

Brushstroke's Song

by Scott Pickard

"Only a Christmas Eve miracle could bring happiness into this house," Mama grumbled as she stirred the hot pot of stew.

The rest of the Flint family sat quietly at the table in the kitchen, making eyes at each other that said 'don't rock the boat, cause Mama's mad, and when she's mad, she's as mean as a hungry bear.' Grandma sat in her wheelchair with the usual scowl on her face, having lived with her daughter's moods for so long. The high school senior Stacy gave a glancing message across the table to her fifteen-year-old brother, Billy, to keep his head bowed and his eyes straight ahead.

"What was that, Papa?" Billy nervously blurted out in reaction to the flicker of the kitchen light.

The father, Jackson Flint, raised up from his chair and checked the bulb.

"Must be the ice building up on the power lines, Billy," Jackson said as he settled back into his chair. "If this icing keeps up they'll be losing power all over Detroit."

"As if things wasn't bad enough on this Christmas Eve," Mama complained as she angrily spooned the stew into each person's bowl, occasionally banging the ladle on the pot to emphasize her frustration. "Your father ain't got a job, we ain't got a penny to spend for Christmas, and on top of it we're gonna lose the power in our house on Christmas Eve!"



"Bess, why you gotta make it worse in front of the kids?" Jackson tried to reason with his wife. "Things ain't as bad as they seem. In a month or so they're

gonna start building cars as fast as they can and I'm gonna get my job back. We can make it until then."

Bess Flint sat down and everyone began to blow on their spoonfuls of hot stew.

"And I suppose you think this is your chance to start playing that fool sax of yours for a living?" Bess challenged Jackson, waving bread at him like it was a piece of evidence.

Jackson ate his stew and wasn't about to get into the same argument he and Bess had had for the last twenty years.

Mama rested her face in her hands as if she was about to cry and said, "The most embarrassing thing is we can't give anything to our friends; can't even give a gift to our neighbors."

Stacy walked over to Mama and grabbed her by the shoulders for comfort. Everyone looked at Jackson for some kind of answer, or apology, or something.

"You kids stop looking at me like I was some kind of criminal," Jackson said firmly. He turned to his wife and said softly, "Bess, I know you're worried, and I know you're sad that it couldn't be a better Christmas for us. But our friends understand. I'm not the only one that's lost his job. These are tough times for the city and we just got to see it through. I'll go play this one short gig tonight downtown and that'll give us a little extra cash for tomorrow."

Everyone was silent. The thought of Papa going downtown to some dive club to play his sax to earn extra cash on Christmas Eve was strange and sad.

"It's only for a few hours and then I'll be back home," Jackson said still working on his stew. "We need the money."

Here it was Christmas Eve and Jackson couldn't get his family to talk to him. He could feel himself being pulled into the depressed mood of the others. He arched his back against his chair and looked up at the kitchen light. He

stroked his salt-and-pepper go-tee as he searched for a bright moment from the past to pick everybody up.

"I remember when I was a kid growing up in the old Black Bottom section on the east side. Every Christmas Eve was the same. We'd dress in our warmest clothes and boots and go outside after dinner to meet up with the other families in the neighborhood. We'd walk from block to block, stopping at each house to sing a holiday carol, huddled together to beat the cold. And my mama, of course, was always in front directing us just like she did the church choir for so many years."

"I loved your mama, Jackson," Grandma said.

Jackson smiled at Grandma and noticed how the tender memory of a dear, lost friend made Grandma feel her age and her arthritis. She massaged the hurt in her left arm that robbed her of a peaceful retirement.

Jackson's attention was drawn back to the kitchen light when it flickered off and on again several times.

Jackson put his hands behind his head and said, "We didn't have nothing, then; I mean, nothing. But it didn't seem to bother us as much then as it does now, because back then we all had nothing together. But on Christmas Eve we sure had something..... something inside us. We'd laugh and joke the whole night, not feeling the bite of the cold, but just enjoying being together and seeing the smiles on the kids when they would come out on their porches and listen to our song. I always looked forward to Christmas Eve because it was the one night out of the whole year when I felt I could really give something to the people on the block. God, I wish I could know that feeling again."

Jackson put his musician hands on his son's shoulder and said, "I don't know why we didn't start doing the same thing as a family."

Billy took his Papa's hand off his shoulder in an impulse of frustration.

"What do you expect, Jackson?" Bess asked as she pushed herself up from the table. "You expect this family to live off the memories of your childhood?" She pointed an accusing finger and said, "You're just a foolish old dreamer, Jackson Flint. You have been ever since I met you, and your dreaming never put anything on this dinner table. And look what your dreaming brought us this Christmas Eve." Bess paused and looked at her children's eyes that echoed the bitterness in her heart; a deep-down bitterness for the hard knocks of life, directed at the man she loved. "Nothing," she concluded and walked to the sink with two empty bowls and tears rolling down her cheeks.

The hurt Jackson saw in the eyes of his kids stung him deeply inside. He lost the strength to face them and left the room abruptly. He grabbed his saxophone case, coat, hat, and stepped quickly through the door into the night without a goodbye.

The door slammed and Mama jerked around in surprise at Jackson having left so suddenly. She walked to the window on the north side that was almost totally glazed over with a thin layer of ice, and peered through a small opening to see her man walking down the dimly-lit street toward the bus stop. "Oh Lord, Mama. What have I done?"

Grandma u-turned in her wheel chair and left the kitchen with Stacy's help. Billy ran over to look through the window but his Papa was already out of sight.

"Mama, why did we hurt Papa like that? Why?"

Before she could answer the power went off. Bess and Billy stood facing each other in the dark. In ten seconds the light returned. She grabbed Billy by the shoulders and said, "Go bring Papa home, Billy. Tell him we love him."

Billy nodded yes without a word. He prayed inside that it wasn't too late to make it right.

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Christian Bouyat, a seaman of the Great Lakes, leaned against the railing by the Detroit River on the Windsor side and watched a giant ore boat pass silently in front of him. He wished he was on that boat, working hard to take his mind off the loneliness. He wondered if

Christmas Eve was as bad for other people as it was for him. Each year he had to relive boyhood memories of Christmas Eve missing his father, the merchant marine always away from home. What bitter irony, he thought; to suffer the same fate, to be drawn to the sea, and drawn away from the people you love.

It was a beautiful view of Detroit from the Canadian side. The towering glass of the Renaissance Center was transformed into a grid of lights. Downtown Windsor was a ghost town and the Detroit lights beckoned him to cross the river and find some kind of companionship. He hailed a cab and in fifteen minutes he was at the front door of the same small tavern he went to last Christmas Eve on Lafayette, not far from Greek Town.

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The wealthy businessman at the top of the Renaissance Tower had his face close to the window as he looked out over his beloved city. It was a rare moment of introspection on their busiest day of the year. But the spirit of commerce wasn't with him. He felt a hollowness inside.

He didn't move a muscle when his secretary entered his office and said, "Mr. Carlton, the downtown store just called to say they received a rush order for eight hundred candles to be delivered tonight to the Ford Auditorium. Downtown only has three hundred candles in stock."

The secretary paused, waiting for the immediate reply that was Justin Carlton's trademark as a quick decision maker. But Carlton continued to stare into the night.

"Mr. Carlton, are you alright?"

"What are the candles for?" he asked without turning around.

"Apparently there is a Christmas Eve musical concert at the auditorium and they want to pass out candles to the audience."

"Sell them the three hundred, and then have a driver from downtown pick up another five hundred from the warehouse and deliver them directly to the auditorium. Charge them double the regular price for the five hundred candles."

"Right," she said exiting to follow through.

"What the hell.....," Carlton mumbled to himself.

"Sir?" the secretary turned around, almost through the doorway.

Carlton turned around and raised his arms palms-up into the air and said, "Why the hell did I just say that? Why didn't I just give them the candles?" He shook his head disgusted with himself.

"Sir, is there something else you want me to do?"

"Yes. Call downtown and tell them I'll bring the candles," Carlton said as he left his secretary standing in the doorway with a broad smile on her face.

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Jackson Flint turned his sax case vertical so he could board the Woodward Avenue bus heading for downtown. He was digging into his pocket for change when the bus driver said, "What's happening, Brush Stroke?"

Jackson looked up and saw the driver was an old friend from the neighborhood. The driver said, "Forget the fare, my man. It's Christmas Eve!"

Brush Stroke, Jackson thought to himself as he moved to a seat in the middle. I haven't heard that nickname in years.

Jackson opened his case on his lap and polished his sax while he stared at the city lights moving by. The night, the bus ride, the comforting feel of his sax all intersected in that old day dream of playing at the Ford Auditorium one time, one song, or maybe even one note, to a packed house. He always dreamed he could see the audience waiting quietly to hear him play. And then he would blow just one note; one magnificent sax note that held the people spellbound for a moment. He could see all the smiles on the faces and then everyone applauded for the jazz man called Brush Stroke.

Jackson packed his sax and moved to the front of the bus.

"You ain't playing a gig on Christmas Eve, are you?" the driver asked with eyes ahead.

"Hey, man, it's my favorite night to play," Jackson answered facetiously. "I'll be getting out here."

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The lights were so low in the tavern on Lafayette Street that Jackson had to pause for a moment until his eyes adjusted to the dark. He walked right past the bartender to the tiny bandstand in the rear corner of the room. He removed a half-drunk stale beer from the tall stool behind the standup microphone.

"You're early," the bartender said wiping dry the inside of a beer mug. "I ain't paying you for no extra time."

"Don't worry about it, man. I came here to play my sax. You pay me whatever you think is fair."

"Hey, no offense, Flint," the bartender backed off. "You get so used to fighting with people down here that you forget what time of year it is. Let's see how you do and maybe we can work something out on a regular basis."

"Sure, that'll be fine," Jackson agreed. "Why don't you go mix me a little Christmas cheer and I'll settle into a soft sax solo for my good friends here in the Motor City."

"You got it!"

Jackson hooked his strap to his horn and adjusted the mike to the right position. He wet his lips all around and smoothed out the moist hairs of his moustache. He licked the reed and set the mouthpiece on his lower lip and paused a few seconds until it was just right. Then he began to play his sax straight from the heart.



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Billy Flint watched his bus pull away from the corner just fifty yards ahead of him. He had tried to run to catch the bus but had fallen down several times on the ice-covered pavement. There wouldn't be another bus for forty-five minutes, so he decided to hitch. The second he stuck his thumb out into the freezing drizzle he spotted a dark-blue limousine heading his way. To his amazement the limo pulled over to the curb in front of him and the driver opened the passenger door.

Billy cautiously stuck his head inside and the driver asked him, "Where you going, kid?"

"Downtown."

"I'm going that way. Hop in," the driver motioned him to sit in front. Billy slid into the limo like getting into clean bed sheets. Wow!, he thought. What a fine automobile.

"What are you going downtown for on Christmas Eve, kid?"

"Trying to find my dad and bring him home," Billy said as he wiped pieces of ice off his glasses with his shirtsleeve. "My dad's a musician. He's playing sax at some bar on Lafayette."

The driver said, "Tonight's not the night to be working. You find your dad and get him home."

Billy thought the chauffeur didn't look or talk how he imagined a chauffeur should. In fact, Billy thought the driver looked more like those that get chauffeured.

Billy had both hands on the dash when he asked, "Did you ever hurt someone you love, sort of by accident? I mean, you say something to that person when you're mad or feeling a little down, and you don't really mean to say it, but for some reason it just comes out?"

"Sure, we all have. I'll tell you something that doesn't make any sense. Sometimes we have to hurt people before we find out just how much we really love them. How crazy is that?"

The truth made Billy feel even worse.

"I'll never be as good a man as my Papa. All these years I've been making fun of his dreams and I never realized he did it for me. He always had a smile for me. I don't know when I stopped believing in dreams. But my Papa, he never stopped believing, even to this day." Billy's eyes welled up with tears, but he held back crying.

"It's tough, kid, I know. But be thankful you love him. Be thankful you've got somebody to love."

"But he doesn't know that."

"Then you'd better tell him."

Billy felt a little better. He knew what he had to do.

"Can I let you out on Lafayette?" the driver asked. "I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Sure, I can walk the rest of the way," Billy agreed. "You in a rush to see your family?"

"Yea," the driver said pointing to the back seat. "All eight hundred of 'em."

Billy turned around and saw eight cardboard boxes in the back seat labeled CARLTON CANDLES.

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"Mind if I join you?" Jackson asked the fellow at the small table directly in front of the bandstand.

"Please, have a seat," the man said as he offered a handshake. "Christian Bouyat."

"Jackson Flint, Mr. Bouyat. People here call me Brush Stroke."

"That was excellent, Brush Stroke," congratulated Bouyat. "I never expected to hear such a soulful sax solo on Christmas Eve."

"I never expected to be playing one," Jackson said as he dabbed the beads of sweat off his forehead. "Got laid off and needed to make some extra money. And so what brings you into a place like this on Christmas Eve?"

"Oh, I don't know. No place else to go," Bouyat said as he tapped the ice cubes in his scotch. "If I can live through Christmas Eve, I'm good for another year. What about you, Flint? You got a family?"

"Yea," Jackson said as he removed the reed from his sax. "Yea, I sure do," he said as he packed his sax into the case. "I should be get'n back to them."

Jackson stood up to make a toast and Bouyat followed.

"Merry Christmas, Bouyat. I hope you find your port," he toasted as they clinked glasses.

"Take it easy, Brush Stroke," Bouyat reciprocated. "I hope you find your song."

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The icing drizzle and blustering winds off the Detroit River at Hart Plaza made Jackson shiver as he stood under the bus shelter. He decided to walk down into the amphitheater of Hart Plaza to escape the wind until his bus arrived.

Standing under the overhang where the stage was, he tried to remember which row he sat in that day he brought Billy down to listen to the best jazz

musicians in the world during the Detroit-Montreaux Jazz Festival. It had been such a fine afternoon sitting in the sun, drinking Strohs beer, serenaded by the artistry of the world's best jazz musicians, and dreaming his dream.

On an impulse Jackson took his horn out and strapped it into position. He grabbed the imaginary mike and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure to introduce to you one of Detroit's finest jazz musicians." He paused to see if the other imaginary members of the band were ready. "He has given the city of Detroit the best he's got to give -- the sincere song of a native son."

The crowd was ready. Time to bring him on.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please give it up for Brush Stroke!"

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"My father is Jackson Flint. Do you know where he is?" Billy asked the bartender on Lafayette Street.

"He left," was all the bartender knew.

"He went home to see his family," came the voice of the seaman bellied-up to the bar.

Billy turned to address the stranger when the lights went out, and this time for good.

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"Everyone, please exit the auditorium on the north side in a calm fashion," the Ford Auditorium manager yelled over the rumble of the crowd. "We have word that downtown Detroit has lost power for an indefinite period, so we are canceling tonight's concert."

"Damn!" Justin Carlton exclaimed in disappointment. My candles, he thought. I wanted to see my candles.

Carlton quickly exited ahead of the crowd and started to head for his limo in the underground garage when he heard the long, lonely notes of a

saxophone piercing the sudden calm of the night. The freezing rain had stopped. The wind had stilled. The sky was clear. And a full moon reflected off the thin layer of ice that covered everything. Beautiful!

Carlton walked to the edge of the amphitheater and then down a few rows. He stood there listening to the solo performance of the shadowy figure on the stage, and then others from the exiting crowd gathered around him. More and more came, until the disappointed throng of concert-goers filled the amphitheater.

Billy jumped out of a cab on Jefferson Avenue and poked his head back inside the passenger window to say, "Thanks, Mr. Bouyat."

"Good luck, Billy."

Billy ran across the plaza towards the bus shelter and saw that no one was there. And then he heard his Papa's sax and ran in its direction. He pushed his way through the crowd at the top of the amphitheater and opened a view of his father on stage.

A new song had come into Jackson Flint's fingers. He played it with an ease and naturalness that could not be explained. He had stepped into a moment, a place, and with his sax, created a brief, brilliant dimension for the people in the amphitheater that was silently shared among them.



Carlton pulled out a candle from his coat pocket and lit the wick, and then lit the candle of the person standing next to him, and likewise from one person to another: two, four, eight, and more. The walls of the amphitheater shimmered from the light-dance of hundreds of candle flames.

"Papa!" Billy shouted to his father.

Billy ran down the stairs and jumped up to the stage. Jackson stopped in the middle of his miracle and swung his horn to the side and pulled Billy to him. They hugged each other like it used to be when Billy was just a little boy,

just before bed, and Jackson would see the sparkle in Billy's eyes. They remembered a love so strong it made them cry.

Carlton noticed there was one man without a candle.

"You sir. You need a candle," he said and dug into his coat pocket for a candle to give the man.

The man thanked Carlton for the candle and then lit it off the person's candle next to him. Then he raised the candle in the air ahead of him, as if gesturing for a toast.

"Here's to life, Brush Stroke. Here's to finding your song."

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