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2400 WORDS

ONE TIME RIGHTS

A HOUSE FULL OF LOVE

BY JAMES J COLLINS

A chicken in every pot, two cars in every garage and five Christmas trees in every living room are dreams of some American families. Something seems to have gone amiss with this image but it brings a glow every time I think of it. Several other triggers, the aroma of an evergreen tree, the feel of snow in the air, or the sound of carols will activate the image of that night, and I look forward to these beautiful memories that remind me of a warm and wonderful night so very long ago.

Christmas holds different memories for every one. Between the rushing for the season and the details that have to be attended to, we often lose sight of the true meaning of the holiday. However, if you are lucky, and keep your eyes open, you may witness examples of true love in the most unusual of events. Many times the significance will slip past you unseen, but if you stop and examine what transpired, you may be lucky enough to see it re-run in your mind. Freeze it in your memory so it can be brought back into focus when you need a little pick me up to carry you through the day. The joy of Christmas can then be with you all the days of your life. This tale describes one of those moments. Three men stood around a fifty five gallon drum watching the flaming wood fire, stomping their feet, and flapping their arms trying to get their circulation going. Placing their hands, which were covered with fingerless gloves, close to the flames, they attempted to extract a small modicum of warmth from the blaze as sparks, like living beings released from imprisonment by miniature explosions, raced upward trying to escape earth's pull only to expire in the cold air. Acrid grey smoke enveloped them like fog causing them to appear and disappear in the night like ephemeral ghosts. The popping fire, the darkness, and the smoke cast shadows and watered the eyes of an observer so that, at first glance, it appeared that the trio was in uniform. They each wore a long dark overcoat, a scarf, a knit hat pulled down over the ears, beat up pants, and rubber boots. An astute observer, however, would correctly determine that in reality they were bundled from head to

foot with an odd assortment of multi-colored, soot-covered, clothes, no two items of which were the same. Their features were so obscured by the clothes they wore and the pungent smoke that enveloped them, that they could best be identified as 'small', 'medium', and 'large'. Due to the enormity of the latter and because of the bulk that was hinted at under his clothes, 'large' could more appropriately be identified as 'extra large'.

Small stretches of snow and dangerous patches of ice covering the ground reflected the flicker generated by the fire which was the only illumination for quite a distance. The area was dark and ominous with a few dim or flickering, odd colored overhead lights sprinkled around the train yards. Two detached box cars sat on the siding immediately in back of the three men while all around were stacked bundles of Christmas trees ranging in height from five feet to fifteen feet.

'Extra large's' face, what could be seen of it, flared like a beacon as he puffed on the cigar that was jammed in his mouth. The tip beamed red as he drew on the stogie and quickly faded, as if hiding from the cold. In his right hand he held a cup of coffee, which had cooled for there was no steam rising from it. When he put his hands closer to the fire, the cup went with them as if he was trying to reheat the contents of the cup but in the cold it was a futile gesture.

There were still a few hours to midnight, and their ordeal would be over. Since Thanksgiving, the three partners, taking turns, had been at this location day and night for the better part of a month. As agreed, each shift was controlled by one of the three, but this was the finale, and they all opted to be present to see it finally end and to divide up the spoils. For this was Christmas eve in 1956 and these were Christmas tree salesmen; the wholesalers. They worked out of the side of a rented box car on a deserted siding in the Market at 155th street just below Yankee Stadium. The box car, now devoid of trees, was the last of twenty that they had purchased, but the year had been excellent and they had received good prices for their merchandise. The Market was known as the Mecca for all the retail Christmas tree salesmen in the Bronx and northern Manhattan. Early each morning till late at night there was a constant procession of trucks and cars coming into the area to acquire bundles of trees for transport to the heart of each borough. Young men, trying to make an extra buck, usually manned these vehicles. It offered an observer an opportunity to see the future business men of America trying out their wings on a short term opportunity.

The retail business was normally conducted outdoors on the

streets. Often an impromptu Christmas tree selling center was set up on a vacant lot on a patch of sidewalk or in front of an empty store. Trees were casually leaned against a wall or against a temporary corral made of a couple of ropes thrown across an opening. For this was the place of business, a real low overhead operation; truly a "plain pipe rack" operation designed specifically for the local inhabitants in hope that they would select their holiday tree from that enterprise at a nice mark up. Besides the cost of the trees, some minor expenses were normally encountered. A few bucks had to be paid to the superintendent so that he would look the other way while the merchandisers hawked their wares from their unauthorized squatter's locale. The 'super' knew they would be gone on Christmas day so why try to fight them. It was an annual event and their arrival was inevitable. He knew from experience that he would have to clean up after them, so if he got paid up front, he was happy.

For the wholesalers, the last night was always the most interesting one, for the buyers who arrived this night were only interested in single trees as opposed to the normal wholesale customers who bought large quantities at an expected volume discount. This was the time when all the heavy dickering took place. Christmas trees are like fish; up to a certain period you can sell them at a premium; after Christmas day you can't give them away. This was the equivalent of graduation day for the tree salesmen. Tomorrow being Christmas, they had to scrap their remaining inventory and look for another business. Now was the witching hour when both the bargain hunters and the panicky procrastinators showed up on their doorstep and the negotiations would be fast and furious. The salesman had to be able to discriminate between the types of buyers to determine which category they fit. This made all the difference in the price one could charge. As every other night, this business, was cash only, but now the last of the inventory had to be moved at all costs, and everybody knew this. The stage was set.

Tommy O'Brien and Jimmy Shea walked over to the fire, drawn there like the proverbial moths. Many of the wholesalers had already left; 'Small', 'Medium', and 'Extra Large', were still in business.

"Now listen Tommy," whispered Jimmy, "you never offer these guys the price you are willing to pay. You always got to start low and you got to dicker with them. Plead poverty and never pull out all your cash. Look hard for more but don't find it. You got the singles in the different pockets like I told you?"

"Yeah, but I don't understand why, and please don't try to

explain it again," Tommy protested as he held up his hand like a stop sign. "Let's not waste forever down here. Let's just get a tree and get out of here. I don't got all night. They're all out, but the folks will be home soon and I want to have the tree all set up before they get back. I want to surprise them. We always get our tree on Christmas eve so I want to have it there when they get home. Maybe we'll even get it decorated in time to really blow their minds. This is the first year I've got a job; the first year I've got some money and I want to do it up right."

"No sweat," Jimmy assured him, "It will only take a few minutes. Let me dicker with these guys and I'll save you a couple of bucks for presents. I've been selling trees on the streets for the last three years and I know what you got to do to get through to these characters."

"O.K.," said Tommy, "but I want a good sized tree, at least seven feet tall. The going rate on the street is twelve bucks for a really good tree. Anything you can do better than that, we're ahead of the game."

"No sweat."

Medium looked over and hollered, "Hey. . . youse guys looking for some trees? Step right over here. We got a couple of really nice bunches going, and we'll give you a good price tonight." The voice cut through the gloom like a buzz saw.

Jimmy Shea walked over and inquired, "What'cha asking?"

"This package here. . . twenty bucks."

"Nah nah," he said, "It's Christmas eve. I'm not going to be able to move three trees this late at night. I'm just looking for one."

"We don't sell retail," protested Medium, "Why don't youse go up on the corners and get from the guys up there?"

"Ca'mon, ca'mon, you know and I know you got to move these trees, and there ain't nobody goin' to pick them up. So why don't we stop messsin' around and work a deal?"

Changing his voice to a more conciliatory tone, Medium says "O.K. eighteen bucks for the bunch."

"Five bucks for one and I get to pick," said Jim as he waved a fin in his hand.

"You're robbing me but it's a deal," growled Medium as he snatched the bill out of Jim's hand before he changed his mind.

The rest of the transaction was simple and in fifteen minutes they were on their way with the tree tied to the handles of the right hand side of the car, while Tommy wrapped his arm around the bundle and held on for dear life.

Arriving at the house they untied the tree from the car and

then freed it from its bonds. It sprung to life when dropped on its butt as a few damaged needles showered the ground.

"Boy the old man will be happy to see this beauty," Tommy said as he lifted it up on the porch. He put it down to reach for his key when the door burst open.

"Merry Christmas," boomed Kevin O'Brien, "and what do we have here?"

"Dad I figured it was time for me to get the tree. This is the first year that I've been working, so I decided to get the family tree."

"Well isn't that grand," said Kevin. "Bring it right in here and put it in the corner."

As he muscled the tree into the room, Tommy's smile suddenly faded. There already were two trees in two different corners, each in a different phase of dress. The one on the right had lights while the second had tinsel. His brother and his younger sister were each attending to a separate tree and they were unhappy at his arrival.

"Why did you bring a tree?" challenged his brother, "I already had one."

"So did I," whined his sister. "Mom gave me the money this afternoon and I had it delivered right after supper."

"Now, now," said Kevin, "They're all fine trees and we will display them all. Each one can have it's own corner."

"But there won't be enough decorations to go around," said Mary. Always practical, she put her finger on a problem none of the others had considered.

"Don't worry your head," said Kevin, "just go out to the kitchen, put on some popcorn and thread it together with needles and thread. Then we can decorate as many trees as we wish."

As the words left his mouth, Karen the eldest pushed in the door with yet another tree. "Merry Christmas," she cried with a smile that disappeared as she entered the room.

Suddenly it was bedlam, everyone talked at once. Each wanted their tree to be spotlighted and the other's trees removed. This was a scenario that required the wisdom of Solomon. Unfortunately he wasn't there so Kevin O'Brien had to assume the role. "Quiet," he hollered. "Everyone sit down." A rush for seats took place. "Now we have plenty of room so each tree will stay. One will go in each corner and you will all share the decorations until they run out.. "

Just the the door exploded open another time. Meg the second oldest and her fiance came in through the door loaded with presents dragging one more tree.

The laughter started before the new arrivals realized what it was all about. The O'Briens loved a good laugh and the absurdity of the situation hit them all at once.

"This place looks like the Black Forest in Germany," said Tommy, and they roared with laughter.

The decorating party went on for hours and as the liquor flowed the neatness of the job seemed to slip but the family got closer and closer.

Getting Kevin O'Brien off to the side, Jimmy Shea offered to get rid of the extra trees before he left.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," said Kevin, "We'll keep them all up till New Years Day like we always do."

"But you won't be able to use the room till then," Jimmy protested. "The five trees fill the whole room."

"Ah but that's all right," said Kevin, "We'll manage."

"Well what if I just dump two of them so you can at least get around in the room."

"Thanks all the same for the offer, but no." said Kevin, "Each of my children bought a special gift for the family and which one could I hurt by rejecting their gift? No they all are special to me and their gifts are equally special. If there is any inconvenience, I'm sure we can put up with it for a while more."

That Christmas week the O'Briens had more callers than usual for the word quickly spread that they had Christmas trees everywhere and many wanted to see for themselves. Several thought the whole clan odd, but Jimmy Shea knew better. That Christmas he had been given a present that lasted far past that memorable day. He learned what many never learn that every day can be Christmas when you have a house full of love.

THE END