

CHILDISH THINGS

by

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We began what Mrs. Gardner chose to call “The Toy Project” in the middle of October, three weeks before my sixteenth birthday. When it ended, on Christmas Eve, we closed the door on it, relieved to have it over with and done. But for me, it’s not *really* over with. Not by a long shot. I don’t know for sure about the others, since we never talk about it. But I suspect they feel the same way I do—and *that’s* why nobody ever mentions it. Not even our adult sponsors, Mr. and Mrs. Gardner. And it was Mrs. Gardner’s idea to begin with.

When we began the project, we had no idea what we’d be getting into, or where it would take us. There’s six of us in our Methodist Youth Fellowship. One is Wes Morgan, my best friend. We’ve known each other for most of our lives. Started kindergarten together, had a lawn-mowing service in junior high, were on the wrestling team in high school till I broke my arm falling off a ladder and had to quit. This year we’re lab partners in chemistry. He worships Mickey Mantle, and just about went crazy in early October when the New York Yankees won the World Series for the fifth time in a row. He even wears his Yankees baseball cap indoors—except during church on Sunday mornings, when his father says he can’t. Just after the Fourth of July, his girlfriend broke up with him, and he’s been grieving ever since. It’s too bad, because Karen was lots of fun and very nice, even though she went to North High and was a Baptist.

When ‘The Toy Project’ began, I didn’t have a girlfriend, but now I do and it’s official: Sue Mitford. We’d known each other for years, at school and church. Her sense of humor and mine are a perfect mesh, and we’ve always kidded around a lot. But what really brought us together is music. Her favorite classical piece is Tchaikovsky’s *Piano Concerto*, while mine’s *The Grand Canyon Suite*. Her favorite pop tunes? Whatever’s on Eddie Fisher’s newest album. He does have a nice voice, but I’d rather listen to Frankie Carle’s piano. Sue’s hair isn’t quite what I’d call blond—more caramel-colored, I guess; her eyes—dark like chocolate—snap and sparkle when she’s angry. Her right cheek dimples when she smiles. I love the way she fills out

those tight Angora sweaters she likes to wear—and I'm not alone in that: *all* the guys stand to and take notice when she comes on the scene.

Before the Toy Project, we'd gone out quite a few times, but only on group dates with the other MYFers: picnics, a trip to Pipe Rock Amusement Park, and movies followed by hamburgers and Cokes at the Koala Drive-in. We really liked the 3-D effects in *House of Wax*, especially when Vincent Price's wax figures were on fire, with their faces melting and their eyes popping out. In September we all went to see *The Robe*—kind of a tearjerker, but I really liked the Caligula character. Sue just swooned over Victor Mature, gushing "He's so *handsome!*"—but I thought he was just a ham.

Doug Burke, the one senior in our group at the time of the Project, is relaxed and easy-going. He doesn't want to go to college, and thinks he might be a professional photographer. On the other hand, now that the Korean War's officially over, he thinks he might join the Air Force and become a pilot. He's talked with a recruiter, but isn't ready to commit himself yet.

Doug's not only the oldest guy in our group, he's the biggest—with broad shoulders, beefy upper arms, hands like catcher's mitts, a 42-inch waist, and legs like fire plugs. If he has a girlfriend, we don't know about it.

Debra Follett would like to be his girlfriend. She always sits next to him at the movies, and is forever bringing him little gifts. The rest of us find it embarrassing. Doug doesn't encourage her, and may even feel sorry for her. Two years ago her mother got a divorce, and her dad moved out of state. It's been an awkward time for her: she's skinny (like she starves herself), wears thick glasses, and has really bad zits.

When we started the Project, Eric Marshall was a sophomore; he's a quiet, mousey guy who sports a crew cut, wears bow ties, and always wants to lead the opening prayer. He's okay, though—cheerful, friendly, willing to help out if you need a favor, the kind of guy who'd guide an old lady across the street and carry her groceries up three flights of stairs. He studies the Bible a lot, and wants to be a minister. He'll probably make a good one.

And then there's me—Bill Anderson. (My name's really William, but I don't use it. From the time I was four, my older sister always called me "Will-*yum*—yum-*YUM!*" She still does. I hate it. Wouldn't you?)

Like Eric, when I was 14 and 15, I thought I wanted to be a minister. Some days, when the spirit was on me, I was convinced that God was calling me to serve Him: "Bill, I've chosen

you to do My Work. Take up your cloak and follow Me." And I'd get all feverish, and moisty-eyed, and resolute, praying for guidance and strength, and preparing myself for whatever work might be dropped on me in seminary. But then, on other days, when the spirit was off doing something else and the call was very faint, I'd get chilly and resentful and start thinking I should go into some other line of work. Oh, I struggled, I really did. If God's giving you the call, you don't want to turn Him down. But you've got to be sure. And deciding whether He really is calling is doubly difficult because of the guilt that gets in the way when you think you might be following your own desires instead of His. But sometime in April, after praying all weekend for guidance, I finally stopped struggling and decided once and for all not to go into the ministry. Coming to that decision was the hardest thing I've ever done, and I begged God to forgive me if I'd made the wrong choice. But I felt sure psychology or journalism would be better for me. And if I apply my Christian principles *there* to do good in the world, I'll still be serving God, won't I?

I've thought a lot about the chain of events that pulled us into the Toy Project. I'm sure the process began in August during the weekend retreat we had at Camp Longview with the city's two other MYF groups.

We have these retreats every year, with about forty in attendance. Asbury Methodist, located in the East Glen subdivision, and the richest church in town, has the biggest MYF, with about twenty-five members. Wesley Methodist has about ten. The Asbury kids think they're better than the rest of us. They have a fancy meeting room of their very own next to their church's gymnasium with access to soft-drink vending machines. At our church, we have to meet in the basement, behind the stairs, in the kindergarten Sunday-school classroom.

We'd all been looking forward to the retreat as a fun weekend away from home at the end of summer, a chance to recharge our batteries before school started. But that wasn't to be. Late on Friday night (just as the retreat was beginning), the guys from Asbury sneaked into the Asbury girls' dorm and bedded down in the empty bunks; and as soon as the girls discovered it, they did a lot of shrieking and squealing, and gave the guys their panties to keep as trophies. You better believe it didn't take long for the rest of us to hear about it. I was angry and disgusted. It was obvious those Asbury creeps didn't understand what retreats were for—a time-out for meditation, spiritual renewal, personal growth. When Eric saw them showing off the girls' panties, it shocked him speechless. All day Friday he'd been working up a Saturday afternoon

program for the whole retreat—something about personal discipline being the foundation of morality—and now he felt all his effort was pointless. He went off by himself in the dark, and when he came back around two in the morning, I could tell he’d been crying. He went on with the program, but his heart wasn’t in it.

And of course everybody made sure that none of the adult sponsors heard anything about the Friday night sneak-in.

When school started, our MYF had a hard time coming up with Sunday programs. It was like the retreat had blown us off course, and we were just wandering in circles. We devoted one meeting to a popcorn party, another to miniature golf, still another to a slideshow about ruins in the Holy Land. On the last Sunday in September we made taffy apples in the church kitchen.

We knew that our sponsors Mr. and Mrs. Gardner resented our slacking off. For them—and particularly for Mrs. Gardner—the whole purpose of MYF was to train us to be “workers in the vineyard”, so as adults we’d be able to dispense the grapes of Christian charity through community service. All through September they were casting about for ways to get us back on track to improve the harvest.

The Gardners don’t have kids of their own, and maybe that’s why they volunteer to manage a bunch of owly high-schoolers on Sunday nights. They want us to call them Calvin and Nora Jean, but we always address them as Mister and Missus. Since they see sponsoring our MYF as their Christian duty and personal mission, we feel we’ve got to maintain an unbridgeable distance between them and us. We don’t want them to start regarding us as buddies.

Mr. Gardner works for a lumber company, sings in the choir, and always says “Is that right” when you tell him something. He keeps his *I LIKE IKE* bumper sticker on their car even though the election was almost two years ago.

Mrs. Gardner does most of the talking. She’s always giving her opinion on this or that, suggesting topics for MYF programs, and telling us how we should behave to please our parents. She doesn’t like the new Revised Standard Version of the Bible. “I’ll stick with the King James,” she says, when the subject comes up. And when Wes Morgan, who likes literature (and showing off) says (as he always does), “But that came out in 1611. The translations in the RSV are more accurate,” she says, “Well, maybe so, I don’t know about that. But the language of the King James is more elegant. And that’s what *I* like.” She teaches Sunday school to the third-graders, and always does kitchen duty during the church’s monthly soup and bean suppers.

We could tell that our drift was irritating Mrs. Gardner. And sure enough, on the second Sunday of October, she sat us down on the tiny chairs in the kindergarten room to propose a project designed to get us back on course. "I've been talking to a person I've known for years," she said, "—Laura Talmadge, director of the Adabelle Franzen Children's Home."

Wes looked at me and rolled his eyes as though to say: Oh good! The county orphanage! Mrs. Gardner pretended not to notice. "She feels it would be wonderful if our group could give a surprise party for the children on Christmas Eve. The Home always has a large tree donated, but they just don't have money enough to throw the kids a party."

Sue was immediately interested. "How many kids?"

"Thirty-eight, ranging in age from five to fifteen. Most are ten or below."

Debra asked, "Does she want us to donate ornaments for the tree?"

"Oh no, the Home has ornaments it's used for many years. She'd like for us to bring refreshments, and provide each child with a gift. These kids are so poor they don't have *anything* of their own. Can you imagine what that must be like? I think it's awfully sad, don't you? She says that getting a gift of their very own would make the kids feel important and show them that people really do care about them. I told her I'd see if all of you would like to host a party."

It didn't seem like a bad idea. Our group certainly wasn't doing anything else. As we kicked it around, it appealed to us more and more. The refreshments would have to be the sort we could easily transport across town: nothing messy, everything substantial and sturdy, like popcorn balls, frosted cupcakes, taffy apples. Everyone began making suggestions, and Debra compiled them into a master list: gallon jugs of fruit punch, ribbon candy, striped peppermint canes, hard suckables with jam centers. Paper plates and cups. A few balloons, and rolls of red and green crepe paper for overhead streamers. Sue volunteered to bake the cupcakes. Since our treasury had just over twelve dollars, we figured if each of us contributed an additional two dollars, we should have enough.

But what about the thirty-eight gifts?

Mrs. Gardner had already been there. "Mrs. Talmadge gave me a list of names and ages," she said, holding up a sheet of paper. "Twenty-two boys and sixteen girls, most of them quite young. She recommends toys; something appropriate for each child that they can claim for their own. And then a few items for the entire group to share—like puzzles and board games."

"But won't that cost a lot of money?" Eric asked. We were all thinking the same thing.

"Well, it would if we had to pay for everything ourselves," Mrs. Gardner said. "But I'm sure the whole congregation would be happy to donate toys if we asked them. I'll bet many people still have toys around the house that their kids have outgrown."

Debra said, "That's prob'ly true. I still have a doll that meant a lot to me when I was little. She has yellow hair and blue eyes. Her name's Martha Much, and I'd really like for another girl to have her who'd love her as much as I did."

"And I've got a wooden train set," said Wes, "still in good shape, with twelve feet of track."

Our vote was unanimous. "Good for you," said Mrs. Gardner. "I'll put a notice in next Sunday's church bulletin, saying we need donations of toys. As for a collection point, I'll ask the janitor to find a large cardboard box that we can leave in the main vestibule."

And that was that. We called it a night, and Doug drove me home in his parents' Hudson. I had a psychology test to study for, and Doug wanted to work on his photographs. "You know," he said as he turned into my driveway, "I think my Dad's Santa Claus costume, beard and the works, is still up in the attic. He used to wear it on Christmas Day when Angie and I were little. And you better believe he always ate the cookies we put out for him. I'll see if I can find it. I wouldn't mind being Santa at the party, Ho ho ho."

"To each his own," I said. "You're just thinkin' about the cupcakes. Ho ho ho."

Mrs. Gardner's notice was in the Sunday bulletin. The janitor placed a cardboard box in the vestibule where people could drop off their toys before entering the sanctuary. It was a very large box, having contained a bulk purchase of paper towels. Mrs. Gardner stapled glittery tinsel around the top and pasted a sign on the side: PLEASE PUT DONATED TOYS HERE.

During the next week, we all went through our closets and attics to see what items we could contribute. When we brought together everything we'd found, it made a modest pile. Most of the things had been well-loved and therefore well-used. The few toys that had not appealed were still in mint condition, some of them in their original packaging. These we immediately set aside to go to the orphanage. Our final inventory of well-used but salvageable items consisted of four Big Little Books, a pair of Scottie-dog magnets, Wes's wooden train set, seven miniature cars and trucks (including a fire truck and an ambulance), a magnifying glass, several dolls

(including Martha Much), three cap pistols, a pair of plastic binoculars, and a stuffed panda. Not a bad start, we felt.

The donations from the congregation began as a frighteningly thin trickle, and Mrs. Gardner placed ever more urgent notices in the church bulletin, counting down the Sundays remaining before Christmas Eve. "The high school MYF desperately needs toys of all sorts to take to the children at the Adabelle Franzen Home. Now's the time to share all those toys your kids have outgrown with other children who don't have *any* toys to play with." All through November, and during the first three weeks of December we left the box in the vestibule as a pointed reminder for the congregation to keep giving, and sure enough, the trickle continued, along with cash donations totaling seven dollars.

On October 28, I turned sixteen, and for two weeks I was preoccupied with planning my birthday party (a hayrack ride on my uncle's farm, with a bonfire and wiener roast, to which the MYFers and other school friends were invited), obtaining my driver's license, writing a paper for junior English on Henry Thoreau's *Walden*, and, at Hallowe'en, volunteering as a zombie in the Park Department's Haunted House. It was the third Sunday in November before I was finally able to re-focus my attention on The Toy Project.

That evening when I ambled into the kindergarten classroom, hand in pocket loudly jingling the keys to the family car, the sight of Sue Mitford nearly blew me away. She'd cut her hair short and arranged it in curls. Though she'd always used makeup, tonight she was wearing it in a new way: a darker, more exotic lipstick, a hint of rouge, and some kind of shadowing that made her eyes even more exciting and lively. Woof! While Eric led us in the opening prayer, I kept admiring from the corner of my eye how she looked in her tight white blouse with puffed sleeves, wide black belt (with gold buckle), and flared green skirt. As frosting on the cake, she was wearing a new perfume that I found totally distracting. When I asked about it later, she said it was "musk oil". I told her I really liked it, but I kept to myself how much it excited me.

Mrs. Gardner indicated several fresh cartons of toys lined up against one wall. "This afternoon Calvin and I brought these down so we can look 'em over. We left the collection box up in the vestibule, because I'm really afraid we're going to need as many donations as we can possibly get."

Doug said, "That's for sure. Some of these are in terrible shape."

We spread the toys on the low tables and gave them a close examination. Four were clearly new and recently bought, and these we immediately set aside for the party. Others, though obviously well-used, were still in good condition—a striped beach ball, a red cash register that chimed when you punched open the money drawer, a miniature rake and garden hoe (which would have to go together as a single gift), two sets of wooden alphabet blocks, and a cardboard kaleidoscope. Most of the other toys showed normal wear and tear, but after thorough cleaning, removal of rust spots, and some touching up with enamel paint, we judged they'd make acceptable gifts. Seeing the amount of work that would be required, Mrs. Gardner was quick to put a cheerful face on it. "There's a lot to do, for sure. But what fun! We'll really get to appreciate what Santa's elves have to go through every year."

Doug was right, though. Some were in terrible shape.

A teddy bear that had lost much of its stuffing through a ripped side-seam was missing one eye. Several cars were shy one or two wheels, and an otherwise attractive blue dump truck had lost its rear axle. The fuselage of an aluminum B-17 from World War Two was pocked by a deep, irregular dent. Smoothing it out would be a challenge, but Wes said he'd try; on the other hand, straightening the bent propeller blades would be a piece of cake. A pressed-tin musical top designed to whirl and hum in response to the up-and-down motion of a central spindle refused to spin no matter how vigorously we pumped.

But it was a large, expensive baby-doll still packed in her purchase box that presented the most baffling problem. It was one of those dolls whose eyelids were designed to open wide when she was sitting or held upright, and to close when she was lying down. We found that when we sat her up, the right eyelid opened as it should; but no matter how we positioned her (even head-down, with vigorous shaking), the left eyelid stayed shut. To see the blue right eye staring fixedly and the left firmly closed in a never-ending wink was downright disturbing. "Really creepy," Sue muttered, voicing what we all felt. But with both of her eyes closed, the doll was beautiful; and when we laid her out in her padded box, nestled deep into the soft, crinkly tissue, she looked just like she was asleep.

Doug said he'd take her home and try to get the stubborn eye to open. I volunteered to take the tin top apart to see why it wouldn't spin, and Mrs. Gardner said that she'd deal with the teddy bear. We agreed that next Sunday's meeting would be a work session. Debra volunteered to buy paint and glue, and we all made a list of the tools we'd need. Then (jingling the car keys) I

invited Sue to the Koala Drive-in for a Coke. She said yes, and I signaled Wes (who looked as though he wanted to come along) that this was to be a private party, and he nodded and backed off with a knowing smirk. At the Drive-In, I gathered up my courage and asked Sue if she'd go with me to the Junior/Senior Prom. She said, "Why, yes, Bill; I thought you'd never ask." Which got me so fluttery in the stomach I couldn't finish my hamburger. However, Sue had no trouble finishing hers, and even asked for a refill on her Coke.

During the next week, I spent about three hours struggling to get the tin top to spin. Careful not to snap the tiny metal tabs that held the upper and lower halves together, I took the top apart, and discovered the internal spindle bent like a dog's leg. I tried to straighten it so that, when pumped from above, its spiral auger would move rapidly up and down and cause the top to whirl. Though the spindle had a very small diameter, its metal was hard, like that of a steel drill bit. I couldn't imagine how anyone could have bent it so badly. I took it down to my Dad's workshop in the basement and tried a variety of tools.

Rubber-headed mallet, pliers, vise—nothing worked. Dad came down to see what I was doing. "Is this one of the toys you guys are collecting for the orphans? Here, let me give it a try." I'll say this for him: he enjoys a challenge, and he's really good with tools. I happily relinquished the job. After ten minutes of attempting this and trying that, he managed to get the dog-leg straightened out, leaving only few minor kinks in the steel.

He'd worked up a sweat, but looked pleased. "Let's put it back together and see if it goes." We carefully reassembled the top, gently folding down the tin tabs that held the halves together. Dad rhythmically pumped the spindle. The tin top rotated slowly, with a tipsy wobble—but wouldn't spin. And then it froze. No amount of pumping would start it up again. Dad said, "Let's open it and see what's wrong."

This time when I lifted the tabs, one of them snapped off and skittered under the workbench. Dad frowned and clicked his tongue: "Metal fatigue." He tightened the spindle into the vise and applied force to straighten the kinks. "It seems to be twisted," he said. And then with a small *pop!* it broke in two. He said "Hell!" and, with a sigh, loosened the vise. "Sorry, Bill. You might as well put it in the trash."

And that is what I did.

On Sunday, I told the group what had happened. Wes reported what he'd encountered in working with the B-17. As he'd expected, straightening the propeller blades was easy; removing the dent was another matter. When he opened up the fuselage, he found that the impact which had punched the dent had cracked the brittle aluminum. Since trying to smooth the dent from the inside would risk splitting the metal further and creating a hole, he decided not to mess with it. "But," he said (always the optimist), "except for the dent, the plane looks pretty good. Do you guys think we should go ahead and give it as a present?"

Eric studied the plane from all angles. "Well, the propellers look fine. And you did a nice job getting the dirt off."

"Face it," said Debra, "We'll have barely enough toys for thirty-eight kids as it is."

"And that's if we're lucky," said Sue.

"Well, I think the airplane looks fine," said Mrs. Gardner. "What do you think, Calvin?"

Her husband nodded. "Those B-17's took a lot of punishment on their bombing runs. That plane's a piece of history, and some little boy will be glad to get it." He gave a chuckle. "He'll just have to make pretend the dent was caused by anti-aircraft fire."

We put it with the gifts.

Mrs. Gardner had succeeded in mending the teddy bear. She'd added fresh stuffing and neatly stitched up the side seam. For replacement eyes she'd sewn on two flat, shiny black buttons a little smaller than poker chips. "Luckily I found these two that matched," she said. "I don't have many buttons left—but I thought black looked better than red or gold." We agreed with that, and the bear joined the B-17.

Doug hadn't had good luck with the baby-doll. "I can't get the eyelid to stay open. I can raise it with my thumbnail, but as soon as I take my hand away, it falls shut again. There's some kind of weight mechanism inside her head that drops down to open the eyelids when she's sitting up, and shifts back again to close them when she's laying flat. The mechanism's either broken or's come loose—and I can't get inside her head to fix it." It was clear that he found the failure painful, and a personal defeat. With a defensive edge to his voice, and almost as an afterthought, he said: "Otherwise, she's perfect. And it would be a shame not to give her as a present."

Debra said, "But we can't leave her with one eye open and one shut. It'll drive her owner crazy."

Doug planted his elbows on the table. "Look, I tried. I'll tell you what our best solution would be. To either glue both eyelids open, or else to glue 'em both shut. That'll settle it once and for all. What's your preference? Open or shut? Either way, we can use her for a gift."

Since we were far short of our thirty-eight toys, it seemed like a reasonable suggestion. We debated whether she'd be better off as Sleeping Beauty or Bonnie Bright-Eyes, and by consensus decided that she'd go to the party with eyes wide open. So with toothpicks, Debra delicately smeared quick-drying glue onto the underside of Bonnie's lids and the top surfaces of her eyeballs, then stood her in the corner to dry.

With that crisis over, we settled into a work pattern that was to become our routine for the next five Sundays.

We sorted the toys into groups according to the kinds of attention they needed: first, the few that simply required cleaning, then (the largest group) those that needed both cleaning and structural repairs or replacement of missing parts, and finally the sizable number which had to be partially or totally re-painted. Within each group, we rank-ordered items by the amount and degree of work they needed.

Each Sunday when we completed work, we organized the toys in boxes at the rear of the room and stored our tools and paints in wall-cupboards. After their teacher had told the Sunday morning kindergarten class that the toys were special gifts for others and not to be played with, the kids left them alone.

We divided up the work to create an "assembly-line" arrangement. Using tools from home, Doug and I together tackled the repair jobs. Some of these were fairly routine, but others were more difficult, and some required highly creative solutions. With three of the toys, we had to fabricate substitutes for broken parts—and here Doug was very skilled. Eventually, we were able to sufficiently repair in some fashion or other all but seven of the toys, and we felt quite pleased with ourselves.

During November and early December toys kept trickling in. Eric devoted two whole Sundays to washing things with soap and water and preparing them for whatever came next; and, when finished with that, he helped Sue and Debra with the painting. Each week they'd spread out newspapers on the low tables and spend a couple of hours wielding brushes of various sizes. I always managed to sit next to Sue so we could talk and I could inhale her musky perfume,

admire her quick, graceful hands doing magic with the brushes, and arrange to occasionally have our elbows touch as we worked.

Wes, who didn't have the patience for painting (and was also a little color blind), helped Doug and me with repairs, and also took responsibility for seeing that the wheels of moving vehicles and pull toys turned smoothly—when necessary, searching for replacement tires among the cars and trucks we'd judged unsuitable for gifts.

The Gardners also pitched in. I've got to give them that. Mister sat gluing together things that had come apart (or were about to) and Missus carefully went over her list of names trying to match up specific boys and girls with toys appropriate for their ages. Mr. Gardner was generally pretty careful with the glue; but he goofed badly while working with a wooden doll whose hair had come loose. Trying to paste the wig back in place, his dirty thumb left a goopy black smudge on the doll's forehead; and when he tried to scrub the thumbprint off, he only made the smudge bigger and scraped away some of the face paint. Sheepishly he handed the doll to Debra. "I'm sorry about that. I think it's ink from the newsprint. Do you think you could touch it up?"

Debra, who liked dolls, was very upset; but she grimly adjusted her glasses, studied the smudge, and, holding back her irritation, told him she'd try.

But the job required much more than a touch-up. First, she had to remove the ink with rubbing alcohol from the kindergartner's medicine chest and ammonia from the church kitchen; then she had to mix four of her enamel paints (red, white, brown, and yellow) in the proportions she thought would match the doll's complexion. Finally, with the meticulous care of a makeup artist, she gently feathered the fresh pigment onto the face to mask the injury. But when the paint had dried, the cover-up flared on the doll's forehead as an angry pink blotch darker than the rest of her face—and Debra said "Oh, rats! It looks terrible!"

Though Mrs. Gardner quickly assured her that the spot was hardly noticeable, that the doll looked "fine", and—with one eye on the wall clock—urged her get on with the rest of her jobs queued up on the table, Debra said "No, I've got to do it right," and undertook to conceal the blemish with skillful camouflage. This required her to mix more pigment in a slightly lighter hue and use the new shade to conform the spot to the rest of the forehead. The work was exacting and delicate, and took over an hour to complete; but when she was finished, we congratulated her, because she'd done the cover-up so well you could hardly tell there'd been a problem.

And this is the way it went week after week, as we worked against the deadline of Christmas Eve, and struggled to squeak through to our required thirty-eight gifts. With two Sundays to go before our deadline, there were one car, two trucks, and a fire engine still missing one wheel each of sizes that couldn't be found in the reject pile; and just when Wes was at the point of giving way to despair (since we needed those four items to meet our goal of thirty-eight), Eric saved the day by announcing that he'd discovered three loose tires while rummaging at the bottom of the empty collection box.

He presented the tiny rubber wheels to Wes with a triumphant fanfare: "Ta-dah! Will these work?"

Wes actually crowed with delight and began matching wheels with vehicles and slipping them onto the axles. One of the tires fit the car perfectly; another fit one of the trucks. But the third tire, which was the proper diameter to match those on the second truck, continually slid off the axle. With resigned frustration, Wes stared at it lying on the table. "Something's worn the rubber away and made the center hole too big."

"Can you enlarge the axle?" Sue asked.

He shook his head. "No. I suppose I could flatten the end with a pair of pliers. But the hole's way too big for that to do any good. There needs to be something at the end of the axle to keep the tire from falling off—something shaped like the buffers on a locomotive. Or like the flat head of a nail."

"What about replacing the whole axle with a finishing nail?" Doug asked. "I can see what we've got at home."

"No, the hole's much too big to be stopped by the nubby little head of a finishing nail."

"Well, what about making the hole smaller?" Sue asked.

Wes thought for a bit. "You mean lining the hole with glue or putty or something like that?"

"Rubber cement," she said. "We have some right here on the table. When it dries it gets firm." She handed him the bottle of rubber cement.

Wes decided to try it. With a toothpick he applied rubber cement around the inside of the central hole, being careful not to fill the space completely. And, when the cement was partially set, he slipped the wheel onto the axle, moving it gently back and forth while it completed drying. Then he set it aside to cure. I could tell by his frown that he wasn't at all happy with this

stopgap measure. But, when the cement was completely dry, the wheel turned smoothly with the others and did not slip off the axle. "It seems to be working," Mrs. Gardner said.

"Yeah, but I don't know for how long. The hole in the tire is still too big. When the car's played with, friction may wear away the rubber cement. I wish I could think of something better."

"Well," she said, "it's *working*. That's the important thing. It means we've got thirty-seven toys of the thirty-eight we need." She ticked it off her list.

That left the fire engine. "I really want it to be a gift," said Wes. "The paint's shiny red, hose and ladders are present and accounted for. It's in great condition except for the missing wheel. Eric, are you sure the wheels you brought me were the only ones in the box?"

"Yep," said Eric. "The box was empty except for a few chewing gum wrappers."

"Okay, then. I'll go through the discards one more time." Wes carried the fire engine over to the pile of vehicles destined for the trash and spent several minutes comparing the size and appearance of its tires with those of the junkers. He finally chose one from a slightly bigger fire engine that had been made by the same manufacturer. Though the new wheel was a little larger in diameter than the three on the smaller engine, the hole in the center was perfect, and just the right size to fit snugly on the axle. Mrs. Gardner made a tick with her pencil. "Thirty-eight. It goes to Jimmy Barlow, age five."

That night we made final touch-ups, did an inventory, and celebrated reaching our goal. We were very tired; as we tidied up and tossed our tools into the cupboard, Mrs. Gardner said that she would put a note in the church bulletin for the following Sunday thanking the members of the congregation who had donated toys.

"That's fine," Doug said in that wry way he has, "but it would be *extra* fine if you could also *not* thank the people who donated useless, defective toys."

"Yeah," said Debra. "And mention that we had to throw a lot of 'em out."

Mrs. Gardner was shocked. "We can't do that! People donated out of the goodness of their hearts. Both to help our MYF, and do something nice for the orphans. To criticize *anybody's* gifts would be an insult, and ungrateful besides."

Doug raised one eyebrow skeptically. "Something nice for the orphans—"

Mrs. Gardner locked eyes with him, and flashed a humorless smile. "That's right. Yes, there *were* lots of old and defective toys. But I'm sure the people who gave those didn't realize

how bad they were. They were simply passing on the toys their kids had enjoyed to another generation—to less fortunate children who don't have any toys of their own. And doing it made them feel good."

"Good about *themselves*," said Sue. Hitting the nail squarely on the head. Smiling, I winked her my agreement.

Mrs. Gardner clearly felt the conversation wasn't going anywhere. "Good about sharing with the less fortunate. In *First Corinthians*, Chapter Thirteen, Paul himself said, that of these, the three great things—Faith, Hope, and Charity—Charity is the greatest. The people who were performing charity by freely giving toys to needy children have *every right* to feel good about what they were doing." She turned to her husband. "Come on, Calvin, it's time to go." And they shuffled into their coats and hurried out.

We stood looking at one another, a little stunned. And then Eric said, "In *my* New Testament, Saint Paul says 'Faith, Hope, and Love'." He opened his Bible to the passage and showed it around.

"Well, you're using a modern translation," said Wes. "The word 'charity' comes from her King James Version."

"Did the King James translators think that 'charity' and 'love' meant the same thing? Giving stuff to needy people, like Mrs. Gardner says? Is that what *Paul* meant by 'love'?"

"I don't know about Paul," said Wes. "It's what Mrs. Gardner seems to think."

We left it at that and went our separate ways. I had a chemistry quiz to study for, so I took Sue directly home without stopping at the Koala Drive-In.

In the car we discussed our set-to with Mrs. Gardner. Sue said, "She was making excuses for the people who gave defective toys. Like it was perfectly okay to do so because their intentions were good. Well, I'm sorry, I don't think good intentions make it okay. Why couldn't they have bought *new* toys to give to the orphans? They wouldn't have had to spend much money."

I said, "In her announcements in the church bulletin, Mrs. Gardner *invited* the congregation to give used toys. Maybe she was afraid we wouldn't get enough toys if they had to be new. At any rate, she set it up, gave them permission to donate used ones, and they did, and felt good about doing it."

She nodded. "And good about *themselves*."

"Yeah, that's right," I said, "—on the cheap."

Sue sat watching the streetlights going by. "And, Bill, what does all this say about *us*? We're simply passing on to the orphans the old and broken toys we were given. How are we any different from the people who donated them?"

It took me nearly thirty seconds to find an answer. "Because we worked so hard trying to fix them up and make them presentable. That should count for something. And we trashed the really bad ones."

Sue said, "Yes, we did work hard. That's for sure. Still, I don't feel very good about giving those toys to the kids. And I don't feel very good about myself." She paused. "I feel ashamed. How do you feel?"

I thought it over. "We did the best we could with what we had to work with. That's something in our favor."

"Well, yes. But still—"

I was having a hard time admitting it, but finally I said, "No, I don't feel good about it, either. Or about myself."

"Ashamed?"

Boy, she had a way of going straight to the bone. But there was no way of avoiding the truth and staying honest. "I suppose so," I said.

And I dropped her off and went home to study chemistry.

On the last Sunday before the party, we planned to wrap the toys, affix the children's names, and prepare the presents for transport across town on Christmas Eve the following Thursday. Just after the morning church service, I was leaving the sanctuary to join my parents for the ride home, when this old lady stopped me in the aisle between the pews. She'd been a fixture in the church for as long as I could remember—I think her name was Mrs. Brubaker. Something like that. She was really old—tiny, with gray hair and lots of wrinkles. Had to be seventy at least. "You're the Anderson boy, aren't you? I'm afraid I don't know your name. . ."

"Bill."

"Well, Bill, I just want to say how much I admire the high school MYF's collecting toys for the orphans. It's a *wonderful* thing to do." She tapped that morning's bulletin with a bony

finger. "Nora Jean Gardner says here that your group has worked on the project for nine weeks. That's a real commitment."

I answered, "Well, yes, it was, but we thought it was worth doing. It did take a lot more effort than we expected. We'll be giving about forty toys altogether."

"Well," she said, "just think how much the children will enjoy them! That makes it all worthwhile." And as I began edging away, a little embarrassed by all the praise, she gave me a broad smile: "And if that's not reward enough, just remember, you've all truly earned stars in your crowns!"

For that, I had no answer at all.

In the car I couldn't bring myself to tell my parents about this encounter; I didn't know how to put it into words. But I thought about it all the way home.

Our noon meals following church are generally relaxed occasions, where as a family we catch up on each other's lives. That Sunday, over fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans, we talked about various things: my Aunt Ellen's upcoming surgery, the courses I was going to take second semester, my sister Katie's new job. When we were nearly finished eating, Katie asked, "Aren't you about finished with The Toy Project?"

"Yeah. Tonight we'll wrap it up." I kind of liked my pun.

"It seems like you've been working on it forever," Mom said.

"Well, there was lots of work to be done."

"That's understatement," Dad said. "I saw those toys you brought home to work on. And you said you got a lot that were too far gone to give as presents."

"They weren't *all* bad. A few were brand-new. And we were able to salvage quite a few of the others. So, here at the end, we *do* have some decent toys to give—and the thirty-eight we need, thank goodness. Mr. and Mrs. Gardner are going to buy a new Monopoly game and a couple of jigsaw puzzles as group gifts. But some of the repairs weren't easy, and we all got discouraged now and then—even Doug, and he's upbeat most of the time."

"I don't think I'd have had the patience."

"Well, Dad, like you said: spit, screws, staples, string, and don't count the stitches."

"Did I say that? It sounds like Ellen's surgery." He picked up his dessertspoon and prepared to tackle Mom's rice pudding. "Well, I'm glad the project's finished. Be sure to bring my tools home. All of them."

Collecting the used plates, Mom said, "I thought Nora Jean wrote a nice thank-you note in today's bulletin."

I decided to skip the rice pudding. "You don't know the half of it. Doug and Debra really rocked her canoe last week by wanting her to tell the folks who donated broken toys that they made our job more difficult. But she wouldn't do that."

Mom paused a moment and then resumed stacking plates. "Well, how *could* she? No one was forced to give toys; it took considerable effort for folks to go through their attics and closets. They gave because they *wanted* to, out of the goodness of their hearts."

"That's just what Mrs. Gardner said. And when we saw that some toys were defective, she said that by fixing those that could be fixed, we'd learn what Santa's elves have to go through *every* Christmas."

Dad snorted. "*Santa's elves?* Oh, she's a piece of work. I don't see how Calvin puts up with her."

Mom said, "Oh, George . . ."

"Well, he has a *lot* to put up with."

"Maybe so, but it isn't nice to talk about her that way. She means well."

"I can't help it. She gives me the dribbles."

Mom gave a little toss of her head and carried the plates to the kitchen. I thought Dad looked kind of pleased with himself. I said, "I'd like to take the car to MYF tonight. After we get the toys wrapped, we all want to go to the Koala Drive-In for burgers and fries. Celebrate finishing up."

He said, "By all means. You've earned a celebration."

But when we arrived at the kindergarten room, we had a nasty surprise. Before we could lay out our wrapping paper and ribbons on the worktable, we discovered that somebody had been playing with our toys and left them scattered about the room. "What happened here?" Sue cried.

Mrs. Gardner shook her head sadly. "Oh, dear. Mrs. Johnson told me that her first-graders would be using the room this morning while the new flooring is being put down in their classroom. She must not have told her kids that the toys weren't to be played with."

We gathered up the toys and brought them to the table for wrapping.

"Well, they played rough with 'em," Eric said, holding up a small wooden horse that Mr. Gardner had carefully renovated with glue the previous week. "Look here, the back leg's come off."

Mr. Gardner took the horse from him and went to the tool drawer. "I'll glue it again," he said. "Use more of it this time."

Debra gave a wail. "And look at Martha Much. Her skirt's all dirty!" She studied the doll, turning it this way and that under the bright light we used for making repairs. "It looks like somebody stepped on her dress. I can't give her to some little girl looking like this!"

Wes, examining the cars and trucks, found that, sure enough, the ambulance was missing one of its wheels. He said, "Okay, guys, keep your eyes open. It could be anywhere. It's black and pretty small." While we started wrapping and labeling the toys, he began systematically moving about the room, bent over and scrutinizing the floor, moving chairs aside, and getting down on his knees to look under things. He finally found the wheel up against the baseboard of the storage cabinet. It had been broken nearly in half.

Showing it to us, he said "I was afraid of something like this. The rubber gets brittle when it's old. So: it's back to the throwaways for a replacement."

We'd put the unsalvageable toys into the janitor's collection box for disposal. Wes spent a few minutes scrabbling among the rejects to separate out the cars and trucks. It took him only a moment to find a replacement wheel for the ambulance. He gave a deep sigh of relief. "It's lucky we hadn't already thrown these out." The new wheel matched the others perfectly.

Sue took the ambulance from his hand ("before something else happens to it") and neatly wrapped it in bright red paper. Mrs. Gardner handed her a nametag—"Ambulance to Alice Fleming, age eight."—and crossed Alice off her list.

When we were nearly done with the wrapping, Doug signaled with a nod that he wanted Wes and me to go with him into the adjacent room—Fellowship Hall, where the church held its bean suppers. We followed him wondering what was up.

Out of the direct line of sight from the door of the kindergarten room, he produced a magazine from the slim briefcase he always carried with him. "I've got something here I want to show you."

His secrecy puzzled us; the magazine was called *Playboy* and had a white cover with a black and white picture of Marilyn Monroe, smiling and waving, wearing a black dress with deeply plunging neckline. "So?" said Wes. "It's Marilyn. We've seen her picture before. What's the big deal?"

"Ah," Doug said. "Look at the centerfold."

Wes opened the magazine. I leaned forward in anticipation, not knowing what to expect. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw. Marilyn naked in full color, posing pink and rose and creamy white against a bright reddish backdrop—all arches and curves, right arm raised above her head, left extending downward. Luscious rounded hip and thigh, smooth calves, bare feet, heels tucked beneath her tush, toes pointed. Elegant breasts, with nipples two-toned, dusky pink and brownish rose. Her swirled hair was honey gold. She gazed at us sleepy-eyed, smiling with a half-open come-hither mouth.

"Shit," said Wes.

I couldn't say anything.

Doug just grinned.

"Where'd you get this?" Wes asked.

"On the newsstand at Devon's Drugstore."

"Do you suppose they have any left?"

"No, I checked yesterday. They're all gone."

At this moment Eric came hurrying to join us. "What are you guys looking at?"

Wes held the magazine away from him. "Nothing that concerns you, Eric. You're much too young."

Predictably, Eric bristled: "I'm fifteen. Come on, let me see it."

Wes appeared to ponder this for a long moment, stroking his chin and looking wise, then handed the magazine to Eric, saying only: "Check the centerfold." Eric immediately thumbed it open. Remembering how he'd reacted to the Asbury panty raid at the MYF retreat, we watched closely to see if his pietistic scruples would cause him to react with disgust, or shock, or simple outrage. Would he want to pray for us, as sinners succumbing to the lure of smut? Or for himself,

for having given in to beholding the long-forbidden fruits?

His reaction was simply: "Oh wow! She's pretty!" And then he blushed. I hoped he wouldn't be dogged by guilt for having enjoyed what he'd seen.

Mr. Gardner suddenly entered Fellowship Hall. "We're just about done wrapping the toys," he said. Then, more sharply: "Here, what are you boys doing? What's that you've got there?" Nobody answered, and before Eric could pass the *Playboy* back to Doug, Mr. Gardner had reached us.

Doug said, "We're just looking at a magazine I bought."

"What magazine?"

"The first issue of *Playboy*."

"Is that right. *Playboy*, huh? Here, let me see it." He stiffly extended his hand. After glancing quickly at Doug, who merely shrugged his shoulders with a resigned nod, Eric reluctantly gave the magazine to Mr. Gardner, his finger still inserted in the centerfold. It fell open in Mr. Gardner's hands to reveal all of Marilyn's glorious curves, contours, and points of interest. Mr. Gardner was silent for a very long time, taking them in.

Then he closed the magazine abruptly, keeping his finger in the centerfold. "You boys should be ashamed of yourselves. Gaping at obscene pictures! They'll fill your heads with all the wrong ideas." His reaction was just about what we'd expected. "Would you want your parents to know? My parents never caught *me* ogling pornography."

"Calvin!" It was Mrs. Gardner, standing in the doorway. "The girls and I are finished with the wrapping. What are you doing in here?"

Mr. Gardner spasmed and half turned to face her, quickly concealing the magazine behind his thigh. "Just having a discussion, Nora Jean. We'll be right there."

"All right," she said, "we're starting to box up the toys." She returned to the kindergarten classroom.

Doug said, "May I have my *Playboy* back?"

Mr. Gardner took a deep breath and cleared his throat. "It's not a picture I'd want Nora Jean to see. It would shock and embarrass her." He opened the magazine to the centerfold, and gazed at the image one last time. "This really is filth, Doug. I advise you to get rid of it. You certainly don't want your mother finding it." He handed the magazine back to Doug, who slid it into his briefcase.

I had to admit that if it were mine, I certainly wouldn't want *my* mother finding it. I already had a couple of items carefully hidden in my bedroom closet under a stack of old comic books. There are some kinds of grief that no one needs.

As for Doug, I knew that he had the sense to keep his *Playboy* safely out of sight around the girls. I'm sure he wouldn't want Debra to see the centerfold, and I certainly wouldn't want Sue to see it. It might give them wrong ideas about us all.

When we'd just about finished packing the wrapped toys into cardboard boxes, Debra held Martha Much back, saying she'd take the doll home with her to wash the soiled skirt. "I'll bring her back on Thursday," she said. "When she goes to a new owner, I want her looking like new."

Afterwards, while relaxing over milk shakes, Cokes, and hamburgers at the Koala, we once again reviewed our plans for the party on Thursday night. As we talked, it became apparent that—far from looking forward to the event with excited anticipation—each of us was actually approaching it with a brooding sense of dread.

Debra said, "Maybe we've been so close to the project for so long that we're simply burnt out. Me, I wish the darn party was over with and done."

Doug said, "I'm still looking forward to putting on the Santa Claus costume. That sounds like fun. But I don't know what sort of Santa I'll make. And I've no idea—no idea at *all*—what I can say to those kids. I don't know anything about 'em."

Eric said, "Have you noticed?—even Mrs. Gardner seems nervous and jumpy."

Debra said, "Maybe she'd like the party to be over, too."

I laughed. "Well, we seriously shook her up her last week. She may not have gotten over *that*."

"She means well," said Doug. "But face it, good intentions don't guarantee good outcomes."

Sue broke in impatiently: "That's the heart of the problem. *She's* well-intentioned, the *congregation's* well-intentioned, *we're* well-intentioned. And what's the result? The poor unsuspecting orphans are going to get a bunch of crummy toys, given to them out of the goodness of everybody's hearts!"

Wes took a final slurp of his chocolate shake. "Charity at work," he said. "After that squabble last Sunday, I decided to follow up on the thirteenth chapter of *First Corinthians* to see what Saint Paul actually said. Eric's Revised Standard Version has "Faith, Hope, and Love." Mrs. Gardner's King James Version has "Faith, Hope, and Charity"—and she defines charity as sharing with the less fortunate. I went to the encyclopedia and a couple of books of Biblical commentary. Paul used the Greek word *agape*, which meant universal love or respect. The Latin version of *Corinthians* translated *agape* as *caritas*, which meant high regard for something, or love of humanity as a whole. The King James scholars translated *caritas* into English as 'charity'. In 1611, the meaning of 'charity' was close to that of *caritas*. But over time, 'charity' came to mean Mrs. Gardner's "sharing with the less fortunate"—like giving alms to the poor. That folks can feel good about giving crummy toys to the orphans shows just how far we've come since 1611."

See, I told you he likes showing off.

Christmas Eve was cold. During the day, a scattering of dry powdery snow had collected on the ground. We'd spent the afternoon in the church kitchen, some of us preparing popcorn balls and taffy apples, Sue and Mrs. Gardner baking and frosting four dozen cupcakes. Having brought back Martha Much with her dress freshly washed, Debra carefully wrapped her and tucked her into a transport box before organizing and packing the party decorations.

The kids at the Adabelle Franzen Home were to be bused to a church service lasting from seven till eight and then home for their Christmas surprise about 8:10. We had to have everything ready when they returned. At six-thirty, Doug and Eric went to the Koala to buy hamburgers for our supper. Forty minutes later, we began loading up my car and Doug's with boxes of brightly wrapped toys, and the Gardners' car with refreshments and party decorations.

Already running late, in our rush to hit the road we got careless while lifting one of the heavier boxes into Doug's trunk. Suddenly separating at the corners, it split open, and spilled a cascade of toys onto the asphalt of the parking lot. "Oh *no!*" Mrs. Gardner cried, "You've got to be *careful!* The toys can't take such rough treatment. Thank *goodness* it wasn't the cupcakes!"

"We need another box," Debra said. "Unless we just want to pile the toys loose into the trunk."

Mrs. Gardner said, "We *can't* pile them in loose and risk undoing all our careful repairs."

"I'll see if there's another box in the janitor's room," said Eric; and he ran back into the church.

"We can only pray that none of the toys were damaged when they fell," Mrs. Gardner said, "Here, Calvin, don't put the jugs of punch so close to the popcorn balls."

We left the spilled toys on the dry pavement and finished packing the cars. Eric came running up with a large cardboard box. "I found this in the furnace room. It had stuff in it, but it's empty now." It was fairly clean. We didn't ask what its contents had been, or where Eric had put them. Luckily the box was big enough to hold all but three of the packages.

Sue and Wes rode with me, Eric and Debra with Doug. The Gardners led the way, since none of us knew how to get to the orphanage.

It was on a quiet back street, a huge brick house three stories tall, with a roofed front porch and a big addition at the rear that I assumed was dormitory space. We parked in the driveway, and gathered around the open trunks of the cars. Mrs. Gardner said, "Let's unload everything onto the porch. It'll make it easier to carry stuff into the house."

Moving quickly, puffing little clouds of frosty condensation into the air, she began carrying trays of taffy apples up the steps. A large woman who'd been watching through a front window came out to greet her: "Hello, Nora Jean." Then to us: "I'm Mrs. Talmadge. Welcome! Welcome, and Merry Christmas! I can't tell you how *glad* I am that you young people are doing this for our children. They'll be so thrilled!"

Mrs. Gardner was all smiles. "I'm sorry we're late, Laura. It took us longer to pack than we expected."

"What can I do to help?"

"If you can take these apples, I'll deal with the toys. Calvin, you're in charge of the punch. Sue, can you be responsible for the cupcakes?"

Mrs. Talmadge took the apples into the house. I stood beside my car trunk lifting out boxes for Wes, Eric, Debra, and Mrs. Gardner. Mrs. Gardner seemed over-excited—cheeks flushed, eyes glittery and bright—almost giddy, in fact. I wondered why. Was it simply anticipation of the children's surprise? Relief at our having reached the orphanage with time to spare? Or—what I really suspected—exhilaration at having successfully brought her MYFers out of the vineyard with a bountiful harvest to share

Then, as we were all crossing the porch with our boxes, she half-turned with a tight smile and said fervently: "Let's pray that the children won't be too rough playing with their presents." She gave a nervous giggle. "I just hope we can get away before the toys start falling apart."

We all could have said amen to that. But since none of us did, her statement just hung there naked in the frosty air.

Mrs. Talmadge led us into a front parlor filled at one end by a huge Christmas tree. Since we had less than forty minutes to get everything ready, we worked fast. Doug put on his dad's Santa Claus outfit, stuffing a pillow into his belted coat to pooch his belly, and hiding most of his face with a flowing white mustache and beard. We set the fruit punch and cupcakes on a long serving table and placed plates of popcorn balls and apples, and dishes of candy strategically about the room. Mrs. Gardner, Eric, and Wes arranged the toys beneath the tree. Sue and I teamed up to hang red and green streamers in the doorways and around the fireplace mantel, and Mr. Gardner inflated balloons. Then we sat and waited for the children.

They arrived at ten after eight, boiling up onto the porch and streaming into the parlor, their chatter and horseplay suddenly giving way to whoops of stunned surprise, then shouts and squeals of delight when they saw the bright decorations, the food, the neatly wrapped toys spread around the base of the tree. When they were all crowded into the parlor, Mrs. Talmadge introduced our group and said, "Boys and girls, the high school class at Epworth Methodist Church wants to wish you all a very Merry Christmas. To do that, they've brought you this party, and a present for each one of you. Wouldn't it be nice to thank them?"

They chorused "Thank you!" and swarmed around the tree.

Doug made a good Santa Claus, mingling with the kids, greeting them with hearty ho-ho-ho's, asking their names. Some responded by giving their names, but others hung back shyly. Quite a few ignored him and went straight for the cupcakes and candy. Mrs. Talmadge oversaw the distribution of presents, helping the kids find their nametags on the packages, and Debra stood quietly observing the little girl who'd received and was playing with Martha Much. Mrs. Gardner supervised serving the cupcakes—one apiece—and Mr. Gardner poured punch.

I found myself strangely disengaged from the festivities. Not inclined to mingle, or to watch the kids scrambling for their presents and eagerly tearing off the wrappings to see what they'd received, I retreated to the sidelines and leaned against the wall. I didn't wish to witness

the inevitable disappointments, and wasn't up to participating in the kids' momentary joys. The minutes slipped by.

Doug, who seemed to enjoy being Santa, continued booming ho-ho-ho to whichever children would listen. Debra was moving about the Christmas tree re-hanging ornaments that had fallen or been knocked off in the excitement. Sue and Eric were picking up discarded wrappings and putting them into the trash bin that stood to one side of the fireplace.

Wes came up with two cups of punch and handed me one. "Well, Billy boy, tell me, are you enjoying yourself?" With a sweep of his arm he encompassed the room.

"Not much," I said. "I feel I'm here under false pretenses."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." He gave me a solemn wink. "But this is what it was all about. *Caritas*. All those weeks of work."

"*Caritas*?" I said. "Charity. And it doesn't make me feel good about myself. Though some of the kids are excited and apparently having a good time." We watched the bustling activity. "Looking back, it's hard to remember how excited I must've been on Christmas morning when I got something I really wanted. I remember my first bicycle—fat tires and all—and later, a microscope with a bunch of prepared slides. But I was older then."

"I remember my first catcher's mitt," he said, "how soft the leather was."

"Well, maybe some of these kids will remember the present they got tonight."

"Maybe so. Let's hope if they do, it's a *good* memory." He raised his cup.

I raised mine. "I'll drink to that." We tossed back our punch.

"The party's gone on for nearly an hour," Wes continued. "Mrs. Gardner thinks it's high time we leave. She's getting pretty anxious."

"I'm ready any time."

While Wes began circulating to pass Mrs. Gardner's message to the others, I wandered over to the serving table to discard my empty cup. Mrs. Gardner said, "It's getting late, Bill. We probably should go soon." "I got Wes's message," I said. As the others began collecting at the table, I found myself increasingly withdrawn, acknowledging and trying hard to understand the sadness I felt.

As soon as the six of us were gathered around the Gardners, a boy about twelve years old with black hair and pale skin approached the table. His large, sad eyes, of a brown so dark they

were nearly black, regarded us gravely, but he didn't speak. After the silence had stretched uncomfortably long, I felt impelled to say something: "My name's Bill. What's yours?"

"Mike." Another silence.

Sue asked, "Are you enjoying the party?"

His response was calm, flat, matter-of-fact. "The younger kids are having a good time. They're enjoying it a lot."

I noticed he didn't have a toy with him. "Didn't you get a present?"

"I left it for somebody else to open. We share things here."

There was another long silence, during which some of us watched the younger children playing with their gifts.

Not moving, Mike continued to regard us with his somber eyes. Then he said, "I suppose we should thank you for doing this."

Eric flinched. I froze. Wes blinked, and stammered out, "No need to. Really. It's something we wanted to do."

Mike nodded slowly, turned away, and joined the other kids around the tree.

Having already packed up the empty jugs and extra napkins, Mrs. Gardner spoke briefly to Mrs. Talmadge, then announced to the children that we were leaving. They cheered their goodbyes, and, with repeated waves and cries of "Merry Christmas," we moved quickly onto the porch; Doug removed his Santa beard, and Wes, the last one out, gently but firmly closed the door.

Back at the church, we finished cleaning up the kitchen, and Doug changed from his Santa Claus outfit back into blue jeans and pullover. Exhausted, we didn't feel like talking, and what little we said didn't mention the party. Even Mrs. Gardner was quiet. While I drove Sue home, she and I made plans for celebrating New Year's Eve.

It's now the first of June, and we still haven't talked about The Toy Project or the party on Christmas Eve. It's *because* we haven't that I suspect the others feel as I do—that the Project took a great deal from us. And by that I don't mean just the time and effort we spent getting the toys ready for giving. No, it took us on a rough, unexpected journey that forced us to leave parts

of *ourselves* behind like so much discarded baggage. A journey that brought us to an unfamiliar, uncharted place of shifted perspectives and vanished landmarks.

In order to move on, we've got to draw new maps. And *that's* why I feel The Toy Project is by no means over with and done. Not by a long shot. Saint Paul would understand.

11,570 words