

Phoradendron Leucaroum Bratus  
or  
The White Viscum Album

"Get some mistletoe this year," said my mother.

"Wha'...?" answered my father, drawing in a mainstream of Chesterfield Short, unfiltered. Jailbird rolls, Mother called them.

"She likes it."

"She?"

"She who else?"

"Marie?" Father frowned a guess.

"Just get the stuff," said Mother, flattening a casserole dish of macaroni and cheese with that morning's egg turner.

"How?" said Father. "Twenty-two? You can't discharge a firearm in the woods these days."

"Not up to the task?" said Mother, thumb projecting toward ceiling.

"Last thing I shot," said Father, "was a kraut--frontschwein--who wanted to shoot me first; am not about to kill a garland for your mother."

"Don't think the garland wants to kill you back."

"Can't-fire-a-gun--legally--in-the-city."

"You mean I'll have to use a butcher knide?" said Mother, drawing one from the block, destined for the chopping of yellow onions.

Father, either getting insinuation or not, looked up at her from both kitchen chair and bottom of eyes, silent in a Christmas wreath of smoke.

"Yeah," Mother sliced a glance sharp as the implement in hand, "that's right."

Cooling off straight razor for non-shave weekend, Father, in rumination, rubbed middle finger across umber sandpaper rough enough to smooth hickory. "Well, at my age, am not scamping any tree for a parasitical berry."

"Maybe next year," Mother smirked, "when you're younger?" She then jutted her jaw and blew irregularly cut bangs up and off a low hairlined forehead. The onions were minced with the exactitude, the rhythmic precision, of a thresher, scraped from cutting board and into casserole dish.

Father, leaving smoke burning in table ashtray, scooted chair caps across linoleum and made for the living room to bring a Philco Bakelite television screen into a snowy hum. "Pittsburgh Steelers," he grouched. "Should be watching in the cellar--where they live--where they belong." First Mabel Black Label commercial, back in kitchen for a bottle of It's Always Fehr Weather and a bag of Beer Nuts. Mother's lunch, dinner, job demands be damned. It was his day. Not the Lord's, not her's--his. His day. His day alone.

I closed my bedroom door, hinge squeaking uh-oh, donned earflap hat, half-belt waister, puffo gloves in side vent pockets, unlatched window, slid mullion glass to top of frame and snaked through the bottom, closed it from outside, then duck-walked under living room bay, around corner into garage, where I removed the summer garden shears off pegboard hook, and began to trek to the winter park at the end of our dead end street.

Early solstice dusk was layering in and every denuded tree spook fingered across a dun gray sky. Nature in cessation. Me in motion. No brilliance, no birds, no bugs, a herd of doe, without stags, giving sloe-eye between cambium grazing and tufts of surviving sprat grass.

Every hardwood, every oak, maple, ash, hawthorn, poplar, seemed to hold what I was looking for: big, beautiful, the size of south western sagebrush, and white berries galore; only forty feet overhead; inaccessible as the dog star. I wandered endlessly, like a man, a boy, searching for the right place to hang himself. The dark began to mantle the forest and once silhouetted branches blurred into a chiaroscuro of indistinction. Coyotes howled, knowing I was on their parous, yet virginal, turf. How many more were hunkered down in dens? How many were full up of venison? How many were looking for a change of menu?

Without realizing, I had traipsed entire copse, working my way through a grove of several hundred yards, into opposing suburb. Discombobulated, I stood stock-still, attempting to

find bearings, only to hear the footfalls of crunching leaves, followed by the sound of dropped water streaming onto dry foliage. Then it stopped and the crunch resumed, then another stop, then another silence.

"Hi-ho," came a voice I knew...or hoped I knew...or hoped I didn't know. "Who's there?"

"It's me," I answered.

"Whacha doin' out here--me?"

"Same question?"

"Shakin' the dew off my liz--drainin' my dais--hangin' hose."

"So I heard."

We both approached.

"You lost?" he asked.

"Nah, man, I ain't lost."

"I ain't, either,"

"Why you out here?"

"Christmas kin--talkin' politics."

"Poli--many," I said. "Tics--blood-suckin' insects."

"What's that mean?" he shot back as if challenged.

"Nothin'. My father says it."

We were distracted by the rustling of a solitary buck gnawing the browse.

"My father says," he said, "these deer would taste better on a barbecue grill than on a car grill."

"Cooked, am sure. Though wolves wouldn't think so."

"Never ate a wolf."

"Gotta red hood, wolf will eat you."

"Your father says that, too?"

"Nah, just me."

"So?"

"So what needs mended. My mother says that."

"I don't care what your stupid mother 'n' father says."

"Neither do they. And your dad's a yard tard--cuts grass  
for a living."

"Ain't no yard tard--he's a landscaper."

"'Sides a land 'scraper', a driveway scraper--shovels snow."

"Your dad works in an office--like a woman."

"'Cause he don't hafta cut grass an' shovel snow like your  
dumb dad."

"I'll cut your throat!" He dipped into his hip pocket to  
remove a spring-handle comb, its teeth busted, faux blade covered  
in tin foil, comically resembling a stiletto switchblade, and  
sprung it open with a slow snap. "Your ass is grass!"

"Pussy," I laughed. "All you cut is up--in school--like  
Sister Mary Domatella said."

"Screw Sister Mary Domatella."

"Now you're goin' to hell--as well."

He stabbed at phantom air. "All I'm goin' is home." Rooted  
to the spot, he remained, frozen in the warrior sneer of a dead  
possum. "It's dark," he suddenly announced.

"Tell me about it."

"What's in your paw?"

"Not what was in yours."

"Mine?"

"First your dick, now your butter knife."

"Them hedge clippers?" he asked, sizing up perceived weapon.

"Something like that."

"What ya gonna do with'm?"

"Hold'm."

"Why?"

"'Cause I wanna."

"Wanna why?"

"For mistletoe."

"Missile..."

"Missiletoe--what astronauts get--like athletes get foot."

"What you get?"

"Nothin'. It's too high."

"What's too high?"

"What we're talkin' about--mistletoe."

"It's for kissin' under, ain't it? Who'd kiss you?--cootie pie."

"Your girlfriend--if ya had one--whose boyfriend is a three dollar bill."

"Hey, wanna get stabbed with your own clips?"

I upped the handle, metallic cold flashing in the gloom.

"You an' what army?"

"Better go home 'fore it's too dark," he advised, requested, threatened.

"You, too."

"What about the missiletoe?"

"Told ya, I can't reach it."

"Climb up an' get the crap."

"Branches are too high to grab from the ground."

"Shinny, then."

"Trunks too wide."

"Get a monkey to do it."

"To doo doo it? Like at the zoo?"

He then jumped, swinging at the lowest branch to miss by six feet. "You be the monkey," he said. "I'll give ya a boost, grab the nearest limb an' monkey your monkey ass up."

"Think so?"

He periscoped and found a linden. "Look, right there. Fulla missile." He folded the spring comb and rehoused it.

I saw the lure, telegraphed before and beyond arrival, but wanted something more than what he was conniving, so stood against the bole as he cupped hands into a basket step. I stuck the clippers through my now too old, too tight Hopalong Cassidy belt, set arch of Boondocker knockoffs onto the web of fingers, and he bolstered me directly to the lowest hanging branch, ten feet aloft. I caught a two-hand grip, the clipper blade digging into the meat of one thigh, and chin-upped to a straddling position. I then heard him whoop: "Drop in sometime, sucker!" as he ambled off, adding: "You're eleven-teen, you're a dummy, I'm twelve-teen, I'm a smartie."

I jockeyed the branch to see and hear, in reverb echo, the chant of: "Great gross gobs of greasy grimy gopher guts/mutilated monkey meat/desiccated donkey dick," while he simultaneously struck book matches, flicking flame to the ground, to stomp it out before igniting. "Hey, Smokey Bear," I yelled, "only you can prevent forest fires."

"I'll smoke Smokey Bear!" he shouted back, engulfing entire book in one flash, dropping it again to forest floor--then was gone, eaten up by the jet. Thank God, or the Devil, the fire fell on noncombustible earth, smoldering into extinguishment.

Never liked the guy. But he was in our class, held back a grade, and this is how the proximity worked. We were stuck with each other and that was that. Such as the time he smashed a box turtle against a telephone pole, shattering its shell to meet a nasty unprotective death. Fate, eight years later, paid back the rotten karma with his own unprotective death in Viet-f'in'-nam. Can't say I was a mourner. However, wellaway, why digress.

I worked up the lattice of limbs until finding a cluster of white waxy orbs glowing off a beach ball-sized bushel. Accessible. Securable. Mine. An...tic...i...pa...tion. I peered through the zigzag to the sky. Moon yellow as Father's nicotine thumbnail, clipped and caught, suspended in a sheet of blackplate, its immobility contrasted by the stars liquid glisterings. All nothing to me other than a source of luminance, I stretched and attempted to snip. Alas, no golden sickle, but the Druids approved the effort enough to snap off several twigs from host branch. The



connecting heartroot was too dense to clipper through, a handsaw having been the proper tool, but, forget it, I was happy.. Happy for small pickings.

Letting the snapped twigs fall to the ground, I descended, tossing clippers en route, where, at lowest branch, dangled several seconds like swaying corpse on gallows, releasing to land exactly on one of the dropped sprigs. Figures. Should have snapped more. Though, deduced, still had enough to wrap a red ribbon around once I got home.

Navigating the night, realized could have brought a flashlight. Had him shine it on mistletoe. Climb up the beam. But then when I got to the top of the beam, he'd turn it off and I'd come crashing down. Boy's Life jokes! Why's it so dark so fast? Am I caught in a Universal horror film? Who turned the woods around? Where did my neighborhood go? Finally, saw the oblique firefly flicker of street lamps and used it as a directional guide. The cold air was now an elixr. Mission accomplished. Objective achieved. Life--boy's life--was good.

I retraced my garage sneak, hide the mistletoe behind burlap covered lawn mower, went around house and entered the back door. Dinner was over and so was the meal I did not have waiting.

"Where were you?" my mother questioned, clearing dishes from the table to my sister, rubber gloved at kitchen sink.

"I--ah...."

"I--ah what?" Mother asked.

"A-e-i-o-u," my sister mocked. "And sometimes y are you so--"

"--incorrigible?" Mother finished.

"He doesn't know what incorrigible means," said my sister.

"He just is."

"What were you doing out there, whistling in the dark?"

"Nothin'."

"Nothin'?"

"Nothin'."

"Nothin' nothin' nothin'," my sister parroted. "Don't convey, Pinocchio, convince."

"Well, Mister Nothin'," said Mother, "nothin' is what you're getting for dinner, and nothin' is what you're gonna be doing for the rest of the evening."

"Sure smells good whatever it is--was--I'm not getting."

"Smell hard," said my sister. "That's the entire meal."

"To your room," Mother ordered. "And no midnight raids on the ice box." She paused, shooting a single knowing eye. "And there's a new invention now, that has replaced windows for climbing out of, called a door. A door which goes to the room you're staying in until morning."

"But," I protested, "I have to watch Shock Theater tonight."

"Your Schlock Theater was yesterday night," my sister threw in her own knowledge.

"Thanks for the TV Guide--pisster."

"That mouth," came Mother. "You like the taste of Ivory Soap?"

"It's ninety-nine forty-four one hundred percent pure," said my sister.

"You're not."

"Shut up, the both of you," said Mother. "You--the dishes.  
You--the room."

"Yes, Mom," my sister, vigorously slopping suds, bull snorted.

I said nothing above muffled huffs and made for my cell, door now squeaking uh-huh, where I consumed the last of a short-lived Cub Scout pemmican project, unearthed Weird Tales from bottom desk drawer, falling asleep, boots on, jacket as blanket, before HP Lovecraft could do anymore damage beyond page three, to the strains of my sister at an untunable spinet, deriding through walls, in my dishonor, a particularly pronounced interpretation of Golliwog's Cakewalk, while I dreamed of painting the entire house in haint blue with a black tourmaline brush that fell elbow deep into the holding bucket everytime I doused the bristles. Who needed Shock Theater?

On Christmas morning, the next day, I was first up. Swallowed two raw eggs, a spoonful of concentrated orange juice and, creating a poor boy's Creamsicle, a swig of whole milk. I then took a long length of red wrapping ribbon from hall closet floor bag, went to garage and fastened it through twig strands, unable to make ends of ribbon curl like my mother could with one blade of scissors, so let it dangle, tucked between the leaves and berries. I got a short rung stepladder from utility room and hung up my project over lintel of the den door, next to Christmas tree, with silver thumbtacks pilfered from jobbing corkboard.

Then, just when I had it arranged in geometric perfection,

my brother opened the closed door, toppling ladder and me into the Christmas tree, knocking off ornaments, several breaking on impact, tinsel askew, lights flickering for a come one come all winked-out death. My grandmother, sleeping covered on trundle bed, woke with a start. She stared and squinted--"For one second you were the youngest person in the world, though it's highly unlikely you'll ever live to be the oldest"--cocooned comforter and turned face to wall. My brother, having plowed through to connecting door at opposite side of room, said, never breaking pace, nigh a word than: "Outofthewaytwerp!"

My mother, up to prepare breakfast, heard the commotion and came downstairs into the den. "Why?" she asked, hands on hips of stained raglan housecoat, surveying toppled Fraser fir, teeter wedged sixty degrees into corner. "Why?"

"I thought you wanted..." I pointed at the mistletoe. "I heard you tell Dad...."

"He got some at the Christmas tree lot last night," she said, exasperated with my ambition. "It's over the foyer light." She then removed my decoration in one tug, opened the connecting door and flung it into the back yard, ribbon and all.

"Why did," I asked, righting self, "you do that?"

"We have enough."

"But...."

"But nothing. Fix that tree. And put that ladder back in utility where you found it."

"I hate Christmas."

"I hate you. And so does the Baby Jesus." Tightening housecoat, she trudged steps, slippers flopping, back into the kitchen.

Leaving tree where it landed and ladder where it lay, I went to my room with a sole present: tube of Testors glue. Me and a Revell model of the Wolf Man. At the time, didn't know you could huff the cosmic mucilage. We just imprisoned our fingers, breaking the seal with a dollop of Butch Hair Wax. Free from comfort and joy, it was a good Christmas after all.

Next morning, I saw the Baby Jesus had split, terracotta manger still intact. Can't say I blame him. Could have repaired Baby Jee with my Testors. But didn't.

Yeah, it was a good Christmas. A good Christmas. Before and after all.