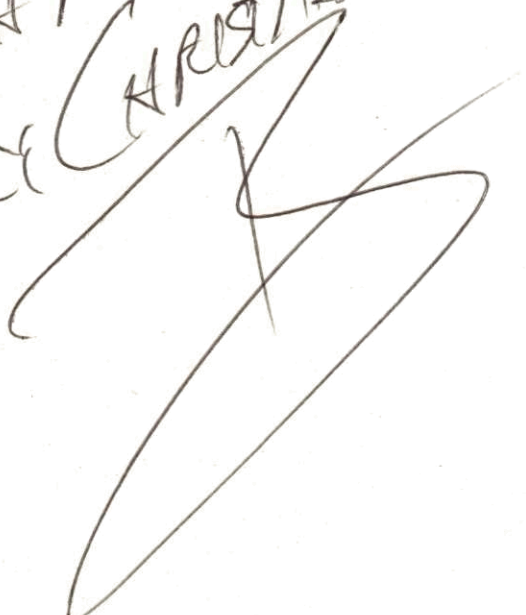


"Lady's Night In"

A Christmas story by Bo Wilson

for friends, family,
and other collaborators in living.

December, 1991

For Mom & Dad
With Love
MERRY CHRISTMAS!


SHE GOES TO THE DOOR and she peeks out from behind the curtain, holding her breath.

Nothing.

Snow, ice, wind (always wind), but nothing else.

He's gone.

She breathes a great sigh of relief. He had said he was going, he had hollered out his lusty "Later Baby!" over the hiss of the wind and she had certainly heard the door slam behind him... but she never really believes it until she can look out and see his tracks already filling with snow. Now she knows. He's gone.

Of course, he'll be back, but not for several hours, and when he gets back he'll fall into a dead sleep for almost an entire day, so she's got what's almost a weekend's vacation before things are back to normal. She looks forward to these few hours each year, the way a junkie looks forward to a fix, and she can never quite believe it when her freedom starts. Which is why she has to peek from behind curtains to make sure that he's really gone.

Now she can relax, and she moves with an excited bounce in her step that would suggest a background as a dancer. The suggestion would make her giggle... but she does like to dance. Just not when anyone else is around.

And not to this music. She crosses to the stereo, wincing at its ceaselessly cheerful spewing of Christmas Carols. He lives for Christmas carols, he'd play 'em all year long if she'd let him, and she often does... but once a year, she gets to listen to what she wants.

Of course, this becomes more difficult each year, because he just loves gadgets and gizmos, and the towering "entertainment center" is ample testament to this fact. An enormous case, stuffed full of menacing black things--Components, he calls 'em. Sleek and sinister, flat and colorless, receivers, transceivers, amps, pre-amps, post-amps, equalizers, woofers, sub-woofers, tweeters-- Is it a stereo or a zoo? she once asked him, and he smiled that irritating man's smile that says Oh, now, go on, women don't understand such things.

Trouble is, he's right-- she doesn't understand it. She views it as an enemy, and she has never wanted any truck with it. When she wants music, she simply turns the switch on the old Philco, a warm and loving momento of simpler times, which she has saved from the rubbish heap time and time again until finally hiding it in her closet. She'll have the music she wants if she can just figure how to make this thing shut up... Is it

the disc player? Its lights are on, but that doesn't always mean anything.... it might be a tape, but she can't see to make sure... she knows that the amp thing is a major nerve center for the whole set-up, but the last time she touched a button, she erased some memory or something, and he was not pleased. He never really gets upset, but sometimes she sees the expression that goes with "I'm not pleased" and that was one of those times... and regardless of their quibbles, she lives to please him, and so she stands, staring at the lights and buttons and smugly whirring black boxes and begins to feel the helplessness welling up within her, just as the second movement of The Nutcracker starts up. Maybe she can just wait, maybe it'll stop by itself... but she's never been one to give up, and doggone it, this time is supposed to be hers and hers alone, it isn't fair!

She is about to begin jabbing buttons at random when she spies the power cord, trailing along the wall, and she feels a cruel smile play onto her normally jolly face. She walks slowly to the outlet, announcing "The time has come, the walrus said, to silence many things!" and with a gleeful yank, she pulls the plug.

Silence. Blessed, enveloping. No Nutcracker. No Handel. And certainly, no George Winston. She closes her eyes to let it all soak in... until gradually, the insistent whistling of the snow and ice across the windows reminds her that too much silence in such a place might not be a great idea... and it's time for her to choose the noise.

She skips to her closet and pulls out the bulky Philco-- the warm, friendly Philco, with its fuzzy material covering its single speaker. Stereo? Who needs it?

She carries it into the kitchen and sets it next to the sink, and plugs it in, knowing that she'll have to wait for it to warm up. She does not resent this the way he would; she knows that worthwhile things take time, deserve time. So waiting, she turns to survey her kitchen.

It is, to say the least, an intimidating sight. An outsider would guess that a medium-sized army had recently dined there, and this guess would be close to the truth. Part of his annual tradition; he insisted that on this night, she sit with him as husband and wife presiding over a table girdled by his coworkers. Colleagues. Subordinates, really, but he never seemed to remember that. He was the sole authority of their workforce, and they owed their livelihood to him, but they acted more like a drunken bunch of footballers than like the grateful employees they should be. Oh, she liked them well enough, and they were hard workers, the hardest she'd ever seen, she'd be the first to agree.

But they were weird. They weren't like normal people, that was obvious. They seemed unable to muster a normal tone of voice, instead shrieking at one another no matter the surroundings, so that they always sounded like a playground of children being hosed down. And they were filthy creatures, which no doubt was an acceptable custom where they came from but which made dealing with them difficult and dining with them almost impossible. And while they worked harder than anyone she'd ever seen, their hours were bizarre. Sometimes they'd go without a break for as much as seventy-two hours, and the racket made it tough for anyone else who wanted to maintain a normal, human schedule. He had promised her that he would move the assembly line to a new building further away, but she had her doubts-- the business had been set up this way for a number of years, and he was a creature of habit. It pleased him to be able to step out his back door and be only a dozen steps from his desk. At least he had arranged for the workers' housing to be out of earshot. Lord only knows what they do when they're off duty.

But nevermind! Tonight they're out with him, and they're all having a grand time, and no reason for her to do any differently. The dishes will wait-- time to check the radio.

She turns the dial slowly, listening with pleasure to the warm pop and crackle of the speaker. Patience, that's the key-- nudge the dial a hair, and then give it time. One of the few advantages to living out here in the middle of nowhere was radio reception that was nothing short of miraculous. Depending upon time of day and allowing for the time zones around the globe, she could get stock reports from Tokyo, or meditative chants from Istanbul, and once a ship's captain, drunk somewhere in the Aleutians, and singing sea chanties into an open mike for anyone who cared to listen. The ship had been a tanker of some sort-- what was it called? Something with a "V"....

Anyway, tonight she wants none of that. Tonight she wants good old American jazz, something with one voice and one piano, something smoky and nothing to do with Christmas. She had once found a station broadcasting out of Chicago, it was here, just a hair right of the middle of the....

Ah! Here we are. She smiles. Tom Waits. That gravelly, cigarette-and-whisky-ravaged voice, half singing, half talking, like he's talking just to her. Talking about city streets slick with rain at three in the morning, about cabs swishing back and forth looking for one last fare... if she closes her eyes, she can see it. She has never been in a taxi-cab, nor even in a city... but Tom helps her to see. If she hadn't ended up where she is, she might have gone looking for Tom Waits... to ask him if he'd like to buy a cup of coffee for a kindly, aging woman from a small town.... Coffee with Tom.

4.

She closes her eyes for a moment, swaying softly within this reverie, letting the music carry her... and then the song ends, and she has to giggle at herself, because she's acting like one of the people in his songs, like some alcoholic, unhappy housewife, and she is actually quite happy and only drinks an occasional glass of wine with dinner.....

And tonight! She dances to the refrigerator-- an ancient Norge which works as well as it did the day he brought it in. She had complained that leaving the food outside froze it solid, and anyway, she didn't like having to let the cold air in to have a glass of milk (or wine! she smiles) and he had of course obliged her, as he almost always does. Of course, the Norge was even older than the Philco radio, but he didn't seem to mind as much. The Norge was for the kitchen, which meant for her, whereas all hardware related to the production of music was the sole province of the male. Men are silly, she reminded herself, and took a sip of an astonishingly fine champagne. She never lacked for the finer things, that was certain. Whatever she wished, he seemed to be able to provide, and with never any of the fuss she had heard other men make when they do a favor. She had read somewhere that most wives suffered through almost endless posturing from husbands who had managed to wash a dish or buy a flower... but her husband did none of that. She would often find something she had asked for waiting quietly, tucked away somewhere-- a sweater in her bureau, or a piece of crystal in the sideboard... and if she quizzed him on it, he'd just smile, and shrug, and say "It's a mystery!" and wander away to his assembly line and his shrieking colleagues. It was at such moments that she loved him most.

She did love him, that was certain-- and if their constant togetherness in such isolation resulted in the sort of cabin-fever that left her happy to have a night alone, so be it. It was a small price to pay for such a man. A good man, whose generosity was exceeded only by his girth. (She had tried to get him to diet, but he had been in business long before such things as cholestoral and blood pressure were of any concern to anyone, and he clung to the idea that his business depended upon his image, and that his image was that of "A big man, a man of substance." A man for whom buying off the rack had long ceased to be an option, she thought while listening to this.)

A good man. For instance, his shrieking workforce had been hired the day that they appeared on the doorstep, near death from starvation and exposure. He had never asked where they had come from (although she assumed that their homeland had deported them and left them without work papers for any other nation, like those poor Cubans.) He had asked them no questions at all, simply taking them in, nursing them to health, inquiring after their skills (they were wizards with their hands) and putting them to work, giving them a home. How many men would do such a thing?

And he had always been good to her, as well. Not just the little gifts and remembrances, but simple goodness. Decency. Kindness. Warmth. There were a variety of words, all of which fell short of the simple impact of his smile, of his gaze. When he looked at her, she felt important, important to him and to the whole world, important simply by being alive. No one else had ever made her feel that way. And when the smile cocked over into a grin, and the gaze narrowed to a mischievous twinkle, her heart doubled and tripled until she felt eighteen again-- and to him, she knew she was.

So now there are dirty dishes. So soon the stinking, shrieking workers would return. So next week he'd be fiddling with the Satellite dish trying to get a basketball game to come in more clearly. So what? He was a good man, and she was a lucky woman.

Still-- tonight is special. Tonight is hers, and hers alone. She fills the glass to the top, and carries out the bottle to her easy chair, turning up the Philco on her way out. Let the whole house fill with imported jazz, all the way from the windy city!

She reaches under the chair for her fuzzies, and kicks off her shoes, slipping into warm, soft comfort. She wiggles her toes and leans back into the chair, which seems to embrace her like the old friend that it is. She reaches for her book of poetry, smiling at the idea that she should read anything by anyone named "Frost" in a place like this.... and her hand pauses, feeling something strange beneath the book.

She looks, and sees that it is a small box, beautifully wrapped and topped with a bow of exquisite lace. For a moment, she feels dread-- he has forgotten this and will return any moment, his schedule hopelessly wrecked and his mood foul... but no, she can see a tag, with a single scripted initial. The box is for her.

She is almost afraid to open it, so splendidly wrapped, so perfect... she looks on the reverse of the tag and sees more of the same careful script: "Dearest, I had the Cartier boy make this up special, as he still remembers the favor I did him a few years back. Think of it as a portrait of my favorite person, and know how much I love you. Merry Christmas!"

Portrait of favorite person? Now she must know, so she carefully pulls away the paper, rustling through layers of tissue to find... she gasps, and nearly drops her wine. It is a small mirror, breathtakingly wrought of polished silver and mother of pearl, the handle inlaid with letters of gold-- her initials. He had heard her then, the other evening, wishing for a little mirror to hold while she brushed her hair. He had heard. Portrait, indeed. She smiles.

"Mrs. Claus, you are one lucky lady," she whispers, and lets the tinkling of a jazz piano carry her through the night.