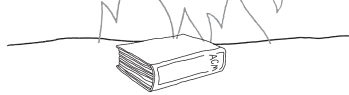


Barry Sileski Barry Sileski

A Merry Little



BEING A JEW AT CHRISTMAS can sometimes lead to more than a little wintry discontent. At least in America, decided Bronstein, a bluff, dark-haired, six-foot success story of an editor from New York with, when it came to women writers, a kind of blind spot.

Cell-phone pressed to his ear, he stood in the middle of the main Delta concourse at Hartsfield, waiting for a signal. Scores of fellow-travelers flowed past, in both directions. Aside from a few in heavy coats, they gave no sign of the holiday season. (Despite his hopes for a warm, somewhat Southern holiday, the weather report told of possible snow and freezing temperatures down this way. So much for the conventional wisdom about the South).

Look—a mean-eyed woman the size of a large land-mammal waddled toward him, her breasts dangling like water-bags. Two men in cowboy outfits strode alongside her. A gaggle of young children cackled by. Passing him on the right came a perfectly modeled young thing, about the half the size of a normal person, her miniature heart-shaped behind in blue jeans receding in the distance as he half-observed it, wondering who she was and where she was going.

So that when the voice sounded in his head-bone he was not quite yet prepared.

“Ron here,” he said.

“It’s me,” said the woman, replicating the sound of absolute resignation.

“I’m in Atlanta,” Ron said. “We had an equipment problem in New York. So they booked me through here.”

“Wish I was there with you.”

“Just stay where you are and we’ll be together soon enough.”

“You know what I mean,” she said. “He’s.....” In the way that it often happened on a cell phone, the voice cracked and split and trailed away. “...on the bright side...”

“Sorry, I couldn’t hear you.”

“.....”

“I can’t hear you.”

Hopeless! Not the two of them, of course, but the signal. He turned off the cell phone and made his way to the gate, wondering

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if, with his late luck, his seat mate might turn out be the fat woman with the elongated jugs. Or the little bitty cowgirl. *That* would be interesting.

But as it happened the two-hour flight to Memphis gave him a dour, white-haired old fellow in carefully pressed trousers and coat and tie, a missionary just returned from dangerous Afghanistan to celebrate Christmas with his grandchildren.

“Greatest gift of God, grandchildren,” the man said. “Got any yourself?”

“Three wives,” Bronstein said. “But not all at once. And no children.”

“That’s heathen,” the man said.

“No children? I don’t get it.”

“Three wives. Kabul, where I just been, met a number of men with more than one wife. I just can’t figure that. Beside the fact it’s a sin, it’s a lot of trouble.”

“Tell me about it,” Bronstein said.

The man took him literally and talked intermittently for the remainder of the flight about sin and redemption, something Bronstein, being a Jew, and a nonobservant one at that, never gave much consideration. When he could Bronstein stole glimpses of the manuscript—“A Life,” she called it on the title page—he had packed in his briefcase, the pages that contained the story of the woman whom he was going to see: the scenes of her troubled childhood in the Delta, of her marriage to the son of one of the great fortunes of Memphis, of his son’s (her step-son’s) suicide by gunshot, of the disruption of the marriage and her flight into the relatively unknown world of Memphian bohemia (which included, like most bohemias, alcohol, drugs, strong coffee, and sexual profligacy).

Only an hour after the airplane descended through shreds of snow-cloud and light rain, he was driving his rental car up the wet gravel road to the large ranch-style house on the edge of a golf course north of the city where she now lived with her husband, with whom she had reconciled. In the manuscript, soon to be, if Bronstein could do anything (and he could do quite a bit), a book a lot of lonely, miserable women would want to read, the husband drank hard and ran around, slapped her now and then, and cursed his fate. Here was the real person, waiting in the open doorway, a handsome, sandy-haired man in his fifties confined to a wheel-chair after a near-fatal automobile accident.

“Rick Paris,” he said, holding out his left hand as Bronstein came up the steps. His other hand lay still in his lap. “Merry Christmas.”



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“Merry Christmas yourself,” Bronstein said. “I guess you know who I am.”

“I do, sir,” Paris said.

“Nice little house,” Bronstein said.

“Big old place, isn’ it? Out back, there’s a huge swimming pool? Built by Toots Moman, Nashville record producer? Ever hear of him?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Shaped like a guitar,” Paris said. “Frozen now, though. Bet you didn’t think it ever froze down this way, did you?”

Bronstein shook his head.

“No, never thought about it.”

“Hello?”

Bronstein looked past his seated host into a well-lighted room with exposed timbers and a large Christmas tree nearly covered with tinsel and dangling artifacts of the season. The woman, taller than he had remembered her, came striding out to greet him.

“My God,” she said. “You’re here.”

Bronstein gave her one of his best disdainful smiles as he walked around the man in the chair and went to take her in his arms. “I was there and now I’m here.”

“I’d say I can’t believe it,” the woman said, “but you know that I’m the kind of person believes everything.”

Bronstein embraced her, feeling her large breasts flatten against his chest.

“If you weren’t, we wouldn’t have our work to do,” he said.

“I’m still so excited about it,” the woman said.

Bronstein, passing up the opportunity, one he so often grasped, for a schoolboyish wisecrack, stepped back from her and smiled again, this time showing what he hoped was his sincerity.

“You already know I think we’ve got a winner. We just have to do a bit of hard work between now and the finish line.”

“It is Christmas,” the husband in the wheel-chair spoke up at Bronstein’s back, “so we’re going to have a party.”

“That’s the way we’ve always lived,” the woman said. “Rick, Ron’s come all this way to work with me. The party’s extra.”

“Right now, party’s all I have,” her husband said. “I’m going to have me a holiday drink by myself, I suppose. Til the company arrives.”

He turned his chair around with the ease of a man born to be crippled and left them alone, casting another “Merry Christmas” greeting over his shoulder as he rolled away.

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“See you in a while,” the woman said, leading Bronstein down a hall and into a small extra bedroom lately turned into a study bare of furniture except for a desk, a lap-top computer, and a few book shelves.

“Merry Christmas,” Bronstein said, wondering where his words were coming from. He didn’t feel merry, at least not yet, though Merry was certainly the motto of the season. Merry Merry. He opened his briefcase and took out the manuscript, showed her some places in the first couple of pages that he wanted to talk about. He pushed, she pushed back. He tugged, she yielded. He pushed further. A few lines went out. An entirely new scene blossomed in their mutually agreed upon plan. Yet it seemed as though he and the woman had hardly started when people began coming through the doorway to say hello.

“We’re working,” she said to each and every one. “This is my editor Ron Bronstein down from New York City and we’re working.” Cheerful men, some bearded, and women with bright eyes gave him spectacular holiday smiles. Bronstein and the woman went back to the manuscript each time, making slow progress through a chapter. She looked up at one point and said, “I didn’t expect people to come this early. They’re all from the church? I am so grateful to them. I don’t want to shout at them. They saved my life while I was in rehab.”

“I know,” Bronstein said. “I read that chapter. In fact, I want to talk to you about that when we get there.”

“Too much of a happy ending? I know you don’t like happy endings up there in New York.” She uncrossed her legs and her foot bumped his knee. “Excuse me.” She sighed, and he watched her eyes dim and then light up again, as if she were remembering something quite distant yet important enough to add to the pages they were editing. “I’m grateful to you, too, you know. I never in a million years thought—“She stood up and went to the door, pulling it shut.

“We love happy endings,” Bronstein said, a little uncomfortable with the praise she was about to bestow on him. “I mean, I don’t particularly. But our readers will. They’ll be ninety per cent women, and women love them.”

Without missing a beat, the woman took her seat again and said, “Because we’re more developed than men.”

“I always thought that,” Bronstein said, cocking his head and smiling. In some circumstances it would have been a stupid thing to say. But it was Christmas—hey!—and everybody was cheerful.

“You’re flirting again,” she said.

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“Am I?” Old rhetorical response, giving him some time to think. Or not to think.

“Yes,” she said, cutting off his time. “Not that I don’t like it. It’s been a real interesting experiment, staying sober and seeing if behaving badly without being under the influence is something I like to do.”

“And the verdict?”

She looked him deep in the eye with the gaze of a woman who hadn’t stared at a man directly for most of the years of her life and now took great pleasure in it.

“What happened in New York happened in New York. This is Memphis. I don’t know what you expected when you came down here.”

“Just this,” Bronstein said. “Work. And more work.” He reached up and touched her on the neck. She ever so slightly flinched, and then settled herself against his hand. He could feel her carotid artery as a steady pulse against his palm. With a gentle motion, he guided her head toward his lap. She reached around and touched him, worked his fly open, eased him out, and without a word tilted her chin up and took him, flaccid though he might be, in her mouth. A tiny rippling shock shot from his groin up into his gut and down along his thighs.

A rousing noise from somewhere else in the house.

She opened her lips and spit him out, like a fish rejecting an imperfect bit of feed.

She sat up. “I can’t.”

Bronstein looked out the window. It was snowing.

“Hah,” he said, adjusting his trousers.

The woman, seeing what he saw, made a nervous little laugh.

“Don’t you think we have snow down here sometimes? Sometimes even at Christmas?”

He was breathing hard but paid no attention to it. They adjusted themselves where they sat and, as though nothing consequential had happened, went a little farther along in their work. Just as they were getting to one of the good places—one of the stickier, juicier sequences where she revealed herself in a way that readers loved and writers usually felt remorseful about years later—even more noise went up in the other part of the house.

“Born Agains have wild parties, huh?” he said.

“Wait’ll you see.”

She stood up and grasped his hand. A second shock, this time along his wrist to his lower arm.

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"You're shaking," she said.

"I'd like a drink," he said.

"Me, too," she said. "But I'll just watch you drink instead."

Walking into the living room gave him yet another surprise. A crowded space, dozens of people. He might have been back in Manhattan, except for the demeanor of the guests. A number of bearded rough-necks ("ex-hippie Born Agains," she said, leaning toward him as he paused at the edge of the room); women in cheap pant-suits, women in velvet dresses; boy children wearing ties and jackets; little girls in red and green sweaters and skirts. In the middle sat Rick in his wheel-chair, waving his good hand.

"Listen up," he said. "Dan Dollar's going to sing for us."

Applause as a young man in his mid-twenties dressed as though out of a cheap department store window stepped forward into the middle, pushing Rick and his chair slightly to the side.

"I...am...going...to...sing 'God Bless Ye, Merry Gentleman,'" he said in a stiff direct voice.

Pattering of small applause.

The fellow took a deep breath.

"It's the MOST wonderful time of the year...." He stopped, looked around, and said, without smiling or blinking, "Wrong song." He took another breath and started again:

"God Bless ye Merry Gentlemen let nothing you dismay
remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day...."

He stopped and took a small bow.

A man, his father, it must have been, stepped up behind him and touched his elbow, saying quiet words that got the fellow to bow again and then to open his mouth and announce, "—And now, a duet!"

From the far side of the room, a stork-like girl with bulging eyes and long hands slipped forward through the crowd, stopping only when she stood next to the young man.

She blinked long and hard. "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer," she began to sing in a lilting off key voice. "Had a very shiny nose."

"Nose," sang the young man.

"And if it you ever saw it,"

"Saw it!"

"You would even say it glows."

"Like a light bulb!"

"All of the other reindeer used to call him misery...and if they ever saw it, they played all the reindeer games...."

"Like football!"



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"Then one foggy Chrisless eve Sandra came to say... Rudolf whiff your nose so bright, won' you glide my sleigh to night...."

"I need a drink," Bronstein said, looking around for the bar.

"There's Rick's supply." She pointed toward the kitchen.

When Bronstein came back, wine in glass in hand, the young man was still singing and the girl was leaning against the wall, swaying to the rhythm of the toneless song with two bearded Born Agains in coveralls.

"Have yourself a merry little Christmas...."

"Isn't he won-derful?" she mouthed at him.

"Is he...?" Bronstein mouthed back.

"Autistic," the woman said.

"An artistic autistic?"

"Many of them are."

Bronstein swallowed his wine.

"In a way, that might be nice. Follow your own rules. Pay no attention to the critics."

"That's not what you let me do." The woman leaned against him, pressing her hip to his.

"Do you want your book to be nice, or do you want to make money?"

"Making spirits bright," the young fellow sang.

"He's mixing up the songs," Ron said.

"That's only our point of view," the woman said. She gave him an unexpected burlesque bump and stood aside.

"...making spirits bright...."

"And repeating himself."

"I do that. You've told me I do that."

"Have yourself a merry little Christmas... now...."

The performer made a smart bow and stepped back into the crowd while people howled and applauded.

Rick rolled himself into the middle of the room.

"Thank you, Larry," he said. "And Tilda."

The stork-like girl stepped forward and waved a long hand over her head.

"Fank you, fank you," she said.

"And now..." Rick waved his good hand back at her.

"Have your surf..." The girl began to sing.

"Tilda!" a woman called to her. "That's enough."

"Her mother," Bronstein's companion said.

"Must be a tough life," he said. "Raising a kid like that."

"I've lived worse," the woman said.

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“But soon, like a man once said, you’re going to turn your worst moments into cash.”

“Time to eat,” Rick announced. “In the dining room, everybody, help yourself...”

“Talking about worst moments,” Bronstein said. “Does Rick know that you put in that scene with him?”

“Not yet.”

“Hope he likes surprises.”

“He’ll have to roll with the punch,” the woman said. “I did.”

Bronstein reached over and touched her face.

“So you did.”

“Not here,” the woman said.

“I was just being tender and appreciative,” Bronstein said. He leaned in to her and sighed a theatrical sigh.

“That’s more than enough,” the woman said.

“You know,” Bronstein said, “you’re deprived on account of you’re deprived.”

“I’ve been,” the woman said.

“Deprived?”

“Depraved. Was lost but now I’m found.”

“They didn’t sing that one,” Bronstein said. “Where’s that autistic guy? I’m going to ask him to sing that.”

“That’s so mean,” the woman said. “Where’s your Christmas spirit?”

“Jews don’t have any,” Bronstein said. “Or maybe we ate it at birth.”

“Cruel,” the woman said.

“Tell me again. Every editor loves to hear that.”

“Not every editor,” the woman said. “Mainly, you.”

“How do you know that? You’ve only had one editor.”

“I’m not stupid,” the woman said. “I asked around.”

“You asked—?”

“I asked my agent.”

“She doesn’t know me that well.”

“Ron, everybody knows about you.”

“So you walked into the lion’s den?”

“Eyes wide open.”

“Can I have that drink now?”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the woman said. She led him back to the kitchen where he poured wine for himself into a tall crystal goblet which he then held up for inspection.

“Family heirlooms. You’ve written about them. This is from

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Grandma Folsom.”

“Yes, yes. Ghosts of Christmas past,” the woman said. “You remembered.”

Bronstein drank rather than sipped. “You made it memorable. When it comes out, everyone’s going to remember.” In a moment he needed a refill. “I’m glad we got some work in before all this,” he said.

“Before all what? Don’t you like talking with me?”

Bronstein gestured toward the kitchen door as the autistic couple came striding in.

“Dan, what can I get for you?” the woman said.

“A drink of water, please,” the fellow said.

“And you, Tilda?”

The tall girl said something that might have been “water.”

The woman poured two glasses of water from the tap.

“Cheers,” Bronstein said, raising his goblet to them and drinking.

“Cheers,” the autistic fellow said, as though reading the line from a script.

The tall girl said something that might have been “cheers,”staring at him as though she knew something about him she couldn’t possibly know.

Bronstein had to look away. “Tell you,” he said, “I’m feeling a little woozy, I’m going to go outside and get some air.”

“Whyn’t you do that?” the woman said. “I’ll tend to a few of my guests and then we’ll have us some supper.”

With a nod, Bronstein stepped out through the kitchen door into the chilly dark, wishing, even before he pulled the door closed behind him, that he was wearing more than a suit and tie.

The door creaked open and he turned around.

“Careful out there,” the woman said.

“I have other plans,” Bronstein said as the woman closed the door again.



“Have yourself...” He leaned against the side of the house and began to sing to himself. After a moment or two he walked slowly along the back of the building, stopping just outside the living room picture window. As though in some larger-than-life Christmas card the party guests talked soundlessly and gesticulated as the two Born Agains in coveralls stood up and displayed their guitars before bowing into an animated but soundless performance. His hostess smiled and clapped her hands in silent time. The autistic singers moved their lips, but nothing reached his ears except the faintest

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twangings and cracklings. In the wheel chair, off to the side of the room, crippled Rick waved one hand and nodded and smiled.

Bronstein turned his back on the scene and, raising the chilly goblet to his lips, stared out into a darkness that seemed to extend into infinity. The air was cold and growing colder. Light snow fluttered down around him.

If he had read about a man such as he was in a manuscript he would have asked the author the question that he himself right now couldn't answer.

Why didn't he just turn around and go back inside?

What motivated him, what moved him? Fiction or nonfiction (and he much preferred nonfiction because the answers always came more easily) you had to ask the author these questions.

But in real life what could he say? He was thirsty but he didn't want to drink? He was drinking but he didn't want to thirst? How to phrase it all? To hell with it! To hell with it on a holiday!

"God damn it!" he shouted, hurling the goblet into the nothing just ahead and listening in the instant that it shattered.

He moved farther along the side of the house. Branches snapped under foot. Then slippery gravel. What? As his eyes became more accustomed to the dark he could make out the faint outline of the swimming pool just to his right.

In the mediocre stories he read by writers better than he would ever become there was always some fucking traditional turning point toward the end—some warmth that descended on a cold night like this, some twist in the mind or even, God help him, in the misguided heart of the main character. But what did he have? The editor? He could make the stories better but he couldn't revise his own life.

Christ! He stamped his foot, as if he himself were some tiny plant or animal creature underfoot that he could squash with one flat blow. And as his foot came down it slid out from under him and he tripped and sailed sideways, coming down hard onto cement—no, ice!—and sliding on his shoulder and elbows along the burning surface of what must be the swimming pool.

Except it was frozen.

When feeling returned to his face and limbs he felt as though he was beginning to freeze himself. Since he couldn't get up—he tried but couldn't—he lay there a while projecting his fears and worries onto the screen of the deep snowy Tennessee night. His legs felt suddenly colder than cold, as if the feeling were coming back into them only to make for a worse than freezing sensation.



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There while shivering and listening to the emptiness of the property around him he recalled an incident from his first marriage forty years before. Why, he couldn't say, but nonetheless it came to him while he lay there on the frozen surface of the guitar-shaped pool.

She was a chubby girl—he liked her like that—who had blonde hair but had dyed it green for a costume party, some maul of a party with their friends, Halloween, perhaps, not Christmas. Her nipples, dark as raisins, showed through a see-through blouse. He had gone outside to smoke a cigarette and when he came back into the house—whose, he couldn't remember—he couldn't find her. As if in a dream—maybe it was a dream, after all these years he remembered it so hazily, so it might as well have been—he wandered through the house asking if anyone had seen her. People laughed in their cups, blew smoke into the air. Shankng up two flights of stairs—where was this house? A city triplex? An old country house with two stories and an attic?—he found a door. His heart gave a jump as he reached for the knob. Opening the door he stepped into a store room and found her sitting on the lap of a large man dressed as a sultan. Clearly, they were having a good time.

Oh, he shivered and sighed a sigh of loss for that wife, for the years gone. Miserable, miserable youth, for all of the success he won early on.

And he sighed in remorse for things he had done to the other two women he had married and divorced. And all the women in between and during and since.

A door opened somewhere in the dark. Faintly, faintly Christmas music drifted to him from the far part of the house, distracting him from his pathetic recollections. His hostess and the two Born Agains in coveralls arrived at the edge of the pool and with a lot of clucking and cawing led an unresisting Bronstein, trembling inconsolably from the chill, back into the house, remanding him to a place before the fire.

“You're mumbling,” the woman said, touching a cool hand to his forehead.

“Put me in your next book and I'll kill you,” he said.

“Hush, you,” she said, sitting next to him.

“Just leave me out of things.”

“But you're in them now, Ronnie.(Ronnie? No one had ever called him that since he was a child!) Just by knowing me. You should have thought better of it.”

“I don't know you, really,” he said.

“Oh, but you do.”



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“I don’t. I fucking don’t.”

“You’ve read my pages.”

“That’s not you. They’re only pages.”

“But one day they will be me. The only me that’s left. Thanks to you.”

“Thanks for nothing.”

“Oh, hush now.”

“I don’t want to fucking hush.”

He looked up, across the room. One of the Born Agains was plucking at his guitar. A song went up. Soon everyone in the room was singing, with the voices of the autistics loud and clear and off-key above the crowd. Everyone.

