

## **BLUE SPRUCE**

Once upon a time, in a forest not so far away, there grew a fine young evergreen tree. Straight and true she was, and bigger than a Bear. With graceful, tapered branches that swept the ground during the winter storms. In the autumn season her neck became draped in a beautiful garland of seed-cones, each year more beautiful than the last. Altogether an excellent specimen of the genus "Picea", commonly called the Spruce.

Picea loved the forest, and all the creatures in it were her friends. Not far from her grew a great Pine tree. From the top of his gnarled old trunk he could see to far-off places. On happy summer days, he would whisper to Picea, describing the golden buttercups in the fields over yonder. Oh, how Picea longed to be tall like her neighbour the Pine, so she could see the buttercups for herself.

All day long the animals came to visit. The playful Squirrels loved to chase each other through her branches. Sometimes they ate her seed-cones for a treat, and generous Picea shared them gladly. And the birds came too. Almost every morning the stately red-plumed Cardinal would descend to perch in her upper boughs. There he would chant his morning psalm. "Carpe Diem, Picea! Carpe Diem! Carpe Diem!" The brilliant Cardinal knew the Latin, of course, and always used it for effect. Then the saucy Bluejay would swoop down from the old Pine tree, and translate the Cardinal's words into his own rough vernacular. "Have a nice day," he would call. And soon he would go flying off again, shrieking "Et cetera, Et cetera, Et cetera," just to prove that he was as eloquent in the Latin lingo as anybody.

But there was one visitor who was more special than all the rest. Once a year, on the night of the new winter moon - the darkest day of the year - he would appear. And all the creatures of the forest looked forward to his arrival. A few of the wood-folk said he was called "Rudolph", or perhaps "Adolf". While others claimed he had a far more ancient name. But throughout the forest he was known to everyone as the "Wish-Deer". For he was a Magic Being.

The Pine tree would see him coming first. Just an orange speck among the northern stars. Then slowly the dot would grow into a shining red ball, and all the animals would come out to look. And soon they could actually see the Wish-Deer flying through the sky. A beautiful Reindeer, with magnificent antlers, and a glowing red nose, which lit up his way wherever he went. While the forest creatures watched in wonder, the Wish-Deer would drop down from his flight to land at the centre of their silent circle.

Then the Wish-Deer would begin his magic. With regal steps he would approach each creature and ask, "What is your wish?" And patiently he would wait for an answer. The silly Squirrels invariably demanded a belly-full of nuts, to which the Wish-Deer always nodded solemnly, acknowledging their request. The old Pine tree made the same wish every year. "Let me see the buttercups again next spring," he would sigh. When the Wish-Deer came to the Cardinal, the elegant bird repeated, "Pax nobiscum, Pax nobiscum - Peace be with us." And the Bluejay, ever the skeptic, would perch on the Wish-Deer's antlers, just by his ear, and in his finest Latin rhetoric, cry out the motto of all wild things since the dawn of time. "Nolitemus illegitimi carborundum, - Don't let the bastards grind us down."

When it came to Picea's turn, her appeal never wavered. "Please, Wish-Deer, let me be as perfect a Spruce tree as I can be!" was all she ever said. And by the way the Wish-Deer looked at her and tilted his head, Picea knew she had his blessing.

When every creature had made its request, the Wish-Deer took a giant leap into the air, and was

gone in a flash. Then the magic Night of the Wish-Deer was over, and once again it was dark in the forest. But every spring after the Wish-Deer's visit, Picea grew taller, bushier and greener than ever before. For she truly was as perfect a Spruce tree as she could be.

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One sunny winter day, not long after the Wish-Deer's annual appearance, several strangers entered the forest. Picea had seen beasts-on-two-legs before, but usually they passed by and were soon gone. But this group stopped when they reached Picea, and all four of them seemed very interested in her. The two tall ones pointed in her direction and talked in their strange tongue, while the two smaller ones ran around the Spruce tree, grabbing at her and shaking the snow from her needles. Picea thought this behaviour very strange, and was alarmed to hear the Pine tree's branches rustling overhead, as if in warning. Whatever could be wrong?

Before she knew what was happening, the tallest beast-on-two-legs stood before her, holding a metallic instrument in his hand. Quickly he bent down, pressing his shoulder into Picea's boughs, and with several smooth motions he severed her most beautiful branches - the largest ones closest to the ground. At first, Picea was too shocked at being mutilated to feel her wounds. How horrible! She could never be a perfect Spruce tree again! But when she saw the beast-children happily waving her dismembered limbs in the air, the pain shooting through her trunk was suddenly incredible. Why would anyone, even a beast-monster, want to do this to her?

By now, the Pine tree's warning had grown to a frenzied roar. The beast-on-two-legs approached Picea with his sharp instrument again. Frozen with fear, she was too terrified to think what he might do to her this time. Once more he knelt beside her, and when Picea felt the touch of his cold steel blade on her bark, she realized the awful truth. With a firm, steady stroke he began to cut into her trunk, directly toward her heartwood. What agony Picea felt, as the other beasts-on-two-legs looked on, laughing together and clapping their hands. Relentlessly the saw continued. Picea desperately wished there was some way to jump out of herself and into her shadow, to escape this ruthless attack. When the sawing reached into her heartwood, the torture became unbearable. Mercifully, her distress finally overcame her and she fainted, toppling to the ground as she swooned.

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It was impossible for Picea to know exactly how long she had been unconscious. When she awoke, she found herself standing in the corner of a large chamber, which, for a creature of the forest was like a prison cell. Instead of the vast sky overhead, there was a low ceiling, and her only view outside was through a hole in the wall across the room. Picea had seen several beasts-on-two-legs going back and forth, and she wondered why they would ever want to live in such confined surroundings. And what possessed them to share their space with a tree? It made no sense to the simple Spruce, but she was learning that these beasts were beings of peculiar habits.

Her trunk ached excruciatingly, and even though her cleanly-hewn stump was soaking in a pan of water, she was so, so thirsty. With dismay, Picea noticed that more of her lower limbs had been trimmed away, and most of her seed cones were gone. She wondered what her captors would do next.

Then the four beasts-on-two-legs came into the room together, and Picea feared for her safety again. But this time, their actions were merely demeaning, rather than harmful. They began by wrapping chains of twinkling lights around all of her boughs, as if she were a prisoner. Then they hung gaudy baubles on her branches. And carved wooden figures, which Picea considered

barbaric. Next they covered up her beautiful needles with silver strands of plastic. The beasts-on-two-legs seemed well pleased with their artistry. But beneath her tinsel trappings Picea felt grotesque and very naked.

With great excitement, the beasts-on-two-legs brought out their final ornament for the tree. But when Picea saw it, she couldn't believe it was possible. For it was a small replica of her hero, the Wish-Deer! With a red nose that flashed on and off. There was no mistaking the likeness. The tallest beast placed it on Picea like a crown, while the others applauded. Of all the violations and humiliations the poor Spruce had already suffered, this action tore deeper into her soul than any of the rest. She had a thousand questions, and no answers. How could the beasts-on-two-legs worship the same Divine Being as she did? And did the Wish-Deer grant their wishes too? But that would make him as evil as they were. Wouldn't it? And the Wish-Deer only did good deeds ... or did he?

Under the weight of her sacred Reindeer beacon, Picea drooped with misery. A few of her precious needles fell to the floor, as she realized her lifetime dream would not come true. For she would surely never see the buttercups now.

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For several days things were quieter. The beasts-on-two-legs came and went, and sometimes they added a bright package to the growing pile already under her boughs. But usually they ignored Picea. It was the task of the smallest beast to give her water, but he didn't seem to take his job seriously, and often her pan ran dry. But no amount of water could ever have quenched her thirst or soothed her pain. And every night, when the Wish-Deer's magic nose started to flash, Picea yearned for the forest she would never see again, and the needles fell steadily from the parched tips of her branches.

One evening, several unusual events made Picea very uneasy. A large number of beasts-on-two-legs came into the room, and they were all very loud. In a compartment in one of the walls they built a great fire, into which they fed offerings of Maple and Birch logs. Picea hated to see her kin-folk destroyed so cruelly, but she was also terrified that she might be thrown into the flames herself, if there was a shortage of wood. By now she knew there was just no anticipating what these beasts might do.

At the height of the ceremony, everyone began to make odd noises together, as if they were trying to sing. Picea, of course could not understand the words. Except in one of their songs they kept repeating, "Glo-o-o-o-oria, in excelcis Deo!" Picea was startled, because she knew this meant, "Glory to God in the Highest!" in the Latin. She had heard her friend the Cardinal sing it a thousand times. It could hardly be a coincidence. Picea couldn't imagine what sort of perverted God these beasts-on-two-legs were idolizing with the Cardinal's phrases, but she hoped her path would never cross with his.

As the night wore on, the number of beasts-on-two-legs in the room gradually dwindled, until finally only the four occupants of the house remained. At this time, each of them hung a stocking above the glowing embers of the dying fire, which was something Picea had never seen them do before. Then the beasts-on-two-legs left, the Wish-Deer's nose stopped blinking, and Picea was relieved to find herself alone, surrounded by peaceful darkness.

Before long, however, Picea noticed a faint glimmer in the black night sky, which steadily grew in intensity until a dazzling red blaze illuminated the room. The Spruce tree became very excited.

This was just like the Night of the Wish-Deer!

Could it be possible that her guardian angel had heard of her plight, and had come to rescue her? Picea prayed this was true.

As Picea contemplated her salvation, there was a bump in the corner where the fire had been, and a plump little beast-on-two-legs tumbled into the chamber. At the same time, the head of the Wish-Deer appeared at the window, his nose aglow, lighting up everything inside as bright as day. Picea was so elated, she paid no heed to the beast-on-two-legs, who was dressed in a red suit and carried a sack on his back. The Wish-Deer was here to save her! "Oh Wish-Deer," she called, "Take me away from this wretched place. Let me see the forest once more before I die."

But the Wish-Deer showed no sign of recognition of Picea, or her plea. He continued to stand at the window, while the little beast-in-the-red-suit filled the stockings above the fireplace with trinkets and candies from his sack, by the light of the Wish-Deer's nose. Desperately Picea tried to get his attention. "Wish-Deer! Oh Great Wish-Deer!" she cried. "You must be able to hear me. Please, please, send me a signal to prove you are listening."

Slowly the Wish-Deer inclined his head and looked directly at the Spruce tree. Then he took a mighty breath and blew it on the window pane, covering it with moisture. The cold glass frosted over instantly, and the Wish-Deer became a fuzzy red blur, with just enough light from his nose filtering into the room for the beast-in-the-red-suit to finish stuffing his stockings. While the bewildered Spruce tree was trying to understand what was happening, the beast-in-the-red-suit completed his chores and turned toward her. "Stop whimpering," he snapped. "You should have known your wishes would get you into trouble!" Then the little beast vanished in the smoke from the fire, and the light outside the window quickly faded. Picea was momentarily astounded that the beast-in-the-red-suit had addressed her in her own dialect. But soon her confusion gave way to panic. What did the beast-in-the-red-suit mean? What had she ever wished to deserve this sadistic treatment? And where had the mysterious Wish-Deer gone? Why would he have blocked himself from view, and left without helping? Unless he was coming back... Of course - he was coming back ...

But as the night wore on, and the window remained dark, Picea realized the Wish-Deer would never return for her. In fact, he hadn't come to set her free in the first place. Everything now was perfectly clear. The pudgy beast-in-the-red-suit was actually a beast-god, whom the beasts-on-two-legs had been praising earlier in their songs. When he was given sacrifices of fire-logs, the beast-god brought gifts of candies and toys in exchange. And the Wish-Deer was his accomplice. The beasts-on-two-legs revered the phantom Reindeer so much, they had placed his image for all to see on Picea's upper branches. And although he pretended to be a champion of the forest-folk, tonight the Wish-Deer had shown his true allegiance, by flying off with the wicked beast-god-in-the-red-suit, and turning his tail on her.

These shocking revelations sent pangs of terror deep into Picea's heartwood. Never before had she felt so totally alone. Standing defenceless in the midst of her enemies, and betrayed by the gods to whom she had been sacrificed, she longed for her friends from the woods, whose support had never failed her. The mischievous Squirrels for their vitality. The pious Cardinal for his inspiration. The impious Bluejay for his gossip. And the dear old Pine tree for his companionship and protection. None of them had ever given her false illusions, or blamed her for having aspirations. As she remembered them all, and speculated on her impending doom, her precious needles rained down like a torrent of tears.

Following her disenchantment with the Wish-Deer, Picea took less and less notice of the goings-on around her. Her thirst was unrelenting, and she was losing strength with every needle that fell. But she was beyond caring. With her dreams shattered, she had nothing to continue living for. Fortunately, the beasts-on-two-legs were too pre-occupied with their own affairs to torment her further. Almost every day there were noisy gatherings, with feasting, games, and sometimes songs and dancing. The beasts seemed to have a limitless capacity for making fools of themselves. And although several more sacrificial logs were burned in the fire-place, the beast-god-in-the-red-suit and the Wish-Deer never returned. So despite the commotion, Picea was left to languish mostly undisturbed.

One quiet afternoon, one of the beasts-on-two-legs unexpectedly began to remove the ugly trimmings from her nearly-bare boughs. When everything, including the ponderous statue of the Wish-Deer, had been taken down and carefully put away, Picea was dragged outside, and tossed on top of a snowdrift. Although very weak, she was overjoyed to be liberated from her shackles, and back in the fresh air once more.

From where she lay, awaiting her destiny, she perceived that there were other dying evergreen trees on snow banks all around her. Softly they murmured to one another, moaning their tales of woe. Every one had been led astray by the treacherous Wish-Deer, and savagely abused by the brutal beasts-on-two-legs. Spruce, Pine, Balsam, Fir, their stories were the same. All had been inexplicably punished for their prudence and ideals. When Picea heard their outcry, she thought of the many, many trees in the forest, and was overwhelmed to comprehend what a dreadful menace the Wish-Deer actually was.

Exposed to the bitter winter winds, and without her coat of needles to protect her, Picea often lapsed into a semi-conscious stupor. She would dream that she was a huge Spruce tree, taller than any other tree in the forest, and creatures came from all over just to admire her exquisite shape. When she awoke, she would reflect in her lucid moments that she had indeed been a perfect Spruce tree, which was a rare privilege. And although she had been sold out by the deceitful Wish-Deer, and unjustly destroyed by the beasts-on-two-legs, they could never diminish her dignity nor extinguish her pride.

Picea lost track of how long she had lingered in the snow. But one day she heard a low rumbling noise, and she could sense it was the voice of Death. Nearer and nearer came the sound, growing to a pulsating roar, and accentuated now and then by a crackling whine. When she finally saw the Death-Beast, she was certain her time had come. Slowly, but constantly it crept toward her. Awesomely large, smooth and dark blue. A beast-on-two-legs kept feeding it the carcasses of other ill-fated evergreens, but its appetite was never satisfied. When finally it came to her, and she looked Death in the face, all Picea could think of were the words of the Cardinal. "Carpe diem, Picea," she said to herself. "Seize the moment." Then the beast-on-two-legs hurled her into the Death-Beast's gaping mouth. There was a shrill, squealing sound, and the once perfect Spruce tree was ground into a million pieces.

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Soon after, a curious Squirrel, always on the look-out for food, chanced upon the drift where Picea had been laying. Her fallen needles had left streaks there, like greenish-brown blood stains in the snow, and amongst them the Squirrel discovered a seed-cone which had dropped from her neck. The little animal picked up the tasty morsel in his paws and examined it. Deciding to save it for later, he ran over to a little park across the way and buried the cone in a warm spot where the sun had melted most of the snow. Then the Squirrel scampered off and immediately forgot what he had done.

Next spring, however, a small shoot, covered in green needles, popped up from the ground, and the Cardinal and Bluejay agreed that the Squirrel had planted wisely. For the new Spruce tree was surrounded by a patch of beautiful yellow buttercups. And not far away, there was a street-light, which illuminated the area all night long, so the Wish-Deer, who only operated in the dark, would never dare to come close. Perched on the light standard, the Cardinal delivered his christening message, "Pax vobiscum, Picea. Peace be with you." And the Bluejay added his woods-wise advice, "Nolite illegitimi carborundum. Don't let the bastards grind you down!" Then he flew away, screaming the only Latin he really knew, "Et cetera, Et cetera, Et cetera!"

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