





# "Magic. My children would want to see magic. So I created

▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶ From page 52

it's December the 22d. You'll give us a good price, right?" Renée's voice is bright. The burly tree man shrugs.

Their voices are visible in the cold air: her high-hearted cheerfulness, his vaporized growls. From the dialogue, two small, but rather satisfactory, green conifers result. Fourteen dollars each.

As we hoist the trees into the back of her antique van, Renée buries her head in the branches. "Mmm, the smell," she croons. "Like roses."

"Roses?"

Renée will tell me about it tomorrow, she says. After I put the children on the train.

"I may not be alive," I warn. For me, there is no *after* once I send the children south.

It's another cold, gray morning, and I stand on the frozen cement railroad platform with the children, silently shivering.

I do not want to cry.

The train is coming. We hear its heaving wail in the near distance.

"We didn't get to decorate the tree,

Mama," the girl, oldest of the three, says.

"I know, darling. There wasn't time, with the packing and all."

"It will be odd not to see you on Christmas morning." Middle son is reflective.

"Will you see Santa?" Youngest son wonders what I'll do.

"I don't know," I say as the black mass of iron and steel soars noisily past and slows.

It is a special agony to tell children goodbye. I load their things, smile and weep at the same time. I tell the conductor to take care of them: ages 6, 9 and 12. The train whistle blasts the air. It may as well be a machine gun to my chest.

Standing outside Renée's door, I must look like a drowned cat. The air has turned misty. My blond hair droops. Rain covers my black winter coat.

Renée is warm and welcoming. There is fragrant cinnamon apple cider simmering in a blue kettle on her kitchen stove. A red-gold fire heaves and repositions itself in her

tiny den. A puffy, yellow tabby cat snoozes on a faded, flowered sofa.

"What do you do? You pretend." Renée answers my question. Her tone is matter-of-fact. She flounces on the sofa, disturbing the plump tabby.

She takes a threaded needle from the armrest and pulls a ceramic bowl of hard, red cranberries onto her lap.

"The first Christmas I did not have my two girls, I was devastated—like you," she says. "But you know, I was worried about them, as well as myself. They kept saying, 'Whatever willl you do, Mommy? Will you be lonely?'"

"What did you do?" I absent-mindedly take a cranberry and bite it, recoiling at the sharp, stinging taste.

"I had a very private, good cry," she says thoughtfully. "Then I thought of what my girls would want to see when they returned after Christmas."

"And?"

"Magic. They'd want to see magic. So I created it—with a tree wrapped with gifts underneath it."

Renée cocks her porcelain face to one side. Her black hair gleams in the



—with a Christmas tree **wrapped with gifts** underneath it.”

firelight. “You know single parents don’t get gifts,” she says. “You have to buy them and pretend. So, that Christmas, I did. I wrapped little things—in inexpensive things—in pretty paper and bows. And then I, well, you’ll never guess,” her eyes twinkle.

“Tell me.”

“Roses! One dozen beautiful red roses! I bought them cheap at the grocery store.”

“Roses?”

“Of course! And when the girls returned and asked about them, I said, ‘Aren’t they beautiful? They came from the Most Wonderful Man!’”

“‘Was it Santa, Mommy?’ they asked. ‘Was it Santa?’ And of course, I rolled my eyes and said, ‘I don’t know....’”

In spite of myself, I smiled. This dark-haired beauty—creator of magic. How brave she is.

“Stay busy,” Renée hands me a package of round, fresh cranberries as I leave her house that day.

Busy, I become. With 10-cent gifts, red and green paper, and gold tinsel ribbons, I create magic to nestle un-

der the tree. On Christmas Day, after a good cry, I go to a new church in the new town where I now live. Coated and crowded, I sit with people strange to me, but who sing with me carols familiar to all ages.

At home I knot round, red cranberries together for tree garlands. I pop popcorn, loving the smell, and lace white, lengthy strands in green tree branches to offset

the red cranberry loops. The fire I’ve built with scattered yard limbs burns brightly. Cinnamon apple cider bubbles on the stove.

In late afternoon Calico Cat tiptoes a tune on the piano keys. I pick it out: *C, B, A, G*. “Joy to the World.”

On New Year’s Day, my children return. They burst in the door, anxious to be home. Yes, it is their second Christmas for the season. But it is special, indeed. For I’ve beaten the beast of despair, and now I know: I’ll go forward.

As for the roses...well....

I’ve bought a second-day dozen at the grocery. They are deep holiday red, circled in a tissue funnel of dark green. Early, early New Year’s morning on my way to the train station for



the kids, I stop by Renée’s. The sun is barely winking in the tall pines near her home. Frost glitters the wreath on her front door. Quietly, I nestle the crimson cluster in the doorway, ring the doorbell and hastily drive away.

It’s odd, I reflect, delivering flowers—one single-parent woman to another.

But sometimes life’s that—odd... inexplicable...magic.

I’ve signed the roses, *From Santa*. ■