

Jane in January

January. Crossroads of the calendar. A month of reflection and renewal. Named for the Roman god Janus, the patron of doorways and beginnings. A figure with two faces, one looking forward and the other back. A time to look in the mirror and perhaps behold a double image. Of that which was, and of that which yet might be...

Jane stands where she always does on this night. In the dining room close to the kitchen door. Alone. Aloof. Several other middle-aged ladies bustle happily about her, setting out food, passing trays, and picking up crumpled napkins. Cheerfully rejecting her tentative offers of help. The men have formed a circle in the living room, telling their jokes as usual. For twenty years or more Jane has observed the coming of the new year from this vantage point in her brother Stan's home. Present at the party but hardly part of it. Over the decades the venue has moved through several houses, each one successively larger than the last, but Jane has always found her place by the kitchen door. Now after twenty-odd years, each annual edition has blurred into the same party repeated over and over again. Familiar faces. Predictable conversation. Same old same old. But Stan can't stop inviting her. And how can she avoid saying yes? Tradition, right or wrong, twisting family ties into knots.

So far this evening she has reviewed three sets of photos of other peoples' grandchildren, been asked her opinion on Santa Claus, and had serious discussions about the marshmallow diet and second-hand smoke. Sometimes she wishes that her sedate lifestyle, revolving around a respectable job, books, the occasional night at the opera and the company of her Siamese cats, would provide more flavourful fodder for party-chat of her own. But ordinarily she finds a broad repertoire of personal stories and anecdotes unnecessary, as she tends to escape most gatherings as early as social graces allow. Except on New Years' Eve, with its obsession with midnight, where a quick getaway is impossible. And so she lingers on by the kitchen door, a reluctant prisoner of time whose feet are beginning to ache.

As Jane nibbles on a cracker and fidgets with one of her earrings, her brother strides into the dining room and empties several bottles into the punch bowl. "Make sure your glasses are ready for the toast at midnight," he roars to the crowd. "The count-down's only half an hour away."

"Great party Stan, as always." She knows he wants her to say it.

"Thanks Sis." He stops beside her at the kitchen door. "We've come a long stretch since that basement apartment on Ripley Road, haven't we? But we still have just as much fun. By the way, did you notice our angels had flown the coop?" Stan places his big hand on Jane's elbow, and motions at the wall across the room.

"Yes, you've got a new... piece of art," she replies. "I guess it was time for a change."

"I'll say," says Stan with a grin. "I hated those chubby cherubs looking over my shoulder while I was eating. We kept them around till Christmas, only because they were in season. But on Boxing Day, See-No-Evil, Hear-No-Evil and Speak-No-Evil went back to the store with all the other rejects."

"That's the true beauty of rented art."

"Exactly. Out with the old. In with the new. How d'you like the new picture? If you can call it a picture. More of a piece of work than a work of art. The clerk at the Lease-a-Mona Art Store promised it would grow on me." They stare at the painting together. An unframed white canvas with two parallel black lines swerving through it. "She said its title is "Black and White Study

Number 16". I call it "Zebra-See-Zebra-Do". I mean, you don't need a talented artist to draw something like that. Hell, even I could do it."

"At least it doesn't clash with the wallpaper." Jane tries to sound positive. "And it won't spy on you during dinner. And I suppose you can exchange it for a Norman Rockwell scene any time you like."

"Now there's an artist I actually understand!" Stan points to the clock, and she can tell he's getting excited. "Gotta pass out the noisemakers! Grab yourself some more punch, Sis." Then he moves on, brandishing his empty bottles.

As she drifts toward the punchbowl for something to do, she feels an urgent tug at her sleeve. "Aunt Jane, is this party gruesome or what?" Stan's daughter Kathy stands beside her, her face contorted in a mock expression of agony.

"Well, there's no one here from your... social circle," Jane acknowledges.

"Everyone looks so old and tired. Like they've been doing this party since before I was born, and they've run out of things to say." Suddenly Kathy calls across the room. "Hi Auntie Ruby. Divine dress! Looks better every time you wear it!"

"So why aren't you out with your friends?" Jane asks.

"They're picking me up later," says Kathy. "After all, it isn't even midnight yet. We're going to a sleazy bar for an anti-New Years' bash. Gosh, they'd better not have forgotten me. I'm just dying to get out of here." She blows a kiss into the living room. "Reverend Morgan, I hope you've got a dirty joke for me tonight!"

"Where have you been all evening?" asks Jane. "I didn't see you earlier."

"Actually, I was up in my room. Protesting. But then I got hungry, so I decided to come down to the Underworld." Kathy stuffs a couple of pastry wraps into her mouth. "Super gourmet sausage rolls, Mrs. Bates!" she cries.

"Protesting?"

"Mmmm-hmmm. Yes, well I really don't deserve to be at this wake tonight. I'm supposed to be in Fort Lauderdale. I was going with a bunch of my friends, who are all down there having fun right now. It makes me sick just thinking about it. Everything was planned. Mom and Dad were giving me the plane ticket for Christmas. Perfect. But do you remember a few weeks ago I crashed up Daddy's car in that ice storm? A new car, and the brakes didn't work!... Can I help it?" Kathy shrugs. "Anyway, after that happened they said they couldn't afford to send me to Florida. So I got a lecture and a sweater for Christmas instead. I know they're just trying to punish me. I mean, we had lots of insurance." She sighs. "One little mistake, and my whole life's screwed up. And here I am spending New Year's Eve with my parents' friends at this crummy party. Do you think that's fair, Aunt Jane?"

"It sounds about as fair as life gets, Kathy." In an effort to empathize, Jane tries to recall something she did which brought on similar negative ramifications in her own past. But she's coming up with a blank. All her deadly sins seem to be of the omission variety.

"Aunt Jane, I really admire you. You're so lucky. You're single. Independent. No one tells you

what to do. Whatever you want, you can do it any time. No questions asked. Have you ever considered getting a tattoo? Daddy said I couldn't have one." Kathy giggles. "But there are places he'll never see." She gives the thumbs-up sign to a lady with a matronly figure. "Love that marshmallow diet, Mrs. P!"

"No tattoos on my to-do list... yet," laughs Jane. "And anyone who is young and free, with their whole future ahead of them doesn't need to envy me. I'm sure you'll make far more interesting mistakes in your life than I ever have in mine."

"You know, it all comes down to money," Kathy declares. "People who can afford to pay for their mistakes can do anything they want. Like if I had a few hundred bucks, I could be in Fort Lauderdale right now. But people with money never spend it on the right things." Her eyes dart toward the painting on the wall. "Take my father. He forks out hundreds of dollars a year renting art he doesn't even like, but won't come up with the cash to give me what I really want for Christmas. Go figure." She points at the head of a burly gentleman, and announces in a loud whisper, "Pssst, nice rug, Buzz! Can't tell!"

"Your father wants a conversation piece," says Jane. "To him it's money well spent. Like you and your tattoo."

"I think he must have the hots for the Lease-a-Mona Art Mart girl. The stuff he lets her talk him into bringing home! Look at "Skid Marks in the Snow" over there." Kathy grimaces. "It belongs on the fridge, not in the dining room. And it reminds me of my stupid accident. Ohhh... I wish I was in Fort Lauderdale."

"Perhaps they're not skid marks. It might be just a rut," suggests Jane.

"ONE MINUTE TO MIDNIGHT!" Stan bellows over the chatter.

"Quick, Aunt Jane, let's both make a resolution." says Kathy. "To have more adventures next year."

"How about... to experience more great stories first hand," counters Jane.

"Isn't that the same thing?" asks Kathy, frowning.

"Some authors think so. And many readers too."

"OK then. More great stories. But they should have happy endings."

TEN... NINE... EIGHT... Do-No-Evil aunt and her Devil-May-Care niece hug one another, consummating their deal.

THREE... TWO... ONE... HAPPY NEW YEAR! All at once noisemakers start blaring, glasses of punch are handed out, and everyone is singing Auld Lang Syne. Eagerly, Stan starts his annual rounds to give all the ladies a New Year's kiss.

"Let's drink a toast," says Kathy through the din. "To faraway places."

"Next year in... Jerusalem?" replies Jane.

"Anywhere but here," says Kathy. "As long as the guys are as hot as they are in Fort Lauderdale!"

A car horn sounds outside. "There's my ride! Time to get wild!" Kathy puts down her glass, waves to Jane and bolts for the hall. Grabbing her coat she yells to the crowd, "Happy New Year everybody. Don't wait up!" In her haste, she leaves the front door wide open behind her.

Jane finds herself once again standing in her solitary position by the kitchen door. As she contemplates saying her good-byes, she looks at the picture on the opposite wall, and wonders what miracles she would have to perform to change it from a rut into skid marks. Thoughtfully, she speculates on various ways to bring this new vision into reality, and debates over which particular course of action might be most suitable. Could she cope with revolution? Is there time for evolution? And could her soul remain intact through the process? Then slowly a courageous smile lights her face, while a silent tear slips down her cheek. Quietly she leaves the party without kissing her brother.

THANKS FOR READING JANE IN JANUARY.

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