

RICHARD MOORE

JANUARY  
THAW



## Preface

### The Year Within

For me, the year-end holiday season, that stretch of splendor from Thanksgiving to New Year's, is a year all by itself.

Many get depressed over the holidays. Many others are fatigued by family and finances. Still others dredge up unpleasant childhood memories or begin to worry about their souls. For many who don't enjoy them, the holidays enclose them, form walls around them, like a closed but bottomless closet into which they are locked away, alone, falling toward a valley far away from everyone else.

Not for me. The Christmas season, the holiday season, whatever you want to call it, is a journey toward a glorious summit all its own, where my world is topped at the top with a chimerical frosting, a confectionary layering of reality, and I am free to take momentary flight. Perhaps the better way to say it is a filtering of reality, a year within a year, whereby I am led to the edge of a great precipice and invited to dive into the depths. I do, not into a starless valley but into a glistening sea of tinsel and parades, of flying reindeer and winged angels and party blowers—all of it drowning out the clear air above the waters into which I have plunged. I am consumed now into a different world, and each foot deeper I dive takes me through a different perception of my life, how shall I say it, it is a dive toward the 'a priori' of everything, real and imagined, toward true meaning beneath the peel of the real, though I never quite get to the bottom of it all before it's over and I emerge again into the blistery, cold world above.

How do I explain it, really? That five to six weeks is in a way like Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Only instead of the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, I am visited by the ghosts of years past, the ghosts of the present year, the ghosts of years yet to come—if I'm lucky.

Thanksgiving is the ghost of years past. Sure, the relatives come to dinner, wished long gone before they even get there, and sometimes friends, and various memories of the past year, or of

years long ago, straggle through the door as well. I give thanks for them all. That I am alive to remember the memories is something to be thankful for all by itself.

Thanksgiving reminds me of the importance of being here, for myself as well as for others. I can look around and treasure the accumulations of my life. Christmas is the ghost of the present year. It is a time to celebrate in the here-and-now, to give gifts to those here right now, to look around Christmas morning, the dog chewing at the tree, the kids tangled in wrapping paper, we parents cleaning up wrapping paper, our grandparents saying don't worry about the wrapping paper, enjoy the moment.

And I do enjoy it and say, I am happy to be here right now. I don't dismiss or downplay the religious significance of Christmas, but I do not deny the secular resonance of it, either. New Year's, well, that's another day, and, as they say, what happens there stays there. New Year's is the day of welcoming a clean slate, even if we did dirty up the old slate one more time the night before. The ball drops, the ticker tape flies, the champagne flows. We wake up a little hung over maybe, but the world I see out the iced windows is nothing more than a blue sky of opportunity, no matter how dreary it seems. This year, I think to myself, this year I am going to get it right.

The first Thanksgiving I really remember, or maybe it's just the most vivid one, was at my Aunt Blue's house in the South Carolina lowcountry. Blue and her husband were the caretakers of an old sprawling plantation. I have no idea who owned it then, but Ted Turner presided over it later, long after any trace of my family had disappeared into its mossy swamps. The main house was run down even then, and yet it was magnificent in a dilapidated Old South way, a reeking opulence of decay. It might as well have been considered a natural resource of the swamp. On the table was venison and wild turkey and duck, all from just outside the window. The mound of mashed potatoes was the largest I have even seen, before or since, and my aunt, herself a massive mound of a woman, had positioned herself right behind it. I have been to many mountain ranges and have always been awed by the way they rise up in the approach, but never have I been so awed by massifs as I was that Thanksgiving Day. Afterward, my dad reminisced about his childhood, living with his older sister Blue, he a casualty of depression and war. Bittersweet for him. And then we spent the afternoon in a john boat navigating narrow canals through Ashpoo hummocks, my father regaling me with tales of his youthful alligator hunts. Whereupon he offered up the best advice he ever gave me: Son, don't ever assume an alligator is dead just because you shot it in the head. Don't put it in your boat.

Alligators have very hard heads. I have never been alligator hunting, but this advice comes in handy in politics, too, I have found.

Christmas is not about remembering this particular one or that; all of them blur together. But there was one constant. My brother and I would sleep together, waiting for Santa Claus. I say ‘sleep’ in the loosest sense of the word because we didn’t close our eyes all night. Always we would find various excuses to decide Santa had come and gone, and that it was safe for us to get up. The wind would heave the porch door back and forth. That must be Santa leaving! Time to get up and see what he brought us. A car door would slam in the distance — surely that must be Santa’s sleigh door! — and so time to get up. A plane would fly overhead. That’s gotta be Santa’s jet fighter escort! Time to get up. My brother and I were never ones to leave Santa milk and cookies because we believed he was too fat already, or at least that’s what we said. In truth, we believed the milk and cookies would only make him dawdle and linger; we wanted him to be gone so we could get up. There is a photo somewhere of one of those early Christmas mornings. I am five, maybe six, standing and holding a pop gun in one hand and clutching my crotch with the other. I had to go to the bathroom badly, but dad wanted a picture. Behind me my brother is laughing it up because he knew the tragedy that was about to ensue. His cackling had chucked his head back into the tree, and it hung there, as if his face was a living ornament. The laughing brother ornament, an eternal testament to his good time that morning.

My mother apparently realized the urgency of things, too, though all you can see is her outstretched arms reaching for me from the side of the picture. I must have blocked out what happened next because I don’t remember anything more. But that was life, you can see in the photograph, life in the there and then. There was chaos. Laughter. Panic. And determination.

That was Christmas. That day. The living ornament of it.

Fade out, fade in to a bright yellow kitchen and an elderly woman hunched over the sink peeling potatoes. She clutched her back and declared, “It’s time for my medicine,” which she kept in a bottle in the back of a cabinet. It looked like grape juice to me.

“Now mamma, don’t go taking your medicine too early, even if it is New Year’s Eve,” my mom told her.

“Just what I need and not a drop more, Genelle,” my grandmom said with a wince and a wink.

My family was not a family of drinkers, at least in the open. What drinking they did they did in secret. New Year's Eve was different. Two bottles of champagne would be shared among about 15 adults to welcome in the New Year, and the family let their proverbial hair down. One by one they arrived, and the scene was set. One woman in the kitchen, then two, then three, then four, then five, and all talking simultaneously. The spread was laid out, and we would eat—bets were taken beforehand which of my aunts would argue before the night was done and refuse to ever speak to each other again, that too was a New Year's Eve ritual—and then the corks were popped. That was the cue for my Great Aunt Katie, a pentecostal who was said to speak in tongues, to kneel in the corner and begin to pray for us all in quite clear English.

Suddenly, maybe it was the fruit juice we kids were given, or the arguing aunts, or the kneeling great aunt, or just the stew of it all, but I felt dizzy.

“Oh, it's gone to my head!” I yelled.

“What's gone to your head, child?” my mother cried. “Oh Lord, mamma, he's gotten into your medicine.”

“He has not.” My grandmother, defiant and insulted, defended herself. “He couldn't have. I drank it all.”

“Oh Lord,” my aunts said all at once.

Granddad said he thought it was about time to go outside for fireworks before they went off inside, and cooler heads prevailed. For a while. But then granddad, who believed in goblins and ghosts, warned us the witches would be out and about tonight looking for prey, and we children had better be careful. My older brother declared he would shoot them from the sky with bottle rockets. I cried, and wished I knew how to speak in tongues.

Soon enough, though, with bottle rockets whistling, and sparklers dazzling me, I was calm enough, or at least distracted. The New Year came, and the night faded, as it did for everyone. The next morning, a blitz of sun attacked from the eastern window and awoke me to its pointed and blazing opportunities. I lay in bed and inhaled the smell of bacon and eggs, toast and coffee. I pulled the quilt up around me, safe now from the past. What had happened the night before, which wasn't much anyway, would stay there. Indeed, all that had gone before in my life was, in

fact, gone. A new year, a new world rose with the sun. I had emerged from my dive from the summit, alive yet, and with a blue sky before me.

The slate was clean. The holiday year, the year within, was over, the real world just around the bedroom corner. Time to get up, and not for Santa. But who is to say what the real world is? Who is to say what truths were penetrated in the year within? Who is to say where they will lead me to, perhaps from an autumn November through a cold December to a January thaw?

Perhaps, perhaps not. All I know is the journey is worthwhile, the experience unforgettable and magical. Let's go.

## Let the decorations begin

### November 1

There is a theory out there about holiday decorations—Christmas decorations in particular—and the mood of the country.

It goes like this. The longer people tend to leave their Christmas decorations up after the new year is reflective of a positive national attitude. In such times, people feel good about the economy and the culture and their place in it, and they want to extend the glad tidings and the good feelings for as long as they can.

Early Christmas decorations, on the other hand, tend to send the opposite message, according to the theory. The earlier people begin to whip out the trimmings, the worse they actually feel.

That's because, in this view, in a slow economy many more people are struggling. They want to feel better about themselves, and they hope Christmas ornaments can prod them into a better frame of mind, or at least provide a little escape from a dreary time.

Now mind you, we're not talking here about the commercialization of Christmas, and the ever earlier advertising that goes with it; that's a different issue. Retail companies have been extending the Christmas season longer and longer for decades now because it is the shopping season they are trying to extend. This year I saw in-store Christmas displays in late September.

That has everything to do with maximizing profit and nothing to do with the national mood. This theory has to do with residential decoration, with the people, not the corporations.

We're not talking about religion, either, observers vs. nonobservers. Believer or not, holiday embellishments make people feel better. Here's how Ben Stein put it about Christmas: "I am a Jew, and every single one of my ancestors was Jewish. And it does not bother me even a little bit when people call those beautiful lit up, bejeweled trees Christmas trees. I don't feel threatened. I don't feel discriminated against. That's what they are: Christmas trees. It doesn't bother me a bit when people say, 'Merry Christmas' to me. I don't think they are slighting me or getting ready to

put me in a ghetto. In fact, I kind of like it. It shows that we are all brothers and sisters celebrating this happy time of year.”

And that’s exactly what it is: Brothers and sisters celebrating a happy time of year. In good and prosperous times, extending the season simply says we want these times to last as long as they can. In gloomy periods, we want to get the holidays started as quickly as we can, the embellishments up faster, the quicker to usher bad feelings out the door.

Over the years, I have come to believe that, in general, the theory holds. In the heady days before the recent Great Recession, I noticed people left their trees up longer, the outside lights webbed the trees through most of the winter, and various Santas and his sleighs stayed longer on rooftops. The reindeer could fly for months.

In the past several years, though, I’ve noticed the other trend. People tend to be putting their baubles and accessories up earlier and earlier, hoping somehow to bring light to a dark national mood.

So what was the reading this year?

Well, if my early, casual observations are any indication, the national mood is as glum as it can be. Down in Milwaukee, Halloween is but a day removed and Santa popped up in a neighbor’s yard. A candy cane took up post in a patch of green only a block beyond.

Here in the Northwoods, I was walking the dog early one morning this past weekend, only to come upon a house with a Christmas tree already shining in the front window. I marveled at that because it is the earliest I have ever seen a Christmas tree unveiled. Sure, many people in the North rush to establish their outdoor decorations before the snow flies, and that’s reasonable enough. But inside the house is another matter; it is the matter of our national state of mind.

So seeing the Christmas tree got me to thinking about our dismal mood, or perhaps my dismal mood, because I was reminded by a friend not to rush to judgment. Perhaps they are having an early Christmas, she reasoned. Perhaps a family member is shipping overseas, or something similar, and won’t be here in December.

Perhaps, and the next few weeks would tell, but I suspected we would see more and more icicles and ornaments and garlands making their way into the fast-coming skysets of winter.

And why not? How could we not be glum? The threat of another global recession ebbs and flows with any given week. The national unemployment rate is edging its way downward, like Santa down the chimney, but we all know it's because record numbers of people have given up looking for work, have given up waiting for Santa to finally arrive with all his goodies.

When you don't have a job, you have more time to rumble about the attic and find those wreaths and candlesticks. When you don't have cash to shop with, you might as well set up a Santa's workshop, where magical toys can be constructed with just a little imagination.

Then, too, perhaps we are just exasperated and fatigued with the perpetual nature of politics that we must endure these days: endless presidential campaigns, endless recall elections, endless incendiary headlines. It's enough to make us rush for a holiday toddy, or an early decorating binge. Perhaps the early decorators are simply the nation yelling uncle, or trying to. Maybe our decorations are a cry for the politicians and the headline writers to give us a break, at least for the rest of the year.

It's not likely they will, of course. Still, it's worth a shot. Maybe, just maybe, putting our glumness on bright display now can help light the way out of it. Perhaps we should take this final week of the year and focus less on the paltry economy and the petty politics, less on what is nationally strained and more on what, as brothers and sisters, we can celebrate together.

And what that would be is our people and our diversity, not to mention our capacity for compassion and devotion to freedom. What we as brothers and sisters would celebrate would be our very humanity, which can only be realized through other humans. Perhaps through our early decorations we can reach a hand to our neighbors and say, Happy Holidays, and may you and your family find good fortune.

For me, I had too much to do to decorate the house properly. The gutters still needed to be cleaned; that fallen tree, removed; the yard, raked; the roof cleared of pine needles and then snow.

But I am decorating in another way. This book is my form of early ornamentation. Maybe it means I am glum about our prospects, or my prospects, or perhaps I am just tired, but, for the rest of the year, I think it would be best if we all moved on from hand-to-hand combat and focused instead on just hand to hand with those we love.

That way, perhaps the glow will linger a little longer after the holidays, maybe the national mood will tick up a notch and reset us in our values and confidence, so we will be ready to once again go about the messy business of a free people and free country.

At the very least, a little Christmas cheer stretched out a bit this year might be just what the country doctor ordered, as refreshing as a second glass of egg nog, as comforting as double visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads.

## **50 ways to tell a life's story in snow**

### **November 7**

It was without doubt good news to hear that Kate Bush released a new album a while ago, entitled '50 Words For Snow.' The singer-songwriter, always brilliant, described the work as seven stories set against a backdrop of snow, all inspired by winter weather. Her genius was to make the icy backdrops rise into the story and intertwine with life itself. The snow is a metaphor—how a lifetime can be as transient as a snowflake, how consciousness itself can evaporate as quickly as hard-packed snow in a January thaw.

Wisdom here, yes, and truthfulness, for, no matter how long we live, our lifetimes are indeed as short and as fugitive as snowflakes in the night, and snow itself is the perfect artistic companion, a new and clean canvas upon which to remake and reshape our own messy struggles, their white light then stretching out with the impressions we make plainly visible—there they are, our footprints in the snowdrifts of time, as vivid as a photograph in the drawer.

Snow is the tangible literature of life. Even the smallest amount of it can freeze within its frames our personal histories. Unlike wind, unlike rain, unlike even the sun, chapters told in tales of snow can be pulled from the freezer of time and eaten like so many popsicles.

Even for a Southerner like me, I can recount so much of my history through the portraiture of snow. Or the lack of it. When I was growing up in South Carolina, even the slightest hint of snow would raise panic among the adults and delight among the children. There were no snowplows—didn't know what such a thing was—and but a skiff of snow would close schools and businesses and send the kids scurrying outside to play.

You had to play in a hurry, too, for the snow would likely melt by the afternoon. And so my childhood friend Ann and I would work as quickly as possible to scrape together what few snowballs we could and dish out the delights to each other. The snow made us feel alive in a way we often could not, and it taught us how fleeting the good times in life can be.

There were exceptions to the lack of the white stuff, of course. In 1973, when I was a student at the University of South Carolina, a freak storm pounded the state with nearly 16 inches. The night of the snowfall we had walked to an Earl Scruggs bluegrass concert. The aging legend had by this time become an anti-war activist, and he helped to rally the student opposition with his banjo.

Throngs of us college kids rejoiced in the driving snow as we walked home, and the pace and the fury and the intensity of the ice against our faces struck home as metaphors for the pace and the fury and the intensity of our own political storms.

The snow can teach humans the limits of such fervor, though, place before the boundaries of our mortality the faces of the overwhelmingly nonhuman forces of the universe, and so the Great Blizzard of 1977 in Buffalo, N.Y., did for me. I had gone there to run a political campaign, and through my research I knew the Buffalo Snow could be immense. But everyone told me the winters had been so mild for so many years. Not to worry, they said. There was nothing to worry about.

And there wasn't, at least until Jan. 27, 1977, when an Arctic front swept through the Midwest to western New York. On Friday morning, Jan. 28, the snow began to quietly, slowly fall. Nothing to worry about. By 11, when a blizzard warning was sounded, there was only about two new inches of snow on the ground. But the wind began to howl and would not stop. I went home for lunch and never made it back to work. In the hour I was home, bumper-high snow drifts made it impossible for me to move the car.

And yet I was one of the lucky ones; 13,000 people were trapped downtown in their offices, and many would be for days. I was trapped in my apartment for four days. Thousands of cars lay abandoned, many completely buried beneath the snow (police used metal detectors to try and locate buried cars). People formed human chains in the fierce winds—which roared for days—to rescue people from stranded cars and pull them into safe shelters. The snow drifts were so high, people standing on top could reach up and easily touch power lines, and officials warned parents to watch so their children wouldn't climb the snow banks.

There was looting and the threat of arrest for anyone who ventured outside, other than emergency personnel. Officials pleaded for people to loan them snowmobiles to bolster emergency rescue operations. The weather was so bad the local newspaper failed to publish for the first time in nearly 150 years.

By Monday the winds died down and by the end of it only 12 inches of new snow had fallen. But the brutal wind, gusting upwards of 70 mph, had blown so continually it plucked entire snow drifts up and moved them from one part of town to the other. In this theatre, the snow provided not a canvas upon which to work a life; the canvas, the whiteouts, obliterated and stalled life completely.

In another way, the snow has been transcendental, an ‘a priori’ affirmation of my own life. In 1989, another South Carolina storm dumped eight inches on the state and gave my mother the first and only White Christmas she ever had. She was like a child that day, and, adults all now, we nonetheless pelted each other with snowballs and built a flimsy snowman, and I could see the little girl she once had been, the very prescendence of me. It was the happiest Christmas we ever had.

Even the sun can become a kind of snow, under just the right conditions, say on a boat ride on a hot, bright Southern day. The day is tapering away, but the light is beautiful. It is a clumsy, leaking boat of a word, but ‘beautiful’ is the only way to describe it. We saw an old plantation on the shore, the way plantation homes are meant to be seen—from the water—and happened upon yet another Southern dialectic, the steady drizzle of a southern scene through a hot afternoon sun, the way it freezes like rain into glassy icicles. The house was a sterling white ice palace shimmering around a rink of warm marsh. We passed oyster mounds, too—dark and oily beds and banks shaped like whale humps but as frosty as gobs of chocolate ice cream. The summer light struck the lawn with such white-hot ferocity that the so snow-like gardens glistened with pure-white hushed borders and bleached paths.

So many chapters, so many memories the snow has given up. How many more will there be? I certainly await this year’s. So far we have had a healthy taste, but the snow sure is pretty when it first arrives for the season. I was driving to Milwaukee, and it was swirling about in the air, and settling over fields like a warm comforter.

The snow stays around too long, for sure, and by March it’s like the relatives who arrived for a short stay and never left. But, boy, when it first shows up, you want to say, as I did, ‘Hello old friend, and you don’t look a day older. Come on in and let’s reminisce.’

And sure enough, the powder securely ensconced in the yards and on the rooftops, we can begin to reread the history of our snow stories and to write new chapters in the clean fresh frosting. We

can say, remember when, and chuckle and marvel at all the ways the snow can tell the stories of our lives, hand down the legacies of our humanity.

## **The snow falls upon us all**

### **November 15**

The snow, as I write this in mid-November, is falling gently outside. The flakes floating so buoyantly upon their cushions of air, some of them lollygagging, others somersaulting, or circle stepping each other in a waltz of sorts, are beautiful, almost sentient in the way they cavort lightheartedly.

The dog sees it, too, and has flipped upon his black back, supine, kicking his legs high into the air, wheel-like, to greet winter's welcoming wagon. He leaps up, the impression of a canine snow angel beneath him in the thin plane of snow, that, his fleeting contribution of unconstrained happiness, and extends his own ebullient welcome before romping away into the woods, a flick of his tongue to one side, and quick to the other, a kiss for a few of his returning friends.

It is hard to share the mirth of the moment. At least this year anyway. Too many loved ones have passed away, or simply disappeared. It has been a year of intense loss, and grief, and the falling snow, which usually outfits me in a festive holiday mood, has instead clothed me in a drab melancholia.

Where usually I appreciate the tease of a flake as it flirts with an eyelash, or takes the liberty to decorate my hair and shoulders with its silky mantilla, it is hard not to imagine the snow this year as anything more than a slowly smothering force, a blanket bound to cover and cocoon all of my humanity.

We all have our years like this. We hear it all the time, too, and it is true, that life is so resilient and strong, and yet so fragile. Most often, in our daily lives, we only allow ourselves to travel among the props of that resiliency. We tend to hide behind the thin curtain that separates durability from fragility—we dare not peek on the other side—but every once in a while the life treatment is heaved away, exposing our vulnerability in painful and utterly unforeseen ways.

When it does, the forecast can be bleak.

This morning, as I look to see where the wandering dog has wandered to now, I hear the snow is falling widely across northern Wisconsin, and I set my scene much as Gabriel did in James Joyce's *The Dead*, as he prepared to journey across the Irish landscape:

“Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, on the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves.”

In the story, Gabriel has realized that his wife of many years has long held in her heart the memory of a young love, a true love, Michael Furey, who had died. Gabriel seized on his own jealousy but was also cognizant that he could not love his wife, or any woman, as Michael Furey had loved her.

What a transcendental moment of realization. Gabriel felt oppressed and he looked at the snow falling everywhere, a metaphor for his isolation and his own mortality, for, at day's end, he understood, the snow falls upon us all:

“It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.”

Of course, those of us who are still among the living have no choice but to journey onward, as Gabriel had to do. We have no choice but to try to move past the dead, even as the snow marries us together, like bone to marrow, and so we trek on, the living somersaulting or circle stepping the dead in that waltz of sorts, looking for a way to romp away.

The journey goes on until it does not. After great loss, though—and this Gabriel had no chance to tell us—we somehow manage to take tentative, struggling steps through the accumulating snow, strenuous trudges of regret and grief, of remorse and disbelief, until at last the deep drifts begin to give way to an ordered, narrow path of resolution. The breathing becomes easier. There are paces of peace and strides of thankfulness for loved ones lost.

The bleakness breaks, and that, too, is a moment of transcendental realization.

As this year ends, I am slowly learning to walk again in the relentless, binding snow. I am slowly learning my paces and taking my strides. This holiday season, I walk in thankfulness of all those in my life who have gone before but who visit me no more, and for all the things they did for me.

This Thanksgiving, I think of my friend Laura, her tangy laugh and the playfulness that propelled her life, cut so short in its prime. Laura lived in the moment, until the moments ran out, and transformed every one of them into blazing furnaces of excitement.

Ah, there we are after a day of shopping in Manhattan, standing at an intersection, on a cold, blustery day. The traffic light is taking an eternity to change, and it is as if the entire city is frozen beneath a frigid glaze. But Apple always had a way of shattering the ice of time. She dropped her packages, and, in a perfect Mary Tyler Moore moment, launched her hat into the dusk-cast sky, performed an enthusiastic and almost elegant, if somewhat executioner-styled, pirouette and then grabbed me in a ferocious hug.

I can still feel her nose against my cheek, as cold as it was that night.

“What in the world are you doing?” I pleaded.

“What?!” she asked incredulously. “Can’t you see? Here we are, right here, right now, right across from Rockefeller Center. Look at the skaters on the rink! Look at the skyscrapers! Look at the shoppers! Look at me, damn it! We might never be here again.”

She was right. We were never there again, and I am sad that I did not appreciate the treasure that was a single hug.

And so this Thanksgiving I think of Laura, and wonder: Where is she now? Where are all our good times and laughter?

I think of my mother, too, who lived a long and good life but vanished so suddenly. One sad Saturday, after 81 years, she was no more. This woman who held and defended me when childhood asthma robbed me of my breath and choked me, who caressed my hair and cheeks to calm me until I could breathe again, her own breath was gone.

I am sorry that I could not watch over my mother’s breath as she had watched over mine.

My mother was mostly about drama. She loved life's theatre, high-brow and low. There was the day she called me in New York to tell me she had burned the house down; actually, it turned out to be only the kitchen, but she needed to make it more of it than it was. There was the day she thought she heard the back door bang shut and immediately concluded burglars had invaded the house, when a neighbor had slammed the door of his truck.

She could have her calm moments, too, sitting on the deck in her beloved North Carolina mountains, admiring the evening's blue haze along the ridges above and the yellow fireflies lighting up the yard below in perfect simultaneous contrast.

"They make the mountains blink like a giant Christmas tree," she would say. "What a wonder that is to me."

Like Laura, she taught me that life itself was a drama, nothing more and nothing less than a concatenation of unexpected happenstance, collisions and meetings, some small, some large, each to be appreciated and greeted with awe and inspiration, and at the end of the day it was time to sit on the porch and let it go for the night.

I think of my mother, and wonder: Where is she now? Where are all our good times and laughter?

I think of Dusty, my fabled canine companion of 12 years, who left on her own journey six years ago. For all her dozen years, until the very last day, she was the epitome of misbehavior—my wife insisted she was her own species, *Canis Naughtiness*—and she was: Too many Yankees' caps devoured to count, too many passersby terrified by a charging, barking dog who would always stop right at the edge of the yard, too many paper bags torn asunder in the living room.

Some might say—in fact, many did say—that Dusty was a princess, and that she was. But she was more, as much a person as a dog, with her own never-ending penchant for thrills, and her syrupy kisses to round out the definition of engaged if sometimes nerve-wracking companionship.

I miss the syrupy licks. I miss the companionship. I miss the naughtiness, and I am sorry I cannot reach down and kiss her now as she would kiss me.

So this holiday season, I think of Dusty, and wonder: Where is she now? Where are all our good times and laughter?

I think of others, too, some who died, others who simply drifted away to another place on Earth. Where is Melanie? Where is Corky? I cannot find them.

This Thanksgiving, I think of them, and wonder: Where are they now? Where are all our good times and laughter?

The answer is, they are here, within me. They are part of me, and they make me who I am. For if they were not, I would not be able to still love them.

A mentor once taught me that all love, all hate, all emotions reside not within ourselves but within the relationships we have. Think of a human in a dark void where no other human and no other animal and no other thing exists, he said. Is this human a person any longer? Can this human feel?

Of course not, he said. If there is nothing or no one to love, there can be no love. If there is nothing or no one to hate, there can be no hate. The emotions we feel toward others reside not within us, nor within the others, but within the relationships between us.

And so each becomes a part of the other, each shapes the other. And each continues to do so, even when one leaves our life physically. Death, it turns out, cannot kill affinity, nor bury the coalesced essence of two human beings

A body may have passed, but the relationship lives.

It is as if each of us is a house throwing open our doors to other people. They come and visit. Some stay awhile and leave; others linger. But each leaves behind a mark that transforms the house forever, becomes a part of the interior decoration, the stain of a spilled drink perhaps, or a piece of rearranged furniture, or that wind chime given as a housewarming present, even a shoe's impression.

Yes, we are like that house—people enter and rearrange our inner selves and change us forever. Perhaps they spill a tear that stains the corners of our anatomy, or they give us a gift of a precious

memory, a shared dinner, a simple nose on the cheek. Maybe it's just a laugh or two they leave behind, soul-lifting wind chimes to be tucked away in a corner closet for a grey windy day.

It's OK to mourn those who have left the premises even as we celebrate their contributions. To think of past loved ones, to relive the memories, is indeed to unite the past with the present.

It is to bring them all home again.

That the snow falls everywhere, upon the past and the present, upon the living and the dead, is not about isolation and mortality, after all. It is about communion and immortality.

It is too bad Gabriel did not know that. His story, poor fellow, ended too soon.

The thing about life is, as fast as loved ones spin away, new company rolls in. There are always new hearts and hopes and loves making their way into the open house. There is always new life on the way.

So it is that this holiday season, I will enjoy what has become a relatively new house. There will be the smell of curry, as there has been these past few years; there will be reconfigured conversations of physics and football, and different faces and laughs than there were years ago.

While I give thanks for them all, this year, especially, I thank those whom I have lost but who made—and continue to make—my house what it is today. Together we shall all gather at the table and feast on the very real meal of long-ago friendships and love.

I must find the dog. Ah, there he is, trotting back from the woods, salt and pepper now with so much snow on his body. He comes bounding through the door, shaking off, the snow flying in every direction.

Joyce was right, it is falling everywhere. It falls upon my floor and feet. It falls to the north and south and east and west. It falls upon Laura, and upon the grave where she lays with all the other Michael Fureys of the world. It falls upon my mother, too, and gathers on the limbs of the oak trees that protect her. It falls upon Dusty, ashes upon her ashes, winter's insulation of her eternal warmth.

The snow falls upon us all, the living and the dead, and it makes my soul swoon.

## Why Thanksgiving Matters

### November 28

Thanksgiving, for me, has always been about the parade.

You know the one, the great Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. My mother watched it religiously, and as a child I did, too, in fertile black and white, using my imagination to color in the lines of Popeye and Underdog and Mighty Mouse and all the floats and singers, all the dancers and bands and clowns below the giant balloons.

To each element of the parade, I could attach a fantasy and live it for days in my mind. The floats dragged me along to worlds I could only hope someday to travel to; the bands marched into some exciting time beyond mine; the balloons lifted me high in the sky and tossed me into the currents of eternal flight.

The promise of a voyage. The vision of orbit. That's what it gave me. I gave thanks to the parade, not because it made me feel good about all that I had, but for the possibilities it showed me I could have.

It made me thankful for my future.

As my days have unfolded, Thanksgiving is a parade still, but of a different sort. The Macy's parade still looms large—what new balloons shall they have this year? What old favorites will return?—but other parades now contend for my attention.

There is the parade of all the years and of all the people who have marched with me through them, some floating along as if by magic, they are so blessed with talent and beauty; some staggering beneath the weight of their own instruments, struggling hard to play them well, to finish the route; some tragically blown off course like giant wayward balloons in a blustery, unexpected wind.

Sometimes there is sadness, awful sadness, in a parade, too.

And what of this year's parade? What procession of people would gather around the cavalcade of food from the kitchen? Who would be there to applaud and squeal and say 'Oh wow, I'm hungry,' as the turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, green beans, and desserts troop by, showing off in front of us, dressed in their finest glazed skirts and lightly-whipped tops?

Yes, sitting around the table, loaded with its ritual pageant, it is immediately obvious what there is to give thanks for: Every year I am grateful for all those who fill the chairs and engage my life with the love shown by their presence.

Each person around the table is like a balloon hovering above the great Thanksgiving Day parade. Each conversation, the laughter and the simultaneous chatter, drifts upward into the next, mixing together into a hearty aroma of its own fine distinction. I don't have to talk. I can sit back and breathe in all the flavors of the humanity in the house.

I can do more. I can throw open the windows and let that wonderful spirit loose upon the world. I can watch it waft up the block and stride into the next neighborhood, its own spectacle on review. That done, I can give thanks for their future, though I know not where they are headed.

Again, though, every parade has its sadness. Perhaps I should more accurately call it a bittersweetness. There are the ones who didn't make it: my son and daughter-in-law in California; the absent best friend; my sick relatives who must spend their Thanksgiving alone; for some families, the soldiers who will never come home.

All are missed. The parade is just a little shorter and a lot poorer for it.

In recent years, my parade has become so much more diverse. The nuclear family is far-flung, so is the extended family, for that matter. So I have inherited another extended family, that is to say, I have developed a sense of family that is extended: not merely my own immediate relatives but this year my physicist friend, so far from the province of her native India; now her friend, whom I do not even yet know, so far from her home in the East; a divorced colleague eager to seek solace in company; an artist pal and his wife; an old friend, too, with whom I look forward to become reacquainted with after 20 years.

I have been filled with excitement about meeting my old friend. It's just like the time they unretired Donald Duck—remember that?—and returned him to the parade after so many years. What would it be like to see him again?

I anticipated it, and gave thanks for our future.

Perhaps this diversity is just a sign of the times. In the past, America has always been a nation of separate and segregated parades. There has been the parade of the rich, always more glamorous and adorned and yet more bittersweet because the affluent are so much more scattered about the Earth. They move about the globe, and so theirs is often a parade of text messages and phone calls and emails.

Then there is the parade of the poor. There is less on the table but more souls around it. May they, on this Thanksgiving weekend, be able to give thanks for their future, but who is to say, in the end, that they who have more hands to hold on Thanksgiving Day are not already richer?

One thing is for sure. As the rich become poorer these days, we all have more diversity and love, if not food, around our tables.

We need it. As a nation we need again, at least on Thanksgiving, to sit together as one extended family, as we did in the beginning, and proclaim unity. For in unity there is strength, and in strength there is freedom, and in freedom there is tolerance, and in tolerance there is love, and in love there is hope for my extended family and for yours.

President Harry S. Truman said it best in his 1945 Thanksgiving Day Proclamation, in celebration of victory in World War II:

“We have won (our blessings) with the courage and the blood of our soldiers, sailors, and airmen. We have won them by the sweat and ingenuity of our workers, farmers, engineers, and industrialists. We have won them with the devotion of our women and children. We have bought them with the treasure of our rich land. But above all we have won them because we cherish freedom beyond riches and even more than life itself. We give thanks with the humility of free men, each knowing it was the might of no one arm but of all together by which we were saved. Liberty knows no race, creed, or class in our country or in the world. In unity we found our first weapon, for without it, both here and abroad, we were doomed.”

I believe that we still sit in unity as a nation, and that it is still our first weapon. I believe the United States of America survives yet as one all-encompassing extended family, and that that remains the sign of the times and thus gives hope to my family and to yours.

May we give thanks for our national soul, and for its future. By no one arm but by all shall we be saved.

As for me, as always, I sit in the fading sun of a Thanksgiving Day I never want to end. I look into the faces of my extended family and wonder where our journeys will take us, both together and apart. I can't help but wonder what will become of us.

It does not matter. Soon my extended family, both those here and those missing, will jump from the porch and into the night sky, a parade on their way into next year. Popeye, Underdog, Mighty Mouse: I stare at them all until the procession fades away into some exciting time beyond mine, into the currents of their eternal flight.

As always, though, they leave with me the promise of voyage and the vision of orbits. They inspire me and give me hope and reassurance. They make me thankful, as I turn out the lights, for the future – your future, my future, the nation's future – on this Thanksgiving weekend.

## **And so this is Christmas**

### **December 11**

I blame the Christmas tree.

I blame the Christmas tree for the impulsive side of me. Every year the tree goes up and the lights go on, and my imprudent and sometimes hasty inner child swings out from its limbs, newly born.

A couple of years ago, on a regularly scheduled madcap whim, the inner child reached out to the outer child. To the one out on the East Coast, working hard while laboring away in law school. Those grueling tasks, plus apparent commitments to a girlfriend (a girlfriend?!) had ruled out a trip with us this holiday season.

No problem, I said, trying hard not to sound glum. After all, he had reminded me, he was planning a trip to Wisconsin during spring break because he couldn't afford to go anywhere else (translation—because he didn't have enough money to avoid seeing me).

I accepted my fate for a month or so.

But then, this past Monday night, I saw the Christmas tree. The glorious, gleaming Christmas tree. I saw the ancient wooden sleigh ornaments, the lights bright like glittering jewels in a royal crown, the delicate glass bulbs, too, so precious and carefully protected all these years, and the little headless angel atop the tree—the dog beheaded it one Christmas after it fell and I neglected to pick it up in time—and I was smitten.

Never mind visions of sugar plums, I saw visions of presents for me.

But I also saw visions of myself as a child waiting for Santa on Christmas Eve—as you read this, I'm getting a little nervous right now—and of my own child doing the same thing just about 30 years ago.

All those delightful images led an insistent father suddenly to the phone and to a flurry of back-and-forth calls as said son negotiated with said girlfriend and with said father, and to mutual but frantic visits to Travelocity, and, as quickly as a lame-duck Congress can pass a barrel of pork, the year-end deal was struck: There's no place like home for the holidays, and my son was coming after all, with said girlfriend, of course.

Christmas is all about the children, is how I explained the swiftly planned trip to astonished friends and family.

And it most surely is.

Not least, it is about Santa for the kids, and about that impulsive child within us all. Roasting turkey and hot apple cider, Jingle Bells and candy canes and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer—for a short time the world is transformed into a child's paradise, and it is hard not to submit to its epistemological parameters.

For Christians, of course, the day commemorates the birth of Jesus, but for all the children of the world, for Christian and nonChristian, Christmas and New Year's and Hanukkah and secular celebrations, too—the all-purpose year-end holiday wrapped in its festive package—can and should be treated as a season of renewal and fresh faith, a time to let bygones be bygones, and a chance to begin again with a clean slate.

It is a time for peace and for the hope of peace. In such a world there is no poverty. There is no war. In such a world, every child's face always bears a smile.

That is not the “real” world as we usually perceive it, of course. Soon enough, we again see soldiers coming home in flag-draped caskets; we read of hunger and abuse. Soon enough, a child wakes up and finds that Santa somehow missed his or her house, after all.

We can never live the dream, only pursue it, but the holiday season reminds us long enough that the aspiration is a worthy quest every day of the year, that, as unto us our children are born, we must realize how precious they are and how hard we must work to protect them, as delicate as any glass bulb they are.

And so this is Christmas, as Mr. Lennon sung, and what have we done? Have we protected the generations that follow us, or neglected them, like fallen angels no one picked up in time?

I remember gazing into my son's face at the instant of his birth more than 30 years ago, and I can tell you it is the most cherished moment in my life—my Christmas on a hot, steamy August night at Mount Sinai Hospital in downtown Manhattan.

It had its moments.

There was drama. We had practiced for natural childbirth, but my wife was rushed to the operating room surrounded by a throng of doctors when the fetal monitor indicated grave distress—what turned out to be the umbilical cord around the neck.

There was comedy, too, at least it could be laughed about later. I was in the next room, halfway done changing into surgical garb when the turbulence that was my wife and the hospital staff shuddered by in the hall. I ran immediately after them, unfortunately without any pants—I just didn't get that far in the process—chased myself by a nurse screaming, “Sir! Sir! You can't go in the operating without pants. It's a rule.”

If they had to have a rule about pantslessness in birthings, it must have been a problem before, I reckoned, but I dutifully put on my pants.

There was, thankfully, the joyous outcome. At 3:17 in the morning, my son was born safely, and my wife was fine, too, if still unconscious as we adjourned to a private room. They handed me the baby, and Liz managed to raise her head long enough to ask, “Is this real?”

Oh yeah, I answered, man, is this real, though she was already out again. What it truly was was the intersection of the “real” and the Christmas world, this beloved gift in my arms, and I stood there and held my baby and looked into his face and promised that I would protect him and do my best to give him a good life.

I haven't even come close to keeping that promise, and I only pretend to blame the Christmas tree. None of us are perfect, and we sometimes let people down, our children included. As he makes his way here this holiday season, though, I have another chance to make good on my promise, both as an impulsive father in his personal life and as a fellow human soldier fighting for a safer, more prosperous planet.

In a larger context, we as a society haven't always kept the promises of a better world we make to the children being born unto us. That is not a condemnation of anybody or any group or any political or religious viewpoint; it is merely to say we can all do a better, more civil job of giving our children a higher quality of life.

We can start by remembering to pick up the little angels when they fall. We can start by reminding ourselves to be guided in our arguments and debates not by past impulses or overindulgences or personal grudges but by the promise of the Christmas season itself, by the commitments we make to our newborn children.

Perhaps the relevant question for the new year is not, what have we done? Perhaps it is: And so this is Christmas, what shall we do?

To all the children who walk this Earth, may all of us help you fulfill and live the ultimate dream of peace and prosperity.

To all the children who shall be born this coming year, we welcome you with open arms and love. You are the latest precious gifts for the human tree, the newest jewels in humanity's glittering crown.

May we not let you down.

## Have yourself a Very Merry Mess December 24

Or, as the Archbishop of Canterbury is telling us all this year, Have yourself a very messy Christmas.

After all, it is said that life is mostly messy, and whoever said it is mostly right.

Life very seldom goes as planned. Things go awry. They lead to headache and heartache and to the age-old saying that, if something can go wrong, it will. And when it does, as we like to say around the office, it's going to cost you at least \$1,000.

Generally speaking, what most of us hope for is a helping hand or sympathetic soul to clean up the messes we make, or that happen around us, as quickly as possible. Best to get that broken dream swept under the carpet right now. Best not to cry over spilled milk but to wipe it up.

Given all that, it must be said, messes are not always bad. There are merry messes, too, and none is more delightful than the cheerful mess known as Christmas.

Christmas trees can be very messy, for instance. When I was growing up, my mother always put up the tree exactly two weeks before Christmas. Each year she stood it in front of the fireplace, which was never used, and out would come the ancient glass ornaments, passed down from the messes of generations past, the gingerbread houses, the red and blue and green lights that, thank goodness, did not blink, and my favorite: Icicles.

My mother hung each icicle with care, but my brother and I would sling them in bunches, and they would rain down on the tree limbs and freeze in poses of anarchy: a furtive duet of ice in the back, a cluster of spikes and daggers over there, oh my, and what's that, it looks like an ice bear—all of them tearing apart my mother's carefully planned conformity.

We made a mess, in other words. But it was a delightful mess, and my mother enjoyed it, too. Along the way we'd almost certainly smash an ornament by mistake, another mess, and I could

be counted on to spill the hot chocolate we were served afterward, as we gazed upon our intricate jumble of a tree.

I looked forward to that decorative free-for-all all year long. It kicked off the 12 messes of Christmas.

The tree had a way of sustaining messhood all the way through the holidays, too. The dog would root about the packages, sniffing to see if something could be had to eat, and walk away taking icicles and fir needles with her, and even once pulling down the entire tree.

What bedlam as everybody came running! The tree itself was a gift that kept on giving, a mess that kept on messing.

Before Christmas Day, of course, there are presents to wrap, and so more messes to make. Somebody in the house is always furtively scooting around wrapping presents, and leaving the tools of the trade scattered round in glorious chaos: Beads and ribbons, tags and tape, scissors and pens.

And then the big mess: Christmas Day itself. Christmess!

Who doesn't delight when the family gathers in the living room and begins, one by one, to tear the wrapping paper from the tantalizing gifts. The boxes, the paper, the bows, the tags—so carefully wrapped such a short time before now scrunched and torn and thrown carelessly and delightfully about. The sweepings build up and sprawl outward as if each crushed piece of paper is a wave in a churning sea of clutter, each ripped ribbon a colorful whitecap on a frosty morning of joyous pandemonium.

To try to get up and walk through it all is to hear the delicious splash of the world's cheeriest disorder.

Of course, when it comes to disarray on Christmas Day, things are just getting revved up. No sooner than we kick the living room cardboard to the corner than it's time to head to the kitchen and wreak sublime havoc there, a frontal assault on every pot, pan, dish and utensil that can be found.

All in the name of the sumptuous Christmas feast, of course. There's the turkey and the stuffing, the potatoes and green beans and fruit salad, the rolls and the pies and the cranberries to cook.

These days Christmas dinner is even better, for now we cook a full Indian banquet of curry and rice, of eggplant and lentils in addition to the traditional fare, and so we have to almost create an import industry, Mess Inc., and scramble about to find enough dishes to soil.

Despite too many cooks in the kitchen, we do a fair job of creating one delicious mess. Satisfaction derives not merely from eating the food, but from standing there in the kitchen afterwards, full and sated as can be, and gazing upon the full range of mayhem we have created.

Once, someone suggested we clean as we cooked, to reduce the three-day ordeal of cleaning the kitchen up, but that was abandoned as just too much heresy. It somehow took the joy out of Christmas dinner.

Some years, we wind it all up with a New Year's Eve party, one last grand chance to make a hash of the house. The confetti is thrown, the glasses are strewn, sparkles litter the hallway. Alas, too soon, the holidays are over, the messes are all scrubbed up and sadly put out of sight, like far-away family we won't see for seasons to come.

We must return to our winding, shifting world, where messes happen not because we want them to but because that's what life brings us.

Someone once said, I forget who, that there is nothing worse than to wake up on Christmas morning and not be a child. That is true and it goes to the heart of the philosophy of messism.

To be able to wallow in playful messes is to be a child again. It is to stamp our feet purposely in mud puddles, to romp through piles of leaves, to strew clothes all across the room, which you never clean unless forced to by grinch-type parents seeking perfection.

And that's where the Archbishop comes in. In his Christmas message this year, he told his listeners that a perfect, well-ordered Christmas was neither necessary nor necessarily desirable. Wasn't Jesus born in the middle of chaos, he asked, what with being in a manger and wise men running all around.

“The story of the first Christmas is the story of a series of completely unplanned, messy events—a surprise pregnancy, an unexpected journey that’s got to be made, a complete muddle over the hotel accommodation when you get there,” the archbishop wrote. “Not exactly a perfect holiday.” And that is a vital message, he said: “We try to plan all this stuff and stay in charge, and too often (especially with advertisers singing in our ears the whole time) we think that unless we can cook the perfect dinner, plan the perfect wedding, organize the perfect Christmas, we somehow don’t really count or we can’t hold our heads up.”

He closed: “I’m never sure whether to wish anyone a peaceful Christmas, because it hardly ever is. But I can wish you joy in the midst of the mess, and every blessing from the God of ordinary, untidy, surprising things.”

And so do I wish everyone joy and peace this Christmas Eve. Have Yourself a Very Messy Christmas and a Rumpled New Year!

## The Sound of Sleigh Bells

### December 25

I may not know much, but I can vouch for this: There is a Santa Claus. I personally know he really, truly exists.

Santa proved he existed when I was only eight. That's the night he gave me what I wished for most. That's the night he returned to me something precious I had lost. That's the night he made me believe forever in hope and love and the simple pleasures of life.

It's also the night he scared the wits out of my mother, my brother, and me.

The year was 1961. My family— mother Genelle, father Billy, and brother William—lived in a small South Carolina town, in a wooded neighborhood with only a few not-so-near neighbors.

In my small town, in my isolated neighborhood, there were never many friends around, and never much to do, except barreledown the steep, menacing road that we called Devil's Gorge, or wait in the summer for the ice-cream man, and, once he had melted away for the season, prepare for Santa's arrival.

By Thanksgiving, when Santa ho-ho-ho'd in the Macy's parade, I could hardly be contained. Every day was like riding a float in a long parade, with Santa at the end on the biggest float of all.

I would start writing letters to Santa to tell him what I wanted, and how life would end if I did not get a hula hoop or cotton-candy machine or G.I. Joes.

Christmas bliss followed Christmas bliss: Shopping at the five-and-dime with my mother, followed by a Coke and hot dog at the counter; watching the local Christmas parade, with its two marching bands; preparing for the school musical, *Mr. St. Nicholas*, and, finally, putting up our Christmas tree, always exactly two weeks before Christmas.

Each year we stood the tree in front of the fireplace, which, as in most Southern homes, was never used. They were showplaces, or hiding places for plants otherwise belonging in cemeteries, not to mention for various household goods the dog took there to stash.

My mother loved the conformity, but in the end my brother and I would turn the decorating event into chaos.

But in the end the chaotic night would give way to symmetry. Soon she would give up, and hot chocolate would crash the intimate party, insistent on company, followed not long after by a drifter Christmas carol or two.

For several years, I had a constant companion to help me with my Christmas devotions. His name was Little Green Martian. He was, as one might guess, from Mars, and he liked to be called Little Green, though the rest of the family said he was just a green plastic toy, an imaginary friend.

He wasn't imaginary to me. He shared my every Christmas thrill. He believed in Santa Claus like I did. We had common dreams, too, and sometimes we would become sad together and cry.

Funny thing, we always seemed to feel and believe and dream the same things. Little Green Martian was my best friend. He was always there, and I could count on him, especially at Christmas.

Finally, the holiday parade would round its final corners. Our relatives often gathered, and a Southern pre-Christmas feast awaited: Fried shrimp and yellow grits, heaping snow mounds of potato salad, sometimes fried chicken, with a delicious golden scald, and about five-million pounds of pound cake.

My grandmother and grandfather would arrive, he as ready as ever to conjure up a ghost story, and Uncle Johnny and Aunt Joan, and Great Aunt Katie, who claimed to speak in tongues, and Uncle Jimmy and Aunt Doris, and all the cousins, and more, until the house bulged along with our stomachs.

Of course we would tune the TV to Channel 5 in nearby Charleston, where weatherman Charlie Hall would interrupt programming every half-hour to give an update on Santa's whereabouts.

At one point, Charlie would boom: “The Air Force has just announced that Santa Claus has entered the United States. It won’t be long, so children of all ages should head to bed.”

To hear that Santa was on his way gave me goose bumps up and down my arms. My heart would race, but I was faster, saying goodnight and launching like a little green Martian into the universe beneath my covers.

I shared a room with my brother, who was four years older, and neither of us could ever sleep. We could hear our relatives leave, and my parents laughing and talking until they would retire and the house would lapse with my brother and me into anticipatory silence.

Never once did I try to sneak a peek. I was told by many—meaning, my parents—that if Santa saw you trying to look, he would never come back. I stayed put.

But I would lay there and listen. I would listen so hard. I wanted to hear the jingle of his sleigh bells, to see if they were like what I heard on TV. I was growing up in a place without snow or sleighs, and had never heard them. That was my secret wish—if I could not see Santa, I wanted to hear the sounds of his sleigh bells.

I never did, and at 4 a.m. we could take it no longer and race to the tree to see what delights were there.

The year 1961 was different, though. My brother had decided he no longer believed in Santa. From Thanksgiving on, he tormented me with it daily.

Plus, I was having a hard time adjusting in school, and soon I was in for an even harder time. One day I came home and could not find Little Green Martian anywhere. I looked everywhere, and then my family looked, too, in the obvious places like the piles of clothes on my bedroom floor, and in the obscure places, like in the fireplace and among its somber plants.

My mother at last explained that Little Green must have gone home to Mars. That must be the explanation, she said.

“But, mom, wouldn’t he say goodbye?” I hiccuped.

“I don’t know,” she said. “It must have been an emergency.”

I could accept that, and the holidays were as festive as ever, but Little Green's puzzling flight took something from me. Now I would have to listen not only for Santa but for my best friend, whom I knew was out there in the night sky.

Christmas Eve dawned gloomily. It was as if the day did not want to begin, and you could hear it spitting into the trees. The temperature was 35. A hard thick drizzle began to fall. The weather reports were dismal, and finally panicky.

The thermometer dipped below freezing by noon. Water surrendered to ice. The state patrol warned everyone to stay home. A major ice storm was on the way.

Just after dark, with trees falling around us, and my parents worrying that the next might come crashing into the house, the telephone rang. My Dad answered it. "I'll be right there," was all he said, but his face, as white as one of my grandfather's ghosts, told it all.

"Genelle, there's been a train derailment in Charleston," he said. "There are rail cars in the highway. I have to go."

When my mother is truly worried, she slumps in a chair, crosses her legs, and begins to swing her foot furiously. Furiously was an understatement now.

"Billy, it's Christmas Eve," she stammered. "You can't go. Nobody's on the roads. You'll get killed."

"I have to go," he said. "I'll call you to let you know I'm safe."

And soon enough he was gone.

Not much later, the phone went with him. And, as if they were lovers runaway lovers like the fork and the spoon, the power up and left with the phone, too, without so much as a flickering goodbye.

My mother slumped into the chair. There will be no call from your daddy tonight, she sobbed. My brother tried in vain to console her.

I worried what would become of Santa. If my father couldn't call, neither could Charlie Hall. There would be no tracking Santa this Christmas Eve.

My mother got up after a while—it was cold in the house—piled quilts on her bed and we all climbed in. None of us could sleep, but this Christmas Eve it was out of worry, not excitement.

Things slowly quieted down. The tree limbs, exhausted from their day battling ice, did not have the energy to break anymore; they simply sagged into silence. The sleet stopped, perhaps frozen in mid-air. The wind, hoarse from its day-long howling, lost its voice.

The silence was so deep in its magnitude that it set off explosions of fear and anxiety in my head. What if I never saw my Dad again? What if he was gone forever, like Little Green Martian?

And then I heard it. At about a quarter past three, I heard it, faintly at first, perhaps just a hint of tinniness, of movement in the air.

“What was that?” I whispered.

I heard it again. This time it was louder, a muffled crackling sound, almost a rustling, as if paper sheets were being crumpled.

“I hear it, too,” my brother yelled.

“Shush,” my mother said. “You two are loud enough to wake the dead. It's nothing but the ice in the leaves rubbing together. It's nothing. Be quiet.”

My mother could quiet her children, but she could not quiet what a second later became unmistakable: the sound of sleigh bells.

There was, in an instant, the timbre of wind chimes right above the house, soft jingling rings falling like a light, general snow upon the three of us. The muted had suddenly become loud; the dull, shimmering; and together the bells produced an overtone so rich and distinctive I can hear it today as vividly as then.

And then they were gone.

“It was Santa,” I said.

“It was Santa,” my brother said.

“It was not,” my mother told us. “It was a practical joke. It had to be.”

But who could play such a joke, above the house, on such a night, at such a time? There were no people, no lights, no cars, nothing but sleigh bells. My mother was as frightened as I had ever seen. But I knew my wish to hear Santa had just come true.

We lay in bed until the civil light broke, and then straggled into the living room. There, under the tree, was my hula hoop, my cotton candy machine, my GI Joes. We were happy, if still confused by what had happened in the sky above our house at a little past three in the morning.

Around seven, my father walked in, relief in his eyes. Everyone was safe, and there were hugs all around. We showed Mom and Dad the goodies Santa had left, and shared with him our sleigh bell story.

He shook his head.

“No, son,” he said. “It was the ice you heard. It had to be. There was ice everywhere, all over the roads.”

My mother said not a word.

I began to pick up around the tree, and play with the dog, who knocked down the funereal plant in the fireplace.

And that’s when I saw him. There, as if he had just awoken, was Little Green Martian sitting in the planter. I let out a blood-curdling shriek that stopped everybody cold.

“Look who Santa brought home?” I screamed. “Little Green!”

I was the happiest child ever. My mother and father and brother said the toy must somehow have gotten lost in the fireplace all those months, but I knew better. We had looked there. Nope, Santa

had surely guided him home and he had dropped down the chimney with the sound of the sleigh bells, one of the soft jangles or clangs or dings I had heard.

Later, the temperature rose, the roads cleared and my relatives arrived. One by one I showed them Little Green and told them my sleigh bell story. I must have told it 50 times. Everybody just smiled.

They were humoring me, I realized later, but many years after that, I asked my mother if she really knew what those bells were that night. She looked me in the eyes, and admitted she didn't know.

"Maybe it was Santa, after all," she said.

"No, mom," I told her, "not maybe. It was Santa."

What gifts did he bring? I can't say Santa that night brought my hula hoop or cotton candy machine or GI Joes.

But I know what he did bring. He brought presents of every-day simplicity, all wrapped up in holiday magic.

My home was full of gifts: Dad home safely, the toy I missed so much returned, playing with the dog, sharing laughter with my family and relatives.

All simple treasures that don't cost a penny, yet make even the poorest household rich. What Santa brings is a celebration of the good in all of us, and an affirmation that we are loved and can love.

He gives us what we already have. He glides over homes, and sprinkles them with the sound of sleigh bells, each jingle a different package of human sweetness. From such presents dreams are born, hope takes flight, and tomorrow soars.

So look around on Christmas, count your blessings, and don't tell me Santa doesn't exist. Oh, he exists all right.

Santa Claus exists.

## January Thaw

### January 1

It sits there on the bookshelf, its pages yellowed. I don't touch it much or read it ever, and the same goes for any of the various copies of it people have given me through the years.

Still, I.F. Stone's "In a Time of Torment" stays with me always. It is at the center of my work and thought; at least I try to make it so.

Mr. Stone was perhaps the greatest American journalist ever. Early on in his career he bolted from the mainstream media scene, so complicit with the government that he thought it was, and he and his wife published an independent newspaper from their New York apartment.

It quickly became a must read in important political circles. Mr. Stone was known for his biting opposition to Joseph McCarthy—he was a leftist but he was also a journalist first, and he dared to publish what the mainstream media would not—and in the end he was widely credited for exposing the lies of McCarthyism and bringing the tainted senator down.

"In a Time of Torment" was a collection of articles and essays from that newspaper, published in the mid-1960s. It was most surely a time of torment for the nation, but Mr. Stone set about to help us look for a way out of the bleakness.

He asked simply, Where do we go from here?

It might be a good question for all of us to ask on the first day of a year, as anticipate a January thaw, a chance to stir outside and embark on new adventures. Where will we go? Will we travel the same paths?

Stone analyzed those question relentlessly from all the angles of all the issues, from the civil rights struggle to the Vietnam War, and he framed an important national dialogue using three critical journalistic elements as his foundation.

The first was memory, his friend Murray Kempton observed: “Mr. Stone always remembers the official lie of last month which is contradicted by the official lie of today.” Stone never trusted the media or the government, and his relentless memory of what they had said the week before often exposed them, and forced the establishment media to follow along.

Second, he was able to observe the little details that were important but that often went unnoticed—the little pockets of poverty nestled in a nation of plenty, a soldier’s nervous breakdown after returning home from Vietnam, the anguish on a black child’s face as the child integrates a Southern school and is taunted and beaten by an overwhelming majority while their teachers look the other way.

He exposed these and more; he reported the facts in relentless fashion, using ruthless character analysis and impeccable investigation of documents.

He was relentless and ruthless because he was angry. And he was angry because he had compassion. He could feel the hunger of poverty, the despair of war, the pain of discrimination—the torment of his time.

But Stone possessed a third gift: the talent of historical imagination. That is, he could reduce the world to its most fundamental building blocks, the relationships among us all, and he could see the possibilities when those relationships were allowed to develop.

He knew the intrinsic human bond between the poor, the soldiers, African-Americans, and what they could accomplish if their hands could ever reach out and touch the others. If they could soldier on together, they could find their way around corners of darkness to a decent, if not outright fairy-tale, existence.

He knew that individual relationships, brought together and united through compassion one for the other, could expose one by one the lies of big government and big corporations and the military industrial complex, and so Stone made it his life-long journey to help those relationships grow, and the people they linked together prosper.

By the time I moved to New York in the 1970s, Mr. Stone’s prime time had come and gone. But he had a legion of loyal followers, and I was especially fortunate to become best friends with one.

My companion Samantha was as fiery a young journalist as they came, five years older than me. She possessed a profound intelligence, a keen instinct about where to look for facts, a wicked wit, a scathing tongue, and she, like Stone, did not suffer fools very well, or the establishment either, for that matter.

Everywhere she went she wore a backpack and in it she carried the vital tools of her trade: her pens and her notebooks, mostly, and that thick volume, its pages not so yellowed then, “In a Time of Torment.”

Everywhere she went, that book went. On Saturdays she volunteered at a homeless shelter and soup kitchen on the Lower East Side, and I.F. Stone—at least his book—volunteered with her.

She would come home from those soup-kitchen experiences and cry. She cried because she felt compassion for the hungry and the homeless, and then she would become angry that there were any hungry or homeless at all, and she would start writing, with I.F. Stone by her side.

By day, as a journalist, she roamed crumbling tenements and targeted criminal slumlords, and I feared for her safety. But everywhere she went, I.F. Stone took her there. They soldiered on together, and it became her favorite phrase.

“Why are we doing this, Sammie?” I would ask.

“Don’t worry,” she would reply, smiling widely. “We’re soldiering on.”

I worried.

One day, in early June—a very, very hot June afternoon in New York City—Samantha and myself and old I.F., we decided to soldier on to a quite different place: our favorite bar.

It sat in Greenwich Village, on Bleecker Street, a ramshackle place, with sawdust on the floor, and you just threw the peanut shells down there, too. A folk band of three hippies—called Fresh Air, what else?—played every night. We loved to sit there and eat peanuts and drink beer and listen to Fresh Air.

So we sweated and straggled our way in the heat and humidity toward Bleecker Street, toward what we hoped would be a decent and at least cooler evening.

What occurred was a fairy tale instead, one of the strangest things I have ever experienced, still to this day—one of my favorite stories of New York.

We rounded the corner onto Bleecker and ran into, well, a fairly steady snow. We literally had walked into a winter wonderland. As far as we could see down Bleecker, snow covered cars and the street and the sidewalks, maybe four or five inches.

People bundled up in winter coats hurried along, carrying packages and wrapped presents, as if it were Christmas! We just stood and stared, wide-eyed and amazed.

I was ready to bend down and pick up some snow to hurl Samantha's way, when a young woman approached us, nicely but firmly, "Excuse me, folks, but could you guys cross the street. You're in our scene."

Yup, they were filming a movie. It was plastic snow. But it was amazing how real it all looked. I almost wanted a jacket. We obliged and crossed, and the woman let us scurry a half-block to the bar, where everyone could look out the windows and see the snow coming down and watch merry shoppers hustling by to their loved ones.

Suddenly Samantha was beaming at me, one of her wide grins—the beam of her own gift, I now know, of historical imagination. She could sense what the night could become, with just a little work.

So off she went, whispering to the owner, whispering to the bartender, whispering to the band. She returned to the table and pronounced happily, "We're turning tonight into Christmas Eve."

I wanted to ask, "Why are we doing this, Sammie?" But I knew better.

And so they went to work. The air conditioner was blasted, the owner lit a fire in the fireplace, the band sang Christmas carols. For that matter, everybody else did, too. Except Samantha, that is. She was too busy, traveling from table to table to table, doing God knows what, I thought.

Later I found out what. She was collecting Christmas donations for the shelter and the kitchen, and she was doing quite well. She had grabbed a hat from somebody, and the hat was full. We didn't know it until we counted it later, but she collected more than \$2,000 that evening.

Slowly, like a fairy tale coming inexorably to its end, the night melted away. The snow stopped. The passersby passed by no more. The caroling became ever fainter, and it was finally time to say goodnight.

When we left the bar – Samantha decided to just put the hat on her head in the dangerous city— there was one more marvel to be had. Not a snowflake was left. Not a single one. Anywhere. It was as if none of it had ever happened. It was as if we had stepped through some tiny crack in the universe and wandered ahead through time for a few months before being shown the way politely back. Whatever it was, Samantha had taken advantage of it, found a little community in a corner of the cosmos, and got them to hold hands, at least figuratively, for hours. And when she did, good intentions showed through. Good deeds were done.

Looking at the empty, almost sterile street, I could only ask her: “What the hell was tonight all about?”

“Well, brother,” Samantha answered, “this is what I call really soldiering on.”

And she pumped her fist high into the air. The next day she soldiered the money right on over to the shelter, to try alleviate suffering for at least a few in their time of torment.

Today, we Americans live in another time of torment, in a time of emotional dispossession, of financial crisis and recession, of unemployment and growing poverty, of war and genocide and terror abroad.

It might, this holiday season, seem like we don't have a lot to be thankful for.

But of course we do. We've got each other, our families and friends to be thankful for, those fundamental building blocks that, with memory and detail and historical imagination about what these relationships can mean to our lives and to the lives of others, surely extend exponentially, friend to friend to friend, into that strong concatenation of relationships we call a nation.

Give thanks for each one of them, for there is no life without them. You cannot love if there is no one to love. You cannot feel compassion if there is no one to feel compassion for. You cannot laugh if there is no one to make you laugh. You cannot cry if you do not risk putting someone there who might make you cry.

When we can see from one end of the line of our relationships to the other, when we can feel the intrinsic human bond among today's emotionally dispossessed, today's soldiers, today's poor—then we shall truly be making progress.

All those eyes looking together for the truth cannot help but expose official lies. All those eyes cannot help but round a corner of our future and find a snow-covered Bleecker Street before them, a fairy tale replete with all the promises of a festive Christmas.

They can help us answer the question: Where do we go from here?

Someone I knew once would say, 'We must just soldier on.' I happen to know she still is. For the rest of us, I merely say, happy holidays and let's give thanks for the richness of the relationships we all have in our lives.

That's where hope starts. That's where the January thaw begins.