The Mulberry Tree
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The pruning shears made a *snick* and the honeysuckle twig fell to the ground. Stacy moved smoothly through the familiar sequence. She clipped off twigs with shears, removed the middle branches with loppers, and cut the central trunk off at the ground with a hand saw. Once a week she brought out a mattock to hack up stumps and pry out roots. Honeysuckle removal was the grunt work of gardening, but she loved seeing her wooded hillside gradually cleared of them, like a sandy beach revealed by a receding tide. She could see the trunks of trees now.

A feral neighborhood cat watched from behind one. The honeysuckle removal project fascinated the local cat colony. Cats came to observe, quiet and staring, in pairs or alone. When she finished for the day and went inside, they romped through the newly cleared space.

She had bought this house on a hill two years ago. It was small and ordinary, tucked into the woods of South Fairmount, on a forgotten side street between Harrison Avenue and Queen City. She could afford the house, and therefore found it charming. At closing, the wooded lot had been too dense to penetrate. The honeysuckle shrubs grew right up to the walk and crowded over, the bowed branches so greedy for space that Stacy had to lean to one side when she walked to the front door.

She had hacked back those shrubs the first year, but left the back yard alone. She had enough work to do inside the house. The bathroom needed new fixtures, the linoleum in the kitchen was ancient, and half the doors were missing doorknobs. But the second year, she made plans for total removal.

She had little daylight after work and she used it all. Tall brown bags of dismembered honeysuckle lined her walk every other Tuesday, waiting to be hauled away. She never said out loud that she was a pioneer, reclaiming a home from the wilderness. It sounded pretentious. She knew her coworkers would laugh.
This city had spread out slowly from the river basin, settling the banks first, then stretching out like the spokes of a web across the ridge tops. The ridges and creeksides and canals attracted houses in tidy lines; between the ridges and the low creeks, houses filled in slowly, or not at all. It was not easy to build on a slope. So the space between the hills in South Fairmount, carefully platted out into lots for sale, stayed unbuilt. The woods beaten back from the roads spread in again. Trees grew and plans faded.

The cats watched Stacy acting on her own plans. Twice they left dismembered prey on her porch. She supposed it was a gift.

The land sloped away behind the house, unseen from the street. The clearing of the underbrush felt secret, a private place she descended with her tools, where no one except the cats noticed her work. She liked feeling alone in the woods in the middle of a city. Her neighbors were afraid of the woods. Her first week in the house she had heard the mother next door punish her son for exploring into the trees.

“Bobby! You don’t know what’s back there,” she snapped. His protest broke off at the look she gave him. “Next time I catch you going back there, it will be worse.”

How unreasonable, Stacy thought. Some people are terrible parents. She had no children herself, though she was confident she’d be an excellent mother.

The month of September was unusually rainy that year, and Stacy could not work on her hill for ten days. Clearing honeysuckle was slippery work if the ground was wet, and she did not want any accidents with the loppers.

The trees were funny. From the window, she could see their crowns, but standing outside in the honeysuckle wreckage she had trouble recognizing them. She knew there was a silver maple whose branches waved outside the attic window, but outside she could not pick it out. And what was that old misshapen thing with the leaves that did not seem to match itself? Some were ovals and others were lobed. It lurked in the back there, in underbrush still too thick to get through. The bark rising above the honeysuckle had scars, and something dark and shiny
seemed to ooze from it. The upper branches still held leaves, fading into spotty yellow with the autumn. The lower branches were dark, barren, and twisted. They curved down toward the trunk like arthritic fingers. Stacy thought of old crones in witches hats, and Victorian illustrations of Krampus.

Now I am being ridiculous, she thought. There is nothing about that tree that google cannot solve for me.

An hour later, Stacy had learned how to recognize a mulberry tree. She had learned about its possible diseases. The ooze in hers was likely the sap running out in response to a bacterial infection, a process known as “bleeding.” The dead branches were a sign of a tree in distress. All perfectly scientific and not creepy. It was merely a tree that needed to be cut down. She could get to it next year.

The rain ended and the ground dried. She worked furiously, pushing herself to reach the property line before September ended. She had a vacation scheduled the first of October, a last break before her officemate left for maternity leave and Stacy’s work would only increase. Not that she would ever complain. She did not do things like that. But she would love to drive home from vacation to a hillside clean of honeysuckle. The lopped branches piled faster.

A soccer ball came down the hill and smacked her in the face.

“Bobby! Bobby, come in here. I know you have homework to do,” the mom yelled out her window.

Yes, Bobby, do your homework, Stacy thought, and stabbed the ball with her pruning shears. It gave a satisfying hiss. She tossed the flaccid leather deeper downhill, where the underbrush still hid things.

She reached the edge of her property line. The last three honeysuckles grew next to the mulberry tree, and she refused to look at it.

This would be a nice spot for a garden shed, she said firmly to herself. Then I wouldn’t have to carry her tools back uphill.
One of the feral cats sat in the crotch of the tree, upright and still, watching a bird settle on a branch a few feet away.

The sun was setting. Stacy continued to cut away branches as it turned to dusk. She had to finish. These last honeysuckles were enormous. This one was a monster: fifteen feet tall on the hill, with a trunk nearly eight inches in diameter. There was no way she could get this done before dark.

I’ll cut through the trunk, she thought. Then at least the main thing will be done. It can lie here and dry and I’ll chop up the branches when I get back.

She sat on the ground, her legs on either side of the trunk. It was the only way to get purchase on the hill. The mulberry loomed, but the sweat ran down her forehead till she no longer saw it. The sap of the mulberry, shaken loose by her motion, dripped onto the back of her neck. She did not notice. The trunk was almost through, and she imagined the whole shrub falling off its trunk and rolling downhill like a giant tumbleweed. She heard the snap of the last few threads of wood giving way under her saw.

The branches of the honeysuckle - twined for two decades in the branches of the trees around it - felt the release of its anchor. Like an arrow in a bow, the tension of those twining branches forced the freed trunk, thick as a small cannon, up and out with a force that could shatter.

The home in South Fairmount stood empty. There was food in the fridge and laundry in the dryer, but inside the house, nothing moved. The wind blew the changing leaves delicately off the trees. A cat sat on a stump and carefully groomed its whiskers. Summer was over. The sap had stopped running, and the mulberry no longer dripped.