

## THE MAN WHO LOVED TREES

There was once a man who loved trees. Sitting in his suburban study, far from the forests in which he'd hunted mornings and evenings as a youth, he would peep out the window in front of his wooden desk. As he tried to read the textbooks he taught at the local school, his eyes would wander to the silver maple standing outside his window. In the winter, he stared at the pinkish buds poking out on the tips of branches. In the spring, he cranked open the windows and inhaled draughts of fluttering blossoms through the screens. In the summer, school over, he floated on his back in a minty sea of green leaves, squinting at the sun through dark glasses. In the fall, he ignited into crimson flames and drifted like ashes back to the ground.

Walking of an evening in the village park, he would examine the ground at his feet for traces of fresh cuttings, tune his ears to the grinding of teeth upon nuts, scan the branches of food trees for the flicker of furry tails. Sunday mornings he listened to Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony and read poems by Robert Frost. His ashtrays spilled over with beechnut shells, fragrant strips of sassafras bark, walnut husks, and acorns. A pair of ceramic squirrels frowned down at him from the top of his walnut bookshelves. In between the pages of his nature studies books were pressed leaves from every variety of North American hardwood. On his walls hung silkscreens of leaf shapes and impressionistic paintings of sylvan scenes. At night he dreamed he was the lord fox squirrel of the wilderness with his nest crowning the tallest shagbark hickory on the continent. Sometimes he awoke trembling with memories of fires raging through the underbrush.

Once he was seen in the park circling a shapely tulip poplar. He glanced around, sidled up to the tree, wrapped his arms around its trunk, and kissed its bark. His neighbors, knowing that he was otherwise an upstanding member of their community, turned their eyes in other directions. On occasion, however, they would warn their youngsters never to go on walks alone with the man who loved trees.

-- Norbert Krapf

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