

No Place Like Home for the Holidays

by Thomas Easterling

Lu's mother, Donna, was a pretty woman, not quite fifty years old, but Lu thought she looked tired. He thought it was because she worried all the time. She worried about money. She worried about her garden—even lost sleep when she thought the deer might be coming in at night to eat her pears or her blueberries. She worried about starving children in North Korea, and neglected Chihuahuas in Beverly Hills. Most of all she worried about Lu. She worried that Lu didn't attend church regularly. Since his father died eight years ago after playing tennis, she worried that Lu wasn't taking good enough care of himself. She worried that he was exercising too much, since that might have done his father in, and she worried that he looked too thin. She worried that he was working too hard; she worried that he was having too much fun. Finally, she worried that he didn't get out enough because he hadn't met some girl nice enough to make him begin thinking about settling down. Lu loved his mother, but her anxieties nagged at him like poison ivy. You can't avoid scratching it, but the more you do, the worse it gets. He wanted to go home because he wanted to see her; he dreaded going home because her worries made him feel guilty even though he had come to the conclusion that the only way he could enjoy life was to live it for himself.

Donna had called him seven times on the six-hour trip home to make sure that he wasn't sleepy, and to let him know that there had been a patch of sleet between Tallulah and their house in Natchitoches. She was waiting for him on the front porch as he drove up. "Sonny!" she shouted, all smiles. "You're home!"

"Yep, I made it," he said, releasing himself from her embrace. "I'm surprised I didn't run off the road trying to find the cell phone

every time it rang, but I guess my guardian angel was looking over my shoulder.”

“Stop teasing me,” she said.

“C'mon, Mom,” he said. “You know I'm glad to be home. You've got the place all dolled up for Christmas. It's gorgeous. We going to any parties tonight?”

“Of course,” Donna said. “Bubba and Betty Gold are having their annual get together before midnight mass, and the Markusons have invited us over for supper.”

“Sounds like fun,” Lu said gamely. Inwardly, he groaned. Bubba Gold was a lawyer, and his son just got out of law school, and even though he was an overweight, self-absorbed prick, everyone at the party would be busy congratulating him for passing the bar, and for getting engaged to a beautiful brunette gold-digger. Jack, the son, would patronize him at some point by telling him how much more fun it must be to tend the bar than pass it. Then he would call the fiancée over for the formal introduction, and Lu would see the ring and know that it cost more than he would ever be able to afford. The Markusons had a daughter a few years younger than Lu. She was nice and steady, a dental hygienist with brilliant teeth and a sweet personality, but she'd never wasted time on an idea her whole life. She was not Lu's type, and both of them knew it, and knew what their parents were up to.

They had a couple of hours before they were to arrive at the Markusons, so Lu made milk punch and helped his mother arrange a few Christmas knick-knacks. She had saved his favorites for last: ornaments Clementine Hunter had painted, a nineteenth-century crèche her mother had brought back from a vacation to Italy, candlesticks carved from the charred remains of a burned-down cotton gin. There was a story behind the provenance of each one of them—it was why he loved antiques. He had only been halfway joking when he told Sandra he'd like to open his own antique store. He would do it in a heartbeat if he thought he could make enough money. But he had seen the antique stores in Oxford and Natchitoches fold, one by one, until only a couple of high-end

establishments remained. He could not break into that market. People liked having new things.

Lu put the candlesticks on the mantle of the living room fireplace, on either side of a photograph of his family at the beach taken a few years before his father died. It had been the end of their vacation, and they had gone for one last walk in the sand before they left, tanned, rested, dressed in white. They could have walked off the pages of a Ralph Lauren ad. None of them had ever looked better.

"He'd be proud of you, you know," Donna said, coming up behind him.

"I hope so, Mom," Lu said. "It's not like I've done all that much with my life to this point."

"You've got time," she said. "You look just like him. You're going to turn out fine."

Lu sensed a wellspring of tenderness flowing up. He turned around to hug his mother—hard, so that she wouldn't have the time to ruin the moment by bringing up career options, or religion, or marital status. She loved him, and she meant well, and that had to be enough for the moment. "Shouldn't we be hitting the road soon?" he asked. "What time are the Markusons expecting us? Do we have a bottle of wine and a Christmas CD for them?"

"Yes, and I made a couple of pans of refrigerator rolls, since we're going there for supper," she said. "We've got wine and a CD for the Golds, too. Will you load them up?"

"Let me go put on my coat and tie," he said. "I'll be ready in a minute."

The meal at the Markusons was mercifully brief. Cindy, the daughter, had brought a girl friend, and had plans to attend a party hosted by the dentist who employed her later that evening. The two girls chatted all night about people who had never left Natchitoches, asking Lu every once in a while if he remembered them—he usually didn't, and when he did he pictured football players and muscle cars—but never really bothering to engage him. Yet he would have preferred staying there to going to the Golds.

The Golds' house was a lot like the Truloves': a brick cottage built in the 1920s on a spacious lot overlooking Cane River Lake, added onto two or three times, immediate curb appeal. But the similarities stopped the minute anybody walked through the doors. The Truloves bought furniture once in a blue moon, had built-in bookshelves in every room with books double-shelved, and wallpaper that had been in the downstairs bathroom for well over twenty years. The Golds gave furniture and appliances to goodwill yearly, took their decorating cues from *Southern Living*, hung flat screen televisions in almost every room, and kept everything in the house spotlessly clean. Lu remembered going to their house as a boy and marveling at the fact that Jack, their son, never had any toys on the floor. He always wondered if his mother got along with Mrs. Gold because they were so different, or because each secretly envied the other. Lu couldn't imagine how anyone could envy the woman married to Leon Gold, though. He loved his possessions and his place in the community and his family, and most of all he loved himself. He greeted the Truloves at the door.

"Donna! Jack!" he exclaimed, putting all the gusto of a game show announcer into it. "Honey, the Truloves are here!"

Leon walked them to the bar, where a college student in a white coat poured wine and opened beer bottles and mixed the occasional drink. Lu noted out of professional interest that the kid worked fast but was way too heavy handed. This might just be one of those years that somebody showed up to midnight mass at the Episcopal Church, started to feel the pew spinning, and barfed during the middle of the sermon. His mother asked for a cab—her fourth glass of the night, he noted—and he got a coke. He'd be happy just to have people think he was drinking. He was just about to turn around when he felt a beefy hand clamp his shoulder. He almost dropped his drink. He knew who it was.

"Well look who's returned from the land of cotton," Jack Gold said. "Old times there are best forgotten, you know? You should've gone to LSU with the rest of us."

"Maybe," said Lu, "but the chemical sunsets over Baton Rouge were not good for my asthma."

"You don't have asthma," laughed Jack.

"And I don't have cancer, either, now that I've avoided Red Stick. Nice party, as always. Good to see you Jack," Lu said, turning away.

"Wait, Lu," Jack said, tugging on Lu's sleeve. "I want you to meet my fiancée, Lydia Callandret."

Jack pulled Lu over to a blue-eyed brunette wearing a clingy red sweater dress and a pleased-to-meet-you grin. She was no more beautiful than women he saw every day in Oxford. Her allure rested in the fact that there seemed to be something beneath the surface. Lu doubted that it was intelligence—she was, after all, engaged to Jack—so she was probably just pleased to have something she wanted: a relationship with a wealthy if homely man who was so grateful to have a beautiful woman on his arm that he'd do anything to keep her there. It wasn't love. It was an economy of exchange, and in the end, she would come out on top.

"You poor soul," Lu said, smiling. "You've agreed to marry Jack Gold."

"It's true," Lydia laughed, sugar sweet. "Want to see my ring?" She extended her perfectly shaped and manicured left hand. Lu whistled. He was never sure what to say when women did the ring dance. Nice rock? That must've really set him back? Are you sure it's real? Finally, he said, "Congratulations. I'm sure you're both very happy. I'm going to make sure mom has a drink. Give me a call, Jack, if the weather clears up and you want to take a run or a bike ride through Kisatchie."

"Sure," said Jack. "We're pretty busy, but I'll try."

Don't try too hard, thought Lu. He spent the rest of his time at the party with his mother and her friends, getting them drinks, sharing anecdotes about keeping bar, asking them about their children, expressing disbelief when he heard a few of them were grandmothers. For some reason it struck him as odd that college-educated people his age would want to marry and have children. He had never been so eager to get to church in his life. He would hide

behind the hymns and lose himself in the liturgy. He and Donna would go home, sleep, open presents—and then he would go home to Oxford and call Sandra Sampite.

“What are you thinking about?” Donna asked on the way to the service. “Your lips purse and you get a faraway look in your eyes when you're thinking, just like your dad.”

“Nothing,” he said.

“Of course,” she said. “I mean, did you realize that you brought Becky Freedman three glasses of wine in fifteen minutes? She wasn't exactly throwing them back, either—she kept giving them away, and asking why you wanted to get an old lady drunk every time you got up. She made a joke about Dustin Hoffman and *The Graduate*, but she looks nothing like Anne Bancroft.”

“I guess I saw her empty hands and kept thinking that I hadn't brought her anything to drink,” Lu said. “Just trying to be nice.”

“What did you think about Jack Gold's fiancée?” Donna asked.

“Pretty, but forgettable,” he said. “I hope they'll be happy.”

“Lydia has a sister, you know. A little younger, a librarian at the public high school. I hear they're like night and day. Have most of your friends in Oxford started to get married?”

“None, yet. And I wouldn't go around describing Jack Gold as a friend of mine. He might get the big head. Do you think Bobby Stevens will play the trumpet tonight? I bet he won't hit three consecutive notes from the sheet music. I look forward to hearing him every Christmas.”

“I always knew you didn't come home just to see me,” his mother said. She looked him in the eye as he parked the car in front of the church. “Don't worry, Lu, I'm not trying to force you down the aisle. I don't need to see you get married anytime soon, I just want you to be happy. And I'm going to ask you just once this trip: do you believe in Jesus?”

“What's not to believe?” he said.

“You're avoiding the question.”

"Yes, mother. No need to fear lightning striking the church tonight. But I did meet this cute little blonde who wants me to visit the Kaballah temple in Memphis next week."

"No!" Donna squealed.

"Just kidding. We don't allow that in Mississippi. It's right up there with spitting on the sidewalk."

"Oh, hush," Donna said, shoving him away. "Nobody would want to marry you anyway."

They walked up the steps and into the nave. Trinity Episcopal is a beautiful church—featured in *Steel Magnolias*—but is a little on the smallish side, and they had to nudge a few friends over to slide into a pew. Bobby Stevens did play, just as poor and proud as always, murdering every melody he could, but nobody cared much. They sang louder to cover his mistakes, and laughed. Lu's looked about surreptitiously to see who else his age had paired up. Not many had. Lu smiled in silent relief until he realized that he was at midnight mass, and that everyone his age who had paired up would be at the 5:30 service with their kids for the Christmas pageant.

He remembered that Jack Gold had played Jesus or Joseph every year he was in it. Lu usually played a wise man, except for the first year he was in it, when he played a shepherd and brought down the house by pointing his crook at the animals in the manger, taking careful aim, and pulling the trigger.

He wondered what Sandra was doing.

