

looked at the cot near the kitchen stove, she shuddered and turned away. For days Mama had lain on that cot, coughing up blood. Christina was exhausted from trying to take care of her mother, mind her little brothers, and cook the meals. Papa, these past days, had been more silent than ever and had begun spending long hours alone in the barn.

Christina, standing again by the window, knew it was almost over. Mama no longer answered when she spoke to her. Her eyelids half covered the glassy blue eyes without blinking. The last time Christina had given her a spoonful of water, the liquid had rattled there a long time in her mother's throat. Now the breaths came in irregular gasps. Finally they stopped altogether.

Christina walked slowly to the front room where the boys were busy playing. She did not tell them. Instead, she returned to the kitchen, pulled on her overshoes and coat, and headed out toward the old barn. There she found Papa. He was using a mixture of kerosene and soot to blacken the coffin that he had made from the barn boards.

"Mama's gone." She said it simply.

Papa nodded. He got up and walked to the harness room. Reaching into the wooden box, he removed the length of muslin.

Suddenly Christina understood. "You knew all along!" she accused him. "Away back then when we *bought* the muslin, you knew it would never be a dress for Mama!"

The great, hulking man slowly nodded. He walked to the barn door and gazed out toward the distant horizon. Outside the eternal prairie winds were still howling their endless, mindless lament. "I always knew," he said. "I always knew it would be her shroud."

A time to be born; a time to die. . . .

How can I forgive the man I love?  
MY HUSBAND STOLE CHRISTMAS . . .  
while I watched in helpless terror!

Libby Kelley

“Don’t, Rod,” I pleaded. “You’ll regret this for the rest of your life!”

Helpless, I watched in aching misery as my husband picked up his leather coat and climbed into our battered ’67 sleigh. Where had I gone wrong? Whirling snow blinded my vision, reminding me of that fateful June morning I first laid eyes on Rod Grinch. . . .

I was working the noon shift at the diner down in Whoville when Babs dropped her left eyelash in the biscuits and gravy. Unknowing, unsuspecting that my destiny would change its course in moments, I bent pensively over the gravy-filled sieve. A strong but gentle tap seared my shoulder, and I froze, shuddering. “Ma’am.” Turning slowly, I pushed the hairnet from my eyes. “Ma’am, do you sell Sno-Cones?”

Silence. I could almost hear the biscuits molding. Our eyes met, and shaking in confusion, I directed him to my apartment instead of Dairy Queen.

One thing led to another, and Rod and I were married in July. How I’d longed for our first Christmas together! Just me, Rod, and Max, our little wolfhound. We’d spied Max in the window of the Whoville Pet Shoppe, chewing on a hamster, and bought her immediately in a moment of giddy impulse. “Max,” we called her, after my blow comb.

I sobbed, choking back the agonizing memory. Was this my fatal mistake? Why hadn’t I suspected when Rod slipped that Saint Bernard, four piranhas, and a ten-pound bag of kitty litter under his trench coat and strode defiantly out of the store? My husband was a sadistic kleptomaniac, and I was powerless to prevent it!

Max! I wept in silent misery, returning to cold, hard reality as I noticed my loafers had filled up with snow. Max used to chew on these loafers, I thought sadly to myself, but she wouldn’t tonight. NO! Painful sobs racked my body. Max was guiding Rod, the man I’d foolishly believed I loved, down to Whoville and the sickest crime imaginable.

Rod was going to steal Christmas. Why? Where had I and John

Birch failed? I turned, sickened by the crime, but fearful for my husband. What would happen if they caught Rod? Would Christmas fit under his trench coat?

I should have known when he dyed the Easter eggs black. Splashing cold water on my tear-stained face, I packed my meager suitcase and caught the next bus to New Whereville.

Living alone was rough at first, and I fought a raging internal battle when I heard Rod had returned Christmas. But no, NO, I wouldn't go back there. I couldn't go back to Rod. Not after what had happened. I shook my head sadly. All my hopeless love could never change this demented maniac. I knew, KNEW in my heart that Rod would always eat liverwurst for Thanksgiving dinner.

The pain's going away, little by little, day by day. I got a job cooking green eggs and ham at the New Whereville diner, and the other morning  
(continued on page 67)