



At 2:00 a.m. this morning, I wrenched my wretched frame out of the cot, threw on an old Mackinaw coat and a pair of pants, and stumbled out under the night sky. Folks touted this as a singular night, a chance to witness something once in 300 years, a meteor shower.

At first I didn't see much. Oh, it was glisteny all right, with a sweet east wind southing the branches of my spruce trees. Then it started. Celestial contrails like zippy slug paths across the night sky. God shooting tracer rounds across the heavens from the mountains toward the sea horizon. I started oohing and aahing like a giddy kid on the Fourth of July, dancing around like a dervish possessed.

This made the July Fourth fireworks look like a kindergarten picnic! This was a sky riot, a Captain Billy's Whizz Bang. It out-Floyded Pink Floyd. I felt awe. Fear and trembling overtook me.

On her radio program Saturday evening, Susie McLerie spoke of an Indian tribe in the Americas. These people believe that shooting stars in the night sky are departed loved ones, whose souls are traversing the heavens. I like that notion.

After 15 minutes of gawking, I started getting practical. I've ogled the dark firmament for hours in the past, clutching some secret wish to my bosom, hoping for confirmation, that special star shooting across the nether. Here was a veritable rain of stars, flashing across the sky like a school of turbo-charged anchovies. Hey, Lindsey, I bethought myself, get to wishin'!

I started out kind of easy like, wishing for the obvious, world peace and harmony. I threw in a hope for dignity, decency, a fair shake for mankind. Yes! A couple of meteor fragments coursed the air. Hell, those things just kept blazing by, so I started getting a bit personal, even a shade self-interested. Ask for health and security, an inner voice told me. Whoosh! A big old burst zinged by. Damn! I thought. I'll throw in longevity for balance. Splash! Another winged toward the sea. My heart of hearts wished for that special girl. No sweat. It was star assured instantly.

"Be Jaysus!" I says to myself. "I might as well shoot the moon."

The long and short of it is this: I wished for Infinite and Eternal Bliss for all of us. We're aces starting last night at 2:20 a.m. I double and triple proofed it. Everything's Beaulah Land for all of us from now on. We are sky guaranteed. Jubilo and Rapture will reign. Rest easy in your boots, dear peoples!

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### Christmas Tea

by Elizabeth Savage

The Heathman in full form: the impossibly high ceilings brushed by the spiny green index finger of the delicate outstretched arm of an impossibly tall, majestic, fragrant—the platonic ideal of a Noble Fir. The tree looks something like a young female member of the British aristocracy dressed up for prom: the gold ribbons and balls, if not exactly gaudy, are thoughtless and in poor taste, hardly a contribution to her beauty, and, while nothing could detract from her natural, dictionary-on-head grace, hardly comfortable.

There is a fire going, and there are extremely quiet little girls in itchy velvet dresses (their deer-like stillness, no doubt, in large part due to the bloodcurdling glances of their mothers and the poisonous smiles of aunts and paternal grandmothers) whose patent leather shoes do not quite touch the lushly carpeted forest-green floor. There is nothing more pleasing to the distinguished sensibilities than the enjoyment of a late-afternoon tea, particularly if supplemented by a string quartet, and most particularly if it happens to be Christmas.

The string quartet in question is smugly deferential, their post-hip lilt (like an interior decorator's accent) pleases my mother to no end. The tea is divine—the little holier-than-thou finger sandwiches and frigid, jelly-filled cookies, the sure, athletic, steaming, arching, water-lobbing silver service gleams. My mother and I were having tea on Christmas.

That is all.

We were having tea on Christmas, and I was obliquely aware of being Very Dressed Up. The revolving door heaved a sigh and cold air rushed into my chest. We walked down the street—she, a porcelain miniature of a woman, took my arm in what the doorman (cape, hat, and brass-button livery: it reminds me of the absurd cruelty of dressing a chimpanzee and then forcing it to perform) might have mistaken as a tender, loving, motherly gesture.

Which, god only knows, may have been exactly why she was taking my arm in the first place. I thrust my balled fists as deep as they would go into the royal-blue silk-lined pockets of my tapered black wool coat, the one that falls just below the knee, allowing the street-side admirer (either a blue-collar, grease-stained Neanderthal or a timidly-balding-Wall-Street-Journal-reading-crumpled-shirt-front-and-drab-out-sized-trench-coat-business-man-type. Although the former are generally more vocal, the latter tend to clear their throats, rustle their papers, or push their glasses up their noses) a delectable view of my tall suede boots and nude-stocked hors d'oeuvres knees. I jabbed my balled up fists into those silk-lined pockets just as far as they would go—certainly not far enough—nowhere near as far as fists in pockets on a proper platonic ideal of a jacket would go. Alas, the pockets of this particular jacket (ideal, might I add, in nearly every other way and certainly the most acceptable jacket I've owned to date)

were, like the woman then clutching my arm, unbearably shallow. But a warm blast of steam rose from a grate, and the roman numerals on the clock on a great-big-historic-bank-building said that it was early evening in the winter, which is pleasantly late, and a strange tea-cozy equilibrium set in and suspended time. The fact was that time would, with some clicking and whirring and grinding of gears, resume. This seemed imminent, but far away. Walking out of the Heathman and down the block was like walking on a tight-rope that is burning, each thread snapping and recoiling like an adder that has just got bit. I knew that we would come crashing down, eventually. It took exactly one block.

By the time one hears an approaching avalanche, it is already too late to escape. When my mother let go my arm, there was a muted rumbling, and I pricked up my big velvet ears and flared my wet-tire rubber nostrils. I blinked, and it was upon me.

Enter my father: his smooth vermouth forehead creased, his voice raised. He was spitting, which I couldn't help but think was remarkably uncouth for a man who solved 80% of his cases through out-of-court mediation. Surely the charges brought against the defendant were often more grave than this. The embezzlement of millions of dollars, say, or the deceptive marketing of a poisonous household product. Or there was one particular case he told us about, (sacrificing all lawyer-client confidentiality laws to the mean-spirited god of our collective voyeurism) wherein the defendant in question capitalized on his wife's multiple-personality-disorder to his perverted, albeit inventive, sexual advantage. If courthouse square is a courtroom, then this wasn't just a trial: it was the Spanish Inquisition, and we had drawn an audience. The horror. My God, I thought, have they no shame?

If I don't come home with them right now, then I'm cut off. Given the cost of a liberal-arts education, this is quite the threat. The terror the parental units feel imagining me with that man is only a fraction of the terror they face at the prospect of everyone talking about it. Recognizing this, it stands to reason that terminating my liberal arts vacation would catalyze my ruin. Unprotected by education, white trash is a sexually transmitted disease. I take the fifth. Their alternate appeals to my decency and accusations of ungratefulness feel like nothing so much as strong gusts of wind. Everyone was watching, and who could blame them? It was a car crash. Stealing my jaw, I decided to call their bluff. I did so in a very soft voice.

No, I am not going home with them. I am not going home at all. I am going to Jake's, and I am going to stay there for the final three weeks of my vacation, as planned. Their spirited closing arguments were lost on me—I was distracted by the bell of the salvation army. Eventually they tired themselves out and left me there, hands in my pockets. I was twenty years old. In some families, this is considered grown-up.

Pioneer Square is made of a million bricks, each inscribed with a name. Many of these names belong to the same athletic club, many of the names go to the Heathman for tea. My name is down there, somewhere—I have been immortalized in brick. The square's tree is magnificent—an Old-Growth sacrificial lamb, impossibly large, impossibly upright. Its pitiless lights sparkle and swim before me. I stand with my hands in my pockets, my breath steaming. I may never move from this spot.

"Hey. Are you okay?" A little hippie girl peers up at me. A heart-shaped face is nestled in a mass of blonde dreadlocks. I suck the snot back into my nose, nodding. I'll be fine.

"You had a fight with the folks? That was so not PLUR!"

Huh?

"Peace, love, unity, respect, you know?" She's cute

enough to get away with that sort of thing. I, on the other hand, am tough.

I was disowned.

"Really? Why?" Tiny dragon-fly barrettes sparkle in her filthy hair. I rub my eyes with my index and middle fingers.

I don't know, it's a long story.

"What happened?"

They don't like my boyfriend.

"That sucks. I'm Rose."

Nice to meet you, Rose, I'm Elizabeth.

"Do you want to smoke some weed?"

I'd love to.

I followed the butterfly on the back of her neck a few blocks, until we were down under a bridge by the river. We smoked a joint with one of her friends (attendants, really,) and she kept telling me that everything was going to be okay. She never took her patch-covered back-pack off. Later I realized that she had torn holes in the back so that she could hide her wings.

Jake McKinney and I sat in his walk-in closet, where he always slept, on an old Star-Wars sleeping bag and a tangle of piled flannel sheets. I told him what had happened, leaning with my back cradled in his chest and greedily inhaling his smell (Old Spice, Big Red, but mostly and overpoweringly HIS smell).

He kneaded my breasts distractedly as the phone rang and I droned on. When he nodded, his red beard scratched my neck. "Well," he said, "You'll never guess what happened to me today..." He was walking downtown and passed Dick and Libby. (He enjoyed using their familiar names.) They walked right by without seeing him. (This is a phenomenon particular to my mother—one that was instrumental in allowing our forbidden relationship to flourish. There are several instances when Mr. McKinney was literally caught in the headlights of her Volvo Station Wagon—but Libby is blind to what she does not want to see.) Jake turned around to watch them pass by. I venture to guess that his stance and expression, during that turn, were nearly identical to the one he uses on barely-dressed underage girls. I imagine he practically whistled at them. At this point, my father did a double take, and a cartoon exclamation point appeared above his graying head. My mother wasted no time in launching herself at him. I am positive that Jake was smirking as my father pulled her off. I am fairly certain that Libby got a few good shots in there, beforehand. According to him, Jake said something about me being a grown-up woman and my own person, but it was lost in my father's righteous roar as he chased the smug little deadbeat down the street.

Safe in the flannel-lined closet, my fingers burrowing into the folds of his corduroy pants, I laughed.

"What?"

"Have you heard of PLUR?"

He hadn't. The phone stopped ringing. Less than ten minutes' drive up the hill, in a totally different neighborhood, my mother had hung up. I imagined her sitting in front of the fire of our darkened living room. The tree would be lit, reflecting off her third glass of red wine, her wedding band, the glossy grand piano. Up a curving spiral staircase, the woman's husband would be drinking Maker's Mark in their bedroom. The man's bourbon, the ice-cubes in the tumbler, and his Rolex would reflect the otherworldly blue of CNN. He'd slouch on the divan, chin on his chest, his face an empty box.

Outside, it was beginning to snow.

### FROM THE LOWER LEFT CORNER



### Tree lover's dilemma

I, the tree lover, have two trees that present problems.

There's a robust maple southwest of the house. It began life as a vandalized sapling, attacked by passing kids, but now dominates a good part of our yard, including most of our vegetable garden. In summer, its dense shade lets not a ray of sun reach the ground beneath it. In fall, its leaves turn fiery red and gold—at least when we have cold nights before the rains begin. The early damage by vandals has healed, producing an interesting trunk that forks into three diverging trunks, which of course branch again and again creating a dense crown. Every couple years we prune this tree, removing branches in what my reference guide calls thinning or "windowing", but it is to no avail. The tree responds with more exuberant growth every time. Its destiny is to be a big tree, but it's in the wrong place. Moving it is out of the question; better to move the vegetable beds.

On the other hand, there is an old hawthorn directly in front of the house. Unlike the maple, the hawthorn has been there as long as I can remember. It's at least 50 years old, but not a hundred. In a 1908 postcard photograph, which has a Christmas greeting in Finnish from my great great uncle to my grandfather, there was a maple in roughly the same location.

The hawthorn has been a delight. From the windows in the house, we can look into its thorny branches and see various birds at all times of year—chickadees, humming birds, juncos, goldfinches, varieties of sparrows, or a rare-for-us black throated gray warbler. Once a sharp-shinned hawk sat for half an hour, watching for prey—smaller birds—before losing patience and flying off.

When the hawthorn blooms, it's a mass of tiny, crimson blossoms. Bird feeders of various types hang from its branches. Curly gray lichen and grizzled moss cling to its twigs, testimony to age and illness. That's the problem: the hawthorn has been failing for years. Every summer, it drops its leaves in August well before fall, a victim of poor, fast draining sandy soils and black spot, a fungus that preys upon all members of the rose family, of which the hawthorn is one.

A deep gash invades the hawthorn's trunk, not the result of vandalism or other injury, but due to a type of decay which invaded the moisture collecting crotch where three major branches whorl out from the trunk. Each year, that gash has gotten larger, and the early leaf drop has gotten worse. Last winter, a major branch broke in the upper reaches of the tree, unbalancing the crown.

I've watched these symptoms and not wanted to take action. Like watching my old dog begin to fail, go deaf, and stumble on the path, I'm resisting the truth about this old tree and my obvious dilemma: slow decline into inevitable death vs. quick dispatch.

This exceptionally dry year has struck a psychological death knell for the hawthorn. Something should be done, but what? Intense pruning in hopes of bringing the growing part in balance with what must be an overtaxed root system? Or complete removal? The idea of no perches for birds, no chickadees hopping from twig to twig, no screening from the street, all these consequences grieve me.

Reviewing our options, discussing the prognosis with others, has produced memorial suggestions. Our neighbor Mike, lover of wood especially when embodied in boats, suggested giving a portion of the hawthorn to Bill, a fine woodworker, to make something we could use to keep the hawthorn alive in another form.

I'm in a dilemma. Like so many situations in life, there's no obvious black and white, no assurance that action is better than inaction. My tendency is to delay, hoping for a bit of wisdom that will clarify my decision or present another option. Yet I know the sooner I remove this tree and plant a new one, the sooner the birds and I will have a tree to enjoy.

So sometime in late winter you may pass our house and see the tree in shambles, broken apart and strewn across the yard. Or you may pass by when the operation is all over, tidied up, and wonder "What happened? Something's different, but I can't place it." And if you realize a big old tree is now missing from the tree lover's yard, at least you'll know why.

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