

Heat Lightning

I must have been about ten. It must have been Spring. The lemon tree outside my bedroom window was blooming. I had my window open just enough to smell the blossoms mixed with the rain. I don't remember why I was in bed but the storm precluded any outdoor activities. I was drifting in that peaceful place between sleep and consciousness when lightning struck the tree in the front yard. The explosion was deafening causing me to jump up, striking my head on the bunk above me. A large limb jumped horizontally from the tree, landing 50 feet away. The voltage melted the telephone line that ran through the tree into gooey smoke. I heard my mother scream in the kitchen. I ran to find her twitching on the kitchen floor, the receiver in her hand. I couldn't go to her. I couldn't touch her. I was afraid of the hoodoo, the black magic. Her eyes rolled back like those folks in the church my aunt dragged me to some Sundays. Would the spell creep up my arm? Would I be taken by the Spirit? My brother pushed past me and took her head between his hands shaking her firmly.

"Mama? Mama! Say something! Are you okay? She slowly quit trembling and regained a sort of connection with us.

"I'm alright," she said, but she wasn't, not really, not ever again.

The smell gave it away, especially walking here between the show barns and the midway. This was the last day of the county fair. The air was sticky with the smell of grilling onions blown down the midway by slow rotating exhaust fans, onions rarely finding their way to gastric indulgence, grilled simply to bring saliva to the mouths of prospective patrons, Pavlov's dogs. The odor of composting animal dung, pungent and earthy, combined with onions and people.

Grandmothers smelled like pies and pickles. Young children, slamming wildly into each other like pool balls, yielded an odor of cotton candy. Teenage couples, attempting the physical impossibility of occupying the same space, mixed hormones and pheromones into a backseat cocktail of questionable decisions. Their bare arms and legs added this scent to the primal summer heat. Many of these folks were here to see me.

I heard the familiar slap of sandals running up behind me. I bent over slightly, bracing for impact. She was on me; arms around my neck, legs around my waist. Her dark curls mixed with my straight blond locks as she took my earlobe between her teeth. I made a playful attempt to dislodge her, whinnying like a bronco and spinning wildly. Just before slipping away, she stuck a moist tongue in my ear. Lily twisted free. I lunged for her, plucked her tiny body free of gravity and drew her toward me.

"Afternoon, sleeping beauty," I said. "You missed half the day."

"I've been up a while, took a shower." She pulled up the sleeve of her t-shirt and grabbed the back of my head, stuffing my nose into her armpit. "You should try it. We're hooked up to the water."

"I will," I said, "when I get ready for the show." I draped my arm over her shoulder but she wiggled free, pinching her nostrils between her fingers.

"And just end up sweaty again."

"So, it'll be clean sweat."

She rolled those dark eyes. "Mixed with gasoline and wood chips!"

"Then I'll take another one. You want some coffee or lunch?"

"I'm okay. Jerry bought me a burger."

"Jerry?" I asked. A hint of something I didn't want to acknowledge inflected in my voice.

"What the hell did he want?"

"He wanted to talk to you about tonight's show."

"It's not a show, it's a competition. That sneaky bastard has something up his sleeve. I don't want you talking to him!"

"Excuse me!" The darkness in her eyes flashed metallic fire.

"I mean about the show, trade secrets and all that. You know." I thought I had recovered, but some of the playfulness drained from the encounter. It's not that I didn't trust Lily but Jerry possessed that magnetic quality. I had run in to him at a few events over the last couple of years. He usually had some starry-eyed fliptail hanging on him like a loose jacket. He was single now and all of a sudden he was our best friend.

"If you're hungry, I could fix you some lunch," she offered. "You have five or six hours before the show."

"Cool," I said. I was, in fact, hungry.

"Well c'mon then." She swatted my butt with her open palm hard enough to sting through my jeans. She ran. I caught her just as we reached the exit to the fairgrounds. I grabbed her hand, she leaned into me and we picked our way across the gravel parking lot to the exhibitor's section. I had one of the nicer units in the section. It wasn't the rolling palaces that the rodeo cowboys lived in but it beat the hell out of the camper shelled pickups that the flint knappers and gypsy traders inhabited.

I hooked up with Lily last spring. Since she began travelling with me she insisted we roll out the awning, spread a rug under it and set out some patio furniture wherever we stopped, even for one day. She had even picked up a couple of ficus trees in five gallon glazed pots that we dragged out on the "porch" every time we set up.

Tonight's performance was one of the last of the season. It was the largest and best promoted. Normally we gave demonstrations of our craft, only one or two of us setting up inside a netted perimeter and producing a work of art in about an hour. The artist was paid a flat fee. The art, usually a bear, eagle or totem, specified by the sponsor, was auctioned as a fundraiser for the organization. Tonight, however, was an open competition. The prize purse was huge, twenty-five grand for the winner and substantial amounts for second and third. Fifteen artists from the Chainsaw Masters organization were entered along with over a half dozen renegades and wild cards from around the country. Even Barbara and Lu Anne from the Chainsaw Chix had entered. They were mostly into showmanship but Barbara could carve out a pretty decent "Barbcat" with the right piece of wood. The cool thing about tonight's performance was that we could chose to carve anything we wanted, no restrictions.

While Lily assembled a sandwich for me, I kicked back on the couch barely an arm's length away. Looking past her I noticed the bed was made. We never did this. The space above the fifth wheel hitch that contained the sleeping quarters was too small for even Lily, at five feet tall, to stand up.

"What are you, channeling Susie Homemaker these days?" I asked. She just smiled over her shoulder.

We hadn't talked about what would happen when the season ended. My brother has a few acres outside of Biloxi where he helped me build a pad for the camper. It has all the utilities and will handle up to a double wide mobile home. I spent the last few winters there helping him with his firewood business, mostly hibernating. I hate winter.

Lily handed me the sandwich, on a plate, causing me to raise an eyebrow. She bounced down beside me.

"You're going to blow them away tonight," she said. She was aware of some of the changes to my act. She had even suggested a couple of them. "What are you going to do with all that money?"

"I don't have any money."

"You will, after tonight."

"Well, little darlin', I thank you for your support but I am going up against over 20 of the world's best artists."

"Whatever, you'll still win. Everybody knows it." She pushed my hair back from my cheek and gave me a reassuring kiss.

"What about your buddy, Jerry?" I asked, pulling away.

"He's good, alright, but not the fancy-assed showman that you are. What you're planning has never been done before."

"Attempted."

"But not accomplished. You're the only guy I've ever met with the balls to pull that off."

"I just hope it works out. The alternative would pretty much suck."

"So do the judges know what you're planning?" She asked.

"Sshh, It's a secret." I put my finger to my lips.

"They might not go for it."

"Nothing in the rules specifically forbids it. I've been at this almost fifteen years, ever since high school, and I've never seen anyone try it."

Lily giggled. "I bet they rewrite the rules after tonight."

I still had the last bite of my sandwich in my hand when Lily tossed the plate in the sink and straddled my lap. She wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed herself against me like a second skin.

"I want to get some of this hillbilly stink all over me," she said. "Let's mess up the bed."

One thing about Lily, she was crazy wild in the sack. She liked to run the show, which was fine with me. She was good at it. Looking back, she had always made the call, not just in the bedroom.

I met Lily back in April. I was performing a demonstration behind a VFW hall in Tyler, Texas, along with one of the Chainsaw Chix named Stella. I had completed carving the bear I was commissioned to create. Like always, they wanted it standing on its hind legs in attack mode. I had created dozens of these. I could pretty much carve one in my sleep. Stella was carving an alligator, a little unusual for this part of the country, not that there weren't any gators

around. Gators usually were commissioned in southern Louisiana. Stella is a skinny girl who performs dressed in tight leather pants and matching vest over a denim work shirt. She puts her sunset red hair in a long braid under a Harley Davidson doo-rag. The perimeter of her cage was three deep in toothless meth heads. The ground was getting damp from their drool.

"Don't it bother you, all those goofballs ogling your old lady?" asked a little girl's voice. I glanced over. Lily was standing beside me sparkling with small town innocence. I just grinned and shook my head.

"First," I said, "she ain't my old lady. Her 'partner' is back at the motel and she ain't a man. Second, her girlfriend could kick any of these skinny boys' asses before they knew what hit them."

"So, where's your 'partner'?"

"I'm flying solo for now," I said.

"Really?" She looked me over head to toe like I was a used car she figured she could work a deal on. She was making me uncomfortable. She didn't look a day over fifteen. I expected a hulking brother or father to step out of the brush any minute with a shotgun aimed at my gonads. Turns out, when I pulled out of Tyler that evening Lily was riding shotgun. The only family member of hers I met was an aunt a couple of years older who was facilitating her escape. I made sure Lily was of age. She had graduated high school the year before and was attending a local community college.

"Everybody has my life planned for me," she said. "My parents, the church, but nobody asked me what I want to do. Hell, I don't even know for sure. One thing I do know is I've got to get out of this one horse town."

We were all wrung out, covered in hillbilly stink and love juice, when there was a knock on the door.

"Just a minute." I pulled on some jeans and closed the curtain that serves as a door to the "bedroom."

"Hey, Jerry, come on in," I said. He had to duck to get through the door.

"The wood's here," he said. "The truck just pulled in. From where I was it looked like some good, large pieces. I'm going over to check it out. Care to join me?"

"Sure, let me grab a shirt and some boots."

"Me too," Lily said from behind the curtain. I heard her bounce out of bed.

For some reason Jerry had decided to befriend me. Maybe it was because we were favorites to win the competition. Maybe it was because I pretended not to be bothered that he's from New Zealand. A lot of the Masters felt he was a foreigner stealing potential gigs. He hadn't affected my bottom line. Still, our approach was different. He concentrated on artistic expression while my main goal was showmanship. He did beautiful work, very intricate and detailed. Usually, though, we didn't even get to choose what we created. We were commissioned for a particular piece that got sold and sat in the rain in front of a bar somewhere until it rotted away. I figured the crowd comes for the noise and flying wood chips. I liked to add a little cock walk, and

sometimes I'd even make another larger figure then cut it away into the one I was commissioned to produce. That always got a rise out of the crowd..

When we reached the racetrack, the infield was already divided by chalk lines into 24 squares. There were two officials on hand. The other competitors were beginning to gather. I picked a square near the center and let an official know of my preference. Jerry picked an adjoining square. The wood was perfect; oak and pecan, green cut and oozing sap, exactly what I needed to make my plan work. I picked out a tall oak trunk with a slight bend in it. Jerry picked a shorter stump with a large diameter. I knew it would be pointless to ask him what he planned to carve. He would no more tell me his plan than I would tell him of mine.

Jacksonville, Florida is a port city. I will admit that had factored into my choice of sculpture. Once our chosen chunks of wood were fork lifted into our preferred workspace, we left. Workers would erect fishnet cages around each piece leaving room for the crowd to circulate among the competitors.

"Let's grab a beer and head over to the livestock arena," Jerry suggested. "The sheep finals start in a few minutes."

I couldn't have cared less about sheep.

"Cool!" Lily said. "Sounds like fun."

"Sure," I said.

We were about halfway through our pints of warm beer and I'd had about all I could take of listening to Jerry pontificate about the merits of various sheep breeds when he turned to me.

"Why don't you two come to New Zealand when the season ends?" He asked. "We have chainsaw art opportunities down under. There aren't as many but the ones that exist pay better. We could use a showman like you to liven things up."

"I don't know. I'm kind of obligated to help my brother with his firewood business. Besides, where would we live?"

"My family has a ranch. We have plenty of room. I'm sure they would be fine with you staying if you helped out with the stock. You're both welcome to come. New Zealand is a beautiful place."

"I don't know. I can't see it happening, but who knows?"

"Think about it," Jerry said. "I'll go get us another beer."

As soon as Jerry was out of earshot, Lily was all over it. "How cool is that! Travel to another country! Let's do it!"

"I'm supposed to help my brother this winter," I said. "He set me up with a pad and utilities. I can't just bail on him. I don't see it happening. I don't even have a passport."

"Me either, but we could get one. All you need is a birth certificate and an ID. You can even push it through quick for a few extra bucks. C'mon, it'll be fun." She was pulling on my sleeve like she was ready to leave that instant.

"I doubt it. We'll be in Biloxi for the winter. Winter's short here anyway."

She stuck her lip out like a five year old and her eyes burned with disappointment. She folded her arms over her chest and refused to look at me. Jerry returned with the beer and sat down on the other side of Lily.

"So what about it?" He asked.

"We'll see," I said. Attention returned to sheep. Enthusiasm was dampened.

Carneys, hawkers and gypsy traders, awakened by the poisoned blood coursing through their veins, analyzed their marks. Local heroes, innocent victims of their egos, prepared to impress their friends and families with prowess at the unwinnable games of the midway. The crowds thickened. The smells intensified. The setting sun projected vibrant colors onto the heavy cloud bank building to the west. Occasional flashes of orange and blue reflected from behind the horizon. I hoped the rain would hold off until after the competition. A storm could ruin my plan.

I was dressed in my pearl snap shirt, black jeans, boots, leather vest and chaps. Lily braided my hair into a single thick rope down my back. All of her sassy playfulness had vanished. I figured I could redeem myself with a win tonight. Even if not, my chosen sculpture was sure to impress her.

I carried the two saws I normally used; the eighteen-inch bar for the rough cuts and the ten-inch narrow bar with the lightweight power head for detail work. Lily carried the special unit I had modified for tonight's performance. The power head was painted gloss black. The fourteen inch bar was chrome plated and polished to a mirror finish.. The major modification, however, wasn't visible to the naked eye. I had enlarged the orifice from the bar oiler. Instead of

heavyweight bar oil, I had filled the reservoir with used motor oil mixed with a generous amount of 200 proof grain alcohol.

Once the artists were enclosed in their protective netting the announcer came over the P.A. He went over the basic rules and safety precautions for spectators. His final announcement, predictable, being that it was the deep South, was "Gentlemen start your engines".

I glanced over at Jerry. He was walking around in a circle, cocking his head from side to side, but the crowd was already too thick for me to see his stump. I started the large saw and looked at my tree trunk. I could see the mermaid inside. I only needed to set her free. She was tall and lean but the woman half of her body was Lily's twin. I pranced around the tree a couple of times, revving the saw, getting the crowd's attention. I cut several large chunks free and kicked them toward the perimeter.

Half an hour later, the mermaid appeared, though she was rough and angular. I picked up the small saw and gave form to the tail fin. I softened her facial features and shaped her arms, hands and fingers. She was looking pretty good. I put curl and texture to the hair that cascaded over her shoulders. Time for the show, I started the "special" saw. Very little wood was being taken away now. That wasn't the point. What was happening was that the fish half of the statue, her hair and bikini top were being coated with the oil/alcohol mix. That done, I reached in my pocket, flipped open my lighter and held it to the tip of the tailfin. A flick of the thumb and the mermaid was engulfed in a flame the color of offshore open water. A collective gasp rose from the crowd as they moved closer. The flames reflected off the chrome bar, flashing beams of blue light into the wanton eyes of the spectators. Revving the saw was like a psychedelic flame thrower aimed at the base of the statue. Each rev of the saw brought a cheer from the growing audience. The

alcohol burned away quickly and the oil in the mix left a sienna sheen to the surface of the sculpture as it burned away more slowly. I strutted around the perimeter of the enclosure, shooting columns of blue flame into the sky while the combustibles on the mermaid burned away. The chocolate colored residue allowed for shading. When the flames died back I started the small saw again and used the flat side of the bar's tip to create the illusion of scales on the mermaid's tail. I added highlights to the woman's darkened hair. I fine tuned the details of the facial features, shoulders and torso of the woman. Feeling that I could make no further improvements to the work, I took the two unmodified chainsaws, one in each hand, and, spinning like a top, saws outstretched, I carved the title of the work in the base; "Lily Of The Sea". I held the saws above my head revving them alternately. The crowd roared. It was what I lived for.

I wasn't the first artist finished but I was by far not the last. I stepped from the enclosure. I saw Lily a few feet away. I sidled up to her and took her hand. She was radiant.

"God, that's incredible!" She said. "I've never seen anything like it. I'm totally amazed."

"Thanks," I said. "I had so much fun with that. I didn't know if I could pull it off but it all came together. Let's take a look around at the competition."

There were a lot of animals; bears, wildcats, eagles. A couple of guys made cigar store Indians. There was one modern art type of sculpture by a guy I'd never heard of. I wondered how well that would fly with the county fair crowd. One big surprise was Lu Anne from the Chainsaw Chix. I had never seen her produce anything that impressed me. Today, though, she was dressed in a tight pink leather outfit. She had painted her saws pink and even her hair was dyed pink. She produced a very accurate likeness of herself riding a Harley chopper, hair blowing back in the

wind. The bike was set at an angle as if accelerating through a curve. The work had an aura of motion. She titled it "Self Portrait." As we approached she was just wrapping up the detail work.

"That's pretty damn good!" I said. "I might have something to worry about here." Her perimeter was several feet deep in horny young men cheering every time she bent to touch up a low part of the sculpture. When she finished she blew kisses to the crowd.

"Classy!" Lily said.

"Yeah, she definitely caught me by surprise. I bet she takes home some prize money."

"Let's go check out Jerry's work," Lily said.

That tight spot in me started burning. "Sure, whatever."

"Don't be that way," Lily scolded. "He's nice. He wants to be our friend. What's wrong with that? He even offered us a place to stay when we go to New Zealand."

"If," I corrected. Her eyes rolled.

As we neared his enclosure he was wiping down his saws with a red shop rag. He then took a whisk broom and gently brushed the wood chips and sawdust from the sculpture. I'd have to say, without a doubt, Jerry does the most detailed work of any chainsaw artist I've seen. Although we were approaching from behind, this seemed intricate even for him. It was a woman sitting in a patch of rain lilies. She was leaning on one hand with her feet pulled up beside her. The other hand was outstretched holding a nut toward a bushy tailed squirrel. The woman's curly hair tumbled down her shoulders. As we walked around to the front of his creation my heart stuck in my throat. The detail was such that I didn't need to see the title to know. I was unsure of how to

react so I didn't. I just looked at the title, "Lily With Lilies", and quit breathing. I looked up quick enough to see their eyes meet.

They didn't even notice me. I looked at the ground and noticed a battery operated grinder. That explained the foliage. No one could carve rain lilies with that much detail using a chain saw, no matter how talented they were. I took Lily by the arm, breaking in to their conversation. "I need you to give me a hand," I said, pulling her away.

"I'll see you later," Jerry said, smiling. I wasn't sure who he was talking to. At this point, I no longer had anything to say to him.

"Grab that saw," I told Lily. "We need to get packed up before this storm hits." The wind had already begun to blow dust across the infield. As I was leaving I found one of the officials.

"You need to check out our 'mate' over by the squirrel feeder," I said. "I think you'll find he used some unauthorized equipment."

Lily planted herself in front of me holding my chainsaw between us. Her feet were set squarely and her nostrils flared. "What the fuck are you doing. Jerry is our friend. You're being a major asshole."

"He's not my friend," I said. "My friends play by the rules."

She dropped my saw in the dirt and stomped off toward the trailer. I picked up the saw but I couldn't carry all three saws and the gas can. I took the valuables. I could always get another can. I got to the trailer but Lily wasn't there. She needed time to cool off, I figured. She had to realize that there was too much at stake here to let somebody get away with cheating. I packed my saws away and retracted the awning so it didn't get damaged by the wind. After waiting a few minutes

for Lily, I decided to go see how the judging was going. Blue fingers of lightning were dancing across the western horizon. We needed to be battened down soon, inside and comfortable.

They were announcing the winners just as I got back to the infield. The guy with the modern art sculpture had won third place. "*Well, I'll be damned!*" I thought. Second prize went to Lu Anne. "*Good for her.*" When they announced first prize I nearly dropped to my knees. I had won. I couldn't wait to tell Lily. I ran back to the trailer, no Lily, but her clothes and toiletries were gone. She left a brief note.

I had no idea how mean you could be. I'm going to New Zealand. See you next year, - maybe.

-Lily

Stunned would have been an understatement. I sat at the table and read the note over and over until a booming clap of thunder shook the trailer. I pulled on my coat and went to the business office to collect my prize. They congratulated me. I thanked them. They asked if I could stop by the next day when it was light for a picture with my sculpture.

"Sure," I said.

I hooked up my trailer and stuck the check in the glove compartment of the truck. I took one last walk over to the infield. The crowd had dispersed. The wind was howling now and every flash of lightning made me twitch. The mermaid stood tall against the other sculptures. I looked again at Jerry's work. I had to admit he had a unique eye for detail. He had captured a part of Lily that I had never noticed. I remembered the gas can I had left in the field. Yep, it was still there. Might as well take it.

Just as I pulled out of the exhibitor's area, large drops of rain began pounding against the windshield. The gale had blown over one of the ficus trees I left in the parking lot. In the rearview, I could see flames licking up skyward as the lightning split the air. It reminded me of a dance. The flashing lights from the fire trucks were about to cut in.

I slowly advanced up my brother's driveway and looped behind the house to center the camper on the concrete pad. I didn't call ahead. I didn't even know if he was home. I was about to disconnect from the trailer when I heard the screen door slam. He was coming toward me in jeans and house shoes. The air seemed a bit brisk to go shirtless. Maybe it was just me.

"Welcome home," he yelled across the yard. "I hear you hit the jackpot, you high roller."

"I guess," I replied.

"So where's this Lily I've been hearing so much about?"

"Long story," I said. I hate winter.