

Marzipan

It's cold. The wheels of his bicycle bump, spin, bump over the side walk. 151, 152, 153: one, two, three newspapers his cold fingers fling onto their front steps.

It's *freezing* outside New York. For the first day all year, the old man with the snarled lips isn't watering his dead wife's heliotrope before his five mile walk to the nearest job he could find. And the girl with the ratty braids and soft grey eyes isn't hiding with her broken marbles outside the noisy yells of the apartment buildings.

There are sorry excuses for wreaths on the doors. The holly bush outside the house of the sweet young widow who cooks and cleans for the strangers living in her own home is bright with red berries. The air smells like snow. He turns down the road and sees a few lights on a few stores.

It's Christmas day, in New York, in the greatest depression this new world has ever seen.

His boss gives him his money and doesn't tell him to scram. Just sits back in his seat and presses the side of his thumb against his desktop pensively and says:

"D'you get anything for Christmas, Lawrence?" his attention on his thumb.

"I don't know, sir. I left before anyone woke up."

"D'you still believe in Santa?"

"I'm twelve, sir."

“Santa’s poor this year.” He said, despite the establishment of the jolly man’s non-existence. “Santa’s broke.”

“Yessir. Everyone’s broke.”

“Yes, everyone’s broke,” he repeated. Suddenly: “D’you believe in God, boy?”

“I’m Catholic, sir.”

“Why d’you suppose he sent us a Depression.” His question seemed to omit the question mark and remain apparently directed toward his thumb. “Why d’you think he sent us so damn much death and trouble and so damn little money.”

“I don’t think he sent the trouble to us, sir. I think we messed things up ourselves.”

“Go home, Lawrence,” His voice still even and calm, “Your Mother’ll be worried.”

Mother isn’t worried.

Christmas is the one day all year that Mother smiles like she used to when they lived in Jersey in the house with the electric stove and the June-bugs in the yard.

Christmas is the day when she puts paper ornaments on her Victorian paper Christmas tree. Christmas is the day that sister Missy jumps around saying: “Merry ChrISmas! Merry ChrISmas!” In her sing-songy way. And Grossmutter comes over with a paper bag holding the one thing that means Christmas the most.

Ma sings God Rest Ye Merry Gentleman and hangs an orange ornament on her tree. She smiles at Lawrence, and in that barren little room with one old bed, one dresser,

one-half a curtain over the window and bitter Northern wind and want outside, Mother's eyes are lit up with the joy of a silly little paper tree.

Miss tackles him and nearly knocks him over with a "Merry ChrISmas! It's ChrISmaas!" And he kisses her curly head and looks at Mother and smiles.

Grossmutter isn't here yet. She's coming later.

"Where's Dad?"

Mother laughs. Mother *laughs*. "Your Father's making you a little surprise."

Missy's eyes shine like the lights in Manhattan, and her pink lips whisper with wonder. "Surprise!"

Mother laughs again and sweeps Missy into her arms and *squeezes* her.

"Goose," she says, and Missy giggles and shakes her head so her curls bounce, while Mother tickles her tummy and the back of her neck.

The surprise arrives.

Three newspaper hats, two newspaper boats and one newspaper sea to sail them in. Dad smiles brightly as he puts a hat, first on Lawrence, then on Missy, and last on Baby in the crib.

The Depression makes them call things by funny names. Baby's "crib" is a drawer pulled out of the dresser, cushioned with a blanket, and placed on the floor beside Mother and Father's bed – the only real bed in the small, sparse room. Missy and Lawrence's "beds" are blankets on the floor. An old crate with an heirloom table cloth is their table. Dad has an old, bent nail to hang his hat on.

Dad gets on his hands and knees to play boats with the kids. Suddenly, he smiles – laughs – grabs hold of Lar, ruffling up his hair, and says “Merry Christmas, Larry.” He smells like the city and he smells like snow. His arm is strong around Lawrence’s waist. If only he’d never let go.

But moments pass, despite our starry wishes.

“*grandmagrandmagrandmagrandma*’s HERE!”

Missy’s little fingers try to contain each other but fail. Each and every one wriggles with excitement over the other as her heels bump up and down.

Grossmutter has a paper bag – *the* paper bag – the bag that, without ribbons and without bows is the most Christmassy bag in New York.

But Ma says “Patience, children.”

So they must wait.

They gather together around the bed. Baby in Ma’s arms, Missy in Grandma’s, Lawrence looking over Dad’s shoulder at the words on the page.

Dad has a way of holding that book like it’s alive. Like it will burst forth with light at any moment. Like it has power inside it.

He reads words of the prophets foretelling things beyond comprehension, of the God of the Universe taking human form as a baby born to a poor family in the middle of what seemed like the end of the world.

And Dad reads the words: Peace on earth, Good will to men.

“But, Dad, there’s people who lost their jobs and they say there’s gonna be a war.

How c’n there be peace on earth?”

“Ya!” pipes Missy, indignantly.

“Bite your lip, Missy.”

“But *Ma*,”

“*Bite your lip.*”

Missy obeys her literally and begins to cry.

“Child!” Ma takes her in her arms and begins rocking her. Then sighs and shakes her head. Glancing at Lawrence she says:

“He was talking about a different kind of peace.”

The paper bag is opened at last.

The Depression makes them call things by different names. To them, through out these dark years, that one, small cream colored block of Marzipan is birthday cake, Thanksgiving desert, and Christmas’s delight.

It is to the children what Ma’s paper Christmas tree is to her;

Marzipan is pure and simple happiness.

Christmas day melts away with the daylight. Through the window he can see one star in between the rooftops of the buildings above. He's cold. But he doesn't care. He nibbles off his thin slice of Marzipan and tastes it melting on his tongue.

"Can I sleep with you?" whispers Missy in his ear. It tickles and the sound buzzes slightly.

He scoots over for reply.

She snuggles up beside him, her curls pressed against his neck, her soft little arm wrapped around his. The addition of her blanket makes them warmer.

"Larlar?"

He hates this nickname, but saying so would melt the treat quicker.

"Tommy Suthens asked me to marry him," says knee-high Missy.

"What'd you tell him?"

"I said yes. He's wonderful, Lawrence. He's going to become president and change everything around."

Lawrence thinks of saying that won't work, but decides against it.

A cloud passes over the star. There are more stars than there are people in the City, but he can't see even one of them.

Missy is asleep. Her breath smells like almonds and her body keeps his warmer. Ma and Dad and the baby are sleeping, and all the people on all the floors of the apartment building are probably sleeping too.

The man with the snarled lip lies awake in bed. Staring at the ceiling.
Remembering what he's lost.

The girl with the ratty braids stares with her grey eyes at the new, unbroken
marble in her hand. Taking comfort in the dark silence of Christmas night.

The young widow cradles her baby in her tired arms. Searching for traces of her
husband in her sleeping child's face.

It's freezing and it's dark outside New York.

"Goodnight," says Lawrence.

And the Marzipan melts.
