



A Distant Wind

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A Christmas Story

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Autumn's leftover leaves crackled underfoot as they neared the wooden office. Smoke ascended from the tin pipe on the roof and Jerry knew the wood stove was red hot. It was Christmas Eve and there were yet a few things he and Angela had to do before they could close down the junkyard and go home. The population marker stated that Gulch was a small town of 2054. Salento Gulch, which had been cut out of the snow-dusted Salento Mountains, as if by a giant axe, emptied into town precisely where their business was located.

Gulch Junkyard was a mini-history of their community. Wrecks of all kinds lay awkwardly twisted within the chain metal fence surrounding the property. Cars and trucks that once were shiny new vehicles holding promise of great driving moments, now lay scattered and rusted like people whose great expectations had been dashed by time's relentless working and just stopped somewhere in the normal course of their lives.

In the distance the 4:45 express pounded rhythmically on the iron rails as it's whistle reverberated five miles down Salento Gulch to the little shack, as if emerging from a distant trumpet.

It had been a mild winter thus far, and everyone in town was expecting a sunny Christmas day. Down the road, Ed Mills was selling out of Christmas trees. Soon everyone in the little town would be headed home to begin the celebration. From the cab of the Kenworth tractor rig, a trucker honked a Christmas greeting as he headed west towards the thin line of dark clouds creeping over the top of the Salento Mountains.

Dinner for Jerry and Angela usually consisted of hamburgers and fries at Gulch City Diner, a converted railroad car parked up the road about a mile. Local people had a chance to pick up news from the truckers who stopped day and night for coffee and conversation.

It was necessary to work twelve to fourteen hours a day to maintain the little business. Jerry drove the tow truck and pulled parts and Angela kept the books and answered the phone. Dinner sometimes came as late as 9pm. Tonight, because it was Christmas Eve, Angela was fixing a turkey dinner with plum pudding and homemade cookies. She had worked until midnight the night before preparing the meal. Tonight for the first night in months, Angela and Jerry would have a night at home in their little apartment sitting by the fire. She longed for the moment to arrive.

Closing the gates, a distant wind began to penetrate their clothes causing Angela to shiver. The sky was turning dark gray with wisps of purple jetting through the gathering clouds. The darkening sky seemed to pick up speed as they paused to study it. The wind, mixed with the last fading notes of the train and amplified by canyon walls, caused Jerry to fasten the top button on his work shirt and put his scarf tightly around his neck.

"That's strange," Angela said, "I thought for sure it would stay warm tonight."

"I did too til I felt that wind. You never know what those mountains will attract I 'll start up the Dodge and you shut off the lights.

Oh yeah, Ang, would you get those gauges you left in the shack?"

Angela went into the little office. She had repeated this ritual nightly for years. Shut down the stove. Turn out the lights. Pull down the shades. In the darkening shack she reached over and closed the flue on the wood stove. The metal gradually cooled as the embers gave off a red glow on the wall above her desk. As she fumbled for the light switch, something strange began to happen. The air seemed to vibrate and quiver. At first, she thought it was the heat but the whole room began to change before her eyes. The red glow seemed to beckon her. She seemed to be going down a long tunnel. Her mind raced.

"Am I having a heart attack, she wondered?"

Angela began to smell hay, and barn smells. Somewhere a baby was crying. Voices singing some heavenly song were sounding in her vision. She could almost see figures passing before her as if beckoning her into some wonderful presence. Suddenly, breaking her concentration, she heard Jerry honk the horn and shout.

"Come on Ang, the car's warm."

Angela turned on the light and the gauges were exactly where she had left them. She picked them up, turned out the light, and paused for a moment. The faint afternoon light still crept into the room. Everything seemed normal. She shook her head as if to clear her thoughts. Pulling down the tattered shades, she stepped cautiously outside. The wind seemed stronger and whirled about her as she locked the door. Still feeling

strange, she walked back to their 54 Dodge sedan. They had found it sitting in the junkyard when they bought it. With time and care it became a useful vehicle despite its' age. Angela climbed in and Jerry closed her door. The wind was beginning to gust. As Angela looked up through the front windshield she could only see ahead about 40 feet. Night was falling like a shroud.

"It looks like we're in for a storm," Jerry said loudly as he got in the car. "It's a good thing you've already got food made. I don't think we'll be goin anywhere tonight."

Angela shook herself. "Yes, Jer', it looks like snow, she heard herself saying. "Let's get home before it breaks. I'm looking forward to a cozy night"

As they pulled out into the boulevard, large snowflakes began to fall, quickly shrinking in size until regular, even snowfall began to cover the streets and houses. The wind began to buffet the car.

"Jerry?"

"Yes Ang?"

Something funny just happened to me?

"Just a minute Hon! What's that over there?"

On their right by a lamppost, they could faintly see an old man in a gray coat. He had no hat and it looked like he had been caught unprepared by the snow and was extremely cold. He stood hunched over with his arms closed tightly about his body.

“Do you think we should stop?” Jerry asked

The same feeling began to well up in Angela that she had experienced back at the shack.

“Jerry I know we should stop but I’m frightened ”

Angela’s reaction surprised him as he pulled the four-door sedan over and got out. It was snowing extremely hard and he had to leave the engine running so the wipers could keep the windshield free of snow. Angela could see Jerry talking to the man between wipes of the blades. Just then the streetlights came on and she could see more clearly. The man seemed about seventy. He had a white beard and wore a thin cotton raincoat. Jerry was leading him over to the car.

Angela felt uneasy but she opened the back door for him and smiled. Jerry had to grab the door as the wind threatened to close it before the man could get in. The old man had clear piercing blue eyes. As he got in the back, he thanked her for being so kind to open the door.

Jerry closed the door, walked around and got back into the car.

“This is Chris, Angela, He has nowhere to stay tonight and needs some help.”

Angela looked at Jerry. There was a mission at the far end of town. She was going to mention it. After all, they deserved a night to themselves. As they pulled away, she began to hear that same music in her heart.

“That wind was turning me into an icicle, I don’t know if I could have made it to the mission. Life is so beautiful,” she could hear Chris saying.

"It's alive. You never know what will happen from moment to moment. . . Every hair of our head is different. . . Every flower a peculiar universe to itself and now we meet Jerry and Angela, and on such a night."

"Yes it is Christmas Eve," Jerry said, "we don't have much, but we can offer you a meal and a place to sleep tonight. "

Jerry paused as if unsure whether he had said too much and continued to peer into the ever-increasing darkness. Angela wanted to remind Jerry that Chris had mentioned the mission. Instead she reached across the seat and squeezed his hand reassuringly. They could hear the engine and the sound of the iced up wipers slapping against the edge of the windshield.

"I am grateful for your invitation." Chris replied.

They were turning into the driveway when Jerry listened intently.

"Do you hear that Angela?"

"Yes, Jerry, I've been hearing it for some time."

"It must be carolers," Chris said.

As they turned off the engine and got out of the car, it was still snowing heavily. They picked their way carefully up the steps. It was quite slick. Angela put the key in the door, pushed it open and the aroma of home cooking greeted them.

The apartment smelled of turkey, dressing, sweet pudding cookies, pumpkin pie, and juniper, which Angela hung from hooks in the

living room. Angela took Chris and Jerry's coats and went to make hot coffee.

Jerry bent down and carefully stacked kindling on the fire grate. Stuffing some old newspapers underneath, he reached for the box of wooden matches. Getting one out he struck it on the rough stone fireplace wall. Lowering the match in cupped hands, he lit the paper. The paper caught fire. As Jerry watched, the headlines of yesterday sparked and turned to flame, slowly disappearing up the chimney. Jerry stacked small fir logs and then added a sizeable oak log to the pile. Soon they were all sitting by a crackling fire and sipping their coffee.

Jerry was the first to speak, "Chris, what do you do for a living? Jerry turned toward Chris and again noticed his clear blue eyes. His gaze was like none he had ever seen. There was light coming out of those eyes.

"I have an unusual job description. My life is not my own. I am a messenger of the life. "

Before Jerry could react, Chris asked,

"Jerry, what do you and Angela focus on in your life? What keeps you going?"

" Oh, I suppose our business. He said wistfully. " There really isn't time for much else. My family all died. I lost my first wife and our children in a car wreck years ago. That's where I got this scar." Jerry rolled up his pant leg revealing a large pink scar down from the knee to the ankle.

Jerry paused reflecting: " I met Angela after that and she seemed to me a God send."

Angela blushed and smiled.

“ We were married and started this business ten years ago. We moved to Gulch because I had to leave the city behind. . . . Too many memories.”

Outside, in the snow covered night; the voice of children could be heard caroling

“O come let us adore him.”

“We work hard and long just to maintain, Chris Anyway, we are glad to have you in our home tonight.”

They all listened as the children sang

“ How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is giv’n,

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His Heaven

No ear may hear His coming but in this world of sin

Where meek souls will receive Him still the dear Christ enters

in.”

Chris, getting back to you, what did you mean “ my life is not my own?

“ Jerry and Angela, I am sent out with a message which I am to give to all who will receive it. This is the message. God loves you and is inviting you into his kingdom.”

O no Jerry thought, a religious nut. He had tried religion and God had let him down. The church he had gone to when a boy seemed to him to

be filled with hypocrites. A long silence followed. Arising out of the quiet, something inexplicable began to happen. Jerry began to shake, shiver all over.

At first, Jerry felt like he wanted to hide. It seemed like Chris could see right through him. Then he felt like he was dressed in dirty rags. The light was coming over him and exposing all his sores and hurts. He remembered the time he fell out of the car into the snow as a little boy and his mom didn't notice and just drove on. He wondered if she was coming back. . . The time in his teens when mom and pa split up and he could see his dad get in a car and drive away.... The time of the car wreck and the awful lonely Christmas afterward.

Angela spoke up excitedly,
" Jerry! This is the music I heard earlier in the shack."

*"O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray.
Cast out our sin and enter in be born in us today
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell
O come to us abide with us our Lord Emmanuel.*

Jerry spoke in amazement

"I feel like my whole life existed in one moment and it's right before my eyes. What's happening to me?"

"Do you ever think about Jesus Jerry?" Chris asked.

Angela began to sense that same vision she had seen in the shack.

"Chris?"

"Yes Angela?"

"I can see the stable and the animals, Mary and Joseph, the little donkey.

O Chris, to think that little baby is God! What are the carolers singing outside?"

" Fall on your knees. Oh hear the angel voices

O night divine. O night when Christ was born."

Jerry began to cry. Big tears coming down his ruddy cheeks

"All my life I've heard about Him but somehow I can feel Him. I know that little child is the one who made me."

"Made you and saves you," Chris replied

Angela began to cry.

"Oh Jerry, something's happening inside me."

"He knows our need," the carolers sang louder,

"Our weakness is no stranger. Behold your King,

Before Him lowly bend."

The carolers, the lyrics, the words Chris had spoken, the vision of the stable, the snow, the memories, all now seemed to be consumed by the presence of someone warm and wonderful.

"Do you believe Jesus is the Christ, the Lord of all creation?" Chris asked.

"I do believe, I believe He is here in the room with us," Jerry replied"

"Will you receive Him in your heart? Your heart is like that stable. Jesus is turned away at many doors. And like your memories, left out in the

cold. He doesn't need a fancy place. Remember what the carolers are singing,

“Where meek souls will receive Him still the dear Christ enters in.”

The carolers were now moving down the road. The strains of the First Noel echoing over the hills as Jerry and Angela knelt down and invited the one who made all things seen and unseen, who had come to them as a little child, into their hearts forever.

In that moment, they understood life was no longer drudgery. For the first time, they were free from the feeling that the purpose of life was to escape from pain without hope of something better. Light flooded their hearts and they were filled with unspeakable joy. It was like a mystery story finally being unraveled. God was loving them personally.

As they looked up from their prayer they wanted to hug Chris and tell him how wonderful they both felt, but Chris was gone.

“Chris!” Angela shouted

Jerry looked around the apartment.

“He’s gone,” Angela said quietly

“Yes, he’s gone but he’s not really gone, is he Angela?”

Jerry paused and looked out the window. ‘I knew when I saw him standing in the snow there was something special about him.’

“He was looking for the Inn wasn’t he Jerry?”

“Yes, that’s it Angela, and He found a resting place in our home.”

“And in our hearts, Jerry.”

“Yes Angela, in our hearts.”

The End