It was a special night, when loved ones were close to Bill’s heart, and there was something he had to do...

By Gillian Harvey

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He’d spotted the look in a few of the passing faces. Should they stop – offer him a couple of pounds for a cup of coffee, a scarf bought for someone as a Christmas present? They’d wrestle with it briefly, the urge to help a stranger, guilt at the contrast between their situations. He’d meet their eyes and give a stiff smile, acknowledging them, but nodding his head to signal that he was OK.

The streetlights scattered through the park were surrounded by orange haloes of light and above, the stars sparkled bright in the evening darkness. The lake in front of him was partially frozen, all wildlife long departed or hunkered down in warm burrows. The grass beyond stretched into the frozen darkness. It was hard to imagine it bathed in sunlight, but when he closed his eyes he was back there – the length of Martha’s hair glistening in the summer glow as she ran ahead, laughing.

He’d always been afraid to do it – step on to the ice and hear it stretch and settle beneath him. That heart-stopping moment when a skater of cracks darted away from his shoe. Then getting braver, pushing out on the flats of his shoes and feeling the cold air sting his face until he felt as if he was flying. Martha ahead of him, her coat whipped back, her hair tucked under a wall as they crept around the back to the expanse fearlessly, laughing.

He felt a gut-wrench of sadness when he saw her friends waiting on the bench, wrapped in their winter coats: Terry with that stupid bunch of holly, his careless glance backwards as she raced towards them, leaving him to stumble behind.

He stood at the side of the lake now, hands in pockets, and waited to hear the voices made bold by mulled wine. She’d looked at him: his big sister, knowing what was going on. He’d made them cut the throat off. A group of youngsters in office gear strode past on the path behind him, arms linked like children, singing a Christmas song out of time in voices made bold by mulled wine.

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Nobody skated on the ice now; even when it was thick. There were signs – people still talked about the girl who’d drowned all those years ago.

A hand on his shoulder now. “Can I help you, sir?” a young man in a high-vis jacket. “Do you have somewhere to go?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry.” He turned from the lake and tried to smile. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, sir,” the man doffed an imaginary cap – a touchingly old-fashioned gesture. As he walked away, he glanced back a couple of times – as if he expected Bill to disappear into the shadows, or perhaps fall into the water.

Bill inhaled, feeling the sting of ice at the back of his throat, and allowed the air to creep forward from his lungs, clouding the darkness for a moment. Then he turned and began to walk home.

The man’s features formed as he drew closer, his arm around a woman – then shock that they were actually there was eclipsed as a small figure ran forward, hair longer than in the photos, and flung herself into his arms. “Grandad!” gasped the girl with a slight Aussie twang. “My grandad!”

He clutched her, feeling the instant connection that comes with blood. “Olivia!” he said. “What a surprise!”

He reached up instinctively and stroked the little girl’s vibrant red hair. Shivering slightly with recognition. Feeling the ice thawing once more. Recognising that Olivia was her own small person, but that his Martha lived on in her glorious red hair.

“Told you,” chuckled William, patting his arm, Gloria at his side smiling her greeting. “Merry Christmas, Dad.”

“Merry Christmas indeed!”

He placed Olivia gently down and went to close the door. Briefly he looked forward, hair longer than in the photos, and stared at the street through his reflection, trying to make out the road beyond the mirrored room glowing against the shiny surface. “Did William ring?”

“Yes, but he couldn’t talk. Said something about a surprise later on.”

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