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Short Story Workshop

Professor Coster

Autumn Under the Trees - Revised

The rumble of the rocks under the car shook Dan and Sarah’s feet. Fluorescent orange and yellow filled the air as they drove past trees amidst the autumn. Even though it was only mid-September, the weather in the mountains of Western North Carolina was cooler than usual. Dan breathed in the pumpkin spice car freshener and lifted his metal to-go mug, taking a sip. The silky chocolate ran over the lip of the cup and, as always, Dan held the sip in his mouth, letting his tongue soak in the flavor of the milk chocolate mixed with hints of nutmeg and notes of melted marshmallow. His wife made the best hot chocolate.

To their left was a smooth-topped lake, who’s bright blue waters were decorated with reflections from the autumn trees. The lake seemed to go on for miles, and despite its picturesque scenery, Dan and Sarah looked to be one of the few people driving along its shoreline.

“Do you want to stop and take photos of the lake?” Dan asked. He knew she’d want to pull out her new camera. Sarah was always taking pictures, but ever since last Christmas, when Dan had surprised her with Nikon’s lasted model, she’d become even more enamored by her hobby.

“Sure,” Sarah replied. She shifted in her seat and looked at her husband. The wrinkles on his hands matched the ones by her eyes. She noticed a glimpse or two from Dan as she put her hair in a ponytail. For some reason, her photos always came out better when her hair was in a ponytail.

Up the road a few miles was a small side road whose path wandered into the woods and lead to the lake. The soft Earth was overgrown with lush mosses and heath. It looked as though no one had walked down this path in years. It’s only marking was a battered wooden fence, whose rotting posts had become homes to the various fungi growing along the path. Dan pulled the car over, and parked next to the fence. The last time he had been to Lake Fontana was the year their youngest son had been born – 19 years ago.

The two used to travel to Lake Fontana every September for their anniversary. Once they began having kids, it became a family tradition to spend a weekend in a cabin situated on the banks of Fontana. It was an easy getaway at first, just one kid wasn’t as hard to manage as three boys under the age of ten. Their first trip with three kids had been hectic enough to ruin the serenity Dan and Sarah had fallen in love with at Lake Fontana. Not wanting to taint the happiness they associated with the lake by the quarreling of children crying for T.V. reception, the couple had decided not to return until their 25th wedding anniversary.

Dan looked at Sarah and remembered how vivacious she had been on their last trip here. Now, with her long gray hair reflecting the brilliant sun, Dan was dazed by the beauty aged with wisdom his wife beheld. Unbuckling his seatbelt, he reached his arm behind the passenger seat and grabbed the camera stand – he knew she would want to use it to get a photo of the two of them.

Sarah unbuckled her camera bag and hung the Nikon around her neck. Walking down the unworn path, she began to scope out the landscape. *The lighting is great under the hickory trees, and I can fit some of the mountain laurel into my lens as well,* Sarah thought as she beelined towards the mix of deciduous trees.The sound of footsteps behind her made her slow her pace. She’d gotten too excited again.

“Dan can you bring th---” she stopped, smiled, and reached her hand out, grabbing the camera stand from her husband. The two walked hand in hand for a few yards before Sarah decided on the spot that would produce the best angle and lighting for her photos. Underneath the towering scarlet oak tree, the couple began to set up the tripod.

I stayed in my usual spot – on a tree branch in the scarlet oak to the left of the forgotten fence. The sound of chattering caught my attention. Peering over the branch, I saw two people with a black, metal contraption. It was a mess of legs that didn’t stay one length, but could apparently be forced to remain in place by squeezing it between the woman’s hand and knee. It had a neck too. The neck grew if you turned it in a circle. I ran in a circle on the branch. I stayed the same length.

The couple smelled faintly familiar. Like autumn, but more clean and less riddled with allergens. It was a fake, chemical mixture of autumn smells, not really resembling the those actually found in these woods. I scratched the bark with my claws and ran down the tree – there was a nut. I picked up the nut, hid it in my stash, and ran back up the tree to get a better view of the grey couple below. It wasn’t often that I saw people in this neck of the woods. Occasionally, some people would wander through exploring the different trees, but they never stayed long. This couple, however, seemed to be setting up to stay a little longer than usual. Below, they were still struggling with black metal contraption. The woman kept changing the size of the legs, and the man kept moving rocks and limbs from under where it was placed.

After a while, I began to lose hope that the couple would ever be able to win against black metal contraption. Finally, they managed to secure its legs and keep it balanced. They weren’t finished yet though. The lady had camera around her neck (I had once heard a passerby refer to a similar looking thing as camera). She fiddled with camera and placed it on top of black metal contraption like a hat. Then surprise! They just left it! Why spend so much time standing black metal contraption up just to leave it?

Suddenly they stopped walking and turned around, smiling at contraption thing. Maybe they were proud it was still standing on its own? A little green light blinked very quick, and a bright flash of light came out of camera. I was stunned. Wanting to find out more about camera and its relation to contraption thing, I scurried down the tree. Black metal contraption looked sturdy enough, it didn’t smell like anything, and its surface was cold and smooth. I started crawling up contraption thing, towards camera, when I heard the lady call to the man.

“Honey look! The squirrel is climbing our tripod!”

“Do you want me to try to get the camera off the stand so you can snap a photo?” man replied.

The lady nodded her head up and down and the man’s body slumped as he crept towards me carefully on his tip toes. As he neared, I began to be able to smell his breath. It smelled sweet, and I felt my mouth begin to salivate. It was a smell I had never smelled before. How pleasant it was to smell! I didn’t feel the need to move as the man neared me. These humans, their good breath and their contraption, were intriguing to me. It wasn’t until camera gave off another flash of light in my direction that I began to move down the thing and up the tree.

“How adorable!” Sarah exclaimed, looking at the screen on her camera. She was shocked that a squirrel had remained on her tripod as she snapped a photo of it. “I think I’d like to stay here for a little longer while the lighting is still good underneath the trees. These photo-ops are too good to pass up.”

Dan looked at his wife and nodded. This trip was doing exactly what he had hoped it would do. His wife hadn’t looked so relaxed in years. He loved seeing her smile from ear to ear as she adjusted her lens underneath the oak. The glimmer in her eyes resembled the one he’d seen twenty-five years ago on their first trip to the lake. Interestingly, he thought, her brown eyes reflected the same mix of orange and purple as they had the first time seeing the leaves in these mountains.

“I’m going to get the thermos, I’ll be right back,” Dan assured his wife, “take your time.”

From my branch I could see the man walk back up the path. The lady walked around the tree flashing camera light at different angles. I heard her mention something about *texture* but I don’t understand what that has to do with camera. After a few minutes, the man returned to the oak tree carrying two metal cups and a big metal container. I wondered if these metal objects would have legs that popped out somewhere too? The man twisted the neck of container, and I anxiously waited for legs to appear. Suddenly, a loud sucking sound came from container. I ducked down on my branch, but peered over the edge. The human accidentally broke container! I saw the top of it separated from the bottom and wondered why the lady wasn’t yelling at him for breaking it.

Then I smelled it. The sweet smell from the man’s breath got stronger once he broke container. I ran back down the tree and sat on my hindlegs, watching the couple pour brown liquid into metal cups. The liquid was steaming, and I heard the man tell lady it would help keep them warm. Why didn’t humans just grow fur like other forest animals? Then you wouldn’t need steaming brown liquid to “keep you warm.”

I crept towards the couple as they sat by black metal contraption, not being able to stop myself from approaching the warm aroma. Usually squirrels don’t approach humans, but the smell of brown liquid was much too appealing. I saw the couple stop talking and look at me. Then the lady said “I think our squirrel friend is back. Would a squirrel drink hot chocolate?” The man laughed and said replied “why not?” Slowly, the lady put her metal cup down on the ground. She put camera back around her neck and scooted a few steps backwards. Camera was pointed right at me. Maybe I was *texture* too?

At this point I knew not to be frightened by the blinking green light and the bright flash that followed. Lady clicked several bright flashes at me as I approached the metal cup on the ground. Man wasn’t moving. Just sitting and observing. The smell of steaming brown liquid kept drawing me closer. Finally, I arrived at the edge of metal cup. Placing my front two legs on the ledge, I peered into its center. Oh, the wonderful smell! Whatever richness I had smelled before was even stronger now. I stayed for a moment letting the scent engulf my body. I didn’t even have to breathe in to smell brown liquid, the wisps of steam carried the aroma right into my nose! Before this point, the only thing I had ever had to drink was water – from the lake, from rainfall cupped in the fallen leaves, or from dew arising in the morning on the soil beneath the trees. Water didn’t smell like the thick warm drink sitting in front of me – I liked this smell much better.

Leaning in, I could sense Lady clicking a few more bright flashes at me. They were getting more frequent now. I opened my mouth and let my tongue soak in a small, somewhat skeptical taste of brown liquid. The drink was instantly more pleasant than anything I had ever tried before. I kept the sip in my mouth for a few moments and tried to discern what was in brown liquid – but the tastes were too new to figure it out. All I knew was that it was amazing, I wanted to try more. Swallowing my first sip was even more surprising. It was comforting, warming my entire body as brown liquid traveled down my throat. How nice of the lady to share such a wonderful treat with me! I leaned my head back in and took another sip, a little more frantic this time. The couple started giggling. I could tell they liked sharing brown liquid by their happy tones and bright flashes still coming out from camera.

There was much brown liquid in the cup, but I couldn’t finish all of it. I wanted to make sure the couple had enough for themselves. After a few more sips, I ran back up the tree and peered over my branch. The couple watched me go home. I’m not sure what was so happy about me leaving, but the man had a big smile on his face as he looked back and forth between lady with camera and me.

“I can’t wait to upload all these shots on the computer. The kids will love the photos of the squirrel and our hot chocolate!” Sarah said, flipping through her recent captures.

“And I thought I loved your hot chocolate, but here you are attracting wildlife with it,” Dan replied. He finished off his cup of cocoa and leaned over his wife’s shoulder. Sarah had done a fantastic job at capturing the diversity of flora and fauna within the autumn forest, and Dan knew she’d spend weeks making an album with the photos once they’d got home.

“Ready to head to the cabin?” asked Sarah “I wouldn’t mind sitting by a warm fire.”

Dan thought back to their first trip up to Lake Fontana. He had made a fire every day, keeping it glowing throughout the cabin as they celebrated their anniversary with a relaxing weekend in the mountains. “I think a fire sounds perfect, honey,” he smiled.

From my branch, I watched the man shorten black metal contraption’s legs, and somehow piece metal container back together. For some reason, I couldn’t sit still. Running along the length of the branch, I noticed the couple’s voices getting softer and softer. Watching the couple hold hands, I realized they were retreating up the path, taking the sweet smell of brown liquid with them. It only took a moment for me to realize that I would probably never have the chance to try brown liquid again – most humans wouldn’t have been nice enough to share with me in the first place. Sadness overcame me for a moment, as I thought about the potential of never having brown liquid again. But then, idea!

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Sarah spent most of the short car ride to the cabin scrolling through her recent photos. It was so thoughtful of Dan to suggest they’d stop and check out the scenery, she thought to herself, smiling. The dirt road leading to the cabin had aged as much as Dan and Sarah. The pine trees had grown at least three times their size since the last time they had seen them, and the definition of the path had become well-worn from guests frequenting the cabin.

“Is it anything like you remember it to be?” Sarah inquired, feeling nostalgic at the sight of the log cabin.

“Couple of logs look rotted on the side there, and the handrail on the porch has warped from moisture, but I guess that’s what the kids call ‘rustic’ these days,” Dan replied.

He had always had an eye for construction and design, thought Sarah. She couldn’t take Dan anywhere without him pointing out a building feature that wasn’t up to par. His amateur-inspections gave him something to do and made him feel useful, so Sarah never told him to quiet down about it. After Dan parked the car, the couple took a relaxing breath – they had finally made it back to their favorite place. Ready to get inside and build a fire, Dan began to unload the car.

“Don’t forget my camera bag! In the back!” Sarah reminded over her shoulder.

“Oh I wouldn’t…the hot chocolate container is in there too,” he replied.

Walking around the car, Dan opened the trunk and got the camera bag, and the thermos of hot chocolate. Noticing the bag of toiletries, he picked that one up too. One less trip to the car he’d have to make later. It took two trips for Dan to unload all of the bags from the car. It wasn’t like Sarah to pack lightly. When all of the bags were inside, Dan started to make the fire in the fireplace while Sarah whipped up some more hot chocolate in the kitchen. It was the perfect evening, Dan thought, sitting next to the fireplace with my wife drinking some freshly made hot chocolate.

The was roaring brightly when Sarah brought two coffee mugs of steaming hot chocolate over to the couches. Taking her spot on the cushion beside her husband, Sarah watched the steam float up from the hot chocolate, maneuvering it’s way between the small marshmallows she’d added to the drink. The crackling of the logs in the fireplace were soon accompanied by a faint squeaking sound.

“Do you hear that?” asked Sarah

“Sounds like it’s coming from over there,” Dan said, pointing his finger towards the bags he’d placed on the other side of the room.

Suddenly, a fury grey head popped out of their toiletries bag. Startled, Sarah pulled her feet up on the couch and listened to her husband giggle. The squirrel was sniffing so fast the movement of his nose was visible from across the room. Slowly, the squirrel began to crawl out of the bag.

“Reckon that’s the same one from the woods?” Dan asked.

The scent of the hot chocolate beckoned the squirrel closer and closer. Sarah leaned forward and placed her mug on the ground, watching the squirrel gain interest in the drink. “I figure it is the same squirrel, look at him propping himself up on the mug,” she answered.

“Must’ve snuck in the bag when we were loading up the trunk,” reasoned Dan. The couple laughed as they watched the squirrel sip some more of Sarah’s hot chocolate. “So much for taking this trip alone,” he joked.

“At least the squirrel is quieter than the kids,” Sarah laughed.