

"Picture Window"

New England was never the most appealing of places to visit during the winter months anyway, after the novelty of snow had worn off and the region was swathed in an endless blanket of white, but Dawn would have to say that winter was one of the worst she'd ever had the displeasure of living through. She had resigned herself to spending most of her evenings curled up in front of the enormous stone fireplace in the family den with a good book and her chocolate Labrador Elgin. He made a wonderful companion on cold winter nights, especially since she and her brother Bradley had trained him to fetch slippers, which were most welcome after one had wiped off the thin layer of drool he usually left on them. At the moment Elgin and Bradley were upstairs in the attic doing God knows what. Dawn had hoped they were looking for the Christmas decorations, which were always put in the same place every year, and somehow were never able to be located by anyone. Bradley had suddenly raced for the attic after dinner with Elgin panting eagerly at his heels. "Where are you going?" Dawn yelled after them.

"Clean the attic!" Bradley shouted back. Dawn had been somewhat nonplussed. Her brother, wonderful though he was, had never really been the type to decide to clean anything of his own free will. But at least that would save her from having to shoulder the task herself come spring. Dawn's parents always seemed to delegate the more onerous tasks to her, such as changing tires, cleaning out the attic and helping re-grout the tiles in the bathroom, to name a few. She supposed it was their way of helping to dispel stereotypical attitudes about male and female responsibilities, but she still thought it was very weird. Bradley, however, was all for it. Go figure.

Dawn had just gotten to the good part of her book when Elgin pranced into the den with a happy bark, followed closely by Bradley. He was grinning from ear to ear and holding up a box. "Look what I found," he caroled, squatting at her feet. "It was stuck in with all the old Christmas toys."

Dawn stared for a moment, not understanding. Then a smile of recognition broke out on her face. "Oh my God, the puzzle," she breathed, unfolding herself from her chair and plunking down on the floor across from him. "Remember when Mom gave you this for Christmas? You were, like, five or six and you accidentally swallowed one of the pieces?"

"Christmas in the emergency room." Bradley couldn't keep from smiling at the memory. They dipped into the box, carefully taking out the pieces and turning them faceup.

The puzzle was of a cabin in the winter, etched in snow, and Dawn had never understood why her parents had given Bradley the puzzle. "It wasn't even of Sesame Street or anything you'd be interested in!" She turned the box over to find the age group the puzzle was directed towards. "Thirteen and up! Dad must have forgotten his glasses that day."

"No, it's probably just that our parents were flakes, Dawn. They always have been."

Dawn snapped her head up from the puzzle and glared at Bradley, about to lash back at him. But she thought better of it, deciding not to ruin a perfectly pleasant evening with another one of their fights. Instead, she bit her lip and returned her attention to the matter at hand.

It was slow going. The snow ticked rhythmically off the windows and piled up silently in the background as the two worked companionably on the puzzle the way their parents had taught them to do so long ago—first fitting together the border, and then filling in the rest. The only sounds in the room were the snow falling and the soothing crackles of the fire, punctuated by an occasional snuffle from Elgin, who had wandered off into a corner of the room and fallen asleep. Dawn handed her brother the pieces, and he fitted them into place, and as the picture became clearer, Dawn was struck by how much it reminded her of her own home. She almost fancied, as she squinted into a half-finished window, that she could see them all inside, chatting amiably by the light of a fireplace, while muted Christmas carols played in the background. Dawn grew silent, lost in thought, and only reluctantly came back to reality at Bradley's shout.

"Last piece!" Bradley triumphantly stuck it in place, and sat back to admire their work. Dawn looked up at him, surprised.

"No, it's not. There's a piece missing."
"That was the piece I swallowed, Dawn," Bradley said patiently. "Remember? Christmas in the emergency room?" He rolled his eyes. "How quickly they forget."

Something akin to panic swept over Dawn. She grabbed the box and began to shake it. "But they saved the piece, remember? We brought it home."

"No we didn't. They had to get it out of my throat. It was all chewed up." Bradley cocked his head and regarded his sister. "What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"You are totally wrong, Bradley!" Dawn shouted, waking the dog up. Bradley stared. The ferocity of her tone completely shocked him. "It must be upstairs. I'm going to go find it." And she stood and charged out of the den. Bradley sat on the floor openmouthed for a minute, and then jumped up and ran after her, yelling at her to slow down. "Dawn, what are you talking about? It's a puzzle, for Christ's sake!"

"It's not finished!" Dawn reached the attic and began to fling things left and right. She was crying and not even aware of it. "I know that piece is here somewhere. You'll see. It's got to be here." She turned and headed for the box of old Christmas toys, but her foot caught on the edge of Bradley's old wagon and she tripped. Bradley caught her as she fell, sobbing piteously. He gently eased her down to the floor and sat beside her, holding her. "I know, I know," he murmured, stroking her hair. "I miss them too. You know I do."

Dawn buried her face in her brother's chest and grieved, her heart feeling like it was shredding into tiny pieces as the memories assailed her. "It's been a year, Bradley, and it

still hurts so bad." She was silent, thinking of that Christmas morning when the two state troopers had come to their house. They had barely been able to get their cruiser to the driveway because of the snow and ice that had collected overnight, and had to hike the rest of the way. They had been polite and quiet and respectful, holding their caps in their hands, and had told Bradley, still in his pajamas, that their parents had been killed in a head-on collision with an eighteen-wheeler on their way back from a Christmas party. The driver had been anxious to park his rig and get home to his kids. Dawn could understand that. Her parents had probably felt the same way. She had rushed down the stairs, expecting Santa Claus, or her dad dressed up as Santa Claus, anyway, and instead had seen Bradley weeping, aged thirty years in the space of thirty seconds. She remembered it all, and wished she could forget. But she couldn't, and so she cried some more.

Bradley hugged her until her sobs quieted themselves. "Dawn, it's okay to cry. You have to cry or else you're going to go crazy." He tilted her tear-streaked face up to his. "I know we haven't had much of a Christmas this year."

Dawn shook her head vehemently. "I didn't want one."

"Me neither. But we have to start remembering. Once we remember, we can let go." Bradley reached over, one arm still wrapped protectively around Dawn's waist, and slid the box of Christmas toys towards him. "Remember this doll you got when you were ten?"

"Is that the one with no head?"
"Yeah, I made a torch out of it, I think." Dawn smiled in spite of herself and peered into the box. She found a dusty piece of green plastic and laughed aloud. "Oh, here's your ant farm from sixth grade. Remember you took it to school and the ants got loose?"

"Oh, shit, yeah! Mom and Dad had to come down because some kid had an allergic reaction or something, right?" They pored over the contents of the box together, alternately laughing and choking up at shared memories. It felt good, and Dawn began to open up the place in her heart where her parents would always rest, the place that she had been afraid to relegate them to before in the fear that she might lose them. But it was okay now, she thought. At least it was starting to be okay.

After a while Bradley took his sister's hand and carefully led her out of the attic, making sure she didn't trip over anything. "Tomorrow we'll finish cleaning this place up," he promised. They went downstairs and studied the puzzle, clasping each other's hands. The missing piece filled in the large front window in the cabin. Dawn lovingly laid a finger in the empty space and blew her parents a silent kiss. "I can still see you," she whispered. "I can still see you."

by Jamie Lloyd

