

Following Star's Light

(A Christmas Story)

By

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FOLLOWING STAR'S LIGHT

I

I remember back when I had to write stories in grade school that I considered it a sound literary tactic to begin each of them with:

“It was a dark and stormy night.”

At the time, I considered it an exemplary way of setting the mood. But things don't actually work like that in real life because, in truth, the world's atmosphere will never reflect the inner workings of a particular story's tone. So, in this case, I will begin *this* story by stating that it wasn't a dark and stormy night at all.

It should have been, but it wasn't.

The months leading up to the night that I decided to end my life were difficult. (I mean they would be difficult if I decided to end my life, right?)

It was approaching Christmas, and the city was decorated brightly—lights were hung on people's homes; holiday music chimed from every shop's PA system; and unseasonable snow blanketed the city like something from out of a Norman Rockwell painting.

The exchange of money heightened the anticipation felt by shoppers and merchants, and if you really stopped to

feel what was happening around you, you could almost feel the mounting layers of economic hope building to its seasonal climax.

For many, this was Christmas. But not for me. Not this year.

What was building inside me this year was a sense of growing emptiness and despair, and this is most often felt to its torturous capacity during Christmas.

It's funny when you think back to your childhood and contemplate all the possibilities that could have been. Ask any child what he or she wants to be when they grow up, and they might say "doctor," "astronaut," or "President of the United States."

No kid ever says "janitor," "sewage treatment worker," or "McDonald's manager." And the thing that leads to a really terrible case of mid-life crisis is the realization that any of those kids could have been any of those things, but they got older, set paths for themselves, narrowed their options, and then washed up where they did.

I remember being asked that question when I was seven. I wanted to be a musician. A drummer. I wanted to be in a band and maybe even write songs. I was a natural at keeping time and rhythm. I don't really know why I loved it so much, but I did.

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Well anyway, it was a dream I had, but reality soon played a hand, and my parents explained to me that they could no longer tolerate the sound of a seven-year-old banging on a drum.

Soon after that, my drums were sold and I was forced to switch from practicing band to practicing football, which led to a scholarship to the state university but not to the NFL.

While there, I majored in business, minored in partying and met Lee, my future wife.

I pursued a career as an investment broker, got a job on a firm, married Lee, and bought a house that had a picket fence.

I later painted it white.

Two years later, we had two cats, one dog, and our son, Richie. We were the typical American success story until things went bad.

I guess I was a little too overconfident in some of my investments. I invested heavily in a dot-com that folded, and I lost every penny I had, which was little consolation to my clients.

None of them lost quite as much as I did. In fact, most all of them managed to sustain the loss without much difficulty. But in addition to the damage to my personal

finances, there was considerable injury inflicted on my professional reputation.

The firm was forced to let me go. And the mortgage on that nice home with the white picket fence ate me up.

That was six months ago. Six months of trying to figure out how to put food on the table. Six months of feeling like a failure in the eyes of my wife.

Until the day she left.

At the same time Lee was quietly packing up to leave me, I was at the toy store trying to decide what present I could afford for Richie. I was walking through the store and, really, you can't help but remember what it was like being a kid when you do.

That's the thing that really got to me, now that I think about it: Of all the possibilities and potential futures I had to choose from, this was the one I picked. This was the one I settled for.

So I bought Richie a drum. Except, as I mentioned, he was gone when I got back, along with my wife.

At home, I sat on the floor with the drum in my hand and I thought about all the possibilities I'd missed. So where do you go and what do you do when the American dream becomes the American wake? I didn't know either, so I emptied out my bank account, bought a gun from a

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pawnshop, and drove off with intention of finding someplace remote and shooting myself.

I didn't know where I was going to go to do this. I suppose it didn't really matter. One place is just as good as the next.

I drove some, and I while I drove, I thought.

I thought about my life and the direction it should have gone. Ah, if only we could stay young forever and keep all of our possibilities intact. Young forever, like Peter Pan. And so what the hell, right? I didn't really have a destination in mind, so I looked at the night's sky, picked the first star on the right, and drove straight on 'till morning.

II

As I said, I didn't really have a destination in mind, so I can't really say that I got lost. Most of the drive was pretty uneventful — just one small town after another, until I passed the California state line, and then, one small town after another.

Night became day. Day became night. I got hungry, so I stopped off to eat and spend Christmas Eve at a diner I found.

The place was warm, and clean, and the waitress had a nice smile. She asked where I was going, and I told her that I didn't know. She seemed to understand, being vested with the wisdom earned by years of catering to people traveling between places at Christmas with nowhere else to go.

"Long as it's not up the mountains — winter storm's coming," she said.

I found myself driving through the mountains, despite her helpful advice. Up and up I drove into the cold, where the city lights dimmed and the stars grew brighter and shimmered in mysterious sequence. There were millions of them. More than you can see down below because we blanket the world in artificial lights, and it blocks theirs out.

Then a stray thought hit me:

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Ever wonder what eternity looks like? Look up. I did. And then the star that I was following engulfed the world with the brightest light I've ever seen, and it blinded me long enough to crash into a tree.

After that, time moved like stars shimmer — strangely, in unfamiliar patterns, and through the hazy atmosphere of my intellect. I found myself walking while carrying the drum and the handgun through the blinding snowstorm — the one the waitress had warned was approaching.

It was as cold as I imagined death would be, but there was a light up ahead that I thought might be a town. It wasn't. I wandered blindly for hours, or minutes, or years through a white, frozen world, while the light ahead began to shimmer much like the star that led me to this cold place, which was sucking the warmth from my body and the core of my soul.

I lifted the gun to my head, and it was as heavy as the weight of my life.

“Don't!” said a voice from ahead, “I want to help.”

And that was how I met Toby. He's an angel.

III

The person standing in front of me — who would later tell me he was an angel who liked to be called “Toby” — was the biggest man I had ever seen. Not fat, but broad and powerful like a bear with big, lovable eyes. He looked like the kind of guy that people say things like, “you big, dumb lug,” if he did something really stupid because you didn’t want to swear at him and hurt his feelings.

If Toby had been a bear, he would be the kind of bear people in the woods give their sandwiches to instead of run away from.

I already liked him, but, at the time, I was standing in the woods with a gun to my head, preparing to end my life. This is normally a private moment for people and I wasn’t in a mood for making a new acquaintance. But I found myself reaching out to him anyway because, frankly, he was the only one there.

“I’m ... lost,” I said.

Then I handed Toby the gun, and he threw it deep into the darkness of the woods. When I heard it hit the frozen ground, my knees buckled and the world gave out from under me.

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IV

I awoke like deadwood floating in a sea of pain to this conversation:

“What’s that you’re carrying, friend?”

“A traveler who got lost.”

“Is he ... dead?”

“Not anymore.”

“That a joke?”

“No. We require lodging and warmth.”

“Uh, well, we got warmth, stranger, but lodgings? Well, ya picked a bad time for that.”

“You have no vacancies?”

“Davidson’s a small town, friend, and the Mexicans flooded in and booked every room we have.”

“I see.”

“Well, sorry about that. If I’d known every Mex in Mexico was gonna be comin’ this way, I’d’ve built a bigger inn.”

“Yeah, I guess. A warm place can be found where?”

“Well, the tavern’s through the lobby that way. Funny, though, you’re the first person I ever seen carryin’ a guy into a tavern, instead of outta it...”

“Oh, yeah? How about that? Listen, I want to give you a lot of money to do something for me.”

“A lot of money?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it ... you know, legal?”

“Sure is. Three travelers will be arriving sometime tonight inquiring about a pregnant woman. Let me know when they get here?”

“How can I get a holda you?”

“Hmmm ... let me think. Say, that’s a nice pager you have there...”

“It’s a gift from my wife,” the innkeeper said. “It’s very sentimental to me—”

“Five hundred dollars?”

“Here ya go.”

“I’m assuming you know the number; and by the way, the job is worth two thousand dollars.”

“And you’re not gonna kill ‘em or nothin’?”

“I don’t kill mortals. I’m an angel.”

“For two thousand dollars, you can be Santa Claus for all I care.”

“Where ... where am I?” I asked.

“You’re awake. Good. You’re at the Davidson Inn.”

“Where?”

“It’s an inn,” Toby said. “In Davidson,” he added, helpfully.

“You can put me down now.”

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“Right.”

He sat me down gently onto the wooden floor of the tavern and then handed me the toy drum he had been carrying.

Then everyone in the tavern began to laugh at us. And why not? Toby was a sight — like I said, big but not intimidating, like a giant you just know trips over his own feet when walking. And there he is, carrying me into the room like a kicked puppy, strung over his shoulder like something he found, wanted to keep, but didn't quite know what to do with.

Then he hands me this little child's drum, and the way he held it made it seem like it was a treasure. So, laughter broke out across the tavern, and Toby, not seeming to know they were laughing at us, laughed at us with them.

The small town of Davidson, I discovered, is located not far from Big Bear Mountain. Usually the population of the town consists of approximately 1,900 white, affluent California yuppies that decided their elevation should match their financial status.

The town itself was originally founded by the Spanish, which is supported by some of the older architecture of the town, especially the church. The descendants of this settlement lived here happily through the centuries — that is, until a developer discovered it back in the sixties.

That developer thought the town was quaint but needed a few condos, a shopping mall, and, years later, a Starbucks. The whites came and drove the cost of living up so high, everyone else was forced to leave. After that, the town was renamed, "Davidson," an English translation of its original Spanish name, which I can't pronounce.

As I said, usually the town has about 1,900 people in it, except tonight it has about 2,500 because, apparently, the descendants of the man who founded the town are having a family reunion of sorts, and they decided to have it in their town. (In talking to some of them at the tavern, I got the idea they're still kind of pissed about losing it.)

So, it's Christmas Eve, and I'm sitting in a tavern eating tacos with a guy who thinks he's an angel. My head still hurts from the crash, and I can't help wondering what my wife is doing tonight.

The last few conversations we had were harsh and spoken in anger. I wanted to call her and tell her how sorry I am, but that's the problem; I'm a little too sorry for her to respect.

"So," Toby said, "You're ... uh ... having a pretty bad Christmas, huh?"

"I guess you got that impression when I was holding the gun to my head, right?"

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"No," Toby replied. "It was when you lost your job. I knew this Christmas would be tough on you when you lost your job. And then ... well ... when Lee left—"

"—How do you know about that?"

"I am the Angel of the Family. Your family. You can call me Toby."

"An angel? I guess that makes me Jimmy Stewart. What kind of name is 'Toby' for an angel?"

"Well ... it's not my *real* name. The first time I heard my *real* name was when my Creator spoke it. It was a word that shaped me from the inchoate void of non-existence; a sound that filled my forming mind like honey refracting golden sunlight, which resonated through my body and ignited the core of my being. Humans can't pronounce it, so Toby's a pretty good name, too."

"That's the weirdest thing I ever heard," I said. "I need some air. I'm going outside for a bit."

"I see," Toby said. "Just be careful. Things happening here ... aren't what you think they are."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm sure you'll discover — oops, I think I'm getting paged. Be right back."

And so I left Toby to conduct whatever business he had going.

I went outside and walked through the town, and I lost myself inside my own thoughts. The air was crisp, cold and silent with the passing of the storm, and as I approached the edge of town, it seemed to get almost impossibly dark.

I stood at the edge, peering into the darkness, and I watched the contour of shadows move like liquid in a way that shadows shouldn't move. Then I realized there was something moving inside of them.

"Hell of a storm we had, eh, friend?"

The person (or more accurately, the *thing* that was person-shaped) who suddenly stood in front of me made me want to run away and hide under a bed. I guess I could describe the features of his face, but I don't think that would describe the effect it had on me.

When I was a kid, I was scared to death of my closet at night. Things in there moved in the darkness and captured my dreams. I once dreamed that I was being pulled in by something wrapped in the moth-eaten clothes we kept in there, and as it pulled me in by my legs, I could hear the crunching of bones as it squeezed and popped them from their joints. I was screaming and choking on fear and the stench of mothballs, listening to it laugh and whisper about the things it wanted to do to me.

And then I saw its face.

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Anyway, we grow up. We forget. We lock the things that scare us in the shadows of our subconscious. And there they stay, I thought, until one of them suddenly walked out and stood right in front of me. He had its face. His breath even smelled like mothballs.

“Apologies, friend. Say, I think I have something that belongs to you ...”

“I don’t think so—”

“Oh, it must be yours; why I’ve got it right here.”

And from inside his black overcoat, which flowed like liquid shadow in the chilled winter breeze, emerged my gun; and once I saw it, I looked directly up into his eyes and I saw the flash that stretches from the end of a barrel to the end of a lifetime.

“Oh it’s yours all right.”

I took it.

“Now, then,” he said. “Since I was kind enough to return your lost property to you, friend, I have a matter I wish to address that bears some discussion — a business proposition, so to speak.”

“I don’t think I ...”

“Now hear me out, friend, just hear me out. I represent a certain party who has a vested interest in a very unique situation that’s developing here tonight; very unique

indeed. Right now, we're content to ... just sorta watch the situation and see how it plays out."

"What's this got to do with me?"

"Well, the party I represent likes to cover his bases, you see, and we were thinking, just in case the situation continues to develop in a manner we deem ... *counterproductive*, we want someone on the inside who can remedy the situation."

"Sorry, I think you have the wrong guy."

"Do I? I wonder. Quite a party going on in the town, I reckon?"

"Yeah. Big family reunion or something."

"That a fact?" he said, glancing back at the town. "Why yes it is, yes it is indeed. Funny. What with all the festivities going on in the warmth of the inn, here you stand at the edge of town, alone in the dark, only you ain't alone, are you?"

"I don't think I ..."

"I think you do. I think you know *where* I found your ... property. Deep in the woods. Now, what might you have been doing alone in the woods with a gun in your hand? No family to go home to? No one to wonder where you might be at such a late hour? Well, that's a shame no man should endure, I say."

"What are you...?"

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“Offering. What I’m offering, friend. Suppose I told you that the party I represent could change all that. Suppose I told you that, indeed, we’ve had our eye on you for quite some time, and we were truly burdened in our hearts at your recent misfortunes? And just suppose I told you we were offering you more money than you ever thought you’d see — enough to put your family right back in order. Why, what man wouldn’t jump at the chance to do that?”

“I ... don’t know...”

“You need time to think it over, I think? Yes, I think you do. What man wouldn’t want to think over his prospects? Or lack thereof, as the case may be. Well, friend, as it turns out, time is on your side. We might not even need to enlist your aid at all. Other parties *are* interested in tonight’s events, after all. So why don’t I leave my card with you while you think it over some, just in case?”

He handed me his card. It was cold and its touch made my skin tingle. It had no number on it, but there was a name.

“There’s no number?”

“Just say the name. I’ll be along soon enough after that. Yes, I will, indeed.”

V

It really was shaping up to be a very unusual night. I don't mind telling you that I was scared — strange as it might sound hearing it from a guy who, only hours ago, was about to end his own life. I mean, I've been afraid of things before. Monsters and things like that when I was a kid; and when I grew, I was afraid of grown-up things like making house payments and my career prospects.

But shit, what was that guy? I wanted to run. I wanted to hide. And I most certainly did not want to go into the woods to do it because I was scared about what else I would find there if I did.

And another thing (although on a much smaller scale, but still worth mentioning) that was unusual about tonight is that I'd managed to go almost my entire life without someone stumbling onto me in the woods with a gun in my hand, looking pathetic and lost. But it happened for the second time when Toby found me. Again.

Only this time I wanted answers.

"You!" I said. "Where am I?"

He smiled and, as you might imagine an angel would, provided a response that was more cryptic than insightful.

"There you are!" he said.

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"I meant, Toby, where the hell have you brought me?!"

"Davidson."

"No you don't! I want real answers!"

"I didn't bring you anywhere. You came yourself. You followed the star, remember? I found you at the edge of town. This town. You were already here. You want answers? You'll find them here. That's why you came."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Hell? No. You're about as far from Hell as you can get."

"Oh yeah? You didn't meet the guy I just met! He gave me back the gun you threw in the woods..."

"Oh that. Him? Well, yes, I suppose his lot would be interested in tonight. And, as far as the gun goes, well, I guess you'd better bring it along."

"I'm not going anywhere," I said.

"You want to stay here in the woods?"

"..."

And with that, Toby and I returned to the mysterious town of Davidson.

VI

Crowds of people gathered in the streets of the town that night. Children were running and playing; happy people were gathering and laughing; and Christmas carolers were busy Christmas caroling — Norman Rockwell all over again.

But there were three in the distance who didn't quite fit. One of them didn't fit with anyone I'd ever seen, and it didn't really surprise me that they were who Toby had to conduct business with.

The first of the three looked pleasant enough. He was dressed sharply, in expensive clothing; his slacks were pressed and his white turtleneck was impeccably clean. He wore silver-rimmed glasses over sad, worried eyes that watched our approach cautiously.

The second of the three was dressed plainly, and he would have blended in with the rest of the world nicely, except he watched things in a manner that normal people don't. His eyes scanned the town; looked up; surveyed the stars; looked at his watch; and displayed impatience. But there was more to it than that. He watched the world as if he were seeing something in it no one else was. No one else,

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that is, except for one other: The person standing next to him. The third of the three.

How to describe him? He stood firmly, his back straight as he anticipated our approach. He wore a dark overcoat draped over his thin frame, which hung stiffly in the breeze. It was leather.

Once, there was a time when hunters painted blood omens to ancient gods on the walls of caves, perhaps seeking favor for the night's hunt. And the animals they hunted? I think he was wearing one of them.

But that wasn't all. To look at him once you'd say he was a middle-aged man with a strange sense of fashion, but if you caught his eye and your eyes met, you couldn't look at him just once. This man possessed the eyes of someone very, very old; like someone who might remember seeing the atmosphere of the Earth forming for the first time. Those eyes could make people feel smaller than they ever had before, and so I concentrated on avoiding them.

This was easier to do than it might've been otherwise because something else managed to grip my attention. As we got closer to them, I noticed that the air seemed to be charged, like static electricity, which made the hair on my arm stand on end. I was going to mention this to Toby, but as I turned to face him, I was surprised to learn that the charge seemed to be emanating from him.

“Great,” I remember thinking. “Everyone in the town gets Norman Rockwell, and I get Salvador Doli.”

“A celestial?” said the second of the three. “And not a very high-ranking one at that. We must be getting close if we can see such a low-ranking celestial.”

“This night, I am the chosen emissary for my Kingdom,” Toby said. “You would do well to be mindful of your position as guest, traveler.”

“As you say. I am Dr. Crandle, and these are my associates.”

The first of the three approached somewhat nervously, staying a semi-comfortable distance from Toby. I was starting to get the idea that he knew something about Toby that I didn't. Not only did Toby speak with an authority he didn't seem to possess before, but he was ionizing the air around him, and his eyes had gone pale.

In fact, Toby didn't seem like Toby anymore at all, and I kind of got the impression that something was speaking through him, so I started wondering if I shouldn't be keeping a bit of a distance as well.

“This is Dr. Védemere,” Crandle said. “He doesn't speak, I'm afraid. Victimized at an early age by a rather unfortunate incident of throat slitting. Severed vocal cords. But, even still, you would be hard-pressed to find greater brilliance in the study of metaphysics.”

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The third of the three didn't move.

"And this is Master Ésau, Emissary for the One who is Nameless. We have journeyed far and have come to bear witness to the fulfillment of that which is written."

"I greet you travelers and bid you welcome," Toby said.

"Well, then, formalities aside, we should like to proceed to the business at hand, straight away."

"I will lead you to the one you seek. Follow."

And so we followed.

VII

I don't know what I was expecting to see, but what I saw wasn't what I was expecting. Toby led us to the far end of the town where we discovered, of all things, a garage.

A simple garage.

And what surprised me further was that the three — who I knew had traveled far, by their own admission, seeking whatever Toby was leading us to — didn't seem disappointed to find a garage waiting for them at the end of their journey.

"Toby, it's ... it's a garage," I said.

"A garage?" Cradle scoffed. "My dear boy, do you have even the slightest idea of where you are?"

"I'm standing in front of a garage."

"Ah. This garage, as you so thoughtlessly put it, is the nexus point for the single greatest event in mortal history."

Okay, so I'll admit I haven't been to many nexus points in my life, let alone one that was the "single greatest event in mortal history." But I have been to a lot of places that were much cleaner and better lit.

In fact, the place was so completely littered with trash, beer cans, and the oil-stained parts and equipment used in

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day-to-day auto repair that it looked more like a nexus point for clutter than anything else.

A switch was flipped, lights were lit, cockroaches scurried, and toward the back of the garage we discovered Joe Rodrégéz, who was holding a gun that was aimed at our heads.

He said something in Spanish that sounded scared and desperate, and I was really hoping he wouldn't shoot one of us to emphasize exactly how scared and desperate he actually was.

"Joe Rodrégéz, lower your weapon," Toby said, and, surprisingly, he did. In fact, he smiled at us once he heard Toby speak, like maybe he recognized the voice?

They talked some, but I managed to only understand about every third word or so. From what I gathered, very powerful people were after him and his family, and he was only trying to protect them. I remembered the one I met in the woods, and I wondered if this poor guy really understood how powerful the people after him really were.

And that they weren't people.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I still don't get it. Why is this place so important? Why are people after this poor guy?"

"Not him," said Toby. "The one they seek can be found through that door."

We opened the door to a room that doubled as both an office and storage, and there, among the filthy piles of paperwork and mechanical workings of cars, we found a woman and a newborn child.

She was lying exhausted from her recent labor on top of a laundry sack filled with rags that smelled of oil and sweat, nursing the child who filled the room with a warmth that I wasn't expecting.

The proud new mother bundled the child in rags, torn from her dress, and held him against her heart, which would only beat for him from this day forward.

And then he looked at me.

I mean, he was a child, but ... but not the kind of child that you make a fool of yourself in front of and talk baby-talk to because he had the kind of eyes that promised to remember you later.

His eyes were soft and warm, and the color of flawless amber with sunlight behind them.

"Oh ... oh ... Jesus," I said. "It's Jesus, isn't it?"

"Ah, the lights of comprehension flickers, I take it?" said Cradle. "And, incidentally, it's pronounced 'Hay-Soos.'"

"But ... how? Jesus lived two thousand years ago? And he was Jewish."

"From one perspective, this is probably true," Cradle agreed.

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“Okay, Dr. Crandle, you’re the smartest ass in town,” I said. “Care to explain?”

“Humph. One wonders how you even found this place. Try to think abstractly, if you can. This one event is of such significance, it has created a temporal, spatial and dimensional convergence point within the very fabric of reality.”

“But it happened two thousand years ago.”

“Time doesn’t work here. I’ve told you. We aren’t in the past, and this event isn’t reoccurring: It is happening *now*.”

“Think, young man,” he continued, “have you any idea how many planets, societies and races of mortals there are in this one dimension alone? The Child had to be born once, and he had to be born for everyone, everywhere. Thus, the convergence point. What you think you are seeing isn’t what everyone sees. This event is ... bigger than your mind can comprehend, so you interpret the events as best you can, as does everyone else. I should think you would know at least some of this. I mean, how did you find this place, yet remain so utterly clueless?”

“I got lost,” I said. “I was driving and ... sort of ended up here.”

“That is truly heartbreaking,” he replied. “I have devoted the sum of my life to the study of scriptures and ancient text, bargained with ominous deities on several

different spheres— all to obtain access to written prophecies that are no longer available on this plain of existence. What I learned would ultimately lead me to this place, to witness the single greatest moment in the history of creation — and you tell me that you simply got lost and ‘ended up here’?”

“Yeah.”

“You are truly the—”

And then Ésau spoke for the first time; and, like his eyes, his voice also made me feel small.

“Cease bickering. Cradle, be silent.”

He walked toward the Child, silently, and stared, as if he were, I don’t know, soaking in the experience? Or trying to make some sort of decision? It was hard to say.

He was the kind of guy you’d expect to keep to himself and not really let you know what he was thinking. And that was fine with me. Some of his thoughts would probably have scared me anyway.

“I wish to be alone with the Child and his mother. Leave us.”

“I will stay,” said Toby, in his non-Toby voice, the one that didn’t invite argument.

“As you wish. The rest of you go. Now.”

So we left. But as I was closing the door, I saw the man who had seen everything crouch before the Child, and,

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with unspeakable sadness, whisper a woman's name. I could only speculate on the reason he did this.

VIII

Out of the darkness and through the night they came.

One by one or in groups they emerged from various places of what, I now know to be, time and space to pay homage to the Child.

Of course they looked like regular people to me — regular people from all walks of life, nations, races, religions and financial statuses. I even saw a mayor from a city in Russia; a Japanese emperor; and a senator of the United States — senator what's-his-name from Kansas.

They brought gifts of frankincense, myrrh and gold. Except the senator, who, if you can believe this, actually gave the Child his gold credit card. Then he and Joe Rodrégéz smoked a cigar together. I had to laugh.

Soon, people from the town gathered outside of the garage and began singing and dancing. A Mexican Maruichi band from the inn began to play. Tables were set up and tacos were served. Popcorn was strung on the trees and snow began to fall.

It was Christmas.

“There you are! Merry Christmas!” Toby said, sounding more like himself. “I brought something for you.”

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He handed me the drum. Richie's drum. I thought I left it back at the inn. I picked it up and remembered ... being young and innocent and just wanting to play.

So I did.

Yeah, I know there isn't usually a drummer playing in a Maruichi band; and, yeah, I was a pretty rusty after all these years, but ... I was doing something I loved. I felt like a kid again.

For the first time in years, I remembered what it felt like to have ... possibilities. Soon after that, Joe went into the garage and brought his wife, Mary, out.

And the Child.

And do you know what? I played my drum for him. Badly, but I played for him. And he smiled at me.

VIV

Hours passed as the celebration began to trickle from community interaction to the bonding shared by personal relationships.

Couples and families walked arm-in-arm by themselves or with their children back to the warmth of their lodgings and their love, as the night subsided into silence.

The silence of peace.

The silence before the storm.

And the storm was gathering furry.

Toby and I stood outside the garage and watched shards of ice form angry clouds that began to reflect the light from the town like the color of fire, swirling with violence on the horizon of silhouetted skeleton trees. If you watched the clouds long enough, you could see a face begin to take shape.

It was a face I recognized.

“He’s coming, isn’t he?”

“Well,” Toby speculated, “it sure looks like it.”

“I think ... I want to say goodbye to the Child.”

Toby continued to watch the horizon.

“Just, uh ... make it quick, yeah?”

FOLLOWING STAR'S LIGHT

Inside the garage, the warmth radiating from the Child caught me off guard once again — a startling contrast to the abrasive cold of the world. I picked him up and held him tightly while also trying to hold on to the moment.

Soon, I knew, I would be facing death, or maybe something even worse than death, and I wanted to find something to hold on to when I faced it.

I remembered the feeling of holding my son for the first time. It's a feeling like everything you've been through in your whole life — all the happiness, sorrow, pain and pride that you discovered in the choices you made — have been worth something, as if it all actually had a point, and wasn't just random wanderings through a life-shaped maze.

I remembered the night Richie was conceived, a night my wife and I made love on a camping trip under the light of stars.

That night, I looked so deeply into her eyes that I saw hope for us and our future, and because of the love we already had for each other, we combined our souls and created a life.

I had that same kind of feeling while holding the Child. A feeling of hope.

It was Christmas. So I gave him the gift I'd been holding, and he gave me one in return.

I went back outside and found Toby, still staring off into the distance with Védemere, Crandle and Ésau.

He looked worried. We all did.

“Toby, I just wanted to say thanks for all your help and for ... showing me the way here,” I said.

Toby didn't speak at first, and then, as I was beginning to walk into the darkness...

“Wait.”

Talk with people who have done this sort of a thing before and you might realize they didn't really convey the impact it had on them. It's because people who haven't done this sort of a thing before can't understand.

Even if a lot of descriptive words are used. Even if you draw them a picture. Those who haven't walked knowingly into a situation where they might be killed can't understand what it's like to be someone who's done exactly that.

One of the last thoughts that ran through my head before I said the name was that I wish I'd paid better attention to my grandpa's war stories. I felt I could have appreciated them a whole lot more. That, and I wish I could kiss my wife and son one final time.

It was a dark and stormy night ...

I said the name.

And he appeared.

"Hell of a storm we're having tonight," I said.

"Why, indeed, it is; yes indeed it is," it said.

"I've been thinking about your proposal."

"Come to turn us down, I reckon? Yes, I think you've come to turn us down. Well, friend, I don't mind telling you,

your prospects for the future aren't too hopeful. No, they truly aren't."

"Actually, I've come here to fight you while the Child gets away."

"That a fact? Well, now, didn't I have you pegged all wrong? Here I thought you'd jump at the chance to set your future right. What man wouldn't want that? But really, all this time, all you were really looking for is a chance to get yourself killed."

"I might die, but I'm still going to beat you because I figured you out."

"That right? What could you have figured—"

"I brought you here," I said. "Just like I brought the angel. You two have been with me my whole life, but I couldn't see you before I got here. Everyone else who came here found it on purpose. I think some of them were even here by invitation. But not me. I was on the edge and going to go either way, so I ended up bringing both of you with me."

"I'm not looking to die, you demonic bastard, I'm looking to kick you out of town because I'm the one with the power over you."

Then it laughed, which wasn't the response I was expecting.

FOLLOWING STAR'S LIGHT

"That's a pretty good theory! Yes, indeed it is! Why that sounds almost good enough to be true! Only thing is, it ain't. See, I was already here; and I reckon I can't speak for your angel friend, but me? I've been here since the beginning, just a waitin' for the Child to come around."

"... oh."

"And, well, about you having power over me? Well, friend, that ain't true neither."

"So then," I said, "that means I'm screwed, right?"

"I think you are at that," it said. "But you know what, friend? My kind's got a reputation for being capable of nothing but hate; but you know what? I like you. Yes, indeed, I truly do. I'm gonna try and kill you real quick-like, and keep it just as painless as I can muster, and you know why?"

"No."

"Because you make me laugh. Best laugh I've had since I can recall."

"Yeah? Do you like me enough for a running start?"

"You know, friend, I think I do at that. So you'd best be gettin' along, just as quickly as your legs can carry you."

And so I ran. I ran as fast as I could, knowing in my heart that it wouldn't be fast enough.

Behind me, I could hear the splitting of meat and bone, like something crawling out of its flesh, and that's most

certainly what it was. The thing that was chasing me wasn't even pretending to be human anymore.

It ran like an animal on four giant legs, and I didn't even need to see it to know what it looked like. It was shaping itself off of my worst fears, which I knew it did when I first saw its face.

In my mind I could see it — talons tearing through the ice as it ran; watching its prey with red slit pupils against coal black eyes; its poison-tipped fangs salivating at the thought of tearing into my soft, human flesh.

I could hear it getting close. I could feel the steam of its breath against my back.

And it struck me. Hard. I heard flesh rend and bone split. And it all happened so quickly that it really had been pretty painless. Physically painless anyway.

I was lying in a pool of my own blood. In the snow. Dying. And the poison of the thing was in me. In my thoughts. In my soul.

Lee.

Lee taking my son. The last words we shared with each other were like weapons. Weapons we sharpened against the growing bitterness inside of us, and we stabbed each other in all of the vital places. My son heard us fight. He cried and couldn't understand why. Shut up kid! Can't you control your goddamn kid?!

FOLLOWING STAR'S LIGHT

Yeah, I know we can't make the payments! I lost my job! I made a mistake! You don't like it, you can get the hell out of my house!

Gone.

The house is empty. I'm empty. I'm dead inside. Why not make it official? I've got the gun in my hand. All I have to do is squeeze the trigger. In the middle of the woods.

Alone.

I'm alone ... only ... didn't something happen? Wasn't there someone here? Here to help? Wasn't there?

And then I remembered the most important thing that I could've remembered.

I didn't come alone.

"Toby ... is he ... in?"

"Town limits? Yeah. You did it."

"Then do something ... I'm hurt ... real bad ..."

"You got it."

And Toby extended his wings and drew his sword. It was made of light.

I tried to watch the fight. I saw the blinding light of the sword stab into the thing, and it shrieked like an animal. I saw it lash out madly at my friend; its talons streak across his face.

He tried to pivot and block its attack, but while he was fighting with technique, it was fighting with ferocious instinct, hatred, and even madness.

The fight became too difficult for me to watch because I think they were fighting on various levels of reality, and my mind couldn't quite comprehend what I was seeing with my eyes.

The last thing I saw before turning away was the thing bite into Toby's jugular and tear a chunk of it out.

He screamed in agony.

Even if I could've watched the fight, I wouldn't have wanted to. I closed my eyes. But I heard it. I heard meat ripping away from a body in bloody chunks. I heard screams and growls and tearing and stabbing and bone splintering and crushing.

And I felt it. I felt the spiritual side of their fight in my mind and soul. I felt a rage that I had never known. I wanted to be a plague. I wanted to strangle and pull flesh from bone. I wanted to take my wife by the neck and suffocate her until she turned blue and her eyes went pale. I wanted to hear her neck crack and pop as I twisted and twisted, slowly as she screamed. I wanted — no!

I didn't want that. That was the battle in my mind. I wanted what I wanted when I held the Child. The memory I had before I came here. I wanted to hold her again. I

FOLLOWING STAR'S LIGHT

wanted to feel her warmth next to me. I wanted to watch her breathe when she slept and wonder what she dreamed. I wanted to gaze into her eyes and tell her I'm sorry and that I will always love her.

I wanted to help Toby by holding on to those things.

I wanted to teach Richie how to hit a ball and tie his shoes, and I wanted to take my wife dancing, and I hoped that I still could. I had hope. I had hope for Lee and Richie and the Child.

And for Toby.

And then the thing screamed a death howl, and both of them fell.

And the battle was over.

I looked up. My God. They were both ... I'd never seen anything like it.

I crawled towards them, slowly, leaving a trail of blood behind me. I didn't have long.

"Eh," it said to me. "You still there ... friend ... not dead?"

"Not yet."

"You tricked ... me ... got me ... here where he was right ... powerful ... yes, he was ..."

"Being close to the Child ... helped him, yes."

“Had you pegged ... wrong, eh, friend? Pretty clever ... after all. But for nothing. Just ... a setback ... someone’ll ... betray him to us ... sooner or later.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But it won’t be me.”

“Stood by ... your master. Really did ... like you, friend.”

And then it died. And melted away. Staining the snow black.

Then Toby moaned. I thought he was dead.

“That ... guy was tough,” Toby said.

“Ah, jeeze, Toby ...”

“Hey ... I think ... I’m dying ...”

He looked like he should’ve already been dead. Liquid light was gushing from him. It looked like staring up at the sun from the bottom of a swimming pool. And he had lost a lot of it.

I took his hand. I watched his eyes shimmer. Then he vanished. And everything went black.

VVI

I remember being in utter darkness and feeling as if I were floating. As if the burden I had been carrying had been lifted.

Ahead of me, I saw a light. A bright and shining light. And I wanted to reach it. I moved closer to it and it looked like ...

“A ... light bulb?”

“Well, yes,” Crandle said. “That is because it most certainly is a light bulb.”

Then, imagine my surprise when I saw Dr. Crandle's face in front of the light that turned out to be a light bulb, saying, “You made it. I had my doubts, but you pulled through. Well done.”

“Am I dead?”

“No. I should think you are experiencing enough pain to expel that belief.”

He was right. I hurt everywhere. I felt like I had been through a trash compactor. I was hot and cold and my body was throbbing at a different rhythm than my head. And there was a horrible taste in my mouth.

“Where am I, Crandle?”

“You are at the Davidson Inn. We found you and brought you here. You were almost dead. Frankly, I’m surprised you lived at all.”

“You jerk. Why didn’t you take me to a hospital?”

“Humph. My dear boy, you were in far better care under my supervision than inside a common hospital.”

“And what’s that taste in my mouth? It’s horrible.”

“That horror in your mouth, as you put it, is the remnant of the medication that saved your life. Did you know that the ancient Aztecs discovered a series of unique plant enzymes that can facilitate the repair of any tissue damage within the body? Truly remarkable, and, sadly, now extinct.”

“And you gave me some?”

“I did.”

“Thanks.”

“I must say, you did well facing the demon,” Cradle said. “Confronting him before he had gathered enough power to destroy the Child, and then leading him into the town where the celestial’s powers were stronger. That, I must admit, was sheer genius.”

“Toby told me it was your idea.”

“As I said, genius.”

“You’re all right, Cradle.”

FOLLOWING STAR'S LIGHT

It was three days until I was well enough to get up and around again. The medication Crandle gave me might have helped with my wounds, but not the blood loss. That would take time to get over.

Crandle had turned out to be a pretty good doctor after all, but a lousy cook. I did attempt to eat whatever it was he was calling "soup," and ended up heaving over a toilet more times than I care to remember. But each time was worth it, just knowing he didn't know how to do everything.

All things considered, though, he and Dr. Védemere had turned out to be decent company while I recovered. We talked and exchanged ideas, and despite Crandle's exterior layer of conceit, he seemed interested in some of my views. He truly was a person who never tired of learning.

But, as I said, it had been three days since I nearly got myself killed, and I was growing restless inside my room at the inn. So when morning came, I went out for a walk to watch the sunrise, and there, standing at the edge of town, I saw Ésau, staring over the horizon with his ancient, distant eyes.

"I see that you are to be congratulated for surviving your ordeal," he said.

"Yeah, it was close though."

"Indeed."

We both stood in silence for a time.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question?” I asked. “I mean ... you don’t look like you normally answer people’s questions, and you look like you keep mostly to yourself, so, if you tell me to, I’ll leave you alone and never bother ...”

“Cease speaking.”

“Okay.”

And again, we stood in silence for a time.

“You may ask your question, so long as it does not pertain to the name you heard me speak.”

“Oh. Uh ... never mind. I don’t have a question.”

And, yet again, we stood in silence.

“I will ask you a question then,” Ésau said. “You brought two items with you into this town, is this so?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess. Richie’s drum and the gun, and well, my car keys and wallet and—”

“Do not speak foolishly. You understand what I ask.”

“Well, yeah ... you mean two items of importance?”

“Indeed. Two symbols of diverging paths. One for you and one for the Child. And why was this so?”

“Well, I bought the drum for my son because, well, because I thought he might like it. And because it reminded me of being a kid. I used to play as a kid. I thought I would be in a band some day and be famous. Who knows, maybe I

could have been, yeah? But then I got older and chose a different path, but ... I wanted to give him something that reminded me of a time when I had options. When I had the world open to me and all the possibilities of the future.”

“And the other?”

“The gun? I was going to shoot myself with it. Not a lot of options there.”

“Indeed. And which did you give the Child?”

“The gun.”

“A strange gift for a child?”

“Well, I unloaded it first ... and really, I gave it to his mom to give to him later—”

“Why give the Child the weapon?”

I had to really think about this one. Why did I? I knew the answer, of course, but it took me a minute to realize that I really did know the answer, and then figure out how to phrase it.

“He’s not a regular child. I remember how Toby took it from me and threw it in the woods, but then the demon found it and gave it back to me. Why? Did the demon want me to shoot the Child? Shoot myself? Yeah, probably both, but I thought there was more to it than that. It wasn’t just a gun to me; it symbolized defeat. It symbolized everything that led up to me buying the damn thing. It was a burden to me, and I started thinking that if the Child was

who I thought he was, then he could, I don't know, handle the burden for me?"

Ésau seemed to consider my answer, and then he spoke.

"I will answer your question," he said. "I have served my master for many thousands of years, and in that time the One who is Nameless has waited for the Child. But the Child is everything my master is not, therefore, the Child could not easily be recognized by him, nor the signs of his birth; thus he sent me to destroy the Child, should I find him to be the One of Prophecy.

"Even before I journeyed, I knew what I would find him to be, but I did not know if I would be able to destroy him. To do so would be to destroy the very embodiment of hope. Therefore, as I stood over the Child seeking to determine what path I would follow, I found ... that I did not wish to end hope."

"Jeeze."

"The name I spoke," he added, "was the name of my truest love."

He closed his ancient eyes, as if to search for her face inside of his memories, and then he continued his story.

"I have carried the burden of her loss for many thousands of years, and like you, I presented the Child with my burden."

FOLLOWING STAR'S LIGHT

“So, what happens when your master figures it out?”

“He will most likely end my existence,” Ésau said. “After so many years, I believe I would look upon this with favor.”

The sun was still inching skyward over the horizon of the east, and as we watched, I saw something that, I suspect, few have ever have seen before: I saw Ésau smile.

“Perhaps the Child will remember her name. Perhaps he will remember me. And ... there is still hope in the world.”

At that point, Cradle and Védemere joined us. They were preparing to leave.

“I have just one more question for you, Cradle,” I said. “Where do angels go when they die?”

“I assume you ask on behalf of your friend?”

“Yeah.”

“He isn’t really dead—”

“You’re not going to say something as trite as ‘he isn’t dead as long as we remember him,’ are you, Cradle?”

Cradle rolled his eyes, and Védemere smiled.

“No, I am going to say something as trite as ‘he isn’t really dead because he is standing behind you’ moron.”

It was true. I turned around and Toby was standing behind me with a big, dumb grin on his face. If I hadn’t been so happy to see him, I would have kicked him for giving Cradle another opportunity to make me feel stupid.

“Toby!”

“Hey, there!” Toby said. “I came to see everyone off.”

“How the two of you managed to keep from getting yourselves or the Child killed is a mystery beyond the scope of my comprehension,” Crandle said.

I looked the three of them over, knowing full well that I wouldn't be seeing any of them ever again, and, although I wouldn't admit this to them, especially not Crandle, I hated that thought.

“Safe journey guys,” I said.

“May all of your journeys bring you fulfillment,” said Ésau, “and options that you find ... agreeable.”

And, as the new day began, the three journeyed in the direction from which they came, walking a path into the rising sun.

“So, Toby?”

“Yes?”

“I thought you were dying?”

“I was.”

“What happened?”

“I went to get fixed.”

“Is it that simple?”

“No. My shoulder still kind of hurts, and I broke my sword. I did have the option of being completely fixed, but, well, I wanted to keep some of the events that happened with me.”

FOLLOWING STAR'S LIGHT

“So, what happens now?”

“Well, time and space are resuming to their normal routine, and soon you’ll only be able to perceive me in a way that you’re used to. I mean, I’ll be around, but we won’t talk much until, you know, we’re supposed to.”

“And what about the Child?”

“People will also perceive the Child as they have in the past. He’ll be real to some and a myth to others. But, hey, at least they still have the option to choose, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You know, I’ve served your Family since they became a family — sort of watching and doing what I can to help, but you know what? I think I really enjoyed being your friend.”

“You still are.”

“I came especially to give you a message: Your wife misses you.”

“And how do you know that?”

“I am of the Family. She is of the Family. She lies in bed and cries at night and speaks your name. She thinks no one is there to hear her, but I am. Just thought you’d like to know.”

“You think she’s up yet?”

“Try her and see.”

“Yeah. You know, I was thinking; when I came out this morning, I saw Ésau just staring at the sunrise. How many

you figure he's seen, anyway? About a million? And he was just looking at this one like it might be his last."

"I don't know," Toby said. "Maybe it was. Then again, Esau's pretty smart. Maybe he just figured out that each of them is different and has all kinds of new possibilities behind it. Maybe he was staring at the new possibilities ahead."

"Yeah, maybe," I said. "Like me and the stars. I followed the right star this time, but what about the next? Now that I see I have possibilities again, which path should I follow?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Maybe ... maybe it's like this: Maybe there really are only two real options: You can follow any one of the million points of light you see, or you can follow the darkness between them. All it takes is your perspective, a little help sometimes, and a choice. Just my opinion, anyway."

"Yeah. I'm going to call my wife now. Goodbye, Toby." And after that, I never saw Toby or the Child again. Until I was supposed to.