

Christmas Trees

“So what is it, you’re telling the story now?” John asks me.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Keep going.”

I can see the corner of his lips lift under his oxidized mustache and I know he’s joking.

“Next time I’ll bring the tape recorder. You can hear yourself talk,” he says.

“I’ll get one,” I say. “Then I won’t need you.”

“You can forget I mentioned it.”

We’re moving along the canal and John points to different houses on the other side, telling me who lived where and what happened when. I put the car into second gear and smell dead algae and sewage.

“You’re getting me all distracted, where was I again?” he asks.

“You guys had just piled the Christmas trees together,” I say.

“Oh that’s right. So we’re going around the neighborhood grabbing all the trees off the curb. We get all these trees together and it is massive, this pile I mean. The pile was massive! By the time we got them all into the street it was almost two stories.”

“I’ll never understand how you didn’t get caught.”

His mustache crinkles.

“Too much brain between the two of us,” he says. “And you know what they used to do on Sundays?”

“They should have arrested you two,” I say.

“Listen, if you didn’t want me to finish the story you could have just said so.”

“Which house did he live in?”

John points to a defenseless brown house with a cracked cement walkway at the end of the canal. It has two windows on it and I wonder how any light gets in.

“Five people in that?” I say.

“I can’t believe it either” he says. “You would knock your head every time you went in there.”

I downshift the car and grind on first gear; I jump but Henry doesn’t blink.

“Jesus, didn’t he teach you how to drive a stick shift?” he says.

“He certainly tried,” I said. “But I was thirteen when that was going on.”

“The earlier the better. Slow down, you’re going to pass it.”

We stop in front of the house and all I can get is the smell of low tide. There’s a low rise chain link fence surrounding it with a slim isle of dirt between the two. Little cement flower boxes with weeds lay beneath the windows and I wonder if they were always there.

“I could tell you stories about that house; if you could have met the lunatic that was your grandfather.”

“How did anyone get fed in there anyway?”

“Are you kidding? You should have seen your father when he lived in that house; that kid was a stick. Did you know he grew six inches when he went away to school?”

“Wasn’t he five-eleven?”

“True story.”

“Oh I don’t believe that for a second.”

“Would I lie to you?”

“No, but I bet you’d tease.”

“I never joke.”

He gets me to smile and I try to imagine Dad as a five and a half foot stick walking around Brooklyn. I try to think of him without gray hair and without the wrinkles across his forehead. It takes a few tries but I imagine him walking home from school and then I put him on a bus. He always walks alone and when he gets to his house there’s no one home but him and then he sits on the couch because I can’t think of anything better for him to do.

“I can’t even picture it,” I tell John.

“You’ll have to ask one of your aunts for a photo. I’ll bet your mom kept one.”

“She wouldn’t have them.”

“Shorter than that fence, I swear.”

John’s glasses have the sun glaring off of them and when he looks to me I can see my face in them. I keep looking for Dad in the glass but all I see are dark eyes and a flat face.

“Are you hungry yet?” John asks.

“Are you?” I say.

“It’s six ‘o’clock isn’t it?”

“So you’re hungry?”

“I’m just saying its dinner time.”

“Then we might as well eat.”

“There’s a place down on Main Street your dad used to work.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Good clams too.”

“So you’re saying you’re hungry?”

“I’m just saying it has good clams.”

I pull away from the curb and John tells me to cross town. It’s like a suburb but once in a while there’s a building that looks like a brownstone. John tells me it’s good living now but you didn’t used to walk alone. We pass Dad’s old high school on the passenger side and John tells me to slow down and look at it.

I’m staring at the cement saints next to the main entrance, thinking about Mom taking me to church with the smell of incense and letting the bread melt on my tongue. Dad never goes to church and all of sudden neither do we. John gives me a story about the school and how the nuns used to beat them with hoses and I think of Dad naming all the saints.

“Are you going to tell me about the trees or what?” I ask.

“If you could shut up long enough,” he says.

“I’ll buy you a beer.”

“Sweet talker, eh?”

“I’ll buy you two.”

John looks up past the moon roof and puts his hands together.

“Finally,” he says. “You taught him something right Robert.”

I pull into the place, an Irish oak wood dive and help John inside with his copper cane. We walk in and the bartender knows John and everyone is shaking my hand and slapping John on the back. I'm six years old again looking up at the stools and ordering a coke at the bar while all the men are swallowing my hand with their fingers; Dad is whispering that I need to have a strong handshake.

"I'll go get us a table," I say.

"You in a rush?" John says.

"Just looking for a table."

"Rub elbows a bit."

John sits at the bar and I post up next to him with two salt and pepper bar flies to my right. They swear I've got the resemblance and I keep looking in the mugs and the ice for it but all I have are the words. At first it's a sitcom but John and the pepper flies get me into the rhythm. Get your drink, bet the horses, grab some pretzels, crack a joke, enjoy the formula.

John buys his fourth round and I watch him start on it, his purple veined digits wrapping around the drink. The beer churns inside the glass and he settles it on the bar-top.

"I think I just about earned that story," I say

"Where was I?" he asks.

"The pile was two stories."

"Two stories?"

"That's what you were saying."

“Well it was very big.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Massive.”

“You said that too.”

John takes another sip from his beer and his mustache starts to drip.

“Didn’t your father ever tell you this one?” he asks.

“Once or twice,” I say. “But I needed to double check he wasn’t a liar.”

“Oh no, he was never that. I don’t think he would ever lie to you.”

“I don’t think he would either.”

“That’s good; I’m glad to hear you say that. He always wanted to get you right, you know. That’s exactly what he said when he visited me last year. You know what he said? We’re sitting at my kitchen table after watching this old western on TV and he’s got a drink in his hand and we’re laughing and you know what he says to me? I swear he looks me in the eye and he says ‘John, I hope I got him right’. I thought he would cry.”

“Quit stalling.”

“I mean it though.”

“How’re you feeling?”

“Maybe too good.

“Yeah you might be.”

“I mean it though.”

“Just tell me about the trees.”

“Is he telling that story about the inferno?” asks one of the flies.

“Oh it’s an inferno now, was it?” says John.

“I’ll be right back,” I say to them.

I leave John and the flies and start walking towards the bathroom in the back. The whole place is a shadow; romantic as hell. All the wood is dark stained and the floor is a burgundy carpet and the resin on the high-tops is cracked but someone would call it character. There’s a bear head stuck to the wall on a plaque labeled “1968” and I figure it’s got mice living in it.

The bathroom is a photo album with picture frames sticking to the walls. I pull up to the urinal and there it is; Dad in the vest and he’s got a Bacardi pouring into someone’s glass. There’s this big marble grin on his face and it’s the first time I’ve seen the picture. I try the smile but I can’t put it on. He’s a natural and he works it all like he invented the damn thing. I should ask for the picture but there would never be any good use for it aside from faking a grin.

I come back from the bathroom and John is waving his cane at one of the flies and they’re all laughing and someone should frame the whole thing and toss it in the bathroom. My seat is still warm and John buys me a drink and he won’t let me stop him. He tells me the rest of the story, about the pile and the fire. He tells me when they lit it the whole thing went up in a minute and it melted their shoe souls and they still tried to run from the fire fighters but I don’t bother seeing it and I kick back my beer.

“How’d that version do?” John asks.

“Superb,” I say. “Gets better with age, unlike you guys.”

“Your dad told you that one?”

“I told you he did.”

“I guess you’ve heard it enough.”

“Maybe you’ve got the dementia.”

“You going to put me in my straight jacket then?”

We finish our drinks and start to head out before the flies give John and I an Irish goodbye and half an hour later we’re finally in the car and it’s just turning dark. I get John to his house and up to his door step and he turns around and hugs me.

“Don’t be a stranger, kid,” he says.

“Thanks for showing me around,” I say.

“You look like him you know,”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yup, same dumb look.”

I start to pull back but he keeps an arm on my shoulder.

“Oh that’s good,” I say.

“True story,” he says.

“Don’t throw your back out brushing your teeth”

“Have a glass of warm milk, it’ll help you sleep better.”

He gives me an iron palm on my back and I head back to the car. I watch him go inside and then I pull away and drive back to the canal, drive up and down it with the windows open and the brine air spitting across my face. There’s a dampness and when I pull up to the house I park it and stare, trying to think of Dad between the man at the bar and the kid on the couch. I smell rotten seaweed and salt and burning pine trees and

melting tar but Dad is stuck where I left him, stuck with a match in his hand and a two story pile of Christmas trees and there's no finding him in-between.