

Year of the Demon Tree

Jesse Waters

January. Divorce. I transplanted the apple tree to my new solo place. The limb by limb bulk of her spread out across my yard and eventually up as it took to soil and made it its own. Each leaf would rattle in the wind, and at night in my cold, solo sheets, I would listen to that whispering and make out words. My old Labrador, Diggy, would whine as the last winter winds blew them loose and rushed them against the doors and windows of the house.

I'd found Diggy howling at my back door one night. I was crippled inside and unable to love, but in the end. I took us both in. Eventually, he did the same and we'd come to an understanding more than simply mutuality, food for love—I admit it, we shared a bed. But when the twitching of his dreaming would wake me, I'd rouse myself for just a few seconds, and rather than soothe him, I'd walk to the window and watch the growing arms of my apple tree waving in the darkness.

That February, I traveled to Europe to find the history of my family. No one in America knew much, and I wanted to be the first to know. We're Jews. Lynn, my ex, loved to see me in a yarmulke. "Your head finally looks perfectly round."

Nine hours in the air and forty-five minutes by bus and I'm in Dachau, where a host family, The Werkliens, has offered to house me. When I walk in, they're making apfelkuchen with bits of bacon, salt to match the sugar. Three daughters, Teilna, Sara, and Greti. Their mother Elka claps her hands and says, "All jewelry off—get your hands underneath the dough and make it paper thin—no tears!" Right then, I imagine my mother making gefilte fish at my

house. I dare you to find one bone. Passover. Pass over. It's an odd word for a holiday.

I stay three days and find no information about my family. I go to the camps—who couldn't? I visit a small out-building, waist-high full of glasses, the kind you wear on your face, but waist-high, eye glasses up to my stomach. There's another thigh-high full of hair. I'm frustrated. I buy an apple in Dachau from a woman selling them out of a cart on a cobblestone back street. No one in my America knows much about my family, and I want to be the first to know *real* things, importance. But there's one family story everyone in my America knows:

My stupid Great Uncle Jolek didn't die in the Nazi death camps. Jolek, who was young, and stupid, did *not* die in the Nazi death camps. Instead, he cut off his own left hand around January 1940, at Birkenau, or Sosnowiec. Three feet from an infirmary, or a cafeteria, with a hatchet, across an Oak tree stump or a make-shift plywood bench like an overgrown root, Jolek cut off his own left hand. He was still right-handed – with that good right hand he banged through the clinic (mess hall) doors, “My hand, my hand!” he cried, and they starched the wound closed, but no one would touch Jolek's lost hand back out in the cold. It lay there shivering. The Polish kapo who'd seen the whole thing had forbidden anyone to go near it, the story goes, and told his sergeant (after losing in cards the night before), who told his captain, who thought the story unusual, a Jew cutting off his own hand. This captain went first to Jolek in the infirmary and asked, “Why? Why would you cut off your own hand?” but Jolek had no answer, would not tell why, and the captain was so taken by the (lack of) story that once Jolek's arm had “healed,” he gave Jolek the kapo position over ninety-five older prisoners, and Jolek beat them with his good right hand, beat them clutching his stump to his chest and made them jump and dance till they passed out sometimes, my Great Uncle Jolek did. But before all that, as that captain left the infirmary, he stopped to stoop at the

still-weeping, still-shivering left hand, “Look,” he gestured to the sergeant—actually a friend from Dachau, or Wiesloch, from before the war—there in the web of Jolek’s left thumb and forefinger, in prison ink blue, was a dime-sized tattoo of the Star of David, lots of Jews had them—in different body places—and as Jolek’s hand turned blue and the tattoo disappeared, they watched.

I imagine it was an amazing thing. That captain and the sergeant talked about it over the years and stayed friends and thought a lot about being called upon to do something bad—called upon by your country to do something bad, because they were not animals or demons, but workaday men and not sure about that even, I found out: I met them both by coincidence, absolute luck, at a tram stop near the Munich airport (moving through after a funeral for the one’s brother, or wife), and we just struck up a chat, in English, and talked about the war because I asked. Compelled, I think, by Jolek’s hand, by memory, like breaking open, they cut each other off telling me how this Jew named Jolek sliced off his own hand with a hatchet, Jolek who wouldn’t take the hand back, Jolek with his left arm clutched to his chest the rest of the year—how they’d watched the Jew in Jolek literally fade from his body—Jolek, Jolek, Jolek, until I just had to tell them—had to tell them about my Great Uncle Jolek, young and mean and stupid, who did not die in the Nazi death camps but rather cut off his own left hand, and that no one in our family ever knew why, and it’s true, it’s true I said, I wouldn’t lie to you, and we sat quiet for a moment. We embraced then. I hugged them each hard like I would my father, and they hugged back hard. The one promised to send me a photograph of my Great Uncle’s hand. I kept that one Dachau apple in my pocket all through the plane ride home. I put it in my freezer when I get back to North Carolina, and later on, it’ll end up in my mouth. I won’t ever see that photograph. I won’t ever really be convinced that my trip to Europe taught me much about my family.

In March I waited for something and walked through the wet, changing streets, hoping for spring.

April came and I visited my father in Chicago. It was not named the windy city because of weather. I didn't know this until the pilot explained its political significance as we banked left behind the airport. The townhouse my father now lived in was half-full. He looked half-full himself. He'd transplanted a lemon tree into the puny backyard. A lemon tree in Chicago. It never really lived. One day as he overwatered it, I told him finally about Lynn. For the whole month I stayed, I watched him lug pail after daily pail down the Brownstone steps to the tiny backyard. He's not a dumb guy, my dad, "You know you're killing it" I said.

"I'm loving it the best way I know how."

"Then you don't know anything about love." We've known each other my whole life.

"You don't know anything about love."

All throughout the month of May, I dated a woman named Trina. But I was fickle as hell and didn't give anything. She took all she could of it and left me for another man, a mortician. "It's a gamble, that's for sure" she frowned, "but you're a sure thing."

In June, I flew to Las Vegas for two days and made a charcoal rub of the headstone at my Great Uncle Jolek's grave. He was born in 1911, in Sosnowiec, and died two years ago in Las Vegas. I couldn't make the actual funeral because the advertising office where I do freelance work on a regular enough basis was having a party for the retiring president, and I didn't feel, at that time, like my Great Uncle was a person I needed to know about. So I skipped it. My mother ended up filling me in on the details over the phone one Sunday during a long, slow North Carolina rain. Later, I did make the time for her funeral. Flying out of the Vegas airport, I thought about making that rub that night before.

It'd been dark out but not night. I could make out the city's skyline about five miles south. The air was warm. The stone was cool and smooth as flour.

During that plane ride back, I thought about how important it would be for me to start truly remembering events in my life, not just things from the trip overseas, or to my Dad's, or anything in Las Vegas, but everything I did, or was. It struck me as important because of one story my family told about me getting bitten by the dog of a friend of my mother.

All the people in my family have a version, even people who weren't there. They all say I was poking at the dog—a small, tough Spitz named Tony—in his “spot,” a stretch of rug under a pew in the friend's foyer. It was deep summer. After teasing him too much, they all say, Tony snapped at me and bit me on the cheek.

But none of them were actually there, I know because I was the only one there, and this is what really happened. I was sitting with Tony in the middle of the friend's living room *next* to the foyer where Tony's “spot” was, putting Lincoln Logs together, when the friend's son Michael jumped out from the dining room and scared the crap out of both me and Tony, and Tony jumped up and bit me on the cheek. Michael and I are friends. It's a funny thing between us now, even though he swears to this day he was nowhere near the event. Lynn and I wanted a dog but never settled on a breed. “You pick the kind of dog that would bolt in a second,” she'd say, or “That one'll kill anything small.” In a dry, wonderful way, it tears at me that I remember all this so vividly and terribly and so differently each time, so I want to make sure I get everything else right from now on. I buy a journal and vow to keep it with me. I write down the call number of the jet we're flying on back to Raleigh. I write down the names of the stewards and stewardesses on board and the kind of meal we have—little long strips of orange roughly and some pasty potatoes. As we eat, the guy sitting next to me pulls off his wedding band and slips it into one

of the folds of his wallet.

When I land back home in North Carolina, in Wilmington, and pick up Diggy from Lynn's house, she warns me: "He's turned sort of ill." When people in North Carolina say ill, they mean mean, not sick. Lynn and I now each have dogs and trust one another to keep each other's pets when the other has to leave town. It's a grudging sort of situation, but it's enough. And too much and not enough. I get Diggy into the back seat of the car, and as I slide in on the driver's side, he leans over the ridge of the front seat and nips me on the ear. It doesn't draw blood, but it hurts. A dark red mark and a little purple bruise pop up by the time we get home, and the message light on my machine is flashing. It's from Lucio Floyd, one of my Dad's friends—he's had a heart attack.

I fly back to Chicago the next day. I don't even unpack my Vegas suitcase. In the hospital room where they have him hooked up to tubes and machines still, he squints up at me and sees my ear. "What happened to you?"

"Diggy bit me." He smiles and starts to laugh but catches himself and takes a deep, long breath that's not a sigh. There's a glass of water with a flexi-straw in it on the little drawer/table next to his bed, and I point at it, but he shakes his head. "How'd it happen?"

"I put him in the back of the car, and when I got in the front, he nipped me. I don't know. I picked him up at Lynn's after the airport, and she told me he'd been acting weird, but I didn't really think anything of it."

"Like I said—you don't know anything about love." One of his machines beeped and an IV filled with a lemony-looking liquid attached to his left arm began to drip. He closed his eyes. I wondered if someone could fall asleep so quickly, and it occurred to me that a person shouldn't really be friends with a parent. It's just too much, they know you exactly. And when they die, it's a double crush. But it wasn't my father's time, that time. Three days later I rolled him to my rental car in his hospital wheelchair and then home.

I stay July and August. I keep the yard clean, water the

plants, all that stuff—but not the lemon tree. As a result, it gets stronger. The roots dry out a bit, and some of the soil loses the moss and mold running through it, and so does the bark at the base of the tree. I call Lynn one afternoon—she tells me Diggy has bitten her, won't eat, and that I'd better fly back. I pack my things and do a little shopping for my father. Before I drive to the airport, I catch Lucio lugging a few pails of water down the steep back steps. I refused him. "Look," I said, "it's actually living; leave it alone."

"It's for your father," he insisted.

In September, the apple from Dachau was still in my freezer. That sentence popped into my head as I was reviewing some of my memory notes from these few trips, making sure what was in my head matched with the info I'd written down. The sun was going down and my father would be dead in thirty-seven days. I imagine a new couple that buys his house will ignore the lemon tree and it will flourish so passionately that when they have two boys who grind the pulp of those lemons into sweet juice for all the kids in the neighborhood, it'll make them popular and happy and total.

Keeping fruit in the freezer will not keep it. When I split open the apple from Dachau, after close to a half-year in deep cold, I see the black seeds inside have grown a tumor of ice in a ball around them and that their little huskshells have split. Through the haze of frost, I can make out the split strips bent back. It's fascinating and for the next few days, I try to translate its look into my journal. It's hard to live even one half-year of a long life. When I do taste the apple, there's absolutely nothing but texture, the one weather of the freezer has killed its flavor.

Please do not ask me about October.

On the first of November, my vet came out through a sleeting rain to the house to check on Diggy and happened to see my own apple tree. "It's got buds," he laughed. "You've

got a demon tree.”

“Demon tree?”

“My grandfather from Boone used to say that when a plant or tree bloomed out of season, it’d gotten the devil in it. He said his father used to call them demon trees. Apple trees are supposed to harvest in the fall, not bloom.” He reached up a hand to touch a branch, and I pulled a longer branch down to my face. Sure enough, under the drizzle of that cold sleet, all along the wood were fat blossoms starting to show.

North Carolina winters here on the coast, low to the ground, are not severe, and the blossoms on the demon tree thrived through even December and January and February of the following year. But with no bees around to pollinate them, they simply swelled with tree-lust. Walking to the mail box, I swore I could smell apple. It made sense to me—fed on hunger and watered with thirst, it made sense that a demon tree should thrive like that. I thought of my father’s lemon tree in Chicago, the block kids there now drinking their fill. Spring came. While mowing the lawn one warmer evening as the sun dropped down and let in just a bit of breeze, I cut into a long apple root close to the house. It bled a kind of clear blood. That night, I dream the soil transparent, that I am watching the first root of that blood take hold, deep down during the one transplant. In the dream, I squat down to get a close look. My mouth says, “I should have let love die before the harvest.” The root answers in a female voice: “My center will be made from luck and lust,” and I wake shaky in these cold, solo sheets—Diggy cocks his head at me in the way lovers and dogs will in half sleep when you wake them—those demon leaves whisper at me, “Bad Jew,” or “You Knew,” or “Tattoo,” and I feel for the first time the earth’s terrible rotation.