

In the Cold of the Night

“Attention shoppers. The mall will close in ten minutes. Please take your items to the checkout counter now. And merry Christmas.”

Dolores turned the lavender slingback pump around in her hand again. Six hundred seventy-five dollars. She squinted to eye the thin strap and flirty peep toe. A bit expensive, but fine Italian design and craftsmanship.

When she glanced up and out of the boutique entrance into the courtyard, her heart leapt.

“Tommy!” she nearly cried out but checked herself. She saw him everywhere—or thought she did, for a split second.

Repressing a tear, Dolores decided to buy the shoes. Why shouldn’t she? They were comfort food for the soul, like a big spoonful of macaroni and cheese. With all she had been through, she deserved them. Never mind that they would suffer the same neglect as all the other unworn shoes that crowded her closet. For now they made her feel better, even if just a little. Party shoes took her back to a time when she was slimmer, prettier, and still hopeful.

Dolores had completed her shopping, at least for this excursion, though it didn't really qualify as "Christmas" shopping. Last week she had bought a cashmere sweater for her ill, aging mother, and after that she didn't have anyone else to shop for. Not anymore. All these presents were for herself, if you could even call them presents.

The icy wind stung her cheeks when she stepped out into the parking lot, her arms full of boxes and bags. In the last row, barely visible, the Mercedes she had retained in the divorce settlement stood all alone. Was she really the last shopper to leave the mall?

Dolores peered from side to side. What if someone was lurking in the darkness, lying in wait for her? She struggled to take out her keys without dropping a package and walked with a quick, firm pace towards her car, which seemed much farther away from the mall entrance now than before. She couldn't wait to lock herself inside, turn on the heater, and feel the soft leather seat cradle her weary body.

Once she had stored her bags and boxes in the trunk, Dolores started the engine and pulled out. But she didn't even reach the exit before her car sputtered to a stop. She tried starting it again. Nothing. Oh, no. Not this. She was out here all alone, defenseless. If only she were safe and sound at home, had her feet up, and were sipping on a glass of wine.

Was the battery dead? Dolores removed the car key, grabbed her purse from unthinking habit, and got out, not to look under the hood—she knew nothing about cars—but to see if some passing motorist might help her.

Not another car in sight.

She stood there for a moment, under a dim parking-lot light, debating what to do.

As if out of the void of darkness a big black man stepped into the circle of feeble light and came limping towards her. He looked homeless and desperate in his tattered army coat and

grimy camouflage pants. From under his raveling blue knit cap his tightly curled hair was matted with dust and lint.

“Please don’t hurt me,” Dolores pleaded. “I have money. I can pay you.” She fumbled in her purse for her wallet.

“You think I want your money?”

“You can take my car. Just don’t kill me. Please, I’m begging you.”

“Open the trunk.”

Her fingers trembled as she pressed the button on the car key to pop the trunk lid. “Take it. It’s all yours. Anything you want.”

The homeless man rummaged about. “Ah, this is what I was looking for,” he said, holding up a gas can. “You out of gas. There’s a filling station ’bout three blocks up the road. Five dollars’ worth should do it. Meanwhile, you get back in the car. It’s freezing out here.”

Dolores gave him a five-dollar bill and did as he said. Inside the car she burst into tears, still shaking from the mortal fear just past. She thought of her elderly mother, who couldn’t have too many years left; of her husband, who had deserted her for a younger woman; and of her son . . . Oh, her son, her son, her only child . . . She laid her forehead against the steering wheel and sobbed uncontrollably.

Half an hour later sounds interrupted her tears—the opening of the gas lid and the unscrewing of the gas cap. Dolores got out and stood in silence, wiping her eyes, as the homeless man finished pouring the gas into her tank.

“There you go. That should get you on your way.”

“Thank you. I was so afraid you were going to hurt me.”

The homeless man lifted the trunk lid, which he had lowered but not latched, put back the empty gas can, and closed the lid.

“I’ve done enough hurting for one lifetime. Now it’s time to help,” he said and turned to leave.

Reassured by his words—and unsettled—Dolores hesitated.

“Wait.”

He stopped and turned around, the tiny icicles in his moustache glistening in the faint light.

“There’s a coffee-and-pastry shop across the highway. Would you like something hot to drink and a bite to eat?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wouldn’t, and I don’t lie—at least not no more.”

During the five-minute drive to the coffee shop they scarcely spoke. Dolores was having second thoughts. Had she made a terrible mistake in letting a stranger into her car?

At the coffee shop, the homeless man held the door open for Dolores. When the waiter saw him about to enter behind her, he scurried up to block his way. “I’m sorry. We don’t allow—”

“He’s with me,” Dolores snapped, turning to interrupt him mid-sentence.

“My apologies, ma’am,” the waiter said and scuttled off, red-faced. The patrons nearest the entrance raised their eyebrows at the sight of the homeless man and wrinkled their noses at his stench.

Dolores glared at them till shame forced their eyes back to their coffee mugs and plates.

“Let’s sit at the table next to the fireplace,” she suggested, smiling at the homeless man now that she was safe inside a public place.

Before he sat, he planted himself in front of the fire, rubbing his hands together and then extending them towards the flames.

“How about a giant cappuccino and a big slice of *Sachertorte*?” Dolores asked once they had both taken their seats.

“A what?”

“It’s a kind of chocolate cake. It’s to die for.”

“Can’t think of a sweeter death.”

In a couple of minutes Dolores had returned with their order.

“I don’t even know your name,” she began. “I’m Dolores.”

“Folks call me G. I. Joe.”

“You were a soldier?”

“Afghanistan.”

He took a sip of coffee, clutching the warm mug between his fingerless gloves. For the first time Dolores saw his fingertips, chafed and split open by the cold.

“What were you doing out on a night like this, Joe?” She assumed that’s what she should call him.

“Redeeming myself.”

Dolores didn’t know what to make of that answer.

“Where do you live, Joe?”

“Here and there.”

“You don’t have a home?”

“The whole city’s my home.”

Just as she had thought. “But where do you sleep?”

“In a pup tent. The stars is pretty much the same here as in Afghanistan.”

He took a bite of cake, chewed once or twice, and then stopped, apparently letting the chocolate morsel rest on his tongue and savoring its flavor. With his eyes closed, he leaned back in his chair, laced his fingers behind his head, and crossed his legs, laying his right ankle over his left knee. Dolores noticed cardboard through the hole in the sole of his army boot.

“Me, oh my! Goodness gracious! Sakes alive! I ain’t never tasted chocolate cake like that before. Thank you kindly, ma’am.”

“No, thank *you*, Joe, for helping me. You’re my guardian angel.”

“A man’s gotta set right what he’s done wrong.”

“What do you mean, Joe?”

“A boy’s dead because of me. I can’t do nothing ’bout that now, but I’ve got to make up for it by doing all the good I can.”

“A boy is dead?”

“He was just nineteen.”

“That was the age of my son.”

“You lost your son?”

“Yes. Tommy. My husband and I went through a bitter divorce, and I guess we were so consumed with hurt and rage at each other that we lost sight of our boy.”

“How did he die?”

“He started using drugs. Drugs! When I was a kid, ‘using drugs’ meant smoking a little pot. Today it means snorting coke or shooting up heroin. The autopsy found he had injected heroin laced with fentanyl. It killed him, and it was all my fault.”

Dolores set down her mug and buried her face in her hands, crying softly.

“Your fault?”

“Yes.” She lifted her face. “All the signs were there. He skipped his classes at the university. His grades fell. He quit the track team. He changed his friends for a bunch of thugs. He lost interest in everything. He quit talking to us. He stayed away from home. He was always so irritable and angry. His whole personality changed. He used to be such a sweet child. The signs were there, and I didn’t do anything to help him. If only I had seen them.”

She buried her face again and cried.

“How do you get through the day?”

She looked up, the tears hovering at the rims of her eyelids. “Oh, I shop. I go out to eat with friends. I go to parties. I travel. Anything to give me a little bit of comfort.”

Joe took another bite of cake and washed it down with a swig of coffee.

“And does that help?”

“A little. For the moment.”

“Hmm . . .” He appeared lost in thought.

“But you said that a boy the same age as my Tommy died.”

“The Taliban was holed up in a compound. I was leading a team in to get them. I didn’t even see the snipers on the roof. They hit three of my men. I still pulled two of them to safety after they shot me in the leg . . .”

“Why, Joe, you’re a hero.”

“ . . . but the third one died. We called him ‘Johnny-Boy.’ He was like a son to me. I had to tell his parents what happened. I should’ve known about the snipers. I didn’t even think of them before I went charging in.”

“And now you’re homeless and you don’t have a job. Joe, have you seen a doctor? You know, a lot of soldiers coming back from the Middle East have trouble readjusting.”

“Oh, I know all about PTSD. I seen some cases of it, something fearsome. People can’t sleep at night. They have nightmares and flashbacks. They all numb. They walk around like zombies. Then all of a sudden they think they back in the war. They do crazy stuff. But that’s not me. No. I’m making up for what I done wrong.”

“So you wander the streets in the freezing cold to help people in need? People like me?”

“Yes’m.”

“You’re a good Samaritan?”

“Wrong on both counts. I was born in Kentucky, not Samaria, and I’m just paying my dues.”

“No, Joe, you’re a saint, an honest-to-God saint, but there’s no pleasure in your life. No comfort. No consolation. You have to have something to make you feel good every now and then. Otherwise, life becomes unbearable.”

“Well, this coffee and cake sure was mighty good.”

“I don’t think I could live the way you do, Joe, helping other people with no thought for myself.”

Joe ate his last bite of cake and finished his coffee, then got up to leave.

“You just did,” he said. “Keep it up.”

And with that he walked away.

Glossary of Names

Dolores: sorrows (Spanish). She is grieving the loss of her youth, marriage, and son.
G. I. Joe: an “average Joe,” and yet a hero