



Why the Oak Trees Keep Their Leaves

Retold by Rosanne Bane

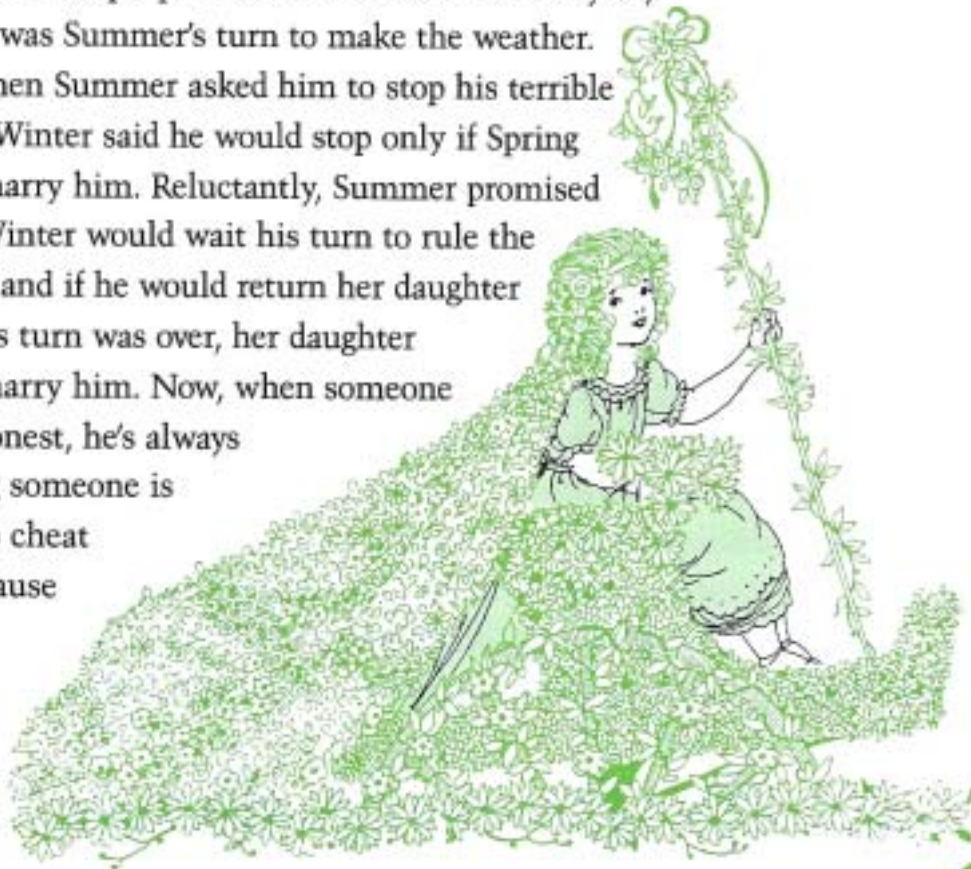


This is an old story that I heard years ago. It might be a story from the Cree or some other Native American group.

Long ago, when trees talked and shared their wisdom with people who listened respectfully, there was a time when Winter wanted to marry Summer's daughter, Spring. But he didn't want to marry her because he loved her; oh no, he was just greedy.

Spring was a beautiful young woman who always wore green. Winter was an ugly old man with a gray face and whiskers made of ice. Spring didn't want to marry Winter and go far away to the North to live in his house made of ice. That made Winter angry and he sent his storms to torment all the people even in the middle of the year, when it was Summer's turn to make the weather.

When Summer asked him to stop his terrible storms, Winter said he would stop only if Spring would marry him. Reluctantly, Summer promised that if Winter would wait his turn to rule the weather and if he would return her daughter when his turn was over, her daughter would marry him. Now, when someone is not honest, he's always thinking someone is trying to cheat him because





that is what he would do. So Winter said, "How can I be sure your daughter will do as you promise?"

Summer answered, "Because she is a loyal daughter and will see that this is what she must do for the sake of all people." Spring was unhappy when her mother told her, but she agreed. Winter stopped his storms and Spring spent a warm and wonderful season with her mother. She was happy and almost forgot that she would have to marry Winter when he came to rule the weather.

But then Winter's nephew, Autumn, came and began to paint the leaves yellow and orange and red and to sprinkle frost over the forest. Spring walked in the forest for hours. The bright leaves had made her happy before, but now they made her sad. She sat down at the base of an oak tree and began to cry.

"Why are you crying?" the oak asked her.

"Because soon I will have to marry Winter and live in his house of ice until his time is over, and I can return to dance my mother awake again."

Then the oak tree sighed and his branches shook with sobs.

"Why are you crying, Oak?" Spring asked.

"Because I heard Winter's voice in the wind, and he has said that once he takes you to his house of ice, he will never let you go. The people will never see Summer again. You must not go to his house of ice."

Spring stood up again. "But I must honor my mother's promise!"

Just then, they heard the wind howl and Winter appeared in the trees. He smiled at Spring and said, "I am waiting eagerly for you, my bride."





Spring shuddered. "I am not ready to go with you, Old Man Winter. It is not your turn to rule yet. I will not marry you before all the two-foots and the four-foots have gathered Summer's bounty and prepared for your coming. You promised to keep your storms away until it is your turn."

Winter frowned. "And how will we know when that is? How do I know the people will not cheat and say they are not ready just to keep me from my bride? I say my time is now!" he thundered.

Spring steadied herself against the cold wind by placing her hands on Oak's strong bark. She felt his courage and strength, and he told her what to say to Winter.





"When all the trees have lost their leaves, we will know that Autumn has finished painting the forest. I will marry you then and go to your house of ice far away in the North."

Winter laughed then. "Yes! When the trees lose their leaves, I rule. You will go to my house, and you shall never leave. Without her daughter to wake the land and the people, Summer will never rule again." Winter laughed once more, and it was a cold, hard laugh that shook the leaves off a nearby maple.

Spring hid her face in her hands, but Oak stood straight and tall. Winter took a deep breath that turned his face from gray to black. Then he blew a wind that shook the leaves from all the trees but the strong and loyal Oak.

"Come, Spring," Winter said, "You will live in my house of ice forever."

"No," said Oak. "I have not lost my leaves and I will not lose them until Spring wakes the land and the other trees blossom again. I heard your thoughts in the wind and saw the evil in your black heart, Winter. I will not let you rule over all the land forever."

Oak kept his promise. Winter blew cold blasts and sent terrible snowstorms that shook Oak's branches until they almost broke. But still, Oak kept his leaves; finally Winter was exhausted and left. Spring danced in the forest, waking the flowers and trees to greet Summer again. Every year Winter tried to force Oak to lose his leaves, but he never did.

And to this very day, when all the other trees lose their leaves, the great oaks keep theirs in memory of their ancestor's promise. Only in Spring's time, when the other trees grow new leaves, do the oaks drop theirs. Winter cannot steal Spring away and control the weather forever.

