

A Light in the Winter

I

All three had been quite sure they could make it.

After all, winters come and go, thought the old man. You treat each one with respect, but you know from experience you'll outlive it. The pompous blustering always capitulates with muddled apologies. He surveyed the night through the small area on his windshield that hadn't frosted over and mentally estimated the miles he had yet to travel.

Oh bother, fumed the young woman. She wished she had never promised to attend that meaningless meeting. It was necessary, of course, to have been there. The editor made that quite clear. She gave the heater button one more push, as though it hadn't fully understood her discomfort last time.

It was only the second winter the boy had been driving, and he couldn't recall that it was quite so bad last year. But he felt good. The car was new, a Christmas present from his uncle. The snow streaking back past his headlights reminded him of that jump into hyperspace he'd seen in Star Wars. He gripped the wheel, and gave the car just a little more gas.

Nobody saw the deer.

It was the woman's car that hit it. Actually, the deer ran into her car, with a startling thud. It caused her to swerve, and the old man, who was approaching in the opposite lane, did what he could to miss her. He was successful, and as the deer bounded away with only a bruised shoulder, both cars landed about twenty yards apart in the snowy ditch, having never touched each other.

It was the boy who panicked. He had been following the woman's car, and the sight of careening headlights through the blanketing snow made him lose his sense of direction. He steered wildly, and his car climbed a good ten feet up a drifted embankment before throbbing to a halt.

For several moments no one moved. Then the woman tried her door, slid across the front seat, and after a couple shoves opened the other door. Tightening her scarf, she looked around. Two sets of car lights bored into the darkness at unrelated angles. Hers had gone out.

She selected the man's lights, which were more nearly horizontal, giving a greater promise of reasonableness. The wind-whipped snow grasped as a child at her skirt, and she was glad she had worn her tallest boots.

The man had been slower to gather his thoughts and was less inclined to reenter the now disarrayed realities of the winter night. But as the woman's form appeared in the lighted area before him, he realized that, like it or not, something had to be done. So he opened his window slightly and called out.

"Are you okay?"

"Oh yes, I'm fine, but it's so nasty cold and what are we going to do?"

The question echoed his thoughts and confirmed a need to act. Besides, although his engine was still patiently purring, he knew instinctively that further travel that evening was not an option. Rolling down his window a few inches more he poked out an arm and gestured in the darkness.

"I think I passed a house a quarter mile back or so. You up for a hike?"

"Of course not." The woman stomped her feet, which were quickly numbing. She stared into the blackness in the opposite direction, hoping to discover an approaching vehicle. But it was late, and apparently the rest of the world had more sense than to be out on a night like this. "Well I guess we have no choice. Let's get going."

It took the man several minutes to gather his belongings, but eventually he waded up beside her and peered into her face.

“Name’s Bettner. Tom Bettner.”

“I’m Miss Allen. Reporter for the Gazette. Do you think anyone’s home?”

“Huh? Oh, the house. Yeah, yeah there was a light.” Tom was studying the angle of the boy’s headlights, which he had only now noticed. “What about them?”

“I don’t know.” Realizing he wasn’t ready to go, she gave an impatient sigh and turned down the road alone. “I’ll send someone back to help.”

Tom, who made it a point never to argue with a woman, glanced at her briefly, then turned his attention back to the car. The thickly falling snow seemed to gather light from the headlights and wrap it gently back around the car. It was a curious phenomenon, and Tom momentarily forgot it was his task to inquire concerning the occupants.

The blast of a horn broke his reverie. “Yes, of course,” he muttered, and plodded on. His boots weren’t that high, and the icy chill of collecting snow soon penetrated his socks. He reached the window and squinted in the darkness, trying to see inside. Finally he knocked on the glass.

“Who’s in there?” he shouted.

The window slowly lowered, and a young voice patiently announced, “I’m Jamie Carrison. Would you please call my father? He’s James Carrison, you know. Tell him to please send someone to get me. Oh, the number is 792-....”

But Tom wasn’t listening. It’s only a kid, he thought. Who in their right mind would let a kid out on a night like this? And how did he get this car all the way up here? And what, he added to himself, am I going to do with a kid?

“Say mister, whoever you are, help me get this door open.”

The boy’s request seemed appropriate enough, so Tom grasped the icy door handle and gave it a yank. Jamie pushed from inside, and suddenly the door opened, releasing a canopy of suspended snow onto the boy’s shoulder and sending the old man awkwardly into the snow bank.

“I say, this sure is some snowstorm.” The boy’s voice piped eagerly through his thick muffler.

Tom raised himself cautiously and groped for his cap. It was futile to shake the snow off, but he tried nonetheless. He had to cover his head with something.

“You’d better come with me.”

Jamie nodded. He was beginning to realize the old man was in no mood for conversation. He followed Tom obediently down the embankment, across the ditch, and up onto the road. Together they leaned into the night, a man and a boy, occupied with that instinctive determination to survive the Creator puts into every human heart.

II

The only semblance of a greeting was that offered by the cat. He was a large animal, with thick brownish-gray fur that eluded description. With absolute composure he examined the shivering newcomers, then brushed his side along the boy’s leg. Amenities complete, he returned to his post, an old green blanket folded near the gas furnace, to contemplate any further duties that might be required of him.

It had been the lady of the house who opened the door. She too had looked them over, and then pointed to a room on their left. Tom and Jamie followed her gesture, and saw Miss Allen seated wearily on what was probably the most comfortable of four unmatched chairs. The other

furnishings included a sturdy wooden end table, two lamps with ornate if dusty shades, a closed piano, and the furnace, which was clearly the cat's domain.

"I'm Mrs. Britt. There is no telephone. You can spend the night, but must leave tomorrow morning. There's tea in the pot," she tipped her head toward the end table, "and cups in the kitchen." With that she turned and left the room.

Jamie stared at her open-mouthed, but Tom nodded at her back and mumbled, "Thank you ma'am." Brushing his snowy jacket a couple more times, he selected the chair nearest the heater and sighed his tired body into it. In his view tomorrow was a much better day to accommodate further questions.

"What happened to her telephone?" The boy addressed Miss Allen this time. "How can we get something to eat? And how will they ever find us here?"

Miss Allen, preoccupied with her own thoughts, swept the air with her hand as though to clear it of the boy's questions. But she answered him nonetheless.

"There will be somebody on the road tomorrow. I have two stories to finish by Thursday, and the editor doesn't take excuses. Besides, no one else can do the entertainment page layout properly. They let Carmen do it once, but she left out the ad from Dunlow's. Almost cost us the account. The editor told me never to let her touch it again."

She broke off sharply and the room refilled with silence. The cat stretched, its tail twitching. The boy shifted his position too. He remembered his car, and wondered if he should have locked it. He wished he'd thought to bring along the bag of Fritos that was laying on the back seat. It had been nearly six hours since he'd eaten.

For a while no one spoke, or moved much. It was one of those occasions when time seemed to go by faster if you ignored it. The old man's eyes were closed, but the boy could tell by the way he breathed that he wasn't asleep. Jamie yawned and studied the lampshade next to him. Perhaps the lamp was worth some money.

At first Miss Allen thought it was the wind. The man opened his eyes slowly and stared at the cat. The boy stiffened. The sound was low and muffled, somehow both faraway and near. It lasted several seconds, then stopped, then repeated itself.

"What's that?"

"It's the old lady!"

Miss Allen's question collided with Jamie's answer. Tom shook his head. He was wishing the night had never happened. The sound began again. This time it was clearly sobbing, a strange weary sobbing, containing the tones of grief long carried. Somehow the three guests realized it was a private grieving and that their intrusion was not desired.

One more time, and the sound stopped. But it echoed much longer in the inner nerves of the boy, the woman, and the old man. More penetrating than the chill wind, it seemed to reach into their souls, thrusting aside layers of things normal, things routine, things understood.

To the boy it spoke of death. Someone had died, someone the old lady had loved. For the first time that evening he thought of his parents. They had expected him home hours ago. Although it wasn't the only night he hadn't made it in. Maybe they wouldn't care. But something told him they did.

His mind returned to him the sight of careening headlights on that snowy road. He remembered it to have been like a moment in the movies. He had closed his eyes and somehow things had righted themselves, just like they did in the movies. But now it didn't seem so simple. The echoing sobs bore witness: the scary parts of life don't always disappear. For the old lady, some past horror had left definite and irremovable stains on the fabric of her existence. In the daytime she was cold and aloof; at night she slept with burning memories.

These were new ideas to Jamie, and not especially welcome. But more troubling was the realization that given a different circumstance, he too might have died that evening. The embankment could have gone down instead of up. There could have been a tree. He could have hit the woman's car. He head began to swim with "could haves" and he shook it to clear them away. The important thing was that he hadn't died.

He eyed the cat, which had been startled by his head-shaking and was now licking its bushy tail. This was a strange place. So very different from the noise-crowded party he'd been at only hours earlier. So distant, almost like he stepped out of one lifetime and into another. Maybe he had entered hyperspace. But this wasn't a movie. The cat was a real cat and he was really here. And deep inside he knew that going back to that other world would never be quite the same. He took a long slow breath, as though to gather strength for what lay ahead.

To the woman the echoing sounds spoke of loneliness As a shadow cast across her mind, she realized one day she too would be old. Would she also be alone, to sob her regrets into night after uncaring night? It struck her that newspapers stride with lofty immortality past the lives of their reporters. Even their editors.

Miss Allen wasn't used to these sorts of thoughts, but somehow the night had become alive with them. She returned her mind to the Gazette. Working for the paper had always made her feel noticed, especially when her name was on a thousand newsprinted copies. But, reminded the persistent thoughts, newspapers are so quickly cast aside, most of them unread. And at best they are only paper, a frail link of pseudo-familiarity between writers and an anonymous public. People knew her, perhaps, but she never knew them.

She looked at the boy across the room. He'd read her paper, no doubt. But even if she told him her name, which she hadn't, he probably wouldn't care. Her sense of loneliness increased. Yet why should he care? I never cared about him. I left him in that car.

Like the snow swirling in the darkness outside, the woman's thoughts wound back and forth across her consciousness. She pressed her cold hands to her cheeks; they felt hot. This is ridiculous, she scolded herself. I'm just tired. Things will be clearer once I get out of this spooky place. Tomorrow is the day I have the interview with Mr. Wellbritton. That could be an important break. She drew herself up and fixed her eyes on the frosty window above the piano, so as to catch the first signal of dawn and freedom.

It was the old man who began to weep. Silent tears slowly wetted his trembling hands. The echo of the old woman's sobs in his soul had stirred to life a memory long unfaced. He'd heard those sobs before, years and years ago.

That night too had been a winter night. He had been a young man, like Jamie, but for him life was not casual and carefree. For months he had witnessed his father's life gradually being absorbed by a dark and fearsome cloud. With youthful wrath he had longed to beat on the cloud, to tear it to shreds before it stole his father from him.

But the cloud had prevailed. The night his father died Tom lay on his bed, so angry he could not cry. His mother's sobs, faraway and near, like tonight, seared his soul. If there was a God, Tom hated him.

Time had slowly crusted over his anger, encasing it so completely that it no longer touched his consciousness. He had done pretty well without God, or so it always seemed. But tonight there was a new stirring inside of him, gentle and faint but persistent. At first he didn't understand, didn't want to understand. Yet he couldn't stop it.

As the tears collected on Tom's cuffs, already wet with melted snow, he knew that inside he had endured a winter far colder than the one he'd walked through that night. Like the warmth of an April sun, comprehension entered his heart. His decision to hate God, made long, long ago, had

been for the dark cloud a double victory. His surrender to anger had paralleled his father's surrender to death. But winters do end, and so could this one. So could this one.

When Mrs. Britt rose the next morning her overnight visitors had already departed. They had left things in good order, she noted. Even the tea had been untouched. The cat meowed for his morning saucer of warm milk. Well, she thought, I wonder if there was anything else I should have done for them. She put the thought out of her mind and turned to fix the cat his milk.

Diane Woerner
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