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2380 words

— CANOPY —

It was Arbor Day.

Nicholas knew this, of course. He didn't need the banner that proclaimed the fact at the local nursery to remind him. It was, in fact, the reason he was on his way to the cottage up the river in the valley north of the city. To the general public, it may have become an obscure, seldom commemorated day, but for Nicholas it was anchored in the family mythos. Arbor Day was his mother's birthday—at least she had been *born* on Arbor Day—so even though her birthday wasn't always on the last Friday in April, it was her spiritual birthday. So every Arbor Day, his father had noted the event by planting a tree out back of the cottage his own father had bought decades ago. Over time, those yearly plantings had transformed the acres behind the cottage into a forest that Nicholas still called 'the grove,' even though it had grown far beyond that as the trees propagated themselves, increasing his father's efforts exponentially. When he was a child, the tree planting felt to Nicholas like the herald of summer soon to come; though the older he got, the more he felt conflicting emotions about the practice, emotions fed by his mother's own increasing annoyance at the ritual. Or anyway, so it seemed to Nicholas, who came to feel uncertain whether the plantings were an expression of his father's devotion, or more of an appropriation of what should have been a day his mother owned. Of course, at this point in time, it didn't matter much since both his parents were dead.

The cottage had fallen to Nicholas as the only child, and he had reinvented the place as a weekend getaway, or whenever he had the time to escape for a few days. The first Arbor Day he'd come up here after his parents' deaths, he had—by dint of habit—picked up a sapling to plant. It was while he was scouting out an appropriate spot in the grove, that it occurred to him

that he need no longer carry on the ritual. However, after a day of consideration, and walking through the expansive forest, he decided to continue the plantings, but for his own reasons: to do in remembrance of his mother, to whom he had always felt close. If his father was appropriating his mother's birthday to bring the spotlight onto himself, Nicholas would plant the trees as memory markers to his mother, in effect buying back some of the emotional real estate that his father had (perhaps) hijacked. Justice of some kind would (perhaps) be served.



Nicholas turned into the nursery, and 10 minutes later left with a small birch poking out of his trunk. He had caught the nursery people just before they closed for the day. He hadn't been able to get out of work down in the city as early as he had hoped, then had gotten stuck in traffic. Now the sun was starting to set.

15 minutes later, he turned into the long dirt drive that led to the cottage, still half mud from the spring rains. The sign at the turnoff read "Paradiso", what his father had decided to rename the cottage and grounds after his parents' only trip to Italy. Another conceptual annexation.

A few minutes later, Nicholas parked under the massive oak that shaded the house, one of the first to be planted.

By now it was past dusk, and the colors in the world had all drained to greys. Still, there was a full moon just rising, so he got out—conscious of the alien country soundscape—and walked around to the back of the house where he got his first look at the grove. The trees were moving slightly in the breeze, some now silhouetted by the moon. Since many of them were quite old, they had grown 50 or 60 feet tall, imposing even in the strange evening light, the canopy of their branches and budding leaves radiating what seemed to be a sense of protection.



The next morning, the light woke Nicholas early.

After some coffee, he went out for a walk into the grove, in part to find the perfect place to plant the new tree. It was raining lightly, but when he went into the woods, the ground was dry, the canopy acting like a vast umbrella.

The thing that was unusual was that it was still April, and as a rule the dense leaf cover didn't seriously materialize until May sometime. But when he looked up, he could see that many of the leaves were already fully formed, the canopy an intertwined latticework.

Regardless of their seemingly premature maturity—or maybe because of it—the leaves were a gorgeous, ineffable green. Of course, in autumn it was also stunning, especially since the variety of trees planted these many years ensured a wide range of colors, though the birch he would plant this time would add a rare yellow to the assemblage. In fall, Nicholas could sit in the late afternoon and do nothing but watch the colors shift as they caught or shaded themselves from the sunlight, twisted and fell. Whatever book he had at hand usually ended up neglected, the show that the grove put on easily eclipsing whatever his current fiction had to offer. But spring was also an excellent time, and Nicholas was again aware of how dry and comfortable it was to walk through the grove, even though he could hear the sound of rain far overhead.

As he walked, he recalled how—as a young adult—he had been unable to appreciate the power of the place, so resentful was he of his father's birthday celebration takeover. The last time he had been with his mother had been in this place, her bony, arthritic hand clasping his arm for support. Someone (a cousin?) had mentioned the fact that trees 'breathe' carbon dioxide and return oxygen to the world. And Nicholas remembered his mother rasping to him, with her customary sense of irony, to be sure to remind her to thank his father... as she paused, laboring to breathe. It wasn't that long after when her lungs failed utterly.

At length, Nicholas arrived at a familiar small clearing in the woods, and there, in the center, the rain fell uninterrupted.

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Once, maybe a decade ago, Nicholas had been to Rome and had visited the Pantheon. That was a rainy day as well, and when you went inside, you were met by the extraordinary sight of rain falling in a column through the oculus in the middle of the dome. You could stand a few feet away and be completely dry while you watched the rain.

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This was like that, this clearing in the woods. You could stand under the awning of leaves and watch the rain as it fell, just a few feet away.

That said, he had the impression that the clearing had shrunk. Not to the size of the column in the Pantheon, but it definitely seemed smaller. Of course, it had been a month since he'd been here and things grow... though, as a rule, not so much in winter. But it did seem that the canopy overhead was sheltering more of the clearing than he remembered. No matter. If anything, this made the sight of the free-falling rain even more beautiful, more... *specific*.

A glimpse of sun pierced the clouds and briefly prised through the rain as it fell; then the sun retreated, once again muted by dark clouds.

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That evening, Nicholas sat on the back deck outside the kitchen. It was the moment of transition between day and night, a time he called "the Blue Hour" when the spectrum shifted and the world really did seem quite blue. It didn't last an hour, of course, it was more like a few minutes, so why he called it the blue *Hour* he couldn't remember. Something from when he was growing up, no doubt, some romantic adolescent take on the natural world. Nonetheless, it always seemed at that transitional moment that the world went still, just for those few minutes. It was like the daytime sounds knew it was time to fade, and the nighttime sounds got ready to take the lead. Nicholas was acutely aware of these moments of suspension, and they brought him pleasure every time: when the world went that lovely shade of muted blue and all went still.

But actually, this evening, that wasn't quite true.

This evening there was a sound he was unfamiliar with. How to describe it... It was like the sound of the rattan seat of a chair when you sat down. A creaking, muted, fibrous sound. It wasn't loud, not at all, but it was everywhere. All around him, the air was saturated with this delicate, alien sound. Then, after a minute or so, it disappeared, overtaken by the normal sounds of encroaching night: crickets, owls, and all that. The familiarity of an ordinary evening restored.

Nicholas tried to identify the sound. Then he gave up, went inside, fixed himself a small dinner, poured a glass of wine, drank it, poured another, and went back outside to eat. He spent as little time indoors as possible when he came up here. It was too good outside. The just-past-full moon had risen by this time, again casting the tops of the trees in the grove into silhouette. And although it was likely a trick of the light and the time of night, it seemed to Nicholas that less of the moon was visible from the back porch than it was when he arrived the night before; more of it concealed by the grove.

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The next morning, the sun was out in full, the rain of the previous day evaporated, and Nicholas went for another walk through the grove since the young birch still wanted planting.

The clearing in the woods was gone.

That's not precisely true. The clearing itself was still there. It wasn't like a thicket had grown in the middle of it. But it was completely canopied over by the branches and leaves of the surrounding trees. Virtually no sunlight penetrated, the leaves had gotten so dense, and (it must be his imagination) it seemed to him that the trees had gotten taller; that the canopy above was further away. *Much* further away. Maybe a dozen feet, or so it seemed.

Nicholas leaned against a tree, puzzling about the clearing... when he felt his jacket being dragged up. He stepped away from the tree and turned to look at it.

The bark of the tree was crawling upwards.

That's not entirely accurate. The bark was elongating, like it was taffy or made of rubber and was being pulled from both directions. It didn't crack or split, the bark was just... stretching. He looked up and saw that the upper reaches of the tree were likewise rising further away from him, the branches and leaves spreading overhead, blocking out more and more of the sunlight. If you looked really hard, you could even see new leaves emerging from these taller, further-away branches creating an ever thicker canopy above.

And all the while, that unsettling creaking, elastic sound filled the air. Now it was, at least, decoded. Then, after a few moments, it stopped. A light breeze caught the leaves, swayed the trees a bit, and the normal sounds of the forest returned.

Nicholas was about to head back to the cottage, when he realized that—while he had been looking up at the canopy—the tendrils of some vine or other had quietly started to wrap around his ankle.

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All the way to the cottage, that cycle of creaking, stretching and pausing continued, and by the time Nicholas arrived back, the house had gotten noticeably darker as more of the sun had been blotted out by the grove.

Nicholas went inside, climbed the stairs to the second story, then up to the attic, which had at one end a large window. The attic had been repurposed—when he was a kid—to a playroom, and then again repurposed when he was a teenager to his own private hideaway. Now it was more like a library of sorts. He went to the window and looked out. The trees in the grove, which one could normally see over, now towered easily a hundred feet high, the canopy thick and intertwined to opacity.

Nicholas decided to pack his few things and head back to the city.

As he shuttled his belongings to the car, he realized that the birch sapling he had leaned against the house had grown noticeably.

There was more. The ground around the house was punctuated at regular intervals by thorny shoots of some kind visibly emerging from the damp earth.

By the time he had settled into the driver's seat, the nasty looking shoots were interweaving, the precursors of what might become a thorn hedge. He imagined, that if he waited, the house would be encircled, like some kind of suburban variation on *Sleeping Beauty*.

As Nicholas drove up the road that led away from the house, it was as if he was driving through a tunnel. The trees to either side had grown and interlaced their branches over the road forming a thick, light-eclipsing roof. At one point, he had to turn on his headlights to see where he was going, even though it was well before noon. The road itself was also quickly becoming overgrown, vegetation rising up from the still muddy soil.

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The thruway was a slow moving mass, all the cars with headlights on at mid-day since—far above the road—a canopy of leaves and branches had formed and continued to grow.

And when the traffic stopped, over the murmur of idling engines, you could hear the now uninterrupted creaking sound of the trees as they grew unchecked.