

The Devil's Oak Tree by Eric Kay

“Once upon a time...

One crisp autumn day, a man hiked into a beautiful mountain meadow. The bright sun felt warm on his face as he exited the pines. An oak sapling stood alone in the middle of the meadow, and the beauty of its red leaves took his breath away.

Now where did you come from? the man thought.

The pines around it told the oak's tale. The devil himself, they said, planted that tree. He walked in among them one day, dropped an acorn and pushed it into the ground with one booted toe. Then he just walked away.

Now, the man did not know a lot about such things, but he could see that the tree did not belong there. The soil was poor and the aspens stole all the water.

Suddenly a storm blew in! A frigid mountain storm with tearing winds and pelting snow. The man grabbed his tent and did his best to shelter the sapling. He stayed up all night, weathering the storm with the young tree.

In the morning, he rose to a sky painfully blue. The man smiled as he picked beautiful red leaves from his coat and blanket, as if the tree was trying to protect him as well.

This tree must be moved or it will wither and die. He stayed with the tree for another night. He made a fire for warmth and as its flames died away in the night, he could see the stars all the way to the treetops. He contemplated a plan. He knew the perfect place to move the tree. He also had a trusted friend who could help him, who knew much more about trees than he did.

He drifted off to a peaceful sleep. The next day he regretfully drove away. "I'll be back as soon as I can." And true to his word, he was.

On the way back up the mountain the man thought a lot about the strange affection he felt with the tree. He and the tree were connected in some way. Like the tree was a part of him and he understood the tree, its roots.

So, with tender care, the man and his friend removed the tree, placed it in the truck, and the man rode with it through the cold wind. He knew the perfect place. Off the mountain, the air was warmer. Fall hadn't started there yet.

A small stream ran through the hills and other oaks, planted there eons before, held soil, rich and dark and moist.

As they approached the spot, the birds sang and fish broke the surface of the deep, slow-moving stream."

Trying to push away, I interrupted, "And they both lived happily ever after, the man occasionally coming to visit the tree. Just to make sure it was getting the nourishment that it needed."

He only smiled gently and reached over to pat my knee. "Actually, the man saw the tree everyday for years. He helped water it and took care of it for a long time. Eventually, it began to grow and didn't need him as much."

He continued the story, "As the man grew older, the tree came into its own. He loved to sit beneath its branches, especially in the fall, when it would gently drop its leaves on him, his back resting against its strong trunk.

The entire hillside was a better place, if possible even more beautiful than before the tree arrived. The shade it provided made homes for the birds and animals alike.

The man loved nothing more than to sit for long afternoons in that shade. He would talk to the silent tree, and he believed that the tree answered with the sound of the wind in its leaves.

As the man grew older the tree only grew more magnificent. People remarked on its beauty for miles around. The man often thought he could hear the sap within it pulsing like a heartbeat, and he knew the beauty on the outside was nothing compared to the beauty found in its depths.

The man never regretted his decision to move the tree, somehow knowing that it was best, and he hoped the tree understood what he had done and saw the meaning behind it.

December 2011