

## *Liberace and the Ash Tree*

In the children's backyard, the ash tree is a celebrity. Its bark shines with sap, and its branches sign their dark autograph into the clouds until the children can't stand still. They dig around roots and climb. They drag out jackknives and carve their initials into the bark. When night falls, and they must go inside, the children cut down a limb and bring it into the house. Their mother stuffs it into a vase. They stare at the large leaves, and only then do they notice the white buds about to bloom. They stare into the flowers as if this will make them open.

In the next room, their mother is playing a record of a bobbing piano tune that is a hit this week in 1950. She hums along as if her bones are made of piano keys. By the time she serves dinner, she can't sit still. Her hair is up, her lipstick red. Her skirt kisses her calves. She scoops the pudding into bowls as a car horn sounds, and she closes the door and is gone.

At the concert hall, she joins a thousand Midwestern wives. The lights dim. The curtains open. The spotlight reveals a shining piano, and then he enters. Stage left. Dipping his prematurely gray pompadour to their uplifted cheeks, their breasts.

For them, he wears a blue Norwegian shadow fox cape and then a King Neptune costume made of pearls and seashells gathered from the open ocean where bottlenose dolphins rub genitals to say hello and male seahorses have the babies. For the finale, he wears a tuxedo embroidered in diamonds that spell out his name: *Liberace*.

He plays one sparkling tune and another until the curtains close and it's over.

He had been the perfect man. Tender. Humorous. He would never gob a girl with kisses. He would always treat his mother well.

The fans wanted more.

They sent him love letters seven thousand times a week and made marriage proposals forty-eight times a month. They came by the thousands to airports of his arrival and fainted at the site of him.

"He makes us feel good all over," one said.

"He is the impeccable man we would like our sons and husbands to be," sighed another.

“He is just like a divine figure...so far apart from anything that is worldly or bad.”

Again and again, Liberace held his bedazzled fingers in the air and waved his light onto the crowd. He was mythic. He was their cosmic Adam, and they were his Eve. He waved as they waved, until the men of the press noticed Liberace’s “soft, well-manicured hands.”

“Did Liberace enjoy sewing over sports as a child?” they asked.

“NO!” replied his lawyer.

No, Liberace assured.

If they did not believe him, they could watch the women in pursuit. “If they were waiting for Jayne Mansfield,” Liberace said, “it would show that there was something wrong with the sex life of the world.”

“But, Liberace,” the press asked, “do *you* lead a normal sex life?”

By the end of summer, 1954, one publication had the answer: “Don’t Call Him Mister.” He lived a secret life, they said, and to a male lover once gave a cigarette case inscribed *To my darling, whom the world forbids me to live with, and without whom I cannot live...*

Two weeks later, Liberace announced his plan to marry the cabaret dancer Joanne Rio. He hadn’t proposed exactly, but he had an “agreement” to marry her in a year, once his concert schedule slowed and once he had given his betrothed “the full Catholic treatment.”

In the meantime, he would have this former neighbor and proposed wife type up her adoration to share with the public. With Liberace’s publicist as her editor, she told the world, “He brings me orchids. He lights my cigarettes, and he opens doors.”

The fans already knew their man would treat a woman this way. Liberace’s love of Rio was real. The fans fell into despair.

A woman from Milwaukee wrote to her Liberace, “I lost out again. I love you too much. I can’t write no more. I am crying too hard.”

A sixty-six-year-old widow from Saint Paul, Minnesota, wrote, “I feel sorry for your mother. The adoration you give her will have to be shared.”

From Colfax, Iowa, “Why, oh why didn’t you wait for me? I’m only eleven, but I practice the piano every day.”

From Boston: “Don’t forget Joe DiMaggio and the promises she made to him!”

New Orleans: “Will she love you like we do?”

Liberace would not be deterred from his love, for “anyone who sacrifices his personal life to the public is very foolish,” he said. “I’m sure that the public wouldn’t want that. Actually, women adore a lot of male performers who are married.”

The fans begged him to understand.

From Gardena, California: “Your appeal is the fact you’re single.”

Detroit: “How can you think of marriage? You belong to us.”

Finally he heard them. He asked his publicist to break up with Miss Rio.

The magazines returned to their question, “Is he, or ain’t he?”

For a brief time, the ash tree was a little bit famous for making the earth. If the ash had still been famous in the time of Hollywood reporters, the news would have been about secret flowers. Reporters would have revealed that ash flowers aren’t what they seem. They can have two anthers *and* an ovary. They look female, but act male. Or they look male and are female.

If the ash were human, the humans would want an answer.

“What do we call you?”

*What?* the tree would say. *What?!*

“What are you?”

By May 1957, the headline of *Hush Hush* magazine asked: “IS LIBERACE A MAN? If not, what?”

But the columnist William Conner, pen-named “Cassandra,” had already figured Liberace out. It was everyone else he couldn’t understand. “[Liberace] is the summit of sex—Masculine, Feminine, and Neuter. Everything that He, She, and It can ever want... a luminous, quivering, giggling, fruit-flavored, mincing, ice-covered heap of mother love... there must be something wrong with us that our teenagers longing for sex and our middle-aged matrons fed up with sex alike should fall for such a sugary mountain of jingling claptrap.”

When Liberace sued “Cassandra” for libel, the courts confirmed that Liberace wasn’t a homosexual. He swore under oath that he was “against the practice because it offends convention and offends society.” For the self-proclaimed “one-man Disneyland,” perception was freedom, and “manhood and Freedom,” he said, “are life itself.”

By the 1970s, he was playing Caesars Palace in a pair of red, white, and blue mini-shorts with jeweled knee socks and a matching handbag. He collected cars so he could cover them in rhinestones and glitter. With each Vegas show, he slipped into something “more fabulous” to give the fans the man they wanted. And then, when the show was done, he returned to his home or hotel where he kept his male lover

in secret and hired a plastic surgeon to make his lover's face look more like his own.

By the 1980s, all were true to their icon, and they knew what to do. During his final stage performance at Radio City Music Hall in November 1986, the fans kept applauding as he stepped offstage between numbers to inhale oxygen from a machine. They told themselves he was so thin because of his new watermelon diet; they told each other he would go home to Palm Springs for a bit of rest.

And here is where the myth hits its limit, for it has already broken down. The Liberace museum closed in 2010. All the feather boas and star-spangled shoes reside in storage. Everyone knows Liberace didn't lose weight because of watermelon. He had AIDS. He returned to California, and soon he needed help to walk. A friend put Liberace's feet onto his own feet in order to walk him from the private chapel once blessed by a Catholic bishop especially for him and into a large bed where Liberace could curl up and watch videos of *The Golden Girls*. By February, he was in and out of consciousness. His nurse removed the rings from his fingers. She laid a string of plain rosary beads in his hands. He died just before spring, when trees make the world anew, and the ash flowers clump together and become what they will become.

Don't be afraid. There they go.