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The Shit Branch

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Pa had been gone all winter.

It was Christmas night the last time we saw him: the old man in the foyer of our family home, booze-face flushed to red. Mom held a hand to her cheek to contain the sting from his slap.

"Don't tell me what to do," he'd said. Slurred, actually. Something about money. Something about mistletoe. He was in no condition to go anywhere, Mom said. She begged him not to. But of course he was going. Even he knew he'd already pushed beyond what passed for acceptable in the Burns household. There was no other option but out.

Mom knew it. Pa knew it. A bottle of Jameson in his system, and he still knew it. That's how smart he was. We kids knew it, too. But we were too young then to know what words would matter to Pa in a near two-bottle state. To make him stop hitting Mom. To keep him from leaving when a storm was raging. But when he skipped the glass and swilled straight from the bottle, we knew we'd have an early bedtime. But that night, my kid brother Andy showed everyone who was the bravest of us three boys, who was mom's true champion, when he dug out the Monopoly game from the pile under the tree and brought it into the foyer where the folks were having it out. Frankie and I hunched behind the tree as Andy held it, one-handed, like a pizza, a soldier in footie pajamas, and lifted the box between them.

"Hey, guys! Let's play a . . . " he'd said, just as the fake money and hotel shares and Community Chest cards and the little silver-plated goat and automobile and cannon sprawled across the floor.

In the confusion of the cleanup, as everyone fell on hands and knees to pick up the silver-plated trinkets, the fake money, Pa made his exit into the snow-filled dark of the night. We never saw him again.

Andy wailed for days, blamed his tears on the missing racecar. But we all knew better.

Not only had Pa left on Christmas night, he did so in the middle of a Nor'easter blizzard boring down across New England. Pa liked to call these "Yankee Storms" on account of the statewide shutdown, as though snow was a conspiracy. Years later, during a science project for middle school, I learned that Nor'easter storms have a circular quality to how the tiny flakes fall, trapped in a pattern, like a shaken snow globe. For hours that night I stared out my window, watching the tumbling, rolling pattern through the steady streetlight, hoping to see a dark figure barreling home through the world of white.

After Pa left, Mom called the cops, but it took two full days before they did anything about it. And it wasn't until the first big thaw two months later that they found him, stone frozen in a snowdrift, two blocks from our school. We'd pass that snow pile every day, played Fort on it after school, even though none of us felt much like playing. The more time we spent outdoors in the cold meant less time listening to Mom cry. She did little else in that winter-long stretch, the phone extension an arm's length away. When the phone did ring, she'd answer it on the half-ring, and we'd listen at her door, trying to catch from the tone of her voice if Dad was on the other end, or the police. We could always tell if it was police or some business stuff because Mom's voice would shift into some weird pitch that made it sound like she was on TV, like she hadn't spent the past week sobbing in a bathrobe. Other times it was Pa's relatives calling long distance from Carolina, or Pa's former boss at the plant, checking in. We didn't learn until much later that Pa had been fired just before Christmas for drinking on the job.

Amazing where the mind moves in the absence of certainty, how it becomes convinced of the ugliest or strangest from among the available scenarios. After Mom turned out her bedroom light, we three boys would convene by the window in our bedroom, keeping watch, and try to reconstruct what might have happened, what could have happened, and why. I, for one, was convinced we'd get a postcard any day from the Florida Keys.

I'd check the mail, even on Sundays, hoping my theory would prove right, hoping Pa would have written a note just to me, inviting me down there to join him in the sun.

We thought perhaps he'd actually made it down to Hugo's, his favorite bar—although the police reported otherwise.

"Maybe he meant to come back," Andy said, "but he got into a fight with a pack of alien ice bandits."

"I vote for a floozy in a convertible with chains on her tires," Frankie said.

"Maybe he crossed paths with the Abominable Snowman," Andy said.

Looking back it was interesting how convinced Frankie and I were that Pa had up and left. After all, maybe he *was* sick of mom. Sick of us. Sick of the snow. Sick of the mistletoe operation. And our guessing game for his absence made us all look deeper into what was wrong with our family, why someone would choose to leave us in the middle of the biggest storm to hit New England. Meanwhile, the police made no leads. And nothing arrived by mail. And, Mom soon discovered, the mistletoe cash was gone.

When he wasn't drunk, Pa was mostly all right. At dinner, he'd crack jokes about barflies and dumb blondes, midgets who play pianos. He let us take target practice on squirrels and tin cans. Frankie always got the shot, but I faked lousy aim, unwilling to advertise my unwillingness to shoot a squirrel. Sometimes in the summer, while Mom got dinner ready, Pa would pass a can of beer around the living room. We boys would sip at the cold, foamy bubbles and watch the Wheel of Fortune on TV, trying not to wince from the cheap, yeasty tang of Pabst Blue Ribbon. Sometimes Pa would complain about Pat Sajak's haircut. Other times, about the Spanish Pentecostals who held tent meetings in the vacant lot down the street. Or the women's libbers from Brown on their latest march, holding up traffic. Or any Northerner who'd bitch about how hot they were in eighty-degree weather. "Let 'em visit Eastern Carolina," Pa would say. "That'd teach 'em a thing or two about the heat." At Thanksgiving, we'd pile into the car and drive down to see Meemaw in Mewborn. We'd tour the swamps—out to Mattamuskeet or the Great Dismal—to see the ducks in caucus, and keep an eye out for mistletoe in the "sick parts" of the forest.

We'd each be assigned tasks: Track, Shoot, or Catch.

Every year, as we tromped through the woods, armed with shotguns and knives and legions of plastic garbage bags, Pa would tell about mistletoe as though we'd never heard it before.

"The way I know it," Pa said, "we got mistletoe up there because some bird ate one of them white berries from some other tree, and then took a crap in this one." He turned around, his chin craning skyward, and pointed. "And that one, too. Look alive, Track."

"Yes, sir. There, Frankie," I said. "Shoot."

Frankie took aim with the Winchester and missed.

"It ain't no moving target, boy. C'mon," Pa said. "Keep your eye shut. Get it that thing your sight, and get it down here." Frankie shot down a big clump on the third try. Andy—in the role of "Catch"—ran to get it. Pa continued.

"Mistletoe only shows up when the tree's on its way out," Pa would say. "One of the meanest parasites out there."

"Like tapeworm?" Andy asked.

"More of an infestation. Like rats," Pa said. "Get this. The Germans? Call it the 'shit branch'. And we here in America we can't quit kissing beneath it."

I could never shake from my mind the image of some girl kissing a turd on a stick as we hauled our catch out of the woods, Santa-Claus style in plastic trash bags, and into the back of the station wagon. What didn't fit Pa would secure on the roof beneath a bright blue tarp. The next morning, a Saturday, we'd drive north, take turns at rest stops, and Pa would always say, "Guard the shit branch, y'all."

We'd arrive home late Saturday and as soon as dawn hit Sunday morning, all five of us would be up and in operation. We boys would haul the bags of shit branch into the house and empty them, carefully, onto what seemed to be an acre's worth of old sheets that Ma had spread out across the kitchen. Pa would dig out massive spools of fake red velvet ribbon from Woolworth's, and tell us to find our scissors.

"Cut the lengths on an angle about ye long," he said. "Like this. Fold it in half, then snip." While the boys cut the ribbon, Pa would use a Bowie Knife left over from his Korea days to cut the mistletoe into sprigs. Ma tied the bows. Together we made what had to be about a thousand sprigs of mistletoe, and Pa spent the next week roadside, selling off every last one for five dollars apiece. The pair of hand-lettered signs said it all:

Fresh-Caught Mistletoe: $5
Test: free (see attendant)

A few times a week, if my homework was done, I got to tag along with Pa. Turned out, in addition to his sign, Pa had rigged up a sprig that dangled like a line off a fishing pole off the brim of his "Mistletoe Test Hat" and showed it off to every pretty lady who stopped in. Only one took him up on a kiss when I was around, a quick peck on the cheek, and you could tell she was just being nice. Even though everyone says from among the three sons I take after him most, I know Pa probably wasn't the handsomest of men, with his skin cracked in straight lines from nose to jowl, and his thick, paunchy nose. By Christmas Eve, nearly every last one of the sprigs sold, and would Pa give us boys each twenty dollars for our help. It wasn't until I was in college that I understood that mistletoe was the reason why we always had such flush Christmases, and why, after Pa died with two thousand dollars in his wallet, they stopped. Who knew for how long that cash would keep our family afloat?

"Amazing the good money folks'll spend on a chance for a damn kiss," Pa would say. "Happy Shit Branch, son."

Mom wouldn't let us see Dad in his casket. She said it was hard enough to see him in the morgue, his face blackened from frostbite, body mangled from the force of the snowplow. But of course we looked, how could we not, alone at the funeral parlor, Mom talking to the director, surrounded by flowers, waiting for everyone to arrive. Three boys in love with gore? How could we not look?

We looked.

We barely spoke to the people who moved through the reception line. We huddled together at night in the same bed, eyes open and silent. We didn't sleep for a week.

Every once in a while I'll think about that vacant lot, how we three boys had played a full month on that snow pile, defending our territory from imaginary polar bears or ice vampires, as our father lay frozen within. One time, Andy even peed right on it. Just stuck out his wang and tried to write his name in the snow.

"I'm now an official member of the Yellow Snow league," he'd said. We held our noses and complained about the nasal pollution we'd suffered from his piss vapors. Andy gave a sinister laugh, and aimed his wang toward us, and gave it another squirt. Nothing came out.

"Maybe a plow truck hit him," Andy said once, at breakfast, when Mom was downstairs changing the wash. "Maybe he fell down somewhere and they plowed him in."

We dismissed Andy's snowplow theory at the time, along with the Abominable Snowman and Ice Alien gang. But if Dad had been around to hear it, he would have given Andy the Best Guess prize, hands down. Because that's exactly what happened.

When they found him, the inner pockets of Pa's coat were stuffed with objects that could only be described as sentimental: a South of the Border family photo (all of us grinning in fake Mexican hats, mouths shaped into joyous "O's" because the photographer made us all say "taco"); a crushed up piece of mistletoe, with a half-dozen dried-up berries, attached by string to his ballcap; and the ugly-ass Shrinky-Dink Darth Vader keychain that Frankie had made him for Father's Day. And there was the fortune from our last Chinese takeout: "Find humor where you least expect it."

In Pa's clenched hand was the racecar from the damn Monopoly game. And in his wallet, two thousand dollars, cash. That Pa had been trapped dead in a snowdrift this whole time brought an odd relief to everyone, especially to Mom. Sure, he left the house that night mad and drunk with the snow falling and draping in endless frozen ribbons, upending our tiny lives. But at least we knew he wasn't quite ready to quit us. Not yet.

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