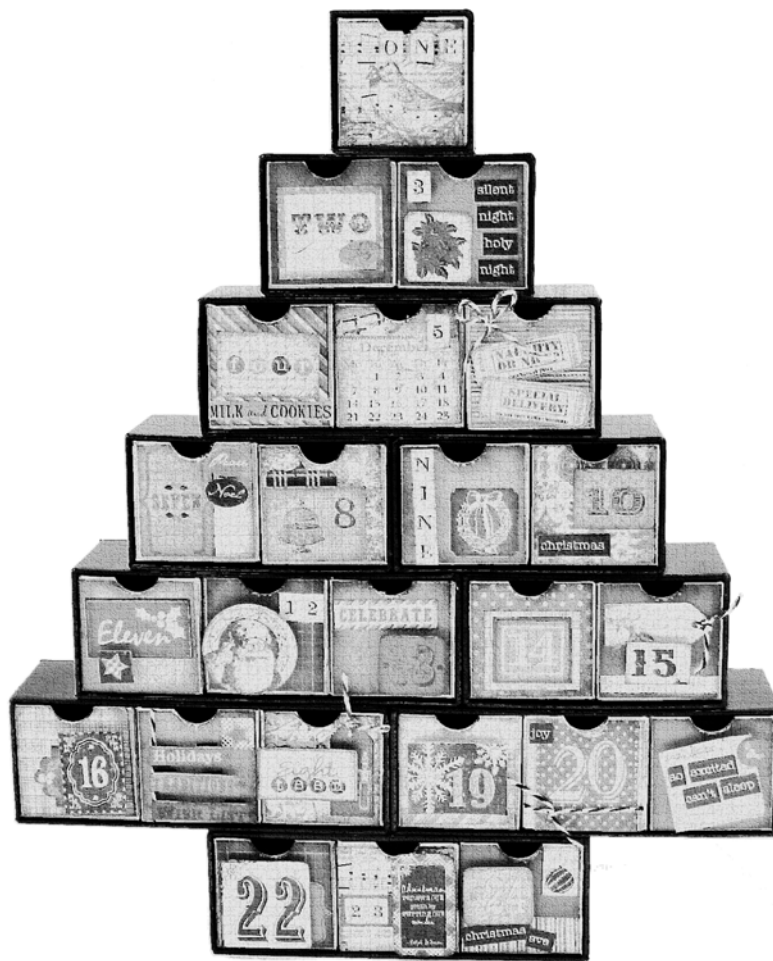


Advent

The Calendar



By
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Introduction

I went walking around the neighborhood last week on a cold day. The air was crisp like the bite of a freshly picked granny smith and the light of day would steal your breath. As I walked, I was plunged into the scent of burning oak and for a brief moment I saw myself staring across the hearth into a merrily burning fire and I felt actually warm. I found it intriguing that such a scent could transport me that way, but as I walked and pondered that moment I realize how often that happens to me.

I am also perplexed that not everyone has the similar experience. Some would just say it was smoke and the conversation would stop right there. Others would relay their thought and memories, or maybe blatantly say “I have to go, I need to get wood for the night”. Of course I’m limited in my perception of the vast amounts of responses to a simple smell or even the lack of it (some people have olfactory issues), but when I was looking into that fire, there was no one else in the room. Just me.

I have these moments all the time. I was once described as being 100% subjective. I thought that was a bad thing, but you know? Maybe it isn’t. Agreed, it has its shortcoming, but I think I have dealt with it pretty well. Even more, it keeps my imagination alive.

I have dreams. I can smell in my dreams. I can hear, talk, converse. My dreams are in full color. Sometimes I can remember my dreams; sometime I am content letting them go. I have had dreams where river water rises and overcomes me; I have driven space ships; I have witnessed peoples death; I have attended conferences and been in some places where clearly I should not have been. Sometimes something in my immediate surrounding sets me to remembering dreams. Sometimes they aren’t dreams, but memories.

This is my last Advent story, and it is all about that stimulus that sends us into remembering. Simple things like a top being spun on a table. It could be a smell. It could be a song or an activity. Christmas is not a time to think about something as simple as a birth, but what this symbolic birth date represents; not just snow, not just trees or presents; not just a fat man in a red suit or carols, but a totality that brings you into the dream, not the other way around.

This years edition: The Calendar.
Dedicated to Deda who loves stories.
Merry Christmas.
–B.D.Peckham 2013



December 1. Gift box

Norman was no longer enchanted by Santa. He didn’t care if you put up a tree. He didn’t care if you lit holiday candles. Presents weren’t magically materialized under a tree. Cookies made you fat, and he didn’t want that. Lights were nice, but he didn’t care one way or another.

His parents only did Christmas for their three children. They garnished a tree that they bought at Target that could be stored in a box in the attic. It actually came with lights pre-installed. They played digitized Christmas carols from their computer for him. They bought Christmas holiday ice cream shaped treats from their HEB local market. There were snowflakes hanging from the ceiling bought from the Dollar

General. His father inflated reindeer and Santa's on the front lawn and completely encompassed the house with a zillion lights. There were cookies, cakes, nogs, chocolate to be had in plenty. But the truth was, it was old. It had been done a zillion times before. Norman felt his parents didn't really care one way or another, but they did care about him and his sisters, wanting to disappoint them. He never told his parents. He didn't want to hurt their feelings.

But Christmas was a lie. There was no snow in Austin in December. It wasn't even cold. Ok, the nights were long and it was kind of cool seeing how the neighbors decorated their properties for the holidays, but eventually it got old... except for one house.

Two houses up and to the right was a house with rotting siding. It had a new roof, but nothing else made it special except for a small change after Thanksgiving. This house had a garage with double doors. The garage doors had windows across the top. Normally when the previous owners turned on the garage interior lights they would bleed out onto the driveway, a dry sallow yellow light. But at this time the spam across the top had been blocked out with some thick black poster board. At first Norman thought it was weird, but the change did make him curious. It wasn't like other neighbors.

As evening overtook the neighborhood, Norman strolled into the street to take a closer look. The garage was definitely illuminating something in the lower corner of the window. It looked like a present cut into the dark poster board and pieces of colorful tissue paper had been glued behind it. There was light being glowing from behind the dark paper, casting a wonderful image into the early night.

It was a box that was wrapped in color paper. Norman stared at the glowing image and found himself standing as a young boy at the bottom step of a long stairway. His eyes were alight with the reflection of a room that was illuminated and many such presents were sitting on the floor surrounding a brightly lit tree. Even though he couldn't make out the nametags on colorfully wrapped boxes, he was sure some of them were for him. He really wanted to advance but felt it would be a violation to his two sisters that may or may not be watching from behind. Norman felt awkward, as if he was watching through a window into someone else's house, but he looked on. As the young boy lingered and finally regressed into darkness, Norman ended up back on the side of the street.

"Naaa." He sighed. This isn't real and went back inside.



Dec 2: The Wreath

School was boring. No one was paying any attention to learning anything. Teachers rambled off the pages of text books and focused on their primary job: Prepare students for the TAKS test (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills). Not only were students irritated with the thought that they would not advance because of a "stupid test", the teachers could not convince their pupils that it wasn't a "stupid test". The room seemed sterile: Linoleum floors, cinder block walls, aluminum windows, white boards had replaced black boards, computers at the back of the room, teachers desk at the front of the room. There were pull-down maps of the world and posters taped to the walls. A few cardboard cutout turkeys, pilgrims and native indians adorned a narrow band of corkboard that was mounted above the white boards; however the afternoon sun streaming in from the south did a pretty good job of bleaching the color from anything at the front of the room.

Beams of sunlight cut diagonally across the room, one such shaft spotlighted Norman's desk. Last class of the day was American history, something that just seemed to last forever. They had just finished with the end of the civil war and the Gettysburg address, which was ok because the text book had quite a few pictures to look at as the teacher, Mr. Coombs rambled on monotonously. There was nothing to interest him here, but it did provide him with a good time to catch up on game cheats and web-comix on his iPad that he didn't dare bring out earlier in the day.

Norman was not old enough to drive, and whatever jobs would be available for a less than ambitious boy of 14 were not glamorous or paid enough to warrant any kind of personal motivation. His parents lived in a plain 3 bedroom house in the south of town even though they could afford better. The cool part was that his sisters had to share a room, which means he had a room to himself. The neighborhood suited him just fine, and as he walked home that evening, he made it a point to walk by the house with the blacked out garage windows just out of curiosity.

There was a new addition: A green wreath. As he paused to look at this simple stained glass-like cutout, he had a vivid dream-like memory that was filled with the smell of pine and a thick ring of spruce branches garnished with a couple of pine cones, sprigs of red holly berries and a large red satin ribbon bow. He reached out and stroked the spruce. The needles were thick and alive and would prickle your fingers if you pressed too hard against the branch. He withdrew his hand and stared at the garage, then put his hand up to his nose: It smelled of pine, and there was a spot of sap on one finger.



Dec 4: Snowman

Next day Norman passed by the garage and the windows were black once again. Not quite disappointed, but not happy either, he went home and up to his bedroom. He pulled out his iPad and did a search on stained glass windows made of tissue paper. Up came craft pages by the hundreds, and stores selling supplies. He browsed a couple sites but still a basic question kept nagging him: "Why now?" This didn't make any sense. He could understand putting up lights, trees, decorations of all types, but there it was; a plain house with deteriorating siding and not even a plastic wreath on the front door. Also, whatever appeared in the windows, nothing was ever subtracted. He typed "Christmas Celebration" into the search field and pressed enter. The first three pages were advertisements and a few wiki's on the subjects. He clicked on the "Pictures" tab and was flooded with the usual associations to the Christmas festival. But there were a few images of church cathedrals with their mandalas of stained glass windows. He clicked on one and despite the wonderful radiant color of the various windows in the Cathedral at Notre Dame, it didn't stir up any answers for the daily changes. After a solid hour of searching and not getting anywhere, he pulled out his english homework and did the spelling list and definitions for the words for the next days quiz, then went downstairs to see what was for dinner.

Pizza. Again. Not even fresh pizza, but one of those freezer section pizzas with the cardboard crusts. It didn't even look appetizing. He smiled at his mother politely as he went to the cupboard, grabbed a glass and poured milk into it from the plastic jug in the refrigerator.

"How long till it dinner?" he asked.

"Not long, only takes minutes to nuke this pie, but your sisters are not home yet so I thought I would wait." She replied.

Odd, he thought. It was getting dark outside and his sisters weren't home. He chugged his glass, put it on the counter and stepped out the front door. The sky was a deep dark blue without a cloud to be seen. To

the west was the faint rosy glow of sunset and up the street he saw his sisters standing still in front of a driveway. He walked up to see what was going on. They had stopped in front of the garage. His younger sister hurried over to him.

“Did you see the present?” she chattered excitedly, “The first picture had a pile of presents under the tree, and I even got to open one!” He walked with her to where the his older sister was standing and followed her gaze. There was a new window, it had a snowman with a red scarf and... Norman was suddenly freezing.



Dec 5: Discussions

All three Alcott kids entered into the house in a lively discussion. Lisa, the youngest was petite but a strong willed child of 11 and would not be underscored in any way by her brother or sister. Lana, the oldest, was thoroughly ignoring Lisa. She talked quietly and directly to her younger brother in a contemplative tone about what seemed to be an oddly similar experience. They were both trembling still with cold; hands in their pockets and elbows close to their sides. As they tunneled into the living room from the hallway, Mrs. Alcott gave orders over her shoulder about dinner, putting their school stuff up in their bedrooms and to come back down and help fix dinner and set the table. She had no idea that the three of them were already heading up to the second floor, unheeding of her instructions.

“You’ve noticed that garage before we did, didn’tja?” Lana said pensively, “And you didn’t care to mention it to us?”

“Noooo” replied Norman, “I didn’t know what it was or realize it was a day by day thing. And besides I thought I was a freak for what I... umm, well, it was just weird. That’s all.” Norman followed his sisters into their room where he sat down on the edge of Lana's bed. Lisa dumped her backpack out on the long table that was set up for her and her sister to use as a desk for homework and spun around.

“That cutout thing is pretty neat, but I don’t think they were just pictures” she said candidly, “I think it is probably bewitched and that whoever lives there are magic.”

Lana gave a snort. “You WOULD think that... you still believe in Santa Clause...”

“Just you wait!” Lisa said in a cold voice, “You just don’t believe anymore. Your loss!”

Lana turned back to Norman still sitting on the bed. “What did you get when you looked at it?”

Norman took his time, not really wanting to say anything for fear it might jinx the situation but eventually said: “I spent an entire morning in new snow making a huge snow man. Mom gave me an old scarf she had... a red one too, and a carrot for a nose. I went to a shed where dad kept his bar-b-que stuff and stole some charcoal and from there, it was pretty straight forward. But..” he said looking up, “I was wearing my jeans and a short sleeve shirt as I am wearing now, and I got wet and cold really fast.” He shivered at the thought even though there was nothing cold about the Texas weather at the moment. It was warm enough to warrant a shot of air conditioning still before everyone went to bed!

“What did YOU see?” he asked, still looking at her.

Lana rolled her eyes and and headed back downstairs.



Dec 6: Golden Walnuts

Austin had turned frigid cold overnight. Sometime after midnight clouds moved in and shortly thereafter a fine mist filled the air. Slowly it accumulated and created a thin slick of ice over roads less traveled, and even on the major roads you could see signs of freezing to the sides of tire tracks. It was not safe. Weather stations posted winter weather warnings that just didn't include the Hill Country, but even the interior of the city. Slowly, one by one, the various counties began to report closures for both municipal and scholastic venues.

Which was nothing new, but for many it was a welcome 3 day weekend. Unlike the northern states, Austin was not prepared for any foul weather whatsoever. Schools could be closed on heavy rain days. Even in light rain some people would refuse to drive at all or would drive so slow that it would cause major delay on Mopac and I-35. When Travis County announced school closing, it was a safe bet that every child from elementary through high school was glued to either the internet, am radio or a television for the report. Bad weather days were rare. Some wished there were hot weather days, but seeing all schools were air conditioned that would never happen.

True to form, Norman had his iPad set to alert of any weather changes and sound a light chime to the affect. When 2am rolled around and the announcement was made, he did a little jig around his bed and hopped on local news to see if there were any interesting accidents that happened already. Much to his disappointment weren't any, but he was sure as the morning progressed some stupid soccer mom would attempt to drive and end up in a ditch somewhere.

When he finally realized that it was precipitating, he got dressed quickly, threw on a hoodie and lightly tread down the stairs to the front door. The bevels in the glass did not tell him much about the weather. He was really hoping for snow, which he only saw once in his life... but now twice in memory. Unbolting the door, he opened it quiet as he could, pushed open the storm door and stepped out onto the front porch.

It was no longer a mist, but a full fledged freezing rain. It made a light clatter on the roof of the family cars, and somewhat hissed out further into the street. He stared up into the streetlight and he could see the fine crystals passing in front of the light and blinked reflectively as if fell into the darkness. The houses dressed for Christmas had a slight halo around them from the freezing rain. Stepping out from the covered porch, he reached down and scooped up a small handful of ice and formed it into a ball. It was really cold.

Norman headed out into the early morning street, careful of how he stepped, and headed to the house with the garage faux glass windows. The driveway was empty but frozen over reflecting the subtle colors from the windows back lighting. There was a new window. It was of a tall slender, bearded man in a white fleece lined red coat holding a tall staff and a short dark fellow holding a heavy bag over his shoulder. Literally frozen in the moment he lost track of time, but when he recovered, he was holding a small gold colored object that looked like a walnut.



Dec 7: Don't!

By the end of December sixth, Norman was a little disappointed that both sisters had also ended up with gold painted walnuts and had similar experiences with the latest window in the garage. Not only that, but it appeared that Lisa had taken a friend to see the extraordinary house with the

magic windows, and she TOO bestowed with a gold walnut. He did, however, accept one thing: Every window had its own unique memory attached to it, and everyone that looked at one of the images found themselves transported into a very personal memory of their own. He didn't know why or how. He could not find reason for getting cold or how objects remained with him after he experienced a memory. The more he thought about it, the more outrageous the possibilities became.

Lisa said magic and witches. They argued about it in private. Lisa once came bubbling in from the back door by the kitchen and just exploded into the long tale of the garage door and what happens when you look at one of the windows to Mrs. Alcott. Mrs. Alcott, startled a little by the conviction her youngest child bestowed to her story that she finally stopped fussing with the Mr. Coffee to pay more attention.

"Where is this house?" Mrs. Alcott asked her daughter.

"Just up the street, mom, want to come look?" asked Lisa.

"Which house, Lisa?" she asked pensively.

"That one that was for sale and nobody wanted it," Lisa replied, "the one with the overgrown bushes in front, the ugly tan one."

"And you say someone is living there now? Have you seen anyone coming or going?" Mrs. Alcott said drawing her brows together in concern.

"Noooo, except that there must be someone making the windows. The garage is black during the day. I think they make the windows during the day and turn the garage lights on at night to make the windows glow." Said Lisa.

"But you haven't seen any cars or lights on in the house?" Mrs Alcott pressed.

"I don't know, but whoever is in there put a small wreath on the front door." Lisa finished

Mrs. Alcott pondered this for a minute then said: "Look, until we know who lives there I don't want you..."

"BUT MOOOOMMMMM!!!!"

"I DON'T want you hanging around up there" Mrs. Alcott looked into the alarmed eyes of her youngest daughter and in that moment she knew that if she continued with what she was going to say, she would have a rebellion on her hand. Changing her tone she continued "... hanging up by that house without either your older brother or sister going with you."

This took the edge off it a bit, but she wrapped it all up with a "Do you understand me?"

Lisa nodded, but you could see she wasn't happy with it at all.



Dec 8: Tree

Lana was drenched in a memory that wasn't her own. She was standing in a huge room. The ceilings must have been at least twelve feet tall. The room was vast. Walls were old school plaster and lath, covered in wall paper with a lovely flower pattern and crowned with a cove moulding. In one corner was a tall tree and across from it a fire was ablazed in a huge stone hearth made of cut stone. Surrounding the fireplace was a heavy looking mantel made of oak as well, with a shelf above the stone that had hooks on it holding up rather large stockings full of nuts, chocolates, tangerines and small poppers. There were heavy balances above the tall windows made of red velvet, not to mention thick garlands and wreaths of spruce and fir that made the room smell rich with antiquated Christmas spirit. For Lana, it was similar to waking up as a younger child on Christmas morning, where the presents under the tree were actually wrapped with care held together without tape but ribbons not made of plastic. The tree was spectacular and filled Lana with awe, hung with hand-blown globe ornaments, tinsel and lights.

Beyond the windows you could see snow falling thick in the fields as the lights from the front porch send shadows across the wind-strewn drifts. But inside, she was warm, happy and excited.

Norman found himself on a hillside. It was cold and stony. He was surrounded by various sized trees, and he was scrutinizing them to see if any of them were worthy enough to grace his living room. He knew that his son and daughter would only be expecting the finest tree in the county, but they were not old enough to attend the yearly venture up the mountain to find a Christmas tree. With bow-saw in hand, he hunted through the trees, looking at the tops, judging if they had that perfect five points that would sit below the antique angel that would adorn the top of the family tree, keeping in mind it would have to stay up through the twelve days of Christmas. Norman must have hiked over a two mile stretch before he decided on the right one. The tree had stiff little needles, as any blue spruce has, but the point in which it would have to be cut was not exactly at the bottom of the trunk. He would have to climb about twelve feet in order to reach it. Gathering his strength, he hoisted himself up the lower branches, bow-saw slung across his back and travelled a good 7 feet before deciding to roping himself to the trunk and begin to saw. It was nothing more than a tedious process, but finally at one point he heard a loud crack. Slung the saw once more across his back and the rope keeping him from falling backwards, he pushed against the upper trunk. The tree gave way, and fell crashing to the forest floor.

Lisa, on the other hand, saw nothing but a tree mounted in a thick plastic holder. It was bare at the moment, but there were lots of boxes on the floor full of lights, ornaments and tinsel ready to prepare a plain Frasier tree that she helped decide on from the local Home Depot. There was a stir of excitement coursing through her slight little body. This was the first Christmas she was actually awake when the family decorated the tree.

Freezing rain was falling all around the three children when their memories sifted into their surroundings, but they all felt warm and happy. Looking from one another, they started to walk home without saying a thing.



Dec 9: What Your Parents Don't Know

There is always a tattle tale, and unfortunately Lisa could not keep her mouth shut. Children her age are pretty gullible and are willing to make everything into a big deal, so when Lisa started telling her friends about the garage, word spread fast between her classmates. The only positive thing that saved her neck was that the windows were black during light hours, and many of her friends did not live close by. At first there was a small covenant of second graders that converged on the house with the rotting siding. Some dared to enter the back yard, or try to peek into the garage to see if anyone was in there. But always, always it was dead quiet and the house seemed to be completely unoccupied. Over the next couple of days the group of children expecting to validate Lisa's story began to thin until finally only the two local neighbors would drop by.

Norman and Lana both noticed this, especially on the first day when the front of the house looked like a rock star lived there. Lisa began to panic. Her reputation was at stake. With so many friends expecting so much from coming to see the windows and nothing happening she was afraid she would never be able to endure kids making fun of her at school. She was also horrified when Norman approached her about spreading the word, but he also knew this would never stay a secret. When he left Lisa she was thoroughly chastised and promised not to talk about it again to anyone.

As night approached, all three were always bugging their mother to fix dinner earlier. Mrs. Alcott asked why they were so hungry, but eventually she figured it out and one night over a bowl of pasta and meat balls, she brought it up with everyone at the table.

“Sooooo, why is this house so much of an interest to everyone?” she asked in a crooning voice. “House?” said Mr. Alcott with a bit of alarm in his voice, “What house?”

“The house up the street, dear. Seems our children have become obsessed with it because of the garage door windows.” She responded, “The kids are convinced there are witches and warlocks living there.” Lana shifted her gaze to Lisa.

“The old Caldwell house? The one where only recently Keller Williams took the sign down? There someone living there?” Mr. Alcott rattled off.

“I don’t think so,” Mrs. Alcott said, “but Lisa says the windows light up at night and throw dreams into their heads.”

All eyes were on Lisa, who slumped down into her chair and fingered a strand of linguini. Lana decided chime in to take some of the attention off her sister; “I don’t think anyone is living there, but someone is very artistic and patient. Every night they light up a new window, and it looks just like stained glass but made of heavy black poster board with openings that are covered from behind with colored tissue paper.” Norman made an attempt to kick her from under the table but missed. “You should come see it.” she said with a quick glare at her brother.

That night after dinner, they all walked up the street. The front of the house was abandoned but the lights in the garage were on. Once in front of the house, they stood looking into the beautifully decorated windows and a silence fell over the family. As Mr. and Mrs. Alcott began to experience earlier windows Norman, Lana and Lisa all stared at the newest addition: An exquisite brass ringing bell.



Dec 10: Gaining Interest.

“I’ll be damned if that wasn’t the strangest thing I’ve ever seen.” Mr. Alcott exclaimed upon re-entering their house. “I, I really don’t know what to make of it. You say you have NEVER seen a soul enter or leave that house?” His eyes examined each of his children for answers, but they had already given him that earlier.

“I, I, I really don’t if I like this or not. What do you think, Vera?” Mrs. Alcott did not say anything. She was deep in thought and did not know how to respond. She eventually went into the kitchen and put the teapot on to boil and sat down at the table. Lana followed her and sat down across from her.

“What did you see, mom? Did you look at all the windows?” she asked.

Mrs. Alcott didn’t look up immediately, but when she did her eyes were reddened. “I couldn’t take it all. There were too many. Too many.”

“Too many...?” Lana asked, “Too many what?”

“Every picture. Each one brought back a memory, but some memories I don’t remember ever having.” Mrs. Alcott said in a low voice, “And there were so many to take in. I’d look at one and something would

awake inside me, but it would change the minute I looked at something else. I felt... panic. Like I had lost my own reality but yet," she took a deep breath, "I didn't feel threatened by any of it".

Mrs. Alcott looked up just as Mr. Alcott walked into the room, Norman and Lisa following close behind. He sat down next to her and with a concerned look he asked if she was all right. Mrs. Alcott smiled silently and shrugged. The light from the overhead fixture cast shadows into her eyes making her look older than she was. The teapot started whistling and Lana got up to turn the stove off.

"I don't know what's going on, but I'm not sure I want you kids hanging out down there." He looked at the three children and was surprised they did not respond.

"There are others." Norman said. "The stories will spread eventually. Lisa told a friend and she has shown up at the house every night since. As long as there are new windows made there is no stopping it."

Norman was right. Come nightfall the next day, there were 4 people camped out in front of the garage, shrouded in the dark except for the warm light coming from the windows. They were like statues in a museum for up to a good 20 minutes, but eventually they stirred and silently moved on. It was almost creepy. Maybe the house was bewitched... which was the thought Norman had as he completely disobeyed Mr. Alcotts orders. He stayed in the shadows of the live oaks that dotted each yard until he was standing right in front of the garage.

At first glance, he was impressed with the new window but ever so quickly found he was grabbing the overhanging branch of a silver birch that overhung a small creek that had frozen over. The moonlight flashed over the slick ice as he steadied himself from a pair of feet that did not want to stand still. He looked down and found a shiny pair of skates had replaced his sneakers.



Dec. 11: Lisa's Story

Lisa came home crying. She was inconsolable for a good hour. She wouldn't sit in Mrs. Alcott's lap or blow her nose on a Kleenex or drink a glass of water. She didn't bother wiping her tears and whatever she had in the way of expectoration ended up on her shirt sleeve. She hiccupped, she buried her head in her arms, and she laid the full length of the sofa in the living room. During the latter part of her catharsis, Norman and Lana came through the front door and stood at the hallway leading into the living room and just stared. By that time, she was laying there with a streaked face staring into nothingness.

"What happened to her??" Lana said seeing her mother come to the arch leading to the kitchen. Mrs. Alcott shrugged her shoulders and gave them an exasperated look, then went back into the kitchen. Lana looked at Norman with a "What the hell" look and without dropping her backpack on the stairs went into the kitchen. Norman, on the other hand dropped his bag, sat down in front of the couch and leaned his back against it far enough to force Lisa to adjust her position. He grabbed the TV remote and turned it on but he lowered the volume immediately. He flipped through the channels.

"Cartoons suck these days" he said dryly "You can only take SpongeBob so much, and what's up with the Powerpuff Girls?"

"PowerPuff" Lisa said correcting her brother.

He turned and gave her a hard stare. "You think I care? Huh? You EVER see me watch it?"

"Once" she said.. but her eyes lit up with a smile even though her lips were still pursed. Norman saw that immediately and poked her lightly with his elbow: "What's up?"

Lisa flipped over and faced the back of the couch and at first she did not talk, but after a couple of minutes of silence she said in a pillow muted voice: “They made fun of my story”

“What?” was Norman’s response?

“They made fun of me at schoooooo!” she snuffled, “We had a sharing time in the morning and the kids made fun of me and said my story was rubbish.”

“What story?” Norman asked turning to look at her and seeing Lana and Mrs. Alcott standing in the opening to the kitchen. Again a long silence commenced only broken by the sounds of the TV. “Was your story a memory?” Not even shifting positions, you could see the knotted head of hair move in an affirmative nod. “One from the garage windows?” he continued. Lisa nodded again. “Which one was it?” he said hoping she would elaborate.

“You know we won’t make fun of you, Lisa.” Lana said from the kitchen, “What window did you tell your story about?”

Lisa pulled herself to her knees looking over the couch at her sister. Norman was looking approvingly at Lana as well. Lisa took a deep breath.

“I said I was at a huge farm house. Really HUGE! It sat in the middle of a huge farm with miles of land around it, and a huge barn, and there was also a really big garage with a whole nother house built over it. All the land had like, foot tall snow all over the place. I was in that house over the garage. It had a big fireplace, nothing like here. You could fit a horse in it! And a fire was burning in it. I just remember there to the left of a large leather chair there was a bowl of walnuts and next to it was a funny soldier with a funny jaw that if you pulled a thing in the back, it would open so big you could put a nut in it. Press the thing in the back and it would crack the nut and you could eat it!”



Dec 12: Daily Dreams

Lisa continued to be heckled at school for a week. This soured her mood immeasurably around the house, and for this reason the three siblings had a powwow in the upstairs girls bedroom and agreed talking about the garage and its windows was not a good thing outside the family. As days went by it was assumed the novelty of the magical house with the garage slowly got replaced by preparations for Christmas for the majority of students and parents, but for the Alcott’s there was always a place just after dinner to see what appeared next in the windows.

One night it was a sleigh with a matched pair of white horses pulling it at a trot. When the family came out of that memory they were all chilled to the bone but wore smiles of immense satisfaction. It appeared they all had a similar experience of being bundled up in blankets swiftly traversing a long narrow road lined with tall evergreens. The cold was penetrating, and snow accumulated on their eye brows and turned their noses bright red. Snow had accumulated everywhere causing branches to bow low as they slid by on their sled, flakes of snow melting on contact with the two brass lanterns with thick candles in them that glowed like molten gold on either side of the front of the sleigh. There were large brass jingle bells that studded the reins that jingled merrily in rhythm as the horses trotted along the snowy path. As the family pulled back to reality, there was no question what they wanted next: HOT CHOCOLAT!

Other times they were joined by neighbors who still shared a curiosity in the doors but superstitious beliefs caused them a certain amount of reluctance based on the observation that no one lived at the house. However, for the Alcotts, they could not rule out the possibilities that others did not come to look

at the wonders over the dark hours of night. They never stayed up to check out if it had visitors, so who knows?



Dec. 13: The Accident

The minute midnight turned to the 13th, the garage window changed. Doubtful anyone was watching at the time, but the window that suddenly appeared were a couple of cookies cut in the shape of stars.

As the night progressed, the weather became warmer. The light from the city obscured most things celestial, only a few stars present and a sliver of a sallow yellow moon in the far western skies. At this time there was limited traffic out on the street, even in the neighborhood of the enchanted windows. But every now and then a car would travel up or down the road, and eventually one slowed down to look at the garage.

CRASSSHHHHHH!!!!!!

In not more that a split second, the car veered off to the right and ran headlong into an old cottonwood tree, impacting the hood and shattering the front windshield. The driver was still unconscious when someone called 911 and the fire department roared onto the street. Not much later there were four police cars and a paramedic truck blocking off through access to the two block street. The driver had been carefully evacuated from the car and was now laying on a gurney just to the back of the ambulance. The injured man was being asked if he could hear, what his name was, how many fingers the paramedics were holding up and how old he was. Eventually he responded.

“Yes, I can hear you.” he said groggily, “James. Three. 28”

One of the paramedic, Ariel, leaned low to see if there was a smell of alcohol on his breath and asked if he had any problems breathing or pain, to which he responded “No, I’m fine I guess, but... why am I here? What happened?”

Ariel explained that he had been in an accident that involved running headlong into a tree, and that was the reasons for all the fire trucks, police cruisers and paramedics. She had no idea what caused the accident. As they were discussing this, an officer approached the back of the ambulance and asked “To make sure, are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” said the man on the gurney, “Do I have to be here?”

“We want to take you to Seton overnight and make sure you are all right, but if you don’t mind me asking this for the record, can you remember anything before the accident?”

The man on the gurney stared blankly at the officer for a moment.

“Would it sound weird if I said the last thing I remember was finding a couple of star shaped cookies on my pillow?”

At that point, he passed out again. The officer looked at the paramedic for an explanation.

“We found lacerations to the forehead which we believe could have caused a concussion, but we won’t know until we get him to the hospital. I only hope this guy has insurance. And if he saw cookies, I wouldn’t mind having one about now.”

Ariel closed the back doors of the ambulance. As she did so, the truck put into gear and the emergency lights started flashing. They did not use the siren as they head off down the street.



Dec 14: Motorist Dream

There was no information about the accident on the morning news, but the neighborhood was buzzing with speculation as to the reason for it. By the time a tow truck arrived to pickup the little VW Golf, the fire departments had watered the entire area around the accident site to eliminate the chance of fire and cleaned up some of the debris from the busted front of the vehicle. There were still two police cruisers with flashing lights blocking access to traffic and one of the officers had managed to find the person that reported the accident and coax them out of their house for a statement. All this activity had drawn out the inhabitants of many houses but as the night progressed only a few huddled together as shadows under the canopy of the live oak trees.

But earlier that night Norman had sprinted across the second floor hallway and invaded his sister's room that had the best window that overlooked the front yard. Startled from their sleep, Lisa and Lana abandoned their warm blankets to stand with their brother at the window, bare foot and arms hugged tightly across their chests to keep warm.

"Didn't you hear that when it happened???" said Norman in low but incredulous voice, "That crash?" His finger pointed down across the street where the car seemed to be apart of a tall tree.

"I did!" hissed Lisa, but Norman didn't believe her.

"Shouldn't we call the police" asked Lana dressed in a tank top and a pair of men's boxer shorts.

"I'll bet someone has called..." Norman broke off his comment when the three heard the distant sounds of a siren and a loud belching horn. As the sound was apparently coming closer the three looked at each other. "Which one dialed first do you think?" Lisa said out loud.

"I think the one to the left of the tree." Said Lana, "I saw something in that window." She pointed across the street and the large window to the right of the house entrance.

"I'm getting dressed." Norman said, turning around to exit the room.

"Norman!" Hissed Lana, but he was already gone. "Oooooooooohhhh!" she groaned and went to throw something warmer on and slipped into her mukluks. "I think you should stay here" she said pulling a hoodie over her head. Lisa was also getting dressed when she heard this and shot her older sister a "NO WAY" look. "You need to stay and let mom and dad know what's going on if they wake up."

But this was already a useless request. Mr. and Mrs. Alcott could be heard coming up the carpeted stairs where they could hear Mr. Alcott asking Norman where he was going. There was a slight and unseen confrontation before the parents could be heard stepping out of the way to let their son through as they continue up to the second floor. They came onto the landing and saw their other 2 children getting ready to head out into the cold night air.

"No Lisa, you stay with us." Mrs. Alcott said with an unmovable resolve in her voice. Lisa protested but eventually plopped with a huff back down onto her bed.

Once outside, Norman hid behind their cluster of oak trees and watched as the story unfolded. His awareness heightened by the chill of the early morning air, he hung onto every word he could make sense of and when he heard the word "cookies" distinctly the epiphany of what had happened went off like an

M80 firecracker in his mind. He quickly dissolved into the shadows and skirted his way towards the garage making sure he stayed under the shadows of the neighbor's house. Reaching the driveway, his conclusion was confirmed when he too saw the new window and ended up with the licorice taste of anise on his tongue.



Dec 15: Media Attention

Austin weather went from cool to toasty the next day, which to many Austenite's was a welcome change. No rain in the forecast for the next week and night temperatures dipped below 40 and the daytime highs were straddling between the low seventies to the mid eighties. But to some who really wanted winter weather to help out with the holidays, it was disappointing. This included the Alcott kids who were now totally enchanted by the garage windows on a daily basis. There was one interesting discovery that Lana found on some obscure website about the 4 weeks before Christmas: It was called Advent. Once that word was out, both Norman and Lana went into a Google search obsession to find everything and anything about Advent, but what this meant for the three was that they came to the conclusion that they were looking forward to another ten days of new memories from the garage up the street.

At first, Norman rejected it all for dogmatic bull dung, but in the moments he and Lana went into a debate about it there was a call from the lower level to both of them. Once downstairs, they looked around the house for their mother but did not see her. Eventually they found the front door opened and beyond it was their mother standing near the cluster of live oaks in front of their house staring up the street. As they walked out to join her, they couldn't help noticing a large white van with a portable broadcast apparatus on the roof, emblazoned across the vans sides was "KATN Your News Live!"

An entire camera crew was standing in front of the garage with the windows. A well dressed reporter was fussing over notes she held as a make-up person lightly applying powder to her face with a wide soft brush. Norman moved out into the street to get a better angle on what they were focusing on, but even though there was a lot of movement, the garage windows were blank. A sneering smile graced his lips and he looked down the street to his sister, who smiled back knowingly at him. As he stood there out in the street, one of the people near the van spotted him and started walking forward. Startled, his grin dropping from his face, he backed away and started walking back to the house.

"Hey!" he heard from behind, "You! Have you HEY! Can you stop for a minute???" Hesitating for a brief moment, he decided to ignore the man. Unfortunately the man from the van caught up with him and touched him lightly on the shoulder: "Hey! You know anything about this... this house?"

By that time, Norman had parked himself with his mother and sister. All three stared at the man.

"Look, I'm Matt Harlen... I'm a co-producer of the evening news on KATN and I'm looking for people who know anything about an accident that happened here shortly after one in the morning." Matt looked from one Alcott to the next hoping to see some sort of response. "Now look, you were right across from the location of the accident. I fail to believe none of you saw anything. I'm only looking for some background."

"Why?" Lana blurted.

"The story the driver gave is of interest." Matt Harlen remarked, "He said he was distracted by this house, lost consciousness and woke up in an ambulance. Now, we have to ask why this house?"

"That house?" Lana asked pointing to the tan house with rotting siding, "No one has lived there for years. I don't know why anyone would say that. Sounds more like the guy was drunk."

Matt Harlen looked at her pensively and decided there was something ingenuine about her comments. He looked at Norman: “What do you say, kid? It was dark. Is there anything about these windows we should know about?”

Norman said nothing. Eventually the producer walked back to the van and crawled inside. The camera crew did a broadcast in front of the house then went around the area more taking video footage of the house, the length of the street and the tree where the car had previously smashed into. Calling it a wrap, they packed up their gear and left.

Norman looked at Lana: “Odd, none of the other people watching volunteered any information, eh?”



Dec 16: Busted

Learning that the accident was caused by cookies after midnight set Norman to thinking. The cookies weren't there when the three of them visited the house the evening of the wreck, which made Norman believe that the new windows appeared at midnight. He also learned that once a memory had played out it never happened a second time, so you were limited to just the one experience and that it was rarely the same from one person to the next. There was the one exception though, which he also pondered: The horse drawn sleigh. It may not have been exactly the same for his family, but it was definitely a shared moment. Another thing: You try not to analyze the experience too much. The more you analyzed it, the more the memory would fade. Reliving the memory was fine, but asking why for some reason turned it phantom.

The real question was: Who is doing this? Whoever it was did really good art work and understood how to make colors work. The details in the cutting of the black background paper was so precise one would have thought a laser with some computational instructions were used. The whole presentations was well thought out, each new window never opening next to the previous one... which made finding the new window not always easy. But the bottom line was: No one ever saw anyone go in or out of the house, and at night none of the house lights were ever lit, only the soft light in the garage.

“Who is doing this???”

Having this in the back of his mind, he decided to test the midnight theory that very night. He set his clock for 11:30 pm just before he went to bed. This apparently was useless. He couldn't sleep anyways. He just hoped everyone else was asleep before he crept out of the house. In the mean time he grabbed his iPad and checked his favorite sites, reading up on some of the posts other “idiots” wrote on reddit.

The last lights in the house went out around 10:45, but at 11:15 or so Norman snorted awake and realized he had drooled on his iPad. He turned it over onto the bed sheets and did a swipe across them. He was ahead of schedule. Putting the iPad back on the side table next to the bed, he got dressed, put on his shoes and opened the door to his room. All was dark except for nightlight glowing faintly from the bathroom in the hall. Treading lightly downstairs he unlocked the front door and quietly went outside.

Mr. Alcott had dressed much of the house out in a cascade of tiny white lights from the eaves and decorated the two bushes to the side of the door with colored lights that twinkled. Fortunately, they were all on a timer that cut everything off at 11:00 pm sharp, so as Norman traveled up the dark street he could

hardly be detected. He positioned himself with his back against the trunk of the old tree in the front yard of the shabby tan house with rotting sides and waited.

With more than half an hour to go, he found himself nodding off from time to time even though there was a chill in the night air. Then suddenly his mother was shaking him.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING OUT HERE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT?” She yelled; “Your alarm went off, you woke the whole house and no one knew where you were!!! Get your butt home. IMMEDIATELY!”

A profound disappointment welled up in Norman. It wasn't even midnight.



Dec 17: The Caravan

Repercussions from that night echoed into Norman's life for at least the next three days. Norman was grounded first; then as a precautionary measure, so were Lana and Lisa.

“It's that damn garage, isn't it? You are OBSESSED with that garage! From now on, NO ONE goes up there unless they are accompanied by either me or your dad! You got that? All of you!” Mrs. Alcott yelled glaring at each one as she applied the rules to all her children. Mr. Alcott, standing behind her and leaning against the door jamb leading into the girls' bedroom did not seem angry, but you could see he wasn't comfortable. He knew a line had been drawn, but remembering back to his days as a young teenager he thought this was mild compared to some of the pranks he pulled. Plus, if this new rule was to be enforced he would also have to be available as a chaperone if his kids wanted to see the daily window posts. By around midnight, all parties dispatched to their own beds and the lights turned out.

However the only one to go back to sleep was Lisa. Norman lay in bed, hand laced behind his head as he stared at the ceiling while Lana rolled from side to side trying to find a way to unplug from the nights events and fall back to sleep. She finally gave up. Pulling one of the blankets off her bed and wrapping it around her shoulders, she left her bedroom and entered Normans.

“You asleep?” she whispered even though she could plainly see his eyes glint lightly in darkness.

“Yeah.” He sighed. “Look, Lana: sorry for this. It's all my fault. I totally spaced out the alarm.”

Lana crossed the room and sat down on the bed. She looked at him tentatively. “You were awful quite out there. I would have thought you would have defended yourself more. What's up with that?”

“I'm going back out.” He said in a low voice. “I need to find out if there is a new window.”

“What the hell???” wheezed Lana, “You gone mental???”

Norman threw off his covers and Lana realized he was still dressed and wearing his dark blue hoodie. “I have to. You think mom and dad are asleep yet?”

“Why, what's there to prove? That a new window appears every day? We already know that...”

“Yeah,” whispered Norman, “Because I think it caused that accident. I want to know if the picture happens at midnight. It's a little late for that now, but even so, if I go out there and there IS a new picture I'll lay odds it pushed a memory to that dude while he was driving, one so vivid he could not even drive his own car!”

Lana sulked quietly at the foot of his bed. Norman came around to the door leading out to the hall and gave her a look of invitation, tipping his head in the direction of the hall. She rose hesitantly, but when she saw the arrogant smile on her brothers' face she followed him. They paused for a moment at the top of the stairs, then not sensing any movement in the house descended to the living room and once again out the front door. Silently they walked through the yard of the neighbors' house, looking very much like shadows more than people, finally arriving at the garage doors.

Norman nearly lost his balance and fell forward, grabbing something that smelled horrible and felt like rough bristles. He was travelling forward slowly on some animal that hobbled in such a rhythm that nearly threw him off with every step. Eventually mastering the ride, he looked ahead and saw that he was following another animal that had an elaborate saddle with what almost looked like tent attached to it. Under the tent was a tall dark rider, bobbing lightly up and down as the beast moved forward. He peered around him. Evidently his beast was carrying packages on either side but further back, much to his surprise, was another beast: A camel; and on its back with her arms clenched tightly around the neck in terror was his sister, Lana.



Dec 18: Believers

Norman and Lana didn't bother when Mr. Alcott volunteered to take them up the street later that evening. As darkness fell Lisa and her father exited the house into the twilight hand in hand and headed up the street. There seemed to be an usual amount of people this night, some were hanging back across the street talking in groups, while some stood silently gazing at the windows. Mr. Alcott knew the routine by now: you looked at a window you haven't seen before and drop into a dream and awaken from it in seconds. The dreams or memories could last anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes during the memory cycle but you awaken almost when you looked at the window. But one thing was for certain, each memory was unique and a topic of conversation on the streets that could last hours.

For Mr. Alcott and Lisa, once they had their dream, they would go home. Having done this ever since Norman discovered it, they knew the memories were sometimes very personal, but other times almost predictable. Mrs. Alcott, on the other hand, would have none of it, and even though Lisa no longer claimed that the house was haunted or had witches living there, she still didn't trust something that could do that to somebody: Made a person drive off the road and smash their car it did. This was totally unnatural and she disapproved every time someone went there or talked about it. Often times ready to use her talents as a clerk at Turner and Turner, Attorneys at Law, she was almost ready to ask her bosses to let her investigate this house. Then again, she also knew the costs it would involve so she kept it off the place even though she suspected nothing good could come of this. So when Mr. Alcott and her youngest daughter came back from their visit giggling and talking about camels, she kept her tongue.

"Did yours smell daddy? Mine smelled like an old wet carpet..." Lisa asked. "I don't know bunny, I was too busy hanging on to notice. That hump... I can't imagine how anyone can ride that hump!" Mr. Alcott said amused, "But I must admit, being in a camel caravan with three kings was way cool, eh?"

"I wish I could have seen the others." Lisa said wistfully.

"Kings?" Mrs. Alcott retorted as she turned around to watch them enter the kitchen, "Kings? Camels? You saw the Three Kings today? Nonsense! Here... take these plates to the table and call your brother and sister and I don't want to hear another word about kings and camels during dinner!"

Lisa gaped at her mother and Mr. Alcott was speechless.

“You don’t believe?”



Dec 19: Birthday

For the first time in her life, Lana drove to school by herself. Having turned 18 that day, it was her one and only request. She asked it with both parents present, which put them on the spot. They had to either make her day or ruin it. Fortunately Mr. Alcotts work environment did not always require him to punch in our out like his wife, so after a brief chat away from Lana earshot, they came back into the kitchen without wearing sour faces, which told Lana immediately it was “cool”.

There was the usual requests from both younger brother and sister to have her take them to school as well, but seeing classes for her didn’t start until 9:30, she gave them the “No Way!” face, then the “You got to be kidding!” face. She took her time and had a late breakfast, said good bye to her parents as they departed together in one car, and she eyed the Mazda in complete triumph. The house was empty, and it gave her a certain feeling of freedom. She wandered up the stairs and changed into something that she knew her mother wouldn’t approve of, applied some black eye shadow and red lip gloss then went down into her parents’ bedroom to get a final view of her reflection in their full length mirror. She may dress kind of grunge, but it was a well thought out grunge. She paused for a moment at their bathroom cabinet and dotted a bit of fragrance onto her wrists and rubbed them together. Grabbing her backpack and nabbing the keys off the counter in the kitchen, she waltzed out the front door.

Once school started, there wasn’t a moment that went by that somebody said “Happy Birthday!” or tried to whack her 18+1 times, or jeered at her for being old. It was all taken in good fun, even during English there was a small celebration where she was given a double chocolate cupcake with 18 tall skinny candles stuck and lit on it. She was happy. As the day began to wear down and classes came to an end, she hooked up with a boy and the two of them hit up a Starbucks near where she lived. The two of them sat outside in the overcast daylight and talked about various things that were common to kids those days. Eventually the sunlight started to dim in preparations for the night and Lana suddenly sat upright.

“Hey! Want to come to dinner? I got something I want to show you that a neighbor is doing.”

“Ehhh... don’t know.” Said the boy Matt, “I was to meet up with some dude that is looking for a bass player.”

“What time?” asked Lana.

“Was supposed to call me around 7-ish.” He replied.

“We’ll be finished by then, really. You really need to see this. Besides, my dad’s just bringing home Chinese take-out and I’m sure my mother just picked up a cake from HEB. Really, it will be totally informal and eat and run.” she finished off. Matt gave a gnarled look of indecision but still had a faint grin in place. Lana looked up and saw dusk was firmly upon them then looked back at Matt. “Come on... let’s go.” She said gathering up her things.

“What is this thing you want me to see, Lana?” Matt asked again. “You won’t believe it till you see it.”

Answered Lana as they meandered down various streets till they arrived at the one she live on. She pointed ahead and said “See that? Those people out front of that house?”

She pulled the Mazda over to the curb.

“Come on.”



Dec 20: Romance and Mistletoe

They stepped out of the car and headed across the street, Matt eyeing the neighbors wearily as they wove their way to the garage. There was nothing unusual about anything. This could have been Matts neighborhood with the same crappy houses, small yards, all shoulder to shoulder about 15' apart from one another.

“Umm... sup with this?” He asked as they came to a halt in front of the garage. Nothing seemed special about it except that you couldn't see through the windows.

“Just wait; it's not quite dark en...” Lana stopped.

Then the landscape changed. Suddenly the garage was ablaze with a multiplicity of images in windows streaming in glorious colors and amazing graphics. Lana found the new window that was added today and for a moment she became a statue.

It was a wonderful memory: She found herself in an old Victorian house with well maintained oak trim, a huge oak staircase decorated in a pine garland, laced with red ribbon and immersed the foyer with its rich scent. On one side was an archway into a huge sitting room that had a full sized hearth ablaze with a brilliantly flickering fire. Over top was an array of stocking waiting to be stuffed and to the front of the room a large live Christmas tree, all decorated with antique ornaments, dripping with metal tinsel that was flashing in a low breeze from the multiple strings of lights interwoven in the tree branches. But more, there was a young man standing in front of her; an older man, maybe in in mid 20s, and he was holding her just in front of an ornate heavy oak door that had cut glass inlaid into the form of a large oval. Just outside was a large wreath where you could see ends of a red bow being blown around by the crisp outside winter air. Lana looked up and found that she and this man were standing under a large cluster of mistletoe.

When she came out of it, she realized she was holding her breath and let it expel with a loud huff. Smiling she looked to Matt who was standing next to her.

He was not moving.

Matter of fact, he didn't seem to be breathing. The look on his face was of one who had been facing towards a nuclear blast. His mouth was open in horror, his eyes unfocused, his breath was shallow, his skin almost white.

“Matt?” Lana said in concern, “Matt, are you alright?”

She poked him. He didn't respond.

“Oh my god! He hasn't seen any of these!”

The realization hit her like someone witnessing a 10 car pileup on I-35. Her first reaction was to divert his attention from gazing at the garage, but she finally ended up tackling him down and rolling him over. Straddling his chest she stared at him waiting for a moment of recognition to come into his eyes, which did but not soon enough for Lana. Matt blinked. His breathing becoming more even. He blinked again and finally focused on Lana.

“WHAT THE HELL....????” He bellowed, rolling so that Lana was thrown off as he got to his knees. He looked around. A number of fat hispanics were grinning at him, one with a gold tooth, a woman in a nightgown.

“¿Esa es tu primera vez, amigo?” one of them said (Is this your first time, my friend?). Matt got to his feet and looked around, then back to Lana who was still on the cement where he rolled her off.

“I’m sorry Matt!” she said, almost in tears, “I’m SO SORRY! I didn’t take into consideration you had never seen any of this... are, are you ok?”

“I gotta go.” He said, “I have to go now.”



Dec 21: Knock Knock.

It would appear that the only one of the Alcott kids that didn’t put their reputation in jeopardy was Norman. He watched. He listened. He didn’t talk about the garage except to his sisters and sometimes to his parents. He thought the treatment of Lisa was appalling, but then again she had to invite people and open her mouth, and make a calls report out of it. He sneered internally when Lana talked about her problems. He learned from their mistakes and was very careful not to make new ones like he did the other night.

He did learn finally about Advent, the four Sundays before Christmas. It really wasn’t just the 25 days of December, which to him seemed odd until he realized that the first Sunday of Advent fell on the first day of December. Some advents were shorter, some longer. Advent in Latin meant coming. That was fitting, but he intellectually felt it was kind of useless seeing that everyone was looking at Christmas the second Thanksgiving was over. Yet there was a soft spot developing in his for it. Yes, most of the memories he experienced at the garage were definitely related to Christmas, but there was more to it. As he researched on his iPad at night in his room, he began to see how some of the traditions came about, specially Santa Clause.

The other thing is he was never seen going to the garage, but he was always there. Developing an early morning pattern, he was usually out in front by at least 3:00 am and he never disclosed his memories unless directly asked. He had witnessed 21 of them, and he wanted to see it through.

That morning walking to the bus stop he passed by the old rotting tan house and once again noticed the wreath on the front door. Pausing, he thought it strange that no one lived in the house yet there it was, the only other thing that made the house look like it was lived in. The garage windows were black. Norman figured he still had time so he went up to the house to give it a second look. What he found was most curious: The black paper in the windows were not cut. There was no looking into the garage. Curiosity building, he put his ear close to the doors. Just as he thought, nothing. No noise. He skirted the side of the garage to the front door. The wreath was like new, almost as if it had been hung that very day. It was plain but perfect with a mix of holly, fir, spruce and something that smelled like Texas sage. Right in the middle of the wreath he noticed a small peep hole. Balancing himself on the toes of his Convers tennis shoes, knowing that the peep hole was focused only to look out, he brought his eye up to it.

There was light in the house.



Dec 22: A Little Too Much.

Norman instinctually baked away from the door hoping that maybe no one was the wiser inside. A couple of other boys on the street were advancing to the bus stop and were almost upon him. Not knowing if they had seen him or not, he stepped into the corner of the front porch where the

house met the garage and stood still. Unfortunately, they had. One of them was a year older, the other about Normans age. Seeing he was discovered, he made an attempt to remove himself from the premises before the boys caught up.

“What you doin, Alcott?” yelled the older of the boys. Norman had reached the top of the driveway, but so did the others. “Hey, isn’t this that weirdo house? The one people think has a spell on it?” The boys stopped and looked. “Yeah, see that Ken? The windows; everyone says they come alive at night but I’ve never seen anything.” Ken grunted, but they both noticed Norman was heading down the street trying his best to ignore them. Ken was a stalky boy but short for his age and was never one to draw attention to himself if he could help. The older boy, Ian, was tall enough to see over the top of an SUV, and his weight was mostly muscle. Ian was not academically bright and was hoping to graduate middle school on his Jr. Varsity football stats alone. Not necessarily brutish on his own, he could be menacing when he wanted to prove his prowess when in the company of others. If he had one fault, it was that he didn’t know when to give up doing something that grabbed his attention.

Seeing Norman had almost advanced to the corner of the street, Ian said in a loud voice: “Wonder what’s in that garage, Ken... Should we find out?” Ken snorted. Ian advanced to the garage and put his hands to the window. The windows were totally blacked out. He reached for the handle and jiggled it but it was locked solid. Next he pushed against the door, pressing the inside rollers hard against the garage door guides that allowed it to open. Heaving his shoulder against the door, he called to Ken to come and find out if there was enough room at the sides to see anything in the garage. Ken, still standing where the driveway met the street had a brutally confused and indecisive look on his face by that time Norman had returned.

“Hey, Carpenter, I’d be careful if I was you.” Norman called out
“What? Why? No one lives here, come on Alcott, lets find out who your warlocks are” sneered Ian.
“They aren’t my friends, Carpenter, just like this isn’t our property. I’d leave it alone if I were you.”
Normans voice was steady and showed no hint of caring how much bigger Ian was. Ian took a step back from the large doublewide door and proceeded to the edge. He put his shoulder to the corner edge in an attempt to see for himself when there was a crisp snapping sound and part of the panel gave way. There was a tinkling of glass from inside the garage.

In that moment there was a tremor in the ground beneath them and a blast of air pressure hit each one of the boys almost knocking them down. Ian steadied himself, gave Ken and Norman a look of panic, pull at the straps securing his backpack to his shoulders and sprinted as fast as he could down the street.



Dec 23: Penitence.

Norman missed the bus, but he didn’t care. The broken garage door panel, even though it was not broken enough to see into the garage was obvious, and the piece of glass above it was missing 3 shards. He felt responsible, and this was his punishment. At some point he would have to tell Lana and Lisa, but right now all he could think about was the defamation of something magical and beautiful and that he was responsible for it. Going back to the house, he grabbed a full page yellow sticky and drafted out a note of apology before going back and posting it to the door on the house, after which he walked to school on foot.

That night, Mr. Alcott returned with Lana and Lisa with Lisa chattering in anger.

“Who do you think did it?” Lisa repeated again and again.

“I. Don’t. Know.” Replied Lana after each repetition, “I just don’t the hell know Lisa.”

Mrs. Alcott turned around as they entered the kitchen with an inquisitive look.

“No light or window tonight,” said Mr. Alcott, “looks like someone tried to get into the garage and failed.”

“There were no lights!” Lisa said perturbed, “And no new pictures!”

“The right side of the garage looks like it was punched with a pair of boxer gloves, and the window above it is broke.” Mr. Alcott remarked. “Must have happened earlier in the day. Sad, just sad.”

A quiet settled over the kitchen. Even though Mrs. Alcott didn’t exactly agree with what was going on up the street, she did not agree it should be vandalized.

Eventually Norman spoke: “It was my fault.”

The quiet became more intense until Lana asked “Umm, well, why would you say that?”

Without any interruption, Norman told his version of the mornings events, not even bothering to apologize for being late to school. The story left the family speechless. In the absence of response, he grabbed his blue hoodie and went outside. Normally, there would have been a crowd in front of the little house with the crappy siding, but even the one person in that area was walking away from the driveway. It was quite cool that night, the late evening temperatures had already dropped into the low 40’s. He wandered up the street. The house was dark, but what was more disconcerting was the absence of the wreath on the front door. The whole front yard was drenched in darkness. Norman leaned back against the tree and slid to a sitting position at its roots. He was feeling completely desolate.

Looking up at the house, he whispered: “I’m sorry. I ruined it. For everyone. I got nosey and went where I know I should not have gone. I just didn’t accept it for what it was: A gift. I watched as Lana went too far. I watched as Lisa got hurt. Why didn’t I just leave it alone? I got curious and killed it.”

He sat there at the bottom of the tree, feeling totally wretched and didn’t notice his father had approached and was now standing only a few feet away from him: “You finished beating yourself up yet?” he asked. There was a long pause. For Norman it was a silence that could have gone without interruption, but eventually he let out a long breath that fogged into the air.

“Not yet.”

“I understand you feel responsible, but this other kid decided to take it beyond reason.” Mr. Alcott said consolingly.

“I shouldna been standing there. I shoulda gone to the bus stop. None of this would have happened.” He said remorsefully.

“I’m surprised no one thought of this before.” Said Lana, who had followed after her dad.

“That guy is an asshole.” Said a much younger voice.

“I told you all to leave it all alone.” Said Mrs. Alcott.



Dec 24: Block Party

No school. South Park Meadows Mall was teeming with business as a complete city woke up that morning and realized they forgot to pick up candles, or they were out of wrapping paper and as others were walking out the door to their cars: “While you’re out, can you pick up some table wine for tomorrow?” The 25th of December was rapidly approaching all. Many retailers would be closed for the Christmas day, if not to celebrate the holiday they would gladly accept a well needed respite from the commercialism this holiday put them through. But not the day before.

The Alcotts were not void of last minute needs, and unfortunately one Alcott or another was sent out into the masses three times to pick up last minute items. During Mr. Alcotts first mission, he took Lisa and came back with more than he needed and a few things he just plain spaced out. During his first time away, Mrs. Alcott barked orders to Lana and Norman to help out but ended up vacuuming and cleaning bathrooms in domestic drudgery. By the time Mr. Alcott had to go out for a second time, Norman asked if he could go. Needless to say, Lisa pitched a fit and managed to talk her father into letting her go a second time, but this time Norman claimed shotgun. As they were leaving the look on Lana's face was one of disappointment which suddenly turned into one of epiphany when she realized that the reasons Norman went was so that he didn't have to help out anymore, then to one of sheer annoyance at the fact that she was the oldest and should have gone first. When the three got home and unpacked their goods, Mr. Alcott ended up doing dishes as his wife disappeared into their bedroom and locked the door.

A good 2 hours later Mrs. Alcott yelled from behind the door: "Is there any more tape out there?" At which Mr. Alcott began a treasure hunt through the house, first asking his three children if they had any upstairs. "We completely out of ribbon??" came another yell from the bedroom. "If it's not in the bedroom dear then I'm afraid there is none!" Mr. Alcott yelled back.

Perfect timing, Lana went directly to the man of the house and asked for his keys volunteering to make one last trip to the Dollar market. Looking gratefully into her eyes, Mr. Alcott handed her the keys but realized he had been tricked: All three Alcott offspring were already out the door.

Dinner was late, but to the elation of the rest of the family not made in the microwave. There was a baked mac and cheese dish that had been dressed like a bacon pizza with black olives and three different cheeses. Along with it were candied baby carrots, cole slaw and a large hours salad. The meal was a welcome change from the frozen waffles they had for breakfast and the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch. As the family sat around the table after the plates had been mostly cleared of food, Norman got up and reached for his hoodie.

"Where you off to?" Asked Mrs. Alcott.

"Outside." He answered.

"Norman, it's over. You don't need to go there." Mrs. Alcott said sadly.

"I know." Replied Norman, "I just need... need to go outside."

Lana looked questioningly at Norman, and Lisa stared at her father with a "can I go too?" look crossing her brow.

Norman went through the living room and out the front door. The whole neighborhood was lit up like a Christmas tree, and up the street it looked like there was a block party going on. Staying as he usually did in the shadows, he worked himself to the side of the tan house. There were people standing out front talking and laughing. Some had bottles of beer, others had steaming mugs of coffee. They were a diverse crowd made up of all ages. Younger children were playing shadow tag under the enormous street light; the people across from the tan house had lit a fire in their small grills and it was blazing merrily; another Hispanic man had a portable radio that was playing Spanish Christmas carols. Something caught his eyes from down the street and realize that the rest of the family were approaching the crowd and joined them, shaking hands and exchanging hugs. Soon they were absorbed into the celebration. Norman saw Lana. Their eyes made contact and she smiled warmly at him and beckoned him to join. He hesitated at first, but eventually walked forward into the light.

They were all sharing their memories from the garage as if it was a common thing. When he realized this was why there was a party, he finally smiled.

Dec. 25: Norman

Eventually the party began to dwindle as people went home in anticipation of Christmas morning festivities. Norman was one of the last to leave. He was entrenched in a conversation with an older neighbor who had developed a conspiracy theory about the windows in the tan house garage and so far, could not be disproved. Norman however thought differently and as that night wore on he began to lean towards something more magical, something esoteric. He had no proof but there was no denying that when Ian broke the garage door panel (who, by the way, did not attend the block party) Ian had managed to get something very angry. He was convinced that “something” had a tantrum that nearly and literally blew them away.

It was nearly 3 in the morning when he began to walk home absorbed in thought. Was there something about Christmas he was overlooking or was it being trivialized by civilization? One thing he felt was that some unseen force that was not just after the death of Christmas, but the whole religious faith. He remembered how Easter died when it just became plush bunnies made in China, or candy, or confetti filled eggs that were also made in China. The last time he was out with Lana and Lisa he realized that there was nothing in the DollarMart that actually had anything relating to the birth of the child Jesus; it was all “Holiday” branded, and that was totally a different thing.

“They can’t use traditional holiday stuff down here, it just doesn’t work.” He thought to himself. It was true. Austin may get some kind of snow every five to seven years but for most days landing on December 25th were often dry and warm. You don’t get snowmen in Austin, only funny snow-globes of melted ones. Norman snorted. There was a Texas Snowman on a shelf in his room. He stopped at his driveway and looked around. Heavy city-illuminated clouds had moved down from the northwest and the air was still and crisp. It wasn’t cold enough to snow, but then again... maybe.

The one thing that did make a positive impression on him was how he felt when Lana was able to coax him out of his hiding place by the house and joined the party. There was no discrimination there. There was no young or old, there was no male and female... well, that wasn’t true: He had a “funny” feeling while he was talking to a girl that rode the same school bus that he did. Before then he had never paid attention to anyone on that bus. There was a feeling of belonging, a belonging that energized him and put a spark of life back into a boy that wore pretty much nothing but black and gray. It made him warm inside and an empathy for others he could not explain.

He became aware of a warm light and it wasn’t coming from the street light: It was coming from where the tan house was. Live oak trees were obstructing his view so he quickly returned to the front of the garage and stopped. He arrived expecting the light to be coming from inside the garage. It looked very much the same but the light was coming from above the house. It had golden flames that formed wings and a body that looked like the tail of a comet. But really, any explanation could not truly describe the beauty and amazing vision that was before him.

Norman and the beautiful light remained motionless for what seemed eternity, but eventually he gathered himself together to ask a question from the corporeal element, but the light in a radiant show saturated the house with its golden light and rose into the clouds. In his head he heard singing. As the neighborhood returned to its harsh reality there was only a boy standing in the street with a big smile on his face and...

It started to snow.