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GRACE AMONG THE BIRCHES

"It's hard to hold onto so many stories," I hear, as I'm walking through the forest. Five birch trees stand in front of me. It's cool where they stand and moss grows under their feet. I love to walk barefoot in the moss. It's like cool velvet between my toes.

"It's hard to hold onto so many stories," I hear again, and realize it must be the birches speaking.

"Are you talking to me?" I ask.

"Why yes. We are the birches."

"Amazing. So nice to meet you."

It seems then as if the birches bend toward me. Especially the crooked birch. His shadow passes over me until he's almost lying on the ground.

"He wants to please you," another birch says, "he misses you when you're not around."

I smile. Someone misses me. I'm enchanted. I pat the crooked birch and feel a slight movement in return. He motions me to step on him, so I do. Then I grab his branches. He stands up, taking me with him, until we are high in the air above all the other trees.

"Don't worry," he says, "I've got you."

My whole life I've dreamt of being in the cool tops of these trees. I imagined it would be like an ocean of emerald waves, and that is exactly what it's like.

The birch tree wraps his limbs around me and suddenly I am tired. I fall asleep and dream. In my dream I am one with the trees. I understand their language. I drink water from pools on the ground. Until finally I become a tree. I look down at what used to be my arms, and see branches with bright green leaves popping out. I'm overjoyed and I run to tell the trees about it. They clap and wave and smile.

A chickadee wakes me from my sleep. I try to call back to her, but it's a sound I need to practice. I realize I'm hungry, so I tell the birch. The birch bends slowly to the ground, allowing me to step off his trunk to the forest floor.

"What exactly does a tree eat?" I ask, hoping I might find some food for myself.

The birch laughs, thinking I am joking.

"I know you wish you were a tree, little one, but you're not. You leave that tree stuff to us."

I look down at my hands and see that they are human. I tell the birch about my dream.

"Yes, yes," he says, "we put that dream into children's heads. Most especially we do this with children who are in trouble; the ones whose families are sick. It's a special gift for special children."

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I smile. The tree loves me. I bend down to pick up some nuts and put them in my pocket. Then I head to the circle of birches to share my meal.

After we have eaten, I climb onto a tree branch and start kicking my feet against the trunk.

Kick. Kick. Kick.

The birch waits.

"Why? Why? Why?" I cry.

Bang, bang, bang. I kick my feet against the tree. Bang, bang, bang.

"You're just a stupid tree."

Bang, bang, bang. I kick.

"What do I care? You're wood. You're just wood. You're wood."

Suddenly I'm with my mother in a kitchen. My mother wears a blue apron and stands by the sink. I'm a useless blob under her feet. She can't even look at me. I'm stupid.

"You're wood. You're wood. You're wood."

Kick. Kick. Kick.

"You're useless. They should make a table of you. You're just a useless piece of wood."

Bang, bang, bang.

"I'm sorry," I say, "you are NOT just wood. You are NOT just wood. You are everything. You are the whole world."

I drop from the tree branch, grab some pine needles, and grind them in my fist.

"These are coffee grounds and I'm going to make coffee. Can I make you a cup?" I ask.

"Why yes, child, I'd love to have coffee with you. Sit near me while you make it. That always creates the very best coffee—when we make it together."

Grind, grind, grind. Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh.

I make cups from leaves hooked together by their stems. I pour imaginary water over the coffee grounds.

"You have to let it steep awhile," I say, "The water has to *learn* about the coffee, and the coffee needs to *learn* about the water. Otherwise, they are strangers, and nothing will taste good."

The tree laughs, "You are a wise one! I'm proud."

My face gets hot. I hand the tree a cup, hop onto his branch, and we drink.

"I wish I had a cookie," I say.

"Well," says the tree, "I might have something here. Let me look." He rustles, then hands me a seedpod.

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"Just as good as a cookie," I say, "I'm glad you're my friend."

"I'm glad you're my friend too," the tree says.

