The Trolley Wood

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I made my way down to Purgatory Creek, situated in the heart of the innocuously named city of Eden Prairie. Cars drove by swiftly overhead along the frontage road, but I didn't mind them. Down here, by the trickling, cool water I was alone.

I'd explored the creek bed many times growing up, but I somehow always managed to discover something new. Today it was an old rail track, weather-stained from Minnesota's vastly shifting elements, but in remarkably serviceable condition for a track that ended in a pack of earth heaped up to support the road above, winding out from a shaded wood.

Another car zoomed along above, faddish pop music echoing down the creek bed from its open windows. I decided to follow the rails. I knew this small wooded area around the creek, I had played in it many times, how had I never noticed the railway before this? As I stepped beneath the green canopy, the world audibly hushed around me. I felt a deep and ancient peace make itself tangibly known in the quiet breeze of the place. Unaccountably, my heart sighed the equivalent of a satisfied "hallelujah" within me. The rail fronted the creek and led deeper into the woods.

The day had been hot outside the wood, but was cool within. The sun had made me thirsty and I stooped to drink from the creek, unusually clear at this point. My parents had long told me not to drink its water, but I had done so for years and never been ill from it, as far as I could tell. Standing up, I noticed the rail became lost in bramble and underbrush just ahead. It did not seem to continue out the thicket's other side. A blue bird darted by and landed on a branch. I was caught up in its sheer, simple beauty. It was wondrous to see a living creature so naturally blue.

I smiled. This wood was now unfamiliar to me. It had grown larger, and wilder, and more beautiful than a mere year away at college should allow, especially in the city, even if a suburb. This knowledge did not frighten, however. The wood's natural peace was too strong. It rather increased my wonder and fanned my curiosity.

I wandered on a space, quietly following the blue bird as it flew from tree to tree, chirping, eating insects, or fluffing its feathers. In time I heard a clanking sound, obviously mechanical, yet one that seemed entirely in harmony with the surrounding wood. I followed toward its source and soon found rails again. The clanking stopped and voices were sounded; they came from farther down the rail.

Rounding a corner composed of a tall moss-grown stone, I came upon an unexpected, yet, to me, perfectly sensible sight: a bright red trolley car parked along the rails with a makeshift veranda set alongside it. Chinese lanterns glowed along strings hung from stakes lit with large Christmas tree lights. Luminaries lit the ground marking a path from where I stood to the trolley and its party.

For a party it was. Music swelled with fiddle and accordion, ukulele, didgeridoo, and French horn. A bagpipe echoed from further down the train. Each car, painted a single, bright color, connected down the rails, ending in a shiny black engine. The folk eating, drinking, and making merry were varied and diverse as the people of the world in their look and dress, but every voice was raised gaily in laughter and conversation. It was a sight as familiar as a cool drink of water on a hot day.

As I stepped to the veranda a woman separated herself from a group composed of what looked like ancient near-eastern magi, a medieval European court jester, and a contemporary New Zealand sheepherder, though how I recognized the latter I have no idea. She was tall and fair with stars in her laughing green eyes. Her red hair hung in thick waves down her back and sides and her light blue dress whispered over her bare feet and the soft grass along the creek. She came straight to me, arms outstretched in greeting.

"Welcome," she said, taking my head and kissing me softly on my cheeks. "Most welcome."

I blushed deep scarlet, I am sure, and managed to mumble some thanks. She smiled kindly in response.

"I am Brighid," she said to my questioning eyes. "This is my wood. Come," she smiled and her cheeks dimpled pleasantly, "come and eat. Be at peace and with joy."
“Shalom!” “Salutations!” “Bienvenidos!” “Well met!” were the greetings lavished upon me by the many guests. I sat at a silver table scattered over with rounded stones glowing pale as moonlight. I was given food and drink, the memory of which I cannot now comprehend. But throughout it all were the people, merry and gay, full of life and laughter, joy and peace, hope and faith and love. My hours among them were sweet and seemed more full and more lasting than many, many spent in other tasks.

Evening had long since dawned and stars peeped through the underlit canopy above, as if envying our company, when I tore myself from my new friends, knowing my parents would worry, adult as I now am, what had become of me. Brighid understood. She motioned to a small, slight man who picked up a haunting lullaby tune. Soon the whole crowd sang in harmony.

Brighid led me up the luminary path on which I had arrived. Just beyond the bend of rock, the wood became again the familiar trees of my youth and I saw the embankment holding up the frontage road and houses inner-lit with electric lights.

“Will you be back?” I asked, wishing English had a plural “you,” as I longed to see them all again. “Will I see you again?”

She smiled and galaxies floated now in her eyes as reflections of the heavenly stars mingled with her own. “You will,” she said. “Though it may be many years, and it won’t be here.”

I nodded and looked up at the stars, oddly bright and close for the city.

“In time,” said her voice, though I looked and she was gone, “you may even join. But for now and forever, Shalom.”

I didn’t turn. Somehow I knew the wood behind me was not the wood I had exited. The stars remained close and my house, visible from the creek bed, looked cheerier and snugger than ever, all lit as it was. I saw family and friends moving as silhouettes in the windows. With joy and a peaceful determination, I made my way home to them.

The King

Zeke Fetrow

The warm trickle from the shower head usually comforts me.

A light stream caressing my every shape.

Tonight is different.

The heavy drops, like stones from a catapult, besiege my fortress of deceit.

Lies sealed behind great wooden doors, unveiled by the incessant battering of the water.

But you cannot wash away guilt.

Guilt is the undying king in the castle of lies.

The shower head sprays furiously stripping away walls and barriers but the king is immortal.

The guilt will always remain.

I scrub angrily, shaving away my skin, and say to myself, “There! What is a castle without walls?”

In a rage I tear at my body ripping away the muscles, “Alas! What are walls if they defend no kingdom?”

Finally pulling the very bones from my frame I shout “What is a king without a castle to protect him?” (I pause for a moment, staring blankly into the mist.)

The king stands alone and naked; stripped of his fortress while the shower head spills its last few drops.

His gates vanquished and his walls crumbled.

He is a king who weeps, overcome with guilt, and stands there showering in his tears.