SELECTED STORIES

Nicholas Gordon

Published 2007

Printed by CafePress.com in the United States of America

TABLE OF CONTENTS

A COLD EYE ON CHRISTMAS

"Let us cast a cold and scientific eye on Christmas," Dr. B. Huston Fawcett said to his final World History class before the Christmas break.

He paused to look over the thirty-seven adolescent faces in front of him, some waiting attentively, others already sliding off into glassy boredom.

Forty-two years earlier, when he had first taught this particular lesson in his first year at St. Mary's Academy, the faces had all been white and the students all Catholic. But over two generations many of the white Catholic families had moved away, replaced mostly by black non-Catholics, and so the diocese had opened its doors to refugees from the public school system of all races and religions. Now the faces in front of Dr. Fawcett were of all shades, the children of all sorts of cultures and traditions. But the souls, Dr. Fawcett thought, the souls had not changed.

So. Dr. Fawcett took a deep breath and started rolling the boulder up the hill one more time.

"Let's look at the story of Christmas as history. For example, does anyone know the date of Christ's birth?"

Hands shot up.

"Miss Doyle?"

"December 25th," Miss Doyle said confidently.

She was a beautiful shade of brown with black kinky hair and sapphire blue eyes.

"How do we know that?"

She shrugged. "That's when we celebrate Christmas."

"Yes," Dr. Fawcett agreed. "But Jesus Christ was born over two thousand years ago. How do we know that it was on December 25th?"

Silence.

"Well," Dr. Fawcett went on, "what are the main sources of our knowledge of Christ's birth?"

Hands shot up, fewer than before.

"Mr. Singletary."

Black, moon-faced Mr. Singletary was born again, and knew his chapter and verse.

"Matthew 2 and Luke 2."

"Very good!" Dr. Fawcett said. "And do either of them supply a date for His birth?"

The class waited as Mr. Singletary mouthed the words silently.

"No," he finally said.

"That's correct," Dr. Fawcett said. "In fact, there is no source that tells us the date of Christ's birth. Mr. Pfeiffer."

"Then why do we celebrate it on December 25?"

"The truth is," Dr. Fawcett said, "that for several centuries the Church didn't celebrate Christ's birth. Easter was the only holiday celebrating Christ. But December 25th was an important pagan holiday in the Roman world, celebrating the birth of the sun god, Saturnalia in the west and the Mithraic feast in

the east. So to compete with these pagan holidays, the Church began to celebrate Christmas on the same day."

"You mean it was made up?" Miss Doyle said, forgetting to raise her hand.

"Yes, it was made up," Dr. Fawcett said.

"To imitate pagan holidays?" Mr. Pfeiffer said.

"To compete with pagan holidays. But let's move on to the year. In what year was Christ born? Mr. Santiago."

"1 A.D." Mr. Santiago answered.

"How do we know that?"

"Well, it's 1 A.D. by definition, isn't it?"

"Yes, very good!" Dr. Fawcett said. "Very clever. But of course no one called it 1 A.D. at the time, did they?"

"No, of course not," Mr. Santiago agreed.

"So when did we decide that it was 1 A.D.?"

Mr. Santiago shrugged. No hands went up.

"Actually, it was calculated by a monk named Dionysius Exiguus in 525 A.D., who counted – actually, miscounted – back through the reigns of Roman emperors up to that time. Though of course five centuries after the birth of Christ no one really knew when that event occurred. Miss Doyle."

"You mean it's not 2007?"

Dr. Fawcett laughed. "Yes, of course it's 2007. But the point is that the number 2007 is just as arbitrary as the date December 25th. These are traditions created by the Church for a variety of practical reasons in the absence of any real knowledge.

But let's go on. There are, after all, a few things we do know. For instance, who was king when Christ was born. Miss Reagan."

"Herod."

"And how do we know that?"

"Matthew, I think. Isn't it Matthew that tells of the three kings and the massacre of the innocents?"

"Yes, it is, Miss Reagan. Very good. You know your scripture. And when did King Herod reign?"

Silence.

"King Herod reigned from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C.," Dr. Fawcett said. "He died in 4 B.C., sometime after a lunar eclipse on March 13 and before the start of Passover. So what does that tell us about the year of Christ's birth? Miss Bayliss?"

"That He must have been born before 4 B.C."

"Yes. And at least how much before?"

"Enough time for the wise men to see Him and report back to Herod, and then for Herod to massacre the innocents."

"Mr. Singletary?"

"Enough time for the Holy Family to travel to Egypt and live there awhile, since they stayed there until they heard of Herod's death. And since Herod slaughtered all of the male children up to two years old, he must have thought that Christ could have been born up to two years earlier. So Christ had to be born around 5 or 6 B.C."

"Excellent! Excellent!" Dr. Fawcett exclaimed. "But we have another piece of the puzzle to consider. Remember that Joseph and Mary traveled to

Bethlehem just before Mary gave birth. Does anyone know why? Miss Mott."

"There was a census."

"And who ordered the census. Mr. Singletary?"

"Caesar Augustus."

"And who was governor at the time?"

Again the class waited as Mr. Singletary mouthed the words silently.

"Cyranius was governor of Syria," he finally said.

"Luke 2:2, right?"

Mr. Singletary nodded.

Dr. Fawcett strolled back and forth in front of the class as if pondering the point.

"No mention of Herod, right?"

Mr. Singletary nodded.

"Isn't that strange?" Dr. Fawcett wondered out loud. "Matthew talks about Herod. Does Luke so much as mention Herod?"

"No," Mr. Singletary said.

"Now we know when that census took place," Dr. Fawcett went on. "Sculpicius Quirinius (Cyranius in Greek) was appointed governor of Syria, which included Palestine, in 6 A.D., and soon after taking over he conducted the census to aid in tax collections. Miss Doyle."

"But Dr. Fawcett. How could Christ have been born during that census if He was born around 5 or 6 B.C.? It doesn't make sense."

"Quite right, Miss Doyle. It doesn't make sense."

"I mean, Luke is saying one thing and Matthew is saying another, right?"

"But the Holy Gospel is the word of the Lord!" Miss Elkins shouted out, unable to control herself. "It can't be wrong!"

"But lookit!" Mr. Santiago said. "If Herod died in 4 B.C. and the census took place in 6 A.D., something doesn't add up."

"Actually," Dr. Fawcett said, "scholars have been attempting to reconcile these dates for many years. Some suggest that Quirinius must have been governor twice and conducted two censuses. Others suggest that the King Herod mentioned in Matthew was not Herod the Great but one of his sons. But every explanation raises other problems. The fact is that we have a discrepancy between Matthew and Luke and no easy way to resolve it. Mr. Pfeiffer."

"Dr. Fawcett, why are you doing this just before we go on Christmas break? What's the point of this?"

"Very good, Mr. Pfeiffer! Very good! We get right to the heart of things. Mr. Pfeiffer, if someone could prove to you absolutely that Matthew and Luke were in conflict, which we have only suggested, not proven, but if it were proven that at least one of them had to be wrong, would you want to know that? Miss Kim."

"Yes, I would."

"Why?"

"Because it was the truth."

"Mr. Pfeiffer?"

"I wouldn't want to know anything about it!"

"Why not?"

"I believe in God's word!"

"Even if it were true that Matthew and Luke disagreed on something?"

"It couldn't be true. The word comes not from them but from the Lord."

More hands. A forest of quivering hands. The bell rang. No one seemed to notice.

"Miss Doyle?"

The beautiful dark face with the sapphire eyes smiled. "What's the difference when He was born? I can believe in Him anyway, can't I?"

"Yes, Miss Doyle, of course you can," Dr. Fawcett said. "But I'm afraid we've run out of time. Think about what we've said here. It has to do with the relationship between reason and faith. Each of you will have to work out that relationship for yourself over the course of your life. Have a Merry Christmas, class! I'll see you next year."

"Merry Christmas, Dr. Fawcett!" some shouted back. But others had already begun to argue about reason and faith, too engrossed to call out Merry Christmas.

Beautiful! Dr. Fawcett thought. How lovely! And what a gift it was to be able to bring young minds to a new awareness.

Christmas Eve, after Midnight Mass, found Dr. Fawcett on his knees before the nativity scene in his local parish church, praying to the infant Jesus. He

had come to mass alone, having lived alone since his wife had died 23 years earlier, and was now enjoying a few precious moments alone with Jesus while the sacristan, a friend, closed the building around him.

What he knew, and his students didn't know, was that St. Mary's Academy was closing at the end of the school year. The number of Catholics in the diocese was shrinking, and the diocese could no longer keep all of its schools open. Naturally, they were closing those furthest from the centers of Catholic population, of which St. Mary's was one.

Having seniority in the diocese, Dr. Fawcett could have been transferred to another school of his choice. But he was loath to force a younger teacher out of a job when he was past retirement age, and so he took the retirement package that the diocese offered.

He prayed to the infant Jesus that he had made the right choice for his life after retirement. For 42 years he lived in the same one-bedroom apartment, for 19 years with his wife, Carmela, and then for 23 years alone, monk-like, giving much of his meager income to St. Mary's, to his local parish, and to mission schools overseas.

He had intended to become a priest but then fell in love with Carmela, and so he changed his vocation to that of a lay teacher, moving across the divide from faith to reason.

Nor did he ever regret that choice, even though Carmela couldn't have children and died early of a cancer in her brain. He was grateful that he had known fleshly love with such a beautiful person, for

however long. And the life of reason, of a scholar, had excited him to the point of getting his doctorate in history and writing one book and several articles about the early history of the Church in North America, works that elicited a good deal of controversy and some academic recognition.

In July he would give up his apartment and go to teach in a mission school in the mountains of Bolivia, and he prayed for health, since that was what most worried him about his choice, years enough of good health so that he might be of use there and not a burden.

He prayed for the students whose education would be disrupted by the closing of the school. Some would have to travel long distances to the few schools that remained open. Others would have to return to the public schools they had fled. Grant them a life of faith and reason, he prayed, and the chance to know with clarity and understanding wonders that he would never see.

He prayed that their faith would not make them clap their hands over their ears and shut their eyes in an attempt to close themselves off from truths of the mind and senses. And he prayed that their reason would never undermine their faith, poisoning their will with a skepticism that would refuse so extraordinary a gift.

He prayed in gratitude for his own faith, which had filled his life with love and meaning. And he prayed that in his new life he would have the strength

to do God's will and to accept gladly the fate God intended for him, whatever that might be.

Finally, as he heard his friend the sacristan noisily closing cabinets and drawers, he wished the infant Jesus, a plastic doll in the arms of a plastic Mary, faced by a kneeling plastic Joseph, a happy birthday.

"Happy Birthday, Blessed Lord!" he whispered, tears of happiness starting to his eyes. "Happy Birthday!"

He got up off his knees, turned, said goodnight to his friend the sacristan, and walked out into the cold Christmas morning.

A GUILTY CONSCIENCE

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>
Date: 9 Aug 2007
Re: Arrgh!!!

Thanks a lot! I had a mouse problem, now I have a python problem!

Last night I did what you said, took the thing out to cuddle with it, get it used to me, and bang! it shows me its fangs and hisses and I drop it, all six feet of it, and off it goes, slithering quick as a bunny for the nearest wall.

And now it's gone! Gone! Who knows where? Probably hunting for mice in the wall, happy as a clam.

What worries me is the guy right below me. He's a lawyer! And he's nuts! And he's had three heart attacks! So if he sees this thing slithering out of the wall at him, I'm cooked! I'm fried! I'm yesterday!

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>
To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>
Date: 9 Aug 2007
Re: Ghosts

You say you don't believe in ghosts, but I'm

telling you, there's a ghost in this apartment. I actually saw it last night. Well, not actually saw it since it chose to be invisible. But I saw it move something.

I was as usual having a tough time getting to sleep (I know you say a guilty conscience needs no accuser) when I heard some eerie sounds coming from the living room, like someone bumping into things. Well, you know what I mess I have in there.

So I went to have a look, and when I flicked on the light one of the piles of books by my armchair suddenly spun half round like a record on a malfunctioning turntable.

Holy crap! I thought, and turned out the light. As if the thing couldn't see in the dark.

And then I felt the presence of evil in the room. I can't describe it any other way. An ancient, cold, remorseless, unstoppable evil permeating the air.

I backed out of the room and went back into bed to think about it. A ghost! Who was it? What did it want? How was I going to get rid of it?

My heart was pounding, and I thought: What if it comes in here? Maybe I should just leave. But where would I go? And for how long?

Maybe it wants revenge. Maybe it's out to scare me so much that I have another heart attack.

I decided that the main thing I had to fear was fear itself, and that calmed me down a little. I had to approach the situation scientifically. It's got to be someone's ghost. The ghost of someone I screwed big time. So I started going over all the people I've cheated over the years – as you know, a long, long list.

Not including you, of course, or any of my other exes, since you're all still alive, as far as I know. So I boiled it down to three really big-time victims, all of whom are no longer with us.

I decided to make restitution to each of them, one by one, starting with the least expensive (hope springs eternal). If the next night the ghost is gone, fine. If not, I'll have to move on to the next.

So what do you think? Sound like a plan?

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>
Date: 10 Aug 2007
Re: Get this thing outta here!

Next weekend? You're gonna come over next weekend? You got to be kidding me!

What if Cuddles crawls into Wynner's bed? And the guy's heart stops? And his kid or cousin or concubine sues me? What do I do then?

Don't tell me it's not an aggressive snake! It's a snake! And it's big! Get it outta here!!!

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>
To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>
Date: 10 Aug 2007
Re: One Down

Yesterday I sent a check for $14,873.33 to each of Ray Goldberg's three children. You remember Ray Goldberg. He was the guy whose suit I settled early

when I took you to Hawaii to make up for my first affair with Gloria.

Boy, was he pissed! He claimed he got only half of what he should have, but actually it was a third.

Well anyway, the ghost isn't Ray's. I sat in the armchair all night in the dark, waiting. I must have dozed off because around 3:00 in the AM I felt something cold and muscular touch my leg!

My heart pounding, I switched on the light, and the poltergeist practically lifted my chair! With me in it! I felt the center push up against my ass, as though a fist at the end of a long, sinewy arm pressed up against it and suddenly released!

"Who the hell are you?" I screamed at it. "Who? Who? What do you want? Tell me and I'll do it! Just tell me, for heaven's sake!"

Of course, no answer. The thing had done what it wanted to do. My heart felt like it was flip-flopping at the end of a broken spring.

I'd better get it right today! The second one on my list is Beryl Hyde. You remember – the widow I was trustee for. That's how I got the leg-breakers off my back.

Let's hope it's Beryl. I don't know how much more of this I can survive.

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>
To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>
Date: 11 Aug 2007
Re: Two Down

It's not Beryl. I sold off my entire Hathaway portfolio and sent her grandnephew $225,000 – that's with interest from 1983 – with instructions to distribute it as he thinks she would have intended.

Then I took up my living room vigil. I know it might sound stupid to haunt a ghost, as it were, but I want to know when the damned thing is gone.

I laid a copy of my letter to Beryl's grandnephew with my checkbook register on the coffee table, just in case the ghost wanted proof, and waited.

Nothing. All night, nothing.

"You were Beryl!" I shouted out loud to the dawn. "You haunted me out of every penny of my savings! But thank God you're finally gone! And I still have my annuity!"

I waited for the gray to turn a little brighter and went back to the bedroom hoping to salvage just a bit of sleep.

And there it was! It must have been lying in wait for me on the bed! As I entered the room the sheets began thrashing wildly, and then the night table starting rocking as though an earthquake were shaking the house.

I raced back into the living room and cowered in the armchair, waiting for it to come for me, waiting for the heart attack that I knew was imminent. But it never came. Eventually I fell asleep in the chair. I wasn't going to get back into that bed!

So it has to be Grandma. I never told you about Grandma. This was before we were married.

After Dad split with Mom and then disappeared, she made me the executor of her estate.

But her will left me only $1,000 to compensate for being the executor. Every penny of the rest went to Beth Abraham – the nursing home that was taking care of her.

So when she was finally sinking into her last coma, I wrote up another will, reversing the priorities, and got her to sign it, telling her this was just a minor rewording to solve a technical problem in the previous will.

She was barely able to sign the thing, forget about checking to see whether I was telling her the truth. When she died I got enough money to buy into what later became my practice. Beth Abraham got the thousand bucks, which, by the way, they were very happy with.

Well, today I sold my pension. The whole thing. After taxes, that gives me $843,295.27 – Grandma's legacy plus interest. The ghost had better be Grandma because now I'm clean, I've got nothing left. I'm going to be living on social security.

But my conscience is clean, too. Funny thing. I never felt guilty about anything I did, not to either the living or the dead. I figured that people with a conscience were just children who never grew up. You look around the world and you see what people do, and pretty soon you begin to wonder why you should be one of the only chumps.

But I feel right about this. The ghost is Grandma, and she's haunting me for a reason. There's

a power greater than me or the ghost, something that's making this happen, that makes everything happen for its own purpose in its own time.

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>
Date: 11 Aug 2007
Re: Yuck!

So I bought two dead mice from the pet store and I rubbed them all along the moldings of the living room walls, like you said. And I put them with the hide box beside the tank, and now I'm waiting.

This had better work! I can't believe you lent me Cuddles to get rid of mice and now I have to buy dead mice from the pet store to get rid of Cuddles!

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>
Date: 12 Aug 2007
Re: Cuddles is back!

Well, it worked! This morning the dead mice were gone and the thing was in the hide box, just like you said it would be.

So I picked up the hide box with the thing in it and put it back in the tank.

You'd better believe I'm not taking it out again! It's all yours! Come and get it!

I wonder if it ever did get down into Wynner's apartment.

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>
To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>
Date: 12 Aug 2007
Re: Free at Last!

Yes! It was Grandma!

I spent the whole night walking back and forth between the living room and bedroom, with forays into the bathroom and kitchen – and nothing! The sense, the smell of evil is gone! I'm free!

Shows you what scientific method can do. Hypothesis, experiment, result, conclusion. Works every time.

Not that it didn't cost me. I'm down to social security. But I'm square with the world. Or at least with Ray, Beryl, and Grandma. I know I owe you, too, and a lot of other people. But you can't squeeze blood from a stone. I did what I could, under the circumstances. Thanks to the ghost.

But I forgot – you don't believe in ghosts.

A HANUKKAH MIRACLE

Rabbi Joel Feigelman's congregation fired him in August, and, having no other source of income, he was forced to put together hurriedly a patchwork of part-time positions.

On the sabbath he conducted services Friday night and Saturday at the Daughters of Jacob Home for the Aged. Mondays and Thursdays he gave spiritual comfort to Jewish patients at Bauman Memorial Hospital, and Tuesdays at the Hospital of St. John of the Cross. Wednesdays he gave classes on Judaism at the Fort Dixon Hills Senior Citizens Center.

Not the life he had envisioned for himself thirty years earlier at Union Theological Seminary. But neither was his messy divorce after twenty-seven years of marriage, nor the embarrassing dismissal by his congregation in response to some admittedly inappropriate behavior with a married congregant in the aftermath of his sexual liberation.

One evening in the waning days of November he was listening to Dave Brubeck in his furnished room when the phone rang.

"Rabbi Joel Feigelman?" came a distant, slithering voice, strained through a cell phone.

"Yes?"

"This is Murray Rosenbaum. Sorry for the bad connection. I'm in Singapore."

"Yes?" Rabbi Feigelman repeated.

"You *are* the rabbi for the Daughters of Jacob."

"Yes."

"Well, I cleared it with Ms. Kay. I'd like to pay you an extra fifty bucks a shot to light Hanukkah candles for my mother."

"Yes?"

"Fifty bucks. My mother, Rivka Rosenbaum. She's in hospice at the Home. It would mean a lot to me to know that someone was lighting the candles for her."

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman agreed.

"I gotta get back to a meeting. Yes or no, Rabbi. What do you say?"

"Yes!" said Rabbi Feigelman. Eight days at $50 equaled $400 – 20% of his credit card debt. For that he'd light Hanukkah candles for a corpse.

"My secretary will send you a check at the Home as soon as the holiday is over. OK with you?"

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman said one last time, and Murray Rosenbaum hung up.

After Havdalah services on the next Saturday evening, Rabbi Feigelman went over to the hospice wing of the Home to take a look at the woman for whom he was supposed to light Hanukkah candles.

As he entered the room, Rivka Rosenbaum seemed to be asleep, but soon she opened her eyes as wide as a child's and gave him a look of wonder.

"I'm Rabbi Feigelman," Rabbi Feigelman said. "Your son called me from Singapore."

The words didn't seem to register.

Rabbi Feigelman noticed the tatooed numbers on her cadaverous arm. A Holocaust survivor, once again skin and bones.

The hospice nurse explained that Mrs. Rosenbaum had been given two or three months until a metastisized melanoma killed her, but her doctor and medical proxy had agreed instead to stop dialysis, which would end her life more swiftly and far less painfully in four or five days.

The likelihood of her making it even to the first night of Hanukkah was slim. The likelihood of her making it to the end was zero.

Please, God! Rabbi Feigelman prayed, just half jokingly. Two more weeks! I need the money.

On the first night of Hanukkah, Rivka Rosenbaum was still alive, though barely. Rabbi Feigelman showed up, menorah, matches, and candles in a plastic shopping bag.

The woman was in a coma, he was told, and would have absolutely no consciousness of what he was doing. Still, he was being paid, so Rabbi Feigelman set the menorah up on the little rolling table by her bed, lit the Shamos, and then with the Shamos the candle for the first night, singing the blessings as he did so.

He set the menorah on the window sill and looked over at his audience.

She turned uncomfortably in bed, breathing heavily, then turned again and moaned, as if in pain.

She opened her eyes and stared at Rabbi Feigelman as though he weren't there.

Rabbi Feigelman shuddered and wondered what she was seeing.

"Mrs. Rosenbaum?" he said.

She moved her head as if in recognition that someone was speaking to her.

"I'm Rabbi Feigelman. Your son Murray asked me (he was about to say 'is paying me' but thought better of it) to light Hanukkah candles for you. Would you like that?"

Amazingly, she nodded her head and smiled.

"Wonderful!" he said. "Can you see the menorah? Over there, by the window."

She turned her eyes towards the window and stared at the glow of the two candles. She seemed thoroughly entranced by the light. Her face had lost its former stupor and seemed intelligent, almost beautiful.

Then she returned her eyes to the ceiling and shut them, as if going to sleep.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Rosenbaum," Rabbi Feigelman said softly. "I'll be back tomorrow evening to light the second candle."

Very quietly, he left the room.

Since the following evening was Friday, the beginning of the sabbath, Rabbi Feigelman did the regular sabbath service in the large lounge and then the candle lighting for the entire population of the Home – residents and staff – at the electric menorah in the main lobby.

Then he went over to the hospice wing to light the candles for Mrs. Rosenbaum. As he entered the room the hospice nurse drew him back out into the

hall and whispered to him.

"Rabbi Feigelman, it's unbelievable! Mrs. Rosenbaum woke up and said it's time for the candle lighting and where were you? So I told her you were doing it for everyone else in the lobby and that then you would be coming over to do it privately for her, and she clasped her hands together with joy. With joy, Rabbi Feigelman! Her potassium readings are high enough to shut down an elephant's heart, and she seems healthier than she's ever been here at the hospice. It's a miracle!"

Oh, God! Rabbi Feigelman thought. He was happy for Mrs. Rosenbaum, but could it be that God was actually answering his ugly, venal, only half-serious prayer? It seemed ludicrous even to think so. Fear gripped his heart.

He came into the room and bowed to Mrs. Rosenbaum, who was waiting like a concert audience for the conductor. Then he lit the Shamos, and with the Shamos two candles while singing the blessings, then transferred the menorah from the rolling table to the window sill.

Mrs. Rosenbaum looked on with enthusiasm. Then she stared at the glowing candles.

"How beautiful!" she exclaimed, the first words he had heard from her, quite apropos and clear.

"You like it?" he asked.

"I love it! And you sing the prayers so well! Excuse me, but your name . . ."

"Rabbi Feigelman. Joel Feigelman. I'm the rabbi at the Home."

"So pleased to meet you! And thank you for the private candle lighting, since I can't go to the public one. I do appreciate it very much."

"You're very welcome. Your son Murray . . . requested it."

"My son?" she asked, confused. "My son?"

She closed her eyes tightly, as if trying to picture him, and fell asleep.

On the third night Rabbi Feigelman had to finish the Havdalah service in the chapel before he could come to Mrs. Rosenbaum's room. When he got there, he found Ms. Kay, the head of social services; Dr. Hilton, the head of medical services; and Ms. Raimondo, the head of nursing services; all waiting for him.

"You don't mind if we watch," Dr. Hilton said. "This is the most extraordinary medical phenomenon I've ever heard of."

Rabbi Feigelman shrugged his acquiescence and greeted Mrs. Rosenbaum, who seemed to be anxiously awaiting the ceremony. He lit the three candles with the Shamos, singing the blessings, and set the menorah on the window sill, where Mrs. Rosenbaum stared at it rapturously.

"This is something to live for!" she exclaimed. "Isn't it? Did you ever see anything so lovely?"

"No," Rabbi Feigelman said quite truthfully. "I haven't."

"The miracle of light! Isn't it like the miracle of life, Rabbi Feigelman? Inexplicable beauty on the edge of nothingness. How grateful I am for it, even for a

few extra days!"

Staring at the candles, she again fell into a sudden, deep sleep, while Dr. Hilton hurriedly pressed his stethoscope against her back and Ms. Raimondo slapped a blood pressure cuff around her left arm.

Rabbi Feigelman left the room shaking. He shook all the way home on the three buses he had to take, and then all the way up the three flights of stairs to his room.

"God, God, God, God!" he kept repeating. "What are You doing to me? Are You punishing me? Are You making fun of me?"

He had resolved not to go back to Mrs. Rosenbaum's room the following night when the phone rang.

It was Murray Rosenbaum, this time from St. Petersburg. He sounded like he was under water.

"I just spoke to Ms. Kay," he said enthusiastically. "The head of social services at the home?"

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman affirmed.

"She said it was a miracle! My mother's in a coma till about a half hour before you come. Then she wakes up and is all animated and actually happy! God bless you, Rabbi! Tell you what I want to do."

"Yes?" said Rabbi Feigelman.

"I'm gonna double your pay. One hundred bucks a shot. Eight hundred bucks total. That sound good to you?"

"Yes," said Rabbi Feigelman.

"Great! I'll give the instructions to my secretary

and she'll send you a check just as soon as the holiday is over. Keep up the good work!"

He hung up.

The next night there was a little crowd in Mrs. Rosenbaum's room. Rabbi Feigelman had to elbow his way in, though as soon as he was recognized, the crowd made a respectful, almost awed path for him.

With a wave of his arm, he cleared Mrs. Rosenbaum's sight line. Her face was beaming with anticipation.

How marvelous that so little gives her so much! he thought.

He lit the candles, singing the blessings with unusual grace. He placed the menorah on the window sill. Below the window, which was on the second floor looking out onto an interior garden, another crowd had gathered, and through the closed window Rabbi Feigelman could hear a muffled cheer.

This scene was repeated over the next four nights, the crowds growing, Mrs. Rosenbaum glowing like a Hanukkah candle for the hour or so that she was awake. Rabbi Feigelman was introduced to the Chairman of the Board, the Director of the Foundation, the Head of the local Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, and so on, all of whom praised him and hinted at more lucrative possibilities for the future.

He felt as though he had been mounted on a rack and pulled apart until his limbs popped out. He couldn't believe that the Lord would for one second concern Himself with so trivial a request, or would

keep life burning in an old lady for eight miraculous days just to ease his financial situation.

It was the Hanukkah miracle replayed as farce. He felt guilty for using a dead woman for his own material advantage, and each time he saw her preternatural joy, he cringed inside.

On the last night of Hanukkah, the crowd was larger than ever. A local cable television station covered the event, as did a photographer and reporter from the Associated Press.

As usual, Mrs. Rosenbaum was animated and vigorous. She was interviewed by both the TV and print media before Rabbi Feigelman arrived, and to both she asserted her belief that she would die soon after the last candle on the menorah was lit, but that she was overjoyed at every opportunity to experience the beauty of light.

"You don't know what a miracle it is," she told them, "because you take it for granted. But for me every second of beauty is a second worth having, and I'm grateful that, for whatever mysterious reason, God has granted me eight more days of it."

When Rabbi Feigelman arrived, the media wanted to interview him as well, but he brushed right by them with a "no comment" and began setting up the menorah for the final candle lighting. As he lit the eight candles with the Shamos while singing the blessings, all eyes were upon him. But after he set the menorah on the window sill, all eyes shifted to Mrs. Rosenbaum.

How her eyes danced, just like the light of the

nine candles! She was an advertisement for the joy of life, and everyone present was sold.

Then her eyes closed, as though her battery had suddenly run out, and she seemed to have fallen into a deep sleep.

Everyone waited while Dr. Hilton checked her vital signs, and fifteen minutes after Rabbi Feigelman had lit the last candle, Mrs. Rosenbaum was pronounced dead. The miracle was over.

Rabbi Feigelman, however, had slipped out while attention was focused on Mrs. Rosenbaum. By the time she died he was on the first of his three buses home.

He felt sorry for her, but he didn't want to be part of the circus going on in her room. Nor did he want to be questioned about why he was lighting Hanukkah candles privately for anyone, nor whether or how much he was getting paid to do it, nor whether he had prayed for her to live just so that he could collect his fee for service.

So he wasn't sure whether she had died until he called Ms. Kay the next morning.

Yes, Ms. Kay told him. She had died no more than fifteen minutes after he had lit the last candle.

"Have you called her son Murray to let him know?" Rabbi Feigelman asked.

"What son Murray?" Ms. Kay said. "She doesn't have a son. At least not one who's alive."

"No son Murray?"

"Her husband and children were killed in the Holocaust. She never remarried. That's why her

attorney was her medical proxy."

"But didn't he ask you whether it as all right for me to – "

"Didn't who ask?"

"Her son Murray."

"How could he ask if he doesn't exist?"

A fair question, Rabbi Feigelman thought. He apologized for bothering her and hung up.

Then he realized: No Murray Rosenbaum, no $800. And he began to understand just how divinely he had been had.

ANGELS WITHOUT WINGS

"A Jew on Christmas is like an angel without wings," my Uncle Paul used to say.

Not that Uncle Paul disliked any particular Jews, of whom in any case there were few in the little upstate town of Windsor, New York, where he and my mother grew up and where he and Aunt Flo still lived in the ancestral home – a narrow, two-story frame house set back from Pine Street. His next-door neighbors on the right were Jews, as was his boss at the bank, and Uncle Paul got along fine with them.

It was mostly the *idea* of Jews that got Uncle Paul riled. He seemed to take their rejection of Christ personally. After all, it was they who prophesied Christ, as in Isaiah 9:6: *For unto us a child is born . . . and his name shall be called . . . the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace*.

What could be clearer than that? These were Jewish words, written centuries before the birth of Christ, words that the Jews themselves still considered holy. If anyone should believe, Uncle Paul thought, it should be Jews. Christ Himself was a Jew, as well as Mary, Joseph, and all of the Apostles.

But instead they killed Him. It might be politically incorrect to say so, but there was no arguing against a fact. Pontius Pilate washed his hands of it, and the Roman soldiers carried it out, but the Jews

demanded it, and then reaffirmed it by choosing to set free Barabbas instead of Christ.

And they would do it again, Uncle Paul was certain, if Christ came back at a time when they had the power to do it. The religious ones, the ones in the black hats and coats. In any state they ran, you could bet that Christians would be persecuted, as they were of old, and worship of Christ would be forbidden as blasphemy. Even in Israel, a supposedly secular Jewish state, Jewish stars were everywhere, even on the flag, and Jewish prayers were said on every public occasion.

But turn things around, and here in Windsor the third grade couldn't even put on a Christmas play because it might offend the one Jewish child in the class. The town hall had to get rid of the nativity scene on the front lawn. (Just think about what kind of fuss objecting to the public display of a menorah in Israel would engender!) The Bible could no longer be read at public assemblies. The football team could no longer pray to Christ in the locker room before games, even though there had never been a single Jew on the team in anyone's memory. And so on and on through a much-repeated litany of grievances against the Jews.

The thing was that in a Christian country the Jews insisted that all public symbols and practices of religion be forbidden, while in Israel, Christians and Muslims were forced to tolerate a Jewish state.

They were smart, Uncle Paul conceded. In every country they infected they became rich, became lawyers, took over the media, so they could have their

way. A tiny minority ruled the vast majority, preventing them from living a Christian life.

No one understood why Uncle Paul was so obsessed with Jews. In all other respects he was mild mannered and reserved, a large, silver-haired man with pale skin and lips and light blue eyes, who looked like he might have gone through too many washings. He was the formal type who always wore a jacket and tie outside the house, and even inside kept on the white shirt, the dress pants, the freshly shined shoes.

But on the subject of Jews it was as though he had a little lava lake of fury that, like an intermittently active volcano, erupted and subsided on its own schedule.

Then suddenly one Christmas Eve the tirades stopped.

My parents and I would spend every Christmas with Uncle Paul and Aunt Flo. For my mother it was "going home" for the holidays. For me the little house on Pine Street in Windsor, New York, *was* Christmas, and as the only child in the house – my parents had only one, and Uncle Paul and Aunt Flo were childless – I was for many years the lens through which Christmas happened.

There was no chimney in the small Bronx apartment where I grew up, and I often wondered how Santa would have gotten in to deliver presents had we not gone up to celebrate Christmas in Windsor. There, there was an ample fireplace and room for a tall, beautifully decorated tree, and piles of presents on Christmas morning, which after breakfast I unwrapped

to the shrieks of delight of four perhaps overly indulgent adults.

At any rate, one Christmas Eve, when I was twelve, Uncle Paul called home from the bank to say he would be late. It had been snowing heavily all day. A colleague had damaged his car in one of the many accidents that morning, and Uncle Paul was going to drive him home. He lived just a bit past the next town, Damascus, and so it shouldn't take long.

Five hours later, the police called. They had found Uncle Paul unconscious in his car, which had skidded off the treacherous country road on the way back to Damascus. He seemed to be unhurt, but they had sent him by ambulance to the emergency room in Binghamton, just to be sure.

When we finally got both him and his Jeep home at around midnight, Uncle Paul seemed physically fine but distracted, as though something had happened on that little snowy road to Damascus that now occupied his attention completely. He answered our questions in single syllables, said he was tired, that he couldn't talk now, couldn't sit down with us to dinner.

We put him to bed, and the next morning he seemed perfectly normal – with one significant change: He said nothing more about Jews. Nothing good, nothing bad. It was as though a faucet had been turned off inside him, and the torrent of anger and hatred had ceased to flow.

The faucet remained off for the rest of his life, some twenty years, at the end of which he died at his

desk at the bank of a stroke. Aunt Flo lasted another ten lonely years before she followed him. Since my parents had also died, and I was the last of the family, on the Christmas Eve after Aunt Flo's death I found myself again in Windsor to pack up whatever needed to be saved and to get rid of the rest before selling the house.

In the interim I had gotten married, had had two children, had gotten divorced, and now lived alone near Boston, where I had tenure at a small Catholic college.

So it was with a good deal of nostalgic melancholy that I went through the bits and pieces of my family's lives – photographs and letters, certificates, printed announcements and invitations, holiday cards and condolence cards and thank-you cards – that are the standard detritus of ordinary living.

At around 1:00 AM a single piece of paper written on both sides in my uncle's handwriting fluttered to the floor. It had been tucked into a notebook that recorded meticulously the transactions of the local Knights of Columbus chapter, of which Uncle Paul had been perennial treasurer.

I opened the paper, which had been folded in half the better to fit in the notebook, and saw the title in large letters: *A Vision*, underneath which was a date: *Christmas Eve, 1977*.

And then:

I had dropped Henry Slater off at his house and had just started back towards Damascus when I felt my car

unaccountably drifting off the road in heavy snow. I came to a stop in an open field, which was, however, green under a warm, starry sky.

Bewildered, I got out of the car to see Christ descending towards me out of the stars.

He was, as on most crucifixes, nearly naked, and bleeding from the wounds of the cross. In His bloody hands, each perforated by a large hole the diameter of a half dollar, he carried a white dove which had no wings.

"Oh, Paul, Paul!" Christ called out to me in sorrow. "Why do you persecute me?"

"Dear Lord!" I cried back. "How do I persecute you? What do I do to offend you?"

Christ held up the wingless dove, white but for smears of blood from His hands.

"You have taken my wings," He said.

"How have I taken Your wings?" I cried out again in dismay. I was shaking with remorse and confusion.

He came closer to me and took me in His arms with His bloody hands and held me against His bloody chest. And He whispered to me, "I am a Jew, am I not?"

Then He kissed me on both cheeks and hugged me again to His bloody, bony body, and in that hug I felt all the love of the universe spill into me, as though a sea had emptied itself into my heart.

"Forgive me!" I said. "Forgive me!" Again and again, weeping, weeping, until I was awakened by the police and found myself behind the wheel of my Jeep in the middle of a white snowy field.

The hatred in me was gone. I pray that it never returns.

Your prayer was answered, I whispered to Uncle Paul, the one who had written these words nearly thirty years ago, who could not have known when he wrote them that he would never again express hatred for Jews.

What he felt inside, of course, is unknown. How many of us, however deep our love of Christ and faith in Christ's love for us, can ever totally banish hatred from our hearts? I knew all too well that I couldn't – hadn't – hadn't even tried in one particular case, which was one reason I was sitting alone on Christmas Eve in the living room where as a child I had known so much Christmas love and beauty.

But I hoped that Uncle Paul had found some peace in the twenty years that had been left to him, and prayed for us all to find peace from the hatred in our hearts, for all of us angels without wings on this Christmas Eve, as on every Christmas Eve, singing of Christ's glory yet still unable to fly.

CANDLES IN A WINDOW

As Solomon Simon lay on his deathbed in Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx, he asked his only grandchild Raphael to make him one last promise.

"What's that, Grandpa?" Raphael asked, holding his grandfather's surprisingly strong right hand.

"Promise me you'll put your Hanukkah candles in the window."

"But I don't light Hanukkah candles, Grandpa."

"Then I guess you'll have to start."

Solomon squeezed his grandson's hand and smiled.

"I'm not religious," Raphael protested. "I don't believe in God."

"You don't have to believe, Raphael. You just do it. The belief comes."

"I'm not even Jewish, Grandpa."

"Please," Solomon pleaded. "Promise me. It's a little thing."

Raphael was silent, inside in turmoil. It wasn't such a little thing. He had been raised a New Age sort of Buddhist by his Chinese-American mother. His wife was an African-American Catholic, which was how they were raising their son.

He knew why his grandfather was so insistent. The old man wanted to make sure a little Judaism

survived in the mix. But he was asking a lot. Especially to put the Hanukkah candles in the window. That was a public statement Raphael really didn't want to make, mainly because it wasn't true.

He was about to say, "I wish I could . . ." when he looked up and saw that his grandfather had fallen asleep. That was how he had become from the medication – likely to fall asleep at any moment, even in mid-sentence.

Raphael thanked the God he didn't believe in and slipped out of the room without having to tell his grandfather yes or no. But when the old man fell into a coma the next day and died three days later, Raphael was not happy that he hadn't had the opportunity to answer him. While not saying no was different from saying yes, there remained a residue of obligation that Raphael would rather have done without.

Through the abbreviated period of mourning – the funeral and burial in the morning, the four hours of *shiva* (down from the customary seven days) in the afternoon, Raphael said nothing to his father about his grandfather's dying request. He still hadn't decided what to do about it.

His inclination was to do nothing, but at the murky bottom of that choice something gnawed at him. It wasn't that he thought the soul of his grandfather was looking down at him – dead was dead, as far as he was concerned. Nor was it any promise he might implicitly have made by not explicitly saying no.

Instead, it was something alive in him, perhaps

a reincarnation of his grandfather (though Raphael, despite his Buddhist upbringing, did not believe in reincarnation) – an actual desire to do it, a little factoid struggling to break free of the mud below.

When Raphael thought about his grandfather, Hanukkah candles in the window loomed large in his memories. He had been brought up in Sacramento among his mother's Chinese-American family. But since his mother, unlike his father, believed firmly in the importance of family, he had often spent Christmas vacation visiting his grandfather in the Bronx, first with his father and mother, then with his mother, then by himself.

Whenever Hanukkah had fallen close enough to Christmas, he would watch his grandfather light the candles in the kitchen, then bring the lit menorah over to the sill of the living room window, where the little flames danced and glowed in the early winter darkness.

The living room window looked out onto an air shaft, and Raphael could see other Hanukkah candles placed in windows up and down the air shaft, like friendly people waving.

He remembered a certain peace and satisfaction in his grandfather's face as he said the Hebrew prayers, a sense of something beautiful beautifully done, an enjoyment of the musical phrase drawn out and savored at the end. Somehow, he thought, that shouldn't be gone from his life now that his grandfather was gone. It would be a memory of his grandfather embedded in his life. A sort of reincarnation.

At the end of that long day of saying goodbye to his grandfather, he said goodbye to his father at the airport. He was flying back to Cleveland, his father back to San Francisco, where he lived with his sixth wife – like all his wives, of whom Raphael's mother had been the first, a former student.

"Grandpa asked me to put my Hanukkah candles in the window," he said as they shared a drink before going off to their separate gates.

"You don't light Hanukkah candles, do you?" his father asked.

"Not at the moment."

"Are you going to do it?"

"I don't know."

His father, as always, looked right through him. "You always were a sentimentalist," he said.

"You say that as an accusation."

"Well, it is. You don't believe in that crap, not for a second, so the whole thing is a lie, not just to your family and neighbors but also to yourself. Which is what sentimentalists do. They lie."

"Sometimes you just do something for whatever reasons and the truth tags along."

"The truth never tags along," his father said decisively. "It's just there. In stone."

It felt more like Play-Doh for the first few days after Raphael arrived home in Shaker Heights, as he shaped and re-shaped it, studied it , then re-shaped it again.

One late afternoon after he and his wife Letitia had come into the kitchen after setting up Christmas

decorations on their snow-covered front lawn, he broached the subject of his grandfather's last request.

"He asked you to do *what*?" Letitia asked with the little side-to-side motion of the head that in some African-American women signaled defiance.

"Light Hanukkah candles and put the menorah in the window."

"You didn't promise him, did you?"

"No," Raphael admitted. "He died before I could answer him."

"Well, then."

She took out a colander and began to wash some string beans.

Xavier, their nine-year-old son, came in from throwing snowballs at Harry, their mutt from the pound, who had the body of a pit bull covered by the bristle of a wire-haired terrier.

Raphael looked at his Black-Asian-Jewish child and wondered what he, Xavier, would make of all these heritages, and what he, Raphael, could do to help him.

"Your father thinking about lighting Hanukkah candles and putting them in the window," Letitia said.

"For Pop-Pop?"

"For good. Every year."

"That's nice," Xavier said. "They're pretty."

"They're Jewish," Letitia said.

"Whatever."

Xavier finished hanging up his wet ski jacket, pulled off his boots, and vanished into his room, leaving Harry shaking off the melting snow in the

middle of the kitchen floor.

"This something you really want to do?" Letitia asked.

"Yes," Raphael answered.

Letitia shrugged. "People gonna wonder."

Raphael kissed her on the cheek, sure for the first time about what he wanted to do, and went upstairs to call his mother.

"O-o-o-o-o-h, how nice!" she cooed. "Channeling your grandfather!"

"Not channeling him," Raphael said. "Just remembering him."

"You'll see. You'll light the candles and believe me, you'll feel his hand guiding your arm."

"You think so."

"I know so. He'll be so happy!"

Then Raphael clicked on the computer to do some research on a subject he knew almost nothing about.

When the first night of Hanukkah arrived, the little family gathered in the kitchen. Raphael put on a yarmulka and one on Xavier, and Letitia wore a shawl over her head. Raphael struck a match, lit the Shamos candle, and began the blessings, singing them in Hebrew, blending a melody he had gotten on the Internet with what he remembered from evenings with his grandfather.

When he was finished, two candles, the Shamos and the candle for the first night, flickered on the menorah.

As he had seen his grandfather do so many

times, he carried the menorah carefully over to the sill of the picture window in the living room, shading the flames with the palm of his free hand. It shone out into the suburban night, along with the Christmas decorations, for all to see.

As his mother had predicted, as he carried the menorah into the living room and placed it on the sill, he felt eerily as though his grandfather had stepped into his body, as though for a moment he was his grandfather and was watching the glow of the candles through his grandfather's approving eyes.

Raphael wished only that he had told him yes while he was still alive.

"You happy now?" Letitia asked.

"Yes," he said, watching Xavier watch the flames. He gave Xavier a Hanukkah card with a five-dollar bill in it, calculated to make Xavier ecstatic about the idea of celebrating both Christmas and Hanukkah, and Letitia a card which told her how much sharing the holiday with her meant to him.

Then he stepped out of his house and walked over to the sidewalk to see the effect of the menorah from the street.

The two candles in the window overlooked a natural pine tree on the front lawn decorated with blinking colored lights. Near the pine tree three brightly lit reindeer looked on with wonder.

What his grandfather could no longer do, Raphael had taken over, blending it with the rest of his inner melange so that in his family it would not die, at least not yet.

Raphael wished that his grandfather could see it. Well, why not imagine that he could and was pleased? He crunched out into the middle of the freshly plowed street, shouted, "Yes, Grandpa! I promise!", and waved up at the cold black sky.

JESUS LIGHTS THE CANDLES

When Meyer Salzman was five years old, his parents told him that henceforth his name would be Michel LeBlanc, and that he would be Catholic, not Jewish.

"And you must never speak Yiddish, never, never, never again," said his mother. "Promise me!"

"I promise," Meyer said in Yiddish.

"In French! In French!" his mother insisted.

"I promise," Michel said in French.

"And what's your name?"

"Michel."

"Michel who?"

"Michel LeBlanc."

"And what religion are you?"

"Catholic."

"And you were born in Gordes. Where were you born?"

"I was born in Gordes."

They were standing at the entrance to the Catholic orphanage of St. Joseph the Protector, he and his father and mother. A borrowed car idled by the side of the road.

"Again, where were you born?"

"I was born in Gordes!" Michel almost shouted, desperate now, tears in his voice.

His father crouched next to him and took him in his arms.

"And your father and mother. You don't know them. You never saw them. Say it!"

"I don't know my father and mother!" Michel shouted. "I never saw them!"

"Goodbye, my sweet, my dearest boy," his father said, hugging him and kissing him on the cheek. "Be strong."

His mother kissed him, too, and then his parents got into the car and drove away, leaving him by the locked, massive wooden door.

He pulled the bell chain and heard it sound within. He waited.

"My name is Michel LeBlanc," he recited to himself in French. "I'm Catholic. I never knew my father and mother. I was born in Gordes."

The door opened.

"And who is this?" a priest asked, coming out of the gate and crouching down to Michel's height. "Whom do we have here?"

"My name is Michel LeBlanc!" Michel proclaimed. "I'm Catholic! I never knew my father and mother! I was born in Gordes!"

Years later, when with his American wife and three children he revisited the place where he had stood in front of the orphanage gate, Meyer Salzman wept for the five-year-old boy who had been abandoned there in order to save his life. And he wept for his parents, who had been forced to leave him there, and whose names had surfaced on a list of those to be transported to the east, only to disappear again, perhaps into the smokestacks of Birkenau.

But then, as he was led into a large courtyard surrounded by low, two-story buildings, at the far end of which was a chapel with a tall bell tower, Michel was too bewildered to weep.

The priest walked him across to the chapel, where about 50 boys of all ages were at prayer. They knelt on the hard stone floor facing a crucifix that dominated the altar. On the crucifix a nearly naked man hung from nails driven into his hands and crossed feet. On his head was a crown of thorns. He seemed to be in agony.

Michel looked questioningly at the priest.

"Do as the others do," the priest said kindly. "Copy them exactly. You'll learn soon enough."

So Michel joined the boys on their knees, one hand clasping the other, eyes on the crucifix, though he couldn't follow what they were saying, which was not in French. He looked at the man on the cross, wondered who he was, what had happened to him, why now such a large statue of him was hung over the altar, why all the boys seemed to be praying to him.

When the boys were finished, they moved their hands rapidly across their chests in a way Michel could not imitate. Then they got up.

"Jew!" the boy next to him whispered vehemently to Michel as the priest at the altar began to speak. "Don't you even know how to cross yourself?"

Michel reddened and stared at the floor. Then he began to cry to himself, inside, smothering the tears that sprang to his eyes.

As the priest continued to speak, Meyer

imagined his home in Paris, a small apartment near the Place des Vosges, where he slept in the living room. In the early morning the sun came through the windows facing the Rue Saint-Antoine, and he could hear the sounds of deliveries being made to the kosher butcher four flights below.

Each morning he would peer out the window at the busy street until his parents awakened, and his mother came into the living room and kissed him as his father went downstairs to buy fresh bread and the morning newspaper.

Michel became aware of the boys stirring around him. He got up with them. As they left the chapel they turned, bent at the right knee while mumbling, and crossed themselves. Michel tried to do as they did, mumbling nonsense syllables, and emerged with them into the sunny courtyard to begin his new life.

The next day Michel was taken out of afternoon prayers to meet Father Landau, a large, rather rotund elderly priest who was busy at his desk in a luxuriously furnished room as Michel was ushered in.

"Wait! Just wait!" Father Landau called out to Michel, who was waiting anyway.

The priest who had brought him bowed and left, closing the heavy oak door behind him.

While he was waiting, Michel had the opportunity again to examine a crucifix, this time one behind and above Father Landau's desk. On this crucifix the exquisitely carved face of Jesus (Michel

had by this time learned his name) was not in agony but serene, so serene that Michel could not stop staring at him, imagining that despite the nails in his hands and through his crossed feet, despite the wound in his side and the crown of thorns on his head, no state of being could be more beautiful.

"You're Jewish!" Father Landau suddenly accused him, breaking into the rapt loveliness of his thoughts.

A shudder ran through Michel, and he began to recite his litany.

"No, sir. I am Catholic. My name is Michel LeBlanc. I was born in Gordes. I never knew my parents."

"Drop your pants!" Father Landau ordered. "Go ahead. Don't be afraid. Drop them."

Michel dropped his pants. Father Landau got on his knees in front of him and pulled down his underpants.

"You see?" he said triumphantly. "You're circumcised. That means you're Jewish. They'll take you away for that!"

Michel shuddered again and began to cry.

"Now don't worry," Father Landau said hurriedly. "I'll protect you. But you must try very, very hard not to let anyone else see this. Ever. Do you understand?"

Michel nodded through his tears.

"If anyone sees this they'll take you away and kill you," he repeated. "Here. Put your hand here."

He took Michel's hand and put it between his

legs and began to move his hips back and forth, back and forth, until suddenly he stopped.

"Now," he said. "Come on! Lean against the desk! Now!"

Michel, his pants and underpants still around his ankles, leaned on the desk as Father Landau came around behind him.

And then something very strange happened. Jesus Christ came down from the cross, a real, life-sized man, and took Meyer Salzman in his arms. He held him while the priest was busy behind him, held him and kissed him as his father would have, until Father Landau was finished and Christ receded back up onto the cross.

"Now go back to the others," Father Landau said, sitting back down at his desk and resuming his interest in the papers in front of him. "Remember: Don't show yourself to anyone. I will protect you and keep you alive, but you have to help me. Do you understand?"

Michel nodded.

"Now go!"

Michel joined the others in the middle of a French lesson, but he heard almost nothing. All he could remember was the beauty of being held by Jesus Christ. Above the teacher was another crucifix, this one so small and far away, and of such dark wood, that Michel could barely make out the figure on it. But he knew who was there and could still feel the rapture of being held in his arms.

As the days passed, there were more interviews

with Father Landau, and at each one Michel became Meyer as Christ came down to hold him through his ordeal. It became a trick for Michel to become Meyer, and a very successful one.

Even in the chapel at prayer, though on his knees before Christ, Meyer would imagine himself at home on Shabbat with his parents. His father would bless him, stretching out his hands to cover Meyer's head after his mother had lit the candles. And then they would say grace in Hebrew as Michel mumbled his nonsense syllables in the chapel.

But the strange thing was that Christ joined them for Shabbat dinner, sitting at the table to make a little family of four rather than of three. Michel would go through this fantasy three times a day, and each time Christ was there in the same place, singing grace with the rest of the family and holding hands around the table, as though Meyer had brought home a new friend whom the family had accepted as one of their own.

Days and months passed. Summer turned to autumn and then winter. Michel had by now caught up to the rest of the boys his age in both his religious and academic studies. He could recite the necessary prayers in Latin, spoke French in the Provencal dialect, and had begun to learn to read and add and subtract. His interviews with Father Landau became fewer and fewer. Aside from the need to shower and go to the bathroom with unusual modesty, outwardly he had become like the orphans around him.

Inwardly, Meyer led a different life entirely. He

lived at home with his parents in Paris, spoke Yiddish, and practiced what little remnants of Judaism he had been able to understand before his parents had left him at the gates of St. Joseph the Protector.

At least once a day he enjoyed Shabbat dinner with Jesus and his parents. Since he didn't know the proper dates for the Jewish holidays, to round out his days he repeatedly enjoyed apples and honey for Rosh HaShana, fasted on Yom Kippur, took his meals in a sukkah on Sukkot, and so on. And always Christ was with him and his parents, a valued friend and guest, celebrating with them the Jewish sabbath and the holidays.

With the cold weather came thoughts about Hanukkah. Since he didn't know the proper day on which to begin this, his favorite holiday, he saved it for a propitious time.

One Tuesday evening after the first heavy snow, the boys were as usual in chapel. The priest was giving his usual sermon about the hell that was reserved for those who did not believe in the divinity of Christ when Christ, Meyer Salzman told his wife and three children, "came over to me and said, 'Meyer, it's time. Let's go light the Hanukkah candles.'"

"So," Meyer continued, "we went over to the menorah on the kitchen table of my family's apartment. My mother and father were waiting in the kitchen, all dressed up, my poor mother in her best jewelry, the few pieces she could take from Berlin, my father in his starched white shirt and collar, jacket and tie.

"Usually, Jesus was a guest. But this time for some reason he was the master of the ceremony. He put on our yarmulkes (my father was already wearing his Homburg hat, my mother her lace shawl) and struck a match, lit the Shamos, and sang the first blessing. He had a lovely voice, a rich baritone, and his singing was the most beautiful I had ever heard.

"Then he lifted the Shamos up higher and sang the second blessing, all from memory (unlike my father, who had to have the prayers written out in front of him), and it struck me that he shouldn't know the words because I didn't know them, but he went on.

"As he lit the candle for the first night of Hanukkah, he sang the third blessing, ending in a practiced flourish with the smile of someone very pleased with what he has just done.

"After he placed the Shamos back onto the menorah, he hugged me and kissed me and said, 'Meyer, this is goodbye. Be a good Jew always. Make your parents proud.'

"And I was back in the chapel. The priest was finishing his sermon. I looked at Christ in his agony on the cross, and I wept inwardly that he was back up there suffering. I wept for losing him as a friend, and for losing the rich inner life that had sustained me up to then until I was strong enough, even at that age, to bear it on my own. I wept and wept, I didn't know why, but when I was finished with weeping I was finished with it altogether, and in my hard little heart was ready to survive."

Now Meyer Salzman was weeping, and he took

his wife and children in his arms and wept and wept and wept until he couldn't weep anymore, and he felt clean and whole. After which they all went to dinner in a typically excellent little country French restaurant, had a long and satisfying meal, and spoke of everything but the days Meyer Salzman had spent in a nearby orphanage under the name of Michel LeBlanc.

JUSTICE

Dear Ted,

You ask me why I want to refuse a second printing of my book *Justice*, and to withdraw what few copies remain of the first printing. I realize that I have no rights in this matter. Even so, I must insist on making the request.

I do appreciate the commitment that you personally and your firm have made to the book and to me. But I no longer believe that what I say in the book is true. To put it most trivially, I have changed my mind. But that, I recognize, is hardly a satisfactory explanation.

As you know, the book tour you arranged for me involved a number of faculty lectures, including one at Prairie State University in North Dakota.

I was just into the question-and-answer period when a faculty member at the university got up and asked me whether I believed in ghosts.

"Of course not," I said. "Do you?"

There was some giggling, but the faculty member, a Dr. Hamilton Mildridge, was undeterred.

"Yes," he said. "I do. Ghosts are the ultimate refutation of your argument."

"In what way?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"You argue that revenge has no place in the justice system of a civilized country. That the three

criteria for imposing a sentence on any criminal are isolation, deterrence, and rehabilitation, and that since isolation is temporary and deterrence minimal, rehabilitation ought to be the system's primary goal."

"Yes, that is an excellent summary of what I have to say."

"But ghosts demand vengeance, Dr. Binder. They cannot rest until they get it."

"I haven't conceded that they exist," I reminded him.

"They are disturbances in the aether," he went on, ignoring me, "echoes of an injustice that must be righted if they are ever to have any peace. We owe it to them, Dr. Binder, to make the punishment equal to the crime, to balance suffering with suffering. Otherwise the imbalance will ripple through eternity like a cry unheard."

With that he sat down, and the question-and-answer period resumed along more rational lines.

But at the reception after the lecture, Dr. Mildridge came up to me and invited me to meet a ghost.

I smiled politely and pointed out that I had a ride to the airport within the hour.

"Rides can be canceled," he said. "Flights can be rearranged."

Perhaps you remember, it was in late October, near Halloween, actually, that I called Robin and asked him to rearrange my schedule. Which, with your concurrence, he very graciously did.

Why I humored what seemed to me at the time

was a madman is beyond my capacity to explain. Suffice it to say that the ghost as a metaphor intrigued me, and that somewhere in the gut I was struck by the notion that the desire for revenge had perhaps more dignity than I had been willing to concede to it.

Dr. Mildridge picked me up at my motel at around 9:30 PM, explaining that the particular ghost he was going to introduce me to haunted a nearby wheat field each night at precisely 10:15.

On the way to the wheat field, Dr. Mildridge filled me in on the details. The ghost was that of a 16-year-old girl, Holly Hinton, who had been brought to a barn by a 16-year-old friend, Patrick Dent, for what she thought would be some adolescent kissing and petting.

But Patrick had other ideas. He confessed to planning to rape and murder Holly because he "wanted to know what it would feel like" (his words), and so he brought a small hatchet with him to the barn.

Threatening her with the hatchet, he stripped her naked and raped her (his first sexual intercourse – both were virgins), and then proceeded to chop up her naked body like an animal on a butcher's block – first her legs below the knees, then her arms below the elbows, then, as she stared unbelievingly into his eyes, too shocked to scream, the rest of her legs and arms, and finally, mercifully, her head.

He then bathed in a nearby stream, changed his clothes, and, leaving both clothes and hatchet in

the barn with the dismembered body, set the barn on fire.

His mistake was the hatchet, the head of which was still identifiable and, through the local hardware store, was traced to his father. In a deal with the prosecutor, Patrick pled guilty and got 15 years, of which he served 10.

Now in his late thirties, he is living in Montana with a clean record, a job managing a string of donut shops, and a wife and two kids.

So here's a case, the denouement of which I should have approved – prisoner rehabilitated, justice done. But Dr. Mildridge had something different to show me.

It was a moonlit night, and when we got to the wheat field I could see fairly well. I was, as I had guessed, where the barn had stood some 22 years earlier.

The winter wheat had been recently planted, so that where we stood afforded a long view of bare, slightly undulating fields. It was crisp in the moonlight, and I shivered in my woolen overcoat.

Exactly at 10:15 the ghost appeared. I have no other word for it – one second there was nothing in my line of sight, the next second she was there.

She was naked, and looked as though she had been sewn back together, still bleeding at the seams – around her knees and elbows, around her shoulders and thighs, around her neck. Her eyes were still wide with disbelief.

Dr. Mildridge put his hand on my arm as she

approached me moaning a savage, high-pitched moan of pain. She dragged her disjointed body closer and closer, moaning this unearthly moan. Without Dr. Mildridge's hand gripping me, I would have turned and ran. As it was, I could not control the violent shiver of my body, and the poor creature brought me to dry, unbearable tears.

She came right up to me, white in the moonlight, but as though she didn't see either Dr. Mildridge or me, as though she saw nothing around her, still frozen in the moment of her horror, still reliving it, and as I looked into the depths of her eyes what I saw was anger, unrequited anger trapped forever inside an agony I could see but not imagine.

"Oh, God!" I moaned, "Oh, my Lord!", my moans in counterpoint to hers. She veered away from us and continued across the field in her strange, not-quite stumble, and then, when she was about fifty feet from us, disappeared.

I was shaking, weeping, barely aware of who or where I was. It was a while before I realized that Dr. Mildridge was holding me up.

"Come back to the car," he said gently. "Here. Come."

As he guided me towards the road, I looked back at the empty field where the barn had once stood, where the ghost had just walked, where the unspeakable had taken place, and, believe it or not, for the first time in my life knew – really knew – the meaning of the word, "justice."

Here I was, the expert of the moment on

justice, the author of a best-selling book by that name, and I knew nothing of the thing itself. Something ancient and true had been touched in me, and I began to understand that the desire for revenge is as human as the desire for love, and as necessary and consuming.

Spirits stalk the earth, Ted, and we forget them at our peril. For they will haunt us, whether or not we are willing to admit it.

Something is not right about that boy Patrick enjoying his life. Something is not fair. He fits precisely my description of what should happen, and now I know that it shouldn't.

What I want to say in my new book is that justice is orderly vengeance, the state taking it out of the hands of the clan, providing the symmetry the heart demands, allowing the angry, aggrieved spirit to rest in peace.

The other elements of justice – the need to deter criminal behavior, to isolate criminals and to rehabilitate them – remain, but are secondary to the need to provide, for the sake of the victim, a punishment commensurate to the gravity of the crime.

But that is my new book. My old book I wish to crumple up and throw into the wastebasket, like a draft in which I see not one word worth saving.

The eyes, Ted! The girl's eyes! They won't let me sleep until I do!

With noontime hope and midnight desperation, I remain as ever,

Yours,

Emlin Binder

NO TIME FOR CHRISTMAS

There was no time for Christmas this year. Again.

Each year Candi promised herself that she would take Mike and Joey to early mass on Christmas Eve, and each year, with the shopping and cleaning and decorating and wrapping, there was no time.

Next year, she promised herself. Again.

It was 4:00 AM and she was still wrapping frantically, with only three hours to go till dawn. The wrapping inched forward like a car stuck in traffic while time flew by overhead. Gifts from her. Gifts from Michael, now again Miguel and living down in Santo Domingo with his new girlfriend and son, and with another child on the way.

Gifts from Michael's parents, also back down in Santo Domingo, and from her grandparents in Santo Domingo, who barely knew their own names.

She bought all the gifts, and the cards, and wrapped them, so that the children could wake up on Christmas morning to a tree with a pile of presents underneath it from a loving family. Michael said he would pay her, of course, for the presents from him and his parents, but he said the same thing about child support.

4:30 AM. The car inched a little further forward. She wrapped a play-doh set from Daddy to Mike and a set of ABC blocks from Daddy to Joey,

and then a Candy Land game to both of them from Nana and Pappi, who lived in an old-age home in Santo Domingo because there was no one left there to take care of them.

Candi's parents had always meant to bring them up to New York, but time passed and they had never really wanted to come. Candi, then Candida, remembered presents from them every Christmas that now she knew her parents had bought and wrapped with a card that they had signed. She had never seen Nana and Pappi, though her father had gone back down to Santo Domingo to visit them a number of times. There had never been enough money for the family to go.

And then her parents were murdered, both tied up in bed and shot in the back of the head a few months after Candi had gotten pregnant and moved out to live with Michael. And no one had ever found out who did it or why.

It was Candi's responsibility to bring Nana and Pappi up here in order to take care of them. Dominican families took care of their own. But she worked over 40 hours a week as a medical assistant in a clinic on St. Nicholas Avenue and went to City College in the evening. Her childhood friend Rosa watched Mike and Joey after school and preschool, for money, of course, and gave them dinner. But Rosa wasn't a nurse, which was what Nana and Pappi needed. There was no way Candi could afford a nurse and an extra room, and no way the American government would pay for a nursing home up here. So

Nana and Pappi lived in an American-style nursing home in Santo Domingo, and would probably die there never having laid eyes on their granddaughter and great-grandchildren.

5:00 AM. She wrapped a Transformers Deception Desert Attack 2-Pack from her to Mike and an Alphabet Bus LeapPad from her to Joey.

She knew that mass was more important than toys and that she was depriving her children of something more precious than the excitement of shredding packages on Christmas morning. They would never learn what Christmas meant if they just played with toys under a Christmas tree. They would learn it only in church, which was where she had learned it. Her mother had brought her to church every Sunday, and on Christmas Eve and Easter her father had joined them. As a child she had believed in Jesus, in the way that Mike had once believed in Santa Claus and Joey still did. And even as an adult she still reflexively called out to Him, though she no longer believed in Him. She even felt His love for her. But although that love was something exquisitely beautiful, to her it was not something real.

5:30 AM. The last gifts waited to be wrapped – a My First LeapPad Book from Michael's parents to Joey and a Where's Waldo book from Michael's parents to Mike.

She switched wrapping paper – Rudolf paper for Mike, Donald-Duck-as-Santa paper for Joey. She didn't want to wrap more than two presents in any one kind of paper. The fiction was that they came

from different sources. On top of that fiction was the fiction that they came from Santa, but somehow neither Mike nor Joey saw the incongruity. The gift was from Santa no matter who else it came from.

She had been the same way as a child. She had been born in New York, and her parents had raised her in the American tradition of presents delivered by Santa on Christmas Eve. She had never questioned how Santa could have brought presents from Mommy and Daddy. In fact, she had to write out the "from's" and "to's" on presents to her own children before she realized how naturally she had believed as a child something so obviously nonsensical.

Now she had to make out the cards and put everything under the tree. And then, if the kids weren't sneaking out of the bedroom yet, she could begin cleaning up the kitchen.

Rosa and Manuel were coming for lunch at 1:00, perhaps with their children. Candi had presents for all four of them – Rosa, Manuel, Bob, and Caroline – under the tree, though it wasn't certain that Bob and Caroline would come. They were still living at home but already, in American fashion, breaking away from family. And Rosa and Manuel would bring presents for Candi and Mike and Joey, putting them under the tree as they came in.

There would be cold cuts and cheeses and store-made salads and a bakery cake and bakery cookies. What else could Candi do? It was pitiful, but it was all she could manage. And lentils and rice, the lentils from a can. And fried plantains.

She felt like Atlas, exhausted from holding up her world. But she was out to do more – to move this world out of its Washington-Heights orbit and get Mike and Joey out of here before they got too far into school. When she got her degree in three or four years she would be a nurse, and they would move to a house in a much nicer place, and Mike and Joey would go to good schools and make something of themselves.

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" she thought. "Help me!"

What was it? It wasn't that she was on a sleepless marathon, or that she didn't sleep much even on good days. Or that she lived in a slummy one-bedroom apartment in a dangerous neighborhood and had a rotten job with years to go in school. Or that she hadn't allowed herself to be touched by a man for four years now, since Michael had left when she was pregnant with Joey, and was unlikely to for another fifteen years or so, until the boys were old enough to be on their own and she was off this treadmill, and her youth was gone, sacrificed to the American Dream. Or simply that she was failing to give her children any spiritual life at all.

6:00 AM. They could be stirring any minute now. On normal days she was just waking up to the normal morning sounds of traffic starting the day four stories below on St. Nicholas Avenue, the buses groaning out of the stop below her kitchen window, the delivery trucks idling double-parked in front of the bodega across the street, the sounds of water running as people took showers or flushed toilets in the apartments all around her, the renewed pounding of

feet across the ceiling from the family of four crammed into the apartment upstairs.

But just now it was as quiet as an open field in the dark hour before dawn, as the Earth held its breath before the sun came up and turned on the birds and set life moving again. That was it, yes! she thought in the sweet silence. It was only that she wanted Christmas, the real Christmas, the one that gave her Jesus Christ, to come once again into her heart.

Candi gathered up the cards and presents and began to ferry them into the living room, which doubled as her bedroom. But the tree took up too much room for her to pull out the sofa-bed, and so during the week of Christmas, until after the Day of the Kings when the tree was dismantled and put back into its box for next year, she slept on the couch as a couch.

She set the gifts out under the tree as artfully as she could, mixing shapes and colors so that even though it looked like a haphazard heap, the bows and curlicues stood out, and one could see all of the patterns, the sheen and the shine.

She stood back and admired the effect. For this she had foregone the real Christmas, the babe in the manger. In church there was a *nacimiento*. It was a Dominican custom to put one under the tree at home, but she had never had one as a child and had never gotten one for the house. In church the nativity scene was large and beautiful and full of mystery, and Mike and Joey's Christmas would have been full of the miracle of God-as-man. They would have gotten into

the habit of praying to Christ, who would have become a presence in their lives.

In the Dominican Republic presents were given on the Day of the Kings, in memory of the presents the three kings had brought to the infant Jesus. And although Candi's parents had, following American custom, switched the day to Christmas, she had gotten gifts on the Day of the Kings as well – little token gifts, like a bag of homemade jelly balls dipped in coconut, or a card of jacks with a tiny rubber ball. Something to remind her of the Christ in Christmas.

As a child she had loved Jesus and believed in Him. And now her children believed in Santa Claus, though Mike was already outgrowing that. Children needed such stories to make the world seem safe and beautiful, as it should be rather than as it was.

And not only children, she thought. Not only children.

Next year, she promised herself. Again.

Then she heard footsteps emerging from the bedroom and the high-pitched murmur of her children's voices. Their excitement sounded like an angel's flute singing through the brightening skies, and Candi smiled as she slipped back into the kitchen to listen unseen.

ROPE TOWS TO HEAVEN

Let us speak of the little town of Por Esampleau in Southern Fritalain.

Like most such towns, its winding narrow streets and cobblestone squares were choked with noisome, buzzing, fume-spewing automobiles. Perched on narrow sidewalks, crammed in front of public buildings, beseiging fountains, blocking vistas, they were like a swarm of beetles some angry god had dumped on the town one vengeful afternoon, a curse that would afflict the lives of the townspeople until the god's fury could somehow be appeased.

Everyone agreed that life had been better — quieter, healthier, more civilized, more leisurely – before the advent of this plague. Yet no one could agree on how to rid the town of it.

Banning automobiles from one part of town merely piled up traffic in other parts of it. Restricting parking, raising gasoline taxes, charging tolls on bridges leading into town – all these were tried and failed to stem the onslaught. A yellow pall hung over the town, killing its older and weaker inhabitants, turning its rain to acid, eating away at its very stone. Yet the more punitive measures were taken to keep cars out, the more cars flooded in.

The truth is that nothing exists in isolation. The automobile had become embedded in a whole new way of life, and could no more be removed than one

could remove a heart or lungs or stomach and expect the patient to go on living. People had built houses which, without a car, would be well over a day's journey from where they worked. The picturesque mountains surrounding the town were dotted with houses, schools, factories, hospitals, churches, where before had been rock-strewn wilderness. Families that once had been crammed into two rooms on a dark street now lived in three-or-four-bedroom houses surrounded by yards and sun decks and even, in some cases, swimming pools.

There was no going back.

One day Rudolfo, a little boy who lived in one of those new houses in the hills, decided he would like to roller skate to school.

"It's over eight kilometers," his father said.

"So?" Rudolfo said. "I can do it in less than an hour."

"It's dangerous," his father said. "There are too many cars. Besides, when you come home, how are you going to climb the hills on roller skates?"

Rudolfo thought about that. Yes, it would be dangerous to roller skate on the highway. And getting up the hills would be difficult. He would have to take off his skates and walk.

Still, he would surely love to roller skate to school.

"Why can't people roller skate instead of driving cars?" he asked his father.

His father laughed. "It would be more fun, wouldn't it?" he said.

Which meant: How ridiculous!

Well, Rudolfo thought. Not so ridiculous.

He began to draw with his crayons on great white sheets of oak tag.

There would be a lane right down the middle of the highway just for roller skaters, with concrete barriers on either side.

For hills there would be rope tows, as there were on ski slopes, to pull the skaters along.

In fact, the rope tows would go everywhere, pulling people on skates, people in wheel chairs, people on bicycles, people in all sorts of contraptions on wheels.

To protect people from sun and rain, there would be narrow metal roofs above the rope tows.

A whole network of rope tows, along each major street or highway!

Older people and families with babies would ride in carts mounted on bicycle wheels.

Handicapped people would tool along in their wheel chairs.

Rudolfo could see all of the people of the town moving serenely to and fro through the streets, in and out of the hills, across the river, at about 15 kilometers per hour, hanging on to rope tows.

Wonderful!

He finished the pictures and sent them to the mayor of the town. Which, in 999,999 cases out of 1,000,000 would have ended the story right there. In Por Esampleau, however, the mayor of the town at

that moment just happened to be the owner of a sporting goods store.

The rest is history.

A visit to Por Esampleau would be instructive.

Yes, of course there are still automobiles. Not everyone is enchanted by the thought of traveling daily on roller skates pulled along by rope tows.

But automobiles no longer clog the streets. No longer does the yellow miasma arising from tailpipes eat away at lungs and stone. The roar of tens of thousands of explosions per second has subsided to an occasional annoyance, created mainly by truckers who, understandably, resist transferring their heavy loads onto carts mounted on bicycle wheels.

The punitive measures remain in effect. They are, however, made effective by the presence of an alternative which is pleasant, healthful, and cheap. The system of rope tows has evolved beyond even Rudolfo's imaginative dreams.

There are elaborate four-wheel vehicles which snap onto and off rope tows with a flick of the wrist. Little electric motors propel sedentary passengers up and down streets too small or remote to be served by rope tows.

On main thoroughfares, the rope tow roofs have sprouted clear plastic sides to protect against wind and rain. Highway speeds approach 25 kilometers per hour.

Surfaces adjacent to the rope tows have been paved with hard rubber to reduce friction and the incidence of scraped knees.

Roller skates, bicycles, and other vehicles are available for rent at large parking lots in the regions surrounding the town.

The rope tows themselves have received a four-star rating in the Paparrazzi Guide to Fritalain, surpassing even Pedro de Forcanelle's famous fresco, Piccolo de Manger en Tiffania, as the premier tourist attraction of the region.

Yet they are inexpensive to operate. One rope tow (there are all together 700 of them in the town and its environs) requires approximately one quarter of the energy per hour of a single four-cylinder vehicle traveling uphill at 40 kph. If the rope tow carries 2,000 people uphill for five kilometers in an average rush hour, that's 10,000 pkh (people kilometer hours) as against 160 pkh (assuming four passengers) for an automobile using four times the energy!

To avoid wasting energy, the rope tows do not run continuously, but are activated by the press of a button. Many townspeople use them only to ascend steep hills.

Incidence of heart attacks and strokes has decreased by 8.673%

With all these obvious advantages, it is surprising that no other town has adopted the rope tow transportation system as its own.

The cause of this failure is as instructive as the success of the system in Por Esampleau.

It is, simply, that the inhabitants of Por Esampleau are known as *enfinos* to the people in the surrounding towns, or "children," both because they

spend so much of their time on roller skates, and because their laughing, smiling, cheerful, carefree, and happy demeanor seems so out of place in adults.

SECOND RATE

Joe Reynolds dreaded Valentine's Day because each year he had to come up with a present and an evening that he thought might please his wife.

"Surprise me," Adele would say, laying the rock of her expectations on his shoulders.

Soon after New Year's he would make dinner reservations and order flowers.

But the gift! Oh, the gift!

It was not easy to find something affordable that did not look somehow second rate.

One afternoon in late January he was scouring the stores on Main Street, having already exhausted the malls, when he noticed a sale sign in the window of a jewelry store he had always considered beyond his means.

"Up to 50% off," the sign promised. So he decided to give it a shot.

His hopes were quickly dashed when he saw the one small counter of sale items, most of which had labels announcing a mere 15% to 20% off.

"Yes?" the woman behind the counter asked.

She was dressed tastefully and expensively in a gray woolen suit, her shoulder-length blonde hair and makeup as perfect as a movie star's. Her diamond pendant, matching earrings, and ring sparkled in the intense rays of the store's track lighting.

Joe was already sorry he had come in.

"I'm looking for a Valentine's Day present," he said reluctantly. "For my wife."

The woman smiled indulgently, indicating she knew the whole story – that Joe worked with his hands, that his wife had let herself go and sagged in all the wrong places, that his tiny house was squeezed onto a tiny lot, that he couldn't afford 99% of the jewelry in that store.

"How much were you interested in spending?" she asked. Since there was no one else in the store, she was at his disposal.

"Around three hundred," he said, instantly doubling what he had intended, cursing himself for having walked into the store, cursing himself for not just walking out, which he was, after all, perfectly free to do.

The woman seemed to suppress another smile. "Are we looking for a ring? Earrings? A bracelet? A pendant?"

Joe shrugged. "Whatever's best for the price. Do you have anything on sale that might work?"

"No," the woman said decisively. "We have an opal pendant I think I can give you for something close to that. Just a second."

She went into the back as Joe perused the sale counter, hoping to find something there that might rescue him. But no such luck. Even with 20% off, most of the items were over a thousand dollars.

One item that drew his attention was an opal pendant on sale for 20% off the price of $1,300. In the fierce light of the display case, the stone seemed to be

on fire, with green, yellow, pink, and violet embers glowing in the depths of its creamy flesh.

It was set in a delicate 18-carat gold frame, with diamond chips above and below. But what mattered was the magnificent stone, talisman of a world which Joe could only gaze at longingly from afar.

The woman came back out to the counter carrying a small pendant on a black velvet tray. She laid it on the glass just above the pendant Joe had been marveling at.

"I can let you have it for $430," she said. "With the chain. That's 14 carat."

Joe nodded. $430 was way over the $300 he had specified and way, way over the $150 he had originally had in mind. And the stone she had brought out was pitifully small next to the magnificent specimen below it – a blue-and-cream teardrop with little hints of pink and yellow flashing within.

"It's $300 without the chain," the woman said. "Maybe your wife already has a chain that would go with this."

Joe said nothing. He was thinking about how ridiculous it would be for him to spend $430 on a Valentine's Day gift for Adele.

He had no doubt that the pendant was worth the money. That was the sad part. He was very far from being able to afford even this second-rate facsimile of what he would have liked to give her.

He remained silent, consumed with resentment and despair.

"It's a beautiful stone," the woman went on. "I'm sure your wife will love it. Do you want it with or without the chain?"

"With the chain," Joe said, hardly believing that he was actually buying it.

The woman disappeared again, leaving Joe looking down at the pendant he had really wanted.

Such a beautiful thing! he thought. So extraordinary! He and Adele owned nothing like it and never would. Its very existence seemed like a judgment against his manhood.

The woman came out with the pendant wrapped in a cream box with a yellow bow. Joe wished he could look at it again, to see if it might be just a little bigger or more colorful than he remembered it. But wrapped so beautifully, it would have to wait until he gave it to his wife.

That happened at The Way Inn, a local restaurant that Joe and Adele reserved for special occasions.

After they had had their fill of the buffet and had danced a bit, they returned to their table to exchange cards and gifts.

Adele was wearing the freshwater pearls he had gotten her a few years before. Her black knit top had a plunging neckline that the short strand of pearls did nothing for, but Joe knew she had worn them for him, because they were the most expensive thing he had gotten her on a previous Valentine's Day.

That was Adele. Everything she did was with an

eye to pleasing someone else. That was how she got her pleasure.

He opened her heart-shaped card and read the sentimental little ditty inside. And then her own words:

Dear Joe,

I love you so much. You are what I live for. I hope you know that.

Your loving wife,
Adele

He leaned across the table and kissed her, moved by her simple words. It was true, he thought. Adele didn't say things that weren't true.

He opened the gift, knowing from the shape and weight that it was a belt, something he needed. And it turned out to be a black dress belt to replace the one he was wearing, the worn third hole of which showed clearly where his stomach felt most comfortable against the leather.

Then it was her turn. She opened his card and read the canned sentiments, followed by nothing more than "Love, Joe," and kissed him.

Then the gift.

When she opened the little box, she gasped. Joe leaned over, hoping the opal would look better than it had three weeks earlier, but Adele brought the box up to her face, staring at the tiny stone.

"Oh, Joe!" she said. "This is exquisite! This is too much!"

"You like it?" he asked.

"I love it!" she gushed. "Oh, Joe! You shouldn't have spent so much money!"

He blushed and didn't answer.

She reached back behind her neck and took off the pearls.

"I'm going to put it on right now!" she said.

She took the opal pendant out of the box, placed it against her chest, and fastened it at the back. The tiny opal lay against her bare skin just above the glimpse of cleft, giving off a gentle bluish-white sheen in the dim light of the restaurant.

"You like it?" Adele said, arching her sagging breasts towards him.

"It's lovely," he said, thinking of the other opal and of the woman who had sold it to him. And then, "I'm not talking about the pendant."

She blushed and hit him playfully on the arm.

Then she took his hand.

"I love it, Joe," she said. "I really do. But you shouldn't think you need to do things like that to show me your love. I know you love me."

Again he blushed and said nothing.

"It's very expensive, and I know how hard you work," she went on. "This is something special that I'll treasure as long as I live, but I don't expect something like this every Valentine's Day. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"Now don't pull a long face on me! I'm very happy tonight. Really. And I want you to know how much I treasure you and our life together. I live for you, Joe. I mean that. Of course, for the children as well. But first for you."

She took his hand and kissed it. And then kissed him.

He began to cry.

"What is it, Joe?" she asked.

"I don't deserve you, Adele," he could barely say. "I don't deserve you."

"Of course you do!" she said, beginning to cry as well.

"No, no!" he insisted.

She stopped crying and looked him straight in the eye. "Are you having an affair?" she said.

"No, I'm not having an affair," Joe laughed. "Believe me, I'm not having an affair. I just haven't been grateful enough for what I have."

He would have wept more, wept all the beauty he felt rising in him like lava, but for the fact that they were in a restaurant and people were already beginning to turn their way.

So instead he held it down just below his larynx, and with a smile wobbled on above it, stumbling along a trail of hot stones straight into his wife's eyes.

They rested their foreheads together, laughing through their tears, and when they separated Joe looked again at the gentle bluish teardrop suspended just above the cleft between his wife's breasts and

decided, yes, it looked pretty good, perfect, in fact, right where it was.

THE DEATH OF THE SUN

Once upon a time a planet in a far distant galaxy put out its sun.

Not on purpose, of course. Here is how it happened.

Once the planet had reached the point of travel within its solar system, it conceived the brilliant idea of tapping its sun as a source of energy for interplanetary travel.

The advantages of such a practice seemed myriad. First, enormous quantities of energy were available at minuscule cost. It was estimated that 40 billion sprinugs of propulsion power could be delivered for less than 1500 kopags. That would be the equivalent of a gallon of gasoline for .00073 cents.

Second, there was no other cost effective way to increase the speed of interplanetary travel enough to make regular trade and intercourse practical. Using conventional fuels it took, for example, over a year for a spaceship to travel to the nearest planetary neighbor. The more distant planets took five to seven years to reach. Using energy mined directly from the sun, the same trips took five days, a month, and six weeks, respectively.

Finally, energy from the sun could be considered, for all practical purposes, inexhaustible. It was estimated that the first fifty years of interplanetary travel, leveling off at 157 million flights per year,

would use no more than .0000659874 of the sun's energy.

Even so, twenty-three years of painstaking testing, debate, and litigation preceded the actual start of commercial mining. The process was studied from every conceivable angle, until all responsible scientists pronounced it safe, insofar as existing instruments could measure it. Computer models showed not the slightest effect on the sun's continued ability to produce energy. Political support for mining grew as the energy requirements of interplanetary travel raised the price of energy to levels which threatened economic stagnation. Enough testing, the public began to say. Enough litigation. Let's get on with it.

To satisfy the timorous, severe restrictions were put on mining for the first fifty years. The sun's energy was to be used for nothing but a limited number of interplanetary flights. And a commission of the planet's most eminent scientists, including those leading the opposition to mining, was set up to monitor the sun's activity. One word from this commission, and all use of the sun's energy was to be suspended.

The ceremony marking the first shipment of energy from the sun's core into vast storage tanks ringing the planet was marred only by a small group of demonstrators, the same cranks who ritually oppose all technological progress, professional naysayers whose ancestors undoubtedly opposed the introduction of candles on the grounds of air pollution. As the first fifty years of mining passed,

experience proved them wrong, as usual. Interplanetary travel became routine. Even the outer planets were rapidly colonized. The population quadrupled. Unemployment, poverty, overcrowding, shortages of raw materials–all these became memories of the elderly. The home planet became a luxurious condo complex inhabited by the best and the brightest. As the populace looked forward to the lifting of all restrictions on the use of the sun's energy, only more peace, prosperity, and happiness seemed to lie ahead.

The commission charged with monitoring the sun's activity grew, understandably, a bit lax in its vigilance as over fifty years went by with no measurable effect on the sun. Its budget was cut several times, and the scientists willing to serve on it were no longer of the first rank. Even so, in the seventy-third year of mining, a junior scientist monitoring isotopes in the sun's radioactive envelope noted a minuscule change in the proportion of He^{423}. His report was filed with other reports and nothing more was said about the matter.

Several more decades of monitoring revealed a disturbing trend–a slow but unmistakable decrease in He^{423}. The amounts seemed ludicrously tiny to the layman–from 15 parts per billion to 14.8429–but eventually the concerns of a few scientists made their way into scientific journals and the popular press. What was happening? What did it mean? Not one scientist could state definitively why the proportion of He^{423} was declining: whether it was related in any way

to the mining, or whether it was a cycle that occurred naturally and would reverse itself in due time.

The mining, meanwhile, continued.

A number of governmental panels came and went, none able to say anything definite about the phenomenon. In the absence of any proof of danger, or even that mining the sun's energy was a contributing cause, it seemed irresponsible to wreak havoc on the lives of the entire populace by halting mining. People were by now scattered over the entire solar system, dependent for their survival on regular trade. Conventional fuels were no longer remotely adequate to the task of servicing this expansion; aside from considerations of cost, they would be depleted in a matter of months. Recalling the population to the home planet would be the equivalent of asking the entire population of the planet Earth to crowd into the state of New Mexico.

In short, there was no way to stop mining the sun without killing off three-fifths of the population and impoverishing the rest.

Even so, at great political cost, a courageous administration cut the rate of growth in use of the sun's energy by ten percent. This was considered a victory for the environmentalists who, never satisfied, demanded fifteen percent cuts. Trillions of kopags were invested in a search for alternative energy sources, and for the first time high taxes were slapped onto the sun's energy to discourage use.

Just in time for the hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the start of mining, scientists finally

agreed on what was happening. Mining had a totally unforeseen effect on the fusion process within the sun, one which had not been measurable by instruments available a hundred and fifty years earlier. The removal of each trillion sprinugs of energy resulted in the creation of one atom of a new element called Ka^{73}, apparently through a complex series of reactions brought about by an almost imperceptibly minuscule decrease in thermal energy in a given region of the sun's core. Scientists estimated that in the first hundred and fifty years of mining about 612 of these atoms had been created. Ka^{73} had the unfortunate tendency to unite with He^{423} to form contigunite, a new substance which seemed to act as a damper on fusion reactions.

Not to worry, of course. A hundred and fifty years of mining had produced, at most, .039 of a gram of contigunite, which, in relation to the sun's total energy, was like pouring an eighth of a drop of water onto a burning skyscraper. Still, a certain unease crept in. A few scientists retained by environmental groups pointed out that the effect would progress geometrically, since even minuscule amounts of contigunite would result in local decreases in thermal energy, which would create more atoms of Ka^{73}, which would unite with more He^{423} to create more contigunite, and so on. Scientists began to calculate the effects of a .029% drop in temperature in the next century. Some meteorologists claimed that the cooling trend had already set in, but most believed that it was still generations away.

The mining continued.

A blue-ribbon governmental commission was established to perform a cost/benefit analysis of the situation. It decided that even a 3.79% drop in temperature over the next three hundred years (the worst-case scenario given a 20% reduction in energy use) would wreak less havoc than a total suspension of mining. In other words, the consequences of continuing to mine at reduced levels were preferable to the consequences of stopping mining altogether.

The entire solar system slid into recession as 20% cuts in energy use took hold. A crash program was instituted to reach beyond the solar system so as to be able to mine nearby stars. People wondered vaguely what life would be like for their great-great grandchildren. Some were suffused with a discomforting sense of guilt. Others professed to be unwilling to endure continued privation for the sake of generations unborn. As always, a few cranks boycotted all interplanetary trade and travel, achieving nothing more than an ostentatious stroking of their own egos.

The mining continued.

Two hundred thirty years after the start of mining, a computer model showed that once a certain critical mass of contigunite had been achieved, the process of shutting down the sun's fusion would become irreversible, and the sun would, over the course of centuries, go out. The critical mass projected by the model was alarmingly small, only twelve grams, an amount which some scientists believed had already

been reached through geometric progression. Others scoffed at the model. The mass of the sun was, after all, over 2 x 1030 kgs. How could twelve grams of any substance be a mass critical enough to affect so massive a body?

Even so, there were cries for an immediate cessation of mining. Who knew what day, what hour, what second the critical moment would pass? The government forced through an additional 30% cut in energy use, phased in over five years, over the objections of politicians from the outer planets. Efforts to reach the nearest stars, to remove contigunite from the sun, and to make each planet self-sufficient, consumed much of the solar system's wealth. Society came under military discipline, with everything rationed, and summary execution for theft, profiteering, and waste of resources.

The mining, however, continued.

Some hope stirred over the next few decades as several planets approached self-sufficiency. Eighty billion sprinugs of energy went into an exploratory flight to the nearest star. A process for removing contigunite from the sun was tested successfully in a controlled fusion experiment, and plans were made to put an extraction facility in orbit around the sun. No one actually believed that the ultimate catastrophe, extinction of all life in the solar system, and as far as anyone knew in the universe, would actually come to pass. Technology had, perhaps, gotten them into this mess, but surely the massive and refined application of

technology over the course of several generations would get them out.

To think otherwise would be to go mad.

Meanwhile, the mining continued.

Two hundred and seventy years after the start of mining, a new technique was developed for measuring the total amount of contigunite on the sun. 11.3742 grams.

The entire solar system shuddered with both horror and relief. Horror that now mining would have to be stopped and at the privations that would follow. Relief that the critical mass had not yet been achieved.

The mining stopped.

Nearly all interplanetary trade and travel ended. Scarce resources were directed towards transporting refugees from the outer planets. The mentally ill and retarded, the physically handicapped, the diseased, and the elderly were simply abandoned. People lived heaped up on one another like ants. Only one out of fifty couples was permitted to have a single child. No one had hope anymore for happiness in this or the next generation. Still, the surviving remnant was willing to suffer extreme privation in good spirits. Computer models showed that in the absence of mining contigunite levels would begin to decline. Life was therefore saved. That was the main thing. What had happened to them was a mere historical incident. They had learned their lesson. Never again would they take even the most infinitesimal risk of extinction simply for an increase in material well being.

Never.

Their feeling was much like that of a drunk driver who, after crashing into a tree, is relieved still to be alive and almost grateful for the suffering that will deter him from ever driving drunk again.

Yet the following decades saw no decline in contigunite. In fact, the total mass of contigunite on the sun continued relentlessly to increase. Since there was still no measurable effect on temperature, the danger which so many people were suffering and dying to avert seemed somewhat arcane. There was, in fact, a lunatic fringe that saw the entire contigunite scare as a conspiracy, and talked darkly of clandestine energy use and hidden riches. But most people simply watched in horror as the numbers went up: 11.4 grams, 11.6 grams, 11.7 grams, and so on.

It turned out that the computer model which had predicted 12 grams as the point of self-generation had not taken into account two phenomena which had been recently discovered. Refining the model to reflect the migration of two electrons of Ul^{792} to an inner orbit and the splitting of .00000000069347% of the Ul^{393} atoms into Fo^{467} and Zk^{293}, two events which could not even have been guessed at before the invention of the Ergon Medio-Hylometer, resulted in a revised prediction of 11.1349652 grams of contigunite as the point of no return.

In other words, sorry folks! Guess you stopped mining a couple of months too late.

Or, you should have known that science was not an exact science.

In the riots and revolutions that ensued,

civilization was destroyed, and so all chance of finding a method to remove the contigunite, or of mining stars beyond the solar system, was lost.

Over the next hundred years, as temperatures began to drop, the population also began a long decline. There seemed no point in having children, no point in starting or maintaining institutions, no point in anything when the only result in the near term was extinction.

People once again became religious.

Death became a friend.

People realized that the end, ultimately, had always been extinction. The only question had been the relatively trivial one of when.

After several generations of turmoil, they were at peace with themselves and with nature. Despite lives of great privation, they became grateful to the catastrophe for teaching them this truth.

The end came quietly as temperatures dipped below levels tolerable for life. The several hundred thousand survivors on the home planet died of hunger and exposure over the course of three exceptionally severe winters. The last person, of course, had no idea that she was the last person.

The dying sun shone wanly on the dead world.

One thousand four hundred and thirty-seven years, five months, and three days after the start of mining, the sun went out.

THE MAN WHO OWNED FIVE ELEPHANTS

There was once a man who owned five elephants.

This would not have been unusual in Southeast Asia or East Africa. It was, however, quite unusual in South Carrington Station, New Jersey.

These were, moreover, no ordinary elephants. They were miniature white elephants, about three feet from floor to top of head, pure white with pale pink eyes and a permanent, mischievous smile on their loose flapping lower lips, as if perfectly pinched with delight to be in the back yard of Dr. Oliver Turner in the tiny Pine Barrens town of South Carrington Station, New Jersey.

The five elephants, each a perfect replica of the other, as if stamped out by a stuffed toy company, marched around the two-and-a-half acre back yard in an unvarying line, tail in trunk, smiling happily in the hot summer sun. The sticky scent of pine tar mingled with the hot dry detritus of wood chips and brown pine needles kicked up by twenty little flat elephant feet shuffling along with the precise dull regularity of a chain gang. Heads bobbing, tiny pink eyes twinkling, loose lower lips laughing drily. Five tiny white elephants winding in and out of the stunted pine woods like a five year old's Christmas dream, watched with raised and anxious eyebrows by their solicitous

mother, Rhoda, a big slobbery St. Bernard panting in the shade in the lee of the house.

How had this fantasy come to fruition?

For years, Dr. Oliver Turner, Chief of Genetic Diseases at Memorial Hospital in Philadelphia, had been working secretly on the application of gene splicing techniques to create new species of higher animals. By day he was one of the world's leading authorities on gene replacement therapy, and he had two years earlier been awarded the Nobel Prize for the pioneering replacement in a human embryo of a gene which would have caused juvenile diabetes. By night he played in his own private laboratory with evolution, a role, or throne, perhaps, which had heretofore been occupied mainly by God.

He did this purely for his own enjoyment, with no mischievous intent, taking the same safeguards as applied in his meticulously guarded lab at the hospital. His motive was to see what could be done, and his intention was immediately to destroy any new species which emerged successfully from his ministrations.

As the tiny white elephants emerged one by one from the womb of Rhoda, however, popping out like so many grinning rubber squeeze toys and immediately hooking on to one another, tail to trunk, as they stood blindly on their quivering little stumps, he did not have the heart to kill them.

Kill them? How could he kill them as Rhoda licked them lovingly clean, one by one, from the front to the rear of the tremulous, shivering little line? How could he kill them as they flapped their little white

lettuce ears, grinning at him with tight shut little eyes, the front elephant exploring his palm avidly with his or her tiny trunk while the rear one flicked its white-tufted tail? How could he kill them as they began their stumbling safari around the hard tile floor of the lab, all immediately, instinctively in lock step, the front elephant keeping track of Rhoda's warm furry bulk with its outstretched trunk like a pointing forefinger, the rear elephant swaying behind like a fat woman in a hula skirt?

No way could he bring himself to kill that stumbling, swaying, hooked-up, grinning little line of five tiny white elephants!

Besides, what would be gained from the murder of these innocent, adorable creatures, other than protection of his own career? And he didn't care a fig for that. They were no danger to the environment. In fact, they would make an excellent species of pet. If they were like other elephants (which they were exactly, except for color and size), they were intelligent, loyal, affectionate, patient, gentle creatures, suitable in every way to be the companions of children of all ages, as the circus used to say.

Far from being eliminated, they should be bred.

Yet Dr. Oliver was aware of the storm that would erupt if anyone found out that he had created a new species of higher animal through gene replacement. The technique he had now perfected could be used for ill as easily as for good. It could even be used to direct human evolution, with results too

terrifying, or intriguing, to think about. It was clear that Dr. Turner had let a genie out of the bottle, and that for the moment, at least, he'd better keep the genie locked up in his lab.

The elephants, however, soon brought their happy little conga line out into the back yard. Dr. Turner built a high fence around his property so that they could frolic undisturbed, and they wound joyfully among the stunted pine trees and over the gray dusty soil, swaying ponderously like pachyderms five times their size, nodding their little white heads, grinning like children consumed with a secret joke, the punch line of which was life! yes, life! which had so capriciously placed them in this brilliant back yard with its hot sun and pine-scented air.

In due time, of course, they were discovered. The very existence of a fence is a question crying for an answer, and so one afternoon a group of neighborhood boys climbed the fence and came back down asking one another whether they had actually seen what they had actually seen.

Five tiny white elephant heads lifted simultaneously, the front trunk waving hi!, the fat rear leg poised, all grinning merrily, lettuce ears flapping ...

No way! they thought. Over they went again, and again were greeted joyously by the five white little railroad cars, coupled tail to trunk.

The jig was up.

Within hours armies of police, journalists, TV cameras, and representatives of humane organizations descended upon the neat little brick house with the

interesting back yard. Helicopters took turns over the two-and-a-half acre enclosure, cameras snapping and rolling. A set of saw horses kept the curious beyond the front lawn.

Dr. Turner himself, notified of the commotion as he worked in his laboratory at Memorial Hospital in Philadelphia, arrived just in time to see his five little friends disappear cheerfully up a metal ramp into a truck belonging to the New York Zoological Society, which had facilities for strict isolation. Rhoda was also taken away for fear that she may have been contaminated, while Dr. Turner was served with the proper papers for the total destruction of his house and laboratory, and his eventual incarceration.

All of which would bring the story to a sad end, were it not for the fact that the population of the world, circus children all, fell in love with the five tiny white elephants who marched grinning with crazy delight tail in trunk across their TV screens. Their happy little pink eyes, their flapping white lettuce ears, the way the front elephant bobbed his or her head while the rear elephant raised one fat little leg, immediately endeared them to the entire population of the Earth.

When the President of the New York Zoological Society conceded that, rather than killing the elephants, he would recommend sterilizing them, he was greeted with a roar of scorn.

Sterilize them? Better sterilize him! He wasn't half as cute, and twice as dangerous! Let the zoos of the world be populated with little white elephants!

Why not? What harm was there in it? And eventually the pet shops. Could you imagine owning a little choo-choo train of those things, grinning happily as they wandered through your living room and out your front porch?

The problem was that the first creatures created by genetic engineering were not Frankenstein monsters or terrifying microbes but five tiny white miniature elephants swaying adorably to and fro with the joy of life.

Why not live teddy bears? the public wondered. Tiny tigers. Bathtub-sized seals. A whole bonsai zoological garden.

After several years of intense litigation, the Supreme Court decided, first, that Dr. Turner had committed no crime, and, second, that the five elephants and their offspring were his property. The town of South Carrington Station passed a special ordinance permitting him to keep miniature elephants in his back yard, and he returned in triumph. He was ineligible to receive government grants and could no longer practice medicine, but what did it matter? A career as the Earth's sole breeder of miniature white elephants awaited him along with cheering crowds.

In the decades that followed, the human race slowly and painfully came to terms with the fact that it was now in charge of evolution. There was no ducking the opportunity. The means had become commonplace and not susceptible to easy control.

The problems of regulation and legal

responsibility were solved in the usual slow, bumbling way.

A rich array of species came into being, each just as bent as the rest on self-perpetuation.

But who could regret what had come to pass as he or she sat in his or her armchair, watching the little freight train of joyful white elephants shuffle aimlessly by, lower lips grinning with their secret joke, lettuce ears flopping, tiny pink eyes twinkling with happiness?

THREE STRIKES

On Valentine's Day, Harry Meisner stepped off the slowly revolving turntable of a rooftop restaurant and out onto a balcony overlooking the Florida night.

The bay below was silver dotted with darkness. A breeze carried the fragrance of possibilities lost and far away.

Behind him, Celine waited angrily at the table for his return.

The argument, as always, had been about something trivial – in this case, whether he should have shaved again before they left for the restaurant. The underlying issue, however, was anything but trivial – for him, a declaration of independence; for her, an indictment for lack of consideration.

What was the secret? Harry wondered bitterly. There had to be a secret. Not everyone was as unhappy as he was.

One would think that after sixty-one years and three marriages, he would know something more about life.

A little, pudgy, bald-headed man, round as a button, stepped off the turntable and joined him on the balcony with an enigmatic smile.

"You look happy," Harry said accusingly. "Tell me. What's the secret?"

The little button-shaped man looked out onto the gleaming silver bay and said, "Love."

"Easy enough to say," Harry snorted. "But what does it mean?"

"It means," the little man said to the moonlit darkness, "that you care about someone or something else more than you care about yourself."

Harry thought about that for a moment, taken aback by both the seriousness with which the man had fielded his rude inquiry and the simple truth of the response.

"How do you do that?" he asked, now truly anxious for an answer. "How do you care about someone else more than you care about yourself?"

It was something that he was suddenly afraid he had never done.

"That's the hard part," the little man said, finally, perhaps reluctantly, turning towards him. "Somehow it's a lot easier to do with kids and animals. Do you have kids?"

Harry nodded. "Two."

"Do you care about them more than you care about yourself?"

Harry wasn't sure. He wanted to say yes, but he also wanted to be honest with himself.

His kids hated him for leaving their mother, his second wife, for Celine, his third. They thought he was a selfish bastard and told him so to his face the few times after his divorce that they allowed him to see them.

"I used to," he finally said. "Though I guess I didn't act like I did."

The little button-shaped man nodded, then turned back towards the bay.

"Love is a choice," he said to the black velvet air. "Love is something you decide to do. You can always just step off the turntable and out onto the balcony."

"Just like that?" Harry asked.

The little man nodded. "Just like that. The hard part is remembering to do it."

"But why does doing it make you happy? Sorry if I sound like I'm looking for free therapy, but this is my third marriage, and you know what they say."

"No," the button-shaped man said. "What do they say?"

He sounded interested.

"Three strikes and you're out."

"Three strikes and you're out!" the little man repeated, almost gleefully. "Yes, that's good! That's very good!"

Then he dropped his voice, getting back to the matter at hand.

"You feel like you're living in a cage," he said. "When you're alone, you're lonely, and when you're tied to someone, you're tied down. Neither state satisfies you, neither makes you happy."

"Exactly!" Harry agreed.

"What you don't understand is that you're the cage. Not marriage. Not your wife. You."

"And love is the way out of the cage," Harry said, a light flashing.

"Yes. Love of your children, love of your wife, love of God, if you believe in Him."

"The way to get outside the self."

"Yes. And once you're there, you're able to see how beautiful it all is. That's really the reward of love. Beauty. It's the beauty that makes you happy."

He motioned out towards the moonlit view.

"It's like living back there, in that restaurant, nauseous with the constant motion, the going round and round, worrying about the bill, about whether the food is worth the money, about whether the waiter is humiliating you, about how this is Valentine's Day and all the passion and romance in your life is long gone. And then you step off. You stop turning. You see how beautiful everything is, including your love for your wife, which is like music playing in the background that you never listen to and so never hear."

"Yes, that's true!" Harry said enthusiastically. "Everything gets in the way. I do love my wife, I just don't let myself feel it."

The little button-shaped man nodded. "So that's it," he said, throwing his hands out and then slapping them back against his sides. "That's the secret. In the old nutshell."

He laughed and, turning away, seemed to end the conversation in contemplation of the night.

The secret of happiness! Harry thought, also turning away to give the man some well-earned privacy. He looked south now, down the strip of high rise hotels and condominiums that lined the narrow

beach. Far below him traffic ran incessantly up and down the four-lane road that paralleled the shore.

What a fool he had been all his life! Trapped in the cage of his own self-interest!

His first marriage, it was true, had been ridiculously premature. He and his wife were children, both barely 21, obligated by what they had assumed was the other's expectation. A brief, honest conversation before the wedding would have saved them a lot of grief.

All he could think of was: Stuck for life! The one sexual partner he would ever experience. Ever!

He had wanted out right away. His first wife had been totally bewildered by the change in him just a few days after the wedding. Nasty, belligerent, impossible to please. And she lacked the maturity and experience to know what to do with him. Within seven months, the marriage was annulled.

What followed were fifteen years of exuberant bachelorhood, affairs sprinkled with one-night stands, when he could do whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, answerable to no one but himself. He later wondered why he had brought that period of his life to a close by remarrying. He had considered it in retrospect the happiest time of his life.

Obviously, something had been missing. Each affair ended badly, with tears on one side and an unavoidable brutality on the other. It had gotten so that he was reluctant to start an affair for fear of the ugliness at the other end.

Despite himself he had had the wisdom to marry his second wife, a woman with whom he felt unaccountably at home, as though for the previous fifteen years he had been traveling and could at last unpack and put his things where they belonged.

The first few years of that second marriage had been truly his brief bit of happiness. When his children were young, his wife affectionate, and, most important, he had been in love.

But when the passion had cooled a little, he decided to have it both ways – both the freedom of bachelorhood and the comforts of home – simply by cheating on the side. The first time was an experiment, the second a corroboration. By the third, cheating had become a policy, a way of life, unsustainable, as it turned out. Which was something he learned when he met Celine.

Boy, had she been hot! Also in a second marriage, also enjoying a double life. They came upon their affair looking for a recreational binge, but for both it quickly became an addiction. And like any addicts, they courted and found destruction.

Both no longer cared what their spouses knew, or thought about the inevitable consequences of what they were doing. When the explosion came, they married in the wreckage of their lives, as though that were the only alternative left to two aging survivors who had nothing left but each other.

Ghosts haunted both of them, along with the knowledge that what they had sacrificed was far more precious than what they were left with.

Well, it was not too late for Celine, Harry thought. He may have messed up everything else in his life, but this one thing he could still do right.

Love is a choice, the little round button-shaped man had said, which Harry found vastly empowering. He would make the right choices this time. The alternative was an angry and bewildered bitterness that could hardly be called a life.

Breaking through his thoughts was the sound of sirens coming up fast from the south. Harry looked down to see multiple flashing lights pull off the four-lane road and up into the driveway of the hotel.

He looked over to where the little button man had been, but he was gone. Harry was alone on the balcony.

He moved back to the bay view and looked straight down to where an ambulance and two police cars were pulling under the cupola by the entranceway. He saw a crowd around a scoop of flowers jutting out from below the cupola, and in the center of the crowd a body sprawled face down.

Across a short skirt of lawn from the hotel driveway the gigantic bay still sparkled silver in the moonlight, dotted with islands of darkness.