



Roses in December

*God gave us memories so that we
might have roses in December.*

— James M. Barrie

The new nurse found the missing old man in the garden, head back and moonlight in his eyes, howling like a wolf. He'd ripped open his pale blue pajama tops, the ones with the Wintercrest Nursing Home logo on the right breast pocket. His hairy chest gleamed silver. Discarded buttons littered the snow like pocket change. He was barefoot. He was howling. He must be, thought the nurse, a total loon.

“Mr. Holstead?” She leaned in close enough to turn and read the plastic band on his wrist. “Barry?”

“Arrrrrrrrrrrrroooooooooooooo!” howled the old man, a bitter breeze tossing his long grey hair.

The name was familiar — something she had been told by one of the day nurses. Holstead . . . Yes, that was it. The poor man's wife had died just last week. Compassion displaced her irritation at being outside in fifteen degree weather. She touched his arm. "You're going to catch a cold out here, sir."

Another melancholy howl. From somewhere beyond the grounds a neighborhood dog answered. She looked in its direction, but could see little for the security wall. A rooftop just the other side twinkled with Christmas lights.

She took him firmly by the arm and tugged him toward the home. "Come on, Mr. Holstead. We're going inside." The old man was stronger than he looked. She pulled, but he didn't budge.

"Do you smell it?" he asked unexpectedly.

"Smell what?"

A long, deep shuddering breath. Head back. Eyes closed. Moonlight in his beard. "Yesterday," he whispered. "As clear and sweet as a rose. Yesterday."

"I don't know what you mean."

He smiled at her gently. "Christmas Eve, 1944. Glenn Miller caught a plane to Paris and was never heard from again. I was in the Philippines, having just taken Guam with Admiral Halsey. I was on R & R, mourning Miller's death with too many beers and howls that sent the local girls to work the other side of the room, when this U.S.O. dancer put on

Moonlight Serenade.”

She smiled at him indulgently, shivering now. “We can continue this story inside, Mr. Holstead.”

“Sweet, sweet Betty. The first time I saw her, I knew this day would come.” He leaned back against the nurse’s arm, opened his mouth, emitted another of his eerie howls. It seemed to go on forever, the nurse pulling unsuccessfully on his arm, the hound on the other side of the wall adding its own sad harmony, and the ambivalent full moon dominating the sky.

“Betty? Was she your wife?” the nurse asked when the howl had finally died.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Mr. Holstead.” It sounded condescending to her. Insincere and contrite. She struggled for a better response, but before she could say anything else, he spoke again.

“I loved her,” was all he said, softly, wistfully.

“I’m sure you miss her terribly,” added the nurse.

He nodded. “Her and all the others.”

“Others?”

“Deborah and Julie. Delice and Dina and lovely Paula Jean. I miss them all. And each time,” he said, staring now into her eyes with an intensity that made her step back, “I tell myself I won’t fall in love with another.

“But I always do.”

He howled.

Pity, she thought, that such a nice old man should be so delusional. But enough of this; it was time to get him back inside. “If you don’t come in with me now,” she said, breaking into the middle of the wolf’s call, “I’ll have to go in and get security. They’ll bring you in by force, Mr. Holstead. You don’t want that, do you?”

He smiled at her, snorted a small careless laugh. “No. I suppose not. Someone might be hurt.” Then he seemed to notice her shivering. Wrapping an arm around her shoulders, he steered her toward the door.

Moments later, they were back in the Spartan room where he’d spent the last seven years watching his wife deteriorate. The nurse tucked him into bed and, on impulse, planted a single brief kiss on his cheek. “You buzz for me if you need anything, Mr. Holstead.”

“Thank you.” His eyes twinkled in the light from the window. She had the impression that he was laughing at some secret joke.

“Goodnight.” At the door she smiled back at him. “And Merry Christmas, Mr. Holstead.”

“Merry Christmas to you, too.”

Closing the door behind her, she stopped in the hall and stood there for a long minute, hand on the knob. *Moonlight Serenade* by Glenn Miller — could she get it on compact disk or would she have to find an old album at an

auction? It would have been nice to have given it to the old man tomorrow for Christmas. Obviously no one else had remembered him.

A cold breeze kissed her ankles. Drafty old place, she thought, just before she realized that the chill was coming from under the old man's door. She turned and pushed it open. Swept her eyes around the empty room, across the deserted bed, to the curtains blowing back from the open window. The old man's pajamas lay on the floor. She ran to the window and looked out, but there was only the wind and the cold and the moonlight.

And a set of tracks leading out across the snow toward the security wall.

Wolf tracks.

From somewhere beyond the wall came an echoing howl . . .

