

THE CHRISTMAS LIFT

My grandmother's name was Bessie, not Elizabeth, Bessie, but I called her Nonny. A short wiry old lady who brooked little nonsense. She prided herself on being a tough old bird. My Mom and Nonny raised me on Oakland Avenue in Mount Vernon, New York, just north of the Bronx.

I moved home in the summer of my sophomore year in college. My mother had cancer. The kind people of Fordham University took me in, no questions asked, keeping my Viet Nam student draft exemption alive.

Mom died in early December. That was first time I ever saw Nonny cry. She announced,

“There will be no Christmas this year.”

No big tree in the sunroom for a dog, cat or her to knock over this year.

I was lucky to grow up in a Jewish neighborhood. That fact helped to make Christmas special at my house. My boyhood pals, to my mother's delight, would flock to our house to share our holiday cheer, enlivening our home with their laughter.

None had the spirit of Christmas better than my oldest and dearest friend, Danny Einbender. Being a little round and sprightly, there was a bit of Saint Nick in him. His eyes always twinkled with mischief and thankfully, the year my mother past, that twinkle was still there. Home from Northwestern for the holidays where he had managed a full scholarship playing tuba in the marching band, I believe, he was one of the first band members to upset Midwest sensibilities with his brown flowing locks sticking out of his high brimmed NW band

cap. This was 1968 and hippies and long hair were foreign in the Midwest

Danny came over Christmas Eve while my grandmother was asleep. There was an awful, quiet sadness in our house. My Mother always took a real delight in Christmas adorning the house, baking and celebrating. The more who came over the merrier. Dan and I sat round telling stories about my Mom and our Christmases past. After a few nips of Christmas cheer some merriness snuck in the room. A plot was hatched.

Mount Vernon was a working class town bordered by tonier Pelham to the east. That Christmas, too good to be true, snow swirled under the streetlights on Oakland Ave. Quiet abounded on our empty street. It was past 11 when I wheeled my family's big blue winged Pontiac out into the snow heading toward Pelham. We had often passed by the fancy overpriced tree lot right on the Pelham side of the border. Game on! We were going to steal the biggest tree we could find. After all the next day they all would be rubbish anyway.

I nervously pulled our winged wonder of a car next to the lot's fence. We feared that an unlucky Pelham policeman, working Christmas Eve, might be cruising the area to keep his burghers safe. The chain link fence was easy to jump over, even for my overweight friend. We went shopping, but it didn't take long. There still were rows of trees left now covered in white. There it was the biggest and best. We grabbed it and scurried for the fence. I went over first hooking my long coat on the fence and ended sprawled in the snow. Dan quickly hefted up the tree and handed it to me. Smiling, calmly he hopped over the fence. A quick tie down and we were over the border. That big old Blue Pontiac glided through our town's streets we knew so well with our prize on top

It was easy to sneak the tree in the back door while my elder slept upstairs. We left the tree in the side sunroom and crept up the stairs to the third floor attic. Down the creaky wooden stairs we smuggled the family Christmas decorations and tree stand, not stirring a mouse. Refortified by Christmas refreshments we jumped to our task. For at least an hour that early Christmas morning we whirled around the tree putting up lights, decorations and telling stories of our shared childhood Christmases.

Our favorite one was, the time Nonny tried to rearrange some decorations, tripped and fell taking the tree with her on the way down in front of her gathered family. Her anger only increased as we roared at the proper lady buried under a Christmas tree.

So many of the ornaments brought out fond memories of other Christmases. I realized that for the first time in a long time, I was smiling. I was sure my Mom (although shocked by our criminality) was smiling too.

Too soon Danny drifted away and I turned in for a very short sleep. Like a young boy, up early on this Christmas Day, I went down and admired our tree in the morning light anxiously anticipating my Grandmother's arrival. Soon she appeared, a small slight woman in the white robe, white hair disheveled. She approached the coffee pot. We had left the lights on and the tree could be seen through the kitchen door. I waited. As she turned from the stove her eyes spied the tree. A big frown crossed her face. She expected to be obeyed and shuffled past me toward the tree.

“I said no Christmas this year.”

Then, again I saw a few tears and slowly a smile crossed her usually stern face. She plopped herself in a big arm chair and said

“What have you done?”

“I couldn’t help myself, Danny helped me,” I said trying to spread the blame.

There was a pause, and then she asked,

“Can you finish off the coffee I think I would like to sit here awhile. And can you put some brandy in our coffee?”

There were no presents, but we sat by that tree for hours and my Grandmother told me old stories of her, my Mom and our family, some I had never heard before. Joy had crept back in our house and healing began.