

3RD PLACE
FIFTY-FIFTY FICTION AWARDS*

BOB THURBER

SIMPLE DECORATION

I WAS ALL JACK THAT CHRISTMAS. On the drive cross-town I thought of nothing else. Not my wife, whose car I had begged to borrow, or my daughter experiencing her first Christmas without me. My headlights carved tunnels in the slanting snow. I found a clear spot in a tow zone and I bumped up onto the curb. I left her there, engine running, not caring if I saw the car again.

My key still fit. I let myself in, stomping snow from my boots. It was late. I was embarrassed. All the real work had been done.

Phil was there. Arthur, too. They had repositioned the bed, set its angle, laid Jack out neat and cozy. On a pedestal table, dead center of the carpet, stood a two-foot tree, some of its branches dripping wet snow.

"The roads are treacherous," I told the room.

Someone coughed. Arthur, I think.

He was huddled by the bed, holding Jack's hand as though it were a tiny bird. Phil was behind him, sipping from a mug with my name on it.

"So what's the word?" I said. "What do they say?"

I reached under my scarf and fingered the collar of my coat.

"They? They don't know anything," Arthur said.

Phil rocked, and shrugged. "Tonight. Tomorrow. Who knows?"

"I do. I know," Arthur said. "He'll die in the morning. He'll die on the day Christ was born."

My nerves burned cold as I approached the bed. Someone, probably Arthur, had stacked Jack's prescription bottles into a useless pyramid. I had to tuck my elbow to avoid knocking them over. No one said anything as I kissed Jack on the forehead and slowly backed away.

"That's new," I said, nodding at the tree.

"Fifteen minutes old," said Phil, tilting his watch to catch the light.

"Phil stole it from the side yard." Arthur said.

"Roots and all," Phil said.

I started to smile, then thought better of it. I leaned my face into the tree. I touched a pine needle with my nose.

"Tell me," I said. "Either one of you uncomfortable with my being here?"

Phil shrugged. "You have a right," he said. "I guess."

He was staring at Arthur, at Arthur's back.

"I don't care," Arthur said. He was studying Jack's hand as though something were written there.

"Though I used to. I used to care very much. Enough to hate you both." He turned his head a little; his eyes were closed. "I suppose none of that makes a bit of difference now."

I shrugged out of my coat.

"Let me help you with that," Phil said.

I WAS IN A HALLWAY CLOSET, a closet meant for coats, that we found the wicker basket full of garland and tinted-glass ornaments, and some embroidered things Jack's mother had made.

Hers was a story we'd forgotten to remember.

She'd been dead almost forever but in her last days had crocheted tiny stockings, little candy canes, macramé angels, a few fat-faced Santas with cotton balls strategically placed.

Fine needlework!

All with a loop of yarn so you didn't need hooks. Just snatch up a branch and slip the thing on, easy as a ring.

Like fools we used it all.

We emptied that basket, squeezing everything in, overlapping when we had to.

Then we settled back, sipping cocoa and admiring our handiwork.

The air grew hot with our breathing and the thick smell of pine.

I closed my eyes and fell asleep — for a minute or an hour.

When I woke the windows were full of light, and the tree looked gaudy and cheap — far too flashy for our friend who hated glitz.

I said so out loud. And first Phil, then Arthur, agreed.

And with fresh cups of cocoa in one hand we stripped that tree bare, except for the garland and a single yellowed angel whose yarn had snarled.

God, we were tired.

Each of us needed a shave.

The three of us yawned like lions as we circled that tree, planning to start again, to keep it dignified and simple.

But then Jack fluttered an eye, turned his head on the pillow:

"Perfect," he whispered.

So we left it that way.