

Advent



By
Brian D. Peckham

Forward.

Within the last 3 years, I have been creating web based Advent calendars of various flavors. Many of the information on these annual webs have been carried forth from the previous years, but I try to grace each year with new thoughts and innovations.

This year, I got it in my mind to journal the events of a fictional family, the Dowers', from the first Advent Sunday to Christmas day. There is actually a lot of history involved with the family that you only get hints of throughout the vignettes, but the suggested theme is discovering something new and trying to integrate it as a part of family life. Some of these vignettes are based out of my own experiences, others are just accents that help the story along.

For those of you that have followed this years story on my website and have spoken positively of it, your good will has inspired me to see the Advent season to its finale. I appreciate and thank you for your encouragement.

Unfortunately, due to the amount of focus and work that goes into a project like this, I can not guarantee a similar attempt next year or years to come. What I can promise is I will try.

Brian D. Peckham
2006

*This story is dedicated to my mother.
She has introduced me to so many experiences in one life it will take several to fathom their
impact.*

Sunday, December 3rd

Something felt different. When Sam had gone to bed last night things seemed okay. His brother was still sleeping in the bunk above him. Having enough elusive pre-daybreak light in the room he managed to navigate their bedroom and slip into the hallway. What was different? He worked his way down the hall to the living room, and there in the corner was something new: A circle made of evergreen. The wreath took up the entire surface of the table. You couldn't even put a glass on it. The wreath was garnished with a couple stems of red and blue berries, and 2 rather smallish wooden pine cones. In the hollow of the wreath were five candles, long and pointy. One pink and three Blue candles surrounded a tall white candle in the middle. The closer Sam came to the circle of greens, the pungent smell of the freshly cut boughs brought memories of Christmas trees and fresh garlands from the trimming of the bottom branches.

Christmas! But it was still 4 weeks away! What was this doing on the table? A wreath! What was mom doing putting it on the table? Don't wreaths belong on doors?

The curiosity in that moment was both exciting and confusing. Sam only knew Christmas, and presents, and Santa Clause, and food. That only happened near the end of the month. Pondering this, he went into the kitchen where he was met with yet another surprise: On the pantry door was a tall poster of a funny thin multi-level house. It was hand painted, and someone had garnished it with a variety of sparkling glitter. But more importantly, upon closer inspection, it had areas that looked like little windows you could peel back. There was something hidden under those windows. He counted 25 total, and yes, they were all numbered neatly at each corner. The one numbered the 25th was a lot bigger than the others. It was a very festive hanging. He still didn't know what it was.

Yes, he thought to himself, something was different. Seems he would not get any further until his mother was up.



Monday, December 4th

It was early morning again. Not even the first hints of morning tainted the sky, and Sam was laying in bed with his hands laced behind his head, trying to recapitulate the strange new things he had experienced the previous night.

Advent.

His mother called last night the first night of Advent. Sam didn't even have the presence of mind to ask her any questions about it; where she heard of it; why things were done the way they were done. In other words, Sam was taken by surprise. It wasn't the first time she had caught him off guard, but everything was new now: New school, new neighbors, new town, new house; the need to make new friend was also new.

"That Advent thing was weird" he thought to himself. He felt the bunk bed shake as brother made a familiar hop as he flip-flopped to his other side. Sam could hear the slow breathing, and sometimes the whole room trembled as he ground his teeth. Ben wasn't much older than Sam, but just enough to make him feel like an older brother; enough to warrant his getting the top bunk; enough for him to have his own desk in the room. The little pale blue-green nightlight disk, not being openly visible in the corner cast a long shadow from the waste basket that was positioned in front of it. Sam stared at the basket until the edges bled with a ghostly red hue.

He had learned two songs the previous night. He let his mother sing them by herself the first time because he didn't feel comfortable not knowing them. He liked the two songs though: The first one

sounded a little mysterious and the second he had heard before in church. He never sang along even though Sam had a good voice. He was just shy. He conjured up the image of the new wreath and candles in his mind, watching his mother as she lit candle number one as she softly sang: "Light the advent candle one..." The candle blazed bright and big being lit the first time, then settled back eventually into a calm, warm twinkling glow. He listened to his mother as she told him a story of a little girl that gave all she owned and in return got caught in a shower of gold. After the story, Carrie Dowers sang "People Look East" and the little ceremony came to an end. His mother left the candle burning up to the time he went to bed.

Sam definitely had some questions about this whole thing he needed answers for. He also knew his brother Ben would be badgering him for information too. Ben didn't get home till late, but the candle was still burning.



Tuesday, December 5th

Mom! We don't have any miiiiilk!" Ben yelled. He had already poured a bowl of cereal. "What am I suppose to pour on my frosted flakes? Red wine?" He rummaged to the back of the lower shelves in the refrigerator: Nothing.

"Fine!" he mumbled to himself, "I'll use her SlimTrim, that's almost like milk". Going to the cupboard, he extracted a can that he assumed was vanilla flavored and popped the tab, pouring the contents over his cereal. Grabbing a banana and his bowl, he sat down at the table and started eating.

"So, what's your story?" he asked his younger brother while masticating a huge spoon of flakes and diet drink; "What's with the greens and candles? Another one of mom's things? She's been weird lately."

"They celebrate this at school too" responded Sam, "They call it Advent. We have a wreath in the classroom. And a table with some table cloths draped over it." Sam scraped a piece of overcooked toast with some butter. "You don't think she's gonna go religious on us, do you? There seem to be a lotta people around here that are all into the bible and stuff, but I don't see them doing Advent."

He put the knife back in the butter, lacing it with dark crumbs just as Mrs. Carrie Dowers walked across the kitchen to the refrigerator. She adjusted her blouse and glancing at her two children said: "I will be working late this afternoon. Seems I have to break in a new boss this week."

"Uhg" grunted Ben "They giving you a raise to do that?"

"HAH" was all the answer he got.

"Ben, that SlimTrim is not for your breakfast. Please don't use it for cereal. Besides you don't need to loose anymore weight off that skinny little body of yours. I'll pick up some milk on my way home this afternoon. Eat fruit for a snack until I do the weeks shopping".

She produced a loaf of white bread and a jar each of jam and peanut butter.

"Mom?" asked Ben, "What's with the wreath and candles?"

"Sams teacher is doing this in her class and she asked me to do it at home as well." she responded, "It's not much... couple of songs and lighting candles. It's suppose to be a way to prepare us for Christmas without needing to actually do Christmas for 4 weeks straight. I have a list things that go on during Advent. Did you know the truth about Santa Claus? If you're interested, there's information on that and other things in a little newsletter Sam brought home. There's some stuff we can do here that might be fun too. I don't know if I'll have the time for it all, but I'll do as much as I can. It would be nice if you helped. I'll leave the newsletter she sent us in the living room for you to look at."

She wrapped the sandwiches in plastic wrap then shoved them into paper bags along each with an apple, a pouch of juice and a pudding snack. Turning around to inspect her two boys, she paused for a

moment in thought.

“You know? This time isn’t easy for me either. There is a lot of pressure to be all Christmassy, and at the moment I’m having a hard time getting into that mood, you know what I mean? I need your help, both of you. This year Christmas is going to be a little on the light side because I just can’t do it all by myself. Read the newsletter. See if there is anything on there we can do together. I’ll see you when I get home.”

She walked to the table and kissed each boy on the forehead, then walked out of the kitchen.



Wednesday, December 6th

Mrs. Carrie Dowers still slept on the right side of the bed as she was accustomed to doing ever since she had married her late husband 12 years ago. Shot down during a routine surveillance mission over Iraq, Lt. Thomas Dowers had left his wife with enough to cover the basics: A nice apartment, furniture, a few luxuries. Still, it was taking a long time to adjust to the change, and there were some days Carrie Dowers just didn’t want to adjust. If it wasn’t for the boys, she would have taken a break from reality with no estimated time of return. She did need a change though, and within one month after the funeral of her husband, she had packed the boys and all their belongings into a Bekins moving truck; boarded their Volvo station wagon and made the long, slow ride across country from Maryland to Colorado Springs.

The transfer from Andrews Air Force base to Peterson was actually a significant promotion for Carrie Dowers. But with one boy in private school, and the other wanting to be in just about every sports program locally available, it was all she could do to keep up with the current standards of living. The change was just enough though: It was both familiar and unfamiliar.

She glanced over at a small digital clock on the bedside table, then wondered if her boys were up and found the little surprises she left nested in their shoes. If they weren’t awake she would have to get them moving and dressed soon for a day of school ahead. She rolled out of bed, went to the dresser, did a quick fix to her hair, put on her robe and went to her closet. She slipped her feet into her fuzzy slippers only to find her toes were met with some resistance. There was something big and cold wedged in the toe. She picked up one of the slippers and turned it heel down. Out fell a small tangerine and a couple of chocolate kisses, colorfully wrapped in red and green foil.

She grinned in surprise as she thought: “Looks like I wasn’t the only one playing St. Nick last night!”



Thursday, December 7th

Sam had come to the conclusion his new school was weird. He told his mother every afternoon the ‘weird’ things they did in class. The first thing he noted on entering his classroom was that it lacked a squeaky clean feeling. It didn’t have computers; It didn’t have hanging alphabets or numbers; it didn’t have stacks of coloring books or those silly cartoons of bears or dragons with cute little behavioral suggestions written in balloons coming out of their mouths. The room was painted in a warm reddish/pinkish color. He definitely felt they needed a “boys” color in the room and not all this girly color. Unfortunately, there were more girls in the class than boys, so he abandoned the thought of asking his homeroom teacher. The desks were all wood and rather heavy with tops that looked like they had been recently sanded and varnished. In the front of the room was a large antique black board made of real slate and framed in a warmly varnished oak wood.

In one corner in the back of the room was the table he tried to describe to his mother a couple of days ago. It was low to the floor, about the size of 2 student desks pushed together with rounded corners. These too were made of a heavy oak and glowed of the same golden honey color as the rest of the desks in the room. On top of the table, silk fabric of browns and earthen greens had been draped over a barrage of odd shaped forms to give it the appearance of hills and valleys. Already there had been items added to the table over the past three days: A couple of quartz crystals the size of a small juice glass were carefully placed at the base of one of the hills and perched on a small out-cropping was a small geode whose inside was lined with a blanket of tiny red crystals. This morning's addition to the landscape was another stone, but this one was flat with jagged purple amethysts adorning one surface. If you stood back from it, you could almost imagine what the table would look like if it had small trees and grass growing. Unfortunately the objects were rather disproportionate along side of each other and Sam began to wonder how the teacher was going to make it all look right in the end.

Sam was almost in daydream mode when a bell out in the hall yanked him to attention, and followed the rest of the students to their desks where they sat down and waited for their teacher to start the school day.



Friday, December 8th

Ben was up earlier than normal. He decided to get what chores he was responsible for out of the way without his mother nagging him every few minutes to hurry up or he would be late. Normally not a morning person, Ben favored staying up late playing World Of WitchCraft online. Unfortunately he couldn't get the game to log onto the server the previous night, so out of boredom, he sat in front of the TV and made a meager attempt at finishing off an assignment due that day. Ben never seemed to plan ahead for such events, so homework always came as an emergency exercise usually just hours prior to their due date.

He took a quick shower then threw some baggy jeans and a T-shirt on. Carrying his shoes and sox to the kitchen, he threw a couple of Toaster-Tarts into the toaster-oven then went to the refrigerator to get a glass of milk. In the dim light of morning, he noticed the calendar hanging on the pantry door and decided to investigate it in detail. He had been aware of it the day his mother put it up, but never really paid much attention to it. Her behavior was odd lately, but he usually just passed them off as another one of those "things".

The poster certainly was bright and cheerful. It was more a cartoon than a depiction of a real life house. The walls weren't quit perpendicular to the ground the house was build on, and the doors and windows had each a secret flap that could be opened. Seven of these window flaps had been peeled back, and where once an empty windows sat, there was now some item that was related to Christmas revealed. Ben tried to discover the order in which they had been opened, but all the little windows seemed randomly assigned, and it seems whoever opened the current ones weren't considerate enough to leave the little window flaps attached to the calendar.

"Humph" Ben grunted. He was oddly surprised at himself for even caring, but he couldn't deny he was curious now. He wanted to know what the next windows would reveal. Actually, being as impatient as he was, he found he was battling with himself over opening all the little doors to see what was behind them. He slid a fingernail around the hatch for day 10, but couldn't find a loose edge to pry. He was on the verge of taking the liberty of opening it when the kitchen light suddenly snapped on.

Carrie Dowers stood with her arms crossed over her chest as she leaned against the arched wood door frame. She had a curious smile pulling at the edges of her mouth, and her eyes twinkled brightly

in the florescent light.

“Go ahead” she said aloud, “Sam already opened all the previous ones”

Seeing that his mother wasn't going to chastise him for being a “baby”, he turned his attention back to the next unopened window, this time digging his finger nail into the perforations and flipping the covering paper back. Underneath, there was a picture of a brightly wrapped box with a large red ribbon holding it together. Being a little disappointed, he was almost ready to open a second window, but he stopped when he heard his mother clear her throat.

“Only one per day, Ben” She instructed.

Ben reluctantly sat down at the kitchen table and put his socks on.



Saturday, December 9th

Unlike other Saturday's, Carrie Dowers didn't have to even think about work. She decided to finish unpacking the rest of the boxes stacked in the study and hall, take a well deserved bubble bath then take her two sons out for some noonday shopping at the mall and maybe grab a late lunch/early dinner at the Sundown Grill.

Starting off with the first 3 boxes of books, she quickly filled the shelves, arranging the books not so much by name, but by height. There was the usual array of romantic novels and children's books, and a collection of thick ancient volumes of air force manuals and reference books. She even came across a couple of “Do-It-Yourself” Mr. Fixit manuals. Her late husband had purchased these with the best of intentions. He had always intended on being Super Dad, but he could rarely find time (or motivation for that matter) to do most of the projects on his own “Honey Do” lists.

She affectionately touched the spine of the book, lingering; lost in some memories of a more passionate time in her life when they were young and everything seemed perfect. Now the ghosts of Christmas past haunted her, and she was hard pressed to find a renaissance with her current life with her boys.

She finished off emptying the book boxes, moving onto the ones which made a house home. Prisms, crystals, a couple of oriental boxes, a vase, a set of coasters... the amount of stuff in these boxes were seemingly never ending. She opened one tall box and to her delight found something very specific to the holiday season. What she pulled out the box was of particular nostalgic value, for it was a gift Tom had brought home from Germany many years ago: A 24” tall wooden three tier carousel that was driven by a paddle fan at the top and powered by 6 candles. It was exquisitely made of birch, each piece constructed and painted by hand.

At the very top of the carousel, there were three Angels, one playing a lute, one playing a long horn, and one singing. The first tier from the top were three splendidly dressed kings, all carrying different shaped packages: The second tier found a traveling group of shepherds, one was carrying a lamb over his shoulders, the other two were herding three sheep with their long crook staffs: And on the bottom tier you found the Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus in a tiny crèche housed inside a stable surrounded by various animals.

No one was allowed to touch this trophy. It was in mint condition and it was going to stay in mint condition as long as she could help it. She carefully removed the contents from the box, laying all the pieces out on the floor. Picking up the paddles, she plugged each one into the top spindle, twisting them so that they looked very much like a colorfully painted airplane propeller. She then thread the spindle (which was attached to a long metal shaft that resembled a skinny knitting needle) down the center holes of the carousel, giving it a light push to make sure the paddles turned without any resistance. She pushed the candle holders (which were nothing much more than a flat piece of wood with a brass candle holder riveted to it) into the accommodating slots on the base. Lifted the whole

unit, she transported the carousel onto a coffee table in the living room.

“Note to self” she mumbled “Pick up some candles at the mall... LOTS of candles.”



Sunday, December 10th

It was well into the afternoon when the temperature ended up hovering around 28 degrees. Both Ben and Sam were not acclimated to this at all, and sat with their down jacket collars turned up so that all you could see were their eyes and a faint cloud of vapor that escaping from behind a wrap of scarves. The Volvo was a cold ride, seeing that there was a problem with the heating unit that they just couldn't afford to fix at that time. They had already been to three tree lots, and the boys were ready to take home any tree that could host all their decorations. But Carrie Dowers was not going to accept anything but the perfect tree; one that would make Tom proud if he were there himself.

Ben pushed a few buttons on the radio to surf the channels, stopping sometimes at a station playing a rhythmic dominated song dripping with a heavy bass. However, one quick glance at his mother and he was surfing again. Sam sat in the back trying very hard to play his Banshee Personal without taking off his nylon mittens, getting frustrated easily and resetting his game back to level one with little patience. The Banshee Personal was the last thing his father gave him the previous Christmas, and it was his prize possession. He wouldn't even let Ben play it, usually hiding it so well his brother even gave up searching for it when Sam wasn't home. Ben had a GameMax Advance, but he had run out of games to play that interested him, PLUS the Banshee Personal could also play movies.

Heading back to the home apartment, they passed by a small sign with an arrow pointing west with a single Christmas tree stenciled next to the name 'Corky's Trees'.

“How 'bout there mom?” asked Ben, a little bit of impatience biting at his tone “I'm getting hungry”.

“I am too actually, but...” she paused to rethink her strategy “Okay. Let's see what this place has. If we can't find our tree here, we'll just go home and heat up the rest of the stew”. She turned right and the three of them started playing “Spot the Signs”. It didn't take much time. They came to a long low wooden storm fence and about one quarter mile down they found a driveway where on one side was a larger sign that said “Corky's Cut Your Own. Firewood”. Turning in they followed the gravel road back to where a large barn and farmhouse stood completely surrounded by young evergreen saplings. As they approached, a man wearing a heavy plaid wool coat and a red cap pulled down over the ears walked out of the barn, meeting them at the gravel parking lot that lay next to it.

Ted Corky was a heavy set man in his mid 40's. He had ruddy cheeks from being out in the barn tending to business, but his mannerisms were all smiles. Once he heard the word “Blue Spruce” his eyebrows lifted and he gave them a big grin: “follow me” was all he said. They skirted the barn where he grabbed a bow saw and trod a well beaten path through some leafless brambles to a lot in the back.

The lot was on the side of a steep hill, and it was covered with trees with tight branches of blue green needles. They were evenly spaced and pretty much all about 7 to 10 feet tall. Carrie Dowers gasped in excitement; they were just about all perfect! What she needed now was to find one with a perfect point with 5 new branchlings within 8” from the top. Ben and Sam ran wildly about the trees, tired of being cooped up in a car, playing tag and hide-and-seek while Carrie Dowers inspected a number of nearly perfect spruces. It wasn't long until she decided on one. Ted crouched down and skillfully used the bow-saw to cut down the young tree.

She clasped her mittened hands and sighed in happiness.

“It's the prefect tree, Tom. See? Can I pick 'em or what!”.



Monday, December 11th

Bens school was your average elementary public school: Big metal front doors with glass that had what looked like chicken fencing wire melted in-between layers; floors of that speckled linoleum; halls lined with open front cubbies with enough room in them to hang your foul weather gear, a few books and a lunch box; classrooms where one wall was solid windows with radiant heat registers under them and of course girls and boys bathrooms with no windows whatsoever. Ben believed all schools looked like this. The one in Maryland felt almost identical to this. It was old, but not *that* old.

The rooms had metal desks with laminated wood tops. The chairs matched, and well maintained for something that was probably manufactured in the early 70's. However, the marvels of modern day were making their appearance in the room, they had a couple of iMacs in the corner surrounded by a bank of Compton's Encyclopedias, Miriam Websters and lines of cloned text books for various academic classes. There was a decent sized television mounted to a rack on the front wall that had cable, and when the weather was bad would be tuned to the cartoon network during recess.

However, since Thanksgiving, the class Ben was in was much more active. The excitement of the coming of Christmas was upon them, and even the Non-Christian boys and girls seemed to be caught up in the spirit of things. One niche of girls had asked permission to decorate the borders of the whiteboard, and now it twinkled gaily with strings of lights braided with red and silver tinsel garland. Already Ben's homeroom teacher, Miss Langford, had put up some obnoxiously cute cutouts of a fat Santa faces and plump snowmen.

Ben tried to tell some of classmates about Saint Nicholas but quit after one boy began to make fun of his experience the night of the 5th.

"Santa is for babies anyways, he's not real. My dad said he was invented by the Coca Cola Company in order to sell soda" the boy said. The other boys laughed and the conversation moved away from the red clad gentleman to a discussion on the new gaming console from Nintendo. Ben stood there listening, but found his thoughts again drift onto how different things were at home from the way the classroom felt about the approaching Christmas day, and he was a little surprised to find he preferred their version of preparation over what was being celebrated here.

"At least St. Nick was a real person" he thought to himself, "I thought he was something mom and dad made up." He found some satisfaction with the fact that some of the childhood stories surrounding Christmas were true.



Tuesday, December 12th

Snow. It started around 12:30 that afternoon. Older residents stood outside and watched what direction the flakes were blowing from. On one side of the city you had pretty flat country to drive through; but face the other direction, and you were met with the formidable ascension of the Colorado Rockies. One never knew what kind of snowball would be thrown your way: The Mountains could shelter or bury you for weeks. This time the Weatherman and the local sages agreed, this was a storm to watch, and no amount of precaution could be taken just in case Mother Nature decided to play rough.

Sam's school canceled all afternoon activities, and allowed the younger classes to leave early. There was an excitement in the air because the holidays were upon them, and the hope of a white Christmas was on everybody's mind. They had already received a light covering earlier just days before Thanksgiving, and even though there wasn't much on the streets, there were still spots in the shaded areas around large pine trees that still had icing of crusty snow on the ground. Most of what

remained didn't look much like snow at all; more like small brown imitations of the Rockies that had been shoved to the sides of parking lots by the municipal plows.

Sam stood in the front hallway by the offices where the buses usually pick up and drop off students. He would have liked it if his mother had come to pick him up, but she was in meetings all afternoon, so he had to wait for the delayed district school buses to shuttle him and five other students to northwest part of the city. The brown linoleum was slick with droplets of melted snow, enhancing the prints of the boot that brought it in from the outside promenade.

Just as his bus pulled up, there was a commotion at the further end of the hall. He peered down the row of cubbies to recognize one of the teachers in the 4th grade dressed in old baggy knickers, a heavy coat, burlap that seemed to wrap her shoes, but more importantly, she had a beard and mustache glued to her face with cheeks bright red! This was NOT Santa, but looked more like some peasant from a tale of an old movie about England. Not more than a few seconds later, she was joined by three other 'peasants' dressed in similar garb; one had a stocking hat with a huge tassel hanging from its point. Then, to his surprise, he recognized one of the other players as his class teacher! For a moment their eyes met. Mrs. Grinelli smiled and quickly disappeared through an open door. Sam resisted the urge to go on a sneak, but dutifully followed the other students out the front door and into the waiting school bus.



Wednesday, December 13th

Ben woke up with a jolt of hope: How much did it snow last night? He wormed his way down to the foot of the bed and slid off the top bunk as quietly as he could. There was no movement in the rest of the house. He went to the window and poked his hand between the split in the curtain, lifting one side far enough to get a good look into the apartment parking lot. Using his pajama sleeve to clear off some of the condensation on the glass, he peered to the farthest side where the tall neon lights ran in a line. In it's pale sallow blue fairly thick flakes of snow swarmed through the air. Everything was white. It was pure. There was a good eight inches covering everything in site. His heart leapt: NO SCHOOL!

He padded over to the lower bunk, where Sam laid sprawled, his left leg tied in a knot of sheet and his right arm hanging off the mattress. He was breathing a soft, slow breath, sometimes interrupted buy a quick snore, as if he was gasping for air. Ben gave Sams shoulder a little shake.

"Sam" he whispered, "Sam".

No response. He leaned a little closer and in a soft voice he said "snow".

Sam stirred, lifting his pajama sleeve to his mouth and wiping the spittle that drooled down his cheek, then turned to face the wall, grabbing his "woobie" blanket of ancient years. Sam reached over and shoved his waist.

"SNOW" he said a little louder.

Sam released his catch and rolled onto his back again and gave his brother a half-lidded look.

"Did Santa Lucia come last night?" was his first question.

Ben became impatient; "How would I know! Dammit Sam, SNOW for crissake!"

This finally registered. Sam sat bolt up, jumped out of bed and ran to the window, pulling back both curtains.

It was a fairy land out there. Usually, one wouldn't think of a bunch of cars in an old worn parking lot with a couple of dumpsters in the far corner at the end would be anything but enchanting, but it always struck one short as amazing how nature can make even the ugliest object beautiful and sparkle with a sense of dignity once it was covered with a fresh layer of undisturbed snow. All the cars had thick white caps on them, drifting as far as it could to the edge as possible. A light breeze

pushed the accumulations thick up against the tires on one side of the cars, almost concealing them from sight. The evergreens dotting around the edge of the lot and the larger oaks and maples empty of leaves created a canopy that dwarfed the objects around them. Every branch hosted a thick band of snow that had just started to fall to the ground. The light from the street lamps softly caressed everything it could touch, expanding its reach by the glass-like crystals of each individual flake so brightly that it was truly hard to detect exactly where the light advanced and the shadow retreated.

Neither boy could speak for a moment, absorbed in a quiet that in its self to be muted. The accumulation of snow on the sill was a good 5 inches. Ben reached across Sam, unlatching the casement window and turning the crank at the bottom. The window resisted his first attempt, but with a little coaxing, it grunted open and swept snow off the ledge. A blast of cold air hit both boys, waking the skin from its comfortable warmth and assaulting it. In the quiet, you could hear the snow as it fell to the ground.

Sam whirled around and was heading towards the dresser when something caught his eye. There, on Ben's desk were 2 candles held upright in small brass holders and a dish of star-shaped cookies on a little paper plate.

"Cool!" exclaimed Sam, "Santa Lucia did come last night!"



Thursday, December 14th

The snow had finally come to a halt early that morning. All night long, you could hear the municipal plows hard at work, shoving the snow into ever thickening mountains along the road side, and specially equipped dump trucks traveled over the newly plowed roads, spreading a layer of cinders on top to help traction. Many of the local businesses had reopened already, but all schools were closed for a second day.

For most students in both the public and private sectors, this was just fine. It was already just one week away from Christmas Break, so any time off was just a bonus to their already much anticipated holiday. The sky was a mixed blue soup with a thin layer of almost translucent cirrus clouds streaming southwards towards the New Mexico. People struggled through the snow with labored breath; their fog lifting out and up, finally dispersing with the cold air above. Even their mother had left early to risk the roads in order to get to work on time.

Carrie Dowers' two boys had done pretty much everything two boys could do on a snow day. They built forts; they built snowmen; they made snow angels; they went sledding; they went sliding across frozen puddles; they had snowball fights with each other; they had snowball fights with their friends; they shoveled the snow off the front entry where their tree stood in a bucket of now frozen water; they went down the street asking neighbors if they wanted their walkway shoveled for a small price... and by 12:30 pm they were already bored. So they pulled out the Swiss Miss, made hot chocolate, and seated themselves in front of the TV with an assortment of healthy and not-so-healthy snacks. Sam kept flipping back and forth to the local news channel to see if there would be any more announcements about Friday's weather.

"I hope they don't cancel school" Sam said earnestly.

Ben inhaled some potato chips the wrong way and went spluttering into a coughing fit. "Why the hell would you want that!" he choked, "This is GREAT! I LIKE SNOW DAYS!!"

"Because if they close school tomorrow they might not do the Shepherds play" Sam whined.

Ever since he saw his teacher in the hall dressed as some bum, he had made inquiries with other kids who had been in the school longer than he had. He didn't have any idea of what was going on since he attended first grade in the Sussex Elementary School in Clinton, Maryland. Unfortunately, with the death of his father he was out of class more than in it at times. The little private school in

Colorado Springs suggested he take that grade over to his mother, Carrie Dowers in the hopes, as they called it, he would have a chance to “Healing” and get into some new habits and a happier place. It seemed to be working. He was certainly engaged and learning about Advent with all the weird things that occurred during it pretty fast.

Ben reached for his soda and drained the bottle to suppress his coughing. “They are going to do it again at night anyways for the public, I’m sure even if school is closed they will still have that one.”

But Sam wasn’t all that convinced. He was anxious that the good weather would hold.



Friday, December 15th

Sam had worried needlessly. The streets were cleared by Friday and the city resumed business as usual. Unlike Maryland where snow was always a surprise and people would panic at the mere site of a flurry, the city of Colorado Springs accepted it as a routine event, and didn’t make any big overtures when they would get eight inches or more. It was for them business as usual.

Sam’s class was not that big, maybe 12 all told, but it was a lively set of students, and during the 45 minutes till it was time to head off to the gym where the performance was to take place, the parents played various games such as I Spy, Duck, Duck, Goose and Whisper Down The Lane.

A hand bell sounded in the distance, heralding that the play was ready to commence. The class trailed off in single file down the long hall to the gymnasium, where folding chairs and benches were set out in advance. Being a smaller school, the seats filled up from Kindergarten at the front to 8th grade towards the back. The stage area was decorated with two long benches on either side; a simple painted backdrop of some old style Inns, and a little platform accommodating a couple of hay bales, and a wooden manger and two chairs draped in burlap behind it. It was very plain, and Sam was wondering if he was going to enjoy this at all. The clamor going on in the gym was in good spirits, even though this was evidently done every year.

Once seated and everyone settled, the school headmaster walked briskly to the front of the stage and called everyone to quiet down. A brief description was given amidst a light twitter of last minute conversations, and then the play commenced.

It wasn’t the most polished production Sam had ever seen. He remembered once going with his family to the Music Man in Washington, DC. Now *that* was a spectacular play, with a big orchestra, colorful lighting, bright costumes and well rehearsed singing. This paled by comparison. The orchestra consisted of Mrs. Opperland, a plump little lady that never had much to say. She was the schools accompanist for all occasions. The lighting was supplied by a few track lights with cut squares of blue and pink plastic over the fronts, and the character costumes looked like they could have come out of a local goodwill dumpster.

However, the teachers loved their play. The Angel Gabriel was tall, commanding and compassionate; Mary and Joseph were full of heart; and the rambunctious antics of the shepherds, which were for the most part women except for one (he taught art). At first Sam watched in wonder at how silly this all was, but within a short period of time he found himself caught up in the gift of acting. He laughed out loud as his teacher sat on the front of the stage and sprinkled the students from a water pouch with the other shepherds as they fed themselves before falling asleep under a darkened night. By the time the Angel stood over the sleeping shepherds to deliver her heralding of the birth of the Baby Jesus, the piano sounded like a full orchestra, and the stage was a real field frozen with ice and snow, and the poor shepherds huddled together to keep warm.

It was over all too soon, and Sam found himself being ushered back to the class room. It was the best play he had ever been to.



Saturday, December 16th

Why *can't* we put up the tree today, mom??" Ben said exasperated, "We would have had the tree up two weeks ago if we hadn't moved here! Geeze. My friends have their trees up, the neighbors have their trees up... damn, even the mall had a tree up almost three days after Halloween!" He sat down in complete moodiness on the edge of the couch, giving the top of the Christmas Carousel a good spin and sending the wooden icons frantically chasing each other around in circles.

Carrie Dowers made a swipe at Ben's hand as he dared to touch her prized possession.

"BEN!" she yelled, "Ben, stop this right now! Just because I decide not to celebrate Christmas until Christmas doesn't mean we aren't going to celebrate it at all." She stared intently at her brooding eldest son with unflinching eyes. Ben's eyes didn't come up to meet her gaze but he did flop himself back against the cushions, crossing his arms over his chest in a defiance. After a few minutes into the standoff, and no one giving in, Carrie Dowers parked herself in the corner chair next sofa. Reaching out and touching Bens knee, she continued:

"I know your friends are probably wondering what's going on and you think I've probably lost my mind, but be rest assured; if I had known then what I know now about this time, I would have tried a lot sooner to keep Christmas in it's place instead of falling in with all the hype going on out there". She paused for a moment before deciding to take a different approach: "Look. There's a lot more to life than just 'getting there'. Take our trip for example: We could have taken the interstates and set the cruise control to eighty miles and hour. You could have sat in the back waiting for the next pit stop and play your GameMax, but we didn't. We visited places along the way: Some of them were fun, some you found boring. The point is, is that by going slower we actually got to see more. If man is born to die, then we just get born, go to school, get a job, have a family, grow old and die. I personally refuse to believe that is our purpose on earth. I want more than to just die."

"What has THAT got to do with Christmas though?" Ben grumbled.

"Ben, *getting* there is much better than *being* there. What happens when you have finished a game?" Carrie Dowers asked.

"Nuthin. Start a new game I guess." was his answer.

"Exactly." She continued, "We go onto the next thing. Advent is a season of its own. Christmas doesn't really start until the 25th, though we start celebrating it on the 24th. I was talking to Sam's teacher and she said when she was young her parents put their tree up a couple days after Thanksgiving. When She became a teacher she learned about Advent, and decided to try putting the tree up at her house for her children Christmas Eve. Of course her children are only three and five, but she said the look on her children's faces Christmas morning after she and her husband transformed the living room into something really festive, it made all the difference. They keep their tree up for twelve days *after* Christmas, right up to Epiphany. Doing Advent with her children provided enough activity and preparation before Christmas that it became like the cherry on top of the ice cream Sunday."

Ben sat there and said nothing. He wanted to argue, but realized she was totally committed to this idea of Advent. He had also forgotten about the twelve days after Christmas, and that provided him with a little comfort. Most of his friends' trees were out on the curb almost the day after Christmas, and all their decoration taken down. He had to admit: It seemed anti-climactic in theory, but he still wanted to have his tree up.



Sunday, December 17th

Carrie Dowers felt so guilty after monologging to her oldest son she decided that maybe they could do something around the house to appease that "Putting up the Christmas Tree" desire. Ben was right: For a fairly young family the apartment was a little sparse of holiday cheer. Sam seemed to be more in the mood than anyone, he even had his own little advent garden in the bedroom (Much to the chagrin of his older brother, who still "poopoo'd" the idea and wrote it off as a corny kids thing). It had little rocks he had found before the snow set in. He had imbedded some moss into a home made aluminum foil pan, and with a couple of twigs that he had hot-glued some brown and green lichen on, stuck them in the clumps of moss. Carrie Dowers smiled every time she came in to straighten up the room and gather laundry. Her youngest son seemed to be doing well considering the fact that this was their first Christmas without Tom Dowers.

"Don't know how you would take to all of this, Tom." she thought wistfully, "It would take you just as long as it's taking Ben to get used to the change... but I think I'm doing the right thing."

She gave a quick glance up and murmured "Don't you think?"

After church, she drove Ben and Sam back to Corky's "Cut Your Own". When asked, Ted was happy to give them all the tree branch trimmings they could shove in the back of the Volvo station wagon. On their way back to the apartment, they stopped by a department store. As Carrie Dowers shopped for things on an mental list, Ben and Sam went to wander around the store. They stopped at the electronics area where they engaged each other in a game of Speed Racing IV on one of the new gaming consoles. It would be too much to hope that they would find one of the Banshee X-Gear consoles under the tree at Christmas, but that didn't extinguish their hope. Ben made it a point to drop a little hint to his mother anyways about it.

Carrie Dowers bought four boxes of tiny lights, a spool of green twist wire, some ribbons, tinsel and other smallish decorations that she could easily hang from the wall. She also bought some black construction paper, a package of brightly colored tissue paper, a couple of Exacto knives and some glue sticks. When she finally caught up with her boys, they were wandering the endless isles of toys near the center of the store. There she was met with some resistance in leaving and requests for money, but she was not to be coerced: Not even one candy bar to be plundered at the checkout.

When they got home, they all helped haul the branches and packages up to the apartment and out of the cold. After a quick lunch, Carrie Dowers showed her sons how to create a garland from the branches. By example, she pruned the large branches into smaller branches and joined them together using a long piece of dark twine and the green twisty wire. Mixing different types of trimmings into the garland, she also tied in some of the berries and pine cones. Ben and Sam were soon working on their own roping, sitting cross legged in front of the TV while their mother took her tack hammer and tapped some small brads into the upper wall in order to hang the garland from. The smell of evergreen filled the house with balsam. It affected everyone's holiday senses.

Carrie Dowers pulled out the boxes of lights and showed her boys how to string them securely onto the garland, after which, with the assistance from Ben, hung the green roping up on the nails. Sam wasn't tall enough to help, but he busied his time with collecting a few smaller choice branches and disappeared into the bedroom.

"Sam?" Called his mother, "Can you come in here and plug the lights in?"

What a silly question! Sam was back in one blink of time and took the plug from their first garland and fitted it into the socket on the wall... then they all stood back. Not only were the lights small and ethereal, some of them twinkled softly behind the decorations and under the shiny star tinsel. Ben turned off the TV and every light in the house, then returned to almost lean against his mothers tall slender body. It was...

"Perfect"

She lit candle number three in the advent wreath and sang the candle song. Christmas was coming, and they were finally getting ready.



Monday, December 18th

What are you getting mom for Christmas?" asked Ben when he got home that afternoon. Sam didn't answer immediately. He had discovered the tissue paper in one of the bags from yesterday's shopping and was busy transforming it into wrapping paper with potato stamps. Ben looked over his shoulder and grunted. "Man, it's been ages since I did this... what's that shape?" he asked pointing at a blob of red that crisscrossed the paper along with what looked like a holly leaf and a star.

"It's suppose to be holly berries, but I kinda messed them up. I was cutting out the stuff around the drawing I did on the potato and goofed." he replied in an automated tone, "I was hoping you'd be able to tell because they were red, but I guess not". He inked the home made stamp and printed a few more stars. Not being very pleased with the end product, he was about to crumple it up and toss it in the trash when Carrie Dowers briskly came into the kitchen and placed a couple of sacks on the counter.

"WHOOVEEE!" she exclaimed with a winded breath, "But it's COLD out there!"

It was true. That was something else they were not used to living in Maryland; the whole family was discovering new meaning to the words freezing and cold. Even at mid day recently it was rare for to have temperatures above thirty-two degrees, and God only knows how cold it was at two o'clock in the morning. She was wearing her dark blue down jacket that reached low enough to the ground that it would drag on the floor if she wasn't wearing shoes with high heels. Fact was, the edges of the bottom hem were getting quite stained now that the snow had made its appearance. She yanked her gloves off, unwrapped the long thick scarf from around her neck and the knitted hat from her dark brown hair. Unbuttoning but not removing her coat, she proceeded to unpack the contents from the shopping bags: A large carton of eggs, two packages of unbleached flour, three pounds of butter, one bag of white sugar, one package of brown sugar, assorted bags of nuts, raisins, but more importantly an array of little plastic bottles filled with brightly colored sugars. Leaving the items on the counter, she turned to her two boys and announced: "We have lots of work to do."

For the next four hours, there was nothing but flour, eggs, sugar and vanilla extract. They made Candy Cane cookies; they made sugar cookies and punched out hundreds of shapes with their huge collection of cutters; they made pecan puffs and sand tarts. At one point between batches, Ben tossed a small handful of flour at his younger brother. Without so much as a blink, Sam (who was un-intimidated by his older brother) coated one hand completely with flour and in turn stamped the back of Bens black t-shirt with a couple of prints. After that, it was all out war. At first, Carrie Dowers backed herself into a corner by the trash can and just watched, but when the air started getting thick with white flour, it was time to intervene. This didn't prove to be easy at first: The war was quickly escalating to dough and butter, threatening to move into the living room. Thinking quickly, she picked up the phone and dialed JT's Pizza, then in the loudest voice she could muster asked what pizza toppings her boys wanted over their howls of laughter and indignation.

It is amazing how well the word "PIZZA" works in a mission critical setting. Both boys were a picture perfect snap of distraction and recognition that maybe the stomach was in need of something more than cookie dough and colored sugar.

"Food will be here in 20 minutes" Carrie Dowers announced in an authoritative voice, "I don't want to eat in this mess, so lets do a quick scrub down, and you two..." she cocked her head slightly to the side as if inspecting some troops that were out of uniform "need to reconsider your wardrobe."

Both boys stared at each other as if to say “What’s wrong with our wardrobe?”, but quickly realized she wasn’t talking about what they were wearing, but more the state their apparel was in. Ben grabbed a broom. Sam grabbed a damp rag. When the pizza delivery man rang the front doorbell, they had just changed out of their war gear and into something cleaner. They paused in the threshold leading from the living room to the kitchen. Carrie Dowers gave them a quick once over, noting they would need to shower before bed, and said with a quick nod: "Better."



Tuesday, December 19th

Last full day of school. Teachers found this time particularly difficult simply because every student there was already on vacation... Mentally. However, Sam's school was only a half day, which afforded a few remarks of protest from his older brother. Carrie Dowers had asked for the afternoon off so she wouldn't have to find a babysitter. She had her own projects to attend to as well.

Due to the oncoming vacation, Sam's classroom had to finish off their Advent table by putting the nativity into the mix. It was the strangest nativity though: All the 'People' were little puppets made of cotton and felt with different colored wool for hair. The Mary puppet had a tiny blue cape and a dark red dress on. The shepherds were of similar nature except outfitted in brown with little crooks glued to the sides. They even had a few sheep made of lambs wool tied off with string. There was a small shed constructed of bark that gave them shelter from the imaginary elements of the garden they were placed in.

Sam's garden was a pale reflection of the one in his classroom, but he still spent some time every day adding things to it he found. Some of the items were not quite things that were to be discovered in nature: Like *finding* the glass prism-crystals Carrie Dowers had hanging in the living room window. Normally his mother would have pitched a fit for taking these without asking, but when she saw the items nested in the moss, she couldn't get upset. She let it be, and decided to wait till after Advent to see if he would return them to their proper place. She did, however, remove a small candle that fortunately showed no signs of being lit yet.

During the last two hours of the morning schedule, Sam's school had an open door party. Students were free to visit other classrooms and sample whatever that classroom had to offer. Sam, being new, did not feel comfortable yet just wandering around without friends or purpose, so he opted to stay in their class room and enjoy the visits from others. Their room had been decorated seasonably well, with wool and wax Angels; stars and snowflakes made of what looked like hay straw hanging from a branch of birch in the front corner of the room, and colorful collages made of tissue paper taped to the windows.

Sam was munching on a cookie when he became aware of music that seemed to be filtering in from out in the hall. Wandering over to the door, he peered around the corner down the brightly lit hall and discovered that three parents had set up a couple of chairs near the corner where the halls met. They were playing Christmas Carols. One parent was playing guitar, one playing a wooden flute and the third was playing a beautifully hand-crafted harp. This was no ordinary concert harp though; it had less strings and was much smaller. The ensemble was well complimented. Sam finally moved into the hallway with all the activity going in and out of the door.

He was still watching the musicians quietly from his cubby when Carrie Dowers found him and told him it was time to go home.



Wednesday, December 20th

Ben pleaded with his mother, begging her to let him stay home using every possible bribe or bid for sympathy he could imagine. The first excuse was that there was first nothing to do (with the exception of devouring food and soda and mingle with his friends); then there was the “Well, Sam’s school is out and your not working today, so what’s the big deeeaaal??” approach followed by “I can help you clean the house” and “we need to make more cookies”, all of which were met with a wall of staunch resistance from Mrs. Carrie Dowers.

“Ben” She said in a crisp determined voice “You are going to school and that’s that.”

The whining didn’t stop till he was reluctantly escorted to the door with a bag of cookies to share with his class and a little present for his teacher. Once he passed through the threshold and the door shut to keep winter outside, Carrie Dowers gave a breath of exasperation: “MY! How that boy can go on!” She cast a quick smile at Sam and winked; “Now, we need to do some cleaning... and I have a surprise I want to share with you.”

Ben’s mood was slow to change. He decided to sit at the front of the bus this time and ignore everyone behind him. This gave him an opportunity to see just how many kids actually talked their parents into staying home. With that information, he could use it to stay home *next* year. The bus groaned and growled through the streets of the upper north suburbs until it finally found its way to the elementary school which was busily preparing for the final hours before Christmas break. Teachers stood as sentries in the crowded covered promenade where the buses picked up and let off students, and once inside the hallways were teeming with lively conversations and students getting a head start by emptying as much junk from their lockers as possible. He weaved his way through the crowd, finally reaching the 4th grade hall where the level of decor was less mature. Some of the girls had taped crepe paper streamers to the wall above the lockers along with a hand painted sign with “Happy Holidays” with red paint on dark green railroad board, taped together in order to fit all the words. Ben ignored the greetings from fellow students and stored his coat in his locker then adjourned to his classroom.

Within a short period of time (and a dozen cookies), Ben was busy talking about hockey with a couple of his friends when the intercom in their room crackled to life: “Ben Dowers. Ben Dowers. Please bring your coat and belongings to the main office. Ben Dowers please bring your coat and belongings to the main office. Thank you.” For a moment all eyes were on Ben. He suddenly burst forth with a huge grin and headed towards the door as his friends mumbled how lucky he was. His teacher caught up to him to bid him farewell and Happy Holidays. She also gave him a small package wrapped in Santa paper that felt oddly like a book. He thanked her by shaking her hand and then escaped to the hall and the contents of his locker.

Ben had no idea why he was going to the office, but by the sound of the announcer it didn’t sound like an emergency. As he approached the hall where the 6th grade presided, he caught site of his younger brother standing in the door leading to the main office. Sam ran to him.

“We’re going to the airport!” he beamed, “Granny and Pawpaw are coming for Christmas!”



Thursday, December 21st

There was a wonderful smell to wake up to that morning. Evidently the elder Dowers’ were early risers, and with the key given to them the previous night before leaving for their motel, they drove their rental car to the apartment before the first rays of sun paled the sky. They must have stopped at some all night store as well, because for the most part, the only food Carrie

Dowers had in her refrigerator where a few perishable items. Most food was packed in boxes in the freezer. But with fresh breakfast sausage links in the skillet, the waffle iron steaming new batter and the sound of oranges being wrung on an old citrus press, breakfast was almost ready.

Not having enough chairs to go around the table, Ben brought the ones in from his desk and his mother's study. It ended up being a crowded but cozy ensemble, where elbows and arms had to be tolerated as food got passed around the table; jams, jellies and honey shared and pitchers of milk or juice. There was just too much to talk about, and it seemed both boys fought to tell Frank and Edith everything that had transpired since the move to Colorado.

"We passed by three huge trucks with Bekins written on the sides of the trailer and thought we were gonna get her way before they did!" explained Sam

"We stopped at a place in Tennessee" continued Ben, "and bought a huge bag of fireworks too!"

"We saw a huge pyramid in... where was it mom?"

"Memphis" answered Carrie Dowers;

"MEMPHISSSSS" repeated Ben

"Memphis" continued Sam, "but we didn't stop to see Elvis' house because mom had to be at work the next week..."

So the conversation went back and forth between Sam and Ben for much of breakfast, forgetting about their food until it was almost cold. But then again, they really didn't care. They had their dad's parents there. It was an excellent and much needed visit.

After breakfast, Sam took his grandparents on a tour of the house, culminating in his bedroom, spending a vast amount of time elaborating on his Advent Garden. He had to explain to them what his class teacher did, and what he was doing with his garden in detail, even down to the placement of the moss and the making of the trees. He almost re-enacted the entire garland-making process and how he searched through the leftover trimmings to finish off most of his little forest nested in the moss.

"I'm not finished yet" he finished, "I have three more days to make the barn, the animals and the people".

Edith looked in amazement at her young grandson, then to her daughter-in-law, then back to Sam. "My!" she said with a certain admiration in her voice, "You have been very, very busy I see!" She looked back to Carrie Dowers, who had been following them around as they inspected the house, hoping they wouldn't turn around and give her that look that usually is translated into a "We need to talk about this more".

"Yes" she smiled, "they have been very busy boys lately, and a huge help to me, despite" she paused giving an amused glance towards her two sons, "a few minor infractions when making cookies."

Both boys looked at her sheepishly, then grinned at one another.



Friday, December 22nd

The drive from Saint Matthew's church was not a short one. Coming home from an evening of carol singing and bell ringing, it was a cozy ride with Frank Dowers riding shotgun and Edith sitting with the boys in the back seat of the station wagon. One could see the work of the snow plows when going outside the city for the snow in some places exceeded the roof of the station wagon. You could at least see the pavement in spots, and the painted road stripes. The snow may have been more than a week old, but it had not lost its night time luster: fields were illuminated by what light the moon could cast over the encrusted white blanket of snow, the kind of illumination that you can only experience when the weather turns bitter cold and you are thankful for being inside a heated car.

All day long, it had been driving from one place to another, gathering last minute items. The boys didn't mind; having accepted the resolves of Mrs. Carrie Dowers earlier that day. They made the best of it listening to stories of their dad, and actually joining in the singing of a few Christmas songs that they accompanied on the radio. Edith worked with Ben, who actually had a good strong soprano yet at his age, teaching him how to do harmonies to Jingle Bells while Sam sang the melody. Ben was just getting to that age where anything considered *uncool* were to be avoided. However, when in private company, he could still be coaxed into joining in.

The back of the Volvo was full of packages from their day of shopping. They had not been home since a little after 10 that morning, with the day culminating in the drive out to the Saint Matthew's for a Christmas Celebration. The church had been tastefully decorated with real branches of evergreen and holly; large ribbons adorned the dense garlands draped along the front of the upper balcony. Smaller wreaths garnished the pillars that supported the arches vaulting like fountains into the upper chasm of the ceiling. Disappointingly enough, the balcony was roped off, and the boys denied access to the upper seating, but they had a good view from the front. There where two long tables draped in deep blue, one table at ground level, the second table at the top of a short ascension of steps. Each table was populated with an assortment of hand bells and podiums for sheet music. Behind the second table was a tall rack with what seemed like metal bars leaning against the back rail. Behind the tables, and on a set of stair risers stood the choir, also dressed in deep blue with wine colored collars.

Neither of the boys had been to a concert that had hand bells as a part of the venue, let alone even know what a hand bell was. They watched everything that went on, and when the ringers did a new arrangement of the Carol of the Bells, both Ben and Sam found themselves their feet, heads swimming in the ethereal chiming and rich tones that culminated in the long metal bars sounding the final four notes, echoing in the vast space above them. Not one sound could be heard from the audience for what seemed like hours following the last bell. Each person there hung on that silence only to be broken when from the far right came the first hands to clap. Soon the sound of applause overtook the entire congregation like a tidal wave. The performers bowed, the directors presented their players, and the nights events came to an end.

Now, onto Christmas.



Saturday. December 23rd

Carrie Dowers sat cross-legged on the floor. On one side were the packages that she had already wrapped and labeled. On the other were still a few odd items yet to be concealed and tagged. In front and behind were rolls of colorful gift wrapping papers, tape, bows, tags, ribbons, scissors, pens and markers and piles of wadded up paper scraps. Within reach was a rather large mug that of half full lukewarm coffee and stemware empty of its wine. With her mother and father in-law finally making their ride to the Holiday Inn for the night, she had turned the lamp off on the corner table so the only light illuminating her work was the twinkling fairy-like light from the garland and the warm glow of candles as they turned the Christmas Carousel slowly in place.

It had been another full, busy day. They had done the shopping for the Christmas feast earlier and Frank had taken the kids out to see a new movie about dragons. Carrie and Edith Dowers had stored as much of the food away in the refrigerator, but even after cleaning out some of the plastic containers with fuzzy leftovers in them space was at a premium. They decided to wrap the turkey in plastic and packing it in the turkey pan, covering it tightly with the lid, put it out on the back porch too keep it cold for Christmas day. Carrie Dowers didn't even bother cleaning up the kitchen after dinner. Edith would have volunteered, but instead became involved in conversations and glasses of

wine. Soon the evening had worn on to the point where Frank was snoring loudly in the lounge in the corner of the room, so Edith packed him in his coat and the two of them drove off to the Holiday Inn.

"The last few days have been wonderful." Carrie smiled thoughtfully, "You really do have wonderful parents."

She grabbed one of the smaller objects and looked intently upon it before wrapping.

"I hope I'm not making things worse with our kids, Tom."

She sighed and put the small action figure in front of her and without working the scissors, slid the paper between the blades. With a smooth zipping sound, she severed a section of wrap just large enough to cover the toy, taking all of 40 seconds to wrap and tag, ready to be thrown on the finished pile.

Pausing for a moment, she stared vacantly at the oddly shaped package she held in her hands, then into the space before her. By this time, Tom would have been done with his pile and be sprawled out on the couch watching late night news and sports. The tree would be up, loaded with every ornament, garland, tinsel and strand of lights to be pulled out of the Christmas box. It was definitely a family tree; where new and old melded together in some odd harmony that seemed perfect for this time of year. Presents would already be piling up under the lower boughs and the house would be a mess from all the activity that was constantly going on. From out of the hallway, a younger Ben emerged rubbing his eyes and asking his dad to turn the television down and for a glass of water. Tom rose from the sofa, and grabbing his young son by his waist like a sack of potatoes, walked the giggling boy to the kitchen. Tom poured water into a paper cup and offered it to his upside-down son. In very short time, they emerged from the kitchen with Ben riding happily on Tom's back. With a quick wave and a good night, they disappeared down the dark hallway. Carrie reached over for the remote and lowered the volume on the TV. Eventually Tom returned to the living room and flopped down on the floor next to his wife who was dressed in her nightshirt and fuzzy slippers. He eyed her in tender amusement: "He said he had a dream where the hamster was dressed in a red suit and carried a big bag over his back... he was being chauffeured around in the jaws of a fat cat with a red nose from one house to another!" Carrie laughed and ran a playful finger through a tuft of hair at the top of her husband's forehead: "At least we can't fault him for being uncreative" she commented.

There was a faint sound like rain on a tarpaulin that brought Carrie Dowers back to the current moment, and looking down saw that the toy she held was spotting with drops of water. She reached up to her cheeks and brushed a few tears away that had started their descent.

"Tom"

Her lips quivered until she could no longer hold herself upright. Curling up on the carpet, she wept.



Sunday, December 24th

The long awaited day finally came for Ben and Sam. Their mother had promised them they would be able to put the tree up. That was great! Then she said if they had presents they could put them under the tree once it was decorated. That was great too. They had waited this long, it was all good. Then Carrie Dowers said their presents would not be out until the next morning.

It was like pushing a button. Ben burst forth with a rant that was suitable for sailors and dock workers, with Sam occasionally chiming in with strong support. She finally had to send them both outside to cool off. To make matters worse, Carrie and Frank Dowers adjourned to the front porch to trim the trunk of the blue spruce and center it in the stand in full view of the boys. They went to the porch rail and looked down into the court yard of the apartment complex, and saw Ben and Sam

attempting to throw snowballs at each other. The snow, being old and brittle wouldn't pack into a ball unless they found an area closer to the buildings. Those were no longer called snowballs though, they were slush balls, and they could pack a sting if the ball made contact with open skin. Frank Dowers looked from the boys to his daughter-in-laws face: "They'll be all right. Maybe a few stingers might be just what they need." Carrie Dowers looked on in motherly concern, but decided that intervening at the moment would only make things worse. They did make it a point to make as much noise as they could when dragging the tree into the house, then shut the door.

As predicted, it didn't take Ben and Sam much time to find their way back to their apartment. Ben nudged the door open a crack, just enough to poke his head inside.

"Mom?" he questioned submissively, "Sam and I are sorry for being bratty. Can we come in now and help put up the tree?"

Casting Frank Dowers a glance with twinkling eyes, she faced the boys with a stern face; "This is the night before Christmas, guys... I don't need to have it spoiled by a couple of whiny boys. If you want to help, help; but leave the attitude at the door, eh?" To the amazement of both Edith and Frank Dowers, both boys filed into the entry and together said "Yes, mom." Seeing their apology was accepted by the smile she gave them both, they peeled off their winter gear and went to their room to change clothes.

For the rest of the afternoon, the living room looked like the wake of a small tornado: Empty glass ornament boxes adorned the sofa and lounge; skeletons of tree light holders tossed under the coffee table. Little shoe boxes that once held a collection of odds and ends, like popcorn garlands, plastic snow flakes and individual personal décor were left abandoned in remote areas on the floor. Seemed that the only thing left in the big blue tote that was marked "Christmas" in black indelible ink were the well preserved boxes of fiberglass angel hair. Carrie Dowers had searched high and low to replace the older boxes that were now tangled and matted with old pine needles. Later she found that angel hair was abolished because a cat or a dog would get caught in the tree and end up getting cut. Her first thought after hearing this was: "Well, then they should keep their pets out of the tree! Sillies!" But there was nothing to be done now. Angel hair was always the last thing to go on the tree, and something Tom Dowers had always taken personal pride in weaving over the trees entirety. It used to take him fifteen to thirty minute to finish, making sure that every light had a small halo around it when the room lights were turned off. It was the final touch. It made almost any tree... Perfect.

This year the layering of the angel hair fell to Carrie Dowers. While she worked on this, Ben sat on the couch and directed as Sam, Frank and Edith Dowers began straightening up the living room, putting the storage boxes back in the totes. When everything was reasonably picked up, Sam visited each light switch in the house, turning all but the stove hood light off. Eventually they all ended up standing around the decorated tree, admiring it, taking in the warmth the entire room now enveloped them in.

"OH!" Carrie Dowers exclaimed, "We need to light the last Advent Candle!" She turned to Ben and asked "Would you like to start things off?"

Ben went to the corner table, and taking the box of wooden matches approached to the Advent wreath. He ignited the match as Sam and Carrie Dowers started singing the Advent Candle song. Frank and Edith Dowers looked on thoughtfully as Ben lit the fourth Advent candle.

As of this morning, Advent was now played out: twenty-four windows on the Advent calendar were open; Sam's Advent garden was only awaiting the arrival of the baby Jesus, and the last candle was lit.

During the 4th verse to People Look East was sung, Ben disappeared into the hall a re-emerged with a stack of boxes and put them under the tree.



Monday, December 25th

Dear Mom.

I hope this letter finds you and dad well, and that you had a good visit with James and family. I know you probably don't understand why I didn't fly up to meet you at my brothers, but I really felt it was important to stay here with the kids and have our first Christmas at home. Also, I'm sorry this box and note was so late getting out to you, but you know me: Little Miss Last Minute girl. Really, I don't intentionally do this, I mean well, so please accept my tardiness. Let me know if any of the clothes don't fit, I still have the receipts.

Things have come a long way since Tom died, I don't know where to start. I guess the best thing to do is to start with thanking you for the incredible help you and dad have been during this time of transition. The way you stepped in to watch over Ben and Sam, well, I will forever be grateful. I just don't know if I would have been able to keep up with their needs, manage the affairs left by Tom, and deal with my own emotional wasteland. Tom's parents really tried their best to help, but I didn't want them to get too involved on this end. I mean, it was their only son that went down in that crash. The vacant slot in their life must be unfathomable. No parent should have to see their own child buried.

But mom, moving here was probably the best thing that I have done in my life. It blew new life into this family and has helped the kids. I know there will be hurdles yet to overcome, but in the mean time the newness here keeps them engaged in the real world. Oh, and thanks for getting the boys that Banshee gaming thing, they have been drooling for one ever since they came out with it. It was a real surprise for them. I told them though if they wanted new games, they would have to work for them. I'm sure after the snow has stopped they will be out making as much money as they can around the neighborhood!

For the most part, we had one of those old fashioned practical Christmases with lots of clothes from Frank and Edith, and stuff the kids needed. I was able to find a cool little desk for Sam so he has a space of his own to store his stuff. I don't think he liked it at first, but I believe he will appreciate it more in the months to come.

Anyways, I wanted you to know I have oddly found a new life here with this whole Christmas thing this year. I started out having real problems approaching it, and without Tom here to take care of certain things, I have had to assume dual identities. It's strange. This place feels more like home to me now even as an

apartment in a complex, much nicer than living on any base or subsidized houses.

We did something called Advent this year. Sam's school celebrated it. You should look into it. I was so happy I didn't have to have Christmas up the day after Thanksgiving like we used to do. Focusing on other things seems to have come easy. Funny though, the last couple of days, it feels like Tom has been here in spirit. I feel him strongly and it makes me smile. Ok, it could be something I ate, but it still feels warm and happy. I think I fell apart maybe 3 times during the last 4 weeks missing Tom, but in every case I was able to find a good memory for every sad one I was holding on to.

I hope you don't think I've gone off the deep end here, but I really, really believe if you had come to Colorado this year you would have probably notice the difference too. Christmas ended up meaning more to Ben, Sam, myself and even Tom's parents. Moving here couldn't have been a mistake. My job is good, the boys are in a great place, and the memory of their dad is strong. What more can we ask for this time of year? It's been a wonderful season. Maybe next year you can come and feel it too. That would be a great wish to come true.

So, with best wishes from my deepest heart of hearts, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. I hope yours is a good one. I love you very much and miss you very much.

From your loving daughter
Carrie

PS: Tell dad I loved the Marshmallow gun. Now I need to go out and get me some ammo!