

Quelling Carols
Amy Manning Burns

It's Christmas Eve. Outside my apartment on Stone Street in Fayetteville, there is someone stomping past my large, living room windows. The blinds are closed, so I can't see who it is. The heavy footfalls echo off the walls of the apartment and reverberate inside my chest. The tinkling of jingle bells sounds in time with the footsteps. A loud knock and a booming "Ho...Ho...Ho..." make me jump.

Opening the door a crack I see...Santa Claus, literally Santa Claus, standing on the other side of the screen door. I hesitate at first. It's dark, I'm alone, and someone dressed in a Santa suit is standing on my front stoop under the glow of the streetlight. But, when I notice the watercolor-blue eyes, I open the door wider.

It's this guy I'll call Alex in a fur-trimmed red coat, red pants, and a white beard who steps through my doorway. He's the maintenance man for my apartment complex. His white-blond hair, which usually sticks up like strands of cotton candy, is contained under the Santa hat.

He is cute – wild-man hair and all. Alex's eyes, framed by dark blonde eye lashes, are as translucent as blue watercolor paint. He jokes easily and is quick with the one-liners. I remember the weekend Alex, a mutual friend, and I go to a twenty-four hour diner where they serve yellow gravy out of a can over crunchy hash browns. We bring the smell of the clubs where we danced that night with us, the three of us reeking of cigarettes and stale sweat. Alex and I sat next to each other in the booth, our thighs touching.

"Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas!" Alex booms. I laugh when I see that he's stuck cotton ball strands on his eyebrows and has a pillow stuffed under the suit. Santa opens a red bag, pulling out an ornament to hang on my four-foot tree, which he proclaims as "pitiful" in a big, deep voice. He hands me two gift certificates to Victoria's Secret, a bold move considering we are still dancing around our mutual attraction.

Then an awkwardness falls between us. He hesitates, not knowing what to say next. I don't know what to say either. Framed by the white trim on his hat and the white beard, those blue eyes stare out at me, gauging my reaction, waiting for...what?

The moment vanishes, and Santa says something about having a busy night ahead of him and bustles out my front door, bells ringing. I open the living room blinds and wave at him as he passes by the two large windows. He turns the corner at the other end of the triplex and disappears in a wink in the dark. Twenty minutes later Alex returns – sans red suit – to go with me to Christmas Eve mass. Smiling, he is amazed by the story of my visit from Santa.

On this night, those blue eyes - the same ones I'll think about shining against all that white fluff for Christmases to come - stare at me as we enter the Fayetteville time square after Christmas Eve mass. The square is strung with thousands of particolored lights. They outline every store and encircle each tree. Glowing, dancing snowmen and reindeer greet us as we turn corners. Where the tinkling of holiday music is coming from, we have no idea.

I walk on the sidewalk that surrounds the old post office, the centerpiece of the square. Alex is beside me. At one point, I think, he gives me his scarf. Maybe it is here

that we pause and look at each other, the unsaid things weighing on our chests. No words can form. Breath falters on our lips. Speech is impossible. But, in that moment, everything becomes possible.

Fifteen months pass. It's nighttime in late winter, and the apartment is almost empty of furniture and packed boxes. I'm crouched against the wall, on the floor, staring across the living room at the two big windows, sobbing. Sobbing until I feel sick. Alex and I are moving out of the apartment on Stone Street. He thinks the apartment is too old and dirty, and I don't clean enough. And truth be told, I don't.

Crying in to a wad of paper towels, I think back to the previous fall, our first here as a couple on Stone Street. We sit on the concrete stairs that lead to the back door of the apartment, watching a meteor show rain hellfire on the earth. Meteors burn across the sky in flaming-orange and white-hot yellow. Ancient people used to believe that meteors were bad omens, combustible warnings from God that disaster loomed.

We are smoking cigars. The grey smoke encircles our heads, which are tilted toward the show in the sky. Alex says he wants to be finished with school in three years; he's working on his B.S. at the local university. I lean in to his shoulder and purr that I'd like to be married to him in three years.

"Well," Alex says and regards the glowing end of his cigar, "we'll see. Some things will have to change first."

"Some things" mean me. I recoil from his body.

Some nights when I can't sleep, I imagine myself walking around my old apartment on Stone Street. I open the front door to see Santa Claus with an ornament for me dangling from one gloved finger. My mind pauses where we paused in the middle of the living room that Christmas Eve, our eyes on each other's faces, waiting for words that wouldn't come until much later.

I don't like thinking of the night we sat on the stairs watching the meteors. I like it here in this moment on Christmas Eve on Stone Street. I visit it quite often. I cup it in the palm of my memory until I fall asleep.