The Smell of Christmas Trees

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By Clyde Zimmerman

The grey December afternoon had merged imperceptibly into dusk behind a curtain of falling snow. The world outside the farmhouse was obscured by the great, blobby flakes that came swirling down. Woods and fields were deep with their white covering, and still the snow fell silently.

A tall, slim girl stood at a window of the farmhouse, her palms pressed against the pane. In the room behind her the fire purred contentedly in the huge fireplace. Close to it stood a piano, and beside it an old lady sat in a rocking chair knitting. In one corner stood a small, gaily-decorated Christmas tree.

Suddenly the girl turned away from the window. "What is it like when it stops snowing, Granny?"

The old lady ceased knitting and rested her hands in her lap. "It's like a soft, fluffy blanket, spread over everything, Beth. Our arbor looks like a palace of spun sugar. And the trees like old, old men, with long beards, wandering through some fairy-tale wood."

The girl smiled wistfully and then crossed slowly to the piano and sat down. She ran her fingers over the keys, lightly, caressingly, as if she loved them. Then she played a bar—two bars—of "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

"You're happy when Christmas comes, aren't you, Beth?" asked her grandmother.

Beth played the first line of "Silent Night, Holy Night." She said, "Yes, Granny. Yes, I'm always happy on Christmas. I like all the sounds of it—the carols, sleigh bells, and the laughter. I like the smell of it, too—especially the smell of Christmas trees." She turned her head toward the tree in the corner.

"I like Christmas, too," said her grandmother.
Beth played softly for a few minutes, and then her fingers rested on the keys. "Did you hear something, Granny? Yes, there it is again! It sounds like a car."

"I don't hear anything," said her grandmother.

They listened in silence. Then came the unmistakable sound of an approaching car, laboring along the snow-filled road.

"Who could be coming way up here?" said the old lady.

The sound grew nearer and then suddenly ceased.

"It has stopped here," said Beth in a wondering voice.

As she finished speaking, there came a loud, impatient knocking at the door. Her grandmother hurried out into the kitchen and lit the kerosene lamp on the table. Then she opened the door.

A young man stood in the doorway. Snow was heaped on his hat and more clung to his shoulders.

"Good evening," he said. "Could you tell me if this is the right road to Ridgefield?"

"You'd better come inside." She stepped aside to let him enter. Then she closed the door.

"I'm afraid I've brought a lot of snow in with me," he apologized, stamping his feet. "My Ford has to get along without a top."

"Now don't worry about that," said the old lady; "brush it off and come in by the fire. You must be nearly frozen."

He hesitated for a moment, then obediently followed her into the next room. When he saw the girl at the piano, he stopped.

"Hello," he said.

Beth turned her head toward him. "How do you do?"

He didn't reply, but stood staring at her. "Won't you take off your coat and sit down?" asked the old lady.

"I'm afraid I haven't time," he said. "I've got to get to Ridgefield. Is this the right road?"

"You must have taken the wrong turn at Brown Corners," said the old lady. "Ridgefield is ten miles straight south of it. Now you've come a long ways out of your way. That's too bad."

"I'll say so," he said. "It was the snow—I kept thinking I had taken the wrong road."

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"You better sit down and rest awhile," said Beth.
He took off his coat and went over to the fire, stretching his hands to the blaze.
"How are the roads?"
"Bad—and getting worse," he answered. "I just managed to get through some of the drifts."
"You must be hungry," said Beth. "Would you like something to eat?"
"I guess I am kind of hungry—but I hate to bother you—"
"I'll get you something," she said, and started to rise.
"Now, Beth," said her grandmother, "you just sit still and I'll fix him something." The girl sank back as her grandmother went out into the kitchen.

The young man glanced around the room. "That's a nice tree," he said. "I like the smell of Christmas trees. I guess I'll never grow up, because I always want one on Christmas."
"I like them, too," said Beth. "Have you friends in Ridgefield?"
"It's kind of a long story," he said. "My name's Neil Clark. I live in New York, but I'm going to college out here. Well, Bruce Miller—he lives in Ridgefield—invited some of the gang out to spend Christmas—some of us who live so far away we hadn't planned on going home. I started out later than the rest. What with the snow and all, the going has been pretty slow."
"You shouldn't try to go on tonight," she said.
"Oh, I'll make it, I guess. I promised Bruce I'd be there."
"What kind of a Christmas will it be?" she asked.
"Mostly a noisy one, I'm afraid. Bruce doesn't go in for old-fashioned Christmases. Thinks they're a lot of sentimental quicksand."
"Oh," said Beth softly.
"Won't you play something?" he asked.

She played "Jingle Bells"—played it with such a jolly tinkle of the keys that they were both laughing when her grandmother came in from the kitchen.
"We haven't much left from supper," she said, handing him
a cup of coffee and a plate heaped high with cold chicken and preserves and bread and butter.

He took the plate and cup from her. "It's the best Christmas present I ever had. It seems ages since I've eaten."

He ate slowly, but the old lady in her rocking chair noticed that his hand trembled when he raised the cup and guessed that it was costing him an effort.

Beth played "The Blue Danube Waltz" while he was eating, and when he finished, the clock on the mantelpiece began to strike the hour. Ten strokes sounded.

"If you can't get through—where will you stay tonight—and tomorrow?" asked Beth. Her voice was casual, and she did not turn her head away from the piano.

"Oh, I'll find a spot. I've spent Christmas Day in a lot of queer places before."

Beth's hands—the slender hands of a born musician—made a slight discord upon the keys of the piano.

"Gracious me," said her grandmother, "that's no way to talk."

There was silence for a moment, broken only by the crackling of the flames. He stared into their depths. Then he looked at Beth. "Won't you sing something?" he asked.

Her fingers trembled on the keys as she began the beautiful carol, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing." Then she started to sing, and from her throat the song came clear and went winging its way in the room. Her voice was one of soft rapture—of mingled joy and heartbreak.

When she finished he said: "Do you know that with one song you have brought back all the Christmas memories of my life?"

She smiled. "I'm glad."

"Sing some more," he begged.

So she sang again. She sang snatches from opera, love songs, and songs of sadness. And while she was playing "Tales from a Vienna Wood" and coaxing the soul from the piano, the clock began to strike eleven. When the last note had died away, he stood up. "I must be going—it's getting late."

"It's nearly Christmas Day," said Beth.
“Go! Fiddlesticks,” said her grandmother. “You are perfectly welcome to stay here tonight. We have plenty of room.”

“Thanks, but I’ve imposed on you enough already.” He picked up his coat and moved toward the kitchen. “Good-by and thanks again for everything.”

“Good-by,” said the girl, and her voice was so low he could scarcely hear the word.

Her grandmother followed him out into the kitchen. With his hand on the door he turned and looked back into the room where Beth sat at the piano. The old lady noticed his glance.

“She’s blind,” she said.

“Oh,” he said softly, “hopelessly?”

“The doctors say an operation might—” She made a futile little gesture. Then he opened the door and stepped outside. A handful of flakes swirled in, and then the door closed.

The old lady went wearily back into the room, which seemed suddenly very empty and a trifle cold. Beth’s hands drew a mere suggestion of “Humoresque.”

“What was he like, Granny?” she asked.

“He was tall, with a nice smile and brown, curly hair.”

“I was hoping,” said Beth, “that he would stay with us tonight. It would have been fun to have him here for Christmas dinner.”

“Yes,” said her grandmother, and she marked the fierce longing in the girl’s voice.

Suddenly there was a sound from the kitchen, and Beth sat very still. Then the boy came back into the room.

“I guess you’ve got me on your hands,” he said. “The old bus would never get through these drifts.”

Beth’s grandmother looked at him and guessed that he could have gone on but had chosen to stay. A light of happiness shone from the face of the girl as she swept into “Joy to the World.” And as the music swelled forth the room was again bright and warm and full, and the whole world seemed filled with the smell of Christmas trees.