

# Christmas Comes But Once A Day



Jim Reed

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**BLUE ROOSTER PRESS**

**Birmingham, Alabama USA**

[www.bluroosterpress.com](http://www.bluroosterpress.com)

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4 5 6 7 8 9 10

ISBN-10: 0-9762557-1-5

Fourth Printing

Credits:

Photos by Jim Reed & Liz Reed

Peeping Santa painting: Gwen Gorby

Magic painting: Michael Ballew

## **DEDICATION**

*For Liz and Margaret and Irene*

*Who put up with me no matter what*

*&*

*In memory of my Christmas Mother, Frances Lee McGee Reed 1913-1997 A.D.*

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## FOREWORD

In these times of political unrest and intolerance and so many opposing belief systems competing for air time, it can be hard to see all that is magical and wondrous in this world, all the ways love weaves and binds all of humankind together. When I think of that goodness, that purity that exists in each of us somewhere, I think of Santa, and then I think of Jim Reed.

This book is Jim Reed's love letter to family and friends, to anyone and everyone, even those he's never met. It remembers traditions and the simple joys that make life like the snow globe that sits on the mantel all through the Christmas season, like the children's faces when the stockings are hung, like the circle of loved ones who gather around the fireplace to hear again the story that's been told a thousand times already. So grab your mug of hot chocolate, your kids, your parents, your friends, and remember with Jim all the ways the spirit of Christmas permeates all of our days.

Irene Latham

"A clear conscience is a continual Christmas."

--Benjamin Franklin

## CHRISTMAS COMES BUT ONCE A DAY

Christmas *does* come but once a day!

I can't keep it out of my mind.

My mother was a Christmas mother. Every holiday provided the excuse she needed for bolstering her own spirits and the spirits of those around her. Our little family on Eastwood Avenue in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, was a Christmas family because of Mother.

You see, Christmas was the very thing we needed most to counteract the dead of Winter, to bring light to the longest nights of the year, to give us a chance to once again believe in the idea of Spring. Without the idea of Spring in mind, how could we possibly have survived the Winter?

We kids and Mother decorated everything that didn't move, and some things that did. Our pet dogs Brownie and Sissy might be seen running through the house decked in wreaths or gossamer aluminum icicles. The windows would be sprayed with fake snow. The plastic candles with big red bulbs shone through the fake snow to provide just the right glow to passersby.

The Christmas tree had to be somewhat democratically selected by the entire family as we trudged through the cold woods near Uncle Pat McGee's home in Peterson, Alabama. It wasn't really a Christmas tree if it didn't have to be lugged through what seemed like miles of forest to our waiting Willys automobile. It wasn't really a tree if we didn't later find pine or fir needles in our underwear, if we

didn't get our fingers sticky with resin that couldn't be removed voluntarily. It couldn't be called a Christmas tree unless half the needles had fallen off by New Year's Day. Those needles were necessary to remind us in the middle of July—when we were still finding them under the sofa and in our socks—that, yes, another Christmas just might come one day.

Every part of Christmas was special to Mother and us kids. We got the tree up and decorated as early as possible and sometimes did not take it down till February was threatening to occur.

And every decoration counted, every decoration was sacred.

There were cheap plastic Baby Jesuses and velvet-clothed Santa Clauses, bakelite angels and glassy angel hair strands, small ceramic Snoopies and brown-paper handmade stars, miniature mangers and stockingcapped elves, tin whistles and school-pasted wooden shards with glitter applied, strung popped popcorn necklaces and varnished mummified cookies.

Mother's fireplace mantle was fully and carefully decorated and arranged with a mixture of kids' handcrafted stuff and store-bought doodads. The front and back doors were decorated, the lawn was bedecked, even the bathroom door was all Christmassed-up.

Christmas was a yearlong idea, a monthlong project, an intense array of garlands and gewgaws, clutter and array. So much was put into Christmas that the images stayed with you all year long and in fact all life long.

Every and each time I smell ginger or apples or vanilla or pine or baking dough or roasting pecans, Christmas comes back to me in a second. Each time I pass an ornately dressed bungalow in a tiny neighborhood, it all comes back. Every time I hear the old carols, whenever I look up in the frozen winter to see a bright star or two, whenever I see the gleam in a child's eye, Christmas comes back to me.

Christmas comes but once a day.

When the very idea of Christmas, the very idea of unselfish giving, the very idea of warm family gatherings and sharings...when these things die from our lives, won't we all die a bit, too? When the soul goes flat from lack of sweet remembrance, the world will be declared flat, too.

Thanks to you, Mother, I can hold on to Christmas even when there's nothing visible to grab hold of ❄️



## SNUG ADRIFT

WHEN YOU'RE SNUG ABED AND TRYING TO SLEEP THE NEARLY-LONGEST-NIGHT-OF-THE-YEAR and you begin to drift raftless through the years and the years of holidays gone past, holidays gone dim, holidays occasionally bright and warm and tacky with the carnival-design colors and trappings that kids love and cherish and hold their breaths over, I hope you will take a moment to remember the best Christmas or holiday you ever ever ever had and allow yourself to slip into it and dream the sweet sweet dreams of a four-year-old who just knows that every kindly fable and each and every sweet tale every adult ever told any kid is absolutely true and verifiable if just for that one moment when the tale is first told.

And I hope this brings a comfortable smile to your lips despite the Grinch-like characteristics society thrusts upon you.

For one sweet moment, simply defy reality and be a safe, secure and happily sugarplummed child and remember you—the once and future real you—and how you once were and how you still are, somewhere deep deep deep down inside ☐



## THE ONE TRUE SANTA

When you believe something so strongly so unrelentingly so innocently that your behavior defies all logic all convention all common sense all cynicism, then you have the gift of purity that can only be defiled by an unkind word a thoughtless gesture or one moment of insensitivity.

Remember when you believed so deeply in Santa Claus that you would confide only in him—in him only—your innermost desires? Remember when you believed so deeply in the omnipotence and honesty of Santa that not only did you confide in him your wishes but you at the same time, honoring the magic secret between yourself and the old elf, would not dare not could not tell anyone else your secret—not even your parents? Remember what it was like to keep such a tightly held secret so pure that, because your parents did not know what you and Santa had discussed, you therefore did not receive on Christmas morn the gift you wanted? Remember how you never blamed Santa Claus for not bringing the gift you desired, since Santa did after all tell you that he'd try his best but couldn't promise?

You looked the other way on behalf of Santa because he was sacred he was honest he bore no grudges he did no evil he was you know Santa Claus, after all.

How long has it been since you believed in something that powerfully? And isn't it amazing that because you held those beliefs as a child, Santa still has some power over you?

All logic all evidence aside you still want to believe in Santa Claus and the idea of Santa Claus and somewhere deep deep inside you, don't you think you do still believe in him?

Because if you ever stopped believing in such wonderful ideas wouldn't the world do its final bit of perishing in the heart and wouldn't the world just be another planet in the technical and mathematical universe, bereft of all soul and heart and sincerity and just full of cold debris and detritus floating around with no particular purpose?

Santa is the glue of the hopeful universe—Santa and his counterparts deep in the beings of children since time began ✨

## IF ONLY IN MY DREAMS

This is the home stretch. It's the time of year when all your feelings get jumbled together and you really don't know what to feel except nervous, excited and oh I don't know, maybe even thrilled.

You know you want to get a lot of good stuff for Christmas, but you also know that you shouldn't feel too excited about just getting instead of giving...you know you want to give something to people you love or people you want to impress or people you know are probably going to give you something back, but you also know that there's something vaguely sinful-feeling about just wanting to give for the sake of what you're going to be given.

You read all those stories about Christmastime charity and how nice it is to give of yourself and your time and even of your money to those who won't ever be able to repay you, but you also would like to get a bunch of nice things that remind you of the best Christmases you ever had.

You always want people to kind of read your mind and give you just the perfect gift that takes you back to your best years, but you don't even know how to express this to them and so you just go on feeling like the best part of Christmas is the anticipation, the wanting part...not the actual getting and giving part.

You may even remember the few times in your life that you secretly gave something to someone who needed it and never ever let them know that it was you who did it. You remember the mixed feelings you had about that—how you knew it

was blessed to give anonymously, but also how you wished you knew for sure that you were going to get credit for the deed in some celestial Big Book in the Sky.

You also know that you will never know for certain whether you'll get credit for deeds like that, and it's that special tension created out of this confusion that makes you much more alert and wired at this time of year.

And best of all, you also know deep deep down inside you that the best Christmases you've ever had or ever will have are those Christmases that exist in your memories and in your future hopes.

As the Grinch learned almost too late, Christmas happens whether or not there's lots of getting and receiving and gimme-ing.

I hope this helps you know that there are others who are ambivalent about Christmas and about the spirit of giving and getting. And know this, too: the best part of you is the part that is willing to admit ambivalence and is willing to struggle to walk the tightrope that carefully and precariously balances you between total selfishness and total martyrdom. You just happen to be human ❄️

## JANGLING

You can almost feel the holiday seasonings coming upon you, even if you are a Grinch, even if you are a Scrooge, even if you aren't even Christian or Jew or Muslim.

Somehow, the silent and humid darkness manages to creep in between everything and affect you, in between the jangle bells that jingle the nerves, the jingle bells that jangle the nerves, the electronic carols, the lyrics about people longing for another time, in between the strains of escalator music, down under the heat vents outside the big stores where street people huddle to suck up the warmth, deep down into the basement where newborn puppies try to open their eyes and figure out what's for lunch, down under the cars where mechanics probe oil pans to ready the metal monster for its annual homeward trek.

You can smell spices even if they aren't there, you can feel the cottoned snow on your fingers even if it is only Alabama-80-degree-cotton snow, you can glimpse in the eyes of overstimulated kids the anticipation—just how will grandma like the crayoned gift you've worked on, just how does that fat guy get down a chimney when there's no chimney in a trailer or an apartment or a housing project?

The season bears down on you like a heavy warm comforter, and despite the nervous merchants, the hassled salesclerks, the commercials and billboards and ads, despite the lost gift lists and the just-one-more-item-I-gotta-get panic, despite the sure knowledge that the season isn't the same for everybody, you can still pick up from the very chilled breath-puffs in the air the spirit that you now need to get

through and muddle by and tread softly past your troubles hoping that they won't grab you till after the first of the year at least.

Here's to all the people who'll try to find, with a little help from anybody who's paying attention, some solace and a small joy or two, even if they are inside a jail, rec-halled in a nursing home, lined up at a soup kitchen, abed in a hospital, lonely and alone in a Rolls Royce with no friends to be found.

Even if they are in a joyous state of collapse, let's hope they find some comfort in knowing that the world is full of people who despite the oncoming disasters that we can all dream up, are still able to pause once in a while and find peace, even if it has to be deep inside rather than outside and in plain view, even if it's just seven times a day aimed toward Mecca, even if it's for a brief moment over a cuppacoffee before the happy young savages attack the Cheerios, even if it is just for a brief and godlike moment behind your tightly closed and wishing eyelids ❁

## SANTA ME

For a long while there, I wanted to be Santa Claus. No, I really mean I wanted to be Santa Claus for a living. Not just for a living, I wanted to really and truly be a fulltime Santa Claus in a jolly red fur-lined suit and I wanted to be the center of attention of all the children of the world who know anything about Santa Claus.

What a kick. To be the man to whom all children look when they still believe in the things that are really true...things such as:

It is better to receive and to give in an equal spirit of loving...

It is joyful to spend hours picking out just the right gift for just the right person and personalize it with handmade wrapping and little notes (instead of grabbing something from the \$20-and-under counter at the drug store on the way to Grandmother's house)...

It is better to wait in gentle agony for the gift-opening than to actually open the gift itself (once that's done, it's all over, you know)...

It is better to sit quietly contemplating the lighted Christmas tree in the darkness of your own living room than to watch every heavily-commercialized Christmas special ever made and every commercial loading you down with guilt and misgivings (wind up a little music-box there in the darkness and listen to some old, out-of-tune-but-grand-anyhow Christmas tune and shed a tear for the sweet memories it retrieves from your jumbled and overtaxed brain)...

It is better to hold the hand of someone you forgot to love enough, than to glad-hand a boss you don't care for or an influential person you just feel like buttering up (surprise your least favorite relative by giving forth a big hug, look straight into those lonely eyes and smile warmly like a Cheshire cat...what a glow that might bring!)...

It is better to sit down and carefully, painfully bring back the good times in your silent mind and fondle them kindly, and forgive the least forgiveable people you know—what power that gives you!

And it is better to figure out how nice something is all by yourself than to shell out tons of money on therapy and self-improvement...figure out what blessings you have that can't be taken away because they are safely tucked abed in the so-soft darkness of your imagination ❁

## SEASONINGS

The holiday season, wound up tight as a catch in the calf, is winding down now, long enough for the survivors to tally the blessings and nurse the wounded. So, here's an alcoholesse toast to my blessings, and the blessings each of us carries if we'll just take time to check:

Here's to the little old lady who'll be taking her holiday lunch alone at a downtown cafeteria, daydreaming of a time when she had family who made it a point to stay in touch and keep on touching...

Here's to the memory of my father's large, cool hand on my small brow, checking to see if I would survive another childhood illness under tons of blankets & gummy aspirin, so long ago in Tuscaloosa, Alabama...

Here's to the prisoner who'll get to see family visitors for a few precious moments, and to the prisoner who'll see only vertical shadows on the nearby wall...

Here's to all our never-to-be Southern dreams of an icy white blanket of snow covering the sidewalks and making puppies dance on Christmas morn...

Here's to the toothless old man in line at the Social Grill Cafeteria in Birmingham, Alabama, who asks for three servings of hot mashed potatoes and nothing more...

Here's to my Mother, who taught us kids to make toasts like this without the use of alcohol or tobacco or caffeine. Wherever she is, may she be proud of the fact we don't drink or smoke or take coffee to this day...

Here's to the large vacant lot across the street from our house when I was tiny, where I made so many wonderful memories, and where friends were more plentiful and loyal than they've ever been since...

Here's to a handful of people in my life, who, despite widely varying interests and personalities, have never forgotten to stand by me in times of good and times of bad...

Here's to the land of Alabama, where my fortunes have been made and unmade and made again, and where my roots are so deep that, should you try to move me, I'd crack at the base and wander lost forever...

Here's to my Wife, for whom marriage to me has been a true sacrifice, and who is loyal and true and more cuddly than the Teddy Bear I've owned since I was one year old...

Here's to my wish that you might share a dream with me, a dream of a day when all of us can look with newborn eyes at one another and relish our differences, celebrate our idiosyncracies, chuckle at our vanities & forget for a time about words & concentrate instead on the terrible longing each of us has to hold and be held with tenderness and acceptance.

Drink deep this toast and remember the good stuff and eschew the bad ❄

## CHRISTMAS 1988

What was that that just whizzed by and left us breathless, heavier, broker...and did we get anything out of it?

What it was, was Christmas.

Thought we had gotten the latest Christmas out of the way, but its vestiges are everywhere apparent, still.

On the road back from Fort Payne, Alabama, this weekend, a plastic mailbox wreath blew tattered in the warm wind. On the baby grand piano in our foyer at home, a few wind-up toys and an electric train remain partially dismantled, and soon the small ceramic houses and latex Santas will take their long winter's naps in tissue-padded gift boxes.

The toys and trains and holly plastics are little jabs into the past, small probes I issue each year in an attempt to regain an old feeling or two that I can safely identify as the Christmas Feeling. I no longer feel self-conscious about it.

The word has gone out: *don't get Daddy (me) anything but toys for Christmas.*

I don't care for clothes, don't need a screwdriver, don't want a gift certificate, have all the books in the world. Just get me toys, toys that are simple and whimsical and inexpensive.

After years of proclaiming this, the extended family has gotten the hint, and *toys R me!*

The toys do help, and each one opened is one played with by adults around me who haven't gotten a toy in years. I went around asking each adult I ran across before and after Christmas: are you getting toys for Christmas? Did you get a toy

for Christmas? Each time, the same response: a defensive twitch followed by something nameless crossing the face, and then an almost forlorn, “Well, no, I guess I didn’t get a toy.”

And I watch visitors to our home at Christmastime. They are first taken a bit aback by the toys I pull out and put on display each year. And within minutes they’re fiddling with them self-consciously, then, later, they sneak back to the piano, and we’ll find them winding and switching and playing by themselves with little grins of private satisfaction they probably haven’t had for a long time.

Allow me \$15.00 to spend on a gift for you and I’ll find a toy that meets all the requirements of a Christmas toy: it’ll puzzle you, delight you, make you chuckle out loud, and if all is according to schedule, it’ll break before the day is through. But that’s OK. Part of the joy is taping and pasting it back together and making it work again—gives you an excuse to take it apart to see what makes it tick.

Of course, I can’t diddle like this all year, or folks will start thinking up reasons to put me away safely.

So, I’ll store those Christmas toys away sometime this week, just minutes before my wife is finally exasperated beyond all patience, and I’ll give her a hug she may not have time for and assure her that her foyer and her piano are all hers again for another eleven months.

And I’ll gleefully think of the day next December when I’ll casually say to her, “Why don’t we get the toys out this year for the *kids* to enjoy?” knowing full well that kids will pay little attention to them—after all, kids are used to having toys around all year.

It’s the kids abed within us who want so badly to have their toys back and around them just one more time ❁

## **WHAT DAY *ISN'T* CHRISTMAS & FATHER'S DAY ALL AT ONCE?**

Most of us don't get a chance to select our given names, mainly because, as infants, we can't articulate the words needed to make a suggestion for a good name. So, we live with what's given us.

My name is James Thomas Reed, III, which means that my father and paternal grandfather had the same name. It just kind of trickled down to me. My grandfather was called Jim, my father was called Tommy, and I am Jim.

My grandfather bought a house in the tiny coal mining town West Blocton, Alabama, around the turn of the century—a house that is still standing. On Easter Sunday in the year 1909, my father, Tommy, was born in that house. Since there were seven or so brothers and sisters ahead of Tommy, my grandfather Jim placed the infant in an Easter basket and announced to his brood that the Easter Bunny had delivered this pink, noisy package.

Back then, kids believed that sort of thing.

Now, to know my father, you'd have to know the people he admired, since men in his generation weren't much for sitting around telling you about themselves. No, you just had to look around and pay attention to the men whose lives they emulated.

In my father's case, I can remember who some of his heroes, both literary and real, were:

Sergeant Alvin York, who never accepted a dime in trade for the heroism he'd shown for his country in World War I.

Preacher Josiah Dozier Grey, and Uncle Famous Prill, the heroes of Joe David Brown's Birmingham novel/movie, *Stars in My Crown*, men who never wavered from belief in family and neighbors and principles. They were forerunners of Atticus Finch and other strong Southern heroes of fiction and non-fiction.

Harry Truman, who dispensed with nonsense and tried to do the right thing, even when it was not popular. He was in a long line of no-nonsense leaders, such as John L. Lewis and Eric Hoffer, people who thought for themselves and never followed a posse or a trend.

Jesus Christ, who, like my father, was a carpenter, and a principled man.

And so on.

Now, it's important to understand this one thing about my father—to look at him, to be around him, you'd never know he was a hero. He was a working-class, blue-collar, unassuming person you'd probably not notice on the street, unless you noted that he limped from an old coal mining injury received when he tried to save another man's life. It was his very invisibility that made him a true hero, because he did the kind of thing that nobody gets credit for: he loved unconditionally and without reward. That's right. He was a practitioner of unconditional love for family, the kind of love that seeks no return, no attention. You would have

embarrassed Tommy Reed if you had tried to thank him for his acts of kindness, because you were not supposed to notice.

He gave money in secret to relatives in need. He grimaced and bore silently the abuse of those who forgot to appreciate or thank him. And he never announced his good deeds. You just had to catch him now and then in an act of kindness.

His heroes were all men who didn't need adulation.

What my father needed was a hard day's work at an honest job, a few moments of privacy after a good meal, time to read a book or watch television with a child or grandchild on his lap, and an occasional hug from his 50-year wife, my mother.

You could do worse than have a father like Preacher Grey and Joel McCrea, Uncle Famous and Juano Hernandez, Gregory Peck and Atticus Finch, Eric Hoffer, John L. Lewis, Harry Truman, Sergeant York and Gary Cooper, and Jesus.

Do they make 'em like that any more? You bet they do, but you won't know about it for a while, because they don't have press agents. What they do have is the appreciation that takes years to grow and make itself known, the appreciation we come to have after we, too, have been called upon to commit an occasional act of unrewarded kindness.

Take another look at your own father. Who are his silent heroes? Who are yours❁



## ANNOYING ANNOYANCE

Now you just have to be patient for a moment here and listen to my tale about THE ANNOYING TOY. It goes this way:

Last Christmas, my two-year-old grandson Reed received from friends of the family a beautifully crafted bright yellow purple-tired red-hubcapped red-fendered battery-operated HOT DOG TRUCK.

Now this is not just your regular run-of-the-toys-r-us hot dog truck. This hot dog truck is nine inches long and nine inches high and has clear-plastic display panels on each side which each display six small hot dogs (wieners to you, weenies to us Southerners).

In the open front cab of the truck sits a pink-faced mustachioed guy with a blue hat, orange shirt, white pants and white gloves—not to mention blue eyes...

shaped like this: + +

The green headlamps, bright green bell and slogans animate everything—"Happy Hot Dog" on the front hood, "Yum Yum" on the side doors, "Chili Cheese Dog 99 cents Mustard Dog 59 cents Deluxe Combo (fries and drink) 99 cents."

Behind the six vertical hot dogs (no mustard) is a sign, "Happy Hot Dog Dancing for You." Did I mention the fact that atop the hot dog truck is a great big hot dog (with mustard snaking across the top) that looks almost real if you squint or if you're two years old?

Now, this hot dog truck toy is pretty cute and quite unusual looking, but what makes it really fun and annoying is what it does. When you throw the switch on the bottom of the hot dog truck, it suddenly begins playing loud, rhythmic and unidentifiable music, and the front purple wheels begin walking (not turning) the front of the truck in time with the beat.

The truck walks!

Then, after the tune goes on for a few seconds, the hot dog truck driver yells, "Hot Dog! Hot Dog!" in a clipped accent of some kind—could be Brooklyn, could be Hispanic. Part of the mystery, you know.

While he's yelling, his upper body shakes back and forth, he rings the green bell, and the six hot dogs (three on each side) start dancing! Then, the truck repeats this routine until an annoyed adult turns it off or stomps it.

A most wonderfully annoying toy!

Well, two-year-old Reed was afraid of that hot dog truck and wouldn't have anything to do with it, but I loved it. It was just the thing every kid dreams of having—a toy that makes you laugh while annoying all adults within hearing distance.

Even after you turn the truck off, you can still make it yell, "Hot Dog! Hot Dog!" twice by pushing a rose-colored button next to the driver, or you can make that funky music go on for a couple of seconds by pushing the violet button.

Boy, did I have fun with that hot dog truck! Nobody else did.

As we were leaving my daughter's home after the Christmas weekend, she presented me with the bright yellow hot dog truck. "No," I said. "This belongs to Reed!" She looked at me for a second and said, "Dad, I want you to have this toy." The steel in her voice made me realize that she not only NEEDED for me to remove this toy from her home, but she knew that it would make me a lot happier than it would ever make her or Reed.

I grabbed this gift and drove the five hours back to Birmingham, occasionally annoying my wife and granddaughter by pushing the rose-colored button. And, once in a while, by pushing the violet button. What fun!

Now, the Happy Hot Dog truck sits atop my bookloft counter (I'm at least smart enough not to take it home) for me to show off to annoyed customers and annoying little kids.

If you know anything about other annoying toys made by the Metro Toy Company in the Philippines, please let me know. My joy may be your pain, but what's wrong with making an old guy happy ❄



## MALLED BY CHRISTMAS

So there I was, cruising along Downtown Birmingham, when I noticed the sign over the building that for half a century was F.W. Woolworth, only now it's called CALIFORNIA FASHION MALL and has a bunch of shops ranging from CHECK CASHING to WIGS to FASHION WEAR and the like.

Think about it for a minute.

CALIFORNIA FASHION MALL in Downtown Birmingham. What a concept! Little old Alabama is promoting the state of California with its cutting-edge trendy fashions, paying homage to a state a few thousand miles away.

Any day now, residents of Los Angeles will be driving along in downtown L.A. and get whiplash as they pass ALABAMA FASHION MALL. No doubt when they see the sign covering the old L.A. F.W. Woolworth building, they'll be doing U-turns and rushing in to see what cutting-edge trendy fashions those Alabamians have come up with this week.

Imagine! ALABAMA FASHION MALL.

Soon, L.A. Baptists will be poofing up their hair with spray starch and wearing macho hip-hugging jeans you see now and then in the Deep South, those polyester-frocked folk wearing pointy-tipped eyeglasses and spitting tobacco from their pickup trucks, sporting deer-hunting hats in the summer and lacquering on another layer of makeup before going to the whistle-stop cafe.

And while L.A.'uns are coming up to speed with their idea of who Alabamians are, Alabamians will be coming away from CALIFORNIA FASHION MALL wearing thong bathing briefs, shaving their heads and donning desert boots, painting their nails purple and dying their poodles pink, just like you see on TV.

This could be the start of something profound.

Hope you folks in L.A. have a peaceful Christmas around your pink aluminum Christmas trees (honest—I think that's what a lot of us believe you do!), and I hope that you get some laconic pleasure out of picturing us Alabamians fanning ourselves against a white column on the front porch while a hound dog eyes the Christmas tree which is after all just a Southern Pine ❄

## A CHRISTMAS JIGSAW PUZZLED LIFE

A puzzlement, to be sure, is life and its puzzles within puzzles. My wife works crossword puzzles as daily therapy. If she doesn't get to spend some time serially and intensely and uninterruptedly grimacing over a crossword puzzle at least once a week, her balance is awry and I am in danger. My presence is needed during these sessions only once or twice a year, when she through kindness or distraction will actually ask me for a difficult word. I'm usually wrong.

My brother Ronny is a jigsaw puzzle expert, always has been. The rest of the family is in awe of his ability to stick with a jigsaw puzzle, calmly scanning the table surface for the next exactly perfect irregular piece that will go precisely over there, completing the pepperoni slice of the large pizza puzzle we just knew would finally, for once in his life, stump him. When Christmas shopping, we never find a puzzle that conquers him. Ronny has even been known to turn a puzzle over, face down, and put it together just as effortlessly. We've given him mirror-image puzzles designed to create stress of a high order, but he works them anyhow.

Some day I craftily plan to give him two identical jigsaw puzzles mixed together in the same box, or a 20-foot by 20-foot jigsaw puzzle, if such exists. Even though the family has given him puzzles for Christmas for decades, he never complains—of course, he probably wouldn't complain, even if he quietly gave up the hobby years ago. He'd still work the puzzles out of politeness.

At least there are two people in the family who are easy to give to: a crossword puzzle book for Liz, a jigsaw puzzle for Ronny, and—make that three people—toys for me. Yes, nobody dares give me books anymore, for fear I already own

everything—which I do. And Ye Gods forbid I should be interested in clothes or tool sets. No, I just like little inexpensive but eccentric toys. Any time you're stumped over what to give me for another embarrassing birthday or another Christmas, it's safe to give me a toy.

I'm surrounded by toys and books, and maybe that's why I am sometimes caught smiling for no reason at all, in the midst of the terrorist activities of family and life. Just leave me alone, looking at my windup duck riding a tricycle, sitting on the ledge in front of me next to my Reed's Rocket Nutcrackers container and the plastic nose that dispenses ugly green candy, and I'm happy for a while. Just put me next to my signed and inscribed copy of Ray Bradbury's first book, and my copy of a first-edition Walt Kelly and my copy of the unpublished work by my brother Tim and myself, HORACE THE HORRIBLY HOARSE HORSE, and I can muster a momentary smile.

Just give me a place for my stuff and I will somehow survive the obfuscation around me, just give Ronny a jigsaw puzzle and he can be alone in a crowd for a few hours, just give Liz her crossword puzzle and run for the hills, and she'll be blissful. Hope that at Christmas, you have something you can hide out in for a mo' ❄

## MY BEAUTIFUL SANTAS

I was born in 1941, into more beautiful and simple times.

Just three months before the U.S.'s entry into World War Two.

My early childhood was magnificent. Despite all the horrors that were taking place in the world, my parents and family managed to shield me. Despite all the suffering and sacrifice, I was allowed, with my brother Ronny and sister Barbara, to simply be a child.

I've never thanked my parents enough for this gift, nor can I ever.

My family, plus my uncles, aunts, cousins, neighbors, grandparents and my village in general, kept me pure and innocent as long as they possibly could.

Maybe that's what all really good villagers do throughout the world. Good villagers know the secret of whistling past the graveyard, the secret of distracting yourself with simple pleasures and wide-eyed fantasies and lesson-laden folklore.

Anyhow, part of my joyful childhood was spent thinking about Santa Claus and all that he and Mrs. Claus represented. Mother and sister Barbara made sure we boys did not insult Santa by thinking of him as merely someone who brought us lots of undeserved loot each year. They carefully instilled in us the idea that Santa represented how good people could be to each other, given the opportunity. If Santa was to be good to us, we would have to learn to be good to Santa, too.

We respected Santa Claus and wrote him letters, making certain that we did more than ask for goodies. We asked how he was feeling, whether he and Mrs. Claus were weathering their perpetual winter ok, how Donner and Blitzen were getting along. We promised him we would leave lots of milk or hot chocolate and cookies for him, and of course a bowl of raisins for the reindeer. Early on, we knew the importance of frequent snacks when you're working—or playing—hard.

We even knew what Santa Claus really looked like.

The fact that Santa was a black man and a white man at the same time did not confuse us at all, because we had visual proof.

White Santa looked exactly like Edmund Gwenn, a wonderful old character actor who played Kris Kringle in the movie, "Miracle on 34th Street." Black Santa looked exactly like a beautiful color painting that appeared alongside Roark Bradford's story, "How Come Christmas," in Collier's Magazine.

"Miracle on 34th Street" changed my life forever. It's the story of how cynicism is useless in the face of fantasy. It's the story of how fantasy is the only truth in a child-filled world. Santa lives!

"How Come Christmas" changed my life forever. It's the story of Santa Claus through the eyes of African American children, who turned out to be exactly like White American children.

The only other Santa Claus-like figure in folklore that we believed in passionately was James Baskett, who played Uncle Remus in Walt Disney's movie, "Song of the South." Uncle Remus was every bit as heroic and gentle and child-loving as our White Santa and our Black Santa. We even suspected that all three were the same person.

I can't think of anybody who exerted more influence in my life—to this very day—than Santa Claus. And I still remember what I discovered in childhood: There are Santas everywhere. They are rare, but they can be sought out and found if you look hard enough.

I guess I've spent my entire life looking for and secretly appreciating my Santa Claus heroes. These were people who profoundly believed in the child each of us tries to hide from the world, except when it's safe. I still have them comfortably nearby, in my stories about them, in little keepsakes, in small reminders of their existence.

You could do worse in life than believe in Santa Claus, the kind of Santa Claus that can pop up anywhere in the world and treat you with kindness and respect. If you go looking for Santa, Santa will be available. Doesn't matter whether you're religious, unreligious, antireligious. Doesn't matter whether you are 95 or five. Santa is right there, waiting to give you a reassuring smile and the gift of attention. Don't blink and miss him ❁



## SPITZ JUNIOR

When I was a young one just trying to absorb the fact that I'd never be a Babe Ruth or an Albert Einstein or an Edgar Allan Poe or a Gregory Peck, I received for Christmas, sitting there just beyond reach of the carnival-decorated gaudy fir tree, a SPITZ JUNIOR PLANETARIUM, manufactured by HARMONIC REED CORPORATION OF ROSEMONT, PENNA.

It was a most special Christmas gift.

Just looking at it now, in my mind's eye, it has remained crystal-clear all these many years: a shiny black flexible-plastic globe bifurcated by a yellow rubber equatorial flange that represents the stellar ecliptic and incidentally holds the two half-spheres together. The black globe sits atop a white plastic observatory-shaped base, and the whole thing can be rotated round and round as well as moved up and down to simulate all the naked-eye observable movements of the stars.

To appreciate the planetarium, you had to take it into a pitch-dark, preferably cube-shaped room and slowly turn up the rheostat just above the off-on switch on the front of the base. If you did it just right and just slowly enough, you would suddenly feel yourself transported to the middle of a darkened field in the middle of the night in the middle of the planet in the middle of the universe because, all around you, there would suddenly appear stars in exactly the same positions, the same configurations, as they would appear if you actually were in the middle of a darkened field in the middle of the night in the middle of...etc.

Even if you couldn't go outside to see the stars, even if it was cloudy and raining, even if you had just come indoors from the humid sunshine, you could still go into that darkened room and be somewhere else in time and space and feel all alone in a crowd of billions of others whose names you did not know.

Just a while ago, my sister Rosi got my SPITZ JUNIOR PLANETARIUM out of storage and presented it to me and I took it home and now I sleep again in the middle of a darkened field in the middle of the night in the middle...

Whenever the demon insomnia causes my eyes to flicker open, I can see the old familiar stars keeping me silent company and reminding me that they will always be there and that any problems that seem gargantuan now are minuscule compared to the distant silent coolness and the close-up noisy fury of those suns upon suns upon suns out there. The mathematics and physics of astronomy escaped me early on, but the sheer personal poetry of the tiny points of light so large and so far away still affects me and still makes me remember what it was like to be a small boy and open an incredible shiny gift that pure and lonely Christmas so many eons ago in Tuscaloosa, Alabama ❄

## MAGIC

When I was small—not too small, mind you—the world was still a magic place. I wanted to lead everyone I knew into this magic world. I thought a smashing way to do this would be to become a magician. A prestidigitator. A master of illusion. A fake fakir who could fool and entertain his superiors all at once.

Santa Claus, who still existed back then, gave me a big, garish book of illustrated magic tricks by Joseph Dunninger. I spent hours wearing that book out, trying to master the simple tricks within.

Later, one of my most cherished gifts, my Rosebud, came, at yet another Christmas: a complete paper-covered case full of Mandrake the Magician magic tricks. I practiced alone in my room, tried out the easier ones on my brother Ronny, and spent hours hoarding and cataloging these and other sleight-of-hand acts and gags, dreaming of the day I'd be able to fool everybody at will with my suave patter and my dashing Batman cape (blue on the outside, red on the inside, or vice versa—confiscated from my sister Barbara).

What I did not yet know about myself was that I was shy, painfully shy, and that my only confidence remained hidden within myself, was only apparent in my heart.

By the time I got up enough nerve to perform in front of my entire family in the dining room (even my father, though fidgety, sat bemusedly and watched my show), I was nervous but determined to go ahead with the tricks I'd learned. The easiest trick I knew, which I believe Barbara had taught me, was the one where you

make an empty glass go through a solid table and land on the floor, hopefully unbroken. I actually pulled this off successfully if slowly, and went through a few other tricks I knew before the performance faded to an end.

The family had watched patiently if stoically. My fantasies had come to a head, had been realized right in my own dining room. I was satisfied and thereafter gave up magic, for I had not yet been given the gift of self-confidence and knew that I could never stand before strangers and fool them, too. I knew my family watched because they had to, because they had manners and could not help but watch, and because they loved me and would have enjoyed the show even if it had been terrible.

So, my little box of tricks lay stored and labeled by my mother, waiting for re-discovery.

After that, I went on to other hobbies, including amateur astronomy and sky observation. Now that was a hobby tailor-made for a shy person. I never had to perform. I could be alone a lot and my family would not worry over the fact that I spent entire nights on the roof of the house, peering through a telescope and dreaming my dreams, my starry dreams.

Even that hobby came to a close abruptly one day, when the Soviets launched the world's first artificial satellite and suddenly everybody wanted to become an astronaut or a star expert. Since loners have to have their own personal hobbies, hobbies that no one else they know is involved in, the skies suddenly lost their appeal as career fodder.



I faced the fact that I didn't want to be an astronomer anyhow. Facts and physics left me cold. What I really enjoyed about the heavens was their accessibility to the poet within me. I didn't want anyone to require a mathematical formula of me. I just wanted to enjoy the enormous, awesome feelings that came over me when I looked skyward, and I wanted to share these feelings with others.

Years later, I actually went to a meeting of amateur astronomers and found that they spent little time looking at stars, but much time doing calculations and explaining black holes to each other, and theorizing about the death of stars.

Sara Teasdale would not have approved, thank goodness. Do you know her poem, the one that best expresses that wonderful feeling the stars can give you if you open up to them? May I share it with you?

*Alone in the night*

*On a dark hill*

*With pines around me*

*Spicy and still*

*And a heaven full of stars*

*Over my head*

*White and topaz and misty red*

*Myriads with beating hearts of fire*

*That eons cannot vex or tire.*

*Up the dome of heaven*

*Like a great hill*

*I watch them marching*

*Stately and still*

*And I know that I*

*Am honored to be*

*Witness of so much majesty.*

Sara knew. Sara knew me. Sara knew all about me. Through the distance of time, through the timelessness of distance, she still holds my hand and Knows ❁



## PURITY

One day when I was seven years old, the world got all cleaned up and everything got a chance to start all over again.

Overnight, the multi-textured earth became one smooth, soft, icy texture, the world of colors and hues became one wonderful multi-shaded land of whites and off-whites and cream-whites and shadowed whites and faintly pinkish whites.

The world overnight cleansed the landscape and allowed clapping children to remold everything in their own images.

Snowmen and snowwomen appeared quickly, playing guardian to our delight.

Makeshift sleds materialized mysteriously out of old siding, ragged boards, large tubs and pans.

Footprints showed us who had been where and from where and where to, leaving traces of their makers—something that could never happen during ordinary times.

Mother took the whitened landscape that Daddy had gathered from the yard and shrubbery and, waving her large magic wand of a serving-spoon, created the sweetest, sloshiest ice cream I've ever tasted.

Large multilayered men came outside to pretend they were younger in the deepening creamy banks, and little stuffed-slug kids meandered about in pelts made of nylon and dacron and cotton and leather.

Though we could barely make out each others' faces under all those makeshift scarves, we recognized everybody instantly, because they were our transmogrified neighbors and playmates running amok upon the unfamiliar terra-infirma.

All human routine was suspended and during that 24-hour period fifty years ago, nobody seemed to hold a job, nobody had homework to do, nobody had to be anywhere else but right there on our block on Eastwood Avenue right down from McArthur Avenue and Patton Avenue and 15th Street.

Some celestial force had taken over our little village for a day and, like Brigadoon, it would not repeat itself in our lifetimes but would save itself for the next hundred-year generation that needed a quick and gentle cleansing so that the next day, when all was back to normal texture normal color normal temperature normal firma, everybody who had experienced this whiter-than-white washing of the spirit would have a memory to cherish in old age, a memory of things being just right and just magical and just totally real all at the same time ❁

## UNCLE ADRON & THE MODEL-A DANCING MOON CATCHER

My earliest impressions of the big city of Birmingham came from the simple act of visiting there when I was very small. My Uncle Adron and Aunt Annabelle Herrin would load us kids, their kids and my mother into their Model-A Ford and take us from Tuscaloosa to Birmingham by way of the old Old Birmingham Highway.

In my lifetime, there have been three Tuscaloosa-to-Birmingham routes. There was first the old Birmingham Highway that ran right past my Grandfather's General Merchandise Store in Peterson, then there was the newer Birmingham Highway that bypassed the older road and began the demise of many businesses along the way, including, eventually, R.L. McGee General Merchandise.

The newer Birmingham highway was made of light asphalt and ran by Hamm's Pottery and a host of other landmarks in Tuscaloosa County. Then, much later, both roads were consigned to oblivion when the Interstate 59 highway made travelling to Birmingham a lot faster and a lot less interesting.

But way back then, in the late 1940's, the only logical route to the City was via the old Old Birmingham Highway, a black-asphalt, curvaceous two-lane route that took us past Peterson into Brookwood, from Brookwood to Bessemer, where we looked excitedly for the landmarks that would tell us Birmingham was near, such as the old Wigwam Motel—you could actually spend the night in a motel shaped like an Indian teepee, though I never got the chance to do it.

Then, we would look to the far right horizon in Bessemer to see who could spot the gigantic iron statue of the Norse God Vulcan, standing atop Red Mountain. Once we saw this rusty icon, we knew we were near the end of our voyage.

Speeding along the old Old highway on a clear cold December night, you could see the near-full moon ahead of the Model-A flying high in the purple-black sky. The moon would dance over the twisting road, touching the treetops, dipping out of sight, rising instantly high up as we followed that snaking trail and rose and fell with the hills and valleys along the way.

Uncle Adron, always a speed demon, would make that Model-A feel like a roller coaster, and he would always remind us that our primary goal was to catch up with that moon.

On the way to the annual Birmingham Christmas Parade, we kids would wiggle all over the back seat in impossibly tortured anticipation of seeing the Meccas of the season: Santa Claus on a parade float, and S.H. Kress and F.W. Woolworth, where everything Santa could ever dream up would be on display.

Coming into Birmingham, my first impression was a lasting one: I had never seen so many Black people, and they were a beautiful sight to a small boy, since they seemed to be dressed up in brightly-colored outfits and stylish hats and shoes, the likes of which I had never seen in Tuscaloosa. I thought it would be wonderful to be able to dress so boldly, for bright mixtures of colors always signify to a kid

happiness, good times and playfulness. I noticed that White people didn't dress nearly as well.

The big wide streets of Birmingham always seemed littered and not very well kept, compared to our little town of Tuscaloosa, but that didn't much matter to us kids. It would be unbearably cold on those Birmingham streets, but that was part of the excitement, you understand.

The parade would be gigantic, the stores brightly decorated, the city blocks long and arduous to walk, and the whole experience thoroughly exhausting and delightful. Then, Uncle Adron would pack all of us and our purchases back into the old Model-A and start the long trip back to Tuscaloosa. By then, the dancing moon and the cold stars in the purple sky would be forgotten because we could snuggle down into our musky blankets and sleep the safe sleep of children who knew nothing bad would ever happen to them as long as Uncle Adron was in charge, as long as Uncle Adron was running away from that dancing moon and aiming us all back toward Tuscaloosa and our own sweet-smelling beds ❄



## PLASTIC JESUS

Well, those genuine plastic Jesuses and those warmer than life holy Santas are everywhere now, and wherever you go, little kids are starting to get glowy-eyed, greedy and just plain as good as they can be, at least when they think about it, which is every twenty seconds or so.

On some rooftops, the mixed metaphors include Jesus, Rudolph, Mary, Santa, the Three Crosses, the Star of Bethlehem (five points, please), the Star of David (make that six points), Frosty the Snowman, the Wise Men (make that three), the shepherds, and Cabbage Patch Kids in the Manger.

Boggles the minds of those of us who think of Christmas as the sight of a dusty old Scrooge getting his comeuppance and learning to appreciate the real meaning of Christmas, which to any media-bred person today probably includes all of the above participating in some kind of Last Supper Before Gift-Opening-Time. Think of it: Santa would break the bread, perhaps, after having it blessed by Frosty, the wine changed into water by Jesus (after all, there are more Baptists down in this part of the country than there are people, and when I was a kid, Baptists didn't believe that Jesus ever drank real wine—just grape juice, you know), and a merry Thanksgiving turkey would be enjoyed by everyone except the Dove of Peace, whose mother taught him that cannibalism was wrong.

Does anybody remember the stories that really started all this seasonal warmth in the first place, the Hanukkah celebration, the Nativity idea, the longest-night-of-the-year ceremonies of Druids and lots of other meaningful gatherings that were

designed to bring people together for a bit of hand-holding and hugging before the spirit lifted and everybody got back to the business of living.

Well, curmudgeonly as it might sound, there are still some quiet and peaceful and downright spiritual moments to be had, even if they have to be shared by the Christmas Bunny and the Easter Elves. Hope you are blessing and blessed and that the season will be kind to you and you to it ❁

## SANTA'S MESSAGE: THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL

I run a Christmas shop, a Christmas museum, a Christmas antique emporium.

Why Christmas?

Well, you'd know the answer to that—if you'd known my Mother.

To Mother, every day was Christmas Eve and Christmas Day combined. All her life, she was able to see through the pain and confusion of life, through to the sweetness that she felt from the time she was born till her own Mother died fifteen years later. She never left childhood alone on the back step, but took it with her and carried her understanding of children and their pure and innocent outlook on life, all the way to another existence, eighty-three years after her birth.

Every day was Christmas at our house. Each day, we paid careful attention to weeds and frogs and paint chips and stuffed toys and sunbeams and tears and relatives and concrete sidewalks and Pepsi Colas and fresh cornbread. Under Mother's tutelage, we kids learned to note things, notice things, note people, notice people. Taking her example, we learned to find something fine in just about everything, everybody, every Thing, every Body. Each day, we woke up to a Christmas gift of life, neatly wrapped, anxiously waiting to be unwrapped.

That being said, maybe the rest of this story will make more sense to you.

Whenever I use the gift of *noticing* people, I learn something new.

While she was still alive and active, Mother spent some time each day hiding messages she prepared for her kids, grandkids, great-grandkids, and her extended family of kids. She didn't give us these messages directly, since her experience with human nature warned her that we would probably ignore them because of our youth and immaturity. So, Mother sent messages in bottles for us to find accidentally through the years, each time just as we were almost grown-up enough to recognize and appreciate them.

Christmas was Mother's favorite season, so she made sure that more secret messages were generated at that time. She wanted us to remember how much fun, how much love, swirled about our family so that we would remember to pass this joy along to our own families and extended families.

Mother died in 1997, and life went on without her, as life does. We kids and grandkids and great-grandkids went our way and did our own lives the way we thought we had designed them. At times, we acted as if we had never had a mother, as if we had invented ourselves, as if we were self-made.

But we could never fool ourselves for long.

Without Mother's nurturing and sacrifices, without her humor and overwhelming bluntness, we could not have been formed.

One day, my sister Barbara gave me a bunch of stuff she had salvaged from Mother's old house in Tuscaloosa. In the pile was an unopened box that felt hefty

enough not to be empty. When I had time a few days later, I took that box up and peered at it, reading the words thereon: “MUSICAL ROCKING SANTA. Sure to delight collectors of all ages, this 8 inch high rocking Santa captures the spirit of Christmas past with exquisite handfinished detail.”

The box was colorful and depicted a kindly snoozing Santa.

The imprinting continued, “It features a genuine Sankyo wind-up musical movement from Japan. Handcrafted and handpainted in China by people who care. This copyrighted design is made under an exclusive licensing agreement with the copyright holder. (C) 1995 II INC.”

This box looked familiar to me, but I couldn't quite get it. If it was manufactured in 1995, it couldn't have been one of my childhood toys.

Hmm...

I carefully opened the box, making sure not to damage anything, since I might find that it belonged to somebody else in the family.

Inside, a toy any Christmas Lover would covet:

A statue of Santa Claus—a dozing Santa Claus. I can still see the toy on my shelf at home, today: Santa's dozing, full-capped and furred, in a green highbacked rocking chair with a yellow kitten peeping over his right shoulder, a flop-eared dog

in his lap, a December 26 calendar in his drooped left hand and a small toy at his feet. His bathrobe and striped longjohns and tasselled red boots top it all off. This man is tired and at peace, falling sleep so fast he's forgotten to remove his spectacles.

When I wind him up, the chair gently rocks back and forth, a melody tinkles its way about the room, “We Wish You a Merry Christmas...”

I loved this toy, and it took me a few days to figure out its history. Recalling that Mother never stored anything she owned without leaving a note about it, I went back to the box, turned it upside down and, sure enough, there was Mother's message to me, these few years later. I could hear her musical voice saying it aloud,

“This goes back to Jim after I'm gone! I enjoyed this toy! –Mother”

That was my Mother, ok. She never threw anything away, knowing that someone in the far future would find joy in each remaining object, if only it was stored safely enough to be found.

This was her way of giving back to me the joy I had given her when I presented her with the Santa before she died.

Now, ol' Santa sits on my shelf, waiting to entertain, waiting to make me remember my Christmas Mother, waiting for me to pass him along to the next person who would take a close look at the bottom of the box to see what kind of message I would add to Mother's ❁

## MAGIC ACT

It's impossible to sleep any longer.

I sit upright on the top bunk in the bedroom my brother Ronny and I share, and I just about bump my head on the pimpled plaster ceiling as I jump down to the cold December hardwood floor. The thunk and the creak don't wake Ronny up, so I shake him from his always-solid deepsleep.

“Get up! Ronny! Up!”

It's time—daylight has arrived—to run into the livingroom to see what Santa has left us. Rules of the family dictate that all three of us kids have to go into the livingroom together, at the same time, and older sister Barbara makes sure we don't break those rules.

First thing Barbara does is come into our room to corral us and to point out that Santa has left lumps of coal in our shoes—a sure sign that we're not going to get everything we asked for. The brother in least favor for the week gets the most coal. We pay attention to that fact for about three beats, then head for the livingroom, looking for signs of the True Claus.

In a split second, I take in the entire livingroom and figure out where Santa has left my loot. He always lays out a few unwrapped items, and each kid gets a specific location that is easy to spot. Today, my gifts are on the sofa, and, like the Holy Grail, the best gift of all glows red and black and yellow and blue. It's a small cardboard suitcase that has been opened to display its contents:

*A MANDRAKE THE MAGICIAN MAGIC KIT!*

It's there, waiting and beckoning to me, promising hours of concentrated fun and much future fame, as Jimbo the Magic Man learns to be the nation's number one prestidigitator.

We're a reading family, us Reeds, so in addition to fondling and disassembling the tricks inside the suitcase, I absorb every word associated with the kit, inside and out.

It's "a Transogram 'Gold Medal' toy!"

It contains "magic made easy for children."

It's also "a fascinating collection of outstanding magic tricks!"

And look: It's copyrighted by "(c) king features syndicate 1949."

The fact that it's copyrighted makes it that much more special and official. I now own a COPYRIGHTED magic kit!

I also note that it's "Made in USA" instead of some inferior foreign country.

The Mandrake the Magician magic kit contains:

A “Mandrake the Magician wiz-escape trick,” magic tags, a “magic book of mystifying tricks series number 4.” Series number 4 sounds quite official and specific, doesn't it?

It was made by “Skinner mfg co omaha nebraska!” So far away. What a journey for Santa to bring that magic kit all the way from Nebraska to Alabama, along with a handful of coal for each shoe!

In that magic box are all kinds of tricks, some of which I will learn how to do with slight agility, some of which I never quite get right in performance. But the kit contains all the PROMISES, you see, and it's those promises that will get me through the full twelve-month year all the way to the next Holy Grail Christmas Day.

Tricks I may or may not learn to perform include the “jumping-jack” cork trick, the optical illusion trick that makes you think something is larger than it is, the egg-in-milk-bottle trick that allows you to make an egg enter an opening smaller than itself, mind-reading card tricks, a flying card trick, a shrinking dollar bill trick, a multiplying sponge bunnies trick, match tricks, needle tricks, and on and on and on.

In these pre-television days of yore, when kids like us spend our time reading and playing cards and board games and writing stories and drawing pictures and listening to Bob Hope and The Shadow and The Lone Ranger on radio and keeping scrapbooks and collecting comic books and bubble-gum cards and hearing our parents and neighbors and relatives tell stories both actual and true, we don't have time to slow down and dull down and sit like couch potatoes. There's always

something to do! We are not skilled voyeurs holding remote controls. We are the action that is controlled inside our joyful enthusiastic selves.

We don't have time to be bored because there's so much to experience and learn and absorb. Each day and night is a new experience-loaded time-and-space machine, and we don't know how to disembark.

Some of our neighborhood friends have gotten off the machine and disappeared into their homes to sit staring, then glaring, at black-and-white glowy square tubes featuring test patterns and a few hours of live time-filling performance. But we haven't been hooked yet and don't know how to sit still for something else to entertain us. WE entertain us! And even on a slow day, we sit quietly and search the staining grass for four-leaf clovers and lost marbles and newfound ladybugs and armadillo-like insects. A butterfly flitting by gives us our jolt of laughter for the morning. A small, gruff bullfrog talks to us. The cotton clothing on Mother's clothesline slaps at us and smells of sunshine as we pass by.

We are blissfully innocent of the knowledge of how to squander time. We look at each other and the surrounding world as newfound experiences moment by moment, and a surprise always intrudes itself just as we start to yawn.

The Mandrake the Magician magic kit still glows there on Mother's long-gone sofa, more than half a century later. The magic tricks still perform themselves in the air above my head. The television tube still frowns at me for spending so much time away from myself, my soul embedded in its hypnotic commercial glow. It seems to say, "I'm glad you're a vidiot for my sake, but just out of curiosity, how did someone so young and brilliant become so vidiotic? What happened to the gruff bullfrog and the flitting firefly ✨"

## THANKSGIVING: THE HAPPIEST SAD DAY OF THE YEAR

*The saddest thing I ever saw: a small, elderly woman dining alone at Morrison's Cafeteria, on Thanksgiving Day.*

*Oh there are many other sadnesses you can find if you look hard enough, in this variegated world of ours, but a little old lady dining alone on Thanksgiving Day makes you feel really fortunate, guilty, smug, relieved, tearful, grateful...it brings you up short and makes you time-travel to the pockets of joy and cheer you experienced in earlier days.*

Crepe paper. Lots of crepe paper. And construction paper. Bunches of different-colored construction paper. In my childhood home in Tuscaloosa, my Thanksgiving Mother always made sure we creative and restless kids had all the cardboard, scratch paper, partly-used tablets, corrugated surfaces, unused napkins, backs of cancelled checks, rough brown paper from disassembled grocery bags, backs of advertising letters and flyers...anything at all that we could use to make things. Yes, dear 21<sup>st</sup>-Century young'uns, we kids back then made things from scraps.

We could cut up all we wanted, and cut up we did.

We cut out rough rectangular sheets from stiff black wrapping paper and glued the edges together to make Pilgrim hats. Old belt buckles were tied to our shoelaces—we never could get it straight, whether the Pilgrims were Quakers, or vice versa, or neither. But it always seemed important to put buckles on our shoes and sandals, wear tubular hats and funny white paper collars, and craft weird-looking guns that

flared out like trombones at one end. More fun than being a Pilgrim/Quaker was being an Indian—a true blue Native American, replete with bare chest, feathers shed by neighborhood doves, bows made of crooked twigs and kite string, arrows dulled at the tip by rubber stoppers and corks, and loads of Mother's discarded rouge and powder and lipstick and mashed cranberries smeared here and there on face and body, to make us feel like the Indians we momentarily were.

Sister Barbara and Mother would find some long autumnal-hued dresses for the occasion, but they were seldom seen outside the kitchen for hours on end, while the eight-course dinner was under construction.

There was always an accordion-fold crepe paper turkey centerpiece on display, hastily bought on sale at S.H. Kress, just after last year's Thanksgiving season. It looked nothing like my Aunt Mattie's turkeys in her West Blocton front yard. And for some reason, we ate cranberry products on that day and that day only. Nobody ever thought about cranberries the other 364 days! And those lucky turkeys were lucky because nobody ever thought of eating them except on Thanksgiving and Christmas. They were home free the rest of the year!

*Now, back into the time machine of just a few years ago. It is Thanksgiving Day. My wife and son and granddaughter are all out of the country. Other family and relatives are either dead or gone, or just plain tied up with their own lives in other states, doing things other than having Thanksgiving Dinner with me.*

My brother, Tim, my friends Tim Baer and Don Henderson and I decide that we will have to spend Thanksgiving Dinner together, since each of us is bereft of wife or playmate or relative, this particular holiday this particular year.

So, we wind up at Morrison's Cafeteria, eating alone together, going through the line and picking out steamed-particle-board turkey, canned cranberries, thin gravy, boxed mashed potatoes and some bakery goods whose source cannot easily be determined.

But we laugh at our situation and each other, tell jokes, cut up a bit, and thank our lucky stars that this one Thanksgiving Dinner is surely just a fluke. We'll be trying that much harder, next year, to not get blind-sided by the best holiday of the year, Thanksgiving being the only holiday you don't have to give gifts or reciprocate gifts or strain to find the *correct* gifts.

*On Thanksgiving holidays ever since, I make sure I'm with family and friends, and now and then I try to set a place at the table of my mind, for any little old lady or lone friend who might want to join us, for the second saddest thing I've ever seen is a happy family lustily enjoying a Thanksgiving feast together and forgetting for a moment about all those lone diners in all the cafeterias of the world who could use a glance and a smile ❁*



## **DREADED NIGHT HOLY MOLY NIGHT**

There are those among us who are filled with dread at the prospect of a Holiday Season coming up. There are those among us who wait with entranced expectation, hoping the season will arrive just a week earlier for once, so that we won't have to suffer so.

The Holiday-Dreaders remember only the bad: the requirement to give a gift to someone you not only don't like but someone who never gives you anything back...the memories of frayed nerves and too much booze and too much candy and too much screaming and shouting—the kind of holiday that a Stephen King might delight in building a novel out of.

The Holiday-Delighters just know that, despite the fact that they might be surrounded by Holiday-Dreaders, this year will be different: this year everybody will be happy and mellow and smiling and hugging and just plain relaxed and pleasant for a change.

The Holiday-Dreaders know that Christmas will be a dreadful pain and they hope it will not happen this year at all.

The Holiday-Delighters know somewhere in back of their very souls that not all Christmases have been wonderful, but they persist in carrying forth the dream of what Christmas might be could be should be oh please just this one time **WILL BE!**

And so Christmas slowly inexorably marches our way, oblivious to the Delighters and the Dreaders, not at all aware that there will be misery and joy juxtaposed throughout the land, not at all aware of the turmoil going on in Delighters' heads—all those sugar plums and magical wistful Santas and Frostys and Rudolphs and Deck Us All with Boston Charliers...not at all aware of the turmoil going on in Dreaders' heads—all that tension and feelings of incompleteness and feelings of no-gift-will-be-good-enough in the eyes of the receivers.

Christmas will come again and go again and the Delighters will hold whatever good memories they salvage in a safe place to bring forth in the hot and humid days of July and treasure anew...and the Dreaders will try to forget it all and hope that another Christmas doesn't come too soon.

You can wait for Christmas with open arms open heart open mind open soul and find the gentle goodies therein.

You can pace the floor hating the very idea of Christmas and dreading each thought of it again and again.

Whether you decide to become a Dreader or a Delighter, you most certainly as long as you are on this earth will not be able to avoid Christmas.

Select the attitude you want and embrace it and don't let the bed bugs bite you on this next wonderful opportunity that's being offered to you as a precious gift. If you're worried about the fact that Christmas just might slip up on you and make you feel good, just use Thanksgiving as a dry run: See what good will and good wishes and an incredibly stubborn decision to have a nice peaceful disposition for once can bring you. You just might surprise yourself ❄

**OH, BY GOSH BY GOLLY,  
IT'S TIME FOR MISTLETOE AND HOLLY**

A pleasant young Russian scientist with pretty wife and fussy baby girl in tow, shows up at Reed Books/The Museum of Fond Memories, this pre-Christmas Saturday. The three stare wide-eyed at the array of books. He's looking for Birmingham souvenirs they can afford. Frank Sinatra's voice bounces against the books as other browsers drift the isles, "Oh, by gosh, by golly, it's time for mistletoe and holly..."

A smelly street guy shows up to purchase a HOBBIT DVD for his buddy, who can't come to the shop...cause he's not allowed to leave the shelter." He was caught with a cellphone and for some ethereal reason that's forbidden. He's being punished for not following the Memo. Mel Torme doesn't notice, he just goes on about "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire..."

A slender shopper reminds me that she served me breakfast at Dimitri's one morning and is making good on her promise to visit the store. We chat warmly while an enormous man cruises the isles in a cold sweat, searching for esoterica. Several customers appear escorting visiting family and friends who've never before been Downtown. I extoll the wonders of the city while they try to take it all in. The Modern Jazz Quartet dances the musical notes around "England's Carol," their version of "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen..."

A merry woman spends much of my time trying to fit as many purchases into a twenty-dollar bill as she possibly can. She finally seems happy with three small

leatherbound Shakespeare plays and an enormous encyclopedia volume. She leaves behind several 1940's pulp-fiction novels and a beat-up Purple Heart display case. Now, candyman Sammy Davis, Jr., is soaring about "Christmastime in the city..."

One departing customer returns to the shop, unable to resist purchasing an old copy of TALES OF UNCLE REMUS by Joel Chandler Harris. Something resonates with her childhood and she has to have it. The Russian couple wants to walk the city, so I send them to their next stops, the Jazz Museum and the Civil Rights Institute. Vince Guaraldi continues interpreting Charlie Brown with his rendition of "Oh Tannenbaum, oh Tannenbaum..."

The day is filled with auld acquaintances materializing, new friends made, adventuresome explorers sated, bookmongers always looking for the next fix, children grabbing stacks of tales for their dad to read aloud, and one man spending two hours to find just the right volume to adopt. Dean Martin trills, "Rudolph, with your nose so bright, won't you guide mein sleigh tonight..."

And by gosh and by golly, a good day was had by almost all, and isn't that about as much as you could possibly hope for in this erratic, terror-filled, joy-soaked world? "I'll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams..." ❄

## **THE PERSISTENCE OF SOMEWHERE IN TIME**

The FRAGRANCE of the books, the documents, the letters and diaries and postcards and posters and scratch-and-sniff paper blends with the SMELL of seasoned wood, old Bakelite, hot Christmas lights, ancient tobacco-soaked bindings...

The remembered TASTE of metallic coins and antique Pez and fresh MoonPies and acrid fingertips licked in order to turn to the next chapter mixes it up with cane sugar memories...

The crackling SOUND of old envelopes being opened and volumes sliding along dusty shelves and floors creaking beneath the soles of quiet booklovers and the clicketyclack of keyboard keys researching the genealogies of antiquarian tomes and the music from the old Victrola scratching its way into your vinyl memoirs is everchanging in this eclectic and confusing time capsule...

The SIGHT of artifacts overlapping 500 years of generations and leather leaning against vellum leaning against pulp paper leaning against anguished illustrations leaning against conflicting, ever-recycled fads and fashions and styles astounds and entertains the imaginations...

The TOUCH remembers everything...what your tongue and fingers remember from childhood—back when you tasted and touched all within reach, storing the information for later...

A young couple drifts through the store, smiling at that, thumbing through this, ingesting first one thing, then another. The woman sneaks away from her partner and leans over the counter with a conspiratorial smile, asking, “What music is that?” playing through the speakers. I smile back, because I know what has happened, “The score from the film SOMEWHERE IN TIME.” She nods knowingly and almost floats over to her companion and hugs him tight.

This music has that effect on people. John Barry’s soundtrack is so romantically evocative and sad and nostalgic that those in the know always recognize it.

As a matter of fact, every item in the store meets this SOMEWHERE IN TIME criterion.

If you’re alive and alert, each object will gently jolt you, guiding you to the Past or the Future or a parallel Present.

Your bliss awaits you ❁

## THE EVE OF CHRISTMAS REMEMBERED

It's morning on the Eve of Christmas, 2011 A.D.

The last two weeks have been very busy at the Museum of Fond Memories, so I'm happy that the shop doesn't open till 11 a.m. Since Liz is up and out, I'm alone to determine how to spend a much-needed quiet morning. The usual breakfast haunts are either crowded or closed, so I take my New York Times and head for McDonald's, hoping for an isolated table and a few moments of meditative non-work activity.

The stressed employees humor me with my order—scrambled eggs, grits, two tomato slices, sausage and biscuit, with iced tea on the side. A rare chance to gorge—after all, it's Christmas Eve, isn't it?

While I'm just settling my brain for a long winter's fast-breaker, a couple arrives at the next table, she with Santa hat and earphones, he with strained countenance and long gazes through the window. She doesn't notice his inattentiveness, nor does she recognize my solitude. "I'm dreamin' of a white Christmas," she sings loudly, boogie-ing her body to the earplug sounds, blissfully unaware that there is anybody but herself in the establishment. She continues singing out-of-tune parts of other carols while her partner and I try to concentrate on our own tiny universes. The speaker system at McDonald's is blasting other Christmas-related tunes, so my mind has to delegate two sets of simultaneous lyrics to their respective hiding places while I attempt to focus on the Times.

Later, on the way to the car, I begin to appreciate the girl's annoying joy and realize I could use a little less grouch and a bit more Christmas boogie myself.

“Hey, what church are you from?” a shouted question careens over my left shoulder just as I’m trying to pile into the automobile. I have to twist around to see who’s there. A large wrinkled smiling face is staring at me and repeats the question, “Hey, what church are you from?” My first reaction is that I’m being panhandled, so I slam the door. Then, realizing I’m being testy, I lower the window to reply—suddenly realizing that the street man has assumed I’m some sort of clergy because of the black shirt, trousers and jacket I’m wearing, probably contrasted with my white Santa beard.

I don’t try to look like something special, this is just the way I am.

“No church,” I reply. Then, my fast mouth getting ahead of my thought processes, I add, “I’ve got a long night ahead of me, delivering toys.”

He looks startled and backs away, as if he suddenly believes me.

I drive to work and begin to focus on my shop and my customers.

Does Street Man think he’s just encountered some sort of Santa Claus?

Does Book Man think he’s just crossed paths with a needy soul who thought for a moment he might find peaceful words?

How many more opportunities might I miss this day? Or did I do exactly the right thing?

How will I ever know?

I hope you have many good and mysterious encounters this and every week in this Land of Perpetual Post-Christmas ❄

## CHRISTMAS DREADED JOY

The Shopping Mall of the Literary Vanities is a one-of-a-kind destination point, at least today. Someday, it may be franchised and you'll find them everywhere. Here at the Mall, you can stroll past storefront windows that display waxwork scenes of authors who are in the process of having what we call BOOK SIGNINGS. One window depicts Kurt Vonnegut puffing away and signing like crazy, as adoring fans are ignored and processed. Another window shows Rick Bragg kindly signing book after book for 'Bama fans. Then, there are the windows of the Unknown Authors. Here, you'll see one lonely writer after another sitting stiffly and staring ahead, pen poised, waiting for attention from invisible throngs.

Naturally, in order to properly represent statistics, you'll find about 98 lone-author displays for every two busily-successful authors. It's a big mall.

This might as well be a Gary Larson cartoon more properly titled **The Shopping Mall of the Literary Vanities Hell** that we writers often have nightmares about.

That was a dream. What follows is what happened today:

I'm driving into the parking lot of Little Professor, a book store in Homewood, Alabama, where, this very Sunday High Noon, I'm attending a book signing.

Not just any book signing. **My** book signing!

I've dusted off the last few copies of my title, **Christmas Comes But Once a Day**. Liz has decided it's time I make myself available to the masses in order to sell off

our “stock” before I add another handful of stories and publish a revised edition for next year.

So, here I am in the parking lot at Little Professor, about to spend two hours being The Author. Why do I dread these events? Even more puzzling: why do I look forward to these events?

Any experienced author will tell you how wonderfully terrible and terribly wonderful book signings can be. Like many others, I’ve spent hours over the past decades, sitting in bookchain stores waiting for somebody—**anybody**—to buy my book and ask me to sign it, to no avail. Then, again, I’ve sat in stores where people have lined up to get my signature.

The fun part is having people **ask**. The horrifying part is having **nobody** ask.

The even more horrifying part is **never knowing in advance what kind of book signing event it’s going to be**, till I’m already there, sitting nude at a table with a small sign over my head explaining what this geezer is doing in the middle of the store staring into space.

Today’s signing is pleasant, and I am relieved. A number of friends and strangers buy my book—as well as my writing book and my “Tweed Coat” book, and, better than that, some folks sit and talk with me and listen as I read a couple of Christmas tales to them. People can be so kind—thankfully.

I am relieved and grateful—and very glad that I don’t do this for a living. I’m a lot more secure in my old book shop, comforting all those long-dead authors who have been through many other book-signing hells...and I assume they, like me, are happier where they are than where they have been ❁

## **PORTERS AREHOUSE OPEN FOR CHRISTMAS GHOSTS**

Driving in from a dreaded trip into the bowels of the 'burbs is worth every moment, once I arrive in the Southside/Downtown world I inhabit.

It's comforting to see the sights many suburbanites will never enjoy:

1. An enormous sign: PORTERS AREHOUSE. Only we living ghosts of Downtown would know that this is the abandoned establishment once known as Importers Warehouse, now weather-sheared of some of its former identity.
2. The California Fashion Mall, which is a story unto itself. That story is in this book, too.
3. The haunting memory of long sterile rows of neatly regimented books in lock-step passionless order at an emporium I saw a few months ago. Can't wait to get back to Reed Books/The Museum of Fond Memories, my homage to the way books ought to be treated: since each book is its author personified, I've always assumed that few authors would like it if we lined them up and forced them to stand at attention under cold fluorescent lights, bereft of any of the comforts near which they wrote their stories—such as the blankies and favorite chairs and tasty snacks and window-views and neighborhood sounds that provided a solid pedestal for their work. My shop is arranged so as not to insult book or author or customer with regimentation. Joy is everywhere in this little world! The merry confusion of Reed Books is part of my gift to you.

4. Stopping by my 1906 home, then driving to the 1890 building housing Reed Books, is a ritual and a privilege. These buildings are the center of my little world, and I love it when you visit. Come see things you'll never experience in the 'burbs, take home a memory, a memory you can use as seedling for spreading the gospel of Old Things and the wonderful feelings they evoke in people. Drop by and I'll show you a few.

5. Since Christmas comes but once a day in my world, pick a day and come in. See what this season can be all about in a dreamworld more realistic than anything you'll find Out There ❄

## THE LITTLEST CHRISTMAS ANGEL

Well, another Christmas whizzed by, and what do I have to show for it?

Well, I received some kind attention and some truly marvelous trinkets.

One of my favorite Christmas stories from grammar school is the Charles Tazewell tale of the Littlest Angel.

The story of the Littlest Angel always stuck with me because of the respect it paid to the feelings of little children, the reverence with which it viewed the really important possessions of life.

As you may recall, the Littlest Angel was not happy in heaven because he had left behind under his bed the most important things in his world. Each of these objects had absolutely no significance to anyone in the world but him...and that's exactly the metaphor I've cherished all my life.

As a middleaged guy you wouldn't want to see partying naked, I still value most the small things that remind me of tenderesses long gone.

I have little doodads all over my book loft and everywhere at home, and each attentive family member knows by now that what I want for my birthday or Christmas is not a tie or a shirt or a screwdriver, but a toy or a handmade trinket that is just a little bit special and that was selected out of love instead of duty.

The rule of buying a gift for Jim Reed, should you ever be so inspired: Find something that makes you smile, then bring me your smile and that thing.

What was in the Littlest Angel's box under his bed? If you don't know, I'll tell you one day. If you do know, write me a note as a kindred soul.

What really made my morning today, though, was a little present in the mail from my big sister (I must learn not to say big, because she isn't...but I must say older sister, even though she's not old): A small handcarved wooden whistle with three distinct notes that I tooted over and over again all the way to work, enjoying each moment of pure sound and looking forward to seeing my grandkids and small namesakes salivating all over it and having a grand time.

Big sisters still remember what little brothers and small angels love most ✨

## **BUTTERFLY CHRISTMAS GIFT**

Buy...purchase...get..gimme...can I have it...it's only...this week only...buy now  
pray later...layaway...

Christmas is coming and it's time to turn off all the noise and visuals for a moment  
and cleanse the soul for a spell.

Hope your pre-holiday weekend was as gentle as mine.

I sat with my daughter and her friend and watched butterflies by the hundreds in  
the Callaway Gardens sanctuary and meditated on the weightlessness of beauty and  
rarity of silence ❄️



## EX-GRINCH TELLS ALL

The season is upon and surrounding and blissfully cozying us with its sudden bursts of temper and goodwill, its dizzying waves of cold wind and warm sun, and its odd mixture of hyper-ventilated shoppers and quietly day-dreaming grandchildren by the trees.

Not only do I hope you'll smile warmly at your friends and family and unexpectedly bear-hug them and wish them well, but I also hope someone surprises you with love and spontaneously unselfish acts when you most need them this season.

I really do love you even though I can't see you and don't know what you look like.

Perhaps that's the way humans love best.

As Shel Silverstein said, since everybody looks the same and has the same status in the dark, maybe we should reach up and turn out the lights once in a while.

Next best thing to that is simply close your eyes for a while and think about what all this season scramble is supposed to be about ❄️



## THE CHRISTMAS EVE TIME-TRAVELER

He scurried into the book loft, barely escaping the 1940's time-machine he had invented to transport himself to this specific spot.

He wore a long gray overcoat and a gray suit and a gray vest and a gray-striped tie and atop all this was a Bogart-gray hat just like my father used to wear in the 1940's. Only the difference between this gray hat and the kind of gray hats we see in modern movies is striking. This gray hat worn by this time-traveler exactly matched his body, his head size, his gait. It had been lovingly selected in a department store many years ago, with the help of a salesclerk whose job it was to make sure no man purchased a hat that did not look exactly right for him. The size had to be right. The tilt had to be right. The shade had to be right. The social class to which the man belonged had to match the hat's social class and price. Thus, this hat looked right for this man and this man only.

The slender, hunched time-traveler came in out of the Christmas Eve cold and spoke hesitatingly and clearly and politely, the way your family taught you to speak at the nightly dinner table back in those days before television and video and computer games sucked the family-dinner-conversation tradition right out of several generations of families.

The time-traveler had heard that I might actually know who Willie and Joe were—you know, Willie and Joe—the G.I.'s who were featured weekly in single-panel cartoons by Bill Mauldin, the guys who gave us folks back home during World War Two some idea of what it was like to be in a muddy foxhole with a green second lieutenant in charge of your very life, the guys who showed us how to laugh in the very worst of circumstances.

He was right, of course—I did know who Willie and Joe were, and I always carry copies of their book in the shop. UP FRONT by Bill Mauldin was the first adult cartoon book I'd ever seen when my uncles brought copies of it back home from the war. Even as a four-year-old I enjoyed seeing the cartoons, and later on, when I could read the accompanying words, I wasn't at all surprised—since Mauldin had drawn characters and situations so clearly that you hardly needed to read the captions to know what was going on.

The time-traveler was excited and grateful, and he pulled out an old leather wallet with a large rubber band around it, extracted \$20 from it, carefully replaced the band, and asked me to place the book inside a snapped satchel that hung from his cane.

I never saw more than one arm darting from inside his overcoat, and I suspect that he had but one.

The Christmas Eve time-traveler tipped his hat and disappeared onto the gray street that matched his gray outfit, got into his time machine, and went back to those days when he knew why he was fighting and who he was fighting, when he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that his enemy was worthy of defeat.

I worried about this frail specter for a while, since the streets of Birmingham are not always friendly toward gossamer figures with canes bearing the post-war years upon their hunched backs.

But I like to think that the time-traveler is sitting safely in a nice old armchair near a warm fire this chilly Christmas Eve, reading about Willie and Joe and remembering a few chuckles he and his buddies shared so many years ago ❁

## DUMPTY

THE FIRST CHRISTMAS DECORATION OF THE SEASON to be broken was broken, I guess, by me. It happens every year.

Sometime during the process of getting everything done getting everything just right getting each and every little item in place if you hold your mouth just right, something gets broken.

In this case, the tinkly shattering of a glass ball caused a momentary lapse of movement.

Five-year-old Hallie stopped decorating the tree, her brow furrowed as she looked up at me first of all to see if she was suspected of having anything to do with the breaking and second of all to see if her Grammy (my wife) would scold me, for it was clear that I was the culprit.

Grammy was careful not to moan too loudly, although she always cringes when any of our old, old decorations are maimed.

We have a stack of broken Christmas ornaments waiting patiently for Santa's workshop makeovers, and I actually believe that this coming year will be the year I'll try to repair what I can repair.

However, the hollow glass ball that I just dropped on the hardwood floor is not repairable, so we'll just have to try to remember it fondly and pay attention instead to the wide array of family keepsakes that now swing from the greenness of our tall

tree, the tree that's getting harder to decorate each year since we're getting older and the ornaments are proliferating.

That's one reason why Hallie is helping us this year, just as granddaughter Jessica used to help. The young ones are here to delight in the project, to brag that they helped decorate two trees this time, and to learn the process for the times when we'll be too old to do it all ourselves, Grammy and me.

Anyhow, this ritual we carry out each and every year is indispensable to Christmas, and the challenge is, we never get it exactly right—daughter Margaret would prefer we have a REAL tree instead of a manufactured one, Hallie would prefer we have three more trees to decorate, Jessica would rather the trees come pre-decorated so that she can get down to the business of anticipation, grandkids Rebecca, Reed and Ryan would rather just let us entertain them with Christmas cheer all year round, and grandkids Robby and Becky would just as soon get on with opening the gifts now, if you please. Shelby Reed is still forming an opinion.

I hope you have something nice to keep from breaking this season, some fragile object or fragile memory that you can hold onto while gazing glazed-eyed at the glowing starry sky this winter ❄

## CHRISTMAS THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving is just about the only holiday left when somebody isn't worried about gifting and being gifted. You know what I mean: Thanksgiving is the voluntary holiday, the holiday that doesn't require that you give a gift to someone just because they're kin or ken or acquaintance, or just because they are on the Reciprocal List, or just because you're supposed to.

Also, Thanksgiving doesn't make folks feel those silent and guilty thoughts: Just how much did they spend on this gift? How much should I spend? This is something I'd really like, but will they like it just because I do? Am I buying this because it made me feel good all inside and because I love this person, or am I giving it because of what I might get in return, or because this person has some sort of godawful power over my life? Will this relative fake a smiled thank-you when you give your gift, then silently file it away in the basement a month later? Will that friend even open the book you autographed and spent an hour selecting, much less read it? And so on.

You can always tell when somebody has dropped by the convenience store on the way over and picked up something to give, just as you can always tell when someone really and truly thought long and hard about what to give you, spent some time actually selecting it and doing some homework on your likes and dislikes in order to pick just the right thing.

This used to be a simple pleasure.

What would it take to make Christmas more like Thanksgiving?

When we were kids, we would go through one of those S.H. Kress boxes of 50—count 'em—50 different Christmas cards to find the one that exactly fit the personality of the recipient. It was no bargain to buy a box of 50 cards that all looked alike. Too impersonal. And we would never have dreamed of having our names engraved. We felt that the personally-opened, intimately signed, carefully-licked-and-sealed card would surely be treasured more by the receiver than those to-whom-it-may-concern greetings that required not one whit of personal attention. The message that was pre-printed inside our S.H. Kress cards was all-important, too. Not too gushy. Not too cutesy. And not too "Christmasy" (mustn't offend the heathens and pagans on our list).

Yes, we spent a lot of time on small things in those days, and we really believed with all our hearts that those who received cards from The Reeds would instantly recognize and cherish the personal touch and the tailored-and-hand-selected charm with which the process had taken place.

What would it take to make Christmas more like Thanksgiving?

I'm sure Santa would approve.

Thank goodness we still have Thanksgiving. We just get together and eat ourselves silly and try to look deeply at loved ones for signs of further aging and hints that somewhere still inside those now older bodies still lurks the small kids who immersed themselves not in TV and video games, but in the sheer and tiny joys of making sure each gift was exactly from the center of the heart ❁

## MAY CHRISTMAS

The month of May is a perfect time for looking back at my Christmas Eve notes and trying to reconstruct what it was like to drive the sparse streets of Birmingham toward certain home on that confusing and ever-memorable day.

Christmas Eve 2:30 pm and headed home from the book loft, heading home via what we in Birmingham call Southside, the resurrected vestiges of White Flight from the City some 35 years later, after all the Civil Rights Wars left the streets and went underground.

A woman moves past my van, smoking away in her closed-windowed car, a golden hairpin shining out against the gray misting afternoon.

It's just cold enough and gray enough and wet enough in the gray and wet town, to make this feel like Christmas—this Christmas and oh so many previous Christmases in my half-century of remembrances. In my thoughts, I drive past Najjar's Bargain Center, a store frozen in time with a diminutive octogenarian owner still sitting alone inside and listening to Talk Radio and surrounded by merchandise that's been marching in place unmoved since the 1960's, an incredible piece of living history both happy and sad.

That Christmas Eve feeling of needing to get home and get safe before anything bad happens this good and blessed day.

One day Santa Claus himself came into my loft, wearing coveralls and a bright white beard. He ambled down the hall, picked up a book called *Alabama*

*Scrapbook*, turned to my story “Private Lessons” and began to read it aloud to me and the customers. It was the first time I'd ever heard my own words being read back to me. Santa disappeared after a while, but I still see him now and then, encouraging other writers. Is he my Muse? I dunno. Things like this just happen to me and don't seem to make any sense at all, which is why they are so real to me, in contrast to the forced sensibilities I'm required to live within most of the time.

At home at last on Christmas Eve. Everybody is sane and healthy KNOCK ON WOOD and that's what I need...happy healthy family in happy healthy relationships, and ain't we all so very damned blessed this spiritfilled day?

But in my mind, homeless people stockingcapped against the cold and the stares, roam under the viaducts seeking territory and tepid warmth. Dr. Tim comes by the loft to sell me something that I don't buy, but he buys a copy of my book *Dad's Tweed Coat* anyhow. Why do I feel guilty about that? What is the gift I can give him? Perhaps the words will sink inside him and cool his tortured brow, this defrocked physician who drifts in and out of my life along with all the other Dickensian characters.

Jim the computer guy proudly installs my new computer book program and seems happy for a change with himself as he leaves for Christmas home. A man is desperate to find a Star Wars poster for his son and is unhappy with himself and his wife for not finishing up a project for said son. I take his check. He leaves happy but sad.

And so I drive to the Christmas Eve home of my today family and long for the 50-year-ago Christmas Eve family that can never be Humpty Dumptied together again unless I decide to bring them back to life and love on pages such as these ❁

## HAPPY NEW WHATEVER

Oh my! Another holiday has come upon us!

Soon, Christmas will be a jumble of memories: stockings filled with useless fruit and lots of sweet and crunchy food, relatives relatives relatives, friends, not-so-friends, nerve-shattered kids, sugar-rush post-Santa-partum-blues kids everywhere—looking under the beds & trees for just one more gift.

A trip to Chiefland, Florida and a carload of stuff I just had to pick up on the Christmas trip, thrift stores in Englewood Florida, Greek restaurants in Venice and Tarpon Springs Florida, billboards out of Orlando advertising an all-nude-waitress truck stop (maybe next time, maybe never, Tuscaloosa Alabama and more relatives, real barbeque in Birmingham, foodfoodfood at Ma's house, a new microwave which means everything in Ma's house has to be moved two feet over since everything is connected to everything else, from my wife a new toy for me to play with and a new shake-it-and-snow-will-come-down-upon-it globe from my daughter who just knows how I love tacky stuff, other gifts from insincere as well as sincere family and extended family members. Wonderfully muggy cool and overcast Christmas day—the kind of Christmas day only Alabama provides regular as clockwork seemingly all of my life. Christmas cards with family pictures and Xeroxed personal what-we-did-all-year enclosures, an occasional poignant or depressing note from lonely friends, foodfoodfood, cold South Alabama air all the way down to below Tallahassee and suddenly warm Florida air as if the rest of the world doesn't know what cold means.

Too many people everywhere in Florida—what an overpopulated state!—except for Cedar Key, which just goes on being Cedar Key with 1000 people year after year after year, stale-smelling and poor-Florida-building-code motels that are cozy anyhow since we're away from workworkwork.

Oranges and lemons growing in the yards of relatives—ain't it great! and lots of love and confusion everywhere, booklooking in Dunedin in a go-as-many-places-as-you-can-in-what-little-time-you-have mode, the Dali museum in St. Petersburg—what a disturbed genius!, sad news everywhere about illnesses and deaths and separations and dysfunctions, good news everywhere about births and passages and honors and lovings, and just plain exhaustion afterwards, when we gotta get back to doing whatever it is we're supposed to be doing here in the Deep South.

Just hope you had as much vigor and fun and despair mixed together during your holiday ❄

## THANKSGIVING DAY, VERBENA, ALABAMA

Field of dogs.

We're in the deep countryside, walking in their domain,

But they only welcome us with tongues out and energetic pantings.

These are fields any childhood would find a way to enjoy.

Tall grass, fluffy dandelion wisps, long cattails to use as gentle weapons.

No alligators in sight,

We trudge toward a drought-reduced pond to see what was under water, hidden for so long.

The cool air matches the gray sky. The dried and crackling weeds match the cool air and the gray sky.

We think about the century as if it holds some special quality that previous and future centuries cannot hold. But the centuries are just made-up make-believe centuries that change with each civilization's editing.

The crunch of dried plants under our invading soles is the sound of the afternoon.

The rustle of leaves brushing against the lowslung belly of an amazingly shortlegged dog is all we hear.

The giggling of children waging wars with cattails is all we hear.

No jets fly overhead, or underfoot, for that matter.

No interstate rumblings in the distance.

Just giggles and crunchings and pitter patter of little dog paws and deep breaths taken down into tired citified lungs.

We walk the feast off and live at the singular moment.

The drive back to the city is a droning eventless monotone. Home free! is what we shout when our feet touch our old wooden porch, on the way to the safety of this particular century ❁

## LOTS A LUCK

Remembering this Christmas week will shortly become just another way to travel time.

Here I am, trapped in a year that produced just about everything that life has to offer—and dish out. And I'm still here. Amazing.

And you're still there, I hope. By the time you read this, Birmingham, Alabama will have had a couple of cold nights (we have nice Summery weather for Christmas). Firecracker maniacs will have expended mucho gusto outside our home for days prior to and after Magic Midnight. The ghost of Guy Lombardo will have been summoned via video to admiring tribes around the continent.

Somebody will have gotten quite tipsy (the cutesy word for drunk) and done something embarrassing. Some newspaper will report the name of the first baby born in town, thus making the second and third ones seem a little less important to all but doting families.

And maybe somebody will have worn a lampshade and done something silly and fun.

Speaking of time travel: Driving to work this morning, I listened to old Bob Elliott and Ray Goulding recordings from the last few days of 1959. They, too, talked about Christmas and New Year's resolutions unkept and unkempt, boring activities their audience would participate in on New Year's Eve, and other rather unrelated

but lifelike bits of information. It's comforting to know that we've survived some fifty years beyond the Fifties, when everybody thought Doomsday near.

Ray Bradbury says the fact we've had the means for self-destruction and haven't used them is in and of itself reason to feel renewed hope for the human race. I just wish we had more than a thread to hang on, though.

But take heart. As Carl Sandburg said, "A baby is God's opinion that the World should go on." Let's applaud that first and then the second and third babies and so on, and hope they'll have a bit more sense than those who visited before them.

Try to visit with a young child or an old relative for a few minutes before the Season's over. Both have a much more realistic view of the world's possibilities & limitations than we do. Hug someone, quick, and make the thread that much thicker ❁

## **THE NIGHT SANTA CLAUS SAVED MY LIFE**

At the age of seventeen, I'm walking the late-night long walk home from my job as a radio announcer at WUOA-FM. It's nearly Christmas and, like many Tuscaloosa days, the morning began warm and humid, so I wore my short-sleeved shirt and jeans to work. Now, a cold front is upon me, and suddenly I'm walking home from work in sub-freezing weather circa 1959 A.D.

It's cold, so cold.

My Cushman motor scooter, held together with duct tape and optimism, has finally broken down and the only way to get from the University Campus to Eastwood Avenue is to trudge. I have to walk east on University Boulevard and cut across the railroad tracks to get to 15th Street, but it's getting harder and harder to do this, my breath coming in short and frosty gasps.

Everything starting to freeze up.

My painful nose and painfully cold toes are protesting. My bare arms are screaming for fur.

Gloveless hands are poked down into my too-thin pockets. Thighs are cold for lack of thermal underwear.

My teeth are gritted tight against their chatter and at this point, I'm wondering whether I can make it. I remember all those tales about people freezing to death without knowing it, and at this moment, I'm not knowing if I can make it.

I'm tired of painful walking.

It's too cold to walk.

Now I'm feeling drowsy...

*What will be the last thing I see?*

Childhood comes 'round in my mind. There's Santa, coming to take me back into his arms. I can always depend on Santa. He's made me feel good in the worst of times.

Wait—where am I? I'm walking along in the darkness—and I'm hallucinating about SANTA!

But now *I hear Santa*, I actually *hear* him.

This has got to be the end of me, I chatter to myself, leaning in the wind.

What I hear are *sleigh bells*, and who has sleigh bells in the Deep South on a snowless, freezing-cold night?

I look around to find Santa, and see an old pickup truck, trundling along, a loose chain dangling from its rear gate, making those sleigh bell sounds. The truck slowly passes, heading toward the railroad tracks. I shake my head and laugh involuntarily.

The rush of adrenalin gives me enough energy and body heat to jumpstart myself.

I'm inspired and ready to walk faster, now. The truck's chains have given me the boost I need to survive.

Then, squinting ahead, I see a red-mittened hand and a flash of fluffy white cuff poke outside the driver's window of the pickup truck for an instant, as it disappears in the distance. A wave?

I rub my eyes and the truck is gone.

My pace quickens, and soon I am home, warming my hands and thighs over the floor furnace, drinking hot chocolate, and remembering with a sheepish grin and unclenching teeth the moment when I really believed Santa was coming to rescue me.

Now, fifty years later, I really do believe it ❄



## WAS IT AS GOOD FOR YOU?

Is it going to be a happy new year for you? I hope so. If wishing could make it so, we'd all have a good one-if it was up to me, of course. Which it isn't. At least as far as I know. Existential, eh? Anyhow, HAPPY NEW YEAR and all like that. As my old Southern Georgia swamp friend Pogo used to say, "There's no future in bein' dead." A sobering enough thought. Should serve to make us try to do the best with what time we have.

Away with the eggnog. It's gone to my head, or wherever it is that bookies do most of their pondering.

Thanks for buying this book or checking it out of the library. I hope you like my words and I hope we exchange nice words, too. Drop a note.

The weather is chilly for us: 33 degrees with 97% humidity and about 55% humility. I'm thankful for all the well wishes and good wishes and kind notes I've received this season. It do make my humbug heart feel better for a bit.

Whenever I get an irate urge to feel cranky, I just look back at all the kind words I remembered to jot down during the year and all the kind notes others have sent me, and I get warmed up again and plunge ahead ❄



## FALLING NEEDLES

We're hanging onto our Christmas memories as long as possible. The tree, though drooping, is still up.

Our wedding anniversary is on the 6th of January, so we aren't really through celebrating the season, anyhow. Any excuse for holding on to the good feelies.

I got an electric train for Christmas that will become part of the permanent decor of the season each year, along with other wonderful toys we've saved through the seasons.

Whenever I catch myself feeling low, I hum or whistle a Christmas tune and get a small but warm re-charge while eyes of those around me roll skyward. Life can be sweet. Hope yours is ❄️



## FROZEN CHRISTMAS

Well, Christmas runs hot and cold down here in the Deep South. The temperature in Birmingham will be below 20 for the next two nights—that's cold for us Alabamians! Will Phil (my philodendron here at the book loft) make it through the night? Will our pet finch make it? Will the water pipes freeze despite the fact that we'll be practicing the trickle-down theory of thawed plumbing flow all night?

Will I be able to get the fire started without kindling, just to make us think we're Christmas-warm in our century-year-old house? Or will I chicken out and place a particle board log under the real one to make it burn well?

Will my daughter's car start in the morning, or will I have to grumble-start it myself? Will I think of all those people who are roughing it in a deep winter and multi-feet of snow and surviving, when our greatest challenge weatherwise in Alabama is to survive the tornadoes and not overheat our bodies and our radiators the other nine months of the year?

And will I have just the right book to cuddle if we get frozen in by one inch of snow (really- that's about all it takes to shut down the city here under the right conditions)?

Of course.

Even though I've thousands of books in my loft, I do sneak a few home every night to rummage and ruminate through. Maybe tonight will be catalog night. I'll look at what other people might be buying for themselves. Nothing in the catalogs will be

as oddly divergent as the titles at REED BOOKS. Can you believe the variety? Which ones do you believe never existed? The sad truth is, they all did—hopefully, do—exist, but nobody loved them well enough to keep them handy, so they wound up here.

With any luck, you'll come to the loft and want to take some of them home for Christmas.

We the bookguardians wait patiently.

Sometimes, impatiently, too. Lord, give me patience—and I want it right now ❄

## **BOOKIES WALK THE CITY STREETS**

The winter streets of Birmingham tantalize me.

Why? Because each person I meet on these streets lives a unique life, each person I meet carries baggage that I can't see through, since I'm busy carrying my own.

There are hundreds of individual stories presented to me each week at the Museum of Fond Memories and Reed Books. Each is special in its own way, sometimes joyful, sometimes sad, always mysterious.

Pick a day – for instance, Wednesday:

I arrive at the bookstore two hours before opening time, to catch up on newly acquisitioned books, do a little straightening up, get the heating system going, becalm and brace myself for the day, jumpstart the monthly bill-paying. A shaggy street person is waiting at the door, staring at the posted shop hours but not seeing them. “We open at 10:30,” I say, before realizing he's a regular customer. He says, “I don't have my watch, so I don't know what time it is ... can I pick up that book you got for me?” “Of course.” I usher him into the darkened cave and shuffle through the Hold Shelves to find his special order, trying to ignore the strong fragrance of newly-smoked marijuana emanating from his clothing. I assist him, accept his payment, and am now alone in the store. I am happy for his patronage but happy, too, that he is gone.

Now, I can get some things done.

As the marijuana smell dissipates, I become aware of cigarette smoke billowing into the shop around the edges of the door. I stopped smoking forty years ago, but each day I'm inhaling the secondary smoke of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue North Smoking Society – the employees of adjacent offices and stores who stand in the alcove of Reed Books, lustily inhaling as much as they can on their frequent breaks. I seem to be their smoking court, and no amount of pleasant hints can get through to them the fact that their smoke chokes me and aggravates my allergies. I don't want to become the old guy who tells everybody to get off his lawn, so I never blatantly ask them to go elsewhere. I try to justify my wimpishness by reminding myself that these are pleasant folks who at least make the entrance to the store look busy, and who might come in handy as observers and diffident security guards, should anything go wrong on the street.

I guess what quietly bugs me is the fact that, no matter how many times I invite them to enter the store and look around at the merchandise and the special monthly exhibits, not one of them does. This leads me to believe that smokers are not readers or collectors. They are just ... smokers.

Later in the morning, when the doors are unlocked, the \$2 sales racks are on the street, and I am ready for the day, customers and browsers enter, talk, enjoy, search, walk out smiling — and leave me smiling, too.

Late in the day, a very large, loud-baritoned man enters with a short, obese boy in tow. The baritone laughs broadly, saying, "I want a big doll with big t—s ... that's what I want for Christmas!" He laughs at his own remark and becomes bigger than

the store as he comments on each and every item he sees. He reeks of whiskey and is enjoying his high, while the boy wanders silently about, trying to avoid him. At one point, the baritone starts dancing to the Taj Majal music that's playing, chuckling loudly and trying to engage the boy in a frisky dance. The boy blushes deeply and averts his eyes. Eventually, the baritone leaves, wishing me and the world a Merry Christmas and promising to return someday with money in his pockets. I quietly slip the boy a free Dum Dum and he seems grateful.

I love my job, my independence, my lack of bosses. I love my books and my artifacts and am glad each time someone makes a purchase and goes away happy.

But at the same time, in a parallel portion of my mind, I'm a little saddened at the unfulfilled lives I occasionally see around me. I try to at least act better than I am by being patient with these lone wanderers of the City streets.

And I hope that each of them finds a shard of happiness mid the hundredfold opportunities for gloom in their daily lives ❁



## THE WORLD WITHIN A FIVE-FOOT RADIUS

Since Christmas comes but once a day at Reed Books/The Museum of Fond Memories, it's difficult for me to differentiate between the holiday season and every other season here in Mr. Reed's Neighborhood.

Each day, something special enters my shop and begs for adoption. For instance, I just acquired a WWII bomber flight manual and a Darth Vader life-size standup.

I just sold a copy of Gary Larson's favorite book, Mr. Bear Squash-You-All-Flat, and a Popeye coloring book.

I just placed on display the original Roumanian movie poster for To Kill a Mockingbird, plus a photograph of Marilyn Monroe in a pink bathing suit.

Next to my elbow is an original paperback edition of Catcher in the Rye, next to an LP recording of Fess Parker as Davy Crockett.

I could go on. In any five-foot radius within the shop, you'll find overlapping time zones, modern and ancient icons, heavy tomes and hilarious spoofs, dead-serious diatribes and light-hearted commentaries on the world.

They all exist side-by-side, spanning a 500-year period, ready to entertain, enthrall, excite and amuse.

If you would like to visit the Center of the Universe, if you are brave enough to experience an environment free of mass-marketing and cookie-cutter merchandise, if you like to own one-of-a-kind treasures, then take a chance.

Enter Here ✨



## ANGEL LITE

### *Her story:*

I'm walking along the sidewalk near the St. Vincent's Hospital parking deck and I just plain topple over something. I don't know exactly what's happening, but all of a sudden I'm flat on my back and my head is cut and hurting and my eyes are closed because I'm dizzy. I keep squinting, and I'm afraid to look around because I don't know whether I'm dead or dreaming, or what.

I hear this deep voice saying, "Just lie still, you're going to be all right." I want to see who is talking, so I open up and everything looks dark red and I think maybe I'm blind.

"I can't see," I say to the voice. I think maybe I really am dead.

The deep voice says, "You will be fine. Just be calm. Just be calm."

I try to take a deep breath and hold on. I feel a warm hand touching my forehead and soothing me.

It isn't long before I wake up in the emergency room and learn that I really will be all right. The nurses have cleaned the blood out of my eyes and I'm just fine.

I'll always wonder how my deep voice angel knew how to comfort me at just the right moment. I wonder if I'll ever need him again.

### *His story:*

I'm walking along, near the St. Vincent's Hospital emergency room near Christmastime, absentmindedly trailing behind a large woman who is in a hurry. Suddenly, she trips over a partially off-center manhole cover and falls flat to the

ground, her head gushing blood. Her eyes are closed, and I lean over to see whether she's conscious.

She moves and squints, but the blood from her cut fills her eyes so that she probably can't see. I don't want to cause further damage, so I figure the best thing to do is stick by her till somebody comes from the emergency room.

I sit down beside her so that she will know that she's not alone out here. I lean close to her ear and quietly speak so that she won't be startled. "Just lie still, you're going to be all right."

She turns toward me and says, "I can't see."

All I can think to do is reassure her whether or not I know she's going to be fine. "You will be fine. Just be calm. Just be calm."

She responds and seems calmer. I remember the comforting healing power of my father's large hand when he touched my forehead so many years ago, hovering over my sickbed and worrying. I reach over and my hand becomes my father's hand and warmly touches her forehead.

She lies quietly, almost smiling.

Within minutes two casually-moving ER employees show up with a wheelchair and escort the woman away. Even though her eyes are still closed, I feel she's going to be taken care of.

I walk toward my car and go about my life.

And I often wonder what this unknown woman thinks about when she remembers her Christmas blindness near a hospital parking deck. Does she wonder who I was? Does she know that I gave the only Christmas gift I knew how to give ❁

## MY CHRISTMAS PULITZER PRIZE

Why did I ever go into *retail*?

Well, you know the answer to that—if you, too, are in *retail*.

I did it because I couldn't think of any other way to be my own boss and actually provide food and shelter for the family, *outside the corporate world*. I couldn't think of any other way to have the freedom to write what I needed to write, free of the Dilbert shackles of the corporate world.

So, a couple of decades later, here I am, the Christmas season upon me, at 4:50pm on Friday, just ten minutes till closing time, digging through computer-numbered boxes for a 1962 Esquire Magazine featuring Hemingway, a 1956 BBC Listener magazine containing a Salinger review, a first printing of Asimov's *The Martian Way*, and a first edition copy of Salinger's *Raise High the Roofbeams*...got to get these things overnighted for an anxious customer and then make it to a bookshop across town to conduct a reading, all by 6pm.

The front door chimes go off, so that means somebody has entered the store, 150 feet up the hall and up a steep flight of red stairs. You know the mixed feelings you get: *Damn! Now I've got to wait on somebody and still get my tasks done...if it weren't for these pesky customers, I could make a living (!)*.

I head up the hall to see who's there, passing the glowing lava lamps and glistening Santas that line the path, giving a fairyland glow to the gathering dusk. When I get to the front, I see a small, pointy-haired big-rimmed eyeglass man, standing and

staring at me as if I'm about to hit him. I do my usual "*Hello, how can I help you today?*" customer-friendly voice thing, since I have never seen this guy before.

"Well, do you buy stuff?" he asks. I'm in a hurry, so this means my thoughts are going to be negative—I'm thinking he's got the usual dog-eared Reader's Digest Condensed books and Stephen King paperbacks that we see a lot of around here. "Well, it depends on what it is," I say, thinking this does not look like a millionaire about to donate his Gutenberg Bible to me. "We have just about everything, but we're always looking for what we don't have," I say, motioning down the hallway at the 6,000-square-foot shop.

"What about this?" he says, pulling a rusty three-inch-tall miniature replica of a Sprite cola bottle from his pocket. It's cute, just the thing I have all over the store for decoration, along with the life-sized Leg Lamp from Jean Shepherd, the seven-foot-tall Piggly Wiggly statue and the Pee-Wee Herman Playhouse suitcase, interspersed with books galore.

The next negative thought I have is that he will, like most people, have watched the Antiques Roadshow and determined that this is worth \$32,000, of which I should pay him half for re-sale. I brace myself and say, "That's neat. How much do you want for it?" He says in a small and meek voice, "What about a dollar?"

I am relieved and brighten up instantly, I pull a dollar from the cash tray, give it to him and he walks happily toward the stairs.

He bends to pick up two large and obviously heavy satchels he's lugged up the stairs—I'm just now noticing them. Then, he turns and asks, "Can you tell me how to get to Jimmie Hale?"

The Jimmie Hale mission is for homeless people, and it's seven walking blocks away. I give him instructions, he thanks me, then begins his painful descent. I wait in the foyer, hoping he doesn't stumble, and hoping I can get the door locked behind him so I can head to the post office on my way to being an unknown author reading his stuff aloud.

I can tell he's about halfway down the stairs when I hear his meek voice, "I read everything you write." I freeze in place to hear more. "And I see your columns in Birmingham Weekly. You are a natural-born writer."

I can only yell *thanks!* as he closes the door behind him and disappears from hearing. I rush down the stairs to lock up, look up and down the street, and see nothing. No trace of this fellow and his heavy luggage and his mild temperament.

I lock the door, take down the OPEN sign, and start up the stair, turning out lights as I go.

Back at my counter, I reach into my pocket for keys and find the tiny Sprite bottle. I hold it up to the lava lights and note its special green glow. And I wonder what a Pulitzer Prize looks like. This may be as close to one as I'll ever get, so I'm going to adopt it and keep it around to remind me that now and then—just every once in

a while—a writer can get a good review, a good award, at an unexpected time from an unlikely source...and then wonder later whether it was all imagination.

At the reading, I tell the story of the little man and his Sprite bottle to Joey Kennedy, who is a genuine Pulitzer Prize winner. He grins ear to ear, because he knows all about fate and how things come to you only if you don't look at them straight on ✨

## **HOLISTIC EAR-FLAP SMOKER SKIPS MLK/REL LAUNDRY DAY**

It's not just any Monday morning.

I pull up to the laundry next door to Golden Temple, drop off my week's worth of wash/dry/fold, not very surprised that the laundry is open despite the fact it's a national holiday. The laundry lady sighs when I say, "I see y'all are open on Doctor King's birthday." Her eyebrow movements tell me a lot.

A scruffy chain-smoking guy in ear-flap hat pulls at the locked Golden Temple door, carefully reads the sign, takes another drag, then saunters on down the street, just barely missing a chance to pick up some holistic medical advice...about how to quit smoking? Maybe?

Eleventh Avenue South is almost barren.

A Christmas tree peeks over the back gate of the pickup truck in front of me, waving a forlorn good-bye to the season.

At the shop, computer tech Daniel reminds me that this is also Robert E. Lee's birthday. Sorry I forgot, Bob.

I unpack my bag of show-and-tell goodies from yesterday's speech at the Alabaster public library, receive an e-mail thank-you from one of the attendees, and wonder what it is I said that made a difference in her day.

I pack for shipment a leatherbound limited edition of Ayn Rand's THE VIRTUE OF SELFISHNESS, prepare rough drafts of the weekly message I'll be sending out to fans and subscribers, and send a note to Joey Kennedy, thanking him for

granting me permission to publish one of his stories in a future Birmingham Arts Journal.

I think about the world and all its incredible inconsistencies, small joys, huge terrors, gentle comforts.

I think how nice it would be to have a national holiday devoted to unselfish kindnesses ✨

## BELLYACHING

Christmas is over but it lingers in my gut: there are things in my belly that won't get digested for days, there are things I've eaten that were wonderful going down and irritating once inside, there are things eaten that did not want to be eaten, there are digested goodies that enjoyed the pleasure they gave me as much as I enjoyed vaporizing them.

Now that the orgy is over, what to do with the other 350-plus days? In other words, what am I doing after the orgy?

Well, resolutions may be in order for millions of us, but I tend to shy away from saying them too loudly for fear someone will actually hold me to them. If I were a really above-board hale fellow well stuffed, I'd say this is what I will do in the new year:

1. Never eat anything that has a personality.
2. Walk rather than jog to the bathroom in the middle of the night (keeps me from stumbling and hurting myself);
3. Climb twenty-seven stairs to work each day. There's no other way to get here, actually, so I'll probably keep that one.
4. Never eat more than I can hold.
5. Never hold more than I can eat.

6. Watch babies at play (at a safe distance).
7. Try to avoid changing a diaper.
8. Try not to give anybody any advice about anything unless absolutely begged to (I am beginning to attain wisdom in old age.)
9. Bite my tongue or otherwise find a way to look interested while staying silent during conversations. This is great to do in the family, since I've yet to find anybody who wants me to advise or critique what they're saying. They seem content to see me as silent and eccentric father or father-in-law or son or brother or cousin or nephew or grandfather. They'll never notice that I've remained silent during their discourse on the right wines or the correct politics or the right pre-kindergarten.
10. Go everywhere via a different route just to alert the senses. This, too, is easy, since I've always done it, to the consternation & frequent embarrassment of my family.
11. Try not to write any of this down, for fear someone will ask me why I didn't keep these resolutions or make more noble ones.

So, please, as soon as you're through reading this, ignite this page or use it for fishwrapper (better still, fruitcake wrapper).

Hope you can come up with equally dishonorable resolutions for the year. If not, keep it quiet and reduce the irritation. Hope you are wishful and I wistful and wiser and happier during this, the newest and only Year we have ❄

## MY VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS PRESENT

Every trip to the old Victorian house was like Christmas Morning.

Whenever I could get there, by way of bus or foot or bicycle or ride-hitching, I felt like Christmas had just gotten jump-started.

The Victorian home in Downtown Tuscaloosa, back in the 1950's, had expelled its original dwellers and converted itself into the County Library.

It seemed to exist solely for my pleasure.

Up the stairs not racing in slow motion—didn't want to incur the wrath of a **shushing** librarian—I would head for the bookcases containing the knowledge of the known world and the imagined knowledge of undiscovered worlds.

Opening each book was like unwrapping a Christmas gift.

Each volume contained its own peculiarities. In addition to the printed words within, there were always imagination-laden surprises:

A pressed flower might drop spinning to the floor.

A scrap of paper complete with cryptic message would unfold itself and read its contents to me.

A margin scribble or an underline would challenge me to guess what a previous reader's life was like.

Mustard stains might tattle-tale whether the patron read at night or on the run at a hot dog stand.

Unmistakable tobacco fragrances absorbed by the paper would be identified by brand-name (Cherry Blend was popular).

Little crayoned bookmarks and turned-down corners made certain pages more intriguing.

Coffee rings exposed the previous reader's carelessness.

Librarian mutilations included penciled numbers and rubber stamps and glued pockets and dog eared dated cards and taped-down dust jackets and intrusive binding materials and repaired/reinforced spines.

The heft and texture and color and fragrance and flaws of the physical book were more fascinating than the book itself, at times.

The powerful shower of Holmesian clues would almost make reading the book an anticlimactic exercise.

To this day, I prefer the flawed personality of a well-used book to the pristine untouched edition that nobody ever opened.

Every book has its own history, my dear Watson. I can tell you a lot about what that book has been through just from all the clues and hints of clues that warp it and give it character.

Visit my Victorian shop in the Center of the Universe and commence **your** sleuthing ❁

## PROMISES PROMISES

Down all the years we go and where we stop everybody knows but nobody wants to talk about it too much.

You know what I mean? The New Year will be exactly like the Old Year except for the parts that are different. The future isn't what it used to be, anyhow. Those old Orwellian and Wellsian visions of the future have passed now and it looks as if the future—which is now—is even goofier than Herbert George Wells and George Orwell envisioned. They must be glad that they didn't live to see it—that is, they would probably be glad they didn't live to see it if they could see it now. Following this?

Have to keep you on your toes, you know.

If the future has already passed, does that mean tomorrow is the present or the past? Well, depends on how you look at it. Tomorrow will be yesterday the day after tomorrow and all that.

Now, what was I saying?

Oh, yes! New Year's Resolution Time is upon us. What are yours? Here are some that come to mind:

1. I promise not to say “you know?” more than twice a day.

You know?

2. I promise not to say “wow!” more than twice a day. Notice how middle-aged people do that all the time now? Especially when talking with anyone younger?
4. I promise to treat each visit with a relative or friend as if it were the last time I will ever see them. Too many people leaving me these days.
5. I promise to lose as many pounds as I gain. For me, that's progress! You know? Like, wow!
6. I promise to reveal to the world that Pee Wee Herman is the love child of Pinky Lee and Jerry Lewis. Unless, of course, I am within earshot of an attorney for Pee Wee Herman or Jerry Lewis or Pinky Lee.
7. I promise to eschew obfuscation.
8. I promise not to use a simple word when a vague or long one will do—except when I am writing.
9. I promise to hug any of my kids who will let me, each time I see them. And my grandkids. And my wife. And you, too, maybe.

So, there's my list of things I'll probably forget I vowed by the time the new year crashes onto my head. I mean well, anyhow ❁

## **LIFE IS AN OPEN BOOK!**

WORKWORKWORKWORKWORKWORKWORKWORKWORKWORKWORK.

That's what so many of us entrepreneurs do these days.

When we're not working we're talking about work.

In the case of book-types (bookies) like me, when we get hoarse and can't talk books anymore, we read and fondle them.

We have double trouble in our house, though. Not only is the male of the house in business for himself (meaning no bosses!), but the female is also an—gasp!—entrepreneur.

Most other households seem to have just one entrepreneur and the other person gets a regular salary (meaning, the other person has a boss and punches a time clock).

Cash flow is a bit more stable in those cases.

Not so, us.

Each business has its own cycle. My wife's business has either a bunch of money coming in all at once, or none at all. Same with mine. During months that are the none-at-all type, we cringe and whimper. Other months are better, and are spent catching up from the slumps.

When you're in business this way, you're scared not to work, so we, as I said, workworkworkworkwork.

Except for this past weekend.

Couldn't take it anymore. Had to get out of town, if for just 24 hours.

In the nick of time, a couple just three hours away on Lookout Mountain (in both Tennessee and Georgia) called and invited us to drive up and spend the night. We jumped at the chance, and did. A true Christmas gift!

Only when we got there, we found ourselves talkingtalkingtalking about workworkworkworkwork.

That's because they, too, are both entrepreneurs and work all the time.

It was comforting to share ideas and gripes through the night, and we all passed out from exhaustion in the wee hours of the morning after talkingtalkingtalking till we were hoarsehoarsehoarse.

On the way back from our extremely nice 24 hours in the countryside, my wife made the apropos comment of the day. "It's comforting to know that things don't get cleaned up all the time in somebody else's house, too."

She was referring, of course, to one of the signs of maturing and workaholing: we older, busier folks just don't spend as much time trying to make everything perfect

anymore. The paint peels an extra year or two before we begin to worry about it now; dust gets a bit thicker before anyone gets inspired enough to grab a rag; and things grow a little greener in the refrigerator before the cleaning urge hits us.

Our dear friends are in the same fine mess we are in!

To insure their freedom from bosses, they work themselves into a happy frenzy, just as we do.

Each time I'm laboring into the night, trying to keep up with the requests and fill the orders, each time my eyes are strained and my patience wears thin, I try to catch myself.

All I have to do to get back on an even keel is remember what it was like to have bosses all those years.

Then, a kind of transcendental peace flows over me and I grin and sigh and get back to work after giving thanks to that great big Head Bookie in the sky who knows the big secret, just as I do: Life is an open book.

And some of us are here on Earth to make sure the books survive even if we don't ❁



## MISTER REED'S NEIGHBORHOOD

It's an odd little neighborhood, this avenue where my book shop is located. Inside my particular building is housed more books than any other old book place in Alabama—or Mississippi, for that matter. Reed Books has hundreds of boxes of books all numbered for ease of location. In addition to that, there are thousands upon thousands of books stacked and piled and encased in the enormous rear of the store where customers don't go...waiting for sorting and fondling and computerizing and selling. And, of course, there are thousands upon thousands of books, magazines, newspapers, scrapbooks, clippings, artifacts, posters, advertising signs and toys stacked precariously around the main part of the store...items on the floor, under the tables, leaning against the walls and the chairs, piled high not quite to the top of the 16-foot ceilings, where you can see circus posters and pinup calendars and three-dimensional movie stand-ups and everything from large iron ducks to a seven-foot-high Santa Claus, and everything else from a large stand-up of Willie and Joe to a 60-year-old life-size nude mannequin who has held up quite well over the years.

There's an entire post office in my store—a remnant of my grandfather's general store—and there's an old switchboard and old telephones and an old 16-inch turntable that used to be used in radio stations and movie projectors and grammar school desks and showcases garnered from old businesses going out of business. There are even trophies from dance contests and VFW conventions, a six-foot-high Sinclair Oil sign, stuffed animals perched high above your head if you dare to look up, and of course there are books you just don't see anyplace else around here, books long since forgotten by the oldtimers but instantly remembered once they happen to walk in: hundreds of turn of the century dime novels, thousands of mass

market paperbacks from the golden age: 1939 to 1959, cases of books signed by their authors—from TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD to a Kate Douglas Wiggin title—hundreds of old calendars from every year you can imagine, hundreds of pulp magazines from the 19-teens to the 1950's, military manuals from various popular and non-popular wars, ocean liner menus, early books on how to build and fly airplanes, pop-up Little Black Sambo books and other politically-incorrect items, mixed gaily with funny comic books from the days when comics were comic.

And, of course, there are all our fictional and actual heroes mixed together all over the place: Little Lulu, Wonder Woman, Nancy and Sluggo, Lucy and Desi, John Wayne, Pogo Possum, Jerry Lewis, Bob Hope and Fred Allen and Jack Benny, Ray Bradbury, Moby Dick, George Bernard Shaw, C.S. Lewis, Albert Einstein, Moms Mabley, Anais Nin, Joe Louis, Shirley Temple, Mr. Bear, Billy Graham, Steve Allen, Fannie Flagg, Martin Luther King Jr., J.R. Williams, Laurel & Hardy, and on and on and on. Wherever there is something deadly serious—such as MEIN KAMPF—there is something frivolous or joyful or silly to offset it—such as Charlie McCarthy and Red Skelton.

And of course Harpo Marx is within two feet of Karl Marx.

This is the kind of place you call a book store simply because it's easier to describe. Actually, it's JIM REED'S MUSEUM OF FOND MEMORIES, a place where I can hide out from the aggression of the streets and the violence of the corporations, a place where I can look across the room and see Aldous Huxley and Marilyn

Monroe right next to Rock Hudson and Gregory Peck, and enjoy the benevolent presence of them all, and actually get to understand them better through their images and their written words than I was ever able to appreciate them in person.

Just now, a little boy came in, looked up at me with wonder in his eyes, and said, "Hey, Santa Claus!" I told him that I wasn't Santa, but that I knew Santa personally, but this did not faze him. He decided that I was the real Santa Claus, so I took him around to the other side of the store and showed him my Scrooge door-knocker that says, "Bah, Humbug...Merry Christmas!" when you lift the knocker handle. He was suitably impressed and went away promising to be good all year round.

Hey, this is my stuff, and this is my living room, and this is my life, and if you don't like old things, maybe you shouldn't have bought this book—it's going to be old any day now ❁



## RESOLUTION RESOLVE RECONSIDERED

Drifting dangerously close to the new year this Christmas season, so I guess it's time to make a few (ugh! gasp!) resolutions—just so I'll be able to snap back and itemize a list of them in case somebody asks. Let's see...what do I so resolve to do?

1. I resolve to floss daily. My wife points out that I already do that, so let's make it a bit more specific: I firmly and hereby strongly resolve to floss only my own teeth daily. I will not floss anybody else's—at least during the new year. OK, to you and other casual commentators, this may not sound like much—but that's because you haven't considered the possibilities. What if a beautiful and famous woman asks me to floss her teeth? What an opportunity I'll have to show my courage and character by refusing. Or what if somebody offers me a million dollars to floss their teeth? In this case, of course, I'm reasonably confident that my wife will encourage me to break my resolution, thus giving me an excuse to lapse once more into mediocrity, albeit a more fiscally comfortable mediocrity.

2. I promise not to fold, spindle, tear or mutilate anything. Unless, of course, some written instructions forbid me to do so. As long as nobody gives me such an order, I shall refrain.

3. I will not join the Army unless things get really bad. I'm willing to negotiate, naturally, but only under duress.

4. I will not serve on any committee to which I am named, unless said committee is called **THE COMMITTEE ON PROCRASTINATION AND OBFUSCATION**, in which case I will gladly put off making a decision about accepting membership

which, in the case of this particular committee, should be perfectly acceptable. I think.

I will consider—but not quickly and not seriously—suggestions about other resolutions, and I promise to give you my answers by December 31.

Meanwhile, I hope that your resolutions are at least as realistic as mine, and I hope that all wars—those in our streets and those pending elsewhere—end, and soon ❁

## THE SNOWMAN WHO WOULDN'T MELT

In my book loft and museum of fond memories, a large lone Snowman keeps watch over the many wonderful items you can find if you get lost here for a few hours.

This is the kind of Snowman any child would love.

That's because he never melts.

This is the kind of Snowman you can trust to be on duty day and night, pleasantly glowing white, always in a good mood, and within protective view of a fifty-year-old lifesized Santa Claus who stares out over Downtown Birmingham.

Around my meltless Snowman's neck is a violet Slinky, a breezy year-round scarf that offsets the blue and green 3-D glasses he wears.

This is one Snowman who sees the world through tinted glasses and, though he has a carrot for a nose, the carrot will stay fresh forever because it, like the Snowman himself, is made of plastic.

Years ago, the magic Snowman was the last display-model snowman in the annual Fix-Play Display sale—you know, the gigantic Christmas decoration sale that used to be conducted by this long-gone business.

I adopted the icy figure at the Fix-Play sale and put him in charge of the shop.

Thousands of suburbanites used to trek Downtown once a year to purchase the kinds of decorations you can't easily locate anywhere else. Third-and-fourth-generation customers came to Fix-Play, looking for just the right Meltless Snowman or Ancient Santa Claus to keep watch over their Christmas trees by night.

They went away confident in the knowledge that a Snowman who won't melt is just about as magic a Christmas present as you can possibly imagine ❄️

## DONDER GETS HIS NAME BACK

Some time back, I wrote a Christmas piece in which I referred to the reindeer Donder and Blitzen. When the story was published, an unknown editor had changed Donder to Donner without my permission—and without Donder's.

What! you say, it is spelled Donner.

Wrong, Reindeer Breath!

Clement Moore, reputed author of A Visit from Saint Nicholas ('Twas the Night Before Christmas), clearly named all eight reindeer, and he wrote more than once that Donder's name is, well, Donder—not Donner!

This means that Gene Autry (first recording artist to electronically transcribe the song Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer) got it wrong. He simply mis-read the lyrics.

So, for once in our lifetime, let's get it right. Pay respect to Donder by calling him by his rightful name.

Anybody who calls this trusted Santa helper by his incorrect name will hereafter be known in reindeer circles as a Donderhead.

Don't believe me? Go to <http://donder.com> and learn more.

Merry Happy, Donder and Blitzen and all you other reindeer and reindeer fans ❄️



## JOY BY DEFAULT

A chilly cool and clear sunny pre-holiday day in Birmingham will almost make you smile idiotically and think everything is just fine just fine and sure enough maybe it is maybe it is.

I mean what if everything in the universe suddenly one day for no particular reason became just fine for a split infinity?

How would we handle that?

What good would our gripes be?

What if by sheer cosmic accident everybody who counts as a sentient being happened to have a just-fine feeling at the same moment and somehow this was the only excuse the cosmos was looking for and presto! things became just fine?

How quickly would our cynicisms slide slithering to the floor how soon would our friends and family grow bored with our snivelings and snorts our blackened thoughts and our absolute certainty that the world is always going to Hell how ineffectual would we suddenly feel if all our cute observant but nasty remarks about the rottenness of everything but us became merely the mutterings of some old demented and out-of-touch post-sixties hippy-wanna-be how unremarkable it might become to find it necessary to cast aside all asides and snides and derides and let joy appear by default and change remarkably the countenance of all who decided to stay with a just-fine world and try to somehow get along with it absorb

it and eventually be won over to the idea of things just going right much of the time?

A world suddenly gone to Well, a world gone Glad.

Grasp and seize this wondrous thought and, white-knuckling it to the sweetened and unbitter end, give it a chance. You just might find yourself stumbling into having a happy holiday you know ❄

## DO GO ON

Well, life do go on, no matter what else doesn't go on. What have we lost this year? Did we lose the American Family (or, as my daughter's generation calls it, the "family unit")? No way. Some say we lost that back in the 1950's when television replaced face-to-face. Are we simply spectators to the shambles that occurred a couple of generations after TV? Did we lose peace in the Middle East, or simply accept a Pyrrhic victory? Or have we long ago lost our self-respect and now simply lie low, waiting for the revolution?

What did we gain this year?

Well, that's the question you must ask yourself, because all that's important is inside that cranial structure of yours. Media devices won't give you answers. Reading Tarot cards or listening to talk radio won't solve anything. Perhaps sensory deprivation isn't the answer—something like sensory re-organization might be a better solution.

Eschew the unnecessary for a while and see what happens.

I once went two years without watching television. An amazing experience. My mind cleared even if my complexion didn't. I saved so much time and energy. Think I may do it again—cold turkey might work.

I don't shave any more. Save so much time each morning! I tell little kids that I know Santa Claus personally, which I do.

I once went ten days without talking. That, too, was an enlightening experience. Makes you pay attention to your lesser-known vanities and all.

WHERE WAS I?

Oh, here I am. Just sitting here trying to run a book shop and scrape together a few rubles (about what dollars are worth now) to give a Christmas present or two. Hope Hanukkah went well. Trust Christmas will go as well as your cranium will allow. And let's somehow make this year a bit better.

Even if we just wouldn't whine for a year, the world would have time to take a nice deep breath and get shored up for the next decade. Take joy with you ❄

## CHRISTMAS IN CHICAGO

We were standing quietly inside a building hallway in Downtown Chicago one Wednesday afternoon, watching the Rube Goldberg gigantic presses grinding out a big issue of the daily paper, glancing at the wall opposite the large windows at a journalistic display of photographs. The press was awesome.

What became even more awesome was the silence when the presses stopped running. We thought something had broken down.

Later that day we saw the paper, folded and fresh off the press, in the hands of a vendor shouting about the mayor's death. We hadn't known till that moment what had made the presses stop. The city had turned sideways and was trying to right itself.

I remember two of the photographs in that hallway that particular day: One of an elevated cage of firemen poking their bodies out of a Dante inferno of smoke; another of a crowd of people standing way back from a man about to put his hand into a bag containing what had to be a time bomb.

Life is sweet, but life can be dramatic and, well, awesome. The holiday season was an interesting time to be in Chicago. Wish we had had the money to stay longer and visit friends and strangers alike. I did get to three bookstores in Evanston and a couple in the city, plus I got a personal tour of the most wonderful book haven I've ever seen: the three-building collection of books and memorabilia of one of the great magicians of an age gone by: Jay Marshall. He was delightful, a book lover gone mad with love of accumulating. The many floors of books crammed against

one another and not for sale would have driven less sturdy collectors wild with envy. I considered it my tour through the looking glass, though the books were thankfully not mirror images.

Oh, well, back to the real world where I have to adopt and sell into fresh ownership the books nobody else wants—at least right now. I try to dust them off and keep them cozy till somebody does. I'm grateful for the silent messages these books send me as I scatter dust down the hall of the loft. **THE OH SO IRRELEVANT BUT PRECIOUS SELF-REVELATIONS AND KINDNESSES.** This is a whale of a way to make a living ✨

## 'BAMA SNOW

This is the only December 24 Christmas Eve that I can know about for sure, this 24th day in the final month of a millenium.

The stockings are not hung by the chimney with care, since we will be celebrating Christmas at the homes of two of our children, seeing all seven grandchildren and all one child namesake in the same 24-hour period.

The weather is overcast and the temperature is rising. Somewhat comforting, since perhaps 50 of my Christmases so far in Alabama have been warm and overcast. This is Christmas for us 'bamians, and no amount of dreaming can conjure up real snow real cold and creamy snow.

We will be departing for Fairhope tomorrow, Christmas Day, in the midst of a Solar eclipse—the last Christmas Day Solar eclipse for 383 years or so. Better appreciate it while I'm here in mind and body and zeal.

Liz is out decking her client with newly-designed brochure, and I am full of freshly peppered grits and microwaved bacon and tefloned eggs and am now running copies of my brochure that I use at the book loft to try and make more sales so that I can afford not to work on Christmas Eve and instead spend a little quiet time in my little home on Birmingham's Southside.

Bing Crosby's electronically-reproduced voice is singing belowdeck a carol about Bethlehem and other tunes about soft feelings at holiday time.

The trashcan is full of debris from Christmas gusto, waiting for the collectors to come back from holiday and haul away the drippings.

Louis next door is snug a-TV and cozied against the gray sky. Debbie next door is perhaps away yonder in Atlanta to see old and new grandkids. Neighbors Margaret and Frank are seeing to great-grandkids and grandkids and kids amuck. Neighbor Leeann is behind closed doors as seemingly always.

And Ma in her kerchief and I without cap will some hour soon take a long nap, with visions of sugarplums half a century old, visions as new and fresh as the day they were borne on the sweetly moist air of Alabama, fresh as the newborn red clay dust that will eventually settle over our dreamed landscape and bring us back to rest ❁

## CHRISTMAS PUMPKIN

SO BE IT! A new year is well on its way to being the real thing. Our warm winter in Alabama is coming to a close and now the cold part begins.

We may have snow by Thursday. Kids pray for it, adults who have to show up for work curse it. Others who make their own hours welcome it.

Of course, snow's kinda like Christmas. All the fun is in the expectation and anticipation. Once it's here, it's nice for a while. But, like visitors, it wears a little thin if it stays too long.

You may be one of the fortunate few who can decide whether or not to work on a stormy day. If you decide not—the cash flow may slow down, but you have a good time. The price of being a loner.

As Thoreau said, "I would rather sit on a pumpkin and have it all to myself than to be crowded on a velvet cushion." How did he know ❄



## WRAP RAP

Enthusiastic, energetic seven-year-old daughter Margaret helps me wrap Christmas gifts, way back when.

Wife Liz is off working late someplace, daughter Jeannie is on the perpetual phone in another room, son Robin is doing his own life somewhere else on Southside

Margaret and I are trying to help Liz by wrapping some gifts. My wrapping skills are sloppy and patchwork. Margaret, though, devotes full energy to her task and makes every present look special.

We're drinking eggnog and listening to a compilation of Christmas songs I play each year: Harry Belafonte singing about Mary's boy-child, Mel Torme singing about chestnuts and nose-nipping, the Modern Jazz Quartet improvising England's Carol.

We've even tried to revive the old fireplace downstairs with chunks of coal and alley wood.

Among the miscellany of boxes that I give Margaret to wrap...is her gift. A gift from me to her. But she doesn't know it. She doesn't know what's in the box, I just make sure she thinks it's something I'm giving to somebody else. She carefully wraps and decorates the box and slides it across the table, under my nose. "Who gets this?" she asks, colored pen in hand upon the gift card. "It's your gift," I say.

She pauses, eyes big, mouth open in dismay.

“What? It’s my gift?”

“Yep. From me to you.”

“But,” she sputters, “I didn’t know it was mine!” She grabs it from me. “What is it?”

“Can’t tell. But you did a great job of wrapping it.”

Margaret is conflicted. A cast-iron family rule mandates that no package is pre-opened. Poking and squeezing and shaking are allowed, but no pre-opening.

“You fooled me!” She shouts with laughter and dismay mixed.

“Yep,” I grin.

“Aarrghh!” she screams in true Charlie Brown style.

“I’ll never let that happen again,” she vows.

By the following Christmas, she’s forgotten that vow and I play the same trick on her. It even happens yet a third time, the Christmas after that. By then, though, I know that the trick is over. I’ll never be able to make it happen a fourth time.

But to this day, Margaret and I still joke about the old one-two combo I delivered to her three years in a row. I almost achieved the status of Lucy and the football, but she learns faster than Charlie Brown, and I can never get away with it again.

Down all the Christmas memories, this one sparkles in its own little world, in my heart, in my mind, in my forever memories of good times re-savored ❄

## SAVING THE HARLEM REINDEER DREAM

My first visit to Harlem to visit Oliver Hardy was just a few years back, but I can't forget it.

Let me back-track.

I'm driving the long and barren interstate between Augusta and Atlanta in the dead of winter. The sky is gray, the asphalt is gray, the grass and trees are gray, and the mood is grayish. My wife, Liz, and my granddaughter, Jessica, are with me. Suddenly I see a roadside sign directing me to Harlem, Georgia.

Interesting. There is a Harlem Down South?

Then, the next sign tells me that Harlem is the birthplace of the late film comedian Oliver Hardy, of Laurel and Hardy fame.

This is my chance to break the gray day into something smileful. Without asking anybody's permission, I swerve onto the road to Harlem.

"Where are we going?" Liz asks.

"Why are we turning?" Jessica asks. She's in a hurry to get to Columbia, South Carolina, to visit family.

"Oh, I'm just going to check something out," I say. "Maybe we'll have fun!"

Both passengers grumble and try to go back to their naps.

Suddenly, I'm yelling, "Look look look!" rapid-fire, to make sure Liz and Jessica wake up and look ahead of us on the two-lane blue road.

There, half a block away, five deer are crossing the road, and Jessica claps her hands in delight,

"Are they reindeer?"

I make my usual retort, "Maybe this is where Santa keeps his reindeer off-season." Jessica is still young and hopeful and a Believer, so she accepts this explanation without a hint of cynicism.

We drive on in to Harlem, the gray day broken by smiles and daydreams.

Harlem is a tiny town, but, sure enough, it's the hometown of Oliver Hardy. Nothing is open today, since it's Sunday, and this is long before the Laurel and Hardy museum is fully functioning.

We visit for a while, find that some locals don't know who Hardy was, find that others are proud of who he was. Liz and I enjoy the visit, but Jessica doesn't know who these comedians were, so she's just along for the ride, still thinking about those five reindeer.

Years later, when Harlem has its act together, I take grandsons Ryan and Reed to Harlem, and they get to see a Laurel and Hardy movie, which makes them instant fans.

But today, driving out of Harlem and heading back to the interstate, Jessica starts to settle down in the back seat and Liz closes her eyes while I drive.

Once on the interstate, I'm driving along at my usual at-the-speed-limit rate when I see in the rearview mirror a truck bearing down on us and getting ready to pass. The large open bed of the truck has something gray piled onto it, so I glance again, as it starts to pass us, to determine what it is hauling.

Two hunting-capped men are in front and in the bed are five fresh deer carcasses, their antlers waving with the truck's motion.

Since they're passing on the left, I quickly yell, "Look over there! (pointing to the right-hand fields) What's that? Do you see that?"

Liz and Jessica rise up and peer to the right, their attention focused intensely, just as the truckload of deer passes on by. I keep making up stuff to keep them searching the fields, until the truck is out of sight. Then, I have to fabricate something so they won't think I'm completely crazy.

"I thought I saw a grizzly!"

They look at me funny and settle back down, never having seen the truck.

And I continue the drive toward Augusta, slightly proud of myself for having saved one little girl's dream of Santa for at least another season ❄



*I found this little story in a bunch of near-forgotten stuff left in our home by our youngest grown daughter, Margaret. It must have been a school assignment, but it recaptures the flavors of those yonder days.*

## **TWAS THE MONTH BEFORE CHRISTMAS**

by Margaret Reed Hutton

After Thanksgiving the Christmas decorations in grocery stores and convenience stores start popping up. Entering a shopping mall is like entering Santa's workshop, with little elves telling patrons to have a happy holiday. For weeks and weeks the whole country seems to be in a good mood, with thoughtful people out spending money on the friends they love. Every day everywhere across the land, children are snooping through closets and under beds to try and find the presents from Mom and Dad. Excitement is in the air.

For the Reeds, Christmas seems to go on for months. Mom and Dad have my siblings and their families over several times before the big day to make cookies and play with trains and toys received in years past. This is the perfect time to give and receive hints for gifts. The few weeks before Christmas is a great excuse to spend time with my family just relaxing and having fun.

This pre-Christmas month is probably one of the busiest months of the year as far as parties are concerned. When I was younger, I was never allowed to attend the parties my parents went to. They were “adult parties.” I always wondered what happened at these gatherings. Did they sit around telling dirty jokes and watching R-rated movies? Did they cuss and say foul words that I was too young to hear? Of course not. Now that I am older and allowed to attend these get-togethers, they are

not quite as exciting as I had dreamed. But being young and imaginative is all part of being a child at Christmas time.

I always know Christmas Day is coming soon when presents start collecting under the tree. Every few hours I check to see if any new boxes have appeared, because, of course, no box will be left unshaken. The anticipation drives me crazy, as well as my parents, who keep hearing, “Can't I open just one, please?” The permission is never granted, which makes the days turn into years. Gifts start coming in the mail from out-of-town relatives, and my mind, like playing in the new-fallen snow on a clear winter Saturday, is free and open to imagine what is inside the carefully wrapped packages.

Christmas Eve, which has to be the longest day of the year, finally arrives. The day is spent running about town taking care of the last minute tasks—obtaining stocking stuffers, buying more Scotch tape since all twelve rolls have mysteriously disappeared, and going to friends' houses picking up the gifts that were so special they needed an “unfindable” hiding place. Every store looks as though every four year old in the country was let loose in it, and all of the sales people feel as though every four year old was let loose. Most of the mothers look frazzled while most fathers are anxiously awaiting putting together their child's first bicycle at two o'clock in the morning.

With my brother and sister spending the evening with their in-laws, my parents, a few close families and I spend Christmas Eve at home in front of the fireplace visiting and enjoying a wonderfully prepared home-cooked meal. Each of us is allowed to open one present just to satisfy the urge of tearing into all of them. We all try to act as relaxed as possible, all the while anxiously awaiting nine a.m. the following morning when my siblings arrive for the “grand opening.”

At about ten p.m. my mother, myself, and anyone else who cares to join us, drive around town seeing how other families and neighborhoods decorate for Christmas.

It's fun to see neighbors try to out-twinkle and out-Santa each other. Many families are out as we are trying to expend the excess energy that is attained on this night. This tradition is a reversed parade with the people in the cars watching proud owners of elaborately decorated houses waving at them. By midnight we are in the elegant Cathedral of the Advent in downtown Birmingham for midnight mass. Hearing the Christmas carols and smelling the fresh pine lets me know that Christmas morning is only the Sandman away. Fighting it every step of the way, children in church fall asleep dreaming of Santa bringing their first bicycles.

By some strange phenomenon I always wake up brighteyed and bushytailed early Christmas morning, even after a restless night's sleep. By eight o'clock I'm awake brushing my teeth, feeling like my heart is about to jump out of my body and open my presents on its own. I run jump in bed with my parents, shrieking, "Merry Christmas!" They grumble, groan and stumble out of bed and mumble, "Merry Christmas." As the clock strikes nine times, announcing that my loved ones should be walking in the door, the coffee has been brewed, orange juice made, and turkey put in the oven.

By nine fifteen and no sign of family, I pick up the phone and start calling. It never fails that my sister and her husband have overslept, and my brother and his family are still playing Santa Claus with my niece. I'm positive they do this to me on purpose—getting me back for the years I tormented them by being the typical bratty little sister. By ten o'clock and their arrival, my parents are debating whether or not to call the ambulance about my possible cardiac arrest from the anticipation.

The big day is here! The presents are opened as hugs, kisses, and thank-yous are exchanged. The whole process lasts fifteen minutes and then it's all over. New clothes are put on, Christmas dinner is devoured, and naps are taken all before sunset. The thrill is gone. The moment we all have been waiting for was just that...a moment.



And who must have the final word? My Christmas wife,  
of course, who brings me Christmas every day



## **THE LAST CHRISTMAS TREE IN PINELLAS COUNTY**

by Liz Reed

It was the year we remodeled the house and because the contractors worked until the last possible minute, we waited until Christmas Eve to buy a tree. Not usually a problem. But the year before, merchants had over-bought, and this year, they over-compensated.

Our father fared forth in high hopes of finding the perfect tree. First he went to the lots in our hometown, then in the next town, then on down the road a piece, then nearly to the county line. He finally found a tree, at this point settling for any tree remotely shaped like Christmas. As he was paying for the last Christmas tree in Pinellas County, a distraught man came running into the nursery. With tears in his eyes, he explained he was visiting from Michigan, his little girl was three years old and this would be the first Christmas she'd remember and there wasn't a tree anywhere to be found.

“Here,” Daddy said as he handed over the last Christmas tree in Pinellas County, “Merry Christmas.” The grateful visitor hustled the tree into his car, shouting his gratitude and wishing Daddy, his family, the nursery worker and anyone else within earshot a very happy holiday indeed.

Now what to do? Daddy turned back to the nurseryman and scratched his head. All the cut trees were gone, all the burlap-balled living trees were gone. “Well,” said the nurseryman, “how about a nice podocarpus?” And so Daddy bought a small, green sort-of-conical-shaped tree in a ten gallon can. The can was bigger than the tree. We decorated it with one strand of tiny lights and selected the smallest ornaments. We wrapped the can in red foil paper and set our tree in the middle of the dining room table. After Christmas, we planted the tree at 513 Scotland Street where it still grows, some 50 years later.

When I think back on all the Christmas trees in all the years, that's the tree I remember best.

## **DID I EVER TELL YOU WHAT TO GET ME FOR CHRISTMAS?**

If you really want to please me, if you truly wish to give me something that will make me smile, if you want to feel you've done the right thing by me, then read on:

This Christmas, give me something personal, something of yourself—not something you picked up at the Mall or ran into the Pharmacy and grabbed at the last minute. Just this one Christmas, I would love to receive something truly personal, something that is part of you.

The gift you give as a part of yourself could be any number of things.

You could write a little poem for me, one you made up all by yourself.

You could sing me your favorite Christmas carols, the ones you've loved since childhood.

You could do a little performance for me—a funny jig or a joke or two about what it's like to know somebody like me.

You could draw me a picture and sign your name at the bottom and date it, “Christmas, The 21st Century A.D.”

You could take me to dinner all by yourself and sit and chat with me over some nice food and drink, I listening to what you have to say and you listening to what I have to say.

You could make a little album of photos and memorabilia about me and you, and give it to me with a loving hug.

Get the idea?

You may come up with something better or something more interesting than any of these—that's ok. As long as you give me something personal, something affectionate and caring, I will be happy.

Maybe you feel uncomfortable, trying to improvise a Christmas gift for me. Perhaps you've gotten used to going to the store and purchasing something, and maybe you feel this IS a personal way to gift me. If that's so, then here's something you can try, something that may please us both: Go to the store and find a delightful little toy, a toy that makes you smile, involuntarily. Then, bring me that smile—and the toy, too. We can enjoy the toy and our mutual smiles together at the same time!

If all of this is just too much trouble, you could even do this: take me to lunch and ask me what I'd like to give to you, if I could only afford it or if I could only do it just right, in a way that you would appreciate.

Anyhow, I thought you might get a kick out of learning the answer to that age-old question we all ask each other every year: "What do you want for Christmas?" This year, I thought I'd tell you the truth, as I feel the truth this year.

Give me part of you, and I will try to return the compliment next Christmas ❄







Jim Reed has written hundreds of true and actual stories about his 70+ years in Alabama. He resides in Birmingham, where he continues to recall the good times and learn from the bad. CHRISTMAS COMES BUT ONCE A DAY can be ordered from [jim@jimreedbooks.com](mailto:jim@jimreedbooks.com)

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**U.S. \$16.95**  
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[www.jimreedbooks.com](http://www.jimreedbooks.com)

ISBN-13: 978-0-9762557-1-0

ISBN-10: 0-9762557-1-5



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