

The Misfit

Fiction

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Dedicated to the Clayoquot people of Meares Island

No one in the small rural village knew exactly how old the fir tree was. To one native old-timer, it was a survivor from the days of his ancestors. The tree had been enormous even in his youth.

It stood, tall and majestic, a solitary tree near the edge of a cliff in a small park. From the foot of the tree, its roots went deep into the earth. Surrounding the tree at its trunk was soft, thick grass where many generations of children had played. Below the cliff, on the sea, people in their small boats sought it as an infallible landmark. To the young, it symbolized romance; to the old, it gave peace.

Many people shared the tree, and loved it, each in his own way. They watched when the sun shone on its head and the light danced through its prickly green arms as it moved with the winds. They watched the tree at night, when it rested, gently bowing its head, dark and shadowed against the sky. Generations of people had lived, watched and died while the tree—it continued to grow in stature and in beauty.

Then it became a potential menace.

No one knew exactly when some of the village people began to look with suspicion at the tree. The change crept up on them and slowly overtook them. They came to see the tree more as a curiosity and less as an object of beauty. They regarded it with new eyes, suspicious eyes. It was getting too tall, too round, too heavy. If it fell in a storm, the tree could kill someone. Moreover, some of the villagers complained that it obstructed their view of the sea.

The old fir tree had become a misfit.

And so it was unofficially agreed that the tree should be cut down. But some of the local people objected. This was such a special tree, they said, and besides it was like an old and very dear friend. There were so few of these old firs left.

This argument was challenged, and as the debate went on, back and forth, agreement seemed impossible. Finally, it was decided to settle the matter at a special meeting in the park, under the old tree itself.

On a warm summer evening, the local people gathered to decide the fate of the tree. They discussed the safety of their children and the need for more playgrounds. They talked about subdividing the park land. Supply of choice view property would create demand and, along with it, financial rewards for the community.

Inevitably, as they argued, some angry shouts were heard.

"It blocks my view," said one of the men.

"Murderer!" yelled a young woman. "The tree was there before you were. It's the only beautiful one left. We have no right to kill it."

"Sentimental nonsense!" shouted the man. Then he added, "It'd make good lumber."

"Oughta come down," mused an elderly man as he sucked on his pipe and gazed up into its great boughs.

The crowd shifted into a restless mood. But above their heads, the tree gently spread its branches to the heavens and stood, majestically posed, a dark silhouette against an evening sky splashed with orange and red. Nervous glints of light shot from branch to branch; dusky patches of shadow moved silently along its limbs.

Finally, it was decided by a majority that the tree should be cut down. Two men were chosen to make preparations. They felt the importance of their responsibility and began almost immediately to make plans.

They hired Joey, a tree faller known to a few local loggers and admired not only for his skill but also for his unique abilities. He could perform balancing tricks high up in branches of tall trees. The men now felt a further interest in their plan. Joey could be trusted with the hazardous work and put on a little show as well.

Before long, their plans were settled.

On a cool day in late summer, men with trucks and equipment gathered early in the morning. Soon after, people came from all parts of the community to watch.

There was a rustle of excitement when Joey arrived. A rather short, slightly-built man, he walked casually towards the tree. A reporter and a photographer followed him. The men in charge shouted to one another as they hurried back and forth, organizing equipment while the crowd watched.

Meanwhile, the tree rocked slowly with the wind.

As Joey approached the tree, the people became suddenly quiet. He began his climb with rope and power saw. He started the saw.

Soon after, a lower branch fell. There was a slight stir in the winds, but the tree remained still. Joey moved slowly to another branch, a larger one. The only sound now was the shrieking noise of the saw. Branches began to pile up near the base of the tree.

A car approached and came to a sudden stop near the outer edge of the crowd. The driver and a man with a television camera rushed to the men who were obviously in charge. The camera-man spoke rapidly as he gestured in the direction of the faller. Then people began shouting and waving their hats as they tried to gain the attention of the man with the saw. Others whistled. But Joey could not hear above the piercing scream of the saw and he worked on, unaware of the commotion below. Another branch fell. The tree stood rigid, as if in shock.

Then as Joey climbed onto a thick, heavy branch, he glanced down briefly. He turned off his saw to give his attention to the crowd below.

“Do a stunt, Joey!” someone yelled.

Joey understood. He secured the saw, and stood upright on the heavy branch. Waving his arms, he balanced himself first on one foot, then on the other. The crowd watched with nervous attention. Cameras clicked and whirred. Joey waved his arms again, threw his hat in the air, and leaned precariously. The hat landed on his head.

Applause!

He took hold of the branch with his hands and slowly raised himself. Using his arms as a brace, he appeared to be standing on his head. His legs moved back and forth in a wide arc, his toes pointing straight to the top of the tree. He continued his stunt for a few moments and then quickly changed his position, stood on the heavy branch, and bowed with his hat in his hand.

More applause!

Once again, the grinding motion of the saw worried the tree. This time the thick branch fell. The wind whined mysteriously in a low eerie moan. A wide dark cloud passed overhead. In the shadow of this cloud, the tree took on a somber hue.

Joey climbed down. When the saw began again, it was at the base of the trunk. He cut first on one side, then on the other. The crowd watched anxiously now, looking from the head to the foot of the tree, but the old fir stood solidly rooted in the earth, its wounded trunk now garishly exposed. This naked gash glared out from its side as if in angry defiance and silent indignation.

Still the saw screamed on, causing a shudder to pass through the tree. It quivered and shook. Then it was still.

Another tremor raced through the branches.

Again the saw screamed on. This time the tree quivered with terrible violence before it was quiet again. The crowd watched as one intense body while the saw continued its cold indifferent attack on the tree. More shivering. More shaking. More desperate trembling. Then, abruptly, the saw completed the cut.

In its final, hushed moment of life, the old tree gently lifted its quivering arms to the sky.

Then it began to fall, slowly at first, more quickly and powerfully in the end. A convulsion raced along the earth when it struck. Jagged parts of its body flew wildly across the ground. Those who watched felt a shudder pass through their bodies. Where it fell, the ground was broken and torn with the shattered limbs of the tree.

And then, lying on the ground, wounded and bleeding, the tree wept. Thick yellow sap poured from its body. In life it had stood with dignity. Now it lay dying, broken and silent.

There was an eager rush for the faller. Bravo, Joey! He stood awkwardly as he faced cameras and questions. Then, without a look back at the dying tree, he walked away. People stayed behind to examine the remains, to estimate the weight, the length, the age. Children walked along the dead trunk.

Soon a large logging truck came by. A burly man in a heavy shirt bargained with the men in charge.

“Sold!” said the man.

The tree lay still in death.

Work on the remains of the tree continued until the end of the day. By nighttime, the last of the crowd had returned from the park. On the evening television news, a brief account of the logging contract was given. Joey was seen again, this time from comfortable chairs in thousands of homes. His skill was praised. Some of those who had originally fought for the tree were now absorbed in admiration for the man. They looked for their own faces on the screen and felt a sense of pride in the publicity which the occasion had aroused for their village. Practical people, many of them, they reasoned that there were plenty of trees around.

Others, saddened by the death, mourned silently for the tree. They felt its loss as they would the loss of a loved one.

At the edge of the cliff in the small park, night came prematurely. Heavy, dark clouds hung sullenly overhead. The wind whispered and moaned as if in grief. No longer a majestic tree, only the stump remained, its rings now boldly revealing its age. The stump stayed behind as a stubborn, ugly reminder of long life crushed in sudden and violent death. The stump was the only part left. It took the man twenty-four minutes to kill the tree. It took the earth four hundred years to grow it.

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