

The Last Tree Standing

For starters, it was devastation, wide as the continent, harried, hurried, invasion from the depths of all significant bodies of water, those landlocked and those not, come shoreward a titanic force and right behind it the New People with unheard of powers, suppression their game, all-out suppression. The land rocked with changes,

Old prospector and traveler Alec Perfed, separatist for almost half a century, wide-eyed like his known two blue oceans, broad shouldered and thick-chested, still a dreamer of the old days before the New People arrived in mysterious clouds of fog and mist and wide-water upheavals from wherever in the semi-darkness of one insidious evening, had been absolutely delighted and surprised to discover a tree in a crevice in the Teton Mountain Range.

He hadn't seen a tree in two years.

He measured time on a piece of an old pool cue stick stuck in a leather sheath on his mule, and was more than a month of marks into the third year when he first smelled the tree and then spotted it in the slight crevice where it had started and leaped slim and desperately high seeking the rays of the glorious sun, vitality moving two ways at once, at once powerful and pleading. He admired the birth and growth of the tree against all the odds. Promise, pride, the sudden burst of passion in him said it would be, forever, a story to be told,

For three days of celebration he sat against its trunk, sipping water from his canteen, sharing drips and drops of it with the base of the tree, loving again the connection, his mind loaded with thoughts now and then coming fuzzy, now and then clear, as the rhythm of the tree's life surged through his tissue and muscle, graced his bones, said that love still lived inside, that the Old People still had a chance at revival, survival.

Above all, the tree was a Godsend, a message so dear it almost exploded in him, the charge long and lengthy and full blown in his frame. On a sudden spurt of energy and mind, he observed from several viewpoints, each one quite decisive, how special this tree was, an oak appearing like no oak ever revealed. From hidden images that deployed in various parts of his mind, he saw every other oak as hunchbacked as Quasimodo, broken-armed, distorted, a simple convolution of growth, limbs everywhere awry, twisted, cross-bowed and cross-linked, crooked as a thief bent on awful errands and commissions, proud, stubborn, muscular against nearby pines and maples, making way in the face of all the deciduous and coniferous allies of the forest, king of many lawns and lays of land, trunk solid as the nose-guard of a Super Bowl winner, residing under the hide of a rhinoceros or crocodile, armor-borne, impenetrable, immovable, yet at periodic instances might provide yield.

Yet this lone tree was different by every degree: dream-like, sylphic, the silken, long limbs stretching far overhead, hunger's reach for passion of performance, a ballet dancer caught on stage by a photograph in a second of maneuver, a brief copy of her elasticity and grace, her limbs on one tiptoe and stage-oriented for this single and lone observer, and inarguably fateful from the outset of observation.

For a moment he felt as special as the lone tree stretched out for its life, its very cause ... of which, it also said, Perfed had lone control over its existence.

Out of that mind set, in a quandary, arguments in range, he shifted again, distractions beginning to work him endlessly. Coming in soft cushions of thought, in self arguments, were other wonders and awes; he missed his wife Melody and the country songs that had mated them in the first place, him coming from the northern edge of the Atlantic, her carrying the heart of Nashville, the guitar in her hands, nearly the best of late evening gifts. He had not seen her since the big wave came crushing and taking all he owned, but he remembered how she sang her

songs, every one of them; loaded with suspense and promise for the late evening, the middle of the night, dawn pulsing with the same arrangements.

If he met a solitary soul in the mountain, his personal introduction would begin on a simple note and turn complicated when any conversation took place. Too often people held back, trust thin in such thin ranks. There were times, however, when Perfed was received elatedly and he'd reply, "I've traveled a long ways in my journeys, just as you have. I read that on you as though you sport labels."

He'd clear the air immediately, tie past connections to that other world they once had. "With me, I came from the murky waters of the Atlantic where my home was washed away on that first savage night on insular Nahant, now an island once more, Lynn off to the stern. Never a splinter of that warm abode seen again by me. The first great wave, water warmer than ever, at 90 plus degrees they tell me, had knocked a hole in the foundation of the house and took out of action every element with life, force or power by any and every connection, sending all to smithereens, and my Melody on an errand, beyond help, out on the causeway or at Lynn shore. Oh, we later heard stories that gained momentum about mountainous eruptions in the midst of all oceans and larger lakes, all at once as though a button had set them off, and surging landward with deadly force and steadiness, some waves, like tsunamis, standing up and rolling 40 and 50 feet high to the nearest coasts, nothing less than obliteration in their wakes. My home, on a ledge of rocks, its thousand pieces, went easy to that frenzy."

His head would shake with the recalled visions.

"I lit out of course, my wife gone, no one to hold me. In my early roaming, Maine-ward, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, Pennsy, heading west, I skirted around places like Winnepesaukee, Moosehead, Sebago, Erie and the lower Great Lakes, waters presenting any

significant size where far shores disappeared in vaguest mists, where new eruptions might occur. I subsisted on brook or stream fish at first, found or stolen goods cached in secret places by people who had already passed in the first year of The Extermination where The New People gathered in clusters waiting to break out and claim all the Earth.

"Oh, they were inventive, The New People, besides the way they had of killing trees, cutting lumber laser-like, a lightning-fast process, and that hideous supplanting power that took hold of whole cadavers of Old People and made new models in their new way, slaves for their bidding, like building new homes, working tirelessly, brought back from death to be drones or automatons. Frightening it was in every instance, like made-over mortuaries serving up plain servitude. At close looks I saw faces and the frames of old friends and relatives adapted into the new system, minus all the old connections. Each one of "the recovered" had an alpha-number permanently scribed on their foreheads; such marked brothers, fathers, mothers, sisters and all along family lines are believably never welcomed by Old People no matter how deep their retreat is, most of them being in mountain ranges where the New People don't tread unless in army numbers, huge squadrons of them, much the way of the really old Flying Squadrons. That you've seen yourself, aye? It seems incredulous that they have their own fears. Think seriously on such a revelation. It could be a spoiler for us if we ever discover what it is, find the hook, the knockout punch, the great persuader."

On this particular day, the third day after he discovered the tree, he was ready for likable company, social hunger prodding him, beating at him That's when a clanking but familiar sound told him he'd definitely have company ... a clatter of steel hooves on a rocky surface at a slow pace; "Time in no hurry to get any place on," as they might say. Not in weeks had he spotted anybody, and that last time across a wide canyon, the sun showing the man off as another wanderer of the land, nearly sequestered away, daring for a bit of sunshine, changing skin color

with a new tint, feeling different about himself, at least trying to. But Perfed didn't hail the fellow. Unknown company up here had to be received with strict trepidation; perhaps that figure might be a scout for a "flying squadron."

With rapidity things happened closer to him on this occasion, air changing beforehand, a signal old as the past, ties coming along with it, seen, negotiated, connected. The sensations of past days possessed him with peculiar strength; at times he thought it to be loneliness. At other moments the old powers coming back to him by slim degrees. The old boisterous odors he loved and rosy scents in a new place, the quiet adventures, the soft romances of new days, the wet dribbles of love, hope eternal.

It all said this day was different too, as the sound grew louder. The first notes of a guitar chord slipped their way to him and he swore he knew the song but could not bring the name up. Then came few words that captured the song title for him, one of Hank Williams' song, a haunting from so far away and so far back it numbed him: *"I'm a rollin' stone all alone and lost/For a life of sin I have paid the cost/When I pass by all the people say/Just another guy on the lost highway/Just a deck of cards and a jug of wine/And a woman' lies makes a life like mine/Oh the day we met, I went astray/I started rolling down that lost highway."*

The mule appeared first as it rounded a bulging ledge on the face of the cliff, an oblong and dark head with aerial ears, and then Perfed saw the man suddenly waving a guitar overhead with one hand and with the other hand tap the mule on the head with a thin wooden prong, surely a long-held souvenir from the lumber wars. This was followed by a clear canyon-echo voice, his old acquaintance, Thorne Moraise, calling out, "Alec, I spotted you from a mile back. Any word yet? I'm anxious as hell for news and I'll settle for good or bad. Ain't talked to nary a soul in three months and been followin' your trail for a few days, your mule better'n my old Millie here. I

sure hope you got a change of chew, a candy bar, an apple core. My tooth is pulsing like my heart. It ain't right. None of this is right, but we keep movin' on.”

Another chorus of "*Lost Highway*" leaped off cold stone and warmed Perfed's heart, saving grace with timbre in it; moody and melodious and marvelous.

For openers, in cordial meetings, Moraise was boisterously hale, looked hard as nails, offered a solid smile when the gap closed between two men, and then, as though he might have forgotten, finally touched his hand over his heart in the truest Old People's acknowledgment. It was the old sign in a new place.

That simplest of gesture carried reams of belief in it, of promise, the salute, the announcement saying with its one tap, “All will one day be good again, good again for the Old People, the friendly ones, not the new ones, those alien critters from wherever the Hell they had come from, and bound to take over all of Earth.”

The simple but encouraging tap on the chest, the way it was conveyed, was a gesture from those who intended to enjoy this Earth down to the last grain, the last blossom, the last fallen leaf, if such be the end, the hungry hanging on, the thirsty bent on digging new wells, the loneliest of them waiting in the new kind of mountains for the return of good Old Mother Earth to dance her old tune, swing to her own rhythms again, after the momentous swings of the Ages ... Stone, Bronze, Iron, Medieval, Industrial, however they hit her wide parts, her continents, islands, and outlandish elsewhere.

Perfed replied, tapping his own chest, past images floating magically and instantly between the two as though a movie provided the connection. Those two saw both oceans cupping them, green hills rushing up at snow-capped peaks, Florida jungles and Utah forests, the rocky Maine coast where endless blue stones stood in the way of the capricious seas, the sand dunes of the outer

Carolinas, Oklahoma oil rigs silent as God could make them, all the places that work, vacation, war and wandering had taken the pair and their fair brethren of all races, breeds, medal winners, leaders of some sort at one time, and the down and out, often quite like a close-to-losing fighter in the ring, on his knees, his head fuzzy, questioning a rally finding way, and wondering if it would be worth it?

“What’s happenin’?” Moraise said. I’m glad to know why you’re out here. You never did say the other times we met, too much goin’ on then. I always look to my own protection on trail meets but knew it was you.”

“Aye, I did see some of ‘the converted,’” replied Moraise. “It forced me never to address or hail anybody encountered in the mountains, and there were some like me, until I saw the face of that person, determined him New People with the old form, a cadaver come back by some awesome power we might never understand.

“What else is goin’ on?” Moraise said.

Perfed motioned to him and said, “I want to show you something special, a piece of promised brightness, I swear,” and took him to where the tree, a normally rugged oak with clutches of fingers at odd ends and loose, grown up tall and forcefully graceful in its niche of stone, its growth forced long and lean and glorious by its slim, prison-like location.

Surprise and glee grasping him, Maraise’s face lit up like a lamp on an old telephone pole, the glow honest and his whole frame showing a sudden freshness as though a target had been reached, he and his mule coming to a sudden stop at sight of the tree. Quick judgment said its roots apparently had lunged down through a rocky path to find water, to keep it alive under awed, enforced circumstances, and allow it to grow straight for the clouds in its narrow confine, a stretching reach for God's grandeur.

Moraise, aware of a momentous discovery, exclaimed loudly, "What the hell are we going to do with it, Alec?" His hand rubbed the bark like it was his lost woman, teased it, waited for response, his eyes closing with lost dreaminess, a shiver grasping him with more old stuff, making him spit out to his friend, "It never goes away, Alec. That's one thing we own and that's for sure."

"We're going to chop it down and stack the splits." Alec said, "before 'they' get it. Then we'll fire up a good blaze. We've seen thousands and thousands of trees dropped by New People's laser application, whole forests in a day, and lumbered in mind-shaking speed. Hell, every one we've ever seen, or used to see. If we look down from here we don't see a single one, This is it, Thorne. This is it. All of them cut before any of us could take a deep breath. We're going to celebrate it, this fantastic new discovery, this lone tree, piece by piece. We're starting a celebration of an odd sort."

With that declaration, in agreement, their axes were swinging, biting, chewing at the tree, the old rhythms quickly found by the pair. Back they went to the days of rising oil prices, purchasing wood-burning stoves, venturing into forests and hillside growths, into neighbors' yards for falling apple trees, cutting, splitting logs, stacking them in the yard, in the wood box, fighting against the increase of prices, loving the woods and forests and the comradeship of two or more ax men, at least two vehicles, two gas saws, such as Jonsereds and Husqvarnas, never alone in the woods, fishing on the way home, beer in cans, cheese sandwiches, now and then catching a trout in Pye Brook or under Thunder Bridge on the Ipswich River, temporary illusions of heaven, labor's payoff and contentment.

The good days.

It was Perfed's immediate decision right from the beginning of the discovery; this first tree seen in two years to be sacrificed for the old folks. From across the valley he hoped they'd come. Some of them to be Necessary Couples, those bound by oath to help the other as long as they lived, arrangements taking the place of marriage.

Perfed started a fire with a single match put to the shavings they'd sliced off one stick of wood. The welcomed warmth promised that it would last only a few weeks at most, but, as suspected, the thick, dark curl of smoke began drawing Old People off hidden places in peaks and high trails of the Tetons. They came, dozens of them the next day, to share the mystery, to warm their hands, to smell the smoke, to hear the old stories, a line of them emanating from peaks where new sleep spots had been located, hideaways for seekers, hunters, mountain prowlers, at times moving thin as shadows, those who could be mistaken for opponents counted on semi-invisibility.

The strange realization come to many of them in the gathering, as Perfed spoke, that individually and collectively the New People would not live in Old People's houses. "That habit, that trait, that unconditional issue, bothers me endlessly,:" he said, "for there's a reason built in it, a fright, an imperfection that might be harmful, frightful or infectious to New Folks. From this knowledge we might establish a weapon against them. Most all the trees across the land have been laser-cut as we've seen and lumbered for new homes in such a speedy manner it seemed unbelievable."

As he talked he fondled the bit of seed in his pocket.

Perfed went on to tell those gathered at this singular fire, "I made some experiments on my own, like tossing a handful of loam into a crevice or a cranny in the middle of a rock pile and grass'd grow while I was looking at the spot." And it all would end in his firm belief, "If we hang on

long enough, we can beat them because there is something we had in our homes that frightens the New People to extreme measures.”

Heads began to nod at that declaration; there had to be a way to confront them, beat them at their game.

When the fire would burn out, the last flame and ember dark as earth, the word on this tree had to go with those Old Folks when they finally departed from the final embers in guarded secrecy. The news, they trusted, might refortify at least some of the other Old People out there, but of course had to be kept from the New People.

Now, after the huge and momentous run-off of trees by the New People, old folks like Perfed could stand on a peak and not know the country out in front of them, not a tree in sight, the old Earth in a new curve out there, almost uncompromising, bald, bare, barren, a sight to frighten bold men. It was not the former land, comprised of places for animals, insects, the buzzing bee, the happy, lonely men like Perfed who could live and love necessarily the solitary life. But it was land without trees in succession like the pugnacious oak, dwarfed, weathered, and limbed to a kind of hell and back, or the gathered cottonwood centering their oases, or the pine and Douglas fir being the dress and gown and undergarments for a succession of hills and climbs for miles into and past the heat of horizons. Those horizons, every which way on Earth from most points, had always broadcast a calling for them as if they belonged over there instead of here, out there where squaw pine and deadwood lay waiting for fire watches, campfires, coffeepots at outlandish morning accents a man could live on during long nights of wait.

What they saw was different.

What came in place was a land of green lawns that ran for endless miles, the grass taking hold as if by a new magic and the oxygen produced from it was richer and cleaner than early oxygen.

Grass grew, it appeared, in any clutch of earth no matter the size of the plot or the usual locations.

And far off, vaguely seen from the peaks, New People's tinned roofs reflected the specialized energies, the new communities glistening under the sun, fresh collections almost every day, spreading across the land, dooming what once was America to a particular and peculiar land of reflections, rays, glinting signs of an unknown energy from a strange source.

But no more trees.

None of them knew a seed had been cached in the pocket of Perfed's greatcoat. Of course, they'd want to make a ceremony of planting that seed and many of them would volunteer to stand watch as long as they could, until Kingdom Come, as some of them would obviously vow, still being cut the way they came into life in the old days.

Realizing the size of his audience, and to what extent he could sway them, agitate any of their complacencies, Perfed added to his speech: "There is going to be a war, perhaps a long war, but you must realize what I believe is going to happen.... Even though the New People are cutting all the trees to get lumber for thousands of new houses, they have no idea that once a tree comes down and the resultant lumber is used in construction, the first thing that arises will be the microbes and germs that the lumber brings with it right at the construction level. What they are afraid of is what they'll introduce to new buildings on their own; the first bit of dust tromped in, dropped food particles, shoe detritus from outside walks, will begin to infect their new houses. They are not immune to the extent that we are to the microbes and germs we've come to live with, as long as we followed decent habits of cleanliness. They really will fall to what they fear the most no matter how strong they appear, how smart and complicated, the obvious talents they have, yet are as simple as life."

One man jumped up and said, "That'll be forever. When does the war proper start? What should we do? I'm itching for action. All of us are tired of hiding out like forever." He balled one fist and pounded it into the other hand.

"Don't you see it yet?" Perfed said, rolling his eyes, looking outward over the grassy world, "They are infected as of now. I can feel it. It's bound to happen even quicker than we hoped, and even the final may take years but it'll be worth every day of it."

He raised one fist in salute and celebration, threw his head back, thrust both arms toward the blue sky and yelled out his newly favored slogan, "Robin will have Sherwood again," and the hearty, robust laughter echoed in the mountains all round. Some Old People danced, some sang, the fever caught up the ranks. The rocky background made it illustrious, notorious, the echoes running for mile on mile through the circuitous Tetons, as much "Hallelujah" as ever heard.

Before long the infections came, as Perfed vouched, and the New People, in a new hurry, began to fall flat on their faces as they rushed out of their homes, sick, bitten, ravaged to their worst fears. At first, when others came to help, they too fell ill and died quickly, with their adopted servants also immediately returning to their previous pasts. When such losses became unbearable for them, the New People caved in, panic ensued, and the new civilization was on its way off the face of Earth as swiftly as it had come.

When one seed sprung loose a tree from Mother Earth, right where Perfed had placed it, other trees began to grow nearby. The summer months enriched them as did the reach for water. With their growth assured, the forests started to return, their deep clutches welcomed by the riches of the land.

Eventually the stories came into the mountains about the final days of victory when all the seas and all the lakes and large bodies of water built up to new momentous eddies, whirlpools,

vortexes and maelstroms, the water rushing in greater force than seen before. Such violent changes drew into their whirling hearts all the New People on the face of the Earth. They came, or were drawn by an enormous power, from every direction and from the longest distances, as if they too longed to be home again, in that distant place that sent them out in the first instance, explorers and settlers of another order, another place.

From high in his perch, Perfed looked down as New People's home became inhabited again, surely by the same unseen old microorganisms after a fashion, and by the Old People in heavy numbers enjoying new comforts for old bones. The wise men had always determined that there are many "good" bacteria in homes helping to keep the "bad" germs away. "Helpful microorganisms," they said, "overwhelmingly outnumber harmful ones. That's what the New People could not fend off. If you take away too many of the good bacteria it provides bad germs a chance to increase at a harmful level."

For a thousand years the Earth did not feel the wrath of invasion from another unknown source and Alec Perfed had long been encased in his favorite out of the way place in the Tetons. Once again he knew Melody's songs coming out of the Deep South, finding him for odd moments, awed times at old Nahant, but usually in the Tetons where he'd found his place of rest.