

## A Million Moss-Green Shards

By Jonathan Lasser

I.

At about eight-fifteen on July evenings, the fireflies are all the light you need. It's still too bright for stars, and the cold green traces in the sky catch the corner of your vision. Watching the almost unnatural glow vanish, and then reappear elsewhere, is mesmerizing, like watching static on television. Sometimes I sit there, watching, waiting to see the pattern.

By nine-fifteen, the fireflies have stopped. Their presence fades, all too naturally, and you are left staring at the darkness, sitting on the rocks, sipping your beer among the scraps of glass which catch the light the way the fireflies caught your eye the hour before.

One slowly-fading night, the summer I was sixteen, I sat in the meadow watching the stars quietly replace the lightning bugs. Holding the empty moss-colored bottle, I considered filling the deep ridges of the outcropping with noise and more sharp edges I wouldn't be able to see as I felt my way home between the trees.

Later, I rolled it down the gentle slope at the edge of the woods as I made my way out; as it splashed gently into the pond, I imagined the bottle floating down the clear stream, into the river's brackish waters, out into the ocean, one day washing up on the beach as a soft green piece of sea-glass, about the size of a silver dollar.

After I sat the bottle down, temporarily, precariously, on the rocks, I wondered how to fill the remainder of the evening. I tore out a tuft of grass growing where the rocks were starting to crumble. I sighed, wishing I had remembered the flashlight that now stood, topheavy, on the dresser in my bedroom, next to my alarm clock.

Somewhere in the woods, a twisty two-fifths or so of a mile down one of the many paths that converged in the meadow, stood an old chimney, the only sign of a house that once burned down. Rumor had it that, a generation or so ago, a drunken high-schooler fell down that freestanding chimney and cracked his skull in two. Since then, the trail had become overgrown. I wondered if I could find my way there without my flashlight.

The moon was several days beyond full, so its strange almost shadowless glow illuminated the brambles that flew from either side of the hard-packed dirt, barring my passage. Gingerly, I grabbed one branch, thumb and forefinger between the thorns; pulling carefully, I disentangled each piece, and moved on, just as warily, to the next.

Just as I was beginning to wonder if there might be another path to the chimney, to suspect that this might in fact not be the path at all, I saw a small meadow just beyond. No tree

branches faced towards the meadow, and though the grass was high, the bushes were still low. I imagined that, halfway up the trunks of the taller trees that ringed the clearing, I could see charred wood.

When I stepped through the forest, in the light of the moon, now much lower in the sky, I saw the chimney. Its upper half had toppled, and gave the effect of a red-brick waterfall.

II.

Since climbing the chimney had proved itself a disappointment, I went back to the meadow and picked up the bottle I had left. At the edge of the woods, I rolled it into the pond, and walked along the side of the stream as the bottle bobbed up and down, tripping over rocks, drifting towards the river.

About ten minutes from the pond, I was just beginning to lose patience (and was beginning to consider picking the bottle out, and just tossing it into the river myself). Behind a barn whose roof had been torn off several years earlier and was never replaced, the stream just stopped. Disgusted, I stepped on the empty bottle, sinking it in the muck that sat at the stream's terminus like a tiny delta; I heard a stone somewhere under the mud scrape against the glass, and headed home.

I wasn't working the next day, so I spent the morning in bed until the sun started poking its rays between my westward-facing blinds, and I was forced out from under my sheets. Naked, I walked over to my blinds and pulled them open. I stood there, looking over the town, which appeared perhaps not yet miniature, but at least decidedly shrunken. I could see two of the three traffic lights in town from here on the third floor, and the river, with a thin strip of polluted beach on either side.

Just before the sand on the nearer side of the water rose the rusted-steel skeleton of the old iron works. As a child, I had wanted to walk inside that abandoned giant-roofed space, to climb the mounds of sand. Several weeks earlier, just before the school year ended, I cut class to spend the afternoon there with Robyn and Jenny, who both must have been as sick of tests and grades as I was. Robyn's father had died last October, but that afternoon in the iron works was the first time she had cried.

Staring out the window, squinting in the sunlight, I just looked at the river sluggishly roll out to the ocean. I examined the boats on the river: several smallish motorboats, one fairly large sailboat, which I didn't know the proper name for, and the usual assortment of flat, graceless barges. I just looked out at the boats, and pictured, stuck in the mud, useless, empty and stationary, last night's bottle of Rolling Rock.

I imagine, sometime in early September, while the Boy Scouts were involved with their annual Keep Our Village Clean campaign, a troop was cleaning around the woods behind the barn. One of them saw the bottle. Not wanting to touch it himself, he pointed it out to a younger scout, who sighed and dutifully plucked the water-filled bottle out of the mud, which popped slightly when the suction was broken.

III.

Dinner that evening was at eight; although this was almost an hour later than usual, it seemed appropriate during this lazy sort of day. I tended to lose track of the days of the week, unless I bothered to look in the upper-left corner of mom's paper when she came home from work. If it was Sunday, of course, the stack of useless glossy advertisements, every page crawling with coupons and trumpeting the word sale would tell me the day.

Yesterday was Sunday, and the busy Sunday Circulars sat in the corner of the kitchen on the floor, coupons clipped so frequently it seemed giant scissor-jawed moths had mistaken the pictures of neatly-piled sheets for the sheets themselves, and had eaten through them before realizing their error. Tuesday afternoon I would have to work. Mom wasn't in the kitchen; the back door was open.

The grill, in the far left corner of the patio, was leaking smoke the color of stormclouds into an already-darkening sky. Beyond the crumbling red brick patio, the grass, which hadn't been cut in several summers, leaned over and rolled with the wind.

Mom turned as I came outside, the peeling paint flaking off the squeaking screen door as it slowly shut. Her shoulder-length soft-brown hair, further lightened with streaks of grey, flew behind her. "Go inside--Steak will be done in a minute," she told me. Turning around to look at the steak again, she added "Find out what your brother wants and pour drinks. I've already set the table." So I went back inside, not even bothering to ask my question.

Sometime around two in the morning I woke up; the little television in my room was still on, but the only picture was that static that looks like an incredible close-up of cross-hatching so big one person could never quite make sense of it. I literally rolled out of bed and flicked the off button on the TV.

--Have you ever noticed, after turning your television off, if you put your hand on it, you feel charged electrically, and when you take your hand off, your palmprint sits there, glowing, on the TV for a minute? It's like a dream somehow, not quite real: this glowing memory somehow on the TV, that feeling passing into your body and pretty much up your arm. The TV sitting there, the tube grey but still warm, off but somehow magical, like you could ask it for anything.

I had been thinking of magic that afternoon after I woke up; the toppled chimney hidden in the woods disappointed me, because I had wanted it to still be how it must have been so long ago, for the boy who died there. I don't know how I expected it to stay that way, unless maybe the ghost put the bricks back, haunting, it, waiting for his friends to show up and pull him out of the chimney.

I wanted to ask my mother, who taught the biology class I was taking this year, if the brain was all electricity and chemicals, why we couldn't store it, like in a battery, or transmit it like TV, or both. Because then the chimney ghost, and Robyn's dad, and Uncle Sebastian would all still be with us, even if it was in some way I didn't completely understand.

I sat on my bed, thinking of magic and glowing handprints on the television tube, and I imagined I was talking to Uncle Sebastian. I really was talking to Uncle Sebastian. Of course, he wasn't answering.

IV.

Tuesday afternoon, I woke up just in time to get to work; I had forgotten to set my alarm, but I had also forgotten to shut my blinds, and the daylight stirred me in time. I showered, put on a clean pair of jeans and a fresh t-shirt, brushed my teeth, and hopped through the front door.

Robyn's mother, Nancy, owned the store. Sighing and sweating a little, I walked in. From behind the register, she greeted me: "Hi Chris, how are you. The shipment's late today, I called them, they swear it's on the way. Until it's here, there's not much to do. What say you take the register so I can smoke."

I was still behind the register almost an hour later when the shipment finally arrived. I counted the boxes, signed the slip, and started unpacking. Since we didn't have much room, we put one of everything out front, and kept the rest in the back.

I was almost finished counting when Robyn walked into the store. She gave her mother a peck on the cheek, and smiled at me.

"Robyn, could you do me a favor?" her mother asked.

"Sure, what is it?" Her voice was lethargic but not unhappy. I imagined that her sole function in life was to imitate chocolate syrup dribbling down the side of a glass full of milk. Briefly, I imagined stirring that milk, and I could see the dark clouds inside the glass billow, and subside. I smiled.

"Could you please run next door and pick up a ham and swiss sandwich for me, on a kaiser roll--"

"--with lettuce and tomato. And a coke." Robyn finished, and looked at me. "Anything you want?"

"How about... How about ham, egg, and cheese on a toasted English muffin, and a Dr. Pepper?" I pulled out my wallet and handed her three dollars.

"No problem," she said, and slowly walked out the door. I finished the shipment, and was behind the register again when she returned; Nancy was in back, smoking a cigarette.

Robyn put my sandwich and soda on the counter. "Here you go," she said, "your change is twenty-two--"

"Keep the change," I said, grinning.

She giggled. "You're so generous." I nodded gravely, unsuccessfully suppressing a grin. Edging around the counter, Robyn aimed a finger at me and shot it into my ribs. We giggled. "I'll take the register," she said, "go in back and have your sandwich. You going to be down at the river tonight?" I nodded, and took my sandwich to the back.

V.

Every summer evening, there is always a party to which everyone is invited. All the football players, every misfit, each stoner with his stringy black hair and torn T-shirt covered by a denim jacket with slightly bulging pockets. Some nights, this party was at the meadow, in the woods; tonight the party was at the river.

By the time I was out of work, grabbed dinner, and had finally wandered to the river through the hole in the fence near the railroad tracks, they were nearly out of beer. Marcus, one of the stoners, with a black baseball cap shading his eyes, walked around nonchalantly with a notepad, collecting money and orders. Ten minutes, he said, and all would be put right.

I walked over to Robyn. She hinted at a smile, and I tipped my imaginary hat to her. After I gave her a ten for Marcus, with no specific instructions, we exchanged typical party pleasantries, swapping gossip and rumor before I walked on.

The sun had set not so long ago, and twilight shadows suggested small animals creeping between the rocks. Feeling no need to distinguish between the rats and the gloom, I walked in the other direction, towards the old iron works.

Outside that hulking abandoned space, standing there, it seems so large that it's hard to believe it is bounded, although you can clearly see its walls, or what is left of them. Looking between dunes of rubble, you can see dunes of sand illuminated during day by the girders of sunlight riveted between the window-spaces, themselves accentuated with a fringe of shattered glass. The roof is so distant that the only reason it doesn't drop must be that it's stuck so far into the sky it can't fall.

Standing inside, I imagined standing in a salad bowl full of concrete and sand, topped with a crumpled, ripping sheet of aluminum foil. It was becoming quite dark, and some people who had been inside were moving back outside. One of them looked strangely at me as I wandered in.

"It's dark," he shouted at me, but the echoes from the concrete made it seem like a whisper, and I brushed it off like a spiderweb. I held my eyes closed for a moment, to try and adjust them so I might see. It was dark, and I tripped over a row of carefully lined bottles someone had left before leaving, the glass making nearly musical scrapings which also echoed whisperingly.

VI.

Wednesday evening after work, I returned to the meadow. The sun had not yet set, and I stood among the stones, surveying the green half-buried shards of glass scattered there as if they were my kingdom. The light was still too bright; they did not yet sparkle, although I knew that they soon would.

I walked to the edge of the meadow; all the pine trees leaned away from the center. Staring upwards, I saw that none of the larger trees ringing the meadow had branches facing inward, just deep, elongated scars where the limbs had burned away.

My eyes ached. I cupped my hands over my closed eyelids and gently rubbed them with the tips of my fingers. In my mind, I saw the half-topped chimney which stood nearby under moonlight. Opening my eyes, I stretched my arms and slowly strolled back across the meadow, to the path which lead to the chimney.

As I disentangled the overgrowth, bulldozing through the forest, a thorn pricked my thumb. I stopped, and held my hand so that I could see it better. Although no blood was dripping, I was able to squeeze out one sparkling drop, which I sucked off with my tongue.

I pressed on through the brambles, which eventually thinned out and finally parted before me, revealing a clearing lit mostly by moonbeams and fireflies, whose staccato green flashes blinked like Morse Code messages on a transparent marquee. Drawing my eyes back and forth several times across the space, I attempted to recover my bearings. The chimney wasn't here; I had evidently chosen the wrong path away from the meadow.

This clearing was almost a mirror of the chimney's space, as much as I could remember it, with one obvious distinction: instead of toppled leftovers from a vanished building, this landscape was dominated by an enormous, ancient tree. I was unable to identify its species, but at the time that hardly mattered.

I approached the giant and circled it several times; its branches were too low to walk under without crouching. From outside that circle, it seemed that even the topmost branches were strong enough for the gods to walk across; with their altitude, that the gods would walk across them did not seem implausible.

I walked around the tree, counting my steps. By my best estimate, it must have been seventy or eighty feet around the outside, near where the branches almost touched the ground. Walking around again, to make sure I hadn't made a gross error, I tripped over a swollen root protruding from the earth and landed sprawled on the ground.

Wiping the mud from my knees and elbows as best I could, I decided to see the tree from underneath. With one more circle around, I found a space between the low branches I could climb through. As I stepped through the portal, I wished I had remembered my flashlight, which was still sitting in my room, atop my dresser.

The bowed limbs radiating from the trunk formed a dome whose green shingles deflected the moonlight. The trunk itself was twelve or fifteen feet around, gnarled and half-stripped of

bark. Followed upwards, it receded into the dim; although its roots must have sunk a considerable depth beneath the soil, they also emerged in gigantic knotted clumps, suitable perhaps for sitting, if one didn't mind a few hard, tumor-shaped lumps pressing into one's back.

I approached the base of the tree, and placed my hands on the trunk where the bark had been completely stripped away. I could feel things carved into the wood, patterns of finger-wide grooves. Straining my eyes, I was able to make out a heart, with two sets of initials inside. I couldn't quite make out what the letters were, or the other, stranger, carvings some distance below the heart.

Running my hands up the wood, near the top of my reach I could feel a thick, low limb protruding. I followed it with my eyes; the branch ended in a jagged fracture about six feet out. Tentatively, I pulled down on the branch. Slowly, I put more and more weight on it until I was dangling from the limb. Bracing my legs against the trunk, I brought them up and over so that I was now sitting on the damaged bough. Balancing myself against the trunk, I slowly stood up, and lifted my arms heavenward searching for the next branch.

VII.

Despite some aching in my shoulders and my arms, I continued up the tree, branch after distant branch. The dome of leaves rustled in the wind; when that was silent, I could hear crickets in the meadow beyond.

Perhaps fifty or sixty feet up the tree, I wondered if there might always be further to climb, like a sort of enchanted beanstalk, or magic ladder. I imagined the tree receding into the sky, and at the same rate fading away so that it would be infinitely thin, like the wing of a dragonfly.

Another fifty feet up the tree, the trunk split in three. With my foot in the cleft, I stretched, yet I could reach no higher branch. Sighing, I sat at this fork, my back against one of the branches, staring at the other two.

I looked down at the branches below me; they seemed to radiate from the center with a mathematical precision, as if the entire tree had been built by an automaton, or as if a seashell had stared into a funhouse mirror.

I lifted my eyes and examined what was above me; those branches bent away from the trunk at every impossible angle, and seemed to be spaced haphazardly as if to challenge the regimented limbs below. Sometimes, several branches would meet, and they might braid themselves together, or even melt into a single branch.

I heard a rustling in the leaves above. I looked around, and saw a man dressed in a moss-green suit climbing downwards. As he approached the smooth trunk above the split, he looked down on me and grinned. He sat down on the lowest branch above me, the trunk my left foot was resting on.

He was bald, spindly-limbed, barrel-chested. His pants faded away into a suit jacket of the same green; it appeared he wasn't wearing anything beneath his jacket. His sharp grey eyes met mine; I glared suspiciously, willing him to speak first, but his eyes sparkled and he didn't say a word.

I heard another noise from above; sliding down the trunk my right foot was leaning against was another man, regularly proportioned, blue-eyed, wearing a slate-grey three piece suit and a maroon necktie over a white dress shirt. Holding a well-made walking stick in his left hand, he smiled and laughed softly as he slid over the trunk.

Shaking my hand, he grinned amiably and introduced himself: "Sidney Lost. Pleased to meet you. And yourself?" His voice was smooth, firm, noble, like Robin Hood, or the manager of a grand hotel. "This is my brother John," he added as he gestured at the green-suited man, who smiled slightly and nodded his head. "I'm afraid he's not very social."

"I'm Christopher, and I'm afraid I'm not very social either."

"Is that so?" Sidney Lost smiled. "And why is that?"

"I don't know. I guess most people don't interest me, I just don't really connect with them, I guess."

"What about your family?" Sidney cocked his head slightly and wrinkled his forehead. "What about your brother?"

"Don't really speak much with him. Just not my sort of guy."

"Your parents?"

"Mom... well, she's busy all the time. And I haven't seen my father in years, since he moved away."

Sidney nodded. "What about your friends? And, incidentally, how did you get here?" He gestured at the tree.

"What do you mean? I climbed it."

"Did you? Well, how exactly did you get to the tree?"

"Of course I climbed it. How did you get here?"

He smiled. "I've always been here. John too. This is our tree."

"What do you mean, it's your tree?"

"How did you get to the tree?" Sidney stared at me, his eyes demanding an answer.

"I told you," I whispered, "I was walking in the woods, and I was going to the chimney, but I must have made a mistake and--"

"You don't get here by mistake. And no, you didn't tell me. Are you happy, Christopher?"

"Nobody's happy," I said confidently, "that's just a myth." Sidney looked at me, his eyebrows slightly raised.

"Why is it a myth? Can't you choose to make yourself happy?" Sidney smiled. "After all, you choose your friends, you can choose those connections, you control these things. Isn't that right, John?" John Lost nodded emphatically. Sidney smiled again; I noticed his teeth, rows of nearly-flat ivory planks, like a bleached pier. I wondered what it would be like to be a pirate, and thought that Sidney looked like a wonderful first mate.

Sidney Lost chuckled under his breath. "Have you ever seen a glass eye, Christopher?"

"No, but--"

"Don't worry, I won't show you now." Sidney grinned. "Nor will John. Do you know anything about Norse mythology? Have you ever wondered about spirits?"

I thought about the chimney boy, and wondered if maybe I was there dreaming all this. Still, Sidney and John gave me chill enough without more souls about.

"No," I lied.

"Oh," said Sidney, his voice dropping slightly, "then I suppose you won't be interested in what we have to offer."

I shook my head and, as if on cue, the Lost brothers shook their heads sadly. Sidney nodded to me, John followed suit, and the two climbed away up the tree. "Goodbye, Christopher," Sidney called as he vanished beyond the highest branches I could see. Climbing down the tree was much easier, maybe because I had seen the pattern from above.

## VIII.

At my front door, I paused to find my housekeys. I checked the right pocket of my jeans, then the left. As I was pulling my keys from my left pocket, I felt something. Two perfect spheres, cold and smooth, glass. I held them under the light: two milky-white marbles--one grey, one blue.

## IX.

Saturday afternoon, I was sitting in the iron works with Robyn. We were drinking beer, sitting on chunks of concrete which resembled freeze-frames of ocean waves during a hurricane,

our bottles in one hand, the rusted steel reinforcement bars protruding from the chunks in the other. The wind outside was whistling, and the sand near the doorway was blowing around like a sandstorm in the movies.

"What was up Tuesday night?" Robyn asked, "I saw you, but then you disappeared and I didn't see you again."

"I don't know. I got bored, I guess, and I was tired, so I left." I felt the marbles in my pocket. "Sorry, I guess I should have said goodbye."

"That's okay, no big deal. Just wondering." Robyn brushed the hair out of her eyes, and blinked several times. I felt goosebumps begin to form on my arms and the back of my neck.

The sun was beginning to set, and dusty orange light illuminated the space from the shattered windows above. In the distance, I could hear a fire engine's siren, and then an ambulance. Must be a convention of banshees, I thought, and touched the marbles again. I'd been doing that a lot. On the one hand, I didn't want to believe Sidney and John. On the other, I didn't want to believe in them. Since I did, though, I figured I had to believe them, too.

Robyn looked at me, then giggled. "What are you so serious about?"

"Nothing. Just thinking. Mind if I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead, I guess." Robyn sounded puzzled.

"Do you think I spend enough time with people? In general, I mean."

"Well..." Robyn paused. "I guess you're kind of out of it, sometimes. But you're nice, you know?"

I smiled, then spent a long time swallowing. "I guess I'd like to spend more time with you."

Robyn laughed. "You guess you'd like to spend more time with me? Like, you're not sure?" Robyn stood up and walked over to the block I was sitting on.

I stuck my hand in my pocket and touched the marbles. I giggled. "I am sure. Yes."

"Yes, what?" Robyn smiled and stepped away.

"Yes, I'd like to spend more time with you," I whispered.

Robyn brushed the hair out of her eyes again and stepped closer, halfway to where she was before. "Well, I guess that would be nice." She laughed.

"You guess?"

"That would be nice," she whispered, "to spend more time with you."

"Yeah," I whispered as I held the marbles tightly, "it would be nice." I tossed my bottle into the corner, where it hit the wall and broke into a million moss-green shards which caught the light of the setting sun.