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Christmas Lights

This was the 30th of November, nearly eight years ago.

I'd left Grahamstown for the first time in my life and I was living in Tennessee, in what they call a college town — that gave way on the east to the Great Smoky Mountains, and on the west to a snarl of highways and interstates.

I missed my girlfriend and I missed my car — and even though she could be nasty and distant and careless with my feelings, and ended up leaving me a little while after I got back, and even though that car broke down on me quite soon after that — I was missing them so much at the time that they'll always be a part of this thing. Well, that feeling will.

I couldn't relate to the people I was living with, who were rich and seemed so young, and even though most of them were from Tennessee they weren't nearly as country as I was even, and sometimes that'd make me feel ashamed.

I was there on a study exchange deal, and so on top of all this other stuff the courses I was doing at the university were too easy — and I used to be proud of that stuff, reading well, thinking lots — and by October I could feel myself sinking into this thing I get sometimes, where it's like I've fallen out of love with the world and I just want it to leave me alone.

For a while, since I knew it was really for a notion of the land that I'd left home in the first place, I actively tried to like the town I was in. I'd go walking for hours, along Main Street and up and down the sidestreets there and I'd even walk around the autoyards and I'd hang out a bit at the truckstops. I'd walk in the suburbs and on the service roads and once, I walked about three hours towards Sevierville and back. I tried, but even though it was autumn, and the sunlight and the sky and the cottonwoods were truly beautiful for a whole month — every day I carried around this feeling, like things were going wrong — and I carried it till it was like I couldn't remember ever feeling anything different.

This period was the first time in my life that drinking got on top of me, the first time when I'd do it even when I promised myself not to. These days, of course, that compulsion to disappoint myself is a familiar thing, and I can watch for it. But at the time — that first time — it was like rapture, it gave me a tragic feeling that I thought was adding heft and meaning to my days.

I drank every night in a tiny bar at the end of Main Street called Tumblin' Dice, except Sundays when it was closed and I'd drink in my room, or else take a few into the woods with me and sit down in the leaves and drink there. Tumblin' Dice had great live music on Wednesday and Saturday nights and it was the only place in town where you were allowed to smoke inside. And early on, before the well was poisoned and especially when I'd go in the afternoons — and watch the men come in with dirty faces, wearing clothes with reflecting panels on them and carrying their work boots and talking loudly in that songlike way I keep close in my memory — in the first few weeks of knowing Tumblin' Dice, I really thought I'd found a grail.

I remember the whole of November had been cool, with cobalt skies and pitching sunlight, and clouds that looked like sheet metal. But that day, Wednesday the 30th, was the first day it'd snowed. It wasn't quite the first time I'd ever seen snow in my life, but it was the first time I'd ever seen it snow like that.

They told me three inches came down before lunch and I promise it came down like hard rain, in sweeps, so hard there were times you could hear it landing. I spent most of the day watching the snow from my window, and then at about five I left my room. It was clearing up and it was dark, and walking across campus my feet creaked on the snow and crunched on the grass, and I could see icicles glinting on the dogwoods.

I went by one of my favourite places in town, a warehouse that was now a Baptist church, with a huge parking lot and an illuminated board out front the pastor would write terrifying things on, like BACKSLIDING STARTS WHEN KNEEBENDING STOPS. I went and stood in the parking lot and looked at it — the board, the pastor's handwriting, the squares of fluorescent light in the windows — and I strained to hear what they were singing inside and

I wondered like I always did about actually going in. I often think that if I'd known, standing there, that I was only going to be in America for another four days, I'd have done it right then: and it's strange, but still, often I wonder how things would've gone for me if I had.

I couldn't get onto Main Street at the Alcoa turnoff because they'd thrown salt all over the road, and so the ditch near the guardrail where you climbed over was full of mud. I walked through a suburb and then down an alley that led between two lines of kit houses, and I found another alley that went up to Main.

I saw a van parked in front of a coffeeshop I'd been into a few times. The cargo door was open and there were three guys standing around looking into the back. When I joined them, they were gesturing at a heap of tubes and cords and brackets, and one of them was saying, 'You're a ass if you think we can do it buzzed. We'll kill usselves first.'

I spoke to them and it turned out they were there to hang Christmas lights on the front of the shop, except they had to wait till midnight to do it. There was a bylaw saying that light displays were only allowed to go up on December 1st, and had to be down by January 10th or something like that, which was a weird thing about Maryville since there was so much to do with Christmas everywhere else. Even back in October, the Walmart had installed a bunch of Father Christmases, on little platforms with plastic trees and fake gifts all around them, and lots of people had strung tinsel up inside their cars and for about a month already no matter where you went or what you bought they'd give you a candy cane with your change and tell you to have a Merry Christmas. In fact, without that law, there'd probably always be Christmas lights up in Maryville.

The owner of the coffeeshop was the uncle of the one of the guys, or one of their cousins or something — anyway, he was paying them to have the lights up before morning. I thought about asking them if they needed any help with it, when one of them said, 'Hey! You know what we could do, we could drag the shit upstairs now, and put it together and shit, then bake out while we waited for go-time.'

The rest of them didn't even talk about it, they just started getting things out the back of the van — and I turned it over a couple of times in my head but in the end I just wanted to drink, so I left them there and went on down the road to Tumblin' Dice.

Getting drunk felt just sort of usual, but the band that played that night was something special. They were called Kin, three brothers from Mississippi and their cousin — drums, bass, guitar and a Hammond organ — and I'd never heard an organ played in real life before, and since then I've gone looking for one that sounds like that one did and I still haven't found it.

It'd be quiet in the verses and barely there in the choruses, just swelling behind the voice. But when it got a break it'd just flood into the song — and the sound would go everywhere, it'd lift you and make you feel like you were in a church — and I never dance

but that night I danced on my own and with other people, it didn't matter, everyone was dancing. I bought rounds and rounds of drinks for the musicians and they let me up on stage to hand them over between songs and when their set was finished, I can't explain it, but I just felt different, like at last someone'd drawn back a curtain, and I had a view again.

I finished the drink I had and when I went outside it was snowing again, a light flurry, all of it staying in the air. My ears burned like they had current in them and I turned my collar up and I got my gloves out of my pockets and put them on. I saw the van still parked outside the coffeeshop and I started walking in that direction.

Two of the guys, Harlan and Steve, were leaning on the side of the van. When they saw me, Steve said, 'Hey man, stay for the show.'

It was five minutes before midnight and I looked up at the balcony and even though the lights were off, I could imagine, and I told them please just to wait for me. I went to a Texaco down the road and bought two twelve-packs, some cigarettes, and some stuff to eat.

When I got back to the van Ed was there too. We opened the cargo door and climbed inside and started drinking the beers. We drank four or five each while we ate chips and peanuts and smoked some of the cigarettes, and it got warm in there, and we spoke easily with each other.

After a while it got too smoky inside and someone said, 'Should we do it?' and we climbed out into the freezing air. For some reason, Ed was going to be the guy to plug them in. The rest of us got to watch. We stood on the pavement and we shouted 'Three, two, one!' and they flashed on even brighter than I was ready for, the colours with an immense light in them: reindeer, a child wrapped in a white blanket. 'Wait for it' Harlan said, and suddenly two blue angels appeared over the scene and streaks of light ran toward the centre and crashed together to make a pulsing star. I could feel Steve's arm around me and I heard him say, 'Hey now buddy, how's that?' and I heard Harlan call out to Ed — and while I was looking up at the lights and the falling snow I saw how the two were parts of each other and bits of something else, and I knew it was a real thing, and I said to myself right then that if I was still in America on Christmas day I'd be drunk and lonely, and I'd have ruined it forever.