

# A Christmas Story

by S. Banta

He dreams. The helicopter's blades are spinning. The dust cloud stings his eyes. The screaming engine is deafening. He's pulling on the door—trying to get in. The door will not open. There is no one inside.

He starts to grow taller. His legs are stretching. He looks up at the blades that are getting closer and closer to his face. The door won't open.

His head lops off in one clean cut. There is no blood. It spirals over the horizon, like a perfect football pass.

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The plastic, light-up, life-size manger scene is arranged around bales of hay in front of the City Building in an anonymous town that is famous as the mobile home and recreational vehicle capital of the midwest. The bulb inside the black wise man is burned out. A thin layer of ice freezes over the mud puddles at night and melts by noon. Giant red ribbons are on top of every mobile home and recreational vehicle in the sales lot on the edge of town. The deluxe model on the end has a sign in the windshield that reads, "Indulge Yourself This X-Mas."

Eddie sells shoes to the people who sell the mobile homes and recreational vehicles. The store where he works has a sign in the window that reads, "Just 28 More Shopping days Till X-Mas." They are having a sale on tennis shoes. Eddie will not work on commission.

Eddie is moving from a two-room efficiency to an efficiency-plus-study in the same apartment complex. It is the only apartment complex in town. He doesn't need the extra room.

All of his possessions fit neatly into little cardboard boxes. The little cardboard boxes fit neatly into the hatchback of his yellow Pinto. He only has two more payments until the Pinto is paid for.

Before he unpacks, he sets up a three-foot, artificial blue spruce by a window. He wraps a sheet around the base, hangs five styrofoam balls from the wire branches, and places a foil star on the top. On the lowest branch, he ties a blue ornament that used to play jingle bells. He hangs three mistletoe leaves above the doorway to the bathroom.

His old apartment was in the basement, next to the laundry room. The sounds of the washing machine switching from spin to final rinse would lull him to sleep. There were no other apartments in the basement.

Eddie's new apartment is on the second floor, at the end of the hall—Apartment 2B. His new apartment overlooks a small man-made lake with a family of ceramic ducks posed around it. There are two other apartments on his landing. Eddie is looking forward to having neighbors.

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He stands by a window and watches a group of children playing with the ceramic ducks. The children try to pick them up, but the ducks' little webbed feet are cemented into the ground. Giving up, the children start to play "smear the queer." Eddie notices that the smallest child is getting knocked around. She is six. The bigger kids push her down into the frozen mud. She laughs. She lives with her mother in Apartment 2A, next to Eddie's. Eddie has seen her playing by herself in the hallway.



He wants to go outside and make the children play good. He wants to stop them from picking on her. He could be Clint Eastwood, John Wayne, or the A-Team, riding into her tormented existence on a white horse and saving the day. He isn't.

Instead, Eddie stands by the window and watches the children play. They finish the game and he notices the little girl is walking back to her building. He opens the door to his apartment and fumbles with the doorknob, pretending to be fixing it.

The little girl runs up the steps, slowing when she sees Eddie. She moves quietly toward 2A. Her dirty blonde hair is fine and shoulder-length. She wears a light blue, quilted jacket with a furry hood, a brown skirt, and sneakers. Her right knee is scraped. She looks happy, but is not smiling.

"What's your name?"

"Mary."

"I'm Eddie. . . I live here."

"I know."

"Do the other kids always play mean with you, Mary?"

She is silent.

"Mary, do they pick on you?"

"We's just playin'." She looks puzzled.

"Mary, if they start picking on you again, get me. I'll take care of them."

"We's just playin'." She looks frightened.

The door to Apartment 2A opens and Mary's mother steps into the hallway. Mary tugs on a belt loop on her mother's jeans. Mary's mother smiles at Eddie and closes the door.

\* \* \*

He dreams. He is looking out the window.

Mary's feet are cemented into the ground. She can't move. The children are hitting her. They throw rocks and swing sticks. Pieces of her body fall to the ground. The children are laughing and singing in rhythm.

He stands by the window and watches as her body is reduced to rubble.

\* \* \*

Because of the Christmas rush, Eddie works evenings taking inventory. As he leaves, Mary's mom is getting home from work after picking up Mary



from the babysitter's. Mary's mom usually talks to Eddie as she opens the door to her apartment. He waits when they are late.

She is a fairly attractive woman. She has curly, frosted hair that she tints herself. She wears heavy pancake make-up that covers the scars from a bad complexion during her adolescence. She wears jeans to work. Eddie doesn't know what she does. Eddie doesn't know what happened to her husband. Mary's mother's name is Denise.

Eddie's sex life is regimental. It occurs each night in the shower before he goes to bed. This has progressed to the point where merely the sound of running water turns him on. This is not a fetish but a result of Pavlovian conditioning. Eddie seldom thinks about making love. He never thinks about making love to Denise.

\* \* \*

Eddie buys a tube of ready-bake tollhouse cookies and asks Denise if Mary can come over and help him bake them. It is only for an hour. Denise thinks this is fine.

Mary doesn't like to bake. She watches a rerun of "I Love Lucy." She doesn't understand it, but she laughs. Eddie puts the cookies in a shoe box and has Mary take them home to her mother.

\* \* \*

Denise invites Eddie to Mary's first-grade Christmas pageant.

The children fidget under bathrobes and look nervously at their parents as they deliver their lines. The parents sit perfectly still, smiling. The baby Jesus is a balding plastic doll wearing a dish rag. One of the wise men wets his pants. The teacher hurries him off stage.

Mary plays the part of a lamb. She says, "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." She says her line perfectly. Eddie is proud. After the pageant, Mary runs up to Eddie and tugs on a belt loop on his jeans.

In the punch and cookie line, Eddie picks Mary up and puts her on his shoulder.

"You must be Mary's father."

"No. . . Just a friend."

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He dreams. A child is born in the City of David.

From behind a plate glass display window in the center of the Nativity scene, a sterilized nurse holds the child. The baby girl yawns. Her fine yellow hair sticks to her head. He presses his hands and face against the glass. He feels like the child is his own. She isn't.

He wants to hold the child. He can't.

\* \* \*

Denise invites Eddie over for dinner on Christmas Eve. Eddie buys a stuffed animal for Mary and a bottle of medium-priced perfume for Denise. Denise gives him a money clip that she'd originally purchased for her boss. Eddie doesn't notice that the monogram engraved on it is not his own. They eat spaghetti.

After dinner, Denise wants to go out and get a bottle of Ruinite. She asks if Eddie would mind watching Mary for a little while. She hands Eddie a beer from the fridge and tells him to feel free to go home if Mary goes to sleep.

Mary sits on the floor and stares at the twinkle lights on the small tree. A papier-mache angel with one wing looks down from the top.

"Do ya want me to tell you a story?"

Mary nods her head, continuing to stare at the tree.

"Let me . . ."

"Tell me 'bout the baby Jesus." Mary turns around and looks in his eyes.

Eddie starts to set his beer down and drops it on the floor. He walks to the kitchen and gets some paper towels. He wipes up the spill and gets another beer. Mary is asleep on the couch.

Eddie sits in the leatherette easy chair and watches her sleep. Her head is resting on a satin pillow. The lights from the tree make her face glow. The shimmering pillow encircles her head. Her chest moves up and down slowly with each even breath. Eddie sips his beer.

Denise gets home at around 2 a.m. She opens the door quietly and rubs her eyes when she sees Eddie. She is not carrying anything. She sits on the couch and hugs Mary.

"You should have put a blanket over her. She'll catch cold." Denise picks Mary up and starts to carry her to her room. She smells like she's been drinking.

"She just fell asleep. She's all excited about Santa and everything." Denise doesn't hear him.

He goes back to his apartment. He does not dream.

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Ethel Merman's rendition of "Oh Holy Night" blares from Eddie's clock radio at 11 a.m. on Christmas Day. He listens to the radio while he makes scrambled eggs for breakfast. He doesn't take a shower.

Eddie hears the door to 2A open and hurries to his own door. Mary is bundled-up standing in the hallway. Denise is reaching around a grocery sack full of presents, fumbling with her keys. Eddie grabs the bag from her and she locks the door.

"I . . . I forgot they don't deliver mail on Christmas." Eddie looks at the floor. "Are you going . . ."

"We're going to my ex's for Christmas. I ran into him last night . . . It's good if Mary sees him today." Denise is smiling. She is wearing more make-up than usual. "Well . . . Have a Merry Christmas."

"Ya . . . Merry Christmas."

Eddie walks back into his apartment. On the radio, an after-Christmas sale at the mobile home and recreational vehicle dealership is being advertised.

## Writer's Notebook

*by Jennifer Aikman*

A poem later  
and all the while  
a war dances on in Iraq