

Homer and Annie only lasted five or six years after Harmon died and Betsy moved with the boys into their house. Jeff and Michael had always loved playing the old pump organ when they visited their grandparents. They became the ones to teach little Christopher, as soon as his legs were long enough, how to prime the bellows and keep up a rhythmic pumping so the volume would be even. But it was clear Christopher had inherited the family talent, the “ears” for music.

After high school, Jeff joined the Air Force and quickly earned a place in the band. The latest postcards from cities around the world where the band played were often propped in the music stand of the pump organ. Michael won a voice scholarship to the state university, then joined the opera company in Santa Fe. By the time Christopher was twelve, he and his mother were alone.

Betsy worried about Christopher. He was a misfit for more than his unusual looks. He didn't seem to mind that he had almost no friends. He did well in school and brushed off the occasional teasing about his ears. Once in a while he would go home with another kid to watch TV or even shoot baskets in the driveway, but mostly he was content to come home after school to read and play with the family terrier, Lucas.

Betsy worked late two evenings a week at Bluegem Drugs. She would have worked more hours if they had given them to her. For a while after Jeff and Michael left home, things got a little better, moneywise. It was cheaper to feed just herself and Christopher, and Lucas. But lately the station wagon had become

unreliable and everything in the house seemed to be wearing out at the same time. And Betsy felt she was wearing out as well. Her legs and back often hurt and she knew it was owing to standing behind the register at Bluegem all day. She looked forward to settling into Harmon's old recliner at the end of a day and listening to Christopher play the pump organ. For both of them, the evening of music was often the best part of the day.

One Wednesday in October, after Betsy had worked twelve hours, Christopher greeted her with the news, "Mom, we're out of dog food. I tried to feed Lucas but the bag is empty." Betsy sighed. She was already buying an off brand of dog food from a discount chain, but payday was still two days away and she'd have to put some gas in the car in the morning. Maybe there was a can of something she and Christopher didn't like in the back of the cupboard, something poor, uncomplaining Lucas could make a meal of. She sank into the recliner and said, "How about some show tunes, tonight, Christopher?"

The boy slid onto the bench attached to the base of the pump organ and began pumping the bellows, his slim body rocking side to side and his big ears almost flapping with the motion. Then he began to play a medley of music from *My Fair Lady* – "With a Little Bit of Luck," "Here on the Street Where You Live," and others, ending with "Wouldn't It Be Lovely?" A few extra notes sounded oddly from the organ after Christopher's fingers left the keyboard. He frowned and cocked his head.

“It would be lovely, indeed,” Betsy said in her best Cockney imitation when the music ended. “Have you had anything to eat?” she asked her son.

Christopher paused before answering. “There are some eggs. And a little bread. You could have scrambled eggs and toast.” He thought of the stray notes that had followed the last song and picked out a silent melody with no air from the bellows to give it voice. G-G-F-E.... The notes were familiar but he couldn’t place them exactly.

Betsy looked hard at him and saw that he was avoiding her question. “But have you had anything to eat?”

“I’m okay. I ate a big lunch at school.”

Betsy felt her stomach twist. She understood that not only was the dog food bag empty, the fridge and cabinets were nearly so and Christopher was offering her virtually the last meal in the house. She was guilty lately of trying not to think about the bare shelves in the kitchen, in complete denial about how close to edge they were living now. She had done the same thing two weeks ago just before payday – told Christopher to eat the last can of soup and a few crackers, because she had “a big lunch at work.” She’d actually eaten a small container of very old chili from the back of the freezer and a stale hamburger bun for lunch. Now Christopher was telling her the same lie, trying to take care of her. Betsy sighed and turned to the kitchen.

As Christopher had said, there were two eggs and two slices of bread in the refrigerator. An empty juice

container and a milk jug with perhaps a quarter cup of fluid occupied the biggest shelf. In the cabinet left of the stove there was a box of oatmeal; even a few raisins. They had breakfast anyway. Reflexively, but not hopefully, Betsy opened the cabinet on her right. "Christopher?" The boy arrived unenthusiastically to his mother's summons. "What's this?" Betsy gestured to a large bag of dog food, two cans of hash, and a small bottle of ketchup.

Christopher stared at the unexpected items. "Where did that come from?"

"I asked you first," his mother said.

Christopher filled a bowl for the grateful Lucas and Betsy scrambled the hash with eggs and made toast for herself and her son. They said a prayer of thanks for the food. Christopher ate rather heartily for someone who recently declared himself not in need of food. He was especially thankful for the ketchup. The second time he asked for it to be passed, Betsy said, "I guess you just overlooked the stuff in that cabinet, huh?"

Christopher looked at her strangely. "Mom, I know you brought that food home with you."

"No. I didn't." Neither of them wanted to argue the point, or even think about it very much. It was late. Betsy washed up their few dishes and utensils. Christopher let Lucas out for his last potty break of the evening and took a small sack of trash to the container in the alley. All three took to their beds gladly and fell asleep quickly.

In the morning, Christopher pumped out a few tunes from Oklahoma while Betsy showered and dressed for work. "Oh, what a beautiful morning!" she sang along. Betsy boiled water for oatmeal while Christopher set the table. He placed a full jug of milk on the table with the bowls and spoons. Betsy stared at the milk. If the boy noticed anything unusual, he wasn't commenting. When they finished eating, Betsy told Christopher to be sure to eat all his school lunch because they really might not have much for supper that night. The next day would be payday and they could make it one night without an evening meal. At least Lucas, who couldn't understand about paydays, still had plenty of food in the big bag that had appeared the night before.

Thursday evening, Christopher was doing homework when Betsy arrived about six. He finished an algebra problem while she sifted through the day's bills and junk mail. She had already let her magazine subscriptions go and the older boys didn't write often. Betsy leaned back in the recliner and said, "Let's have old gospel tunes tonight, Christopher." He smiled, knowing that was some of his mother's favorite music. He pumped the bellows like a bicycle racer to produce hand-clappers like "When We All Get to Heaven," and "I'll Fly Away," then slowed a little for "I Love to Tell the Story." He finished the concert with "Rock of Ages," and "His Eye is on the Sparrow."

Christopher's hands paused above the organ keys and his strong legs rested from their pumping.

Without his help the old organ repeated the sequence of notes it had originated the night before,

then expelled a pious sigh. Another faint whistling sound turned out to be Betsy, snoring lightly in the recliner. Christopher slid quietly from the organ bench. He thought he might have a glass of milk for supper. Lucas had already been fed after school, but he padded into the kitchen hopefully.

Christopher opened the refrigerator, expecting to ration out some milk for himself and for his mother, leaving some for the next day's breakfast. He discovered a carton of orange juice next to the remaining milk. On the next shelf were a pound of bacon, a loaf of bread, and a package of sliced cheese. There was a jar of mayonnaise in the door of the refrigerator, next to last night's ketchup, and lettuce and tomatoes in the crisper drawer. BLT's were Christopher's favorite meal! He almost shouted before he remembered that his mother was sleeping. She must have been mixed up about the date she'd be paid.

Christopher felt even his toes were smiling, wiggling happily inside his sneakers. He decided to make sandwiches first and then wake his mom, but the aroma of bacon was a happy alarm. Betsy came into the kitchen blinking and sniffing. "What's going on here?"

"Thanks, Mom. You know BLT's are my favorite."

Betsy stared, still groggy from her half-nap. "Where did you get bacon?"

"From the fridge. It's okay, ...isn't it?" Christopher was suddenly afraid the food didn't belong to them, although he couldn't imagine who would be storing food in their refrigerator, or why. "I thought you weren't

getting paid until tomorrow, but I was going to have a glass of milk before bed, ...and I found all this stuff. I figured you got paid early.”

Betsy had opened the refrigerator and was frowning at the orange juice. “Was the house locked when you got home from school?”

“Yeah. You think somebody put food in our fridge?”

“I don’t know what I think.” Betsy had discovered the lettuce and tomatoes, luxuries on her budget. Her voice was soft.

“Well, I fed Lucas when I got home from school and this stuff wasn’t here then. That’s why I figured you brought it, like last night.”

“I didn’t bring home anything last night either, Christopher.” Mother and son held a long look, breaking their gaze to rescue the almost-over-done bacon from the skillet. Their prayer of thanks over the late supper was especially heart-felt.

When Betsy said “Amen,” Christopher exclaimed, “That’s it!” She waited to hear what he had discovered. “The music. The organ. It’s the Doxology! Da Da Da Da, Da Da Da DAH,” he sang. Betsy knew the song but didn’t understand why the old hymn had so excited Christopher now.

Betsy and Christopher continued to find various items mysteriously supplied to the household when money was especially tight. Usually the provision was food, but there were times when over-the-counter medications were needed, oil for the aging station

wagon, and once, new gym shorts when Christopher lost his on the way home. Mother and son didn't talk about the amazing occurrences but Christopher began adding a favorite tune as a finale to every session of music-making at the organ. Betsy sang along, "Praise God from Whom all blessings flow."

About a year after the hash-and-eggs supper, Betsy found a job as receptionist for a small suite of offices. The hours and pay were both better than at BlueGem. She was able to replace the station wagon and a cracked bathroom sink. Unexpected foodstuffs gradually stopped appearing in the refrigerator and kitchen cupboards. The Doxology remained a fixture of Christopher's evening concerts.

Spruce View

When I was very young the fact that my mother was missing the lower half of her left arm didn't register as unusual to me. I was bathed and dressed, snuggled, read to and well fed in a home that was clean and comfortable. That my mother did all this with only one hand was an unremarkable part of the miracle of security. When I started school, other children asked me what had happened to my mother's hand and I had to notice that she was indeed different from other mothers.

My first questions were answered with, "There was an accident when I was very young and I lost my hand." Of course I wanted to know if it had hurt. "For a little while," she said. And that was enough for me, and for my friends, for several years.

I was entering my teens before I thought more about my mother's disability. I suffered from the typical adolescent fantasy that I was the center of the known world, which should be as perfect as possible for my benefit. For the first time I felt ashamed of Mother's handicap, as though her lack somehow reflected on me, made me less than perfect. I think she understood my feelings more than I did, and in her patient way refused to take offense at my behavior.

One summer day when friends came to the house to hang out in my room and talk, Mother offered to bring us lemonade and cookies. Respecting our privacy, she had only knocked and I chose to talk to her through the closed door. “It’s okay. I’ll come to the kitchen and get the snacks.” My friends knew my mother had only one hand, but I suddenly didn’t want the imperfection on display. I slipped out of the room and retrieved the tray Mother had prepared without a “thank you,” without even looking at her.

That night she came to my room after I was in bed with my book and asked to tell me a story. I rolled my eyes. I was way too old for bedtime stories, although that had been a favorite ritual when I was younger. This is my mother’s story.

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The village of Spruce View had its heyday as a logging town just before World War II. Once the United States entered the war, more and more loggers enlisted or were drafted or took jobs in war-related industries outside the mountains. One logging company survived, though much smaller, as a supplier of hardwoods for cabinet and furniture makers.

Past sixth grade, children had to go down the mountain to the town of Riverbend for school. All the churches but one gradually closed their doors, and that one was served by a traveling preacher from Riverbend only twice a month. The post-war boom didn’t reach up the mountain and Spruce View was dissolving like mist on a summer morning.

In the spring of 1952, Spruce View began to experience vandalism, something new in the town. At first, windows and doors of abandoned houses and shops were broken and splintered, one or two, here and there, without pattern. The sheriff tried to patrol more at night but never caught anyone in the act and never saw unfamiliar vehicles in the area.

The generator that powered refrigerators for Thompson's Gas and Grocery was destroyed when somebody packed the coils with mud and pulled wiring loose. Tommy said the wires looked like they'd been chewed by squirrels but there were no electrocuted squirrel bodies lying around. A big swamp cooler at Miss Morgan's beauty shop was pulled out of its window mounting and crushed like a cardboard box on the ground.

In June, some loggers reported finding tracks in the woods like those of a bare-foot man but bigger than any man on the crew. Most people said they were just bear tracks, but some talked of the mountain creature, known by many names in mountainous areas all over the world. Old Mr. Avery found some of the tracks when his chicken coop was broken open at the roof line, like somebody opening a box he said. There were a couple of dead chickens on the ground and several more missing, but whether someone had taken them or they just flew away in fright, Mr. Avery couldn't say.

After Avery's chickens were ravaged, larger animals were found dead with vital organs raggedly ripped out – a couple of dogs, a goat, some pigs. People started looking for the monster's tracks. Some thought they

saw the marks when dead animals were found, others said they were only imagining things. Plenty of folks claimed to have heard rustling in the brush when they walked near the woods, but that could have been any kind of forest creature.

Sheriff Carter and his deputy Wilmer continued patrolling through the county at night, hoping to put who or whatever was harassing the community on notice. It was while they were driving slowly down County Road 417, near the Baker farm, that Carter and Wilmer heard a cow making an awful racket like she was hurt or maybe in labor and having trouble. They pulled their truck to the side of the road, got out and took turns holding the barbed wire apart for each to climb through. Not far into the pasture, well illuminated by a three-quarter moon and a country sky full of stars, the bellowing cow was writhing on the ground. They stared as the cow began to move away from them, sliding on her side, still mooing and mawing pitifully. The noise stopped suddenly when a ragged hole opened in the cow's belly, a huge chunk of flesh rising, then disappearing in the air. The men hurried back to their truck and the safety of the sheriff's office in town.

It was harder for skeptics to dismiss the report of Sheriff Carter and Deputy Wilmer than the stories of drunken loggers, foggy old men and nervous middle-aged women. When the lawmen's tale was analyzed, the conclusion was reached that whatever was harassing the town was not only huge and evil but invisible. People began to speculate that the attacks might escalate to include human beings. Deputy Wilmer moved off the mountain.

About the time the deputy left, in the middle of all the wild stories, young Doctor Martin moved back to Spruce View with his family. James Martin had grown up in Spruce View, went away to college and medical school and then to the War. He served in Europe and was briefly a prisoner in Germany. He wanted to come home to a quiet place, a country way of life, for his wife and little girl. Doc Martin didn't put any stock in the tales of the mountain monster and the people of Spruce View tried to believe that his youth and education and smiling good looks were the truth, instead of the broken machinery, dead animals and soft, deep tracks many of them had seen – continued to see.

Doc Martin and his wife Joyce fixed up a house at the edge of town with a nice little yard where Joyce could plant a garden and their daughter Christine could play. Christine was a beautiful four-year-old with hair in long ringlets. Joyce kept her dressed in starched pinafores, matching hair ribbons and a silver bracelet with a tiny cross charm that had come from Doc Martin's mother's jewelry box. The girl's chief playmates were her dolls and stuffed animals. Her menagerie included the usual rabbits and cuddly teddy bears, but also one fiercely lifelike grizzly with teeth showing, gift of an elderly aunt for the girl's third birthday. Her parents never understood why the furry menace was Christine's favorite toy.

In early September that year the weather was already turning cooler on the mountain. Joyce Martin had been having headaches and she took to her bed one afternoon, giving Christine strict instructions to stay indoors. Ordinarily a compliant child, Christine grew

bored with her books that day. She decided her mother had told her to stay inside because of the cool weather, so she found a sweater to wear and packed her favorite toys outside for a picnic, only yards from the darkening woods.

Christine spread a little cloth on the ground and arranged her toys around the edges for a tea party. She spent some time getting the group settled in a way that pleased her. She talked to the dolls and animals, scolding and instructing them, mediating little disagreements she imagined. Once, Christine stopped her play and looked up into the trees. Perhaps she had seen something, a large shape moving toward the house, but the movement was indistinct and she returned attention to her toys.

Wind stirred the brush at the edge of the yard but the cracking of twigs was too heavy and the bowing of branches was too deep to be caused by the wind. Christine looked to the trees again. This time the shape moving toward her became more distinct as it approached. She instinctively pulled her favorite bear close and watched as the huge creature lumbering through the brush showed itself to be the living form of her grizzly toy. She was fascinated but not afraid, she later claimed, because the monster seemed so familiar despite its gargantuan size. Its head was as large as her whole four-year-old body.

The creature moved silently, except for the breaking of branches where it strode through a thicket of hawthorn. It thrust its shaggy snout down to the dolls' picnic blanket then suddenly took Christine's left hand

and forearm into his crushing jaws. Only then did she sense danger, as well as anger. With her right arm she swung her grizzly toy in a wide arc, hit the monster's nose and cried, "No!" Her slender left arm snapped, bone and every tissue severed by the horrid teeth, but the creature backed away. Christine fell, limp as one of her toys in the childish scene now in gory disarray. Her blue plaid pinafore, white sweater and blouse were stained deep purple with her life serum.

Doc Martin must have arrived in his green Rambler station wagon within a couple of minutes of the attack. Some said the creature had been driven away as much by the sound of his approaching car as by Christine's fearless rebuke. She certainly would not have survived without his quick attention.

There was a lot of talk in Spruce View about whether Christine's attacker was the mountain monster that had plagued the town for months or "just" a grizzly bear. When the child was able to talk about her experience, there was no doubt she described a bear. She even showed questioners her grizzly toy, uglier than ever after its fur was ruined by Joyce's cleaning efforts. But Christine insisted on a creature bigger than any grizzly ever known. More argument centered on the fact that the experience of the sheriff and his deputy had established that the mountain monster was invisible. Why would Christine have seen it if no one else had?

Experts from the state university came to examine the monster's bloody footprints clearly limned on Christine's picnic cloth. They could not come to

agreement on the size and nature of the creature that

made the prints, but it was not heard from in Spruce

View again. The silver bracelet with its tiny cross charm

was never found – lost to the belly of the beast along

with Christine's innocent, playful hand and forearm.

Plaid Christmas

The Stewart family was big on Christmas. Susan Stewart loved to decorate for all kinds of occasions, and Christmas was an excuse to go way overboard. She prided herself on “keeping Christ in Christmas” and there was not a ghost of a Santa Claus anywhere in her prodigious collection of décor – a few snowmen and snowflakes maybe, but no Santa Claus. This year, she was doing plaid – classic red and green Scots plaid with evergreen and candles everywhere you looked. And all the family packages were wrapped in brown Kraft paper with plaid bows. The look was simple but classy. Susan thought it was a perfect statement of her personality.

Susan and Henry had never told their children the Santa myth, although they were well-spoiled with Christmas loot. When their son, Hank, was five and assured a friend there was no such thing as Santa Claus, the other boy made such a grand apologetic that Hank came home a convert and tried to convince his parents and baby sister of the old elf’s existence. But by the time little Hillary was in kindergarten, both children were given to rolling their eyes when friendly strangers asked, “And what’s Santa going to bring you this year?”

But, apart from Santa, the Stewarts participated in every Christmas tradition Susan heard of, including from a variety of other countries. They had German

advent calendars and a Swedish candle carousel. They invited neighbors and friends from church for a Mexican posada celebration, which they combined with a birthday party for Jesus when the pilgrims finally reached the “inn” that had a place for them. And they carried the season all the way to Epiphany on January 6th, when the children got more presents from the Wise Men, according to the tradition of several countries with predominately Catholic culture. Susan was particularly proud of that custom because it seemed to justify the whole gifting frenzy by tying it to the Bible story of Jesus’ birth. Despite complaining about the difficulty of keeping all the family appointments during the rest of the year, Susan had no reservations about crowding the December datebook. She was convinced that celebrating Christmas to the point of exhaustion was a great testimony of her Christian faith.

Hank and Hilary, now fourteen and eleven, mostly didn’t mind the Christmas hubbub. It had always been so at their house, their mother insisting every year that they must do all the traditional things and finding something new to add each year. Hank’s favorite Christmas activity was decorating sugar cookies. The children had been encouraged to invite friends for a cookie decorating party since before they started school and now their friends looked forward to it as much as they did. Susan had to host two cookie parties now, one for Hilary’s girl friends and one for Hank’s buddies, because the girls were grossed out by the boys’ inability to keep the knives used to spread the colored frostings out of their mouths. The girls always went home with a plate of cookies to share with their families. But for a

few years now, the boys usually ate their cookies as fast as they decorated them.

Ever since his brief apostasy to the fantasy camp, Hank was hardcore anti-Santa. Like an ex-smoker who preaches the gospel of clean air, Hank was a missionary for all the religious aspects of Christmas. He would have been content to have all the gift-giving put off to the January date, to really emphasize the gifts of the Wise Men, part of the Bible story of Christmas. He was the only family member who thought they should forego a decorated tree, because it was actually a remnant of pagan traditions from northern Europe. None of the Stewart family was interested in the fact that Jesus' actual birthdate was probably in spring, or possibly fall, according to various historical information and the unlikelihood of shepherds having their flocks out at night in the dead of winter.

Hillary's favorite activity of the season was caroling. She loved making up goodie bags for the old people in the church, favorite teachers, the firemen on duty, and going out to sing and deliver the bags. It was one of the things her family did at Christmas that really seemed to be about helping other people, not just indulging themselves. She also liked filling a box for Project Christmas Cheer to send to a child in a war-torn country. She took a sandwich from home to school every day in November and December so she could have the money usually spent on lunch to buy presents for her family, and she always saved back a couple of dollars for something girly and sparkly to put in the Christmas Cheer box. She thought about how it would be not to have any pretty things of her own and was

very aware that she lived a privileged life when compared with most of the world's children.

Henry tolerated his wife's Christmas fetish, even though he would have preferred a more low-key observance of the holiday. He loved all the traditional foods and being given permission not to think about healthy eating for a month or so. He was proud of the Martha Washington bonbons and cream cheese pumpkin roll Susan always sent to share with his office mates in December. Henry felt Susan's excess of celebration sort of made up for his own lack of enthusiasm about Christmas. He knew he was very fortunate to have a good job that provided more than enough for his family. A loving wife, healthy children who were generally respectful...Henry was often incredulous to be living what many people would consider a charmed life indeed. He knew himself to be more than a little lazy and a lot selfish. He also knew those failings were easy to disguise and that few people were aware of them, maybe not even Susan. He was less sure that his dad was fooled by his veneer of the model family man.

Grandpa Herschel, Henry's father, had been living with the family for three years, since his wife died. Herschel missed Eleanor deeply, but he was settling into life with his son's family very well. He was pleased that the sale of his former home had made possible the purchase of the house they all lived in now, with the ample guest suite over the garage that was his domain. The family was really quite blessed to have him there, he surmised. Besides being able to contribute to the monthly utilities, he scouted around the property looking
