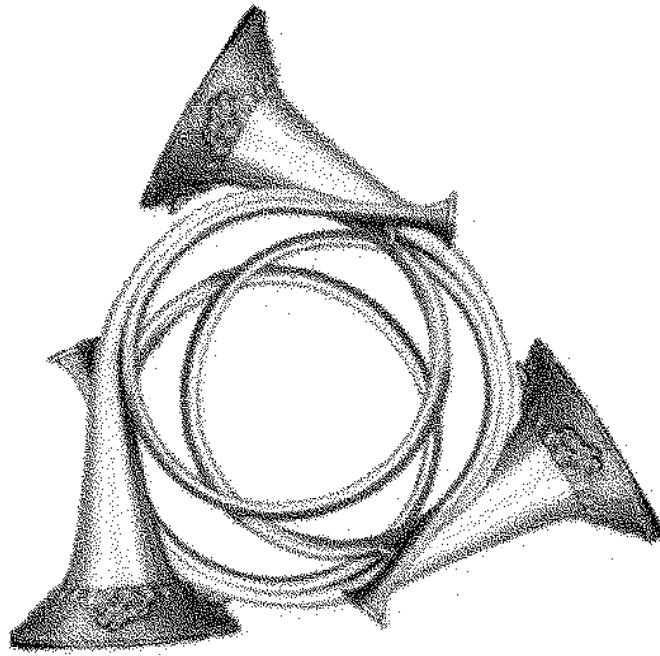


Advent

The Herald



By
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Introduction

Every year presents new challenges and each challenge must be met with new thinking. To tell you the truth I had no inspiration for any stories this Advent up to almost the very first day of its writing. Honestly, I was taking a shower when whole synopsis blinded me and I was not only taken off guard but also stunned. This didn't feel like an Advent story or Christmas story, but the brief outline when condensed to a single sentence was everything that encompassed the very depth of Christmas: Selflessness.

This has not been an easy story to write either; each day I literally had to start with a totally blank page and let the story tell its self. It is not pretty. It isn't about children or elementals. It is about the harshness of the reality and one very personal way of living it. For the year of 2009, I give you Herald.

This year I have dedicated the story to an un-named person that is looking for all the right things in all the wrong places. May this person trust life that if let go, life will shed light and lead in the right direction.

B.D. Peckham

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Wednesday, December 2nd

There it was; the embodiment of newness yet aged without history. The eyes were the color of deep blue milk, round and wondrous. The face was slick, streaked, the cubby arms outstretched as if suddenly dropped into a tumultuous sea and desperately seeking for something to grasp, something solid, something to hold on to. Wrapped in rags ripped from the bottom hem of the mothers skirt, he gazed up into her eyes, then unfocused and untrained stared wildly into the shadows of the rocky ceiling above.

There was a strange light shining in the room, a light that seemed to emanate from both mother and child. It cast an eerie glow into the surrounding chasm, lightly caressing the outline of an old man standing behind the woman and some of the animals that were also present at this miraculous occasion.

Did this child have any idea of who he really was? Did his mother? Did his father? The chamber in which this birth happened was cold, hewn of stone, unforgiving. Why did this happen here? Where was the family? The in-laws? The attending physicians? The nurses? The equipment? This didn't feel like the city anymore... it felt distant, totally unrelated to reality.

Harold looked down. His hands were dirty. His coat was tattered and drafty. His belly protruded beyond the available waistband of his sagging trousers; so much that his navel was clearly seen through a gap between buttons of his thread worn flannel shirt. He looked back up and was reconfirmed that what he was seeing wasn't just something in a shop window where the TV burned brightly and nightly news was broadcasting the horrors of the day. Staring at the unfolding drama, bewildered and confused he was still also in a state of awe. This vision he was having, whether induced by dream or by alcohol was oddly comforting, and somewhere in his darkness he felt the beginning of a warmth that was not environmentally produced.



Thursday, December 3rd

The day wasn't starting out all that well. Despite the fall in temperature, it was threatening to rain, maybe even freeze a bit. The underpass Harold called home provided some shelter but would only protect him from precipitation, not the temperature or a stiff cross-wind. Scavenging for a box, a tent, even a small trailer would only save him from the residual mist that would float into the open space and into wherever he would live. It could have been worse. So far the local law enforcement did not demand a change in his address, but if he were to construct a fortress against the weather it might attract too much attention. He would have appreciated a waterproof tarp over a couple of flannel blankets at this moment, but the blankets were all he had.

Harold had been forced to move out of the ally he had been dwelling in for the previous 8 months. It was quite annoying actually because some low life had decided to take up living in the same area and not follow a fundamental rule of the homeless: If you wanted to camp out, you had to be as invisible as you could to the public. Even to Harold, the newcomer was not only noisy, but had no respect for territory. It made it difficult to procure those conveniences that were most necessary not only to survive, but make life somewhat comfortable in hobo terms. It also made finding supplemental food scarce. Living behind a bar one could find half eaten bags of chips and other such disposables that can be reused in plenty. Harold found that because of the deadbeat he had to get up earlier or retire later in order to dig for these treasures in the backstreet dumpsters. He missed those days, sort of.

Living below the overpass had its benefits though: When you pan handled and looked pathetic enough, you could, most likely, afford one if not two meals a day if you didn't have other habits to support. Harold had to give up smoking only recently. He usually had enough pennies and nickles on top of his daily meals to purchase a pack of Pall Malls every three or four days. If he was extremely lucky he even scored a can of cheap beer.

There were definitely benefits to living under the interstate, but no matter where he parked his backpack, the least of these were environment.



Friday, December 4th

Living a hobo life wasn't all that bad. Hobo's can be viewed with scorn or dismissed as bottom dwellers. They all have a life of thought. They have feelings like you and I, and day to day needs. Homeless and for the most part forgotten, they come into a town, seek out the various charities it has to offer, then set up a mobil shop where like other people all over the planet beg for wants or needs. Hobos can work, but unfortunately most establishments require an address and more than a reference to "Eastern top of concrete support ledge under Interstate 40". It's true! And many homeless people would argue their point about the ethics of work: Why do it when you can stand on a corner with a cardboard sign and look pathetic? That counts as work too.

Harold knew many of the homeless in this city, having spent days wandering it's grid seeking out the more profitable locations. He was friends with a younger homeless kid two blocks down near the big drug store with the red neon sign where he found and repaired a discarded wheel chair. He was able to exploit it's use with great results, sometimes making \$40 a day if he caught the morning rush hour. He was very good with the wheels... and a convincing paraplegic.

Hobos also follow the local wildlife when it comes to seasons: In the spring you will find them out enjoying the sun and bathing in public places to only be chased out by local law enforcement. Summer comes along and they shed just like a dog: Shirts come off; shorts get created ripping the pant legs of their worn jeans; they shave and cut their own hair and they slowly roast to a deep brown as they pan handle through the long summer days. Autumn comes and they go into a hording frenzy. Sometimes pilfering a shopping cart can come in great handy when you need to transport canned good, various sundry items and of course the collection of foul weather gear. Winter comes, and even though you will see them out, it won't usually be by choice. The less fortunate are huddled under plastic and newspapers to keep them from the ice and wind, but other may be lucky and find a cot to sleep on at some public shelter where they can play checkers and get a warm bowl of soup at least once a day.

It's work to be a hobo.



Saturday, December 5th

The raw weather of that morning did not afford any sunlight. Clouds obscured whatever blueness or warmth there could have been. The ledge under where the bridge rejoined solid ground was a good 6 feet, so if you were not of an extraordinary height could sleep perpendicular to the ledge that fell steeply to the road below. Under the center of the west-bound lane was a backpack stuffed to the point of

tearing the ripstop seams, side pockets bulging with hard lines from objects within. To one side was a small tent made of a couple of sheets of plastic and blankets under which a cold but healthy Harold lay peering out at the cars as they passed below him and wondering how quickly he would be able to acquire the donations to afford at least a cup of coffee, and maybe a breakfast taco.

His legs hurt and his fingers prickled with told tips. A light wind was blowing from the south but it was tolerable and not even enough to blow out a match cupped in a hand to light a cigarette... not that he smoked. Harold had to give that up with his last bought of bronchitis, but that was almost two years ago. He pulled his overcoat tight over his grey hoodie with a dirty hand and reached for his backpack, peeling back one of the pocket covers and retrieving a pair of brown cloth work gloves. Wrestling the coverings back over his shoulders and putting his hands under the blanket he yanked the gloves on and carefully sat up so the plastic didn't blow off. With a quick flip, the blankets were on top of the plastic and he rolled it into the plastic, tying it securely to the bottom straps of the backpack. He stood up and did a quick stretch as bones and joints popped from a long night on a concrete bed. He buttoned his overcoat, grabbed the backpack by the top loop and headed down the slope to the street below.

It was a good spot for a hobo, no one else to share the ledge, plus there was an added advantage to the location because there was an off ramp that emptied to the access road where you were usually halted by a streetlight. It was very much like working at home except that your pay came instantly if you knew how to play the cards right.

Harold was no novice and was in a short amount of time heading across the intersection to the 7/Eleven for a cup of coffee.



Sunday, December 6th

Harold crossed 6th street and entered the mini-market. Opening the door was an experience in its self as he was greeted with a warm blast of air that carried with it stories of locally ground and brewed coffee. You could smell the steam off the hot dogs and sausages being ever so slowly turned over long hot metal rollers; the caustic smell of press ink on news paper mixed with various levels of colognes and perfumes and soaps and even sweat as people crowded the coffee bar and counter for a quick fix and a bit of news. Harold moved through the customers like Moses parting the water. It appeared no one wished to brush up against this ill-dressed man that had obviously not had a bath in at least 5 days. Ask Harold that? He would laugh and tell you he couldn't remember the last time he'd been in water.

Harold took full advantage of the coffee bar and took his time ripping the tops off creamers and packets of sugar, emptying them into the cup until he looked down at the accumulation of sweet white liquid at the bottom before topping off the cup with hot black liquid. He took a sip of it to test if it was to his liking, then snapped a somewhat domed lid over the top and lined the side of the cup with a heat resistant paper slip. As he approached the cashier counter he paused to look at the headlines on newspapers and glanced at the magazine rack behind the attendant where the heads of glamorous women peeked out from over top a plain paper sleeve covering the majority of the cover. He looked up and noticed the people in line had stopped talking and were more anxious to check out of the store, standing uncomfortably and shifting their weight from one foot to the next impatiently.

Once at the head of the line Harold put his cup down, dug into his coat pocket and brought out a handful of coins that he started counting and snapping to the counter top. He counted five quarters, two dimes and three pennies and realized he had enough for one egg taco and pointed the cashier's gaze at a small foil-wrapped pouch indicating to add it to his purchase. He picked out the additional currency and the cashier swept it off the counter and put it in the cash drawer. Turning towards the exit he could make out the morning rush to work through the condensation on the storefront windows but more importantly his eyes caught movement under the bridge where he had stashed his backpack. Moving a little faster, he swung open the door: Someone was going through his stuff!

"HEY HEY!" Harold yelled, but he was too far away and his cries got absorbed by the sound of morning traffic.



Monday, December 7th

Ellen had been wandering the streets after her eviction. She had lost everything. Evidently no one cared what happened to her. She lost her job, caught stashing some underwear and a sweater into her oversized bag after she had finished her shift as a greeter at the local bigbox department store. She didn't blame them, she just had no idea how hard it was to find work after having been blacklisted and the other ramifications it would involve. So, as of October 3rd, she had to pack what she could into a couple of suitcases and vacate what most people would call a project but she called home. No more heat in the winter, no more cool air in the summer; no more nothing.

The first thing she did was go downtown to the Salvation Army to see if she could stay there and maybe work for her keep. Ellen had some skills in cooking, but seeing she never married or had children of her own she never really had the motivation to learn much more than the basics: Throw it in the microwave and let it cook. A refrigerator and a microwave was about all she needed to sustain her day to day livelihood and a TV to keep her from sheer boredom. Was that worth a measly \$380 a month?

"I guess it was" she would mumble to herself in answer.

But the Salvation Army was already teeming with homeless people, some in worse shape than she was. Some were coughing up blood. This made her pause. There were people needier than she was, and most of them had already been living there for many months by the look of things. Still, she had no family locally, and what family she did have was not in much better shape. Slowly she began to dismiss herself as expendable and not deserving of life that included a mattress or a hot meal. She finally took to the streets and to the mercy of the lord.

Having found a kind soul near the underpass Harold resided that let her temporarily spend the night in his tent, she had risen early and had been panhandling already for nearly one and a half hours when despite the business of the street corner she was on was unable to get anyone to donate to her coffers. It was then she decided to look for better hunting ground when she happened to spy a lone backpack up on the ledge of an underpass and went up to see if it was truly abandoned. With some difficulty, she finally ended up that the top of the grade, panting slightly from the stress of the upward climb. She looked around to see where the owner was but all the corners and medians were vacant. How was this possible? Was God finally smiling on her? She opened the backpack and peered under the flap. The top was stuffed with

baggy man-pants, nothing that she would ever wear. She then ventured to undo one of the flaps that were buckles to the side pockets when from the distance she heard an angry voice:

"HEY HEY!" it yelled. She looked in its direction and saw some tallish man trying to cross traffic, his eyes fixed on her. He jumped into the street in the wake of an old Buick, causing a second car to stop unexpectedly and sound its horn. The man glared and yelled something at it and bolted across the rest of the busy intersection. In a moment he was climbing the grade under the overpass and in that moment Ellen decided to flee.



Tuesday, December 8th

Anger welled in Harold at the very thought that someone would dare to go through his backpack. IT didn't matter if he knew the person or not or if they were living under the same bridge: Privacy was Privacy... no matter what the income bracket you were born under. He picked up the pace when he saw the dark figure starting to dart off in the opposite direction. He couldn't be sure if she had found something of value or not it didn't matter at this time, whatever was in that backpack, it was his. Harold bounced unexpectedly off the trunk of a Toyota that he thought would continue to move but had stopped because the light had turned red. Rounding the back, he sprinted between the other waiting cars and galloped up the incline to where his backpack was still perched against the concrete wall supporting the end of the bridge.

Ellen was frantic. By now she had guessed that the man pursuing her was the owner of the backpack. She had no idea if he was a rapist, or a transient or just crazy but the pace in which he was crossing the road indicated to her that this might not be the best time to try to explain what she was doing, and all she could think of was run... run as fast as her legs could manage. She looked back...

Harold had made it to the top of the pitch and was racing across the plateau when something unexpected happened. The lady he was trying to catch lost her footing.

Ellen took a nose dive. To both the pursued and pursuer Ellen's trip was caught in slow motion time lapse photography: At first her hand flailed high, then she twisted her body to the right into the fall, her hands instinctively preparing herself for a hard impact but instead of finding level ground, her hand missed the ledge and her elbow crumpled under her rib cage as she curled over and started to tumble down the embankment. It was not an even fall; her head struck the concrete numerous times and she felt the bone snap at her wrist as it fell under her full weight. She rolled and rolled and rolled, and when she came to the lower sidewalk met the street below, she didn't stop rolling. Bumping across the curb and onto the deck, she crumpled into a fetal position. She looked up as a car was racing towards the intersection trying to beat the light. She put both hands in front of her and closed her eyes.



Wednesday, December 9th

The whole landscape had frozen. Rocks seemed harder, grass was tougher, air was brittle; why would anyone want to be subjected to this even around a pit fire? But that was all there was outside the town of Herodium. It was a barren land. Sheep were the only business most of the people in

this poverty-stricken area knew, and even the sheep were hard pressed to find a living during this cold period.

Hosia had been out to the rocks amongst the little stream that ran locally to do laundry. Breaking through the thin layer of ice she was able to scrub up some of the monthly clothing so that when you came in from out of the cold into the little hut you weren't accosted by the stench. Usually the smoke from the fire pit in the middle was able to mask out all the odor, but lately keeping the fire burning all the time it could get overwhelming.

Amahl and Hosia had been living in the same location since their marriage 32 years ago when having a place of their own was not heard of. Normally living in tribes sharing your fires with at least 8 other family members was not that uncommon, but now with dowries being hidden from the heads of state, marrying into a good situation was not only more common, it was a sought after condition. Amahl was favored in his tribe, and it looked very promising that he was to become a chieftain eventually... if the seasons and the benefits of raising sheep were good to him.

Looking out over the flat lands, Hosia was aware of that the landscape was now quite visible under the night sky. She had finished up her wash late mainly because she had manage to get caught up in some local gossip with the other ladies that shared the same place to do laundry, so usually walking home would have be treacherous had it not been for this unexpected light. As she approached the hut she saw that her husband had returned and was standing in front staring at the sky. Walking up to Amahl, she gave him an inquiring look:

"I was minding my own business" he announced, "when this bright light was everywhere. It was so bright I couldn't see. And in this light I heard singing..."

"We haven't had any wine for a long time, where have you been!" exclaimed Hosia.

"Woman, be quiet!" he snapped "I am not making jest of this. It was a chorus of voices. And they said something very peculiar."

Startled by her husbands sincerity, she was quiet awaiting what he would say next. A few brief moments passed in silence before Amahl spoke again:

"They said to me: 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will.'"

Amahl and Hosia stood in silence looking at a bright star in the sky.

"Will you be leaving?" Hosia had asked, but her voice was lost in the commotion of the noisy emergency room.



Thursday, December 10th

When Ellen started to become conscious the first thought that ran through her head was: "I'm not in Kansas anymore". All things sensational were a blur. There was a flurry of activity around her. The echoes of people talking and issuing orders bounced off the walls like a high strung tension wire; a thousand lights danced through the slim crack in her eyelids. She closed her eyes again. It felt warm where ever she was. Comfortable and warm except for the pounding headache she was having and the numbness she felt at her wrist. The smell of peroxide and sterilized dressings filled her olfactory senses but it was not unpleasant; it was similar to smelling the fumes of diesel or unleaded gas being pumped to the tank of a car. It wasn't what she thought should be happening. Something was wrong.

She tried to sit up and realized she was strapped at the chest and lower legs. Her head was in some kind of restraint that prevented her from turning her left or right. Starting to panic, her breathing getting short, she tried to kick her legs free of the lower restraints then when she realized she was helpless against their bondage issued a high pitched scream of frustration. A hand came down on her shoulder and a resonant voice sounded from in front of where she was not allowed to look:

"You are in Saint David's emergency room. You where hit by a car after you fell down a concrete highway support. Your wrist is broken and they are not sure about your spine or neck so they have your braced until they can perform an MRI."

Ellen thrashed as hard as she could against the restraints. "LET ME UP!!!!" she commanded.

"I can't do that. I wish I could. Are you in pain?" said the voice.

"Fuck you!" She exclaimed, "LET" "ME" "UP" "NOW!!!!"

Some footsteps came to a stop nearby and shifted towards her. "She all right?" said a silky but professional voice. "I think she'll pull through" said the other voice "She isn't happy about the straps though." The female voice responded: "The doctors still want a couple of test done yet. They don't want to take any chances with this kind of trauma."

"Trauma" Ellen heard the voice say. She opened her eyes again and adjusted to the strong flood of florescent lights above, blinking a couple of times to clear the mucus from her eyes. She peered left and right as far as she could, finally focusing on the stubbly face of a man with heavy jowls. He smiled. "There you are."

Her lips pursed in confusion. "How did I get here?"

"I called the ambulance" he said, "I think I'm the reason you fell."



Friday, December 11th

Clouds cleared. Stars came out. Temperatures dropped by fifteen degrees by the time Harold was told he wasn't allowed to accompany Ellen to the floor where they kept the gargantuan Magnetic Resonance Imaging scanner. She was scared. She had never had to under go this procedure before

and the unknown scared her to no end. Add to that she was strapped down and her head locked in a brace this was not a pleasant thing. She would have even been less anxious if there was someone she knew was holding her hand, or even Santa Clause were present during this procedure. She was swept away down the hall and disappeared through a large set of white double doors that locked shut. Behind them they continued into the hall beyond and to elevators large enough to have be home to a family of 4.

Picking up his gear he went outside into the cold night. The chill was enough to send a vapor steaming into the air above as one exhaled but nothing like the winters Harold had experience in Chicago before migrating south to warmer climate. This was mild in comparison. He leaned his backpack up against the brick facade of the emergency entry and looked around. There was a large yellow and green ambulance down the circle drive, engine running to keep the ERS cabin in the back warm and prepped for a quick exit, a dim light bleeding into the darkness from two small windows. People were coming and going from the hospital parking facility, nothing really dramatic for an early evening.

A large man in a dark tweed overcoat emerged from the entry and retreated to a recess to the far side of the large glass front sliding doors. Seconds after he disappeared around the corner, Harold noticed a quick flicker of a lighter warm the opposing wall and quickly extinguish. Harold took this opportunity to practice some skills in the solicitation of goods. Grabbing the backpack by the top loop, he walked slowly over to the recess in the building. The smoker was musing into the night in a grey cloud of smoke when Harold cleared the corner.

"You wouldn't happen to have an extra one of those would you?" Harold asked.

The gentleman blew another long stream of blue smoke above Harold head and a with his eyes made a quick assessment of the bum. "Sorry" he said, "but they don't sell cigarettes in there and it looks like it's going to be a long night judging by the people already waiting." His tone carried no malice but there was a a note of discomfort in his decision to deny the request. He drew his coat tighter around his chest. "Your wife, she's going to be all right?"

Harold snorted. "She's not my wife, but I was the one to call the ambulance and bring her in. I think she's homeless."

"Seems to be a popular occupation these days" he responded with more smoke streaming out as he spoke. There was a brief awkward silence where the two men stared into each others eyes. The stranger sighed and reached into his inner coat pocket, producing a pack of Camels and held it out to Harold. "So, you didn't have to really help her, did you?" Harold took the pack and tapped a white paper-encased stick out of the opening, handing the pack back to the gentleman.

"No, I didn't" he said with a grimace pulling at the corner of his mouth "but we are kind of part of a global family when we aren't arguing over what corner belongs to who and the right to a refrigerator box." Harold stared down in though for a brief moment then continued; "I was chasing her when she fell so I feel responsible. I'll probably hang out until she's released, I owe her that much."

The gentleman made a second assessment of Harold with his dark eyes. "Doesn't seem like your situation is much better than hers by the look of it," he said in a cold grunt "but I understand the family thing though I haven't talked to mine in decades." They shared another moment of silence. The man in the tweed coat dropped what was left of his cigarette to the grass and ground it out with the toe of his black cowboy boot. He reached back into his pocket and retrieved the pack of cigarettes. He handed it to Harold

and grunted; "consider it a donation." then disappeared around the corner and back to the emergency room.



Saturday, December 12th

Apparently the heavy set guy in the dark tweed coat was not just waiting on a patient. As he left Harold, he went through the emergency room entrance, turned right and then left into an available freight elevator. This was the ideal route to take if you wanted privacy. After pressing the 8th floor button, he leaned heavily back against the quilted pad that covered the steel walls and took a deep breath. He was feeling oddly bested because of a simple chat with a bum and it wasn't to his liking. Being the director of a major hospital often meant sacrifice on a personal level. He didn't often find himself in a position of being compassionate or sympathetic; he had to constantly remind himself that whatever he did had to be in the best interest of the hospital.

Roland Highland had worked his way up the corporate ladder for 28 years, starting out as a scrub boy on the obstetrics floor, taking classes at night, earning his medical degree locally at the state university, then slowly working his way up from the emergency room to the top floor. As he closed his eyes he could not help but feel he had lost a valuable connection to the heartbeat living there. Indeed, he felt more like a slave to the needs of the hospital than he did to his ex-wife and his ex-children. There was a price to be paid for such a position he now held, but in the elevator at that time he began to doubt if he had taken the right exit off that expressway to the top.

There was a clang of metal and the cabin halted. The doors slid open and a tall dark skinned man entered pushing a heavy utility cart full of cleaning supplies. The custodian looked into Roland's round doughy face for a moment. He nodded an empty greeting then diverted his gaze to the elevator panel and pressed one of the many round white buttons arranged in rows. The doors hesitated then groaned closed. The floor lurched and started to move, the hum of the elevator motor dominated. They rode in silence up two floors. The elevator stopped and the custodian exited without looking back, disappearing with his cart as the double metal doors of the elevator closed and continued on its way up the shaft.

"He didn't know me" Roland thought "I'm invisible."

"Then again not everybody should know who I am" he mused to himself, "specially with the way I currently look". The little observations did make him stop momentarily from being an administrator. There was a hobo in the street smoking his cigarettes that had performed a service that he had not done in years: Direct involvement with the saving of a life. This bothered him. At one time he cared that people were healthy; that people needed and wanted to live. The cold blue tint from the florescent tubes behind the frosted ceiling tiles cast shadows under his brow, nose, lower lip and chin. It made him to look more like a ghoul of Halloween than a spirit Christmas. The clang announced he had arrived at his floor the doors groaned opened once more allowing passage to the executive offices. The light from hall flooded the elevator compartment but he didn't get off. He leaned motionless against the wall deep in thought. He was restless for some reason.

Eventually, the doors slid shut again as the elevator responded to a service request from a lower floor. Roland's hand quickly reached out and hit the 4th floor button. It lit up in response. That was the floor the MRI scanner was located.



Sunday, December 13th

The security guard found Harold sitting on the ground, his backpack sandwiched between his back and one of the supports holding up the emergency entrance awning. He looked cold but actually Harold was quite toasty in his trench coat. The idea was to make people believe he was cold and even at a hospital people had felt bad enough for him to drop "alms" in the form of currency; one kind person even gave him half of a nearly fresh ham and cheese sandwich on wheat. Without much ceremony, the guard reached down pulled Harold into a standing position. Harold started to brush off his coat but found his backpack thrust into his arms, forcefully turned away from the building and escorted to where the circle drive met the parking lot. Harold began to protest, beseeching the guard that he had a friend in the building that was undergoing some tests, but when he couldn't give a name to the woman he was promptly asked not to return. Stunned, he watched the guard walking back up the circle drive. Access: Denied! His eyes wandered across the vast wall of windows of the hospital. Many of them were lit bright; some had their curtains pulled across them and some almost totally dark except for the light bleeding in through a partially opened door into the hall. He wondered if the woman would end up in one of those rooms or whether they would do their test and then just release her. Would her neck be in a brace? Would they ask her back for checkups or to remove the cast that covered her lower arm in plaster?

"Well, if she goes back out on the street, the cast will be an added benefit" he mused to himself, "and better; if she has a neck brace... ohhh, people will REALLY feel sorry for her!"

But deep in his heart, his wish would be that if there was something wrong with her they would keep her there for a little while, compliments of the county tax payers. He did wonder if she had any belongings and the thought crossed his mind that maybe he should go back to the scene of the accident and hunt in the general direction she was trying to escape towards. He hoisted his backpack across his shoulder and headed down the street.

However, life for Ellen was not as bad as first thought. Roland had stopped in at the office on the fourth floor and watched from behind the huge plate window as Ellen was slowly rolled through the huge white donut shaped port hole, becoming less visible as she disappeared into the cylinder at the middle.

Anatomic images flashed up on some rather large flat panel monitors. After all was done, he talked briefly to the tech. There didn't seem to be any serious injury but there were signs of bruising at the back base of the neck that warranted at least the need of a collar. He accompanied them to a nursing station and went to talk to one of the nurses there. Initially the nurse did not recognizing her superior and surprised he would be prowling her floor. She had balked at the idea of finding a room for this homeless lady, but the hospital director gave her a direct request. She trotted off down the hall where she disappeared into an open room. Roland walked back and peered into Ellen's eyes. "I'm going to have you stay here for a couple of days. That nurse is preparing you a room. You will have a window and a television. We will be taking you out of this brace and putting a foam collar around your neck to allow some bruising we found to heal. Would you like us to notify anyone for you?"

There were tears welling up in Ellen's eyes as she whispered "No". She would have been shaking her head but it was still held firmly in place by the brace.



Monday, December 14th

Harold took his time heading back to the 7th street bridge where he had left a simple life behind when a stranger looked like she was stealing his backpack. There was wall of guilt he had his nose to. Who would have thought that a simple misjudgment would end up with people getting hurt? No. Wait. Who said she wasn't trying to get into his stuff? Why did she run if she wasn't doing anything wrong? Yeah. He was right to chase her off! Why should he be carrying the burden of guilt on this one? She got what she deserved for messing with things she had no business messing with. Then again, what would he have done in the same situation? Damn. He sure did feel guilty.

Sticking to the access roads along the interstate he worked his way south, passing cheap motels, adult shops, gas stations, restaurants and quick marts. As he approached the bridge that he had called home for the last ten days he started flanking the alleys and cross streets for evidence of her belongings. H didn't know what he was looking for, plus knowing nothing about her aside from the fact that (as far as he knew) she had no home did have its disadvantages. She could have been using a shopping cart, or a plastic trash bag, or a backpack similar to his or worse; nothing at all. The thought that she was totally destitute was unsettling.

"I guess I acted impulsively" the thought. Here he was, homeless, feeling responsible for another person life. This was not the kind of busy he preferred and it was getting to a time he should think about shutting down for a couple of hours. He became increasingly aware of the time and decided he would start looking for her stuff after he had a short nap and then a quick bite. Harold ditched into a side street that turned away from the access road and used the facilities between two large green dumpsters. He was ripe and in need of a shower and cleaner clothes. Emerging from the alley he could see his nesting spot in the distance just under the bridge but out of the direct light emitted from the nearby stores and overhead street lamps along the interstate. Seeing the traffic was lean he started taking a direct path to the bridge along its cement supports. He was crossing 7th street and almost to the other side when he searching the area to see that everything was as it should be when he noticed a dark figure crouching at the top ledge of the underpass opposite his usual camping spot. The shadowy outline suggested a heavy overcoat and by its side was a large bulging black plastic yard bag.

"I saw what happened" said an rough alto voice. It had an edge to it, like taking a thumbnail and grinding it up the bronze wrapped lower E string of a guitar. Harold paused and stared up into the darkness. "That was a good thing you did, getting someone to call an ambulance" it continued in a flat tone "but you and I know you made her fall".

"She was going through my stuff" he said more out of curiosity than defensively. "She might not have known if the owner was dead or not, but I think if she sat and watched for a while...." He paused and then as an afterthought said sort of like you're doing right now. I think time would have explained everything." "I was sitting here the whole time" the shadowy person said. "It isn't like there's no room for more up on these ledges. I have her belongings."



Tuesday, December 15th

I can't keep up with it" said the innkeeper's wife, "You have to stop now! I don't think we have enough to feed the crowd we already have for the night!"

Indeed, there were many in the dining room that night. It must be because of those damn taxes was the first thing that Makis thought. Mostly the house was barely able to afford the old brick and mud plastered walls from falling under local jurisdiction. The thought that he would be out on the street terrified the old man, but he was happy tonight. Not only did they not have enough room for the people that were in the dining area, there were people on the upper floor that were already asleep. That meant that those who couldn't fit in a room would be camping on the floor that night.

"As long as they don't spill into my bedroom, let them feel like dried dates stuffed in storage bowl!" he thought to himself happily. Tonight would pay for months of poverty, and whatever it took, he would make sure those at the table were fed and well cared for no matter how little food they had left. He turned to a table seated with 5 gentiles and asked if they would like a skin of local wine. Without so much as an argument, Makis was pocketing silver coins into his apron as he hurried away to fetch some earthstone cups and the refreshment, but when going back into the kitchen area his wife Harika turned to him in exasperation: "No! No more! We are out of bread, we are out of soup, we are out of stew. We have no more! You must start turning people away now!"

"We are not out of wine" he said calmly. Going across the dirt floor he reached up to the upper most shelf and pulled down a large jar. Grabbing a clay pitcher off the second shelf, he poured some of the deep maroon liquid into the opening and returned the jar to the shelf. "We can not afford to ignore the requests of the house, dear wife. If you need to make the portions smaller, then make them smaller. I do not want to give excuses to our guests!"

There was nothing left to say; Harika could not argue with her husband or the needs of the house. She looked with futility back at the fire place and the grate that was holding up the various iron pots that were nearly burning whatever was sitting at the bottom of them. She had to make them last. With a heavy sigh, she turned away from the door and back into the kitchen gallery when there was another knock heard at the front door.

"No MORE!" Harika commanded

Makis went through the door and into the dining area. After leaving the pitcher of wine and cups at the table of the guests he strode to the front door where he lifted the cross bar and pulled the latch. Outside he was met with an old man holding onto the rope of a donkey who was carrying a lady that was obviously in discomfort.

"Dear sir" the older man said politely, "I have come a long way and my wife and I need rest for the night and a place to put up the ox and ass." Makis was unable to answer for the moment. His heart felt that it would be a mistake to turn these customers away, but he also knew that his wife would nag him to the end of days if he took on more company.

"I am sorry" Makis finally said, "but alas, I can not take a single person more. Inside, I have four and twenty guest stacked like peas in a pod. I wish I could accommodate you and your wife but your must look elsewhere."

The look on the old mans face was one of panic. "But where will I find such accommodations?" he started to say, but just down the street there was a siren and flashing lights responded to a truck collided into the back end of a late model Honda Civic.



Wednesday, December 16th

Hello? Hey. Hey... " Harold said sharply to the man now laying sprawled out on the cement. "Just my luck, he's probably epileptic." He put an arm under the mans neck and grabbed him under the arm pit, swinging him around to a sitting up position supported by the massive concrete slab that supported the bypass above. Not knowing what to do next, he looked down the steep cement embankment to where the contents of Ellen's belongings now littered the street below. Traffic was maneuvering to the oncoming lane to avoid running anything over and possibly spoiling the undercarriage of the vehicle. Farther up the street a patrol car was parked at an angle, lights flashing red and blue, forcing traffic into a single lane. Cars moved slowly through the wreckage as if watching a carnage movie expecting to see if any gory details were to be seen. Harold stood up and stretched, the cold night air reaching through the collar of his shirt and sent a chill down his chest.

"I don't think I'm having much of a good influence on the people I'm meeting tonight." he said to himself. He was about to head back down the grade when the scratchy voice of the man he thought was unconscious: "I don't think it's you."

Harold kneeled back down by the mans side and put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't know if you heard me ask this earlier, but are you ok?"

"Dunno." he answered uncomfortably, "but wherever I was it wasn't much better than this."

"Can you stand?" came the next question, "I... I... I got to get down there and pull that stuff off the street before we have another accident. You be all right while do that? If you need something just call, I'll be back in a minute." The man grunted as to relay he was fine and Harold descended to the street where he didn't waste much time picking things up in any kind of gentle or orderly manner. Pretty much throwing things to the sidewalk and curb was all he was interested in at the moment just to make life less perilous for him. He wasn't all that happy with how the night had progressed. He had just finished grabbing the black plastic bag that was blowing around on the pavement and was heading back to the sidewalk when a patrol car stopped and the passenger side window rolled down.

"This stuff yours?" said a plump hispanic officer.

"No sir" said Harold looking up, wind brushing the hair into his face, "I was picking it up for that guy up there that dropped it" He pointed in the general direction of the upper ledge.

The officer looked on, his face void of expression. "Well, you can't stay here. Pick this stuff up and move along. I'll be back to check in a bit." The window was already rolling up as he finished and the cruiser started rolling towards the other end of the underpass.

"Great." Harold said under his breath, "Just great. There goes the gravy train."



Thursday, December 17th

Dr. Landon had been making his rounds and had arrived at Ellen's room. Ellen was pretty bruised up after her tumble down the concrete footing; her face was puffy with blue/black blotches, her neck now encased in a thick foam support that was held with velcro at the back and of course the solid plaster caste intended to keep her wrist from moving. She had been given some percocet's to relieve any pain she was having so she was pretty disoriented, knowing mostly she was in a nice room with a second bed, lots of monitoring devices and a television set to mute at the moment with only closed captions displaying the current dialog. The curtains were open upon her request and her bed, which had all these controls to make it raise and lower every part or it was in an upper diagonal position allowing her to see most of the room and people passing in the hall. Behind her was a consol with a lamp boom attached to it as well as an array of florescent tubes indirectly illuminating the room and was dotted by a variety of buttons, some lit red or green and control switches.

Picking up the clipboard hanging at the foot of the bed, Dr. Landon reviewed the comments, checking to see that she was up to date on her meds. He rounded the bed, stopping to her left and pulled out a little red pen light. Laying the clipboard on her legs, he pried one eye open with his thumb and flashed the light briefly into the cornea to see its reaction. "I'm awake" she grunted.

"Ah!" exclaimed the young doctor "Good. I don't have to tiptoe around then do it?" He winked at Ellen who stared blankly into his blue eyes. He then examined her neck brace to see if it was fitted correctly and her cast, lifting the fingers and examining the way they curled back into the casts' palm. "Does that hurt?" "Noooo" she drawled, "and if it did I wouldn't know with this stuff you've given me."

"Then it's doing its job." Dr. Landon smiles again. He was in his early 30s, a picture of the Arian race with dark blonde hair and bright blue eyes. His manner and his attire were well pressed but his bedside manner was more congenial than professional. Ellen would have found him attractive if she didn't have the chip of futility riding around on her shoulder like an elephant on a guard rail. Both eyes open she was craning as little to the side to get a better view of what the doctor was doing, but he was busy scribbling notes in some foreign language to be anything more than eye candy. He turned to the life monitoring unit to her side and pressed a button. It immediately responded by issuing a thin length of paper with some graphs on it. He views it as it was being printed till it finally stopped and he ripped the length off from the machine and clipped it to his board.

"I'll see you in the morning again before end of shift and check up on you." He said calmly, "if you need a nurse for any reason just press that little button that's hanging by the arm that isn't bound." Smiling in farewell, he quietly walked from the room. He walked down the hall and stopped at the nursing station where a stocky middle aged woman in short hair wearing blue and red print scrubs. He circled the desk and pulled out a metal hanging folder, flipping the cover and started writing noted onto the paper it protected. As he was writing, Dr. Roland Highland came up to the desk.

"You taking care of our homeless waif?" he smiled as he approached. Dr. Landon looked up; "Ummhumm." He said with lack of expression and returned to his notes. Roland finally came to a stop behind the young doctor and looked over his shoulder. "I want her to stay here until the abrasions on her face have faded a bit, then I want to be notified that she is well enough to check into a half way house or a home. I don't want her wandering the street in a neck brace and a caste.

The younger doctor looked up questioningly "She have a secret donor taking care of her expenses here?" he said seriously.

"I believe she does" Roland replied. There was a meeting of eyes that the conversation was now at an end and Dr. Landon had his orders.



Friday, December 18th

Harold's mood turned sour. Mumbling curses under his breath he began throwing the junk he had tossed to the curb back into the black trash bag which primarily were womens clothes, but also included trinkets such as photographs in cheap plastic frames, an old wind-up travel clock, a little black box of jewelry held together with a hair band and various sundry items. Some of the lighter objects had been blown down the street towards the city which didn't help lighten his outlook, and every now and then he looked up into the darkness where the stranger was hopefully still alive and watching from the cement ledge of the bridge footer.

A large tow truck rumbled by towards the flashing police lights down the street where the accident was in full swing. An EMS unit had arrived along with a fire truck which seemed to be a standard practice with accidents just in case there was a leak of gasoline. Harold chased some papers down the sidewalk, finally catching one under his foot while the other two continued on their way. He watched them for a moment. Cold and dark, the approach of a new day did not look as promising as the day Harold had just been through. He looked down and picked up what appeared to be a part of a multi-page, typed document that looked like it came from some government office. It was Ellens foreclosure notice. There was a time stamp at the top that wasn't even two years old.

"Poor lady" he thought. He put the letter into the bag and decidedly grabbed one of the plastic frames that was protruding from the mass of soiled clothes. It was a picture of her, he assumed as a young child. She was standing in a formal family pose with an older brother. The children flanked the parents who were sitting on dining chairs, hands folded on their laps and smiling artificially at the camera. Harold thought back to his own family, times when his life was simple and without fear or want but it came back to the present when he had a thought that the contents of the bag did not really represent the belongings of a person who had lived on the street. It was more like a travelling bag one used to go on a visit only missing the suit case. He twisted the top of the plastic bag shut and headed back to the bridge where he found the ledge void of people but more importantly, his backpack was missing as well.



Saturday, December 19th

No 'cleaner' clothes, no razor to remove two days of facial hair growth, no toothbrush and feeling absolutely abandoned he slumped to the deck letting the plastic bag fall and some of the content spill back into the world. Wrapping his arms around his legs in a prone position Harold proceeded to knock his forehead against his knees time and time again. NOW what was he going to do? It had taken years to accumulate his mobile home so that it suit his day to day needs and afforded him the best possible defense against the weather and pan-handling. Harold felt desolate. Homeless. His hands were crusty with dirt and blood, his coat looked more like urban camouflage; his longish hair was greasy and matted and he had dark blue-grey rings under his eyes. He was unable to remember the last time they were shut in peace. In his mind he conjured up a mental image of how he must look to the rest of the world, and if he were in their place would he even roll down the window of his car to chance a sniff of his filth?

Homeless.

What a paradox: He was so poor now the only thing he had aside from the clothes he was wearing were the belonging of someone else he had no need for. A sneer spread across his lips: "And she's in a hospital, in a nice warm bed, with some nice drugs pulsing through her veins with people taking care of her. She's probably clean and dressed and fed. Oh... and not to mention there is a creep out there that had a bag of my stuff, stuff that would make his life easier living on the street!" He let loose of an explosive breath that plumed into the cold air in a cloud of vapor, letting loose of the hug he had around his knees and his back lean against the support foundation of the bridge. His hands fell to his side, one landing on top of the black plastic trash bag containing Ellen's possessions. He looked down and the corner of the frame of the photograph of her and family was visible just above the opening. He picked it up and stared at it.

By this time traffic on 7th street was sparse. Businesses had shut down. People were probably home watching a bit of television before going to sleep in their nice warm comfortable beds. Sleep. The 7/Eleven's parking lot visible from the ledge he was sitting on had only one car parked in front of the large glass walls painted internally with steam and dripping condensation. The night was very quiet now. The wind was still blowing from the east, tugging at strands of his hair, send them across Harold's face and getting caught on his lips. He reached into his trench coat pocket and pulled out the pack of cigarettes, extracting one and putting it in his mouth. He then went to his side pocket for his lighter but found the pocket empty: His lighter was in his backpack. With a sigh and a grunt he pushed himself up into a standing position and headed towards the store to see if they would at least give him a book of matches before asking him to return to the cold night air and an even colder world.



Sunday, December 20th

Many of the staff on the floor were not receptive about taking in a homeless person under their care whether or not the director of the hospital approved. In their opinion a charitable donation would have consisted of an ace bandage and a couple of aspirins, then it would be out the door. But they were professional about their work. They fed and cared for her as best they could even if it was under protest, but even though Ellen had injuries did not mean her hearing was impaired had to endure the posturing of the nurses once they were out in the hospital hallway.

"This is a waste of my time and hospital space" one nurse would say, or "I don't know why the director is taking such and interest in this one, he hardly wastes time with any of us" or just simply "It's your turn to feed the bum."

This made Ellen's time in the infirmary very uncomfortable, but she bore it with as much dignity as she could. They were right about one thing: She was a bum. She hadn't always been bum, but she was now and she too wondered why they just didn't kick her out. She was enjoying some short lived comforts like three meals a day and she was clean for the first time in a week. She had enquired whether or not anyone had found a bag with her belongings in it, but eventually gave up.

"I have nothing left" was all she could think. The future was unknown to her now. She didn't know where she would go from here. She had no money, no clothes or local family; she didn't even have identification. For all the hospital staff knew she was a Jane Doe and for the most part treated her as such. Dr. Landon came in promptly twice a day and checked on her progress and was apparently please with it. He had taken her of Percocet and moved her on to Tylenol. Her bruising was healing rapidly as well but her neck

was a different story, and sleeping through the night was nothing less than impossible even with sleeping aids. Her cast? She would have to wear it for 4 weeks.

Ellen had become bored with the same old television programming and had asked one of the nurses for some reading material. The attending nurse made an impatient clucking sound but after a short absence re-emerged from the hallway with a newspaper and a couple of magazines. She laid them on the stand next to her bed and left the room. Ellen picked up one of the magazines and started flipping through the pages when overheard the start of a commotion out in the hall.

"Yes I know, but if you will just let me..." said a masculine voice. "I'm sorry sir, no visitors at this time," she over hear the head nurse say in an angry voice, "You must leave now!"

"I'll only be a second." The male voice was closer now to Ellen's room which meant he wasn't going to let them get in his way. The nurse called down the hallway, firing out orders to get security up to the floor but by the time she had finished a rather filthy looking man wearing a trench coat entered carrying a large plastic bag. Ellen recognized the bag and the man carrying it: He was the one that chased her under the bridge. Her face turned white and she pressed the red call button hanging off the side of the bed. "WAIT!" Harold yelled in panic, "I only wanted to drop your things off and see how..."



Monday, December 21st

There comes a time in each life where hope becomes strained and simple faith is only a placebo against the cold and the bitterness and the hardness of reality. The warmth of the soul and the light of the spirit get weak. As winter in the north becomes cold and strips the land of its beauty sometimes covering it in ice, so to does each human. The human in us does not have an annual winter like the world we live in. No. We experience the seasons over a lifetime and no matter how long that lifetime is there is a point where we go through a type of rebirth. Every time Harold came to that point something always came along and yanked him back.

The December moon was full that night and a ghostly halo surrounded the perimeter. The air was sharp and the city lights were drowning out many of the stars. No air stirred now in the small hours of the morning. The sounds of the interstate echoed through the streets seemingly empty at the moment of traffic, but the stop lights still managed invisible traffic as if it were morning rush hour.

No where to go, Harold walked towards the center of the city, canvassing the back streets and alleys for shelter abandoning hope of finding the man who had taken his gear. He turned west and traveled down a dark street lined with trash containers large enough to house a family of 3. One such bin was a compactor and inside it's steel door was a flat piece of cardboard from an appliance it protected during shipping. Harold pulled it out with a little effort and soon had a small A frame constructed between 2 large green containers that provided some shelter from onlookers. He foraged in another dumpster and found a clean plastic bag that only contained paper waste which delighted him, he could use this as a rather comfortable pillow that night. He pulled some of the paper loose from the bag and stuffed it inside his coat for added insulation and climbed between the sides of his cardboard tent to lay down with his head towards the wall, hugging the plastic bag under his head.

As he started to drift off to sleep, he heard a cat prowling near by, but he also became aware of the sound of short jittery breaths... the kind you recognize when you are standing in a foot of snow within a crowd

of kids waiting for a school bus. This breathing was uneven and obviously not that of a child. Harold sighed and inched himself bug-like out of his box and waked to the end of the tall green trash container. The owner of the breathing had wrapped himself in a dry-cleaner bag but he was shaking uncontrollably. Without hesitation Harold quickly bent down and peered into the dark brown face of an older man, lines carved like ravines around the eyes and cheeks that had been baked in the sun for long stretches of time. "Come on old man" he said, hoisting him up and grabbing him around the chest; "There are better places than this to rest."



Tuesday, December 22nd

There is light everywhere. The light was not blinding. The light bleaches all color from all objects so that you can only detect edges and shapes, like so many boxes and spheres painted white and a hundred light sources preventing shadows to form in any direction. In this light is movement; movement of what one would assume would be human movement, but it is not grounded. The outlines of these humans are ethereal and apparently a source of light in themselves. The voices are singing. As they sing, the light shimmers like tiny iridescent flakes of snow that float away and dissipate into the abundant whiteness. The light is warm. The light holds you like a child to a mothers breast and you are filled with a calm and inner peace. The warmth bathes you and washes through your soul, cleansing it and purifying it.

A new purpose makes its presence known and suddenly everything becomes clear to you. Little by little the singing takes on form and meaning and your life becomes defined in that moment; all events and experiences you have stored up in the form of memories were leading to this moment: Epiphany. In wonder you walk forward and the beings of light part, retaining a certain distance from you but bowing reverently as you pass by. There is no question that you are not meant to be here. All is as it should be. There will be no going back. You, like the shining, singing shapes are sharing a singular thought and you find yourself singing. You fail to realize that you are no longer a part of the world you were living in, only to know joy and warmth and elation. Your singing flows from you and joins the host that surround you. You become aware that something important is about to happen. Something that is about to change the history of the world and you are preparing with other like you.



Wednesday, December 23rd

Dr. Roland Highland was on hand to sign the release papers personally for Ellen. It was not very ceremonious, but the staff wasn't about to argue the point now; they were happy that his patient was leaving. Ellen had been in the hospital for a total of five days now and she was almost spoiled despite the ambivalence of the staff that had been ordered to wait on her hand and foot. No matter what happened from this point, she had a nice new memory of being cared for.

Not only this, but the horrible man that had entered her room a couple of days ago did not manage to keep a firm grip on the plastic bag he was carrying, the plastic bag that had most of the things she held precious to her at this time. After Harold had been removed forcefully from her room and seeing she was not being tethered to an IV drip, she had swung her hips off the bed when she realized what had transpired and hobbled as fast as she could to pick up the bag. Dragging it across the floor, she heaved it up onto the hospital bed and sat down next to it. When one of the nurses realized the contents belonged to Ellen, they removed the articles of clothing and sent them down to the hospitals laundry room where everything

would be sanitized as best it could be. The head nurse was actually happy at this for it meant they didn't have to find clothes for her that fit when the hour came for her departure. She had her own clothes now, no matter how ratty and ugly they looked in their opinion.

For Ellen the best moment of her stay was yet to come: Before they took the bag she had hoisted it to the bed as now perched on the edge, feet dangling like a little girl on a chair too big pulling at the tie holding it closed. There was something hard and rectangular pressing against the side, and object so familiar to her she didn't even need to look at it to know what it was. She pulled it impatiently away from the plastic and held it to her chest and smiled. There it would stay even as she napped. One of the orderlies tried to pry it from her as she lay asleep, but she woke so violently and started shouting at the poor man he fled the room swearing that he would clean up the room after that "Evil bitch" was no longer there. The night before her release however, the head nurse had been doing her rounds and took the opportunity to gently slide the frame out from her fingers and look at it.

Surprise lit her eyes as she recognized that the older woman sitting in the center of the picture flanked by a very handsome man and well mannered kids was the very woman laying on the bed. Knowing that she would not be able to return the photograph to its preferred location, she pulled out the little plastic stop on the back of the frame and rested it on the night stand next to the bed. This woman was not a nobody any more.

"She was not homeless." thought the nurse "I guess we all have history. Maybe I was a little hard on her no matter what her circumstances are currently. It's obvious she once belonged to a family and she was loved." The nurse paused thoughtfully in the door leading to the hall and looked back, wondering what event sent her life crashing to the ground; she even felt a little saddened and embarrassed for her previous behavior. She flipped a switch. The room darkened and leaving only a small crack in the door she turned and disappeared down the hall.



Thursday, December 24th

There wasn't a lot of ceremony when Ellen was taken from the hospital and replanted in the mid-town shelter, but she did receive a cloth laundry bag to keep her belongings in instead of the plastic trash bag. All in all she didn't get the sense that the good doctors and nurses held her in contempt, at least as much as they maybe did 4 days ago and although some did not bid her farewell, she did enjoy a quiet ride in a wheelchair to the main entrance to where a cab was waiting. The drive wasn't more than a few minutes across town. Soon Ellen was standing in front of an old brick building tastefully decorated for the holidays.

The Episcopal church had a long rectory on the corner that flanked the chapel. It had been renovated and refurnished to shelter people in need. It was a tired looking building, but the brick was in good shape, with trails of ivy climbing up on either side of the entrance. The entry porch with its tall wooden columns held up a vaulted overhang with an intricate weaving of wood in the design of a Gordian knot over which a gold painted cross was attached. The columns had been wrapped with thick artificial garland, not nearly as pleasant as the real stuff, but along with the tiny white twinkling lights and the red satin ribbon that was interwoven into the green it looked very festive. A large, singular wreath made of real holly and fir was fastened to the heavy wooden door that had a small viewing windows protected by wrought iron bars. There was no sign or welcome to it but it warm and inviting just the same. Ellen climbed the steps and rang the doorbell.

A tall thick lady in a heavy dark red flannel shirt and a pair of baggy jeans opened the door and smiled a greeting: "You must be Ellie," She said in a comfortable manner "we've been expecting you! Come inside, come inside" she waved. Ellen crossed the threshold and the door closed behind her. The building was deceiving for it was huge inside and brightly lit. The foyer had a large antique mirror at one end with coat pegs fastened to either side but was being used to also host more garland, ribbon and lights. At each upper corner were festive red bows. She took a quick scan of the room and when she looked up into the ceiling noticed a sprig of mistletoe and quickly moved deeper into the foyer.

Ellen was to share a room with at least eight other women and even though men also occupied the same building the only things they shared was the dinning room and the common rooms. She tucked her bag under her bed, removing the photograph and propping it up on the little nightstand next to it, then turned her attention to taking all the linens that were folded neatly at the foot of the bed and dressing the mattress. She fell back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling oblivious to the comings and going of the other ladies in the room.

No matter how short her stay may be, for the moment (and for the first time in at least a year) she felt safe and warm. She was clean and wearing clean clothes. She was fed. Pictures started playing like movies dating back to the days when at this time she would have been running around frantically trying to orchestrate the decorating of the tree, the making of egg nog, the preparation of a dish of cookies for Santa, the last minute packing of toys or the dressing of the turkey that would be put in the oven even before the candles were lit for Christmas morning. There would be mighty excited children that next morning. It was a labor of love that holds its own and can't be compared to with any other day of the year. She would have precious little time to snuggle with her husband and catch a few peeks at the kids as they began to play with the various things Santa had brought them, and she would be happy.



Christmas, December 25th

Ellen woke with a start, sitting up directly in her bed. By the feel of the dark it must have been early morning for even though this room wasn't facing the street there was enough light to make out the outlines of cots all lined up against the wall with a small side table to separate them. The beds and the people in them were dark, some of the sleeping ladies were snoring softly. This however was not the reason for her awakening: There was a man sitting quietly at the foot of the bed. She was so startled that she couldn't think of anything else to do than sit up rigidly and stare at the darkened figure.

"Greetings" it said with a slight drawl to his voice, "I hope I didn't scare you too much."

Ellen sat speechless at first. Many minuets went by in unbroken silence. The man on her bed did not seem to be in any hurry. Eventually Ellen whispered: "Do I know you?"

"Yes mame" he said, "My name is Harold."

Ellen didn't think the voice all that unfamiliar but cocked her head to the side; "What is it you want if you don't mind me asking... and how did you get in here without waking anybody? Are you staying in the men's rooms? Why you coming to me?" Her whisper becoming almost vocal.

"Ellen" Harold said and touched her hand. In that moment Ellen saw the man for the first time. He was bathed in a silver light that shimmered around him like moonlight on gossamer. She took in a deep breath; "You are dead? I... I..."

Harold looked at her and smiled kindly.

"You are the man that chased me?"

Harold nodded.

"You had me taken to the hospital?"

Harold nodded again.

"You brought my things to me. Why?"

Harold just smiled and smiled. "Ellen. By the time the events of your accident played themselves out I had no more need for anything. They are yours and you need them."

Ellen's shoulders relaxed a bit, but the question still hung on her face.

"Ellen, you ask if I am dead, and I say no. I am more alive now than I was as a bum. Oh yes, I was a bum, but meeting you changed all that. I became a giver instead of a taker, and that changed me. I will always be in your service."

Ellen was speechless again. Her mouth opened and closed as she asked a silent question then was able to find the answers herself.

"They are fine, Ellen. You children and husband can't be with you now but know they are in good hands. You will meet them again when you have finished the tasks you have been assigned to do in this life of yours. Do not blame yourself. You tried to save them which is more than the driver did when he ran off that night. You have endured much, but you are blessed."

Throughout this remark, Ellen's mouth was open in awe. She was blessed? How could that be? Her life was nothing anymore, everything was taken away from her and she wanted it back. Her eyes teared up. "They can not come to you." Harold went on, "You will come to them in time but until then they will be watching and waiting and helping. You have much to do yet."

"What must I do?" She asked.

"What your heart tells you to do. I am now a Herald... your Herald, and I am telling you so that you may know that you have great things yet to accomplish. On this day, a day we give our thanks for the birth of the baby Jesus I will visit you. You may not always know it is me, but you will feel my presence as I felt the presence of my own Herald. One day we will meet and you will find yourself in the company of your family once again."

There was a burst of light that bathed the room. There was a host present in the light, all had their own threads of gold and silver winding around their bodies similar to those of Harold's light.

"I must go for now, but I will always be with you. Thank you for showing me the way." He bowed his head as if tipping a large cowboy hat then he rose and joined the rest of the heralds.

"Glory to God" They announced and sang "And Peace on Earth to men of good will"