

THE END

by
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Another Christmas story for my daughters
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They seem angry, the two standing emotives, maybe with the lie-flat one. They're looking down at him, all wrinkles and no hair. I can't hear their words, never can now, not unless I get close and then I have to dodge the shots aimed at me. But there's a glow off their faces and trembling in the air. So I think it's anger. I scurry closer, trying to catch a word or two, careful not to alert them to my presence. I make it to the bed without being noticed, take cover under the lampshade.

"You can't go on like this," says the tall one with the daisy head of hair.

"You have to go to Westover Lodge," says the short one with the disagreeable, sweet smell.

"I'm not going. I'm staying here," says the lie-flat one.

He's been flat out in the sleeping room for a couple of days now. Ever since I got trapped here. It was better outside, in among the deserted animal houses and the overgrown fields. The smells all crowd in on me here, like being drowned in a flower garden. It does have its good parts. Like when they open the door on that silver box in the cooking room or that water room with the gleaming white bowls where he does the grunting thing. Still, I wish I could find the gap, the one where I came in. I'm the only one in here and I kinda miss the other guys. Yesterday it was just him and me. That black thing with the numbers on it kept buzzing away, like an angry wasp, but he ignored it. He ignored the world, including me when I was really close, I mean *really* close. Then today these two turned up, banging on the door, bursting in and asking "Why didn't you answer the phone Dad?" "Can't be buggered," he answered, then added, "Why are you here? Is it Christmas?" They didn't like that question. They looked at each other kinda funny before the short one snapped at him. "Look outside Dad. The sun's shining, there are leaves on the trees and there's birdsong outside your window. How could it be Christmas?" He just shrugged and asked the tall one what she'd done to her hair. Since then they've been fawning over him, feeding him and having whispered conversations of concern in the cooking room or the comfy chair room. These, of course, I can't hear. One of them keeps calling the other Becks but she doesn't like it - being called Becks. She keeps correcting her in this annoyed tone - that's how come I hear it. "It's Rebecca not Becks," she yells. "How would you like it if I kept calling you Mags instead of Margaret?" Margaret - the tall one - says sorry but doesn't stop doing it. This Becks, I mean Rebecca, spends lots of time in the water room on her own. I snuck in there with her. She doesn't grunt. She cries, quietly. Some tears trickle down. Before leaving she mops them up though. She

paints her face with stuff over her eyes and lips, smooths down her hair, sprays an awful sweet-smelling fluid around her neck, swigs something from a flask, and tugs her clothes back into shape. She's all sharp creases and crafted presentation. Not like the tall one, Margaret. From the wild hair to the rumpled clothes and scuffed old shoes she doesn't seem to care what she looks like. She's more of an ungroomed barn cat – all tufts, matts and sticking out straw. I like her. She's the one who does everything. Makes them things to eat – love most of those smells – helps the lie-flat one to be a sitting-up one, covers over the windows when it gets dark – saves me from the frustration of seeing the unreachable outdoors – and puts all those clothes in the big tub to get wet and then in the other tub to make them dry. Why make them wet in the first place? Seems pretty stupid to me. All the smelly one does is sweep up, make clouds of dust I get lost in, and straighten things on flat surfaces so they're at right angles. She's the one that keeps taking shots at me.

They're definitely mad at him. Well, not exactly mad. Not as in 'we want to crush you'. More irritated, as in 'why won't you do what we want'. I don't know why. He's no trouble. Just lies there most of the time. They keep using the word stubborn.

“You can't look after yourself anymore Dad, you're just being stubborn trying to stay here. You didn't even answer the phone when Margaret and I kept calling yesterday. How can we know if you're okay if you don't even answer?”

“I'm not going to no home. You're not putting me there. This is where I belong, with the animals. Did you feed 'em yet today?”

It's Margaret who answers, more gentle than Rebecca, not angry, not even irritated. “Dad, there are no animals to feed. You know that. We sold them – the hens, the pigs, and all the cattle.” And then she reaches out and lays her hand on his arm when she says, “They were too much for you.”

Rebecca continues, in her exasperated tone, “That was years ago Dad, years ago. Now it's time for *you* to leave.”

The lie-flat one doesn't answer. He looks puzzled. He frowns, making even more wrinkles, and runs his hand over the smooth skin of his hairless head. Eventually he closes his eyes and rolls over, his back turned to them. They look at each other and with some unspoken signal leave.

They settle in the comfy chair room. This time I follow, dodging a swipe from the smelly one, and settle in a fold behind one of the cushions. It's a good spot, I can hear them. I hate getting old, losing hearing, my radar dull, can't taste things like I used to and alone now, no others around, trapped here with these emotives. They're sitting close, lowered voices, conferencing. Margaret is all concern and caring, Rebecca frustration and fight.

"He's never wavered, always said this is where he wants to be. I've heard him say 'Take me out in a box' more times than I care to remember. We need to respect that Becks."

"Goddamn it, IT'S NOT BECKS!"

"Sorry. Rebecca."

"But what are we respecting Margaret? A crazy old guy who doesn't think straight anymore. Christ, he thinks the animals are still around, that he's running a working farm, that it's Christmas. Think about what's needed to keep him out here. Are you willing to come from town to cook his meals, make sure he takes his pills, do his laundry? It's nearly an hour's drive for Christ's sake. Every day. I'm not doing it."

"You know I can't, my job won't let me. But we could find someone. Pay them."

"Who'd want to take care of a cantankerous old man like him all the way out here? Anyway, it'd cost more than Westover Lodge even if we could find someone. Don't get me wrong Margaret, I've done my bit along with you to keep him here as long as possible but it's time to move on, move him out, to get on with our lives."

Finally I realize what they're talking about – moving him somewhere for the end. Do they have a special place for that, these emotives? Why do they need help with it? Why doesn't he just stop? Like we do. He's all worn out so it must be his time? If he can't even get his own food, what's the point? He's done for, right? He must be close, that's why he's lie-flat all the time.

"How can you be so callous about it Becks?"

The smelly one is about to correct the name again but instead rolls her eyes and sighs, loudly. She doesn't say anything. She smooths out the wrinkles on her clothes and starts picking little specks of something off her sleeve. Finally she looks straight at the tall one and says, "Because I'm the big sister, the one who has to face the facts, the responsible one not the pie-in-the-sky Peter Pan."

Now she's made the tall one mad. I can feel her energy change and she sits bolt upright on the comfy seat.

"So now I'm the little sister who needs to be taught reality am I? Don't do the high and mighty big sister routine. There's nothing you can teach me. Half-drunk second husband, kids who couldn't get away fast enough and the highlights of your life are hair appointments and bridge nights. Why can't you be the one who comes out here to help? You've no job to worry about. You have all day to yourself now Adam and Mark have high-tailed it out of town. Or, better still, why not move him in with you? You've got the boys' space in the basement, empty now. I'll help if you bring him there."

"It wouldn't work. It just wouldn't. You know how much he and Arthur hate each other. I couldn't stand refereeing their fights all the time. And he's so messy. How could I keep the place tidy with him around?"

"How inconvenient!"

"Oh, he's got you wrapped around his little finger, hasn't he? You always were Daddy's girl."

The air around their heads is moving in short, sharp waves. They're both mad now. And definitely it's in the 'I want to crush you' way. Getting dangerous around here, I'm leaving. How do I get back to the lie-flat one? Through the crack in that door I think. Yes, this is it. There he is. Oh, look at that dollop on the pillow. Food. Mmmm. Tastes good. Wonder what it is.

— *Peanut butter.*

— *What! Did you just answer? You can hear me? You can connect with me?*

— *You're a sight more interesting than those two out there. All they's want is to be rid of me.*

— *Actually, that's not true. One of them does, the smelly one, Rebecca, but the nice one with the crazy hair, she wants to keep you here or look after you in town.*

— *That figures. Maggie's the one what's always worried about people and trying to give 'em what they want. Becks is worried about what people think of her and whether they'll give her what she wants. What's your name?*

— *Esouh Ylf.*

— *Sounds Middle-Eastern to me. Not from around here?*

— *No, I'm from outside. Been trying to find a way back there. I wasted a lot of time beating on your windows. I can see where I want to go but can't get there. Maddening. Where are you from?*

— *Born, bred and lived my whole life right here. Just like my Pops and his before that. Cudlows have worked this land for three generations. Coming to an end I guess. They tell me we ain't got no animals now. When did that happen? Why'd I stop?*

I don't know what to say so I just stay quiet, suck back more of the peanut butter. Seems like he doesn't needs an answer though – keeps on talking anyway.

— *I can remember when we had a hundred head of cattle, herd of milking cows, shed full of chickens and a barn brimming with pigs. Used to have bacon and eggs for breakfast, wings for lunch and steak for dinner, all raised with me own hands. Mind, that was when we had two farmhands and the girls were still at home to help. Them farmhands used to live in the Bunkie back of the barn. God knows what they got up to back there. Place was fairly humming in those days.*

— *Can I ask you a question?*

— *Sure. Fire away.*

— *Do you emotives have a special place where they take you for the end? Is that where Rebecca wants you to go?*

— *I aint going nowhere. The only way they'll get me outta here is in a box.*

He seems so bothered by his own troubles he doesn't answer my question. Unless this box is the special place.

— *But you can't do anything. You're useless. Can't even get your own food. You don't seem to be having much of a life. Isn't this the end? Do you get in the box yourself now? When we're all used up and can't feed anymore we just end, wherever we are. No box, nothing, just gone.*

This seems to shut him up. He stops talking for a while. Maybe I've made him mad but there aren't any of those short, spiky waves around him. I get even closer, sit next to his ear on the side of his shiny head. Maybe he didn't hear me.

— *You still there?*

I shout this, right in his ear, to make sure he can hear me.

— *No need to yell you bothersome little pest.*

He swipes at me. I dodge out the way and hear the slap of hand on forehead.

— *Mebbe you're right though. Mebbe it's time to call it a day. Take things into me own hands. Is that what you lot do? Will yerselves to death.*

— *I don't think so. Not from what I've seen. We don't have a lot of choice in it. Either someone ends it for us – snapped up by a bird, trodden on by a cow, smacked into a car windshield, that sort of thing – or we just stop, sort of run out of life.*

— *Mebbe you can end it for me Esouh Ylf.*

— *I don't think so. I guess I could try getting stuck in your throat and choke you to death but you'd probably swallow me and then that would be the end for me not you. Ask Rebecca to do it. She seems to be your best bet.*

— *Too much of a coward, she'd never do it. No, it'd be the pills I suppose, the ones Doc Willis give me to sleep. They'd likely work.*

Funny idea – choosing your end like that. Hey, the smelly one's coming back in. What's that in her hand? Christ, it's a swatter. Time to skidaddle, time to hide som ... SPLAT.

- The End -