the yard, and the tree realized that she had gotten cold sitting at the base of its trunk and chided itself for being so engrossed with the conversation of thoughts that it hadn't noticed. It resolved to be more attentive with Summer soon to give way to the biting winds of Autumn.

That resolve was oft-forgotten, as the girl continued to spend day after day sharing and interpreting feelings and thoughts with the tree. Before the tree even realized, the first heavy rain of the season flooded the lower side of the yard. After that, the girl didn't come to sit beneath the tree's branches, and the boys didn't come to play. The tree was startled by the isolation it felt after coming to expect them each day. It had spent decades growing there without the children, and only with their absence did it begin to realize loneliness.

Days passed, and the tree focused on receiving. It couldn't feel anything from inside the house, that place was beyond its reach. Sometimes it felt the distant tremors of heavy footfalls on the path near the shed, and knew that to be the children's father. There were other tremors, light and hesitant footsteps, those were the mother's. She hardly ever left the house, and never came near enough for the tree to know her better. Occasionally the father's work brought him near enough to the tree for a sending, and the tree would reach out. All it found was a dense cloud all around the man that made it difficult to discern anything, and the tree was afraid to probe any deeper.

It grew colder and the rain turned to sleet and the occasional snow. The tree was tired. Autumn had stripped it bare of leaves and flowers, but soon its seeds would be borne on the winter winds. It had been weeks since the children had come down the slope, and now deep puddles and banks of half-melted sleet made the tree recognize that it was likely to be without them until Spring arrived.

One clear evening after several days of rain, the tree felt a sending. It had a material form that confused the tree initially, a floating object that slid upon the wind to drift near its branches. The tree recognized the feelings bound to the object as the girl's. The message it contained was a reflection of what the tree felt, a fondness and a loneliness in the absence of the other.

The object, a paper plane, dipped and floated toward the ground, toward the deep puddle at the tree's base. Panic surged through its trunk, boughs and roots. With a great effort, it sent a request to the wind to prevent the crash. The wind, to the tree's surprise, acquiesced with a sudden gust that lifted the paper plane up and brought it into a slow, wide orbit around the tree's crown. A sustained breeze gave the tree time to study the plane and interpret the sendings attached.

The paper plane contained a greeting that the tree recognized with ease and relief, but it was short-lived. The tree discerned, after several orbits of the plane, that the girl was ill, and so were her brothers. Autumn had been no kinder to them than it had to the tree, it seemed, and they were cloistered indoors waiting for their fevers to subside. The tree was relieved to know that she was still there, and still thinking of the old tree at the edge of the yard. The wind was beginning to struggle with the plane, and it began a slow spiral

toward the ground as the tree struggled to unravel the last of the sendings.

Her last message, whatever it may have been, was washed away as a dense cloud of ambiguous sendings eclipsed the tree's perception of the paper plane. A turbulent darkness crawled upon its trunk. A tangle of intense feelings burgeoned into the tree's awareness and coiled around its being.

The father walked slowly across the yard, his attention on the airplane as it circled and dipped. The tree couldn't begin to read the torrent of feelings exuding from the man. At one time it felt fear, another hostility, and another instant brought pain to its attention. Every feeling was explosive and volatile, snatched back and hidden away as soon as it was revealed. The wind fled. The paper plane dropped at once to land in the mud. The father picked it up and opened it. The tree experienced through the man a distorted version of what it had received from the letter. A greeting to the tree turned juvenile and wasteful. An explanation of absence a form of ungratefulness. He crumpled the paper, and the tree felt the malice in the action, but also the conflict within him, simmering. A brief sorrow was swiftly buried, but the tree knew that he worried for his children.

The tree felt deep sympathy for the man. Living with so many feelings in constant conflict inside must feel like being ravaged by swarms of insects. If he were a tree, his bark would appear healthy from a distance, but up close you would see the holes they burrowed through. His branches would be storm-battered and tangled, and his roots would be struggling to grow through stone. The tree sent a tentative sending of the first peaceful thing that came to mind, the wind carrying its seeds away to spread and grow.

The sending was met with a wave of revulsion and animosity. The cloud that surrounded the man writhed and thrashed as the man tensed, and the tree could feel him shaking. The tree retreated. When the man's fury subsided, his attention shifted from the tree to the crumbled paper in his hand, and back. The vague cloud of rage that followed him coalesced as he walked back to the house. Even as the man entered his home, the tree could still feel his malevolent attention.

Months passed and the tree at the edge of the yard remained within itself, making only tentative inquiries outside its physical form to discern the state of its surroundings. The boys returned in winter to play in the snow on the slope of the yard, but their sister did not. They did not receive its sendings the way she did, but the tree could still eavesdrop on their thoughts and feelings. They were morose and melancholy, their fun and games tempered by a consistent gloom that clung to, and confused them. The tree understood from the boys that their sister had gone somewhere. Something was wrong with her, or something had been wrong with her. They had been told, but they still did not entirely understand. They deliberately stayed away from the tree.

One day, the boys went inside early. Their father came out to the old tree at the edge of the yard. He brought tools with him. A saw, a shovel, shears. An ax.

The tree knew what was to come. It felt bitter determination exuding from the man, and other things. Spite, anger, resentment, fear. It sent a simple greeting to the troubled man. Wind in the boughs. The rattle of dry branches. Healthy soil beneath its roots.

He bristled. The tree knew that he was receiving his sendings. He was even more sensitive to them than his daughter. It sent again, a soothing sensation of roots deep in the earth. The slow, rejuvenating act of drinking what the earth provided.

The man hefted the ax and took a step forward. The tree felt the tumult of feelings swell. Outrage, conflict...curiosity? Swiftly replaced by violence. Violence. Violence.

The blade bit into the tree's trunk, and again. A wedge of wet inner wood was exposed as the bark buckled and broke away. The tree sent flashes of its pain, its terror, into the man. It was an act of panic. The man sent back. Hatred. Rage. Suffering. Fear.

The tree fled from the agony, deep into the roots. The pain was there too, a shuddering thud that found it even at the end of the smallest tendril in the ground. The tree fled upward, to the end of its highest branches and out, begging the wind to carry it away, riding upon clusters of winged seeds loosed by the tremors of each impact. It searched for the girl that had understood it, willing itself to find her and touch her mind and beg her to stop her father.

While it sent upon the wind, it felt the snap. The shudder, the descent, and the crash. It could not return. The tree at the edge of the yard had been there before the house, before the family. Borne upon the wind, the tree at the edge of the yard became something else.