

## The witch tree from Lille

In the past, poachers often saw black cats or witches dancing around "the witch tree" at midnight before flying off to Cologne for the witches' Sabbath ... Others say that those who wandered around here at night invariably got lost and ended up back at the witch tree. Children were told never to hit Den Heksenboom with a stick, because the witches would fall out of the crown and the bad consequences could not be foreseen. There are many stories about the Witch tree.

A few years ago, they organized the event FAKE, organized by Kempens Karakter, and shared the story of Jef van Koerel Kabee: "When I was about eighteen years old, I was a grinder and one day in the factory there was a bet that whoever dared to go alone at night to the witch tree and back, would win twenty francs, put together by all the grinders. It was pitch-dark that night, but I easily made it to the witch tree and took the marked stick that had been put into the ground there by my workmates in the early evening. I returned along the Herregracht canal but... I no longer reached the inhabited world. A little later I came to a crossroads and to my horror I found myself back ... at the witch tree. Whatever road I took, I always came back to the same place! It was only when it got light that I came back to civilization. I was not afraid, but I had a great fright...".

On the website of the municipality of Lille, you can read the following: "Likewise, two young lovers who were 'talking' under the broad crown of the Witch tree before saying goodbye to each other. Suddenly the two young people felt they were not alone ... Above them something was stirring and rustling. Worried, one of them said: "If you are from heaven, spit, if you are from hell, spit! Whereupon a few drops splashed down on the heads of these two people, although there was not a cloud in sight! What had happened?"

## A Pine Tree in the Campine

Once upon a time, there was -and there was not- a pine tree, rooted in the Campine soil. Before the pine was born, the Campine was cut off from the rest of the world. The poor farmers lived very frugally; because the soil was infertile for many crops. Their diet consisted mainly of porridge and herbs from the moors. Then came the canals, which connected the great city of Antwerp with the great mines in Limburg, and the canals brought new ideas, and the new ideas attracted new trees. Also the parents of this pine tree, lured with false promises, migrated full of curiosity to this mysterious foreign land and gave birth to this pine tree, which would later become known as the Witch Tree. Very soon the pines discovered that no long and happy life awaited them; they were planted close together, no place for comfort, only to be felled after twenty years. Their dead bodies were shipped to the mines of Limburg. Powerless, the witch tree watched as the older pines, including his parents, were cut down and began to cry.

Now you must know that in those days people still often talked to trees, and even more, trees could hear them speak. More often than today.

For example, there lived a young girl, a daughter of a mining worker. She had seen her father leave for Limburg and missed him greatly.

Her mother was a witch, who was glad that her father was gone, because now she didn't have to practice magic secretly. Her husband did not know that she was a witch. In those days, they-and especially those of the Catholic Church-did not like smart women who still knew everything about the rest of nature.

The mother decided it was time to teach her daughter witchcraft. The girl was interested because she hoped she might be able to use magic to help her father, but once her mother understood her motive, she made her daughter promise never to use magic in front of her father. The girl did not want to learn magic after that and ran into the woods and moors. She sought solace in the pine forests, but seeing the pines did not help her. She was jealous of the pines that would help her father in mining. She wanted to be with him. Then a tear fell on her head. She looked up and saw more tears hanging from the branches of the pine under which she sat.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

And the tree told what terrible fate was in store for him. That girl was no stupid girl either. She understood more about the world than most people, so she began to cry. Would her father be treated like that too? That night she could not sleep. At the crack of dawn, she went to her mother and asked to teach her magic after all.

"What changed your mind?" her mother asked.

"I want to help a pine tree," the girl said. Then she told the story of the pine tree.

Her mother sighted. As a witch, she obviously knew the sufferings of the pines and young men sent to mines. She had also thought before how to help them, but found nothing. This time, however, there was more at stake. Her daughter. She would run away. She knew.

And then -because mothers get their best ideas when their daughters are at risk- the witch got an idea how to help the pine tree.

"Look," she said, we can only help one tree. This is heavy magic and requires a lot of magical ingredients. I only have enough to help one tree." Then she handed her daughter a bag of all kinds of ingredients, such as the mane plucked by a full moon, the kiss of a viper, the tears of an orchid and the yellow of a dandelion. "It's actually a mean witch's trick that we're going to deliver on whoever was going to harm this tree," her mother said.

That night they went to the tree and enchanted it so that no one could harm it. As soon as someone hit this tree with a stick, axe or anything else, cats and other mischief would jump out of the tree. And yes, a moon later people tried to cut down this tree, but were overwhelmed by thousands of witches and cats that fell out of the tree and bit them. Other people tried and were also all overcome by all kinds of mischief. And so that tree got a name and its legend.

And that time when a couple felt wetness on them, those were tears from that tree. After all, that young woman was the witch's daughter who helped him. She looked up and smiled. The young man wondered from where that rain came and if the devil really lived there, but the young woman smiled at the crown of the tree. Now that she was older, she heard trees talk less, but she still remembered everything. And she knew that tree did like witchcraft. That was how it could survive. She realized that sometimes being bold was also a lesson to her and other too-good-women.

She laughed, gave the frightened young man a quick kiss on the cheek -which was quite brutal in those days- and left a puzzled man behind. The young woman left for the big city to learn more about mining.

Who knows, she would become one of the first female engineers.

And the witch tree lived happily ever after, until it died a natural death, in complete peace, and surrounded by its younger companions.

***About the story itself:*** This story is a retelling of the 'witch tree' in Lille. Some years ago, this tree died, but it got a tombstone as some sort of monument. Many legends exist about this 'enchanted' tree, but no legend touches the fact that the pine tree did not belong to this region more than a century ago. The Campine region was an isolated region in Flanders, Belgium, until mining activities started. Many pine trees were planted to support the mining industry. Some decades later, the mining industry invited 'guest workers' from Italy, Turkey... to work in the mines.

The pine tree in the story is an 'immigrant second generation' and refers to the human immigrants in the same region; how pines and human immigrants contributed to the 'economic growth' but were also

treated as less. I hope this story sparks a debate about the idea of 'exotic species', 'invasive species' and how it affects belonging and initiates othering. This retelling is part of a bigger project. I will soon start a second year working on this project and create space for others to retell folk stories to root. The original version (this is a translation from Flemish) is shared during a circle at the beginning of a forest bath. Interestingly, the pine trees around us started to dance with the wind when I told the story. They were listening too.