

Cold Christmas

by Barry R. Taylor

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Joe was less than half an hour from home when he realized he could go no farther. The road ahead had disappeared into a blurry wall of white. The wind drove the snow before it in horizontal whitecaps of foaming snow. It buffeted the small Peugeot, shoving it this way and that. Snow was falling so fast Joe could hardly keep the windshield clear. The road surface had long since disappeared beneath a deepening layer of new snow, and wind-blown drifts were growing like dunes across the road. Sooner or later he would get stuck, or lose control and slide into a ditch.

He pulled over onto what he hoped was the shoulder of the road and turned on his four-way lights. It hardly mattered. He hadn't seen another car for over half an hour. Other people weren't foolish enough to attempt the coast road in a blinding blizzard.

For a moment his temper got the better of him. He banged the steering wheel and swore. The truly aggravating aspect of this disaster was that he knew it was going to happen. It was entirely avoidable, a consequence of his own wishful thinking and stubbornness. He had been warned. "There's going to be a bad storm on Christmas Eve," his mother said on the phone. "You don't want to be driving in that. Why don't you come home a day or two early?"

Of course Joe hadn't done that. He had no desire to extend his mandatory holiday visit. He read the weather forecast, but maintained his standing position that storms were never as severe as predicted. He had clung to this argument throughout the long drive up from Halifax, even as the clouds gathered and the wind began to rise. It was snowing on Mount Thom, but that didn't mean anything. The weather was always bad on top of the mountain. The snow didn't relent. Conditions only worsened as he crossed the causeway into Cape Breton. The coast road brought wind off the ocean that blasted the snow into blinding white-outs. Somehow Joe and his tiny old Peugeot had soldiered through it all, until it became obvious even to him that the road was impassable. Now he found himself marooned in a frigid blizzard along the road to nowhere.

Were it entirely up to him, Joe wouldn't have come home for the holidays at all. He had things to do in the laboratory. He had no time for the whole Christmas business, with all its

commercialism and schmaltz. A noisy interruption to his schedule, nothing more. His friends at the university called him Scrooge, but that wasn't fair. Joe had no reservations about feeding the hungry or helping the poor. He didn't see why we needed endless, vapid television movies and guilt-laden exchanges of meaningless gifts to do that. A day to celebrate peace and good will? Fine idea. What about the other 364 days of the year? It was all nonsense.

Of course, the real problem was deeper than that. Joe had long moved away, physically and socially, from the Cape Breton farmland that his parents called home. He had little in common with his father, a retired farmer, and his home-maker mother. He worked in a physics laboratory exploring new applications for laser welding, a subject his parents didn't understand and he had grown tired of explaining. The same applied to his pretty sister Holly, who married before her nineteenth birthday and got pregnant before her twentieth. Her husband was an amiable fellow who worked at the feed store. Joe had a slightly better rapport with his younger brother Mark, who at least had ambitions toward higher education, although he kept putting it off as long as he could find work. They all lived within twenty kilometres of the farm where they grew up.

Joe considered his options. The situation was serious. Cell phone coverage had faded away long ago. Freezing to death in a snowbound car was not an idle proposition but a real possibility. It happened. He could run the engine to produce heat, but how long would that last? Once the fuel ran out, he would be trapped in a metal box with no insulation in full exposure to the wind. A snow plow probably wouldn't come by until tomorrow morning.

Staying in the car was not a good option. He had to find better shelter, a building somewhere. There were few houses along this sparsely populated stretch of road. He had passed a few farms and summer homes, obscured by the snowstorm, but none nearby. He did not relish the idea of trying to turn around on a narrow road where he couldn't see the margins. The only recourse was to press on and hope he could find a house before he got stuck.

He put the car in gear and inched down the road, squinting to see ahead. The world had lost all colour and form, giving everything over to whirling, impenetrable white. It was barely late afternoon, but three days past the shortest day of the year, light was already failing. Joe could make out the trees by the roadside and the broad shape of the hills beyond, but nothing else. Would he even be able to see a house?

His progress was agonizingly slow. The car skidded and bumped through the snowdrifts, even at low speed. He had to stop twice to wipe snow off the headlights. The land around revealed nothing but forest and empty land.

Joe was about to give up and risk spending the night in his car when a grey-black building took shape on the hillside above the road. It looked like a barn or a shed, perhaps a football pitch distant from the road. He guessed he could reach it on foot, even in this storm. There was no house or other building nearby. The barn didn't look like much, but it was better than the alternative. He pulled the car over again and shut off the engine.

Joe was not entirely unprepared. Running an old and not wholly reliable automobile through Canadian winters had taught him to take precautions. He put on his gloves, fastened his toque firmly on his head, opened the door and climbed out into the teeth of the wind. Snow was still falling in heavy, wet flakes. The wind turned them into weapons. Joe grimaced against the snow slapping his face as he made his way around to the trunk.

His backpack was there, along with gifts for his family. He retrieved a plastic snow-shovel, his emergency kit, a flashlight and a foil blanket. He stuffed everything but the shovel into his backpack, along with some holiday treats. He had no other food left. He had to toss out his pajamas to make room. After a moment's reflection he squeezed in a battery jump cable and a couple of bungee cords. He shouldered the backpack, picked up the shovel, and headed up the hill.

The journey, short as it was, became an ordeal. Joe waded through knee-deep snow in the face of a snarling wind that seemed personally opposed to his progress. The snow abruptly became waist-deep when Joe stepped into the roadside ditch he didn't know was there. Cursing, he used the shovel to dig away snow until he could free his feet, then fought his way back to level ground again. Beyond the ditch lay a rampart of hedgerow bushes that could only be penetrated by pushing through with his backpack in front like a ram. Overhead branches dumped buckets of snow on his head, then tore at his clothes as he pushed through.

On the other side of the hedgerow lay a span of open ground that Joe guessed was a hayfield or pasture. The snow was shallower here; in places, tufts of old grass protruded through the drifts. The wind had free rein. It roared and howled in the trees and hurled snow relentlessly into Joe's squinting eyes. He could barely discern the outline of the barn through the blowing

snow. At times it disappeared completely. Joe slogged on up the hill, one determined step following another.

At length he reached the barn. Though the trip could not have taken more than a few minutes, he was already cold and wet. He leaned against the leeward wall, out of the wind, to catch his breath. Up close, the barn was clearly old, and in ill repair. The boards were worn, and rotted at the bottom. The roof was cedar shingles. The whole building listed to one side.

He needed to find a way in. Braving the wind again, he circled the building. He found a large rolling door on one side of the barn and an ordinary hinged door, padlocked, on the far side. He tried the rolling door first. Though he shoved mightily, it refused to move. Was it rusted, or merely stuck in the snow? For a moment Joe almost panicked. If he couldn't find shelter soon he would freeze out in the storm.

He returned to the locked door. The padlock was old and rusty. Nevertheless it refused to yield to Joe's impatient tugs. He had no tool to pry it with.

Joe did his best to calm himself, despite the wind and cold. He had an idea. The lock was intransigent, but the wood around it was old. He took the jumper cable out of his backpack, clamped all four terminal clips to the metal latch, then yanked on the cable as hard as he could. The first time, and the second, the clips simply came off, throwing him backward. The third time, he managed to push one clip through the space between the door and the latch, then hook it on the bottom. He gathered the cable and gave a great heave. The screws pulled clean out of the ancient wood; the latch few open; and Joe flew backward onto the snowy ground. He arose, bruised and swearing. But the door was unlocked.

It took five minutes of brisk shovel work to remove enough snow for the door to swing open, even part way. When he could force the door open wide enough to allow passage, Joe stepped inside.

The transition was like stepping out of a riot into a church. The air inside the barn was cold and still. It seemed almost unnaturally quiet after the turmoil outside, as if Joe had violated a tomb. Weak light came in through square windows on three walls. A pane in one was broken.

Joe pulled out his flashlight and looked around. The barn was small. Wooden structures along one side looked like pens for animals. Had this been a horse barn? A staircase of unfinished wood led upstairs, presumably to a hayloft. Construction materials, long abandoned,

were carelessly stacked along one wall: lumber and shingles and bricks and pipes of various kinds, along with bits of detritus left over from when the barn was in use.

For the next twelve hours or so, this was home. Maybe not so bad, Joe decided. Jesus of Nazareth was born in a barn, at least according to the stories. Of course, that was in the Middle East where they didn't have to contend with freezing snow and a wind chill. If he was to survive the night, he needed to warm up, and quickly.

He stuffed a good shirt from his backpack into the hole in the window. He was about to close the door when he thought better of it. If snow blocked the door again he could be trapped inside. He retrieved a long plank from the pile of lumber, wedged it upright in the gap created by the half-open door. A drafty solution, but the best he could do.

The cold was the immediate problem. He had materials to build fire, but the challenge was to avoid setting the barn alight. He used a broken-handled broom to clear a section of the earth floor, near the staircase, of dry leaves and bits of straw. Then he built a kind of hearth by stacking bricks to make three sides of a square. He stopped when he ran out of bricks. He had no hatchet to make kindling, but there were wood scraps and straw enough. The stack of forgotten lumber by the wall would provide enough fuel for one night.

Joe was growing seriously cold. His hands were shaking as he tried to build a conical pile of wood scraps over some straw. He withdrew a book of matches from his emergency kit, lit one against a brick, and set it to the straw. His shaking hand knocked over the pile and quenched the match. He rebuilt it quickly, then tried a second match. He used both hands to bring it to the straw.

This time the fire took. The flame grew quickly as it devoured the straw and old wood. In two minutes Joe had a small fire of burning wood chips between the bricks. He fed it carefully with larger pieces until at last he had a steady blaze.

Only then did he allow himself to relax. He pulled off his wet gloves and held out his hands to the warmth of the fire. He shivered. Maybe he wasn't going to freeze to death after all. He watched the flames dance as the smoke wandered up into the hay loft. "Yet man is born to suffer, as surely as sparks fly upward," he said, quoting the book of Job. "There had better not be any sparks flying upward," he appended, "or this barn will go up in flames, with me in it."

While Joe had been building his life-saving fire, the barn had grown dark. The fire cast an unsteady light around the room. It spawned restless shadows in the corners. Joe could hear

the wind howling outside, a frustrated wolf keen to get in. The fire was fending off the deep cold, but the room wasn't warm. The lumber was old, and burned quickly. Joe couldn't shorten the planks, so he slid them in from the open end of the hearth.

Some time later, when full night had fallen, Joe was sitting on a pile of old shingles beside the fire, leaning back against the edge of the staircase. He was wearing the only change of clothing he had brought with him for the holidays. He had wrapped the emergency blanket around his shoulders like a cloak in place of his ski jacket, which was drying over the fire. He was neither comfortable nor warm, but drier than he had been. The foil blanket crinkled with every move he made.

The clothing he had worn through the snow was arranged around or above the fire. His toque and gloves dangled from the clips of the jumper cable, the other end of which was clipped to a sagging floor board in the loft. His boots were sitting on the bricks, turned toward the fire. In their place, Joe he had pulled a sweater over both feet. Everything else was hanging from pipes leaning over the fire, held together by bungee cords. He could see steam rising off his jacket.

"I only hope I don't have to leave in a hurry," Joe told himself. He kept a length of baseboard by his side so he could push wood into the fire without getting up. He was snacking on the only food he had left, soft-centred chocolates intended as a Christmas gift. He understood that having dry clothing in winter was nearly as important as having fire to dry it. But it would take a long time. In the meantime he was chilled, hungry, immobile, and vulnerable.

Not to mention bored. The snowstorm had inspired him to leave his car so quickly he hadn't even grabbed his cell phone from its charger. Now there was nothing to do but sit and watch the fire as it bravely fought off the cold and dark. His only companions were the shifting shadows.

What would he be doing if he had made it through the storm? At least he would be warm. Christmas Eve at his parents' house was rich in tradition, if not ossified by it. There would be trays of snacks and cookies and a big bowl of egg nog that his brother would augment with rum until he became drunk and argumentative. His sister and brother-in-law would come over, to give Mark someone to argue with besides Dad. Her three children would run about the house shrieking and stomping and breaking things and neither their mother nor their grandmother would do anything to stop it. Mark's date (he always brought a date) would sit demurely and try

to make civil conversation with Joe's mom. Sometime in the evening his father's brother and his extended family would drop by (they lived not far away) to add to the uproar, and god help us Holly's husband would haul out his guitar and start singing carols and guiltling everyone else into joining in. There would be candles and garlands everywhere, an over-decorated tree occupying one side of the livingroom like an invading army and endless, vapid Christmas music on the radio. The cat would hide beneath the sofa for the entire evening.

Joe would sit in a corner, trying to ignore the noise and squabbling and screaming children, and wish he could go somewhere and read a good book. He would answer the inevitable questions about life in the city but deflect talking about his work. He would make a real effort to avoid getting into a political arguments with his father, or his brother, or Molly's husband, or his uncle, even when they pronounced biased and parochial opinions as if they were obvious truths. He would pass on the spiked eggnog, and decline to sing. He would grimace when his mother asked, predictably, and in front of everybody, when he was going to bring a "lady friend" with him when he came home for the holidays. He snorted at that. Cheryl had recently made it clear that she wasn't coming home with him for the holidays this year or any other. Fortunately, Mark was there to pick up the slack: he brought home a different girl every year.

Eventually, when a few gifts had been opened, the egg nog was gone, and the children were getting sleepy, the guests would leave and blessed quiet would descend on the household. Joe's father would turn off the radio, then the outside lights, then the Christmas tree. The cat would poke its nose out to see if the coast was clear, then make a run for the food bowl. Joe would try to sleep on the futon in the den; his mother had long since converted his old bedroom to a sewing room.

The following morning, Christmas day, everyone would get up and do it all again.

Joe used his stick to push wood into the fire. He adjusted his seating, trying to get closer to the fire without knocking over a brick. He watched snowflakes flutter in here and there through cracks in the outside wall. Shivering by a fire in an unheated barn was not how he had imagined spending Christmas eve. Yet he felt no nostalgia about the homecoming he was missing. For all its discomforts, the barn was peaceful, and quiet. His situation was uncertain, and a little bit scary, but as long as the fire burned he would be all right. In this fire-lit sanctuary, free from all the noise and nuisance of the family gathering, he could be alone with his thoughts.

It was an odd feeling, at first, to be so completely solitary when he knew that all around him, up and down the rural roads and in the towns and villages, families were gathering for a boisterous celebration. Joe was no Scrooge, and no Grinch either. He had no quarrel with other people enjoying the holidays however they liked. There was sense in the idea of taking a break from the routine of working life now and then, to pause and take stock of the year ending before plunging into the next. Certainly there was value in seeing a snow-covered hill as an invitation to go tobogganing rather than an impediment to getting to work.

The problem was that traditionalists had filled up the Christmas season with meaningless rituals, and the business world, inevitably, had seen it as an opportunity to profit. Now the Christmas season was a month-long ordeal of commercial excess and cloying sweetness. There were rules in the air, unspoken but immutable, concerning what one could or could not do, eat, or think during the Christmas season. The rules demanded replaying the same time-worn list of seasonal music, making expensive and stressful trips across the province or across the country, and of course, spending lots of money on gifts for everyone, to the benefit of the retail industry. Those that found these rules arbitrary or silly were to be pitied, because they hadn't discovered The True Meaning of Christmas.

At Joe's parents' house, Christmas dinner meant turkey. Always stuffed, always with cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes, gravy, squash and carrots. Mincemeat pie for dessert. Any deviation from this protocol was sacrilege. Every year his family would sit down at the table with great enthusiasm, pile up their plates, and emote at length about how yummy everything was. Joe would eat quietly, repressing the urge to remind them, again, that he didn't like turkey. When he was younger, he had foolishly suggested to his mother that perhaps one year they could try goose, or chicken, or ham, or even roasted yak instead of dry turkey. His mother looked at him as if he were mad. If word had come out that turkey was poisonous, Joe's family would have eaten it anyway.

Of course, spending Christmas day with family was also required, even for the estranged and separated. The worst possible fate a person could suffer was to pass Christmas alone. In fact, Joe didn't mind being alone, particularly. He would have been content to pass Christmas sitting in his apartment playing video games. Like many introverts he was uncomfortable with exuberant crowds. He had a few close friends and many casual companions, at work and elsewhere. For a few exciting months he had the company of Cheryl. He would have been

content to spend Christmas binging on video games with his friends, but of course they were required to spend the holiday with their families.

It was all a nonsense. Traffic-clogged streets and crowded stores, plastic Santas and awkward company parties, stilted conversations with relatives he hardly knew. Buying presents without any idea of what was right or appropriate, then carefully wrapping them up so the recipient could tear the wrapping off again. Joe had more than once considered telling his parents he simply couldn't make it home for the holidays this year. His mother would be heartbroken.

The fire was starting to run low. Joe pushed the last of the plank onto the coals, then checked his gloves and toque. They were dry, mostly anyway. He settled the toque over his head and gloved his hands. That was better. He put his jacket back on. The wind outside sounded less ferocious than before. The fire had succeeded in taking the bite out of the cold; the barn was merely chilly now, at least in Joe's corner.

He started thinking about how to sleep, or at least lie down. He could hardly sit here by the fire all night. A wooden trough ran along most of the length of the barn, not far behind the steps. It was close enough to feel some warmth from the fire, without risk of being ignited by it. Maybe he could make that work. Those bricks around the fire should be warm by now.

His boots weren't fully dry, but they were warm from the fire. He pulled them on, then gathered some more wood for fuel. Then he layed down roofing shingles inside the trough to create a flat bottom. Using a couple of pieces of wood like chopsticks, he awkwardly picked up a half dozen bricks from the firepit and laid them in the trough, atop the shingles. He was adapting a trick he had seen in a movie. A thick layer of shingles over the bricks made a more or less flat surface and insulated him from the bricks underneath. But their heat would radiate upward during the night, or so he hoped, creating a crude heated mattress. Freezing to death during the night was not a prospect to ignore.

When all was ready he pulled off his boots and stretched out on top of the shingles. He kept his toque on. He pulled his sweater back over his feet, then used the thermal blanket and his jacket to cover the rest. The old shingles sank and broke beneath his weight. "I think you've done it!" Joe congratulated himself. "You have created the most uncomfortable mattress in the history of humanity." Could he sleep on this? It didn't really matter as long as he stayed alive. He set his empty backpack under his head.

Joe used his flashlight one more time to inspect his surroundings. He scattered the shadows in the corners. He could see snow drifting in over the plank he had wedged in the door. Then he lay on his make-shift bed for a long time, staring at the fire-shadows dancing on the ceiling and listening to the wind. The fire was lively now from fresh wood, but it would sink soon. He was probably too hungry to sleep, yet his stomach was grumbling from too much chocolate.

Joe was fine with being alone, usually. He spend most nights in his apartment by himself. This was different. When he sat in his apartment eating dinner or watching science-fiction movies on his computer, an entire city full of people swirled around him. He could have as much or as little human contact as he wanted, simply by going outside. Friends and entertainment were as close as his cell phone. His horse-barn home, by contrast, was isolated from everybody by endless, empty acres of snow. Here was absolute and unbreakable solitude.

It occurred to him, belatedly, that his musings were selfish. He had consoled himself in his isolation by invoking the ghost of Christmas passé and remembering how tired he was of holiday traditions. There would be no eggnog and caroling this year though, not when he failed to roll up the long driveway of his childhood house. His parents would wonder why he was late. He had told them he was leaving that morning. They knew he was on the road. They would become increasingly worried as the hours passed with no word. They would probably call his home phone in Halifax. They would get voice mail.

Maybe Mark would suggest that Joe had found a hotel somewhere. His mother would answer, "Why hasn't he phoned?" Maybe his father had even called the police by now. They would tell him, not unkindly, that there was nothing to be done until the storm passed and the roads were cleared. Everybody would turn in early, but nobody would sleep.

"I'm sorry Mom," Joe said to the air. "I'm sorry Dad, everybody. I didn't mean to put you through this." He closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

It was not an easy night. The broken shingles refused to concede a comfortable position. The thermal blanket crackled with every movement. His stomach growled. The air about him was cold and smokey, and stank of roofing tar melted by the hot bricks. The fire died to small flames, then to embers, then to ashes.

In the deep of the night the call of nature awakened him from a restless sleep. He was gratified to learn he had been sleeping at all, however lightly. He could see almost nothing

around him. Without the light of the fire, the darkness was profound. The storm-fueled wind that had lulled him to sleep had gone quiet.

Joe used his flashlight to find his boots, then pulled his jacket back on. When he was fully dressed he pulled down the board by the door and stepped out into the night. He signed his name in the snow, then waded through the drifts a few dozen paces until the barn no longer impeded his view. Then he looked up at the star-pierced blackness of the night sky.

The last of the storm clouds were hurrying away to the east. The moon was down; there were no street lights or porch lights to spoil the darkness. Overhead, the Milky Way splashed across the sky from horizon to horizon in a billion sparkles of light. The sight transported Joe back to his childhood on the farm, when, returning late from some chore in the barn, he would stop to look up at the shoreless sea. He tipped his head back, searching for familiar constellations. Orion had set, but Hercules was hanging directly overhead. He found the Great Bear, then traced that back to the north star and the Little Bear. He remembered Cepheus, the king, and Cassiopeia, forever tied by ribbons to her inverted throne. He found the zodiac constellations Leo and Virgo, down near the horizon above the ocean. A little searching revealed Draco the dragon, and spread-winged Cygnus, the swan, flying through the densest star-band of the Milky Way. He recognized other constellations whose names he no longer remembered. In his teens he had known them all. Seeing the night sky again was like meeting a gang of old friends.

He turned about, this way and that, trying to take in the whole sky. As his eyes adjusted, more and more stars appeared. The points of light he saw came from impossible distances, and hence from long ago. The star field invited him to change his perspective. If he looked straight up long enough, it was just possible to imagine himself riding on a giant sphere hurtling through space, following the turning arms of the galaxy, and it was he, not the stars, that wheeled across the heavens every night. For a moment he could almost feel the Earth moving, carrying him and everyone on a wild ride around the sun.

The wind was light now, almost calm. Snow covered everything, clean and undisturbed. It lay thick on the ground, deep-coated the roof of the barn and outlined every branch on every tree. Joe looked about. If the sun was gone and the moon had set, was he seeing the world through reflected starlight? The idea appealed. He took a deep breath, feeling the bracing chill of the winter air in his nose. He puffed steam into the air as he exhaled. He could feel the cold

against his cheeks, contrasting with the warmth of his body inside. He could hear his own pulse. He spread his arms as if to embrace the world. Here he was, a living, warm-blooded mammal, standing outside on a winter night, protected from the deep frost by insulation and his own body heat.

It occurred to him then what a privilege it was to be alive, to be a metabolizing, organic being in a universe of rock, fire and empty space. Such a tiny, tiny fraction of all the matter in the universe, or on Earth, got to be alive, to assimilate energy instead of dispersing it, to grow by division, to move by volition, to defy entropy for a while. And among those lucky few living beings, even fewer had the capacity to realize it, to feel the full joy and anguish of life and death though self-awareness. One of those lucky few was Joe. He was hungry and cold and sleepless, yet he was standing in the snow, looking up and feeling overwhelmed by the star-filled sky because he had been blessed with the capacity for awe. He could imagine no better Christmas gift, no more meaningful holiday celebration than this.

After a while he turned back to the barn. He replaced the board across the door, climbed into his make-shift bed, pulled off his boots, and waited for the morning.

A few hours later, when he could no longer pretend to be sleeping, Joe rose once more. The shingles beneath him were broken and useless. The bricks underneath were cold. He threw aside the thermal blanket and used the flashlight to find his boots. He had succeeded in adding sleeplessness and sore muscles to his list of Christmas gifts. It was almost seven in the morning, but the late winter sunrise had not yet begun.

Joe packed up by flashlight. He could wait for the morning in the car now, without fear of running out of gas. The car would be warm. If it would start.

He adjusted his toque and gloves. He pulled down the board by the door and set it aside. He had judged rightly: if he had closed the door, a snowdrift would have trapped him inside. He tossed a couple of shovels-full of snow onto the extinct fire, just to be sure.

Outside, the predawn light was beginning to lift the darkness to sooty grey. In the half-light, Joe could make out a farm lane running by the barn on its way to the road. The blizzard had prevented him from seeing it.

Shaking his head, Joe began wading through the drifts toward the road. He had barely begun when he heard the distinctive sound of a truck engine. He looked up the road. A

snowplow was working its way down the road. Its headlights glared through a standing wave of snow as it blasted through the drifts. It was coming toward him at a brisk pace.

Joe felt a surge of alarm. His car! It was almost buried in snow. Would the driver even see it? Would he stop in time? Panicked, he began running down the hill, hurdle-jumping clumsily through the snow. He shouted and waved his shovel over his head. Almost at once he lost his footing and fell into the snow, face first. He bounced back to his feet and kept on running, and shouting, and shovel-waving. The snowplow continued its advance, as steady as an incoming tide. Joe fell down again, got up, shook off snow and staggered on down the hill.

The snow plow was almost in front of him when it's plume of snow collapsed. The truck came to a stop, a few car lengths from Joe's rusty old Peugeot. It sat there, idling quietly, like a bull deciding whether to charge. The headlights illuminated the lump of mostly snow that was Joe's buried car.

Joe arrived at the road. He was out of breath and wet with snow. He came around the front of the truck, between it and his abandoned car. He squinted in the glare of the headlights. The driver who was climbing down from the truck was surprisingly petite. With a start Joe realized she was a young woman. She was wearing work boots and jeans, covered with an unbuttoned work coat several times too large for her. Brown hair tumbled down below her hard hat. "Merry Christmas!" she said, grinning. "Is that your car?"

Joe was still catching up. "Uhm, uh, yes. Yes it is. Are you – are you the snowplow driver?" It was an idiotic question. She seemed too small, too young and too pretty for such a physical occupation.

She grinned at him. "We'll, I'm driving the truck, so I guess I must be."

"But . . . but . . . I mean, are you . . . qualified?"

"I absolutely am not," she replied cheerfully, "but Dad didn't want to work on Christmas day and I was up for some alone time. A little too much family, you know? The Department doesn't need to know everything."

"Can you drive this thing?"

"Relax, will you. I drove mining trucks up in Timmins so I can handle one of these rigs. Dad showed me how to work the blade."

Now that he thought about it, there was no reason why a woman couldn't drive a snowplow as well as anybody. Joe had simply never seen it before.

The driver pulled off a glove. She stuck out a hand. “Mary Mombriquet,” she said.

Joe shook hands. “Joe MacKinnon. A pleasure.”

Unexpectedly, she laughed. “Seriously? It’s Christmas morning and we’re Mary and Joseph!” Then she grew serious. “You look cold. Come on into the truck.”

“Thank you!” Joe replied, with feeling.

He climbed into the passenger side while she slid back behind the wheel. The cabin was augmented with a large joystick which Joe assumed was for adjusting the blade. It was warm inside. Joe let out a sigh of relief. “Do you have any food?” he asked. “I haven’t eaten since yesterday noon.”

“Have my lunch,” Mary said at once. She handed him a plastic yellow lunchbox with pictures on it.

Joe took it. “Fairies and unicorns?” he wondered.

“It belongs to my kid sister.”

“Ah.” He opened the box, found a sandwich that wasn’t turkey and dug in.

“How are you doing?” Mary asked. “You’re all covered in snow! Did you spend the whole night in your car?”

He had to swallow before he could answer. “No. I stayed in that old barn.” He pointed up the hill.

“Oh my goodness. It was really cold last night. Are you all right? Do you have frostbite?”

“I’m fine. I built a fire.”

“*In a barn?*”

He shrugged. “It was that or freeze. You know I just realized I spent Christmas eve lying in a manger.”

Mary laughed again. He was beginning to like the sound of it.

Joe had an idea. “You have a radio, right? Can you ask somebody to call my parents? My mom must be worried sick by now.”

“Of course.” She picked up the microphone, pushed a button. “Truck five to dispatch.”

“Dispatch,” said an older woman’s voice. Then: “Mary, is that you? You know you’re not supposed to be – ”

Mary's thumb cut her off. "Listen, I'm clearing the coast road, around kilometre twenty-three and I have a stranded motorist."

"Oh. Are they all right?"

Mary looked over at Joe, grinning. He had finished the sandwich and was working on an apple. "He looks right fine to me," Mary said. "Even covered in snow. But he's asking for a call to his folks to let them know he's ok."

"Of course. What's the number?"

Joe gave her his parents' phone number and listened while Mary repeated it. "Truck five out," she finished.

"Thank you," Joe said again. "I guess I'd better start digging out my car."

"Not a chance," she replied. "You need to go home, eat, shower, and sleep. You can make digging out the car a family adventure. Later. Do you live near here?"

"Lower Devon Road, about twenty K farther up the coast."

"Oh, that's right on my route. I'll give you a ride."

"Are you sure?" he protested.

"It's no trouble. You would be following me anyway. I'll clear a path right to your door."

Now Joe was laughing. "That's perfect!" he exclaimed, as Mary put the truck in gear. "Thank you once again." After a pause he said, "You know, it's funny. Yesterday evening, as I was driving home for Christmas, I was kind of dreading the whole thing. Too much family, too much ritual, too much turkey."

"You don't like turkey?" She made a small adjustment to the wing and moved forward. Snow began flying off the road. "Everybody likes turkey."

"Everybody except me. I can barely stand it. Too dry. Anyway, I wasn't looking forward to spending a week with my family. Now I can't wait to see them. To let them know that I'm ok. Everyone will be relieved. We'll all be one big happy family. This feeling will last for about five minutes."

Mary was steering with one hand on the steering wheel, the other on the joystick. She was leaning forward in her seat, watching the edge of the road in the headlights. "I know exactly what you mean," she said. "I love my family to death and I'm delighted to see them, but I get restless pretty quick. I think that's why Dad let me have the truck."

They chatted amiably as the truck worked its way up the coast road. Mary made small adjustments to the wing as she drove. Occasionally there were tire tracks where someone foolish or in a big truck had braved the road.

“Do you ever hit mailboxes?” Joe asked.

“Only when I’m aiming for them,” Mary replied. Joe was already in love with her laughter. “Tell me how you survived the night in an unheated barn in a blizzard.”

Joe explained it all as the snow flew. “Resourceful,” Mary commented, when he finished.

“Mostly cold,” he countered. “Although the experience was . . . revelatory.” Then a new idea hit him. “Wait a minute! Mary, you’re going to take a lunch break some time, right?”

“Well, I would do but you ate my lunch.”

“Exactly. So why don’t you come home with me for Christmas dinner?”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m serious. Mom is always riding me about bringing a girl home for Christmas. Imagine the impact if I bring you home in this rig and you clear the driveway on the way up.”

She thought about it. “Will there be lots of turkey?”

“Inevitably. With all the trimmings. And mincemeat pie.”

“Hey, that sounds good! I’ll make a deal with you. I’ll tolerate your family for Christmas dinner, if you tolerate mine tomorrow, for Boxing Day lunch.”

He was dubious. “More turkey?”

She shook her head. “No turkey. Rappie pie.”

“What’s that?”

She shot him a look. “How long did you live in that barn? Rappie pie is a traditional Acadian dish made from chicken and potatoes with the water squeezed out. It’s delicious.”

“I’m willing to try anything that isn’t turkey. All right, I’m in.”

“Are you sure? I have three sisters.”

“Oh. Well, if you can tolerate my bickering family, I can put up with yours. Let’s do it!”

The sun was finally rising over the forest and fields. It glinted off the sea. Mary steered the big truck with casual skill. “I think this is going to be an interesting Christmas holiday, for once” she observed, looking over at Joe.

He grinned back at her. “Yes, I think it may be.”

