

## Looking Back Through the Rings

*By Lacey Doby*

My brothers and sisters have long since fallen, but I am still here.

I stand in the center of what was once a humble forest. I remember the blanket of emerald studded branches intertwining into a ceiling above the forest floor. I remember how the vines used to grip me tight and burrow deep into my bark, sapping my strength and making my leaves brittle until some of you came along with shears and determination and sliced me free. I remember the taste of the air, clean and fresh, as if it could fill you up like water.

I watched silently as my brothers and sisters were lassoed with ribbon and then cut down so you could erect houses from their flesh. I groaned as their branches slid away from mine and they toppled to the ground. I felt the weight of their fall reverberate from my roots to the sunlit tips of my highest leaves.

You built a house at my base. Many of you came to live in that house throughout time. You would walk the same pathways across your lawn to your car day after day and form muddy streaks in the grass, and you would turn your lights off and on as the sun fell and rose, and you would grow up and leave and grow up and leave and though the faces changed, the patterns remained. I would often drip moss on the roof and watch it roll out thin carpets of green. You would tear them up once the sun had burned away the clouds.

One of you looped a rope around one of my branches and tied a tire to the other end. The youngest of you would spin and swing and shriek joyfully from the attraction, but I let my moss trickle down the rope and eat away at the thick twine. One day, as one of you was sitting with your legs slipped through the rubber loop, the rope snapped and you tumbled unceremoniously to the ground with a yelp. None of you tried to rebuild the attraction, and soon you hardly ever came out to sit beside me.

It was around that time that I became concerned with the gossip of the birds. They would speak about forests that had all but disappeared across the land, replaced by these developments you would build and fill with more and more of you. There seemed to be an unending supply of you, and the birds said it almost seemed as though there were more of you than there was sky.

You had taken over the skies too, I could taste it. The air changing, growing sour and thin as you pumped gunk into the wind. I worked hard to clean it, but my lone efforts did nothing as far as I could tell. Still, the birds sang praise for me from my branches, keeping me company while you hid away in your home, ashamed of what you knew you were doing or too preoccupied with yourselves to care. I never even saw your eyes. It was as if I was no longer even there.

But then one of you looked. I saw you pause as the wind blew through your hair and you looked up and you breathed in with your eyes closed and then you turned and you saw me. You stared at me like you had never seen me before. My leaves danced in the wind and some leapt from my branches, twirling through the air until you extended your arm and snatched one from its flight. You held it gingerly in your palm, gazing at its veins like they were a puzzle. Then you turned and walked inside, and I thought that was the end.

But then the families that moved into the house began to change. The muddy streaks you had tread into the grass began to grow green again, and I saw more and more of you on

bicycles speeding by with a determination I hadn't seen in a long time. I saw more of you walking along the sides of roads and through the slice of forest that was left. One of you nudged a birdhouse between my lower branches and the birds happily inhabited it. I saw you looking up more, looking at the sky, looking at the birds, looking at me.

You pulled out a section of the lawn and blocked it into rectangles which you filled with fresh soil and seeds which you treated with care until they bore you vegetables and fruits. When you were finished gardening, you would lean against my trunk and gaze at your work, your sweat seeping into my bark so that you and I were one.

The birds said the forests were all disappearing, but this one was different. You were building us back. You were watching us, moving between us, become one with us. The forests were disappearing, but not this one. This one was growing. You had become a part of us, one with the forest. We were one and the same, and I think you realize that now.

I am old. I am so very old. Thousands of you have passed beneath my branches and run your fingers across my bark and breathed my air. I have watched you see me and forget me and finally remember me when I thought you never would. You gather at my base to watch as they tie a ribbon around my trunk. One of you has a young sapling potted by your side. I know that you don't intend to forget about me again, and though I may be gone, we will remain as one.

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