

Like a Christmas Tree

Theodore K Phelps, 2022

Brandy. They called their boy that. And being too nice a boy, generally, for what he had just done, it was at first that name they thought to blame for his breaking bad on Christmas Eve. Nobody in the whole ‘system’—law enforcement, school, church, family services—could ever pin any other family abuse on the boy, other than their having named him for booze.

Joshua Brandy Madison was a nice boy, but he had lit up the whole lot of unsold trees right at midnight. About two hundred balsams and mixed firs. People grasp for reasons, and the name seemed like an opening into a world of bad. Because: why on earth would a good kid turning ten in March be on his bike a mile from home Christmas Eve just before midnight not to mention there with a click lighter? The cops who nailed him thought it was deep stuff, as did the jailers and then the teams of first-responder caregiving criminal justice sorts down from the County who think a thing *has* to make sense. “Troubled Home” they were sure and set out to find the usual suspects of home-life peripherals, both substances and parental stuff, to make the puzzle fit.

His parents were no help. That is, no help finding dirt on him. The savvy family counselor saw a lot in his older sister, truly *not* a nice kid, being willing to say she didn’t even believe it was Brandy until her brother spoke quietly into her ear that, yeah, he did it. She was the only one not to ask Why. She had had the same idea, for the past several years, to light up that dismal and creepy lot of unbought trees, standing on the baseball diamond, a mute gathering of Christmas ghosts. But she would have waited until everyone was at the January sixth bonfire at the Methodist church and would have brought red canisters borrowed from the school—she knew how to get into anything—in case the wildfire got out of hand.

Brandy’s work seemed less thoughtful than that. He just took a clicker from the fireplace, took his bike from the garage, wended past a mile of Christmas-lit split-levels to his school’s baseball field and flicked a flame onto the nearest branch of the lost children and sat back a few feet on his bike and watched. A crime. One that could slam an adult in prison for several years. A neighbor along that street saw the orange flames and the silhouette of somebody straddling a bike, hands to his head. She called it in. When the cops got there, the boy was standing the same way, like a statue but for the heaving of his chest, hard to see under a down parka.

Whenever people asked him Why in years that followed, he said the same he had told the cops: “Not sure. I was sad.” Or sometimes, “I was mad.”

These days, three decades past any chance of criminal prosecutions, he knows the answer should be this: “How can you ask that?! It should be obvious.”

This year, two days before Christmas, Brandy—now going as Joshua—was returning to his home from a business trip in Chicago. He had taken the scenic route and now found himself, not quite happily, as it was now nearing midnight, along a stretch of hilly country road in a fresh and not-yet plowed snow. He had been passing rusting industrial signs announcing a tree farm, but was listening to a business podcast reviewing the awful year we just went through. Eventually the

continuous flicker of the moonlight through evenly spaced trees made him turn and see that he was passing a long stretch of young firs. He stopped. "Those are goddam Christmas Trees!" he shouted.

His body, let's say, more than his thinker, turned on the car's warning lights, stepped him out, pulled on his emergency winter boots and down hoodie, and stepped him over the guardrail and walked him right in. Trespassing. Into a kind of heaven, we must see. The moon on the snow, a blackened sky streaked with stars. And complete silence. You had to stand still for a minute to hear it. To believe it. Only thing moving was a jet flashing among the stars, maybe headed for O'Hare. Then, a breath of air puffing through the balsams to his left. It is different from the wind in a forest. More a whispering. At the level of your ears. His mind had stopped. He didn't know why he was there. No active memory of his Christmas Eve arson thirty years earlier.

He was standing now in a thicket of older ones, the ones that have missed their chance. A few years back they had been passed over and continued to grow, often unkindly, and now they will never be chosen to decorate a home. Most of them just too tall, but others wounded and uneven where a branch had been lost when they were young; some had lost their heads, sold for a tabletop tree; some were just twisted in their spines from farmer neglect or wind.

A gallery of the lost. He whispered, "Sorry, guys."

He stepped further in and came to a hilled area with tire tracks and branches scattered around and lots of stumps among the living. These are the chosen ones, cut down by hand and taken on a car to be what their dharma is, to cheer a home at Christmas and there to fall slowly asleep over a week in too much dry heat nailed to a metal pot on the floor. He touched a stump. The bleeding sap. That unearthly aroma they try to pack in small pillows in the gift shops. He kissed it and breathed out, "Give them a hell of a Merry Christmas!"

Joshua then ascended the hill and stopped. Before him was a scene from war: acres of evenly cut stumps, many hundreds of trees taken one warm day before Halloween. A team of cutters, chainsaws, binding ropes, loading, trucks growling all day and driving through the night to the cities.

He shouted into the sky, "I'm sorry. I love you..." And when the neighboring hill sent back the sound, he fell to the ground.

And then he remembered himself. Time to get home to his family. And all the way back, his memories were of that day long ago, a day when he had done something about it. The day he burned the unsold ones. They had been so close to the houses where the chosen ones had been carried through the front door and made the honored guest, dressed in fancy clothes and were, like the one in Brandy's own home, right then making love to wrapped packages squealed up close to them. These ghostly unsold ones had paid the same awful price as the others: they too had been severed from their life in the earth, their roots also still up there trying to make a living on the field where they were born. But the unchosen had been left to die tied to a wooden stake somewhere out in left field. Literally. Soon to be burned by officials in a nameless pit at the edge of town.

At least that one time, Brandy had done something about things. He had given them a sendoff. A blast. That night, he lit them up like a Christmas tree.

And *they*...have been remembered.