

XMAS

Bill Ransom

The Jewish schoolteacher entered the coffee shop late on Christmas Eve and ordered a straight double espresso in a tall cup.

"You don't mind if my dog comes in, do you?" she asked. "She's pretty old and it's terribly cold out there."

"Health inspector won't be by on Christmas Eve," the owner said, packing the fragrant coffee tight. "Bring her in."

The woman settled the wagful dog at her feet with a pat, and sighed. One of his older regulars, she preferred her espresso straight. She knew good coffee, and often shipped him local samples from her travels. Tonight she had some trouble getting her coat off, and she didn't perch on the stool quite right.

He hit the lever on the machine and nodded at her paper cup.

"Did you want that to go?"

"No, no," she said. "I need to be still a minute. Such a busy day. Are you going home?"

"No," he said, "I'll be here awhile."

He handed her the coffee, and she dumped the contents of her paper cup into the espresso.

"I've been to the grocery next door," she said, and raised her eyebrows as though that explained everything.

The proprietor caught a whiff of whiskey on the steam.

She sipped her drink and relaxed, a little tilted on her stool.

"Yes, I've been to the grocery. And the butcher said, 'Come back here for a minute. Just for a minute.' Well, he took me back there in the shop and they were drinking whiskey."

"Wild Turkey, I'll bet," he said.

"Why, that's right. Wild Turkey. And it's very good, you know. But I remembered my dog was tied up to the USA TODAY rack outside—she keeps people from buying that rag, you know—and I had to go. But he gave me this cup."

"Sounds like fun," he said. He himself had already drunk two fine Christmas beers and was nursing a third in a mug under the counter. "Do you have family coming for the holiday?"

She made a wry expression and sipped her drink.

"We have plans," she said. She waved a glove towards the window. "But this ice and snow, I don't think they'll make it. My daughter and my son. They have to drive from Seattle. How about you?"

"Same thing," he said. He ventured a sip from his mug and the schoolteacher listened politely. "My sisters and their kids were coming, but I don't think they'll get through."

"We had our holiday last week, you know," she said. "And thank you for directing those people to my house. There aren't many Jews in this area, and it was nice we could all get together. So, we had our holiday. You know, I like coming here because it's always warm and clean and you can read here."

"Have you read that Hemingway story, 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place'?"

"Yes," she brightened further, "yes, I have. I was just thinking of that. I didn't understand that story when I was younger. You know, what's the big deal? But I understand it now."

"Yes." He sipped again. "So, what brought you out on a night like this?"

"Well, I got a tree, a real Christmas tree, because my daughter's coming and I thought she'd like one. You know, she's a *modern* one. So I have the tree lying on the porch, and I came down to find a stand for it, you know. But then I ran into the butcher and the grocery didn't have one and now I think I'd better just go home, you know?"

He knew her as a prim woman, very intelligent. Though the intelligence still shone through, some of the primness was melting under the heat of the Wild Turkey. He seldom celebrated Christmas with his family. Still, he had the right equipment in his closet at home.

The dog looked thirsty to him, so he cut the bottom out of a plastic jug, filled it with water, and the dog lapped it up.

"Thank you," the woman said. "How did you know she was thirsty?"

"She's been eyeing our drinks," he said, and laughed.

He emptied his mug and went to the refrigerator for a refill. He poured it right out, seeing no need for discretion.

"I have a stand," he said. "This year a customer was throwing away a tree and asked me to haul it off in my truck. It's a spruce, a nice one, in a pot. So I took it home for the grandkids, you know, and my sisters. I'll put it in the ground on New Year's."

"Oh, yes," she said, "that's very nice. A live one. Very nice. Thank you for offering, but it's so icy outside, and when you get home you should stay there." A sip and a shudder. "Accidents all over tonight."

"No trouble," he said. "I'll mop up and bring it by. Can I get you another? It's on me, for the holidays."

"Oh, no," she said, "no, thank you. I have to get home. Really, it was nice of you to offer, but don't feel bad if you can't bring it by. That ice is terrible tonight."

She shrugged into her coat, gathered up her leash and led her reluctant dog into the night.

The owner washed his dishes but closed up without mopping. If his sisters weren't coming, he'd have all day Christmas to clean up. His old truck started with the last spark of battery. He drove home and dug out the Christmas-tree stand and a cardboard box of lights and ornaments from behind stacked cartons of paper cups and napkins and toilet paper for the shop.

He parked in the only spot of dry pavement outside the Jewish schoolteacher's house, left his warning flashers on and rang the bell. All of her lights were on, including the porch light, but no one answered. He rang again, then peeked through the porch window. She slept half-curved on the couch, her coat for a pillow, dog at her feet. Her home, like his own, was a clean, well-lighted place.

The proprietor tipped his hat, set the stand and the box of ornaments beside the tree on her porch. He took out a brass dove, hooked it over a branch and slipped and slewed his way back home to finish the last of his Christmas beer before bed.