



It is Christmas on
the highway,
In the thronging
busy mart;
But the dearest
truest Christmas,
Is the Christmas in
the heart.



Christmas in the heart

As always, Christmas seems to bring out the love we have in our hearts for the Lord, for each other, and for those who have no one special to share the season with. These stories, poems, and articles have been collected by Family members worldwide. Some are reminders of those who need Jesus and His love at Christmas. Others give tips on how to share His joy and the feeling of "family" with those around us. Still others remind us of the wonderful thing He did in coming to Earth for us. Enjoy!—And Merry Christmas!

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My Christmas Rifle

By Rian B. Anderson

Pa never had much compassion for the lazy or those who squandered their means and then never had enough for the necessities. But for those who were genuinely in need, his heart was as big as all outdoors. It was from him that I learned the greatest joy in life comes from giving, not from receiving.

It was Christmas Eve, 1881. I was fifteen years old and feeling like the world had caved in on me because there just hadn't been enough money to buy me the rifle that I'd wanted so bad that year for Christmas.

We did the chores early that night for some reason. I just figured Pa wanted a little extra time so we could read in the Bible. So after supper was over I took my boots off and stretched out in front of the fireplace and waited for Pa to get down the old Bible. I was still feeling sorry for myself and, to be honest, I wasn't in much of a mood to read the Scriptures.

But Pa didn't get the Bible. Instead he bundled up and went outside. I couldn't fig-

ure it out because we had already done all the chores. I didn't worry about it long though; I was too busy wallowing in self-pity.

Soon Pa came back in. It was a cold, clear night out and there was ice in his beard. "Come on, Matt," he said. "Bundle up good, it's cold out tonight."

I was really upset then. Not only was I not getting the rifle for Christmas, but now Pa was dragging me out in the cold, and for no earthly reason that I could see. We'd already done all the chores, and I couldn't think of anything else that needed doing, especially not on a night like this. But I knew Pa was not very patient at one dragging one's feet when he'd told them to do something, so I got up and put my boots back on and got my cap, coat, and mittens. Ma gave me a mysterious smile as I opened the door to leave the house. Something was up, but I didn't know what.

Outside, I became even more dismayed. There in front of the house was the work team, already hitched to the big sled. Whatever it was we were going to do wasn't going to be a short, quick, little job. I could tell. We never hitched up the big sled unless we were going to haul a big load. Pa was already up on the seat, reins in hand. I reluctantly climbed up beside him. The cold was already biting at me.

(For 9 years old and up. Selected stories may be read with younger children at parent's discretion.)

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I wasn't happy.

When I was on, Pa pulled the sled around the house and stopped in front of the woodshed. He got off and I followed. "I think we'll put on the high sideboards," he said. "Here, help me." The high sideboards! It had been a bigger job than I wanted to do with just the low sideboards on, but whatever it was we were going to do would be a lot bigger with the high sideboards on.

When we had exchanged the sideboards Pa went into the woodshed and came out with an armload of wood—the wood I'd spent all summer hauling down from the mountain, and then all fall sawing into blocks and splitting. What was he doing? Finally I said something. "Pa," I asked, "what are you doing?"

"You been by the Widow Jensen's lately?" he asked.

The Widow Jensen lived about two miles down the road. Her husband had died a year or so before and left her with three children, the oldest being eight. Sure, I'd been by, but so what? "Yeah," I said, "why?"

"I rode by just today," Pa said. "Little Jakey was out digging around in the woodpile trying to find a few chips. They're out of wood, Matt."

That was all he said. Then he turned and went back into the woodshed for another armload of wood. I followed him. We loaded the sled so high that I began to wonder if the horses would be able to pull it. Finally, Pa called a halt to our loading.

Then we went to the smokehouse and Pa took down a big ham and a side of bacon. He handed them to me and told me to put them in the sled and wait. When he returned he was carrying a sack of flour over his right shoulder and a smaller sack of something in his left hand.

"What's in the little sack?" I asked.

"Shoes. They're out of shoes. Little Jakey just had gunnysacks wrapped around his feet when he was out in the woodpile this morning. I got the children a few treats too.

It just wouldn't be Christmas without a few treats."

We rode the two miles to Widow Jensen's pretty much in silence. I tried to think through what Pa was doing. We didn't have much by worldly standards. Of course, we did have a big woodpile, though most of what was left now was still in the form of logs that I would have to saw into blocks and split before we could use it. We also had meat and flour, so we could spare that, but I knew we didn't have any money, so why was Pa buying them shoes and candy? Really, why was he doing *any* of this? Widow Jensen had closer neighbors than us. It shouldn't have been our concern.

We came in from the blind side of the Jensen house and unloaded the wood as quietly as possible, then we took the meat and flour and shoes to the door. We knocked. The door opened a crack and a timid voice said, "Who is it?"

"Lucas Miles, Ma'am, and my son, Matt. Could we come in for a bit?"

Widow Jensen opened the door and let us in. She had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. The children were wrapped in another and were sitting in front of the fireplace by a very small fire that hardly gave off any heat at all. Widow Jensen fumbled with a match and finally lit the lamp.

"We brought you a few things, Ma'am," Pa said, and set down the sack of flour. I put the meat on the table. Then Pa handed her the sack that had the shoes in it. She opened it hesitantly and took the shoes out one pair at a time. There was a pair for her and one for each of the children—sturdy shoes, the best, shoes that would last. I watched her carefully. She bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling and then tears filled her eyes and started running down her cheeks. She looked up at Pa like she wanted to say something, but it wouldn't come out.

"We brought a load of wood too, Ma'am," Pa said. Then he turned to me and said, "Matt, go bring enough in to last for awhile. Let's

get that fire up to size and heat this place up."

I wasn't the same person when I went back out to bring in the wood. I had a big lump in my throat and, much as I hate to admit it, there were tears in my eyes, too. In my mind I kept seeing those three kids huddled around the fireplace and their mother standing there with tears running down her cheeks and so much gratitude in her heart that she couldn't speak. My heart swelled within me and a joy filled my soul that I'd never known before. I had given at Christmas many times before, but never when it had made so much difference. I could see we were literally saving the lives of these people.

I soon had the fire blazing and everyone's spirits soared. The kids started giggling when Pa handed them each a cookie and Widow Jensen looked on with a smile that probably hadn't crossed her face for a long time.

She finally turned to us. "God bless you," she said. "I know the Lord Himself has sent you. The children and I have been praying that He would send one of His angels to spare us."

In spite of myself, the lump returned to my throat and the tears welled up in my eyes again. I'd never thought of Pa in those exact terms before, but after Widow Jensen mentioned it, I could see that it was probably true. I was sure that a better man than Pa had never walked the earth. I started remembering all the times he had gone out of his way for Ma and me, and many others. The list seemed endless as I thought on it.

Pa insisted that everyone try on the shoes before we left. I was amazed when they all fit and I wondered how he had known what sizes to get. Then I guessed that if he was on an errand for the Lord that the Lord would make sure he got the right sizes. Tears were running down Widow Jensen's face again when we stood up to leave. Pa took each of the kids in his big arms and gave them a hug. They clung to him and didn't want us to go.

I could see that they missed their father, and I was glad that I still had mine.

At the door Pa turned to Widow Jensen and said, "The missus wanted me to invite you and the children over for Christmas dinner tomorrow. The turkey will be more than the three of us can eat, and a man can get cantankerous if he has to eat turkey for too many meals. We'll be by to get you about eleven. It'll be nice to have some little ones around again. Matt here hasn't been little for quite a spell." I was the youngest. My two older brothers and two older sisters were all married and had moved away.

Widow Jensen nodded and said, "Thank you, Brother Miles. I don't have to say, 'May the Lord bless you.' I know for certain that He will."

Out on the sled I felt a warmth that came from deep within and I didn't even notice the cold. When we had gone a ways, Pa turned to me and said, "Matt, I want you to know something. Your ma and me have been tucking a little money away here and there all year so we could buy that rifle for you, but we didn't have quite enough. Then yesterday a man who owed me a little money from years back came by to make things square. Your ma and me were real excited, thinking that now we could get you that rifle, and I started into town this morning to do just that. But on the way I saw little Jakey out scratching in the woodpile with his feet wrapped in those gunnysacks and I knew what I had to do. So, Son, I spent the money for shoes and a few sweets for those children. I hope you understand."

I understood, and my eyes became wet with tears again. I understood very well, and I was so glad Pa had done it. Just then the rifle seemed very low on my list of priorities. Pa had given me a lot more. He had given me the look on Widow Jensen's face and the radiant smiles of her three children. For the rest of my life, whenever I saw any of the Jensens, or split a block of wood, I remembered. And remembering brought

back that same joy I felt riding home beside Pa that night. Pa had given me much more than a rifle that night; he had given me the best Christmas of my life.

Christmas Boy

By Shirley Barksdale

As an only child, Christmas was a quiet affair when I was growing up. I vowed that some day I'd marry and have six children, and at Christmas my house would vibrate with energy and love.

I found the man who shared my dream, but we had not reckoned on the possibility of infertility. Undaunted, we applied for adoption and, within a year, he arrived.

We called him our Christmas Boy because he came to us during that season of joy, when he was just six days old. Then nature surprised us again. In rapid succession, we added two biological children to the family—not as many as we had hoped for, but compared with my quiet childhood, three made an entirely satisfactory crowd.

As our Christmas Boy grew, he made it clear that only he had the expertise to select and decorate the Christmas tree each year. He rushed the season, starting his gift list before we'd even finished the Thanksgiving turkey. He pressed us into singing carols, our frog-like voices contrasting with his musical gift of perfect pitch. Each holiday he stirred us up, leading us through a round of merry chaos.

Our friends were right about adopted children not being the same. Through his own unique heredity, our Christmas Boy brought color into our lives with his irrepressible good cheer, his bossy wit. He made us look and behave better than we were.

Then, on his twenty-sixth Christmas, he left us as unexpectedly as he had come. He was killed in a car accident on an icy Denver street, on his way home to his young wife and infant daughter. But first he had stopped by

the family home to decorate our tree, a ritual he had never abandoned.

Grief-stricken, his father and I sold our home, where memories clung to every room. We moved to California, leaving behind our friends and church.

In the seventeen years that followed his death, his widow remarried; his daughter graduated from high school. His father and I grew old enough to retire, and in December 1986, we decided to return to Denver.

We slid into the city on the tail of a blizzard, through streets ablaze with lights. Looking away from the glow, I fixed my gaze on the distant Rockies, where our adopted son had loved to go in search of the perfect tree. Now in the foothills there was his grave—a grave I could not bear to visit.

We settled into a small, boxy house, so different from the family home where we had orchestrated our lives. It was quiet, like the house of my childhood. Our other son had married and begun his own Christmas traditions in another state. Our daughter, an artist, seemed fulfilled by her career.

While I stood staring toward the snowcapped mountains one day, I heard a car pull up, then the impatient peal of the doorbell. There stood our granddaughter, and in her gray-green eyes and impudent grin, I saw the reflection of our Christmas Boy.

Behind her, lugging a large pine tree, came her mother, stepfather and ten-year-old half-brother. They swept past us in a flurry of laughter; they uncorked wine and toasted our homecoming. They decorated the tree and piled gaily wrapped packages under the boughs.

"You'll recognize the ornaments," said my former daughter-in-law. "They were his. I saved them for you."

When I murmured, in remembered pain, that we hadn't had a tree for seventeen years, our cheeky granddaughter said, "Then it's time to shape up."

They left in a whirl, shoving one another out the door, but not before asking us to join

them the next morning for church and for dinner at their home.

"Oh," I began, "we just can't."

"You sure as heck can," ordered our granddaughter, as bossy as her father had been. "I'm singing the solo, and I want to see you there."

We had long ago given up the poignant Christmas services, but now, under pressure, we sat rigid in the front pew, fighting back tears.

Then it was solo time. Our granddaughter's magnificent soprano voice soared, dear and true, in perfect pitch. She sang "O Holy Night," which brought back bittersweet memories. In a rare emotional response, the congregation applauded in delight. How her father would have relished that moment.

We had been alerted that there would be a "whole mess of people" for dinner—but thirty-five! Assorted relatives filled every corner of the house; small children, noisy and exuberant, seemed to bounce off the walls. I could not sort out who belonged to whom, but it didn't matter. They all belonged to one another. They took us in, enfolded us in joyous camaraderie. We sang carols in loud, off-key voices, saved only by that amazing soprano.

Sometime after dinner, before the winter sunset, it occurred to me that a true family is not always one's own flesh and blood. It is a climate of the heart. Had it not been for our adopted son, we would not now be surrounded by caring strangers who would help us hear the music again.

Later, our granddaughter asked us to come along with her. "I'll drive," she said. "There's a place I like to go." She jumped behind the wheel of the car and, with the confidence of a newly licensed driver, zoomed off toward the foothills.

Alongside the headstone rested a small, heart-shaped rock, slightly cracked, painted by our artist daughter. On its weathered surface she had written, "To my brother, with love." Across the crest of the grave lay a holly-bright Christmas wreath. Our number-two son,

we learned, sent one every year.

As we stood by the headstone in the chilly but somehow comforting silence, we were not prepared for our unpredictable granddaughter's next move. Once more that day her voice, so like her father's, lifted in song, and the mountainside echoed the chorus of "Joy to the World," on and on into infinity.

When the last pure note had faded, I felt, for the first time since our son's death, a sense of peace, of the positive continuity of life, of renewed faith and hope. The real meaning of Christmas had been restored to us. Hallelujah!

Christmas Is for Love

—Author Unknown

Christmas is for love. It is for joy, for giving and sharing, for laughter, for reuniting with family and friends, for tinsel and brightly decorated packages. But mostly, Christmas is for love.

I had not believed this until a small elf-like student with wide-eyed innocence and soft rosy cheeks gave me a wondrous gift one Christmas. Mark was an 11-year-old orphan who lived with his aunt, a bitter middle-aged woman greatly annoyed with the burden of caring for her dead sister's son. She never failed to remind young Mark, if it hadn't been for her generosity, he would be a vagrant homeless waif. Still, with all this scolding and chilliness at home, he was a sweet and gentle child.

I had not noticed Mark particularly until he began staying after class each day (at the risk of arousing his aunt's anger, I later found) to help me straighten up the classroom. We did this quietly and comfortably, not speaking much, but enjoying the solitude of that hour of the day. When we did talk, Mark spoke mostly of his mother. Though he was quite small when she died, he remembered a kind, gentle, loving

woman, who always spent much time with him.

As Christmas drew nearer, however, Mark failed to stay after school each day. I looked forward to his coming and when, as the days passed and he continued to scamper hurriedly from the room after class, I stopped him one afternoon and asked why he no longer helped me in the room. I told him how I had missed him, and his large gray eyes lit up eagerly as he replied, "Did you really miss me?" I explained how he had been my best helper.

"I was making you a surprise," he whispered confidentially. "It's for Christmas." With that, he became embarrassed and dashed from the room. He didn't stay after school anymore after that.

Finally came the last school day before Christmas. Mark crept slowly into the room late that afternoon with his hands concealing something behind his back. "I have your present," he said timidly when I looked up. "I hope you like it." He held out his hands, and there lying in his small palms was a tiny wooden box.

"It's beautiful, Mark. Is there something in it?" I asked, opening the top to look inside.

"Oh, you can't see what's in it," he replied, "and you can't touch it or taste it or feel it. But Mother always said it makes you feel good all the time, warm on cold nights, and safe when you're all alone."

I gazed into the empty box. "What is it, Mark," I asked gently, "that will make me feel so good?"

"It's love," he whispered softly, "and Mother always said it's best when you give it away." And he turned quietly and left the room.

So now I keep a small box made of wood on the piano in my living room and only smile as inquiring friends raise quizzical eyebrows when I explain to them that there is love in it.

Yes, Christmas is for gaiety, mirth, and song—for good and wondrous gifts. But mostly, Christmas is for love.

The Spirit of Raton

By Daniel "Chip" Ciammaichella

Silhouetted by the blackness of the storm clouds surrounding her, the majestic snow-capped peak of Sierra Grande towered over the volcanic plains of northeastern New Mexico like a lonely sentry, seeming to keep watch over a lone eighteen-wheeler that made its way west on the steel-gray ribbon of U.S. Highway 87.

Mike could feel the mountain watching him as he guided the truck through the fading remnants of what little daylight the storm clouds had allowed to filter through. The cinder cone of Capulin Volcano rose like a black mirage as the dark clouds spewed forth a misty white blanket of snow, devouring all signs of the mountains to the west, and the mesa country to the north.

Mike knew the hazards of this stretch of US87 in the winter; he had been running between Amarillo, Texas and Taos, New Mexico, for a couple of years. On this night he was also in a hurry to get home to Taos, determined not to miss his first Christmas with his new wife and their baby boy. Despite the white nothingness ahead he pressed the accelerator and urged the Peterbuilt on, determined to cover as many miles as he could before meeting the storm. He reached up and turned the tuning knob on his stereo until the strains of "Little Town of Bethlehem" echoed clearly from KRTN in Raton, now only about 30 miles to the west.

Within minutes the first flakes of snow began to pepper the truck's windshield and gusts of wind began to buffet the cab. Soon the snowfall increased along with the velocity of the wind, building into a full-blown blizzard. Despite not being able to see even the front of the truck, Mike pressed on through the whiteout conditions. He knew he should stop and wait for a lull in the storm, but one glance at the fuel gauge told him he did not have

enough fuel to stop, keep the engine running to provide both heat and light to warn any other vehicles of his presence, and still make it to the nearest fuel stop in Raton.

As the cab began to yaw to the right, slipping off the shoulder of the road, he realized he should have just stopped. He jerked the steering wheel to the left and applied pressure to the accelerator, but it was too late. His corrective actions only caused the tractor and trailer to jackknife. Before any profanity could escape from Mike's mouth, the truck crashed over on its side like a beached whale, throwing him across the cab to the passenger side that now rested on the snow-covered earth.

Except for his pride, Mike was unhurt. His first reaction was to grab the CB microphone, now dangling above his head, and call for help. He tried all forty channels, but his transmissions were met by only static. Disgusted, he kicked out the windshield, regretting it at once as the wind and snow began howling into the cab. Knowing he had just eliminated any option of staying in the truck, Mike climbed out carefully through the now-missing windshield, and slid down the engine cover to the ground. The wind and snow blotted out the view of all but a few feet of the overturned truck, as Mike stumbled his way up the incline to the road, and made his way on foot towards Raton.

It didn't take long for Mike to realize the foolishness of trying to walk through the blizzard. So far every decision he'd made had turned out to be the wrong one, and he wondered if fate had decided that his time on this Earth was over. The snow blinded him as he stumbled on, not even sure if he was going in the right direction. The white tempest that surrounded him gave no indication of dimension, and he couldn't even be sure of the ground below him as the cold rapidly made his feet numb. The sharp wind cut through his jacket and clothing, the cold penetrating to his bones. As if in a trance, Mike pressed on, until finally he stumbled and rolled down an embank-

ment that bordered the road. He tried to regain his feet, but his legs didn't seem to work upon command. He felt tired, so very tired. He did not try to get back to his feet; instead he curled up and closed his eyes.

"I'll just rest here for a few minutes, then I'll start again," he thought as he drifted into unconsciousness.

Mike felt warm and comfortable, and he could see his wife sitting at home on their worn-out sofa, gently playing with their three-month-old son. He felt quite content, until a voice cut through the fog and brought him back to consciousness. "About time you woke up, Son. I thought you might be dead."

Mike opened his eyes to find himself sitting on the passenger side of a car, covered with a blanket. As the interior of the car came into focus, he noticed the stack of radio equipment between the driver's and passenger seats, and the red "gumball" mounted on the dashboard. He began to wonder if this was a police or fire vehicle, but that was easily answered as he looked to his left. The man driving the car was obviously a policeman—the Raton Police patch on his right shoulder made that a no-brainer, but the man himself could have easily been a poster model for police officers. His hair and full mustache were mostly gray, but as he took his eyes off of the road to look at Mike, his glasses could not hide a youthful twinkling blue. His voice resonated with both authority and compassion as he spoke again.

"So how are you feeling? You know you're darned lucky I found you when I did. You could have frozen to death."

"Yes, sir. I realize that, officer," Mike replied. "I guess I should have stayed with my truck. Better yet, I should have never tried to keep driving through this storm." Mike hesitated, "Which brings up an interesting question. How and why are *you* driving through this storm? I can't even see the front of your car."

The police officer just chuckled. "I can see just fine. Would you rather I was back in Raton

sipping coffee while you froze to death? Speaking of coffee, I have some in that thermos next to you. Help yourself.”

“Thanks, I will.” He grabbed the thermos and poured the steaming hot liquid into the cap. After a sip he asked, “So how did you find me, anyway?”

“Somebody saw you roll your truck and called it in.”

“Don’t the State Police usually handle stuff out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Usually, but we all do what we can. There aren’t enough of us to be everywhere at any time. Besides, I kind of enjoy a nice drive through a snowstorm. You weren’t hard to find—you only made it about fifty feet from your truck, after walking in circles for a bit.”

He turned and grinned at Mike, who immediately took a liking to him. Mike wasn’t a fan of cops, but this one seemed like a really nice fellow, the type of guy you couldn’t help but like. After a minute or so the officer spoke again.

“I called ahead and got you a motel room. You can make any calls or arrangements you need from there.”

Mike thought about his wife and son. “I was hoping to find a rent-a-car and get home to Taos. My wife just had our first child recently, and I’d hate to miss my first Christmas with them.”

“Sorry, Son, but I doubt that you’ll find a rent-a-car at this time of night on Christmas Eve. You’re lucky you got me. Besides, the State Police have closed all the roads out of Raton, so even if you found a car you couldn’t go anywhere. I doubt you’ll be going home until the day after Christmas, but don’t worry. If you have a little faith, things might just work out.”

Mike didn’t reply. His face showed his disappointment as he turned to stare out the passenger side window. “Do you have a family?”

The officer’s voice softened. “Yes, I have the best wife in the world and we have three great children. We are together always, but I do know how it feels not to be with the ones

you love. I also have two other children from my first marriage, and it hurts not to be able to spend time with them as well. My parents also live far away from Raton, so I don’t see them as much as I’d like. The bottom line is simple, though. We have to live our lives under the circumstances that the Lord sees fit to bestow upon us, and make the best of it. Your wife and son love you, as you love them, and nothing can change that. Learn to appreciate what you have, and not dwell on the pitfalls fate throws your way. Life is just too short.”

Mike remained silent as the bright streetlights announced they were entering Raton. The police car continued on US87 until coming to the light at the Main Street intersection, where they turned left and traveled another half-mile before turning into the Robin Hood Motel. Instead of going to the office, the officer pulled right up to the first row of rooms, and tossed a key to Mike.

“There you go. Everything is already set up for you, compliments of the City of Raton.”

Mike caught the key, amazed at the efficiency of this policeman. “You’d think you knew I was coming.” He grinned as he got out of the patrol car.

“I did.”

Mike turned and stared at the policeman. His blue eyes twinkled, but gave no other indication that he was joking. Their eyes met for a moment. “Seriously, I don’t know how I can thank you, officer. I owe you my life.”

“Anytime, Son. You just be a little more careful driving next time, and take good care of your wife and baby. Maybe buy me a beer sometime when you’re passing through.”

“I’ll do that.” Mike grinned as he shut the car door and stood back to watch the patrol car pull out into the street. The driving snow made it seem that the car merely faded and disappeared into the night.

Mike turned and placed the key into the door. It didn’t occur to him to wonder why a light was already on in room 11, but as he opened the door he was met by the sight of his wife sitting on the bed, playing with their

baby boy. He stood in the doorway, dumbfounded.

"Close the door, silly! Do you want to give the baby a cold?" She laid the baby on the bed and rose to greet him as he closed the door.

"How did you get here? ... How did you know?" He embraced her when she came to him, still dumbfounded.

"I thought you sent him, dear."

"Sent who?"

"That nice Raton police officer who came to Taos to bring me here to meet you. He told me you sent him because you were going to be delayed in Raton. He loaded all of our Christmas presents as well and even brought us that little tree in the corner. He really was a nice man. ... Imagine driving all that way just to do a stranger a favor."

Mike remembered the police officer's words as he was getting out of the car and grinned. "I think that policeman must be some kind of an angel." He recounted the night's events to his wife, who listened in wonder, grateful that he was all right and that they were together. Soon, the baby began fussing, and all attention turned to him. Mike didn't care to try to explain how or why this police officer had brought him together with his family for Christmas—he was just grateful that he had. He turned to his wife, and looked into her deep green eyes.

"Merry Christmas, darling."

Mike didn't even try to rent a car on Christmas Day, but rather contented himself by spending time with his family. They opened their presents under the small tree, and walked to the High Country Kitchen restaurant next door for a wonderful Christmas dinner. He'd never really spent much time in Raton, and he was amazed at the friendliness of the people he met. One couple, hearing they had no vehicle, took them on a tour of the little town, showing off its Christmas tree in Ripley Park, and the famous City of Bethlehem display in Climax Canyon. By the end of the day Mike was convinced that Raton was a town he would like to live in. The place seemed to

overflow with magic and enchantment.

The day after Christmas, Mike had no problem securing a rental car from a local car dealership. Before going back to the motel to pick up his wife and son, he decided to drop into the police department so he could thank the officer who had done so much for him. He walked into the lobby and approached the opening in the glass window where the dispatcher sat.

"I'd like to speak to one of your officers, to thank him for helping my family and me on Christmas Eve."

"No problem, sir," replied the dispatcher. "What was the officer's name?"

Mike gave the dispatcher a sheepish grin. "I never did get his name. He was a tall fellow, with gray hair, glasses, and blue eyes. Perhaps if I could just talk to the chief?"

"One minute, sir," the dispatcher responded, picking up the telephone. "To your right, on the wall there, you may be able to recognize him from those pictures."

Mike surveyed the photos on the wall, but did not see the officer who had helped him. As he turned back to the dispatcher he noticed an 8½ x 11 photograph sitting by itself in a corner of the room.

"No, I don't see his picture there, but that's him ... there, in that picture in the corner."

The dispatcher looked confused for a moment. "What picture in the corner?" As she turned to follow Mike's gaze, she dropped the telephone receiver abruptly. She did not turn around as the imposing uniformed figure of the police chief walked into the room.

"Hello, sir. I'm Chief Marcus. What can I do for you?" He didn't notice his dispatcher, still staring at the photograph in the corner, her face as white as a sheet, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Hello, Chief. I was just telling your dispatcher that I'd like to thank that officer over there for helping my family and me on Christmas Eve." He pointed to the picture in the corner. The dispatcher remained frozen.

The chief turned to follow Mike's out-

stretched arm. He too froze for a minute, and turned back to Mike, anger burning in his eyes.

"I don't know what kind of a loony-tune you are, mister, but your joke is not funny at all. You'd better leave now before I arrest you and throw away the key."

It was Mike's turn to be angry, as well as a bit confused. "Look, Chief, I don't know what your problem is. I merely want to thank that officer for going above and beyond the call of duty by saving my life and bringing my family together for Christmas. I don't see anything funny about it. What's the matter with you people? Please give my thanks to that officer, and I'll just get on home to Taos."

Mike stormed out of the building and got back into his car to leave. As he started the engine, he heard a tap on his window and turned to see the police chief standing next to the car. He rolled the window down.

"What do you want? Are you going to give me a ticket or something?"

The anger had left the chief's eyes, replaced by a look of great pain. "I'm sorry I blew up at you, sir. ... You obviously don't understand. Please, come back inside and tell me about what happened on Christmas Eve."

Mike met the chief's gaze. Neither man spoke for a moment, until finally Mike shut off the engine and opened the car door. As the two men walked back into the building, Mike recounted the events of Christmas Eve. The chief listened without interruption. When they re-entered the building Mike noticed that the dispatcher had obviously been crying.

"That's what happened, Chief. You have one heck of an officer there. I owe him my life, and so much more."

The dispatcher could no longer control herself, and the chief motioned her out of the room. "I'll mind the store for a few minutes, Darla. Get yourself some coffee."

He remained silent for a few moments after she left the room, then he turned to face the picture of the officer. Mike noticed that the chief's eyes were moist as well.

"Yes sir, he was indeed a fine officer, the best."

Mike was confused. "Was? Did something happen?"

The chief took a deep breath, his voice cracked as he spoke. "That is Lt. Vinnie Harrelson. He was one of my best officers as well as a good friend." He paused again before continuing. "Vinnie died in a plane crash a few days before Christmas last year, along with his wife, three children and his father-in-law." No longer able to control his emotions, the chief walked away into the recesses of the police department, leaving Mike alone.

It took a few moments for the chief's words to sink in. Mike's own emotions began to overcome him as he stared at the picture of Lt. Vinnie Harrelson. It might have been the tears welling up in his eyes, but it seemed like the officer's blue eyes twinkled at him from the photograph.

Author's note: Although our friends Vinnie, Katie, Audrey, Erica, and Ryan Harrelson no longer walk among us, their spirits will forever be a part of Raton and all who knew them, especially at Christmas.

Angels, Once in a While

By Barb Irwin

In September 1960, I woke up one morning with six hungry babies and just 75 cents in my pocket. Their father was gone.

The boys ranged from three months to seven years; their sister was two. Their dad had never been much more than a presence they feared. Whenever they heard his tires crunch on the gravel driveway they would scramble to hide under their beds. He did manage to leave 15 dollars a week to buy groceries. Now that he had decided to leave, there would be no more beatings, but no food either. If there was a welfare system in effect in southern Indiana at that time, I certainly knew

nothing about it.

I scrubbed the kids until they looked brand-new and then put on my best homemade dress. I loaded them into the rusty old '51 Chevy and drove off to find a job. The seven of us went to every factory, store, and restaurant in our small town. No luck. The kids stayed, crammed into the car and tried to be quiet while I tried to convince whomever would listen that I was willing to learn or do anything. I had to have a job. Still no luck.

The last place we went to, just a few miles out of town, was an old Root Beer Barrel drive-in that had been converted to a truck stop. It was called "The Big Wheel." An old lady named Granny owned the place and she peeked out of the window from time to time at all those kids. She needed someone on the graveyard shift, 11 at night until seven in the morning. She paid 65 cents an hour and I could start that night.

I raced home and called the teenager down the street that baby-sat for people. I bargained with her to come and sleep on my sofa for a dollar a night. She could arrive with her pajamas on and the kids would already be asleep. This seemed like a good arrangement to her, so we made a deal. That night when the little ones and I knelt to say our prayers we all thanked God for finding Mommy a job.

And so I started at the Big Wheel. When I got home in the mornings I woke the baby-sitter up and sent her home with one dollar of my tip money—fully half of what I averaged every night.

As the weeks went by, heating bills added another strain to my meager wage. The tires on the old Chevy had the consistency of penny balloons and began to leak. I had to fill them with air on the way to work and again every morning before I could go home.

One bleak fall morning, I dragged myself to the car to go home and found four tires in the back seat. New tires! There was no note, no nothing, just those beautiful brand-new tires. Had angels taken up resi-

dence in Indiana? I wondered.

I made a deal with the owner of the local service station. In exchange for his mounting the new tires, I would clean up his office. I remember it took me a lot longer to scrub his floor than it did for him to do the tires.

I was now working six nights instead of five and it still wasn't enough. Christmas was coming and I knew there would be no money for toys for the kids. I found a can of red paint and started repairing and painting some old toys. Then I hid them in the basement so there would be something for Santa to deliver on Christmas morning. Clothes were a worry, too. I was sewing patches on top of patches on the boys' pants, and soon they would be too far gone to repair.

On Christmas Eve the usual customers were drinking coffee in the Big Wheel. These were the truckers, Les, Frank, and Jim, and a state trooper named Joe. A few musicians were hanging around after a gig at the Legion and were dropping nickels in the pinball machine. The regulars all just sat around and talked through the wee hours of the morning and then left to get home before the sun came up. When it was time for me to go home at seven o'clock on Christmas morning I hurried to the car. I was hoping the kids wouldn't wake up before I managed to get home and get the presents from the basement and place them under the tree. (We had cut down a small cedar tree by the side of the road down by the dump.)

It was still dark and I couldn't see much, but there appeared to be some dark shadows in the car—or was that just a trick of the night? Something certainly looked different, but it was hard to tell what. When I reached the car, I peered warily into one of the side windows. Then my jaw dropped in amazement. My old battered Chevy was full—full to the top with boxes of all shapes and sizes.

I quickly opened the driver's side door, scrambled inside and kneeled in the front fac-

ing the back seat. Reaching back, I pulled off the lid of the top box. Inside was a whole case of little blue jeans, sizes 2-10! I looked inside another box: It was full of shirts to go with the jeans. Then I peeked inside some of the other boxes: There were candy and nuts and bananas and bags of groceries. There was an enormous ham for baking, and canned vegetables and potatoes. There was pudding and Jell-O and cookies, pie filling and flour. There was a whole bag of laundry supplies and cleaning items. And there were five toy trucks and one beautiful little doll.

As I drove back through empty streets as the sun slowly rose on the most amazing Christmas Day of my life, I was sobbing with gratitude. And I will never forget the joy on the faces of my little ones that precious morning.

Yes, there were angels in Indiana that long-ago December. And they all hung out at the Big Wheel truck stop.

Angel on a Doorstep

By Shirley Bachelder (*Reader's Digest*, 1992)

When Ben delivered milk to my cousin's home that morning, he wasn't his usual sunny self. The slight, middle-aged man seemed in no mood for talking.

It was late November 1962, and as a newcomer to Lawndale, California, I was delighted that milkmen still brought bottles of milk to doorsteps. In the weeks that my husband, kids and I had been staying with my cousin while house-hunting, I had come to enjoy Ben's jovial repartee.

Today, however, he was the epitome of gloom as he dropped off his wares from his wire carrier. It took slow, careful questioning to extract the story from him. With some embarrassment, he told me two customers had left town without paying their bills, and he would have to cover the losses. One of the debtors owed only \$10, but the other was \$79

in arrears and had left no forwarding address. Ben was distraught at his stupidity for allowing this bill to grow so large.

"She was a pretty woman," he said, "with six children and another on the way. She was always saying, 'I'm going to pay you soon, when my husband gets a second job.' I believed her. What a fool I was! I thought I was doing a good thing, but I've learned my lesson. I've been had!"

All I could say was, "I'm so sorry."

The next time I saw him, his anger seemed worse. He bristled as he talked about the messy young ones who had drunk up all his milk. The charming family had turned into a parcel of brats.

I repeated my condolences and let the matter rest. But when Ben left, I found myself caught up in his problem and longed to help. Worried that this incident would sour a warm person, I mulled over what to do. Then, remembering that Christmas was coming, I thought of what my grandmother used to say: "When someone has taken from you, give it to them, and then you can never be robbed."

The next time Ben delivered milk, I told him I had a way to make him feel better about the \$79.

"Nothing will do that," he said, "but tell me anyway."

"Give the woman the milk. Make it a Christmas present to the kids who needed it."

"Are you kidding?" he replied. "I don't even get my wife a Christmas gift that expensive."

"You know the Bible says, 'I was a stranger and you took me in.' You just took her in with all her little children."

"Don't you mean she took me in? The trouble with you is, it wasn't your \$79."

I let the subject drop, but I still believed in my suggestion.

We'd joke about it when he'd come. "Have you given her the milk yet?" I'd say.

"No," he'd snap back, "but I'm thinking of giving my wife a \$79 present, unless another pretty mother starts playing on my sym-

pathies."

Every time I'd ask the question, it seemed he lightened up a bit more.

Then, six days before Christmas, it happened. He arrived with a tremendous smile and a glint in his eyes. "I did it!" he said. "I gave her the milk as a Christmas present. It wasn't easy, but what did I have to lose? It was gone, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said, rejoicing with him. "But you've got to really mean it in your heart."

"I know. I do. And I really feel better. That's why I have this good feeling about Christmas. Those kids had lots of milk on their cereal just because of me."

The holidays came and went. On a sunny January morning two weeks later, Ben almost ran up the walk. "Wait till you hear this," he said, grinning.

He explained he had been on a different route, covering for another milkman. He heard his name being called, looked over his shoulder and saw a woman running down the street, waving money. He recognized her immediately—the woman with all the kids, the one who didn't pay her bill. She was carrying an infant in a tiny blanket, and the woman's long brown hair kept getting in her eyes.

"Ben, wait a minute!" she shouted. "I've got money for you."

Ben stopped the truck and got out.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I really have been meaning to pay you." She explained that her husband had come home one night and announced he'd found a cheaper apartment. He'd also gotten a night job. With all that had happened, she'd forgotten to leave a forwarding address. "But I've been saving," she said. "Here's \$20 toward the bill."

"That's all right," Ben replied. "It's been paid."

"Paid!" she exclaimed. "What do you mean? Who paid it?"

"I did."

She looked at him as if he were the Angel Gabriel and started to cry.

"Well," I asked, "what did you do?"

"I didn't know what to do, so I put an arm around her. Before I knew what was happening, I started to cry, and I didn't have the foggiest idea what I was crying about. Then I thought of all those kids having milk on their cereal, and you know what? I was really glad you talked me into this."

"You didn't take the \$20?"

"Heck no," he replied indignantly. "I gave her the milk as a Christmas present, didn't I?"

Only Human?

By Barbara Popyach

I stood at the kitchen sink washing punch cups for our annual eggnog party. This year I wished we could just skip it. It was my first Christmas without Daddy, and I dreaded gathering around the piano for carols without him. Someone was sure to request "Silent Night," his favorite, and I didn't think I could sit through it without crying.

The doorbell rang. It was an older man, impeccably dressed. "Good morning," he said, tipping his hat, his smile as brilliant as his blue eyes. "I'm here to tune your piano."

I'd made an appointment—but not for that day. No matter, I led the piano tuner to the baby grand and went back to the kitchen. I listened as the man tested and tightened the strings. Minutes later music swelled from the room. "Night and Day," I'd always loved that one. The man segued into "Tenderly." Then "I Concentrate on You," another of my favorites.

Just when I thought he had finished, the piano tuner began playing "Silent Night," soft and slow, just the way Daddy liked. I wiped my tears with the dishtowel. How could I be sad, knowing my father was enjoying "heavenly peace"?

When the last notes faded, I told the man, "Your concert was just what I needed. Can I give you a check?"

"Call the store," the piano tuner said,

"and have a blessed Christmas."

Later I called for the bill. "We didn't send anyone out there," the manager said. "We've fallen way behind schedule. I doubt we'll be able to get to you before Christmas."

"You can take me off the list," I said. "My piano's already been tuned." Good thing, because the party was around the corner and I had some heavenly peace to pass on.

An African Christmas Story

The Night Before Christmas by P. E. Adotey Addo

It was the night before Christmas and I was very sad. My family life had been severely disrupted and I was sure that Christmas would never come. There was none of the usual joy and anticipation that I always felt during the Christmas season.

I am eight years old, but in the past few months I have grown a great deal. Before this year, Christmas had always been for me one of the most joyous religious festivals. It was the time for beautiful Christmas music on the streets, on radio, television, and everywhere. Christmas had always been a religious celebration and the church started preparing way back in November. We really felt that we were preparing for the birth of the Baby Jesus.

Christmas was the time when relatives and friends visited each other, so there were always people traveling and visiting with great joy from all the different tribes. I always thought that was all Christmas was. Oh, how I wished I had some of the traditional food that we used to have at the Christmas Eve dinner and the Christmas Day dinner. I knew I could not taste the rice, chicken, goat, lamb, and fruits of various kinds this year.

The houses were always decorated with beautiful paper ornaments. The children and all the young people loved to decorate their homes and schools with colorful crepe paper.

All of us looked forward to the

Christmas Eve service at our church. After the service there would be a joyous procession through the streets. Everyone would be in a gala mood, with local musicians parading too. Then on Christmas Day we would all go back to church to read the Scriptures and sing carols to remind us of the meaning of the blessed birth of the Baby Jesus. We always thought that these were the things that meant Christmas.

After the Christmas service young people received gifts of chocolate, special cookies, and crackers. This always meant Christmas for us. They also received new clothes and perhaps new pairs of shoes. Meanwhile throughout the celebration, everyone was greeted with the special greeting word, "Afishapa," meaning Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. Oh, how I wished that those memories could be real again, in order to bring us Christmas.

However, this Christmas Eve things were different. I knew Christmas would never come. Everyone was sad and desperate because of what had happened last April when the so-called Army of Liberation attacked our village and took all the young boys and girls away. Families were separated and some people were murdered. The soldiers burned everything in our village, and we were forced to work and to march for many miles. We were often hungry and we were given very little food.

During our forced march we lost all sense of time and place. Miraculously we were able to get away from the soldiers one rainy night. After several weeks in the tropical forest, we made our way back to our burned-out village. Most of us were sick, exhausted, and depressed. Most of the members of our families were nowhere to be found. We had no idea what day or what time it was.

This was the situation until my sick grandmother noticed the reddish and yellow flower we call "Fire on the Mountain," blooming on a tree in the middle of the marketplace. There the tree had stood for gen-

erations, and for generations it had bloomed at Christmastime. For some reason it survived the fire that had engulfed the marketplace. I remembered how the nectar from this beautiful flower had always attracted insects, making them drowsy enough to fall to the ground to become food for crows and lizards. We were surprised that the fire the soldiers had started to burn the marketplace and the village did not destroy the "Fire on the Mountain" tree. What a miracle it was!

Grandmother told us that she knew it was almost Christmas because the flower was blooming. My spirits were lifted for a few minutes when I saw the flower. But soon I became sad again. How could Christmas come without my parents and my village? How could this be Christmas, the time when we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, when since April we had not known any peace, only war and suffering? How could we celebrate as grandmother instructed us to do?

Those were the last words she spoke before she died last night. As I continue to think about past joyous Christmases and the present suffering, we hear the horn of a car. It is then not just one horn, but several, as some cars approach our village. At first we think they are cars full of men with machine guns, so we hide in the forest. To our surprise they are not soldiers, and they do not have guns. They are just ordinary travelers.

It seems the bridge over the river near our village had been destroyed last April as the soldiers left our village. Since it was almost dusk and there were rumors of landmines on the roads, these people had chosen a back road, as they did not want to take any chances. Their detour led them straight to our village.

When they see us, they are shocked, horrified at our suffering and the devastation all around us. Many of these travelers begin to cry. They confirm that tonight is really Christmas Eve. All of them are on their way to their villages to celebrate Christmas with family and friends. Now circumstances brought them to our village at this time on

this, the night before Christmas.

They share the little food they had with us. They even help us to build a fire in the center of the marketplace to keep us warm.

In the middle of all this, my sister becomes ill and cannot stand up. A short time after we returned to our village, my grandmother had told me that my oldest sister was expecting a baby. My sister had been in a state of shock and had not spoken since we all escaped from the soldiers.

I am so afraid for my sister because we do not have any medical supplies and we are not near a hospital. Some of the travelers remove their shirts and clothes to make a bed for my sister to lie near the fire we had made. On that fateful night my sister gives birth to a beautiful baby boy.

This calls for a celebration! War or no war, Africans have to dance, and we celebrate until the rooster crows at 6 A.M.

We sing Christmas songs. Every one sings in his or her own language. For the first time, all the pain and agony of the past few months flees away from me.

When morning finally comes, my sister is asked, "What are you going to name the baby"? Would you believe for the first time since our village was burned and all the young girls and boys were taken away, she speaks. She says, "His name is Gye Nyame, which means *except God I fear none.*" And so we celebrate Christmas.

Christmas really did come to our village that night, but it did not come in the cars or with the travelers. It has come in the birth of my nephew in the midst of our suffering. We see hope in what this little child can do. His birth has turned out to be the universal story of how bad things turn into hope, the hope we found in the Baby Jesus. A miracle has occurred, that night before Christmas, and all of a sudden I know we are not alone anymore.

Now I knew there is hope. I have learned that Christmas comes, in spite of all circumstances. Christmas came even to our village that night.

Christmas Now

By Kitsy Jones

The Sunday before Christmas one year, my husband, a police officer in Arlington, Texas, and I were just leaving for church when the phone rang. *Probably someone wanting Lee, who has already worked a lot of extra hours, to put in some more*, I thought. I looked at him and commanded, “We’re going to church!”

“I’ll leave in five minutes and be there in about twenty,” I heard him tell the caller. I seethed, but his next words stopped me short.

“‘A Wish with Wings’ was broken into last night, and the presents are gone,” he told me. “I have to go. I’ll call you later.” I was dumbfounded.

“A Wish with Wings”—Lee serves on the administrative board—is an organization in our area that grants wishes for children with devastating illnesses. Each year Wish also gives a Christmas party, where gifts are distributed. Some 170 donated gifts had been wrapped and were ready for the party, which was to be held that evening, less than nine hours away.

In a daze, I dressed our two children—Ben, just seventeen months, and five-year-old Kate—and we went to church. In between services, I told friends and the pastors about what had happened. The president of our Sunday school gave me forty dollars to buy more presents. One teacher said her class was bringing gifts to donate to another charitable organization and they would be happy to give some of them to Wish. *A dent*, I thought.

At 10:30 A.M., I phoned Lee at the Wish office. He was busy making other calls, so I packed up the kids and headed in his direction. I arrived at a barren scene. Shattered glass covered the front office where the thief had broken the door. The chill that pervaded the room was caused not only by the cold wind coming through the broken door but also by the dashed hopes of the several people who

stood inside—including Pat Skaggs, the founder of Wish, and Adrena Martinez, the administrative assistant.

Looking out at the parking lot, I was startled to see a news crew from a local television station unloading a camera. Then I learned that Lee’s first phone calls had been to the local radio and TV stations.

A few minutes later, a family who had heard a radio report arrived with gifts, already wrapped. Other people soon followed. One was a little boy who had brought things from his own room.

I left to get lunch for my kids and some drinks for the workers. When I got back, I found the volunteers eating pizzas that had been donated by a local pizza place. More strangers had arrived, offering gifts and labor. A glass repair company had fixed the door and refused payment. We began to feel hope: Maybe we could still have the party!

Lee was fielding phone calls, sometimes with a receiver in each ear. Ben was fussing, so I headed home with him, hoping he could take a nap and I could find a baby-sitter.

Meanwhile, the city came alive. Two other police officers were going from church to church to spread the news. Lee told me later of a man who came directly from church, complete with coat and tie, and went to work on the floor, wrapping presents. A third officer, whose wife is a deejay for a local radio station, put on his uniform and stood outside the station collecting gifts while his wife made a plea on the air. The fire department agreed to be a drop-off point for gifts. Lee called and asked me to bring our van so it could be used to pick them up.

The clock was ticking. It was mid-afternoon, and 6:00 P.M.—the scheduled time of the party—was not far away. I couldn’t find a sitter, and my son started running a fever of 103°F, so I took him with me to the Wish building just long enough to trade cars with Lee.

Nothing I had ever witnessed could have prepared me for what I saw there—people

lined up at the door, arms laden with gifts. One family in which the father had been laid off brought the presents from under their own tree. It was like a scene from *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Inside, Lee was still on the phone. Outside, volunteers were loading vans with wrapped gifts to be taken to the party site, an Elks lodge six miles away. By 5:50 P.M.—just before the first of the more than 100 children arrived—enough presents had been delivered to the lodge. Somehow, workers had matched up the donated items with the youngsters' wishes, so many received just what they wanted. Their faces shone with delight as they opened the packages. For some, it would be their last Christmas.

Those presents, however, were only a small portion of what came in during the day. Wish had lost 170 gifts in the robbery, but more than 1,500 had been donated! Lee decided to spend the night at the office to guard the surplus, so I packed some food and a sleeping bag and drove them down to the office. There, gifts were stacked to the ceiling, filling every available inch of space except for a small pathway that had been cleared to the back office.

Lee spent a quiet night, but the phone started ringing again at 6:30 A.M. The first caller wanted to make a donation, so Lee started to give him directions. "You'd better give me the mailing address," the caller said. "I'm in Philadelphia." The story had been picked up by the national news. Soon calls were coming from all over the country.

By midday, the Wish office was again filled with workers, this time picking up the extra gifts to take the other charitable organizations so they could distribute them before Christmas, just two days away. Pat and Adrena, whose faces had been tear-stained twenty-four hours earlier, were now filled with joy.

When Lee was interviewed for the local news, he summed up everyone's feeling: "It's really Christmas now." We had all caught the spirit—and the meaning—of the season.

Star of Night

By Katherine Paterson

(From *Angels and Other Strangers*)

It had been raining when he left Chicago, but now as the plane circled for landing, he could clearly see the picture-postcard dome bathed in light and the Washington Monument piercing white against the black winter sky. Against all his resolutions, the beauty of the city below made Carl hope that this trip would not be as futile as all the others.

The last time word of his son had come was two years ago. And then the message had been that Jimmy was dead. Even so, Carl had gone out to San Francisco, hoping at least to bring the boy's body home for burial, but there had been no trace of it. He had talked to two people who had seen Jimmy taken to a hospital, unconscious from an overdose. They had not seen him again, but they had both heard that Jimmy had died.

When he first returned from the San Francisco trip, none of the family would believe that Jimmy was really dead. No death certificate was ever sent. But after a year with no word, Carl noticed that the girls had begun to refer to Jimmy in the past tense, and lately both he and Miriam seemed to have come to an unspoken agreement to accept Jimmy's death as a fact.

And then suddenly yesterday, a phone call had come from one of Jimmy's high school friends. Jimmy was alive, he said. He had seen him on the street in Washington. Jimmy had pretended not to recognize him, but there was no doubt in the boy's mind that it was Jimmy he had seen.

Somehow—a miracle, the ticket agent said—Carl was able to get a reservation for Christmas Eve on a flight to Washington. He hated to leave Miriam and the girls, but their hope that he might bring Jimmy back home with him canceled their own disappointment.

Carl himself resolved not to hope. His

hopes had been shattered so often in the last five years that he carried the obliteration of hope about in his body like shrapnel fragments. He could not lay his weary soul open to still another assault of hope. And yet ... and yet he did hope.

From the airport he called Bill Woodson, a fraternity brother who was pastor of a large church in the city. After a brief tussle with the clergyman's protective secretary, he got through to his friend.

"Carl Porter!" the voice boomed, deeper and more resonant than Carl remembered it. "What brings you to Washington on Christmas Eve?"

"I heard yesterday that Jimmy might be here in the city."

"Jimmy? But I thought..."

"Yes, so did we. But a school friend saw him here on the street a few days ago."

"But that's wonderful news!"

"Well, I hope so. I've got to find him first. I know how busy you must be, but I just don't know anyone else in the area who might help me."

There was a long pause at the other end of the line.

"I know this must be a bad time for you," Carl said.

"Yes"—another pause—"I have another service tonight, and my wife has invited an army of relatives. ... Have you tried the police?"

"No." Carl cleared his throat. "This is between me and Jimmy. I don't want to go to the police with it."

"Hey, why don't you come on over here? We'll put our heads together. I might think of someone who could help us with this thing."

"*This thing*" is my son, Carl thought, but he thanked Bill and got directions to the church.

Wearily he dumped his suitcase and umbrella into the front seat of the rented car. As he drove, there unfolded before him a city more beautiful than the one he had seen from the air. Arlington stood in majesty by the

Potomac River, and Lincoln looked out in compassion at yet another generation of confused youth. The tree on the White House lawn was a gigantic tower of brilliant light, and the hope that he tried so hard to deny kept pushing up in his chest.

He left the car in a lot marked "For Staff Only" and took the back steps of the building two at a time. He was met by a custodian, and when he gave his name and asked to see the pastor, he was handed a note.

"Sorry. Had to rush home between services. Try Chris Westoff at St. Thomas's. They work a lot with street people. Good luck and Merry Christmas!"

Street people. He swallowed and asked to be directed to a phone. He found the number for St. Thomas's and let it ring for what seemed an eternity. His only alternative was the police, and he dreaded having to go there. That was where the trouble between Jimmy and him had begun. No, not begun. It began God knew when. When had the boy changed from a laughing, bright little child into a stubborn, narrow-eyed enemy? He had tried to get through to the boy, God knows he had tried, but all their encounters ended alike—he, in a rage of frustration, driven to punish the child far more stringently than he had intended, while Jimmy looked at him coldly through those narrow slits and refused ever to cry.

That was why, as he had tried to explain to Miriam a hundred times, when Jimmy had called from the police station, Carl had waited until morning to go and get him. He had been unable to discipline the boy, so perhaps a taste of the consequences would straighten Jimmy out. ...

"St. Thomas's Church. Merry Christmas!" The background was such a din that he could hardly hear the speaker.

"Yes. This is Carl Porter. I'm trying to reach a Reverend Westoff."

"He's at a Christmas party right now. Can I take a message?"

"No. I'll come over. I have to see him." He checked the address in the phone book and

on the way out got directions from the custodian. He had no difficulty suppressing his hope now as he opened the car door.

There was a form on the back seat. Carl felt more annoyed than startled. It would mean another delay in this endless search. "Who are you?"

"Man, don't you know better than to leave your car unlocked in this kind of neighborhood?" The form straightened up. Under the curly black hair, the face looked about twelve, maybe fourteen. It was hard to tell.

"What do you want?"

"Well, mainly, man, I want a warm place to sleep. My old lady went out and left the apartment locked up. If I break that lock again, she'll give me hell. I don't know when she'll be home. Tomorrow, next day, maybe. When she celebrates, man, she celebrates."

"What's your name, son?"

"Independence Murray. In honor of a little celebrating she did one Fourth of July."

"Oh."

"I don't mind. Suppose it had been Halloween?"

Carl got into the car and shut the door. "You know where St. Thomas's Church is?"

"Nope."

"Want to help me find it?" It was a wild idea. The kid might mug him at the first dimly lit street.

"Hey, you're all right, man." Independence vaulted over into the front seat. He shoved the suitcase and umbrella toward the middle of the seat and settled himself comfortably in the corner.

Thus it was that when they finally found St. Thomas's, there were two of them. Carl was led through the din of a balloon race to a short man in a clerical collar. He was not sure how he could scream the tragedies of his life over the loud rock music and the shrieking voices and the bursting balloons. But the merciful pastor took the two of them to a closet-sized study and closed the door.

"I'm looking for my son. ..." Carl saw at once that Westoff had heard the words a thou-

sand times. He had not heard the name James or Jim or Jimmy Porter. The description Carl gave of the boy and the five-year-old picture must have sounded and looked like every other young boy the pastor had been asked about. It was to be another wild-goose chase. Rising, Carl tried to thank Westoff for his trouble.

"No, wait," the clergyman said. "We've just begun."

Westoff then spent about thirty minutes on the phone in a dozen undecipherable conversations. He seemed to spend a lot of time shaking his head. At last, in the midst of a conversation, he smiled and, putting his hand over the mouthpiece, turned to Carl.

"I have a lead on a boy that might be your son. Light brown hair, brown eyes, chipped front tooth. He's calling himself Brian Jones."

Carl's heart stopped as the huge poster of the Rolling Stones that Jimmy kept on his bedroom wall flashed before his eyes. "That sounds right. That could be Jimmy."

Westoff thanked the person at the other end of the line and hung up the receiver. "I think we're in luck," he said. "There's a girl here at the party that may be able to help us."

He reappeared shortly with a girl—a child, really—who wore a postage stamp of a dress. Her hair hung around her thin face and trailed almost to the abbreviated hem of her garment. She looked about twelve.

"I'm eighteen," she belligerently replied to Carl's stare.

"This is Tiny," Westoff said. "Tiny—Carl and Independence. Can you help them find Brian Jones?"

"I don't think Brian wants to be found too much."

"I just want to talk with him," Carl said.

She eyed him shrewdly.

"Come on, sister. Where's your Christmas spirit?" Independence asked.

The girl flashed Independence a sour look. "Okay," she said to Carl. "I'll get my coat."

Tiny climbed into the back seat of the car, curled her legs under her, and settled into the

corner with a cigarette.

"You'll have to direct me, Tiny." Carl started the engine.

"Yeah. Well, I don't know exactly where it is, but I think it's like toward Maryland. Northeast, you know."

Carl shifted carefully into reverse. He must keep his temper. This child was his only hope. He waited while she took a long puff from her cigarette.

"Try Thirteenth or Fourteenth Street," she said at last.

Independence knew enough to get them to Fourteenth Street and headed north. "Do you remember anything special about the place?" Carl concentrated on erasing any trace of impatience from his voice. "Any landmark that might help you recognize it?"

"Yeah. Like there's this big blinking star on a building across the street from his house. If I hadn't been so stoned, it would have kept me awake all night."

Carl breathed audibly. "Good," he said. "We ought to be able to locate a sign like that."

They followed Fourteenth Street all the way into Maryland and Thirteenth all the way back. "Maybe they took it down," suggested the girl lackadaisically.

"Hey, wait a minute, man." Independence was leaning forward. "Stop at that drugstore over there."

Carl obeyed. The boy disappeared inside, and Carl had a fleeting fantasy of being the getaway man for Bonnie and Clyde. But in about ten minutes Independence reappeared, waving, not a sawed-off shotgun, but a piece of paper.

He forked it grandly over to Carl. "Here, man, is the name and address of the White Star Savings and Loan Corporation." He let Carl read the address and then slammed the door. "I had to go through a hell of a lot of stars in the yellow pages. But the way I figure it, with a big blinking star, it's got to be either a loan shark or an auto repair. Right?"

Carl started the car. "You're a genius, Independence."

The boy grinned happily. "So they tell me. So they tell me."

In less than five minutes they had found the White Star Savings and Loan. The cinder-block building seemed about to topple over under the weight of the huge star blinking on its roof.

Carl and Independence both turned to the back seat. "Well?" demanded the boy.

"Yeah," she said. "That's it. That house over there across the street—the one that's all boarded up."

"Don't look like nobody's living there."

"No, it don't," Tiny replied with light sarcasm, and settled back into the corner for the return trip.

Carl got out. "You two can wait," he said. "I'm going to look around."

"In this neighborhood? You crazy, man?" Independence reached over and punched down the door lock, huddling down to make himself less conspicuous.

Carl walked around the house. He was feeling a little crazy. He had come so far across so many years and heartbreaks and gotten so close, only to lose again.

It had once been an impressive house, in an ugly late-Victorian way, with two bay windows and massive front steps. All the windows on the first floor were boarded up, the panes long ago sacrificed to vandals. In the dim light he could see obscenities and slogans painted across the brownstone. There was a large official warning to trespassers posted on the front door. He rattled the doorknob, then banged on the door.

"Jimmy! Jim! Are you there?" It was no use. Fatigue assailed him as he turned to go back to the car.

Just then Independence jumped out of the front seat and ran toward him, grabbing his arm. "Look!" the boy whispered, pointing upward.

A thin wisp of smoke was rising from the chimney. They watched the old house in silence. Once Carl thought he saw something move at one of the second-floor windows.

He turned to speak to Independence, but the boy was already back at the car. "Okay, Tiny, out," Independence was saying.

He locked the door behind the reluctant girl. "You people got ways of letting each other know who you are. How 'bout getting us into that house?"

"Yeah." Tiny shrugged Independence's hand off her arm. They followed her to the back of the house and up some steps to a small latticed back porch. "Got a credit card?"

Carl handed her one from his wallet, and she slipped it under the bolt through the crack of the screen door and yanked up. The door fell open. They followed her across the dark porch. She handed the card back to Carl and then knocked on the door in what he guessed was a code. There was a scuffling noise inside, then silence. At length the door opened a crack.

"Oh, Tiny, it's you, isn't it?" a soft voice replied. The crack was widening to reveal a girl even more pale and childlike than Tiny. Her dark hair hung almost to her waist. She wore a long beaded dress. In her left hand she was carrying a candle, which gave her features a soft warmth, and slung over her right hip was a baby wrapped in a fringed shawl.

"Who is he?" She pointed her candle past Tiny.

"It's all right," said Carl. "He's with me."

Independence jabbed him in the ribs. "She means you, baby. Not me." Carl blushed in the darkness. Of course, the boy was right. It was Carl himself who was suspect in this setting.

"It's all right, sister," Independence said jauntily. "We're just the three wise guys following the big blinking star. How about a little shelter for dusty travelers?"

The solemn little mother smiled. "I thought they were three men—the wise men."

"So? We're liberated. Right, Tiny?" By this time Independence had smooth-talked his way through the door and was standing beside the girl. With a bow he shoved the door wide and ushered Tiny and Carl into the house. The girl made no objections. They followed

her and the candle through the ancient kitchen and broad hallway into what must have been the parlor. Through the cracks in the boards, the star of the loan company across the street gave a steady pulse of light. There was a large fireplace in the room, built for four- or five-foot logs. In it, a tiny, orphaned flame sputtered. The only furniture was a mattress pushed against the wall. The girl put the candle on the floor and shifted the baby to her other hip.

"Seen Brian lately?" Tiny asked finally. She pointed her nose at Carl. "Says he's his old man. Just wants to talk."

"Really, I do just want to talk with him," said Carl. He tried to keep from begging, but the tone came through all the same.

"Let's just sit down," suggested Independence, plopping himself down on the mattress.

Carl sat on the floor near the girl. She was toying with the fringe on the baby's shawl.

The baby was quiet, but the girl hugged it to her as though it needed comforting. She looked into the little face and said quietly, "Brian. Brian is dead."

He had heard it before, and he hadn't believed it then, either. So although the word "dead" bound his chest like a cold chain, Carl did not surrender to it.

"When did he die?"

"October," the girl replied. "November." She was talking to the baby rather than to him. "We don't always know the time, do we, Jason?"

"Was it drugs?"

The girl looked up quickly. "No," she said. "He's been clean since Frisco. He nearly died in Frisco."

"I heard that."

"No. He was looking for work. He was worried about me and the baby, you know. A car hit him. ..."

The floor creaked above their heads. Carl looked up. "Rats," said the girl. The baby made a gurgling noise.

"Hey, can I hold him?" asked

Independence.

"He might cry," said the girl.

"No way. Babies are crazy about me." Independence leaned over and took the child. "Hey, he's really something. How you doing, man?" The baby smiled up at the boy and made more baby noises. "See that? He's laughing." The boy began to sing under his breath, rocking himself and the baby in rhythm:

"Mary had a baby, yes, my Lord, Mary had a baby, yea, my Lord, Mary had a baby, yes, my Lord. The people keep a-coming and the train has gone.

"I always liked that part about the train," Independence explained to no one in particular and resumed his quiet song.

Carl leaned toward the girl. "May I ask you another question?"

"Sure," said the girl, not taking her eyes off the boy and the baby.

"Is the baby—is Jason my ... ?"

"He's Brian's, yes." She turned toward him with a half smile. "I don't mind, if you don't."

"No, no," he stammered. "I'm ... I'm very pleased ... proud. . . ."

"You hear that, Jason baby?" the boy asked. "You just got yourself a proud granddaddy. Want to hold him?"

"Well, I—"

"Hey, don't be scared, Carl baby. Jason won't hurt you." He handed the baby to him.

Carl trembled at the touch. He looked into the baby's face, searching there for something of Jimmy. The baby smiled. *I'm going to cry*, thought Carl. *When have I ever cried?*

"Hey," Tiny was on her feet "hey, can we go now? I got you here like I said."

Carl opened his mouth to reply, but shut it again as a huge rat emerged from the darkness and raced across the floor toward them. They all drew back as it ran over the mattress and into a hole in the wall on the other side.

"Wow," said Independence respectfully. "They grow'em big around here, don't they?"

"Yes," said the girl. Carl could see that she was shivering.

"Come with us," he said. "Let me find you a warm place to stay without any rats."

"We don't stay here all the time, you know"—her jaw was out—"just until we can get enough for key money on a decent place."

"I know," said Carl. "But let me help you just for a few days, anyway."

"No, I can't leave."

"Are you waiting for Jim—for Brian, I mean?"

"Didn't I already tell you Brian is dead?" She wouldn't look at him.

"You're waiting for someone else?" he asked gently.

"No."

"Please, come with us—for Jason's sake."

"I can't leave." She reached out, so Carl reluctantly gave her the baby. She hugged him close.

Carl turned to the boy. "Independence, would you get my things from the car?" He handed him the keys. "We'll spend the rest of the night here."

"What a hell of a way to spend Christmas," grumbled Tiny.

Independence flipped the keys into the air with his left hand and caught them behind his back with his right. "You can always hoof it on your own, Tiny baby."

"In this neighborhood? You crazy, man?"

Carl distributed the clothes from his suitcase. The girls and baby lay down on the mattress covered with a ragged blanket, Carl's overcoat, and his extra suit jacket and pants. Independence lay near the fireplace on top of part of the *Chicago Tribune* and put another section over him.

At everyone's insistence, Carl himself put on his bathrobe over his suit and then propped himself in a corner with the umbrella next to him. He was determined not to sleep and was sure, in fact, that the cold would keep him awake, but despite his discomfort, exhaustion overcame him. Toward dawn his head had dropped to his chest.

He was dozing, when he heard the click-

ing noise of rat paws on the wooden floor. By the time he was fully awake, the rat was nosing about the mattress near the baby's face.

Carl jumped to his feet with a shout, expecting the rat to run, but the creature snarled like a vicious little dog and turned its attention once more to the child.

It was not just a hungry animal to Carl. It was some evil manifestation. It was all the evil in himself, and in everyone like him, that brought these little children to such a place. And Carl attacked it as such.

He swung the heavy handle of the umbrella down with such force that the rat gave out an almost human shriek and then lay stunned. Carl kicked it away from the mattress. He tried to stab it with the point of the umbrella, but the flesh was soft and gave way under his blows, so he raised his foot and stamped down again and again with his heel until dark blood gushed from the rat's head and ran onto the floor. The creature twitched, then was still. With the point of his umbrella Carl pushed the rat's body into the fireplace.

Panting, the sweat rolling from under his bathrobe, Carl fell back into his corner.

"My Lord," Independence was staring at him respectfully, "you're in the wrong line of work, man."

They were all staring at him. Carl wiped his sweating hands on his bathrobe. He was ashamed for them to look at him like this.

There was a noise on the stair. *Oh, God, I'm not up to another battle*, he thought, but he staggered to his feet and raised his umbrella against this new intruder. This one was human, with shoulder-length brown hair and a beard.

"Take it easy, Dad." The speaker had a chipped front tooth.

"Jimmy?" Carl lowered the umbrella.

The young man went over to the mattress and bent over the girl, who was holding the now screaming child. "Is he okay?" he asked.

"Yes," she said.

"It's all right, Jason boy," Jimmy said soothingly, stroking the tiny cheek with his forefinger. "It's all right."

"I think he's just hungry," said the girl. She unhooked her dress and began to nurse the baby.

"We thought you were dead, Jimmy," Carl said.

"I was, in a way. I'm all right now."

"Why couldn't you let us know? Would it have been so hard just to call your mother?"

"Not hard to call Mother. No."

"Oh, God." Carl turned away. He was sobbing.

Strong young arms came about his shoulders. "Sshh. It's all right. You came to look for me, didn't you?" Jimmy held Carl tightly. "I saw you fighting for my baby," he said softly. "I was watching through the floor."

"Well," said Independence. "This is a nice little scene, but I gotta move on to the next act. Come on, Tiny. Hand me those things." He started to pack Carl's suitcase.

"Come back home with me, Jimmy."

The young man shook his head. "Not now," he said. "In the spring we'll come."

"Would you let me lend you the deposit for an apartment?"

Jimmy looked quickly at the rat where it lay in the cold fireplace. "That would be good, Dad. I'd appreciate it. Just until spring." He smiled his boyish chipped-tooth smile.

"I'd appreciate a little breakfast," Tiny's shrill voice announced.

"He's taking us all out to breakfast, Tiny. Don't you worry. Little celebration due all round." Independence immediately took charge of herding the little group out the door and toward the car.

Across the street, the White Star Savings and Loan Corporation squatted small and dirty under its darkened star.

"Right on, guiding star!" Independence waved. "We wise guys have seen the light."

"Yeah," said Tiny. "Ho, ho, ho! Merry Christmas and all that."

Carl put his arm around the girl's thin shoulders. "Merry Christmas to you, too, Tiny," he said.

Merry Christmas, Mrs. Moring

By Henry Hurt

(Originally published in *Reader's Digest*, December 1995)

Danny Moring had settled down to watch the eleven o'clock news in the den of his quiet home in the U.S. state of South Carolina. His children were tucked in bed. His wife, Allyson, who had complained of a sudden bad case of the flu, was asleep at the other end of the house. Her illness was so severe—fever, chills, cramps, vomiting—that she had isolated herself so she would not pass along the bug to the rest of the family.

Suddenly Danny heard an odd scuffling noise in the kitchen. He went to look. There lay Allyson, curled on the floor in a fetal position. She had pulled herself all the way from their bedroom and now reached toward him, her face distorted in pain. "Danny, help me. I'm dying," she gasped, her teeth chattering. "I really am."

Her husband was stunned. Allyson, 36, had enjoyed wonderful health—except for recent surgery for a ruptured spinal disc. Only the day before, she, Danny and their children—Elizabeth, nine, and Robert, one—had returned home from a Thanksgiving-weekend camping trip.

Danny looked down at Allyson; the skin on her fingers and toes was turning purple. He carried her back to their bedroom and called 911. Then he stroked the wet, dark hair plastered to her face and hugged her icy body to him. "I've never hurt like this," Allyson whimpered. "It's like pins sticking in me all over."

Minutes later, when the emergency crew

arrived, Allyson's blood pressure was undetectable. She was placed on a gurney and carried from the house. Standing in the doorway as the ambulance sped off into the night, Danny felt weak. Of all people, how could this be happening to Allyson?

Danny phoned his father to come stay with the children, who were sound asleep. In his mind he could see them, snuggled in bed, innocent to the fact that the very heart of their lives had been plucked out and taken away.

Lit by a Smile. "Stick your tongues way out," Allyson Moring had said to her teenage students at choral practice a few days before she fell ill. "Let's do our warm-ups." Then, Mrs. Moring, as her pupils called her, exuberantly jutted her own tongue out and led the vocalizing. Awful guttural noises, mixed with nervous giggles, resounded through the music room.

"Now we're ready!" Mrs. Moring said, convinced that nasal cavities were opened, voice ranges extended, and—perhaps most important—egos leveled by laughter. Her gaze swept the 50 youthful faces, and she hooked her arms into the air. She gave a crisp flick of her hands, and young voices rose in sweet unison. With her high spirits and smiling slate-blue eyes, Mrs. Moring had won over the hearts of her charges at the high school. They loved to watch her drive into the parking lot, her head bobbing energetically as she filled the car with her own rendition of "I Could Have Danced All Night." Even at her most intense moments of conducting, her face was lit by a half-smile.

Since her earliest days, Allyson, oldest of five girls in a family of six children, had loved music. From the age of five, she had taken piano lessons, and later, voice lessons. As a teacher, she believed that music could change lives for the better—that it could foster emotional development and enhance all the good aspects of life, the serious as well as the frivolous. She believed, too, that it could soothe those parts of life that are most difficult. In

every sense, Allyson Moring was an apostle for the power of music.

For the 1994 Christmas concert, Mrs. Moring's group was attempting one of music's most difficult choral pieces, the "Hallelujah" chorus from Handel's *Messiah*. A challenge even for adults, the selection would be the centerpiece of the concert—if the students could get it right. The very first note had to explode from 50 throats in perfect harmony. Then the parts had to follow one another in a cascade of sound—new voices breaking in upon old with exquisite precision.

For 16 long weeks, the boys and girls had practiced after school, perfecting simpler selections and struggling with Handel's masterpiece. During Mrs. Moring's absence for back surgery, Katherine Allen, 17, a senior who had taken a course in directing music, filled in. But Katherine, slight of build with long blond hair, had found it hard to manage the large group. Believing she had failed as a conductor, she vowed she would stick to singing and leave directing to others.

Allyson Moring returned to choir practice, the success of her surgery marred only by a staph infection, for which she was given antibiotics. She finished the medication on Thanksgiving Saturday. Within hours, she had taken to bed with what she believed to be flu.

Last Rites. When Danny Moring reached the hospital, the news was brutally bad. Medicine's oldest enemy—massive systemic infection, also known as sepsis—had laid siege to his wife's body. She had gone into septic shock, in which bacteria overwhelm the body's systems, blood vessels begin to leak, and vital organs start shutting down. A doctor took Danny aside and suggested he gather the family. There was little chance that Allyson would survive the night.

Gripped by this grim diagnosis, Danny rushed home. There, he sat on the edge of Elizabeth's bed, kissed her lightly on the forehead and nudged the little girl from her sleep.

"Where's Mom?" Elizabeth asked. Her eyes were beseeching now, confused, and Danny caught the color in them—the precise slate-blue of Allyson's.

"Mom went to the hospital," Danny said, tears welling in his eyes.

"Is Mommy going to die?" she said, her voice wavering.

"Lizzie," he said, "she could die, but we're going to ask God to be with us and we're going to pray and pray like we've never prayed before."

Elizabeth burst into tears as the two of them hugged each other. They prayed together, Elizabeth's small voice begging God to make her mother well. Then Danny tucked her in. With the light now off, Elizabeth cried in her pillow until sleep brought her peace.

Back at the hospital, among the doctors watching over Allyson was her father, pediatrician Allen Harrell. As her mother and sisters stood around her bed, Danny and Dr. Harrell each took one of Allyson's hands. The Mornings' parish priest, Father Timothy Watters, stood by.

Allyson Moring's eyes opened for a moment. She looked around at her family and at Father Watters. Her father gently said to her, "Allyson, honey, you're very sick. It would give us all strength if Father Watters gave you the last rites." He rubbed her icy hand.

"Am I going to die?" Allyson asked.

"Honey," her father said, gently squeezing her hand, "this is to give us the strength we need to go forward."

Tears welled in Allyson's eyes, and she closed them. Then the priest touched his fingers to the palms of Allyson's hands and to her forehead, anointing her with oil.

Katherine Allen made her way through the bustling corridor as classes changed at Bishop England High School. Suddenly she was face to face with Jessica Boulware, a junior from the choral group. Katherine could tell from Jessica's expression that something was terribly wrong.

"It's not true," said Katherine after hearing the news. "There's no way Mrs. Moring could be that sick."

"I'm serious," said Jessica. "She's been given the last rites." Speechless, the girls stared at each other, feeling empty and alone. Would Mrs. Moring really die? What would happen to the Christmas concert?

The next afternoon, the choral group met to talk about Mrs. Moring. The latest medical reports were dire. It would be almost impossible to stage the Christmas concert, only ten days away. But, more important, what could they do—now—for Mrs. Moring?

Jessica Boulware had an idea.

Joyful Voices. Allyson Moring's infection raged on. At first, in her delirium, she had mumbled about the Christmas concert, telling Danny it had to go on. Then she became totally unresponsive, and was kept alive only by a respirator. Her body swelled so horribly with toxic fluids that her eyes disappeared into bloated flesh.

Danny was standing vigil at her bedside when two of Allyson's colleagues from the high school, Barbara and John McPherson, came to the intensive-care unit and handed Danny an audio cassette. "From Allyson's students," Barbara said. Danny inserted the tape into a small player and turned it on. In a sudden burst, the joyful voices of girls and boys singing Christmas carols filled the cubicle.

Staring into Allyson's face, Danny prayed that she could hear these voices that he knew she loved. Then his own heart jumped as he picked up the high, sweet refrain of one of her favorite songs: "Do you hear what I hear? Do you hear what I hear?"

As Danny prayed for God to let Allyson hear, the singers suddenly began the "Hallelujah" chorus. What happened next astounded him. Allyson's eyelids twitched, and he felt a firm squeeze from her hand. Staring into Allyson's face, he thought he saw a tiny half-smile, as thrilling as any smile he had ever seen.

Danny Moring wept with relief and knew that he would play the tape over and over. Then someone touched him on the shoulder. It was Allyson's father. "Danny," Dr. Harrell said gently, "I cannot let you get your hopes up. Allyson can't survive without a miracle."

But there was no miracle. Pneumonia set in a few days later, and the illness grew worse.

"The tape made Mrs. Moring smile!" whooped a girl when Katherine came into the music room the next day. That spark of hope ignited the students. "There's no way we can not have the concert," said Jessica. But who would conduct? All eyes were on Katherine Allen.

"Never," said Katherine. "I'm not capable of it." But efforts to find a substitute director failed. One night, Katherine and her mother talked until 1 A.M. Over and over, Katherine insisted, "I'm just not a conductor." But she couldn't stop thinking about Mrs. Moring. She remembered the powerful inspiration the teacher brought to their choral group—and the immense satisfaction they felt when she pushed them to their performing limits.

The next morning, Katherine announced to her parents, "I've decided to do it." Practice resumed. As a perfectionist, Katherine wrestled with the pitch, the pacing, the soloists. But the greatest challenge was keeping the singers together for the "Hallelujah" chorus.

"I can't get the altos to hold their parts," Katherine told her parents in frustration. "I just don't see how it can all work." Her sleep was ravaged by nightmares of her own failure—something as a top student she had rarely experienced.

The rehearsals were also clouded by bad news from the hospital. At each grim report, someone would break down crying. Katherine was filled with fear.

"This is for Mrs. Moring." On December 8, Charleston's magnificent Grace Episcopal Church opened its doors for the high school Christmas concert. Word had

spread about the students who were determined to fulfill their teacher's dream. More than 500 people packed the seats and spilled into the foyer.

In another part of the church, Katherine and the chorus went over the difficult parts one last time. Finally, Katherine called for silence. "We are going to pray together for Mrs. Moring," she said. "And then we're going to go out there and make her proud."

As she led the group in the Lord's Prayer, Katherine heard sobs. She struggled for composure herself. Then she addressed them for the last time. "We cannot be emotional," she insisted. "It'll ruin the concert. Keep saying 'This is for Mrs. Moring, this is for Mrs. Moring.' It must be the best we've ever done."

In the darkened sanctuary of the Gothic church, the chorus, holding candles and singing "O Holy Night," made its way down the aisles. When the singers reached the front, the lights came up. Katherine could see Mrs. Moring's family in the front rows, their faces shining with the same hope the singers felt.

Steadying herself, she looked out over the crowd and informed them that their director was deathly ill. "We dedicate this concert to Mrs. Moring in the hope that she will get well," she said.

Then Katherine turned and, with great flair, began the performance. As the voices intoned the familiar Christmas hymns, her confidence rose. But one thought continued to nag her: *Can I keep them together for the finale?* When the powerful opening to the "Hallelujah" chorus burst from the organ, Katherine took a deep breath and raised her arms. There was an excruciating pause. Then she flung her arms wide—and heard the voices explode, every note in place, warm and confident. Mrs. Moring's students were summoning sounds so pure that Handel's long crescendo of "hallelujahs" seemed to soar to the rafters, touching ears and hearts with the sound of Heaven itself.

When silence finally fell, the listeners rose and broke into applause, some weeping and

others crowding forward to embrace the singers. Exhausted, Katherine felt a hug at her waist. It was the Morings' daughter, Elizabeth, embracing her as tightly as she could. Looking into the child's slate-blue eyes, Katherine was overcome with joy.

That same night, less than a mile from the church, Danny Moring sat holding his wife's hand, the tape made by her students still playing. Allyson's condition remained hopeless. Danny didn't even know whether the news of the successful Christmas concert had penetrated her unconsciousness.

But slowly, remarkably, over the next few days, her systems began to stabilize. Lungs and kidneys started functioning. Allyson began to recover.

Faith in God's Power. On Christmas morning, just 17 days after the concert, Allyson sat quietly in her own living room. Baby Robert squirmed in her lap as Danny and Elizabeth fetched presents from beneath the tree. Allyson was bone-thin and exhausted, but her face wore a radiant smile.

Why she got well, or even when the precise turning point came, is not important to Allyson Moring. The key fact is that her long, tortured slumber was filled with music. "What I remember is music, music, music—the beautiful music and voices that I love."

Soon after Mrs. Moring got home, Katherine Allen and Jessica Boulware and several others from the choral group tapped gingerly on her door, bearing gifts and flowers. There was an explosion of emotion as the girls and Mrs. Moring hugged one another. She told the girls what she had told so many—that the entire experience has certified her faith in God's power through music and prayer and the wonderful capacity of young people.

If the most precious of God's gifts is life, the Morings have realized a blessing every bit as special to them as Allyson's recovery—a baby boy born to them in October 1995, named Jonathan Tucker.

Merry Christmas, Mrs. Moring.