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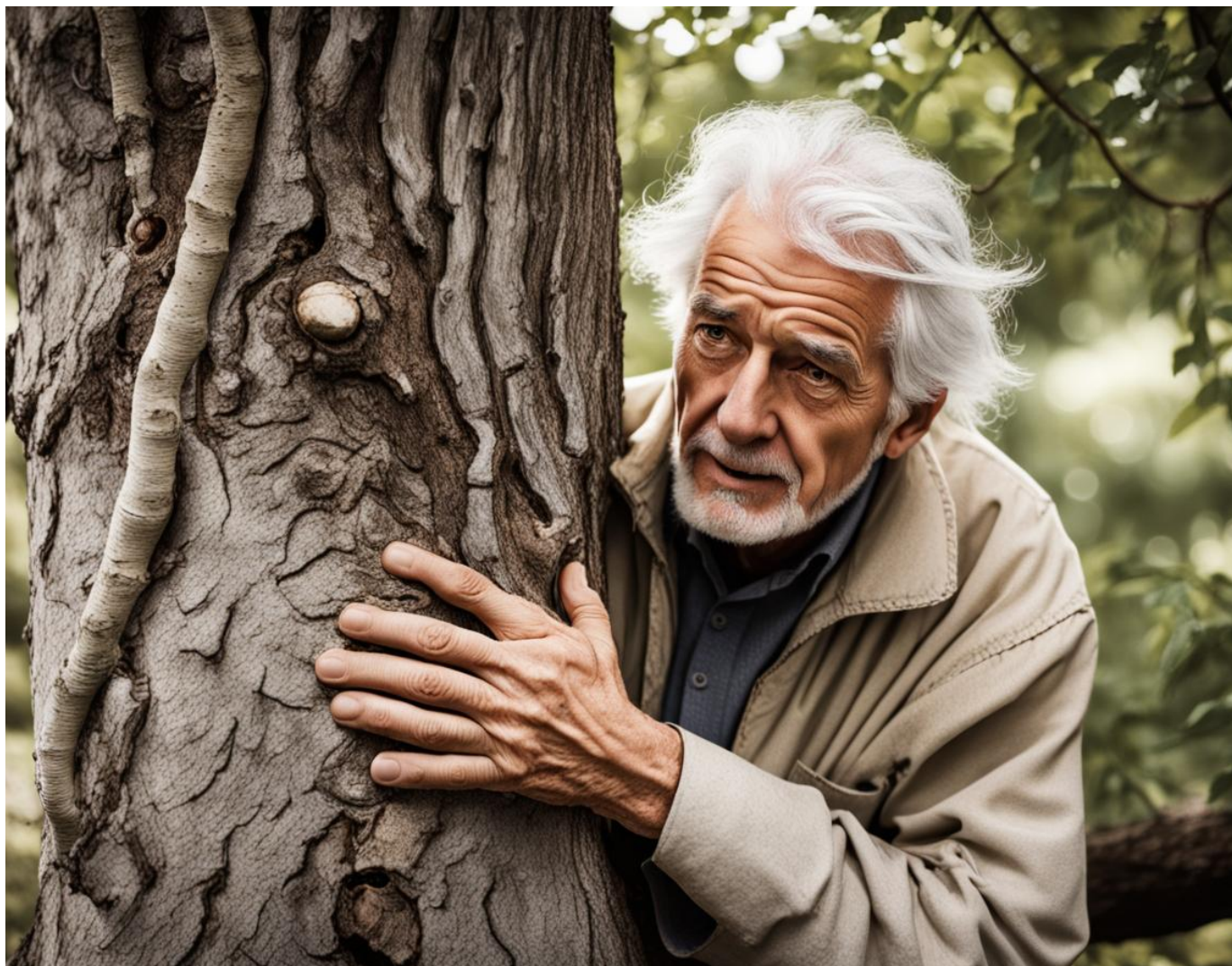
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## The Hollow Tree



By [editor@whitecatpublications.com](mailto:editor@whitecatpublications.com)

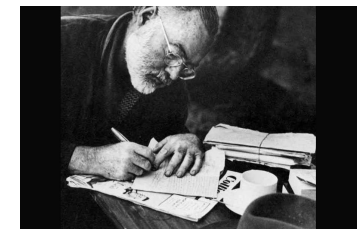
NOV 10, 2023 #Matias F. Travieso-Diaz, #The Hollow Tree



By Matias F. Travieso-Diaz

A withered old man was instrumental in the discovery of the ancient tree. Discovered is not quite the right word, though, since many of the villagers had passed under its broad shade when entering the forest. Yet, probably not more than a glance was ever cast by anyone on the tree's gray trunk and the maze of gnarled branches that spurted from it in all directions.

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The man was crazy, of course. Occasionally, he would shake his head and whisper incomprehensible words to himself in a drawn-out monologue. He never spoke to anyone else, and nobody could figure out what he was saying.

One day, however, he was observed crouching on the ground next to the tree, hands encircling the trunk and head hidden from view, for it was lost within a large opening on the tree trunk not far from the ground. What made the scene unusual was not the man's strange posture (he was already written off as an eccentric) but the fact that he could be heard talking rapidly into the tree.

A crowd began to gather next to the old man, everyone trying to make out his words. As people closed in on him, the man grew quiet and withdrew his head from the tree. Instantly, a noise issued from above. It sounded like a prolonged insect call, now low and halting, then screeching like a wail, next dropping to a barely audible rumor. This went on for a while, and when the sound faded away the man stuck his head back in the hollow again.

It became obvious that the old man was carrying a conversation of sorts with someone or something within the tree. At this point, most of the villagers became frightened and ran away. The brave souls that remained witnessed a repetition of the previous exchange: the old man talking excitedly, the tree replying without hesitation. At last, the old man stood up and walked away without seeming to notice the people who remained around the tree, gaping at the scene in disbelief.

A long pause followed the old man's departure. Then, curiosity overcame fear, and a teenage boy approached the tree and inserted his head within the hole. Darkness obscured his vision, and he felt the inner space to be damp and smelling of moss and decay. Feeling inside, the boy extracted a few dried nuts and a handful of decomposing matter. Otherwise, the space within the trunk of the tree was perfectly empty.

"There is nothing here!" called out the boy. His words were followed by a low rumble, like the flutter of invisible wings, coming from the very heart of the tree. The boy drew back with a shudder and ran away. The others that had remained about joined in his escape.

Before long, the story of the talking tree had turned into the main topic of conversation in the sleepy village. The consensus was that nothing short of sorcery would cause a tree to behave so irregularly. Most people agreed, however, that if sorcery was involved, it was not all that powerful, since little by little almost everyone in town had exchanged a word or two with the tree without adverse consequences.

As novelty wore out, the bizarre conduct of the tree was starting to be treated as a harmless oddity. And then something happened.

A girl's lover had been lost in the woods, presumably slain by wild beasts. She took to sitting next to the tree, crying her grief to the wind and then into the tree's dark hollow. Her sobs and lamentations were promptly answered by noises from the tree. This response seemed to make the grieving lass experience some relief, for she placed her arms on the trunk and continued to weep some more, until she lost consciousness from exhaustion.

The girl's example caught on and some began to visit the tree to confide to its vegetable soul the secrets in their hearts: the hopes and fears that they dared not share with anyone else, their despair and loneliness and other hidden emotions. All were answered by a myriad of voices that at times sounded like the gushing of sparkling streams, the calls of wild birds, haunting melodies sung by remote voices. It

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was all so serene that people would return home refreshed, as if talking to the tree made their lives easier to face.

A shrine was constructed around the tree, and rustic seats were placed near it for people to sit while waiting for their turn to talk with the tree. There were now lines of waiting villagers at all hours of the day until dusk, when the gusts of cold wind chilled the body and the lengthening purple shadows brought melancholy to the spirit. The tree seemed to loom larger then, its leaves rustling with sympathy for those wretched people huddled down next to its roots. As night fell, people would seek the safety of their homes and the tree would be finally left sitting alone.

A cult developed. Gods were believed to inhabit the tree, dispensing comfort and advice to those who were in need of it. It was only the humans' fault that they were unable to understand the tree's messages, but one day the meaning of the tree's words would be understood and then good fortune would come to all. Elaborate rituals were developed, and ceremonies were held in which maidens would crown the lower tree branches with wreaths of fresh blossoms; the villagers danced and chanted around the tree until the moon climbed very high in the starry heavens.

Priests were ordained to administer the worshipping of the tree, and they became its most frequent visitors. They would talk into the hollow and attempt, unsuccessfully, to decipher the echoes that emanated from the tree.

The old man had not been seen in the village for a very long time and was presumed dead. One spring morning, however, he was spotted lumbering about the village, going from one hut to another in a meandering way, ignoring the taunts of the children that ran around his legs and the startled gazes of the freshly awakened grownups.

His erratic motions carried him to the hollow tree. There, his glance circled from the makeshift temple where the priests lived and prayed, to the benches, the worn-out paths to the tree, and the branches festooned with loops of flowers and colored beads. A woman was sitting on a stool next to the trunk, engaged in an earnest exchange with the hidden gods; behind her, a waiting line was already forming.

The old man remained motionless, as if trying to make sense of the scene. Finally, understanding dawned and he let out a loud, sustained guffaw, turned around and went into the forest, never to be seen again.

The hollow tree remained an object of worship for generations. People kept coming, bringing forth their hopes and regrets, in the belief that the gods within understood them, cared about their feelings, and stood ready to render advice and help. Although none of this was confirmed to have happened, people went on believing, and did not seem to be any worse for their enduring faith.

THE END



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