

## The Good Month

It was Marcy's favorite time of year again. The only thing better than Christmas morning was the month leading up to it – the month of lights around the city, the month of humming cocktail parties downstairs, the month of her mother's iced sugar cookies. There was something otherworldly about the shorter and shorter days. As the holiday approached, her afternoon bike ride home became darker and darker, and the lights in her house grew more welcoming. The colder the wind lashing against her body outside, the warmer the house. The busier her parents, the sweeter it was to spend all of Christmas day with them. December was always a month of opposing forces; Marcy took comfort in the triumph of the good every time.

It all began again the day after Thanksgiving. When she was younger, the good month always snuck up on her. Now she understood the order of the months, took note of the date every day in school. It made for less of a surprise, but afforded her the ability to count down the days and intensify the anticipation.

“Guess what? Only a month until Christmas!” She skipped into the kitchen in a blue nightgown. The friction of her socks against the kitchen floor made her slip a few inches; she grabbed her mother's skirt to get back on her feet.

“Marcy, be careful.” Mama stood by the coffee maker, counting down the minutes until it began to percolate. She smoothed out her plaid wool skirt where Marcy had touched her and fluffed her red curls. As a rule, she never appeared downstairs in pajamas or rollers. Marcy looked around, but there were no signs that Mama had begun breakfast. She didn't dare ask if she could have pumpkin pie instead of oatmeal or eggs. Mama usually didn't mind that kind of thing. When she was in a good enough mood, Marcy was her partner in crime, the one asking if it was really okay to have dessert for breakfast. This kind of day had not happened much lately.

“Sorry.” Marcy sat down at the table and tried not to say anything more about her excitement. She wondered why she had said it and felt sorry for her mother. In the holiday specials on television, Marcy thought, there was always a character who didn’t like Christmas. For the last week or two, Marcy had harbored the suspicion that perhaps her mother was one of them now. Marcy had never heard a dramatic uttering of “I hate Christmas!” but a curt “Marcy, be careful” could sound like the same thing. Marcy tried to put it out of her mind. It was a silly thing to think. After all, Mama always looked beautiful for her Christmas party. Perhaps buying the Christmas tree would cheer her up. A familiar frenzied *clunk-clunk-CLUNK* prevented any further speculation. Daddy was downstairs.

“How are my girls?” He kissed his wife on the cheek; for a second, Marcy saw Mama’s eyes brighten, but there were no other signs that the kiss had registered.

“Marcy?”

“I’m great! Are we getting a tree today?” She sat up on her knees, elbows on the table and hands holding her face up.

“Only if you sit down, Miss Marcy.”

He winked a blue eye. Marcy hadn’t gotten the hang of winking yet, but Daddy knew she was trying to when she batted her eyelids in return. He turned to his wife again and lowered his voice. “And how are we doing?”

“I’ve been better, Jack.” Her coffee spoon clinked against the rim of her cup.

“Anything I can do?”

She shook her head.

“When do I get breakfast?” It didn’t seem to Marcy like this was a particularly important conversation, or at least not one that couldn’t be conducted over the preparation of oatmeal. Her father sighed.

“Marcy, would you mind just having some pumpkin pie? I know you just had it last night--”

“Of course.” Marcy busied herself with this hoped-for breakfast.

“Now, really, tell me what you think I should do,” said Daddy.

“There just isn’t anything.” Mama swigged the last of her coffee and left the kitchen.

Marcy and her father heard the creak of the hall closet door, the click of a coat hanger put back onto the rod, and the slamming of the front door.

“Where is Mama going? Is she taking another walk?”

“Yes, Marcy. Cut me a piece of that pie, will you?” Daddy sat down across from her.

“You don’t have a plate to put it on. How are you supposed to eat a piece of pie without a plate to put it on?”

“Marcy.” She complied, and watched in awe as Daddy held the pie in his left hand and wielded a fork with his right. She was going to ask why she couldn’t eat pie out of her hand, but a more important question had to be answered.

“So, when are we getting the tree?”

“Well, your mother ran off again, so we have to wait.” He swallowed another large forkful of pie. Only the crust and a small sliver of burnt-orange filling remained in his hand.

“Are you mad?”

“Of course not! As long as she comes back.” His pained smile let Marcy know it was time to stop asking questions.

After Mama returned home cheerful as ever, the trio set off to find a Christmas tree. Every year they bought one from the same tree farm. At one time, it had been convenient. The farm always planted its parking lot forest and big white tent behind the same church. When Marcy was very young, her parents had taken her every other week, but they weren't a particularly religious family. Without saying anything to her parents, Marcy had begun to sleep in on Sundays, and that was that. They went back to the white wooden Gothic revival building only when a wedding or baptism obligated them to socially. They went back to its parking lot every November.

Marcy wandered through the rows of trees. She found that in exactly the right place she was almost completely closed in by pine needles. They partway muffled the hum of conversation and traffic around her; her imagination supplied the rest of the silence. She was alone with a quiet rustling, the smoky, icy air, and the occasional twinkle of artificial light sneaking in through the gaps in the branches. She wanted to stay in this fragrant hiding place forever – or at least the rest of the night. Her mitten-clad hands probed each tree, carefully checking for stray leaves and birds' nests.

“Marcy! Come see the tree we found!” It was Daddy. *I'll go to them in a minute*, Marcy thought. Something felt strange. Just as Marcy had penetrated the trees with her hands, so had the trees penetrated her mittens with their needles. She giggled. A few tufts of yarn floated loose above her fingers, and a strong piney smell accompanied a faint stickiness. She leaned back into the trees, testing their arms against her weight.

“There she is!” said a gruff voice as he removed a tree. Marcy blinked, her hideaway opened up to the world.

“We've been looking for you! Aren't you a little old for hide-and-seek?”

“Sorry, Daddy.”

“Well, tell your mother that. She’s been in the cold car waiting for ten minutes.”

Marcy regretted hiding even more when she saw the tree her parents had chosen tied to the roof of the car.

“It’s so small! We won’t be able to fit any ornaments on it!”

“If you had stayed with us, you could have chosen a bigger one,” said her father sliding into the driver’s seat.

“Jack!” said Mama. “Don’t be too hard on her!” Then, in a lower voice, “Do you really want her to think this is the time of year her parents turn into monsters?”

Marcy got in the car. It looked as if the tables had turned, and Mama was on her side tonight. She looked back at Marcy and smiled.

“You were just having fun, weren’t you?” Marcy nodded as her father pulled out of the church parking lot. “Aw, I’m sorry. But don’t run off like that, okay? I don’t want to lose you.”

“Kind of like Mama?” At this, her mother crossed and uncrossed her arms. Daddy didn’t say anything. There was little traffic on the road, but he kept his eyes peeled as if looking for an opening in the next lane. No one said anything until the car pulled into the driveway.

“Welcome home, Christmas tree.” Mama grimaced and stood back from it as Daddy untied it from the top of the car. “Guess it’s really winter now.”

“Nope! I learned from Mrs. Blevins that winter doesn’t start until the twenty-first! That’s when they have the equinox,” Marcy offered.

Neither of her parents seemed to hear. Daddy half-dragged, half-carried the tree inside. Mama held the door open, but her face betrayed no real welcome for this guest.

In the living room, the tree managed to delight at least one of the trio. Something spectacular had happened as it passed through the doorway. Marcy was certain it had grown a few feet, and knew with equal certainty that Mama and Daddy would never believe that. In the living room, it nearly touched the ceiling. Daddy moved the television out of the way, the faux-wood paneled box with silver knobs abruptly upstaged by a rival infinitely simpler and more fascinating.

“Where do you want me to put this, Lorraine?” asked Daddy.

“Where do you always put it?” asked Mama from the hallway.

“It’s hard to watch it when we put it the attic, you know.” Marcy knew she wouldn’t mind giving up the television for a few weeks. The tree signaled the beginning of the best time of year, and the TV set was merely there to make the rest of the year a little more exciting. Besides, there was enough to do already. She had kept busy enough on her days off for Thanksgiving by practicing cursive in her composition notebook and riding her bike around the neighborhood.

“I’ll leave it up to you,” Mama said. After hanging up her coat, she turned towards the stairs.

“Are you going to get the ornaments now?” Marcy hoped that having the tree in the house had perhaps made her mother happier about Christmas.

“No, sweetie, I’m going to bed. I had a tiring day.” She smiled at her daughter. “May I have a hug before I go to sleep?”

“Yes! Do you want me to tuck you in?” Marcy giggled.

“No, you can go help Daddy if you want. I just need to get some sleep now.”

Not long after, Marcy’s father went to bed.

“Turn the lights off before you go to sleep. We’ll work on the tree tomorrow.” Marcy was left alone with the tree. All it wore now was a string of colored lights. All of the other lights downstairs were off except for the bulbs of Technicolor. Marcy planned to spend only a few minutes admiring the tree, but its stained-glass light lulled her to sleep on the sofa.

A few days later she was back in school. The leaf rubbings she and her class had made in early November were stripped from the walls, soon to be replaced by paper cut-out snowflakes.

“Did everyone have a good Thanksgiving?” asked Mrs. Blevins. Marcy was surprised when she didn’t take part in the collective “YES!” that answered the question. *Thanksgiving was good because it was a holiday. I like holidays. Why wasn’t it good?* Marcy couldn’t figure it out. It had been just like any other Thanksgiving, and even though her parents were sometimes grumpy, that was no reason not to answer yes. She remembered getting in trouble among the trees and thought she might cry.

“Marcy, are you all right?” asked her teacher.

“Yeah.” Marcy and Mrs. Blevins headed the class line to recess. Mrs. Blevins never assigned a line leader, and always told her students on the first day of school that they were finally old enough to line themselves up. Now most of Marcy’s classmates competed to see who could get closest to the back. Marcy usually didn’t involve herself with this. She liked her teacher, and it still made her proud to be in front.

“Well, you seemed sad this morning. Maybe you’re just tired from your first morning back at school.”

“Yes, I think that’s why.” Marcy was relieved to reach the jungle gym. She slipped away from her teacher and waited for her friends in the middle of the line to catch up.

One afternoon a week or two later, Marcy decided not to go home right after school. Daddy would still be at work, she reasoned, and Mama would still be as grumpy as she had been the day before. Her blue bike carried her a few blocks away to the library, where she checked out two Nancy Drew mysteries and bought a Baby Ruth from the vending machine. She had brought along some change in anticipation. The sequence was satisfying: the clinking of coins followed by the beeping of buttons and the mechanical groaning of the release mechanism and a final *plunk* when the candy became hers. It was her first time doing so many things alone. She couldn't help but smile as she walked out through the double doors. She carried the books in her hands rather than her backpack just to show them off.

The good feeling dissipated when she put her books away and hopped back on her bike. It was almost dark. The thought of riding home by herself in the cold *and* the dark alarmed her; all she wanted was the warmth of her parents' car. Timidly, she began to pedal. It was colder now than it had been when she bundled up for school, and she pictured her mittens safe and warm in her room while her hands froze against the bike handles. It wasn't far to her house at all. She lived only a few blocks past the school. Still, it seemed like a long way to go in the unfamiliar light.

When her father found her, she was sitting next to her bike on the sidewalk eating the Baby Ruth. He pulled up at the curb. Marcy sprung to her feet, pocketed the candy, and raised her bike off the ground.

"Daddy!" Her arms wrapped around his waist. He didn't say anything, but he didn't look angry. "I went to the library, and I checked books out by myself! I also used the snack machine. But then it was dark--"

"It's okay. I'm just glad I found you." There was something he wasn't saying.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you in the car. Come on, let’s put your bike in the back seat. You can sit next to me for once.” Marcy tried to help him lift the bike onto the seat, but he didn’t need her to.

“Okay, you can tell me now.” She wasn’t used to riding in the front seat. Without realizing it, she began to play with the radio controls.

“Marcy, I need you to pay attention to me right now.” She nodded and placed her hands in her lap. “I think you know that Mama hasn’t been feeling well lately.”

“Is she sick?”

“Well, I don’t think so. I think she’s just a little down in the dumps.” Marcy cringed a little when he said this – she didn’t like that expression.

“Anyway, she’s going away for a little while until she gets better.”

“Did she go yet?”

“No, not yet. She’s at home packing.”

“Can I say goodbye to her?”

“Of course you can!”

“Then why aren’t we going home? This isn’t the way home.” It wasn’t. Daddy had turned back, and they were already past the library.

“Your mother can’t make dinner tonight, so I thought we could go to your favorite place.” Marcy was uneasy. She liked the diner, but had never eaten there when it wasn’t her birthday. It didn’t feel right on a weeknight like this – she had only ever been on Friday nights when it was busy. Tonight only three other tables were occupied. She and her father ate on stools at the counter.

“Want to put some money in the jukebox?”

“No, not really.” She dipped her grilled cheese sandwich into a pool of ketchup. It was also her first time there without her mother. She and her father didn’t say much to each other. The clock on the wall said it was 6:30. Marcy usually had her homework finished by then, but didn’t worry about it tonight. She thought about her mother. She hadn’t seen much of her since Thanksgiving. This year, she wasn’t bustling around planning her party or grilling Marcy for gift ideas. If she wasn’t in her room, she was downstairs, listlessly haunting the living room in her pajamas. She didn’t talk to Daddy much, but always had a hug for Marcy.

The shiny double doors swung as the father and daughter left the diner. The sky was a strange sight; thick clouds had settled in around the moon. Daddy tried to make conversation on the way home, asking the same questions about school he always asked: Who’s your best friend this year? How is your teacher? Is your penmanship improving? Marcy leaned against the window, watching the moon move with the car. When they reached the house, it was completely dark except for one upstairs light.

“Want to help me put this bicycle away, Miss Marcy?” She heard him but was already in the front door.

“Well – in a minute. Need to see --” She was halfway up the stairs. She hadn’t bothered to hang up her coat or take off her shoes. She heard a click from the first door on the right – was Mama locking her out? Her hand hovered over the knob as she caught her breath. Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried it. The door opened.

“Mama! I thought you locked me out!” Marcy started towards her and stopped. There was only one lamp on in the room, the bright standing lamp her mother used for reading. Mama stood only a few feet from the door, like she had been waiting for Marcy. Her white bathrobe and vaguely awestruck expression gave her the appearance of an angel caught off-guard.

“No, no, I just unlocked it so you could come in if you wanted to,” she chuckled nervously.

“Silly, you didn’t open the door!” Marcy embraced her mother with even more force than she had used to hug her father earlier.

“I didn’t know if you wanted to see me.” A little lower she said, “I don’t know what your father told you.”

“He said you’re sick and you’re going away tomorrow.” Mama looked relieved.

“I’m going to miss you, Marcy.”

“When can you come back? We can have Christmas later if you’re going to be sick on Christmas.”

“No, no. You don’t have to wait. I’ll try to be back by Christmas Eve.” She paused a minute. “M-Marcy, you’re being so grown up about this.”

“Thank you!” Marcy beamed.

It seemed to her that this wasn’t so bad. Everything had worked out so well for her that day – she had checked out a book by herself, she had had a good dinner, and now Mama didn’t seem to be so sick, after all. She wondered why she had worried so much – about getting home in the dark, about not getting home to see her mother. It had all happened. Everything was as it should be, but she still wondered about Mama. Perhaps Daddy had been right about this sickness. Right now, with her kind words for Marcy and slightly red face, she seemed fine.

“Mama, what kind of sick are you? You seem really healthy right now.”

She regretted asking immediately. Her mother’s faint smile wilted.

“I can’t really describe it, honey.” She brushed a lock of Marcy’s hair back behind the ear. “But someday I’ll tell you more about it.”

“You sleep a lot. You wear your pajamas around the house,” said Marcy, eager to prove that *she* could describe it, that she already knew something about it. “And you were smiling, so I know you feel okay.”

“I’m happy because soon I’m going to feel better, Marcy. And I’m happy because you’re here.”

Daddy appeared at the door.

“Marcy, I think your mother needs to finish packing.”

Marcy started down the hall to her room.

“Please -- don’t encourage her questions,” she heard Daddy say. “How do you think it’s going to make her feel? She’s supposed to think the world’s a great place, at least for another year or two.”

“I can’t help when this happened.” Mama sounded sad now.

“I still don’t see why this can’t wait until after Christmas. God, Lorraine! It’s supposed to be the happiest time of the year for her. Do you know what she did this afternoon? You may not have noticed, but she didn’t come home. Didn’t it strike you as odd that you were the only one home at five o’clock?”

“No, I didn’t know that, Jack.”

“Yeah, well, I did. I got home, didn’t see her bike, got right back in the car, and went out looking for her because that’s what we’re supposed to do.”

“I thought you picked her up from school and took her back to the office to keep her from--”

“From you? No, I wouldn’t do that. Found her near the library and took her out for dinner. Obviously she doesn’t like it here anymore or maybe she would have come home after school. And I don’t blame her.”

Marcy was now crouched on the floor, close enough to the bedroom door to hear, but positioned where she thought her parents wouldn’t see her. It made her uncomfortable to overhear them talking about her under any circumstances, but tonight it hurt. Sometimes she felt like covering her ears, but her hands were frozen in place by her side. Her whole body was frozen.

“Why didn’t you bring her home? I could have spent some time with her before--”

“It’s not good for her, Lorraine. I want her to be happy! Why do you think I practically rewarded her for running away?”

“She’s happy around me! She and I were very happy until you came in.”

“Then why don’t you stay here?” The question silenced Mama. Marcy wanted more than anything for Daddy to leave so she could talk to Mama some more, but it was hard to be mad at him when he had said himself that he wanted her to be happy.

The argument began to intensify again, but by now Marcy didn’t really hear what either of her parents said. As she drifted off to sleep on the hallway floor, they became disembodied voices without any meaning. When she woke up the next morning, she was in her bed.

Mama and Daddy stopped arguing long enough for a cheerful goodbye breakfast.

It was strange not to have Mama around. Marcy and her father agreed that every day she could go to the library after school, and he would pick her up around closing time. It was unnecessary. She could have biked home every day like she once had, but at the same time it seemed sacrilegious to follow the same routine. At school, she joined her classmates in the

scramble for the end of the line. At recess, she sat on a bench and read; her afternoons at the library meant she could get a new book every day as long as she was finished with the last one. The best part of the new arrangement came at six every night.

“Well, I never did decide on a dinner. How about we go out?”

Daddy uttered some variation of this every time. Every time Marcy pretended to be disappointed. She forgot the anger she had felt the night of the argument; that Daddy was forgotten, and only the one who said he wanted to make her happy remained. He raced her through the cold parking lots every time. They alternated between the diner and a Chinese restaurant.

Over dinner, they never discussed Christmas, but that didn't stop it from approaching. Marcy still kept a countdown. They never discussed, Mama, either, but Marcy still worried in secret.

At school, Marcy's classmates chattered about their wish lists and debated Santa's existence. It was easy to ignore in mid-December, but as the holiday break approached, she began to wonder if Mama would really be back by Christmas Eve. She brought it up at dinner on the twentieth.

“Marcy, I don't know. Don't get your hopes up.”

“But you talk on the phone with her! Can't you ask her?” Marcy speared a piece of chicken with a chopstick.

“It's fifty-fifty.”

“Okay.” The look on Daddy's face let her know it was time to drop it. Mama had said Christmas Eve, and Marcy wasn't going to doubt her.

“Marcy, you know I really want her to come back, too.”

“Yeah.”

When they got home, Marcy realized they hadn't turned on the Christmas tree lights in over a week.

“May I turn the Christmas tree on?” she asked.

The tree wasn't as heavily decorated this year. They had finished hanging the ornaments, but no one had remembered to buy tinsel or candy canes. It didn't matter. In a way, the tree looked better.

“Sure, why not?”

“I just thought since we hadn't --”

“No, why don't you. It will be nice to see it lit up again.” Daddy disappeared into the kitchen.

Marcy flipped the switch. She thought the tree was beautiful, but something wasn't right. She turned off the other lights in the room. Now everything was right. In the dark, she ran into the corner of the brick hearth; the resulting scratch on her leg was ignored for the beauty of the room. The tree's glow favored no one color; sometimes it looked blue, sometimes warmer. The shadows of the room were all rearranged by this strange light source; a spidery twin now perched on the ceiling next to the chandelier, and a lamp on the end table now appeared on the wall slightly bent.

Marcy lay down on the sofa thinking only of the light show before her. Half asleep, she thought she heard the telephone in the kitchen ring, and she thought she heard her father answer.