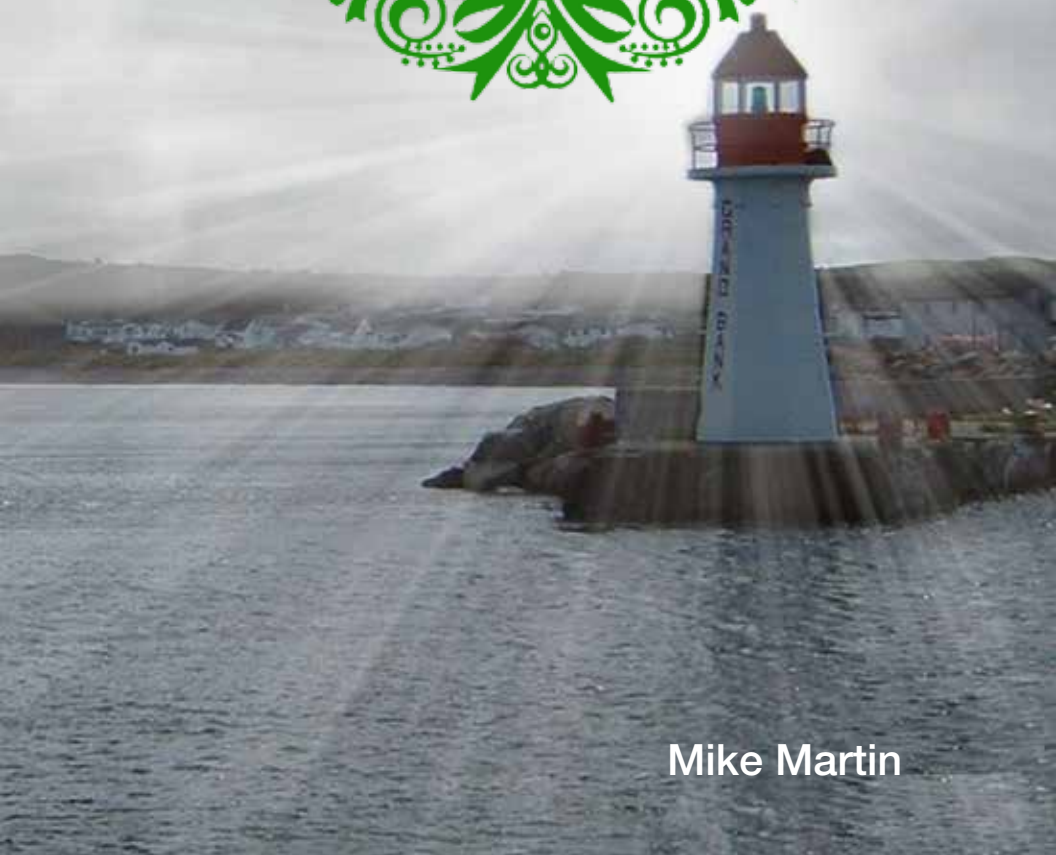




*A Windflower
Christmas*



Mike Martin

A Windflower Christmas

It was just days before Christmas and Sgt. Winston Windflower only had one big problem. That was what to get his girlfriend, Sheila Hillier, for Christmas. Other than that, life was good for the RCMP officer in Grand Bank, Newfoundland. Crime was low, if non-existent, and spirits were running high, as the holiday neared its peak in this little seaside town.

The Mountie's biggest concern was impaired driving. But Windflower and his team had been out on the roads for the past two weekends with the R.I.D.E. program. He figured that meant everyone would be on their best behaviour for the next couple of weeks. That was especially true since one of their own had been charged with impaired driving. Two others received suspended licences because they were close to the legal limit of alcohol allowed.

Even the weather was cooperating. They hadn't had any snow in Grand Bank for almost two weeks. That was a relief to not only the snow shovellers who caught a break after a series of early winter storms. But also to the RCMP officers who had already worked several overnight shifts because of

storms this winter. The best news was that there wasn't even any snow in the short-term forecast. Along with the RCMP vigilance, it meant that the town could be festive and safe during this holiday season that was already well underway.

The old town of Grand Bank went all out to pretty itself up for Christmas. Almost every house had some form of decoration, and Christmas lights were aplenty all over town. Some people went old fashioned and just had a wreath on their front door, and a couple of strings of lights hanging from their eaves. Others decided to splurge on nativity scenes and blow up Santas, as they held nothing back in their gaudy and joyous celebration of the season.

Old Saint Nick had already made one visit. That was last weekend during the Santa Claus parade that was led by the antique pumper truck from the volunteer fire department. He was eagerly anticipated in a return engagement on December 25th. Windflower and the local RCMP vehicles were decked out in flashing lights and ribbons as they collected toys and gifts for the Salvation Army along the parade route. Sheila had rounded up a few extra dollars from local businesses to ensure that even the abandoned

buildings near the wharf were gaily festooned with ribbons and bows. And the essential Christmas lights.

Windflower never thought he'd say this, but he wished they had a bit of snow for Christmas. It just didn't seem right to have brown on the ground and fog in the air at this time of year. Most of the locals agreed as they sat around the Mug-Up café. Over coffee and tea biscuits they lamented the lack of snow, and collectively prayed for a white Christmas. The RCMP sergeant and his corporal, Eddie Tizzard, certainly shared this sentiment as they nursed their coffees.

"I know it's happened before, but it doesn't seem right," said Tizzard. "It's not really Christmas without the snow."

Windflower nodded in agreement. "We never had this problem back home. By this time of year we would be frozen down solid, with at least a foot of snow on the ground. It made the trees all seem like they were decorated."

"We had a few years like this in Ramea when I was going up, but almost always it would snow on either Christmas Eve or in the morning. I remember one year getting a sled that my Dad made me, and running out in my pajamas to try it out," said Tizzard.

Windflower laughed, and nodded again. “Here’s Sheila,” he said, as the café door opened and his girlfriend walked in. Sheila made sure to greet each individual in the café personally and with a smile, on her way over to see Windflower and Tizzard. That’s a real politician, thought Windflower.

“Good morning, Sergeant and Good morning, Corporal,” said Sheila.

“Morning, ma’am,” said Tizzard. “I’ll see you later,” he said to Windflower, as he put on his hat and nodded to Sheila.

“Good morning to you too, Mrs. Hillier,” said Windflower. “I thought you were taking a break from campaigning for the holidays.”

“I am,” said Sheila. “I’m just being friendly. But it doesn’t hurt to say hello to folks.”

“Or to voters,” said Windflower with another laugh.

Sheila laughed too and ordered a coffee from the waitress, Marie, when she came by.

“Since I’m not officially running for mayor this week that’ll give us more time to have fun,” she said. “There’s the

Christmas concert tonight and drinks at the Stoodleys first.”

“Sounds good,” said Windflower. “I’m definitely going back to running after the holidays. I bet I’ve put on 10 pounds already. Anyway, I gotta get back. See you tonight.”

“Okay, Winston, see you tonight,” said Sheila as she took her coffee over to join some of her friends at another table.

Windflower waved goodbye to Sheila and drove the short distance back to work. Things were slow, slow and very slow at work. But that pace actually suited Windflower these days. It had been an early and busy start to winter. All of the staff at the Grand Bank detachment were looking forward to a break at Christmas. Tizzard and Windflower would be staying in Grand Bank over the holidays, and they would split the workload, which they both hoped would be minimal.

The other two staff members would be getting a real break this Christmas. Constable Carrie Evanchuk would be going home to Estevan, Saskatchewan. Corporal Harry Frost, who had just arrived as a temporary replacement, had already booked a week in Cuba with his girlfriend. Evanchuk would be leaving late tomorrow, the day before Christmas Eve,

and Frost would do the same next week. That left just enough personnel on duty to keep everything going in Grand Bank until after New Years.

Windflower had little family to go back to at Christmas, even if he had the time off to go. His Uncle Frank and Auntie Marie and a sprinkling of cousins were all that were left in Pink Lake, Alberta, where he had grown up. It was a small northern Cree community that was struggling to survive. But it was always like that, thought Windflower. He knew that it was both poor and impoverished, but to him it was still home, and he always fondly remembered his Christmas times growing up there.

There were not many gifts, but there was always lots of love and lots of food. The whole community saved up for Christmas, and stockpiled food for the community feasting which took place from about Dec 18 to Dec 21. That was three days of splurging on turkeys and baked hams along with venison roasts, bannock and Windflower's favourite: baked lake trout from the deep, cold water of Northern Alberta. He could also taste the desserts in his mouth every time he thought about them including Saskatoon berry pie with fresh cream that his grandmother made every year at Christmas.

During the twelve days of Christmas every family would have an open house in turn, and welcome the community to visit. Windflower could remember trudging from house to house with his parents, and the singing and dancing at every home. While there was some alcohol, there were very few drunks. There was just the spirit of community and friendship and sharing. It reminded Windflower a little of the mummering tradition in Newfoundland that he was introduced to in his first year in Grand Bank.

He had been sitting in the living room at Sheila's one night between Christmas and New Years when he heard a loud commotion and a banging on her front door. When he went out to answer he was very surprised to see a band of mummers. There were half a dozen people of various shapes and sizes wearing madcap costumes including a bulky and bearded man with what looked like a large pair of ladies bloomers on the outside over his pants. Their question to Windflower was "Any mummers loud' in?"

He turned to Shelia who was standing beside him for guidance. She nodded, so he opened a door the crack. That was all the mummers needed. In a flash, they were inside and quickly arrayed themselves around the living room. They brought a variety of musical instruments with them,

including a fiddle and an accordion. The bearded fellow had a large wooden stick with bells and whistles and other things hanging off the side of it. Sheila would tell Windflower later that this was called an 'ugly stick', and it was used to keep the beat for the mummers' music.

But that music was not happening, at least at the beginning. In fact, Windflower thought his new guests were starting to get upset. One of them openly grumbled about being thirsty and hungry. Luckily, Sheila had gone to the kitchen and came back with a tray of drinks. Then with another tray of Christmas cake and cookies. The mummers dug into their food and drinks. Once their appetites were satisfied, they broke into song. A few of them even danced around the living room, and the one with the beard laid down his 'ugly stick' long enough to whirl Sheila around a few times. The mummers left shortly afterwards to visit the next house up the road, and Windflower and Sheila had a good laugh about their entertainment.

Thinking about those good times reminded Windflower how much he liked Christmas. It also jolted him back to the reality that he hadn't gotten Sheila's present yet. He was running out of time. Now was the time to panic. He was still thinking about Sheila's present when he went to pick

her up for the Christmas concert. Sheila was as gorgeous as ever and was taking advantage of the milder weather to wear a short strapless dress than highlighted her natural beauty, and her long, beautiful legs. She wrapped herself in her antique seal skin coat, and they were off to the concert.

He was watching her walk in front of him into the Lions Club when Windflower thought about the gift. She had this beautiful coat. Why not get her a pair of matching seal skin boots? But where? Windflower racked his brains through the introductory session by the Men of the Sea choir, and again through the Burin Peninsula Irish Dancers. It was only when the children's choir began the last set that it came to him. Dan Quigley was a St. John's boy. He would know where to get the boots.

Windflower thoroughly enjoyed the last of the show, and as soon as he could afterwards he texted Quigley with his request. Later that evening he was sitting on the couch at Sheila's when his phone buzzed. He picked it up and smiled when he saw the news. Quigley knew of a store in St. John's that stocked ladies seal skin boots, and he sent Windflower the website address.

"What's the good news?" asked Sheila.

“You’re not supposed to be asking questions this time of year,” said Windflower. “It might spoil your Christmas surprise.”

“I’m getting a Christmas surprise?” asked Sheila.

“Only if you play your cards right,” said Windflower.

“Come on, Sergeant,” said Sheila. “If there’s presents on the line I have a few more tricks to show you.”

Windflower didn’t need any more encouragement and the couple had an absolutely lovely evening together.

Windflower was up early. After his walk with his dog, Lady, he was on the website that Quigley had sent, looking for the ideal pair of boots for Sheila’s present. He found them quickly: ‘tall, elegant, ladies 100% seal skin dress boots’.

They were black in front and speckled white around the back. They were advertised as ‘warm, durable and definitely head-turners’. That was exactly what Windflower was looking for.

He called the store in St. John’s and asked for a pair of the boots in Sheila’s size. He had checked her shoe size earlier just before he left her house. It wasn’t much good being a police officer if you couldn’t do a little detective work in your personal life, he thought, feeling pretty pleased with

his efforts. They had the size, and Windflower told them that someone would be in to pick them up. His next call was to Anna at Froude's Taxi to make that arrangement.

Now, Windflower was set. It was the day before Christmas Eve and he bounced around the office all day. He was even happier than Betsy who had been wearing her light-up Santa hat for a week now. They had a special lunch at the RCMP detachment that day to celebrate their own Christmas together before everyone headed off to separate parts, and the good spirits lasted throughout the day and into the evening.

The next morning was Christmas Eve and Windflower had a special tradition that he always followed on that day. He had learned it from his grandfather who took him for the first time when he was just a small boy. They wandered far out into the forest, following the snowshoe trails until they came to a clearing. They stood inside a circle of amazing balsam fir trees, each of them rising so high that Windflower thought they touched the sky.

His grandfather did a smudging ceremony inside the balsam grove. He explained that all living things had a spirit. Even these trees had a spirit, an old spirit that lived here long before human beings had arrived. Some called the

trees the standing people and believed that they stood sentry to warn all of the other creatures when there was danger. Then his grandfather opened his pack and took out a package of nuts and dried berries, along with an apple that he cut into pieces. He and Windflower made small mounds and laid them at intervals around the grove.

They were gifts for their animal friends, the birds and the squirrels and rabbits, and the larger animals. When Windflower asked where the animals were, his grandfather pointed to the trees. "We cannot always see them but they are always watching us," his grandfather said. Together they prayed silently, and then just as silently walked home.

It was a magical and spiritual time for Windflower as he awoke to the animal and natural spirits around him. As a young man he continued this tradition with his grandfather until he died, and still carried it with him wherever he travelled. So today on Christmas Eve, he and Lady were walking in the forest, on the nature trail up past the brook in Grand Bank. There was still a little snow in the densest parts of the forest, and Windflower found a clearing of balsam fir trees, not as tall as the ones back home, but they still reminded him of his early Christmas Eves with his grandfather.

While Lady frolicked in the snow and made sure to taste samples from all of the remaining varieties, he stood in the middle of the clearing to smudge and say his prayers. He offered his thanks to the trees, the standing people, and to the animals who were watching. He prayed for the spirits of his ancestors, especially his grandfather and grandmother. And for his parents and the people in his life today, especially Sheila. At the end, he opened his backpack and took out some dried fruit and berries. He laid them in piles around the area. Lady thought they might be a snack for her and checked them out, but was just as happy to come follow Windflower as he led the way back to the car.

Windflower went to the RCMP detachment where Betsy was laying out yet another tray of Christmas cookies along with a bottle of Purity Syrup. Windflower had never seen or tasted anything like Purity Syrup before. It was like liquid sugar that you mixed with water. It came in a variety of flavours from cherry to strawberry to lemon. It was the preferred drink of children and teetotallers. Kind of like a Newfoundland 'Shirley Temple', without the cherry on top.

Windflower took a pass on the cookies and syrup, at least for now, and settled for a strong black cup of coffee and a croissant from a package in the lunchroom. He was saving

himself for later. Tonight he and Sheila would go to church at midnight. Afterwards they would have slices of glazed ham and coleslaw along with freshly made Parker House rolls.

Christmas Eve was a bit of a blur as people kept dropping in to wish him, and the RCMP, a Merry Christmas. Just after lunchtime, Tizzard came in for his shift. He and Windflower were chatting when Betsy came in to his office with a box from St, John's that had been dropped off by Froude's taxi. "Is that from Santa?" asked Tizzard.

"Christmas secrets," said Windflower. "Between Santa and me."

He went out and recruited Betsy to help him wrap his present for Sheila. That was certainly not his forte. But with his minimal input and Betsy's gift wrapping acumen, they did a great job. Windflower stayed with Tizzard until about 5 p.m. and then headed for home. He took Lady for a brisk walk around town and then went over to Sheila's. They had a light snack, and while Sheila finished getting their late night supper ready Windflower found '*It's a Wonderful Life*' on the television.

Soon he and Sheila were happily snuggled together on the couch, as George Bailey rediscovered his joy of life with the help of that friendly angel, Clarence. The pair dressed and did a quick walk around town before the midnight service at the church. It was getting a little chillier, but still a very pleasant December evening. They dropped in on the Stoodleys along the way. Together the foursome walked up to the United Church where people from all over Grand Bank were gathering.

An hour later Windflower and Sheila were walking home again, filled with the joyous sounds of Christmas ringing in their ears. Just before they reached their destination, Windflower saw one fat flake and then another fall before them. Soon the air was filled with snow that danced all around them. It was a magical sight that warmed their hearts and lifted their spirits even higher.

“Merry Christmas, Sgt. Windflower,” said Sheila.

“Merry Christmas, Sheila,” he said. “Now let’s go open our presents.”