



It may seem like a strange thing: there are few trees in Iceland, and most of those Birches. Even so, each year, in a tradition that may come from an age or place a long way away, the Elves of Iceland travel far and wide to collect an Evergreen tree for their Álfakirkja, their elven church, for the celebration of the Winter Solstice.

So important is this tradition, that planning for each year's tree begins eleven moons prior, while the length of daylight is still short.

(Some older elves grumble that in this age of the humans' airplanes, the younger elves just want to travel to the Caribbean, where it is bright and warm.)

In mid-January, after the Solstice revelries are past and everyone has had several days of long napping, planning begins.

A number of elves, a group that includes young and old, males and females, tall and short, are selected to travel to seek the next year's tree.

A region is selected, where a tree that is of the right height, and sturdy, might be found.

And so in this year, designated by humans as 2013, the elves decided to seek a tree in North America, in New York State. Many suitable trees had been found there in the past, and this year's group included several youngsters who had never seen that continent.

Now, the eldest of the group, a woman who had been on many journeys seeking trees, held a secret hope: that they might find a Guide. This Guide would likely be a human, who had been in a prior life a Winter Solstice tree in the Álfakirkja. Such a Guide would (often without even knowing what was happening) lead them to their tree. When trees were found with the help of a Guide, they were more lovely than any others. It had been a long time since such a Guide had appeared, and so the elder elf tried not to hope too much.

The decisions made, the plans laid out, the airplane tickets, provisions and cameras procured, the elves began their annual journey.

First, of course, to the Caribbean. Trinidad and Tobago were always a favorite, particularly because the elves could celebrate Carnival out in the open, and not elicit any unusual stares.



The elves took pictures of some participants.



The elves learned the name of the Trini lady in these pictures: Anne-Marie.

Then off to Tobago to meet up with some old friends.



One of the younger girl elves said she saw the same lady human scuba diving as they had seen in Carnival. The young girl said she was sure because this lady was very distinctive, very tall and big, like she imagined trees to be.

The rest of the elves said that was unlikely and she should shush. But the Eldest Elf wondered, and tried not to hope.

The younger elves, who hadn't ventured far from Iceland before, were astonished at the lush trees and plants, at the birds, (like the Kingfisher whose nest they got a picture of) and at the balmy weather in Tobago.



Their excursion to the Caribbean was over, and now it was time to head to New York State to start searching out a tree. The younger elves were excited to see New York City for the first time, from the airplane as they landed at JFK.



While taking a picture of the Empire State Building, the Young Girl Elf saw the tall lady human again. She tried to get a picture of her, but it came out blurry.



The older elves wanted to take an excursion to Pennsylvania, to look for a turtle friend. They tried the Norristown Zoo.



They met some owl friends, and some rabbit friends



... but the only turtle they saw was a young human, named Marti, pretending to be a turtle.



Marti was taking pictures of the animals.



Then the Young Girl Elf saw the Tall Lady! She was pretending to be a frog, as Marti took her picture.

The Eldest and the Young Girl Elf decided to follow the Tall Lady, who lived in Brooklyn. In centuries past, many lovely trees had come from this region.



The Tall Lady and her friend Deborah visited the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, and Greenwood Cemetery. While there were many beautiful trees, none that were suitable for a Winter Solstice tree. Still the Eldest Elf was starting to think that The Tall Lady might be a guide.....



....if only because she took so many pictures of trees.

The Young Girl Elf marveled at the flowering Magnolia and Cherry trees.

The Tall Lady's sister (who was even taller) and Marti came for a visit! They made plans to visit Eastern Connecticut.



Marti's Cousins lived in Eastern Connecticut...



...and while there were no suitable trees, there was a very interesting abandoned textile factory.





Then the Tall Lady went (with a group led by some staff of the distinguished Discover Outdoors) to Northern New York State, to the Adirondacks. Even though it was mid-spring, the weather was snowy and chilly.

It had been several centuries since the Eldest Elf had been to this region. It was as lovely as she remembered, and was one of the few places in the world that she thought almost as beautiful as her home.

Most of the deciduous trees were still bare, so checking the conifers for height, fullness and health was a simple task.

There, in the Adirondacks the elves found their tree, tall, full and strong. The Eldest Elf smiled to herself. The Tall Lady *had* been a guide.

The elves caused a lovely flower to grow near the tree, so they could easily find it when the winter solstice approached.



The Young Girl Elf wanted to reveal herself to the Tall Lady to thank her.

However, her self-manifestations was less than perfect.



Now was the time of the Summer Solstice, one of the two most important days of the year. The elves returned to Iceland for the festivities, and to announce that the tree was found.

Everyone was astonished at the news. Once the festivities were completed, the elders frowned, and told the travelling elves that it was impossible that they had succeeded, that they must continue their voyages.

None of the travelling elves objected. They submitted their expense vouchers, and returned to New York State.

On the flight, the Eldest Elf wondered how to convey to the Elders that she had found a Guide.....

The Tall Lady had a friend named Debby, and the two of them went hiking several times in Harriman State Park.

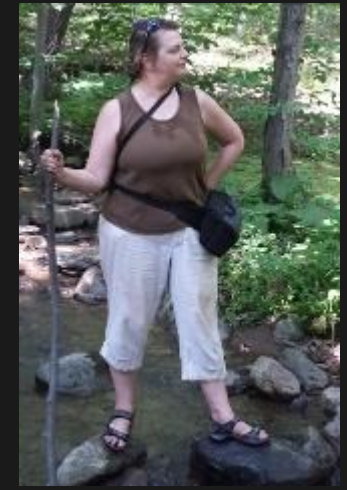


Debby was very patient as the Tall Lady took even more pictures of trees.

Luna was a smart and friendly dog, who looked after a friend of the Tall Lady, named Carl.



The Tall Lady, Marti and the Tall Lady's Taller Sister (whose name was Christie) visited the Lakota Wolf preserve, where they went camping.



The Tall Lady and Carl had some delicious drinks for his birthday.



The Elves shared a joke with one of the wolves there. The younger elves asked if the wolves were unhappy in the large pens. The wolves faces grew long. The Eldest Elf said that these wolves had had painful and difficult lives, and that they were now safe and happy at Lakota, in New Jersey.

The Tall Lady hiked, camped, back-packed, climbed rocks, and rappelled with the Discover Outdoors humans, in different parts of New York State.



They were also very patient as she took pictures of trees.





The Tall Lady and her friends: Kathy, Chrissie, Misty and Debby had a picnic, along with husbands Scott and Christophe, and kids Kira, Marti, Hunter and Benjamin



The Tall Lady, Marti, Christie and Jeff (Marti's Dad) visited the beach in New Jersey. Pancakes!!!

There were beaches in Iceland, but none as nice as the one in Ocean City, New Jersey.



When the Tall Lady and Marti visited the zoo in Cape May, the Elves found the Turtle they had sought!

The Elves and the Turtle all had a long conversation about the weather and Global Warming and if humans were ultimately a good or bad thing.

Some of the Elves argued that humans had brought nothing but disease and destruction to the Earth. They listed examples of war, cruelty and indifference.

As they spoke, the Turtle munched on a leaf, slowly.

The Eldest Elf pointed to the Tall Lady and Marti. She spoke about the Tall Lady and her colleagues at Common Ground who help humans who are sick and impoverished. The Tall Lady's immediate staff, Estevan, Sandra, Magdi, Greg and Jeff; and her boss Toby contribute to Common Ground's success.

The Tall Lady's neighbors at 408 St. John's Place make safe, comfortable (and bed-bug free!) homes in Brooklyn with their families.

The Tall Lady hikes with Discover Outdoors, with Max and Evan and the other guides, who teach humans how to enjoy the outdoors while leaving no trace.

The Tall Lady's friend, Valerie, a Mom and Episcopal Minister, brings comfort and guidance to those around her. Another friend, Kathy, cares for her three children despite struggling with medical issues. Deborah uses Art to help people with mental illness improve their lives. Her friend Debby is a committed vegetarian and shares a special bond with the animals and humans who come into her life. Her sister Christie cares for Marti through all of her medical issues, and, under the auspices of Flashes of Hope, provides photos of ill children to their families.

With all of these examples, how could anyone say that humans were wholly malignant?

The Elves turned to the Turtle, who was as old as the oldest of them, to pass judgment.

But the Turtle said nothing. She only paused and posed for Marti to take her picture.

Then, late in the month that the humans called August, a few moons after the summer solstice, when the sun was still high, the Eldest Elf revealed a surprise. She had figured out how to show the Elders that she had found a Guide.

The solution was simple! With the help of the Discover Outdoors humans, and also some humans from Arctic Adventures in Iceland...

...she brought the Tall Lady to Iceland!



Right away, the Tall Lady began to take a lot of pictures.



Míó, of Artic Adventures, and Max, of Discover Outdoors led Angkana, Karinna, Scott and Deborah on a five day hike on the Landmannalaugar Trail in the Highlands of Iceland. The Elves were all happy to be back in their familiar home.



The Tall Lady marveled at the beauty of the Highlands.

The Elders understood finally that the Tall Lady was clearly a Tree Guide, and agreed on the tree the Travelling Elves had selected.

Many Elves followed the hiking group along the trail, making sure the group saw how lovely their home was.



They even allowed the Tall Lady and the hiking group to see the Álfa Kirkja, which very few humans had ever seen.



Their task accomplished the Travelling Elves assumed that they would remain at home, and prepare for Autumn. But the Eldest Elf had learned that the Tall Lady would soon travel to Las Vegas, which means “The Meadows”, in North America. The younger elves begged to be allowed to go. And so they continued to follow the Tall Lady.



The Tall Lady hiked in a place with the most beautiful Red Rocks.... ..and in a Valley that looked as though it had once been filled with Fire.



With her friend and supervisor, Toby, the Tall Lady visited the Neon Museum. The Eldest Elf was reminded of the great works of Art created by humans.

(A few of the Elves also attend the HR Technology Conference in Las Vegas with the Tall Lady and Toby. They found it to be very informative!)



In November, as the days grew shorter, and the leaves fell from the trees, the Elves took one last hike with the Tall Lady, and her friend Valerie, in Harriman.

After that, the Tall Lady stayed in her warm apartment and prepared for the Winter festivities. Many interesting projects at Common Ground kept her in her office. As she baked cookies, she thought about the places she had seen that year

She spent time with her friends and family, and began planning trips for the following year. (The Elves wondered if they could go scuba diving in the Galapagos with her!)

In December the Elves returned to the Adirondacks to collect their tree. The days grew short, and the Winter Solstice approached.



As they transported their Evergreen to the Álfa Kirkja, they thought about their year, and the upcoming festivities, and about years that had passed, and those yet to come.

