

A Christmas hymn

Brian Deady, MD

Angela's image came in a rush, escaping the repressed confines of Loretta's subconscious. She appeared as an emaciated youth, track marks on her arms, eyes blank and cadaverous — as if she had come home one last time, still stinking and sleep-deprived after a stint on God-knows-which downtown street.

Sitting in her rocking chair, Loretta stopped knitting and set aside the almost-finished sweater. She attempted to erase the mental picture, her fingers trembling as she tried to light a cigarette. She sipped cold and bitter tea between puffs. Across the room, a small pine tree leaned into the corner, awaiting Yuletide decorations.

Darkness had fallen and her arthritic fingers ached; she would finish the sweater tomorrow for the upcoming craft fair. She stubbed out her cigarette and stood, glimpsing the photo of her daughter twirling a baton, its edges yellow with age. Loretta slumped back into her chair; sleep would be difficult tonight. She placed a heating pad over her neck and shoulders, swept a gray hair from her forehead and closed her eyes. Then she rocked back and forth slowly, waiting for the heat to work its soporific magic.

As she relaxed, she willed herself to recall the first memory of her daughter, moments after birth: a red-faced squalling infant wrapped in a hospital blanket. Loretta smiled, as if Angela had just come into the world. "Angela," she whispered. "My angel." Then she summoned the likeness of Angela as a schoolgirl — a timid wavy-haired child clinging to Loretta's skirts, her striking blue eyes looking up, pleading for reassurance.

It was then that Loretta heard the tune, the bittersweet piano, the background strings and the familiar voice. She hadn't thought about the song in years, so she listened carefully, making sure she had it right, then she hummed along:

*But Angie, I still love you, baby
Ev'rywhere I look I see your eyes **

It was Angela's song. She was 10 or maybe 12 at the time — a scrawny ill-at-ease child with buck teeth she hadn't grown into. Loretta hated Angela's classmates for teasing her, but Angela never complained. At home, though, side-by-side, they would sew and crochet after school in preparation for the arts and crafts sale. They were happy and close, sharing the pleasure of working with their hands.

When Angela was nine, Loretta left her husband. She resolved to "make it right" for her daughter. But the bonds between mother and daughter could not sustain the needs of a child burdened by memories of a mean-spirited alcoholic father. Despite Loretta's best intentions, Angela became increasingly withdrawn in her adolescence, losing interest in one thing after another.

"I'm sick, Mom."

"Again, Angie? What is it this time? Your stomach?"

"Yeah, Mom. It's all jumpy, like something's eating it from the inside. I don't think I can go to school."

"It'll be all right. You go back to bed and rest. Perhaps you'll be well enough to go later."

"You don't get it, do you Mom? I can't go there any more. I won't!"

Loretta woke with a start. She felt disconnected, yanked painfully back to reality by the linear constraints of time. Despite the years that had passed, she still missed her daughter terribly — especially at Christmas. But she had

* "Angie" by Jagger/Richards, from the album *Goat's Head Soup* (1973)

long ago stopped blaming herself. With the push of a syringe, addiction forced its way into Angela's life. Loretta was powerless to stop it, feeling her own life pulled along in the slipstream of her daughter's destruction.

Tonight Angela's absence was like a weight on her chest. The unrealized dreams were squeezing her heart, searing her throat. Sweat beaded on her clammy skin and ran like rivulets between her shoulder blades. Her breathing quickened as anxiety consumed her.

An unfulfilled fantasy, like a delirium, washed over her. In it, Angela was happily married — the mother of a curly-haired girl, bright and strong and confident, with smiling blue eyes. This child liked to knit and sew, and was content to sit by her grandmother's side sharing the joy of working with her hands.

But it was not to be. Loretta sank to the floor of her

apartment, alone but for the lyrics that whispered in her ear:

*All the dreams we held so close seemed to all
go up in smoke
Let me whisper in your ear
Angie, Angie*

She listened, and her pain eased. She felt a tingling sensation on her neck as if someone was touching her. The light flickered for a moment and Loretta knew that all would be right. Outside, the Christmas lights sparkled like multicoloured stars. No one noticed the snowflakes melt as they met the earth.

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