

JOY TO THE GHOST

A Vignette by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Tammy put the little Christmas tree on Lance's grave, straightened a few silver balls, stood back to study the effect, then leaned over again and picked off two pieces of tinsel. Hazy sun glinted off the remaining tinsel, shone from other Christmas decorations on a few scattered graves in the Fleetwood Cemetery. Tammy glanced around. Nobody else's tree was as nice as the one she'd decorated for Lance.

"Yeah, like, he's rilly gonna notice every little thing," said her best friend Aura, chewing gum madly.

"I just want it to be pretty for him."

"My mom thinks you are rilly weird," said Aura, chomping.

"Good thing I'm not friends with your mom."

Aura stopped chewing gum long enough to stare at her, then spat the gum right at Lance's headstone. The gum was Extra Winter Fresh, bright blue-green, and landed right under the "Son" in "Beloved Son and Brother."

"God," said Tammy, "don't you have any feelings?"

Aura touched her cheek and stared heavenward as if pondering this question, then smiled, dimpling, and said, "Consider it an extra decoration."

"You're impossible." Pulling a tissue from her tiny disco purse, Tammy cooty-caught the gum without touching it, making ick-ick faces while wadding up the paper and tucking it back in the purse.

"No, but rilly, Tam, you have this weird obsessive thing about Lance. He's dead, you know. It's not like he cares what you're doing."

"How do you know? Are you God? Huh?"

"Trust me on this one, hon." Aura turned and spike-heeled her way down the lawn-carpeted hill to the 'Vette, carefully avoiding stepping on any graves.

"Lance," Tammy whispered into her pocket phone. "You there?"

"Sure, babe," he said. She had slipped a cellular phone into the coffin at the funeral, shoving it down by his hand, even though his mom was staring at her the whole time.

"Do you care that I come here and decorate? Aura says you don't care."

"I love it, babe. I love having the most beautiful grave in the cemetery. After the gates close, we all get up out of the ground and check each other's plots out, and I get a lot of points for your work."

"Hah! So that's another lie Aura told me, and she says trust her on this one, too! Just like when she said you were hitting on her."

"A complete and utter fib."

"Hitting on her and three cheerleaders."

"I never even looked at them."

Tammy stared at the Christmas tree a little longer, shifted a bit of tinsel to cover a bare spot. She bit her lip. "I wish we could have talked this way when you were alive." Then you might still be alive, she thought, but didn't say.

"At least we can now," said Lance in his sexiest voice.

"Yeah," said Tammy. She took a candy cane out of her coat pocket and set it on the grave just below the tiny tree. "Merry Christmas, darling."

"Thank you, babe."

For an instant she clutched her phone tight. "You haven't been talking to any other girls, have you?"

"Of course not, Tam. Only you have my private number."

She relaxed. "Oh. That's right. Have a good time tonight, sweetheart." She kissed her fingers and planted the kiss just below the headstone. It wasn't until she had climbed into the passenger seat of Aura's 'Vette that it occurred to her maybe Lance was dialing out. Damn! She'd have to get that phone out of there!

The day after Christmas. Until then, she'd let him have his fun. Her last and most generous gift to him. ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

