

## The Winter Fire

I love the sound of a beech wood fire. The way the wood crackles and snaps seems to get amplified by the design of the antique fireplace that is the centerpiece of my cottage. The hearth is made out of fieldstone and the craftsmanship that went into its construction over 120 years ago has served it well. The fire is warm and inviting. The hypnotic dance of the flames has pulled me into a melancholy trance.

My cottage, nothing more than a modest cabin in the isolated woods by Amber Lake, is an old family retreat. Nestled in the Adirondacks, this setting has always been my chosen spot to spend the Christmas holidays. It would be hard to conjure a more idyllic Christmas tableau than what I am seeing right now. The fire roaring, the snow falling heavily outside as the wind off the lake whips the large flakes through the trees. The well-decorated Balsam fir Christmas tree in the corner with its earthy aroma of pine filling the air.

And here I sit, a snifter of whisky in my hand as I recline on a worn yet comfortable chesterfield in front of the hearth. The glow of the Scotch inside me almost matching the warmth of the fire and the plaintive howl of the wind which is conspiring to make my mood one of weary loneliness.

I have no family left to share this cabin with and no one in my life whom I would call a friend. I do have a small circle of acquaintances, mostly work-related, but all of them have joined their own families for the homespun holiday. But the solitary nature of my time at the cabin is not unexpected nor lamented, save for the absence of just one person.

Alice.

Oh, how I wish she were here with me right now. It's the same invocation I've offered up every year at this time; that she would visit me in this spot and sit with me by the fire. To be able to hold her hand and gaze into her eyes as we share and laugh and remember the time we spent together all those years ago. Another sip of whisky and the sting of it on my tongue snaps me back to the fire and the cold reality that I haven't heard from Alice in years and the likelihood of her coming here to be with me...no, not here. Not tonight.

I stand up slowly as my old bones creak in protest at the unwanted movement. I stroll over to the cabinet, my gait meandering slightly due to the drink, and pour myself another hearty dose of the Laphroig before I stare out the large window overlooking the shoreline. Ghastly night to be out. It must be well-below freezing and that wind would cut to the bone. The soft lights from inside the cabin illuminate the small porch and the small cluster of cedars which frame the doorway. The moonless night envelops anything beyond that. I shudder as a small chill runs through me to remind me that I have strayed too far from the warmth of the fire's glow.

I return to my reclined position and let the spirits pull my thoughts back in time, back to when I lived in that old brownstone in the city. Cypress Hills, actually. Brooklyn was such a fun place to be back then. I was able to work mostly from home and my trips into Manhattan were sporadic and only required when I needed to meet with the executives of the architectural firm at which I worked. My apartment was just the right size for me and the other two tenants in the building were kind and courteous. I didn't speak much with Mrs. Marley as she was an older widow who preferred a solitary existence. But the other tenant was someone with whom I was well-acquainted and deeply in love.

Alice.

She moved in two years after I started living there and our attraction was electric. What started with short, cordial conversations as we retrieved our mail or took out our trash soon blossomed into a deep and affectionate fondness for each other. I felt so utterly comfortable with her around. It felt like we had been together for years.

A loud crack from one of the burning logs snaps my eyes open and startles me back to the present. To appease the fire, which seems to be admonishing me for neglecting it, I slowly rise once again to place two more fresh logs on the fire. I take the long iron poker in hand and stare at it intensely for a moment before stabbing it into the coals and embers to stoke the flames and the glow of the renewed pyre shines brightly into the room.

Would it really be so far-fetched to think Alice would arrive to visit me this evening? So many people are pining this very night for a visit from a person who is entirely imaginary. Isn't it them who are expecting far too much? They listen intently for the clatter of hoofs upon their roof and wait for the jolly elf to bestow gifts upon them for being oh so good throughout the previous year. Even Scrooge got his three visitors of the all-too fictitious kind. Why would it be so unimaginable for Alice to arrive at my door and embrace me and tell me how much she has missed me? Tonight is a holy night, a night when our prayers might be answered. And I do pray.

The last time I saw her was a night very similar to this. A cold, blustery December evening and I was pouring myself a cup of tea that I had steeped a little too long. Alice poked her head around the corner and asked me what smelled so good. I told her it was Assam Gingia and asked her to join me. She seemed almost giddy as she accepted the offer. I looked at her closely. Her usual calm demeanor had been replaced by the signs of a person who is ready to burst out laughing or crying or both. I handed her the steaming mug and with an inquisitive glance I asked her what was causing her such excitement.

She said, "Jacob, I am just so happy."

I smiled back at her and wanted to affirm that I was equally as happy as she was, with her sitting next to me.

She continued by saying, "I found out today that I'm pregnant!"

She barely concealed a small squeal of glee and lightly clapped her fingers together in front of her mouth.

I was stunned. Pregnant? But how? The time that Alice and I had been together had certainly been a period of deep and intense love between us. We shared so much and planned a long life together. But we both knew that any sort of physical consummation of our love would not be acceptable outside of the bonds of marriage. I had promised myself to her and had sworn not to indulge in any carnal desire until we became as one. And Alice, my dear sweet Alice. Her purity was unblemished and I knew she shared my steadfast commitment to maintaining herself as a virgin and to only give herself to me wholly in our wedding bed.

Pregnant? My mind swirled around to the point of dizziness. I could barely hear Alice speak. She asked me why I looked so upset. I stood up and paced around the room. How could this be? We were both virgins! How could she be pregnant? I glared at her. I asked her if she was serious and she looked slightly alarmed because of the tone of my voice. She said that she was serious and forced a smile as to calm me down.

A horrible thought raced through my mind. It was December. Everywhere you looked there were signs of Christmas. The celebrations of the birth of Christ. Born in a manger to a virgin! Alice must have been losing her mind. She must have experienced some sort of delusion about Mary and becoming pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She was out of her mind.

My heart raced as I alternated between rage and pity. How could someone say something so blasphemous? To defile the glory of Christ's birth by mockingly pretending to emulate it? And how could my dear sweet love Alice succumb to such a vile hallucination? She stood up and mumbled something about being sorry for springing something so personal on me. I spun to face her. She said she was just so excited because she and Tim had been trying for for over a year to get pregnant and there was still a bit of a stigma attached to having a child before getting married.

Tim? Trying for over a year? My dear Alice had lost her mind. I felt like breaking down in tears but I knew I had to maintain a sense of calm lest I upset her even more. She blushed slightly and said she had better leave. She was going to drop-in for a surprise visit to a friend of hers up the street. Before she turned to leave she looked into my face. She looked sadly at my expression and thanked me for the tea.

"You know, Jacob, you've been a big help to me since I moved into this building. Can you believe it's been a week already? Anyway, I just wanted you to know how happy I am and, again, I'm sorry if what I told you was a little too personal for two people who barely know each other."

Poor, poor Alice. I could think of nothing else to say to her. I offered to walk her out to the street and she stepped into her apartment to grab her jacket and gloves. I held the door for her as she stepped out onto the stoop.

"It's a cold night out here and it's getting late. I'm glad my friend isn't too far away."

I nodded and painted a fake smile on my face in order to not upset my dear deluded love any more than she already was.

"Talk to you later, Jacob."

She turned and as she did I reached out my hand and lightly brushed my hand against her lovely flowing brown hair. She descended towards the street. I turned and closed the door without looking back at her. I broke down in sobs as soon as I closed my apartment door.

I open my eyes as the tickle of a tear rolls down my cheek. Such sad memories. I wipe the tear away and take a deep pull on my glass of whisky. I long for its warmth to be replaced by its numbing anesthetic qualities. I don't want to remember the pain of those events long past but they are swirling through my thoughts.

I recall the swiftness with which I packed up my belongings and procured another place to live. I found an adequate apartment on Roosevelt Island, near the bridge. It didn't have the charm of my old place but I had to leave there. I had to get away from the curse that had befallen Alice. There was nothing I could do for her anymore. She was lost to me. As much as it made my heart ache, I knew I would never see her again.

I need more liquor to banish these awful memories from my mind. I sway my way towards the liquor cabinet and bend down to find a bottle of a much cheaper whisky. I don't need a dram of fancy single-malt anymore. I want a tall tumbler of booze. Mind-numbing hooch to dull my thoughts into a stupor and then the blissfulness of unconsciousness. I stand up with an almost full bottle of Johnnie Red in my hand and lift it above my head as I yell, "Begone, Ghosts of Christmas Past!" and chuckle to myself. Before I fill my glass I glance out the window and stare directly into the face of Alice, standing outside on my porch.

My shock is almost instantly replaced by a wave of utter joy and happiness as I realize she has returned to me! I smile broadly at her and look into her face that is dimly illuminated by the light of the cabin. I cannot believe she is here. My mind is spinning as waves of emotions and so many questions flood over me.

Does she remember how we parted on the steps that night?

I wonder to myself if she felt my hand reach out to her and lovingly touch her hair as she walked away. Could she sense how much I wanted her not to leave me? Did she somehow realize that I did not intentionally push my hand into the hair she hung down over her shoulder, causing her shoulder to be shoved forward and throwing her off balance?

Surely she knew that I saw how icy the stairs were but how could I have known that her feet would slide out from under her as she tumbled down towards the decorative wrought-iron fencing that lined the sidewalk. It had ornamental Fleur-de-lis trefoil spikes along the top and I could not have known how easily they would pierce through her sternum and ribs as she plunged over the edge of the stairway and landed facing down upon the fence. Did she actually think I could do anything to help her as she flailed her legs wildly and moaned in agony as she tried in vain to lift her weight off that fence? She might have been grateful to me for not hurting her even more by trying to pull her off those spikes. The blood was hemorrhaging out of her chest and I'm sure she felt a small sense of relief as the darkness flooded over her and she faded into the eternal night.

Once I had scanned up and down the dark street and realized that no one was around to witness her fall, I turned and closed the apartment door behind me. Alice must have been happy for me when the police classified it as a tragic accident. I answered a few cursory questions from some stranger named Tim who seemed to be quite upset by Alice's accident. I told him what I told the police: I did not see anything happen to her. I didn't even tell them about Alice's delusions of being pregnant. I wouldn't allow her blasphemy to be on the public record. She must have appreciated that.

But she stares at me. I beckon her inside.

"Come inside, my love. It must be well-below freezing and that wind will cut you to the...bone."

I pause and look down to see that she is wearing no clothes at all. Her desiccated body has been reduced to a skeletal frame with thin patchy layers of skin stretched tightly along the bones. I can see the skin along her chest and the line of holes where the fence had punctured her body. I look deep into her empty eye sockets and the remaining skin around her mouth becomes pulled into a mournful grimace.

But I know she still loves me. She still knows how deep and abiding my love is for her.

"Come inside and be with me, my darling. Come warm yourself by the fire!"

She remains where she stands, the wind seemingly having no effect on her dry and ragged patches of hair that remain on her skull and which hang down over her decrepit shoulders.

"Here let me stoke the fire and build it up in order to warm you, my love."

I race to the pile of logs in the crate to the left of the hearth. I lift up three large logs, well seasoned and dried, and move them to the fire. I pull back the screen and plunge them into the well fed fire.

"You see, my dear? I will make you warm again!"

I turn towards the window and Alice is now pointing at me. Her arm is outstretched and a bony finger is pointing directly at me.

"Yes, my darling, I will warm you and you will come sit next to me and hold my hand and we will talk once again."

I pull the iron poker from its rack and before I start rearranging the logs to make more room, I glance at the shape of the its iron head. It is shaped like a Fleur-de-lis trefoil. I glance over my shoulder and look out the window at Alice. The grimace on her face almost appears to be malevolent and screaming, but I know she loves me. I plunge the poker into the fire and force the logs to the side so I can place even more wood on the coals.

"It will be soon warm enough for you, my dearest love!"

I jam two more logs in the fire and an already burning log rolls off the pyre and beyond my leg onto the carpet behind me.

"I never forgot about you, darling. I dreamt about you every night. I am so happy you've come back to me."

I step over to the crate to grab four more logs and throw them with giddy delight into the fire. An explosion of sparks and embers burst out of the fireplace and spread around on the floor and furniture near the hearth. The carpet, already ignited by the log that rolled upon it, is now alight with flames. Thick embers have landed on the chesterfield and the smoke is smoldering thickly from its dry fabric. I run back to the window and lean over the liquor cabinet to look into Alice's face.

"You see how warm I'm making it for you, darling?"

I grab the bottle of whisky from the cabinet and hurl it into the fireplace. A short distance but still an impressively accurate toss and the bottle shatters upon the fire causing a expulsion of blue alcohol-fueled flames to burst from the fireplace. The chesterfield has now joined the carpet in full flame. Embers have bounced their way into the corner and the beautiful fir tree adorned with so many lovely Christmas ornaments has joined the conflagration.

"Come inside, Alice. Come be with me!"

The cabin is now an inferno.

"Come warm yourself, darling."

I barely feel the heat as my pant leg catches fire.

"My truest love. My angel. Come stand with me."

Alice just stands outside and points at me, barely visible as the thick smoke envelops me.

"Alice!"

The flames race up my legs and my robe is now searing my flesh.

"Alice."

I fix my gaze upon her hollow eyes as the flames ignite my hair and my entire body becomes engulfed in flames.

"Alice..."

I look to see her no more.

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