

BARRANCA, KING OF THE TREE STREETS

by Lowry Pei

My friends lived on Chestnut Street, and when I was looking for a place to live they said, “Go see Barranca, up at the barber shop, he owns half the tree streets.”

“Tree streets?”

“Chestnut, Maple, Spruce – right around here.”

“Oh.”

In the grocery store (if I remember right) I saw a young woman who looked like a girl I was in love with in college. They had been called girls, twenty years before. She said “hi” to me in the checkout line and also later, on Chestnut Street, as if I looked like someone she knew, too. I noticed the unselfconsciously arrogant way she held a twenty-dollar bill between two fingers as the clerk bagged her groceries. Outside the store, I passed a couple of other women and caught a whiff of some perfume, like an odor of sanctity, that went right into me and hit the mark.

Chestnut Street was lined with pin oaks, sugar maples, lindens, and scarlet oaks – the ones whose leaves tell you their name because there is a “C” cut out of the leaf and their Latin name is *Quercus coccinea*. There was a Chinese Redbud that I looked up in the *Atlas of Woody Landscape Plants*, and it said “barely survives in central Indiana.” It was doing fine in northern New Jersey.

“Hi,” she said.

I thought of the voice of a singer, long ago: "It's late September and I really should be back in school." I had trouble remembering where I was staying while I looked for a place.

I went into the barber shop; a bell clicked and dinged over the door.

"Yes?"

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Barranca."

"He's busy right now."

"Well, do you know when he'll be back?"

"What would you like to see him about?"

"I'm looking for an apartment and I heard that – "

"You come back later."

I described the man I had spoken to – graying, gaunt-faced, short, kneading his cheek as he stood looking out the barbershop window. "That was Barranca," my friend said. Every day there were more and brighter leaves on the sidewalk.

I bought a new corduroy jacket like one I had had in college, such as I had been promising myself for years, but somehow I forgot to take it with me. I also forgot that I had bought it, until the next day, when I remembered, because I had it on.

That same day I met the same young woman at the corner of Chestnut Street. She said "hi" again, and since we were both going down the hill, I asked her if it would be all right to walk together. "Sure," she said, smiling, and the coldness left her face for a moment, leaving her almost shy. I found out her name was Caroline, which was not the name I'd been thinking. I told her something about plants, especially the ones on the street. She was a student, as I thought, and asked if I taught a class. When we reached the bottom of the hill, she turned to the left and I did not have the courage to follow her. "Maybe we'll meet at the corner again," she said, smiling once more. She wore a beige trench coat and carried a square leather bag with a shoulder strap; her hair was a splotch of red-gold against the grey blotter of the afternoon. From behind she looked exactly as I remembered her. I watched her for a long time, afraid that she would look back and see me watching. At one point a couple of blocks away she suddenly seemed to grow very tall; then she returned to normal size.

"Mr. Barranca?"

“Mr. Barranca is not in right now,” he said, moodily watching the sidewalk. I didn’t know what to say.

“Perhaps you remember I was here the other day, asking about apartments. Did you speak to him about it, by any chance?”

“No, I...” He seemed to lose interest in the conversation. After a while he said, “He doesn’t have anything right now.”

“Well, thank you.” I turned to go.

“What were you interested in?” he said as my hand touched the doorknob.

“Something right around here – you know, the tree streets – nothing elaborate, just for me.”

“You got pets?”

“No. Well, I might have a cat,” I said, surprised at this piece of information. “Some friends of mine are keeping him for me.” I couldn’t remember their names, but I recalled the cat perfectly now.

“You let them keep him, huh?”

“Do you think it would help me,” I said, looking at him as directly as I could, “you know, with Mr. Barranca?”

He glanced at me briefly. “Yes.”

I began devising ways to show up at the corner of Chestnut Street ten times in an afternoon without simply hanging around. On the third day I met Caroline there, and we walked down the hill together again. At the bottom, where I expected her to turn, we both kept straight on, past the music school, until we reached a frame house where she said she lived. She invited me in for a cup of tea; my heart pounded, not because of the stairs. It turned out she lived in one large white room at the top of the house. There were few furnishings – a big square table of unstained oak, a mattress on the floor with an antique quilt over it, some bentwood chairs. It was impeccably clean. I put down her groceries and reached up to pull the string that hung down from the overhead light, but she said, “No, that makes everything ugly,” and turned on a lamp by the table.

As she made tea she talked to me about the anthropology she was studying and how curious people were. I thought that I might have been content to sit in silence, watching it grow dark, without a light in the room except her breathing and my own. The tea steeped in a heavy brown stoneware pot, with a white-flecked glaze. I told her how beautiful it was, how beautiful her room was, but she did not reply.

I tried to tell her a few things about myself, my life, but could manage only stumbling phrases, and I found the subject of no interest.

She was silent for a long time, looking at a picture on the wall (I thought). I did not get up to make sure what it was. When I began to speak she shushed me.

Finally I became convinced she was not going to speak again. I got up and moved toward her with the intention of saying goodnight. Awkwardly, I stood in front of her, offering my hand; she looked up. “Why did it take you so long?” she said. I bent down, putting my hand on her neck, to kiss her; at the last moment she turned her cheek to my lips with half a smile. “My name isn’t Caroline,” she said, now that I was unable to speak. Her hand touched mine gently, moving it away.

I went to wherever it was I went at night and slept and slept.

Click, ding.

“Mr. Barranca,” I said, taking all my courage in hand, “I must have a place to live.”

“Mr. Barranca is not in,” he said tiredly, perfunctorily. “So, you must, eh?”

“Yes.”

“Whereabouts do you want to live?”

“The tree streets. Chestnut Street.”

He sighed profoundly, turned the sign on the door from “Open” to “Back in Ten Minutes,” put on his jacket, and showed me out.

We walked down the hill, scuffling red leaves, in silence.

“Anyone you know live here?” he said.

“Yes – a couple of friends, in one of these houses here,” I said, indicating vaguely.

“Anyone else?”

His questioning annoyed me, and I did not answer.

We continued down the hill to the bottom, straight on, past the music school, to a frame house with a large white room at the top. Her furniture was gone. I could see holes where picture hangers had been driven into the walls. One seemed to be in the spot I remembered. He turned on the overhead light.

“Previous tenant just moved out.”

“But – “

“You say you must have a place, nothing elaborate, here is a place.”

“Yes.”

“Well?” He seemed very old, his eyes hooded; he did not look at me.

“Yes, I’ll take it.”

We walked back up to the barber shop so that I could sign the rental agreement, under the pin oaks, the sugar maples, the scarlet oaks with a “C” cut out of their leaves. When I had completed the papers and paid, he said, “And now you will have a haircut. On me. This apartment-hunting has been hard on you.” He gestured me toward a chair.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t think of – “

“Yes, I insist, it is my trade after all, and you will know that I am glad to have you for a tenant.”

“So you are Mr. Barranca, then,” I said triumphantly, expecting some acknowledgement, but he impassively motioned me to sit back in the chair.

“And a manicure,” he said, as if I had not spoken.

From the side of my field of vision, a woman took my hand in professional fingers. I looked over.

“I haven’t seen you in an age,” she said. “It’s wonderful, the people I meet in this shop.”

“Hello, Alison,” I said, closing my eyes. Nothing else, but still the red-gold hair.