

## UNDER THE TREE

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I'm standing and looking at the tree with my hands on my hips. It's lovely. I've strung the red, yellow and blue lights and my roommate has meticulously re-arranged and adjusted every single one. We're not lovers. I think that's a disappointment for Shari. She's a few years older than me. The other day she wore a worn t-shirt without a bra. Her heavy breasts swung with a rhythm all their own and her stiff nipples grazed the soft cloth. I kept my eyes on the floor as she stood in front of me laughing and talking. She made chicken dinner for us tonight and offered me wine. I was too damn tired to drink and stayed with sparkling water.

She bought the tree last night at a small lot. I say it's not symmetrical and she defends her choice. I have no axe to grind. It's not like I give a shit. Hell, my *life* is not symmetrical. It hasn't been ever since we came to this island, my ex-wife and I. It's been uphill inch by bloody inch. Thank goodness I've got a job now and she decided to stay here and not run off with our little boy like she threatened to do after the divorce.

My roommate wonders what I'm staring at. The tree, I say. She asks if something's wrong with it. No, I reply. I don't admit I'd like to be hanging these ornaments with my boy Sam and watching his eyes catch fire as the light bounces off the tinsel and swinging red balls. I don't say I used to take off my glasses and lay on the floor under the tree when I was a boy. I'd push the presents out of the way, lay down on the carpet and stare up through the needles. I don't mention how the lights got fuzzy, blended with the branches and the tree smell swallowed me in a fragrant, piney cloud. I don't tell her about the peace I used to feel and how everything is shattered now.

She pulls a slim glass ball out of a box and sighs. It's cracked. I see curved silver inside. She shows me a hand-painted ornament, a cowboy on a horse from the 1950s. She shouts, catches herself and nearly topples off a chair onto the tree when she puts a blue angel on top. She climbs down, shaky. I offer her hot cider and stoke the fire.

She told me at dinner tonight about her sister Becky and Becky's husband Mike. They have a little cottage on the beach south of here in Oregon. She says they all used to meet there for Christmas. They'd fly up from California and rendezvous in that cozy beach shack.

"Your folks were still alive?" I ask.

"Yeah. But they usually came up for Thanksgiving."

She told me about walking out on the beach in high rubber boots. Bringing in buckets of clams to steam for supper. How they'd hunt for squid, set out crab pots and even get oysters. "For my mom," she said, "I don't even *like* oysters."

I remember what it's like to sit down with a family that isn't broken. When I was a boy we

lived in Minnesota. My Dad dressed up as Santa Claus. We wore pressed shirts on Christmas Eve instead of our usual t-shirts and jeans and had lobster tails for dinner. I guess that was our religious practice since Dad was an atheist and Mom an agnostic. After dinner the three of us boys would do the dishes and give my mom a break. When the dishes were done Dad would say, "So long. I'm going to look for him. He can't be too far." Then he headed out the front door, his face lost in the fur-ringed hood of his parka. We waited for Santa with our noses pressed against the big picture window and stared out at the crusty drifts sparkling on our front lawn.

Dad walked down the road until we couldn't see him anymore. Then he doubled back and slipped behind a low hill in the rear of our split level where Mom let him in through the basement door. In the dark she helped him into a flimsy red polyester Santa suit with puffy cotton trim on the sleeves. She pasted a lumpy cotton beard on his chin and rubbed red lipstick circles on his cheeks. Once dressed, he headed back outside in sub-zero cold with a droopy red hat that had a fluffy white ball swinging on the end of it. He made a great racket stomping up the freshly shoveled walk shouting, "Ho, ho, ho," with little puffs rising from his mouth and a threadbare sack that looked suspiciously like one of our bed sheets slung over his back. We stood in unison, awestruck, until one of us opened the door. We were speechless. He clomped into the entryway with unfastened galoshes and stamped his feet on the braided rug by the door.

Mom smiled and waved him in. Before you knew it he was kneeling, reaching into his bag, pulling out a shiny red present, dropping it in my little brother's astonished hands and clearing his throat. He fixed his liquid brown eyes on my brother and said in a deep Erik Von Stroheim accent, "Haf you been a gooot boy?" My brother squirmed and nodded. Then he turned his gaze on me. "Haf you been beating on your broother?" he asked. I stammered that I hadn't in a voice about an octave higher than I intended. I swore I'd been good. He paused and gave me a look that said, "Who're you kidding? I know if you've been bad or good." Then, he dug deep in his bag and produced a glowing green foil treasure for me.

My older brother was in on the drill. When we lived in an apartment the year before he made a lot of noise when Dad passed out the presents. "Hey," he said to Santa, "you have freckles on your hands just like my dad." Dad and Mom shooshed him. He got the message and clammed-up like a good soldier. I didn't figure out until a year later.

When Dad was done passing out the presents he posed for a picture with us. Mom snapped away dutifully, blinding us in front of the tree. Then, faster than a snowflake melting on your tongue, he was gone. We waved goodbye to him. He chuckled and told us he'd see us next year. As we drove our trucks under the tree and tore open the remaining presents, he stepped out the door and circled around to the back where Mom was waiting for him.

When he was all cleaned up, he slipped out of the basement and blew in the front door out of breath. "Did you see him?" he panted, "I've been looking all over."

We laughed. "No, you missed him. He was just here."

"Darn," he exclaimed, "what did you get? Let me see."

We showed him the new blue jeans that somehow miraculously fit each of us perfectly with matching white socks and t-shirts. Then, the *good* stuff. An Erector set, Lincoln logs, a pirate sword for my little brother. And models; an aircraft carrier for my older brother and a German Panzer for me.

"All in all," he said, "it looks like you made off with quite a haul. Are you sure you boys aren't pirates? This is quite a pile of booty if you ask me."

I knew it was. I pulled a candy cane off the tree, peeled off the wrapper and slipped it in the side of my mouth like a cigar.

We were a young family then. All of us together. There was still a bright flame of love between my mother and father. He hadn't extinguished it yet with the adultery.

I'm older now than they were then.

I'll get my boy this Wednesday night and this weekend too. He'll come over and make straight for the tree. I know he will. He'll be amazed and touch the dangling glass balls. He'll ask me about the hanging elephant, bug-eyed red owl and that funny cowboy rearing back on a horse. Maybe he'll pick them off the tree, turn them in his hands like precious stones and ask me how they got here. He'll finger the tinsel, pull on it. I'll build a big fire in the fireplace. Heat up some apple cider, too. I'll draw him pictures with letters and numbers the way he likes. Ones with Sam riding high on the back of an elephant or a giraffe. We'll take a bath together. I'll scoop up a handful of bubbles and put them on his knee. He'll brush them off, tell me "No" and try to splash me. He'll want to blow out the candles when we're done with our bath and I'll let him. I'll let him do whatever the heck he wants as long as he's not hurting himself or someone else.

I'll say, "Hey Sam, c'mere, look at this." I'll push the presents back and lay down under the tree. Put my arm around his shoulders and take my glasses off. We'll look up through the needles and lights. They'll be a little out of focus for me.

He'll see everything clearly then. The yellow, red, blue and green light glancing off the tinsel and bright, curved balls hanging in space. All that light reaching our eyes at exactly the same time.