

## Christmas Memories

There was little to distinguish this particular avenue from those that led to and from it. Signs, once proudly displaying a street name and number, had disappeared with little fanfare. Even if anyone *had* noticed, no one seemed to care. At the far end of the street, a cluster of faded, brick walkups huddled together in the darkness. The other end of the street swam in blackness, as a solitary lamppost umbrelled light onto the rain soaked pavement below. Steely, winter clouds hovered over the empty neighborhood and refused the slightest hint of moon to peak through, even though the sky had stopped crying hours before.

Across from the streetlight, and just out of reach from its protection, a motionless car served as the only reminder that life had ever existed here. Its lengthy metal frame, once representing some of Detroit's finest work, was covered with a deceitful, creamy pearl finish, too youthful and fresh for its years. Oversized bumpers that, in a previous life, had twinkled with metallic pride, now shamefully tried hiding growing flakes of rust. And desperately tinted windows made it impossible to tell whether or not their purpose was to keep out the night, or hold it *in*.

The noise of the city sang in the distance, but inside the seemingly abandoned vehicle on the nameless, deserted street, two girls warmed themselves with the voice of Nat King Cole.

"Jack Frost nipping at your nose..." one crooned to the other as she folded the money she had just finished counting.

“Don’t put that in your bra,” said the girl behind the steering wheel. “A stripper coulda had that in her whore crack right before you got it—ya know?”

“Oh my Gawd, Ramona! You are disgusting!” squealed the other, and she flinched slightly as she glanced around the car.

From the lamppost, abandoned strands of light found their way into the car and danced between drops of moisture that formed on the inside of the windows. The burgundy leather seats had weathered the years better than most. And it was only upon closer inspection that one would perhaps notice, with the exception of some slight fading and a few unseemly cracks, that the beautiful car was barely stitched together, clinging to the last few moments of its neglected existence.

The girls sat in the front seat, next to each other, on opposite ends of the leather bench; two packs of cigarettes, two lighters, a pack of gum, and a string of condoms cluttered the space between them. Nat King Cole faded away, as Bing Crosby waltzed through the wood trimmed, dashboard radio, sharing his dreams of a white Christmas.

“For God’s sake, Minnie, put your money away,” Ramona ordered, putting one hand on the steering wheel and the other on her hip, “just *not* in your bra.”

“Well then *where* do I put it, Ramona? *You* gonna hold it for me?” Minnie asked, leaning over from the passenger seat to fan the small wad beneath Ramona’s nose.

Ramona’s hand darted from her hip, to snatch Minnie’s wrist. “You know that stuff is covered in disease,” she said, and she shoved Minnie’s hand away in disgust.

Minnie apologized, but as soon as Ramona looked away, she snuck the money into her bra. With the exception of Bing Crosby, the car once again filled with silence, and the two girls stared out the windows and into the darkness.

Minnie's frame was slight next to Ramona's, although neither was of formidable stature. Minnie's blond hair was pulled tightly into a ponytail that poured from atop her head. Her smooth opal complexion was buried beneath *Cha Cha Cherry* cheek stain and layers of *Perfectly Plump Plum* lipstick, in an attempt to disguise the youth that came with only seventeen years of life. Her dress hugged her body so tightly that, from a distance, one might think her torso was simply painted crimson. And the hem seemed anxious to leave the comfort of its curve, in order to expose the shy parts of her female form. In spite of this, Ramona still saw the same Minnie who used to beg to hear "The Velveteen Rabbit" before they fell asleep every night.

Ramona watched a shaggy, stray dog gimp along under the streetlight, and she thought about the blond cocker spaniel they had when they were little. She cringed as she remembered all the times it had puppies. Each time, Minnie would beg their daddy to let them keep one, just one, and every time, he would make the girls load the newborn puppies into a burlap sack. He would tie a knot at the end of the squirming bag and toss it into the bed of his truck, as if it was an empty beer can. Then he'd smile at the girls and tell them to get in.

The short drive to the creek was always the same. Their daddy would puff on a Winston 100 and sing along to whatever country song blasted through the speakers, but never loud enough to drown out Minnie, who would be wailing like a church widow. Ramona knew it was pointless though, and she refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. Once, Minnie tried to keep a puppy and snuck it into their room. But their daddy found both Minnie, and the puppy, hiding in the closet. He didn't beat Minnie that

day. He just told her to take the puppy and get in the truck, then he took the girls to the creek and made Ramona watch as Minnie had to drown the puppy with her own hands.

Ramona's mind left her dad and all the drowned puppies behind when Minnie grabbed a pack of cigarettes and began to pound the package against the inside of her wrist. "Ramona, you remember that time Daddy caught you smokin' one a his cigarettes?"

"That's a dumb question. You think I'd ever forget something like that?" Ramona asked, and she paused briefly and shuttered at the memory, "I also remember *you* watching from the shed, when he made me *eat* the rest of the sticks in the pack."

Minnie shot back, "Yeah, but afterwards, you tricked me into eatin' one by tellin' me they tasted like candy." She shook with an embarrassed giggle, "I can't believe I was so stupid to believe you."

Minnie snickered and lit her cigarette. After a long puff, and a little thought, she asked, "Member when we went to the fair, and mama let us ride all the rides?"

Ramona bobbed her head and snorted, "And, she let us eat whatever we wanted?" Laughter began to build between the two girls until they could no longer hold it in. "And remember how you *had* to have that corn dog? And *right before we got on the tilt-a-whirl?*"

Minnie quickly calmed her laughter and wrapped her lips around the cigarette, but a snicker pushed out the smoke, and she asked, "And 'member how you kept yelling at mama, 'I ain't ridin' with her if she eats that!'"

Ramona's laughter faded slightly, as she said, "But she made me anyway," quickly adding, "Thank Gawd you waited 'til we were off the ride before you started pukin'!"

Minnie took another drag and as she exhaled, she whispered to herself, "Mama was always so much fun. Hard to see her ever fallin' for someone like him." She flicked the ashes

into the floorboard and turned towards Ramona to ask, "She coulda married anyone. I wonder why him?" But there was no answer from Ramona and the question hung between them, in the cold night air.

"You think he ever loved us?" Minnie asked, hoping for an answer to this question.

Ramona shook her head, "Don't know—hard to tell."

Ramona's strawberry curls were pulled away from her face and pinned into a tidy chignon. The powder used to cover her freckles was too chalky, even for her ivory skin, and it drained all the life from her flesh. Her lips, naturally rosy, needed little more than Vaseline to look polished, but she hid them anyway, beneath layers of the same plum lipstick Minnie used.

Ramona had the misfortune of finding her womanly form at an age when girls did not know what to do with such things. Out of necessity, she had learned just how to pour herself into a dress to get what she wanted, and tonight's fiery red piece was no different.

Minnie's mind wandered back to earlier that day. She and Ramona had gone to the market, where Ramona bought them a turkey. Ramona only agreed to the purchase after Minnie refused to stop her incessant begging.

"C'mon, Ramona—Please? It's the only thing I want for Christmas," Minnie grabbed the side of the shopping cart and submissively twisted her body her body around it, as she stared at Ramona, waiting for an answer.

It was only after they had picked through all the frozen bodies, and found the fattest one, that Minnie gave her reason for such a request. "The smell of roast turkey reminds me of Mama," Minnie said and she smiled as she flung the bald bird into the basket.

The crisp night air had begun to creep into the car, and the girls' clothing did nothing to shield them from the chill.

"How much longer do you think it's gonna take?" Minnie asked.

Ramona shrugged and reached for her pack of cigarettes. "How am I supposed to know?" she asked. "*But*, I sure wish he woulda left the keys."

Minnie agreed, before she added, "At least we can listen to the radio without em."

Ramona squinted at Minnie, and thought about how much she hated that Minnie always looked for the good in every situation.

"You think Tony was serious—about those people?" Minnie asked.

"Probably not," Ramona said, as she reached over and patted Minnie's knee.

"But what if he was, Ramona? What if—" Minnie stopped.

"Minnie, you know there is no such thing as what if," Ramona said. "There is only *is* and *is not*. Too many people waste too much time on *what if*, and we can't be one of em."

"Well, Ramona—what if?" Minnie squinched her face at Ramona and scooted toward her, "I had to go pee—because I do."

Ramona laughed at Minnie and shooed her away just as Elvis sauntered through the radio and, both girls began to sing along, "I'll have a bloo ah ooh, Christmas, without you." Minnie reached forward and turned Elvis up.

Ramona only sang for a moment before she remembered where she was. The fog covered windows now kept them from having a clear view of the night. Ramona shifted uncomfortably in her seat before turning the radio down.

"We can't, Minnie," Ramona said. "If Tony was telling the truth, and I not sayin he was—I'm just sayin—We gotta keep the radio down."

Tony was one of the first people they met when they got into the city. Stepping off the bus, the girls shared twenty-seven dollars between them. They were still waiting for their bags when he approached them and offered to get them something to eat.

Tony was skinny, the kind of skinny that tricks your mind into thinking his bones clicked together when he walked. And any time he spoke, his Adams Apple bobbed up and down in his throat like a run away buoy. He sounded like Ricky Ricardo, and claimed he had snuck in from Cuba, but the girls had overheard him, on more than one occasion, speaking with no accent. He almost never quit moving either, though his movements rarely seemed to serve a purpose, other than to keep him from having any peace.

It was his height though, that the girls first noticed. His sun kissed frame stood at least a foot taller than anyone else at the station, and he wore gold aviator sunglasses, even though it was almost midnight. Tony had his own gravitational pull, and the girls were sucked into his orbit before they even knew what was happening.

“What time is it?” Minnie asked. “I really do gotta pee.”

Ramona pulled a band less watch from in between the seats and grunted, as she raised two fingers. They had been waiting for more than four hours.

“Merry Christmas, Ramona,” Minnie whispered.

Ramona nodded at Minnie, but had no words. She closed her eyes and laid back. She thought about her turkey, defrosting in the sink, and how she needed to get it in the oven if it was to be done on time.

She thought about their Christmas’ growing up, and how their mama always made the perfect turkey dinner. Along with preparing their Christmas dinner, their mama stayed up all Christmas Eve night and baked pies and made candy. One year, she made chocolate

covered cherries with white chocolate and topped each one with a tiny dab of pink icing. Their daddy ate every last one, because he said “They looked like boobs.”

“Ramona,” Minnie whispered. “Are you awake?”

Ramona didn’t bother to open her eyes, but rather, she rolled her head in the direction of the passenger seat to allow Minnie to decide for herself.

“Seriously, Ramona. I have to go,” Minnie whispered loudly. “I’m gonna pee on myself in a minute, if I don’t.”

Ramona opened her eyes and saw that Minnie’s hands were tucked in between her thighs, which she had woven together in attempt to alleviate the urge to make water. The chilly night air had been bullied away by a frigid winter wind, and Ramona knew that if Minnie opened the car door, any piece of warmth they had, would disappear for good.

She looked around the car for something Minnie could use, but there was nothing. Ramona knew that her sister’s bladder wouldn’t hold much longer, and she begrudgingly motioned for her to get out of the car.

Trash filled lots, littered with remnants of old lives and happier days, lined the sides of the streets next to them. In spite of the temperature, and even in the dark, Minnie looked around. She imagined that the gutted sofa, busted television, and barren chandelier, which had been dumped in the unfertile plot, had once belonged to a happy family that threw lavish Christmas parties. She also noticed a mattress nearby, but thought the happy family would have had no use for it, since it looked as if it had provided service for amputees during the Civil War.

“Hurry up!” Ramona hissed, as she pushed Minnie further into the field.



Minnie found a spot and took care of her business as quick as she could. Just as she finished, a slew of headlights began to make their way down the block.

“Minnie!” Ramona yelled in a whisper, but Minnie had already seen the headlights and bolted toward the car.

Both girls jumped in the back seat and slid into the floorboards. The burgundy carpet, which matched the burgundy leather seats, reeked of Pall Mall’s. Both girls gasped for air while trying to keep as still as possible.

Voices and music started to dance in the air around the car. Headlights and horns filled the street. The girls slowly emerged from the safety of the smoke filled carpet and looked around.

“Someone’s havin a party,” Minnie squealed, and they watched as an endless stream of twenty-somethings lit up one of the walkups.

A red Mustang parked just in front of them, and two girls, who looked remarkably similar to them, teetered out. The obnoxious mustang matched the girls, who were both swaddled in dark fur coats. It was obvious the girls had both clearly begun the party much earlier. Ramona and Minnie watched the party girls sway toward the festivities, until one of them ran back to the car and tossed both coats into the front seat. They couldn’t believe their luck.

Ramona was gone and back, behind the wheel, before Minnie could mutter a single word of caution, and she held up both coats so Minnie could take her pick. Ramona didn’t look at it as stealing. She only took what they needed, and she told herself that if Tony got back before the party was over, she would put the coats back where she found them.

Once the girls were comfortably wrapped in the furs, Ramona suggested they get some sleep until Tony returned. Minnie paid no attention to Ramona's proposal; instead, she leaned forward and blindly searched the floor near her feet.

"Got it," Minnie squealed as she popped up. "Merry Christmas, Ramona," she said. Minnie handed Ramona a small package, wrapped carefully with the fragments of a brown paper bag, and held together with green, produce, twist-ties.

"Minnie, I—can't. I didn't—" Ramona stuttered, and swallowed the lump in her throat.

"It's okay, Ramona. You take care of me every day," Minnie said and quickly added, "And don't worry, I didn't spend any money on it."

Both girls giggled, and Ramona slowly untwisted the twist-ties and opened the gift.

"Oh my *Gawd*, Minnie—you didn't!" Ramona gasped and with wide-eyes inquired, "How did you get it?"

"The day we left?" Minnie grinned, "I waited 'til he fell asleep, and then—I just took it."

Ramona raised the small silver frame into the light, and there was their mother, smiling at the both of them. It was the only thing left of their mama, who had been gone longer than she had been around. And their daddy kept the only picture of her as a hostage in the drawer, next to his bed.

The picture made Ramona forget that she and Minnie were waiting for Tony to return from a dealer that he owed money. Her mama's smile made her forget Tony's story that the dealer might try to get one of *them*, if Tony didn't pay. Her mama's face erased the fear that she felt, knowing that he *had* no money for the dealer, even though Ramona knew

exactly what it was to pay a man's debts. In that moment, their mama offered them sanctuary, and Ramona *knew* that Tony would keep his promise to protect them. He would never tell the dealer where they were. Minnie's gift gave them back their mama's love, and just like their mama, Tony loved them.

Ramona clasped the small frame to her chest, "Thank you, Minnie," she said. "This is the best gift I have ever gotten." And for the first time since their mama died, Ramona let the tears flow freely from her eyes.

Minnie scooted toward her sister and laid her head on Ramona's shoulder. She began to cry too, and her tears rolled onto the fur coat. "I'm glad you're my sister, Ramona," Minnie whispered, and she squeezed Ramona's arm.

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That Christmas morning, as the sun tried to make its way through the snow filled clouds, Judy Garland floated into the only car left on the avenue. *Have yourself a merry little Christmas. May your heart be light.* With the exception of the white sedan, the street had emptied hours before, when all the partygoers decided to return to their warm homes and loving families.

That was when Tony, flanked by two dark figures, emerged from the darkness behind the car. He muttered an apology to one of the shadows, about the delay, and said something about not expecting a party. He followed the apology with a promise that it would never happen again, and nervously jostled his hands in appreciation.

The soft glow from the dashboard radio, perfectly outlined their silhouettes, as Tony nodded his head toward the figures and raised his finger to point at the car. And that

Christmas morning, on the deserted street, Ramona and Minnie, with their mother between them, shared their final Christmas gift.