

"The Red Sled"

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Annie and I were going to surprise Dana for Christmas. This had been an on-going plan for four decades—it never quite worked out. Living in different states; physically, emotionally, and economically, had always made it too difficult to get together at this time of year. Now that I was diagnosed with my second case of breast cancer, I thought it might be a good time to give "the plan" a herculean effort.

My first bout with breast cancer turned out well. The only reminder of those days spent in radiation-terror, were a few scars and a reduced bra-cup. Ten years later however, my options were much more limited. I didn't plan on telling her right away. I thought I would wait until after the holidays. Right now I just felt a child-like need to be close to my sister, and experience all those same sights and smells and sounds, that kept my spirit alive so many years ago.

My dog Annie was sitting shot-gun, strapped into her seat-belt. I couldn't help smiling every time I looked to my right and noticed her eyes flitting around - watching the fast-flying scenery - as intently as any bird dog might, right before going into 'point'. She and I had split a Slim Jim and a bag of Cheetos at our last gas stop. She still had Cheeto-crumbs stuck to her whiskers, and her big smile exposed an orange-coated tongue.

Annie had just quit flinching at the 'splatting' noises of the huge, slushy, snow-blobs a few miles back - now she was having fun. We were doing our best to beat the blizzard conditions developing up ahead. Annie thought we were in hot pursuit of 'snow-blob-birds'; delighting at their demise upon the curve of the protective bubble she was flying in.

My two-year old, black retriever-mix was a shy girl; snagged from the Pound on the very day she was scheduled to be euthanized. She had been abandoned, and it took over a year to regain the trust she'd lost for humans. Now our bond was solid, and she meant more to me than most people would understand. I was hoping her Auntie Dana would be so busy fussing over me at the door, that she wouldn't pay much attention to the seventy-five pound lap dog hiding behind me as we made our entrance. Annie would then simply saunter into the kitchen (on cue), while Dana and I were finishing up some little powdered-sugar detail, and I could introduce them. That was our plan.

Actually - being childless - Dana had always treated my dog-children as if they were just as special as her human nieces and nephews. Through the years she had always included carefully wrapped presents for each of them, in her much-loved Christmas boxes that were stuffed to the brim with baked goodies (ETA...last second--FED EX--Christmas Eve). Annie was wearing her 'special occasion', pink-rhinestone collar now. She looked stunning! I had spent more time packing her suitcase, than I had my own. It included such things as; light-up reindeer antlers (always a big hit at family gatherings, I imagined), her brush, and a hedgehog named "Hog", who's cotton innards were savagely ripped from his gut within an hour of receiving it last year. (Having submitted to her superior position in the pack, crusty old "Hog" became her confidant and trusted friend). Annie's shiny suitcase matched her

collar...pink...studded with rhinestones.

The sky was rapidly developing into the ominous-gray, only a seasoned mid-westerner can identify as both: extremely exciting and dangerous at the same time. The wet snow had taken on an airier form as the temperatures began to drop. This made driving treacherous, as the frozen slush created patches of black-ice; hidden beneath the fresh swirls of dry snow. I decided to pull off the highway, when the snow in my head-lights, started messing with my INA (internal navigating system), creating a hypnotic-like trance. I knew this maneuver was dangerous--my mind flashed on to a macabre, 'action-flick' scene, with cars careening into me from every direction--turning the serene white peace, into a blood-bath with twisted metal...shards of glass littering the road for miles, and the "Jaws of Life" unable to distract me in one piece. (Obviously, I could have chosen a better time to wean off my Valium).

As it so happened...most of the traffic had pulled off to the side, hoping this would pass. Having lived in this part of the country in a former life...I knew it wasn't going to pass any time soon.

I had just left Wyoming behind me, when I shot past my I29 S exit, which would have taken me through Sioux City and on to Lawton. I was feeling more confident now, as I kicked-in my four-wheel drive option. I whipped back out on the highway, and we were back on the hunt; chasing snow-flakes, and looking for that lost exit of ours.

I drove for half an hour, and was sure I'd overshot the exit sign again. Annie was starting to get hungry, and the progressing darkness was beginning to make driving even more of a challenge. Frustrated and tired, I turned onto the first rural road I noticed, that had lights in the distance — hoping we'd find a small hamburger joint. (Annie thought hamburgers were the world's way of thanking dogs for being so cute). The distant lights turned out to be an old silo. I was guessing we were a zillion miles from any form of civilization, when I jerked the wheel around, and slammed my foot on the gas. I didn't see the ditch ahead.

My first panicked thought as we plunged head-long off the road, was that Annie wouldn't get her hamburger. I heard a loud whimper from my right - then everything went black.

I woke up with my body wedged against the steering wheel. My seat-belt saved me from a head long encounter with the windshield. The back of my head hurt, but everything else seemed fine.

From what I could see, we were nose-down in a huge drainage ditch—filled with yesterday's plowed snow. I regained my wits and looked to my right. My whole world went black again. Annie was twisted at an unlikely angle, as she dangled from her seat-belt; toes touching the dash. Her little orange, lolling-tongue was still hanging from her mouth, but the smile had disappeared. I reached over and turned her head toward me. Her brown eyes were full of pain, but there weren't any visible signs of blood. I worked to release myself, and felt blood flowing from the back of my head. The collar of my coat was drenched, but it didn't hurt much, so I started working to release Annie. My work area was small.

As gently as I could...I eased her into a lying position--on her side--on the cold windshield. The car was almost completely submerged and the doors wouldn't budge. The heater wasn't running, and one attempt at the windows told me the electrical system was shot. I was the last human hold-out to the 'cell-phone conspiracy', so I didn't own one. All this added up to one

thing: We would freeze to death if nobody came out on this road over the long Christmas weekend.

Everything from the back seat had found it's way up front. My circulation had always been terrible, so my feet and legs were already starting to freeze. I gave God a little "thank you" for reminding me to throw a small lap rug in the car before taking off. I slipped this under my cramped body, and lifted Annie's head just enough to cushion her from the hard, cold glass. I dug around in the glove-box and found a diminished roll of paper-towels. I flattened that, and slid it under her rump. Every movement made her whimper. I felt a gnawing, helplessness when I looked at her.

It's ironic; the things that pop into a muddled-mind - a mind that should be dealing with matters so closely tied to life and death. In this case; I found myself wandering off to a winter in New York, when I was eleven and Dana was twelve...

Someone had given us a bright red sled for Christmas. It was leaning against the wooden steps to our trailer; that one Christmas we spent in Cornwall. My Step-Father had just been shipped-off to Viet Nam...it hadn't come from him. We all thought this was probably a gift from my Mother's secret, new boyfriend. A bright red bow tied neatly and professionally around the front rudder, told us this was a gift from someone 'special'. My mother was never home anymore, and she missed that Christmas altogether. Our wild imaginations concluded that her new love was 'Italian Mafia', and perhaps he was holding her hostage. The sled could have been from her, but we didn't have that kind of money. Mysterious 'Mafia' people did.

I don't remember opening any other presents that year. I did remember our haste in dressing, as the four of us scrambled to try out the new red sled in our first snow. There were sleigh-bells tied to the back, and every time we flew down a hill, the bells echoed. I also remember being the only one of four kids who's wet and frozen carcass had to be dragged home, every time we took the sled out. Dana always felt sorry for me, and as much fun as she might have been having--when I'd start to whine--she'd drag me home.

We were a sorry looking gaggle of four poorly-equipped transplants from California; with one sled. But despite the agony of freezing fingers and frost-bitten toes, the snow remained a novelty for the entire winter we were there. Dana never once complained about dragging me home; sleigh-bells ringing all the way.

The days leading up to that Christmas were spent trying to stay warm in our rusty, fifty-two foot trailer with one small space-heater. Food seemed like a luxury, and a box of "Kraft" macaroni and cheese made up our Christmas feast. We had spoonfuls of sugar for dessert. Dana and I took turns scaling the side of the trailer to adjust the antenna, so the four of us could watch "Rudolf" and "A Charlie Brown Christmas", in something other than black and white static. We all cuddled together on the couch and tried to pretend this was what all normal children did this time of year. We also walked Bobbi and Ricky around the rest of the trailer park every night. We'd gaze through the windows at the beautifully decorated trees with flashing lights and mounds of presents. I don't remember ever feeling sad about any of this back then. Kids have a way of delighting in almost any situation. The memories even made me feel warm now.

I'm pretty sure it was that same 'mystery-sled' person, who always left a half a gallon of milk on the porch every morning. Occasionally there was a box of "Captain Crunch" or a loaf of

white "Rainbow" bread. This became a game to us...we loved opening the door in the morning to see what was out there. We drank the milk greedily, cereal or not-- before hiking in all directions through the snow to our different schools.

My oldest sister hadn't been seen in weeks. She had quit going to school, and was living with her boyfriend Mark. With my mother gone all the time...Dana was in charge. Dana was pretty much robbed of her childhood, by trying to take on the demanding role of family Matriarch that year. I thought about that now (while I looked at the dog I planned on leaving to her), and felt selfish... Why would I ask her to give up any more of her life for me? The answer came too quickly--I knew she would.

I always believed myself to be the weak one in our family of five children. Dana sensed this, I'm sure. At that very young age of 12, she developed a nurturing instinct akin to a mother hen. My younger brother, sister and I were her, eh...'brood'. I wanted back under her wing. She had always loved me enough to take my hand, and walk me through that brightly-lit, trailer-park of life...point out all the beautiful trees, and even drag my frozen butt home on a little red sled--(most assuredly, saving my life on more than one occasion). She and I had gone our separate ways, but through all the years, and all the physical barriers that kept us apart...we maintained a bond of love that dissolves all barriers. Love like that has no words to describe it's depth. Love like that never doubts itself. It may change forms, but it never goes away. I knew this in my heart. Whatever my future held...I was safe with Dana-- and I hoped she would love Annie.

After Dana took over, those weirdly, de-formative years took on a small sense of structure, but my memories of Christmas are what I cherish most.

Santa never missed his rounds at our house. I never wanted to admit that I knew Santa had long blond hair and big blue eyes--he might not come--but she did everything from; burning cotton to make it look like Santa had come right through the radiator, (since we never had a fire-place)--to putting rein-deer, hoof-marks on the steps outside our front-door. She could even turn a brown paper-bag into a chain of smiling gingerbread boys, to hang from our tree. Our 'tree', was usually a sorry little twiggling of a thing, generously donated by any local tree-dealer who felt sorry for us. With bits of ribbon tied into bows, and a glitter-and-glue, card-board star... Well, I've never seen prettier trees in all my life since. I never knew where she found the small bits of money to buy the candy and jacks and paddle-balls that overflowed onto the floor from our stockings. The toe was always stuffed with a tangerine.

I was peeling a tangerine now--found laying next to me on the wind-shield, like a small, orange ghost from the past. I watched the slow-motion of the sweet spray from the fruit, as it settled into a shiny mist on Annie's fur.

My head hadn't stopped bleeding, and now the entire back of my coat was damp and sticky. I could actually smell the blood. I was getting light-headed, but needed to stay alert in case I heard a car. My humming of old Christmas carols had taken on an eerie, dark edge...like a twisted, funeral-drone. I made a mental note to try and remember how it sounded. I liked it--in a sick way. I sat helpless--waiting for a sound of any kind. I was wearing the sticky, mingled smell of tangerines and blood. I decided I couldn't eat my tangerine.

It was dark now with only a slight glow from the nearby silo lights. I watched--in silence now--as the snow completely covered the rear window of my car. I should have been

terrified. Instead, my mind was far away...swooping up and down the steep, snow-covered slopes of our Christmas's in Germany...

My father had returned from Viet Nam, and the tour had taken a heavy toll on our family. His drinking had increased dramatically, and robbed him of the jovial, life-loving spirit we had all fallen in love with. He had seen a world that doesn't allow for laughter; from anyone with a conscience. He was always tense and angry. Haunted. He was everything, except the person who had left us a year ago.

I suspected my mother had married him to help provide for her five children. She used to show a 'fondness' for him, but I felt sure it was all for the sake of us kids. When he received his marching-orders for Viet Nam--she broke--started looking for someone else. She found someone who loved 'her', but didn't necessarily want to take on a whole family. She gave us up.

Christmas, that first year in Germany was spent trying to understand what had happened to the 'Mommy' and 'Daddy' we had lost. My parents were back together, but both were constantly sick. I imagine it was mostly due to stress and heart-break...the never-ending cycle of alcohol-abuse. When our household goods finally arrived--months after we had--the 'red-sled' was the first thing I looked for. The one solid thing I could connect fun and happiness to. The snowy hills weren't far from our home, and we spent countless hours there. Dana, dragging me home after every outing.

We lived in a rambling old ginger-bread-type house, smack-dab in the middle of Ramstein for the first 6-months. It smelled like the fuel-oil we used, to fill our stoves. The streets were very 'Dickens'-like. We tried to ignore our parents.

Dana and I teamed-up that first year to buy as many gifts as we could for the family--thinking this might heal everything. A 'mark' was equivalent to a quarter in those days. Our tree had real candles, and the tiny, perfectly wrapped presents were everywhere. Dana bought me a pair of soft, warm mittens that Christmas. Nothing was healed that year, except my frozen fingers.

I grew-up very fast and furiously in those next few years. The only thing that kept pulling me back toward my last remembered moments of childhood innocence, were the days leading up to Christmas.

Once we finally moved into our base-housing apartment...Dana and I made a ritual of painting huge Charlie Brown murals on the picture window leading out to the balcony. We were both quite sure this balcony would fall off the side of the building; had we used it. Her highly-critical eye would be watching as I'd carefully paint Snoopy's smile; just so. She insisted on the exact number of lines to emphasize 'happy' on Snoopy's 'happy-feet'. We'd encase the entire thing in snow-from-a-can...barely leaving a peep-hole to peer through.

We also lived next to the woods. This gave us instant access to all the pine-boughs we wanted and we had those tied to everything we could wrap a string around. We risked our lives with the wrought-iron balcony, which could have been mistaken for an old-growth forest, by the time we were finished. Shiny baubles and brilliant lights everywhere... We were the envy of the entire air-base(or at least we thought we should have been).

Those three years before Dana got married, she and I started our midnight 'peeking' ritual. First, we would make sure everyone else was fast asleep, and then we would creep out into the living-room, under the spell of conspiratorial whispers. Picking out that one present on the first night, wasn't easy. We always had a steaming cup of hot chocolate (made from a packet...had to be the packet-type), and the lights from the tree made everything soft and warm, and magical. We'd use our fine-tuned 'peeking-ritual' skills to dismantle the wrapping, and with the same measure of skill...we'd re-wrap. We would do this every night leading up to Christmas Eve, and even had to throw a few ridiculously-constructed, gag-gifts into wrapping paper, just to make it through the entire 24 days. When the tree dried-up and began to shed it's needles, my childish side was shed, as well. I quickly reverted back to my free-roaming, mini-teen persona. Always looking for excitement. Always in trouble.

Dana left home the year before we returned to the States. That last Christmas I had to pretend I was a grown-up, and didn't care about Christmas anymore. Santa quit coming to our house, and the red sled never came out of the closet again...

I had brought a thermos of our 'special' hot-chocolate for the trip to Dana's. I knew it would be swimming with thin, silvery-glass-- as I had a sneaking suspicion this is what gave me the goose-egg on the back of my head. A knowing-smile crossed my lips as I thought of the karma-effect, and how I was being paid back for all those years of sneaky-peeking. I opened the thermos; the smell was haunting but made my situation seem ironically peaceful. I don't know why I passed the thermos under Annie's nose--maybe I was just trying to get her to respond to something...she was starting to fade. I was too.

Annie's body was beginning to lose it's warmth, so I shifted myself closer, to try and share more of the small blanket with her. I was pressed up against her side--kissing her cold black nose as I rubbed her head. I was holding on as tight as I could...so she wouldn't slip away from me. She still smelled like the conditioner from her bath two days ago. My eyes were dripping but I was trying not to cry. I knew the jerking-sobs would make my head explode.

Once I let the tears out, I felt calmer...almost too calm. I closed my eyes again and my frozen arms cuddled Annie even closer. I was rocking her and humming my own deranged version of "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" now. It was Christmas Eve, and we were missing the Christmas caroling. We had always sung carols on Christmas Eve when we were little. By now Dana's house would be full of the scents of hot chocolate, and cookies. Rows and rows of smiling, brown-paper, ginger-bread boys would be hanging everywhere, with their sugary counter-parts being grabbed by little fingers. The lights would be flashing in her windows. Perhaps "Snoopy" would be dancing there...surrounded by canned snow -- pine-bough ties everywhere. I wondered if she had shared our "peeking ritual" with anyone else. I winced at the thought. I wondered what-ever happened to the red sled.

Off in the distance, I thought I heard the faint sound of sleigh-bells. I opened my eyes and shook Annie as the sound drew closer. She didn't whimper this time...her eyes were starting to glaze. With every last bit of my strength I shook her hard... "I HEAR THE SLEIGH-BELLS ANNIE! WAKE-UP! ANNIE!!! I hear the sleigh-bells...Annie... Dana's coming to take us home".

A distraught driver, in a red SUV makes a wide U-turn in the deep snow after discovering the

lights--mistaken for a town--led to nothing but an old silo.

A smiling Golden Retriever, sitting shotgun, suddenly perks her ears and whines as she looks toward the ditch. The vehicle begins to slow. The driver reaches over to pat her dog's head, and reassure her they'd find something to eat soon. The dog's ears begin to lower as the driver continues on down the country lane, toward the highway. The snow-chains on the tires, sound eerily like sleigh-bells...

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