

# Under The Tree

*by* Alex Aro

There were echoes all around them, their shadows delirious and only existed in short spurts under the breath of the streetlights. They danced as their cigarettes leaked calligraphy across the night sky and she tried to trace it with her finger. He asked her what it said and she replied "It's a secret to the stars."

The smoke towered over them for a few moments, observing before dissipating into the darkness and she took the cancerous pen to her lips to write some more. There was a light veil of frost over the front yards of the neighborhood and the cars glistened like midnight ghosts with a message. He looked up to the stars for a moment but their lips were sealed with her secret.

She wore a polka dot party dress under her open coat, ribbons and bows snaked across her chest, and he wanted to unwrap her like a Christmas present. He imagined them pulling at each other's clothes until they were naked in the snow.

Every night she confronted the grinning monster in the mirror, she saw her blood flow across her insides, a stomach that begged for food and a heart that didn't beat quite fast enough. She knew of nothing internal, for without covering, everything inside her belonged to the world.

He edged closer to her as they continued around the block and the comfort of night decreased as the gap between them grew shorter. Her life was a game of hide-and-seek with only one rule; no one could ever find her.

"Do you ever wonder if somewhere out there, across the stars, there is someone just like you, walking along a street, thinking the same things you are, doing the same things you are?" he asked. She took a few steps away from him to keep the distance.

"I doubt it." She replied.

"Why?" he blew smoke out through his nose and it tickled her face. His footsteps were closer and she took a few steps away, arms folded across her chest.

She had picked up smoking from her mother and would lock herself in her room and watch the smoke enter her lungs. She would watch them blacken, and her heart rate increase. He thought there was something beautiful about cigarettes, something aesthetic about the smoke slithering out from under his lips and the loss of care that lasted until that burning line reached the filter.

She shook her head, "Oh, the burdens."

He knew all too well about burdens with his lizard skin. As she stared into the mirror before meeting up with him, he had too. He stared at the scaly patterns across his body, trying to make sense of the designs. He felt their hardness, like smoothed braille, before putting his clothes on and wishing he could wake up soft.

It was days before Christmas and all around them houses gleamed with blinking light and holiday figures guarding the lawns. He had set up his tree earlier in the day. It was taller than he had thought, and it bent at the top like a sad haircut. He stood under it, star in hand, and wondered how he could crown it properly. Finally, he placed it in the middle on a fat branch and said "I give you heart,"

She didn't have a tree this year. Lately her melancholy mother sat at the table with a pile of bills and cried to long glass bottles. Her house was empty and black, the paint peeled in the hallways and the cold air seeped in through cracks with the cockroaches. Sometimes she awoke in the middle of the night with roaches all over her, under her shirt and over her heart. They saw everything though her transparent skin, they danced on her veins and followed her blood flow like water slides. She never moved an inch.

For a long time she had talked with him but she remained behind the wooden fence in her yard. He peered over at her but she was splinters from the neck down. He kept his coat snug and tight, the cold air dried out his scales and it irritated him. One day he asked her if she would come over the fence, if they could walk somewhere. She stood silent for a moment, her heart beating furiously and she

wondered if he would be able to see it. She finally accepted but when they walked around the block it was as if she carried the fence with her and each time he tried to step closer she would see hammers in his hands.

Their walks became an everyday occurrence and she started to look forward to seeing his face appear above her fence. One time, as she climbed back over the fence into her yard, she leaned over and kissed him. His mouth was the evergreen trees she and her mother used to cut down every Christmas. She held the kiss and could feel the axe in her hands, see the smile on her mother's face and then the tree falling down.

“So you really don't think...”

“No,” she cut him off, “it's not that I don't think. I hope. I hope there isn't someone out there exactly like me. I wouldn't wish that for anyone.”

He leaned back and stretched with a groan. Again, his steps drew a little closer but his breathing sounded sweet to her, soothing. When she looked down at his hands he wasn't holding hammers, and when she came back to herself she had already started climbing the invisible fence between them.

They held hands and he smiled. “This is nice and new.”

When they arrived at her yard she climbed back over her fence then turned to kiss him. The kiss was pounding excitement, like bounding down the stairs on Christmas morning to see what was underneath the tree. She let go and he asked, “Will you come over tomorrow for Christmas Eve?”

“Perhaps,” she said.

When she walked inside her house her mother was sleeping with the long glass bottles. She went upstairs, lay on her bed and dreamt of a girl's night. She dreamt of being surrounded by girls with budding breasts and letting their secrets spill out across their sleeping bags. Girls named Therese, Kelsey and Amy. They all chatted in their t-shirts and underwear because that is what boys

want, girls in their underwear. She was all the rage, all eyes on her. Therese stopped painting her nails, Kelsey stopped combing her hair and Amy stopped twirling hers, and all of them stared and said, "You are so beautiful. We're so jealous." Then Therese cupped her breasts and said "My boobs are way too small." She giggled with the rest of the girls and they turned the lights off. Morning came in the dream and when she woke the girls still slept. She slid down her underwear and took her t-shirt off, because that is what boys wanted, naked girls. She paraded over the sleeping girls and her heart was hidden, her blood veiled and they all watched, even with their eyes closed.

He was home and stared at the ceiling. He wondered if she could love a lizard, if she could rub his scales and be pleased by it. Downstairs his tree sighed but its heart glistened, and so did his when he thought of her. He rolled over in his bed and shut his eyes as the memory of her kiss lulled him to sleep.

She woke and was alone, her imaginative sleepover gone. He slept through the afternoon then went to her fence to wait. He waited and waited but she never came. He looked into her windows but didn't see her walking around. He rubbed his head and walked back home, slouched with his hands in his pockets. It was Christmas Eve and all the houses jumped, the inhabitants partied and kissed and exchanged gifts while his house frowned with darkened windows.

When he walked in and turned on the lights, there she was under the tree. She was in her party dress with a bow on her head and a gift tag tied around her wrist. She didn't move and she didn't smile. He stared at her for a moment then sat down next to the tree.

He picked up the tag and read his name. He grabbed her by her feet and pulled her out from the tree bottom and she still remained motionless. He pulled the bow off her head then grabbed a pair of scissors and started to cut up the seam in her dress. He ripped the dress off her and saw her heart as it thumped wildly about, saw her blackened lungs, saw the blue lines of her blood running throughout her body and he said "I'm glad you didn't bring the fence with you."

She smiled and reached over to unbutton his coat. She pulled his shirt and pants off and looked him up and down. They kissed and fell and rolled under the tree. They made love under the branches and the heart of the tree slipped forward and crashed to the floor. The light faded into the carpet, while his heart illuminated his scales. Hers burned bright too, he could see it.

