

## Home for the Holiday

Driving down a rural one lane road in the town just outside of Quentin I passed a vast cemetery. *How peaceful*, I thought, reflecting that in my own hometown I had never felt such a feeling. Was there a cemetery in Quentin? I recalled seeing Bedwicks Funeral Home but an actual graveyard? Who could say. Having been away for some time there was admittedly much that I didn't recall about the town. I drove on, passing from the other town with the cemetery through a part of the region that didn't have a name before entering Quentin's city limits.

Though I was expected, I felt a strong urge to not just appear on the doorstep of my childhood home. Instead, preferring to *creep up* as it were, I left my vehicle in a vacant lot—actually a former used car establishment—located on the fringes of town. Parking at one end of the lot I saw on the opposite end a grouping of metal chairs, but conjectured no further as to their reason of placement on this empty expanse of concrete. Paper and other pieces of trash were strewn about. A copy of *The Quentin Observer* lay pulpy at my feet. I could just make out the headline: *Crash Kills Four*.

I started walking. It was towards the end of winter or the beginning of spring (maybe it was right in the middle) and the peculiar wide range of temperatures that went with that time of year was present. It was light jacket chilly when I exited my car but the temperature had risen—an effect accentuated because I had been walking—to short sleeve shirt weather. The trees, I noted—maple, magnolia, oak—were still predominantly bare, the leafing-out had not yet begun. I watched the wiry, naked upper branches gently swaying in the wind. The outer part of town was (I did remember this) still undeveloped and I walked for a mile or two before coming to the first

houses, a few of which were decorated for the holiday. Soon enough I found myself on Main Street. Down I went through the center of town, passing the former bank whose building was now Quentin's city hall, passed Angell's Car Repair and, crossing Main, passed the used bookstore. Some of the other businesses, like Quentin's Food Mart, were still hawking candy and other paraphernalia for the holiday. I paused in front of the storefront window, where a sign was hung:

Piñata kits!

Everything you need!

Spread out for display was an array of materials for use in the construction of a festival piñata. If the traditional route of paper-mâché construction was your preferred method, there were kits that contained bags of flour, measuring cups, strips of "official" holiday paper and an assortment of balloons (essential for any piñata construction) in a variety of sizes. For decorating purposes there were available a smorgasbord of decorative crepe papers, paint, glitter, buttons, and other craft items. Helpfully, there were different kits available depending on *your* finished piñata's design. Around the corner in a grassy area where it appeared a building had recently stood and perhaps burned down, another business—How Convenient Convenience Store—had set up a kind of auxiliary tent for business, something just for other holiday merchandise. From the sidewalk I could see bats—long, short, wood, plastic—dangling from the interior of the tent...and bags and bags of candy spread out on tables situated around the perimeter of the tent.

Leaving the center of town (and the businesses to their holiday goods) I turned onto Oak, a residential street. Piñatas already hung from many of the trees and there was an interesting variety of individual interpretations on the holiday's central symbol: the snake. An "S" shaped

serpent wove through the branches of a large dogwood, while a coiled cobra type creature dangled menacingly from the twiggy structure of a withered birch. In a couple of instances, the spirit of pure abstraction took over, producing intertwining circles of differing diameters.

*Was it always snakes?* I asked myself. Perhaps there was an earlier iteration, like the turnip before the pumpkin, when something else was used. Perhaps.

Kaleidoscopic in their decoration, the piñatas, richly layered in the colorful crepe paper I had seen, stood in stark contrast to the barren tree limbs they were suspended from. Adding to this outburst of color, streamers, ribbons, and other ornaments were hung, braided, and laced through the trees. Several houses had extended these prismatic adornments to the homes themselves: flags and banners of varying shapes and sizes dangled from windowsills and porches, undulating smoothly in the delicate breeze.

Like the possibly non-existent cemeteries of my hometown, the *why* as to the use of piñatas at all was a missing chapter in the record of Quentin. In fact, the entire holiday was itself not celebrated in any other town or region of the country. Unlike the mishmash of tradition that was adopted, adapted, or corrupted to become Halloween, Circles Day as we called the holiday, had no worldly historical antecedents or connections. It didn't trace back to somewhere in Europe, or arrive from China, or come by way of the Druids—whoever they were. Closer in time to Easter, Circles Day had no discernable religious aspect that connected it to the resurrection of that old rascal Jesus, though its springtime placement couldn't help but suggest a whiff of revival or renewal. Some of the more capitalistic townfolk thought the celebration a wholly eccentric invention of Quentin's founders, an early destination marketing strategy to bring in tourists and their pocketbooks. And while the idea of breaking a container filled with treats or other good—seeds more than likely—dated back before the piñata became a favorite activity of birthday

parties and other celebrations, Quentin had no strong agricultural history to connect it to a seasonal planting or harvesting. Others, somewhat bizarrely, theorized that in the infancy of the town there was a large piñata manufacturing industry, hence the invented celebration of the town's main source of revenue and, if stories are to be believed, pride. Nothing, however in the annals of the town speaks of anything remotely resembling a thriving piñata industry.

Approaching the turn—my turn—onto Graystone Drive, I came to a house that was not colorfully decorated nor was it just not decorated. In this house each window had a black placard placed in it; whether affixed to the inside or outside, I could not tell. On each card was a symbol of some geometric design, possibly done in white paint or chalk. Upon seeing this home and its strangely adorned windows, I thought of another type of piñata that I had seen when I was a young quester (as the piñata breakers are called). These other piñatas were far fewer in number and, though my memory is hazy, I don't recall them being fashioned into snakes.

Before I could explore this memory in more depth I was standing on the porch of my childhood home.

“Home for the festivities?” my brother said by way of greeting.

“Just a coincidence,” I rejoined. It occurred to me that the last time I had been back for a visit was the year that Aunt Elia died. How many years had that been, I could not say.

“Right. right,” replied my brother.

Mother and father greeted me in the kitchen. I ate a ham sandwich and drank some seasonal cider. Slicing a piece of apple pie I carefully placed it on my plate and then carefully asked, “And Uncle Kris?”

A pause at the table.

“We know you were close,” I heard and then nodded in affirmation.

Another pause.

“You knew the state he was in,” said mother.

“Dealt a bad hand is all,” said father.

“You know the state he is in,” I thought I heard but maybe not.

“Well, he’ll be with your aunt now,” I definitely heard.

We sat, now beyond a pause, silently at the table with our pie.

I wasn’t shocked or laid low by the news. I did know the hand he was dealt that led to the state he found himself in. Excessively withdrawn and prone to malaise with bouts of insomnia, Uncle Kris was congenitally suited to fits of *dreadful silent reflection* and their ultimate outcome. I finished my pie and cider and made other small talk about the things one talks about upon returning after being gone for a while. After the customary catching up, our talk fell to minor observations concerning work, the weather, the local sports teams, and vague family remembrances. A sound reverberated throughout the house. Father rose to check. Mother smiled and nodded. When father returned, we again sat in quietude. Finally, my brother added:

“We waited for you to start decorating.”

I had no desire to take part in the decorating and said so. When my family—mother, father, brother, and, well, that was all, busied themselves with dressing up the property, I took leave for a walk about town.

Night had yet to fall but the holiday, at least for the youngest celebrants, was already in full swing. The parking lot of New Dawn Church had been taken over by a coterie of Quentin's children. Smaller—and presumably easier to break piñatas—hung low from clotheslines strung across the lot. There were no bats being swung about but rather something more like foam clubs flailed in the air, with parents surreptitiously using their hands to inflict the rupturing blow. *Even the church approves*, I thought, though the banner that waved announcing the event termed it simply as a Spring Festival. I watched for a bit, taking in the spectacle of staged questing. As the sun slide down behind the church, the temperature began to cool. I donned my jacket.

Moving down Steele Street I could see groups of older children parading up and down the block, wielding their bats like bandleaders with their batons. Making a left onto Tidewater I found the entire street had been given over to the holiday. Typically—and this number seems to have increased since I last witnessed the festival—there were those who didn't participate at all, instead extinguishing their porch lights as a deterrent to would be questers. But here, perhaps because of some H.O.A. agreement or good old civic pride—or someone still involved in the piñata trade—each house was bedecked in the gaudy colors of the holiday. The first house on the street had not one but multiple piñatas hanging from trees. A group of five pre-teens were gathered around a strangely angular purple and green viper, bats in hand.

“Open to me or let me be!” they shouted in excited unison. I looked to the porch for the owner to give the signal of approval.

“Open to me or let me be!” they shouted louder, more exuberantly. One more to go, I thought. But before again shouting, the lights flickered off and on several times. That was it, the sign for this group to swing away with their bats and gather the treasures—chocolates, gum, and whatever other sugary confections were packed in—that spilled forth.

After a few rounds of being wacked, the piñata gave up its prizes. Candy gushed out and the questers whooped and laughed as they gathered the treats into waiting sacks and bags. I continued down Tidewater watching similar events take place. In a couple of instances, the third invocation of “open to me or let me be” was not met with a flicker of lights. In these instances, custom dictated that the revelers turn to the residence and shout “rest, rest, on with our quest!” and move onto another house. This last part of the holiday was, however, now somewhat of a forgotten addendum to the festivities—even I scarcely remember using it. Questers—young adolescents that they were—were often too disappointed and impatient with the withholding homes to give the traditional valediction.

(What houses flickered their lights on and to whom was a simple whim of the homeowners; some said it was how loud the revelers yelled, some, how musically the invocation was given, others just flicked the lights on and off at the first questers who appeared, anxious themselves to be done with this year’s holiday and turn in for the evening).

It was after turning onto Ridgeview that I saw another of the other types of decorated houses—the kind with the placards and symbols in the windows. This home, a slightly rundown ranch, was, however, more embellished. In addition to the symbols or signs, of which I could make out circles as being the most numerous, there was also a piñata in the yard—a piñata of sorts, that is. Not of the snake or even abstract variety, but something quite a bit more humanoid. I was a bit too far away to make out the precise substance of construction, though it didn’t appear to be of a single material. The porch lights were off and I could see no lights on within, though a faint orange haze seemed to hang about the premises.

I had wandered far outside the neighborhoods I grew up and played in. There were less and less colorfully decorated houses and more un-decorated. Mixed throughout were a sampling

of houses with the human shaped piñatas or effigies or whatever they were, along with the strangely symbolled window decorations. At no time in my wandering did I encounter a street completely given over, as Tidewater was, to this type of decoration. Nor were there ever several of such houses grouped together: they were always sparse neighborhood interlopers.

I was well outside the limit of where streetlights were to be found and the night was a moonless, full dark. Every now and again I heard a cry or scream reverberate in the distance, late night questors, no doubt, winding down the holiday. I found myself on a dirt road where the dwellings were set further back from the road than in my neighborhood, the houses shielded behind densely growing trees. I walked a bit, crunching dirt and gravel underfoot. It was nearly pitch black; the moonless night coupled with the dense tree growths created a type of arcade above the street, shrouding where I walked in a tunnel of darkness. I had difficulty in telling where houses were exactly, no doubt passing some that were swallowed in the blackness beyond the barely visible road.

Before even seeing the house, and well before seeing those figures hanging from the trees, I became aware of a rusty colored glow enriching the atmosphere. Approaching, I stationed myself near the mailbox which jutted crookedly from the ground. From this vantage point I could make out what the source of this gauze of color was: it was the piñatas, of which there were four. From their crackled construction a limpid amber emanated. I watched as the orange-tinged aura gathered in strength. From the piñatas sudden flashes occurred, distinctive rays of greater intensity shot forth from the piñatas, piercing the blackness of the night. I observed the figurines more closely. The substance of their construction was decidedly not paper-mâché, but was something much more heterogenous. By the light of the growing effulgence, I could make out a dense patchwork of twigs, leaves and dirt wrapped by twisting and knotted vines. I could also



make out other, less natural material. Household items—bottles, books, toys—were mosaicked into the earthen mortar. The beams from the figures quickening in their discharge. From an amber orange, the light, now a rhythmic beating, had, by gradation, become a brilliant scarlet red I detected a movement in the figure closest to the road, *closest to me* I thought, a swaying that was not of the wind.

The porch light came on as the trembling spread to the other figures, becoming a lurching, convulsive motion. From around the trees rose a muffled sound, a lowing undercurrent resolving into speech from which I could make out a plaintive keening: “open to me, again let me be.” And from somewhere inside that home I could hear the response: “Rest, rest, be done with your quest.”

I awoke in my car in that vacant former used car parking lot. Since my presence in town and among my family was already known, I had no hesitation in now driving to my parent’s house to bid farewell. Driving slowly (and throwing the newspaper out the window) I saw remnants of the Circles Day celebration: piñatas hung from trees in varying states of demolition, a discarded bat dropped here and there. But these remains were but a palimpsest. Our Circles Day was just a sipping of the past—and a watering down of it at that. The serpent, unholy it was not, for was its circularity not the symbol of recurrence? Our snake day, *our Ouroboros Day*, was the true festival and our true practice. Though the results, unlike the seasonally kin Easter, were not necessarily resurrection.

I slowed the car down in front of the house with the four human shaped piñatas. They had been broken apart. I came to a stop. Broken apart from within. A pulpy goo had puddled beneath each from which a slimy trail emerged. Two of these trails led back to the house. One went off in

to the woods beyond, while one flowed towards the road where it inexplicably ended in the middle of the street.

Steering onto Graystone, I could see our yard and something hanging from the old maple, placards in each of the windows. *They decorated* I thought. A slick of syrupy substance led to the front door. Aunt and Uncle, together again.

And the rest of the family?

None of them have been or will be buried in Quentin's graveyard for there is none. And even though I have on several occasions returned to my hometown, I should not like to die in that place. I drove down Main, through the outer neighborhoods, and then into the even more rural parts until I passed the former used car parking lot. Outside of Quentin, in another town, I came to the cemetery I encountered when arriving. As I passed, I slowed the car down.