

Colorwheel
By Craig Laurance Gidney

Lazlo crept down the stairs, careful not to step on the stair that creaked. His folks were deep in slumber, but he still wanted to be careful on the off-chance that they might hear the creak that sounded like a softly trumpeting elephant. He even nicknamed the step—the third one from the bottom—Dumbo. Even wooden elephants needed their sleep.

Once at the bottom of the stair, Lazlo made a bee-line for the living room. The green carpet was littered with the mess of tonight's party, the one he only heard from the prison of his bedroom. The coffee table was full of paper plates, some with food still on them. Plastic cups, half full of wine and other grownup drinks were on every available surface, from the mantle to the bar. Some of the cups were marked with the half-kisses of lipstick. Ceramic ashtrays held the butts of cigarettes, and in one case, the burnt, squashed end of something he deduced was a cigar. It was a mess. Ma would scream her head off if he was even one fourth as messy as this room was. She would make him clean up the mess, and might send him to Papa for further punishment; mostly likely more screaming and a threat to "knock some sense into you." So far, Lazlo had never had sense knocked into him; he was pretty sure that was a Figure of Speech, but with Papa, you never knew. He briefly toyed with the idea of cleaning some of this stuff up. But he ultimately decided against it; he might be praised for his "gumption" for being a Helper or he might be screamed at for leaving his room. You never knew.

Lazlo ignored the mess. He moved over some folding chairs, and cleared a space in front of the Christmas tree. He plugged in the colorwheel that sat at the base of the tree. The colorwheel had four plastic segments, triangles of plastic in the shades of orange, red, blue and green. Unplugged, it reminded Lazlo of a lollipop with four flavors: orange, fruit punch, Italian ice blue raspberry and mint. Plugged in, the light behind the panels cast beautiful colors on the aluminum tree. The silver tree burned orange-red, like the heart of a volcano.

Then it cooled to a mystical blue-green, like liquid stained glass. Lazlo could watch this for hours. The moment when blue turned to green was his favorite.

The kids at school would brag about their Real Christmas trees. These stories featured families going out to the edge of the known world where dark firs grew and wolves prowled. Far away from the highway, the family would find the Perfect Tree, revealed to them by some sign—a star, a bird—and then the father would chop it down while the family sang carols. The Real Tree would be strapped to the top of a car and into civilization the family would drive. These Real Trees were always ridiculously tall. Kids would talk about how their tree would be strung with popcorn garlands, holly blossoms, gingerbread people and of course ropes and ropes of twinkling lights.

One year, Lazlo's family decided to get a Real Tree. It was a disaster. First, the family didn't go to some eldritch wood dowsed in snow and moonlight. It was a lot on the side of the road, full of gravel. Ma and Papa wasted no time in finding the discount trees. Lazlo looked longingly at the tall trees, thick with needles and branches. Papa picked a spindly tree, no taller than Lazlo, with sparse foliage. They wrapped the tree on the top of the station wagon with elastic cables. At home, the tree was installed in a corner of the room with rusty old stand. It gave off a resiny smell that caused his eyes to water but Lazlo didn't complain. Thick bulb-like strings of lights were draped around the tree. Half of the bulbs didn't work at all. Papa made one of his dubious promises to get more lights. Ma stuck a couple of loose bows. Lazlo hung the one ornament he'd made in school art class—a wreath made of Plaster of Paris. The ornament was heavy, so the branch it was on drooped. He knew it would fall and shatter into a thousand pieces before the Christmas season was over. That did not happen, surprisingly. What did happen was the endless rain of pine needles that annoyed his mother. The string of lights shorted out on Christmas Eve. And one of the branches broke; sap poured from the wound and soaked into the carpet. That was the end of his family ever getting a Real Tree again.

Silver and color-splashed, the tree gleamed like one of Cher's dresses. Baubles dripped from the furry aluminum branches—glass and other fragilities in metallic tones. These

soaked up the light of the colorwheel. The tree was crowned with a headdress of a topper. (Lazlo could see some showgirl tottering down a flight of lighted stairs in time with some bubbly tune).

They were a perfect couple, the tree and the colorwheel—a wife and husband team. Did they fight? Did they have any children they yelled at? Lazlo didn't think so. The tree didn't smoke or drink. The colorwheel didn't go to some #1@ing job everyday. He wished he could be their son. Lazlo Xmas, always held close in silver arms, warmed by lamps, cast in shining light.

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