

Thank God For Christmas Lights by Andrea Stalnaker

“Did you see the lights on that one?” Excitement radiated off Niki’s voice.

With my eyes still glued on the tunnel of light around the dark road, I plainly replied, “Yes, just like the last two houses.”

“But that last house had a blow-up Frosty the Snowman!” she whined.

“Oh, thank God for Frosty.” I laughed.

There were no other cars on the road. It was past midnight; the only reason Niki and I weren't in our beds was because we came from Dean’s holiday party at his house. He and his roommates went to college in another city, so it took us at least an hour to get back to our campus. Niki convinced me to go, I only knew Dean through Niki. It was a fun party, until someone drank too much spiked eggnog and threw up all over the kitchen sink. That’s what told everyone that the party was over.

“Are you sure we should have left them? I mean, could we have helped them clean up?” Niki glanced out at the dark window.

“It’s not our fault that the kid couldn’t handle his booze , it’s *their* house, *they* get to clean the puke off of *their* sink.” I told her.

“Who brought alcohol to the party anyway?”

I slowed down a bit just so I could just look at Niki because of what she said. “Seriously Niki?” turning my head back to the road, “We are college kids that went to another college kid’s party, of course some numb-nut is going to bring alcohol.”

“But you and I don’t drink, Casey.” she answered.

“Yeah, but everyone else pretty much does.”

It was quiet for the next twenty minutes. The snow started to fall as we left for home, it began slowly and gently. The sky was orange and gold like champagne bubbling over the glass, sweet and chilled. Then snow fell harder and louder down the road as the sky got pitch black in only what felt like a second. The wind brushed snow on the asphalt road as if someone was trying to sweep something away. You saw a house every few minutes in the almost vast winter wonderland; The Christmas lights on the roofs and fences whispered glowing light flashing through the flurry of snowflakes coming from the sky.

“You know what the road ahead looks like, Casey?” Niki asked after thirty minutes of silence. “What?” I thought, amused at what she would say.

“Like we’re going Warp-speed, like, in Star Wars?”

That was true, all the large snowflakes tumbling on the windshield and dashing past the windows looked like stars trailing past us and then disappearing behind us. “I was thinking more Spaceballs than Star Wars.” I chuckled.

I knew that Niki would be excited about that reference. The First three weeks I moved with her into our dorm she started making movie references, when I said I didn’t get it she told me what kind of rock I was living under and then showed me all the movies she was referencing on weekend nights. Spaceballs was one of the first movies we watched. I had never seen it before. It was kind of stupid, but pretty funny. After finishing a movie Niki said now I could get all her references.

“I didn’t think you liked that movie.” She gave me this big smug smile leaning closer to me like she had the upper hand over me.

I took one of my hands off the wheel so I could push her smug face away from a vision. “I liked it, granted, it was pretty dumb, but also a lot of fun to watch. Kinda like watching you try to do a backflip at that trampoline park we went to with Achu. I just wish one of us could have recorded it.” I burst out laughing, then felt a playful punch hit my shoulder.

“You are such a smart-ass, I can’t believe I tried my hardest to impress you and Achu! Only for you two to ridicule me. And to think I got you both awesome presents this year.” Niki scoffed like she was in a dramatic movie. I kept laughing at her goofy antics Until I could see the city lights up ahead.

We were getting closer to the dorm. Arriving in town, all the lampposts had wreaths on them with a red bow with gold trim on it. Streetlights damp with sleepy yellow light flickering in them. All the stores, apartments, traffic lights reflected off the wet black road. It looked as if the car was driving on ink. Yellows, blues, pinks shined in the little puddles and tiny streams flowing in the veins of the road. The sky was still black with snow drifting down, but everything around it wasn’t as dark and scary it was leaving Dean’s house party. All the lights stretched out as far as they could go, leaving the edges of the city looking black and ominous. It was like the whole city was a snow globe resting on the shelf in a Christmas movie.

Downtown was easy to drive through. No cars, roads were snow plowed, and you could see everything around you as you drove. I looked over at Niki when we were at a stop light because She hadn’t talked in a little while, her head was droopy over her shoulders and her arms were crossed in a slouched manner. Her closed eyes flinched like she was dreaming.

“Hey,” I shook her shoulder, careful not to startle her. “We’re almost there.” Her sleepy brown eyes looked at me, in a dazed way, I probably woke her up from a hazy dream.

“O-ok.” She yawned, “Are we just pulling up to the parking lot?”

“Yeah, you're going to have to stay awake, because I'm not carrying you up four flights of stairs, got it?” I pulled it into an empty space and parked it. A short, tired snort told me Niki could carry herself up the stairs.

We made our way up the stairs of our building and walked down our hallway floor to our dorm room. As it started to turn the key on the worn-out lock that's been there since the 70s, Niki rested her head on my shoulder and asked barely awake, “Do you think he'll call you?”

I finished unlocking the door, brushed Niki's extremely dark chocolate colored hair out of my left eye. “I don't know, Niki.” I was still looking at that battered doorknob from the 70s. “I'm not sure he'll even call again.”

I pushed the door open, with Niki's head still on my shoulder. I wrapped my left arm around her and we both shuffled into our room like two penguins walking together in the snow. Niki walked up to her loft bed and climbed up and her face planted into her Scooby-Doo pillow. I crawled up onto my bed, I sank a little on top of my lavender colored blanket. I laid down on my Garfield pillowcase I got from my mom, I tilted my eyes to our one window in our dorm. Niki and I hung multi-color Christmas lights all over the dorm. It gave the room more, *Christmassy* feel to it. Looking out of the fogged window, I could still see it snowing outside. The sky wasn't dark as it was during the drive, the glow of all the Christmas lights in the city pierced through the darkness. “Hey Casey?” I looked at Niki cuddling a Hello Kitty stuff animal, “It's not your fault.”

I raised a tired eyebrow at her, “Are you sure you didn't drink that Glogg Niki?”

“Yea, I sure, it's just... you seemed a little distanced lately since you broke up with him, like, sad a lot.” She looked at me with doll-like eyes, sleepy and a little sad. Niki always thought if things didn't go my way, it was her fault. She was honestly like a six-year-old in a nineteen-year-old's body. Caring and sweet, but clueless at times.

“It is my fault though; I can be such a bitch to people that it ends up pushing more and more people away.” Laying on my back I look at the posters on my side of the ceiling.

“You haven't pushed me away.”

I laughed without opening my mouth at that remark. “I couldn't push you away even if I wanted to. You're just so damn happy all the time. You're a lot like my mom, always dragging me along to try new things and to play with the neighborhood kids.”

“Your mom's right you know. And look at all the friends you've made so far. You are basically friends with everybody on our floor! You are so frickin' cool! You can do ballet! That's Awesome!” Niki got excited again, she sat up during her speech still holding Hello Kitty in her arms.

“Where does all the energy come from?” yawned, closing my eyes but still listening.

“Sugar, most likely.” She replied. “But you are one of the coolest chicks I know Casey. You’ll be just fine and if you really feel bad about hurting people, a good-hearted apology can work.”

“If only it was that easy.” I started to doze off.

“Well, it’s always worth trying, even when it’s impossible.” Niki’s voice became heavy with sleep.

“Maybe, oh and you’re wrong about me being the cool one, it’s you.”

“Thanks, old buddy, old pal, old friend.” Niki gave one last sleeping yawn.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah... you’re welcome.” I quietly remarked.

My body felt lighter, and my mind went dark and then everything went soft and warm. Knowing that all the Christmas lights were still twinkling in our dorm room, all throughout campus, in the city and the houses we passed on the road from Dean’s house; And as I fell into dreamy slumber I thought to myself, Thank god for Christmas lights.