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## The cone sample

He could hear the hissing coming from the spruce's deformed root, outside the tent. He was starting to get used to the sound pattern: a low, irregular hissing that peaked every so often in a growl or whistle, like a complaint. It was the same sort of whistling a piece of wood makes on a blazing fire when a glowing ember is about to explode from the log, but the threat of explosion in this sound contained the whole tree, not just the twisted root clump that stuck up from the ground. This was the tree's gaping wound. The root sore seemed to be a vent for the sick spruce.

Ola had been observing the site in Widtskogen since late afternoon. It had taken him three hours to drive here and the daylight had dwindled as he set up. He couldn't sleep, even though it was nearly half past one. Boiled tree, he thought to himself. Was the root sore and the abnormal arched root a sign that the wood fibre mass was stewing in some kind of local, chemical process that would turn it into cellulose before the night was over? He had never heard of anything like that before, but the others were bound to ask the same questions when they came, because he had never seen anything like this before either. There's a few folk from Forest and Landscape should come and have a look at the tree, Ola thought. But at the same time, he admitted to himself that he wanted to be the only one observing the tree.

If nothing else, the noises and steam coming from the root sore seemed to express the pain that the spruce was in. He lay still and closed his eyes. Tight. The evening had given no answers and so much time had passed now that he crammed more and more thoughts into different

scenarios. In one, the spruce tree exploded from the ground in a great eruption of twig chaos, a mighty shower of branch spears, chips and splinters and pine cones hurled over the neighbouring tree tops. One image, one solution! Tight, he suddenly was aware of how tight he was squeezing his eyes shut, even though he was wide awake. He opened them, opened the zip on his sleeping bag and let the cold air in. He still had his long-johns on, even though he wasn't cold. He hadn't been cold all evening. There was a definite heat emanating from the tree and root sore. Another hiss rang out, a real deep growl it was, it sounded encapsulated, like it came from the very depths, like the noises from human intestines. That was powerful, he thought, that was something new. So he wasn't used to the noises from the root clump after all. But he wasn't frightened, despite all the changes since nightfall; the sounds that had vanished, the new sounds that were added, the scenarios that multiplied.

He undid the tent flap. The trees and trunks in towards the Widttjern lake were faintly illuminated by the snow, but he couldn't see the moon. He did up his boots and pulled on his thick outdoor sweater. The Norwegian Forest Research emblem was stitched on as close as possible to the heart. Following the merger between Norwegian Forest Research and the Norwegian Institute of Land Inventory, now called the Norwegian Forest and Landscape Institute, a new outdoor sweater had been ordered, which was exactly the same as the old one, except that the new logo was printed on the back, something the management of the Institute believed was wholly a production error, and as the dispute with the manufacturer was not over yet, his new sweater was still lying in its plastic packaging at home, unused. Ola put on his hat, even though it was mild enough

outside. Yep, the tree was still standing in the same place as it had been the last time he looked. Again he wondered if the lateral root running away from the root clump had got fatter, even since he arrived. He didn't think it was possible. But why was he even thinking it then? The clump where the wound was had formed where the root arched, a sick corkscrew that stood about a metre and a half from the ground, as though it had come up for air or to release its poison. The root was also thickest here, before levelling off and running down along the ground for a while, then disappearing under the earth again. It was impossible to tell whether or not the root clump had been out in the open for a while before the heat started to develop. An extreme variant of snow blight was one theory, or brown felt blight, but there was no dark mycelium on the branches, as far as he could see. He really wanted to get up in the tree to see if there were any changes in the needles. In his field book, he had also noted shingled hedgehog as a possible explanation. But the spores needed temperatures of around 37 degrees to germinate and the temperature around the root was much higher, more like boiling than germinating heat.

The stone he used as a toilet was a clear marker in the terrain. It was here by the stone that the snow stopped and the bare ground started. The heat from the spruce had resulted in a local thaw. He extended the zone with yellow piss. Why hadn't he put out markers here to see if the thaw had accelerated at the edges? And why wasn't he tired? He broke off a branch from a birch tree, and stuck it in the edge of the snow like a pole. The snow lay thick on the heather, even where it passed under other spruce trees. There were drifts on either side of the heated lateral root and Ola thought that the vegetation along the root looked as if it was coming to life too, but he couldn't be sure. No doubt daylight would help. And

then he'd take more photographs.

He went over to the tripod and turned on the work lamp that shone into the forest towards Widttjern. What was he looking for? Ola felt alert, wide awake. He turned the lamp in towards the trunk of the spruce. He knew that the trunk was warm, but he still went over and put his hand on the bark. How long would it take for him to accept the simple truth, that the tree standing in front of him was warm and sick and didn't have the answers he needed? The wood fibre he had extracted from the wound looked normal, with white sap. But the consistency was softer. And something had already come out of the resin tap. It wouldn't normally happen that fast. Ola took the cooking thermometer out of his pocket and thrust it into the trunk.

In the meantime, he relit the fire, more for the sake of light and company than anything else. He hadn't worn his jacket since he arrived. He got the fire going with some kindling and paper, and he still had some good logs in front of the tent. The flames roared up, talking in the same language as the tree. The whistling of some still wet wood harmonised with the whistling from the root. It would be easy to fell the spruce and study the phenol content of the annual rings, but that wasn't what he wanted to do, it wasn't constructive to think like that; autopsy, diagnosis, some environmental initiative, work done. If the tree could recover where it was, that would be best. Or if the tree could tell him something new, in an hour, in five hours, in twenty-four hours.

He checked the thermometer, 52 degrees, as before. He'd leave it for a while longer. He swept the beam of light from the work lamp upwards. The branches had a good span, free of snow as far as he could see, so the heat was radiating upwards, outwards. The whole tree was in rhythm

with the stoker in its cellar, the root clump. But sick? He would have to wait for daylight before he could look at the crown, but there was nothing that looked abnormal further up, and the cones hung in heavy clusters. He peered up at the branches for a suitable path to climb. It wouldn't work. He would have to try to get a stepladder if he was going to collect samples from the crown. Even if he found cones on the ground, it was the ones at the top that would give him the answer. He swung the light back down, heard a deep creaking in the forest. It was nothing, just some frozen water that wanted to talk. He looked for cones around the base of the trunk. None. He crept right in to the trunk, hunkered down under the branches; it was like coming in, a spruce hut, standing there ready without having been built. It was softer in here, different sounds under the branched roof, warmer, he could sit up here, yes, it was a hut. He looked out; the root was still bubbling and boiling. There was no peace. He unfolded up and out from the spruce hut. And not a pine cone to be seen. Peculiar. He had to get a cone sample. The spruce was clinging on to all its cones, now that it was sick. A happy, feverish spruce, perhaps, rather than a sick spruce.

He turned the work lamp towards the root, and walked over. Was there a sweet smell? Didn't it smell just like coins? Ola's right foot slipped on the muddy earth, jarring his hip. I can feel the tiredness coming over me now, he thought to himself. He stood, waited a while, his pulse hammering in his leg; he was at home again, on the stairs where he grew up, full speed, up and down without falling, his body permeated by the house, his feet knew the exact measurements of the steps and his arm and hand in the air knew the exact height of the banister if he needed to grab it. There really was a sweet smell here. It reminded him of coins. He reckoned the

smell was released with the steam, that it came from the resin flow. So there was a change to note, because he was sure that the smell hadn't been there earlier in the evening.

The night was just as long both ways now; what was past, the evening and the short rest in the tent, lay behind him in time, and what was to come, the dawn and breakfast, lay ahead. Thinking about the light, about food, made Ola happy. He could eat now, but he wanted to wait. A lovely, sweet smell. His hand rested on the root where the corkscrew slimmed into thinner wood. Nice and warm. He could feel that the wood fibre was porous. The actual wound was too hot to touch. The thermometer had shown 91 degrees the last time he put it directly in the wound. He would have to take the temperature again soon. There was more heat coming from the root clump than from the fire by the tent. A good fire, he thought, and I have to keep it that way for the rest of the night. He looked over at the trunk. Other people might come in the morning, the local paper at least. What would he say to them? A runaway condition that results in a rising temperature? That's what he could say. Then he could reject the theory that rust fungus was savaging the pine cones and they were foaming with sickness. This was a completely new tree disease. An overproduction of some kind or another. A distortion in the relationship between the gametophyte and sporophyte, that the unifying zygote was unbalanced and running riot again and again and again.

Back to the tree. Tilt the beam from the work lamp. Ola lifted back his head and looked up, everything was weighing on his shoulders. Alone with the job, here, in the night! How the tree was boiling and bubbling, a real winter party! The spruce tree rose up and up, no star at the top. He couldn't see

it, but he knew the crown was there when the wind soughed through it. In daylight he would be able to establish whether things were so bad that the tree had grown in width, when he could see the rockface in the clearing on the other side of Widttjern again and could use it to measure.

He turned the light back to the root again. He had to have another look down there. More to discover there. The energy field warmed him straight through. The root sore was agitated and did not look like it was getting better. Go over and touch the root again, Ola thought and stepped into the pool of light: sick sores of smoke and fire, what will bind the evening quiet. The voice came from the spruce tree. So it was here, it was to be just here, on his patch, in his night forest, the sickest tree, that which no longer could be called normal. And the spruce tree, with its language of air and steam, its sounds of seething and sighing. What arose from thoughts and visions of the night, what was left on the ground, what disappeared into the air forever? Ola closed his eyes and held on to the heated root.

'When daylight comes,' he said and lifted his hand. He saw something. O night's soft wings, where goes she hence, this night I am no longer my own? The words and visions accelerated, the dark root was bright with power, rays of energy surged up his arm and Ola hugged the root back, he held on but didn't feel the ground, no, he just felt the air, the air in all that he held in his right hand, he grabbed the pine cone and felt it prickle, he saw the pine cone, a pine cone that rose and fell, spinning on its own axis, hanging there, hanging there, waiting for Ola who grabbed and grabbed and felt the energy from the root running up his arm, shooting up to the hand that held the cone and yes, a warmth enveloped him, complete calm, Ola was not afraid of the pulse; this quickening in touch, the night gave the only change worth mentioning, a rasping wind over his eyelids that was not

really wind at all, and the dark embraced the warmest point in the forest; he didn't need to see, because the bushes were growing by themselves, he didn't want to see; the pine cone kept him connected to the root, he became a static embrace spanning from the ground out through the two hands that were holding on to the pulsating touch, faster now! It raced through the forest like a final storm, a forest devoid of capercaillies where the word rose up in a song, a song that carried only one word: cone, the word that Ola now said: cone, he said it quietly, slowly he blew seed upon seed in front of him into the warm dark that he held in his hand in the air, and the cone was caught, here was the cone, yes, the cone, he felt the cone, yes, his cone, caught in his hand forever, and the cone hung in the air and was new to Ola who held on to the root and guided himself, the cone and the root back to the tree as he said Thank You.

Ola opened his eyes and breathed, the voice disintegrated and he carefully freed himself from the root grip while he held his right hand straight up in the air, clasped round the cone that was not there. He lowered his hand, opened his fist. How powerful the moment was, how powerful the forest and the night song!

'I...'

Ola said. He didn't say any more, but went over to the fire and sat down on the camping chair. He felt dizzy, but also exhilarated. A cone vision! he thought. He started to rub his arm, massage the muscles that were tense after his endurance test at the root. He was bleeding slightly from a graze on the lower joint of his pinkie, his hand was shaking and his forearm was stiff and aching. A pine cone vision, he thought again. In his right-hand palm there were small indentations from where his nails had gripped round the imaginary cone in the air. He had had a cone vision. That was quite clear. A real cone vision! I'm a small man in this forest, Ola

thought to himself and took off his sweater.

Ola dug out some clean underwear from his bag and changed out of the sweaty set. He hung his outdoor sweater over the roof, and in the beam from the work lamp he saw steam rising from that too. He saw so clearly what he didn't see. He took everything in. He thought about the small bushes at home, the ones he could only see the top of from his chair by the kitchen table. Even though he couldn't actually see the birds eating the suet balls that hung there, he saw them doing it all the same; the tops of the bushes shook with the movement of them eating, the heaviness of the birds holding on to the suet balls with their claws. Peck! Rip! Swallow! They were there right in front of him. Ola drank some water, took off his hat, but then put it back on. He could just stay sweaty up there. This was quite something, he thought to himself. There hadn't been talk of anyone having a real cone vision since Hans Rolland's series of powerful visions in the Sixties. He had read everything about Hans Rolland and it was Rolland himself who had exposed several colleagues' reported cone visions as shams, pure falsification, either because the vision had taken place in an area where there simply were no cone-bearing trees, or because the vision had come during meditation or under the influence of medicine. But here! Now, tonight! Ola stretched his arm out behind him, caught the other arm and stretched some more. He didn't know how he would formulate it in the report, or whether he should write it down at all. Food, he thought. Can't wait until breakfast after all. Or he could say it was breakfast now as it was nearly half past five. Hunger stepped into his empty stomach with a hollow, clawing hallo.

Had to get hold of a stepladder, he thought. The water was boiling so he added the coffee. He had opened a tin of sweetcorn. Put some salami

on crispbread. Ate. He could feel it getting lighter, as if the snow on the ground didn't have the same great, shining power over the branches. The trees standing closest to the sick spruce looked as if they were still unaffected, though one spruce had no branches until halfway up the trunk and there were no signs that an elk had been there. But the snow lay thick on its branches, the needles making up a fretwork that welcomed the snowflakes that created another fretwork, the warm and the cold working together, the snow climbing the trees like small Michelin men. The coffee tasted good, but it speeded up his thoughts and theories, which were hurled into more scenarios. A dog barked on the other side of Widttjern. A stepladder. Ola looked at his watch. Quarter to seven. In an hour he could go in search of people, borrow a ladder.

Ola assumed that it was the same dog that he had heard barking at dawn that now greeted him as he entered the farm. Just as it should be, the dog was an angry alarm tied on a lead. Ola had been affected by the warm sleepless night, he noticed as soon as he got onto the dirt road out of Widtskogen, and the dog no doubt registered a number of unfamiliar smells. The lead was attached to a cable that ran between the garage, the barn and the farmhouse. The dog ran as far from the cable as he could, a restricted and mean run for a dog, like the hare at greyhound races. The dog was forced to stop abruptly a couple of metres away from Ola and the doorbell. The cable sang out. Ola didn't need to ring the bell. A woman with big, slightly frightened eyes opened the door. Ola introduced himself, said that he was working for the *Norwegian Forest and Landscape Institute* in Widtskogen. He didn't say what with. But he needed to borrow a ladder. The woman's eyes didn't change, but her

voice was calm and gentle.

'Sven will be home again soon,' she said. The key words work, forest and ladder were easily connected directly to her husband.

'I'll talk to him then,' Ola said. She nodded. Did she have to have her husband's approval to lend him the ladder? Is that how bad things were here? Maybe there was an explanation for her anxious eyes after all? They didn't need to wait. Sven was coming along the road, with a rhythmical *tap-tap*.

'Sad to see him like that, he who was always so healthy,' his wife said and pointed. The farmer, Sven, now walked with sticks.

'My father worked here on the farm until he was 78, and barely ill a day before that,' she said.

'We may live longer now, but we're much sicker in the meantime,' she continued. Ola was surprised, not by what she said, but that she said it at all. She obviously had something to get off her chest, here and now, to a stranger. And he felt himself getting irritated, it was nothing to do with him, he didn't need to know, he needed help. Sven came over to them, said hallo. He was breathing heavily.

'So, are you working with that tree then?' he asked. Had he seen me yesterday?

'Yes. I've come to see if I could borrow a ladder,' Ola replied.

'It was one of my relatives who reported the tree. He walked past it yesterday. Going by what he said, it's an extreme form of fungus,' Sven said. His wife had disappeared into the house, there was nothing more for her to do out here.

'Do you know about tree diseases?' Ola asked. Sven was still finding it difficult to breathe, thin and sunken, must have been ill, or perhaps still

was.

'Best thing would be to cut it down and see if there are any traces of phenol in the last annual rings,' Sven said. Yes, he did know something, Ola thought to himself.

'A volcanic root, I was told. Yes, must come down and have a look myself. Could also be too much nitrogen,' Sven said and got his sticks into starting position. He turned and looked at the dog that was sniffing around down by the barn. Still at the outer limit, his lead straining at the cable. They walked towards the garage and Ola presumed that they were going to get the ladder.

'Have you seen or heard of anything similar here in the woods before?' Ola asked.

'No. And you haven't either?' Ola shook his head. Sven took a remote control out of his jacket pocket and pointed it at the garage door, which then started to rattle up. A white jeep was parked right outside the garage. That was maybe just as well, as there wasn't much room inside. Ola noticed two fruit machines at the very back. Must be plugged in, because they were whirring and flashing in there. Sven went over to a freezer, slapped the lid and turned to Ola.

'Fish. Would you like any?'

'Fish? Have you got enough?' Ola said.

'Was out on the fjord yesterday,' Sven replied. 'But you won't get any of the char I caught at Widttjern last weekend,' he said and laughed. His laughter turned into a nasty cough. He must be sick, Ola thought. He felt that he had to accept the fish in order to get the ladder, his ticket to the ladder lay in a bag of fish. Cod fillets. Sven took out two bags and put them down on the cement floor.

'You must have a look at this,' he said, and lifted out a plastic bag that crackled with ice. He opened it and pulled out a whole fish. Ola couldn't see what kind it was straight away, but he noticed pretty quickly that there was something wrong with the fish, something with its mouth, disfigured by a hook, Ola thought at first, but then he realised that it wasn't that either.

'Is that a cod?' Ola asked.

'Yes, it is,' answered Sven. 'But look closer at the skin, see how green it is. And here.' Sven pointed to the spine. A light stripe ran from the middle of the head down to the tail bone, a line that separated the spine from the rest of the body and the actual flesh. It was as if the fish's back was arched up and out, that there was no contact through the light stripe.

'You don't need to be particularly interested in fish to see that this, this is totally abnormal,' said Sven.

'And look at the mouth. A cod with a harelip! I don't think it's been maimed by another fisher.' One of the fruit machines played a short tune, which finished with a mechanical cheer and applause. Ola noticed the tiredness seeping into his body. His thoughts had to struggle their way through a layer of cotton wool, and on the other side, nothing was shocking, nothing was important enough. Sven put the cod back in the bag and mumbled 'Well, well.' One of these woolly thoughts was to ask Sven what he thought about doing with the deformed fish, but it escaped and Ola said nothing. Sven closed the lid of the freezer hard, and then put some pressure on it to make sure that it was closed properly. Ola picked up the bags of filets from the floor and discovered that it was good to get some blood to his head.

'So, the ladder! We can strap it on to the tractor, then I'll drive you back,'

Sven said.

Once Sven had stopped the tractor, it took a while for the sounds of the forest to settle down again. They undid the ladder and carried it between them, retracing Ola's footsteps. It was now that he heard it. Not a sound from the spruce tree. He could not hear the hissing from the root sore from the road, as he could when he left the place at daybreak. Had the wind changed direction and taken the sound with it? Ola walked so fast with the ladder that Sven, at the other end, had to ask him to slow down. A light wind in the tree tops, the crunching of snow steps, heavy sick breath from Sven, but no sound from the root.

They put the ladder down by the spruce. In daylight, the tent was a sharp green against the slope behind it. The work lamp was still on. Or had someone else been here? No steam from the root, but the area of bare ground had grown since breakfast. Sven stood, catching his breath.

Ola went over to the root, felt where it pushed up from the ground. Less warm? Then he felt the lateral root that ran away from the open wound; yes, it was definitely not as warm as it had been before breakfast. Heat was still radiating from the volcanic wound, but it looked like the wood fibres were more viscous now. He got out his pen knife, and poked around. Yes, definitely more viscous. The process had slowed to a halt or near enough. But the smell of coins was still there.

'Aren't you going to go up the tree?' Sven shouted. He was bent over double, still breathing heavily. Sick man bending over by sick spruce. Ola nodded, went over to the tent and got some plastic bags for his cone samples. He took the bags of cod filets out of his jacket pocket. Again he felt the blood rushing to his head; a new thought, a fresh thought and

the freshness told him that he was tired. I need to forget these here, he thought, and dropped the bags of fish to the ground between his stuff and the tent flap.

Sven was coughing badly again. He doesn't look good, Ola thought. They stood for a while longer.

'Are you alright?' Ola asked. Now it was Sven who nodded, but he stayed standing where he was as Ola opened out the ladder to its full length.

He lifted the ladder up and swung it in against the trunk of the spruce tree without waiting for Sven to help. And it felt fine, it was perfectly OK that Sven wasn't active, or wanting to get involved. The only thing he needed from Sven was his body weight at the bottom of the ladder. The ladder stretched up over the thick middle branches and in to where the trunk narrowed. He was sure to find some top cones there. Ola checked the thermometer in the trunk. 74 degrees. Hmm, so it was still rising. He turned towards the root sore one more time before putting his foot on the ladder. Sven already had his hands on the rungs when Ola climbed up. He could feel it with his fingers. The needles were warm. Juicy green, strong smelling and tempered. He couldn't see any broken branches or sores on the trunk. Sven coughed violently again. After climbing a few more rungs, Ola bent in towards the trunk. The ladder swayed. Ola looked down. Sven was leaning sideways against the ladder. From a bird's eye view it looked as though he was supporting the ladder with his shoulder. Or the ladder was pushing him down into the ground. Ola leant in a bit further, opened up his penknife and lightly scraped the bark. No cellulose patches. No wood rot. He cut off a sliver, put it in a plastic bag. Then he scraped some wood fibre from the wound in the bark and put that in another bag. A new volley of coughing from the ground. Ola tilted his

head back and looked straight up at a cluster of cones. No abnormalities in the crown worth mentioning. Up there, get a cone sample, down, then sleep a bit before driving home.

He could feel the heat from the tree on his face and if he closed his eyes now he would fall asleep standing on the ladder. A slight shaking in the tree top, a gentle murmur from the trunk. A crow took off from a neighbouring tree. Ola rubbed his forehead, pressed his eyelids lightly, brushed his cheeks. Wake up! he thought. No discoloration, no visible fungi, no loss of needles, nothing, nothing. But something was new all the same, a new, rising sound.

A new rising sound of panting and sighing, something in the tree quickened, a series of hisses, something was bustling in the wood fibre mass, something wanted to get out from under the bark and the spruce tree let it happen without the needles turning brown or falling off, just a slight rustle, as if a squirrel had jumped from a branch, but it was Ola climbing up the last few rungs, rising up to meet the cone samples and with no ladder left, he grabbed hold of a branch and heard Sven's terrible coughing attack on the ground at the same time that he heard the first steam being released from the crown; the tree exhaled and something opened, small tears in the bark, Ola didn't know what, but the steam came and with it the sound of pollution and with that a new sound from whatever it was that was boiling in there and with that a new seizure of coughing on the ground, and what was shaking more now, the spruce tree or the ladder? And if the tree had a language, as it had during the night, what would have been written in the snow, if not We love small hand movements, swaying lights in the dark and a tree that stands well in the landscape, never never never had he seen moss fire before, but

now a flame flickered across some moss on the trunk, Jesus, moss fire ripping through it! and then dark patches appeared on either side of the spruce tree and with these patches, new ways of thinking; an aaah rose up from the ground and Ola saw Sven lying at the root of the ladder and even though he knew it was serious, his eyes wanted to look up, up! and he grabbed a new branch which sent tiny heat waves out through the needles and into his palms, good prickles of heat and another deep sigh from the depths of the tree, steady feet on the ladder, good work, and out with another plastic bag, moss on fire and another, deep coughing fit from the ground, the spruce tree simmered and bubbled and the dark patches were nothing more than pops from the pine cones as they left the branches like dark trails sprouting away from the tree, pop-pop-pop, and Ola heard a Help from the ground, but the word didn't have the same impact up here as it would down there, because Ola reached out for another pine cone, the whole tree was shaking now, and the cone was hissing like an angry squirrel, yes, there was even steam coming out from between the scales and Ola reached out his hand with the open bag, and with his feet firmly on the ladder all he had to do was break the cone off with the other hand, even though he was boiling hot, oh! at last, a cone sample! A dog barked in the distance and the spruce tree helped Ola to break off the cone that shot straight down into the bag with pop, and then lay there, stunned, before melting its way right through the bottom of the bag and falling down towards Sven who was lying motionless at the foot of the ladder, which Ola didn't notice because his eyes were following the cone's descent, at the same time that he registered that he and the ladder had left the spruce tree and were now in mid-air.