

Carol at Christmas

Now: Is it him?

As I roused out of my half-awake trance, the noise behind me resolved into something I could identify: sock-covered feet on carpeted stairs. Then it stopped, and I wondered if I had dreamed it.

I had been foolish to get so comfortable in Terry's lounge, a chair far more luxurious than anything I would own. The ever-shifting flame of my candle had been leading the Christmas tree's shadow in a dance from the picture window's thick curtains to the wall behind the piano and back again. If the noise hadn't roused me, I probably would not have noticed when the flame went out. The shadows would have continued dancing on the backs of my eyelids until six-year-old Jacob stormed down the stairs at first light to see what Santa had brought.

Maybe it's him, I thought. Reflexively, I glanced down at my duffle bag on the floor – the tools I carried in case this year, at long last, I got to fulfill my promise. But then I came fully awake and realized that he wouldn't come as footsteps on the stairs. He would just be there, all at once, without warning.

It's not him.

Then: In the yard of Dad's old house in Oklahoma I played football with myself, throwing the ball in high parabolas that let me run underneath as I imagined the two teams around me. My mittens made the ball hard to grip, but the wind was too chilly to take them off. Maybe it would even snow, and at the age of ten I would see my first white Christmas.

I had looked for my brother Jackie, but he had been drafted into some holiday project that I was too young for. I seemed to be too young for everything this Christmas. The Chosen were up to something big, but no one wanted my help. I had no idea what it was.

And then I put it together.

I had to get out of there. Now.

Way back: Every spring, the Babylonians had a festival they called Zagmuk. The old year was over, and for 12 days the great god Marduk battled the forces of primordial chaos for the right to define the new year. He always won, and the calendar was renewed.

Because it was so important for Marduk to win, every year the Babylonians sent him help: their best warrior, the king. They sacrificed him at the beginning of the festival and went kingless for 12 days. At the end of the festival, with the new year ensured, a new king was crowned.

Now: But the sock-covered feet did belong to someone. Not Jacob, who had yet to grasp the concept of stealth. If the stairs had creaked louder, I might have thought Terry was coming down to pour us each a nightcap and try to recreate one of our all-night bull sessions in the dorm. Or it might have been Marianne, as unlikely as that seemed. She might have awakened in the night with an overwhelming need to break the loneliness of my annual vigil, which she doubtlessly saw as yet another of my life's many vacuums. Like Nature, Marianne abhorred vacuums. She found it tragic that I had nowhere else to go on Christmas, and every year she invited another of her unmarried girlfriends to balance the table.

But Marianne would not have lingered on the stairs. Ten years of motherhood had made her decisive. Children, she reasoned, needed the security of believing that their parents had things well in hand. They could learn indecision and hesitancy elsewhere.

My stealthy companion had already learned them, maybe from me. Each step down was followed by a pause, and a new opportunity to reconsider. I fished a fresh candle out of the pocket of my sweatshirt, then leaned over the end table to light it from the nub of the old. At my first motion a step-in-process stopped. I made sure the wick had caught, then blew out the old candle and shifted the new into the cordial glass I had appropriated to protect the flame. From that posture it was almost natural for me to look up and see her.

"Hi Carol," I said in a voice soft enough to be heard on the stairs, but not much further. "Can't sleep?"

Carol's shrug was inhibited by having her right hand on the rail and her left behind her back. "Not really," she said, meaning either that she couldn't really sleep, or that my deduction wasn't really correct.

Her shadow flickered, jagged and gigantic on the stairs as she took a few more hesitant steps. "You weren't moving, so I thought maybe you were asleep."

She was all the way down now, but still keeping her distance. The right hand fell to her side, while the left remained twisted behind her as if some bully were trying to make her say uncle. She wore an old-fashioned pink nightshirt that came down to mid-calf, and red slipper-socks with a Disney princess on them. Her shoulder-length blonde hair seemed to amplify whatever candlelight fell on it.

"Did you come down to see the presents?" I speculated. At nine-thirty Marianne had remanded the kids to bed until first light, and then Terry and I had carried a king's ransom in from the garage. (As the only mechanically inclined adult in the house, I foresaw a morning's worth of construction projects.)

Carol sidled towards the tree, not looking down at the packages she wasn't supposed to see yet, and keeping herself between me and whatever was behind her back. I tilted my head just enough

to indicate my curiosity. Sheepishly, she brought forward a book-shaped package wrapped in striped paper. “I was going to sneak it under the tree,” she confessed.

“You know I didn’t get you anything,” I reminded her.

She nodded. “You don’t give Christmas presents, so you don’t want to get any back. Mom explained it to us.” She looked right and then left at nothing in particular. “But ... I didn’t want you not to have a present, and if you were asleep I wasn’t going to tell anybody it was from me. The card says it’s from Santa. You don’t have to give Santa any presents.”

Carol had explained the nonexistence of Santa to me three years before, but she still played along for Jacob’s benefit. And now for mine, it seemed.

Then: Without a single thought or preparation, I left the football on the cold ground and ran. I vaulted our chain-link fence into the Knowles’ back yard. They were also of the forty Chosen, so I couldn’t stay there. I jumped their fence as well, and then three more until I was in a yard I didn’t recognize. From there I got to the alley and ran two more blocks before I stopped to catch my breath and listen for pursuit. My lungs hurt from the cold air and I was sweating under my coat, but I had to keep moving. It wouldn’t be long before someone noticed I was gone, and then they’d be combing the neighborhood in cars. I had to get far away and hide. But where?

In September Jackie and I had ridden our bikes all the way downtown and back. I had never been there by myself or on foot, but I knew I could make it.

The stores would still be open. They’d be warm.

Way back: One year’s king had a brilliant idea: Why not resign and let some poor schmuck be king long enough to get sacrificed? At the end of the festival, after Marduk’s great victory, he could reclaim the crown and rule for another year.

True believers must have been horrified by this scheme, but Marduk kept beating back the primordial chaos and the years rolled on. After two or three generations, no one remembered that they had ever sacrificed the real king.

That’s how holiday customs are: The way your parents did it is the way it’s always been done.

Now: When I asked how Marianne had explained my aversion to presents, Carol protested: “But you do give presents, Uncle Mike. I really like your birthday presents.”

Ten-year-olds make the best lawyers. I rephrased the question. “Did your mom explain why I don’t give *Christmas* presents?”

Carol’s brow wrinkled into a parody of the expression Terry used to wear during exams. “I think it had something to do with your religion.”

I could picture Marianne making up something like that. I doubted that Terry had told her the real story. (Or explained much of anything beyond shaking his head and saying, “You can’t imagine what his family was like.”) He probably didn’t even remember it.

Or Carol could just be guessing. She was, for her age, an amazing guesser. I glanced down to check that my duffle bag was safely closed, then looked quickly away from it. “What religion do you think that is?” I asked. I had no idea what she would say, because I could hardly have answered the question myself.

Like Marianne, she said “Well ...” to stall for time to think. “Isn’t your Dad the guy on TV who yells all the time?”

Dad was better known as Daniel DeSalvo, televangelist and founder of the DeSalvo Institute. And if the yelling of his tiny image inside a television had impressed Carol, I was thankful that he had never towered over her in person. The thought made me grit my teeth.

And then I put it aside. Dad wasn’t here, after all. He and Jackie would be in Oklahoma tonight. The midnight service was over by now, so either they were sitting up drinking or he was in bed with the younger woman he’d married after Mom died. In the house across the compound, Jackie’s wife Bonny and their four kids would be safely asleep (unless someone was sneaking down to look under the tree). In the morning there would be an emperor’s ransom in presents for everyone, and a feast the like of which I would probably never see.

Then: I didn’t even really know what they wanted out of me. I didn’t remember the Event, I just knew the story they told: One time, years before, there had been a miracle. A bright light had come down from above, hit me, and spread out among them. And for a time -- a second, ten minutes, an hour (it always varied with the teller) -- all forty of them had been united in a single consciousness.

Dad had been a struggling tent-revivalist then: small towns, small crowds, and never enough money in the baskets. But after the Miracle it all turned around. The Forty were bound to him, bound to his mission -- whatever he said it was. They had a sense of vision and purpose. They’d been chosen by God to briefly share a small slice of the Divine Mind.

And they desperately wanted it to happen again.

If I had done it, I didn’t know how. At that age I would have done whatever they told me good boys do, but I couldn’t help them no matter how hard they begged or bribed or punished me. And yet, strange things continued to happen in my presence, even if I did not intend them. Dad and the Chosen became more and more convinced that I was the Miracle Boy. In time I persuaded them that I was not in control, but that just made them work on my unconscious. They experimented with fear: Maybe a miracle would happen if I believed I was in danger, if I believed I was lost, if I believed Jackie was in danger. One time they starved me, trying to imitate Jesus’

thirty day fast in the desert. I don't know what convinced them to relent and feed me after only a week.

Phenomena continued, but nothing that did Dad's ministry any good. The Lord was moving in mysterious ways.

Assuming that I came from the Lord.

Way back: Over the centuries, traditions made their way from Babylon to Persia, Persia to Greece, and Greece to Rome. The Romans had a different god who combined the aspects of calendar and chaos: Saturn. His week-long Saturnalia surrounded the winter solstice rather than the vernal equinox, and the lengthening of days replaced the sprouting of plants as the sign that chaos had been defeated for another year.

Having done away with kings and human sacrifice, the Romans expressed the potency of chaos in a more republican fashion: During Saturnalia the social order turned upside down. Masters served their slaves, and plebians strutted through the Forum like patricians.

The Romans also added candles to the tradition, and presents.

Now: Carol made several tries at guessing how my religion might keep me from giving presents. Given her age and how little I had told her, her guesses (if incorrect) were remarkably plausible. I had to do little more than shake my head for her to accurately debunk her own theories: If I were anti-Christian (or just anti-Dad) I wouldn't have watched her church Christmas pageant. If I were anti-materialist I wouldn't give birthday presents. And none of her theories explained why I stayed up all night.

After a long silent stretch of brow-wrinkling and lip-pursing, she realized she needed more information. "This is one of those long stories, isn't it?"

I nodded, then looked meaningfully in the direction of the grandfather clock Marianne had inherited from her grandfather.

"I'm not sleepy," Carol protested.

I sighed. Like most stories from my childhood, this one wasn't appropriate for children. "It's kind of scary," I warned. "And there's a ghost in it."

"Good," she said. "I like ghosts."

Then: In the beginning I had just thought *downtown*. But long before I got there I knew where I was really headed: Alvy's, our local imitation of a big-city department store. Four stories high, it had been built next to the town square in the boom years before the Depression, and had two more years to live before the WalMart on the highway killed it. I arrived as the shadows of the

bank and the town hall reached the far corner of the square. Lights were coming on as the early sunset approached.

I had never been inside Alvy's during the Christmas season, so at first I stayed outside and mingled with the clumps of people admiring the window displays. I kept needing to wipe my runny nose on my mittens, but otherwise I didn't feel cold and my lungs didn't hurt anymore. I had settled down to a businesslike pace for most of my journey -- fast enough to keep me warm, but slow enough not to pant. I had stayed off the busy streets and hid whenever I saw a car of a familiar make. All the close calls had turned out to be imaginary.

After examining each of Alvy's windows three times, I began to chill. And I worried about being seen. I couldn't keep track of the traffic behind me, and the crowd wasn't thick enough to hide my red jacket from all angles.

I didn't want to stay outside, and I didn't dare go in. Because Alvy's had something I wasn't supposed to see: Santa Claus. Santa, Dad claimed, was just Satan with the letters re-arranged. No son of his was going to sit in a false god's lap and pray for presents.

I wavered. And then I went inside.

Way back: The Norsemen had their own winter solstice festival: Yule. Like so much of their religion, it was grim and bloody and practical. Three seasons of the year they lived off the land, but the harsh northern winters forced them to eat their cattle. With little to forage under the snow, an animal in winter was just another mouth to feed, and (like the Norsemen themselves) the cattle got thinner as the season wore on.

Sensible people that they were, the Norsemen decided early which animals they would eat this winter, and slaughtered them at Yule while they were still fat. For one day, meat was plentiful and fresh. The Norsemen gorged themselves in anticipation of the lean days to come.

But earthly reality, they understood, is a mere reflection of the world above. On the night of Yule, Odin passed overhead in a cart pulled by flying goats. Looking down on his people, he picked out the ones who would not survive the winter.

Now: "Is it a real ghost?" Carol asked.

Terry and Marianne didn't believe in ghosts, so I had avoided discussing them with the kids. But one particularly reckless evening when I was stuck for a story, I had told Carol about the spirits she lived with. Terry's house wasn't haunted exactly, but it did have two minor poltergeists who did things like drop car keys behind sofa cushions. (Lots of houses have them. I don't know where they come from.) I didn't intend for her to take me seriously, and she had appeared not to. But she didn't forget. Whenever I visited now, she regaled me with the recent adventures of the household spirits, weaving their exploits out of the ordinary calamities of a family with two careers and two children.

“Real enough for me,” I said.

“Like Dickens?”

“Not exactly. Maybe he was a long time ago.”

Some children whine to get what they want; Carol spoke with a softly voiced determination that I have never been able to resist. “I want to hear the story.”

The best thing for everybody was to get her back to bed as soon as possible. We stared at each other until I blinked. *He’s not coming anyway*, I thought.

“It’s long,” I warned. “You probably want to sit down.” She wasn’t so big yet that I couldn’t still carry her up the stairs. If she sat down she might fall asleep before I got to the bad parts.

Carol held the present to her chest while she decided where to sit. A year earlier she would have climbed into my lap, or we’d have scrunched together side-by-side in the lounge. She used to run across a room and jump on me, the way that Jacob still did. But recently she had developed a prepubescent self-consciousness. Maybe it was just courtesy. Maybe she was waiting for me to pat my leg or scunch to one side of the chair or just pluck her up in my arms and set her down on my lap. But I was getting self-conscious too.

Still hugging the present, Carol slipped quietly into the antique wooden rocker on the other side of the end table. The candle between us was too bright to look at directly, so we both watched the tree and the dancing shadows behind it.

We had already been talking as softly as thieves, but now I began compressing the natural music of my voice down to a hypnotic drone. I was determined to reach my conclusion by as round-about a path as possible. “You know where Christmas comes from, don’t you?” I asked.

“Jesus was born,” she answered without hesitation.

“That’s one story,” I said.

Then: Alvy’s seemed brighter than a summer noon. I wandered aimlessly in the dazzle until I realized I was hot, then unbundled myself and began to get my bearings. Santa held court in the center of the main floor, where the second-floor mezzanine allowed two stories of headroom. They needed almost all of it for the biggest, greenest, bushiest Christmas tree I had ever seen, decorated with white lights and red ribbons and styrofoam stars.

Santa looked just like his pictures and sat throned as regally as any false god could be, attended by green-smocked elves who (if Dad was right) were themselves some species of demon. A long line of worshippers stretched down the center aisle, past a display of men’s ties and the perfume counter.

I could not guess how long a wait the line represented. Most of the children in it were smaller than me, and accompanied by a parent. Again I wavered. Merely standing in the line would be a great sin, and yet I was sure no one would look for me there. And was I not already in the process of thwarting my father and whatever miracle-producing ritual the Chosen had planned? Perhaps I was damned already, and sitting on the knee of this fatherly false god could produce no more harm than I had already called down upon myself. He looked so kind, so bright, so colorful.

And then I saw the other one.

Right behind Santa stood a bum, a big scary homeless-looking guy. He was tall but scrawny and his clothes were old. He hadn't shaved, his teeth were crooked, and I expected him to smell bad. I couldn't imagine why the store let him stand behind Santa, or why he didn't scare off all the kids.

He saw me looking at him, and flashed me a big, creepy, crooked-toothed smile.

I had to leave.

Way back: Not long after Rome lost its Republic and became an Empire, Jesus lived and died. Christianity was born -- but not Christmas.

For the first few centuries of the Christian era, Easter was the big holiday. By the time the church got around to celebrating Jesus' birthday, no one remembered when it was. The gospels were no help; Luke's Christmas story says only that "it came to pass in those days" -- whenever they were. Some details about the shepherds might point to spring. Or not.

But everyone knew when Saturnalia was. The festival got more popular all the time, especially among the poor people the church wanted to convert. It seemed like everybody had a big December holiday. Sol Invictus, the unconquered Sun, was reborn each year on December 25. And the Persian savior god Mithras celebrated his birthday on December 25 also.

Demanding that people give up their favorite holiday season, the bishops realized, was bad marketing. So they needed a Christian reason to celebrate in late December.

And Jesus needed a birthday.

Now: "They killed the king?" Carol asked, her eyes big and shining over the candle flame.

Human sacrifice, I realized a second too late, was an unfortunate feature to include in a go-to-sleep story. I tried to act like it was no big deal. "People did things like that in those days," I said. "You only got to be king for a year."

"So why did anybody want to be king?"

“They really believed, I guess. If you think you’re going to help the great god Marduk battle the forces of chaos, maybe dying doesn’t seem so bad.”

Carol’s brow wrinkled again, while her innate idealism battled with her innate pragmatism. I waited for the outcome. “I don’t think I want to be king,” she concluded.

Carol was wide awake now. She pulled her legs up onto the chair and hugged them, crushing the package between her thighs and chest. If she had been heavier, the rocker would have tipped over backwards.

She peppered my lecture with more questions than a roomful of freshmen: Did queens get sacrificed too? During Saturnalia, did kids get to send their parents to bed? Did we overeat on Christmas because of the Romans or the Norsemen?

“Maybe this isn’t such a good bedtime story,” I suggested after describing Yule, but she was having none of it.

“Bedtime was hours ago. This is a middle-of-the-night story.”

When we got to the Christians, she repeated my more controversial statements nonjudgmentally, as if she were just trying them out. “They stole Saturnalia,” she said.

And as I talked, I worried. Maybe Marianne would get up and be annoyed with us. Maybe I was undoing years of Carol’s religious training. I might have worried that she would repeat the whole story to Marianne and get me in trouble, but I didn’t. Practically from the cradle, Carol had been conspiring with my cat-in-the-hat style of babysitting. She never lied to her parents, but she always seemed to know what part of the story to leave out.

“So that’s how we get here,” I concluded. “The date, the 12 days, caroling, presents, candles, the cart pulled by flying animals, the big meal--”

“And trees?”

I should have known that I couldn’t ignore something that was eight feet tall and standing right in front of us. I looked at the clock, which was readable when the candle flickered in just the right way. “Are you sure you’re not getting tired?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“You know, if you went to sleep now, when you woke up it would be morning and you could open your presents.”

She looked straight ahead and slightly up, at the unlit star. “But then Mom and Dad would be up, and Jacob would be running around, and you wouldn’t finish the story.”

I acknowledged that she was probably right.

“And you still haven’t told me about the ghost.”

Way back: Trees happened in stages. Outside the tropics, evergreens and winter solstice have gone together for as long as anyone can remember, because all the other trees look dead then. Evergreens represent the hope that the forces of order will win out again this year and life will go on. The Romans decorated the Saturnalia with evergreen branches, similar to our wreathes.

According to legend, when St. Boniface brought Christianity to Germany he cut down an oak that had been sacred to the German pagans, and an evergreen sprung up in its place. So he made the evergreen the symbol of German Christianity. Later on Martin Luther had the idea of bringing the trees inside and decorating them with candles -- something no fire code would allow today. The real Christmas miracle was that Germany didn’t burn to the ground.

Then: Outside, it had gotten dark and seemed much colder to me. I thought about finding another store, but I realized that all the stores downtown would be closing soon. There had to be some other warm place to go on Christmas Eve.

And then I realized that there was: a church. But not our church.

The Methodist church across the square wasn’t as big as Dad’s new building out on the highway, but it was made of red brick and looked older and classier. For Christmas they had constructed a little stable on the lawn out of hay bales and boards, and a couple of real sheep were milling around the plywood cut-out shepherds and wise men. Inside they put a manger with a doll for baby Jesus and a plywood Mary and Joseph.

I’d never been in another denomination’s church. “What if the world ends while you’re sitting in the wrong church?” I’d heard Dad ask from the pulpit. “What will Jesus think?”

None of the Chosen would be there. And if any of the Methodists had come to our revivals, I probably looked a lot different now than I did in a white robe with the spotlight on me. At least I hoped I did.

The sundown service was almost over, so I sat in the back and scrunched down as small as I could. I wasn’t sure whether I should sing, but all the hymns were the same and I knew them. When they recessed to *Joy to the World* I kept my seat and pretended to read the hymnal. Before long they had a children’s pageant, and then a choir concert after that. People looked at me a little, but if anybody recognized me they didn’t let on.

During the concert I saw the bum from Alvy’s, on the other side of the church. He recognized me, and I looked away. I wondered why they didn’t throw him out, because he looked awful. But then I thought: *If they start throwing people out because they aren’t dressed right, I’ll have to leave too.* So then I was glad he was there, as long as he stayed far away.

After the concert I made believe I was invisible, and no one bothered me. I continued paging through the hymnal until they turned out the lights for midnight service. In the total darkness the

minister lit a single candle and said something about Jesus being the light of the world. With each reading or song a few more candles got lit, until at the end they gave candles to everyone and passed the flame from person to person.

When the flame came to me, I turned to light my neighbor's candle. And it was him, the bum. I didn't know how he could have gotten there. He smiled his crooked-toothed smile again, and I almost dropped my candle. But I lit his, and then I looked away. He smelled just like I had imagined, like old garbage in the summer.

Every candle was lit by then, and the church was almost as bright as Alvy's. They played *Joy to the World* again, and I knew I had to leave. I didn't look back at the bum. I lost track of him in the traffic jam at the door, and after a while I couldn't even smell him.

The wind blew out my candle before I even got outside, and it seemed horribly cold now. I didn't know where to go next. Too late, I imagined hiding somewhere in the church and sleeping there. But people were still flowing out the door, and I wouldn't be able to hide if I drew attention to myself by fighting my way back in.

It was past midnight now. Whatever the Chosen had been planning to do to me, if I hadn't imagined the whole thing, probably would have happened at midnight. So I was probably safe from that now, or I would be soon. I could just go home.

Except that I'd run away and screwed up the plan. When I got home Dad would probably be drunk and furious. Right now Jackie was probably catching the worst of it for not keeping an eye on me, whatever other tasks they'd assigned him. But he'd be forgotten as soon as I stepped in the door.

There was no way I was going home. I'd freeze to death first.

Now: I'd often imagined telling Carol about the occult side of my life and the long strange trip from Miracle Mike to whatever I was now. But I had pictured her older, at least a teen-ager. I trusted that eventually she'd grow into a wise and insightful young woman, one who could listen even to a story like mine and judge it on its merits.

"Uncle Mike?"

Unlike most adults, I never talked down to Carol. I always answered her questions. If she didn't understand and lost interest in the explanation, I dropped it. But I had never assumed that the truth was beyond her understanding.

Don't start now.

"I was ..." Every way I could think to start sounded clumsy. "Things were strange for me as a kid, because I was always *different*. I used to see things that other kids didn't see. And sometimes strange things would happen around me. Like I drew them to me or something."

Carol nodded, which was not at all the reaction I'd been expecting. "Like ghosts," she said.

"Sometimes." I thought she was taking this remarkably well. Maybe I had underestimated her.

"Like that time outside the Mall, when the woman came up and asked you where her daughter was, and Mom said there was nobody there."

Maybe I had seriously underestimated her. Marianne and I had dropped the subject like a hot rock, and (at least as I remembered it) my side of the conversation wouldn't have given Carol's imagination much to work with.

"Did you see her?"

Carol shook her head. "I just heard the voice."

"That was three years ago. Why didn't you ever say anything?"

She shrugged and looked a little guilty. "I thought it was something we weren't supposed to talk about."

I felt stupid: In all the years of watching her hide our adventures from her parents, I had never thought that she might be hiding things from me. I didn't know what to say.

It was Carol who proposed a solution to our conversational impasse: "You could go on with the story now."

Way back: For centuries after December 25 picked up the name Christmas, it continued to resemble Saturnalia more than the holiday we know today. Mobs of the poor would elect a Lord of Misrule to lead them in every manner of drunken mischief. They'd travel from one estate to the next, demanding food and alcohol from the local gentry. If they got them they'd sing, but if not they might turn violent.

The Puritans wanted no part of Christmas and its rowdiness. Cromwell banned it in England, and the Massachusetts Bay Puritans fined anybody who celebrated on December 25. As late as 1820 a Christmas mob got out of hand in New York City. By the next year, the city fathers had organized their first police force.

Then: For a while I stood on the sidewalk, as if a car was about to pick me up. When the crowd started to thin, some nice older couple asked if they could help me find my parents. If I had spun some ridiculous story they might have taken me home with them, but instead I said I lived a couple blocks away and could walk. After they left I found a dark spot at one corner of the church building where I figured nobody would notice me, but it was exposed to the wind and I was getting cold. I was hungry and tired and I wanted to give up.

Let them do whatever they want to me.

And then the floodlight went out on the manger scene. I looked at those three walls of hay bales and the boards that made a roof, and I realized that the open side faced directly away from the wind. I knew that the idea in my head had to be wrong somehow, but I couldn't work out exactly why. I went over to investigate.

The sheep had quietly gone wild. They had pulled their stakes out of the ground and were wandering around free, methodically laying waste to the creche. The light had gone out because one of them had chewed through an extension cord. The wise men were down, Mary and Joseph on their backs, and the manger overturned. I never found the doll.

I hunkered down in the empty stable like a soldier in a foxhole, and the sheep came over to check me out. They sniffed and snuffled and eventually approved of me. They ended their rampage and lay down, one beside the other in the doorway.

I started to think this might work. Even the smell wasn't that bad. Maybe I could sleep like this and then come up with some other plan in the morning. I was really tired by then, so I closed my eyes.

And then I heard a voice say, "Are you going to stay in there all night?"

I peered out over the sheep and saw the bum. I told him I wasn't coming out until sunrise, because it was cold out there. And he said it wasn't and held out his hand.

I took it.

Now: Carol had no sympathy for the Chosen and their schemes. Vicariously, she stood up for me better than I ever stood up for myself. "I'd have kicked them," she said.

"I think I wanted them to like me," I explained.

She was adamant. "I don't care if bad people like me."

"Maybe," I suggested, "that's because you have good people who like you."

Carol thought about that, and then took another turn completely. "What ever happened to the woman at the Mall? Did she find her daughter?"

"What?"

"I've stood at that entrance and listened, but I've never heard her again. Did you go back later? Did you help her?"

"No," I confessed. "There's a different mall closer to my apartment, so I haven't been back there."

"Oh," she said with disappointment.

That wasn't fair. *I'm not a super-hero*, I wanted to protest. *It's not my job to bring peace to every spirit who crosses my path.*

But I didn't. Because there are good people who like Carol. And I really wanted her to believe I was one of them.

Then: Suddenly we were back in Alvy's, by the tables on the mezzanine. He nudged me to sit down at a chair in front of a big steaming cup of hot chocolate. He sat across from me with tea. I looked down at the main floor, which was all lit up and full of shoppers trying to elbow past each other.

"It's after midnight," I observed. "Why isn't this place closed?" And then I thought I understood. "This is a dream, isn't it? Really I'm freezing to death back at the Methodist church."

"Not likely. I think the sheep will take care of that. No, it isn't a dream. It's a vision, which is a little different. I've been wanting to talk to you ever since you first noticed me."

"Me? Why?"

"Because I have a message for people and I want to tell somebody."

"Why tell me?"

"Because hardly anybody sees me these days. And even fewer know who I am. But you do."

I wanted to deny it, but as I looked at him I began to feel as if I did know him. I looked harder, at the crooked teeth and the threadbare suit that must have been expensive once, a long long time ago. I breathed in his awful scent and looked at his whiskers, which were too scraggly to be a beard.

"You're the Spirit of Christmas," I told him.

Way back: When Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol* he wasn't restoring the old spirit of Christmas, he was inventing something totally new. In America, Washington Irving was doing the same thing. His descriptions of old English Christmas traditions cleaned up all the rowdiness. In Irving's version, the Lords of Misrule turned into well-scrubbed carolers wandering from house to house. And the English gentry invited them in for treats and warming drinks out of gratitude and the goodness of their hearts, not because they were afraid of violence and vandalism.

Now: Carol hadn't interrupted for a long time, but now she asked: "Past, present, or future?"

"Present, I guess," I said. "Though he didn't have any trouble showing me things that were past and future, as long as it wasn't too far. I think he was the Dickens/Irving spirit, that he only went back that far and didn't remember Zagmuk or Saturnalia or the Lords of Misrule. Maybe those

holidays had their own spirits. Maybe each spirit only lived for a few centuries before giving way to the next.”

“What was his message? Did he tell you that you should try to make Christmas less about presents and money, and more about love and family and stuff like it was supposed to be?” Carol speculated. “Is that why you don’t give presents?”

And I thought: *If only*. And I almost chickened out. I almost lied to her and said: *Yes, that was the message. Now why don’t you up to bed and go to sleep thinking about how to bring more love into Christmas this year.*

I think she would have believed me. She’s a smart girl, but she’s ten years old, and even smart people believe you when you tell them what they expect to hear. And why shouldn’t she believe? Wasn’t this whole thing just *my* pathology? Wasn’t it just something that I carried around because of growing up with Dad, growing up in a cult, growing up as the Miracle Boy? It didn’t have anything to do with Carol. In ten years no one had raised a hand to her. No one had threatened her with hellfire. No one wanted her to do anything other than grow up and be herself. She had friends and a brother who looked up to her and two parents who would do anything for her.

And me. She had me. I wondered if she knew that. I’d always thought it went without saying.

Carol was sitting up straight now, so that she could see my eyes over the candle flame and I could see hers. It was a triangle of lights, the candle and her two eyes. “Isn’t that right, Uncle Mike?” she asked seriously.

I will never lie to you. I won’t always make you happy and you won’t always like me, but I swear to you that any truth I know is yours, if you want it. That’s all I have. I’ll never be able to give you anything your parents wouldn’t already have two of, except for truth.

“No,” I said. “The message was: *Make it stop.*”

“Oh,” she said. She kept looking. She was thinking about it. “Make what stop?”

Then: He didn’t give me the message right away. He let me finish my vision of hot chocolate and then said he had to show me things first. Maybe he felt obligated to follow the Dickens tradition, or maybe he figured that I wouldn’t understand unless I saw for myself.

It took forever. Time doesn’t pass the same way in visions; I don’t know how long it would have taken if he had strung the scenes together in the mundane world like a movie. But it was a long time, and it was hard.

I don’t remember most of it. I know I saw a lot of sweatshops in Asia that made presents and ornaments. They weren’t at all like Santa’s workshop on the North Pole, and some of them used kids instead of elves. One was over a hundred degrees and the air was full of dust from the material the kids were stuffing into dolls.

I saw executives in dozens of countries. Some were as greedy and ruthless as any movie villain, but most were just desperate. Their companies would go under without good Christmas sales. They knew their competition would do anything to beat them, so they had to do anything back.

I saw kids as young as three point at TV sets and say, "That one." Other kids sat on Santa's lap making demands like highwaymen, with lists that went on forever. I saw mothers turn violent to get the last doll on the shelf. And I saw attics full of unused presents from Christmases past.

And families. They went by in blizzards. Some had the same argument year after year. Some gritted their teeth and smiled and said nothing. (And -- just briefly -- I saw Jackie with bruises on his face saying, "I don't know where he went.") Some people were alone and depressed. Some got drunk at parties and caused accidents on the highways.

But most of the visions were of endless trivial stress and anxiety: rushing from here to there, standing in lines, feeling joylessly obligated to one activity after another, wondering how the credit card bill would ever get paid, feeling guilty about not feeling happy.

I tried to be patient, but eventually I couldn't take it any more. I asked him to just give me the message and let me go.

Now: "That's what I asked. And the answer was: Christmas. All of it. He didn't want us to save it, whatever that means. He just knew that it had become something different and he couldn't be its spirit any more. But he didn't know how to die, and he didn't know what would happen if he did. But he really, really wanted it to stop."

"Oh." She leaned back and the chair creaked. She was looking at the unlit star. "Who did you give his message to?"

"Who could I give it to? Dad? The New York Times? I couldn't tell anybody. I was ten. Who would listen to me?"

I was looking at the star now too. I wasn't looking at her and didn't know what she might be thinking. We were both quiet for a long time, and I wondered if maybe she had finally gone to sleep. It was late. She ought to be tired.

"You told me," she said quietly. "I listened to you."

"Yes you did," I agreed.

She started to rock again, very slowly and quietly. "Did you ever see him again?"

"No," I said. "And I've looked everywhere. Stores, churches, happy suburban families. He never shows up."

She rocked some more, falling into rhythm with the ticking of the grandfather clock. “What if he did? What would you tell him now?”

That was a very good question. I hadn’t expected to have to answer it. “Now that I’ve grown up and I’ve studied, I know things that I didn’t know then.”

“What things?”

I glanced down at the duffel bag, then decided I didn’t want her to see me look at it, so I looked back up at the tree. “If he still wants to die, I think I can help him.”

I was grateful that she didn’t ask me how.

Carol closed her eyes and rocked. *Finally*, I thought, *she’s going to go to sleep*. I leaned back in the lounge and realized how tired I was. Maybe I wouldn’t make it to sunrise this time.

Then I heard a bang from the other side of the house. A cold wind blew across the room, and the candle snuffed out, leaving us in darkness.

“What?” Carol started, but I shushed her.

“Stay here,” I ordered.

Then: In the morning I woke up with a face full of musty wool. The sheep had huddled in closer sometime during the night and the straw had held out the wind. I was almost warm and very definitely alive.

The Methodist minister found me when he came out to inspect the debris of his manger scene. I expected him to be mad, but he said that he had suspected all along that the sheep were a bad idea. I didn’t know where I could go other than home, so I told him where I lived and he drove me.

Dad was embarrassed, of course, but he put on a good show of rejoicing at the prodigal’s return until the outsider was gone. And then I faced a punishment, which (to be honest) has congealed in my memory with all the other punishments of my childhood. Which one this was, I couldn’t say. But I didn’t run away again until I had a college scholarship to back me up.

I do remember that they sent back all my presents that year. Dad expected me to be devastated, but I didn’t flinch. I didn’t want any presents. Presents were at the center of the whole big machine that was Christmas, a machine that I now knew far too well.

Make it stop.

The spirit’s message stayed in my head, but I didn’t know who to give it to. Telling Dad or the Chosen or even Jackie seemed pointless. They might be waiting for God to give them a message through me, but they also had a pretty good idea of what He would say. This wasn’t it. And while

I could clearly see the difference between my vision and a dream, I knew no one else would understand. If it was going to stop, I would have to stop it myself. And I had no idea how.

“I’ll study,” I promised my dark and empty room that night when I was finally alone. Christmas still had a few hours to run, so I hoped that he could hear me. “If there’s a way to make it stop, I’ll figure it out.”

The room seemed to doubt me, to doubt that the determination of a ten-year-old had any substance. So I spoke again.

“I won’t forget.”

Now: I walked in the direction of the coldness, through the dining room and into the kitchen. The back door was open. The storm door was still latched, but cold air was pouring through a gap between the door and the sill.

Outside it was snowing heavily, as the weatherman had predicted. I looked out at the sidewalk and the driveway. There were no tracks of any kind. I reached out with my other senses, and heard nothing but the giggling of the household spirits.

Jokers.

I shut the door, made sure the bolt was latched this time, and turned around to go back.

Carol was standing right behind me. She was carrying my duffle bag.

“Put that down!” I snapped.

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized that it would serve me (but not Carol) right if she simply dropped the bag with a crash onto the hardwood kitchen floor. But instead she set it down as carefully as a sleeping baby.

I breathed a long and grateful sigh.

“I’m sorry, Uncle Mike. I just wanted to help.”

I let the bag lay and picked up Carol as if she weighed nothing. She put her head on my shoulder and wrapped her legs around my waist. “Don’t be sorry. It’s my fault,” I said. “I wouldn’t have you be any different. There’s nothing wrong with you at all.”

I speeded up my breathing to match hers, then slowed it gradually until we were both calm. Then I walked back to the living room and put her down.

“Was that him?” she asked.

“No.”

“Do you think he’s coming?”

I took a deep breath, cleared my mind and reached out as best I could. On every channel I could access, it was a silent night. “No,” I said. “And I don’t know why. Maybe he got better, but I doubt it. Maybe he died some other way. Maybe this age has new Spirit of Christmas, one who celebrates money and shopping malls and greed. Or maybe this kind of Christmas doesn’t have a spirit. I don’t know.”

My lack of answer seemed to satisfy her. She picked the striped package off the floor.

“What are you going to do with that?” I asked.

She thought about it. “I bought it for you,” she said.

I didn’t respond. She already knew why I couldn’t take it.

“But it wouldn’t have to be a Christmas present,” she said shyly. “Or even a Zagnuk or Saturnalia or any other kind of holiday present.”

I waited to hear what loophole my lawyer had found.

“Don’t you have a birthday sometime?”

“In April,” I said.

“Can I give you your present early?”

Resistance is futile sometimes. “Sure,” I said.

She smiled her best blonde, ten-year-old smile and held out the package with both hands. “Happy birthday, Uncle Mike.”

I took the present. The grandfather clock bonged three, four, five times.

“So what do you think?” I asked. “Can you go to sleep now?”

“Maybe. Can I get you to promise me something?”

A great negotiator always gets one last concession. “What?”

“Tomorrow afternoon, when everybody else takes their nap, can we go back to the Mall?”

“The stores won’t be open,” I reminded her.

“I don’t want to buy anything.”

I looked into the dark kitchen, where the duffle bag must still be on the floor.

Maybe this is how it happens if you're raised right, I thought. Maybe when you're ready you push back against your protectors and stand up for your right to see what life has for you in its bag of tricks.

“Sure,” I promised. “We’ll go back.”

Doug Muder

December 2005