

Drifting

by Dale Lerner

Years of black coffee and unfiltered cigarettes crackled through John's speaker.
"Your wife's on line one, Mr. Parks," his secretary said, and coughed.

John knew better. The papers he signed two days ago made it perfectly clear she was no longer his wife. He thought for a minute, then punched the button for line one.

"I'm sure you're busy, John, but I wanted to get Christmas straight."

He thought she sounded too nice.

"I know. I remember," he said. "You get the kids this time."

"No, it's not that. I was thinking about how we were supposed to spend Christmas with your parents this year, and—"

"I'm sure they'll understand why we can't make it."

"Actually, I was thinking we should keep our plans and go."

He was trying to get some things together for a meeting as they spoke, but that stopped him. Why would she want him around now?

"That doesn't sound like such a good idea, Maria."

"Maybe not for us, but the children need some normalcy in their lives, and having us together as a family unit over Christmas could help."

He thought she was watching too much Dr. Phil, but he left it alone. His secretary leaned her tired body on his doorjamb and cleared her throat.

"Marketing meeting in five," she said.

John nodded and waved her away.

"Look, I've got to go. I'll call my parents—"

“I already spoke to your mother.”

“What?”

“She thinks it’s a good idea.”

“Then I guess there’s nothing to argue about. I’ve got a meeting. I’ll get the details later.”

He made the meeting but couldn’t get his mind off Maria’s phone call. He was just beginning to get his concentration back after going through the divorce, and then a call like that. What was he supposed to think? Why did she feel spending Christmas together would bring normalcy? Things weren’t normal. Why pretend?

Maria called his apartment that night. She said Christmas was on a Saturday. They could drive up on Friday and come back on Monday. He still thought it was a bad idea, but he didn’t feel like arguing, and he gave in.

* * *

John pulled in on Friday morning and parked next to the SUV that used to be in his name. He noticed the shrubs and mulch along the driveway were new. Maria came out with the kids before he could get to the door. She slid on a pair of sunglasses when he said hello. She looked thinner, and he wondered if she was dating. He jammed his bag in the back of the SUV, and they were off.

The seven-year-old, Dylan, blamed his dad for the divorce and pouted most of the trip. Sarah, the three-year-old, was cranky and slept a lot. Maria spoke about Dylan wanting to try out for baseball and how the Gabriels were moving to Boca. John nodded agreeably. It was a boring drive, but they weren’t arguing.

It began to snow as they crossed the Tennessee state line, and by the time they reached Knoxville it was dark out and snowing harder. John struggled to see the exit sign for his parents' road. He turned off just in time and felt the tires slide in the loose snow.

"John, be careful! It's bad out," Maria said.

"Don't worry. I was raised in this stuff."

He saw Dylan return a look in the mirror from the back seat. It was the first time Dylan had looked him in the eye since the day he moved out of the house.

As they drove away from the city, the streetlights ended and the line of trees on both sides of the road grew darker and denser, and the falling snow drifted down out of the darkness and into the headlights like a swarm of confused white bees. John watched the bees swirl over the hood and melt on the windshield. He liked the way he felt right then. There was danger, and his family was counting on him to bring them through. He could play that role, and he wanted to, but over the past few years it seemed he wasn't right for the part.

John thought he recognized the outline of a split-rail fence and took the small road next to it. They plowed along past fields of untouched snow and then headed up a familiar hill with the tires spinning. As they crested over the hill, his parents' house lifted into view like a brightly lit carnival ride. Loose strands of Christmas lights outlined their chimney, roof, and front porch. His parents came out and stood in the headlights as John pulled into their driveway.

"We were so worried with all this snow," his mother said, and she quickly snatched up Sarah.

His father gave him a firm handshake and said, "Let's get out of this mess," and yanked the heaviest bag out of the back.

Dylan lagged behind kicking through the snow, and John stopped and dug some together with his bare hands. He turned to Dylan as he packed a tight snowball.

“Watch this,” he said, and threw it at the maple tree in the front yard and hit the trunk.

Dylan hesitated, but then he grabbed a pile, flipped it in his hands a few times, and threw it, but it left his hand in a loose spray of crystals.

“You didn’t pack it tight enough,” John said, as he handed Dylan a smaller lump. “Here, now squeeze it until it’s like a baseball.”

“Like this?” Dylan said, as he worked his hands.

“Yeah, that’s good. Now throw it.”

Dylan wound up and followed through on the release like a pro this time, and it hit and left a mark just below his father’s. Dylan flashed his eyes up at John, but then he quickly looked down at his shoes.

John’s mother had eggnog with cinnamon waiting for them inside next to the fireplace. Their Christmas tree had red-mirrored bulbs and bright green lights, and John could smell the fresh pine needles when he entered the living room. It was topped with a glittering star, and silver garland spiraled down to the bottom.

The pile of presents under the tree were neatly wrapped, and Sarah escaped and ran for them with her hands out. Maria caught her, but not before she tore open the edge of a box. His parents laughed, and it reminded John of the sort of people they were—nice. He didn’t know nice people anymore.

The kids took his old room, and he and Maria were in the spare. She seemed as uncomfortable as he was, but they had twin beds, so it worked.

“Thanks for going along with this, John. I think it’s good for the kids.”

He wasn't sure what to say. "Okay, well, goodnight," and he turned off the light.

* * *

Christmas morning carried in warm smells of scrambled eggs and buttered biscuits, and John's mother made the kids sit down and eat before opening their presents. Dylan continued to pout, but it was obvious he was faking.

They moved to the living room, and it was decided Maria should hand out the presents. John watched her deliver each gift with a pleasant smile. She had a quiet, graceful way about her.

Dylan unwrapped his presents as if uninterested in such things, but John caught him glance over now and then—like a boy might do who thinks a lot of his father. John looked at his own dad and caught a wink.

Things settled down. Maria took Sarah in for a nap, and Dylan kept busy with some Matchbox cars. John's father watched a parade on TV, while his mother started a ham simmered in the oven.

John put on his coat and wandered out into the backyard. The sun was up, and the sky was a deep blue. A crust had formed on the snow, and he felt his shoes break through with each step. The gazebo was still there. He stepped in and cleared some snow off the bench and sat and looked at the snow-covered hill that sloped down away from the house. The tree limbs along the edge of the woods were bent from the heavy snow. He could feel the cold air begin to sting his face. He found himself thinking about how Dylan looked at him after hitting the tree trunk with the snowball, and how Maria was so serene and motherly. Something was coming back. Something he'd given up on.

He heard the screen door snap shut. Maria came out squinting at the sun. She shivered and stuck her hands in her coat pockets. He watched her step in his footprints on her way out,

and it suddenly occurred to him how far away he had drifted from who he once was, and he didn't like it. He cleared a spot on the bench for her and hoped it wasn't too late.
