

## Twister's Run

### Act I

He was thirty feet up in the air swinging from the branches of his ten-ton wooden mother.

Twister had been growing there all summer attached to his mum by a tough stalk with a set of vascular bundles running down the middle of it. Twister loved his vascular bundles almost as much as he loved his mum. They brought him fresh water from the deep roots drinking from the underground springs. They brought him the sweet, sticky sap that was made in the leaves. A young seed couldn't ask for more.

He swung gently in the autumn sunshine and concentrated on getting fat and getting brown. Down below, on the edge of the soil moving silently through the wet grass on his strong muscular foot was Slug. He was many times the size of Twister, his ribbed ginger flanks shouldering aside the vegetation. The corrugated foot on which he rippled along was not only powerful it was also extremely sensitive and could taste the ground over which he hunted. It was these flavours, rather than his stalked eyes which usually guided him around and helped him find his greenfolk victims. He overcame the danger and irritation of the sharp flint and glass in his way by producing his own path, a thin tough coating of slime which would protect his foot from the sharpest point and roughest grit. This production of slime was prolific, effective and costly, to travel far he expended much and so had to eat much. His victims usually ended up covered in his slime, it dried to a bright silver thread in the sunshine and made their broken bodies look quite pretty.

He was hunting hard now, his slime flow at maximum as he cast around for victims. There was fruit in plenty, this was given freely by the greenfolk out of pity for those who could not feed off the sunlight. He had already passed several fallen apples on which other smaller destroyers were feeding. He was seeking richer pickings, the sweet and strong nourishment that lay within the precious seeds. Seeds like Twister. Twister's mum had tried to protect him. Around his living core and its blanket of food was woven a tough fibrous coat, proof against most enemies. It was though, no match for Slug's powerful rasping tongue. This savagely toothed horror had the impact of a chain saw. It could rasp through a seed-coat and into the soft green flesh faster than you could say 'help'. Fortunately for Twister and his fellow seeds they were high above Slug and safely out of reach of that terrible tongue.

Following behind Slug staggered millipede. 'Millipede' means 'a thousand legs', he didn't have that many, but he had a lot. When he'd been young he'd had superb control of the many legs that ran up and down either side of his long segmented body. They would ripple in harmony like a perfect Mexican wave. He wasn't so good now though. Over the years various injuries had taken their toll and both number forty three on the left side and number twenty seven on the right side had become unreliable. This meant that sometimes he stumbled and sometimes he lurched. No problem with his mandibles, razor sharp shears of arthropod steel which could make short work of shoot, leaf and branch. Seeds were trickier, but if he could get in after the slug chainsaw had broken them open.....

Twister had enjoyed the good life for so long that when the storm came it was a complete surprise. He held on for all he was worth, but his stalk had shriveled with the onset of Autumn and was no longer really up to the job. The rain hit him hard and the wind raked him. His wing was lifting and twisting him in the buffeting air. It was a blast which bent the mother tree almost to the ground which finally finished him. The break was sudden and complete. To let go and stop struggling was almost a relief. He spun free into the roaring blackness of the storm. His safe life in his mother's arms was behind him.

The next few minutes were the purest chaos and confusion. The madness only stopped when he struck soft wet soil. It was sodden and held him fast. His capture was completed by the rain which pushed him down yet further into the wet earth. So far so good. Despite the howling gale and the sticky mud he was luckier than he would ever realise. He had no way of knowing the astronomical odds against his good fortune. Road, river, garden, field and a thousand other fatal resting places were already claiming the lives of his brothers.

That there was soil into which he could fall was thanks to the aunt whose seed, a century earlier, had been twin to Twister's mother. She now lay dying, blown over by the storm, exposing torn roots to lay bare the earth which now welcomed him. During the night the rain continued to fall, pushing him deeper and deeper spattering a light covering of soil over the top of him.

By the morning the storm was over. He was so low in the ground that the late Autumn sun peering damply through a gap in the clouds failed to reveal his presence. While Twister had been in the tree he had been safe. Now he was a sitting target.

Slug and millipede wasted no time. They didn't usually like to come out in daylight but today was different. The weather was gray and damp so drying out wasn't a problem. Besides, lunch was scattered all over the ground, just waiting for the slimy toothy tongue of a slug and the clicking mandibles of a limping millipede.

When Twister had fallen from the mother tree he had separated from the twin with whom he had shared his tree-borne life. Twin's journey through the storm had closely paralleled Twister's except that he had not quite made it to the bare earth into which Twister had fallen.

The sun was low and shadows were long and dark, the sort which hide you if you're in them and expose you if you cast them. It was Twin's shadow which betrayed him to the swiveling eyes of Slug for he had not lain long enough for his scent to soak into the soil around him. It took only a few seconds of rasping with that terrible tongue to break through the seed coat and into the living food underneath. Slug enjoyed his meal for a few minutes before his eyes locked onto another victim, untouched as yet which tempted him to move on. He left Twin behind, coated in slime and fatally breached. Twin's embryo, his living heart, was still intact and food enough remained to sustain life through the winter. Theoretically, he could still make it.

Twin was, however, split open and that meant there was a way in for the soil fungi. Small, white, primitive, blind they sensed his distress and gathered around him their threads growing through the soil with primal instinct and lethal purpose. They found him. They slipped into him. With neither relish nor pity they prised open each cell in turn to digest and suck out all that was living and wholesome.

It takes a long time to die one cell at a time.

Meanwhile, the new meal that slug had spotted was Twister, his last victim not even a memory in a mind so simple it could not even hold the vague impressions that flickered across it. In its thin neural network even the blind impulses of appetite left no mark when they subsided. Slug was no intellectual, he just did what he did. It was enough. Just before reaching Twister, Slug came upon the broken earth, loose ground from which he had to turn aside. Even with his slime flow set to maximum he could not make a secure pathway. He knew this, not because he knew things, but because the soil moved in such a way beneath his foot that he almost toppled. Such a fate would leave him helpless and prey to his enemies, not least of which was the sun. It might feed the greenfolk but offered him only desiccation and death. As Slug retreated Twister was left alone, for the moment.

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## Act II

Twister had much to learn. Like most of the greenfolk he took his learning straight into his growing points where it could help him grow. This was the greenfolk way, something no destroyer like Slug could ever understand. Autumn became Winter. There came a night when the sky was clear and shone with that pale moonlight from which the greenfolk could not feed. It was the time of the deep cold. Twister had met it before when he had lived in the tree. He had felt it form in the air around him, locking up all the edible dampness. He had felt it pass him as it fell to earth, and he had shivered. Now it settled around him where he lay on the ground and with nowhere to fall, it settled close and stayed. All around him everything turned white and solid. He felt a profound cooling and a deep lassitude that struck to his heart. It posed no threat to his slack cells and rich fluids and he slept.

It could however spell disaster to the thin watery insides of the destroyers. It had caught, frozen, and shattered the soft body of the small snail lying nearby. Relying on its lighter weight to brave the loose earth which had deterred Slug it had failed to reach Twister and toppled onto its side. Unable to reach the shelter of the leaf pile the deep cold had taken it from the foot inwards. It was a gentler death than it would have offered its greenfolk victims. It had simply slowed beyond the point of no return. There was no visible sign of death beyond an unchanging rigidity. Its frost-broken insides would not slump nor the inevitable fungal thread attack materialise until the thaw came.

For Twister, although he was barely alive, it was a time of relative safety and great peace. Day after day the cold continued. Every drop of liquid water in the ground around him expanded into hard edged crystal which sliced and pressed on Twister's tough coat. It began to crack and weaken. Twister was in no shape to register or respond, he had shut down almost completely. So solidly was he frozen to the ground that even a starving squirrel scurrying briefly at his icy surface found no purchase and gave up.

Gradually the cold began to lose its grip, the frozen peace and hibernating tranquillity of winter slipping away. The earth thawed and softened and cold water began to penetrate in the way that cold water does. As his cells inflated he felt prepared. As the days lengthened there came the time when, in every part of him, simultaneous switches turned and purpose became activity. It was time to grow.

His root exploded through his worn out seed coat with a force that, on a different timescale, would not have disgraced Slug's deadly toothed tongue. Slug could taste the flavour of the ground, but he was an amateur compared to Twister who was absolutely absorbed by it as he turned his thrusting rootlet this way and that to search out tasty water in every nook and cranny of the soil. There was no stopping him. With his root now firmly braced he gathered all his strength and thrust himself free of the ground's prison and into the sunlight which was growing stronger even as he was. As he quivered unsteadily on his crisp green stem he made another huge effort and shrugged off the useless remains of his old coat. It fell onto the now liquefying corpse of the frost-killed snail

His first two stubby little leaves he carefully spread into the sunlight. At last he stood on his own two roots. In his frantic efforts to stand though, he had burned a lot of energy and used up nearly all the food he had hoarded through the winter, he desperately needed more. He needed sweet sap like his mum used to make for him, but where was he going to get it now he'd left home? As he stood, shivering delicately in the strengthening light, he was running out of the energy to live. Then a miracle happened.

The sunlight began to work on him. As it struck his leaves a small part of it was captured by the very greenstuff which marked him as a plant. This trapped sunlight was then fired into particles of water, which it delicately sundered, in the process giving valuable oxygen for free to a world in which everything else of value had to be bought. His leaves then hunted for traces of waste gas in the surrounding air. We know this

gas as carbon dioxide and hate it for global warming. Twister loved it. He knew that it was in very short supply but he wanted it grabbed as much as he could get his leaves on. Inside Twister the gas and the broken water was gradually linked together in an increasing chain. Finally the chain was brought round on itself and made into a ring by a single oxygen atom which held the two ends together. It was a hexose ring, a sugar circle, the basic building block of life.

The miracle that was taking place in his leaves was the answer to the mystery of how he would feed. From water, gas and sunlight sugar circles were being made and turned into the sweet sap which was reaching and feeding every part of him

This was the greenfolk answer to the problem of food. A problem that animals could only solve by killing. He was doing it. He was taking everyday ingredients and using sunshine and his greenness to turn them into a meal. Not for him the hunt for other green plants to graze on, nor the murderous search for meat. He could stand under the sky and sunbathe and because he was green he would get fat. Revelling in his new ability he fed on the light for all he was worth and as the sap fired his growth so he reached higher and spread more leaves to catch the bounty from the sun.

The brakes were off and his growing point was a madhouse of activity, at one moment making stem, at another leaves. His extra leaves were banqueting off the unshaded light and he had all the sap he could wish for, and then a bit. The world was green and buzzing. He felt strong with the strength that came from his limitless benefactor the sun. He felt a sense of affinity with all that was green. Life was good

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### Act III

It was a warm dappled morning, the gossamer wings of thousands of tiny green flying motes dusting the sunbeams. He barely noted the feather soft landing, so delicate was the footfall of this greencreature. He felt none of the heavy chitinous vibration which warned of the working jaws of a destroyer or the choke of slime on pores which preceded the deadly rasp of Slug and his kind. He had no cares. The sap flow was starting to build to its morning peak as the softstepping greencreature made her way to a sheltered spot on his stem. He was unprepared for the impossibly delicate lance that she thrust through his tissues and into his sap flow. The wound wasn't serious, greenfolk are tough and resilient, but it wasn't the wound that hurt, it was his sap. She was stealing it. The amount was small and while he was producing so much it wouldn't be missed. Night came and once he had ceased sap making he stopped the flow. The green destroyer, he now knew her for what she was, continued to feed and his sap flow didn't stop, it continued to move, only very slowly, and backwards, into the destroyer.

Worse was to come, she began to produce daughters, at first singly and then by the score. They didn't have wings and so couldn't leave him, they simply walked to a clear piece of stem or leaf underside, always directly over one of Twister's veins. Here where his rich sap flowed their light steps would slow and halt and he would brace himself for the inevitable incision and sap-sucking. It seemed to Twister that he was working his leaves to death just to support them. Whenever he managed to produce more sap more demands were made on him by these parasites who multiplied in perfect proportion to his efforts. He was becoming a very sick seedling. He had virtually stopped growing and was being overtaken in the race for the sun by

other plants. Shadows were falling on his leaves. Wherever this happened, although the leaves did their best for him, his sap flow slackened. The quivering tautness of his green stem was drooping into scarred and exhausted wilt. His tormentors sensed his failing and began to produce flying daughters who could leave before it was too late. Those who couldn't fly knew that his death would be their death too. That didn't matter as long as they could multiply successfully.

In the insect scheme of things the individual was of no consequence. The hundreds who remained continued to suck his sap from him, growing fat on the last of his living essence and despatching more winged and baleful ambassadors to carry their plague to new greenfolk victims. Every shrivelling starved cell knew it was dying, the previously so active growing points had given up long since. Nights were the worst, he was unable to work his leaves to satisfy the demands of his tormentors. At these times his sap, and with it his strength, was drawn from him at a terrifying rate. He was now almost covered in green crawling horrors. Even Slug had passed close to him without detecting his scent so overpowering was the stink of insect.

Below the soil his roots had stopped their search, some of them had died and been devoured by the fungi, always ready wherever greenfolk began to fail. He had summoned the last of his flickering reserves to dam off the dead sections with scar tissue. For the moment this kept their questing threads at bay. They could wait, they were good at that. Twister really couldn't do very much more. Time was running out for him.

He felt the vibrations of a creature that began to climb his weakened stem. He bent under its weight. It felt like one of the heavy-jawed destroyers, at least the end would be quick now. Strange thing was its flavour. Unlike the sap-sucking destroyers who carried the flavour of greenfolk, this creature tasted of concentrated insect. He felt the agitation of the sap-suckers. This creature was powerful enough to do him serious harm, yet he sensed no threat, perhaps it was not a destroyer. Although Twister could do wonderful things with light, like turn it into food, he couldn't use it to see. Had he been able to do so he would have seen a segmented matt navy blue creature with yellow spots and a business end that spelt trouble for someone.

It had something in common with the destroyers who were killing Twister, it couldn't make its food from the sun. It didn't eat greenfolk however, it ate destroyers. There was a certain poetic, if harsh, justice in the way it went about its business. It would grab a slow moving sap-sucker with its mandibles and turn it delicately in front of its armoured head until it was positioned just so, square on to its underbelly. Then, with routine, casual violence smash through the delicate abdomen with a probe that was essentially a beefed up version of the one the sap-suckers used on Twister. The delicate sap-fed insides of the greenfly were suctioned out in a few moments, the empty skin discarded and a new victim selected. The overwhelming numbers with which Twister's attackers had threatened to bring about his downfall had backfired. They were no longer an army of parasites, they were a banquet. Some had hidden themselves under leaves at the growing point, biting into the veins so that the leaves folded over them. It was good camouflage but it only delayed the outcome.

The navy blue predator would stay and hunt until it was ready to turn into a pretty little black beetle with red spots, and a modest appetite for sap-suckers. Until then it's appetite would be voracious and it would scour every bit of Twister for victims.. Life had been too easy for the sap-suckers, they were sluggish and vulnerable. They were meeting a fate that was horribly similar to that which they were dishing out. Unlike Twister they had a choice, they could wait to be killed or they could drop to the soil and try to escape. Some chose to drop, some were shoved off by navy blue armoured flanks. The drop itself did them no harm, but the spindly legs and hooked feet which worked so well on Twister's stem proved useless on the soil. Many of them never managed to get off their sides before the jaws of various predators crushed them into delicious sweet juices. Those who staggered to their feet lasted a little longer, but they were just too tasty to live. It was a massacre and Twister was enjoying every minute of it. It was some time before the bulk of the infestation was clear, Twister's ally remained until he had eaten through every one of the sap-suckers and once again Twister could grow. In the soil his roots resumed their tireless foraging, shoving aside the now

harmless fungal threads which had already turned away in search of weaker victims. His now crisp firm stem barely shook at all as his well fed and now much heavier friend made its way off him to look for somewhere quiet to reshape itself. It would return when its metamorphosis was complete and make more permanent the bond between predator and greenfolk by mating on his leaves and laying under them eggs which would hatch into youngsters who hunted destroyers.

Things were looking up. His leaves were working for him again. It was only their unstinting work which had got him through his struggle with the sap-suckers. If he was to catch up on missed growth there could be no respite for them now. He had to make up lost ground. He knew he knew his hard working leaves could be relied upon to go flat out whenever the sun shone.

Soon it was winter again. Twister would live through as he had before. His leaves would die. They died so prettily, turning red and gold before they fell. It was hard to lose them that first year, but he would become hardened to their loss as the years passed, and never again would he rely so totally on their efforts as he did that first year. He himself became harder as his soft green stem slowly lignified and became wooden.

Then, one spring he found himself wondering about having children. Thing was, he knew he was a 'he' only because that was how he'd always thought of himself, but he wasn't sure what it was that made him a 'he', rather than a 'she'; or vice-versa for that matter. This spring though, problem solved, he didn't just grow leaves, he grew flowers. Now flowers are all about sex. They have male private parts called 'stamens' and female private parts called 'pistils'. If you're a plant and you want to now what sex you are, all you have to do is have a look inside your flowers, if you're a bloke you'll see stamens, if you're a bird you'll see pistils....simple. So that's what Twister did. He'd got both.

He learned to live with it. He saw himself as a father when his stamens sent his pollen off to land on some other tree's pistils, and she was a mother when some other tree's pollen landed on her pistils to make a new set of seeds.

Years passed and he grew. Each spring welcomed a new set of soft green leaves into the growing workforce, each summer they worked hard to make sap. The other half of the food gathering team was the roots. They had tunnelled through soil, subsoil and beyond to drink. They drank from deep streams purified by a thousand years of slow filtering and enriched by even slower mineral collection on their long journey through ancient rocks. By mixing the sap in the down flow with the mineral water in the up flow he could make for himself all the foods for which animals had to hunt. He would never be driven by the terrible impulses of hunger. Hunger was strictly an animal thing.

He had started out as one of a thousand little greenfolk brothers weighing in at less than an ounce. Luck, fortune, destiny; whatever. He was the only survivor.

Now half a century on she was a ten ton wooden mother with a sporadic gender identity crisis. Hey-ho.