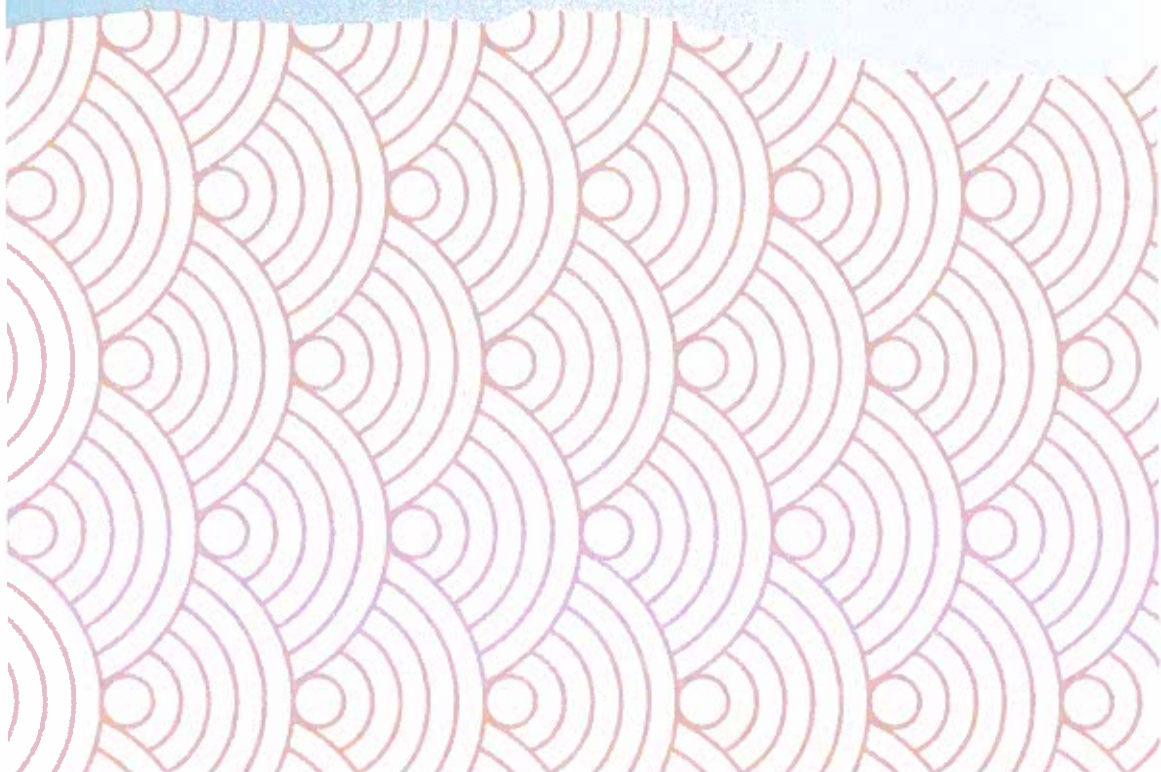




A Christmas Tale



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It was a particularly cold early December night, this tenth day past Thanksgiving, and a massive front of arctic air was rushing down from Canada and the Great Lakes and descending on the city. Robert Jackson was at his favorite spot by the window, so that as he lulled to sleep, he could hope to hear a yuletide orchestra of New York City getting ready for Christmas.

But the evening's urban cacophony was crisp and distinct; the atmosphere being so cold and clear. The usual sirens punctuated the night. The "whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop" of the police cars. The harsher howlers of the fire engines. And an occasional "ooh-oo ooh-oo ooh-oo ooh-oo" of an ambulance. This last sound always reminded Rob of the dreaded SS vehicles he heard some twenty-three years before in Europe.

As he pulled the fabric up to his chin and turned over on his side to get comfortable, Jackson began to fall asleep remembering earlier Christmases.

His dreams were coming in fragments since the symphonic metropolis's hustle and bustle occasionally awakened him, caused him to stir, and redirected their images before he could ease back to sleep.

In the first fragment that began to develop, he was in the hospital. Undoubtedly the ambulance triggered something in his memory. The medical staff wore their white garb. They looked more like novice chefs trying a spaghetti sauce recipe for the first time rather than a skilled OB/GYN team who had just assisted at the Caesarean birth of his first child.

What a happy day it was to recall. Of course, his son always complained about being born on Christmas. Robbie often felt he got fewer presents because both occasions fell on the same day. No matter how hard Mr. and Mrs. Jackson tried to convince their son he shared his birthday with one of the greatest persons ever to live on the earth, that nagging absence of presents always seemed to a growing pre-teen to be a cross to bear.

The clicking of high heels on the pavement below the window stimulated the next dream segment. Everyone was dressed for the big day: the christening of Robert Jackson, the Second. On that day of naming, remembered now from so many years ago, everyone's shoes were shined, pants were pressed (cuffs were the fashion), heels were high, and new dresses rustled in their freshness. Everyone's smiles warmed the February morning and challenged the winter sun for brightness.

From off in the distance the jubilant voices of four women broke into this baptismal reminiscence.

"That was a wonderful last meal."

"Oh, don't go on teasing her that way. Getting married's not going to be the end of the world."

"Not for her. I really think it's going to be the beginning of the world."

"Okay, you three. Just make sure you all get to the church on time. And no fights over who's going to get the bathroom first on Friday night."

"Who ever heard of a Friday night wedding anyway?"

"Oh, it's the raaagge, dahhhling."

“Very funny. Just stop it. You know it was the only time we could ... “

As the voices passed and drifted away a languorous tear from Robert Jackson’s eye salted his cracked lips. He found himself back at his own daughter’s wedding.

What a beautiful, beautiful day. He was so proud of this young woman. He felt none of the remorse that his friends had cautioned him he would feel about “losing his little girl.” He had known this son-in-law for a long time. He was a fine boy from the neighborhood. He and Robbie in their full-dress uniforms lent an air of tradition and pride to the day and to the family.

He remembered thinking on that wedding day long ago: *“after working all those years on the line, I wonder just what a difference my life has made.”* On that day, the day his “baby” was stepping forward to start a family of her own, and his son was ready to go off and serve his country, and his wife looked so faithful and beautiful, he knew the answer to that question. He found everything had its meaning because of these three people. On that sunny day, he couldn’t imagine himself ever being without them. He could only think in terms of their being a part of his everyday life. And the tears on his face bore witness to that—in the warmth of that wedding day. And on this bone-chilling December night.

The silent padding of sneakers on the sidewalk did nothing to stir this beginning of Rob Jackson’s hibernation. But the shouldered boom box four feet nine inches in the air above those sneakers was quite another story. The vibration of the reverberations shook the window he was curled beneath. The golden oldie that echoed now as a remix was one of his wife’s favorites.

The boom box music walking the street and the car radio tunes keeping time at red lights down at the corner struck a festive mood on an otherwise increasingly frigid winter’s evening. His dream segued so Rob was at his own wedding and not his daughter’s.

He dreamed of that first dance as husband and wife—to the original more familiar version of that remixed song. The music warmed him beyond belief and provoked even warmer thoughts: *How could two people be so much in love? How could they be so lucky? How could he be so fortunate? How could he tell his friends that his life had a brand new meaning on this wedding day, now that the two of them were one?*

For the first time in many years, he recalled the old friends with whom he had lost touch. Friends he had not thought about in ages. Friends about whose current doings he did not wonder. These were friends he could only remember in their past, because he couldn’t possibly imagine their present. Being dead, their precise whereabouts were a mystery to him.

There was Marv the trombone player. Jackson had always laughed to think that a trombone player from high school days was always so good at sliding in and out of trouble in his life. Marv never seemed to be able to get his feet on the ground. No one ever knew how Marv died, or why. They just knew the announcement came some few months after the event itself. Marv had been out in Detroit visiting family and trying to play some jazz clubs. And then word came: Marv was dead.

Marv had stood up for Rob Jackson. When Rob’s future father-in-law was uncertain about the timing of the wedding, it was Marv who interceded. At the wedding, Marv was

tremendous fun. There he was improvising his personalized Dixieland Jazz on his gleaming slide trombone. And next to him, playing the most soulful trumpet this side of a professional musician, was Robert Jackson's new father-in-law

Yes. Music had made the world go round that day. And amidst his sleep, Robert Jackson's foot began to tap at the night air.

The club looked spectacular for the wedding. Done up in balloons and crepe paper. Why you'd never guess that for most other nights of the week there were card tables over the wooden floor, dancing allowed only in the corner. And long wooden folding tables covered with paper tablecloths lining the walls, where club members poured and spilled drinks all night long.

Marty Jackson. He smiled in his sleep to think that his wife was called "Marty." But Martha just sounded too formal. Marty Jackson looked splendid that day. And the Ingersoll family who was giving her up to the Jackson clan were proud and sure this marriage would stand the test of time. Rob had a job. He was a responsible fellow. He didn't run around late into the night or hang out at the club on weeknights. And if Franco or Mussolini or Hitler ever drew the country into a war, Rob Jackson would know what part he had to play.

And so, he dreamed into the night, reliving that glorious day. The day he passed from being one and alone. That glorious day of passage that changed his life.

Somewhere in the street a youth going home for the evening was causing a new sound to slip into Jackson's consciousness as he eased inevitably toward a deeper sleep. It was the familiar New York City sound of a chilled basketball "ping-ping-ping-pinging" away each time it was bounced onto the cold concrete sidewalk. Some young, dreaming, future star of the NBA switched dribbling hands from right to left, left to right, right to left.

Many years drifted by in Jackson's memory, and he found himself hearing a similar dribbling sound. But now the dream sound was echoing off a hardwood floor and a neighborhood high school gym wall. The dueling dribbles syncopated and collided into a cancelling silence. Blessedly they were blocked for now, from within and without, and Jackson slept on fitfully for some few hours.

In the early morning hours, the small surge of traffic leaving the night spots overpowered the dream montage of his immediate family and replaced it with a sound collage of cars and recollections of extended family and friends.

Rob Jackson had never learned how to drive. Busses. Subways. They had always sufficed. And would. A few friends had cars. But they didn't stay around too long. The friends, that was, not the cars. Cars brought them to places with more promise. Places where jobs were said to be easier to get. Places in the South or Detroit.

Yes, Detroit, the home of the car.

He recalled one of his neighborhood friends, Lyle Morris. Good man Lyle. Lyle was always friendly. But he was never really liked. Never liked until he got his car, that was. Then he had plenty of friends. Why, you couldn't find Lyle on a weekend or a weeknight after work was out. It was always, "Lyle, bring us here." or "Hey, watcha doin', Lyle?" Yes,

Brother Lyle was always good for a ride. That was his key. Not just to friendship. But out of the neighborhood.

Lyle was one of those who went down South. Lyle was also one of those who never made it out of the South. The only thing Jackson ever heard was that some of those “good ole boys” down South thought Lyle was just too hard to keep in his place since he had that car. So one day, Lyle just wasn’t there anymore. Thirty days later, the sheriff auctioned off Lyle’s car and the money went to the town’s general fund. But never was a word, nor a sound, to be heard out of, or about, Lyle Morris again.

An abrupt screeching of brakes in the street disturbed the winter’s night sleep of Rob Jackson. The noise drove yet another automobile memory into his wearying, drifting subconscious. This time it wasn’t Lyle, though. Lyle was gone. Forever. This new dreamscape was closer to home. It was about his nephew, Brian. The nephew who was almost like a son because Jackson’s brother-in-law disappeared when Brian was just a boy.

It always seemed that Brian needed to prove himself. Prove that he could be a man, even though—or maybe because—he didn’t have a dad. And the best way he found to do that was his 1962 Pontiac LeMans. What a street car. There wasn’t a piece of that car that Brian didn’t know about.

There in his sleep Rob Jackson watched and remembered that his nephew could take that car apart and put it back together, even the engine, like most younger kids played with erector sets. When Rob and Marty would quiz this nephew about not going to college, Brian would answer politely enough. He’d say one day he’d be making a good living after high school as a car mechanic. He dreamed of being part of a race car team, like the ones he’d seen on Saturday’s *Wide World of Sports* on the local garage’s television.

Rob Jackson recalled laughing as Brian explained to him—over cold sandwiches in the garage one night—that they didn’t teach mechanics in college. He wasn’t going to be a brain surgeon. All Rob could tell his nephew was that the LeMans in pieces on the floor looked as close to an autopsy as he could imagine, and Brian may as well be a doctor. Neither the young man nor his uncle knew how much of the comment was a criticism and how much was a compliment. So, they both just shrugged their shoulders and let it go.

But the last part of the memory was something that Jackson had never been able to let go. Late one rainy night Brian was trying to prove himself again. He overdrove the road and missed a curve over on Route 4 in Bergen County. Rob often wondered what the sounds of the screeching brakes, the breaking glass, and the impact were like to Brian; because they were certainly the last things this promising young man who loved cars ever heard on this earth.

Rob Jackson remembered, ironically now, how guiltily comforted he had been that his son, two years younger than Brian, was out at basketball practice that night. Otherwise, he certainly might have been with Brian. He also would have died too young and needlessly on a New Jersey roadway. He never would have finally made the varsity team and finished high school.

Deep in his troubled sleep, Jackson found only momentary solace in the dream vision of his son, a junior, struggling with his grades to get into college. Working hard as the sixth man on the basketball team. Practicing endlessly to improve enough to win a scholarship. Had he been able to go left-right, right-left, left-right a little more stylishly he

might have gone to college. And as the left-right, right-left, left-right thought stayed, and preyed, on Robert Jackson this incessantly cold December night in the city, the sounds of cars and music, high heels and basketballs, gave way to the more severely cadenced sounds of government-issued boots.

Your left-right-left, left, left; your left-right-left ... forward march. Haunting him in his sleep, left-right, left-right ... and, yes, his son had left, right after high school.

Young Robbie graduated from high school and immediately went to what, when writing home, he would come to call the University of Vietnam. Had he a little more grace, a bit more agility, that fraction of a second more acceleration for that first getaway step, he may have made it home. The sound of a delivery truck door accordioneing its way down the runners and slamming shut sealed Robert Jackson's dream-plagued December sleep.

His son. His son, the ball player. The would-be collegiate player. The would-be scholar, for lack of a scholarship. It kept stalking Jackson's dreams. If he had been just a step quicker, they would say. In the swimming subconsciousness of December's sleep, he felt a wash of hot and mechanically smelling air. For whatever reason, maybe because he was thinking about his son, the rush made him wonder what the air crushed downward by the rotors of a helicopter felt like to someone lying in the grass below. His boy had known that feeling. Briefly.

In the deepest part of the night. At the far end of Robert Jackson's sleep. The thought of his son and the suffering of rushing air in a tropical climate came tumbling in on him in one, last, rotating, fragmented, kaleidoscopic memory. He could see the dreaded telegram repeatedly in his dreaming mind's eye. His son was the last member of the squad trying to scramble to a helicopter to get out of an enemy ambush. Jackson couldn't reconcile how the hand-written message from his field commander sounded like the rejection letters from several collegiate athletic directors. "God only knows why, sir. If only your son had had a moment more. One step quicker and he would have made it. He sacrificed his life covering his buddies. However small a consolation this heroism is at this time of deep pain and loss, I assure you it will comfort you when you look back upon this time in later years."

The news killed Marty Jackson after one year of grief. Five years ago.

Robert Jackson sank deeper than sleep and heard his son's voice calling to him.

The pre-dawn patrol inched warily from behind the corner building. The two uniformed officers carefully scanned both sides of the street, as they rolled along slowly. The one riding shotgun saw an indistinct shape that sent a cautionary shiver up his spine. He deliberately reached across and brushed the driver's arm to catch his attention without alarm. He quietly pointed in the direction of the spot he wanted to investigate. His partner drove them in closer still, with all senses on maximum alert.

They alit from their vehicle, unholstering their sidearms as they went. They moved across the harsh and cluttered terrain, avoiding patches of ice. What lay before them, huddled as if in sleep, below the huge shop window and atop the subway grating, was the memory of Robert Jackson, left behind by a freezing world on a frigid December night in a city waiting for Christmas.