



A Tree of Night, Truman Capote

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IT WAS WINTER. A STRING of naked light bulbs, from which it seemed all warmth had been drained, illuminated the little depot's cold, windy platform. Earlier in the evening it had rained, and now icicles hung along the station-house eaves like some crystal monster's vicious teeth. Except for a girl, young and rather tall, the platform was deserted. The girl wore a gray flannel suit, a raincoat, and a plaid scarf. Her hair, parted in the middle and rolled up neatly on the sides, was rich blondish-brown; and, while her face tended to be too thin and narrow, she was, though not extraordinarily so, attractive. In addition to an assortment of magazines and a gray suede purse on which elaborate brass letters spelled Kay, she carried conspicuously a green Western guitar.

When the train, spouting steam and glaring with light, came out of the darkness and rumbled to a halt, Kay assembled her paraphernalia and climbed up into the last coach.

The coach was a relic with a decaying interior of ancient red-plush seats, bald in spots, and peeling iodine-colored woodwork. An old-time copper lamp, attached to the ceiling, looked romantic and out of place. Gloomy dead smoke sailed the air; and the car's heated closeness accentuated the stale odor of discarded sandwiches, apple cores, and orange hulls: this garbage, including Lily cups, soda-pop bottles, and mangled newspapers, littered the long aisle. From a water cooler,

embedded in the wall, a steady stream trickled to the floor. The passengers, who glanced up wearily when Kay entered, were not, it seemed, at all conscious of any discomfort.

Kay resisted a temptation to hold her nose and threaded her way carefully down the aisle, tripping once, without disaster, over a dozing fat man's protruding leg. Two nondescript men turned an interested eye as she passed; and a kid stood up in his seat squalling, "Hey, Mama, look at de banjo! Hey, lady, lemme play ya banjo!" till a slap from Mama quelled him.

There was only one empty place. She found it at the end of the car in an isolated alcove occupied already by a man and woman who were sitting with their feet settled lazily on the vacant seat opposite. Kay hesitated a second then said, "Would you mind if I sat here?"

The woman's head snapped up as if she had not been asked a simple question, but stabbed with a needle, too. Nevertheless, she managed a smile. "Can't say as I see what's to stop you, honey," she said, taking her feet down and also, with a curious impersonality, removing the feet of the man who was staring out the window, paying no attention whatsoever.

Thanking the woman, Kay took off her coat, sat down, and arranged herself with purse and guitar at her side, magazines in her lap: comfortable enough, though she wished she had a pillow for her back.

The train lurched; a ghost of steam hissed against the window; slowly the dingy lights of the lonesome depot faded past.

"Boy, what a jerkwater dump," said the woman. "No town, no nothin'."

Kay said, "The town's a few miles away."

“That so? Live there?”

No. Kay explained she had been at the funeral of an uncle. An uncle who, though she did not of course mention it, had left her nothing in his will but the green guitar. Where was she going? Oh, back to college.

After mulling this over, the woman concluded, “What’ll you ever learn in a place like that? Let me tell you, honey, I’m plenty educated and I never saw the inside of no college.”

“You didn’t?” murmured Kay politely and dismissed the matter by opening one of her magazines. The light was dim for reading and none of the stories looked in the least compelling. However, not wanting to become involved in a conversational marathon, she continued gazing at it stupidly till she felt a furtive tap on her knee.

“Don’t read,” said the woman. “I need somebody to talk to. Naturally, it’s no fun talking to him.” She jerked a thumb toward the silent man. “He’s afflicted: deaf and dumb, know what I mean?”

Kay closed the magazine and looked at her more or less for the first time. She was short; her feet barely scraped the floor. And like many undersized people she had a freak of structure, in her case an enormous, really huge head. Rouge so brightened her sagging, flesh-featured face it was difficult even to guess at her age: perhaps fifty, fifty-five. Her big sheep eyes squinted, as if distrustful of what they saw. Her hair was an obviously dyed red, and twisted into parched, fat corkscrew curls. A once-elegant lavender hat of impressive size flopped crazily on the side of her head, and she was kept busy brushing back a drooping cluster of celluloid cherries sewed to the brim. She wore a plain, somewhat shabby blue dress. Her breath had a vividly sweetish gin smell.

“You do wanna talk to me, don’t you honey?”

“Sure,” said Kay, moderately amused.

“Course you do. You bet you do. That’s what I like about a train. Bus people are a close-mouthed buncha dopes. But a train’s the place for putting your cards on the table, that’s what I always say.” Her voice was cheerful and booming, husky as a man’s. “But on accounta him, I always try to get us this here seat; it’s more private, like a swell compartment, see?”

“It’s very pleasant,” Kay agreed. “Thanks for letting me join you.”

“Only too glad to. We don’t have much company; it makes some folks nervous to be around him.”

As if to deny it, the man made a queer, furry sound deep in his throat and plucked the woman’s sleeve. “Leave me alone, dear-heart,” she said, as if she were talking to an inattentive child. “I’m O.K. We’re just having us a nice little ol’ talk. Now behave yourself or this pretty girl will go away. She’s very rich; she goes to college.” And winking, she added, “He thinks I’m drunk.”

The man slumped in the seat, swung his head sideways, and studied Kay intently from the corners of his eyes. These eyes, like a pair of clouded milky-blue marbles, were thickly lashed and oddly beautiful. Now, except for a certain remoteness, his wide, hairless face had no real expression. It was as if he were incapable of experiencing or reflecting the slightest emotion. His gray hair was clipped close and combed forward into uneven bangs. He looked like a child aged abruptly by some uncanny method. He wore a frayed blue serge suit, and he had anointed himself with a cheap, vile perfume. Around his wrist was strapped a Mickey Mouse watch.

“He thinks I’m drunk,” the woman repeated. “And the real funny part is, I am. Oh shoot—you gotta do something, ain’t that right?” She bent closer. “Say, ain’t it?”

Kay was still gawking at the man; the way he was looking at her made her squeamish, but she could not take her eyes off him. “I guess so,” she said.

“Then let’s us have us a drink,” suggested the woman. She plunged her hand into an oilcloth satchel and pulled out a partially filled gin bottle. She began to unscrew the cap, but, seeming to think better of this, handed the bottle to Kay. “Gee, I forgot about you being company,” she said. “I’ll got get us some nice paper cups.”

So, before Kay could protest that she did not want a drink, the woman had risen and started none too steadily down the aisle toward the water cooler.

Kay yawned and rested her forehead against the windowpane, her fingers idly strumming the guitar: the strings sang a hollow, lulling tune, as monotonously soothing as the Southern landscape, smudged in darkness, flowing past the window. An icy winter moon rolled above the train across the night sky like a thin white wheel.

And then, without warning, a strange thing happened: the man reached out and gently stroked Kay’s cheek. Despite the breathtaking delicacy of this movement, it was such a bold gesture Kay was at first too startled to know what to make of it: her thoughts shot in three or four fantastic directions. He leaned forward till his queer eyes were very near her own; the reek of his perfume was sickening. The guitar was silent while they exchanged a searching gaze. Suddenly, from some spring of compassion, she felt for him a keen sense of pity; but also,

and this she could not suppress, an overpowering disgust, an absolute loathing: something about him, an elusive quality she could not quite put a finger on, reminded her of—of what?

After a little, he lowered his hand solemnly and sank back in the seat, an asinine grin transfiguring his face, as if he had performed a clever stunt for which he wished applause.

“Giddyup! Giddup! my little buckler-ROOS ...” shouted the woman. And she sat down, loudly proclaiming to be, “Dizzy as a witch! Dog tired! Whew!” From a handful of Lily cups she separated two and casually thrust the rest down her blouse. “Keep ’em safe and dry, ha ha ha....” A coughing spasm seized her, but when it was over she appeared calmer. “Has my boy friend been entertaining?” she asked, patting her bosom reverently. “Ah, he’s so sweet.” She looked as if she might pass out. Kay rather wished she would.

“I don’t want a drink,” Kay said, returning the bottle. “I never drink: I hate the taste.”

“Mustn’t be a kill-joy,” said the woman firmly. “Here now, hold your cup like a good girl.”

“No, please ...”

“Formercysake, hold it still. Imagine, nerves at your age! Me, I can shake like a leaf, I’ve got reasons. Oh, Lordy, have I got ’em.”

“But ...”

A dangerous smile tipped the woman’s face hideously awry. “What’s the matter? Don’t you think I’m good enough to drink with?”

“Please, don’t misunderstand,” said Kay, a tremor in her voice. “It’s just that I don’t like being forced to do something I don’t want to. So look, couldn’t I give this to the gentleman?”

“Him? No sirree: he needs what little sense he’s got. Come on, honey, down the hatch.”

Kay, seeing it was useless, decided to succumb and avoid a possible scene. She sipped and shuddered. It was terrible gin. It burned her throat till her eyes watered. Quickly, when the woman was not watching, she emptied the cup out into the sound hole of the guitar. It happened, however, that the man saw; and Kay, realizing it, recklessly signaled to him with her eyes a plea not to give her away. But she could not tell from his clear-blank expression how much he understood.

“Where you from, kid?” resumed the woman presently.

For a bewildered moment, Kay was unable to provide an answer. The names of several cities came to her all at once. Finally, from this confusion, she extracted: “New Orleans. My home is in New Orleans.”

The woman beamed. “N.O.’s where I wanna go when I kick off. One time, oh, say 1923, I ran me a sweet little fortune-teller parlor there. Let’s see, that was on St. Peter Street.” Pausing, she stooped and set the empty gin bottle on the floor. It rolled into the aisle and rocked back and forth with a drowsy sound. “I was raised in Texas—on a big ranch—my papa was rich. Us kids always had the best; even Paris, France, clothes. I’ll bet you’ve got a big swell house, too. Do you have a garden? Do you grow flowers?”

“Just lilacs.”

A conductor entered the coach, preceded by a cold gust of wind that rattled the trash in the aisle and briefly livened the dull air. He lumbered along, stopping now and then to punch a ticket or talk with a passenger. It was after midnight. Someone was expertly playing a harmonica. Someone else was arguing the merits of a certain politician. A child cried out in his sleep.

“Maybe you wouldn’t be so snotty if you knew who we was,” said the woman, bobbing her tremendous head. “We ain’t nobodies, not by a long shot.”

Embarrassed, Kay nervously opened a pack of cigarettes and lighted one. She wondered if there might not be a seat in a car up ahead. She could not bear the woman, or, for that matter, the man, another minute. But she had never before been in a remotely comparable situation. “If you’ll excuse me now,” she said, “I have to be leaving. It’s been very pleasant, but I promised to meet a friend on the train ...”

With almost invisible swiftness the woman grasped the girl’s wrist. “Didn’t your mama ever tell you it was sinful to lie?” she stage-whispered. The lavender hat tumbled off her head but she made no effort to retrieve it. Her tongue flicked out and wetted her lips. And, as Kay stood up, she increased the pressure of her grip. “Sit down, dear ... there ain’t any friend ... Why, we’re your only friends and we wouldn’t have you leave us for the world.”

“Honestly, I wouldn’t lie.”

“Sit down, dear.”

Kay dropped her cigarette and the man picked it up. He slouched in the corner and became absorbed in blowing a chain of lush smoke rings that mounted upward like hollow eyes and expanded into nothing.

“Why, you wouldn’t want to hurt his feelings by leaving us, now, would you, dear?” crooned the woman softly. “Sit down—down—now, that’s a good girl. My, what a pretty guitar. What a pretty, pretty guitar ...” Her voice faded before the sudden whooshing, static noise of a second train. And for an instant the lights in the coach went off; in the darkness the passing train’s golden windows winked black-yellow-black-yellow-black-yellow. The man’s cigarette pulsed like the glow of a firefly, and his smoke rings continued rising tranquilly. Outside, a bell pealed wildly.

When the lights came on again, Kay was massaging her wrist where the woman’s strong fingers had left a painful bracelet mark. She was more puzzled than angry. She determined to ask the conductor if he would find her a different seat. But when he arrived to take her ticket, the request stuttered on her lips incoherently.

“Yes, miss?”

“Nothing,” she said.

And he was gone.

The trio in the alcove regarded one another in mysterious silence till the woman said, “I’ve got something here I wanna show you, honey.” She rummaged once more in the oilcloth satchel. “You won’t be so snotty after you get a gander at this.”

What she passed to Kay was a handbill, published on such yellowed, antique paper it looked as if it must be centuries old. In fragile, overly fancy lettering, it read:

LAZARUS

THE MAN WHO IS BURIED ALIVE

A MIRACLE

SEE FOR YOURSELF

ADULTS, 25C—CHILDREN, 10C

“I always sing a hymn and read a sermon,” said the woman. “It’s awful sad: some folks cry, especially the old ones. And I’ve got me a perfectly elegant costume: a black veil and a black dress, oh, very becoming. He wears a gorgeous made-to-order bridegroom suit and a turban and lotsa talcum on his face. See, we try to make it as much like a bonafide funeral as we can. But shoot, nowadays you’re likely to get just a buncha smart alecks come for laughs—so sometimes I’m real glad he’s afflicted like he is on accounta otherwise his feelings would be hurt, maybe.”

Kay said, “You mean you’re with a circus or a side-show or something like that?”

“Nope, us alone,” said the woman as she reclaimed the fallen hat. “We’ve been doing it for years and years—played every tank town in the South: Singasong, Mississippi—Spunky, Louisiana—Eureka, Alabama ...” these and other names rolled off her tongue musically, running together like rain. “After the hymn, after the sermon, we bury him.”

“In a coffin?”

“Sort of. It’s gorgeous, it’s got silver stars painted all over the lid.”

“I should think he would suffocate,” said Kay, amazed. “How long does he stay buried?”

“All told it takes maybe an hour—course that’s not counting the lure.”

“The lure?”

“Uh huh. It’s what we do the night before the show. See, we hunt up a store, any ol’ store with a big glass window’ll do, and get the owner to let him sit inside this window, and, well, hypnotize himself. Stays there all night stiff as a poker and people come and look: scares the livin’ hell out of ’em....” While she talked she jiggled a finger in her ear, withdrawing it occasionally to examine her find. “And one time this ol’ bindlestiff Mississippi sheriff tried to ...”

The tale that followed was baffling and pointless: Kay did not bother to listen. Nevertheless, what she had heard already inspired a reverie, a vague recapitulation of her uncle’s funeral; an event which, to tell the truth, had not much affected her since she had scarcely known him.

And so, while gazing abstractedly at the man, an image of her uncle’s face, white next to the pale silk casket pillow, appeared in her mind’s eye. Observing their faces simultaneously, both the man’s and uncle’s, as it were, she thought she recognized an odd parallel: there was about the man’s face the same kind of shocking, embalmed, secret stillness, as though, in a sense, he were truly an exhibit in a glass cage, complacent to be seen, uninterested in seeing.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“I said: I sure wish they’d lend us the use of a regular cemetery. Like it is now we have to put on the show wherever we can ... mostly in empty lots that are nine times outa ten smack up against some smelly fillin’ station, which ain’t exactly a big help. But like I say, we got us a swell act, the best. You oughta come see it if you get a chance.”

“Oh, I should love to,” Kay, said, absently.

“Oh, I should love to,” mimicked the woman. “Well, who asked you? Anybody ask you?” She hoisted up her skirt and enthusiastically blew her nose on the ragged hem of a petticoat. “Bu-leeve me, it’s a hard way to turn a dollar. Know what our take was last month? Fifty-three bucks! Honey, you try living on that sometime.” She sniffed and rearranged her skirt with considerable primness. “Well, one of these days my sweet boy’s sure enough going to die down there; and even then somebody’ll say it was a gyp.”

At this point the man took from his pocket what seemed to be a finely shellacked peach seed and balanced it on the palm of his hand. He looked across at Kay and, certain of her attention, opened his eyelids wide and began to squeeze and caress the seed in an undefinably obscene manner.

Kay frowned. “What does he want?”

“He wants you to buy it.”

“But what is it?”

“A charm,” said the woman. “A love charm.”

Whoever was playing the harmonica stopped. Other sounds, less unique, became at once prominent: someone snoring, the gin bottle

seesaw rolling, voices in sleepy argument, the train wheels' distant hum.

"Where could you get love cheaper, honey?"

"It's nice. I mean it's cute..." Kay said, stalling for time. The man rubbed and polished the seed on his trouser leg. His head was lowered at a supplicating, mournful angle, and presently he stuck the seed between his teeth and bit it, as if it were a suspicious piece of silver. "Charms always bring me bad luck. And besides ... please, can't you make him stop acting that way?"

"Don't look so scared," said the woman, more flat-voiced than ever.

"He ain't gonna hurt you."

"Make him stop, damn it!"

"What can I do?" asked the woman, shrugging her shoulders. "You're the one that's got money. You're rich. All he wants is a dollar, one dollar."

Kay tucked her purse under her arm. "I have just enough to get back to school," she lied, quickly rising and stepping out into the aisle. She stood there a moment, expecting trouble. But nothing happened.

The woman, with rather deliberate indifference, heaved a sigh and closed her eyes; gradually the man subsided and stuck the charm back in his pocket. Then his hand crawled across the seat to join the woman's in a lax embrace.

Kay shut the door and moved to the front of the observation platform. It was bitterly cold in the open air, and she had left her raincoat in the alcove. She loosened her scarf and draped it over her head.

Although she had never made this trip before, the train was traveling through an area strangely familiar: tall trees, misty, painted pale by malicious moonshine, towered steep on either side without a break or clearing. Above, the sky was a stark, unexplorable blue thronged with stars that faded here and there. She could see streamers of smoke trailing from the train's engine like long clouds of ectoplasm. In one corner of the platform a red kerosene lantern cast a colorful shadow.

She found a cigarette and tried to light it: the wind snuffed match after match till only one was left. She walked to the corner where the lantern burned and cupped her hands to protect the last match: the flame caught, sputtered, died. Angrily she tossed away the cigarette and empty folder; all the tension in her tightened to an exasperating pitch and she slammed the wall with her fist and began to whimper softly, like an irritable child.

The intense cold made her head ache, and she longed to go back inside the warm coach and fall asleep. But she couldn't, at least not yet; and there was no sense in wondering why, for she knew the answer very well. Aloud, partly to keep her teeth from chattering and partly because she needed the reassurance of her own voice, she said: "We're in Alabama now, I think, and tomorrow we'll be in Atlanta and I'm nineteen and I'll be twenty in August and I'm a sophomore...."

She glanced around at the darkness, hoping to see a sign of dawn, and finding the same endless wall of trees, the same frosty moon. "I hate

him, he's horrible and I hate him...." She stopped, ashamed of her foolishness and too tired to evade the truth: she was afraid.

Suddenly she felt an eerie compulsion to kneel down and touch the lantern. Its graceful glass funnel was warm, and the red glow seeped through her hands, making them luminous. The heat thawed her fingers and tingled along her arms.

She was so preoccupied she did not hear the door open. The train wheels roaring clackety-clack-clackety-click hushed the sound of the man's footsteps.

It was a subtle zero sensation that warned her finally; but some seconds passed before she dared look behind.

He was standing there with mute detachment, his head tilted, his arms dangling at his sides. Staring up into his harmless, vapid face, flushed brilliant by the lantern light, Kay knew of what she was afraid: it was a memory, a childish memory of terrors that once, long ago, had hovered above her like haunted limbs on a tree of night.

Aunts, cooks, strangers—each eager to spin a tale or teach a rhyme of spooks and death, omens, spirits, demons. And always there had been the unfailing threat of the wizard man: stay close to the house, child, else a wizard man'll snatch you and eat you alive! He lived everywhere, the wizard man, and everywhere was danger. At night, in bed, hear him tapping at the window? Listen!

Holding onto the railing, she inched upward till she was standing erect. The man nodded and waved his hand toward the door. Kay took a deep breath and stepped forward. Together they went inside.

The air in the coach was numb with sleep: a solitary light now illuminated the car, creating a kind of artificial dusk. There was no motion but the train's sluggish sway, and the stealthy rattle of discarded newspapers.

The woman alone was wide awake. You could see she was greatly excited: she fidgeted with her curls and celluloid cherries, and her plump little legs, crossed at the ankles, swung agitatedly back and forth. She paid no attention when Kay sat down. The man settled in the seat with one leg tucked beneath him and his arms folded across his chest.

In an effort to be casual, Kay picked up a magazine. She realized the man was watching her, not removing his gaze an instant: she knew this though she was afraid to confirm it, and she wanted to cry out and waken everyone in the coach. But suppose they did not hear? What if they were not really asleep? Tears started in her eyes, magnifying and distorting the print on a page till it became a hazy blur. She shut the magazine with fierce abruptness and looked at the woman.

"I'll buy it," she said. "The charm, I mean. I'll buy it, if that's all—just all you want."

The woman made no response. She smiled apathetically as she turned toward the man.

As Kay watched, the man's face seemed to change form and recede before her like a moon-shaped rock sliding downward under a surface of water. A warm laziness relaxed her. She was dimly conscious of it when the woman took away her purse, and when she gently pulled the raincoat like a shroud above her head.

The End