

## Spruce and the Maples

Ken Cheng

The sun rose above the clouds, dispersing the morning fog. The light gently touched the tips of the trees, alerting them of the arrival of spring.

Spruce squinted his eyes to peek at his new-grown leaves, imagining fiery red maple leaves swathed over his body. He glanced from left to right. Not a drop of red was visible anywhere on his branches. Widening his eyes despite the bright, blazing sun, he couldn't believe that he didn't have a single maple leaf. Instead, sharp green spikes were growing out of his hands and lumps of weird honeycomb-like grenades were hanging from his boughs. And yet here he was amid all these stunning sunset-orange, burnished yellow and burnt red maples. Wasn't he, too, a member of the maple family?

"Ouch!" shouted Young Maple, waking up to find herself being punctured by Spruce's needles. Her fierce, angry eyes darted about the woods to find whom exactly was responsible for the assault. Maple pointed at a dandelion, screeching "you!"

"No madam, not me, I swear that it wasn't me," the poor dandelion stuttered nervously in response. Maple continued to glare. "It was Spruce!" cried Dandelion, and everyone's attention shifted towards the tall, prickly pine tree.

"Oh dear! What is this ugly tree trying to disguise itself as?" sneered Young Maple, rolling her eyes. "Look at you! Have you been trying to live as one of us all this time? Revolting."

Spruce frowned, but remained silent, holding back his words. Other maples started to brag about how they could not wait to be carved into beautiful violins and produce dazzling melodies. Spruce wanted to stand up for himself. But in that moment, he was helpless. He couldn't even begin to fathom that he wasn't one of them, that he had been an outsider all this time.

"Just die," Young Maple broke the silence. "Actually, no," she went on, "the woodcutter will do that job next time he is here. They don't want trees like you affecting our growth. You know, with your big, tall body stealing all our sunlight. And to become what? Wooden floors?"

Young Maple's words were echoed by rounds of laughter and mocking from the other maples.

Spruce didn't know how to respond. The problem was the maples were right. How could he argue when what they said was true? He could not escape the fact that he was the oddity among all the trees in the woods. He didn't look like the maples, that was for sure. He didn't even act like them. He fasted for days, with not a sip of water, not a touch of sunlight. What was the matter with him?

The breeze lifted the delicate star-shaped maple leaves into the air and gently carried them along its current, while scattering Spruce's needles to the ground. As the autumn days dragged on and the maples continued to flaunt their dazzling palette of reds, burgundies, oranges, bronzes, golds and yellows, Spruce stayed the same old icy green he'd always been.

A single maple leaf glided down the wind and onto Spruce's face, covering his eyes. In that moment, a question flashed through his brain: why should I care what they say? Spruce straightened himself up to his full height, rising from the pile of his shed needles.

Knowing he was the outcast, Spruce decided he no longer cared how the maples felt about him. He didn't care that they teased and mocked him and bragged and boasted about their own beauty. He might not thrive, but he would survive, conquering each day with endurance and faith.

Then one morning arrived that was different. It was not one of those radiant autumn sunrises. It didn't look as if the sun was going to bother to properly rise at all. The wind did not blow away the maple leaves but instead hurled sleet at them, covering them with layers and layers of white snow. Water droplets in the air froze into mesmerising snowflakes. The temperature had dropped so drastically it killed the gorgeous colours of the maples. While the maples craved water for their dry barks, Spruce was not thirsty. Every maple in the woods curled up and retreated into itself, like snails into their shells. Even Young Maple shut her mouth to spare her parched throat.

"Look at all these goodies!" yelled the muscular woodcutter at the top of his lungs with a bottle of beer in one hand and an axe in the other. His voice echoed through the woods, rousing everyone's attention. Young Maple was taken aback by his loud voice, and she sensed something was wrong.

The old man stumbled with irregular footsteps towards Spruce. Spruce held his breath tightly, keeping his fingers crossed that the woodcutter wouldn't notice him and take his life. "Ouch," cried the woodcutter as Spruce dropped one of his pine cones on his head. "Now, this tree would look nice on my floor," murmured the man, taking a good whiff and fiddling with Spruce's needle-like leaves. Raising his axe and delivering a forceful strike, he began to chop at Spruce's trunk.

"I told you the woodcutter wouldn't like you here," said Young Maple, chuckling. "Good luck, wooden floor."

As the old man slowly heaved up Spruce, his large belly drooping as he bent over, he caught a glimpse of Young Maple. Noticing his gaze, Young Maple tried to impress him with her smooth bark and tantalising branches. "Ah!" he exclaimed, assessing the maple. "Too young! But an old man needs to get cosy by some fire. This will have to do."

Young Maple's jaw dropped as she was chopped and bundled up like the rest of her species. Spruce remained silent.

The sun had dropped into the lake and fished out the moon. The older, bigger maple logs were loaded onto a cart and sent on their way to be fashioned into musical instruments, leaving the woodcutter with a pocket fat with money. He used it to buy a turkey for a feast, then began the journey home. He still had Spruce and Young Maple tethered together and hauled over his shoulder, trailing along behind him.

Soon they arrived at a lodge. It looked warm and inviting inside. But Spruce was placed outside, in front of the window. "Kids, look what Dad has got you!" the old man exclaimed as he burst through the door. The children looked up hopefully, their eyes darting behind the old man's back in search of presents. "Ah, not until we've had our dinner," said the old man, more gently this time. He crouched down and started a fire, using Young Maple to stoke up the flames. Outside, Spruce calmly waited to be made into floorboards, like the maples had said he would be.

But after dinner, the woodcutter came for Spruce and announced to his children, "Well, Daddy got you this." Now that he was inside, Spruce could see the glistening floor beneath him and wondered why the woodcutter had brought him home.

It didn't take long to find out. An hour later, Spruce was adorned from head to toe with ribbons and ornaments. A bright star was perched on his head like a crown. The children's eyes were shining as they gazed up at Spruce adoringly. He looked magnificent.

Spruce had always thought that the thing he wanted most was to be like all the other maples. But now he knew there was no one he wanted to be but himself.