WHEN A TREE FALLS

He could feel it down beneath the surface of the cool earth; an almost imperceptible series of sinister quivers and tiny movements all along his deep roots, reaching quietly up through the base of his trunk until every branch and leaf seemed to vibrate with the ominous sensations. He was by no means an old tree. Neither was he undersized or dried out or based in bad soil. Yet by some incomprehensible intuition he knew beyond a doubt what these subtle movements beneath the ground meant. His roots were dying. Soon he would be upended from the ground and torn from the soft earth that had embraced him for so long. “Soon,” he thought, “my body will be dirt and my life less than a memory. If I have been given any consolation, it is that I will be dead long before I hit the ground.”

He was a modest looking Green Ash. He was not young, but by the standards of trees he was not really old either. He was tall but not broad, ordinary in comparison to most of his kind, yet manifest in his actual locality. He stood upon a small hill, which swelled a dozen feet above his surroundings, and sat almost squarely in the center a gently sloping valley. The deep basin of the landscape that was his home lay nestled within a chain of heavily forested mountains that towered, silent in their emotionless cogitation, on all sides of the twenty or so square miles that constituted the valley. Although the mountains were covered in thick bristles of forest, the valley itself was completely bare of all plant life, save the miles of soft grass, and the one and only tree.

Isolated and lonely he had often gazed with envy upon the many birds that flew high above him. Although he was gifted with long life and a capacity for reason and thought far
beyond the bounds of normal creatures he often used to feel that he would gladly trade all of it just to experience a single day of the freedom and companionship that was denied him. He used to long to partake of a nature so inherently independent that it seemed to border on a kind of primal arrogance. In his loneliest days he envied even the slowest and most detached creatures. “Even a turtle,” he thought, “is capable of finding others like itself and is given the chance to search for and coexist with endless specimens of life. At least it can move towards its dreams, that is, if it has any.”

Yet a nature like his was practically incapable of fostering envy indefinitely. As he had grown older and stronger, he had become increasingly focused on the musings of his own thoughts. He built within himself a labyrinth of vibrant observations and ideas that slowly permeated the very deepest levels of his hopes and his unrestrained pursuit of meaning. Now for the first time in his life he felt his world, so small and fragile, dissolving into nothing. His roots were becoming increasingly weak, and he could feel by the air that a storm was brewing just beyond the mountains. Storms in the valley were not infrequent and were usually not devoid of a threatening degree of violence. But this silent monster, that gathered darkly in the skies above him, this was different.

The electric tension and the rising winds that were beginning to beat all around him in the cool spring air suggested a level of fury that he had never yet known. As the leaves of his thick branches whipped around him in growing anguish, he heard a low, soft voice, barely perceptible and yet impossible to ignore. “When a tree falls and there is no living thing to hear it, does it make a sound?” So spoke the wind. The wind had often spoken to him before now, although he had learned quickly that seeking conversation with it was useless. The wind spoke,
and beyond that nothing could be known of its strange wisdom. When he had been very young it had whispered small phrases to him, sometimes words reassuring and comforting, and sometimes stormy hisses of wrath and disgust. But this time the words were cold and snide. They were a mocking prediction of his death. “When I fall will I make a sound?” Suddenly this became the only question that mattered.

Long ago when he had first wormed his way through the musty earth and sprouted from the ground like a weed, his perceptions of a life’s purpose had been so simple: “Reach for the sky, spread out and strain towards the sun.” It was so close, maddeningly close, just out of reach and yet impossibly far away. “When one is barely above the dirt,” he mused, “the sun seems no more distant than the birds in the sky. Just out of reach . . .” This constant striving towards something had given him purpose, but he had lost that sense of purpose when he was forced to realize that the sun and sky were unattainable and that his life was to be limited by more than the extent of his willpower. The sun, the clouds, the stars, they all seemed to look with pity at his failure to be with them. In his mind, the mountains and the forests upon them always appeared to be scrutinizing him, waiting to see him fall or wither, wondering perhaps what purpose something so remote could serve, what possible meaning could lie within a story which seemed never to have been meant for telling. He sought to spite his loneliness, to be somehow great despite the frustrating bonds of nature which urged him towards the heavens and yet gave him no means for their procurement, no answer to his solitude, no companions to alleviate his desire for something more in his life.

Once, many years ago, he thought that he had at last found a true sense of purpose. There used to come to him a girl, walking no doubt from some small village on the opposite side of
the near mountains. He usually saw her from a great distance as she exited some rough and
overgrown mountain path, walking down across the grassy slopes towards the base of his little
hill. Upon arriving, she would walk up, prop her back against him, pull out a book from her thin
jacket, and immerse herself in its pages for the next several hours at least. Why the girl walked
so far just to sit and read was more than he could understand. What could be worth such an
effort at solitude?

Whatever the reasons for her long treks, he was grateful for them and was never so
happy as when she was with him. When she came he would watch her with a kind of
inexplicable awe, every movement she made was to him something beautiful and
incomprehensible. As she poured through her books he could feel the very air around her
resonate with the elegant chaos of her emotions as her eyes absorbed the rise and fall of
innumerable lives and ideas. Thousands of men died in wanton misery, nations rose in glory
only to collapse under the weight of their own opulence, families rejoiced at birth and
shattered or endured through adversity, good and evil clashed on a hundred fields of battle,
men wept for a thousand things lost, and women for a thousand things which should never
have been found, and all the while the very fabric of reality itself, shuddered under the crushing
burden of life’s hopes and dreams, and love, arrogance, hate, passion, mercy, pride and all else
which comes together to form the electric beauties of the world. These things and many more
passed before her eyes and the sight of the tree, and as he continued to look on, he slowly
realized that as long as she was near him he was somehow a part of something well beyond the
confines of the lonely valley in which he lived, and no matter what life she came from or
whatever it was that made her leave it, he loved her as he had never known he could love anything.

The girl continued to come frequently for more than a year, although sometimes going weeks between visits she would often appear five or six times in as many days. The tree would await her with eagerness and the mere sight of her filled him with an impenetrable joy.

Then, slowly at first, her visits became less frequent as several months passed throughout which she came only twice. Perplexed, he watched her closely, looking for signs of change in her appearance and movements, but he observed nothing which could distinguishable from the first times he had seen her. “She has merely been busy with her works and other duties” thought the tree, “she will visit more often when her time permits”. Yet as one month followed the next and the time between her visits continued to lengthen, he became increasingly confused. He felt deep within himself a cold emotionless force slowly pulling away the foundations of the hopes and ideas that had given order to his life. Yet once more she came, and although she neither looked different nor acted in any unusual manner, he knew without knowing how, that she was already lost to him. And then, as suddenly as the day she first emerged from the forest and came to be with him, she was gone. A year he waited for her, tortured by anticipation and dread as he stifled the truth within himself. What could have happened to her? Did she marry or move away? Was she dead? She had seemed so young and strong. Hadn’t she realized that she had been the most hopeful and beautiful thing in all his life? I wish her dead!” He cried at last. “What right did she have to walk through the forest, to come up to me and become a part of my life? Why did she come here in the first place? What can any living creature possibly want with this solitude?”
“So walk off and find her,” whispered the wind in a mocking voice.

After that day he never once looked to the skies or beyond the mountains with hope. His once incorruptible fortress of thoughts, ideas, and desires rotted, and slowly crumbled away beneath the overwhelming weight of his hateful self-pity. He never looked at the ground or the waving grasses of his valley. “Never again,” he told himself, “will I care about the lives of other trees and animals. Nothing has ever cared about me, so how can anything else matter?” These thoughts seeped deeper and deeper into him as the years wore on. In appearance he remained much the same as ever, but his rage and contempt enveloped him like a shadow, so that all animals, even the birds, ceased to pass within sight of him, as they sensed and avoided his thoughts like a poisonous gas.

The heat of many summers and the ice of many winters came and went, until finally he stood upon his hill with his roots crumbling beneath him and the great storm brewing just beyond the mountains. Will anything hear me fall? “It doesn't matter,” he cried savagely. “They didn't hear me in life, so why should they in death?”

“And never a single bird ever nested in your branches,” breathed the wind.

With a great noise of crashing thunder, the storm began to break over the peaks of the near mountains. Unseen by the dangerously rocking tree, an old wizened turtle crawled slowly up the hill.

“You know the girl only stopped coming to you because she found a better tree,” the wind hissed.
“You’re lying!” screamed the tree, as it began to full dawn upon him that these were the last moments of his life. “I have worth! I never needed you or anyone. That girl is dead and I’m glad of it.”

As he spoke, his voice battled with the noise of wind and thunder.

Black titanic clouds blocked out all remnants of sunlight, as lightning crashed down to earth from the heavens. The wind shrieked high, scornful laughter and grew increasingly wild and jubilant at the hopeless cries of the tree. Down on the ground the old turtle crested the hill and called out to the tree, “Give no ear to the wind! I have traveled many miles to be here and to end my life with a companion. Please, listen to me!” But the tree could not listen. He could hear nothing but the derisive laughter of the wind and the desperate cries of his own voice as he diverted every last ounce of his strength to block out the madness of the storm and the agonies inflicted by his tormenter.

Again the feeble voice of the turtle rose against the thundering chaos which raged all about him. “Ignore the wind, nothing deserves to die alone! Please look at me!”

Yet the tree neither saw the turtle, nor heard his voice. He raged on in terrified anguish “I have always been more than you, or she, or any other living thing could ever understand, you know nothing!”

“Please,” croaked the turtle.

“I have worth!” screamed the tree.

“Fool,” whispered the wind.

And With a great crash, a bolt of lightning struck the base of the tree, launching flames up the side of his trunk and sending him reeling over in an explosion of shattering limbs,
twisting bark, and tearing roots. As the he fell he never even saw the old turtle standing hopeful to the last, and as his great wooden body cracked and splintered, scattering destructive shards and deformed fragments across the seething grass, he realized with satisfaction that his fall was the loudest sound that the valley had heard in all his life.