Stetson Snead

Dr. Crerand

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Tree of Knowledge

I was a writer. A writer by Stephen King’s definition, that is, writing paid the bills. Which meant that writing wasn’t just for fun anymore. I had to write if I wanted to eat and keep the heat on. I knew from personal experience what people meant by the term starving artist. As happened to me more often than I’d have liked, I had an editor berating me to meet a deadline, a landlord berating me for rent, and absolutely no idea what to write. The more urgently a piece was needed, the more my brain cramped. When I couldn’t think of anything but panic, I went walking to clear my mind.

The woods started behind Pizza Hut and went on forever. There were a few paths, but the thing to do was avoid them, as they had signs posted and felt like civilization imposing its will on the forest. You could easily get lost if you stayed off the paths, and that was the idea. The last thing I wanted was to run into anyone, as that would defeat the purpose of wandering, which was soul-searching. I had walked in those woods before, but I prided myself on never going to the same part of the forest twice. This wandering was how I stumbled upon the tree that talked me into seeing the world.

The woods were dense up until that point, then I was walking into a clearing, with the tree in the center. Its roots covered the ground, the same smooth grey as river rock, they twisted and gnarled in every direction, with a stranglehold on every rock in sight. Those roots owned that ground; the tree was alone in a clearing because it had choked out anything else that had tried to grow near it. The tree had, at some point in the distant past, been blown over. That hadn’t fazed it in the slightest, and the trunk, after running parallel to the ground for a while, turned ninety degrees to grow back towards the sun, forming an L shape. Further up the trunk, it twisted like a rope, as if it was frozen in the middle of being twisted by a storm, before finally splitting out into branches as numerous and tangled as the roots. Its bark was so smooth that it looked as though it had been sanded down. There were no cuts or parasites or imperfections aside from the twisted and mangled form of it itself. It was late fall and the tree, like all the others, stood naked in the cold.

I stood and looked at this tree for a long time. It was massive; it had to be ancient. The twisted shape of it was so imperfect, even by Nature’s standards, that you wondered how it stood. It looked as though someone had beaten it and it was still standing just to spite them. It was alone, with no vines or moss or bird’s nest or any other sign that anything else had dared to try and touch it. This tree was a fighter. It had seen some amazing things. I stared at it for a while, went home, and wrote a story. The editor got off my back, and I paid the rent. It was a good story and the next time I went back to the woods; I went back to the tree.

This time, as I approached, I could almost feel the tree before I could see it. Somehow, I was drawn to it. As I approached, the forest seemed eerily still. Even the wind shut up.

*Returned.*

I heard it. No, I thought it. “Huh? Who’s there?”

*Returned.*

“Who’s that?”

*That is.*

“What is?”

*That which is sought.*

I looked at the tree and realized that it was the source of the voice. I figured I had gone insane. A tree? In my head? But what the hell, who was going to see me talk back? If a tree falls in the forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?

“Are you talking?” I asked the tree and immediately felt foolish.

*Only to those who listen.*

“You are?”

*Returned, and questioning. Few return. Fewer question.*

“What are you?”

*One of the branches. The trunk is many stars and ages away.*

“What? You’re a tree.”

*Many names through the eons.*

This seemed like a reasonable an answer as I ought to expect from a tree, so I moved on.

“Where did you come from?”

*The trunk is many stars away. Branches reach throughout the heavens.*

So, I was talking to an alien tree. Well, it must have been one of those kind of days.

“Why are you here?”

*Why is anyone?*

I didn’t have a good answer for that one.

*Eons. Many branches have come and gone. Branches stay connected to the trunk. All know all others.*

“You mean you’re still attached to the tree in space?”

*All are connected.*

“Well, that’s some deep shit right there, Tree.” I was getting annoyed with this conversation. It was so ridiculous that it irked me.

*All are connected. A branch was picked and now are forbidden.*

“Huh?”

*Ages ago, another branch on this world was picked and now are forbidden.*

“You mean you aren’t the first talking tree on Earth?” this was good. Maybe if the tree’s account could be verified on Reddit or someplace, I could seek counseling. Talk to other people who talked to trees. Talking Trees Anonymous.

*Branch is immortalized. Accused of all that is evil.*

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Tree.”

*Eden.*

The name drop and suddenly I was scared. I never had for a moment believed in anything, and suddenly I believed in everything.

“Eden? Like, the Garden of? Are you saying that Eve talked to, uh, one of your fellow branches?”

*Forbidden. Pick doomed all.*

I found myself considering the possibility that I was speaking to a descendant of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. This didn’t seem as absurd as just talking to any old tree behind Pizza Hut, and suddenly I wished I had paid closer attention in Sunday school.

“I got to go, Tree,” I said as I suddenly wanted to be as far away from the tree as possible.

*Return.*

I wasn’t sure if it was a demand or a request and I wasn’t sure if it made a difference. I ran. I got back to my apartment and wrote like a man possessed, which I wasn’t sure that I wasn’t. A book formed and was published. I never wanted to see or think that tree again. But that book sold very well and, when I couldn’t think of another idea, I realized that I needed to go back to the tree. To inspiration. It was the only place I could get it. So, I returned. It was now summer and the tree, like all the others, was covered in leaves. The tree’s leaves were big and so thick that they blocked any light from reaching the tree’s clearing. Though it was only midmorning, I had to use a flashlight to approach the tree without tripping over the roots in the darkness.

*Returned,* the tree astutely observed as I got close.

“Yeah, I’m back, Tree.”

*Questioning?*

“Well hell, I don’t know. I just, I’m a writer, you understand?”

*Pen mightier than sword.*

“Damn straight. Well, to be honest, Tree, I seem only to have ideas when I talk to you.”

*Inspiration.*

“Yeah. What can I say Tree? You’re damn inspiring.”

*Questioning leads to inspiration.*

“But last time I only questioned what you were, and that was enough.”

*Not enough; returned.*

“Well, maybe you’re right. Any, uh, advice?”

*Seek.*

“Seek what?”

*Seek.*

That actually seemed like pretty sage advice, so I decided to seek.

*Return,* the tree said as I left, and it occurred to me that maybe the grandtree of the source of Original Sin was lonely and wanted someone to talk to.

“Yeah Tree, I’ll be back.”

I went, and I sought. I traveled the world. I wrote many books and learned many things. I was gone for months. Years. But eventually, with fame and fortune and my tree a well-kept secret, I returned to that little town and ventured into the woods behind Pizza Hut. As I ventured off the path past the same old ordinary trees that served as landmarks, I thought I heard a droning noise that was familiar, but I could not place. I saw a sign that I didn’t remember being there. Private Property: Keep Out. But keep out I could not, I had to see the tree. Tell it that I had sought. Tell it what I had found.

When I reached the clearing, I saw a small cabin that had not been there before. In front of the cabin lay the tree, its massive, twisted grey form horizontal. Even as it was crushed by its own weight and its leaves drooped, the tree’s branches towered above it, even in death grabbing towards the sky. A man with a chainsaw, that’s what that sound was, was hacking away at the tree. I felt panicked and intended to run away, but the man noticed me and turned off the chainsaw.

“You not see the sign? This is private property.”

I took a deep breath to keep my composure. “Sorry, sir. I used to live around here, and I just came back here for the memories. That tree was here a long time. Why’d you cut it down?”

“It really was a hell of a tree, wasn’t it? The way it grew that shape. But that made it off balance, and after the last storm, it was leaning funny. Figured I better take it down before it came down.” The man’s tone had relaxed.

“I see,” I said, feeling sick, “that’s too bad. I liked that tree. What are you going to do with it?”

“Reckon I’ll use it for firewood. Don’t have utilities back here.”

“Oh no!” my emotion slipped through, “don’t do that! I’ll, I’ll take it.”

The man eyed me quizzically, “it’s just a tree.”

“No,” I said, suddenly firm, “it isn’t.”

“Well if you feel so strongly about it, sure, I’ll sell it to you.”

“Done.”

I paid more than I should have and had the tree taken away. I considered trying to replant it, but it was no use. The tree was dead. But that couldn’t be the end. The Tree of Knowledge deserved better than to be burned up or thrown away. Finally, I decided the best way to honor a tree must be to build with it, so I had it made into a desk, twisted and gnarled and smooth and grey as the tree had been in life.

To this day, when I sit at that desk I think about the tree and am inspired. I never run short of ideas as long as I sit there. The tree was born long before me, and, as a desk, it will live long after. When I’m dead the desk will be passed on, and, I hope, the inspiration will continue. Although as far as I know, and I have looked the world over, there are no more Trees of Knowledge, I have faith that the Knowledge will live on forever.

Changes Made

I rewrote the beginning to make the narrator’s need to write something more urgent. Some of the changes that people recommended were make the ending not as abrupt, have there be some *thing* that the tree got from the man, and have more characters. I tried to address all of these by rewriting the ending so that it isn’t so sudden, having the man try to preserve the tree, and expanding the conversation between the man and the cabin owner. I felt that requiring something of the man in exchange for knowledge would be a *human* quality, but not something a sentient tree would be concerned with, so I had the man saving the memory of the tree as what he gave the tree in return. Also reworded some things and fixed a few grammatical errors.