

Extract from 'The Wild Places' by Robert MacFarlane, pages 3-5

The wind was rising, so I went to the wood. It lies south of the city, a mile from my home: a narrow, nameless fragment of beechwood, topping a shallow hill. I walked there, following streets to the city's fringe, and then field-edged paths through hedgerows of hawthorn and hazel.

Rooks haggled in the air above the trees. The sky was a bright cold blue, fading to milk at its edges. From a quarter of a mile away, I could hear the noise of the wood in the wind; a soft marine roar. It was the immense compound noise of friction - of leaf fretting on leaf, and branch rubbing on branch.

I entered the wood by its southern corner. Debris was beginning to drop from the moving canopy; twigs and beech nuts, pattering down on to the coppery layer of leaves. Sunlight fell in bright spears on the floor. I walked up through the wood, and midway along its northern edge I came to my tree - a tall grey-barked beech, whose branches flare out in such a way that it is easy to climb.

I had climbed the tree many times before and its marks were all familiar to me. Around the base of its trunk, its bark sagged and wrinkled, so that it resembles the skin on an elephant's leg. At about ten feet, a branch crooks sharply back on itself; above that, the letter 'H', scored with a knife into the trunk years before, has ballooned with the growth of the tree; higher still is the healed stump of a missing bough.

Thirty feet up, near the summit of the beech, where the bark is smoothest and silver, I reached what I had come to call the observatory: a forked lateral branch set just below a curve in the trunk. I had found that if I sat my back against the trunk and put my feet on either tine of the fork, I could stay comfortable there. If I remained still for a few minutes, people out walking would sometimes pass underneath without noticing me. People don't generally expect to see men in trees. If I remained still for longer, birds would return. Birds don't generally expect to see men in

trees, either. Blackbirds fussing in the leaf litter; wrens which whirred from twig to twig so quickly they seem to teleport; once a great partridge, venturing anxiously from cover.

I steadied myself in the observatory. My weight and movement had made the tree rock, and the wind exaggerated the rock, so that soon the summit of the beech was creaking back and forth, describing arcs of five or ten degrees. Not an observatory that day; more of a mast-top crow's-nest in a sea swell.

From that height, the land was laid out beneath me like a map. Dispersed across it were more fragments of woodland, some of whose names I knew: Mag's Hill Wood, Nine Wells Wood, Wormwood. To the west over corduroy fields was a main roach, busy with cars. Directly north was the hospital, its three-piped incinerator tower rising far higher than my hilltop tree. A deep-chested Hercules aeroplane was descending towards the airfield on the city's outskirts. Above a road verge to the east, I could see a kestrel rising in the wind, its wings shivering with the strain, its tail feathers spread out like a hand of cards.

I had started climbing trees about three years earlier. Or rather, restarted; for I had been at a school that had a wood for its playground. We had climbed and christened different trees (Scorpio, The Major Oak, Pegasus), and fought for their control in territorial conflicts with elaborate rules and fealties. My father had built my brother and me a tree house in our garden, which we had defended successfully against years of pirate attack. In my late twenties, I had begun to climb trees again. Just for the fun on it: no ropes, and no danger either.

In the course of my climbing, I had learned to discriminate between tree species. I liked the lithe springiness of the silver birch, the alder and the young cherry. I avoided pines – brittle branches, callous bark – and planes. And I found that the horse chestnut, with its limbless lower trunk

and prickly fruit, and also its tremendous canopy, offered the tree climber both a difficulty and an incentive.

I explored the literature of tree-climbing: not extensive, but so exciting. John Muir had swarmed up a hundred-foot Douglas Spruce during a Californian windstorm, and looked out over a forest, 'the whole mass of which was kindled into one continuous blaze of white sun-fire!' Italo Calvino had written his magical novel, *the Baron in the Trees*, whose young hero Cosimo, in an adolescent huff, climbs a tree on his father's forested estate and vows never to set foot on the ground again. He keeps to his impetuous word and ends up living and even marrying in the canopy, moving for miles between the olive, cherry, elm and holm oak.

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There was nothing unique about my beech tree.

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I had climbed it many times; at first light, dusk and glaring noon. I had climbed it in winter, brushing snow from the branches with my hand, with the wood cold as stone to the touch, and real crows' nests black and in the branches of nearby trees. I had climbed it in early summer, and looked out over the simmering countryside, with heat jellying the air and the drowsy buzz of a tractor audible from somewhere nearby. And I had climbed it in monsoon rain, with water falling in rods thick enough for the eye to see. Climbing the tree was a great way to get perspective, however slight; to look down on a city that I usually looked across....