

Orson Scott Card

Homeless in Hell

Orson Scott Card's Christmas present
to theHatrackRivercommunity:
a never-before published Christmas story
Homeless in Hell
A Christmas Story

This is a rather dark tale in places, not meant for children. (So for heaven's sake, don't read this to your family on Christmas Eve.) For the rest of you, we hope you enjoy it, and have a merry Christmas!

If you don't get into heaven, you go to hell, right? That's what I'd always been taught. Heaven is Harvard, and hell a county technical college. If you finished high school, they've got to take you. Except that with hell, dying is the only diploma you're supposed to need.

I read those near-death-experience books, where they talked about how "the light" was full of warmth and love. Well, it was nice, but it sort of sets you up for disappointment, because when you're really dead and not just straying in there by accident, you get past that feel-good stage and suddenly you're at the light, and either it sucks you in or it shunts you away, like a magnet, and it all depends on how you're polarized.

I got pushed away.

Well, what did I expect, anyway? I used to go to church and all, but I wasn't much of a stickler on, like, telling the truth and helping my neighbor. And office supplies from work had a way of ending up at home. Not a lot, but I wasn't exactly perfect. Lots of looking upon women to lust after them. Just at the Victoria's Secret level. Quarreled with my wife a lot but I never hit her, though I did compare her to her mother way too often. Kind of the normal sins. I was sort of hoping they graded on the curve -- I figured I was bound to make the top half. But no, it's straight percentage, you get one question wrong and you're out.

So what's the other choice? Hell, right? I start looking around, wondering if Dante was just making it all up and if not, which circle would I get into?

The answer is, Dante didn't know squat, there are no circles. You just find yourself on a street in hell and you go up to a door (and it's always the same door, no matter what the street is) and you see people going in and out, dressed to the nines, and you think, Cool, there are good clothes in hell, which stands to reason, really, and you go up to the door and you knock and the guy looks at you like you're a worm and he says, "Name?"

So I say my name and he makes this moue with his mouth like you sort of passed your expiration date about a month ago and he says, "Please, don't waste my time," and he starts to close the door in your face.

"Wait a minute," you say, "this is hell, right?"

"Hades," he says, and you can taste the contempt.

"Well I didn't make heaven, so you've got to let me in."

"No," he says, and then with a kind of faux patience he explains, "The place where, when you go there, they have to take you in, that's home. Not hell. We don't have to take just anybody. We're all about class here, nobody wants to look around and see you. There are real celebs inside. Stalin. Hitler. Caligula, for heaven's sake -- oops, did I say that?"

"I'm not asking for the best seat in the house."

"There is no table insignificant enough for you."

I did a quick calculation -- how many people ever lived on earth, how many would likely fail the entrance exam for heaven, and how many first-rank sinners would be ahead of me in line. "But ... what do I do?"

"You bogey off and stop blocking the door."

"What do you think this is? Studio 54?"

He laughs. "Oh, no, it's much worse. It's like junior high. And you ... ain't ... cool."

And you get a big hand planted in your chest and when he pushes you don't fall, you fly across the street and smash into a building only it doesn't hurt -- you're dead, remember? -- and you're not injured and it begins to dawn on you, you're stuck in hell but you can't get in. You try a few other doors and the same guy is waiting behind every one of them to bounce you. And it's starting to rain. A thin cold drizzle, and even though you can't actually get injured, you can get cold and damp, or at least you feel like you've been left out in the cold, which in fact you have. You're not going to get sick, you're not going to starve, but you're also not going to get in.

Not that I was alone out there. There are a lot of streets in hell, and lots of homeless people wandering around. And they seem just about as crazy as the normal mix of homeless people. A few who look like they're waiting for a drug deal to go down, only I knew it was a fake, because what is there to buy or sell, and even if they're carrying -- because you pretty much look the way you see yourself, so some

people are armed -- they aren't dangerous. If they had ever been truly dangerous, they'd be inside watching the strippers, or whatever they did inside Club Styx. These guys think if they look bad enough, if they say enough rude things to passersby, maybe someday they'll get by the bouncer. Ditto with the ones who look like hookers. They've got nothing to sell. But let's face it. Not everybody in hell is bright.

Then there are the crazies, shouting and preaching about Jesus and the end of the world, only it dawned on me pretty quickly that they aren't crazy -- I mean, after you die there's no schizophrenia because there's no brain to malfunction. They're preaching because they're trying to tip the balance the other way, to show how righteous they are, denouncing sin, calling out the name of Jesus -- or whoever, depending, but most of the shouters were, like, born again, only it apparently didn't take the way they thought.

I stood there watching them, and walked around watching them, and sat down and watched them, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't bring myself to care. It began to dawn on me just how long eternity was going to be, stuck on the streets of hell. I tried street after street, only nothing changed except the faces. The language didn't even change, because after you're dead all the languages become the same. They speak, and they think they're speaking Arabic or Tagalog, only what you hear is English, or at least you think it is. If you speak English. Anyway, you can understand everybody, and that's the worst, because you can't even go to a place where you don't understand the words people are saying so you can tune them out. You're always tuned in and it's so boring.

Daytime comes and goes, just like on earth, and gradually it began to dawn on me that this was earth. In fact, it was Washington DC, which is where I happened to buy the farm, hit by a car trying to cross Wisconsin in Georgetown on New Year's Eve 1999, which meant that whether the world ended that night the way everybody said it might, it definitely ended for me. I knew the streets. I could walk down the mall. Only everybody I saw was dead.

I thought for a while that the whole world must have died or something, but then you'd think there'd be more newly dead people like me, you know, the whole government thing, if the world ended surely some significant percentage of them would go to hell, and surely they couldn't all qualify to get into Studio 666, so where were they? No, the world hadn't ended, just my little oxygen-consuming, carbon-dioxide-expelling bag of blood and bone.

And now that I was looking for it, I began to see the signs that life was going on. Things changed position. Garbage cans were in one place and then they were in another. Cars were parked somewhere and then they weren't. But you never actually saw them move. Nothing moved. It was like when they were in motion, they disappeared. And it occurred to me that it was like long-exposure photography. You set the exposure time really long, the aperture very small, and the only things you get are the things that don't move. Pedestrians, cars, anything that moves is gone.

It's like in hell time passes so slowly that living people are invisible to us. I had it figured out!

"You think you've got it figured out," said a fat man.

I looked at him, a little puzzled by why he was fat. I mean, surely when you die, you don't have to be fat anymore.

"It's how you see yourself," said the fat man. "You know how people said, 'inside every fat person there's a thin person struggling to get out'? Not true. It's just another fat guy in there. In fact, usually a fatter guy."

"Can you lose weight?" I asked, because at least it was a conversation with somebody who wasn't trying to get wafted up into heaven or deeper into hell. And also it was kind of funny.

"You can look thinner," said the fat guy, "if you start to think of yourself as thin."

"So why can't you think of yourself as good, and get on up into heaven?"

He shook his head. "Those street preachers, they aren't thinking of themselves as good. They're thinking of themselves as righteous. Saved. Chosen."

"Better than everybody else."

"Bingo. Ditto with the bad dudes and the tough girls. They're needy, all of them, and needy doesn't get you off the street. Needy is what gets you on the street."

"If you've got it all figured out," says I, "what are you still doing here?"

"I'm conflicted," he said. "A common problem. Whenever I start going one direction, I do something to

send me back the other." He grinned. "While you, you're talented."

Talented? "I'm not the one reading minds here. I mean, you've been answering stuff I didn't say."

"Yeah, I've got good hearing. I don't have to wait for you to speak. Because, you know, it's not like we actually have voices. We just sort of wish our thoughts to be heard, and then people close by can hear them. But your thoughts are actually just as loud, so to speak. So yeah, I can hear stuff. But you, you can see things."

I looked around. "No more than anybody else."

"Nope, nope, not so. I watched you. Crossing the street. You waited for the light."

"I did not. The lights don't change."

"And you dodged the pedestrians."

"There are no pedestrians."

"Nevertheless."

"I don't see them, so how can I dodge them?"

"Oh, you philosopher, you."

"What possible difference could it make to you?"

"I want to see how useful you are. What you can do."

"This is a job interview?"

"I've got an opening for an elf."

I looked him over, this time more carefully. No pipe clenched between his teeth, but his stomach was rather like a bowlful of jelly. "Am I supposed to laugh when I see you in spite of myself?"

"ClementMooredidn't actually see me," he said. "I'd long since stopped doing personal appearances by then. But you see, it doesn't make much difference. I've got this image in my face every Christmas -- no, every Halloween and two months after -- and it's all I can do to keep from wearing the red suit all year long. I used to be thin, when the Dutch were in charge of the image."

"What are you doing in hell? Aren't you supposed to be Saint Nicholas?"

"I'm not in hell. Any more than you are."

"Here's a clue, Nick. This ain't heaven."

"We're hovering, my friend. Or maybe we're volleying, like the shuttlecock in badminton, back and forth, almost one thing, almost another."

"Me, I'm just walking the streets."

"Dodging the pedestrians."

"I'm not a toymaker."

"Fine with me. That toymaking, that's just part of the myth. Hasn't anybody caught on that I'm dead? They don't issue us hammers and saws and set us to work making wooden toys. There's precious few of us can even see the living, and those that can move things in the material world, those are even more rare."

"So how do you come up with all those toys for good girls and boys?"

"When we need toys, which isn't as often as you think, we steal them."

"Ah," I said. "Now I'm beginning to get why you aren't in heaven. You aren't Santa Claus. You're Robin Hood."

"Mostly we break toys," said Santa. "Or hide them. It's not like we can move anything very far. And nowadays it's a cash economy. Come to think of it, it was back when I was alive, too. They used to draw pictures of me with bags of money, because that's what I did, my famous good deed, I paid a ransom in coin, saved some kids. Money's what we mostly use now, too. And because it's paper, it's even easier. Lighter. Even my less talented elves can move it."

I couldn't help it. He was so serious. I laughed. "Man, you had me going there. Santa Claus, stealing toys, breaking them, hiding them, dealing in cash. You got your elves out picking pockets?"

He didn't look amused. "Yes," he said. "I fail to see the humor."

"You're not putting me on?"

"I want to see if you can move things. In the material world."

"I told you, I can't even see the people, let alone pick their pockets, and even if I could, I've never been a thief." At once my conscience twinged. "At least, not deliberately. Not systematically."

"You got a better job offer?"

"I want a shot at heaven," I said. "As long as I'm not completely in hell, why not?"

"Me too," said Santa. "Some years I've been so close."

"What about getting into the devil's workshop? Been close to that, too?"

He shrugged. "As a novelty act, they've invited me now and then. But not to stay. Strictly in the back door, you know."

"Why should I do this? I mean, you've been at this for what, fifteen hundred years? And you're still here."

"Got any better plans? It's not like you're running out of time."

"Santa, excuse me for saying this, but as far as I can tell, you're as looney as a one-legged duck."

He shook his head. "My friend, nobody's crazy here. We might be wrong about a lot of stuff, but we can't lie and we aren't crazy. Still, like I said, no hurry. Look me up if you decide Santa's gang of elves sounds more interesting than ... whatever it is you're doing."

"How would I find you?"

He rolled his eyes. "Just ask. In case you didn't know it, I'm famous. People keep track of where I am."

"I was afraid I'd have to go to the north pole or something."

He shook his head, turned his back, and walked away.

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He was right. I could see living people. And it wasn't a matter of slowing down or speeding up, either. It was more like you had to pay attention to something else, sort of look away and then be aware of what's going on at the edges of things. Only that's the strange thing -- when you're dead, there are no edges. You have the habit, from all those years of binocular vision, of seeing only this window in front of you, with out-of-focus glimpses to the sides, and most dead people never get past that. But the fact is, when you're dead you don't have those limitations. You can see ... well, you remember how people used to say that teachers seemed to have eyes in the back of their heads? Or it's like, you could feel someone's gaze on you, even though they were behind you? Well, that's how it is when you're dead, once you get the hang of it. You're aware in every direction. It's not really vision. It's just knowledge, but your mind kind of makes sense of it like vision. I wasn't consciously seeing those moving cars or pedestrians, so I didn't "know" they were there. But I was aware of them, aware of the people in the cars, aware of the people on the street, and some old reflex made me dodge them, weave among them without knowing it.

Thanks to the tip from Nick -- I hate calling him Santa Claus because that name's too loaded down with cultural freight, I just have to laugh whenever I think of saying, "Hi, Santa!" -- I got pretty good at seeing mortals. Got to be a habit, really, knowing where they were, knowing what they were doing. I found my range was pretty good, too, because this awareness thing, it isn't blocked by mere walls, I know who's coming around the corner before they actually come into my field of view. And I'm not a genius, either, I can imagine there's those that can see for miles, right through hills and cities and whatever else is in the way. Maybe see forever, if they've got the mind to sort through all the stuff you'd see in between.

And it wasn't just awareness. I could move stuff.

The thing is, touching the material world, changing it, that doesn't come the way awareness did -- it isn't just automatically happening, so you only have to notice it. Ordinarily, when you're dead you simply don't affect the material world in any way. You don't sink through the earth or walk through walls, but only because you still have the respect for those surfaces you learned when you were alive. You can go through them, just as you can sink down into the earth, though that's extraordinarily boring, since nothing much is going on once you get past the earthworm and gopher level.

But you can affect things, not by touching or pushing or pulling, but by -- oh, how else to say this? -- by really, really wanting things to move. Yeah, OK, by wishing. But we're not talking about some wistful little desire. "Oh, I wish I could eat a candy bar again." No, it takes a desire so intense it consumes you,

at least for the moment, the way a campfire consumes an empty marshmallow bag. You feel shrunken, thin, weak. But it's funny, because you also feel amazingly powerful. Like a superhero. Just because you got a chair to move.

Only how much can you really care about moving a chair? That's why poltergeists are so rare, and why they're usually so mean. They're angry all the time, and they move things around in order to cause fear in the living. That's the consuming desire -- to make the living afraid of them. To have power. It's a pathetic thing, and it's definitely on the evil side of the ledger. Evil, but the bouncer doesn't let poltergeists into the netherclub, because they don't need somebody inside moving the furniture or spilling the drinks, I guess.

I'm no poltergeist. I'm not mad at anybody. OK, well, so, that's a lie. I'm pretty steamed about being stuck between heaven and hell, and I'm ticked off about getting killed before the prime of my life (at least I assume the prime was still ahead of me, seeing how nonprime the years I actually lived through seemed to be). So how was I going to move anything?

It was Nick who showed me how. Once I realized he'd been right about my seeing the living, I looked him up and he kind of took me under his wing, he and a few of his elves -- who are not little and not cute, they're just dead people like me -- and showed me the work they do.

It isn't just at Christmas, though Christmas is for them like tax time is for accountants. All through the year, Nick and his gang are watching out for children. They'll pick a kid -- almost at random, or so it seems to me, though maybe there's some system in it, some signs they look for -- and they just follow, watching. Most kids, their life is OK. Sure, they get yelled at, spanked, ignored, ridiculed, the normal stuff that makes life interesting, but most of them, somebody loves them, somebody's looking out for them, somebody thinks they're pretty good to have around. You can live through a lot of hard times, if you've got that.

There are other kids, though. Two kinds. Bullies and victims. And Nick's on the look out for both. The victims, they break your heart. The ones that are getting tortured or beaten, there's not much we can do for them. The rage in the person hurting them, that's a powerful force, it matches any wish we can come up with, and then on top of that they've got bodies, which pretty much makes us helpless. What Nick's gang does in those cases is, they try their best to make it obvious to other living people what's going on. You know, cause a shirt to ride up so a bruise is visible, or get a neighbor to look in a window or hear a sound, something to make them suspicious. A lot of them call the cops or child welfare, if it's a country where the cops care, or where there is an agency whose job is to look out for kids. But a lot of them don't, and in the end, our hearts just break for those kids and we sort of just wait for them to join us. Because a lot of Nick's best recruits come from among those children. His scouts, so to speak. They've got a nose for it.

The neglected kids, though, Nick's gang can help a lot, there. We get food to them, sometimes. We open a door now and then -- that's a lot harder and more complicated than you might think. And when they're alone, some of Nick's gang, they can't move things, but they can make sounds that the living can hear, so they sing to them or talk to them. Tell them stories. We get tagged as imaginary friends sometimes, but it's not like we're looking for credit. We just try to help the kids know they're not alone, that somebody cares what they're going through. And those singers, they do a sweet lullaby, I tell you. Songs that even the deaf can hear, cause they sing right into the mind. Sometimes I go with them, just to hear them sing. We can't save all their lives, but we can make what life they have a little better, and that's good. It's not like we think of death as all that big a deal, anyway. I mean, we are dead, and so death doesn't hold any fear for us. That's why we're generally not in the lifesaving business. When we can get a few crackers to a kid, sure, we'll do it, but ... they'll just need more tomorrow, right? While a good song can live in their memory through a lot of dark nights of fear and loneliness.

But that's not the kind of work I do. I'm not a singer, and when I move things, I've got to be mad. It's my sense of injustice that has to get riled up. And so I'm on the bully patrol.

You know the kids I'm talking about. Some of them are physically violent, but most bullies do their damage with their mouths. They've got this instinct for the thing that makes a weaker kid hurt the most. Sometimes it's obvious -- a kid with a big nose, you don't have to be a brain surgeon to figure out what to make fun of. But some of these bullies, it's like they can read minds. Their victim has a drunk mother, the bully goes straight to the mother jokes -- how does he know? The girl who's lonely and scared she's not good enough for anybody, the bully girls taunt her clothes or play really mean jokes where they pretend to be her friend until she commits herself, says something that shows she really believes in their faux kindness, and then they can mock her. Some of the things they do are so elaborate, it takes so much thought and effort to do them, you can hardly believe someone would go to all that trouble just to make another person unhappy.

Well, that ticks me off. That gets me all intense, and I feel it building up, and I can move things.

The trouble is, what do I move? It's not like the bully deserves to die or anything, so I can't make the roof cave in on them. Death may not be a big deal to us, but murder still is, and one of the rules that seem to govern the universe is that while we can do a little messing around with the material world, we're not allowed to kill. Just can't do it. Wish all we want, but if the thing we try to move might kill somebody, it just won't budge.

So we've got to be resourceful. I mostly try for justice. A girl makes fun of another kid's big nose, I make sure the bully girl bumps into a door that wasn't quite where she thought it was. Big swollen nose, a shiner. Let her see how it feels to have other people stare at your face for a while. Or a bully boy who shoves little kids around -- I can arrange for him to twist his ankle or trip and fall headlong right as he's going after a kid, make him look bad in front of everybody or distract him with a little pain. My favorite, though, is to make it so when the bully just touches his victim, I make the victim's nose bleed like a river,

make him bruise up around his eye or jaw. Doesn't really hurt the victim when I do it, but it makes it look like the bully did a full-out assault, gets him in so much trouble. A few times the bully's been so frightened by the injury he "caused" that he gets control of his hostility and stops picking on kids.

But here's the problem. I'm working on justice, protecting kids from each other, trying to help change kids who've fallen in love with cruelty, help them start being a little more decent, learn a little compassion. But when you come right down to it, what am I actually doing? Causing pain. Hurting people. All in a good cause, right? But remember, the guy who judges you is the same one who said, "Turn the other cheek."

I tell myself, I'd turn my own cheek. But he never said I have to turn away and not notice when somebody else is getting slapped, right? I mean, he also said that it was better to tie a millstone around your neck and jump into the sea than to hurt one of the little ones.

But then I also have to be honest and tell myself that I'm hurting some of his little ones, too. The mean ones, the vicious ones, the ones that maybe he doesn't really think of as his. But if his capacity for forgiveness is infinite, the way some people say, then they're all his. Didn't he get ticked off at some moneychangers, though, and lash out with a scourge and knock over some tables? Surely he understands how we feel, those of us who are working on trying to stop the bullies.

You know the real problem? There are so few of us. Few who have the ability even to see the living -- can't do much unless you can see what's going on! -- and even fewer who, seeing, care. Because most of the dead, they just disconnect from the living. So mortals are mean to each other. Big deal. Get over it. Get on with your ... well, your death. Whatever this is. You can't fix anything in the mortal world. You get no credit for it. You're already judged to be unworthy of heaven. So it's not like you've got a stake in what's going on.

Just a few of us who care about the kids and have the ability to do anything about it. So even if we're making a difference in the lives of some kids, there are thousands, millions of others that we never see. That's not a reason to stop, though. It's a reason to try harder. It's not like we sleep. That's something, anyway. We got twenty-four hours a day.

You do get tired, though. Not physically tired. Just tired in your soul. Seeing how many mean people there are. Seeing how eagerly the victims keep hoping that their parents will love them, that they'll find friends at school. And here we are, trying to help keep those hopes alive. It breaks your heart. It makes you want to despair sometimes, that despite all that hope, there's always a bully to dash it. Why do they hate happiness in other people so much? Especially the children -- where do they learn to take such pleasure in someone else's misery?

Was I like that?

Oh, man, that's the thing that comes back again and again. Every rude thing I ever said to another kid. There was this guy in junior high and high school, we were friends, you know? In plays together, in band. He was smart and talented, and I liked him. But one day, I'm sitting there with a song going through my head, and for some reason I come up with a new lyric for it that makes fun of this friend. A song about Bruce, talking about how conceited he is. And, well, he is, not so much conceited as really excited about all the cool things he can do. I think back on it and I realize, he wasn't vain, he was just thrilled to keep discovering new things he could do, and he thought he could share his excitement with his friends. Well, I cured him of that. Cause it wasn't just the one song. I sang that to my friends and they all laughed and that was it for me, the first talent I ever had -- a talent for musical meanness. I must have written twenty Bruce songs. Till Bruce stopped hanging around with us and it was no fun to sing it when he wasn't there. Made me look bad instead of clever.

I think back on that, I wonder where Nick was. Maybe Nick's gang saw me but figured, Bruce really was talented and smart, he really didn't need a loser like me for a friend. They didn't have to stop me, because I just wasn't important enough in Bruce's life for him to need rescue. I sure hope that's it. I hope I did no harm.

That's the kind of thing that goes through your mind when you're on bully patrol. Way too much self-examination, if you ask me, but you can't help it, you keep seeing yourself in the bullies as much as in the victims. They're all kids, after all. Even if they're rotten and mean, they're kids. They might still become something worthwhile.

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Christmas, that's the tough time. I had a whole year of learning, mostly on American streets because I knew the culture well enough to recognize what was going on with the kids and to be able to think of ways to help them. And just when I'm getting pretty deft and clever at bully-stopping, Nick comes to me and says, "It's the Christmas rush. Bully patrol is over till after the big day."

It's obvious that it's Christmas. I mean, there's no missing it -- because Nick's in a red suit. When the decorations go up, there's all these pictures of him looking like Norman Rockwell's Coke-drinking Santa, and he just can't hold onto his civilian image, the red suit just pops right out of him and that's how he looks. And it's a good thing I can't see myself in mirrors, because I've got to tell you, I wouldn't be at all surprised to find that I look really small and I'm wearing green. Sometimes you just want to yell at those advertising guys. Can't they leave us a little dignity?

Christmas and the elves. That's when the serious thievery begins.

Right, like you thought we actually made the toys! We're dead, and even if we were alive, most toys that kids actually want require serious machinery. Do you have any idea just how much equipment it takes to make one lousy little Lego? Let alone a whole Toy Story action figure. No, we don't make toys. We just redistribute them.

And not in the stores. Think about it -- who goes to Toys R Us? People with no money? Hardly. So going to the parking lot and taking things out of one shopping cart and putting them in another, what good is that going to do? We can't move things far anyway -- it just wipes us out even to jostle stuff. So none of this stuff about bags of toys going down chimneys. It's pretty rare for something to show up under the tree that Mom and Dad didn't know about in advance.

Besides, we have to be really intense in order to move things, right? So here's what we do on Christmas patrol.

We watch for people with more than they need to be out around poor people. Or for poor kids to be in a place where there's plenty of money changing hands. I'll be teamed up with one of the singing elves, and she'll distract the rich guy while he's handling his money, while I liberate a five-dollar bill or sometimes even a twenty and cause it to drift down to the floor. Then I stand watch over it, keeping it from being noticed by anyone until the singer is able to entice some poor kid to be close enough, and then I push the five or the twenty -- or, heck, the buck or the quarter, cause sometimes that's all I can get -- out into the open, where the kid can see it.

You know the amazing thing? The number of kids who immediately try to give it to the store owner, or take it straight to their parents. Well, once we give it to them, it's theirs to dispose of. The gift has been given. And when you think about it, maybe the best gift is for the kid with no money to give that twenty to the store owner, to prove that he doesn't really need that money, that it's more important to be a decent person than to have what money can buy. Or if he gives it to his parents, well, maybe that's food on the table. Sure, maybe it's booze, too, and that's why they're poor, but it's not the kid's fault, the kid did the right thing. He contributed to the family.

About half the kids, though, they hang on to the money, and that's fine, that's even better, because you know what? Almost every time, they use some of it to buy themselves a treat -- ice cream or a candy bar, maybe a cookie -- but then the rest of the money goes straight into buying a gift for somebody else. A little brother or sister. Mom or Dad. Sometimes a teacher who's been good to them. I even saw one

kid who had four dollars and twenty-eight cents in his fist -- change from the ice cream bar -- and he sees a kid who looks even more poor than him, and he just walks up and gives it to him and says, "Merry Christmas." Right then I loved that kid so much. Because he got it. He understood. None of that stuff goes with you when you die. Only what you did for other people, or to them, and what they did for you, and to you. That's all you have with you when you're dead. That kid, when he dies, he's going to have so much cool stuff. Because he has a good heart. He won't be walking around the streets of hell, no place to stay. He'll fit right in with the light, he'll pass that entrance exam, they'll greet him with songs, you know? And I got him the fiver that he was able to mostly share. That's something.

That's Christmas. We just use the season to get gifts into the hands of children who don't have anything. It's about hope, just like what we do the rest of the year. That's what Nick does -- he's in the hope business.

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So it's the day after Christmas, and we're back on the regular schedule, but Nick, he comes to me -- and the red suit hasn't faded yet, so he really looks like Santa Claus -- he comes to me and says, "Want to take the long hike with me?"

I don't know what he's talking about, but I say, "Sure," because he wants me to and it's only thanks to him that I feel like I'm worth the space I take up, even on the streets of hell. Whatever the long hike is, it's not like I'll get tired or have to carry a pup tent on my back. So I say sure and off we go.

Straight up to the light.

And it's not a very long hike at all, not heading there. It's like, no matter where you are on earth, once you decide to find the light, there it is, just a little out of reach, up and over your shoulder. Nick, he goes like he knows the way, and I guess he does. Every year after Christmas, he goes back to the light and tries to get in. That's what I was along for. The other elves, I guess most of them have gone with him, some of them more than once. And I guess they were just as happy to have the new guy go along.

Because there goes Nick, straight into the light, and you think, "Man, this time he's going to make it. This time he's getting out of hell!"

He's in there so long. You have so much hope for him.

And then ... pop. He's right back out. He looks at you. Shrugs his shoulders. "Better luck next time," he says.

Only I was new at this. And I'd been working on my sense of outrage all year, you know? And it's not like I was getting into heaven any time soon. I mean, if Nick can't pass the entrance exam, you think I stand a chance?

So I stand there and yell -- not speaking loud, because it's not actually, sound, but I'm really intense, you know? -- and I know I'm not supposed to get ticked off at the light for heaven's sake, but anyway, I yell, "Did you ever think that your stupid requirements might be too high? What've you got in there anyway, a bunch of pious martyrs? A bunch of goody-two-shoes never broke a rule in their lives? Well take a look at Nick here, he's on the front line, dead though he may be, he's trying to do something about it! I don't see you down there on the streets trying to make life better for kids! So what about that, huh? Ever think about how maybe some of the people in heaven aren't doing diddly-squat and maybe some of the people in hell are actually doing some good in the world?"

Finally I say enough that the intensity wears off and I remember who I'm talking to and I think, Man, it's going to take, like, ten thousand years to work off the sheer blasphemy of what I just said.

Only right then I hear something inside my mind, the way it must be when the singers do their lullabies for the suffering children. This voice, so soft, so kind, and all it says is, "Whatever you do for the least of my little ones, you've done it for me."

And it about knocks me over. He sees. He knows. What we're doing. What our work is. He knows, and he loves us for it, and yet ...

And yet Nick still can't get in.

I look at him, and he shrugs again. "Yelling doesn't solve anything," he says.

And then he leads me on the long hike back. Yeah, that's the "long" part of the long hike. Getting to the light is quick. Getting back, that's hard and slow, because every step hurts, coming away from that

beauty and going back to the plain old world with all the dead people preaching or being cool, and all the living people going about their business as if life were really long and they had all the time in the world. And you can't help but think, when you look at the living, you think: It's so easy for them, they can just do things, only they so rarely do anything that matters. So many children, all they need is a word and a smile, all they need is an act of kindness and generosity, something that any living person could give them, but so often they leave it up to the dead. But the ones who don't leave it up to us, the ones who are good to the kids, they're my friends, you know? They're my sisters and my brothers. I can't do anything to show them how I feel, but I'm glad they're alive. They're the only reason hell isn't more, well, hellish.

Finally we got back, down on the streets of hell. And Nick says, "Another year to go."

And I say, "Nick, thanks for letting me be part of it. Maybe it's not good enough for them, but it's good enough for me."

And he grins and even though he doesn't move, it feels like he just clapped me on the shoulder, and he says, "Then it's good enough for me, too." And off he goes.

Only there's something wrong with this picture. I'm seeing him but there's more to him than the red suit. There's a kind of jauntiness in his step, and even though that's probably my own mind creating the image that fits what I'm sensing about him, the fact is that it's still true. Nick just failed for the fifteen hundredth time to get into heaven, and he's almost dancing.

"Hey!" says I. "Hey, Santa!"

He turns around and there we are, face to face, and I say, "What are you so happy about?"

"It was a good Christmas," he says, all innocentlike, and I know he's not lying because you can't, but he's also not exactly answering me.

"How come you didn't make it this year?" I demanded.

"I don't think you get a list," he says.

"Bull," says I. "I came out of that light knowing every little sin I ever committed. You got the whole inventory, Nick. And I want to know what it is that keeps you out."

He turns around slowly, indicating the street around him. All the Christmas decorations are still up, of course, and there in every window, there's his face, Santa Claus, grinning and selling stuff. "It's all that," he says.

"What, the Christmas decorations?"

"The fact that it's my face and not his."

"You don't paint those pictures! You don't hang them up!"

"Yeah, but I like it that they're there. I like being famous. He never did."

"And that's it? That's all?"

"I don't even know if that's the reason," he says. "Because they don't give me a list of sins. But it's a story. Better than nothing, right?"

And off he goes, this time for real, and it's time to get back on the bully patrol, but a thought crosses my mind. Maybe the reason they don't give him a list of sins is because there isn't one. Not for him. Because there aren't any sins. He was in the light an awfully long time before he bounced out. What if he didn't get bounced at all? What if, every year, he chooses to come back even though he doesn't have to? Because he'd rather be here, homeless in hell, doing the work he does, than to be happy in heaven. In fact, maybe heaven would be hell to him, knowing that he could be leading us in helping kids, only there he is with a harp or whatever. So the only way for him to be in heaven is not to be in heaven. He's got work to do, and he's doing it, and that's heaven for him.

And then this really strange thought comes to me. What if that's all heaven is for anybody? What if everybody gets bounced down to the streets of hell, but if you find the right things to do, it becomes

heaven for you? Look what I've got: A job to do that matters in the world. Good friends to work with. Nick leading me, a man I can look up to. Tell me what heaven's got that's any better than that.

Hey, it can't be true. I mean, if it were true, wouldn't St. Francis and St. Peter and all those guys be down here, working alongside us? No, heaven's heaven, and I'm in hell. Maybe Nick's an angel in disguise, and maybe he's just what he seems to be -- another homeless dead guy desperate to figure out a way to get off the streets. What difference does it make?

I'm not in torment. In fact, I had a pretty merry Christmas. I saw a lot of sad things, but I saw some good things, and a few of those good things, I made them happen.

And then I thought, maybe I could make even more good things happen if I could just tell the living about how it is here, about how it works. I can't do it like an angel with a trumpet, so that everybody would have to believe. But I can tell it like a story. Making letters appear on a computer screen, that's a piece of cake compared to getting a five-dollar bill out of a wallet and onto the street. So I found a guy who leaves his computer on day and night, and I wrote all this down, and now you're reading it, and you can take it as fiction or you can take it as truth, it doesn't matter to me. I don't care what you believe. I just care what you do.

Well, I've taken just about as much time off as I can spare. Like the old joke says, "Back on your heads!" I'm up to my neck in it and there's only a few of us to shovel. Merry Christmas. God bless us every one. Suffer little children to come unto me. All that stuff.