



*Ancient City*  
CHRISTMAS



shannon o'neil

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*Ancient City Christmas*  
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*Dedicated in loving memory of*

Grace Brown O'Neil

*1912 - 2007*

“**T**HE FAMILY. We were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another’s desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together.”

– *Erma Bombeck*

# one

MONDAY / DECEMBER 24TH

I SHOULD NOT HAVE YELLED AT the nice lady behind the ticket counter.

Incidentally, I also should not have thrown a piece of luggage at a fellow traveler, cursed at a young skycap, taken a swing at a security guard, and basically caused a disturbance that brought the entire ticketing lobby of the Jacksonville International Airport to a standstill for half an hour on one of the busiest travel holidays of the year—Christmas Eve.

I have come to these conclusions by way of a long, quiet hour of reflection, which I have observed in near monastic silence and solitude. Of course, by solitude, I mean controlled confinement inside some sort of holding cell reserved for potential terrorists and unruly travelers such as myself.

It's possible that I might have arrived at said conclusions sooner if I'd been able to pace around and contemplate the many mistakes I've made this evening. Unfortunately, such pacing has been rendered impossible by the small size of the room and, to a greater extent, the

giant, plastic zip-ties (handcuffs of the new millennium, apparently) that have me bound at the wrists and ankles.

Unlike the interrogation rooms you see on television, this room has no two-way glass or glaring light to point in someone's face. Instead, my cell is disappointingly bland and vaguely disgusting—sort of like a public restroom. From the cinderblock walls to the cracked ceiling tiles and linoleum floors, every bit of the room is dusty and yellow, and even the air inside feels dirty.

Even less pleasant than the dingy appearance of the room is its rather distinct odor, which falls somewhere between cat pee and dead bodies—with just a hint of strawberries (which is also similar to a public restroom).

The off-white folding chair I'm zip-tied to and another just like it (though with notably fewer stains) sit on opposite sides of a vinyl-covered card table that's pock-marked with deep gashes and stains. Just those three pieces of furniture take up the entire room, except for the spaces filled with the incessant buzzing of the lights that would be driving me crazy if it weren't for the fact that I passed crazy and entered sheer insanity when I attempted to throttle several people at the ticket desk.

Hence the reason I'm here in the first place.

Before anyone passes judgement, let me say that I think I have a pretty damn good defense. Present situation notwithstanding, I am typically a pretty laid-back individual. I consider myself friendly, intelligent, and well-mannered in most situations. My biggest vices in life are chocolate, good books, and reality television.

I'm a twenty-three year-old recent college graduate who borrowed more money than I care to think about in order to purchase a creative writing degree from Boston College. A degree that now collects dust in my apartment, where I work as a struggling freelance graphic designer.

I'm not saying all this to pat myself on the back (literally speaking, I *can't* pat myself on the back, thanks to these handcuffs) I'm saying it to make it clear that it would take a series of extenuating, unusual, and chaotic circumstances to send me into a tailspin like this.

In fact, it would take something like a Perfect Storm of events to bring me across the border of sanity into my current predicament—and that's exactly what has happened.

If it sounds like I'm being a little melodramatic, my current attire should be ample evidence to back-up my claims. Although my fashion sensibilities may be a little lacking, I would never voluntarily dress myself in a shapeless, ankle-length, long-sleeved dress, covered in blue sequins and lined at the hem, collar, and cuffs with faux white feathers. With its NFL-sized shoulder pads, this garment looks like it came straight from the back of Bea Arthur's closet, circa 1983 (where it had been buried along with the things even Bea herself would never wear).

This outrageous outfit is part of a costume I was forced to wear for my stepmother's blasphemous Christmas parade float entitled "Jesus Through The Years." (Don't worry, there will be plenty of time to dive into the sordid details of that soiree later...)

The point I'm trying to make right now is that if I were still the same, sane person I was when I arrived in Florida four days ago, I would not be clad thusly. Unfortunately, I lost all the clothes I brought along for my trip in a tragic *hujta* (that's hoo-ta) fire within my first twenty-four hours on Sunshine State soil. Therefore, my wardrobe since then has been largely sculpted by need and not fashion.

So, with the "blasphemous float" and "tragic *hujta* fire" in mind, I don't think I need to explain further why I was so irritable when I arrived at JIA by taxi just after dark and saw fit to skip the switchback line of customers mounting in front of the ticket counter.

In a tone just a notch below hysterical, I informed the woman behind the counter that I needed to be on the next flight to Boston (or

anywhere between here and Boston) at any cost. I had my credit card out, ready to charge my way back to sanity, when the woman informed me (in a rather sassy tone, I might add) that there are no more seats available on outgoing flights tonight. She said if I wanted to get in line and wait like everyone else, she could see about putting me on standby.

At that point in time, my only intention was to utilize a firm, but compassionate touch to convey to this woman how urgent my request was. However, some of the people in line who saw me climb across the counter, seize the woman by her ridiculous bowtie, and lift her off her feet seemed to think that what I was doing actually fell under the umbrella of assault.

The security officers at JIA certainly believed that to be the case, otherwise I don't think they would have used a TASER gun to subdue me (I suppose I should be thankful it wasn't a real gun). Nor would they have dragged me into this little room, handcuffed me to a folding chair, and left me to sit here alone with my thoughts.

Although I can see how my actions may have been misconstrued, I maintain that I am an innocent person who was driven to the point of desperation by forces out of my control. It is not my fault that there are no lifeguards in the gene pool. I did not ask to share DNA with a troupe of individuals whose light bulbs have been permanently dimmed. I am the lone Halogen among them, and I have paid the price for it.

These are the same people that I ran away from to go to college in another state. I haven't been home since Christmas four years ago, when I spent nine whole days (eight days too many) visiting my family and getting a refresher course in why I decided to go school in Boston in the first place.

Look, I am not a horrible person. I'm a good person, I swear. I love my family, I really do, but they're crazy people. All of them. They make me, even in my current state, look like I'm as put-together as a Martha Stewart gift basket (pre-prison Martha, not the new Martha).

I know that all families are a little crazy. Maybe it seems like I'm just over-exaggerating, but it's really hard to make a fair judgment without actually meeting my family.

Okay, I'm not completely uncultured. I know that everyone's family has a little craziness to it. Everyone has skeletons in the closet, everyone has a black sheep, everyone has a few family gatherings that go awry. I know that. But my family has storage units full of skeletons, a flock of black sheep, and not one family gathering that has ever, EVER gone well.

E-V-E-R.

Including this very Christmas.

Although technically the holiday is not over yet...which is something that scares me more than the odds on me getting a cavity search sometime in the very near future.

As I'm stuffing down the fear that comes from that invasive line of thought, the door to my tiny cell flies open and the hulking frame of Tony the Security Guard takes up a position in the doorway, completely eclipsing my view of the hall behind him.

"You still thinking about taking a swing at me?" he asks.

I shake my head vigorously. "No sir, Officer. I apologize for that. I got a little carried away."

"Just a little," says Tony with a short chuckle. He moves into the room and shuts the door behind him with a thud. I reflexively kick my feet in a futile effort to move my chair as far back into the corner as it will go. Tony (who I'm sure someone at some point in his life has dubbed "Big Tony") has cut the size of the tiny room in half.

"Listen, Officer," I begin, "I know I caused a major spectacle out there at the ticketing counter, but it's been a long couple of days."

"Tell me about it," says Tony as he sinks into the folding chair across the table from mine. The chair creaks loudly, and I'm terribly afraid it's going to collapse, but Big Tony seems unconcerned. He reaches across

his rotund body to pluck a candy cane from the breast pocket of his uniform.

"I really don't want to waste your time," I insist from my side of the table. "I'm sure there are much more dangerous airline travelers out there that you should be questioning instead of me." Tony peels back the plastic wrapping on his candy cane and happily shoves the straight end into his mouth, leaving the curved portion to hang off his lips like a festive cigarette.

"You're not wasting my time," Tony says with a crooked smile. "I'd rather be in here eating my candy cane than be out there listening to all those people bitching and moaning about getting to wherever they're going. Matter of fact, I'm good to sit right here with you until my shift ends."

"And when might that be?" I ask hesitantly. Tony glances at the silver watch on his wrist that would probably fit around my thigh, then folds his arms across his thick chest.

"About six hours," he replies. His smile doubles in size and the candy cane moves from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"Well, Officer, as much as I would like to sit here with you for the next six hours and watch you eat that candy cane, I really need to be getting on my way. I'm not sure if the nice lady at the ticket counter had a chance to put me on the stand-by list for the next flight to Boston before I threatened her, but at any rate I need to be making the necessary arrangements to get on that flight as soon as possible." I offer Tony a big smile of my own, hoping to come across as pleasant and completely sane. He doesn't seem convinced. "You have some explaining to do first," Tony says in a serious tone.

"Like what?"

"Well, for starters," Tony clears his throat, "what the hell are you wearing?"

He has a valid point.

“It’s a costume,” I tell him. “I was in the Christmas Parade in St. Augustine earlier today, and I haven’t had a chance to change.” (Not strictly true, but this was honestly the best option I had.)

Tony doesn’t seem swayed by my rebuttal, but he lets it go for the bigger issue that I was really hoping wasn’t going to come up.

“All right then,” he says. “Then how about you explain to me why you were all over the news a few days ago for punching Santa Claus in the face?”

“Okay, first of all, he wasn’t Santa Claus. He was an alcoholic homeless guy in a Santa costume.”

“Oh really? And here I was thinking Santa took time out of his busy day at the North Pole to hang around outside a mall in Boston ringing a little bell for charity.” Tony’s sarcasm is palpable.

“The bottom line is, no charges were filed,” I insist.

Tony hesitates before he poses his next question. “You know what the problem is with people like you?” Tony leans forward and places his forearms on the card table. “You can be in a crowd of hundreds, and yet you can’t see past the three feet of space you’re taking up on this Earth.”

“I don’t think I’m one of those people,” I reply a little tersely. I’m in no mood to be patronized by a giant, candy cane-eating security guard.

“Of course you don’t,” Tony says coolly. “But you are.”

“If I were one of those people, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because if I were one of those people—a selfish person like you’re implying—I would be in Boston right now enjoying my Christmas holiday with my friends and a good bottle of wine.”

“I see,” Tony says with an amused raise of his eyebrows. “And for what unselfish reason did you come to spend Christmas with us Florida lowlifes instead of your pals in Boston?”

“Well, it’s sort of a long story,” I say. “I guess I came down here to give my family another chance. I wanted to see if they’d really changed since the last time I came home, four years ago.”

“How does that lead to you trying to throttle one of my fellow airline employees in a sparkly muumuu?”

“My family is crazy. Absolutely, unequivocally crazy. I would have sworn them off years ago if they hadn’t still been helping pay for my college tuition.”

“That sounds totally unselfish to me,” Tony says sarcastically.

“It’s not what you think,” I tell him. “My parents are divorced—”

“So are mine.”

“—and they’ve both remarried.”

“So have mine.”

“I have ten brothers and sisters.”

This gives Tony pause. His jaw goes a little slack and the candy cane slips forward a bit. He quickly regains his composure and leans back in the chair, which elicits another loud creak.

“Okay, that’s a lot of people,” Tony admits, “but that still doesn’t give you cause to disrupt airport travel on Christmas Eve.”

“No, but the events of the last four days do,” I reply.

“Like what?”

“Where do you want me to begin?”

“I suppose the beginning would be a good place,” Tony says. Sarcasm again.

“You mean the beginning as in my parents’ marriage at a shady wedding chapel in Daytona, or the beginning as in when I accidentally burned down my stepmother’s backyard tribal hut three days ago?”

Tony tries hard not to show it, but he’s definitely intrigued.

“Wherever you need to start to convince me that I should let you out of this room so you can get on a plane and take your crazy ass back to Boston.”

“All right then...we’ll start at the wedding chapel and work our way forward.”

“I’ve got six hours, let’s go.”

“Tony,” I reply sincerely, “I’m not sure that’s enough time.”



Well...do you want to read  
the rest of Bailey's story?

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