

O Tannebaum

by James Van Pelt

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Christmas is about friends. You have to believe this and not get discouraged. Look around you. Everyone here is poor--some poorer than you--some are crazy, but look at them, eating turkey generous people donated, opening baskets full of clothes that are meant for them. All gifts of love. All symbols of human kindness. Today, of all days, you can't give up.

Here, pull up a chair. Grab a plate of turkey. Go ahead. Fill it up with dressing too. Everybody always shares. As long as I've lived, people have been kind. Maybe today I can give you a little in return for all that's been given me.

So there won't be any surprises, let me tell you something straight up front about me as an explanation. This Christmas day, I turned twenty-one--it's my birthday, I think, but not for sure. It's different for me. Lots of people don't know for certain when they're born. They're abandoned at birth, so a birthday is assigned to them, probably one pretty close too. A baby, you can tell within a month or two how old they are, but that doesn't work for me. See, I have to count days, because for me, it's always Christmas.

Well, that's not exactly true. Lately it's been Christmas--the last five years ago or so, and for the five years before that, it was the last day of the Saturnalia. And before that, one kind of winter solstice celebration or another as far back as I can remember. My years, of course. Not your years. Really, for me, it's always Christmas.

Like this morning, I woke up in this shelter. The cot felt solid under my back, and the bed roll was worn but clean. Smelled old, you know, but not bad. Some folks were already stirring.

Guy next to me sat up coughing. Young looking fellow. Maybe my age, but a real dry cough that doesn't bring up anything, and he kept going for a couple of minutes.

"Got to quit these coffin nails," he finally said, lighting one up, tears still streaming down his cheeks. He took a deep drag. "Gonna be a good one today. I can tell," and he offered me a smoke. See, first thing that happened to me today was an act of

generosity.

I shook my head. People moving all around. Elderly ones, or the touched ones, talking to themselves. Bundled up, mostly. Like that guy over there--three trashed coats and two grimy scarves. Hat pulled over the ears. It's warm in here, but homeless folk hold their clothes tight.

Gina entered my head then. I hadn't thought of her at first, and that made me sad, you know, 'cause every time we talk now it's probably the last. Without a miss for two-and-a-half months I've called her in the morning to say hi, to see how she is.

My months, that is, not yours. Like I said, everyday is Christmas for me, and for me, two-and-one half months ago was 1917 when this soldier I met, Humphrey, asked me to call Gina. He sat next to me in the trench; I'd found out earlier in the day that we were twenty miles south of Verdun. German trenches weren't a hundred yards to the east, but you couldn't see them. Broken spirals of barbed wire, torn up dirt, a busted ambulance were all I could see. Night had fallen, and it had gotten very cold. A sentry walking by, head low, broke through a layer of fresh ice that had formed over the mud, so every step crackled, then squished. We had to pull our feet back to let him pass. The soldier's boots made a silly little squeaking sound when they pulled free.

Humphrey laughed. He was tired and scared, an eighteen year old Brit with a downy, blonde moustache and blood-shot eyes. He laughed at the ridiculous sound though, and then he started telling me about his family and his girl friend, Gina. He talked for an hour, low and passionate and non-stop. He made me swear to contact her if he didn't make it home.

"It's Christmas," he said, and he didn't say anything about where we were or what we were doing. He leaned his head against his gun and shut his eyes and by the light of the winter moon told me about Christmas in Lancashire, where he was born. I wish you could have heard his voice, kind of low and broken. He was a lot more down than you. "They're roasting chestnuts," he said. "And eating quince pudding, and telling each other stories. My Uncle Charles will bring out a cask of stout--he makes it himself--and they'll tap it open. He'll pour pints all around. Charles and Aunt Edna will be pie-eyed and toasting to the King's good health. Gina will be with them." Humphrey paused for a long time at that. No other sounds up and down the trenches, just cold, milky light pouring down on us, and the air like ice razors pressing against our cheeks. Finally, he breathed, "Oh, Gina, my good girl, my black eyed girl."

"Do they sing carols?" I asked. It had been a good day for me. Everyone clapped me on the shoulder. Ruddy faced fellows, mostly young, like myself, like you. "Merry Christmas, old sport," they'd say. "Separated from your company, are you? Good thing you Yanks are in it now," and they'd offer me stiff shots of warm brandy from hip flasks that suddenly appeared.

"Yes," said Humphrey. "They sing 'O Christmas Tree.'" and he started to sing it, very softly, and I could tell he was crying. His voice, clean and clear, carried in that icy air, and it seemed like the only sound in the world, all tied up in the night sky and the moon and the barbed wire, and when he got to the part that goes, They're green when summer days are bright; they're green when winter snow is white, his voice cracked and he could go no further.

It was the saddest thing I have ever seen in my life: Humphrey slumped down in the bottom of the trench, lost and far from his home, from his Gina, the marvelous dark-eyed Gina who was hanging popcorn strings on a Christmas tree in a fire-lit room surrounded by Humphrey's parents and sisters and brothers and Uncle Charles and the homemade stout a million miles away.

And the echo of Humphrey's Christmas carol still rang in my ears, and I realized it wasn't an echo. It was the same tune, but the words had changed. Humphrey looked up too. He canted his head to one side and listened. Clear, so clear, as if the singer was in the trench with us, we heard a voice singing Humphrey's song. It sang, "O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum . . ."

Humphrey hopped up then, and so did I, and looked across the no man's land. A face looked back. A German face under a pointy helmet, and he waved a tiny, white handkerchief at us. Humphrey dug into his back pocket and waved his own handkerchief. I don't know who climbed out of the trench first, the German or Humphrey, but I followed Humphrey across the cratered ground to the broken lines of barb wire in the middle.

Humphrey didn't even pause at the wire. He stepped over it, his hand out, "Merry Christmas, old chap," he said.

"Frohliche Weihnachten mein freund," the German said back, and they shook hands.

I stood behind them, arms wrapped around me against the cold. The moon, bright as any flare. All the way up and down the lines, as far as I could see, men were tentatively climbing out of trenches, walking toward the enemy, embracing, pulling out pictures to show each other.

Humphrey handed me a flask, his eyes shiny, his face alive with merriment. "It's Schnapps," he said. "It's Christmas Schnapps."

I fell asleep that night in the trenches, and I woke up the next day, a year later on Christmas in a hospital in London. Called Gina on the telephone. Told her I was a friend of Humphrey's. Found out he had died in January, but she was so glad to hear from me. Asked me if I was the "Yank" Humphrey had written to her about.

We talked a long time. It was another good day. In the hospital they brought in big baked hams. Cut them up in the wards. Even the sickest of the sick. Even the amputees and fellows who'd been gassed in the battle who couldn't hardly breathe, were happy. I made sure they sang "O Christmas Tree," because I knew I'd made a

friend. For the first time in my life I could talk to one person from day to day. Gina told me to keep in touch. With the telephone, I could. No matter where I was on Christmas day, I could call her.

So when I woke this morning, the man in the cot next to me offered me a smoke. A fellow from the kitchen told me that they'd be serving turkey and all the fixings in a couple of hours. Some kids from the high school were coming over later to carol with us. I asked him where the phone was. Yesterday--last year--Gina wasn't doing so good. Her heart, she said, was weak. "But you're sounding good," she had said.

"Yeah," I said. "The year's have treated me well."

I made the call. She's in a nursing home in San Francisco. Moved to America in '57. I was afraid. The phone rang for a long time. Not many nurses on Christmas morning, and then someone answered.

I asked for Gina. Gina who, she said, and I told her. "I'm new here," she said. "I don't know that patient." Papers shuffled around on her end. She put the phone down, and someone mumbled to her in the background.

You've got to understand. I've never known anyone for more than a day. A day is all I get. I don't understand why. When the morning comes, I wake up, and it's Christmas. Sometimes I won't sleep for a couple of days, but everyone sleeps. It can't be avoided. Maybe I vanish in the night. Maybe a year later I appear when no one is looking. Who can tell? I always wake up in a place where a stranger could go unremarked, an army, a hospital, a festival, a flop house and soup kitchen like this one. I don't know if it's a curse--there's lots I don't know--but all I get is a day a year, and I'm a stranger that no one knows.

Then Gina came on the line. It was her voice. I've heard her grow old. "Hello, old friend," she said. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," I said.

Each year she's been there. Each year. She's ninety-six now. I'm twenty-one today. It's my birthday. In three-hundred and sixty-five years for you, I'll be twenty-two, but I want to tell you something. It's important I think.

I hear rumors of bad things in the world. I hear about wars; I've even seen some, but in my experience, human beings are good. They're generous. They share with strangers, and they reach out to someone they've only talked to on the phone once a year for eighty years. If you could just see things from my perspective, you'd understand, even without friends, people are good. There are reasons to hope.

You shouldn't give up. People will help.

And you know what else? I wonder if you could do me a favor. You could? Great. I wonder--would you mind if I phoned you next year, here? Do you think you could find your way back here on Christmas to take my phone call? It would mean a lot to

me.