

SONG OF THE WIND

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was "inside." Other trees had told of the many insides built by the rootless ones, and how many pines, oaks and poplars had died in their making. It was so still, and not in a peaceful way. Even the calmest days in the grove were not like this. Lolla felt stifled and immensely alone, cut off from the wind, its news, its song.

Inside — in this particular inside — the small eddies of air brought her the bumps and knocks, the shushing and droning and crackling rapping of the rootless ones. Their song was a dull rumble spiked with sharp, edgy bursts. Mostly, though, the sounds barely ruffled her sleepy fog. Only her roots tingled icily, reminding her of Nестeena's wince when she felt autumn's first bite. Lolla feared her lendils soon would drop, and she would lose her senses.

One sound, however, kept her hope alive. It was such a soothing sound. It had started when Lolla was still

swathed in the fog of sleep.

The soft, lilting melody had caressed her, easing her

into this new world. Lolla

realized the song came

from a small rootless one

who came one morning,

then another, then another,

just to sit beneath her branches and hum quietly.

Her voice carried a round warmth far

more deep and beautiful than the chirps and

warbles of the sparrows, chickadees and

hundred other songbirds she loved. On the third

morning, the little one touched Lolla. There

was no tugging or pulling, only a gentle lifting,

as the wind itself might lift her branches on a

breezy spring day. She had known only the

spindly clutch of bird's feet before. This was a

lovely feeling, and Lolla was cheered by it.

Her cheer turned to horror the next

evening. Rootless ones, bubbling with chatter,

filled the space about her and began scurrying

with nervous excitement. At first she thought

the little one had brought them to caress her

lendils, but instead they pawed and pushed,

actually draping things on her branches. She

could feel a tiny weight here, another there,

and another and yet another, until not a single

branch was left bare. Nothing had felt like this

— not the birds' nests or the countless

snowflakes that stuck to her branches. Little

weights all over, making a big weight, heavy

and cloying in this windless air. It was as if

she were trying to hold up a thousand star-

lings, and her spirits sagged.

Then, Lolla felt her special little one. The

gentle touch was familiar, so careful and tender,

and soon Lolla recognized the lilting

melody of the little one's humming. It seemed

to echo within the chatter of the other root-

less ones, reflecting a tinkle here, bouncing off

a sparkle there, bringing a light into the circle

until tree and rootless ones alike seemed to

glow with a harmony Lolla had never known.

Even through the numbing fog that enveloped



“Bewaaaaare, the gnasherrrrrs.”

OLD MAN OAK

her, she recognized the faint notes of joy, of creation celebrating itself and the power of life.

The rootless ones sang of joy? Surely Lolla was wrong. What about the gnashers? What about the millions of her ancestors taken? And the countless other creatures whose voices were but a memory on the wind? Could the humming of this little one shine through all that? A glimmer of light cut across Lolla's questions, but it was fleeting. The moment faded, and the rootless ones soon were gone. The inside was silent and dark, leaving Lolla immersed in a gloom that pressed against every lendil.

The next day, Lolla knew she was dying. She could feel it. The coldness in her roots crept up her trunk as slowly and as surely as the sun moved outside, sending its shadows crawling across her limbs. Her branches drooped, and not just from the tiny weights hanging on every notch. There was no wind; she was suffocating. No wind to sing of life, no wind to carry her song. She remembered what Frohsia had said, recalling Old Man Oak: "To sing is to live." Lolla's song would no longer be on the wind.

Just as Lolla began slipping into darkness, she felt her little one nearby. Even through the black mantle around her, Lolla sensed an urgency. The little one was not sitting quietly, but skipping eagerly. And not just humming, but singing! Singing! Singing as if she were the queen of the wind itself. The melody was the same, as familiar and as fresh as the first time Lolla had heard it.

Then, just at the tips of her lendils, hardly

discernible. Lolla heard the same melody outside. It was faint and muffled, filtered through the walls, but it was there nonetheless. She strained to hear the notes, and yes, they were getting stronger, clearer. Her little one squealed and redoubled her own singing.

In an instant, the room was filled with rootless ones, and Lolla heard a chiming, a knocking. More scuttering and scurrying and scrambling followed until, suddenly, from somewhere, there was an opening in the inside. Beyond all miracles, Lolla felt the wind, the blessed wind, hit her branches with sharp, icy force. It was as if all creation were packed into one bracing wave that splashed across Lolla, jolting her to life.

And on that wave of wind was the most joyous song she had ever heard. Rootless ones inside and out were united in one strain. The melody was the same as hummed by the little one, only now it was a glorious chorus, flowing with power and majesty. And they were singing to her, to Lolla, to all trees, to all crea-

tures, to all creation and beyond. To the eternal mystery of life and death and life anew.

Lolla was humbled. She recognized Old Man Oak's story in this song. She recognized bits and pieces of every story, of every song, of rainbow colors that blurred and blended into a single immortal brilliance.

It was the song of the wind. It was the song of love.

And it was beauuuuutiful.

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Many days and weeks and months later, Lolla roused to feel the spring sun warming her. All about her, the stirrings of rebirth filled the air. She was eager to introduce herself to the trees that now surrounded her. Lydna Forsythia and Corinne Azalea and their families were already fast friends. A dogwood against the fence would probably be the first tree to shake winter's slumber and burst forth with buds.

After her miracle of song inside, Lolla had fallen into a gray fog between sleep and wakefulness. Only later did she learn from Canter Pine, who grew in a corner of the yard, that she had been replanted. The rootless ones had intended it all along, and that's why she and Frohsia had heard no gnashers. Last season, Canter said, another pine had been brought from inside to be placed back in the earth, but it had withered and died.

Lolla was alive, thanks to the little one. She had visited and hummed and watered and caressed Lolla to strength. And now Lolla was eager that her song be heard. The melody might have been there all along, but she wanted to make sure the wind carried the song of joy among all things, rooted and rootless alike, of harmony and brilliance and love.

After all, to live is to sing, and the wind never forgets a song.