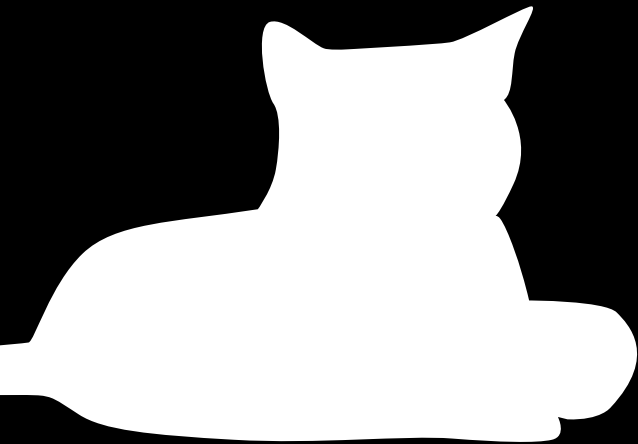




SECONDS OF DECEMBER



BY NICOLA ZIMMERMANN

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To Henrik.

*“I’ll be looking at the moon,
But I’ll be seeing you.”*

44

The sun was burning through the puffy clouds, forcing most of the runners to stop and drink water and punishing the ones who didn't. The sky was dark blue and the palm trees were swaying in the warm wind. The heat made the air dance, forcing her to keep an extra eye on the road, as the heat waves made the ground look misty and alive.

The radio was playing her favourite artist. It was Elvis Presley's 'Blue Christmas' and she sang along, as she always did, whenever Elvis was played.

Kate drove a mini truck. It was bright red, and she sat rather high up, looking down not only on the road, but on the other cars as well. She loved her car and because she was a small person, she enjoyed having the height while driving. It made her feel safer and sitting on her two pillows gave her the overview she always wanted. It was the safest car she had ever owned and it had been a part of her life for nearly 15 years.

As she changed lanes, taking the one going through Boca Raton, forcing her off the highway, she could feel a sense of freedom. She got that feeling whenever she drove to the mall, but of course it could also just

be her love of shopping which she knew would be satisfied in a matter of minutes.

Kate liked this part of town. Everything seemed cleaner and bigger. Even the roads had an extra lane compared to the ones in West Palm Beach. She was half an hour from home, half an hour from the beach and forty-five minutes or so away from down-town Miami, depending on the traffic.

As she drove around the parking lot, trying to find a good place for her truck, the next song playing was Bing Crosby's 'White Christmas.' The song reminded her of how long December could be. It was the most played Christmas song on the Oldies radio station. She knew that before New Year's she would most likely have heard it about fifty times, perhaps even more.

It had to be one of the hottest days of winter yet and the air con was playing up. She was running late as usual but needed a cigarette before meeting Dina, her niece. They had planned a day of Christmas shopping and with any luck they would find something for Sam's birthday, too. It was a tradition they had established years ago and Kate knew that Dina would never accept a cancellation. Even if it meant that Alex would have to be at home alone, unattended and, more importantly, unwatched.

Parking the car was always difficult. Finding a shady spot was nearly impossible. She preferred parking it next to a tree, taking advantage of the shade of the branches and leaves, but today she was out of luck. All the good places were taken. People were probably out buying Christmas decorations, as the mall had 50% discount on all gifts purchased in the first week of December. They had the same deal every Christmas, and every year she would spend 1 December with Dina, going through everything, before making their joint list of possible gifts. As it was Sam's birthday on the fifth, they always began with his as it shouldn't be a Christmas gift

but a birthday present. Of course, as the years went by it meant less, but when Sam was a child he used to make a big deal out of ensuring that he wasn't missing out on presents.

As Kate circled a third time around the parking lot she finally capitulated, seeing the queue of cars behind her. She decided to park right in front of the mall, even though there was no shade there. She was at least grateful that she didn't have to walk so far.

She slid down to the ground, taking care not to scuff her high heels and then closed the car door with her palms, as she had recently had her nails done. After reapplying her lipstick, she instinctively lit her cigarette, feeling the sun burn on her bare shoulders. It was 1 December and they were experiencing a heat wave. How she hated this state. Of all the states she could have picked, she often asked herself why she chose the hottest of them all? The humidity alone was challenging her mascara and sometimes even her eye shadow fell down to her cheeks. This day could be one of them. At least she could use the air con. The thought of Sam driving around in his car with his windows rolled down made her smile. He had a stupid idea that it kept the car younger and more intact if he didn't use the air con. He was worse than her, sweating bullets just by stepping outside. Just thinking of how sweaty he would be when he finally arrived at work was enough to make her smile all day long. He could be so funny at times, although mostly it was at his own expense.

As she headed towards the entrance she looked at her watch, knowing that Dina would voice her opinion about how bad smoking was before she had even smelled her. Dina had to be the world's worst non-smoker, finding pleasure in giving free advice to every smoker she met. Smoking guests were given a nicotine patch when entering the house, as smoking outside in her garden was also forbidden. What made things worse was that with age she seemed to battle Kate's smoking more intensely, rather than realising smoking was a habit Kate would more than likely never

give up. Yet she kept getting more and more annoyed with Kate's smoking, and it was getting to the point where Kate sometimes cancelled a lunch date or get-together, just to avoid hearing Dina go on and on about smoking being the most disgusting habit ever and how she (Dina) was at risk of dying when someone smoked in her presence.

While going through her shopping list in her mind, she remembered that she also needed to find a lock that she could put on Sam's door. He was complaining that his uncle kept on snooping through his room while he was at work. She figured the best way to avoid a fight was if he had the only key to his room. She never liked the idea of rooms being locked in a house but, on the other hand, if Sam felt his privacy was being violated, she had no choice but to give in to the locking system. She could always make a spare key, just in case. Sam would never have to know.

As Kate came up to the entrance, she was met by another smoker also heading for the outdoor ashtray. He was an elderly man ... well, probably her age. Rather good looking considering his years and if she wasn't losing her mind completely, she could have sworn that he had actually checked her out, just for a second or two.

'Nice to know that I am not the only smoker in Miami,' he said and smiled, stopping a few feet away from her. Kate, who hadn't dated a man for decades, was completely off her game, while feeling like she might just be interpreting things that didn't exist.

'Yeah. It is a hard habit to quit,' she said, hearing her voice sound a bit higher than usual. A tone usually dedicated to her dog or cats.

She was wearing one of her miniskirts and a top that matched in colour. Back in her day matching colours were the big trend and the one thing everyone considered before dressing. These days, however, her niece told her that matching everything made her look like Nanny Fine.

She was also told that miniskirts were not for women in their sixties and definitely not for women entering their seventies, but her skirts and her smokes were two habits she knew she most probably never would let go of. She didn't want to either.

'So, doing your Christmas shopping?' He looked at her and his look forced her to glance down. It was foolish of her even to react and that was the embarrassing part. What if he caught her, noticing the colour in her cheeks? She would be so embarrassed, knowing her age.

'Yeah. And birthday presents as well,' she said, as confidently as she could.

'Ah. Your husband's, perhaps?'

Now Kate really didn't know how to react, and her cigarette had come to an end.'

'No, my son's. I don't have a husband.'

'Ah. Your son's. How old will he be?'

Kate felt her cheeks burn, and a small sense of annoyance towards the question. She hated being asked her age or getting a question that might imply how old she was.

'He will be forty-three.'

'Wow'! The man looked at her as if she was telling him a lie.

'I had him early!' she quickly said, realising how silly she sounded.

'And what are you getting him then?' he asked, looking into Kate's eyes, as if she was carrying a secret he wanted to obtain the answer to. 'Ahh. Well.... Okay... I don't know. I haven't given it much thought.' 'Well, I guess his wife will get him the nice stuff, so perhaps you should get him something he needs. Perhaps something for the house?' the stranger suggested, putting out his own cigarette.

Kate knew that by now it was a matter of seconds before he would go, and she would most likely never see him again.

‘Actually...’ Kate cleared her throat, feeling embarrassed to say so, but at the same time she felt like telling him. ‘He isn’t married either.’

‘Well, what a pair!’ He winked at her, grabbing the bags of shopping that he had put on the ground earlier.

Kate saw Dina parking a bit away, knowing Dina had probably noticed her talking to him.

‘And what about you? Christmas shopping, too?’

‘Yeah. For my dog. I am a widower.’

His honesty surprised Kate and for a split second she didn’t know what to say, making him smile.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ she finally stuttered.

‘Thanks. I know it is strange, but it is nice to hear. Even from a stranger.’ By then Dina had joined them, grabbing her auntie’s arm, obviously assuming she was enduring some kind of harassment from the man. ‘Well,’ Kate muttered, realizing that Dina was about to pull her away from the only man, in a fair few years, who made her think of men.

‘Merry Christmas,’ he continued, saying the very words on the tip of her tongue.

‘And the same to you,’ Kate smiled, looking straight into his eyes, which were staring hypnotically back into hers.

‘Okay, Auntie. We don’t have all day, and we also have to remember Sam’s birthday.’

‘I know, I know,’ Kate replied, while letting her niece push her into the shopping mall.

Once they entered, the cool breeze hit them both instantly.

‘Ahh. Nice,’ Kate commented, seeing Dina nod.

‘Auntie. Before we shop I need you to go wash your hands in the restroom. You stink of cigarettes.’ Dina, being more than six feet tall looked down on her aunt and Kate always felt that with Dina, she became the minor in everything.

‘Okay. Okay,’ she muttered, heading towards the toilet, wondering how something once so normal and cool, like smoking, had turned out to be so freaky and bad in just a lifetime.

‘And Auntie!’ Dina yelled, making Kate turn around. The mall wasn’t full of people, but it was December and Dina was loud enough to make a handful turn their heads.

‘What, honey?’

‘Don’t talk to strangers, Auntie. You never know. Even at your age.’

‘Oh. I see. Thanks, Dina,’ Kate replied, not knowing if she should be grateful for the consideration or hurt by the lack of understanding that comments like that didn’t help her embrace her age.

On the contrary. It made her stick to miniskirts.

‘Did you wash them?’ Dina asked, pointing towards Kate’s hands as she left the ladies room.

‘All washed and smelling of ginger,’ Kate replied and smiled at her niece.

‘Can I smell them?’ Dina looked dead serious, but Kate slightly angry, knowing in the back of her mind that Dina had always been a very complex girl in regards to her own nature.

‘No. You may not,’ Kate replied, beginning to walk towards the men’s

section.

‘I just don’t want you to touch anything, smelling of smoke!’

‘I won’t. Don’t you worry.’

‘You should stop smoking, Auntie. Think of the signal you are sending Rebecca.’

‘Now I was thinking of getting Sam a t-shirt or some sportswear...’

‘That’s a good idea, but I would still like to smell your hands first.’

Kate turned around, being a few feet ahead of Dina. She was wearing high steel heels and they made a screeching sound when she moved the slightest. She was almost a dwarf compared to her niece.

‘Here, smell them then,’ she said in a sharp tone, reaching up in the air, so Dina could scent them. ‘Are you satisfied now?’ Kate asked in her harsh voice, looking at her niece, who glanced around in embarrassment to see what people might think.

‘Put your hands down NOW, Auntie.’

‘Well, one moment you want to smell them, and the next you don’t.’

‘Not when you make a scene I don’t,’ Dina replied, turning towards the escalators.

‘Sam will need some new runners. Let’s check them out,’ Dina finally muttered, looking at her watch, probably planning their day down to the very last moment.

That was Kate’s cue to move on, forget prior harassments from her niece and focus on Sam’s present.

‘Okay. We can go for a warm drink afterwards,’ Kate suggested, knowing her niece was addicted to green tea with honey.

It was nearly five by the time they finished going through the last shop in the mall. Kate was tired, and in need of a cigarette, but didn’t feel like

going through the argument with Dina. It was also time for Dina to get home, so she wouldn't have to wait long. Rebecca had singing lessons later and Adam wouldn't be home until late, so it would be Dina who drove Rebecca back and forth.

'How is Becks handling her singing lessons?' Kate asked, walking towards the exit of the mall. She had no idea that it was already dark outside, as a storm was coming.

'I don't know, Auntie. I can sing and Adam can sing, but somehow she can't.'

'So why do you force it, then?'

'Because I want her to learn. I want her to be able to dance, sing, read and write. I want her to be creative.'

'Of course, Dina. One always wants the best for one's own children, but I think you might be pressuring her a bit.'

'I think you should mind your own business, Auntie. Look at Sam. You never pushed him and that resulted in him still living at home at the age of nearly forty-three, without a girlfriend or a network of friends. Perhaps you should have pushed him some more?'

'Okay. You make it sound like everything is so black and white, Dina.'

Kate sighed, feeling Dina was pushing every button she knew of.

'It is black and white!'

'What about the shades of grey? There are shades, Dina.'

'Auntie, since we are talking about grey areas, I do think you should consider removing Sam's gun from the house.'

'Now, why would I do that? He has had that gun for years.' Dina sighed,

pushing her aunt outside, where the heat once again took their breath away, for a second or two.

Kate put her shopping bags on the ground and lit a cigarette before Dina had the chance to object.

‘It’s just that I ran into Sam the other day. He was driving out of the driveway and I just caught him, before he headed to work.’

‘And?’ Kate asked, taking a puff, blowing it out slowly. She remembered the man from before, wondering what he was doing now. Was he lonely? Him and his dog, sitting, watching sports. She couldn’t stop thinking about him, and that made her think even more. She hadn’t been with a man since Sam was 21. It was so long ago now that she could honestly say she had given up on men. These days, she found a chocolate bar to be a much safer satisfaction, but looking into his eyes made her feel she might be missing out.

‘Auntie? Auntie? Kate, are you listening?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well! Sam said Alex had been in his room again and had touched his gun. He seemed very upset about it. You know the way Sam can get when he is really mad. I swear, if you don’t remove the gun, someone will get hurt.’

‘Do you think Sam would shoot Alex?’

Kate sounded worried, inhaling twice without blowing out any smoke.

‘Well, Uncle might grab it and use it. Perhaps on the cats. I don’t know, but I think it is better to be safe than sorry.’

Kate looked down, not knowing what to say. She knew the gun had always been an issue. Even more so now with her brother living there. But Sam had never used it so far even though she sometimes thought he might.

‘I can’t remove that gun. You know that, Dina. He will kill me if I remove his gun.’

‘Auntie, he might kill you if you don’t.’

‘It is not loaded,’ Kate replied, ‘so let’s not make a mountain out of a molehill, shall we?’

Dina shook her head, her cheeks blushing. ‘Well. If the day comes, don’t say I didn’t warn you.’

‘The day will never come. You know Sam. He has a hot temper, but he would never kill anything.’

‘What about Uncle then? You know how curious he is. He won’t know what he is doing!’

‘That’s why I am getting Sam a lock for his room. I thought he might appreciate that. That way, Alex cannot enter his room and get to the gun.’

‘Do that then,’ Dina commented, looking at her watch to see what time it was.

‘Auntie, I have to go. Adam is working late and Becks has to eat before her practice, so I will call you later.’

‘Okay, sunshine,’ Kate muttered, but Dina had already gone, half running towards her car, as it looked like it would rain any moment now. Kate could smell it too. The sweetness in the air, filled with the heat. No doubt about it. Thunder was on its way.

The second Kate jumped into the car, a loud bang was heard and within a minute the sky had opened up. It was pouring down so heavily, she thought her car might get damaged.

She sat for a while, waiting for it to clear up. After a few minutes, she

searched for her favourite radio station, the Oldies, and set the car in reverse. As she entered the highway, the lightning illuminated the whole sky and within seconds she was startled by the loud crack of thunder which followed. She lost her radio connection shortly afterwards and spent the rest of the drive in silence, reminiscing about the lovely gentleman she had encountered earlier.

When Kate finally arrived home, she got soaked from head to toe running from the car to the house, only a few feet away.

‘Why are you wet?’ Alex asked her the minute she entered the house. The front door opened up to the living room where her brother always sat, enjoying his soaps on the TV.

‘It’s raining like mad outside.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. Can’t you hear it?’

Kate looked at him, realizing that he was so medicated he probably couldn’t hear a thing.

‘Perhaps. I am hungry. Make me some food.’

‘Did you eat lunch?’ she asked, knowing the answer beforehand.

‘No. I am hungry. Very hungry.’

‘So what’s that then?’ Kate asked, noticing the bowl in front of him.

‘It’s a snack.’ He stated, taking a rubber band, rolling it around with his fingers.

Kate went over to the table and realized it was the cat’s bowl he had been eating out of. She didn’t bother to comment on it. She just took the bowl and went through the room, into the kitchen.

She put the bowl down on the ground next to the water bowl and the cats came running from different places in the house.

Kate remembered the time when her sister, Madison, had put the cat food in a bowl and left it in the fridge. It had been her plan to serve it for her cats when she came home from work. Unfortunately, her husband Brian came home first, opened the fridge, assumed it was dinner, warmed it up, and claimed it was his best meal ever. She never told him, but even to this day, she would sometimes serve it for him, and he still thought it was her best dish. Little did he know that it was Whiskers ‘Duck with gravy’ and this was a secret the whole family managed to keep from him to this very day.

‘Where are all the presents?’ Alex shouted, still keeping his back to her, sitting in the couch, concentrating on his rubber band.

‘They are in the car.’ Kate replied, looking into the fridge to see if there was anything simple she could cook.

‘So, what have you been up to?’ she asked, trying to seem interested, even though she asked purely to make conversation. Half the time Alex didn’t answer her and, when he did, she didn’t understand most of it.

‘I went on an adventure.’

‘I hope it didn’t lead you into Sam’s room. Alex, stay away from Sam’s room.’

Kate went over to her brother to catch a second of eye contact. She always knew if he had been bad by the way he ignored her.

‘Look at me,’ she said but he turned away, still twisting the rubber band between his fingers.

At that moment the door flew open and in came Sam, completely soaked.

‘Do you see this shit? Look at me?’ Sam spat, trying to get his shoes off without slipping on the wet floor.

‘I have just been through the same. It is raining like mad out there,’ Kate commented, trying to ease the tension off Sam.

Alex began to laugh hysterically while pointing at Sam, trying to piss him off. He knew that as long as Kate was there, Sam wouldn’t do anything to him.

‘What’s the freak laughing about?’ Sam snapped, looking as if he was only seconds away from exploding.

‘Leave him. Don’t worry about it,’ Kate whispered, feeling a little scared of Sam’s intensity. How could she ask him for the gun when he was already so upset?

‘Did Dina tell you that this prick entered my room again?’ Sam walked quickly past Kate and into the kitchen with the bags of groceries she had asked him to buy.

‘Are you making dinner for me, Mum?’ he yelled in his tender voice and she knew that he would be furious with the answer.

‘It was actually for your uncle. He hasn’t had lunch today since I went out shopping with Dina.’

Sam walked back into the living room, looking spiteful and angry.

‘So, you make food for this asshole who sits all day long and shits himself, but your own son you cannot cook a meal for? Even though I am the

only fucking idiot who works around here!’

‘I can make you some pasta!’ Kate knew she was wasting her effort by now. Sam wanted to be mad that was clear as day and she somehow always made him explode.

‘Don’t fucking bother, Mum. You sit on your ass all day with this ass, playing your fucking video games, wasting years and time on NOTHING.’

‘Well, Sam, what do you do then?’ Kate was so tired of them fighting, she felt she no longer listened to his arguments or had the energy to explain herself again and again.

‘I work every day for twelve hours at a job I hate. I can do that for the rest of my fucking life, paying back my school loans, which you took on my behalf, MUM!’

‘Well, I can’t see the problem in that. You’re still here!’

Kate knew how that sounded, but didn’t bother explaining. Sam was sure to take the worst interpretation and go with that.

‘What do you mean? You don’t want me here? Well, I am not surprised. You probably want me dead, don’t you?’ Sam was, by now, beyond mad. His head was beginning to slide a little to the left, which it always did whenever he was furious.

‘No. I meant you still live here. With your mother. Almost forty-three. That’s what I mean.’

‘What about Uncle then?’

‘He is brain damaged, Sam. You are not, as far as I know.’

Kate went back to the kitchen to begin cooking the pasta. Sam went down

the hall and into his room, closing the door behind him as loudly as he could.

‘Would you like some food now?’ she asked Alex, knowing he could eat at any time of the day.

‘Food NOW!’ Alex grumbled, putting his rubber band away for a minute, while going through all the channels to see if he was missing out on anything exciting.

‘If you want, we can play a video game together,’ Kate suggested, referring to the computer game he had been trying for the last few months. Knowing that Alex probably just wanted to play alone she didn’t think he would want to share his game with her. He was still at the first level of the game and had been so for almost six months.

‘Okay,’ he said to her surprise, but when she served him his food ten minutes later, he had changed his mind again.

It was nearly one a.m. in the morning when Kate went to bed. She liked watching TV in bed, setting it to switch off at three a.m. so she could fall asleep to the sound. She also made sure her dog Fluffy had a full water bowl and a fresh towel that she placed at the end of her bed, knowing Fluffy rarely chose to sleep so far away from her.

She had the biggest bedroom in the house with the biggest cupboard and the biggest bed. Every night she liked spending an hour or so in her room, doing whatever she wanted. Her dog was the only one she allowed in, and both Sam and Alex knew not to interrupt her during this time. The same was said about the mornings. She never came out of her room before eleven a.m., but she was often up around nine. She felt these hours were the only ones where she could do and say anything she pleased, and not be judged or hassled. She didn’t have to listen to Alex or hear Sam complain. In her room, there was only herself and her dog, the TV, and

all the miniskirts a woman could collect through sixty or so years of hard shopping.

Tonight, however, Kate couldn't fall asleep. She knew Sam couldn't sleep either, as she spotted the light from his room. He had been suffering from insomnia for almost two years and somehow she too felt she shared the problem. She knew it wasn't contagious, but she still felt odd that she somehow was experiencing these long, sleepless nights too.

As Kate lay in bed, hearing the rain dance on the roof, she realized that Dina was right. The gun was bad. Especially with Sam being in such constantly poor moods. She was actually beginning to fear him and just thinking of taking the gun away from him gave her gooseflesh. Yet it had to be done. She would talk to her sister about it when she got the opportunity. She might know how to handle it or what to do in such situations, as Madison worked at the police station and had probably had a lot more training around guns. When her TV went off, Kate still lay awake, knowing that it was after three a.m. She could hear the cats running around, but she was too tired to check if Alex was hunting them. Then she heard Sam's TV go off and not long afterwards she fell asleep.

The next day, Sam had already left when Kate woke up. It was nearly eleven a.m. and she could hear Alex's morning show end. The jingle was so loud and Alex liked to sing along to as many jingles as possible. It was his favourite music. In a short while it would be 'Love Boat' he would watch and she knew she had to force him to have a shower today. He hadn't had one for days, but he knew how to and she simply didn't want to give him one, knowing he was capable of having a shower by himself. She knew that if she left it up to him, he would wait one more week before even considering it.

Kate stepped out of her bedroom with Fluffy running around her feet and the cats following her around. She usually gave them their tuna at the

same time every day. Today she was late.

‘Good morning. How did you sleep?’

‘Okay. I am hungry.’

‘Well, let’s see what we have. Perhaps some Coco Pops?’

Normally Kate never suggested anything too sweet, but she knew it was an instant satisfaction for him, making him keep quiet for a while and therefore also an instant satisfaction for her.

As she stood in the kitchen she remembered the Magnum 44. She knew Sam would be gone all day and chances were that he probably wouldn’t miss it for a day or two, if she took it.

She thought about it for a second or so, realising that she would never have the courage to remove it herself. Her sister would, however. She was used to guns, working with all the detectives and what not. She might even know how to remove the bullets, if there were any.

‘Here’s your breakfast. Enjoy,’ she said, handing Alex the bowl before going outside with her coffee and cigarette. After her first smoke, Alex came outside to join her. He usually never did.

‘Listen, Alex. Don’t go into Sam’s room. Please. He is very angry that someone went in there.’

Alex didn’t reply. He just kept looking at the pool and after a while she lit another one and sat back in the chair, enjoying the sounds of the frogs playing next to the pool, on the shady side.

‘I cannot believe we are already in December again,’ she muttered to herself. Alex nodded slowly, as if what she had said had been deep and meaningful.

‘It’s Christmas time again!’ he shouted, breaking the silence, making the lizard at his feet run away before he could grab it.

‘Yeah. Another year has passed. I can hardly believe it,’ Kate replied. She knew that he knew more than he let on and yet she also knew he didn’t know or understand as much as she wanted him to.

‘Christmas always makes you blue!’ Alex stated, leaning back, turning his head towards her.

‘Do you know what that means?’ Kate asked curiously.

‘Yes. It means that you’re sad. SAD,’ he grumbled, and looked away again.

After a while, Kate finished her coffee and decided to go back inside. She needed to check her stocks, as well as the news. Also, all the presents needed to be wrapped and she still hadn’t picked up the decorations yet. They were still in the garage along with the white and pink Christmas trees, which had been her best bargain ever, compared to the real trees. Dina never liked them. However, these days she could tell her that they were environmentally friendly, as they preserved the real ones. Perhaps she would change her mind about them. Dina often did, if she felt it would be the right thing to do, say or feel.

‘Hey, I have an idea.’

‘What?’ Alex said, looking into the ground, fiddling with his rubber band.

‘We can decorate the house for Christmas. Would you like to help me?’

‘No.’ Alex looked so determined not to that Kate didn’t bother asking him twice. Instead she went back into the house and began her daily routine.

The day turned old. Before Kate knew it was already evening and time to fix Alex his dinner. She was tired from a full day of chores that were long overdue. She managed to give Fluffy a bath as well as Alex, who hadn't objected too much. She had done the food shopping, wrapped all of the presents besides Sam's birthday gift that needed a different colour. She didn't want it to appear as a Christmas present and wrapping paper helped give that impression. She had even managed to get out most of the Christmas ornaments and her pink tree. Madison had called her while she was organising the Christmas decorations and she had managed to explain to her that the 44 needed to take a leave of absence. She wanted it gone. Madison agreed to do it when she had a spare moment. She had her own problems to deal with having a husband with severe diabetes.

After dinner, Alex finally passed the first level. He was so trilled, forgetting his rubber band, jumping up and down on the couch, clapping and giggling at the same time.

'Wow. That is wonderful, Alex. You deserve a reward. Let me get you some ice cream,' Kate suggested, leaving the dining room and her news channel to fix them a bowl each. She had bought two types. Her favourite, which was French vanilla and her brother's, which had always been chocolate. It was only at the sound of the door opening that she realised she forgot to buy Sam's favourite, which was strawberry.

'Hi, Mum. What are you doing?' Sam yelled, entering the room a few seconds later, leaving her no option but to show him.

'I'm serving your uncle ice cream. He passed and made it up to the second level.'

'I see. Did you buy any for me?'

'They ran out of strawberry,' Kate heard herself say, knowing that such a

terrible lie was worse than just admitting she forgot.

‘You forgot, didn’t you? Well, your son got another star at work today for customer service. But I guess getting ice cream for me would be too great a reward. After all, I am still here, right? On level fucking one.’ Then he left the kitchen with rapid steps. She heard the main door open and shut. After a few seconds the car started and it was then that Alex shouted at the top of his lungs:

‘Where is my reward?’

‘Coming. Coming,’ she replied and went to the dining room, handing him the bowl. She sat down next to him, watching him attack his dessert as if she never fed him. Then she heard Sam’s car leave the driveway in full acceleration.

‘He didn’t want ice cream?’ Alex asked, looking directly at Kate for the first time that day.

‘No, honey. He likes strawberry flavoured.’ This piece of info seemed to surprise Alex, keeping him busy in thought until his bowl was empty. Kate, however, took longer finishing her portion but before she finished her last bite, she had forgotten about Sam and the strawberries and was looking at yet another re-run of Friends.

The Rubber Band Man

‘One, two, three, four, five, six, seven ... and eight.’ Sam kept on counting to himself, taking eight bench presses with weights, three sessions and two breaks in between. Every time he took a break he made sure he kept on moving. He always had a habit of working on at least two machines at the same time, annoying the young, tattooed boy who had been waiting for him to finish for the last ten minutes or so.

He looked at himself in the mirror while doing the exercises, paying careful attention to every part of his body, while trying to avoid the stare of the boy. He was still not as big as he used to be, but at least he was fit. The only thing that truly bothered him was that whatever hair he lost on his head he gained on his back. Looking at himself, all red in the face and with his exercise vein popping out on his forehead, he realized that the reason he recognized himself in the mirror was because he knew it was him. Paying attention, he noticed that something was different. It certainly wasn't his carves. His legs still looked like chicken wings compared to his upper body. No. It was something else. Yet his upper body looked okay and he was getting his six pack back. He just couldn't really put a finger on it, but something with his looks was off. The tattooed boy sighed, tapping his foot, implying that Sam should hurry up. Sam ignored

him, turning the volume on his iPod up as high as it could go. He was listening to Rammstein's 'America' and every time he heard the chorus he felt like taking one more session. Rammstein always made his training so much better. Almost as good as if he had a training buddy, like he used to. It was amazing how much music motivated him, and always had.

'One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight.' As he did his final session he made sure it was perfect. From the way he carried himself, doing the exercise slowly, to pushing himself further. His t-shirt of the periodic system was completely soaked and sweat was running down his cheeks. When he finished he nodded to the boy, grabbed his towel and drank a whole bottle of water, going over to the weights where the water fountain machine was to fill his bottle again. The gym's air con wasn't really functioning, so they had tried to solve the problem by putting fans all over the gym. Only this wasn't helping, as it was blowing the warm wind around instead, making it hard for him to breathe. It was simply too hot to.

It was night time when Sam finally left the gym. He usually went straight from work to workout, as his regular gym was right next to his work, but during the last hurricane his gym blew away - literally. Now he had to drive for more than half an hour to get to the nearest centre in the same fitness chain, and every time he took the drive, which was nearly every day, he cursed the state he lived in. Why his mother had ended up there with him he couldn't even remember now. It was so long ago. It was when Led Zeppelin still existed and when guys had long hair, and smoking was considered cool. But of all the states she could choose between, she chose the one state he absolutely hated. Besides the storms and hurricanes it was generally too hot and humid and the majority of the people were either uptight or simply just conservative. But of course most of them were way into their sixties.

When Sam came home he went directly into his room. He preferred it like that. Even though he didn't consider himself a loner, recent years had

forced him to become one. His uncle was probably the biggest reason, but his mother was a close runner up. They both did absolutely nothing and every time he saw them, he was reminded of how much he did and how unfortunate his life had turned out. No degree, no girlfriend, no career, no house and no plan B. All he had to himself was his cat and the gym. His father and half-sister lived on the other side of the world. He got along with them but what did it matter when he was here in Florida, working twelve hours a day for eight bucks an hour.

Sam popped three of his strongest sleeping pills and went to bed. He put the TV on and for once he fell asleep almost right away.

Sam was already cursing when he entered the gym again the following day after a ten hour shift at work followed by two hours of unplanned overtime. He was hot, he was sweating bullets and his mood had reached new heights of anger that even he found overwhelming.

Sam had to park more than a block away from the gym because of all the freaks who chose to shop during the first week of December. It was only the third but even at work everyone had Christmas on their minds. Sandy already asked him if he wouldn't mind being Santa this year, as George couldn't do it. Of course he told her yes as Sandy was such a hottie, but now he had to figure out how the hell he would get out of it. How stupid Sandy was, though, to think he would care to be Santa. He fucking hated Christmas and everything about it. As a child he used to love December, finding it to be the best month of year, but now his birthday and all the gifts he was forced to buy for Christmas made him despise it. 'Who the hell in their right mind wanted to become a year older, with a drained wallet as well, all in one month,' he used to tell everyone repeatedly, during the first week of every December.

As Sam pushed the door into the gym, it gave away so loudly that everybody looked up when he entered. 'What the fuck!' he stated, looking

at the instructor closest to him. The man quickly looked away and Sam walked passed him as fast as he could, heading towards the weights. Every time he saw them they always reminded him of the time when he used to have his own fitness room, in the room where his uncle now slept. Sam sold all the equipment, as he needed the money, but today he couldn't recall what he had spent the money on afterwards. Probably drugs but, thinking about it, he really loved that workout room and everything in it. It was all top of the line back then and if he had known that his gym would blow away in a hurricane, he would never have sold one single weight or machine. He would have worked out at home instead.

'Are you done with that?' he asked the woman sitting on the bench presser, looking as though she was there to chat and not work out.

'No, almost!' she said, without looking up, still sitting with her water bottle in her hand.

'If you need to take a break why don't you go to the fucking mall, lady, and have yourself a Sundae ice cream. Instead of wasting my time,' he voiced, pushing his way through her and her friend, forcing her friend to jump away to avoid his shoulder.

'Fucking bitch,' he mumbled on and walked over to the weights, hoping he didn't have to queue.

When Sam finally finished his workout, it was nearly 9 p.m. He drank a protein shake before leaving the gym, making the door bang so hard after him he was sure they were all looking at him go.

'Yeah. See my sorry ass disappear, you fuckers,' he muttered to himself, walking through the parking lot and around the block to find his sixteen-year-old car still sitting there unlocked.