The Christmas Trumpet

Ken Zemsky

THE CHRISTMAS TRUMPET

by Kenneth T. Zemsky

INTRODUCTION

The year the pandemic hit was very, very rough. For many, the time was filled with all sorts of distress. For a very few, they found light through the darkness. And for one, this is a Christmas story, about a person who dealt with despair and redemption, both at the same time.

GABE'S STORY

This was a day the Lord hath made, and I rejoiced and was glad! It was one of those days that makes you believe there is a God. The sky could not have been a more radiant blue, the clouds amazingly fluffy, the first snow of the season still majestically blanketing the fields and tree branches, and the air breathtakingly pure, it being an unseasonably mild winter day.

I was enjoying an early morning jog. Fortunately the roads were clear, so no risk of black ice or any other form of slipperiness. As I said, it was early, so there was virtually no traffic noise to interrupt my otherworldly serenity. I rounded a bend and saw in the near distance another jogger. Runners rarely frequented this place, since it was pretty well tucked away. I was on the service road adjoining the scenic Palisades Interstate Parkway, the "PIP" to the locals. On each side I was surrounded by trees and open fields.

At the end of the service road from whence I had just turned around was a small station manned by the state highway department. It being the eve of Christmas Eve, they were closed today. On such days, the highwaymen barred the roadway leading to their end of the service road with a chain link fence. That presented no barrier to me, as I simply jogged around the end of the fence and was able to run the full length of the service roadway. Being a bit of an exercise freak, slithering around the small space between fence and tree was easy. The jogger in front of me had apparently stopped at the fence barrier, and turned back to complete her run.

From my view in the near distance I could tell it was a she. I could not make out much else, except she was in quite good shape. I also saw I was moving at a much faster clip and would shortly overtake her.

You know how when you sneak up on a person, even unintentionally, they tend to get startled? Especially in these times, when one never knew what danger was lurking around the corner, especially this being a remote area. I didn't want to alarm the poor young lady, so as I got much closer I tried to make some inoffensive sounds to alert her to my approach. I pounded my feet extra hard on the blacktop, hoping she would hear the noise. I even scuffed my running shoes on the ground for a stride or two. Failing that, I fake-coughed, kind of on the loud side. Nothing worked. She had something plugged into her ear, and as I got closer still, even from yards away I could hear her listening to some high decibel music on her phone.

I didn't want to stay behind her, and ruin my run until she would veer off a quarter mile away, besides which I had reason to introduce myself to her, so…

Another step and out of the corner of her eye she saw a sudden movement. "Aah!" she cried out in some surprise, stumbling mightily as she did so. We both stopped running.

"Sorry!" I said. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"I didn't hear you. I was listening to my workout play list," she explained.

"Too much noise," I muttered but she did not react.

She took a step forward and then… "Ow!" She stopped again and reached for her ankle, rubbing it. Looking up and frowning she said, "I must have sprained it." She took a few steps gingerly, but was clearly hobbling in pain.

"I'm sorry," I again offered but she waved me off.

"Not your fault. I guess it's an occupational hazard to us runners," she smiled wanly. "Well, I'd better limp home." She took a few steps, but the pain was so intense even I could practically feel it.

"You can't go far like that," I said. "Let me help you. It is sort of partially my fault." I beckoned to my shoulder and neck for her to support herself. She seemed to debate internally for a moment and then placed her arm around me. We slowly headed toward her house. With three good legs we managed nicely, thank you.

When we got home, she untangled herself from me and said, "Thank you."

"Wait, Jillian, I can't leave you out here. Getting into your house on your own could be problematic."

She looked at me carefully. I knew she was thinking that she didn't know me and was loathe to invite a stranger inside. "I don't even know your name," she said.

"Gabe!" I smiled as I held out my hand.

"Jillian," she said, then pulled her hand back. "Wait! You just called me by my name, but how did you know…"

"I think you said it earlier."

"No, no I don't think so."

"Well," I smiled what I hoped was my most disarming grin, "Then you tell me how I know your name? "

Jillian shrugged and said, "Allll…right. Help me inside, but…no funny business."

"Certainly not," I spoke emphatically, "unless the incredible urge to tell a joke comes over me."

Jillian laughed and must have figured I was all right. She again grasped me and we slowly took the steps of her front landing and went inside. I helped her to the nearest easy chair, and found a fluffy pillow to place underneath her raised leg. “Remember,” I said, “RICE, rest, ice, compression and elevation.”

I offered to get some ice and she directed me to her fridge. After gently placing the wrapped ice pack on her already swelling ankle, I wished her good luck.

“Some luck,” she grumbled. “I was supposed to do my Christmas shopping today. But with this…” She motioned with her head toward the injured limb.

“Before I leave, may I touch it?” I asked.

“What?”

“Haven’t you heard of the therapeutic touch?”

“Noo. Is that some sort of holistic nonsense?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I just know sometimes the aura a healthy person gives off can help an injured person.”

“Oh, please,” was all she said.

I also said, “Please. I won’t actually touch you. And it can’t hurt. It’ll also be the quickest way to get rid of me so you can get some much needed rest.”

“Okay.” As I stepped closer, she was peering intently at me. Her phone was at the ready, in case she had to call for help.

I held out my hands over the wounded area, closed my eyes, and silently prayed as I moved my hands along her lower foot and leg. Then I said, “Again, my apologies, and good luck.” I gently fluffed her pillow, and moved the phone aside to give her more room. As I reached the door I turned and said, “Oh, and have a Merry Christmas!”

“Yeah,” she grumbled, and in very low voice said, “Thanks.”

"I hope we run onto each other soon," I smiled.

"I'm not interested in another relationship at this time," she told me. "The odds of us seeing each other again are beyond remote."

"You never know," I smiled once more. I had a strong premonition I would be seeing a lot of Jill.

I left.

JILL'S STORY

I was glad when Gabe left. That whole healing touch thing was a little creepy. He did seem like a nice guy however. I took a deep breath and bemoaned the fact that if I was going to be laid up for a few days, my Christmas shopping plans would be ruined. Oh well, I guess I was going to have to let Amazon do my shopping, though I generally avoid having to give Jeff Bezos any more money. With that I realized I was tired and as Gabe had said, RICE. Since the first part of that acronym stood for rest, I put my head back on the sofa and drifted off to sleep.

The phone ringing startled me awake. Gabe had left it on the demilune on the other side of the room. I raced off the couch and grabbed the unit. Turned out to be a robocall. This one about my auto warranty that was about to expire. There must be a rash of these. Last week my friend Shirley got one—for a car she hadn't owned in three years! Somewhere behind all this I was certain there was an African prince lurking who needed my social security number to recover his temporarily lost wealth.

As soon as I angrily disconnected, it dawned on me that I had leapt to this side of the room with absolutely no soreness! Frowning, I put the phone down and walked slowly around the room, turning this way and that. No pain whatsoever. "I definitely sprained it," I whispered to myself, "but I've never heard of a recovery this rapid."

Not looking a gift horse in the mouth, I figured I'd be able to do my shopping as per the original plan. Yay!

Just then the phone rang again. If it's that auto warranty guy again… But it was Shirley, calling to catch up. "What's new?" she asked.

"Nothing, except the funniest thing happened to me this morning. I went out for my normal run, got startled by a guy fast approaching from behind me, and twisted my ankle."

"Ouch! You need me to come over to cook or get you anything?" Shirley asked.

"No, that's the funny thing. It's completely healed."

"Doesn't sound like much of a sprain."

"It was," I insisted. "I've done it before, and this was more painful than those other times."

"What did you do to heal thyself?"

"Nothing special, just rest, ice, oh, and Gabe applied his healing touch," I giggled at the silly thought.

There was a moment of silence. "Wait. Back up. Gabe?"

I explained about the strange guy.

"And he was able to cure you?" Shirley wondered.

"Yes…I mean no. Of course not. I don't know what happened."

Shirley then asked if I had gotten Gabe's number. "You ought to ask this guy out. You need to get back in the water, Jillian."

I winced. "No, I'm not ready for that."

"So this guy seems nice, you did say he was okay looking, he had enough kindness to help you when you couldn't walk, and he performed a miracle. Which part are you not ready for?"

"Shirl, it wasn't a miracle…and I'm not going to see him again."

"How do you know?"

"There are seven billion people on this planet. I've gone almost 30 years without running into this particular one. What are the odds that I'm going to happen upon him again? Not that I care to."

"The odds are probably as good as your recovering from a serious sprain in hours."

With that, we made plans to get together after I did my shopping. Shirley was one of the ones I had to buy for, so I couldn't invite her to tag along. She certainly deserved a great gift. I mean, she was the only one who stuck by me when it all fell apart.

I changed clothes and took a few more steps to be sure my ankle could weather the Christmas jungle and then was off. The mall is only about three miles from my house so it was a quick trip. Christmas shopping, especially the last week before the holiday is like I said, a jungle. This year counterintuitively it was not. The pandemic had kept many people in, doing their shopping via the Internet. So parking and traversing the many shops inside the Palisades Mall was a relative breeze.

After I had almost finished my purchases, I was distracted by an absolutely beautiful sound. Following the music to the area where Santa traditionally greeted youngsters (Santa was Covid-grounded this year and socially distancing), what did my wondering eyes behold…but Gabe! He was blowing on a trumpet, part of a musical trio, all with horns. They were playing the Hallelujah Chorus. And it was absolutely spell binding! Despite my problems, I found myself grinning uncontrollably, it was that beautiful. More and more shoppers were gathering around, many masked up, and all equally euphoric at this sound of the season.

When it ended, there was sustained applause and cheering. I had to approach Gabe and tell him.

As I neared, he caught my eye. "That was wonderful!" I gushed.

He looked down and smiled shyly. "Thank you. Oh!" he looked at the other guys in the musical trio, one had a few days' growth of beard and the other wore a wool cap. Turning to them, Gabe said, "These are my friends, Mike and Rafi." The two bowed their heads and smiled.

"You guys are so fantastic. Do you play together often?" I asked.

"As often as we can," Mike said, "but this time of year we're kind of busy. This was a rare opportunity for us to jam."

I smiled. "Well, it was…I don't know, I can't think of an adequate enough word…"

Just then an elderly couple stepped in. The woman said, "That was heavenly!"

That was the word I was searching for, for indeed it was. The three amigos graciously accepted the lady and gentleman's kudos, as well as those of other bystanders who similarly said they had never enjoyed music so immensely.

I lingered, not wanting to leave just yet. When the crowd dispersed, Gabe said, "I see your foot is better."

"Yes," I replied, "My friend called it a…miracle," I said with a slight tone.

His grin was wide. "They do happen, you know. The therapeutic touch and all."

"I don't know. I mean, I don't believe in miracles, not anymore, but I also don't look a gift horse in the mouth, so whatever the reason, I'm just glad I'm better."

"Me too!" he said enthusiastically. Then his look turned slightly serious. "You need to slow down," he advised.

"This is New York," I explained (even though we lived 30 miles northwest of "the City", we Rocklanders all thought of ourselves as New Yorkers). "Everything moves fast in New York."

"That's part of the problem. You need to slow it down. Why not go to church or something? It's pretty quiet there, especially now in the middle of the day with no services scheduled."

"I'm not a churchgoer. Not anymore. But listen, thanks again for helping me earlier…and for the music too." I gave a little wave to his bandmates, and one of them, Rafi, called out, "Later."

After I had walked a dozen yards, I was seized by an impulse and turned back. To my surprise, Gabe was staring after me. He looked a little sad. I thought to walk back and take Shirley's advice and get his number or ask him out. "Oh, this is stupid!" I thought to myself. "I'm not going to start dating again with

a guy I hardly know who plays Christmas music in malls and has weird ideas about healing and visiting churches." So I gave a last wave and resolved it was best that he be out of my life.

If I only knew.

GABE'S STORY

We finished our set at the mall and all flew off. It had been such a glorious day I later decided to enjoy a walk. I am a big walker, when I'm not flying around the world, that is. I had gone pretty far when I noticed threatening rain clouds rolling in, so I turned back. The most direct route seemed to be the PIP so I hiked along the shoulder when the rain started to come down. Actually more than come down. It was pouring buckets. I didn't mind in the least. Sometimes walking alone in the rain can be the most tranquil of experiences. Everyone else is hunkered down inside, so there is relative peace in the world. My reverie was disturbed when I heard a woman scream.

Ahead of me, also on the shoulder stood a woman beside a car. It was obvious she had just gotten a flat, and was clueless as to what to do. She just stood there with a battered umbrella that would hold off the monsoon only moments longer, raised her eyes to the heavens and wailed. I trotted ahead to see if I could be of assistance.

Wonder of wonders! A sentiment I saw she shared, because it was Jillian! In spite of herself she smiled and said, "Three times in one day. Go figure."

"It must mean something," I remarked and she just gave me a thoughtful look. "Can I help?" I asked her.

Jill said she had never been good with flats. I assured her I could handle it. "Go sit in the car before you get drenched," I told her.

“The weatherman said nothing about rain today. It was supposed to be bright and sunny all day.”

“The Lord moves in mysterious ways,” I commented. “Now get in the car and out of this mess.”

“What about you?” she said. “You’ll get wet.”

I pointed to my already dripping garments and said, “Too late.” Then I held the car door open for her and got to work. I jacked up the car and got the tire off easily enough, then was careful to bring it to the trunk unseen. There I fiddled with it after which I put a tire back on. When it was finished I gently rapped on Jill’s window and told her she was good to go. “By the way, I was able to patch the puncture and replace the same tire. It’s as good as new.”

“What did you fix it with? Your bare hands?" she seemed surprised. I just shrugged.

"Well, thank you so much!” she said with genuine feeling. “I guess it’s goodbye again, except it seems we keep finding each other.”

“Imagine that,” I smiled.

Before putting her key in the ignition she looked around and asked, “Where’s your car?”

“Uh, I’m currently without wheels.”

“You mean you were out here walking?”

“You are as perceptive as you are pretty,” I replied.

“Get in,” she said. “I’ll drive you where you’re going. It’s the least I can do.”

“No,” I protested. “I’ll get your seat all wet.”

She would not hear of it. “Get in!”

I did and thanked her, easing myself into the passenger side.

“You’re an angel,” Jill said. I let the comment pass. Then she asked where I lived.

“Oh, it is quite some ways from here. You see, I’m just passing through.”

“So where are you staying?”

“Also hard to get to by car. Just drop me off by your house and I’ll walk from there.”

Jill shrugged. We talked. She asked where my trumpet was. I told her I had already stored it before going on my walk. “You’re really terrific,” she noted. “Where did you learn to play?”

“I picked it up on my own. I have had years to practice.”

“Teaching yourself…that’s pretty incredible, especially how good you are. I mean it. You could play professionally.”

“I have jammed with a few good musicians. Louis Armstrong. Al Hirt. Others.”

Jill gave me a mildly startled look. “Louis Armstrong? You can’t be old enough to have known him.”

“Well, it was late in his career.”

Jill said, “You know, your playing, along with your friends, was sublime. And so appropriate to the season. It’s like the angels playing at that first Christmas.”

I smiled. “Actually, I think those stories are apocryphal. The angels didn’t play any brass instruments in Bethlehem.”

Now it was Jill’s turn to smile. She had a very pretty smile. “And you know about the angels in Bethlehem?”

I rubbed my chin. “Search the scriptures. They speak of angelic presence, but nothing about musical talent. No, I think those are legends that have arisen over time.”

Jill frowned. She was pretty when she wrinkled her brow as well. “Wait. I know I’ve heard of Gabriel’s trumpet.”

“Yes. That’s from an old Negro spiritual, which in turn came from those stories I mentioned. Sometimes it’s called his trumpet, sometimes his horn. One hymn refers to it as the golden trumpet. When Mike, Rafi and I play this time of year, I like to think of it as a Christmas trumpet.”

“Well, whatever, it really reached me,” she spoke softly. We had just arrived at her home. The rain had abated but was still coming down in force. “I can’t let you leave like that in this,” Jill said. “Come inside. We’ll get you dried out and when the rain stops, you can go.”

"You drive a hard bargain," I said and we both smiled.

Inside, Jill suggested I take off my clothes so she could throw them in the dryer.

"Oh no! You're not getting in my pants!" My look made clear I was jesting, and she laughed.

She went to a back room and came back with a pink fluffy bathrobe. "Sorry, it's the best I can do," she said.

After I changed and she deposited the soaking garments in the Sears Kenmore, I said I could get drummed out of the corps if they ever caught sight of me like this.

"You in the military?" Jill asked.

"Different corps," I simply replied.

"You know, there's something about you," Jill told me. "Being around you, I feel good inside. I can't tell you how much that means, because I have been in dire need of goodwill."

"Rough year?" I asked.

"Rough is a word and a half for it," she said a tad morosely as she poured tea for each of us.

"Care to share?" I said.

A shrug.

"I'm a good listener." That did it, and Jill began to unburden herself.

"Early this year," she began in halting tones, "When the pandemic was just beginning, my Dad caught it. He was having trouble breathing and all. I rushed him to the hospital. He lingered a few days, then passed away." She wiped at a tear with her napkin.

"He was more than a father." I sensed Jill needed to get this out. "Mom died when I was seven. Dad filled in and was both mother and father. We were so incredibly close. It just hit me hard when he…died."

I placed my hand on her arm soothingly. "It's never easy, but some things we just have to accept. I mean none of us is going to live forever."

Jill waved it off. “I can live with Dad dying,” she snorted at the odd phrasing. “What has destroyed me is knowing he was suffering so and I couldn’t even be there with him to try to comfort him. The hospital had banned visitors. He died all alone and in pain…Gabe, what kind of God would allow such awful things to happen? That’s when I realized there is no God.”

“Maybe the awful things are the work of the evil one. Not God,” I said and took a deep breath. There was a lot going on here. “Have you tried going to church and praying?” I asked.

“No. What’s the purpose? Like I said, there’s no God.”

“There is. There is a God. And He is good. All the time.” I spoke with assurance. “He also sends His angels to help us. The angels are always here for us.”

Through still teary eyes Jill looked at me. “I see you have faith.”

“Yes. Abundantly.”

“Well, good for you. I guess. But everything’s gone to hell in a handbasket since then. My ex…” she paused so I jumped in.

“You were married?”

She shook her head. “No. Engaged. Brad was his name. He was a good guy and like you, kind of religious. He couldn’t deal with the change he saw in me, including my leaving the church. He said he was willing to be patient, but months after Dad passed he didn’t think I was ever going to come back and couldn’t imagine having children in a Godless household. So we broke it off. Last month actually.”

“Bummer,” I said. After a thoughtful pause I said, “You could go back to him.”

“Uh-uh. Brad was right. I’ve changed. I’m not the same person he fell in love with.”

“You can change back. If you changed once, why not twice?”

She gave me a look. “Not gonna’ happen.” She wiped at her nose, then her eyes again. “Sorry. I’m usually much stronger than this.”

“Emotion knows neither strength nor weakness. By the way, why don’t you start looking for ‘Mr. Right?’” I made quote marks with my fingers.

“You sound like my friend Shirley. But no,” she shook her head slowly. “I’m not ready. I’m not even sure where I’d look.”

“How about at work?” I asked.

“I work in public accounting. Have you seen the guys there?”

“Looks aren’t everything,” I observed.

“I know. I didn’t mean to sound shallow.”

I knew I had a serious look and it was intentional. “Without God, you are going to be living a shallow life.”

Jill smirked and seeming to want to change the subject she said, “Hey, enough about me. What about you?”

“What about me?” I asked.

“What do you do?” she wondered.

“Uh, I work in charity.”

“Oh, which company?”

“We’re sort of a generic concern. I get involved in all sorts of charitable endeavors.”

“That sounds nice.”

“It is what I was born to do,” I told her. “I find it quite rewarding.”

“Then you are one lucky person. I wish I had that.”

I snapped my fingers, as if the light bulb had just gone on.

“Why don’t you join me tomorrow?”

“Look,” Jill said, “You are a nice guy, but like I said, I’m not yet ready to date again.”

“Earth to Jillian. Did I say anything about romance? No, what I had in mind was you accompanying me on one of my good works. I think it would…enrich you.”

“Thanks, but no. I’m not interested…”

I interrupted. “Not interested in showing good will toward men…and women?”

“I didn’t mean that,” she protested.

“Sounds like that’s exactly what you meant. Look, it’s not an eternal commitment, though it should be. Just a chance for you to get away from your routine. Get your mind off your troubles. Doing a random act of kindness for someone might make you feel better. You know, it is in giving we receive.”

“Well…”

“Jills, what have you got to lose? It’s only for part of a day. And you’re off from work this Christmas week.”

Jillian looked up with a start. “You called me Jills. No one ever did that, except for Daddy. And how did you know I was off from work?”

I ignored the comment about her father, but told her it was well known that all the major accounting firms took the week as a sabbatical. It was a way to pay lip service to quality of life, while grinding blood out of the employee stones the rest of the year.

“As for Jills,” she said, “where did that come from?”

“I don’t know. I must have heard it somewhere. So, you in?”

“I do feel better when I am around you.” The buzzer on the dryer sounded and Jill retrieved my dry clothes which I quickly donned. Looking out the window she said, “It’s stopped raining.”

At the door I repeated, “So? You coming tomorrow?”

Jills gave me a very thoughtful look, biting her lower lip as she did so. “No date?” she asked.

I held up my hands, palms extended. “No date,” I promised. "No romance."

She slowly shook her head yes. "All right. Yes, let's do it." As I walked down her front walkway she called out, "By the way, what are we going to do?"

I gave a jaunty wave of my right hand and called back over my shoulder, "Tomorrow."

JILL'S STORY

Next morning my doorbell rang, and there stood a smiling Gabe. "Want some breakfast?" I offered.

"No thank you. I've already gotten my nourishment. Ready?"

I looked around behind him. Seeing nothing I said, "Let me guess. You're still without wheels." He acknowledged that was the case.

"Okay, I'll drive, but how do you get around without a car? Even a loaner?"

"I manage," Gabe said. "It often seems I can get places faster without a car."

"If you could bottle that, you'd make a mint," I said.

"Money isn't everything," he replied. "Shall we?" he indicated with a sweep of his arm.

In the car I asked where we were heading.

Gabe answered, "Midtown Manhattan. You okay with city driving?"

I told him I could have been a cabbie, and giggled.

We made great time, even through the George Washington Bridge toll plaza and down the West Side Highway. Gabe directed me to a parking garage on 42nd, just off 9th Avenue. It was self-parking and before we left Gabe exchanged exuberant greetings with the parking attendant, whose name was Miguel and was clearly happy to see Gabe. It made an impression on me. I generally didn't bother to chat up people in service positions like garages and the sort. Gabe's easy friendliness made me wonder why I had never done so?

Anyway, we only had to walk a block and a half to Holy Cross Church, which a plaque informed us was at "the Crossroads of the World," aptly put since it was in the Times Square area. The church sponsored a food pantry, which was where we would be assisting today. Already there was a well-formed line, and people respectfully surged forward once the doors opened. Gabe told me since the pandemic had resulted in so severe a loss of jobs, the pantry's clients had grown significantly. "There is a great need," Gabe said.

"For food, or for kindness?" I asked.

"Right," Gabe answered.

Gabe was on the food line. I was working toys. In addition to supplying foodstuffs, and at this time of year turkeys, the pantry also gave out toys to those with small children. Even though we were apart, Gabe looked over from time to time to check on me, which was kind of sweet. After a while I couldn't take the time to notice if Gabe was there or not, we were so busy. There was no let up. The line just kept on and on. People already had their food from the other lines when they got to me. My job was to quickly find an appropriate toy, depending on what the person asked for. You know, age and sex of the child, and any specific requests we could fulfill. Of course the stock of goodies we had were courtesy of other peoples' kindness, many from the giving tree that had apparently been in the church since Thanksgiving.

What struck me was how incredibly grateful the clients were. One woman, probably my age, took my hand in both of hers and with tears said, "My husband and I both lost our jobs. This will at least make our little one able to believe, and to be happy. God bless you!"

I didn't know what to say, except to wish her the same. Her strong emotional response touched something deep inside me. As did the overly grateful reactions of others, parents and grandparents alike, all so much less fortunate than me.

At last, after I had given a mitt to an elderly man for his "favorite grandson" (the man explained he was on a fixed income and had this year incurred unexpected medical bills that made gift giving out of his own resources near impossible), I looked up—and no one was there. Except a second later a smiling Gabe stood before me. "We made it!" he exulted. "Finished for today." Gabe told me we had handled over 600 people!

There was only one item left in the gift pile behind me. A Barbie doll. This one was cheerleader Barbie. I knew that because the presents were all unwrapped. That way we knew what we were handing out and the clients could have the pleasure of wrapping and labelling and putting something of themselves into the gift. Gabe told me to take the Barbie doll with me, which seemed sort of strange. I mean, it's not like at my age I wanted a doll as recompense for working that day. I was getting used to little oddities that Gabe had about him however, so I dutifully kept the package with me.

There was a small coffee urn in the back where Gabe and I and the other volunteers shared a cup of joe. The coffee maker had certainly seen better days, which made sense, since Holy Cross was obviously a poorer parish. To my surprise, the coffee was quite good. I asked Gabe what brew it was? It tasted as good as the high-priced mocha lattes I was used to. He said he didn't know. One of the volunteers overheard and told Gabe it was probably one of those "heavenly coffees", a reference I supposed to an old-time jingle for one of the long-established coffee brewers. Gabe laughed good naturedly at the jest.

As we sipped, and had a bagel, I told Gabe this was tiring work, we had been so busy. Yet I couldn't believe how the time had flown by. Gabe looked at me seriously and asked, "Tell me what you really feel, deep inside. Just tired? Is that all you feel?"

My answer was spontaneous. "No," I laughed. I feel…good. Very good. To see how much our little presents meant to these people…well, that's what has given me a boost."

He nodded and smiled. "It is in giving that we receive." I raised my paper cup with a matching smile and we clinked. It suddenly reminded me of an incident when I was young. A single older lady in our

neighborhood had just moved in and seemed to have no company. My friend at the time, Amy, and I picked some holly and brought it to the woman as a Christmas present. The woman had been so grateful. I wondered when I'd lost some of that childlike innocence.

On the way home, I asked Gabe why he wanted me to bring the Barbie doll. “Oh!” he said. “I almost forgot! I must be getting old! There’s someone else we have to give a gift to. Someone who couldn’t come to the church hall.”

“Want me to stop by the post office so we can send it?” I asked.

Gabe looked at me. “The gift without the giver is bare.” He suggested we return home. There, since I had extra Christmas wrapping paper, we sealed Barbie in some pretty white paper with angels on it. I mentioned this was different, since we had not wrapped all the other gifts. “Different program,” is all Gabe said by way of explanation. Wrapping the gift with Gabe brought me back to another earlier but recent memory, when I had wrapped a present for one of Brad’s parents. We had gotten a little wrapped up in sticky tape, but it had turned into a fun, and slightly amorous, experience. I smiled at the thought, then immediately pushed it from my mind.

Gabe must have noticed. “There’s nothing wrong with being happy,” he said.

“No,” I said, but not wanting to get into it with him, and certainly not in the mood to be psychoanalyzed, I switched subjects. “So where is Barbie going?”

Gabe explained, “Not every needy person lives in the poor section of town. You do realize even some people in your own neighborhood are suffering?”

I lived in a typical suburban development, 40 or so homes, but my work hours were so long I rarely got to see any of my neighbors. I did on occasion cross paths with the people on either side of my house. On those occasions a wave of the hand was the extent of our communication.

Gabe told me, “There’s a girl down the block. Her name is Carly. She rides a red bike a lot, is six years old, wears New York Rangers sweats a lot…”

I brightened. “I know her! I see her sometimes on her bike when I’m jogging.”

“Yes,” Gabe nodded. “Did you know her father lost his job because of the pandemic shut down? It’s going to be a bleak Christmas for that family.”

“They must have something saved up for a rainy day,” I said.

“Sure. That ‘rainy day fund’ (again he used quote marks) is what is going to keep them in that house. It costs money to maintain the mortgage, utilities and property taxes."

“Yeah…I guess I didn’t think.”

“Not thinking is the start of not caring,” Gabe’s voice was uncommonly stern. “It’s our job to correct this.”

“Well, sure. Of course.” After all, I couldn’t argue with the point he was making. Something did trouble me however. So I asked Gabe, “You’re not from around here. How do you know about Carly’s family’s plight? I live here and *I* didn’t know.”

He smiled, the sternness gone. “I’m in the charity business, remember? It’s my job to know these things.”

“Wow, you must be good at what you do.”

Gabe shrugged, a little sheepishly, and said he tried his best. “Anyway,” he brightened, “Let’s go deliver this to Carly.”

We walked down the street to where she lived. Sure enough from a distance we could see her circling the cul de sac adjacent to her family’s plot on her bike. Gabe stopped abruptly. “Okay. You go,” he urged.

“What? Aren’t you coming with me? I mean, I don’t really know her.”

Gabe answered, “To her I am a strange man whom she should not be talking to or accepting offers of presents from. Getting myself arrested would not be in the best interests of my philanthropic mission. You at least are familiar to her. Go,” he again urged.

I walked ahead, a little unsurely. As I neared her, Carly looked up and stopped her bike. “You’re not running today,” she observed.

“Doesn’t look like it,” I smiled. “I have a package,” indicating the wrapped parcel, “which makes jogging kind of cumbersome.”

“I like seeing you when you run. My dad does to. He says you’re very attractive. Mom tells him to keep his eyes in his head.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I like seeing you bike ride,” I said. “You’re lucky it’s December and today it’s gotten so warm you can ride.” Indeed, the snow that had fallen was fast melting.

“I don’t feel so lucky,” Carly groused in a little girl sort of way. “Mommy says this year Santa may not come.”

Thinking quickly I said, “Because of the pandemic, I think he had to make his trip earlier this year. And I also think the virus that’s all around must have gotten him a little mixed up. He left this at my house—for you!”

Carly’s eyes grew wide as saucers as she got off the bike and hesitantly stepped forward. I was grinning and encouraging her onward with my eyes.

When she took the package, she caressed it fondly. “Such pretty paper!” she said. “I love angels!” Then she said, “When should I open it?”

I suggested she put it under her tree at home and open it tomorrow morning, Christmas Day.

“All right!” she was so excited. “Whatever it is, I bet it’ll be the bestest Christmas present ever! Even if it’s not what I wrote to Santa for. Thank you for bringing it to me, uh, uh…”

“Jillian,” I offered my hand.

Carly grasped it, shook firmly and repeated, “Jillian!” Thank you sooo much!”

As she walked off with the present and bike back to her house, I called out, “I hope you like it.” I hoped she would not be disappointed and was into dolls. I know I certainly was at her age. “By the way, what was it you wanted Santa to bring you?” I asked.

She called back, “A Barbie doll. There’s a Cheerleader Barbie I really wanted. Bye! Merry Christmas!”

She was gone inside now but I kept staring, absolutely stunned. Slowly I turned and in the near distance saw Gabe, smiling approvingly. I walked back and said to him, “How did you manage that? It’s not possible!”

“What?” he said. I explained about the Cheerleader Barbie coincidence.

Gabe just scratched his head. “Who knows? You said it yourself. Christmas coincidence, Christmas magic, what’s the difference? How do you feel?”

“I feel…strange. Good. I mean, I almost had tears in my eyes when I realized I, we, are going to make that precious little girl’s Christmas dream come true.”

“Tears can be good,” Gabe smiled.

“Now what?” I wondered.

“Just follow me,” he said softly.

GABE’S STORY

Jill told me it was funny how giving food and toys to the needy and the doll to Carly had greatly improved her outlook. “I can see why you’re in to the charity work,” she told me.

I gave her my best Delphic smile. “Maybe now is a good time for us to go to Church,” I suggested. She frowned and said her outlook had not changed that much. “In that case,” I said, “We have time for another stop.”

“Someone else in need of a gift?” Jill asked.

“Yes.”

“But we don’t have any more presents,” she pointed out.

I looked at her. “Sometimes the best gift is the gift of yourself.”

“You’re speaking in riddles,” Jill said.

“No,” I answered, “What I am saying is the simplest thing to understand, but people get so caught up in materialism and all the noise surrounding the modern world that you shut out the message. Ah, we’re almost there.”

We had walked about a quarter mile in the other direction from Jill’s home, and were still in her neighborhood.

“You know,” Jill said, “You sure take a girl to the weirdest of places.”

“Depends on your point of view. From thirty thousand feet, I’d say it’s the best of places.”

Jill guffawed. “Like you could see me from thirty thousand feet up.”

“You’d be surprised.” Before she could delve into that, I told her I had to brief her on our next visit.

“Am I going solo on this one?”

“No, this time we visit together,” I said. Then I explained the circumstances. “Mrs. Hogan lives in the older section of your neighborhood. Her husband died earlier in the year.” Before Jill could ask, I said, “No, not from the covid. He was quite old, they both are. It was natural causes. But this will be her first Christmas in over a half century without him and she is feeling lonely.”

“I didn’t know,” Jill said.

“You should make it your business to know. It’s not like she’s from Wyoming. It’s practically your back yard. Anyway, we’re going to introduce ourselves and spread a little Christmas cheer.”

“That’s it?” Jill asked. “It doesn’t sound like much.”

“It is enough.”

Jill followed me up the short pathway, I could sense her reluctance at barging in on a strange person, but to her credit she did stay with me. I guess the earlier visits imbued me with some credibility.

When old Mrs. Hogan answered the door, I said, “Hello, Mrs. Hogan. This is my friend Jill who lives in the neighborhood.” I gave the precise street address. “We just wanted to stop by and wish you Happy Christmas.”

Immediately the stooped, white haired lady brightened. In seconds it seemed she had taken years off her life. “Won’t you come in, that is if you have the time?” she asked hesitantly.

“We’d love to,” Jill said, picking up on my clues, I am pleased to say.

Mrs. Hogan patted at her hair. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t expecting visitors, so I’m not presentable.”

“Why, you look smashing, as the British would say,” Jill said, and the woman gave us an, “Oh, come on,” friendly wave of the hand. She guided us to the living room and offered us something to eat and drink.

“We don’t want to impose,” I said.

“It’s no imposition at all,” she answered. “I hardly ever get any visitors, so this is a very welcome surprise. You know, most people treat us older folk like we don’t exist.” Then she bustled off, returning in a wink with some tea she had just brewed and a plate of cookies. The cookies were round and white, having been sprinkled with confectioner's sugar, it appeared. Mrs. Hogan explained she had just made them; they were called pfeffernusse. “It’s a German treat,” she said, “with a ginger bread taste. It was my husband’s favorite. He’s gone, you know.” And her look grew sad.

Jill sat next to her and took her hand. “I am so sorry,” Jill said, patting the aged, wrinkled hand.

Mrs. H smiled fondly and said, “Well, it is that time. We’re not going to live forever. And Henry got his wish.”

I perceived, but Jill did not. The woman explained very quietly, “Henry always said he hoped to die first, so he would never have to spend a day on earth without me.”

I saw Jill's eyes mist and she impulsively hugged the old woman. "What a beautiful love story," Jill commented.

"It was," Mrs. H replied. "Still is. Not a day goes by I don't think often of him. And am ready to be at his side again soon. Oh, but hush this talk and do try the pfeffernusse."

We each popped one in our mouths. "This is wonderful!" Jill said. "I've had gingerbread cookies, but nothing like this! I'd love to get the recipe." Mrs. H said she would love to share it. Then Jill said, "You know, I've seen these in the stores at holiday time but didn't know what they were. The name made it seem a little weird to me."

"These are better than store bought," Mrs. H proclaimed non-boastfully, but in a matter of fact manner.

"Of that I have no doubt," I said. "So tell us about Henry," I offered.

"Come on," she beckoned. On a side table was a wedding picture, of them, she explained.

Jill picked it up and studied it. "What a handsome man," she said, and Mrs. H nodded eagerly. "And you, you are so beautiful," Jill said, adding, "You still are."

Mrs. H made that shooing motion. "Maybe when I was younger…Anyway, come here."

In a side room there were all sorts of paintings. There was a magnificent seascape, one of Neuschwanstein castle in Bavaria, among many others, and a stunning portrait of what from the wedding photo we knew was the young Mrs. H. "Henry did these. He was quite the painter, especially after he retired."

Jill's lips parted slightly. "These are…these are magnificent!"

Mrs. H's eyes sparkled.

Then I said we had to be going. We had other rounds to make.

"Of course," Mrs. H said, escorting us to the front door. "It was so very kind of you to visit. You made me so happy! Now that we've been properly introduced, don't be strangers."

I said that I was from out of town, but would try to look in on her, and as for Jill…

"I'd love to see you again, and soon!" Jill said. I was heartened to see her smile was genuine. Jill told the lady when she returned, she would love to copy that recipe down.

"Certainly, my dear," Mrs. H said. "And perhaps next time you two will have news of your own?" To Jill's uncomprehending look, Mrs. H motioned to her hand, twisting where a ring would be.

"No," I said insistently yet politely. "We're just friends."

"Yes," Jill was right on my heels, verbally speaking. "Friends. Nothing more."

The old lady's eyes sparkled yet again. "Well you're both lovely people and you deserve to find happiness. That will be my Christmas wish for you." We thanked her and took our leave.

Outside Jill linked her arm in mine as we strolled back up the street toward her house. "That was wonderful!" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "It didn't seem like much."

"What? Are you kidding? Didn't you see how the lovely lady lit up when we were there?"

"Didn't seem like much to me," I remarked. "No gift or anything."

Jill opened her mouth, then stopped. "That's what I said earlier, isn't it?"

I nodded.

Jill shook her head. "I was wrong. It was…special."

I took Jill's hands in mine and said, "What we've done today, it was nothing more than getting out of the rat race and taking time for the important things in life."

She nodded in understanding.

Then I asked, "So how about a visit to Church now? It should be quiet there, since the Christmas vigil Mass doesn't start for a few hours yet."

Jill frowned. "Noo…I admit I do feel different, but I don't feel all that religious yet."

"If religion is about doing unto others, I'd say you performed admirably today," I pointed out. "Look, you've had a rough time. A lot of people have this year. Some grow embittered by their setbacks, like dear Ebenezer Scrooge. That's not you, however. Deep down you are a warm, caring person. It just got momentarily locked away and with all the noise around you, you didn't get a chance to let it back out."

I could sense she was wavering, but I'd also learned the hard way you can't force people into spirituality. I told Jill, "Formalized religion is not restricted to churches. Church is good because it is a quiet place where you can shed the outside noise and find yourself. It is in the quiet that we feel the presence of the living God. But that doesn't only happen in the different denomination's houses of worship. Isn't there some place special, your quiet place, where you can get away from it all?"

Jill was shaking her head "yes." She told me of the place.

JILL'S STORY

Gabe was nice and all and he had led me to things that certainly improved my mood. For the first time this year, I actually felt Christmassy, and for that I was beholden to him. But he kept bugging me about church, and that scene just wasn't for me. Nor was that quiet place he was prodding me to share. However, partly to thank him and partly to get him off that church kick, I told him about a particular spot I'd always favored. Moreover, since he was not from Rockland, he doubtless didn't know of it, and would enjoy it. The county had grown geometrically, so almost everywhere you looked there was that noise that Gabe spoke of.

Except at Perkins Memorial Tower. Perkins was off of Perkins Memorial Drive, adjacent to Bear Mountain. Many a time Brad and I had lunched or picnicked or hiked at Bear Mountain, one of the gems

of the New York State park system. A number of people must have felt as I did, for there were often multiple visitors. If you timed it right however, you could have the place all to yourself, which to me was one definition of bliss. It wasn't the tower per se I enjoyed. Just beyond the tower was a small rock outcropping.

I used to like to sit on the rock, stare out at the vista atop the mountain, and just let my mind wander. I explained some of this to Gabe as we (I—he was without wheels, and apparently unwise in the ways of rental cars) drove to what we locals called the "north country."

When we got there, I parked in the public lot of the Bear Mountain Inn and we got out and hiked up Perkins Drive. I led the way, being the local, and Gabe remarked that so far it seemed as pleasant as I had made it out to be. I was pleased to see his reaction when we reached the rock outcropping at the top and sat. "Wow! It really is something," he gushed. "You sure can enjoy the Lord's handiwork from here." Then he looked at me and said, "So this is where you come to think?"

"Yes. To think, or just veg out. Sometimes I like to let my mind be blank and just…just be. You know, just feel. Though I haven't been in a while."

Gabe's smile was wide. "I understand completely. I do that a lot. And you're right. This is a perfect place. You can get almost a mystical feeling. That's what I meant about spirituality not being the sole province of organized houses of worship, though certainly they foster the same spirit."

He was still looking at me and laughed.

"What?" I said, suddenly feeling a little self-conscious. "What is it?"

"Nothing," he replied. "It's just I'm happy for you."

"Why? Nothing's happened. We're just sitting here."

"Nothing's happened—yet," he corrected me. "Don't mind me. Go ahead. Do your thing."

"My thing?" I said.

"You know. Find your inner quiet place and get in touch with our ever-present God."

“Or whatever,” I replied.

“Ok, or whatever,” he said. “I’ll be quiet,” Gabe said. “Just close your eyes and shut out all distractions."

I did, and slowly everything faded away, even the conscious knowledge of Gabe by my side. I did feel so at peace. At one point my eyes fluttered open and I saw Gabe extending his hands over me. “Shh,” he whispered, “close your eyes.” I did.

Slowly, very slowly, an image formed in my mind. It grew stronger and more defined until…

“Jills!”

“Daddy!” He was right before me and looked just as he had when I last saw him, before he got sick. It seemed so real, and felt so wonderfully pleasurable.

“I’ve missed you so!” I said. Actually no words were spoken; all the dialogue was nonverbal, in my head. But like I said, it was no less real. I was crying heavily.

Dad said there was no reason to miss him. “We’re always here, when you need us,” he said.

“Who’s we, Daddy?”

“Your loved ones. And the angels of course.”

“You mean there really are angels?”

My father smiled that wonderful, warm grin of his. “You of all people should know about the angels.”

I did not pursue the point but asked if he had missed me.

Dad chuckled. “Not really. You see, I’ve been watching you, and praying that you get past this.”

“It’s so hard,” I groaned. “To have left you alone and in such pain.”

“Oh Jills, I was not in that much pain. And I was never alone. You see, since you were born, I’ve always carried a part of you inside me.”

“Me too,” I was barely able to whisper, the tears still flowing.

Dad then said, “And your mom visited me in the hospital, near the end.”

“Now I know this can’t be real. Mom died so long ago.”

“Jills, she did come to me. From beyond, not unlike this.” He motioned to the two of us. “It happens a lot when a loved one is close to passing.”

“But why did you have to go?”

“Even now I can’t tell you why the Lord moves in mysterious ways.”

“They seem like cruel ways,” I noted.

“Not at all. Jills, you remember the stories how when I was in Vietnam I had come in contact with Agent Orange?” I nodded. “Well something that the doctors were not aware of but I realized would have eventually happened later is that the virus would have interacted with the Orange poison in my system and if I had lived, I would have been an invalid. My lovely Jills, do you think I would have been happy being kept alive but with no quality of life?”

“Well, no…”

“That’s right. No. It was better that I go, and I am not allowed to share details, but where I am is a wonderful place. As a matter of fact I have to go back there now.”

“Will I see you again?”

“We can talk whenever you like, and I’ll always be in here,” he said as he gently touched my heart. “But for now…goodbye.”

He got up and walked a ways, in something that seemed like air. In the distance, a woman joined him and they clasped hands lovingly. The lady turned and gave me a radiant smile that I knew from my deepest memories. “Mom!” I gasped. And then it faded. I opened my eyes.

Gabe was looking at me…lovingly, there is no other word for it. I leaned over and put my arms around him. “Oh Gabe, it was beautiful,” I croaked as I wept plentifully.

After a while I composed myself and said, “It would be nice if it was really like that.”

"Why do you think it wasn't?" Gabe said.

"You mean it was? It wasn't just my imagination?"

Gabe gave a little smile. "Let me ask you a question, Jill. How do you feel?"

I wiped at a stray tear or two. "I feel…I feel wonderful!"

"Then what does it matter if it was real or not? It's your reality."

"But, but it was so…mystical…like not part of our world."

"That does not make it any less real. The spiritual and physical worlds do intersect at times, and it is hard to reconcile. Do yourself a favor, Jill. Don't overthink it."

"Yeah, but how can another realm really exist here?"

"Oh Jill. Haven't you ever experienced something spiritual? A premonition, or déjà vu or something otherworldly that you couldn't explain? Jill, trust me. This was…is…real."

I still had to wipe at my eyes. "Oh Gabe, thank you so much!"

"You're very welcome. Now there is something I'd like you to do for me."

I figured this surely had to do with church, but this time it didn't bother me. "Of course!" I said, "After all you've done for me, of course I'll do you a favor."

Then Gabe told me what he wanted. I laughed. It had nothing to do with church. We left the rock outcropping and headed back home. Though in a more meaningful sense, I was home, in a way I had not been for far too long. It was time to redeem Gabe's request.

GABE'S STORY

I know I surprised Jill with my request, but I also knew it was one that would both please her and leave her unable to refuse.

“You want to go for a late afternoon jog? That's the favor?” she said.

“Sure,” I replied. “We didn’t get to go this morning.”

“Are you that much of a workout nut?” she asked, but with a happy lilt in her voice.

“You might say I work out religiously,” I grinned back at her.

At Jill’s house we changed into workout clothes and headed down Jill’s street across Townline Road and onto the service road where we had first met. As we ran, Jill said, “One thing odd about the vision or whatever it was, Dad told me we could speak again. How can that be?”

Since I was focused on where we were running, I looked at Jill out of the corner of my eye. “I think that’s called prayer, Jill.”

“Prayer?”

“Yes. Prayer is not just a means of communication with God, and it’s not restricted to formalized prayers you were taught when young, like the ‘Our Father’ and ‘Hail Mary.’ Any time you talk to someone in the Great Beyond, whether to God or a departed loved one, that’s praying.”

She nodded as we kept moving at a decent clip. Jill was quiet as we pounded the pavement. After a little while she said, “I’d really like to go back to Church. To Christmas Mass.”

The light was beginning to fade in the late December afternoon, but my smile could have lit the way. Jill smiled back and said she had hoped that would make me happy. “You have no idea,” I said.

“There is one other thing,” she added, and seemed a little nervous. Jill said, “I’m not sure if you think there is something between us, but, I mean I like you and all…”

I cut her off. “I like you too Jill, and while I’ve hoped for a deep relationship with you, it is not of a romantic nature.”

She brightened, as a load was lifted. “So, you mean like friends or something?”

I nodded as I paused for breath. “Or something,” I agreed. “Listen,” I went on, “ever since I met you, I wanted to do something good, like helping you back onto your right path, including being with Brad.”

"That's good," she replied, "'Cause I was thinking of calling Brad and see if he'd go to Christmas Mass with me."

"I'm sure he'd love that."

"Jill shook her head left to right. "I don't know. There's some water under the bridge."

I disagreed. "You might be surprised. I have a strong suspicion he will be more than happy to have you back." I said it in a way that conveyed such confidence it made Jill feel more secure. To be sure, I added, "Jill, do what feels right, what your heart is telling you."

"I will," she said.

We were just at the point in our running route where I had first come upon Jill and she had stumbled.

She said, "Something else seems strange. Dad said I of all people should be familiar with angels. What could that have meant, Gabe?"

"Nothing more than I have now finished my mission and it is time to say goodbye," I said quietly as I looked over at her.

JILL'S STORY

Gabe looked at me and said it was time to say goodbye. I saw him out of the corner of my eye as he said this…and then suddenly he was gone! I stopped and circled all around. He was nowhere to be seen! And although I could not see him, I heard Gabe's distinctive voice say, "Remember Jill, we are always here to help you."

Never had I felt such astonishment! I fell to my knees, and cried, and cried and cried. They were not tears of sadness.

GABRIEL'S STORY

After Jill got over the shock and stopped crying, she got up and half walked, half ran back to her home. She fully intended to call Brad, but he beat her to the punch. You see, while I was spending holiday time with Jill, my friend Rafael, Rafi to his close friends, was working with Brad who, despite his outward religiosity, needed a lesson in patience, especially toward one who had recently suffered a deep emotional trauma.

Jill never did see me again, not in this life, anyway. She did not need to. She was now well equipped to deal with anything that life—and death—threw her way.

Jill and Brad did spend that Christmas Eve at Church and for many, many times thereafter. They also did marry in the next year. They had children, and their children had children, so the line continued, throughout which Jill and Brad's love story became the stuff of family lore.

As for me, I was very, very happy. To celebrate, I took out my Christmas trumpet, and played a Christmas song.

The End