

A Winter's Tail

It was snowing so hard, I almost hit the old man. It was pretty dark, sure. And he WAS right out in the middle of the road, waving his arms like a madman. And to tell you the truth, I really didn't expect to see anyone out at the Superstore so late on Christmas Eve. I skidded to a stop and popped the doors on the transit bus.

"You damn near hit me", he scowled, heavy shopping bags swinging. You go down to the Beach? Down by the blue bridge?"

"Last run tonight. You just made it. You'll have to walk from WalMart. That's as close as I get."

"Hmmp", he said, big boots heavy on the step as he climbed in. Stomping snow. "Damn LCBO closed at 5 tonight. Wish somebody had told me." Missus sent me out for a wine run. At this hour...can you imagine?"

I don't like last minute calls to work, and I sure don't like driving after dark. Just my luck to get stuck with some old bum on what has already turned out to be the worst day of my life.

The old man snorted. "Every year she has the gang over for Boxing Day dinner. 'They work so hard' she says. But, of course, she forgets all about the booze, and guess who gets to go out and make things right? Them little buggers drink like fish, too...Pain in the ass, if you ask me.."

The old man plunked into a front seat and set his bags down with a distinctive clank that could only mean bottles. He clawed at his beard and brushed snow off his overcoat, finally using the sleeve to wipe his nose. I closed the door and pulled out. There was no traffic, and we rode silently through the storm. Wipers on the windshield. We were well past the Recplex before he spoke again.

"You're awful quiet tonight son. Not feeling well? Nice night to be out, except for the storm, I mean. Something bugging you?"

"Well, I shouldn't really be here. Got called in last minute. My dog is sick. I'll be surprised if she doesn't die tonight." My voice caught on the last part of "tonight". I wasn't going to do this.

"Ah", he said. "That's too bad. Me and the missus, we know plenty about livestock, but we've never had a dog. Damn animals are a blessing, I suppose, but they're a curse, too."

I didn't really want to talk, but something the old man said had made me curious. "A curse? How so?"

"Well", he said, leaning forward, "It's kind of like gettin' married, isn't it? When you first hook up, it's all fun and games, and you think that's just gonna last forever. It don't always work that way though, does it? You go through good times and tough times, and sometimes you just want to walk away but inside, you know you just can't do it. It's like making a promise." He thought about that one for a minute, and wiped his nose again. "See, any damn fool can MAKE a promise, son. I've made some pretty big ones in my time and I can tell you they're not always easy to keep. There's a lot of Devil in them details sometimes. That's what gets you through though, I suppose...dealing with the devils..." He laughed a big, gruff laugh. "That said, though, I wish I'd never promised to go get this damn wine. I can tell you that."

We lapsed into quiet again. The sound of big tires squawking through the snow. Schoonertown. Glen Eton. Veterans' Way. Not a single soul at any of them. Good folks of the world hunkered down for the night. Which is where I should be. Absolute quiet. The soft hiss of the heater fan. For a minute, I was thinking the old man might have nodded off, but suddenly he sat up, bottles clanking as he moved his weight.

"Say. What time is it, anyway?"

I glanced at the GPS. "It's a quarter after eight"

"Quarter after eight? It can't be." He was suddenly animated. "I've got to be somewhere. Stuff to do. Any way we can pick up the pace a little?"

I sighed to myself. Really. Another bum out in the middle of the night, in a great big hurry to go no place. I'm certainly not going to step on it. Only a fool would speed in this crap.

"Tell you what we'll do, Pops." I pulled into the left turn lane, turning at the cop shop and winding my way down past the library and town hall. "I'll take you down to the bridge, how's that? There's nobody out here anyway, and it's my last run. No one will ever know." He sat back. "Unless you rat me out, of course." My standard joke. Truth be told, I was craving solitude.

I pulled up to the corner by the bridge and popped the door.

"Blue bridge. Here you go. This ought to give you just a bit more time."

"Well, I appreciate this, son. I really do." The old man gathered up his bags and went down the steps. "Guess I'll have to owe you one.." He turned at the bottom and gave me a long look. "A bit more time", he said, "Yes, that's what we'd all like, isn't it? Just a bit more time. Well, thanks again, son." I heard him laughing some more as he clanked out into the storm, and then he was gone.

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Maggie was on her pillow beside the couch when I came inside. She tried to lift her head and give me a wag, but she just couldn't seem to find the energy. She looked at me with glazed eyes and sighed a big, long sigh, nose between paws. I walked across the carpet in my snowy boots, gathered her up in my arms, and carried her outside to take care of business. When she was done, I brought her back in and laid her gently down on the pillow again. Dinner was out of the question. She hadn't eaten a thing for the last two days. Come to think of it, I wasn't particularly hungry myself. Exhausted, angry and heartbroken, I lay down on the couch and put my hand out to touch her beautiful, perfect head and sang her favourite song - a little nonsense where the only words were really her name, over and over again. Before I knew it, I was fast asleep.

The transit bus is stuck. I mean REALLY stuck. In a snowdrift that NOBODY could ever get out of. And the doors are stuck. Wide open. We have taxpayers here too, trying to get to the Link bus to go to work, and we are not going anywhere. The guy in the green parka yells something in my direction, then picks up a big wad of snow and throws it through the doors. And then, all at once, everyone is making snowballs and throwing them into the bus. Cold, wet and horrible, they are hitting me right in the face, over and over again.

Suddenly, I'm awake, and facing the coldest, wettest nose ever. Maggie is paws up on the couch, giving me the once over, pawing my arms, and punching my face with her beautiful nose.

"Maggs, what is it? What is it, girl?" She's off the couch now, and back on, and off again, and suddenly, she's gone, racing around the house like something gone wild. Under the bed, and back to the couch, and around the little tree we bought which I set up last week but haven't even decorated yet. Finally she skids to a halt and plops on the pillow, looking up at me. I'm afraid to say it, but I do.

"Do you want some breakfast, Maggs. Want some food?" Immediately, she's off again skidding her way around the corner into the kitchen and I can hear the clatter as she runs into her bowls, sending them flying. "Food

hockey" we call it. We make bacon and eggs.

By ten o'clock, Maggie is in her little sweater and I am in my parka. I clip the leash to her collar and out we go into Christmas Day. We stumble along the sidewalks, greeting our neighbours and their dogs while Maggie pulls like a demon, sniffing and slipping and sliding, throwing snow with her nose, and rolling on her back. Her energy seems boundless. I am mystified, but not about to argue. We turn the corner into the trails and Maggie gets down to business, sniffing out all the deer who have come through the night before in search of Halloween pumpkins dropped by our neighbours. Finally, I'm the one who is worn out, and I'm forced to drag her home. Christmas night, I climb into my bed, and she sits, patient, expectant, on the carpet beside me.

"Come up", I say "Come up". And she springs up on to the comforter and nuzzles my ear, nestling into the crook of my arm.

Boxing day dawns clear and cold, and by early morning we are on our way to the leash free at Klondike. Maggie plays and romps like the puppy I remember so well, catching up with old friends, warily sniffing out the newcomers, and chasing her tennis ball. She sits on the front seat as we make our way back to the house. "One quick stop, Maggs," I tell her as we pull into the Foodland parking lot, "and then we're going home." As soon as we are in the front door, I grab a spoon, head to the front room and sit on the carpet. Maggie lays beside me, with her head on my lap, and together we share the tub of ice cream; a spoonful for Maggie, and then a spoonful for me. Full and happy, we cuddle together and drift off into sleep.

Monday dawns, sullen and cloudy, and something is wrong. I'm all alone on the floor. There is no cold nose to greet me, and no frantic run to the kitchen. I search the house, calling her name, and I finally find Maggie in the bathroom. She has come here to relieve herself, knowing it's a poor substitute, but the only place she could find inside where she might be spared a "bad dog." Whatever has happened in the last two days is now nothing but a memory. Nose on soft paws. She can barely raise her head to look at me. I look into her beautiful brown eyes and all at once I understand. "Any damn fool can make a promise, son. It's keeping them that's hard." Anyone can make a promise... Tears streaming, I bundle up my sweet, gentle girl in her favorite blankie and take her out to the car. It's time to keep my promise. .

I cry like a baby all the way home from the vet, gathering up her collar and leash off the front seat and bringing it into the house. My beautiful girl is gone, but my beautiful girl is everywhere. I wander aimlessly through the sea of reminders, picking up her bed and her chewy toys and her bowls and her stuffies, dropping them all into a bag to take to the shelter tomorrow. Promises....

On my way back down the hallway, I notice the ribbon hanging at the front door. It's the first trick I ever taught her - to ring the jingles when she wanted to go outside. I pull the ribbon off the doorknob and start to gather it up to toss it into the bag with the rest of Maggie's stuff. As the jingle ribbon comes free, it hits the door jamb, and I hear the most pure, most perfect sound I could ever imagine. All at once I feel the love of all our days together washing over me like a warm, sweet, beautiful wave. "A bit more time..." I look down and that's when I see it.

Hanging from the bottom of the ribbon is a tiny, perfect, beautiful silver sleigh bell.

David Schindler is a local musician, writer and community activist. He is a two time finalist in the Toronto Star Short Story contest, and a recipient of the CERC Editorial Journalism Award.