

# Liberating

// JO-ANNE ROSEN

DAN'S worked out a search and capture mission to the largest tree lot in Oakland, where one tree won't be missed. He's done the preliminary recon. Gina will be lookout. He'll snatch the tree and tie it to the roof of the car.

"We don't need a Christmas tree," Gina says. "Where would we put it?"

"Shit, babe, you were the one begging for a tree. I promised you one."

"You didn't say we'd be stealing it."

"We're liberating it from the one percent," he says.

"You don't like Christmas much, do you?" The arms folded across her chest are thin but wiry, so are the long legs she twines around him every night. Her face is a fine-boned oval. She's like a Madonna with spiky hair, gentle yet tough. He'd do anything for her, except pretend to like Christmas.

He hates it. He never got one thing he asked or prayed for. In his family, everyone got drunk, even Santa. But that wasn't as bad as Christmas in the Al Hajarah desert, 110 degrees and sappy jingles over the PA.

"Christmas started in the Middle East," she protests.

"There are no fir trees in the desert," he says. "Just fleas and suicide bombers."

She wraps her arms around him then, as if he might jump out of his skin. This is how she holds him when he thrashes awake from dreams, slippery with sweat.

"Alright," she sighs, "I'll help you liberate the damn tree."

They don black sweaters, pants and ski caps and at midnight drive off in his Honda Civic. He cuts the engine a

block away and it coughs and shudders into a parking space on a residential street behind the tree lot. There's an opening in the fence just wide enough to slip through; he's made sure of that. And there's cloud cover.

"Keep to the shadows," he whispers. Gina's shoulders tremble. "What's wrong?" he asks.

"So cloak and dagger," she splutters.

"Shhhh." He hears footsteps and puts a hand over her mouth. "Heads up, trooper," he hisses, then drops to the ground and pulls her with him. A flashlight beam circles over their heads.

The footsteps fade. It's dark again. They skulk along the fence.

"I know you're there," an angry voice booms.

Again they drop to hands and knees, crawl behind a large trash bin, peer out. They are still nowhere near a tree. The guard is maybe fifty feet away when the moon breaks free from the cloud bank, and they see the man clearly, huge as a fullback yet light on his feet. His skin is ebony. Dan sighs inwardly. This is not the one percent.

Gina clutches his hand. She mouths, "Let's go."

He shakes his head, points toward the street and his car. You go, he gestures.

She hesitates, waiting for cloud cover, then kisses him and glides away without a fumble, as if she had a nightscope. He has to admire that; she'd have made a crack infantryman. Dan studies the night watchman, his wary stance, the tilt of his head and the way his uniform stretches across the broad back. It isn't going to be possible to filch a tree under this man's nose. He can feel his own heart pounding, he's sweating like he just did a hundred push-ups. If he's caught, he'll spend Christmas in jail. But he's not going home treeless. He leaps up suddenly.

The man whirls around, eyes glittering. The flashlight shines into Dan's face.

“What’re you doing here?”

“Good evening, sir,” Dan puts out a hand. “I’m Corporal Foley, 1st Battalion, 113th Field Artillery Regiment. Retired.”

The guard ignores the hand, but his face softens. “State your business, soldier,” he says.

Gina is dozing in the back seat when he throws the tree on top of the car. She wakes as he passes the rope in through the windows, and gets out and helps him tie a knot.

“How did you do it?” she marvels.

“I told him my wife really wants a Christmas tree and we’re flat busted and can’t find work, so he gave it to me.”

“Your wife?”

He shrugs that off and instead tells her the guard had been a master sergeant in Viet Nam, and they’d sat down and talked about their respective wars and what a crazy-making bitch war is.

“You never get over it,’ is what he said.”

“Well, that’s cheery news.”

It takes a while to figure out where the tree should go, not that there are many options in their small basement studio. Furniture has to be moved around. They don’t have a proper basin. Dan finds two flat pieces of wood, nails them in an X and then nails the tree to that.

“Poor tree,” Gina sighs. “Nailed to its cross and dying of thirst. But it smells wonderful, doesn’t it?”

Dan takes a joint out of his shirt pocket. “Merry Christmas, sweetie.”

He lights it up. Gina gets out popcorn seeds and pops a huge bowl full so they can decorate their tree with strings of popcorn. But then they get the munchies and Dan eats most of it before she can thread a single skinny string. She drapes it over three branches.

"It's a minimalist tree," she says, her smile radiant.

He takes her in his arms and they fall into the bed, laughing. Hours go by, or minutes. He can't restrain his joy afterward. "Oh Jesus, oh god, I love you, babe," he says. "I could fuck you to eternity and back."

"You just did," she says. And after a dreamy pause, "I could have your baby, Dan Foley. I really could."

He says nothing. Where is that coming from, he wonders. Isn't the goddamn tree enough?