

Yule Rule

By Kevin Gooden

It was our first Christmas without Dad, and we planned to do it right. They say the first year without a loved one is the worst. All those notable days lurking; all those notable absences hurting. Days like birthday, Mother's Day—or Father's Day, depending on the *who*—anniversary, Thanksgiving, the Super Bowl, in Dad's case, and worst of all, Christmas.

Dad was a ruler. Not the King Henry the Eighth type. The foot-long wooden type you used in elementary school to draw straight lines, measure the odd thing, maybe still had one tucked away somewhere, always lost when needed. All those little meticulously spaced lines dividing up the inches, those were Dad's rules. He had rules for everything, even Christmas.

But I admired his Christmas canon—he called it the Yule Rule—because it was simple: family first.

So, we and our dread were gathering with Mom at the farm. I arrived in Minnesota two days ago from LA, happy I'd remembered to dig out my old winter coat at the last second. The producer was crabby I was going, but I didn't care, cause the producer was *always* crabby. Sandra and I just broke up, and I'd imagined my brothers would be all over that. But Josh and Lisa were splitsville, too. Maybe unexpected death makes you ponder life, where it is or isn't going.

It was great to see Josh's always mussy dark hair and those blue eyes that still drove ladies crazy, good to talk, like old times. It felt like Dad and his faded Packers T-shirt, salt and pepper hair, and traditional winter-only beard were just around the corner, in the kitchen, fussing over the turkey, basting, measuring temperature way too many times, questing poultry perfection.

Jason was arriving tonight, on schedule. Typically, no one had info on Janice's arrival. Out of us four kids, she was the one most opposite Dad, a red-haired terror most likely to be the wrecker. But Mom said she was coming from 'Down south, somewhere.', would be here tomorrow night for dinner.

"How are you doing, Mom?"

"Oh, you know. I'm fine," she said, wiping the counter.

She looked fine, which I didn't understand. She'd let her hair go gray, but there was *something* new about her, a lightness. Then I heard it.

Is she... humming?

"Where's the snowman?" I asked. Dad had a gaudy three-foot high Styrofoam snowman, looked like Frosty, that he always put on the counter.

“That was always in the way,” Mom said, putting a hot pie in Frosty’s spot to cool. “It’s on the hallway table.”

I looked and there he was. Didn’t even notice. Maybe he was in the right spot, now.

“Do you need any help?”

“No, I’m fine. Why don’t you go help your brother?”

In the living room, surrounded by Mom’s beautiful display of poinsettias, evergreen garlands, candles, Christmas canes, bows, bells, ropes, ribbons, and the plethora of glittering age-old decorations that we knew and loved, Josh was doing one of Dad’s tasks: decorating the tree. But the tree’s location was wrong.

“Dad always put it over there.”

“Mom told me to put it here,” he said, smiling. “Makes sense. Now you’ll be able to view it from outside, too. Not sure why Dad squished it in by the piano. We sacrifice one chair this way, but so what? It’s always just us. Plenty of places to sit.”

I considered it. Made sense.

But what about Dad?

“Have you noticed Mom?”

“Yes! Doesn’t she look great, Jenn?”

“Sure Josh. But don’t you think... I don’t know. Shouldn’t she be *sad* still?”

“We’re all sad. But no, I’m glad she’s okay. You should be too. Here, hang this.”

Mom still saved all the ornaments we crafted in school. Josh passed Janice’s hideous creation, that looked like Marley’s ghost, complete with chains, holding a candy cane. We both laughed.

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Jason got in late. It was the first time I met baby Kirsten. She was beautiful.

“I’m so happy you picked a ‘K’ name. Dad would *love* you carrying on the tradition.”

Annette, Jason’s wife, beamed.

We stayed up late, played Dad’s favourite: Rummoli. Mom surprised everyone by repeatedly winning the Poker Pot. Jason cursed, said a high three-of-a-kind should beat a low card full house, and we laughed so hard I thought I’d pee. Jason never changed.

The next night, Christmas Eve, was when we usually had our big dinner, so the cook had the day off on Christmas. Jason took over turkey duties. The table was set, and Janice still hadn't arrived.

"Maybe we should start," I said, not wanting the food to get cold.

"No," Mom said, surprising me again.

Before anyone could speak, we saw headlights, heard a car's snow-squeaky halt.

"Janice is here."

There were two door slams, voices. Laughter.

Who's she with? Someone... not family, is at our family dinner?

Janice and her guest entered in a swirl of snowflakes, a whirlwind of hugs and introductions.

Jendayi was a refugee from Sudan. With her afro and dark skin, she looked about as different from Janice's pale skin and long red hair as you could imagine.

The only empty chair was Dad's. Mom said, "Welcome Jendayi, please sit." Pointed at his chair.

We settled. We were ready. Except... Dad always said grace. Silence.

Janice said, "Would anyone mind... if Jendayi spoke?"

Mom said, "Go ahead." Smiled.

Jendayi said, "In my homeland, my name means 'Grateful'. Today I *am* grateful for a country I am safe in. A new good friend. And for a family who honours tradition, and even when missing a loved one, still welcomes a stranger. Thank you for everything, God. Amen."

And I finally understood. Dad's tradition wasn't about minutia, this thing here or that thing there. It was about family. About love. And we *were* honouring him. In a new way.