

Pretty on Christmas

Daniel Hartridge was twenty-nine and had been sober seven days. However, as this number represented a cumulative for the year and was by no means consecutive, he felt no real trepidation towards the object in his hand, which was a heavy, sealed bottle of Macallan 30 single malt scotch whisky. It was a lovely thing to behold; the deep amber obscured the image of his trembling hand as his fingers held the bottle by its back, the label's blue strip covered the veins where his hand met his wrist and he thought of the blood coming in purple and oxygenated and leaving as whiskey.

Don't get started on that, he laughed to himself, or you'll cut yourself along the artery and abandon the plan.

A Douglas Fir sat hunched in the corner, broken at the top so that it would fit beneath the low ceiling, and the fresh scent of pine perfumed the air of his small apartment. The string of white lights that wrapped around the tree shone dully in one half of the bottle in his hands while the other half reflected the blue-red-yellow-blue-red-yellow Christmas lights clinging to the square border of the only window in the room.

He sat before this window and looked out at the street four stories below, divided by the iron bars of his fire escape's railing and adulterated by the falling flakes of snow like static on a television. Two black-clad figures walked side by side with small, careful footsteps over the thin sheet of ice on the pavement. He laughed at the more hulking of the two, whom he assumed was a man, and thought that the conquest of flesh was a fatuous one.

He did not have to verbalize this line of thinking to his wife, who understood each and every unspoken thing to pass through Daniel's mind. He stroked his free hand down the back of her head, which did not exist, curled his fingers through her long, smooth golden hair, which did not exist, and with one finger carved a snaking canyon through the notches of her spine, which, also, did not exist. This business of nonexistence made

her an exceptionally versatile spouse, capable of just about any imaginable thing. She sat to his right, she sat on his left, she sat on his lap, staring out the window, she chastised the invisible children and sent them to bed in the studio apartment's third room and afterwards sat facing him and making love.

She was far more resilient this way and he appreciated her vastly for the manner of invincibility she wore with such fervent grace. He had memories of their songs beneath the unleaved weeping willows of autumn and of their golden wedding on the cliffs of Gibraltar. He minded not that she hadn't flesh or blood, for memories, too, shared that vice, and he was more than willing to forfeit the brief instant of contemporaneous love for the perfection she allowed him in reminiscence; she had not aged a day and her breasts did not droop below the highest of her ribs. These, he pushed up towards her neck, which had always and would always retain that youthful loveliness, her jugular pulsing with nothing, with nothing, with nothing.

It was true that on occasion he had grown angry with her, furious even. He threw her head in the oven, filled her pockets with stones and laid her to rest in the river, slipped the blade of a kitchen knife up and under the soft skin beneath her sternum and dug its tip into her heart. She died in just the ways he wanted, brought him sorrow in just the ways he wanted and then, when it was unbearable, she came back in all her former splendor and threw her arms around his neck; loving, forgiving, divine.

She looked sadly at the tree, as it stood bowed in submission to the limits of his world and mourned that it hadn't a Star. "How," she asked lightly, "will the magi ever find you, darling," and kissed him gently on the cheek. And then sadly, "He'll know it if you go through with it. He'll know all about that, darling."

He wished that she hadn't said it, that he hadn't thought it. That was all religion was about anyway, he said to himself, making the police a little more omniscient and the punishment a little more severe. It makes it

damn difficult to trust anybody who puts too much stock in God. You never know if they're good or if they just don't want to go to hell. The necessity of hell and the promise of heaven was the brilliance of some ancient sage who understood all about men.

It's the problem with hell, with the devil, with it all. It all relies on a very fragile order. Fragile as hell. He laughed at his line of thinking. One rebellion can be two and given an eternity they're damned certain to win once. And when they win it'll be good to be with them; they have far greater capacity for cruelty and oppression. They've been numbed to the inferno and understand that torture is not sitting in a burning room with locked doors; rather, it is sitting in room of neutral comfort, with unbreachable windows looking out into the virgins dancing naked in a sunlit rose garden, with a door that only unlocks for one second every day and whose knob is hot as an iron. That was torture; *that* was hell. Abandoning hope took away all the pain of it.

Anyway it would be best, at the end of it all, to have abstained and to have not believed and to be surrounded by those of similar conviction. They would be the least volatile and the death of god would mean very little to them and if they hadn't killed before they probably wouldn't now. That's what it was all about, he reassured himself, making the police a little more omniscient and the punishment a little more severe.

"Oh, darling," she replied, "you don't have to go through with it. Twenty-nine is mighty young, you know. Don't you want the memories of old age? Don't you want them to fade and live each second and not remember a thing? Won't it be splendid to be old, darling?"

"No, no," he thought, "I had memories of old age when I was a child. It was a far lovelier old age than any that could come about and I'd prefer to keep it as the only old age I enjoy. One hundred is such an arbitrary number. If it waned and waxed like the phases of the moon, people wouldn't mind so much to die at twenty-nine on the twenty-fourth of any month, especially December."

“Twenty-nine years,” he thought, “it is long enough. Long enough to be alive. I would rather sip from a single glass of single malt aged thirty years in casks of sherry than wince through a bottle of cheap whiskey. I would rather hold it on my tongue and savor it there and filter the taste of smoke between the spaces in my teeth and let it hiss up towards my nose and taste it once more there and then swallow and feel its warmth trickle down and dissolve into my blood. I would rather that than to wince through a bottle of cheap whiskey. I am through with wincing. I am through with wincing and cannot afford a full bottle of the good stuff so I’ll take a glass. I’ll take a glass.”

“Oh but darling, you *can* afford it. You have it right there.”

“Yes, well that’s the cost you know. That’s the gold with which I made my purchase. I can’t really afford it.”

“It isn’t gold. It isn’t gold. I can bring you amber aged millennia in casks of finest oak.”

“Your spirit isn’t mine darling. It simply isn’t and I wouldn’t enjoy it as you do. Your spirit isn’t mine.

She wept and threw her head in the oven, filled her pockets with stones and floated on towards the river, took the kitchen knife and twisted it into her lungs until she wheezed like an accordion.

“Stop that,” he thought, “you know how it must be done.” But he was thinking to no one and was alone in that apartment, holding not the breasts of his wife but the warm glass of the bottle. Breaking the seal with his thumbnail and uncorking with his teeth, he lifted the thick glass to his lips and slowly drank from it. He held the liquid in his mouth and soaked his tongue to the point of disintegration. That lovely smell triumphed over the scent of pine and in a motion of vehement defiance he spat the liquor out towards the tree in a golden mist. He took another drink and leaned back and closed his eyes.

“The memories are another thing. A bottle of the cheap leaves you clueless and ill, a glass of the fine only makes you wise and sharpens every

sense in your memory. Fool a memory and you fool the person. It's all that people are, just a bundle of memories. I'll take the flawless drop of memory and sacrifice that ocean of imperfection. Of course I would. Who wouldn't? I'd take a glass of the fine any day and not wince through the bottle of cheap. It's good to see when a thing is coming to an end and becoming unaffordable and to savor what you have left rather than to push on indefinitely and wince through the cheap. I'm done with wincing."

And so he was. With the second sip of luxury still on his tongue, he held the bottle high above his head and turned it over. So long had it sat in its pretty box on the liquor store shelf that there was no real temperature to it, only the feeling of wetness. It saturated his hair and then cascaded down along his forehead, falling off his heavy brow and his sharp nose and then bending back towards his body.

Then it felt warm. "Oh," he thought desperately, "the warmth of love, of a life fully lived, of family's embrace!" He had them all. His wife had returned and was holding him tenderly, whispering to him tenderly, forgiving him tenderly, weeping and throwing her head in the oven tenderly, weeping and filling her pockets tenderly with stones. "Do it however you want, darling," she said, "you do it for your spirits and I'll do it for mine. Children!" she called to the bedrooms of Daniel's studio apartment, "children! Grandchildren! Descendants of our love come forth and embrace us, wish us farewell, tonight we journey on! Do not be sad, it is a wonderful way to have lived and there is no more we could ask out of life and not being greedy in our love we will turn now to the other!"

They came swarming from the doors and from the windows and from the air vents and from the drain beneath the faucet. They came running to embrace him and he felt their warmth and the goodness of having loved so many and having birthed so many and felt their myriad small arms grasping to make contact with his skin like the embrace of a pine. He reached beneath the tree; beneath the daughter's dresses sewn masterfully

by his wife, beneath the shoes of the sons whom he had provided for so well.

He reached beneath the tree and found the present, purchased by the wife and wrapped by the sons and ribboned by the girls and in excitement tore open the glossy red-green wrapping and held a book of matches. Tears came to his eyes and, "oh children and oh dearest you knew just what I wanted. It's perfect, perfect, perfect." And striking one with a trembling hand he placed the flame like a crown upon his head and embraced the tree. He felt them all, felt the warmth of them all and the warmth of the love of them all and the warmth of the blood of them all which was his blood and he smiled as the ecstasy of having lived so well consumed him and tickled him to the point of screaming and dancing wildly about.

The couple on the street, trembling despite the warmth of their wool countenance, can see the image of the flames dancing in the window and dream chestnuts and stockings and the children roasting marshmallows on long, silver tines. "Oh darling," says the girl pointing and clinging to his arm. The words curl up in wisps of white smoke which climb climb climb past the window and past his blackened corpse and past the flame crawling along the skeleton pine and disappear into the Christmas evening, "oh darling. Pretty, pretty."