

# Sycamore Dreams

By Joe Wright

Old Man Brittlebark heaved a weighted sigh. He was one of the oldest (he strained as he considered the passage of the years), nay, perhaps **the** oldest tree in the park. He recalled being a younger sapling, when the Native Americans still occasionally visited Long Island, but that was long ago. He remembered New York growing larger and larger, and that eventually, his part of the island had been surrounded by the encroaching city. Somehow though, the humans had decided to spare he and the small island of 800 or so acres of land where he stood. Tomorrow he was scheduled to be chopped down and removed, due to his dilapidated state, and having lost a major trunk during the last nor'easter that winter. But Brittlebark, despite his normally grumpy disposition, was at peace with this.

The last 150 or so years had been much louder and busier than the decades that preceded them. Now, in his ancient years, old Brittlebark was the patriarch of the park. His trunk took several adults, with arms outstretched, to encircle. He was once a proud and large tree. Yes, a few of his mightier branches had been lost in wind and blizzards over the decades, but he had always recovered. Now however, the damage he'd suffered was irreversible, and he was quite aged, and it showed.

You may not think a tree has a consciousness, or even a personality, and for many trees, that may be true, but not for Brittlebark. Indeed, he was, and had been, in many ways, like the cranky old man that might live down the street. Many different animals used his branches and buttonball seeds for food and shelter, and as a larger old sycamore tree, he had many cavities inside him that made ideal homes for numerous birds, chipmunks, squirrels, and even a raccoon family at his base, along with thousands of sycamore leaf beetles, which had developed quite a taste for his and other sycamore's leaves. "Those damned beetles will be the death of me," he murmured and cursed.



Now, Brittlebark wasn't just an incredibly old and often cranky tree, but he had other special abilities as well. He could, if he thought hard about it, actually sway or move or even grasp with a root, branch, etc. He had first

used this ability nearly 200 years before, on that fall day...Everyone in the forest knew (and feared) the man, Francis T. Georgetown, and he was a veritable monster, who hunted for sport. Several dozen carcasses had lain mouldering in the surrounding forest from his dastardly deeds, and that fateful day, in 1833, when Mr. Georgetown had crept up behind his trunk, the anger that Brittlebark had felt surprised even himself.

An innocent deer had bounded past his trunk, and several other resident squirrels, and even a family of woodducks, had darted into their respective cavities inside old Brittlebark. Something had spooked them. Brittlebark had been napping that morning, as trees are wont to do, especially elderly trees, like himself, but as he awoke with a start, he could feel the nervousness of his friends (more like parasites, really, but hey, it was better for his mental health to consider them friends) that cowered now in fear inside him. Brittlebark looked down, to see a deer bounding away, which a moment before had been lapping from the nearby stream.

Brittlebark could sense the fear in the air, and then he sensed it...Georgetown! The bastard was in the forest again, and he was in a killing mood. Anger started to build inside him. This human was a very poor example of its race. He bounded about, with his double-barreled Remington shotgun, acting quite high and mighty, knowing that he was supreme among the beasts that wandered these hallowed halls. He would occasionally show up, blast away some poor creature, and then leave whistling some baw0dy tune. If he'd bothered to at least consume his prey, that might be excusable, but not this one. He killed for sport, and if Brittlebark had ever seen a monster, its name was Francis T. Georgetown.

Well, the monster was back. He came, not very quietly, though quietly enough, and crept up next to the tree. The deer had stopped about 50 feet away, and looked back, but Francis had hidden behind the immense girth of Brittlebark, so he remained unseen. After a few nervous seconds glancing about, she believed she was safe. "The Fool!" thought Brittlebark. He tried to warn her, but she didn't sense his urgent message. The blast rang out, destroying the serenity of the forest, and she soon lay twitching on the ground, her life ebbing away. Mr. Georgetown whistled congratulatorily to himself, and grinned wide. Brittlebark meanwhile had been filled with a bloodlust not often seen in trees. His rage at the senseless murder of the roan maddened him, and with all his might, he wished to strike the monster down...and then he did! A root uplifted, knocking Francis forward, and a low branch thumped him soundly on the head. He fell, and another root wrapped itself around his writhing self, soon finding his neck. Brittlebark was barely conscious of it, just filled with an infinite rage against this creature, but soon, the writhing stopped, and the man lay as motionless as the deer he had killed.

Eventually the bloodlust passed, and Brittlebark realized what he'd done. He'd had no idea he was capable of such anger, but the deed was done. Francis was found by authorities a few days later, and of course, the newspapers were full of the joyous news, because who wants a poaching monster roaming the forest, killing for the sport of it? No one, apparently.

But all that was many years ago. Since then, Brittlebark had used his newfound ability several other times, sometimes to brush off annoying sycamore beetles, or scratch an itch, or even relocate an annoying squirrel that just would NOT stop chattering...he was sent flying several hundred feet, and he didn't bother Brittlebark again. Old man Brittlebark had lived overall a good life. Each spring, new creatures would emerge from inside their homes from inside him, and to him this was a joy to behold. Whole generations of families of squirrels, some chipmunks, and several generations of woodducks had called him home. Many bird as well, which ate his seeds, and helped eat those blasted sycamore beetles.

Nothing made Brittlebark more annoyed than those beetles, always eating his new green growth. The birds helped a lot with that, while also helping themselves to copious amounts of his seeds, but Brittlebark

begrudgingly was grateful to them for that de-beetling service they provided. Sure, they squacked, twittered and chirped incessantly, but it was soothing as well, and he had grown to accept it as well.

He had seen many, many seasons pass in the park, and after several centuries, and many long years, it was time to leave the forest to those younger than himself. The loss of his major branch that fateful blizzardy day was the final straw, and he knew it. He had felt since then weakness entering his trunk, and the sap had stopped flowing as it should. The animals seemed to sense it as well, and many had left, after their goodbyes. This day had been long in coming, but Brittlebark was alright with that. He sensed that the animals he loved would all find new homes, and that the cycle of life would continue after he was gone. As the chainsaws started their work, he accepted this, and his fate. The forest would continue, even after he was gone, but that was right.



As what remained of Brittlebark was being consolidated into smaller pieces, a small finch, a friend of Brittlebark, consumed some seeds from his buttonballs for the last time. He fluttered off, and later, those seeds, passing through his digestive tract, were deposited along the shore of a lake, an ideal spot for a sycamore... The following spring, a green sprout shot up, again continuing the circle of life.

The End