



In December
My Heart's
Full of Spring

a Christmas short

by
Kate McMurray

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www.katemcmurray.com

The night seemed unusually dark, though the colored lights strewn between lampposts were reflected by the sidewalk, on puddles created by the melting snow, creating kaleidoscopic patterns. Max pulled up the edge of his scarf to hide his face from the bitter cold, but it didn't help much, and besides, the scarf did nothing for his feet, which were soggy from trudging around in the slush for the last few hours.

He passed a Salvation Army bell-ringer who pleaded with him to drop a few coins in the bucket. Max turned his pockets out for show, and then kept walking. He'd never been one to donate money, though given how tired and hungry and desperate he felt in that moment, he had a new appreciation for the people who needed it. He resolved to make a huge donation the next time he found himself with enough spare change.

A big red tour bus rumbled down Fifth Avenue and slid to a stop on the corner where Max was walking. He hadn't been paying much attention to his surroundings, mostly just thinking and walking, trying to reason with himself, trying to make the night seem okay. He'd failed so far. But the bus stopping made Max realize he must have stumbled over to a tourist destination. He looked up and realized he was walking in front of the Empire State Building.

He'd never been to the top before. It was on his list of things to do that he just never got around to doing. He lived in New York, he'd always reasoned, he could go see the building at any time. It would still be there tomorrow.

But he had nothing else to do that night. He looked around and realized that not many people were there. It was Christmas Eve, after all, and even the tourists had families to attend to. Max reached for his wallet and quickly counted how much cash he had. There was money for the trip to the top and he'd have enough change afterwards to buy a warm beverage. He went inside.

Allen stared at his computer monitor and tried to make sense of the columns and rows and numbers on the spreadsheet in front of him. He resigned himself to the fact that his brain had checked out for the afternoon. He was starting to wonder if his email wasn't a watched-pot situation when his boss breezed by his office.

"Are you really still here?"

Allen sighed. "I don't have anywhere special to go tonight, so I figured I'd get some work done while the office was quiet."

His boss nodded. "Get the hell out of here, Al. It's Christmas Eve. Go spend time with your family."

It felt like too much effort to explain that he had no one to go home to that evening, so he nodded and started packing up for the night.

He took his boss's advice and decided to go spend time with his family. He opted to walk, pulling the collar of his coat up and moving quickly, bracing himself against the brisk weather. It took him fifteen minutes to get to his destination: the Empire State Building.

Andy had always loved New York in December. Allen remembered fondly the many arguments they'd had on the subject. Allen came down firmly on the side of being annoyed by it: he found tourists irritating, the area around his office was always packed with people, and travel into or out of the city was a major pain in the ass. But Andy had loved it, had always seen magic in the lights, in the sounds, in the man playing "Silver Bells" on a trumpet on Sixth Avenue, in the windows at Saks, in the subway, on the streets.

Allen had tried that December, he really had. He'd wanted to see the charm of the decorations and lights but all he felt instead was an emptiness. Andy loved every minute of the holiday season in New York. But now Andy was gone.

Allen got in the line and took the elevator to the top of the Empire State Building. Andy would grudgingly acknowledge how corny his love of the building was, but he'd say in the next sentence that there was something very zen about standing on an observation deck so far in the air. Allen stepped out onto that same observation deck and wondered as he always did if he'd be able to see the whole city before him, or if, eighty-six stories in the air, he were any closer to heaven.

He walked over to the fence that kept people from jumping and looked down Fifth Avenue towards lower Manhattan. Hardly anyone was out there tonight. There were a few clusters of tourists, but no one seemed to be staying outside very long. The wind was biting, much harsher at the higher elevation than it had been on the street. Allen found he kind of liked it. The wind scraped against his skin like sandpaper, but it reminded him that he was still alive, that he could still feel.

"Hi, Andy," he said to the sky. "I don't know if you're out here, big bro, but I figured I'd stop by, see if maybe you were." He sighed. "So, ah, you probably know this, but it's Christmas Eve, and I'm here in New York, and it sucks. Mom told me not to bother coming home this year. 'It's not Christmas without Andy,' she said, which I guess means there is no Christmas." Crying in public wasn't an

option, so Allen pinched the bridge of his nose and willed the tears to stay at bay. "I miss you so fucking much." He let his hand drop and looked back out at the city before him. "So you want to hear what's going on with me? Well, things didn't work out with David. He told me I was too melodramatic. And, uh, I got a promotion at work, thought you'd be proud of that."

Allen gripped the fence and felt the weight of his loss pressing against his shoulders. Behind him, he heard the elevator open and close, heard people shuffling around. A crowd of people who had been standing maybe ten feet to his left decided collectively to go inside to the gift shop. Their chattering drew Allen's attention, so he watched them leave then turned his head to look back at the view again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a man in a long wool coat standing against the fence. He looked disheveled and something about his hunched shoulders gave off the impression that he was profoundly sad. Allen wondered if the man was homeless, but then quickly dismissed the idea, because there's no way a homeless man would pay the \$20 to get to the top.

Allen looked at the man. The man looked back, which Allen found startling. More to the point, the man was much younger than Allen had initially guessed. And much more familiar.

"Max?"

The man started and took a step closer. "Allen."

Bad enough that the space that he'd started to think of as a sanctuary kept getting invaded by tourists and now this stiff man in a wool coat and a suit, Max thought.

But like the cherry on top of a fucking sundae, the stiff turned out to be none other than Allen. Just looking at Allen conjured a million flashes of Max's life in his mid-twenties: parties, bars, laughter, hugging, light.

Allen pulled on the sleeves of his coat and said, "Fancy meeting you here."

"Yeah. Strange coincidence."

Allen nodded. "I haven't seen you in a while. How are you?"

Max walked closer to Allen and looked at the night sky. "I've been better," he said.

Allen looked so polished, life was surely going well for him. But he said, "Yeah, me too." He looked pensively down towards lower Manhattan. "So what brings you to the roof of the Empire State Building on Christmas Eve?"

Max sighed. "I couldn't afford the ticket home this year." He looked at Allen, who turned to look at him. Allen had always been so elegant. He stood perfectly straight, and the expensive-looking clothes he wore made him look like exactly the sort of man Max didn't want to speak with that night. Even so, he was strikingly handsome. The beginnings of stubble had sprouted on his square jaw and his light-brown hair had been tousled by the wind. "I, uh, got laid off."

"That's awful," Allen said.

Max twisted his hand around a metal fence post. "The Monday before Thanksgiving, they let me go. So that was my introduction to the holiday season." He took a deep breath and wondered if he should tell Allen the whole sordid story. They'd been friends once, though they hadn't seen each other at all in a couple of years. Allen would probably get disgusted and run away, but at least that would leave Max to his own misery. He said, "Then my lover left me. Packed up a bunch of stuff and left me in a half-empty apartment by myself."

"That sucks."

Max laughed bitterly. "Yeah, it sucks." He kicked at the fence. "Oh, and, I don't know if you knew this about me, but I'm gay, and I'm pretty sure the wrong person at work found out and that's why I lost my job. And my lover, Chris, left me after two years for reasons I don't even understand, just packed up his shit and was gone one day. Why do I even bother keeping it a secret anymore? Someone always finds out." He kicked the fence again. "I'm gay! You hear that, New York? I'm gay! Now you all know!"

Allen waved his hand, his eyes darting around. "Calm down," he said.

"Fuck you, Allen," Max said, turning to move away.

But then his arm snagged on something. He turned and found that Allen had grabbed him. "No, wait, don't leave just yet." He let go of Max's arm and frowned. "I'm really sorry that all this has happened to you. It's all really terrible. And... you're alone on Christmas Eve now."

Max stood there and stared at Allen. "Thanks for the reminder. What are you doing up here?"

"Seems we have a few things in common."

Max wasn't sure what that meant, but he nodded. "You still in touch with everyone? Kimmy and Lester and Keith and everyone? And your brother, too, how's Andy doing?"

Allen looked deeply troubled, but he swallowed and said, "Yeah, we still see each other pretty often. I, uh, knew you were gay. Kimmy told me you'd basically deserted us for some guy. And as for Andy..."

"I always liked him."

"Everyone did." Allen sighed and looked away. "He's dead."

Max felt the words like a punch in the face. "Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry."

"It's all right. You couldn't have known." Allen stepped over to the fence again. "It was so sudden. There was this spectacular accident near the Flatiron Building this past spring. A bus, a couple of taxis, and a guy on a bike all collided. Andy was the guy on the bike."

"God, that's awful." Max vaguely remembered reading about the accident in the paper. Thinking about it made him feel nauseous.

"I'm also alone tonight," Allen said. He turned to Max and looked him over. "You're shivering. You want to go somewhere?"

"With you?"

"Yeah. I'll buy you a cup of coffee."

After mulling over the menu at the coffee shop on the ground floor of the Empire State Building, Allen and Max agreed that hot cocoa was the way to go. Max secured a table while Allen waited for their drinks to be made.

Allen contemplated the bar where drinks were placed. It was pretty odd to see Max again. He wondered, though, if it wasn't a blessing. If anything, he wouldn't have to pass this Christmas Eve by himself.

Two cups of hot cocoa appeared on the bar, so Allen picked them up, thankful for the heat warming his hands. He placed one in front of Max.

"He did me a favor," Max said.

“What?”

“Chris did me a favor when he left, I know that.”

Allen didn't know how to react to that. He took a sip of his cocoa and waited for Max to elaborate.

Which he did a moment later. “I really miss going out with you guys. But Chris got jealous, and he'd tell me that, for the sake of our relationship, we needed to spend more time together. I don't know if it was more that he didn't like you all or if he didn't like me spending time with other people generally. After a while, it just seemed easier not to go.”

Allen suspected Max was referring to something bigger than just going out for drinks when he said, “not to go.” He nodded.

Max pulled his hat off and ran a hand through his mussed-up hair. It stuck out in several directions, but the dark mane made Max look younger, somehow. His cheeks were flush as his skin reacted to being inside somewhere warm after the bitter cold of the roof. “It wasn't good,” he said at length. “It hadn't been in a while. He did me a favor by leaving. But I still miss him, you know?”

“Yeah, I know how that is,” Allen said. “I just went through a breakup, too.”

Max shook his head. “What a couple of sad sacks we are,” he said. He took a long drink from his cup. “This is good cocoa, at least. So tell me about the woman who broke your heart.”

Allen closed his eyes. “Well, *he* is a stockbroker for one of those villainous firms that keep making the news.”

“Shit,” Max said. Then he laughed, real genuine laughter.

Allen found it hard not to get caught up in it, and he laughed, too. It felt like he hadn't even smiled in days. “Yeah, it was pretty ridiculous.” He kept laughing, tears coming to his eyes.

“I don't know if I'm more surprised by the fact that you're gay or that you dated a stockbroker.”

Allen wiped his eyes. “Oh, come on. How could you not have known I'm gay? We spent all that time together when we were younger. And the stockbroker thing is like the punchline of a bad joke.”

"Sure, we spent time in the same room. But I don't know that you and I ever had a real conversation about anything consequential." Max drank from his cup and looked at Allen over the lip of it. His whole demeanor had changed since they sat down at the table together, and he seemed more relaxed now, seemed more like the Max Allen remembered and less like the vagrant he'd first spotted. "You know, I'm glad we ran into each other tonight."

"Yeah?" Max said. He drained the rest of his cup.

"I wasn't really looking forward to going home."

"I'm sorry for how I acted on the roof. I didn't realize... I mean, about Andy and everything else."

"Thank you." Allen looked into his cup. The whipped cream had dissolved into a white swirl. He tipped the cup then drank from it. "Well, since we didn't get the chance to get to know each other in our glory days, I'd like to get to know you now."

Max smiled. "I'd like that, too."

They sat together in the cafe, talking until the Christmas CD playing cycled back to the same songs. Allen laughed when he heard a goofy version of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" play again. Max laughed with him, and Allen thought to himself that Max had a great laugh, that the way he smiled made his whole face light up.

A woman pushing a broom came by the table. "Hey, guys, we're closing in a few," she said.

Allen felt deeply disappointed by that, not wanting the night to end yet. He was surprised to realize that he was more upset by the fact that he and Max would soon have to part than he was about the prospect of going home alone.

Of course, these were two problems easily solved. "Come with me," Allen said.

"Where?" Max asked.

"Home."

Max stared the ceiling of Allen's bedroom, intrigued by the pattern made by the tin panels, while he listened to Allen snore softly. When Allen had invited him back to his apartment, Max had just thought it was a way to pass the time until morning broke and they went back to their lives.

He'd said, "If I go home with you, it's going to be hard to keep my hands off you. I had a little bit of a crush when we were younger."

Allen had smiled and said, "If having sex is what it takes to make this Christmas a little merrier, well, that's a sacrifice I'm willing to make."

There'd been little preamble. They'd tumbled through the front door together laughing, then Allen had kissed Max, and Max had succumbed, they'd both given and taken what they'd wanted, and the sex had been thorough and satisfying.

But it was just supposed to be a way to kill time. Why did Max feel so reluctant to leave?

Allen stirred. He rolled onto his side and opened his eyes slowly. He murmured something incoherent, then reached out an arm to wrap around Max's waist. "I'm sorry I fell asleep," he said, not sounding especially remorseful. "I guess I was more tired than I thought."

"It's okay," said Max.

Allen closed his eyes and pressed his forehead against Max's shoulder. "So now what?" he asked.

Max thought that he should leave. He should ease away from Allen, wish him a Merry Christmas, and be on his way back to his half-empty apartment and his half-empty life. Leaving seemed impossible, though, when he was wrapped up in Allen's warm arms, in a warm bed with expensive sheets and a thick down comforter, in a warm apartment that was full of life and promise.

"I don't belong here," Max said.

Allen picked up his head. "What are you talking about?"

"I should leave, Al. We both know I should leave."

"Why?"

“Because you have a successful job and a nice little life, and I’m a mess. I don’t fit in with all this.”

“Let me decide that,” Allen said.

Max was surprised by the conviction in Allen’s voice. “But...”

“You’re going through a rough spot. It happens to all of us. Hell, I’m not doing much better. I spent most of the day thinking about my dead brother. What’s the point of that? There’s not a goddamn thing I can do to bring him back. And it’s Christmas, but my family doesn’t want to see me. So, instead, I went up to the roof of the Empire State Building to see if my brother was out there somewhere and I found you instead. I don’t know if what’s happening between us is anything that will last past tomorrow, but I do know that you helped me feel a little less lonely tonight, and I’m grateful for that.”

“Oh.” Max didn’t know what to say. He was equally grateful to Allen. “Yeah,” he said, moving his hand to run his fingers through Allen’s hair. “There were moments tonight when I forgot about all my problems.”

Allen chuckled. “Was that about the time that you had just gotten naked and I...”

Max laughed. “In the coffee shop, too.”

Allen lay back down and settled in against Max’s side, his head laying on the pillow next to Max’s. “Yeah,” he said. He sighed and ran a hand up Max’s bare chest. “You belong here as much as I do.”

“Allen...”

“Just stay for a while. All right? Stay with me for a while.”

“Okay,” said Max. “I’ll stay.”