

Karen A. Thomas  
Flying Over the Edge of Christmas

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## Flying Over the Edge of Christmas

Bing Crosby never crooned about eastern North Carolina. Here the lyrical dream of a white Christmas seldom merges with reality. But in 1989, the skies brought forth an unexpected Christmas Eve blizzard worthy of a song. It was a snowstorm that duty forbade me to enjoy.

Thirty patients, four junior residents and Dr. Tommy Beeson awaited my arrival at Anderson Memorial Hospital in upstate South Carolina – our home for the holidays. As co-supervising, senior residents, Tommy and I agreed to give each other 36 hours away from the hospital during Christmas. Now, after a touch-and-go “vacation”, I kissed my husband, Bill, goodbye and boarded the nearly empty commuter plane.

Sadness spiraled around me like the stripes of a candy cane. In the movies, you flew home on Christmas morning. I cried and ignored the dozen other passengers who were gazing at me with open curiosity.

“You don’t look very happy,” offered a man my father’s age. For thirty minutes he had watched me empty a box of tissues.

“No,” I squeaked turning away to stare out of the window. Then, ten thousand feet below, I noticed the line.

The mark stretched to the horizon, dividing east from west as if drawn by an unseen hand using a celestial straightedge. East of the line, the ground glowed in a dress white

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uniform of snow while to the west it wore the mottled, dull camouflage of winter. The plane was flying over the edge of Christmas. Alone on a commuter flight headed in the wrong direction, I steeped in pity. And not once did I consider Tommy, his wife Gloria, or their three children.

Two hours later, I trudged into the somber, aseptic world where life began and ended on different floors. Inside the impersonal resident's call room, I glanced at my watch. Back in Bath, my husband and his boisterous family were ripping into packages and savoring chocolate-covered cherries.

*Get over it, Karen.*

Wondering how many patients had been admitted to the hospital in my absence, I picked up the phone and asked the operator to page Dr. Beeson. While waiting for him to answer, I plopped into the battered, bile-green recliner and closed my eyes. The scent of powdered eggs and overcooked bacon oozed into the room as the breakfast cart rumbled by. The phone rang within a minute.

"Hey, girl," Tommy droned, his voice heavy from the lack of sleep. "I guess you're snowed in. Gloria's going to bring the boys to the hospital since..."

"Tommy," I interrupted, "I'm here."

He paused.

"What? But the Weather Channel said that no one was getting out of there today."

"And you believed the weatherman?" I retorted. "Meet me down in the doctor's lounge and fill me in on the patients," I sighed, resigned to carry out my Hippocratic duty.

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Yet, even from within my self-inflicted funk, I recognized the surprised joy of a five year-old in Tommy's forty year-old face. Christmas morning dawned in his eyes as he bounced into the room and wrapped me in a hug. The man reeked of glad tidings.

"I still can't believe you're here," he marveled.

*Enough, already. Let's just go over the patient list. My Christmas is over.*

And again I noticed the line.

My against-the-odds arrival in Anderson transformed Tommy's gloom into unabashed delight. Without knowing it, I had brought Christmas with me. The line had followed me west, but this time it wasn't about the weather.

Only my duty as a physician had compelled me to ask my husband to plow a Toyota through snowdrifts in the pre-dawn stillness of a white Christmas. My duty - my spoiled holiday - my sadness. Selfishness had tackled me short of the goal of the season. A state-long stripe of snow reminded me that Christmas is a line.

Jesus' birth is infinity laid down for limits. It is judgement crumpling before grace. It is pure white self-less love overcoming the deceptive camouflage of self-love. It is flying over the edge. And it isn't a dream.

In Tommy, I observed the wonder of a father anticipating the miracle of the holiday. It was a gift he had not expected.

"Go home, Tommy. It's my turn to watch over things here," I ordered, pushing him towards the door.

"Oh, and Tommy," I called as he jogged down the hall, "May all your Christmases be white."

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