

**THIS
CHRIS  MAS
MORNING**

A COMEDY OF CHRISTMAS TRAGEDIES

BY RICH
MELHEIM

THIS CHRISTMAS MORNING



*To Kathryn and Marie,
two wonderful grandmothers
who made great gravy and are
waiting in heaven for
the rest of us*

THIS CHRISTMAS MORNING

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*Listen to the author read this story, enjoy the song
that inspired the book, "This Christmas Morning" by Robin Cain
and read the stage play at www.faitlink.com/TXM*

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Don't choke on the tinsel.

– Rich Melheim

I.

Classic Plastic Christmas

The snow was falling lightly in Grandpa's meadow just before dusk. A doe and her twin fawns paused, listening to the muffled sounds emerging from the Victorian farmhouse before stepping cautiously into the yellow glow of the kitchen window toward Grandma's salt lick. A red-tailed hawk circled silently above the house in the night sky, as if searching for something or someone. Had Grandma Melissa been alive, there would have been apples, seeds and fresh hay for all of God's creatures on this most holy eve. But Grandma had flown to join the angels on Thanksgiving Day. And this Christmas morning would be quite different for more than just the animals of the forest.

Quite different, indeed.

Monty was digging hopelessly through a closet, searching for the long string of blue Christmas lights Grandma always used to hang on her fresh-cut tree. He stuck his head out the door with a growth that looked suspiciously like a cell phone propped between his ear and shoulder. "Lights! Where'd she put the lights?"

No one bothered to answer.

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Monty's wife Jana stepped into the room with a can of pine scent and surveyed the scene. Son Leo was lying on the floor, mesmerized by a rock video with his pierced nose seven inches from grandpa's tiny black and white TV screen. The boy had never seen a black and white television before. He was fascinated. Leo's freshly shaven head annoyed his mother only slightly more than the Mohawk he tried to wear to grandma's funeral exactly a month ago today.

Daughter Ariel was busily tossing globs of tinsel in the general direction of the plastic Christmas tree while Grandpa sat scowling in his overstuffed brown chair like a fortified island in a sea of madness. Newspaper in one hand. Cigar ready to light in the other. As far as he was concerned, all of this was totally unnecessary and none of it was anything like his dead wife would have done.

Jana sighed. She was trying her best to hold things together for everyone and make this first Christmas without mother as pleasant and as normal as could be. Under the circumstances, it looked to be an impossible task.

"I don't see any lights," shouted her husband from inside the closet. "They must not be in here." Monty's voice was followed by something that sounded like an avalanche of cardboard and glass. Jana gazed up from a box of colored bulbs and managed to suppress a satisfied smile. "Oh honey, I know they're in there somewhere. That's where Grandma always used to put 'em."

Ariel glanced at her mother, then glared at her brother lying lazily on the floor by the television. She stepped over to him, tinsel in

hand, barely resisting the urge to wedge a wad of the glittery stuff down his adolescent throat. “Mom, how come Leo doesn’t have to help?”

Grandpa shifted his trifocals toward the sports page and muttered something just loud enough for everyone to hear. “We used to have a real tree.”

The echo from the musty closet sounded more than a tad perturbed. “Honey, if you think the blue lights are in here, why don’t you just come and look for them yourself? And Leo, help your sister.”

Grandpa continued his grump. “We used to have a real Christmas.”

Jana had to work to force the frown out of her voice. “It’s too late for that now, Pop. For a real tree. If you wanted...”

“Plastic! Harrumph!”

“It’s Christmas Eve, dad. If you wanted a real tree you should have thought about that ahead of time and gotten one yourself.” Jana was going to make this a pleasant Christmas if it killed her. And him.

“You sound like your mother.”

“Why, thank you, dad.” She mustered up a sappingly sweet smile and threw it in her father’s general direction before nudging the lump of a son on the floor with her foot. “Leo, your sister needs help.”

The boy didn't bother to look up. "Sorry."

Father's baritone voice boomeranged from the closet. "What do you mean, 'sorry'? Help your..."

"I can't help her," Leo shouted back.

"And why is that?"

The little comedian had been waiting to deliver his punch line all day. "I can't help her. I'm neither a psychiatrist nor a plastic surgeon."

"Mom!" Ariel was not amused.

Jana snatched the aerosol can and began to douse the tree in pine scent. Grandpa glared up at the assault against the stale air of his besieged private castle. This was the last straw. He hadn't asked for any of it. "Spraying that pine scent around just doesn't do it for me."

His daughter was not deterred. "Oh, it's going to be fine." She sprayed on. And on. And on.

"Doesn't take the place of a real tree. A real Christmas."

Monty stepped out of the closed and hovered silently over his son for a moment as if to begin a lecture. Then he remembered the PBS special he'd seen recently on the topic of adolescent brains. The boy wouldn't have a fully developed prefrontal cortex – a judgment center – for another decade. Lecturing and arguing with him about "television rotting his brain" wasn't going to motivate Leo to action.

Changing the focus of the situation to the desired action and stating the obvious in as few syllables as possible – that’s what would initiate the action. Monty leaned down and switched the TV off.

“Hey, I was watching that!”

“Go help your sister.” Five syllables. That ought to do it.

“I was watching that!”

“Go – help – your – sis – ter!”

“I’m bigger than you.”

“I – can – hurt – you – fi – nan – cial – ly.” Okay. Seven syllables. But the point was made.

“But...”

Monty lowered his voice and his eyes at the same time. PBS said adults should smile a lot and talk quietly if they really wanted adolescents to know they were serious. “Go help your sister.” Leo frowned, resisting the urge to sneer. Mother would take a sneer or worse, but not father. The boy paused for a moment, surrendered, then slumped as slowly as humanly possible across the room in the general direction of the sister he loved to hate.

Monty smiled. “Thanks, PBS.”

†††

Grandpa was scowling down at his sleeves. “Anybody seen my cuff links?” He had misplaced a lot of things lately. His watch. His

wallet. His stool softener medicine. They could all be replaced, but his Korean War cuff links were one of a kind. Two of a kind.

“Cuff links?” asked Leo. “What’s a cuff links?”

“It’s what you keep... it’s what keeps your shirt on,” said Grandpa, digging beneath his seat.

Leo smiled. “Ugly women are what keeps my shirt on.”

Grandpa laughed out loud for the first time since the funeral. Ariel glared at her brother. “You are so disgusting!”

“Let’s see if we can’t find something a little more in tune with the season,” said Jana, seizing the moment and the 50-year-old transistor radio from its perch next to the algae-covered guppy tank on top of the fridge. She tuned from commercial to commercial to some radio preacher lambasting the commercialization of the season until she came across Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas.”

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas

Just like the ones I used to know...

For the first time in fourteen years, Leo and Ariel McCaffrey were of the same mind. They gagged in unison. “Ohhhh, pul-eeeeease!”

Where the treetops glisten, and children listen

To hear sleigh bells in the snow

Grandpa turned his hearing aid up. This wasn’t anything like Grandma’s Christmas. Miserable. Maybe Bing could help.

†††

Monty emerged from the closet empty-handed. He paused momentarily by the leaded glass parlor window and peered out at the long, white winding road to the farmhouse. It was as beautiful and still a night as he could remember. Crisp. Clear. Almost frozen in time. Fresh fallen snow blanketed the fields and lay heavy on the evergreen bows. Icicles glittered like giant diamond stalactites from the roof of the house. A blue-white moon bathed the countryside in peaceful half-light, casting huge shadows. The smell of gingerbread and Irish cream coffee flashed him back for a moment to his first Christmas in this house. He was only a junior at the University when he fell madly in love and Jana, his fiancé of only three weeks, dragged him home to meet “the folks.” Grandpa and brother Roy did their best to make Monty feel unworthy until they found out that he planned to be a millionaire by his thirtieth birthday. Grandma Melissa was just the opposite, lavishing him with food and kind words and food and presents and food and attention and food. He remembered trying to picture Jana in thirty years. If his wife were to turn out anything like her mother, this was going to be a wonderful marriage and he’d probably weigh three hundred pounds by then.

Snow was swirling across the barnyard in miniature cyclones and the glass frosted at his breath. Monty remembered the last time he’d stood at this very window. It was thirty days earlier and as many degrees warmer on the night of Grandma’s funeral, but it had somehow seemed just as cold. The house was creaking quietly. He was awake and alone, engaging in a one-sided conversation with

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death when a tiny crystal snowflake hit the window inches from his eyes on the other side of the pane.

“The other side of the pain...” he thought to himself.

The snowflake was a perfect, beautiful, elegant, impossibly symmetric diamond. It arrived quietly. Gently. No one would have even seen it if Monty hadn't been standing right there, aware, at that very moment. Then, in an instant, as quietly as it had arrived, this magnificent gift from heaven melted and was gone. Forever.

And then the strangest thing happened. Monty's eyes were still focused on the spot where the snowflake had melted when a red-tailed hawk swooped in from out of the clouds and settled - as if by appointment - on a fence post fifty yards across the barnyard in his perfect line of sight. It was as if the snowflake had transformed into a prism bird! Now, Monty wasn't a superstitious guy, but this was more than weird. Something more than superstition drew him out onto the porch. And although he hated being cold more than just about anything else, he grabbed Grandma's Afghan, stepped out into the night and sat barefoot and motionless on the bent wood rocker for twenty minutes or more, staring the bird down.

He eyed the messenger, fought a frozen tear and recited Poe's "The Raven" from start to finish.

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary,

Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore,

While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,

As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.

'Tis some visitor,' I muttered, 'tapping at my chamber door -

Only this, and nothing more.'

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December,

And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor...

Monty whispered the entire poem by heart, from the mysterious opening lines to the final tragic “nevermore.” Then, as he stood to leave, he entertained the strangest notion of his adult life. Maybe the snowflake wasn’t a snowflake and maybe this bird wasn’t a bird. Maybe the snowflake was the “tapping” at his chamber door. And maybe the hawk was actually Grandma Melissa, come down to see the place one last time before flying off to heaven.

He chuckled and thanked the feathery aberration for all she had done to make him, a former foster child, feel part of a real family. And then, as if to say good-bye, the bird nodded three times, lifted off, made one lazy loop over the farmhouse and disappeared into the low-hanging clouds.

She ascended to heaven. Forevermore.

Nevermore.

†††

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A car sped past the county road at the top of the hill. A dozen spooked pheasants in the shelterbelt took flight, breaking into Monty's memories. He sighed. "I wonder when Roy and that new girlfriend of his are going to get here?"

Grandpa rose and joined his son-in-law at the window, scowling at the massive icicles hanging from his eaves. They were probably going to ruin the roof and cost him a fortune by spring. The thought of spending money on a new roof was only slightly less annoying than the thought of spending money to fix the old one. That's why it had never been done. Grandpa had plenty of money. That wasn't the point.

Not spending it was the point.

"What's that?"

"I wonder when Roy and his girlfriend are going to get here."

"When Roy's going to get here? You mean 'if Roy's going to get here. That boy of mine never did learn how to drive on ice. Never did. Never will." Grandpa squinted and squeezed out a sarcastic smile. "Come to think of it, he never learned how to drive on a dry road, either." He turned back to the artificially Christmasized room. "Anybody seen my cuff links?" The old grouch's eyes opened suddenly wide at the sight of a silver stud in his grandson's nose. His voice raised ten decibels. "And what, pray tell, is that? Is that my cuff link?"

Leo quickly turned his head away and attempted to change the subject. “Maybe Roy stopped off at the Mega Mall.”

At the sound of the word, Ariel dropped her glob of tinsel. “Mom, can we go to the Mega Mall for a Mega Mall Christmas?”

The phone rang. Jana’s hands were full. “No. And can somebody get that?”

Grandpa was too busy trying to grab at Leo’s nose to bother with the phone. “Is that my cuff link?”

“No, grandpa.”

“Well, what is it?”

Jana might as well have been talking to the tree. “Can somebody please get the telephone?”

“It’s a nose ring, grandpa. Lots of kids have ‘em.” Leo opened a box of chocolate covered cherries and waved it up to the old man’s nose, but Grandpa was not to be deterred.

“Oh, excuse me. I thought I was talking to Leo. Leo, my grandSON.” Grandpa grumped. “What’s this world coming to when boys are wearing jewelry? Nose rings! Ear rings!”

“Phone rings!” cried Jana. It was no use. At the seventh ring she exhaled audibly, dropped her string of lights and snapped up the receiver. “Okay. I’ll get it. Hello?” She handed the phone to her husband. “It’s your new business partner. Get rid of him.”

Monty aimed his wife into the closet and muffled the receiver to his chest. “I still can’t find those blue lights. They must not be in there.” He cleared his throat and shifted into his power voice. “Oh, hi, Bob. How you doing? What? My cell’s dead? Oh, sorry. Yes. The Smith project? All together on that one big guy.”

Jana spent all of three seconds in the closet with her radar engaged before emerging with a blue box and a smirk. “Can some one please help me with these blue Christmas lights?”

“Oh, those blue Christmas lights! No can do right now. Business call.” Monty stepped out of the living room and into his business transaction. “No, not you, Bob. No. That I can do. What? It’s the Christmas decoration thing. You know.”

Ariel noticed the familiar tiny jewel in her brother’s nose. “Is that my earring?” She immediately joined her grandfather in clawing at the boy’s face.

“Make her quit!” Leo covered his nose and dove behind his mother. “Mom, make her quit.”

“Mom! Leo has one of my earrings.”

“That’s not her earring. That’s my cuff link!”

“Make her quit, ma. Make her quit. I tell you, she touches me and she won’t live to see her ancestors!”

Jana resisted the urge to step back into the closet for the remainder of the holiday season and forced a tooth-clenched smile at the warring factions. “I’m so glad to be a mom.”

The boy's eyes glazed. "I'm going to kill her. I'm going to kill her. She touches me one time and I'm not responsible for what happens."

Ariel reached for her brother again. He mussed her hair before jumping away. "Mom! I just did my hair for tonight!" She let out her trademark "harrumph," raised a sixteen year old nose to the sky and stomped out of the room.

Satisfied with his triumph, Leo dropped back to the floor. "I'm not helping you guys anymore. I'm going to watch TV. Black and white TV!" He reached the dial and cranked the volume.

Monty shouted above the fray. "No. No. Nothing's wrong, Bob. Just the family thing. You know, the Christmas thing." He covered the receiver. "Can you guys pul-eeese hold it down?"

Grandpa stared in disgust at the plastic tree and shook his head once more. In forty-six years of marriage he never once had seen a plastic tree in his house. Grandma Melissa would not have allowed it. His wife was a purist who, on her worst days, could make Martha Stewart look tacky. Anything less than a fresh-cut long-needle pine would have been anathema. Sacrilegious. This sorry excuse for a central decoration was probably made in China by slave laborers from Tiananmen Square. Buying and decorating it was tantamount to supporting communism. And here it sat in the middle of his living room, haunting him, taunting him and insulting everything decent he had fought in Korea to uphold. Millions had given their lives.

Now this!

Grandpa sighed and placed a heavy hand on his grandson's shoulder. "You know what it's like to cut your own tree, boy? To go out into the woods, just you and the ax? Nature?" In spite of the jewelry piercing the boy's nose and his freshly shorn head, young Leo was Grandpa's only acknowledged ally in this insane family. The two thought alike, looked alike and both enjoyed a good belch in public. Grandpa gripped his heir by the arm. "Just you and the ax. Nature. I tell ya, it's a feeling like... like... like victory. Like nothing else. It's like walking into a Norman Rockwell painting."

Leo nodded politely, although he hadn't the foggiest idea who Norwell Rockman was. Grandpa continued. "Now those were the good old days. The ax. The tree. The honest sweat of a man's brow. I ever tell you about the good old days, son?"

"Yes, Grandpa." Leo sighed and rolled his eyes. The boy honestly did enjoy the old man's stories about the good old days. But being an adolescent, it was written somewhere in his job description to sigh and roll eyes whenever phrases like "good old days" and "when I was your age" were uttered.

"We used to put potatoes in our mittens to keep our hands warm on the way to school," said Grandpa.

Leo shook his head. "Rocks."

"What?"

"Before you told me it was rocks."

“No. It was potatoes. Hot potatoes. To keep our hands warm.”

“You said rocks.”

Grandpa’s voice rose to meet the challenge. “Potatoes. Whose memories are these, anyway? Potatoes! Potatoes! P-O-T-A-T-O...” He thought for a moment, then wrote in the air. “S.”

Grandpa motioned the boy toward the tree. The two stepped over to enjoy a mutual sneer. “Plastic tree. Plastic garland. Plastic baby Jesus in a plastic manger. You know what you get with all this plastic, Leo?”

“What’s that grandpa?”

“A plastic Christmas, kid. A classic plastic Christmas.” He sighed, scratched himself in a place that even Leo found disgusting and returned to the newspaper and his unlit cigar.

Jana managed to dismiss the comment and finished hanging the last string of blue lights. She had guessed it was going to be like this when she decided to attempt a recreation of Grandma’s Christmas for the family. Nothing could possibly compare to Grandma’s Christmas. She knew Grandpa would grouch and complain. Nothing would be quite right to him. But she also knew her dad well enough to understand he would be secretly and profoundly hurt if she didn’t at least try. In a world that had been forever changed only a month ago, the Christmas ritual alone held the possibility and promise and potential power to initiate the process of healing for her broken father’s broken heart. It had to be tried.

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Over the years, the Christmas holiday had become more than mere tradition for this family. Christmas was truce time; the one sacred moment each year when Grandpa's sarcasm, brother Roy's stubbornness and her own frustration were all put on hold. An unspoken cease-fire was called and the dormant love they actually held for each other had a chance to surface and breathe. Like a desert flower that blooms but once a year when the conditions are exactly right, these holidays were truly holy days. They carried with them the seeds that could make this family momentarily whole. Once a year, peace. Once a year, love. And once a year, the closest thing to a little honest joy Jana could ever remember.

Grandma Melissa was the midwife who somehow birthed this annual, mythical, methodical miracle. She was the referee who enforced the truce. The playwright who scripted the event. The stage manager who somehow pulled all the right pieces together year after year. No one knew exactly how she did it, but she did it. And now, in her absence, the impossible mantle had been passed on to her only daughter. Jana's self-imposed sentence was clear. She would do her best to recreate the sights, sounds and smells Grandma had prepared so well over the years. And then she would step back to wait, hope and pray that the magic of the season, itself, would take it all from there.

†††

There was a momentary silence in the room. Jana found herself alone at the tree, holding a handmade green construction paper

ornament with a ten-year-old photo of her adorable little children pasted in the middle. She smiled at the memory of a simpler time and remembered how Grandma had bribed Ariel and Leo with homemade toffee just long enough for them to sit together for the photo. Jana turned back to the room. Her daughter was nowhere in sight. “Ariel!”

Grandpa scowled and lowered his paper. “Ariel? Since when is it Ariel?”

Jana reached to touch her father’s hand. He pulled away. “She wants to be called that now, dad.”

“Melissa isn’t good enough for my grand daughter anymore? That’s what you named her. It was good enough for her grandmother. Why would you let her...?”

“I’m just trying to be supportive. She’s such a sensitive girl.”

“Ariel! What kind of name is Ariel? Sounds like something you break off a car.” Leo thought that was funny, even though he didn’t know what an “ariel” was or what it had to do with cars. He reached up from the floor to fondly elbow his grandfather’s shin.

The little princess wandered back into the room wearing a Megadeth t-shirt freshly pilfered from her brother’s suitcase. Leo’s laugh continued for a moment until he realized that he’d been robbed. “Mom! She’s wearing my shirt.”

“You wear my earring. I wear your shirt.”

“Take it off! Mom?” Jana intercepted her son before he could rip the shirt from his sister’s back and aimed him directly at the television. He hissed, plopped down on the floor and turned the volume up full blast. Grandpa countered by cranking Bing up even louder on the little black radio.

Monty yelled into his phone. “Yes, Bob. I think we can get together on this one. How about tonight? Oh, it’s Christmas Eve? That’s right.” He looked about the room and plugged his ears. “I don’t think that will be a problem.”

Jana glared at her husband, then at her children. “Roy and his girl... friend... girl... whatever she is, are going to be here in an hour and we have to get the decorating done. You don’t have time to go anywhere for anything.” These words had barely passed her lips when somehow above the pandemonium, she picked out the familiar sounds of a creature gagging. “What’s that?”

Leo saw it first. “It’s the cat!”

Mom rushed to capture the animal. “She’s choking!”

Even Monty set the cell aside. “Just a minute, Bob. Gotta get the cat!”

“Oh, gross!” Ariel shouted. “She’s going to throw up. Must have swallowed the tinsel again!”

Jana had only one thought: “Get her off the carpet and out the door! Out!”

They darted toward the frantic feline, knocking over lamps and smashing decorations until, finally, Leo caught the sorry tabby by the tail and made for the door. But one step from the threshold, he dropped the retching beast in disgust.

“Oooohhhh!”

Mom turned away, trying not to look. “Can someone get the carpet cleaner, please?”

“Yeah,” smiled Grandpa. “Might as well use the pine scent. Kill two birds with one stone. Pine scent. At least make it smell a little like Christmas around here.”

Monty retrieved the receiver. “Huh? Bob, you don’t want to know.”

Everyone turned away except Leo. He stooped, picked up a silver object from the cat puke and buffed it with his shirtsleeve. “Hey, Grandpa. I think I found your cuff link.”

“Gee, thanks kid.”

May your days be merry and bright

And may all your Christmases be white

II.

Dewey the Destroyer

Cinnamon-scented candles flickered and danced their shadows across the room. Presents wrapped neatly in gold, red and silver lay perfectly positioned beneath the plastic tree. Jana paused from her baking to inhale the moment along with the smell of fresh-cut pie apples and boiling cranberry Wassail Tea. She sighed and stared out from the kitchen to the living room. All was still and quiet, except for Grandpa who sat slumped in the overstuffed chair, snoring in heavenly peace. Monty, bent over his laptop in the den, was rubbing his temples. Daughter and son had apparently called a cease-fire and retreated upstairs to watch “The Simpson’s Christmas” DVD and devour the last batch of Grandma’s potato *lefse* from the freezer. It was the first moment of quasi-quiet Jana had experienced since they arrived yesterday. She wondered how long it would last.

A ringing phone answered her question. Jana called out from the kitchen. “Will somebody get that? I’m covered with flour.” It rang again. Grandpa stirred. “Can somebody get that?” And again. “Will somebody please get that!” She popped her annoyed face out from the kitchen door and yelled to the stairs. “Leo!”

The out-of-sight boy nodded but didn't move. "All right." It rang a sixth time.

"Leo!"

"Ariel's closer."

The girl objected. "Am not."

"Am too."

"Am not."

"Am too."

Jana stormed into the room covered with baking flour, slammed a mixing bowl down on the coffee table next to her father and lifted the receiver with her cleanest hand. "Yes? What is it?" Her voice changed immediately from basic-bothered to pseudo-civil. "Oh, hello pastor. Yes. Yes, thank you. Yeah, it's good to be home. What? Yeah. Yeah. Merry Christmas to you, too. It's been..." She blew the flower from her watch and squinted to read the digital display. "I guess it's been exactly a month since the funeral. Who? Me? Oh, fine. I guess. Trying to hold everything together for Grandpa and the kids. You know, make it as much like mom used to have it around here. As much as possible for the holidays. Some semblance of normalcy. Yeah. What?"

Monty could see the veins begin to bulge in his wife's forehead from across the room. He traced a set of invisible Ginsu knives flying from her eyes toward her father's chair. Grandpa stirred and yawned. "No, dad didn't tell me about the Christmas food baskets for the shut-ins. How many? Twenty? Well, Roy and his girlfriend

are due here any minute now and we still have a lot of... I know mom always used to deliver them, but... I don't think we're going to have time to..." Jana rolled her eyes in a way that would have made Ariel and Leo proud. "Dad said what? That I'd be glad to take them? Oh. Well, yes, I suppose if mother... Okay. Okay. Yeah. They're at church? I'll be there as soon as I can. Bye." She stepped over to her father, rolled up the newspaper covering his face and whacked him promptly and sharply upside the head.

Grandpa was suddenly awake. "What? What did I do?"

Jana mimicked her father's voice. "Oh, pastor, my daughter would love to deliver your twenty food baskets on Christmas Eve."

Grandpa felt his head for a lump. "Well, your mother always considered it an honor to be asked. And she never turned anyone down for anything. Not once in her seventy-four short years, God bless her. I thought you'd want to do it one last time. In her honor."

"But why did you wait until now to tell me?"

"I forgot. Give an old man a break."

She wadded up the newspaper again and waved it toward her father's nose as if to threaten a break of another kind. Grandpa quickly retrieved his glasses from the end table and put them on, pointing to his face. "Glasses!"

Jana gripped the paper in her right hand. "Weapon."

Leo walked into the room to see what the fuss was about. The old veteran snatched his grandson and held him as a shield. “Hostage.”

The word “diversion” popped into Jana’s head and she stared suddenly at the window. “Oh, is that Roy pulling in?” The moment he turned his face toward the glass Jana belted her dad over the head with the paper.

“Pain,” he muttered.

Leo had only one word as Grandpa released him to the floor. “Weird.”

†††

An hour passed. Then another. Still no Roy.

Ariel was flipping through a ten-year-old Redbook magazine, calling every other model fat. Leo and Grandpa were fitting together a 10,000-piece picture puzzle of dogs playing poker to kill time. Jana popped the last of the pies into the oven and snatched her coat. “Where’s your father?”

“Died and gone to Philadelphia,” smiled Gramps.

“I was asking the children.”

“W.C. Fields put that on his grave, you know. I’d rather be here than in Philadelphia.” Grandpa motioned to the basement door. “Business call.”

Jana stuck her head in the stairway but Monty waved her away. She scowled and decided to try her luck back in the living room.

“Dad, if I’m going to do this food basket thing for you, you’re going to have to get the kids to help finish everything in the kitchen before Roy and Fern get here.”

“You’re not doing it for me. You’re doing it for your mother. And God.”

“Either way, you’re going to have to help in the kitchen.”

Gramps lifted two hands in the air, waving peace signs and mustering his best Nixon impersonation. “I am not a cook.”

Ariel looked up. “Where you going?”

“To church to get the Christmas baskets. Someone ‘volunteered’ me... us to deliver them.” Jana rummaged through her purse for keys.

“I can drive! I can drive.” Ariel jumped up.

Grandpa had been waiting for that one. “That’s a matter of opinion.” Leo gave him a high five and the two belched out a three on the Richter scale before settling back to the puzzle.

“Grandpa,” said Leo, “It says ‘eight to twelve years’ on the puzzle box. I think we’re going to be done by tomorrow.”

“What can you say?” said Grandpa. “We’re stinkin’ geniuses. Or is it genie-ai?”

Mother was not amused. “Look you three, the turkey’s gotta go into the oven in fifteen minutes and the cranberries have to be

prepared and the pies go out of the oven before the turkey goes in and somebody's got to peel the potatoes..."

Grandpa gave his daughter a "can't you do this when you get back" look and tried to wave her off.

"The list's on the counter, dad. Into the kitchen and don't you dare come out until it's all done or I'll bring home your Christmas dinner in plastic containers from Burger Doodle. You hear me?"

The word "plastic" was all it took to bring Grandpa to his feet. He rose, saluted and motioned the troops out of the room. "All right, all right. Say the word." He picked Leo up by the collar. "Ours is not to reason why."

Ariel resisted. "This is just like a prison camp."

"*Silencio! Macht shnell.* Ours is not to make reply!" He prodded the children into the kitchen.

"Even Mr. Scrooge gave Bob Cratchet Christmas Eve off," Leo objected.

Grandpa saluted his favorite progeny and shoved him sharply forward. "Ours is but to do or die."

"And don't you dare mess anything up while I'm gone," Jana's eyes swept the living room. "We've got this place finally together. Don't touch anything. Better yet, don't even breathe on anything in here. I want to find this whole house exactly as I left it when I return. You copy? Exactly as I left it!"

THIS CHRISTMAS MORNING

Grandpa exited, then returned with a frying pan in hand. Let me rephrase that: “Ours is but to do and fry.”

Jana tied a red scarf securely about her neck and tugged at the plaid beret, muttering to God or anyone who might be listening. “I try my best. That’s all I can do, right? Try?”

A shout echoed from the kitchen. “Ours is but to make the pie!”

Jana caught herself mumbling something about not being her mother as she stepped over a golf bag in the back hall. “Grandpa, put these golf clubs away. Someone is liable to trip on ‘em!” She jerked the frozen kitchen door open, stifled an urge to put the clubs away herself and sighed. She wasn’t her mother, but she wasn’t his mother, either. He could pick up his own damned toys.

Two heads poked immediately out of the kitchen the moment the door slammed. Grandpa’s eyes darted about the room. His bushy eyebrows rose. “Is she gone?”

Leo emerged with a helmet-like copper cooking kettle on his head. He saluted. “Yes, Captain. She’s gone.”

The old man made his way toward his favorite chair and opened a beer. “Turkey’s in the oven. Pies out. And the twenty-four hour Christmas Americana Wrestlemania Marathon starts in three minutes. Ho, ho, ho! Doesn’t get any better than this, eh boy?”

Leo plopped down at his grandfather’s feet. “Uh, it would if I could have one of your beers, grandpa.”

“Don’t push it, kid.”

“Worth a try.” Leo dug out the TV Guide and settled on the floor. “What about the rest of the stuff on the list?”

Grandpa pulled Jana’s pink Post-it note from his pocket, glanced at the pencil scrawlings, stuffed it into his mouth and began to chew. “List? What list? I never saw no list.” He swallowed. “When you get to my age, people expect you to lose things. Forget things. Right? Must have misplaced it.”

“Grandpa, you’re way cool.”

“Yeah.” The old man chuckled at the notion and sat just a tad taller in his chair. “I am, aren’t I?”

†††

Ariel was leaning on the broken bureau in the basement, paging through some old yearbooks. She had descended into the bowels of the spider-infested farmhouse to retrieve two cans of grandma’s State Fair beet pickles from a wall of jars when she noticed a mysterious old trunk wide open. Every other time they had been here, the dusty metal container had been locked. Last summer when they visited she overheard Grandpa telling Leo it wasn’t a trunk. He called it a time machine and they weren’t to touch it.

“This isn’t a time machine,” Ariel shrugged. “It’s just a stupid trunk and bunch of old junk.” She noticed three dusty yearbooks and commenced to look for Grandpa’s name in the index. Grandpa had thirteen pictures in the book in all: Student Council, Honor Society, every sport, 4-H and a musical group called “Gay Notes”

which she decided not to ask about. She stared at the wavy blonde hair and million-dollar smile of his senior picture. He was almost handsome in those days. A note was scrawled under the photo in smeared ink. Something about being careful “over there.” Ariel paged through the rest of the seniors but couldn’t find Grandma Melissa. She panned the juniors and sophomores and was almost ready to return to the index when the teenager’s eyes riveted on a freshman named “Missy” Aaslesen. “Freshman?” Grandpa had robbed the cradle! Ariel studied the youthful smile a moment. There was something oddly familiar about this picture. She gasped. The girl had been looking at that very same face the night before in her mother’s bedroom. Only it wasn’t in this Braves ‘51 memory book. It was in a yearbook labeled Braves ‘81.

Scrambling up the stairs with the canned beets in hand and the yearbook hidden under her shirt, Ariel retrieved her mother’s high school yearbook from the shelf. Then she opened Grandpa’s book, placed the pages together and gasped again. Not only were her mother and grandmother beautiful, but except for the hairstyles, Elton John glasses, braces and three decades between them, they looked exactly alike. They could have been twins.

Ariel was tucking the books beneath her pillow when something fell from the older book. It was a weathered yellowish envelope with a three-cent stamp attached. She was about to place it back in the cover when the faint scent of perfume caught her attention. A small twinge of guilt hit as she opened the tear-stained letter. It was

addressed to Miss Melissa Aaslesen from some man with sloppy handwriting:

My dearest Missy,

I can't say what I want to say out loud because whenever I think of you I get all flustered and the words don't come out right.

When I leaned over and kissed you in the yearbook room yesterday I felt like I'd been struck by lightning. I don't know why I did it, other than it was all I've ever dreamed of. You looked so beautiful and your lips were so inviting. I know I caught you totally off guard and it was improper. You'd have every right to call me a masher and never see me again or tell your dad and get me fired at the feed store. I'd understand it and accept it as my fate. But please, don't YOU quit the store. It's my fault, not yours.

I'll probably be going to Korea after graduation if Eisenhower doesn't end the War before I get my chance. And I may never come back. I know this sounds hokey, but I'd consider it an honor to hold your picture next to my heart and die - if I must die for God and country - with the memory of our one moment, our one kiss on my lips.

Ariel's sigh surprised herself. She normally detested mushy stuff, but this wasn't half bad. Romantic, even. She stuffed the letter into the yearbook and tucked it under her pillow before trotting back to the kitchen. She wanted to ask Grandpa about it, but she'd have to

wait for the right moment so he wouldn't get all emotional or yell at her for reading his personal letters without permission.

†††

The kitchen was empty. Ariel set the beet pickles on the counter. "Hey, you guys. Get back in here. I'm not going to do all this work alone. And where's mom's list? We got a lot of work to do before..."

Grandpa glared up from the television and placed the copper kettle back atop his head. He didn't quite recognize the look in his granddaughter's eye. She was smiling at him. Like she kinda liked him or something. "What are you looking at?"

"Nobody. Come help."

Grandpa turned toward his grandson. "Are we going to take orders from her? She doesn't even have a helmet on." Then, in an uncharacteristic moment of temporary fiscal insanity, he pulled a \$20 out of his wallet and handed it to the girl. "Here, Air - e - el. Why don't you peel the potatoes for us, then go call your boyfriend back home?"

"My cell phone doesn't work out here. Dad's is the only one getting reception and he's on a business call."

"Hey, use my land line. Long distance. The call's on me. Maybe after a half hour or so on the phone with your boyfriend you'll forget all about our little lost list."

Ariel snatched the money and headed back to the kitchen. “Make that an hour and I’ll forget my own name.”

Grandpa smiled. “I wish you would.” Leo thought that was funny. “Ariel. What kind of a name is Ariel? Sounds like something you break off a...”

“Car.”

“Yeah, car.” Grandpa raised his eyes above his trifocals. “You know, kid, that’s what I like about you. You think like me.”

‘Yeah. We’re stinkin’ genie-ai.” Leo glanced at his watch. “Only a couple more minutes until the Twenty Four Hour Christmas Extravaganza Wrestlemania Marathon begins. What a way to spend ‘oh holy night,’ right grandpa? With the greatest of the World Wrestling Federation right in your own living room on a black and white TV. Just like the olden days, right?”

Grandpa eyed the tree and lamented. “I bet Hulk Hogan never had a plastic Christmas tree.”

The phone rang. Leo jolted up but grandpa held him back. “Wait!”

“I’ll get it. Maybe it’s mom.”

“You’re going to be serving women the rest of your life if you don’t learn early. Now sit down and count to seven.” He grabbed the boy and body-slammed him to the couch.

“Seven?” asked Leo. They let it ring a second and third time.

Ariel called from the kitchen. “Can somebody get that?” A fourth time. “Can somebody get that?” It rang a fifth and sixth. “Will someone please get that?” With the seventh ring Ariel burst into the room. “Hello!”

Grandpa smiled at Leo. “Females. They can’t stand to let it ring more than seven times. Near as I can figure, it must be a genetic defect built into the X chromosome.”

Ariel stayed on the phone for all of thirty seconds, which was her own personal record for brevity, and only muttered a few “uh huhs” before hanging up. Grandpa winked at Leo. “Oh, was that the phone?”

The girl growled back. “Oh, was that the phone?”

“Who was it?”

“I don’t know. Something about the food baskets mom’s picking up. I’m supposed to ask you if you remembered to order the turkeys from your friend who has the turkey farm. They weren’t in the baskets.”

Grandpa snarled at himself and slapped his own face. “Shoot. Forgot. That’s the second worst thing about Alzheimer’s. You just keep forgetting things.”

“What’s the first worst?” Leo asked.

Grandpa and Leo smiled, winked and spoke simultaneously. “I can’t remember.” The stale joke was interrupted by a car screeching to a halt and sliding into what sounded like a garbage can.

“Roy’s here,” said Grandpa without breaking stride.

Ariel was first to the window. “A ‘92 Toyota? And he’s got Barbie with him.”

Grandpa tried to keep from smiling. “Her name is Fern. Not Barbie.”

Monty stepped into the room cradling the cell between his chin and shoulder, stuffing papers into a briefcase. “What was that?”

Grandpa licked his comb and smoothed down the sides of what used to be his hair. “Roy and Barbie are here.”

Monty wondered for a moment if Roy had found yet another new girlfriend since the funeral, then shrugged his shoulders and finished his call. “Gotta go, Bob. Brother-in-law and his new lady friend are here. You know. Yeah. The family thing. Okay. I’ll see if I can slip away for a while to talk about that Andersen Window account. Maybe tomorrow. What? Ooooh, you’re right. It’s Christmas.” He paused and glanced around the room. Jana was nowhere to be seen. “Better not make it until after ten.”

†††

The clang of Norwegian goat bells hanging on the front door hailed the arrival of the lovely couple. Fern burst through the doorway in a sexy red Santa dress two sizes too small, doused with enough perfume to choke a herd of reindeer. She immediately tweaked Ariel’s cheeks and pulled Leo to her bosoms; which didn’t annoy the boy a bit. Then she snatched a green cardboard mistletoe

car freshener from her purse, kissed Monty on the lips and tried to do the same to an evasive Grandpa. Roy followed, staggering under the weight of a dozen bright packages and Fern's seven pieces of matching faux Louis Vuitton luggage.

Leo steered uncle Roy toward the tree, asking him if he could teach him how to thread spaghetti from one nostril to the other like he did last Christmas. Grandpa muttered a snide remark about Roy flossing his brain and retreated to the safety of his favorite chair.

"Care for a cup of Java, Roy?" asked Monty. "With a little Baileys?" Roy accepted and launched immediately into a one-sided discussion about how the wallpaper business was booming in Fargo since the flood. Monty nodded, emptying three creams, six sugars and a couple shots of Irish Crème into the Cenex coffee cup. Roy added a drop of coffee.

"I might have to add somebody after the first of the year," Roy confided. "We're really growing. Thank God for floods. You interested in investing? And where's sis?"

Monty was more interested in putting money into Chia Pet futures than into his brother-in-law's seventh business in ten years. He quickly changed the subject.

"Jana's out doing some last minute deliveries. You know. The church thing."

Fern elbowed her most recent fiancé and nodded at the door. Roy cleared his throat for the announcement. “Uh, say. Fern and I have a little...” He paused.

Fern chose the word. “Surprise...”

“Surprise?” Ariel was suddenly interested. “Did you set a date? Do I get to be a bridesmaid?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“I hope it’s not another cat,” Grandpa muttered. “I don’t want another cat in the house until I kill the last one you gave me.”

Roy hemmed and hawed. “Uh, yeah. Well, no, it’s not a wedding date and it’s not a cat. To... to tell you the truth...”

Fern chimed in again. “What he’s trying to say is, my ‘ex’ ran off with his karate instructor for the holidays and we...”

“Big woman. Strong woman,” Roy added.

“Kind of at the last minute. And we weren’t planning on it but what we’re trying to say is... well...” They looked at each other and broke the news simultaneously. “We had to bring Dewey with us.”

A momentary silence was followed by an audible gasp. The cat’s tail frizzed to the size of a squirrel and Leo swore he heard Grandma’s ghost scream in the attic.

Grandpa scowled. “Dewey? The kid still owes me \$746 for the chandelier at the funeral home!”

Dewey the Destroyer, as Grandpa fondly referred to Fern's boy, was an eight-year-old bundle of unbridled mayhem who could ransack a home in minutes while jabbering in a way that made even Fern sound like a Pulitzer poet.

"I know he's a handful, but don't worry," consoled Fern. "He's on a holiday dose of Ritalin so everything should be fine."

"Forget the kid," Grandpa whispered to Leo. "It's me who needs the drugs."

As if on cue, the freckled phrenetic burst through the doorway screaming for presents and leaving a wake of destruction in his path. In the next few moments the house was rattled, sacked and ransacked. A Christmas catalogue, a reading lamp and three couch pillows found their way to the floor. A poinsettia was defoliated. A half dozen packages were shaken. Garlands somehow managed to tangle themselves in the boy's foot, bringing the entire Christmas tree crashing to the floor.

Dewey the Destroyer had arrived.

†††

Jana was humming "Deck the Halls" and smiling at the fact that her house was finally in order as she fumbled for the doorknob. Balancing three food baskets in her arms, she hadn't noticed Roy's car by the barn. If all was on schedule, the turkey would be in the oven, the table would be set and she would have a leisurely hour to enjoy an eggnog and make herself presentable before Roy and Fern

arrived. They'd all fan out and deliver the care packages in three cars on their way to worship and finally return for a quiet evening of presents, food and reflection. A glass of Grandma's homemade wine, a glowing fire in the fireplace, and the contented smiles of her thankful family would top off a perfect evening and all would sleep in heavenly peace. There was only one thing in the world that could possibly spoil her plans for this picture-perfect Christmas. And, thankfully, that little something was quietly spending this holiday season with his father in Fargo.

Jana muttered only two words as she opened the door and drank in the destruction. The first was "Dewey."

The second wasn't fit for print in the church bulletin.

III.

Fresh Turkey

Ariel's suggestion to leave Dewey in Roy's car and bring him food for the next three days seemed completely logical to everyone. Leo volunteered to run an extension cord and set up his own DVD player in the back seat for him. He'd even sacrifice the Wii Rock Band 2 Special Edition he had rattled in a package neath the tree if there was even a possibility it would keep Dewey conveniently occupied. Grandpa seconded the motion: "After all, the car does have a heater and the forecast isn't bad for this time of year. Unseasonably warm, even. Might break into the teens!"

Even Jana's self-preservation instinct had to be muted in the name of hospitality. "He's only going to be here for three days." The words almost gagged in her throat. "Let's make the most of it."

"Three days?" Grandpa grumped. "It only took the Hindenburg three minutes to explode and turn to ash."

"I'd even cook it for him," Ariel offered.

"You'd cook for him? Hey, we hate the boy," Leo smiled, "but not that much."

Jana shook her tinsel at the kids and tried not to smile. “Dewey is our guest. That means he’s welcome in this house.”

“But, mom...”

“Quiet. Here he comes.”

The miniature terrorist flew down the steep back staircase in three bounds, energized by the Mountain Dew and Twinkies he’d inhaled for pre-dinner hors d’oeuvres. Leo had warned Fern’s little darling to keep the cat away from the tinsel. Predictably, the moment he hit the floor Dewey made his way directly toward the tree, fingered a piece of the glittery stuff and began calling “kitty, kitty, kitty.”

Grandpa was cleaning potting soil from a fallen poinsettia when Dewey wandered within earshot. “You know, Dewey, I used to have other grandchildren.”

“Oh yeah?”

Grandpa whisked up the dirt and placed it in a cracked plant pot. “Yup. A lot of ‘em. Did you ever hear the story of the old widowman who used to lock little neighbor children in his furnace and turn them into fertilizer ash for his flowers?”

“No.”

“Story goes, he had the prettiest poinsettias in the county.” Grandpa smiled insanely and tapped the boy on the shoulder with his little broom. “In this county, Dewey. This county.” He looked back toward his sorry smashed Christmas flower. “Gol-darnit. If

this poinsettia doesn't need a good dose of fertilizer right now. I wonder where I might procure some?" He leaned in toward the boy. "Drooping a bit, don't you think?"

The phone rang as Dewey backed away from the crazy man. For the first time in his life, Dewey picked up the receiver on the first ring. "Hello?"

Jana's stepped into the room with the good silver to set the table. "Who is it, Dewey?"

"It's the turkey farm. They're bringing the turkeys for your food baskets. How many do you want?"

"Twenty."

Dewey repeated the message over the phone and waited until Jana was out of sight before speaking quietly and clearly to the man on the other line. "What kind of turkeys are they?" He flashed an evil smile. "Oh, no. No! They got to be fresh. Yeah. Real fresh. We want live ones. Live ones. Yeah. No. We want to kill them ourselves. Yeah. Okay. Hurry 'em over; it's almost time for dinner. Okay. Good-bye." Jana thanked the boy for answering the phone as she stepped back into the room to place grandma's ruby red Czechoslovakian cut glass water picture on the table. She debated for a moment whether the priceless family heirloom should be kept in the same county as Fern's boy. If she hurried, she could pack it up and still get it to the mail before the window closed.

Dewey smiled all too sweetly. "It's my pleasure to be of service." He bowed and approached Jana.

Jana instinctively lifted the picture above her head. "Are they gonna bring the turkeys?"

"Any time now, Auntie Jana. Any time."

Fern looked up from her crossword puzzle. "See! Dewey can be very helpful." The boy pulled another piece of tinsel from the tree and resumed his efforts to gag the cat.

†††

Ariel was back in the basement, engrossed in a second pile of love letters she had found and fingering Grandpa's Purple Heart. She was reading chronologically, and had followed Grandpa from basic training at Camp Rucker in Alabama to the hills around Nashville for maneuvers. The letters trailed from the deserts of Arizona to San Francisco where they were shipping out for Japan and then Korea.

Knowing she would be missed if she tarried longer, Ariel skipped to the letter at the bottom of the pile. The Korean War had just ended. The future looked bright. And a young man was writing from a hospital ship on the way home, asking his beloved if she would be his wife.

It was the most beautiful thing Ariel had ever read.

IV.

Christmas Dinner

If what the French say is true and you do eat twice - first with your eyes - then everyone at Grandma's table should have been stuffed before the turkey ever made it out of the oven.

There were steaming golden fresh rolls, fruit breads, and piles of *lefse* with brown sugar and real butter. There were marshmallowed sweet potatoes, crusted scalloped potatoes, fruit soups, wild rice hot dishes and two types of stuffing with tart and sweet cranberry sauces. Mountains of pure white whipped potatoes waited for rivers of succulent brown peppered gravy. There were bright green and red salads and colorful relish trays lining the perfectly decorated table. Apple, cherry and pumpkin pies sat cooling on the oak buffet. There were *Krumkakes* and *Julekakes* and *Sand Kagers* and *Kringles* and *Rosettes*. All of these Old World delicacies were positioned perfectly on the forest green linen with white roses, a real pine bow centerpiece and Grandma's festive red china setting them off.

The expectant family sat with forks and knives in hand, awaiting the advent of the twenty-three pound butterball and drooling in Pavlovian splendor.

Ariel dipped her finger impatiently into the gravy boat for a foretaste of the feast to come. “This gravy doesn’t taste like Grandma.”

Leo couldn’t resist annoying her. “I hope not.”

“Hope not what?”

“I hope it doesn’t taste like Grandma. She’s dead.”

Monty didn’t want this to go any further. “Leo!”

“Well, she is,” said Leo, objecting to father’s objection. The mahogany kitchen doors swung open and Jana made her grand entrance with the perfectly basted turkey on Grandma’s most beautiful antique Blue Willow platter. Steam rose above the golden brown bird and fogged her glasses as she lowered her head to find the table. “Ooohs” and “aaahs” followed as if on cue. Monty dimmed the lights, lit the candles and nodded at Grandpa. “Can you say ‘grace’ dad?”

“Rather not. Anyone seen my other cuff link?”

“Come on, pop. It’s tradition.”

Grandpa winked at Leo and everyone lowered their heads. “Okay. Grace!”

Jana tried to kick her father under the table, but only managed to jostle the eagle claw oak leg, causing Jurassic tremors in all the water glasses. Fern reached unsuccessfully to remove her son’s “No Fear”

hat, but Dewey insisted on receiving a logical explanation before parting with his treasure.

Roy smiled through clenched teeth and glared at the boy. "That's just the way we do it here. Hat's off."

Dewey wasn't convinced. "Give me one good reason I should take it off."

Roy tightened both fists. "I'll give you two."

"Let's just eat," Leo pleaded. "My stomach growled."

Jana wasn't about to let so much as a parsley sprig off her platter without a proper blessing. "Why don't we all hold hands and dad will offer the blessing?" One by one everyone complied. Everyone except Dewey. He looked down at Ariel's hand as if the girl had boogers on it. Or Swine Flu. Or both.

"No way I'm holding hands with a girl."

Ariel raised her eyebrows only slightly and aimed a condescending smile at the boy. "Fine with me. And I'm not a girl. I'm a woman."

Leo laughed and followed suit. Jana spied the turkey waiting for a prayer partner and quickly joined Dewey's left hand to one leg of the bird and Ariel's right hand to the other to complete the circuit. "Father WILL say grace."

Grandpa didn't have to look up. The tone of his daughter's voice was enough to tell all that she was through playing games. "Okay. Okay." They lowered their heads once more.

“Ah, bless us oh Lord...” Grandpa paused a moment as if he had somehow forgotten how to pray, then cleared his throat and continued. “...and these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty through Christ our Lord.” The entire family opened their eyes, expecting the prayer to be over, but for some reason Grandpa kept going. He took another breath and worked his way into his first real prayer since before the funeral. “And on, uh, on this blessed night we are mindful of those who have little or nothing before them. And, ah... on this first Christmas without our dear Melissa...” The old man’s voice seemed suddenly much older. It started to break. “We... we pause to... to... we are...”

He stumbled into his own silence.

Jana sensed she had pushed her father a bridge too far. She squeezed his hand and Leo’s simultaneously. Leo took the cue and finished the prayer. “We all hope Grandma’s having a hell of a good first Christmas up there with you and Jesus and all the rest of your company of heavenly ghosts. Amen.”

Everyone added their “amens” before Jana wiped a tear and corrected the boy. “It’s not heavenly ghosts, Leo. Heavenly hosts.”

Fern lifted the water goblets to the light, looking for a way to complement herself into Jana’s approval. “Oh, what a lovely table you’ve set. And your crystal, is it Bohemian?”

“No, I couldn’t find any of mom’s good crystal,” Jana answered. “Grandpa packed it away so I used his next favorite.” She smirked at her dad. “Plastic.”

The old man stared at the goblet in disbelief and tapped it with a fork. She was, of course, joking. Dewey stuffed his mouth with a bun and threw in a pad of butter – cardboard and all - to mix it on the way down. “Gramps, is your dead wife in heaven?”

Grandpa winced. “Don’t call me Gramps.”

Fern forced a smile. “What would you like Dewey to call you?”

“How about long distance?”

Jana elbowed him under the table. “Dad!”

“All my life I’ve enjoyed annoying people, and now suddenly you want me to just up and quit?”

Jana was not amused. “Answer the boy.”

“What was the question?” He played dumb.

Dewey added a spoon of strawberry jam to the bread and butter pad in his mouth. “Ish your old lady in heaben?”

“Damn right.” The old man didn’t miss a beat.

Jana elbowed him again. “Dad!”

“She’d better be in heaven. After all the time she spent down here making the arrangements.”

“Well, if she is in heaven,” Leo added, “I bet the angels are sure having better gravy than we are.”

Ariel scowled. “Well, maybe we just should have had Grandma leave her deathbed at the hospital and freeze us up a batch before she kicked off.”

“Actually, she probably would have if you had asked her,” said Grandpa “That’s just the kind of lady she was.”

Ariel raised her nose in the air to match her eyes. “Don’t say ‘lady’. Say ‘woman’.”

Grandpa was not about to be told how to speak. “Your grandma was a lady.”

“Woman.”

“A ‘lady’ in the truest sense of the word.”

Jana felt the simmerings of a dangerous argument. “Would you guys knock it off please? It’s Christmas. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Why don’t we just suspense with this turkey crap and open the presents now?” demanded Dewey. Grandpa reminded the boy that Christmas presents weren’t opened at this house until Christmas morning, and that the word “crap” was not allowed at the table.

“No fair!” Dewey objected.

Grandpa snarled. “That’s the way we’ve done it since Roy and Jana were little and that’s the way we’ll do it now. Dinner in the evening. Presents in the morning.”

“Who thought that stupid idea up?”

Grandpa glared at the boy. "I did."

"Stupid."

The insulted patriarch waved a menacing butter knife. "Look, kid, I'm trying really hard to be civil here, but you're making it very difficult for me."

Fern squeezed the blood out of Roy's wrist under the table. Roy spoke without looking up from his potatoes. "Leave the boy alone, dad."

"What's civil?" Dewey asked.

Leo smiled and raised a knife of his own. "That means trying to be nice even though he'd really rather cut your little tongue out with a carving utensil."

Fern moved all the nearby knives out of her son's reach. Dewey rose to leave, but Roy aimed him back into his chair. He filled his mouth with turkey stuffing and commenced a familiar whine. "My real dad always lets me open presents on Christmas Eve when I'm at his house."

"Well, you're not at his house," Roy said.

Grandpa smiled and picked the bananas out of his lime Jell-O. "We could make the arrangements."

"My real dad always lets me do anything I want."

"Maybe that's your problem," snorted Grandpa.

Jana had had about enough and asked them all to change the subject. Grandpa couldn't resist one last jab.

“Little fart.”

Ariel surprised herself by coming to the boy's defense. “Abraham Lincoln said that if you can't say anything nice about someone, you shouldn't say anything at all.”

Twenty seconds of silence fell on the table before Leo spoke. “If that's the case, it looks like it's going to be a real silent night.”

For the next three minutes the only sounds heard on Grandpa's forty acres were the clinking of forks and the musty old ship's clock in the hallway. Finally Dewey stuck his tongue out at Grandpa. The old veteran returned the gesture. Fern tried to resuscitate the situation. “I really like the way you've decorated here. It's very festive. Especially the tree.”

Grandpa muttered. “Plastic.” The silence continued.

Ariel thought about mentioning the love letters and yearbooks she'd found, but held back. She was not sure how Grandpa would respond to her snooping through his private letters. She settled for a less controversial subject. “I Googled the Unofficial US Census before we came and I found out there are 94,135,860 homes with real trees in America but 97,978,140 with artificial trees.”

Grandpa was not impressed. “Fascinating. Pass the cranberries.”

“Artificial trees are more popular among the elderly, less affluent and less educated.”

Grandpa smirked. “Less educated. It figures. Pass the stuffing.”

Fern looked up. “We’ve always had an artificial...” Grandpa lowered his head, let his glasses slide down to the end of his long nose and shook his head, holding back. That one was too easy.

Monty changed the subject. “Say, as long as we’re all together this might be a good time to talk about what to do with mother’s memorial money.”

This was the last subject Jana wanted to discuss over Christmas dinner. “Not now, dear.”

Grandpa was surprisingly compliant. “No, that’s fine. Now’s as good a time as any.”

Dewey objected, stating that he didn’t care to talk about dead people at Christmas and that he wanted to open presents.

“She’s not just a dead person,” snarled Grandpa. “She’s Leo and Ariel’s dead grandmother.”

“Could we not talk about ‘dead’ at the table?” asked Ariel.

“Pass the dead turkey, please,” smiled Leo. Jana’s hand inched closer to the electric knife.

“What were you thinking about as far as memorials?” Roy asked.

Monty explained that about four hundred dollars had come in from friends and family since Thanksgiving. He and Leo had counted the money in a stack of unopened cards yesterday morning just after they arrived. Monty didn’t bother to mention that

Grandpa had instructed the boys to burn the cards with the trash so Jana wouldn't find them and he wouldn't have to write "thank yous" to all his cheap friends.

"I thought we might donate the money to your church to help with the carpet fund," Monty offered, not caring to share his father-in-law's suggestion that the money be used to start a fund to remove the new pastor.

"Your mother-in-law was against the carpet fund," said Grandpa.

Jana offered her first choice. "How about the sanctuary renovation?"

"She liked the sanctuary just the way it was."

"How about the youth fund?" Ariel asked.

"Your grandmother hated kids."

Ariel was insulted. "Did not!"

"Did too."

"Did not!"

A thought popped into Leo's head. Laser-carved walnut Bible verse plaques above the urinals might be a nice memorial for the church. He refrained from mentioning the idea, however, since he didn't think his mother would like to hear the word urinal at the table. "I got a better idea. Why don't we donate it to the Red River relief fund for families who lost stuff in the flood?"

Grandpa smiled at the lad. “Now there’s a thought. Your grandmother always did like a good disaster.”

“Is that why she married you, Gramps?” Dewey smiled.

The old man picked up a turkey leg and shook it at his nemesis. “You’re getting awfully close to the poinsettia pot, boy.”

Roy chimed in. “Jana tells me you haven’t gone out much since the funeral, dad. I’m a bit concerned. You should be doing more with your friends instead of sitting around here all day watching soap operas and ball games.”

“I’m touched by your sudden concern,” feigned Grandpa. “But I find soap operas personally cathartic. And I also watch the weather channel.”

“I just think you should get out more. Sitting in front of the television can’t be all that healthy day after day.”

“What else are you supposed to do when all your friends are dead and you don’t like any of your loved ones?”

“All your friends are not dead,” said Jana. “What about Arnie Wilowicz?”

“Dead.”

“How about your old whist partner, Finster?”

“Folded his hand permanently last February.”

“What about those people you used to bowl with? The Wombats.”

“Wombats? Dingbats! Besides, they’re a couple. Who wants to go out with a couple? And they’re moving to Sun City after New Years. Might as well be dead. All those old people...”

“Your best buddy, Mergen. He’s not dead,” said Monty.

“Hardly. Just got married to a twenty-three year old.” Grandpa stuffed his mouth with stuffing and popped in an apple slice. “Yeah. He’ll be dead soon.”

Monty and Roy looked at each other and chuckled. Dewey asked his mother what was so funny and was told that he’d understand when he was older.

Ariel decided it was time to broach the topic of the love letters. “I miss Grandma.”

Jana stroked her daughter’s hair. “We all miss Grandma, Meliss... Ariel.”

“Grandpa, do you have any old pictures of Grandma when she was young? Photos? Yearbooks?”

“Nope. Threw ‘em out years ago.”

Leo strained a flour lump out of his gravy and set it on the side of his plate. “I especially miss her gravy.”

“Oh, I’d give anything to see some pictures of her when she was my age...”

“She was never your age.”

“I heard she looked a lot like mom.”

“I don’t see the resemblance.”

“Would you mind if I dig around in the... attic to see if I can find a memento or two of hers I could keep? Or the basement...”

Grandpa’s ears perked up. His eyes narrowed. He studied Ariel’s poker face a moment, then let it pass. The girl decided it was time to change the subject. “I remember the last time we talked before Grandma got sick. I had just broken up with Palo Brzinski and was looking for some matches to incinerate his letter jacket. Grandma Melissa brought out Grandpa’s old welding stuff and said the sweetest thing to me before we torched it. She said: ‘Honey,’ she always called me honey, she said ‘Honey, this is a difficult time of life for both of us. Your hormones are just kicking in and mine are kicking out.’ That’s what she said.”

Dewey didn’t care to hear any more about hormones. He pounded a pudgy fist on the table, shaking the water glasses and sending Fern’s tepid tea into her lap. “I want to open presents!”

Jana shifted the subject once more. “How about we go around the table and tell what Christmas means to us?” The groan that followed was the only thing this entire family had agreed upon since the fall of the Berlin wall. Jana persisted. “Come on. It’ll be fun. Ariel, you first.”

Monty’s rang almost on cue, excusing him from the ritual. He pulled it out and pushed back from the table. “I was waiting for this call. It’ll just take a minute. Hello, Bob.” Dewey continued his chanting for presents, forcing Monty to shout over the receiver.

“No, no. This is a good time. Just shoveling on the old feedbag. You know, the Christmas dinner thing. Yeah.”

“Tell Bob to call back later!” Jana was losing it as Dewey raised his demands to match Monty’s volume.

“I said I want my presents!”

“Dewey!” Roy and Fern shouted in unison. The little pest made the unparadonable mistake of taking the Lord’s name in vain loud and clear and repeatedly.

Grandpa was on him like flies on fresh manure, seizing him by the face to shut his mouth. “Grandma Melissa allowed no swearing in this house and I’ll be damned if I’m going to let it start with the likes of you!”

“Take your hands off my son!” shouted Fern. The boy bit Grandpa’s hand, broke away and all hell broke loose with him. He began screaming obscenities and law suits along with further demands for presents.

Shocked to the extreme, Grandpa snatched the nearest blunt instrument within reach - which happened to be a turkey leg - and began shaking it overhead like a war hammer. “There’ll be no swearing in this house. You understand?”

Ariel shrieked. Leo cheered for Grandpa to let the “Dewdster” have it. Fern turned a shade redder than her lip-gloss, demanding an immediate apology and threatening to leave the house, never to speak to this family again. Roy tried to calm her and hold her back

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from the Jell-O plate. Monty yelled above it all on the phone. Ariel demanded out of the family.

In a slow motion instant, Jana seized the carving knife, plunged it into the turkey and let loose a bloodcurdling scream the likes of which had never been heard in that house. “Aaaahhhh! This is Christmas! The season of love and family and good will! Now would everyone just shut up, sit down and eat!” She pulled the knife back out from the turkey, glared about the room, eyes bulging and head snapping from one potential victim to another. One by one they cowered to their seats in submission. Monty was the last to sit, gingerly pulling the phone to his ear and quietly signing off. “Uh, Bob? I’ll have to get back to you on that one, Bob. You know, the uh... the wife with the knife thing.”

A ringing doorbell broke the tension. The entire family jumped up. “I’ll get it!” Jana aimed the knife at Leo. He nodded without a word and backed away toward the door, keeping a wary eye on the carving tool.

They sat in silence until Leo returned. “The turkeys are here.”

“Tell the man to put them in the food baskets in...” Jana began.

A surprised grin spread over Leo’s face. “No. I mean the turkeys are here. The turkeys.”

“Yeah. Just have him put them...”

“No, mom.” Leo continued. “The turkeys. The ‘gobble gobble’ turkeys.” He flapped his arms to mimic a live bird.

Jana rose and walked toward the door. “So, what’s the big deal? Just have him take them to the... the...” She stood in the doorway for only a moment gazing at the forty black beady eyes staring back at her from the farm truck. She hissed like an angry cat. The birds gobbled back at her in unison, sounding slightly more terrified of her than she was of them.

The stunned woman returned to the living room and collapsed on the couch. “Merry Christmas.”

Ariel sighed. “This gravy doesn’t taste like Grandma.”

V.

Round John Virgin

The feast was over, the live turkeys were on their way back to wherever they came from and the last of the dinner dishes had been cleared from the table. Grandpa loosened the top button on his old man pants, excused himself and stepped into the pantry closet. Moments later he emerged with a large bag of mixed bird seed and headed for the door.

“What are you doing with that seed, Grandpa?” asked Ariel.

“Oh, just bringing it out to put some more by the cat feeder next to the front window,” he answered.

“You mean the bird feeder,” Ariel corrected.

“No.” As he spoke, a blue jay hit the front window and fell to the ground, dazed. “I mean cat feeder.” Grandpa opened the door. “Here kitty, kitty.”

Roy took Dewey aside to fill him in on some of Grandpa’s other unwritten holiday expectations. “Another tradition we have here is after dinner when the dishes are done, we all sit around the piano and sing Christmas carols.”

“What songs do you sing?” asked the boy.

“Old traditional favorites. You know, like the carols they sing at church.”

“I don’t go to church,” said Dewey flatly. “Can we go to the barn and see the manure spreader?”

“We’re all going to church tonight as a family,” Roy announced, preempting his sister’s sure and certain condition for his continued survival.

“When I’m with my real dad I never have to go to church,” said Dewey. “The last time he was in church he got mad at the pastor and hasn’t been back since.”

“When was that?” asked Leo.

“I don’t know,” said Dewey. “At his confirmation or something.”

Mom walked over to help Ariel sift through the piano bench for some of the old Christmas favorites. “Where are all the old carol books?” asked Ariel.

Jana began to dig in the piano bench. “They’re in here somewhere. Grandma always...”

Ariel wasn’t looking too hard. “I don’t think they’re in here.”

Jana looked toward her father. “Grandpa, any ideas?”

“I put them in a box to Goodwill with all the rest of your mother’s old stuff,” said Grandpa.

Jana glared in anticipation. “What old stuff?”

“You know. All her clothes and sewing and stuff.”

She dropped the red hymnal onto the floor. “You didn’t throw her quilting?”

“I don’t know.”

“Dad!” Jana stormed over to her father. “She was making a quilt for us before she died. The beautiful blue one with the snowflake pattern and a heart and cross in the middle? The last thing she asked me was if I’d finish it and give it to Meliss... Ariel from the both of us.”

Grandpa was not impressed. “I don’t know where it is.”

“Dad!”

“Hey, I’m sorry.” He wasn’t. “You can make another one.” She couldn’t. “Let’s sing.”

Jana wasn’t through with this. “I can’t believe you’d throw the quilt away!”

Grandpa grimaced. “In the words of my beloved daughter: Can we talk about something else?”

Ariel gave up the search and began to thumb through the AARP magazines for a Seventeen. “All that’s in this bench is one old Norwegian song book.”

“Are the notes in Norwegian?” asked Grandpa.

“No.”

“Good. Then play them,” the old man smiled. “Jana, you play it.”

Jana wasn’t through with the quilt issue. “I can’t believe you threw the quilt.”

“Are we going to sing or simply sit here and dwell on the past?”

Ariel found a favorite hymn in the book. “Let’s do this one.”

Jana began to hammer out “Good King Wenceslas.” The family gathered slowly around Grandma’s perfectly tuned piano and commenced to massacre the song:

Good King Wenceslas la la,

On the feast of Stephen

When the la la la la la

Deep and crisp and even

Brightly la la la la la

La la la la cruel

When la la la la in sight

Gathering winter fuel

Jana turned the page. “Okay. Here’s an easier one.” She plinked out the first lines of “Hark the Herald Angels.”

“I know this one!” shouted Dewey as he belted it out at the top of his lungs:

Hark the herald angels sing

Glory to the newborn king

Peace on earth, and mercy mild

God and sinner reconciled

*Joyful all ye nations rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With the jelly toast proclaim...*

“It’s angelic hosts, Dewey,” said Jana. “Angelic hosts.” She turned to “It Came Upon A Midnight Clear” and motioned to gather the troupe. “Everybody knows this one.”

Ariel decided to correct everyone on the “peace on the earth, good will to men” line. “It’s not men any more. It’s good will to all.”

Leo glared. “It’s men.”

“All!” Ariel screamed, shoving her brother. “That’s excluding me as a woman!”

“I’d like to exclude you as a sister!”

“Mom. He’s so mean.” She shoved him again.

“Besides, you’re not a woman,” Leo continued.

She took a swing at him. “Mom!”

“That’s enough!” Jana pounded out “Angels We Have Heard On High.” Everyone except Dewey knew that one. When they got to the “*gloria in excelsis deo*” part, Dewey thought they were singing “inexpensive day old” or something like that.

Fern fetched a comb from her imitation Gucci handbag, licked it and attempted to straighten the cowlick in her son’s hair. “Let’s do one Dewey knows. What would you like to sing, Dewey?”

Dewey nodded proudly. “We Three Kings.”

“I can play that,” smiled Jana. “Dewey, why don’t you sing a solo for us?” Dewey happily obliged:

We three kings of glory and tar

Tried to smoke a burning cigar.

“What a little brat,” smirked Ariel.

“Mom, she’s calling me names!” Dewey objected, tugging on his mother’s too-tight dress until a strap snapped. “She’s calling me names!”

Grandpa placed a surprisingly gentle hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Maybe she should have called you a taxi.”

“What’s that mean?”

Jana turned to “Silent Night” and wished it was one.

“Everybody knows this one. Come on. Let’s sing.”

Silent night, holy night

All is calm, all is bright

Round yon Virgin mother and child

Holy infant so tender and mild

Sleep in heavenly peace

Sleep in heavenly peace

“Who’s Round John Virgin?” asked Dewey. “Is he really fat?” The doorbell rang and the boy jumped up to answer it. Racing past the couch, he tripped over Grandpa’s golf clubs. Leo commenced to laugh until his mother glared him into silence. Jana turned to her

father. “Are you through with those golf clubs, dad? I thought I told you to put them away if you were through with them.”

Grandpa looked up. “Oh, what happened?”

“Dewey tripped over them.”

Grandpa winked at Leo. “Then I’m through with ‘em.”

Dewey hobbled over to the door and pulled it open. The copper goat bells hanging on the door clanged as a gust of arctic wind chilled the room. A group of carolers had gathered on the porch and were beginning their serenade. Dewey blinked at them twice, then slammed the door.

“Who was it, Dewey?” asked Fern.

“I don’t know. Somebody wanting money, I think,” said Dewey.

“Singing beggars?”

“Yeah. You can’t be too careful out here in the country. They’ll rob you blind. They distract you at the front door while their partners come in the kitchen and clean you out from the back door.”

“Let ‘em in, Dewey.”

The frozen-faced high school singing group decked in white and red and gold stepped gladly in and took their places in the entry. They sang “Deck the Halls” and “Lo, How A Rose” for starters. They performed “*O Tannenbaum*” in German and “*Jer Er Saa Glad*” in Norwegian.

Jana watched Grandpa's eyes trail to the floor as they began "In the Bleak Mid-Winter." He had recognized the hand-sewn golden capes and red berets as his wife's handiwork.

He brushed a tear from his eye.

Dewey took center stage as the carols concluded with "Angels We Have Heard On High" and belted out his new "inexpensive day old bread!" line to replace the "*in excelsius deo*" part.

Grandpa raised the repotted poinsettia subtly, hinting at a strike. His upper lip twitched a forced smile.

"Put the plant down dad," smiled Jana.

"I'm gonna get him," muttered Grandpa, resisting the urge to usher the carolers to the door so he could slap the little Dewdster silly. "As God is my witness..."

"The plant, dad."

"You're no fun."

VI.

Nervous Service

Jana shuddered as a little man with a farmer's tan and a \$50 toupee led her entourage to the only pew left in the church, directly beneath the pulpit and the preacher's nose.

"Front row seats. Great." She pulled the iPod wires from Leo's ears and begged Ariel to put her nail file away. They shuffled in, saving one space for Grandpa, who was parking the Buick.

"How come we have to sit in the front row?" complained Dewey in a voice well above a whisper.

Jana clenched her teeth into a smile. "Because we're late and these are the only seats left."

"How come we're late?"

"Because we had to split up to deliver the food baskets. And then we couldn't find you when it was time to go because you were behind the barn peeing your name in the snow."

"How come these are the only seats left?"

Leo leaned over to Dewey. "Because everybody goes to church on Christmas. It's tradition."

“What’s tradition?”

Leo looked around, then leaned in again. “It’s something you always do because you’ve always done it before... whether anybody knows why you’re doing it or not.”

The bell choir finished their rendition of “Oh, Holy Night” and the pastor began three pages of announcements about who gave the memorials for the radio service, who died that year and how much money the church still needed to end the year in the black. Dewey stood on the pew and turned to look for Grandpa. “Where’s gramps?”

Jana pulled him down. She was determined not to let Dewey get her riled up at church. Especially not within earshot of the three blue-haired former Sunday school teachers who had known her since she was a baby.

The opening prayer and the children’s sermon went on without incident. Dewey kept himself busy coloring in the new red hymnbook. Jana forgot herself for a moment and actually enjoyed a brief bit of uninterrupted peace before she realized that her dad had yet to show up. She looked at her watch twice and dabbed a surprising tear from her eyes when the Cherub Choir sang “Away in a Manger.” Mother always loved that song, especially when the little ones sang it. Mrs. Boone, an elderly friend of her mother, leaned over and handed her a lace hanky embroidered with golden angels.

“I know, dear,” said the old saint. “I know.” Jana nodded and took the hanky, then fumbled through her own purse for a tissue, unable and unwilling to blow her nose on an angel.

“Where’s your dad?”

“Parking. I think.”

Grandpa didn’t show up until the pastor entered the pulpit to read the Christmas Gospel. He smelled like fresh cigar smoke and his eyes were redder than the altar flowers.

“You okay?” whispered Jana.

“Peachy.”

Grandpa frowned to see the only space open was next to Dewey. He waddled in and sat with arms folded tightly and nose high in the air to read the preacher’s lips beneath his trifocals. A soothing bass voice commenced with the Christmas text from Luke 2:

“And in that region there were shepherds out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night.” And an angel of the Lord appeared and the glory of the Lord shone round and they were filled with fear. The angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you wondrous news of joy to all the people for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign to you, you’ll find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly hosts praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to those with whom God is well pleased.’”

Jana glanced at Dewey. The boy was transfixed by the words. It was as if he was hearing them the first time. Perhaps he was.

“Peace on earth?” she sighed to herself. “Peace on earth.”

“We will now take our Christmas offering as the choir sings a new song written especially for our worship this day,” the pastor said.

Grandpa reached reluctantly for his wallet. “Great. I’m late parking the car and I still make it in time for the offering. Once more around the block and I would have missed it.”

Roy nudged his father. “How come they’re doing the offering before the sermon at church now?”

“Have you ever heard this guy preach?”

“No,” Roy looked puzzled. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Grandpa smiled. “If they waited until after the sermon, no one would give a cent.”

Monty’s cell phone beeped as the plate passed. Jana snatched it from his coat pocket and dropped it in, along with a check that had one too many zeroes on it. Dewey glanced at the ushers as they gathered the plates together in the back of the sanctuary. “How much did you get?” he asked Grandpa. Fern shushed her son before Jana could reach him. “How much did you get?”

Grandpa raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“How much? From the offering plate?” Dewey waved a bill in the air. “I got a twenty.”

Grandpa snatched Andy Jackson from the boy’s grip. “Give me that.” He looked toward the ushers, then discretely tucked the twenty in his own jacket pocket.

The preacher returned to the pulpit and began a talk about God interrupting the ordinary with news of the extraordinary. Then something about soteriology, escatology and the clear Christocentrism of the early desert fathers.

“What’s he talking about?” asked Dewey, wishing the pastor would get back to the story about the shepherds and the angels and the reindeer.

“I don’t know,” shrugged Grandpa. “I never know what he’s talking about.”

Dewey resumed coloring in the hymnbook. “I wonder what they’re going to do with my dad’s quarter?”

“What do you mean?”

“With the quarter my dad gave me to throw in the plate. What do they do with it?”

“I don’t know,” said Grandpa. “Probably send it to the missionaries or something.”

“How do they send it?”

“What?”

“How do the missionaries get it?”

“Huh? Oh, in the mail, I suppose.”

“Oh.” Dewey’s brow wrinkled slowly. “But it takes forty-two cents just for a stamp. If they send it to the missionaries, they’ll end up owing...” He did the math on the bulletin. “...seventeen cents for each letter.”

Grandpa shook his head. This kid was smart. “If everyone did that, the missionaries would go broke in no time.”

“I should have given the missionaries another quarter.”

“Yeah. Cheapskate.”

Five minutes into the sermon Dewey dropped the hymnal and crawled under the pew. “What kind of place is this, anyway?”

Grandpa pulled the boy up by the collar and plopped him back in place. “It’s a church. Now sit down and shut up. They’re talking about God’s love.”

Dewey scanned the sanctuary. “If this is a Christmas place how come I don’t see no windows with Santa on ‘em? There’s not one stinking reindeer in the whole building. They do have a Christmas tree, though.”

“Plastic,” grumped Grandpa.

Fern shushed them both, then added, “You’re not supposed to talk in church.”

“He is!” Dewey’s voice was loud enough for all to hear. He pointed up at the preacher, who paused a moment and lost the place in his manuscript.

Grandpa bent over the boy. “Let me explain here. You know the origin of Santa Claus...”

“What’s a origin?” asked Dewey.

“That’s where he comes from.”

“Well, du-uh! He comes from the North Pole.”

Grandpa shook his head. “No. Not the fictionary peeping Tom in the red union suit Santa Claus. The original Santa Claus was Saint Nicholas. He was a fine Christian man who cared for the poor and gave food to the hungry and homeless.”

“If they were homeless, how did he get the food down their chimneys?”

“He didn’t.” Grandpa’s blood pressure was beginning to rise. “He doesn’t. He went from place to place helping real people with real problems. And not just at Christmas, either. He helped them all the time.”

“Why?”

“Because he was... he was... I don’t know. I suppose he was grateful.”

“For what?”

Grandpa didn't answer until the sermon was over and the ushers began to hand out candles. "For life," he whispered. Then he whispered it again. "For life."

Dewey forgot the question. He was hoping to nab a candle. "What?"

"The real Saint Nicholas gave gifts to the poor because he was grateful for life. Family. For all his many blessings. I don't know. Ask him yourself tonight when he shows up to bring your coal."

Dewey paused, then looked up. "Was there a real Mrs. Saint Nicholas?"

"I don't know. I really don't."

"I think there was," said Dewey.

Grandpa forgot he disliked the boy for a moment. "Why's that?"

Dewey didn't miss a beat. "Because most old men need a round old woman to keep them from getting too cranky."

"You're probably right, kid. You're probably right."

The lights dimmed. The congregation rose to light their candles and sing "Away in a Manger" and receive the blessing. Then they began the Doxology.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow

Praise him all creatures here below

Praise him above ye heavenly hosts

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Dewey had heard this one before. He saved his voice for the last phrase and belted it out loud above the congregation:

Praise father, son and whole-wheat toast!

“Whole wheat toast?” thought Grandpa out loud. “With the jelly toast proclaim. Inexpensive day old bread. Whole-wheat toast. Kid’s got some kind of wheat deficiency.”

The worshippers sang out the three-fold “amen.” The Christmas bells clanged joyously from the steeple. And Jana Pederson McCaffrey ushered her entire family out the side door before anyone she knew had a chance to talk to them.

VII.

Somebody's Baby

Grandpa was snoring loudly from his overstuffed chair. Jana finally finished scrubbing the last of the pots and was hitting the kitchen lights when the grandfather clock chimed midnight in the hallway. She followed the snorts and snores into the living room and leaned over to gently shake the sleeping man. His hair appeared whiter than she had remembered and strangely thin. "Wake up, Grandpa. Wake up and go to sleep." Straightening up, she rubbed her tired temples. "Now that makes a whole lot of sense."

Grandpa stirred and spoke from a dream. "Melissa, tell Jana and Roy that they've got to do their chores or they can't go to town."

Jana's eyes fell to the deep furrows in her father's forehead. She studied the wrinkles around his mouth. He seemed somehow so much older than he had even a month before. For the first time she noticed the brown age spots on his hands. She thought to lift the ancient hand and kiss it, but she resisted. Instead, she tucked mom's favorite Afghan around her dad and turned to the window. Then she froze. Someone or something was standing on the other side of the frosted pane on the porch. Her heart began to race.

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Jana's first thought was to call out or kick Grandpa. Then the figure lit a match. She smiled. It was twenty below and her dead mother still had enough hold on Roy to make him take his nicotine habit outside. Jana lifted a patchwork quilt from the couch and stepped out to join her brother.

"I thought you were asleep."

Roy shook his head and flicked the cigarette ashes into the snow. "Couldn't. Went for a walk." He wrapped his strong arms around her and gave her a squeeze.

"Where'd you go?"

"Down to the bottom of the hill where we used to play in the big woods. It's a shopping mall now."

Jana nodded. "I saw it when we came last summer."

"And the old school? You see that? Gone."

"Yeah. Condos." Jana sighed.

"Things really change, don't they?"

Grampa's snore broke the mood. He moaned.

"Some things do. Some don't." Jana leaned her head onto her brother's shoulder. "Do you love her?"

"Who?"

"Fern."

"Of course I love her."

"Are you going to marry her?"

Roy shrugged his shoulders. Jana could sense his smile. “Dewey.” That’s all he needed to say.

“Yeah. Dewey. You really must love her. A lot.”

They stood together without another word until Jana’s toes went numb. It felt so good to have someone hold her, even if it was only her brother. “Well, I’m going to turn in.”

The clanging bells on the opening door almost brought Grandpa out of his dream. “I tell you, Missy,” he shouted, “the dogs only bark at a moving train.”

Jana leaned in over her father and tucked the blanket firmly around him. “Some things change. Some don’t.”

Roy sat on the stairs and untied his Sorels. “It’s been really hard on him, hasn’t it? This last month.”

“He doesn’t show it. Stubborn old goat.”

“Tries not to.”

“It’s either jokes or insults with him,” said Jana. “That’s his way of dealing with it.”

“Dealing with it? That’s his way of denying it. Keeping people away. But how about you?”

“Me?” Jana was caught off guard. This was the first time in a month that anyone who wasn’t wearing a clergy collar had asked her about her own feelings. “I’m fine. Okay.” Roy opened his hands. Jana held back a moment, then accepted the invitation. She sat down next her brother and was encircled in his strong arms again.

“No. I’m not okay. I’ll be okay. But I’m not okay. Not yet. Not just yet.” She fought the tears.

“You know, no matter how old you are, as long as your parents are alive, you’re still somebody’s baby. Someone’s little girl. Little boy. But once they’re gone, you have to grow up quickly. You don’t have the luxury. The choice. Maybe deep inside it forces you to see that you’re not going to last forever, either.”

“Maybe.” Jana lifted a tissue from the pocket of her mother’s robe and laughed as she cried. “I kinda like it the other way... somebody’s baby.”

“Me, too.” Roy inhaled the words and held them a moment. “Somebody’s baby. Well, I gotta go to bed. Big day tomorrow.”

“Big day.”

“And I’m sure that Dewey will be awake by six when the rooster crows.”

Jana dabbed her eyes. “Or when the turkey he stashed under his bed starts to gobble.”

Roy looked alarmed. “He didn’t...”

“Gotcha.”

Roy rose and plodded slowly halfway up the staircase. “Good night.” He paused without looking back. “You’re doing a good job. With Christmas, I mean.”

“Thanks. That means a lot.”

“Except, of course, for the gravy.”

She threw a sofa pillow at him and turned to unplug the tree.

The plastic tree.

†††

The fact was, Jana did not feel like she was doing that great a job of anything. Not as a mother. Not as a wife. Not even as a daughter. She couldn't handle it all like her mother did. “Clean house. Cheery disposition. Smiling children. Christmas baking.” Jana began to wonder aloud. “Homemade. I love that word but I hate that word. It just reminds me of everything she was that I'm not.”

She did not see her father's hand reach slowly up and turn his hearing aid on high. “I'm trying to make this such a perfect Christmas for dad... for everyone, but I can't do it. I just can't. How did you ever do it, mom? How did you do it all? Or did you? Was that just my perception as a child? God...” She snapped up. “Am I talking to God or my mother? As a kid I used to get them somewhat mixed up. Am I mad at her for dying or at God for taking her or at myself for not being able to do anything about it? Fix it. Fix it. Oh, I wish I could find some peace.”

Jana spied a small silver music box on the mantle and lifted the lid. Nothing. No sound. She gave it a quick wind. A gentle tinkle of miniature bells plinked out “Silent Night.” The soft hymn, the smoke from the dying fire and the smell of her mother's perfume still lingering in her robe sent her back to a memory she didn't

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know existed. She was a child, safe and warm in mother's arms. Mother looked so beautiful in the orange firelight. So radiant. Almost like an angel. She was rocking her own little angel to sleep and singing softly.

Silent night, holy night

All is calm, all is bright

Round yon Virgin, mother and child

Holy infant so tender and mild

Sleep in heavenly peace

Sleep in heavenly peace

"Mamma," asked a little Jana, "what is heavenly peace?"

A much younger Grandpa stepped from the shadows and sat nimbly at the foot of the rocker, leaning his shaggy brown hair against his daughter's face, tickling her nose. "That's when you and your brother are finally asleep and your mother and I have a little quiet in the house for a change."

"Papa!"

"No!" Grandpa smiled. "It's true. We sneak past the hall, tuck you in, kiss you on the foreheads and tell you how much we love you. Then we tiptoe into the kitchen for a cup of tea and thank the good Lord that you came into our lives. And in those few moments each night in this quiet house - and only for those few moments -

your mother and I come about as close to heavenly peace as anyone outside of heaven, I suspect.”

The child attempted to braid her father’s dark curly hair. “Mamma, do you have to die to sleep in heavenly peace?”

“Is that what’s kept you awake tonight?”

“No. Yes.” She looked into her mother’s eyes and bit her lip. “What happens when you die?”

Melissa gave her darling a squeeze. “Oh, honey girl, you don’t have to worry about that for a long, long time.”

Papa turned and lifted her chin with his finger. “I think it’s kinda like this: You know when you sometimes fall asleep in the car on the way home from town and a few hours later you wake safe and snug in your own bed? How do you get there?”

“You and mamma carry me in.”

“How do you know?” he asked. “You don’t see us.”

Jana searched into his eyes. “I just know.”

“Well, when you die, I believe you go to sleep and your heavenly father carries you safely into the warmth and light of heavenly peace.”

“How do you know?”

“We just know,” said Melissa.

“We just know,” Papa nodded.

“When I go to heaven, will I sleep in heavenly peace?” asked Jana.

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Melissa squeezed her darling. “Yes, sweetheart. Oh yes.”

“Why?”

“Because heavenly peace is resting in Jesus,” said Melissa. “Trusting in Jesus. And wherever Jesus is, there is peace.”

The moment was broken by baby Roy crying from the other room. “We should tell Jesus to go in and be with the baby,” said Jana.

Papa smiled. “Then we’d all have a little more peace.”

“Will you be there? In heavenly peace?” asked the child.

Her father nodded. “We’ll probably get there long before you.”

“To get things ready?” asked Jana. Both her parents nodded. Jana’s little forehead scrunched and she looked up at her mother. “You’d better go first.”

“Why’s that?” asked Melissa.

“Cause daddy might not know what to do to get things ready for the rest of us.”

Papa burst out laughing. “She’s right. You’d better go first.”

The baby’s cry became louder. “Shhhhh!” said Melissa. “Peace! Peace!”

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The music box wound down to silence and Jana’s nodding head hit the brick of the fireplace. She shook herself awake, closed the box and rose. Something drew her to her father. She took his hand

and pressed it to her lips. He stirred. “Oh, Missy. No more pie. You’re going to make me wider than I am tall.”

“Good night, dad.” Jana wiped a tear from her eye. “And if mom can spare some more time from your dreams to come over and visit mine for a while tonight, I could use her company. Especially tonight.” She turned to go.

“I’ll ask her,” whispered Grandpa.

“Thanks.” Jana turned away, then back, wondering. “Good night, dad?”

“Good night.”

“Love you, dad.”

Grandpa emitted a two syllable sigh that could have been interpreted as a “love you” if you stretched.

It was enough for the woman but not enough for the little girl.

VIII.

This Christmas Morning

Winter winds were howling outside the window and goat bells were clanging from the front hall door as Jana woke to see her own frozen breath. Something was wrong.

At first she wondered if the pilot light in the furnace was out. Maybe Roy would rise and light it before she was forced to put a foot on the icy wooden floor. She buried her head back into the goose down pillow. Six chimes of the hallway clock joined the clanging. It gradually occurred to Jana that the door must have blown open. She muttered a most un-Christmas-like greeting to the day, drew herself slowly up and pulled her mother's pink Terry cloth robe tightly about her shoulders.

The music box lying in the center of the hallway floor was a second sign something was amiss. Then she saw her dad. He was standing barefoot in the open doorway, holding a hatchet in one hand and a card in the other. Dazed.

“What are you doing?” Jana asked. “What are you doing?”

“Shhhh.” There was an unrecognizable emptiness in his eyes.

“Waiting for Santa Claus.” His bare feet were red. Swollen. Covered with snow.

“What are you looking at?” She stepped to close the door. “Grandpa? Dad?”

He lifted the hatchet in defiance. “Winter. Cold.”

“Come out of the doorway. You’ll catch your death...”

“Death.” His voice was so sad. So very old.

“You’ll catch your death of cold.”

“The winter of my life...”

“What are you talking about?”

He laughed again. A laugh colder than the morning. “You have no idea.”

“Dad, I know what you must be feeling...”

“You don’t have any idea how I feel!” he snapped back angrily. “My world...”

“Life is not over just because mom is gone...”

Grandpa shook the hatchet like a weapon. “My whole world came crashing to an end on Thanksgiving Day. Maybe not your world, but my world. My whole world! And it can never come back!” Grandpa’s voice turned suddenly soft. The hatchet fell from his hand onto the icy step. “She’s not gone, Jana. She’s dead. Dead.

And no amount of hoping, no amount of praying is ever going to change that.”

“Dad, what’s...”

Grandpa walked slowly back into the house, reading the small white card in his hand. “Merry Christmas, Mr. Meyer. A very Merry Christmas and a happy New Year from your friends at the Thalacker Mortuary!” He ripped the card in half and threw it in Jana’s face. “My world!”

“Stop talking like that! I’m your world, too. And Monty. And my Melissa and Leo. Roy and now Fern.”

He sneered. “Don’t say Dewey or you’ll ruin the mood.”

Jana was ready for this fight. “How dare you treat me like this! I come to this house, put on a happy face, drag out the decorations so that it will be nice for you and the kids...”

Grandpa tried to shout her out. “Okay! You want me to say that you’ve done a great job? Kid, everything is perfect! Just plain perfect! This is the best Christmas I ever...”

Jana wanted to slap him. “Now you’re patronizing me!”

“I didn’t ask you to...”

“You think I enjoy this charade? You think this is how I really feel - all Christmas cheer and smiles? You hard-hearted old...”

“What do you want from me?” he shouted.

“I just want...”

“What do you want...”

Jana bit her lip. “I want a Christmas that... I just want... I don’t know what I want. I’ve been so damn busy that I’ve forgotten what I... what... what am I doing all this for?”

“What?”

She tore a limb from the plastic tree. “Christmas. What are we doing it for? What is anybody doing it for?”

“No one asked you to come here.”

“Love asked me to come here! You old...”

“Guilt asked you to come here.”

“Ahhh!” Jana was too frustrated for words. She threw the branch at her father. “Okay. Yes, love. Yes, guilt! Sometimes they’re part of the same emotion.”

“I don’t need your pity.”

“I don’t have to pity you. You self-centered old ass!”

Grandpa clenched his teeth. “Don’t you ever use profanity in this house. If your mother were alive...”

“I don’t have to pity you. You’ve got enough for the whole family. You’ve locked yourself up in this big house of self-pity and now you’re drawing the curtains, bolting the shutters and pushing everyone who ever loved you...”

“Leave me alone!”

“Is that all you see? Yourself? Can’t you know I’m hurting, too? Part of me died that day, too, you know. A big part. She was your wife for forty-six years. But she was my mother all my life.”

“She wasn’t my wife. She was my life!” Grandpa’s anger melted to a whisper. “Can’t you know how much I hate myself? I killed her.”

“You didn’t kill her.”

“I killed her. I told her it was all in her head. I told her we couldn’t afford all that running back and forth to those expensive doctors in Rochester. I told her...”

“You didn’t kill her, dad! You didn’t. I didn’t. God didn’t take her so he’d have another alto in the choir. The cancer killed her. If you want to be mad at anything, be mad at that. Strike out at that.” She reached to take his hand.

“Leave me alone.” He pulled quickly back, unable to be touched.

“Don’t push away the only ones who can help you... who love you. Your family. Your friends. Don’t push God...”

The word God snapped him back from pity to anger. The rage almost caught in his throat. “God? Where was this God of ours when your mother lay breathing her last? 84 lbs. - 84 lbs.!”

“I don’t know, but...”

He snatched Grandma’s worn Bible from the table and flung it across the room. “...wracked by such pain that the morphine didn’t even phase her.”

“I’ve asked the same question!”

“Where was this God when my prayers were a river of tears, and not one of them was answered?”

“I don’t know!”

“Where was this Christ if he was supposed to love her? Where?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know. Maybe he was hanging on a cross with a broken heart preparing to buy her eternity! You forgiveness. Me peace. Maybe God was there. That’s what you always taught me. Maybe God was holding us as we held each other. Maybe God was reaching to her, beckoning her from her pain to that perfect peace she always taught me to pray for! That’s what you believed all your life. You were the one who taught this hope to me! Dad! Don’t you believe it anymore? Is it all a lie? Some cruel joke to make the tragedy, the hopeless emptiness of death more palatable? Is that what Christmas is? Is that what your faith is? A joke? Wishful thinking? Or is hope real? You do still have hope, don’t you, Daddy? Daddy?” He couldn’t answer. “Then you’re right,” she froze. “You have nothing to live for. You might as well be dead.”

Grandpa slumped into his chair, suddenly worn. “Hope? That’s all I have. Hope.” He began to weep.

“Daddy, your little girl is hurting here and she doesn’t have...”

He turned away. She grabbed his face, forcing him to look at her. “Daddy! Your little girl is hurting and she doesn’t have a mommy. Okay, her mommy isn’t gone. She’s dead. And now all she has is

you. You!” He broke away from her eyes. “Daddy! Does she have you? Dad? I love you. But if you can’t let me love you, would you at least let me love the part of mom I see in you? Daddy. Dad?”

Grandpa began to shake. “Hope. Yes, I hope. But it still hurts. You can’t know how much it hurts...” His words turned to an uncontrollable sob. He could not fight both the tears and his daughter’s embrace. She wrapped herself tightly around his quivering frame, weakened but unwilling to let him go.

“Shhhh. Shhhh. It’s okay. It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” He spoke between gasps. “I know she’s with God. I know I’ll see her again someday. But it’s hard. So hard.”

“It’s hard for me, too.”

“I’ve been such a fool. Such an old fool.”

“Yes, dad.” She held him even tighter.

“An idiot. A complete idiot.”

“A blind...”

She fed him the next lines: “Stubborn.”

“...stubborn...”

“Mean.”

He pulled a tissue from her bathrobe pocket. “...mean...”

“And nasty...”

“...mean and nasty old fool.”

“Yup.”

Grandpa blew his nose. “You don’t have to agree with me. You’ve never been so agreeable before.”

“You’ve never been so right before.” They held each other for a moment, half laughing, half crying. Finally it felt safe to let him go. “Dad, before when you said all you had left was hope? I’ve felt that way before. But it’s not true. We have each other. You have me and Monty and Roy. And Leo and Melissa...”

Grandpa sniffed. “Ariel.”

“What?”

Grandpa sniffed again. “Her name is Ariel. You know, like what you break off a car.”

“Right. Ariel. Ariel. And now Fern.” Jana smiled. “And Dewey.”

“Dewey?”

“Dewey!”

Grandpa took another tissue from Jana’s offering hand and blew his nose again. “I was starting to feel so much better before you mentioned that name.”

She hit him gently in the chest. “Dad!”

“All right. All right,” she said. “And Dewey.”

“He’s part of our family now. You might as well accept it.”

“I don’t have to like him, do I?”

Jana wound her arms around her father but held him even more firmly with her eyes. “No. But you have to love him.”

“I suppose if I don’t you’re going to make me feel guilty.”

“Hey, love... guilt...”

“Sometimes part of the same emotion. Sometimes.”

They held each other for a moment longer. The furnace kicked on. The house began to stir and creak. Others were rising. “I love you, dad.”

“I...” there was a long pause. Jana smiled and glared at the same time as he considered the words that were so hard for him to say. “I know.”

“Dad!”

“I said I know!”

“I said I love you.” She pounded his chest with each syllable. “Say it! I... love... you! Say it! Why is it so hard for you to say it?” Jana grabbed his jaw, opening and closing it with each syllable. “I love you. I love you.”

“Okay! I love you. I love you! There! Are you happy?”

A broad smile spread over his daughter’s face. “Yeah. I’m happy. I’m happy. Merry Christmas, dad.”

“Yeah. Merry Christmas.” They embraced again. The clock chimed the half hour. “I hate to spoil all this Christmas cheer and all,” said Grandpa, “but I gotta pee.”

She held him for a quiet minute more. Scents of his Old Spice mixed with the perfume in mother’s robe and, for one more mystical moment, Jana forgot where she was. Then suddenly she knew where she was.

Peace. She was at peace.

†††

A radio alarm began to blare “Jingle Bell Rock” from the top of the stairs.

Dewey came barreling down, shrieking, “Where’s my presents?” Leo and Ariel were at the Dewdster’s heels, followed by Roy, Fern and, at last, Monty. Jana retrieved her mother’s worn Bible from the floor and tried to convince everyone they should pause and read the Christmas story like Grandma always used to do, but to no avail. Paper and bows were already flying everywhere and everyone was wrapped up in the unwrapping of gifts. Leo and Ariel fought over a large box with no tag attached. Monty opened a new iPhone and stepped to the porch to try it out. Fern removed the cover from a tiny jewel box, screamed and leaped into Roy’s arms, peppering him with kisses.

“Put a ring on it?” smiled Roy. “And a date on the calendar?”

“Ab-so-lut-ely!” Fern screamed between kisses.

Dewey managed to destroy another lamp as he tripped over the tree lights in a mad scavenge for additional presents. Grandpa watched it all for a moment, then disappeared to the bathroom and returned with an armload of boxes and bags.

“You went shopping? Dad, you spent money?” Jana smiled, only half joking.

“Hey, can’t take it with you. It was either presents or fix the leaky roof.”

Leo opened his box first, then grinned and gave his old ally a high five. “Beatles Rock Band Wii and two tickets to the Wrestle-Mania Americana Extravaganza coming to the Fargodome over spring break. Grandpa, you’re way cool!

“I know,” said Grandpa.

Roy opened Grandpa’s gift next. He smiled at the Cabellas gift card and a bottle of aspirin that moments before had been sitting in the bathroom drawer. Fern thanked her future father-in-law for the Target gift card and a cobalt blue cut glass antique bridal basket that moments before had been locked in Grandma Melissa china closet. Dewey thanked his new Grandpa for the twenty-dollar bill and red woolen scarf that moments before had been hanging in the front hall closet.

Ariel blinked and smiled as she tore paper off a subscription to Seventeen Magazine, three ancient yearbooks and a pile of antique love letters from Grandpa’s locked trunk. “I thought you might find

these interesting,” said Grandpa with a knowing wink. “Might learn a little something about real romance.”

Grandpa turned to Jana next and handed her a large, soft object wrapped roughly in newspaper comics and tied with bailing twine.

“Dad?”

“I thought you might like to finish this.”

Jana peeled the paper back and exhaled. “Mom’s quilt?” The beautiful unfinished work of love was stitched in a blue snowflake star pattern with a cross inside a heart inside the star. Tears returned. Grandpa nodded and bit his lip. She squeezed him again.

Then it happened.

The magic of the moment was broken by a teenage girl’s scream. Jana’s ears picked up the all-too-familiar sound of a tinsel-choking feline. Leo, Roy and Dewey snapped into action and dove for the cat. “Get her out! Outside!” Jana joined the chase.

Leo caught the unfortunate animal by the tail and flung her toward the doorway, but it was a fraction too late.

“Ooooooh!” said Leo.

“Gross,” said Ariel.

“Neat,” said Dewey.

Leo peered down in disgust at the cat puke on his slippers, then smiled. “Uh, grandpa. I think I found your other cuff link.”

†††

Monty was not in on the action. He was not in the closet. Through it all he had been standing motionless by the front hall window, staring through the tiny prism of a snowflake that had just melted.

Jana looked up. He beckoned her with his finger. She walked to him in silence and opened the door to step out onto the front porch. One by one the family dropped their gifts and joined Jana by her husband's side.

Across the yard near the barn, a large red-tailed hawk sat perched on the fence post. The bird watched them for a moment, then stretched out her strong wings.

"Thanks mom," whispered Monty.

"Or God or whoever you are," Jana added.

"What are they talking about?" asked Leo.

"They think your dead grandmother is a bird," said Grandpa, trying his best to spoil the moment.

"Weird." Leo shrugged his shoulders, handed the cuff link to his grandfather and returned to the pile of presents.

And nodding her head three times if to salute the holy morning, the hawk lifted off into the crisp country air. She made one lazy

loop above the farmhouse, screeched out her last good-bye and disappeared into the clouds.

“Nevermore,” whispered Monty.

“No. Evermore,” smiled his wife, kissing him on the cheek, then embedding herself beneath her father’s folded arms.

“Forevermore.”



*Listen to the author read this story, enjoy the song
that inspired the book, “This Christmas Morning” by Robin Cain
and read the stage play at www.faihbink.com/TXM*

About the Author

Rich Melheim grew up on the plains of North Dakota but never did own a pick up with a gun rack. An entrepreneur, author, speaker, playwright, songwriter, family counselor, business systems consultant, amateur complexity theorist, log cabin builder, preschool designer, cartoonist, and student of the human brain, Melheim has appeared on 50 network television news shows from WNBC-NY to KTLA to CNN consulting on family issues.

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