

Mary sits on the floor and stares at the twinkle lights on the small tree. A papier-mache angel with one wing looks down from the top.

"Do ya want me to tell you a story?"

Mary nods her head, continuing to stare at the tree.

"Let me . . ."

"Tell me 'bout the baby Jesus." Mary turns around and looks in his eyes.

Eddie starts to set his beer down and drops it on the floor. He walks to the kitchen and gets some paper towels. He wipes up the spill and gets another beer. Mary is asleep on the couch.

Eddie sits in the leatherette easy chair and watches her sleep. Her head is resting on a satin pillow. The lights from the tree make her face glow. The shimmering pillow encircles her head. Her chest moves up and down slowly with each even breath. Eddie sips his beer.

Denise gets home at around 2 a.m. She opens the door quietly and rubs her eyes when she sees Eddie. She is not carrying anything. She sits on the couch and hugs Mary.

"You should have put a blanket over her. She'll catch cold." Denise picks Mary up and starts to carry her to her room. She smells like she's been drinking.

"She just fell asleep. She's all excited about Santa and everything." Denise doesn't hear him.

He goes back to his apartment. He does not dream.

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Ethel Merman's rendition of "Oh Holy Night" blares from Eddie's clock radio at 11 a.m. on Christmas Day. He listens to the radio while he makes scrambled eggs for breakfast. He doesn't take a shower.

Eddie hears the door to 2A open and hurries to his own door. Mary is bundled-up standing in the hallway. Denise is reaching around a grocery sack full of presents, fumbling with her keys. Eddie grabs the bag from her and she locks the door.

"I . . . I forgot they don't deliver mail on Christmas." Eddie looks at the floor. "Are you going . . ."

"We're going to my ex's for Christmas. I ran into him last night . . . It's good if Mary sees him today." Denise is smiling. She is wearing more make-up than usual. "Well . . . Have a Merry Christmas."

"Ya . . . Merry Christmas."

Eddie walks back into his apartment. On the radio, an after-Christmas sale at the mobile home and recreational vehicle dealership is being advertised.

Writer's Notebook

by Jennifer Aikman

A poem later
and all the while
a war dances on in Iraq