

Waltz of the Pink Flamingos

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IT'S THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS in Sarasota, and I haven't even unpacked my bags yet, and already my father has started listing people who were famous by the age of thirty. "Einstein had already published five physics papers by age twenty-six," he says, clicking from channel to channel. "And Niels Bohr discovered the atom when he was twenty-eight. Did you know that?"

"Sounds like a real *bore*," I say, and when no one laughs, I add, "Besides, Dad, I'm not a scientist; I'm a bartender."

"Einstein was a patent clerk, sweetheart," my father says.

"Don't forget Alexander Graham Bell," my brother, Steven, says, barely looking up as he flips through his latest issue of *The American Lawyer*.

My father settles on the twenty-four-hour *A Christmas Story* marathon and pulls the handle on the side of his torn, red-leather recliner. "Elisha Gray beat him to the patent office, partner," he says, holding up a finger and cocking his head.

Steven is the district attorney sixty miles north of here in Tampa. I live a thousand miles away, in Columbus, Ohio, where I started school but never finished. Every Christmas for the past five years, since Mom died, I've made the trip south. And every Christmas, my father gives Steven and I each a present—some piece of junk stockpiled from a yard sale or a flea market, something that neither of us is likely to ever use.

It's midday, but little light finds its way into my father's house. The blinds are closed and the air-conditioning is off, of course, in spite of the unseasonable heat wave. A ceiling fan shaped like palm leaves pushes the spicy odor of widowedness around the room. A cactus sits on top of the VCR, its pink flow-

er shriveled, and the soil around its base looks dry and hard. Pots and pans in the sink, week-old food dried to the insides. A dead ladybug that has been mostly swallowed by a dustbunny front and center on the coffee table. Balding patterns in the shag carpet marking the path my father so frequently takes from his chair to the kitchen and bathroom.

"How about James Dean or King Tut?" I say. "Or Billy the Kid?"

"Jane, they were all *dead* by thirty," Steven says, rolling his eyes.

"Yes, but *first* they were famous," my father says.

This conversation makes me think of the regulars at my bar, The Old Bag of Nails. It's located in Grandview, a trendy suburb that would like to be Columbus' version of SoHo. But it's not, of course, because a place like Columbus can't have a SoHo—part of the reason I live there. Every Wednesday night, a group of guys not unlike my brother Steven—lawyers or other kinds of professional men—come to drink from our extensive list of scotches. They order drams and entertain the notion that they're very clever by picking a theme for the scotch they try each week. First was by geography—lowland scotch, highland scotch, scotch from the islands Islay and Skye. Then they made it more interesting—scotches favored by Bonnie Prince Charlie or Sean Connery, which really translated into a lot of Drambuie, honey-warm and mid-priced. On St. Patrick's Day, they wore kilts and asked me if I wanted to peek underneath. "Just a wee look there, lassie?"

I dread March already.

My Wednesday night boys would probably turn Dad's "first famous" obsession into a drinking game if given the chance.

It's gone quiet in the living room. Dad and Steven are just looking at me with their perfectly matched glares, until Steven says, "Everything okay with you?"

I nod. "Just thinking of something back home."

"You got a boyfriend or something?" Dad asks. "That'd be new."

"Not exactly," I say. Dad knows I'm a lesbian. To his credit, he didn't freak out when Mom told him, didn't threaten to disown me or preach eternal damnation. Still, he and Steven never really accepted it either. Their response has always been to treat it like trivia—a fad or a phase or a distasteful habit akin to eating ice cream from the carton or leaving wet towels on the bathroom floor. Mom was the only one who ever made an honest attempt to understand.

Out the window, the neighbor's palm trees are strung with pink Christmas lights, and there's Santa and his sleigh being pulled by bright plastic flamingos. The lead flamingo is wearing a Santa hat and a pair of Ray-Bans. A special kind of Florida Christmas tacky. The first year I moved to Columbus, I went to the zoo's Christmas lights with Christina. My breath puffed in the cold, feathered and dissipated. Christina's nose, small but flat, turned red and ran, and she continuously sniffled into her Kleenex. She had a dainty sniffle.

Steven blows his nose in a loud honk. He never met Christina, but I know they wouldn't have gotten along. They'd both want to be alpha lawyer.

"Dad, would it kill you to dust this place?" he says. Dad keeps his eyes on *A Christmas Story*, tuning Steven out. I'd rather watch a bowl game, but instead I settle in on the couch, spying out the window the flamingo sleigh in the neighbor's yard.

From my old bedroom, I can still see the tacky pink flamingos. My room doesn't feel like mine anymore; it is painfully clear that Dad has been up to his hoarding again. The brown clock radio on the nightstand has to be at least thirty years old, and it looks like it has been scavenged from a Holiday Inn. There is a dusty bottle with a ship in it on my dresser. But the coup de grace is the black velvet painting of the crucifixion

of Christ that hangs on the wall opposite my bed. Instead of blood, there are red LED lights that blink when you plug it in.

I take my overnight bag into the bathroom and set it next to the sink. I bought it for a couple bucks at the local hospice resale boutique back in Columbus. I figure some people go to church and put money in the collection plate. Browsing the merchandise and purchasing at least one thing is my offering, but sometimes I wonder if it isn't the same as Dad's flea market hoarding. In the bathroom, his and her towels with someone else's initials hang from the bar next to the door. The soap dish is shaped like a lobster. I splash water on my face, and then make my way back to my room to lie down.

Dad's hoarding started when the cancer killed Mom. I wish I could say that Mom had kept him in line, that she was the reasonable force that prevented him from buying such garish eyesores, but the truth is, though he'd never been the most fashionable man, my father's passion for kitsch is a relatively new development. Somehow, that makes it worse. That was also about the time when he started harping on me about fame, listing all the people who had accomplished more than I had. Thirty loomed ahead, and I could tell Dad was afraid I'd turn out to be nothing more than a bartender.

I glimpse my father in the hallway as he passes by my door. He backtracks and pokes his head into my room, nodding toward the ugly Jesus painting. "You like that?" he asks.

"Yeah, it's great," I say.

"Got that at a flea market for a dollar," he says, as though it's a bargain I should find impressive. So I raise my eyebrows and nod appreciatively.

"Wash up and put on something nice for dinner," he says. "We're having company."

"Company?" I ask.

"One of your mother's old work friends, Linda. And she's bringing her son and daughter," he says, adding, "so there will be someone for you and someone for Steve."

"Dad?" I say.

"Relax," he says, cocking his head. "I didn't mean it like that. Just someone to talk to during dinner."

"Talk to?" I ask. "Where will the rest of you be?"

"Don't be smart, Janie," my father says.

It's tough enough for a woman to dress herself under normal circumstances. But there's no outfit in the world that fits the occasion when your father sets you up on a blind non-date on Christmas Eve. I take some solace in knowing that Steven is going through the same hell that I am. Even though it's hot, it's still winter and I feel like anything sleeveless would be inappropriate. I have a black skirt in desperate need of ironing, but settle for dousing it with the wrinkle-releaser I carry in my bag. After spraying it, it smells heavily of starch and flowers and reminds me of the disinfectant used by hospice when they came to care for Mom.

I decide on a white t-shirt to pair with the black skirt, but then I worry that it will be too causal. So I layer on a cotton cardigan, the way the girls who work at the Gap in the Polaris Shopping Mall do. It's pink, like the damn flamingos in the neighbor's yard, all wrong for Christmas. It's also too hot to be wearing any extra clothes. But I settle on it anyway. The whole ensemble has the ruffled look of being recently packed.

In the bathroom, I brush my teeth and then swish with Listerine I pour into a shot glass bearing the phrase I GAVE IT A SHOT AT PANAMA BEACH. My toiletry bag carries a Spartan assembly of cosmetics: powder, blush, concealer, eyeliner, mascara, faintly pink-tinted ChapStick. I do the best I can with it to appear fresh-faced. "Why bother," I say to my reflection. Then I run the bristles of a flat-paddled brush through my hair, pulling locks into a stubby ponytail at the base of my neck.

I feel ridiculous, until I walk out of my old room and see Steven. He's wearing a light blue, meticulously pressed button-

down and creased trousers. He smells of cologne, expensive, though I don't recognize the brand.

"You look nice," he says looking at my face, then down at my feet, and then back at my face.

"So do you," I say, and we eye each other on our way down the stairs, as though to say, *Who are you trying to impress?*

The table has been set with Dad's finest dinnerware, mismatching holiday plates from Crate & Barrel, Target, and Pottery Barn, which translates into a melee of various shapes and colors. Penguins, snowmen, reindeer, and a whole lot of holly. Before the guests arrived, Steven had asked Dad about Mom's good china.

"Oh, that's in storage," my father said. "Just put these plates out; they're festive."

Now, at dinner, I am seated beside a tall, thin podiatrist named Daniel. Across from me, Steven sits beside a petite blonde schoolteacher named Sue. She's about my age, fit and quiet. My father enters the room with Linda. He carries a skillet of what appears to be Hamburger Helper, and she carries a bowl of leafy green salad. Arranged in the center of the table is a basket of Pepperidge Farms dinner rolls and a cylindrical blob of cranberry sauce still bearing the imprint of the can. Sue made stuffed mushrooms. She explains to Steven that she dug the recipe out from one of her Williams-Sonoma cookbooks.

My father has really gussied himself up for this occasion. A blue-checked button-down. Brown suede jacket that looks to be older than I am. A skinny red tie. I don't know whether to be amused or ashamed. For her part, Linda wears a flowered sundress. Hibiscus. Not exactly in keeping with the holiday spirit. She smells of so much heavy perfume you'd think it were pre-serving her.

Dinner starts without much of a hitch. Dad and Linda reminisce about my mother. Steven asks Sue about her job,

what it's like to work with kids all day, at one point putting his hand behind her chair and leaning in close to hear the answer. I ask Daniel some polite questions about feet and malpractice. He's happy to answer. It's all relatively painless until Dad begins talking about people who were famous before the age of thirty.

"Stephen Crane," Dad starts, "wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* before age thirty."

"Crane died when he was twenty-eight," Steven says, a little smug. Like Dad, he's the kind of guy who can read something once, commit it to memory forever.

"That so?" Daniel says in a voice that conveys his complete lack of interest. It makes me want to slip off my shoes and put my feet on the table, see what he has to say about my toes.

"What did he die of?" Linda asks, touching my father's arm, a move she probably picked up reading *Glamour*. She is trying to make eye contact, but my father is staring down at the food on his plate.

"Tuberculosis," I say. The rest at the table turn to look at me; Steven looks stunned and Dad lets out a sort of hiccup-burp-laugh. I fork up some of the Hamburger Helper and shove it into my mouth.

"Figures you'd know that," Dad says. "You're obsessed with death."

I want to blurt, "No, Dad, you're the one obsessed with death." Instead, I say, "The *Playboy* model Elisa Bridges also died at age twenty-eight, from a drug overdose."

"Playmate," Steven says, correcting me, and Sue wrinkles her nose.

"Caligula was assassinated at twenty-eight," I say. Then, looking Steven in the eye, "Did you know that? Seems like the kind of thing you'd know." He shrugs, takes a sip of jug wine from a red Depression-era goblet.

"Also, the Russian figure skater Sergei Grinkov, Ryan Shay

the marathoner, Heath Ledger, Brandon Lee, both actors. All dead at twenty-eight," I announce to the table. They're bewildered into a silence marked by chewing.

Finally, it breaks. "How old are you?" Daniel asks, his voice a little too high pitched to hide concern.

"Twenty-eight," Steven says, the way I imagine he'd make his summary arguments in a courtroom. "And counting."

Linda is visibly worried, kneading the edges of the reindeer-stitched tablecloth. She turns to Sue, speaks in rapid-fire sentences. "What do you think of the salad dressing? It's a recipe I clipped from *Real Simple*. I like the lemon. I could go either way on the cilantro. It's a taste I never really go for. Except in salsa. Of course. But it was different. I thought what the heck. You like it?"

Sue only nods, looking from me to Steven and back to me. The corners of her mouth twitch a little.

Dad smiles. "Cheer up, kiddo," he says to me. "Shelley made it to twenty-nine, and so might you." He gets up for a beer, some sort of special Christmas blend by Sam Adams. He grabs two bottles, opens one and places it in front of me. "Merry Christmas," he says. "Be of good cheer."

I take a sip. The beer isn't that good, but not terrible either. It's cold and smooth enough. Despite the fact that I'm a bartender, I don't really like to drink. But right now I'd rather put my lips to the bottle than continue talking.

"Don't you want a glass for that?" Daniel asks.

"I'm more of a bottle kind of girl," I reply, and Sue raises an eyebrow. Unless I'm mistaken, she's flirting with me. But that's one detail that's lost on Steven. He tells a lawyer joke, something he does to show he's ironic and witty, and Sue laughs too loudly. Daniel and his mom talk about HMOs. I sit quietly through the rest of the meal, and I think we're all happier for it. I fight the urge to go to my room and dial Christina's number. Even if I did, she wouldn't answer anyway.

The next morning, I'm still wearing my pajamas—a pair of mesh shorts that says “Buckeyes” along the hems and a white tank top with “OSU Law” screen-printed across the front, both having belonged to Christina—when my father decides it's time to exchange presents. My hair is plastered to the side of my head, and I need coffee, but still I trudge into the other room and sit down on the sofa next to Steven. He looks over at me and yawns.

“Good morning to you, too,” I say.

“Sorry,” he mumbles.

This year, I got Dad a gym membership. It'll get him out of the house, help him socialize, with the added benefit of keeping him in shape. It's a good gift, I think, but Steven got him TiVo, and there's no competing with that.

“Thanks, darling,” my father says when I hand him the card. He turns it over in his hands a few times.

“The gift's inside,” I say.

“Oh, that doesn't matter,” he says, tearing open the card, scanning it quickly and then pulling out the membership to Gold's. He frowns. “Oh, this is great,” he says in a voice that tells me it's just *okay* at best and probably a waste of money. “I hope you didn't spend too much on it,” he adds. It's a far cry from the “*holeeee-moly*” when Steven showed him how he could now program his television to save all of his favorite shows.

My father leaves the room, and when he returns, he's carrying two small boxes. They've been wrapped in newspaper. Not the funnies, either, but the Classifieds section and the Sports. “These are for you,” he says, handing us each a box.

I open mine and pull out one of those creepy-looking wooden nutcrackers. Someone obviously handled it a lot. The red paint has been chipped and the white fur beard is matted and discolored. It looks up at me with its sad eyes and toothy grin, and I force a smile. “Just what I always wanted,” I say.

“That's a collectable,” my father says. “Probably.”

Steven wipes his face and covers his grin with his palm.

“It's great, Dad,” I say, getting up and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“Open yours,” my father says, nodding at Steven, and I turn then, eager to see what *quality* gift my brother will receive.

Steven tears at the newspaper tentatively, working the seam of tape. His gift is wrapped in a plain but slender white box. It could be anything. He looks at the box, rotating it in his fingers.

“It doesn't open itself,” Dad says, rotating his new TiVo remote in his hands much the same way Steven does with his box. I look out the window at the flamingo sleigh, and even though it's morning and the sun shines, the pink lights are still on.

Finally Steven opens the box, and inside there's a vintage watch, square faced and gold toned with a band of brown leather. On the back is a distinctive mark—a five pronged crown—as well as a serial number. It looks to be in great condition.

“Wow,” Steven says, “not bad for a replica.”

“That's no replica,” Dad says, his voice slipping into a paternal defiance. “That was your grandfather's watch. It's a 1937 Rolex. Not a scratch on it.”

Dad apologizes for losing the original box, but Steven barely hears him. He puts the watch on, obviously pleased with it. “You can tell the craftsmanship,” he says, fingering the buttery leather band.

At first, I'm stunned. I look at the crappy flea-market nutcracker that Dad picked out for me. If ever there was a moment where I felt like *the other child*, it's this moment. I just can't bear to look at either of them, so I get up and say, “I need coffee,” and pad toward the kitchen. Neither Dad nor Steven notice me. I don't stop at the kitchen; instead, I keep walking out the back door and sit on the concrete stoop. It's going to be hot again. I can feel it in the air, even though it's still early. I bite the inside of my cheek to try to keep from crying, but a few tears slide

from the corners of my eyes. I wipe them away. I can't really tell if I'm sad or angry. My emotions are soupy.

I hear Dad's laugh from the living room, where, no doubt, he and Steven are bonding over an expensive timepiece and programming the Now Playing list to record twenty-five episodes of *Matlock*.

I can't help but remember the Christmas that my mom bought me a Barbie Dream House. It was garish pink and took up the better part of a wall in my bedroom. I remember that I didn't even ask for it, but earlier that year my friend Heidi Barnett had gotten one for her birthday, and she always insisted I play over at her house. I hardly ever played with mine, but kept Barbie posed in various rooms so Mom would think that I used it all the time. I knew it was expensive.

Christmas always reminds me of how my relationships implode. I'm eager just to get home, to get back to work at The Old Bag of Nails, where my Wednesday night boys will drink their scotch and tip me well. Through the fence, I see a neighbor bringing out a trash bag, probably full of Christmas morning leftovers: tinsel and paper and bows. All the trappings of family festiveness. I imagine the fake click of digital photos.

Later in the afternoon, while my father snores in the La-Z-Boy, Steven and I drink coffee in the kitchen. On the table he's arranged the various sections of the newspaper—Local, Sports, Entertainment—which he scans, looking for restaurant advertisements. The headlines scream something about shoplifting and the price of gasoline.

"So dinner was fun last night," he says.

"Fun for you," I say. "You weren't stuck sitting next to Danny the foot Doc."

"What's wrong with Danny?" Steven asks. "He seemed like a nice enough guy."

I roll my eyes, the way I used to when we had these kinds of arguments as kids.

"I was thinking about calling Sue, see if she'd be interested in going out for dinner," Steven says, not bothering to look up from the paper.

"I don't think she's your type," I say.

"You don't?" Steven says, looking up then. "Why not? I thought she and I really hit it off."

"Give her a call then, Mr. Rolex. What do I know?" I say, and through the window I want to wipe the smug grin off that stupid flamingo's face. Knock his lame hat and his hipster sunglasses off his head. Wring that scrawny little neck of his.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Steven says.

"Forget it," I say, studying my nail beds. I don't want to cry again. Not in front of Steven.

"Dad's only trying to get us something nice," Steven says.

"And besides, if you think I should feel sorry for you because I got a better gift, forget it. It's only payback for all the great gifts you got when we were younger."

"That had better be a joke," I say.

"Mom was always lavishing you with great gifts, and I got nothing. Think about it," Steven says. "You got an Easy Bake Oven; I got six-weeks at Bible camp. You got a bicycle; I got Sansabelt slacks. And for your sixteenth birthday, you got a Camaro. You know what I got? Orthodoxy. I'd say it's all evening out now."

"Yeah, well, Mom's not around anymore," I say, standing up. Steven shrugs and looks at something high on the wall behind my head. And because I don't know what to do, I add, "I'm going to mow the lawn."

"What are you two talking about?" my father asks, wiping the nap from his eyes as he enters the kitchen.

"Yard work," I say, pushing past him.

I'm the only person in the neighborhood outside, but I mow the grass anyway while Steven and my father watch through the kitchen window. It's bright, and I work up a sweat as I push the mower around the little patch of grass behind my

father's house. I haul the bagger onto the driveway and dump the grass clippings into a Hefty bag. Then I pull it to the curb where the garbage man will pick it up in a few days.

When I walk back into the kitchen, Steven tells me that Sue has agreed to go out with him. "She called it a *'friendly trip to the movies,'*" he says. "What do you think that means?"

"Well, I'm no expert, but it sounds like she just wants to be friends," I say, letting the water in the tap run cold and splashing my face.

"Thanks, you're a lot of help," Steven says.

My father says, "Yuri Gagarin" and we both stop talking.

"What?" I say.

"I thought of another one," Dad says. "Yuri Gagarin was only twenty-seven when he went into space."

I glare at him, long and hard. I consider asking him if he thought Yuri Gagarin ever mowed his old man's lawn. Instead, I take a long drink of water, and say, "Joan of Arc."

Steven is back in his bedroom, primping, I suppose, when Sue arrives. She wears a freshly pressed dress, light blue with a pleated skirt and cap sleeves. Too June Cleaver for my tastes, except for her extra glossy lips. They're plump and fantastic. And I consider my brother, once again, a lucky bastard.

"Prince Not-So-Charming will be out in a minute," I tell Sue, as she crosses the threshold into our house.

"Oh, well, I'm not in any hurry," Sue says, glancing down at her feet and then smiling at me. I'd forgotten how much I miss first-date awkwardness.

I can tell that Dad is perplexed. Once Sue and Steven are safely out the door, in the car and headed to the movies, Dad will launch into a speech about how men and women behaved back in his day. "Your mom would never pick me up for a date, no-sir-ee-bob," he'll say. I just know it.

"Steve, get your ass out here," Dad bellows from his recliner. "Sue's waiting." When Steven appears, he's wearing linen

trousers, a yellow button-down, and going sockless with loafers. I suppress a giggle and the urge to say, "What's happening, Don Johnson?" He fiddles with the brown strap of his fancy, new watch as he walks, and I can't help but think that he's showing off. Too much lawyer, too little man. When he leans in to kiss Sue's cheek, she leans back and pats his shoulders awkwardly.

"You kids have fun," I say, and Dad gives me that no-one-likes-a-smart-ass look.

"Are you sure you don't want to come too, Jane?" Sue says, and Steven's head just about explodes.

"No, thanks. I have a full night ahead of me—inspired drinking and drunk dialing my ex," I say, adding, "her name was Christina."

"Oh," Sue says a bit too enthusiastically. "Well, maybe we can come back for a drink later."

"Sure," I say, and my brother scowls. He's trying hard, but he's missing all the signs. He opens the front door for Sue and guides her through with his hand at the small of her back. It reminds me of Christina, how she used to clutch my hand and guide me through crowds at the mall or at the bar. She was always leading me, and I miss it.

"Wouldn't hurt you to get out there like your brother," Dad says, flipping channels. "You're not a half-bad looking girl."

I know he means well, but his words sting like rubbing alcohol in a paper cut. "And miss a glamorous evening here?" I say. I pick up a thin, tattered paperback. It's a copy of Robert Lowell's *Lord Weary's Castle*, a book I had read in an introductory poetry class at Ohio State. The book is a remnant I can't give up, and so I tote the tattered copy around with me—to the Old Bag of Nails, to Florida, to the Kroger down the street. I'd purchased the copy in a used bookstore, and inside the front cover there was a peculiar inscription to its previous owner: *For you, Peggy, to enjoy and remember Boston, to try on the monotone of majesty, affectionately, etc. V---*

I puzzle over the inscription as much as the poetry. Was this person a relative? A friend? A lover? Are they still close? I'm reminded of the monotone of majesty whenever my Wednesday night regulars order scotch and every time Steven opens his mouth.

"What you got there?" Dad asks, as I turn the book over in my hands.

"Nothing," I say, defensively. "Just a book from an old class I liked."

"You ought to get yourself back in school," Dad says. He fiddles with his TiVo, searching for car shows.

"I'll get back," I say, flipping through the book just to give my hands something to do.

"Good," Dad says. "Cause you're a smart girl and it would make your mom proud."

It's tough to hear Dad talk about Mom as though she were still alive. But sometimes I do it too. When Dad settles on a football game—one of the lesser bowls—I set down the book, happy to watch first downs and shoddy defenses. Before I know it, Steven and Sue have returned. From the kitchen, I can see them. They stand in the doorway like teenagers under mistletoe waiting to kiss. Actually, Steven seems like the one waiting for a kiss; Sue seems to be looking for a graceful exit. She smooths the pleats on her dress and chatters something about the movie and having a nice time.

When I step out to greet them, she says, "Did you ever make that phone call, Jane?"

"Nope, decided it was a bad idea," I say.

"Still up for that drink?" Sue asks.

Steven nods and offers to bring her something, but she is already on her way to the kitchen. *Good grief. Worse than the Wednesday night regulars.*

"It is *not* going well," Steven whispers as he passes me.

I make a quick detour to my bedroom and touch up my makeup in the mirror. I have no intention of ruining my broth-

er's faux date, but it doesn't hurt to look nice. I figure one quick drink and then I'll wish them both a good night and retreat back to my room with my copy of Lowell. When I enter the kitchen, Sue is sitting at the table, and she's already on her second glass. She's drinking a purulent-looking concoction—spiked eggnog of all things.

She giggles and says, "Janie, have a cup of cheer!"

"No thanks," I say, but she pours me a glass anyway and winks, and I accept it without protest. I can't help feeling lonely. There's no way that Sue and I would ever work out. We probably wouldn't even last through the holiday season. But with that ridiculous drink in hand, she reminds me a little of Christina.

Sue picks my nutcracker off the table, inspecting its matted shock of beard fur, and slowly opens and closes its mouth.

"It's beautiful," she says, topping off her glass.

"It's a classic nutcracker," Steven says, as though he had been the one to scour flea markets to find it. "Dad got it for Janie for Christmas."

"It's just like the one my father had," Sue says, and her eyes shine with something like nostalgia.

"You can have it," Steven says. "Janie doesn't even like it. Right?"

It's a last-ditch effort on his part, a lousy thing to say. All eyes are on me, looking for some affirmation or sign of benevolence. Only I don't feel all that benevolent; I feel protective and defensive about my gift. Like a child with a new toy. It's true—I don't like the nutcracker. But it's still mine. Dad gave it to me, and I'm sure as a sugarplum not going to give it up. Not to Sue or anyone else.

"No, in fact, I want it," I say, yanking it from Sue's hands more forcefully than I should.

"Oh," Sue says, just like that. "O." One letter.

Steven shoots me a dirty look, a shot right between the eyes. But I don't care. That stupid wooden soldier is all I've got,

and I'm not letting them take it away from me. He reaches for the nutcracker. What happens next is, ironically, a lot like the ballet *The Nutcracker*, which Christina had taken me to see last year. Like the children in the ballet, Clara and Fritz, we battle over the toy. I get a firm hold on its base as Steve grabs for its head. We tug at our ends; I'm sure that I can out-tug my brother, and he pulls as though he's sure he'll get it free. We both lose our grip and the nutcracker goes flying across the room, smacking the wall with the dull whack of wood on paneling.

"What in the hell is going on in there?" Dad yells more than asks.

"Nothing," Steven and I say in unison. Sue runs to the nutcracker, collecting its head in one hand, its body in the other. I stare at my broken present.

"You can superglue it," Sue says, her voice more hopeful than the situation warrants. Perhaps I do look upset and shocked. "It'll be as good as new," she adds. Her eyes are glassy with the threat of tears, and she seems so earnest. Just as she's about to say, "I'm sorry," I take her chin in my hands and kiss her plump lips. And she pulls me in. Hard. She opens her mouth to me, flicks her tongue against my lips. She tastes sweet and stale, like eggnog and alcohol.

I hear my brother whisper, "*Fucking. Perfect.*"

The house goes silent, except for the dull din of the TV in the other room, and I break the kiss, taking the two halves of my nutcracker from Sue's hands. Her eyes are wide, and her cheeks are flushed. I turn and slowly pad down the hallway toward my room with what's left of my Christmas gift.

As I walk away, I hear my brother trying to recover his composure. He makes a feeble joke about not being her type. Then he asks Sue if she's okay. She pauses before answering, "Your sister is a *really* good kisser," and I can't help but smile.

In my room, I lie on my bed and stare at the ceiling for a while. Then I rummage through my closet and find an old shoebox. It's full of pictures, which I dump on the floor. An hour

passes, maybe two, as I look at each photograph. My mother and father. Old girlfriends. Steven and I when we were kids. I place the pieces of the nutcracker in the box. Then I tear out the page with the inscription from *Lord Weary's Castle*, add it to the box, and tape it shut. I plan to wrap it in brown paper and, with a black Sharpie, write Christina's name and address in symmetrical capital letters. Tomorrow, I will take the package and mail it before I head to the airport. I can imagine the look on her face, her long lashes fluttering over her soft green eyes as she opens it. She'll see the broken nutcracker and the page from my book and realize that the holidays have come and gone, and that I'm okay. Hurt, but okay.

No, she won't. I know better than to believe that.

I toss the box into my closet and begin stuffing the discarded pictures into my bag when there's a knock at the door. I don't stop, but the door opens anyway and Steven asks, "Can I come in?"

"You can do whatever you want," I say, not looking up.

He sits on the corner of my bed. "Okay, so how the hell was I supposed to know, Janie?" he says. "I really thought she liked me." What he really means is *why didn't you just tell me?*

I look over, wanting to cut him with a retort, but Steven looks a lot like he did when we were young—boyish and bookish and a little afraid. "I'm sorry, I was angry," I say. "I miss Mom. And I miss Christina." It's not the whole truth, but it isn't a lie either.

Steve falters a minute, and then stretches his arm out to me. "Here," he says, holding out his Rolex.

"I'm not taking your watch," I say. "That's stupid."

"No. You take it this year. Next year, I'll have it back," he says, in the quiet thoughtful voice he'd use whenever we would go to visit Mom in the hospital.

I sit down next to him and let him fasten the watch around my wrist. It's heavy and solid. I give him a hug, something I wouldn't normally do. When he breaks the hug, he turns me

toward my bedroom's window. He snaps off the light. Outside, some teenagers are stealing the neighbor's flamingos and Santa sleigh. A beefy boy with a buzz cut takes the Ray-Bans from the lead flamingo and puts them on. Pleased with himself, he pulls the flamingo out of the ground. My brother and I watch, as one by one the pink lights on each bird go out, the neighborhood returning to the inky dark of night and a sleepy, opaque kind of peace. ■

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