

The Cedar Elfin

Varlam Shalamov

In the Far North, on the boundary between *taiga* and tundra, among the dwarf birch and the low-growing rowan bushes—with their unexpectedly large, juicy, bright-yellow berries—and among the 600-year-old larch, which mature only after 300 years, there lives a very special tree: the cedar elfin. A distant relative of the cedar, it is a coniferous evergreen shrub with a trunk two to three meters high and thicker than a man's arm. It is hardy and grows along mountainsides by clinging to the soil in cracks between rocks. Like all northern trees, it is brave and obstinate. And uncommonly sensitive.

It is late fall, almost winter, and snow is long overdue. For several days now, low blue clouds the color of bruises have lurked at the edge of the white sky. And today, since morning, the penetrating fall wind has gone threateningly quiet. Does it smell of snow? No. Snow is not coming. The cedar elfin has not lain down yet. One day passes into the next and still no snow. The clouds roam somewhere behind the hills and a small pale sun enters the wide sky, entirely in keeping with autumn...

And then the cedar elfin bends. It bends lower and lower, as if under an immeasurable, ever-increasing weight. It scratches the rock with its tip and flattens itself to the earth, extending its emerald boughs. It spreads out, resembling an octopus dressed in green quills. Lying thus, it waits a day or two. Then snow spills from the white sky like powder, and the cedar elfin plunges like a bear into its wintry sleep. Huge snowy blisters swell on the white mountain slopes—these are the prostrate cedar elfin bushes, wintering over.

And toward the end of winter, when a three-meter thick layer of snow still covers the earth, when blizzards pound dense snows into the valleys, snows that only steel can penetrate, people vainly look for signs of spring in nature, even though the calendar says spring should already have arrived. But the day still feels like winter—the air is thin and dry, no different from January. Fortunately, a human's senses are too crude, his perceptions too simplistic. In fact, he has but a few types of feelings, five in all, and that is insufficient for prophecy and divination.

Nature's senses are more refined. We have proof of this. Remember the salmon, which will only lay its eggs in the exact river from whence it was born and grew into an adult? Or how about the mysterious routes of avian migrations? And we know plenty about barometric plants and flowers.

And so, amidst the endless snowy whiteness, amidst the hopelessness, there suddenly sprouts the cedar elfin. It shakes off the snow, straightens itself up to its full height, and raises its green, icy, reddish trunk to the sky. It hears a call of spring inaudible to us and, believing it, stands erect before any others in the North. Winter has ended.

There is something else: campfires. The cedar elfin is too trusting. It so dislikes the winter that it is willing to believe in the warmth of the campfire. If, in the winter, you build a fire near a bent cedar elfin, doubled over for the winter, the cedar elfin will stand up. When the fire goes out, the disillusioned cedar, weeping from shame, will again bend and lie down whence it came. And be covered with snow.

No, it does not only foretell the weather. The cedar elfin is the tree of hope, the only evergreen in the Far North. Amid the blinding white snows, its dull green coniferous branches speak of the South, of warmth, of life. In the summer, it is modest and inconspicuous—everything around it is rushing to blossom, seeking to thrive in the short northern summer. The flowers of spring, summer and fall overtake one another in an impetuous, wild blooming. But fall is near, and already the thin yellow pine needles are falling, the deciduous trees are becoming naked, the straw-colored grass is changing color and drying out, the forest is emptying, and in the distance one can see how, amid the pale yellow grasses and the grey moss of the forest, there burns the massive green torches of the cedar elfins.

I have always found the cedar elfin to be the most poetic of Russian trees, better than the glorified weeping willow, the sycamore or the cypress. And wood from the cedar elfin burns hotter.

First published in Russian: 1960
Translation by Paul E. Richardson