



Another Yuletide Attraction

BLUE RIVER'S CHRISTMAS TREASURES SHOP DOESN'T WAIT by Ben Ricker

I can't think Christmas without a deep chill running up my spine. I smell burning and I forget for a second where I'm standing.

Something bad, way back, deep. But swell things, too.

For Christmas-phobes, stepping foot inside the year-round Christmas Treasures gift shop on the winding McKenzie River Highway is liable to send mean pulses of nostalgia through your being, and your heart into convulsive spasms, almost.

Bring Kleenex.

Tell me about your Christmas store, I say to part-owner Nancy Wood, trying to be present while simultaneously being lifted away to a Christmas at my grandma's house. I'm five years old at best, fingering a cigarette burn in the houndstooth pattern carpet while watching TV. A jet of cool air rushes in from under the door to the garage.

Christmas Treasures is a 23-year-old family business near Blue River, out past the filbert orchards and beyond the Lazy Days trailer park. Past Nimrod. Wood and her partner, Patrick Dibala, opened the shop on a whim, the way Wood tells it. For a time, they lived with their kids in rooms behind the sales floor.

The serene look on Wood's face assures me she has no idea how close she is to having a grown man in blue flannel sobbing like an infant in the middle of her red-and-white Christmas shop.

She deserves better than that. Plus, I don't want to scare the sweet old ladies I just met who stopped in on their way to an important volleyball match involving one of their teen granddaughters. I smell the gymnasium and I can see their pimples, ponytails and Nike headbands, whole lives ahead of them.

Dolly Parton's Christmas record plays dimly in the store. My notebook reads: "Emotional time capsule hand grenade!"

The tranquil sales floor belies a bustling, non-stop enterprise in back, where seasonal staff fill online or-

ders and prep finely made Christmas trinkets for shipment.

Wood tells me a story I only barely remember about her partner decorating the 150-foot Douglas fir outside. Fifty thousand LED lights, she says. Grainy photos show a tiny man in the willowy arms of an endless fir. The lights had to come down to be repaired and replaced, but should be back up in time for the store's 25th anniversary in 2018.

She says the building used to be a fishing and hunting lodge.

Wood seems pretty normal, if a little serious. She shows me the first ever Rudolph plush toy.

She says it's not for sale.

"Everything's got a price," I counter, without knowing why.

Nancy isn't moved. Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was invented almost 80 years ago by a guy who worked for the Montgomery Ward department store, I learn.

Nothing's sacred.

I disapparate mentally to when I was probably about 10 shoveling the walk at night under an ice-black Rochester sky.

Wood's son Mark says, "You get used to [Christmas every day]." He also says he sometimes feels like he lives in a different world from everyone else.

Their expressions go blank when I ask them to quantify their holdings.

Out back there are six parked trailers full of Christmas stuff, I'm told. I suddenly remember the moment I learned the truth about Santa.

The Woods say the attic is also storage and there are two more warehouses behind the shop. What's more, they bought the building that once housed the Blue River Market when it went out of business in '05 and stuffed it full of Christmas overstock.

I ask Mark Wood if he gets any customers for whom Christmas is terrifying.

He says, no.

'You get used to [Christmas every day].'

— MARK WOOD