

Lithia Park

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On dog day afternoons, shingles buckle on barn roofs here—before dropping flat onto their bellies in the evenings, exhausted from the day's heat. People do the opposite: on their bellies through siesta hours, up and out in the cool evenings to stroll in the park or along the avenues. Children throw bread crumbs to swans afloat on Lithia Pond, squealing and upstaging one another, daring younger siblings to let the creatures feed directly from their hands—which, of course, they do to prove their courage, snatching fingers away as the birds arch their long necks speculatively as if about to strike. The children's squeals can be heard clear to the band shell in town square, where members of the Red Satin City Orchestra prepare for public concert, the first violinist pulling his bow across the E string with a thin smug smile at number two to his left, torturing from his instrument a plaintive squawk that causes oldsters in the front row to firm their lips in taut, vibrant facsimile of nylon strings wrapped in coils of gold wire.

The picture of small town tranquility, so it seemed at least to this recent visitor from New York, where crowds shove and honk through sweltering rush hour afternoons. I was raised in just such a tranquil small town years ago. Though in recent years—what with news reports of domestic violence, infanticides, hometown bombings and gang warfare—I've come to believe such places extinct in all but memory.

I'd just been seated in the town's single Chinese restaurant, the Satin Dragon. It seemed odd to me that I was the only customer in the Dragon, but maybe the good folk of Lithia preferred Vietnamese or Thai cuisine. Perhaps, though I hated to think so, vicious rumors of cat meat substituted for pork on the menu had been circulated by other restaurateurs in town. Such rumors made the rounds of my own home town as I was growing up. Even then, I understood there was some lesson in them, but I failed to understand it.

I ordered chicken chow yuk and was astonished but not alarmed when a waitress, surely more Swedish than Chinese, set before me what seemed an enchilada smothered in peanut oil. I ate it cheerfully, a full subscriber to the serendipities of travel, recognizing bean sprouts as I chewed, unable to ignore the ginger. It was apparently a ginger root enchilada. I was marveling at its multicultural ingenuity, when an old fellow entered and sat at a booth across the room, giving me that curious, good-humored perusal I had grown accustomed to in the region: a wonder-what-that-fella-does-where-he-comes-from sort of look. It made me want to declare: I come from here, a place much like this.

I studied him as he read the menu. An organic face which lines had settled into early on, guy wires at lip corners prepared to stretch the mouth into a smile, floating blue irises, which I've come to regard as a given of regional heredity, like translucent saucers on a blue sea of possibility, brow not plowed so much as hatched. A farmer possibly, given the size of his hands, but wearing the dented, roguish leather safari hat of a suburbanite in search of adventure. One aspect of him canceled out another: checked shirt contradicted orange synthetic golf slacks, "High Fly" Nikes contrasted a string tie. He was a conceptual Great Divide or a frontier between time zones, past and present colliding in the flesh. I have to say he made me uneasy. Likely

my expression betrayed it, for he turned to me as if I'd spoken and asked, "How long you plan to stay?"

"Few days," I said.

"Catch many fish?"

"No. Well, I didn't come to fish."

He winked knowingly, as if I'd said something idiotic I should have kept to myself. "Not having much fun, are ya?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. Actually I was just thinking—"

"That's awright. I know people wouldn't walk across the street for a trout dinner—"

"I'm not one of them, believe me."

"—Pan-fried over an open fire. To each his own." He cocked a finger at me as if that settled it and called for the waitress.

I would have suggested the ginger root enchilada, but I was nursing a grudge. Not the first time words had been put in my mouth in Lithia. Just that morning I'd assured the proprietress of the bed and breakfast where I was staying that I'd had an excellent sleep, thank you: no revving buses, no honking cabs.

"Now that's a He and you know it," she insisted.

"Look me square in the eye and say that."

"But I did. Really."

"See! you're blinking."

"Honestly. I wish I could sleep as well in New York."

"That's the problem, isn't it," nodding in that privy Lithia manner. "All the quiet can get downright spooky. Oh, I know. Oh yes, I do know." She actually shuddered, but quickly composed herself with a smile that would have been fetching without the multiple chins and dewlaps to refract it. Still, she had attractive teeth, a bit small maybe; secretly, I wanted to examine them.

"No, a wonderful sleep, believe me. Nirvana."

She adjusted her bust and eyed me. "It won't ruin our friendship, you know, to hear you had a rough night in my attic bedroom. I'm not that petty really."

"Friendship?" I asked.

"I'm easy." She smiled.

"Okay then, for the sake of friendship, let's say I did have a bad night."

"See now!" She clapped chubby hands. "If you had just admitted it up front we wouldn't of had to go through all this."

I was licked. When she suggested I didn't really want bacon and eggs—all that nasty cholesterugh—I accepted the twelve grain cereal that was sure to bind me up for a week and work under my gums beyond flossing range, listening as she explained what hippies had contributed to American culture. Fascinating, I hadn't thought much about it: drugs, hard rock, the religious right (by way of reaction), long hair (& the current hairless fad—by way of reaction), free love (the current lack of it—by ... you know). Mostly, everything we've become can be attributed to them.

"I'm gonna tell you something about fishing."

I looked up, startled, hadn't noticed the old fellow slip into the booth across from me.

"Fishing ain't nothing about fish at all. No sir. It's about water. Some see into it, some don't. Them what can see catch, them what can't see don't."

I studied him a minute, wondering what he was getting at. When I spoke my

voice stumbled. "It's a metaphor for life, I guess?"

He seized my water glass in a huge fist and thrust it under my nose. "How many cubes? Count 'em."

I recoiled. "They've melted."

He let go something between a hiss and a cackle; his tongue appeared momentarily between lips chapped and rough as fish scales. "Blind as a bass."

"Bat," I corrected him.

"You bet."

He turned the glass upside down. The contents slid out and landed with a heavy clunk on the table. Solid ice.

He was still grinning when I paid my bill and escaped into the cool evening air, on which a few errant notes drifted from the band shell in the park, discordant and slurring, reminiscent of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. In Lithia, I was at sixty-five hundred feet, I reminded myself, the air elusively thin, certain to distort perceptions. My own hometown is near sea level. Raise such a place over a mile high and it's sure to cause distortion—Chinese restaurants, for example, which possess nothing in common with those at lower altitudes beyond bean sprouts, MSG, and chopsticks (but those in the Satin Dragon more like brass tuning forks which produced an eery, lingering bass hum when struck together).

I was breathing heavily by the time I reached the park; ginger formed an acid reflux fireball near my heart and sprouts had begun a snake dance through my intestines. A five year old girl winked lewdly at me and lifted her dress to see if I would look away—as small girls sometimes did when I was growing up, too. She chortled knowingly, eyes aglow like thunder eggs that once rained down from surrounding mountains, found for sale in local curio shops, cut open and polished to a cold glitter inside. Hers the cynical, world-weary expression of a hooker on a Chelsea street corner.

Swans grazed on Lithia Pond, their flexible necks stretched underwater. Thank God for them, so docile and reassuring. In the dusk, I couldn't tell what they were feeding on, and wondered if the old man at the restaurant could have—with his fisherman's eyes. On the far shore, three boys waited in tense yearning, leaning over the water, their blue Lithia eyes focused intently on the swans. All three squealed in unison when a bird came up and craned its neck at the sky in agony, squawking terrible honking protest. Red foam bubbled from its beak down into fleece, turning sleek white feathers a garish pink. I watched in horror. What had they done to it? And why?

"You know," I heard a stylishly dressed woman passing by say to her companion, "I don't believe I've ever heard a swan song before." She regarded the suffering creature, her arms folded in something like approval. Her companion nodded. "They're usually so quiet." The three boys ran around the pond squealing delight.

I hurried back to the bed and breakfast, consigning events of the past hour to altitude and fatigue. "Don't be silly," my friend, the proprietress, told me when I mentioned the old man, the ice, the swans. "You're just spacing out. You need a lithia hair raiser. That'll fix you right up."

"What's a lithia hair raiser?"

"Simple. Two parts milk, one part vodka, a sprinkle of nutmeg."

Just the thought of it turned my stomach, but I downed three of them straight. The lactose, which I can't tolerate on its own, seemingly neutralized by vodka, so I tasted only nutmeg and a faint afterglow of lime. Before I knew what was happening, I was upstairs in bed with my hostess.

After a rollicking bout of lovemaking we lay side by side. Her breathing, hippopotaman at first, subsided to the wheezing sigh of wind through cattails on Lithia Lake (where the old man wanted to send me fishing). I sensed she was smiling, but didn't care to look aside at her terraced chins and spoil the enchantment. I imagined her at half her weight—beautiful, hair blood red, with a satiny rose wood luster, soft as swan's down. So cozy, sinking down into her quilted flesh, such a contrast to the trim, rock-hard city women I'd been dating—all muscle and remorseless bone. In truth, it was the best lovemaking I'd had in years.

She heaved onto her side with a great tumult of bed springs. "When you said you are between wives now, what did you mean by that exactly? You're divorced and have another waiting in the wings?"

"Oh, right! Always another," I said self-mockingly.

She frowned, nose flattened and nearly feline, as were her slit eyes—canny blue Lithia irises looking into me, fathoming what I felt but didn't speak. I realized, with a kind of shock, that she resembled the girl flasher in the park, who was, no doubt, in grave danger—the mad omnicultural enchilada maker out at dusk trapping children in his net, concocting evil, ambiguous meat dishes, while around him slept a town gone vegetarian. Frustration drives us all to extremes. Ridiculous, I told myself. Silly cat meat rumors of my youth updated for less innocent times.

Her plump infant's fingers clutched the quilt atop us, and I saw that my hostess wore a high school class ring identical to that worn by the waitress at the Satin Dragon, realized I hadn't looked at the woman's face, other than to note she wasn't Asian. "What about me?"

"You!" I was startled.

"I'm a gourmet cook, I'm loyal and thoughtful. Well, maybe a teensy overweight, but you gotta admit I'm marvie in bed."

"Your final high note nearly took out my ear drums."

She giggled. "Around here we call it *orgasm*."

"Yeah. I guess."

"So how's about it, lover? You'd absolutely love Lithia."

"I wonder if I would."

"You could help me do the B and B. We'd expand, honey, buy the old armory on Main Street. Sky's the limit."

"I'm a dentist," I reminded her.

"Between fillings." She burped laughter at her little joke. In a swath of lamplight, hers was precisely the face of the girl flasher in the park thirty years hence.

I rolled out of bed and up, slipped quickly into my jeans.

"Okay...all right—" her hands trembled, moving parallel to the bed like an umpire's signaling safe—"I admit there's nothing special about me I'm no Madonna like who is I doubt she is herself under all that makeup when it comes down to it, one person is the same as another it might just as well be me as somebody else here I am!" She opened arms and eyes wide. "What you see is what you get."

"No, no, this is wrong. Absolutely," I said, stumbling into my shoes. "Forgive

me. I didn't mean to...didn't intend....It's the altitude and those milky lithium, whatever they are. I have a pounding headache." Truth be told, I was coated in sweat, heart racing high in my throat, trying to remember from general med classes whether that signaled a heart attack. Her face had collapsed on itself, become deranged in the manner of a cubist sketch, features migrating, eye and mouth changing positions, scalp crawling so her ears perked forward like my ex-wife's. Unnerving. Perhaps in Lithia it was literally true: *One person is the same as another*. A single spirit moving among many forms.

"It isn't about love," she groaned. "Don't you see? Or sex. It's about one person seeing down inside another. Some see, some don't. Guess I pegged you wrong."

No, I wanted to tell her. No, you didn't. But said instead, "Seems I keep hearing that in this town."

"Maybe you need to hear it. We're exactly what we are. Take it or leave it." She rolled thick thighs over the side of die bed and felt about with toes for her slippers.

I was panicked, a man in a dream, wanting to move but struck immobile, remembering the fat girl in grade school who'd had a crush on me and chased me about the playground. In the perverse manner of prepubescent sexuality, she threatened to sit on me and make me her pancake. But couldn't catch me. Later, after she'd shed goose fat and metamorphosed to a sultry adolescent swan, the girl lost interest in me and left me to dream about her nightly. Now she reached out a hand for mine, knuckles like almonds buried in mounds of whipped cream. For a moment I stared at them, my own hand trembled longingly. Then with a great sigh, I turned and fled the room.

I took Highway 54 straight out of town. Feeling shaken and disoriented, wondering if the media didn't have it right about the demise of simplicity after all, while convinced I'd just narrowly escaped a generous helping of simple-as-it-gets. I drove blindly on. Seeking a place where swans float unperturbed on the placid surface of ponds and hearty, recognizable notes (John Philip Sousa maybe) float across the park from the band shell, where small girls are demure and old men speak predictable saws, and what we find attractive comes packaged sleek and trim as a hometown beauty queen, where all is exactly what it appears to be without complication. Maybe I would find it just ahead in Oregon or Idaho...not sure which of those states I was just leaving.