"Hidden Angel"
by Kayli Meek
Submissions:
First and foremost, we love a good story in prose, poetry, flash, or photography/digital artwork form. Secondly, we welcome all writers and artists, whether you have been published worldwide or this is your first.

We do not subscribe to a specific genre, as we enjoy reading all kinds of things ourselves - including mysteries, fantasy, sci-fi, romance, historical, comedy, and YA among others. What unifies Edify Fiction's content is its ability to be positive, inspirational, and motivating.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis online. Full guidelines and the submission link are found online on the Submissions page of our website.

Cover Art: Hidden Angel
Photographer: Kayli Meek

Kayli Meek enjoys all types of photography -- from landscapes to portraits. Her interest in photography and graphics editing began when she won the DITSCO competition for her division in elementary school. Now a junior in high school, she takes family portraits for community members, works on the high school literary magazine, sells her work at local fairs, and is a staff photographer for Edify Fiction. See more of her work on her website: kaylimeekphotography.com.
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From the Editor

I love the Christmas season! I enjoy the buildup, the decorating, the music, the movies, the somber reverent reflection in the quiet of a dark house, illuminated only by the lights of a Christmas tree. I actually relish decorating and don’t mind the take-down process. I take time to sniff the fresh Fir branches, the cinnamon pinecones, the spices for the pumpkin pie.

I understand it has to come to an end. That doesn’t mean I can’t languish in the season for a moment rather than closing down shop lock-stock-and-barrel when the last present is unwrapped. I slowly remove myself from Hallmark Christmas marathons and take one last drive around town to look at the lights…and then another before the new year must be ushered in.

So, I share with you this last lingering look at Christmas. It’s likely all your packages are opened and you are on your third round of leftovers. Or perhaps the season flew by so quickly you didn’t have a chance (or an inclination) to decorate or purchase the first gift. That’s okay. We’ve got a last look at Christmas right here for you. You can sit back with a warm drink, a peppermint stick, and take a moment to immerse yourself in all things seasonal with this issue.

Remember, Christmas doesn’t have to end when the last plate is cleared from the table or even when the stockings are put away. You can choose to let it live on in your heart throughout the whole year.

Happy Holidays and Warmest Blessings for your New Year!

Angela Meek
Editor, Edify Fiction
Congratulations to Sandra, Karen, and Monty! They are our winners in our Christmas giveaway and will be receiving gift packages that include a journal, a selection of books, and gift cards.
Grandma's Gift

By Robert Miller

*To M.T. from Grandma Grace.* It was a very mysterious package. Wrapped in plain brown paper from an old grocery bag, there was no string around it and no fancy bow. When he picked it up it weighed nothing; nothing more than the weight of the box and paper it was wrapped in. He shook it and there wasn’t a sound; no rattle, no clunk. It was as quiet as a silent night. As far as he could tell there was nothing in Grandma’s gift.

Matthew Tibbals Jr. was 10 years old and this had never happened before. There was a package under the tree and he couldn’t guess what was in it. The label said *To M.T. from Grandma Grace.* Grandma Grace had a Christmas magic about her that made M.T. wonder if she wasn’t an old friend of Santa’s. Every year she did something special that he would remember long after all his new toys were broken and his new underwear and socks had holes in them. Grandma’s gifts always made M.T. stop and think about the meaning of Christmas and why everyone exchanged gifts.

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M.T. started getting excited about Christmas before summer was over. He tried to wait until at least Halloween to start his official countdown to December 25, but it wasn’t easy. Stores started stocking Christmas decorations on their shelves about the same time they put out the witches and skeletons. No wonder Matthew wanted to go trick or treating dressed as Santa Claus.

His mother would say, “M.T., it’s a long time to Christmas. We haven’t even had Thanksgiving yet.” His family called him by his initials so he wouldn’t be confused with his father, whom they called Matt. They were both named Matthew, but that sounded too formal so he was M.T. He wished he had a distinctive name—like LaBron. It bugged him that his sister Sarah actually liked her name.

“We’ll put up our tree on the first Sunday of Advent, and then we can start singing Christmas carols and listening to Christmas music,” his mother went on. “Would you rather have turkey or ham for Christmas dinner?” M.T. thought it sounded like his mom was kind of
Christmas thinking about Christmas, too. But Christmas was still a whole month away.

Advent finally started the Sunday after Thanksgiving. As soon as they got home from church they ate a quick lunch; mom put on some Christmas music and dad set up the Christmas tree. The tree was beautiful with its lights and its shiny balls and the angel on top. But there was nothing under it. To M.T., the best part of the Christmas tree was the pile of packages under it that kept getting bigger and bigger as Christmas got closer and closer, until it spilled out into the middle of the living room. Every time someone walked by they had to restack the pile. But there was nothing there yet. It looked so empty.

As Christmas got closer, packages gradually started to accumulate under the tree. His mom and dad would go shopping then come home and put packages under the tree. To Sarah from Mom, To M.T. from Dad, to Mary from Matt. M.T. even put some of them under the tree himself; one for each member of his family. The pile got bigger and bigger. He liked the tradition of giving gifts to the people he loved. All those packages under the tree were kind of like a picture of his family. They held memories.

Grandma Grace arrived a few days before Christmas and the family felt a little bigger. Grandma didn’t come with a big sack full of toys like Santa Clause. She said she couldn’t carry much on the airplane so her gifts were usually small enough to fit into the stockings that hung on the mantle. That disturbed M.T. because the stockings were strictly off limits till Christmas morning. He couldn’t shake them and try to figure out what was in them.

M.T. had learned about his name from Grandma Grace.” Matthew,” she explained, “wrote the story in the Bible about the wise men bringing gifts to the baby Jesus.” In fact, he learned, everyone in the family was named for someone in the Bible. Sarah was Abraham’s wife; she was Isaac’s mother. M.T. couldn’t follow Isaac’s whole family tree but he understood that without Isaac there wouldn’t be any Jesus and without Jesus there wouldn’t be any Christmas. M.T. knew, of course, that his mother’s name was Mary and that she was named after Jesus mother Mary.

The evening when they had discussed all those family names, Sarah asked her grandma, “Who are you named after? I don’t remember anyone named Grace in the Christmas story.” Grandma Grace answered, “Well, the name Grace isn’t actually in the Bible but it says Jesus was full of grace and truth.” “And,” she continued, “When Catholics say the Rosary they say, ‘Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.’ So that’s me.” Then she chuckled and said, “But I remember when I was pregnant with your mother, I thought of myself as Grace full of Mary.”

Sarah thought for a moment. “Grandma, you just said ‘Grace full’, like graceful. Is that what your name means?”

“Sure,” Grandma replied, “Graceful, like those ice skaters we watched on TV last night. They made it look so easy because they had practiced and practiced until it was easy for them. It really is a lot easier to be graceful than to fall down on the hard ice all the time. But it takes lots and lots of practice.” I’ve always liked my name,” she added.

Around Christmas time M.T was given another name. They called him “The Santa Sleuth” because he always figured out what was in every box under the tree. Sarah got mad at
him when he told her what was in all of her boxes. She saw gifts wrapped in beautiful paper and enjoyed the mystery and wonder of not knowing what was in them. But M.T. always knew what she was getting, and told her. That ruined it for her. Sometimes it was easy to guess. Anybody would know that little package from Mom was the underwear and socks she gave him every year. Everybody got underwear and socks from Mom. The box was always the same size—it wasn’t very big, it wasn’t heavy at all, it didn’t rattle, and you could squish it without breaking it. There was an identical box for everyone in the family. But not every package was that simple to figure out. Grandma’s gifts always defied sleuthing. But he could apply his best sleuthing skills to almost everything under the tree. He could figure out some of them by deduction. That is, he had been begging for remote control helicopter and there was a box under the tree with his name on it that was just the right size. He knew he wouldn’t have to beg anymore.

Because the Tibbals family lived in a small town, M.T. also knew what store each package under the tree had come from simply by identifying the wrapping paper. Red paper with white snowflakes meant underwear and socks that came from the New York Store. Green paper with snow men and candy canes came from The Sports Lure. That would be the baseball glove he had asked for. The plain brown wrapping on grandma’s gift wasn’t going to give him any clues.

His dad would try to disguise packages so M.T. couldn’t guess their contents. He would wrap small gifts in big boxes. He would add weights to things just to throw him off. He would douse them with his aftershave to make them smell funny. Grandma Grace never needed to disguise her gifts. They were always something M.T. never knew he wanted.

Matt always announced, before the gifts were passed out, that everyone was to save the paper their gifts were wrapped in. He would say, “That way we don’t have to buy new paper next year.” M.T. knew they didn’t buy the paper anyway. Most of the presents were gift wrapped at the store. He knew his Dad was going to use old paper to disguise next year’s presents.

Every year he turned in his What I Want For Christmas list. It was usually a pretty long list even though underwear and socks were never on it. When M.T. had been a little kid, he had cried in his mother’s lap when he didn’t get everything he had asked for. “How could Santa Claus be so mean,” he cried. “I’ve really tried to be good.” Then, as his mother rocked him in her arms with his face snuggled in her fuzzy housecoat that smelled slightly of cinnamon where she had spilled wassail on it, she reminded him of little kids who got nothing at all for Christmas. Of course, that only made him feel guilty, and he cried even more. Then she would read a Christmas story to him and that would settle him down. The Littlest Angel was so familiar that he knew a lot of the words and could pretend he was reading with her. He also liked The Little Engine That Could. It was a story about a train taking toys to little kids on the other side of the mountain. “I think I can, I think I can,” the little engine said slower and slower and he struggled up the hill. Then, once over the top, faster and faster on the way down, he said, “I thought I could, I thought I could.”

On Christmas Eve, when Grandma Grace was with them, she always read the Christmas story from the Bible. When the story was over his dad said, “M.T. if you found a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes you’d probably pick it up and shake it to see what was inside.”

“And, you’d probably smell it too,” his sister added. “And I know what a baby’s diaper smells like.”

Now that M.T. was older, he knew he couldn’t expect to get everything he asked for. By Christmas Eve, he had accounted for almost every gift under the tree, and checked them off of
his WIWFC list. He went to bed excited to finally get to play with his new helicopter. But he was even more excited to see what else might show up under the tree in the morning. He kept thinking about those wonderful presents that weren’t there when he went to bed but would be there in the morning with his name on them. They were the presents his parents said Santa brought. The presents Santa brought were always the best. Sometimes they weren’t even on his WIWFC list. Santa seemed to know what M.T. wanted more than M.T. did. He hadn’t had a chance to sleuth them, and had no idea what they were. Sleep was almost impossible.

That gift from Grandma was every bit as exciting as those that Santa brought. He had been sleuthing it for three days and still couldn’t even guess what it was. Grandma had brought her Christmas magic once again. Grandma’s magic was in knowing that there was something more to a gift than what was wrapped in the package.

To M.T. from Grandma Grace. He thought about that package for a long time. On Christmas Eve, after he heard everyone else go to bed. He reviewed what he knew about it:
* It was wrapped in plain brown paper like an old grocery bag. He couldn’t identify which store it came from; probably not the grocery.
* Grandma put it under the tree; not in his stocking. That seemed significant.
* There was no string around it, and no fancy bow. Grandma usually made her little stocking gifts very fancy – even artistic.
* It didn’t weigh anything. It didn’t rattle or clunk.
* It just smelled like an old grocery sack.

Of course that package intrigued M.T. more than any of the others. He already knew what was in most of them, so there was no mystery or expectation to them. He would just open them and check the items off his WIWFC list. He was plenty excited about all the new stuff he was going to get, but he almost felt guilty about it. Especially after he had talked to the bell ringer guy outside the grocery store and heard about so many kids that didn’t get anything for Christmas and always had holes in their underwear and socks.

All the evidence indicated that there was nothing in the box in the plain brown paper wrapping. He wore himself out trying to crack the secret of Grandma’s gift until he finally fell asleep. He dreamed that night that he lived alone in a cold barn. The only heat came from the stars but it wasn’t enough. His dream ended when his mother came into his room and wrapped the blankets around his shoulders.

Finally, on Christmas morning, after Mom refilled everyone’s cup with hot chocolate or coffee, they started taking their turns opening gifts. Sarah got to go first, and she went right for her American Girl Doll. She knew which one it was because M. T. had told her so two weeks earlier. She had actually figured it out herself because it was the first thing on her WIWFC list.

When it came to M.T.’s turn, he opened the baseball glove first because he didn’t want everyone to see how eager he was to solve the mystery of Grandma’s gift. He knew everyone was watching him as he told them, “I already knew this was a baseball glove; my old one got too small.” He waited until his third turn to choose Grandma’s gift. He made a big show of it, holding it up to inspect it, shake it, and sniff it. “I don’t think there’s anything in it,” he said and made a funny face like he was really disappointed.

Grandma Grace said, “Now M.T., be careful opening that so you don’t rip it. Remember, we want to save all the paper.” So he made kind of a show about pulling off the Scotch Tape very carefully so it wouldn’t tear the old grocery sack Grandma used for wrapping. “Dad sure
wouldn’t want to waste this,” he said as he folded it and handed it to his dad like a precious gift. Everyone laughed.

Inside the wrapping was just a plain white box with nothing printed on it that might indicate its contents or where it came from. M.T. noted that it was “cubicle” and “just a little bit bigger than the underwear box.” When he felt he could longer play his audience, or prolong his own suspense, he opened the lid.

There was nothing in it.

The box was empty.

The room was silent and M.T. didn’t really know what to say. He couldn’t say thank you because Grandma Grace apparently hadn’t given him anything. Maybe she just forgot to put his present in the box. Or maybe it was her way of saying she didn’t think he deserved anything: like Santa putting lumps of coal in a bad little boy’s stocking. But Grandma Grace just wouldn’t do that. If Grandma had made some kind of mistake, he didn’t want to embarrass her. No one else said anything either, and the room was strangely quiet.

His lip started to quiver and he fought to keep from crying. He couldn’t hide his disappoint. He looked at his grandmother as if to say, “I’m sorry” because he didn’t want to hurt her feelings. He did feel sorry, but he was also kind of angry about not getting anything and about being put on the spot in front of the whole family. He felt like he had suddenly ruined Christmas for everyone.

Grandma Grace stood up from her rocking chair and came into the middle of the room where M.T. had sort of melted onto the floor like the candle left to burn on the mantle all night. He was just a puddle of sadness and confusion. She sat down on the floor beside him and put her arm around his shoulder and told him to sit up. “Now, tell Grandma what’s the matter,” she said, as though it wasn’t obvious what the matter was.

Rubbing his eyes he said, “Your present was empty.”

“Why, no it’s not,” she said. “What I gave you for Christmas is too big to fit into that little box. So the box is just symbolic. Do you know what symbolic means?”

“Yes,” M.T. replied. “A symbol is some little thing that stands for a big thing; like a flag stands for a whole country.”

“That’s right, and that empty box stands for Christmas. What I am giving you is Christmas.”

“I don’t think I understand, Grandma. It’s empty.”

Then Mary spoke up. “Mom, you’ll have to explain this to all of us.”

Grandma Grace held up the empty box and began her explanation with a question to M.T. “Tell me what you remember most about last Christmas.”

“Well, what I liked best about what we did last Christmas was when we all sang Christmas carols to our neighbor after we opened our presents. I remember how she shared her box of chocolate-covered cherries with us and Sarah sang Jingle Bells then plopped herself in the snow when she sang, “and then we got upset.” Oh,” he added. “I also can’t forget the compass you gave me so I wouldn’t get lost. But you said it was,”So that I wouldn’t lose myself.”

Grandma smiled and said, “Now how could I ever fit all that into a box of any size? M.T., I put Christmas in that little box of yours.”

Everyone else was just as confused as M.T. Mary said, “Okay Mom, I get it…I guess... about the box being full of Christmas. But I don’t think empty is the right symbol for Christmas. Christmas makes me feel full. I get full of excitement leading up to Christmas and we all get full of turkey and dressing at dinner.”

Then Grandma spoke again to M.T., but it was obvious she knew everyone was listening.
“That WIWFC list of yours is so full that there’s no room for Christmas.”

Again, it was Mary who asked her mother, “I don’t believe you didn’t give M.T. anything for Christmas. Do you think empty is the best symbol for Christmas?”

“Why, certainly dear,” she answered. “Why was Jesus born out in the stable?”

“Um,” Mary hesitated, “because there was no room in the inn.”

“That’s right; it was full. Christmas needed some empty space for Jesus to be born. And at the other end of Jesus’ life,” she said, “there was the empty tomb.”

To that apparently profound statement, Matt added, “And the empty cross.” Grandma Grace smiled and said nothing more.

* * * * *

After a minute of strangely comfortable silence, Grandma Grace said, “I think it’s Sarah’s turn.”

As Sarah picked the present she wanted, Matt reminded her to be careful with the paper. As she carefully opened her gift she said, “I guess, it’s okay if this is empty because the wrapping is probably better than what’s inside.”

“Right,” Matt chuckled, “Never judge a cover by its book.” To which Sarah contradicted, “Dad, remember when those kids teased me about those stripy socks I got for Christmas last year? You told me then it doesn’t matter what people see on the outside; it what’s inside a person that’s important.”

There was something in Sarah’s present. It was a vanity mirror. On the back of the mirror was the inscription, YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL. Sarah looked for a moment in the mirror then said, “Does that mean on the inside or the outside?”

Sarah handed the mirror to M.T. He stared at himself briefly then passed the mirror to Mary, who was sitting next to him. The mirror went around the room until everyone had looked into it and been reminded that they were beautiful both inside and out.

* * * * *

When the presents had all been opened, everyone had been hugged and thanked, and they all started putting their loot into neat piles, Grandma Grace spoke up again. “Wait, we’re not quite finished yet.” There was nothing left under the tree and the candy from the stockings was already half gone. What was there left to do but put the batteries in his helicopter and wait to be called for the turkey and dressing?

“M.T., where’s that brown paper your box of Christmas was wrapped in?” Everyone turned to look at Grandma Grace, expecting some astonishing new surprise.

M.T. dug through the stack of wrinkled wrapping paper that his dad had so carefully protected from demise and brought out the old grocery sack. “Here it is, why?” He gave it to his grandmother. She unfolded the paper and spread it out on the floor where everyone stared at it. Then, with little ceremony, she turned it over to show the other side.

Spread out on the floor in the center of the living room in front of the whole family, at noon on Christmas Day, was a beautiful hand-painted portrait of Matthew Tibbals Jr. Grandma had painted it from a photograph of M.T. looking into the sky waiting for the ball to drop into his old baseball glove. Her brush had caught the joy on his face and the strong youth of his body and preserved it for all time. Her painting said that this boy would be fulfilled the moment he
grabbed that ball in his empty glove. The catch would symbolize a turning point from “I think I can” to “I thought I could.” The picture, so full of memories was a symbol of M.T.’s growth. Grandma had titled it “The Catch.” That catch had followed hundreds of other less graceful ones. He had practiced until it was easy and success became routine. That catch had begun to turn a boy into a man.

* * * * *

In the sparse, neatly kept office in a warehouse at the edge of town, a hand painted portrait hangs on the wall above the desk of the man who is director of a non-profit organization called The Empty Box. The program provides Christmas gifts to children whose lives are empty because of their family’s poverty; or maybe a child who doesn’t have a family. The name on his door reads Fuller Tibbals.

Ever since that Christmas when Grandma Grace explained the symbol of the empty box full of Christmas, his family called him Fuller instead of M.T. Sarah said it first as he asked her to pass the gravy at the dinner table that day. She said, “How can you get any fuller?” He took the gravy and said, “You’re right; I’m not M.T., I’m Fuller.” He liked the name. It reminded him of that moment when he was about to cry over the empty box before Grandma Grace sat down with him and opened Christmas for him forever.

Fuller remembered that moment when he had felt most empty was when there was finally enough room inside him for Christmas to mean something more than what was on his WIWFC list. That empty box was filled with Grandma’s love. That box was filled with Christmas.

The mysterious thing about the picture over Fuller’s desk is that it is facing the wall so that all you see is the back side of the brown paper.

**About the author**

**Rev. Dr. Robert F. Miller** is a retired minister of the United Church of Christ. He has served congregations in Wyoming and Montana. The love of mountains drew him west from Ohio at an early age. As a child and far into adulthood, some undiagnosed learning disability (probably Attention Deficit) prevented him from learning from others. He compensated for that by being creative. That creativity is expressed in his ministry and through the songs he writes. He appreciates the diversity of nature and seeks out that which is unique in every person, place and thing. There is always beauty. He finds it especially in the huge emptiness of mountains and simple grain of woods. As a woodworker he has built banjos and guitars and is fascinated by the way each instrument speaks for itself. Miller’s personal mission statements says: The purpose of my life is to promote the image of God in all people and things. He lives with his wife, Diana on the side of a mountain in Wyoming.
Half the size of a deck of cards, this pink alligator folder, which I snap open to see all the names of those my mother knew in 1925 when she was ten. Forty names and addresses, only two with phone numbers. A few names familiar, parents of relatives I once knew or knew of. On the front page, her name, Pauline Hanschitz, address, 244 Main Street. How odd to have an address book for which no listed soul is still on earth. Pages are falling out. Of course I should toss it, and not follow my first impulse, which is to send a Christmas card to every lost address.

About the author

Janet McCann is an "ancient" Texas poet who taught at Texas A&M from 1968-2015. Journals publishing her poetry include Kansas Quarterly, Parnassus, Nimrod, Sou’wester, New York Quarterly, Tendril, Poetry Australia, etc. A 1989 NEA Creative Writing Fellowship winner, she has taught at Texas A & M University since 1969. She has co-edited two anthologies, Odd Angles Of Heaven (1994) and Place Of Passage ( 2000.) Janet has coauthored two textbooks and written a book on Wallace Stevens: The Celestial Possible: Wallace Stevens Revised (1996). She has also published essays on Sylvia Plath, Wallace Stevens, and Emily Dickinson. Her most recent poetry collection is The Crone At The Casino (2013, Lamar University Press). She has written many reviews, for Women’s Review Of Books, Christianity and Literature, Texas Review, and many other journals.
"The Christmas tree is dying."

So said my Father. How he could see it from the hospital bed we had set up for him in the front room still mystifies me. But he was right. It was dying.

The Christmas Tree had been part of my family’s Christmas tradition for 12 years. Dad had purchased a Christmas Tree permit from the Arizona Bureau of Land Management for $15.00 and he and I had driven to our assigned area, near Pinetop, Arizona, to hunt for a Christmas Tree, cut it down and return with our trophy. I was 18 years old, had just graduated from high school and was slightly indignant about being asked to go.

"Why don’t we just buy one at the corner?" I smugly asked.

“Well, we could do that,” he slowly explained, as if to a child “but then, I wouldn’t get to spend this time with you and create some memories.”

Chastised, I slouched down in the car seat and resolved to be miserable for the next 3-4 hours. We stopped in Pinetop for lunch at the Lumberjack Café (Best Burgers on the Rim!) before proceeding to our designated area, approximately 100 square miles of rocky outcrops covered in junipers, sycamores, wild vines and thousands of pine trees, any of which, I was quite certain, would be willing to sacrifice itself for the benefit of our Christmas celebration.

“There’s a good one,” I remarked, as Dad negotiated our 1984 Chrysler Minivan along a forest service road. “Or that one, that’s a good one. Or how about that one right there? Dad?”

My Dad smiled. “Here’s the thing son,” he finally spoke, his words as measured and slow as the frustratingly slow pace we were driving, “they all look good because they’re where they belong. They fit here. But take one out of the forest, like that one there, for example,” Dad pointed to a tree we were passing, “and you’d have to buy a new house in order to get it through the door.”

Having no suitable retort, I determined to keep any future observations to myself. We drove on for what I considered to be an interminable amount of time which was, in reality,
probably only about 10 minutes, when my father slowed the car and stopped.

“There,” he confidently pronounced, “there’s our tree.”

It was about 100 yards away, standing alone on a hill, a delicate dusting of snow causing its branches to sparkle in the receding sunlight.

“C’mon he announced. We haven’t much time. It’ll be dark soon.”

My father opened the rear hatch and produced two shovels and some burlap. We were halfway to the tree when the obvious suddenly occurred to me.

“Dad, don’t we need a saw to cut it down?”

“We’re not cutting it down, son.”

“Why?”

“Because if we cut it down, it’ll die.”

For over an hour, we chiseled and pried at the cold earth. And then, in one desperate levered effort of our two shovels, the ground yielded and the tree emerged, its root system largely intact.

Whoops of joy and high fives followed, our cheers absorbed by the dense, darkening forest. A light snow began.

Our fingers numb, we wrapped the roots of the tree in burlap and carried, dragged, coerced it to the van. While the tree was barely four feet high, it resisted our clumsy efforts to corral it through the rear hatch. Finally, the tree succumbed to our efforts and we were on our way home.

“I said, the Christmas Tree is dying.”

“I heard you, Dad. What do you want me to do?”

My Dad sighed deeply, the congestion in his chest making it difficult for him to talk. “I want you to take it back.”

“Take it back where, Dad?”

“To the forest son, where else?”

Sidling up to the hospital bed, I leaned over and studied my Dad. He was as alert as ever, his eyes sparkling.

“The pot’s too small,” he continued. “Has been for a while.”

“In that case, Dad,” I countered, “I could just transplant it into a bigger pot.”

“Nope,” my Dad insisted, “you’ve got to take it back from where we got it. It’s time.”

Not wishing to agitate my father any further, I remained silent.

“Do you remember when we brought it home?” he suddenly asked.

I laughed. “When I saw Mom’s reaction, I understood why you didn’t cut it down.”

“It was her last Christmas with us,” my Dad sadly recalled. “I think she knew it might be.”

Father paused, his voice struggling. “Is the necklace still hanging in the Tree; the pearl necklace I gave her?”

“Of course, Dad. It’s been hanging there every Christmas since you gave it to her.”

“She so loved Christmas,” my father quietly observed.

For several days, my Dad held on. We reminisced about little league games, throwing a Frisbee on the beach, catching sunnies on a mist shrouded lake in Minnesota; all things which, at the time seemed so ordinary and mundane. Now, the memories of our times together shimmered like a myriad of stars against the backdrop of the fading light still apportioned to my father.

And then quietly, simply, with a gentle sigh, he was gone.

Weeks passed. I was busy settling the financial affairs of my father and thanking friends and relatives for their support, when my six-year-old son approached me and asked, “What about the Christmas Tree, Dad?”

“What?”

“Grandpa said you might forget. He asked me to remind you about the Christmas Tree. That’s all he said.”

I hugged my son. Somehow it felt as if I was hugging my Dad at the same time.

“You’re right,” I admitted, “I had forgotten. We’ll take care of it this weekend. Thanks, son.”
On Saturday, we rose early, and loaded the Christmas Tree in its too-small-pot into the car. We passed through Pinetop which looked exactly like it had twelve years before. I knew I’d never locate the exact spot where Dad and I had found the tree so I turned down the first forest road we came to and the search began.

“I think it should be near the other trees,” my son quietly observed, “it’ll be happier that way.”

The dense forest surrounded us on all sides until we rounded a bend and came upon a clearing, a small creek meandering through its center. Pine trees, just like ours and about the same size, bordered the creek.

“What do you think?” I asked my son.

“Perfect,” he answered, smiling.

We unloaded the Christmas Tree and wheeled it like a barrel across the clearing until we reached a spot next to the creek. The soil was rich and there was plenty of water nearby. Here, our Christmas Tree would thrive.

My son and I took turns digging, making sure the hole was big enough for the roots to expand. After an hour, we were covered in dirt, exhausted and sweaty.

I hadn’t felt this good in a long time.

Surprisingly, it wasn’t difficult to get the Christmas Tree out of the ceramic pot. I had brought a hammer in case we needed to shatter the pot to free the Tree but it wasn’t necessary. Lying on its side, my son and I gave a quick jerk at the base and it popped out. Slowly, almost ceremoniously, we lowered the tree into the hole we had dug and scooped in the dirt.

Our Christmas Tree had come home.

It was then that I pulled Mom’s necklace out of my shirt pocket, the one Dad had given her that first Christmas.

“Are you going to leave it with the Christmas Tree?” my son asked.

“Yes, with one addition.” I opened the clasp of the necklace, slipped my Dad’s wedding ring on and closed the clasp. “Here, Son. Hang it on the Tree.”

Slowly, my Son approached and took the necklace, cradling it as if it were a rare, fragile gift.

After studying the Tree closely, he hung the necklace on one of the lower branches.

We stood silently for several minutes, admiring our handiwork. It was during this moment of reflection that I suddenly realized why my Father had been so adamant about returning the Christmas Tree to the forest. It wasn’t just about the Tree. It was about giving my Son and me the opportunity to create some precious memories of our own, just like he and I had done so many years ago.

“Thanks, Dad,” I said quietly to myself.

“I think we should come back every year and visit the tree,” my son quietly observed.

“Good idea,” I agreed, tidying up the area around the Tree. “As for now, I seem to recall my Dad and I stopping in Pinetop several years ago at a restaurant which claimed to have the best burgers on the Rim. Interested?”

“Yes! I’m starving!”

As we made our way back on the forest road I made a mental note of the mileage and landmarks. For I knew that my son and I would return to visit the Christmas Tree and relive the memories it had help to create, for years to come.

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**About the author**

**Dave Bachmann** is a retired special education teacher who worked with emotionally disturbed adolescents as well as those on the autism spectrum in Arizona for 39 years. He is currently retired, living with his wife and 13 year old lab in California.
Emmie

By Cynthia Elder

You always came at Christmas,
I offered up my room,
glad for an excuse
to slip back in without a reason.
The room changed with you in it,
mysteries swirled like morning mist,
lifting when you left.

Your last visit forced in
the first snow of winter,
the neighborhood poised for change,
on wet feet, waiting...

The day of your departure,
waking to crusted branches,
gutters thick with fluff,
you said, “Child, do what you must,”
and promise with the years
that had carved the honest truth
in your eyes:
it would not be easy.

It hasn’t been, I’m thinking
on this first snow,
a decade now behind us.
I focus on pine needles
fastened in ice cocoons
to the evergreens beyond the window
from which I now gaze.

Your hand feels close,
I can almost hear you whispering,
“l’ll miss you.”

About the author

Cynthia Elder lives with her family on the edge of Hundred Acre Cove in Barrington, Rhode Island. Her poems and prose have appeared in The Allegheny Review, Dog River Review, Plainswoman, Calliope, Young Ravens Literary Review, Every Day Writers, Eudaimonia Press Mental Health Anthology, and elsewhere.
Ellen stepped off the bus onto a dirty pavement. Christmas Eve. A car horn blared, the driver pressing down overlong, telling the world he was angry. The sun was sinking low and the clouds were heavy, laden with snow, perhaps.

*Fat chance – more likely rain.* Ellen sniffed the air, hoping for chestnuts and getting diesel instead. Something twisted inside her – she sniffed away a tear. This was her first Christmas in the city.

She picked up the pace, heading for *Sullivan’s*, where Bradley was waiting. Hopefully. *Bradley wasn’t too punctual.* When she arrived, the windows of the café were fogged up. She took a deep breath and opened the door. Hot grease and coffee took over from diesel. Sullivan’s sold a lot of fries. She pushed the door shut firmly behind her, shaking off the cold air as she quickly took stock.

*Fairy Tale of New York* rolled out across the hum of a dozen mingling conversations. Bradley had his head down, studying the menu. *Why? He always ordered fries.* Eventually he looked up. For a moment his smiled betrayed how pleased he was to see her.

It was then that Ellen first realised that the best moments were the hardest to catch. She snapped that goofy smile into her memory, saving it for later. *Fixing it on the hard drive.* As she sat down, the hum in the café seemed to fall an octave. Perhaps the wind changed. Perhaps the chef was roasting chestnuts after all.

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**About the author**

**Donna Brown** lives in Cheshire, England. She writes short stories and flash fiction, and she is currently working on a novel. Donna’s flash fiction has been published on the *Casket of Fictional Delights* website, and one of her short stories recently featured in the 2019 volume of the *Leicester Writes Short Story Prize Anthology*. Donna won the Winchester Writers’ Festival Short Story Prize in 2018.
Spear shaped in the falling snow
the leaves were spread all over the ground
on the thin layer of snow
in your neighbour’s garden
like Christmas decorations
which had been knocked off a tree
by a cat ski-jumping off the window.

About the author

Andy N is a writer, performer, podcaster, creative writing workshop tutor, and sometimes experimental musician from Manchester who also currently co-running Stretford’s always welcoming spoken word night ‘Speak easy’. Andy has published three full length poetry collections, the most recent being ‘The Birth of Autumn’ (with a split book with his partner, Amanda Steel, ‘Run away with me in 7 words’ and his 4th collection ‘The Streets were all we could see’ to follow shortly). He is the creator / editor of ‘Spoken Label’, which since 2016, has done over 120 Podcasts with a whole host of writers, artists etc. Also with his partner, he co-runs the review Podcast series ‘Reading in Bed’ (and also co-runs other series such as Comics Unity and A Nature’s Way) and assists with the running of ‘Printed Words’ a quarterly online / paper creative writing journal. He also does ambient music under the name of Ocean in a Bottle. His official website is: onewriterandhispc.blogspot.co.uk.
Once at Christmastime during my childhood, a large package wrapped in The Philadelphia Times and several yards of strong twine arrived at the Kylertown Station. Mr. Jacobs, the stationmaster, had sent word that it was addressed to my youngest sister, Carrie Clark Dale. It was severely cold that winter, and a seven-mile road covered with many feet of snow awaited Father’s carriage. Two days elapsed before the way was clear enough to make the journey.

Carrie was more than a little anxious. She knew the box would contain a Christmas present sent especially for her, but she disguised her excitement when she asked Father to take her along. He was caught off guard, for Carrie hadn’t wanted to leave the house in months, most certainly not in the cold weather.

Ever since our sister Abigail had died of consumption the previous summer, Carrie had taken on a serious disposition, rarely laughing or playing with her friends. All through the autumn months, she had stayed out of school and complained of stomachaches and sluggishness, even though the doctor told us nothing was wrong with her. It was as if something unexplainable had left Carrie, and no one knew how to replace it.

Father decided it was best that she stay home, however, fearing that the harsh winds and coming storm might worsen her condition.

He said I could accompany him, after much discussion with Mother over whether or not I really needed a new dress for the Mistletoe Dance. I emptied the glass jar I’d been filling with coins and dropped them, one by one, into the leather purse Father had given me when I turned fourteen.

The little wood stove Mr. Jacobs usually kept lit was doused when we got there. The station door was unlocked, and a note on the table said, “Home for two days. Package for Dale is in the closet. Mail is in the boxes. Pull the door to when you leave.”

The tiny square windows in the baggage room were splintering with frost. Crystalline lines zig-zagged across the glass and reminded me of Black Moshanon Lake at first freeze.
Mr. Jacobs had wrapped the box carefully in a field blanket. Father placed it inside a large trunk in the carriage, surrounded with pillows. Anything from the Philadelphia cousins was bound to be inordinately fragile and unfit for our bitter season. They had given Alice Ann a set of porcelain tea cups and saucers for her china set on the Christmas of 1891, which have lasted, all but one, through many mad tea parties and hardwood floors. And the year before, Adam got an authentic man’s watch on a braided silver chain. It had silver hands and kept perfect time, until he lost it at the bottom of the creek.

As for my business in town, I had already picked out the dress two months back when we had come to Kylertown for the farmers’ annual auction. Miss Pettit had said she would hold it until Christmas, but no longer, staring at me with those doubting eyes, confident that she would never see my two dollars and thirty cents.

Mother had been reluctant at first to let me buy the dress. “Why can’t you just get the pattern, Ida Blanche?” she had said crossly. “There’s no need to pay good money just so you don’t have to do the stitching.”

“But Mother, it would cost as much just for the material,” I had pleaded. “It’s taffeta, trimmed with rose quilling, and I’ve never seen such a pattern at Miss Pettit’s or anywhere.” At last she had conceded, allowing I saved the money.

It was only a short ride from the station to the center of Kylertown, which was a splendid sight as it sparkled with candles through every window and holiday finery that ran the length of Main Street. Father went around the bend to the tobacconist’s and left me to tend to my own affairs.

Miss Pettit was as surly as ever as I counted out the coins on the table. She assured me she could have sold this dress four times over and it was only her good heart and interminable patience that had persuaded her to keep it for me.

“I’m sure I’m grateful,” I’d said, quite sure that I wasn’t. I would have done almost anything to get that dress, but the acrid tone of her voice made me glad the transaction was over. Mother usually handled the purchasing of fabric, so I rarely had the pleasure of Miss Pettit’s company.

We hurried back to the farm amidst Father’s grumbling about “another blizzard coming fast and furious,” and I stayed quiet for most of the trip. I knew he was worried about the sagging ceiling in the kitchen and the shingles that got damaged when the big oak split in the last storm, but I was occupied with my own thoughts. My mind bounced back and forth between my good fortune at having been asked to the dance by Donald Jesperson, the handsomest boy in the school, and little Carrie, who I’d left early this morning as she sat by herself, staring out her bedroom window.

As the sun grew hazy behind the storm clouds and the stars began to poke through, we inched closer together and Father put his arm around me, bringing me into his heavy cloak. He whistled a melody I’d heard since I was Carrie’s age, and I sang along with him, embellishing the tune with my own words.


“How do you think I bought my cream? I sold the trout that I caught downstream,” Father sang.

“But I had no fish and I had no meat, and the field showed nary a sign of wheat,” I followed, gigglng while he struggled to improvise another line.

“So I sold my cream and I sold my plow, and I bought some fish, a pig and a cow.” We laughed and he clasped me tighter around the shoulders as the horses brought the carriage up toward the house.
I ran in while Father lifted the trunk gently from the carriage, hollering for Adam and George to come tie up the team.

Carrie’s cheeks had grown ruddy as she sat by the fire wrapped in an afghan. She’d been listening for the wheels approaching, I knew, but she was ten-and-a-quarter now and wasn’t about to rush out like a little girl.

“Where’s your new dress, Ida Blanche?” Mother asked as I came bounding into the kitchen. I pulled it out of my canvas sack and held it up in front of me, twirling around the table and grinning widely.

“Isn’t it just beautiful, Mother?” I asked. “Won’t I just be the most beautiful girl at the dance?”

“You surely will be,” she said, as she reached into the oven to remove a tray of steaming fudge. “Now sit yourself down and have some soup, and dish out a bowl for your father. We’ve all eaten and Carrie Clark’s doing her best to be patient, so don’t mince time.”

“Your dress is real nice, Idy,” my little sister chimed in. “Bet Donald’s going to fall flat down when he sees you.” She eased up to the table and whispered, “Did’ja get the box, Idy? Does Daddy have the box?”

“Not telling,” I answered, pinching a little fold of baby fat that obscured her waist. She knew her present was here. I’d never tickle her if she was about to be disappointed.

Father and I finished dinner in a hurry and then everyone gathered in the sitting room. Mother lit candles all around and sang bits of old Christmas melodies under her breath as she moved about the room.

The fire was a healthy one, casting shadows on the faces of the whole family as we finished Mother’s walnut fudge, which, she protested, was not fit to be eaten at all. Carrie nestled down next to the mysterious box, wiggling the twine gently while she waited. She was in no hurry to unwrap the package. This was her moment, and everybody was watching. I smiled at her and tugged her scraggly brown ponytail.

“Open it up, Carrie. Don’t keep us holding on forever,” I said.

With the help of Father’s pocketknife, she cut the twine and loosened the newspaper on the outside of the box. One slit down the middle of the corrugated cardboard and the flaps popped up, revealing handfuls of shredded paper. She reached into the stuffing and lifted out a smaller box, this one wrapped in delightful paper printed with holly trees and sleigh bells. A handsome velvet bow, slightly crushed in passage, topped the whole affair.

“I wish Abigail were here, Mama,” Carrie said. “I’d give her this big bow to put in her hair if she was.”

I looked down at the wooden floorboards, remembering the months Abigail had spent in bed. Her sickness had touched Carrie more deeply than the other children, because they were closest in age, and the two of them would often sleep in the same bed, telling stories and gossiping long into the night.

I hoped that whatever was in that box would lighten Carrie’s somber moods. Ever since she found out that the Philadelphia cousins were sending a present for her this year, she’d been a sight more cheery, even smiling when I teased her about her bushy eyebrows.

“No more bushier than yours, big ape,” she had jested back at me.

Mother brought out a tray filled with mugs of cocoa for the children. Being sixteen, I got to sip a small snifter of brandy, which sent a shiver of heat through my body as fiery as the embers in the hearth. Carrie snipped the tape with a pair of scissors and folded the paper neatly next to the box. She lifted the top off slowly, her eyes forming perfect orbs as she looked at what lay inside.
The doll’s exquisite wax face, unlike anything we had ever seen before, had cracked wide open from the cold. The split ran from her amber locks across her forehead and cheek and stopped at the neckline.

Even in this delicate condition, Carrie clutched the doll to her closely and cast a protective glance around the room as she straightened the lace petticoat. A globe of light shone from inside the tear that clung to the corner of her eye, but it was overshadowed by a smile – a strong smile.

Carrie picked up her doll and moved over to my side, not resisting when I lifted her into my lap. She twisted around to whisper in my ear, and asked me if I’d help her think of a name.

“I’ll need to give her a name before I show her to my teacher next week,” she said.

The sound of the fire’s crackling seemed to grow louder in our silence. Mother started, very softly, singing a song we all knew. One by one we joined her, until the music filled every crack and crevice in the room.

A Note from the Author
The preceding story was based on an excerpt from a collection of notes written by Elizabeth Alice Woolridge, my grandmother. Discovered by my aunt, Cynthia Grant, in her attic during a recent move, these notes contain extensive genealogical information as well as interesting anecdotes from many generations past. The anecdote that follows is, word for word, the factual account which inspired this fictionalized story:

Once on Christmas during Carrie Clark Dale’s childhood a large package, from Phila. cousins, arrived for her at the Kylertown station. The weather was severely cold that December and the baggage room unheated. Several days time elapsed before the box was claimed, and when opened there reposed a beautiful wax doll whose lovely face and head had cracked wide open from the cold. Nothing could be done to restore her, but even in this delicate condition she was a joy to her new mother for many years. I expect she is still about, resting in her box of cushions, as she was when I was a little girl, and was taken by Aunt Carrie, along with her three small daughters, to view the doll where she lay in the parlor.

About the author
Cynthia Elder lives with her family on the edge of Hundred Acre Cove in Barrington, Rhode Island. Her poems and prose have appeared in The Allegheny Review, Dog River Review, Plainswoman, Calliope, Young Ravens Literary Review, Every Day Writers, Eudaimonia Press Mental Health Anthology, and elsewhere.
Desert Snow

by Gwendolyn Joyce Mintz

About the photographer

Gwendolyn Joyce Mintz is a writer and photographer.
Her Christmas Tree

By Mark Weinrich

While other wives are jamming malls
My wife is evergreen enthralled
With pinyon pine or Douglas fir,
No fenced-in, month-old trees for her.

Though I am stuffed and stupefied
From heaps of turkey and pumpkin pie.
She waltzes in with saw in hand
Expecting me to be her mountain man.

I start to moan and make excuse.
She smiles just right then passes my boots.
I drive while she dreams of the perfect tree;
There’s a chance, I think, we’ll probably freeze.

Round and round we hunt for that tree,
“I think the first,” she says, “was the best to me!”
I cut the tree, then tie my rope
And finally we stumble down that slope.

I hear a swish, a warning scream,
A rushing avalanche of green,
And caught, like a rabbit in headlights,
I’m run over by Christmas on a November night.

While spitting snow, I try to stand;
I thought she’d pity her mountain man.
She checks the tree and waves, “It’s fine.
Oh, don’t you just love the smell of pine!”

About the author

Mark Weinrich is a cancer survivor, a retired pastor, gardener, hiker, and musician. He has had over 395 poems, articles, and short stories published in numerous publications, some include The Upper Room, Birds and Blooms, New Mexico Magazine, Ideals, The Secret Place, and Live. He has also sold eight children’s books and currently has two fantasy novels on Kindle. He currently volunteers in a wildlife rescue and rehab center.
Just Because it's a Trailer Park Doesn't Mean it can’t be Christmas

By Kaylyn Wingo

Every year people ask me why I go to the trouble I do (and it's not just at Christmas either, you should have seen the place for Halloween!) They usually add something like, seeing as where you are and all. This is what I see when I look at where I am: the Deli/Liquor sign lit up in a window across the street and the big new Rite Aid down on the corner. Next door, the Salvation Army store hangs clothing by color and I appreciate that kind of care. (Plus, I'm always on the lookout for something special I can add to my displays.) OK, being situated as we are on a bend in the road does make it hard to pull into sometimes and I've had people tell me they went right by before they knew it, (although I don't always think that's why they didn’t stop.) Then there are those who say that
I’m right on the street with
all that traffic going by. I
have to give them that. It might
be quieter in the back, but
I have to believe
I’m out here for a reason. I mean
the noise doesn’t bother me anymore
and if I happen to awake up
and in the middle of the night,
I don’t feel all alone.

I think I’m where I am so I can do
what I do at Christmas. You know,
just because it’s a trailer park
doesn’t mean this isn’t home,
doesn’t mean that Real Life
isn’t going on right now. And
despite any inconveniences,
even with its hard times, you can
always find something to celebrate. So
I sit at the table with a cigarette
as it gets dark and
think about the people driving by.
Say they’ve had a bad day at work.
They get stopped by the light
right outside my door and at first
they’re mad about being held up. But then,
maybe they to look over and
see all my lights or
something crazy I’ve put up,
and it catches them off guard.
They have to smile
in spite of themselves. They think,
tonight I’ll take the kids
to go get a tree, or
when I get home
I’m calling the folks
to see what we’re doing this year.
And as the light changes, so does their mood
and they drive on making plans.
That’s when I smile myself.
I stir my coffee and say to the cat,
we’re right where we belong.

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**About the author**

Kaylyn Wingo is a retired paralegal living in Michigan, where she is a member of the Waterford Township Public Library’s Poetry Writers’ Workshop. Her poems have appeared in *Poetry Leaves*, *Voice of Eve*, and *Spectral Lines: Poems about Scientists*. 
The young lovers across the street
spent their whole day stringing lights
across every inch of the house, beating us,
who’ve had it planned for quite a while
but never found sufficient energy or time.
And then there’s that voice inside both of us,
the one we rarely speak of, the one we detest:
“What’s the point. It’s all meaningless.
Before we know it, Christmas will be over.
Why bother?” A voice like dark ice.
Our lights are still in the Wal*mart bag,
still wound on cardboard cylinders
in their pristine, shrink-wrapped packages.

We’ve never decorated the house before,
but it seemed a good idea on impulse
the night we took our kids to see the wreathes
and ornaments all over town.
“Yeaaaah,” they cried,
“we like lights! We want lots of lights!”
Their enthusiasm was infectious.
Cathy must have sensed my second thoughts
as I pulled the packages out for the cashier
to scan. Why else nudge me gently in the ribs?
“We’re putting up those lights, hear me?” she said.
I thought of the ladder, hammer, hooks, nails,
how cold it would be – and unpleasant.
That voice again, rising ponderously
from the depths like a sunken tombstone.
“Why bother? Blink your eyes, it’s over?
Lights are for other people. Forget the kids,
even if they do remember, they won’t care.”

On the drive home I must have slumped
more than usual. “You’re thinking about them,
aren’t you?” she said. “So am I. It’s like
rotating the tires. Let them rotate themselves.
Just another thing to do. Or sewing on a button.
Cleaning out the fridge. Watering the lawn.”
We took our exit onto streets swirling with darkness.
The kids had fallen asleep in their car seats.
“We’ll string those lights this weekend,” I said.
Saturday, Sunday, neither of us mentioned the lights.
And now the neighbors have put us to shame.
We could not stop glancing from behind curtains
to watch as she reached up with each loop
and he, on the ladder, received them to tack into place.
And tonight, their house looks so cozy, festive.
Oh, we’ll get ours up all right . . . soon.
And the kids will screech and yelp with joy.
We’ll pat ourselves on the back, feel more moral.
Right now though, that bag is still stashed
in the back of our closet. Only in our dreams
do they flicker madly, flare, short-circuit.

About the author

Two volumes of Louis Gallo’s poetry, Crash and Clearing the Attic, will be published by Adelaide in the near future. A third, Archaeology, has been published by Kelsay Books; Kelsay will also publish a fourth volume, Scherzo Furiant, in the near future. His work has appeared or will shortly appear in Wide Awake in the Pelican State (LSU anthology), Southern Literary Review, Fiction Fix, Glimmer Train, Hollins Critic, Rattle, Southern Quarterly, Litro, New Orleans Review, Xavier Review, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Missouri Review, Mississippi Review, Texas Review, Baltimore Review, Pennsylvania Literary Journal, The Ledge, storySouth, Houston Literary Review, Tampa Review, Raving Dove, The Journal (Ohio), Greensboro Review, and many others. Chapbooks include The Truth Change, The Abomination of Fascination, Status Updates and The Ten Most Important Questions. He is the founding editor of the now defunct journals, The Barataria Review and Books: A New Orleans Review. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize several times. He is the recipient of an NEA grant for fiction. He teaches at Radford University in Radford, Virginia.
Corey
By Rhema Sayers

On a snowy Christmas Eve morning many years ago, I was in the second year of my family practice residency at a small hospital forty miles east of Pittsburgh. I had volunteered to take this stretch of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day because all the other residents had children and Christmas is so special for kids. My husband and I planned to make the day brighter for the people who had to work on the holiday. Despite the developing snowstorm, we brought in the ingredients to make about 20 large pumpkin pies, two for every nurses' station.

After I took report from the resident who was going home, George and I started making pies in the kitchen area next to the big conference room on the top floor of the hospital. The first pies were just coming out of the oven when a call came from the ICU. An elderly woman had been admitted during the night with chest pain. She was spiraling downhill.

Covered with flour, I left George to the pies and ran downstairs to the ICU. By the time the cardiovascular surgeon made it to the hospital through the worsening blizzard, I had put in an intravenous pacemaker to bring her heart rate up from 30 to 70 beats per minute. She wandered in and out of consciousness, always smiling when she came around. Unfortunately, she still had no blood pressure despite the medications I was giving her. We tried to place a balloon pump to bolster her pressure, but failed. We tried just about everything, but she slipped away. It didn't seem fair, dying on Christmas Eve.

I had just finished the chart when the ER called. They had three admissions for me to work up. George delivered all the pies, receiving vows of undying gratitude from the working staff, then came and kissed me goodbye and drove home through the blowing snow.

The morning passed quickly as I worked through the admissions, an elderly gentleman in congestive heart failure, a woman with pneumonia and a nursing home resident with a urinary tract infection.
Christmas 2019

About one o'clock in the afternoon, while eating lunch, I got called to the 4th floor admit a child. She was seven years old and I could see that she had red hair, although there wasn’t much of it left. She was on chemotherapy for acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Her eyes were green and tired and old as she sat, leaning forward, chest heaving, wheezing and trying to breathe around hacking coughs. She paid no attention to anything but her struggle to live. The chest x-ray showed the white of pneumonia on both sides of her lungs. Her white blood cell count was practically non-existent because her immune system had been knocked out by the chemotherapy. Her name was Corey and she was very close to death.

Throughout that day and into the night I worked to save Corey’s life. Ordinarily I would have immediately transferred her to Pittsburgh Children’s Hospital where her pediatric oncologist was, but the blizzard howled outside. Nothing could move on the roads or in the air. I talked to her oncologist who confided that he didn’t think she would make it. Corey’s mother sat by her bed, shoulders hunched, never taking her eyes from her daughter's face. Her father paced or stood at the window staring into the swirling snow, his face angry and frustrated. I pumped antibiotics into her, gave her breathing treatments and prayed. Each time I entered the room, I sat by her side for a while and talked to her.

Corey was not responding well to treatment. I called her oncologist again. Following his advice, I gave her steroids to reduce the inflammation in her bronchial tubes, despite the possible further depression of her immune system. Her face was pale and sweat dripped onto the sheets. Her temperature was only slightly over 100 degrees, but that in itself was discouraging. She was unable to produce a high fever because her immune system wasn’t working. The fever would have helped her fight off the infection.

Gaspings, harsh breaths were wearing her out. Staring fixedly at a spot on the wall in front of her, she never flinched when the iv had to be restarted. Occasionally she would look at me, just a little flick of her eyes sideways and then back to that spot on the wall. Fatigue was obvious in her drooping eyelids, but she couldn’t sleep. She had to work to breathe.

I tried to prepare her parents for the worst, but they wouldn’t hear it. They turned their faces away from me and tuned me out. Her mother cried quietly. Her father wanted to put her in an ambulance and head for Pittsburgh. And if the ambulance wouldn’t take her, he’d put her in his car and drive her himself. I had to jump in front of him to prevent him from picking her up at one point and carrying her out into the storm. I finally convinced him that that way would kill her. Corey’s breathing drowned out all other sounds in the room.

I had to see to other admissions and handle minor crises throughout the rest of the night, but nothing kept me away from Corey for very long. Each time I neared her room, my stomach clenched as I tried to prepare myself for the worst. She had continued to deteriorate during the early hours. I knew she couldn’t hold on much longer.

I had been in the ER for nearly an hour, working up another elderly man with a urinary tract infection. After writing his orders, I ran to Corey’s room and slipped inside quietly. Both of her parents, totally exhausted, were asleep on cots I’d ordered for them. I looked at Corey and found her regarding me with a little smile on her face. She was still pale, but her skin was dry now and her eyes clear. I thought that maybe her breathing was a little easier.

She hadn’t said anything before, too busy just trying to breathe. Now she looked up at me and smiled. "I’m not... going to die." she said. My eyes filled with tears and I patted her hand. "Santa Claus... told me... a little... while... ago." She held up a white teddy bear with a bright red ribbon around its neck. “He... gave me... Teddy.”

The storm finally let up about 10 AM. Corey began to improve and was able to lean back and fall asleep. I asked the nurses who had given Corey the teddy bear, but they all denied any
knowledge of the bear. Anyway, I liked her explanation better.

After making arrangements for her transfer to Pittsburgh, I helped load Corey into the ambulance. Her mother sat in the jump seat at her head. Her father would drive their car. Corey’s left hand gripped mine while her right pressed Teddy to her chest. When I started to back out of the ambulance, she sat up and pulled me into a hug, probably the best Christmas present I’ve ever gotten. Standing in the swirling snow, watching the tail lights disappear, I looked up into the sky, half expecting to hear sleigh bells. Not all the wetness on my face came from the skies.

Note from the Author: This is based on a true story. Even though I met Corey many years ago, her story was one of those I wrote in a diary that I kept sporadically through my years as a doctor. It has stayed fresh in my memory. I can still feel the cold winter and the snow on my face as I watched the ambulance pull out. Corey did live through the pneumonia and survived the leukemia.

About the author

Rhema Sayers is a retired ER doctor, now working as a freelance writer. She has had over fifty articles, short stories and poems published and is working on a novel. She lives in the Arizona desert near Tucson with three dogs and one husband.
In the Universe of Round Things

By RC deWinter

It's Christmas morning, the day of the feast, and I, sluggard that I am, have not yet made the apple pie I promised.

I'm jumpy, nervous as a cat, because I haven't heard from you. I know it's the landscape of your life; you can't always get in touch, but I'm so used to your virtual voice, your virtual love.

But heigh-ho, away we go. Grannies, Golden Delicious, Cortlands await the sacrifice of my peeling, coring, slicing.

Then cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, a sleight of sugar, all baptized with the blood of a lemon. This keeps me grounded. One can't make a pie with one's heart in the throat, one's mind on vacation.

Some are called to greatness, some, to the kitchen. We all have a job to do. You're out saving the world, and I have to make an apple pie.

About the author

It can be lonely being a thirteen-year-old girl in Bethlehem. There are no other girls my age here. They’re all a couple of years older or a couple of years younger than me. In fact, there are no boys my age either. That’s why I’m so glad when Jayjay comes here, as he does sometimes with his father. He is thirteen too, and he’s my best friend. That’s why I call him Jayjay, though it’s only my heart name for him, and I never say it out loud. Actually, I have a feeling Jayjay knows. He knows things my heart knows. That’s why he is my best friend.

Jayjay was actually born in Bethlehem, but he doesn’t live here. His family left soon after he was born which is why he is still alive and escaped what those awful men did to all the young children here thirteen years ago. With me, it’s the opposite to Jayjay: I wasn’t born here, but came here later, when my father died and Mama married my second Papa. That’s why I’m alive, and here and thirteen years old. Jayjay’s father has family here, so that’s why he was born here and they come here sometimes, but it’s not very often. It is a four day walk for him and his father. Once the whole family came, but that took a week and was hard for his mother and younger brothers and sister, so they have not come again. Too bad. His mother is the sweetest woman I have ever met. His father seems nice enough, but mostly he is old. I mentioned that once to Jayjay, and he said, “My father is older than anyone knows.” His father says very little, and seems to only make sound when he is pounding or sawing, so I mostly know him by his work. And he’s an amazing worker: He can make or fix just about anything. I commented on that to Jayjay, and he said, “Your faith is strong.” Jayjay says things that puzzle me sometimes. When he talks about his father it’s often like he is talking about someone else, not the old man I see. I said that to him once too—I can say anything to Jayjay—and he said, “You should know my father.” I still haven’t quite figured that one out, but I’m working on it. I usually get his meaning after a while. I like it that he trusts me to understand. That’s why he’s my best friend.

When Jayjay is not helping his father then we can talk and he takes me places and we do things together. It’s so nice to have someone who knows what it is like to be me-- I mean, he may be a boy, but he doesn’t think like other boys. He knows my mind, and he knows what it is like to have a body like mine—I mean, not a girl’s but my size and strength. Two years younger
or two years older makes a big difference with children, though Jayjay and I are almost
grownups now. When we go fishing, older boys tease me or get frustrated with me when I can’t
cast my net as far as they can, even though I am strong for a girl since I do boys work. Jayjay
arms are no longer or stronger than mine, so he understands how it is for me. But the neat
thing is that Jayjay can cast a net more broadly than any of us. He says it’s a matter of knowing
how, and he is teaching me. I don’t know if he ever tried to teach the others, but if he did I
know the big pushy ones probably wouldn’t listen. I like to fish with Jayjay when the others
aren’t there to interrupt us or act show-offy or put upon. And I’m getting better at fishing,
which somehow annoys those brash older boys more than it impresses them. Even so,
sometimes I see them watching how I do it, and sometimes I catch them imitating the
technique that Jayjay showed me. And it works for them too: they do better, though they won’t
admit it, and I’m not going to point it out. They think it’s odd a girl is fishing anyway, but I do it
because I don’t have any brothers-- except for Jayjay, but he’s just a brother in my heart, and
his hands are not usually around to help with my work. Even so, after he’s been here I always
feel stronger, or maybe I’m just happier.

Most of the other kids love to be with Jayjay as much as I do, but the brash boys are
often suspicious of him or jealous. Grownups seem to either love him or are puzzled by him, or
both—that is, the ones that bother to pay any attention to him. A lot of grownups don’t seem to
have any time for children unless they want us to do something or not do something. Their
grunts and groans say that life is hard and there is a lot to do. Jayjay is as good a worker as his
father, but he never grunts or groans. He is so quiet about what he does that people often don’t
even notice that he is doing things until they turn to a task and find that it’s all done. Even then
they sometimes don’t know that it was Jayjay who did it and even forget that it ever needed
doing, and they ask Jayjay why he is just standing there doing nothing. Sometimes they gripe
that he spends too much time talking and listening and looking around him at the world like it
is a wonderful new gift. Not the rabbis of course, but I’m not allowed to be part of that. When
other grownups slow down enough to listen, sometimes Jayjay will point out something
beautiful, and they’ll say, “Oh, yes.” like they hadn’t noticed or had forgotten how beautiful
ordinary things are. Then Jayjay smiles, and they smile, and for a while it feels like a bit of
Sabbath, until they forget again or someone calls out to them and they rush away. Then his
smile fades. But when he looks back at the beauty he is radiant again. I’ll watch his face and
listen to the busy people behind him, and for a while he doesn’t seem to hear it. Then the noise
of business and bickering will get through, and he will look puzzled and a bit sad, but also -- I
don’t know-- hopeful?

When my first Papa died and Mamma married my new Papa, he brought us here to live,
and I never did understand that. It had something to do with Papa’s brother and some cattle,
but I am not sure what. It wasn’t very nice, and they don’t talk about it. Like no one talks about
all the babies that were here thirteen years ago and then suddenly were not. It’s too awful I
guess. I have heard older boys say it was a lot of men who went house to house with swords and
knives, but that doesn’t make any sense. Those boys just like to talk about horrible things. Like
they go on in gory detail about how Roman soldiers nail men to posts in the ground and just
leave them there. Of course most of them have never seen such a thing, but the loud ones say
their fathers or uncles have. I suspect a couple boys really have seen it, but they don’t talk
about it. In fact, they tell the others to be quiet. I mentioned it once to Mamma and Papa, and
Mama tried to hush me up. Papa said the Romans do it to scare us into behaving ourselves.
Mama said that won’t work. I decided not to say anything about it ever again.

I like to talk to the shepherds’ children who tell nice stories, like the one about a baby
who was born in a cattle shed in the winter, and there was a strange light in the sky, and lots of people came from all over the place and it was like a party. It gets a little confusing about just when all that happened, but it sounds like it was just about ten or twelve or maybe even thirteen years ago. The thing is, part of the story is that some of the people came on camels from really far away, and that must have taken many months, so it’s hard to pin down a time. I asked Jayjay if he knew that story, and he smiled a big smile and said it was a lovely thing. I got the feeling he knew it well. I said, “Why would everyone be so excited about a baby?” He said, “Why wouldn’t they?” I had no answer to that. Babies are special. Mamma and Papa would be thrilled if they ever had a younger brother or sister for me. But babies are also pretty common; I mean they happen a lot to just about everybody. But if that cattle shed baby was born right after all the other babies were gone, I suppose people would be very happy about it. But if it was born before that happened, wouldn’t it be gone with all the others? Or maybe, like Jayjay, the baby’s parents took it away real soon—Or maybe it was Jayjay? I only thought of that possibility a little while ago, and I’ve never said anything to him about it. I’m afraid he would tell me it’s not so, and that would ruin it. I would rather believe the beautiful story with Jayjay in it. The beauty is there whether it is true or not.

I actually came up with that idea about Jayjay being the special baby when I was sitting on a log right next to him. When it hit me I gave a little gasp, and he asked me what I was thinking about. I almost blurted out the whole thing, but I thought a moment and just said, “Sometimes I don’t want to know the truth.” He cocked his head like he was surprised, then then he smiled his soft, gentle smile like he understood. He said, “You know there is always help.” Then I thought about how no one helped save those babies and I felt bad, but I didn’t want to talk about that horror to Jayjay, not right after he’d smiled at that other baby story, the beautiful one, so I said, “There wasn’t help when father died and left me and Mother alone.” Jayjay said, “Really?” not like he was surprised but like maybe it wasn’t as true as I thought. Then I had to admit that people in the village had helped for a while, but I also said, “But it didn’t last. They had to go back to taking care of themselves, then Mama had nothing except hungry little me.” My new papa has mentioned that a time or two. Again Jayjay looked like he understood and he also looked thoughtful and a little sad. He knows that life is hard, and I think he wishes he could help everybody. Then he said, “But you are not alone,” and he took my hands. I guess he meant that I had Mama and my new Papa, but just then, mostly I felt good that I had him. That’s why he’s my best friend.

Last time Jayjay came to Bethlehem, when he first arrived he found me sitting on the back doorstep, feeling depressed. Elias, one of the older boys who teases me about fishing and likes to talk about gruesome things, announced that he is going to marry me in a couple of years. The other boys shouted and laughed, and the girls gasped and glanced at me then looked at the ground. I ran away and asked Mama. She said it was not decided on. That wasn’t a definite no, which worried me and got me thinking. Young men want young brides, and I am the only young girl around who will be of marrying age in a couple of years. The older girls will all be married by then. So will the boys, so there will be no husband for me, unless Elias waits for me. Oh dear. For a moment I thought that maybe I could marry Jayjay, but that’s silly; He’s my brother. Well, not really my brother brother, but in any case, I can’t see him marrying anyone. He loves and does good for everybody; He can’t narrow it down to just one person or one family.

I told Jayjay what I was troubled about, as I have told him most things, but this was the first time I ever talked about how there is no one my age in the village because that brings up what happened thirteen years ago. Now I did. I said “Elias wants to marry me, and he says that
men from away came and got rid of everyone who was born around the time we were, so there is no one else.” Jayjay said nothing; Then he cried. I wasn’t sure what to do, so took his hand. We sat in stillness for a while, then Jayjay stood up and helped me up, and he led me to a grassy place by the water. By then I felt better, and I lay down on the soft summer green and slept.

When I woke up I found Jayjay had set out some grape leaves piled with dates and pistachios. We fed each other and laughed, and the river gurgled and the lilies smiled. We paddled our feet in the water, then he told me that he and his father would be leaving the next day. He said he got an ass for his father to ride, and I was glad of that, but I thought of him walking all that long way back to his home and marveled that he could go so far. I looked at his beautiful feet and thought of all dusty and rocky the ground they would tread. He followed my gaze, and he pulled up his knees and wiggled his toes at me. I reached into the stream and splashed water on his already wet feet then I rubbed them with my skirt. I wanted to give him some comfort for the journey. It wasn’t much, but it was all I had. He smiled at me and at something beyond me, then he reached over and rubbed the sweat off my forehead. He dipped his other hand into the water and rubbed it on my hot cheeks and brow; it was very refreshing. Then he walked me home, and as I entered my house he said he would never leave me. I knew that the next day he would walk away at his father’s side, but I knew what he meant. That’s why he is my best friend.
About the author

Erika B. Girard is currently a senior at Saint Leo University in Florida. Originally from Rhode Island, she loves her family, friends, faith, and finding suitable words to express concepts beyond herself. She claims writing, proofreading, and photography as some of her greatest passions and says, “Challenge yourself to great things. If you find something you can’t do, try harder.”
About the photographer

Tara Troiano is a poet, musician, photographer, and sophomore at the University of Texas at Austin. Her photography aims to draw the viewer's attention to movement and textures. Through photography, Tara hopes to inspire appreciation and observation of the natural world. Her photography can be found in Sediments Literary-Arts Journal and Edify Fiction. Follow her on Instagram: @tarajt28 and her website: taratroiano.wixsite.com/photography.
The Christmas my father disappeared started as festive as all the others. I’d turned twelve that year and still thought of Christmas as the best time of the year, but that was about to change. On Christmas morning, my younger brother, sister, and I opened our few presents eagerly even though already knew what they were because we’d bought them for ourselves.

At some point, my father went to the wood stove and lifted the lid to put in more firewood. His eyes glowed amber in the firelight and I didn’t stare at them long but turned back to my play. That year, my brother and I got flashlights and monster puzzles. His was Frankenstein and mine was Dracula. I remember mine being mostly red and his mostly blue. My brother and I had our half-completed puzzles laid out side by side on the floor while my sister played with some windup toy. I think it was a deer or rabbit but I don’t remember exactly.

My father returned to his armchair and took a long sip of his beer and then focused on the TV that he always had on despite the fact that we only got one channel, CBC Winnipeg. That meant that current events were easier to grasp then, not all the interference of opposing sides we have now.

My mother sat on the couch across from my father watching the TV too. I don’t remember any of us talking much that day, although my brother and mother and sister were usually very talkative, unlike my father and me. My mother got up after a while and went and sat on the bed in their room. When I looked in on her later, she was crying. I asked her what was wrong and she waved a hand as if to say that she had it under control. I know now that she didn’t but I believed her then. I returned to my puzzle and the few remaining unused pieces formed a small red pile to my right, facing my father.

By then, he was so engrossed in whatever was on TV that he looked like a robot turned off except that his eyes occasionally blinked and drifted from side to side as though tracking something. I returned to my puzzle and closed my eyes and attempted to put the remaining
I took the puzzle apart and started over. When I glanced over at my brother, he’d done the same. That seemed to be the point of those puzzles. They were so easy to put together that we did that over and over just to feel each piece going into its rightful place. When the monsters were fully assembled, they weren’t scary especially reduced to two dimensions. They looked as though they were lying on the floor. When I finished mine a second time, I stood and put a foot on top of Dracula just to see him disappear from view.

My father got up then and as he walked past me, I heard a hissing sound as though air were leaking from him. I wanted to reach up and touch him as he passed but instead watched him move at a slow purposeful pace. When he got to the stove, I took my puzzle apart and closed my eyes and listened to the metal noises he made as he lifted the lid and set it to one side. Then I heard the hollow clunk of dry poplar being forced into the stove. He kept the lid off the opening until the wood fully caught fire and crackled. There was a minute more of cracks and pops (what was he doing?) before he scraped the cast iron lid along the stovetop and let it clang into place over that fiery opening. He didn’t seem to be concerned about how noisy he was.

I reached then for the first puzzle piece I could grab without paying attention to where it might go. I set it down in front of me and selected another and another working my way out from the middle toward the edges.

My father didn’t return to his chair but went outside, where it was cold and snowy, and stayed out there. I went to the door and opened it and saw that he was sitting in his truck with the engine running. I stood with the door open despite all the cold air rushing in. My brother and sister stopped what they were doing and looked in my direction but didn’t say anything. The cold settled into my bones and my fingers stung but I still held the door open. Eventually my father backed the truck up and then headed down the road. His taillights vanished almost immediately in the wildly blowing snow. I knew he was going to town to drink more beer and wouldn’t be back until very late. It was Christmas Day, but he knew places in town where he could still buy beer and sit and drink.

I shut the door and returned to my puzzle. My mother came out of their bedroom and went to the TV and turned up the volume and sat in his chair. My brother got up and went outside to pee. He was gone so long I almost got up to check on him, but he came back inside before I got the full urge. When he came in, he was covered in a light dusting of snow. He didn’t have a coat on so was shaking noticeably. He went to the wood stove and put in more wood just as my father had done but he closed the lid right away and stayed there to warm up. He was nearly two years younger than me but even then, had a better grasp than I of what was really going on.

My mother remained fixed on the TV show she was watching and I gave up my puzzle and sat in the couch to watch with her. I am not sure what show was except that it was likely something Christmassy. Whatever it was would have depicted a very different Christmas from ours and took place far away maybe somewhere it didn’t even snow. In it, everyone would have been nice to each other and, by the end, everything got forgiven. I knew even then, that those were the rules for Christmas. I also I realized then that my mother wouldn’t ever forgive my father.

The four of us continued with our Christmas celebrations without my father as best we could. We had ample wood to keep the house warm. I pretended that I didn’t miss him but in truth I wanted him there. I needed our family to be whole for one day a year, even if it meant he’d be held here against his will. I am no longer certain of the nobility of such a wish, but then my father not being there had seemed a crime of significant proportions.

At some point, I went out into the snow to pee too and aimed the beam of my new
flashlight into the tire tracks of my father’s truck. They were already partly filled in with fresh snow but I could still see how he’d backed up at a sharp angle and then driven straight off. The tracks going away were steady despite the number of beers he’d already drank. I tried to imagine then what his thoughts were as he drove away. But I had no idea of them nor do I now beyond the urge to be somewhere else—somewhere he could let out what he’d been holding in.

Standing in that cold and shivering, I didn’t know then the dent that icy Christmas Day would put in all our lives. Then, I imagined my father stumbling in later perhaps even tripping on some toy my sister or brother or I had left out. The house would be dark by then and chilly even as the fire would have burned down to embers. All of us four huddled under covers sleeping in whatever warmth we could find.

Only now, from the distant lens of the future, can I face the truth that the four of us woke the next day to a cold house. My brother or mother dressed first and started the fire. None of us went to a window to check to see if my father’s truck was there because it wasn’t. Nor did he return later that day or ever. He was simply gone for good. Only now can I admit how, as soon as we rose that morning, Christmas was over for good and any promise such a day had afforded it never would again. Christmas was the day my father disappeared. His truck was found buried in a snow bank next to a rock cut he’d managed to swerve and miss. But he wasn’t in the truck nor were there discernable tracks leading from it because by then, it had snow so much and so many vehicles had passed over that spot, it was as though he’d never gotten out of the truck and yet he wasn’t in it either.

His truck was hauled out by a tow truck and didn’t have a scratch on and the engine ran perfectly fine. My mother would drive it for years after and then later my brother and I until it finally cratered more than decade later. By then my mother had become permanently committed to the mental hospital in Fort William and the three of us were old enough to make due on our own.

His body never turned up and all we know for certain is that he’d been on his way home. Likely too drunk to properly make out the highway and had simply skidded off when the truck hit black ice. It went into a snow bank only four miles from home. Perhaps in his drunken state he mistook the nearby power clearing for the highway and set off that way. Police believe he perished somewhere in all that deep snow and later in spring some wild animal dragged him too far off to be found.

While I was still in school, twice a day the school bus passed that spot where his truck went off the highway and I would often wonder if he was still out there somewhere having survived despite the odds. But I knew even then that was a hopeful dream the living cling to when all logic suggests otherwise.

“Stop looking,” my brother said to me many times when our mother was gone too and there was only the three of us. Still I think often of that Christmas because it was my last Christmas until I had a family of my own and was able to start over again.

I wondered often the exact moment that day when it all took a turn for the worse. I can’t help thinking it was the moment when my father went to the stove to stuff in more wood. What he’d seen in the flames must have told him what he should do next.

I have often imagined that in those vital moments after his truck slide of the highway and he got out alive he’d thought he’d be fine. Everywhere he turned it would have been so thoroughly white. The snow would have picked up even more by then and been falling in such heavy flakes that I imagine him reaching out a hand like he must have done as a boy to catch a few of them just to feel them melt on his palm.

Nothing the least bit dangerous about snowflakes all on their own like that and yet in a few minutes or an hour at most it would be all over. There wouldn’t have been any traffic on the highway at that hour especially in the middle of a snowstorm and he would have been susceptible to drunken logic and likely burrowed in somewhere and thought that would stay
him warm there until morning. I doubt he even had time to sober up. That would have happened later when he was already dead, his body as stiff as the trees all around him heavy with snow.

But that isn’t what happened and is only the depiction of the raw reversal of thought. My father did go to the fire and he did go outside but only to pee. In a few minutes he came back in the hose and returned to the chair and continued to watch the same TV show he’d been watching. My mother came out of the bedroom and sat on the couch across from him but leaned toward my father and he reached out a hand and she took it and they sat like that for the longest time.

I had completed my puzzle a second time by then and looked at it for a moment and specifically at the mouth of Dracula. I wanted him to be smiling but he wasn’t. I then broke the puzzle apart piece by piece starting at the top right corner and worked my way toward the middle and from there down to the bottom left corner. When I had all of the pieces broken apart, I set them in the box the puzzle had come in and walked the box to the wood stove. I stopped there for a moment and through the open kitchen door I had a full view of the rest of my family. All of them had stopped what they were doing and were watching the Christmas show on TV. My brother had completed his puzzle too and it was on the floor beside him.

I opened the lid of the wood stove and watched flames move wildly about the pieces of wood my father had set there earlier. They were all fully engulfed and halfway burned through. I felt the heat immediately of those flames as the fire burned so hot I couldn’t stand to leave the lid open long. I lifted the puzzle box and tried to fit it through the round opening, but the rectangular box didn’t fit. I slipped the lid handle out of its notch in the lid and used it to poke the box until it fell into the flames below. It didn’t take long for it to ignite and I watched the flames swirl around the box at first then melt away inside to those jagged edged red pieces.

When a few of those caught fire, I set the lid back over the fire and knew that soon the puzzle box would be reduced to ash. I glanced toward the TV. Only brother turned to look in my direction but not for long as he soon turned back to the TV too. I stood for a moment longer at the stove as my father had done earlier and then returned to where I had been sitting before but this time I too focused on what was on TV. I watched that black and white drama in a grey world and felt incredibly happy.
I grew up in my grandfather’s home
Under his roof every holiday was a parade of pan dulce,
And thanksgiving dinner, camping trips, smiling faces,
Poker chips, Nintendo 64 & hide and go seek.

But grandfather passed away when I was 7 years old,
And for many years my family was left trying to pick up the pieces-
In those days Christmas Eve tamales felt much lonelier.

But what I found was something beautiful,
That grandfather’s legacy lives on
Through the roots of this family tree,
His children,
That every tia y tio
Now turned abuela y abuelo, as years passed has their own traditions,
Their own Christmas Eve tamales

That we still comeback to grandfathers’ home on Christmas day,
Sharing hard earned tamales & old war stories of the man.
And this; a parting gift made metaphor for life, and death,
Of an ending giving rise to new beginnings,
This may have been the single greatest lesson he left me with.

About the author

Christian Rivera Nolan grew up in his grandparent’s home in Santa Clara to a working-class Mexican-American household, raised by his mother and disabled brother. He studied Latinx Studies and Biology-Physiology. An aspiring physician, poet, and community organizer. He is a child of alcoholics, of divorce, and the son of a Navy veteran coping with Post Traumatic Stress and Mental Illness. He enjoys backpacking, spoken word poetry, and salsa dancing. He believes in growth through conflict and in the accumulation of knowledge through the service to others. Follow him on Instagram @asequoiatalks and check out his website: asequiatalks.com.
I. December, 1959
Dreaming of city life,  
bright nights, honking taxis,  
loud holiday bustle far, far from  
Florida, New York, from Bethlehem  
and a stable close with the breath of beasts,  
a chosen sapling reigned on a coffee table in a home  
where Carol intended to plant, then donate it 60 years hence.

II. December, 2019
Enthroned above a manmade lake  
where skaters play heedless of falling through ice,  
this same tree balances a glowing star created by a renowned architect, a 900 lb. crown with 3 million glittering crystals to capture and refract the light, and wears no Depression-era strings of cranberries, paper garlands, or tin cans, but a Jacob’s robe of 50,000 colored bulbs.

III. December, 2020
Limbs stripped, trunk milled and planed into lumber used by and for those like Jesus who’d had no place to lay their heads, the name of its glory day, “Rockefeller Center Tree Lighting 2019,” fire-etched on each piece like a brand burned onto ox hide or sheep horns like unseen maker’s marks carved by the artisans setting cathedral stones, this Norway spruce will be remembered in the 2x4’s hidden in the walls of new homes, bearing stresses, reinforcing, filling in gaps.

About the author
Elaine Wilburt lives in Maryland with her family and received a 2019 Creatrix Haiku Award. She is a copy editor for Better Than Starbucks. Her fiction and poems have appeared or are forthcoming in The Cresset, Little Patuxent Review, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Heart of Flesh and Route 7 Review.
Once upon a time, there was a poor struggling orphanage that was closing down due to lack of funds. Fortunately, the townspeople closest to the orphanage rallied together by working hard to find all of the little orphans some nice loving and caring homes. Much to their delight, their efforts were rewarded and all of the young children were happily adopted out into their new forever homes. That is to say, all of them except for one pair of raggedy looking and hungry little siblings. The young brother and sister had just recently arrived at the orphanage and had no clothes aside from the very worn and tattered attire they bore on their person. Being so young, their clothes would normally be getting too small for them as they grew. But since they had had so little to eat in the past few years, their clothes still clung misshapen and loosely on the underweight young pair.

Not knowing where else to turn, the mayor of the town asked this childless elderly couple if they wouldn't mind taking in the poor little girl and boy until a more permanent home could be found for them. The elderly duo were quite up in years and of limited income. However, since Christmas was approaching, they felt they had no choice but to open their home to the little orphaned duo.

Thus, the elderly man and his wife eagerly welcomed the hungry little pair into their home and, on the very first evening, began making some Christmas wreaths to sell in their shoe repair shop. With the holiday season coming into full swing, the wreaths made for a nice detail that people could purchase and hang on their doors. Over the past few years, the elderly gentleman would bring in the leftover cuttings from the tree farm nearby. And the elderly lady
would decorate them in a festive manner fit for the jingle bell season.

Tonight, though, her eyesight was failing and she couldn’t see well enough to put together the finishing touches on the Christmas wreaths. Deciding it was best to simply go on to bed with the evening hour turning into night, they tucked the little orphans to bed in the softest blankets they could find and then retired to their own room. Once the snoring of the elderly couple began echoing throughout their humble abode, the little kids quietly got up and tiptoed to the living room.

Having never made Christmas wreaths before, the young little girl and boy reached for the leftover cuttings and pricked their small fingers more than once. But before too long, they figured out how to nicely shape the wreaths. The next morning, when the elderly couple awoke, they found two of the loveliest wreaths they’d ever seen simply lying there in the living room waiting for them.

During the day, the elderly gentleman hung the wreaths in his store and the first customers who walked into his shoe repair shop bought them all right away, exclaiming all the while about how beautiful they were. Being unable to conceal their delight in this latest find of theirs, word about the elderly gentleman’s lovely Christmas wreaths soon spread throughout the entire town. People stopped by to clamor for more.

That evening, the elderly couple tried to make a few more wreaths before retiring to bed. But once again, the elderly lady struggled to see well enough to adequately finish putting together the lovely poinsettia shade of red and gold decor that helped make the wreaths so very pretty. The little orphaned brother and sister listened closely while tucked in their beds for the elderly couple’s snoring that they were certain they’d hear once again. As soon as the deep sonorous sound of the aged couple’s snoring manifested itself, the young little pair climbed out of their beds and softly tiptoed towards the living room. They immediate set about making some more Christmas wreaths. Now that they had a better knack of it, they were able to finish three whole bundles of wreaths before their own weary sleepiness set in.

The next morning, the aged couple awoke and gasped in bewilderment upon seeing how many elegant wreaths the children had made. The elderly man hung them in his shop and by mидday, all of them were sold— all the while with people still stopping in, hoping to find some wreaths remaining that they could purchase and take home with them.

Seeing how hard the little kids had worked during the night putting together such lovely wreaths, the aged couple used some of the extra money brought in from selling the wreaths that day and treated the impoverished little tykes to a delicious homemade steak dinner that evening followed by some homemade vanilla ice cream for dessert. The young pair had never eaten so well in their life and almost couldn’t believe such delicious food was really for them.

However, with the late hour approaching, the elderly couple tried to put together some more wreaths. They realized that they had better get to bed so that the elderly gentleman could be up in time to open his shop in the morning. With their tiny tummies full of from the heartiest meal they’d ever had, the little orphans waited once more for the sound of the elderly couple’s snoring to reverberate throughout their humble dwelling. Once the now familiar sound manifested itself, they quickly set out to making some of the Christmas wreaths. Now that making the wreaths was so very easy for them, they didn’t even prick their little fingers a single time. Before the sunlight of morning streamed in through the windows, four little bundles of Advent wreaths were lying in the living room, ready to greet the elderly couple and bring a smile to ease the worry lines that had been etched so deeply into their faces after years of financial concerns.

True to form, the elderly shoe repairman hung the charmingly beautiful Christmas
wreaths in his shop that morning. Some people even came from out of town to buy some of the lovely holiday decor. As soon as they all were sold, which sell out they did, the elderly lady decided to provide the young boy and girl with something special. Going shopping that day, by evening she came home with some brand-new clothes for the little ones, including some delightful elf costumes that happened to be on sale.

The mayor of the town, not wishing to neglect his duties, stopped by the elderly couple’s home, accompanied by his daughter, just after dinner to check on the welfare of the little brother and sister. To their delight, as soon as they rang the doorbell, out came two charming little elves to welcome them in. The little girl and boy were all rosy cheeked now and as cute as buttons in their Santa’s elves attire. “We simply must take them home!” the mayor’s daughter enthusiastically stated. And, with that, the little brother and sister were orphans, no more.

Not wishing to overlook the very great kindness of the elderly couple, however, the mayor declared they be commemorated by an annual Christmas wreath festival to be held by the town. A festival that would appeal to the young and old alike and feature homemade Christmas wreaths designed by the elderly couple, with the added elegant flourishes being completed by the little brother and sister. They would teach their classmates how to make and shape the Christmas wreaths so that everybody from miles around would visit their little town and be filled with the merry and loving spirit of Christmas.

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**About the author**

**Luisa Kay Reyes** has had pieces featured in "The Raven Chronicles", "Fire In Machines", "The Windmill", "Halcyon Days", "Fellowship of the King", "Enchanted Conversation: A Fairy Tale Magazine", the "Route - 7 - Review", "The Foliate Oak", "The Eastern Iowa Review", and other literary magazines. Her piece, "Thank You", is the winner of the April 2017 memoir contest of "The Dead Mule School Of Southern Literature". And her Christmas poem was a first place winner in the 16th Annual Stark County District Library Poetry Contest. Additionally, her essay "My Border Crossing" received a Pushcart Prize nomination from the Port Yonder Press. And two of her essays have been nominated for the "Best of the Net" anthology.
Family Sled

By L.B. Sedlacek

We wax our sleds all summer long in anticipation. Sleds of wood and iron – they’ve been in the family for years. Other kids have ones in bright plastic, but they never go as far in the snow as my wooden sled, the Flyer -- that seems so heavy when I carry it up the hill, but so fast when I come back down.

About the author

L.B. Sedlacek’s latest poetry books are "The Architect of French Fries" published by Presa Press and "Words and Bones" published by Finishing Line Press. Her poems have appeared in publications such as "Pure Francis," "The Broad River Review," "Third Wednesday," and "Mastodon Dentist." Her short fiction has been published in such places as "October Hill" and "The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature." She teaches poetry at local elementary and middle schools, publishes a free resource for poets "The Poetry Market Ezine," and was Poetry Editor for "ESC! Magazine." LB also enjoys swimming, reading, playing ukulele, and volunteering for her local humane society. Follow her on Twitter: @lbsedlacek and check out her website: http://www.lbsedlacek.com.
'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, every creature was stirring, especially the mouse.

“After him!” bellowed Commander Donnegal. Five soldiers whipped out their swords and charged after the tiny mouse, who escaped into a hole in the wall.

That was the scene that greeted Salis Brennan as he opened the door to Troop D’s barracks. While he had been gone, a mouse had found its way into the main sleeping quarters and caused an uproar. Before tonight no one had known that Commander Donnegal was deathly afraid of mice. When he had first spotted it, he had jumped onto a table, broken it, and caused the mouse to go haywire. The rest was history.

Aside from the broken table, blankets were strewn all over the room, mattresses thrown up against the walls, and smashed chairs. Someone had even stabbed a window with his sword during all the confusion. Now half the troop was hacking away at a hole in the wall where the mouse was hiding.

Salis stood in the doorway gawking at it all with a grin on his face until Commander Donnegal noticed him from the chair on which he was standing.

“Brennan!” he yelled, his face red as a tomato. “Go get Suri What’shername, and tell her to hurry!”

Salis scooted out the door again laughing. Suri Settergren was one of King Charles’ handymen, or in her case, the only female handyman on the payroll—and the best. From the way things looked in the barracks, if Suri didn’t get there soon, Troop D wouldn’t have a building left to live in!
By now the streets were thinning out, and it had started to snow. Already snow piles were forming in the corners of the houses. The houses Salis passed glowed with candles and firelight. In a few of them families were sitting down together eating their evening meal. He watched it all silently as he rounded the last corner before reaching Suri’s workshop.

Salis felt the sweat he’d worked up on the way over here begin to freeze. He knocked on the door, hoping Suri would open it quickly.

“Suri! Hurry up! It’s freezing out here!”

The door didn’t move.

Only when Salis hopped up and down to keep himself warm, did he notice the note on the door. It had fallen off and rested against the bottom of the wooden door.

“Gone to the market. Be back soon,” it said.

“The market!” Salis burst out. “Of all the crazy things!” What in the world was Suri doing at the market this time of night, and on Christmas Eve? Everyone knew the market closed at five. It was already past seven now.

He jiggled the doorknob. Maybe it would be better to wait inside until she came back. It couldn’t be any colder inside than out here in the snow.

The door was locked. Besides, Suri would be madder than Commander Donnegal if he broke her door down. Salis ran off in the direction of the market to look for her himself, his teeth chattering louder than the bells at St. Julia’s Cathedral.

The marketplace was totally empty except for an old drunk guy with a bottle of wine. Salis searched every side street leading off from the marketplace and even asked the drunk if he had seen Suri, but Suri wasn’t around.

“Oooooh!” Salis shivered through his thin army uniform. “Gotta find Suri, gotta find Suri.”

If he went back to the barracks without Suri, Commander Donnegal was sure to give him another demerit, especially since he was already pretty annoyed about the mouse incident.

Suddenly a flash of green three or four blocks ahead caught Salis’ eye. There was no mistake about it; that was Suri’s green hooded winter cloak. He recognized her hopping gait made by her two crutches and recently broken leg.

“Suri!” The snowy wind carried his voice away from her. Salis ran to catch up with her. Suri didn’t appear to have heard him. She kept hopping along slowly on her two homemade crutches.

“Sur—” Salis completely missed the patch of ice in front of him and landed flat on his back. *At least with the broken leg she can’t get too far out of sight*, he thought, waiting for his breath to return.

As he waited, Suri hopped forward a few more steps, looking all around her carefully.

“Almost as if she doesn’t want anyone to see her,” Salis whispered.

Then, after taking a final look around, Suri hobbled into a nearby alley.

Salis stood up now that he could breathe again. Whatever Suri was doing, she didn’t want anybody watching, and that was all the more reason for him to investigate. He crept noiselessly down the street, straining to hear anything.

He had reached a run-down, shady part of the city. The tramps hung out here, and children begged for food with hollow, sunken eyes. Salis kept one hand on the knife at his belt. A sword would have made him feel more comfortable, but he hadn’t earned one yet thanks to too many demerits...and if he didn’t hurry up and take Suri to the barracks, he would have another.

“Please, miss, could you spare a dime?” a child’s voice said.
Salis stopped, listening carefully.
“What happened to your fire?” That was Suri’s voice.
“It won’t stay put,” replied the child. “The wind keeps blowin’ it out, an’ with the snow fallin’, it’s even harder to relight it.”
An especially strong wind just then threatened to take Salis’ cap away. He grabbed onto it protectively.
From the next street sounds of wood being clanked together could be heard. Salis dared to take a peek at what was going on.
Suri had laid her crutches down and was sitting in the snow next to three poorly-dressed girls. She had just started a fire and was shielding it with her cape to keep the wind from blowing it out. The children looked at her hungrily with big eyes. The oldest one looked about twelve years old. The youngest couldn’t have been over five.
“There,” Suri said when the fire was blazing hot. “You’ll have to keep throwing wood on it throughout the night, or it’ll get too small and blow out again.”
The oldest girl nodded politely to her. “Thank you, miss. We appreciate it. May you have a merry Christmas.”
“Do the three of you know the Christmas story?” Suri was saying now.
“How the Christ child came to earth, miss?” answered the oldest. The younger two were either too cold or too afraid to speak.
Suri nodded. “And the hope he brought with him.”
None of them answered this time. Salis guessed that these kids had never had much to hope for. They looked up at her silently.
“It’s kind of like your fire,” Suri continued. “It was small at first and kept dying out, and then when it was big, it gave you hope and relief, didn’t it? It made you feel a little better.”
The youngest girl nodded. Her teeth had stopped chattering.
Suri drew her gently to her side and began wrapping her green cape around her.
“Back then,” she explained, “before the Christ child came, the world was like that. It was like a big, cold wasteland without any hope of light or warmth.” While she spoke, Suri slowly wrapped the cape around the child. “And when God sent the Christ child, there was hope, and everyone knew things would get better, and then they had something to live for.”
A smile had crept up on the face of the young child wrapped in the cape.
“Oh, look,” Suri said. She had reached into one of the many pockets on the side of her pants. “I forgot I had these in here. Do you all want them?” She held up a few meat sandwiches.
Salis turned away. Even though his body was freezing cold, he had forgotten all about it.
“Oh!” he heard Suri suddenly exclaim. “I have to be going. I might have a job waiting for me back home. You three take care, all right?” Sounds of her struggling to her feet with the two homemade crutches echoed around the corner. Salis scooted noiselessly behind the alley of the house behind him.
The Suri Settergren who came out of the alley was different from the one that had gone in. She hopped a little faster now, and her cheeks were jolly with red, but the most striking difference that stood out was her green handmade cape. She wasn’t wearing it.
Salis ran out from his hiding place. “Suri!”
This time she heard him. “Hey, Brennan!” she greeted. “What’re you doing out this time of night?”
“Looking for you.” He fell into step beside her. “Commander Donnegal wants you to
come repair the barracks. A mouse got in and caused all kinds of havoc.”

She grinned. “A mouse, huh? That sounds interesting. Well, let’s hurry back to my workshop before we freeze to death! I haven’t even had any supper yet.”

They moved faster.

“She, how come you’re out in the snow without your cape?” Salis finally asked.

She dismissed it with a wave of her hand. “It was so warm inside before I went out.”

Then Salis knew for certain. Suri had meant to go to the marketplace when no one was there. She had meant to pass by that street with a few meat sandwiches in her pockets. She had even purposely given those freezing children her cape, the one she had been so proud of and had made herself. Salis still remembered watching her hand-sew it painstakingly stitch by stitch, pricking her thumb, and ripping out bad stitches. After all the work she had done, she had simply given it away without a care.

Salis couldn’t help but see the tiny smile in Suri’s eyes. No, he was wrong. She had cared about it, or she wouldn’t have given it away in the first place. More importantly, Salis realized, she had given the three children much more than food and clothing. She had given them hope, hope for a better future.

Just like the hope that Christmas brings to the world, Salis thought. All at once the hold on his heart was released as he felt what he had been missing this Christmas season. A simple demonstration of kindness had done more for him than any present could.

Salis smiled as well and decided to keep her secret to himself.

“What’re you smiling about?” Suri’s voice had its old saucy tone back to it.

“Ah, I’m just happy it’s Christmas.”

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**About the author**

**Rebecca Linam** lives in Alabama and enjoys playing the harpsichord in her spare time. Her stories have been published in "Bards and Sages Quarterly," "Clubhouse," and "The Caterpillar," among others. For more, visit her online at [www.rebeccalinam.com](http://www.rebeccalinam.com) or find her on Twitter [@rebecca_linam](https://twitter.com/rebecca_linam).
Let it Snow

By Ishita Sharma

It was a casual day for Christmas - shopping and all - but to bump into somebody I didn't want to see wasn't part of my plan.

I was too busy listing off the people I had to buy gifts for in my head that I wasn't paying attention to where I was walking.

And it was then, that I noticed a pair of sneakers on the ground as the sun was blocked out. I tilted my head up to look at the culprit and I swallowed hard at the figure that made me stop.

Standing in front of me with his towering height was my ex-boyfriend. My weight of shopping bags in my arms felt heavier than before as I stared at him, scanning his appearance.

Along with this thick sweater, he was wearing a knitted beanie. His eyes were still as inexpressive as ever, but the more I stared at them, the more I got lost. Judging from the lack of shopping bags, I assumed that he would have just arrived. I, on the other hand, would have made Santa Claus proud with the amount of purchases.

I wanted to run away from him as fast as my black boots could take me, but I couldn't. My feet seemed to be glued to the sidewalk as I tried to formulate words inside my head. From the way I was acting, you would guess that we had a nasty break-up scenario.

If only that was the case.

We started going out a couple of months ago, because I finally told him how I felt. My friends urged me that I would regret it for the rest of my life if I didn't say it to him. To everyone's disbelief, he said yes to going out with me.

I thought it was mutual but, boy, I was wrong.

After the initial spark that only lasted a couple of weeks, it seemed like I was the one who pushed through the relationship and almost everything felt one sided. It was me who remembered the important dates, the one who initiated things, and the more time I spent with him, the more I felt as a burden. Of course, couldn't stand it after four months and I called it quits. And when I told him this, he had the same reaction he had when we got together - he grunted and nodded his head. Part of me was completely embarrassed and the other part agreed with him.

"Ivan." I finally gained the courage to greet him, forcing a polite smile on my face.

He nodded, curtly, as his eyes zoomed in on my shopping bags.

"Just a busy day of shopping." I said, awkwardly. After a few seconds passed and he hadn't said anything, I decided it was best to leave.

I turned around and started walking but, to my surprise, I felt his hand on my arm,
stopping me. My heart started to beat a little faster as I turned to face him. I gave him a questioning look as he ran a hand through his hair.

"I need your help in choosing a gift."
He must have noticed the confused look on my face, so he elaborated a tiny bit.
"I don't know what present to buy for a girl." He said. “Would you mind helping me?”

A girl.
Something in my chest dropped when he explained. Who was he shopping for?
A friend?
His sister?
A girl he likes?
"Is that okay?" He asked, nervously.
My mind told me to yell 'NO' and walk away, but hearing his voice, I agreed subconsciously.

He let a small smile form on his lips. He them glanced around the shops. "Where should we start?"
"How about that store?" I asked, pointing at the store a little further down the street where the words Bell's Gift Shop were written in bold, blue letters.

He shrugged as he walked forward, and I followed him. When we reached there, he turned to look at me once before pushing the glass door of the store and entering inside.

"Welcome," A girl greeted us. "Would you like to leave your bags here?"

I took up her offer, left all my bags by the counter and followed Ivan who was already gliding through the shelves. My plan was to just agree with the first appropriate thing he picks out in the store and leave. I knew that the more time I’d spend with him, the more I’d lose my sanity.

"What kind of a girl are we shopping for, anyway?" I asked, trying to make a conversation.

"She's really annoying," He deadpanned.

Should I worry with that answer or not?

"But she’s also always cheerful and smiling," He started to say. "And she's fierce and headstrong. Wouldn't take no for anything. I like that part about her."

My head lowered at the way he spoke about the mystery girl. His voice was laced with this kind of adoration that it took all I had to not let tears form in my eyes. Clenching my fists, I swallowed the sadness and forced a smile on my face. "She must be really lucky to be with you then."

"She probably hates me right now, though," He said, mindlessly, as he continued to look through the shelves. "And because of me, she probably hasn't been smiling too often."

"I'm going to look over there." I blurted out and walked away. If I had to hear another word of affection, I would have seriously started sniffling.

I gripped on the shelf before me. Memories of the time we spent together came rushing into my head. I had spent a few weeks convincing myself to move on and as soon as I'm almost done, he comes back and makes me fall in love with him again.

Lifting my gaze, I paused when I saw a figurine panda. It looked ridiculous with the way it was grinning and whoever painted it had put too much blush on its cheek.

"Well, at least one of us is smiling." I mumbled. Blinking at it, I mentally punched myself. As if being dramatic about this situation wasn't enough, I was now talking to a toy panda.

"There you are." Ivan rounded on the corner making me jump back. His gaze went to the panda and then at me.

It was time to put a stop to this thing.

"Look, I have to go. My mom texted me." I lied.
"Oh." He breathed out.
"I'm sorry, but good luck with your shopping." I told him and quickly turned around.
I picked up my shopping bags from the girl at the counter before walking towards my car. Stuffing everything into the backseat, I just sat there on the driver's seat, my hands resting on the steering wheel.
I shouldn't have come here today.
I rested my head and my hands on the steering wheel and let out a sigh. Why did I fall for him, anyway? Maybe it was because he was always kind. Even with his troublesome nature, he never got mad at me and tolerated me with the kind of patience no one else had. And suddenly the memory of him running onto the field, towards me when I had just won a football game came into my mind. The referee was blowing his whistle an insane amount of times, asking him to leave, but he continued to run towards me, and then gave me a hug. The memory finally made the tears spill out, rolling on my cheeks. I didn't wipe them away. At least I was alone. Or so I thought.
Hearing someone tap on the window, I muttered a curse. Lifting my head up, I almost jumped in my seat to see it was Ivan.
When he saw me crying, he didn't think for a second more before reaching for my door handle and opening my car door.
"Yes?" I said, trying to sound confident but it came out all squeaky.
He bent down, pulled me into is arms and rested his chin on my head.
"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." I breathed out and hugged him back.
He sighed before beginning again. "I know you probably hate me right now, but just please accept this. I promise you won't see me again." He slowly handed me a small brown bag.
Reaching out, I took the bag but before I could open it, he began again.
"You were my first girlfriend. You could imagine my shock when the a girl asked me if I wanted to go out with her."
My eyes widened a bit and my eyebrows furrowed.
"But slowly, I fell in love with you. You were the only one who looked at me as if I wasn’t a weird kid who avoided everyone."
I froze in my spot.
"And I didn’t know what to do and I know you deserve the best, but I was afraid of doing something that made me seem clingy."
I opened my mouth to say something, but then decided against it.
“I shouldn’t have let you walk away.”
While I was too in shock to reply, he took this as a sign that I didn’t want to talk to him.
He got out of my car and walked away, his hands in his pockets.
Looking down at the paper bag, I slowly opened it. Pulling out the single thing inside, my heart almost stopped.
It was a panda.
A ridiculously grinning panda.

About the author

Ishita Sharma is an eighteen year old psychology student from the UK. A proud Gryffindor, she approaches things that excite her with energy and enthusiasm. When she isn’t writing, she can be found dribbling a ball on the basketball court, taking laps in the swimming pool or whipping up her favourite treats in the kitchen.
About the artist

Edward Michael Supranowicz has had artwork and poems published in the US and other countries. Both sides of his family worked in the coalmines and steel mills of Appalachia.
Wintery Landscape
By Peter H. Dietrich

Wintery landscape, wintery blues,
Go pull on your favorite shoes,
Let’s plant footprints deep in the snow,
Running hand in hand as the cold nights glow,
We’ll skip along to old Jack Frost’s tune,
While singing praises to the silvery moon,
And as the countless flakes fall glistening from above
We’ll melt them one by one with our shining love.

Wintery landscape, wintery dreams,
Go dig out all your favorite themes,
Let’s throw snowballs without any rules,
Then warm the cockles of our hearts beside the blazing Yules,
Old Santa is flying by with his trusty reindeer,
The kids all go rushing out to grab some good cheer,
And when the stars are twinkling in the dark sky up above
We’ll capture them and pin them to our ever-glowing love.

Wintery landscape, wintery trees,
Go grab the ring with the jangling keys,
Let’s open the hearts of all the sleeping flowers,
And rescue the lonely damsels from their ivory towers,
Then we’ll hurry on to unlock every solid door,
Behind which the lonely hearts are crying out for more,
And when the tears and smiles are all gathered up above
We’ll drink them as a warming toast to our beloved love.
Wintery landscape, wintery world,
Go stoke the fire where the old cat is curled,
Let’s raid the kitchen for the freshly baked mince-pies,
Then reap all the goodness from our mother’s knowing eyes,
The carol singers ring and serenade the silent night,
While the mulled wine is steaming to put the whole world right,
And when our deepest wishes are all floating up above
We’ll let them go and watch them as they carry off our love.

Wintery landscape, wintery blues,
Go take the gifts to those who cannot choose,
Let’s tell the magic story to those who want to hear,
Then count the booming chimes that ring in the brand new year,
Warm kisses in the winter cost nothing to give or take,
And hugging distant family relieves the long heartache,
So when the cold comes creeping in from somewhere up above,
We’ll warm the wintery world again with our eternal love.

About the artist

Peter H. Dietrich is a reporter/film-maker/spinner-of-tales originally from Northampton, in the UK, and has been travelling the world non-stop for over 40 years, writing non-stop all the way in different forms. He has traversed the Sahara, been to the Amazon rain forest, and spent four seasons in the French Alps. He has lived in Morocco, France, Tunisia, Portugal, Spain, Germany and Poland. Eleven years living in Ukraine led to eleven amazing summers exploring in the Crimea, and his films were among the first to extoll the virtues of that extraordinary place, before the political upheavals. He is currently living in Bulgaria, working on 2 musicals, one a comedy, the other a tragedy. The musical-comedy has also been published as a children’s storybook, with original illustrations.
Twas the Week after Christmas

By Sandy Stert Benjamin

Twas the week After Christmas
before the new year
My stocking was tattered
drank all my good cheer.

The guests have now gone home
it’s me by myself
What a mess I am left with
dead tree, cardboard elf.

There are pieces of ribbon
and dried scraps of food
The dog won’t go near it
which seems kind of rude.

Just one week ago
the place was abuzz
Now the fridge is near empty
except for the fuzz.

The memory seems distant
the highs are now lows
I’ll be rummaging forever
through boxes and bows.

I’m glad it’s all over
at least for this year
The cleanup has started
I create what I fear!

About the author

Sandy Stert Benjamin is a writer and poet, who enjoys finding the humor in everyday situations.
This month's topic: Making Christmas Stories Fresh

By M. Sakran

If you are a writer trying to write a Christmas story, one challenge you might be faced with is, how do you make your story fresh? Many Christmas stories revolve around similar themes. Some of them include:

- “Two hours to the big kiss” – If you have not read stories like this, you most likely have seen T.V. movies like them. A man and woman are thrown together over Christmas, they have their differences, but by the end of the story they fall in love, which culminates in ... the big kiss.

- Redemption and discovering the true meaning of Christmas – The most obvious example of this is Charles Dickens’ A Christmas Carol, but this is a theme you can see in a number of other stories.

- Santa and Santa magic – These are the stories with elves, reindeer, and the North Pole. These stories have magic in them where Santa makes the impossible, possible.

- Religion – You might feel that not enough Christmas stories actually contain religion. There are number that do though. These stories focus on the Christmas story, prayer, miracles, and redemption.

- Family drama – These are stories that focus on family dysfunction that is amplified during the holidays. Some of these stories can be very serious, whereas others might be on the lighter side.

There are other themes as well, but they can all sometimes feel like they are packaged in boxes. They can feel a bit predictable, overdone, and formulaic. After you’ve read a dozen stories, they can all start to feel the same. It can seem like there are only seven presents under the tree, and you have already given them more than once. How do you come up with a new gift for your readers? Here are some suggestions:
1. First have an interesting story.
   This is really important. Before you focus on making your story fresh and new, make it interesting. Make sure the characters are engaging, the plot is surprising, and the story flows. No matter what kind of story you write, you should focus on this. It is a critical part in making any story good, and something you need before you can make it fresh. Also, having an interesting story, will help whatever you write about feel more engaging for your readers.

2. Use the mold, but break the mold.
   Think of the “two hours to the big kiss” stories. How do you make these new? One idea might be to keep the general idea, but do something different with it. As an example, in these stories, the male and female leads are usually shown at the start and it can seem really obvious he, will end up with her. You can change that around though. Maybe the initially introduced male and female characters don’t get together. Maybe she falls in love with his brother. Maybe he falls in love with the girl he’s always known but hasn’t noticed.
   In another twist, you can make the couple obvious but the situation different. Maybe instead of meeting for the first time, they could be an estranged husband and wife. Instead of falling in love for the first time, they could fall in love again.
   This same idea applies to other themes. Maybe a redemption story is told not from the perspective of the one being redeemed, but from the perspective of the person they are redeemed in association with. In other words, what if A Christmas Carol was told from Cratchit’s perspective instead of Scrooge’s? It might make for a very different story.

3. Mix it with a different genre
   One way to make your Christmas story unique is to mix it with an uncommon genre. Ever read a science fiction Christmas story? How about a steampunk one? If not, something like that might be just the thing to make your Christmas story standout and not seem like the rest. There are a number of genres you could explore. You could keep the common themes mentioned above or do something different.

4. Add unique elements
   Imagine a Christmas story with bodybuilders. Or one with race cars. Or maybe one with astronauts. Or one in Madrid. These kinds of unique elements can help a Christmas story feel fresh, even if it is otherwise a standard type of story. A story of redemption takes on a new element if the redeemed person is on a space station or speeding down a race track.

5. Explore different traditions
   Different cultures celebrate Christmas differently. Many of the Christmas stories you come across though don’t really explore this. They might tend to focus on what might be thought of as a standard American Christmas.
   This of course is not bad, but if you want your story to be fresh, you might consider framing your story around a different tradition. Maybe, for example, you could explore the Russian Orthodox practice of celebrating Christmas. Depending on the calendar they use, there are some in the faith who don’t celebrate Christmas until January 7. You could look at this and other elements such as music and food and include those in your story. You could tell a traditional Christmas story but in a way that might seem completely new to your readers.
Christmas 2019

There are a lot of ways to make a Christmas story fresh. These are just some ideas. Remember though, don’t make your stories too different. When readers read a Christmas story, they are expecting something. They are expecting tradition. Sure, tradition can livened up a bit, but it still needs to be tradition. Maybe you serve pheasant for Christmas instead of turkey, but you probably shouldn’t serve squid.

About the author

**M. Sakran** is that guy who walks those dogs. He is usually found standing by the side of the road while one of his dogs plays in a ditch and the other wonders why he isn’t getting a treat right now. When not catering to canines, he tries to be a writer. He’s had over ninety items published, including a collection of poetry called *First Try*, and has also self-published an eBook called *Understanding: poems with explanations*. You can find his poetry related blog at msakran.wordpress.com and his website at msakran.com.

Coming up:

There are still more issues to come including:

-- Our [overdue] "Sprummer" issue coming in January
-- A two-volume Pain-themed issue

While you wait for those, remember to stay positive, pay it forward, treat others how you would like to be treated, express gratitude, and take care of yourself!

...until next time...