

**Faith, Hope, and Legacy:**  
**A Collection of Christmas Reflections**

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To

Gretchen, Emily, Meggie

Holland, Madelyn, Braeden

and all of my students, past and present.

*You are all children of the light and of the day...*

## Acknowledgments

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Most of the photos included in this collection were taken by me, but I need to offer a special thanks to Karin Blackburn for her photo of the drum ornament ("Gretchie's Gifts"). Sometimes, things just come across our lifefeed when we need them the most. Thanks, Karin.

## Preface

In 1981, I owned a 1968 Ford Falcon – my first car that was desperately seeking love. I was reminded of this at every red light, when I would have to throw the car into park, rev the engine just enough as if I were soothing its little hood, and then drop it into drive and push on before it stalled out. We named her “Deuce,” and she became the vehicle, both literally and figuratively, for my first group of high school friends to explore life beyond the boundaries of home, and beyond the tired old wheels on our rusty bikes.

Given that first taste of freedom, my friends – Brad, Faith, Lisa, Sheilah, and others – chose to use that freedom to brighten the lives of some individuals who were less fortunate, or who might be spending the holidays alone. We created a group called The Smile Merchants, thanks to the guidance of our theater teacher Mike DeVita and friends Chuck Graham and Kurt Bond. We spent 30 days between Thanksgiving and Christmas visiting 30 hospitals, pediatric cancer wards, senior centers, and nursing homes bringing smiles to those who would be spending their holidays away from home. Deuce somehow managed to carry us to each place and back, even if that meant, at one time, driving a good 68 miles from Johns Hopkins in Baltimore City to our humble homes in Towson, a mere 6 miles away. Sometimes, we have to go the long way to get to our destination. It was all worth it, though; we were with friends. In many ways, this is how our journey has gone since then. The road has been long and winding, but we carry on to our destination.

These original stories and essays are an extension of what we did with that freedom when we were 16. We chose to embrace light, even in those darkest moments. I will never forget how we spent our early evening after a show 35 years ago on this very day of the release of this publication. December 8, 1981. It was raining, and we had just finished an emotional show downtown. It was also the one-year anniversary of the death of John Lennon. As I pulled in front of Faith’s house, “Imagine” came on the radio, and we all cried and held on to each other, understanding that peace,

even in times of sorrow, is possible through us and through our actions. We understood the importance of faith and of hope, of love for ourselves and for others. We understood that we were charged with a calling to be the merchants of smiles, and we embraced it fully.

As you read this collection of stories, essays, and reflections, listen for the message that I have heard in my journey, a message that we need to hear today, and every day. It's not a seasonal message that we need to hear just during the holidays; we need to believe in love, in peace, through the power of faith and hope during all days. Let this season energize us to remain merchants of smiles to all throughout the year.

"Gretchie's Gifts," the featured story in this collection, embodies that power. Gretchen was a friend from high school whom I wish I had taken the time to know better. We were like toddlers, always practicing parallel play in our circles, never really connecting but always aware of what each other was doing. We did connect a few years ago at a viewing, and she reminded me that she had never been a Smile Merchant but had wanted to be one. That night, I dubbed her an honorary merchant of smiles (nobody had a more beautiful smile than Gretchen), and we stayed in better touch after that. We chatted online whenever our paths crossed, usually very late at night. In our last chat session, Gretchen told me this most extraordinary story of the greatest gift she had ever received. "This is a story that you need to tell," she wrote.

"I will," I said. "I promise."

Soon thereafter, Gretchen died. As much as I tried to write this story in 2015, I just couldn't dig beyond the grief of losing her, my own brother Warren, and his son and my nephew Noah. It was all too much.

The story stayed with me, though, and continued to write itself in my mind through most of 2016. In November, I sat down and started writing "Gretchie's Gift," and it practically wrote itself. While it is a work of fiction, its foundation is grounded in fulfilling Gretchen's wish to tell her story.

There's a deeper part of this story, though, that I need to share with you. For good or for bad, I have always had a sense for the fragility of life, and in my journey, I have had the honor and privilege to meet or know of people that are true champions at living. Meggie Curd and Emily Davis, along with my sister Cindy, are three such individuals who have had that battle with cancer.

Meggie Curd and Emily Davis were never students of mine. I never

even met Emily in all her young years as she changed the lives of so many while battling cancer. Yet, when she passed away in February of 2004, I found myself mourning her death as if I had known her.

But I did not know Emily, at least in the sense of meeting her in person. I am a member of the community comprising thousands whose lives were touched deeply by such an inspiring, courageous girl, a 15-year-old artist and hero who shared the passion of living and loving so strongly that it reached us, stayed with us, forever changing our lives and making us better individuals toward each other.

Emily's love and inspiration touched those who knew her well so deeply that, in knowing them, I was touched forever by her strength in working with others, helping them see beauty within themselves.

That love, that courage to make the most of today and to allow others to see it as well, is with me as strongly today as it was when Emily died.

Here's why:

When I was much younger, still a teen in high school, I took a class called Education for Responsible Parenthood taught by Mrs. Falcone, and in that class I met a wonderful young girl named Meggie Curd, who, at the age of 8, was battling cancer. Now, this was 34 years ago that I met Meggie, and I did not get many chances to spend time with her or even get to know her well as I might a friend I see every day. But the frequency of visits did not matter at all. Meeting Meggie just those few times was all I needed to understand that we all have choices in our life in how we use our precious moments here on Earth. We can spend our time in sadness or grief over our past or our present, or we can embrace the new moments that are here now, and are yet to come, filled with possibility and with hope, filled with whatever we choose to make of them.

Meggie did two things: She decided to see love in those moments, and she decided to share that love with others, so strongly and powerfully that it stayed with them so that they, too, could share that magic and that love with those they met along the way.

When Meggie died, we all cried and mourned her passing. But when we hugged each other in support and in comfort, we knew that each of us contained a gift from her to carry with us for the rest of our lives. She allowed us to see the beauty in these moments that we experience, and we have the awesome responsibility of sharing that love, that beauty, with all whom we meet.

That responsibility, that love, stays with us forever.



I called Mrs. Falcone just last week as I was wrapping up “Gretchie’s Gifts” and thanked her for that opportunity to meet Meggie. It had been 34 years, a long time since hearing her wish me the best of luck upon graduating high school. It seemed as if no time had passed at all. That’s what this collection is about: the timeless connection, the legacy of love, hope, and faith that we share and pass along in our short journeys here on Earth.

In 2005, a year after Emily died, I was at a local restaurant with a good friend when I saw a few members of Emily’s family a few tables away. I wanted to let Emily’s mom know that her daughter, through her friends and her family, had touched me deeply with that love and seeing the beauty in each moment. A few others from the Davis party joined us at our table, and I shared my story of Meggie with her, telling her that Emily’s memory will not fade away; it will stay strongly with us just like Meggie’s memory is still with me and so many others.

One of Ms. Davis’ friends who joined us at the table had been Emily’s nurse. She looked at me and smiled. “Meggie Curd?” she asked. I looked at her, a little incredulously and nodded. “Meggie was my patient,” she said. “She touched people like that. She’s still making a difference.”

I got over the initial surprise that Emily’s nurse had also known Meggie as well. And today, I take great strength in the way our lives cross in such important ways. It reminds me that the ripple of love, of courage, of hope never ends as we carry with us the people in our lives who have passed on.

There is great sadness in the passing of a friend, a loved one, especially so young. But their lives, and the way they lived them, serve as reminders to us all how there is much to savor in a single moment. Each passing second contains an opportunity to make a difference, to reach out and remind each other that we do have a choice. In Meggie and Emily’s memory, and in the memories of Gretchen and so many others that have passed on so early in their lives, I choose to see that love and pass it along.

My sister Cindy, who has battled cancer since 1990, continues to be a daily inspiration to me. She chooses to live, every day, with positivity and love. In everything I write there’s a thread of my sister’s will to live, her belief in the beautiful, and her courage to face life’s greatest demons with a smile and an unwavering, indomitable strength to carry on.

Each of these amazing individuals – and countless others – inspires me to share their stories and how they have lived their lives. Each of them

has taught me that all we need is a single ray of hope, whether that comes from a letter, an ornament, a greeting, a smile. We cannot control how or when it will be received; it is our job to merely offer it, and offer it as often as possible.

As I get older, I sometimes see myself as that broken-down Falcon, chugging along and throwing it in park a little more often than I might like. But thanks to all of you, and especially my faithful readers, I hold on to that light that lets me drop it in drive each day and continue along on my own little journey. May you continue to see the light, and be the light, to all in your lives.

As always.....rvw, 8 December 2016

*One final note on this collection: Some names overlap. I believe there is a reason for this beyond the obvious fact that these people have been special in my life. I'm not sure how the characters, themselves, all connect, but I trust that, in time, I will understand that, too. ~rvw*

## I. Gretchie's Gifts

by Rus VanWestervelt



### Part I. Mar-Mar

“This isn’t going to hurt one bit, Orion. I promise you.”

Gretchie Starling combed through her pony’s chestnut mane, studying the individual hairs that flowed through her fingers. They were a stark contrast to her raven-black hair that flowed over her own shoulders. After finding a few strands that seemed strong and sturdy, she pulled a small pair of scissors from her pocket and snipped off a pinch of them that were no longer than two inches.

At just 14.1 hands, the pony made Gretchie feel like a grown up as she stood next to Orion.

“This ought to do the trick,” she said, brushing Orion’s mane with her hand. Gretchie was only 13, but she had been raised on this small make-shift farm tending to more horses, cows, and pigs than she cared to count. She connected with animals more than she did with any person (her brother especially), with the exception of one: Mar-Mar.

“See, Orion? I told you. No pain. And just imagine how much you are going to make somebody happy this weekend.”

Orion whinnied as if she knew, nodding her head and baring her teeth.

Gretchie gave her a quick brush between the eyes and then left the barn, still clutching the handful of hairs that she had just snipped.

“Wasting your time with those stupid animals again?”

Gretchie’s older brother by just about 4 years, William, stood in the barn’s shadow and tossed a twig in her direction. It fell just in front of her, where her little pug, Chuggles, picked it up and dropped it at Gretchie’s feet.

“Leave me alone, turd.”

Willie, nearly six feet tall and pushing 200 pounds, gave her a little shove, and she stumbled. “All you do is art things and animals. Nice contribution to our family. While I’m out trying to make some money for Mom to make up for Dad leaving us, you’re doing absolutely nothing but being some bratty little farm kid.”

Gretchie leaned down and scratched Chuggles under the chin. “What I wouldn’t do to make you an attack dog right now,” she mumbled.

Chuggles licked her hand and wagged her tail.

“I know, be nice.”

Willie threw another stick at his sister, and this one hit her in the head.

“Sorry,” he offered with as little sincerity as he could muster. He pushed his red hair out of his eyes, and brushed his hands. “Hope it helps, though.”

“Turd!”

But Willie was already running down the gravel path to the main road, laughing the entire time. He hadn’t planned to spend so much time harassing his baby sister, and now he might be late for work if he didn’t sprint to the gas pumps where he worked most afternoons.

“Honestly, Chugs. A major turd.”

Chuggles scampered behind her as they returned to the old farm house. There, in the kitchen, spread out on the long wooden table that her father had made before she was born, was an old newspaper, a cup of water, several small tubes of paint, and a ceramic pug that looked very close to the one now curled in a ball under that table.

Gretchie trimmed the hair of Orion’s mane and taped it to the end of an old brush that had lost its bristles a long time ago. She tailored the tip, dipped it in the golden yellow dab of paint on her palette, and picked up the ceramic pug.

“Time to give you a little light to guide your way, Chuggles Jr.”

Against the glossy white shine of the pug’s stomach, Gretchie painted a

small sun radiating light in all directions. She accented it with thin highlights of white, orange, and red before holding it out at arm's length.

"Not too bad if I say so myself. Mar-Mar's going to just love it."

She and Mar-Mar had been friends for about three years. They were both quiet kids, and much of their time together was spent taking long, slow walks through the woods, pretending to be prancing wild reindeer, jumping over magical logs and hiding from the wild predators that lurked in the darker shadows of the coniferous trees. Chuggles and Mar-Mar's pug, Petunia, always did their best to keep up.

But that was before Gretchie's mom came into her bedroom that Friday morning after Thanksgiving and sat on the edge of her bed, working through a fake smile that pushed her cheeks against her puffy eyes.

"Morning Pumpkin," she said, gently moving Gretchie's hair from her eyes.

"Please stop calling me a kind of pie, Mom. And good morning to you too. Why do you look that way?"

"I just got off the phone with Miss Barbara."

"Mar-Mar's mom? She's the best. No offense. You're bester, but she's so nice to me."

"Yes she is, Pumpkin. Mar-Mar's one lucky gal to have her."

"If she's so lucky, then why do you look so sad?"

"Well, Gretch. She called to tell me something about Mar-Mar. Baby, your friend is sick and has to stay at the hospital for a little while."

"What's wrong with her? We were going to play in the woods this weekend."

"She's got something called cancer. It's like having a sickness on the inside that has a real hard time getting better on its own. She has to take medicine to get better. Medicine that they can only give her if she's in the hospital."

Gretchie was quiet for a long time, then looked at her mom. She hated how much her mom's hair was like Willie's mop. Both of them had rust-orange hair that made them the undeniable mother-son duo whenever they went out. She always felt like the adopted one. Having her father's hair used to be a good thing.

"Is she going to die like Daddy died?" She asked so matter-of-factly that it broke her mother's heart.

"No baby. I hope not. The doctors are working real hard, and the medicine they have now is the best it's ever been to beat it."

“Can I see her today?”

“I don’t think so, but I’ll check,” her mother replied. “At the very least, you can make her a card or something. She would like that, I think.”

“I can do that,” Gretchie said. “And she has Petunia. That dog cheers up everyone with how dumb it is!”

Her mother chuckled, then lowered her head, as if it were against some rule to laugh when you were telling your child that her best friend was dying of cancer.

“I’m afraid Petunia has to stay home with Miss Barbara. Why don’t you draw her a picture of Petunia?”

“I’ve got an even better idea,” replied Gretchie. “Do you know where my paints and paintbrushes are?”

Gretchie’s mother stood up and stretched her hands behind her back. “Your paints are under the kitchen sink, but I had to throw all of the brushes out. You didn’t clean them out last time and they were useless with dried paint running through the thin tips.”

Gretchie remembered now. She would have to be resourceful.

Her mother stood in the doorway and watched her daughter bounce off the bed and look through the various figurines on her dresser. She picked up a small pug and smiled.

“Mom? This one doesn’t mean that much to me. I bought it last month at the Dickersons’ yard sale. Is it okay if I paint over it?”

“Sure thing, pumpkin. Just put paper down when you paint.” She frowned. “And I have no idea what you are going to do about brushes.”

Gretchie winked at her mother. “You worry about the dumbest things. Pray for Mar-Mar and I’ll take care of cheering her up.” She slipped on a pair of jeans and headed for the barn. It wasn’t the first time she had to be resourceful.

\* \* \*

The next morning, Gretchie’s mom drove her to the hospital where Mar-Mar was staying. The ride there was quiet, which was fine with Gretchie. She wasn’t in a very talkative mood anyway. She clutched the little porcelain pug that she had repainted and looked out the window. The hospital campus was overwhelming.

“I guess a lot of people get sick,” she said.

Her mother, through tight lips, just nodded. She wondered if it was the

right thing to bring Gretchie here.

“Pumpkin, we don’t have to do this. We can wait for Mar-Mar to come home and see her then.”

Gretchie shook her head but didn’t say anything. Her mother parked the car and turned off the engine. Neither of them moved.

“Is this where daddy went?”

“No.”

“Did he go to a different hospital to die?”

“Yes.” It was a lie, but she didn’t think it was the right time to tell her the truth.

More silence. The windows began to fog over with condensation as they sat, motionless, in their seats.

“Really, Gretch. We don’t need to do this.”

But Gretchie reached back and unlocked her door, pushing it open with her shoulder, and holding on to her porcelain pug as if it were the most precious commodity in her life.

She stood by the car and waited for her mom to join her. Then, together, they walked toward the Alfred Ellison Cancer Center. Gretchie reached for her mother’s hand, and she took it into hers, a warm grasp that reminded her of how her father used to hold her hand when they took long walks in the woods, just last year.

“Promise me that she’s going to get better, mommy.”

Gretchie’s mother squeezed her hand and pulled her closer.

But she said nothing, and Gretchie noticed.

After her father died, nobody made promises anymore.

\* \* \*

On the ride home, Gretchie was encouraged by Mar-Mar’s attitude and spirit. While the grown ups spent most of the time in the hallway being too serious, Gretchie and Mar-Mar were in the private room making fun of Willie (King Turd of Turdlandia, they renamed him) and plotted new adventures in the woods when she got better. They sang their favorite Christmas songs (including “Little Drummer Boy,” which Gretchie loved more than any of the others). About an hour after they had arrived, Gretchie’s mom peeked her head in the room and gave her the dreaded two-minute warning.

“Put Pugsy by the window, Gretch. I want to be able to see him all the

time.”

When she put the porcelain pug on the window sill, the sunlight bounced off the little figurine and cast colors on the ceiling.

“Perfect, Gretch! Thanks! Give me a hug and let’s pray before you leave. I learned a new verse this morning. Mommy taught it to me. It’s my new favorite.”

Gretchie gave her best friend a big hug and felt a sudden rush of sadness and worry. She kissed Mar-Mar’s shoulder and promised her she would come back to see her soon.

“You better, Gretch. But until then, I got Pugsy to keep me company.”

Gretchie held Mar-Mar’s hands and squeezed them, but she noticed that Mar-Mar seemed a little weak when she squeezed back.

They both closed their eyes (they had done this plenty of times before when they said goodbye to each other) and bowed their heads. After a short pause, Mar-Mar whispered the prayer.

“Dear God. Let us not know darkness. We are children of the light and children of the day. We are not of the night or darkness. Let us encourage each other and build each other up, for in the light, we are strong. We will stay in the light today and tonight. For in the darkness I will hold on to the light. Stay by my side, Oh Lord. Be the lamp unto my path. Bless Gretchie and Pugsy and even King Turd, Lord. I need as much light as I can get right now. Help me be strong.”

After a brief silence, they both whispered, “Amen” together.

Gretchie’s mom pushed through the door just as they had finished.

“Time’s up, Gretch. Love you so much Mar-Mar! Be strong!”

The girls opened their eyes, and when they did, Gretchie saw a touch of fear.

“I will be back. I promise, Mar-Mar. Stay in the light!”

They hugged again, and Gretchen blew her a kiss as she left the room.

Mar-Mar turned to the porcelain pug on the windowsill and followed the light as it still spilled colors across the white ceiling.

In her finest voice, Mar-Mar started to sing.

*“Come, they told me, pa rum pum pum pum. Our newborn king to see, pa rum pum pum pum. Our finest gifts we bring...”*

But she broke off there as she began to cry. She heard the muffled words of her mother and the doctors on the other side of the door. It all sounded too serious.

*“Pa rum pum pum...”*



And she didn't know why or how, but she knew one thing to be absolutely true: Gretchie was wrong. No matter how much she stayed in the light, no matter how much she prayed, she would never see her best friend Gretchie again.

And she was right.

## **Part II. William**

*December 22, 40 years later*

Pastor Mary was desperately trying to get in the zone, as she liked to call it. Christmas Eve was just two days away, and she had yet to write her sermon for the candlelight service. She knew that she could always fall back on the standard nativity story. And in fact, a big part of the homily would be from Luke and the story of Christ's birth. But she was searching for relevance. In recent years, more members of her Baltimore congregation were moving toward Church Lite, skipping the weekly services but still migrating to the sanctuary on Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday. She was finding it harder to make church a personal experience for her parishioners.

"Let the youthful beauty of Christ be born in each of us today; let us renew our Christian faith and –"

No. Just no, she thought. She scribbled out the passionate plea and took a sip of coffee. She didn't want to give up (and she never lost faith in her parishioners), but she began to wonder if God was beginning to call her away from her ministry at New Life Methodist.

Mary pushed away from the small kitchen table and refilled her coffee. She added a splash of cream (her doctor had told her just last month that she was getting too thin and needed to find ways to add a little fat to her diet), then looked out the window above her sink. She could see Lake Montebello just across from Harford Road.

*Maybe a good walk would help,* she thought.

"God, I'm cleaning the clutter," she spoke out loud, still staring at the mile-long path around the lake. "Just for you. Walking the path for guidance, God."

She took a gulp of coffee and placed the pale blue mug on the counter. After grabbing her phone and zipping up her favorite fleece jacket, she left her small apartment and crossed the busy road to the improbable beauty

of Lake Montebello, right in the heart of Baltimore City. She remained mindful of the good that can often remain surrounded by so much turmoil. She had used that in her sermons more than a few times. Once, she even believed that her congregation got the analogy well enough to let it linger in their thoughts after the service had concluded.

It was still an hour before the sun would be setting on the shortest day of the year, this first day of winter, but the decorated trees along the path that wrapped around the lake were already lit. The “Merry Montebellans,” as they liked to call themselves, really took pride in making the lake a beautiful expression of Christmas. The trees that lined the outer perimeter of the path were lit with alternating white and multicolored lights, and each tree was decorated in some theme unique to Baltimore: sports, arts, history. Each tree was a true Baltimore statement. Many gathered strength here this time of year – real pride – in the most unlikely places.

After completing one full lap around the lake and still struggling with her sermon (or hearing a new calling), she decided to take at least one more loop. Besides, she saw some carolers gathering by the Hillen Road entrance, and she loved to hear the sounds of Christmas sung with such joy.

She could see the carolers on the other side of the lake, walking toward her, but she could not yet hear their song. It looked like three families: six adults and five children, all dressed in 19th-century clothes as they clutched single black binders.

“Ok, God,” she whispered. “Let’s play a little game here. How about you send me some kind of epiphany before I can hear the song being sung by those carolers. Deal? Opening all channels.... And GO!”

Mary laughed. It never worked as a kid when she had tried it, but maybe this time would be different.

That’s when she felt her phone vibrate in her pocket.

“Great,” she said sarcastically. “God’s calling me directly. How’s that for a quick response.”

She checked the caller ID but didn’t recognize the number.

“Hello? This is Mary.”

Mary Margaret Bellamy? Of Faith’s Landing?”

Mary stopped. There was an edge to the deep male voice that she recognized.

“Yes, but that was a long time ago. Who is this, may I ask?”

She heard a heavy sigh that resonated disgust more than anything else,

as if the man on the other end of the phone was perturbed in having to make this call.

“You probably don’t remember me. Oh, hell. What do I know? Maybe you do. I’m William Starling. Gretchen Starling’s older brother. You hated me when we were kids.”

He then paused, as if wanting to take that last part back.

“It’s been a long time, though. So.”

Gretchie, my goodness! Thought Mary. Dear Gretchie.

“Yes, it has been a long time Willie—I mean William. How are you? How is Gretchie? I haven’t been back to Faith since we moved to Baltimore. My gosh, that was so long ago.”

Mary could feel the guilt already. When she was sent to Hopkins in Baltimore for the cancer treatments, the stress was too much on her parents, and they separated. She and her mom stayed in Baltimore and her father moved back home to Wisconsin. For him, he couldn’t run far enough away from the guilt for abandoning his family.

Mary had been meaning to get back in touch. She never felt right about not saying goodbye, but the cancer came quick, and everything afterward had happened in such a blur. The divorce had been devastating, and Mary shut everything else out as she focused her energies on surviving remission.

“Well, that’s why I’m calling,” he replied.

Mary was used to these calls. Gretchie must be sick, and William’s looking for a little spiritual help to get her through. She wanted to make it easy for William to talk about it and “get a little God” as she would tell her congregation from time to time.

“Is Gretchie not well? I feel so bad for not staying in touch. I answered a calling to serve others in Baltimore and—”

“Gretchie’s dead, Mar-Mar. There was a fire in our parents’ old home where she was living. She never had a chance.”

Mary searched his voice for remorse, but she didn’t hear any. What she did hear was a hint of sorrow and regret in her own voice when she replied.

“I am so sorry, William. This is just horrible.”

“Yes. Anyway, I need your help. She really didn’t have anybody else in her life, especially recently. It’s a horrible thing to die alone.”

“Yes, it is.”

“I’m a little stressed, to be honest. It’s a busy time for me. You would

think that the holidays would make everybody Ho Ho Ho and cheerful and whatnot, but my time with the couchers has tripled since Black Friday.”

“I understand. I find the needs of my parishioners go up this time of year as well.”

“I’m sure they do,” he replied. “Anyway, I don’t have time for this. And as far as I can tell, you were her last close friend.”

“Really? That can’t be right. It’s been so long.”

“Pathetic, right? For someone like her with such a big heart to die alone, not really doing a damn thing for others. I just don’t get it.”

Mary bit her tongue at the irony. William never knew she was bothered by his attitude toward his sister.

He continued. “Can you meet me at the house tomorrow morning? Fire department is giving me a chance to give it a sweep – at least the part that’s not been condemned already – before they bulldoze the whole damn place.”

Mary cleared her throat.

“Oh, sorry Pastor. Uh, can you be at her house by 9 a.m. tomorrow?”

“Sure,” she replied. “Anything to help. I feel just awful--”

“Thanks.”

“—For her.”

“Of course. Remember where it is?”

Mary blurted out the address without even thinking.

“Need the old phone number too?” she asked. “It’s weird how we hold on to things like that.”

“Uh huh. See you at 9, Mary. Thanks.”

William hung up the phone before she could say goodbye. She put the phone back in her pocket as the carolers approached.

*“Come, they told me pa rum pum pum...”*

Mary listened to the carolers as she prayed. Not five minutes ago she asked God for some kind of divine guidance; now she asked for strength to understand the senseless death of an old friend, as well as the callous response of her own brother, seemingly bothered more with the inconvenience of his sister’s passing.

She stayed there for a long time. The carolers had moved on to other songs and to other parts around the lake; the sun, too, had all but disappeared behind the tall city buildings to the west. By the time she had reached her apartment, all of the day’s light had disappeared. Darkness

cornered her like an old, oft-worn shroud. Leaving the lights untouched, she went directly to bed, asking forgiveness until she finally fell asleep.

\* \* \*

*December 23*

When Mary pulled up to the remains of Gretchen's rancher-style house in Faith's Landing, she stared so intently at the devastation that she nearly hit the back of William's car. The house stood out like a black eye to the other houses along the street, adorned with Christmas decorations and six-foot inflatables wobbling in the light wind.

William stepped out of his car immediately, checked his watch, and walked toward Mary. His once-red hair now showed nothing more than a reminiscent touch of rouge in his otherwise gray hair, combed back to reveal a deep, receding hairline. He was dressed impeccably, with a long wool coat over a dark gray suit. His polished black shoes looked brand new as they crushed the residual silt from the fire, an acrid mix of ash, water, and embers. Sprinkled through the sludge were broken chips of porcelain. Probably old dishes broken in the battle to extinguish the fire.

"Right on time. Thanks. Makes it easier to keep my 10 a.m. appointment."

"Good morning, William," she replied. Mary got out of her car and began to offer a hug in condolence, but he extended a hand instead.

"Pastor."

Mary shook his hand, unsure how to receive any of this.

"Once again, William: My condolences."

He grimaced, then gestured toward the house, or what was left of it.

"We need to take care of three things, Pastor." He paused, as if giving her time to take notes.

"First, we need to do a quick walk through of the areas of the house cleared by the fire department. That's basically everywhere left of the main hallway. The fire started in the garage. What it didn't burn was totally ruined by the amount of water they dumped in that area to put the fire out. You would think they could come up with a better way to save houses and people from fire, but I guess some systems can't help but be so antiquated."

Mary absorbed that last comment and found it out of rhythm with William's lack of care for everything else.

“William,” she said. “Are you looking for anything in particular?” She tried to keep up with his matter-of-fact approach, but this was no cold walk through. Just two days ago, her good friend died here. Alone.

She remembered the last time they saw each other in the hospital room in Faith’s Landing where Mary had just learned she had cancer. There was a promise made between them, but she couldn’t remember what that was.

“No,” he replied, emphatically. They walked to the front door, and he lifted the yellow Caution: Do Not Cross tape tied to the front porch. Mary stepped over a makeshift memorial of a single poinsettia, a few single roses, and a white Christmas bear with a red scarf wrapped around its neck.

Mary was struck with the pop of the colors against the black and gray ash, even if it was put together out of neighborly diligence or even guilt from the genuine mourning of the loss of a friend.

“In fact,” William continued, moving the flowers and the bear to the side of the steps. “The goal is to leave with nothing. Unless, of course, you find something for a shelter or some homeless thing you run. You do those, right? I always thought that every church does that kind of thing. That’s why you do what you do, right? To help people?”

And then, almost as an afterthought fueled by anger and frustration, he added, “It must just kill you that you can’t help all of them, doesn’t it.”

“Yes. To both, I guess,” she answered. “We have these homeless drives. I will keep an eye out as we go through. That would be nice to be able to donate some of her salvageable belongings to those in need. Thank you.”

“Good, then. I can’t imagine anything here that I would want or need. No estate papers here or secret treasures. I closed this chapter a long time ago. This is all formality now.”

Mary picked up a red rose, inhaled its sweet scent, and rested it in the bear’s outstretched arms.

“So that’s the first thing: clear the house for demolition. Years ago I took care of her arrangements for what happens next. There won’t be a viewing or memorial service. Who would attend, right? Just a waste of money for you and me to say our goodbyes. So that leads me to the second thing. Even though it will be just us, and maybe a neighbor who checked in on her every once in a while, I need you to handle some kind of graveside service. I can handle all of the papers and the details with the cemetery, but I need your pastoral services to bury her. I will pay you, of course.”

Mary was nearly disgusted at the thought.

“You won’t need to pay me,” she whispered. “It’s the least I can do.”

“Thanks. That helps me a lot. I’m sure Gretchie doesn’t mind either. Like old times, right?”

“Sure, William. Just like old times.”

He pushed open the broken door to the front of the house and walked in. She could hear more porcelain crushing under his black soles as he walked ahead of her. She noticed that he never looked down to see what he was stepping on.

She followed him inside. The odor of fire was strong, despite seeing more water and smoke damage than any charring. She was sure the garage was black. She peered into the living room on the right, a monochromatic Monday morning, where a stubborn fog refused to lift. It was depressing to think this is how Gretchie’s life ended.

“I figure we’ll just work our way left to right and end up in the dining room, as much as we can get to, anyway. Unless you want to dig through the bedroom where they found her. I don’t have a particular interest to do that, but I don’t know. Maybe her spirit is still there or something and you can connect.”

“I’m not a psychic, William. Just a pastor.”

“Right. Of course. Sorry, Mary.”

Mary discerned the first twinge of emotion in William’s voice, but it was gone just as quickly.

“The fire investigator said it started in the garage about one in the morning. She left something plugged in—some kind of glue gun she was using for one of her dumb crafts. I mean really. What’s the sense of it if you just cut yourself off from the rest of the world, you know? She lived for a damn long time after all.”

Mary remembered those moments of guilt she felt that she had lived when so many of her friends in the cancer ward had died. She felt the urgency to do something with that gift of time God gave her and not the others. It kept her humble and focused. That’s why she decided to head to seminary school as soon as she was old enough.

“I understand.”

Mary suddenly pictured in her mind that craft pug Gretchie had made for her when she was sick, sitting on the windowsill when she was first hospitalized. She was good at it all those years ago. Pugsy, they named it. Beautiful Pugsy.

“William,” Mary changed her tone, and William noticed. “Gretchie

loved her pug when we were kids. That dog went everywhere with her. Did she have any pets in the house when the fire started?"

"No clue. Nobody said anything, but I didn't ask either. So I guess not. She was such a recluse. Probably didn't want the hassle of walking the damn thing every day and facing her neighbors."

As much as she hated the way he phrased it, Mary knew he was right. Older people who avoided social contact usually chose cats over dogs, for the ease of in-home care and security of remaining isolated.

"The barn animals were long gone, as well. Too much upkeep, even for Gretchen."

William walked along the hallway toward the kitchen, despite his earlier plan to begin with the bedrooms on the left. He leaned over the caution tape and looked around the room.

"No pet bowls on the floor. I guess that's a good sign, right?" he said.

Mary nodded, though he wasn't looking at her.

"I mean, she'd keep that kind of stuff in the kitchen, right? Seems logical. That's where we had them when we were kids."

"Yes, unless she wasn't too mobile."

"She was plenty mobile, around the house. She chose not to be mobile outside of these four walls, that's all. There was nothing wrong with her."

As William turned left to walk along the bedroom hallway, Mary peered into the empty living room, also marked off with tape. She gasped.

The entire room had been decorated for Christmas. Even with the curtains still pulled across the windows, the natural light from the open front door revealed a showcase of celebration for the birth of Christ. In each corner was a Christmas tree, each meticulously decorated with homemade ornaments of porcelain, wood, and glass. . . . .

There were two bedrooms and a large bathroom, all damaged from smoke and water. The larger bedroom was modestly adorned with framed artwork by Monet and Renoir. The linens, all pearl white, looked fresh on the neatly made bed.

Mary thought the room had not been used in years.

On the dresser was a lace doily with a single porcelain pug. A thin red choker was tied around its neck. Mary picked it up and noticed the name "Chuggles" painted on its tag. It was the perfect image of the pug that used to follow her around when they were kids.

And it was a "grown up" version of the pug Gretchie had made her when she was sick. She picked it up and turned it over.



Mary sighed and could feel the tears building in her eyes. There, with a delicate brush, Gretchie had painted her signature “g” that looped into the face of a pug. Next to it were the letters “IThSS.”

On the nightstand were three smaller porcelain pugs, each with red chokers and name tags: Blue, Petey, and Gunther. They rested on a smaller doily and all faced the pillows on the bed. She lifted each pug, and they all had Gretchie’s signature “g” with the letters IThSS.

“William?”

“What? I’m in the other bedroom. You won’t believe what is in here.”

Mary held on to Gunther the Pug and joined William in the smaller room. With the exception of a small clearing around the front window, where a single Christmas tree stood decorated, the rest of the room was filled with arts and crafts materials. William was standing by the tree, which had seven individual ornaments on it.

“Pretty. She had other trees like it in the living room. Did you see those?”

“Yeah. They weren’t anything like this one. Look at the ornaments.”

Mary stepped closer and studied the white porcelain star. It was hand-painted a pearl white with a hint of an opal swirl. Embedded in the middle of the star were pieces of stained glass. She noticed that each of the seven star ornaments had different colors: green, red, blue, yellow, orange, and purple.

“Did she make these?”

“Yes. She gave me one for Christmas a few years ago. I hate it. So much talent wasted on a stupid ornament. I boxed it up so I wouldn’t have to ever look at it again.”

Mary turned the ornament over in her hand.

“What in the world?”

In beautiful hand script was painted the name, “Mar-Mar.” Below it, the signature “g” followed by IThSS. She turned over the pug in her other hand. The signatures were identical.

“Why is my name painted on this ornament? Is yours on one of the others?”

“Yes,” said William. He turned over each one and read the names:

“Willie, Mom, Dad, Chuggles, Orion, and you.”

“What about the seventh one?”

William looked at the last ornament on the tree and sighed. It was the one closest to the Angel that rested on the top branch, its arms open, just

like her wings. “I didn’t recognize the name.”

Mary reached for the ornament and turned it over.

“Sarah.”

She thought back to those carefree days in childhood. She remembered an Amanda and a Tracy, but no Sarah.

Mary turned to William. “Anybody you know?”

He shrugged. “Why in the hell would I know anybody named Sarah? Probably one of her stupid crafting buddies.”

“Do you mind if I hold on to this one? And mine as well?”

“Take them all. What we don’t leave with will be razed with the rest of the place in a few weeks.”

They walked back to the main bedroom, and Mary opened the closet door. She stepped into the walk-in room, a space filled with clothes and shoes of all sizes, for all ages, all neatly hung on hangers, folded in neat bins, or stored in shoeboxes.

“My goodness, William. These will help many of our families in need. It’s like they have been prepared just for that purpose.”

“Just another example of how she could have helped others years ago with these clothes.” William grimaced, as if he were fighting back anger. “I guess it will do some good now, though. Take them. They’re all yours.”

William stepped out into the hallway. “I need to get some fresh air. You need any help with those things? There are boxes in that other bedroom with the tree, if you need them.”

Before Mary could answer, she heard his soles crushing more porcelain pieces in the hallway as he stepped outside. She found a few sturdy boxes and packed up as many clothes as she could. They would need a good washing at the laundromat, but then they would be as good as new for about a dozen homeless families in Baltimore.

When she reached the back of the closet, she found five large boxes, each sealed, and each with prepaid postage and ready to be mailed.

There was no return address on any of them. Instead, Gretchen had written a year on each box.

*2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020.*

There was no name with the mailing address, but Mary recognized it immediately. She placed her hand over the box marked “2016” and closed her eyes.

“Dear God, Thank You for leading me here today. Bless Gretchen in her selfless work. I think I understand now. May Gretchen’s spirit live on in

the hearts of many, and may Your light shine on as she had always hoped. Amen.”

She moved the five heavy boxes with the rest of the clothes that she had packed up and called William’s name.

William walked back in to the room and leaned against the doorway as she was giving the room one more look.

“Look, Pastor. I know that I’ve come off a little cold about all of this. But Gretchen gave up a long time ago after our mother was killed in that big accident under the Five Bridges 15 years ago. I’ve gone through all of the stages of grief with losing her, and I did it all over again when I couldn’t pull Gretchen through. She threw her life away, her love for others, her creativity, her compassion, her everything when she died. It was like I lost the rest of my entire family that year. Like I said earlier, today is a matter of formality. Gretchen was dead to me 15 years ago. I hope you understand.”

Mary stood up and walked toward William. She squeezed his hand and offered a smile.

“We all handle grief in different ways, William. I am very sorry for your losses. I know this is hard for you. I am glad that you called. I am glad we could go through Gretchie’s things together.”

He gave her hand a quick squeeze before releasing it. He choked back the emotion and lifted the first box filled with his sister’s clothes.

“You can come back all you want to get the other stuff. I left the key in her bedroom by that big white dog on her dresser. My business card is under it when you are ready to return it.”

He paused, as if remembering something.

“Or I guess you can just give it back to me at the gravesite when we bury her. I’ll let you know when that is. Before Christmas, I can promise you that.”

*Promises.*

He motioned to the door. “Let’s get these into your car. I can’t be late for my 10 o’clock coucher.”

Mary picked up the first sealed box and followed him, beginning to hear the faint whispers of a Christmas Eve sermon that she wondered if she would ever have the strength to deliver.

### **Part III. Sarah**

*December 23, late afternoon*

The glass doors, framed in polished soft pine, were new, but the logo etched in each of the long panes was just as she had remembered it. Three children – a small girl with a balloon, a tall boy in the middle holding her hand, and a third nondescript child to their right, taking a bold step ahead of them. They held their heads high, smiling, emanating joy. Hope. Faith.

Everything she was told to believe in when she was 13 years old.

Printed above the etching in simple, block letters was “The Sarah Strong Pediatric Oncology Wing: Hope Matters.”

And then, directly below it, in italics: “The Alfred Ellison Cancer Center, Faith’s Landing, Maryland.”

She balanced the box in her right arm as she opened the left door. Immediately the sounds and scents of the unit stirred a whirl of emotions: gratitude mixed with fear, love tinged with sorrow, hope attached to pain.

Nothing else was as she had remembered it. Instead of a sterile check-in counter a few yards from the entrance, there was a large open space lined with floor-to-ceiling windows, with an oblong island in the center of a labyrinth-style carpet, where attendants dressed in bright outfits smiled as they helped parents and friends of the ward’s patients. Children’s artwork of hope and inspiration covered the base of the island station, and one of her favorite verses from the bible ran in beautiful, flowing script along the back wall:

*You are all children of the light and of the day...*

Mary smiled. It was a verse from 1 Thessalonians that she had shared with Gretchie, a verse that she had embraced when she was first diagnosed. She leaned on it for strength when the light had seemed to be so nearly extinguished.

She stood there, in the middle of the great room, turning slowly to capture the positivity of the space. How far the ward had come since she was 13!

Mary noticed that, in addition to the holiday garland and decorations around the room, spaced evenly along the glass wall were five Christmas trees, each about 7 feet tall. The first and last were decorated with white lights and traditional ornaments that any child remembers seeing at their

grandparents' house on Christmas day. The second and fourth trees were lit up with multi-colored lights and filled with creative, hand-made ornaments, presumably by the children who would be spending the holidays at the hospital.

The tree in the middle, illuminated by hundreds of small white lights, was otherwise bare. Mary stared at the tree, wondering why it had not yet been decorated. After all, Christmas was just two days away, and—

“Have you brought us a present?”

Mary startled and nearly dropped the box, then turned to see a small, young girl, maybe 12 or 13, looking at her with tentative excitement. She wore a long hospital gown adorned with the faces of various cartoon puppies, all seemingly happy with bright eyes and perky ears. An oatmeal-colored, hand-knit cap covered her bald head, and her feet sported cozy puppy-dog slippers with little tongues sticking out of the toe tips. She had ice-blue eyes and flushed cheeks, and her hopeful smile was one of the most genuine that Mary had ever seen.

She felt as if she was looking at a reflection of her 13-year-old self.

“The package,” she said, pointing to it with her left hand as her right rested on the mobile IV pole. Mary noticed the tubes and shuddered at the memory of what that was like. “I hope it isn’t heavy. I can’t take it for you, but I can find somebody who will.”

“Oh, this,” Mary said, nodding to the package. “Thank you. I’m okay. My name is Mar-Mar—I mean Mary. Pastor Mary. I was a patient here about 40 years ago. The place looks wonderful – Well, I guess ‘wonderful’ is a relative term. It looks a lot brighter than when I was here. This brings me strength.”

“Me too. That’s why I come out here when I’m feeling well enough.” She pointed to the window by the third, and bare, tree. “I like to set up an easel and paint out here. It’s a lovely view. Certainly better than my room, though I do what I can to make that a happy space, too.”

And then, as more of an afterthought, she added, “Nice to meet you Pastor Mar-Mar. My name is Meggie. I’m a regular around here.”

“Nice to meet you, Meggie. Are you painting today?”

Meggie shook her head. “No. Having a bad week. Took a lot of energy just to make it this far out here.” She motioned to the tree. “Pretty sad to see that our tree is still bare. That ornament got me through some tough days last year.”

“What ornament?” asked Mary.

“Well,” she began. “Like I said, I’m a regular, but only around the holidays, it seems. I was here last Christmas, and Sister Anna all called us out – the ones who were well enough, of course, and told us she had a very special gift to share with us.”

Meggie stopped and reflected. “Some of us are back again this year. Some of us made it. Too many of us didn’t.”

“I know about that, Meggie. And I still think about my friends who passed on. I’m sorry.”

“Me too.”

She paused, then led Mary to the bare tree and brushed the branches with her thin fingers.

“It’s amazing what a silly little ornament can do, isn’t it? But so many of us held on to our pretty little stars, holding them up to the light.” She turned to Mary. “Did you ever have anything like that?”

Mary thought of Pugsy, the little porcelain pug that Gretchie had given her when she was here.

“Yes, Meggie. My friend painted a little porcelain pug for me when I first found out that I was sick. It made me feel better right away. I still have it. I think it will always give me strength.”

Mary smiled, but she felt pangs of guilt for neglecting to reconnect with Gretchie before she died.

“I’m getting tired,” said Meggie. “I think I need to lie down. It was nice meeting you. I hope to see you again.”

Mary offered a hug, and Meggie melted into her arms. She closed her eyes and prayed for wellness for the girl, that she might continue to find strength every day in the little things, even simple ornaments that shine in the light.

Meggie finally let go, and smiled. “I’ll find Sister Anna to help you with your package.” She turned to return to her room, offering a gentle “Merry Christmas” over her shoulder.

Mary waved. “You too, Meggie.”

As Mary waited for Sister Anna, she walked over to the second Christmas tree against the glass wall. The tree was filled with small ornaments, each painted a variety of bright colors, and each with a brief bible verse written in Sharpie.

*Look to the Lord and His strength...*

*Set your minds on things above...*

*Be kind and compassionate...*

*The light of all mankind...*

*You are the light of the world...*

*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path...*

*I can do all things through Him who gives me strength...*

*Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer...*

She began to weep at the innocence of the handwriting, the hope in the words, remembering what it was like to cling to verses such as these when she was younger. How many of these did she whisper in her sleep? She placed the package at her feet, as if it were a present under the tree, and wiped away the tears. She wanted each of these children to get through, to have the gift of life that she had been given.

She felt a soft hand on her back, comforting her.

"These trees get to all of us. Believe me, you are not the first to shed a tear for these courageous children."

Mary turned around to see an elderly woman dressed in a soft red blouse adorned with a green Christmas wreath pin. Colorful little lights blinked randomly on the pin, and it made Mary smile. Just below the pin was the woman's nameplate: Annabelle.

"It's lovely to meet you, Mary. Meggie mentioned on her way back to her room that you were looking for me. I've been here on this unit for a long time. I think I've got everybody beat by at least 7 years." She smiled and offered a tissue. "How can I help you today?"

Mary wiped the tears from her cheeks. She didn't really know where to begin.

"It's a long story, Sister Anna, so I will give you the short version."

"No matter to me," she said. "This is why I am here."

Mary smiled. "I know. That's the way it's always been here. I was a patient when I was 13, then I moved on to get my treatments in Baltimore. I was so inspired by this gift of life that I went to seminary. I'm now serving the congregation of New Life Church in Baltimore. You can imagine how elated I was to be placed at a church with such a relevant name. Providence, right?"

Sister Anna nodded. "By the grace of God."

"Yes. This is my first time back here. It's really remarkable how inviting this place continues to be."

“Thank you. We think it makes a difference for our families and our patients. Do you have a friend or relative who is now a patient?”

“No,” replied Mary. “I’m here for a different reason today. A friend of mine has passed away, a friend that I haven’t seen in a long time. She helped me when I was a patient here. I’m realizing that she helped me in more ways than I had ever known. We think about such things in these life-changing moments, I guess.”

“We do,” agreed Sister Anna. “It’s what keeps us humble, for sure.”

“And a little sad, too. There’s some guilt mixed in all that humility.”

Sister Anna offered a soft smile, but said nothing.

“Anyway,” continued Mary. “I am here to deliver something for her that I think you were meant to have.”

Mary motioned to the box at her feet. Sister Anna’s eyes widened when she saw the box.

“Or at least I think I am,” Mary added. “I’m not really sure. I found this box when I was cleaning out her things. Actually, I found several boxes for you, but this one had 2016 written specifically on it, so I thought I would begin with this box and see if you wanted the others. They are all addressed to you, and they are all postage-paid with about a million of those Forever stamps, like this one.”

Sister Anna, with her eyes still wide, smiled at Mary and turned to the undecorated tree in the center. She stepped toward it. Mary followed.

“Do you know why this tree is bare, Mary?”

Mary shook her head. “I was wondering about that,” she said. “Meggie mentioned something about an ornament that she had, but she was too tired to continue our conversation.” Mary looked at the other trees on either side. “Why isn’t it decorated when all of the others have been trimmed?”

“I have a strange feeling that the answer to your question might be in that box.”

Mary looked back at the plain brown package under the children’s decorated tree. The multicolored lights brought some life to it, and Mary could see an energy about it that she had not noticed before.

“It’s crazy,” Mary said, “but it almost looks as if it fits right in. Like it’s home or something.”

“I don’t think there is anything crazy about that, Mary. You see, we’ve been receiving a box like that for nearly 20 years. It always arrives a few days before Christmas, and we were beginning to worry that something



had happened to it, or worse – to the lovely individual who has been sending it to us all these years.”

Mary walked back to the box and picked it up. She brought it to Annabelle and handed it to her.

“This has been happening for 20 years?” asked Mary.

Sister Anna nodded. “Nothing short of a miracle, if you ask me.”

“So you mean to tell me that all this time you and the other nurses before you don’t know who has been sending you the ornaments?”

“We have had our suspicions over the years, but every single one of them was wrong.”

“Well, Sister, I believe, then, that we can safely say that it has been successfully delivered for another year, and there are four more boxes – each with a new year written on it like this one – that you will be receiving through 2020.”

Sister Anna took the box, held it with great care, and then frowned from a wave of sorrow.

“You said your friend passed away. I am so sorry to hear this, Pastor. May I ask—”

“She died alone in a terrible fire in her family’s old home. I’m afraid she had no one in her life, and she had become estranged from her only brother.”

Annabelle clutched the box and began to cry.

“Forgive me. We have a ritual here each year in decorating this tree. You see, for more than two decades, our children have opened the box and have claimed one of the ornaments for themselves. They then hang it on the tree close to one of the lights, and each ornament comes to life in brilliant color through the stained-glass center. I inherited the tradition and am merely the keeper of the ritual. Before I joined the ward, another nurse, Sarah, was the recipient of the first box, and it was she who decided to begin the tradition of decorating the center tree with your friend’s decorations.”

Sister Anna wiped away another tear.

“We lost Sarah a few years back. Cancer. Awful, awful cancer. It was one of the toughest days here on ward for our children, as she was revered by so many. The children absolutely loved her. We held a service right here in this room. So many of her patients from years ago came for the service. It was very moving for everyone.”

“I’m so sorry,” offered Mary.

“Oh, it’s okay. But thank you. I just wish she were here to learn, finally, who our mystery angel really was.”

Mary remembered the seventh ornament on the small tree in Gretchen’s bedroom. The name “Sarah” had been meticulously written on it, as Gretchen had written the other names. It was a common name, but she had no doubt that they were the same person.

“The strange thing, Sister Anna, is that I think my friend knew Sarah well, even if she never revealed the fact to her that she was the one providing the ornaments all these years.”

Mary told Sister Anna about the seven ornaments on the tree in Gretchen’s bedroom, then reached into her pocket and pulled out the ornament with Sarah’s name on it. She held it out for Sister Anna, and she embraced it with a certain reverence that Mary completely understood.

Sister Anna, washed in a golden melancholy that seamlessly married the love and grief that she felt, held the ornament, tracing the letters of Sarah’s name with her fingers.

“Oh, yes,” said Sister Anna. This is her work. No doubt about it. Dear, dear Sarah. How you were loved.”

“We feel the same way about Gretchie, but she never knew it. I don’t think that she felt it for herself.”

“Very sad. She made so many children happy. Brought them hope when it seemed like there was none left to find.”

Sister Anna turned over the ornament and stared at Gretchie’s signature on the back.

“There it is. The famous little “g” with the pug face and IThSS.” Sister Anna smiled. “It’s on every ornament she ever made for our children. And it has been a part of this space for the past 20 years.”

Mary looked closer at the signature. “Sister, for the life of me I cannot figure out why she signed each ornament with ‘IThSS’ after her ‘g’ initial. Is that some kind of secret code for the hospital?”

Sister Anna laughed. “Pastor, We’ve been surrounded by it this whole time!” She turned and glanced at the quote stenciled on the wall.

Mary read the quote out loud:

*You are all children of the light and children of the day.*

She looked at the initials, looking for some kind of pattern to IThSS.

“Sister, I’m afraid you got me.”

“Surely, it wasn’t your friend’s intention to stump you. *ITh*. First Thesalonians, perhaps?”

Mary smacked her forehead in embarrassment. "Of course! And it's not SS but 55, or chapter five, verse five. I Thessalonians 5:5."

"I'm sure you lead your congregation in other wonderful ways, dear," she winked, offering a comforting pat on Mary's shoulder.

Sister Anna turned to the tree and held Sarah's ornament about eye level. She placed it in front of a white light, and the ornament burst through the tiny cuts of stained glass in colors of red, green, and yellow.

She stepped back, and for a long time, they stared at the tree, a single ornament spreading light to all.

"That's what they both did," said Mary. "Spread light to the children of the day."

"I agree," offered Sister Anna. "Beautiful acts of grace through providence."

Mary looked back at the glass doors at the entrance of the unit. From there, she could barely make out the reversed printing above the graphic of the three running children.

"Someday you are going to have to tell me all about Sarah Strong. I don't think that she was somebody that grew up with Gretchen or me when we were kids."

Sister Anna, looking confused, shook her head. "Sarah Strong wasn't her name, dear. It was actually a statement we used when Sarah was sick, and it encouraged us to stay strong. The children put one of those pound signs in front of it."

"A hashtag?" asked Mary.

"Yes!" exclaimed Sister Anna. "They said it was trending or something, whatever that means."

Mary laughed. "Yes, Sister, it is a trendy thing these days to use hashtags and encourage other people to share it."

"Sarah would have been all over that. She was a very outgoing and social individual. Devastated her husband when she died. Poor man. Now he, I am sure, you have heard of. Very popular doctor here in Faith."

Mary shrugged. "I doubt it. I have spent so many years in Baltimore. I don't know many of the locals anymore."

"That's a shame. He is a good man, but still in a lot of pain. Look him up if you get a chance." Sister Anna turned back to the tree and adjusted Sarah's ornament. Mary noticed the colors brightened when she moved it.

"You seem like the kind of person who might be able to help him," she added.

“I will do that, Sister. What is his name?”

Sister Anna turned and faced Mary.

“Starling,” she said. “Dr. William Starling.”

## **Part IV. Gretchie**

Mary sat in her car outside of the Sarah Strong Pediatric Oncology Wing and stared at the five trees on the other side of the glass wall. She had not yet answered the text on her phone that rested on her dashboard.

“Bad news. The cemetery can’t hold anymore burials until December 26.”

It was from William. William Starling. aka husband to #SarahStrong, an oncology nurse who had lost her own battle with cancer, aka Sarah Starling, sister-in-law to Gretchie Starling.

Mary finally understood why William was so angry, stand-offish, and even downright rude. He was still mourning the loss of his wife, and he could not handle the emotional burden – touched with, perhaps, guilt – of now burying his sister.

She pulled from her pocket the small ornament with her name on it. Mary wept now, wondering how she could have let so much time pass without checking in on her friend. She wondered if Gretchie and Sarah had ever become friends, if Sarah ever had any idea that Gretchie was the one who was providing ornaments to the children all these years.

Mary thought of Pugsy, the porcelain pug that Gretchie had made her. Where was it now? Would she even be able to find it after downsizing repeatedly after leaving high school?

She was overwhelmed with Christmas Eve just a day away. She still had not written her sermon for tomorrow night’s candlelight service, and there was so much that she still needed to talk with William about.

The ornament caught the light of her phone when a new message popped up, and she could see the streaks of purple, yellow, and green running across the gray ceiling as the light filtered through the tiny pieces of stained glass.

The text was from Rebecca, her assistant at New Life.

“You missed our meeting about tomorrow’s service. Everything okay?”

She threw her head back in disgust. How could she forget the very meeting she had scheduled with her staff? Maybe her worst fears were

true. Maybe she was the reason why her congregation was dwindling. If she couldn't lead her staff, how could she lead her parishioners?

Mary closed her eyes and whispered a prayer for strength and guidance.

*"Oh, God. I recognize the timeliness during Advent of these trials and tribulations, of these tragedies and challenges. You have tested me before, and I know I need to let go of my fears to see the providential calling before me."*

Mary opened her eyes, and as she stared at the glass wall with the five Christmas trees on the other side, she noticed a small figure staring at her, standing next to the center, undecorated tree.

Meggie.

She smiled down to Mary, and then pressed her hand against the glass. Mary could see the frailty of her fingers, as if the lights from the tree were shining right through them to reveal thin, translucent bones.

From her hand dropped a small pearl-white star dangling from a thin gold ribbon, and light from the tree sparkled red, green, blue through Meggie's own ornament from last year.

Mary received the light as if it were her own. She picked up her personal ornament from the dashboard and shined her phone light through it. Meggie laughed, then offered a gentle wave and a soft smile before turning around and disappearing beyond the trees.

Mary stared at the bare tree in the middle, then at the other fully decorated trees on each side.

*You are all children of the light and children of the day.*

Like the sudden appearance of Meggie at the window, an idea struck Mary so quickly that she was afraid she would lose it.

Mary called the hospital and tried to reach Sister Anna, but the call went right to voice mail. She explained, emphatically, her idea and left her number with an urgent plea to call her back immediately.

She then opened Rebecca's text and answered her with the same enthusiasm, then fired off a similar text to William.

Within a few seconds, both of them responded with the same message.

"You're crazy, Mary."

Mary laughed, tossed her phone on the passenger seat, and pulled out of the parking lot.

"Thank you, Gretchie. Your work is far from done."

She turned on the radio. Amy Grant's "Breath of Heaven" filled the modest coupe, and Mary suddenly felt as if a new life had been breathed

into her. She knew she had a lot to do in 24 hours, but it all felt possible. She needed to meet with William and tell him that she knew about Sarah, and meeting with Rebecca was an absolute must to make all of this work, especially with Sister Anna.

*Help me be strong...*

*Help me be...*

*Help me...*

*Breath of heaven.*

At last, Mary felt the faith and hope she had been seeking; this was how it was all meant to be.

\* \* \*

*Christmas Eve, 4:25 p.m.*

Mary, dressed in her white robe, clutched the folded papers of handwritten notes in her hand while she greeted her guests. She was both relieved and grateful that Rebecca, her assistant at New Life, had been so successful in reaching their congregation just hours before the service. When most of them heard that Pastor Mary would be performing a special early Christmas Eve service, they didn't hesitate to say yes, they would attend.

They were joined by many Pastor Mary did not know, but shared a strong connection with nonetheless.

Sister Anna greeted each guest as well as they walked through the glass doors, handing each a tall, thin white candle.

"We are so elated that you could join us for our special service," she said to many of them. Others, she simply hugged them as they approached her. Tears replaced words, and when they went to find a seat facing the glass wall and the magnificent trees in front of them, they continued to offer hugs to others who had already arrived.

Rebecca leaned in to Mary. "It's nearly 4:30. Are you ready to get started?"

"What about Meggie? I don't see her here yet."

Sister Anna lowered her head. "I'm afraid she has not had a very good day. She's just not feeling well enough to join us." She looked up at Mary with a touch of hope. "Maybe you can see her after the service, Mary. I know she would like that."

Mary nodded to Sister Anna as the last guests walked through the doors. She offered candles to the elderly couple, and led them to two empty seats near the back of the room, then returned to the entrance. She walked out in to the hallway, then over to the lobby window that seemed to watch over the parking area.

There were no more people. The last had arrived.

She sighed. "Oh, God. Please let him find his way here. Please."

Mary returned to the room. There was a reverent stillness in the space as one of the children played "Silent Night" on the piano. Mary walked slowly to the back of the room, listening to the soft, single notes and reflecting on the beauty of the four trees, the significance of the undecorated fifth tree in the middle, and the people who had come together for this very special service. Each had lit their candles before sitting down. The room was filled with light.

When the last note played, Pastor Mary walked to the front of the room, just to the left of the undecorated tree. She stood in front of this new congregation, felt the strong emotion building in her, and inhaled a new breath to begin.

It was then that she noticed the small reflection of light shift from the glass door opening. It was William, and he stood at the entrance, not too sure what to do next.

Sister Anna approached him and offered him a candle. After she shared a few words of condolence, he embraced her, weeping in her arms. The entire congregation watched as Sister Anna helped him to an aisle seat toward the front.

Mary walked to him and held his hands in hers. "Thank you, William, for joining us tonight. You are not alone."

William tried to smile. He squeezed her hands instead and nodded. "I think you have a lot of people waiting for you to get started," he said.

Mary smiled. "Yes, William. Let's begin."

\* \* \*

"This is probably one of the most enlightening nights of my life," Mary began. "But I know that I am not alone. Each and every one of you in this room is here for a very specific reason.

"Of course, we come to celebrate the coming birth of Jesus Christ. The

Christmas Eve service has always been one of my favorite times to celebrate the work that Christ does in our lives, right from the very first breath taken. It is also a time for all of us to come together, to unite in celebration of light and of life, to share these brief moments more as a family than we might at any other time of the year. For in this gathering, there is hope for what is promised, for what is to come, for what is possible in birth, in life, both here on Earth and in the eternal.”

Mary took a moment to look at the four decorated trees behind her.

“We see plenty of life here, don’t we? Life, and hope, and love. They all resonate in the beautiful ornaments that our children and our families have created to brighten this room, this shared space, for all who may enter it. But most especially for the children who have come here unwillingly, who are facing the greatest challenges in their very young lives: the battle to beat the cancer that they absolutely refuse to let own them.”

Mary then took a step back and stood next to the bare tree in the center. A lone ornament toward the top offered singular tiny bursts of colorful light.

“I want to tell you a little story about why I am here. Just a few days ago, I was standing on the bank of Lake Montebello, just a few blocks from where I live. I wasn’t sure if God wanted me to continue serving in this way, leading the congregation at New Life in Baltimore. I had been receiving too many challenges, it had seemed, and I needed to ‘give it to God,’ as we often say. That’s what I did. I gave it to God.

“Now, when we do that, we expect great signs of blatant hope, don’t we? Surely the Universe provides when we open ourselves to receive, right? Maybe we don’t always get that envelope from the Clearing House Sweepstakes with that check for millions of dollars, but we get some positive sign, yes? A new job offer, perhaps, or even a new relationship that is healthy for us.

“So when my phone rang on the banks of Lake Montebello, my heart leaped. I remember thinking that this was the fastest answer to a prayer, ever.”

Mary smiled, and the congregation offered a soft chuckle.

“Instead,” she continued, “I received the news that my closest childhood friend, the one who inspired me when I was 13 and a patient right here, the one who offered me hope when I didn’t even know I needed it, had died. The news was devastating. Yes, her death was just horrible. To die alone is one of the saddest things imaginable.”



Mary tried to push back the tears, but they fell anyway.

“The news was devastating personally, though, because we had lost touch over the years, and I have learned in these last few days how powerful grief can be, and how it can grip us in ways that we can’t even see.”

She looked at William, who stared at the lit candle in his hand. He, too, was crying. She could see the reflection of the candle’s flame in the tear-drops welling in his eyes.

“Our friend Gretchie struggled with this most of her life after losing some of the most important people she had known, but that did not stop her indomitable spirit to help others. For decades, and without ever saying a word to her brother or even her sister-in-law, Sarah Starling who was a beloved nurse in this ward until cancer took her life a few years ago, Gretchie brought hope to the lives of hundreds of children through hand-made ornaments, each adorned with her simple signature, a little ‘g’ with a happy pug face.”

Mary looked out at the congregation, where nearly 100 people focused on the undecorated tree. Some of them were wiping away tears while others leaned a little closer to the person next to them.

“Every Christmas Eve service, one of my favorite parts of the service is where we bring gifts to celebrate the birth of Christ. At New Life, we have children who come forward with beautiful handmade baskets, or paper flowers, or even tiny little clay Nativity animals that were made so meticulously with their tiny fingers. You can picture them, can’t you? One eye shut, tongue sticking out, as they pinch out clay ears and clay hooves, then carving smiles in each of them. Happy camels, donkeys, and sheep.”

Mary mimicked a child making a small clay animal, and many smiled, nodding their heads, remembering when they might have done the very same thing.

She reached into the pocket of her long white robe and pulled out a small porcelain pug.

“Here’s mine. Gretchie made this little pug for me when I first learned that I had cancer. She didn’t have brushes to paint the intricate details of the smiling dog, with the little tongue hanging out of that grin, so she made her own with the hairs from the mane of her horse, Orion.”

Mary held it up for the congregation to see. The sun that Gretchie had painted on the pug’s stomach still shined as if it had been painted yesterday when they were just 13 years old.

“This was, to my knowledge at least, Gretchie’s first ornament of hope,

her first offering of a gift to believe in something we cannot see, a gift to hold on to when the light went dim. When the stars vanished from the sky. When we felt like giving up.”

There was a general sob that rippled among those sitting in front of her.

“Many of you know what I am talking about,” said Mary. “And if you are one of those people who can thank Gretchie for staying in the light when the stars went dark, I want you to stand up.”

One by one, nearly a third of the congregation stood. Most of them were in their twenties, a few older and a few younger.

“Through Gretchie’s selfless acts all these years, you have found strength in a single ornament, a single gift, a single beacon of light and of hope that stands for so much more. God bless you all.”

Mary nodded for them to sit, but they stood standing.

A petite woman, dressed in white and standing next to William, raised her hand.

“Pastor, I think some of us would like to continue your tradition of offering gifts.”

“By all means,” Mary said. She stepped aside as the woman approached the tree.

“Sarah was my nurse about 10 years ago when I was here,” the woman shared. “Whenever she was on shift, she took care of me and gave me great hope when I felt like the rest of the world had moved on without me. My family was supportive, of course, but they were going through this as well. It was hard on all of us.”

The woman turned to Mary for support. She struggled with the right words to continue. Mary placed her hand on the woman’s back and looked into her eyes. “You are already in the light,” she offered. “You already have the strength.”

She nodded, then pulled out a star-shaped, pearl-white ornament with colorful pieces of stained glass. She held it up so everyone could see it.

“This was the ornament that I received from Gretchie. In the darkest nights, when Sarah wasn’t here or when my family was away, I would always turn to Gretchie’s gift. I would hold it up to my little night light and watch the colors flow across the walls of my hospital room. They painted my get-well cards and pretty hand-painted pictures a rainbow of hues. Hues of hope and light that got me through.”

She kissed the ornament and hung it on the tree by one of the white

lights. Immediately, it came to life. She turned and returned to her seat, offering William a gentle hug.

Mary started to approach the podium to resume the service, but the others who were standing started coming forth. One by one, they kissed the ornaments that Gretchie had made them and hung them on the tree.

When the last individual sat down, a man in his early thirties who looked worn, as if the cancer had been unrelenting, Mary turned to look at the tree.

“Your gifts are beautiful,” she said, turning back to the congregation. She could see Sister Anna on the other end of the center aisle, holding Gretchie’s box of ornaments that she had delivered yesterday. “A genuine testament of life and light, of hope and peace, of possibility and promise. I am reminded, though, that as many of us celebrate that strength, we are in a place tonight where many are fighting for their young lives. Just like so many of us were, they are not in a place of gratitude for surviving and thriving beyond the cancer that tried to take us; no, they are in the throes of the battle, doing what they can to keep that light on, morning and night, good days and bad.”

Mary motioned to Sister Anna to come forward with the box of ornaments. Instead, Sister Anna stepped aside.

Directly behind her was Meggie, dressed in a beautiful white dress. She smiled through her terrible pain, and walked up the aisle pulling her mobile IV pole, now decorated with silver and red garland.

Behind her were 7 other children, all dressed in white like Meggie.

She gave Pastor Mary a big smile when she stopped next to William. Even though he was still seated, Meggie could look directly into his eyes. Their shared tears caught the reflection of the lights from the tree.

“Will you help me?” She asked.

William felt a comforting pat from the petite woman seated next to him.

He tried to answer her, but the words were caught in his throat. He stood up, and Meggie offered him the same hug that Mary had received the night before.

William hesitated, then wrapped his arms around Meggie.

“Of course I will help you,” he whispered. Together, they walked toward the tree.

As Sister Anna opened the box of ornaments, William faced the others in the congregation.

“My sister never stopped thinking of others, doing whatever she could to help them when they needed it the most. For most of my life, I didn’t understand that. When my wife Sarah died a few years ago, Gretchie sent me an ornament that, at that time, I could not appreciate.”

William reached into his pocket, carefully holding the lit candle with his other hand. He pulled out an intricately crafted ornament of two white stars crossing each other. In each of the stars were reds, yellows, and blues on the outer points. Where the two stars crossed, there were purple, green, and orange pieces of stained glass. He held it up and read the back to the congregation.

“May your shared light and love always be with you.”

Mary and Meggie both comforted him as he turned and placed the ornament on the tree. He touched a few of the other ornaments, then turned around.

“There are times when we all lose our way, our light,” he offered. “But that doesn’t mean that light isn’t there for us anyway.” He motioned to the tree behind him and pulled Meggie closer. “The light we seek is in each of us, for each of us, always. It is in the acts we do, whether others are ready to receive them or not. We do them anyway, though, just as Gretchie did all her life. She brought light to others, even in her own darkness.”

William looked up and noticed the verse painted on the wall.

*You are all children of the light and children of the day.*

“May we be children of the light for all, in all that we do.”

Sister Anna stepped forward with the open box.

“Is it okay if we do this now?” She asked Mary.

But it was Meggie who responded. She looked at the other children with whom she would spend Christmas morning.

“It’s your time. There is plenty of light, plenty of hope for each of you.”

Mary, Meggie, William, and the rest of the congregation watched as each child stepped up to Sister Anna and selected an ornament. When each approached the tree, Mary offered a prayer.

“This is your gift of light, of hope, of strength, of love. May you see each of these in you as you continue your journey toward wellness and good health. God bless you.”

When the last child hung his ornament on the tree, Meggie stepped forward and hung the star she had received from Gretchie last year. It touched the bottom tips of William’s stars and completed a rainbow of

light in the center of the tree. She smiled up at him then, and together they walked back to his seat. He offered her one more hug before he sat down. Meggie walked slowly to the back of the room, where Sister Anna had moved a leather chair for her. When Meggie sat down, Sister Anna handed her a lit candle. She seemed to be a star herself, a gleaming beacon of hope despite her frail frame. Her white dress filled with color, and when she smiled, it seemed to Mary as if the entire room brightened even more.

Mary walked down the aisle as the child on the piano played the opening notes of “Little Drummer Boy.” She stopped and offered William a smile before standing next to Meggie.

Together, the congregation began singing as they looked upon the centerpiece of the five trees, now filled with various pearl-white stars,

*Come, they told me pa rum pum pum pum....*

each a beacon of hope for others from the past and the present,

*Our newborn king to see pa rum pum pum pum....*

a reminder of what is possible,

*Our finest gifts we bring pa rum pum pum pum....*

when we remember that we are all children of the light,

*Pa rum pum pum pum....*

and children of the day.

## **Epilogue. Meggie**

*Christmas Eve, 17 years later*

Sister Patricia had just finished hanging last year’s ornament on the otherwise bare tree. The miniature white lights brought life to the colors embedded in the pearl-white star. She noticed the small “m” with IThSS painted on the star and realized that it was backward. She flipped the ornament hanging by the thin gold ribbon.

“There we go. That’s the way it should be.”

She inspected the other four trees against the glass wall. Each was decorated as it had been for decades: traditional and handmade decorations from the children in the unit. She was happy that the numbers had been dwindling in recent years; advances in cancer research were finally translating to fewer children fighting for their lives. Still, cancer had not been fully eradicated, and their commitment to making the lives a little better

for any child with cancer had not changed. This space was as sacred on this Christmas Eve as it had been 10, 20, even 30 years ago.

A young intern breezed through the glass doors at the entryway carrying a small package, wrapped in white paper with gold ribbons and a bow.

“Sister Patricia! He’s here!”

“You know what to do,” she replied, moving a few of the handmade ornaments on the second tree. “She’s in with Angelica in room 3.”

The intern placed the package on the information island in the center of the great space and disappeared down the adjacent hallway. Sister Patricia walked to the counter and straightened the bow on the package.

This was her ninth Christmas Eve managing the annual tradition. When Sister Anna moved south to Florida to care for her ill brother, Sister Patricia was honored to step up. But she was getting older, too, and she didn’t know if she would be able to continue on after this year.

She was not worried, though. When it was time for her to leave, the tradition would be well cared for.

“What do you think of the wrapping paper this year, Sister?”

Sister Patricia looked up to see Meggie, the newest nurse in the ward, and the one who knew more about the Sarah Strong Pediatric Oncology Wing than anyone there.

“You would know, dear. You were the one who wrapped it.”

“Shhh... You don’t want to give away our little secret do you?”

“Of course not, Meg. I know how important this is to you, and to our children.”

Meggie nodded, then looked toward the front glass doors. “I see him. Do you want me to let him in before we bring the kids in? I was thinking that we might want to have him go to the rooms and lead them all out here together. What do you think?”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea. I will join you.”

As they walked toward the door, Meggie could see the oversized outline of a man dressed in red and white, with a sack on his back loaded with toys.

“He’s taking Mary’s passing well, don’t you think?” asked Meggie.

“He is,” answered Sister Patricia. “They had been close until the very end. He gathers great strength in these acts of kindness.” She paused at the door, then added, “For many years, Mary had been a light in his life; he’s not going to stop being a light in the lives of these children. I bet he is more radiant than ever this year.”

Meggie opened the glass doors and greeted William, dressed as the most distinguished Santa Claus that she had ever seen. Light sparkled in the colorful glitter that covered the white cotton trim of his suit.

“Ho Ho Ho!” he blared. “I hear we have some beautiful children here ready to celebrate Christmas!”

Meggie wrapped her arms around William and closed her eyes. She could here the excited screams from the children in the ward, and she remembered what it was like to be filled with light and love when it seemed like there was none left to be found.

“We’re right here, Santa,” she said, squeezing him even more tightly. “We’ve been waiting for you.”

She let go and he looked her in the eyes, seeing the young child that led him to that tree so many years ago.

“I’m sure Mary is proud of you, Meggie. Thanks for keeping the light on like she and Gretchie did all those years.”

“I hope they like the ornaments. I did my best.”

“I’m sure you did.”

“I kept reminding myself of what has always been most important: creating a gift that offers hope. Everything else that matters will fall in place after that.”

“Everything else. Faith. Love. They all matter when Hope exists.”

“We won’t forget that.”

“No.”

“Let’s make sure they don’t either. Will you help me?”

William nodded. “Of course I will help you.”

He walked into the great space and placed his white-gloved hand on top of the package.

“For Gretchie. For Mary.”

“And for all the children.”

“Children of the light.”

“Children of the day.”

William held out his hand. “Ready?”

Meggie took it and squeezed it tightly as she started to sing:

*Come, they told me pa rum pum pum pum....*

Meggie picked up the box and turned toward the children’s rooms.

*Our newborn king to see pa rum pum pum pum....*

With William and Sister Patricia behind her, she continued to sing.

*Our finest gifts we bring pa rum pum pum pum....*

And the children met them in the doorways, smiling through their sickness, forgetting, if just for one night, that anything but light, hope, love, and faith existed in their world.

The children of the light. The children of the day.

The End.



## “Gretchie’s Gifts” Playlist

*(played incessantly while writing this story)*

1. “Peace” by George Winston (December: 20th Anniversary Edition)
2. “Carousels 12 & 14 in F” by George Winston (Spring Carousel: A Cancer Research Benefit EP)
3. “Gulf Coast Lullaby, Pt. 2” by George Winston (Gulf Coast Blues & Impressions: A Hurricane Relief Benefit)
4. “Blues for Fess, Beloved” by George Winston (Gulf Coast Blues & Impressions: A Hurricane Relief Benefit)
5. “Lament” by George Winston (Remembrance: A Memorial Benefit)
6. “Thumbelina” by George Winston (Montana: A Love Story)
7. “Loreta and Desiree’s Bouquet, Part 1” by George Winston (Summer)
8. “Where Are You Now” by George Winston (Remembrance: A Memorial Benefit)
9. “The Impending Death of the Virgin Spirit” by Will Ackerman (Meditations)
10. “Remembrance” by George Winston (Remembrance: A Memorial Benefit)
11. “Where the Sun Rises First (Kumakahi)” by George Winston (Remembrance: A Memorial Benefit)
12. “Daughters and Sons” by George Winston (Remembrance: A Memorial Benefit)
13. “January Stars” by George Winston (Winter Into Spring)
14. “NIGHT: Part Three: Minstrels” by George Winston
15. “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht” by Thomanerchor Leipzig (Jennifer 8 Soundtrack)
16. “Carousel 1 in G Minor/Carousel 2 in G Minor” by George Winston
17. “The Little Drummer Boy” by the Vienna Boys’ Choir
18. “A Christmas Song” by George Winston (December: 20th Anniversary Edition)
19. “Breath of Heaven (Mary’s Song)” by Amy Grant (The Christmas Collection)

## II. The Christmas Rose

by Rus VanWestervelt

*Dedicated to Patrick and Sandra, whose sons Ryan and Danny, respectively, passed away far too early in their young lives. May their spirits, and their love, live on forever in the hearts of all who loved them – and you.*



### 1.

*Dear Alice and Anna:*

It is very early Christmas morning. You are both still asleep, and I have just returned from what was (I am fairly certain) my final journey to and from the Big Hill. The two white roses that will go in your stockings are next to me, along with two gifts wrapped in white paper adorned with small, hand-painted roses. They are beautiful, as always.

Tonight, though, they have even greater meaning. Last Christmas, for the first time, you asked me about those white roses and the gifts wrapped in the pretty white paper. Do you remember? I smiled, and I told you to simply enjoy their beauty and that, someday, I would tell you the full story when you are ready. At that time, I thought that I had plenty of time to

wait for you to get a little older.

I was wrong.

I don't think you are old enough yet to understand any of this, and I certainly don't think I could just sit down and tell you (I am sure that my tears would get in the way far too much, and it would take away from the beautiful story of the Christmas rose and its legacy that is bigger than any of us). So, I think I'm going to do my best here on these blank pages and write it all down for you. It's time that I do this now anyway. I can't trust my memory for too much longer. Things seem to be progressing pretty fast now and, well –

No. I think I'll just stick with the story behind the beautiful Christmas roses. Like I said already, none of this is about me, anyway.

This town has changed very little since I was your age. Old Emily's Estate on the Big Hill (at least that's what we used to call it when we were kids) is as beautiful as ever, and although our house is part of a newer development here in Luther's Village, the rest of the town has remained true to its good, traditional feel. Your great-grandparents (that would be my Grams and Pop Pop) were the original owners of what is now our home, and your bedroom was the very same room I stayed in when we would come to visit them every Easter and Christmas.

The view from your window is the same, too. I could see Old Emily's Estate lit up at night, just like you can now. Funny how that name has held up, even long after she passed away. Those single white candles in each window mean a lot more to me now than they did then. Believe me. One day, they will seem even more beautiful to you, too, as you will see them from a very different perspective.

I'll get to that soon enough, though.

Old Emily was legendary to us while she was still alive. She died about a week before we arrived that Christmas when I turned 17. For years, all of the kids had believed the tales that had been spread about her. Emily Starling, lone inhabitant to the mansion that rested on the highest point here in Luther's Village, was a wealthy, lonely old woman. For 364 days every year, those big iron gates that separated us from the winding driveway to her home stayed shut—locked tight for so long that we believed they would rust themselves shut forever. But on that one day, December 24, she would open those black, rusty gates and allow a select few to enter on foot.

On that night before each Christmas, a handful of town elders would make the mile-long pilgrimage up the winding driveway to her house. As

kids, we would watch them from a distance as we made snowmen along the wooded ridge (when we were fortunate enough to have snow on the ground). Each elder brought a single wrapped gift (they were all quite small) and homemade, aged spirits (your great grandparents would always take their own Quarant Quatre). Once, I saw them return just after midnight, and their arms were filled with so much more.

We never knew exactly what they took up, and we definitely never knew what they brought back. All we could ever see were single white flowers peeking out of the bags they brought down. My Pop Pop was an elder, and he would make the trek every year, though we never spoke of it. Nobody did. That's just how it was.

The rumors among us kids were wild. Some swore that the elders brought offerings, like sacrifices, to Old Emily. (I'm not going to go into too much detail about that here, though. You girls are just too young to hear about that.) Others believed that she was older than the town itself, and that she would never die. Every Christmas Eve, she would receive something from the elders that made her live another year.

I'm sure that, in time, you will be able to imagine what that was. But like I said before, I'm not going to be the one to talk to you about any of that.

In that year when I was 17 and Old Emily had finally passed on, everything was different here at Grams and Pop Pop's house. They were sad, for sure, and very reflective, as if they had lost one of their own relatives. They both hugged me more than they had ever done before (and since, for that matter, until the year when they died themselves long before you were born).

My parents and I had arrived on the 23rd of December that year, like always. When we pulled into the driveway, many from the town were walking back from the graveyard. They had just laid Emily Starling to rest, and there sure were a lot of quiet people milling about the streets. It looked more like the third week in a hard Winter's January than just a few days before Christmas. Their sadness was just too heavy, I guess. They wore their grief like a heavy wool blanket, unable to shake the bitter chill of the winter air.

When my Grams and Pop Pop returned to the house, they both did their best to put on a smile for us. Your grandparents hugged them as I stood awkwardly by. Soon enough, we were all ushered into the house, and a sense of routine seemed to return. At least for a few moments.

Just after the sun had set and the fire in the living room had brought some warm comfort to me, your Great Grams called me into the kitchen. She was a round, fastidious woman who was always happy about the food she was cooking, and she was preparing a feast that smelled just delicious.

“Andrew,” she said, “I decided that this year, on the occasion of you turning 17, I would make you two of those pecan pies you love so much.” And she held up two fingers crippled with arthritis, and danced them in the air like crooked sticks.

I gave her the gentlest of hugs (she seemed so fragile then – but compared to who she had become the year she died, I guess she was okay back in the day).

“Thank you, Grams,” I offered, but the smile she offered turned to concern very quickly.

“There has been a lot of change around here this year with Miss Emily passing on,” she said. “But you’ve changed a little too since we saw you in March. You are growing up too quickly, Andrew, and I can tell that you are itching to get out of high school and move on to bigger things.”

Grams could always get right to the point with me. I liked that.

“I am ready. You’re right,” I replied. “I just don’t know what that means. Where we live in Solomon’s is beautiful, but I’ve never felt any real affinity for the place since we moved down there. Something’s missing.”

“Most people feel that way at your age. Don’t fight it,” she smiled. “But don’t let it consume you, either.”

I hugged her again, and I could feel her fragile fingers wrapped around me, fighting for just another second before finally letting go. When she did, she held me at her thin arms’ length and looked directly into my eyes.

The hazel hue in her own eyes captured colors that I never even knew existed.

“There’s something else, Andrew, about this Christmas Eve that we haven’t shared with you yet,” she said. “Pop Pop and your father will explain everything to you – what they can, at least.”

And here is where everything changed for me.

“It looks like you have been invited to join them tomorrow night up to the Big Hill.”

Immediately, I could hear the fears, the resistance, formulating in my mind.

*Me? To the Big Hill? Why? And why is anybody going up there at all? She’s dead now, right? –Gosh, that sounds so cold. I didn’t mean it like that. But if she’s not there*

*anymore, why does anybody need to go back up there?*

“Your grandfather will explain most of it to you, along with your father. The rest of it, though? Good luck, Andrew. I don’t think they even know what to expect.”

That night, stuffed with pecan pie and Grams’ classic steamers made with pure vanilla, I sat on the edge of my bed and looked out of my window, staring at Emily’s home atop Big Hill. The single white lights were in each window, as they had always been, but every window on every floor had now been draped shut. No additional light. No movement. Nothing.

The house itself looked as if it had been in mourning for Emily’s passing, if not dead itself.

*There’s nothing more we can do, Luther. The house – all of it – is no more. I am so sorry. We did our best. . . .*

Of course I didn’t believe any of it. I knew that somebody had to be in that house, someone who probably had a lot to do with whatever was going to happen tomorrow night.

*How much will I be allowed to know?* I wondered.

I tucked myself under the covers, and as I drifted off to sleep, I was sure that a single curtain in one of Emily’s windows had been pushed aside, and a woman dressed in white watched over me as I dreamed of the next night’s journey: a Christmas Eve tradition of secrecy that I was about to join on the hallowed grounds of Emily Starling’s estate.

## 2.

The air on that Christmas Eve was heavy, a cold and saturated gray that hovered over all of us as we made our final preparations for Christmas day. Your grandmother had some last-minute shopping to do, and I was glad to go with her to Hutzlers and Hoschild Kohn’s, where the decorations were always so beautiful throughout the store. We stopped by Woolworth’s for stocking stuffers and peppermint sundaes, our little gift to ourselves for making it through the crazy crowds.

By the time we got home, Grams had cooked another big meal, and we sat together largely in silence, passing the mashed potatoes and sliced ham, the string beans and the cranberry sauce, as the sounds of silverware on Grams’ finest China plates replaced our words.

When we finished, I noticed that Pop Pop gave a nod to Grams. She brought out fresh black coffee to him, my father, and me. That had never

happened before, and at first I thought it was some kind of mistake. She and mom went into the kitchen, and I then realized that this was it; the time had come. They were going to reveal the secret of Emily and the annual trek up to the highest peak in Luther's Village.

"Andrew," my father began, "when we finish our coffee, it will be just about time to join the other elders in the community and head up to Miss Starling's home. I know that you and your friends have heard – and have probably created yourselves – a lot of rumors about her and the big house on top of the hill."

I nodded, but didn't say a word.

"I have heard most of them," he continued, "and none of them are true. Mrs. Starling was a normal person like you and me. There were no rituals or ceremonies, and she certainly wasn't some super human who was outliving all of us, although there were qualities about her that seemed to be timeless."

"I never believed any of those rumors anyway, Dad," I offered, but he could tell I was lying.

He smiled, then continued. "Your grandfather and I both agree that it is time you joined us. A few other teens will be heading up with us, too. Jake Bearing is going up with his dad, and Steven Sayers is going in place of his father, who is just too sick to make the trip this year."

"But they are both 18, right?" I asked.

"That's right, Andrew, a year older than you. And they've lived here all their lives. You will be the youngest, and the only person joining us who doesn't live in Luther's Village."

The mug was warm in my hands, and I raised it to take a sip, buying myself a few extra seconds to figure out how to ask what I was thinking.

Finally, I just said it, trying not to sound ungrateful. "Then why am I going if I don't live here? Isn't it some kind of rule that you have to be living in Luther's Village to be a part of your group that gets to go up?"

Your great grandfather smiled and leaned toward me from the other side of the table. "What matters more than anything else," he offered, "is that those who make the annual journey are sincere; they must make a promise to carry on certain traditions."

He then turned to my father, who nodded as if giving him permission to continue.

"Andrew, your father and I have been talking about this for a few years now. Someday, you will inherit this house. Along with it comes the respon-

sibility to carry out Miss Starling's traditions."

It was all too much for me to take in at that age (which is why I guess I am writing this down for you now instead of telling you in person). I just nodded in response, took another sip of my coffee, and looked at my father.

"Don't you want this house, Dad?"

"We are too settled in Solomon's Island, Andrew. Besides—"

He paused for a long time, and I began to worry that I had said something wrong or disrespectful. He finished his coffee, wiped his mouth with the decorative Christmas linen, and turned to me with a grim smile.

"She wanted you. Not me."

Before I could respond, Grams came through the kitchen door with the Quarant Quatre in a handcrafted bottle, the cork sealed in wax.

"Do you have the other package taken care of?" she asked Pop Pop. He nodded, finished his coffee, and pushed away from the table.

"It's time," my father said. "Get your scarf and gloves, Andrew. It's colder up there on The Hill."

### 3.

There were 23 of us outside the tired, heavy gate that remained shut. We huddled close, shared warm greetings, and I nodded without saying too much when some of the other elders welcomed me to the gathering. I knew most of them; few people around Luther's Village remained indoors, especially during Christmas. Our group that had gathered outside of Emily's gates seemed to represent the core of what this town has meant to many of us for a long time.

Pop Pop stood by the gate and called for our attention. His voice was no louder than it had been just minutes before as we sat around the dining room table, drinking hot coffee and talking about this very moment.

"Tonight signifies the end of one era, and the beginning of another," he said, as puffs of white air followed his words and quickly dissipated in the cold night. "The death of Emily Starling provides us all with an opportunity to carry on her legacy and pass down the traditions that have mattered so much to the children and their families here in Luther's Village for nearly 150 years."

Many of the elders nodded, and a few whispered words in agreement. I looked around and tried to understand what traditions he was talking



about.

“Joining us tonight are some new friends who will help us in carrying on that tradition. We welcome Jake Bearing and Steven Sayers, as well as my own grandson, Andrew. Gentlemen, we are grateful to have you with us this evening.”

The 20 men who surrounded us tucked their packages under their arms and offered a muffled round of applause. I looked at Jake and Steven, and it seemed like they were just as curious as I was about these traditions and legacies.

One of the elders, Ben Steward, stepped forward and walked to the gate. He held up a key and spoke to us, as if he were reciting a passage he memorized long ago.

“Once a year, we are granted permission to unlock these gates and join Miss Emily Starling for an evening of gratitude and charity.” Mr. Steward bowed his head, as if realizing that the speech he had delivered for so many years no longer applied with the passing of Emily.

“Tonight, however, we have been granted permission, posthumously by Miss Starling, to return to her estate on Christmas Eve. None of us here has any idea what to expect. So tonight, we are all together, new and old, in our journey.”

Ben Steward raised the key high in the air and said, “In your name, Miss Emily Starling, we carry on your tradition.”

Ben turned, unlocked the gate, and pulled the heavy doors open. A whisper of cold air rushed past us as we stood in front of the long driveway.

For the next 20 minutes, I don’t remember any of us speaking as we walked the narrow and winding path that led us to the top of the Big Hill. I did my best to stay in the middle of the pack as the older men led with a slow but consistent stride, though in my youth I wanted to sprint to the top and see what waited for us. *Charity? Tradition? Legacy?* I racked my brain trying to make sense of it all, and in the process, I nearly missed the fact that it had begun to snow.

By the time we hit our last little switchback in the winding driveway, the greens that lined the side of the road were dusted with snow. Somehow, the purity of the snowflakes seemed to make the green leaves more vibrant. In fact, everything seemed more alive as we approached the house. Born out of my anxiety to see the late Emily Starling’s estate was an unexpected energy, a surge of life and color and light.

The house was magnificent. As many times as I had seen the home through my tiny bedroom window back at our own house, I never imagined it would be so beautiful close up. We stepped through two towering, all-glass doors and stood in an oversized atrium, a beautifully decorated space with polished hardwood floors. Several freshly cut Christmas trees stood tall in and around the room, all but one adorned with handmade ornaments and bright, colorful lights. Pine roping lined the banisters and railings, and potted poinsettias splashed the glossy floors with green, white, and red reflections. The entire room felt like some Hollywood-designed set for a big-budget TV Christmas Special. I would not have been surprised to see Amy Grant, or even Bing Crosby, emerge from one of the many decorated doorways and begin singing “White Christmas” personally to us.

In fact, though, just the opposite happened, and I could tell by the faces of the elders that the absence of Emily Starling was now very real to all of them.

After a moment of unexpected silence, where a few did their best to check their emotions, a few of the elders whispered short instructions to carry on what must have been their longstanding traditions. On one table near an 8-foot tree decorated with white doves and cobalt blue lights, they left their homemade wines and spirits. And on another table on the opposite side of the room, next to a bare tree with simple white lights, they placed their small, wrapped boxes.

As Ben Steward and another elder started serving the liqueur (even I received a few ounces of Pop Pop’s *Quarant Quatre* in a small dessert wine glass), three others (your grandfather, along with Jake Bearing’s dad and his brother) started unwrapping the boxes at the other table. In each was a single, handmade ornament, a uniquely crafted red rose, that was tied to a thin gold string.

I didn’t wait to be told what to do. Steven, Jake, and I joined them. Together, we decorated the tree as some of the other elders began humming “Silent Night.” The room was filled with music, light, and something more.

I wasn’t sure if it was the *Quarant Quatre*, acting like some kind of elixir that heightened the magic of Christmas Eve, but I found myself in a space caught between my own reality and some ethereal, spiritual place. I had never met Emily Starling, but I felt her with us in that moment – and for the rest of the night – as we brought the town’s love, ornament by ornament, into her home – a place from which she watched over all of us in

that long, white gown for so many years.

Ever since that night, I have carried with me the spiritual beauty of those moments, a beauty that I am doing my best to pass on to you now.

We finished decorating the tree, and the rest of the elders gathered around us as we joined hands; some quietly wept. I was so caught up in the experience, the mixture of melancholy and joy that made me realize the spirit of Christmas was much bigger than any one of us. I was surrounded by members of my community who understood something deeper, something that reached far beyond them. And, especially on this night, in the wake of the passing of Emily Starling, that something transcended our own existence here on earth.

After the tears slowed and our hands fell by our sides, Pop Pop moved to the center of the great room.

“Andrew, Jake, Steven. Please join me.”

I turned to look at the other elders, expecting one of them to step forward. Surely there was another member of Luther’s Village named Andrew. But nobody joined Jake and Steven as they approached Pop Pop. Instead, they all looked at me with gentle smiles of encouragement and, I think, gratitude.

I looked into my father’s eyes, and he placed a hand on my shoulder.

“It is okay, son,” he said. “Like I said earlier, this is what Emily wanted.”

I turned toward Pop Pop and joined him, along with the other two young men, in the center of the room. Together, we faced the others. The warm ambiance of the room seemed to hold us together as the echo of “Silent Night” continued to resonate within me. Among the tenor and bass notes of the elders, I sensed the subtle tones of a lovely alto, and I wondered if Emily had, at times, sung with them.

“As most of you know,” began Pop Pop, “our work here is not yet done. In a few moments, Andrew, Jake, and Steven will lead us through these doors behind us, and we will follow the path of the lovely Christmas roses that Emily had planted so many years ago. As is our tradition, please find a few select roses to clip and carry with you as we make our way to Emily’s Christmas Chateau. I think our number this year is just a little over 150, so each of you needs to select about 7 roses.”

Collectively, the elders raised their glasses.

“But before we leave, you also know that we are commissioned to take care of some important business – a ritual that happens only once or twice

in our lifetimes.”

Pop Pop put his arm around my shoulder, brought me close to his side, and raised his own glass. I looked at him as he spoke.

“The passing of Emily Starling has left us with a vacancy, and it has been the tradition since the founding of Luther’s Village in 1852 that the keeper of this estate, if he or she is in good mind to do so, shall determine who inherits its land atop Big Hill and the responsibilities that come with it. In previous generations, the inheritor has always been a child of the deceased. This year, however, is different, as Miss Emily had no children. As a result, she made her choice clear to us several years ago.”

I turned to the elders to see who that might be, but when I did, they were all looking directly at us, with glasses raised, now in our own direction.

“Gentlemen,” Pop Pop continued, now looking at the three of us. “I am not certain that you remember this, but seven years ago, when you were on the verge of becoming teenagers, you took it upon yourselves during that early Spring vacation to breathe new life into our Town Square. Andrew, do you remember? You spent the whole week with us that March.”

I nodded, as Jake and Steven cracked smiles. “Oh, I remember, Pop Pop,” I said. “We set out to own that acre of land if it killed us.”

“And own it you did, Andrew. By mid-June, many of the flowers you planted exploded with summer color, and it became the epicenter of beauty for Luther’s Village.” Pop Pop took a step toward the towering windows by the front entrance. “Gentlemen, follow me please.”

We did, of course, and when we stepped up to the window, we could see a clear view of that acre of land in the Town Square. The lights lining the gazebo in the center of the square cast a radiant white light in all directions. It captured the hues of the red, yellow, and white winter flowers we planted along the pathways leading to and from the small open structure.

“The work that you did, gentlemen, brought much happiness to Miss Emily. In a moment, you will understand why. Without any pushing or prodding, the three of you made the decision to make this town a better place for everyone, whether you knew them or not. That mattered a great deal to her. It is something that she never forgot.”

Jake draped his arms around Steven and me, never taking his eyes off of the gazebo. “We never intended it to have such a big impact. We just

wanted it to look better for everyone, at any time. That was it.”

“Well,” said Pop Pop, “Sometimes that’s all it takes: the desire to make things better.”

I turned to face him and the others. “What does any of this have to do with Miss Starling and her decision for us to inherit her estate?”

I will tell you, girls, that just saying that out loud was staggering to my mind that the three of us had just been gifted the golden jewel of Luther’s Village. It all seemed too surreal to even mutter out loud

Your great grandfather turned and walked all the way to the other end of the great room. He stood before two large glass doors, identical to the ones we had entered when we had arrived at the estate.

He looked over his shoulder in our direction, but never looked directly at us.

“I think the answer you seek is on the other side of these doors.”

I looked at Jake and Steven, and together we walked toward Pop Pop. The other elders filed in behind us.

I squinted out the glass door but saw nothing. It was as dark as the night.

“I’m sorry, Pop Pop,” I offered, “but I don’t see anything. Everything is black.”

He just smiled, moved his glance to the right of the doors, and locked in on a single switch that was on the wall.

“Andrew, why don’t you flip that little switch and spread some light for all of us.”

I walked to the wall bathed in decorative light from the trees, placed my thumb on the switch, and pushed it up.

At first, I thought that I did something wrong, as nothing changed outside. It was still pitch black. But within a few seconds, I saw the beginning of the transformation. Lights closest to the glass doors began to warm, illuminating a stone path lined with red and white Christmas roses.

Pair by pair, each set of lights along the path turned on, and the stone walkway wound its way around decorated trees that lit up as well. Each tree had its own theme, much like the trees inside the great room.

The path worked its way up another hill I never knew existed, and it stopped in front of a beautiful white chateau, a small cottage now beaming with the brilliance of a thousand white lights. Under its light were red and white Christmas roses, all in full bloom, dusted with a light snow.

“It’s absolutely beautiful,” I said. “And these roses. I always marveled at

them each Christmas morning. Looking at them now, though, I don't think they look like any flower I have ever seen before."

"That is another miracle of Christmas that Emily Starling spent her whole life working on," said Pop Pop. "You can't see it from here, but to the right, about another 100 yards into the woods, is a rather large greenhouse that Emily had built back in the early '60s. These 'roses' that line this path are a variation of Camellias that she cultivated for decades until she was able to have the bloom beautifully in December, just in time for Christmas. There are no other flowers quite like these."

The flowers stretched nearly two feet in the air along the stone path. "I just thought that they were the real Christmas roses, like the ones from the story about the roses growing from the tears of a young girl who had no gift to give Christ."

"Those roses," he replied, "are highly poisonous. Emily would have never allowed them to be shared with the children on Christmas morning."

I opened the glass doors, and the fragrance of the flowers found us immediately.

"They smell wonderful, don't they? Most Camellias carry no fragrance," said Pop Pop. "Emily, once again, found a way to make them the most beautifully scented flower throughout Luther's Village."

I felt hypnotized by the beauty and the scent of everything I believed Christmas to be.

Pop Pop gestured to the path. "Well, then. Shall we all take a little walk? It is getting late, after all. And it is Christmas Eve. There is still much work to do."

#### 4.

As Pop Pop had mentioned, he allowed Jake, Steven, and me to lead the way to the chateau. This time, though, unlike our walk up to the estate, I took the time to take in the beauty of the flowers and the view from the Big Hill. Below us, Luther's Village loomed, a glowing beacon that represented everything Christmas was supposed to be about. There was nothing big about our town. We never pushed a population over 500. But tonight? We looked as if we were the brightest light in the entire land.

From here, where Emily Starling, a voluntary recluse, spent many years watching over us, our little village was a timeless reminder of what is al-

ways possible for each of us, and for all of us.

We reached the chateau, and I noticed that the elders kept their distance behind us along the path. As Jake, Steven, and I stepped on to the wraparound porch and approached the simple wooden door, we could hear the whispers of “Silent Night” fill the air once again.

It was the second most beautiful moment we shared that night, as the elders’ voices filled the night with an indescribable reverence.

I gripped the brass handle, pushed it toward the porch floor, and felt the door open on its own.

A warm light of soft yellows and greens spilled on to the three of us as we peered inside. What we saw left us breathless. In our silence, the sweet song of the elders filled our hearts with the miracle of Christmas all around us.

In the back of the room stood the most magnificent tree that we had seen all evening. It was easily 15 feet high and decorated with ornaments made by children – some even by our own hands – from as far back as the mid 1800’s.

Under the tree, and covering nearly every inch of space in the chateau, were hand-wrapped gifts of all different sizes. Roses of different shapes and sizes were painted on the plain white paper covering each gift.

Attached to each gift – there were 157 to be exact – was the name of a child in Luther’s Village.

We each looked toward the other, in complete disbelief, as we recalled the gifts wrapped similarly that we had received as young children.

I looked back at my father, at Pop Pop, and the other elders. They continued to sing, but some were now shedding tears.

I remembered the Christmas globe I received the year we filled the Town Square with flowers. Inside the beautiful glass orb was a cottage surrounded by flowers. When I gave it a quick twist upside down, the snow would fall gently on rose petals, just like the ones we had planted.

It was then I remembered that it was wrapped in plain white paper, decorated with small red roses.

Jake turned to the elders. “This is where all those “mystery” gifts came from when I was a kid? What is this place? Was Miss Emily some kind of Mrs. Claus or something?”

As the elders continued to sing, Pop Pop stepped forward and joined us on the porch.

“I guess you could say that, Jake. But this is much bigger than Miss

Emily. As it is much bigger than you, Steven, and Andrew.”

We all looked at him, waiting for him to continue.

“This is merely the fulfillment of Jeremy Luther’s wish to hold on to the spirit of Christmas in our small village. More than 150 years ago, he pulled together a small group of town elders, just like us, and shared his vision to provide selflessly for the children in the darkest hours of the year: Christmas time. He wanted them to know love, to be the recipient of kindness, so that when they became older, they felt compelled to give to others what they had received.”

Pop Pop offered a wide smile to us all.

“The original inhabitants of our little village were not rich, by any standard. Luther, on the other hand, was one of the most wealthy members throughout Maryland. He established a charitable fund that would supply gifts to the children of his village for hundreds of years to come.”

We looked back at the gifts, overwhelmed with the beauty of such anonymity, of such kindness.

“The three of you are evidence that Luther’s vision is, indeed, timeless. No technological breakthroughs, no war, no act of terror can ever threaten the genuine goodness of humanity. What you did for Luther’s Village warmed all of our hearts, and Miss Emily’s especially. She knew that you would be the perfect successors to carry on Jeremy Luther’s vision of bringing joy to all of the young children in our town.”

Steven picked up one of the gifts and read the tag.

“To Danielle, the sweetest ballerina the town has ever seen.”

“Hey,” he offered. “I know this girl! She’s not even 10 yet and she is already doing things on that stage that most dancers only dream of accomplishing!”

Jake found a long, thin package and held it in his hands like a fishing rod. He read the tag and smiled. “I think this is going to make Josiah a very, very happy fisherman.”

I blurted out a battery of questions to my grandfather. *How does she know what gifts to buy? Where did the money come from? When did she buy them? Why don’t we ever see her in town? Who wrapped all of them?*

He answered none of them and, instead, smiled.

“So many questions, my grandson. If you simply believe in the spirit of Christmas, you will realize that the answers are immaterial to what matters more than anything else.”

My father joined us inside the chateau and looked at his watch. “What



we can't ignore, everyone, is the time. We really must get going."

The rest of the elders joined us in the chateau and began collecting gifts. They seemed to be organized by street.

I looked at him incredulously. "You mean *we* deliver them? Tonight?"

"Not only do we deliver them, Andrew. We share the spirit of the Christmas rose with all of the children as well."

Jake, Steven, and I rolled the stems of the flowers between our fingers and inhaled deeply their unique fragrance. I remembered receiving them in my stocking as a child, putting them in water even before breakfast, and savoring their scent among the aromas of the fresh pine and Grams' cooking.

"We held on to them as long as we could," I reminisced. "And when they started to turn, Grams and I would press them between the heaviest books we could find. When I would come back for Spring vacation, she would share the dried flower with me. I could still smell Christmas between the pressed petals. It made me think that the spirit of Christmas was always with me."

"Luther's vision," said Ben Steward. "We all have similar memories, and they are similar to the memories of the children – now grown and gone – that have lived here since Franklin Pierce was our president."

"And it is the hope of all of us," said Pop Pop, "that the children of Luther's Village 150 years from now have similar memories of Christmas and kindness."

We wept as we nodded; Jake, Steven, and I agreed to carry on the wishes of the elders, of Emily Starling, and of all who preceded her.

Without any more hesitation, the elders distributed large sacks to each of us, and we began to fill our bags with presents. We clutched the handful of picked Christmas roses and began our descent back in to town. We knew that the new sunrise would be breaking the horizon in just a few hours. It was time to begin our final work for the night.

## 5.

When we finished delivering the gifts and Christmas roses just before dawn, Jake, Steven, and I headed back to the gazebo in the Town Square. Most of the winter flowers we planted were now in full bloom. The light snow now falling all around us had dusted them with white, and I felt like everywhere I might go, now, could feel like it did just hours ago on the Big

Hill. I looked up toward the estate; the chateau was nowhere to be seen.

“Not exactly what I planned for in my life,” Steven said. “I’ve been spending so much time here with Dad being sick. I guess I just wanted to get out of here for awhile, you know?”

“I don’t think you should fight that,” I replied. “There’s three of us here. We can take turns, right? I mean, there aren’t any rules about how the three of us do this.”

“And who knows anyway,” Jake added. “Maybe Miss Emily was planning on that. Maybe we don’t just do this here in the Village. Maybe we spread it out, you know? God knows we need more of this stuff happening all over the place.”

Steven nodded, and we fell silent. None of us wanted this night to end. As light continued to spill over the horizon, Jake stood up, walked over to the Christmas roses, and brushed off the dusting of snow.

“So I guess this is all hush-hush then, right?” He asked. “No one can ever know about this?”

“That’s right, Jake,” I replied. “Even if they guess it right; it has to remain our little secret. For always.”

“But when will we know when the time is right to pass along the legacy?”

I looked at the estate, and Emily’s candles still burned in the windows.

“We will know when it is the right time, just as Miss Emily had known it was the right time to pass the responsibility along to us. Until then, all we can do is what has been asked of us. Right?”

We all agreed, and for many years we never thought of successors or ending our run on bringing joy and kindness to so many of our own children. Steven settled his family in Hunter’s Valley and started some new traditions of his own in that small town. Jake and I stayed. We never looked back since that Christmas Eve when I was just 17.

But just like for Miss Emily, there comes a time when things change. And here we are today, on the verge of that transition that happens just once or twice in our lifetimes.

Yes. The time has come to pass along the legacy to the two of you far earlier than I had ever wished. Although you are too young now to read these words, your guardian angels, Mr. Jake and Mr. Steven as well, will know when the time is right.

As for me, I hope that I don’t have to give you this letter for a long time. The doctors are trying some new medicine with me that they’ve never

used before, and if it works, —

It is late, and it is time to finish this letter. I guess what I want the two of you to know is that every one of us is given the chance to change the world. We don't always expect that chance when it comes by, and sometimes we don't even recognize it immediately. But it's there. And when that opportunity comes your way, seize it. Embrace it. Because when you do, the change you make for yourselves, for your village, even for your world, means something so much greater than any of us can ever imagine.

The light in the room darkens, and I look up from the page.

"Daddy?"

Little Alice's silhouette fills the doorway to our family room. Her white nightgown is painted in the colorful hues of the Christmas tree lights.

"Alice. It is too early for you to be awake."

"I saw the woman in one of the windows of that big house on the hill again. She was beautiful, Daddy, and she was looking right at me. She was all dressed in pretty white, too."

I take her in my arms and hold her tightly.

"I'm sure it was just the long gingham drapes blowing in the wind, sweetheart. They fool me sometimes, too."

"No. It was the beautiful woman in white. I'm sure."

She looks at the stack of handwritten pages on my desk and sees her name.

"Are you writing me a letter, Daddy?"

"Yes, Alice. It is for both you and Anna."

"Can I read it?"

"Not just yet. There will be a time for that, but not now."

She picks up one of the Christmas roses, twirls it between her fingers, and smells it. A smile fills her face as the lights from the tree find their way into her eyes, a glistening prism of Christmas that reminds me of her great grandmother.

"Why did you take these out of our stockings, Daddy?"

"I guess I just wanted to smell them too, Alice. They really are beautiful, aren't they?"

Alice giggles. "Of course they are, Daddy. They are Christmas roses! They are what Christmas is all about. They last forever, even after they die."

I pull her into my arms again, kiss her gently on the top of her head, and push a giggle from the deepest part of my heart.

“Yes, Alice. Even after they die.”

She kisses me back on the top of my own head and heads back to the stairs.

“You smell good like the roses, Daddy. Just like Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Alice,” I whisper, twirling the Christmas rose between my fingers.

“Goodnight, Daddy, and Merry Christmas to you, too. I love you.”

“I love you too, Angel.”

I wait for her to climb the stairs, jump on her bed, and turn out the light.

I turn back to the letter.

“And that’s forever,” I whisper as I write, wiping the tears from my tired eyes.

“Just like Christmas.”

The End.

### III. A Christmas Legacy by Rus VanWestervelt



#### **One: A Darkening Solstice**

**E**llie sits in the darkness by the decorated tree, where faint shadows ebb and glow on the walls opposite the candles on the fireplace mantel. The lunar eclipse—an astral event that happens every 500 years or so on Winter Solstice, is in full swing, and the full moon's light, once fighting through clouds in the bay window behind her, is now giving way to the dark, orange shadow of the Earth.

*Of course I understand that you can't make it back before Christmas. We're all very busy.*

Ellie is dressed in flannel pajamas, and she practically disappears in the tag blanket draped over her shoulders and pulled tightly under her chin. The electricity has been out for more than five hours, since just before sunset. Sub-freezing temperatures outside are slowly stealing the heat from their house, and her father, who now stands just outside the open front

door, is not doing much to preserve what little warmth remains in their split-level home.

*They've been saying since Monday that she won't make it through the night. It's not like she hasn't known that you've been here every night since. I don't know. Mom always did do things on her terms, didn't she?*

Monday had been three days ago. Ellie, just 9 years old, couldn't understand how grown ups knew such things about dying. She worried that, one day, her dad might say something like that about her mom or, worse, about herself.

*Tonight just feels different, though. The eclipse happening—on Winter Solstice no less—just seems a little, I don't know—ominous maybe?*

Ellie overhears her uncle mentioning the transformer fire, too.

*Exactly. I just feel like the stillness is preparing all of us for the inevitable. . . .*

Ellie studies the decorated tree in the darkness; once-illuminated ornaments now stretch from the shadows seeking some remaining light to get their shine on. But they are frozen in the near-darkness, too, an orange-reddish hue in each of them. She shifts her legs in front of her, scooting them under the tree skirt that, in just a few short nights, will be invisible from the mounds of presents under the tree. She almost prefers the subtle sanctity of this quiet moment to the chaos Christmas morning will bring.

*Yes, yes. I have your new cell number. You will be the first I call if anything changes.*

There is silence as they exchange hugs, some tears.

*I love you too.*

The front door closes, and Ellie's dad joins her at the tree. He is wiping his eyes.

"The cold will do strange things to you, Ellie." When he dabs the corners of his eyes a second time, he looks down at Ellie and stops, as if really noticing her sitting in the dark, a bundle of blanket staring blankly at the dark tree.

"You okay?"

"Yeah," she says. "Just thinking."

He sits down next to her and faces the tree. Together they are silent, but both feel a certain understanding and comfort in the silence. This is the way it has always been between them.

"Kinda odd," he offers, interrupting the silence. "Beginning of winter, the eclipse happening tonight—now no power in the neighborhood. Makes for a pretty dark tree."

“Mm-hmm.”

“I think I got a set of battery-powered lights we were going to string around the wreath on the door. I might just drape them over the tree instead. Things are a little dark around here right now. I can fix that.”

“It’s not the lights I miss so much. It’s seeing Grams’ gifts wrapped in gold paper under the tree. She’s always the first one to put out presents. I miss that this year.”

“You miss getting her presents?”

Ellie looks at her dad and rolls her eyes. Sometimes, she thinks, he just doesn’t understand her at all.

“No, Daddy. I miss things being normal.”

“Oh.”

She looks back at the tree and imagines the gifts placed with purpose atop the red-plaid tree skirt. Grams was always concerned as much with how they looked and where they were placed, as she was about what was inside each of them.

Ellie considers getting her presents to everyone from her room and putting them out tomorrow morning. It might make everybody feel a little better, she thinks, even if they know it’s only her gifts and not Grams’.

“It was good to see Uncle Jim,” she whispers, trying to change the subject. Her voice is as calm as the warm air that still hovers above them. “He always finds a way to make me laugh when things are sad.”

He nods his head and closes his eyes, but he’s too late. The tears find their way again down his cheeks anyway.

“He’s always been pretty good at that,” he replies. “When we were younger, around your age, he was the only one that could get me to smile after your grandfather died. And let me tell you, that was a hard thing to do.”

Ellie doesn’t answer immediately. She is suddenly too busy thinking about whether she will cry when Grams dies.

“Were you with your daddy when he died? Like we’re going to be with Grams?”

He looks over his shoulder and up the steps to the door, partially closed. There is commotion, but nothing alarming. Maybe she’s just thirsty, he thinks. Or she needs to be changed. That’s probably it.

“Yes,” he replies. “But we were all in the hospital. I remember things being more separated. There were these two big doors that would swing in and out whenever anybody went through. But when they were closed,

it was like we were all in another world. Totally separated from what was going on in his hospital room.”

“What was it like when you said goodbye? Was he still alive and did he know you were there? Like Grams knows?”

He turns back to the dark tree and tries to find an old ornament of a robin’s nest that he made when he was Ellie’s age.

“He was still alive, and I remember the nurse telling me that he could hear my voice. I held his hand as I told him I loved him. I think I felt him squeeze my hand before I let go. I’ve never been really sure about that, though.”

Ellie pulls the blanket over her chin and scoots herself a little closer to her dad.

“Sometimes, I think we just want something to hold on to, Ellie. Something special.”

They sit for another minute in the chilly room, staring at the ornaments on the tree. Icicles, pine cones, teddy bears, and angels. No little nest. Their silence is broken by the raspy breathing that seeps from the partially opened door just up the stairs behind them, a little to the right.

“I never saw him again. He died nine hours later.”

Ellie finally looks up at her father and sees the tears. “That’s the way it’s going to be here, isn’t it. Kinda like Grams.”

“Yeah,” he says. “It is. Kinda like Grams.”

## **Two: Final Words**

Ellie stands, but she casts no shadow on the tree or anywhere else in the dark room. The candles on the mantel are cold, and the eclipse is at its peak just as the moment Winter Solstice arrives. For these next few minutes, her world stands still, an absence of light, shadow, and form.

At first, it terrifies her that her dad is no longer next to her. She must have nodded off though, and she now vaguely remembers him getting up to check in with Grams. A kiss on the top of the head, cluttered with a fragmented “I love you,” and he was gone.

She looks out the window and notices the wind, bending the branches of young saplings they planted months ago. They are so flexible and refuse to succumb to the push and the pull of the shadow-less wind that roars by.

As if in harmony, she hears a voice upstairs—more like an intentional



hum—sync with the wind, a quiet meditation that lures her up the stairs.

It is coming from Grams' room.

"Grams? That you? Are you okay?"

The hum continues from inside, and she places her cold hand on the brass handle and gives it a twist. With a gentle push, she feels the warmth and smells the subtle scents of vanilla and primrose as they both brush over her. Light from candles falls on the walls, her own face, as she whispers again.

"Grams?"

The humming stops as Ellie steps in.

*Close the door, dear.*

She looks around Grams' bed and notices the flowers and the candles that surround her. Only the ones from Uncle Jim, sitting on her night table, are new; the others arrived on Monday when everyone assumed that it was soon going to end.

At the foot of her bed, just by the now-dark window, is the hospice nurse, Fran. She is sound asleep in one of the two Victorian chairs Grams demanded to have in the room with her. The other chair, empty, is at the front of her bed.

*Have a seat close to me, Eleanor. I want to talk with you.*

"Of course, Grams." Ellie sits, and when Grams lifts her hand toward her, she immediately takes it in her own and rests them on the bed. She can feel her grandmother's pulse, slow but present, through the pale-skinned fingers.

*Your dad tells me you want your gifts.*

Immediately she is upset. "No! He never understands! I just like seeing them under the tree! It's normal. It's how I know everything is all right. And they're not there. It's not about what's in them!"

*I know what you mean, Eleanor. I always have. I was just like you when I was your age.*

Ellie, relieved, looks closely at Grams and struggles to find a resemblance between them. Since she can remember, both her own Dad and her uncle Jim have told her how much she looks like Grams.

"You mean you had a dad who didn't understand you sometimes too?"

Grams smiles.

*Yes, I'm afraid it must run in our family. It doesn't mean he doesn't love you, though.*

"Oh, I know that. He just doesn't get it all the time, you know?"

*I do know. Most dads struggle a bit in the beginning. He'll get better at it as you get*

*older, though. Trust me on this one, Eleanor. His love for you will guide him along the way.*

An uncomfortable silence passes. Ellie listens for the roar of the wind outside, but hears nothing. There is no breeze in this room, and the candles don't dance; they stand still, as if in meditation.

*Eleanor, I need to tell you something.*

Ellie leans in and rests her head next to Grams' on the pillow and begins to cry.

"I don't want you to die, Grams. You can't die. You mean everything to me."

Ellie feels her grandmother's hand squeeze gently.

*Do you remember what you said to your father about why you wanted those presents under the tree?*

"Yes. It's just the way things have always been. It's how they're supposed to be."

*That's right. Did I ever tell you about my grandmother and what she would do for us on Christmas?*

"I don't think so. I remember you telling me how she would tell you stories and that she would remind your dad to be nicer to you."

*That is all true, Eleanor. Sometimes, your great-grandfather struggled just like your own dad does now.*

Another period of silence, but Ellie does not care. She feels a certain peace and comfort that she has only heard about in church.

*Now your great, great grandmother, Grandmère, I felt as close to her as I think you feel to me. When I was your age, a long, long time ago, she would wrap her presents for us days before Christmas—yes, they were wrapped in gold paper, just like mine are, and we would always put them under our tree and try to guess what she had made for us. We made everything for Christmas in those days—the decorations, cookies, even the ornaments on the tree.*

"I remember we did something like that with Mom and Dad a few years ago."

*Exactly. I think that's why your dad is looking so hard for that little bird's nest right now.*

"You mean, an ornament on the tree?"

*Yes. The two of us made that together when he was a little boy. Funny how we hold on to memories like that.*

"He'll find it. Right?"

*I'm sure he will. You know your father; a little forgetful at times, but his heart is*

*always in the right place.*

“Yes. And he knows I know that. At least I’m pretty sure he does.”

*He most certainly does, Eleanor.*

Ellie yawns as she whispers, “I know you love me.”

For a long time they sit in silence. Ellie begins to fall asleep in the oversized Victorian chair, her hand in Grams’, her head on the pillow.

*Eleanor, we’re almost done. There’s just one more thing I want you to know.*

“Can it wait until morning, Grams? I don’t think I can stay awake much longer.”

*I’m afraid it can’t, Eleanor.*

Nearly asleep, Ellie sighs. “Ok. I’m listening.”

*We live on in our traditions, our legacies. The love that my grandmother shared with me when I was your age is still here, in me, just as strong as it was all those years ago.*

“Just like your love is in me.”

*Exactly right, Eleanor. The things that are special to you—the presents under the tree, the special times we have spent together—*

“Like right now.”

*Yes, yes. Like right now. That’s where love resides. It never dies, Eleanor, and it never fails. Even though our time to pass away comes eventually, the love I have given to you has been passed down by my grandmother, and before that, by her grandmother, and so on. That’s what makes love eternal. Love is patient, love is kind.*

“Love does not insist on its own way.”

*Love bears all things, believes all things.*

“Hopes all things, endures all things.”

*Love never fails.*

“My love for you will never die, Grams. I won’t let it. Ever.”

*I know, dear. I believe in you, and I love you.*

“I love you too.”

Ellie closes her eyes and lets the gentle scents of vanilla and primrose carry her to sleep. As the minutes slip away, she does not feel the subtle easing of Grams’ fingers around her own.

### **Three: Legacy**

The chill that swirls around Ellie awakens her abruptly. It is still night, but hours must have passed. The candles are quiet, dark, and there is a

different lingering scent that mingles with the vanilla.

Outside the window, she notices a new, subtle pulse of light reflecting on the snow. Ellie stands, walks over to where Fran still sleeps, and peers out.

The Earth's shadow is all but gone from the moon now, and most of its bright-white glow casts new light, new shadows below.

The pulsing light Ellie sees, though, seems to be coming from the house itself, from the window just below her. Reds, greens, whites, and blues bring a come-and-go splash of hues across the front yard snow.

Ellie, suddenly excited, leaves the window and turns, bumping the nurse's chair.

"Be right back, Grams!"

She runs out of the room and skips down the stairs, stopping abruptly on the bottom step.

The electricity is still out, but the room emanates a new warmth. The glow from the moon casts a soft light on the tree, now blinking red, green, white, and blue.

Underneath the tree are three presents, wrapped in gold paper.

Ellie walks across the room toward the colorful tree, throwing gentle shadows along the floor that stay close to her. She kneels, bows her head in prayer, and with closed eyes whispers lines from 1 Corinthians:

*"Love is patient, love is kind. . . ."*

She repeats "Love never fails" several times before opening her eyes, smiling. From the presents wrapped in gold, she follows the string of battery-operated lights as they were draped from the base of the tree. At the top, they form a little resting-place for an old ornament, a handmade nest with two hand-carved robin's eggs nestled snugly in the bottom of the nest.

*Love never fails. . . .*

There is commotion upstairs, and Ellie turns to look as Fran calls for Ellie's father. He stumbles from his bedroom, still partially asleep, and disappears into Grams' room.

The presents under the tree are arranged perfectly, Ellie thinks. She reads the unsteady writing on the tags on each gift: a rather large, square-shaped box for her father, and next to it is a long, heavy box (surely a robe or winter sweater) for her mom. To the right of their gifts, set subtly apart as if on purpose, is a smaller box, the heaviest of the three.

*"To Eleanor, A Legacy. Love, Grams."*

She turns the tag over and sees another message. Three simple words:

*“Please Open Immediately.”*

Ellie looks back to the stairs and can smell the scent of vanilla and primrose that slips through the open door and finds its way to her. She doesn't want to make her father angry if she were to open the gift. Maybe if she delicately opened the corner and slid the present out gently without disturbing the rest of the wrapping. . . .

And that is exactly what she does. Ellie slides her finger along the side flap of gold, unseals the single piece of tape, and unfolds the corners.

When she reaches in to slip the gift through the opening, she is surprised at its texture. She feels material, worn in some places, tattered in others; single strings of thread hang from the delicate edges.

This is something old, heavy, covered in cloth.

With one determined tug, she pulls the present from the paper and holds it firmly in her hands.

The journal is old, probably older than any other book Ellie has ever seen. The dark brown fabric is laced with ornamental gold thread and outlines an oblong patch of parchment in the center of the front cover. Written in beautiful handwritten script is a simple phrase:

*A Christmas Legacy*

Ellie, now oblivious to the new sounds coming from the top of the stairs, opens the journal and reads the inscription, written in the same script that is on the front cover.

*“To Grace, on the day of my granddaughter’s blessed birth, my gift to you. May these stories of my past and our own memories shared of days yet spent together bring you great comfort in the beauty and majestic powers of Love. With all my love and God’s blessings, Grandmère.”*

Centered below the inscription is the date.

*12 May 1926.*

“That’s the day Grams was born,” whispers Ellie.

She turns the page and begins reading the first entry.

*“13 May 1926*

*Dearest Baby Grace:*

*I held you in my arms for the first time today, and nobody believes me when I tell them that you smiled right at me the whole time. I remember the first time I held your*

*Mommy when she was born, and I felt a love at that moment that I had never felt before. Until now, that is. . . .”*

She begins to turn more pages and finds pictures, little works of art, notes shared between them when Grams was a little older. Eventually, though, the time between entries jumps from days, to then weeks. Two months had passed when Grandmère wrote her last entry, and it was dated 16 May 1938.

*“Dearest Grace,*

*I’m afraid this will most likely be my last entry to you, but it does not mean that I will ever stop loving you. There’s something that I want you to know. . . .”*

*“Ellie.”*

Ellie’s father stands at the top of the stairs and calls her name gently, but she does not hear him.

She turns the page and finds a small card taped in the center of the page.

*17 May 1938*

*Eleanor (nee Bisset) Hampton,*

*Devoted wife to the late Charles Hampton,*

*Giving mother to. . . .*

And below the card, in Grams’ unmistakable handwriting, are three words:

*Love Never Fails.*

Ellie hears her father coming down the steps, slowly.

She turns the page and finds a new, more recent card, taped in the center. A birth announcement.

*It’s a Girl!*

*Sally and James Hampton are proud to announce*

*the birth of their beautiful daughter*

*Eleanor Grace Hampton*

*on 14 April 2002*

*19.5 inches*

*7 pounds, 11 ounces*

*Blessed are the families and relatives*

*who will raise this child with love!*

She turns the page and sees the first entry of many, written to her, from her Grams.

Her father, now behind her, places his hand on his daughter's shoulder, kneels down, and kisses the top of her head.

"Ellie, there's something I need to tell you."

Ellie closes the book, looks up to her father, and begins to cry.

"Oh, Daddy. I'm going to miss her so much."

She turns into him as he lifts her into his arms. And as he stands, he notices the little robin's nest with the two hand-carved eggs, resting peacefully on the lights.

"I'm going to miss her too," he says, as he pulls her closer. "Just like you."

The End.





## IV. Selected Essays and Blog Posts

### **Christmas Is For Children, But They Give Us These Three Greatest Gifts (2013)**

**W**e hear and see it everywhere -- from the non-stop Christmas music being played on radio stations to the holiday movies that we love to watch in the comfort of our own homes: Christmas is for kids.

I remember those early mornings, waking up before sunrise to see what magically appeared under the tree overnight. I would kneel in front of that magnificent plastic tree, with big colorful lights covering my world with greens and reds and blues. When my sister finally awoke and joined me, we shared those last few moments together in total bliss, waiting for our parents to join us.

These are the memories we make as kids. Magic, merriment, and family all rolled up in a bundle of wrapping paper and colorful light. As we get older, though, the gifts we receive change. Where our greatest delight once came from the biggest box under the tree, our greatest gifts today come from the lessons of our own children. Here's what mine have taught me.

#### *Live The Life You Were Meant To Live*

Before young children experience fear, guilt, or hurt, they cannot stop being who they are at such young ages. They demonstrate a forthright determination to fulfill a life lived as genuinely as we can only imagine as adults. For my own children, this meant gymnastics, equitation, baseball, and creative expression. It's bigger than that, though; it's about tapping in to the core of who you are and just doing it, living it, simply because it is what is inside of you. For me, it is writing, photography, and music. These are my oxygen. My kids remind me every day that I should never sacrifice the air that I breathe, for any reason. This is their first gift to us.

*Love Everyone, Everywhere*

A child's compassion brings us to tears every single time, simply because it is pure; it is the nectar of our being. We see and feel our own love and innocence in their acts, and we even ask ourselves, at times, when did we become so jaded as adults? As I drive around town doing some last-minute shopping, the strangers around me shoot glares of anger, even threats of don't-you-dares and get-out-of-my-ways. We complain that the holidays stress us out, but really -- we are the generators of that stress. It's not the stores, it's not the pressure to buy! buy! buy!; it is simply our choice to abandon the basic principles of love because we feel that it is necessary to fulfill everyone else's expectations. I don't see our young children running around all stressed out during the holidays. I see them running around all excited, filled with love and magic and hope. Imagine shopping with a heart filled with those three wonderful things: love, magic, hope. This is their second gift to us.

*Get Peace, Give Peace*

As I walk through the stores and see frustrated moms and dads with their children, I don't focus on the anger of the adults. I look at the children and see and hear what they are feeling, thinking, wishing, and dreaming: Peace. They don't want their moms and dads angry, or frustrated, or stressed out. They want peace. They want the loud words to stop, the endless chain of No's to finally find their end. They just want us to abandon our frustration, our anger, and receive their peace that they feel, enjoy the joy, and share in the magic. They don't understand why we cannot see it or feel it. We can, if we only choose to. This is their third gift to us.

When our children were very young, and we would take them for Christmas drives to look at all of the pretty lights that you put up around your houses, we could not savor enough the oohs and aahs that would come from the back seat as they saw and felt and appreciated the magic of Christmas. We need to hear that again and carry it with us, not just in this holiday season, but always. We need to live our lives, love everyone, and participate in peace. These were never dreams of our children; they were their realities, just as they were once our realities as well.

**Life. Love. Peace. Once and always within us.**

## Electric Christmas (2000)

**I**t is the last Friday in November, just after our dinner of leftovers and well after sunset. We leave the house with food still on our plates, lights left on. We have little time left.

“Hurry,” I say to them. “Into the car! We’ve got a lot of ground to cover. Did I remember the tapes? Oh no! Don’t tell me I forgot the tapes!” My wife double-checks our daughter’s booster seat belts, then double-pats her coat pocket with confidence.

“I have both of them, right here. Let’s go.”

*Always a step ahead of me; thank goodness!*

She slides into the seat next to Holland Grace’s booster, shuts the door tightly, and straps herself in. I turn over the motor and adjust the rearview mirror. My wife and I lock eyes.

“Ready?”

She nods, and Holland Grace confirms our status. “Let’s Go, Daddy!”

I ease out of the driveway, synchronously getting a tape in handoff from my wife and inserting it into the player. The leader tape seems interminable.

“Daddy? Time yet?”

Just then, the leader ends, and Bing Crosby’s silky voice stills the air.

*“I’m dreaming, of a White Christ-mas....”*

A chorus of sighs fills the car, and we are on our way.

No, we’re not the Von Trapp Family Singers fleeing our homeland; we’re just a Baltimore family continuing our own holiday tradition, taking to the streets and looking for beautiful displays of lights and seasonal celebrations while our daughter “oohs” and “aahs” as we pass by your creations.

When I was just a bit older than Holland Grace, who is now four, I would come downstairs from my bedroom long before daybreak replaced the streetlights in Towson, and I would wake my sister—six years my elder—with a gentle nudge and a flashlight pointed in her eyes.

“Cindy, are you awake?”

“No,” she’d grumble. “I’m sound asleep. Now leave me alone before I kill you in my dream.”

“But it’s time for *Christmas*,” I’d whisper, nudging her again, then peeling up an exposed eyelid and shining in a beam of light in a desperate attempt to wake her.

“No,” she’d say. “It’s time to turn off the flashlight.”

“Then you’ll get up?”

“If it means you’ll stop blinding me.”

“Cindy, it’s *Christmas*!”

With that said, I’d run down the hall, plug in the tree lights, and kneel before the miracle.

“*Wow*,” I’d whisper. This was the most magical of moments, sitting alone with that illuminated tree and the multicolored wrappings, enveloped in a darkness that sealed the spirit of Christmas all around me. I could not have felt warmer, fuller of that magic.

My memory was not strengthened by what was in those boxes wrapped in the multicolored paper. In fact, I’d be hard-pressed to name you more than three or four toys I received in all of those childhood Christmas mornings. What I do remember is that first smell of brewed coffee mingling with the scent of the pine cones on the tree; the rustling of wrapping paper as Dad finished wrapping a few last gifts; Cindy and I touching each package, shaking them gently and deciding which we’d open first and which seemed mysterious enough to open last; our dog Toby sniffing out his own stocking filled with puppy crackers. These memories of Christmas mornings never seemed to change because this was our tradition.

Years may pass, but traditions stand the test of time. One Christmas, my sister gave me a game called “*Operation*,” and we thought we were on the cutting edge of space-age technology. This year, I’d like to finally return the favor and give her a virtual surgery game that puts the scalpel in your hand and lets you know if you’ve removed the wrong organ and have sent the patient into V fib. Not that there’s anything wrong with this change in what’s under the tree. We were in as much awe with an electronic board game as we are now with a virtual computer game. But let’s face it. Gifts break, small parts disappear, and the novelty loses its luster after the lights have been taken down and the tree has been tossed on the corner for recycling.

Traditions don't break down or lose their parts or dull over time. That's what makes them traditions, and they end up being the greatest gifts we can pass along to our children.

When I knelt down before that great, plastic, flame-retardant tree as a child on Christmas morning, I wasn't thinking too consciously about what it all meant. I was too overwhelmed. Rather, I thought nothing but *felt* everything. It was in me, radiating as much inside as outside, an electric glow which would remain forever that, someday, I would share with my own family.

As adults, we all share these memories with the ones we love. We sit over a cup of coffee or we lie in bed a few minutes longer in the morning and ask what Christmas was like as a kid. He might say it was the memory of feeling a bit older with his dad when they would go to cut down a tree, always on the second Sunday in December. She might say it was trying to stay up all night with her older brother every Christmas Eve to hear Santa rustling through his sack downstairs and drinking the soured milk that had been sitting out for hours.

It's that electric glow that we remember, a tradition that our parents and family either continued or created for us in childhood.

*"Wow..."*

I adjust the mirror in the car to look at my daughter, eyes wide open, a finger touching the window as she points out another display to her mom. "Bee-Youtiful!" she says, a duet with Crosby, both of them crooning in the back seat.

So, this is our tradition. Every night following Thanksgiving, we take a drive to look at the lights that all of you string up around your trees, your houses, your lamp posts. We look at the brilliant displays of candy canes and holly bushes and snowmen, and then we'll head down to Baltimore's own 34th Street, where miracles and holiday spirits (not to mention electric bills) could never be greater.

And as each night's route becomes longer and more fulfilling than the previous evening's drive, we hear from the back seat of our car---over and over again---that unmistakably wondrous whisper of a child experiencing yet another magical discovery, the sound of a child beaming electric inside and out, the sound from which traditions are born.



## Christmas Song Reflections (2009)

### **“Variations on the Kanon by Pachelbel” as performed by George Winston**

I’ve always been a big fan of George Winston. His piano music has soothed me through the toughest of days and has given me hope and inspiration when I believed none remained. This particular piece is very special to me, as it bridges Thanksgiving with the beginning of the Christmas celebration.

Winston plays the song as softly as he does with profound intensity. The rise and fall in this music captures the ebb and flow of emotions for me during this time, the sweet celebration with family, and the melancholy of memories of those who have left us.

My friend Brad introduced me to Winston’s music when I was in my first year of teaching in the winter of 1987. I spent most of my winter break with him and his family that year, listening over and over to the sounds of December, Autumn, and other Winston works as the sweet smell of his mother’s cooking filled every corner of their home. Now, as I listen again to the familiar melody, I reflect on all that has changed since those days of innocence. Both of my parents have passed on, as has his mom (my second Mom, as she always said), and now his father lay in the hospital recovering from a heart attack.

I have much to be thankful during these ebbs and flows in my life. Our departed have left us with gifts of their own to appreciate our lives with a greater sincerity, to love more fully, to appreciate more genuinely. I would like to think that these days of celebration and contemplation enrich our lives long after our cheers of the new year have fallen silent on the quiet streets of 2010.

May each of you be blessed with good memories and reflections today. I am grateful for all that you have given me, and I will do my best to pass on your kindness and love to others along the way.



## **“Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas” by Burl Ives**

I’ve already mentioned it once in the early stages of this countdown, and undoubtedly, I will mention it several times more before we hit number 1. Christmastime is synonymous, in so many ways, with the time spent with Brad and his family all throughout the year.

Brad’s parents, Bob and Bev, were my “second set.” They provided a place where I always felt at home, secure, at peace, and happy. From 1981 to the mid-1990’s, I had a sanctuary to call home if I ever needed to get away or just feel loved in a way that had no attachments or conditions. Now, I have to stress that there was never a problem in my own home. My parents were wonderful in every way, as were/are my brothers and my sister. There was just something about Bob and Bev’s home, though, that attracted so many of us and made us feel safe. A home away from home, even if we were just minutes away from our folks.

Perhaps more than any other time of year, though, it was Christmas that defined their love and generosity. Their Christmas celebrations were unparalleled. In fact, the lower rooms of their home were always decorated for the holidays, with lights, a tree, and tinsel. There’s something about keeping the magic of Christmas with you year-round.

Anyway, I don’t exactly know why, but this song, as sung by Burl Ives, has always reminded me of Bob and of his festive, happy, loving spirit of Christmas that he radiates each day of the year. His health has declined recently, and I continue to keep him in my thoughts and prayers as we move toward Christmas day.

For Bob, it is more about the celebration of Christ’s birth than it is about the gifts. It’s always been that way. He is such a spiritual man, and he will be the first person to tell you it is God’s love that beams through him, reaching all of us.

Maybe we all need to do that. Reach deep inside of us, whatever our beliefs, and embrace more fully the spirit that defines our happiness, our path, our origins of love. Through this deeper understanding of life, may all of our days — not just at Christmastime — be a little more jolly.

## **“Santa Claus Is Comin’ To Town” by Bruce Springsteen**

Just last week, Bruce came to Baltimore and took requests from the audience for songs to sing. One of the few requests he accepted was this



song, with which he helped bring a contemporary sound to a timeless classic.

Who doesn't know this version of the song that was written and performed way back in November of 1934? Springsteen first did his rendition in 1975, and ever since then, just about every one of us has grown up cheering on his bantering with Clarence and the crowd.

For me, it's memories of driving around in my first car lovingly named Deuce, a 1968 Ford Falcon that had seen so, so many better days. When I was a member of the Smile Merchants, traveling to area hospitals and day-care centers during the holidays (not one of them to be outdone by our trip to Hopkins Children's Hospital, where we were lost for hours while trying to get home), Deuce played Bruce loud and often to and from all of our shows.

It's that playfulness, that good spirit, that fun that he has with this song, his band, and the entire audience (as well as all of us who continue to listen) that makes me love this song so much. To love what you do (and do what you love) — that is the secret to our happiness — today, tomorrow, and all of the glorious days yet to come.

### **“First Snow” (Instrumental) by Trans-Siberian Orchestra**

I think Mannheim Steamroller was the first orchestral group to perform Christmas songs with an edge that really caught my attention. Their CD, *Fresh Aire Christmas*, was played ad nauseam on radio stations when it first released in December of 1993. Since then, other groups have taken interpretations of holiday classics in new instrumental directions. By far, my favorite group is Trans-Siberian Orchestra. They are most famous for “Christmas Eve Sarajevo 12/24,” which released in 1996 on their debut CD, *Christmas Eve and Other Stories*.

It is this song, however, that will forever be linked to memories with my family and friends in winter.

Just this past March, we had a late snowstorm (really the only one last winter to “paralyze” us here in Baltimore—home of the flurry-freakouts), and we went sled-riding with Brad and his family at a local golf course that is all hills and curves—perfect for sledding.

It was at this time that I was also bitten by the video bug by some of my students (Jenna J., in particular), and I was encouraged to make my first family video. True—It's been my only video to date, although Amy is doing

wonders with Madelyn's horseback riding; still, I had a lot of fun putting together a little video of our snow ride.

There's something about documenting an event, though, that makes it seem even more memorable as time goes by. Even with just the passing of several months since we went sledding, I look back at that video and remember those few hours as being some of the best ever spent with our friends.

I know that's not true. There have been many, many times when we've gotten together, and I know that we've all shared such wonderful times that would challenge our snow event as "the best" there ever was. Still, the simple documentation of the event makes every moment of it more permanent, more memorable in our minds.

Now, every time I hear this music, I think of the generic abstracts of family, having fun with friends, spending time in the snow. But most of all, I remember the smiles on the faces of our children as they battled the bigger hills, the moments spent together, the memories that they made that they will be referring back to as they get older. It's in our efforts to document, to record, to make a statement that we were here that is most important. To freeze those moments so we may look back on them fondly and with a smile, to know that love can be captured in still frame and be preserved for a lifetime.

For me, it reminds me of sledding many years ago with my sister on our little slopey street in front of our childhood home. Not only were our friends sledding with us, but all of our parents too. It was one of those neighborhood events that just happened spontaneously with each new snow. The old traditional Flexible Flyers would sail down that snowy road, and we would be screaming just as loud as our parents who had slipped back into their own youths, remembering the days when snowfalls really did paralyze Baltimore.

Although the video is 7 minutes of two families sliding down hills having fun, I'd like to think it's a little bit more than that. It's a part of history that, perhaps, will rekindle memories of your own when you played in your First Snow, all those years ago.

### **"We Wish You a Merry Christmas" by John Denver and the Muppets**

When I was only six, my sister begged my father for a puppy. She knew

a family in the neighborhood whose dog had just had a litter of Peek-A-Poos, and there was nothing she wanted more in the world than a dog to call her own.

I remember her pleading with Dad, cupping her hands together to show how little he would stay, how cute he would be, and how she would be so responsible and take care of him in every way. I don't think Dad needed much convincing, however. A few days later, we hopped into his truck and headed up the street to pick up our new puppy, Toby.

Toby was a great dog—all black with white paws, a white tummy, and a little white goatee that made him look rather funny when he smiled—a snarled lip with one of his lower teeth protruding from his grin. In every way, he was my sister's dog, but Dad spent so much time with Toby, taking long walks, playing with him outside, and cuddling with him in the early evenings after dinner.

One of the happiest memories I have of Toby is during the holidays when we would play Christmas music. For some reason, he had happy reactions to many of the songs. But this song, "We Wish You A Merry Christmas," drove him nuts. He would bark, howl, and dance in circles every time we sang it to him, drawling out the word "wish" and holding on to the "sh" sound as Toby would join us in full howl. It was as if he were singing along with us.

And so every time I hear this song (the Muppets version, the shortest song in my countdown at just 1:05, continues to be a favorite with my own kids), I can't help but think of those moments in childhood where every moment was grand – waiting for a school bus, playing with our family puppy (who did get just a wee bit bigger than my sister said when she pleaded her case to Dad that he wouldn't be a bother at all if we got him), and being with Mom, Dad, or Cindy. There was a newness to all of it, an energy that matched Toby's dancing and howling every time we played this song.

When I listen to this song today, my two younger children love acting out the roles of the various Muppets talking about the differences between piggy and figgy pudding (still made with bacon), and every time, my son laughs a little harder at Madelyn singing. When I hear his laughter, I feel that young again. I run the reel-to-reel movie in my head of playing with Toby and my sister as we sing our Christmas songs together.

Some moments in childhood keep us young at heart when we need them the most. May you find good memories of Christmases past to warm

your hearts this day. May I be the first to wish you a Merry Christmas!

### **“Agnus Dei” by Amy Grant**

In July of 1988, I was living with two paramedics on a small patch of farmland close to the school where I was beginning my teaching career. I had just finished my first year and, only one month into the summer, found that I was suddenly lost; it had been the first time in my adult life that I had had any time at all to just relax and reflect. I had spent my entire life going to school, working, performing in shows, and spending time with friends. In that first year of teaching, it seemed like every moment of my life was spent working on newspaper or yearbook projects, drama productions, or prepping for English classes. I had successfully kept my life as busy as it had always been.

Until that June, when classes ended and I had no plans for the summer. Something had happened to me when I stopped running. Suddenly, I found myself struggling in ways far beyond my understanding. Who was I? When I removed all of the \*things\* that kept me busy, what was left that defined me?

I had no answers.

In the days of solitude that followed in that month of June, the deep hollowness continued to worsen; it chilled my soul and made me question my existence, my purpose. It made little difference that I was living on the shores of the Chesapeake. Fairhaven Cliffs, nearly 20 million years old, served as a sanctuary in so many ways. But these times were brief respites from my hectic days and nights. They weren't during the long stretches of time that I suddenly had.

In all ways imagined, I was terrified to learn that I had never stopped long enough to question and ponder my own existence.

It had rained hard the entire first weekend of July, and I was at my lowest point. Even writing wasn't helping, as I didn't have the knowledge or experience to guide me through my troubles. I felt as if I were a car stuck in the mud; I understood that these four wheels could free me, but spinning them continuously was doing nothing but making matters worse. As my depression deepened, I stepped harder on the gas, only sinking further into the muck.

That Sunday evening, July 3, the rain continued. I was alone in the big white house when, Tim, who had grown up there, burst in through the

side door, radiating with an energy that I had never seen. In every way he beamed with life: his voice, his walk, even in his stance in that large kitchen.

I couldn't help but ask what had happened to him over the weekend, especially in this horrible weather.

"I have been to the greatest event in my life," he had said (or something very close to it). "I went to this barn revival in the rain with hundreds of Christians all around me, celebrating Life and Christ and everything else."

I instinctively shuddered when he mentioned Christ. I had never let religion be an active part of my life. That would have meant turning over control, something I had never been too interested in doing.

He continued. "But last night. Last night was unbelievable. We were in the barn, and the music played on as the thunder and lightning crashed all around us. One of the most spiritual and magical moments of my life."

Tim beamed as he poured some juice and continued to tell me all about the revival, especially the music. I was suddenly aware of the extreme differences in the energy each of us was radiating. I was spent, depleted, empty; Tim was filled with life, love, spirit.

I realized, at that moment in that kitchen, that life was not about filling up every moment of your life with "stuff" to keep you busy. Those activities did not feed the soul, the spirit, the heart of who you are, no matter how good those activities might be or what the intentions are.

In other words, if you don't fill the well with love and with a spiritual understanding, you're going to find yourself exactly where I was that weekend — alone, thirsty for something I did not understand, and unable to tap into the strength of a spirituality that was inside of me all along. I had stayed in all weekend, sheltered from the driving rains, whereas Tim had spent those same days outside, in celebration, and drenched in the downpour of God's love.

Three days later, a friend of Tim's came over, and we had a spiritual rebirth that I will never forget. While Kevin played beautiful music on the guitar and sang, I started poring over passages in Corinthians that started to fill me with a love I had never experienced. Since that evening, I have understood the power of spirituality in my life.

Now, the road has not been easy. I have studied other religions, have delved into Buddhist teachings and studied the Tao Te Ching, but I have never abandoned that belief in a greater being, a God so powerful that I know, through Him, all things are possible.

Amy Grant has been the cornerstone of that faith. Her music has made me realize that I don't have to be perfect; all I have to be is what God wants me to be.

Amy Grant singing "Agnus Dei" blends that day in July 1988 with who I am today: lost but found, scared but reassured. She reminds me that being spiritual doesn't make my life perfect; it makes me embrace my imperfect life with love and adoration for all things immaterial.

May you find the spirit in your heart during these blessed days...and for always.

### **"Crabs for Christmas" by David DeBoy**

Let us turn, now, to the lighter side of the holidays here in good ol' bawl'more.

There's nothing like making a little fun of yourself from time to time, and Baltimoreans have plenty of provincial ways that make us, well, "unique" from other states across the country. This song seems to capture all of the little nuances that make us who we are. Love us or not, there's really no second-guessing where we're from when you get us talking about our Nattie Boh, our crabs, and our beloved O's.

Believe it or not, though, this song evokes a bit of familial pride about a hometown I'm proud to call my own. There's a certain comfort in coming home to a place that so easily defines you. For many years, I've taken extended trips up north to New England, a place where I feel an inexplicable affinity every time I am there. In fact, there's a part of me that still wants to move up to Concord, Massachusetts permanently. I just cannot explain how or why I feel this charge, but it's there. I walk the small towns as comfortably as if I had worn out many pairs of shoes along those streets in the past. I guess if you believe in reincarnation, you might think that I'm tapping into another lifetime. I don't know. As I said, I can't explain it.

But even when in New England, that feeling is deeply personal; my connection to that area begins and ends with me. That's not the same charge I get about growing up in Baltimore. And this song, love it or hate it, captures that love affair that hometowners like me have with our beloved, leave-us-alone little city.

So take the time to get a cup of holiday Joe and go down to 34th Street for a little Christmas cheer. Check out the traditions that have defined the place I call home, and just relax. It's Bawl'more, hon, after all, and don't

you forget it.

### **“Jingle Bells” by Bing Crosby and the Andrew Sisters**

I have to begin by saying that this song, “Jingle Bells,” is probably one of my least favorite holiday songs, simply because it’s been done so many times, yet there are only so many ways that it can be interpreted (even barking dogs doing the song did not improve its merit with me).

Still, I’m drawn to this particular version for one reason: The Andrew Sisters. Maybe it’s their legacy of being the largest entertainer for troops overseas, next to Bob Hope. Or perhaps it’s the uncanny resemblance my mother and her sister, when in their twenties, share with them. Or, it simply could be the vocals — a harmonious blend of voices that had always wowed my father (and still me) in ways that few other harmonies can do.

Roll up all three into one big reason: Harmonic Nostalgia.

The sisters Patty, Maxene, and Laverne were about 10 years older than my mother and her sister, and they recorded “Jingle Bells” with Bing Crosby in September of 1943, just two years after the sisters recorded “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy,” one of their most famous hits. It was during this time, World War II, that their popularity piqued. They were beautiful, entertaining, and devoted to supporting those who were serving our country. There was no reason not to love them.

I was born two decades later, in 1965. By that time, my father had amassed a stack of LPs of Glen Miller, Rusty Warren, The Andrew Sisters, Artie Shaw, and Tommy Dorsey. There was always music in the house when Dad was not at the firehouse, and my early childhood was filled with the vocals and sounds of the big band era.

So when I hear Barry Manilow and others trying to do a remake of this classic, emulating the tone and pitch of every note they recorded way back in 1943, it reminds me that you can try all you want to mimic the masters, but you can never replace everything else they did for that era, or for helping my father define who he became later in life when I was brought into this world. By then, nearly 25 years had passed since he was turned down to fight for our country because he was color blind. Who knows the melancholy that he might have clung to when playing those songs, taking him back to a time in his life when he could not serve while others were fighting overseas. It’s something I’ll never know. I never took the time to ask.

I guess I carry along with me a bit of that melancholy that somehow

comes through in their harmonies, a melancholy filled with the memories of a father I didn't have the time to get to know as an adult. I wish I had the chance to do that part all over again, to spend more time with him on the water, fishing. To ask him the bigger questions in life that might have mattered more to him than, "can I have the car keys, please?"

Once again, I was too busy. He died just months after my epiphanic awakening in July of 1988.

So now I don't shy away from sharing with my own children the harmonic sounds of my life. After my father died, my mother and I spent a great deal of time together. She talked about the many facets of her life before I was born, and I listened, absorbing every word as I pieced together the puzzle of her life, one memory at a time.

We never have as much time as we want or believe we may have. Harmonize with others, and let them know the beautiful sounds of your life that now blend to create the unmistakable Harmony of You.

### **"God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" by Barenaked Ladies (Featuring Sarah McLachlan)**

When this song was released in 1997 and first played on the radio, I knew immediately that it was Sarah McLachlan singing with the Barenaked Ladies. Two great artists had come together for this rather spontaneous taping of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," and the 1990s instantly had a contemporary classic to call all their own.

It's hard to believe that it was over 12 years ago that they released this song. Back then (gosh that sounds weird), iTunes still had another 4 years to go before Apple would make music downloads an every day (hour?) occurrence. Copies of this song were hard to come by, and you were lucky if you were able to catch it on the radio (again—back then, there was no Sirius XM, no stations dedicated fully to Christmas music like we have now); you had to flip around to different stations and try to catch it being played between 45 minutes of regular Top 40 songs.

This song became our *Charlie Brown Christmas* of the 70s and 80s TV world (even *CBC* wasn't released on video until the early 1990s); we were lucky to catch it when it played once or twice, it seemed, during the holiday season. Of course, when it did play, nobody was allowed to talk for those 3 1/2 minutes. And when it was over, you did everything you could to keep Sarah McLachlan's silky voice in your head as long as possible.



Sarah McLachlan was just coming into her prime with *Lilith Fair*, which ran from 1997 to 1999 and featured many local, regional, national, and international female artists, including Tracy Chapman, Joan Osborne, Holly Cole, Madeline Peyroux, Emmylou Harris, The Indigo Girls, Lisa Loeb, Shawn Colvin, Paula Cole, among others. For me, this was beyond heaven. And then, to have her record a classic like “Ye Merry Gentlemen,” well, that was just too much to ask for.

For me, I’ll always hold on to the memories of what it was like to still have to wait for songs to be played on the radio to enjoy. Those born in the early 1990s will never know what that was like, to have the necessary patience and wait for things that you loved. Now, nearly everything is available instantly, and we, as parents, are finding it an emerging priority to teach patience to our children, a skill that was, for the most part, self-taught all those years ago.

### **“Baby, It’s Cold Outside” by Zooey Deschanel and Leon Redbone**

There are many, many versions of this song, and before Zooey Deschanel and Leon Redbone cut their version for the *Elf* soundtrack, I didn’t like any of them. They were too fast, too slow, or worse — too peppy and cute. The Deschanel/Redbone cut is, by far, the perfect combination of silk and jazz that makes this “classic” finally memorable, in my opinion.

The movie *Elf*, in its own right, is becoming a holiday classic for its simple tale of what may come if we all do our part in believing in the magic of Christmas. It’s embedded firmly in the contemporary genre of holiday movies like *The Santa Clause* trilogy, where both children and adults have plenty to keep them entertained.

Perhaps one of the reasons why this song made the countdown is its grown-up appeal, the notions of love and romance heightening at this time of year. I absolutely love the relationship between Buddy and Jove in the movie, one based on kindness, respect, and love. While Buddy never tries to be anybody but himself, Jove takes a little more time to believe in who she is, and to believe that Buddy is genuine. When she does, though, it’s automatic that they will, indeed, live happily ever after as *Elf* and Wife.

To be yourself. Sincere. Genuine. Kind. Loving. . . .

The movies may be corny, as might the songs that get wrapped up in

them. But their simple messages to us should not be taken lightly. There's plenty to learn from movies like *Elf*; we just need to take the time to embrace those lessons and live our lives a little more genuinely, that's all. It doesn't matter if the message comes from this movie or *It's A Wonderful Life* or even *Miracle on 34th Street*; the message is the same:

Love yourself, love others, and for goodness sake, believe in the magic of Christmas. :)

### **“The Christmas Song” by Nat King Cole**

I have to thank the movie, *Home for the Holidays*, for creating my own personal home movie in my head whenever I hear this song.

At the end of the movie, we see a collection of home-movie clips of family moments — all good — at Christmastime. Even the characters that are less than likable in the movie have something to be grateful for, are smiling, or are sharing love.

The point? We may have our tough times with each other, we may not always approve of what our friends are doing, but each has the opportunity to experience love, especially during the holidays. And many do, in their own way, with the people they select to enjoy it with. They are able to do this because they take the time to appreciate each other, to let the craziness of the world fall away just long enough so they can see clearly what's been in front of them the entire time.

We're all making our movies of the moments we want to hold dearly to us. And just like the song, our message to one another is so simple: Stop. Look at what you have. Treasure it. Enjoy.

This song is one of my all-time favorites simply because its message is so clear: Nat King Cole paints a very simple picture for us of simple times: It's cold outside, the fire's warm inside, we're together, the kids are getting ready for Santa. No matter how young or how old you might be, there's a part of Christmas you can enjoy. If you take the time to stop and cherish what you already have.

I don't know. Maybe I'm trying to hold on to something that is slipping away, losing its place to a different kind of Christmas that is less about people and more about things. But there's a reason why I cling to this romantic notion of Christmas. I believe that it's not just in the movies or in the songs, this love for one another, this chance to slow the world down and appreciate one another. I believe that people still hold deeply in their

hearts the understanding that, beyond all the gadgets and social networks and devices that keep our one-on-one time at a distance, there's nothing that can ever replace the simple joy and magic of spending time with each other, in appreciation for that love and that friendship, above everything else.

Please tell me you still believe as well.

### **“You’re A Mean One, Mr. Grinch” performed by the Brian Setzer Orchestra**

What's not to love about this Seussian classic? “How The Grinch Stole Christmas” was written and published by Dr. Seuss in 1957 and made into a television production in 1966, featuring the voice of the legendary Boris Karloff. Most recently, in 2000, it was produced as a full-feature film starring Jim Carrey as the Grinch.

This version of the song, “You’re A Mean One, Mr. Grinch,” was performed by the Brian Setzer Orchestra in 2005 and released on their *Dig That Crazy Christmas* CD — their second holiday big-band release following the successful *Boogie Woogie Christmas* released three years earlier.

I can't say that this story was the origin of my understanding that there were more important things at Christmas time than presents and toys, but I remember being swept away in awe as these wonderful little Whos of Whoville gathered around in the center of their town to sing on Christmas morning, despite the Grinch's greatest efforts to do away with any and all Christmas spirit.

And I remember thinking at that time, even as a little kid, that Christmas magic was real. It was bigger than Santa, bigger than anything I might find under the tree Christmas morning.

I still believe in that magic.

Theodor “Dr. Seuss” Geisel did not just stumble upon this chance to make a point about the true meaning of Christmas. His stories were often filled with deeper meanings and commentaries — from natural conservation to nuclear annihilation. Seuss used a medium that reached large audiences to make this world a better place. At the very least, he got us thinking about the issues that mattered then and — surprisingly enough — matter just as much today.

*And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,  
Stood puzzling and puzzling: “How could it be so?”*

*It came without ribbons! It came without tags!  
"It came without packages, boxes or bags!"  
And he puzzled three hours, 'till his puzzler was sore.  
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!  
"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store.  
"Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!"*

I wonder though, sometimes, why it's so hard for so many to get the message about the importance of the simpler things in life (peace, community, love). Perhaps, if it can happen for the Grinch, it can happen for them as well....

On any level, though, the Grinch offers so much entertainment, no matter how old or young you might be. It is still a favorite among many of today's teens, and I'm going to have to get a new copy to read to my kids in the coming weeks. We have fun with the words, the rhymes, and the illustrations. It's an event whenever we pick up Seuss. :)

Make it an event in your life. Pick up a copy, bring the words to life, and sing a tune or two with Mr. and Mrs. Who (Yes! I'm talking to YOU!!)

### **"Merry Christmas Darling" by The Carpenters**

For one reason or another, this song evokes strong emotions from so many of us. For me, it's the extreme contrasts between an absolutely beautiful song, sung by a beautiful woman with a beautiful voice, who struggled with demons all her life.

Demons so many of us knew nothing about.

Karen Carpenter was only 20 years old when she recorded this song in 1970. Thirteen years later, she died from heart failure as a result of her lost battle with anorexia nervosa, an eating disorder that, when I was in high school, was something nobody was yet talking about. Karen's death changed all that.

The early and mid-80s were filled with things we didn't talk about. The fight against drugs (Just Say NO) and against drinking and driving were just being introduced to us. These were big issues that didn't require a lot of focus on any one individual. It was a campaign to keep people alive from harmful substances that you put into your body.

Talking about eating disorders or mental illnesses, however, was still very much taboo. These were individuals who had problems, and we didn't want to put much emphasis on things we couldn't feel good about

combating. Tragically, reporting rapes and other horrific crimes against individuals fell into this same category. We were just beginning to grasp the courage to “come out” and share some of these deeply personal stories that were always swept under the carpet to be dealt with privately, if they were dealt with at all. Unfortunately, many individuals lost these internal battles because they did not have the support to help them through identification, treatment, and recovery.

The death of Karen Carpenter in 1983 was a turning point for discussing such battles when her disorder, anorexia nervosa, was finally exposed as a nationwide problem affecting nearly 40,000 individuals, primarily girls between the ages of 15 and 19. We were all in shock, of course. Not that she struggled with an eating disorder, but that such a beautiful individual could be struggling with anything at all.

That wasn’t the way things were supposed to be.

Slowly, other individuals with eating disorders began to seek out help, and their courageous steps helped others confront their problems and find the treatment they needed. The stigma attached to anorexia was being chipped away — ever so slowly — and those in need were learning that it was okay to seek help. Others suffered too. They were not alone.

Since I graduated from high school, this song has been that wonderful, yet depressing tune that reminds me we too often present to others a better side of ourselves, sometimes masking our pains and struggles. We’ve come a long way since Karen’s death 26 years ago, but we have so far to go.

### **“Christmas Canon” by Trans-Siberian Orchestra**

This is the second song by Trans-Siberian Orchestra to make the countdown); this is also the second time Pachelbel’s Canon has been featured (“Variations on the Kanon” by George Winston was the first). I just couldn’t pass on this version, though, especially since Trans-Siberian Orchestra will be playing here in Baltimore this evening at the First Mariner Arena. I am sure they will be performing this song.

This particular track is from their 1998 CD titled *The Christmas Attic*, the second of the Christmas trilogy which includes *Christmas Eve and Other Stories* and *The Lost Christmas Eve*. The choir who performed this song is from St. Bartholomew’s Church in New York City.

It’s the first of several songs here that features the voices of young children. For me, this has always grounded me in the meaning of Christmas,

the enthusiasm and the innocence of our children as they are in awe of the magic of Christmas. As a father of three children (two of whom are still wowed by the celebration), I experience this time of year with unconditional joy for them as much as a deep reflection on my own childhood memories of sharing this holiday with my sister. It almost seems unfair that I should be so lucky to be able to combine the two experiences. It makes me appreciate this season that much more, in all ways.

If it is even possible, though, it runs deeper than just my own experience.

As adults, we tend to cherish the innocence of our children as they experience all the world has to offer them with open hearts and a belief in all things good. Some say it is their naiveté that makes them “vulnerable” to such foolish thinking. After all, the world is a cruel place, right? It is filled with mean-spirited people who have created this societal machine that strips individuals of their freedoms and their rights. Correct?

We’re led to believe this. We’ve given into the false premise that life isn’t fair and that children aren’t living in the Real World of hard knocks and broken dreams.

Wait till you get older, we tell them. Then you’ll see how life really is.

How dare we demand them to let go of their beliefs, their dreams, and their innocence when they grow up! Who are we to track them so dangerously along a path of broken hearts and dreams? Perhaps if we adults wouldn’t be so preoccupied with the darker side of growing up, we could actually convert that negative energy and encourage them to continue believing in themselves and embrace the power of that magical love for life. Imagine that. Our children growing up with confidence, love, and a belief that the magic and innocence of their youth is the very core of their being, the foundation upon which all of their life decisions are considered.

So when you hear their voices singing, hear their message. Listen to the magic and the love and the belief in all the things we, as grown-ups, try so desperately to hold on to. Let them remind us that these remain inside of us, and we still have the chance to let our little ones know that the magic of Christmas is something they should hold tightly to, for the rest of their lives.

### **“Christmas Wrapping” by The Waitresses**

Nothing deep here. This trademark song of the 80s by Patty Donahue

and The Waitresses (best known for their 1982 song, “I Know What Boys Like”) wraps up so many memories from this decade — the Pat Benatar-style new-wave singer doing a half-sing, half primitive rap about a feel-good love story that ends in a happily-ever-after.

Unfortunately for the heavy-smoking Donahue, her life ended much too short, as she died of lung cancer in 1996 at age 40.

This song never made it big on the charts (it peaked at no. 41 in 1982), but it continues to be played every year during the holiday season.

This is a very personal choice, and I know it’s probably not a popular one with others who have their own countdowns. But it’s one of my “fun” songs, and I love the simple lyrics about a girl who’s done with boys and just wants to close out the world this Christmas and celebrate it alone. On Christmas Eve, she runs into a guy at the local A&P that she’s been trying to get together with all year, and they spend Christmas together.

Simple. Fun. Happily Ever After, 80s style. . . I miss it!

### **“I’ll Be Home For Christmas” by Josh Groban**

There are times when our emotions are so deep, the words escape us. We are left with actions, instead, to speak for us. Today, I let Josh Groban and Morrill Worcester do what I cannot seem to do. Josh’s tribute to our troops in his rendition of this song, and Morrill’s Wreaths Across America project that he started in 1992, both capture the love and support that so many of us have for our loved ones who are fighting for our freedoms, or who have died in the brave and heroic battles that have been hard-fought for you, for me, and for all of us — even those yet born — in this great country.

I have always stood for peace. In high school, we created a group called The Smile Merchants that promoted peace and love in all ways, especially for those who were less fortunate than we were during the holidays. We visited children’s hospitals and nursing homes, hoping to brighten people’s lives even just a little bit. But in the ‘80s there was no real war that we were fighting. My friends weren’t making critical decisions about joining the Armed Forces to fight for our freedoms. To me, peace was still a lingering term left over from the 70s, a time that I was still too young to understand Vietnam. My brothers did. They lost their best friends in that war. One of them still flies a POW-MIA flag at his house.

We were the generation that grew up between Vietman and the Persian

Gulf War. And even that battle was so surgical in nature that it cast a pretty veil over the realities of war. As a man in my 20s, I still had no concept about what it meant to fight for the preservation of our freedoms.

That all changed in September of 2001. But it wasn't some sudden jolt that might awaken me back to a time I had forgotten. There was no experience to recall. I was shocked — we all were. We didn't know how to respond. Suddenly, we were responding to a call for freedom and security in unprecedented ways. We were not attacked by a particular country, and so we launched an offensive attack that we believed would serve as our best defense for our country.

In these last eight years, our lives, our histories, our backgrounds and experiences have all been rewritten. On the outside, we are not the same people we were at the beginning of the new Millennium, nor are we the same country. But on the inside, we are understanding — some of us for the first time — what it means to be an American citizen; what it means to have the freedoms and the securities unparalleled by any other country in the world.

That's what war does. It strips away all the dressings and reveals our character, defines our core.

For those of us who have loved ones in the military, or who have lost loved ones who have already served, we understand it in an entirely different light. My two nephews are now fighting for this country's freedoms, and because of that personal connection, I have been given the privilege to grasp the meaning behind the concepts of dedication, sacrifice, and commitment.

To devote your life to our freedoms. To face the enemy and stand tall as an American. To do all of this for all of us. We are strangers to them, for the most part. And yet, they don't think twice about putting their lives on the line for you. Or for me.

Today, my friend and faithful commenter Michele is taking her son to Arlington to participate in Wreaths Across America. Last night, they were at BWI airport, welcoming home 330 soldiers who will get the chance to be home for Christmas with their loved ones. I told her that I thought it was a wonderful thing for her to be doing with her son. Humbly, she reminded me that it was nothing compared to what these soldiers have done for us.

Michele is right, of course, but we can never do enough to let these brave men and women know how grateful we are for the ultimate sacrifice



they have vowed to make for you and me.

The songs and the videos are sad. They rip at our emotions and our hearts. But they allow others who don't have the friends or family in the military to understand (like me just a few years ago) how important their service is for all of us, now and forever.

Please, take the time this holiday season and do something for our troops. Write a card, send a care package, even share a video or a story with somebody who is struggling to understand. If you see a member of the military at the local grocery store, take a moment and say Thank You. Let them know that you, a stranger, are grateful for what they are sacrificing for all of us.

We're all for peace. And we all want our soldiers to come home safely. Let us remember, especially during this time of year, that we are who we are because of them. So whether it is a grandfather who fought in World War II or a brother who just received his orders last week, take the time to remember, to give thanks, and to cherish the freedoms we still share today.

### **“When My Heart Finds Christmas” by Harry Connick Jr.**

Harry Connick Jr.'s music takes me back to the very early 90's when I was actively involved in the production side of our church, Chesapeake Presbyterian, in Southern Maryland. I was on the drama team, and we performed skits that contributed to the focus of each sermon. I made a lot of friends there, many of whom I haven't seen in a long time. I miss them genuinely.

For some reason, Connick, Jr. would always be playing on my rides to and from the church, and I had his voice, his energy for life with me wherever I went. I wish I could explain it. My spirituality and commitment to the church was enhanced by his music. Perhaps it was the fact that I had joined Chesapeake soon after my father had died; I was carrying many of my father's loves with me during those fragile days and months, and his ties with the Big Band sound were certainly no exception. Maybe it brought me closer to him when I needed him more than ever. I don't know.

I do know that I love Harry Connick, Jr.'s music today just as much as I did then.

Connick, Jr. has cut a lot of Christmas music. I like much of it, but this song resonates a certain belief in me that the magic of Christmas, if

shared openly with others, is contagious. It's what makes us get "in the spirit" when we are surrounded by those who love this time of year.

Toward the end of the song, Connick, Jr. belts out the lines, "Let the angels sing around us / Christmas time is here. / Let our children's love surround us / Laughing and filled with cheer." I am filled with memories of my own children embracing the spirit of Christmas. All we need to do is open our eyes, our hearts, and our arms to let the spirit fill us, too, whenever we need it.

People are belting it out everywhere, like Harry Connick, Jr. We just need to let the madness of all the commercialism and financial pressures (will stores *\*sell\** enough to stay alive in 2010? ugh) fall away so that the true meaning of Christmas resonates strongly among us.

May your heart find Christmas, now and always. It's found me, and I have no intention of letting it slip away.

### **"All I Want For Christmas Is You" by Mariah Carey**

This one goes out to all of my yearbook alums who bring this song to life every year in our beloved room 701. A few years ago, during a particularly stressful deadline rush with yearbook, a few of my editors made a playlist with just this song in it — about 15 copies, to be exact (I don't think they fully grasped the concept of the "repeat" option in iTunes). It played over and over as they sang again and again, and it lifted the spirit of our room tremendously during those otherwise stressful hours.

Now, that goes back several years when we were two steps ahead of the fire marshall at all times, and we had Christmas lights dangling from the ceiling, running in every direction. This was a most spirited group, and they infused a life into our room that still exists today (despite the lack of lights!).

So — To all of you whoever contributed to the love and the spirit of our publications room no. 701, I dedicate this song to you. You gave me everything I wanted for Christmas — and more!

### **"Angels Among Us" by Alabama**

I know, I know. You're probably in one of two camps: either you are wondering why this didn't make the top ten, or you are wondering why this song is in the countdown at all.

As I've mentioned before, I am drawn to stories, especially in songs. This song is on a *Country Sounds of the Season* compilation that I received from one of my students several years ago. I think it's one of those tunes that's played more during this time of year, but it is certainly a stand-alone song of inspiration and belief that can be played any time of the year.

Not many people know that I was brought up with a little western culture, thanks to my brothers, especially Steve. When I was younger, he instilled in me a love for cowboy hats and country songs — a love that was not consistent with many of my friends or others in my family. Nobody was right or wrong — we were all just different, that's all.

I spent a lot of time with Steve. There would always be Alabama or Waylon Jennings (among others) playing in his Blazer wherever we went, and I had a line of cowboy hats and boots to be just like him. The hats outlasted the boots, and to this day, I still have one hat that borders on the western side of life. I miss those days of four-wheelin' and spending time with him. But most of all, I miss the relationship we once had.

That's true about all three of my brothers, though. They were born a generation ahead of me, and we just lead different lives. I wish we made the time and the effort to see each other more. I know it's not too late, thank God. Time to reach out to them. Give them a call. Drop them a note. Something to let them know they still matter in my life.

Anyway, Country music is in me. It helps me gain appreciation for the works and sounds of other performers, from the Grateful Dead, to James Taylor, to Emmylou Harris, to Alison Krauss. Throw in a story, and I'm hooked.

This song in particular strikes a certain harmony with me, as I do believe in angels. I think that we're the ones making the choices about whether we accept what they have to offer, that's all. All we need to do is open our eyes, close our mouths; open our hearts, close our minds. In no time, you'll see the miracles of angels working all around you.

When I was hiking on the Appalachian Trail in the '80s and '90s (a trail I still strive to return to some day), there's something called Trail Magic, where individuals leave you little things to help you along your way. This can be everything from food to a roll of duct tape. It makes no matter; these are gestures of good will and kindness, selfless and with love.

I remember one particular night, grateful for the little trail magic that came my way, thinking that there was little difference between the invisible angels and the ones who are living, breathing, human beings. They are

sent to guide us, protect us, and at the very least, provide us new directions and opportunities that we might have never had. It is because of them that I was able to go to sleep with a renewed energy and enthusiasm for the long walk ahead the following day. Angels bring us hope, a belief in ourselves, a comfort when we're down, a friend when we're in need.

Look for the angels among us, and be an angel to others as well. Random acts of kindness go a long way. It's what keeps our faith in each brand new day, every day.

I believe. . . .Do you?

### **“Do They Know It’s Christmas?” By Band-Aid**

I have been shocked in recent years to find that there are people that absolutely dread this song when it comes on the radio. For me, I can't imagine this song not being in the top ten of anybody who grew up in the eighties. It debuted in late November of 1984 in the UK and went immediately to number one on the charts, remaining the best-selling single for 13 years until Elton John released his tribute to Princess Diana, “Candle In The Wind.” Although it never hit the same peak in the United States, it has remained a constant in both the UK and in the United States for airplay during the holiday season.

The song, coupled with Live Aid in July of 1985, raised over \$100 million to ease the widespread famine in Ethiopia during 1984-1985 due to a heavy drought season. Perhaps this is why the song means so much to me. Never before had I witnessed a single idea turn into such a meaningful and successful project that helped so many. It gave me the courage to go against the common laws of what people can and can't do to help others. I learned that, with passion and commitment, anything is possible. It's not always easy, but it's possible. And if you see it through the bumps and the battles, you'll achieve your goals.

Perhaps the first example of this for me was the 9/11 project, where a few friends got together right after the terrorist attacks in 2001 and made the commitment to document how Marylanders were reacting to the attacks. A year later, after receiving over 500 submissions from all areas of the state, we published the first volume of *Maryland Voices*. Now, *Maryland Voices* is in its eighth volume, and we continue to give individuals the space to publish the true stories that matter most in their world.

I think that's where I found the strength to begin Lines of Love. We

must work harder to reach out to our teens struggling with anxiety and depression. They need to know that they are not alone. We must believe that we can build that bridge to help them find the resources they need. It's not easy to do this, but it's necessary. What we go through to establish an organization is nothing compared to the struggles they face daily — sometimes hourly — as they battle depression. Why in the world wouldn't we work as hard as we could to help them?

Like so many other songs in this countdown, it goes even deeper than that. It's a way of life for me now to believe in the impossible, to believe that we can conquer evil and tough times with love and perseverance, that it's not just a bunch of dreamy ideas and notions to believe in the concepts of love and peace and kindness. Helping others is possible; making a difference is all about your determination to make that change happen (how many of our eighties icons sang about this? I write this line and think of Michael Jackson's "Man In The Mirror").

If you grew up with me in the eighties, you can look proudly back at the many messages we learned about love, kindness, giving, and hope and gain strength from them. We are now in a position where we can gain strength from those messages and do great things for our generation and those that will follow us. We can build upon that concept that anything is possible and, when the time comes, pass the torch and the confidence to our children and let them know that anything is possible. Anything is achievable. You just have to believe in yourself, believe in your cause, and believe in your friends and your community that they will believe as well.

**“Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas” by Judy Garland  
(then) and James Taylor (now)**

This song, in my life, marries the old and the new, and the constant hope for better days for all. Many of you who know me from my younger years remember my One Man Wiz, where I would perform *The Wizard of Oz* — all of it, and by myself — in about 10 minutes. There was a run one year where I seemed to be doing it daily, from Hagerstown to Towson to the Inner Harbor. Everybody wanted to see me do this show. I learned it from a great performer named Chuck who was one of the founders of the Smile Merchants, a group that I mentioned earlier. Nobody could do the One Man Wiz like Chuck. I simply had the honor of doing my best in carrying on his legacy while performing it all over the state.

My love for *The Wizard of Oz* is connected, in many ways, to my love of Judy Garland and the energy and dedication she brought to the stage and the screen. In addition to her acting and singing talents, she was an exhaustive performer who would entertain for hours and hours until she collapsed. She gave all she got, every chance she had. I like living life that way. My belief is that we're on this Earth but once, and we need to make the most of every moment. Judy Garland did just that.

This song, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," was written for her to sing in *Meet Me In St. Louis*, a film she did in 1944, just 5 years after *The Wizard of Oz*. It's a rather sad song that she sings to her little sister, as they prepare to move to New York from St. Louis. It was never meant to be a holly, jolly song; instead, it called upon the more melancholy side of the holiday, wishing for better days to come.

It wasn't until 1957 that Frank Sinatra did his own version of this song, but he requested that the lyrics be changed to reflect a more "jolly" sentiment. The line, "Until then, we'll just have to muddle through somehow" was changed to "Hang a shining star upon the highest bough." The next 50 years, nearly every performer who sang this song chose the more upbeat Sinatra version over the original Garland piece.

That is, until 2002, when James Taylor (my other favorite performer) decided to remain true to the Garland version when he cut a remake on his *October Road* CD. Taylor's interpretation of the Garland classic brings back the melancholy tone as only JT can do, thus making it one of my all-time Christmas favorites.

I never saw Judy Garland live in concert (she died in 1969 when I was just 4 years old), but I've had the pleasure and the honor of seeing JT many times. And every concert I've attended, he has been tireless, devoted, and passionate about his music, its message, and its legacy. I'd like to think that he is living his life in many ways like Judy Garland did — Treasuring every moment as much as possible.

They both had similar battles, though, and they are reminders to us all that, at times, there are possible costs to living such a lifestyle. I find it fitting that these two selfless performers are also married by a song that provides a recognition of tough times, and a belief and hope that tomorrow may be better.

Enjoy both videos. And let's stick together, muddle through, and keep our eye on even better days to come.

## **“River” by Joni Mitchell**

There aren't too many versions of this song that I do not like. I didn't even know it existed until a few years ago when a run of musicians started covering it — James Taylor, Sarah McLachlan, among others. Then, a good friend shared a Christmas playlist with me called Santa's Boots, and it had Joni Mitchell performing her song live at the Royal Albert Hall in 1970.

Before she begins singing, she says this to the crowd: *This is a song that I wrote a year ago just before last Christmas and, uh, it's a very sad song. Gets yourself in a kind of melancholy before Christmas spirit. Here we go.*

To hear Joni say these words, to share this sentiment....you can tell by the hush of the crowd that it was quite the intimate moment as she played for them, shared with them a bit of sorrow and reflection of things that no longer are.

James Taylor, Carole King, Joni Mitchell... They're all able to capture that emotion so well, though. It's hard to hear that in today's music. Sarah McLachlan and Norah Jones do a pretty good job, but I almost feel as if they are who they are because of James, Carole, and Joni.... No one can truly touch the folk singers of the 60s and 70s. That's why it's so important to go to the song's origins and understand who composed them, and why.

I digress...

My memories of the Susquehanna River and our cabin in River Hills, Pennsylvania are what clinch this song as a top ten choice for me. We had a small pond at the end of our property, and as much as we would fish those waters in the summer months, we'd spend the weekends ice skating as a family (after Dad made sure the ice was thick enough to go on, of course). The cabin is where we would always have our "second Christmas." Mom had a little plastic tree that we would decorate, and it seemed like our holiday was made complete by spending the weekend after Christmas there.

I have only fond memories of that cabin. Dad and Mom were their happiest, it always seemed, and my sister and I always had plenty to do. The weekends were, for the most part, unplugged (and in those days, that simply meant no television). There was enough to do outside and around the cabin to entertain us in the calmest of ways.

In every sense of the word, it was tranquility for each of us, as much as it was for all of us collectively.

After I graduated from college and landed my first teaching gig, I found a cabin to live in along the Chesapeake near Solomon's Island. There as well, I made so many wonderful memories with friends, and I was glad that Mom was able to see it a few times after Dad passed away.

I miss the cabins, and Mom and Dad, greatly. The memories are so strong, especially this time of year.

And to hear Joni Mitchell sing such a song that brings back those same types of memories for her.... Well, there's an affinity there that seems inexplicably strong.

Enjoy, and take a moment to cherish the memories of your past that defined who you are today. May they bring you warm thoughts as we get closer to December 25.

### **“Peace” by George Winston**

The snowfall we are receiving is quite timely, as George Winston's “Peace” captures the beauty and absolute solitude of a newfallen snow. Whenever I try to explain George Winston's music to friends who have never heard him play, I begin by describing the basic idea that a quarter note is made up of many smaller notes. Most musicians perfect the art of playing those smaller notes quickly, using countless eighth and sixteenth notes to tell a story in music. Winston does just the opposite. He uses the full space of a quarter note to play that sixteenth note with a surgeon's precision — not for the sake of playing that particular note, but for the emphasis of the silence that falls before and after it within that quarter note.

Hard to explain. I guess to put it as plainly as I can, George Winston does more with space than he does with actual notes. The silence that falls within the span of a single note is as important as the note he is playing. On countless occasions I have turned to George Winston for that patience, that solitude, that gift of finding serenity in the throes of an exceptionally hectic day. Those notes of peace are there, always, to be captured, held, savored for their powerful strength that is bigger than any event in which you find yourself.

To me, there is no time more essential to remember this than during the holiday season.

Coming home from school each day, I am now faced with fast-paced drivers who are taking life-threatening risks, just to save a minute or two



on their commute. They have no care for the others whom they put at risk, not to mention themselves.

The same is true for that lovely shopping experience here in good ol' Bawl'more. Last night we gave ourselves the simple task of finding some ice cream for the kids. Shoppers at both grocery stores we went to were moving their carts like the same drivers on the beltway — careless, disrespectful, and with the added death-glare for slowing them down by merely existing.

The good news is that they, too, have the same moments we do. Even they, the too-busy-to-care crowd, have the chance to find peace in their hearts, their minds, their lives and make their holiday experience (not to mention for others as well) immeasurably more pleasurable.

Take a few moments to listen to this song. Let the peace fill your heart before you go into the day. Let it be a reminder to you that there is always the possibility to capture that serenity, even if it is one-sixteenth second at a time!

### **“Happy Xmas (War Is Over)” by John Lennon with the Harlem Community Choir**

Oh, the words of hope for peace, if you want it. John & Yoko, with the Harlem Community Choir, released this single in December 1971 in protest of the Vietnam War. Two years earlier, they rented billboards stating “WAR IS OVER (if you want it),” which is sung by the Harlem choir throughout most of the song.

Amazing how, 40 years later after they posted their words of peace around the world, we continue to pray for the same thing today.

Lennon's death in 1980 triggered this song's rebirth, and it's been a popular holiday classic ever since. My memories of this song, as I've mentioned elsewhere in previous posts, are founded in Christmas 1981, when performing shows around the Baltimore area for hospitals, children centers, and nursing homes.

Today, from Yoko and John's Christmas whispers to their children Kyo-ko and Julian to the final notes of the Harlem Choir 3 minutes later, this song still evokes strong emotions and a belief that Peace is Possible.

One of the things I struggle with this time of year is the senseless disregard for kindness and love. The hectic shopping, the careless driving, and the overall frantic lifestyle of countless shoppers who put themselves

and their missions above all other things (including the safety of the lives of others) saddens me greatly. This year, a day has not gone by during the countdown where my life was not put in danger by a careless driver who put himself above all others, forcing me and many other drivers to swerve, slam on our breaks, or pray through clenched teeth as we gripped the wheel tight.

Much like we continue to wish that such individuals would be more respectful to others, we keep asking for a return to peace, that such a way of life is possible. I propose that we begin with peace instead of return to it. Maybe if we make the conscious decision to be peaceful when we wake, all of our actions and interactions will begin with peace.

Think how profoundly that would change our lives. For you and for me.

If you live in Baltimore or anywhere else in the state of Maryland, you missed a day of shopping yesterday with all of the stores shut down because of the snow storm. The next four days might be filled with a greater anxiety and rush to “get things done” before Christmas Eve on Thursday. Those who were crazy and disrespectful these last few weeks will most likely be even more frantic, putting our lives — and the lives of our children — at great risk.

Do your part. Begin with Peace. End the Christmas Rush War with a determination to keep in focus the true meaning of the holiday season. Lennon tells us that War is Over if we want it.

Yes, John. I want it. May peace reign here in Baltimore and all over the world.

I hope you want it too. Make the decision, and let it begin with You!

### **“Christmas Time Is Here” by Vince Guaraldi**

*And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

I was raised on Snoopy, Linus, Woodstock, and all the others in the Peanuts gang, and this comic strip had more of an impact on my childhood than any other cartoon or cartoon character that has ever existed. While many of my friends were caught up in their dream worlds of Speed Racer, The Fantastic Four, or even The Archies or Scooby Doo, I was diligently working on my artistic recreations of the Peanuts characters. These guys were real to me. I could identify with Charlie Brown’s woes, Lucy’s big-sister hold over Linus (not to mention his philosophic outlook on life),

and Peppermint Patty's more adventurous lifestyle. It was Snoopy, though, who represented a love-for-life approach in everything he did that gave me a happy outlook on my own life.

*And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.*

I literally grew up watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas* since I was a baby. It was released the year I was born, 1965. In this short episode was everything anybody ever needed to know about Christmas — spending time with friends...

*And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*

Sharing gifts with loved ones...

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*

And boldly enough, the origins of the birth of Christ.

*And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.*

It's hard to believe that a single cartoon could have such a profound influence on anybody. Yet, 44 years later, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* is still a holiday classic, despite ABC's butchering of the show just two weeks ago to make time for Disney's Prep & Landing. It is reassuring that they didn't touch Linus' response to Charlie Brown when he asks "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*

Charles M. Schulz, Peanuts creator and illustrator, was adamant that Linus' reading of Luke from the King James Bible stay in the final version of the story, exclaiming, "If we don't tell the true meaning of Christmas, who will?" Schulz, in the final minutes of the show, marries the reading of the verses from Chapter 2 of Luke with a few more words of Linus' wisdom: *Love is a very powerful thing, and sometimes, all we need to do is share it to bring out the beauty in all things, even Charlie Brown Christmas trees.*

So many life lessons in such a simple Christmas TV special (which, ironically enough, was originally filled with many blatant commercial pitches for its number one sponsor, Coca-Cola...Talk about the commercialization of Christmas!).

This song, "Christmas Time Is Here," helps me keep that true meaning close to me. The innocence in the voices, the simplicity in Guaraldi's piano

playing, the classic characters of Snoopy, Charlie Brown, Linus, Lucy and all the others singing together in the snow — all of it shields me from the commercial and secular celebrations of Christmas and finds deep within me the true meaning of Christmas.

May the voices of innocence remind us all that, indeed, Christmas Time Is Here, and there is much to celebrate.

### **“Breath of Heaven (Mary’s Song)” by Amy Grant**

Everything — every note, every word, every second of this song fills me with strength, reflection, and a certain faith in the intangible. This is what I believe in. This is what I need in my life, every day, to keep my focus of what my existence on this earth is all about.

I’ve already told you about the Christian rebirth that I experienced in July 1988, and I’ve touched on the topic of spiritual wavering. It has become a part of who I am to question this faith from time to time. Amy Grant’s song, however, that shares the Nativity from Mary’s perspective, shifts the selfish focus on me to the selfless and ever-faithful courage of Mary.

When I listen to this song or re-read the lyrics, I find it pretty easy to put any one of our journeys in the same situation. We often find ourselves alone, frightened, and in the dark. Everywhere we turn seems to be a dead-end. Our friends cannot be found or have turned on us, and the tangible things that we have foolishly relied on for strength no longer bring us the comfort (no matter how false and horrible that comfort might have been) we are seeking.

It is through Mary’s strength, her faith in God, that she was able to carry on. There were no tangibles to rely on, only her belief in a breath from heaven to lead her along the way.

If we’ve forgotten how to do it, if we have somehow lost our way, we can find it once again now during this most holy of seasons. At Christmas-time, we are given the stories of faith, of miracles, of strength, of perseverance to guide us along our journey, but only if we take the time to stop for a few moments and allow the busy, hectic time of Christmas shopping and preparations to settle like swirling grains of sand in purified waters.

And when they do settle, we are left with the clarity to see all things, believe all things that define our place on this earth.

Take those few moments. Listen to Amy Grant share Mary’s story.

Let the grains settle and the glory of clarity shine through you. These are tough days for so many, and regardless of your spiritual foundation, there is great comfort that can come from just taking the time to calm the crazy waters of the more material and mechanistic aspects of the holidays.

### **“O Holy Night” by Celtic Woman**

Sometimes, a song moves you so much that words seem to get in the way of its powerful meaning. “O Holy Night,” which has been sung beautifully by countless artists and choirs, is one of those songs.

It stirs memories of evenings with my mother and father when I was young, when I lived in my cabins when I was a bit older, and now when we drive home from Christmas Eve gatherings with friends and their families. It reminds me of Christmas Eve services held at midnight, both those that I have attended in person and those that have been broadcast on television as Amy and I finish our last-minute wrapping of gifts for our children. “O Holy Night” stills my world and aligns within me the spiritual meaning of Christmas with all things pure. It is one of the holiest songs in my life.

Perhaps it is the universal stillness that comes after all the shopping is done, where nothing more can be bought; we are given the opportunity to discard the hustle and bustle of the shopping frenzy and turn our thoughts to the stillness of the night, of the promise of a celebratory dawn, a rejoicing of life and love in ways that no material present can ever provide us.

### **“Silent Night” by Various Artists and Choirs**

*Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht,  
Alles schläft; einsam wacht  
Nur das traute hochheilige Paar.  
Holder Knabe im lockigen Haar,  
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!  
Schlaf in himmlischer Ruh!*

In any language, “Silent Night” is probably the most recognized Christmas song ever performed. And in nearly every case, it is recognized for its melodic solemnity in the holiness of the moment of Christ’s birth.

“Stille Nacht” was first performed 191 years ago tonight in the Church of St. Nicholas in Oberndorf, Austria. Two years earlier, in 1816, the lyrics were written by the Austrian priest Josef Mohr, and the melody was

composed the day of the first performance by the Austrian Headmaster Franz Xaver Gruber, reportedly for the guitar. Since then, “Silent Night” has been translated into 44 different languages and recorded by over 300 performers or artists. To this day, it stands as one of the most spiritual and holy of Christmas carols to be played on Christmas eve and early Christmas morning.

*Oíche Chíúin, oíche Mhic Dé,  
Cách na suan go héiri an lae.  
Dís is dílse ag faire le spéis.  
Glór binn aingeal le clos insan aer.  
Críost ag teacht ar an saol.  
Críost ag teacht ar an saol.*

For me, this song will forever take me back to the second Christmas after my father died, and I spent Christmas Eve with my mother to help her through the loneliness of those most solemn moments. We attended a Christmas Eve church service, went to a traditional gathering of friends, and then went home. Mom had this little tape player, and she played a Christmas Classics tape with various carols and gospels, including “Silent Night.” We didn’t speak much as the music played, but hours later, in the silence of the night, I heard her crying.

When we awoke Christmas morning, she was different. There was an energy to her that I had not seen since Dad’s passing, yet she didn’t share anything with me about why she was feeling this way. We exchanged our Christmas gifts, had breakfast with my Brother and his family, and I went back to my cabin in southern Maryland.

It wasn’t until Christmas Eve, the following year, that Mom shared with me what had happened that night. She told me that she had been visited by an Angel, and that Dad was there as well. Dad told her that he would always be with her, and she should live her life fully. They would be reunited again soon.

Certainly, a lot had changed for Mom in the year between those two Christmas eves. She regained her confidence, and she met a gentleman that would end up staying with her for the next fifteen years — right up to the night she died.

I know Mom was afraid at first to tell me that she had seen my father with an angel that night, but I never doubted her for a moment. To this day, I believe that Dad did visit her, and he and the angel set her free to live her life with God’s grace and blessings. I have no doubt that, when

she lay dying in May of 2007, she was visited again, and when she passed away, was carried to heaven in their hands.

It doesn't matter which version I hear. Whether it is sung in German by the St. Thomas Boys' Choir, in Irish by Enya, or in English by Stevie Nicks and Robbie Nevil, Silent Night will always be much more than a beautiful Christmas carol. It will forever be laced with the memories of my mother's reunion with Dad on the holiest of nights, when Christ was born.

### **“Peace On Earth/Little Drummer Boy” by David Bowie and Bing Crosby**

*Peace on Earth, can it be  
Years from now, perhaps we'll see  
See the day of glory  
See the day, when men of good will  
Live in peace, live in peace again*

For me, it was never a question that this song was going to place first in the countdown. For many years, I have held this song in the highest esteem for its simple message that transcends the very things that divide us by our different generations. Peace is something we all wish for, and it is something that we hope someday is achieved throughout the world.

It starts much smaller, though. It starts with me. It starts with you. Just yesterday, I ordered a Christmas Blend coffee from Starbucks, and on the cup were two messages:

I wish Grown-Ups Could Remember Being Kids  
I Wish Everyone Could See How Much We All Have In Common

I do not know how to put it more simply.  
*Peace on Earth, can it be  
Every child must be made aware  
Every child must be made to care  
Care enough for his fellow man  
To give all the love that he can*

There's something that happens to us when we get older. We get caught up in the game of life without even knowing it, and we suddenly get hardened by the knocks that do their best to bring us down. We become focused more on ourselves than we do others. We forget to smile, to love,

to offer a little kindness without solicitation.

We need to do better than that.

Maybe today's younger generations need to write themselves a note about how they feel about peace, and how they hope it will be a reality when they grow up. They should seal the envelope and write "To Be Opened in 2025." Maybe that reminder will help them soften a bit, awake them from the slumber of the machine, and make peace and kindness the center of their lives once again.

During the height of the shopping frenzy yesterday, I was driving along York Road, and a gentleman was trying to merge onto the street. I slowed down, flashed my lights, and waved for him to go ahead of me. Before he could thank me, his face registered more shock than gratitude. I genuinely believe that he thought he was going to be waiting a while for somebody to let him in.

It took less than 10 seconds for me to slow down, let him in, and resume moving along the road. I was surprised I did not get honked at by the "inconvenienced" drivers behind me.

Ten seconds. Maybe that's all it took for him to believe kindness still existed. Maybe he then passed it along to somebody else. That's the way it's supposed to work, at least.

*I pray my wish will come true  
For my child and your child too  
He'll see the day of glory  
See the day when men of good will  
Live in peace, live in peace again  
Peace on Earth, can it be  
Can it be*

I believe it can. Truly. With all of my heart. For you, for me, for all of us, in all ways.

May each of you have a blessed Christmas, and let's all do our best to keep Peace and Love in our hearts, in all that we do. Not just during this time of year, but throughout the weeks and months that follow.

God bless, with love and peace.



## About Rus VanWestervelt

I believe in living fully. My writing, teachings, photography, seminars, and online courses have been shared around the world, and I hope they have allowed others to recognize the beauty in living in the present and embracing individuality.

I am all about Baltimore and the wonderful state of Maryland. I received my undergrad degree from Towson University (where I currently teach), and then received my MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Goucher College. I teach English and journalism in the Howard County Public School System and the Community Colleges of Baltimore County (CCBC), and I am a former columnist (and sometimes feature writer) for the *Towson Times/Baltimore Sun*. In the past, I have written for other local pubs such as *Baltimore's Child* and *Mason-Dixon Arrive*, among others. My first book, *Cold Rock*, is set partially in Maryland as well. Nearly all of my creative nonfiction essays are Maryland-based. You can check out many of these stories at [www.baltimorewriter.wordpress.com](http://www.baltimorewriter.wordpress.com).

I am also a Teacher-Consultant with the National Writing Project. Since 1989, I have led workshops and presented at state and national conferences on various topics, including journaling, creative nonfiction, memoir, the writing process, revision, and publishing.

I have lived in Baltimore all my life and have no intentions of ever leaving. I am a fan of the Ravens and Orioles as much as I am an advocate for protecting and preserving our Chesapeake Bay and Allegany Mountains.

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