

## Resolution

By A.C. Hall

Gene cleared his throat and raised his champagne glass high in the air. The house was filled with jubilant people, all anxiously awaiting the dawning of the new year that was now just a few minutes away. But all of them quieted and paid attention to Gene. He was on the landing of the stairs, giving him a raised platform to speak from.

“I know this is a party and some of you have already had far too much to drink,” Gene said, clearing his throat and pointing towards Uncle Frank who was passed out asleep on the couch.

Everyone laughed and Gene waited for it to die down before continuing.

“But I wanted to take a moment to recognize someone. Neil, where are you at?” Gene asked.

Neil stepped forward and Gene smiled at him warmly.

“Get up here,” Gene said.

Neil returned the smile and joined Gene on the landing. The two men couldn't have been more different. Gene was a massive man, overflowing with small town sensibilities. Neil had a slight frame, his slicked black hair and New York accent making him stand out every day in the small community. Gene hugged him and kept his arm around him as he continued speaking.

“It's hard to believe that a year ago none of us had met Neil. I'll never forget, it was January 5<sup>th</sup> when I saw him walking down Main Street. I knew right away that he wasn't from around here. I went up to him and I asked if he needed any help. Do you remember what you said to me Neil?”

After nodding and smiling Neil answered.

“I said, ‘I'll take a job if you've got one’.”

Everyone laughed.

“Growing up in a small town like this you don't get a lot of attitude from folks,” Gene said. “So at first I thought about smacking him upside his head. But as I got to talking to him I decided to go against my gut instinct and to take a

chance. So I hired Neil on to help at the shop. Soon after that he met Rebecca. Becky? Where are you at?"

A moment later a beautiful young woman stepped forward.

"There's my gorgeous daughter," Gene said, gesturing for her to join them.

Her flowing brunette hair cascaded across her bare shoulders, her green dress hugged tightly to her curvy body. She stepped onto the landing and hugged her father, then turned to Neil and gave him a long kiss. When some of the partygoers whistled and clapped she pulled away and smiled, slightly embarrassed. Rebecca and Neil held hands as Gene continued speaking.

"I can't say I was too pleased with how fast things progressed between these two, but when I saw how happy Neil made my baby girl all of my reservations disappeared. This small town never felt big enough to contain Becky, I always knew that she wasn't happy being stuck here helping me run the business."

Becky frowned as she interjected.

"That's not true daddy, this is my home."

Gene patted her on the shoulder, then continued.

"You were destined for bigger things, things that you weren't going to get here, we both know that, but then Neil came and everything changed."

The big man paused and took a drink from his glass. The smile on his face faded away and his voice was serious as he spoke again.

"No one but Neil knows this but, before he showed up the shop was three weeks away from being taken by the bank."

Several people spoke at once, expressing their surprise over this. Gene's business was thriving now, making he and his employees rich over the past year. Hearing that it had been so close to folding surprised almost everyone in the room.

"It's true," Gene continued. "But Neil changed all of that. First he stabilized us, then he got us on the fast track to success. I watched him work on several occasions but I still can't tell you how he did what he did. All I know is that one day I was worried sick about how I was going to have enough money to pay the mortgage and then four months later I gave Neil and Becky this three hundred thousand dollar home as a wedding present."

"It's a beautiful house," Neil said with a smile.

This drew some laughs and clapping.

“Then there’s what Neil did to Peter,” Gene said, his tone serious once more. “I had written my wayward son off, lost to his addiction to drugs. You all know the struggles that Peter had, five times he laid at County General, and I had to listen to the doctors tell me that this may’ve been the overdose that had killed him. But he always pulled out of it, always lived on to do more drugs, to let down his family, to waste his potential.”

The mood in the room had darkened as Gene recalled the struggles of his only son.

“But once again, along comes Neil,” Gene said, pausing to wipe tears from his eyes. “He made my daughter happy, made me rich, but he had one more miracle to perform.”

Gene turned and was addressing Neil directly now.

“I’ll never understand how you did it. Why were you able to save Peter from his demons when no one else was? I’ll never know, but I’ll never stop being thankful for it.”

Neil nodded and clapped Gene on the back.

“If any of you are wondering where Peter is tonight,” Gene continued. “You’ll find him upstairs asleep. He wanted to be well rested for his meeting in the morning. Neil and Becky have given him a home, brought him into the business, and he’s now such a blessing to all of us.”

The tears were flowing now and Gene had to take several deep breaths to keep from breaking down. A moment later he raised the champagne glass once more.

“The ball’s about to drop so I’ll finish quickly. Raise your glasses to Neil. Even though it’s just been a year, we feel like we’ve known you all our lives. You saved my business, made my baby girl happy, and brought Peter back from the edge of hell. This New Year’s Eve, we drink to you Neil.”

“TO NEIL!” everyone shouted.

Neil smiled and embraced his father-in-law.

“It’s dropping!” someone yelled.

They all rushed into the living room. The 60 inch flat screen television was displaying the ball in New York City as it entered into the final seconds of its descent.

“Three! Two! One! HAPPY NEW YEAR!” everyone screamed.

Neil and Rebecca kissed. When they separated he saw that she was crying. He hugged her close and held her for some time, not wanting to let her go. Neil wasn't sure about a lot of things but he was sure that he deeply and truly loved his wife.

The party broke up soon after and by 2 a.m. everyone had left. Neil and Rebecca straightened up a bit but finally he convinced her to go to bed and let him finish. She reluctantly agreed and Neil worked for two more hours getting the house in perfect condition. He mopped, scrubbed and straightened, knowing that it was important to get it all just right. When he was done he quietly walked up the stairs.

He paused outside of Peter's bedroom door. The young man had been deeply troubled when Neil had first met him, but the two had since become great friends. Neil smiled as he recalled some of the good times they had shared, then continued on to the master bedroom.

Neil stood beside the bed, staring down at his sleeping wife. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and somehow she had the personality to match. Most attractive women he had known came with a horrible personality, a lifetime of being told they were beautiful turning them into controlling, joyless people. But not his Becky. She was warm, funny, intelligent, and compassionate. He leaned down and kissed her gently on the forehead. He felt tears forming in his eyes so he turned away quickly, knowing that he wasn't going to be able to follow through on his plan if he looked upon her any longer.

Moving to the closet, Neil crouched down and moved several coats from the bottom shelf. Behind them there was a small bag packed with a few essentials; some clothes and some toiletries. He grabbed the bag as well as a bundle of papers sitting next to it. He then stood up and left the room.

Neil was careful to look at everything as he came down the stairs. He wanted to have a perfect memory of this home, of everything that was in it. The remote that activated the gas fireplace was nearby and he pressed the button on it. A fire leapt into existence and he pulled the rubber band off of the bundle of papers and moved to the fireplace.

First he threw in his driver's license, then his social security card. Next came a year's worth of accumulated paperwork, car insurance, bank statements, every

single document that proved that Neil had ever existed. When they were all engulfed in flames he turned and walked out the front door.

The sun hadn't risen yet and he pulled his jacket tight around him. He walked past the cars in the driveway and started walking down the street. When he reached the small bridge he stopped and looked down at the dark creek below. Carrying out his New Year's resolution was never easy but this year it was tearing him apart to do it. Fourteen years, fourteen identities, fourteen lives lived, one year and done. But this time it was different. For the first time since coming up with this resolution, he didn't want to go. He wanted to turn around and walk back into that house, his house, and go upstairs to that woman, his woman, and live that life.

But it wasn't his life. Not anymore, not as of 12:01 a.m. He gritted his teeth as he pulled his wedding ring off. He threw it into the creek fast, knowing that if he held it too long he'd slip it back onto his finger.

The man turned and jogged down the street, knowing that he needed to be out of town by sunrise, on to the next year, the next life. He knew that it was going to be damn hard to live up to this past year, but he had a resolution to live up to.

And what was a resolution if not a promise to oneself?