

B e d t i m e  
C h r i s t m a s



**Stories to tell and read**  
by W. Frederick Wooden  
c 2002



## Foreward

I began clergy life in a very small town in the remote hills of central Massachusetts. It is a postcard town, with white church and town green, clapboard houses and quiet lanes. But in one respect, at least, it was not the Rockwellian image of America. They did not hold a Christmas Eve Service. It was, for them, a feast kept at home.

I destroyed this, callow young clergyman that I was, and introduced an early evening service with familiar readings and carols. But it needed something more and a sermon seemed wrong with so many children in the house. Whereupon it occurred to me that Christmas is a short story, a tale. I should tell a story.

This insight is not new. Many authors have written Yuletide stories, ranging from Dickens durable novella (hardly ever actually read and excellent) to shelf miles of transient inspiration sold every year at the season. What was new was crafting a story that could be told in the space of a sermon; that could be appealing to both child and adult; and yet still grasp something of the “meaning of Christmas.”

That has been the task I set for myself over the last twenty some years: in that remote town, in another a few miles away, in Austin, Texas and most recently in Brooklyn, New York. Below are a dozen or so of those that have survived.

They were written to be read aloud in a short time. I have, though, used the liberty of print to extend one or two somewhat beyond that. But they are still rather short and can be read aloud to older children. I hope they also have their adult charms, doing for you what

they did for me: providing some gentle pleasure and a quiet reminder, in a season when gentleness and wisdom are in short supply.

It goes without saying that none of these stories are “true.” Each is a pure and wonderful fiction. But for me, as for many others including some clergy, a tale sometimes tells more truth than any “fact.” I leave it to you to decide how much truth lies within.

W. F. Wooden

## Scraping the Bottom Line

‘No fruit cake,’ hollered out a voice from the back room.

‘You sure?’ Mel bellowed back

‘No fruit cake,’ the voice repeated.

‘Will you be getting any soon?’ asked the customer.

‘No,’ said the owner blandly from behind the cash register.

‘It’s December,’ the customer wondered out loud.

‘Should I order a case just so you can buy one?’

‘It’s Christmas.’

‘Which means I should be foolish, eh?’

‘Other folks will buy the rest?’

‘Not likely. And the governor says I have to pay inventory tax on what I have in stock December 31. So I am not about to order a case just to pay tax on it in 2 weeks.’

The customer rolled his eyes in resigned defeat. He bought a pack of gum, the cheapest thing he could find, and smiled his best sarcastic smile to accompany a similar ‘Merry Christmas to you too.’

The owner didn’t catch the insult. Mel Newcomb was already headed to the back room, muttering to himself as he went. In the stock room he scanned for Manuel, the stock boy, who was actually a man of

more than thirty years. Not seeing him, Mel opened his mouth to holler when suddenly there he was.

‘Yes boss?’

‘You found that champagne yet?’

‘No. I just start looking when you ask for fruit cake.’

‘Well, let’s hurry it up. Frank said he has a buyer and he’ll pay me an extra 15% over wholesale if I can get it to him this afternoon. I’ll make \$50 between the profit and what I save on inventory tax.’

Mel didn’t need a cash register. He knew every price in the store, wholesale and retail, and could figure a bill almost as fast as a machine.

He always knew, within ten dollars, just how far ahead or behind he was. And he took pride in this. ‘Look after the pennies and the dollars will look after themselves,’ he was taught and so believed. In business, especially retail, details made all the difference.

Yet despite his scrupulous ways, he never turned a great profit. He never lost money, but he never really made much either. Year after year he stayed just profitable enough to continue. Never enough to expand, but never so little that he had to sell out.

Meanwhile other store owners he knew, like Frank, had not only survived bad years, but enlarged. Frank had gone from a variety store to specialize in wine. Mel thought this foolish, but the gamble paid off. Elliot and LeRoy had opened second stores. Marge had bought part of a florist. But Mel, on the other hand, was still running the same shop he opened back in ‘64.

And that mystified him. They were less frugal, less astute about how to trim costs, less shrewd in general. They had even lost money in the past. Yet they flourished. Mel chalked it up to luck. In the card game of life some got good cards, others bad. He was dealt a poor hand. Indeed, were it not for his canny and cunning ways, he would have gone under years ago.

With distinct pride he told himself, ‘I must be a better businessman because I have survived working with much less.’

Mel was the Henry Thoreau of retailers: self reliant, independent, beholden to no one. He had found his Walden, a tiny place he leased at very low rates. It was not in the choicest of locations, but like Thoreau’s little cabin, Mel thought it shrewd. Inexpensive, which minimized costs, but only a short walk from downtown. He didn’t advertise, it was too costly for such a small return. He believed in word of mouth. Good prices were their own advertising, he always said.

No doubt about it, he had been practical at every turn, made all the right choices. Even hiring Manuel was the logical thing, despite his being an illegal alien. Mel didn’t know this for sure, and he didn’t want to, either. But he had a strong suspicion when Manuel came in the first time to buy one can of beer.

‘Very happy,’ he said that day, with a huge smile. But when Mel asked why he suddenly got jittery, laid down a five dollar bill and didn’t wait for change. That got Mel’s attention. When Manuel came back a few days later asking if he could make a few dollars cleaning up, Mel agreed to try him at ten dollars a day.

And it was an enormous job. Mel had tried to run the place all by himself to keep expenses to a minimum. But over time the job had gradually gotten ahead of him, so the store was usually dim, dusty, and about as drab as the neighborhood itself. When asked why the place was so dissheveled he usually shot back, ‘You want to pay for product or atmosphere?’ So it was not for appearance that Mel hired Manuel, but because even in November he was figuring out how to take inventory and sell off the excess.

When Manuel came asking for work Mel told himself, ‘At last a bit of luck.’ But it had an ominous side. He had to keep Manuel from being discovered, at least until New Year’s. So Mel had him spend most of his time out of sight, and told him not to come out front or make himself obvious.

Manuel didn’t seem to mind. He worked harder than asked, even asked for more work when he finished early, which was usual. Mel almost felt guilty paying him less than \$2 an hour. Almost. But, Mel reasoned, he couldn’t pay social security without Manuel having a green card. And besides, the extra money would be cutting profit too much. No, \$10 a day was reasonable. And to Manuel, Mel thought, it must be a fortune. They both came out ahead, right. So he told himself.

‘Is it back there?’ Mel told Manuel, pointing back toward the oil tank.

‘No boss, just old box.’

‘What’s in it?’

'I look.' Manuel disappeared behind the oil tank. He coughed as the dust rose, then stood up holding a long dirty serpent of wire upon which hung an assortment of dusty colored light bulbs. 'What these?'

'Christmas.'

'Navidad?'

'Yeah, that's right. Put'em back.'

'No put up, like Frank?'

'Too expensive. I'm not going to waste electricity on stuff like that. Put'em away.'

'You no like Navidad?'

'My Christmas comes on April 16.'

'No understand.'

'You're not the only one. Put them down and find the champagne.'

Reluctantly, and with a shrug, Manuel put the lights back in the box and found the cases of champagne. He found them, hiding an open carton of fruit cakes.

Madre mia, Manuel thought. Even with his poor understanding of English Manuel could tell Mel was not the forgiving type. What would happen when he found it? Would he get fired, or worse, be turned into the authorities?

Maybe he should just leave. But he remembered three things that kept him there. It was very cold and he had no place to go. He had

some money, but if he left now he would have to spend it until he found another job. And Ysabel was on her way.

Besides it was Christmas, even Senor Newcomb will find it in his heart to forgive. Manuel shook his head sadly. If there was any heart in Mel, Manuel would have to work to find it. He had to do something.

‘I’m going to take that champagne over to Frank’s now,’ Mel said, coming through the door. ‘Show me where it is.’

‘No, no, you wait. I get.’ Manuel quickly loaded the cartons into Mel’s car. This only delayed the inevitable. While Mel was gone Manuel worked feverishly to make the place even cleaner, all the while trying to figure out what he should do.

In this new situation Manuel knew only a few things, but he was quite sure about each. One, that Mel hated to pay money, especially tax. Two, that Mel loved to get money, no matter how little. And three, that the customer who asked for fruit cake was the only the second one to ask for it.

Mel was back in less than an hour. He could see Manuel had done extra work, polishing the counters, dusting even the upper shelves and clearing cobwebs from the corners. He was surprised at how much nicer the place looked for just that little bit.

At closing time he paid Manuel, saying, ‘Uh, the place looks real nice. You did a good job.’

‘Gracias, senor.’ Manuel cleared his throat to prepare for what he had to say.

‘You want something?’ Mel asked.

‘Today I would like to buy something.’

‘I don’t understand.’ Manuel had never bought anything since working there.

‘These, por favor,’ producing the fruit cakes from beneath the counter.

‘They are muy beuno, yes, but these are all you have.’ Manuel tried to sound genuinely interested, but he emphasized that last part.

‘I see,’ said Mel. ‘That comes to fifteen dollars.’

Manuel dug into his pocket and slowly counted out three dollars and seventy cents. ‘Could you take the rest from tomorrow’s pay? I need money for the bus.’

Mel frowned and furrowed but nodded reluctant agreement. He then wrote down the IOU and stuck it on the spindle by the cash register. No wonder they’re so poor, Mel thought, figuring only a fool could get himself into such a position.

No words were said as Mel put the fruit cakes into a paper bag and locked the door behind Manuel before closing for the evening. Manuel was uncertain. Mel’s face was as sullen as he had ever seen it, but he didn’t fire Manuel either.

He came to work as usual the next day. Nothing was said about the previous day. Manuel felt the quiet more than usual. Mel didn’t even play a radio. From inside the store you couldn’t tell it was almost Christmas. Now and then Manuel would hum or whistle, but very quietly and never when Mel was around.

At closing time Mel counted out Manuel's wage, deducting it from the IUO. He was about to say good night when Manuel smiled and handed him a brown paper package of strikingly familiar shape.

'Feliz Navidad!'

Mel was nonplussed. He had no idea how to respond. He had nothing for Manuel, obviously. He felt keenly self-conscious accepting any gift, to say nothing of this gift.

'You open, yes? I hear is very good.'

'When I get home.'

Manuel was visibly disappointed, and Mel quickly back pedaled. 'Well, maybe a sliver.' With quick nervous motions Mel unwrapped the fruit cake and dug out a small slice.

Manuel smiled broadly, standing there while Mel chewed the leaden confection.

'Well, it's getting late, Manuel. See you on Monday?'

'Yes boss,' he said with enthusiastic relief.

Mel did not realize what this meant to Manuel. He was too embarrassed to realize that in fact, he, Mel had given a great gift, hope. But this went unrealized, for he was so affected by what Manuel had done.

All real gifts are given unawares. In the heart of reality gifts are only known to those who receive them, and they are always humbled by them. So Mel was unaware of his own gift because he was humbled by the gift he received; which was itself unrealized by Manuel. For he had

given with the generosity possible only from those who have nothing. And there they stood, each humbled by the other, and yet unaware that they felt the same.

On Monday, when Manuel arrived, Mel told him what to do as usual. ‘Sweep out the store, restock the shelves, defrost the old freezer, and put up the Christmas lights.’

‘Por favor?’

‘You heard me. Now what are you waiting for, Christmas?’

## Posadas

Water Street on winter mornings is an urban hangover. Dull gray air seeps out between the warehouses and factories, the few still working. Salt bleaches the streets of color and sand thrown from crusted cars stings the face. The cold aches the feet and dries the mouth.

Mel Newcomb hunched his shoulders against it all as he walked down Water Street to his store. Not so long ago all these places were busy; and the men in them his bread and butter. A gold mine, he told himself when he decided to open his convenience store. But Mel's was the last business to open there. The atmosphere of gritty progress gave way to one of grimy regress.

Mel's store, also so named, was comically sad. Tired paint and faded signs bespoke its meager life. A tiny square cottage set amid the sprawl of industry and its debris, it was mushroom of a place, an eccentric little bump in the neighborhood. It would have been picturesque if it were in a painting, or on a wharf, or painted brightly in a tourist village, but it wasn't. So it was sad, made more so by winter's patina.

But this sadness was only visible to the outsider. To Mel and those who also worked there, Water Street was simply where they worked. If it was not an easy life, it was not a miserable one either. A leathery pride attached to those who spent their lives here, defying anyone to judge them unfortunate.

What they lacked in creature comforts and pretty surroundings was made up in real work and real friends. Water Street may not be charming but it is honest. And they would tell you so, if in less elegant terms.

Mel turned his back to the wind as he worried the keys into the locks. The sweet little bell rang as the door, and he heard something else he couldn't quite make out. Hurrying to the wood stove he worked quickly to start the fire. Unlike most folks with wood stoves, Mel had always had one.

The store came with one when he bought it, that's how long the place had been empty. And he would still have had it, except that it cracked some years back and he had to replace it with a newer (and to his chagrin) more expensive model. But it worked better, he had to admit. And soon enough the comforting sound of the fire delivered increasing warmth.

There was that rattling sound again. And Mel was about to go into the store room when the bell rang and a blast of cold swept into the store. It was Manuel, Mel's first and only employee in 20 years.

'Buenos dias, boss.' Manuel spoke loudly and hurried to catch Mel before he went through the back door. 'Thas my job, not yours.'

'But it sounds like those squirrels I had last year. Took forever to get them out. And now they're back. And I know just where they are, too.'

'But boss,' Manuel insisted, 'time to open.'

'You're right. You check it out. Look up where the chimney meets the roof, that's where they got in last time.'

‘You bet, boss. Be right back.’ Manuel slipped through the door, opening it just enough to get through. Mel heard him whistling, which he did constantly. This time it was ‘Joy to the World.’ Mel couldn’t be sure it wasn’t just his imagination, but it sounded a little different, faintly tropical.

Mel turned to the daily routine of making coffee and setting out newspapers. Manuel opened the store room door and pushed his head out.

‘I see no squirrel, no thing, boss.’

‘Must have been the wind. Bring the crullers in,’ Mel said, referring to the bakery drop off each day. Manuel brought in the tray of boxed donuts and other pastry.

‘One box broken, boss, throw out.’

‘Typical. Set the donuts behind the counter and put the rest on the rack in back.’

‘You bet.’

Mel started serving his regular morning customers who, though few, were steady. But where else could they go? Mel knew their orders by heart: pouring out coffee, setting out donuts and pulling out cigarettes without saying or hearing a word. In the cold of early morning conversation was simply too much work.

The morning crowd, it they could be called a crowd, came and went in twenty minutes. Mel could count on an hour before the derelicts came in, some for coffee and some for wine. He hated to admit it but half of his business was wine, chiefly Thunderbird and other fortified grapes. A few still came in to buy lunch, although they were mostly new workers and those who forgot to bring their dinner pails.

But now there was a lull, and because of that he could hear something in the back room. He could not tell what it was, precisely, but he imagined Manuel had been proven wrong and was trying to corner some creature and cursing himself for being outrun and outsmarted. Remembering how hard it had been to catch them last year, Mel walked through the door, saying as he went, ‘They got you cornered yet?’

Mel stood dead still in the door. Instead of Manuel chasing squirrels he saw a half dozen people huddled under blankets. He instantly assumed them to be among the drunks and derelicts that clung to the edges of the neighborhood. But before he could say anything he heard what could only be a very young voice, barely more than an infant. And that made him look at the faces. They were all younger than him, and two of them women.

‘They no stay, boss. Leave now.’ Manuel turned to the group and started yelling at them in English, ‘Go, go, go.’ They didn’t understand until he waved his hands to demonstrate. They got the message, got up and were at the door before Mel stopped them.

‘Wait a minute. Wait a minute! You know these people, don’t you Manuel?’

‘No,’ he protested vigorously. But then waited a moment and corrected.

‘Yes. Me family.’

‘All of them?’

‘Mi esposa Ysabel, hermano Felipe, y esposa Teresa, ninos Jose. Dos amigos, Diego y Javiar.’

‘Slow down. I can’t understand. Where did they all come from? Wait, don’t answer that. How long have they been here?’

‘Yesterday, sundown.’

‘So they spent the night here. And I suppose those donuts are the ones that fell off the truck.’

‘Yes, boss,’ and Manuel reached into his pocket for money.

‘We’ll settle that latter. All I know is that I’ve got trouble and you got me into it. Damn it, Manuel!

Manuel was suddenly afraid. His first reaction was an honest one.

‘We no bother you any more. Thank you Senor Newcomb for job. Here is money for food. You very kind.’ And Manuel turned to them and spoke in rapid Spanish. They nodded and all headed toward the door again.

‘Where are you going?’

‘I find old train, no move no more. Stay there.’

‘You mean the caboose behind the shoe factory? Good God, that’s a rat hole. You’ll freeze.

‘No freeze. Stay there many times.’

‘In this weather?’

‘No.’

‘And how long do you figure to stay there?’

Manuel shrugged.

‘Why?’

Manuel struggled to find words. Mel was impatient.

‘What was so bad there? It wasn’t cold. You had a place to live. It was some kind of home, at least. How can this,’ and Mel gestured around, ‘be better.’

‘Is better, senior, is better.’ Mel looked at Manuel in disbelief. It was a long moment, and for the first time Mel saw something more than a wetback. He saw the look in his face, a look he saw in the other faces too.

It spoke of complete loss and the kind of hope known only those who have lost. He saw something unanswerable in their eyes, something that would not yield to reason or logic or anything sensible.

‘That caboose is dangerous, you know. You could get sick, or hurt, or worse. If you get caught you go back. If I get caught my store would go under. So why am I thinking what I am thinking. Christmas, damn fool Christmas. Turns the brain to mush. Tell me Manuel, where do you want to go?’

‘Canada, safe for us there. No send back.’

‘Well, you won’t get there by staying here. I gotta figure this out. Manuel, give them some coffee while I make a few phone calls.’

‘Yes, boss, right away.’

Mel shook his head in disbelief at what he was going to do. He spent about a half an hour making calls before going back into the storeroom with Manuel.

‘You tell them what I tell you.’

‘Yes.’

‘My sister Martha has a room at her place in Keene. Day after tomorrow you go there until her son can drive you up to Newport, Vermont. My cousin Pete has a camp, a hunting cabin, up there where you can stay until after New Year’s. Then a friend, a Canuck I met in the war, will come down and take you across east of Derby Line. He

says he'll have no trouble. Ten days, you all will be in Montreal. And if you think it's cold here, just wait.'

Manuel translated as much as he could, but the idea got through. Great smiles mixed with palpable relief. They tried to embrace Mel, but he stiffened up and walked to the door.

'Hey, I ain't doing something for nothing here. You all can help Manuel here. This place is a mess, not the least for your stowing away. I want to see this place shine before closing time.'

And it did. The work kept them warm, but Mel had a tough time keeping them quiet, so a constant babble of Spanish could be heard from the back room. Mel was worried people would ask questions, so he turned on the radio for the first time in years. Customers thought he was succumbing to Christmas sentiment and he lied by acting sheepish and admitting they were right.

The sun set early, and it was dark as closing time approached. Suddenly it dawned on him that there was no place for them over Christmas. Martha had the family home. They couldn't stay in the store. Someone would notice.

Quite by accident Mel had cornered himself into taking them home. Sure he had enough room, but he was an old bachelor, not accustomed to having family much less strangers under the same roof. But what else could he do? At that moment the thought crept into his mind that perhaps this was no accident at all. He shivered at the thought, refusing to consider it more than a fraction of a second.

'Manuel,' Mel hollered. 'Can you all walk about 4 blocks, with the baby and all.'

'You bet.'

‘Well, go up Water Street two blocks. Turn left on High Street and go to number 27. Go in the back door, and try not to make yourself obvious. No singing or whistling okay?’

‘Sure boss. Whose house?’

‘Mine.’

‘Your house. Thank you, senor, thank you.’

‘Get going before I change my mind.’

‘Yes, yes.’

‘And take this stuff with you. We’ll need it.’

Mel handed him a bag, and Manuel quickly peeked down to see not only milk and bread, but a tin of fruit cake and a bag of candy.

A few minutes after they left Mel finished closing the shop. He closed the stovepipe, emptied the cash drawer and was about to turn off the Christmas lights outside when he remembered to go and lock the back door.

Only after he had locked both doors and stood outside did he realize he left the Christmas lights on.

In the dark, the store lost its tired grayness. All you could see were the lights outlining the windows and roofline. They blinked. Manuel had connived him into putting them up this year. Mel didn’t like to spend the extra money for electricity.

By force of habit he started back to turn out the lights, then shook his head in resignation. What was the use? Financially, this Christmas was already a disaster. So he turned and walked up Water Street, absently whistling a tropical carol.

## The Night Before the Night Before

Sleet makes a cold sound, thought Millie. She was now an expert on sleet, for it had started falling hours ago as they climbed up into the hills of highway 77, which runs the ridges and hollows of West Virginia. Down in the valleys to the east it was rainy and almost warm. But up in these mountains the rain turned to sleet. It was, after all, late December; the warm weather couldn't last forever.

'Keep turning the wiper,' Ben reminded his daughter. Millie wiggled the spindle under the dashboard faster. When the windshield wipers stopped working back in October they had to take turns wiggling the blade by hand from inside. This was made easier because it was an old car, a 1962 VW bus in fact. It was simple to reach in and turn it by hand, which they all took turns doing in wet weather. But it was awkward, constant, and painful. So Millie, her little brother Spit, and her mother Jo, all took turns.

It was Millie's turn and she was miserable. The sleet made turning the wiper harder. You had to wipe faster because it was ice, but it didn't work as well for the same reason. And the knob was icy cold. It was to distract her from these miseries that Millie thought about other things, like how sleet sounded cold when it hit the roof of the bus; how even the word sleet sounded icy and raw; and whether it would be this cold and raw in Ashland.

They were heading for Ashland, Kentucky: home of Ashland oil and the Erwin family. Which is to say that's where Ben's aunt and uncle lived and the place they tried to be for Christmas as they worked south

from Maine to Florida. Millie remembered how her father had told her that they were like the Roosevelts and the Rockefellers, who lived in Maine in the summer and Florida and the winter.

But unlike the Roosevelts, the Erwins went to Aroostook County in Maine, full of pine trees and mosquitoes, so Ben could harvest Christmas Trees. And they went to Hillsborough County in Florida, harvesting oranges and grapefruit. In between Ben picked apples, dried tobacco, milled lumber, loaded trucks, even made coffins. Thus they followed the seasons, moving south with the sun in winter, and north with the warmth

In summer, Jo said they had pet herons, for they traveled with them both ways. She swore they probably fed the same birds in Tampa and Bangor.

But at Christmas they tried to be in Ashland. Ben and Jo grew up there, as had their folks. And until the oil boom went bust, Ben worked there. Like most folks, even those with a job didn't have much; and when that was gone everything else went with it. Not enough room at home to go back, what with Ben and Jo both being from large families. So they had to leave.

At first they figured to settle down somewhere else, but each new job, from North Carolina to New Hampshire, lasted a few months at most. Ben had a knack for being the last guy hired before a down turn. Before they knew it they had become migrants, working fields and factories and everything in between. But every December, when Ben finished working a tour as a Mall Santa, they headed south to be in Ashland for Christmas.

For a few days they had a roof, a bed, a home. But Ben was worried this time. They had started later than usual

That morning. The weather was getting worse and worse and he was driving slower and slower. It was obvious night would catch them well north of Charleston.

Then came a heart-stopping vision. Flashing lights and a police officer waving traffic off the highway. Ben supposed an accident ahead had closed the road, and as many times as Ben had gone this way he did not know the country well, to say nothing of during a sleet storm at night with the wipers broken.

‘What’s happening, Pa?’ Millie asked. ‘We’ve got to make a detour.

But I’m sure we’ll be back on the highway in no time,’ Ben lied. The next interchange was miles ahead.

‘I’m hungry,’ said Spit from his dark perch in the far back seat.

‘We’re out of peanut butter, Ben,’ Jo said as quietly as possible. What else could go wrong, Ben thought. He didn’t have long to wait.

Along a truly lonesome stretch Ben saw the temperature gauge rising. ‘How in heaven’s name,’ he said screwing up his face in frustration and confusion.

‘What’s wrong, Ben?’ Jo asked, exhaustion in her voice. ‘The engine is overheating, and in this cold to boot. I’ve never seen such a thing. Keep wiping Millie, I can’t see a thing as it is.’

‘There’s a house,’ Ben said, sounding decisive. He pulled the car off the road and onto the shoulder looking for a driveway. Two ruts jutted out with little warning and Ben turned abruptly, slipping on the frozen dirt. Jo moaned and Spit started crying. Millie caught a whack

from her dad's elbow as he whipped the steering wheel, but she swallowed the groan in her throat.

As they drove up the drive Ben wondered how we had seen the place at all. There were no lights on. Uncut brush and grass, hung over with ice, draped onto the porch. The closer he got the more he realized this was an empty house, abandoned. His heart sank, for the engine was in the red zone now. They had to stop, and where they stopped they were going to stay, and even to Ben this was no place to hang your hat even for one night. But he had no choice.

'Everybody out,' Ben said, trying to sound positive. 'We'll spend the night here and still get to Unc's Christmas Eve.'

'From your mouth to God's ear,' Jo murmured as she stepped out of the bus. They both knew from experience that once lame the bus did not recover quickly. So Ben and Jo scanned the hovel before them knowing this would likely be their Christmas home.

Living out of a bus as they did, they were equipped for survival. Ben grabbed his flashlight and a tire iron. Jo, Millie and Spit were already on the porch waiting as Ben foolishly leapt up the stairs. Like an old movie his feet shot out to one side, slipping on the glaze ice, and he landed in a sprawl on the porch. Spit laughed, and Ben thought, at least he isn't whining about food for a moment.

With Millie holding the flashlight, Ben prepared to force the door. 'Try to door first, would you?' Jo asked. It opened. 'You stay here, just in case,' Ben said as he Crouched low against cobwebs and other nasties. Ben slowly walked in.

From outside Jo, Millie and Spit saw the flashlight beam wander around, and they heard Ben muttering. Inside, Ben saw the familiar form

of a three-room house, a living room, a kitchen and one bedroom. A third door led to a shotgun addition, which had another door further back that his nose told him was a privy. Old newspaper lined the walls, and some blanket curtains billowed with the wind. But the window could be closed, which he did making a great noise that made those on the porch scream.

It was mostly dry, very dusty, but free of squatters, so he trotted back and said, 'It's okay, come on in.'

'Boy is this weird,' Millie said. The floors creaked, the wind literally whistled through the cracks and fluttered the edges of the newspaper on the walls. A piece of threadbare furniture invited her to sit, which she did sending up a great cloud of dust. She jumped up, gasping and choking. 'We're going to stay here? I'm going to sleep in the car.'

'Unh-uh, young lady,' Ben said. 'Too cold.' We've gotta sleep in here. You come with me and get our stuff.' They went out, gingerly going down the steps, and brought back sleeping bags, pillows, a kerosene lamp, a suitcase, and a paper bag Ben had stuffed into a corner behind the spare tire.

'I'm hungry,' Spit was whining again, and Jo could not keep herself from looking both dismayed and depleted. Ben handed the paper bag to Millie and said, 'look inside.' Millie's eyes grew wide.

'I guess that's our supper,' Ben said. Millie pulled out a one of those little gift boxes with salami and cheese, candy and in the middle a diamond of maple sugar. 'I got it for Unc and Aunt May. You know how much she loves that maple sugar, and Unc just loves those little cheese things.' Ben was obviously proud of his Christmas find and how

much he had gotten for his money. They had been doing better than last year and he wanted the folks in Ashland to know.

Taking one long breath, he dove through the plastic with his knife and passed some food to Spit and Millie and Jo. Nobody dared take the maple sugar candy, so when everything else was gone it remained, a sacred host too pure to be consumed. Ben wrapped it up in some of the plastic and put it in his pocket, saying ‘We’ll give to Aunt May tomorrow night.’

To Ben’s surprise and relief, the fireplace worked. And there was enough wood to throw some light and warmth, enough to turn off the kerosene lamp, which meant he could save some fuel. As soon as the fire was dependable he made everyone bed down.

Mille and Spit fell right to sleep. Years of experience at sleeping in odd places made it almost natural, but Ben and Jo lay awake for a while.

‘What are we going to do?’ Jo asked.

‘I guess I’ll try and fix the car tomorrow, if I can. Maybe we’ll get lucky this time.’ Even in the dark Ben could see Jo’s sarcastic smirk. Or maybe he just thought he did. ‘Okay, we’re probably stuck here.’

‘What about Christmas?’ Jo insisted.

‘I don’t know. I got a couple of doodads in the suitcase, but I figured on Unc for Christmas morning.’

‘I’m not so worried about Millie; she’s almost ten. But Spit sent Santa a letter this year. I wrote it down for him. I liked to cry my eyes out when he said, ‘Dear Santa, we don’t live in a house. We only have a car, so could you bring me a fire truck at my Unc and Aunt May’s.

We go there every Christmas.’ Ben, I can’t stand to break his heart.’

‘I know, Jo. But what can I do?’ Jo had no answer.

Millie was not asleep. But she lay still until she heard their steady snores. The dimming light of the fire allowed her to see out the window, and she noticed that the sleet had stopped. It was quiet, wonderfully quiet, with just the muffled pops and squeaks of an aging fire.

Oddly warm, Millie crawled out of her sleeping bag and tiptoed to the window. The moon was above the tree line. Each ice-covered branch bent the moonlight into her eye, with its clean white-blueness. With her night eyes she could see where they got names like icing and frosting, for every surface was either encased in glass or softened by satin. It was what she imagined Christmas to be, all clean and clear and shiny.

A sadness rose up in her. First the sadness of not getting presents from Santa. Then the sadness of missing Christmas with Unc and Aunt May and the others. Then another sadness: the sadness of knowing that if they had not stopped she would not have seen this. For the first time in her seven years she realized that everything costs. Every yes has its no, every left its right. And she felt the sadness of knowing that there will always be choices unchosen, paths untaken, gifts unreceived.

And now, seeing this, she was sad that she was alone and no one could share in it. She turned to wake Spit, but realized that to wake anyone would ruin it.

It was like the maple sugar candy: Too frail, too sacred. All she could do was look. So she sat there with her head on her arms, gazing out the window, hoping never to forget the night before the night before Christmas.

## Up on The Rooftop

'I'm hungry,' Spit wailed as he woke up. That wasn't his real name, of course. Leonard Boutwell Erwin was the name on the birth certificate. When he was a baby he was so colicky that he spit up almost every time he got fed. This disgusted Millie, being the older sister, so naturally she took to calling him Baby Spit Up instead of Leonard. Ben and Jo told her not to call him that but the name stuck.

Now five, and voracious, Spit was the family alarm clock, rousing them all every dawn with the same message: 'I'm hungry!' But today that plea would have to wait some time for an answer.

It took each of them a few seconds to remember where they were, and where they weren't. They weren't in Ashland with Unc, Aunt May and the family. They weren't in the VW bus or the tent where they usually slept. They were in an abandoned house somewhere in West Virginia, a hovel that they stumbled across last night when forced off the road by sleet, night, and an overheating engine.

Ben muttered crossly as he pulled his clothes on. The smoke from his first cigarette felt good, until he gasped and coughed. Millie hunched down into her shoulders at the familiar sickening sound, scared and angry at the same time. Ben didn't see this, heading for the fireplace to get a fire going. It took a little kerosene, but a fire did start and the flue drew well.

'We don't have a thing to eat,' Jo reminded Ben, which he already knew. So Ben snapped back, 'I'll figure something out, okay?'

He lit another cigarette.

‘Best see if I can figure out what’s wrong with the car.’ That didn’t answer the question of food, and the other question of money, but Ben might be able to do something about the car.

He couldn’t. While there were patches of blue in the morning sky, sleet and ice had fallen all night, covering everything, including the bus, with almost half an inch of ice. Ben could not flip the cover on the engine of the 1962 VW bus (with sunroof) because it was frozen tight.

‘It’s frozen solid,’ he came in to tell Jo. ‘Can’t get into it. I’m going to find out where we are. Maybe there’s a house close by where I can use a telephone.’ Jo nodded resigned agreement. But she resented being left alone with two hungry children and being unable to get to the few things they carried with them in their migrant life.

The sun came out. And after they were dressed Jo noticed that the ice was melting in the light. The children were already restless, so she called out. ‘Hey, kids, we’re going outside, and clean some ice off the car.’

Gingerly, they walked onto the porch. With mincing Geisha steps they descended to the yard and the bus. Jo took Ben’s flashlight and rapped it against the ice. It cracked. With ever colder hands she clawed the pieces away until she could open the door. Inside she dug out fresh clothes, toilet paper, coloring books, a National Enquirer, and hoped to turn up a scrap of food she might have forgotten.

Millie and Spit was skating on the frozen dirt road. They were delighted with the ice world: where grass broke and forsythia shattered, where icicles hung long and low from the roof, and the brightness of the

reflected light made them squint. As the sun warmed, sheets of ice broke loose from the roof and rattled down.

‘Millie,’ Jo shouted, ‘take this bucket and put some ice in it. We need the water. The two of them made a game of breaking icicles from the house and crushing them into the bucket. Jo watched them from inside the bus, relieved the children had something to do other than whine and complain. She also noticed the two paper sacks Ben had wedged into the crevices, which she surreptitiously checked.

The rumble crunch of tires approached and slowed. Out by the road Ben got out of a small truck holding a small paper sack. He turned and said, loud enough for Jo to hear, ‘Thanks, and Merry Christmas to you.’

Ben hurried down the driveway, almost falling several times, but never quite.

‘Got lucky, Jo. There was a big accident on the highway last night.’

‘Ben, that’s horrible!’

‘Well, yeah, but the lucky part is that the undertaker doesn’t have enough help, so he wants me to work for a couple of days at \$50 a day.

Can you believe that, Jo, fifty dollars?’

‘But what about Christmas?’

‘We couldn’t get there today anyway; you know that.

‘But the kids, they really need Christmas.’

‘I know, darlin’, but some things just can’t be helped. You tell them, okay.’

‘Uh-unh. You tell them.

Ben called Millie and Ben inside. ‘Well, kids, it’s like this. The car is busted and we can’t get it fixed before day after tomorrow. But I got this great job that’ll give me \$50 a day until then. I got us some food...’

‘What about Santa?’ Spit interrupted. ‘He won’t find us here,’ Millie explained.

Ben didn’t know what to say.

‘I’ve got to get to the funeral parlor if I want that job,’ he said as he walked past Jo.

‘What about the kids?’ Jo asked, but Ben pretended not to hear.

Jo made tuna sandwiches with the stuff Ben brought back, and at least Spit was content for a while. Jo then demanded that they stay inside and play with the few things they had. But in a short while they were screaming and picking on each other. Jo was fed up.

“Outside, both of you. Do whatever you want, just give me a few minute’s peace.” The kids thumped out and Jo flopped into the tattered easy chair left behind.

Outside on the porch Spit began to cry. ‘Knock it off, crybaby,’ Millie said. ‘But I want Santa to come, and he’s not.’

‘Maybe if he knew we where we were it would help.’

‘But how?’ Spit asked, unconvinced.

They stood on the porch for a long time. Millie absently flicked a few of the remaining icicles off. Spit sniffled.

‘There’s a big field out back,’ Millie remembered.

‘So what?’

‘We could start a big fire? There’s plenty of wood out there.’

No, that wouldn't work.' Millie fell silent again. 'Hey, I've got it. We'll make an arrow so Santa knows somebody's inside.'

'But how will Santa know the arrow means him?'

'We'll spell out Santa by the arrow,' Millie said.

They tramped out back, crunching the ice as they went. Some logs were too big and slippery for them to move, but with the smaller pieces they gradually lined up an arrow pointing at the house. At the base of the arrow Millie started lining up 'Santa,' and then thought it would be better to put the word 'Here,' in front of Santa. And over the next hour they laid out their message on the milky field of ice, in letters four feet tall 'H E E R S A N T A.' Millie and Spit stood back, admiring their work for some time. They stood there until the wind and a fresh blanket of cloud made it too cold to remain there. Then they hurried in.

'Ma, See what we did!' Spit dragged Jo to the window where she could just make out the message on the field. 'Santa's gotta see that.'

'He'll come for sure.'

'Sure, honey. I'm sure he will,' said Jo.

Ben got back late, after dark and just as more sleet and snow started to fall. Jo knew what he'd say: 'Ya know, maybe we should stay here a while. This may be a steady job.' It never was, but Ben never stopped thinking it would be. 'How much you got left?' Jo asked knowing it was less than fifty dollars.

'Plenty.'

'How much?'

‘We’ll talk later. Right now I’m hungry. I’ll bet we’re all hungry,’ he said getting louder and scooping up Spit in his arms. ‘Look in my pocket. Go ahead.’

Spit reached into Ben’s pants and found a Hershey bar. He squealed, and before Millie could ask Ben pulled another one out for her.

Jo shook her head, and it could have meant either defeat or forgiveness. Maybe both. She opened another can of tuna and fetched the mayonnaise from the bucket of ice water.

Over her shoulder came a warm breath and a peace offering.

‘Forever Yours.’ You always remember.

‘And it’s true, darlin’. Forever Yours.’

‘You are a lot of talk, Ben Erwin. Now, where is that money?’

He handed her thirty nine dollars and some cents.

‘And what happened to the rest?’

‘We’ll talk later.’

‘No. We’ll talk now.’ Her voice was sharp and loud. The children stopped talking and the room was suddenly quiet. Millie heard the sleet on the rooftop.

Jo shivered and went back to fixing sandwiches. Ben gathered Millie and Spit around the old easy chair and told them in exotic and improvised detail about his day.

Soon after supper they put the children in their sleeping bags in front of the fireplace.

‘But it’s Christmas Eve. Pa. Do we have to go to bed right now? Tell us more about the dead bodies.’

‘No, and yes, it’s time for bed. You need your rest if we’re gonna get to Unc’s tomorrow night.’

‘What are you talking about, Ben,’ Jo said.

‘I mean, after working tomorrow we’ll start out. The weather is supposed to be warmer. A mechanic in town figures we got an oil leak and if we add a quart every few miles it’ll get us home. So, cross your fingers, we can leave supper time tomorrow and be there by midnight.’

‘Yay,’ Millie and Spit cheered, jumping out of their sleeping bags.

‘So get to bed.’

Spit started to whimper. ‘But we’ll still miss Santa.’

‘Yeah,’ Millie jumped in. ‘It’s cloudy and snowy. He won’t be able to see us.’

Santa’s a pretty smart guy. Don’t you worry, now.’

Jo shot him an insistent look. As soon as they fell asleep she said,

‘Let’s go outside.’ There, Ben lit a cigarette. Jo snatched it from his mouth and leaned close.

‘What happened to the money, Ben? Or should I ask, how long did it take to drink it? I saw those bags you stuffed in the trunk. Did you think I wouldn’t find out?’

‘Maybe we can’t give them Christmas now, but if you go and spend it on your liver they’ll never have anything. You should see what they did today.’

‘I saw. Out the window. And I swear I had nothing to drink. Did you look inside those bags? No. If you did... Well let me show you.’

Ben trotted out to the car and brought back the two wrinkled bags and a new larger paper sack.

‘See, here’s some jacks for Millie, and a yo-yo. I got cowboy pistol for Spit. It’s really a squirt gun, but doesn’t it look good. And after you told me about the fire truck I stopped and got this.’ Ben pulled a large, garishly red, plastic fire truck from the bag. ‘Cost six dollars. But, like you said, you just can’t break his heart.’

Jo smiled a weak accepting smile. ‘I knew there was some reason I married you. But what about Millie? Ben sighed and shook his head.

The fire was all but out when Millie awoke. From her place she could see the forms of Mom, Dad and Spit. They were all sound asleep, motionless. Millie was about to get up and look out the window when she heard a clattering sound on the rooftop. Sleet was still falling. But there was something else, a thumping, a crunching, almost a walking sound.

A walking sound! Millie took a sharp breath. Could it be? She had her doubts, not only now but before. It didn’t quite add up. But right now there was this noise, and that was very real. Ice pellets fell down the chimney. There was definitely something, or someone there. She scrunched her eyes closed, knowing that you weren’t supposed to see Santa on Christmas Eve. Her heart pounded with each crunching step above her.

Then it was morning. Instead of his usual alarm, Spit was shouting, ‘Santa was here. He found us.’ Beside her, Millie found a candy bar, Hershey’s, and a note tied around it. ‘Dear Millie, Thanks for

your message. I might have missed you. Sorry there's not more. Love, Santa'

There it was in black and white. Who cares if there was only a yo-yo and some jacks? Santa left them, absolutely. And he wrote her a letter, too, thanking her.

'Merry Christmas,' Millie shouted to her father, for he was about to leave for work. 'Merry....,' but he paused and had to let out three massive sneezes. 'Christmas, Christmas, Christmas,' it sounded like to her. But they were only sneezes.

## **Weihnacht**

Like peeling sunburn the paint curled off the clapboards. Colored halfway between Public-Works Yellow and asphalt gray, the effect made the pastor think of a faded photograph of a summer cottage. But it was December, so the little house looked all the more pathetic. The door opened. "If it ain't the pastor come to call?" sang a woman of some years, propped up by a four-pronged cane. "Come in," she said, and stamping the ice from his boots he stepped into the crowded hallway. A dim bulb glowed from the ceiling fixture. Stacks of newspapers lounged amiably about, like long time boarders.

"Morning, Edna," giving her cheek a peck and her hand a squeeze. "How you doing today?"

"Better, thanks." They walked back toward the kitchen at the end of the hall.

How about some coffee?"

"Sure," he said as she dropped his coat over a chairback already piled high with clothes. Edna pushed some jars and cans aside to make space on the counter. Gas popped under the stained kettle. He was given his choice of an 'I love Gramma' or a Bicentennial mug. He usually drank it black, but with Edna he added condensed milk as she did. It helped because she used a heaping tablespoon of instant, which made it undrinkable otherwise.

Chatting stopped for the pouring and stirring. The milk rolled about in a granular way, following his spoon down into the black depths only to come back up the outside edge. In the quiet of those seconds he looked at the familiar house. Every inch was full. Cabinets were open, the counter crowded, the table stacked. The newest groceries were still in bags, which rested in a full laundry basket. Used spoons, sugar, crumbs, and instant coffee salted what little surface remained. About now, when his hands first felt the warmth of the coffee, he noticed how cold his feet still were. She did not have the heat on today. Thinking of his own two pairs of socks he noticed how Edna was dressed. A housedress, a sweater, knee socks and furry slippers.

"Let's go in and set down," Edna said, and they moved into the living room. Like the kitchen it was filled with stuff. One corner was devoted to an easy chair, the telephone, the TV, and a straightback chair to hold the most current newspaper and TV Guide. She brushed them off and he sat down there as she dropped ungracefully into the easy chair.

"So I hear you're feeling better?"

"Yep. The pain is much better, and I got a new cane. The doctor says I might get back to work soon." She was lying. In truth, she would

never fully recover from her broken hip. “Until then, though, I depend on Albert.” Her son, in Indiana, sent money every couple of weeks. It wasn’t enough, but she didn’t say that to Albert. She didn’t mention the Food Stamps either, but the pastor knew and she knew that he knew.

“You going to Albert’s for Christmas?” he asked.

“I can’t afford it,” she said, meaning Albert couldn’t. “Besides, this has always been my home. I’ve got friends here. Now that Daniel’s gone it’s too hard to change.” Daniel, her husband, left, literally up and left, twenty years ago. No warning and no reason. Edna never told him this, but others had and Edna knew they had. Now and then a letter for the kids came, and then after five years nothing at all. Then one day an awkward letter from the Amarillo Texas Police Department. It said Daniel had been found dead. They buried him. Days later a man was arrested with Daniel’s wallet. Inside was an address.

“I’ll bet you miss the grandkids,” said the pastor, thinking of his coffee mug.

“Oh I do,” she replied. “You want to see the latest picture?”

He walked over and bent low by her chair to see the snapshots she carried in a pocket of her sweater. He saw her eyes moisten even though she smiled as she gazed at the two girls, about 5 and 8.

“Well, since you’re staying here, maybe you can help cheer me up? I need all I can get.”

“Oh, what could an old fool like me do for you?”

“You could help out at the Christmas basket project,” he said. “I’m having a tough time finding enough folks to do it.”

“Sure,” she said, “but I don’t know how much help I’ll be.”

“Edna,” the pastor said, “you have no idea.”

She laughed, a wiggling, loose and undignified cackle that was absolutely genuine. For Edna was always cheerful, always smiling. It wasn't optimism. It was resignation. Years of hard luck took even the pathos from her tragedy and left it merely comic, with herself the audience. Perhaps she was pitiful to others. But she was alive for whatever reasons. And regardless of why she was cheerful, he enjoyed her. Soon he took his leave, took his coat and another dry kiss, and trudged back to his car.

A few blocks away another house, this one of brick with gleaming paint on the window frames and door. The gleaming brass knocker as surrounded by greenery, and a small clutch of painted fruit clung to it. He rang the deep bell, and very soon a pair of red cheeks appeared through another window and a door opened to a stream of chatter.

“Good Morning, come in, how nice of you to visit, I was just taking this strudel from the oven, it smells so wonderful, no?, and you're just in time to sample some? Please take off your coat, I was just about to...”

Leaving her in midstream he went to put his coat in the closet. Along the way he saw the tree in the parlor, the gifts mounting up. In the kitchen the cookie tins were stacked, rolls of ribbon waited by the desk. Music, Christmas Music in her native German, was playing somewhere. In design, it was the same house, long front hall going beside parlor and dining room, leading into the kitchen.

“Don't you love Christmas? Already I am done wrapping presents, and baking, and it's still two weeks away. See these stockings I've made for the grandchildren?” He knew not to answer but only to

nod. In a few moments she would slow down and they could visit. She demanded he sample the strudel over his insincere protests. When tea and strudel arrived the pace slowed.

Cream in a creamer, and sugar in a bowl with a spoon, cup and saucer, and every implement touched with red or green or gold.

“Christmas means a lot to you?” he said with just a wink of irony in his voice.

She smiled with understanding. “It is the best time of the year. So much *gemutlich*..uh, good feelingness, between people.”

“You must have some wonderful memories.”

“Ach, so many. The snow, the music, the food!” Greta was no mere slip of a girl. Rather she was *zoflige*, full. “Christmas was always a special time when I was young, even in those days. Papa’s vineyard made good wine. We always had enough for something special at Christmas. One year, when bread cost a million marks a loaf, we got new shoes, real new ones. And another time we had oranges from America. I remember thinking, ‘These came all the way from Florida, USA,’ and imagining the tropical trees and the hot weather even in winter. I even felt sorry for them, because they had no snow at Christmas.

“Even the first years of the war were pretty good. I was fifteen when we invaded Poland. In the house everyone cheered when we heard about Paris. Christmas was extra special that year, a new bicycle. But I couldn’t ride it until spring. That bicycle.”

A few seconds passed in silence. She remembered, but he also knew what she was remembering. She was riding it when the soldiers marched through town on the way to Italy. She was riding the day they

came back, in trucks. She was riding when she stopped for a train and saw the pale boney faces craning at the barred windows of the boxcars rushing past. She was riding it home the day when the Russians came through. Not yet twenty-one, she fled west toward Belgium, hoping to outrun the Russian army and perhaps find her young soldier-husband, Walther. Allied troops found her hiding under a bridge, after an artillery battle, petrified and shivering.

What he did not know, and what she could not share, was that she knew the bicycle was bought from Jews for mere pennies. She found that out by accident, but when she knew she was even proud of it. Until the day when, sitting on that misbegotten gift she watched the grim train go by. And only then did she know why the bicycle had been so inexpensive. "Papa never could drive a bargain," she said aloud, without realizing it, as her head shook slowly.

"You look sad," said the pastor.

"Just tired," she said, smiling quickly, and turning back to clucking and cutting another piece of strudel. The pastor made a mental note to skip lunch for the next week.

A few days later Greta was teaching the ladies how to make a cute little Christmas basket for shut-ins and others. She was ingenious with such stuff. This year a felt Santa was perched on a tiny wire bicycle. Edna was there, doing her best, but no match for the quick mind and hands of Greta. Edna took twice as long to learn and thrice as long to do. What looked gracious when Greta was finished looked pitiful when Edna was done. But Edna seemed not to care or notice.

The pastor dropped by. When he saw the cycling Santa he raised a knowing eyebrow to Greta who shrugged and cocked her head. He then spent a few moments with everyone there, saving Edna for last.

“Hello!” Edna trilled. “Don’t it look fine?” she said pointing to the basket she made. The Santa drooped over; the wheels were barely ovals. “Greta showed us how to make them.”

“They look wonderful,” he said as he turned it around. “And I’m so glad you came to help out. We really needed it.”

“I’m glad to help,” she said. “Even though I’m not quite so good as Greta. If I can’t work at least I’m good for something, right? Lot’s of folks need something like this to brighten up their Christmas. Believe me, I know.”

Greta came over and shook his hand with both of hers. “All the ladies have done so well. Look at them! But could I speak with you a moment?” They stepped to the end of the room.

“There’s a problem,” she whispered. The pastor frowned gently. “It’s Edna. She’s sweet, but she takes forever and what she makes isn’t very good.” He nodded. Stepping back into the group he said,

“Say Edna, who do you think will get your Santa?” Greta was relieved to think he would let her down gently.

“I heard Greta say she got a bike for Christmas years back. I did too, you know. Once, I rode that bike right off the bridge into the river. The wheels looked kind of like these.” She laughed. “Greta gives us so much, maybe she ought to have this one.”

“Maybe so, Edna.” he said. “How’s that hip today?”

“Not so good, the cold weather and all. Maybe you could give me a lift home? I took the walked up, but it’s getting dark now.”

“No problem,” he said.

When everyone else had left there was only Edna, the pastor, and Greta who was tidying up. He helped Greta a while, so they could all leave together.

“Oh damn,” he said, clenching his teeth. “Pardon my language ladies! But I just remembered something that simply can’t wait. Greta, could you drop Edna at home for me. She lives on Spring Street. It would be a big help.”

“Ja,” said Greta, looking skyward.

“You sure it’s no problem?” said Edna as she clambered into Greta’s car. “No problem,” echoed Greta, shutting the door. The pastor slowly walked up stairs, got his coat, turned out the lights, and went home early.

He awoke the next morning to the insistence of the telephone. Blinking sleep away he picked it but could not even say hello.

“O, you devil,” shouted Edna over the phone.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“No, something wonderful. And you shouldn’t have, but thank you.”

“I don’t understand Edna, what did I do?”

“Come on, you know.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The basket, silly. You took one that we made and put cookies, and strudel and all sorts of stuff in it. And the money, Pastor, only you could know.” She stopped, and he could tell she was regaining her

composure. “It’s just grand,” she said. “But you should have given it to someone who really needs it.”

“Edna believe me, I did not send it.”

“Then who did?”

And he thought of twinkling eyes, and rosy cheeks, and suggested, “Maybe it was Santa Claus?”

## Sursum Corda

“Brethren, pray that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable...” Father Brian was on autopilot. The words dropped with the same unconscious rhythm of his feet on their daily run. As his voice rolled on his mind was far away, tending to more earthly matters. He was, in fact, reliving his morning run, which was nearly ideal. The weather was cold and still. He was loose and relaxed. The slate sky warmed to orange as he trotted toward town, and blossomed to gold as he circled the common and turned back toward the rectory. On the last uphill stretch the clouds parted and the sun spilled through. It was all just right. And his time was the best in months.

“The Lord be with you.” His mind heard the Latin, “*Dominus vobiscum.*” But the congregants were speaking English, saying “and with your spirit.” But Brian didn’t hear them. “Sursum corda,” Brian said without thinking. Only Sister Lucille answered automatically, “*Habemus ad Dominum.*” The mistake momentarily returned him to the present, making him repeat, “Lift Up Your Hearts.”

They got back on track. Brian resumed his daydreaming, now on the decay of old catholic virtues, like Latin. When he started everything was in Latin. It was hard to get people to change. Now, barely twenty years later, most of them had either never learned the Latin or forgotten it. What price progress, he wondered. Then he smiled inwardly at Sister Lucille who alone had the same ingrained piety. “You gotta hand it to them,” he thought. “They keep the faith.” Out of a corner of his eye he caught Sister Lucille mouthing the liturgy silently with him.

Every Mass was like this. After twenty-five years the ritual had become habit, the rites routine, the ceremonies commonplace. His heart wasn't in it. At first he flagellated himself, figuratively, for losing his piety. But now, with the realism of middle age upon him, he no longer apologized even to himself. Forget visions and callings, religion was just his job.

Even moreso here at St. Bede's, and its meager flock. Rarely were there more than 30 at Sunday Mass, and just 40 for golfer's Mass on Saturday evening. This was not a Parish to inspire a pastor by its size.

If he were not so competent it would be discouraging, but he was good and that meant he could get the job done with minimal effort. Leaving him time, even during mass, to enjoy a freedom few of his brothers could know. But that was small compensation for what he lost.

“This, then, is our dutiful offering...” Brian heard the word dutiful, for he was nothing if not dutiful. He was pastor at St. Linus before Bede's. It also was not a large church, though other priests his age had long been settled in ‘better’ parishes. Still, Linus had a history of sending priests toward the mitre and crook. Brian had hopes.

Then the bishop ordered him to Bede's. It was an obvious shame. Everyone knew it, but Brian never spoke. 'Thy will be done.'

And then Mass was over. The March wind in the narthex roused him, as did the hands of the faithful extended in ritual thanks. Inside of half an hour he had dispatched the flock, cleaned up the altar, turned back the heat, and locked the door. He paused only briefly to remove his collar and confirm in his appointment book that he was, as usual, free for the day.

Wrong. He had to serve Mass at the Veteran's Home. It happened once every four months, so he gave a sigh and slipped his collar back in. It was a long drive into the city. He welcomed that part, and the excuse to stop into Mallory's, a haunt from his seminary days. But the duty itself was a hardship. Like all events in life, there were credits and debits.

Every blessing had its curse, and every curse its blessing. Although it seemed to him that the ledger of curses always ran a little longer than the blessings.

And the curse began at the door of the Home. The smell sickened him. That spoiled to sweetness smell of decay pervaded the hallways. The chapel was at the far end of the building, which meant he had to walk past most of the residents, inmates he called them. His steps carried him past old men who didn't have enough money or family to afford a nursing home.

His steps took him past those his own age, disabled in Korea and Viet Nam, their lives sacrificed as fully as any of the noble dead. His footsteps stood out from the squeak of nurse's shoes and the squeal

of wheelchairs, making him very self-conscious, painfully aware of being an outsider and of being glad for it.

The chapel was in fact a patient room, remodeled a few years ago: Six pews, an assortment of Bibles, an old dining table against the wall for an altar, plastic flowers. Brian alternated between disgust and disbelief. In these cramped quarters he had to balance the communion pack on his knees to set up. There was just enough room for the chalice, the paten, the ciborium and so on. The altar looked more like a church supper. He tried rearranging things but it was no good. The crowded and haphazard look would have to do; people were arriving.

Without leaving he wriggled into his alb, kissing and knotting rapidly. He brought his plainest chasuble. He long ago dispensed with formalities as ludicrous and embarrassing. Nothing annoyed him more than priests who dragged a whole cathedral into everything. He remembered serving as deacon for a funeral only eight people attended. The chapel was so small that the coffin filled the aisle, effectively imprisoning the mourners. Yet the celebrant, a fatuous fellow, conducted a solemn requiem mass. It was excruciating, and Brian resolved never to commit such a stupidity himself.

The congregation numbered eleven this afternoon. If nothing else it made his actual flock look pretty good by comparison. With his customary polished absence, Brian began the liturgy. He swung along at a brisk pace, barely allowing the worshippers to catch on much less catch up. But they never complained, and that, too annoyed him. His jaded eye fell upon each of them, arousing pity and disdain. Except one.

This one caught his attention. He was rapt, enthralled. Brian knew he himself was only going through the motions. But this man

looked like an angel in a religious painting. He hung on every word, looking straight at Brian as though he were God. It was downright creepy. Brian found it hard to look at him and impossible not to.

Each worshipper received communion, except the angel. He just knelt and watched, transfixed. Brian hurriedly consumed the remaining wine, and pushed on to the end. The attending nurses then led their charges back, one gently raised the angel by the arm. They turned and left, and Brian couldn't help but watch them, hoping to see his face turn back just to be sure it was as beatific as he thought. But he didn't.

Brian was ready to leave in five minutes. He had it down to a science. Already his mind was racing ahead to evening, and tomorrow, and the day after that. He barely noticed that he had left the chapel and was already in the hall, when he saw the angel walking with a nurse. Brian couldn't help stopping and looking, hoping the man might also stop and even talk. This time he did.

"Hello, my name is David. What's yours?" Brian was about to answer when David said, "It sure is cold for Saigon, don't you think?" Brian was speechless, holding the outstretched hand until the nurse nudged him away. A few feet further down the hall David stopped a fellow resident and said. "Hello, my name is David. What's yours?" A nurse saw Brian's puzzled look and took him aside.

"David sustained a head wound in 1967. He remembers nothing since then. To him there is no sooner or later, only now."

"But he was so attentive in Mass."

"All he has, Father, is an eternal present. Whatever he is doing is the only thing to do. He has no plans, no afterthoughts, nothing except what is before his eyes. Whatever he does is everything there is.

Brian felt the weight of understanding strike him in the chest. David was a simpleton. He was also a genuine angel. His infirmity cost him his personhood but made him truly an angel. Not in the sense of a winged person doing heavenly chores, but in the moral sense: an intelligent being without consciousness, sinless and pure. David was pitiful, sub human, and holy.

Meeting an angel is unsettling. Abraham was unsettled, so was Mary, and now Brian. For Brian the irony was deafening. All his life he believed that holiness was something to be sought after. Only a few ever touch it. And Brian knew he was not one of them. So he had accepted that his place was not to commune with God but to be the janitor at the altar: to open the door, sweep the place clean, keep the house in order. Now this invalid, this literal half-wit communes with God as naturally as he breathes. Either faith is folly or Brian was the fool.

Everyone who meets an angel wonders: why me? The word angel means messenger. Brian got the message. The half-wit is holy, not because of his half wittedness, but because of his whole heartedness. “All he has is an eternal present,” said the nurse. “Whatever he does, he gives it everything he has.”

*Sursum corda*, lift up your hearts. Up until now Brian had assumed he couldn't. But now Brian knew what it meant. Thoughts, plans, and memories all exact a price. They dilute life, draining away the present to sustain past and future. They defer life, holding part of us in reserve. Yet the present is all there really is, and anything we withhold from the present is squandered.

*Sursum corda*, Lift up your hearts. Everything depends on this. As the man said, the Kingdom is within you.

## Peace by Piece

White footprints followed him from the door. By the time he had hung his coat and pulled off his boots they had turned into clear puddles that startled his stocking feet. So Elmer Prescott danced into the kitchen, holding his arms like a tight-wire artist. Across the threshold lay his slippers, which he always meant to leave by the door but never did. He couldn't decide which was better: to have cold slippers close by at the door, or warm ones farther away near the stove.

He was often of two minds about things. His friends would say two was a conservative estimate. When a friend invited him to join in business he considered it so thoroughly that someone else's name was on the letterhead by the time he decided. Long suffering Frances proposed to him after seven years and he said he needed time. His life was the residue of weighing options until one or more them expired. In Elmer the virtue of deliberation went to seed.

Take the house. He considered expanding it but by the time had a plan the price of lumber had risen, so he reconsidered. He was almost ready another time when a new kind of pipe made him decide to redesign the kitchen. Plans were strewn on the kitchen table, all seven versions. Elmer dropped the mail on version four.

A creature of habit, his hands worked without conscious thought. Pick up the mug, add the damp breakfast teabag, a pinch of sugar from the 5 pound bag that never quite got into the canister, then evaporated milk when the water boiled. He opened the damper on the stove to fan the flame. In those moments he opened his mail.

The bills he set on Version Two. Ads were tossed directly into the wood stove. The rest were Christmas cards. Cousins, nieces, nephews, his insurance agent, the oil company (both with calendars). He read them all before the kettle whistled, but as he reached for the mug he saw another envelope on the floor, getting very wet. He knew this envelope by sight and burned himself hurrying to pluck it from the muddy mire by the door. Bouncing it lightly he felt the familiar silk toughness of the paper and turned it to read the address. It was very wet, and the ink was starting to run so he kicked the door of the stove open to dry it in his hands as he slid his nail under the flap. Between the hot breath of the stove, the cold wet behind him, and the letter before him, he was transported to a time and place almost fifty years past.

Back then, mud, cold mud, covered his boots; but his face burned with the heat of the charcoal stove. He was in a strange house somewhere on the road from Sapporo to Otaru on the northern island of Hokkaido. "At least it's a white Christmas," he had thought, trying to give himself solace. With orders for a western village facing the USSR, Corporal Prescott was to eavesdrop on the once esteemed Soviet ally at an intelligence station on the coast. The trip was short, but he got lost. Night came and he was literally at a cross-road when a single figure approached.

*'Otaru wa doku desu ka?'* Elmer said, maiming the language. The man bowed and said, *'wakarimasen, mo ichido itte kudasai masu ka?'* Elmer shook his head, wishing he could find his GI dictionary. The man understood. *'eigo o amari hanashimasen, uh, I don't know many English,'* he said, *'could you say again?'* Elmer broke into a smile

and said, "Which way to Otaru," Elmer gestured broadly. "Uh, dozo," he added, please. The Japanese man smiled and gestured for him to follow.

That's how he ended up in the man's house, dripping mud onto the tatami mats. Elmer's host indicated he should remove his shoes and put on slippers. He saw no furniture, just the stove and a few pillows on the floor. Wary and curious he sat down as his host bid him, and waited. The walls were paper screens, one slid aside and his host set out a low table and asked Elmer, "Cha, tea?" Elmer said, "Coffee?" and his host nodded but brought out tea. "Sukimashita ka?" Elmer blinked, not understanding. His host struggled for the English and finally gestured his hands to his mouth. "O, hungry, Elmer understood, "Yes, uh, hai." The man disappeared and Elmer sat there wondering what he would get. Presently, his host returned and offered a large bowl of noodles, with bits of meat, leeks and onions. Elmer offered his best inquiring look, his host understood and said, "soba." "Soba," Elmer repeated as he shoved some in his mouth. Soon he realized his host wasn't eating, and stopped. But his host gestured for him to continue, and he did.

The man was older than Elmer, yet not yet fifty. Still, he gazed at Elmer as a father would a son. Something more than hospitality was present and Elmer sensed it. As he ate he watched his host and wondered. How did he know English, and why was he so solicitous? Did he have a family? A note of anxiety crept into Elmer's mind, pushing out his sadness over being lost on Christmas Eve.

"Thanks," said Elmer, barely finished. "Saki?" his host offered, and Elmer nodded agreeably. Warm wine loosened their hesitation. "Ika ga desu ka?" the man asked, "How are you?" "Oh, fine thanks," Elmer said, stopped and then realized he was supposed to repeat. "I ka ga desu

ka?’ The older man smiled and answered ‘genki desu, okagadesama de.’ ‘Genki desu, okagadesama de,’ Elmer echoed.’

‘Watashi wa Moribata Natsume to moshimasu.’ Natsume gestured to illustrate, and Elmer answered, ‘Watashiwa Elmer Prescott to... moshimasu.’ ‘Haji memashite, Elmer san,’ said Natsume. ‘Hajimemashite Moribatasan,’ echoed Elmer.

It was late and both were tipsy when Elmer remembered it was Christmas Eve. He had been hurrying to Otaru to find a few fellow exiles to help celebrate, such as they could. His look of regret was visible to Natsume who asked, ‘You sick?’ Elmer tried to explain. ‘Mother and father are far away. Lonely.’ Natsume nodded understanding.

‘Christmas is for gifts, family and friends, wishing good things. But here I am, no family, no friends, no gifts, no Christmas.

Natsume slid another screen open and brought out a folder tied with a ribbon. Inside were pictures. He pointed to faces and said, ‘Mother, father; brother, wife, son; all gone.’ Elmer knew they were dead. And he knew Natsume was showing sympathy. ‘I know what you mean,’ Natsume was saying.

‘Dochira kara irasshai mashita ka? Where are your home’ Natsume tried to change the subject. ‘Johnson, Vermont,’ Elmer answered. Natsume then instructed. ‘Watashi wa Johnson, Vermont kara desu.’ Elmer repeated. ‘Dochira kara irasshai mashita ka?’ Elmer said, and Natsume’s face went blank. He said, ‘Watashi wa Kyushu kara desu,’ Natsume was dodging the answer. ‘dochira... uh, city in Kyushu mashita ka?’ Elmer improvised. Natsume paused and said, ‘Watashi wa Nagasaki kara desu.’

A very long moment passed. Natsume changed the subject.

‘What is ‘Christmas?’’ Elmer paused, held up his finger to signify he was thinking. Then he said, ‘Christmas is about a baby who was born on long ago. The story says that angels in the sky sang for him, they sang about peace.

“What became of boy,” Natsume asked. “When he was grown he was killed because people were afraid of what he said. Every year since people hope Christmas will bring peace. The war is over, but there is still no peace. I am sorry, gomennasai.’ Elmer bowed, and Natsume thought how much this stranger reminded him of his late son, both so ingenuous. The moment was bitter and soothing, hot and cold, what Japanese calls ‘shibui.’ Natsume took a piece of paper and folded it very precisely many times. Elmer watched as a bird emerged, a crane. Natsume held it out to Elmer and said, ‘You fold one thousand cranes you will have your wish to go home.’ ‘Teach me,’ Elmer asked.

Elmer left at dawn. Natsume pressed some cranes into his hand as he left, saying, ‘I wish you Christmas.’ Elmer smiled, and handed his own poor studies to Natsume, saying, ‘I wish you Peace.’ Every few weeks Elmer would get a letter and inside each one would be a crane or two. Different sizes and colors, even slightly different poses and shapes. Many months later, 227 cranes later, far less than a thousand, Elmer went home. And the cranes still came. He asked why. Natsume answered, ‘for little boys who make the sky sing.’

The letters got fewer with time. Now they came only once a year, at Christmas. The handwriting was shakier; Natsume was nearly ninety now. But each one held a crane, now 421 altogether. Reaching inside the envelope he lifts out the crane. The writing on the wing says,

Happy Christmas. Elmer writes its number, 422, and adds it to the Christmas tree, which is filled with paper birds. Those that don't fit on the tree are tucked elsewhere. Cranes are all over the house, a silent aviary, and Elmer knows them all. Small ones, large ones; blue, pink and white ones; flying cranes, sleeping cranes, cranes with legs and cranes with beaks. Forty-seven years of Christmas cranes surround him. At that moment, the sound of the burning wood hissing and popping could almost be the sound of wings. And with the undulating light and constant drafts the many paper birds seemed to be alive.

Back at the stove he puts his own crane in an envelope. It was a much finer example than his first. On its wings he writes, Peace: part #147. Unlike the rest of his life, Elmer is of one mind about Christmas.

## **Go Where I Send Thee,**

Paul was daydreaming. He had only a half-day of work on Christmas Eve, but he was daydreaming. At his desk, looking out the window into the bleak gray courtyard, he did not see the courtyard but the blinking lights draped in front of Macy's. He did not see the soot stained bricks but the green wreaths around the Library Lions. He did not see the grimy window but the great snow flake above 57th street.

Ever since the children were little he had brought them into the city one afternoon close to Christmas and simply enjoyed it all. Sometimes they saw the wonderful Neapolitan tree and decorations at the Met. Sometimes they saw the model trains at the Botanical Gardens.

Sometimes they pushed through the hordes at FAO Schwartz. But every year they saw Santa at Macy's, the animated windows on 5th avenue, ate chestnuts (which were never as good as they sounded in the song) and pretzels, and ended at Rockefeller Plaza.

Paul said he did it for the children, but he also did it for himself, which he didn't say but Mama knew. Even Eloise and Philip knew. But that was over now. Eloise and Philip had grown up.

But Paul still went up to the Met and down to Macy's. He still had to see the windows and eat the chestnuts. So though he was at work, he was imagining the afternoon ahead. That was part of the pleasure.

The telephone drew him back from his reverie.

"Yes, dear" he said. Soon a pencil was in his hand and he was writing a list. "Yes, dear. I have it. One extension cord, a dozen lights for the tree, 2 red pens. Why do you need 2? Film, tissue paper. Stamps, today?"

"Are you sure you all this today? OK, I'll take care of it" The gray gloom of the courtyard came in and covered his face. Reverie was replaced with resentment. With so many errands he wouldn't have time to take his Yuletide pilgrimage. So when noon came he left, list in hand, trudging down the street.

Maybe he could find them all quickly and still have time to enjoy. But then he realized that in all the years he had worked here he did not know where he would find half these things. Film and pens were easy. Tissue paper shouldn't be too hard. Now, the extension cord and bulbs should be in the same place, but exactly where would he find a hardware store around here? And the stamps, she expressly asked for holiday stamps, but short of the post office where were they?

For pens he stopped in what everyone at work called the ‘drug store,’ which was around the corner from work. It had no drugs, except aspirin, but it did have all sorts of other stuff, what used to be called sundries. The owner (Paul assumed he was the owner) was a compact man with a large mustache and small glasses who was always looking into a newspaper or magazine, yet always also seemed to know exactly what was going on. Paul had been here many times, and more than once Paul watched as the head bent man bellowed “You look for something?” to someone at the back of the store. In all the times he had been here, though, he never needed red pens and he never exchanged more than a thank you.

Now he was standing among the pens, trying to remember if she wanted felt tip or ball point, when he heard “You look for something?”

“Red pens. My wife wants two red pens.”

“Pens that look red, or pens that make red?”

“Pens that make red.”

“Felt tip or ball point?”

“That I can’t remember.”

“That I can’t help. But if you want ballpoint, look in the drawer. If you want felt tip they are behind you.”

He decided to buy two of each. When he got to the counter, the man looked over the top of his glasses and said, “Four?”

“Better safe than sorry.” And the man with the mustache raised his eyebrows, which meant he understood. Paul handed him five dollars, but the cost was \$5.79. So he reached into his pocket and all he had was a twenty-dollar bill.

”Forget about it. You’re a regular. Let’s just call it a Christmas discount.”

“But you’re...”

“Muslim, yeah, but you don’t have to be Christian to be Christian, you know what I mean.”

“How did you know I...”

“Celebrated Christmas? You looked awful. Anyone who looks awful on December 24th must celebrate Christmas. So what could I do? Merry Christmas

“Indeed,” said Paul.

Further down the block he stepped into the camera store to buy the film. A harried clerk was trying to handle the press of last minute shoppers, each wanting to examine a camera or cell phone or walkman. She was clearly over her head in customers, probably a seasonal employee. She was young and unsure about how to handle so much business at once.

When she finally got to Paul he asked for a roll of 110 film, and she knitted her brow in puzzlement. Turning to her side she yelled to another worker, “We got 110 film?” A man yelled back “yeah, in the bottom drawer next to the flash bulbs. She was obviously annoyed about having to go out of her way on an already frantic day. When she finally emerged, she held a four pack of film. He only wanted one. She could tell by the look on his face.

“You only want one, don’t you?”

Paul bit his lip a little and said. “No, now that I think of it, I need four. How did you know?” He smiled. She smiled too, the smile of relief. She returned his change with a wink of gratitude and he felt a

sweet twinge of affection. He hadn't meant to flirt, but he was secretly glad she thought so and had returned the favor.

Extension cord and light bulbs. That meant a hardware store, and they were not likely to be out here on the Avenue. Head toward home, he thought, and hope Bill's Variety would be open. But if it wasn't he was stuck. What to do? Paul found himself standing still in the sidewalk like a rock in a river of people. Rather than invite angry looks he made his way toward a storefront to think.

Standing there he saw a pretzel and chestnut merchant on the corner. "At least I can eat my chestnuts," he thought to himself. The man had gloves with cut-off fingers. The chestnuts lay in a tin foil bin and he scooped out about a dozen and put them in small brown bag. The hot nuts in the little bag pleased his cold hands. Fishing money from his coat pocket, he off handedly said as he paid, "You wouldn't know where a hardware store is around here?"

"End of the block, next to the card store."

"You're a lifesaver," Paul said as he started away.

"Happens all the time," said the chestnut man, not kidding at all.

Sure enough, there was the hardware store, Murray Hill Hardware. Paul playfully thought that it could mean either the neighborhood or someone named Murray Hill. How many other neighborhoods could also be personal names, he thought. Mott Haven came to mind right away. Clinton Hill would work. How about Roosevelt Island?

He pattered his way through the store, looking for extensions cords. He found the Christmas bulbs right away, and not a moment too soon. There were only six packages of 3 left. Now the question was,

how long an extension cord. He found the great orange snakes with black plugs that he could better sling over his shoulder than carry in hand. Not those, he decided. But then he had to decide between 6, 12 and 18 foot. He compromised on 12, but now, which color? “Brown goes with everything,” he said out loud.

“Not with blue suits,” said a stranger pawing through the next bin to his.

“I’ll remember that,” Paul said, with amusement. “Chestnut?”

“Sure, why not” Paul poured out two. “Warm” the man said.

“They’re never quite as good as you expect them to be.”

“Yep. But somehow every year I get some.”

“So do I.”

“Brown goes with chestnuts,” Paul noted.

“Absolutely. So don’t eat any blue ones.” The stranger advised with mock solemnity. They both laughed at their improvised banter.

Paul went next door, hoping for tissue paper and, if there were any gods, holiday stamps. Tissue paper was another pause, as he wondered how much, and what color. White would do just fine, he decided readily. It also helped that it was right there in front of him and there was no alternative in sight. How much was settled like the pens. Buy two packages.

At the counter he asked, “How much?”

“Five dollars” said the manager. “Do you sell stamps?” The counterman silently reached below the counter and dropped a booklet of standard first class stamps. “Twelve dollars,” he intoned for the new total.

”You have any holiday stamps.”

“Only books, no Christmas. You want something else, go to post office.”

It was two o’clock, a little past. He could buy these and have time left for a little stroll. Going to the post office would take forever. But... she wouldn’t have asked for holiday stamps unless she really needed them. He had to go to the post office. Fortunately, he could take a short cut through Macy’s on the way.

He entered the famous front door and made his way under the bowers of gold-ribboned greenery that formed arches all the way to the escalators. Frenzy and folly were everywhere as people hurried to make their procrastinated choices. Not needing to shop here, he could simply observe and take in the wild abandon of the shoppers, the pervasive music, the dazed staff. For a moment he forgot that he was on a mission of his own, until he reached the far side of the store.

The looming horror of the post office was visible at the end of the next block. Leaning a little forward, as if to propel himself, Paul urged himself down the street and up the stairs. It was just as terrifying as he feared. The long lines looked like so many cattle heading into the abattoir. Was there one he should choose, or were they all equally depressing?

He flipped a mental coin and joined a line. Within moments a fellow inmate joined behind him, stacked with packages and puffy envelopes. Paul felt some trivial relief at not being behind him. They moved tectonically, complete with collisions and explosions as those with bundles often put them down while standing still only to have to pick them all up again to move. Occasionally someone would jump ahead at just this moment and there would be a flash of anger.

Paul was on line about twenty minutes when the man behind moved strangely and Paul felt a package sliding against his head. Reaching up he caught it just as it was slipping past him, heading toward the floor. Its companions did fall, but the owner said, “Thank You,” a real genuine “thank you.”

“That would have broken if it fell. You saved my life, pal.”

“I wasn’t even thinking. Just reached up and there it was.”

“Whatever you say, but you just saved me a lot of grief. Say, you don’t have any packages to mail. Why are you here? Picking up?”

“No, my wife needs some stamps, holiday stamps no less. So where else can I get them but here?”

“Well, you’re right about getting them here, but maybe not there,” he said pointing to the far end of the line.

“I don’t follow.”

“Look, you just saved me from a big problem. I have stamps in an envelope here, to use on the packages. But I can just as easily sell some to you and buy more there. How many do you need?”

“Fifteen or so, five bucks worth.”

“Done.” The man asked Paul to hold the packages while he fished out the stamps. Then Paul handed the bundle back so he could find the money. And he was free.

It was past three. The daylight was already drooping into long shadows that drew the color from the sky and everything else. He considered going back to 5th avenue and doing at least the Lord and Taylor windows. But if she wanted stamps today she needed them before the last pickup at the mail box. He had to go home.

On the train his regret drifted into retracing his chores of the afternoon, and how they ruined the day. But as he did what came back was not how terrible it was but how each had brought something unexpected: a word, a smile, a wink. He remembered the gaudy gold garland in the camera store and the little dancing Santa doll holding a “Sale” sign. He remembered the red neckties no one would wear if it weren’t Christmas, and how carols were playing even in the Muslim drug store. Even in the postal mob he could see Santa hats on some of the workers. He remembered the warmth of the hot chestnuts, the smell of the food cart, the funny name of the hardware store, the sound of desperate shoppers in Macy’s, the unexpected laughter with a stranger.

Christmas is wherever you look for it. It’s in Rockefeller Plaza, and Murray Hill’s Hardware. It’s in beautiful windows or gaudy garlands, animated windows or samba dancing santas. It is in the poignance of memory, but also in the present moment. Sometimes, we are so fixed on what we want that we miss the gift that is already there. And what is a gift but something you didn’t expect, and didn’t plan, and didn’t choose?

## High Over Gowanus

“It’s not easy being green.”

“Huh?” said miserable Margaret.

“It’s not easy being green,” said Aunt Till. “You look a little sick to your stomach. And when people are sick to their stomach we say they look green.”

“Yeah,” Margaret said, saying as little as possible because speaking made it worse.

“Don’t look out the window. Close your eyes,” Till said. But Margaret kept watching the walls go by as the F train traveled beneath 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The rushing bricks and passing lights were nauseating, but also hypnotic. And being seven years old she didn’t quite make the connection.

Aunt Till saw her pupils twitch as they followed each light in the tunnel, and realized Margaret wasn’t really hearing her. So she lifted her hand in front of Margaret’s face and pushed her eyelids down gently. Margaret startled and flailed at Till.

“I didn’t mean to scare you, dear,” Till said quickly. “But shut your eyes. It will help”. And Margaret did. But they did not stay closed long. Margaret was too tired. Though unable to say this even to herself, Margaret knew that if she closed her eyes she might actually fall asleep. And the memory of Radio City Music Hall, and the Christmas Spectacular, and dinner, and popcorn and candy, and (she wished she hadn’t thought about the food just this moment) everything was too

exciting and too wonderful to give up to sleep. Besides, it was Christmas Eve and she wanted to be awake for every bit of it.

Aunt Till, meanwhile, wanted Margaret to take a nap. Though it was 7 p.m. there was still a church service ahead, and it would be preferable at the very least for her not to get truly sick to her stomach on the way. So she again brushed her palm lightly down Margaret's face to close her eyes. But she paused before lifting it and said, "Close your eyes and think of your favorite part of the show. Tell me what you liked best."

"Well," Margaret pondered aloud, "I liked the Nutcracker part a lot," she said. And she scrunched her eyes together to remember it precisely.

"What did you like about it?" Till asked to keep her focused on the show instead of her nausea.

"I liked how Clara got those huge presents, and how they opened up when she touched them and the toys came to life."

"That was your favorite part of the show, then?"

"No, but I liked it a lot.

"But what was your favorite part of the show?"

And Margaret scrunched her eyes together again. Till could almost see the little wheels of her mind turning, her face was so involved.

"I think," Margaret paused, "I think," and she paused again, "I think it was Santa's workshop." And before Till could ask for more Margaret began to describe it all. "The wheels and whistles, the elves, especially the really little one with the pointy shoes, and Mrs. Claus, and

all the toys.” Her voice trailed off and her face softened as she started to drift off toward sleep.

Till bit her lower lip in anticipation, seeing that her strategy worked. To assure success she gently nudged Margaret so as to lean into her, but to her dismay this had the opposite effect. Margaret roused and said, “The sleigh took off so fast, and then you could see it flying into the sky.”

The train shuddered and the brakes squealed as they pulled into the York Street station. Margaret came completely awake, blinking and smiling. And she grabbed Till around the middle, saying, “Thanks Aunt Till.” But she only loosed her grip slightly, preferring to stay in close embrace.

Till felt a muscle cramp growing in her lower back from the awkward position she now enjoyed as Margaret’s hitching post. She bit her lip again, to keep from saying anything and tried to think her way out of the pain rather than make Margaret move. Better a crampy old lady than a nauseated young lady, she thought.

At Jay Street there was a great exit as many were transferring to the A and C. Margaret now had more room so she put her head in Tills lap and spread onto the third seat in the little row by the door where they were sitting. She looked through the window across the car from her low sideways position and saw the newsstand in the station, its magazines all displayed and green plastic garland draping and drooping from the corners. To most of those in the area, it was a tired and tawdry effort but to her it was wonderfully fancy and special. She was about to call attention to it when the train lurched slightly and left the station.

“Remember how they forgot to make one last toy because a letter had gotten stuck in the sack?” Margaret didn’t wait for an answer. With eyes closed, but still awake, she recounted how Santa had to start up the machinery again and how there was so much smoke and even a some sparks as the shop made too many dolls who then flopped all over the place.” Margaret laughed at the memory as Till began to feel the soporific effects of the train. She now struggled to stay awake.

The train slowly crawled up out of the tunnel and chugged up toward the 9<sup>th</sup> Street station high over the Gowanus Canal. Margaret could see the city slowly rising past the window. First the Kentile sign, and then the Williamsburg bank building. And as they crept around the curve, the lights of Manhattan slid into view, the buildings mere outlines that contained the many false stars that blended with the random real ones in the sky.

Quite suddenly, the train stopped. A few seconds went by and the conductor announced that they would have to stay here because the train ahead of them could not leave the next station yet. Margaret turned her head and looked up at Till to see if there was a problem. Till’s face was disgusted not worried, and Margaret was now very sleepy, so she dig her head down into Till’s lap and gazed across to the window and the lights and stars outside. She wished she could see them better, but the lights in the train obscured her view.

And then the lights went out. Margaret heard a small moan from Till and a few others in the train. They sounded unhappy, but Margaret was very pleased. Lying there on Till’s lap, the lights out and the windows full of the city and night stars, it felt like when she went to bed

at night, only better because this window was so high and she could see so much.

She noticed that there was a shadow in the train, a deep pale blue shadow. Turning her head ever so slightly to see that the moon was big and full, just above the Williamsburg Bank Building with its red clocks. Margaret struggled to keep her eyes open, she was so sleepy, but the lights were so lovely, and the moon, and even the red hands of the big clock.

She thought about seeing Santa's sleigh pulling into the night sky at the North Pole. It must have looked like this, she thought, and she scanned the blue-black spaces between the stars and the lights for some sign of a sleigh.

"You won't see him, you know," said a soft strange voice.

Looking up, which is to say behind her, she saw there was an old man sitting in the seat next to them. He was surrounded by packages and well muffled against the cold with a heavy coat and a furry hat with earflaps that came down over his shaggy white hair. Margaret rolled over a bit and saw the Aunt Till asleep, her head tilted back and her mouth a little open.

"It's too early yet," said the old man. Margaret furrowed her brow, at least as much as any little girl can, scrutinizing the man. First because he was a stranger, but second because he did seem a bit chubby and he did have white hair. But even Margaret knew he could not be here, on the F train. She was from Brooklyn after all, and Santa certainly wasn't. Still he had all those packages.

Margaret decided it was just wishful thinking on her part and closed her eyes so the old man wouldn't talk any more. But she didn't

close them completely. Call it New York caution or seven-year-old curiosity; she looked out through the narrow slits of her mostly closed eyes to make sure nothing funny went on.

The old man looked out the window beside him, apparently respecting Margaret's pretense of sleep. He reached into his coat (was that a red jacket underneath she thought she saw a bit of), and pulled out a long long strip of paper. He held it in the faint moonlight, struggling to see. Shaking his head, he reached into his coat again and flipped out a pair of half glasses which he perched on his nose so he could read.

Margaret's eyes slowly opened more. She forgot to pretend, as the old man now was unmistakably familiar. And as she looked harder and harder, hoping for some decisive clue, the old man turned from his list and looked down over his glasses right at Margaret, not in the surprised and said with a gentle frown, "You'd better not spy, Margaret!"

Her eyes snapped shut and she burrowed into Aunt Till.

The moving train came to a stop and, her eyes still closed, she listened as feet moved off the train. A poking finger dug into her shoulder but she refused to move.

"Come on, Margaret, wake up." It was Aunt Till. She carefully opened her eyes and saw Till blinking away her own sleep. "We must have dozed off for while," she said, "because here we are at home."

Margaret was puzzled. Home was Coney Island, and yet she hadn't had her eyes closed that long. This could only be 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue. But the train was emptying out all right. And when she sat up the old man was gone and everyone else was getting off and sure enough she could see out onto the beach.

Till and Margaret made their way down the stairs. She smiled at the bright Nathan's Hot Dogs sign that meant summer and fun. But now it was red and yellow and green and everything she loved about Christmas. She even felt hungry. "Can we get a hot dog, Aunt Till?"

Why, not an hour ago you were sick to your stomach. Children. I don't think so, dear. Besides, we need to go the other direction. "Aw gee, Aunt Till." Margaret whined. By now the ride home was slipping into the place where dreams go when we wake up.

"Could we at least walk on the board walk a little?"

Till stopped and thought. "Okay. It's not too late and its not too too cold and it is a pretty night. What a good way to end a special evening. Let's go." And Till led them out toward the beach.

The noise of the traffic, already less because of the occasion, almost vanished as they walked toward the dark shore. The moon behind them lit the sand and they could see the tiny waves of ocean and heard its ever-comforting splash and swish.

Out past the shore they could see a few freighters marked by running lights and dull black shadows against the bright black sky. Their eyes slowly adjusted and the stars reached through the darkness and the moonlight, scattering their light on the sky the way shells wash upon the sand.

It was still. And they stood still for a moment, watching the dark sea and the night sky, hearing the sound of summer afternoons but feeling the whole of winter. Margaret breathed very long and slow. She hugged Till's hand to hers for warmth.

They were both looking up when a long thin slice of light cut across from left to right and vanished as soon as they saw it. Margaret gasped and Till giggled. “A shooting star,” said Till, “what luck.”

“Yeah,” said Margaret, “ what luck. But she knew it wasn’t a shooting star.

## O Little Town of Hackensack

Were it not true someone would have made it up. But it was nonetheless a fact that Manny, Murray and Mikey were friends. Mikey was the only native, his parents having left Boston for the fair hills of New Jersey when dad was transferred by the railroad that sliced through town just south of Central Avenue. Murray came next, his father moving the family here from the Bowery to buy a tailor shop at Passaic and DeWolf. Manny was the last, arriving with parents and grandparents from San Juan after the war. Together, the Irish kid and the Jewish kid and the Puerto Rican Kid, they were a walking poster, but they did not know that.

They met the way all children meet, on the street when mothers and carriages collide. So though they came at different times and from different places, Manny, Murray and Mikey had never known anything else. They had grown up together, meeting almost every day on the corner of Central and Summit. And now they were all of twelve and there was a new century coming and for all three there was a sense that somehow there in the heart of Hackensack New Jersey they were living in the best place in the world at the best time to be alive.

Of course, to you and me it was hardly that. They were not starving, but no one could call them middle class. Their mothers squeezed every ounce of worth from food and clothes. The boys thought it normal to have patched knees and shiny seats. They knew other kids

had more, but these were “spoiled kids,” softies who were beneath their respect. No, the world was theirs, and after school they owned the alleys and back streets, which existed to play stickball and red rover and hide when snatching an apple or orange from Lou’s fruit stand.

A cold wind tore down Summit Ave that day, whipping under their jackets so that they hurried into the candy store rather than stand outside. Old Mr. Steinmetz was famous for kicking out loafers, so Murray produced a nickel when Steinmetz demanded “Buy or bye-bye,” his furrowed eyebrows leering over the counter. “Ach, a nickel,” he said. “What bank did you rob?”

“Hey,” said Murray, lifting a defiant chin. “This is my Hannukah gelt. Papa says I’ll get a nickel every day this year.”

“Rich man,” Steinmetz nodded with a mock frown. “And you are sharing this bounty with these hoodlums.”

“Papa says it’s a mitzvah to give alms.”

“These are no beggars,” Steinmetz retorted, gesturing to his partners in crime.

“Oh Murray, please help me,” said Mikey, clutching his stomach in dramatic fashion. “I am so hungry. Help a poor boy.” “Me, too,” said Manny. And the both of them implored as best they could, making forlorn faces.

“Such a philanthropist,” Mr. Steinmetz spoke to the ceiling.

“Phil what?” Mikey said. “That some kind of insult?”

“No sir,” said Steinmetz formally. “A philanthropist is someone who does good deeds by giving money to the needy, like Andrew Carnegie.”

“You saying Murray is like Andrew Carnegie?” Manny asked.

“If I had money I wouldn’t be giving it away,” Mikey added.  
“No sir.”

“But young Feldman here is giving you some of his money. And he has less than Andrew Carnegie. Would you do the same for him?”

“Sure I would,” and Mikey produced two cents from his pocket to prove it.

“So you are not as poor as you appeared a moment ago,” Steinmetz said, closing the trap. “And this means Michael here does not actually need the candy, young Feldman, and so it is not a mitzvah you are doing. In fact, you are being made the fool because young Collins here was willing to take your money when he had some of his own.

“Say,” Murray thought aloud, “you’re right Mr. Steinmetz.” And he turned to his friend. “Thought you’d pull a fast one on me, did ya? Pay for your own candy instead of mooching off me!”

“I wouldn’t take it if you gave it to me.”

“Oh yeah?” Murray retorted, and the two boys fell into a scramble on the floor. In a trice Mr. Steinmetz bounded around from the counter to separate them, bending down to pull the clawing animals apart. “You hellions will be the death of me,” he said, and just at that moment the boys stopped fighting and looked up at the man holding them each by the scruff of the neck. They smiled wickedly.

And just at that moment Mr. Steinmetz realized he was the one who had been trapped, for sure enough, he heard the door behind him. Manny’s shoes and jacket were just slipping out of sight. A great hole had been dug in the licorice bin and Steinmetz roared toward the door. Mikey grabbed his pennies from the counter and the two of them ran out

behind Steinmetz, turning left when he turned right. Steinmetz heard their footfalls and shouted in vain outrage.

They met behind the switchman's shack in the railyard just west of Summit. A creek ran just a few yards away, though by now it was frozen over and would soon be a hockey rink and race course. Hidden from view the three of them divided their booty, knowing that soon enough Mr. Steinmetz would be telling the neighbors to summon their mothers and fathers to account for their crime. A warm rump and an empty dinner plate awaited them all, and so they gorged on candy as if it were a prisoner's last meal. What they couldn't eat they stuffed into their knickers hoping to save for hunger pangs late in the evening.

It was getting late. The sun was below the bare trees along the creek. They each lived east of Summit, which meant the best route passed Steinmetz's store. So they waited until a train came and as it moved slowly through town, clanking and wobbling, they ran behind it to the south until they were east of Summit. Then they would turn north at Prospect or even 3<sup>rd</sup> Street.

Curiously, they had never been in this exact part of town before. It was just two or three blocks from their usual haunts, but here, south of the tracks, they found the houses of the poor people they had imitated a little while before. Like the trains that passed so near by, these houses, more shanties or shacks, leaned and teetered. Some were barely more than lean-tos.

The streets here were unpaved, streaks of ice filled the ruts and dips. Stiff shirts and pants, usually with several patches, hung from clotheslines between the rude dwellings. Weak, cold looking smoke rose

from tin chimneys. A few bundled up souls were walking down the sorrowful lane, their thin coats or jackets flapping in the wind.

“How can they clean their clothes and look so dirty,” Murray asked almost in whisper as they walked tentatively beside the tracks.

“They’re not dirty. They’re colored,” Manny explained.

“My dad calls them something else,” Mikey added, “but when I said it Ma smacked me across the mouth and then washed it out with soap. When Pa was out she told me that it was a colored woman who took her and uncle Frank in when they were little and the typhoid took her ma and pa. Nobody who would do that should be called something so awful, she said.”

“But they are kind of strange looking, don’t you think?” said Murray.

“I don’t remember much, I was very little, but there were colored people in San Juan. Only they weren’t so poor, all of them,” Manny added.

They were approaching Prospect and could see the more comfortable buildings of businesses that lined that street. Right at the corner was a butcher, and the only reason they noticed this was that a girl, a black girl about nine, was standing in front, staring in. She had a sweater over her dress, but that was all. But she was not shivering. Her hands were at her sides, clenching and rubbing. She looked as if she were about to pounce, only they couldn’t see anything to pounce on.

The boys, coming from the shantytown side, surprised the girl who startled when they appeared. She gave a short shriek as if discovered, causing the boys to startle now, stopping them.

“Who are you?” demanded the girl, talking the offence.

“Who are you?” echoed Manny, with equal sharpness.

“Don’t matter who I am,” she said with narrow eyes. “This is my part of town, not yours.”

“We can come here if we want,” Manny replied, speaking for all three.

“Then why haven’t you been here before?”

“How do you know we haven’t?”

“I can count on two hands the white folks who have been here, and you aren’t among them.”

Manny and his cohorts were silent, knowing they had seen colored people from time to time but wouldn’t know one from another.

“We’re just going home,” Manny explained, pointing up Prospect Avenue.

“Then you’d best be going before your mama comes calling,” she said implying they were too young to be too far from home.

“Won’t your mama be calling you?” Manny asked facetiously.

“No,” she answered flatly, her serious tone signaling Manny and the others to drop the sparring. She’s asleep. Works nights at the factory. I expect she’ll be getting up soon and...’ her voice trailed away unable to find a word. She seemed to fold up like a newspaper. She sat down on the curb and wrapped her arms around her bare knees.

“I was on my way home to fix supper and realized there was nothing to fix. Pay day won’t be until next week.” Her face was beginning to crease with emotion that she tried to hide. “I saw that chicken in the window. I thought how easy it would be, especially if the man turned his back. I was getting ready, really ready, when you,” and again she couldn’t speak.

“Want a piece of licorice,” Mikey asked nonchalantly. She nodded yes and all three of them were reaching into their pockets at once. She laughed and so did they.

“Listen,” Murray said, talking to his comrades, “we must have got ten cents worth from Steinmetz. What am I going to do with this nickel now than he’s angry with us?” Murray held the shiny coin in palm.

“Here, you take it.”

“No,” the girl said.

“Come on. It’s a mitzvah to help others.”

“A what?”

“A good thing.”

“Sure enough,” she said.

“And it would be wrong to keep me from doing a mitzvah, a real one.”

“You think so,” she said.

“You know,” Manny added, “Father Ambrose sometimes tells people to give stuff for penance.”

“Penance?” the girl said, unfamiliar with the word.

“It means, uh” Mikey tried to find a word he remembered from catechism, “atonement.”

“I heard that before,” the girl said. “It means setting things straight.”

“Yeah, when we go to confession Father makes us do penance to get forgiven for our sins. You have to do good to make up for the bad.”

“And we were pretty bad this afternoon,” Manny added.

“Anyway, here’s my licorice, and a nickel,” Mikey said handed the stuff to the girl.

“I thought you only had two cents,” Murray challenged, realizing Mickey had been holding out on him.”

“And two cents,” Mikey added as though he hadn’t heard Murray.

“I got some licorice,” Manny said, “and,” he rummaged through his pockets trying to find something he had overlooked. “And three cents!” which he dug from the brim of his cap where he kept them for emergencies.

“How much is that chicken, anyway?” Mikey asked.

“Twenty cents,” and she began to wail.

“Wait, wait. Maybe he’ll let you have it for the money and the licorice.”

“I don’t think so,” she said, sounding very sure of herself.

“Why don’t you go inside and ask him. Tell the man we said you should.”

And the girl reluctantly rose, taking the change and the candy inside. The boys, meanwhile, each quickly found a goodly stone and stood outside the window.

The man nodded no. The girl pleaded. He nodded again and pointed outside. The man looked through the and saw Manny, Murray and Mikey all standing there with evil grins while they flipped their stones absently.

The man jerked his head hard to the right and the girl jumped with a smile. Down the chicken came, and he wrapped it (poorly) in paper. Her eyes were glued to the scrawny bird whose plucked flesh

puckered in the cold. She could hardly wait. The man looked out the window one more time, and seeing the boys were still there, handed the licorice back to the girl who fairly leapt with delight. “Thank you, thank you,” she shouted so you could hear her out in the street. And she ran from the store, shouting,

“He did it! You were right! He did it! And it took a few second to realize that the boys had run across the track just ahead of the train that now lumbered across Prospect Avenue.

The light was gone now, and only the glow of the houses, sometimes peeking through cracks in the wall, guided her home. The cold dead bird felt warm against her chest knowing that tonight they would eat, and tomorrow, and the night after that. It would be Christmas after all.

## The High Cost of Blessings

The hammer dropped good satisfying blows. Nails bit deeply. Ken worked with the easy rhythm of someone familiar with tools and confident in their use. After several years, the house and barn were his. And he was building this addition to make it easier to go between the two in winter. In doing this he was following a long-standing New England pat-tern. In fact, this place had one once but it had fallen to ruin after the barn was consumed by fire. A new barn was built but the connector had never been rebuilt. Until this year.

It had been a year of additions. Little Hank showed up in February, the mortgage was signed in June. And starting in October, this addition. And though Thanksgiving was past, Ken was still giving thanks to all the powers that could be, for this had been the best of years.

Ken was so intent on his work that he didn't notice it was dusk until he missed a nail in the half-light. It pleased him to be able to throw a self-wired switch and fill the room with light. In a matter of moments he was done. Oh, there was still some finish work, wainscoting and molding to nail set and fill. The varnish would have to wait until Spring. But despite these details he thought the job done. The room was tight, dry, and when he got the stove lit, warm. And that's what he did. A christening of sorts, wasn't it? The first fire brings a place to life, warming it to welcome living things. An cost of blessings extra note of pride gladdened Ken because he had run the metal flue pipe sideways into the barn, along the length of the barn suspended above the floor, then up and out. This way heat lost up the flue would fill the barn not

the out of doors. An idea he got from an old church he visited some time ago.

‘Come on in,’ Ken hollered. Elinor had Hank on her hip as she came through the door. Barefoot and red cheeked, Hank gnawed on his knuckle. By the light of the open stove Ken tilted back in a chair, hands behind his head, a smug smile on his face. Elinor’s face opened into a big too-thy smile and as she bent over to kiss him Hank reached for Ken, which tilted him just far enough so they both fell on the floor. Hank laughed loudly and Ken winced but couldn’t help laughing at the comedy of it all.

Elinor just shook her head. ‘Could you give a fellow a hand?’ said Ken. Hank was climbing onto the rough flooring, so she quickly picked him up. When he started crying she noticed a splinter in his foot. ‘Bless it,’ she cursed, for this was exactly what she was trying to avoid. So all three hurried back the kitchen. Ken absently reached back to turn off the light.

Ken awakened suddenly. It must have been a dream, for the room was still and dark, and he could hear both Elinor and Hank breathing. He lay back down to settle himself when he saw a funny shadow on the ceiling. Not much, but enough to rivet his attention. Darting from the bed he went to the window and looked down to the new addition. Faint yellow light flickered from the window, the light of fire.

Not five minutes passed between that sight and Ken bundling Elinor and Hank into the pickup. The Fire Department was at least another five minutes away. In that time he had to decide which to save, the house or the barn. There was no real choice, but that did not make it

easy. Axe blows rained down on the clapboards he had nailed a month ago. Tears rained down his cheeks. He didn't even notice the Fire Engines. Or that he was joined by five other fellows, while the rest poured water on the barn in a vain attempt to save it.

Elinor and Hank sat in the pick up, wrapped in blankets. Hank slept, and Elinor wished she could sleep. But cold and shock kept her awake. She watched as they fought to keep the fire from the house. They succeeded.

Only the faintest smoke and scorch mark was left in the v shape of a roof. The barn was lost.

And the sheep? Ken roused them but couldn't be sure they all moved out. He sensed some had not escaped but tried not to think about it until after the fire was out. The Fire Department left about ten in the morning, after they made sure it was safe to go back in the house. Elinor and Hank watched them through a smokey window. 'Baba,' Hank said, waving. Elinor hugged him close, silently thankful for his innocent happiness.

Soon Ken was building again: a lean to against the house for the ewes. The cold grew brittle and his hands grew numb, but he had no choice. He found room for the rams with one farmer, and space for his yearlings with another. But he had to keep the ewes because they would be lambing in a few weeks, maybe sooner (remembering Alice and little Eve a couple of years ago), and that meant shelter.

So Ken was building a lean to against the house, making it into a true saltbox. He put it right where the addition had been, using the same sills in fact. 'Might as well get some use out of 'em,' Ken thought bitterly.

Ramshackle and ugly, it nonetheless worked. Old blankets hung inside dampened drafts that roared through. A few light bulbs hung down, swinging with the wind. It was awful, but Hank thought it was just grand. Standing at the child gate between the kitchen and the stable he would gaze at Ken and the ewes. Ken went in and out, stepping over Hank each time, at which Hank would reach up and try to grab his dad.

But only Hank found anything to love in this arrangement. The smell was creeping everywhere, to say nothing for more tangible evidence. Straw found its way into the bed and laundry was found in the stable. All of this was almost tolerable, but Christmas week, when Ken was plowing the drive and Elinor was spinning the wool she kept, Hank chose this moment to learn how to open the gate.

Ken quickly invented a Hank-proof system. Like the shed it was nothing elegant, but it did the job. Hank was crestfallen.

Christmas Morning was their first rest. There was plenty to do, but for today it could wait. God even sweetened the weather so that the sheep could be comfortable in the meadow. Hank wasn't quite sure what it was all about, but he was ever cheerful and that softened the irony. So little, so much. So little left but so much. So much taken but so little.

Near noon the Potters knocked on the door. 'Merry Christmas,' they said, but not merrily. 'Listen,' said Glen, 'I don't quite know what we can do, but, uh, we have a little salted away. And, well, uh, here.' He pressed some bills into Ken's hand. Glen and Ken barely knew each other.

He was town folk, Ken was newcomer. They had little cause or occasion to speak. Ken understood how much Glen was doing.

‘Glen, that’s mighty generous of you. But the insurance will take care of the money. I just can’t.’ And Ken tried to return the money, but Glen wouldn’t take it. ‘It’s good to know folks like you are out there when we need them,’ said Ken.

They were still standing in the door, neither one sure what the other wanted to do, when Katy Potter, Glen’s ten year old, saw a sheep poking through the kitchen door and squealed with delight.

‘You want to say hello?’ Ken asked. So they came in. Ken squatted down to introduce them. ‘She’s going to have a lamb soon,’ he said. ‘Can I have her?’ Katy said impetuously.

‘Now Katy,’ Glen said. ‘You know Mr. Joyce needs those lambs for his business.’ But Ken cocked his head as he heard her words and a little bell sounded.

‘Why not.’ He said. ‘I don’t mean to keep, but seeing as how I have so little room and so many to take care of, if your dad doesn’t mind you could be my partner.

‘Ken, I don’t know about this. I don’t mind, but she’s just ten years old.’

‘Really, Glen, it would be a help. In a month I’ll have dozens of lambs here and no way to take care of them. This way I have a chance, the lamb has a chance, and I give a little girl a chance. The way I see it, at least somebody comes out ahead.

Next day Glen’s cousin Bernard came by. He brought a case of Maggie’s famous canned goods: applesauce, pepper relish, sour pickles, even real mincemeat. He said how much he was sorry, asked how he could help, and just happened to bring his 11 year old along. Ken didn’t need a map.

Come New Year's an assortment of folks had just happened by. And somehow each one had a little something for the larder or the 'new barn', and each one had a boy or girl between nine and thirteen.

Ken had wondered how these people had survived so long. Out here even the best of times may not be enough. Finally he was figuring it out. Life wasn't luck, it was work. As in nature so in life for every giving there is a taking. Even blessings cost. The only way to get as much as you need is to give as much as you get.

## ‘A Useful Idiot’

Ken should have known better than to trust the weather man. The forecast decays with each mile outside Boston. And Ken and Elinor live in an unknown, mispronounced place well away from the city. He should have known better. But Ken wanted to finish his Christmas shopping. The forecast said a chance of rain, so he hopped into town. But now Ken was watching the splatter of sleet on his windshield. He still drove toward town but thought of home, hoping it would get no worse. It did, and now there was snow mixed in. Slowing for traffic, he slid on the road and realized that his shopping trip was cancelled.

The trip home took forever. Ken thumped nervously on the steering wheel, trying not to let his impatience push him into a mistake. Time driving was time wasted. But his real frustration was not weather or roads but himself for not knowing better than to trust the weather man. That new watch for Elinor would have to wait. Pouting, Ken thought. ‘If I didn’t love her so much I wouldn’t do such stupid things. It’s her fault.’ But he didn’t mean it.

Skidding up his driveway his attention turned to the pens and meadows where the herd stood glum and soggy. Over two hundred sheep, ewes and a few young females, needed to get inside before getting caked with ice and snow. Oh, they would survive if left outside, but one or two could get lost and succumb. Since most of the ewes were pregnant to lose one is also to lose the lamb which is more than half of the return to the shepherd. Pulling his hood up over his cap, and tugging

canvas gloves on, Ken dropped down from the truck and trotted into the meadow.

‘Wombat,’ Ken hollered, and whistled loud to summon the dog. Between the two of them they moved the closer part of the herd into the barn, which siphoned those further away. Once some of them started the rest would follow. Herd instinct, Ken thought. Strange that they would follow each other but never start on their own.

With a shrug and a sigh Ken hiked into the farther meadow, squinting against the flying snow. Alice and Maybell were still out here, too far from the herd to get drawn in automatically. Two hundred yards beyond the stile he found Maybell caught in a bramble, looking perplexed though not agitated. He tugged her loose and led her back to the stile where he whistled for Wombat who came and chased her home.

Now where was Alice? A young ewe carrying her first, Ken was genuinely worried about her. She was highstrung, easily alarmed and eccentric. ‘She’s not a bit sheepish,’ Ken said to himself and hearing his voice suddenly noticed how much his life had changed.

Just three years ago he was a new schoolteacher living with Elinor on the other side of town in a homemade house. That life crumbled when he lost his position, so they sold the house and moved to Australia, living with an army buddy from Ken’s Viet Nam days. Ken looked for work while helping Tom on the ranch. But soon it was obvious he would do more sheep ranching than teaching.

With the little bit of money they had left Ken and Elinor invested in Tom’s herd and in part because of Ken’s labor made a good profit. Tom said he had a feel for the job. They both felt a door opening. Ken was happier, Elinor was relieved that Ken had found something,

and they had made enough to go their own way. Though Australia was lovely and Tom was a great friend they knew they had to come back and redeem the life they had abandoned.

For once things fell into place. A small farm was for rent, although the owner didn't a farmer. But by renting they could spend more on livestock, and last year they had a good run of lambs. The wool was welcomed by the new specialty mill being started in the next town. Things were going uncommonly well. Although not at this particular moment.

Ice pellets formed on Ken's beard and eyebrows. His face stung with the slap of sleet and snow and his feet were aching. Down a short hill in a freezing stream stood Alice. Her right front foot stuck through a hole in the ice, holding her prisoner.

Stumbling and sliding, Ken made it down to Alice. It took only a moment to free her foot, but it was badly hurt and she couldn't walk. So Ken struggled, vainly, to get her over his shoulders. Instead he had to hug her around the legs instead. But now he couldn't make it back up the slope. He had to walk alongside the stream, which led away from the meadow, until it broke onto level ground. Then he could circle back behind the farm and come in from the far field. It meant a half a mile in an ice storm with a hundred pound ewe. Ho ho ho.

It was dark when the two of them appeared at the barn. Elinor was home and had begun to worry. The truck was here, the sheep were in the barn, Wombat was in the garage, but where was Ken? When she noticed Alice was missing Elinor knew what was going on and that there was nothing she could do. But when night fell she was almost beside

herself. Then Ken showed up. She saw him heading past the house for the barn. She met him there.

‘Kenny, where have you been?’ Ken shot her a hard look look. ‘Forget I said that. Tell me later. What can I do?’

‘Get this sheep off my back, okay? Take her under the middle here and help me lay her down.’ Once on the ground Ken took a long look at her foot. It didn’t look broken but it was bloody and raw. He debrided it and put a bandage on it. Meanwhile Elinor was working the ice out of her coat and trying to keep her calm.

They called the vet and she told them they did everything just right, but watch her carefully. So Ken decided to take his supper in the barn and ended up staying there, reading by the brittle light of the lamp swinging from wind. Fatigue and the hypnotic rhythm of the moving light put Ken to sleep. He sat slumped in the stall, snoring, newspaper in his lap.

Stirring straw awakened Ken. Alice was moving, even struggling. Ken tried to settle her but she wouldn’t. It dawned on him that she was not sick but in labor. Ken knew she would drop soon, that’s why he was so worried, But what should he do? He knew what to do with a healthy ewe, but this was different. Alice was injured. She might be in shock.

Ken ran back into the house. He got a blanket, a lamp, and a few other useless things. The clock read 3 a.m. so Elinor would be fast asleep. It was just Ken and Alice, then. Taking a deep breath and a long drink of cold coffee Ken hustled back to the barn.

Well, son of a gun, Ken thought. Somehow, Alice had gotten up and found a three legged stance. He checked her foot and it was not any

worse. Some strands of straw on her muzzle gave it away. She had braced herself against her own face which she had pressed into the hay bale beside her. Pretty cagey for a sheep. The rest of the drill was easy.

Wobbling now and then Alice nonetheless managed to drop her lamb quite by herself, as any ordinary ewe did. Ken was of no use at all, as it should be, but he couldn't help feeling a little put out. After all, she was a helpless sheep, injured and all. He was supposed to be taking care of her, even though he had no idea what he would have done.

As nature unfolded its newest citizen Ken watched, and realized that it was a good thing he hadn't been here. He would have done the wrong thing. When all was complete he helped Alice lie down so the lamb could nurse. And both mother and midwife fell back to sleep.

Elinor found them at first light, gently poking Ken to rouse him. 'Merry Christmas Eve,' she said quietly, and handed him a cup of coffee. Blinking and wincing, Ken came back to life. And the first thing he thought of was the watch still waiting at the jewelers.

That evening, as they sat down for supper, he pushed a little box onto the table and acted as though nothing had changed. 'What's this?' Elinor asked in mock indifference. Ken gave an innocent, careless look and went back to eating. Elinor slipped the package into her pocket. Ken glanced up from his stew, but looked down when she turned to him.

'It's getting late, Kenny. We gotta get to church for the pageant.' 'You're right. I have something else to do too.' And he hurried from the table. Elinor hustled the dishes into the sink, found her coat, and was in the pickup when Ken appeared at her window.

'Open the door.' And when she did, he handed her a blanket full of new lamb, eyes barely visible through the folds. 'What are you

doing?’ ‘Well, they have shepherds at this pageant, right? Why not give them something to shepherd? Christmas is about babies right? Who’s the newest baby around? Little Miss Eve here.

‘Nice name,’ Elinor said. ‘Where’d you get it?’ She teased. ‘I dunno. Just came to me,’ said Ken.

## A Dirty Little Christmas

Reduction In Force. Bureaucratise for 'Fired.' Ken had been rified. Just two years into teaching, the creation of a new school district forced everyone to play musical chairs, or more accurately, musical classrooms. Fewer positions meant he and other newer teachers were supernumeraried, another euphemism for out of work.

The checks would end in June, the savings in October. All July and half of August he chased down every rumor of a position within fifty miles. But the same thing that makes rural Massachusetts charming is what makes it poor: few people, children, money, anything. If Ken and Elinor had roots here they could have hung on with relatives. But they came here alone, far from their home city, to live the simpler life. Build your own house, heat it with your own wood, grow your own vegetables, that sort of thing. But even self reliant types need some money, and they were not even that self reliant. It was obvious that something had to change.

As the weeks wore on Ken even considered enlisting again. The war had ended a year ago, he was still in his twenties. But to keep the house Elinor would have to stay here. And it still wouldn't work. She would have to come with him, become an army wife, and the mere sound of those words brought shivers to both of them. They couldn't keep the house. Being a service family made no sense. What was left?

Because of all this Ken was flooded with memories of his tour in Viet Nam. He was lucky, assigned to Saigon with the Quartermaster Corps. But he had to survive a mix up that assigned him to

reconnaissance unit near the old city of Hue. Everyone knew he was in the wrong place, but that didn't speed things up. For three weeks he lived the grunt's life, creeping through the bush with an M1, and dozens of ungainly maps. The lunacy of it all made him laugh even now. Walking through a jungle looking more like a lost tourist than a soldier. His combat duty ended not by order but by broken ankle, sustained when he tripped over a log because, that's right, he was looking at a map. While recovering, his new orders caught up with him and he was sitting in an airconditioned office, foot on pillow, two weeks later.

But his most best memory was not Viet Nam, but a week's R & R in Australia. Ken had met an Aussie corporal in Saigon and had been invited to spend Easter with him and his family at their home along the Murrumbidgee River in New South Wales. At first Ken was disappointed. Five hundred miles inland from the populous coast, there was none of the excitement servicemen habitually seek. But quite soon Ken felt a long absent pleasure. The sturdiness of the people, the solidness of the land, the simpleness, the feeling of safety, all closed in on him like a great mother hug. That was when the idea of a rural life started.

'Let's go to Australia,' Ken said suddenly. The utter foolishness of it amused Elinor. 'Why not?' she said nonchalantly. Ken got up, went to the phone, called Australian information, and sure enough the Lindsay's still were home. A boggled Elinor decided to leave Ken alone. Nothing was going to stop him, not even common sense. What time was it in Australia, what day for that matter?

'Hello, Mrs. Lindsay. This is Ken Joyce, Tom's friend from the States. I visited that Easter. Yes, I am calling from the US. Sorry to call

at such a bad time. You always get up early. Well, I'm looking for Tom. Could you tell me how to get in touch. Yes, I've got a pen handy.'

It turned out Tom was as game as Ken, and promised a place to stay a if they could get there. Elinor's disbelief turned to shock as she realised they were going to Australia. Not that she had an alternative, but this was such a complete alternative. But Ken thought it was merely a change of venue. That memory was what he had been pursuing. A sense of place, of purpose, of substance. Who cares where one finds it so long as it is found.

It was just as Ken remembered. The thick meadows, the clumps of trees, the mountains giving way to undulating hills, and across the river an ever spreading and flattening prairie. It might have been the US except that wasn't and something about it reminded you this was another world. Exactly what he couldn't quite fix, but there was something.

Tom, like his father, was a sheep rancher. His herd numbered in the thousands. It was a ranch, with hands and horses and dogs and broad brimmed hats and ropes. It was wonderful, but no better than home. Far from the city the jobs were few. After a few weeks of pretending it was obvious things weren't working out. It seemed fate was out to trap Ken.

Consider: It was almost Summer when he realized his career was gone and his home was doomed. Here it was six months later, a half a world away, and everything was the same. It was almost Summer, and his career was still gone and they still had no home. Either the gods were against him or he was had a blossoming talent for failure. Neither choice offered much solace.

Ken ended up working for Tom as a ranch hand. It was only as a favor, you know, a way to help Tom and show some gratitude for his hospitality. 'Say Ken,' Tom had said one day. 'Could you give me a hand today.' That's how it started. Every day Tom said the same thing. Not being a practiced hand, Ken travelled by pickup truck and on foot. He would drive out to watch over a part of the herd with one of the dogs. He was glad to have something to do, but it felt rather pitiful, so he was glad to be alone.

Summer was close. The sun felt hot on his neck, and dust caked on his moist skin. The green of Spring was turning yellow, and the sky was a dull haze white. Following the herd meant living in a dust storm. The thirst was unbearable for everyone.

When the first really hot day came along someone said, 'Its beginning to look a lot like Christmas.' And at that moment Ken's heart sank its lowest. Walking behind the herd, squinting in the heat and dust, the very thought that it was cold and crisp at home just about broke his heart. The cost of his foolishness bore down on him. The closer Christmas came the worse he felt.

Indulging his self pity, Ken decided to work Christmas Eve. He just couldn't face the full impact of what he had done to himself and Elinor. The very idea of singing, joking, celebrating, sent a knife through him. Fear rose within him with every Christmas carol he heard on the radio along the road. Finally, he flicked it off and drive along in silence.

He drove without the headlights, this being a private road and there being plenty of moonlight. He steered by the stars, he fancied, though he didn't recognize one of them. Even the sky was different here.

Coasting to a stop he left the truck and whistled gently for the dog. Nuzzling her throat, Ken squatted down on a low hill and watched the sleeping herd. The dog sat beside him. And as he watched the herd and the unknown sky above him the hardness of his heart began to soften.

Perhaps it was the hour, it was getting very late. Or perhaps it was the accumulated fatigue of weeks. Weariness had taken even the will to complain. For a long time Ken just watched. The blanket of sheep, tinkling and rustling, were a music. The night palette of blues and grays pleased his sun tired eyes. And the stars were thick across the sky. More than he had ever imagined the sky could hold.

Call it resignation. Call it defeat. Whatever it was, Ken stopped looking inward and gazed outward. As he did the grip in his chest loosened. After some time, Ken didn't carry a watch, he went back to the truck to check on the time. He turned on the radio and heard more Christmas Carols. He dialed, listening for a spoken voice. 'And there were in the same country shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night.' Ken heard this and shivered with recognition. He was a shepherd, wasn't he?

Everyone else was in church thinking about the shepherds, and here was being one. The rightness of that word planted itself in him. 'And they were sore afraid, But the angel said, Fear not.' And he didn't. The shepherd, amid the sheep, beside the dog, under those countless stars, lost his fear in the angelic song of quiet.

## We Were Very Merry

With something between a moan and a wail, almost like a siren, the ferry pulled into Whitehall, its metal sides rubbing the wet pilings into weird but familiar song. A flurry of bubbling and churning rose as the engines reversed, and the crowd pushed reluctantly to the gates, for it was cold and wet, inhospitable to comfort of any kind.

From the mid deck waiting passengers could see people below making good their escape, walking up the gangways and then parting, as water does around a rock, for the old man pushing a wire grocery basket very, very slowly in the opposite direction.

Those having to slow and collide were annoyed, even more so as they came close and could tell he was not recently bathed. A few made muttering complaints, but all were eager to get on with their tasks, and so hurried on.

At the bottom of the stairway, he paused. Then backing up the stairs, he bumped the grocery cart, full of clothes and shoes, up the stairs to the mid deck where he walked equally slowly to a row of blue plastic seats. Though the ferry was filling up again, now with commuters heading home early for the holidays, no one shared the bench of seats near him, so that he had a zone of emptiness around him, about as far as smells carried.

He began to unpack his cart as if it were a suitcase, removing shoes, socks, pants and shirts. At the bottom was a blanket or something very like it, which he pulled out and spread on the bench, evidently for his immediate use. Then he put the shoes back in (in plastic grocery

sacks no less) and then the pants and then his underwear and socks, then the shirts, and finally the jacket and coat he wore as he came on board.

Sure enough, he settled himself for a long winter's nap just as the churning and moaning began again, punctuated by a deep blast on the whistle announcing their departure.

Now, not far away but out of sight was Edina, seventh grade student at St. Basil's School, though she herself was Kosovar, and that meant Muslim though neither she nor her family ever set foot inside a mosque. In the usual parochial uniform, visible under the open coat that flapped about, she was on her way home to the apartment building where Mom and Dad were superintendents.

As restless as the other was exhausted, she walked and skipped the length of the deck, alternating between grownup and child, as most thirteens do when alone. As you can predict, just as opposite poles of a magnet attract, Edina was bound to meet Ned.

She launched through some doors and, not looking as she went, tripped over Ned's basket, sending it and herself sprawling.

"Oh man," Edina said angry with herself and seeing what it was. Screwing up her mouth with disgust, she pushed the stuff together, trying not to touch it, and just enough to get it out of the way. Then she stood up and was about to leave when Ned barked.

"Stop! That's my stuff little lady and you should clean up this mess."

"Yeah, right" she said with the sarcasm of the innocent, and shrugged herself away from him.

"I insist," Ned said, with a firmness and clarity of voice that few would expect from someone of his appearance. And he held out an

umbrella to bar the way. Edina was about to scream, not because she was frightened but because it would get sympathy, but the people around were looking and their eyes were not sympathetic.

“Ok, she said with a mope, and flopped down to gather the clothes, looking sideways at Ned with eyes like slits, keeping an eye on him and also conveying her disgust. “Man, you smell,” she said loudly.

“Not everyone has a bath at their disposal, or a laundry,” Ned corrected her.

How humiliating, to have to clean up for a bum, she thought. Yeah, she did it, but what did it matter? He was only going to drag it from place to place anyway. It’s not like it’s all that precious, you know. So she thought to herself.

“Good enough?” she said demandingly, and was turning to leave when his hand caught hers and pressed a quarter into it. She was instantly embarrassed.

“Hey, no, I don’t need, deserve, you probably…” she stammered.

“Take it. If I can scold, I can praise, and maybe if a few more adults did both well we would all be better off.”

“But I have plenty, uh, and you must need, uh, it doesn’t seem fair.”

“Believe me young lady, I know what’s not fair. I did not get to this all by myself, though I certainly did my best, or my worst, under the circumstances.

“Gee, you don’t sound like the guys I see in the city. Why are you,” and she couldn’t find a polite way to ask.

“Long story, my young friend; you wouldn’t be interested.”

“I don’t know, maybe I would,” Edina said with cool defiance.

And Ned began to tell about growing up in Indiana and being drafted (and explaining that) and going to Korea (and explaining that) and how he ended up in New York after being mustered out at Fort Dix (near Six Flags, he said when she asked where), and how he was going to play the piano so he came to New York and waited tables and washed dishes and went to clubs to hear the Count and Duke and Thelonius and Fatha. (He didn’t even try to explain jazz).

“So you were famous?” Edina asked, disbelieving but wanting to believe.

“No. Closest I came was jamming with a few after hours. Never did get a steady gig. When I was lucky I played butterfly at some bar, once filled in for Marian McPartland when she was sick all of a sudden.

“Who?”

“Doesn’t matter. I came close, but I never grabbed the ring.”

“The ring?”

“An old expression, youngster. It means winning.”

“Oh. I’m going to be a winner. My Abba works very hard for me to go to St. Basil’s, even if it is Christian. And I am going to go to college and become a doctor.” Edina said it was the conviction of those too young to know.

“You want to be a doctor.”

“Oh, yes. It’s what Abba wants, what my whole family wants.”

“Do you want it, just for yourself.”

“Everyone has told me for years. I am sure I want to.”

“Good,” said Ned, nodding, and he fell silent.

Somewhere in all this the ferry docked at Staten Island, and started back, and docked at Whitehall and started back again. But Edina had not noticed even yet. She still wanted to know.

“How did you,” and she stopped, not knowing how to ask.

“End up a bum?”

Edina nodded slightly ashamed to be so transparent.

“That was the point wasn’t it?” And Ned got up and walked over to the window, looking out toward New Jersey, though the fog made it invisible. Edina followed him.

Looking out the window, he spoke. “I believed too much.”

“I don’t understand,” Edina said.

“I kept on believing I would grab the ring, get a break, long after I should have moved on. Got pneumonia, lost my job, then I lost my apartment. It’s hard to get jobs after a while, even off-the-books sort of work. They see the gray hair, the wrinkles; they hear the cough, and decide some younger guy is better. And they’re right.

“Everybody knew it was over, except me. I felt really stupid for a while, then I realized, I still had my dream. All those other people had given theirs up, sold it for whatever the going price was. Maybe I can’t. Maybe I was meant to keep my dream, even if it would never come true.

“That doesn’t make sense?” Edina said, furrowed and dubious.

“Well, you have to spend a lot of time on this ferry, going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, thinking about how it never gets anywhere but what would the city be without it. You have to see how everything kind of belongs, even when it doesn’t seem to, or even want to. You have to live out in the world like me to see how people are so close and yet never see each other or anything else, like when a big-

shot fellow dropped a \$100 bill and even though I tried to catch up to him he was so sure I was bothering him that I never could give it back. So I figured, it was meant for me, and so I got a room at the Y, and this fine jacket, and ate a great big corned beef sandwich and enjoyed every second. And you know, he probably never missed it. So it's for sure I really appreciated that money more than he could.

“Appreciating. That’s what I do. All day long, I appreciate. It’s a full time job, I discovered, and the pay is not as bad as you think. For instance, I came over here because I know that on an evening like this, the lights around the Statue of Liberty kind go all bright and blurry, and it gives her a halo. So she looks like an angel.

“There she is. See what I mean?”

And true enough, the familiar face was all soft and bright, and her torch was kind of undulating with the mist. The folds of her copper gown blended into the fog at the edges so you couldn’t see exactly where she ended and the mist began. It was wonderful.

“Now, who else is going to appreciate that? Someone has to, or God’s gone to a whole lot of trouble for nothing. “Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,” Ned began to recite, “With conquering limbs astride from land to land; Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand...”

“A mighty woman with a torch,” Edina jumped in, and they continued to the very end. “...Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

“The homeless, tempest tossed. She stands there for me, young lady. She believes in me.

“My mom and dad came here when their village was destroyed. I was not even two, and don’t remember anything. But I suppose they, we, were homeless and tempest tossed too.”

“So we are birds of a feather, as they say. Wouldn’t think so to look at us, but neither of us would be here, right now, if it weren’t for the lady and her dream. Most of these people behind us, reading their papers or carrying the Christmas gifts don’t know they are birds of a feather either: that they wouldn’t be here, right now, if it were not for the lady and the dream. It’s kind of like the Christmas story, the part about how the baby was born and only a few shepherds and animals noticed. Everybody else was just too busy to see that the most important thing was right there in front of them.

There she is, the most important thing in America, and who notices? If not for her, they wouldn’t be here, but do they see it? I am glad she didn’t stop believing, even if they did. And I think someone ought to appreciate that.”

And they stood there silently until the statue faded into the mist.

“Oh my gosh,” Edina said with terrible recognition, “I should have been home two hours ago!”

“That’s what believing does to someone,” Ned observed with a gentle finger.

“What am I going to do? They will absolutely kill me.”

“Little lady, just tell them the truth. You ran into an old friend and lost track of time. ‘We were very tired and we were very merry, and we went back and forth all night on the ferry.’”

“Whose poem is that?”



