

LEA CARPENTER

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## Christmas

**T**he morning my father died I woke up before dawn. My newborn son was screaming. He was hungry. Had he not been hungry and had he not screamed and had I not woken up to feed him I would have not been in the room when my father turned towards the window (apparently this is a very common thing) and took his last breath. I had fed my little boy then gone to check on my father, he was just down the hall, I was home and sleeping in the bedroom I had slept in as a child. In the twenty-four hours preceding that hour my siblings had all come home, too. My Virginian godmother, always aware of rule and requirement, arrived and immediately ordered food for days, comfort foods like tea sandwiches and shepherds pies, platters of shrimp with pints of cocktail sauce, fried oysters and alcohol including champagne even as this was not a celebration. Everyone was spilling out of rooms, my nephew made a bed on a treadmill. And everyone knew what was happening. There is terror in the hours around a death but there is also a kind of peace. When someone slaps you in the face you take a minute to catch your breath.

The day before my mother had called and said, “it’s time.” It was almost Christmas and people were busy, the absolute cliché and yet absolute acceptability of too many parties causing stress. Who doesn’t love Christmas, who doesn’t love joy and twinkly lights. A few nights before I’d been at a dinner downtown in Manhattan where everyone talked about the now, what they wanted and expected, wants and expectations being the currency when you’re young. I had stepped out of the dinner to call home. By then, it was taking him almost an hour to get down

the two small flights of stairs from the bedroom to the kitchen and my mother was preparing meals at seven and eating at ten. At Thanksgiving she'd explored the cost of installing an elevator. When my father said he would never use one she told me, "he's putting us on notice."

The night before the morning my baby woke me up I'd sat on my father's bed. He was on oxygen. He wasn't talking much. Or eating, despite my mother pouring Ensure into a martini glass. When things get chaotic, we fall back on ritual. The martini was a ritual, always with three olives, always on the rocks, always Beefeater's. We knew he couldn't drink but the idea that he knew the drink was there gave us something, maybe hope. That glass was the belief that this thing wasn't moving in one direction. I gave my son my father's name.

There were four or five doctors around the house, some involved in Daddy's care and others who were friends, a Harvard psychiatrist who seemed positioned mainly to mind me, to catch my pieces if they fell apart or disappeared. I remember him standing behind me as I tried, and failed, to boil a pot of water. As the house filled with people coming by for last visits, I felt relief when my father finally told us he didn't want to see anyone anymore.

I remember my baby crying around five AM. I remember walking down the hall in my nightgown. I remember my mother in the room with my father and my sister, who is a minister. "This is it," she said, and I wanted to say, "This is what?" We held hands and then he turned toward the window. And then he was gone.

Later, before we had moved him, one of the doctors gave me a pair of scissors. She told me to cut a piece off the bathrobe he was wearing. It was navy cashmere. My mother had dressed him in it worried he was cold. It made me think of the Terracotta Army, buried alongside the First Emperor of China, there to protect him. My father had lived and worked in China. "So far I believe I am going to like my new job tremendously," he wrote home to his mother then, "all of it is outdoors, and not unlike my Western experiences. Couldn't help remembering the days when my idea of a perfect life was to ride through the hills packing a .45 and carrying a carbine, and now I'm paid to do it." What he really wanted was to be a cowboy.

"You'll want it someday," was the doctor's rationale about the bathrobe and, like a child in a cult who feels nothing and follows orders I cut along the edge of one

sleeve to make a rectangle, rolled it up, and placed it in my pocket. A few phone calls were made and the first friends to come had been out shooting ducks and were still in their hunting gear and orange ball caps. They sat on the edge of that bed and wept, grown men, giants in their fields, totally broken. In those moments everyone peels back the masks. There is only emotion. If we tried to live life at that pitch all the time we'd explode.

It was raining. It was almost noon. I was still in my nightgown. We would place my father's body in a coffin and the coffin in a Hearse. My mother draped a flag over him. Everyone went out in the rain and walked alongside the car as it moved down the driveway lined by the tall oaks my father loved, the rhododendron he'd seen bloom for over fifty years. The house *was* him. When the driver flipped his blinker to turn I didn't handle that well, I didn't want that car to take him away, I wanted him back in that bed. I wanted to roll everything back. To a week before, when I didn't come home because I'd gone to that dinner party downtown. Or a month before, when I'd stayed at the beach with friends. No, to a year before when, instead of hearing an opera at the Met he loved I'd chosen to stay home and watch news. Every single choice I'd ever made suddenly seemed insane. And then, soaking wet in my nightgown, I remembered my baby, who needed to be fed. He was six months old.

My mother asked everyone into the one room my father loved, a library where he had a desk and where I once did homework alongside him after dinner. My mother asked everyone to say what they were feeling, a sort of Quaker meeting for lapsed WASPs and Catholics. I didn't know what to say so I said something he had taught me, Juliet's lines about *and, when he shall die take him and cut him into little stars*—That afternoon I wrote his obituary.

That night someone quoted Luke 2:14, it was almost Christmas Eve, after all:

And suddenly there appeared with the angel a great multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests!" When the angels had left them and gone into Heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

My father claimed he didn't believe in God. He preferred Shakespeare. But he loved the story of Christmas, and the idea of angels. He loved the simplicity of the manger as a crèche for the son of God and he loved the Wise Men with their gifts wandering the desert on camel back, the Immaculate Conception of Mary which he knew nearly everyone thought was the Immaculate Conception of Jesus. He loved the idea of shepherds minding flocks who wanted to "see this thing that has happened," a bit of Biblical understatement, or wit. My father had once experienced war but seemed to prefer peace, or maybe that was my experience of him. A desire for peace is maybe why he turned toward that window.

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**LEA CARPENTER** is the author of the novel *Eleven Days* (Vintage). Her second novel, *Red White Blue*, is forthcoming from Knopf.