

## Hadewig Stylites

It's 5:35 P.M. and Lili Marlene still isn't home from the grocery shopping. She's buying his booze, too, which is more to the point. MacArthur rolls his chair to the picture window in the living room and watches the snow pelting down at an angle in the street lights. Normally, they would be doing this together. They wait for it, without saying it, all year long; have done so since they were little. It's only special right before Christmas. Afterwards, it's depressing.

Weird how things change from magical to soul-sucking in the blink of an eye. Particularly true about everything having to do with Christmas, he reflects.

Pain gnaws its way up his spine. Most likely it's the cancer cells doing their thing as they always do when he's got a hangover. He fishes an OxyContin out of his robe pocket and crunches it down dry. It's not nearly as good as booze. Aquavit, eau de vie, uisge, the waters of life. Oh how he craves a cold, rummy eggnog.

Once he's wasted, he can sit and stare out the window at the Vest's Christmas lights. Red, blue, green, red, blue, green until the universe runs out of gas! Nothing can touch him then.

Where in the hell is Lili Marlene? There isn't a drop in the house. He knows, because he already crawled down the kitchen steps into the garage on his hands and knees and checked all the cupboards where she hides the booze from him.

Her cat Fluffy is up on the table eating his lunch. He throws his slipper at her but she keeps at it. Did she forget to feed her damned cat?

A note is stuck under the soup bowl. It's how she communicates when he's in a foul mood. Her predictability drives him mad and she isn't even in the house.

December 22, 2013

Jesus, Mary and Joseph

Dear MacArthur,

You told me last night that you're not a good person. That isn't true. Remember when we were going to Our Lady of the Most Blessed Sacrament--when I was in eighth grade and you were in sixth--and I put on lipstick and eye shadow and the kids made fun of me? Gemma Nardoizzi said my eyebrows grew together in the middle and my legs were built like stumps. My parents must have been blind and crazy to name me after a beautiful woman.

You hit her on the head with your catechism and told her she had a butt like a B-52. You shouldn't have done those things, but I appreciated the gesture.

You always watched out for me, MacArthur. You will always be my little brother. Remember what Mom said right before she passed. We only have each other and we must stick together to the end. I hope you remember that in case I decide to do something really stupid again.

XoXo

Lili Marlene

PS, We will be reborn in the blood of Our Lord and Savior, and warmed by the love of his Holy Mother. We can pretend to each other, MacArthur, but not to them. In heaven, there is only love and it burns like a fire.

MacArthur reads the note twice, turns it over and examines the back.

There's a loud rapping on the front door. It's the littlest Vest kid. Lili Marlene usually deals with the neighbors. He opens the door a crack. The kid shoves three UPS boxes into MacArthur's lap. More of her eBay crap. Even the boxes look like they've been used over and over. Damn. More shite to add to the rest of the claptrap in her bedroom and closet. He starts closing the door.

"Mr. Chizek, Mom says you need to turn on the news. Your sister's on TV. Mom says you can call her if you need any help."

His heart thuds and skips. The crash, it's finally come. Blood and carrots in the slush, Lili Marlene's head protruding from the windshield, his booze trickling down the trunk. He jabs the remote through all the channels.

The headline runs along the bottom of the TV, "Local woman climbs billboard outside state package store, resists rescue efforts of Mesquatin fire department and police. Story at 6."

What the F? This can't be his sister. Then he sees the fur-trimmed galoshes dangling over the side of the platform, kicking back and forth. He smacks his forehead with his palm.

There they are, for the whole world to see, to flier and scorn. Every year she wears them at Christmas, every year he mocks and torments her about the way they gape and squish, the way she's bringing shame upon the entire family, living and dead, by wearing them in public. To no avail.

He rolls his chair back and forth in front of the window, creasing the cover of one of his old chemical engineering journals under the wheels. He spots her cell phone on the counter. She forgot it, again. He tears his hair.

He could call a cab, he supposes. He'll never ask the neighbors for help.

God, what if she died up there on the platform, or fell off?

What if she went around the bend and had to be institutionalized?

Who would take care of him? Who would buy him booze and hide it from him?

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Lili Marlene is closing the trunk when she spots something luminescent moving around above her. She's right underneath the billboard. It's always displayed ads for the Wolf Creek Baptist church, with big crosses, praying hands and Biblical passages.

Maybe they're doing something flashy for Christmas. It's one of those fancy animated signs, a meadow sprinkled with wildflowers, a plashing brook, puffy clouds moving across a bright blue sky, butterflies and twittering birds somersaulting through the air. Scents of roses and jasmine and new mown hay drift down to her as she stands in the frozen parking lot, and her hair curls in the warm, humid breeze.

Wait, how can this be?

She's thunderstruck. A radiant young woman in a long gown leads a naked baby boy through the grass. He toddles, looks up at his mother and laughs, baring two little teeth. The lady looks up and sees Lili Marlene for the first time. She smiles at her, a radiant smile filled with love. Lili Marlene hasn't been loved since Mom died five years before, and this is love multiplied a hundred times, a million times.

Her eyes fill with tears of happiness. She falls on her knees and clasps her hands, never taking her eyes off the beautiful lady and her sweet baby.

Then he beckons with a rosy hand. Lili Marlene climbs the ladder propped against the platform. She climbs more nimbly than she has in years. Mom's galoshes are as light as the wings of a dragonfly. She dances on tiptoe through juicy green grasses, sits down at the feet of the lady and clasps her knees. They're surrounded by golden light.

The lady hands her the baby. Lili Marlene kisses him again and again, hugs him tenderly. He wraps his arms around her neck and kisses her cheeks. Her soul overflows.

“Henceforth you will be Hadewig, Hadewig Stylites. You are the Blessed anchorite who climbs the ladder to adore My Son. You will remember why He was born, and how much He suffered for His love. You will remember He is an endless ocean of love, and I am the Star of the Sea.”

Much more she says, speaking directly to Lili Marlene’s (Hadewig’s) heart and soul. They talk about galoshes, mothers and brothers, recipes for cooking fresh fish. Our Lady unbends; they shed tears over Her Son’s fate while He plays happily in the grass, unaware.

That’s how they find her, on the top of the billboard platform, engaged in an animated conversation with no one. Next to her is an open can of adhesive, a paint brush and a large tube containing a printed ad for the Wolf Creek Baptist Church.

One of her former catechism students, Ervin Novotny, a volunteer fireman, climbs the ladder to bring her down. His chief, Randy Boldt, a man who went to school with her fifty years ago, climbs up after him. Then a young newcomer climbs up after *him*. So there are three big firemen on the platform and Lili Marlene (Hadewig).

“We know her,” says the chief, smirking, to the newcomer. “It’s Lili Marlene...Chizek,” he chortles. The newcomer looks at him blankly. Lili Marlene (Hadewig) smiles. The new generation knows nothing about the lascivious old song.

Lili Marlene (Hadewig) refuses to budge. They coax, cajole, reminisce about old times, discuss the priest who was fired for child molestation, The Kansas City Chiefs and the flooding of the Mississippi River the previous spring. Everything but her vision.

A news crew from the local TV station shows up with mikes and cameras, yells questions. Lili Marlene (Hadewig) raises her hands and everyone falls silent.

“In three days we will celebrate the birth of Christ Our Lord. He was born to save us all when we had gone astray. Let’s remember the death He died. And His Mother, the Blessed Virgin, who watched in agony as Her Son sacrificed Himself so man may live forever more.”

MacArthur watches from home. A strange emotion takes hold of him. He is prepared to cringe in humiliation as soon as she opens her mouth. Instead, he’s impressed. She isn’t acting like a lunatic. Plus the firemen nod their heads in solemn agreement every time she makes a point. It looks like a press conference.

The night grows colder and colder and a sharp wind whips across the platform. Our Lady’s halo grows dimmer and dimmer and disappears with a pop. Only then does Lili Marlene (Hadewig) turn to Ervin and tell him she’s ready. Even then she hardly feels the cold, hardly feels at all her own foolishness as she stumbles over the rungs of the ladder in Mom’s galoshes and Ervin saves her with a mighty hand.

Ervin takes her aside. The possibility of a psych evaluation has been discussed. They’d need to impound her car.

“Would I have to go someplace overnight? My brother can’t take care of himself. He doesn’t have anybody else,” she says.

“Sorry, we forgot about that. I haven’t seen your brother in years. Go explain this to the chief, he might let you off.”

She stands next to the chief’s vehicle just as he’s calling the psych ward to get her a bed.

She lowers her eyes, a mute apology for having a laugh at his expense. The chief has had countless laughs at her expense over the years, but at this point, what does it matter? She needs to get home. The chief states his terms. She listens humbly, agrees to everything.

Ervin drives Lili Marlene (Hadewig) home in her own car.

“Hadewig. It’s my new name,” she says to Ervin.

“How so?” he says cautiously.

She remembers him as a gentle boy with a simple faith.

“I saw Our Lady up there. She gave me a new name.”

He whistles softly. “Gosh. Ms. Chizek, that’s really something. A miracle. But I’d be real cautious about who you tell this to. A lot of people will take it the wrong way. The chief, for example.”

“Hadewig isn’t a pretty name. Not like Lili Marlene,” she says.

“It suits you better.”

“I guess I’ll get used to it.”

The wind howls. The Vest’s Christmas lights are dancing crazily as Ervin pulls the Crown Vic into the garage.

MacArthur sits in his chair in the garage door. He nods to Ervin. He looks at Lili Marlene in a way he hasn't in a while.

"I have a new name. Hadewig."

He opens his mouth but no words come out.

He follows her into the kitchen. She sits at the table and closes her eyes for a few seconds. She smiles to herself.

She takes out a mixing bowl.

"I saw my old classmate, the guy who works the fish counter at ValuRite. What's his name," she says, diverting him from whatever he's getting ready to confront her with.

"Boob Gryffyd," he says.

"Oh, yeah. How could I forget." Usually he retreats to his bedroom and the internet while she makes dinner.

"Margaret called," he says. "She and the kids can't make it tomorrow because of the blizzard. They saw you on the news." Margaret is their cousin.

"Too bad they're not coming." she says.

"So we won't be having a Christmas party this year. We'll have to watch "Mr. Magoo's Christmas Carol" all by ourselves." He's fallen into his habitual moroseness. He's expecting her to reminisce, the way she always does this time of year, about Mom and Pop, and how they're in the cold, cold ground, and how they loved Christmas.



“The kids don’t care about “Mr. Magoo’s Christmas Carol,”” she says, flaring up. “They have their own shows and I’m afraid we’ll never understand what they like and what they don’t.”

“What happened out there?” he says, feeling his way. He’s usually the only one allowed to be testy.

She pauses, shrugs. “Sorry, MacArthur. A miracle happened to me.”

“You’re lucky,” he says.

“Maybe,” she says. “You’re good-looking and smart. I’m not.”

“But on the other hand, neither of us has ever got married or had a kid,” he says.

“We’re the end of our line,” she says.

“Maybe a good thing,” he says.

“I don’t know. Why did you never get married?” she says.

“I always had more important things to do.” He doesn’t ask why she never got married.

“Our parents had something special,” she says. “But they didn’t make a big deal of it.”

“Well, maybe, but they picked names that scarred us for life. Hadewig isn’t much better. Are you going to be able to live with that?”

She shrugs. “I will.”

He opens the gallon jug of Old Sporrán and fills a Christmas mug. Lili Marlene rolls out a pie crust, cuts four slits into it, arranges it over the pie plate. She works the heads of four fresh

sardines out of the slits so their big round eyes are looking straight up, pointing in all four directions.

“What’s that?” he says.

“Star gazy pie,” she says. “To celebrate the birth of the Christ Child. See, they’re looking straight up to heaven, where Mom and Pop and Baby Jesus and Our Lady are looking down at us.” She brushes egg yolk over the crust.

“Did you plan this before you had the... vision?” he says.

“No. I got the idea later, from talking to somebody.”

“Did you have some kind of premonition? I’m curious about how it works.”

“Yes. Not that I knew *exactly* what was going to happen,” she says, looking at him uncertainly.

He could never tell how real her naïveté was. That was an attribute of medieval saints, he read someplace. Naïveté, uncertainty about themselves, certainty only about their faith.

“Pour me a mug,” she says.

He looks up from his own mug. “Really?”

“Yes,” she says.

“Cheers.” They clink mugs.

She sips, gags, swallows.

The scotch burns all the way down.

In a few seconds, the light in the kitchen melts into gold. Her pupils dilate. Mom's cat clock rolls its eyes, swings its tail, overwhelming her with affection.

Sagging with laughter, she slams her mug on the pearly table top. "Jonathan Winters! On Jack Paar! Remember the time he pretended the stagehand crawling around on the scaffolding was his grandmother?"

MacArthur watches her with hooded eyes. He nods his head and cackles.

"You look like a turtle," she says.

He freezes, bares his teeth in a chilly smile.

He's holding three sky blue juggling balls. They're lit from within, little earths seen from the moon. He juggles them for a few minutes, then loses his rhythm and they drop and bounce, scattering across the floor, sending Fluffy streaking into the living room.

"Wow!" she says.

He sips from his mug, pleased.

She puts an LP on the stereo console. The music, a Christmas organ medley, thunders forth. They don't make Christmas albums the way they used to, they agree.

The aromas of baking pie crust, browning butter, simmering onions and fresh fish fill the room. She hangs a wreath on the inside of the door singing, *Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child.*

"Whoa, sister!" MacArthur says, choking, wide-eyed.

In the door way Our Lady is smiling and nodding to the music. The Baby Jesus in her arms is jumping for joy.

Hadewig gasps, “Macarthur!”

He juggles the balls. The baby claps and laughs.

“Anselmus,” Our Lady says. “It’s your new name.”

“Um, OK,” he says.