

## Leaving (Abridged)

by Eric D. Goodman

Hannah's yard was the tidiest in the neighborhood. The grass, a lush emerald carpet, featured eight symmetrically placed flower beds. Each bed accommodated immaculate flowers. Hannah's yard was her pride and pleasure. Or more specifically, her control over the yard made her proud.

She shouldered any pains necessary to maintain the finest landscape around. She spent most evenings and many weekends toiling in the dirt, trimming the three-foot hedge surrounding the grounds and pruning the trees in pursuit of perfection. Her dedication was noted and recognized: she'd held the community's annual home and garden award four years in a row.

But there was the tree: the eyesore centering her yard; a huge blue spruce, it dwarfed all the other trees in the neighborhood. Three times the height of her two-story house, it was an old tree, the branches beginning to wither here and there, slowly dying.

The blue-green branches did not begin where the enormous trunk met the ground, as with some of the younger spruces in the neighborhood. The coat of needles on Hannah's spruce began a good five or six feet above the

ground, like an older woman with a hemline too far above the knee, trying on youth but instead revealing the scars of age.

Underneath the branches, upon the bare wood that knew no light, lay evidence of past trauma. The scars — bark-covered knots — remained from where dead branches of years gone by had been cut away.

The dying branches were no longer concentrated in one area toward the bottom. They were scattered throughout the tree's coat, and one touch sent brown needles trickling to the ground like short strands from a barber's shears.

There it stood, right in the middle of her perfect front yard for everyone to see and condemn — although no one was as sickened by the tree's sickness as Hannah. It was the splinter in her green thumb, the thorny crown pricking her brow. In fact, nothing bothered Hannah more than the blemish at the center of her perfectly landscaped yard. She just wanted to be rid of it.

After dinner one Wednesday evening, Hannah did the dishes while her son went out to trim the tree's dying branches. That's when she first heard the screaming. It was a man's voice, but somehow deeper, woodier.

*Neil!* She jumped from her chair and raced out the door.

Neil stood on a stepladder with an axe.

“Did you hear something?” Hannah asked.

Neil wiped his forehead with a red handkerchief. “Like what?”

“Never mind . . .” Hannah dismissed.

She couldn't sleep that night. The deep moaning from outside her bedroom window wouldn't allow slumber. She went outside and approached the tree. “Is it you?” “It's me.” The voice was deep and clear.

“Trees don't talk.”

“Trees talk. People don't listen.”

“So trees have feelings?”

“We have feelings more genuine — more focused — than the human race can understand.”

“Why more?”

“Half of the feelings humans have aren't even real. You're more likely to be moved by an untrue story put out by a slick film producer than by the true stories of your own family. You're more focused on sensationalized reenactments and imagined predictions than on the moment, the here and now.”

Hannah's thoughts were scattered, like the leaves she raked each autumn.

“And you feel pain?”

“More than you know,” replied the earthy voice.

Hannah began to talk to the tree often, and she allowed his dying branches to clutter the yard. Seeing the success of the tree, others began to speak to Hannah – flowers, bushes, grass, weeds. By mid-summer, Hannah had given up all control of her yard.

Gossip sailed through the neighborhood, windblown seeds sewn along the fences where neighbors met. Action took root.

Hannah was inside when she heard the growl of a chainsaw coming to life, coming to kill. She jumped up and ran outside. Three men attacked the yard.

“Stop! Get off my property!”

“Sorry, Ma’am,” the crew leader said. “We have our orders.” Two men climbed the tree, severed the top and dismembered the limbs. Green and brown branches fell to the ground, and over the angry growl of the chainsaws Hannah heard the deep screaming and moaning of Spruce as they cut him down piece by piece.

When it was over, the scent of murder lingered like an allergen. She fell to the ground in tears.

The old spruce had lived and died contently, always in the moment — being, and then not being. Now, an empty void remained in the center of the yard. The tree had been leaving every spring for decades; now he had left.

Hannah planted a new tree where Spruce had been. She put in a privacy hedge to keep away the neighbor's prying eyes. She considered it a shame that they had to hide their yard in order to let it be. But, like a tree, Hannah could bend with the winds of oppression.