

FOREVER CHRISTMAS

Nora lived the past fifty years under the same old roof, dreaming the same ol' dreams. This being her last few moments on earth, she sat quietly studying the flames in the fireplace, smelling the burning hickory and seeing her life flicker before her like a silent movie — one frame at a time.

She returned her thoughts to Newfoundland, to when Halloween and Christmas were all sewn into one grand spectacle, to a time when Santa freely walked hand in hand with ghosts and goblins.

Nora shivered as she travelled back to when she was four years old, to when her cousins led her through the village of Woody Point, all of them dressed in bedsheets, ragged clothes and wearing tattered pillow cases over their heads.

On the eleventh night of Christmas, when it was her turn to go out. Her cousins stood her in one spot, but they still could barely line up her eyes with the sheet's rough-cut holes. Once that had been accomplished, she waited beneath a spruce tree for their return.

Her body shivered and she stomped her feet while watching the kiddy ghouls crisscross the snow-covered moonlit streets.

After a few moments, excitement started to race in her gut. She ran to join in with her boisterous cousins down the road. They played their toy instruments and remained cloaked hoping homeowners wouldn't be able to guess their names so they could reap the rewards from the older generation.

She recalled the next house in line. It was an ancient structure and its outer clapboard walls were patched with tarpaper and scraps of thick bark. Blankets shivered in the windows and a verandah rocking chair creaked in the breeze. After hammering on the door with her knitted mittens, a crooked man answered and just stood there, taking forever trying to figure out who stood beneath the soiled sheet. The old man snuffed before finally admitting defeat. He pulled out a potato sack and gently handed Nora a giant orange with a huge bag of satin candy. When she looked up to thank him she saw a grand smile creep over her face.

A log popped in the fireplace. Nora shook her head. The visions of mummering began to fade into her past while the fireplace-flames slipped beneath the smoldering coals. Those ancient memories disappeared as quickly and as silently as the goblins and ghosts of her youth. Then her Ontario teen years rushed in, brushing away every thought of Newfoundland.

She had never completed schooling; not everyone did back then, but somehow she still outshone the brightest star of nearby *Apple Blossom City*. She performed her everyday chores and lived a simplistic life; yet everyone knew that she was as enlightened as any man could be.

Nora never passed an opportunity to become more educated, even if it wasn't in school. She won most of the knitting and sewing contests, her heavy blankets was always first to be sold at the *Salvation Army* raffles. Even though she lived outside the city, she had nurtured her intellect through life and circumstance, while keenly aware of the world around her did not stand still.

As she focused her rheumy blue eyes on the smoldering coals, she watched the flames slowly climb out of the ashes in conjunction with another uplifting memory.

She reflected on her first meeting with Henry, the day before Christmas of 1918. That day blew far colder than any other during that year. Not a motorized vehicle could be started and the thoughts of sending a buggy out into those frigid conditions would be at the very least, undesirable for either man or horse.

Their chance meeting took place only because of her mother's obsession to leave Christmas shopping to the last available minute. Only then did she run into town looking for bargains. And because of that, they had to catch the early morning train.

The Butcher Line Express, as the locals called it, consisted of a passenger car, five cattle-cars and a broken-down caboose. It ran both ways twice a day, morning, noon, mid-afternoon and supper.

Nora and her mother eagerly climbed aboard for their annual Christmas spree. It wasn't often they took the train, but Christmastime was special. All aspects of the festive season provided memories that Nora reflected on year round, long before businesses took Christ out of Christmas. However, at nineteen, this one trip gave Nora more than just church worship and faded memories, it introduced her to someone who was about to change her life.

The frosted trees and snowy meadows blew past and soon they had become rows of ancient rundown houses and boarded up storefronts. As they travelled, snow squalls erupted before slackening off into thick puffy flakes that seemed to float delicately from the sky. The train stopped and waited for an all-clear signal before entering The Blockhouse tunnel. She pulled down the window and shoved her head out to see why it was taking it so long to get into the tunnel.

Snowflakes stuck to her face while drabs of water glistened off the inky-black locomotive. The passenger-car trembled and jerked forward. The tunnel's dark mouth widened as they edged closer. Once inside, the locomotive headlamp mirrored off the wet stone walls and the musty smell of an old dirt basement permeated the worn passenger-car. When the train finally emerged from the long tunnel, the snowy ground beyond had become mud and the rundown buildings they had passed earlier were now slaughterhouse corrals.

The train halted near the shore of the St. Lawrence. Waves of foamy whitecaps splashed over the rocky shore like suds flowing over the sides of a washbasin.

Nora shifted her squinted eyes from the cattle pens and focused on the crowded railway station ahead of them. On the platform amongst a forest of Christmas trees stood a young muscular man who didn't resemble anyone in the crowd. As she watched him, the racket of the wooden cattle doors slamming broke the murmurs of the dismounting holiday shoppers. She looked to a gang of older men that were guiding livestock up icy ramps into the slaughterhouse cattle cars.

Nora followed her mother to the exit and then carefully stepped down onto a portable train step. She raised her face to the sky and allowed a mass of swollen snowflakes to melt over her cheeks.

After a moment of feeling cold water dance over her face, she glanced back to the young man selling Christmas trees. He was watching her too, probably from the moment she had stepped out of the railway car. Nora's cheeks ran hot. She turned away and started to breeze after her mother through the chilly open-air market.

"Come here," her mother said. She grabbed her hand. "Look at the price of these scraggly trees. Can you imagine?"

A sudden rush of embarrassment and nausea flooded Nora's stomach. As she and her mother inspected the neatly-lined Christmas trees, Nora again noticed that the young vendor was carefully eyeing her.

She grinned a nervous, crooked smile.

He winked a self-assured blink.

A few awkward moments passed. He gingerly moved toward her, picking up a knee-high pine on the way. She turned her face toward the grey river. When he reached her, he tapped her shoulder and pushed the spindly tree into her chest. Her delicate facial features became perplexed as the treetop brushed the underneath of her chin. With the scent of freshly cut evergreens filling her nose, she looked to the man and spoke, her voice as faint as freshly lit wood-smoke. "I can't afford a Christmas tree, kind sir. I have already spent far too much this Yuletide season."

His eyebrow twitched. "A present for your dreams," he whispered. His smile grew as wide as an excited child and his speech became as jittery as an unskilled actor.

Hesitant smiles soon graced both of their young faces.

That was seventy-two-years ago this very day - Christmas Eve.

They didn't meet again until her aunt's annual country event at the end of 1919: Yvonne's New Year's Eve Celebration.

The night had grown long and Nora had searched for a place to escape. She just wanted to be alone. The wild assortment of suitors, young and old, asking for the next dance, wore her out. She pulled on her corduroy overcoat and slipped into the backyard to watch the stars glitter in the night sky.

As she spied the heavens, the slow deliberate crunching of footsteps crept across the snow-encrusted yard. Nora twirled about. A grinning man stood near. His nervous breathing almost blotted out the laughing sounds of the party inside the house.

"What are you watchin'?" Puffs of vapor ballooned in the frigid air as he spoke.

She recognized the stranger. "Nothing really. I like to be part of nature and everything it offers. Good and bad," she said.

He drew in a ragged breath and considered the surrounding darkness, "Yep, me too."

Nora leaned against the split-rail fence.

"That tree you gave us made a world of difference in our home this year," Nora said.

His voice caught in his throat. "Sure glad you liked it."

"Why did you give it to us? You don't even know my family."

"Cuz you you're the most beautiful woman I'd ever met."

She dropped her head and gazed to the ground. She smiled.

"I — I'm Henry Millar," he continued.

"I'm —,"

He cut her off. "I know who you are Nora. I've always known. Ever since grade school."

A flash of memory transported her back in time. She suddenly recognized the man, this older man, for who he was. Even his name sounded familiar. “What is it you’d like?”

Henry picked at his fingernails, “Can — can I take you for dinner some night?”

She heaved a nervous giggle and broadened her smile. Her eyes winked skyward and she twirled around again, her coat skimming the air like a kite. She stopped and a flutter of laughter burst from her lips. “Oh, silly me, I thought you came to ask me to dance!”

Henry moved closer; he softly enclosed her gloved hands in his and gently pulled her close and danced to the music that escaped the house. She felt his heart beat against her chest. Excitement surged through her soul. “What do you promise if I say yes?” she whispered.

“I promise you’ll fall in love with me and that I’ll make every day of your life seem like Christmas.”

She giggled. “And if you should fail to carry out that promise?”

“Then, I’ll have proof true love doesn’t exist.”

“Really? Doesn’t love beat in our hearts everyday of our lives?”

“Only your answer will tell.”

“And if love resides only in our heads, what then?”

He pulled her until their noses almost touched. They were so close now she could taste his breath on the December breeze. “Let’s not think of that,” he whispered.

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By early spring, Nora and Henry had become one in the eyes of the Lord. Their elderly neighbors and close relatives donated hand-me-down clothes and furnishings for wedding gifts. It was like winning a church bingo. First, there was the old walnut chest of drawers, then came a scratched bed table, a broken-down icebox, and finally, the oak grandfather clock which chimed every quarter hour in the vestibule by the front door. With all these grand gifts, the newly married couple thought they had wandered into heaven from earth.

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Over time, their farm and surrounding countryside had been taken over by tiny bungalow subdivisions. Each morning commuters passed the Millar residence heading to jobs that paid more in a week than Henry ever made in a month of Sundays.

With every new generation of neighbors, it was the adults who felt the Millar’s were nothing more than eccentric old-timers, while their children reveled in the delight of helping the elderly couple with their chores. Every child, no matter what their age, relished in apple picking, haying and the gathering of summer fruit and autumn’s vegetables. Soon the seasons became years and it didn’t take long before the elderly couple’s health began to falter. For them, garden work along with snow shoveling had become dreams of a distant past and a young person’s game. Even setting up the Christmas tree in the parlor window had become a difficult annual chore for Henry.

Nora tried to speak. Her ancient voice cracked like fresh hickory sticks thrown inside a burning wood-stove. Then there was the scent of stuffed apples, the warmth of fresh raspberry pies and the taste of hot Christmas cinnamon candies, they were all on their way now to becoming a faded memory. Nevertheless, her most precious reminiscence, the one that she'd never forget, was that of Henry's tiny Christmas tree resting on the coffee table, its lights twinkling through the frosted parlor window for all the neighborhood to see.

Still, Nora knew this year the flame of Christmas would not burn as brightly in her soul. She couldn't help but reflect to the colors of autumn, just when night-frost began to tinge the branches that hovered over their verandah roof. That was the last time she saw Henry healthy, the final time he had hiked into the forest with a miniature chainsaw dangling from his aged hand. It was to be the last cut of the season. He had entered the forest to haul the last of the wood out for winter heating. It was way past supper when Nora began to worry. In his whole life, he was always home before dark.

She called the neighbors and they searched while she sat at the kitchen window, worried, staring at the forest, expecting that any minute he would wander out of the night. Two days later, a group of teenagers found his body twisted, pinned beneath a half-rotted apple tree.

Nora squeezed her eyes shut. Tears rolled down her wrinkled rouge cheeks. Behind her closed lids, she watched her husband struggle, bound in the hospital bed with leather straps, like some lunatic. "It's for his own good," the doctor said, "his bones are brittle and if he falls, they'll splinter and break as easily as dry kindling."

Henry's watery eyes told Nora his time was near.

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Nora tossed a pine-cone into the smoldering coals and it burst, spewing tiny embers over the stone hearth. Though she owned a HI-FI, Nora had set an old scratchy Christmas record on their only expensive wedding gift: a Victrola. After cranking the handle, she sat back in her chair, and with both hands clasped her last piece of wedding China, a cracked cup, and thought about Henry's, their final hours.

She blinked her eyes. "Why couldn't the good Lord take me?" she whispered, sipping the warm apple cider. "He's being taken care of, but what about me?" Who'll take care of me? Oh, God I need him so much," she cried.

Christmas would never be the same. The coffee table in front of the frosted window sat empty this year and no tiny Christmas tree with twinkling lights would ever again greet passing children.

Outside, the front flagstone walkway was covered with snow and the two maple trees that they had planted sixty-years before resembled skeletons blanketed with mounds of puffy snow.

She took a long deep breath, her cup tipped, spilling the last few drops of cider onto her pink robe. A weak, faint noise echoed in the background as the pinecone's dying flames turned from bright blue to fluttering orange. Soon, the fireplace had become home to red embers.

Nora fell slowly to the chair's arm when a meek distant voice coated the thick damp air around her. Anxiety permeated her breathing like frost infiltrating the rafters of their old stone house. A chill scampered up her forearms. She recognized the voice, one she had known for most her life. Her hands trembled, her cup tumbled and shattered onto the warped plank floor.

She opened her cloudy eyes. Every corner of the room hung in hazy darkness. A dazzling aura of lights danced outside her windows above the snowdrifts. Slowly the lights jittered toward her home. The closer they came, the more vivid they became.

SWOOSH!

The fireplace's dim radiance exploded into a wild fiery splendor. The flames licked the charred firebrick and threw its brilliance, splashing it over all the parlor's frosted window panes. Exploding sparks melted through the glass, as if the window wasn't even there, yet sprinkling their dusty magnificence throughout the gloomy interior.

Warmth once again embraced the room.

Then there was that voice. It sounded so firm and close.

Dancing particles of gilded light beamed from the middle of the front room. The manifestation hovered next to the empty wing-back chair, his empty wing-backed chair, the chair on which he sat every Sunday to read the Bible.

She turned her head.

What a sight! There was no reason to be frightened as Henry leaned heavily on a hospital walker. The the sound of a thousand rushing wings batted the still air. Hundreds of incandescent minute angels fluttered all about him. He slid his hands off the walker and rose straight and stood strong. Henry appeared younger, yet she knew it was the same man she had met at the railway station so long ago.

He was dressed in white, the last set of new clothes he had ever bought: his wedding attire. The garments graced him better than any modern tuxedo ever could, and hung on him no differently now than they had seventy-plus years ago.

Henry eased his hand into hers, gently raising her from the cold rocking chair. He led her to the foyer and the grand wooden door creaked open before they even got there. She followed without hesitation. He led Nora past their silent grandfather clock, and beyond, outside to where the wind was gentle and thick snowflakes fell delicately from the night sky. When she stepped outdoors, to her amazement, the winter cold no longer bit her flesh as she followed him barefoot down the snowy walkway. They strolled without exchanging any words.

Then she heard a loud click. Turning back, she saw their farm with its door shut and a dreamy halo of opulent light glowed through a veil of wet snowfall. She glanced to the ground where they had been walking. They had left no footprints!

Henry squeezed her hand. "This my love, is a new beginning," Henry said. "We'll always be together at Christmas . . . Forever and ever."

She smiled, and as she looked into his eyes she saw the dim reflection of their house, the love it embraced, and a brightly lit Christmas tree mystically twinkling inside the frosted parlor windowpanes.

The End