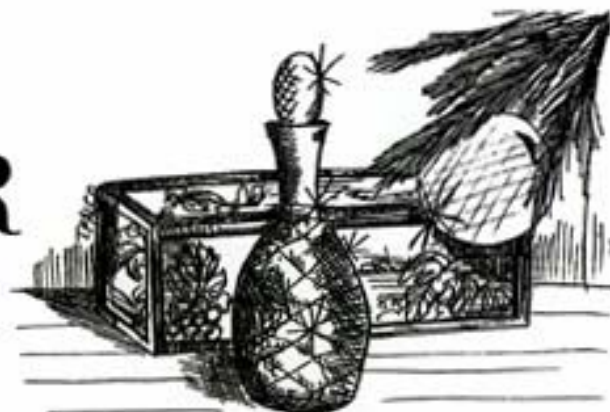


THE DECANTER

A Christmas Tale

By Bill Stephens



Earl Fuller leveled a kick at the front door of his wine shop that would have seen his foot inside of a more modern structure. "I can't believe this is happening to me!" he exclaimed, his voice cresting from aggravation to wrath.

The mid-day thaw had melted just enough ice from the front door of "The Cellar — Fine Wines" to flood its lock — which lock became operative as the intrusive water hickened to ice in the deepening cold of a gray, sunless, San Antonio Christmas Eve. A sign on the door acutely announced Christmas Eve closing to be "5 p.m. Sharp!"

Now, fully an hour after his estimated departure time, he still struggled and cursed the lock, the door, the building and the fact that fixtures should be subjected to sub-freezing temperatures. Just before repair clouded his whole consciousness, the bolt moved rudely into place and "The Cellar — Fine Wines" was secure at last.

The Cellar, as most of its regular customers called it, was the idea of Earl's father, Winston Fuller, M.D., or reasons unclear to Dr. Fuller, his son's wife had loaded Earl's stereo, Earl's money and everything else that fit into their 1981 Volvo Station Wagon and left for a destination as yet unknown — even after five years.

The shock of the unrequited loss weighed so heavily on Earl that his mother's professional expertise led him to suggest a complete change of lifestyle: from aeronautical engineer to wine merchant — wine being a passion ardently passed from Fuller to Fuller. Dr. Fuller, a roundish man most of a life, with a happy, open face only ritually obscured by a beard grown to compensate for a constantly receding hairline, actually had three passions in life: his patients, his family and his wine cellar. The same sparkling intensity danced in his eyes when the conversation happened upon any of these subjects.

Earl's father was a family physician with a rural constituency, even as a rural doctor his income was efficiently disproportionate to that of other residents in the area to own him a large Fredericksburg-style, arched stone home. Dr. Fuller was utterly captivated by the house on his first saw the fall-aisled, stone-enclosed cellar. His passion for collecting art wines was inspired through the stunts made during an exchange residency at a hospital in Besune, France.

"A young man cannot live for two years in Besune without learning to appreciate great Burgundy," he often

philosophized.

In 1984, San Antonio's urban sprawl met the Fullers at the edge of the Boerne Hill Country on I.H. 10 West, and they decided to move into retirement and a small ranch house 35 miles away on property purchased near Pipe Creek, some four miles south of the Bandera highway. It was a planned, orderly withdrawal, begun only after selecting those wines with which Dr. Fuller wished to grow old.

"Earl Boy, you've got to be tired of drawing pictures of aluminum rivets up there in Fort Worth. Why don't you come on down and start a wine shop here in the old house? Enjoy life a little!"

The life-changing suggestion took only three days to accomplish, due primarily to Earl's never having replaced those family accoutrements lost in his wife's rapid exodus. The deal was simple. He would live upstairs, run the most esoteric wine shop in the Southwest on the ground floor, and sell, on consignment, his father's astounding collection of wines resting in the cellar.

"It'll be sort of a retirement income for your mom and me," his father had chuckled.

The reputation of Earl Fuller, his picturesque wine shop and its incredible cellar had spread nationally, making the shop something of a mecca for anyone with even a passing interest in wine.

Earl gave The Cellar's door, and its recalcitrant lock, the obligatory rattle of all property owners, bent down, picked up a highly-polished rosewood box and headed for the BMW in the first parking place.

His last act before his bout with the door had been to decant — using a mechanized cradle — a 1919 Dr. Beuret Chambolle-Musigny, thought by many to be the finest red Burgundy wine ever laid to rest. Earl had discovered the wine at the back of a bin holding lesser-known Côte de Beaune Burgundies during a year-end inventory. Offers as high as \$15,000 for the bottle were tendered and rejected. The bottle simply brought too much pleasure to consider its sale.

"Decanting this baby should be televised," Earl thought, as he began the process. The exaggeration caused a brief, reflective smile, but his disappointment at not sharing the event was real.

Transferring the bottle into the decanting cradle was the most treacherous element of the operation, since one sudden movement would cause a sooty cloud of sediment to convolute the wine, moving back its opening indefinitely. The day was won once the bottle was in the cradle. Its pivots, screws, levers and other gadgets were

up to the task of carefully tilting the bottle from nearly vertical to just below horizontal in micro movements. The purpose of this exercise was to drain off the wine, leaving the noxious solid matter, thrown off by the wine over the years, behind.

But this still left the problem of the cork. He had long ago learned that pneumatic openers were the answer here. Corkcrews used on old, brittle corks stuck in bottles full of sediment were simply an invitation to disaster. His concentration was so intense during the insertion of the pneumatic opener's needle through the cork, that he failed to notice the pain of his tongue between his clenched teeth. At precisely the right moment Earl pushed the valve and the cork burst from its 70-year residence.

Decanting was accomplished in a crystal Elizabethan decanter located after a week's searching in New York City antique shops. Period decanters are plentiful, but fitted to rosewood boxes, they become quite a bit more dear.

The BMW's engine turned over effortlessly and Earl, with the rosewood box and its precious contents, swung onto I.H. 10 heading for the Scenic Loop cutoff to the Bandera Highway and Christmas Eve with his father.

Wind jostled the Beemer as the blue norther howled in, unimpeded, from the Arctic Circle. Sleet collected on the windshield as Earl's knuckles whitened on the steering wheel.

Impatiently, he flipped the wipers to a faster speed. Their rhythmic sway mesmerized the driver, distracting him from the warning light that appeared on the dash. The previous month's conversation with Ethan Cotter, M.D., physician to and life-long friend of his father, crept forth once again.

"Earl, you know how worried I've been about Winston ever since your mother died."

"Yeah, Ethan, it's been a concern to me, too. Him living all the way out there by himself."

"You know he came to see me last week?"

"No! About what?"

"He wasn't feeling good and he wanted a second opinion. Actually, he knew exactly what was wrong. How a licensed physician could let that condition continue this long without treatment is beyond me."

"Sometimes he seems like he doesn't care to live," Earl heard his own words without comprehending their meaning.

"Care to live? Well, by George, he's gonna get his wish. I don't want to be blunt, Earl, but this is your daddy's last Christmas!" Ethan was always blunt.

"How long does he ...?" Earl's voice trailed off.

"Hard to say. Four, maybe five months. I was afraid he hadn't told you. That's why I called. You need to get him back to town, Earl. This won't be a walk in the park, you know."

The windshield wipers thumped away the sleet and melted ice as Earl choked back the emotion absent during Ethan's call.

The confrontation following Ethan's announcement was more telepathic than verbal, with each man reaching for the other's feelings while guarding his own.

"Pop, have you thought any more about coming back to live at The Cellar?"

"Don't really like city life."

"But I can't take care of you out here."

"Who says I need taking care of?"

Pop was more hurt than offended.

"Pop, you know it's just a matter of time until ...," Earl stopped short of the truth and looked into eyes that had passed sentences on so many similar prognoses and fell silent.

"Well, the way I look at it, Earl Boy, this is a really good Christmas to spend here on the ranch. Then we can see what has to be done, okay?" Winston Fuller, M.D., smiled and went back to his book.

Earl walked in the woods to recover. The most difficult conversation of his life had passed without elaboration.

The Pipe Creek garage, filling station, grocery and post office, a weathered clapboard structure still up to its various tasks, was dark except for the lighted telephone booth in the parking lot. The car sped noiselessly past for another two hundred yards, slowed, turned and headed down the ranch road — a four mile stretch of blacktop pavement.

One half mile of split rail fence had marked Earl's progress when the BMW belched, coughed, sputtered and rolled to a stop.

"What in God's name ...?" Earl frantically looked at the gas gauge, which, to his dismay, was resting squarely on empty with the fuel warning light glowing like a hot ember on the dash.

Three and one half miles ahead lay the Fuller Ranch. One half mile behind was the dark service station with the phone booth. It was an easy decision. He retreated toward Ma Bell's electronic savior with ever-quickenning strides. The wind and sleet ripped through his trousers like a rasp through wood.

"Out of order!" He stared in disbelief at the small hand written note taped to the telephone dial. "This phone is 'out of order!' This incredible piece of crap is out of order!" Picking