

# A Santa in the Toaster





# Merry Christmas 2017





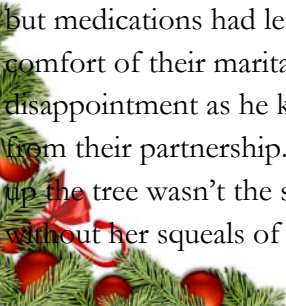
## Chapter 1

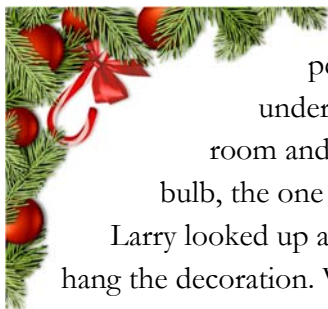
The bulb turned in his palm as his fingers searched for purchase. It was a simple Christmas bulb fit for most any tree. Gold in color with silver trim, a silver crown was perched on top. It had a metal loop peeking through the center of the crown, ready for any errant hook capable of fixing the small decoration to a needy tree.



Larry continued staring at the bulb as it turned over and over in his palm. The action prompted meditation. Larry thought about the past year. Difficult would have been easy. But last year had been rough. He never, in all his years, had lost friends over an election. It still tore at his gut. Fear and anger had replaced hope and love. The kindness of strangers and friends that had sustained him in trying times was now an empty well. Meanwhile, his wife had fallen ill to the ravages of time, and their personal savings had dwindled to almost nothing trying to reverse what nature had ordained.

Now Christmastime had rolled around once again and he was left decorating a sad little tree set in the corner of their living room. Donna had tried to be a viable part of this annual tradition, but medications had left her so weak she had returned to the comfort of their marital bed. Larry never mentioned his disappointment as he knew it tore at her heart to be absent from their partnership. Still, he missed her so. Putting up the tree wasn't the same without her laugh, without her squeals of joy, and without her





determination to make the tree so perfect. So, after he made sure she was safe under the blankets, he had returned to the living room and took up one more bulb for the tree -- this bulb, the one turning resolutely in his hand.

Larry looked up at the tree again and searched for a place to hang the decoration. With barely four bulbs in place with the tree lights on the branches, multiple choices were available. He reached out and hung the bulb on the most convenient branch then headed for the kitchen. He needed something, anything, to help him regain his hope, his confidence, a sense of normalcy. He needed a Christmas. A Christmas in which Donna baked cookies, the kids and grandkids called repeatedly and friends dropped by with baked goods or just to visit. He needed a safe harbor to refill his soul but didn't know where to find it.

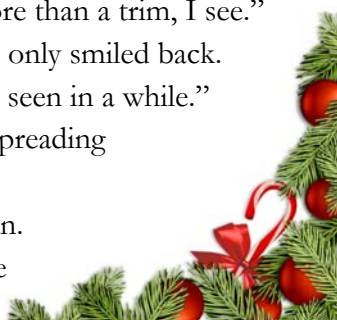
As Larry looked around the empty, cold kitchen his eyes spotted the gleaming surface of their old toaster. He grabbed a few pieces of bread and went to the toaster's perch on the counter. Tilting the toaster to get a better look at the dials and knobs, he saw his own reflection on its surface. A white beard and mustache coupled with long white hair stared back at him. It was Santa. At least he looked a lot like the jolly old elf. He chuckled at his reflection and leaned in for a better look, maybe even a conversation with the old guy.



"A bit long in the tooth. Need more than a trim, I see." Larry said to the reflection. The reflection only smiled back.

"Now there's something I haven't seen in a while." Larry chuckled as he looked at the smile spreading across the reflected face.

"So, where have you been, old man. I've missed you this year," Larry said as he





sat down on a stool before the toaster to have a conversation with – well, maybe himself, but maybe it *was* Santa.

“Yeah. Been rough. Thought I was gonna lose her a time or two. Still, she’s here. Might have a Christmas or two left in her. We’ll have to see.” Larry grabbed a glass and a container of milk from the fridge and poured himself a drink, then sat down again to continue the conversation.

“Bout took my cork under when I was so close to losing



her. Wasn’t prepared for that.

Guess no one is. Still, she fought back. But I think I need to start preparing for the inevitable. Shit stinks when you find out you’re not immortal.”

The reflection wiped a tear that had fallen from a clouded blue eye onto a pale cheek. Larry noticed the eyes.

“Looks like you lost your twinkle, old friend. Time taking a toll on you too, I see,” he said.

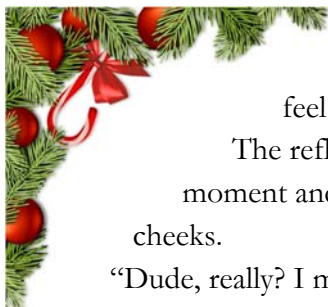
The reflection gave him a small grin that grew into a large smile.

“That’s more like it. Give us a smile and the twinkle will come,” Larry continued. “So, how do I get you out of that toaster and back into the house? My world really needs a little Santa right now.”

The reflection stared back at him then crinkled its eyes as it revealed the solution.

“Smart fellow. Just playing it back on me. If you want to find someone to do something then look in the mirror.

Yeah, I know. No one can give you Christmas. You



have to work for it. So where do I begin in this cold house? Doesn't even feel or smell like Christmas."

The reflection pondered the question for a moment and then another smile spread across its cheeks.

"Dude, really? I mean, I don't cook. Wouldn't know where to begin." Larry pondered the problem a moment as he looked at the reflection. "Well, why not chocolate chip? I'm doing the cooking. Why not make my favorite?"

He rose from his stool and went to the pantry. He took inventory and went back to the toaster.

"Cupboard is bare my friend. Haven't been shopping for weeks. We need everything: eggs, flour. And a recipe wouldn't hurt."

The reflection smiled back at him again.

"Well, yeah. It would do me good to get out of the house. Donna is out for a couple of hours. I'll leave her a note. Think I can do it? Think I can get everything we need?"

The reflection smiled back at him yet again.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, old man. Be right back. You stay here and we will do it together."



## Chapter 2

Larry got up from the counter and made his way to the desk. He wrote a note for Donna and set it beside her bed. He got his keys, coat, and toboggan hat and made his way to the car. The day was crisp and cold, with about six inches of snow on the ground. But the roads were clear and sun was bright. It warmed the interior of the car and put a flicker of warmth in his soul.

He was about two miles from home and still a mile from the big box when he saw the car at the side of the road, a little lady with a young 'un on her hip was kicking at the old heap and cursing it best she could. It still wasn't going anywhere. Larry pulled to the side of the road in front of the two-tone Buick and got out.

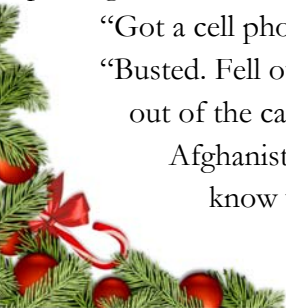


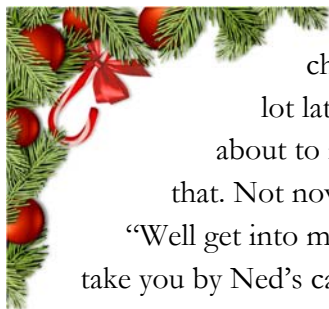
“Don’t think kicking it will make it move,” Larry grinned as he walked back to the woman. Another child jumped out of the car as he approached. He looked up at Larry and pointed, mouth agape. No sound came out.

“Guess not,” the lady replied as she shifted the child on her hip and grabbed at the other one.

“Got a cell phone? We can call for help,” Larry suggested.

“Busted. Fell out of my pocket onto the road when I got out of the car. Wouldn’t help anyhow. Husband’s in Afghanistan. Parents are two states away. Wouldn’t know who to call.”





Larry saw a small tear fall on a young cheek. He knew that look. He'd worn it a lot lately. The dam holding those tears back was about to release. His heart couldn't, wouldn't take that. Not now. So, he reached out.

"Well get into my old buggy. I'm going to the store. I'll take you by Ned's car repair and he can sort this out for you."

The little woman looked quizzically at Larry a bit then moved toward his car.

"Well, if you can't trust Santa at Christmas, who can you trust?" she said as she strapped her kids into the back seat of Larry's car.

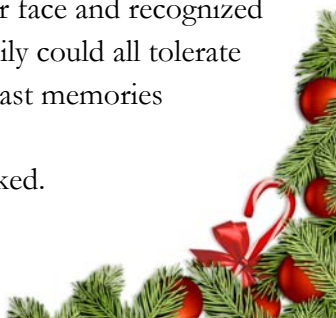
Larry grinned when she called him Santa. He helped her move her gear and didn't correct her error. They were soon at Ned's. Ned had been a friend of his for over 20 years, but they hadn't spoken since the last election. The divisions were too deep. Still Ned was better than a fair mechanic and a good business owner. He never overcharged and only sold you what you needed. If Ned said it was necessary, it was.



Two minutes with Ned and the car care was sorted out. Ned told him he would get right to it. If it needed to be towed in, he would get it done. He said he would have an answer in about an hour. Meanwhile, the little lady and her kids could wait in his front room.

Larry saw the small grimace on her face and recognized the delay might not be something her family could all tolerate in one small waiting room. He smiled at past memories with his own kids.

"Where were you heading?" he asked.





“Store. Same as you. Got some shopping to do,” she said with a bit of the desperation a mother of two rambunctious boys wears constantly.

“Well, we might as well go together. Besides I could use some help.” Larry grinned.

“What kind of help does Santa need?” she smiled back.

“Cookie ingredients.”

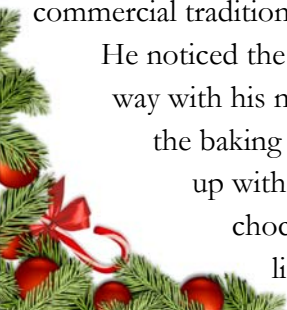
It wasn’t too long before they were all back in his car and heading to the store. Larry explained to her about his lack of baking experience and his need for help with chocolate chip cookie ingredients. She agreed to provide the needed information and displayed a wonderful smile as a bonus. The older son was still stunned to be sitting in Santa’s car and was trying to be as good as he could.

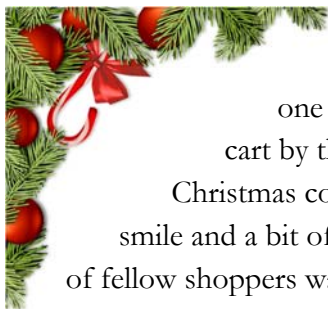
They reached the big box parking lot and Larry grabbed a cart to set the little one in. Safe and secure with the toddler hanging on tightly to his mother’s hand, they made their way through the sliding glass doors into the busy buzz of a busy big box store. Shoppers and staff bustled about under multiple sales signs adorned with various expressions of Merry Christmas. Artificial boughs of holly stretched across many displays accompanied by twinkling lights and canned music.



“Christmas in America,” Larry thought. He grinned at the sight. Whatever Christmas had become, he found comfort in the commercial traditions. It was, for better or worse, home.

He noticed the trail of looks he attracted as he made his way with his new companion and her little ones toward the baking goods. It wasn’t too long before he was set up with the complete necessities for baking chocolate chip cookies. He offered to watch the little ones while she shopped.





Larry soon found himself pushing a cart with a baby and toddler while she placed one item after another inside. He stopped the cart by the bake shop and grabbed a couple of Christmas cookie samples for all of them. He left a smile and a bit of laughter. He had to admit the comradery of fellow shoppers was helping his dark mood. Maybe that Santa in the toaster knew more than he'd realized.

They hit the checkouts and made their way back to his old buggy. The toddler had become quite chatty as the initial shock of meeting Santa wore off. Larry was even able to hold the baby for a bit. Babies were just so small. The big yawn and bobbing head brought out the "grandpa" in him big time.

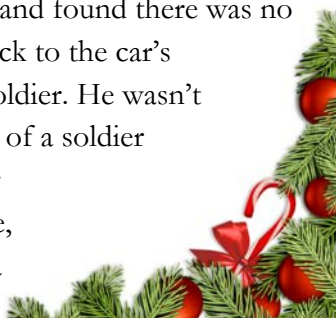


They made it back to Ned's as he was pulling her car out of one of the service bays. He waved them down and Larry pulled up to see what was up. He rolled down the window and Ned stuck his head inside.

"Nothing much. Just a bad battery cable connection. I cleaned 'em up and tested your battery. You're good to go."

Diane, Larry's new companion, was visibly relieved. Larry put his car in park and moved to get the groceries out. Ned came around to help and in no time they had transferred the toddler, baby and groceries into Diane's car.

She reached into her purse to pay and found there was no charge. Ned had noticed the base pass stuck to the car's bumper and knew she was the wife of a soldier. He wasn't having any part of profiting off the family of a soldier whose family was in need. At least not for something as easily fixed as a battery cable, especially not at Christmastime with Santa



looking on. Larry knew this because he said as much with a bit more than a stage whisper.

Diane turned to Larry with a twenty in her hand and thanks on her lips. Larry put up his hands up and refused as well. He'd been paid many times over in the past two hours while he'd held the baby and played with the toddler. With her sincere efforts rebuffed, Diane was left with little more to give than a hug for each man, which they accepted readily.

As she sped off in her car. Ned turned to Larry. Larry reached out his hand.

"Merry Christmas, Ned," he said.

Ned reached out his hand and gave a small smile. "Merry Christmas, Larry."



The tension was still there. They had not resolved their differences, but they were speaking. It was a beginning. A beginning to what, Larry didn't know. But speaking with Ned again was a whole lot more comfortable than holding a grudge.

"Making chocolate chip cookies, huh? Didn't know you could cook. You'll have to bring one of them by," Ned said, still grinning.

"I will if they turn out in any form of edible," Larry said.

"Larry, just call if you or Donna need any help."

Larry looked into Ned's eyes. It was a sincere offer of help.

Larry misted up a bit and nodded his head. Support was sparse these days. It was nice to have again. His empty heart was beginning to fill up just a bit. Larry hopped into his car and headed back to Donna with his smile intact.





## Chapter 3

He dropped his bags on the counter. The toaster was still sitting where he'd left it. He turned it on its side and peeked. Santa was still staring back at him, but this time his eyes shone a little brighter, their blue a little deeper.

Larry wagged his finger and admonished the Santa in the toaster. "I have no idea why you think I can do this. In for a penny in for a pound, I guess. But you are a part of this now. You're going to be right here by my side. No backing out. You got me started. You're gonna help me finish."



It was the clanging in the kitchen followed by a loud curse that woke Donna up. She caught a whiff of something not quite burning, but not quite cooked either. She looked at the clock and realized a good part of the day had passed with her in bed again. She moved to get up and slung her legs over the mattress until her feet reached the floor.

"Thank god for carpet," she thought as the chill of the day seeped into the bedroom. Her toes crunched the warm carpet between them. She grabbed a housecoat and made her way to the bathroom. Nature demanded attention before she could focus on the confusion outside her bedroom door. Once done, she slowly made her way to the bedroom door and peeked out to see if the coast was clear. She heard another loud



expletive from the direction of the kitchen and something clanged sharply on her kitchen counter. She also smelled something unexpected.

“Warm cookies?” Donna asked herself, as she made her way to the kitchen.

Once at the kitchen door she quietly peered around the corner and was greeted with the sight of her husband covered head to toe in flour dust. His cheeks were flushed red against his white beard, while a smattering of sugar, egg and chocolate smeared across his face and clothes. He was bent almost double as he looked intently through the glass on the oven door, his glasses almost completely fogged by the



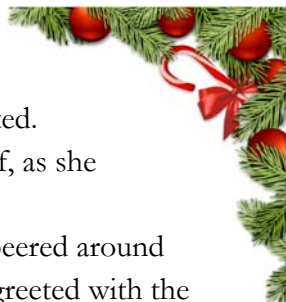
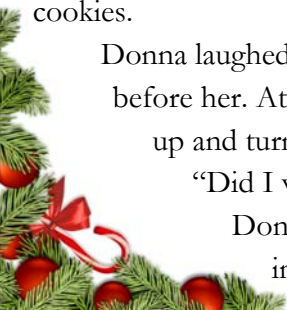
radiant heat.

Her kitchen was well beyond a disaster. Bowls of flour, sugar, and salt lined the counter. Remnants of each littered the floor and counter tops. A large sack of brown sugar was perched upright next to each of the bowls. Half of its contents were gone and the ragged open top prepared to topple the rest all over her floor at any moment. In the center of the counter stood a big bowl and a mixer, beaters full of what could be cookie dough, leaning hard against it. Next to this minor architecture of incompetence, displayed like a singular prized trophy, were a dozen tender brown cookies. By their look and smell they clearly were chocolate chip cookies.

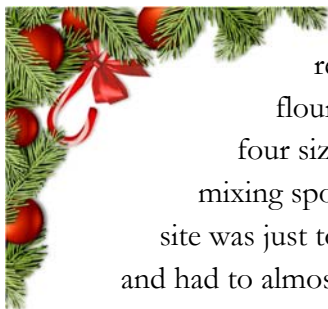
Donna laughed. She laughed a good long laugh at the site before her. At the sound of her amusement, Larry stood up and turned toward her.

“Did I wake you?” he asked in stunned innocence.

Donna couldn’t help herself. She just burst out in uncontrollable glee. Here was a very large







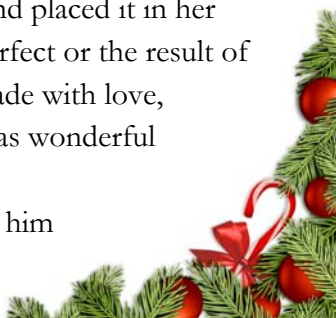
man, long white beard, white hair, rosy red cheeks, covered in cookie dough and flour dust, wearing what appeared to be her four sizes too small apron and holding up a mixing spoon asking if he had woken her up. The site was just too much. She doubled over in laughter and had to almost crawl to the stool at the counter. She couldn't speak. Hell, she could hardly breathe, she was laughing so hard. So, she just nodded her head at his question.

Larry followed the laughter when he heard it. Her peals of laughter fell like pearls of raindrops on a tin roof on an early summer day. It had been so long since he had heard her laugh, truly laugh and his soul filled even more with the warmth of life. Her laughter caught like an infection and he began to laugh as well. Larry turned his gaze to the toaster and saw Santa close to tears with laughter. He noticed the smudges of chocolate, white flour and scraps of cookie dough on Santa's face and his laughter welled up inside him. Larry's belly fairly shook as he laughed, much like a bowl full of jelly.



As his and Donna's laughter died down a bit Larry picked up one of his finished cookies. It was his pride and joy. He had actually baked it without burning it. He wanted Donna to be the first to try it. Donna gratefully accepted and placed it in her mouth. She savored the taste. It wasn't perfect or the result of years of cooking experience, but it was made with love, the greatest of all ingredients. The taste was wonderful and she told him so.

Donna went to Larry. She hugged him so tight. She wouldn't have let him go



except the stove's timer announced the completion of the next batch of cookies. Larry released her and turned to get his new trophies. Donna reached for a dishrag and began to wipe down the counters and counter tops in an effort to return the kitchen to some degree of order. Larry prepared his next batch for the oven while she worked.

"Why the cookies?" she asked as she swiped at another spot on the counter.

"It was Santa's idea," Larry said as if it were a matter of fact. He was busy measuring the batter just so and didn't think to tell her Santa was watching him from the toaster.

"Well of course. My bad," Donna said. She reached for another cookie while she continued wiping up flour residue.

Larry stopped his efforts and looked up at his beautiful wife. They had been more than forty years together through thick and thin. Mostly thin, if he had to measure it. But there she was, weak, tired and fresh from her own personal battles, yet still at his side. As she always was. Larry reached across the counter for her hand. Donna responded with a small smile. Larry looked into her eyes and held that small delicate hand strongly in his.

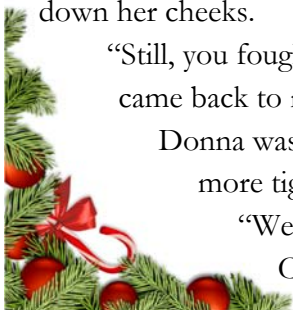
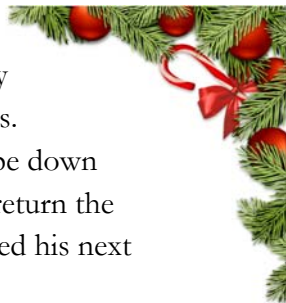
"I almost lost you this year," Larry said as tears filled his eyes.

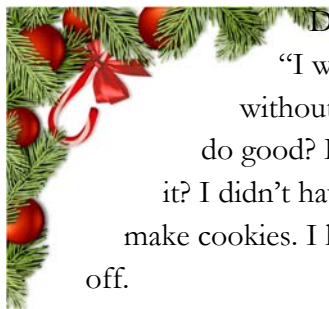
"I know," Donna said. Her eyes allowed her tears to flow freely down her cheeks.

"Still, you fought back. You came back to me."

Donna was becoming a puddle and held his hand even more tightly.

"We might not have too many more of these Christmases. They are counting down."





Donna nodded, unable to speak further.  
“I was wondering how we could go on without each other. What would happen? Did we do good? Did we make a difference? Was it worth it? I didn’t have any answers. Then Santa said I should make cookies. I like chocolate chip.” Larry’s voice trailed off.

Donna came around and held Larry tight, as tightly as she could. She wanted to be a part of this man forever. Her sobs were her only reply as Larry bear-hugged her. They broke their embrace and sat on stools next to the counter, looking deeply at each other. Neither wanted the moment to end.

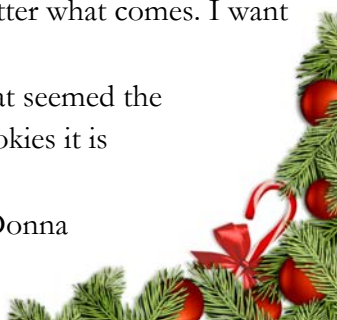


“Santa reminded me he was here long before I was a thought in my mother’s eye,” Larry said, trying to explain the inexplicable. “And he would be here long after you and I are gone, giving hope and happiness to those who follow.

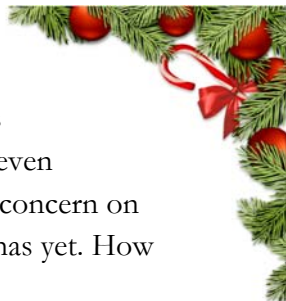
I realized we were but a moment. We may never know the reason for our life and why we came together. A plan, if there is one, is the work of those who have infinity to work its wonders. We have only now. Each other and now. Nothing else is given. So, we should enjoy what was given while we have it. I like chocolate chip cookies at Christmas. It makes me happy. They make me smile. They remind me of us. They always will, no matter what comes. I want to celebrate us. So, I made cookies.”

Donna dabbed at her eyes for what seemed the hundredth time. “Well, chocolate chip cookies it is then,” she said.

Larry leaned forward and kissed Donna on the forehead. He grabbed the cookie



sheet and shoved it into the oven. When he turned back to her, Donna was smiling. Larry looked at the toaster. Santa was smiling just as broadly as Donna. His twinkle was back. But even though the twinkle was there, Larry noticed a concern on the old man's face. It just wasn't quite Christmas yet. How could it be Christmas if it wasn't shared?



"Let's have a feast!" Larry exclaimed.

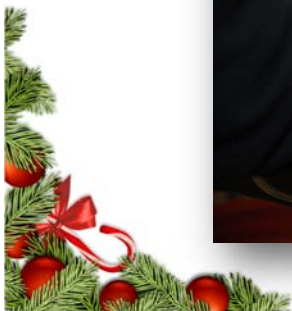
Donna was taken aback. "It's a little bit late, Larry. I'm sure all our friends have plans. I don't think I can cook. It just wouldn't work."

"We'll make it potluck. I'll do our cooking. I'll make a turkey and add some more cookies. A few soft drinks and wine. It will be fine. I'll even do the cleaning. I'll scrub really hard. We'll put out our dishes and a good table cloth. You just have to supervise."

Donna could see it was important to him. Her mouth hung open to protest, but his smile and twinkle and ruddy red cheeks overcame all objections.

"Well, we'll do it just to see you cook a turkey. But you'll have to do almost everything. I am just too tired."

Larry grinned. If he could get Donna to agree to the party, the rest was all downhill. He took another look at 'ol Saint Nick in the toaster. Genuine excitement was filling his face.



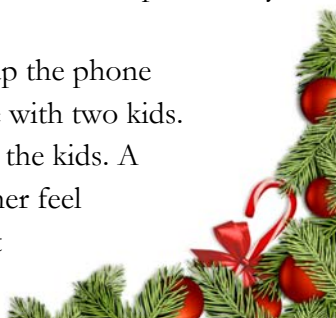


## Chapter 4

Larry finished the cookies and found the instructions for turkey and dressing. He helped Donna to the couch and turned on an old Christmas movie. He pulled out his phone and looked at the contact list. Ten names stood out. Ten names of good friends that had fallen by the wayside as the year had passed. He took a chair by the toaster and began to call. He truly didn't know if anyone would come. Donna was right. It was late. This was too sudden in a packed holiday season. But Larry knew he had to try.

Ned was first. He was also the first to accept. No hesitation, and he was bringing the mashed potatoes. Alice and Frank, Bob and Judith, Simone and Jeanne, Moe and June all agreed to come. All thought it a hoot, a great idea. Not a single rejection. They set the time for tomorrow night. They'd all be there by six, each with a dish and their drink of choice. It was just the break each had needed on this particularly stressful year.

As a final measure, Larry looked up the phone number of Diane, the soldier's wife, alone with two kids. He called the number and invited her and the kids. A little coaxing and a chuckle or two made her feel welcome enough to agree. Larry looked at





Santa in the toaster and saw the twinkle in his eye and the kindness in his face. Christmas was almost here.

Larry went out to the living room to tell Donna the news and found her placing bulbs on the tree. She was moving slowly and sat down often. But the task was not heavy and the joy was real. Just as he was about to help her he heard a car door slam, followed by the giggle of urchins as they stomped onto his front porch. Donna turned at the sound.

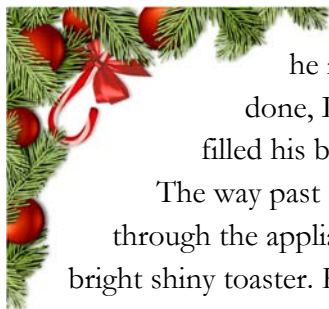


“I called Sheryl. She’s bringing Theresa and Emily to clean this house. There was no way I was trusting you to get it done.” Donna giggled as our daughter and two teen-aged granddaughters burst in.

Before long, Larry was ruled non-essential. Sheryl and her mother had the house cleaning well in hand. Theresa and Emily were chatting on their cell phones while dancing quickly around the house, each making short work of their chores. The usual rolled

eyes and abbreviated protests accompanied many of the tasks, but they had been raised well and completed their jobs efficiently and with little need for correction. Larry envied their vigor and tried to remember when he’d had that kind of vitality.

With nothing to be done in the house Larry headed back to the store. He had a turkey to cook and stuffing to stuff. Of course, candy and a cake or two had to be purchased. Two women studied Larry as he stood in the baking aisle trying to figure out what he needed for the turkey and stuffing. It wasn’t too long before they understood they were dealing with a neophyte



and took Larry's hand to guide him where he needed to go. Cart full and shopping done, Larry headed for the checkout. A hum filled his brain and exited under his breath.

The way past snacks and baking goods took Larry through the appliance section. There on the shelf was a bright shiny toaster. He stopped and looked and saw the old man had followed him to the store. He obviously was having a bit of fun. But Larry noticed something behind the eyes, the joy and laughter, and the kind face. The gift. Larry had forgotten the gift.

A gift was a token really. A small pale effort to express what was in your heart. A moment to give and share to those you care

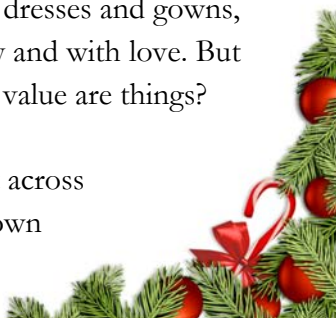
for, to thank them for their importance in your life. If done right, a gift could serve as a memory year-round, a memory that could be shared over and over, bringing solace in even the darkest of times. It was an integral part of Christmas. One of the reasons 'ol Saint Nick



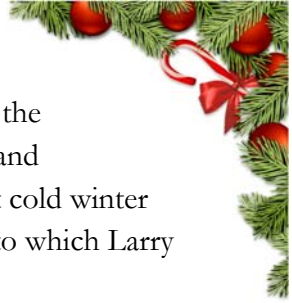
made his midnight ride. And Larry had forgotten it.

He found a bench to sit on, looked about at the bounty before him and asked himself, "What in this wide world should I give the one that has meant life itself to me? What do I give when she and I know that our place together is a short measure? Diamonds I have given. Rings and pearls, dresses and gowns, house and home have all been given freely and with love. But now that the countdown has begun, what value are things? How do I show my love?"

The pillow was his first clue. It sat across from the toaster. It was big and fluffy, brown with white stripes and trimmed in black.



Maybe a bit gaudy, but quite sturdy for what he had in mind. Right next to it was the quilt. Not just any quilt. It was in the biggest bag in the quilt aisle. It was fluffy and warm and brown and white. It was the kind you curled up in against cold winter nights. Both along with the singular memory to which Larry was privy would make the perfect gift. He resolved to find the missing piece tomorrow while she slept. He picked up the pillow and quilt and made for the checkout. At the door he made a good donation to the charity doing the gift wrapping. Tonight, there would be presents!

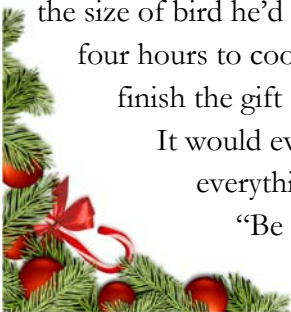


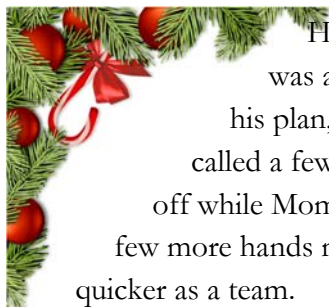
He started early the next morning. The turkey still had to be stuffed and a special present to be bought. Donna was sleeping soundly as the medicines and excitement had worn her out. Just seeing the presents he'd brought home last night had set her in a tizzy. It drove her crazy to see a box with her name on it, one she couldn't open right away. She fretted over both presents until she went to bed.

After Larry checked to make sure the oven was on for the umpteenth time, he was ready to put the bird in. Making the stuffing had taken only two and a half hours, so he was pretty psyched that the whole turkey thing might work out. Because of the size of bird he'd bought, it looked as though it would take four hours to cook. That would give him plenty of time to finish the gift shopping and get back to set up the house.

It would even give him time to order a pizza if everything fell apart.

"Be prepared," Larry cautioned himself.





His first stop was Josh's place. Their son was a master carpenter. When Larry explained his plan, Josh was all in. He grabbed his tools and called a few buds. It was gonna take a bit to pull this off while Mom slept, and they had to get it done fast. A few more hands made light work and they could move quicker as a team.

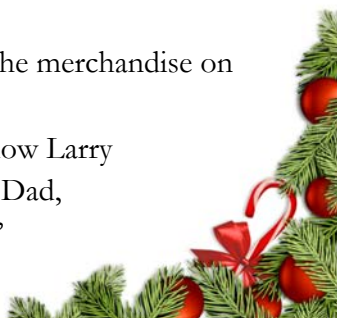
Larry met Josh at the lumber center, another home improvement big box with all the extras. They spent the better part of a half hour looking over one model after another. Larry needed to move quickly, but he was enjoying the company much more than he'd expected. Larry and Josh exchanged a few Christmas memories and a couple of family jokes. The laughter filled him with hope and he reached up to place his arm once more across his son's broad shoulder.

Larry was proud of his boy and what he had become. With little hesitation and the lack of time on his mind, Larry turned Josh to him and told him as much. Tears flowed freely as each man tried his best to regain their manly composure and failed miserably. Josh reached in and hugged his father. It was returned with joy. An awkward release soon followed with the realization they had found their "perfect" model. Josh took it in his arms with little effort and led the way to the checkout. Larry pulled out his card to pay, but Josh put a hand on his effort.



"My pleasure, Dad." Josh placed the merchandise on the floor and retrieved his wallet.

As they checked out, Josh asked how Larry had thought of the gift and the party. His Dad, with all earnestness, said, "Santa told me."



Josh nodded, signed the receipt, picked up the merchandise and headed for the exit. In his world, nothing more needed to be said. Dad said it. It was true. Facts were facts. Josh and Larry jumped into their vehicles and headed to the house.

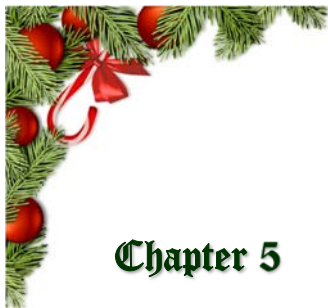
As expected, Josh's buddies were waiting outside the driveway entrance. Josh pulled over and waited for Larry to give the high sign. Larry went in to check on Donna. She was still sound asleep; the medications were still working. Plus wanted a good rest before the guests arrived. Larry went to the porch and waved to Josh.

Quietly and quickly, Josh and his buds moved to the house. In seconds, they had the measurements of the porch. With rags and cloths they silenced their cordless tools and climbed up to install Larry's surprise. Fifteen minutes and only a minor bit of muted grunting later, they were done. Larry covered it with wrapping paper and placed a bow on it. A large handwritten note was left on the seat. It read, "SHHHHH, don't tell Donna." Larry wanted the present to be a big reveal and hoped his guests would keep their silence.

Josh and his buds climbed down from the porch and left as quietly as they could. Larry gave Josh one last big hug before he left and reminded him not to be late. With his assurance in hand, Larry went back to the kitchen to check on the bird. The meat thermometer said it was doing fine. In a few short hours their friends would be here. Larry thought he might actually pull off his big party. He turned to the toaster for confirmation. Santa looked back with mirth, warmth, and hope.







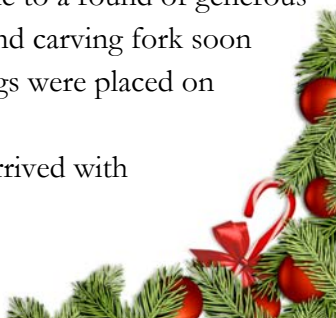
## Chapter 5

They began arriving early. Ned with his large pot of mashed potatoes, Alice with a huge green bean casserole, Simone and Jean with cakes and pies, while Moe and June brought two baskets of homemade bread. Sheryl had the tree lit and Josh brought out a cooler of ice with a couple of cases of beer. Many of the ladies went for the wine provided by Larry and Donna, but the men generally went for the beer and hard liquor. Simone and Alice joined the men while Larry sipped on wine.



A buffet was set on the dining room table with various TV trays placed around the house for each guest to choose. There were far too many family and friends to have a formal sit down at the table so they all agreed to the less formal arrangements. As the last entrée reached the table, Larry pulled the bird from the oven, where it had been kept warm. Everyone gathered to watch. With great pride and flair, Larry placed it at the head of the table to a round of generous applause from the guests. A sharp knife and carving fork soon made short work of the turkey and servings were placed on a platter.

The feast had begun. Diane had arrived with her baby and toddler in tow. A couple of grandkids joined in with her toddler and



became fast friends. The baby was surrounded by grandmothers and mothers so it was nip and tuck for a few moments as to whether Diane would be able to take her child home with her, considering all the attention they gave the infant. Diane did, however, find relief from the task of constantly holding the child. She was even able to eat a full plate of food uninterrupted.

During all of the feasting and merriment, no one, neither child nor grandmother, ever mentioned the present on the porch. Bellies were full, candies were eaten, only two slices of pie remained and the bird was for all intents and purposes headed straight to the waste bin. There would not be any cold leftovers. Ned had eaten about a half dozen of Larry's cookies, exclaiming surprise and admiration for their quality and his newfound talents.

As the final hour drew nigh Larry brought out Donna's gifts.

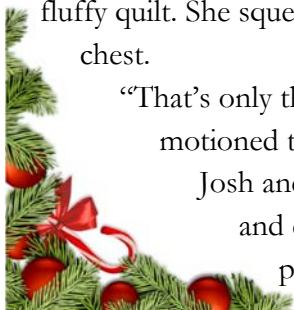
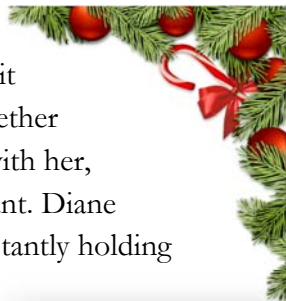
"Larry, not now!" Donna protested with some embarrassment.

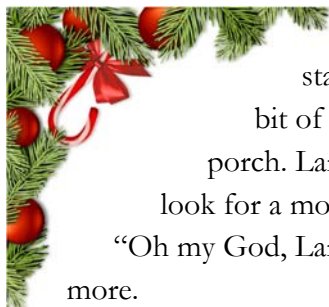
"Now!" Larry insisted, and everyone cheered.

With apprehension followed by a little girl's glee, Donna tore into the two packages revealing the large pillow and warm, fluffy quilt. She squealed with delight as she pulled them to her chest.

"That's only the preamble, Lady," Larry said as he motioned toward the front door.

Josh and Alice, Sherly and Moe, Diane and Simone and everyone else in the room stood and made a path to the front door and the porch beyond.





Larry reached down and helped Donna stand. With wonder in her eyes mixed with a bit of trepidation, she made her way to the front porch. Larry turned her toward her gift and let her look for a moment.

“Oh my God, Larry. What did you do?” she squealed once more.

“It was all Josh and his buddies,” Larry said.

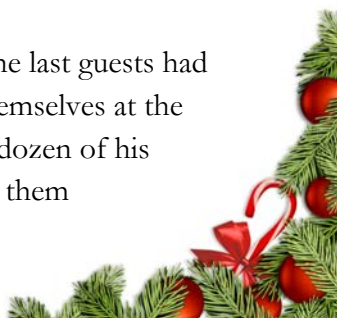
Donna turned and grabbed Josh and kissed him on the cheek. Then she ran towards the gift with Sheryl close behind, followed by Alice, Simone, Judith, and Jeanne. They pulled at the wrappings and bows until the final present was revealed.

It was the finest, most comfortable and ornate porch swing anyone could hope for. It looked toward the morning sun and came complete with puffed up deep red pillows. Donna turned and sat down on the swing and gave it a rock.



“It squeaks. It squeaks just like they’re supposed to.” She laughed. She patted the seat beside her and bade everyone to give it a ride. Each did in turn, until Sheryl came out with the large pillow and quilt. She placed her mom in the center of the swing all bundled up. Then she and Josh put Larry down beside her. With both cuddled and warm, Josh and Sheryl stood behind them. It was Theresa who took the first photo.

When all was said and done and the last guests had left the house, Larry and Donna found themselves at the kitchen counter. Larry had secured a half dozen of his cookies for himself and they were sharing them with a glass of milk. The toaster sat to the side. Larry had turned off the overhead



kitchen light to let the glow of the Christmas tree lights filter into the room. He turned to



look at the toaster and saw Santa, a contented elf. Christmas had come, in spite of it all. Troubles come and go. Mostly they come. But so does Christmas. You only have to look for it.

“You remembered,” Donna said.

“Yes. You always wanted a really nice porch swing you could curl up in under a pile of blankets. Don’t know why we never got around to giving you that. Doesn’t much matter now. But, we finally got it done.”

“Thank you,” Donna said. “But I didn’t get you anything.”

“You’ve given me something every day we’ve been together. I don’t think there is anything more you can give, except more time.”

“I don’t know if I can even do that much longer,” Donna said as her eyes began to moisten.

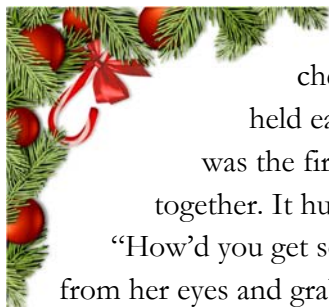
“Darling, I know at best we only have a few more years together in this life. That’s why I wanted to get you the swing.”

“One last item on a bucket list?” Donna smiled sarcastically.

“No. But that wouldn’t have been a bad idea,” Larry said and continued quietly: “I wanted to give you what we have left, what was really important. I wanted to give you time. Time with me.

That is the only thing that has weight right now. I don’t know how much time we have. And things are meaningless without time. But any time I can spend with you swinging on that porch swing has more value than the most precious gem either of us could leave behind.”

Larry began to tear up and took a small bite from his cookie. Santa was crying in the toaster, too.



Donna's face streamed tears down her cheeks as she took Larry's hand in hers. They held each other's hand and let the tears flow. It was the first time they had faced their mortality together. It hurt and it pained, but it also gave relief. "How'd you get so smart?" Donna asked as she wiped tears from her eyes and grabbed another hankie.

"Wasn't me. It was Santa," Larry said and pointed to the side of the toaster.

Donna studied the toaster and saw the reflection of Old Saint Nick himself. Donna allowed herself a small giggle.

"Santa, huh?" She giggled again.



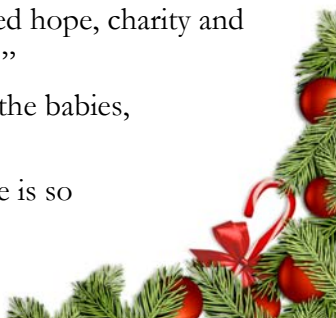
"Yeah. When I first saw him, he was way down. No sparkle in his eye. Sad. No hope. He looked awful. I realized that the old guy had been here years before I came on the scene. He was here while I was a baby and he kept me happy when I was young. He gave hope through a number of years that we celebrated when there was little hope to give. I knew also that he would be here long after we've gone. I just couldn't let the guy down. Couldn't let him take care of those that follow us with those sad eyes. He's our legacy. So, I asked what he needed to cheer up. How could I help him?"

"Chocolate chip cookies," Donna offered.

"Yep. Wasn't too surprised he liked what I liked. But that wasn't the only thing he needed. He needed hope, charity and friends. He needed Christmas to be Santa."

"So, the party, helping Diane and the babies, putting up a swing."

"It's what he wanted. And look, he is so content and happy now."





Donna looked at the toaster and saw a very happy Santa smile back at her.

“You know he is very smart,” Larry said.

“While doing all those things, I found out that all the troubles we have are just troubles. We’ll get through them somehow. But what is important is our time together. Our friends and family.”

Donna stood and grabbed a towel and some cleaner. She sprayed the toaster and cleaned it briskly until it glistened. Then she gently placed it back on the counter. Larry watched without a word. Donna then took Larry’s hand and headed to the front room. She placed the too large quilt in his hands and grabbed the big fluffy pillow. They went outside in the chill night and sat on the new swing.

Donna wrapped herself tightly in the warmth of the blanket and Larry’s love. Then her little toe set the swing in motion. Her head tilted so slightly to rest on Larry’s chest. In a moment, she was sleeping quietly, with a broad smile on her face. Content with the thought that Santa had found a place in their toaster.







Merry Christmas  
and a  
Happy New 2018!

(I mean, can you believe it!)





This Story is my Gift to you. May you know the love and joy of the  
Holiday Season year round.

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