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CHRISTMAS NEVER CHANGES

By Georgia C. Lowenberg

Somehow it wasn't Oklahoma that I was returning home to, but the memory of Christmases I had known there. Now when I thought of Oklahoma, I was able only to visualize some vague red-earth land where oil-field derricks taunted the sky and dust clouds mockingly obscured steel and sky alike, sucking in the desolate vistas, shrinking my horizons. There was a brief recollection of cowboys and Indians, but perhaps it was the product of a country-western song breaking through the static of the pick-up radio. *Okie* was part of my vocabulary because men like Merle Haggard and John Steinbeck had endowed it with an indelible image and branded it on my brain. The years had effectively separated me from the place I had grown up in.

It was this last stretch of the journey that was hardest for me. The truck, its grimy box haphazardly brimming with cable, air-hose, and the sundry used and abused tools of the welding trade, had always afforded me a sense of belonging, of purpose in life. It had been some seemingly blind, relentless sense of destiny that had again and again compelled me down the interminable miles of highway to each new job; to the rivers that ran blue on

the map but, more often than not, dirtier than hell underneath me because mud and pollution had fouled their waters—toward the stalwart bridges that spanned them. I had long ago lost all semblance of upbringing or family ties in the role of the hooded, faceless form that straddled the girders, hunched over the precisely aligned joints, indefatigably striking the glaring electrical arcs fated to consume or obscure it. Watching other welders from a distance, I would never be sure which. I had learned to measure a day's work not by the electrode-stub piles that gave wanton testimony to my industry and skill, burned as they were to the very last inch of flux, where the coating tapered, then yielded to bare metal for the alligator-jawed stingers to bite. We bought our welding rod in 50# tins. I emptied one almost every day out. And I was very proud that I could work that hard!

My pride sustained me because now the pick-up box was devastatingly clean, devastatingly empty. This year it wasn't only inclement weather that had closed in on us, but the floundering national economy. There would be no winter shop work for anyone. If (*If, not When!*) we went out again next

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spring, it would be with the same broken-down, run-down and worn-out equipment that had carried us through this past construction season—in the same aggravating state of despair, but even more in need of paint after the intervening months of exposure. Even the illiterate laborers who couldn't read the headlines that screamed RECESSION had heard the news broadcasts and/or the despairing words from the tight, grim lips of the afflicted: there was no work anywhere. No place! Nor any excuse not to go home for Christmas.

I don't really remember when I crossed the state line, not even the rush-hour traffic on the Oklahoma City bypass. Maybe it was just the mood I was in, but Interstate 40 West seemed no less nondescript than had Interstate 35 South earlier in the day. An unspectacular sunset had swiftly, inexorably, donned a vaguely menacing night-cloak. Nonetheless, it was this darkness in which I now sought refuge. It seemed as much a shield to me as did my welder's gear. But what it protected me from was either ill-defined or completely unknown. Maybe it was nothing. In any case, I was too tired to think about it.

I still don't know how I garnered the presence of mind to head south at Weatherford. It was, in retrospect, less a conscious action than a dormant habit resur-

rected by some memory-trace of place or landscape. A few miles later, I became aware of wind buffeting the truck and great slashes of rain assaulting my windshield. The crackle of static became unbearable, and I replaced it with the less obtrusive, more rhythmic slapping of the wipers. That sound, in turn, was all too soon obliterated by the tinkle of ice. Tightening my grip on the steering wheel, I bit my lip and resisted a strong temptation to vent my frustration in pent-up road-gang expletives. Much to my relief, the sleet was short-lived. It had, in fact, only heralded the arrival of the snow. My headlights illuminated a myriad of dancing ghosts. Snow! Schnee...

A, B, C,

Die Katze liegt im Schnee.

Der Schnee geht weg,

Die Katze liegt im Dreck.

It was funny how things started coming back to me, the kinds of things that invaded my mind: a German nursery rhyme, the spellbinding chant of the auctioneer at the Mennonite Relief Sales, the toe-tapping square-dance music to which I had too often turned worldly ears. The snow fell harder, swirling at unpredictable intervals like some out-of-control welding arc under the influence of conflicting magnetic fields. It had become difficult to see the road ahead of me, and I strained forward in my seat. When I hit the brake, it was with a senseless, spasmodic

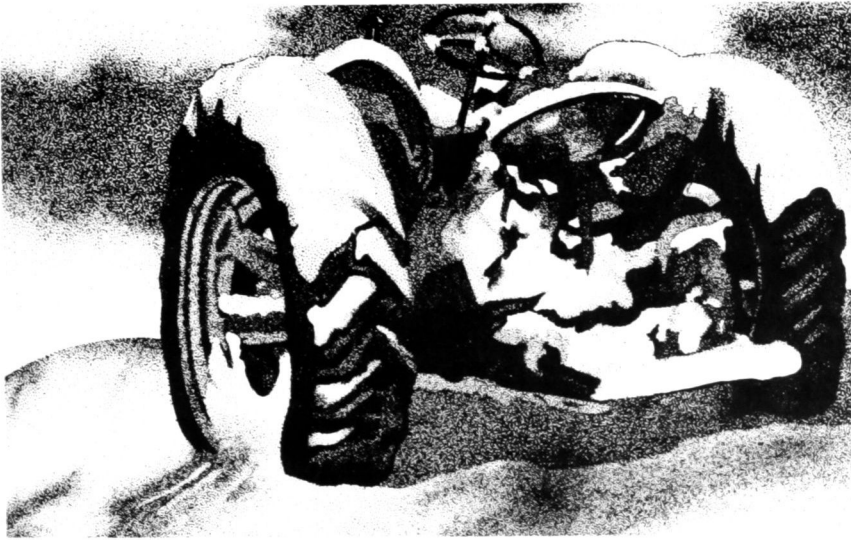


illustration by Dawn Hebert

action that sent the pick-up box fish-tailing across the now-slick asphalt. My panic was brief. Deliberately turning into the skid, I regained control of both my vehicle and myself and—more prudently—pumped the brake pedal. I was slowing down for the inevitable turn home.

The reassuring glow of the yard light was enveloped by the drifting snow, but I instinctively knew that it was there and that it was on for me. An angry wind caught the truck door and assailed the sprawling white fields that surrounded me with a lusty roar of malicious intent. Ravished, unraked leaves, the last remnants of the previous season, lashed at me, stinging my face and hands. Suddenly a porch light flickered, the heavy storm-door groaned open, and two large collies bounded out and about me, barking excitedly. “Hans! Susie! Haltet die Munder! Eli’s zu Haus!” It was my father’s voice. “Eli’s home!”

I slept fitfully that night. It had been a long, hard trip, probably too long for a single day on the road. Indeed, my arrival had been so much past my family’s accustomed bedtime that I had promptly pleaded exhaustion—and gone to bed hungry. Predictably, I had dreamed about food:

There were four of us around the campfire that night. All of us were abundantly conscious of the snow clouds riding darkly against the western horizon. One by one Larry retrieved the bulging foil packets from the eerily glowing coals. With his characteristic lack of ceremony, he meted them out. Like a lot of road-gang cookies, Larry had learned his skills in the railside ‘bo camps of his wandering days. And he was as good as they came! The random concoctions of meat, potatoes, onions, and whatever—liberally sprinkled with Lowry’s seasoned salt and swimming in beer—never failed to tantalize. We ate them without benefit of silverware, the grimy oil-film of the rolling mills transferred to our hands from the steel, from our fingers to our mouths. A gust of wind...

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The whole house shuddered in the fury of the wind. I awoke with a start, momentarily unsure of where I was or how I had gotten there. The intensity of my dream had sent my stomach into painful turmoil. Or maybe my hollow interior had—in simple desperation—precipitated my dream. There would probably be proponents of both theories. (I don't know which one I subscribed to myself) The clock struck two a.m., and I willed myself back to sleep.

When I awoke again, my first impression was of the cold. Extracting my face from the feather pillow, I could see my breath hanging in the frigid air each time I expelled. My father had always insisted that a house must have two stories, with a closed staircase between. The upstairs registers had been tightly shut the very day that we had moved in—and never re-opened. Each year, after the heat was turned on in late autumn, the door to the stairway was kept shut, too. Sleeping with heat on was a self-indulgence that neither could—nor would—be tolerated under my father's roof. It was a bleak day, but some of my memories were even bleaker. The cold, ominous silence was broken by the throb of the tractor's engine, the defiant, determined scraping of the plow-blade.

He worked several hours in record-cold temperatures, pushing a half foot of snow, breaking through drifts as high as our

fenceposts. Once he caught a glimpse of me watching from the festively decorated windows, and he raised a half-frozen arm in greeting. I waved back. "Er ist ein guter Mann," my grandmother said over and over again, each time with the same unfailing conviction. "Ein sehr guter Mann!" His name was Harvey Engel, and he had purchased the property next to ours. He and his family belonged to the Church of the Brethren. "We couldn't have gotten better neighbors if I had picked them myself!" my father proclaimed with no little pleasure. "Ja," Grandma agreed. "Das ist wahr."

By mid-afternoon the house was full of people—and still the cars turned down the lane that Harvey had cleared for us. The wall-pegs bulged with overcoats. One coat over another, I thought with irony. Buckle-type overshoes—designed for utility, definitely not for fashion—lined the baseboard, as neatly set on the old plank flooring as row crops planted in the Oklahoma earth. Grandma tended the guest-book with her usual fervent delight. Peering over her shoulder, I half-expected to see the names inscribed in Fraktur as I had when I was a boy. The names still betrayed their German heritage, but now the writing was in English. Not so surprisingly, I could still write the fine, flowing German script that I had learned at home and perfected in Sunday School. In contrast, from

the very first stroke, my English writing had been small, incomplete, nearly illegible. On an impulse, I leaned over and scrawled my hand that recalled the old days.. Grandma busied herself with the task of dating another page. She couldn't look up at me; she was crying.

Almost from the beginning, the guests had separated (segregated?) themselves—the men in the dark, formal parlor, the women and the youngest children in the ample kitchen. The boys weren't boys, but little men; the girls were little women. I headed for the dining room.

In a house superfluous with rooms, the dining room had always been my favorite. Years ago, I had deluded myself into thinking that the welding fumes had sorely compromised my sense of smell. To be sure, the acrid odor of purged acetylene, the stale, all-pervasive stench of sweat and grease in combination, had long ago ceased to offend my nostrils. Likewise, the exhaust fumes belched from the cast-iron digestive tracts of the gas-guzzling monsters that stalked the highways. Today the haunting fragrance hung in the air like the redolent ghost of an ancient, undefiled forest: cedar!

The black walnut hutch could be adequately, even eloquently, described in just three words: beautiful, dark, immense. I tended to think of the adjectives alphabeti-

cally because the object itself still inspired such awe that I couldn't rationally select a more appropriate word order. Grandfather had told me its story until I could repeat it in sing-song rote:

Noah Shertz had been raised in an Amish settlement somewhere in Illinois. But long after he had left his faith and his home to become a Mennonite, he remained inexplicably bound in Amish tradition. He bought black automobiles and painted the bumpers and chrome black in a futile attempt to deny their worldliness, then walked more than he ever had when he relied on a horse-and-buggy.. Utilizing Old World ideas of design and craftsmanship, he built magnificent hutches—solid, no veneers—as strong and imposing as an Amish barn and, invariably, lined them with the aromatic wood favored by his birth-people.

I thought of Pavlov's dog, trained to salivate at the ring of a bell. Thanks to Noah Shertz, I, too, had developed a conditioned response. Let the faintly intoxicating scent of cedar waft on a wayward wind—or softly, mysteriously, emanate from my mother's china service—and my mouth would water in pleasant expectation. I couldn't remember when it had been otherwise because the hutch had been a part of the family longer than I had been.

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As soon as there was an opening in the small group that had crowded around the great hardwood table (another Noah Shertz creation), I edged into it. The mere sight of the food regaled me: silver trays in every conceivable geometric shape inundated with sliced ham, sausage, and cheese; baskets of zwiebach (not the thin, dry toast of the supermarket, but tasty double-decker buns) and stollen; gaily-flowered china relish-dishes teeming with pickles, spiced apple rings, and minted pears; cut-glass compotes a-shimmer with jellies and conserves; fruitcakes and cookies everywhere. I took a plate and mounded it high with lebkuchen, several varieties of pfeffernusse, and the springerle that more closely resembled miniature bars of soap than anything edible. With a large mug of coffee in hand, I proceeded into the parlor. The voices of the women faded, their animated talk of rag-rugs and quilts and holiday candy-making. Between giggles, a few of the children were singing about Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer in the shrill, spirited, discordant—yet utterly charming—lack-of-togetherness characteristic of very young, untrained voices. Somewhat reluctantly, I left their sound behind me, too.

In the parlor, the conversation flowed in English, German, and some heavily accented blend of both languages. Resorting to a precarious balancing act with my food and

drink, I finally elbowed my way—as gently and politely as I could—across the crowded room, stopping only briefly to exchange pleasantries with the men who called out to me. The couch, the overstuffed chairs—even the straight-backed chairs brought in for extra seating—were all occupied. I pushed aside several houseplants and sat down on the window-seat—alone, in my own world—where I had always sat as a boy. It was a dismal, overcast day, but someone had thought to light the Christmas tree. The tiny colored lights danced in the dark corner recesses like stars twinkling in the vaulted depths of the night sky. I guessed that Grandma had strung the popcorn. There was also no doubt in my mind that she had baked most of the cookies.

I bit into a lebkuchen, the thin white glaze crackling between my teeth. It was heavy with the tastes of molasses, spice, candied fruit, and almonds.. I sampled the pfeffernusse; first one, then a whole handful. My grandmother's tasted faintly of anise. In the springerle the anise flavor was so strong as to be almost. overwhelming. I savored every mouth-watering bite of them.

"Eli! Harvey Engel!" A man I had never seen before introduced himself. With cookie crumbs still on my fingers, we shook hands. He had a firm, hearty grip that I instinctively liked.. "Glad to meet you, Harvey!

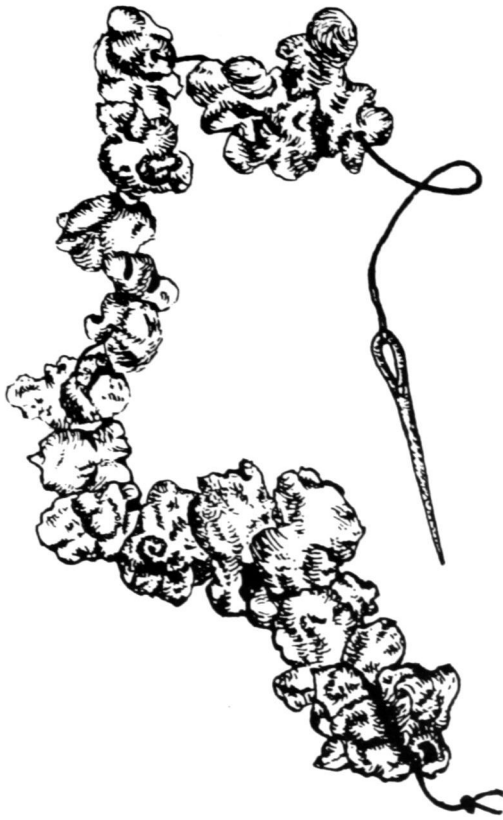


illustration by Dawn Hebert

I didn't recognize you without your hooded jacket. I can never thank you enough for what you did for us today!" I slid closer to my mother's flower pots. "Sit down, Harvey! Please!"

We talked about a lot of things. People came and went around us—and still we talked.. For some indeterminable time period, I had been vaguely conscious of a certain elusive transparency, a subtle play of light on the fields. Harvey must have noticed it, too. "Well! It's going to clear off after all!" The clouds thinned, grew wisper, and then dissolved into the off-blue of a winter sky in late afternoon. The sun broke through with

benign intensity, the snow-shrouded earth beneath it glittering like a sea of diamonds, the light-rays glancing off the random wind-strewn ice-crystals

of the storm front.

"You know, Eli, we have so much to be thankful for. A blizzard last night, this change in the weather now. Western Oklahoma's a beautiful place!" He shifted his gaze into the room. "And we are privileged, indeed, to live amongst such fine people." The words of my grandmother came back to me: "Er ist ein guter Mann, Eli." She had been right.

I touched his shoulder and smiled. For a brief moment my hand lingered there. "I know. That's why I came back!" Harvey returned my smile. "Merry Christmas, Eli." Then almost as an afterthought, he repeated himself in German: "Frohliche Weihnachten!"

Outside, the Oklahoma sun reflected a radiance as brilliant and blinding as any welding arc ever could. At long last, I knew that I was home.▲

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