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This Day, Among Others

You told me that it felt like one of those days where you couldn't seem to wake up. No amount of coffee helped, you said. I asked if you wanted to go for a walk and you said no, because that would make you more tired. No energy at all, you said. Oh, I said; and I sat down with my coffee at the kitchen table. That was the day I felt like a cold cut in the back of the deli case.

I remember that it was a few weeks after Christmas. Your brother had just gone back to Wytheville after staying with us for a while. A change of scenery and time to take stock, is what he kept telling me. Stock in what is really important in life, he elaborated one time after drinking all of my whiskey. I asked him if he knew how long his stock-taking would last and he just stared at me, and he looked like you in the eyes. Just wondering, I said to him. Hey, you can stay here for however long. Only making conversation. He threw back his glass one more time to get the ice from the bottom. He chewed it up and thanked me again for being hospitable and understanding. Just needed some time to take stock and smell the roses, he said. He told me that the world isn't anything but a random sea. Sometimes you catch men and sometimes men catch you. It's merely a matter of which direction your eyes are pointed, he said to me. We all have hooks, he said, in both ends, he said. We hook some and we're also hooked ourselves.

When you got home that night you asked me where all of the whiskey went and I told you what had happened. You went "Oh." before going back to the bedroom and shutting the door.

Keep that tree up, your brother would say when he noticed me staring at it. It still feels like Christmas around here, and it helps me take stock of what matters now, is what he said. Keep that tree standing like it's the last, warm Ebenezer you'll ever see. Your brother slept under the tree most nights. He said it reminded him of getting his clock cleaned in a bar fight near Marion. I laid on the ground, he told me, and I stared up at those colored orbs and twinkling star of soft white light; and I asked the Lord to turn on the OPEN sign on the mighty gates, so that I might know where to point my front axle. That was years ago now. The illuminations keep reckoning themselves for my view, and I would be a proud fool to ignore them. I'm here now and the warm body of this tree buzzes with the tenor of all that the ethereal has to offer me, you, anyone. You ought to know, he said.

I remember having to explain it to Randall across the street why we still had the lights up at the end of January. It's damn near Valentine's Day, Randall said one day when I stepped out of the house. I think he was waiting for me. I told you, Randall, we have to take stock of what matters here, right? That's how I responded to him.

I asked you about the lights and you told me that it didn't bother you to have them up. You said that neighbors can have opinions if they want but we have to be a family. There is no wanting involved.

It would only be a few more days after that before your brother would be gone. He left without saying goodbye, but he did leave a note that said

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to keep that tree up a little longer, at least until he was back to doing what he did best. I showed you the note and you asked me if the miracle of Jesus' birth burns a gaping hole in the hearts of the ones who sing at church on Christmas Eve but can't seem to get themselves back through the doors the following Sunday. I told you that your brother rode his motorcycle away from the North Star both on his coming to and his leaving of us here.

It was clear that I worried you, so I went and watered the tree again; and I came back into the kitchen smiling. You asked what made me smile and I told you that no amount of water could stop a rootless fur from withering away. I started laughing when I thought about that tree as a carcass that we dolled up with shiny bulbs and patterned strands of popcorn and cranberries, like when we were getting your grandmother's body dressed for the wake. Her pearls were red and white, I said. You went, carcass is not the word I would use in either situation. But you gave me no alternative term that was better.

I remember asking again later if you wanted to go for a walk. I guess I was wondering if your energy had gone back up. You emerged from the bedroom and looked at the tree, glowing warmly next to the fireplace. There were a few unopened presents still sitting under the tree. You asked me who those were for and I told you that I didn't know. To my knowledge, they had just been sitting there. The wrapping paper was ours, I knew that much. Hey, I said, let's figure out this mystery. The tree is still up and there are presents underneath. I'll make some coffee. You went, no, did you ever buy more whiskey? And I went, yes. Let's do that, you said.

It was about that time when the phone rang. I don't think we had yet sat down to open those presents. You answered and it was your mother. You listened for the most part, in that call to your mother. Your head was on the arm of the couch and you were laid out, stretching out your legs, laying your feet on my thighs. I sipped my drink and patted your feet softly. It was then when I noticed the blanket of brown pine needles from the tree that had begun to collect on the floor. You were going yes, no, yes, mom okay, yes, to your mother on the phone. Your eyes were closed; and when you opened them we locked our gazes for a second. I am sure I smiled because you did something that looked like a smile, and it looked responsive, more so than preemptive.

After the phone call you asked me if there was any reason I could think of to go to the grocery store. You wanted something but only if we needed other items would it be worth the trip. I said I could go for whatever you wanted but you said no. We turned our eyes back to the tree and the presents. The colored lights blurred into one blinding mélange of waves when I found myself drifting into a malaise. It was only about three in the afternoon and the sun was casting a long shadow of our house into the front yard. It always looks dark here, I said to you. The sun hits the back of our house now and it looks dark.

You turned your body to a sitting position and stared at the tree. In your bare feet you walked over to the tree and grabbed the presents. Turning them upside down you told me there was no name on them and they didn't feel familiar. You did most of the shopping this year, I said to you. I really don't know. You handed me the other present and we sat on

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the couch trying to remember what they were. Pine needles covered the bottom of your foot. I watched you scrape them off and they fell onto the carpet. You laughed and I asked what was funny. You imagined what it would have been like if the magi had brought their gifts in fancy boxes but, in the dark, had forgotten what was inside of them. I smiled too. How long should this tree and those lights stay up, I asked you. I think Randall might call the police soon. Randall is a purist, you retorted. Randall has no room at his inn. But now he has to stare across the street at our lowly manger and I'll bet he wonders to himself why he didn't think to stockpile some hay.

I asked you then if you thought your brother would be okay. And if your mom would be fine. Christmas made oxen and asses of us all, you said. They were all standing around in the presence of the lamb and thought he was just a lamb, you said. You looked down at the unopened present in your hand and your mouth dropped open. You put it on my lap and walked to the bedroom. I sat there like Joseph and wondered how I would come to remember this day, among others.