

Advent

Guardian



By
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Introduction

Advent has always been one of my favorite seasons. Unlike Lent, it isn't a purging process. It doesn't make demands on you, but allows you to create a place in your soul to allow the celebration of the birth of Jesus. It does not require a wreath, or a candle, or a song or a calendar (though they help), but a moment of true quiet where this inspiration may seed and grow.

The stories I write will always culminate on the 25th, Christmas day, and may take an odd course as it sails through the month of December, but I believe that my work here is to capture the various ways Advent may enter life. Sometimes laced with personal tragedy; sometimes adorned with spirit, I hope my Advent gift may be received with your heart in the manner in which it is offered: In Peace. In Love.

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2007

The dates are associated to the date the chapter was written for and don't represent a date in the day of the lives written about in this story.

Sunday, December 2nd

Thanksgiving was still on the plates when there was a flurry of activity around the house. Ethan Hart pulled down the attic steps and ascended the ladder leading up into the cold, drafty space above the rooms on the third floor where all those boxes that rarely needed to be accessed were stored. Three young children stood at the bottom of the steps, enduring the cold draught of late November air plummeting through the open hatch, waiting to see what box would make it down first.

"Craig?" came a mature voice from above, "can you help me with these boxes please?"

"Yeah" was the response as the oldest of the three boys clambered up the ladder to stop midway as the corner of a box appeared at the top, coming into Craig's grasp quicker than expected. As more of the box came into the open the word "CHRISTMAS" written with a fat magic marker could be seen on the side. The older boy, still too small really to handle the size of the box managed to hug it as best he could to his chest and felt with his sneakers for the next rung down, his head hidden behind the cardboard.

"Evan, help your brother will ya?"

A second boy moved to the bottom of the ladder and waited.

"I can get it, dad" Craig yelled in an authoritative but unconvincing voice. He turned and managed to make it to the next stair down before he started to teeter forward a bit. Evan immediately held up his arms in response and pushed back on the box, pressing his older brother back to the ladder and almost forcing him to sit down. Craig looked up and saw his dad was already lowering another Christmas labeled box down the hole and put an arm up to hold that one steady, but at the same time ending up releasing the full weight of the previous box onto his younger brother.

"Sorry!" he yelled as Evan and the box became unstable and bumped to the floor. "Slow down DAD!"

Eventually, they had 4 boxes pressed up against the old paper covered plaster walls of the stairwell. Christmas was upon them now. There was a clear charge of excitement

"I think that's enough to start with" Ethan Hart announced, pausing at the top of the ladder to light a cigarette, "Sunday morning we can start putting up lights"

A cloud of white-blue smoke billowed out of Ethan's open mouth and spread its self thin just above the ladder threshold in the ceiling. He immediately coughed a harsh raspy cough, stuck the cigarette tightly between his lips and clambered back to the floor. He gave a grin to his boys and folded the ladder up against the closure panel and gave it a push up. The trap door responded with a groan and sealed up the portal to the attic.



Monday, December 3rd

Vermont already had its first snow. Winter had tested the forests around Chatham with a two inch dusting the second week of November and even though most of it had disappeared very quickly, the ground still remained stony, hard and cold; never to warm again until mid May. Many of the older houses that lined the town streets were well maintained. There were many old brick building along Main street that had been painted numerous times as businesses opened and closed in them, but despite the 'old' feeling of the town, Chatham was a surprisingly inviting place to visit or live.

Most towns in Vermont depended on the winter season to make their yearly quotas. Catering mainly to the downhill and cross country skiers, Chatham wasn't as blessed as some of the surrounding towns that actually leached off the hard core ski resorts. However, if you wanted a cozier atmosphere, Chatham was a great choice. Actually nationally spotlighted for its superb hospitality spas, you may not be able to roll out of bed and onto a pair of skis, but you could wake up most times to a room with a private fire place,

plump old comfortable loungers, a small table with antique chairs surrounding it, often a time small private kitchenette where you could cook a modest meal, and even a Jacuzzi.

Ethan Hart did not provide you with bed and breakfast, but he did own and operator of a corner shop perfectly situated in the downtown district. The Hart Emporium had been in his family for three generations, and he was definitely hoping that at least one of his boys would take it over when he could no longer manage the business. It was there you could pick up a few goods to eat or sit and have a croissant and a cappuccino. You could bring your laptop computer with you and hop onto the World Wide Web to find out news, weather, local skiing conditions or movie times. One could also find provisions for hunting or fishing, camping or hiking. There were drawers where you could find cabinet knobs, screws, nails and smaller hand tools. He had racks of greeting cards; a special rack for magazines and newspapers, and a nook for souvenirs. In essence, you could spend a very long time browsing the shelves. It truly was a one of a kind shop, and Ethan Hart loved it as much as he loved his family.

He made sure the shop was clean, in good repair, and pleasant to look at. Like many of the stores downtown, the entrance was accessible by climbing 3 cement steps to a landing that was flanked by large heavy display windows that allowed not just a great view to the town and the mountains beyond, but provided plenty of light to the store. The display windows were very very old; probably the original windows, with etched scroll work at the top of each one. You entered the shop through a beautiful dark forest green door that had a leather strap of brass jingly bells riveted to it to announce the comings and goings of its customers. The floors were plank, but they were sealed and oiled yearly, and added a great aroma to the inner sanctum. Ethan took pride in his shop. He accepted that he would probably die there too.



Tuesday, December 4th

Ethan Hart and his family lived right behind the Emporium, sharing the same back yard that was divided by a rusty chain link fence and a small gate. The latch on the gate had long since been abandoned for a simple rope loop that draped over both fence and gate poles. Having inherited both properties had the benefits of being able to change which lot got the better of the two properties. Long before Hart children started arriving, Ethan and his wife Nancy had decided that the back of the Emporium was too big for its needs, and decided to extend their own back yards into the Emporium. Nancy loved to garden and even though her energies were now eaten up by the maternal needs of life, their children were at least at an age where she could maintain a sizeable plot of garden for growing vegetables with their somewhat limited help. The expansion of the yard also allowed Ethan to build things for their children, such as a tree house and a massive rope swing from one of their maple trees. There was also a low V-type rope bridge to a second maple where he had fastened a small wooden flat around the first branch node of the trunk.

Unfortunately it was now too cold to stay in the “clubhouse” as the boys called it for too long. Craig, who had recently turned 10, led the family by four years before his younger brother came along, and seven years above baby brother Jonathan, who finalized the family tree. All three boys were quite different. Craig marked his territory as only a first child can. Craig had this conception that everything in the house belonged to him, even if it belonged to someone else. Charlie on the other hand was quite the opposite. Dreamy in nature, he sang along with his father in the Unitarian choir, and enjoyed drawing... on everything and anything in the house. Many of the third floor walls were decorated with his work. No one quite knew who Jon was yet. The only thing Craig and Charlie knew was to not get in his way or take

something from him without it being offered. Often times more like a goat than a human, Jon had more bumps on his head than a Texas Horney Toad. It always felt like they spent more time at St. Mary's emergency room than at home sometimes.

Ethan took ownership of the Emporium after his father had a massive stroke. Ethan Hart Sr. was now bound to a wheel chair as a result, his mental facilities impaired. Being the oldest in the family, the job of running the Emporium fell to Ethan Jr. His father had started him out helping on Saturdays, but as he grew older, he ended up working there after school stocking the shelves and cleaning the floors. His sister Shelly also lived locally, and helped out during holiday times, but Ethan was loathe to call her in mainly because she was an intolerable gossip. On a good day, it would take her only 12 minutes to press some coffee and froth a little cup of milk. She could be almost rude to customers waiting to be served if she was in the midst of some hot topic. She was harmless, but just couldn't seem to stay married for any length of time. Ethan was always poking fun at her, asking who the next future Mr. X would be. All hard work aside, it was almost a perfect life.



Wednesday, December 5th

Ethan didn't open the Emporium doors the day after thanksgiving like so many businesses usually did. A simple sign stated his policy on Thanksgiving: Closed Thanksgiving day and Friday. That made for a nice break before the shopping season officially opened, however that didn't mean things didn't need to be done. The holidays were upon them now in force, and he had an image to keep up. There were decorations to be put up, a tree to be set up and trimmed, seasonal items to be put out on the shelves and a small selection of gifts and toys to be tagged and displayed. Normally would have liked to have had more time to do the decorations himself, but his sister Shelly offered to come by later that afternoon to cheer the place up. Every year she made this offer and every year Ethan apprehensively agrees, though lately he has had to remind her to be "Sensible" with her approach. One year, she had purchased a box of "My Little Pony" dolls, drilled through their bellies and shoved lights up them. She then laced the room with the toys along with tinsel garland and ribbon. It was... unusual to say the least. Maybe for a toy store, but it didn't fit with Ethan's concept of Christmas. He was a traditionalist.

This caused problems with the local town council, because Ethan refused to bow to the current trends of "Nanny Statehood" as he liked to call it. The council had banned live trees from retail businesses more than 4 years ago, but every year Ethan would go out with his sons and find a life tree, cut it down and bring it into the shop. Ethan refused to start the Christmas before Thanksgiving. Every year he would put his life tree up in the front corner of the store centered in front of the large display window, and every year the fire department would fine him for doing so. However, they were nice enough to do this only once, and not repeat the action. The store owner would not bow.

So, that morning Ethan roused his kids, fixed them some leftovers for breakfast, had them get bundled up and headed towards the old green station wagon in their mission to go tree hunting. The boys liked hiking with their father; it was one of the few things that were special to them and would probably carry with them into the future when they were adults. They didn't even mind that the station wagon had no heat, not even enough to defrost the front windshield. They were constantly using an old towel he kept on hand to clear a patch big enough for their father to see where he was going.

For as long as Ethan could remember, they had never "paid" for a tree. Like his father before him, they would head north into the county above Chatham and then hike the hills of the forest until they came across a suitable tree. This year, pressed by time and the cold that had settled in, hunting went pretty quick. The tree they decided on was much bigger than they needed, but it did have a perfect star at the top.

The rest would probably be stripped of their branches for more garlands, and the trunk set out to season for a year.



Thursday, December 6th

Charlie was being moody. He had wanted to go with some friends down the street ice skating, but his mother wasn't convinced things were thick enough at this time. Failing to realize that she probably equated her weight into the mix, Charlie's slight little body could have probably skated fine on just one inch of ice. He now lay on the floor, a bit of mid morning sunlight streaming a pillar of light through one of the windows on the east side of the house, watching reruns of cartoons. It was Saturday morning; there was nothing else he could think of doing.

With his older brother helping out in the shop, and his mother Nancy sipping her tea while browsing bargains on the Mac, he was the picture of apathy. He wasn't old enough to do much without having an adult present, but too old to be treated like a baby, Charlie was at an awkward point in his life. He had just started school that year in September, which was still fun, and it was a nice break from being toted around with his baby brother and mother like he had been forced to do up to that point. Lately, their homeroom teacher had been working on some seasonal songs along with an assortment of other percussion instruments. Charlie had been given a triangle to play with, while 9 other students had received tambourines, bongos, sleigh bells, maracas and castanets. He liked music in general, although it did take him some time to not feel self-conscious about joining in. Also, up to the Thanksgiving break, they had been doing all sorts of crafts instead of learning numbers or letters.

But he was uninspired until the phone rang and startled him out of his gloomies. Not getting up from the floor, he rolled closer to the kitchen to get a better position to listen to his mother. Evidently it was his father, Ethan. There was a short exchange, a couple of "yes" and "no" answers, then something that seemed to catch his attention completely:

"Oh, he'd love that" Nancy Hart said with delight, "I'll send him right over."

Without any further asking, Charlie was already on his way to the back mudroom when his mother started calling for him.

"Charlie, your dad wants you over at the shop right away, he says there is someone there you should meet" She peered into the living room where last she saw her son; "Charlie??" Nancy called out again.

"I'm on it, mom" Charlies voice came from the back "I can dress myself". He quickly slipped on his boots, threw on a down jacket and was about to open the back door when Nancy caught him and pushed a knitted stocking cap onto his head. He gave her an "aw, mom" look before escaping.

He quickly traversed the backyard, through the gate separating the two properties and ascended the black iron steps to the back door of the Emporium. He didn't bother taking his coat or boots off, but went straight through the stock room into the warm open space of the shop where he stopped and gaped:

Sitting in a chair right up by the front windows, sipping what looked like a steaming mug of hot chocolate was a rather big man dressed in red, trimmed with white fur, with a thick, wide black leather belt and black calf-high boots. His head was balding, but what the top of his head lacked, the white hair bristling out from his face more than made up for it. Charlie, not taking his eyes of the elderly gentleman, inched

his way over to the counter where his father Ethan watched him with an elusive grin tugging his mouth:

“When did HE get here?” was all Charlie could say.



Friday, December 7th

The Sunday after Thanksgiving, as promised, Ethan Hart rounded up his older boys and set the extension ladder to the front of the house. Earlier that morning he spent seeking out those few dead bulbs that didn't allow what seemed like acres of light strings to shine. Finally he felt he had enough to at least get the front of the building glowing.

The house was not small, nor was it new. Constructed in the early 1900's by a master mason, not even a small bull dozer could have taken this historical or the adjoining Emporium buildings down. Ethan had taken care to keep the property in as close to its original state as possible, even keeping the removable window screens and storm windows needed to be change out annually in good repair.

Speaking of windows; there were LOTS of them, which made for quite a Christmas light display. Fortunately, Ethan was prepared for hanging lights now. When Craig was born, the suddenly need to decorate the house became a prominent task every year, and even though Craig's first Christmas would not be a memory for the boy, it taught Ethan much when it came to how not to approach hanging lights. Like a fool, he took his stable gun and pinned the wires to the window trim. Once done, he went to plug in the various strings only to find half of them didn't respond. Snarling at himself, he had to climb the ladder a second time only to discover in most instances he had put a staple through the wire and not around it. Pulling out the staple, he punched in a new one so that it wouldn't interfere. Unfortunately, it took many attempts before all lights were shining as expected. THEN came the week after Christmas when he started pulling all the staples out. Five minutes of this in 12° temperature he quickly decided they could stay up until next Christmas. Still, the task unfinished bothered him, and over the summer months he decided to take them down, and decided while he was up there he would set black hooks with clasps on them around the trim. From that day forth, it was just a matter of clipping the lights to the hooks. Life was so much simpler after that.

Craig and Charlie carefully laid the strings out across the front yard so they wouldn't get tangled. Starting at the roof top, Ethan carefully hung the lights along the bottom of the scalloped soffit as Craig and his brother pulled the strings away from the house. It was slow moving with all the times the ladders had to be moved and ascended, but eventually the worst was over. Craig was allowed to walk on the porch roof to help with the second floor windows much to the consternation of Charlie, but the younger brother was soon involved once his mother appeared with a bundle of thick fir garland to hang under the eaves of the porch roof. Charlie helped her festively wrap the roping with bright red ribbons and more lights so that in the end it looked like a long furry green caterpillar ready to sleep for the winter.

Evening was almost upon them when houselighting time came. Would it all work? Would all the little light bulbs illuminate and twinkle on the garland? By this time, some of the local neighbors had gathered in front of the iron fence and talked lightly of weather and shopping while they watched the progress.

“I guess I better get a move on and put to rest all this anxiety going on here” grinned Ethan to his wife as he set off to the steps leading to the basement.

There was a long pause; way too long for a child to endure. Charlie leaned over: “You think the house has enough electricity to power all those lights?” he asked earnestly, but even as his last word left his mouth, the entire world became aglow with a soft golden light that drenched the houses across the street in its radiance. There were a couple of cheers from onlookers as Ethan Hart emerged from the basement looking triumphant.



Saturday, December 8th

Craig and Charlie had been fully attacked by their mother with cold weather gear before they escaped out the back door and did their routine walk down the 4 blocks of South Cross Road to the Chatham Elementary School. Even though Craig was 4 years older than Charlie, he had already developed distaste for school and much of its attempts to make learning fun. He sensed there was something artificial to it, even though he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He loosened the scarf that had been wrapped around his neck so many times that it almost was a knot and pulled the stocking hat off his semi blonde head, sticking it in his coat pocket. They walked in silence as clouds of vapor rose and trailed behind them in the cold Vermont air.

“I wish it would snow or something” he sighed, “or vacation started sooner. It’s really boring right now.”

“Yeah” was all Charlie could think of in response.

“I mean, what are we doing in class anyways?” Craig picked up a birch branch and ran in along the curb, picking up dead leaves as it scraped the ground. As they walked, they slowly joined up with other kids heading in the same direction, many of them already absorbed in conversations already. Craig quickened his pace and caught up with two other boys who were talking about hockey and predictions of who would be the next Stanley Cup winners.

“Hey Craig, you getting new skates for Christmas?” one of the boys asked as he sidled up next to him, “I asked my dad for a Redwing jersey and shoulder pads. He said he would see about it, which usually means no, but I told them they had them for sale at Cabelas.”

Craig stepped into the street and took a swing at a stone as if making a shot into a goal cage. “I dunno, but I told my dad about it. When does practice start?”

“Soon, I think” the taller of the other three boys, Ken responded, “I think they have already scheduled matches against a couple other teams, but no word yet.” Ken wandered off the sidewalk and picked up another stick that was laying in the front yard of a neighboring house, taking it to the street. Craig was still nagging the rock he had found on the street, when without any warning, Ken lobbed the rock out of Craig’s control and ran after it. Moments later, they were in the middle of the street fighting for possession. Craig elbowed Kens arm and made a feint to drive it to the curb, then reversed his direction, gave the rock a good whack that sent it skidding over the asphalt back towards the school. Ken whirled around and made to take control but Craig had already parried and was on top of the rock quicker than Ken could. Holding the birch stick as he would in a hockey game, and obviously not in a novice way, he positioned his arms to make a slap shot:

WHACK!!!

The rock went flying through the air towards the side walk.

The world fell into slow motion as both boys helplessly realized what they had put in motion: The rock shot past Charlie, who was standing near the mailbox of a house close by, over the fence, over the front yard, hurdled towards the garage and with a sickening klunk bounced off the hood of a BMW that was parked in the driveway. Wide eyed with panic, the two boys threw their sticks to the curb and sprinted towards school and the safety of their classrooms.



Sunday, December 9th

There was a quick winding of a spring. The gigantic antique Grandfather clock at the base of the stairs outside the foyer went through its Westminster chime before striking the slow toll of hour 3. Three AM. I'm sure if you could float through the house soundlessly, you could hear just about everything that was still awake: Like the knocking of hot steam running through old iron pipes leading to the radiators in various rooms; the slow build of steam in the relief valve as the radiator pressurized to its capacity, then forced through the valve cock to spit and slowly hiss like a snake with a plume of vapor into the room; the low rumble of the boiler in the basement, long since converted to oil from coal that used to be kept in bins long forgotten and now used to store bicycles for the winter, the acrid smell of damp coal still lingering; now and then a board or a stud inside the wall would creak like a branch about to break as it responded to the temperature changes inside the house; the rumble of snoring coming from the master bedroom; gritting teeth from another bedroom and the occasional hiccuppy sob as Jon dreamed of monsters in his sleep.

In contrast the outside world, if there were any noises at all were in many ways not as distinguishable. There was no breeze. The air was in pure cryogenic preservation. Nothing moved: Everything frozen in place. There was no cloud to be seen in the sky, and the waning moon glared into the heavens with a solitary brilliance, its light strong enough to outshine any star near it. On the other side on the sky, a lone star hung and sparkled low on the horizon. The town looked much like what you would find in a Snow Globe where for some reason the snow had not been added: Sad, lonely and desolate.

But even in this moment things were not as they seemed. There was life: All it needed was a little push, and it would be set into motion. The only activity was happening on the main road where the headlights of a car scouted the road ahead as it slowly moved through the town, stopping only for the occasional sleeping traffic light then moved on, leaving a trail of frozen smoke behind in its wake. It was a night of anticipation.



Monday, December 10th

6:30 was approaching fast. Ethan went to his little safe in the back office and pulled out a heavy white bag full of change. He had just closed the safe and spun the combination dial when the back door blew open. Two people, a man and a woman quickly crossed the threshold allowing the screen door to automatically slam behind then pushed the door shut. Mrs. Dempsey was a mature lady in her 50s, but she was light on her feet and had a quick hand in the making of a cappuccino. Tom, a thin lanky man with short salt and pepper hair and piercing black eyes was one of those invaluable people that knew the business from top to bottom. If something were to detain Ethan Hart, the store would be in Toms totally capable hands. The two of them peeled off their cold weather gear and hung them on hooks just to the

right of the door. Ethan pulled out various stacks of dollar bills and numerous rolls of change from the bag. After making notes of the amounts, Ethan separated the cash and put them into two cigar boxes.

After greeting his two employees with a big grin, he handed one of the boxes to Mrs. Dempsey then went to the counter at the back and loaded up the drawer of the old register with the contents from the other cigar box. Closing the drawer, Ethan pushed down on a couple of keys. There was a pleasant ding and a white “No Sale” flag appeared in the top display of the old manual register. “What you think?” Ethan said looking up at Mrs. Dempsey.

Mrs. Dempsey paused for a moment, looking thoughtfully in Ethan’s direction. She was dwarfed by the huge copper/brass espresso station that she had just flipped the switches to start warming up. She glanced towards the front of the shop then back at Ethan: “We have people waiting outside. I would say we will have a good day.”

In the limited light of the shop, she turned her attention to making coffee. At the end of the back counter stood two more antique brass coffee makers, tall and well kept, along with a coffee grinding machine and an acrylic compartment rack with six bins filled with different coffee beans. Mrs. Dempsey measured some beans into a cup then emptied its contents onto a paper filter. She then dropped the filter into a holder and slid it back into the coffee maker, pressing a button that started the coffee making process. There was a hiss of hot water as it fell into the filter trap and eventually dark black fluid fell into the copper reservoir.

There really is not a smell that can compete with that of grinding coffee beans, even with the arrival of the flats of locally made donuts, fruit tarts, croissants and warm breads. Combine this with the fragrance of the pine from the Christmas tree in the front the Emporium could hardly feel less homey. Once everything was in place, Ethan flipped the lights on, adjusted the brightness and unlocked the door where the three very cold customers waited anxiously for their morning paper and a cup of hot coffee.



Tuesday, December 11th

Nancy returned home from an all morning shopping excursion with only five minutes to spare before her number two son would need to be picked up. The old station wagons back seat had to be folded down to allow for all the packages she had to disguise so her family wouldn’t know what was what, and who what went to. It wasn’t an easy task because if she used her clout at the Emporium and purchased everything at cost, Craig would have found out. That meant there would not be any surprises under the tree that year. Last year was a disaster. The boys had discovered all the hiding places well in advance, and in some cases had even peeled back the tape holding the wrapping paper to the package. Hiding stuff was becoming increasingly harder to do with a new challenge presenting its self every year. Nancy decided on a new tactic: Leave all the packages IN the back of the station wagon, covered with a thick, old army navy blanket and completely locked up.

She had also learned to be more thoughtful in her purchases. Past years had taught her some purchases were made under the pretense that these gifts would be in the dumpster inside a week. So, that in mind, those purchases went on the cheap side of the Christmas budget. However, she and her husband had conversations that sometimes went late into the night about at least one present that each of their children would get that would hold some value to it, and once the purchase was made the decision that followed would be upheld: “If we are going to spend this kind of money on this, they will have to be responsible for its keep.” The older the family member was, the higher the responsibility would be. So, hidden under

the blanket were objects both extravagant and mediocre. It was a gamble to leave these things out where it could easily be vandalized and robbed, but Nancy had lived here since her marriage with Ethan, and never had they been subjected to anything that needed local law enforcement intervention. She was confident it would still be there in the morning. Besides, most things along that line of excitement usually happened at the Emporium when some fool would try to carry something out of the store without paying, and even then the police were never brought in.

But now the time was at hand, and tightening up the coat hood over Jon's head, she took his mitted hand and started to walk down the street to the Chatham Elementary School to pick up Charlie.



Wednesday, December 12th

Everything started at once. By midmorning the temperature outside was quite balmy for this time of year, hovering around fifty-two degrees, but by late afternoon nothing was comparable. The sun disappeared; the sky got overcast with heavy gray-green clouds; the air became heavy, the atmosphere crystallized as it sent the temperature plummeting to twenty-four degrees. Those people that had dressed lightly for the day without consulting the local news channels were caught off guard when they left their jobs, especially those who didn't drive. Chatham had one Taxi Company, and one bus station. That was it. The wind had picked up, stooping down from above and forcing many of the evergreens to bow before it, gusting around the corners of buildings, chasing coat tails and scarves. Those people that had to walk into it felt the bite of winter to the bone despite layers of clothes, cursing behind scarves wrapped over mouth and nose leaving only a quick glimpse of vapor as it easily got dispersed by its force. By four o'clock, street lights started igniting their mercury vapor bulbs in anticipation of a long cold night. Holiday banners that were hung by the municipality to the street light posts were flapping violently; the corner stores sign that hung freely from a post mounted over the entrance came loose at one of the hinges and now swung so violently that it nearly hit a customer coming out the entrance door.

As the light of day dwindled, the color of the clouds started taking over the ambient light in the town. You could feel snow and almost taste it even though the first flakes had not made their appearance yet. Aside from the force of the howling wind, all sound was absorbed by the sky and a cruel silence fell over everything it touched. Windows, both residential and commercial started glazing over, fueled by the condensation from the warmth from the inside. It crystallized in the corners and slowly crept toward the center where it lost out to the internal heat. Awnings flapped, and anything that lay un-fixed to the sidewalks and streets were swept away, blown clean by the raging gales.

The first flakes started to appear by seven that evening, barely noticeable for the speed in which they ascended into the town, each crystal like a hard piece of glass that you could hear against the windows as they collided. As the snow hit the streets it blew freely, almost dancing with the wind in swirling clouds that loathed the idea of giving up their freedom. By Emporium closing time, the shared yard between retail and consumer properties had a light icing that crunched under foot much like the sound of stepping on a blanket of frosted corn flakes.

Ethan waited at with his son Craig in the back office as Mrs. Dempsey and Tom put on their coats. Marcia Dempsey only had a grey overcoat which she used for almost all outings except during the harder parts of winter. She was one of the people that didn't watch the news that morning. Actually she never listened to the weather reports. As she put it: "If it's dry outside, it ain't raining". Tom on the other hand, even though he didn't wear it to work, brought along a thick dark blue scarf and a huntsman hat with flaps

that could be pulled down over the ears. They dressed as best they could and prepared to brace themselves for the chilly reception awaiting them outside the door.

“I doubt there will be many people out early tomorrow morning” Ethan announced as his employees were heading towards the back door; “If you hear of any closings around town, don’t hurry in. I can manage things by myself”.

“Like you can manage the coming of the snow, eh?” mumbled Marcia.

“What’s that?” Ethan responded looking at her curiously.

“Nothin, Ethan, just mumbling to myself again. You should be used to it.” She said aloud.

Tom turned the handle on the door, Ethan killed the lights, and the four of them entered the harsh reality of the Chatham winter.



Thursday, December 13th

Craig never made it to sleep. He kept rolling over on the bed from one side to the next, his mind working overtime on what tomorrow would bring. Would school be out? Would the store be open? How much snow would they get? Would it be good sledding snow? Would they all have pancakes in the morning? With hot chocolate? Did they have maple syrup? Did mom forget to pick up some butter? What would happen if the heat quit? Would they all freeze to death? Would school be out? Were his skates still packed in the basement? Were the blades in need of rust removal and sharpening? Did dad bring down the box with the sled disks in them? Would school be out? How long would school be out?

“I’m hungry” an intrusive thought said over-riding his primary question of school. He rolled off the bed, shoved his feet in his bear-paw slippers and as quietly as he could went downstairs to raid the kitchen. The house was silver, light was everywhere but you could not see any direct light. Craig felt this is how living in a night light would be like. The boiler ignited in the basement with a whoosh and the pipes in the house started creaking. He traversed the giant kitchen the door of the mudroom leading out into the back yard, and as quietly as he could open it stepped into the cold winter air. Immediately his breath fogged up, and everything under his flannel pajamas felt there was nothing protecting it from the arctic knife that has stripped him of all warmth. His teeth chattered involuntarily as he picked one of the many windows overlooking the back yard to have a look-see.

The ever so fine snow swirled and danced so densely Craig could not even see to the back gate, not that it would matter much. One couldn’t see parts of the fence at all anymore. Almost the entire south fence was barely visible. The ground in the north section of the yard where Nancy kept her garden was almost bare. The grass was dusted with silver, but the fence to the north rose above it like a Maui wave, its crest spewing a fine spray of frozen crystals into the air as the northern wind pelted the leading edge. The snow drift behaved just like a swelling wave across the back from north to south, picking up an ever increasing accumulation of snow as it approached the fence, then in a final desperation broke just above the fence. The very top reached out in a thin icy membrane; almost curling back underneath once it had cleared the fence, then dropped back to ground zero once it was in the neighboring yard. A chill ran through Craig’s body again, reminding him that he wasn’t really dressed properly to do this kind of activity. Curling his arms across his chest he slipped back across the threshold and into the warmth of the kitchen shutting the thick oak door behind him.

“Definitely no school” he mumbled to himself, “Thank god... I didn’t have my homework done anyways”



Friday, December 14th

By the time morning arrived, the clouds had dissipated and a harsh light spilt over the treetops onto the jewel encrusted town of Chatham. Snow was plentiful as was the piercing cold that accompanied it. The Harts back yard was impossible to traverse: The tops of the fence poles were just to be seen peeking out from under a blanket of snow that was now almost level across the entirety of the yard. Frankly, the entire neighborhood was not prepared for this, and although the snow plows were out on the main roads, they had only scratched the surface when it came to the residential roads. Cars were buried, sidewalks invisible, snow pushed up against houses and buildings almost to a first floor window height. As the sun spread its wealth across the town, the human eye was dazzled to the point of pain. The wind still blew, and even the slightest rise in the terrain mounted small dunes of snow that blew crystals into the air.

Pancakes were still baking on the griddle and the smell of sausage fumigated the house to the point of making all living creatures drool with hunger. It was going to be a long day; a day spent in the back yard, the front yard, in front of the gate, on the curb... everything that surrounded the house behind the Emporium, and then some. So it was a well planned itinerary to start it out with hot pancakes, sausage, chilled grapefruit halves and plenty of butter and maple syrup. Breakfast was enough to lift morale and charge anyone for a few hours, and the conversation was lively around the table in the center of the kitchen.

By noon, a path had been dug between the main house and the Emporium. It had been slow going: Ethan worked with the determination of three men, cutting a path to the shed first where the snow blower had been in storage since mid March, taking nearly an hour to get it to prime and warm up. Once the upper crust of snow had been breeched, the fine powdery base easily fed up into the deflector and spouted out the top chute similar to that of a large whale. The wind, which had dropped to a constant breeze now lifted and dispersed the snow in a fine cloud of crystal, creating eventually a bank to one side that was so high it almost dwarfed Ethan with his broad rimmed hat as he pressed forward to the shop.

Craig, Charlie and Jon eventually lost interest in shoveling, becoming more interested in burrowing into the wall that was created in the path the snow blower left. Pulling out shovels from the shed, Craig spooned out a hole in the side and moled his way into the bank. He and Charlie worked in harmony; Craig cutting the tunnel, Charlie pushing the remains out the entrance and spreading it out along the freshly cut trench. Four feet in, Craig made the tunnel go right, down another two feet then started working on a chamber large enough to hold him, his 2 brothers and possibly a bowl of popcorn and a thermos filled with steaming chocolate.

By nightfall, the front of the Emporium has been cleared and the sidewalk useable. Not even thinking about tackling the front walk and digging out the station wagon, Ethan finally peeled off his cold, damp coat, changed into some dry clothes and collapsed in the living room in front of the fire.

“Ethan,” came Nancy’s voice from the mud room “come look”.

Almost grudgingly Ethan forced himself to his feet. The tone coming from his wife suggested that he would be missing something he may rarely see again. Walking back to join her, he looked in the direction of her gaze. The mantle of night was upon the world, but looking down the path there was an odd bluish glow that ghosted down the path in either direction.

“They are still in their fort.” she whispered. It was a moment when you didn’t have to look at your spouse to know she was wearing a wide smile on her face. He put his arm around her and gave a quick squeeze.



Saturday, December 15th

There was no doubt about who would be able to sleep that night, and even though snow plows had at least made one pass through the neighborhood that afternoon, it was obvious that the work done around the house had taken its toll. Nancy could only think “Pizza” and its association to dinner that night and had pulled out a boxed one from the freezer. Pizza really wasn’t much, but all through that day everyone had trudged in and out of the mud room not only to take a break from the harsh Vermont cold, but also to track paths of water through the kitchen; to the refrigerator; to the cupboards; to the pantry; to snack on anything that didn’t require cooking or the removal of snow pants or coats or hats as needed to endure even 20 minutes outside. By eight thirty even Craig was nodding off in front of the television, slice of pizza half eaten in his hand.

Even with storm windows up and sealed, the northern winds found their way into the house. It appeared the wind had only napped during the day, and now it was back in force. By eleven much of the trough that had been forged between the house and the Emporium had started to fill up with loose snow and what plowing had been done to the local streets was nearly undone and for the most part impassible again. By this time the station wagon with all the presents hidden in it back was buried, a radio mast with a little white ball that looked like a clown on the top being the only indication it existed. Loose snow was being scraped up by the wind into plumes of swarming ice crystals around the street lights. If there had been clouds in the sky one would have sworn it was snowing again.

Around one o’clock in the morning the house fell unusually silent except for a sound that kept repeating its self almost every 5 minutes. It started with a click, then a quick rumble followed by a low hum, then it quit again. The sound became louder the lower you went in the house. Open the basement door and you could smell traces of something that unless you were older you wouldn’t be able to put a finger on, but for a grown up the smell was undeniable: It was the smell of something electrical. It was a hot smell, a metallic or hard plastic smell, and it was coming from in the direction of the boiler. The house had gone colder, and all the inhabitants sleeping therein instinctively drew all the layers of blankets and quilts up close around their heads, the roar of the wind disguising any noise coming from the basement.

Suddenly the reoccurring noise stopped but the smell got stronger, mixing with it something more recognizable: Smoke.



Sunday, December 16th

However it happened, it happened slowly at first. The electrical wire leading to the burner in front of the boiler turned bright red, melting the black rubber casing that covered the wires inside. The overheated wire shot up into the wall where it smoldered before reaching the ancient electrical distribution box. The socket where a glass topped fuse was screwed into spit a few sparks into the air followed by a hissing within the boxes interior. At once the box blackened, all power severed, and from around it flames started leaking out in small ethereal wings. The flames searched the walls and found something to infect and what started as a flame expanded into a growing fire.

Smoke started building within the closed basement, bouncing off the old perforated acoustic tiling, seeping through the holes into the spaces between the floor joists that had been stuffed with kraft-faced fiberglass insulation. Smoke escaped from the air space under the door leading from the basement to the kitchen, but the ever increasing cold of the house seemed to disarm its odor. By this time, the fire was eating away at the studs in the walls of the mostly finished basement and climbed up to the floor setting ablaze the ceiling tiles, eating their edges and releasing them from the staples that held them to the joists. Flames quickly set to work on anything it could touch on the floor, including a stack of newspapers which the fire devoured with delight. The bright orange and red light danced over the walls and ceiling accompanied now by the building dark black jets of smoke.

Along the inner wall was a row of boxes. The fire was happy to attach its self to these and worked its way towards the stairwell leading to the outside and the heating fuel tank. Flames leapt and grasped at anything it would touch, building momentum as the basement space heated up, finding the work bench and the shelf that Ethan kept his house paints and thinners on. The shelf gave way at one of the supports, sending the can of spirits to the floor releasing the contents onto the old grey carpet which immediately attracted the fires attention and ignited with a swoosh. By now, flames had made it all the way to the other side of the stairwell, and were now, through falling debris worked to heat up the fuel tank.

Meanwhile, up in the kitchen, dining and living rooms, smoke was pushing its way through the cracks in the floor setting a grey fog over everything. Finally a piercing squeal sounded from the smoke detector just about the archway leading between kitchen and dining room, but the alarm was too late. The fire had accomplished its mission in attacking the oil tank.



Monday, December 17th

The explosion sent an entire portion of the house into the neighborhood, spreading enflamed lumber towards the Emporium. Ethan launched himself out of bed and opened the door. There was a growing red glow coming up from the first floor landing of the stairway. Smoke was everywhere now. Without a moments hesitation he flew down the hall, kicking doors open into bed rooms and yelling directions. Nancy had grabbed all the blankets off the bed and threw them towards the windows that overlooked the front of the house. Ethan flew into Jonathan's room, put socks and boots on his youngest son's feet before wrapping him in the quilt on the bed. He carried him into the front bedroom where Nancy was preparing enough warm materials to her aid in their escape and enduring the freezing winds outside.

Craig stuck his feet into his bear paw slippers and ran to the top of the stairs.

"DAD! THE BIRD!!" he yelled and was almost halfway down to the landing when Ethan appeared at the top.

"GET YOUR ASS BACK UP HERE, CRAIG!" he yelled, but Craig had already disappeared around the corner of stair case. Ethan hurled himself down the stairs and almost ran over his son who was standing like a statue in the foyer archway looking into the living room in utter horror. Fire had browned the wooden floor. In some places it had broken through and was setting some of the furniture a-light. He could feel a draft of cold air created by some part of the house he could not see, but smoke was building fast and there was no time to be wasted trying to rescue anything. Flames spouted up at the front door,

cutting off their direct access to the outside. Grabbing Craig around the waist, he flew back up the steps and deposited him outside his bedroom door.

“I’ll chew you out later,” Ethan said reproachfully to his dumbstruck son, “Now, would you please get something warm on and help your mother?”

Craig could only stand in place like a ghost as his father retreated down the hall, tears welling up in his eyes, his lips set to quivering. Ethan stopped at Charlie’s room but something forced him to turn around to realize that his oldest son debilitated. Trotting back, he took Craig under his arm and the two of them went to the front bedroom. Nancy saw immediately what was going on and ran to them quickly smothering Craig in a hug only a mother can do. Ethan took this moment to go pick up Charlie, but as he left the bedroom there was another smaller explosion heard from the kitchen. A couple of windows shattered and the smoke detector became silent. He ran to Charlie’s room but he was no where to be found. Flying out into the hallway again and running to the end where the bathroom was, he peered behind the shower curtain into the tub: Nope, no Charlie. He yelled down the stairs: No response. He poked his head into Jonathan’s room, then into Craig’s room, neither of which proved time efficient. Ethan was about to head down the stairs again and into the fire that now raged in the front vestibule when he heard a voice back down the hall. As he turned, some of the stairs gave way, opening up a crater that dropped down into the basement. Dashing back he entered Charlie’s room:

“CHARLIE!” he yelled, “CHARLIE, YOU IN HERE??!!”

From behind the closet door he heard a choking cough. Almost yanking the door off its hinges, he looked down and saw his second son huddled in the corner under the clothing suspended by hangers.

“Up you go, son” he said and with one confident movement, pulled his boy up and over his shoulder. “We got to go NOW”.



Tuesday, December 18th

After picking up the confused Charlie from closet floor Ethan began to realize how much confusion was being generated by this fire. The front bedroom was reasonably smoke free yet, but the fire was now on the second floor gaining momentum. In the distance he heard the faint sound of sirens, which meant some neighbor had at least alerted the Chatham Volunteer Fire Company. Ethan also knew that whatever could be done, the house was probably going to be a lost cause. This much seemed to be echoed in the eyes of ever member in the family. Craig was still weeping in the front rooms

corner completely surrounded by blankets; Jonathan was kneeling on the floor in his pajama’s bed, eyes wide and vacantly staring into the hall from which Ethan emerged watching the progress of the fire behind his dad; and Nancy, who could not at this time look at her husband squarely in the face busied herself hunting for clothing and warm things to wear, there would be no time to save anything.

Ethan almost tossed Charlie onto the bed and went to the front window. The roof to the porch was still in good condition and the wind had all but blown all the snow off it; but it was only a matter of time till it would be too dangerous to walk on. He pulled up on the window sash and unhooked the bottom of the storm window from the clasps, pushing forward on the storm windows frame. The windows gave a creak as the bottom came loose from the casement and a cold gust of air attacked the warmth of the bedroom,

sending a chill up the sleeve of the sweater Ethan had thrown on when he was looking for Charlie. He carefully climbed out onto the porch roof and removed the storm window from the hangars, leaning it up against the house.

“Hand me those.” He asked, pointing to the pile of blankets surrounding Craig. Nancy kneeled down in front of the boy.

“Craig? Darling? You’re going to have to be strong now and help your father. We really need you now. We are out of time and have to leave.”

The look in Craig’s eyes could melt ice. They were all gathered in the same room Craig had been born in; the room he had spent the first 8 months of his life until he moved into his own bed room; the house he had grown up in. It was his safe zone, it was his world and all he had known. In the seconds that passed, all those wishes of seeing the world, wanting to get away, being somewhere else were dwarfed by his incredible desire to just go back into his room, onto his bed, under his covers and wake up to everything being ok, with eggs and toast for breakfast. Nancy held out her hand.

“Please?” She asked beseechingly.

Craig’s eyes hardened and with a sudden burst of strength rose to his feet, grabbing as many blankets as he could in his arms, almost concealing him from sight. Walking to the windows where his father was waiting, he loosened his grip and allowed Ethan to toss the objects to the snow covered ground, then climbed out onto the roof. Ethan was just lowering Charlie to the ground when the flashing red reflections from numerous fire trucks could be seen off the walls of the nearby houses, sirens screaming their emergency to the world.



Wednesday, December 19th

There were people everywhere. It was pure chaos: Worse; the fire trucks were having a hard time getting through the accumulation of drifting snow that now covered the residential streets. As a team of fire fighters approached from the Emporium gateway, another team was struggling through the street in an effort to find the hydrant that was nowhere to be seen. By this time, the fire had completely spread to the second floor, burning through anything it could devour, blowing jets of flames out the window from which the Harts had escaped.

The sky was no longer clear. Smoke was billowing out of the old 3 story house at such a rate it was blocking out the sky and filling the entire neighborhood with a choking green-brown fog, thick and massive. The neighbors across the street offered to let the boys rest at their house, which Nancy was very glad to accept. Craig, however, would not leave his fathers side. He followed his dad when he talked to the fire chief; he followed him while Ethan helped find the fire hydrant down the street; he watched when finally a couple of large municipal snow plows came raging down Prism Drive in front of their house and cleared out a wide path to allow the fire engines to move in closer; he followed his father as he went around to the various neighbors standing out in the street, trying to give them some account as to what happened. The house now was now eclipsed by flame and smoke from the basement to the roof. It was a horrid sight, even for a fireman. There was no hope; there was only the chance of containing the blaze so it would not spread.

Eventually Ethan and Craig joined Nancy Hart as she stood alone at the corner of their lot, watching as the walls of their nice white house turned to an ugly black with gaping holes in the roof where smoke still billowed profusely into the sky. The fire fighters had now maneuvered into the house with their breathers and axes. You could hear them shouting orders to each other as they made their way through the various rooms, chopping holes in the walls looking for hidden hot spots. There were two crews working giant fire hoses from the side and front of the house, steadily pouring water over the building. Some of the water had frozen and created stalactites from the eaves and stalagmites clinging to the lower sides of the foundation. The house, once warm and hospitable, now looked like a creepy derelict that one would throw rocks at during All Hallows Eve. Nancy was slowly getting over the shock, and leaned into her husband.

“Why don’t you check on your brothers, Craig and get something to eat. You’ve been very busy and I’m afraid I have worn you out” said Ethan.

“I’m not hungry, dad.” Responded Craig listlessly.

“You need to warm up... your mother and I will be up shortly” insisted Ethan.

This said, Craig released his spot next to his father, turned heel and slowly walked towards the house across the street. Ethan watched him until he had climbed the steps and closed the door behind him. Within moments Nancy and Ethan were holding each other in desperation, slowly being overcome by grief and exhaustion, and started weeping on each others shoulders.



Thursday, December 20th

Morning emerged with a cold heartless sun, cascading over the tops of the trees and spilling into a smoke mingled air. One fire truck remained, most of its crew huddled in the cab trying to keep warm and take quick cat naps. They stayed on to oversee the house and make sure the fire was indeed out. It was their custom. Just prior to the other two trucks leaving, the fire crew had taken their hoses and watered down the back wall of the Emporium and the side of the neighboring house. As they delivered the water, it quickly froze to the surface, leaving a one inch thick coating of ice over everything.

But the biggest heartbreak of it all was the complete leveling of the main house its self. Behind the chain link fence, the snow had been melted back to a pond of ice, embedding all grass and plants within it. The ice was not a clean ice either; it was anything but pleasing to look at. It dark gray that shown up from the landscape was pitted with holes and pieces of debris. As you came closer to the house, the ice thickened, clinging to the brick and cinder block foundation. There was nothing left but a big square whole where the basement was, filled with the remains of objects from the floors above. You could make out the kitchen and laundry appliances, bed frames, the burnt shells of televisions. White vaporous trails wafted through the air above the basement revealing that indeed there was still warmth being generated by the fire down there, enough to melt some of the ice.

Ethan was not prepared to confront the needs of the day. Their neighbors, Alan and Francine Hall from across the street were gracious enough to offer them the hospitality of the house that night, and to keep the family together had taken the large room on the second floor as a flop house for the entire family. At the early hours of the morning it was important to stay together; so Craig, Charlie and Jon were sprawled out on the floor using the blankets they had rescued before they abandoned the house. There was a small daybed under the window that Nancy had fallen asleep on, but Ethan had taken his spot in a recliner that

was far from comfortable. It was just as well he took it. He needed to at least walk down to the Emporium and work out arrangements with Mrs. Dempsey and Tom as to who would take care of the store while he took care of the labors of finding lodging for his family, dealing with the insurance company and the long process of rebuilding their lives.

Around six thirty, Ethan made his way down the stair and into the Halls kitchen. Not wanting to make any noise, he put a pan of water on the stove and started going through the cupboards in search of some instant coffee then realized he was the owner of a store that specialized in great coffee. So, putting on his coat and boots, he quietly went out the side door of the brick house and headed off towards the Emporium.



Friday, December 21st

Someone always needs to break the silence. Nancy had avoided talking about the happenings of that night all that morning while Ethan was busy trying to find accommodations for the family, contact insurance and answer questions needed for the various reports. She had decided not to impose the family needs on their host. The Halls were very gracious indeed, but stuffing a family of five into one room just didn't work no matter how grateful Nancy and Ethan were. So, later that morning she had taken the boys to the diner down the block from the Emporium for breakfast still clothed in bathrobes, slippers and a couple of the smaller blankets draped over shoulders like giant scarves.

The town was in shock over the fire. There was an enormous outpouring of kindness and sympathy from anyone the family came in contact with, and the bounty that was laid before them was a testament to that: There were orders of waffles, bacon, eggs atop of english muffing, fruit cocktail bowls, cereal, real maple syrup, toast and an assortment of jams and jellies all spread across the top of the big table in the booth they were seated at. As they ate, people would walk up to the table and offer their condolences and best wishes for a speedy recovery, all during which the appetites that had started out big were quickly appeased, and plates of half eaten entrees were being discarded as almost inedible.

Charlie was thoughtfully breaking a piece of toast into a zillion pieces when, without looking up said to his mother: "Mom? Are we going to have to move somewhere else now? I mean, like out of town or something?"

"Would that be something you want, Charlie?" Nancy asked responded. Craig, who was looking out the big picture window, now turned his gaze back at his brother, then to his mom seeing if she was going to say more. Charlie continued pulling the crust off his toast.

"What's left for us here?" he mumbled "All our stuff is gone."

"I don't wanna move" Craig chimed in "Mom? They are going to build the house again, right?"

"You'll have to ask your father about that, he's talking to people about that this morning." Nancy said addressing Craig then looking back at Charlie; "Charlie? You have any place in mind you'd like to move to? I'm wide open to any suggestions at the moment."

Jonathan started slouching deep into his booster chair. "We can go live with granny." Was his suggestion.

“Ummm...” Craig started, “I don’t wanna live with them. Granddaddy is sick, she always has to take care of him all the time. Besides, the house kinda smells weird, you know?” Evidently this was not an option as far as Charlie was concerned either. With a snort of disapproval this option was unanimously voted down. Nancy stared thoughtfully from one son to the next, then slid her arm around Jon and pulled him onto her lap. It was a little tight seeing that the booth table was fixed to the floor, but at least it gave the boy little room to squirm out of.

“I think our life is here, boys. Your daddy has a gold mind with that store of his and I think he will get us back on track pretty quickly. All we have to do is find someplace to stay while things are being fixed, get some basic supplies like clothes, food, cooking stuff, some furniture when I know we can just rent until we are ready to get new...”

“Can I have a bunk bed this time?” Charlie suddenly asked with renewed interest. With that said, the decision of staying or leaving Chatham was never brought up again.



Saturday, December 22nd

I’m STARVING” Ethan announced as he startled his family who were still deep in plans for a new house and all the things they would need to make it home again. He slid into the booth next to Charlie and Jon, forcing Charlie to scoot closer to the window and push the booster seat up against the wall. There was a small groan of protest from Jon, but all eyes were on Ethan for news now.

“Well...” Ethan drawled out then stopped. He reached across the table and grabbed the half eaten plate of waffles from in front of Craig, separating a piece from the edge and sopping up some of the excess syrup that now created a pool inside the plated edges. He took a big bite and began chewing it silently, a look of bliss in his eyes. “Ahh... I really wanted that!” he said smiling at his wife. “It looks like we have a fully furnished apartment that will be picked up by the home owners insurance” he announced “AND...” he beamed in a dramatic pause, “Seeing that the Emporium is legitimately mine and the guy who inspected the house says the fire wasn’t due to anything we did stupid, seems we almost have a green light already to start the rebuild process.”

“ETHAN!” Nancy exclaimed, “That’s WONDERFUL! And you did all of this since you woke up??”

“Well, the inspectors were already looking at the wreckage before I had finished my coffee this morning. That fire crew that remained behind said things looked pretty good as far as any new burns. Then, when the inspector appeared from the basement area, he remarked that his report would reflect that some sort of electrical fault had happened in the burner its self and cause the fire. We have no liability involved with the fire at all.”

This was all fine and dandy for grown ups, but a quick look around the table made it evident that whatever news he just reported was understood but not believed, and even though Jon was now having fun making finger paints in the condensation building on the picture window of the diner, Craig and Charlie had many questions still in their expressions. Ethan finally had to just express that all their questions would be answer in time despite their protests. The one thing that did cause much anticipation was that their dad had mentioned that they already had a “furnished apartment”. For the boys, that was a totally new concept. To them, that was about as cool as a pop-up book.

This euphoria didn't last long though. Ethan led the boys back to the Emporium so that Nancy could head up to the outfitters to buy some clothes for the family to tide them over until they could pull the car out of its iceberg and take a trip to the neighboring city's mall. Ethan led Jon over to the corner where miscellaneous toys still on display, while the other two boys wandered around the store inspecting objects they had not seen come into the store. However, this activity was short lived, and Craig and Charlie inevitably found themselves sneaking out the back door and passing through the gate into their old yard.



Sunday, December 23rd

It was like returning to a bad dream as they approached the remains of their old house. With all the snow around the house within a 15 foot perimeter still slick with ice, they crept to the edge and looked down into the pit which once was a basement. Craig could identify bits a pieces of the debris: A frame that once used to be a bicycle; a few un-charred sticks that looked like they could have been his parents headboard to their bed; the unmistakable outline of their refrigerator and stove, the bricked area around the old boiler now crumbled on one side, the side that faced the oil tank; and....

“Is that ...” asked Charlie looking up into his brothers face.

The objects was barely visible over the piles of ruins in the pit, but the slender wires bending gracefully towards a bras knob laid to rest their hope that the bird once given to Craig on his 8th birthday was now officially another casualty of the fire. Craig sighed, very tempted to descend the burnt basement steps to uncover the cage in the hope that maybe his little budgie had managed to escape. Then he remembered what his father said when this gift was given to him: “You have to keep him warm, Craig. This is a tropical bird and the primary reason you don't see them flying around in Vermont weather. They don't do well in drafty cold places, so make sure you keep that cover across the back on at all times so he has some place to go if he feels a draft or is cold.”

“Well,” he thought sadly, “If you didn't get burned, you probably died from the freezing cold anyways.”

“Hey, look!” Charlie yelled excitedly, He had circled the foundation and was now standing on an elevation of brick that used to be the front porch. As if awakening from a sleep, Craig stood up from his crouched position near the cage and walked with curiosity around to where Charlie was standing, who was looking around a charred piece of wall where the entrance of the house was. Climbing up the brick steps, Charlie pointed again to something Craig could not immediately see. “Look!”

Craig followed the direction Charlie's finger was pointing and also became a little excited: Their father usually kept a lock box in their bedroom closet that he put valuables into, and much to their surprise and delight, they could make out one corner of it poking out from some of the rubble. Craig looked thoughtfully at his brother than his eyes widened: “You stay here, I'm going to get something from the store.” He was already moving off the porch, jumping off the side and slipping on the dense ice covered ground. Recovering quickly, he moved as best he could; sometimes walking, sometimes sliding along the path leading back to the Emporium.

Returning shortly with a long broom handle and a thick metal coat hangar, he bent the wire around the end of the pole and shaped a hook. He and Charlie then returned to the edge of the porch. Craig leaned as far as he could over the edge and began to at the debris around the lockbox. It was tedious going and Craig almost fell into the rubble if it had not been for Charlie pulling him back to check his balance. Eventually, the handle of the lock box was uncovered. Craig began fishing the hook out over the box to the handle, missing it by inches on numerous occasions. His arms aching, he almost threw the pole in

frustration. Charlie immediately took his chance to try. Seating himself on the porch ledge overlooking the basement, he launched the poles hook over the box and much to the astonishment of Craig, managed to get the hook under the handle and connect. Craig joined Charlie, and between the two of them they got the lockbox up onto the brick, both boys expressing nothing but delight with their recovery.

“Dad and Mom and going to be soooooo surprised!” beamed Charlie.



Monday, December 24th

The few days leading up to the night before Christmas were a blur of activities. The need to get somewhat settled was first and foremost. First there was an apartment to decide on and move into; then there were excursions to malls for clothing needs, Goodwill for kitchen needs, Safeway for consumable goods and many little side trips along the way. As purchases were made to replace objects and good lost in the fire, Nancy often found herself in a melancholy that was completely understandable. Nancy had lost years... no, decades of belongings and memorabilia that could never be replaced: Kids drawings, a lifetime worth of photographs and movies, jewelry, gifts from her husband and kids... she even missed her make up kit now that the shock from the fire was over. She had been so preoccupied with keeping their children distracted and not dwelling on the uprooting of the family, when she did have time to take a moment to breathe, the loss often found its way out involuntarily through the tear ducts.

Ethan, on the other hand, was busy with restoring the family to health. He bickered with the insurance representatives; he bartered with landlords; he was relentless in his conquest with the Architects who were already drawing up the plans for the new house and the hiring of contractors to not only remove the depression that hung like a black cloud over the old homestead, but to already start working to reinforce the foundation and walls of the basement. He would, however, always find time to be with family during meals and evenings. Every time he went to look at a place to live, he would always call his wife to meet him at the location and get everyone opinion before making a judgment. When it came finally down to features verses location, the features won out and the family took a side by side in a managed community. It had its own swimming pool, a community center with games and fitness equipment, there was even a golf course that skirted the western perimeter of the complex. Craig already had a notion of making some money caddying for golfers that didn't want to use the carts.

The day before Christmas was upon them, and in no way were they prepared for this event. The station wagon was still under ice up to the preceding day. During moments when Ethan could get away from all the bureaucratic management of the house and the Emporium, he would go out the back of the store with an axe and cut around the automobile until there was at least twelve inches of free space surrounding it. He tried to start it, but the old vehicle would only groan in protest and click at him in disgust until Ethan finally abandoned it with a sigh of defeat. He went back to the shop and called a wrecker to come pick it up and drop it off in front of the apartment.

That night, Ethan came to the front door and Called Craig and Nancy to come outside; he needed help bringing something in. Craig, being incredibly bored jumped up from the couch faster than an ejection seat and put his new used coat on and boots. Nancy joined them at the front and they went to the huge truck that Ethan had rented using parts of his insurance claim and there, sitting in the back bed was a huge box with a picture of a widescreen TV on it. Craig yelled in ecstasy as he pulled down the gate and hopped up on the bed, bringing the immediate attention of his brothers who quickly put on shoes and ran outside.

Once set up, all the Harts gathered in the living room around a couple boxes of pizza and started testing the new addition to their entertainment center. Unfortunately, there weren't many channels that truly filled the screen, but they could adjust the size to cut off the heads and feet of most actors in a show. As the hours progressed, Charlie curled up next to his mother and rest his head in her lap.

"There isn't going to be much of a Christmas this year, is there?" he said in more of a statement than a question. Nancy stroked his hair and a mysterious smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "What? You want more than the new widescreen TV?"



Christmas, December 25th

Dear mom and dad.

I can't thank you enough for all the help you have given us through this most horrible time in our life. The kids loved the presents. Craig was overjoyed at finally getting his first GOOD remote control truck. Charlie almost forgot about some of his other packages and was already putting together that Lego space port, and Jon didn't know what to do first with that art kit you bought him. We had to distract him before he started recoloring the carpet. As always, the inclusion of all the clothes, sox and underwear, though not appreciated at the moment will be invaluable when they are needed, especially the new scarves and hats. The one thing that really helped though was getting a parakeet to replace Dora. He named the bird Blue for obvious reasons, and it is quite gentle.

The last few days have been truly unreal. Ethan is amazing. I really have to hand it to him. He is the one not only responsible for keeping this family from the steps of the Salvation Army, but whatever good spirits we do have is all due to him. Last night the kids went to bed feeling completely hopeless that Christmas was going to pass them by. Ethan went to the emporium after they were asleep and brought the tree home with all the trimming still on it!! I still don't know how he managed to get it through the door without breaking everything on it, but we set it up in the corner, plugged it in and VI OLA! I nstant Christmas! The kids had completely forgotten about all the stuff I hid in the station wagon, so when they woke up and saw stacks of presents surrounding the tree... well the look on their faces was priceless. Even Craig who is always connecting the dots was at first totally stumped. Ethan and I

agree, next year the tree will go up the night before Christmas instead of putting it up right after Thanksgiving. It's so much nicer.

I wish I had bought a camera. I really spaced out pictures this year. It's interesting. It felt more like Christmas this year than any previous ones. The desolation and helplessness we felt at the onset of the fire almost tore me away from this amazing family we have. I wanted to escape. I wanted to run home and start all over. At times I just didn't know I would be able to make it to bedtime. But something happened. I was overwhelmed by the people in this town. I never knew we had all these friends here. The couple from across the street offered to let us live on their second floor. Even when we moved into this place, the people living here all seemed to know us. They say that help comes in the most unexpected way. This year's Christmas has changed me. How? I don't know yet. But I can say that future Christmases will be different from now on.

I know you and dad can't visit us without packing almost your entire house up and shipping it here. It's still very hard not to have all the family around for Christmas. Maybe next year we can bring Christmas to you there in Florida. Family is everything. I can't tell you enough how much I love you and dad.

I need to wrap this letter up. Again, thanks for all you have done. May the Blessing of Christmas be yours for ever.

Love,

Nancy Ethan craig ~~charlie~~ Jon.