

Reason for the Season

[A wrote this short story at the request of my publisher. She and a colleague wanted to do a Christmas e-book to promote their publishing houses, named *Crimbo**, that would cover stories for the season from a different viewpoint. I came up with this retelling of the familiar story found in Luke. I'll bet it's the first Christmas story you've read that started with a curse! Enjoy the trip—I think you'll be glad you took the time. – T. H. Pine * ghetto slang for Christmas.]

∞ 1 ∞

The Good Samaritan

“**D**amn!” Joe said, as the lug nuts tumbled into the snow. He had stepped on the hubcap and sent them flying. Normally, he wouldn't be out on a night like this, looking for lost lug nuts in one-and-a-half feet of snow, but his wife, Mara, had gone into labor at this, the most inopportune time possible. He had feared he would get stuck in the snow, or skid off the road, but he had gotten a *flat*, of all things.

“If you think this is the way I should be spending my Christmas Eve,” Joe grouched to God under his breath, “you have one *hell* of a lousy sense of humor.”

Joe and God weren't really on speaking terms, in spite of his sarcastic pseudo-prayer. First, he had lost a good job due to cutbacks and, after nearly a year-and-a-half out of work, picking up odd jobs here and there; he had just started in a new position. He didn't consider mounting tires the best of jobs, but the boss treated him fairly, paid him a good salary and let him work all the hours he wanted. Joe paid him back by doing the best job he could. The boss let him have a set of keys, so he could work late and he worked all hours to amass some savings. They had just begun to get on their feet, after a few months of solid work, when Mara came up pregnant—just what they needed.

Joe had just finished mounting all the tires on a customer's fleet of service trucks that day. He had intended to put a set of new radials on his old pickup to replace the old, “may-pops,” but time got away from him and he had to hurry home to spend time with Mara on Christmas Eve. He had no sooner gotten in the door, bone-weary, than her water broke and he had to get her to the hospital.

He and Mara had argued over her wanting to have a home delivery—no kid of his would be born in a bed like they were poor or something, he had argued. Now, he wished he had listened to Mara. A home delivery would have spared him...*this*. Joe's dark thoughts tumbled around in his head when a white, late model Escalade pulled to the curb in front of his truck.

Just what I need, Joe thought, a friendly, useless Good Samaritan.

The door of the car opened and a tall, young man, in a sparkling white suit stepped out. He looked like he belonged on Hollywood Boulevard, hobnobbing with producers, directors and movie stars—he surely looked handsome enough.

This is just great, Joe thought. He'll probably whip out his designer cell phone and make a call for a tow truck—as if I could afford that.

“Wow, what a time to get a flat, eh?” the man said, as he walked up to Joe.

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Joe grumbled, annoyed at the man's cheerful, holiday manner.

“Oh, I get it. You kicked the hubcap and sent the lug nuts flying.”

“Got it in one,” Joe said, surprised at the man's quick grasp of the situation. Nevertheless, it still irritated him.

“Here, let me help,” the man said.

“Don't worry about it. You don't want to get that designer suit of yours dirty.”

“Not a problem; that’s what dry cleaners are for. I could call in a tow truck for you and, since it *is* Christmas Eve, I’ll even pay for the tow; spirit of the season and all that. How about it?”

“No, that’s all right. I have to get my wife to the hospital. She’s in labor like—*right now*. This flat couldn’t have come at a worse time.”

“Oh my gosh! Well, I guess we better find those lug nuts and get you on your way.”

“Look,” Joe said, “There’s no need. I was going to take a lug off the other three wheels, just to get me on my—”

“Joe!” Mara cried from the cab, “The contractions are really bad! I don’t know how much longer I can wait!”

Joe hustled around to the passenger side to see to his wife while the man bent to look for the lug nuts. “How quick are they coming?” he asked.

“Pretty quick...*uhn!*” Mara managed to say before another contraction hit.

“Okay honey, just breathe like you learned. That’s it...”

Just then, Joe felt the truck move. Thinking it had slipped off the jack, he went back around to the other side in a panic, hoping the guy hadn’t hurt himself. To his surprise, he saw the white-suited stranger heft the flat into the bed of the truck.

“I found the lug nuts for you, put them on and lowered the truck.” He bent to retrieve the jack and placed it in the bed with the flat. “You better get on your way. It sounds like your wife’s ready to give birth any minute.”

Joe looked in astonishment at the white-clad stranger. Even after having put on the spare and putting the flat and jack in the bed, he still looked immaculate, not a hair of his head out of place.

“How did you...?” Joe started to ask.

“No time for questions now; you need to be on your way. The three of you...have a blessed Christmas in the name of our Lord. Don’t forget to remember the reason for the season—’a child is born to us this day’ and all that.”

“I don’t know how to thank—”

“Go man! Time’s a-wasting. Drive safely. You have a long way to go yet.”

With that, the man turned to go back to his Escalade. Joe walked to the driver’s door of his truck, wondering at the strange words the man in white had uttered. Why did he say, “You have a long way to go yet?” they were only ten minutes from the hospital. He got in and checked on Mara. She seemed to be doing well, considering.

He looked out through the windshield, expecting to see the Escalade pull away from the curb, but, to his amazement, he couldn’t see the vehicle anywhere in sight! He scanned around the area, as he started the pickup, but the road looked Christmas-eve-deserted with no tire tracks leading away from his truck!

“*Huh...* where the...?” he started to say but ended up shrugging. “Wish I had one of those high-end SUVs though,” he muttered under his breath.

Joe eased the truck out onto the road, glad to be on his way. The road got slipperier, but he managed. He estimated he’d be at the hospital in under ten minutes.

“Hang on honey,” he said, as he looked over at Mara, who puffed and blew like a trouper, trying to control the pain of the contractions.

Because he had been looking at Mara, he never saw the vehicle that piled into the side of his truck.

∞ 2 ∞
The Rescue

“Oh my God! You all right?” the driver of the other vehicle, a large F-250 pickup, cried as he approached Joe’s door.

Dazed, but unhurt, Joe looked over at Mara first. She had kept breathing like nothing had touched the truck, but the seat and floor in front of her looked soaked; she’d been leaking amniotic fluid like a small river. Joe turned to talk with the stranger and got a good look at the side door of his pickup in the glare of his headlights. The magnetic sign read: *Jim Inman, DVM “Put your Hooves and Paws in My Hands.”*

“What the *hell*?” Joe spat.

“I’m *so* sorry man,” the stranger, who Joe suspected might be *the* Jim Inman, said apologetically. “I was going too fast for the conditions. I had no idea it was so slippery.”

“Yeah, well thanks to you, *dickhead*, my truck’s out of commission and my wife’s about to give birth any minute.”

“Wow, *really*?” the man asked, craning his head to look inside, “Look, why don’t you follow me to my place?”

“Are you nuts? We’re heading to the hospital.”

“No you’re not.”

“*No*? What the *hell* are you talking about?”

“I just came from the other direction. The whole road’s blocked at the bridge—a huge accident involving a semi and six cars; must’ve been because of the snow and ice. I just had to drive twenty miles out of my way to get *here*.”

“Figures,” Joe said, looking skyward, “Having fun yet?” he yelled at the sky, as snow fell into his eyes and stuck to his eyelashes.

“Are you okay, man?” Jim asked. “I know your wife’s giving birth, but you seem edgy.”

“It’s personal. Look, we got to get my wife into your truck and try for the hospital using the detour. She’ll probably give birth before we get there, but we gotta try.”

“There’s no need to move her. Moving her too much will only bring on the urge to push. Besides, my truck’s a bit of a climb.”

“But I can’t follow you in my truck. You *on* something, man?”

“Take a look for yourself; some damage to the door and front fender, but she looks drivable.”

“Well, I’ll be,” Joe said, as he surveyed the relatively small amount of damage. The crash had evidently sounded worse than the actual damage—score one for sturdy old pickups. “Why your place?”

“I’m a vet. I have a nice, sterile surgery for smaller animals. We could set up there.”

“You ever done a delivery?”

Jim smiled and gave him an *Are you kidding?* look. “You might say that—every kind of complication you can imagine—only *my* patients can’t express their thanks in words.”

“Okay then. Let’s get going.” Joe got into his truck. “Hang on honey,” he said to his preoccupied wife.

Just then, the night got darker. Joe looked around and saw that all the streetlights had gone out. The town, once visible in the distance, had also gone dark.

The snow had caused a major blackout.

∞ 3 ∞
The Birth

“Don’t worry man, I’ve got a generator,” Jim said “Cuts in automatically. It’s probably running now. We’re going to be okay.”

“Yeah, right,” Joe muttered. He looked heavenward and gave the gray sky a sour look. “What? Icing the cake now? Thanks for the help,” he said to the dark, overcast sky.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Jim asked.

“I’m fine. Let’s get going.”

Joe followed Jim down a side road he hadn’t even thought existed. No one had plowed it, but the newly fallen snow proved easier to handle than the slipperier, more travel-packed roads. In only a few minutes, Joe saw the solitary glare of a sodium vapor light on a high pole. It was the only light for miles around; Jim’s generator *had* kicked in automatically. He followed his rescuer to a large, steel, commercial structure.

Jim stopped at a door and opened it, reaching in to flip on the bright, fluorescent lights Joe saw flicker into life inside. Then he walked up to Joe’s truck.

“Okay, let’s get your wife inside,” he said, opening the passenger door. “How you doing ma’am?” he asked.

“I’m...d-doing...*ungh*...f-fine...I g-guess,” Mara said around her contraction. “W-where...are we?”

“Don’t worry about that right now, ma’am” Jim cooed, “You just concentrate on having this baby. Fight the urge to push for as long as you can. We’re almost there.”

Joe had come around to help Jim and together they linked arms and carried Mara into the surgery, since Jim didn’t want her to walk and get to pushing just yet.

When they entered the immaculately clean room, Jim began barking orders like a doctor in an emergency room. “Get your wife out of the bottom half of her clothing and sit her here,” Jim ordered, as he grabbed a stainless steel, low stool and put it near Mara. He went and got a fluffy towel and plopped it on the stool. “She can sit on this. I’ve got to wash up.”

While Joe did as ordered, Jim got into green scrubs and went to the sink, where he scrubbed his hands and arms vigorously.

“Don’t worry honey,” Joe said to Mara. “This guy seems to know what he’s doing.”

“I’m...n-not...worried,” Mara answered, smiling weakly. “I l-like...him...he’s n-nice.”

As Mara, now bare from the waist down, positioned herself on the stool, Joe looked up at Jim. “Why’s she sitting on this stool?” he asked. “Shouldn’t she be lying down?”

Jim finished his scrubbing and walked over, drying off his hands and arms. “Nope. If she sits up, gravity will help her with getting the baby out.” He grabbed a pair of rubber gloves out of a cabinet, using the towel so as not to touch the handle. “Don’t worry—this isn’t my first time.”

“It is with a *person*,” Joe retorted.

“Not really. I handled an emergency birth this past summer at a farm I visited to inoculate some cows. Here, at least I’m in my surgery. It’s much better equipped.”

“Oh,” Joe said, chastened. “What do you need me to do?”

“You need to wash up and get into a set of scrubs.” He tossed a set to Joe.

“Don’t you want me to boil water or something?”

Jim chuckled. “No, that’s strictly make-work to get husbands out of the way.” Jim bent over Mara, spread her legs apart and examined her pelvic area. “But you just gave me an idea. It looks like your wife here isn’t as far along as I suspected. She’s only a couple of centimeters dilated.

Grab that tub over there and fill it with body-warm water. It shouldn't feel hot or cold when you put your hands into it. Use that hose over there." Jim looked up into Mara's eyes. "Ma'am, you're going to give birth just like a porpoise—in water. Here, let me help you out of these heavy things and get you into a scrub top."

∞ 4 ∞
The Seekers

“Hey! I see a light over that way!” Mel said to his passengers.
Mel and his two passengers sat in his station wagon, its bed filled with gifts, on the way back from the roadblock at the bridge. Things there looked a mess, owing to the snowstorm and the blackout, never mind the difficulty it caused getting rescue equipment to the scene.

Mel, a professor of ancient languages and history, taught at the local community college. He and two of his students had been on their way to a Christmas party hosted by the dean, something the latter had made an annual affair. When they began the trip, the snow had just started, but it piled up fast. Now, their hopes of even getting there looked slim. Mel hoped the other students and faculty would get there safely. Cass, one of Mel's top students, sat next to him in front. His second passenger, an exchange student from Romania, named Balthus, sat in the back, looking clueless, since his poor English left him out of much of the conversation.

“Why is that light so important?” Cass asked.

“One, it's as dark as the inside of midnight out here, despite the snow. Two, we're fifty miles from where we need to be and the needle's hovering just below a quarter tank. Maybe we can find some gas there, or, barring that, shelter for the night. According to the weather report, it's supposed to stop in the wee hours, near dawn.”

“I'm think ve give a shoot at it, no?” Balthus said, smiling. Evidently, he *had* picked up enough of the conversation to understand their plight.

“Okay, here we go,” Mel said, as he guided the car onto the cutoff, following the previous tire tracks, which the blizzard had nearly filled in.

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“Congratulations, ma'am, you have a healthy baby boy!” Jim crowed, as he finished cleaning up the baby.

“My name's Mara,” she said from where she sat in the tub of water.

“And mine's Jim. Well, Mara; how was the experience?”

“Oh, it was wonderful! The warm water made the contractions feel so much better and the baby practically swam out!”

“Great! Sir, why don't you get that wet top off Mara here, towel her off and get her into these dry scrubs, so I can give her your son.” He tossed Joe a dry set.

“Joe. My name's Joe. Thanks for all you've done.”

“No problem. It's the least I could do, considering the circumstances.”

“You know, in a way, it was a good thing you hit my truck,” Joe said, as he helped Mara out of the tub, pulled off her wet scrub top and towed her off. At this point, the fact Jim would see her fully naked didn't occur to either of them.

“You do have a point there. I might have just passed you by and not even seen you in this storm.”

“I know why we were out, but why were *you* out tonight?”

“Well, I’m a single guy and my profession’s pretty much my life. I have a couple of four-legged patients over in the stalls and I wanted to make sure they’d be all right for the night. I was planning on just staying here and visiting my best friend Christmas morning.”

“Well, I too am glad you hit us,” Mara said.

“Thanks. Oh, I have a bed in one of the smaller animal recovery rooms, so my assistant can stay over when necessary. I’ll sleep there. Let’s get you set up in my room, shall we? There’s a queen-sized bed, so Joe can sleep with you there.”

“We couldn’t put you out like that,” Joe objected.

“You can and you will. I insist on it. The other bed’s comfortable enough and I didn’t just give birth. I’m just sorry it has to be basically in this barn.” Since Mara had finished getting dressed, Jim walked over and handed her the baby. “I think he’s hungry—rooting like crazy. Good little tyke though. He hasn’t complained much at all.”

Mara took her son and lifted her top so he could latch onto one of her engorged breasts. The baby found it difficult, so Jim walked over.

“He’s having trouble getting the nipple,” he told Mara. “Yours aren’t prominent. Try pressing down on each side of it, so he can get some suction. There, he’s got it now.”

Jim realized he had been paying a great deal of attention to Mara’s exposed breasts and looked up at Joe. Joe had been looking as intently as Jim and he looked up to meet Jim’s gaze and smile.

“Why don’t I get you two set up in my room?” Jim said, relieved that Joe hadn’t gotten angry with him.

∞ 5 ∞

Three Visitors

Before Jim could lead them to his room, he heard a knock at the door. “Now, who could that be? The room’s right through there and to the left. I’ll go see who it is.”

When he answered the door, three people stood in the snow, their faces looking jaundiced in the light of the sodium vapor floodlight.

“Come on in!” Jim invited, “It’s much too nasty to be out there.”

The three men entered and shook the snow off their coats, stomping to get it off their boots.

“Hi, my name’s Mel,” the oldest of the three said. “This is Casper and Balthus.”

Jim shook their hands. “Why don’t you get out of those coats? It’s nice and warm in here. What are you doing out on a night like this?”

“Well, I’m a professor at the local college and I usually take a couple of students with me to the annual Christmas party. On the way, we were going to bring gifts to those folks who are stuck in hospital wards on Christmas Eve. They really appreciate it and we always enjoy doing it; sort of an instant feeling of good will. But, tonight, we couldn’t get through. We saw your floodlight. It was the brightest thing for miles. Stood out like a star.”

“Yeah, it’s a real mess over at the bridge. I just took care of a birth, a young couple headed to the hospital I accidentally hit.”

“Are they okay?” Mel asked, concerned.

“Oh, it was just a light tap, really; didn’t even disable their truck. She gave birth minutes ago and they’re now in my room.”

“I’m glad they’re okay.”

“Wow, the baby was born on Christmas Eve!” Cass said excitedly.

“Yes, he was, wasn’t he?” Jim seconded. “Say, I just had an idea. Mel, those two kids seem to have been through some hard times. Want to help me out here?”

“Sure, what do you have in mind?”

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Mother and Child

Joe had just gotten Mara into bed and she had the baby contentedly nursing when a knock at the door interrupted them.

“Come in,” Joe said.

He got a surprise when three men entered the room with Jim.

“I’ve got three men here who want to see the baby and give you something. They’re refugees from the storm as well,” Jim said.

“Hi, I’m Mel and this is Casper and Balthus. We were going to go to the hospital to bring gifts to those folks stuck in the hospital wards, but we couldn’t get through either, so we thought we’d give you these gifts. They were purchased by donations from the students at my college.”

With that, each of the three men held out a gift.

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Abiding in the Fields

Just then, a knock at the outside door interrupted them, yet again.

“Good grief!” Jim said. “Suddenly, this place is busier than the Holiday Inn. You have a nice visit while I go see who it is.”

When Jim opened the door, a tall, beautiful, young man in a sparkling white suit, which curiously didn’t look yellow under the sodium vapor spotlight, but seemed to glow from within, greeted him. A half-dozen Mexicans in coarse garb stood with him.

“Come in,” Jim said, his eyebrows arcs above his surprised gaze. “It’s not a fit night for man nor beast out there!”

The group entered the building. Much brushing and stomping ensued, except for the man in white, whose clothes looked dry. He didn’t seem to have a speck of snow on his white shoes either.

“I found these fellows in their old, broken down truck. They’re towing a stock trailer with a flock of sheep in it. I was wondering if you could help out. You’re a vet, right?”

“As a matter of fact, I am. My truck’s an F-250 four-by with a hitch, so I can hook up the trailer and pull it in. I have a bunch of empty stalls as it turns out—enough room for everyone. Let them know that I just helped a woman give birth to a beautiful baby boy tonight and I need to let her and her husband know what’s up, then I’ll be right with you.”

“Take your time,” the man said as Jim bustled off. “I’ve got all night.”

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Glory in the Highest

Joe heard a knock on the door. “Come in,” he called out.

Jim popped his head in. “I have to go help some sheep haulers get their trailer here from off the main road. Their truck broke down. You gonna be okay ‘till I get back?”

“Yes, Mara’s fine,” Joe said, “but can I come with you?”

“You should be with your wife right now.”

“No, *really*; I want to help...and I need to tell you something.” He turned to his wife. “Okay, Mara?” Mara nodded.

“Okay then. Let’s get this over with. I’m not ashamed to admit I’m not looking forward to going out there again.”

When Jim and Joe got to the surgery, Jim let Mel know the score. “Look in on Mara and the baby from time to time while I’m gone. I shouldn’t be long.”

“Will do.”

Jim, Joe and two of the shepherds rode out in Jim’s truck to go get the trailer. Joe and Jim sat up front and the two Mexicans sat in the back seat of the club cab.

“Uh, Jim,” Joe began, “I...I’m sorry I was nasty to you back awhile ago.”

“Hey, it’s not a problem. You were stressing out over your wife. I understand.”

“No...I acted like a jerk. I watched how you were with Mara. You were great, a lot gentler with her than I ever was.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Unlike another lady I know of, on a Christmas Eve a long time ago, Mara didn’t get with child by way of a miracle. Something had to be going on between you two, if you catch my drift.”

“Yeah, we were really close once. Then, I lost my job and it was touch and go there for a while; took me almost two years to find a decent job. It’s not what I really want to do, you know? I guess I got bitter after awhile, started blaming God for my troubles. But, even though this night started out as a bummer, it sure has shaped up. Mara couldn’t have gotten better care at the hospital.”

“Well, I’m just glad there were no complications. I *am* just a vet, you know.”

“You should have been a doctor. You’re too good to be just a vet.”

“Hey, don’t let any of my regular patients hear you say that. Who’re they gonna go to if I’m only helping humans? By the way, what did you do...you know...before?”

“I worked in construction. Carpentry mostly, but I started out as a farrier down in south Texas, near the border; learned from my dad.”

“You don’t say? There’s always work for a good farrier and carpenter around these parts. I’ll have to see what I can do; that is, if it’s okay with you.”

“Are you talking about getting me some work?”

“Uh-huh. I get a lot of horses in my stalls that could use some shoeing and my clients always have carpentry work that needs doing around their places. You’d probably be turning away work.”

“You’re not pulling my leg, are you?”

“Nope. Serious as a judge.”

“Wow, and to think this all started with you hitting my truck.”

“It *is* Christmas Eve, after all. Miracles still happen in this night.”

Joe looked at Jim and smiled. “Yeah, I guess they still do, huh?”

The two Mexicans directed Jim to their broken down truck and the four men wrestled the trailer over onto Jim’s hitch. Jim then towed the trailer to his place and they got the sheep into a couple of the stalls. He then arranged to have the seven shepherds and the three college men bed down on some hay from bales in the hayloft. With enough blankets and pillows, everyone seemed reasonably comfortable. Just before Jim left, one of the Mexicans, the leader, spoke with Jim.

“Habla usted Español?”

“Si.”

“Por favor señor, podemos ver el niño?”

“Por que?”

“Porque nosotros creémos que es una cosa buena que el niño nació en la Navidad.”

“Déme ver que puedo hacer.”

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Jim went and knocked on the door of his room yet again.

“Come in.” Joe answered.

“I’ve got seven shepherds who say it’s good luck to see a baby born on Christmas Eve,” Jim said, “You up for visitors? I normally would just say no, but it evidently means a lot to them.”

Joe looked at Mara. “What do you think, honey?”

“Yes...let them come in.”

In a few minutes, Jim led the seven Mexicans into the bedroom, along with the man in white. They grouped around the bed, all smiles and soft words of admiration.

“El niño es hermoso,” the leader said.

“What did he say?” Joe asked.

“He said our son is beautiful,” Mara translated.

At that moment, the man in white began singing a Christmas carol, *Angels We Have Heard on High*, in a sweet, tenor voice of operatic quality. Jim joined in and the seven Mexicans accompanied him in Spanish. Then they sang *Hark the Herald Angels Sing, Joy to the World* and, finally, *Silent Night*. When they had finished singing, each of the Mexican men briefly laid his hand on the baby’s head and filed out. The leader turned at the door and said, “Muchas gracias. Feliz Navidad,” bowing as he left.

No one needed a translation for that.

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Jim made sure everyone had settled in, made one more check on the animals and went back for one last visit to Joe and Mara before turning in for the night. He sure felt tired enough and he suspected everyone else felt that way as well. “Sorry to bother you again,” he apologized, “but I just wanted to say good night and merry Christmas.” He chuckled. “I just got the seven singing shepherds and the three wise men all tucked in. Couldn’t find the guy with the angelic voice in the white suit, though. Not a trace of him anywhere. His Escalade’s gone too. Funny.”

Joe’s head snapped up. “Did you say a guy in white, with an Escalade?”

“Yeah, he brought the shepherds in from the road; came in with them to see the baby.”

“I didn’t see any man in white.”

“No? He was the one who started singing the carols.”

“No, *you* started and the Mexicans joined in, along with us.”

“You pulling my leg?”

“No, but a guy in a white suit helped change my flat, so I could get on my way. I looked away and he just disappeared. It was weird.”

“I’ll say. I guess we can chalk it up to Christmas angels, or something. That’s gonna be my story and I’m sticking to it. Well, merry Christmas and sleep tight.”

“Merry Christmas to you too,” Joe said, “and thanks for everything.”

“By the way, you come up with a name for the baby?”

“I always liked the name Josh,” Mara answered, “So I guess we’ll name him Joshua, if that’s okay with you, honey.”

“No problem,” Joe agreed, “I like it a lot. Josh is simple—like Joe.”

“Sounds like a good, solid name for him,” Jim added, “Well, good night.”

“You have a good night too and thanks again,” Joe replied.

“No problem. I’m just glad I had room in the stable, if you know what I mean.”

∞ 9 ∞
Silent Night

Joe got undressed, took a shower, toweled off and climbed into bed with his wife and child. The baby nursed yet again.

“Wow, the little guy seems to eat all the time,” Joe observed.

“Actually, he hasn’t nursed for a couple of hours,” Mara said.

“A regular fast,” Joe kidded, smiling at Mara. “Honey, I want to apologize for being so difficult lately.”

“I understand,” Mara said. “It was tough losing your job.”

“No, I had no excuse for taking it out on you.”

“But you didn’t, really. I never sensed that.”

“I’m glad to hear that, but *I have* been blaming God for everything. Man, I can’t believe what a jerk I’ve been. Look how God worked everything out. You might say he sent an angel to help us. From now on, I’m going to be more thankful...and I’m going to treat you better too.”

“You treat me just fine, sweetheart. But, you know, I listened as you and Jim talked about this man in white. I have no idea what either of you were talking about.”

“You didn’t hear him sing?”

“No.”

“And you didn’t feel the truck move when I checked on you back in the pickup?”

“Not really. I was a bit preoccupied then. Anyway, I thought *you* got it fixed.”

“No, it was *him*. He said goodbye and I got in the truck. When I looked up again, he was gone. That’s why I questioned Jim.”

“Well, you *were* under a lot of stress, what with the baby coming and all.”

“Oh well, there’s no sense debating it. God knows I’m running on batteries, I’m so beat. By the way, you open the gifts?”

“Just Josh’s. He got a cute stuffed dog and an outfit. I can’t wait to see him in it. I saved the other two for when things died down. Want to open them now? It’s Christmas eve, after all.”

“Sure.”

Mara handed Joe his present and they both opened them. Joe, disdaining neatness, finished first and held it up for Mara to see.

“Oh, it’s a beautiful, gold watch!”

“More like gold *tone* honey. I doubt those college kids could pony up for real eighteen-carat.”

“True, but it’s sweet of them nonetheless and you *do* need a dress watch.”

“You have a point there. What did you get?”

Mara finished opening her present. It was a beautifully decorated, scented gift candle. “Oh, how pretty! It’s so Christmassy,” she said.

“I can smell the scent from here,” Joe said. “I can’t place it though.”

Mara turned the candle over. The label read: Manufactured by the Frankincense Candle Co., Bethlehem, PA.

“It says the scent is *Myrrh*.”

“Never heard of it before, but it sure smells nice, though.”

Joe placed his watch on the bedside table and moved up next to Mara. Josh had been nursing the whole time.

“Sure is a hungry little dude,” Joe observed.

“I think it’s more for comfort,” Mara pointed out. “I don’t think there’s much left in there.

Joe laid his hand on his wife’s stomach. “To think...my beautiful wife made our son right in here....”

“You had something to do with that, *Daddy*. Isn’t it wonderful though, the way things worked out?”

When Joe didn’t answer, Mara looked down. He had fallen fast asleep.

“You’ve had a long, hard day honey,” she said, laying her hand on his head and smoothing his hair.

Joe responded by snuggling in closer. Mara looked at Josh. He too had fallen asleep with her nipple still in his mouth. She disengaged him and he composed himself for deep sleep.

“Sleep well, you two men in my life,” she whispered. “You’re both the best Christmas present I could ever get.”

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Just then, the door of the room swung open. Startled, Mara threw the corner of the coverlet over Joe’s naked body and pulled it up over herself and Josh. She expected to see Jim. When it turned out to be a beautiful man dressed in a white suit, for some reason she felt no fear.

“Blessings in the name of Jesus, the Savior,” the man said, “and merry Christmas.”

Mara looked in wonder at her visitor. Tall and beautiful, his suit glowed as though made of glow-in-the-dark material. Yet, his countenance didn’t look scary. He just stood, smiling at Mara.

“May I see your son?” he asked. Mara let down the sheet and lifted Josh. “Aren’t babies beautiful?”

Mara merely nodded.

“They’re so small and frail, yet they have so much potential. It’s that way with all babies.” Having said that, the man’s face took on a look of unutterable sadness. “It was like that for Hitler, Stalin and Mao too, but look how things turned out. Thankfully, it wasn’t like that with Jesus, bless His Holy Name. But he wasn’t born on December twenty-fourth, you know. It was in the spring, around when you celebrate Easter.”

“Does it really matter?” Mara asked, wondering why he said “you” and not “we.”

“No. It’s the thought that counts.”

“Are you the man who helped Joe?” Mara asked and he nodded. “And did you bring the shepherds to Jim too?” Again, he nodded. “Are you an angel?”

“Is that what you think I am?”

It was Mara’s turn to nod. “Thank you for helping everyone. You made a lot of people happy tonight.”

“Hey, it’s what I do; the boss’s orders. Well, I just wanted to pop in and wish you a merry Christmas. You have a beautiful baby boy there. I like that you named him Joshua. It reminds me of another baby boy with that name, bless Him forever. Goodnight and sleep tight. Be sure you raise him up right. Don’t let him forget the reason for the season.”

“I won’t,” Mara said, smiling, “And bless you too.”

The man shook his head. “No, bless God instead. He deserves all our praise for his unimaginable gift.”

As the man walked to the door, Mara realized he had known her son’s name without her having told him. Suddenly, she felt so weary she could barely keep her eyes open. She fell asleep before the door had closed.

Tomorrow, meeting the man in white would all seem like a wonderful dream, to Joe, to Jim and to her.

A beautiful, *Christmas* dream.