

FOLLOWING THE STAR – COMING HOME FOR CHRISTMAS (EVE)
12-24-01

Five-year-old Madeline climbed into her father's lap. *"Did you have enough to eat?"* he asked her. She smiled and patted her tummy. *"I can't eat any more."* *"Did you have some of your Grandma's pie?"* *"A whole piece!"*

Joe looked across the table at his mom. *"Looks like you filled us up. Don't think we'll be able to do anything tonight but go to bed."*

Madeline put her little hands on either side of his big face. *"Oh, but, Poppa, this is Christmas Eve. You said we could dance."*

Joe feigned a poor memory. *"Did I now? Why, I don't remember saying anything about dancing."*

Grandma smiled and shook her head as she began clearing the table. *"But, Poppa,"* Madeline pleaded, *"we always dance on Christmas Eve. Just you and me, remember?"* A smile burst from beneath his thick mustache. *"Of course I remember, darling. How could I forget?"* And with that he stood and took her hand in his, and for a moment, just a moment, his wife was alive again, and the two were walking into the den to spend another night before Christmas as they had spent so many, dancing away the evening.

They would have danced the rest of their lives, but then came the surprise pregnancy and the complications. Madeline survived. But her mother did not. And Joe, the thick-handed butcher from Minnesota, was left to raise his Madeline alone.

"Come on. Poppa." She tugged on his hand. *"Let's dance before everyone arrives."* She was right. Soon the doorbell would ring and the relatives would fill the floor and the night would be past. But, for now, it was just Poppa and Madeline.

Rebellion flew into Joe's world like a Minnesota blizzard. About the time she was old enough to drive, Madeline decided she was old enough to lead her life. And that life did not include her father.

"I should have seen it coming." Joe would later say, *"but for the life of me I didn't."* He didn't know what to do. He didn't know how to handle the pierced nose and the tight skirts. He didn't understand the late nights and the poor grades. And, most of all, he didn't know when to speak and when to be quiet.

She, on the other hand, had it all figured out. She knew when to speak to her father...never. She knew when to be quiet...always. The pattern was reversed, however, with the lanky, tattooed kid from down the street. He was no good, and Joe knew it.

And there was no way he was going to allow his daughter to spend Christmas Eve with that kid.

"You'll be with us tonight, young lady. You'll be at your grandma's house eating your grandma's pie. You'll be with us on Christmas Eve."

Thought they were at the same table, they might as well have been on different sides of town. Madeline played with her food and said nothing. Grandma tried to talk to Joe, but he was in no mood to chat. Part of him was angry; part of him was heartbroken. And the rest of him would have given anything to know how to talk to this girl who once sat on his lap.

Soon the relatives arrive, bringing with them a welcome end to the awkward silence. As the room filled with noise and people, Joe stayed on one side; Madeline sat sullenly on the other.

"Put on the music, Joe," reminded one of his brothers. And so he did. Thinking she would be honored, he turned and walked toward his daughter. *"Will you dance with your poppa tonight?"*

The way she huffed and turned, you'd have thought he'd insulted her. In full view of the family, she walked out the front door and marched down the sidewalk. Leaving her father alone. Very much alone.

_____ Madeline came back that night but not for long. Joe never faulted her for leaving. After all, what's it like being the daughter of a butcher? In their last days together he tried so hard. He made her favorite dinner – she didn't want to eat. He invited her to a movie – she stayed in her room. He bought her a new dress – she didn't even say thank you. And then there was that spring day he left work early to be at the house when she arrived home from school.

Wouldn't you know that was the day she never came home?

A friend saw her and her boyfriend in the vicinity of the bus station. The authorities confirmed the purchase of a ticket to Chicago; where she went from there was anybody's guess.

_____ The scrawny boy with the tattoos had a cousin. The cousin worked the night shift at a convenience store south of Houston. For a few bucks a month, he would let the runaways stay in his apartment at night, but they had to be out during the day.

Which was fine with them. They had big plans. He was going to be a mechanic, and Madeline just knew she could get a job at a department store. Of course he knew nothing about cars, and she knew even less about getting a job – but you don't think of things like that when you're intoxicated on freedom.

After a couple of weeks, the cousin changed his mind. And the day he announced his decision, the boyfriend announced his. Madeline found herself facing the night with no place to sleep or hand to hold. It was the first of many such nights.

A woman in the park told her about the homeless shelter near the bridge. For a couple bucks she could get a bowl of soup and a cot. A couple of bucks was about all she had. She used her backpack as a pillow and jacket as a blanket.

The room was so rowdy it was hard to sleep. Madeline turned her face to the wall and, for the first time in several days, thought of the whiskered face of her father as he would kiss her good night. But as her eyes began to water, she refused to cry. She pushed the memory deep inside and determined not to think about home.

She'd gone too far to go back...

The next morning the girl in the cot beside her showed her a fistful of tips she'd made from dancing on tables. *"This is the last night I'll have to stay here,"* she said. *"Now I can pay for my own place. They told me they are looking for another girl. You should come by."* She reached into her pocket and pulled out a matchbook. *"Here's the address."*

Madeline's stomach turned at the thought. All she could do was mumble, *"I'll think about it."* She spent the rest of the week on the streets looking for work. At the end of the week when it was time to pay her bill at the shelter, she reached into her pocket and pulled out the matchbook. It was all she had left. *"I won't be staying tonight,"* she said and walked out the door. Hunger has a way of softening convictions.

_____ If Madeline knew anything, she knew how to dance. Her father had taught her well. Now men the age of her father watched her. She didn't rationalize it – she just didn't think about it. Madeline simply did her work and took their dollars.

She might never have thought about it, except for the letters. The cousin brought them. Not one, or two, but a box full. All addressed to her. All from her father. *"Your old boyfriend must have squealed on you. These come two or three a week."* complained the cousin. *"Give him your new address."* Oh, but she couldn't do that. He might find her.

Nor could she bear to open the envelopes. She knew what they said; he wanted her home. But if he knew what she was doing, he would not be writing.

It seemed less painful not to read them. So she didn't. Not that week, nor the next when the cousin brought more, nor the next when he came again. She kept them in the dressing room at the club, organized according to postmark. She ran her finger over the top of each but couldn't bring herself to open one.

Most days Madeline was able to numb the emotions. Thoughts of home and thoughts of shame were shoved into the same part of her heart. But there were occasions when the thoughts were too strong to resist.

Like the time she saw a dress in the clothing store window. A dress the same color as the last one her father had purchased for her. A dress that had been far too plain for her. With much reluctance she had put it on and stood with him before the mirror. *"My, you are as tall as I am,"* he had told her. She had stiffened at his touch.

Seeing her weary face reflected in the store window, Madeline realized she'd give a thousand dresses to feel his arms again. She left the store and resolved not to pass by it again.

It time the leaves fell and the air chilled. The mail came and the cousin complained and the stack of letters grew. Still she refused to send him an address. And she refused to read a letter.

Then a few days before Christmas Eve another letter arrived. Same shape. Same color. But this one had no postmark. And it was not delivered by the cousin. It was sitting on her dressing table.

"A couple of days ago a big man stopped by and asked me to give this to you." explained one of the other dancers. *"Said you'd understand the message."*

"He was here?" She asked anxiously.

The woman shrugged, *"Suppose he had to be."*

Madeline swallowed hard and look at the envelope. She opened it and removed the card. *"I know where you are",* it read. *"I know what you do. This doesn't change the way I feel. What I have said in each letter is still true."*

"But I don't know what you've said," Madeline declared. She pulled a letter from the top of the stack, ripped it open, and read it. Then a second, and a third. Each letter had the same sentence. Each sentence asked the same question.

In a matter of moments the floor was littered with paper and her face was streaked with tears. Within an hour she was on a bus. *"I just might make it in time."* She barely did.

The relatives were starting to leave. Joe was helping grandma in the kitchen when his brother called from the suddenly quiet den. *"Joe, someone is here to see you."*

Joe stepped out of the kitchen and stopped in his tracks. In one hand the girl held a beat-up backpack. In the other she held a card. Joe saw the question in her eyes.

"The answer is 'yes,'" she said to her father. *"If the invitation is still good, the answer is 'yes.'"*

Joe swallowed hard. *"Oh my, the invitation is still good."*

And so the two danced again...on Christmas Eve.

On the floor, near the door, rested a letter with Madeline's name and her father's request.

"Will you come home and dance with your poppa again?"

Here tonight, on the floor of the wasted days of your life there is a letter, with **YOUR** name on it, and one question: *"Will you come home and dance with your poppa again?"*