

Sleeping Children

Ah sleeping children. Give thanks for sweating piggies inside feet pajamas, and for ghastly afghans crocheted by Ya Ya's lumpy fingers, for everything toasty. Thanks to the Gobi desert, may its dry heat move across underground plates and under oceans and up the pitted steam pipes of every tenement. And let me tell you a story that happened several years ago, at just this time.

We were wanted by all, you and you and you and I. We had nightly picnics on the bed, the bills so filled the table. Mister Rothkugel himself climbed from first floor to fifth and wore out his already bony knuckles knocking, so much in demand were we. We made fish faces so as not to giggle on the bed until we heard him sigh and walk back down.

Mostly the utility company wanted us. It being the afternoon before Christmas, the post would do longer do. You won't remember this, but we had musical snowsuits.

Little Lou, you hadn't any, so you wore Alexander's and Alexander, you wore Malka's.

On you Malka we put everything left in the closet.

Outside, it snowed like the razor stubble of God himself. We walked. Forests of fat Douglas firs grew on every corner. Christians scurried. The doors of the shops swung open and closed, scenting the snow now with sachet, now with the must of

old books, now with bacon. Shopping bags shuffled this way and that down the sidewalk. It grew slick, so we slowed our pace. Malka, you had to pee and Alexander you had blisters, while you, Little Lou, a balloon of mucus grew and shrank from your nose as you snored on my chest. I clutched the envelope in my hand. The neighborhoods changed, and so did the smells. The sun went down. We walked.

Candles are everywhere on the night before Christmas, but none blazed as bright that night as the ones in apartment 5F. You were peaches, the three of you, huddled and bundled in that flickering light. We lit the good beeswax candles in Ya Ya's silver holders. We hunted up nubs left from blackouts in the kitchen junk drawer. From old Mrs. Lashinsky in 2B we had a full pack of yahrzeits and from Bobby Michaelman, who was always prepared, a small kerosene stove.

We opened the cupboard and Malka, you fashioned coffee cup candelabra. Alexander, that night you learned to strike a match and to blow it out just in time, and you've been a bit of a pyromaniac ever since.

We ate jelly omelets (although you, Lou, ate only the jelly) and we shared a pot of weak tea, as we have every Christmas Eve since. And so that we could see what we were eating on that darkest of nights, we planted a candle in the middle of each omelet. We each made a wish and then we blew the candles out.

-- Michele Herman

