

The Secret Life of Trees

by PD Allen

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Forest Highway 16

Carl Landau saw movement off the side of the road up ahead. At first he thought it might be a deer, but it was too pale. It was a shimmer of white that blended in with the snow. Could it be a wolf? No, it was too tall for a wolf, and it was standing on two legs.

It was a young woman, wandering out here in this winter wilderness in nothing but a thin, transparent white gown. She had long, light blonde hair and pale white skin. He could almost think she was a mirage, some trick of the snow, the trees and the sun glaring into his truck from low in the west. But no, she was really there. And she was in trouble. Carl put on the brakes and brought the truck to a halt.

The girl did not even look his way. She went on trudging through the snow, clinging to the trees for support. As he climbed out of the truck she slipped, landing on her side. Instead of getting up, she lay there dazed, her pale breasts rising and falling under the gown as she breathed.

Carl raced to her side, stomping through the snow and the underbrush. "Don't worry, I'm going to help you."

For a moment she had a wild look of panic, like some trapped animal. Then she peered up at him and seemed to relax. There was something unusual about her eyes. Carl looked closer and saw her irises were colored such a light gray they were almost white. There was a dark circle tracing the edge of the iris, and the pupil in the center. The effect was quite striking, almost bewitching. It set off her beauty and gave her an otherworldly appearance.

"Come on." Carl squatted beside her. "Let's get you in the truck." For all of her beauty, she was thin and weak to the point of emaciation. Carl doubted she had the strength to walk another foot.

He reached one arm under her legs and the other around her back and lifted her out of the snow, "Let me carry you."

She was much lighter than he expected. He doubted she weighed more than ninety pounds at the most. She wore nothing underneath the gown, and the thin gown could not

provide much protection from the elements. She was so cold to the touch he was surprised she showed no sign of frostbite. "You're freezing!"

She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly as he carried her over to the passenger side of the truck. She weighed so little he could easily hold her with one arm while he opened the door with the other. He took off his coat and wrapped it over her. Then he stood for a moment, looking at her bare feet and wishing he had something in which to wrap them.

"I'll get this truck heated up in no time." He shut the passenger door and walked around to climb in on the driver's side. As he kicked up the heater and threw the truck into gear, he looked over at her. Beautiful was not the word for her. She was enchanting.

"It's a good thing I came along when I did. What are you doing out here?"

Until now, she had been silent. It seemed to take some effort for her to speak. Her voice was soft and pipey, almost musical, "I do not know."

"I'm Carl, Carl Landau."

"I am called Arna," she reciprocated.

It was an unusual name. Carl thought it was odd the way she said "I am called..." instead of "My name is..." or simply "I am Arna." But he did not trouble himself about it too much.

"I'm on my way to Michigan Tech." Carl had spent Thanksgiving break with his family in Long Lake, Wisconsin. "You're lucky I was trying this short cut. I doubt anyone's been down this road in a week or more."

Forest Highway 16 had been a muddy mess what with the unseasonable warm, wet weather. And they said global warming was a hoax. But last night the temperature dropped and the roads froze up just in time for him to try this route.

"As soon as I can find someplace to turn around, I'll take you to Iron River."

"That is not necessary." Her voice became a little firmer and she sat up a bit.

"We need to get you some medical help," Carl insisted. "Look, I don't know what you were doing, wandering around out here like this." In his mind, he had no doubt someone dumped her, possibly after raping her. She sported no bruises and her gown was not even torn. Though she did not seem to be physically violated in any way, he was sure something bad happened to her, leaving her traumatized to the point that she could not remember. "We need to contact the police."

"No." She reached out and laid her hand on his arm. "Please don't." Her hand felt warmer and stronger already.

At the touch of her, Carl felt something stir inside of him. He was no longer sure what to do. "Okay." His thoughts seemed to grow sluggish. "Where do you live?"

"I have no home," she said, as though there were nothing unusual in that.

"Surely somebody must be wondering where you are?"

Her hand still on his arm, she gazed at him intently. When he looked back at her, he felt everything slip away. He was lost in her eyes, as in a silent snow-clad forest. He wanted her, though he knew he could never possess her.

"Let me stay with you," she said.

He desired nothing more than to keep her by his side and never part from her. He wanted to give her everything he could. He wanted to dedicate his life to her.

"Okay." He drove on, almost forgetting how he found her or where he was going. They continued through the wintery forest, silent. She kept her hand on his arm and

huddled closer to his side. She felt warmer and stronger. He wanted to stop the truck right there, take her in his arms and make love with her. Her very touch seemed to melt his soul.

"Tell me about yourself."

The request, coming from a young woman who only moments ago escaped being frozen to death out in the middle of nowhere, did not sound at all odd to Carl. He wanted to tell her all about himself.

II

He looked down the long, straight dirt road, cutting through miles of forested wilderness to either side. The hardwoods had lost their leaves over a month ago. Now they were clad in several inches of snow that fell the previous night, like a cozy white comforter.

A fresh dressing of snow always transformed the otherwise barren winter landscape into a wonderland. Forest Highway 16 gave Carl access to this otherwise hidden world. He liked that; it was why he studied to become a civil engineer.

"I'm studying engineering at Michigan Tech. I'm heading back early cuz I gotta big test on Monday."

He intended to spend the weekend buried in textbooks, studying hydraulic mechanics and load strength. Professor Murdock was a bear. He would not allow them to consult tables, not even if they were stored on a calculator. So Carl had half a dozen tables to memorize, and at least that many formulas.

"You are a good student." Arna nestled in close beside him. It felt good to have her at his side. Carl wanted to protect her and nurse her back to health. He wanted to give her everything. He could hold nothing back.

"I'm on academic probation. If I don't buckle down and bring up my grades, I'll lose my scholarship."

"Why is that?"

"Well, there was this girl."

"Ah!"

"Lori Farquest." Carl had trouble even recalling her name. Funny, though he risked everything for her, Lori seemed so distant, with Arna at his side.

"She was dark-haired, part Indian. She has this vulnerability. That's what drew me to her. I wanted to help her. Instead, she sucked me down into her life. Drinking, partying and drugs.

"She got busted selling weed on campus. They were trying to get her for meth, but she didn't have any when they raided. I was there when they broke the door down. There was a shitload of cops pointing guns at all of us. Man, they don't kid around when they bust in.

"They took us down to the station. Fingerprinted us and photographed us. I spent the night in the county jail, but they released me the next morning. The only ones they filed charges on were Lori and her roommate Shawna. After Lori said the weed was all hers, they dropped the charges against Shawna."

Carl fell silent. Why was he telling her this? Given her situation, why did Arna care about his past?

The cab of the truck was a protective cocoon, sealing the two of them away from a world that grew increasingly distant.

"So what happened?"

"Lori was expelled and spent a few months in county jail. She's in Marquette now, living with her parents. I ain't heard from her since the bust."

"What about you?"

"I caught hell. Had to take a drug test. If I failed it woulda been the end. I woulda lost my scholarship and everything else.

"A friend told me about a detox kit guaranteed to pass a drug test. It worked. I haven't touched anything since. Not even a joint.

"The Dean of Academic Affairs is keeping a close eye on me. I gotta keep my grades up."

"What is it you want to do?"

Arna's voice was so pleasant, and so intimate, Carl wanted to share all his dreams and goals with her.

"I want to build roads and bridges that'll take people where they couldn't go before."

He looked out at the wilderness through which they drove. The sight filled him with such longing. He wanted to explore deep into the heart of these forests, where no one had ever gone before.

He felt something quicken in response to this desire.

III

Here he was, exploring this wilderness for the first time, and he had Arna to share it with. The thrill of it recalled his childhood, when he would explore the forests around his home in Long Lake. He had to share these memories.

"When I was a kid I used to spend a lot of time in the woods. I never knew what I'd find out there. It was all so free and open. I wanted to be the first to experience it."

"You liked the forests?"

"Yeah. I wanted to be a trailblazer." He failed to notice how Arna tensed up at this declaration.

"There was a big swamp. Standing water and sinkholes, and thick brush. But there was a grove of oak out there. You could see them towering over the swamp. They used to fill me with longing. I just knew nobody had ever been on that island in the middle of the swamp."

"Islands are sanctuaries."

"A lot a kids tried to get to that island. I tried a couple times. A kid got bit by a rattler in that swamp. He nearly died. And the mosquitoes out there were something terrible. I could make my way through the brush. But the island was ringed by open water. It was only a foot, a foot and a half deep. But it was dark, murky. Nobody would dare wade it, cuz ya knew it was swarming with leeches. All I could do was stand there and look at the island, so near yet...."

"Maybe you weren't supposed to go there."

"That's what drove me nuts. It was so inaccessible I just had to go there. Me and my buddy, Lee Jameson, were determined to set foot of that island. We scoured the woods for fallen trees, and we scavenged our old forts for boards and plywood. We piled everything at the edge of the swamp. For a week we laid a trail, cutting brush, putting down boards and logs across sinkholes. We came home a muddy, mosquito-bit mess every night. And the next morning we could hardly wait to get at it again.

"It took us three days to clear a path to the moat around the island. That's what we called it: a moat. We had to go all the way back to the edge of the swamp, grab a board or a log, and drag it back to where we left off.

"That moat had us stumped, though. It was just too deep. Anything we laid out there would either sink or float away. We nearly gave up. And then I thought of the pile a rocks that ran along the edge a the old farm fields.

"I borrowed my dad's wheelbarrow and we moved several loads a rock to the edge of the swamp. Then we had to haul each rock by hand through the swamp and toss it in the moat. Hard work, but we kept at it.

"Once we had enough rocks piled up, we'd toss down some wood on top. It took us a few days, but we finally got within a few feet of the island. We stopped with the rocks and found a few logs long enough to span the gap. Then we laid plywood over the top.

"I felt like the first man on the moon when I set foot on that island. I knew right then what I wanted to do with my life."

"What happened to the island?"

"Suburbs. They cut down the trees, filled in the swamp and put up a subdivision."

"So that untouched island is gone. All the trees, and all the animals that lived there."

"Gone now." A sadness swept through Carl. He realized the rest of his life had been spent trying to recapture the moment when he first set foot on that island.

"Better you had never built your bridge."

This criticism struck him odd. His little bridge did not lead to the destruction of the woods, the swamp, and the island. The development would have come with or without him. At least he got to explore the island before it was razed. He carried it in his memory now. Yet somehow what Arna said got under his skin, where it planted a seed of uncertainty.

Arna was like that island. She was so beautiful and fragile, so unattainable. Though she cuddled close beside him, something about her was distant, some novel mystery, foreign and alluring. He wanted to build a bridge to her, even though this bridge would take him far beyond the point of no return.

Arna was like the forest they drove through, deep, impenetrable, uncharted. Yet drawing him on with the promise of magnificent new vistas. As he drove, Carl felt his old life, his memories, his goals, his desires, and his weaknesses fall away, until there was only he and Arna, the truck, the dirt road, the endless expanse of snow-clad wilderness.

Looking at the clock radio, he realized more than half an hour had passed since he rescued this most beguiling woman. He was growing weary of driving. In fact, he was quite tired and in need of a good rest. He thought of stopping the truck and cuddling with Arna for a nap. Perhaps they could make love first, but the nap was beginning to appeal to him more. He yawned and shook his head to clear it.

Just then he saw a man standing in the road dead ahead of them. He swerved to avoid him, off the road, into the woods. Fortunately, he was not driving too fast. The snow and the brush slowed the truck even more, so that when it ran into a tree and came to a halt, the impact was not even enough to set off the air bags.

IV

A crotchety old man looked in through the driver's window. He had a full head of hair and a thick beard, white with a few streaks of black to attest to the former color. His face was ruddy and well-wrinkled. He was short, but at one time he must have possessed a powerful physique. His body still harbored a strength honed by endurance. He was dressed in a woolen flannel shirt and brown woolen pants that were every bit as ancient as he was. The latter were held up by leather suspenders. Though he spoke to Carl, he kept his eyes on Arna. His brown eyes seemed to almost hunger for her.

"Are you alright, young man?"

"We're okay." Carl rolled down his window. "Just a little stunned."

"Ain't been a car by here in days," the old man said. "Ain't been outta my house in at least dat long. I'll be damned if da first time I set foot outside I don't almost get runned over."

"I'm sorry," Carl apologized. "I didn't see you."

"Well, it seems your buggy took da worst of it."

Carl opened his door so he could climb out and assess the damage to his truck. Arna grabbed his arm and sought to keep him beside her.

"I've got to take a look," he assured her as he pried himself loose. "I'm not going anywhere."

"I know nothing about horseless carriages." The old man stepped over to where the truck had rammed the tree. "But I'd say dis beast has knocked itself senseless."

Carl joined him, noting as he did so that it was much colder than it had been when he found Arna. The front bumper was bent and the grill was cracked, but that appeared to be all of the damage, along with a few scratches. Nothing leaked out underneath, which suggested the radiator was intact.

"It's not serious," Carl told the old man. "I'm just glad I saw you in time."

He looked back at the skid marks leading twenty feet to the road. It was a path of torn brush, plowed snow and mud. The road here was banked up over the forest floor by a couple of feet. Even if he could shake the truck loose from where it sat, Carl doubted he could get the momentum going to back it up the embankment and onto the road again, even with four-wheel drive.

"We're gonna need a tow truck," he told Arna. Then he turned to the old man, "You say you live nearby? Can we use your phone?"

"My cabin is over yonder." The old man pointed off to the right. There was a large two-story cabin sitting by the side of the road not a hundred feet away. It startled Carl that he had not seen it before. "You're welcome to share my poor hospitality. But I'm afraid I have no talking phone."

"Maybe your neighbors," Carl suggested.

"I have no neighbors."

"I don't suppose you have a truck or a car?"

"No motor vehicles," the old man confirmed.

They were out in the middle of the wilderness, probably twenty miles to the nearest main road. There was no sense in trying to hike that distance so late in the day.

As if reading his mind, the old man offered, "You are welcome to stay da night with me. I can make you pallets on da floor."

"Thank you, Mister?"

The old man did not offer his name. Arna spoke up instead, "I will stay here."

Carl leaned in over the driver's seat and spoke to her in a gentle voice. "You can't stay out here. You'll freeze." He reached out his hand to her. "Come on. I'll be with you. It'll be alright."

Arna darted a distrustful glance at the old man. "I would rather be on our way."

"So would I," Carl told her. "But we need a tow truck, and we won't find one until morning." He lowered his voice, "The old man's alright, and I'll be with you."

Arna took his hand and let him draw her across the seat. Carl helped her down out of the truck, where she stood facing the old man, looking for all the world like a cat with its back up.

The old man was all smiles, trying to assure her that he meant no harm. "Good. I'm glad dat's all settled. Let me welcome you to my house."

He scurried through the snow, in a hurry to usher them indoors. Carl followed behind, helping Arna through the snow. It seemed to him the old man's smile never quite reached his eyes. He decided that in the morning Arna would come with him, instead of waiting here.

"Welcome to my home," the old man drew open the door to his cabin and bid them enter. Arna was hesitant, but she allowed Carl to bring her inside.

The interior of the cabin was antiquated. It was almost as if, by crossing through the doorway, they stepped back into another century. There was a fire going in the stone fireplace. Additional lighting was provided by oil lamps. Down a short hallway that led to the kitchen, Carl caught a glimpse of a large wood stove.

There was no computer, no television, not even a clock radio. All the furniture in the cabin could have come from an antique store. Carl saw nothing he could say with certainty was less than one hundred years old. The only thing in the living room that was in any way mechanical was the grandfather clock ticking the seconds where it stood against the wall. The furniture was Victorian, chaises and lounges. Beside the old man's favorite chair was a smoking table with a line of pipes. The floor was covered with a thick rug of dark, warm colors. Against one wall was a bookcase filled with books. Carl did not see one title that dated from the 1900s. Both Dickens and Twain were well-represented.

As old as everything was, none of it had aged. The cabin held none of the musty odor generally associated with antiques and attics. Nor did anything show the wear that would normally come from long usage. There was a bible lying open on a bookstand by the bookcase. Carl noted its pages were not yellowed, though it must have been as old as all the other books.

"Yer cold. Please have a seat by da fire, where you can warm yourselves," the old man directed them.

Carl led Arna to a loveseat where they could both be seated comfortably. He intuited that she did not want to be parted from him, and he took pleasure in her touch.

"This is quite a place you got here," Carl sought to make conversation.

"'Tis but a working cottage." The old man dismissed the cabin. "My real home is in Chicago, though I have not been dere in ages."

"Oh, and what keeps you here, Mister..." Once again Carl fished for the fellow's name.

"Da lumber business," the old man answered without offering a name. Arna stiffened as he spoke, and shot him an icy glare. Pretending not to notice, the old man went on playing the host. "Are you two hungry? I have some venison stew dat'll go to waste if it isn't eaten up."

Arna shook her head, but Carl said, "Yes, I'm hungry, thank you."

"Let me fetch you both some stew." The old man seemed eager to serve them. "And a spot of tea. It should still be warm. Dis time a year I keep a fire going in da stove all day long. It shan't take but a moment." He hurried out of the room.

Once the old man was gone, Arna turned to Carl and said, "We must leave now!"

"Arna, it's getting dark out, we're in the middle of nowhere, and the truck is stuck."

"We can't stay here."

"Why not?" Carl asked. "Granted he's a little odd, and this cottage is a regular museum. But he seems nice enough. Or do you know something I don't?"

Arna was silent, though Carl sensed she was holding back from answering him.

"What is it?" he urged her.

"It is nothing," she finally admitted, though she could not dismiss her paranoia. "Do not leave me alone with him, not even for a moment."

"Okay," he promised, wondering if this distrust was an aftereffect of whatever trauma she suffered.

"And don't eat or drink anything he offers," she cautioned him.

"You think he's going to poison me?" Carl stifled a laugh.

Arna hushed him as the old man returned bearing a tray. On the tray were two bowls of stew and three mugs. The old man sat the tray on his chair as he went to fetch a small table that sat under a window. This he placed in front of the loveseat and then laid the tray on top of it.

"Dis should fill you up."

The smell of the stew made Carl's mouth water. He realized he had eaten nothing since breakfast. If ever he had taken Arna's injunction seriously, it was now quite forgotten. He brought up a spoonful of potato and meat, and shoved it into his mouth. It tasted quite good, but it was very hot. He juggled it in his mouth to keep from burning himself. As his stomach pleaded to be filled, he chewed quickly and swallowed. Arna glared at him the whole time.

"This is delicious." He spooned another mouthful.

"Dere's more if you want it," the old man said. He opened a door on the front of his smoking table and drew out a bottle of whiskey that looked as ancient as everything else in the cottage. He poured a generous dollop into his own mug, and then asked, "Would you like me to warm your tea?"

"Please," Carl said as he ate.

The old man poured a large shot into Carl's mug. Then he held the bottle out to Arna. She regarded him coldly, angry with both of them. He added a small drop of whiskey to her tea.

Carl took a drink that burned down his throat and lit a glow in his stomach. Arna touched neither the stew nor the tea. She sat stone still as though she wanted no part of this visit.

Carl ignored her. This old man meant them no harm, and the food and drink comforted him, leaving him contented and not a little tired. He paused from eating to engage the old man in conversation. "I didn't know there was an active lumber business in the area."

Seated in his favorite chair, the old man sipped his tea. "At one time, dere was a thriving lumber mill near here. Dis cottage was once in da middle of a lumber town."

"A town, here?" Except for this one cabin, all around them was dense hardwood forest.

"Aye," the old man assured him, "da town a Reese City, founded by Edgar Reese, a lumber man from Chicago who came here in 1888 to harvest da white pine. It was a booming town, and Edgar was on his way to doubling his fortune."

"What happened?" Carl asked.

"'Twas a fire," the old man told them in an amused voice. He selected a pipe, filled it with tobacco and lit it with a wooden match as he spoke. "It burned down da forest and da town with it. And 'twas all on account of a woman." The old man regarded Arna. Arna seemed to have frozen in place, like a deer caught in the headlights of a car.

"A woman much like you, my dear. Adriade was no ordinary woman." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "And dere were some who said she was not human at all."

Carl paused from finishing his bowl of stew. "You almost sound like you knew her."

"Well, maybe I did." The old man kept his eyes on Arna. She was forcing herself to relax, almost resigning herself.

Carl humored the old man, who would have to be at least 140 years old if he had been around in 1888. "If she resembled Arna, then she must have been a great beauty."

Arna patted his arm.

"Aye, she was," the old man confirmed. "She had three men fall in love with her, to their doom. And to da doom of all who lived here." The old man sipped his tea and smoked. "Would you like to hear da story of Reese City and da woman who brought it down?"

Carl finished the last of the stew. He took his cup of spiked tea and settled back beside Arna. "Yes, please. If you don't mind."

"And you, Miss," the old man turned to Arna, "would you hear dis tale?"

"Maybe your account would help to pass the while," Arna allowed as though she was finally relaxing.

The food and drink imbued Carl with a quiet, sated euphoria. It had been a long and eventful day that left him more than a little weary. He never could have dreamed he would end the day in a quiet cabin in the wilderness, listening to a tale told by a quixotic old man whose name he still did not know, seated next to the most beautiful woman he ever met and whom he rescued earlier that day. Yet he accepted it all as though it were quite within the ordinary course of events. Sipping on his whiskey and tea, cuddling next to Arna, Carl lost himself in the old man's story.