

ABIDING BLUE VELVET



Just as had been predicted, almost on the stroke of noon, great feathery flakes began swooning among the glass towers and granite office buildings of downtown Baltimore. Their size and lackadaisical descent signaled a negligible accumulation — a nuisance, really, rather than something magical.

But, still! Snow! On Christmas Eve!

On the fifteenth floor of the Bartlett Building, a sense of surfeit flowed from the reception desk to the conference room with its foil-wrapped poinsettias and paper plates of sprinkled cookies.

“White Christmas ... White Christmas ... good bye ... merry ... merry.” In his corner office, Deke Sutton listened to the snippets of departure. He could imagine the paralegals and associates checking their pockets one last time for their bonuses before putting on their gloves. Deke, too, had a sense that they all shared something no less important for being unspoken. In the closing doors and exclamations, he heard the startled realization that Christmas had, indeed, come around again.

Surprising that it was here so soon. Astonishing, really. That four seasons had passed. Just like that. He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets and moved away from the window. Let the others hurry home.

Two weeks earlier, right after they’d sent their compliments to Juan for the crab cakes at their regular Tuesday lunch, he’d told his older brother Whit, “Good-byes are something I’ve never been very good at. But now I find that I’m not even good at hellos. I don’t even want to bother with them. With the hope that ‘hellos’ carry. I don’t have the energy for them.”

The only sounds had been the snap of fresh cloths over the tables and the clink of dinnerware glasses being set lip-tolinen by men in white jackets. Out the window, the harbor’s horizon was drizzling away to gray.

“I guess that means you won’t be taking anyone to Christmas Eve.” Whit had said. “I think we’d better go to a restaurant this year.”

“I’m not seeing anyone, if that’s what you mean. But I don’t just feel this way around women. I even find it’s getting harder to be decent to ... well ... to just be decent. Just civil.” Thank God, he’d stopped short of telling Whit maybe he was out of sorts because he’d spent the morning with the divorce papers of one of their Pelham Academy friends — Whit’s own separation from Betsy still was so fresh their three children winced at loud noises.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s this holiday crap,” Whit had said. “I have the kids for Christmas Eve. I have to have them to Betsy’s parents’ by nine on Christmas morning ... it’s in the agreement. Leave it to the MacCauliffs to throw a real pity party for them. That’s why a restaurant might be best for us for Christmas Eve.”

Deke said he’d make the reservations.

“And can you get Aunt Elsbeth? God knows if Betsy will have the kids ready on time. If you can get Elsbeth that will help.”

Deke had kept his questions about how Betsy was holding up to himself. Whit, well, he could be sarcastic, and Deke just hadn’t felt like hearing that. He just said he’d get their greataunt, buttoned the middle button of his suit coat and took out his credit card — it was his turn.

The snow was sticking on Charles Street and traffic was snarled. The leave-takings were growing fainter; things would be quiet. He could get a lot done. The thought crossed his mind that maybe he should go to his

apartment before getting Elsbeth, but the Armbruster case, that deal with the Watermann contract, they were piling up. Better to work.

“Will you be needing anything, Mr. Sutton?” His secretary stood in the doorway. She’s already half way to picking up her little girls at her mother’s, Deke thought.

“Thanks, Donna. I’m fine. I guess almost everyone has left.”

“Just Meredith. But I think she’ll be going soon, too.”

“Who?”

“Miss Cottman. The paralegal in trusts ... you know.” Deke remembered something at the partners’ meeting. The woman’s father had died sometime near Thanksgiving; there had been discussion of the size of the wreath. The other men referred to the Cottman woman as “Her Blondness,” but Deke had stuck to his rule: aside from his secretary, courtesy titles always for the women at the office.

“Oh. Well, I’m fine. Merry Christmas, Donna.”

“Same to you, Mr. Sutton. Sure you don’t need anything?”

“No. No. I’m fine. Just, well, ... that little gift shop in the lobby, is it still open, do you think?”

“Carl’s? Probably. People always need last minute things.”

“I thought I’d surprise my aunt, my great-aunt, really. You know how it is.” No sense explaining anything more. Elsbeth was so private, living in an African violet world with her books and her dog. You don’t expose someone like that to your secretary, have her spread what you told her all over the office.

He told Donna it looked like the snow was sticking; she took the hint.

When he’d mentioned to Elsbeth they’d be going to a restaurant for Christmas Eve, she had said, “Well, of course, that makes perfect sense. After all, Whit, well, he’s got his worries right now. You and I, Deke, we’ve always been the flexible ones. You know, they’ve put the tree up in the lobby already. I took Lotte Lenya for her walk, and there was Dawson, wrestling it in.”

Pure Elsbeth, Deke had thought, knitting the details of life together, binding her year-to-year. Nothing escaped her: the dogwood across from the Presbyterian church, the praying mantis that scared her dog, the cheese man at the farmers’ market. So frail, she seemed almost incorporeal, almost as if she materialized out of blue air for holidays, weddings and funerals. Every family event, there she was — always cheerful, always thankful for whatever crab dip or chocolate-crowned cookie came her way. Even Whit’s kids loved her.

But, still, Deke had surprised himself, telling Donna he wanted to get her a gift — he’d never done that before. What do you get someone like Elsbeth? And, too, she was old. To be eighty-something, alone, and still excited about a Christmas tree. How much of her enthusiasm, he wondered, was artifice, that ingrained graciousness, honed during years of private schools and Bryn Mawr teas. A friendliness she summoned to make you feel at ease, to give you something to chat about before you drove her home and she rode the elevator to her waiting dog.

Deke took out the files on the Watermann contract. Increasingly, details, not rainmaking, had become his forte. At the last partners’ meeting, Old Man Carter had called him a tailor for the way he sewed up loopholes. Still, he was having trouble.

The facts kept escaping. Like quicksilver, he’d gather them up only to have them slip away. Again and again, he tried assembling them into a bastion of purpose, but they kept eluding him. And those he did grasp, seemed petty beyond redemption. Just to hear something, he made his chair squeak

Ten minutes later, he walked down the corridor to Old Man’s Carter’s office, making certain to jangle the change in his pocket — he didn’t want to startle the Cottman woman. In her doorway, he cleared his throat, and she lifted her curtain of blond.

“I’m going downstairs, he said. “I just want you to know that you’ll be up here alone.” He didn’t want to call her “Miss Cottman.” They were the last ones — they shared that common denominator; there had to be some intimacy in that. And, too, “Miss Cottman,” that sounded so stodgy; he was only forty-four, after all.

“Melody, is it?”

“It’s Meredith, Mr. Sutton. My name is Meredith. But, I’m just about done. I just have to print out, and I’ll be done.”

“Well, I just wanted you to know that you were going to be alone, that’s all.”

“I won’t be long. Mr. Carter needs this the twenty-sixth. I just need to print.”

“Well, Merry Christmas.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sutton. And you too.”

Before the elevator doors closed he heard her printer beep. The gift shop seemed dedicated to the sort of doodads that women give each other to gush over and then put beside their computers. Nothing for a woman like Elsbeth, his grandmother’s never-married sister. To be that old and alone: What would a woman that age want with brass worry balls? Or a pink padful of inspirational messages?

“Just a last minute thing,” he said to the black man behind the counter. The fellow wore a Santa hat over yellow hair; he didn’t even try to hide his swish when he walked.

“I’ve been selling a lot of ‘last-minute’,” he said. He was eating chocolates. Deke fingered an angel with a pearl blue glaze.

Santaman said, “Those are popular.”

Deke put his hand in his pocket. Even after she’d retired, Elsbeth had traveled with her Briarley School colleagues: the ruins of Petra, the coast of Patagonia, Singapore. Her apartment was a symphony of mementoes. Not to mention the things she’d inherited: the chests, highboys, sideboards, and Chinese porcelain some relative or other had collected.

The afternoon Deke had come to “fetch” her to the christening of Whit and Betsy’s younger boy, the woman he had been seeing then had remarked about a bowl with an oxblood glaze.

“It’s the workmanship that matters,” Elsbeth had said. “That and the idea of connection fascinates me. Somewhere in seventeenth century China, someone made this. And here we are, you and I, on a beautiful Sunday in September in Baltimore, admiring it. Maybe your fingers are in the exact place his were as if he’d been handing it to you all this time.” The memory of Elsbeth saying that was more vivid than the one of the woman’s kiss.

“I just need something for my great-aunt,” he said. “She’s on in years. She doesn’t need anything, really.”

“We should all be so lucky.” Santaman said. He popped a candy into his mouth then motioned for Deke to take one — the caramel had glued his mouth shut. He signaled he’d be back and went into the storeroom. When he came out, he was holding a red umbrella studded with white hearts. With a flick of his wrist, it whooshed open.

“Here, take it,” Santaman said. “It’s incredibly light. That counts when you’re old. Does she still go out, your aunt?”

Well, concerts. That sort of thing.”

There you go. It’s really a Valentine’s item, but in my boat, hearts go any time.”

Deke took it. It really was light. He held it over his head, and then out in front to inspect the ribs; it seemed well-made. He snapped it shut, and there, in the lobby, was Meredith Cottman waving goodbye to Santaman. And there he was, a partner in the firm, holding that girly umbrella. He weighed her smile — it wasn’t mean — and watched her duck into the snow.

She’s a doll, that one,” Santaman said. “Right up to the time her father passed, she’d come in, get some little thing for him. I knew what she was going through — I went through it with my dearest friend.”

Deke paid for the umbrella, went back to the office and tried to work. But the quiet was oppressive and he was getting hungry. He thought of those cookies in the conference room, but they had looked pretty pathetic. Store-bought, too. Stew that would be good.

He went to that place those Koreans ran near the courthouse, but it was closed, so he had to go back to Charles Street. And, of course, all the sidewalks were covered. Who would shovel on Christmas Eve? He was almost at the Washington Monument before he found a five-stool place still open.

When he asked for stew, the woman behind the counter never put down her cell phone; she just couched it against her shoulder when she opened a can. Deke didn't say anything. The dinky plastic spoon she gave him felt so insubstantial that, with his eyes closed, he wouldn't have been able to tell if he grasped it or not. Touch, he thought, we don't appreciate the sense of touch enough. He looked around for someone to talk to, maybe something about which of the five senses was the most valuable, but the man two stools away had shaking hands and an untied shoe. The other one hummed every time he took a bite.

Deke ate his stew and tried to remember what he had done the Christmas before. Whit and Betsy had still been together, but the tension between them had been so thick he almost felt stifled by it before he rang their bell. And neither the MacCauliffs nor Elsbeth could dispel it. He'd been glad the woman he was seeing then had gone home to Miami.

Still, they had gotten through it: his niece Emily had shown him her new flute, and Betsy had surprised everyone by digging out the old one she had from when she played in the Briarley School ensemble. She and Emily had played "Greensleeves," and by the time dinner was served, Whit had mellowed enough to make his grace at least sound heartfelt. And Elsbeth, of course, had told her famous story about the Christmas the lights went out. How there had been a terrible ice storm when she and her sister were little girls, and how, just as Christmas dinner was about to be served, the lights failed.

"Well, don't you know, your grandmother and I, we had gotten the most beautiful sweaters that year: mine was trimmed with blue velvet and hers with grosgrain ribbon," she had said, "Well, the lights were out and Mother had guests up one end of the table and down the other. Of course, we had candles, so it wasn't a total catastrophe, but poor Cook, I don't think she had more than a word or two of English, and there she was struggling to get the dinner out. And the kitchen — well, candles are grand for dining, but not for serving. Oh, Cook, she was having a time of it, so Mother told your grandmother and me to help her. Well, it was pitch dark, I tell you, and all of sudden I didn't see your grandmother anywhere. Not in the dining room. Not in the kitchen. Not in the pantry. And, then, there she was, as helpful as could be, carrying out one platter after another. Of course, eventually the lights came on, and Mother had Cook serve dessert in the parlor, and there, under the tree, someone had switched our sweaters. Near your grandmother's presents was the blue velvet one, and near mine, the grosgrain. I tell you, I was about to throw a fit, but, Mother just hugged me to her and whispered I was not to dare make a fuss. Not in front of guests. So, of course, I didn't, but ever since then, sometimes I find it hard to abide blue velvet."

He remembered how Whit and Betsy's kids had listened; he knew they'd hear Elsbeth's story again in the restaurant this year. When he paid for his stew and stepped into the snow, the outlines of the buildings had become blurred, and the deepening twilight had given a purple cast to the Christmas lights streaming from the Washington Monument. He checked his watch: still over an hour before he had to get Elsbeth. A drink — rubbing elbows, shooting the breeze — that would put him in the Christmas spirit. He found a place down on St. Paul Street, but it was chockablock with people fifteen or more years younger than he was. A group in the corner was singing a beery "White Christmas" and when they got to "like the ones I used to know," they shouted it like drunken frat boys. What could puppies like that know about "used to know"? Their mocking, ironic tone irked him — they didn't even know how to drink.

A blonde girl had her back to him, and when she turned, he saw it was Meredith Cottman. A young fellow, a clerk for one of the judges, Deke thought, had his arm around her shoulder and was running his fingers through her hair. She smiled, but turned her head away. The fellow took his hand down, but she still reached for her coat. By the time the group had broken into another chorus of "White Christmas," she was walking toward the door. Smiling, but, still, leaving.

Deke held the door for her and turned up his collar against the snow.

She looked up at him. "Oh, Mr. Sutton. It's you."

"I thought it was you It's Meredith, right? Did I get it right, this time?"

"Yes . . . it's Meredith."

“Let me walk you to your car.”

“I’m, fine, really. You don’t have to do that. My friends, you know, they mean well ... they’ve been telling me to get out ... now that my dad’s gone. They all say that’s what I should do. But, I don’t know. ” Her eyes showed him the depth of her loss.

The snow crunched under their feet and fell on her hair. “You really don’t have to walk me to my car, Mr. Sutton. I’m fine, really,” she said.

He wanted to tell her not to call him “Mr. Sutton,” but felt now wasn’t the time. He could see the snow was getting on her shoes: her feet had to be cold. He tore open the box with Elsbeth’s umbrella — he’d tell his aunt he’d had to walk someone from the office to her car. Elsbeth was from the era of the courtly gesture. She’d understand.

Across the street, a car beeped when the Cottman woman pressed her key. Deke held the umbrella over her, but there was water in the gutter, and he had to take her elbow to help her over. Even through his glove, her coat, and who knows what else she wore, he felt the aliveness of her breast. The malleable quickness of it. How lush. How blessedly soft. Just a momentary thing. But, still, there it was. So warm.

And then he moved his hand lower on her arm, and by the time they’d crossed the street, the sensation was only a memory imprinted on the back of his hand.

“Could you please wait a minute?” she asked. “I want to check my trunk. This time of year, well, people get desperate; I don’t want to pull up at my brother’s and find out that I’ve been robbed. I’m the high aunty, you know. I’m the aunty who gets to sit by the fireplace and drink eggnog.”

Deke knew she was being effusive because of the drink. He wanted to kiss her and knew she’d probably let him. But he didn’t want any kiss he gave her lumped with every other casual holiday kiss she’d ever been given — she had looked him in the eye, showed him something of her grief — you don’t take advantage of someone like that.

In the trunk, tied with a bright red bow, was a babydoll carriage.

“It was too big to wrap with paper,” Meredith said. “My niece is only three. It’s not politically correct, I know. My sister-in-law will probably have a fit. She and my brother just moved back ere from Houston. She’s a microbiologist. She even has her own lab. And here I am, giving her little girl a doll carriage. I probably should have gotten a microscope, but this doll carriage was so cute. My niece is only three.” “I’m sure she’ll love it,” said Deke.

“I loved mine. I remember pushing it up and down St. Bart’s Way.”

He wanted to tell her how Betsy had taken Emily’s picture the year she had gotten her carriage. And how Whit had put the dog in it, and the pooch had stayed while Emily pushed. He wanted to tell that story, but Meredith’s feet were getting wet. When she got into her car, Deke noticed little collars of snow circling her high heels, and he was glad he hadn’t given her a cheap kiss.

Then she pulled away. And Deke watched her go. And felt what he was. A man holding an umbrella. Alone. On an empty downtown street.

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He gauged the snow on the canopy of Elsbeth’s apartment house; it had to be at least six inches. It was getting down the collar of his coat, but he didn’t want to put up the umbrella. Using Elsbeth’s gift for Meredith Cottman, that was one thing, but using someone’s gift for yourself, that was another.

When he got to Elsbeth’s floor, her dog began barking even before he rang the bell. And when Elsbeth opened her door she had to struggle to keep the creature inside.

“Lotte. Lotte, you Lotte Lenya, you be a good girl.” His great-aunt’s speckled hand reached for him. “Come in, Deke. Come in.”

He stamped his feet just to make certain all the snow was off. On a round table was a little Christmas tree, and white candles and greens were on the mantle. Somewhere a radio was playing.

“Can you believe it?” Elsbeth said. “I can’t remember the last time it snowed on Christmas Eve. I looked back in all my diaries to 1965 and couldn’t find it. I’m certain I would have written it down, whenever it was. Come in. Come see. Come see how it looks from up here.”

She seemed even frailer than she had at Thanksgiving — the way her eyes swam behind her lenses — and that sibilance of hers — the whole impression was one of spittle and bone. One of her hips had cantilevered higher than the other, and a slice of white slip flashed whenever she took a step. Deke knew she’d be embarrassed for it to be seen in public, but couldn’t think of how to tell her.

“Come see, Deke,” she said. “Come see.” The dog picked up a lime green rubber pig. “Oh, Lotte, Lotte Lenya, Deke doesn’t want to play now. Just be a good dog.” She went over to a bank of windows overlooking the rooftops of the houses just across Charles Street, every one of them plumb and four square, built to withstand whatever came its way.

In high school Deke had loved a girl who lived in one with east and west-facing sunrooms, a slate roof and flagstone patio. He remembered how, his junior year, it had taken him all fall to get the courage to ask his great-aunt if she taught a girl named Betsy MacCauliff. And how, a week later, Whit had stood in his doorway, saying, “Some girl named Betsy has asked me to the Snowflake Fling at Briarley. I guess I’ll go.”

He stood at Elsbeth’s window and tried to pick out the MacCauliffs’ house. How could he not know which one he used to drive by — used to make up some excuse, some other Briarley girl beside him, just to pass by where Betsy lived?

“Isn’t it magical?” Elsbeth was saying. “Have you ever seen anything like it? So peaceful! We’re so lucky!”

Deke looked down on her. At the bravery of her lipstick.

“I brought you an umbrella, Elsbeth,” he said. “It had been wrapped, but one of the women from the office, well, I had to walk her to her car — her feet were getting wet, so I kept her head dry — that doesn’t make any sense, I guess.”

“Sense? ... sense ... ? Oh, Deke, I gave up on sense a long time ago.” She held the umbrella over her shoulder.

The evening he had stood on the landing of the MacCauliffs’ stairs and toasted Betsy’s engagement to Whit, everyone but Elsbeth had smiled and smiled up at him, but from behind his great-aunt’s glasses he caught sympathy. Later, Mr. MacCauliff had cornered him in the kitchen, shook his hand, and told him it had been a terrific toast. Deke had been answering that a toast for your brother and his fiancée, well, that’s something you want to get just right, when Elsbeth came out of the powder room. She was feeling a bit “peakish,” she said. Would Deke walk her home? — Her apartment was only block away. It had been a cool June and the azaleas were still in bloom. She had been what? — nearly seventy, when she astonished him by taking long, playful strides, like in that child’s game — step on a crack and break your mother’s back.

“This is how you do it, Deke,” she had said. “Just one foot in front of the other. One step at a time. You get through it. You find joys the others are too busy to notice.” He had walked back to the MacCauliffs’ remembering the story his grandmother had told him of how she had given herself three weeks to steal the only boy who ever came calling on Elsbeth. She’d done it in two! He had considered taking his own long strides, playing the game. But he hadn’t.

“We’d better get going, Elsbeth,” he said. “Our reservation is at seven-thirty.”

“Just let me get my coat and shut off the radio.” Lotte Lenya picked up her pig and trotted after her.

He was left alone to look for the house where the girl he had loved had lived. Whit and Betsy, he thought — they had staked so much — marshaled three children as a bulwark against being alone. But still, here they were, blasted apart. One of them alone tonight. The other, tomorrow.

In the bedroom he heard the radio still playing; Elsbeth wasn’t coming out — it shouldn’t be taking her that long to turn off a radio and get her coat. He called, but she didn’t answer. He didn’t want to go up the hall — he couldn’t ever remember being in her bedroom before, but, still, it was getting late. What could be keeping

her? He called again. But still no answer. Maybe she couldn't hear over the radio. Or maybe something was wrong. He'd feel like an intruder going there, to her bedroom, but, still, what if something had happened? After all, she was old.

When he went up the hall, her coat was on the bed, and she was in front of the window.

"It's Bing Crosby," she said, "Bing Crosby!"

"Who?"

"On the radio, Deke! Bing Crosby! Can you believe it?"

"White Christmas."

"Elsbeth, it's just that . . ."

"I saw him, you know."

"You saw Bing Crosby? I never knew that."

"Yes . . . yes. I saw Bing Crosby. It was before the war. Mother took me. Oh, I tell you, how he could sing. When I went to Bryn Mawr — it was the only thing that made me special. My sister, you know, your grandmother, well, she had the looks. Maybe that's why Mother took me to see Bing Crosby . . . so that I could have a great story to tell. So I could say I'd been the one to see the most famous crooner in America.

"Other girls, well, they had other things. Monica Palmer she always claimed she'd had luncheon with Randolph Scott . . . I don't know if I believe that. But Bing Crosby! I was the only one who had actually seen him. He was handsome, you know. He doesn't get enough credit for that. But he was."

On an oriental carpet, her feet were tracing a dance. Deke recognized the fox trot — for Betsy and Whit's wedding he'd taken dancing lessons. He stepped into Elsbeth's pattern and, with every step, her white slip flashed out. And through her dress, he felt her bones, nearing the surface now, freeing themselves from the weight of flesh. Later, he'd hold an umbrella of hearts over her, and the footprints they made in the snow when they left his car would almost be gone by the time they sat down in the restaurant where she'd tell her blue velvet story. And maybe, this year, the one about Bing Crosby. And Whit and Betsy's kids would listen politely. Because that is what they'd been trained to do. And because they sensed in their great-great-aunt's words some distillation of their own history.

But, here, in this moment, over this carpet, knotted and cut by someone's long-ago fingers, his feet traced a pattern danced to a song sung by a man who'd been dead for decades. A man whose voice came from a box in a bedroom where Deke had never been in before. A bedroom where a woman he'd known all his life slept every night. A woman who still had stories to tell.

So Deke held her. And he danced.