

# a thin black tree

## short story by black moon

February morning rose up wearing a dismal cloak of grey. On the distant horizon thin black elms, like gnarled old hands held the first pale shafts of ice-white light. It was Sunday.

On his narrow cot, 18 year old Zed Zambowski, lay flat on his back, quaking beneath tented quilts. In one of his own little hands, he too held a pale white shaft.

"Jesus," he moaned to his member (which was standing stubbornly stiff, an impish grin on its little fish mouth) "Get down you donkey!"

Inside Zed's head two timeless contestants were engaged in a terrific contest: Christian Goodness vrs. Pound-your-meat. Both imperatives were candidates for power over Zed's psyche; but neither could win. To break the deadlock, a wishy-waspy compromise of need-less misery had to be reached. Zed could masterbate alright; but to get his rocks off, he had to be mentally working out crosswords. Such is life for a Baptist named 'Zambowski'.

At the moment, an entire army of chekered-coated graphs were marching through Zed's mind. Sweat beaded on his brow; damp brown curls coiled on his forehead; his head and one hand pounded. Somewhere between his ears, a primitive drumbeat began. The puzzles broke rank and boogalooed. One little number shook an unfiled box just scant inches from his minds eye. Aqua-ink perfume wafted into his minds nose.

"ANMGGNNNNNNMM" mumbled Zed "Wow, some action! I'm this close!"

The drumbeats quickened. Forcing a thumb and some of the fingers from his free hand to the bridge of his nose...He squeezed. The floodgates opened. The dancing crosswords blurred then blended into a sort of houndstooth pattern. (Not exactly what you could call a fire works display but a decent climax considering what he had to work with.)

As his breathing quieted, Zed gazed off into the distance through a frosted pane in his bedroom window. There on the horizon he saw many a thin black elm.

"Like gnarled old fingers," he thought redundantly without furthering the plot.

Fortunately, 2 heavy boots helped out by clomping across the porch downstairs. Something rattled in the mail slot, and fell through. Kaplunk. It was the morning paper.

"The morning crossword" thought Zed. His eyes narrowed to a cat's slits, his flacid weeny flopped across his belly like a perch out of water.

Meanwhile, back up in Zed's head, a tiny rabi with the voice of Oral Roberts leaned closer to a microphone:

"Touch that devil's wand he warned, "and you'll surely go insane."

"Aw, that stuff's for dummies," countered Zed.

"Yes my boy, so don't you be one," the rabi quipped.

With a sigh and a promise Zed slipped out of bed, zipped up his jeans, and tripped on the stairs. He snatched up the journal.

At the kitchen table, Zed's older sister, Kathy was spooning up the last of her wheat-germ, honey, and skim milk as she worked on the weekly grocery list. When Zed came in, she said 'good morning' and added the words 'hand lotion'.

"Morning Kathy. Say, you wouldn't know where there's another pen would you?"

"Try the bathroom, in the toothbrush rack. You always leave pens in the bathroom."

"Do I?"

"Yes. Because you always lock yourself in with those stupid crosswords!"

"Don't torture me Kathleen."

"That's what your going to do right now isn't it?" she accused.

"Well I - crosswords are educational, they help build vocabulary."

"Horseshit. Just be sure to leave the rest of the paper out here with me."

"Well sure, OK, fine. I'll just, ah, take the puzzle page. There we go. Well, ah, I'm off... The sooner I'm in there the sooner I'm out..."

.... Smiling and waving, Zed backed up all the way to the bathroom.

"And this time," called Kathy, "Don't lock the -

Click.

"Oboyoboyoboy," squealed Zed, as he folded back the page neatly around the borders of the puzzle. He plucked a stickpen from among the tooth brushes, dropped his denims, and sat down eagerly.

"Oooooo that's cold." He shivered and rubbed the stickpen briskly between his palms.

"OK, 1 across. 'Bungle, colloq.; Four letters, hmmm. If I bungle this crossword, if I blank this cross- If I BLOW this crossword! B-L-O-W. Four letters!" Stealthily his free hand slipped down under the puzzle to pump his puma.

"Ooooo 17 down. 'Common Fall Flower.'.... Aster! Omigod it is! A-S-T-E-R. 17 across 'Beast of Burden.' ASS. O you insatiable sausage! Rush on my burning blood, rush! O you darling little empty boxes; begging, screaming 'Fill me, fill me, fill me!!! O I LOVE YOU ALL.

"Zed? What are you doing in there?"

"Munnnganinnn...."

"Zed! ?

"Go away Kathleen...pete...peti...poti..."

"Zed, I know what you're doing in there."

"...Veto...veto...veto...Kathleen, if you care at all for me...sue...rue...due...you will go away from this door...aret...pres...ekes..."

"No Zed, I can't do that."

"Why not Kathleen? Why can't you just do that?"

"Because Zed, I love you. Because I'm your only 5 letter female relative, and I care deeply for you. Unlock the door."

"Negative Kathleen, n-o spells no. I'm sorry."

"Please Zed, if you have a problem, I want to help you."

"Yes Kathleen, I do have a problem; a 4 letter word for 'bungle'. But I'll solve it Kathleen, myself...Meta...meta...nete..."

"OPEN THE DOOR!"

"An emu, enzu, Zeus;:"

"Zed!"

"And a cuff, coff, cife!

A fuzz, fyke, fuze;"

"Stop it Zed! Stop abusing yourself!"

"And a puffa puffa rice.... A biff boff buff, And a miff maff muff; A mm- Kathy! !"

"What? What is it? Whats wrong!"

"MUFF. That's it. O glorious muff! O mother of muff!"

"Are you making a mess in there,"

Joyously elated, Zed rescaled the dizzy ecstatic heights.

"Bungle off Kathleen. Muff out! !"

Then with a whoop and a screech he fell

back, dazed.

Two minutes later, feigning composure, Zed rejoined his sister in the kitchen. Openly, Kathy stared at him, wide-eyed with disbelief.

"Zed," her voice was choked, tiny, "What's happening to you?"

He shrugged. Cool nonchalance.

Kathy erupted. "What's wrong Zed? Who are you anyway! ? ?

Zed smiled nervously. "Who am I Kathy? Me, your favourite, seven letter relative?"

Kathy collapsed sadly into a chair. Nodding with tight lips she counted off 7 letters on her finger tips: "Pervert", she said.

A meaningful silence ensued as the weight of the word pierced his mind like a macheti through mush. Finally his defences cracked; he let go and fell to his knees. Hot tears ran down his cheeks, leaping off his chin to his sister's lap.

"Please," he sobbed. "Please Kathy, help me!"

"There, there" she cooed, cuddling his head in her damp skirt.

"Don't cry Zeddy Bear, Kathy's here."

Ignoring an urge to cringe from her ridiculous endearment, he asked quietly; "Kath, what's wrong with me?"

Kathy sighed. "Zed," she began, "I'm no psychiatrist. But still, two people can't live together 18 years and not notice certain things, you know? ..."

The damp wool was tickling his nose; he couldn't breathe....Like for instance the way some people squeeze toothpaste directly out of the tube into their mouth... Or always leave apple cores in the ashtrays, or -

"Kathleen?"

"Yes Zed?"

"You're squashing my head, my knees are killing me; and why am I on my knees, Kathleen? I'm humbling myself, crying my eyes out, begging you to help me. Kathleen? ..."

"Yes Zed?"

"Don't tell me I leave apple cores in the ashtrays."

"I'm sorry."

Zed stood up. "Forget it, it's my fate. I'm doomed to a life of misery."

"Don't say that."

"It's true. How could I ever ball anybody? I can't even masturbate like a normal human being. You were right Kath. I'm a confirmed pervert. Zed Zambowski, The Crossword Queer. Excuse me."

"Where are you going?"

"To jump off a bridge."

"In February? Everything is frozen."

"I'll wait."

"Zed, listen. Wait a minute. Why don't you call up Janey Westley. She's a terrific person and she really likes you."

"-maybe I'll put my head in the oven..."

"It's electric. Honestly Zed, Janey would love to be balled by you; by anyb-"

He stopped her like a traffic cop. "Thank you, Kathy. Your a good person; But it's hopeless. You want to phone somebody? Phone the sanitorium. If they make pick-ups, I'll be in bed, sucking my thumb."

As soon as the door to Zed's room had closed, Kathleen Zambowski placed a telephone call to Jane Westley.