

a rose for martha

It was a special night, when loved ones were close to Bill's heart, and there was something he had to do...

By Gillian Harvey

Christmas Eve. The chatter of excitement in the last-minute shoppers rushing past to their warm homes; crackling fires and mince pies; excited children hanging up their stockings; Christmas sherry and favourite films.

"Mummy, what's wrong with that old man?" The girl, her voice sharp and unselfconscious, looked up at her mum as they hurried along the darkening path, laden with shopping bags.

"Shh, Rachel." The woman glanced at Bill as they passed with the flicker of a smile – sympathetic but too busy to stop.

Earlier a group of teenagers had laughed at his beard.

"Oi, Santa, where's yer reindeer?" one of them had joked. "Nice flower, is that for ya girlfriend?"

He'd smiled; it didn't matter. He

She flashed across the frozen expanse fearlessly, laughing

remembered being that age – anyone over thirty-five had seemed ancient. Let alone seventy-two.

Where had the time gone?

It was colder now, almost five-thirty, and his breath misted in front of his mouth. He cupped his hands in front of his lips, blowing into them to alleviate the chill.

On this one evening of the year he would never wear a coat, scarf, gloves... he needed to feel the way he had felt all those years ago.

He'd spotted the look in a few of the passing faces. Should they stop – offer him a couple of pounds for a cup of coffee, a scarf bought for someone as a Christmas present? They'd wrestle with it briefly; the urge to help a stranger, guilt at the contrast between their situations.

He'd meet their eyes and give a stiff smile; acknowledging them, but nodding his head to signal that he was OK.

The streetlights scattered through the park were surrounded by orange haloes of light and above, the stars sparkled bright in the evening darkness.

The lake in front of him was partially frozen, all wildlife long departed or hunkered down in warm burrows. The grass beyond stretched into the frozen dusk. It was hard to imagine it bathed in sunlight, but when he closed his eyes he was back there – the length of Martha's red hair glistening in the summer glow as she ran ahead, laughing.

He'd always been behind, breathless, never quite catching up. His red boots pounding against the packed, dry earth, laughing in spite of himself. The smell of soap, grass cuttings and pear drops. That feeling of being on the cusp of something amazing that only comes at the edge of childhood.

"Best days of my life," he muttered. Although it wasn't true, really. There was the time when Polly was passed to him, sticky from the womb, wriggling in a blanket and their eyes had locked for a

heart-stopping moment. And teaching William to swim in the municipal pool – that look on his face when he splashed his way to the other side for the first time.

Later, that feeling of pride when Polly had the twins – holding both at once; his picture in the local paper. And seeing William's place in Australia a couple of years ago – all those hours on a plane, but the look on his son's face when he got to show his father his beautiful house. Meeting Gloria, his daughter-in-law. Now there were the photos in his wallet of the granddaughter he'd never met; years more to look forward to, God willing.

Still, there was something about childhood, wasn't there? Big memories looming out of the gloom of forgotten, blended days. Her arm on his – the taste of a currant bun stolen from the bakery. That day at the seaside. And skating on the frozen lake.

He'd always been afraid to do it – step on to the ice and hear it stretch and settle beneath him. That heart-stopping moment when a sliver of cracks darted away from his shoe. Then getting braver, pushing out on the flats of his shoes and feeling the cold air sting his face until he felt as if he was flying.

Martha ahead of him, her coat whipped back, her hair tucked under a red bobble hat. Crying back to him, "Come on, Billy!" as she flashed across the frozen expanse fearlessly, laughing with the exhilaration that only comes with movement and danger. Winter after winter; and always on Christmas Eve, when it was cold enough for the water to harden into a surface thick enough to play on.

She'd been fifteen that year – plump, on the cusp between childhood and the



beginning of something altogether more exciting. Growing at a rate that made him feel insignificant and small in comparison. She was hanging out with Terry and his friends at the edge of the park, leaving him kicking a ball against a wall as they crept around the back to try a cigarette.

At Christmas she'd been his again. "Oi, Billy," she'd said, over Christmas Eve tea. "Fancy a skate before carols?"

He'd looked at his mother, feeling his eyes widen with the ache of longing. "Can we, Mother, can we?"

Later, he felt the gut-wrench of sadness when he saw her friends waiting on the bench, wrapped in their winter coats: Terry with that stupid bunch of holly, her careless glance backwards as she raced towards them, leaving him to stumble behind.

He stood at the side of the lake now, hands in pockets, and waited to hear the cathedral clock chime six. The chatter of shoppers faded into the distance as the bells rang; and he was back, shivering in his too-thin coat, feeling the

He felt a gut-wrench of sadness seeing her friends on the bench

disappointed sprinkle of pinprick drizzle begin to dust his cheeks. "It's going to melt," he'd said. "I want to go home."

She'd looked at him: his big sister again, just for a moment.

"It'll be all right, Billy," she said. "It's been really cold. You stay here if you like." And she'd put out a black shoe, the bobble of grey tights just visible up to her knee, and pushed gently against the frosty sparkle of the lake's hard surface.

It had been darker then, fewer streetlights – but the night had been clear and the moon had glowed gently on the frosted ice. She'd tottered for a couple of steps, then gained confidence, sliding her shoe more deftly and gliding forwards a few yards. "Come on, everyone!" she'd said, her head turning, the cloud of breath hanging in front of her lips. "It's fine!"

Terry, Don and Mags had raced onto the ice, whooping with excitement. And

she'd twirled right there, spinning – her hair flying free as her hat came loose and flopped softly onto the ice. Terry had wrapped his arm around her back and drew her close.

Then the crack, a yell – Bill's heart somersaulting, feet frozen to the ground in fear.

He opened his hand, now, and looked at the white rose – forced, no doubt, in a greenhouse somewhere, but still beautiful. He'd made them cut the thorns off. A group of youngsters in office gear strode past on the path behind him, arms linked like children, singing a Christmas song out of time in voices made bold by mulled wine.

"Love you, Martha," he said, and threw it beyond the thin ice into the water visible in the deeper part of the lake. It floated for a second, then he lost sight of it in the gloom. "Miss you."

Nobody skated on the ice now; even when it was thick. There were signs – people still talked about the girl who'd drowned all those years ago.

A hand on his shoulder now.

"Can I help you, sir?" a young man in a high-vis jacket. "Do you have somewhere to go?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry." He turned from the lake and tried to smile. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, sir," the man doffed an imaginary cap – a touchingly old-fashioned gesture. As he walked away, he glanced back a couple of times – as if he expected Bill to disappear into the shadows, or perhaps fall into the water.

Bill inhaled, feeling the sting of ice at the back of his throat, and allowed the air to creep forward from his lungs, clouding the darkness for a moment. Then he turned and began to walk home.

Theresa was standing at the cooker when he got in, stirring some sauce in a pan. She glanced up at him and their eyes met briefly.

"OK, love?" she asked and he nodded. She rubbed his arm as he passed. "There's a sherry on the table if you want one."

"Thanks," he said, his voice sounding



"Probably going to taunt us about the weather again." Barbecues at Christmas still seemed bizarre, but they'd see for themselves next year.

"I wondered if Gloria was pregnant again. He seemed really excited."

"Goodness." He took a final sip and let the liquid flood his body with warmth. On the road outside, headlights bloomed in the darkness then disappeared as traffic passed. A car slowed, pulled in to the tiny space. Then

A small figure ran forward, her hair longer than in the photos

strangely loud and his body shivering with relief at the warmth of the kitchen. "I'll be through in a minute."

"Polly's just rung, said she'd be along for the carol service," she called to him through the old-fashioned kitchen hatch.

"Oh good. Is she bringing the boys?"

"I think so."

The sherry was good – something about the taste of it. He didn't like it much – or Christmas pudding, for that matter – but he always had a glass on Christmas Eve. He stood at the window, and stared at the street through his reflection, trying to make out the road beyond the mirrored room glowing against the shiny surface.

"Did William ring?"

"Yes, but he couldn't talk. Said something about a surprise later on."

his family spilled on to the street.

Polly with that hair – dyed now – that still made him ache. The two boys, twelve now – not allowed out on their own, let alone skimming across a lake in the frozen darkness. But times were different – they hadn't been careless then. Just normal.

He could think of her now without it being painful. Every now and then it hit him – the children she'd never have, the grandchildren. All that potential. That awful Christmas Day sixty years ago. The turkey uncooked in the fridge – his mother's eyes red. But for the most part he could smile, looking back.

Then he heard them, chattering up the path, and he gave a nod as if to signal the end of a thought.

He flung open the door, the two boys

sloping in – less enthusiastic than last year. An awkward handshake from his son-in-law, then Polly's warm embrace.

"Hi, Dad. Merry Christmas." She smelled of strawberries. They passed him into the hall, Theresa taking coats and offering drinks.

"Merry Christmas," he replied, distractedly, his hand still on the front door.

In the gloom of the darkness, he saw another three figures emerge from a second car. Peering into the black air, he gasped slightly – he'd recognise that young man's walk anywhere. "William?"

The man's features formed as he drew closer, his arm around a woman – then shock that they were actually there was eclipsed as a small figure ran forward, hair longer than in the photos, and flung herself into his arms.

"Grandad!" gasped the girl with a slight Aussie twang. "My grandad!"

He clutched her, feeling the instant connection that comes with blood.

"Olivia!" he said. "What a surprise!"

He reached up instinctively and stroked the little girl's vibrant red hair. Shivering slightly with recognition. Feeling the ice thawing once more. Recognising that Olivia was her own small person, but that his Martha lived on in her glorious red hair.

"Told you," chuckled William, patting his arm, Gloria at his side smiling her greeting. "Merry Christmas, Dad."

"Merry Christmas indeed!"

He placed Olivia gently down and went to close the door. Briefly he looked once more on to the road that had been his since childhood. Just for a moment, he thought he saw a flash of red hair and the white of a flower in a girl's hand.

"And Merry Christmas, Martha," he murmured softly.

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