

Tennessee Christmas

By Ría Prestía

The Present

When I think about Christmas many great ones fill my mind, but one that pops in every time and always puts a warm feeling in my heart was the Christmas when Gunner Jones found the true meaning. It was many years ago when I was in high school—ninth grade to be exact.

The Past

Gunner Jones is a troublemaker. Not a bully, but a troublemaker. He's the type of kid that sits in the back of the room and throws paper balls around when he thinks the teacher isn't looking. But the one thing that Gunner doesn't know is that the teacher, Mrs. O'Conner knows he's doing it. Mrs. O'Conner does call him out every once and a while, and he does what he does best—denies it, and then Mrs. O'Conner gives a slight laugh and rolls her eyes to his denial when you know deep down she's thinking, *keep believing that I didn't see you do it Gunner—keep believing.*

Anyway, a lot of kids don't like Mrs. O'Conner because she's tough. They think she's mean, but I know that she's hard on us because if she isn't, we won't reach our potential in life. She pounds writing and reading into our head the way my grandpa pounds the hammer at the cars he restores. It seems like they are both determined to mold the metal.

The first day I met Mrs. O'Conner, with her hair up in a clip and her reading glasses on, was right after Labor Day when my parents moved us permanently to Tennessee after my dad retired from the Air Force. By the way, my name is Autumn, and yes, I was named after the season that I share a name with. See my grandparents met in autumn, my parents got engaged and married in autumn, many of my great great grandparents were also born in autumn, so the name is appropriate. Besides, it really is my favorite season, especially in Tennessee. There was so much family connection to the season of autumn that when I was born on a beautiful November day, my parents thought it was faith, and so voila there was my name, Autumn Gaynor.

I do have an older brother named Tanner. Tanner is older than me by two years. He's a football player on the JV squad. He's 6 foot 3 and built from working out, and yes, he's cute and yeah, he knows it, and so do the girls. He's my best friend,

and he always will be. He really is. Tanner is the type of big brother that will put his life on the line for you, and at 6 foot 3 and full of muscle . . . well people sort of automatically back off if Tanner confronts them. But deep down, he's really sensitive and hates to fight anyone. But if anyone bothers me, he'll get involved, and well . . . I guess protect his younger sister. Tanner is like our dad who is a tough man with a strong personality who has a sensitive interior.

Well back to Mrs. O'Conner. See, I figured that the class would be boring because usually English class is. I hate to admit it, but the books us kids want to read versus the ones the school board picks is well like comparing granny smith apples to pineapples. They're both fruits, but taste really different. Pineapple is sweeter.

However, Mrs. O'Conner is a bit different. Maybe it's because she's been teaching for so long that she doesn't care what anyone says to her anymore. Or maybe it's because she has taught ninth grade for so long that she understands us. I'm not sure, but she does the "shall we say curriculum", but she always adds a twist to it. She adds fun projects and tries hard to tell jokes and connect the humdrum story to everyday life. On top of that, she does literature circles so we get to pick the book we want to read in our small group instead of the class reading the same book. The craziest thing is that she has read all the books from the list we can choose from, so she can join in on the conversation in any lit circle and add a lot of insight to the story. She really knows her subject area unbelievably well.

Mrs. O'Conner is not from Tennessee and neither are my grandparents for that matter. She's originally from New York and so are my grandparents. And although she's been out of the Big Apple for years, she still has a thick accent like my grandmother. Except Gram's has a hint of Italian to it and Mrs. O'Conner's is Irish, and she can be really strict or really fun. It just depends on your attitude. Don't piss her off or well—let's just say that the heavy Irish strictness will come out in droves as well as her accent. She'll write you up faster than you can say, "Happy Birthday!" But after three months in her English class, I realized that I liked the class, and I liked Mrs. O'Conner. I think I get her because she gets us. She tells us every once in a while about her past—just little tidbits of information. She doesn't divulge a lot. I guess I can understand why. I mean, how much info do your students need to know about you? Some kids think she's ancient because she's seventy years old. You heard me right—she's seventy years old. Well, maybe seventy is ancient when you're only fifteen.

So now back to Gunner. See Gunner is a troublemaker because well, it's sort of what people expect. He really isn't into school and an education. He reads at grade level, but he doesn't apply himself at all. Gunner is smart, and he's able to figure things out, you know—fix things. He likes to work on cars. My grandpa has an auto body shop in town, and Gunner spends his afternoons their working on old cars. My grandpa loves cars. He knows so much about them, and well he gave Gunner a job at the shop after school. Gunner is fifteen and he needs to get through high school and get a diploma—something he seems to try real hard not to get. And well,

he keeps stopping himself because he hates to read and do school work. I think it's more because he's afraid that he won't be able to handle the workload and he'll fail or end up dropping out.

The job at the shop is nothing big, but I think Grandpa gets a kick out of teaching Gunner the ropes. He did the same thing with my dad, and my uncle too. My grandpa loves all cars and he's been restoring them since he was fifteen. He too started by working at the local auto body shop near his home. That's what he did in order to pay for his college degree. Grandpa is a man who believes you need both in this crazy world—a degree and a craft, and his degree was law, and his craft was restoring cars. My great grandma said that my grandpa in his youth needed a car, so they told him, "Go build one," and he did. The sixties classic muscle cars have been his favorites, but through the years Grandpa has worked on them all. It was a hobby and not his day job until he and Grandma moved here to Tennessee when they retired, and now he does it full time, but more for fun than for money. It seems like Grandpa knows every car that was ever made and can tell a '59 Ford from a '56 Ford by looking at the tailfins, and a '65 GTO from a '66 GTO by looking at the headlights and taillights. He's a detail man. That's what Gram calls him. He's an expert at details.

Gunner has that detail quality too. One time when we were driving with my best friend Faith and her mom, Gunner told Mrs. Hanley—Faith's mom—to bring the car into the shop to have it checked because he could hear a rattle in the engine—no one else heard it, and it was nothing too bad, but enough to cause a bigger problem if it had been ignored. So a ten-dollar part helped her to save a few hundred dollars. Gunner knew cars the way Grandpa knew cars.

See that's what I mean about Gunner—he's smart in his own way. Mrs. O'Conner gets that about him and about all of us. I think the hardest part she has is that there are over a hundred of us, and only one of her. But that's ninth grade—the coming of age years. It's the time when you screw up, have all the answers, and yes give attitude. But you're growing up and you're shedding your immaturity (somewhat) to become an adult and live in the adult world where you have to fight and compete to survive. For some of us that's scary. So not doing our *potential* as the principal, Mr. Bull says is because we're too afraid to step out onto the road and grow up, especially if we don't believe we can do it. Which is how Gunner feels. He doesn't believe that he can do it. Some teachers forget about this age and get caught up in the state, the mandates, the standards and making the grade, but Mrs. O'Conner, she cares about the students and who we are. I think sometimes she cares a little too much, but I guess that comes with the job.

My grandma is a writer. That's what she does. She used to be an English teacher too, and when she and Grandpa first moved here to their mountain home, Grandma substitute taught in the town. But then Grandma started to publish her stories and well, she's done pretty well with it. She also has a cute little shop in town that sells pretty much everything. It's where she brews the best coffee in the world

and people can coffee clutch while reading a book, listen to music, or just hang. It's become the local hangout for many of the students in town and grandma loves it. In her spare time, which is really rare, she volunteers at the local Hospice. She deals with dying people and helping them by bringing them books and reading stories to them or just talking. Grandma loves to talk which is ironic because Grandpa is more the silent type. Maybe that's why they lasted almost sixty years. I think he just ignores her when she starts to rattle on and on, but he says he hears everything she says.

Anyway, Gram also helps the people in Hospice to write their memoirs so that they can pass them on to their families. She listens to them as they talk about their life, and she writes down what they say and then she types the memories up on beautiful linen paper and puts them in a beautiful scrapbook like book for them to give to their family. She says it's sad when people are terminal, and you know it, and they know it but Gram—in a weird way—believes that we are all terminal and that this life is very temporary. She can't be a hope stealer, so she smiles and says, "It'll be okay. It's all in God's plan and you're a strong person. You'll get through this just have hope. See deep down Gram can't rob a person of hope. Hope is the one thing that once extinguished—well there is nothing left to live for. When hope is gone—you end up in a dark place: a place that is the hardest to get back from. That's what happened to Gunner the day his mom was diagnosed with cancer. For the first time the troublemaker in the back of the room had no desire to throw a paper ball. For the first time, Gunner Jones had no mischief in his eyes. For the first time, Gunner's eyes had lost their hope and they were lifeless—practically dead. And well, for the first time, the students got to see the real Mrs. O'Conner; the Mrs. O'Conner we never knew. For the first time, Mrs. O'Conner wanted Gunner to throw the paper ball.

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It was 4:30 in the afternoon the day after Thanksgiving and Grandma's coffee shop *A Little Daily Break* was pretty packed with people. It was always like that. It was a place where students, teachers and townspeople all gathered. It was situated in the town square close by Grandpa's auto shop. Let's say close enough for Gramps to continuously get his fresh coffee. This afternoon, I was helping out making some cookies and pastries and breads. We were getting ready for the holiday season. Even my mom was in and out taking photos of merchandise to put on Gram's website in order to help sell stuff. That's what mom does for a living, she's a photographer, and since we moved to Tennessee she took over the shop next door to Grandma's and made it her studio. Mom's photography is amazing. It really is. She does weddings, newborn photos, holiday family pictures, and she also sells her photos that she has captured of nature and people, and life basically. What Grandma

does with words, my mom does with photos—reflects on life.

Ever since we moved permanently to Tennessee, I work at Grandma's shop *A Little Daily Break* almost every day after school. I really like it, and I know that she does too. She seems to ask me advice on new things to sell and lets me come up with new coffee concoctions that the young customers like a lot. I was totally surprised when she handed me a special apron and a shirt that had *A Little Daily Break* on the top right hand corner with the words Assistant Manager, Autumn on it. I looked at her with a huge smile and she said, "You deserve it, and now with your help, I can do a little more volunteering at Hospice and let you run the place."

Grandma's shop was full of handmade gifts and crafts like jewelry and scarves and hats. There was a seasonal shop that changed well with the seasons and of course the homemade bakery items and breads. Grandpa never said anything until the day in October of this year when grandma decided to add an all day lunch menu. Then he thought that she was pushing it a bit. But she was adamant about it and he just caved in and decided to let her be. Besides, he actually loves her cooking and it makes it easier for him to get lunch and dinner with her working so close. For grandma, it gives her the ability to take out her family recipes and cook up a storm of food like chicken or eggplant parmigiano, chicken Alfredo, antipasto salad, stuffed shells, beef stroganoff, stuffed cabbage, and chicken salad. The list is endless and every day brings a new menu pretty much. The townspeople love it, and as always Grandma's idea took off and it was a success.

Just then as I was busy in my own world, the door opened to the shop and Gunner Jones walked in, and I was slightly surprised to see him since he had never come into the store before. I watched him quietly walk to the corner and sit in the old leather wingback chair and put on his headset and close his eyes. I wasn't sure what to do since one of the things we like to do at *A Little Daily Break* is to say hi to each of our customers as they enter, but Gunner looked like that was the last thing he wanted me to do. But I had to do something because that's just me. I felt bad about his mom and I wanted to say something to him but at the same time, I didn't want to say something, so instead, I decided to make him one of my special coffee drinks—a double shot of espresso with peppermint and vanilla flavoring, steamed half and half, whipped cream and white chocolate shavings. As I started to bring it to him, I thought to myself, *watch he probably drinks his coffee black.*

I handed him the coffee and said, "It's on the house."

He looked at it, smelled it and said, "I drink my coffee black."

I smirked and said, "Of course you do."

Just then Mrs. O'Conner walked in and looked at the two of us and smiled.

Gunner made a smirk and turned his head to look out the window. I turned to Mrs. O'Conner and said, "Hi Mrs. O'Conner, would you like your usual?"

She looked at Gunner and then at me and said, "No, I'll have what he has."

I smiled and said, "Cool! I'll make you one too. It's one of my special drinks!"

I smiled and handed the coffee to Gunner who took it begrudgingly.

I walked away in a surprised manner because Mrs. O'Conner, like Gunner, usually takes her coffee black. I wasn't far from them, so I could hear their conversation which I purposely wasn't trying to do, but I was curious. So I saw Mrs. O'Conner sit down in the chair next to Gunner and take off her gloves. She started to speak and as typical, Gunner kept his headset on and closed his eyes. Mrs. O'Conner smiled and tapped him on the hand a few times. Finally, he opened his eyes, took off his headset and said, "What?"

"Gunner, I need to talk to you."

"About what? "

"Your grade in my class. That's what. Gunner you're too smart to fail my class. You need to pass me this semester and year and get your credits towards a diploma."

"I hate language arts class. It's boring. I don't like writing."

"I don't believe you. I saw your records from elementary and middle school. Your grades were great and your reading and writing scores were fantastic. What happened that changed that?"

"I grew up. I'm not going to college. I just want to work and make money. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing. I've been doing that for over fifty years. It's worked for me, but I finished school first, and I worked while I went to school and got a diploma. Not every career requires college, but critical thinking skills are needed for probably all jobs, and that's what my class gives you with the reading and writing. Do you think crime scene investigators never read a murder mystery?"

I interrupted with her coffee and Mrs. O'Conner smiled, smelled the coffee, took a sip and then really smiled and said, "This is wonderful. I think I found something better than my black coffee. What about you Gunner? What do you think?"

"It's okay," he said quickly.

I smiled and turned to walk away when Mrs. O'Conner asked me to stay and sit with them.

I gave a slight smile . . . well a fake smile and slowly sat down.

We all sat there staring at each other until Mrs. O'Conner finally broke the thick silence.

"Autumn, I need your help."

"Um . . . my help with what?" I asked curiously.

"With Gunner and my class. Well, with his paper for my class."

"Why me?" I asked.

"Because you're one of my best students, and I think you can handle this rebel."

"I'm not a rebel," Gunner said with a smile.

"Yes, you are. Look, you're smiling. You like people thinking that," Mrs. O'Conner said.

"I'm not writing a paper," Gunner said.

"Then how will I help you?" Autumn asked.

"Write it for me," he told me with a grin.

"No way Dude. I'll help because I'm nice and Mrs. O asked, but there's no way

in hell I'll write it for you."

Mrs. O'Conner started laughing.

"What's so funny, I asked."

"I knew you could handle him. That's why I asked you. You're a tuff sassy ass.

"Mrs. O'Conner!" I said shocked.

"What? I'm not in the classroom. I can say that. Besides it's the truth. You are."

"I laughed out loud and said, " Yeah, I am," in a pretty proud manner.

I looked at Gunner and said, "We meet here after school for 45 minutes and then you can head to the auto body shop."

"My boss won't like that," he said.

"Really? I think you seem to forget that your boss is my grandfather. You know the one with a college degree. Try and worm your way out of this one," I said sarcastically.

Gunner got pissed. I saw it in his face, but I didn't care. I liked him and deep down I really did want to help him. Then Mrs. O'Conner asked Gunner about his mom. I was surprised that he answered her. "She's stage two almost 3. Is that what you want to know?"

"I'm sorry Gunner. What do the doctors say?"

"The usual, chemo, radiation and prayers. It seems to be a standard phrase these days."

"How is she doing?"

"The treatments suck, and she's very sick a lot. She's half way through them. Two more weeks to go and then they'll see if it the treatment worked."

"She's young, Gunner. That's a plus. She can fight and she can win. Don't give up hope."

"Hope? Please. What about her job? That's why I need to work. She can't work and have treatments, and fight, and if she misses work, she doesn't get paid. Plus our health insurance has large copays. Reality sort of squashes the mystical idea of hope, Mrs. O'Conner."

I listened to him talk and felt like I was listening to an adult. He realized all the issues and wanted to fix them. I understood why school didn't seem to be top on his list, and why hope seemed like an illogical answer.

"Hope is necessary because it helps you to critically think and find answers, and because it keeps you alert to possibilities. Hope helps God send people into your life to help you. People who care. Hope is very important to have. It's the door to God's graces."

Right then and there Mrs. O sounded like my grandmother.

"Maybe I can help," Mrs. O'Conner said which surprised Gunner and me.

"How?" he asked.

"Well, I have a huge house—well a mansion. It's an old Colonial up on the hill with many acres of property and a large wrap around porch where only my two dogs and I live. And well, I do have a barn and a few horses too, but I have someone I pay who cares for them. You and your mom could stay with me during the rest of the treatments and until she's better. I don't need rent money. I'm financially good. My husband left me well off and I have no children except for my students. Also, I'm

an active member on the board at the hospital. I can try to help with the copays."

I was shocked. I had no idea that Mrs. O'Conner was in such a position. It really surprised me, and I could tell Gunner was as well.

"There is one catch," she said.

"I knew it," Gunner said. "What?" he asked with attitude.

"You focus on school, and you let Autumn help you, and you do your work in all classes so you pass on to tenth grade."

"I have to talk to my mom first. Mrs. O'Conner, I don't like school. My plan is to drop out at sixteen which is soon and to work."

"Do you think everyone likes school? It's laden with work and rules, but it teaches you how to be a responsible adult in society. It gives you a foundation to make wise choices as an adult. I'm not trying to curtail your freedom. I'm trying to help you have more freedom as an adult to do things you really want to do. You need to stay in school."

"She's trying to help you," I said. "Don't be such a jerk."

I saw Mrs. O'Conner smile.

"Gunner, you and your mom can stay with me as long as you want."

Gunner shook his head in understanding and said, "Okay."

Mrs. O'Conner put her gloves on and stood up. "Have your mom call me, and we'll arrange everything."

She handed him a card that had her number on it, and he took it.

"Thanks Autumn for the wonderful coffee. I'll be back tomorrow for another one."

She smiled and left. I looked at Gunner and said, "Tomorrow. After school . . . here, and don't be late."

"Fine," was all he said with just a slight attitude not his usual . . . Fiiiiiiiiinnne where he exemplifies the word. I figured it was an improvement. I started to walk away when he touched my hand. I quickly turned to face him. I was slightly taken back by his touch. Then he smiled slightly and said, "Autumn, thank you. The coffee was really good."

I smiled at him, and yes, I melted a bit inside because if I forget to mention it earlier Gunner was really handsome. He had dark hair that was cut short and these beautiful green eyes. He was tall and had a presence about him that was hard to ignore. I composed myself and said, "You're welcome," as I let my hand linger in his."

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I was closing down the store when Grandma asked me to sit down for a minute, so I did. She poured some hot cocoa that was left in the caraffe for us while I locked the door.

"Autumn, I think it's very noble of you to help Gunner with his classwork."

"How did you know?"

"I ran into Mrs. O'Conner at the hospital. She was there getting information

on how to help Gunner's mom."

"I forgot. This is a small town," I said.

"News travels fast. Besides, Amy, Gunner's mom is originally from here."

"Gunner didn't say that," I said surprised.

"He doesn't know. But Mrs. O'Conner knows. Amy was a student of hers and Amy's dad was the pastor of one of the churches here. Her parents were killed in an auto accident many years ago after Amy left town at age seventeen with Gunner's dad, Ace."

"Ace?"

"Yes, Ace Jones. A real rebel. Came here on his Harley to live with his grandmother who couldn't handle him. Poor old lady. She too passed quickly from a heart attack after he left. He drained her of everything she had. It's a sad story, but Amy fell for him, and her parents totally did not approve. The more restrictions they placed on her, the more she rebelled. She snuck out all the time to meet him, and one night, she left with him. Her parents were never the same. She wrote them three letters and then the letters stopped. Some time after that they were killed in an accident and no one knew where Amy was."

"What about Gunner's dad?"

"Well, I heard Gunner's dad took off after Gunner was born and from what Mrs. O'Conner was able to find out he died on his bike one night."

"So if Amy dies, Gunner has no one," I said sadly.

"Yes, he has no one."

I got quiet and started to drink my cocoa and felt really sad inside. I mean how could someone at the age of sixteen be faced with having no one in his life. It seemed so very unfair. I didn't know what to think or even say.

"I wanted you to know and so did Mrs. O'Conner. Just realize that Gunner has a lot to deal with at a very young age."

"I will, Grandma."

When she and I left, I felt really appreciative of my own life and all that I had in it with my family and friends. I felt very lucky, and I wondered why I was blessed and Gunner wasn't. At least at that moment it didn't feel like he was blessed to me.

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As planned, Gunner showed up right after school which surprised me and he ordered my special drink which also surprised me. We sat at a small round table and the first thing I did was look at his folders for his classes, and of course as I figured they were each filled with undone handouts and blank notebook paper.

"Do you do any work in your classes?" I asked in a slightly condescending tone which probably wasn't good, so I quickly apologized. "Sorry. I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I guess I just can't figure out how you can go to school and do nothing. That to me would be really boring."

"I just find the stuff we have to read boring. I like history, but only when Mr.

Cramp is showing us war events with his soldier collections."

"Oh, yeah, I agree. Just taking notes on dates and people bores me too, but when he sets up the American Revolution battles on his wooden table and calls us up to the center of the room, it's fun."

"Math class is okay, but I like working with a partner and Mrs. Woods does that rarely. Her class is this quiet zone of independent work, and I hate it."

"How can you have an 'F' for Mrs. O'Conner. Her class is good, and she's not boring? "

"I find books boring."

I took a sip of my coffee and a bite of a cookie and sat back. I started to talk in an excited voice which meant my eyes were wide open and my hands were flying. I could tell that Gunner found it cute, and noticed that he couldn't help but smile. I blushed a bit and then got on a tangent about *The Great Gatsby*.

"Gunner, we're reading about *Gatsby*. F.Scott Fitzgerald's wonderful novel. That's not boring. A young not rich man falls for a debutant and then leaves for war. Daisy loves him, but she loves money too and all it can buy, so she marries another man for money and status and *Gatsby* finds out, so he goes on this quest to acquire money so that he can come back and win her heart. And yes his money is made through bootlegging and illegal ventures that were prevalent in the Roaring *Twenties*, and when he returns he woos her and they have this torrid love affair of which her philandering husband discovers and in his jealousy tries to get Daisy back. Daisy in a haste is driving *Gatsby's* car and kills her husband's lover by accident. Daisy stays married to her husband for his power and wealth because she was just using *Gatsby* as a diversion to her boring life and to make her hubby jealous. Her husband twists the story of who killed his lover and makes his lover's husband who is his mechanic think it was *Gatsby* driving. And the disoriented husband of his lover kills *Gatsby*. It's so sad," I said. I could tell he was paying attention to me, which made me glad.

"So Daisy was a player for her own good," Gunner said.

"Yes, she was. She's a selfish woman and yes, she used *Gatsby*."

They were quiet for a moment. "Look," I said, "Fitzgerald's writing is full of run-on sentences and figurative language that can make the story confusing, and a literary analysis darn near impossible if you don't know figurative language, but it's an emotional book and we can watch the movie too so that you have a visual in your head when you read it.

"Why can't writers just say it as it is?" Gunner said. "In less words."

"Well, Mrs. O'Conner would say that it's because the words create the mystique, the ambiance and figurative language helps you critically think. It's reading between the lines. It's figuring out that Daisy is playing *Gatsby* without Fitzgerald saying it so bluntly. It's subtle and you have to draw that conclusion on your own through the characters thoughts, words and actions. It's called critical thinking."

"I have no desire to be a psychologist and cars don't think or talk or act on their own."

"No they don't. They need people to drive them and people need to think when they drive, and reading stuff like this helps you think at a higher level. It all

works together. I bet my grandpa would say the same thing. He restores cars and fixes engines, but he was also a lawyer. He thinks at a very high level and people respect that about him. You can't fix the car if you can't read the manual. And those manuals aren't easy at all. Look a car has a heart; it's called an engine. It has blood, it's called oil and it needs maintenance from a mechanic just like the human body needs service from a doctor. It all requires higher reading."

I reached into my book bag and took out my copy of *The Great Gatsby*. "You have to read the book before you can write the paper. You also need to understand figurative language and what it looks like in a story. We have a lot of work to get the paper done and to get you ready for her semester final, and we only have three weeks. This is my copy of *Gatsby*." I opened the book and started to flip through the pages. "As you can tell, it's written in and there's lots of underlining and notes. This is how you read a novel for a literary analysis. I already marked all the figurative language and added periods to his run-ons to make it easier to understand his writing style. I'll let you read my copy."

"Is this like cheating?" Gunner said with a smirk.

"No, it's sharing notes from a fantastic note taker. And besides, you'll read it with me. Together, after school and weekends if needed. It's not a long book."

"I work Saturdays at the shop with your grandfather. I need the money."

"Well then Saturday nights. I can come to Mrs. O'Conner's. She doesn't live far from us."

"Saturday night? Like a date?" he asked.

"No, not a date. A book club meeting."

"Oh, okay," was all he said, but his eyes said more as he gazed at me. I felt him scanning my face in a serious tone and then he touched a loose strand of my dark hair and gently placed it behind my ear and out of my eye and then he stared deeply into my deep brown eyes. I got a little nervous and I bit my lip and then realized I had on this burgundy lipstick, and I hoped it wasn't now on my teeth. "You're pretty," he said. "Really pretty and sweet in a sassy ass sort of way."

I blushed and all I could say was, "You just like that I don't take your shit."

"Maybe," was all he said with a smile.

I noticed his gaze at me and blushed even more. Then I put my glasses back on and decided that I'd let him chase me a bit, and that I was going to be very hard to catch, so I got right back to business. I gently tapped his finger to get him out of his trance and said, "First thing is that you need to make flash cards on the figurative language you need to know with definition and examples and then you need to study them daily. It's about forty words, but they're the bible for this class, and if you don't know them you're technically, shit-out-of-luck! And that my friend is a cliché."

"A what?" he asked.

"A cliché." I pulled out my flashcards and pulled out the one marked cliché and handed it to him. "Read this. Front and back. Shit-out-of-luck is an example of a cliché; a phrase that is over used and has no thought to it.

He did what I asked and then said, "Why can't I just study your cards?"

"No dude. You can copy mine onto your own note cards."

"That's double the work since you have them."

"Gunner do you get this. The copying of the notes by your hand from my cards makes your brain and hand work together. That's what gives your brain the memory retention so that you can find a simile on your own in the story because you know what it looks like. It's not that different from working on a car. The manual helps with steps on how to fix the air conditioning and after numerous attempts at doing it, the practice lets your brain remember it and you can fix it without the manual or notes. And guess what? Then you're a master at it. It's no different."

"You sound like Mrs. O'Conner. Besides, fixing a car is more fun than analyzing a story."

"Not to me. I live in my books. I love to write my own stories and create complex characters and their conflicts. It's like psychology. I find it fun."

"Well, I live under the hood of a car. Cars are simple. You fix them, they run and they don't tell you what to do."

"Then why do men call them she and give them a female personality?" I asked.

"Because it's a woman that doesn't talk back and give attitude."

"Funny, that's what Gramps says, too, but they still need TLC, just like a woman!"

"I gave a big smile, and handed him blank note cards and a pen. "You have a lot of copying to do, and besides copying my cards onto yours is the first time your studying so concentrate."

"Can I listen to my headset, Mrs. O'Conner?"

I gave him a serious frown and raised my eyebrows just like Mrs. O'Conner said, "I'm quizzing you when your done. There's music playing in the background here at the coffee shop. The choice is yours."

"Okay, teach. I hear ya."

I walked away knowing that he was doing this for his mom. He put his headset away and started copying. I raised the volume on the Christmas music that ran through our speakers and watched him smile. I knew that he and his mom being able to live with Mrs. O'Conner was a huge stress release on them. Plus Mrs. O's connection to the hospital would help them with the bills. Mrs. O'Conner was a real angel. I thought maybe that was what she meant when she said you have to keep your heart and eyes open to hope because she just shows up and you don't want to miss her. I just hoped that at some point, Gunner would do his education for himself.

* * *

It was already dark when I arrived at Mrs. O'Conner's house. I walked up the walkway and saw Gunner leaning over the wooden ledge of the wrap around porch and wondered what he was doing. He saw me and looked up and said "Hi!"

"What'cha up to?" I asked.

"Christmas lights. I found them stored in the garage and decided to put them up. Mrs. O'Conner seems to like the idea."

"That's pretty nice of you."

"We live here and she won't take any money, so I figured I could work for our room and board. Hey, stay there while I plug them in."

"Okay," I said and stood on the walkway. I stared at the house and when he plugged in the lights I was pretty shocked. "Wow. . ." was all I could say. Just then Mrs. O'Conner and Amy, Gunner's mom came out. I noticed that Amy looked frail and she had a beautiful quilt wrapped around her. She and Mrs. O'Conner walked slowly down the steps and stood next to me with the same expression of awe on their faces.

"Oh, Gunner, it's magnificent. The house hasn't been decorated since my husband Bill died. This is so nice. Thank you. Isn't it beautiful, Amy?"

"Yes, it is. Wow sweetie, I didn't know you had so much talent. It really is nice."

I too was impressed. The lights were organized by color and sat in perfect alignment. Gunner also found the giant Santa Clause and Nativity and put them out along with the lighted reindeer. And over to the side, he lit the living Christmas tree with lights and placed ornaments on it and lighted presents underneath the tree.

"I forgot how much stuff Bill had. Since we live so close to the town square, he would decorate the house for the families who would come by and look at the large town tree and decorations at night. He even decorated the gazebo, and we would pass out candy canes to the kids and hot cocoa. You can see the the whole town square from here and the Gazebo has a perfect view of the tree once they light it."

"I think that would be fun to pass out candy and I know Grandma plans on being open late the night of the tree lighting. I bet *A Little Daily Break* could supply some hot cocoa."

"Oh, Autumn, that's a perfect idea," Mrs. O'Conner cheered.

"We can do cookies too and set up the gazebo as our spot." I turned and looked at Gunner. "Can you decorate it for us? Please."

I saw that he smiled and couldn't say no to me.

"I guess so, but you have to help."

"Okay, I will"

"Gunner, there are more lights stored in the garage, but there are also more decorations in the attic. Bill, I believe thought he was Santa Clause. Use anything you want," she said with a big smile and a chuckle. Then she turned to Amy and said, "You need to get rest. It's getting too cold for you. How about we go watch a Christmas movie and sit by the fireplace? Hot cocoa would be good right now."

"I'm not arguing with you at all Mrs. O," Amy said.

"Oh, and Gunner, you two study wherever you want, but the study in the house is also a great room and feel free to put the fireplace on if you like."

* * *

Gunner opened the wooden double doors to the study and I followed him into the room. It was magnificent. The room was large and had built in shelves that were inundated with books. From the bay window you could see the gazebo and further to the town square. Cherry wood paneled half way up the walls to the chair rails and flowed with the wood floors. By the bay window sat two burgundy wing back chairs with matching ottomans. The pedestal cherry wood table sat between the chairs and a colorful Tiffany light sat on top of it. The room was dimly lit and gave a cozy feel. I ran my hand over the plush white throw that was gracefully placed over the arm of the sofa. I walked over to the shelves and gazed at the books. There must have been a thousand books on the shelves.

"This is a great library," I said in awe. "My grandparents have a similar room, but theirs is a combination train room and library."

"It must be the generation," I heard Gunner say as I pulled a copy of *The Great Gatsby* off of the shelf. It was in perfect condition and when I opened it I noticed two intriguing things. It was a first edition, which made it very old and it was signed by F. Scott Fitzgerald, which made it very rare and valuable. My hands started to shake, and I was about to drop it when Gunner gently took it from me and placed it back on the shelf.

"I can't believe she has a signed first copy. That's so unbelievable. I mean there has to be a story about how she got that."

"Well, the house is over a hundred years old and it belonged to her grandparents. Mrs. O'Conner told me that her grandfather was a newspaper man, so maybe he met Fitzgerald."

Just then Mrs. O'Conner came in with a tray that had two cups and a carafe on it with some snacks and chocolate. "A little hot cocoa," she said. She put the tray down and looked around and smiled. "The first time I entered this room since Bill died was yesterday when Gunner told me you were coming over to study. Bill and I sat in this room every night after dinner and we would each read our own books and talk and have coffee and Bill would sometimes have a little nightcap of *Jack Daniels*—a Tennessee favorite. When he died, I closed the room. It wasn't the same anymore. But yesterday, I aired it out and dusted and decided that the room needed life again in it—young life. Gunner, if you start a fire it will create a nice ambiance for reading."

"I'm on it," he said.

"If you need anything let me know."

"Thanks, Mrs. O'Conner," I said as I placed my bag on the floor by the chair. I poured some hot cocoa for both of us and watched Gunner start the fire. When he finished, he sat down on the chair and opened his copy of the book. We were almost finished with reading it and then he could write the literary analysis.

"I don't like her," he said.

"Who," I asked.

"Daisy. Why is *Gatsby* in love with a woman who could never love any one but herself?"

"I guess it's just how things are. I mean it happens in real life. Even women fall for guys who only love themselves," I said.

"Yeah, that's what my mom did."

I was slightly surprised that he said that. "Um...what do you mean?" I asked.

"My mom fell for a real bad boy. Seems my grandfather was a minister here in town and Mom was a good girl, and well you get the picture. My dad didn't treat her right, but she didn't see it. I bet people think I'm just like him."

And then it hit me. His whole bad boy get in trouble image was because he figured people were judging him based on who his dad was, so just be the part.

"You're not your father," I said sternly. "You are yourself."

"I have his DNA!" he snapped.

"So what! You also have choice. A choice to live your life and make it what you want. You have nothing to be embarrassed about because of who your dad was. It's why you feel so responsible to care for your mom isn't it? It's why you feel you have to work and provide for her. To make up for what your dad failed to do."

"I love my mom. I don't want her to die."

I grabbed his hand and the energy that ran through us shocked both of us.

"She will be okay. You have to have faith."

"Yeah, faith means God's will and what if His will is that she isn't suppose to be here?"

I felt sick inside because I knew he was right. I didn't know God's will. So I just held his hand and said, "You have to believe that whatever happens will be because of a plan bigger than ours and either way, you have friends who will be there for you."

"Well, we'll know right before Christmas if the treatments worked. She has a test in a few days."

I squeezed his hand and we leaned into each other, and then it happened—we kissed. It was soft and nice and sweet and he tasted like hot cocoa, and I melted inside. When we pulled apart he kept hold of my hand and said, "You're falling for the bad boy?"

I smiled and said, "If you were such a bad boy, my grandpa would never let you near me or his auto body shop. He protects those cars like he protects us. Besides, my dad and Mrs. O'Conner would never let me help you."

He smiled at me and I saw him blush and then we continued reading *Gatsby* and holding hands.

* * *

Conner wrote his paper, and with my support, he completed his work and handed it in. Winter break started and on the day before Christmas Eve his mom's test results came back. He was nervous, and so was she. I went to the doctors with them along with Mrs. O'Conner and we sat there on pins and needles. Finally, the doctor said that the treatments worked and although Amy had recovery still to go through, he felt good that she would beat the cancer. It was a highly emotional

moment for all of us. I watched Gunner hug his mom so hard that I thought she'd break, and then Gunner just cried really hard and I held him and cried too.

Mrs. O'Conner too had tears in her eyes and said, "Well, this is excellent, but you still need to stay with me and build your strength up."

Amy agreed because she had learned the past few weeks that you couldn't win trying to argue with Mrs. O'Conner, and that family and friends are necessary in life. By the time we got back to Mrs. O'Conner's house, we had enough time to set up the gazebo for the town tree lighting. A bunch of friends from school showed up along with my parents and grandparents. Gunner felt a bit overwhelmed by the well wishes. I could tell he wasn't used to people actually feeling good for him. His mom looked good and she and Mrs. O'Conner stood with my family close by the street in perfect view of the tree. When the tree was lit Gunner took hold of my hand and said, "Thank you."

I just smiled and said, "You're welcome", and then he kissed me . . . and again I melted.

Christmas was wonderful. My parents and my grandparents invited Gunner, Amy and Mrs. O'Conner and it became the most festive celebration. The food was fabulous, we watched Christmas movies, played games, and ate the best desserts in town as neighbors came popping in and out throughout the night to visit. It was close to midnight when Gunner and I were sitting outside on the swing that hung from the front porch. He took hold of my hand and gently kissed my fingers. At first I giggled a little and he smiled. Then he gently kissed me and said, "You're the best thing that has ever happened in my life."

I was surprised, but in a good way. It made me feel good. It made me feel special. I turned to him and said, "I'm so glad that Mrs. O'Conner asked me to help you. At first, I really wanted to say no, but I'm so glad I said yes."

We kissed again and it was so comfortable, so real. We sat there staring up at the stars when everyone came outside.

"I think I am going to restart an old tradition this year," Mrs. O'Conner said.

"What tradition?" Gram asked as she held grandpa's hand.

"I am going to throw a New Years Eve party again just like my parents did and Bill and I used to do before he died. In those days the entire town came to our home to celebrate. It's time to open the mansion up and have parties again. There is still so much about life for me to celebrate, and I thank you Amy, and Gunner for showing that to me."

"Is there time to plan," My grandpa asked.

"Of course there is," Mrs. O'Conner said. "I can post an invitation in the town square."

"Mrs. O'Conner, we can also post it on *Facebook* and invite people."

"*Facebook*? Oh, yes the school has a page, but um . . . I don't," she said.

"We'll set you up Mrs. O. Don't worry about that. Autumn and I will help you," Guner said.

"We can also put an invitation up in *A Little Daily Break*," Gram said.

"And the photo studio," Mom quickly added.

"And the auto body shop," Grandpa said.

"Oh, it will be a wonderful gala. We'll have music and dancing and tons of

food and we'll get decorations. I'm so excited. It will be fun!" Mrs. O'Conner said as she smiled.

It was a plan, and with everyone helping we would pull it off and have the best New Year's Eve ever, and we did. Gunner and I worked feverishly the whole week getting the mansion ready. And a mansion it was. I had no idea how many rooms there were until we started to set it up. Mrs. O'Conner opened the whole house and she turned the huge barn into a dance hall. It was amazing how fast she worked at hiring people to help. The whole town showed up and the night was full of love.

Gunner and I were dancing on the dance floor in the barn when he asked me "Will you go steady with me?"

I could tell he was nervous, and I blushed when I said, "Yes." It was what I wanted and it made me so happy. Gunner and I watched as my parents and grandparents joined us on the dance floor and then I smiled when my big brother Tanner did a very noble thing. He asked Mrs. O'Conner to dance. I saw her smile and blush and take his hand and follow him onto the dance floor. He danced a few dances with her and then Gunner cut in and twirled her around to the music. It was a wonderful sight to see, and I knew Mrs. O'Conner loved it. That was the magic—the hope that she was talking about. Once your heart is open, you cannot stop hope from coming in. Mrs. O'Conner set out to help Gunner with school and she ended up helping Amy live, and helping herself bring life back into her old mansion. In the end, by giving hope to someone, she received hope herself. In the magic of the night, I couldn't help but think that Bill was there with her and that he helped in making all this happen somehow, and then my grandma touched my shoulder and said, "Bill is here. This is all his doing. He brought them together, he opened this house again and her heart."

"I was just thinking the same thing," I said.

"You have the gift, too Autumn,"

"What gift is that," I asked her.

"To know when the two worlds . . . heaven and earth are blending. To feel the presence of the ones who have gone home, but return when we need them. You can sense it like me."

I hugged Grandma and knew she was right. I could sense it and maybe that made me too sensitive to the world, but it was who I was. So by being so sensitive I risk being hurt, but if I don't risk feeling and possibly hurting then I'm not living life because life is full of emotions.

Amy beat the cancer and went back to school and started working in the hospital. Gunner and his mom stayed with Mrs. O'Conner permanently, and they became a family, and in time Gunner realized that even though his dad's DNA ran through him, so did his mom's, and he had the choice of who he was going to be. Gunner and I did date for a while, and he did graduate high school—but that's another story.

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