



Oaken Memory

Those new Pagans at the university say trees remember, but they have never actually spoken to a tree. Too impressed that some of their circle have awakened enough of the old blood to actually hear the whispers, they don't listen. Granted, it takes silence and patience to hear the mumbling impressions of the trees. True, it takes tenacity and a certain arrogance to make a tree notice a human's chattering voice.

The trees forget over the slumber of winter. Even the firs and evergreens, though they are light sleepers. Each spring comes as a surprise, and every winter is met with dread. They have a preoccupation with the weather. Trees are also easily distracted.

I had done my part; the oak hadn't paid attention. I banged on his gray trunk with the plastic handle of my rake. He still held the majority of his canopy, rusty red and faded yellow, to whistle and crackle in the autumn wind. A few acorns pattered down across the gray shingles, as if he had just cleared his raspy throat.

My corner lot had several trees surrounding the small ranch-style house of orange Oklahoma brick. The pin oak, thick in the trunk and generous with the refreshing shade during the summer, stood proudly as a monarch overlooking the intersection, the tallest tree in the Hartenbauer Estates. A trio of scotch pine saplings suffered through the heat of the summer in the back yard, huddled together, suspicious of all the leaf droppers, but giddy from the crisp touch of frost the night before. Chinese pistaches lined the road to the west, guarding the lawn. Even a thick hedge of holly bush acted more like a tangled reclining tree than a bit of shrubbery. But the true royalty were the two native pecans along the south road, and her highness, the queen,

the papershell pecan, alone on the north part of the lawn. Her branches bowed, heavy with nuts slowly splitting from the tough husks.

"Hey, oak. The pistaches remembered. The pecans are nearly finished. You're supposed to drop your leaves today." I rubbed his trunk with my hand. Bits of gray-green fungus flaked away, coating my work gloves. The fungus had me worried, though I hadn't mentioned it to the oak. I hoped it was just a variety of lichen.

"Oh," he said slowly. His voice resonated in my bones. "I had wanted to protect the nest. The wind is growing cold, you know."

The oak was inordinately proud of the prairie falcon nest in his highest boughs. I had enjoyed the shrill cries in the mornings, and had even boasted to friends at work of the raptors that had made their home in my yard. But the nest was empty for the season. I had to remind him. "The birds left for the winter."

"That's why I've felt squirrel claws recently." The oak dropped away into a creaking silence.

I tapped his trunk again. "You need to drop your leaves."

"Hmm? Oh?"

"I need to rake up beneath you. You put a lot of tannic acid into the soil. That can't taste good. If I don't get the

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leaves up before winter sets in, they can become a breeding ground for fungus. You don't want spores, now do you?"

A few leaves detached with the delicate snaps of breaking twigs. They twirled down around me. I dutifully scraped them together in a small pile. I waited, but the oak would win the battle of patience.

"Today, please."

"I'm worried about her." A shiver ran up the oak's branches. A dry rain of leaves began to fall. "She carries too much fruit. The little ones will break her and it's growing colder."

The oak had an unusual concern for the papershell pecan. The trees that I had known and spoken to tended to care only about their closest neighbor. Most often, it was a rivalry for sunlight or soil rather than a worry. But the queen papershell was on the north lawn, visible to the oak only across the asphalt shingles of my house, and the oak stood on the southwest corner. Even on the shortest days of winter, their shadows never touched. The short orderly pistaches stood closer to the oak than the pecan, but they kept to themselves.

I tried to comfort him. "She'll drop the nuts when they've ripened. She'll drop them in her time."

"But there are so many," he lamented.

She was producing a bumper crop of pecans this year. I had already gathered several gallon buckets of waxy nuts, tawny brown and splotchy, little leopard-print shells. She had seemed happy, humming to herself as I went through the daily ritual of picking up the newly fallen nuts from her portion of the lawn. Searching for the ripened and sweet pecans in the grass was as close to gardening as I willingly performed. It was more of a game, like an Easter egg hunt, than yard work, and that made it nearly enjoyable.

"Just let go of your leaves," I said as clear and firm as I could to the slow-thinking oak.

I went inside for a break from the trees. Silence and a glass of water. When the members of the Pagan circle had boasted of their spiderplants and indoor ferns, I knew they didn't really listen. Houseplants do remember, not having a winter to lull them to dormancy, but they only remember vaguely. Flowering houseplants are possibly the worst for those who have the old blood, like nervous little lapdogs, always "Me! Me! Me!" That's why I don't allow living plants in the house, except for an occasional hydroponic-grown head of butter lettuce, lulled into slumber in the fridge. I would never have quiet otherwise. Even during the winter.

Looking through the picture window, I noticed the postal truck pull away from my mailbox at the curb. I finished my water and dumped the plastic Eskimo Joe's cup in the sink. I walked out the front door and popped open the mailbox. Bills, credit card offers, overpriced gadget catalogs, and a letter from the arborist that had checked out the gray growths on the oak's bark.

I was about to tear open the arborist's letter, when an older model Jaguar sedan turned the corner and slowed to a stop next to me. The engine barely made a sound. I turned as the front passenger window

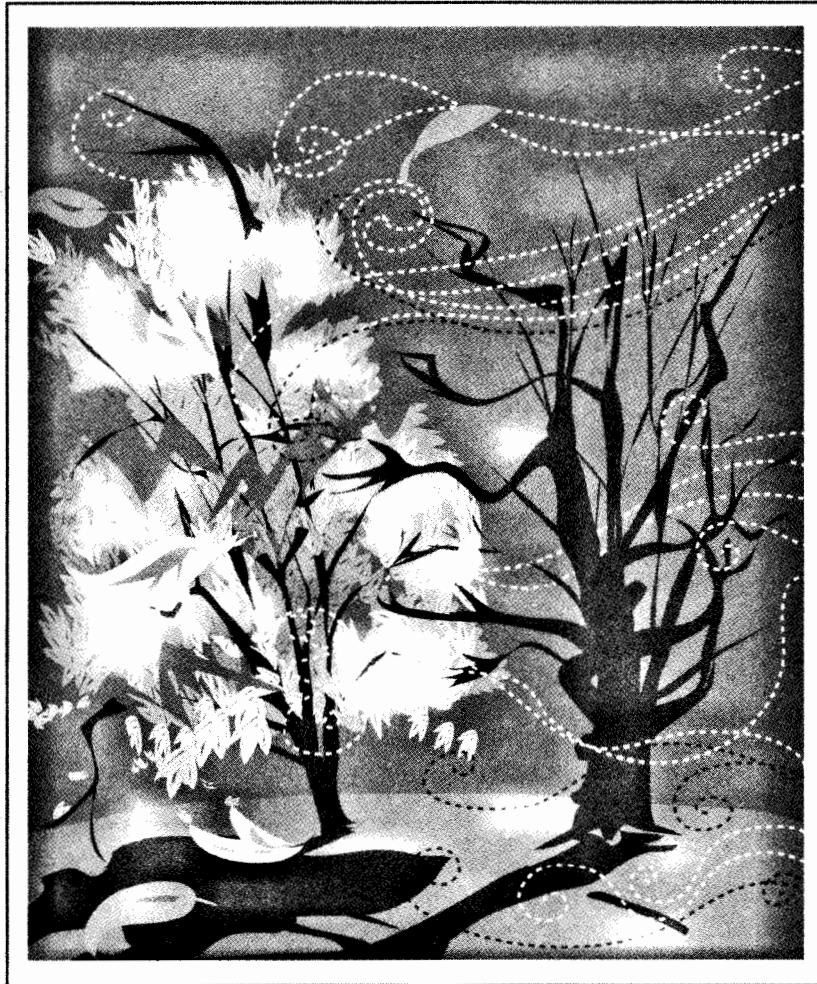
glided open. I stuffed the letters back in the mailbox and knelt down.

A pleasant-faced old woman smiled up at me, soft-cheeked and bright-eyed. She had carefully-done-up hair of pure white, and her makeup was tastefully applied. A single strand of pearls looped around her neck.

The old man behind the steering wheel barked out a question: "Good crop of nuts this year?"

"Pretty good so far," I replied warily. "Better than last season."

The old man wore a twill driving cap and leather driving gloves. His polo shirt was a pastel yellow, and he wore



charcoal Dockers. His face seemed a bit gray and weather-worn. Then I noticed the transparent tubes leading down from beneath his nose to a tank of oxygen in the back seat. He took a labored breath and then said, "We built this house."

"It was the first house we lived in after we got married," the old woman said. She had the type of lilting voice I had always tied to fairy godmothers ... assuming fairy godmothers had faint Texas accents.

"It's been a great first house," I smiled and nodded, trying to be neighborly. "I've only been here for two years."

"Sometimes I wish we still had the place," the old woman said, like she was confessing an embarrassing secret. "Much easier to keep up."

I hoped I didn't blush. My own housekeeping was marginally better than my yardwork. I may have moved in two years ago, but I still had cardboard boxes to unpack. "My name is Chris, by the way."

"Oh, my manners." Mildly shocked, she covered her mouth with her hand and I couldn't help but notice the large diamond wedding ring. "I'm Cary Lynn and this is my husband, Lou."

"Lou Robur of Robur's Cartage."

I waved through the open window. "Nice to meet you."

Lou propped himself up on the steering wheel. "A fine autumn day like this, I had to see how the old pecan was doing."

"Lou was always partial to that pecan tree."

"The trouble that sapling gave me, I *should* be partial to it."

Lou peered through the windshield with watery, colorless eyes. "I planted it and the oak

over fifty years ago. There was a good-sized pine out back."

"It's only a stump in back, but the previous owners put in some more pines." I could almost hear the oak and the pecans, as if they were calling out a greeting, but the fast-paced human conversation distracted me.

We chatted for a couple minutes, about the yard and the house and business in a small town. Lou asked what I did for a living and I told him about the computer center at the university. Cary Lynn asked if I was married and after a moment of hesitation, I said that I lived alone.

"We're going to a little place up the road in Pawnee. *Click's*, it's called."

"My favorite restaurant," I admitted. I shifted, my knees sore from squatting. "When I can make the trip and afford it. Good pies too."

"Oh, the pies are to die for," Cary Lynn said. "I have never been able to get the meringue that high on my banana creams. Have you?"

"No." I bought my pies from the supermarket.

"Well," Lou said, readjusting in the driver's seat. "Looks like you have a choice. You can keep raking leaves, or you can let me buy you a steak dinner."

My ingrained suspicion of kind strangers flared up. Being cautious kept misfortune away. Bad things always happened to nice people on the news. I stood up, ready to

refuse, but as the Roburs waited for my answer, I heard the trees speak.

"A sapling can't grow under the shade of fear," the oak said. A scattering of leaves twirled down to gather on the lawn.

"I remember him," the queen pecan said, surprising me with her show of memory. "He was good to me when I was small."

I glanced at Lou and Cary Lynn, but, like most, they couldn't hear the trees. Being overly cautious kept good fortune away as well as bad, an excuse to never risk anything new. Little good things didn't make the news, but that didn't mean nice people didn't exist. And it *was* a free steak dinner. "What the heck. Let me get my cell phone."

After I settled into the back seat, next to the wheeled oxygen tank, Lou drove off. During the twenty-minute drive to Pawnee, he swerved a couple times making my right foot twitch for a brake.

As we pulled up to the intersection by the Dick Tracy mural just off the main street, Lou leaned to the middle and said, "I haven't driven much lately, but when you're feeling good, you just have to take advantage of it."

Lou pulled his Jaguar into a parking spot outside the front door of *Click's* dark wood façade. I maneuvered the tank out of the car and Lou had me turn the valve so the pressure gauge read twenty-five.

"Thanks for the help," Lou said in a low voice. "I try to be strong for her, but—" He went quiet as Cary Lynn came around the front of the sedan.

I waited as Lou readjusted his oxygen line so I could help him into the restaurant. Then I noticed the pamphlet on the

front seat, "Living with Cancer."

Cary Lynn patted me on the arm. "Come with me, dear. He prefers to do this on his own. I'm glad for the company and a chance to get out."

Click's didn't put much emphasis on décor, which was part of the family atmosphere. Old linoleum flooring, red vinyl chairs, and some cowboy art on the walls. I sipped at my water and read the single page menu as we waited for Lou to make his way in. Through the front window, I watched him moving slowly, but deliberately. Several minutes later, he joined us, breathing hard.

Cary Lynn scowled and pointed toward his belt region. Slightly abashed, she blurted, "Oh, Lou, your ... Your ... It's undone."

Lou looked down before he sat. "My fly? Dang nabbit. I was just trying to get some attention. I'm not as young as I used to be, so it takes a little more advertising." With a wink at his flustered wife, he zipped up with a chuckle and a flourish.

I ordered the filet mignon, the most expensive meal but my favorite, at Lou's insistence. He did the same. I don't eat red meat that often, so when I do I make it a treat. Lou felt the same way, but his diet wasn't by choice.

We talked over the salad, steak, and finally the desert. Mine was coffee and a slice of lemon meringue pie that

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stood at least eight inches tall. I mostly listened to their stories. Fifty-seven years of marriage produced a lot of stories, and many good-natured corrections and squabbles over what *really* happened. Listening to them was a glimpse into a different time. I could see worry and love in the old man's eyes when he listened to Cary Lynn's recollections. The check came as the empty plates disappeared and more customers had lined up, waiting for a table.

"Thank you for the wonderful meal," I said. "This doesn't happen every day."

"You're welcome, dear. We don't do this everyday either."

"We might have been robbers," Lou said with a snort. He pulled his battered leather wallet out and handed a credit card to the waitress.

"It did occur to me." I sipped at the last of my coffee. Its bitterness balanced the sweet aftertaste of the lemon pie. "I figured that if you were robbing the place, and drove such a nice car, you'd see what I owned and leave a twenty on the kitchen table. And a note telling me to buy better stuff."

Lou settled up, and we went out to the Jaguar. Lou took longer. Once he got out, Lou leaned against the hood. He fished in his pocket and produced his key-chain, bursting with keys, a lifetime of authority and responsibility. Breathing heavily, he held out the Jaguar's key with a shaking, large-knuckled hand. "I need you to drive."

The wind had picked up and the temperature had dropped twenty degrees since we went in for dinner. A line of clouds, faintly lit by

the setting sun, marked the approaching cold front.

I drove back in the dark, Cary Lynn in the passenger seat and Lou behind me. Lou assured me that he would be able to drive home once we got back in town. He just needed a little breather. The big engine wanted to go fast, speeding up though I didn't put much pressure on the pedal. The countryside flew past.

When they dropped me off, Lou did seem stronger. We exchanged a final round of thanks for the company and the meal. Lou looked up from the driver's seat and said, "Take care of that pecan for me, if you would."

"Of course."

I went inside, feeling happy and sad for the old man and his wife. Lou must have wanted to see something last beyond himself, to know that what he had done mattered. From their stories, he had lived a good life, but on this day he saw his mark on fleeting time in a pecan tree growing on the lawn of his first home. The queen pecan shared the deep connection Lou must feel, because she had remembered him despite her flighty disposition. His concern sounded like the oak's noble preoccupation and Cary Lynn shared the pecan's sweet, but naïve nature. I wondered how much of their spirits were reflected in those two trees they had planted and cared for even if the old blood lay quiet

in them. A resonance only perceptible to me because I had listened. I went to bed haunted by a renewed sense of my own mortality.

The scraping on the window scared me out of a light sleep. Claw scrapes against screen windows and skittering toenail sounds on the shingles filtered through the gusting howls of wind. I pulled a fleece over my head and flipped the light switch. My bedroom remained dark. The shadow of the oak waved at the curtained windows. I noticed the red glow of the alarm clock was off. The power was out.

I stumbled to the front door and opened it carefully. A bitter damp cold raised gooseflesh on my legs as the storm door rattled in the wind.

The oak's deep voice cried out in alarm. "She's in pain. She hurts from the burden. It's breaking her."

"Oh no." I pulled on pants and boots and grabbed my Gortex jacket from the hall closet. Ice coated the steps and I almost fell headlong into the ornamental monkey grass as I went to the pecan on the north lawn.

The queen pecan was bowed down with ice, looking more like a glass-encrusted weeping willow than her normally jubilant self. The crystalline spattering of freezing rain cascaded through her bent branches. As the wind

whipped from the north, I could hear the horrendous sound of slowly splitting green wood.

I pulled open the garage door and found a heavy-bristled push broom in the dark. I carefully made my way back to the queen pe-

can and brushed ice from her lower branches. I tried to be gentle, to not cause the harm I was trying to prevent. But I knocked off ice, pecan nuts, and the smaller twigs.

"They're not ready," she said confused with pain. Her tone was apologetic and pleading. "You don't want them in the husk."

I couldn't reach high enough with the broom. More ice was forming well above my head. Her upper branches seemed nearly bent in half, ready to split, cracking her down to the base of her trunk. I grabbed onto a lower thick bough and swung back and forth. A shower of shattering ice dropped on my head and into the glazed grass of the lawn.

She whimpered under the strain. One of her highest branches snapped off under the weight of the ice and ripening pecans. The falling branch caused an avalanche of ice-encased twigs, but the slight release from the frigid coating was immediately lost under the spattering of more freezing rain. I could already see the gap that missing branch would make in her canopy.

I had to do something for her, but what? I had an electric space heater, but there was no power and I wasn't going to put it out in the rain. I had nothing to burn. I didn't even have a grill. I had no way to warm her.

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A cold trickle of melting sleet dribbled down my back. My pants were sticking to my legs and water pooled up in my boots. But the water around my toes felt warm compared to the melting ice. I had a possible solution, but I was afraid that my cure might contribute to the danger.

I pulled the hose that I had coiled up for the season from the wall. I connected it to the spigot and sprayed the queen pecan. The temperature of the water must have been sixty degrees, still warm from the day, and the water would have to release a lot of heat to freeze.

Please work, I thought. Rationally this made sense, but intuitively I felt like I was hurting her more. But I could see the ice slaking off her limbs, to be replaced by a much thinner coating of dribbling liquid water. I kept spraying her, soaking her free of the ice and standing in a growing puddle of slushy mud. She stood taller, her shape turning back to an upward-reaching fan of branches.

The freezing rain let up after what seemed like hours. The wind had died away. Exhausted, I hoped the worst was over. I slogged out of the freezing mud and returned the garden hose to its storage hook.

Fingers numb with pinching cold and constant body-shaking chills, I carefully went back inside through the dark garage. I wrapped my hair in a towel, squeezing it as dry as I could, and changed into flannel pajamas. I pulled an extra afghan from the closet and burrowed into my bed, desperate for warmth.

I must have dozed off. A splintering crash knocked pictures from my bedroom wall. *The pecan*, I immediately thought. But that was at the other end of the house. The north end. *Oh, not the oak*, I prayed. I couldn't look out the bedroom window.

The sun was rising, shedding a gray light into the house as I slowly dressed. I went out the front and saw broken tree limbs lining the street. I turned to where the oak had stood.

A spike of trunk was all that was left upright. Exposed white heartwood faced the corner of my house where my bedroom windows looked onto the street. The rest of his great bulk had fallen past the native pecan and broken as it hit the street. The neighbor's station wagon had a large dent in the hood where a larger branch had landed. The oak had fallen, split, deposed of his throne as tallest tree in the old development.

I walked up to him and put my hands on his thick gray trunk. I had to bend down to hear him.

His rumbling voice came as echoes. "Is she living? Can she live without me?"

"Your queen pecan survived the ice." I hoped she would survive the flood I had created to save her.

"Perhaps the falcon will nest in her crown." His rambling voice lost volume.

I listened and listened, but couldn't hear him. I pushed myself to my feet, but rubbed the oak's damp bark with my bare hand. Why hadn't he said something last night?

Perhaps he knew there was nothing I could do for him, but the pecan might be saved. At that point I knew another strong oak had broken last night. With complete certainty, though I couldn't say why, I understood that Lou Robur had taken his last drive in his Jaguar.

A white pick-up truck with ladders hanging off the side came to a cautious stop by my mailbox. The arborist I had hired to check the oak for fungus earlier that week got out of the truck and came over. He pulled off his gloves as he walked across my twig-and-wood-strewn yard. "Are you okay?"

"Just lost the big oak. The one you looked at." I forced a smile and patted the fallen trunk. "Could have saved you the trouble."

"I'm sorry. I was in the neighborhood checking on downed trees. I try to help out old customers first."

I nodded and sighed. "I'll need help clearing up dead wood."

The arborist took his hat off and scratched his unwashed hair. "This trunk should have fallen directly onto this corner of your house. I've never ever seen a tree split and fall like this. Must have been some gust to push it over at a right angle. I've seen two other places that had smaller trees just punch through the roof and collapse whole rooms."

The oak had fallen away from my bedroom. In his last act, he had tried to save me, never sparing a thought for himself, even though he would never listen to me.

"It's bad getting ice this early," the arborist continued. "Most trees haven't dropped their canopies yet, so the ice causes more damage."

If he had only dropped his leaves when I had asked. I didn't mean to, but that was when I began to cry.

The arborist looked uncomfortable. "I'll come back later."

I sat on the damp grass and laid my head against the oak's trunk. The arborist left me there.

After a few moments of peace with the fallen oak, I stood and brushed off my pants. Then I searched the grass. I found an acorn. Soon I had a handful. They were quiet for now.



— M. T. Reiten grew up in North Dakota, but has lived in Chicago, Houston, Wisconsin, and Germany prior to settling in Oklahoma for graduate school. A poorly practiced Episcopalian by military records, M. T. has been writing both science fiction and fantasy for several years and regularly collecting rejection slips.