

Further Shores

a Christmas Story for friends and family
by
Bo Wilson

c. 2014 by the author
all rights reserved

Joanne usually finds something she doesn't like about the place.

It *looks* wonderful. In fact, it looks almost decadent with its promise of easy living, like an exclusive celebrity rehab facility-- perfectly groomed lawns, with finely graveled walking paths, along which rest occasional flower gardens, small bursts of color framing the occasional bench or chair, the sound of quietly burbling water coming from a tiny fountain. The construction didn't leave many trees, but the ones that remain are immense, stately things.

Even now, a week before Christmas, it's balmy here, and a string of tasteful white lights along the deep, wide porch are the only hint of the season. A few of the residents take in the afternoon sun, in wheelchairs with attendants, sheltered by antebellum columns that seem to announce one needn't come closer without a great deal of money at one's disposal.

Indeed, this was one of the things Joanne frequently finds to dislike about the place: this casual presumption of wealth. She had come to her own money via her divorce from an extremely wealthy and extremely unfaithful husband, and like most who come to wealth after having lived modestly, she often feels like an imposter in such surroundings.

Other times, her dislike decides to focus upon the smell of the place. Its air seems to offer multiple layers of unnatural scents, from the artificially piney air freshener, to the many currents of different perfume (applied in floral bucketfuls by the female residents, whose failing olfactory sense leaves them unaware of their effect,) all undercut by the baseline constant of institutional disinfectant.

Today, however, her dislike fixes upon the music. She can hear it as she approaches the entrance, elevatorey-sounding Christmas carols, tinged with a kind of desperation that seems determined to extort holiday cheer by sheer dint of insistent repetition. Once sacred songs, reduced to department store kitsch, and she actually has to pause for a moment on the threshold and gather herself. It is not their fault, she reminds herself as part of a mantra that she frequently employs before entering: They are doing their best. Their job is difficult. Their tools are few. You won't be here long.

And perhaps this is the idea truly at the heart of her various dislikes: The powerful guilt arising whenever she gratefully remembers that she can come and go as she likes, while the "residents" (such a deceptively innocuous term) are here for... well. Ever. It's not the wealth or the smell or the music, not really. It's the very fact that it exists. It's what it means. It's the inescapable truth that not even money, not even bags and bags of money, can change what happens here.

"Merry Christmas," she mutters to herself, before taking a deep breath and marching through the doors.

Far to the north, in a vast realm many, many feet below the ice, a tiny bell chimes along a wall full of similarly chiming bells. They ring their sweetly tiny sound anytime that anyone, anywhere speaks the words "Merry Christmas." By the time the day itself arrives, they seem to jingle in rich and constant harmony, a gleeful, thousand-voice chorus. It had been something the

Saint had asked the Makers to create several years ago, a seeming whim which, like all of the Saint's requests, soon proved to be more. Its sweet, pure sound reminded the scores of little laborers that their efforts were in service of countless wishes, great and small, and that these wishes were always toward some greater good. Even the briefest holiday wish to a neighbor contributed to the whole of the world's goodness, just as each chime contributed to the lovely chorus the Makers had so expertly crafted.

And after all: Wishes are their business.

Joanne has sailed past the front desk (which she has privately christened "Checkpoint Charlie") with its resolutely cheerful attendants who greet her warmly by name and with wishes for the happiest of holidays (part of what the money pays for, she reminds herself) and she wishes them the same in return because it's not their fault, they're doing their best, etcetera, etcetera; across the lobby, into the elevator (more horrid music!) and before she knows it, she is on the fourth floor, east wing, known technically as CCLT-B, which stands for "Chronic Care Long Term, Section B," and known less technically among staffers as the Sleeper Wing.

It's the place for elderly patients who are unconscious and who aren't going to wake up.

Here, at least, there is silence; the music is blessedly stilled. Christine is on duty, and that's good, she likes Christine; indeed, she likes all the staffers on this section. She's never noticed an ounce of indifference or cruelty in their outlooks, and if this is an act, then they're all very good actors, and if that's part of what her money is buying then that's fine with her. They're certainly knowledgeable of the day to day state of the residents in their charge, and that's no act. They notice the smallest things and note them in their charts for their colleagues, because they know that in a place where very little seems to change, the slightest thing matters. When Joanne had visited last week, it was Christine who had told her that during his last sponge bath her father had given a little sound that might have been a chuckle, that his mouth had given a little twitch that might have been a smile. She also reported that Joanne's mother's breathing was definitely less labored, and that her face no longer seemed quite so drawn.

Today, Christine smiles her usual warm smile, and asks Joanne how she's been, and then excuses herself, knowing exactly how long to persist in these social niceties, knowing that Joanne will be back for a longer chat after her visit. This, too, this deeply skilled understanding of time and place, is part of what Joanne is grateful for even while disliking the institution. She herself worked in a variety of service capacities before her marriage, and she knows and appreciates good service when she encounters it.

Now she walks down the hall and into her father's room, which connects by a door to her mother's room. (The Parental Suite is how she thinks of it.) She had tried very hard to have things arranged for both parents to be in the same room, but there had been a number of technical obstacles and she had ultimately given up; her money had only taken her so far in that fight, the institution serving no one who did *not* have piles of money, so she had settled for connecting rooms. She had to admit that it probably made little difference. Both of her parents were in deeply unconscious states and not likely to be aware of much of anything, ever again.

Still, there's no end of sources claiming one cannot know the extent to which people in such conditions are aware, or partially aware, of their surroundings. It's why she visits every week, and spends time sitting at their bedsides, talking to each of them. She harbors no illusion that they might awaken, but maybe they can hear her anyway; maybe, somewhere in that faraway place they inhabit, they like the sound of her voice. So she tells them everything she can think of: What had happened on the soap opera that she and her mother had watched together so many times, who had won the basketball games her father had always been so fond of, what she'd dreamed about the night before, what was on sale at the grocer's. Anything. Everything.

It is all she knows to do.

Past the long ice-wall of energetically tinkling bells, one must make a choice: Left, Right, or Straight Ahead? To the right, one encounters the wood shop, the metallurge, all of the gamesmiths and toywrights and dollshops. To the left is the Great Wish Hall, into which all of the wishes from all over the world flow. Most of these are handled without the Saint ever having to involve himself (although to say he isn't aware of them would not be true, for the Saint is aware of everything that happens in his realm.)

Straight ahead? Why, straight ahead, over the windbridge and past the library, are the chambers of The Saint himself, perfectly positioned between the two halves of his realm: Wishing, and Making.

On very rare occasions, the Saint will become aware of a particular wish to which he would like to attend personally. When he feels this, he dispatches his right hand, his maker-in-chief, Blaine, to fetch the wish in question and bring it to him. He has already seen to a handful of such wishes this season, and is beginning to feel the growing energy of The Day itself, which looms like a mountain over everything they do.

But it is a joyous pressure, the pressure of expectation, its own sort of wish if you think about it. Just now, Blaine is expertly overseeing the flow between the halves, sending certain wishes here, and others there, assigning this Maker to this task or that Maker to that one. He is calm, courteous, and in fullest command of the large effort underway, and he is well aware that there is no better feeling than to know oneself to be involved in a great and good undertaking. He does not know what today will bring, for who besides the Saint himself could even dare such a claim, but he does know that whatever comes, they will be ready for it.

If he doesn't know exactly how... well. That's part of the fun.

Back at Christine's counter, Joanne is gratefully sipping a cup of excellent coffee, and chatting with the sympathetic woman.

"I wonder sometimes, what the worst thing about it is," Joanne muses. "I mean, in some ways it's not so bad. They're comfortable. They're in no pain. They're well taken after by all of you..." Christine gives a tiny nod of thanks at being appreciated, and Joanne nods back, then continues "I think it's the sense of... lost opportunity."

“Things you wish you’d said or done?” asks Christine.

Joanne shakes her head. “Not my opportunities, theirs. How many things in this hall, in this building, are there that all these people were hoping to do but just, for whatever reason, never got to do?”

Christine nods, knowing when it’s best to just keep listening.

Joanne’s eyes are seeing into some private, middle distance. “I mean, take my parents. They both worked hard their whole lives. They never really traveled or had vacations, plenty of weeks they never even had a day off.” She sees Christine’s confusion and explains “All of this is paid for by a divorce settlement,” and the woman nods in understanding. Joanne continues: “And you wanna know something that they always talked about doing but never actually got around to? They wanted to go to the beach.”

“The beach?” asks Christine. “Like, the ocean beach?”

“Right. Can you believe it? It sounds so simple. Lived their whole lives maybe two day’s drive away, but somehow never quite got there. They talked about it, they daydreamed about it, about renting a little cottage or a little boat, and they joked about who would get more sunburned and how my dad would get a heart attack from all the girls in bikinis, but they just.... never got there. And now it’s too late.”

Christine is quiet.

“I mean, I know they’re never going to wake up. I know we’re not in some Hallmark movie. This is it. And they’re lucky to have this, I know. But still, I just wish that there were some way.....” Joanne’s vision blurs as her eyes fill with tears, and she looks away, feeling foolish. It never fails to startle her, how close to the surface her tears can be, even after all this time. Through her tears she notes the staff’s efforts at decorations, the shiny cardboard Christmas trees, the stockings, the glaringly red Santa who is peering intently at what looks like a letter he has just received. But no, it’s not a letter. On the paper he holds is the beginning of the famous poem: “’Twas the night before Christmas.” Joanne knows the poem by heart.

She stares for a long moment.

Then she turns to Christine, and without pausing to question herself, she says “Can you give me a sheet of paper and a pen, please?”

After a half a beat of confusion, Christine does as she’s asked, and Joanne wipes her eyes, and begins to write.

“BLAINE!!!”

The ice walls shake a bit with the thunder of his summons. The Maker turns his head slightly in the direction of the call, pursing his lips in disapproval (such noise!) then shakes his head and completes his instructions to the Apprentice Maker who stands nervously before him. "A bit less chrome on back fender and it's perfect," he assures the youngster, who hurries away gratefully, and Blaine begins moving toward his master's voice.

He reaches the threshold of the chambers just as the Saint gives another jolly roar: "BLAINE!!"

Quietly, casually, Blaine speaks: "Sir, I wonder if you might one day soon take the time to learn the use of the intercom you had us make for you, we wouldn't want any children to lose the benefit of your ho-ho-ho due to vocal strain."

"Blaine!" he cries, happily. He is always happy. This is rather less pleasant than you might imagine, for his happiness-- like everything else about him-- is a huge force that can buffet the unprepared Maker with the force of a hurricane. He bends now to peer at his chief Maker and best friend. "When have you known me to be less than in fullest voice?"

"Never, sir, which was rather my point," Blaine sniffs.

The Saint smiles, knowing how fortunate he is to have a right hand who is so undaunted by him and his powers. "My friend, there is a wish I'd like to know more about."

Instantly all business, Blaine unrolls his scroll and says "Yes sir?"

(The scroll is magical, as are most things in this snowy kingdom. It can show any letter written to the Saint anywhere at any time. There is no postal service in these lands, and most children couldn't begin to guess at a proper address beyond a vague polar coordinate. They simply have faith that their wishes reach him, and they do-- instantly, and reliably.)

"It's from a grown woman. Middle aged. J something. Something about a beach."

"Beach?" asks Blaine.

"Apparently," replies the Saint.

"A *beach*...." Blaine muses, his eyes moving quickly as the scroll offers possibilities.

"Yes, Blaine, a beach, a seashore, a sandy place where water meets land, what is your difficulty?"

"Many responses suggest themselves, sir," comes the arch reply. Then his knowing eyes narrow, and his mouth twitches with the slightest hint of pleasure at his success. "Her name is Joanne, sir," he says, extending the scroll for the Saint's view.

Here is what the scroll says:

"Dear Santa,

I have not written you a letter in probably fifty years. I hope you will not hold it against me, ha-ha.”

(The Saint chuckles; Blaine rolls his eyes.)

“I have a Christmas wish that’s probably ridiculous, although it might not be any more ridiculous than a fifty-nine year old woman writing a letter to you. Years ago, my parents suffered very large strokes within a few weeks of each other, and are now cared for in a very nice home for the elderly. I know they will never wake up and I would not waste your time wishing for such a thing. Although my real wish may actually be even more impossible. But I felt that it could not hurt to ask. Here it is: All their lives they wished they could go to the beach. It sounds so simple but it never happened. I know that putting them on an actual beach makes no sense. But maybe there is another way. Even to this day we recite poems about how you put things into the dreams of sleeping children. Visions of sugar plums for instance. I thought of this and I wondered whether you might have any way to give my parents visions of the sea shore that could dance in their heads. I don’t know how you would do such a thing, and I don’t know whether I would ever know whether you have succeeded or not. But I had to ask. With love and thanks, Joanne Robeson.”

The Saint stares into space for a moment.

Blaine waits. Then the Saint is in motion, light on his feet and speedier than you’d think. “Come with me!” he calls without looking back.

Blaine hurries to follow him. “May I ask, sir, wh--”

“A special gift!” is all the Saint says.

Blaine smiles broadly, catches himself, looks around to make sure no one has seen, and quickens his pace.

In the Saint’s private chambers, there is a chest which is not visible unless the Saint wishes for it to be seen. It is protected by locks both physical and magical. Blaine holds one key, and the Saint, the other. They insert their keys, the Saint counts three, and they turn them in unison. The Saint murmurs a word that Blaine has never quite been able to hear (and, truth to tell, doesn’t wish to hear. Some things are better unknown) and with that the chest opens silently.

The chest does not hold money, though its contents are priceless. It holds items that are not only one of a kind, they are once-upon-a-kind and never-a-kind; they are impossible, and they are here. There is a piece of a phoenix feather. There are is a phial of ashes from the Library at Alexandria. There is a single strand of Samson’s hair. A dragon scale. A small cloth stained with Galileo’s tears. A piece of the star you wished on when you were ten. Dozens and dozens of magical and mythical items the likes of which any wizard would trade half his life simply to behold.

From this chest, the Saint withdraws a tiny bottle of sand.

He speaks another word and the chest closes without a sound and vanishes. Blaine feels both satisfaction and relief that he need no longer look directly upon it, for even he feels dizzy if he regards it and its contents for too long. “One presumes, sir, that the bottle does not hold ordinary sand?”

The Saint is staring at the bottle, and for once he speaks softly. “There was never any sand less ordinary.”

He holds it up, and Blaine is certain that the light he sees isn't simply reflected; this light is coming from the sand itself. The Saint speaks: “Long ago I had occasion to travel to the river at the edge of the waking world, where I performed a small favor for the Lord of All Dreams. In return, he asked me what he could give, and I asked him for a small bottle of the sands from his side of the river. That is what this bottle holds.”

“Dream sand...” mused Blaine. “But surely, such a substance would be too powerful for any mortal...”

The Saint nodded, returning to his usual brisk manner. “Just so. Down at the glass blowers there is a wide selection of sands...”

“A dilution, I see,” nodded Blaine, speaking over him, both of them excited as they work out what must be done.

“Take care with the proportions, my Maker. I suggest one hundred parts something, what, Caribbean isle perhaps, to one part dreamstuff. Hm?” He holds the bottle out to his Chief Maker.

Blaine cradles the bottle like a flower, and murmurs “I'll see to it personally, Sir.” Their eyes meet; one pair twinkles with pleasure, and the other flashes with determination.

When Joanne arrives for her next visit, Christine is again at her desk, and her eyes widen at the sight of Joanne. “You have a package!” she says with some wonder, and produces a small box from underneath the countertop. “It came special delivery, I had to sign for it, and I had to sign a second piece of paper that I would give it to you and only you. I'd never heard of such a thing. It must be pretty important.” She holds it out, and after a moment, Joanne accepts it.

Joanne studies the box for a moment and then begins to open it (when she thinks about it later, she'll swear that the box opened all by itself the moment she reached for it.) A single piece of creamy velum slips into her hand. On it is written, in perfect script:

“When subject is sleeping, remove cork slowly. Sprinkle a few grains around subject. Effect is immediate. Duration increases with amount used.”

Joanne turns it over. No signature. She looks at the box. No return address. She looks at Christine, who shrugs, and says “Don't look at me!”

Joanne reaches into the box and withdraws what seems like a small, corked test tube. She holds it up to see its contents more clearly.

Christine leans so that she can see too. "Sand?" she asks? "Who would send you a test tube of sand? What does the letter say?"

Joanne stares at the bottle which is, she is suddenly sure, growing warmer in her hand. In that moment, her mind is made up. "Are you working tonight too?"

Christine nods. "Yes. The other girls had family things they wanted to do, and I thought it'd be a shame for them to miss anything like that."

Joanne seems barely to have heard her. "I need you to do me a favor," she says, still looking intently at the test tube. "There's five hundred dollars cash in it for you, and it only needs to be for tonight."

Christine looks at Joanne. She's watched this woman come visit her parents every single week, rain or shine, for over a year, when there's absolutely no hope of them waking. She hopes someone will be that devoted to her if she's ever in such a state. And it's Christmas Eve. Whatever it is that Joanne wants, Christine is prepared to do anything she can. "Keep your money," she says, "and tell me what you want us to do."

When Joanne returns later that night, an orderly named Samuel whispers "Over here!" and holds a side door open for her. A moment later, she is back upstairs, where Christine has already moved her mother's bed into the room with her father, so that they're side by side.

"Thank you," murmurs Joanne, holding the tube of very warm sand in her palm. Then she looks at Christine. "You don't have to stay."

Christine's eyes widen. "Are you crazy? Whatever you're doing, you couldn't pay me to miss it." She smiles. "In fact, you already tried. Remember? If I wouldn't leave for five hundred bucks, you think I'd leave for free?"

Joanne manages a smile in return. "Okay. But to be honest, I don't know what I'm doing. Except making a little bit of a mess, but I promise I'll clean it up."

With that Joanne uncorks the tube, and sprinkles a very few grains of the sand at the base of her parents beds.

After a moment, she looks up. Christine is looking at her quizzically.

Then all at once, neither of them can see.

Joanne squints and after a moment reaches the conclusion that she's not actually blind, there's just a very, very bright light, and it's very warm, and as she squints she sees bright flashes of even brighter light off of the

water?

As she struggles with this, she hears a faraway voice, but it's difficult to make out over the sound of the surf?

Oh my.

Oh.

The smell. The warm wet grainy tang of salt, and of damp seaweed, and the coconut smell of suntan oil, and from elsewhere a trace of baby oil and the steady wind coming inland, and the cries of the seabirds....

Joanne squeezes her eyes tightly shut, and then opens them again. Bright white sand. Vivid blue water. Aching blue sky. The colors, the sounds, the textures, the smells, even the faintly briny taste of the air coming into your lungs... easy, contented peace.

Oh my.

Then, all at once, they are back in her father's room again. Joanne looks at Christine whose eyes are wide.

"Did that happen?" Christine whispers hoarsely.

Joanne nods, and looks at the test tube, and then she's smiling, and then she's crying, and then she sees Christine staring toward her parents beds and she follows her gaze.

Her parents clearly remain in a state of deep unconsciousness... but across the empty space between their beds, they have joined hands.

Joanne reaches likewise for the other woman's hand, which finds hers in space as they stare in wonder. Joanne feels the warmth in her other hand, and looks at the test tube, still nearly full of the sparkling grains, and she knows what they have to do.

"How many other patients do you have up here?" she asks.

These days, if you show up at the right time, on the right night, and if Samuel knows you, you can slip into the building. At eleven o'clock sharp, Christine and Joanne start at opposite ends of the hall and sprinkle a few grains at every door. And for a time, the world goes blindingly

bright, and the sounds of pounding surf and hissing wind fills the entire floor, and the smells of sand crabs and people grilling picnic lunches and the happy cries of sunburned youngsters fills the air.

If you happen to ask about it, you'll earn only a bewildered smile. If you mention that you heard a story about a doctor whose elevator stopped on the wrong floor, and who was bewildered by the sound of seagulls and the smell of Coppertone before the elevator doors slid shut again, you'll be reminded that those poor doctors work terribly long hours.

Joanne's test tube is about half empty now. She's very careful about how much she uses, but she knows that sooner or later she'll run out. Until then, her parents (whom Christine has managed to keep in the same room) will hold hands, and she believes that they'll know, somehow, that the last Friday night of every month on CCLT-B is Beach Night .

"Did you end up using the Caribbean Isle sand as I had recommended?"

Blaine lifts an eyebrow at the question and says "With due respect to your recommendation sir, I thought we might get a bit more longevity out of a more subtle blend. I employed a variety of sands from several Polynesian beaches, as well as Capri, Sydney, and yes, the Caribbean also, sir."

The Saint smiles his approval. "Well done, my friend."

"Thank you, sir," Blaine bows slightly, and then he adds "It's a very fine gift that she has given her parents, don't you think?"

The Saint chuckles a deep chuckle that Blaine feels in his ankles. "Yes, but it wasn't especially for them, you know."

"No sir?"

The Saint regards his old friend, who doesn't quite seem to follow. "No," he says gently. "The gift is far more for her than for her parents. We gave her the gift of knowing she has done them a goodness. It is a gift of giving, do you see? Now she can be easy within herself, knowing that she has done something for her parents that they could never do for themselves. That no one else could do for them."

"No one but you, sir," observes Blaine simply. The Saint smiles at him with the warmth of a seaside sunrise, and places one massive hand upon his friend's slim shoulder.

"Merry Christmas, Blaine."

"Merry Christmas, sir."