

THE ADVENTURES OF  
ASHER SVENSON: STORY  
ONE: THE SECRET WOOD

Lucas W. Holt on the Mystery of the  
Forest

A young man, a rugged youth,  
Sought to find the truth  
Of a mysterious wood –  
In the midst of which he stood.

He talked with creatures that lived therein  
To see if he could then begin  
To find out just where he had come,  
For all he knew was that he was far from home.

But for all the strangeness of the place,  
One could see a change upon his face,  
From dark and grave and full of fear  
To light and grins and merry cheer.

Just what was in this wood, you ask?  
Ah, now we have reached our task.  
And so we begin to embark upon  
The adventures of Asher Svenson.

There is a small, dense wood that lays hidden in the slopes of southern Oregon. Asher Svenson chanced to find it one morning on one of his Sunday long runs. How he had gotten to it was a mystery, but it was a place he would never forget. Within the wood are large, towering trees that stand like ancient pillars, which seem to stretch to the clouds and connect the earth to the heavens. Not only are the trees tall, but they possess a majestic quality, with their auburn colored bark and olive green leaves. When the sun breaks forth, a dome of dark green and gold covers the wood and dresses the mighty firs in robes of light. An aroma of cedar fills the air, tinged with scents of evergreen. The sound of birds calling back and forth to one another can be heard throughout the day. Towards the western side of the wood runs an ice blue stream that contrasts with a muddy, green embankment so strikingly that Asher once fancied he had stepped into a Monet painting. California poppy wildflowers dot the little clearings throughout the wood. When the sky darkens and

the sun begins to set, the yellow-orange color of the wildflowers stand out like candles at compline.

Asher often called the secret wood “Elf Land,” for he fancied that millions of years ago the wood was inhabited by elves. One day he decided to go on a walkabout to tour the wood to see if anything had changed since his last visit four months ago before he left for college. As he was walking, a strong wind came howling by that caused the leaves on the trees to rumble. The rumbling had a strange sound. It was as if it were not a rumbling but rather a snickering; like the wind had just given the punch line of a joke and the trees were in laughter. Asher began to feel that he was in a very different place than the small wood he once knew.

As Asher continued to walk through the wood he noticed what looked like a very odd tree. It had a large, dark hole in its trunk. Looking at it made him feel like he was staring into the mouth of a toothless giant. All of a sudden he could start to feel his heart thud against his chest. He looked up and down the tree, with its peeling bark, its bulging roots, and its branches stretching forth like the arms of an octopus. Then in a flash an owl came flying out of the dark hole, startling the young man so much that he actually fell back and began to

breathe heavily. The owl alighted on a branch just to the right of where he lay and stared at him. Its eyes were gigantic, colored with a mix of gray and yellow, as if God had created two secret moons and hidden them on this owl's face: simply looking at its eyes could make one feel like they had grown in wisdom and intelligence. The young man started to tremble. He felt weak. His legs were like jelly, and he was unsure if he would be able to stand back up. What was the owl going to say? Was it going to say anything or just stare at him? Unsure of what to do, he quickly composed himself and gave a bow to the venerable owl. "And to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" he asked, with slight trepidation.

The owl said nothing. It just sat there and stared. Two minutes of silence ensued, which to Asher felt like an eternity. Then the owl finally replied, speaking in a soft voice with a slow cadence, "I had heard that there was a fellow roaming the wood and thought I'd come sit on a branch to see if I could chance upon a view of the lad. And here you are."

Surprised, Asher began to ask questions: "How did you hear of me? Where did you come from? Is that your home in there?" his eyes shifting toward the black hole.

“Well,” responded the Owl, “it is a small wood, as you know, and news often travels with great rapidity. It did not take long for me to hear of a young man roaming about. The two sparrows who live near the river bend were eager to tell me about your arrival.”

“Ah, interesting,” replied Asher passively, being most interested in the last question. He reiterated, “But where did you come from? Is that hole in the trunk of the tree your home?”

“I think the more interesting question,” replied the Owl, “is where did *you* come from? Surely your being here is more curious than me being here, wouldn’t you agree?” With sinking heart and furrowed brow, Asher conceded that this was indeed true.

There was a moment’s pause before the Owl asked, “What are you thinking about?”

“Well, Madame Owl, to be honest, I’ve been thinking about how this wood seems so strange. It is very different than what I remember.” And then he said quietly to himself, half-jokingly but also half serious, “It’s like the world at present”. The Owl heard what the young man said, for she had very great ears.

She responded thoughtfully, “Ah, I see. You know, I believe that there is a purpose for your being here in this wood right now. It may seem strange, but I am of the opinion that strange things can be better indicators of what is true than what is regular. And yet, even seemingly normal things are strange, really. Why is the sky blue and not purple? Why is grass green and not red? But now I merely muse. Press on and keep exploring!”

Asher was a bit puzzled at her response but before he could form a coherent thought the Owl flew off. “What a curious creature!” he thought to himself. “I wonder if there are others in this wood as interesting as her.” So he continued to walk throughout the wood, and as he did so he contemplated what the curious winged creature had said.

Pressing onward through the woods, another very peculiar tree caught the corner of his eye. It was visibly different from the others. Its branches reminded him of the antlers he saw on deer when he would go hunting with his grandfather as a boy. The branches emerged in every direction out of its trunk, one on top of the other. Not only did the branches look like antlers, but also they had the similar effect: a betrayal of distinction and importance. The trunk of the tree looked so firm

and ancient that he thought it must have been there for thousands of years. Indeed, it had a sense of antiquity; but it also seemed new and fresh, like it had the ability to detach from its roots and leap to and fro with great finesse like a young fawn. Sparked with an immediate sense of curiosity the young man steadily approached it in great awe and wonder.

As he was approaching the tree it started to shake violently and the earth beneath him began quaking. It was as if the tree had been dead but upon Asher's arrival it came to life. Two giant pieces of bark began to fall from the center of its trunk, but it was not peeling bark: it was the tree opening its eyes. Then the tree started speaking, but it was the strangest thing because it had no visible mouth, only its voice could be heard. It sounded to Asher as if the voice were coming from inside the trunk. And had there been a large hole in the tree like the one the Owl flew out of, he was certain the volume of the tree's voice would have increased significantly and perhaps shattered to pieces the surrounding trees. It was such a lovely voice, though, and it sounded as if the tree was singing.

“What are you singing?” asked Asher in a moment of bravery.

“It is part of an old song that has been sung by many of the trees in this wood for a long time,” said the Tree. “Would you like to hear it?”

“Yes, absolutely,” said Asher.

For all our life we have lived under the sky,  
Beholding the bright stars that shine above,  
And indeed the moon and sun.  
But of all the lights that ever were, none prove  
Greater than the one that lingers close by.

O fair radiance! O shining brilliance!  
Bright yellow, orange and red,  
Thy light is like a flaming torch:  
Which gives some delight and others dread,  
But for us trees makes us want to dance!

“I quite like that!” exclaimed Asher.

“If only you heard the whole thing!” replied the Tree. “But, of course, that would probably take an hour or so. The song is really part of an old tale that tells the story of one of our ancient relatives named Roshanuk who was felled in a forest far away.

Anyhow, what brings a young man like you into this wood?"

"I've been trying to figure that out myself," said Asher. "In fact, I was just speaking with this owl not long ago who said"

"Oh! Mrs. Feathergloss!"

"Yes, Mrs. Feathergloss," said Asher slowly and curiously. "You know her, then?"

"Indeed I do. She is very kind, and incredibly wise. I often let her and her little ones come and perch on my branches."

"Ah, I see," said the young man.

The Tree fixed his eyes on the young man and asked, "What is your name?"

"Asher," the young man responded.

"Asher. That is a fine name. Let me ask you, Asher. Do you enjoy looking up at the stars at night?"

"I do," he said.

"So do I," said the Tree. "Would you like to know why?"

"I would," said Asher.

The Tree began, "Have you ever noticed how it is never completely dark? The sun governs the day, and the moon and the stars govern the night. There are always lights on. Looking up at the stars gives

me hope. It reminds me that no matter how dark things may get, there is always hope. There's always a light shining in the darkness. Even on cloudy days the sun shines though we cannot see it."

"I had never really thought of it that way before. It is a rather comforting thought. And it is true." There was moment of silence between them, and then Asher asked, "But what is this other light that you sang about?"

"Ah, yes," the Tree replied. Then, taking a leafy limb and swinging it down near Asher, much like one stretches out an arm to place a hand on a shoulder, he said, "You will find it if you keep searching. Take courage, and continue on your quest, young friend!"

And with that the Tree shook violently just like it did when Asher first arrived, and then returned to its original state. Asher was sad that the conversation was over. He thoroughly enjoyed talking with the magnificently truncated tree. Then as he was getting ready to turn and walk away, a shiny object caught the corner of his eye. It was a small capsule lying at the bottom of the Tree's trunk. He walked over to it, and on the capsule was written the words: "Strength for the journey. Enjoy." Asher opened the top of the capsule and

looked inside then took a whiff to see if he could tell what it was. It smelled sweet like syrup. Then he lifted it to his lips and threw his head back and drank a small portion of it. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "it is syrup!" The syrup was a rich, dark brown and tasted as sweet as it smelled. "What a great gift!" said the young man. And he stretched out his hand and placed it on the Tree's trunk looking at it with affection. He smiled and then continued walking.

What a day the young lad was having! He couldn't wait to tell his friend Miguel about all that had happened so far. He was so full of joy, basking in all that had occurred. His conversations with Mrs. Feathergloss and the Tree were incredible, and he was also enjoying the spectacular scenes of the wood in which he found himself. A feeling of joy began to well up inside of him to the point where it became hard to contain his emotions. He soon burst forth and began to dance, jumping into the air and shouting aloud.

Soon after, he decided to keep exploring. He was walking through the wood admiring its verdure. Everything was teeming with life. The branches of the tall trees were leafy and green, the wildflowers were a brilliant orange, the stream of water was ice blue, and the fish in the stream were literally

rainbow trout, with all seven colors of a rainbow running down either side of their bodies.

As he kept walking he noticed a bright light off in the distance. It was so bright that he fancied for a moment he had found the sun's hiding place. But when he looked up above he could see through the branches that the sun was still floating in the sky and concluded that it couldn't be. Intrigued by the shining light he began to make his way toward it. As he got closer and closer it looked like it was a fire! It appeared as though flames of orange and yellow were swirling through the air, and so he began to run toward it to see if it was so. He was now about fifteen feet from the bright light and he was astonished, for, there was no smoke, nothing was burning. He could have sworn it was a fire, and yet no visible damage had been done to any of the surrounding trees or bushes. The yellow-orange light, however, was still shining splendidly. Intrigued, Asher crept closer and closer, and then he heard a voice ask, "Who's there?" The young man, startled, drew a deep breath. You would have thought that after the strange occurrences he had had earlier he wouldn't be so surprised. And yet so he was.

"Asher Svenson," he answered in a trembling tone.

“Hello, Asher,” said the voice, “would you care to join me for some tea? I just gathered the leaves this morning.” He was a bit shocked by such a gesture but warmly accepted the invitation.

“Why sure,” he said, “that sounds lovely.” He breathed a sigh of relief. He felt now that he wasn’t in any danger. “Where are you, sir?” he asked, for he still couldn’t see who was speaking.

“Over here!” said the voice. Asher was puzzled for a second. He looked around and around but did not see anyone.

“I don’t see anyone,” he finally replied.

“Come closer to the light,” said the voice. Asher got as close as he could, and “hullo!” he shouted. It was a firefly!

“Greetings, Asher” the Firefly said. “I am so glad you decided to join me for tea. Here, let me dim my light a bit so you can see more clearly.”

Asher started laughing out loud. “I beg your pardon, but I must tell you I feel rather embarrassed right now,” he said while chuckling. “I saw your bright light from far off and I thought a fire was burning in the wood!” The Firefly was delighted to hear such a compliment.

“Well thank you,” he said, “that is very kind of you to say.”

“Come. I want to show you something,” said Fai the Firefly. He flew in front of the young lad, his fiery light leading the way. He led him on a narrow dirt path. The density of the wood got thicker and thicker the further along the path they went. No longer were the trees spread out; they were packed tightly together, side by side, like stalks of corn in a cornfield. The path weaved around the trees such that it seemed like a maze. Then the ground started to gradually rise and Asher could tell they were ascending a hill. Fai was flying at a much quicker pace now and soon enough Asher lost sight of him. But he decided to press on and keep walking until he got to the top of the hill. As he was approaching the top of the hill the trees opened up and there was a small circular opening. All of a sudden a strange sensation overcame him. He felt like he had seen this place before but he couldn’t recall where or when. He paused and looked around. Asher had forgotten that he was looking for the Firefly. Then all of a sudden right in front of him a bright light emerged. Fai had undimmed his light. And it was glowing so radiantly that Asher could no longer see him. He squinted his eyes and could only make out a glowing whiteness in front of him. Slowly it grew dimmer and he could start to make out a figure. The

figure appeared to look like that of a man. But as the brightness from the light continued to decrease, he could more clearly see that it must be something other than a man. And to Asher's amazement, he realized it was an elf. The pointed ears are what gave it away. The elf looked like a king, as if he were the leader of a village of elves. He had chocolate brown skin and his hair was smooth and black, crowned with a wreath of golden leaves. He was dressed in dark blue attire with a brown leather strip coming diagonally across his jacket that was the strap of a bow, and on his left hip was a quiver of arrows. On his feet were light brown, paper-thin coverings that Asher figured must be some type of elfish sock or shoe which elves use to scale trees and mountains. There was a faint gleam of light still surrounding the elf's body.

With the twinkling of an eye the young man saw before him Fai turn from being a firefly into an elf. He could not believe it. Feelings of both fear and joy ran through him. Fai knew what he was thinking and said, "You are correct. I am both a firefly and an elf."

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?" asked the young man.

“You would not have believed me even if I told you,” said the Elf.

“But how is this even possible?” asked Asher. It was really a silly question, for he ought to have realized by now that such strange occurrences were normal in this wood.

But Fai was a very gracious elf, and so he answered, “Think of it like light. As quantum theory suggests, light can be both a wave and a particle. Its duality is mysterious and yet it is so.”

Asher was delightfully surprised. “Ah! Quantum theory! I must admit that the interaction of subatomic particles is a most mysterious thing. It really is quite magical. Oh the wonders of science!”

Fai couldn't help but smile as the young man spoke with such glee. The two of them stood there in the opening of the wood and then Fai said, “I must get going soon, Asher.”

“So soon?” asked the young man.

“It is my turn to keep watch over the wood,” the Elf replied. Asher now realized why he had a bow and a quiver of arrows. “I must protect the wood and all who are in it.”

Asher was sad to see Fai leave so soon, but he wished him well. “I bid you farewell, Noble Elf. I do hope I see you again.”

“You will see me again,” replied the Elf.

Asher moved on and set out to find a place to rest. He was exhausted. It was such a strange day that all he wanted to do was find a place to sit and stare up at the sky and look at the clouds as they moved along. He found a quiet spot and lay down with his hands behind his head, eyes closed, relaxing in the shaded area. He looked up at the large cumulonimbus clouds as they passed by and pondered the day's events, the conversations he had had with Mrs. Feathergloss, the Tree, and Fai. As troubled as he was by the day's occurrences, he felt unusually well. He realized that in the midst of all of these events there was inside of him much joy. It was an odd feeling. At the same time he felt like he was somewhere very far from home, and at other times it was like his adventure was more of a returning to a place he had visited long ago as a child. He was unsure of what it all meant. And so he continued to lie there in the shade, exhausted from the day's journey, and soon closed his eyes. A peace came over him that he had not felt in a long time. Then he fell asleep.