

Scattered Snowflakes

I pushed open the church door and was greeted by the acrid smell of incense. Lit candles reflected in stained glass windows, starched altar cloths, an Advent wreath. A neighbor, whose face I recognized but whose name I couldn't place, greeted me warmly taking both of my hands in hers. I shrugged the scarf off of my hair, letting the snowflakes scatter on the worn red carpet. I made my way to a place on the side aisle, steadying myself on the pew ends.

"How nice to see you, Ann." A woman leaned over from the far side of the pew. "It's been a while... I haven't seen you here since..."

"Yes," I said. "It's been a while."

The service was calming, as if nothing had changed since my last visit. The entire ritual, the readings and songs seemed familiar, with "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," still an Advent staple. In the quiet moments, I thought about the haze that had been the last two years, Hannah's death, the divorce, the debilitating depression. The sermon focused on forgiveness. Fat chance.

The service ended with the organist playing "Silent Night" with the choir humming along, a teaser for Christmas Eve, almost the hymn, not fully sung, a foreshadowing of the celebration of Christ's birth. The song had been played on my last visit, not long after Hannah's funeral, and the line "sleep in heavenly peace," then, as now, brought tears to my eyes. I hoped that Hannah was indeed sleeping in heavenly peace. It was the only thought that could remotely give me comfort.

Hannah had always been one to get the tree up as early in the season as possible. She had been relentless in badgering me to go to the tree lot so the holiday, in her little kid mind, could

start. No Charlie Brown last-minute tree for us, but that might be all that remained on the tree lot this close to Christmas.

There it was, the abandoned property that once a year morphed into Bob's Xmas Trees, its faded plywood sign at an angle virtually impossible to see from the road. It never failed; every year I had to search to find the entrance, backtracking several times until I finally honed in on it. Hannah, with her vast tree buying experience, deemed Bob's as having the "best trees ever," so off we went, the quest being part of the adventure. Someone should tell Bob that visibility and tree sales go hand-in-hand.

I parked under a string of naked 100-watt bulbs, the only lighting on the entire half-acre property. Surprisingly, there were still lots of trees, even with Christmas only a few days away. Maybe I could get a good price. A graying, arthritic dog ambled towards me as the door of a 1960's era vacation trailer opened and a person in a tan padded cold-weather jumpsuit tumbled out, the name "Bob" embroidered on the heavy twill. Pulling work gloves on, he pushed his oversized fur lined WWI-aviator-style cap back on his head, his clunky work boots slipping on the ice crusted snow as he made his way over to me.

"Buster!" said a decidedly soprano voice, "You get back. Hi there. How can I help you?"

"Are you 'Bob'?"

"Well, yes and no... 'Bob' is my father. I'm actually Roberta."

"I thought because of the name..." I gestured towards her chest.

"Common mistake. But why get a new suit when my friends all call me Bob anyway. Just rolled up the legs. Dad finally retired to Florida a few years ago. Guess he figured I could handle the lot on my own after all those years as his number-one-helper. Now, how can I help you?"

"Well, I'm, a, looking for a tree." Well, duh. I'm at a Christmas tree lot.

“Any idea of size or type of tree? Bob waved her arm out over the lot. “We’ve got lots of choices left.”

“I haven’t bought a tree in a couple of years.” Hannah had always liked the ones that had short, stubby needles. What were they called? “Maybe one with short needles? About six feet tall?”

“OK, you’re looking at a Douglas or a Fraser. About the same length needle. I like the Frasers myself, the scent stays longer, but they’re both nice.”

Bob started towards the back of the lot, disappearing down an aisle, and I struggled to stay on my feet on the rutted, ice-covered path. Stopping to get my balance, I looked up into the night sky. The snow was tapering off, the moon starting to shine through the clouds, and despite the ambient city light, a few stars twinkled. I found Hannah’s star.

From the time she was a toddler, she and I used to find the first star of the night sky. Hannah always called it “her” star. She would always chant, “Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, wish I might, have the wish I make tonight.” The last wish she made was when she was eight, the night before she died. She’d never share her wishes, said they wouldn’t come true if she did. We were walking to the train station to meet Dave, who was coming home on the 6:35. The night was crisp and clear, with a forecast of snow. “I need coal for the eyes, do we have any coal?, and a carrot for the nose.” She stopped, pointed to her star, closed her eyes tight and spun in a quick circle. She flashed her missing-tooth-gapped smile. “What would make a good mouth?, red licorice? and the green scarf Grandma made, with crooked branches for arms. That would make the most-excellent snowman!” She ran into her father’s arms as he came down the platform. We laughed on the way home.

“You coming?” asked Bob.

“Yeah. Sorry.”

Bob was holding two trees upright.

“Both of these have fairly straight trunks. We’ll give it a fresh cut and trim off the scraggly branches.”

“Hmmm...” I tapped a gloved finger against my chin as I examined the trees. “I’m not sure...”

“Lady...”

“OK, I like that one.” I pointed to the tree on Bob’s right. It was wider at the bottom and I could hear Hannah’s voice in my head calling it “chubby.” Placing the rejected tree back on the pile, Bob hefted the chosen one up above her head, adjusted it for the balance point, squared it on her shoulder, needles out of her face, and proceeded back to the parking lot.

Hannah was in third grade and she begged me to start walking back and forth the four blocks to school with her neighborhood chums. What could happen in four blocks, right? It was a few days before Christmas and she was leaving an after-school Brownie Troop meeting. It had started to snow, the first of the season. I pictured her laughing with her friends, sticking her tongue out to catch the snowflakes, not watching out for the cars whose drivers were certainly not watching out for her, when it happened. The streets were slick and the car skidded as the driver turned the corner. The girls scattered to safety. All except Hannah.

The driver fled the scene on foot, only to be picked up by police an hour or so later as he wandered down the middle of a busy street. A thirty-something mama’s boy, he was driving a borrowed car while on a suspended license. At the trial, he said he knew it was wrong to leave, but he was stoned and he’d panicked. It was wrong all right. Just like it was wrong for Hannah to

be crushed against a lamppost. Just like it was wrong for Dave to identify his daughter's body. Just like it was wrong for me to take her red velvet Christmas dress to the undertaker. Dave and I both gave victim impact statements at the sentencing, a life cut short, potential wasted, the usual. It really didn't matter what the sentence was, it wasn't going to bring Hannah back. We went home. And it was just Dave and me. Soon, it was just me. With Hannah gone, there was no family.

“Jingle bell, jingle bell, jingle bell rock. Jingle bells swing and jingle bells ring. Snowing and blowing up bushels of fun. Now the jingle hop has begun...”

A red Jeep with its soft top barely attached to the roll bars, roared into the tree lot. Christmas music spilled out of it along with a party of tree shoppers. They personified the spirit of the season, all dressed in red and green, striped scarves with matching mittens, steaming thermos mugs smelling of chocolate and mint liqueur tightly clutched. A reveler in a fuzzy Santa hat with a necklace of jingling bells, bounced over to me, smiled broadly and extended a cup of hot chocolate.

“Here, you look like you could use some Christmas spirit!” she said. “Have some. We’ve got Schnapps if you want a bit of additive.”

“I’m OK.... But, thank you... Merry Christmas.”

“Well, Merry Christmas.” She scampered back to the Jeep and started shimmying to the carol, singing along with the Glee Chorus. Soon her whole party was boogying to the playlist of the all-Christmas, all-the-time, radio station, a salutation to the gods of the winter solstice.

Bob, securing the tree to my car, started to bounce to the music, the earflaps of her hat keeping beat.

“Well,” said Bob, “will you look at that! It’s the Moose. Been comin’ here for years.”

I followed her gaze. Sure enough, one of the partiers was dressed in a chunky utility suit identical to Bob's. His hat, if you could call it that, was indeed a moose head, large, brown, antlers of sorts, big floppy ears, smoking a stogie. The spicy odor of the cigar filled the air, clashing with the heavy scent of pine.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Don't rightly know," said Bob. "I just call him 'Moose'. Always comes with his kids... almost like I've watched them grow up. Used to be a bigger crowd in tow, though, brothers, cousins, even his mom. Stuff happens, I guess..."

The Moose sauntered over to Bob. "Merry Christmas, Bob-the-tree-seller! How's life treating you? You look good!"

"I am good!" said Bob. They hugged in that side-by-side manner of two people who are friendly, but not necessarily friends. "You know, I'd like to introduce you two, but I don't rightly know your names. So Moose, meet our newest customer. Newest customer, meet Moose."

"You crack me up, Bob!" said Moose. "Hello, newest customer." He extended the non-stogie-holding hand. "One thing is for sure, once you're a customer of Bob's, you're really a friend forever. My name is actually Nick, but I'll accept Moose as a moniker."

"I'm Ann. Nice to meet you." I shook his offered hand and with the other pushed the hair off my face, wishing I had taken more care with my makeup before I headed off to the late afternoon church service.

"Wait a minute! I thought you looked familiar! You're Ann? Of Ann and Hannah? I didn't recognize you without your pint-sized sidekick! My dad got such a kick out of her! He'd talk about her every year. Said he didn't know anyone who loved Christmas more! I'll have to tell him you stopped by."

“Well, that was Hannah...” I pulled my keys from my pocket.

Nick’s eyebrows arched and he looked directly at me. Pulling on his cigar, he exhaled the smoke away from Bob and me.

“She getting too big to shop for the tree with her mom?...”

“Hey,” Nick interrupted, “Once we get the tree dropped off at the house, we’re going into town. Since everyone is legal this year, we’re headed to the bar at *The Scruffy Dog*. How about you all join us? A little Christmas cheer, a burger, some sweets. All good stuff.”

“Well, I’ll be closing up here in a bit, maybe I’ll make it for dessert, but don’t wait for me.”

“Ann?” asked Nick, “How about you?”

“I’ve got some plans for tonight.” I gestured to the tree atop my car. “But you never know, maybe...”

It was a struggle getting the tree off the car, then through the door at home, and finally into the stand. I could have stayed with the original plan to trim the tree, fondling all of the Hannah-made ornaments or put on sweatpants and snuggle up on the sofa with some eggnog to watch, yet again, a rerun of *It’s a Wonderful Life*, but no, I kept thinking to the group gathered at *The Scruffy Dog*. Correction, I kept thinking of Nick at *The Scruffy Dog*. I found jeans that hugged in all the right places and an Irish wool sweater that seemed like it would fit in at an apres-Christmas-tree-shopping party. As I locked the door, I saw the open box of ornaments on the floor and wavered, key still in the lock. Hannah would understand. She’d want me to have a life.

With more snow and ice in the night's forecast, I decided to take the train, rationalizing that it was only one stop between my house and the restaurant. The train schedule would provide a logical reason to leave if the evening was a bust.

Artificial evergreen boughs wrapped with multicolored holiday lights outlined the windows of the bar, *The Scruffy Dog's* logo emblazoned on the red awnings. I paused at the door. What was I thinking? I should have stayed home, decorated the tree, shed some tears for myself. And here I was meeting up with people I don't know. Am I that desperate for company? For friends? For some sense of normal? Could be. Breathe deep. Smile.

The warmth of the air inside was welcome and I felt my cheeks flush as I pulled my gloves off, crossing the bar to where the tree shoppers were settled. Nick stood up; having shed his moose hat and utility suit, he now appeared trim, fit, and reasonably attractive, although the now unlit stogie was still parked between his fingers.

A chair and a glass of white wine appeared out of nowhere. The appetizers were passed and I settled into the flow of the conversation putting names, or at least personalities, to the faces. I gathered from the banter that Nick was an attorney, recently single again, devoted father of the jingle-belled young ladies, and, no surprise, a cigar aficionado.

"So, Ann, what's your favorite Chicago sports team?" asked Nick.

"Don't really have one."

"Don't have one!" The table erupted in a chorus of disbelief.

"No, I'm more of a bookworm, a stereotype librarian."

"That's cool," said Nick. "Librarians know everything."

"Actually, we just know where to find everything!"

"Better than Google, in my book!"

How could I not warm up to a man who liked librarians when most people equated the existence of the Internet with the demise of anything in print. A debate erupted at the far end of the table about the number of games in the recent Blackhawks winning streak.

“I bet Ann knows! Ask her!” said one of Nick’s daughters.

Ever resourceful, I pulled an iPhone out of my bag, dutifully Googled “Blackhawks AND wins”, and in ten seconds, responded “21!”

I relaxed against the rounded back of my chair and smiled at the easy banter of the people at the table. When had I last been in a bar, with new friends, just enjoying the moment? The divorce was final right after Hannah’s death and the trial, and that was three years ago, so at least that long. Actually, now that I thought about it, maybe it was even before I met Dave. He was always so pretentious, hung up on appearances for appearances’ sake, more concerned about having a good response to the Monday morning query, “How was your weekend?” than in actually enjoying the weekend.

“Where have you been?” said Nick. “You seemed miles away.”

“I think I was, but never mind.” I shook my head, flipping my hair over my shoulder. “You know, I’m not the type who meets a person at a Christmas tree lot, of all places, and then follows him to a bar!”

“Yeah. I’m not sure Bob’s Christmas Trees is on the list of pick-up joints in the greater Chicago area.” Nick leaned forward, elbows on the table, arms triangled under his chin. “So tell me, what type of person *are* you?”

“Me? I’m steady, dependable, conservative, even.”

“And cute and witty and willing to take a chance?”

“A chance?”

“Yeah, a chance that this might be fun, and then you never know... Seriously, Ann, I’m glad you came. You light up the room.”

I blushed at the compliment, eyes glancing down into my wine glass. “Thank you.”

Nick settled back in his chair, a thoughtful expression on his face, chewing on the end of his cigar. The waitress brought another round of drinks; deftly clearing used plates and utensils.

“So why did you decide to join us?” He gestured grandly with his stogie at those assembled around the table.

“I was intrigued.”

“Intrigued?”

“Yes, intrigued. I mean anyone who goes by the nickname ‘Moose’ and wears such a ridiculous hat –”

“Ridiculous! My hat?” Nick pulled it out from the pile of coats and began to punch it back into shape. He perched it on the back of his head and stuck the stogie between his teeth, grinning like Groucho Marx.

It was then that Bob arrived and pulled up a chair at our end of the table. She ran her fingers through her short grey hair, repairing the damage from her stocking cap. Waving the waitress over, she ordered a coffee for herself and another round for Nick and me. She intently stirred the cream into her coffee.

“Ann,” Bob was shaking her head, looking sidelong.

“What?”

“I have to apologize... didn’t hit me until after you left, that Hannah, well, that Hannah had died. Real sorry for you.... God, I feel like such a doofus.” She shook her head, staring at the spoon in her coffee.

“No! Don’t! It was such a nice memory of Hannah! That means a lot to me... more than you’ll know.”

“You’re kind...”

“What’s this?” asked Nick. “I must have missed something.”

“Not really,” I said. “Bob was just connecting some dots ...”

“I didn’t realize that Ann’s daughter had died and I had to, in my usual clueless fashion, go and stick my foot in my mouth...”

“Your daughter died?...”

“It was a couple of years ago now. To be honest, it’s taken a while to get back on my feet.”

“Tell me about it!” said Nick. “I’m sure you gathered from the conversation that I’ve gone through a split myself. Nothing compares, though, to the loss you’ve had. I have to say, I don’t know what I would do without my wonderful family.” He gestured with his stogie hand around the table. “We always rally around each other.”

“You’re lucky.”

“Maybe. Maybe just blessed.... Do you mind me asking how it happened?”

“No... it was a car accident. Driver was high.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Wasn’t that like the accident your brother was in, Nick?” asked Bob.

“Yeah, he was an idiot...” Nick dismissed the comment with a wave of his hand. Bob pushed back her chair and made her way to find a coffee refill.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Your brother ... ?”

“Yeah,” said Nick, “at the tree lot it crossed my mind you looked familiar... I saw you at the trial. My brother was the driver.

“Your brother...” My hands gripped the arms of the chairs, knuckles whitening. “You and Bob set me up! You knew! You both knew!”

“No,” said Nick. “Believe me, no. This isn’t a set up... Who would have known we’d end up at the tree lot at the same time, for God’s sake...” He shook his head. “But now that this is all out, I have to admit I’ve been haunted by you, by the memory of you. I never thought I’d see you again. And yet... here we are. Maybe things happen for a reason. You know, everything about that nightmare is flooding back now. Right now.”

“Flooding back? I live in that flood, day in day out. I live in a house with an empty room, pass by the corner where my baby was pinned by a car to a lamppost, look at kids playing and wonder what might have been, buy a god-damn Christmas tree because she would have wanted one! What do you want from me? What could you possibly want from me?”

“Forgiveness, maybe? For my family? For my brother? I mean, he is doing his time...”

“Forgiveness! Really? You can’t be serious! Your brother had no shame! No remorse! All he did at the trial was smirk... like it was all a big joke...”

While bursting with questions, I had no patience for answers. I reached under the table for my handbag, stood so abruptly the chair fell backwards, crashing to the floor. “How dare you...” I grabbed my things and bolted to the door.

Once outside, I struggled into my jacket, and despite the heavy snowfall, turned hard on my heel and burst into a run, scarf streaming, handbag bouncing, tears flowing. I pulled into myself turtle-like, wound my scarf up near my ears, hugged myself tight. I couldn’t get far enough, fast enough.

The conductor was pacing outside the open door of the train car, pulling out his watch and gesturing for me to hurry. Climbing the steps, grasping the handrail, steadying myself, the train gathering speed.

Leaning my forehead against the cold window, I looked back at the station. Through the falling snow, I saw Nick walking away, hunching his shoulders, raking his hand through his hair, scattering snowflakes.