

Tree Voices (revised)

by Mathew Paust

It was known locally as The Hanging Tree. No history to corroborate the name that Sutton knew of, but he allowed there was enough circumstantial evidence. At least one if not others of its massive reach of sturdy horizontal branches might well have held a rope or more back in the day. And it was old enough. Sutton knew that. At least two centuries under its ragged bark. And huge. Hips big as an Asian elephant's. In fact, damned thing looked like the child of a wild night 'tween a mastodon and a giant squid. Frozen, though, were that the case, save for the trillions of leaflets waving like royal fingers in a parade.

The circumstantial evidence was good enough for the history buffs to picket the tree with scolding signs. The age of the tree was enough to bring out the huggers, who climbed into its multitude of crotches and vowed to stay put come hell or chainsaw horror. The poets enlisted choir members to lend timbre to their march singing new words to the Joni Mitchell chestnut about not knowing what you got 'til it's gone, with the new chorus being, "You rape paradise to put up a business school."

Sutton knew any one of these groups was capable of carrying its protest into lethal territory. And if not the groups themselves then some lone assassin. And assassin was most assuredly the right word because anyone who drove ten-penny nails into a tree that was marked to be taken down was virtually guaranteeing the poor bastard with the chainsaw would get enough of himself sliced apart or off when a nail bounced the snarling teeth back in a finale the local media could only euphemize for their family audiences. Which is why Sutton was up there now with a magnet and a claw hammer as a nasty-looking storm rumbled in from the west.

He didn't especially like the risk of climbing around in a tree with a storm approaching, but it seemed the only opportunity to do so without protesters interfering.

So he was alone, straddling one of the limbs and scanning an area he'd marked for cutting, when the discussion started. At first he thought it was just more of the distant thunder. The voice was low and resonant, Paul Robeson leading into Old Man River. He looked around carefully. Saw no one. As it turned out there was only the one voice, but it spoke a multitude of viewpoints. As if each speaker went to the same microphone which electronically converted all of the voices into Robeson's. It was a gentle discussion, an enlightened one, one without any apparent stake beyond a collective concern for an uncertain future.

Soon locked in the spell of unseen eavesdropping, Sutton slid down to the nearest crotch and leaned his back against the rough old trunk, and listened.

"Kinda small potatoes. No passion."

"We've tried passion. Too dangerous. Inevitably led to religions."

"True, but without the risk what does it matter if a bunch of introverted stoics believe? Organized action is still our best bet."

"Pure love is all that matters. It's all we have. This guy wants to believe but he needs rational assurance. Blind Faith is a band."

"But the danger. We prove to him, we prove to a million like him that we exist and can and will interfere, can they handle it? Can we be certain none of them will go messianic on us, again?"

"Now wait a minute. The messianics have done good by us. We wouldn't be here without them. It's the ones who take advantage of them, twist their messages. The metaphysical predators."

"There will ever be mortals who can't wait. It's in their genes. Even when our chosen ones sacrifice their bodies, their lives to demonstrate the power of their love, there will always be seculars who subvert the example, the opportunists."

"So you're saying no more beacons?"

"We've given them enough beacons. It's time to go subtle. Time to work with the meek. Prove our existence to them in an intimate way, that we recognize them with love, let them know their calling and their commitment to it are vital."

"Yes. And they recruit by example, their devotion to vocation, the quiet confidence and strength we give them."

"By example alone? No proselytizing?"

"Absolutely."

"Will that enough?"

"It has to be."

"But we're nearly out of time. They're destroying the planet. We can't afford to lose the species. What can ten, a million, nay, ten million devoutly loving introverts inherit when all is risked by the others for comfort and pride?"

"The truly devoted can survive."

"They must."

"If they don't?"

"Have *we* faith enough to last without the love of mortals feeding us? Have we enough *love* to face the unknown, the eternal cosmos? *Have we?* Sing it, children--"

"*Shhhhhhh*. I should like to think we do, but it's a risk I'm not wanting to take."

"Nor I."

"Nor I."

"Ummmm..."

"Nor I."

"Nor I."

[This rumbles awhile.]

"The nays have it. Well then, as our sole effect is on attitude, we'd best get cracking."

The ringing in Sutton's ears resembled the whine of jet turbines too near, and he choked on the ozone. He saw by the steam rising from the fresh gash in the bark of the neighboring cedar this is where the lightning had struck. Raindrops pelting his head and neck had restored his consciousness. It was just starting, what promised to be a deluge.

"Hoo boy, best to get down now." He clambered out of the crotch and dropped to the ground. He patted the trunk that had provided his backrest. "Later, old girl." He jogged to his truck.

