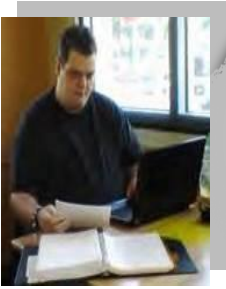


## LUCKY BROWN'S FIRST CHRISTMAS



By Edward White/CP Bialois

Things in this world change around us with each passing breath, but for one Lucky Brown, things were changing even faster. Originally born into a loving family he and his brothers and sisters were put up for adoption when he was only seven weeks old. During that time he knew nothing of the outside world or even of his being able to be bought for four hundred dollars. You see, Lucky is a puppy, half black lab and half Akita. His four brothers, two sisters, and mother are the only things he's known about until the day the Brown family came to see him.

When he first saw the boy run up to the enclosure he and his siblings were placed in the front porch. He couldn't stop his tail from wagging. In fact, out of the eight puppies he was the only one to show any enthusiasm at all. It was early December and while the weather hadn't yet turned too cold to be outdoors, the others had already developed a love for the comfortable indoors and soft carpet where they were usually kept. While Lucky enjoyed the carpet and warmth as much as the rest of them, he also enjoyed his time outside the same. The scent and feel of the cool air on his nose was unbelievable. He knew these periods were only for a brief time for visitors to see and play with them.

A happy and good natured puppy, he only wanted to play and love someone so when the young boy came to the enclosure he reared up onto his hind legs and stretched as far as he could to try to reach the boy's hand.

"Daddy, can I have this one?"

The boy's father paused to look down at his son and Lucky. Smiling he shrugged, "If you're sure that's the one you want. Sure you don't want to play with the others first to make sure?"

As if on cue, Lucky's siblings began to bark in their high pitched puppy voices and crowd towards the boy. Lucky wasn't the biggest but he'd already decided this was his boy, no matter what the others said about it. They could have the other children when they came to visit but this boy belonged to him. In seconds, he used his desire to push his siblings aside, being the most determined and smartest of the litter had its privileges.

At the sight of his aggression the woman with the man and boy turned to the person Lucky recognized as his mommy's mom. "I don't know... he's awfully aggressive isn't he?"

"Awe — mom..." The boy whined looking sad. The look he gave the woman broke Lucky's little heart forcing him to begin whining until the boy looked back at him, With his boy's attention Lucky reared up again to try to reach him.

The man watched the whole scene and shook his head. "He doesn't seem to be a problem unless the others crowd him. He wants Tommy." He nodded towards the third woman. "Isn't that right?"

Lucky's mommy's mom nodded, "Yes, I do believe so. I don't know how much experience you have with animals, but I believe they choose us to be with them. Not the other way around."

The woman still looked worried but the man seemed satisfied. Tommy smiled as he reached out to pet Lucky's head and ears. Lucky reciprocated by licking every part of the boy he could reach with his tongue.

"Gross..." Giggling, Tommy remained determined to pet the puppy whether he could reach him or not.

The third woman smiled at the pair, "If you'd like you can take him into the parlor and play with him some while we talk things over. Would you like that Tommy?" Another giggle was her answer and so she called her husband to separate the puppies and take Lucky into the house with the others.

While Tommy's dad and the woman discussed the dog, Tommy's mom sat watching the two, play in the safe confines of the house. She was worried because of rumors that Akita's were viscous dogs but the more she watched the more she understood that despite his size Lucky was taking it easy on Tommy.

Lucky didn't care about what the others were doing; he was too busy having fun with his new boy. The two roughhoused throughout the room going from chew toys, to old socks, and finally to each other. Each time Lucky got close enough to Tommy's face to make his mom hold her breath he bathed the boy in licks.

The pair continued on their break-neck pace for the better part of an hour while the others discussed how to take care of a dog like Lucky from medical to food and training. The whole time the pair fell more in love with each other until Tommy's mom felt comfortable with them being together. By the time they were ready to finalize the deal she believed in her heart of heart that they'd just gotten the one friend Tommy could always count on.

Over the next couple of weeks Lucky became acclimated to his new home and even learned his name, Lucky Brown. He also learned about many interesting things around the house that he could chew on or play with. Some things like their shoes and wooden chair legs seemed to anger his humans although he didn't understand why. What was the point of having something so tasty and interesting if one wasn't going to chew on it? Others like the occasional mouse seemed to terrify his boy's parents, especially Jill, his boy's mom, when he'd bring one he caught to her. She didn't like the other interesting things he found and brought to her either. The one thing he could smell but couldn't yet reach was the most interesting of all: toilet water. Oh how the smells of minerals and chemicals teased him, sometimes to the point where he'd lay next to the toilet wishing for it to become shorter.

Through it all the one constant in his life was his boy Tommy. Whenever Tommy was awake the two were inseparable, especially with the first snowfall of the year. For Lucky it was something he never dreamed was possible and yet something cool, wet, and neat fell from the sky. He sneezed and leapt backwards three feet when the first snowflake touched his nose. The shock of the sudden coolness brought out his playful

side causing him to bark and bite at the white stuff settling on the grass. He'd show it not to mess with him. That would be the day the white stuff would learn the name Lucky Brown!

Lucky continued to bark at the fallen flakes until he was satisfied they'd learned their lesson then turned his attention to the falling snow itself. As fast as he could he raced around the yard, snapping at the flakes before they could land on him. For minutes he bound from one side of the yard to the other trying in vain to catch all of the snow flakes and tripping over his oversized paws more than once. Tommy laughed hysterically throughout most of the event as Lucky was the craziest and coolest dog in the world.

Even Jill's call for them to come in when the sky began to grow dark didn't break through Lucky's desire to teach the snow a lesson. He kept right on barking and running around until he heard his boy calling him. Without hesitating he looked towards Tommy and when he saw him entering their house he ran after him as fast as his little legs could carry him.

Once inside, Lucky was forced to sit off to the side and watch as his boy was given a wonderful smelling treat called hot chocolate and buttered toast. The smell was so intoxicating that he let out a whimper or two earning a reproachful glance from his boy's mom. Each time he tried to use his inborn charm by looking as sad as one could possibly imagine. While only a couple of months old, Lucky had already mastered the art of begging to the point one thought he was dying by the sad look on his face.

Jill was never one to give in, in fact she made a practice of not allowing Lucky to have any people food for the simple reason it wasn't healthy for him. Tommy, on the other hand, had no problem in sneaking a little something to his friend. When his mom's back was turned Tommy took a small piece of toast and held it out below the table for Lucky. Without hesitating Lucky took the treat and scarfed it down in two bites. The taste that welcomed him was something he never experienced before. It was far better than the food he normally ate and he would be sure to work harder to get more in the future.

Tommy was about to give him another piece when his mom interrupted

him. "You'd better get ready for bed; Santa Clause will be coming soon."

Lucky tilted his head to the side, *who was Santa Clause?*

Jill turned around as Tommy was already trying his hand at mimicking Lucky's sad expression. "Don't try that with me kiddo. I'm immune."

"But moooomm..." He drew the word out until he ran out of breath.

"Don't 'but mom' me. I let you play in the yard after dinner and now it's your bath and bed time."

Fussing, Tommy slid from his chair and stalked out of the room. Lucky would follow in a few seconds he wanted to make sure nothing would be left to waste. Licking his lips Lucky propped himself on Tommy's seat and looked towards the table sure no one would miss the crumbs.

"Down... Shoo!" Jill waved her dish towel at him and Lucky took the hint. With a defeated expression he followed Tommy upstairs.

Sleep. The glorious, wonderful moments where Lucky could chase after rabbits and eat all of the toast he wanted, not to mention being big enough to drink out of the toilet bowl as an added advantage. Just as he was about to take a deep, refreshing gulp of the mysterious toilet water he woke to a strange sound. His head raised from the ground with his ears perked in an effort hear better... When the sound repeated a low growl escaped from his throat but he forced himself to be quiet. He wanted to bark and scare away the intruder but he didn't want to wake his boy. Instead he glanced over to make sure Tommy was still sleeping then he rose and walked out of the bedroom.

As would be his habit for the rest of his life, Lucky began his first late night check to ensure everyone was safe and sound. He made his way down the hall towards his boy's parent's bedroom as quickly and quietly as his paws would let him. He bumped into a hall table at one point with his bottom when he drifted too close and gave the offending part of him a reproachful look. This was no time to not do what he told it, and in answer his tail wagged which greatly satisfied him.

Once that was behind him he nosed into the bedroom and looked

towards the bed. He could see his boy's mom but not the dad. Interested, he walked around to the other side but it was empty. Hmm. Set on finding the cause of the late night noise he went back into the hallway when he heard it again. It came from downstairs!

Excited he was about to catch someone he ran to the stairs and down them as fast as he could, narrowly missing falling over his paws a few times. When he was near the bottom he saw his boy's dad leave the room and head towards the kitchen. Well that was that. With a job well done he was about to climb the stairs again when he noticed another figure by the Christmas tree. A low growl came from him again and the hair on his back began to rise. Someone had dared to infiltrate his family's house!

The man turned around at the sound, his white beard was long and the spectacles he wore reflected the light from the lamp. Moving slowly, he raised a finger to his lips and shushed Lucky. Confused, and never being shushed before, Lucky gave out a high pitched bark. It'd grow deeper as he grew older but at the moment he was forced to make do with what he had. The man smiled at him and held out a small bone.

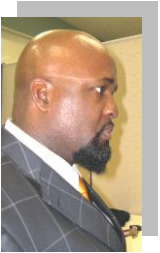
Lucky struggled with himself at seeing the prize that was obviously meant for him. He wanted to taste the treat but he had to defend his family and home. The man seemed to know what Lucky was thinking and set the bone down on top of a present and reached over to stroke his ears. Whoever this was wasn't playing fair but Lucky couldn't resist his ears being rubbed. Just as he was about to let himself become lost in this man's gentle touch and nature his boy's father walked into the room. That quick he pulled his head free of the gloved hand and wagged his tail at his boy's father.

"Lucky? What're you doing boy? You know how late it is?" Stan walked over and rubbed Lucky's ears but the puppy refused to be so easily foiled in his role as protector. Didn't he see the man? "Did you hear something?" Lucky did a quick prance to show his boy's dad had gotten it right and looked to where the man was but he was gone.

Stan laughed, "It's okay boy. No one's going to break in tonight, it's Christmas. Did Tommy send you down here to find Santa Clause?"

Lucky didn't know what Christmas was or who this Santa Clause was. What he did know was that he must've scared the man off and that filled him with pride. His eyes settled on where the bone was sitting and he licked his lips. He wanted to take it but something told him he couldn't until the morning when his boy was there. He turned and climbed the stairs as a hero. As much as he hoped to find this Santa Clause everyone kept talking about, he knew his dreams would be filled with that bone. He'd make sure that bone would be the first thing he'd grab in the morning. It wasn't everyday he was left something so special and tasty.

## THE HOMELESS MAN



By Etheridge G. Lovett

Like so many days prior, the homeless man sat at a bus stop in the big City of New York, waiting patiently. His unkempt, gray hair danced with each winter wind gust. He shoved an overused, black briefcase closer to his shivering legs. With a slight tug he pulled his dirty coat tighter around his frail body. His sea-blue eyes glanced up at the gray clouds floating over the skyscrapers surrounding him. Leaning back on the bench, he crossed his legs, displaying his dingy red All Star sneakers. The strong stench of urine, intermingling with his body odor, permeated the area surrounding the bus stop. Crumbs from his morning meal decorated his scraggly beard. He rubbed his hands together for warmth from the harsh winter cold. He watched the city bus turn the corner. A smile formed upon his face when he noticed several people stepping from the bus. They sat down beside him at the bus stop on that cold Christmas Eve.

One black teenager dressed in a New York Yankees sports outfit and white sneakers, got a good look at the homeless man, frowning, saying, "Damn, you really

stink, dog. You need to go somewhere and take a serious bath or do something... You smell funky as hell dude." The teenager jumped up from the bench, walking away from the homeless man. He turned the music up on his cell phone. His head bobbed up and down to the beat of his favorite rap lyrics. Every so often the teenager would twist his wooly hair, which stuck up on his head like tiny fingers. The homeless man looked at him, smiling. He shoved his hands down into his coat, glancing at an elderly Hispanic woman sitting on his right.

"Excuse me, ma'am, I haven't had anything to eat this morning, do you have a dollar that I can have to get a warm cup of coffee?" the man asked. The old woman looked over at the man, frowning. She ignored him as if he didn't matter. The man asked her again, but the woman clutched her purse tight, stuck her nose up, stood up and walked away. She stood off in the distance, staring at the man as if he had three heads.

The teenager exploded in laughter, pointing at the man, saying, "I told you he was funky and stank as hell."

"Here, Sir," an attractive black woman said to the man in a calm, pleasant voice. She was a heavyset woman with her hair neatly cut. Her nails were also well manicured. She was dressed in a fine dress and a long overcoat. "It's truly a shame how people treat others these days, especially during the Christmas season," the woman said. She handed the man a dollar.

"Thank you so much," the man replied, pulling his briefcase forward.

"Well, that's how I must be if I plan to get to heaven some day. You can ignore those two sinners over there. Your smell and looks don't bother me none," the woman admitted.

"So, I see you believe in God," the man said.

"Yes, I sure do. I've been a Christian for seven years and nothing's going to turn me around. I'm on my way to church right now to enjoy a Christmas play," the woman said.

"Where is your church located?" the man inquired.

"It's the One Way Church of God in Christ just a few blocks down the street. The Reverend, Timothy T. Johnson is our pastor and overseer," the woman expressed.

"Can I go with you to church today," the man requested.

"Oh sure, I have no problem with that at all," the woman responded.

"Is it okay if I go dressed like this because I don't have anything but the clothes I have on my back," the man confessed.

The woman looked at the man, hesitating a moment, then she said, "Why don't you go by the Salvation Army up the road and get cleaned up first, then come visit us?"

"You know, when I was a young boy, I can remember the minister at my church telling us that God would accept us as we were. Isn't God the same as he was back then?" the man asked.

The woman looked at the man, saying, "Well, if I take you to the church looking like that, my friends, and Pastor Johnson, will certainly look at me funny."

"Don't worry, you can keep your dollar," the man said, handing the dollar back to the woman as he released a warm smile. He pushed his briefcase back underneath his legs.

"Are you sure you don't need the money?" the woman asked.

"I'm quite sure I don't need it," the man said.

"That's fine with me," said the woman, shoving the dollar back inside her purse, snapping it shut. She pulled her purse near her bosom and began humming a gospel hymn.

A short time later, the man's eyes darted over to his left at a young black woman, talking to a little boy. The boy begged his mother for something to eat as he held his stomach. The man reached into his pocket, pulling out a Snickers candy bar, handing it to the little boy.

"This should hold him until you get him home to eat something," the man said.

Tears welled up in the young woman's eyes as she said, "You're very kind, but I wish I still had a home to go to."

The man became deeply concerned. He slid closer to the young girl, asking, "Tell me—what happened to your home?"

Tears trickled from the young woman's innocent brown eyes like raindrops as she explained; "I was living with my father until he suddenly became ill, eventually passing away. When he died of cancer, I lost the house we were living in. Because of this, my son and I have been surviving the best way we could."

"What about the child's father and your mother?" the man asked.

"His father was shot dead while selling illegal drugs one night and my mother walked off and left my father when I was a little girl. My life has been a living hell ever since. I survive by scrounging through waste cans near restaurants for scraps of food for my child. Lately, I've been tempted to even sell my body to make sure that my child survives. He's all I got," the woman said.

"Where are you headed now?" the man asked.

"Wherever the bus takes us... We ride the bus to stay out of the harsh winter cold. When the buses stop running, that's when I'm really afraid for my child. We're then forced to wander the streets until we find somewhere to sleep. I try to sleep where there's a lot of light," the young woman divulged, hugging her child.

The man looked up at the gray sky, inhaling the frigid air; then exhaling. Tears fell from his eyes. He turned to the young woman, asking, "What is your name?"

"Tameka Terrance," she answered.

The man shook Tameka's hand, saying, "I'm Daniel Weinstein. Tameka, look over there across the street, do you see that limousine parked and running?"

"Yes, I see it," Tameka answered.

"That's my vehicle and driver," Daniel revealed.

"But why are you dressed like that, sitting out here in the cold?" Tameka asked.

"To help precious people like you, Tameka. You see; I was once very poor when I was a child living in the Midwest. I was so poor that my mother would cut out cardboard to put inside my worn out sneakers to stop the rain water from getting to my socks. People mocked my family wherever we went, calling us poor white trash, but my father was rich in intelligence, wisdom, and patience. He struggled for many years to finish his college education with the money that he made from working several odd jobs, graduating top in his class. With his engineering knowledge, he revolutionized the way we travel today. He designed and developed an engine that runs on electric, water and sunlight. Because of my father's unyielding efforts, I'm wealthy beyond your wildest imagination. And what better way to spend my money than to give some of it to a good hearted person like you who want to do good in life, but are caught up in unexpected circumstances," Daniel said. He grabbed the briefcase and stood up.

"Come, walk with me, Tameka. Please forgive the strong putrid smell. It's only fake urine and body odor spray I purchased from the prank store down the street," Daniel confessed.

They laughed as they walked towards the limousine. The driver of the limousine opened the back door. Daniel sat the tattered briefcase on the seat, opening it. Inside the briefcase were stacks of one hundred dollar bills, neatly wrapped in plastic.

"Inside this briefcase is one million dollars in cash. You can do whatever you want to do with the money. Hopefully you'll do the right thing. And here's a check for another one million dollars... Merry Christmas young lady," Daniel said, handing Tameka the check.

Tameka hugged Daniel tight, saying excitedly, "Thank you so much...You don't know how much I appreciate this. Merry Christmas to you as well... I can't believe this is happening. Mr. Daniel, thank you so much." Tameka screamed with excitement, kissing Daniel on the cheeks.

"You just take good care of this little champ for me. I want him to become someone great in life some day so that he

could help someone else," Daniel said, patting Tameka's son on the top of his head.

"He will, Sir, I promise you that he will, thanks to you," Tameka vowed.

"I've also taken the liberty of calling one of my private cabs for you since you have so much ready cash on hand. I want you to head straight to my bank on 53<sup>rd</sup> Street and tell them that I sent you. Here's my business card. Call me whenever you need me," Daniel said. He hopped into his limousine and the driver shut the door. Tameka got into the cab and rode off. Her son stared out of the back window of the cab at the generous man as he waved goodbye. Daniel waved back.

"Gregory, make a u-turn and pull in front of the bus stop," Daniel requested. The limousine whipped around, stopping in front of the bus stop. The back window went down where Daniel sat.

"What's up, dog? I knew that was you climbing your filthy butt inside someone's limo," the teenager said when he saw Daniel sitting in the limousine, gazing at him over the tinted window.

"Sweet Jesus, is this your car?" the heavysset woman sitting on the bench asked. The old lady was also stunned to see Daniel sitting in the limousine.

Daniel only smiled, saying, "The lesson for you three on this Christmas Eve is to never judge a book by its cover and to always be true and caring from the heart. Yes, I am a multibillionaire. The young woman with the little boy that walked over to my limousine is now a millionaire simply because she didn't judge me by my appearance. Merry Christmas you three and make sure you work on those personalities," Daniel said. He let his window up as the limousine rolled away, weaving its way through busy traffic. The people at the bus stop stood dumbfounded. They watched the sleek limousine drive away down the snow-kissed streets of New York as the winter snow began to fall once again on that cold Christmas Eve.

## FAMILY MOMENTS



By Jamie White

The holidays were always a chaotic time for the Phillips family; there were parties to attend and host all across their little section of New York. Not to mention all the shopping that had to be done. Sarah had actually begun to see it as more of a chore than anything else as the years went by. Especially once the kids had started making their own plans. Sarah and her husband saw no reason to stop them; they were both almost out of High School and would be leaving to attend college soon anyway. The result was they weren't around much and holiday gatherings didn't hold the same appeal without wide eyed children around to enjoy it.

Sarah was an interior designer who lived for her work. She decorated the house for the season with a large tree full of lights, garland and colorful ornaments. Around the living room, she set out their Christmas pictures in the special holiday-themed frames. On the one table, she created an elaborate winter scene with different ceramic figurines. She also set out some diffusers with pine and other holiday-type scents in it. It was beautiful; too bad she'd mainly done it so she could take photos to display on her website to give people an idea of what she can do. Lucky for her she married Robert, a business man equally obsessed with advancing career-wise. Together, they had raised two over-achieving kids who also managed to join every club humanly possible at school. Christmas morning the whole family was up at the crack of dawn getting ready for the big day. Robert was going to spend the morning at the office while Sarah would be meeting with a client before picking up a quick dinner on the way home. The kids, meanwhile, had been invited to some friend's Christmas parties. They couldn't

wait! It was only one of the biggest parties of the year! Unfortunately, there was one thing they didn't plan on...

The youngest, Kathy, opened her bedroom curtain to see a huge blanket of white outside with more raining down like a torrential downpour. "Ugh!" She never did like snow much, especially when it could end up interfering with her plans. Kathy ran downstairs to turn on the TV and see what the weather report had to say about this. When she got there the rest of her family was already there and not looking too happy. Her brother, Sam, was already complaining about not being able to go to his party. "Is it that bad?"

Her father looked up from the TV, nodding. "No one's going anywhere today. And I really wanted to get those contracts nailed down."

"I better call my client to reschedule our meeting... this is going to throw the whole project off schedule," Sarah complained, picking up her cell phone. "Kids, why don't you go into the kitchen and see what we're going to have for dinner later?" They were going to have to come up with something now that her take out idea was a no-go as well.

"Alright, Mom." Sam and Kathy hurried into the kitchen. They spent the next 20 minutes arguing over whether they were going to eat the frozen pizza like Sam wanted or the lasagna like Kathy wanted.

"What's going on in here?" Mr. Phillips asked.

"He won't let me co-," Kathy began.

"We had lasagna a week ago, I want-," Sam interrupted.

"ENOUGH!" Mr. Phillips was beginning to feel a migraine coming on.

"Ok, I'm going to break the tie and I vote for Pizza, ok? End of discussion." As he turned to walk out the door, Sam shot a gloating look Kathy's way. She glared at him, but she didn't dare say a word. Not with her dad in earshot anyway. She wasn't really in the mood for getting lectured at the moment. She'd just have to get Sam back later.

The group returned to the living room where Mrs. Phillips was hanging up the phone, having rescheduled her

meeting. "So what did we decide?"

"Pizza," Robert replied. The look on his face warned them not to even think about opening up a debate again.

With that all settled, Kathy took her cell phone out to text a friend and Sam signed on the computer to check his fantasy teams. Mrs. Phillips went upstairs to find her sample book while Mr. Phillips retreated to his office to go over a few documents. Within minutes the house was plunged into darkness.

"Awe, man! I almost had my team set! I'm so going to lose this week!"

"Too bad," Kathy teased "My phone's working fine."

Suddenly, Sam jumped up and tried to grab it from her hands. She just barely dodged him, almost bumping into her father in the process. "What now?"

"Sam tried to steal my phone!"

"Did not, I just wanted to borrow it a second to fix my roster!"

"What is all that racket?" Mrs. Phillips walked into the room holding some candles. She handed them to her husband, raising an eyebrow at the kids while waiting for them to explain themselves.

"Never mind," they mumbled both sitting down on opposite ends of the couch. "That's better." Mrs. Phillips sat down in a chair across from them while her husband lit the candles and put them on the table. The whole family sat there in awkward silence for several minutes. They almost didn't know what to do with themselves if they weren't rushing around to get ready to go somewhere. Finally, Sarah couldn't stand the silence anymore and suggested they play one of the old games that were tucked away in the closet. The kids groaned, both clearly thinking that was a boring idea.

"Why not?" Mr. Phillips got up, taking one of the candles with him to light his way to the closet. "Sam, would you come help me carry them please?"

"Alright, Dad." He clearly wasn't happy to be the one volunteered to help with this but he figured complaining wouldn't get him anywhere at the moment so he kept his mouth shut. Mr. Phillips handed the candle to his son while he

pulled a few games down from the shelf. They both returned to the living room and set the games down on the floor. After several minutes of debate, they decided to start with Monopoly because the game would last longer than the others. The tokens led to another pretty lengthy argument where both kids wanted to take the car. Once everyone's tokens were selected, the dice rolls began. Kathy smiled smugly at her brother when she ended up winning the right to go first.

A couple hours later, they were all laughing as they started talking about past Christmases for lack of much else to talk about. "Remember that time we snuck downstairs to try and get a peak at some of the presents and we heard that noise?"

"Do !! You practically jumped a foot in the air before you almost knocked me over trying to get upstairs!" It'd actually been their old dog trying to get into the trash can; Kathy was slightly embarrassed thinking back on it.

"So that's what you two were up to when I caught you sneaking back into bed. I thought you might've but nothing had been touched." Mrs. Phillips shook her head. It was a wonder they'd managed to keep any of the kid's presents a secret from them at that rate. She smiled; they'd been so cute back then, buried in a pile of wrapping paper with huge smiles on their faces.

"How about that Christmas pageant a few years ago? They were great... why don't you two do shows like that anymore?"

"Dad, we're too old for that stuff" complained Sam. "Those costumes were so embarrassing!"

"It was kind of fun, though," Kathy mused. "You were just upset you didn't get the lead part!"

"Well, I was better but the costumes were terrible. The guys didn't let me hear the end of it!" Now that he thought about it, it had been kind of fun and he'd made a few friends that year through it.

Finally, just as they were about to start their second game of Uno the lights came back on, the TV blaring some silly sitcom none of them liked. Mr. Phillips reached for the remote, considering changing the channel. He looked over at Mrs. Phillips a moment before shutting the

TV off all together. Instead of getting up and leaving, the kids stayed put, Kathy asking for hot chocolate.

"That sounds good," Mr. Phillips agreed. "How about making some extra?"

"Alright." She looked over at Sam.

"Would you like some too?"

"Sure!"

"Hey Mom, can we make some of those cookies you used to make every year?" Kathy's eyes were practically watering with the memories of the gingerbread men her mother was a master of.

"Why not?" They both headed into the kitchen while Mr. Phillips and Sam blew out the candles and started putting away a few of the games. On the way back to the living room, Mr. Phillips took an old Christmas record out on impulse and put it on. 'Twas the season....

## ACCIDENTAL CHRISTMAS



By Pierre Fenelon

Incidentally, it just so happened that I met with a five year old boy on a train last year on my way to work. It was a difficult year. It was the month of November right after Thanksgiving, just a few weeks before Christmas. As I sat across from the little boy whose eyes were illuminated with hope, charity, and grace, he continued to stare at me. He stared with an inquisitive look upon his face as if he wanted to ask me something. The child finally worked up enough nerves to ask, "Sir, what are you thankful for?"

As soon as his mother heard him asking me this question, she reached for his arm, saying to him, "You know better than speaking to strangers." She went on

to say, "I am sorry, sir, don't mind my son... he likes to ask questions."

I replied to her, "It's alright... it is perfectly understandable, don't worry." I then said to the boy, "My name is Thomas Williams, but you can call me Tom. What is your name?"

The boy smiled, saying, "My name's Jonathan Samuels, but everybody calls me John... even my mom calls me John... So what are you thankful for?" John asked again.

"I suppose I have many things to be thankful for such as health, job, home, family, everything, and what about you John... what are you thankful for?" I asked.

Jonathan looked up at his mother, then looked back at me after a slight pause and said, "I am thankful for my dad because he is coming home."

I was so excited to hear such words, assuming his dad was in the military overseas fighting for our freedom here in America. This prompted me to say, "That's wonderful John, where is your dad coming from?"

With no hesitation very abruptly his mom said, "From prison." She then chuckled slightly... "Yeah... from prison..."

Jonathan added, "That's my Christmas present... that's what my mom said."

"I am so sorry to hear that," I said quietly.

"It's perfectly ok... he had it coming," said Jonathan's mom.

I was a little curious to know why Jonathan's dad was in prison, so I asked her why?

She replied, "I was pregnant and engaged for two years, we were about to leave town for a weekend getaway. As we were leaving our home, there were two police cars with flashing lights blocking our driveway. Coming from one of the police cars, the voice of a man shouted, *this is the Miami Police... Please exit the vehicle with your hands in the air...* So we did, and they rushed over, searching the vehicle and handcuffing my fiancé, taking him downtown. He was indicted and after three days in jail he was brought before a judge and was found guilty for theft and was

convicted for fifteen years in prison. This year is his fifth year in prison. He never had a chance to meet his son face to face ever since he was born.

“So on what ground would he be able to come home so soon since he was to spend fifteen years in jail?” I asked.

“You know, after some more investigations later on, and some evidence had been brought in to reopen his case, luckily they found out that he was wrongly convicted for something that he did not do. We are now waiting for the judge to revoke his sentence and order him to be released immediately at the earliest this year before Christmas,” explained Jonathan’s mom. “By the way that is really rude of me, you’ve been talking to my son and I jumped right in without introducing myself, my name is Denise Redford, nice to meet you,” said Denise.

“Thank you! Likewise, nice to meet you as well... I am so sorry that I got carried away in conversing with your son, I hope it is alright,” Tom replied.

“No, don’t be, it’s just that ever since he knew that his dad would be home for Christmas, it’s kind of like a bit embarrassing for me to explain his coming home situation and all the reasons that caused him to be in jail in the first place. You know what I mean, right?” Denise asked.

“Well, relax... I think his dad is not the only one that had to endure some difficult days of his life, I am sure that there are other people that are facing a great deal of pain, especially during this time of year during Christmas. I wouldn’t count myself an exception when it comes to this time of the year, I too had it pretty rough when I was growing up,” said Tom.

“Oh really... I am sorry to hear that Tom. What happened to you, if you don’t mind me asking?” Denise questioned.

“Not at all... It’s just that, I did not have what you would call a normal life because my life had been one experience after another which pretty much sums up as a troubled life to say the least,” Tom said.

“Oh... I am sorry. Tom you know you don’t have to tell me anything about your life if you don’t want to. You know that— right... Don’t feel pressured because of my son’s situation and mine to

share your perhaps most difficult painful experience in life so that you can make me feel better,” Denise said.

“It was almost as if for me, some parts of my childhood memories have never existed for the fact that I have none to compare to a typical young boy such as your son who perhaps has many Christmas’ stories over the years to share. Unfortunately for me I have had rather different experiences of Christmases over the years. As a young boy I could remember when I was five or six years of age that I was sitting in the living room of another family, which I was accidentally there to be somewhat of an additional member of that family for the next eleven years and a half. I was wondering why there were so much activities going on around the house which I came to discover that they were decorating the Christmas tree, putting the lights on, wrapping gifts to sort of setting the mood for what I was yet to know as Christmas celebration. Unfortunately for me it was clearly defined that I was excluded from the family gathering because I was the only one who did not have a Christmas gift while the other kids were opening their Christmas presents, and so were the older members of the family. Later on, after the Christmas festivities had diminished a bit, I remember sitting somewhere in the corner of the house alone, reflecting upon the situation, trying to make sense of it. I then realized that I was a distracting element for their Christmas tradition, and that I was in fact an accident to be present in such a time like this. And so it began every year thereafter, I remained that same little boy who never gets a Christmas present. Every other kid would be looking forward to celebrating Christmas as a yearly tradition for all, but for me it wasn’t the case because I would rather not celebrate Christmas knowing that I would be miserable for the whole season. To alleviate the pain of not being able to get a Christmas gift I would go ahead wrap myself a little gift and lay it under the Christmas tree secretly to make it seem as if I received a present from someone, and I would come up with a name from whom the gift came from. Every year during that time friends and other kids in the neighborhood, and also from school would share their exciting moments of Christmas stories, which have tremendous positive impact upon their lives to the point they are not embarrassed to tell them over and over again with the same enthusiasm. For me it is a quiet a silent moment, which also had tremendous impact upon my life in a whole

new way that could potentially destroy my life.”

“Wow, you must have been in a very awkward environment with that family... How did you end up being in the family you mentioned in the first place?” asked Denise.

Tom replied, “Well... it was not easy to be me in an environment like that considering how I ended up being with them. My parents were trying to offer me a better opportunity in life, which they did not have when they were younger in order to prevent the financial burden upon their family, so they were asked to allow me to be fostered by this family so that I could be exposed to better schools, friends, and other people that could have positive influence upon my life. So they accepted the offer by placing me to live with this family, and the story goes on, that’s how it all started with me being in the home of this family in the first place.”

“So you never sat on Santa’s lap before?” Jonathan asked.

“That I cannot say I did,” said Tom. “I probably wouldn’t, even if I were to see him, because nobody ever explains to me who he was and what is it that he did. You must feel really lucky that you have your mom and your dad who is coming home for Christmas to celebrate so that you would not have to be an accident to somebody else’s Christmas tradition.”

“Thank God, we wouldn’t let that happen,” Denise said. “Listen Tom, Jonathan and I would love to have you with us this year for Christmas. I am sure Michael wouldn’t mind having you around either to join us. It would be an honor for all of us to have you, especially for Michael since he has not been around for the past five years. What do you think?”

“I think this is an excellent idea... I would love to celebrate Christmas with a family that can help me build positive memories unlike the ones I had with other families,” Tom said.

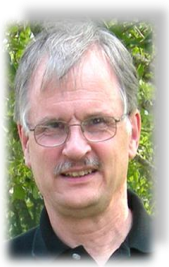
As Denise and Jonathan approached their destination, they simply gave Tom a big hug and exchanged information so that they could eventually come together for Christmas. When the train doors slide open, Denise said to Tom, “Don’t worry, it’s going to be fun, we’re looking forward to it... Bye bye now... and take care!”

Denise and Jonathan exited the train while Tom was waving at them and said, “You two take care, I will talk to you soon, bye.”

Tom sat quietly in the train as he continued his journey toward home, and yet at the same time knowing that he had bad childhood Christmas memories, he also was looking forward to a great Christmas time with Denise and Jonathan’s family for a fresh start.

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## BLACK FRIDAY



By Rick Weber

It was very early on a cold and damp Friday, Black Friday -the day after Thanksgiving and Art North was trying to jump start his old Honda Civic with his wife, Marie’s, almost as old Dodge Mini-van. He connected the cables to the Honda’s battery and jumped into car praying that it would start. Luck was on his side and the Civic kicked over on the first try. Art was thankful for that because he had to be at work by 4:30 AM. Art was a salesman at a nearby big box store. He got the cables off both vehicles and closed up Marie’s van after putting the jumper cables in the trunk of his Honda. With that done, he headed to the store.

This was Art’s fourth Black Friday at the store where he worked in the electronics department. He did not always work in retail sales. Art had been a human resources (HR) manager at a local factory and lost his job more than three years earlier when the company closed the plant as a downsizing measure at the start of the recession. Art landed his new job first as a temporary worker for the holiday season but he became a regular full time employee when he had the best sales record of anyone in his department that Christmas. Art felt lucky just to have a job. The area where he lived with his family in the Northeast had been particularly hard hit by

the economic downturn. No other HR positions had become available locally and relocation was not feasible. Marie worked as an elementary school teacher and had been with the local school board for over twenty years. Both Art and Marie had strong ties to their community having grown up there even attending a local college where they met. They married shortly after graduation.

Art focused on the slippery wet roadway in front of him as he drove to the store. As Art pulled into the mall parking lot, he saw that a long line of customers had staged themselves at the store’s main outside entrance. Art parked near the employees’ entrance and went inside to clock in. He put his overcoat and lunch in his locker and headed out to the sales floor after checking his appearance in a mirror on his way out. His thinning gray hair was combed neatly and his store name tag was pinned evenly on his sport jacket lapel. He was ready for the opening volley of the Christmas rush. He knew that the next four weeks were crunch time not just for the store but also for him. Marie and Art were depending on his commissions from the Holiday season to help them break even with their finances for the year.

In his assigned department, Art could see his boss, Walt De Witt, waiting for him. His coworkers had yet to arrive there. Walt was anxious himself. Just like Art, he needed a good bonus check to survive. Walt greeted Art cordially by asking him, “Are you ready?” “Of course,” Art quickly replied and then Walt went over the Black Friday promotions with him. Walt was glad to have Art working for him because Art was both dependable and a good salesman. In fact, Art was still the best salesman in their department. Two of Art’s four co-workers are not so enthusiastic about their jobs. Why Walt put them on the schedule to open on Black Friday Art did not know. Five minutes before the doors opened, the two stragglers, Joe and Tony, showed up on the floor. With no time for Walt to chastise them, the doors opened and an onslaught of humanity was headed their way. Three customers came right to Art, who was at the cashier’s counter. All three had been in a week earlier and Art gave them information on some promotional items which would be on sale. Each of them had grabbed several different items from the displays. They knew what they wanted and Art was glad that they remembered him. It was shaping up to be a good day for him. Sales were brisk for everyone on the floor,

even for Joe and Tony. Art elected to work an extended shift on Black Friday when Walt asked him since he could use the money and he knew that Walt could not rely on Joe and Tony to close the sales as fast as him.

Art was glad to be busy. It kept his mind off of things at home. His relationship with Marie was solid. His younger son, Sean, was the light of their lives; an honor student in his freshman year of high school looking forward to becoming an engineer after college. The problem was with their older son, David. He was a junior with another year and a half until graduation. While Sean was a giving child, David was always demanding. When times were good, David always got what he wanted; a new computer and a cell phone, just to name a few. Even though he was sixteen years old and could hold down an after school job, David chose not to work. On the other hand Sean, at fourteen, hustled to make his own spending money; cutting lawns in the summer and shoveling snow in the winter. Sean even put some money aside for college. Sean knew that his parents were strapped but David kept begging them for everything even though he fully was aware of their situation. David stayed out late many nights past his curfew. Art and Marie had spoken to him and even disciplined him on more than one occasion without success. Sometimes when he came home late, Art and Marie had waited up for him and found David to be inebriated or high on something when he walked in the door. They confronted him each time and each time he denied using any alcohol or drugs. Lately, Art and Marie noticed some things missing from their home such as an antique ring, an heirloom from Marie’s grandmother. Like many parents, their suspicions about David’s substance abuse problems were becoming confirmed and now they were discussing what to do about it.

Marie got out of bed about an hour after Art had left. It was her usual time to get up anyway. She generally used it to make lunches, grade papers, and get ready for work. Since schools were closed for the long Thanksgiving weekend, she would be doing other things on a personal level. Marie, Art, Sean, and even David spent Thanksgiving at the home of Marie’s parents. Art had no close family members in the area. His parents were deceased for some time and his siblings were scattered across the country. David stayed for dinner but left right after when a friend called him. This led to another late night for her and Art

with Art scheduled to get up early to be at the store. David got home about 1:00 AM but was too intoxicated to have a coherent conversation with by them. He staggered up to his room and fell asleep on top of the bedcovers where he still sleeping was when Marie got up later that morning and checked on him. Sean was also sleeping but had plans to start work later in the morning at a Christmas tree stand to make money for Christmas presents. Sean had stayed up with his parents for a time while they waited for David. Art and Marie told Sean to go to bed before it got to be too late knowing of his plans to work.

Marie sat at the kitchen table with her laptop in front of her. She was searching the internet for counseling services to help them with David. With the missing jewelry from the house, she and Art knew that rehabilitation may be David's next stop but they needed to go through some other steps first. The school district furnished her with some leads and now it was up to her and Art to find a solution even if David was resistant. Visiting the various websites made Marie cry. She asked herself, as she had done a number of times before, how could two boys raised by the same parents under the same roof be so different; Sean so kind and giving with David so selfish and demanding.

After an hour, Marie could not bear the process any longer and turned off her computer. She got dressed and came back to the kitchen to make breakfast. With the coffee pot brewing, she heard Sean behind her saying, "Good morning, Mom." She turned to him and smiled saying, "Good morning, sleepy head. What can I get you for breakfast?" Sean was beginning to show signs of growing up and with his changing voice he told Marie, "A couple of fried eggs and toast would be great." Marie fried a couple of eggs for herself along with the two she was making for Sean while he made toast for both of them. They ate together as Sean discussed his plans for today. He asked Marie, "Can you drop me off at the tree stand by nine? I don't want to be late. Mr. Smith wants me to help him set up a display." "No problem," she replied as she was cleaning the skillet. She got Sean to the stand run by their neighbor, Bob Smith -a nursery owner, promptly at nine. As she kissed Sean on the cheek, she wished him luck on his new venture before returning home to find that David was still in bed.

With the house somewhat to herself, she called a counseling service,

which happened to be open, and made an appointment for early the following week for her and Art to meet to talk about David. Her initial conversation not only confirmed that David had a substance abuse problem but that from what Marie outlined about David's recent behavior, the problem was getting worse. After she hung up with the service, Marie just sat at the kitchen table and sobbed. The thing which ran over and over again in her mind was at sixteen David was throwing his life away with her and Art almost helplessly being forced to watch. After she got her emotions in check, Marie cleaned up the kitchen and put away some serving pieces she had taken to her parents' house for Thanksgiving.

It was after 11:00 AM when David finally woke up. He came down to the kitchen to find Marie going over the monthly bills at the table. "Good morning," he said with a groggy slur to his voice. Marie turned to him and snapped, "Where were you last night? We were worried about you." "I was just out with the guys hanging out," came his vague reply. Marie just shook her head knowing that this would be the best answer she would get from him. She also knew that her and Art would need to confront David together after they saw the counselor. "What are you doing today?" Marie asked him.

"I am going out to the mall with a few people to do some window shopping," was his once again vague response. "Well, I am going over to your grandparents to help out with Grandma for a bit while Grandpa does some errands," Marie said. Marie's mother had Alzheimer's disease and Marie went over as much as she could to give her father a respite. With that, Marie put on her coat and told David, "There's leftover turkey in the refrigerator if you want something to eat." David could only mutter okay as she walked out the door to her van. As she got into the van, Marie only hoped that nothing else would be missing from the house when she returned.

Although he was having a long day, Art was making a lot of sales. It was now noon and he called Marie on his lunch break to see how things were going. She was still on her way to her parents' place and gave Art the rundown about appointment with the family counselor along with her conversation with David after he got out of bed. Art and Marie commiserated and made some plans for confronting David about his issues after

their meeting with the counselor. "I never thought that we would have to go through something like this," Art told her in a shaking voice." "I know," Marie responded quietly as she pulled in front of the house. "I used to wonder how parents could let their kids get hooked on drugs before this happened to us," Marie felt the tears well up again in her eyes. "We'll see what the counselor says next week and then we may have to drop the hammer on David," Art resolutely said to her. Before Art could go on, Marie cut him short after seeing her father waving to her from the front door. "Art, I have to go. Daddy is waiting for me." "I know," Art replied. "I have to get back to work myself. I should be home about six. We'll talk some more then." On a lighter note to change the mood, Marie told Art, "I hope you know that we're having leftovers for dinner." "I wouldn't expect anything else," Art said with a laugh, "I love you." "And I love you, too," Marie responded as she hung up.

At about 5:30 PM, Marie's father got home from his rounds and Marie told him about spending the afternoon going through family photographs with her mother. They both sadly noted that Marie's mother was succumbing more and more to her disease. Marie hugged her father and left. She got home to find David gone, which she expected. As she began to get things out of the refrigerator for dinner she heard a knock at the door. At the same time, Art finished up at the store for the day and was headed home. As he pulled into their block, he saw a police car parked in their driveway. His first thought was what David has done now. He hurried inside and saw Marie seated on the living room sofa crying profusely. Two officers were with her. One, a female, was sitting beside her with her male partner standing nearby. "What happened?" Art asked in a stressed tone. "There's been an accident," the male officer started to say. Before the officer could finish, Art butted in, "What happened to David?" Then he heard Marie cry out, "It's not David! It's Sean! He's dead!" With that Art's knees buckled and the male officer guided him to a nearby winged back chair. "Mr. North," the male officer continued in a calm quiet tone, "Sean was struck at the Christmas Tree stand by an elderly woman who had a stroke while driving her car down Main Street. He was hit along with a man who was there to buy a tree. They both died on impact. We are sorry for your loss." The officers stayed for awhile giving Art and Marie the information they would need for the undertaker to claim Sean's body. Both Art and Marie then went

over to Marie's parents to break the news to them. David was nowhere to be found and his cell phone was turned off. They left him no message. Marie's father was devastated crying uncontrollably while her mother looked at them in a state of confusion. The rest of the weekend was spent making arrangements for Sean's funeral and David did not make it home until Sunday night when Art and Marie gave him the news. David cried but they did not believe his tears.

Sean was buried the following Tuesday in a plot near Art's parents' graves. The funeral service and burial were crowded with relatives, friends, and Sean's classmates. All deeply mourned Sean's passing. David stayed close to home for Sean's wake and burial but stepped out for some unexplained short periods of time returning home each time under the influence of something. After the funeral, David again disappeared but Art and Marie had too much going on to chase after him. At their home, Art and Marie graciously received the other mourners. Their neighbors, many had known Sean his whole life, brought over large servings of food for those who were there. This was viewed as quite generous by Art and Marie since some of them were also having tough economic times. Walt De Witt came to extend his condolences and told Art when he was away from the other visitors to take as much time off from work as he needed. Art thanked Walt and told him that he would be back to work the following day but would need to take some time off later in the week to attend to some other matters. Walt's reply to Art was, "Just let me know and we will work with you at the store."

Two days after Sean's burial, Art and Marie got in to see the family counselor, Dr. Charles St. Clair a psychologist specializing in substance abuse. Dr. St. Clair got right to the point. "David needs in-patient treatment. His unexplained absences and under the influence behavior when he comes home both indicate that something serious is going on with him. We won't be able to know the extent of his problems until we have the opportunity to talk with him. I know that this is hard on both of you especially with the loss of his brother, Sean. David is sixteen and you as his parents can have him hospitalized without his consent. We can help you with this by having an intervention. This will be difficult for you and, we will work with you at each step. You are not alone." With that both Art and Marie sobbed together dreading

the thought of losing two sons. Dr. St. Clair gave them information for the center and a contact number for them to call when David finally showed up at home.

The following day as he was sleeping off another stint of partying, three large men came into David's room, woke him up, and spirited him out of the house to a waiting van passed his parents who were crying in the living room. "Where are you taking me?" screamed David at the top of his lungs. "To some place safe," said one of the men. Initial assessments at the rehabilitation center revealed that David had a serious drug problem and that he would be an in-patient for an unspecified time. Art and Marie faced this with silent resignation and hoped for the best. The good thing was that David was still a minor and could not sign himself out of the treatment program. He had to face his problems.

During the rest of the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, Art and Marie grieved for the loss of Sean and prayed for David. Art worked long hours at the store while Marie spent time with her parents when she was not in school teaching. It was a long painful interlude for them. A week after the funeral, Marie went into Sean's room for the first time and the shoe box where Sean kept his extra money and valuables was empty. Marie sat down on Sean's bed and cried. David had robbed his dead brother. Art also broke down himself later when he got home from work and Marie told him. Still, they had to continue in the Holiday spirit. With Marie in charge of the school's Christmas pageant and Art putting on his best face at the store for the customers, they both felt that this was the most difficult Christmas they ever would have. Grieving for Sean and waiting for more information about David made thoughts of celebrating the Season the last things on their minds.

Dr. St. Clair told Art and Marie at a family counseling session that David was proving to be a hard case most notably in group therapy; denying he had a problem and blaming Art and Marie for his situation. Although he could not go into specifics with them because of doctor-patient confidentiality, Dr. St. Clair told them not to give up on David yet. Their health insurance from the school board allowed for a certain amount of in-patient care so for the time being they would not be hit with huge bills from the hospital. At this point according to treatment protocol, they could not have contact with David. For the time

being, Marie and Art were not anxious themselves to see David.

As the Christmas Day drew closer, Marie and Art, when he could, spent their free time with Marie's parents. Her mother's memory was fading but she still asked, "Where are David and Sean?" Marie and Art went all out and decorated her parents' house not just for her mother and father but, for themselves, as well. Lights, a train garden, and a large tree with the many ornaments her parents had collected over the years graced the living room. A festive wreath was on the front door and lighted candles were in every window of the house. Even with her declining condition, Marie's mother helped address Christmas cards and strange as it may seem, Marie's father and Marie got some sense of purpose by explaining to her who some of the people were whom she had forgotten as she addressed the envelopes. Art was glad that Walt De Witt listened to him outside of work while he vented his frustrations with David and his loss of Sean. As it turned out, Walt was that one true friend to Art, a friend most people never have and Walt continued to help Art through this most difficult time.

On Christmas morning, Art had his first day off since Sean's funeral and he went with Marie early to her parents' place. Their own home was dark and unadorned. They had no one there with whom to share the holiday. The place evoked pain. They would never get over the loss of Sean. As for David, they still had not had any direct contact with him but Dr. St. Clair had told them that David was making some progress. This was a sign of hope but Marie and Art knew that for David there was a long way to go.

They entered Marie's parents' house to find her mother having a good day and her father upbeat. They exchanged gifts, ate a hearty breakfast, and made calls to family members living outside of the area. It was the first time that both Marie and Art had smiled and laughed in almost a month.

Indeed, this Christmas was the most difficult one Art and Marie would ever have. The best thing to come of it was a stronger bond between them and greater love for each other as they looked to the New Year. This was the best gift they could have given each other.



## THE ARRIVAL



By Narda Mc Carthy

While Patty waited for Joe with little Joey's head on her lap, she thought that the time was drawing near. She got up making sure that Joey stayed comfortably on the sofa and went to the window. From the second floor she could see the lights of the small city where they lived. She had been born and raised here, but Joe came from a faraway place. Both loved their city.

She looked at Joey who had a smile on his angelic face and thought "our baby will come to a loving home, our perfect Christmas present."



Angelina heard the phone ring. With her eyes closed, she extended the right hand, feeling around trying to answer the call quickly. In doing so, she knocked down the lamp, a stack of papers and the phone.

"Mmmhh, I could be quicker" she thought. Listening to the thump, thump of her heart, she looked at the clock feeling a sudden burst of green light invade her brain.

"Patty must be ready now" she told Olie, her husband. Both sat up on the bed suddenly awake and anguished.

It had been a long month for Patty. She had been in pain and showed some symptoms that worried Angelina, but

of course, she would not say very much... she didn't want to add to Patty's stress. The midwife had indicated that this baby was bigger than the first and that the child may put the family on edge. The young couple believed in all natural methods and had decided to have their children at home. The first baby had been rushed to the hospital a few days after his birth, but this one had everyone concerned.

Angelina finally reached the phone that continued its furious demand to be answered.

"What happened?!" she asked in a panicky tone.

"This time the contractions had been steady for the last two hours. They are a minute and a half apart; the midwife is on her way".

"We'll be there".

Hurriedly they got dressed and rushed to their son's home. When they arrived Patty was reclining on a sofa, avoiding the bed until the last minute. Olie wrapped up the sleeping toddler in a blanket and they left asking to be called as soon as the baby was born.

Not five minutes after they had left, Angelina said, "Olie, I feel like a ray of golden light has touched their home and risking to be called crazy, I would even say I hear voices singing".

"I love your imagination Angie! It always adds spice to our lives".

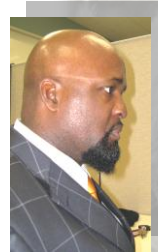
"Seriously Olie! It is as if the baby were being received in a very special way. Who knows, maybe he will change the course of humanity."

"Maybe he will find the cure for AIDS" responded Olie with a wink and a smile.

"Or soul disease" answered Angelina pensively.

At that moment her cell phone rang. Angelina answered and on the other side a welcome cry was heard. Joshua had been born.

## THE HUNTED



By Etheridge Lovett

On the Thursday evening of February 12, 1852, a proud hunter named Joe Calhoun, journeyed through the biting cold winter elements from Texas to South Dakota to hunt big game. Joe heard about the large herds of buffalo, roaming freely throughout the Black Hills of South Dakota. Joe also heard about the legendary White Buffalo that wittingly protects other buffalos from hunters venturing out into the Black Hills. This legend prompted Joe to visit South Dakota to see for himself, such an interesting creature. If the buffalo existed, Joe planned to bring down the great beast single-handedly.

Riding upon his favorite horse, Caroline; Joe trekked across the snow-laden plains to the small bustling hunting and gold miner's town near the Black Hills of South Dakota known as Deadwood.

After entering the town, Joe left his horse at the town's holding stable to be cared for overnight. Joe entered the Red Rooster Saloon to relax and unwind from his long journey. The moment Joe entered the saloon; you could hear the distinct jingling sound of the fine silver spurs he wore upon his tough, well-crafted cowboy boots. A sudden blast of frigid air, mingled with large snowflakes, followed Joe as he pushed his way through the swing doors of the saloon. Piano sounds, laughter, and loud conversations permeated the popular saloon.

Several people fixed their eyes upon the tall, handsome young hunter approaching the bar, wearing some of his hunting gear. Two ammunition belts, laden with shotgun rounds, were strapped across

his chest. Two .44 Caliber Smith and Wesson single action revolvers were neatly placed inside holsters attached to his belt. He also wore a long coat made of tough buffalo hide, with another thin gray coat barely seen underneath it. On the side of his belt, Joe wore a well-crafted Cheyenne Indian hunting knife. He wore his long blonde hair platted down his back. The only hair upon Joe's stern face was the long mustache he wore, curled up at each end. The mustache was so thick that you could barely see Joe's top lip. Joe's sea-blue eyes scanned the room of high-spirited visitors who were all gambling, drinking, and frolicking about with the sensually attractive saloon girls. Those who noticed Joe entering the saloon began to lean to one side, whispering to each other.

"Bartender, I'll have a bottle of Jim Beam whiskey," Joe requested, placing his wide-brim, black hat upon the counter.

"A bottle of Jim Beam whiskey coming right up," said the bartender, preparing the drink.

"Pardon me for asking, but where are you headed, Mister?" asked one plump gambler sitting at a table near Joe.

Taking a quick gulp of his whiskey, Joe answered, "I heard that there's a menace up in the Black Hills, killing off most of the hunters around here. I thought I'd come here and offer my services to get rid of him. You see, I take the death of any hunter personal."

"Well, I hope you brought the U.S. Calvary with you. That menace you spoke of up in the Black Hills, is like the devil in white buffalo hide. One witness said that the White Buffalo stands eight feet tall, weighing around one and a half tons. Some men believe it's a spirit," the plump man said with a slight chuckle.

"If the White Buffalo breaths, it bleeds. If it bleeds, it can roll over and die. It's just another beast of the field to be tamed, maimed or killed. Besides, I don't believe in spirits. That's hogwash... I only believe in my rifles," Joe said, taking another drink from his bottle of whiskey.

The plump man stood, walking over, shaking Joe's hand, saying, "Mister, you're my kind of man. My name's Nick Mosley. I'm the Mayor of Deadwood."

"I'm Joe Calhoun, a buffalo hunter from Dallas Texas."

"Joe, I want you to meet my gambling buddies," said Mayor Mosley, as he and Joe walked over to his table.

"Listen up everyone; I'd like you to meet my good friend, Joe Calhoun, visiting us all the way from Dallas Texas. He's a buffalo hunter. He traveled many miles to come here and rid the Black Hills of the White Buffalo," Mayor Mosley informed.

Everyone in the saloon went silent for a minute, gazing upon the young hunter after hearing the mayor's words. Some onlookers whispered to each other. Concerned about the young hunter, one old Cheyenne Indian tracker, with a head full of snow white, long hair, stood; approaching Joe. The Indian grabbed Joe firmly by the shoulders, looking deep into his eyes, saying, "Listen to me, Mister, if you go up into the Black Hills to hunt buffalo, you will surely regret it. As long as you, and other hunters, continue to hunt the buffalo in the Black Hills, the White Buffalo will continue to attack. Whatever you do, stay away from the Black Hills. Go back where you came from and you won't be harmed."

Assuming that the old Indian tracker simply wanted the elusive White Buffalo to live so that he, and his people, could maintain their fear over the small town, Joe became outraged. Joe pulled out one of his Smith and Wesson revolvers, turned the weapon over, striking the Indian across his mouth with the butt of the weapon, knocking the Indian to the ground. Everyone in the saloon was shocked at Joe's explosive reaction. Several cowboys laughed at the dazed Indian sprawled out on the floor. Gathering himself, the old Indian sat up, wiping the blood from his split lip with his hand. He stared at the blood upon his fingers; then gazed up at Joe with a frown. The Indian pointed at Joe's face, saying, "Remember, I warned you not to go up into the Black Hills."

"Some of you boys get this fool Indian out of here before he gets himself killed!" Mayor Mosley shouted. Several local cowboys grabbed the Indian by his shoulders, dragging him outside in the freezing cold. They went back inside the saloon, laughing about the incident. Joe twirled his revolver around upon his finger a few times for show; then shoved it back down into his holster. He walked over to the bar to finish his whiskey.

"Well, if you need any extra supplies for your hunt just let me know

before you leave. Hunting the White Buffalo won't be a Sunday picnic," Mayor Mosley said.

"Thanks, but no thanks, mayor. I'll be just fine. These are all the supplies I'll ever need," Joe said, patting his hand upon his Smith and Wesson revolvers. "These babies haven't let me down yet."

Everyone laughed at Joe's arrogant response.

"Can you use a little extra attention tonight courageous cowboy?" asked one attractive saloon girl, approaching Joe. Her eyes were sea blue, like those of the young hunter. Her blonde, curly hair shone like fine gold. Her body showed no flaws. Her sweet smelling perfume filled Joe's nostrils as she drew closer. Joe eyed the voluptuous woman from her head to her feet; then he answered, "Sure. I could use your kind of attention any night."

"Come up to room seven when you're ready, cowboy, and let me show you a good time," the woman offered. She smiled, walking up the winding stairwell. Joe consumed the final gulp of his whiskey, leaving the empty bottle on the table. He placed a one dollar bill beside the bottle then followed the woman up the stairs to her bedroom. The mayor smiled, watching the young hunter disappear in the shadows upstairs.

### The Next Day

Despite the biting cold, the morning sun peeked through an opening in the white-laced curtains, striking the closed eyelids of the young hunter. Feeling the warm sunshine, Joe's eyes blinked several times. He awakened, sitting up in bed. Rubbing the back of his neck, he glanced over, noticing the saloon girl sprawled out, nude in bed beside him. Joe smiled. He reached over, grabbing his pants from a nearby table, reaching into the pocket of his pants to get his wallet. Joe left three dollars on the table for the saloon girl's sexual services; then he went over to a large tin pail of ice cold water, wiping himself off. He pulled out his straight razor and shaved. He dried himself off and put on his shirt, ammunition belts, weapons, coat, and boots. Flipping his fancy hat upon his head, Joe glanced back at the young woman still asleep in bed. He tipped his hat, quietly exiting the room. Joe casually exited the saloon, walking towards the holding stables.

“Good morning, Mr. Calhoun. I guess you’re ready for your horse, Caroline,” one old stable hand said.

“You’re absolutely correct. I have a long day of hunting ahead of me. I need to get a head start before the weather turns,” Joe said.

“Caroline rested pretty well last night. She slept like a newborn fillie. I also changed her horse shoes to make the hunting journey easy on her. I took good care of your saddle gear as well,” the stable hand said.

Joe checked over his horse; then he checked over his saddle gear to make sure that everything was there.

“You got a pretty nice set of weapons there fella,” the stable hand said.

Joe half smiled, grabbing one of his rifles from his saddle bag, saying, “This here is a .50 Caliber Sharps Buffalo Rifle. Most hunters call it ‘Old Reliable.’ My other rifle is a .44 Caliber Winchester rifle with a 24 inch barrel. Then there’s my two .44 Caliber Smith and Wesson, single action revolvers. To top it off, I have a genuine Cheyenne hunting knife that I stole off a dead Indian.”

“I see you’re ready to kill a lot of buffalo today,” the stable hand said.

“Not a lot of buffalo, one buffalo in particular. I’m traveling up into the Black Hills to bring down the great White Buffalo, putting an end to a local legend. If I have enough sunshine and rounds left, I’ll probably kill a few extra buffalos for sport,” Joe bragged, glancing off at the Black Hills in the distance.

“I certainly wish you all the luck on God’s green earth, Mister. When I was a young man, I went up into the Black Hills with a close friend of mine to hunt buffalo. We saw the legendary White Buffalo with our own natural eyes. The creature stands taller than a man and seemed twice the weight of an average buffalo. Me, and my friend barely escaped with our lives when the creature attacked us. My heart darn near jumped out my chest. I have never been up there since. So far, no hunter has been able to stop the great White Buffalo. Indian legend says that the white buffalo’s a spirit. A spirit’s not something you can shoot and kill with a bullet,” the old stable

hand said with a concerned look upon his face.

Gazing into the eyes of the old man, then up at the ban of cirrus clouds in the frozen blue sky above, Joe smiled, answering, “I really don’t believe in spirits, old man. But I’ll leave you with a bit of sound advice, stay out of the Indian camps listening to their empty legends and foolish tales.” Joe climbed upon his horse.

“I hear you talking, Mister, but I know better. My old eyes have seen much, and my old ears have heard much. Spending time on this Earth makes you very wise, if you live long enough to pay attention. I have a bad feeling about you going up into the Black Hills, Mister,” the stable hand said.

“I hear you, old man,” Joe said, handing the man two dollars.

“Thanks, Mister; I sure appreciate it,” the old man said.

Joe reached into his pocket, pulling out a small lump of snuff, placing it between his bottom teeth and his gums. He tipped his hat to the old man, spitting off to one side of his horse. With a slight kick of his fancy boots, Joe rode away from the stables down the main street of the small town.

“You take good care of yourself, Mr. Calhoun!” Mayor Mosley yelled, standing at the doorway of his office.

“I’ll be just fine, mayor!” Joe shouted back.

The mayor half smiled, muttering under his breath, “You damn arrogant fool.”

Joe’s horse galloped down the snow-covered road in the middle of the small town as he neared the town’s edge.

“Take care of yourself; Mr. Joe Calhoun!” shouted the saloon girl, waving from a second floor window.

“I’ll bring you back something real nice, honey!” Joe vowed.

“I’ll be waiting, Joe,” the woman shouted back, her girlfriends standing behind her, giggling.

Other town members watched the young hunter riding past the city line, heading towards the Black Hills in the

distance. Gentle gusts of frigid air blew across the snowy open plains as the lone hunter vanished from the view of the town’s people. For an hour, Joe rode until he came upon the area the Indians called the Sacred Hunting Grounds.

“Whoa — Caroline!” Joe shouted, pulling on the rings of his horse. Caroline slowed to a mere trot; then she stopped. Joe climbed down from his horse; closely examining several fresh buffalo hoof prints, pressed deep into the snow. The prints led off into a rocky, forested enclave, partially covered in snow.

“Come on, Caroline,” Joe said, grabbing his horse by the rings, walking with her towards the narrow enclave. The frigid wind howled like weary ghosts, blowing through the Black Hills. Faintly drifting upon the cold breeze was the loud, deep and eerie roar of a lone buffalo, echoing throughout the Black Hills; then it suddenly stopped. Joe grabbed his favorite shotgun, Old Reliable, loading several rounds. His keen eyes scanned everything that twitched or moved, but not one buffalo was in sight. Only dead silence remained. Joe shoved his rifle down inside his saddlebag, following the buffalo hoof tracks pressed upon the ground throughout the snow-covered, wooded area.

“I know you’re out here somewhere, I can feel it in my bones,” whispered Joe, frowning. As he walked further over a small hill, Joe noticed in the center of the woods, a large clearing. In the middle of the clearing there stood a small herd of bison. In the center of the herd of buffalo there stood the legendary White Buffalo.

“There you are. You’re as good as dead,” Joe whispered. He carefully removed his shotgun from his saddlebag. He tied his horse to a nearby tree, slowly lowering himself down into the cold, fresh-fallen snow aligning the crest of the hill.

“Take your last breath, legend of the Black Hills,” Joe whispered to the White Buffalo. He aimed his shotgun at the head of the large beast, firing his rifle. The buffalos surrounding the White Buffalo ran around in a panic. The White Buffalo remained still, staring in Joe’s direction. The creature blew several breaths of hot air from its nostrils and mouth, angered by the mere presence of the young hunter.

“Damn it. How did I miss?” Joe questioned. He glanced down to quickly

reload his shotgun. When he raised the weapon for another round of shots, the White Buffalo was gone, so were the other buffalos. Only the voice of the White Buffalo was heard, roaring aloud throughout the brisk winter breeze.

Standing to his feet, Joe brushed the snow from his hands, chest, and stomach, untying his horse from the tree. He hopped upon his horse, riding down the hill into the clearing. He sat there, trying to make sense of the vanishing buffalo.

“I got all day and night, damn you. You can hide in the woods until Hell freezes over, but I’ll find you, and bring you down!” Joe shouted, brandishing his shotgun high above his head. The sound of the buffalo’s roaring voice suddenly went silent.

Joe laughed aloud, with his face pointing towards the cool sky above. As he continued to laugh, a thunderous pounding sound was heard all around him. When Joe looked off to his right, he saw the incredibly large, White Buffalo, charging towards him with great speed. Before Joe could aim his rifle at the creature, the White Buffalo struck Joe’s horse with a thunderous impact, knocking Joe Calhoun high into the air. Joe landed in the snow several yards away from his bleeding, dying horse, Caroline. The White Buffalo charged onward up the hill, vanishing beneath the tall trees in the distance.

“Hang on, Caroline!” Joe yelled. He crawled over to his horse, weeping beside her. The horse, kicked several times, trying to get up, but it couldn’t. The wounds the White Buffalo inflicted; slowly dragged Caroline into the shadowy realms of death. With her eyes stretched wide, Caroline panted several times. She drew her last breath, releasing her spirit into the freezing wind of the Black Hills.

“Damn you!” Joe shouted from the pit of his stomach. He hopped to his feet, pulling out his two revolvers. Joe began shooting in every direction, firing at everything that moved. Tears streamed down Joe’s stern face as he unleashed a hail of bullets across the horizon. Streams of blazing gunfire jumped from Joe’s powerful twin revolvers as he wept for his loving horse, Caroline. He fired his weapons until he only heard the clicking sound of the hammer of each gun, striking, but finding no more bullets to ignite. With his revolvers still in hand, Joe fell forward upon his knees before Caroline. Joe wept

bitterly over her death. As Joe wept, he heard the loud trampling sound of buffalo hooves coming from the narrow path of the snow-covered forest area. Joe stood, looking in the direction where the sound came from. He saw a large herd of buffalos charging towards him.

Filled with a burst of rage over the death of his horse, Joe pulled out Old Reliable, firing upon the buffalos, bringing them down, one by one. Even the young buffalos fell under the blast of Joe’s powerful rifle.

“You killed my horse, now I’ll kill buffalos by the hundreds!” Joe shouted. He reloaded his weapon and continued firing. Between shots, Joe heard a loud, distinct buffalo’s roar, filled with rage, ringing out behind him. When Joe spun his rifle about, that was all the time he needed to fire one blazing shot right into the forehead of the great White Buffalo approaching. Blood spurted from the buffalo’s large head, but the creature kept charging, striking Joe with a bone-crushing blow, knocking Joe Calhoun unconscious. When Joe regained consciousness, he was laying flat upon his back with pain streaking throughout his body. As Joe lifted his head, he looked directly into the large, cold black eyes of the White Buffalo, staring back at him. The huge creature was laying motionless across Joe’s legs in death.

“Damn you!” Joe shouted when he realized that the dead buffalo had fallen, pinning him to the ground with its incredible weight, crushing both of his legs. Trembling from the intense pain and cold weather, Joe reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a bottle of whiskey. He took several quick gulps of the whiskey; hoping that the strong drink would somehow dull the pain, but the excruciating pain continued. Joe feared that death was closing in on him. Laying flat upon his back, Joe watched the pristine white snowflakes trickled down from the blue skies like angels descending from heaven. The dead silence seemed almost surreal to the young hunter. He looked off to one side, noticing Old Reliable, lying in the snow, broken apart by the impact of the White Buffalo. Joe lost consciousness once more.

“Joe Calhoun, wake up!” a familiar voice beckoned.

When Joe opened his eyes, he saw the old Indian he attacked inside the saloon, standing over him. Beside the

Indian, he saw a black horse and a wooden carrying platform the Indian made from dried tree branches and leather strips. The carrying platform was neatly attached to the saddle on the Indian’s horse.

“Where’s the White Buffalo?” Joe asked.

“I didn’t see a White Buffalo. I only found you laying out here in the snow with your legs busted up something good,” the Indian said.

A confused look formed upon Joe’s half-frozen face.

“Drink this, it will help keep you alert until I get you back to town,” the Indian said, holding the back of Joe’s head, administering an old Indian medicine that he’d made from natural herbs. The bitter taste of the medicine caused Joe to frown.

“I warned you not to come out here, but you didn’t listen to me, young hunter from Texas. Now look at the terrible shape you’re in,” the Indian reminded, carefully dragging Joe’s broken body upon the platform. Joe gritted his teeth in pain. The Indian placed Joe snugly into the platform, covering him with several hand-woven, wool blankets. The Indian climbed upon his horse, riding slowly out of the Black Hills, in route to the town of Deadwood. When they made it to town, people watched as the horse dragged the platform, with the brave hunter nestled inside, towards the town’s doctor’s office.

“Everyone, get back!” shouted the doctor, pushing his way through the crowd towards Joe. The doctor pulled back the blankets and saw Joe’s busted legs.

“My goodness, what happened to him?” the doctor asked the Indian.

“He tussled with the great White Buffalo and lost,” the Indian said.

“Un-strap him and bring him inside my office—quick!” the doctor shouted.

The old Indian carefully untied Joe from the carrying platform. Several men helped place Joe inside the doctor’s office.

Grabbing the doctor by his shirt, Joe asked, “Doc, will I ever walk again?”

“You’ll be lucky if you remain alive after getting busted up like this,” the doctor answered.


Joe rested as tears seeped from the side of his weary, reddened eyes.

“Don’t worry, Mister, I’ll do everything I can to save you, you damn fool,” the doctor said, working frantically on Joe.

“Thanks, doc,” Joe replied. He turned his head to one side, looking out of the window at the small crowd of people gathered outside the doctor’s office. Standing in the crowd of onlookers, Joe’s eyes fell upon the old Indian that saved him. The Indian drew closer to the window, with his hands pressed against the glass. He peered through the window at Joe with a blank stare upon his face. At that very moment, the snowstorm began once more. A strong gust of wind blew past the old Indian, causing his snow white hair to blow upward, twirling about in the winter breeze. Underneath the Indian’s long hair, Joe noticed the shotgun round hole in the center of the Indian’s forehead. At that very moment, Joe Calhoun fully understood why the Indian tried to prevent him from hunting buffalo up in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Joe quickly learned that the Indian, and the White Buffalo, are one.



**“HAPPY  
HOLIDAYS!”**



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