



REAL BEATS NORMAN ROCKWELL EVERY TIME

by Wendy Lawless

It was the first time I was spending Christmas with my boyfriend, David, and his family in Ohio. I'd been dreaming about it for exactly a year. The Christmas before, I was performing on Broadway and had to stay in the city. I spent the day with my sister, Robin; we ate roast chicken and watched *High Society*. Even this was a lot more festive for us than holidays past, when we'd sit around a table with our chain-smoking mother and stare at a big piece of overcooked meat. Still, every time David called to tell me about ice skating or drinking hot chocolate with his family, I longed for their kind of Norman Rockwell holiday. This year, there would be a hand-knit stocking on the mantel with my name on it.

When we pulled into the driveway on Christmas Eve, the house was lit up with cheer. Lights twinkled on the snow-covered bushes, and a beautiful tree stood in the front window. It was picture-perfect, except for

the tears in David's parents' eyes when they opened the door. His mother threw her arms around him and said that his grandmother Josephine had passed away while we were on the road. That night, along with the stocking hanging, I saw him cry for the first time.

Christmas morning, a snowstorm hit. We opened presents, had breakfast, took down our stockings, and went to the funeral

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home. Surrounded by David's solemn family, I didn't want to admit that I had never seen a dead person. I felt trapped between terror and nausea as I approached the coffin, but it was my only chance

to meet Josephine. She was wearing a pretty pink nightgown and, at her request, her glasses—"So I can see in heaven."

The next day we set out over icy roads to the tiny town in Pennsylvania where Josephine had been born. I sat in back, holding his sister's hand while she wept, and tried not to get carsick. That night at the hotel, since Josephine had been one of 11 children, I sat down to dinner with a horde of extended relatives. I was overwhelmed at first, experiencing culture shock—suddenly, I was in a foreign country where people hugged and kissed each other. It was like a crash course in family, an evening filled with wonderful stories and tender toasts.

The church was packed the next day. David struggled to deliver his eulogy, sobbing intermittently. And watching him, I realized that even at a funeral, I was experiencing Christmas at its best. What matters most isn't the traditions but what underpins them—the deep foundations of love and devotion between family and friends, between generations, that bind us to one another.

*Wendy Lawless's memoir, **Chanel Bonfire**, will be released in January.*