

SELECTED  
STORIES

Nicholas Gordon

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## A COLD EYE ON CHRISTMAS

"Let us cast a cold and scientific eye on Christmas," Dr. B. Huston Fawcett said to his final World History class before the Christmas break.

He paused to look over the thirty-seven adolescent faces in front of him, some waiting attentively, others already sliding off into glassy boredom.

Forty-two years earlier, when he had first taught this particular lesson in his first year at St. Mary's Academy, the faces had all been white and the students all Catholic. But over two generations many of the white Catholic families had moved away, replaced mostly by black non-Catholics, and so the diocese had opened its doors to refugees from the public school system of all races and religions. Now the faces in front of Dr. Fawcett were of all shades, the children of all sorts of cultures and traditions. But the souls, Dr. Fawcett thought, the souls had not changed.

So. Dr. Fawcett took a deep breath and started rolling the boulder up the hill one more time.

"Let's look at the story of Christmas as history. For example, does anyone know the date of Christ's birth?"

Hands shot up.

"Miss Doyle?"

"December 25th," Miss Doyle said confidently.

She was a beautiful shade of brown with black kinky hair and sapphire blue eyes.

"How do we know that?"

She shrugged. "That's when we celebrate Christmas."

"Yes," Dr. Fawcett agreed. "But Jesus Christ was born over two thousand years ago. How do we know that it was on December 25th?"

Silence.

"Well," Dr. Fawcett went on, "what are the main sources of our knowledge of Christ's birth?"

Hands shot up, fewer than before.

"Mr. Singletary."

Black, moon-faced Mr. Singletary was born again, and knew his chapter and verse.

"Matthew 2 and Luke 2."

"Very good!" Dr. Fawcett said. "And do either of them supply a date for His birth?"

The class waited as Mr. Singletary mouthed the words silently.

"No," he finally said.

"That's correct," Dr. Fawcett said. "In fact, there is no source that tells us the date of Christ's birth. Mr. Pfeiffer."

"Then why do we celebrate it on December 25?"

"The truth is," Dr. Fawcett said, "that for several centuries the Church didn't celebrate Christ's birth. Easter was the only holiday celebrating Christ. But December 25th was an important pagan holiday in the Roman world, celebrating the birth of the sun god, Saturnalia in the west and the Mithraic feast in



the east. So to compete with these pagan holidays, the Church began to celebrate Christmas on the same day."

"You mean it was made up?" Miss Doyle said, forgetting to raise her hand.

"Yes, it was made up," Dr. Fawcett said.

"To imitate pagan holidays?" Mr. Pfeiffer said.

"To compete with pagan holidays. But let's move on to the year. In what year was Christ born? Mr. Santiago."

"1 A.D." Mr. Santiago answered.

"How do we know that?"

"Well, it's 1 A.D. by definition, isn't it?"

"Yes, very good!" Dr. Fawcett said. "Very clever. But of course no one called it 1 A.D. at the time, did they?"

"No, of course not," Mr. Santiago agreed.

"So when did we decide that it was 1 A.D.?"

Mr. Santiago shrugged. No hands went up.

"Actually, it was calculated by a monk named Dionysius Exiguus in 525 A.D., who counted – actually, miscounted – back through the reigns of Roman emperors up to that time. Though of course five centuries after the birth of Christ no one really knew when that event occurred. Miss Doyle."

"You mean it's not 2007?"

Dr. Fawcett laughed. "Yes, of course it's 2007. But the point is that the number 2007 is just as arbitrary as the date December 25th. These are traditions created by the Church for a variety of practical reasons in the absence of any real knowledge.

But let's go on. There are, after all, a few things we do know. For instance, who was king when Christ was born. Miss Reagan."

"Herod."

"And how do we know that?"

"Matthew, I think. Isn't it Matthew that tells of the three kings and the massacre of the innocents?"

"Yes, it is, Miss Reagan. Very good. You know your scripture. And when did King Herod reign?"

Silence.

"King Herod reigned from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C.," Dr. Fawcett said. "He died in 4 B.C., sometime after a lunar eclipse on March 13 and before the start of Passover. So what does that tell us about the year of Christ's birth? Miss Bayliss?"

"That He must have been born before 4 B.C."

"Yes. And at least how much before?"

"Enough time for the wise men to see Him and report back to Herod, and then for Herod to massacre the innocents."

"Mr. Singletary?"

"Enough time for the Holy Family to travel to Egypt and live there awhile, since they stayed there until they heard of Herod's death. And since Herod slaughtered all of the male children up to two years old, he must have thought that Christ could have been born up to two years earlier. So Christ had to be born around 5 or 6 B.C."

"Excellent! Excellent!" Dr. Fawcett exclaimed.

"But we have another piece of the puzzle to consider. Remember that Joseph and Mary traveled to

Bethlehem just before Mary gave birth. Does anyone know why? Miss Mott."

"There was a census."

"And who ordered the census. Mr. Singletary?"

"Caesar Augustus."

"And who was governor at the time?"

Again the class waited as Mr. Singletary mouthed the words silently.

"Cyranius was governor of Syria," he finally said.

"Luke 2:2, right?"

Mr. Singletary nodded.

Dr. Fawcett strolled back and forth in front of the class as if pondering the point.

"No mention of Herod, right?"

Mr. Singletary nodded.

"Isn't that strange?" Dr. Fawcett wondered out loud. "Matthew talks about Herod. Does Luke so much as mention Herod?"

"No," Mr. Singletary said.

"Now we know when that census took place," Dr. Fawcett went on. "Sulpicius Quirinius (Cyranius in Greek) was appointed governor of Syria, which included Palestine, in 6 A.D., and soon after taking over he conducted the census to aid in tax collections. Miss Doyle."

"But Dr. Fawcett. How could Christ have been born during that census if He was born around 5 or 6 B.C.? It doesn't make sense."

"Quite right, Miss Doyle. It doesn't make sense."

"I mean, Luke is saying one thing and Matthew is saying another, right?"

"But the Holy Gospel is the word of the Lord!" Miss Elkins shouted out, unable to control herself. "It can't be wrong!"

"But lookit!" Mr. Santiago said. "If Herod died in 4 B.C. and the census took place in 6 A.D., something doesn't add up."

"Actually," Dr. Fawcett said, "scholars have been attempting to reconcile these dates for many years. Some suggest that Quirinius must have been governor twice and conducted two censuses. Others suggest that the King Herod mentioned in Matthew was not Herod the Great but one of his sons. But every explanation raises other problems. The fact is that we have a discrepancy between Matthew and Luke and no easy way to resolve it. Mr. Pfeiffer."

"Dr. Fawcett, why are you doing this just before we go on Christmas break? What's the point of this?"

"Very good, Mr. Pfeiffer! Very good! We get right to the heart of things. Mr. Pfeiffer, if someone could prove to you absolutely that Matthew and Luke were in conflict, which we have only suggested, not proven, but if it were proven that at least one of them had to be wrong, would you want to know that? Miss Kim."

"Yes, I would."

"Why?"

"Because it was the truth."

"Mr. Pfeiffer?"

"I wouldn't want to know anything about it!"

"Why not?"

"I believe in God's word!"

"Even if it were true that Matthew and Luke disagreed on something?"

"It couldn't be true. The word comes not from them but from the Lord."

More hands. A forest of quivering hands. The bell rang. No one seemed to notice.

"Miss Doyle?"

The beautiful dark face with the sapphire eyes smiled. "What's the difference when He was born? I can believe in Him anyway, can't I?"

"Yes, Miss Doyle, of course you can," Dr. Fawcett said. "But I'm afraid we've run out of time. Think about what we've said here. It has to do with the relationship between reason and faith. Each of you will have to work out that relationship for yourself over the course of your life. Have a Merry Christmas, class! I'll see you next year."

"Merry Christmas, Dr. Fawcett!" some shouted back. But others had already begun to argue about reason and faith, too engrossed to call out Merry Christmas.

Beautiful! Dr. Fawcett thought. How lovely! And what a gift it was to be able to bring young minds to a new awareness.

Christmas Eve, after Midnight Mass, found Dr. Fawcett on his knees before the nativity scene in his local parish church, praying to the infant Jesus. He

had come to mass alone, having lived alone since his wife had died 23 years earlier, and was now enjoying a few precious moments alone with Jesus while the sacristan, a friend, closed the building around him.

What he knew, and his students didn't know, was that St. Mary's Academy was closing at the end of the school year. The number of Catholics in the diocese was shrinking, and the diocese could no longer keep all of its schools open. Naturally, they were closing those furthest from the centers of Catholic population, of which St. Mary's was one.

Having seniority in the diocese, Dr. Fawcett could have been transferred to another school of his choice. But he was loath to force a younger teacher out of a job when he was past retirement age, and so he took the retirement package that the diocese offered.

He prayed to the infant Jesus that he had made the right choice for his life after retirement. For 42 years he lived in the same one-bedroom apartment, for 19 years with his wife, Carmela, and then for 23 years alone, monk-like, giving much of his meager income to St. Mary's, to his local parish, and to mission schools overseas.

He had intended to become a priest but then fell in love with Carmela, and so he changed his vocation to that of a lay teacher, moving across the divide from faith to reason.

Nor did he ever regret that choice, even though Carmela couldn't have children and died early of a cancer in her brain. He was grateful that he had known fleshly love with such a beautiful person, for

however long. And the life of reason, of a scholar, had excited him to the point of getting his doctorate in history and writing one book and several articles about the early history of the Church in North America, works that elicited a good deal of controversy and some academic recognition.

In July he would give up his apartment and go to teach in a mission school in the mountains of Bolivia, and he prayed for health, since that was what most worried him about his choice, years enough of good health so that he might be of use there and not a burden.

He prayed for the students whose education would be disrupted by the closing of the school. Some would have to travel long distances to the few schools that remained open. Others would have to return to the public schools they had fled. Grant them a life of faith and reason, he prayed, and the chance to know with clarity and understanding wonders that he would never see.

He prayed that their faith would not make them clap their hands over their ears and shut their eyes in an attempt to close themselves off from truths of the mind and senses. And he prayed that their reason would never undermine their faith, poisoning their will with a skepticism that would refuse so extraordinary a gift.

He prayed in gratitude for his own faith, which had filled his life with love and meaning. And he prayed that in his new life he would have the strength

to do God's will and to accept gladly the fate God intended for him, whatever that might be.

Finally, as he heard his friend the sacristan noisily closing cabinets and drawers, he wished the infant Jesus, a plastic doll in the arms of a plastic Mary, faced by a kneeling plastic Joseph, a happy birthday.

"Happy Birthday, Blessed Lord!" he whispered, tears of happiness starting to his eyes. "Happy Birthday!"

He got up off his knees, turned, said goodnight to his friend the sacristan, and walked out into the cold Christmas morning.



## A GUILTY CONSCIENCE

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>  
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>  
Date: 9 Aug 2007  
Re: Arrgh!!!

Thanks a lot! I had a mouse problem, now I have a python problem!

Last night I did what you said, took the thing out to cuddle with it, get it used to me, and bang! it shows me its fangs and hisses and I drop it, all six feet of it, and off it goes, slithering quick as a bunny for the nearest wall.

And now it's gone! Gone! Who knows where? Probably hunting for mice in the wall, happy as a clam.

What worries me is the guy right below me. He's a lawyer! And he's nuts! And he's had three heart attacks! So if he sees this thing slithering out of the wall at him, I'm cooked! I'm fried! I'm yesterday!

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>  
To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>  
Date: 9 Aug 2007  
Re: Ghosts

You say you don't believe in ghosts, but I'm

telling you, there's a ghost in this apartment. I actually saw it last night. Well, not actually saw it since it chose to be invisible. But I saw it move something.

I was as usual having a tough time getting to sleep (I know you say a guilty conscience needs no accuser) when I heard some eerie sounds coming from the living room, like someone bumping into things. Well, you know what I mess I have in there.

So I went to have a look, and when I flicked on the light one of the piles of books by my armchair suddenly spun half round like a record on a malfunctioning turntable.

Holy crap! I thought, and turned out the light. As if the thing couldn't see in the dark.

And then I felt the presence of evil in the room. I can't describe it any other way. An ancient, cold, remorseless, unstoppable evil permeating the air.

I backed out of the room and went back into bed to think about it. A ghost! Who was it? What did it want? How was I going to get rid of it?

My heart was pounding, and I thought: What if it comes in here? Maybe I should just leave. But where would I go? And for how long?

Maybe it wants revenge. Maybe it's out to scare me so much that I have another heart attack.

I decided that the main thing I had to fear was fear itself, and that calmed me down a little. I had to approach the situation scientifically. It's got to be someone's ghost. The ghost of someone I screwed big time. So I started going over all the people I've cheated over the years – as you know, a long, long list.

Not including you, of course, or any of my other exes, since you're all still alive, as far as I know. So I boiled it down to three really big-time victims, all of whom are no longer with us.

I decided to make restitution to each of them, one by one, starting with the least expensive (hope springs eternal). If the next night the ghost is gone, fine. If not, I'll have to move on to the next.

So what do you think? Sound like a plan?

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>  
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>  
Date: 10 Aug 2007  
Re: Get this thing outta here!

Next weekend? You're gonna come over next weekend? You got to be kidding me!

What if Cuddles crawls into Wynner's bed? And the guy's heart stops? And his kid or cousin or concubine sues me? What do I do then?

Don't tell me it's not an aggressive snake! It's a snake! And it's big! Get it outta here!!!

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>  
To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>  
Date: 10 Aug 2007  
Re: One Down

Yesterday I sent a check for \$14,873.33 to each of Ray Goldberg's three children. You remember Ray Goldberg. He was the guy whose suit I settled early

when I took you to Hawaii to make up for my first affair with Gloria.

Boy, was he pissed! He claimed he got only half of what he should have, but actually it was a third.

Well anyway, the ghost isn't Ray's. I sat in the armchair all night in the dark, waiting. I must have dozed off because around 3:00 in the AM I felt something cold and muscular touch my leg!

My heart pounding, I switched on the light, and the poltergeist practically lifted my chair! With me in it! I felt the center push up against my ass, as though a fist at the end of a long, sinewy arm pressed up against it and suddenly released!

"Who the hell are you?" I screamed at it. "Who? Who? What do you want? Tell me and I'll do it! Just tell me, for heaven's sake!"

Of course, no answer. The thing had done what it wanted to do. My heart felt like it was flip-flopping at the end of a broken spring.

I'd better get it right today! The second one on my list is Beryl Hyde. You remember – the widow I was trustee for. That's how I got the leg-breakers off my back.

Let's hope it's Beryl. I don't know how much more of this I can survive.

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>

To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>

Date: 11 Aug 2007

Re: Two Down

It's not Beryl. I sold off my entire Hathaway portfolio and sent her grandnephew \$225,000 – that's with interest from 1983 – with instructions to distribute it as he thinks she would have intended.

Then I took up my living room vigil. I know it might sound stupid to haunt a ghost, as it were, but I want to know when the damned thing is gone.

I laid a copy of my letter to Beryl's grandnephew with my checkbook register on the coffee table, just in case the ghost wanted proof, and waited.

Nothing. All night, nothing.

"You were Beryl!" I shouted out loud to the dawn. "You haunted me out of every penny of my savings! But thank God you're finally gone! And I still have my annuity!"

I waited for the gray to turn a little brighter and went back to the bedroom hoping to salvage just a bit of sleep.

And there it was! It must have been lying in wait for me on the bed! As I entered the room the sheets began thrashing wildly, and then the night table starting rocking as though an earthquake were shaking the house.

I raced back into the living room and covered in the armchair, waiting for it to come for me, waiting for the heart attack that I knew was imminent. But it never came. Eventually I fell asleep in the chair. I wasn't going to get back into that bed!

So it has to be Grandma. I never told you about Grandma. This was before we were married.

After Dad split with Mom and then disappeared, she made me the executor of her estate.

But her will left me only \$1,000 to compensate for being the executor. Every penny of the rest went to Beth Abraham – the nursing home that was taking care of her.

So when she was finally sinking into her last coma, I wrote up another will, reversing the priorities, and got her to sign it, telling her this was just a minor rewording to solve a technical problem in the previous will.

She was barely able to sign the thing, forget about checking to see whether I was telling her the truth. When she died I got enough money to buy into what later became my practice. Beth Abraham got the thousand bucks, which, by the way, they were very happy with.

Well, today I sold my pension. The whole thing. After taxes, that gives me \$843,295.27 – Grandma's legacy plus interest. The ghost had better be Grandma because now I'm clean, I've got nothing left. I'm going to be living on social security.

But my conscience is clean, too. Funny thing. I never felt guilty about anything I did, not to either the living or the dead. I figured that people with a conscience were just children who never grew up. You look around the world and you see what people do, and pretty soon you begin to wonder why you should be one of the only chumps.

But I feel right about this. The ghost is Grandma, and she's haunting me for a reason. There's

a power greater than me or the ghost, something that's making this happen, that makes everything happen for its own purpose in its own time.

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>  
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>  
Date: 11 Aug 2007  
Re: Yuck!

So I bought two dead mice from the pet store and I rubbed them all along the moldings of the living room walls, like you said. And I put them with the hide box beside the tank, and now I'm waiting.

This had better work! I can't believe you lent me Cuddles to get rid of mice and now I have to buy dead mice from the pet store to get rid of Cuddles!

From: Andrew Dolittle <thedude101@hotmail.com>  
To: Dante Espinoza <charmer11@yahoo.com>  
Date: 12 Aug 2007  
Re: Cuddles is back!

Well, it worked! This morning the dead mice were gone and the thing was in the hide box, just like you said it would be.

So I picked up the hide box with the thing in it and put it back in the tank.

You'd better believe I'm not taking it out again! It's all yours! Come and get it!

I wonder if it ever did get down into Wynner's apartment.

From: Eli Wynner <winnerwynner@gmail.com>  
To: June Wynner <juneloveselvis@aol.com>  
Date: 12 Aug 2007  
Re: Free at Last!

Yes! It was Grandma!

I spent the whole night walking back and forth between the living room and bedroom, with forays into the bathroom and kitchen – and nothing! The sense, the smell of evil is gone! I'm free!

Shows you what scientific method can do. Hypothesis, experiment, result, conclusion. Works every time.

Not that it didn't cost me. I'm down to social security. But I'm square with the world. Or at least with Ray, Beryl, and Grandma. I know I owe you, too, and a lot of other people. But you can't squeeze blood from a stone. I did what I could, under the circumstances. Thanks to the ghost.

But I forgot – you don't believe in ghosts.



## A HANUKKAH MIRACLE

Rabbi Joel Feigelman's congregation fired him in August, and, having no other source of income, he was forced to put together hurriedly a patchwork of part-time positions.

On the sabbath he conducted services Friday night and Saturday at the Daughters of Jacob Home for the Aged. Mondays and Thursdays he gave spiritual comfort to Jewish patients at Bauman Memorial Hospital, and Tuesdays at the Hospital of St. John of the Cross. Wednesdays he gave classes on Judaism at the Fort Dixon Hills Senior Citizens Center.

Not the life he had envisioned for himself thirty years earlier at Union Theological Seminary. But neither was his messy divorce after twenty-seven years of marriage, nor the embarrassing dismissal by his congregation in response to some admittedly inappropriate behavior with a married congregant in the aftermath of his sexual liberation.

One evening in the waning days of November he was listening to Dave Brubeck in his furnished room when the phone rang.

"Rabbi Joel Feigelman?" came a distant, slithering voice, strained through a cell phone.

"Yes?"

"This is Murray Rosenbaum. Sorry for the bad connection. I'm in Singapore."

"Yes?" Rabbi Feigelman repeated.

"You *are* the rabbi for the Daughters of Jacob."

"Yes."

"Well, I cleared it with Ms. Kay. I'd like to pay you an extra fifty bucks a shot to light Hanukkah candles for my mother."

"Yes?"

"Fifty bucks. My mother, Rivka Rosenbaum. She's in hospice at the Home. It would mean a lot to me to know that someone was lighting the candles for her."

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman agreed.

"I gotta get back to a meeting. Yes or no, Rabbi. What do you say?"

"Yes!" said Rabbi Feigelman. Eight days at \$50 equaled \$400 – 20% of his credit card debt. For that he'd light Hanukkah candles for a corpse.

"My secretary will send you a check at the Home as soon as the holiday is over. OK with you?"

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman said one last time, and Murray Rosenbaum hung up.

After Havdalah services on the next Saturday evening, Rabbi Feigelman went over to the hospice wing of the Home to take a look at the woman for whom he was supposed to light Hanukkah candles.

As he entered the room, Rivka Rosenbaum seemed to be asleep, but soon she opened her eyes as wide as a child's and gave him a look of wonder.

"I'm Rabbi Feigelman," Rabbi Feigelman said. "Your son called me from Singapore."

The words didn't seem to register.

Rabbi Feigelman noticed the tattooed numbers on her cadaverous arm. A Holocaust survivor, once again skin and bones.

The hospice nurse explained that Mrs. Rosenbaum had been given two or three months until a metastasized melanoma killed her, but her doctor and medical proxy had agreed instead to stop dialysis, which would end her life more swiftly and far less painfully in four or five days.

The likelihood of her making it even to the first night of Hanukkah was slim. The likelihood of her making it to the end was zero.

Please, God! Rabbi Feigelman prayed, just half jokingly. Two more weeks! I need the money.

On the first night of Hanukkah, Rivka Rosenbaum was still alive, though barely. Rabbi Feigelman showed up, menorah, matches, and candles in a plastic shopping bag.

The woman was in a coma, he was told, and would have absolutely no consciousness of what he was doing. Still, he was being paid, so Rabbi Feigelman set the menorah up on the little rolling table by her bed, lit the Shamos, and then with the Shamos the candle for the first night, singing the blessings as he did so.

He set the menorah on the window sill and looked over at his audience.

She turned uncomfortably in bed, breathing heavily, then turned again and moaned, as if in pain.

She opened her eyes and stared at Rabbi Feigelman as though he weren't there.

Rabbi Feigelman shuddered and wondered what she was seeing.

"Mrs. Rosenbaum?" he said.

She moved her head as if in recognition that someone was speaking to her.

"I'm Rabbi Feigelman. Your son Murray asked me (he was about to say 'is paying me' but thought better of it) to light Hanukkah candles for you. Would you like that?"

Amazingly, she nodded her head and smiled.

"Wonderful!" he said. "Can you see the menorah? Over there, by the window."

She turned her eyes towards the window and stared at the glow of the two candles. She seemed thoroughly entranced by the light. Her face had lost its former stupor and seemed intelligent, almost beautiful.

Then she returned her eyes to the ceiling and shut them, as if going to sleep.

"Goodnight, Mrs. Rosenbaum," Rabbi Feigelman said softly. "I'll be back tomorrow evening to light the second candle."

Very quietly, he left the room.

Since the following evening was Friday, the beginning of the sabbath, Rabbi Feigelman did the regular sabbath service in the large lounge and then the candle lighting for the entire population of the Home – residents and staff – at the electric menorah in the main lobby.

Then he went over to the hospice wing to light the candles for Mrs. Rosenbaum. As he entered the room the hospice nurse drew him back out into the

hall and whispered to him.

"Rabbi Feigelman, it's unbelievable! Mrs. Rosenbaum woke up and said it's time for the candle lighting and where were you? So I told her you were doing it for everyone else in the lobby and that then you would be coming over to do it privately for her, and she clasped her hands together with joy. With joy, Rabbi Feigelman! Her potassium readings are high enough to shut down an elephant's heart, and she seems healthier than she's ever been here at the hospice. It's a miracle!"

Oh, God! Rabbi Feigelman thought. He was happy for Mrs. Rosenbaum, but could it be that God was actually answering his ugly, venal, only half-serious prayer? It seemed ludicrous even to think so. Fear gripped his heart.

He came into the room and bowed to Mrs. Rosenbaum, who was waiting like a concert audience for the conductor. Then he lit the Shamos, and with the Shamos two candles while singing the blessings, then transferred the menorah from the rolling table to the window sill.

Mrs. Rosenbaum looked on with enthusiasm. Then she stared at the glowing candles.

"How beautiful!" she exclaimed, the first words he had heard from her, quite apropos and clear.

"You like it?" he asked.

"I love it! And you sing the prayers so well! Excuse me, but your name . . ."

"Rabbi Feigelman. Joel Feigelman. I'm the rabbi at the Home."

"So pleased to meet you! And thank you for the private candle lighting, since I can't go to the public one. I do appreciate it very much."

"You're very welcome. Your son Murray . . . requested it."

"My son?" she asked, confused. "My son?"

She closed her eyes tightly, as if trying to picture him, and fell asleep.

On the third night Rabbi Feigelman had to finish the Havdalah service in the chapel before he could come to Mrs. Rosenbaum's room. When he got there, he found Ms. Kay, the head of social services; Dr. Hilton, the head of medical services; and Ms. Raimondo, the head of nursing services; all waiting for him.

"You don't mind if we watch," Dr. Hilton said. "This is the most extraordinary medical phenomenon I've ever heard of."

Rabbi Feigelman shrugged his acquiescence and greeted Mrs. Rosenbaum, who seemed to be anxiously awaiting the ceremony. He lit the three candles with the Shamos, singing the blessings, and set the menorah on the window sill, where Mrs. Rosenbaum stared at it rapturously.

"This is something to live for!" she exclaimed. "Isn't it? Did you ever see anything so lovely?"

"No," Rabbi Feigelman said quite truthfully. "I haven't."

"The miracle of light! Isn't it like the miracle of life, Rabbi Feigelman? Inexplicable beauty on the edge of nothingness. How grateful I am for it, even for a

few extra days!"

Staring at the candles, she again fell into a sudden, deep sleep, while Dr. Hilton hurriedly pressed his stethoscope against her back and Ms. Raimondo slapped a blood pressure cuff around her left arm.

Rabbi Feigelman left the room shaking. He shook all the way home on the three buses he had to take, and then all the way up the three flights of stairs to his room.

"God, God, God, God!" he kept repeating. "What are You doing to me? Are You punishing me? Are You making fun of me?"

He had resolved not to go back to Mrs. Rosenbaum's room the following night when the phone rang.

It was Murray Rosenbaum, this time from St. Petersburg. He sounded like he was under water.

"I just spoke to Ms. Kay," he said enthusiastically. "The head of social services at the home?"

"Yes," Rabbi Feigelman affirmed.

"She said it was a miracle! My mother's in a coma till about a half hour before you come. Then she wakes up and is all animated and actually happy! God bless you, Rabbi! Tell you what I want to do."

"Yes?" said Rabbi Feigelman.

"I'm gonna double your pay. One hundred bucks a shot. Eight hundred bucks total. That sound good to you?"

"Yes," said Rabbi Feigelman.

"Great! I'll give the instructions to my secretary

and she'll send you a check just as soon as the holiday is over. Keep up the good work!"

He hung up.

The next night there was a little crowd in Mrs. Rosenbaum's room. Rabbi Feigelman had to elbow his way in, though as soon as he was recognized, the crowd made a respectful, almost awed path for him.

With a wave of his arm, he cleared Mrs. Rosenbaum's sight line. Her face was beaming with anticipation.

How marvelous that so little gives her so much! he thought.

He lit the candles, singing the blessings with unusual grace. He placed the menorah on the window sill. Below the window, which was on the second floor looking out onto an interior garden, another crowd had gathered, and through the closed window Rabbi Feigelman could hear a muffled cheer.

This scene was repeated over the next four nights, the crowds growing, Mrs. Rosenbaum glowing like a Hanukkah candle for the hour or so that she was awake. Rabbi Feigelman was introduced to the Chairman of the Board, the Director of the Foundation, the Head of the local Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, and so on, all of whom praised him and hinted at more lucrative possibilities for the future.

He felt as though he had been mounted on a rack and pulled apart until his limbs popped out. He couldn't believe that the Lord would for one second concern Himself with so trivial a request, or would



keep life burning in an old lady for eight miraculous days just to ease his financial situation.

It was the Hanukkah miracle replayed as farce. He felt guilty for using a dead woman for his own material advantage, and each time he saw her preternatural joy, he cringed inside.

On the last night of Hanukkah, the crowd was larger than ever. A local cable television station covered the event, as did a photographer and reporter from the Associated Press.

As usual, Mrs. Rosenbaum was animated and vigorous. She was interviewed by both the TV and print media before Rabbi Feigelman arrived, and to both she asserted her belief that she would die soon after the last candle on the menorah was lit, but that she was overjoyed at every opportunity to experience the beauty of light.

"You don't know what a miracle it is," she told them, "because you take it for granted. But for me every second of beauty is a second worth having, and I'm grateful that, for whatever mysterious reason, God has granted me eight more days of it."

When Rabbi Feigelman arrived, the media wanted to interview him as well, but he brushed right by them with a "no comment" and began setting up the menorah for the final candle lighting. As he lit the eight candles with the Shamos while singing the blessings, all eyes were upon him. But after he set the menorah on the window sill, all eyes shifted to Mrs. Rosenbaum.

How her eyes danced, just like the light of the

nine candles! She was an advertisement for the joy of life, and everyone present was sold.

Then her eyes closed, as though her battery had suddenly run out, and she seemed to have fallen into a deep sleep.

Everyone waited while Dr. Hilton checked her vital signs, and fifteen minutes after Rabbi Feigelman had lit the last candle, Mrs. Rosenbaum was pronounced dead. The miracle was over.

Rabbi Feigelman, however, had slipped out while attention was focused on Mrs. Rosenbaum. By the time she died he was on the first of his three buses home.

He felt sorry for her, but he didn't want to be part of the circus going on in her room. Nor did he want to be questioned about why he was lighting Hanukkah candles privately for anyone, nor whether or how much he was getting paid to do it, nor whether he had prayed for her to live just so that he could collect his fee for service.

So he wasn't sure whether she had died until he called Ms. Kay the next morning.

Yes, Ms. Kay told him. She had died no more than fifteen minutes after he had lit the last candle.

"Have you called her son Murray to let him know?" Rabbi Feigelman asked.

"What son Murray?" Ms. Kay said. "She doesn't have a son. At least not one who's alive."

"No son Murray?"

"Her husband and children were killed in the Holocaust. She never remarried. That's why her

attorney was her medical proxy."

"But didn't he ask you whether it as all right for me to – "

"Didn't who ask?"

"Her son Murray."

"How could he ask if he doesn't exist?"

A fair question, Rabbi Feigelman thought. He apologized for bothering her and hung up.

Then he realized: No Murray Rosenbaum, no \$800. And he began to understand just how divinely he had been had.



## ANGELS WITHOUT WINGS

"A Jew on Christmas is like an angel without wings," my Uncle Paul used to say.

Not that Uncle Paul disliked any particular Jews, of whom in any case there were few in the little upstate town of Windsor, New York, where he and my mother grew up and where he and Aunt Flo still lived in the ancestral home – a narrow, two-story frame house set back from Pine Street. His next-door neighbors on the right were Jews, as was his boss at the bank, and Uncle Paul got along fine with them.

It was mostly the *idea* of Jews that got Uncle Paul riled. He seemed to take their rejection of Christ personally. After all, it was they who prophesied Christ, as in Isaiah 9:6: *For unto us a child is born . . . and his name shall be called . . . the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*

What could be clearer than that? These were Jewish words, written centuries before the birth of Christ, words that the Jews themselves still considered holy. If anyone should believe, Uncle Paul thought, it should be Jews. Christ Himself was a Jew, as well as Mary, Joseph, and all of the Apostles.

But instead they killed Him. It might be politically incorrect to say so, but there was no arguing against a fact. Pontius Pilate washed his hands of it, and the Roman soldiers carried it out, but the Jews

demanded it, and then reaffirmed it by choosing to set free Barabbas instead of Christ.

And they would do it again, Uncle Paul was certain, if Christ came back at a time when they had the power to do it. The religious ones, the ones in the black hats and coats. In any state they ran, you could bet that Christians would be persecuted, as they were of old, and worship of Christ would be forbidden as blasphemy. Even in Israel, a supposedly secular Jewish state, Jewish stars were everywhere, even on the flag, and Jewish prayers were said on every public occasion.

But turn things around, and here in Windsor the third grade couldn't even put on a Christmas play because it might offend the one Jewish child in the class. The town hall had to get rid of the nativity scene on the front lawn. (Just think about what kind of fuss objecting to the public display of a menorah in Israel would engender!) The Bible could no longer be read at public assemblies. The football team could no longer pray to Christ in the locker room before games, even though there had never been a single Jew on the team in anyone's memory. And so on and on through a much-repeated litany of grievances against the Jews.

The thing was that in a Christian country the Jews insisted that all public symbols and practices of religion be forbidden, while in Israel, Christians and Muslims were forced to tolerate a Jewish state.

They were smart, Uncle Paul conceded. In every country they infected they became rich, became lawyers, took over the media, so they could have their

way. A tiny minority ruled the vast majority, preventing them from living a Christian life.

No one understood why Uncle Paul was so obsessed with Jews. In all other respects he was mild mannered and reserved, a large, silver-haired man with pale skin and lips and light blue eyes, who looked like he might have gone through too many washings. He was the formal type who always wore a jacket and tie outside the house, and even inside kept on the white shirt, the dress pants, the freshly shined shoes.

But on the subject of Jews it was as though he had a little lava lake of fury that, like an intermittently active volcano, erupted and subsided on its own schedule.

Then suddenly one Christmas Eve the tirades stopped.

My parents and I would spend every Christmas with Uncle Paul and Aunt Flo. For my mother it was "going home" for the holidays. For me the little house on Pine Street in Windsor, New York, *was* Christmas, and as the only child in the house – my parents had only one, and Uncle Paul and Aunt Flo were childless – I was for many years the lens through which Christmas happened.

There was no chimney in the small Bronx apartment where I grew up, and I often wondered how Santa would have gotten in to deliver presents had we not gone up to celebrate Christmas in Windsor. There, there was an ample fireplace and room for a tall, beautifully decorated tree, and piles of presents on Christmas morning, which after breakfast I unwrapped

to the shrieks of delight of four perhaps overly indulgent adults.

At any rate, one Christmas Eve, when I was twelve, Uncle Paul called home from the bank to say he would be late. It had been snowing heavily all day. A colleague had damaged his car in one of the many accidents that morning, and Uncle Paul was going to drive him home. He lived just a bit past the next town, Damascus, and so it shouldn't take long.

Five hours later, the police called. They had found Uncle Paul unconscious in his car, which had skidded off the treacherous country road on the way back to Damascus. He seemed to be unhurt, but they had sent him by ambulance to the emergency room in Binghamton, just to be sure.

When we finally got both him and his Jeep home at around midnight, Uncle Paul seemed physically fine but distracted, as though something had happened on that little snowy road to Damascus that now occupied his attention completely. He answered our questions in single syllables, said he was tired, that he couldn't talk now, couldn't sit down with us to dinner.

We put him to bed, and the next morning he seemed perfectly normal – with one significant change: He said nothing more about Jews. Nothing good, nothing bad. It was as though a faucet had been turned off inside him, and the torrent of anger and hatred had ceased to flow.

The faucet remained off for the rest of his life, some twenty years, at the end of which he died at his



desk at the bank of a stroke. Aunt Flo lasted another ten lonely years before she followed him. Since my parents had also died, and I was the last of the family, on the Christmas Eve after Aunt Flo's death I found myself again in Windsor to pack up whatever needed to be saved and to get rid of the rest before selling the house.

In the interim I had gotten married, had had two children, had gotten divorced, and now lived alone near Boston, where I had tenure at a small Catholic college.

So it was with a good deal of nostalgic melancholy that I went through the bits and pieces of my family's lives – photographs and letters, certificates, printed announcements and invitations, holiday cards and condolence cards and thank-you cards – that are the standard detritus of ordinary living.

At around 1:00 AM a single piece of paper written on both sides in my uncle's handwriting fluttered to the floor. It had been tucked into a notebook that recorded meticulously the transactions of the local Knights of Columbus chapter, of which Uncle Paul had been perennial treasurer.

I opened the paper, which had been folded in half the better to fit in the notebook, and saw the title in large letters: *A Vision*, underneath which was a date: *Christmas Eve, 1977*.

And then:

*I had dropped Henry Slater off at his house and had just started back towards Damascus when I felt my car*

*unaccountably drifting off the road in heavy snow. I came to a stop in an open field, which was, however, green under a warm, starry sky.*

*Bewildered, I got out of the car to see Christ descending towards me out of the stars.*

*He was, as on most crucifixes, nearly naked, and bleeding from the wounds of the cross. In His bloody hands, each perforated by a large hole the diameter of a half dollar, he carried a white dove which had no wings.*

*"Oh, Paul, Paul!" Christ called out to me in sorrow. "Why do you persecute me?"*

*"Dear Lord!" I cried back. "How do I persecute you? What do I do to offend you?"*

*Christ held up the wingless dove, white but for smears of blood from His hands.*

*"You have taken my wings," He said.*

*"How have I taken Your wings?" I cried out again in dismay. I was shaking with remorse and confusion.*

*He came closer to me and took me in His arms with His bloody hands and held me against His bloody chest. And He whispered to me, "I am a Jew, am I not?"*

*Then He kissed me on both cheeks and hugged me again to His bloody, bony body, and in that hug I felt all the love of the universe spill into me, as though a sea had emptied itself into my heart.*

*"Forgive me!" I said. "Forgive me!" Again and again, weeping, weeping, until I was awakened by the police and found myself behind the wheel of my Jeep in the middle of a white snowy field.*

*The hatred in me was gone. I pray that it never returns.*

Your prayer was answered, I whispered to Uncle Paul, the one who had written these words nearly thirty years ago, who could not have known when he wrote them that he would never again express hatred for Jews.

What he felt inside, of course, is unknown. How many of us, however deep our love of Christ and faith in Christ's love for us, can ever totally banish hatred from our hearts? I knew all too well that I couldn't – hadn't – hadn't even tried in one particular case, which was one reason I was sitting alone on Christmas Eve in the living room where as a child I had known so much Christmas love and beauty.

But I hoped that Uncle Paul had found some peace in the twenty years that had been left to him, and prayed for us all to find peace from the hatred in our hearts, for all of us angels without wings on this Christmas Eve, as on every Christmas Eve, singing of Christ's glory yet still unable to fly.



## CANDLES IN A WINDOW

As Solomon Simon lay on his deathbed in Montefiore Hospital in the Bronx, he asked his only grandchild Raphael to make him one last promise.

"What's that, Grandpa?" Raphael asked, holding his grandfather's surprisingly strong right hand.

"Promise me you'll put your Hanukkah candles in the window."

"But I don't light Hanukkah candles, Grandpa."

"Then I guess you'll have to start."

Solomon squeezed his grandson's hand and smiled.

"I'm not religious," Raphael protested. "I don't believe in God."

"You don't have to believe, Raphael. You just do it. The belief comes."

"I'm not even Jewish, Grandpa."

"Please," Solomon pleaded. "Promise me. It's a little thing."

Raphael was silent, inside in turmoil. It wasn't such a little thing. He had been raised a New Age sort of Buddhist by his Chinese-American mother. His wife was an African-American Catholic, which was how they were raising their son.

He knew why his grandfather was so insistent. The old man wanted to make sure a little Judaism

survived in the mix. But he was asking a lot. Especially to put the Hanukkah candles in the window. That was a public statement Raphael really didn't want to make, mainly because it wasn't true.

He was about to say, "I wish I could . . ." when he looked up and saw that his grandfather had fallen asleep. That was how he had become from the medication – likely to fall asleep at any moment, even in mid-sentence.

Raphael thanked the God he didn't believe in and slipped out of the room without having to tell his grandfather yes or no. But when the old man fell into a coma the next day and died three days later, Raphael was not happy that he hadn't had the opportunity to answer him. While not saying no was different from saying yes, there remained a residue of obligation that Raphael would rather have done without.

Through the abbreviated period of mourning – the funeral and burial in the morning, the four hours of *shiva* (down from the customary seven days) in the afternoon, Raphael said nothing to his father about his grandfather's dying request. He still hadn't decided what to do about it.

His inclination was to do nothing, but at the murky bottom of that choice something gnawed at him. It wasn't that he thought the soul of his grandfather was looking down at him – dead was dead, as far as he was concerned. Nor was it any promise he might implicitly have made by not explicitly saying no.

Instead, it was something alive in him, perhaps

a reincarnation of his grandfather (though Raphael, despite his Buddhist upbringing, did not believe in reincarnation) – an actual desire to do it, a little factoid struggling to break free of the mud below.

When Raphael thought about his grandfather, Hanukkah candles in the window loomed large in his memories. He had been brought up in Sacramento among his mother's Chinese-American family. But since his mother, unlike his father, believed firmly in the importance of family, he had often spent Christmas vacation visiting his grandfather in the Bronx, first with his father and mother, then with his mother, then by himself.

Whenever Hanukkah had fallen close enough to Christmas, he would watch his grandfather light the candles in the kitchen, then bring the lit menorah over to the sill of the living room window, where the little flames danced and glowed in the early winter darkness.

The living room window looked out onto an air shaft, and Raphael could see other Hanukkah candles placed in windows up and down the air shaft, like friendly people waving.

He remembered a certain peace and satisfaction in his grandfather's face as he said the Hebrew prayers, a sense of something beautiful beautifully done, an enjoyment of the musical phrase drawn out and savored at the end. Somehow, he thought, that shouldn't be gone from his life now that his grandfather was gone. It would be a memory of his grandfather embedded in his life. A sort of reincarnation.

At the end of that long day of saying goodbye to his grandfather, he said goodbye to his father at the airport. He was flying back to Cleveland, his father back to San Francisco, where he lived with his sixth wife – like all his wives, of whom Raphael's mother had been the first, a former student.

"Grandpa asked me to put my Hanukkah candles in the window," he said as they shared a drink before going off to their separate gates.

"You don't light Hanukkah candles, do you?" his father asked.

"Not at the moment."

"Are you going to do it?"

"I don't know."

His father, as always, looked right through him. "You always were a sentimentalist," he said.

"You say that as an accusation."

"Well, it is. You don't believe in that crap, not for a second, so the whole thing is a lie, not just to your family and neighbors but also to yourself. Which is what sentimentalists do. They lie."

"Sometimes you just do something for whatever reasons and the truth tags along."

"The truth never tags along," his father said decisively. "It's just there. In stone."

It felt more like Play-Doh for the first few days after Raphael arrived home in Shaker Heights, as he shaped and re-shaped it, studied it, then re-shaped it again.

One late afternoon after he and his wife Letitia had come into the kitchen after setting up Christmas



decorations on their snow-covered front lawn, he broached the subject of his grandfather's last request.

"He asked you to do *what*?" Letitia asked with the little side-to-side motion of the head that in some African-American women signaled defiance.

"Light Hanukkah candles and put the menorah in the window."

"You didn't promise him, did you?"

"No," Raphael admitted. "He died before I could answer him."

"Well, then."

She took out a colander and began to wash some string beans.

Xavier, their nine-year-old son, came in from throwing snowballs at Harry, their mutt from the pound, who had the body of a pit bull covered by the bristle of a wire-haired terrier.

Raphael looked at his Black-Asian-Jewish child and wondered what he, Xavier, would make of all these heritages, and what he, Raphael, could do to help him.

"Your father thinking about lighting Hanukkah candles and putting them in the window," Letitia said.

"For Pop-Pop?"

"For good. Every year."

"That's nice," Xavier said. "They're pretty."

"They're Jewish," Letitia said.

"Whatever."

Xavier finished hanging up his wet ski jacket, pulled off his boots, and vanished into his room, leaving Harry shaking off the melting snow in the

middle of the kitchen floor.

"This something you really want to do?" Letitia asked.

"Yes," Raphael answered.

Letitia shrugged. "People gonna wonder."

Raphael kissed her on the cheek, sure for the first time about what he wanted to do, and went upstairs to call his mother.

"O-o-o-o-h, how nice!" she cooed.

"Channeling your grandfather!"

"Not channeling him," Raphael said. "Just remembering him."

"You'll see. You'll light the candles and believe me, you'll feel his hand guiding your arm."

"You think so."

"I know so. He'll be so happy!"

Then Raphael clicked on the computer to do some research on a subject he knew almost nothing about.

When the first night of Hanukkah arrived, the little family gathered in the kitchen. Raphael put on a yarmulka and one on Xavier, and Letitia wore a shawl over her head. Raphael struck a match, lit the Shamos candle, and began the blessings, singing them in Hebrew, blending a melody he had gotten on the Internet with what he remembered from evenings with his grandfather.

When he was finished, two candles, the Shamos and the candle for the first night, flickered on the menorah.

As he had seen his grandfather do so many

times, he carried the menorah carefully over to the sill of the picture window in the living room, shading the flames with the palm of his free hand. It shone out into the suburban night, along with the Christmas decorations, for all to see.

As his mother had predicted, as he carried the menorah into the living room and placed it on the sill, he felt eerily as though his grandfather had stepped into his body, as though for a moment he was his grandfather and was watching the glow of the candles through his grandfather's approving eyes.

Raphael wished only that he had told him yes while he was still alive.

"You happy now?" Letitia asked.

"Yes," he said, watching Xavier watch the flames. He gave Xavier a Hanukkah card with a five-dollar bill in it, calculated to make Xavier ecstatic about the idea of celebrating both Christmas and Hanukkah, and Letitia a card which told her how much sharing the holiday with her meant to him.

Then he stepped out of his house and walked over to the sidewalk to see the effect of the menorah from the street.

The two candles in the window overlooked a natural pine tree on the front lawn decorated with blinking colored lights. Near the pine tree three brightly lit reindeer looked on with wonder.

What his grandfather could no longer do, Raphael had taken over, blending it with the rest of his inner melange so that in his family it would not die, at least not yet.

Raphael wished that his grandfather could see it. Well, why not imagine that he could and was pleased? He crunched out into the middle of the freshly plowed street, shouted, "Yes, Grandpa! I promise!", and waved up at the cold black sky.

## JESUS LIGHTS THE CANDLES

When Meyer Salzman was five years old, his parents told him that henceforth his name would be Michel LeBlanc, and that he would be Catholic, not Jewish.

"And you must never speak Yiddish, never, never, never again," said his mother. "Promise me!"

"I promise," Meyer said in Yiddish.

"In French! In French!" his mother insisted.

"I promise," Michel said in French.

"And what's your name?"

"Michel."

"Michel who?"

"Michel LeBlanc."

"And what religion are you?"

"Catholic."

"And you were born in Gordes. Where were you born?"

"I was born in Gordes."

They were standing at the entrance to the Catholic orphanage of St. Joseph the Protector, he and his father and mother. A borrowed car idled by the side of the road.

"Again, where were you born?"

"I was born in Gordes!" Michel almost shouted, desperate now, tears in his voice.

His father crouched next to him and took him in his arms.

"And your father and mother. You don't know them. You never saw them. Say it!"

"I don't know my father and mother!" Michel shouted. "I never saw them!"

"Goodbye, my sweet, my dearest boy," his father said, hugging him and kissing him on the cheek. "Be strong."

His mother kissed him, too, and then his parents got into the car and drove away, leaving him by the locked, massive wooden door.

He pulled the bell chain and heard it sound within. He waited.

"My name is Michel LeBlanc," he recited to himself in French. "I'm Catholic. I never knew my father and mother. I was born in Gordes."

The door opened.

"And who is this?" a priest asked, coming out of the gate and crouching down to Michel's height. "Whom do we have here?"

"My name is Michel LeBlanc!" Michel proclaimed. "I'm Catholic! I never knew my father and mother! I was born in Gordes!"

Years later, when with his American wife and three children he revisited the place where he had stood in front of the orphanage gate, Meyer Salzman wept for the five-year-old boy who had been abandoned there in order to save his life. And he wept for his parents, who had been forced to leave him there, and whose names had surfaced on a list of those to be transported to the east, only to disappear again, perhaps into the smokestacks of Birkenau.

But then, as he was led into a large courtyard surrounded by low, two-story buildings, at the far end of which was a chapel with a tall bell tower, Michel was too bewildered to weep.

The priest walked him across to the chapel, where about 50 boys of all ages were at prayer. They knelt on the hard stone floor facing a crucifix that dominated the altar. On the crucifix a nearly naked man hung from nails driven into his hands and crossed feet. On his head was a crown of thorns. He seemed to be in agony.

Michel looked questioningly at the priest.

"Do as the others do," the priest said kindly. "Copy them exactly. You'll learn soon enough."

So Michel joined the boys on their knees, one hand clasping the other, eyes on the crucifix, though he couldn't follow what they were saying, which was not in French. He looked at the man on the cross, wondered who he was, what had happened to him, why now such a large statue of him was hung over the altar, why all the boys seemed to be praying to him.

When the boys were finished, they moved their hands rapidly across their chests in a way Michel could not imitate. Then they got up.

"Jew!" the boy next to him whispered vehemently to Michel as the priest at the altar began to speak. "Don't you even know how to cross yourself?"

Michel reddened and stared at the floor. Then he began to cry to himself, inside, smothering the tears that sprang to his eyes.

As the priest continued to speak, Meyer

imagined his home in Paris, a small apartment near the Place des Vosges, where he slept in the living room. In the early morning the sun came through the windows facing the Rue Saint-Antoine, and he could hear the sounds of deliveries being made to the kosher butcher four flights below.

Each morning he would peer out the window at the busy street until his parents awakened, and his mother came into the living room and kissed him as his father went downstairs to buy fresh bread and the morning newspaper.

Michel became aware of the boys stirring around him. He got up with them. As they left the chapel they turned, bent at the right knee while mumbling, and crossed themselves. Michel tried to do as they did, mumbling nonsense syllables, and emerged with them into the sunny courtyard to begin his new life.

The next day Michel was taken out of afternoon prayers to meet Father Landau, a large, rather rotund elderly priest who was busy at his desk in a luxuriously furnished room as Michel was ushered in.

"Wait! Just wait!" Father Landau called out to Michel, who was waiting anyway.

The priest who had brought him bowed and left, closing the heavy oak door behind him.

While he was waiting, Michel had the opportunity again to examine a crucifix, this time one behind and above Father Landau's desk. On this crucifix the exquisitely carved face of Jesus (Michel



had by this time learned his name) was not in agony but serene, so serene that Michel could not stop staring at him, imagining that despite the nails in his hands and through his crossed feet, despite the wound in his side and the crown of thorns on his head, no state of being could be more beautiful.

"You're Jewish!" Father Landau suddenly accused him, breaking into the rapt loveliness of his thoughts.

A shudder ran through Michel, and he began to recite his litany.

"No, sir. I am Catholic. My name is Michel LeBlanc. I was born in Gordes. I never knew my parents."

"Drop your pants!" Father Landau ordered. "Go ahead. Don't be afraid. Drop them."

Michel dropped his pants. Father Landau got on his knees in front of him and pulled down his underpants.

"You see?" he said triumphantly. "You're circumcised. That means you're Jewish. They'll take you away for that!"

Michel shuddered again and began to cry.

"Now don't worry," Father Landau said hurriedly. "I'll protect you. But you must try very, very hard not to let anyone else see this. Ever. Do you understand?"

Michel nodded through his tears.

"If anyone sees this they'll take you away and kill you," he repeated. "Here. Put your hand here."

He took Michel's hand and put it between his

legs and began to move his hips back and forth, back and forth, until suddenly he stopped.

"Now," he said. "Come on! Lean against the desk! Now!"

Michel, his pants and underpants still around his ankles, leaned on the desk as Father Landau came around behind him.

And then something very strange happened. Jesus Christ came down from the cross, a real, life-sized man, and took Meyer Salzman in his arms. He held him while the priest was busy behind him, held him and kissed him as his father would have, until Father Landau was finished and Christ receded back up onto the cross.

"Now go back to the others," Father Landau said, sitting back down at his desk and resuming his interest in the papers in front of him. "Remember: Don't show yourself to anyone. I will protect you and keep you alive, but you have to help me. Do you understand?"

Michel nodded.

"Now go!"

Michel joined the others in the middle of a French lesson, but he heard almost nothing. All he could remember was the beauty of being held by Jesus Christ. Above the teacher was another crucifix, this one so small and far away, and of such dark wood, that Michel could barely make out the figure on it. But he knew who was there and could still feel the rapture of being held in his arms.

As the days passed, there were more interviews

with Father Landau, and at each one Michel became Meyer as Christ came down to hold him through his ordeal. It became a trick for Michel to become Meyer, and a very successful one.

Even in the chapel at prayer, though on his knees before Christ, Meyer would imagine himself at home on Shabbat with his parents. His father would bless him, stretching out his hands to cover Meyer's head after his mother had lit the candles. And then they would say grace in Hebrew as Michel mumbled his nonsense syllables in the chapel.

But the strange thing was that Christ joined them for Shabbat dinner, sitting at the table to make a little family of four rather than of three. Michel would go through this fantasy three times a day, and each time Christ was there in the same place, singing grace with the rest of the family and holding hands around the table, as though Meyer had brought home a new friend whom the family had accepted as one of their own.

Days and months passed. Summer turned to autumn and then winter. Michel had by now caught up to the rest of the boys his age in both his religious and academic studies. He could recite the necessary prayers in Latin, spoke French in the Provencal dialect, and had begun to learn to read and add and subtract. His interviews with Father Landau became fewer and fewer. Aside from the need to shower and go to the bathroom with unusual modesty, outwardly he had become like the orphans around him.

Inwardly, Meyer led a different life entirely. He

lived at home with his parents in Paris, spoke Yiddish, and practiced what little remnants of Judaism he had been able to understand before his parents had left him at the gates of St. Joseph the Protector.

At least once a day he enjoyed Shabbat dinner with Jesus and his parents. Since he didn't know the proper dates for the Jewish holidays, to round out his days he repeatedly enjoyed apples and honey for Rosh HaShana, fasted on Yom Kippur, took his meals in a sukkah on Sukkot, and so on. And always Christ was with him and his parents, a valued friend and guest, celebrating with them the Jewish sabbath and the holidays.

With the cold weather came thoughts about Hanukkah. Since he didn't know the proper day on which to begin this, his favorite holiday, he saved it for a propitious time.

One Tuesday evening after the first heavy snow, the boys were as usual in chapel. The priest was giving his usual sermon about the hell that was reserved for those who did not believe in the divinity of Christ when Christ, Meyer Salzman told his wife and three children, "came over to me and said, 'Meyer, it's time. Let's go light the Hanukkah candles.'"

"So," Meyer continued, "we went over to the menorah on the kitchen table of my family's apartment. My mother and father were waiting in the kitchen, all dressed up, my poor mother in her best jewelry, the few pieces she could take from Berlin, my father in his starched white shirt and collar, jacket and tie.

"Usually, Jesus was a guest. But this time for some reason he was the master of the ceremony. He put on our yarmulkes (my father was already wearing his Homburg hat, my mother her lace shawl) and struck a match, lit the Shamos, and sang the first blessing. He had a lovely voice, a rich baritone, and his singing was the most beautiful I had ever heard.

"Then he lifted the Shamos up higher and sang the second blessing, all from memory (unlike my father, who had to have the prayers written out in front of him), and it struck me that he shouldn't know the words because I didn't know them, but he went on.

"As he lit the candle for the first night of Hanukkah, he sang the third blessing, ending in a practiced flourish with the smile of someone very pleased with what he has just done.

"After he placed the Shamos back onto the menorah, he hugged me and kissed me and said, 'Meyer, this is goodbye. Be a good Jew always. Make your parents proud.'

"And I was back in the chapel. The priest was finishing his sermon. I looked at Christ in his agony on the cross, and I wept inwardly that he was back up there suffering. I wept for losing him as a friend, and for losing the rich inner life that had sustained me up to then until I was strong enough, even at that age, to bear it on my own. I wept and wept, I didn't know why, but when I was finished with weeping I was finished with it altogether, and in my hard little heart was ready to survive."

Now Meyer Salzman was weeping, and he took

his wife and children in his arms and wept and wept and wept until he couldn't weep anymore, and he felt clean and whole. After which they all went to dinner in a typically excellent little country French restaurant, had a long and satisfying meal, and spoke of everything but the days Meyer Salzman had spent in a nearby orphanage under the name of Michel LeBlanc.

## JUSTICE

Dear Ted,

You ask me why I want to refuse a second printing of my book *Justice*, and to withdraw what few copies remain of the first printing. I realize that I have no rights in this matter. Even so, I must insist on making the request.

I do appreciate the commitment that you personally and your firm have made to the book and to me. But I no longer believe that what I say in the book is true. To put it most trivially, I have changed my mind. But that, I recognize, is hardly a satisfactory explanation.

As you know, the book tour you arranged for me involved a number of faculty lectures, including one at Prairie State University in North Dakota.

I was just into the question-and-answer period when a faculty member at the university got up and asked me whether I believed in ghosts.

"Of course not," I said. "Do you?"

There was some giggling, but the faculty member, a Dr. Hamilton Mildridge, was undeterred.

"Yes," he said. "I do. Ghosts are the ultimate refutation of your argument."

"In what way?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"You argue that revenge has no place in the justice system of a civilized country. That the three

criteria for imposing a sentence on any criminal are isolation, deterrence, and rehabilitation, and that since isolation is temporary and deterrence minimal, rehabilitation ought to be the system's primary goal."

"Yes, that is an excellent summary of what I have to say."

"But ghosts demand vengeance, Dr. Binder. They cannot rest until they get it."

"I haven't conceded that they exist," I reminded him.

"They are disturbances in the ether," he went on, ignoring me, "echoes of an injustice that must be righted if they are ever to have any peace. We owe it to them, Dr. Binder, to make the punishment equal to the crime, to balance suffering with suffering. Otherwise the imbalance will ripple through eternity like a cry unheard."

With that he sat down, and the question-and-answer period resumed along more rational lines.

But at the reception after the lecture, Dr. Mildridge came up to me and invited me to meet a ghost.

I smiled politely and pointed out that I had a ride to the airport within the hour.

"Rides can be canceled," he said. "Flights can be rearranged."

Perhaps you remember, it was in late October, near Halloween, actually, that I called Robin and asked him to rearrange my schedule. Which, with your concurrence, he very graciously did.

Why I humored what seemed to me at the time



was a madman is beyond my capacity to explain. Suffice it to say that the ghost as a metaphor intrigued me, and that somewhere in the gut I was struck by the notion that the desire for revenge had perhaps more dignity than I had been willing to concede to it.

Dr. Mildridge picked me up at my motel at around 9:30 PM, explaining that the particular ghost he was going to introduce me to haunted a nearby wheat field each night at precisely 10:15.

On the way to the wheat field, Dr. Mildridge filled me in on the details. The ghost was that of a 16-year-old girl, Holly Hinton, who had been brought to a barn by a 16-year-old friend, Patrick Dent, for what she thought would be some adolescent kissing and petting.

But Patrick had other ideas. He confessed to planning to rape and murder Holly because he "wanted to know what it would feel like" (his words), and so he brought a small hatchet with him to the barn.

Threatening her with the hatchet, he stripped her naked and raped her (his first sexual intercourse – both were virgins), and then proceeded to chop up her naked body like an animal on a butcher's block – first her legs below the knees, then her arms below the elbows, then, as she stared unbelievably into his eyes, too shocked to scream, the rest of her legs and arms, and finally, mercifully, her head.

He then bathed in a nearby stream, changed his clothes, and, leaving both clothes and hatchet in

the barn with the dismembered body, set the barn on fire.

His mistake was the hatchet, the head of which was still identifiable and, through the local hardware store, was traced to his father. In a deal with the prosecutor, Patrick pled guilty and got 15 years, of which he served 10.

Now in his late thirties, he is living in Montana with a clean record, a job managing a string of donut shops, and a wife and two kids.

So here's a case, the denouement of which I should have approved – prisoner rehabilitated, justice done. But Dr. Mildridge had something different to show me.

It was a moonlit night, and when we got to the wheat field I could see fairly well. I was, as I had guessed, where the barn had stood some 22 years earlier.

The winter wheat had been recently planted, so that where we stood afforded a long view of bare, slightly undulating fields. It was crisp in the moonlight, and I shivered in my woolen overcoat.

Exactly at 10:15 the ghost appeared. I have no other word for it – one second there was nothing in my line of sight, the next second she was there.

She was naked, and looked as though she had been sewn back together, still bleeding at the seams – around her knees and elbows, around her shoulders and thighs, around her neck. Her eyes were still wide with disbelief.

Dr. Mildridge put his hand on my arm as she

approached me moaning a savage, high-pitched moan of pain. She dragged her disjointed body closer and closer, moaning this unearthly moan. Without Dr. Mildridge's hand gripping me, I would have turned and ran. As it was, I could not control the violent shiver of my body, and the poor creature brought me to dry, unbearable tears.

She came right up to me, white in the moonlight, but as though she didn't see either Dr. Mildridge or me, as though she saw nothing around her, still frozen in the moment of her horror, still reliving it, and as I looked into the depths of her eyes what I saw was anger, unrequited anger trapped forever inside an agony I could see but not imagine.

"Oh, God!" I moaned, "Oh, my Lord!", my moans in counterpoint to hers. She veered away from us and continued across the field in her strange, not-quite stumble, and then, when she was about fifty feet from us, disappeared.

I was shaking, weeping, barely aware of who or where I was. It was a while before I realized that Dr. Mildridge was holding me up.

"Come back to the car," he said gently. "Here. Come."

As he guided me towards the road, I looked back at the empty field where the barn had once stood, where the ghost had just walked, where the unspeakable had taken place, and, believe it or not, for the first time in my life knew – really knew – the meaning of the word, "justice."

Here I was, the expert of the moment on

justice, the author of a best-selling book by that name, and I knew nothing of the thing itself. Something ancient and true had been touched in me, and I began to understand that the desire for revenge is as human as the desire for love, and as necessary and consuming.

Spirits stalk the earth, Ted, and we forget them at our peril. For they will haunt us, whether or not we are willing to admit it.

Something is not right about that boy Patrick enjoying his life. Something is not fair. He fits precisely my description of what should happen, and now I know that it shouldn't.

What I want to say in my new book is that justice is orderly vengeance, the state taking it out of the hands of the clan, providing the symmetry the heart demands, allowing the angry, aggrieved spirit to rest in peace.

The other elements of justice – the need to deter criminal behavior, to isolate criminals and to rehabilitate them – remain, but are secondary to the need to provide, for the sake of the victim, a punishment commensurate to the gravity of the crime.

But that is my new book. My old book I wish to crumple up and throw into the wastebasket, like a draft in which I see not one word worth saving.

The eyes, Ted! The girl's eyes! They won't let me sleep until I do!

With noontime hope and midnight  
desperation, I remain as ever,

Yours,

Emlin Binder

## NO TIME FOR CHRISTMAS

There was no time for Christmas this year.  
Again.

Each year Candi promised herself that she would take Mike and Joey to early mass on Christmas Eve, and each year, with the shopping and cleaning and decorating and wrapping, there was no time.

Next year, she promised herself. Again.

It was 4:00 AM and she was still wrapping frantically, with only three hours to go till dawn. The wrapping inched forward like a car stuck in traffic while time flew by overhead. Gifts from her. Gifts from Michael, now again Miguel and living down in Santo Domingo with his new girlfriend and son, and with another child on the way.

Gifts from Michael's parents, also back down in Santo Domingo, and from her grandparents in Santo Domingo, who barely knew their own names.

She bought all the gifts, and the cards, and wrapped them, so that the children could wake up on Christmas morning to a tree with a pile of presents underneath it from a loving family. Michael said he would pay her, of course, for the presents from him and his parents, but he said the same thing about child support.

4:30 AM. The car inched a little further forward. She wrapped a play-doh set from Daddy to Mike and a set of ABC blocks from Daddy to Joey,

and then a Candy Land game to both of them from Nana and Pappi, who lived in an old-age home in Santo Domingo because there was no one left there to take care of them.

Candi's parents had always meant to bring them up to New York, but time passed and they had never really wanted to come. Candi, then Candida, remembered presents from them every Christmas that now she knew her parents had bought and wrapped with a card that they had signed. She had never seen Nana and Pappi, though her father had gone back down to Santo Domingo to visit them a number of times. There had never been enough money for the family to go.

And then her parents were murdered, both tied up in bed and shot in the back of the head a few months after Candi had gotten pregnant and moved out to live with Michael. And no one had ever found out who did it or why.

It was Candi's responsibility to bring Nana and Pappi up here in order to take care of them. Dominican families took care of their own. But she worked over 40 hours a week as a medical assistant in a clinic on St. Nicholas Avenue and went to City College in the evening. Her childhood friend Rosa watched Mike and Joey after school and preschool, for money, of course, and gave them dinner. But Rosa wasn't a nurse, which was what Nana and Pappi needed. There was no way Candi could afford a nurse and an extra room, and no way the American government would pay for a nursing home up here. So

Nana and Pappi lived in an American-style nursing home in Santo Domingo, and would probably die there never having laid eyes on their granddaughter and great-grandchildren.

5:00 AM. She wrapped a Transformers Deception Desert Attack 2-Pack from her to Mike and an Alphabet Bus LeapPad from her to Joey.

She knew that mass was more important than toys and that she was depriving her children of something more precious than the excitement of shredding packages on Christmas morning. They would never learn what Christmas meant if they just played with toys under a Christmas tree. They would learn it only in church, which was where she had learned it. Her mother had brought her to church every Sunday, and on Christmas Eve and Easter her father had joined them. As a child she had believed in Jesus, in the way that Mike had once believed in Santa Claus and Joey still did. And even as an adult she still reflexively called out to Him, though she no longer believed in Him. She even felt His love for her. But although that love was something exquisitely beautiful, to her it was not something real.

5:30 AM. The last gifts waited to be wrapped – a My First LeapPad Book from Michael's parents to Joey and a Where's Waldo book from Michael's parents to Mike.

She switched wrapping paper – Rudolf paper for Mike, Donald-Duck-as-Santa paper for Joey. She didn't want to wrap more than two presents in any one kind of paper. The fiction was that they came

from different sources. On top of that fiction was the fiction that they came from Santa, but somehow neither Mike nor Joey saw the incongruity. The gift was from Santa no matter who else it came from.

She had been the same way as a child. She had been born in New York, and her parents had raised her in the American tradition of presents delivered by Santa on Christmas Eve. She had never questioned how Santa could have brought presents from Mommy and Daddy. In fact, she had to write out the "from's" and "to's" on presents to her own children before she realized how naturally she had believed as a child something so obviously nonsensical.

Now she had to make out the cards and put everything under the tree. And then, if the kids weren't sneaking out of the bedroom yet, she could begin cleaning up the kitchen.

Rosa and Manuel were coming for lunch at 1:00, perhaps with their children. Candi had presents for all four of them – Rosa, Manuel, Bob, and Caroline – under the tree, though it wasn't certain that Bob and Caroline would come. They were still living at home but already, in American fashion, breaking away from family. And Rosa and Manuel would bring presents for Candi and Mike and Joey, putting them under the tree as they came in.

There would be cold cuts and cheeses and store-made salads and a bakery cake and bakery cookies. What else could Candi do? It was pitiful, but it was all she could manage. And lentils and rice, the lentils from a can. And fried plantains.



She felt like Atlas, exhausted from holding up her world. But she was out to do more – to move this world out of its Washington-Heights orbit and get Mike and Joey out of here before they got too far into school. When she got her degree in three or four years she would be a nurse, and they would move to a house in a much nicer place, and Mike and Joey would go to good schools and make something of themselves.

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" she thought. "Help me!"

What was it? It wasn't that she was on a sleepless marathon, or that she didn't sleep much even on good days. Or that she lived in a slummy one-bedroom apartment in a dangerous neighborhood and had a rotten job with years to go in school. Or that she hadn't allowed herself to be touched by a man for four years now, since Michael had left when she was pregnant with Joey, and was unlikely to for another fifteen years or so, until the boys were old enough to be on their own and she was off this treadmill, and her youth was gone, sacrificed to the American Dream. Or simply that she was failing to give her children any spiritual life at all.

6:00 AM. They could be stirring any minute now. On normal days she was just waking up to the normal morning sounds of traffic starting the day four stories below on St. Nicholas Avenue, the buses groaning out of the stop below her kitchen window, the delivery trucks idling double-parked in front of the bodega across the street, the sounds of water running as people took showers or flushed toilets in the apartments all around her, the renewed pounding of

feet across the ceiling from the family of four crammed into the apartment upstairs.

But just now it was as quiet as an open field in the dark hour before dawn, as the Earth held its breath before the sun came up and turned on the birds and set life moving again. That was it, yes! she thought in the sweet silence. It was only that she wanted Christmas, the real Christmas, the one that gave her Jesus Christ, to come once again into her heart.

Candi gathered up the cards and presents and began to ferry them into the living room, which doubled as her bedroom. But the tree took up too much room for her to pull out the sofa-bed, and so during the week of Christmas, until after the Day of the Kings when the tree was dismantled and put back into its box for next year, she slept on the couch as a couch.

She set the gifts out under the tree as artfully as she could, mixing shapes and colors so that even though it looked like a haphazard heap, the bows and curlicues stood out, and one could see all of the patterns, the sheen and the shine.

She stood back and admired the effect. For this she had foregone the real Christmas, the babe in the manger. In church there was a *nacimiento*. It was a Dominican custom to put one under the tree at home, but she had never had one as a child and had never gotten one for the house. In church the nativity scene was large and beautiful and full of mystery, and Mike and Joey's Christmas would have been full of the miracle of God-as-man. They would have gotten into

the habit of praying to Christ, who would have become a presence in their lives.

In the Dominican Republic presents were given on the Day of the Kings, in memory of the presents the three kings had brought to the infant Jesus. And although Candi's parents had, following American custom, switched the day to Christmas, she had gotten gifts on the Day of the Kings as well – little token gifts, like a bag of homemade jelly balls dipped in coconut, or a card of jacks with a tiny rubber ball. Something to remind her of the Christ in Christmas.

As a child she had loved Jesus and believed in Him. And now her children believed in Santa Claus, though Mike was already outgrowing that. Children needed such stories to make the world seem safe and beautiful, as it should be rather than as it was.

And not only children, she thought. Not only children.

Next year, she promised herself. Again.

Then she heard footsteps emerging from the bedroom and the high-pitched murmur of her children's voices. Their excitement sounded like an angel's flute singing through the brightening skies, and Candi smiled as she slipped back into the kitchen to listen unseen.



## ROPE TOWS TO HEAVEN

Let us speak of the little town of Por Esampleau in Southern Fritalain.

Like most such towns, its winding narrow streets and cobblestone squares were choked with noisome, buzzing, fume-spewing automobiles. Perched on narrow sidewalks, crammed in front of public buildings, beseiging fountains, blocking vistas, they were like a swarm of beetles some angry god had dumped on the town one vengeful afternoon, a curse that would afflict the lives of the townspeople until the god's fury could somehow be appeased.

Everyone agreed that life had been better – quieter, healthier, more civilized, more leisurely – before the advent of this plague. Yet no one could agree on how to rid the town of it.

Banning automobiles from one part of town merely piled up traffic in other parts of it. Restricting parking, raising gasoline taxes, charging tolls on bridges leading into town – all these were tried and failed to stem the onslaught. A yellow pall hung over the town, killing its older and weaker inhabitants, turning its rain to acid, eating away at its very stone. Yet the more punitive measures were taken to keep cars out, the more cars flooded in.

The truth is that nothing exists in isolation. The automobile had become embedded in a whole new way of life, and could no more be removed than one



Which meant: How ridiculous!

Well, Rudolfo thought. Not so ridiculous.

He began to draw with his crayons on great white sheets of oak tag.

There would be a lane right down the middle of the highway just for roller skaters, with concrete barriers on either side.

For hills there would be rope tows, as there were on ski slopes, to pull the skaters along.

In fact, the rope tows would go everywhere, pulling people on skates, people in wheel chairs, people on bicycles, people in all sorts of contraptions on wheels.

To protect people from sun and rain, there would be narrow metal roofs above the rope tows.

A whole network of rope tows, along each major street or highway!

Older people and families with babies would ride in carts mounted on bicycle wheels.

Handicapped people would tool along in their wheel chairs.

Rudolfo could see all of the people of the town moving serenely to and fro through the streets, in and out of the hills, across the river, at about 15 kilometers per hour, hanging on to rope tows.

Wonderful!

He finished the pictures and sent them to the mayor of the town. Which, in 999,999 cases out of 1,000,000 would have ended the story right there. In Por Esampleau, however, the mayor of the town at





Roller skates, bicycles, and other vehicles are available for rent at large parking lots in the regions surrounding the town.

The rope tows themselves have received a four-star rating in the Paparrazzi Guide to Fritalain, surpassing even Pedro de Forcanelle's famous fresco, *Piccolo de Manger en Tiffania*, as the premier tourist attraction of the region.

Yet they are inexpensive to operate. One rope tow (there are all together 700 of them in the town and its environs) requires approximately one quarter of the energy per hour of a single four-cylinder vehicle traveling uphill at 40 kph. If the rope tow carries 2,000 people uphill for five kilometers in an average rush hour, that's 10,000 pkh (people kilometer hours) as against 160 pkh (assuming four passengers) for an automobile using four times the energy!

To avoid wasting energy, the rope tows do not run continuously, but are activated by the press of a button. Many townspeople use them only to ascend steep hills.

Incidence of heart attacks and strokes has decreased by 8.673%

With all these obvious advantages, it is surprising that no other town has adopted the rope tow transportation system as its own.

The cause of this failure is as instructive as the success of the system in Por Esampleau.

It is, simply, that the inhabitants of Por Esampleau are known as *enfinos* to the people in the surrounding towns, or "children," both because they













































































