

“Paolo”
by: Daniela Mattes

The world had always been a weird place for Paolo, he just never felt comfortable in his own skin. The relentless coming and going of his daily routine was simply unbearable. Walking the same streets day in and day out, taking the same bus, greeting people he didn't know and didn't want to know...When was all of this going to stop? It chilled him to the bone to think that his life, that “life” wasn't more than this. Even worse, to think of the many years to come, doing the same things over and over. Life felt like an endless state of suffocation.

He had tried it all: changing jobs, acquiring healthier habits, getting a new hobby, making friends, and at the insistence of many, he even tried going to church...but nothing seemed to change, if anything, everything made him feel worse.

Maybe he was trying too hard, trying to change something that was never going to change. He knew that things couldn't continue this way, so he felt obliged to accept that this world was just not the right one for him, at least, not in the current state.

He then decided to carry a little notebook with him, to write down any clues pointing him to what he needed to be. On it, he wrote that there was a short moment in the morning, when he managed to leave home right before sunrise, when a shiver would run through him at the first contact with fresh air. The scent of a rainy evening made him feel like he could finally breathe for a second. And there was a memory that held a special place both in his notebook and deep inside him. This memory filled him with warmth and hope: one day, when he was walking his usual route, he saw a fig tree loaded with fruit. He couldn't stop himself, he reached out, grabbed one of them, and saved it carefully in his pocket.

As soon as he got home, he took the fruit in his hands: it was very soft to the touch, it was as if it contained the smell of summer itself, and its sweet-grainy pulp moved him to tears. Never, not in a very long time, had life felt more alive than it did at that moment.

It was then that a longing arose in him. The answer he had been looking for arrived, and it struck him in the chest like lightning: the world had made a mistake with him, he wasn't supposed to be a human, he should've been a tree.

His was the soul of a tree trapped in a human body, there was no doubt. He always thought that finding his answer would be the hardest thing, but now that he knew what he needed to be, he faced a whole new complication: how to leave behind his human body and fulfill his calling.

There weren't manuals for this. Some technological advances had allowed people who identified themselves as an animal of a different species, to make some adjustments to their bodies to give them a more satisfying existence. However, he was certain of his destiny and he wasn't going to stop until he achieved it.

He didn't want to lose any more time. He finally started living on his own terms. As a first step, he filled the apartment with plants and got rid of all the furniture and stuff that he never really needed and that now were just hindering his vegetable being.

He also removed all windows and doors so that the wind, the sunlight, and the rain; could run freely and nourish both him and all of his friends.

He stopped going to work, in his new incarnation, he wouldn't need to buy anything or have to pay taxes. Human rules no longer applied to him.

Little by little, changes started to show in his body. He quit eating, as a tree, he wasn't going to need it anymore. He got very thin and his skin stretched tightly to his bones.

It was a painful process in the beginning, but hunger wasn't going to stop him. Everything was worth it when one day he was finally able to feed on the sunlight. It was an autumn morning and the days had been cloudy for a while, when some weak and pale sunshine filtered through the window and touched his face. He didn't understand what was happening when a delightful taste invaded his body and satiated him deeply. It was as if he could savor it with every cell of his body and it was sweet and gentle. Through time he discovered that the sun's taste changed with the weather conditions: on a cold day, the sun sips resembled a nice hot cocoa that kept him warm from the inside. That's why he didn't need to cover his body anymore. Summer days were his favorite, those days the sun had an intense and spicy tang, that packed him with strength and made his body change faster than ever.

He liked to daydream of the tree he was going to be. Would he become a tall tree and provide refuge to many birds and squirrels? The possibility of becoming a flowering tree, charmed him. If he could bring some color and beauty to the world, his existence would have so much more meaning.

Time goes by differently in the mind of trees. As a tree you feel connected to The Everything and the sun controls the rhythm of your changes. Life was a never ending musical piece conducted by a wise and energetic *Maestro*.

By now, some animals inhabited what used to be an apartment. It wasn't easy for him to stand still the first time a bird landed on him and pecked him. He had to make a huge effort not to burst out laughing at the tickling he was feeling.

It took a long time before he started to grow leaves. By then his thoughts were almost wordless, they were now made of colors and sighs. Long gone were the days when life was suffocating, as now he was able to breath through every millimeter of what once was human skin.

He felt elated when the kids discovered the garden that had grown in the middle of the building. They didn't use to have any place to play in, as their parents wouldn't allow them to leave the building on their own. But now that there was a garden right there, they could play together without having to go outside. Paolo loved to help the kids to hide and felt fulfilled when they hung a swing from one of his branches.

He had searched for so long and in so many places for the meaning of his life...and it was some kids who bestowed it to him, and in such a natural way! Paolo wasn't just a tree, he was a refuge, a hiding spot and a playmate.

Some seniors met by him on Saturday afternoons to play chess, and on Wednesdays, a group of ladies gathered there to do some knitting. They placed a table with some chairs under his branches, to cover themselves from the sun and the rain.

It was this way for a while, until one of the neighbors brought in an inspector. He was worried about the risks of having a garden in the middle of the building. The tree's roots might damage its structure, and so many plants could cause fungi that would make people sick.

The children and the people from the chess and knitting clubs, stood up for the garden that had brought so much happiness to their lives. But there was no alternative, it wasn't allowed for trees to grow inside this edifice.

Very early on a Sunday some workers arrived and cleaned up the place while everybody was still sleeping. Nobody noticed as they carried out a tree chopped into tiny pieces.