

DRYAD

Jane VanCantfort

The stately pine that stood sentry at the steepest point of the trail called to Ann on that cold spring morning. It was as though it wanted to bring her closer, closer, ever closer, enough to touch its weathered bark. Ann told herself that a brief rest before the hill wouldn't hurt, and that there was never anyone back there who would see her anyway.

So she climbed over tangled brambles and a little hillock to get close enough for contact. She had to reach as high as she could to touch the heart-shaped divot. She admired its bark's scalloped beauty. She looked up into the majesty of the overhanging branches, awed at the symmetry and felt a little dizzy. She'd been feeling so unsteady lately.

Ann closed her eyes and wished for luck, for good fortune, for providence, she wasn't sure. She heard herself panting and felt the pulsing of her heart in her chest and in her ears, in that quiet moment. The tree appeared impassive,

but its pull was unmistakable. She heard a squirrel or a bird in the underbrush, crackling a twig, and stepped back onto the trail. A turkey gobbled distantly. The sunlight flared briefly within the clustered leaves. There was a slight breeze that rippled the water in the irrigation ditch.

She had read that trees “spoke” to each other underground through their intertwined roots. Trees felt it when one of their fellows was chopped down or lost a branch or shattered or fell across a creek or was torn asunder with spiking shards of wood. She wondered if the trees nearby were in pain. Lately she would whisper “sorry” whenever she saw a fresh, raw stump.

The woods represented fire danger these days. People nearby were clearing their land so they could still get fire insurance, an astronomical cost. Each year the fire danger increased with a longer season than ever before. And every year the resources to fight them were greatly compromised. There was talk of returning to the burns the indigenous people had once done, but no new policies were in place.

Some said that it was unnatural to try to stop the fires since it was nature’s way of fostering rebirth. Others thought that people shouldn’t be living in the forest, or at least not so many people. The new houses being built were so large and so unaffordable for the average person. Many of the people moving in had

sold their homes in Los Angeles or San Francisco and could spend a lot. They could buy an eco-friendly home with all the solar trimmings, built to fit into the landscape.

The first leg of her daily run was through her woodsy neighborhood. Lost Lane and Sunnyglade Drive hosted a mixture of city transplants and longtime locals, with modest ranchers and trailers mixed with the massive new homes. The houses were nestled into the hills three miles out of their little mountain town, half hidden in the spring and summer and barrenly exposed in the winters.

Ann ran as quickly as she could to avoid any neighbors, always speeding up at the mailboxes. But luck wasn't with her today, as she saw tall, bespectacled Duggan smiling at her at the crossroads. He let his squirmy Labrador pup Willie free from his leash so the dog could run to her.

"Duggan, you've been here every day lately!" she said, quickly turning her attention away from the man to the leaping dog, rubbing his soft yellow-beige ears and admiring his sweet brown eyes. Willie knew she carried dog biscuits, and he loved the smell of her running gloves. He was such a good dog, so cute; she always stopped to pet him for a moment. When she caught up to Duggan, with his dog jumping madly around her, she stopped briefly but shifted from

foot to foot, always edging incrementally away.

“Willie never runs to me that way!” Duggan declared. Ann ignored this; it was just the biscuits in her pocket.

“How are you doing today? You are getting super fit. How far do you walk each day?” she asked, though she knew his route exactly and timed her runs to miss him.

“Ha! I wouldn’t say that. I don’t have your discipline. I did get the heart regulator inserted, so I’m not getting shortness of breath anymore.” Duggan paused and tapped his left pectoral, then removed one of his earbuds. Ann hoped he wasn’t in the mood to talk for long. “Hey, do you get ticks? I found one in my hair yesterday.”

“Yes, I think they fall from the trees. If you find them in less than twenty-four hours, you don’t have to worry about Lyme disease,” Ann answered, turning to look longingly at the waiting trail.

“My wife has Lyme disease, though, and it’s really affected her,” Duggan answered. He took a deep breath to continue, so she began to back away fully. She had forgotten his wife had Lyme disease, so she made a distressed face, a real-life emoji.

“Well, I better get going! Have a nice day! Bye-bye, Willie, you are such a

good dogger!” and she waved and ran off as quickly as she could, praying that Duggan had Willie on the leash again so he wouldn’t follow her.

She headed to the last group of mailboxes, hoping she wouldn’t run into anyone else, but there was Susan in her bright red knit cap. It was too late to try to hide in the bushes, pretending to be observing wildlife.

“Hi! Tell me your name again?” Susan asked. That was always her opening salvo, though they had met at least five times.

“I’m Ann. We’ve met several times. You’re Susan, right?” she answered.

She knew it was Susan. Susan was known as the den mother of Sunnyglade Lane. A neighbor with dementia had been wandering last month, so Susan called the sheriff; that woman was in a care center now and her husband under the care of an ombudsman. Someone had left their fire briefly unattended on a burn day, and Susan had called the fire department, and they were ticketed, even though they were simply in the garage.

“Do I have your email? I want to let you know about the neighborhood meeting. We need to talk about the garbage cans,” Susan said, forcing Ann to pause and bounce on her heels.

“Oh, you have my husband’s email.” Ann waved her gloved hands dismissively. “I gotta get running! See you around!” she said, sprinting away as

fast as she could.

Turning the corner by the final mailboxes meant she wouldn't run into any more humans, so she'd have a blessed, peaceful hour. The anxious thoughts, the half-remembered dreams (losing all her money attempting to make a bank deposit, doing an impossible task at work, hopelessly lost in a strange city with menacing people), and the barking dog that kept her up the night before all cleared away.

Ann was glad she had once more strapped on the running shoes, despite the spring cold and morning damp. She'd been waking with a headache and blurred vision daily, but the trail, and the daily ibuprofen, seemed to cure it.

The trail wound around an irrigation ditch, and she had to cross a rushing creek. She was still able to balance on the rocks at her age; the big slate one in the middle was always a boon. But some mornings she tottered and stumbled, and sometimes her shoes filled with icy cold water. The rocks would be brutal on her hips and ankles if she fell. The rusts and browns and grays of the rocks, glistening under the clear water, were beautiful.

These days she bypassed the metal bridge; she felt too unsteady there, too afraid of falling and being unable to climb up the concrete sidewalls. The bridge was creaky metal and only had a railing on one side. It was only twenty-

three steps (she had counted), but she could no longer convince herself to cross it. The creek often ran very fast there after a snowfall or heavy rain. The irrigation district usually regulated the flow but not first thing in the morning after a snow, and there had been late spring flurries the evening before. She had a perfect run, and ran into no one else, just the way she liked it. And communing with the pine just added to her peace.

The next day Ann headed down to the creek, marveling at the buoyancy of her new shoes and planning the week's menu and the day's activities. She passed by four or five deer gathered on the hillside and called to them in that high voice that kept them frozen and staring alertly at her. It was called speaking appeasingly, she had read in a book about interacting with wildlife. The birds and the squirrels seemed to be responding, chirping back at her. Ann loved the romance of the notion despite the dismissal of her rational mind.

Then another tree called to her, this time a eucalyptus. It was the tree where she often saw a fat blue squirrel peek around the trunk at her to see if she was still coming. Ann felt that she must stop. Perhaps the trees had come to know her as the deer did.

Again, she fought her way to the base of the trunk through the tangled

vines but touched both hands to the bark this time. She closed her eyes, shutting out the blue sky, the crunchy, frosty leaves, the birdcalls, the tinkle of the creek below, and communed. It was a prayer to a religion she didn't understand, but it didn't matter.

She heard the turkeys gobble—they were mating this time of year—and one darted out in front of her. He looked like was wearing a brown and orange tweed jacket with a red and white ascot, thanks to his beautiful plumage. He had the tottering, unsteady walk of the elderly; she imagined him in a children's book, one of those charming English ones; he'd probably have a cane with a silver tip in the illustration. When she looked up again, he was gone.

Ann ran on, thinking about trees. Her family had always joked about their Druid roots and celebrated Yule. She loved the wreath on the front door, the ancient stories about why the tree was brought inside, those half-forgotten rituals of winter solstice that brought the spring again.

There were family jokes about Wiccans too, their association with nature and the occult. She had often played the Ouija board with her mother in the evenings by the fireplace. They would balance the board on the old butcher-block table with the unexplained dark stains, the table that had been in the family for generations. The planchette pulled so ferociously when it was her

turn. It felt like a force rising from the board and making her strong, stronger than her mother. The board was doing Ann's bidding. One day, the Ouija board had simply disappeared from its place in the hall closet. Perhaps her mother thought it was a bad influence; it was never mentioned again. Ann hadn't thought of the Ouija in years. The power she had felt from it reminded her of the pull of the trees.

She came back to the house and ate her oat milk yogurt and muesli, took a shower, and did her daily yoga. She kept to a rigid schedule: an hour run, an hour yoga, an hour at her desk, every day. The days had become long since she retired and she strained to fill them.

She sipped her coffee and stared out the window at the plum tree beginning to bloom, waiting for the muse. She'd wanted to write poems her whole life and decided it was now or never. She'd accomplished some things in her life, and she should be counting her blessings.

After all, she may have had a bad first marriage, but a happy second one. She'd left her small hometown, a desire she'd had since she was a teen. She was finally done with the ridiculous clerical jobs that paid her bills.

Her two kids were doing okay. Addiction was now long behind her son, though she wished he didn't like guns. Her daughter was working on getting

her degree at last, though Ann worried that she and her boyfriend drank too much.

All her goals had been accomplished, so she wasn't entirely sure what her purpose was anymore. Blessed with good health, maybe due to all the running. No tragedies. Not wealthy at all, but just enough money. She'd had a life, a normal life. Nothing special.

The third day there was another tree calling her. Ann had woken that day with bad vision, her left eye especially, though both eyes were blurry. She also had a relentless headache but forced herself to run anyway.

Ann thought she saw a lurking gray wolf waiting menacingly on the trail for her. She felt the shock of the flight-or-fight sensation, that ancient human knowledge. But it was just an illusion; it was only a misshapen tree that had been hit by lightning and now held up a dead section of itself on a deeply shady section of the trail. Her heart was pounding and her stomach clenching in fear as if it was real, as if seeing this vision had meaning that must be acknowledged.

She ran on, imagining that the trees were reaching for her on either side of the narrow trail. Were the trees extending their branches, mocking her as she ran past them? She heard a huge crack behind her and sprinted away, just

missing a large branch that fell to the forest floor with a resounding thump. The recent wet and heavy snow had weighted it heavily. Just a coincidence, that was all.

Then she came to the spot on the trail she liked to call the Green Grotto, where the Irish green moss grew deeply and greenly, spongily nestled against the craggy rocks. There was often a small pool in the center of the largest rock where yellow-striped finches flitted through the surrounding branches and then landed for a drink, their wings catching glints of the sun if it wasn't overcast. The water of the creek rustled and bubbled around the rocks, and the trees there were cedar and such a beautiful shade of green, brighter than the pines, brighter even than the moss. Could the color be lime? The cedars seemed to be open-armed and welcoming here; she even felt an impulse to open her arms in response. She offered up her prayer to the grotto, thanking it for salving her fears and saving her.

But once seated at her desk for her poetry session, the malevolent thoughts returned. Ann imagined telling a therapist about them and ending up on a seventy-two-hour hold, or heavily medicated, or in a daily session, or perhaps all three. She stared out the window and saw a raven with a piercing yellow eye looking at her from the plum tree, with one foot raised and his spiky talons

uplifted. He turned his head quizzically at her, so large in the spindly young tree. The raven was looking directly at her.

Suddenly her husband appeared at the window, his face alarmingly red. He had high blood pressure, which was supposed to be regulated by medicine, but sometimes he had an unnatural, brickish color on his face and arms, startling now that his hair was stark white. He scared the raven away, but had he not seen the bird? He didn't seem to see it fly away; he was focused on his phone. He wanted her to show him again how to pay the gas bill on his phone. Ann shook her head, mouthing, "Not now."

He was her dearest friend and beloved mate, but sometimes his heavy hand on her hip weighed her down in the middle of the night. He would often pull all the blankets to himself when he turned or shifted. She often woke to the sound of his snoring and then was unable to return to sleep. His breath had become quite noticeably bad. They never took walks together anymore, as he was too slow. Sometimes he would go on and on about stuff she wasn't interested in. He'd interrupt her reading over and over to show her Instagram pics of dogs.

At that moment a sudden torrent of plum blossoms fell, pretty against the blue sky, descending on the shoulders of his dirty plaid shirt. He must have

wiped his muddy hands on it. He walked away, and she saw how his gait had changed over the years. He had the same walk his mother had in her last years. They both thrust their chests forward and angled their arms slightly back, and they both had a sort of shuffle in the feet, a slow stiffness in the gait. She could hear him speaking kindly to the cat; the cat really loved him, always happy to climb over her to find his blanketed lap on the couch each night. The cat would hate it if he were gone.

Ann forced herself to turn back to the computer screen. The room darkened. The wild March weather had suddenly shifted, and a huge and mighty cloud, puffy white, had passed over the sun. It was a burn day thanks to the recent wet weather, and she could see the gray smoke of the burn pile whiffing up into the pines, matching the puffing lavender diffuser on her desk.

She was ridiculous, imagining that a raven was bringing a message, or that the gentle flow of the plum blossoms sailing by the window had any meaning, or that trees could tell her what to do or help her. But she couldn't let it go, remembering that the Celts tied rags or ribbons to the trees to bring luck. And lots of cultures believed that spirits or ghosts lived in trees. Maybe she should tie one of her scarves around a branch tomorrow and try a prayer. It couldn't hurt.

Finally, her time at the desk was up, and she had to run into town for groceries, a five-mile drive to the co-op. Halfway down the winding road, she saw the bright orange signs and the yellow cones signaling tree work ahead. She had to wait as they had closed down one of the two lanes and were letting drivers through only one at a time, alternating which side could go. They had rolled out heavy equipment, and there was a crew of people in heavy orange vests with helmets and face shields standing around. They looked like explorers from an alien planet, their faces obscured and darkened by the scratched plastic.

They must be getting ready to clear the land for more houses. Maybe they had finally sold the land the old gold mine had stood on. It was 750 acres and possibly toxic, tainted by arsenic and mercury no doubt, but housing was so needed.

It took forever at the co-op. They were unpacking all the food, and each aisle was jammed. She had gone vegan to help her husband's blood pressure, so the menu planning was much harder. She spent a lot of time in the produce section, pondering turmeric root and fresh cauliflower rice. The canned foods took forever also. The sesame oil and quinoa and curry paste and pad Thai sauce and various beans and vegetable broth had to be procured. All the while

she had to dodge clueless citizens and abandoned carts. At least she could fly by the meat and dairy section now. Then her card didn't work getting gas, and she had to go into the gas station. Next, the post office parking lot was totally full, so she had to go around the block twice before she found a parking spot. She didn't head home for nearly two hours.

And then she came upon a massacre. Cruel, marauding soldiers, a vicious and destructive invading army, had devastated the once peaceful country road. The fallen trees, the relentless grind of the chainsaws, the ferocious climbing of the backhoes were bad enough. Ann could also see through the few remaining trees to the decimated hill, bleak and deserted and gray. So many trees were down, littering the hillside like a spilled box of matches. It had been dense foliage and manzanita bushes before, now crushed as if by a giant's hand, or by a cruel, destructive toddler, leaving a trail of devastation behind.

She half expected to see blood on the men's clothes, or to hear the trees screaming as their sap dripped into the earth beneath them as they toppled. They had been standing together for decades, only to be randomly torn asunder by awful mankind. Crows were cawing above them, swooping and diving against the distinctly gray sky. There had been hail briefly at the co-op, and rain was imminent again; the men must have wanted to destroy as much as

possible before the weather went against them.

She told herself that fires would destroy the trees too if they weren't cutting it all down. But she felt a sensation of pain and shock, and she was glad she had to wait so that she could control the shaking of her hands. The flagman stood stoically, staring off into space or turning his back to speak into the walkie-talkie, his face blank with boredom or perhaps hostility, like a soldier at a checkpoint. She could smell pine and sap permeating the air.

The flagman let the waiting cars drive on at last, and the horror was clearly visible for at least a mile, the entire right side of the road ravaged. She saw the road, and her hands on the wheel, and the truck in front of her, but also felt oddly removed from it. Maybe her husband would want to move now, with so many new homes encroaching on their quiet property in the country. Their lives were going to change; they already were.

Her husband had grown old. He was always cold now. He had a young woman riding his horse since he no longer could. It took him days to dig a new fence post, and he couldn't lift the water into the dispenser anymore. He was forgetful and confused on the phone or tablet sometimes, then adamant that he could do everything at other times. He hated doctor's appointments, and they were growing more frequent as his blood pressure kept rising. He wasn't

the young man who had kissed her so passionately in front of the preschool, or that man who wanted to make love all night anymore, or the guy with sideburns who turned to smile at her from the driver's seat of the old pickup. So many years had passed.

She ran and did yoga, was vegan and a decade younger, but she woke up in the night with fear. What would become of her? If he died, she'd have to sell everything. The house wouldn't go to her; it was in a trust for his kids. Her children were just making it, and not in a position to help her. She lay there in the corpse pose, to not disturb him, and was afraid.

There was no mom and dad to call for help anymore. She felt like a needy child, wanting to call out in the night with bad dreams, though she was in her sixties. She had always been weak and fearful, and now it had come home to roost. Suddenly she felt flushed with heat, and took one leg from the covers, and heard her dog shifting in his bed next to her. Dear Sparky, her faithful companion, growing old and feeble as well. *Worry doesn't help, worry doesn't help*, and with that mantra she finally fell asleep.

But in the morning, she put the coffee on, fed the pets, and heated her husband's flaxseed blueberry muffin; she'd been bringing him a small muffin and a cup of coffee in the morning for thirty years. It was still unseasonably

cold, but the sun was out. Laundry today, then, and maybe plant some prim-roses. The run should be nice. Ann and her husband chatted about the headlines; they were so happy there was a new administration.

Everything would work out. She rooted through her scarf drawer and found one her mother had made her decades before, extra-long. It would be perfect for a tree trunk. She tossed the hay over the fence to the horse and donkey, with some extra carrots, and scattered the food for the chickens before heading out.

She eyed the trees as she ran, trying to find the perfect one for her scarf offering. Did the trees know what had happened to their brethren down the road? Ann decided to tie it around one of the welcoming cedars; they were small enough and close enough to the trail to be reached easily. She didn't know what words she should say, she should have looked up some Druid or Wiccan prayers, not sure what the tree spirits could provide or how to call them in.

She stepped back with pride to admire the muted knitted green yarn against the dark bark. It was silly, it was meaningless, but it was also harmless. She muttered: "Please, please, protect me." Then she took off running. She could hear the far-off sound of the sand cranes high above the earth, but they

were too distant to see.

When she got home, he was lying on the couch with the cat on his lap. He was never on the couch in the morning; that was his garden time. She went to the kitchen to assemble her breakfast, and he was silent. He usually asked her how her run went. She slowly cut the berries and measured the yogurt and flaxseed carefully, focusing on the smell of the strawberry, the ray of sunshine on the wooden cutting board, the sharpness of the paring knife.

“What’s new in the news?” she called to him when the muesli was prepared. He didn’t answer.

She walked slowly up to him, and the cat in his lap looked at her with strangely knowing eyes, the gold pupils set off by the tortoiseshell fur; the cat had always favored him. His mouth was open and his head at an odd angle on the gray and white striped pillow. Ann touched him very lightly on the chest, and he didn’t respond. She drew her breath in sharply, her hand to her mouth. Should she check his pulse? Call 911? Take a shower and pretend it wasn’t happening? She reached her hand out to take his wrist, thinking to check his pulse, and the cat lashed out at her with one swift paw, and she jerked back. At that second the paused TV burst back on loudly—he always turned it way up—and he stirred. His face was brick red again, and he blinked at her several

times before he spoke.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Do you want some cocoa?” she answered. She made it, served it, and went to the shower, all the while regulating her breathing. She used an organic rose body wash, the hot water cascading down her back, and the fragrant smell made her moan slightly. Then she found a lump in her groin area, a lump that wasn’t on the other side. It didn’t hurt. She must have pulled a muscle in yoga.

Soon, she was once more at the desk staring out the window. She took a deep sip of her French roast with foamed oat milk, holding the cup in both hands. Her mother always drank coffee that way, savoring it; holding the earthenware cup the same way she was doing now. She had always been so critical of her mother.

She remembered her mother getting a second bottle of wine at a dinner when she was a teenager, and snapping: “Do you really need another bottle?” Her mother had frozen with the bottle in her hand, not sure what to do next, a stricken look on her face. Her parents were the World War II generation, big drinkers and smokers. She had been a hippie who disdained alcohol and meat. Never mind how much pot she smoked or the acid she had dropped. Yet her mother never wavered in her love for Ann. She remembered how much

her mother had worried over her anorexia. Or the anguished and fearful look on Mom's face when she had pulled the knife out of the rack to threaten her sister. Ann would have done anything to stop the teasing. So much guilt lingered in Ann, and sadly, much of it was justified guilt.

When Mom was dying and loopy on morphine, and they clutched each other's hands, Mom whispered to her that the family was Norwegian royalty. Her lips barely moved as she stroked Ann's long fingers, but her grip was oddly strong. Mom's hands were icy cold and bony, her wedding ring now dangling, but never falling off, thanks to her arthritic, swollen knuckles. Long fingers were supposed to be a sign of the aristocracy, her mother had always said. Mom had always thought so much of her children, too much.

Alone in the writing room, her face twisted in the rictus of crying, she apologized to her mother once more, yet again too late, years too late. She imagined her mother's hand on her shoulder; her mother had always forgiven her, always encouraged her. Perhaps Mom understood now, now that she was on the other side, that children don't mean their cruelty, that in fact we are all cruel to one another over and over again. She let her mother's hand rest there, on her right shoulder, until her logical brain took over once more and she shook it off.

The next day she took down the scarf. She didn't need to dwell in this place of worry and guilt; there was no need to draw up the spirits. Her mother was long gone; it was too late to make amends.

Living in the moment was the only answer.

Five months later she still tried to walk on the trail, but since she had refused treatment, she was very weak and needed the cane. She always brought her cell in case she couldn't make it. She sat and rested under the pine tree, with the deer and the turkeys walking by, no longer noticing them, drifting away in thought. This would be a good place to scatter her ashes; she'd have to remember to tell the kids.

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