

Holiday Search

The second week of December brought three days of cold Kentucky rain, turning the yard to a soupy marsh which then froze to a slick glimmering sheet in the ice storm that pelted the following afternoon. The weather report had nailed it, before it happened. The children had been sent home from school and right after lunch, before the roads got too treacherous, Cain Aerodynamics had sent Danny home from work.

He was in the den, building a fire, as Gloria heated a batch of chili, thinking it could tide them over, need be, the next few days locked inside. She dialed the chili to simmer, went to the den and rubbed her hands at the fire. Curling into the nearest corner of the couch, she pulled a striped afghan around her shoulders. “You know the whole time we’ve been together?” she said. “I’ve never once been invited to Cain.”

She’d driven past, countless times. She’d seen the chain-link security fence, the enormous blocky buildings sprawling fifty acres of flat land. It made her think of doomsday cults, fringe people stockpiling weapons. “You don’t do anything I’d think was creepy,” she said. “Do you?”

Chuckling softly, Danny speared the bottommost chunk of wood, twisting the poker as the pile shifted and flared and launched orange sparks up the flue. “Of course not,” he said. He tapped the woodpile, sending up more sparks, and made a few last thrusts at the swelling, crackling fire. “In fact,” he said, “we just firmed up a new project with the space program.”

As if there was nothing creepy about shooting machines into space. Gloria was about to say something to this effect, when footsteps came thudding over the brickwork

of their front porch, up to the door. Danny and Gloria looked at each other. When the person knocked, Danny said "I'll see who." He pitched the poker at a standing rack, where it clattered upright against the other tools.

"No," said Gloria, scooting past. "You sit down."

She slowed up, coming into the hallway, and took her time getting to the door. As she came down the front hallway, the person knocked again, only softer this time. Back in the den, they might not have even heard it.

Veering into the living room, Gloria peeled back a curtain and saw a bareheaded girl with bushy blond hair flap her arms, up and down, one time, and start away from the door.

When Gloria opened it, the cold wind rushed at her. The girl was halfway down the sloping yard, but at the sound of the door she turned around. "We're here," Gloria called out. "Can I help you?"

The girl looked up the street, as if she'd been sent to the wrong place and was hoping to be picked up so she could change direction. But her bicycle was parked, Gloria could see, out on the sidewalk. The girl stepped carefully across the ice, up to the glazed front walkway. Gloria couldn't place her. The girl looked like she might have important news. Justin flew into Gloria's skirt with a toy truck. The girl stopped and waited on the walkway. She looked pale, a little bit scared, as Justin leaned into Gloria's waist.

Fingering his hair, she said, "Has something happened?"

"Who is it?" Danny called from the den. "Get in here, Justin."

The girl looked down the street again. Dark bare maple trees sagged with ice. The electrical poles, the black lines strung between them, were totally entombed.

As Justin trotted off, the girl said, "I'm going around, to see if you want this ice cleared off." She clomped cautiously onto the porch. Her eyes were restless. Gloria worried she might have something gruesome stuck in her teeth, from testing the chili.

But the girl was just embarrassed, had to be, forced to hoof up work in weather like this. She wore a green turtleneck with a maroon headband. Gloria leaned against the screen door, weatherproof glass, and looked around. "You don't have a shovel?" Now, this was pathetic.

"I can use what you have," said the girl. "If that's okay." She smelled like damp wool and her breath rolled away in clouds. College girl, Gloria decided. Maybe she was paying her way through school.

"What are you asking?" Gloria said.

"I don't know," the girl said, coming closer to the door. "Twenty?" *Au naturel*, as they say, no makeup, save a light sketch of eyeliner. Her cheeks were spotty and red, flushed from the wind. She cast her eyes down to the frozen slush spattered on her boots, brown suede bucks with rubber lug treads. They looked big and heavy but her feet were not. In fact she was just a little thing altogether. Gloria hadn't noticed the short little legs until they were up this close. Maybe it was the bulk of the rust-colored down jacket that made her seem bigger. But her small hands barely made it out the sleeves, which seemed ready to swallow them up. "I think we can do twenty," Gloria said. "Meet me around the side, at the garage, and I'll give you the shovel."

"What is it?" Danny said as she went through the den, into the garage.

"Some girl," said Gloria. "She wants to shovel ice."

"What girl?" said Danny, poking at the fire.

Gloria pressed a button and the garage door shuddered. As it slowly rumbled along its track, she opened a dark closet and found the snow shovel. The door kept climbing but she didn't see the girl. Ducking under the bottom edge, she stepped onto the driveway, gripping the shovel in both hands. She looked left and right, then went around the side of the house and saw the girl riding off, pedaling up the mucky street, front tire shimmying in a track of slush.

"That was odd," said Gloria, coming inside.

"What happened?" said Danny.

"Beats me," said Gloria. "She just pedaled off."

"Not to worry," Danny said. He slung an arm around her shoulder. Pulling her close, he said, "I'll get out there tomorrow and knock it out."

The next few days, as the sun came back and the ice melted away, Gloria threw herself into work. She spent whole afternoons on the phone, arranging an upcoming banquet for breast cancer research. Nights she worked on a grant proposal she was doing for the distance learning center on campus. She liked her jobs, but they weren't enough to settle her down. They didn't even get her out of the house.

Two weeks before, on Thanksgiving weekend, Danny had suggested renting an apartment downtown. "Might give us more space," he'd said, "now that the kids are grown."

With Justin—their youngest—being eight years-old, it was hard to think of him as grown even if you looked at him cross-eyed, with your head tilted sideways. As Gloria groped for words, stunned and glazed over, Danny had paled to an instant backpedal,

saying, “For holiday conversation, that’s pretty rotten, I’m sorry. We can talk about it later. Not like it’s a pressing matter. It’s just an idea. But I thought you should know.”

Later on, though, they had not talked about it. There seemed to be no words for it. Halfway through December, Gloria was still waiting for him to bring it back up. The longer she waited, the more strange questions she asked herself, such as, What was *later*, anyway? Even time seemed to make no sense.

No pressing matter, his words, but it seemed to be bringing up other pressing matters, ones Gloria couldn’t quite put her finger on. They swirled inside her like wind-driven snow, and just as hard to grab onto.

Gloria hauled the Christmas tree down from the attic. She wrapped it in furry, glittering fringe and covered it with ornaments. After pushing the vacuum around the rugs, she unplugged it and stood awhile, tapping her teeth.

In the bedroom, she opened the walk-in closet. She couldn’t walk into it for all the shoes. In a funk there was no fix for Gloria like a few hours in a shoe store, a few hundred dollars on the credit card.

Knowing this, Danny stayed out of her way when it came to shoes. But he loved surprises. Back before he even said “I do,” he had memorized Gloria’s most flattering colors, cuts and materials. He had an eye for what was in fashion. He’d learned her sizes, too, and over twenty years of marriage had kept up with them as they changed.

She picked out a few dresses and laid them across the bed, still in their hangers. The bed was where she had discovered each of them, when Danny surprised her. She went through the clothes and pulled out other things he’d bought, skirts from out of the blue, blouses, pairs of slacks. All laid out together, it made quite a collection, and that

was only the clothes. Over the years there had been flowers, opera creams, caramel-chocolate turtles. Her friends were sick with envy. They would tell Danny they wished they had husbands like him. Danny would just shrug and call it a natural thing.

Maybe it was nothing, his idea for more space. Gloria told herself maybe he'd just taken a funny notion, and it had passed. Sometimes people took funny notions, especially around the holidays, and they moved on.

Gloria could feel a notion taking hold as she put away the clothes and went downstairs, all the way to the basement, to a dark, narrow L-shaped room that dead-ended off Danny's workshop.

It took all the nerve she had. The room was like a vault, or a tomb. She actually had nightmares about it, where a big steel door would swing shut, trapping her inside, and in a breathless moment everything would be strange and terrible, the ceiling would rain, for instance, or she'd suddenly realize she wasn't alone.

The snooping bug had nipped her, though, and she was determined to find some Christmas presents. Now that Joe was eighteen, he had to rush through the festivities so he could go be rowdy with his friends, and Janice, who was fifteen, had a cell phone glued to her ear and treated them all like pests. One of them had even blown it for poor little Justin and told him there was no such thing as Santa Claus. Gloria suspected it could have been her mother-in-law, some time when he'd been dropped off to visit. It felt like *someone* in the family ought to be in the spirit of things and getting excited about presents and Gloria had decided that someone had to be her.

She heard Danny come in the back way. Overhead, he strode through the kitchen, *fee-fi-fo-fum*. If he decided to come downstairs she was busted for sure, but Gloria

moved into the shadows of the narrow L-shaped passage, tracking his footsteps to the next level and up to the bedroom. She waited to hear her name called. Instead, she heard him start his after-work routine, the wrenched-off wingtips hitting the floor, the jangle of his belt buckle.

When she heard the water start running, the clatter of the shower door, she knew she'd just bought some time. She knew she would find something. This was exactly where Danny would hide a present. It wasn't a place where the kids ever messed around, and he knew how bad Gloria hated the dark dead-end room. They'd shoved a spare refrigerator in it, for freezing extra meat and storing Gloria's homemade preserves. There were soft drinks in there, too, and if Gloria ever needed anything she would send Danny down to get it. She would even wait until he got home, if he wasn't around. It was that creepy down there.

She opened the refrigerator, shedding golden light on the L-shaped room. Halfway to the ceiling, rows of boxes were stacked along the exposed wooden wall beams. They were stuffed with old clothes, paperback books, seven-inch vinyl records, no telling what kind of junk.

Gloria swung the refrigerator open. She looked the boxes up and down, row by row, until she came across a blue box with the name of a department store she knew but never shopped. It was wedged inside a tall stack, in the corner of the L. She lifted off the top boxes and set them on the ground. With a feeling not unlike the first far-off hint of a sneeze, she uncovered the blue department store box and lifted out a red silk scarf. Holding it up to the light, looking through the sheer fabric, she ran a hand down it and looked back in the box. Folded snugly inside was a shiny green silk chemise, trimmed in

lighter green lace, with a dark green bow tied between the breast cups. Gloria's eyes went straight to the tag: three sizes shy of her own, and two sizes too small for Janice to squeeze into, even in her most skintight mood.

She drove the fist that gripped the scarf into the box, crammed the lid back on and went racing upstairs. She flew through the kitchen and took the next set of stairs two steps at a time, practically tripping up the last few and feeling like a rocket on lift-off as her mind whirled with thoughts of the tiny college girl.

Danny came out of the master bath in a lazy slouch, a towel wrapped around his waist. Gloria kept the box pressed against her chest, knowing otherwise she might try and claw his face off. He saw the box and showed her a familiar face, one she'd seen time and again in her own children, all three of them growing up, whenever someone had scrawled the dining room wall with colored crayons, or tried to flush a whole unspooled roll of toilet paper. They'd all gotten that face from Danny.

Gloria yanked the red scarf from the box. In a flourish so manic she nearly choked, she twisted it around her neck and mangled a crude knot, saying, "This, I love, so thank you."

Danny reached for the silk chemise, but she knocked his hand away and tugged it over her head. As she jerked down the hem, the fabric tearing and splitting along her sides, she said, "This? You're going to have to explain."