

A Christmas Toy

Snow weighed down the trees' boughs, covered every street sign, and veiled the sky. The road ahead remained stubbornly gray. Mark's fiancée, Camille, had said that her parents' vacation home in Sunriver, Oregon was an ideal place to celebrate Christmas; but five minutes past the wooden welcome sign, Mark already harbored doubts. He could manage the snow, but every few hundred yards he came upon another roundabout, and Camille had misordered the sequence in her directions. After two wrong turns and a near foray onto a bike path, Camille owed him—a massage, with oils. Maybe that would rekindle things.

Mark was thirty-five and the new day manager of Giampietro's, a three-story Victorian house on the Oregon coast remodeled into an Italian restaurant. He ran up and down its spiral staircases less now that he didn't serve, but the back of his stiff white collar was still yellowed by the end of each shift. Mark thought he fit the part of manager well: tall, but not intimidating, a thin build, and calming green eyes. Features that helped make things right with customers when something went wrong. And something did, every day. His manager's utility belt, which he wore at all times, held a sleeve of gift cards, a roll of small bills for change, and a detergent pen.

The week after Mark's promotion, they had gone home-shopping, and found the perfect beach house in Yachats. There, he and Camille—the four-star-restaurant manager and the crafter of toys—would settle and marry and make love and not leave until the ocean rose and carried them away.

But he first had to navigate the pretzel of slushy roads that led to the Rousseaus' house.

Ahead, a blue figure emerged from the whiteout. Mark stopped alongside.

"Excuse me! Do you know how I can find Mountain View Lane?"

The walker turned, and through the falling flakes he saw a middle-aged woman whose face bulged from the fur lining of her hood. The fat in her cheeks surely warmed her as much as the fur. A delicate pair of eyeglass frames rested on her short, curving nose; her eyes were vague and milky behind the lenses, which fogged in the moist air.

"Sure! Those are my stomping grounds!" She smiled; she wore braces on her bottom row of teeth. "I'm Yvonne Blakely." She extended her hand, and Mark, after a second, took it with both of his. He gave her his managerial smile.

"Pleasure. I'm Mark Whinsome. So how about those directions? I'm not quite so bundled." He had put on black slacks that morning to meet the senior manager, and he might as well have been naked against the frigid gusts that penetrated the car.

She jutted out her chin, then carefully listed the roundabouts and right-turns that would lead to Mountain View. Mark stared at the bridge of her nose as she spoke, as he used to do while taking people's orders.

"I think I can manage that. Thanks."

"See you around!" Yvonne crunched away through the snow.

The Blakely house would be a picture of Christmas extravagance, Mark was sure, if the exclamation points in Yvonne's voice were any indication. Long strands of white icicle lights would trail from every rail and all of the eaves, a wreath would hang on the front door—maybe, too, on the grill of her car—and mounds of gift boxes would hide the tree. Perhaps Mountain View was long, and they wouldn't see each other around. His eyes already hurt from the glow of the lights. Mark had been relieved to hear that Camille's family celebrated a simple, noncommercial Christmas. He'd had no idea what to get Camille, or what she deserved, given her recent distance.

The power mechanism resisted as Mark rolled up the window, and the glass stopped two inches from the top. The Volvo was Camille's car, a decade old, and something nonessential broke every few months. He drove it now because Camille and her parents were coming north from her toymaker convention a few hours away, and he wanted them to have the Suburban in case they found trouble on the roads. She'd asked Mark to go with them—she was presenting her company's new toy, after months of secrecy—but he'd had to stay for one last shift.

Three roundabouts later Mark came upon Mountain View Lane, and he popped his gloved hands together after making the final, correct turn. He felt no less satisfaction than the previous summer when he and Camille had visited her cousins in Paris. Mark had fought off swarms of compact cars and Camille's erroneous passenger-seat driving to successfully navigate the Arc de Triomphe.

The Rousseaus' vacation home was a light brown two-story structure. It had a wrap-around porch, and two wooden rocking chairs by the front door, chained together so they would remain safe during the months Camille's parents were gone. It was an unnecessary security measure; the chairs had weathered to a deep, fungal green.

Two doors down, an SUV sat in front of a khaki, one-story ranch house, a series of footprints connecting them. The truck had a wreath on the front, and Mark knew it belonged to Yvonne. But the house had no Christmas lights, nor did any of the cul-de-sac's other half-dozen houses. These appeared empty. Perhaps the lack of decoration had to do with what Camille had said about Sunriver's strict building code, which seemed to forbid any paint color that didn't naturally occur in the earth's soil. Dim, deserted, and snowed under, Mountain View Lane resembled a Northwestern ghost town.

Inside the Rousseaus', Mark felt the stagnant air from last Christmas, infused with the scent of stale candles. He would have to wait for the others amid this chilly potpourri of

caramel apple and cinnamon. It would be several hours. Mark took two deep breaths and cheered himself by thinking back on Camille's final act of persuasion, the one that brought him here to the snow: her warm, whispering appeal an inch from his ear. *You will be fine*, she had said. *I'll make sure of it*. Whatever her meaning, he, long-starved, had heard sex; if she gave truth to this, he would have his happy Christmas.

Mark was into his third hour reading *The Hobbit* by the fire when he heard Camille and her parents arrive. The book had been his Christmas tradition since middle school, when he first followed Bilbo Baggins to the Lonely Mountain. Now he was sorry to leave the hobbit behind in Mirkwood. Mark finished the paragraph he was on before rising to greet everyone in the entryway down the hall.

Camille entered tightly wrapped in her favorite charcoal peacoat. A burgundy scarf wound about her neck. The cold had flushed her cheeks, concealing her usual orange freckles. Camille had done up her long amber-streaked brown hair, apparently for the convention. Her shoulders seemed bare without her curls, which now coiled upon the peak of her head like a thin desert snake. Mark's blood coursed through him with greater vigor, and close by his heart came a twinge. Perhaps tonight. She was always gorgeous—every night he filled his eyes with Camille in the last seconds before sleep, so that he might have beautiful dreams—but their last lovemaking had been the night they had found their beach house.

Camille slipped her feet from her boots and gave Mark a wet, chilling hug. Her peacoat soaked through his sweater, but her jasmine scent kept him close.

"Well, honey, looks like you made it okay." Mark kissed her and removed her coat. He looked for a coat rack but found none, and instead draped it over his forearm.

"Yes, nothing to report. Odd, we're nearly alone this year. The Blakelys are the only

other ones who have come for the holidays. Mom and Dad went over to say hi." Camille gestured toward the Yvonne's house and wreathed SUV, where the woman surely distributed large slices of walnut fruitcake to Philippe and Caroline.

"By the way, how did my Volvo hold up?" Camille's lips parted just enough to reveal a thin strip of white teeth.

Mark knew she wanted to hear how the Volvo had bested him. She was proud of its faults, and of her singular ability to manage them. But he wouldn't give her the satisfaction, and he realized that the passenger seat was still collecting snow from the open window. "It held up wonderfully. But you owe me a massage. Your directions were awful." He stretched the last syllable and ended it softly as he thought about Camille's warm hands tracing and kneading the muscles of his shoulders, back, and thighs.

The door swung open and sent a cold gust across Mark's face. Philippe and Caroline entered with their duffle bags.

"Mark!" Philippe said. A wide smile covered his portly face. "So good of you to come!"

"Yes," said Caroline. "This might just become your new holiday tradition!"

"Grand," Mark said. "Just grand." His voice came out as hollow as he felt. Even in their cheer—or maybe because of it, thick and dripping, like Yvonne Blakely's—they sapped his romantic energies.

This was only the third time Mark had seen Camille's parents. They traveled continuously in retirement. Each of their families had emigrated from France after World War II, and they were normal Americans with respect to manners, names, and, in Philippe's case, obesity. But something was off. At least Camille seemed normal, and had remained thin into her thirties like her mother. Mark didn't think he had to fear waking up one morning to an overweight wife, who had no place in his beach house vision. How could such a wife inspire beautiful

dreams?

Mark hugged Caroline and kissed her on both cheeks. She was a few inches shorter than Camille, closer to five feet. Like her daughter, she wore a peacoat, the same deep black as her hair, and draped her body with all kinds of jewelry. An especially fine diamond-studded cross hung around her neck. From what he'd seen, Mark didn't think the couple was actually religious—Camille surely wasn't—but they pretended with great energy. When they had come for a weekend over the summer to meet him and see his and Camille's apartment, Philippe had insisted on taking everyone to church. He had stopped at the first one they came to, which happened to be Episcopal, and kept his eyes shut tight throughout the sermon. Mark had nearly been convinced, until he caught Philippe peeking every few minutes. Maybe he was trying to show off the piety of the French, or maybe he thought that's what American families were supposed to do together, but he looked as relieved as Mark was when they left.

Mark hesitated as he leaned toward Philippe, but the squat man looked expectant, so Mark gave him two kisses alongside his cheeks.

A few hours later, Mark leaned against the hard plastic wall of the Sunriver mall's outdoor skating rink. Blue sky poked at the horizon, but scattered flakes still fell, some fluttering toward Mark under the covering. Camille had decided on a whim they should go ice skating, just as Mark had settled in to read a few more pages before dinner. It was so *pretty* outside, she had said as she tugged on his sleeve—why couldn't they leave the house? This when four inches of snow had accumulated on the window's ledge. He had ignored her until she lay down beside him on the bed and slowly, gently traced her fingers up and down his thigh. That was better—they could bond just as well lying in bed. He set his book down, expecting his massage, and closed his eyes. A moment longer her hands roamed across his chest, then her

weight rose from the bed, and nothing. "Come on," she'd said as he opened his eyes, and with a sidelong glance at his book, a pitched tent on the bedside table, he went.

The floppy canvas uppers and chipped blades of Mark's skates inspired in him little confidence, so he watched Camille. She wound through the sparse crowd of other couples with easy, nimble turns. A couple in their early twenties skated by Mark to the exit.

"Good ice out there!" the man said.

"Don't listen to him," the woman said softly, leaning toward Mark. "It's too chunky."

"I'll await the Zamboni, then."

She raised an eyebrow, then laughed, and continued to laugh as she and the man clomped away.

Camille came near every so often, but Mark could only wave and shout a few words before she was once more out of range. He soon became bored and ordered a beer at the concession stand.

"Good ice out there?" asked the boy behind the counter, a blond kid of about eighteen. A patchy beard grew along his jawline.

"Yeah," Mark said. He sipped his hefeweizen. "A bit chunky, though."

"You here for the holidays?"

"Isn't everyone?"

Camille called from the rink, and Mark carried his beer over.

"Mark! You barely came onto the ice!" She leaned her elbows against the railing and perched her head on her fists.

"I stood there and watched you for at least ten minutes. You were the epitome of grace."

Camille smiled, and in that moment the diverse colors of her face shone. Her orange freckles were in full bloom on her cheeks, the cold had given her lips a hint of purple, and her

tawny eyes glinted even under the stark glow of the fluorescent light above. Mark decided he could take at least one lap around the ice with her before they left.

Later, after dinner, Mark changed into his bathrobe and a thinning pair of felt slippers he found in his closet, then joined the others around the fire. Camille lay on the couch and Philippe and Caroline sat in armchairs opposite. A series of tall, narrow windows made up the wall behind them, and each seemed alight as it reflected the burning wood in the hearth. Mark was pleased to see everyone else finally reading, but just as he moved Camille's legs to sit down, Philippe spoke.

"Mark, come on." He rose from his chair. "Let's get some more wood."

The pile of wood by the hearth still measured at least two feet high. "Right now?"

"You used too much this afternoon, and we might need more for the morning. It's better to go now."

Camille kept her nose in her book and offered no support, so Mark reluctantly followed Philippe from the room. Philippe led him through the hall and down a narrow set of stairs to the basement.

It was a square room as large as the ground level, and a workshop covered the middle of the concrete floor. Along the walls were wooden partitions that divided each side into a series of alcoves. Some of these niches contained obscure tools that Mark didn't recognize, and one held tremendous stacks of firewood, enough to keep the house crackling for years. Philippe had surely been joking about Mark burning too much wood.

"Load me up." Philippe held out his forearms for Mark to fill. They were short, but strong and wide. After piling on the sixth piece, Mark suggested he could get the rest, but Philippe only glared at him. "I said load me up."

Mark added every piece he could, trying to cover Philippe's face, ruddy and probing. After the tenth, Philippe finally left the alcove. Mark managed to fill his own arms with eight pieces, and returned to the stairs hoping to find Philippe halfway up, collapsed under his load. Mark would shake his head at the pudgy man—he'd told him so—then offer him a hand. But Philippe called to Mark from the corner.

Phillipe loaded his wood into a lift that seemed to rise to the hearth, much like the old dumbwaiter they still used at Giampietro's.

"Did you make this?" Mark asked.

"Yes, when I built the house. It's my favorite feature."

For a moment Mark looked in wonder at this man whose collared denim shirt seemed a tent dress. Then he smiled as he realized Philippe was joking again. "You built this house? I thought you were an insurance salesman."

"I was. But I could also build a house. All I needed were the tools you see around you. Would you know what to do with those tools?" Philippe placed Mark's firewood into the lift piece by piece, undoubtedly counting them.

Mark took a deep breath and imagined how Philippe would look crammed into the lift, spilling out its edges. "No, I can't say I would."

Philippe finished loading and looked at Mark with squinting brown eyes. "You want to marry my daughter? You learn to use tools, and then we can talk like men."

Philippe pressed a button to send the lift to the hearth and went upstairs, flipping off the light as he left. The man had a duty to his daughter, but Mark hoped Philippe's show wouldn't last long. He wasn't sure how hard he was willing to fight for Camille's hand. He had met her when he served her and a girlfriend one night at Giampietro's, and he could always meet another to share his beach house with.

Mark fumbled for the lift's down button and returned upstairs.

The Rousseaus had gone to sleep early, after Philippe delegated Mark to tend the fire. He sat on the couch, eyes closed, as Camille lay across his lap.

"Hey." Camille looked up from her magazine. "Do you want to see my toy?"

Mark's eyelids were heavy, he was warm inside his plush robe, and he wanted only to sit. "Right now? It's late, and it's already been such a long day."

"Come on." Camille poked him in the side, and Mark flinched, but didn't move. "I've been working on it for months. And you didn't come to the convention."

"I couldn't have." But Mark had been curious these many months. "Where is it?"

"In the car."

"No way."

"I'm getting the keys. I'll go without you." She rose, and a few seconds later Mark heard the front door open. Soon a draft brushed against Mark's bare calves, and it lingered after Camille returned inside and shut the door.

"Okay," Camille called from the kitchen. "It's in here."

Mark heaved himself to his feet and went to the kitchen. Camille stepped aside to reveal the toy on the table.

It was Heidi, a blonde, white-skinned doll in a sparkly pink box. It wore a red skirt and white apron and blouse, and came packaged with an assortment of cooking implements and utensils. The toy didn't surprise him, given the company's history with Barbie. But it was disappointing. Camille's development process had spanned six months and included focus groups, yet the toy looked like any other piece of painted plastic on store shelves.

"So." Camille leaned against the kitchen doorframe, her eyebrows raised. "Now you've

seen Heidi. Do you like her?"

Camille had put much into this toy; Mark had seen, and barely resisted exploring, the thick files in her home office. He, too, had sacrificed for Heidi; he had often fallen asleep alone while Camille retooled and refined her designs. But when he noticed the tiny wooden spoon that Heidi grasped in her little fingers, he began to laugh.

Camille crossed her arms, and they disappeared in the folds of her navy bathrobe. "Huh. Just a silly waste of my time, then, is she?"

"Camille, I didn't say that." He had stopped laughing, but tried in vain to remove his smile. Heidi was very silly. But wasn't she supposed to be? He sat at the table. "Okay, let's be serious, then. What's the angle?"

Camille held her head aslant. "There have been some successful cooking video games to come along recently, and we wanted to tap that into market. You should appreciate the concept. You work at a restaurant."

"I manage a restaurant, yes." Mark felt that he had somehow been lured into a trap, but he wasn't yet sure what kind, or how he might escape it.

Camille threw her head back. Her hair, now loose, splayed against the doorframe and seemed to hang for a moment before settling on her shoulders. "Is there a difference?"

"Of course there is! And how can you attack me, when you make playthings?" He leaned his head back into the web of his clasped hands. "Why are we even talking about this?"

Camille stared at her fingernails. She picked at the corner of one. She looked up at him with eyes suddenly fighting tears. "You don't appreciate what I do."

If she had cried, Mark would have risen to hold her; deprived of this imperative, he merely sat, confused. "Camille, I'm sure kids will love Heidi—"

"I'm not just talking about Heidi." Her tears streamed. "I mean me. You never come to

me, take me up, make love to me, never want to do things with me. And when I come to you, you lie silently, waiting for it to be over. Then I make Heidi. Something beautiful you will like. And you laugh."

"Camille." She spoke nonsense now—he had only found her toy funny, and now she spoke this nonsense—and he struggled to wade through her words. So—so! she had been ready and willing, only waiting. Waiting for him to open his eyes and return her caresses, so she might give herself up to him.

Mark rose now to hold her tight, to offer his warmth and absorb her shivering fears. Their every layer of clothing was a hindrance as he tried to feel each point of contact along his body. Her head rested against his shoulder, nudging into his neck, and Mark held tighter still. Her toes pressed the ends of his slippers, her knees knocked against his shins, her waist fused with his own as she nestled deeper into him still. Flakes golden in the kitchen light swirled round and built on the window sill beside them. Six inches now, or seven, and if it snowed through the night—if only they could make it through—they might awake to walls of white around the house. Then they would remain in bed, impervious to all, feel each other, and make love. They would celebrate Christmas in bed, and Boxing Day, then return to the salty winds of the coast, claim their beach house, and make love and raise their children to be good in love, too.

Camille raised her eyes to meet his, and he thought, he hoped he saw snow building in them.