

The Night of the Day After Christmas

Looms made the loudest noise, a metal against wood rhythmic slamming that I could hear late in the evening when everything else lay quiet and I stood very still on our front porch. I could picture the men wearing green or black t-shirts and standing by the dirty large-paneled windows and smoking cigarettes or drinking coffee. I would imagine car headlights turning the corner and the men leaning their sweaty faces out of the windows into the chilly updraft from the river below. They watched the single yellow light split in two and then go by and disappear up the hill toward the town square.

Inside the tall brick mill my mother, Maud, ran a long mechanical monster designed to cleanse and disentangle and align the wool fibers before they traveled to the spinning room where they were spun into yarn. She always wore high black sneakers and blue jeans and a short sleeve blouse while at work and tied her thick pelt of silver-gray hair back with a blue bandana. Her hair had prematured when she was only eighteen, the appearance of the first brilliant streaks prompting her older sister, Linda, to say that she was jealous and that a tint of silver in her own ivory black mane would surely put older clients more at ease and raise her tips. Eventually, Linda's hair did streak a yellowish-gray but those streaks, my mother once told me, only arrived after Linda had served two years in a New York reform school. By that time Maud's own hair, depending on the light or the time of the day, was either solid silver or platinum gray.

I first went to meet my mother as she came home from the mill when I was nine years old. It was the night of the day after Christmas and I wanted to try out my new pair of rubber knee boots. They were brand new and unused. I turned out the kitchen light and went outside into the fresh snow. Snow was everywhere. It was deep and over my boots and I cinched the tie strings at the tops and then ran through the snow, taking kicking goose-steps like a Prussian guard before a palace. Snow was falling and collecting on my cap. It came straight down in nickle-sized flakes, layering the street and the lawns and the roofs and clinging to the bare branches of the elms overhead so that they looked like parachutes billowing majestically in the storm. A hundred yards along I stopped high-stepping and listened through the wool of my cap as it held my ears snug against my head. Through the muffler of straight falling flakes came the hammering of the looms. The oily smell of the mill's insides flooded my senses and I stepped quickly through the snow, anxious to see and smell my mother.

Maud's sister, Linda, played the instrumental role in getting her to leave Halifax and move to New York City. Maud sailed from Halifax on the first commercial ship bound for New York after the cease fire of World War I, having been born and raised along with Linda, one older sister, Amy, and a brother, Donnie, in Clark's Harbor, Nova Scotia. Clark's Harbor is a tear-drop shaped peninsula that juts out into the wind and cold of the North Atlantic off the mainland's south westernmost tip.

My new Christmas boots sliced through the snow. As I got closer to the mill, the clamoring swelled and split into distinct sounds: a wood-against-metal slapping of hundreds of smoothly worn parts and then a quick pause followed by the slapping. I plowed up the first hill on Church Street and then up the second. I reached the top of the second hill and stopped between the steepled church and the red brick fire station.

In the center of the town square a fifty foot pine glowed solid with red bulbs and the Town Hall and the Hotel Rogers had rows of brilliant blue and red bulbs lining their fronts. Giant yellow stars and twenty foot candy canes hung lazily from the branches of the elms that filled the square. Buttery light spilled from the archway of the Lebanon Library and the snow covering the stone stairs looked like cake frosting being folded out of the night.

I was as happy as I had ever been in my nine years of living.

When Maud was four and Linda six, their stepmother killed the younger brother, Donnie. At the time he was two and just as well off dead, his throat raw from screaming and crying at the daily beatings he received from the stepmother. Neither Linda nor Maud nor Amy dared mention the beatings to their father because the stepmother vowed to kill the first one who opened a mouth. Their real mother had died giving birth to Donnie, and since her death the father, a cobbler by trade, had been working six days a week and getting drunk and beating the stepmother on the seventh.

Long before Donnie was hurled against the railing of the parent's bed, Maud began crawling into his straw filled crib every morning and soaking up his nightly urine with rags and straw and her clothes so that the stepmother would not realize that Donnie was wetting the bed. One morning though the stepmother caught Maud. She beat her so she could not hear for three days. After that Maud knew that the stepmother hated her even more than she hated Donnie.

When a doctor announced Donnie dead, the three sisters listened through the thin slat wall separating the bedroom from the kitchen. The stepmother explained how Donnie fell and tumbled down the narrow cellar way to the rock floor below. The doctor nodded and left.

I made a pile of snowballs and stacked them like cannonballs. No more than five or six car tracks circled the square, and when the first headlights appeared on the crest of Benton Hill I watched them come towards me and then waved at the passengers and quickly threw two snowballs when I was sure that the driver could not possibly see me. One sunk into the foot of soft snow on the car roof and the second blended into the white blanket of the storm.

The town clock struck eleven, the hour the second shift at the mill ended. I peppered the streetlight over my head and twice hit the yellow bulb as it blazed away in the snow smothered night. The light refused to pop and my arm grew tired. A couple more cars crested the hill and I looked at the sidewalk along the road, expecting to see my

mom come walking along it.

Two men came out of the fire station. They were startled to find me sitting there on their iron railing. One of them was Bobo Duhaimé and he waved at me and then threw a fast snowball. It sailed over my head and hit something behind me. I turned and the sermon announcement for the Congregational Church had a white catcher's mitt blocking out the upcoming Sunday's topic. Bobo laughed and the other fireman slapped him on the back. They walked away and faded into the distance like snowmen.

One snowy day the stepmother told Maud to go and get some groceries. Maud went. She was delayed returning by her shoes which let the snow in and demanded frequent thawings in front of neighbors' fires. Maud closed the door to her house and a flashing silver object passed her head and struck in the door by her cheek. It was a butcher's knife. Maud dropped the groceries and stood trembling before the enraged stepmother who screamed at her to get out. Maud turned and ran. She went to her aunt's house, and when she reached it her toes and fingers were frostbitten. She remained at the aunt's for two months and the old lady clothed and fed her. After two months the aunt found a family of Russian Jews to take Maud in.

The Jews loved Maud and did everything they could to show her affection and to make her happy. After a year the father of the family tried to adopt her, but her own father, who had become a drunkard, refused to allow it. Through eight years and repeated attempts he continued to refuse to allow it.

When World War I approached an armistice, the Jewish family made plans to return to Europe; Maud, who during the eight years had learned to speak and write Yiddish and to keep house for the picky couple and their five sons, would have to be left behind. As the Jewish family packed to return home, Maud sailed for New York City where Linda was living. Prodded by Linda, the father had signed the emigration papers.

A car stopped on the corner of the square. My mom climbed out and said thank you to the driver. She turned and almost tripped over me.

"What in heaven's name are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you, mom."

"You should be home in bed," she said with a smile.

"Can't we wait for Dad?"

She looked around at the square and the snowflakes collected on the blue bandana and on her silver gray hair.

"The shifts are short handed. He'll be working overtime."

She bent over and grabbed a bare handful of snow and flipped it at me. I tossed one back that she scattered with her lunch bucket. She laughed. she kneeled down, brushed the snow off my cheeks and kissed me. She took my hand and we started down the Church Street Hills.

My mom held my hand and I goose-stepped like a Prussian soldier. The snow was falling everywhere and the night was as quiet and as peaceful as a dream. We reached

our house and I switched on the kitchen light. I looked up at my mom's face. Ice coated her cheeks. They were as beautiful as waterfalls in winter.