

The Book

Smuggler's Den

November
2019

Heartwarming
Holiday Short Stories

This Month's
BOOK

RECOMMENDATION

What better book to read than, Kristen Hannah's *Winter Garden* this time of year? Read the whole review inside!

Poetry
at its
finest!



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Winter Garden by Kristen Hannah, Reviewed by Dani Watkins

Letter from the Editor

Gratitude is the inward feeling of kindness received. Thankfulness is the natural impulse to express that feeling. Thanksgiving is the following of that impulse. - Henry Van Dyke

I absolutely enjoy Thanksgiving! I love to cook, but I am always off the hook for hosting the actual event. Getting a whiff of that first smell of turkey and sides as I walk up to the ring the doorbell is the best. I could go on and on about the food, but the best part of all is getting to be around family.

Someone told me a funny story about their epic nontraditional Thanksgiving. It was just the two of them that one year, a husband and wife. They decided to have a bit of fun and go to the desert to enjoy Thanksgiving there. The couple hopped in the car to drive to the Airbnb they reserved. Once there, they figured they could cook themselves a two-person Thanksgiving Day feast with a turkey and sides. The couple packed up their car with a few snacks, some grapes, and cheeses. Along the way, they stopped for a bit to stretch their legs, then carried on with their journey. As they got into town, and the sun was setting, they knew they had to find a store to pick up supplies for their dinner. But when they got there, all of the stores had already closed!

Bummed, they headed back to their Airbnb and had a Thanksgiving feast of grapes and cheeses. I thought how sad that must have been, but my friend laughed. She explained that even though they didn't get the traditional turkey dinner, it taught her that it doesn't matter. All that mattered was the two of them were together, safe, healthy, and enjoying the desert air.

I am sure you've heard this about a thousand times already but I'm going to ask it again, "Where did this year go!? How is it already Thanksgiving!" Something I have learned this year is to stay in the moment and be grateful for what is going on. So let's not bother to think about how we got to be where we are, and get to some reading.

Happy Thanksgiving!

Dani Watkins

Dani Watkins

Editor-In-Chief, Book Smuggler's Den Literary Magazine

Late Autumn on a Maine Lake

By Noelle Flewelling Carle

You two should be gone by now.
The wind has turned and pushes from the north
with a hint
of frozen days
and dark mysterious nights.
The air is shot through with leaves
like clumsy arrows lazily loosed.

You should go before the
water stills and holds you,
before the trees are bare,
before the grey water
reflects the pewter sky.

Oh, I know...
I know why
you are still here.
It is this air,
laden with
pine, maple, cedar, water,
the sounds of you that haunt these shores.

It is this water, these silent
long nights,
these very skies
that hold you.
But...
you two should be gone by now.

The Gift

By Sonia Hawkins

Beyond the cracked sidewalk, and the telephone pole with layers of flyers in a rainbow of colors, and the patch of dry brown grass there stood a ten-foot-high concrete block wall, caked with dozens of coats of paint. There was a small shrine at the foot of it, with burnt-out candles and dead flowers and a few soggy teddy bears. One word of graffiti-filled the wall, red letters on a gold background: Rejoice!

Jeremy's breath filled the air with wispy clouds as he walked quietly up to the shrine. People hustled past tightly gripping colorfully wrapped gifts, laughter and excitement filled the air. 'Twas the season after all. When the birth of Christ is to be celebrated. They had no time for the remembrance of things lost. Being Christmas eve, New York was bustling with anticipation of waking up to gifts neatly wrapped under well-decorated trees and stockings stuffed with treats.

His light hazel eyes narrowed in sorrow as Jeremy carefully peeled up the soggy missing person flyer closest to him on the telephone pole. The picture of a young woman with a cheeky smile stared back at him. Silently, he bowed his head, messy chestnut hair covered his eyes as a silent prayer for those lost in the night, alone and cold and broken filled his mind.

Opening his eyes he was greeted by an odd scene, laying in the gutter was a small box. It glistened in sunlight with metallic gold wrapping paper and a bright red bow. Jeremy frowned with concern as he hesitantly picked it up for closer examination, maybe it had a name on it? The concern turned to confusion with the lack of any label or name on the expensive-looking present. What was he to do? Wait for the owner to show up I guess. Jeremy thought as he sat on his haunches, hunkering down for a long wait.

A tug on his coat arm started Jeremy out of his hazy thoughts. Round blue eyes greeted him from under a black toque. Bits of blonde hair poked through the toque covering the little boy's well-bundled shoulders. "Did you find that mister?" inquired the boy. With a small chuckle, Jeremy held out the gift for the little boy to examine. "Is it yours?" He asked with amusement. "no" stated the boy with a smile. "but I know who it belongs too!" he laughed.

Overhearing the conversation, a poor ragged-looking elderly man contemplated. "I have no money for a meal let alone gifts...I could just ask for it. Perhaps they would be kind and give it to me?" The old man picked up his walking stick and pushed through the crowd towards the two. "Would either of you happen to have anything to give?" Asked the old man with a smile.

Jeremy fished in his pocket and pulled out a ten-dollar note. He handed it to the disappointed man. "Here! Buy yourself a nice meal!" He smiled, but the man scowled. "I heard you found that gift? Why not give that instead?" the man inquired. "Because it belongs to someone else, I'm not going to give it to anyone but the owner!" stated Jeremy flatly. "Why not?" Blurted the man angrily "Because that's as good as stealing." He huffed as he turned back to the little boy who was now watching him intently. "Besides, we know who it belongs to don't we?" He laughed.

"Aren't you at least curious about what's inside?" Debated the man. Jeremy considered his answer. "yes but it doesn't belong to me."

The elderly man left quietly contemplating the situation as a well-dressed man walked by. Jeremy stood up, sure it was the owner of the gift he pulled it out from under his arm. "ahh" Said the well dressed man, "Nice gift!" laughed the man "Is it yours?" asked Jeremy with a tired sigh it had been over an hour since the mysterious package had appeared, it was starting to get late.

After a small silence, the man's face turned serious. "I'll pay you for that! A surprise gift might do me some good!" Jeremy looked curiously at the man, doesn't he have enough money to buy himself a gift? What's with all the attention the box was getting? "No sorry, I'm not interested in selling it.." He stated in a tired and quite annoyed voice. "fine, it was just an offer." The man stated shortly as he smiled a bitter smile and walked away.

Jeremy stared down at the package in frustration, this was getting ridiculous. Weary eyed he looked through the large skyscrapers down the road, the sun was setting. Well, it's not like the person, whoever they were, was missing the gift. Jeremy thought as his gaze moved back to the package. Maybe I could just re-wrap it afterward? Nobody would know, and I've earned it I think.

The little boy stared intently at Jeremy, his eyes sharp and narrowed that sent shivers down his spine. "Hey, you think you could go to the coffee shop around the corner and get me a hot chocolate? Here get yourself one too!" He said with a forced smile. "Sure." stated the little boy flatly. The boy didn't look at Jeremy as he took the money out of his hand and ran towards the corner. Licking his lips, Jeremy waited for the edge of the boys' coat to disappear around the corner before looking down again at the gift. The gift glistened gold in the light of the street lamps that now filled the streets with a dull orange glow. Scanning the area, an empty alley with two garbage cans caught his eye.

Walking quickly, that turned into a small trot down the alley. Jeremy stood in the edge of the light, just out of sight of the pole. Daring only a glance at the pole before starting his unwrapping. The gift only had two pieces of tape on each corner, easy to unwrap, he thought. The box was plain cardboard underneath. Carefully opening the lid Jeremy held his breath with anticipation. A gust of strong wind blew through the alley as a flash of light filled the whole area, blinding Jeremy and knocking him to the ground with an unseen force.

Groaning Jeremy pulled himself to his knees. "what have you done?" came a sharp angry voice. Jeremy looked up to see the little boy, his face looked aged in a strange worn way. youthful yet with eyes sharp and aware. he stood firmly and confidently at the entrance of the ally holding two steaming paper cups.

"What did you do?" he asked again in a voice that seemed far too adult for his age. " So I opened the package, so what?" laughed Jeremy, "SO WHAT?! OVER 2000 YEARS OF PLANNING AND YOU JUST HAD TO OPEN IT! OF ALL THE SELFISH..." "Wait what?!" Jeremy looked shocked at the little boy who was now pacing back and forth muttering. "Ok, ok, we can fix this,

we just have to remind the people, we just have to show them.." The boy looked excited at him "And you're going to help me!" "What are you talking about? Remind them of what? Come on! It was just a little package, nobody is going to miss.." The boy quickly cut him off. "Remind them that it's Christmas, Remind them what that means, Remind them that Christ is why we celebrate!"

Jeremy laughed, "Why would we need to do that?" smiled Jeremy as he ruffled the boy's hair through his toque. "Don't patronize me!" The boy frowned. "That box has been passed down from each Christmas angel to the next. To test mankind. It was my turn, if anyone gives away, sells or opens the box not only do I fail my final angel exam! But mankind will no longer remember who Christ is, or what Christmas is about!" He stared at the little boy, mouth gaping open in disbelief.

"You're crazy!" He stated as he pulled himself to his feet and started dusting himself off. "Oh really?" The little boy's eyes narrowed sharply, "Go ahead, ask anyone, ask anyone who Christ is and what Christmas is!" Jeremy shook his head in disbelief with a small smile as he walked wearily out of the alley. This kid sure has an imagination he thought to himself.

Glancing into the street, the Christmas lights all hung with care, dim-lit stores with neatly wrapped presents in their displays lined the street. "See? still Christmas eve!" "But.." "Now it's already dark! Shouldn't you be heading home?" "But!" "No buts!" Jeremy glanced at his watch before exclaiming " Wow! it's already 9.30 pm!" I have to go! You take care kid, and make sure to get home safe!" Jeremy didn't look at the boy as he ran towards the corner. His mind racing with things left to be done before Christmas day.

The little boy stared longingly after Jeremy before quietly walking back into the alley. He gingerly crouching down to pick up the empty cardboard box and wrapping paper and gently stuck it into his coat. "What am I gonna do?" The worried boy whispered to himself as tears rolled down his cheeks and hit the frosty earth.

Walking the empty streets the boy glanced through the store display windows. "How can I fix this on my own?" He wondered intensely. Just then a particular display caught his eye. It had a giant Santa sitting in the chair, surrounded by gifts. the song Sleigh Bells rang quietly from the display. "That's it!" laughed the boy. "Song! people always remember Christmas with music!"

Jeremy felt a pang of guilt at leaving the little boy behind. But he hadn't even gotten all the gifts on his list yet! He bolted down the road towards the jewelry store, women like jewelry right? His lungs felt like they were going to explode. Turning into the store too quickly he rushed the door only to bounce back and hit the concrete with a thud.

It's only 9.30 pm on Christmas eve! This store had never been closed this early on Christmas eve before! looking around to see if anyone had noticed his embarrassing lapse of judgment his eyes narrowed in confusion as people passed by, something was off. But he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

A little girl stared at the Christmas display in the toy store window with amazement. "Mommy, what's that?" Asked the girl curiously. "I don't know sweetie, probably just another sale gimmick, common, you've got school in the morning and it's late!" Jeremy looked surprised at what the little girl was pointing at, a Christmas tree in the window with a little wooden train set circling it.

A horrible feeling grew in the pit of his stomach as he gathered himself off the sidewalk. It couldn't be? Could it? Jeremy's eyes darted back and forth. The obvious confusion and curiosity filled the air as people wandered the streets aimlessly, inquiring about the bright decorations and lights. "Merry Christmas?" He voiced to a passerby in a quivering voice. "Merry what? What's that?"

Jeremy stood frozen, his worst fear realized. Eyes wide as he watched the cities workers start to dismantle the giant Christmas tree in the city center. "What the heck they put this thing up for again?" "I don't know jack, you don't know jack, we don't get paid enough to know jack." Stated the older worker flatly. "Hey, I'm jack!" "Exactly we don't get paid to chit chat, now get back to work!"

The fear in Jeremy's eyes quickly turned to a hard determination as he turned and bolted back down the road towards the alley. He wondered the streets all throughout the night without luck. The boy was gone. "Where did that kid go?" He sighed as he turned another corner. Bumping quite suddenly into the man in the back of the crowd. Something big was happening in the center of town. Jeremy stood curiously along with the crowd to see what the commotion was about.

The kid got up onto a milk crate and raised his hand. A murmur went through the crowd and then it fell silent, except for a few people shouting words of encouragement at him. The kid acknowledged them with a nod and a shy smile. In the full light of the day, he looked less angry and more beautiful. He waited until people stopped shouting. A siren could be heard, maybe five or ten blocks away. The kid raised the bullhorn, pressed the button, and began to speak.

"Attention to the dear people of New York! I'd like to wish you a Merry Christmas! I know you don't remember what that is but I shall serenade you in song to remind you!" The little boy cleared his throat then began a horrendous recount of "I wish you a Merry Christmas." The crowd listened in horror at the off-key screeching sound the little boy was belting out. Some covered their ears as a tomato flew past hitting the wall behind the boy. "HEY!" he yelled at the crowd. "I'm a Christmas angel! not a choir angel! I'm doing the best I..!" He yelped as Jeremy grabbed the little boy by the arm, pulling him off the milk crate and started dragging him into the nearest alley.

The boy struggled against Jeremy's tight grip as he was hastily dragged into the alley. "Wha?" The boy stated stunned " You know I've been looking for you all night? How did you know that everyone would forget Christmas?" "I told you already!" stated the little angel suspiciously. "I don't really trust humans, heard bad things.." "Oh?" Jeremy shifted his weight uncomfortably. "What about you? Aren't you supposed to have wings?" The little angel puffed out his chest in indignation before striking an odd pose similar to a muscle man flexing. "Nope guess I don't get wings, BECAUSE YOU OPENED THE BOX!" "Ok ok we're getting distracted, how do we fix

this?" Asked Jeremy in a quiet serious voice. "Well, I was told we have to remind people of Christmas." Jeremy thought for a minute. That didn't sound right to him but he shrugged it off, the little angel was more in the know than him. "Got any ideas on how we're going to do that?" He shrugged "As a matter of fact I do!" the little angel smiled as he grabbed Jeremy's hand and led him back out the alleyway.

The little angel led him through the streets with an inhuman speed that left him disorientated and dazed. Eventually, they stopped, leaving him to catch his breath, the little angel entered the shopping mall. After a few seconds of heavy breathing and holding his knees, Jeremy shook his head wearily as he trotted up after the little angel. "What are we doing here?" "Looking for a Christmas star! Nobody could forget that! It's the best thing ever!" Laughed the little boy as he trotted towards the nearest store. Alas, no star could be found among the many trees toppers, angels, candles, the neon representations of stars seemed to disgust the little angel. "No wonder this world can't remember Christmas! All these stars are too small!" He stated crossly. Jeremy smiled a little bit at that. "Well if they hadn't taken down the tree in the center of town, you would've seen the biggest one we have!" That made the little angel stop and stare sadly at the ground. "No, it wouldn't have been..." He stated sadly as he walked quietly away.

Jeremy was filled with an odd mixture of feelings. What did the little angel mean? "Come with me." The small angel stated with a smile. "I need to put in a request." "A request?" "For the biggest Christmas star!" Jeremy wondered curiously after the little angel as he walked towards the restrooms. What did the little angel mean? To put a request in?

The restrooms, an odd place to communicate with heaven he thought to himself. "Not as odd as you would think" Laughed the little angel making him very uncomfortable. Can he read minds? The little angel slowly knelt in front of the sink and prayed a powerful prayer. "Lord, these people have lost everything. Please give them the star, the light of the world mirrored in the beauty created by you. Amen" "That was it?" He stood a bit stunned, a prayer? "Angels pray to communicate with heaven too? "A small sob out of one of the stalls surprised them both. "That was beautiful!" Came the voice from behind the door. Thinking quickly Jeremy grabbed the angel's arm and ran out the door just as the man came out from behind the door. "Now that's what Christmas is about!" The middle-aged man wiped the tears from his eyes as he looked to see who had said the prayer. Finding no one he washed his hands and left.

Jeremy and the little angel laughed as they exited the shopping center. They looked up to see everyone in the streets, cell phones out, recording and watching the amazing scene. A beautiful star shone brightly in the sky in broad daylight! The people in the streets seemed entertained by the light, but nothing more.

Glancing over at the little angel, worry-filled his eyes and the small frown across his little face. "They don't understand..." He stated in disappointment. Jeremy put his hand on the little angel's shoulder "We'll figure it out, but maybe a different approach?" "Like what? They just don't get it!" The little angel said sharply. "You don't build a house from the roof down, maybe start with the foundation?" The little angel looked with extreme attentiveness at Jeremy "what did you

have in mind?" "come with me," Jeremy said as he took the angel's little hand and led him through the streets towards his apartment.

Jeremy wearily poured another cup of coffee with a heavy sigh. He walked carrying the two cups into the living room. The little angel was carefully writing something on a piece of printer paper, a stack piled high on either side of him on the living room floor, paper strewn all over the floor. "I can't seem to figure out what needs to be said and what doesn't. Ok, how does this sound? Jesus is the light of the world, the only begotten son of God. Prophesied to save the world through the remission of sin." The little angel started excitedly. Jeremy sat heavily in the recliner. He had no idea how this little angel had so much energy left. "Sounds good to me." He said with a yawn.

"It's done!" laughed the little angel. Jeremy started awake. "Wha?" Little hands trembling the small angel ran his hand down the roughly bound book before hesitantly handing it over to Jeremy for closer inspection. Looking closer, he noticed how complex the concepts he had included in the book were. Not the average Christmas story, but the drawings included were obviously done by a child, stick men, and mismatched colors.

Rubbing his forehead with concern Jeremy didn't know how to approach the subject. "It's good right?" smiled the little angel. "Yeah, yeah it's good." He didn't have the heart to tell him most will not be able to grasp what he'd written, and the drawings were difficult to decipher. He'd obviously spent a long time creating it. Besides it was the best idea they had had so far.

"There's just one last thing to do." The little angel smiled as he snapped his fingers and a dove appeared. "Whoa!" Gasp'd Jeremy in surprise. "That's nothing! Wait till you see what it can do!" He stared in amazement as the little angel cooed like a dove and the dove answered. "Having a right royal conversation there?" His eyebrows raised in curiosity as the dove hastily picked up the book with its little red feet and flew out the open living room window. "What's it doing?" Inquired Jeremy. "He's delivering the present!" Laughed the little angel with clear excitement. "All we have to do now is wait!" The little angel whispered as he sat hastily cross-legged on the floor, staring at the window with powerful intensity. "To everyone in the world?" Jeremy asked skeptically. "Oh, ye of little faith!" Smiled the little angel as he continued to stare motionless out the window.

They waited, shifting from one room to the other. Making cups of coffee and hot chocolate. The little angel never seemed to lose patience. Jeremy, however, was getting antsy. "What if it doesn't work?" He asked clearly concerned. "It will, it has to!" stressed the little angel. There was a long silence. Only broken by the tick-tock of the clock, further pressing the reality that time was running out.

"What happens at midnight?" Jeremy finally asked. "The world loses its most precious gift, its hope for a future! The understanding of Christ's birth does more than you realize. It's a symbol that heaven believes there is something worth fighting for here! That Light can exist in the darkest places, whether the gutter or prison cell. For the addict, thief or murderer, there can be a hope beyond the darkness that encompasses them. That they don't stand alone in the darkest

recesses of the mind, body or soul.” The little angel’s voice quivered as tears streamed down his face. Jeremy's heart was in his throat as he quietly knelt down and embraced the sobbing little angel.

Unknown to Jeremy and the little angel the dove had successfully delivered the book, and each time it did, another would appear in its little feet. Moving unnaturally fast The bird tirelessly delivered the book to every mailbox, street corner and governing office in the world. Tired from its venture it lay resting in an apple tree in Scotland. Its work done, it had earned the rest.

Noticing right away, people had taken the book seriously. The news spread quickly of the mysterious book across social media and news outlets around the world. People had started reading it. As predicted very few understood the meaning of it. But those that did spread the knowledge of it's meaning far and wide. But in all this commotion, something was still missing, Something important.

As the elderly round man faced the cameras, he took a deep breath. He remembered what Christmas was about since the encounter in the shopping mall bathroom. He stood with the world’s full attention as he explained the book’s tale as the real story of Lord Jesus Christ’s birth. Only to be mocked and laughed off camera.

Jeremy frowned in disgust. The little angel sat huddled in the corner of the room facing the wall as Jeremy flicked through the news channels. Every headline was about the mysterious book. The man from the bathrooms case was not the first person to be laughed at. Anyone who accepted the man’s message was instantly shut down. To them, it was just a storybook, nothing more.

Jeremy let out a heavy sigh before turning off the TV. He quietly walked over to the corner where the little boy was sitting. Glancing up at the clock he squinted to read it. 11.50 pm, they had 10 minutes before the reality of what God had done for them was lost forever. Sitting facing the wall with the little angel the reality of this finally hit Jeremy's heart.

The tears came in waves, between the muffled cries. Jeremy saw the little angel staring at him, a deadness was in his bright blue eyes that he thought should never be in a child's face. Looking down at his hands Jeremy realized he had been the one who had done this. And all this time he had been expecting this small angel child to fix it for him.

Realizing this, a fire built in Jeremy's stomach made it's way up his throat and he started to pray. “I come before you oh lord as a sinner, I ask that you do not look upon my sins, iniquities, and shortcomings, but upon the blood of your son Lord Jesus Christ. Whos sacrifice allows me to stand before your throne. I ask oh lord that you carry through my voice to the people of the world.” The little angel looked sharply at Jeremy. Jeremy, focused, continued “ People of the world. Jesus died for your sins. Can any of you say you've lived a life without regret, Pain or suffering? The book you received today was about the child of God who stood his ground and against all odds made a way through this mess we call life to give you a hope and future!” Jeremy's voice broke “So today I'm asking you, believe! If not for your sake, for your children!

What's better? A world full to the brim with only darkness? Or the beauty of a candlelit by another? Give Christ a chance! And you'll see, he can heal your hurt, he can wash away your regrets, he can console you while you're suffering!" Jeremy couldn't take it. Breaking down into tears again. The little angel staring at him attentively now. He quietly and gently placed his little hand in Jeremy's and closed his eyes. "Lord, I stand in agreement with this man, and if any of you out there wish too, stand in agreement with us. Together we can be the salt of the earth and a light in the darkness, lighting each others candles until the Lord returns. In Jesus Name amen" the little angel's eyes could not be seen. But the meek smile on his face said it all.

Reaching over the angel gave Jeremy the biggest hug, squeezing as tightly as he could muster. "5 minutes till midnight" He heard the little angel say through Jeremy's crying whimpers. He hadn't known what he had, till it was gone. No more light in the world? No more hope of a future beyond the suffering most now know? What kind of world will that be? One of darkness and despair.

As the world turns there are many mysterious things that can happen. But none so much as a spark of faith in the heart of any man, woman, or child. A single prayer can move mountains realized the paramedic, fighting for a life next to the damaged car door. "I stand in agreement" he whispered as he reached into the flipped car to grab the woman's hand. "I stand in agreement" stated the lawyer as he walked into the courtroom to try and free the innocent man. "I stand in agreement" prayed the inmate in a dark isolation cell. "I stand in agreement," cried the little girl in defiance as she begged on the street corner.

Jeremy finally let go of the little angel. It was 1 minute to midnight. "I guess this is it.." he calmly stated with bitterness. "yeah I guess" stated the little angel with curiosity. "Why did you pray like that?" he asked inquisitively. "I guess because it was what I needed to hear," Jeremy said a little embarrassed. Jeremy realized he hadn't prayed since this started. He wasn't sure what rose up inside of him to make him pray but he felt it needed to be done.

3.2.1 midnight struck. A loud sound could be heard throughout the entire earth. It started off small like a whistle. Soon the sound gained definition and traction. It was the sound of voices singing! A million voices singing together in harmony! Joy to the world filled the air in every country, nation, and continent.

Jeremy and the little angel looked at each other in amazement. "We did it? WE DID IT!" Jeremy laughed as the little angel started dancing around the room. "Joy to the world!" laughed the little angel. "Yes you did." spoke a strange male voice. Jeremy and the little angel looked towards the voice. There stood an angel in white robes. With long golden wings. "Time to go." his mouth curled in a small gentle smile. "I guess this is goodbye?" Jeremy couldn't help as his voice cracked in disappointment. "I didn't catch your name.." Jeremy realized. "oh, laughed the little angel as he stood with the larger angel. White light started filling the room, emanating from the angel's bodies. The faint outline of wings could be seen forming on the child angels back. "My name is Trumpet." The light-filled the room and Jeremy opened his eyes to an empty living room. "Thank you Trumpet," he whispered as he turned to get ready for bed. This truly was a Christmas to remember.

Some things should never be forgotten or lost...

Come with Me to the Old House

By Marie Lamb

Carrying cold frosted air, in splinters
tiny silver knives in air, stabbing
coming through gaps in shoelaces
walking along the road
back to the old farmhouse.
Icicles hanging sharp in drops
from the edges of the roof
their aim set by gravity
and mine set by warmth
I try hard not to disturb their deadly teeth.

Arrowing towards home
each step rocking into the next
avoiding the holes in the road
one two three four
each step fighting the hard pressure of
the gales between the windbreaks.

It is the game we play
every October and November wind
pushing us hard across the fields
pulling the air from our lungs
and taunting us, always
with months more to come.
Arriving, winded,
thin cloth on metal handle
to keep the skin from freezing to metal
pushing, shoving, breaking ice
convincing the frozen door open
to be safe from the wind's fierce bite.
Fingers fumbling with the old wick
and the shiny plastic lighter
able to bring light to ancients
and illumination
to books and photos of my ancestors
a time capsule from another age.
Green Lantern, Dracula's daughter and Dora Deane.
Knees to the stoveplate, newspaper and kindling
bit by bit catching to become embers
The half hewn squares of logs are cut
to fit within this small lion's mouth

of blaze and consumption.
To feed the beast and not get burned.

Mittens searing on the rack, drop by drop
to be rescued in a moment to clip to the line
stretched across the ceiling,
the same way the children who came before
dried their hats and gloves and scarves
and now only mine.
In the back kitchen I set the electric pot to working
boiling water for a hot drink
to warm my fingers at the desk.
Eventually the day will warm some,
come out of its icy fortress
by holding the sun to her zenith,
but for now, there is coffee.

Glimmers brighten the room,
lantern and the edges of the barrel stove door
begin chasing the shadows away.
The weak light of the single kitchen bulb is not enough
so I sit here by the brightening window
lantern beside me, bridging two lights into one.
Coffee and shelter have done what they can.
And time with them will do the rest.
Slowly, the cold still shivering in the meat of my legs
begins to seep away and gather back my warmth.
A thick quilt in the chair holds in what it will
and the barrel emanates a wave function of
infra-red across the room to envelop me in it's hold.

I am once again satisfied,
to sit with my thoughts, pen to paper
making warm holes in the window glass with my breath
tracing dark lines on white paper, curls and dotted i's,
somber thoughts by firelight while Winter lies frozen
Grateful the sleeping earth has not caught me yet.

A Christmas Homecoming

By Trisha McKee

Ruby slowly moved the box to the edge of the shelf, tipping it carefully so that it leaned against her hands. Once she had a good hold on it, she coaxed it down further until she was able to properly grip and carry it into the living room.

And she sighed when she opened the box. More Christmas decorations. She tried not to see the items, tried to make it one big blur of silver and red and green. She did not want to remember, especially any good times.

So Ruby set the box in the junk pile. That was the pile she planned on tossing without picking through.

By lunchtime, she was filthy and exhausted. As she looked around the rusty, sagging trailer, she mused at the junk her mother had accumulated through the years. The basement was full of boxes and miscellaneous items.

Thinking of her mother made any remaining energy whoosh out of Ruby's body, and she stumbled backward, falling into a ratty chair that leaned precariously to the side. She knew her mother, she should have been prepared. She should have braced herself against any emotions, especially after not speaking to her for ten years.

Just as she shut her eyes for a rest, a pounding on the door cut through any relaxed state she had been able to achieve. Struggling out of the chair, she remembered the buyer of this property was stopping to go over the timeline and last-minute details.

“Sorry, this place is a mess-” She swung open the door with a mouthful of apologies, but they got swallowed mid-sentence when Ruby was face-to-face with the one thing that almost kept her from coming back. The one person representing the shame she carried around daily.

Mitchell.

Ruby sucked in her breath, feeling as if she had been struck. She had planned to drive out of town for any essentials just to avoid this. But there he was, right at her front door. She had no right to shut the door and close out anything he had to say. If he was there to yell and accuse and demand, she would have to stand and endure it. She brought this moment on ten years ago.

Mitchell disarmed her with his grin, and she was suddenly swept back all those years ago, being a teenager and falling into that gaze, being stunned by that grin. “Ruby! You look amazing. Wow. I knew you'd look good. But” His gaze softened, and she realized he was being honest.

Self-consciously, she touched her newly cut hair, styled into a shoulder-length bob and given highlights. “Thank you. You...” What could she say? He looked amazing. The same except a few lines around his eyes that whispered of his escape from boyhood, the curves framing the corners of his mouth that tattled about the hardships.

But his dark brown hair still fell into those golden-brown eyes. His cheekbones were still expertly carved, his boyish good looks still intact.

Ruby sighed, shutting her eyes with a small smile. Then she glanced up at him and tried again. “You look really good too, Mitchell. I - um, I figured you might want to see me. Get some last words in. But I can’t right now. I’m waiting for the buyer to-”

“Ruby.”

He said her name softly, carefully like someone holding a precious diamond, and she tried not to physically react. “You think I want to have words with you? No, Ruby, listen. We were kids. All good now.”

All good now. Ruby wanted to laugh bitterly at that. There was nothing all good about now. “Oh. Well, I have someone coming-”

“Ruby.”

She stared up at him, her mouth a small circle as she tried to decipher what he was trying to tell her. They used to be able to finish each other’s sentences, but at this moment, she could not figure out what he wanted. Then he motioned toward himself, and with a jolt, she realized.

“You bought this ...?”

“I did.”

Ruby drew back in shock and hurt. Was this his way of torturing her? Buy the home that had embarrassed her her entire childhood? Most of her classmates had beautiful, large homes with double-paned doors that were red or tan and porches held up by columns on a road that ended in a cul de sac.

And Ruby had grown up in the tin trailer that leaked when it rained. It was set on a back road to a dead-end that no one traveled to. It was not the best part of town. “Why are you doing this?”

“May I come in?” He sounded tired as if her suspicion drained him. She blinked but then waved him in. Mitchell walked into the living room, glancing around at the boxes. “I didn’t do this to hurt you. I eventually want the land. It’s perfect for a town store. This area is actually getting pretty popular. For now, I think I’ll fix this up enough to rent out or use as an office while getting everything ready.” He stopped and studied her, brushing his hair out of his eyes impatiently.

“You all right?”

“Of course. Not my business what you do with it. We should talk details. I don’t want to stay here longer than necessary.”

Within twenty minutes, the details were ironed out, and Mitchell’s expression cleared, his gaze intensifying. “So. Ruby. How are you? I’m so sorry about your mom.”

With a forced grin, she busied herself with a packed box, prying open the flaps and peering inside. “I’m fine. I mean, I didn’t have a relationship with her.”

“You did. Once upon a time, you did.”

Straightening, Ruby rubbed her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut. “Mitchell.”

“Okay.” He waited and then asked, “So you’re here until the end of the week?”

“Yes.”

“So... through Christmas.”

She glanced up with a forced smile. “I don’t really... the holidays aren’t a big deal to me.”

“They used to be,” Mitchell whispered, his eyes narrowed in concern.

“Yeah, well,” Ruby paused to heave the box into the junk pile. “When it is the only time as a kid that your mom isn’t beating you or ODing on drugs then yeah, you cherish the ridiculous tradition.”

Again, he whispered her name, and despite herself, she remembered those nights he would hold her and reassure her that things would improve. Those times in his arms... so young and infatuated, so trusting and full of dreams.

But then Mitchell averted his gaze and asked, “How is he?”

It was the question she had been expecting, but it still made her freeze for a full second before she turned and grabbed another box. “Uh, I wouldn’t know, Mitchell. It seems everyone was right about him. We parted ways after a year. Don’t know where he is or ...” Her voice cracked and cursing, she turned and faced the man whose heart she had crushed ten years ago. The very man who’s memory kept her up at night, wondering and wishing. “I never said... I’m really sorry. For how it all went down.”

“Sure you did. The night you left town with him, you apologized. Look, it’s in the past. We were kids. You were a kid in a shitty situation desperate to get out.” He glanced around the room.

“Can I help at all?”

“No, you don’t have to-”

“Hey, it’s me. I’ve known you since second grade when you beat all the boys at kickball and then cried when you fell trying to jump rope. Remember?” He laughed as she blushed. “Right. So what can I do?”

“Um, there are more boxes downstairs. If you could bring them up...thanks.”

They worked side by side for the next two hours, lugging up boxes and quickly scouring the contents to see what pile to toss them in. They worked mostly in silence, breaking the tranquility to ask about contents or to request some tape. The pure simplicity of being together, of the years and issues melting away, put Ruby on edge. Why wasn’t he shouting? Why wasn’t he walking away? She had destroyed him by running away with his best friend, and yet here he was helping her get her mother’s house packed up.

“Where are you staying?” Mitchell asked as they slowed down. He caught her expression and pointed, “Here? Damn. You sure you’re okay with that?” She wanted to scream and tell him of course not. But as good as she did for herself, money was still tight. She could not just afford several nights in a hotel. With a carefully placed smile, Ruby answered, “I’m going to be fine.”

“You know. I have tried to find you. I wanted to make sure you were okay. But you’re not easy to track down.”

That bit of news surprised Ruby and alarmed her. The last thing she needed in her life was someone from her past tracking her down. It was hard enough that she had to return to pack up her past, the very reason she ran. She had to say goodbye to the woman that still haunted her. “I’m tired. I’m going to go lie down.”

Mitchell didn’t look surprised, and Ruby imagined he had become used to her escapes by now. She kept a safe distance and merely waved when he said his goodbyes.

Because his easygoing grin and golden brown eyes still had an effect on her. Ten years of struggling, ten years of fighting the memories back so she could make a clean break, so she could work at getting her life in order. A college degree in English, a teaching job she loved, Ruby cherished her life and did what she could to protect it. The last thing she needed was to be detoured by the past.

That night Ruby dreamed of a childhood full of contradictions and confusion. She dreamed of a mother that could barely hold on to any semblance of sanity long enough to truly be a parent. She awoke in a cold sweat and for a frazzled moment, as she stared at the cheap wood paneling, she feared she was back to being that little girl at the mercy of a bitter woman.

But then the memories came crashing back. Her mother had passed away the week before from an overdose. It was the most predictable way she could have died. Everyone in town had

assumed that would be how she would go, even when Ruby was little. The only surprising thing about her death was that she did not die sooner.

Fighting to catch her breath, Ruby scrambled out of bed. As she dressed, she heard a rustling out in the living room, and she remembered Mitchell had asked if he could stop by in the morning to get a head start on some projects.

But when she entered the living room, Ruby tilted her head back, taking in the tall tree that somehow just fit. “Wha- I... no.”

“For if I show the place to potential renters.”

“Bullshit, Mitchell! Christmas is in a few days, and you think I’m going to believe that you’ll have this dump ready to show by then?”

He drew back with an amused look. “You’re meaner than you used to be.”

“A little.”

Mitchell sighed. “I wanted to do this for you. Because I remember. I remember that blond-haired girl sitting in front of the tree, those sky blue eyes just staring up at the lights.... I remember the teenager that would glow while wrapping gifts for everyone. It was the one time of the year you were without that tension. Your mom -”

“She loved the holidays. She was on her best behavior.” She shook her head. “I don’t have any ornaments.” When she saw where Mitchell was pointing, she shook her head. “Oh no! I don’t want to be reminded.”

“You deserve a good Christmas. Maybe... just hear me out... maybe this can be your way of saying goodbye.”

She blinked, hoping the tears did not fall. “Is that a jab because I wasn’t at the funeral?”

“Not at all. It’s a concern because I know you.”

“You knew me. You don’t know me now.”

There was such a long stretch of silence, that Ruby stole a glance at him. Mitchell was staring back so intently that she got shivers. Her nerves bounced against her skin at the thought of him in front of her again, close to her....

“I know you,” he repeated evenly. “I won’t ever not know you, Ruby Eleanor Barnes. You still twist your hair around your finger when you feel guilty. You nip at the inside of your mouth when you’re agitated. And you ... you look so wounded when your past comes up. I’m sorry. I

wasn't thinking. Of course, you don't want to go back to that time. It was horrible for you." He stepped so close, she could feel the heat radiating off his skin. "I'm sorry, Ruby."

"Stop apologizing. I'm the one that Look, I thought I could do this, but I can't. I need out of this house. Maybe the hotel on Birch Street--"

"For Christmas? You want to stay in a hotel over Christmas?"

The panic whitened her already pale skin, and her eyes darted back and forth. Mitchell recognized the signs and knew she needed out. "Okay. Let's go get breakfast."

"Wait- what? No. I -"

"Come on. My treat. Then we can go look around the shops. You used to love to look at the decorations. Chet's hardware store still has that spooky old plastic Santa that lights up." That perked her up. "Really? Okay. I could eat."

As he drove further into town, Mitchell noticed her reluctance slipping away as she stared at the familiar streets and business. She would point out a new building or one that changed names, and he gave her the history on it. They both remembered how behind the small general store, they had shared their first kiss. How on nights after that, they returned to the high grass behind that rickety building and went further than kissing. But as they stared at that building, much the same except for a new roof and siding, they became silent.

He took Ruby to the heart of the town, a diner where almost every retired person came for breakfast and every teenager came to hang out in the evenings. The place was full, and he led her to the back corner with his hand on her back, his fingers pressing lightly, familiarly.

As they sat, he noticed her face had its color back. "It's a lot," he observed, and he noticed her body relaxed.

"It is."

The waitress had been their teacher in grade school, and not ready to retire, Suzanne had taken a job at the diner ten years ago, her hustle better than anyone half her age. She smiled warmly at Ruby, who greeted her shyly. Fortunately, Suzanne was smart enough not to bombard her with too much exuberance.

Ruby was quiet as she ate, and he knew she was overwhelmed. He knew her, how could he not? They had been passionately in love. They spent hours sharing dreams and fears, goals and promises. They had spent hours exploring each other mentally, emotionally... and physically. He knew her intention had been to come to town, pack up her mother's house, and leave without being seen. It hurt him, but he understood. This town held too much trauma for her.

"Thank you," she said softly, setting her fork down.

Mitchell leaned back, studying her. “I have a proposition.” When she widened her eyes in question, he continued, “Stay with me. I have a guest room all ready for someone to stay. No one’s there, just me. So no one will get in your way. That way you don’t have to be . . . at your mom’s. And no impersonal, shitty hotel. Because you know we have no decent hotels here.”

Instead of answering, she dropped her gaze, tracing her finger on the paper mat. “No wife?”

“Ex-wife. Divorced for three years after two years of marriage.” He laughed when he caught her inquisitive look. “No one you know. I managed to marry someone out of town.”

“What happened?”

“Aw, damn, Ruby, I don’t know. I think I rushed into the relationship. We both did.” He slapped some bills down on the check, glancing up as Mattie made her way toward them, her ample hips swiveling as she tried to maneuver the narrow aisle.

“Is that you, Ruby?” she squealed, ducking her head down and narrowing her eyes.

Ruby’s lips turned up in a small, cautious smile. “It is, Ms. Patton.”

The older woman pursed her lips and shook her head, and before Mitchell could deter her, she leaned forward. “I think it is despicable how you abandoned your mother and didn’t have the decency to attend her funeral. Now you’re back to get what you can. Disgrace!”

Mitchell stood to try to block Mattie from getting any closer, but then she spun on her heel and stomped off. He immediately turned to Ruby. “She’s crazy. You know she’s just a busybody that has nothing to do.”

“It’s fine.” But by her expression, he knew it was anything but fine. He reached out and gently nudged her and then winked when she glanced up. It worked, she grinned, standing and following him out.

As soon as she returned to that soul-draining trailer, Ruby sank back to that lost little girl. He remembered that about her, the utter despair at times, her feeling of inadequacy because of where she came from, and how her mother treated her.

But she was strong if nothing else. She literally rolled up her sleeves and got to work, and he had no choice but to follow suit.

And as she worked, Ruby became calmer, as if succumbing to the memories. Not necessarily welcoming them, but resigning herself to the fact that there would be reminders. At one point, she caught Mitchell watching her and shrugged, “Just need to get through this.”

By early evening, they had the bulk of boxes sorted. She had paperwork to go through, but she explained she could do that at anytime, anywhere. And that was when Mitchell revisited the idea of staying at his place.

With a sigh, Ruby nodded, and he wanted to take her in his arms and console her because she appeared so weary.

Instead, he said, "You know, Mattie isn't the norm. Most people... we knew your mom. We get why you left."

She did not respond, only worked at gathering her things. But once they were settled in at his house, she asked, "Do you really understand why I left?"

"I do now, Ruby. I saw how your mom was. How she treated you."

"But ... back then..."

"Honestly? You left with Will. And I hated you. I loved you and hated you."

In true Ruby fashion, she jumped up and started for the kitchen. "I'm going to make you dinner. As a thanks." From the kitchen, while she was free of having to give direct eye contact, she continued, "I was so young and immature, and I was hurting. I had to get out of that place. I'm not making excuses. It was wrong to do that to you. But you and I had broken up."

"I know." He wanted to respect her need to hide, but he had to see her as he spoke, so Mitchell rounded the corner into the kitchen. "I get that we weren't together, and you were desperate. But Will?"

"He was wild. He was willing to leave. I was too scared to run away alone. And I knew he would figure things out. He was smart that way. Street smart."

"And did he? Did he take care of you?"

Ruby turned away from the counter and looked him right in the eye. "At first. But his temper..." Mitchell cursed. "He hit you?"

"He hit me once, and I left. We went our separate ways. But he was just as young as I was."

"No. Do not make an excuse for that." He paused and then stepped forward, catching her hand when she tried to turn away. "Did you love him?"

"I was seventeen. What did I know about love?"

"You and I were in love."

"Well, what I had with you... no one could touch that. If that's what you're asking."

And staring up at him, Ruby felt like she was staring up at that young boy that was her world, her first love. It was as if the years melted away, and she forgot herself as he swooped down for a kiss. She was tilting her head up, expecting the kiss to be familiar, and it was. But the explosions going off in her body told her this was new territory. She had known Mitchell the boy. Now she was dealing with Mitchell the man.

And as she realized her hands were under his shirt, her fingers rolling over muscles that were new to her, she pulled back and gasped, “Slow. This... what are we doing?”

Just as breathless, he answered, “I don’t know, but I like it.” But he released her from his embrace, leaning against the counter. “Spend Christmas with me. Please. Let’s not worry where this is going but ... Christmas. No pressure. You have your guest bedroom.”

She nodded her consent. “Okay. Christmas.”

And that evening as they sat in front of the fireplace, a blanket around their shoulders, he nibbled on her ear. “Where have you been all this time, Ruby? It feels like you disappeared off the face of the Earth.”

She grinned, shivering as his teeth nipped her. “Rosston.”

He drew back, eyeing her with surprise. “You mean forty minutes away? All this time?”

“Yeah.”

“You sneaky vixen. All these years I’ve wondered, thinking you were probably all the way across the country.”

“Ran out of money and had to settle down there. I don’t know where Will went when he left. I just know I somehow managed to get a few jobs, save money and put myself through school.” Mitchell straightened, giving her his full attention. “You did? Wow, Ruby, that’s amazing. Good for you.

What do you do?”

“I’m a teacher. High school English teacher.” She kissed his nose and grinned. “What about you? I wasn’t far away, but I couldn’t try to look you up. I knew that would break all my resolve and ... I couldn’t come back.”

“I understand. I went to college but dropped out. I run a construction business.”

“Ah, that’s why you’re free these days.”

“Yep. Not much work this time of year. Just the way I like it.”

“So... I have summers off. You have winters off.” They laughed and then they kissed some more. It was a relaxing night, a jolting night, but when Ruby went to bed in the guest bedroom, she fell asleep smiling.

The next morning Ruby was quiet, and Mitchell feared she was having second thoughts about their reconnection. But then she grabbed his hands, a wobbly smile telling him this was more about her own thoughts than about them. “So I have everything packed up at mom’s. I went through the storage boxes. Everything there is just about done.”

“Hmm-mmm,” he murmured, not wanting words to break her from her thoughts.

“But I think there is one thing I have to do. Can you help me?”

She could not help but notice the muscles threading through his arms as he drew her to him. “I will. With what?”

“Just... after breakfast, can we go there?”

And so when they arrived at the trailer, he watched as she went to a pile of boxes and looked through them. Finally, she pulled several to the side. He jumped in to help her lift the heavy boxes, already knowing what was in them. He caught her eye.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” She opened a box and stared down at the glitter and flash. “See, I don’t regret not going to the funeral. She was ...cruel at times, and I can’t let go of that. But this... to decorate for her favorite holiday with all her decorations... that is how I can celebrate the mom that sometimes was good to me. That sometimes loved me.”

Mitchell nodded, tugging her into his embrace. “She always loved you, Ruby. She was just very ill. I wish I had been able to protect you. But I’m older now. I’m not a kid. I can protect you now. Just let me. Give us a chance. Another chance.”

She smiled that mysterious, bewitching smile, and they worked at the decorations up. She showed him the ornaments, sometimes with tears shining in those huge eyes, and told him the stories that went with them. He remembered a lot of them, having spent years with her.

“Oh. She still had this.” She pulled out a Santa figure that was standing beside a miniature tree with lights strung around it. “She had this before I was even born. This one... I think I will keep.”

When they were done, she wrapped her arms around herself and looked around, her expression a mixture of grief and awe. “Okay, mom. Merry Christmas. I hope I did it justice.” The lights were strung over every shelf and counter. The tree was full of ornaments, and there were Santas and nutcrackers everywhere. Just as when she was a kid.

Turning to Mitchell, Ruby lifted a shoulder. “I love you, you know. Always have. I came back here and hoped... hoped I’d run into you somehow.”

“I made sure of it. I love you too, Ruby. Merry Christmas.”

The Fall

By Gabriel Mundo

During summer
we stole the fruit
from our neighbor's
lemon tree and wished
they were oranges
And we threw rocks
the size of teeth at cars
And we existed
at a temperature
that could only be
lowered by watermelon
And we talked about the girls
who liked the boys
that wore heavy gold
crosses but never
seemed to go to church
And we thought of ways
to get those girls
to like us instead
And we grew mustaches
coarse as grains of pepper
And we fought
for the sake of bruises
And we drove our parents'
cars while they slept
And we waddled home
inflated by cheap beer
followed by trails
of our mother's cooking

that left our stomachs
empty as fire
And we forgot
every day
was getting shorter

And we forgot
the fall was coming

Dear Ms. Lang

By Juno Elio Avillez do Nascimento

I've heard your many, many grievances about never receiving your Easy Bake Oven at the age of seven. I have received your letter denouncing me and all of Christmas written in red pen that vows, from that day on to only spend Christmas with your Jewish friends, and stating that if you were to ever have children, even though you detest them, to never raise them believing in me so they would never have to endure the disappointment that comes with believing in an old, overweight man.

I promise you, Ms. Lang, there was a reason I denied your request for a bedazzled Easy Bake Oven, and if you were fully aware of that reason, your fall from Christmas spirit would have never occurred.

You see Ms. Lang, I know much, and I see everything. I knew about the fight you had started because Danny Caesar took one of the many Play Dough tubs you had stolen from Gabriel Martinez on his birthday. I know you sent him to the hospital with a broken nose, three fractured fingers, and a crushed pinky toe because red was your favorite color, and he was, in your words, a puny idiot.

Ms. Lang, as hard as this may be to hear, you were starting down a dark, criminal path by the end of your second-grade year, and you would have not liked the outcome if I had allowed that path to continue.

In all frankness, Ms. Lang, you should be thanking me. That bedazzled rainbow Easy Bake Oven would have caught fire your third week of having it, and although it would have burned half your toys and left a black mark in your carpet that would make your room perpetually smell like burnt plastic, you would have gained an obsessive affinity for fire that would not have been so easily diminished.

If you were to receive that so desired bedazzled rainbow unicorn Easy Bake Oven, you would be in jail for your second time this year on three arson charges, one involving a church and one involving the local rec center, paired with two charges of manslaughter, one being vehicular, and you would have ended up killing your dog Bowie due to smoke inhalation.

I am aware Ms. Lang, that you don't specifically appreciate being a clerk at your father's bank, working alongside your cousin, Sausan, who as you said, is the noisiest little bitch you've ever met and that you just wanted to be a baker as a child, but you should give me at least a small amount of thanks given you're not convincing a massive woman in every way you can, that you are not cut out to helping her smuggle in drugs through bars of soap that smell a little too much like lavender for the guards, not the notice.

Ms. Lang, you must realize that my actions were simply intended to help you, as they did.
Sincerely,

Saint Nicholas.

Two Cigars

By Mark Poe

Most folks gush over Christmas presents from the standpoint of size or cost and some people understand the concept of giving and receiving and the idea of the love that is attached like the ribbons and the bows that adorn them. The greatest comes from the heart and those are the most treasured. That explains the ones I have received that are stuck in my memories like past friends or the thoughts that clear the fog from long-ago days that keep them in the present and have the ability to push the sands of time upward through the hourglass. One of those treasures came in the form of two cigars.

It was Christmas Adam, as my daughters love to call it. The day before Christmas Eve. We would gather as a family for our time to eat, open gifts and, most important in my heart and mind, enjoy each other's company with no interruptions or distractions of the outside world that always seem to wiggle its way in and steal possible memories from the present. The table was adorned with the Christmas tablecloth and the settings for the seven that would be sharing this hallowed time. The house was warm with the smell of all the fixings that melded together to create an atmosphere that is so often associated with a Rockwell painting. The tree was sitting like a statue in our den with many gifts deposited at its feet. The lights reflecting off the many-colored ornaments creating the glow of all the rainbows ever imagined in a child's mind. The headlights through the front window signaled the arrival and the beginning. The beginning of that most special time for me. Christmas has always been my favorite of all holidays. Sometimes I think all the stores start early with the displays for my enjoyment. It opens the box to childhood dreams that I have stored year upon year and renews my spirit and hope for my eternity through the precious birth that is oftentimes overlooked. My wife, Christina, was hurrying herself to finish the last details of wrapping and creasing each corner sharp enough to slice the bird that has now been carried in by my son, Ethan. He was closely followed by his wife, Sarah and her father, Les, who had become my dearest of friends. My daughters Emma and Eden and myself were wishing all the greetings of the day and passing out the Christmas hugs, which should be thought of as the best of the gifts to exchange. With plates full, we all gathered around and held hands as we offered thanks for the many blessings bestowed upon us for this year. The clanging of the forks on the dinnerware was battling for attention against the din of the voices of those telling of the excitement of the company. Full plates and full hearts playing the music of symphonies being written around the table. With each plate being scraped clean from the desert of the banana pudding, my sweet mother's own recipe, which had been passed down to my wife and just earlier today passed on to my own daughter signaled for the move to the den for the passing out of the gifts. The excitement and anticipation of all was at a fevered pitch as the first name was read from the color wrapped gifts from the heart. Once the floor surrounding the tree became clear the tearing and slinging of all the dressings were flying like leaves in the fall wind. Small yelps of glee as the content of each package were announced to the group. The smiles being unwrapped with each one. I then opened one of my own that had been stacked neatly around me so I could enjoy the heart-warming looks of the special ones around the room.

This was another of the favorite things not mentioned in the song. The everyday world finds some small way to steal the happiness from us, but in this setting, for a small moment in time, all is well. Not through the commercial side but from the love of the hearts of giving and receiving. It was my turn to begin. I opened each gift with the thought of how undeserving I was for someone to take from their allotment of time to make this effort for me. It is both humbling and joyous when we really consider that fact. I came to one that felt light. What could it be? Socks? A tie? I broke the tape and peered inside the box. There was a touch of confusion about its contents. Two cigars. The explanation of the gift made the actual contents take life and opened one of those precious memories that I guard so fervently.

"I've always heard you tell stories about how you and Pop used to share a cigar every year. I thought maybe this year we could start our own tradition." My son explained.

Very few times in my life have I been truly speechless about anything. My daughter had given me a combination journal and sketchbook the year before with the inscription "go write your world". I cried. The thoughts of those precious times with my father came to the forefront of my mind and all I could do was sit there and think through a conscious stream of conversations we had enjoyed together. I thought of how my own Father had taught me direction for my life through the skyward wafting smoke. The aimless stream giving way to wise words that would give me knowledge on being a man. In an instance, I was transported back to my seat on the couch and I looked into the dark brown eyes of my offspring. I failed miserably to convey to him the part of my soul he had touched. He had gifted to me the promise of at least one time a year that we could connect in an almost spiritual manner between father and son through two cigars.

Ethan and I had never had any major fights or rifts that have torn many bonds apart. We were always able to discuss any situation despite not always being on the same side but I had always given him the same my Father gave to me. The respect to listen without passing judgment or always trying to over-correct him to make him believe my way. I know that in this corrupt and twisted world he would need to see things through his own eyes and weigh them within his own conscience. I had always tried to show him right from wrong so I know he is prepared to make those decisions. I also know that there was enough respect for his Father that if he ever came upon one that especially vexing, he could come to me openly and freely. He had proven through this act that it was true. It had created the avenue for this to be an open option. The only downfall of our relationship was the inability to connect in a special bond over our everyday life. I was an outdoorsman and a sports fanatic. Ethan was more into the performing arts. He was gifted the ability to pull music from any and every instrument he picked up as well as conform to any part of a script and give them life and voice. I had the ability to throw a baseball. It really doesn't compare in the grand scheme of life. He has the ability to bring tears to the eyes of those watching him perform and I have the ability to need a rub down after throwing rocks at a growling stray dog. I have watched him grow into a man. I have watched him make, what I considered mistakes at the time, and turn them into freedom in life that most only dream of. He married a beautiful young lady from a well-respected family that loves those around them

without making them feel anything but special. They love and accept him as much as me. Can a Father really ask for anything more? He has performed on stage, he has written songs that touch the pulse of long ago misgivings. He is beyond his years but grounded enough in today's world to fit into any conversation regardless of the depth of the subject or the belief of those around him. He is absolute about his own beliefs and will not bend to the loud provinces of others. In a world of the squeaky wheel getting the grease, he prefers to ask why the wheel squeaks and will grease really help.

Anyone who has read my ramblings know that my Father was a grounding rod for the storms of my life. Dad was my example of building a family from nothing and bonding that family together like the foundation to never be shaken by the world. He set the bar high for me and I have spent much of my energy trying to match that love. On that special Christmas Adam, 2017, he gifted to me the therapy of dealing with the loss of my Father and the empty space inside by filling it with new. He took the pain of all my yesterdays since Dad has been gone and changed them into the hope of many tomorrows of happiness with Ethan. He has taught me through this simple gift that I can never be my Father but I can be a Father. That lets me know the most precious of all gifts is the heritage that was created, not the legend. Only a true visionary can create hope for the future. Only the true love of a son for a Father can do that through a gift of two cigars.

Ode to Autumn

By Emily Roberts

Autumn, you were an August away;
I feel you draw near to stay.
No longer will the sun scorch the lawn midday.
The grass will turn to straw and then to hay.
The mountains turn from green to red. The fields of gold
Encourage the wind to claw my hair. Songs of old
Begin to crawl and sing into homes, into no longer cold
Hearths. Scarves and hats stir from closets; pumpkins are sold
Along main street. Coffee wafts through the air;
I hear the cawing crow as I prepare for a good scare.

The leaves on the trees whisper in the breeze
And the cool wind tickles the skirt at my knees.
Acorns loosen and fall for squirrels to collect and gnaw.
My tabby chases those squirrels with maw
Open, proceeding to fall into the water pail.
Purple and red and orange and yellow never fail
To amuse as the hues flutter to earth, to become earth,
To become the fertile dirt my father will use to birth
New growth in the garden. There, he harvests
The vegetables, and he'll go to the couch to rest.

Hayrides, firesides, late night joyrides; the owls hoot
As the world grows dark. The masquerade takes root.
Children, grown-ups, all under disguise
Cooking up backstories of someone's demise
As they sit and eat sweets that may rot their teeth.
But how it's fun to walk and say, "Trick or treat!"
In the soupy, spooky night, ghosts and spirits take flight

And may a black cat bless you before night turns bright
And our Earth continues to spin and grin;
There's warmth in the houses within.

This is the time where nature must die.
Jack O Lanterns rot black and grey, the birds fly
From the cold. Nature has ways to survive.
The acorns aren't found. The bees no longer thrive.
I sit at my window, watching the clouds roll by,
observing escaping leaves from the fire, swirling into the sky.
Burning leaves sting my eyes and clog my lungs.
There are muddy boots; worn out coats hang on rusty wall rungs.
Dark purple circles under our eyes. A red drippy nose.
Yellowing teeth from sugary foods, chipped orange polish on toes.

Autumn, you have your intricate show
Of colors and coolness and sleeping critters below
meadows. But, I see that you so slowly kill
The living green vibrancy; do you do this with ill
Intent? I walk now, casting my shadow
Among the bare woods, the hollow
Oak howls that winter is approaching fast.
We must bask in the fading warmth while it lasts.
Embrace the warmth and the cool Autumn brings
And keep in our hearts the songs the winter bird sings.

Holidaze

By Karen Robiscoe

First Week

It's autumn—

October—

a big Harvest Moon.

The leaves,

from the trees,

upon the ground strewn.

Carpeting porches,

Sidewalks and streets,

Filled with masked children

Soliciting sweets.

Provided by neighbors

—unless they are foolish,

since unsweetened children

Can often be

ghoulish.

Opting to trick

in absence of treat,

consisting—

of twisting

the Charmin' in trees.

Or egging

a doorway,

darkened and quiet,

venting frustration,

in albumin riot—

yes, the ways
one can pay
--for skipping tradition,
are bad for resale
and border sedition.

So don't
be a hero—
on next trip to store,
buy oodles of candy
to keep by your door,
and hand out to kiddies,
attended by Mommy
—who can't be
reproached,
'cause Mommy's a Zombie.

Second Week

Moving along—
to what happens after,
the tricking & treating,
and G-rated laughter--
since when kids,
shut eyelids,
& start sawing logs,
the oldsters,
upholster,
in Halloween togs.

The female among them
will no doubt choose slutty--
—witch clothes

with striped hose,
or maybe a bunny...
'Made famous by Playboy
decades ago,
She might come
as Nurse!
(dressed as a ho')

The disguises—
of most guys is
—generally spartan
(I don't mean the Greeks)
I'm talking the garment,
which might be
the same as—
he wears when at work,
topped with a seasonal
hat and a smirk.

However we do it—
we do like to play...
differing roles,
than those lived each day,
so ponder
the person,
you'd most like to be...
Your close up
is scheduled—
for this Halloween.

Week Three

The next

several weeks
pass in a haze,
a sweet-induced coma,
brought on by days,
of nibbling treats
culled Halloween,
producing—
a loosening
of belts on most jeans.

Hinging on timing,
you might also see,
a partisan race—
to run our country,
a process where candidates
stump & promote,
relevant issues
rockin' the vote,
—smiling the while
by prescribed rote.

It's also
quite likely,
you'll entertain guests,
that come with the season
and must be impressed,
with doo-dads and china,
dragged out each year,
~claptrap~
in bubble wrap
amounting to cheer.
And as time

—advances—
to end of November,
families prepare
a feast to remember—
the instance of stealing
this land
from its natives,
unfair to those there,
but still legislated.

4th Down

This fact doesn't hamper
—the party at all!
Which features
* a creature *
we call Butterball.
A staph-ridden turkey
its carcass: a misery—
--of factory-farmed meat
befouled and be'gristly,
(despite hours spinning in oven rotisserie)

The incumbent host
is stressed, but pretending,
she's not in the least
by way of attending,
to every last detail
right down to
the platter,
on which bird
—is served—
as if such things matter.

As history shows
that will·ful relations,
will full·y decide—
to guzzle libations,
ostensibly hefted
to those they hold dear,
giving their thanks
with two-barreled beer,
though bro' likes nouveaux,
at this time of year.

If you can't
beat 'em—join 'em!
And grab you a Bloody'
through Macy's parade
you'll be buddy-buddy,
a state that degrades
when footballs are kicked,
since pigskins
can stand in,
for symbolic dicks.

5th Golden Week

No matter what level
of build-up and fuss,
the advent of Yule,
is there to remind us—
the meaning behind
the yearly to-do,
that insists
on a list

of to-do
for you, too.

Saint Nick's not the fellow
prompting the pomp,
he's busy enough
with his own global romp,
landing on rooftops
and dropping down chimneys
—A cause—
worth applause,
since Santa's not nimbly.
(Besides which, the roof pitch, is totally wintry)

It comes down to love,
of which there's too little,
the seasonal reason—
for joy in this riddle,
(that's highly obscured)
by a hodgepodge of rites—
involving gift-giving,
and pine trees with lights,
and extra-hard logs—
that burn extra-bright.

Yes, the swell in Noel,
transcends its wrappings,
its trimmings & pinnings—
its ribbons & trappings.
It venerates Christ,
on day of His birth,
whose tender

surrender—
made peace
here on earth.

6% Sales Tax Week

The day's centered 'round
the noblest ideal,
that starts at late mass
upon midnight clear...
When sleepy-eyed families
hit church to redress—
a year of wrongdoing
in 2 hours or less,
(a hella good deal)
for losing some rest.

This doesn't account for—
the late Christmas shopper,
who's still at the mall
becoming a pauper,
trading his dough
for overpriced stuff,
in hopes to avoid
the pending rebuff,
the gifts meant to show,
he's thoughtful enough.

Since praise without largess
is simply suspicious,
for all that the day
is seen as auspicious,
a message that's louder

than thanks or good wishes,
a custom we trust in
as being propitious,
a presenting penance
to remit the pernicious.

The Walmarts,
—and K-Marts—
and Marts of all kind,
are the real alters here
with one thing in mind—
their margin increases
with each sale tallied,
—not Jesus--
He's specious—
and lives in Death Valley.

7 (Deadly Sins) Week

You're bloated
—and bankrupt
Yule Tide's washed your tanker,
into islands of debt,
peopled by bankers--
--likely to raise
your APR soon,
since plastic's
elastic
and rarely a boon.

And though Noel's past
and Boxing Day's done,
you're not

off the hook yet
for ritual fun,
as pending New Year
dictates a freezing--
--of habits—
—and vices--
and other things pleasing.

Yes, gluttons
will diet,
and lazy men toil,
the proud find new lows,
the envious foiled,
smokers will quit,
and drinkers abstain,
following
swallows
of helpful champagne.

Live life
to the fullest,
these next seven days,
pampering—
—hampering
dubious ways.
Indulge in your cravings
your crutches and sins—
at least until midnight
when New Year's begins.

The countdown's been counted,
and kisses exchanged,

'lang syne has been yodeled,
in high-octave range.
The Waterford Ball
in Times Square has dropped,
the New Year's begun—
the old one has stopped.
According to recording
GMT clocks.

Time now to honor,
extravagant claims,
of what you will do
that isn't the same...
And how these adjustments
are sure to effect,
an overdue tune-up
on things you have wrecked
—and by you--I mean me,
because I project.

The quitting of drinking—
will help you grow healthy.
The quitting of gambling—
will help you be wealthy.
The halting of
swearing—
while wearing
in private—
will set an example,
both pompous & pious.

This year will be different.

—If ancients weren't lying—
the Aztecs...the Hopis,
the Toltecs, & Mayans
as planets aligning
will shift, too, our focus,
swing north pole to south,
& screw up the locus.
(unless it's all been
so much hocus-pocus)

Let's Chat with Author Nan Sanders Pokerwinski

Now let's see who our long-time contributor Carol Smallwood had a chance to speak to this week! Smallwood is a literary reader, judge, and interviewer who recently published a poetry collection *Patterns: Moments in Time*.

Nan Sanders Pokerwinski (NSP) was a science writer at the Detroit Free Press for more than a decade, worked as a science writer for the University of Michigan News Service for fourteen years. She's been a contributing editor to *Health and Alternative Medicine* magazines and has written for *More*, *Fitness*, *Dallas Morning News*, and other print and online publications. Her journalistic byline is Nancy Ross-Flanigan and she's received a Pulitzer nomination, several awards.

Smallwood: What awards has *Mango Rash* won so far? How did you come to write it and how long did it take?

NSP: *Mango Rash* won first place in the memoir/nonfiction category of the 2018 Pacific Northwest Writers Association Literary Awards and was a finalist for the Northern Colorado Writers Top of the Mountain Book Award, the Tucson Festival of Books Literary Awards (twice), and the 43rd New Millennium Writings Literary Awards.

I started writing about my Samoa experiences (which form the basis of *Mango Rash*) when I joined my first writers' group in 2004. I'd always struggled to convey to anyone who wasn't there at the time what it was like living on a tropical island as a teenager in the 1960s. I began writing my Samoa stories as a way to explain not only what the experience was like, but also why it made such an impression on me—something I'm not sure even I fully understood until I started writing about it.

I finished a first draft of the manuscript within two years but had to set it aside for a number of years, due to my workload and other circumstances. I kept submitting individual chapters to my writers' groups and to writing workshops, however, and filing away all the feedback. Eventually I was able to make time for more concentrated work on the manuscript as a whole, and I spent a year or two revising it, drawing on all that feedback I'd stockpiled. So I guess you could say it took 15 years from start to finish, but it was really only three or four years of active work.

Smallwood: How do you manage to write on such a wide range of subjects and styles? In what genre did you begin?

NSP: I write about whatever interests me, and I'm curious about a lot of things. I also try to write about things other people are curious about, which opens up a world of topics. I began in nonfiction, as a journalist, and most of what I write is nonfiction. Writing in different styles is something that developed over time. When I decided to write my memoir, I wanted to get away from a journalistic, magazine-y style and adopt a more lyrical, literary nonfiction style. It took a lot of study, practice, and trial and error to begin to write differently.

Smallwood: Please share with readers your literary education background.

NSP: I've had no formal literary education beyond high school and one or two college classes. I've learned as I've gone along, from reading and from writing workshops. I missed a lot of classic literature on the way up, and I've enjoyed catching up (as well as discovering emerging authors) in mid-to late-adulthood.

Smallwood: I was surprised about you selecting potholes as a writing topic—how did that come about?

NSP: During my years as science writer for the Detroit Free Press, I specialized in looking at everyday experiences with a scientific slant. One winter I heard so many people complaining about potholes I decided to find out what scientists and engineers were doing to address the problem. I never expected to win an award for that story, but apparently the National Society of Professional Engineers thought it was prize-worthy.

Smallwood: Do you see a connection between your photography and writing?

NSP: What an interesting question! I'm not sure there's a connection, but the two activities are complementary. When I take photographs, I shift from thinking in words to thinking in images, and that shift gives the verbal part of my brain a rest, which stimulates my creativity and gives me fresh perspectives when I return to writing. Likewise, when I've been working with words for a long time without doing any photography, I find that I'm much more receptive to imagery the next time I go out to shoot.

Smallwood: How has living in Michigan influenced your writing and outside interests?

NSP: I've met and learned from so many gifted writers here in Michigan, and I've found very supportive writing communities in every part of the state where I've lived and worked: Detroit, Ann Arbor, and now West Michigan. It was here in Michigan—at the Bear River Writers

Conference, to be specific—that I first felt I'd found my tribe of kindred writers. As for outside interests, I've always been drawn to nature and the outdoors, and living in Michigan—especially West Michigan—I have ample opportunity to indulge those interests through hiking, kayaking, photography, and just living in the woods.

Smallwood: What are you working on now?

NSP: Right now, mainly promoting Mango Rash and keeping my blog, HeartWood (www.nanpokerwinski.com/blog) and newsletter, "Mango Meanderings," active. But I have several projects on the back burner that I hope to get back to work on soon: a novel about outsider art, creativity, and madness; a childhood memoir with themes of individuality, inclusion, and exclusion; a multi-media project that combines autobiographical collages with micro-memoirs; and a children's book that I'm collaborating on with my husband Ray Pokerwinski.

Smallwood: For more information about this diverse writer please check:
<http://www.nanpokerwinski.com/about.html>

Winter Garden by Kristen Hannah

Reviewed by Dani Watkins

One of my most recent reads was *Winter Garden* by Kristin Hannah. Hannah's newest book is about mother-daughter relationships and the complexities it brings to the family dynamic.

Meredith and Nina Whitson are sisters with entirely opposite goals in life. Nina grew up to become a photojournalist and travels around the world. Meanwhile back on their family's orchard, her sister Meredith runs the business alongside her father and family of her own.

Their mother is a whole different story. She grew up in Russia and is very secretive about her past. When Nina and Meredith were children, she would tell them Russian fairytales. The stories stop when one evening the two girls act out one of the fairytales and their mother gets upset for reasons unknown to Nina and Meredith. After that evening, their mother never tells another fairytale.

Nina returns home from one of her trips overseas when Meredith contacts her about their father growing ill. The two women can't seem to come to an agreement on anything, and their mother isn't helping. It appears that she is now more closed off than ever. Curious why their mother is the way she is, Nina digs deeper and finds out that their Mother's fairytales fit the same storyline of war-torn Leningrad.

The book switches back and forth between the present and past. Soon the two girls really learn who their mother is and why she is the cold and stubborn woman she is today.

I must say I was surprised... I love all of Hannah's previous works and am a big fan of her writing. *Winter Garden* fell flat for me and I wasn't a fan. Why I didn't like it had nothing to do with her writing. She still had the same description to detail, tension, and plot that all of her other works had. So what's wrong with it?

To start, tension is good, but too much can get overwhelming. Between the two daughters not getting along and a mother who is nothing but a grump, it almost made me forget the book altogether. I feel like in order for tension to come off as really powerful, you need those moments where the two sisters hug after a very intense moment that doesn't involve them and their ongoing disagreements.

Winter Garden was also very slow to develop that tension too. I felt like I was sitting around waiting, and waiting for the two sisters to blow up at each other. Instead, it is snippy little comments here and there and internal dialogue that shows the reader how the two women feel about one another.

This one gets two smugglers because she still has a wonderful writing style, but the story itself was a bit dull. It wasn't for me, but if you're someone that really enjoys a good fight between family members you'd probably enjoy this one.

Contributors

Noelle Flewelling Carle is the author of three novels, two children's coloring books, poetry, numerous essays, articles, and devotionals. She lives with her husband Russell in Maine where she finds her muse beside the waters of Big Lake. She has two blogs that may be found at <https://nfcwordwise.blogspot.com>, and www.okaynok.blogspot.com. Two of her books are available as e-books on Amazon [Some Smaller Grace](#) and [Light Over Water](#). Her third novel was the Grand Prize Winner in Deep River Books Novel Contest in 2013. It has been released and is now out of print. She is currently working on her fourth novel and invites you to check out her [Facebook Page](#) where you can keep up with her writings.

Sonia Hawkins is a 29-year-old dreamer who wants to show the world what's truly valuable in a day and age where our next meal is half a days wage. To see the hidden things, the hidden acts of courage and kindness when all you can make out is a superficial gesture... The love, laughter, and tears that make us who we are. Sonia currently has one book on the market, [Health to Bones](#) and is working on several others. All stories hoping to show elements of life that are rarely touched on. To manifest the beauty life creates in every face that you pass on the street every day and in every heart mended with gold.

Marie Lamb grew up in Northern Minnesota, in a place where time had not yet caught up. She attended NDSU because the winds were too high in Grand Forks. She now lives in West Tennessee, on a farm with her husband and daughter, and installs plumbing fixtures for a living. She still stands out in the morning and watches the sunrise. You can find out more about Marie on her website, <http://www.knitowl.com>

Trisha McKee resides in a small town in Pennsylvania known for Christmas homecomings. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in Tablet Magazine, Crab Fat Magazine, The Oddville Press, Kzine, ParABnormal, Night to Dawn Magazine and more. Her short story, *Where We Meet* has been nominated for the Best of the Net Anthology 2019. Find more of her works on [Amazon](#) and be sure to connect with her on [Twitter](#).

Gabriel Mundo is from Highwood, Illinois and is currently a student at CarrollUniversity in Wisconsin. In the spring of 2019, he served as Poetry Editor for Portage Magazine. His most recent work can be found in Nightjar Review, TintJournal, Plainsongs, and Burning House Press. In the fall of 2019, he was selected as a finalist for the Scotti Merrill Award.

Juno Elio Avillez do Nascimento is a writer based out of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He has been published multiple times in the award-winning literary magazine Pulp and has worked with authors such as Yona Harvey and Lee Gutkind. He is a staff member of BatCat Press.

Mark Poe is a lover of short story writing inspired by a country farm life upbringing as well as addressing the darkness of small-town life. He has been published online by Southern Gothic Creations and Gravel: A Literary Journal. He is currently working on a collection of short stories

to be published as well as a new novella series. Mr. Poe currently resides in Black Oak, AR with his wife and two daughters.

Emily Roberts has had her works of literary fiction presented at the annual Sigma Tau Delta convention, along with winning an award for her work. She is pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Education along with a Bachelor of Arts in English Education at Arkansas Tech University.

Karen Robiscoe's stories, essays, & poetry have appeared in numerous literary journals, including Spectrum at UCSB, Steam Ticket, Lunch Ticket at Antioch, and many others. A resident of California, her byline: Fitness Front appears in several papers nationally. Keep up with the author on [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), and her website <https://charronschatter.com>.

Carol Smallwood is a literary reader, judge, and interviewer who recently published a poetry collection [Patterns: Moments in Time](#). Carol has interviewed many authors and contributes regularly for the Book Smuggler's Den.