

things. In the ladies' room, a young mother fastened her toddler's overall straps. A pair of ragged blue jeans and sandals showed under one stall door. The other four stalls swung open and empty.

"Did you see a little woman in a flowered dress?" The mother shook her head.

Jeanne returned to the waiting room where there were more passengers and family members than an hour earlier, but no Miss Truman. Great! What now? She ran to the breezeway where the Dallas bus waited. "Did a little lady in a flowered dress get on already?" The driver allowed her to step on the bus to check. No Miss Truman.

Back inside the terminal, Jeanne felt the beginning of panic. I've got to get on the bus. What am I going to do with this bag? She scanned the crowd again, searching for the relentlessly cheerful face of Miss Truman. She dropped her backpack and twisted the gold clasp of the old brown bag, not knowing what help she expected to find. The bag was empty.

Aghh! I thought she had everything she needed in here. Clawing further into the darkness of the bag in desperation, her fingers found something. She drew out a small, clear plastic box. It held a pair of crocheted baby booties, white with pink and blue trim. A folded sheet of paper was taped to the bottom of the box.

The crowd surged around Jeanne and the bus for Dallas left the station. She sat in one of the hard chairs again and stared at the paper she

had found in Miss Truman's bag. It was the initial application form for an international adoption agency. She thought of Miss Truman saying, "I expect you'll find what you need, too, dear."

Jeanne traded the rest of her ticket for a return trip to Morton. Before boarding her bus, she decided to leave the handbag and the Dallas paper in her chair. She kept the booties, expecting to need them.

Jeanne napped most of the way to Lubbock. When the bus stopped, a girl across the aisle jumped up and grabbed a bag from the overhead rack. She hurried off the bus and into the station ahead of everyone else. Jeanne was rubbing sleep from her eyes, but she could have sworn the long scarf in the girl's belt loops was the same flowered print Miss Truman had worn.

Spruce View

When I was very young the fact that my mother was missing the lower half of her left arm didn't seem 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 if she could share a story with me. I rolled my eyes. At thirteen I was way too old for bedtime stories, although that had been a favorite ritual when I was younger. But she wasn't talking about telling a story. Instead, she handed me a yellowed sheaf of paper, typewritten on one of the old machines whose keys left indentions where the shaped letters struck the paper from behind an inked ribbon. "My mother wrote this." The manuscript was titled "Spruce View," by Joyce Martin, my grandmother.

- § -

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 Thompson 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 remote 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 apprehend who- or whatever was harassing the community. 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 other 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 bellowing pitifully. The noise stopped suddenly

when a ragged chunk of flesh rose from the cow's belly, then disappeared in the air. The men retreated 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 tales of the mountain monster. The people of Spruce View wanted to believe his youth and education and smiling good looks but many of them had seen – continued to see – broken machinery, dead animals and soft, deep tracks.

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 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 their little disagreements. 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.

– § –

My mother sat quietly near my window waiting for me to finish reading the old story, not even coming to comfort me when I started sobbing near the end. "Why have you never told me this story?"

"I suppose when you were little I didn't want you to be frightened. After a while, it didn't seem important. I never worried about the 'bear' returning. After all, I felt I had driven him away for good. I didn't even miss my hand so much after a few months. But I did miss my bracelet. Still do."

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. 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 and his various incarnations, the Stewarts participated in every

Christmas tradition Susan heard of, including those 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 Hillary, now fourteen and eleven, mostly didn’t mind the Christmas hubbub. It had always been so at their house, their mother insisting that they must do all the traditional activities 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 hosted two cookie parties now, one for Hillary’s girlfriends and one

for Hank's buddies, because the girls were grossed out by the boys' inability to keep the frosting knives out of their mouths. The girls always went home with a plate of cookies to share with their families. But 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 put off all the gift-giving 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 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 for fix-it projects to keep himself busy. Henry had suggested he consult Susan before putting in new electrical outlets or shrubbery, but Herschel liked to surprise the family with his offerings.

Herschel's other hobby was sending interesting forwards to his email list. Not just jokes. Herschel sent virus warnings, missing children reports, and partisan political messages. Henry had tried and failed to get his father to check out the legitimacy of these items on Snopes.com before forwarding them to dozens of people. He also tried to teach Herschel to "cut and paste" and use "blind carbon copy" when he sent out a mass mailing, so he wouldn't be sending scores of addresses into cyber space to be exposed to real viruses or spambots. Herschel thought his son worried too much and sent him prayers. In fact, Herschel's email specialty was prayers. Not actual responses to the needs of people he knew, but cheaply-rhymed verses from greeting cards, recycled with clip-art flowers and tinny sound files of old hymns, making their way around the internet with the addition of chain-letter-style promises of what would happen if you passed them on, and warnings of the consequences of failing to

do so. Sending out prayers gave Herschel a warm feeling.

On December 20th of the Plaid Christmas, Susan was putting cookies in the oven when the doorbell rang. By the time she got to the door, the brown parcel service van was pulling away from the curb and a box was sitting on the Christmas welcome mat, right over the "Joy" in "Joy to the World." The odd thing was, there was no shipper's packaging. Susan admired the wrapping on the gift – a heavy but supple brown paper, almost like suede cloth, and a real silk ribbon woven in royal Stewart tartan – the ultimate expression of her chosen motif for the year. Though there was no tag to identify sender or recipient, Susan felt sure the wonderful box was intended for her. It felt like an affirmation of her good taste. She couldn't really imagine Henry picking out such perfect wrapping. Anyway, why would he have a gift delivered to the house? But it was exactly the right size and shape to hold the silver and crystal bowl from Dillman's she had hinted to Henry would be a suitable Christmas gift for her. Marjory? Her best friend at church knew she was doing plaid this year, but Susan and Marjory didn't usually exchange gifts as nice as this box promised. The buzzer on the oven interrupted her speculation on the origin of the box and Susan hurried back to her cookies, leaving the gift on the hall table.

Herschel saw the box when he returned home from his bowling league. He hadn't felt much like Christmas since Eleanor died, but there was something about this box that caught his eye.

For one thing, it was the right size to hold the bowling bag he had been looking at in the pro shop that afternoon. And Henry had noticed last week that the handle on his dad's current bag was pulling loose on one side. Why not? A new bowling bag would make a great gift. Herschel smiled and whistled a Christmas carol up the stairs to his garage suite.

When Hillary saw the chic brown package she stopped to feel the luxurious texture of the special paper and curl a loose end of the silk ribbon in her fingers. She wondered who her mother might be sending the elegant box to. She thought it might be for their new pastor's family or maybe for Grandma Sutton.

Hank was next to find the fancy gift box on the hall table. He hefted it for weight and gave a good shake before heading to the kitchen to sample cookies. He wasn't sure the box was heavy enough to be a bike helmet, but it was the right size. A helmet might mean there was a BMX bike in his future.

The box was still in the hallway when Henry came in after work. Even his usual lack of interest in the Christmas hoopla was not proof against the insistent glamour of the gift. He could see that the paper and ribbon were very fine and likely costly. He expected the box was something his wife had prepared for her mother. He knew how Susan prized pretty wrappings, for even simple gifts, and he reminded himself to go to Dillman's to shop for her so he could ask for a fancy wrapping that might be the equal of this box.

It was after supper before Susan thought about the wonderful Plaid Christmas box again. No one else had mentioned it. The Stewarts knew how to be discreet about surprises, especially at Christmas...how to allow someone the joy of making a surprise. Susan placed the box prominently under the tree, only sorry that its beautiful wrapping made her own best efforts look a shade shabby. An untagged box in the pile gave a little mystery, a little excitement she thought, to an event that was losing some of its fervency as the children got older.

The last few days before Christmas flew by in a rush of activity, as always. Hank begged off The Nutcracker performance by asking to go bowling with Grandpa Herschel. On their way out, his eye fell on the big square box and he had the horrible thought that Grandpa might give him a bowling ball for Christmas if he acted too enthusiastic about the game.

Christmas Eve – hot chocolate, cider, cookies and caroling, followed by candlelight communion at the church.... It was midnight before anyone at the Stewart house got to bed. Still, Christmas morning, Hillary woke about five and brought her stocking into her room from the doorknob. That was a compromise worked out when the children were very young and wanted to start opening gifts before Hank and Susan had even a few hours of sleep. Hank and Hillary were allowed to retrieve their stockings at any hour, as long as they kept them in their rooms. Then, when Henry and Susan got up at seven or so, the family approached the hallowed tree