

2,802 words

A Bright, Shining Thing

The split-trunk oak, standing proud for generations, marked the setback from the Old Post Road that runs along my homestead in Ipswich, Massachusetts. True to the tree's relentless spirit, one of the trunks remains upright, a blazing scar at the base. The other runs a crooked path of shattered branches stretching across the snow-covered paddock behind my house.

A year ago, when the ancient tree indicated its demise by foregoing all spring foliage, I notified the Department of Public Works that it might fall across the road. Six weeks later, a crew showed up—two trucks and five guys in hard hats. They stood around looking up at my tree. I watched them from my kitchen window while I finished my first cup of coffee and poured a second. My aging Springer Spaniel at my heels and coffee cup in hand, I walked over. The DPW Director left his men hard at work watching the tree. He eyed my coffee cup as if it should be full, hot, and for him.

“Morning, Connor,” he greeted me. “She’s dead.”

“Morning back, Charlie. Looks like,” I replied.

“Should bring her down,” he advised. “Come a Nor’easter, she might fall out that way.”

He waved away from my property, toward Boston and points south. “Block the road. Hit a car if one happened by.” He glanced back at the tree. “Oak makes a fine fire, though. You burn in the big house?”

He nodded toward my yellow, wood-frame antique standing forward on the lot. A smaller building, no more than a cabin, nestled in the far northwest corner.

“Yep. In both places. Main house has two fireplaces.” I gestured with my coffee cup. “Ezra’s cottage out back has only the wood stove.”

“You’ll be well set after you bring this monster down.”

I took a sip of lukewarm coffee. This was not going my way. “Me bring it down? You guys won’t? Public land and all?”

“Not on public land. Tree is well off the road setback. At least a foot.”

“Part of the trunk, perhaps, but she’s two, maybe three feet wide. Big chunk comes up on town land. Plus the overhang.”

“Could be so, but we go by plot lines,” he said tapping the roll of documents in his hand. “She’s on your property. Your tree, your responsibility.”

“What about public safety?”

“That’s the thing, ain’t it? We’ll keep an eye on her. She’s still standing strong. If she’s gonna fall, we’ll take her down. Assess you the cost. Believe me, less expensive if you handle it. Have a good day, now.” He joined the other men climbing into their trucks. Time for their coffee break.

I was in no rush to cut the tree down. I would wait and watch, as I was prone to do. Others saw this trait as patience, even wisdom. Occasionally cited in professional evaluations over my forty-year career in law enforcement, it was a reason for my appointment as Ipswich Chief of Police two decades ago. Now, three years retired, I suspect it's a cover for my unwarranted hope for good things to happen and bad things to pass me by. I'm not convinced it works: in my sixty-eight years, bad things have happened and some good things have not.

Over the next year, the old oak stood its ground. The massive girth at the base separated into two trunks, each reaching upward in a collection of tangled branches: multiple arms with outstretched hands spreading gnarled fingers into the sky. Arms, hands, fingers—all empty except for an abandoned bird nest snuggled into the crotch of a branch high above my head. The nest had been home to a pair of jays who ruled the airspace around my house—chasing other birds away, raising their brood, calling out in annoyance, enjoying their riotous lives. When the oak failed to protect them with new foliage, they moved on to a large chestnut beyond my property line.

Throughout the summer, sun and wind picked at my tree's rough surface, stripping its barren boughs of useless bark. In the fall, I raked up the discarded scabs instead of fallen leaves. Gray skies provided a stark backdrop for the sculpture of silvered branches until a late March blizzard brought one of the twin trunks to the ground. Now it lay stretched out on a bed of newly fallen snow.

I walked the length of the dismembered skeleton estimating the cordage of firewood lying there. My foot nudged the nest, twisted free and resting in the snow—still intact. As I picked it up, a glimmer caught my eye.

I glanced over at the cabin on the edge of my property and said, “Jesus Christ, that old bastard didn’t do it after all.”

Ezra Eaton had lived in my cabin for the last two years. Prior to that, he was a guest of the state, serving time for breaking and entering, burglary and possession of stolen goods. It would have been a much longer stay if the charge of grand larceny had held up.

Always “EZ” in my mind, Ezra and I had been inseparable growing up in Ipswich—digging clams on the flats or scarfing them down at the old Clam Box out on Route 133, hanging out along the river with friends and six-packs. After graduation, I headed to Vietnam. With a high draft number, EZ stayed behind, engaging in a variety of petty crimes.

While I was in ‘Nam, both my parents died in a car accident, leaving me the rundown farm on the edge of town. Back stateside and with no interest in raising vegetables and boarding horses, I enrolled at a junior college in the western part of the state and earned a degree in criminal justice. By the time I returned and passed the exam for the Ipswich Police Department, EZ was better known to them than to me. It stayed that way.

Over the years, he was often picked up on suspicion but carried only one conviction for petty theft until he fell from a second-floor window of a closed-up summer house with items that did not belong to him. Idiot should have realized he was too old for second story work. A patrol car found him with several silver picture frames tucked into his jacket and a shattered bottle of Jack Daniels next to his broken leg.

We had a series of break-ins that winter and EZ appeared to be a likely suspect. Officers recovered stolen objects from his rented room down by the river, and a pawnshop operator identified him as the source of a watch taken the previous month.

The county prosecutor wanted to add a more serious crime: grand larceny in the instance of Mrs. Eleanor Gravenstock's diamond ring. Old Eleanor was well known to the Ipswich Police Department—always complaining about loose dogs, noisy children, and lurking strangers. When she notified us that her three-carat diamond engagement ring had been stolen, we took notice. It was insured for eighteen thousand dollars, but the old lady wasn't interested in a payout. She wanted her ring back.

The theft qualified as a major crime in Ipswich. After EZ was arrested, we searched all his old haunts for that ring. We tracked down several of his associates in petty crime and offered incentives for information. We questioned, badgered, even threatened EZ while he was still in the hospital with his leg in traction. We got nowhere. The man remained strangely calm about the charge.

We had him cold on burglary and possession. His public defender accepted a plea on these charges for a maximum of four years' incarceration, but EZ would not cop to grand larceny. When the county prosecutor threatened to include it in the court warrant based on opportunity and known mode of operation, the young defense attorney announced he would fight all the charges.

The prosecutor caved and EZ received a four-year sentence, possible parole after three. He got out a year after I retired. I felt uncertain during the entire episode. We had leaned on him hard. He was guilty on the B&E and petty thievery, but a major crime did not fit right with EZ. Maybe he did steal a ring worth thousands of dollars. But, if he stumbled on the opportunity, I

figured he would leave Ipswich, not hang around until he fell out of a window with a few picture frames and a bottle of whiskey.

Back from prison, he seemed quieter—pale and drawn into himself. I offered him a place to stay. No rent, just occasional help with chores. He picked up odd jobs around town in the summer and spent his winter months carving duck decoys he sold at the outfitter's store and local tourist shops. I didn't see him much unless we were tackling some task around the property. We had not been close for decades, but I knew he was in a safe place and was mostly legal. Now, I owed him an apology for thinking he had stolen the old lady's ring. EZ hadn't done it. The jay had.

I carried the nest up the few stairs of the cabin's front porch and knocked. EZ opened the door, peering out at me.

"Connor," he said.

"EZ," I greeted him. We stood looking at each other.

"Storm last night," he offered.

"Yep. Brought down part of the big tree. Something in it I wanted to show you."

He glanced at the nest with no interest and said, "Might as well come in."

I stamped snow from my boots and motioned with my free hand for my dog to stay, but when EZ opened the screen door and slapped his thigh, the dog entered like he owned the place. I followed him into the small cabin—one room with a bed against the far wall and a workbench and carving tools on another. There was a small table with two chairs. An old rocking chair sat next to the wood stove, which was burning low against the morning chill. My dog circled once

and eased down to what must have been his usual place by the stove. EZ pulled out one of the chairs and sat down at the table. “Let’s see what you brung me, Connor.”

Sitting across from him, I offered the nest. He reached out and tilted it toward the window so the ring, woven into the twigs of the old nest, glittered dimly in the morning sunlight. He nudged the stone with a calloused fingertip.

“Eleanor’s ring?” he asked. “The one you wanted me to have stole.”

“Don’t see how it could be anything but. Probably been in there since right after she reported the ring missing.”

EZ poked at the nest. “Jays?”

I nodded. “Eleanor said she was always polishing the ring so it would sparkle like when her Edward proposed to her on bended knee. She remembered things from decades past but couldn’t recall what she had done or said two hours before. I figure she was sitting outside on her porch, polishing the ring. Then she wandered off to do something else: get the mail, yell at some kids, go to the bathroom.”

EZ shifted his glance up at me before looking down again at the nest in his hands.

“She didn’t provide any details when she reported the theft—just that some damned soul stole her ring and she wanted it back. She must have left it blinking in the sunlight. I can see that blue jay winging by, catching the sparkle with his eye, swooping down. In an instant, the small, shining thing is in his beak and he’s gone. Grand larceny committed in broad daylight.”

“According to you, I stole this ring,” EZ said in a far away voice.

“Well, I didn’t know for sure. But yeah, EZ. I did think you stole the old lady’s ring. Now, I come over to apologize. Show you the nest and apologize for doubting you.”

EZ got up from the table and walked over to his workbench. He returned with a pair of needle-nosed pliers and pried the ring free from the tangle of twigs, grass, and mud. He placed the ring over the tip of his little finger. It rested there, not quite slipping below his fingernail.

“Well, Connor. I’ll tell you something. I did steal this ring.”

I pulled my eyes from the ring and glared at EZ. He went on speaking in a low voice, shifting his hand back and forth in the sunlight streaming through the window.

“Took it one night when I was wandering around her house while that old lady lay snoring away. I used to go in on occasion, late at night. Back door was always unlocked. Eleanor drank a bit. An open bottle of Four Roses always there on the night table. I would walk around, take something or two. Always left her Four Roses alone.”

When I didn’t acknowledge his ability to abstain from drinking an old lady’s liquor, he turned his attention back to the ring on his fingertip. “Lovely, isn’t it? Worth more money than I’d ever seen. My ticket out—away from Ipswich, away from nothing into something new.”

“What did you do with it?” I asked louder than I intended. “How the hell did it get from your thieving hands into this nest?”

EZ looked up at me as if I still wore my uniform. After a moment, he nodded to himself and continued. “I didn’t know where I could get anything near its value without getting caught. Truth be told, I wanted to keep it. I carried it around with me, in the watch pocket of my jeans. I would take it out and look at it.”

He shook his head. “Risky, I know. In fact, your guys stopped me once in town when I had the ring on me. Asking the usual questions, ‘Who’d you rob this week, Ezra? Where’s that ring? We know you stole it.’ They had no cause to search me. Didn’t occur to them I would be dumb enough to carry it around like that. I liked to have it near me. It was my future.”

EZ turned his eyes from me toward the window, looking out beyond my property toward the north. “You remember when we used to hang out top of Bush Hill? Looking down, you could see most of the river, all the way out to the Bay. It’s all built up now, but there’s still that huge rock to sit on. I’d climb up, stack a few small stones on each other and set the ring on top. Stupid, I guess, but it made me feel good.”

EZ went quiet. I sat there and watched him remember.

He shrugged. “One time, I had to pee. Stepped off to the side and pissed out over the ledge. I heard that laughing caw-sound jays make as they race past. I saw a flicker of blue, a gleaming flash in his beak. The ring was gone and so was the bird. I stood there staring at the small pile of stones thinking my future was gone, too. Three days later I fell out that window and your guys found me.”

He put the ring down between us. “What happens now?”

I didn’t reach for the ring. I looked at EZ and felt my anger slip away. I had been fooled by a blue jay into thinking my childhood friend was innocent. The ring in the nest had provided a simple explanation, making it easy for me to apologize—a chance to right things after all these years. I should have known.

“I don’t know,” I said in answer to his question. “Eleanor’s dead. She passed several years ago. I think her insurance company paid out. The ring must belong to them. No charges were ever issued against you. There’s only dusty paperwork in some file. Why not leave it there?”

EZ shrugged. “If they want me, someone will come up with a reason to send me back.” He poked at the ring. “Ya know, clean this up and I bet those jays would want their ring again. They probably don’t remember where they left it. Think someone stole it from them.”

After a moment, I said, “Why don’t you do that, EZ? Make it a bright, shining thing again and leave it out on your deck. Maybe they’ll find it.”

I clapped at my dog and rose from the chair. “We’ll be going now.” I got as far as the cabin door before speaking. “Hey EZ, I notice you’ve got less than half a cord of firewood left. Lots of oak lying on the ground outside. I’ll split it with you.”

The End