

Matchbox Memories

Author: Pam (<mailto:bboxfan@triad.rr.com>)

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Timeframe: Christmas, 1987. The marriage has been common knowledge for a short time.

Feedback: Absolutely! On-list or off. Please tell me what you think.

Author's notes: This story was written in response to two challenges: one at an adult site and one among a group of friends. (The version you're reading has been reworked to satisfy the requirements of this list. If you'd prefer, the "adult" version will be archived at www.geocities.com/blueboxersandbeyond.)

For the "adult" challenge, I was to work the following assigned items into the story: a Matchbox car, Amanda's famous poppyseed cake, and Lee's black leather gloves (the ones he wore in The Long Christmas Eve).

To satisfy my friends, I had to base the story on a character's wish, dream, or fear, as expressed by one of several phrases. The phrase I chose to use was "My favorite childhood memory is . . .".

Thanks to my muse, who cooperated for a change, and to my betas, who always find ways to make me reach a little further.

Well, it's official. The first Stetson family Christmas season started today, and, in honor of our newly decorated tree, we've decided to have dessert in the family room. On my way back with the forgotten cream and sugar for the coffee, I stop for a moment to admire the scene in front of me.

Dotty and Amanda are huddled over the coffee table with the boys, studying the school calendars that they brought home yesterday. I'd never thought about it before, but getting everyone to the right place, at the right time, for the long list of holiday activities is as big a logistical challenge as any inter-agency operation I've ever been a part of. It won't be a problem – I'm convinced there is no holiday challenge that the women of this household aren't equipped to handle.

I'm less confident of my own abilities in that department, though, and when Amanda asked me to take the boys to get a tree this morning, I tried my best to talk her into coming along. After all, my preparations for previous holiday seasons were limited to a quick trip

out for a dozen winter scarves, gift-wrapped, and a more careful visit to the gourmet wine shop around the corner from my apartment. But she insisted that I could handle it . . .



I let out a small sigh of relief as I turned the last corner. The white two-story house, only half a block away, had never been quite so welcome a sight as it was this morning. Not that our excursion went badly. To my surprise, I think all three of us had a good time. It was just different from anything I've experienced since . . . well, since a long time ago.

I'd barely come to a stop in the driveway before Phillip and Jamie burst out of the Wagoneer and into the house, each determined to be the first to tell their mom about the tree we'd found.

Amanda. I sat in the car for a moment, a silly smile on my lips as I thought about my luck. This would be our first Christmas as man and wife, and my first in over thirty years as part of a real family. I shook my head. Who'd have thought, even a couple of years ago, that "Scarecrow" would be a ready and willing participant in a traditional family Christmas?

That thought turned my smile into a grin. Realizing that Amanda would be wondering what had happened to me, I cut off the engine and headed for the house.

She'd been baking. The aroma of her poppyseed cake caught my attention, enveloping me in a fragrant cloud the moment I opened the back door. Across two countertops, an army of gingerbread men lay in formation, waiting for deployment to a science club Christmas party on Monday.

Amanda was standing between the boys, her arms draped across their shoulders, and the looks on their faces told me that, once again, she'd managed to say the right thing to make each one feel like the hero of the day. As I pulled off my gloves, she gave each son a hug and sent them upstairs to clean up, then turned to me with a wide, welcoming smile. "I hear your mission went well," she said, wrapping her arms around my waist and pulling me in for a quick kiss.

Even through my down jacket, I felt the same warmth that her touch always brings. It's hard now for me to believe the pains I took, not all that long ago, to deny those feelings. "I think you could call it an unqualified success," I told her, tossing the gloves onto the counter so that I could hold her cheeks between my palms as I reached down to steal another kiss. I put my forehead against hers. "Do you want me to bring it in now, or do I get a sample of that cake first?"

"The cake is for later," she said with a laugh, "but we should probably grab some lunch before we get started on the decorations." She leaned back in my arms and the look she gave me warmed me right down to my toes. "You go get cleaned up, and I'll have something on the table when you get back downstairs."

Lunch didn't take long – in half an hour, Dotty and the boys were up in the attic getting the last few boxes of decorations. I was on my way to bring the tree inside when I felt a

familiar pair of arms encircle my waist. Her chin was on my shoulder, and I felt the whisper of her breath on my cheek when she spoke.

"Do you need any help?"

Well, I'm no fool. Of course I needed help, especially if it meant having her company. "I couldn't manage it without you," I assured her with a wink. I slipped out of her embrace, got her jacket from its hook, and held it for her to put on. Donning my own jacket, I retrieved my black leather gloves from the counter and escorted her out the door.

It didn't take us long to get the tree down from the roof of the Jeep and to trim the stray branches from its base. Getting it through the door was another story - maybe I shouldn't have listened to the boys when they insisted that the biggest tree on the lot was the only one worthy of consideration. Amanda didn't seem to mind, though. She above all people knows just how inexperienced I am with this whole holiday thing. I've come a long way since my days of solitary Christmases spent with guacamole dip, Dom Perignon '73, and football.

Anyway, when we finally got the "sequoia" wrestled through the door, I discovered that my Agency training wasn't quite as comprehensive as I'd once thought - I am absolutely unqualified to properly position a Christmas tree in its stand. Trying to please both Dotty and Amanda as they had me turn it first this way, then that, and then starting the process all over again, this time with the boys' help . . . Well, let's just say that it was a good thing we could all smell that poppyseed cake. I think it might have been the only reason that everyone finally agreed the tree was straight.

I felt like I deserved a break, and what better reward for my hard work than a big chunk of that cake? Well, all right - I can think of a few things I'd have liked more, but with Dotty and the boys in the same room, the cake would have to do. And it felt good to sit back for a few minutes, listening to Dotty and Amanda talk about past holidays.

It was almost time to get back to work, and Dotty was describing the finer points of decorating a Christmas tree. I remember telling Amanda once that she was a black belt confuser, but I was wrong - she's only a novice. Dotty is the grandmaster, and I listened in fascination as she demonstrated her art. A debate with herself on the relative merits of white or colored lights segued into musings about whether to get red, white, or pink poinsettias for her bridge club luncheon, then drifted into some closing remarks on Agnes Morton's unlikely new hair color. As she went on and on, I wondered if it would be possible to develop a new Agency code based on the convoluted logic that seemed to be a family trait.

I must have fished the important instructions from her sea of words, though. I managed to get the lights up with little difficulty. The five of us made short work of the garlands and ornaments, and the tree was done. Dotty had promised to take the boys to an afternoon movie, and she rushed them out the door with just enough time to make it to

the theater, promising to be back in time for dinner. Amanda went to the kitchen to get the roast ready for the oven, and I was left alone with the tree.

I stood there for a while, replaying the day in my mind – going to get the tree, the aroma of fresh baked goods, doing the decorations, the sense of family – and I found my thoughts straying back to another Christmas, the only one that I remember spending with my parents. It's funny how fickle childhood memories can be. Other things come back to me as scraps snatched from a time over thirty years ago. But that Christmas, when I was four years old . . . that memory is as sharp and clear as an icicle hanging from the eaves. I'd felt loved then, as I feel loved now.

I stopped by the kitchen to tell Amanda that I'd be upstairs. I had a sudden, uncharacteristic urge to revisit that other Christmas.

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I sat at my desk, tucked away in a corner of our bedroom, and pulled the third drawer on the left nearly all the way open. With a smile, I retrieved the small box, opened it, and balanced its contents in the palm of my right hand.

I didn't hear the bedroom door close, so engrossed was I in the small metal object and its attendant memories, but I did sense Amanda's presence at my side. "What's that?" she asked, kneeling down for a better look.

"It's a Matchbox car. My father gave it to me, the Christmas before . . . the Christmas when I was four."

She laid her hand on my arm and rested her cheek against my shoulder. "It must be very special to you." Her voice was quiet, almost reverent. "I didn't know that you had any mementos from when you were young."

"I don't have many," I replied, and suddenly that bothered me more than it usually does. "The Colonel wasn't big on 'sentimental junk', but even he understood that some things were important." My voice trailed off, and for a minute, I just sat there, holding the slightly battered aluminum car between my thumb and finger, rolling its tiny wheels back and forth across my palm . . .

"It's funny what I remember from back then. I was so young . . . Most of the memories are only tidbits – like sitting in that big tree in front of the house, or how pretty my mother looked coming down the front steps to welcome my father home from a trip, or the feel of his moustache against my cheek when he kissed me goodnight. But I remember so much about that Christmas."

The memories were flying through my head, and I paused for a moment, waiting for them to settle so that I could continue. "The three of us went to a farm out in the country, and they let me pick the tree. After we'd decorated it, Dad lifted me up and helped me put the star at the top. I hung my stocking just before I went to bed, and I was so excited that the morning seemed years away.

"But morning came, and so did Santa, or 'Father Christmas', as Mom called him. And in my stocking, I found the car. Dad said that Santa must have gotten confused, that he'd dreamed of silver sports cars since he was a young man, but that he was happy that someone in the household finally owned one."

I carefully put the miniature car and its box on the desk. It had been a long time since I'd allowed myself to revisit that bittersweet memory, but as I told Amanda the story, the emptiness that usually accompanied it fell away, leaving only a small ache of regret in its wake. "I miss them, Amanda. I wish they could have known you."

She leaned in and held me tight, her head pressed firmly against my chest. "I wish I could have known them, too," she murmured. "I wish they could see you now. They'd be proud of what a fine man their son is."

"One thing's for certain." I rose from the chair and bent to kiss her. "They'd be pleased to know that I finally have a family of my own again."

"No more pleased than your family is to have you," she reassured me. I kissed her again, more deeply this time, breaking off reluctantly at the sound of the phone. Why does it seem that we can never get a few moments to ourselves without being interrupted?

She answered the ringing phone, then gave an apologetic grimace that told me it wouldn't be a quick call. I decided to head outside, hoping to get the outdoor decorations Dotty had been talking about before she and the boys got back to "help".

Before long, Amanda joined me. In short order we had bows and greenery on each of the front windows and a wreath at the door and were standing at the front gate, admiring our handiwork.

"Are you surviving?" she asked, slipping her arm around my waist.

I didn't understand her. "Surviving?"

"Yeah," she replied, looking up at me with concern. "This is your first real exposure to a suburban holiday season. You're more accustomed to dodging bullets than hanging decorations, and I wasn't sure you'd be able to handle the change."

Then she grinned, and I pulled her into a loose embrace. "Well, Mrs. Stetson," I paused just long enough to kiss the tip of her nose, "it's not easy, but I suppose that, with the right teacher, I could learn to adapt. Know anyone who might want to show me how?"

The next kiss was for real, and when we pulled back, she laid her head against my chest. "Hmmm . . . We'd better take this discussion inside, Mr. Stetson, before we scandalize the neighborhood."

I pulled her close for one more kiss before I followed her into the house.

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"Lee!" Phillip's voice pulls me back to the present. "Come on, we're waiting for you."

"Sorry," I tell him with a grin, crossing the room and setting the bowl and pitcher on the coffee table. I sit down and reach for my cake. "You didn't have to wait for me."

"But we had to have you here before we could finish the tree," Dotty explains.

"Finish?" I look across the room with surprise. The tree stands tall in front of the windows, its lights casting a warm glow in the room and sparkling across the silvery tinsel.

"I thought we finished it this afternoon. What's left to do?"

"We always save this part for last," Jamie says with excitement, eyeing the paper bag and the two small boxes sitting on the coffee table. "We each have one special ornament. Me and Phillip get new ones every year, but sometimes Mom and Grandma keep the same one for a long time. Mom says they make the tree really belong to us." This is obviously an explanation that had been given many times before, and he looks up at his mother as though to make sure that he's gotten it right.

Amanda reaches into the bag and hands him a box. Carefully unwrapping it and tossing the crumpled tissue paper aside, he grins and holds up an ornament for my inspection. "See, Lee? It's Santa, with a tripod and camera. Thanks, Mom! Thanks, Grandma!"

There's a sense of protocol as the rest of us watch him study the tree, apparently looking for just the right spot. Settling on a nearly empty branch about three feet off the ground, he hangs his treasure and turns to his brother. "Your turn."

Phillip doesn't need any prompting. He's already at Amanda's side, ready to open his own surprise. A Santa in a basketball uniform emerges from the tissue, and he's clearly delighted by the reference to his making the high school's JV team. Muttering his thanks, he hangs the NBA's newest, least-likely superstar with the awkward embarrassment natural to a 14-year-old who's doing something that he thinks his peers might not consider "cool".

Amanda now opens one of the boxes to retrieve her ornament, a panda bear Santa.

"Someone left a giant stuffed panda on our front porch four years ago," she explains with a wink, "and it reminded Mother of her old nickname for me."

"But she got back at me for that," Dotty laughs, reaching for the other box after Amanda has added her Santa to the tree and returned to nestle beside me. Opening it, she holds up its contents and I have to laugh. This jolly Santa is flying off to the wild blue yonder with a bulging bag of toys in the back seat of his bi-plane.

The last Santa now graces the tree, and Dotty takes her seat beside me on the couch. I give both of the women in my life a hug and reach for my coffee cup, but Dotty's hand on my arm stops me.

"Hold on, Lee. We're not done yet." She nods to Jamie, who takes the paper sack from his mother. Phillip reaches inside and produces a third small box, holding it out to me.

Surprised, I look around to see four pairs of eager eyes on me, four eager smiles directed my way. I unwrap the tissue, and for a moment I just sit there, looking at the object in my hands.

"It's from all of us, Lee. The boys picked it out." The gentle intrusion of Dotty's voice reminds me of my role in this, and I rise, happy to fulfill my duty.

When I'm done, I open my arms and embrace my family, who couldn't have said it any more clearly - I belong here. "Thank you," is all I can manage, and even then my voice cracks. We share a hug and I lift my eyes to the tree, wanting to see it again, hanging near Amanda's panda - a shiny silver sports car, with Santa at the wheel.

**The End**