


The Copper Beech

ometimes on warm summer nights a breeze would come up, and you could hear the whispers of the things that lived in the leaves of the upper branches of the beech tree. Often I could see their quick forms moving in the darker shadows, and once one looked at me directly; I saw its large round eyes and its skinny hands.

For years a wolf lived in that tree. My older brothers had seen him on many occasions. He was strong and could jump from the upper limbs to the bedroom where I slept, but he left the year I turned seven, the same year the tree-dwelling things moved in. Probably they drove him out.

We would always climb the copper beech during the day in summer. The bark of the high, ancient trunk was smooth and cool; there was always a breeze at the top, and there were many curving branches to lie along. Sometimes we turned into leopards while we were there. We would growl deeply and watch for baboons crossing the open ground between the watering hole and the great rocky cliff where they lived. The tree dwellers were nowhere to be seen during the day. They retreated into the trunk and came out only at night; in winter they would move underground.

Autumn was a tragic season for the copper beech. One by one, without the flare of the other trees in my yard, the leaves disappeared, and our nest and lair would be revealed. The baboons went south. Sometimes during high winds, the wolf came back. You could hear him whining, my brothers said. I listened, but I was ten, and it really was only the wind. In spring the furry aphids would appear. They covered the branches and squished against our fingers as we climbed. We would go up early in the season, just before the buds were swelling, and we climbed higher than at any time of year. The tip of the tree was spidery and swayed with our weight, bringing us earthward from a thousand feet. We wedged ourselves in the crooks and surveyed the town—the high roofs, and the trees, higher than the houses, and the yards below, dark and green, and worth finding out about.

The town where the copper beech grew was old, a product of the

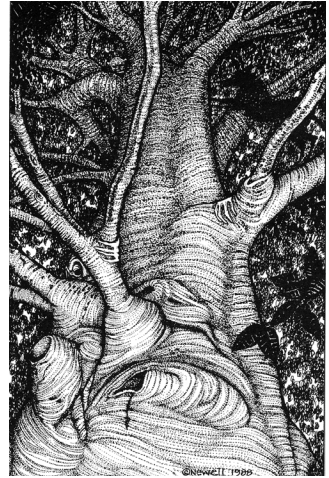
midnineteenth century, and I began to notice that in other yards there were other copper beeches. These too we climbed; there were no things living in the leaves, and there were no wolves, but the trees made a pleasant landscape, a darkness in the green light of summer, an autumnal Victorian gloom that I came to appreciate for its mystery. I ranged beyond my yard, and counted copper beeches.

By the time I was twelve, I knew all the beeches in town. From my perch I could count no fewer than five, three to the north in a wide, landscaped property owned by the notorious Mrs. MacKay who dressed always in Chinese silks and had a Scottish gardener who chased us whenever we scaled his trees. To the west, near the center of town, there was an immense tree, the queen of all the beeches. It grew in front of a tearoom in a yard surrounded by a wrought-iron fence with cruel fleur-de-lis-shaped spikes. This tree we never climbed; we watched it from afar, in admiration. It absorbed all light—a deep, penumbral silence reigned in the interior of its canopy. Things lived in it.

But the town was changing. The tearoom closed, the tree dwellers disappeared from the beech in my side yard. My older brothers grew up, and one day men came with chain saws and cut down the beech in front of the tearoom.

A furniture store moved in, and where the tree once stood, the owner put up a sign advertising chairs. My family was upset. We would close our eyes when we drove by, pretending it hadn't happened. One night I wrote a letter in ink. "It took a hundred years to grow," I wrote to the owner. "Where will you be in a hundred years?"

It didn't bring the tree back, and, in any case, I was fourteen by then. The wolf was memory, the things that whispered in the leaves on summer nights had retreated to the deeper woods, and I never again saw their dark round eyes and their bony clasping fingers.



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