**When Women Were Trees**

By Anna Miles

**The Tree Who Was Once a Woman**

I used to hate running. I used to hate any kind of physical activity - it was always just an obligation, a necessary evil that came with the territory of being alive. I was too cerebral for all of that, I told myself, I was an artist, I said, an intellectual- how could I be bothered to move when my brain was always so nobly occupied?

Now, running is most of what occupies my brain. If I ever get out of here, I think I’ll take up running.

For awhile, after I got past the first waves of anger and fear and despair, after the pain became more bearable, I thought I might enjoy being a tree: all that time to *think*. All that time for *stillness*.

Also, no one really bothers you when you’re a tree- especially not men. Men say they appreciate beauty, but that appreciation fades fast when the object is too firm, when it fails to yield under their touch. There’s not much a human can do to hurt a tree. Of course, a God can hurt a tree, as easily as he can hurt a woman. But I haven’t had much contact with Gods, as of late. I think I’m fairly safe from them, as long as they don’t remember I was once a woman.

Funny that a woman who always hated running should now be defined by the time she ran away. 

*And a flock of birds, who were dreadful gossips, fluttered and chirped around the wood nymph, who was rooted within her chestnut tree to the wet, unchanging ground of the French countryside, and they taunted:*

*We’re going to the exposition in Paris.*

*Now we’re there!*

*What speed, what haste, without any kind of sorcery-*

*Our time is the time of fairytales.*

**The Woman Who Was Once a Tree**

Time moves differently when you’re a tree, so when I say I once spent an entire month trying to imagine what it would feel like to have legs, I’m not exaggerating- a month translates to about an hour in tree time, but that’s still a pretty long interval for one single thought. I don’t have eyes, so I couldn’t close them, but I focused as hard as I could on the deepest part of myself, and then on my longest-stretching roots, and tried to feel what it might be like to move.

I don’t need to fly like the birds or soar like the clouds- I just want to walk a little. I just want to take a few steps.

A human girl who used to live here - her name was Marie - *she* went to Paris. She used to sit beneath me in a ring of other children, and the old priest would come out and tell them the stories of the city: the city where Great Men were made, the city where freedom was born.

The priest was so disappointed when Marie left. “It will be your ruin, little girl,” he told her.

If Paris ruins little girls, who is all that freedom for?

Now that I think about it, the Priest never said anything about Great Women.

But I’m not a girl, or a woman. I’m just a wood nymph. I’m stuck in this tree.

I would give anything to go to Paris.

I would give anything to move.

*Next it was the clouds, who swooped down close to whisper to the wood nymph:*

*Don’t go to Paris- it will be your ruin.*

**The Tree Who Was Once a Woman Who Couldn't Run Fast Enough**

When I was a woman, everyone loved to ask me when I would have children. When will you give me grandchildren? my father would ask, or the women in the village, don’t you want to be a mother one day?

No one believed me when I said I didn’t want to have children. You’ll change your mind, they always said. You’ll change your mind when you fall in love.

No one believed that I didn’t want to fall in love, either.

And then he came along, and he didn’t care what I wanted. He was a God, after all. He was a Man, after all. I ran and he chased, and it was all very tedious and all very terrifying. I love you, he said, be mine, he shouted, you’re beautiful, he cried.

He hung around for awhile after I turned into a tree. He blessed me with eternal youth and beauty, he made my tree green and flowery forever, as if I couldn’t use a break from all that beauty, as if beauty was all I needed. As if beauty was anything I wanted.

But of course, he didn’t care about what I wanted.

I thought he’d never leave- but he got bored, eventually. They always do.

In the story they describe my transformation with words like “numb” and “sluggish,” with the words of slowness. The words of sacrifice.

Which are the same thing, I’ve come to realize.

*And then, finally, in the silent, still night, the full moon gleamed, and out of its disk the wood nymph saw a spark fly. It fell, glittering like a shooting star, and in front of the tree, whose branches shook as if pitched by a storm, stood a magnificent luminous figure, and it said: You will go to Paris, little nymph, the city of enchantment- but poor wood nymph, it will be your ruin. For your longing will not be satisfied- instead it will grow, as longing always does, until your tree will seem to you a prison. But if you abandon your tree to walk about with the humans (and you will abandon your tree to walk about with the humans, for they always do), your life will shorten to but a single night. The leaves of your tree will fade and wither, and never become green again.*

**The Woman Who Was Once a Tree Who Ran A Little Bit Too Fast**

The best part about the expedition in Paris was the dancing. I can’t remember how I got there- I can’t remember most of the specifics of that night, my one night as a human girl - but I remember the feelings. I remember the sensation of the flexible leather boots curving around my new feet, the sound of the leather sole hitting the ballroom floor as I whirled about, infected by the sound of the music, infected by the light that shown upon me from the fire of a thousand lamps.

I remember the other young girls, leaping and prancing and laughing and smiling, a hundred young Maries, a hundred young wood nymphs with red lips and roses in their hair, all come to find ruin in Paris, all come to find freedom in Paris.

I don’t remember the name of the place, but I remember feeling vaguely sad that I didn’t have a name of my own.

We were wild, all us Great Women in Paris, a hundred and one twirling butterflies gliding too close to the sun, doomed to fall back to the earth to die. Even when the exhaustion began to settle in, even when I knew my one night was coming to an end and my life coming closer to completion, even then I kept dancing, even then I kept laughing.

I remember being devoured by my own lust for life. I remember feeling all sorts of things, but I don’t remember ever feeling sorry.

*But the wood nymph, the woman who was once a tree, was not frightened of the figure, nor afraid to die, and so she cried out:*

*Take my years of life! Release me from my prison, give me human life, human happiness for one brief moment, even a single night if that's all I can have, and then punish me only for my bold love of life, my longing for life.*

*But Daphne, the tree who was once a woman, knew she couldn't run forever, and she knew Apollo would always be faster, and so she fell to her knees and cried out to her father Peneus:*

*Help me father!*

*Obliterate me, let my husk, this fresh young tree, whither, fall*

*Open the earth to enclose me*

*Turn to ash*

*Or change my form*

*Blow away on the wind*

*Change my form which has brought me into this danger!*

**The Tree Who Was Once a Woman, Who Never Wanted Any of This**

Change my form, I begged, which has brought me into this danger, because as it turns out, a woman is only safe as long as she consents to being a tree. The only way to repent for her dual sin (the wanting, and the not-wanting), is to sacrifice her body. Her softness. Her speed. Her voice.

Safety comes with silence. Safety comes with stillness.

Unless, of course, the Gods remember she once was a woman.

I never wanted this. But what choice did I have? I couldn’t run fast enough.

I always hated running.

**The Woman Who Was Once a Tree, Who Always Wanted Too Much**

It’s true that I died for this- for one day of freedom, for one day of Paris.

It’s true that Paris was my ruin.

It’s also true that my ruin was my salvation.

I died in front of a church, because the sinner must always die in front of a church. There was an organ playing, from somewhere inside, though I didn’t know it was an organ. I had never heard anything like it, and yet I knew the sound- the sound was the inside of my soul, the part of me that lived within my deepest root, the part that made up my beautiful, short-lived legs. The voice was my own. The voice came from the heart of all things created.

Some versions of the story say that voice said something like, “poor wood nymph; you’re longing, your desire, tore you from the place God had given you, and that was your destruction, that was what you deserved, poor wood nymph.”

But my place had nothing to do with God.

I sacrificed the world to make a place for myself.

It’s true that I didn’t want to die.

It’s also true that it was worth it.

*This all happened.*

*It’s up to you to believe it.*

*It happened in this time, it happened in our time, the wondrous time, of fairy tales.*

*The wondrous time of trees.*