

# Great Tree

I was an odd lass, climbing trees and imagining that I went through portals to higher worlds, and rummaging through leaves for tiny arthropods that, under a magnifying glass, looked like fearsome monsters. I wished so much that I could see a mythological creature, such as a merfolk or a unicorn. I made up my own alphabet, which I used to send secret messages to faeries. It seemed I would become a fantasy writer, but fate decided that I would instead be an archaeologist. I knew there were no faeries or nixies but I fancied that maybe, maybe one would see the messages carved into bark in the wood near our backyard.

As I was about to turn 14, I had given up on the idea that any such creatures are real but thought I would try after a hiatus of several years to go on a hunt for faeries around 4:00AM. Failing that, I may see interesting wildlife as a consolation prize. Being diurnal, we humans miss out on the wakeful hours of many wild mammals. It felt so nostalgic, a last hurrah of childish wonder, going past the crude treehouse I made that could no longer fit me inside, checking under the same rocks, with centipedes but no faeries, inside the same hollowed out logs, with large black ants but no faeries.

I looked along the creek and felt the cool air emanating from it. There were interesting water bugs and tadpoles, but no faeries anywhere, not even water faeries. Heading back, I saw a strange light emanating from the place I used to leave messages in bark. I worried that maybe Leif foolishly left a toy on and outside. There are no fireflies around here but I wondered if it was foxfire. As I got closer, the humanoid shape was clearer and harder to dismiss as pareidolia. This tiny glowing person turned around to look at me, and I immediately felt chills from an eerie emotion I can't describe in words. But I forced myself to push on. If this is a *someone* and not a *something* I must not be rude and flee.

I could see that he was surrounded by a greenish white glow and meekly let out a "hello there?" The tiny, flying man introduced himself as Hrolfr but went pretty quickly from greetings to the subject of my writing system. "I taught myself your symbols. I first realized that the number of different letters exceeds the Roman alphabet your language usually uses, so I thought perhaps it was a syllabary. But I also spotted similarities to said alphabet and concluded that you made a symbol for each phoneme, with an unusual system of ligatures for diphthongs. Perhaps with this prowess with symbols you can someday decipher too, like I did with your alphabet."

I already knew one thing about this strange creature, that he was a geek. A geek such as I. I asked where he lived. It seemed as though he didn't hear my question. As I started to repeat myself, he finally replied "way up the creek behind your backyard." I asked him if we could meet again, and he assured me that we can, "I have time early in the morning but must leave before the sun goes up."

"Can we meet a few days from now?" I asked, hoping to not sound pushy towards this creature I had a strong, repressed urge to capture and immediately bring home.

"Yes that sounds good. I will see you later!" he then did an odd wave I didn't recognize from any culture I was aware of. Both arms above his head with his palms facing me, the hands seeming to sway side to side like water sedge moved by the currents. As he flew away, I quickly lost sight of where exactly he was, and concluded the darkness and his small size makes him difficult to track. I was sad to see him go but also glad to have some time to sleep before school.

The next few days didn't even seem real. It was my same weekday routines as usual. Getting up and staying too long in the shower to avoid the cold that envelopes me when I step out. Walking in the crisp morning air with Lief to school, dropping him off at *mellanstadiet* and continuing to my *högstadiet*.

For lunch, I ate the same sorts of cafeteria food I'd eat every other day - yummy lingonberry, not the best falafel I've ever had and overcooked, unseasoned potatoes. But every routine is colored by a strange glow of me having an upcoming playdate with a real life sprite.

Around that time, we were learning about World War II in history class. History is such a dreadful subject, full of unfathomable calamity that I selfishly wanted not to have to think about at all. I daydreamed of going back in time and preventing Hitler from being born in the first place, but of course that would do nothing. For every Hitler there are dozens of collaborators and millions who didn't even try to stop them. My colleagues would find it ironic how much I hated history.

Literature class was cruelly situated at the corner of the school so that I can see the forest outside, where I'd rather be. I don't mind reading what they expected me to read, however dull or archaically worded. But why couldn't I read it while sitting in a tree? I mind the sap less than these uncomfortable wooden chairs.

The night before I was to meet Hrolfr, I kept waking up from the excitement and nervousness about meeting someone new. My palms were sweaty thinking that I might miss a chance to see him, or any other magical being, ever again. Hrolfr was my kind of people. I knew from the first exchanges I had with him about deciphering my writing that he'll be interesting to have conversations with. And knowing that I had to wake up so early made it hard for me to go to sleep.

The alarm went off and I leaped out of bed. I immediately became lightheaded from getting up too quickly and I was too tired to open my eyes. But I didn't

care because I was excited. I hastily threw on shoes and a jacket over my pajamas and sneaked out to the wood to the side of our house. There he was, sitting on a branch, appearing to be deep in thought.

“Hi there,” I said, “I’ve never seen you or your kind before, so how is it you have been so hidden all this time?” he barely even seemed to acknowledge my presence. I tried again, “do you live nearby? do you have a family?” worrying that I was coming on too strong I stopped pressing these questions. After some more silence, he finally said his first words to me of the day, “you need to get ready for school, right? I can answer you some questions about us faeries but there is much that you must find out yourself.”

He slowly flew in the direction of the old treehouse. “I wouldn’t have to get ready so early if only they could make school start later. But the rotten mayor does nothing for anyone,” I complained.

“Is that Svensson you’re talking about?” he asked. I was surprised he’d have any interest in human affairs.

“Why yes, that is him. And everyone complains about him. He is the worst!” My knowledge of politics at the time was of course quite rudimentary, but my sense that our local government is dominated by utter sleazebags was still right. Because sometimes the truth is simple and blunt.

Hrolfr was surprisingly more responsive on the subject of local history. He then explained to me how Svensson is simply being true to his own lineage’s cursed tendencies. His great-grandfather would borrow vast sums of money, bury the cash in the woods, then claim to creditors that it was all stolen. He’d blame people from the next town over, he’d blame a Roma woman he invented in his head, he’d blame anyone who wasn’t there to set the record straight. He fled the town in disgrace, but his son returned decades later and made these stories disappear with donations to churches.

Hrolfr even knew about my grandma. I told him that I got my love for fantasy books from my grandma, then learned that I also got my love for nature from her. “Oh yes, Greta would play hookey and saunter in the woods. She would gently pick up this or that bug and study their movements - she was quite fond of the ruddy darter,” he said, sounding like an old man in town reminiscing about old times at a diner.

Wondering how he could know so much about events in this town from ages past, I asked him how long faeries live. He again acted as though he didn’t hear me at first, but half a minute later answered: “our hearts beat faster and stop a bit sooner than that of humans; sixty years is a typical lifespan.”

The sky started to get brighter which I knew meant that he had to leave. I was sure he had very important, but tiny, faerie business to get to. After our goodbyes, I went back inside to prepare myself for the kind of day that started with Hrolfr - sleep deprived, with a sense that I was awoken by a strange dream.

On the walk to school, I finally told Lief about Hrolfr. At first he thought I was playing pretend and started telling me about an invisible dark dragon that follows him but I explained, "I know this is hard to believe, but I really mean it about this faerie existing. I will show you him and then you'll know!" Lief started talking about Pokemon, indicating that he probably didn't believe me.

We were in a unit of math that was just too easy for me. Algebra. Factoring. I already got it, so I would draw pictures of Hrolfr and try to imagine what the rest of his kind must look like. He must have a wife or perhaps a husband. Maybe some kids. Why doesn't he tell me about them? At the very least, he has parents. I drew a faerie girl and labeled it "Catherina."

Then I drew a map of our yard, like I used to do when I was younger. But by then I was much better at making the relative distances to scale. I drew the river that runs through our yard, and traced it away as far as I could remember. There was a vast wilderness beyond that I had only explored the adjacent edge of. I know my uncle went backpacking out that way and dreamed of doing that myself someday. He told me it's impassable without a machete. I drew a big question mark in the vast, mysterious wilderness up the river.

Another morning, Hrolfr told me he had something interesting to show me outside. I followed him to the side yard, and up an oak tree. This was easier to climb when I was smaller but it had become hard to squeeze between the branches. He didn't slow down enough for me, so it was incredibly frustrating to keep up. Eventually we got to a more substantial branch, somewhere I used to just hang out, frightening my mother with the elevation I attained.

He pointed to some narrow branches and said "these". I was puzzled. What was special about them, they looked like typical young oak sprigs. He then said "they look like normal branches, but look at the bases." My fingers and eyes followed down to where they met the main tree but instead of typical branching, there was a shallow root system embedding itself in the tree's bark.

"This parasite was once much more widespread, but had been crowded out by other volunteers over the centuries. Its leaves are edible and the stalks have antiseptic properties."

"Do humans know about this?!" I asked.

"I'm sure some do by now, but when it would have helped to know, none did."

I looked at them interestedly then was puzzled by something, "what advantage is there for them to mimic the look of the host tree? Trees have no ability to manually remove parasites."

He just sighed and explained cryptically, "there was once selective pressure to evade the gaze of stewards, pressure that has since been relaxed."

I told him that I'd like him to meet my brother. He looked reluctant but I begged "pleeeeeease?"

Hrolfr said “do you have cats? I’m afraid of cats!”

“We have one dog, but I’ll keep her out of the room so she won’t bother you”

“What about toddlers?”

“Nope no toddlers, just one brother 3 years younger than me”

He still looked like he was thinking of reasons not to, “I don’t know what faeries like to eat, but I have cookies!”

He rolled his eyes and agreed to meet inside our home next time. He then did the strange goodbye wave. By this point, I was conditioned to feel a little sad when the sky started to get bright because it always meant that my faerie friend would have to leave. And I’d have to go back to the mundane world of getting cold from stepping out of the shower and dirty, possibly haunted public school bathrooms.

I felt like I got a major power-up in a video game. Lief will meet Hrolfr and no longer will I be the only one who knows that he exists. On the way to school, I told Lief that Hrolfr will meet us in a few days and that time, he looked somewhat like he believed me. Excited even. Oh to think of all the mornings we did pretend faerie hunting and for us to have finally found one! I skipped joyfully to my school after dropping off Lief.

There was light at the end of the tunnel in history class. Now the Nuremberg Trials were happening and Germany was being split up. Japan surrendered and was occupied by the States. At least the war and the genocide was over but sadists and their useful fools never stop inventing new horrors and resurrecting old ones. There is no salvation for such evil. It is a wound in the fabric of space-time.

I hated sports. I was one of the fastest girls in class, yet also the worst at sports. I could grasp complicated stories or mathematics but I could never understand the rules for ball games. Velda yelled at me for not catching the ball, because I was spacing out thinking about the moons of Jupiter. Oh how I wanted to punch her, but alas boxing is the one sport they didn’t make us play.

On the way home from school, I paid more attention to pine cones and acorns and other things on the ground, and imagined what they must look like from Hrolfr’s vantage point. After I picked up Lief, we took turns kicking a pine cone. They’re awkward, not very aerodynamic objects and the barbs are slowly destroying our shoes. Though the seeds make good helicopters, or snacks, during the fall.

Several mornings later, in another retro throwback to good old times, I played coffee time with Lief, both of us saying things to mock the way adults talk, and sitting in the toy kitchen that had become too small for me. This time, we were accompanied by Hrolfr, who had his own appropriately-sized silverware. The origins are murky but possibly from a disarticulated Pocket Gurlz (TM) set.

The coffee was fictional, but the promised-for cookies were real. Hrolfr didn't touch them.

My dad walked in and the hair raised on the back of my neck at the realization that he doesn't know about Hrolfr and he's right here. He looked straight at us and only said "coffee time, eh? I haven't seen you kids do that in ages! Anyway, you need to get ready for school." He left without saying anything about a faerie being in his house.

A mean streak took over Lief. He grabbed a toy plastic fish bowl, turned it upside down and tried to trap Hrolfr. Then Hrolfr calmly walked toward the edge, became transparent, and moved to the other side like no obstacle was there. Both of us humans opened our eyes wide and Lief looked at me to exclaim "faeries are so coooool!" I wondered what other sorts of magic Hrolfr could do.

"Your dad said it's time to get ready for school," Hrolfr sounded fatherly himself, which reminded me that I wanted to try asking about his family again. Then he did his goodbye wave and Lief tried to mimic it, not quite getting the hand movements right. Somewhere in the commotion of demands from both parents to put this or that item in our backpacks, we lost track of Hrolfr.

We didn't arrange the next meetup time like we always did before, so I worried I'd miss my next chance to see him. Every morning I could, I woke up early and looked around the yard. It became as part of my morning routine as getting dressed and eating breakfast. The wood has a dark beauty to it before dawn, with something numinous about the complex silhouettes of branches against the night sky. Eventually I started giving up hope.

Until one morning he came again.

I woke up to a light emanating from the window. At first I thought maybe there were people partying late or a car leaving early, but the color was familiar - Hrolfr's glow. I peeked out the window and saw him flying next to the hummingbird feeder in the front yard. Too excited about seeing him again, I didn't even bother putting on shoes before darting outside.

"I have something to show you," Hrolfr said, "if you follow along the river and keep going, there is a great tree that you cannot miss. Go up that and there's a village. I'll meet you later." I thought that was odd because I didn't think there were any towns nearby in that direction.

I followed along the creek. I felt the cool air emanating from the water, also the cold earth beneath my feet. I walked quite a way and saw sights I'd only see on occasion, like that tall snag that had been standing for years. But as I went further up the river, the scenery became less familiar and the river got wider than I remembered.

The selection of trees and shrubs changed subtly, which I attributed to microclimates, but I started seeing unfamiliar species of birds and rodents. I started encountering larger and larger boulders along the river, which was now

impossibly wide. This defied my understanding of how rivers and creeks work. There was also something subtly different about the smells of the forest and the river, almost like I was visiting another part of the country.

Even wildlife started taking gigantic proportions. The crows were fearsome and classically dinosaurian. I encountered this awesome beaver. Afraid of the gigantic rodent, I ran away from the river to get out of their sight. I became increasingly worried that I'd lose track of the great tree Hrolfr told me about and tried to make my way back to the river. I wished he was there to help me navigate. I had to circumnavigate a few hills to get back to the river without getting close to the giant beaver. I really hoped I didn't miss the tree. I started smelling what I thought might be a forest fire.

I kept walking along the river, where the large leaves were the least hurtful to my feet. When I had almost given up hope that I'd ever find this village, I saw what must be the great tree he spoke of. From the base up were rungs to assist walking up it, just as Hrolfr told me to do. I heard sounds that don't belong in a forest and weren't joyful. As I got closer, I heard shrieks and unholy yells.

I climbed and climbed and the sounds of screaming were getting louder. What should be a welcome sight after a long trip through the woods - a tree-village - was now filling me with fear and sorrow. I made my way up the last rung to a large wooden platform built onto it only to see many fires and many faeries about my size running into their homes and screaming. A few were frantically pouring water onto structures or catapulting rocks and acorns.

Then I saw Hrolfr running with a few faerie children in his arms. I called out to him, but he didn't seem to hear me at all. He ran back and looked to be helping with the firefighting. I walked toward the other end of the platform and saw the source of the fires - a small group of giant humans shooting flaming arrows into this tree from below. The most violent looking of them all was setting fire to logs and hurling them up into the tree. Next to him, a woman crying hysterically with a motionless baby in one arm and the other trying futilely to restrain him.

They were screaming in a dialect I couldn't place, but I could vaguely understand some of the words. Poison, die, die, some connecting words, evil, demon. Another giant, an old man, arrived with some machine on wheels. On the back side was a pair of bellows and on the front, what looked like a giant hose nozzle. Then the most crazed of the giants helped aim this contraption while the older man lit a fire and started squeezing the bellows.

That was when a flaming, sticky substance flew out and into this village. The water baskets were useless to put this out. Again Hrolfr was running and trying to rescue more children when a large chunk of the material landed on him. He screamed as he and the children were burned alive. All around were faeries burning and screaming until the release of oblivion. A few successfully flew away, abandoning their home. I could smell the smell of burning flesh and burning lives.

I wanted to help Hrolfr but it was too late. I wanted to give him a proper burial and thought maybe I could do that later when it's safe. But at that moment, I just wanted to get away from the danger. I cursed my cowardice. I ran as fast as I could down the tree. I ran along the river as fast as I could. I ran through the beaver's home for nothing filled me with terror more than the horrible flame-giants.

My feet and legs were bleeding from the frantic running. I couldn't get the sights of panicked villagers out of my mind. The stench of burning flesh haunted me. Time went by much more quickly on the way back. As the creek had returned to its more familiar size, so did the trees. I ran and I ran. The familiar snag was a welcome sight. Soon my home was in view.

I saw something else I was glad to see - that familiar glow, faint with distance. As I got closer, I could confirm it was my faerie friend, back to life and his original size. I was glad to see him well but felt a sick sense like an entire universe was about to slip away from me. "Are you okay?", I asked, my voice a whisper. He responded stoically, "that was the day I died, over 800 years ago. And since then, the wood went silent."

He turned around to speak to someone I couldn't see, with both hands raised, shaking like reeds in the wind, "oh Holy Hel, last of the gods - long have I watched over this world that shuns me. Now I leave my load in human hands. So let me join my brethren in your cold embrace." He grinned and slowly turned toward me while saying, "and let our memory wither never."

"I don't understand!" I cried, "what do you want from me?!" He didn't answer, he only waved the same fae goodbye he waved many mornings before, then vanished into a blueish-white flame, never to be seen again.