

## Love Puzzle

*Elizabeth was mad at her boyfriend again, her new* boyfriend, whoever he was. Dorothy could never keep them straight—it seemed like they were all named John or Jack or something like that, a confusing bunch of men with long hair and rotted teeth and scraggly ugly beards. But Elizabeth was mad at whoever her man was now, and she was housebound with no way to get to town, and so she spent her evenings working on jigsaw puzzles with Danny Bob, with occasional trips out to the cellar to smoke her marijuana. Dorothy tried to ignore the two of them and watch TV, but it was a small house, and Dorothy could hear Elizabeth and D-Bob talking, and there was no getting away from them.

Dorothy was worried about that Danny Bob. Gerald had been bringing him out to Burnt House every weekend from October on, and now he was here for the whole month of December, and he was quiet and skinny and sad, and Dorothy didn't think there was much she could do for him but urge him to eat.

“Go eat some of that cake from last night,” Dorothy would say. “Get in there and fix yourself a hamburger.”

“I'm not hungry,” Danny would say. “Really.” But Dorothy saw him eat a bit of Elizabeth's cake from time to time, and once he ate all three drumsticks from a three-legged chicken

she fried one day.

It was always a sad house with young people in it, Dorothy thought. Especially when the young people were sad because their boyfriends or girlfriends were treating them bad, or because their parents were treating them bad or going crazy and running off. But there wasn't ever any real happiness in life.

Since it was Christmastime, or was supposed to be, the puzzle Elizabeth and D-Bob were working on was a nativity scene, an old Renaissance painting of Mary and the baby Jesus. But it was coming together slowly. One dark late afternoon, Elizabeth and Danny were laboring over the puzzle and Dorothy came back from the bathroom and leaned on the table for a moment, resting. It seemed like puzzles were just like everything else in the world—lots of hard work for nothing.

“I don't see how you do it,” Dorothy said. “Or why you do it.”

“I expect you wouldn't,” Elizabeth said. “It's a puzzle.”

Dorothy sank into a chair and watched them puzzle. Nothing on the TV, just cartoons and advertisements for Christmas specials. Dorothy didn't like that much—she didn't like the cartoons, but she'd always especially hated the holiday, Christmas, when kids would be home from school, and there would be extra cooking and cleaning, and wrapping presents, and worrying about money, and arguing. Fun maybe for everybody else but her. This year Elizabeth didn't seem to care too much about Christmas, either, she was mad at almost everybody, all she'd done to decorate was dig a single red glass ball out of the closet and hang it from a scrawny little Norfolk pine potted plant someone had given them. Elizabeth said, “There, that's our Christmas tree,” and she sounded mad, like it was supposed to be something to be ashamed of, the little tree. But Dorothy just felt, well, the little scrawny tree was just fine. Maybe even too much. That was going to be Christmas for them, just that little tree.

“Christmas is just another day with no mail,” Dorothy

said. Nobody asked her, but it was what she thought.

“Your granny’s always hated Christmas,” Elizabeth said to Danny.

“That’s right,” Dorothy said. She picked up a piece of puzzle and looked at it—a piece of background, she thought, dark-brown black, a piece of the shadowy manger—then set it back on the table. “You’re too young to remember your daddy drunk on Christmas Day, waving his Barlow knife around and stabbing the packages open, and me just sitting there worrying about that turkey burning in the oven with its legs a-sticking up in the air. Some fun that was.”

Elizabeth said, “It wasn’t that bad.”

“Yes, it was,” Dorothy said. “You don’t remember. Your daddy was a bad drinker. If men could just see how stupid they look drunk, they’d never drink.”

Elizabeth tried fitting a piece of puzzle into Mary’s head. “Maybe I’ll get you a movie camera for Christmas,” she said. She didn’t look up. The puzzle piece wouldn’t fit. Elizabeth tossed it back on the table and picked up another piece.

“I don’t need a movie camera, now,” Dorothy said. “But I bet you will.”

“Well, I *like* Christmas,” Danny Bob said.

Dorothy looked at him in surprise. “Well,” she said, “I expect you do.” Poor little feller, dropped off on his own, momma and daddy off somewhere wife-swapping or whatever it was they did, fighting maybe, getting a divorce, drinking, who knew where they were or what they were doing, or why. Danny did like Christmas, of course he did, and he wasn’t going to have much of one this year. Dorothy thought for a moment, looked at the skinny boy, then said, “Well, I guess we can maybe go to town and shop a little and look at the lights.”

Elizabeth paused, a piece of puzzle in her hand. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I don’t want to stay out too late,” Dorothy said. “Those roads might get slick.”

Dorothy didn’t have to do much to get ready—coat, keys,

purse—but Elizabeth disappeared out to the cellar for a few minutes, and then shut herself in her room for hair and makeup. Danny Bob sat back in the front room and slouched down in front of the TV. Going to Weston wasn't a big deal for him—he lived in Weston, after all—but it would be good for him to get out of the house for a little bit.

Elizabeth came out eventually, looking nice, though her eyes were kind of misty, and they went out and got in the car, and Dorothy backed it out of the garage and drove down Horn Creek. The first house they came to, Hazlit's, was all lit up with red and blue Christmas lights.

"Well, they sure have the Christmas spirit," Elizabeth said.

"They'll have an electric bill, too," Dorothy said.

Elizabeth pointed out every house that they passed that was lit up, and most of them were lit up, it was that time of year. Finally Dorothy got tired of hearing about lights, and she said, "Elizabeth, if you like lights so much, you can buy some and put them up yourself."

"Well, maybe I will," Elizabeth said.

"And I thought you didn't want a Christmas this year."

"I don't," Elizabeth said. "Everybody's being mean to me. But I still like the lights."

"Well, get some, then."

"Maybe I will."

Though she wouldn't—buying lights would cost too much money, and putting them up would take too much work.

"Oh, I'd sure like to see you put those lights up," Dorothy said. "You could spread Christmas cheer everywhere."

"Yeah!" Danny Bob said from the back seat.

"And you'd make Danny happy, too," Dorothy said.

"You all are too much," Elizabeth said.

In Troy almost all the houses were lit up, and even the post office had a little wreath of lights on the door. One house was dark, though—old Doc Renner, the veterinarian, who'd had a stroke.

"They took him all the way to the hospital in Morgantown,"

Dorothy said.

“I heard they had a time getting into his house because of those dogs,” Elizabeth said. “I heard that deputy wanted to shoot the dogs, but the ambulance guy managed to get past them, somehow.”

“Why’d he want to shoot the dogs?” Danny Bob asked.

“Oh, they’re mean dogs,” Dorothy said. “Big dogs—wolfhounds? Mastiffs? Great big mean dogs.”

“He found those dogs in the creek,” Elizabeth said. “During a flood. They were just puppies, and somebody threw them there in the creek to get rid of them.”

“Aww,” Danny Bob said.

“And those dogs love Doc Renner,” Dorothy said. “That’s why I always say, if you want love you should get a dog, not a person.”

“Oh, Mom,” Elizabeth said. “What about kids?”

“Kids are a burden,” Dorothy said. “And a misery. I don’t know why people do it.”

“Oh, Mom.”

“I wish I could find a puppy in the creek,” Danny Bob said.

The weather turned damp as they drove—a steady misty drizzle, and the air was cool—chilly, even—but not cold enough for snow. Dorothy never drove very fast, even in good weather, and she slowed down a bit more than usual now, worried about the wet roads.

“Maybe it’ll snow,” Danny Bob said.

“Oh, you don’t want that,” Dorothy said.

“Yes, I do!”

“If it snows, you get to shovel off the drive,” Elizabeth said.

“Sure, I will.”

“You say that now,” Elizabeth said. “It’s not going to snow.”

“Oh, let the boy wish,” Dorothy said.

“Listen to you!” Elizabeth said. “You hate snow more than anybody!”

“It won’t snow,” Dorothy said.

They drove through and past Pickle Street, the houses of course cheerily lit, and then up a long hill, and there was a beer joint at the top, and the beer joint was wild with lights, too. Elizabeth craned around in her seat to see if anyone she knew was parked out front.

“Well, I guess even the drinkers have the Christmas spirit,” Elizabeth said.

“I’m not a drinker,” Dorothy said. “I’ve got no spirits.”

“We know,” Elizabeth said. “We know.”

There had been a time, a long time ago, when Dorothy was first married to Vernon, that she’d had to ride their horse all the way to Auburn once a week to get the mail and do shopping, and she’d tie the horse up outside the store with the other horses, and when she’d come back out she could never tell which horse was hers—they all looked the same, all big and brown and shaggy lined up together. She hated that, not knowing which one was hers. It was embarrassing. What if she tried to get up on the wrong horse? What if a bad horse kicked her? So that year for Christmas Vernon got her a bright-red saddle blanket so she’d be able to know her own horse. Dorothy would have preferred a new horse—a white one, maybe, or a gray one—or even better, a Model A truck, but that red saddle blanket did come from Vernon’s heart, and probably was the nicest present he ever got her. So she did know about the Christmas spirit.

“Don’t ever get married,” Dorothy said suddenly.

“What?” Elizabeth asked.

“Don’t ever get married,” Dorothy said. She glanced back in the mirror at the boy. “Either of you.”

“Why’d you bring that up all of a sudden?” Elizabeth asked.

“Just a warning,” Dorothy said. “You all don’t want to be miserable.”

“What about love?”

“Love’s just all made up,” Dorothy said. “It’s a lie, just like everything else in this world.”

“Except for dogs?” Danny asked.

“Right, except for dogs,” Dorothy said. “Dogs’ll love you. People don’t love, though, not really.”

“Boy,” Elizabeth said. “You’re in a great mood tonight.”

They passed the long stretch below the car dealership, drove by the place where Elizabeth ran that truck through the fence and into the creek, though they couldn’t see the new stretch of fence in the dark. The car dealership was closed, though the front window of the office was outlined in lights.

“Where’s your granddad?” Elizabeth asked Danny. “Off counting his money?”

“Elizabeth, be nice,” Dorothy said.

In the back seat, Danny Bob was silent, staring impassively out the window. Still it was probably true that Old Bob was off at some rich people’s resort somewhere counting his money. That mean old man ruined his daughter’s and Gerald’s marriage, ruined this boy’s life.

“I mean that about getting married,” Dorothy said. “Both of you, don’t do it.”

“My lord,” Elizabeth said. “You’re so positive.”

“I should have left your daddy,” Dorothy said. “I would have many times, but people didn’t get divorced back then. I’d sure leave him now.”

They were coming into town, passing the hospital. Traffic was picking up, and headlights glared on the windows.

Elizabeth laughed. “But, Mom, then you wouldn’t have had me!”

“You were a mistake,” Dorothy said. She came to a stop behind someone who was making a left turn onto Broad Street, then moved ahead when she could. “If abortion had been legal then, you wouldn’t be here today.”

“Mom!”

“I was 42 years old when I had you,” Dorothy said. “I was too old—it was hard on me.”

“That’s a hell of a thing to say.”

“It’s true, though,” Dorothy said. “And you’d be better off, too.”

They drove on in silence, past the hot dog stand and Tucci's beer joint, the wide expanse of the old insane asylum opening up on the right. Bright Christmas lights were strung up all along the street.

Elizabeth said, finally, "That's just a hell of a thing to say."