

Christmas in the Catskills
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Michael Libling's efforts lately have been divided between work on a novel and assisting his wife Pat with her new gluten-free baking enterprise. (No comments from Mr. Libling on the subject of how much work goes into testing the brownies and biscotti, but he will admit that he learned hard lessons from his youth when he was a literal kid in a candy store.) The author of such stories as "The Fourth Kiss" and "Timmy Gobel's Bug Jar," Michael Libling sets the mood for the holiday season by reminding us we're also entering the darkest time of year.

Some Christmas this was shaping up to be.

All because of a little chocolate shop in Sturvis.

And then, to top it off, something started eating their car.

"Way to go, Livvy. Way to go."

Of course, Rick could just as easily have blamed *Bon Appétit*, where Livvy learned about "the most glorious, utterly heavenly, hand-dipped chocolates" in the first place. And though, mouth full, he admitted to her they were worth the detour—the dark mounds of caramel, marshmallow and cashews were something else—there was no end to his carping. "Hell, look at it out there."

"Try a chocolate cherry," Livvy replied. She did not remind him that taking the back roads had been his idea, not hers. In summer, you could save a good hour by cutting through the mountains. In winter, you just never knew. Had they driven straight through to Chartersburg, stuck with the interstate same as always, they might well have avoided the worst of it.

There had been flurries off and on since they'd left Manhattan, but nothing to suggest what was brewing up ahead. The radio station out of Albany hadn't even clued in. They claimed the clouds would be gone by noon, assuring Santa starry skies to light his way. Sunshine was promised for Christmas Day, but with below average temperatures. *Frigid* is the word the jock used, followed by some quip about an ex-wife, and then he, his sidekick and the traffic girl cracked up, giggled nonstop till Livvy switched to NPR and some biddy's reminiscence of turkey stuffing and candied yams.

"C'mon, Liv, those guys were a riot."

They couldn't have been more than twenty minutes out of Sturvis when the road up and vanished on them. Blizzard white. Out of nowhere. Like that.

"If God wanted to start over from scratch," Livvy observed, "this would make a fitting first page, don't you think?"

"Yeah. Sure." Rick often claimed deciphering Livvy was like being back in high school lit class, reading stuff that took forever to get to whatever it was the writer wanted to say.

He maneuvered the Malibu as far off to the side of the road as he dared. "Next thing we know—my luck—some asshole'll crash into us."

Livvy feigned agreement. There hadn't been much traffic—three cars at most. Pickups actually. *Assholes* were few and far between. "It'll probably blow over before too long." She slipped the lid of the chocolate box back into place. "At least we won't starve." She parted Rick's grimace with a morsel of marzipan.

Rick stared at the gas gauge, the needle on the downward slope. Slowly, his gaze shifted to his wife's belly. She smiled. Every worst-case scenario and cheesy movie of the week ran through her head. *What would he do? Get delivery instructions via cell phone?*

She deposited the chocolates among the gifts stacked across the back seat—a sentimental rainbow of wrappings, ribbons and bows. "Too darn pretty to open," Rick's family would say, as they ripped them apart. Most would have arrived at the cabin by now, going about their respective rituals. No doubt the tree was already up, though the decorating wouldn't begin till Rick and Livvy showed. Rick's dad claimed her eggnog was the fuel of creative tinseling. (It was also the old fart's fuel for copping a feel every chance he got. "He's just being friendly," Rick liked to say.) Meantime, if the snow wasn't blowing, Rick's older brother, Tom, would have cleared a rectangle of ice on the lake and the nieces and nephews would be practicing their figure eights, demolition-derby style. Most likely, too, Rick's mom had begun her vigil. Not for her. *God, no.* But for him. *Her little Ricky.* They weren't overdue yet, but it was getting close. Livvy adjusted her scarf, splayed the fringes across her lap.

"We could be here awhile. Might be best to put on some extra clothes." He looked back to the trunk. "Another pair of socks, a sweater, maybe." He released the lock, but the snow had drifted dead against the door. Livvy tried hers. The same.

"Great. Just great."

He eased down on the accelerator, shifted back and forth between D and R, but the tires only spun, and the rocking fishtailed them deeper into the bank.

"Damn." He slammed the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. "Should've forked over the extra fifty for that 4 X 4 instead of this piece of crap. And then you know what would've happened? Not a damn thing. Not a goddamn snowflake. Clear roads all the way and back..."

Livvy brushed sandy bangs from blue eyes, an impish grin upon glossy pink lips. She knew she should bide her time till his tantrum passed, but she could not resist: "I had no idea, Mr. Hollis, your choice of rental vehicle impacted so dramatically on the weather."

He turned to her, questioning, and gave up without even trying to make sense of what she'd said. "Can you believe this?" The face of his cell phone smirked *No Service*. He began to say something about climbing out the window when the car lurched forward. And the beast was upon them.

A woolly mammoth on the rampage.

Crunching. Grinding.

Plastic, rubber, metal.

Chewing, Jesus. Something was eating the car.

Rick pushed, punched, drove hard against the door. No give. Another jolt. The trunk bucked into the air and the door swung open. He lunged, arms flailing to hold it wide, but his seatbelt reeled him in, and the blizzard slammed the exit dead. Down they came, the bumper ripped from the chassis, so much flesh from a leg of lamb.

They tried the windows, but the switches clicked lifeless.

A retort from the right. Another from the left. "The tires," Rick shouted, as though the realization would somehow reassure. But Livvy's attention had moved to the crackling from the rear—spider legs racing through the glass. And the window disintegrated.

Shreds of socks, shirts, and sweaters flew into and out of view, Jackson Pollock flicking color on the canvas of the storm.

Paper and ribbons whipped about, a whirlwind of confetti in search of bride and groom.

Cold lacerated their necks, scored their spines. The smell of gasoline filled their nostrils.

He pounded at the door. Kicked at the glass.

They had to get out. But how?

She caught the bottle as it rolled from under her seat, grabbed it up and pressed the neck into his fist. Rick gawked. *The wine for Tom. What the...? Oh, God, yeah.* "Cover yourself," he hollered amid the din, and Livvy pulled her ski jacket up and over her head as he swung the bottle against the windshield.

But the windshield only smiled back, laugh lines creeping to Chevy scalp, ears, and chin. A sardonic half-circle of contempt. Taunting. Breath cool. Eddies of spittle filtering through as white as—as white as snow.

Again Rick swung and the bottle popped a near-perfect circle. Diagrammatic phases of the Moon playing across their windshield. And the jaws roared closer.

Once more. A larger hole. And then he kicked. Both feet. Frantic. Pumping. Doc Marten heels, Doc Marten toes. And then another swing of the bottle. A two-fisted swing. A Barry Bonds swing. And a rush of burgundy glass and snow exploded down on them, and over the dash and onto the hood he clambered.

Flat on his belly, feet and legs scrabbling for friction, he pivoted about, the wind pummeling him as he discarded the jagged neck of the bottle for the arm of the wiper blade. Down and in he reached for her.

Livvy grasped his hand.

Rose toward the opening.

And the airbags erupted.

The boy's eyes are on the door before it opens. *What is it Mama once said? Markus's ears are so big, he could pick a flea fart out of the dark at half a mile* and tell you whose dog it

had drunk to boot. Nothing gets past Markus.

The oskerei shriek from the belly of the storm as Papa emerges from the hastening dark into the yellowed gloom of the meeting hall. Close behind, on either side, a man and woman follow. His eyes are darting, head jerky. A chicken pecking feed. Knowing how Papa reels them in, this is to be expected. But the woman appears not to be rattled at all. Tired, surely. Exhausted, yeah. But most apparent is her curiosity. Eyes wide. Smile slight and tentative.

"She's pretty," Krissy whispers.

Markus nods. *And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry. Luke 15:23.* "I think she's going to have a baby."

Krissy's eyes widen. "Like Mary and Joseph?" Her jaw drops so low, her chin is lost for a moment in the hollow of her neck.

"Yeah. I guess."

"Think they're ours?"

Markus shrugs, watches as Papa helps the woman off with her jacket. The jacket is stained. Her slacks, too. Blood, maybe. Same with the man. Big bloody stains.

"Better set two more places," Markus says, and resumes his trek down the length of the table, folding the napkins, while Krissy follows with forks, spoons and knives. The Slungard girls—Beate and Birgitte—and Simen Midkil are doing the same on the opposite side, though Simen's folding isn't near as crisp as Markus's. Fourth year running it has been his job. Since he turned twelve. He will not be surprised when he is asked to refold Simen's.

Mama is happy to see Papa, but the others go about their business, never having doubted he would come through. Only the outsiders reveal any interest, observing from their benches and chairs, parochial clusters of anecdote, hearsay and tankards of Mr. Ansgar's juleol—his famous Christmas beer.

Papa stomps the snow from his boots so the whole room quakes and then, voice sobby, head bowed, he declares, "I almost killed them." His remorse is convincing to anyone who doesn't know any better. The newcomers bob their heads in weary confirmation, the man flexing his fists, the woman going so far as to give Papa a forgiving pat on the shoulder. What is it Mama once said? *Papa could rob a bank barefaced and, on the same visit, charm the manager into opening a savings account for him.*

Papa's announcement does the trick. Most everyone crowds around for details, something to pass time till dinner. Even Mrs. Slungard and Mrs. Ingstad poke their heads from the kitchen. *Has their rib roast ever smelled finer?*

Satisfied with the attention, Papa urges restraint, says the story will have to wait till Rick and Livvy are feeling up to it.

"Is Livvy the girl or boy?" Krissy asks.

"The girl, I think," Markus says.

"It's a funny name."

"Yeah. I guess." The woman removes her knit hat. Light brown hair spills out. *Gosh, she*

really is pretty. Fat or not. Funny name or not. Maybe prettier than anyone Markus has ever seen.

The outsiders rescued earlier are especially animated now. Never fails, getting stranded brings them together. *Camaraderie* is what Papa calls it. Weird how it works. Strangers. Nothing in common. Until Christmas Eve and Grimsdal.

Some wander close, introduce themselves to the newcomers. Each has a story to share. Abridged versions of how their Christmas came undone. Snow. Ice. Accident. Wrong turn. Car trouble. Flats. Freak this or freak that. *The usual*. Every story topping the one that came before, every detail played to the hilt, and plenty of chuckling, groaning, and head-shaking thrown in for color. But, as Papa warned, Rick and Livvy aren't up to chatting. Rick is beyond jittery, like he's a chestnut twitching in a fire fixing to blow.

"You should let the family know where we are," Livvy says. "Your mother will be worried sick." Odd. Despite her words, there is a calm about her. Rick's mother may be worried sick, but this Livvy is not.

Papa leads Rick to the back to use the phone. The lines are down, of course, but Rick doesn't know it. He assumes it is only his phone that's on the blink.

Mama brings Livvy a blanket and coffee. Livvy thanks her, but asks for a cup of hot water instead. "Or herbal tea. Mint or lemon, perhaps? I try to avoid caffeine—you know, because of the baby." Her voice is as soft and smooth as Christmas cream. She also asks if there's somewhere she might freshen up.

Krissy waits till Livvy is out of earshot. "Is she—are they going to be ours?"

Mama wags an impatient finger. "You've still the glasses to do, young lady. Look, Beate and Birgitte are almost done with theirs."

Now that Mrs. Ansgar is gone, the candles are Mama's domain. She has spent the year making them. Big, fat hurricane candles. Candles that burn down the middle, leaving an outer shell to protect the receding flame. Guaranteed to last the night and then some.

Mrs. Ansgar went faster than most. Dead before New Year's last she was. Mr. Ansgar blamed himself and rightly so. Knocked his wife's candle over changing a light bulb, he did. Not that anyone was surprised, seeing how he'd been into his juleol since lunchtime on the day. And though he set a match to the candle quick as a lightning, there was no escaping what he had done. Some said his trying to cover up was the reason she went so fast. On the other hand, had the Ansgars a guest to see them through the night, Mrs. Ansgar would have been spared. They weren't the only ones without a guest, just the only unlucky ones. It had been a lean year for outsiders. Bad weather wasn't confined to Grimsdal and the mountains. Word was, storms kept people off the roads clear across the state. Then again, why Mr. Ansgar needed to change a light bulb with two Christmas candles burning never made much sense to begin with. Made people talk, it did.

Mama's task is to make certain each family returns home with their fair allotment for the night. The arrival of Rick and Livvy has bumped the number of outsiders to fifteen—a measure of comfort, to be sure, and more than double last year's sorry total—but still far from the ideal. Twenty-seven Grimsfolk remain, after all.

Mama holds the tongs at arm's length as she lifts the candles from the tub. She adds

three to the four already in the Skarran basket. "They *are* coming with us," Markus tells Krissy. "They are."

It is only fair, since Papa rescued them. Markus is surprised, though; Mama has given the baby in Livvy's tummy a candle of its own. *So there are sixteen outsiders then.*

Livvy warms herself by the smallest of the four Franklins that heat the meeting hall. *Mary in the manger.* As though Grimsdal had been in her plans all along, rather than the other way around. Behind her, at the windows, cloaked in darkness, the oskerei grow testy, the panes frosted thick with the vapors of their breath, errant etchings of feathers and claws.

Rick paces. The weathered floorboards of his imaginary cage creak underfoot. "Some Christmas this is shaping up to be." He jiggles his cell phone, slaps it against his palm, his hip, twists it this way and that, invoking a higher power to bless him with service. Rick's actions, Markus thinks, are what Papa meant when he said some people are unable to accept their fate, blinded by the myth of free will. *The very hairs of your head are numbered. Matthew 10:29.* "Damn it. Should never have stopped at that stupid chocolate shop. You and your damn cooking magazines..."

"No one stopped you from returning to the Interstate," his wife reminds him.

"So we'd be stuck in some other shithole instead of here. Christ, I can't believe..."

"Lower your voice. Everything is going to be fine. These are good people..."

"Are you out of your mind? The guy almost killed us."

"...And do you smell what's coming from the kitchen? It's going to be wonderful. You wait and see, a year from now we'll be laughing about this. You'll see. You'll see."

"And my mother?" He grips the cell phone, forefinger itching for a trigger. "How do you think she's feeling right now?"

"The opposite of how she'll feel tomorrow when she learns we're safe. Things work out. They always do."

But Rick blathers on until Livvy levels him with a poke in the ribs. "You are making an ass of yourself." Cheeks red, she looks about to see if there are witnesses. Markus lowers his eyes, focuses on the refolding of Simen Midkil's napkins.

"But that guy could have killed us..."

The skinny outsider, the one wearing the Star of Bethlehem tie, ambles over to Rick and offers him a tankard of beer. Rick doesn't have to be asked twice. He sips. Grins approval. Takes a gulp. And retreats to a corner, joining with two other men to learn what more they may have in common, besides this place, their misfortune and this night of all nights.

Livvy sighs. A nice warm bath sort of sigh.

Krissy arrives with the tea. Introduces herself.

Livvy inhales the steam, then sets the mug down beside her. "Nice to meet you,

Kristine." She shakes the girl's hand with excessive formality, the way outsiders often do to impress sincerity on children. "I'm Livvy."

"That's a funny name."

"It's short for Olivia."

"That's a funny name too."

"Yes, I suppose. It's not too common anymore."

"Is that blood all over you?"

"No. Wine."

"I don't like wine."

"You never know, it might save your life someday."

"Huh?"

"It's a long story."

"My brother says you're going to have a baby."

"He's right. About two months from today, as a matter of fact." *Tap. Tap.* Livvy raps her knuckles against the wood of the bench.

"Would it be okay if I—if I touched it?"

"Be my guest." Livvy leans back, closer to the window, her tummy prominent beneath the winter knit—white snowflakes on a sky of impossible blue. Outside, the oskerei are surely licking their chops, smacking their lips.

"A boy baby or girl baby?"

"I don't know."

"I like girls best."

"It doesn't matter to me. As long as she or he is healthy, I'll be happy."

"Mama has a candle for your baby."

"Really?" Livvy smiles. "That's so sweet. I'll have to thank her." She surveys the room in search of Mama and catches Markus watching. Her smile grows broader, but he gives her nothing in return and she looks away, unease crinkling the corners of her eyes. Markus already knows what his sister must learn: It is not good to become attached to an outsider. Still, maybe he should have smiled. Should not have been so harsh.

Livvy raises the mug, peers over the rim, awareness dawning. "Why are there no decorations, Kristine? No Christmas tree?"

"We have candles."

"Yes, I know. But what about presents? And Santa?"

"Julenisse does not come to Grimsdal." Krissy leans in close. Markus cranes to hear.

"Because of the oskerei."

"Oscar's eye?" Livvy is puzzled. *Krissy should shut up. Markus should pull her away.*
"You mean Oscar the Grouch, like on *Sesame Street*?"

"What's *Sesame Street*?" Krissy asks, and Markus wonders the same.

Mrs. Ingstad clangs the stewpot with a ladle. Dinner.

Mama directs the seating. Outsiders are placed with the families with whom they'll be spending the night.

The doors of the kitchen fling wide and Mrs. Slungard and Mrs. Ingstad lead the procession of dishes and delights. The aromas are dizzying.

Papa cues grace.

Heads bow.

Hands clasp.

Eyes shut.

Mouths water.

Nostrils twitch.

Appetites run giddy.

Old Mr. Ansgar eases into his auctioneer twang: "In Jesus' name, we gather to eat and to drink and to give thanks to God..."

Markus settles in for the long haul. Peeks. Sees Livvy doing the same. She looks at him. But she is cautious now, does not allow herself to smile.

"Pray He protect our souls. Amen."

Amen? That's it? Markus can hardly believe his ears—his big ears. He is not alone. The break with tradition is startling. No one knows what to do. In years past, grace would ramble on so long, Mrs. Ansgar would interject a premature amen. But Mr. Ansgar is not the same without his wife. He has not so much as sampled the beer he brews. "Let's eat," he says. There is no protest. "Let this night be done."

Herring. Lutefisk with mustard sauce and melted goat cheese. Trout and salmon. Sausages and sausage patties. Boiled potatoes and corn. Stewed peas. Spiced cabbage. Cranberries. Flatbread—buttery crosses glistening on crisp crusts. Ramekins of creamery butter. And the rib roast. *The magnificent rib roast.* With crackling.

Sure enough, the outsiders dive right in, raves and food bits sputtered between bouts of rabid feasting. Everyone wants the story behind this dish or that. "Norse traditions." Mrs. Slungard has never been one to share her secrets. "Recipes handed down from mother to daughter. Meat. Fish. Vegetables. Eggs. Flour. Butter."

Mrs. Ingstad isn't any more forthcoming. She points to the lutefisk. "Some prefer to boil the cod, but baking cooks away the fishiness."

No headway on the recipes, the outsiders shift to questions of Grimsdal. Papa, Mama and the others field them same way as years gone by.

From where?

"Norway to Newfoundland. Newfoundland to New Brunswick. New Brunswick to Maine. Maine to here."

Really? How interesting! When?

"At the turn of the century. The last century."

Why?

"Religious persecution."

Oh.

Never fails. Talk of religion takes them down a notch, inspiring compassionate nods and topics better suited to aimless chit-chat and the festive season. Recipes, for instance. Except, this year, there is this Livvy. No stopping her. "Who was persecuting you? And just in Norway or are you saying over here as well?"

"Not *who*. *What*." Mr. Ansgar jumps in before anyone has had a chance to think an answer through. "The oskerei are a *what*."

Right away, the Grimsfolk twiddle fingers alongside ears, displaying the extent of Mr. Ansgar's sanity. Krissy sticks out her tongue for added flavor. Constipated smiles abound.

Mr. Ansgar ignores them all, wags a meaty rib at Livvy like he's conducting a symphony in a slaughterhouse. "We couldn't escape 'em then, can't now. They'll take us one by one, they will." His rib sags to his plate, slips into a bed of potatoes and mushy peas. He raises greasy hands to stem his tears. "Freya, my poor Freya."

Forks rest. Tongues click in sympathy for the losses the old-timer has suffered, both wife and mind. But the lull is fleeting. *Look at all this food*. Rick calls for the platter of trout and his buddy, the guy with the Star of Bethlehem tie, pleads for sausage. And though it is plain Livvy has plenty more to ask, feasting prevails.

Second helpings.

Third helpings.

Too many helpings to count.

By the time Christmas cream is served, all defenses are down. The outsiders feel they have known their hosts for years, if not forever.

Papa winks. Markus lets himself smile. All is going well. So well, in fact, Markus turns to Livvy, lets her see his mouth in all its toothsome glory. She returns the smile.

Best night of the year.

Worst night of the year.

Just nothing like Christmas.

"So I'm out cold in the snow, lying there—what? I dunno—ten seconds, ten minutes? Not a clue, man." Rick holds a tankard and the floor, his left hand carving the highlights of his tale. The story will surely get bigger and better with repeated telling, should he have the chance. *The words of a wise man's mouth are gracious; but the lips of a fool will swallow up himself. Ecclesiastes 10:12.*

"First thing I notice is this chocolate sitting on my chest. Yeah, a chocolate. Right here. But then I realize something's missing. There's no crunch. The thing has stopped eating the car. And then, I think—jeez—Livvy.

"I'm on my feet in a flash. But I can't tell up from down. I mean, this storm isn't letting up. And I don't know if it's Earth or sky rushing at me. That's when Ulf here—Mr. Skarran—catches me. 'Hey, mister, you all right?' he says. And I'm thinking I've come face to face with a talking grizzly, for Christ—for crying out loud. I mean, look at the man."

Papa feigns embarrassment.

"Ever see anybody hairier? But then I realize grizzlies don't wear mittens. And then I say...Jeez, what did I say, Ulf?" Rick quaffs his beer as if it's his first.

"My wife." Papa blots cream from his beard and moustache. "Where's my wife?" That's what he said."

"And then Livvy here calls out..."

Livvy blushes, accepts her husband's handoff with reluctance, her voice almost inaudible. "Get me out."

Rick sets down his beer, loses his hands in his pockets. "I got to tell you, when I saw what was left of the Malibu, I nearly shit my—passed out. The hood. The hole where the windshield was. Livvy stuck behind the airbag..."

Mama expresses concern for the baby, but Livvy allays the fear. "I was leaning forward when the airbag went. My shoulders took most of the blow."

"...And seeing Ulf's snow blower—no more than a seatback from Livvy—and, well, I didn't know what to think. How many screws on that thing, Ulf? Three? Four?"

"Four." Papa hangs his head. Nobody does shame better. "I was heading back when it hit. You never know in these parts. Weather comes from nowhere. Figured I'd do some cleaning up on my way. Never traffic along there. Least of all Christmas Eve. Last I expected was to catch folk roadside. Don't know what I'd have done if I'd..." Mama takes Papa's hand. Nobody does solace better.

"Perhaps it's fate," Livvy says. "Perhaps we were all meant to be here tonight. As frightening as this day has been, I want you to know I have never experienced a more memorable Christmas. I would not trade this day for anything. Thank you. Thank you all so much."

Rick gags up a "God" or a "Jesus" or maybe both, but the seconding of Livvy drowns him out. Glasses and tankards strike gratitude. Hands applaud. And just like that, the enthusiasm gives way to teary-eyed contentment. But it's killing all the fun. *Livvy killed all*

the fun. And there's no way Rick is going to let it go: "What the hell is this, The Last Supper?" His drinking buddies crack up. "The good news is, the Malibu was only a rental. And best of all, that chocolate on my chest—I ate it." The laughter builds. Until the first window shatters.

There are screams, gasps, but no one moves.

No one speaks.

It is the window by the pot-bellied stove, where Livvy had warmed herself. Not the entire window, only a pane. And then a second and a third and a fourth. Panes popping like the meeting hall is built of bubble-wrap. And a fifth and a sixth and a seventh and an eighth. Until the smashing comes full circle.

Outsiders have been known to dive for cover when the windows go. But not this year's lot. They sit kind of stunned, calves in the aftermath of a mallet to the head. Maybe it's the beer. Maybe the dinner. Or maybe the example set by the pregnant woman whose curiosity would seem to leave no room for fear. No matter how hard he tries, Markus cannot stop looking at her. *Just can't.*

"What the hell was that?" Rick's shirtfront is soaked with beer.

Papa stands, palms raised to allay concern. "Only the storm letting us know it's still got some wallop. Funny thing about our valley, the way it whips up the winds coming down the mountains. Turns gusts into cannonballs, it does."

"Cannonballs, my ass," Mr. Ansgar mutters.

"As good a time as any to call it a night," Mama suggests. The whole table murmurs resigned agreement, the outsiders too, though they have not a clue as to what they are agreeing to.

Some women sweep up the glass, while others clear the table. Mrs. Slungard and Mrs. Ingstad oversee the leftovers.

Men board over the broken panes. Each square of plywood a spot-on fit. Not the first time they have had to deal with the problem. Not even close. Outsiders volunteer to help, but the Grimsfolk won't hear of it, and they return to their clusters, shared tales of freak weather now the topic of choice. *Hailstones big as tennis balls. Winds so strong, the roots of trees ended up where the branches should've been. Rain so heavy, so fast, folks drowned in their beds.*

Before heading out, all stop by Mama's table to fetch their candles. Grimsfolk wish her well, jaws set for the night ahead, and Mama wishes them the same. They take their baskets and move on. But the outsiders still think it's some kind of party, tossing *Merry Christmases* so freely you'd think they had some sort of a speech disorder. Like the way Simen Midkil can't get through a sentence without a *you-know* or two.

When all are gone, Krissy asks Mama, "Why do they say Merry Christmas?"

"Because they do not know any better," Mama says, forgetting Livvy stands nearby.

The Moon is a bright three-quarters, with so many stars, you'd think God spilled salt across the sky. "It's strange," Livvy says, "there's not so much as a breeze, yet I can still hear the

wind."

Mrs. Skarran nods. "Sometimes, the mountains play tricks on the ears." Ulf strides ahead, Markus at his side, Krissy trotting to keep up.

"But listen, I could swear it was right here." Livvy glances back toward the meeting hall, searches the sky. "As if it were blowing all around us."

"God, I could use a smoke." Rick hunches his shoulders against the cold. "Why don't you people put up some decorations, for Christ's sake? It's Christmas, Jesus."

Ulf helps Livvy into the wagon. An ancient Ford International that'd be worth some bucks if it weren't gone to rust.

The ride from the meeting hall is a half-mile, no more. But Livvy takes it all in, striving to make sense of the sights the blizzard had earlier concealed. Cottages, bungalows, and trailer homes scattered among tumbledowns and razed foundations. More homes abandoned than lived in. *This isn't a village, it's a vestige.* "How big is Grimsdal?"

"As big as you see," Mrs. Skarran replies.

"I mean the people. How many live here?"

"You met them tonight."

"All of them?"

"All who are left."

Rick leaps in like he's delivering a lecture to the hard of hearing. "What do you expect when you don't keep up with the times?" Livvy grabs his hand, but it doesn't do much good. "Dead towns all over the Catskills these days. And if they're not dead, they're dying. And they deserve it too, I'm telling you. Bring on the Wal-Marts, I say. More the better."

Ulf grips the steering wheel as if he's weighing anchor.

Before her coat is off, Mrs. Skarran sets a pot of coffee on the stove. A large pot.

Livvy hangs back, taking the place in. The foyer emerges into a single large room that occupies the main floor of the cottage. The kitchen takes up the wall straight ahead. To the left, a dining area. To the right, a sitting area. In the center of the room, a staircase leads up. *Where did Mrs. Skarran get her decorating ideas? A Steinbeck novel?*

Linoleum dominates. Brown measles pocking beige upon the floors. Swirls of variegated paisley on the walls. Livvy is disappointed that even within the Skarran home there is no Christmas tree, but she is mindful not to bring it up. Unlike Rick, who isn't holding anything back: "Jesus, haven't you people heard of carpets? This place is an icebox." Livvy glares, but he takes no notice. He flops into the armchair. Throws his heels onto the coffee table. "What's Christmas without a tree? And lights? You need colored lights. I'm not saying your beer's no good, but you people could do with some eye candy, if you know what I mean. Jesus, don't tell me you got no TV? How do you know it's New Year's without Dick Clark?" He blusters on till a yawn paralyzes his tongue.

Markus approaches, his head down. "It dropped," he says, the words more retched than spoken. Her scarf sways from his hands. She thanks him, her fingers gliding cross his palm as she takes it. He nods and hurries off. He is big for his age. Sixteen. Seventeen. Eighteen. Somewhere in there. Destined to be a grizzly like his dad. She remembers boys like him from school. At once humorless and humorous. So shy around her. Awkward in their yearning. Not at all like Rick had been.

Krissy carries the basket as Mrs. Skarran takes the candles. She staggers four across one end of the kitchen table, three across the opposite. "Is there significance to the pattern?" Livvy asks, eager to be delighted.

"I guess," Mrs. Skarran says, as though she has never thought much about it. "Ours are here, yours there. I try to set them far enough apart so they all burn the same. Wouldn't be fair otherwise. Each must last the night."

"And if they don't?"

"Hell, who wants to last the night in this hole?" Rick can't keep his mouth shut. "What's Christmas without gifts under the tree? And TV? What's Christmas without TV? You got a set upstairs, maybe?"

Markus rams a log into the Franklin.

Again, Livvy attempts to atone for her husband. "Are the candles a Norwegian custom? I'd love to hear the story."

Ulf snatches a candle from the Skarran end of the table. "The story is it's Christmas. And this is what we do. We light candles. That's all there is to it. Save yourself the bother, Mrs. Hollis, don't look for more."

She swallows. Breathes deep. Peers over her belly and counts measles on the linoleum at her feet. Watches in silence as Ulf drags his thumbnail through the candle, leaving his mark.

The candle-lighting does not amount to much. No colorful costumes. No goofy hats, frilly shirts, or embroidered dresses. No quaint songs or chants. No folksy tap-steps, kicks, or pirouettes. No prayers. No Jesus. Nothing for anthropologists to record for posterity.

Ulf strikes a wooden match and lights his candle. Mrs. Skarran, Markus, and Krissy initial their candles and do the same.

Mrs. Skarran offers the box of matches to Rick. "Please."

He hauls himself out of the chair with a bellyful of grunts and reels toward the table. Mrs. Skarran shrieks, afraid he will overshoot the mark, upset the candles. Ulf leaps to intercept, arms extended in the manner of a crossing guard. But Rick steadies himself, pauses, stifles a belch. Livvy reaches for a candle, but Mrs. Skarran stops her. "He must choose his own."

Rick wobbles closer, strains to focus, reaches out.

"Mark it for him," Ulf instructs.

Livvy scratches a ragged R into the wax. She strikes a match, secures it between Rick's thumb and forefinger, and guides his hand to the wick.

Livvy lights two. One for herself, one for her unborn. On the second, she engraves a *B*.

"For baby," she explains, though no one has asked.

All watch as the candles flicker, save Rick. He is back in the armchair. Out like a light, funnily enough. Were it not the dead of winter, his snore would be confused for cows lowing in a neighboring pasture.

The awe with which the Skarrans observe the candles is baffling. Livvy has witnessed more brilliance atop a PriceChopper birthday cake. But then, she wonders, is it awe or something else? Trepidation perhaps? Still, in a voice filled with reverence, she says, "They're beautiful. Really. The simplicity. And Krissy mentioned you make the candles yourself, Mrs. Skarran—for the entire town. Amazing."

"The flames." Mrs. Skarran clasps her hands at her mouth. "They are the harbors of our souls."

"So beautiful. Truly."

"I will show you to your room," Ulf says. "You are tired."

"Please. I'd love to hear the story."

"I told you, there is no story."

"But your wife said the candles must last the night. What if they don't?"

"Then our home will be one candle darker."

They try to rouse Rick from the chair, but he will have none of it. "When he gets like this, it's best to let him sleep it off," Livvy advises. She loosens his shirt and wipes the drool from his chin with his collar. "I'm so sorry. Whenever he has too much to drink—"

"Will he sleep the night is all I want to know," Ulf demands.

"Yes. Usually."

"Usually is not good enough."

Livvy fires back. "Yes, he will sleep the night. And most of the morning too, if I know him. And I do. All too well, I do. Satisfied?"

Ulf nods, backs off, admiration buried within the thinnest of grins. He is hardly the first man to be deceived by Livvy's looks.

They leave Krissy to attend the candles and, Livvy supposes, Rick. But no one explains why the responsibility has fallen to the youngest. What could she do should Rick awake?
Tattle on him?

Ulf hovers by the stairs. "Sooner we get to bed, the sooner we get to morning."

"Should I check the windows for drafts, Papa?" Markus asks.

"Never hurts," Ulf replies.

Mrs. Skarran hugs her daughter. "Don't forget the coffee. Whenever you think you need it and especially when you don't."

"I know, Mama."

Krissy opens her arms to Livvy, a second hug to spare. Livvy smiles, wraps the girl up in her arms. Krissy whispers warm at her ear, "Don't worry. I'll make extra sure your candle doesn't go out. You're too nice to die."

Livvy's legs are jelly. Her heart in her mouth. But none of the others have heard what Krissy has said. And Livvy has no doubt it is best to keep it this way.

How she makes it up the stairs and to her room—Krissy's room—she does not know.

It is Christmas Eve.

She is three days short of seven months pregnant.

She is in a house with people she does not know.

She lies in the bed of a ten-year-old named Kristine. Krissy.

The girl sits below, drinking coffee, watching seven candles burn. *Why isn't she waiting for Santa? She should be waiting for Santa.*

Rick sleeps off his binge in an armchair. Rick. Her husband of four years. *His father must be missing his eggnog. His mother must be worried sick about her baby boy.*

The wind rages, but the branches of the trees do not move.

She should be dead.

Or is she dead?

Did Ulf Skarran and his snow-blower grind her to nothingness?

Fresh minced nothingness?

But if, as Krissy said, she is too nice to die, then how can she be dead?

The baby kicks.

Life gets weird sometimes.

So weird.

Eyes on the snow-lit gray of the ceiling. If she has slept, she does not remember a wink of it.

She casts the comforter aside, steps softly into the hall.

You're too nice to die.

He hears as she enters his room. Knows it is her without opening his eyes. The way she moves. Breathes. *Thinks.*

She calls his name.

"Please, Markus, tell me. Tell me about the candles."

Lie still, he tells himself. Sleep. *God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able. 1 Corinthians 10:23.*

"Please." She strokes the back of his hand. "I won't tell anyone."

He wants to touch her. Her hair. Her lips.

"I want to know about the candles."

"No."

"It will be our secret. I promise."

"I can't."

She squeezes his hand. "Tell me, Markus."

"They must burn the night. The whole night."

"And if not?"

"I can't."

She rests her head beside his on the pillow.

"The people whose candles go out..."

"Yes?" she prods.

"I shouldn't."

"Tell me."

"They will be dead before Christmas next."

"Because of a candle, Markus? Surely, you don't believe this? Or your parents? Do you know what a superstition is? An old wives' tale?"

"Mrs. Ansgar was the last. Taking wash down from the line, she was. Wind smacked Mr. Ansgar's overalls into her face. Frozen solid, they were. Drove her nose into her brain, they said. And before her...Mama and Papa say, in Norway, we once numbered hundreds."

"But think about it, Markus. If this were true, why would anyone be so foolish as to light a candle? If you don't light them, they can't go out. And if they can't go out, no one will die. Don't you see?"

"Because of the oskerei. If we don't light them, they will take us as they please."

"What are you talking about?"

"Listen. They're waiting."

"It's the wind."

"It's them. Do you know Heaven and Hell, Livvy?" Never before has he spoken her name aloud.

"Of course."

"The oskerei—they are the souls God has judged too good for Hell, but not good enough for Heaven. They must roam the in-between for all eternity." He recites the story the way it has always been told to him. Same words. Same phrases. Same foreboding. "Unless."

"Unless?"

"They can steal the soul of another. That's what they did in olden times. Swooped down upon the people as they wished. Preyed upon any soul they fancied. Anytime. Until the people begged God to help. And so He came to give the oskerei one night a year."

"Christmas Eve."

"But not even this was good enough. Because now whole villages would be taken on this single night—this one night God had given. Again, the people prayed. And God answered with the candles."

"God has always been partial to candles," Livvy says. "Fires. Burning bushes. Our Pyromaniac, who art in Heaven."

"What?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"The people, they were told to light the candles each Christmas Eve. Those whose burned till sun-up would be protected from the oskerei till Christmas came again, but those whose candles went out would be taken before the year was done."

"It's a good story, Markus, but only that. Were it true, the whole world would know. The oskerei would be everywhere. Christmas Eve would hardly be a joyous occasion."

"It is not joyous." He shakes his head. His nose brushes her ear. He licks his lips, catches his breath. "The oskerei don't care about anybody. Only us."

"The Chosen, so to speak."

"The oskerei want to get to Heaven. Some might not mind Hell—better than Nothing, Papa says—but most want Heaven. So they look for people—souls who will pass through the Gates. Humble people. Righteous people."

"Enter the Grimsfolk..."

"They have been with us since the first candle. No matter where we ran. No matter how hard we prayed. No matter how unhumble or unrighteous we tried to be. There was nothing we could do. Nothing."

"Except find others to take your place."

"Yes." He inhales her hair. Bites his lip.

"Your father plowing into us wasn't an accident, was it?"

"The oskerei help out with the weather."

"And the others who were stranded?"

"The more outsiders on Christmas, the easier to save our souls. When a Grimsfolk

candle goes out, we switch with one of yours."

"And the oskerei don't know the difference? Really?"

"Not even the marks matter. Only where the candles are placed on the table when they are lit. A small mercy, Mama calls it. The only thing we can get past them, Papa says."

"Unless, I suppose, you're the outsider whose candle has been switched."

"Yes, Livvy." There. He'd said her name again. And it felt just as good rolling off his tongue the second time as the first.

"And if it is the outsider's candle that goes out? What then?"

"The oskerei will have him, surely as if he were Grimsfolk born. Once a candle is lit, there is no going back. Doesn't matter whose it is."

"Oh," she says.

He snuggles closer, her belly firm and round against his hip.

"Only one thing I don't understand. If these candles are so important, why trust their safekeeping to a child—your sister?"

"Coughs and sneezes."

"Pardon me?"

"In the beginning, they say, many candles were blown out by those who coughed or sneezed. So the littlest was made to watch, because the littlest will have the littlest cough or sneeze. It is safer, they say. Before Krissy, it was me."

"But Rick—my husband—he could..."

"No. After you bedded down, Papa and me, we fetched some rope. He didn't wake up once."

"You tied him up?" Her voice has gone shaky.

"Stuck a mitten in his mouth too so he would not make a fuss if he did wake up." He senses the fear that suddenly fills her heart.

She takes a long while, then says, "Thank you, Markus."

"You won't tell I told, will you?"

"I promise." She kisses him on the cheek. He turns his head to catch her lips, but she is gone.

Lust not after her beauty in thine heart; neither let her take thee with her eyelids.
Proverbs 6:25.

"Livvy," he says. "Livvy."

Krissy's head rests upon folded arms, her eyes shut tight. A coffee mug sits full upon a stool beside her, placed so as not to disturb the candles should it spill.

Livvy searches three drawers before she finds the knife. Not a spoon rattles.

She searches four cupboards before she finds the pitcher. Not a dish clinks.

She fills the pitcher with water, pauses by the candles, proceeds to the armchair. She extends her arm and empties the pitcher onto her husband's head.

Rick splutters to consciousness, gags the mitten from his mouth. Through muzzy gauze, he sees Livvy looming before him, the pitcher in one hand, the blade in her other. He cries out, but hears nothing. He rises to escape, but goes nowhere.

She holds a finger to her lips, draws his bloodshot focus to his bonds. "We've got to get out of here," she whispers. "Now." She cuts the ropes.

Livvy searches two pockets before she finds the keys to Ulf Skarran's Ford International.

Livvy Hollis primps at the mirror in the hallway, applying the finishing touches to her lips. Red for the holidays. She puckers. Purses. Cocks her head just so. Perfect. For a perfect Christmas. Christmas in New York. Finally, a Christmas with her family.

She smiles, pops the cap back onto the silver tube, as the doorbell chimes.

She does not recognize him at first. It has been a year, after all. He has to tell her: "It's me. Me. Markus Skarran."

"Markus?" She catches her breath. "What are you doing here? How did you find—"

"I've come to be with you. And look. Look what I brought." He raises his hands. A big, fat candle in each. "We can light them together."

"What are you talking about?" She peers over his shoulder to the street. "Where's your family? Your parents?"

"I saw you," he says. "I watched from the stairs. I saw you fill the pitcher. I saw you drip the water on his candle. And then you poured the rest on his head."

"Don't be silly," she says. "I did no such thing."

"He's been taken, hasn't he?"

"It had nothing to do with your silly superstition. It was an accident. In April."

"I like your lips. The color is pretty."

"Let me call your mother. She must be worried sick."

"No. No, she's not. After, when you and him were gone, I went to the table. I put out the rest."

"You what?"

"All of them. Except two, Livvy. Yours and mine."

"Oh God, Markus, no." She stifles her scream, hand over mouth. Drops the lipstick at his feet. Races to the staircase behind her. Cannot get to the top soon enough. Kicks off her

heels. *Please*. Races down the corridor. *Please*. Turns the knob. *Please, God*. Opens the door to her daughter's nursery.

"Where's the kitchen, Livvy? I'll put the candles on the table, Livvy."

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