

## The Mother Tree

Between my last moment of joy and my first moment of terror, I lived a blissful life. It lasted less than five minutes. I carried my new wife over the threshold of our new house, and then we walked into our new kitchen to pour a glass of champagne into our new champagne flutes before stepping into our new garden.

A crowd of men waited. They filled the garden. Their eyes fixed upon us.

Alison walked happily into their midst, skipped and twirled around to face me. She beckoned me to join her. Flirting.

“He sees us but she doesn't,” a voice announced.

The phrase rippled back through that garden full of watchers. Some men smiled and nodded, satisfied. Others even applauded.

Alison remained oblivious to them. I remained speechless, my terrified soul sensed the withering of my joy. She touched my face.

“What's wrong Luke?” it was all I could do to smile my reassurance at her. The men milled around us, one of them shouted back to the crowd,

“He's called Luke !” then to me, “Good day Luke, I'm Robert”.

This followed by a chorus from the crowd, “Luke ! Nice to meet you,” “ Hi Luke,” “Greetings friend !” They were smiling at me, expecting a response.

“Who . . . who ?” I began to ask. All their eyes were fixed on mine.

“Who what Luke ?” Alison's joy was also tainted.

“She can't see us Luke,” said Robert, “we could make our presence felt . . . move

a few things here and there . . . make her feel like she's being watched . . . “

“Luke?” she reached up to my face. Another of the men rested his chin on her shoulder and said,

“After all, she'll need proof . . . especially if you were to tell her about us.”

Alison shivered. I pulled her to me.

“I was just wondering who would help with this huge garden,”

“We'll find a local man,” she replied.

We turned back to the house, the open door and all the windows framed the smiling faces of more men.

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The watchers had a leader. Alison met him soon after our move into Acorn House. She was amazed when she bumped into him, as if by chance, and discovered that he was a keen amateur gardener looking for work.

“Luke, this is Acorn Jack,” she giggled, “the new gardener for Acorn House.”

Alison loved the coincidence of the name but my prickling senses were too frozen to share her joy.

I already knew him of course. He had been in our house, sitting with us like a guest, listening to our conversations. Sometimes joining in, I had to be careful not to respond to him because Alison couldn't see him. Now he had decided to reveal himself to her and I knew that their meeting was not by chance.

He captivated her with his kindly old man persona but when she wasn't looking he often reverted to his true manifestation. A shimmering of some sort transformed his face.

Every time it happened, even after I'd seen it hundreds of times, I felt my breath shorten. His terrible metamorphosis from avuncular old Acorn Jack into a peering, leering, sneering, threatening creature called Æcern Jack who spoke with a moist, rasping voice.

Æcern Jack told me the story of the watchers and of the thing they all had in common – that they had all lived or worked, over many centuries, in the ancient oak wood that once stood where Acorn House now stands.

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The modern ghost-made-flesh manifestation known as Acorn Jack worked in our garden each day, endearing himself to Alison with his stories steeped in local folklore and history. One evening she and I were sitting in the garden, with a bottle of wine and a dozen or so watchers. Acorn Jack joined us.

“Your house is at the centre of the ancient oakforest,” he said, “all gone now of course. The original tree – still known in local folklore as “The Mother Tree” -grew on top of that short rise over there.”

“How long ago?” Alison asked.

“Over a thousand years; the tree lived for almost three hundred years before she was felled.”

“Why did they do that?”

“Well Alison, you see, she was huge, a girth of fifty feet or more, and tall and straight. In those days oak was prize building material.”

“Oh! Was she used to build a king's ship or a palace?”

“No!” Acorn Jack stood swiftly, turning his back on Alison.

Æcern Jack glared at me, his wrath so forceful that my chair tipped backwards. He caught me with hard, gnarled hands, and sneered in my face. His foul breath and yellow, putrid spittle sickened me. Suddenly, I regained my sitting position and Acorn Jack turned and smiled at Alison.

“Luke, what's wrong with you? Spoiling the story! Go on, Jack.”

“Not for the keel of the king's ship or for a beautiful broad beam in a prince's palace or a cavernous cathedral.”

“What then?” Alison asked.

“Ah well, the order had come that the king wanted a long, oak banqueting table. Landowners had to declare large oak trees, the biggest and straightest of which would be used to make the king's table. The forest that provided the table oak would be designated a “royal” forest. In those days, such an honor brought many privileges to the local squire and his villagers.”

The crowd of watchers shook their heads.

“So The Mother Tree was chosen?”

“No. She wasn't Alison. There was a taller tree somewhere else. But I thought, that is ... ”

Since Acorn Jack's loss of control in front of Alison a few seconds earlier, more watchers had joined us. The crowd was listening to Jack and, it seemed to me, comforting him. One sat on the grass, leaning against my knee. I felt the weight of his body, but no warmth. One pressed against Alison's chair but, as ever, she was unaware.

“You? You thought?” Alison asked.

“I? No not I, it was my great-grandfather many times removed who was the Head

Forester at the time. He agreed to the felling of the tree before he knew if she'd been chosen or not..."

"It *was* you," I said.

"Luke?"

"It was him Alison, can't you see? He's ..."

"Luke, stop it," she said.

"Æcern Jack – it was you!"

"Luke!"

Alison moved to sit on the arm of Acorn Jack's chair. She took his hand. He sneered at me. I gagged, it was the first time I had seen him touch Alison. Another watcher sat in Alison's chair. It seemed that they were taking over my wife, my home. My breath.

"What happened, Jack?"

He patted her hand.

"Greed is what happened. The locals realized that if the king's men did not choose The Mother Tree, they would get nothing. Some of them convinced my ancestor to fell the tree anyway. The timber was very valuable. They cut her down and hewed her wood into planks and poles. The work took three weeks and the Squire eventually heard what they had done. He and his men arrived too late to save the tree, but they caught the men. They were convicted the next day as thieves."

"What happened to them?"

Jack put his head in his hands.

"Jack?" Alison asked.

“They were sentenced to death,” he answered in the awful, moist voice of Æcern Jack. He lowered his head further, hiding his face, and my wife rested her head on his shoulders in a gesture of sympathy.

*“Garroted ! Then tied to the wood of The Mother Tree we were,” said a rasping voice at my knee. “Oh yes, you’re right, it was him. I was another.”*

The watcher at my knee looked up. I saw a terrible wound across the front of his neck. I looked at Æcern Jack, he raised his head to show a similar wound.

Acorn Jack emerged at that moment, nodding as my beautiful Alison sympathised, “Sentenced to death, for wood? That’s .... how cruel.”

*“Garroted and not quite dead when we were tied to the freshly cut wood,” the watcher at my knee continued, unheard by Alison. “The Squire wanted us to die a lingering death as a lesson to the other villagers.”*

*The rest of the watchers murmured their discontent. Although she couldn’t hear these details, Alison shuddered as if she sensed something.*

“Don’t fret Alison,” Acorn Jack put his arms around her! He put his arms around her ! “The Mother Tree was so pleased to have escaped being made into a table for the fat old king that she used her powers to spirit the thieves away.”

“You mean that they disappeared?” she asked.

“Yes, into a woodland paradise of naked nymphs and rivers of ale,” Jack laughed.

“Oh, so it’s all just nonsense,” Alison said, relieved, laughing with him, “a fairy tale, that’s all. Now I don’t believe a word of it.”

She stood up, kissed the top of his gnarled head and went into the house. I got up to follow her.

“Luke,” Æcern Jack's rasping voice held me, “we did disappear, but there was no paradise. It was just as my friend Cuthbert here told you. The Squire garroted us half to death then tied us to some of the wood that we had hewn. He left us there for the night. As an example. The next morning we had disappeared. Nobody ever knew what happened.”

“I don't want to know either,” I shouted, knowing that I had no choice.

“The raw, freshly-cut, sap-seeping wood at the heart of The Mother Oak absorbed us,” Æcern Jack said, “and now we possess her as she does us. She's malevolent and vindictive towards all men, Luke, but don't worry, we know how to keep her happy. ”

The crowd of watchers was looking at me. My body fizzed with that half-numb half-painful prickly sensation of pins-and-needles. As though something toxic had entered my system. I stumbled and fell. I voided my bladder and my churning guts began to loosen. I managed to control myself. Just. They, the hovering crowd, sniggered at me. Some laughed outright.

So did Alison as she emerged from the house with more wine and saw the wet patch on the front of my trousers.

“Luke! Are you drunk?”

“You see them don't you?” I asked her, “you must do, you' ve touched them.”

“Who? What?”

“The people ... the ghosts, the watchers! You must hear them or at least feel their presence,” I said.

She shook her head. Puzzled.

“I see them Luke,” Acorn Jack said in a mock-conciliatory tone, winking at Alison, dismissing me.

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There was some timber stored in the cellar of the house and we decided to use it to build a tree house in our oak tree. As the timber lay on the lawn, the watchers gathered around. Touching it and pointing as if at some special features.

“Look,” Alison told Acorn Jack, “this wood blends perfectly with the tree.”

“Of course it does,” Acorn Jack said, “those planks are from The Mother Tree and your tree is her descendant.”

“Descendant of The Mother Tree? More of your fairy tales, Jack?” she asked.

I feared that it wasn't. I felt that we, or rather I, had yet to hear the end of Æcern Jack's story. I had seen what it was that the watchers were pointing at. Here it came.

“After the *'disappearance'* of the thieves the Squire stored the wood to season it. Another Squire, many years later, had it made into a hut for the forest workers. It stood, just about on this spot in fact, for years. It was sheltered in the forest and well looked after by the foresters.”

“How convenient,” I said, “and they all carved their names into the walls of the hut?”

“That's right,” Acorn Jack said.

“Really?” Alison joined the watchers looking at the wood.

Watching her, happily unaware of her companions as she was, I drew a deep breath knowing that when I turned back it would be to look into the face of Æcern Jack. It was worse. Cuthbert, Henry, Godfrey and William were with him. Open throats gaping,

blood bubbling as though the wounds were fresh. I held down my bile.

“The names carved on those planks,” I said, “every single watcher is there. The five of you from the thirteenth century I might have expected, but every name is carved there.”

“Yes ... and?” rasped Henry.

“Even Graham ! I've spoken to him. I know that he's only been with you for ten years. He joined you after the wood was stored downstairs. How ...?”

“Oh yes, Graham, and quite a few others who have not seen their names before. That's why they're so interested in these planks. But they all worked in the woods in their time,” he gestured to what remained of the ancient forest, “and so are entitled to be named with the rest of us.”

I glanced over to check on Alison, then back again, “Entitled?” I asked as I turned my head, but they had gone. All of them. Gone.

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The tree house build was remarkably easy. When I began measuring the wood, the lengths fitted my blueprint almost perfectly.

“Well, that's good isn't it?” was all Alison said.

I had given up trying to get her to see or sense all the unusual things, the coincidences that seemed to pepper our lives. She remained unaware of the watchers and they had done her no harm.

We stood inside the finished tree house. All the watchers were in the garden, milling around, looking up at the tree house. Despite their presence it felt as though we

were almost alone. I felt a twinge of happiness for the first time in six months.

Alison shivered.

“Go inside?” I said.

“No, let's stay and watch the sunset from here. Go and get me a sweater and make us a warm drink Luke.”

I climbed down and she called after me,

“I've got a surprise for you when you get back!”

Ten minutes later, in the tree house, Alison had her back to me. I put the cups of hot tea on the floor. Her sweater slipped from my arm. She turned, picked the sweater up, and looked down the ladder.

“Luke?”

“I'm here.” I stood beside her.

She stood sipping her drink by the window, watching the sunset.

Turning again she called, “Luke?”

“I'm here!”

“She can't see you Luke. Or hear you,” Æcern Jack said.

“What? Alison? Alison!”

There was no response. She moved from the window and I saw my name, newly carved, underneath the sill.

“No! No! It can't be, no. Alison!”

I looked out of the window. The watchers were smiling

at me. They applauded.

“Welcome Luke,” said Æcern Jack.

“What's happened to me?”

“You've been absorbed by The Mother Tree, as is your privilege.”

“Privilege?”

“Yes – you've worked here. Even better, you've worked the actual wood of The Mother Tree, and you've lived here.”

“But I don't want this. Send me back!”

“Ha ha. That never happens.”

He seemed less putrid to me than before, less threatening.

“I don't understand, I ... what?”

“The Mother Tree, Luke, hates men remember? To keep her happy she must be provided with a new man to absorb. Every ten years or so, that's all she wants. But it has to be somebody who has worked with, and therefore, as she sees it, damaged trees.”

“What?”

His tone was so reasonable.

“If we dont cater to her needs those of us already here will remain locked in behind our carved names and, as you've seen, we all like to mingle in the world of men.”

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Alison never knew what happened to me. Officially I'm a missing person. The surprise that she had for me wasn't my name carved in the wood. I didn't even know that she'd had a pregnancy test that day.

My son is eight years old. He plays in the tree house and he has plenty of playmates. Yes, he's sensitive like me. I have to say that the watchers are kind to him. His woodcraft skills are excellent. I only hope that it's a childhood interest and that he doesn't choose to work as a forest ranger or a carpenter. At least not in these woods. Although, it's not really so bad here.

Alison married again. The Acorn Jack that she knew apparently had a son whom she met for the first time when Acorn Jack died. Her husband is, of course, a newer manifestation of Ecern Jack, without the nastiness and malevolence. Marriage, after nearly 700 years, has mellowed him.

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We're getting a bit concerned about finding our next member.

The time is almost upon us.