

Cathy

by Adam Sifre

“Merry Christmas, Wille.” Cathy stood in her kitchen. The cold from the tiled floor made itself known on the thin part of her slippers, but she paid it little mind. Cathy couldn't remember the last time she'd been warm.

“Well, we'll get a little toasty, tonight.” She didn't drink much anymore, her one concession to the doctors. She was always happy for an excuse though, and, after all, that's what Christmas is for. Tonight she'd have a glass or two of that whiskey. The name always escaped her but the memory of it stayed with her fresh as rain. It had a strong, hot, cinnamon flavor. The first few sips always brought her back to childhood. Whenever she'd catch a warm Saturday or summer day, Cathy would scrounge up a few coins, head to the little woods, and take the cut through path all the way up to the interstate where Nagel's Candy Barn awaited -- about 2 miles. Too long a walk for a lonely ten-year old, but it never seems like that when you're ten.

The Candy Barn, always filled with chocolates, licorice whips, jellied candies and...

“Red hots,” Cathy whispered. Those were her favorite. Small, Red Hot jawbreakers. The kind that started off red but turned white after a minute. She could still feel the memory of heat on tongue ...

And that's what the first few sips of her whiskey tasted like. The next few sips, however, would drive all thoughts of childhood out of her head. Cathy smiled.

A soft whine brought her back to the present. Willie was sitting by her feet, tail thumping against the floor.

“Oh, Willie! I forgot all about you!” Cathy bent down and leaned in for a kiss. Willie obliged. “I'm so sorry, yes I am. I am so sorry. You want your bone. I know, I *know*.” Like all dog lovers, Cathy's voice came out an octave or so higher whenever she talked with Willie. She took a marrow bone from her apron pocket.

“Here you go. Merry Christmas.” She pursed her lips together for another doggie kiss, but Willie had other things on his mind now and set his attention on his present. Cathy sat down on the floor. Once she started it was sometimes easier to keep on going than stand back up.

“That's all right. That's okay.” She rubbed Willie's ears.

It was cold and sharp outside, but not a breath of wind. Unusual for this time of year. Without it, the entire house felt a little out of sorts. All the sounds one never hears disappear with a good wind. In this new, still world, there was a sound of absence that set her teeth on edge.

From where she sat, Cathy could see into the small living room. It had a nice fireplace but she didn't trust herself to use it these days. Too easy to fall asleep or do some other foolishness and burn the place to the ground. The mantel was bare. She had thought about putting some Christmas lights and maybe even a stocking or two there, but she never got around to it. Now she wished she had.

The clean, naked slate stone was an accusation tonight. No pictures of loved ones. No holiday cards. *Not even a photo of Willie.*

She commenced the laborious process of standing.

I don't know why I never thought of it before. It's a little odd.

She finally made it to her feet and poured an unhealthy amount of whiskey into a mason jar filled already filled with ice. The liquid sound of the whiskey hitting the ice was muted to her ears, as if in respect to the new unquiet.

Cathy took a sip and enjoyed the feeling of heat and memory flooding her mouth. But not as much as she usually did.

“It's more than a little odd, isn't it Wille?” The dog showed his agreement by taking the marrow bone to his bed in the far corner of the living room.

“How does a woman get to be my age and not have anything to show for it on her fireplace mantel?” She took another sip of whiskey but forgot to taste it.

The house continued to hold its breath. Cathy moved closer to the fireplace. Spotless and empty. The ashes from the last forgotten fire had been cleaned, she supposed, though she couldn't remember ever doing that. *Maybe they just disappear after a while, become dust or something. Can ashes do that?*

The whole thing made her uneasy. "There could have been pictures there, Willie. It's not as if I didn't have my share of times." She absently took another sip of the cold fire, an ice cube bouncing against her lower lip. "I had my share of suitors, but in the end they didn't suit me," she laughed.

That's not true. One suited you just fine. He was a handsome thing and sweet talker, and he had the softest hair. The memory of her fingers running through his hair rocked her back a step. "Like liquid silk." She hadn't thought about that in she didn't know how long. There had been real heat then. Not the cheap, easy kind that she found in the bottle these nights, but the sweet, devouring, desperate heat of youth, dreams and -

and sex. Be honest now. It wasn't a sonnet, even back then. But we took our pleasures and I won't apologize. Especially now.

Cathy reached out and tentatively rested a hand on the cool stone mantel.

"I used to have beautiful hands." But they had disappeared when she wasn't paying attention. They had gone and one morning she had woken up with these. Her beautiful hands, as gone as the wedding albums, birthday cards and vacation photos that never were.

"What have I done," she whispered into the dead house?

