

The Tree

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 he heard her voice.

Hey, you up there!

He tried to look down, but it was apparent his position was such as to block his view to the ground directly below.

Maude! He hoped his raspy voice, stricken further with bemusement, could penetrate the leafy limbs.

Who'd you think it was, your secretary? Hahaha.

Aw, Maude.

Yeah, right. Aw, Maude. Little rat.

That ain't fair, Maude.

Hey, just kidding, my sawed-off hero. Lighten up.

Maudie, I'm kinda busy right now--

You're always kinda busy, aren't you, John. I gotcha now, though, don't I. Got your ear for once. Hahaha.

OK, Maude. My ear is yours.

Good. Now we got that settled, hang on for this: Pastor Pete says you got to start coming to church again.

No fuckin' way, Maude. Excuse me, but you know I can't stand that bag of wind. No way.

C'mon now, John. I know he's not much, but he's doing the best he can.

Oh, sure. Doin' his best to get in your pants. Lookin' into your eyes like that. Holdin' your hand like he don't wanna let go. Can't say I blame him none, but ain't he supposed to be a man of God?

He is, John. But he's a man first, you know.

You noticed, huh?

Oh, John.

Yeah.

John?

Yeah?

You're wondering why I'm here? Now?

Yeah. I am.

Because you're doing what you know best.

I don't--

Because that's when you pay attention, when it really counts, you know?

But--

When you're most alive, John.

No. With you I--

John, not when you're most vulnerable. Then you feel cheated, you get angry. I understand. You know I love you, John.

I--

He thought he heard her start to say something more, but a powerful gust just then smothered all other sounds.

What, Maude? He shouted through the leaves in the heavy quiet that followed.

We all do. It's what he thought he heard. Her voice was small.

The ringing in his ears resembled the whine of jet turbines too near, and he choked on the ozone. He saw by the tendrils of steam and smoke rising from the shiny scalped flank down the trunk 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, and jogged to his truck. He dropped his hard hat and tools in the bed and climbed into the cab, cursing himself for neglecting to carry a rain slicker to the tree when he knew a storm was coming. He was drenched—even his feet inside the boots. He considered driving straight home. Another idea struck him, breaking into his thoughts as abruptly as the lightning had moments earlier.

The truck started easily. He put it in gear and eased it out of the parking area into the adjoining street. His destination was only three blocks away. He was delighted to find a parking space right in front. A merry bell announced his entrance to the shop.

Hello, John. Wow, what a rain. You're soaked. You should have waited. He shook the water out of his hair, feeling like a spaniel after a bath.

No problem, Mrs. Zweitek. I was outside when it started. Glad it's warm in here, though. I'd like a dozen yellow roses.

The woman looked at him strangely for a moment. She recovered and said, Oh, my. We got some nice ones in just yesterday. Would you like them in an arrangement?

Oh, that's OK, Mrs. Zweitek. I can take them like they are. Maybe you can wrap some paper around the stems?

Surely.

Mrs. Zweitek looked up after she'd finished snipping the ends off the stems and wrapping them with a sheet of slick green paper. And what shall I say on the card, John?

Nothing. On the envelope, just Maude.

The strange look returned to her face. She stood transfixed, a small card in one hand, pen in the other.

Oh! Is she...have they...

Sutton shrugged, smiled, rotated his head slightly a couple of times. He watched her finish with the card and affix it to one of the stems with a plastic clip. He handed her a fifty dollar bill, told her he didn't need change. She stared at his back as he left the shop and returned to his truck.

He placed the flowers gently beside him, having carried them upside down from the shop to protect them from the downpour. Yet raindrops still sparkled and danced off their crisp, sunny petals onto the truck seat, soaking into its faded upholstery. Their fragrance, delicate and new as the roses themselves, quickly dominated the cab's older accumulated odors which receded in good nature as if to honor their temporary guest.

Sutton drove back the way he'd come, and parked in the same spot as before. He carried his bouquet through the deluge, past the still smoldering swath the lightning had made on the trunk of the neighboring tree. He knelt at the foot of the tree he'd patted a few minutes earlier, and lay the flowers there. He stood, gave the trunk another couple of pats and slogged back to his truck. He started the engine, turned his head slightly and peered through the rain-

streaked window at the tiny cluster of yellow and green he'd left behind, chuckled, and drove home.

