

The Birthday Bike

By Claus Holm

Part one: George

1.

With the times being what they were, George had thought when he visited the toy store on Friday, birthday presents ought to be something useful and cheap. Perhaps something like a pair of socks or a new jacket. When he had grown up, the toys had been in short supply on Christmas and for his birthday. The few times he remembered getting a toy, his father had made it himself in his workshop. He remembered getting a wooden train and a soldier made of the metal from food tins. Times had changed since then, of course, and so had the kids' expectations. He was sure Jessi wouldn't kick up a fuss about not getting a toy as a birthday present – she was, after all very mature for her age, despite only turning four – but it wasn't so much about her. It was about him. He wanted to give her something nice.

He had taken a look at his cash reserves this morning, and what he found wasn't exactly something that filled him with joy. With Karen's teaching job and him working various odd jobs around the town and on the nearby farms, they had so far managed to keep the nose above water, but now winter was coming. The only jobs he could expect in the coming months were shoveling snow. Then, of course, there was the school's new plan for Karen, which she had told him about yesterday. It would be a lean Christmas...but it was still November, and Jessi's birthday was just two days away. He didn't want to give her a pair of socks, the way his own father had done. He wanted to make her happy, wanted to see her eyes fill with joy over the present she got.

Gilham's Toy Store, the only one in town, was on the square by the clock tower, and was a long, low ceilinged store. Yellow glass globes hanging from the ceiling lit the aisles and the area around the register, and both the shelves and floor were brown wood. It gave the store a cozy, private feel, and Tom Gilham did

his best to make his customers feel at home. He was in his sixties, and since his hair had gone white, he bore a striking resemblance to Santa Claus, if only Santa had been off the milk and cookies for a while. Gilham was skinny as a rail.

Wandering down the girls' aisle, George tried to get an idea of the price level. Even the new dolls called *Barbie* which had come on the market last year were expensive, it seemed, or perhaps 'expensive' wasn't so much a matter of dollars and cents but of how the amount seemed to change in his head. His mind insisted on comparing the price of the toys with the price of food items they needed. A doll with a pink dress cost the same as four pounds of beef and two heads of cabbage. Food they needed held up in the unfair competition with a toy they didn't. He shook his head, irritated with himself. *This is no way to buy a present*, he thought to himself. *Buying presents is supposed to feel good. Not like a chore.*

He rounded the doll aisle and came to the boy's section. LEGO's. *Commander Cody* figures. Toy cars. He passed them without a second glance. Jessi was a girl, and even though it seemed to be increasingly normal for girls to play with boy toys and boys to play with dolls, he didn't figure his daughter for the type to enjoy playing with Erector sets.

He tried to think back to some of the conversations Jessi had had with them – or more precisely, her mother – in the last few weeks. He hadn't seen much of his daughter through the harvest season, having worked hard on various farms in the area. He had come home in the evenings with his back sore, his hands often bleeding from small cuts on the fingers and palms, and if he was lucky he was able to get a few minutes with his daughter before it was her bedtime. He hated not being able to spend more time with her, but it was the only way they would be able to put food on the table. Karen's salary paid the bills and the rent, and the rest was up to him.

Jessi would often sit with her mother at the stove in the kitchen, which was the warmest place in the house. She would keep her hands occupied in various ways, drawing on a sketchpad or trying to knit. Karen had taught her knitting when she was three, and even though she was enthusiastic, her efforts mostly

looked like malformed baby stockings. Her ambition was to make him a scarf he could wear when he worked outside this winter, and she had asked him many times which color was his favorite. He had told her that blue was his favorite, and he was fairly sure she was working hard on finishing a scarf with Karen's help.

George tried hard to remember what they had spoken about when the topic of presents had been raised. Jessi wasn't a demanding girl, and usually never asked for things when she was out shopping with him or Karen, but there had to be something...

He bit his lip as he reached the end of the boy's aisle and got to the place where the bigger things were stored. Doll strollers, Pogo sticks and...

George stopped and put a hand to his face, as he watched the item at the end of the line. It was a shining red bicycle, a lady's model but sized just right for a girl turning four years old. The chrome on the handlebars seemed to gleam, and the red color on the rest of the bike seemed as rich as freshly picked strawberries. George let his fingers trace the handlebar, closing his hand around the rubber grip.

A powerful memory filled his mind, and he closed his eyes to allow it to run its course. Jessi on her old, beaten tricycle, going back and forth in front of the house on the flat piece of ground where a more wealthy family would have parked their car. Her eyes had been shining like stars and her voice lifted up in a laugh he almost never heard her produce. God, how she had loved that tricycle! But she was too big for it now, even if she would have wanted to ride it.

"Do you like it?" a voice asked. George opened his eyes and saw Tom Gilham, the owner of Gilham's toys, approach him with a smile.

George smiled. It was an oddly innocent expression on his large weathered face. Although he didn't know it, it was that smile that had won over Karen when he had been fixing the school's jungle gym.

"I do. I love it. But it's probably too expensive."

Gilham came a little closer, taking his half-moon glasses off and polishing them with his handkerchief. His hair stood around his head in a white cloud.

"Is that so? Well, expensive is all relative. I'm assuming this is for your own little girl? What is she now, five?"

"She turns four the day after tomorrow."

"Well, this bike is actually a bike for five year olds, but if I remember little Jessica right, she's a pretty tall girl, isn't she?"

"She's tall for her age, yes."

"Well, this bike here has a sale price of thirty dollars, George. For you, I guess I could knock a fiver off of that price."

George breathed deeply. "That's mighty generous of you, Mr. Gilham..."

"Tom, please."

"All right, Tom, then. But even twenty-five dollars...with Christmas coming up and all, it's just too much. You know how it is."

Gilham nodded slowly, as if he considered the answer.

"Say, George...you don't mind if I call you George, do you? ...What are you going to do in the Christmas season? Have you found work yet?"

George shook his head. "No. I've got one more day on the Miller's farm, tomorrow, and that's the last of it so far. Until snow comes, at least."

“Oh, the snow will come soon enough. We’ll probably be hip-deep in snow come December.” Gilham put his glasses back on, his eyes blinking a few times. “But I was thinking more along the lines of the next week or two. You’re not busy?”

“Not in the least. Why?”

“Well,” Gilham said, resting one hand on a shelf while the other went into the pocket of his grey cardigan and pulled out an old yellow pipe. He stuck it in his mouth. “I’ve got to get my winter shipment in, you know. Christmas stuff, as well as all the new things the kids will want for Christmas. Right now, there’s a mess of crates up in Chicago in some big warehouse. I need someone to go up there in my old truck, load them and bring them home. It’s pretty hard work, seeing as those crates are heavy and unhandy. Not to mention, of course, that the warehouse isn’t exactly in the best neighborhood. Do you know anyone who would be able to help me out with that?”

George felt his face light up. “Well, Tom, I’d love to help you. But, like I said, the day after tomorrow’s Jessi’s birthday, and I really want to be home with her. Maybe I could do it next week?”

“Oh, sure you could wait until after the birthday to leave.” Gilham roamed around in his pockets for his matches, produced them and lit his pipe. The tobacco had a sweet, cherry-like smell, and the smoke seemed to curl around the yellow lamp globes, dimming the lights even more. “You could leave on Monday. How’d that suit you? You’d be back next Friday at the latest.”

“I’d say you got yourself a deal, Tom.” George put out his hand and Gilham shook it. Both men smiled at each other, both feeling the sort of good, friendly trust you sometimes find with someone you don’t know very well.

“Of course, George, seeing as you now work for me, you can of course buy anything in the store at employee discount.” Gilham puffed on his pipe, pointing to the bike. “How does ten dollars sound to ya’? Closer to the price you were hoping for?”

“Ten dollars? Mr. Gilham...I mean Tom...that’s too much! You can’t...”

“Oh, pish posh!” Gilham waved his hand in a dismissive gesture that made the pipe smoke twirl around him. “I see the rich kids from town come in here with their parents and point to the stuff they want. They pull on their daddy’s sleeve, crying out in whiney voices that they can’t *live* without this doll or that coonskin cap. Do you know what Jessica did when she was in here this summer?”

George shook his head.

“I’ll tell you, then. She stood up there by the counter, still as a statue, while your wife picked out a board game as a present to someone. Jessica didn’t go around the store. She didn’t cry or scream or beg. She stood right up there...” Gilham pointed with his thumb to a spot next to the register, “...just waiting like the best-behaved child I have ever seen. It would make me sick to my stomach to see such a sweet child not get a present while some brat from the town nagged her daddy enough to get it for her. It’s not all about business, when you’ve been in the game as long as I have. Sometimes, it’s about seeing who will have the most joy from owning something.” Gilham hesitated, and then fixed George with his eyes above the glasses. “I’m not blind to what goes on in this town, George. I’m in the business association, and people talk. This town’s small enough that it doesn’t take very long for a rumor to go from one end to the other, and that rumor is that your family is almost up shit creek without a paddle, if you’ll pard’n my language. Please, tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re not. I’m not even sure how we’re going to make it through the winter. The house is...well, our roof is leaking and it’s so drafty it’s a wonder none of us have caught a cold yet. Firewood’s gotten so expensive, and...well, did you hear about the plan the school has?”

Gilham nodded his head slowly. “It came up in the last business association meeting. They’re planning to fire her between semesters, so they don’t have to pay her for the Christmas break.” He clamped his teeth down on the pipe, as if grinding them. “There was applause when it was brought up. I didn’t participate.”

“Without Karen’s salary, we’re down to what I can make by shoveling snow. That won’t even pay for firewood.” George licked his lips. He hadn’t meant to burst out with all his concerns to this man, but it felt good to finally say it out loud.

Gilham drew on the pipe. His eyes behind the glasses looked concerned.

“George, how are your people skills?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, can you sell merchandise? Can you service a customer, even though you’re a little annoyed with him or her?”

George made a short, snorting laugh. “I’ve worked in farming and repair work most of my life. I’ve never serviced anybody.”

“Would you care to try it?” Gilham’s eyes were resting on him with a calm gaze. “Would you care to work as my assistant over the winter? I can’t pay you any more than the minimum wage, but it will most assuredly be more than you can make shoveling snow, and it has the added advantage of you being warm while you work.”

“Your assistant?” George almost felt his jaw hit his chest, but closed his mouth quickly. “You mean, work here? In the store?”

“The store, the truck, whatever I’ll need. To be honest, I can feel the years begin to get to me. When I restock the shelves, I can barely lift the boxes anymore. Whenever some kid wants a pogo stick, it’s all I can do carry it to the register. I need a pair of long arms and a strong back. I could hire some kid from town, but I’d much rather have you. Let’s say, thirty bucks a week. What d’ya say?”

George swallowed. Before he could stop himself, he had grabbed Gilham’s hand again and shook it firmly.

“I say yes, Mr. ...I mean, Tom. I say yes!”

Gilham's face split in a smile that seemed to reach both of his ears.

"Glad to hear it. It's a deal, then. You can start on Monday, as we agreed on, by going up and getting the Christmas shipment. When you come back, we'll start you here in the store."

George was almost speechless and could only nod his consent.

"Now...about the bike..." Gilham said, bending down and putting his hand on the handlebar, "do you want it in a box, or just the way it is?"

2.

Jessi could barely contain herself when she saw the box in the kitchen. Tom Gilham had driven her and the box home in his truck, calling it “employee benefits”. He had considered hiding it somewhere, but realized that there was no way the box could be out of sight enough that Jessi wouldn’t be able to spot it. The house only had three rooms, after all, including the kitchen. Instead he put it down right next to the table, in the corner furthest from the stove.

“What is it, Daddy? That’s the biggest box I’ve ever seen!” Her eyes seemed filled with fire as she walked around the box, touching it with one outstretched hand. Gilham had even helped her wrap the thing in blue paper, so the drawing of a bike on the side of the box wouldn’t be visible.

“Well, it’s your birthday present, darling.” George sat down on his knees next to his daughter and put his arm around her. Her body seemed to tremble from the excitement. “But it’s not your birthday until two days from now. That means you’ve got a choice to make. You can open it tonight if you want, but then there’ll be no present to unwrap on your birthday. Or, you can just leave it here to look at, and then open it on your birthday. It’s your choice, and mom and I will be okay with it no matter what.”

Jessi thought about it, and her face got a look of concentration as she obviously weighed the pros and cons in her head. Her fingers again caressed the blue paper, and gently tugged on the paper ribbon tied around the top. She bit her lip, and George waited, allowing her to make up her own mind.

“I think I’ll wait,” she said finally, her voice firm with conviction. “I want to look at it tomorrow and wonder what’s in it. It’s the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and I want to look at it for a whole day. Is that okay?”

“It’s perfectly okay, darling.” George got to his feet again, and stepped over to Karen by the stove. His smile made her smile as well, as she gave him a kiss on the cheek. “I hope that box is mostly air”, she whispered.

“I’m pretty sure we can’t afford anything that big.”

“I’ll tell you all about it later,” George whispered. “For now, just enjoy it.”

They ate dinner at the table, but it was incredibly hard for Jessi to keep her eyes off the present. She kept turning her head, letting her eyes caress the box and the wrapping. Several times she would stop speaking in mid-sentence, look at the box, shake her head a little as if clearing it, and then continue speaking as if nothing had happened. George had never seen his daughter act this way before, and he loved it.

Later, when Jessi had been tucked in and was fast asleep, he told Karen everything. The job, the salary and the bike discount. They were lying on the bed, which in the daytime doubled as a couch, and Karen’s eyes were so wide he could see them reflecting the faint light from the stars outside the window.

“Work in a store? You? Why would he...I mean, not that I’m saying you couldn’t do it, George! Far from it. But why would Gilham offer you such a deal?”

“I think...maybe he felt sorry for us. For Jessi, at least. He’s a nice enough man, and the deal’s better than anything I could hope to make this winter. Thirty dollars a week, Karen! It’s as much as the people working in construction sites make! We could save some of it, have a bit of money next spring, maybe fix the house up...”

Karen put her arms around him. Her lips brushed his, cutting him off.

“I don’t care about next year. All that matters is that we’ll be able to afford having a decent Christmas. We’ll be able to have a good meal and be warm. Most of all, that’s what matters. We’ll be warm this winter.”

He let his hands slide up under her nightdress, caressing her skin.

“Good. Because if we weren’t warm, I couldn’t very well take this off you, could I?”

She giggled against his cheek.

“Thank God for Tom Gilham, then!”

The next day, George had to go out to the farm one last time, but he finished around lunch time, picked up his last payment and went home. In his bag was a bonus of sorts – three homemade sausages and a pie that Mrs. Miller had insisted he took. Her sausages were known throughout the town, but her pie was legendary. Rumor had it that when the governor passed through town, all he wanted to eat was one of Mrs. Miller’s pies. It would serve as Jessi’s birthday cake, since they would only be the three of them. George’s own parents had been dead for years, and as for Karen’s...He shook that thought away. He didn’t want to think about his father-in-law on a day like this.

He walked fast along the road, feeling the chill in the air and smiling to himself. It felt wonderful to know that his future didn’t involve digging himself through the snowdrifts with a shovel, but instead standing in Tom Gilham’s warm and cozy store, helping parents pick out the present that would make their kids happy on Christmas Eve. He would still have to walk to the store in the morning, of course, and home at night. But perhaps, he might persuade Tom to let him use the truck on occasion. Tom lived no more than forty steps from his store, in one of the small houses behind the church, and didn’t need his truck to get home.

The landscape was already winter-grey and brown. The empty dirt in the harvested fields stretched out on both sides of him, and the road ran between them like a cement river. Even the edges of the fields, where there were usually long green grass, now seemed empty and brown. George swung his bag from hand to hand as he walked. He kept to the shoulder of the road, keeping his eyes out for traffic. The road didn’t have many twists or turns, and there were only a few hills. He whistled as he walked, as he practiced how he would greet the customers when they came through the door to the store.

“Hello, Sir. Hello, Madam. What a wonderful day today. What can I do for you?” That sounded good. “What can I help you find?” Even better. “If you need anything, please let me know.” He pictured himself wearing the same sort of clothes as Tom Gilham – a grey cardigan and a brown suit – behind the counter. He had only worn a suit once in his life, during his wedding to Karen. He didn’t smoke a pipe like Tom, but he was sure he could learn to, if it came to that. He remembered when Tom had exhaled the smoke and it had enveloped the glass lamps, giving the store a mystical glow. He imagined that the kids liked that as much as he did.

Perhaps he could convince Tom to let him dress as Santa Claus on the days leading up to Christmas. He had always enjoyed seeing Santa in the department store, sitting with the kids on his knee and getting his picture taken. Asking them what they wanted for Christmas, and if they had been good this year. He realized he didn’t look much like Santa himself – he was too tall, for one, and his hair was black – but a wig would take care of the hair...

In his inner eye he saw himself in a Santa suit, sitting in a chair next to the register. Tom was behind the counter, ringing up the sale as he had a little boy on his lap, talking to him about...

The car going up the hill was going fast. At least sixty miles, maybe seventy. It wouldn’t be a problem if the driver had kept to the lane like he was supposed to, but he was driving in big, loopy curves, sometimes pulling in over the shoulder. Had it been warm, the car would have trailed a cloud of dust after it when it veered onto the shoulder, but with the cold ground it only produced a loud crunching sound.

George heard the crunching sound a moment before the car came up over the hill in front of him. It was a red truck, the cab dented and scratched. It was a farm truck, the sort of car that would never pass an inspection if an officer of the law happened to pull it over, but that same officer would also know never to do it. The back of the truck bed had wooden boards attached to make it higher, and the tires were worn almost smooth. George had only a fraction of a second to react, and chose the wrong thing to do – he pulled his bag around his back, as if to protect the pie inside with his body.

The truck moving on the shoulder didn't slow down. He was positive that the driver inside had not only taken his eyes off the road, but was actually bent down to look in the glove compartment. Going sixty-three miles an hour, the red truck struck George around the middle of the metal grill covering the engine. George felt the impact, but not really any pain – only a sensation of flying, of being suspended in the air, and had just enough time to think –

-like being in Santa's sleigh... -

- before hitting the Richardson's field, picked clean and brown now. The impact broke his back, his shoulder blade and his left leg, adding to the fractured ribs and skull he had received when the truck struck him. He still felt no pain, but the world seemed to go black, like someone hitting a light switch. His last thought before the darkness claimed him was of the bike, and how Jessi's eyes would look when she saw it.

Part two: Karen

3.

Karen had just put the students to work on the math test when there was a knock at the classroom door. She could have yelled for the person outside to come in, but she always felt such a thing was rude. Instead, she walked between the desks and opened the door herself. She could feel the chill from the corridor against her legs when she did, but the expression in the face of Principal Figg made her colder still.

“What...?” she began, but Figg interrupted her. “Mrs. Thorpe, I’ve...we have to talk. Something terrible has happened. I’ve just received a call for you.” He cleared his throat and looked out at her class. He raised his voice and spoke to them:

“Everyone, I will expect you to sit quietly in class. I’m going to come back shortly, and if there is any noise and mucking around in here, I will be very displeased.” He lowered his voice again and put his hand on her shoulder. Karen felt his fingers trembling. “Come with me, please.”

Karen walked after him out of the classroom, surprised and terrified. It was not school politic to pull teachers out of class unless it was an emergency. “What’s wrong, Sir?” she asked as they walked quickly down the hall.

“There’s been...an accident I guess you could call it. I’ve got a call from Sheriff Daniels in my office for you. I think it’s probably best if he explain it to you.”

But he already explained it to you, apparently! Karen thought, feeling an unpleasant sting of indignation mixed in with the terror that was slowly spreading through her body. “Is it...is Jessica all right?”

“She’s fine, as far as I know. She...it’s not your daughter, it’s your husband.” He paused, apparently considering if he should still keep to his decision and let the Sheriff deliver the bad news, then apparently changed his mind. “He’s dead, Mrs. Thorpe. Your husband’s dead.”

Karen opened her mouth, but the words she wanted to say wouldn't come out. She was only able to produce a small, whimpering sound. Figg kept walking, obviously wanting to get her to his office as quickly as possible. Karen kept walking too – her legs moving like they were separate from her body, and she had no control over them.

When they reached Figg's office, he opened the door for her and ushered her through the secretary's little nook in the front office. Miss Twist looked up from her typewriter, and the look of pity she sent her made Karen cold to her bones.

The inner office was darker, paneled in brown wood and with a thick carpet the color of desert sand. Figg led her to his own desk and sat her down in the one of the two chairs in front of it. He went around to his own chair, picked up the phone lying on the desk and spoke into it.

"Hello, Sheriff? Are you still there?"

A muffled reply came from the phone.

"Yes, she's right here. One moment, please."

Figg held out the receiver in one hand towards her. Karen, feeling as if she was moving under water, reached her hand out and took it. She pressed it to her ear. The voice sounded metallic and echo-y, as if the Sheriff had used the radio in cruiser to call the school.

"Mrs. Thorpe?" the voice in the phone said. *"This is Sheriff Daniels. I'm afraid I've got some bad..."*

"What happened?" Karen asked. Her lips felt cold and stiff, but the words came out clearly enough. The Sheriff paused a moment, unsure of how to continue.

"...well... I'm sorry to be the one to... uh, tell you this, Mrs. Thorpe, but there's... been an accident. Your husband was walking along the road when he was hit by a car. Roger Dalton's car, to be precise. The big old red truck, you know what..."

"Is he dead? Mr. Figg said he was dead. Is he?"

"I'm afraid so, Mrs. Thorpe. Roger turned back and drove back to town to call Doc Fitzgerald but...it was too late to do anything. He was..." the Sheriff paused again, as if unsure how much to say. *"...he didn't look good. Too much damage from...well, he was dead. I have to ask for you to come down and identify him, but...then again, I understand if you don't want to. It's not pretty."*

"How do you know it was..." Karen swallowed, "how do you know it was him?"

"He had his wallet with him. Had his driver's license in it, and a picture of you and your little girl. Not to mention, who in this town doesn't know George?" The Sheriff cleared his throat. *"I'm...I'd appreciate it if you could come down to the station tomorrow. There are some papers that need to be filled out. Whenever you're...when you feel ready."*

Karen lowered the hand holding the receiver. It made a slight *BONK* sound as it hit the table. Figg looked at her, his normally stern and cold face was deeply concerned.

"Mrs. Thorpe...Karen...are you...?"

Karen shook her head slowly. From the receiver came the sound of the Sheriff saying goodbye and hanging up. It was followed by the hum of an open line. Figg took the receiver and placed it gently in the cradle of the phone.

"I believe you could do with a cognac," Figg said, getting up. "I normally don't drink during school hours but, I think in this case, I'll make an exception."

He went to the brown cabinet in the corner, opened it and pulled out a bottle and two glasses. Pouring a fairly stiff drink in both of them, he passed one glass to Karen. She took it mechanically, opened her mouth and downed the contents. She wasn't used to drinking, and the strong liquor made her throat burn, drawing tears to her eyes. She was sure that was the reason tears were running down her cheeks.

“Mrs. Thorpe, I’ll arrange for the janitor to take you home. Your daughter...where is she?”

“She’s with my mother,” Karen whispered. “She looks after her when I work.”

“Then I’ll have him drive you to your mother’s house. You shouldn’t be alone at a time like this.” He sipped his own glass. “Don’t worry about your class. I’ll take care of them.”

Her class was the furthest thing from her mind, but she nodded in acceptance. “He was supposed to start a new job,” she whispered. “He was going home. Today was his last day.”

Figg looked like he wanted to put a hand on her shoulder, but didn’t.

“It’s often...the most worthy that are taken first.” He licked his lips. “George was a good man. I didn’t know him very well, but he always struck me as someone you could count on.”

Karen thought about the time she had met George. He had worked for the school then, taking care of the playground. He had fixed the swings and the jungle gym, put fresh sand in the sandbox and other light upkeep duties. It had been during the janitor’s illness and she was sure Figg hadn’t wanted to pay another man to do the job, but it had been necessary- the swings had been all but ready to collapse on top of the kids using them. She had just been hired as a teacher, and had monitor duty on the playground. She had stood by the swings and watched George work, talking to the kids, laughing with them. He had been working shirtless in the warm air and his shoulders and chest had glistened with sweat. But his eyes and his smile hadn’t been those of a man working in the dirt. They had been wise eyes. She had fallen in love with him at that moment, hopelessly and completely. They had gotten married less than four months later, against her parent’s wishes. They had argued that he couldn’t provide for her, but she had known better. George would go without food if it meant she could eat. He was that kind of man.

Had been that kind of man.

Figg had been talking, but she hadn't been paying attention. He was speaking of comfort in the Lord, of finding meaning in sorrow. Karen, who had gone to church her entire life, suddenly felt like screaming. There was no meaning in this. Her husband, her George, was gone, and the Lord could, for all she cared, go hang himself. There was no comfort in faith for her.

"I'd...like to go now, Sir." Karen bit her tongue, not wanting to scream at Figg to stop talking. It might mean her job, and right now, she had Jessi to think about. Poor Jessi.

"Yes, of course. Please, sit here a moment while I find Mr. Andrews and have him take you home."

Figg left his half-emptied glass on the desk and left the office. Karen reached forward, grabbed the glass and emptied it. She did it without thinking.

When Figg returned, he took her by the arm, the way Old Miss Vegusian was helped in and out of the backseat of the car every Sunday at church. Gently, he guided her along the corridor to the teacher's lounge, helped her in her hat and coat and led her to the waiting car. Mr. Andrews was behind the wheel, and for once she was thankful that he almost never spoke. Figg closed the car door, looked at her through the glass and tried to smile.

"Now, I realize you might have...arrangements to make. I'll find another teacher to take your classes in the meantime. Don't you worry." He slapped his hand on the roof, and Mr. Andrews took that as a sign to start the car.

They pulled away from the curb, and Karen rested her head against the window. She closed her eyes, wishing this was a dream and she could wake up in her bed, with George beside her.

4.

Jessi celebrated her birthday in the house of her grandmother and grandfather. Karen's parents had thought it was a bad idea to return to the house, and had insisted Jessi and Karen should stay with them, at least until after the funeral. Karen's father had gone with her out there to get clothes for the both of them, and they had managed to put the big box in the back seat of the car. Karen wouldn't want Jessi to miss the last present her father had gotten her, even if her father complained about not being able to look in his rearview mirror.

The house was no different from when she left this morning, and yet there was something odd about it. She kept expecting George to come through the door, pulling off his green winter coat, kissing her and putting his arms around her. When she saw the pack of cigarettes on the kitchen table – they couldn't afford many, so George and she only smoked one after dinner each night, and sometimes he went without – she burst into tears, realizing he would never smoke another Lucky Strike again. She packed up the clothes into the old blue suitcase she had originally used when she moved out of her parent's house a few years earlier, and that memory was even more painful than the cigarettes. She remembered George standing by the garden gate – it had been three days after they had been married – waiting for her, respectful about coming up to the house before his father-in-law had waved him closer. That very same father-in-law was now sitting at her dinner table, smoking one of his own cigarettes and leafing through the catalog from Sears while she packed Jessi's underwear and dresses. When they were ready, she got in the car and let her father drive them back to town.

Jessi, who was uncharacteristically quiet all afternoon, didn't give the box much attention the way she had the night before. She didn't cry much, but sat close to Karen all afternoon and evening. Her eyes sometimes got blank and empty, but no actual tears came. Karen, who herself felt like she wanted to cry and couldn't, stroked her hair and tried to comfort her as best she could. Her parents, who had never been very emotional and who had never cared for George, kept mostly quiet. Sometimes, she thought she could see a

bit of quiet triumph in her father's eyes, as if he was saying *See? I told you he would make you unhappy!* without actually having the guts to speak the words aloud.

In the evening, when Karen put Jessi to bed – she insisted on sleeping in the same bed as her mother, something Karen couldn't find it in her heart to refuse – Jessi looked up at her with her big bright eyes. They were her father's eyes, Karen had always thought, but never more so than tonight. Deep green with specks of gold in them.

"Mom, where's daddy? I mean, where is he right now?"

Karen stroked her hair. It was blond and soft.

"Well, daddy's in heaven, Jessi. He's with God now."

Jessi shook her head. "No, not...I mean where *is* he? Where did the Sheriff put him?"

Karen considered this. "I suppose he's at the police station, honey. Or maybe Doc Fitzgerald's house."

"Do you think they've given him a blanket? He always said it was cold at night to sleep without a blanket."

Jessi's hand closed on her mother's. "Do you?"

Karen nodded. In her mind, she saw the white sheet that most likely covered George from head to toe at this moment.

"Yes, honey. I think they did. I'm sure they put a blanket over him. He won't be cold, ever again."

"What about when they bury him?" Jessi's hand squeezed.

"Well, you know what goes in the..." she swallowed, "...in the ground, is just daddy's body. Up in heaven, daddy won't be cold anymore, ever."

"Can we make sure, though?" Jessi sounded insistent. "Can we, mom? I want him to have a blanket."

Karen kissed her hair. "Jessi, I promise you that we'll make sure that daddy gets any blanket you want."

The next morning, Karen opened her eyes and looked at Jessi next to her. Her daughter wasn't sleeping but lay with open eyes and looked up into the ceiling.

"Good morning, birthday girl," Karen said, trying to sound a little more cheerful than she felt. She had barely slept all night, and every time she had dozed off, she had dreamed of the phone call in Figg's office. When the dream jerked her awake, she would just have time to think *oh God what a nightmare!* before realizing where she was and what had happened.

Jessi turned her head and looked at her mother.

"Good morning, mom," she said. Her voice was low and careful. "I wished all night for daddy to come back. Do you think that happens? Is there such a thing as a birthday Santa you can ask for something like that?"

Karen stroked her hair and shook her head. "No honey, nobody can bring back the people who die. Not even God."

"That's not true!" Jessi said. Her eyes lit up. "God can do it. Reverend Martin said so, when he spoke about..." her face became distant as she searched her memory for the right word. Karen was impressed. The girl was turning four today, and she had been to church with her many times, but that her daughter could remember the things said there, she hadn't expected.

"Lazarus!" she said, finding the word she was looking for. "Jesus brought back Lazarus from the dead, mom! So maybe he could bring daddy back."

Karen took a deep breath. Jessi's words stirred something in her. She had been a Christian her whole life, said her prayers and read the bible when the fancy struck her. She was, however, a math and biology teacher and had seen too much science in her education to believe in the bible word for word. She wanted

to believe that a benevolent God could return George to her, but also knew in her heart that no such thing was possible.

“Honey, remember I said that daddy’s with God now?” She put her arm around Jessi, pulling her close. The girl moved willingly enough into her arms.

“Uh huh.”

“Well, if you’re with God, you’re happier than you’ve ever been on Earth. So...so asking for God to bring daddy back to life would actually be...” her voice trailed off, as she tried to find the words, “...it wouldn’t be nice, Jessi. God knows that. It would be mean of him to send him back to Earth. Daddy will be there one day when we die; he’ll be waiting for us in heaven. I’m sure of that. But we can’t ask God to send him back. It won’t happen. He won’t let it.”

She ran her hands up and down Jessi’s back, and felt the child begin to shake, as the tears she had held back last night washed out of her. Karen began to cry too, and she held her daughter close under the covers while the sun slowly rose outside.

Jessi didn’t look like she felt like opening presents when she finally came down to breakfast, but Karen insisted. “Daddy bought this for you, remember? He wanted it to be your best birthday present ever. I think you should open it.”

Karen’s father and mother sat on the other side of the breakfast table, both with their coffee, egg and piece of toast on the plate in exactly the same angle. If they had worn matching clothes, they could almost be a reflection of each other. Even their facial expressions were the same. One of the only things that could produce a smile on her parent’s faces was their grandchild, although even that was a rarity. The fact that Karen’s mother took care of Jessi every day while she was at school was something she was grateful for,

but she also knew it was something her mother had only chosen to do so her daughter wouldn't have to pay for daycare and embarrass her to her bridge club. It was unusual enough that both she and George had work at the same time – but no one should say that Evelyn Manner's granddaughter was being looked after by a stranger.

Jessi crouched down in front of the wrapped box. She ran her hands over it again, the way she had done the first night. She had stopped crying, but her eyes still had a wet, un-focused look. She waited so long to begin unwrapping that Karen's father got impatient.

"Come on, sweetheart. Open the box. Some of us have work to do today."

Karen looked at him in surprise. "You're not going with me to see the Sheriff?"

He shook his head. "No, I've got to go in. I've got reports to finish. Your mother can go with you. Shouldn't be that difficult." He looked into his newspaper.

Jessi apparently decided she had waited long enough and tore the paper off the box. The box had a picture of a bike on it, but it didn't register with Jessi. She had seen boxes containing other things than the pictures on them showed many times.

Karen got to her feet and helped her pull the box open. When the red bike emerged, Jessi seemed to lose her breath. Karen felt warm again for the first time since the phone call, when she heard the excited gasp that came from Jessi's lips.

"Mom, look, it's a *bike!*"

Jessi took hold of the handlebars, pulling the bike forward and out of the box. It rolled forward on its bright white tires, giving off an intoxicating smell of rubber.

Karen's mother's mouth seemed to close up like a string purse.

“He bought her a bicycle? Whatever for?”

Karen turned her head towards her mother, feeling a tip of anger peak above the ocean of grief she had been swimming in the last eighteen hours.

“Jessi loves to ride a bike, mother. She was so good at using her tricycle, but she’s outgrown it. George got a fantastic...” *deal*, she almost finished, but then realized that was wrong. It hadn’t been a deal, it had been a business arrangement. George would no longer be able to drive to Chicago and get Tom Gilham’s merchandise. He might even come looking for the rest of the money.

Jessi, in the meantime, had gotten the bike free of the box and wrapping paper, and mounted the bike in the dining room. Karen’s father’s eyes widened as she balanced on the pedals, and then put her butt on the saddle. Her face, for the moment, held a joy so big that it almost broke Karen’s heart.

It was the perfect gift, George, she thought. If only you had been here to see it.

“Jessica! You can’t be on the bike inside, you’ll wreck the carpet! We’ll need to take it outside. And you’ll finish your milk first.” Karen’s mother’s voice cut through the air like a silver knife, and Jessi stopped smiling right away. She quickly got off the bike, and went back to the table to empty her glass. Karen put her arms around the girl, lifting her up on her lap.

“Happy birthday, my darling. I hope you like it.”

“I love it, mom.” Jessi’s voice was lower than before, but she smiled at her mother. “I just wish daddy could have taught me how to ride it.”

Karen’s father got to his feet and folded his paper. He brushed the crumbs from his toast off his pants, and put his hand on Karen’s shoulder.

“Now, I’ll be home tonight. You’ll get this thing with the Sheriff taken care of discreetly, I trust? We don’t want a lot of town gossip.”

"I...yes, dad." Karen felt like her father's words made little burning imprints inside her. He didn't care about George being gone, only about what other people might say. He didn't care that her husband, the love of her life and the father of his grandchild, was never going to play with Jessi again. He cared about discretion, so no one would gossip.

"Now, you be strong, Karen." Her father's hand patted her on the back in something that resembled affection. "I'm sure it looks bad now, but things will be fine again. For starters, you'll save a lot of money when you move back in with us."

"What?" Karen blinked.

"Well, I thought that's the most reasonable thing to do, don't you? You can't live out there in that...that shack...anymore. You need to come back to town, to cut costs so you can provide for Jessica. The best way to do that is to move in here with us."

Karen, who could think of few things she felt less like than move back into her old room, just nodded. She knew from experience that if she disagreed with her father and spoke up about it, the following discussion would be long and ugly. She didn't feel like having one now.

Her father gave her one last pat on the back, sent her mother a nod and went out of the room. A moment later, they saw him walking past the window. He always walked to the office, claiming it gave him a moment of quiet in the morning to gather his thoughts.

Karen's mother began collecting the plates.

"Why don't you and Jessica take that thing outside, Karen?" she asked. "Give her a chance to ride it a bit before we leave."

Karen got to her feet and pulled her robe together. She hadn't gotten dressed for breakfast.

"Come on, Jessi. Let's go get changed."

5.

Jessi had a little difficulty keeping her balance on the bike at first, and Karen had to hold on to the back of the bike to keep it from falling over. She drove slowly back and forth in the driveway of her grandparents' house, pushing the pedals down with determination with Karen running after her. Jessi's face was mostly happy, but sometimes a dark shadow would seem to fly over it. Karen understood, but tried to encourage her by telling her how well she was doing. The red bike slowly became steadier as Jessi learned to control it. Jessi's sweaty hair stuck to her head, even in the cold air, and her cheeks were red. They spent more than two hours going back and forth in the driveway, until Jessi insisted she wanted to try going out on the street.

Karen looked up and down the street, while rubbing her face with her gloved hand. Her parents lived on a closed street with a slight incline, which would make the bike go faster going down. She had ridden her bike on that street herself many times when she was a girl, but right now – with George's accident less than a day away – she felt reluctant to let Jessi try her luck.

"I don't think so, Jessi. I think it's better if we go inside now. We have...well; I have to...go into the Sheriff's office with grandma. And we have to go to..." *the morgue*, she thought, but said out loud: "...to go get that blanket we talked about yesterday. Remember?"

Jessi put her feet down and turned her face toward Karen.

"Can we go give it to daddy, then?"

"We can give it to the man who's going to put daddy in the coffin when he's buried. He'll make sure it's put over him, I'm sure."

"Okay." Jessi got off the bike, put the kickstand down and pushed the bike up against the hedge at the edge of the driveway. She looked very small in her winter jacket.

“Does grandma have to come?” she asked as she put her hand in Karen’s.

“Yes, she’s going to drive the car, and help me talk to the Sheriff.”

“What about me?” Jessi looked at her mother with a serious expression.

“You’re going to stay in the reception. We’ll bring some books for you to look at. It won’t take long, I hope.”

As they approached the house, Karen’s mother emerged. She was wearing her long brown coat and fur hat, looking for all the world as if she was going shopping in the mid-town stores instead of helping to arrange burial for her son-in-law. She unlocked the car and got behind the wheel, waving them over.

“Just a minute, mother. I have to get some books for Jessi, so she’ll have something to do while we-”

Her mother made an exasperated gesture with her hands and cut her off. She lit a cigarette and put one hand on the wheel. It was as if she couldn’t wait to get going.

Karen gestured to Jessi to get in the car, while she quickly went inside to find a few of Jessi’s picture books. She grabbed her own purse and went out the door to the car again. It struck her how, when she was looking at the way her mother and father handled the situation, her grief became a little more bearable. It seemed like being angry at them helped a little bit.

Getting into the car, she could smell her mother’s cigarette smoke filling the cabin. Jessi sat on the back seat, the joy from her biking now almost gone from her face. Karen handed her the stack of books, and she took them, spreading them over the seat.

“Now, don’t make a mess back there!” Karen’s mother said. She started the engine and backed the car out of the driveway, barely missing the bike standing by the hedge.

“You ought to find a better place for that thing when we come home, Jessica,” Karen’s mother said. Jessi nodded but didn’t speak.

Driving into the center of town in the grey November light, Karen looked out the window at the well-known streets and houses. She had grown up in the town and knew every street, every nook and cranny. Today, though, it felt like a foreign land with unknown geography and strange people. The naked trees stretching their branches out like little arms against the grey winter sky had always made her somewhat joyful knowing that Christmas and the end of the year was near. Now, when she looked up through the branches, they seemed to give her the impression of looking out through prison bars.

I miss you, George, she thought, and felt the tears in her eyes. You've only been gone a day and I miss you terribly. How will I feel in a week, or a month? Jessi deserves better, and so do I. I wish you were here.

Karen's mother parked in the town square, right outside the Sheriff's office. She put out her cigarette and looked at Karen. Her makeup was applied carefully, making her look both younger and gentler than she really was.

"All right. We'll go in and get this over with. I know it's hard, but it has to be done. Like taking bitter medicine."

"There's something Jessi and I need to do first, mother. We won't be long. We need to go to the linen store."

Her mother's eyes widened. "Whatever for? We have all the sheets we need at home."

"It's for George. I promised Jessi to buy a blanket for him, so he won't be cold."

Karen's mother scuffed. "Cold? What kind of-?" she began, but Karen's eyes shot sparks at her. She closed her mouth, unused to the kind of fierce energy coming from her daughter.

Karen reached a hand back and took Jessi's hand, giving it a quick squeeze. "Let's go, honey."

Karen opened the side door and got out, followed by her mother. She adjusted her coat and skirt, before opening the door and letting Jessi out. She took Jessi's hand and crossed the square to the store on the corner where Mr. White sold sheets, linen, pillows and blankets. Karen's mother walked behind them.

The store was warm and smelled like fresh laundry. Jessi took a deep breath, enjoying the smell a moment. Mr. White was sitting on a chair behind the register, reading the paper and looked up when they entered. He was a slender, good looking man in his fifties and had friendly eyes under his dark hair.

"Mrs. Thorpe, Mrs. Manner – welcome." He rubbed his hands together, making a sound that for some reason made Karen think of a snake moving over a rock. She shivered a little, even though she usually liked Mr. White very much.

"Good day to you, Mr. White. We'd like to find a nice, warm blanket." Karen let go of Jessi's hand and looked down at her. "Now, you should find one you like."

"The blankets are on this side." Mr. White gestured to the right side of the store. "How large a blanket would you like?"

"It's for my daddy." Jessi's voice was quiet. "He's tall."

Mr. White blinked twice. *He's heard*, Karen thought. *He knows about George.*

"For your dad?" Mr. White said. "I see. Well, then if I was you, I'd look at one of these ones..."

He took a few steps out from behind the register, gesturing to a display of blankets hanging on the kind of racks Karen associated with drying towels on.

Jessi walked down the line, touching them one by one. The second to last seemed to be her favorite, and she looked back at Karen.

"This one. It's soft."

Karen reached out and touched it too. It felt like wool, and was a wonderful blue color.

“That’s a very good choice, Jessi. Daddy’s favorite color was blue.”

Mr. White took the blanket off the rack, folded it and put it on the counter. His eyes kept going from the blanket to Karen to Jessi. Karen could tell he felt like asking why they needed a blanket for a dead man, but didn’t feel comfortable posing the question.

“Would you like it in a box?” he asked Karen. “Giftwra-” He stopped himself. “Or would you prefer a paper bag?”

“We’ll take the bag. We need it right away.” Karen got out her purse, looking through the bills. “How much is it?”

“Twelve dollars fifty.” Mr. White looked a little apologetically as he said it. “It’s wool.”

Karen found a ten, a two and two quarters in her purse and handed them over. Without them, the purse looked very empty.

“Thank you so much.” Mr. White rung up the sale on the register, and old-fashioned brass device that made a loud ringing sound. “And...Mrs. Thorpe, my condolences.”

Karen forced a smile. “Thank you.”

Grabbing the bag from the counter, she handed it to Jessi and quickly left the store. She felt a sudden need for fresh air, and the laundry smell seemed far too sweet for her.

She stopped a few steps outside the door, taking three deep breaths. Jessi followed her, with Karen’s mother bringing up the rear.

“Are you okay, mom?” Jessi asked. Both her hands held the bag with the blanket clutched against her stomach. It looked too big for her to carry, but she didn’t seem to mind.

"I'm fine, honey. I just needed some air."

"Well, now that we've wasted both money and time, should we do what we came here to do?" Karen's mother said. Her hands were resting on her hips in the stance that Karen always thought of as her mother's "slightly disapproving" stance.

"Yes. Yes we should." Karen took one more deep breath before crossing the square again and walking up the stone steps to the Sheriff's office in the low red brick building. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed people in the square looking at her. Rumors travelled fast in the town, she knew. Mr. White was just the proof of this. Most likely, the Sheriff's deputy would have spilled the beans in the *Drop Inn* tavern last night, and by now the story would be on everyone's lips. They would all know about poor widowed Mrs. Thorpe, whose husband had been hit straight on by a truck. Poor Mrs. Thorpe, who would soon be fired over the holidays to save the school a few dollars. Poor Mrs. Thorpe, who was now the widow Thorpe, and who would soon be unable to pay any of her bills, much less keep living in the house she had shared with her late husband.

She turned her head from side to side, looking for someone actually staring. She didn't see anyone. Either they had all turned their heads, or it had all been in her imagination.

She shivered and went through the door inside the office.

They found Sheriff Daniels behind a cluttered desk in the small office he shared with one of his two deputies. Truth be told, the town wasn't big enough to require three officers of the law, but old Deputy Paulson was only a few years away from retiring and was allowed to stay on as a combination of radio operator and receptionist. Karen let Jessi wait in the front office with Paulson, while she and her mother continued inside.

Sheriff Daniels was a big man, almost too big for his uniform, it seemed. When he got up from behind the desk to shake their hands, his body looked like a mudslide moving forward. His large hand almost

swallowed hers when he shook it. He gestured for Karen and her mother to sit in the chairs in front of the desk, and sat down, his chair giving a loud creak as he settled.

“I’m so glad you could come by, Mrs. Thorpe. I realize that something like this is very shocking for you to hear, and over the phone, no less. I would have come in myself, but I was out by the accident site when I called you, and I wasn’t due to come back to town that day.”

“It’s quite all right.” Karen was surprised at how calm her voice sounded. “I’d like to see my husband, please. Is that possible?”

The Sheriff cleared his throat, and ran a hand over his face as if to wipe away sweat, even though the office was cool.

“That...well, of course it’s possible, Mrs. Thorpe. In fact, as I told you, normally it would be procedure for someone to identify him. In this case, however...not only do we all know George at a glance, but he doesn’t look very...”

“I don’t care.” Karen looked the Sheriff in the eyes. “I would like to see him. We have brought him a blanket.”

“A...blanket?”

“Yes. My daughter would like to make sure he’s not cold. I’m sure you understand her concern, Sheriff. Or at least you would, if you had children.”

The Sheriff, who she knew had never married, opened his mouth to speak, but thought better of it.

“Before we do, however, I would like to know a little more about the accident. For my own peace of mind.”

“Of course.” The Sheriff reached into the clutter on his desk and produced a folder, opening it to look at a few papers. “I don’t have any photos yet – I should get them tomorrow, if you’re really interested, but again, I wouldn’t recommend it. I’ve got testimonies and statements.”

“You said on the phone Roger Dalton hit him?”

“That’s right. As far as I’ve been able to get out of him, Roger had been drinking the night before in the *Drop Inn*. He had so much to drink that Mark refused to let him drive home. Took his keys, as a matter of fact, and let him sleep it out on the floor of the bar. Roger slept like a baby, and when Mark got up in the morning he claimed he was sober enough to drive home. Mark said to me that he wasn’t sober as such, but that he’d like Roger out of the bar. You know that smell he has? Mark said it made the whole bar stink after he slept there.”

“So he let him drive anyway?”

“Yes, he did. Gave him his keys back. That was at eleven o’clock. I’m assuming that Roger stopped somewhere and got a bottle, but I haven’t found out where.”

“Perhaps he kept one in the car,” Karen’s mother said. “I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Perhaps he did. When we measured his alcohol level in his blood when we took him in, it was high enough that he must have had at least two drinks, maybe more. He was driving home in the truck, and said that he was looking in the glove compartment for some nuts he kept there. He must have been all the way on his stomach, driving with one hand on the wheel. We – that’s Deputy Rosenberg and I – think he must have pushed down the accelerator as well when he laid down. He was going fast when he...” he paused, “...when he struck George. We think George tried to get out of the way, but didn’t have time. It happened right at one of the hills, and he probably didn’t see the truck until it was too close for him to get out of the way.”

“What about Roger?” Karen asked. “What happened to him?”

“Nothing. Well, a bloody nose when he knocked his face into the dashboard, that’s all. He’s in the cell right now, waiting for a lawyer to get here.”

“What about the town lawyer?” Karen’s mother spoke up.

“You mean Charles Redford?” The Sheriff nodded out the window as if to indicate the direction. “He’s refused to defend him. He knew George, you see.”

Even through the cold and dread inside her, Karen smiled. She remembered George fixing Charles Redford’s car last summer, on one of the hot summer days that seem to never end. Redford had come out to their house, he had brought ice tea that they had drunk while George was on his back under the car. George didn’t have a car himself, but he loved tinkering with them.

“Is he going to be charged with murder?” Karen’s mother said.

“I doubt it. Vehicular manslaughter, most likely. Not to mention driving under the influence.”

“I see.” Karen’s mother leaned back in her chair and looked for her cigarettes in her purse. It was clear she had expected something harsher. “I don’t suppose Mr. Dalton had any kind of insurance? Something that can pay Karen any kind of...” she searched for the proper word, “...reparation?”

“I’m afraid not. Roger doesn’t have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. His farm’s been sold off bit by bit, so he’s just living in the old farmhouse. He doesn’t have money to repair at and no one wants to buy it. He’s broken down over this, though. Cried all night.”

Karen felt tears sting her eyes. She realized that the accident had most likely destroyed not only her and Jessi’s lives, but also Roger Dalton’s.

“Can we fill out the paperwork you need, Sheriff? I’d like to get this over and done with.”

The Sheriff pulled a pen from his chest pocket, and looked through the file for several forms. "Of course, Mrs. Thorpe."

"Good. And then, I'd like to see my husband."

The Sheriff led her down the stairway to the basement under the office. Down here, a small refrigerated room acted as a morgue. The town had never had enough dead people at one time to justify anything bigger, and it was convenient for the undertaker, since his store had the back door literally twenty steps from the Sheriff's office back door. One need only roll the body out the back door, up a ramp and across a courtyard surrounded by a tall wall to reach the undertaker's back door.

The Sheriff turned the lights on, and moved to the metal door. The lock was a metal arm in the middle of it, and the door looked a little like an old-fashioned safe deposit box.

The Sheriff put his hand on the metal arm but hesitated. "Mrs. Thorpe... You're aware he's...well, he doesn't look like himself. Fair warning."

"I'm prepared Sheriff." Karen held the blanket in one hand, as she stood behind the Sheriff. Karen's mother had remained in the office upstairs with Jessi.

"All right, then." The Sheriff turned the metal arm, making the door give a clunking sound. He pulled on it, putting his considerable weight into it, and the door slid open. A breath of cold air hit Karen's face.

"Let me roll him out here for you." The Sheriff reached inside and took hold of a metal gurney inside. It rolled soundlessly out and he stopped it. "I'm sorry he hasn't been cleaned up yet – the undertaker's coming over tonight to take care of him."

The body was covered with a white sheet, but she would have recognized George even if it had stayed on. He was one of the tallest men in the town, and she knew the shape of his body under covers so well.

The Sheriff took hold of the sheet over the body's face and lifted it down to chest level. Karen bit her lip, but didn't say anything for a moment.

George's face had some nasty bruises on it, but all in all it wasn't nearly as horrible as she had imagined. The shape of the head, though, was completely changed. It looked like the impact had made the back of his head shatter and flatten. The expression on his face was almost peaceful, and if you only looked at that, it would be easy to think he was just asleep, if you didn't know him as well as she did. When George slept, he usually smiled in his sleep. His hair was still dark with cakes of dried blood, and a few spots of it were on his neck as well. Under the sheet, he was still wearing the overalls and heavy shirt he had left home in.

"Do you think I could have a moment alone with him?" Karen asked. The Sheriff looked at her a moment.

"What are you gonna do, Mrs. Thorpe?"

"I just want to say a proper goodbye, and I'd like you not to look at me while I do it. I also want to give him this blanket my daughter insisted on him wearing. I'd like you to tell the undertaker to...to wrap him in it when he's put in the coffin. Is that possible?"

"Of course it is. Very well, I'll give you a minute, and then I'll come back down to roll him inside again."

The Sheriff walked back up the steps, something that obviously took some effort on his part.

Karen stood a moment by George's head, before reaching her hand out and stroking his cheek.

"Hello George..." she began, but then changed her mind. "Hello darling. It's me." She took her handkerchief out, shook it and began wiping a few of the spots of blood off of George's face. "I just wanted to tell you...how much Jessi loved the bike. She's been riding it all morning, and...she'll be really good. She can almost keep balance already. She loves it so much." She hesitated. "She loves *you* so much, George. So do I. I'll always love you. I promise to take care of her the way you would have done."

She bent forward, kissing George's lips. They felt cold and hard against hers.

“You’ll always be with me. I promise that. Always, George. Always. Do you remember when you once said we’d grow old and sit on the square watching people go by? I promise I’ll still do that. I’ll go to Mexico the way we talked about, and Paris. I’ll make sure Jessi does her homework and...and that she never forgets you.”

She shook the blanket out, placing it over George’s body. The blue color seemed to warm up the room when it was spread over the body.

“This is Jessi’s idea. She was afraid you’d be cold. I love you, darling. Love you always.”

She tucked the blanket around his body, arranging it to look comfortable. She considered kissing him again, but instead kissed her fingers and pressed them against the cold lips.

She heard the Sheriff’s heavy footsteps coming down the steps again, and straightened up.

“Rest well, George,” she whispered. “Sleep well under your blue blanket and know we’re remembering you.”

When the Sheriff entered the room she looked at him, wiping her eyes with her hand. Her handkerchief was back in her pocket.

“Thank you, Sheriff. I’m ready to leave now.”

6.

When she emerged into the air again, Jessi took her hand. Karen sat down on one knee and looked her in the eyes.

“Did you give him the blanket?”

“I did, and I wrapped it around him real nice. The Sheriff promised to make sure the man who will put daddy in the coffin knows to put it with him.”

Jessi looked at her, eyes serious.

“Thank you, mom.”

“Nothing to thank me for, honey.”

“Well”, Karen’s mother said as she emerged from the office, “I would say we’ve used enough of our time here. Let’s go home. I could use a good cup of coffee.”

Karen stood back up and looked at her mother. “Mother, I’ve just done the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. Don’t you think you could show just a little compassion?”

“Compassion? What are you talking about? I’m full of compassion. If you’ve had a bad experience, the best thing to help is a nice cup of coffee.”

Karen didn’t feel like fighting with her mother, and put her arm around Jessi. “All right, let’s go back to the house.”

She couldn’t bring herself to call her parent’s house “home”. Not yet. Maybe never. Home would always be George’s house, but in the question of moving, she supposed her parents were right. She couldn’t stay out there with Jessi by herself.

Karen's mother opened the car door and got in, and while Karen helped Jessi into the back seat she could hear her mother light another cigarette. When she herself got in the front seat, her mother looked at her.

"I didn't mean to be insensitive, you know."

"I know, mother. It's just...right now, it's hard for me to think straight. Let's just go back."

Her mother started the engine. The car was cold, and Karen pulled her hands inside her sleeves. The car backed up, and began pulling out of the square. They drove for a while in silence before Karen's mother spoke up.

"Your father thinks you should move back into your old room. I'm not so sure it's such a good idea, myself."

"Oh?" Karen couldn't hide her surprise. It was very unusual for her mother to disagree with her father on anything. At least in public.

"Yes. I think you should let Jessica live in your old room. We can convert one of the rooms downstairs for you. Maybe the old guest room. Your room is better suited to a child."

Karen exhaled. For a moment she had thought her mother had been on her side, but of course it wasn't so.

"Mother, I am very, very grateful for living with you and dad right now. I'm grateful for all that you do, and for you helping with Jessi. But...as soon as it's possible, Jessi and I will find our own place to live."

"Nonsense. You're a widow with a child, there's no way you can live on your own. It wouldn't be proper."

"Proper?" Karen turned her head and looked at her mother; doing everything she could not to raise her voice. "I've lived with George for five years. I'm a grown woman, and I don't want to live in your house any longer than I have to. I've already moved out once."

“Karen...” her mother said, her voice getting the tone in it that Karen hated. The tone that said she was speaking to an ignorant child. “You can’t live by yourself. You need someone to provide for you and Jessi. God knows George didn’t provide *much* but at least he put bread on the table.”

“My salary as a teacher was often better than his, mother! The months where he couldn’t find work, it definitely was. We were *both* providers, and I am going to provide just fine for Jessi if I can find a place to live.”

“Is that so?” Karen’s mother turned her head a little, still watching the road. “Janice from my bridge club is married to the head of the school board. I’ve been told that you’ll be fired over the holidays. You’ll lose two weeks of pay, or more.”

“That’s true. The teachers with less than seven years of employment will be fired and rehired at each break in the future.”

“And you have four years of employment, if I remember correctly?”

“That’s right.”

“So the next three years you will spend July and August, as well as December and January, with no salary. What are you going to do then? Ask your landlord to forego rent? The electric company to keep the power on for a kiss and a song? *You can’t live on your own!*”

“I can and I will. I’ll find another job if that is what it takes.”

“Think about what’s best for Jessica, Karen. Jessica needs a solid home, with regular routines. Especially now. Not to mention, she needs a father figure.”

Karen thought back to the endless years she had spent in her parent’s house when she was old enough to understand the cold distance that seemed to be the prevailing rule in the household. Her parents had never kissed her, never said they loved her or been the people she could talk to about her thoughts and feelings.

Instead, she had early on learned to be quiet and not ask too many questions, less her father swung his hand in punishment. She would sometimes wonder if Jessi felt any of it – she was sure her father had never struck Jessi, but if they lived together, it might only be a matter of time before he decided to discipline her.

Indeed, one of the things she had loved about George was his abundant affection and love for both her and for Jessi when she was born. He always seemed to want to touch her, kiss her, stroke her hair and let her know that he was there for her. It had been so incredibly different from her parents.

“I don’t think dad’s the kind of father figure I want for Jessi, mother.”

“Oh, fiddlesticks! Are you going to go out and find a new man instead? Good Lord, Karen, what would people *think* if a widow went with a new man?”

“I’m not saying that at all! And to be honest, I don’t care *what* people think! I just want what’s best for me and Jessi!”

They were on their own street now, but her mother didn’t slow down. The conversation seemed to make her angrier than Karen had seen for a while. Karen could feel the same anger inside herself, her earlier thought that she wanted to avoid fighting completely gone.

“And frankly, mother, I think living with you and dad would be absolutely terrible for the both of us. There’s absolutely no love in your house. I want Jessi to grow up with lots of love, and not like I did.”

Her mother looked straight at her, at the same moment as she began turning the wheel to the right to enter their own driveway. Her speed was far faster than she usually went, and the car skirted the edge of the hedge.

“You watch your tone, young lady! Or-”

“LOOK OUT!” Jessi screamed from the back seat. Karen’s mother’s head whipped around just in time to catch a glimpse of something bright red before it hit the front of the car. A splintering crunch sounded as it

vanished under the wheels, and the car rocked a little as it passed over it. Karen felt her stomach drop out when she realized what it was.

"MY BIKE!" Jessi whimpered. She groped for the door latch to get out. Karen's mother sat with her foot on the brake, her face frozen in an expression that Karen had only seen a few times before on her mother's features: Complete terror.

Karen unbuckled her own seat belt and climbed out to make sure Jessi didn't fall to the ground. She caught her daughter just as Jessi jumped from the car seat to the ground, and together they turned to look at the bike under the back wheels. It was impossible to see much for the car, but the wheel sticking out didn't offer much hope. Most of the spokes were broken.

"Mother, move the car forward a little. We need to get it out."

Her mother obeyed and the car moved a few feet forward, slowly edging to its normal parking spot. Karen knelt down and inspected the bike.

The frame was bent on the middle, and in two places the metal looked broken through. The front wheel hadn't been damaged but the back one was bent out of shape, with the metal spokes broken and bent. The worst was the handlebar, which now bent the wrong way on one side. Her parent's car was a heavy car, and it showed.

Jessi began crying in long, deep sobs. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and her hands opened and clenched into fists repeatedly. She slowly sank down to her knees, reaching one hand out to touch the broken frame.

All the grief Jessi had not shown yesterday now seemed to pour out of her. In seeing the broken bike – her father's last present – it seemed to Karen she finally understood that he was gone, and never coming back. Karen took her in her arms and tried to lift her up, but Jessi screamed as in pain. She kicked and writhed in Karen's arms, trying to keep her hold on the bike.

Behind them, Karen's mother got out of the car and closed the door. Her face was grey as ashes, and she moved slowly toward her daughter and granddaughter.

"I...I didn't see it." She whispered. "We were coming in so fast..."

"Not now, mother." Karen's voice was thick, and she clenched her teeth. "Go inside. Please."

"I didn't mean...it wasn't..."

"I know. Go inside. *Please.*"

Karen's mother stood for a moment, swaying from foot to foot. Then, she seemed to make up her mind and went inside the house, closing the door behind her.

Karen rocked Jessi back and forth in her arms, sitting on the cold ground. She could feel the cold creeping through her stockings and into her legs, but didn't care. She stroked Jessi's hair over and over again.

The afternoon seemed to darken around them. Karen wondered if it was just in her mind.

Part three: Jessica

7.

The funeral was on the next Saturday, and most of the townspeople turned up to it. Jessica was wearing her nicest black dress, a white hairband and a coat her grandparents had bought for the occasion. Her grandfather had claimed that her old one wasn't 'proper enough', and although she wasn't sure what that meant, she liked the new coat. It was dark blue – almost black, but not quite, had blue buttons and was very warm.

The church service had been hard to get through. Reverend Martin, who was a very kind man, performed it. She knew him from Sunday school and from the times she had gone with her parents to church. He spoke loud and had a very pleasant voice, and almost everything he said that day seemed to be about her daddy. How nice and kind and friendly he had been, how he was with Jesus and the Lord now. He spoke about how it was natural to grieve because he wasn't with us every day, but that we should be happy since he was now somewhere better. Jessica didn't understand all of it.

She had tears in her eyes many times during the service, but tried to catch them all in the handkerchief her mother had given her. Her mother tried as well, but Jessica could feel the shakes in her mother's body whenever she sobbed into her own handkerchief.

She thought her mother looked very beautiful, and thought that if her father saw her from Heaven – Reverend Martin had said that those in Heaven could always see everything that happened here on Earth – he would want to come back and kiss her. He'd do it like he used to do when he came through the front door and lift her mother up in his arms, kissing her right on the mouth. When he had put her down, he would bend down and lift Jessica up as well in a bear hug. She would smell his special smell of sweat and cigarettes and fresh air, and everything would be good.

But that's not going to happen, Jessi! She thought to herself. *'cause he's dead and in that coffin right up there, and mom said that when you're dead, you're not going to come back. Not even to fix my bike.*

She had had the thought about the bike when she was tucked into bed at night. The remains of the red bike were still outside, lying on the front lawn. She could see it if she climbed up in the windowsill and looked out the window. Her grandfather had looked briefly at it when he came home, but had not said anything about it. Later at night, after she had been tucked in bed, she could hear them talking about it in the living room.

Lying in bed, she had thought about her daddy. He could fix *everything*, he had once told her. She had heard other people say the same, and even Reverend Martin had said so in church today. He had the gift of looking at something and knowing exactly what needed to be done for it to be fixed. If he had been alive, he could have fixed the bike, she was sure of it. What hurt most of all was, that the present he had gotten her would *never* be fixed again. She had spoken a prayer into the dark, whispering to herself:

“Dear God, this is Jessica. Would you please send my daddy back for just a little while? Just so he could fix my bike and give me a kiss? Please? Amen.”

There was no reply, which was always the case when she prayed. She had turned over in her bed and cried into her pillow, missing her daddy more than ever.

When the service was over, they all stood up and left the church. The coffin was left behind, and two men were going to take it to the cemetery. Jessica walked with her mother's hand in hers as they exited the church. Outside, the sun had come out and cast bright winter light over the church and the grounds. She blinked a few times to clear her vision.

Her mother shook hands with a lot of people. Several women gave her hugs or the kind of air-kisses that grown-ups seemed to like. Jessica stood next to her, looking at the church steeple, when a voice spoke next to her.

“Hello there. You must be Jessica.”

She turned her head in surprise – no one had greeted her by name all day – and saw a man with white hair kneeling down next to her so his face was at the height of her eyes.

“Uh huh.” She nodded, and looked at the man with curious eyes. She seemed to know him, and when he spoke again, she remembered him.

“My name’s Tom Gilham. I own the toy store in town, and I knew your daddy.”

She smiled a little smile, remembering when she had been in the toy store in the summer. It had seemed a safe, almost magical place and Mr. Gilham had been very kind. She remembered him offering her a piece of red liquorice.

He smiled and took her hand, shaking it like she was a grown-up. “I’m very sorry about your daddy. How are you enjoying your bike?”

His words almost hurt, even though she knew he meant well. Her eyes, which had dried out in the fresh air, now filled with tears again.

“I don’t have it anymore. It broke. My grandma ran over it with her car and it got all bent up.”

Mr. Gilham’s eyes widened.

“That’s not so, is it? Was it an accident?”

“I dunno.”

“Well, I’m sure it was. I’m sorry for that, too, then. It was a very nice bike. Did you ride it?”

“Just once, on the morning I got it.” Jessica felt a little proud as she added: “I could almost ride it myself.”

“Could you really? Impressive. That’s a big bike for a girl like you to ride by herself. Well, perhaps the bike can be repaired.”

She shook her head.

“Huh.” Mr. Gilham rubbed his hand over his chin. “Well, it was very nice to meet you, Jessica.”

“Nice meeting you too”, she said, the way she had been taught to respond.

Mr. Gilham stood up slowly, and took her mother’s hand.

“Mrs. Thorpe, I’m very sorry for your loss. I was wondering...do you have time to drop by my store one of the next few days? I’d like to have a few words with you, at your convenience.”

Jessica lost interest in the conversation when it went up above her head. She looked at the crowd of people still coming out from the church. It really did seem like everyone had been here. She recognized several of them, and when Mr. and Mrs. Hodgkins came out of the church with their son Carl, she cheered up a little. Carl lived on the same street as her grandparents, and they sometimes played together in the front yard of the Hodgkins’s house. When they walked over, she let go of her mother’s hand and she and Carl took a step to the side, so the grown-ups could talk.

Carl offered her a piece of gum, which she took. They didn’t talk much, but it felt good to be with a friend on a day like this. Jessica could see her mother speaking briefly with Mr. Hodgkins, before he moved to talk to her grandfather. They both lit a cigar. Jessica wrinkled her nose, even though she was standing several feet away. She hated the smell of cigars.

“Do you want to come over tomorrow?” Carl asked. He was blonde and had a nice, open face. He was also one of the only boys she knew who had no reservations about playing with girls. “My mom’s made cookies for Christmas and she said we can have some.”

“I guess. Depends on what happens with my mom and grandma and grandpa. They argue now.”

Carl chewed his own gum. "Why?"

"I dunno. I think 'cause mom doesn't want us to live with them. But she also says we can't move back home."

"You could live with me. I could ask my mom."

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

Carl shrugged. To him, it wasn't a big deal.

"So I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Maybe."

Carl's mother came over, stroked her hair in a quick gesture and took hold of Carl's hand before walking off. Carl waved, and she waved back.

The crowds from the church lasted a while, since everyone had to shake her mother's hand. When the crowd finally thinned out, her grandparents, her mother and she walked quietly to the gravesite.

She had overheard one of the talks her mother had with her grandparents in the last week. Her mother had said couldn't afford to pay for a gravesite, and that she was going to have her daddy cremated – which she knew meant burned - instead, keeping the ashes until they could afford to get it buried. Her grandparents had protested vigorously, and in the end her grandfather had said he would pay for it. She was in some sense glad it had gone that way – if her daddy had been burned, the lovely blanket wouldn't have gone with him.

Now, she stood on the slightly brown grass in the cemetery while the two men slowly lifted the coffin into the hole dug in the ground. It was a big coffin, but they seemed to be used to the work.

Jessica held her mother's hand all through the lowering, but when the coffin was in the ground, and Reverend Martin poured the dirt on top of it, she let go. She had been allowed to buy a single flower from the florist, and she had kept it next to her all through the service. Now, she went forward to the edge of the grave and let the flower – a blue flower her mom had said was called an 'African lily' – fall into the hole. It hit the top of the coffin and stayed there, a blue spark amongst the brown dirt.

"Goodbye, daddy" she whispered.

Her mother followed her and also dropped a flower – this one a regular lily – after hers. She had told Jessica that when she and daddy had been married, she had lilies in her bouquet, and it seemed right to give him one today. The two flowers lay next to each other, their stems almost crossed. Her mother didn't speak, but put her arm around Jessica's shoulder.

"Do you think daddy would have liked the flowers?" Jessica asked.

"I think he would have. Come on, honey. I think it's time we left."

When they walked away, Jessica looked over her shoulder one last time. The two men had picked up shovels and began filling the grave in.

Part four: Karen

8.

Karen had been given a two week leave of absence from school, which - ironically - meant that she would get paid until the school vacation began, but not during it. She had spent some time looking for a place to live, but it seemed to be too much for her mind to cope with. Whenever she looked at the newspaper's listing for rooms for rent, the letters swam out in front of her eyes. She had the same problem when she a few times had tried reading a book, and judged it to be a delayed stress reaction. Most of the days she played with Jessi, or just sat in the green chair in the living room, looking into her parent's back yard. Snow had come, and every time she looked out she would think about George as he had been last winter, big coat and scarf frozen with little bits of ice, woolen cap on his head, his eyes sparkling as he shoveled snow along the side of the street. His shoulders moving, his arms swinging in precise motions.

On the tenth of December, she finally got enough energy to leave the house and go to the center of town. She hadn't forgotten Tom Gilham's request, so she made it her first stop.

Walking there along the frozen streets made her feel a little more alive, and a bit more like her old self. Her breath stood out in a cloud around her head, her nose got red and cold and she had to squint against the reflected glare from the snow.

The town square was busy with Christmas shoppers, most of whom greeted her when she walked past them. She had achieved the kind of short-lived notoriety that in small towns always accompany losing a loved one. People had brought her food of all kinds – stews, cakes and pies – and her mother had taken them kindly, calling it a 'supplement to the rent'. She hadn't paid any rent yet, but she would, the moment she got her next paycheck from the school. She didn't like owing her parents anything.

When she opened the door to Gilham's Toy Store, Tom Gilham was behind the counter, ringing up a Daisy air rifle and a Davy Crockett coonskin cap to a man in a black suit. She recognized him as the owner of the

Aladdin movie theatre. Gilham lifted his eyebrows in greeting to her, without taking his eyes off his customer. The rifle was wrapped in brown paper, and the cap in a more festive Christmas green. Gilham put both in a paper bag and handed them to the man.

“That’s for you, and a merry Christmas to you and your boy. Remember, that rifle’s a wonderful toy, but he might need a little training. We also sell extra pellets for it, and he might need some.”

The man put his hat on, lifted the bag and walked out after tipping the hat a little to her.

Gilham got out from behind the counter, looked around the empty store, and walked to the door. In his hand he held a sign saying *“I’ll be right back.”* He put the sign on the door, turned the key in the lock and exhaled deeply.

“Mrs. Thorpe...Let me begin with saying again how sorry I am for your loss.”

Karen made a half smile, the expression she for the last days had perfected. Her “condolence reception” face, that at the same time expressed thankfulness for being addressed, weariness and a sort of semi-hope, meant to show *‘I’ll be okay. It might take a while but I’ll be ok’*.

“Thank you, Mr. Gilham.”

“Tom. Please, call me Tom. I told your husband the same thing.”

“All right, Tom, then, and I suppose you should call me Karen. I understand that you had something to talk to me about? Is it the arrangement you made with George?”

“In a way, yes. But first, please come over here and sit down. I’ve got some tea if you’d like a cup.”

Karen smiled a bit wider.

“Tea would be lovely, but what about your store? What if costumers show up?”

Gilham flapped his hand at the door.

“They can wait. This is more important.”

Gilham led them to the back of the store where he opened a small door in the wood-paneled wall. It led to a small back room with two chairs, a little table, a sink and the smallest stove Karen had ever seen. It was lit by a single lamp on the table – the kind of reading lamps you often saw in a library, Karen thought. It had a green glass screen and a warm, downcast light.

“Please, sit down, Karen. Let me pour you a cup. It’s terribly cold outside, and everybody can use some hot tea on a day like this.” He reached for a cup by the sink, washed it off and poured tea in it from a thermos bottle.

“Milk or sugar?”

“No thanks.”

He handed her the cup and poured one for himself, adding milk and sat down across from her.

“Karen, I assume your husband told you about our conversation the day before...” he hesitated, “...before he passed away?”

“Yes, he did. He said you had asked him to take your truck up north to retrieve merchandise, and that you offered him a position in your store afterwards...as a clerk.”

“A clerk is such an ugly word, Karen. I offered him to work in my store and sell toys. Clerking is what they do at the butcher’s shop. Here, we sell fun and dreams, not food. But you are otherwise correct.”

“I’m sorry he couldn’t have lived to work for you. I’m sure you would have gotten along well with each other.”

“I’m sure we would have. I’d heard some good things about him. I’ve heard some other things, which disturb me a lot, though. I’ve heard about your salary cut, and if I’m to believe Frank Tennant of the realty company then your house has been offered him to sell.”

“That’s right. Jessi and I can’t live out there by ourselves. My parents want me to move back to town and...”

“...and I’m sure the house also has too many memories. I’d feel the same way, I’m sure, if I had ever...lost someone I cared about.” He closed his eyes for a moment, before speaking again: “Have you found some place to live in town? Other than your folks, I mean?”

“No, not yet. I’m assuming I’ll have to rent a room for us for a while.”

“Well, then I can get to the point I wanted to talk to you about. You see, up above the store is a few rooms, meant to be the apartment of the proprietor. I’ve always used them for storage, but...” he shrugged, “...I can’t really carry the boxes down the stairs anymore. They’re very nice rooms with a kitchen and bath.”

Karen’s eyes widened slightly. “Are...are you offering to rent me an apartment?”

“In a sense, yes, but nothing quite so simple. You see, the reason I hired your husband – other than the fact that I thought he could use a little help – is that I’m getting a little long in the tooth. It’s hard for me to keep up, hard to get the merchandise up and down from the shelves, and some mornings, well...” he grinned, “some mornings my back hurts so much I can barely walk here. I had thought about it, and it is time for me to get some help in the store. Now, if someone was to live up above the store, and work for me at the same time, I wouldn’t only fill up some empty rooms, but also perhaps get what they in the big city call an ‘on-site employee’.”

“You mean...you want *me* to work for you? In your store? Tom, I’m a teacher...”

“Indeed you are. A teacher with a four year employment under her belt in a school in a town with a few thousand inhabitants. I’ve heard kids talk about you, Karen – and you’re a very well-liked teacher. I can

understand if you would feel that this would be a step down, career-wise, so to speak. So I'll sweeten the pot a little bit."

He cleared his throat, and his eyes darted round the little room, before returning to Karen.

"As you might know, I've never married. I have no children. My only family is a brother in California, who has his own life, and whom I haven't seen in thirty years. I don't even know if he's still alive. This store...it's my life's work. I've built it up from the ground, and I would hate for it to die with me."

"Die with you? Why...?"

"Because I don't have that long to live. I'll tell you something, Karen, which I haven't told anyone else. In October, I didn't feel well and I went to see the doc. He looked me over and did a whole slew of tests. Turns out, I've caught something...unpleasant. Cancer."

Karen put her hand on top of his. She could feel how warm it was.

"But, you don't look..."

"I don't look sick? True enough, although my belt would disagree with you. I've lost so much weight in the last couple of months I've had to tighten it two holes. Doc Fitzgerald says there are treatments he can try, and will try. But to be honest, I don't think I'm long for this world. That's all right, though. I've had a long and good life. But, as I said, I would hate for my store to be turned into a coffee house, and my life savings go to the government. I hope you can understand that."

Karen took a big sip from her cup. The tea was strong and good.

"I've probably got a year or two in me still. At least I hope so. But no matter what, I want this store to go on, and I want someone who is a good person to inherit it. I started thinking long and hard about it in October, and finally I came to the conclusion that when I saw the right person, I would know."

“And...you thought George...?”

“When I saw him walk in and look at the toys for your little girl’s birthday, I knew it. Just knew that *he* would be the right person to pick up my mantle, as they say. So, now I’m asking you: Would you consider helping me out, and helping yourself a little in the process? You can live upstairs, rent-free, and I’ll pay you the same salary I offered your husband on top of that. That way, even though the salary is lower than your teacher’s salary, you’ll still have a lot more to yourself in the end. We’ll see how things work out between us, and if you enjoy the work – which I have a hunch you will. If things work out, I’ll have Charlie Redford make a will stating that you’re to inherit my estate, as long as my brother doesn’t arrive to disprove it, which I seriously doubt. How does that sound?”

Karen was speechless. She sat in her chair, staring straight ahead. The tea almost fell from her hand, and Gilham reached over gently, taking the cup and putting it on the table.

“Why?” she finally said. “Why me? Why George? What made you choose us?”

Gilham winked. His smile was broad and kind.

“Isn’t it obvious? You always hear people say they want to do something to change the world, but not many does it. I believe that changing the world starts by changing the life of one person. Most of my life I’ve aimed to change my own life, and somewhat spoiled myself in the process. Now, I want to try and change someone else’s life for the better. Someone deserving. And believe me, Karen, no one in town deserves it more than you.”

Karen licked her lips. “You’re really serious about this?”

“Absolutely serious. So, what d’ya say?”

Karen took his hand and held it in hers.

"I say, Tom, you are a godsend. Yes! I say yes! Absolutely. I mean...I know people will talk and gossip but...I don't care, if it means Jessi can have a safe place to grow up, and not live in my parent's house."

Gilham smiled and leaned forward. His hand squeezed hers a moment before he let go.

"I'm so glad to hear it. You can move in whenever you're ready. I've got one question for you, though: Jessica told me at the funeral that her bike had been broken. Is that true?"

"Yes. My mother hit it with her car on the day she got it. She's devastated about it. I've heard her praying to God about letting her father come back to fix it."

Gilham emptied his cup.

"Well, we can't make the dead come back to life, Karen. But perhaps there's another way to make Jessica's prayers be answered, if you're not adverse to it."

"What do you mean?"

"I've got something in my storage room that might answer the question better than words. Come with me."

When Karen came back to her parent's house, her mind was buzzing with the incidents of the day. It all seemed too good to be true, like the kind of thing that would happen in a cheap novel. With the snow falling all around her, she even briefly felt like she was playing a part in *It's A Wonderful Life* and half expected to hear a bell ring.

Tom Gilham had given her a signed contract for the rent-free apartment and the paid job. The rest would have to follow, he said, when they both knew if it 'worked out'. The paper was in her coat pocket, and her fingers kept returning to it, touching it to make sure it was really there.

She went up the driveway to the house, but took a turn and went to the garden shed. Here, leaning against the old wooden structure, stood the broken bike. It had coverings of snow on it, but the red color still looked bright in the December darkness.

She lifted it up, brushing the snow off it, and carried it back to the driveway. She put the bike in the exact spot where it had stood when her mother had hit it, resting it against the hedge. She brushed her hands off and went inside.

During dinner, she could barely keep her mouth shut. She had agreed to wait until the next day so Jessi wouldn't suspect anything. Her parents both looked at the way her eyes seemed to shine, and both noticed that for the first time in weeks, she seemed to have regained her appetite.

When she put Jessi to bed, she tucked the girl in tightly and kissed her on the cheek.

"Tomorrow, we're going down town, Jessi. We're going to look at the new place we're going to live."

Jessi smiled. "You mean we're not going to live here anymore?"

"No. I've found us a new place to stay. It's down town, a very nice apartment. I'm sure you'll like it. You might even get your own room, if you want."

Jessi considered. "Maybe. Can I still sleep with you if I feel bad?"

"Oh honey..." Karen stroked her hair, "You can sleep with me anytime you want. But I've got a thing I wanted to talk to you about. You know how you asked God to send daddy back to fix your bike?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, I thought that maybe, tonight you should say that prayer again. In fact, we can say it together. How'd that be?"

"Okay." Jessi folded her hands, and Karen folded her own around them.

"Dear God," Jessi began, "this is Jessica."

Karen continued. "We ask that you send George, Jessica's daddy, back for just a little while. We ask you that he come back just long enough to fix Jessica's bike..."

"...and give me a kiss," Jessi interrupted. "He has to give me a kiss too."

"...And give Jessica a kiss as well. We ask this of you, Lord, in Jesus's name. Amen."

"Amen." Jessi said. She didn't seem surprised that her mother had asked her to say this special prayer.

"All right, now sleep tight. I'll see you tomorrow."

Jessi rolled to her side and closed her eyes. Her arms were wrapped around her stuffed dog.

Karen got to her feet, and tiptoed out of the room.

In the morning, when Jessi opened her eyes, Karen was already awake. She had lain awake several times in the night, going over things in her mind. It would be a big decision to leave teaching and go work in a store, but on the other hand, nothing in the arrangement stated that she could never go *back* to teaching if she

wanted. Who knew, perhaps there would be a position available at a later date, or perhaps she and Tom Gilham would discover that they didn't enjoy working together.

The funny thing was, she didn't *feel* like that was the case. Instead, it felt like working in a toy store would be just exactly the right thing to do right now.

Jessi stretched her arms and yawned. "Good morning, mommy."

"Good morning, honey. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes. I dreamed daddy kissed me."

"Did you, now?" Karen looked puzzled. "Well, so did I. What do you think that means?"

Jessi seemed to turn it over in her head. Then, she jumped up and almost fell out of bed as she tried climbing over her mother. She ran across the floor, climbed up in the windowsill and stopped, frozen in place. Her face seemed to pass through several emotions at once. Surprise, amazement, disbelief and incredible joy.

"*MOMMY!*" she screamed. "*MY BIKE!*"

Karen got out of bed, doing her best to act surprised, and looked out at the garden below.

By the driveway, exactly where she had left the broken bike yesterday, stood a shining new red bike. It was the exact twin of the one Jessi had received on her birthday. Covering the back and the saddle was a thick, blue blanket.

"Mommy, *look!*" Jessi screamed and pointed, flailing her feet against the windowsill. "It's my bike! Daddy fixed it! He came back and he fixed it! Look, he left the blanket! The blanket we bought him!"

Karen took her daughter in her arms and held her tight. "I know, honey. I know. It's a miracle." She buried her face in Jessi's hair and thought *you would have wanted this, George. I know you would.*

It hadn't been hard for her to convince Tom Gilham to drive the new bike out in his truck and take the old one with him, but it must have been his own idea to buy a blanket similar to the one she and Jessi had bought. He must have asked Mr. White to tell him which one they had bought, she thought. That was the only explanation. The blanket was the last and most important part of the illusion, the thing that in the magic trick sets she had practiced doing as a child had been referred to as *the convincer*. She reminded herself to compliment Tom on it later.

"I gotta go out and get it!" Jessi was fumbling for her clothes. She tried putting her pants on and got her legs stuck in one pant leg. Karen bent down and helped her get dressed in a hurry.

Jessi ran down the stairs, tore open the door and went out into the snow. Karen stood at the door, looking at her as she ran up to the bike. She took hold of the blue blanket, lifting it gently off and slinging it over her shoulder, before letting her hands run over the chrome of the handlebar.

Even from this distance, she could see tears in Jessi's eyes, but this time it wasn't tears of sorrow. She squealed with joy as she pulled the bike out of the snowdrifts and up to the door.

Karen's mother appeared, still in her nightgown.

"What's going on? Why are you letting all the heat out of...oh, my Lord!"

Karen turned her head and looked at her mother.

"It's a Christmas miracle, mother. That's what we're calling it, at least. Understand?"

"Of...course..." her mother whispered, as they saw Jessi climb up on the saddle, the blue blanket hanging down to the ground.

"That blanket...isn't that...?"

Karen didn't reply. Instead she watched Jessi as she tumbled over in the snow, grinning.

“Come inside this instant, young lady!” Karen’s mother said. “You’re not dressed to be outside.”

Jessi got to her feet and pulled the bike to the front door. She had snow down her back and in her hair, but her face was split in a big grin. Karen had missed that grin more than she had known.

“Can I bring the bike inside the house?”

“Of course you...” Karen’s mother began, then looked at the blue blanket and turned her face to Karen.

Karen nodded her head slowly.

“Of course you...can. But we need to put it in the basement so it doesn’t drip snow on the carpet.” Karen could tell how hard that was for her mother to say.

She helped Jessi pull the bike inside and when they had put it in the laundry room in the basement, she looked at her daughter’s smiling face.

“Jessi, I’ve got a surprise for you. I’m going to start a new job, and we’re going to live right above where I work. Now, get upstairs and let’s have some breakfast before we go downtown.”

Giving her mom one last smile, as she stood watching in amazement, Karen and Jessi went upstairs to make breakfast.

The bike stood in the basement, as the melting snow dripped from its handlebars. On the chrome, there were still impressions of Jessi’s fingers, forming a little moist spot.

It almost looked like someone had given the cold metal a kiss.