

## Peace on Earth

Lisa H. Napolitan

"Frank, I'm tired. Please. Just give me ten minutes peace. Please," she pleaded. The tip of Carol's nose burned a hard, shiny pink in the frosty air and the edges of her nostrils, cold and hot at the same time, dripped water as if shedding their own tears. He'd followed her out to the sidewalk in front of his parents' home wearing just his sweater, his Florsheims slipping on the snow-crustrusted walk.

Carol gripped her leather gloves around the handle of the bright blue Silver Cross pram, one of two just acquired Christmas gifts from Mom and Dad Murphy, and pushed through the increasingly thick dusting of snow. Seemed her boots had been a good idea after all, adding some traction, though her stockinged legs numbed in the paralyzing evening air.

The pram's red Christmas bow dangled limply atop the canopy as the vehicle's oversized wheels navigated miniature snow mounds created by earlier walkers. The infant Lori Lynn's eyes jiggled in their sockets with each bumpy disturbance. It unnerved Carol that her baby was glaring up at her with such intensity when she knew she looked a wreck.

"You know you're making a real scene." Frank was right behind Carol, good and annoyed now.

"Just go inside, Frank. Oh, my God. I can't breathe."

"Because it's freezing out here."

"No. No. Because I can't breathe in *there*." She swore if he got any closer, she would push him, make him outright slip on the goddam walkway. "Oh, my Lord. Just leave."

Maybe it was her utter lack of interest in the topic of her sister-in-law's prattling. Some paper-thin model named Twiggy popping up on every magazine cover, making it virtually impossible for the average woman to keep up. Or maybe it was changing that umpteenth overloaded Pamper, squeezing the

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damn thing into the already-too-full garbage can outside the endlessly open kitchen door where the exterior's bitter blast smacked up against the combusting interior making Carol unsure whether to grab a sweater or strip down to her panties. No, she knew what it was. It was that stinking lousy card from Ruth. That's what had pushed her over the edge. Brought it all to a boil tonight. That's what had thrown Carol into this state. She'd been expecting it, the holiday card: neither Christmas-themed nor Hanukkah, but wintry and artistic, always artistic. It killed Carol. Ruth didn't have an artistic bone in her body, and yet always sent the nicest, most interesting cards. Bought in the city, no doubt. Carol recognized the artist right away. Girard. Alexander Girard. She'd tagged his work once, taken his coat for him and gotten him coffee, back when she worked, when she had a life. Green letters on white that said in the simple, new, pop art style, "Peace on Earth." Well, la de da. When was the last time Carol had gotten to go into the city? With the four kids now, a trip to her beloved MOMA may as well of been a trip to the moon.

But it was this part of the note that really drove the knife in; these words scrawled into the card that really finished Carol off. "Just completed my dissertation, 'Escaping Plato's Cave: A Theory of Personal Harmony.' Here I go, dear friend! I'm on my way to professorship!" It was enough to drive Carol into a fit if apocalyptic proportion.

"My mother gave you her cookbook, Carol, and you say nothing? You get up and leave?" He marched behind her, his breath billowing like some cartoon character on a morning TV show. Like Magilla Gorilla or something. She was sure that if she turned around, she'd smell the gravy on his breath, the red wine, the garlic, all in that big, white cloud. "Wonderful impression. Just wonderful," he said. And then he swooped his bare hand into the snow, compacted a snowball and whipped it at the nearby stop sign. The ball hit the sign with a dull clang, leaving a mark between the S and the T. "You know the kids are screaming in

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there. They want to eat." Carol stopped walking. "What do you want?"

Well..." She took a moment and felt herself on the verge of tears. "I don't want a goddam cookbook, that's for sure."

Frank's eyes ducked around to see if anyone was nearby. "Watch your mouth," he said all self-consciously. Some kids across the street were making a sad looking snowman with too little snow, though the snow was picking up, becoming steadier. It would be a tough ride home.

"What do you want, Frank? What do you want me to do?"

"Me? I...I want you to come inside and thank my parents for dinner, for their gifts. I want you to take care of our kids and sit down and eat dinner. Is that too much to ask?" His eyes were softer now, confused, hopeful but wary.

Carol looked at the snow that clung to the stop sign. It appeared to have no interest in falling off.

"That's what you want?" she said.

There were three sets of eyes locked in a triangle, all in wait for the answer to this very simple question, and one was very small and peering out from the carriage.

"I want you to come inside. That's all. It's Christmas Eve, for Christ's sake."

The water dripped from Carol's nose. It ran in a thin trickle down her lip. She wiped at it with her glove.

"It's what you want," she said.

"Yes."

She looked into his eyes thinking, *but what do I want? Ask me again. What do I want really?* but said nothing. She then turned and looked into the eyes of her baby Lori Lynn. *What do you*

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*want?* Of course, only the baby could hear it. Mothers do that, with their eyes. And if you ask them, they will tell you that the youngest of children actually do understand.

Frank, in his sweater vest and short sleeves, (*why short sleeves, Frank?*), is shivering in his inadequate outfit. In a gesture that was both take-charge and uncertain, he helped Carol turn the pram around, and they retraced their steps back up the walk to the house. A horseshoe shape of snow had gathered behind the collar of his shirt. Before they entered, Carol removed a glove and pulled the collection of snow out, tossing it away with a series of small, emotionless flicks. The tiny collection of flakes blurred and disappeared somewhere amidst the rest of the falling snow.

"Hand me the baby, Carol. Come. Come get some ham."

After dinner, the kids clamored for Carol's attention, and the women discussed whether the coffee should be prepared at night or in the morning, and Carol thought of the card from Ruth.

Frank gave Carol good quality modeling clay for Christmas.

"When am I supposed to find time for that," she said, breaking the clay into three more or less equal chunks and handing them to each of her older children to do with as they pleased. She then picked up the baby and left the room, ascending the staircase on her way to putting the infant down for bed.

In the morning, she will unwrap the chunks of clay and teach each child, as they sit at the kitchen table, how to create a dragon for Darren, a puppy dog for Cristof, and for Joan, a magician's magic wand.