

AN INTROVERT'S CHRISTMAS

By

KB Raines

No. No! NO! Don't do it!

I gritted my teeth. Everyone knew the rules about this. If you're going to sit alone in a diner booth, you never sit facing a person who is alone in the next booth. You sit facing away, like you're passengers on a train. But this dingleberry ignored the rules and slid into the wrong side, so now here we were facing each other, eight feet away, across his empty seat and mine. It was going to be awkward to avoid eye contact for the next hour.

While I was stewing, the waitress appeared at my table. "Have you decided on your order?"

I pondered saying "the usual" just to see if she recognized me, but I didn't want to risk the humiliation. I came in here at least once a week and watched her chat and flirt for tips, and yet she invariably approached me as a stranger. As if to rub it in, she offered a tiny friendly wave to the guy at the other table as she waited for my response.

I tapped a finger on the menu. "I'll have the grilled cheese and fries." I wondered if that would jog her memory, maybe provoke a friendly sentence or two.

She wrote it on her little notepad. "And to drink?"

"Pineapple juice."

Her eyebrows rose slightly at the unusual order, just like they did every week.

She pirouetted away and spirited off to the mysterious realm beyond the kitchen wall. I knew from her name tag that she was Katrina, and in previous outings I had eavesdropped that she was divorced with a child and that she regretted her past party days. She was not the best waitress in the place, not the worst, and she looked good in the little blue waist aprons that the waitresses wore.

It was late and dark outside, so the street outside the window to my right was quiet, and of course I had the problem of the fellow sitting directly across from me, so I couldn't look in that direction, either. I tilted my body to the left just a bit so I could watch Katrina re-enter behind the chrome bar, shaking a plastic decanter of pineapple juice. I decided that I should try to banter with her tonight, just a little bit to break this stalemate of non-acknowledgement that we experienced every week.

She came back with my glass, offering a quick "here you go", but allowing no opening for conversation as I opened my mouth to offer a witty quip. Instead, she never broke stride and immediately moved to the fellow in the next booth.

"Bart!" she exclaimed. "I haven't seen you in a while."

He smiled up at her. He was younger than me by a notable margin, probably in his mid to late thirties, with a touch of natural charisma. Katrina was of similar age and charisma, and I wondered if that's why she remembered him and not me.

"I've been in Los Angeles," he replied. "Been there for a couple of weeks."

"L.A.? That's nice. Vacation?"

"No. Business."

"Great." She rested a hand on his shoulder for the briefest of moments as she looked toward the bar. "Hang on. I've got my own business trip to the counter." As she walked away, she turned briefly. "Bacon cheeseburger, no pickle, with onion rings and a Pepsi, right?"

"Right!"

She knew him. She remembered him. I felt a pang of envy.

This Bart fellow and I were sitting in comfortable booths by the window. There were high-top tables to our left, and I would never sit at those if a booth was available. The chair-like stools were uncomfortably high, and one had to rest one's feet on an uncomfortable steel loop that circumnavigated the base. But that's where the redhead chose to sit.

I'd never seen her before, and I would have remembered. She wore a rumpled sweatshirt from a college far away, and it fell down over tight black leggings as she clambered up onto her perch. I guessed her to be somewhere in her forties, with good enough genes and conditioning that neither Father Time nor Mother Nature were disciplining her. The cruel gods of diners decreed that she chose to sit facing toward the window, equidistant between me and Bart, and that now meant that I had to avoid eye contact to my left as well. We were the only three customers in the place, and the other two had to sit where they were staring at me. I twisted my lip and rearranged the different colors of sweeteners. Bart placed a notebook on his table and began to write.

Katrina the waitress returned to the vicinity, but not to me. She took the redhead's order, a fish sandwich and iced tea, then sashayed over to Bart, setting a Pepsi in front of him. "So, you were in Los Angeles on business?" she inquired. "That sounds important."

He grinned in self-satisfaction. "It really was. I was meeting with a music producer."

"A music producer? For what?"

He beamed as he told her, though I also noticed a cautious look in his eyes. "They want me to write a song. They liked my portfolio and get this: the song is for Zane Truckman."

Katrina's mouth gaped and her eyes grew large. "THE Zane Truckman?"

"Yep."

She smiled broadly, and I noticed the redhead swivel on her stool to check Bart out. "I had no idea you were such a big deal!" Katrina exclaimed. "You're really a big-time songwriter."

"Well...", Bart blushed a bit. "I'm working on it. This could be my big break, I think."

I'd heard of Zane Truckman. He was big on the country music circuit, one of the never-ending parade of guys in that genre with twangy accents and cowboy hats

and self-professed old-fashioned values. He was a bigger name than most, though, and I thought he was also dating someone famous. A TV star or a model. I knew nothing about songwriting, but it really did seem like a big deal to write a song for the guy.

“How did—Hang on a minute.” Katrina rushed away. Bart took a self-satisfied swig of his Pepsi. He seemed to be on top of the world, with a career opportunity ahead of him and a woman fawning over him.

The redhead called over to him. “Hey, I couldn’t help but overhear. Congratulations!”

Make that two women. I marveled at the redhead’s courage to inject herself into a stranger’s conversation.

Katrina hustled back over, carrying a grilled cheese and fries. She set it down on my table. “Anything else?” she asked.

“I’m good, thanks.” The next sentence began to form in my mouth, but she nodded brusquely and moved back over to Bart.

“So how did this happen?” she asked. “Tell me all the details.”

“I’d written a couple of songs for another country artist, an up and comer, and she’s done okay. She opened up for Zane at a concert a couple of months ago and he liked what he heard, and, well, his manager called me. Zane wants to release a Christmas song, and he asked me to write it for him.”

“A Christmas song?”

“Yeah.” His smile froze and he took a deep breath. “I’ve never written a Christmas song.”

Katrina left again to head to the kitchen. Bart’s eyes bore a hole through the table as if he had just realized the task ahead of him, and at that point the redhead jumped back into the conversation.

“Christmas songs are fun. Do you have a start that you could sing for us?”

Bart looked up, and his eyes showed outright fear. “I have no idea what I’m going to do. I’m drawing a complete blank. I’ve never even considered writing a Christmas song.”

“Well, it’s August,” she said. “It seems like you’ve got plenty of time.”

He shook his head emphatically. “It takes them time to record it, and then we’ll likely have some changes before that. I have to have the song in their hands by September 30th.”

The redhead swiveled her stool even further toward him, leaving me with her profile. “How do you even write a song? I haven’t a clue. Do you start with the tune or the lyrics?”

“Neither really. I start with an idea that I want to share. Then I start building lyrics from that, and then the tune follows.”

Katrina came back with a cheeseburger and onion rings for Bart, and dinner and a drink for the redhead. “You’ve got a tune?” she asked, somewhat behind the curve.

“No,” Bart said. I’ve been wracking my brain, but I have to start with an idea, and I don’t have one. I’m kinda freaking out right now.”

“An idea?” Katrina laughed. “It’s Christmas. The song is about Christmas.”

“Well, it can’t just be about Christmas. It’s got to be something that Christmas is. Something that’s a part of Christmas.”

I ate my grilled cheese and listened.

The redhead chimed in again. She was sitting about ten feet away from Bart and I was roughly equidistant between them, so I was in a comfortable position of being in the conversation circle without needing to be in the conversation. “What are Christmas songs usually about?”

“Jesus, of course,” Katrina offered. “That’s the reason for the season, right? Baby, manger, bright star, all that stuff.”

The redhead nodded. “That’s a big theme. You also have a lot of themes for kids. Santa Claus, flying reindeer, sugar plums, and so on.”

Bart pursed his lips. “I’ve never known what a sugar plum is.” He paused for a moment. “Winter is a theme. Snow. Riding on sleighs to Grandma’s house.”

Katrina raised a finger in realization. “Oh! And family. Coming home for Christmas. Missing your family when you’re not there for Christmas.”

“Hang on. Let me write these down.” Bart dutifully wrote something in his notebook. “What else?”

The group was quiet for a moment. I watched them raptly. Katrina wrinkled her nose in thought. “A little bit of love, maybe? A kid seeing her mother kissing Santa Claus? There’s that one sexy Santa song, too. The woman wanting Santa to come down the chimney?”

“I’m not sure that one’s about love,” the redhead mused with a muted smile.

“Maybe peace on earth?” Katrina noted. “Hey, we’re blathering. Did they tell you what they want the song to be about?”

“No, not at all. My orders are for a Christmas song, and they said they want something new and different. But I know Zane’s image, of course. He’s not going to do a kid’s song or something silly. His fan base is probably religious, but I bet he’s looking to reach a broader audience with this song.”

I was interested in participating in the conversation, but no one was looking at me to invite me in with eye contact. The redhead took a bite of her fish sandwich and then gestured with it. “Zane’s audience will be big into home and family,” she observed while chewing. “I go to a country bar for line dancing sometimes, so I hear his music a lot.”

As the discussion went down a shallow rabbit hole of Zane Truckman’s brand and discography, Katrina came over to me and nodded toward my empty glass.

“Another pineapple juice?”

“Yes, please.”

She picked up the glass and turned away but smiled at me as she did. “You always get two.”

My jaw dropped. She actually remembered me. I watched her walk away and swore that I would speak to her when the next opportunity arose.

She flipped the “open/closed” sign on the door to “closed”, and then brought back a round of drink refills for everyone. This was it, I decided. I was going to barge into the conversation. I was going to be friendly. I was going to learn the redhead’s name, and Katrina would learn mine. I gathered my courage to be social, to make that critical first comment to break through my barrier of introversion.

Katrina returned and motioned to the other half of Bart’s booth. “Mind if I sit down?”, she asked. Bart readily agreed.

And just like that, I was exiled from the group. Katrina sat down across from Bart with her back to me, like a stranger on a train. The large potential conversation triangle between me, Bart, and the redhead shrank immediately to a smaller triangle that put Katrina at the third corner and me out in the cold.

My plan was foiled. I frowned and picked at my fries.

Bart tried to organize the suggestions. He looked at his notes. “I’m hearing about religion, family, coming home, winter, kids, missing loved ones.” He looked up with a cringe. “All of those things have been done a million times, though. I want to come up with something different, or at least a twist on a theme.”

He looked at the redhead. “Tell me about your Christmas. What’s something special, no matter how small it is? And by the way, what’s your name? I’m Bart.”

“Hi, Bart,” the redhead said. “I’m Maureen. My husband and I are staying in the hotel down the street. He’s been feeling ill, so I stayed in with him tonight and finally snuck out to get some food.”

The three of them exchanged niceties, none of them looking in my direction, and I mentally surrendered. I wasn’t going to break through this self-imposed barrier. I was destined to be nothing in their memories of this night other than that weirdly quiet guy back in the corner. As soon as I finished my fries, I’d leave.

Maureen responded to the question, and I decided to continue thinking of her as “the redhead” since I’d already assigned her that name. “I like putting up the Christmas tree,” she said. “We have ornaments that we’ve collected over the years, so we always talk about the story behind them.”

“Oh, that’s good.” Bart wrote that down. “What else?”

“Uhh, we often invite friends to dinner who don’t have family nearby.”

“Great, great. Open and welcoming as a theme.” Bart briefly glanced at me, the silent eavesdropper in the group, before turning his attention back to the women. I felt like he almost invited me to speak. “How about you, Katrina?”

Katrina thought for a long moment. “I like watching Christmas movies with my daughter.”

“Family time,” Maureen commented.

“And we’ll usually go visit my mother,” Katrina added. “She always goes to church on Christmas, so my daughter and I will go with her. We all like to get dressed up really fancy, and we’ll do a fashion show of different outfits to each other before we get dressed.”

Bart and Maureen smiled, and I even smiled a bit. These were pretty good ideas.

Bart seemed to be honing in on some workable themes.

His eyes slowly traced over toward me. I was nearly finished with my meal now, dipping the last of my fries into the ketchup. “Sir, can I ask you a question?”

I hated being called sir. Yes, I was the oldest one here, but I wasn’t THAT old.

“Sure.”

“Have you been hearing the conversation?”

I nodded guiltily as Kristina turned in her seat to open me up to the conversation. “I’m sorry to have eavesdropped,” I said. “It’s an interesting conversation, and it drew me in.”

“No problem at all. We’re just all chatting. Would you tell me about your Christmas? What’s a special thing that you do?”

I set down my French fry. It was my first chance to talk, and of course he was going to ask me a question that I didn’t have a good answer for.

I glanced at the three expectant looks and suddenly felt very self-conscious. “I don’t know if I can really be helpful,” I said carefully. “I don’t think anyone would write a song about my Christmas rituals.”

“How so?”

I shrugged. “Well, I’m not religious. My parents are dead, so I’m not going to any mythological place called ‘home’. I’m divorced and never had kids.” I gestured out the window and smiled disarmingly. “And it hasn’t snowed in this part of the country for a thousand years.”

“Oh,” Katrina said. “That’s sad. So, is there anything positive for you about Christmas?”

I was embarrassed by her conclusion. “Actually, I don’t think it’s sad at all. It’s my life. And I’m very happy. I like Christmas. I just don’t have the rituals that are going to be romanticized in songs.”

Bart leaned forward over the cooling remains of his cheeseburger. “What do you do for Christmas, then? What do you like to do?”

“Honestly?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll cook a frozen dinner and read a book.”

The redhead winced, so I was quick to correct her emotion. “And that makes me happy. It really does.”

“Why?” Bart pressed me for more.

“It’s all I want. It’s peaceful. It’s quiet.” I smiled. “Frozen dinners are pretty tasty. I don’t need more than that to be happy.”

“So is Christmas just another day to you, then?” Katrina was idly clicking her pen on and off.

“No, not at all. It may seem like it from my description, but I know all of that other stuff is going on. I know that kids are unwrapping gifts and that families are getting together, and that people are dressing up for church. I like the lights on the buildings. I like the decorations. Christmas isn’t so much about me being happy, I guess, because I’m already happy. It’s about the world taking a day to be happy. The world needs that respite more than I do.”

I could see the three of them struggling to visualize my world, so I paused to summarize. “Christmas to me is more about how the world feels than how I feel.”

The lights in the diner suddenly went dark, leaving us shadowed in the minor illumination of the streetlights outside. Katrina nodded in their direction. “The timer just went off,” she said. “I need to close this place up and get home to my daughter.”

No. No! NO! The only chance I had to talk, and I came across as someone to pity. I needed the conversation to go on a little longer, so they understood me. I was happy. I was friendly. I was prosperous. Life was really, really good. I wasn’t just a guy who ate Christmas dinner alone. I needed them to know that, to understand why the traditional Christmas wasn’t needed in my life.

The redhead stood. Katrina wrote something on her waitress pad, then tore off a sheet of paper and slid it across the table to Bart. “This has been a fun discussion. Good luck with the song, and here’s my number if you want to, you know, brainstorm some more.”

My fate was cast. I rose from my seat, offered polite goodbyes, and walked to the door. My one chance for a conversation, and I’d blown it. No one ever hears the introvert.

#

I never saw Bart or the redhead again, and Katrina left the diner for other opportunities a few months later. She was friendly for a while and then I faded into her background, as I tend to do.

I forgot about the conversation until Christmas Day. I was enjoying a chicken pot pie and reading an interesting novel when I suddenly became aware of the soft background music. I recognized Zane Truckman's low-pitched wail because everyone in America recognized Zane Truckman's low-pitched wail. He was mid-song, and I turned the sound up to hear what Bart had composed. A guitar strummed as Zane sang:

*Somewhere in the world today,
The kids play in the snow
Somewhere in the world today,
We kiss in mistletoe
Somewhere in the world today
A family gathers round
Somewhere in the world today
The church bells peal with sound*

*And somewhere in this great big land
A man rests on this day
By himself, a book in hand
A cheap meal on a TV tray*

*But he's as glad as anyone
That it's Christmas Day
Because his hope for everyone
Is to have a joyous day*

*Christmas in the world today
It ain't about the gifts
It ain't about the family
Or sledding through the drifts*

*Christmas in the world today
Means wishing peace and bliss
To one, to all, everywhere
In any way they wish.*

The song continued on, with a nice refrain and beat. I listened till the end, agog at how my hesitant, quiet voice had somehow been heard, how the songwriter had looked past the surface and understood what I was trying to say. Maybe people really do hear the introverts.

Wherever Bart was, and Katrina, and the redhead, I wished them the best. Then I smiled and picked up my book.

KB Raines is a Colorado-based introvert who enjoys writing stories since that's easier than actually talking to people. His work has previously appeared in *Syncopation Literary Journal's* Volume 2, Issue 3 (Short Story: "Learning the Steps").