

Sara

“Channel Six said *light* snow.”

Mom gripped the wheel with knuckles the color of chalk. The Gremlin’s headlights, even on high beam, created only two small weak tunnels on the blizzard’s snowflakes. I could only guess where the sidewalks of Harding Avenue were.

“Light snow, the weather man said,” Mom repeated in a near whimper. “I’ll light snow *him*, by gosh.” Mom was driving at about five miles per hour. Sara’s elementary school was less than two miles away but it might as well have been back in Encino.

The wind whipped from behind us, causing packed snow on the car roof to suddenly slide down, immobilizing the windshield wipers. Mom yelped.

“Don’t stop the car, Mom. We’ll get stuck.” I knew that much even though I was three years away from a learner’s permit. Mom nodded numbly. After a few seconds, the wipers strained and with a final *whooze*, pushed the snow away.

“We’re almost there,” I said, shouting over the engine’s roar so Sara could hear me in the back seat. I continued scraping away the thin ice forming inside the windshield. I only had a piece of cardboard which I quickly torn from the box that held the rusted tire chains. I had suggested before we started out that I’d put those chains, although I hadn’t the slightest idea how. “We’re late as it is,” Mom had replied. Being in my very first

snowstorm, I deferred to her logic. I had forgotten that it was Mom's first blizzard, too.

I shivered as my eyeglasses fogged over again. I wiped them clear as best I could with my free hand. When Dad had visited us four weeks ago, he offered to fix the defroster. But Mom had just kept on washing the breakfast dishes, mumbling vaguely.

"You missed a spot, Peter," Mom said, nodding her head to a speck the size of a quarter. Her voice struggled to stay on an even keel. Ever since the divorce, Mom tended toward panic.

"Okay, Mom." I scraped. "You okay, Sara?" I said over my shoulder. All alone in the back seat, Sara, small even for a six year-old, said nothing. I risked a look back. She gazed out the frozen window, watching the flakes flutter and fall. She neither smiled nor frowned.

Four days ago, Monday, Sara chattered all through breakfast, telling me about all the Christmas decorations she was making in Mrs. Paxton's class, and all about the elf picture she drew in Mrs. Paxton's class, and all about the bright yellow dress that Mrs. Paxton wore. I urgently needed to finish up my make-up Social Studies report on East Germany but I smiled back at her.

"Really?" "How big did you make the elf's hat?" "Yellow, huh?" Sara beamed. She couldn't wait, she said, for her second day of first grade at her new school.

The very next morning, Tuesday, she sat quiet, staring into her Lucky Charms. She had gone straight to her room right after school, refusing to talk, even to me. Mom thought she just had a cold and put a tray outside her door. It stayed untouched.

I asked Sara a couple of times how she was. She only would shake her head.

When we got up to get ready for school, I asked her again what was wrong. She slowly shook her head. I guided her left arm into her faded blue winter coat. I turned her to face me and buttoned it up tight. Before I put on my gloves, I straightened her collar.

She bit her lower lip before saying, "I'm the star, Petey."

I had opened the front door. The cold Ohio morning air caused us to shake.

"What'd you say, Sara?"

Sara stepped off the porch gingerly, as if the concrete steps were covered with oil. "I'm the star," she said.

"The star? The star of what?"

"Our Christmas program. This Friday. Yesterday, Mrs. Paxton made me the star. She made me the star in front of the whole class."

"Really? That's great, Sara. Mrs. Paxton must like you a lot."

"I thought so."

We walked together down to the corner, my gloved hand brushing off snowflakes from Sara's hair from time to time. She had lost her cap at the playground. Mom worked the lunch shift at Denny's and couldn't find the time to get another. I had school and the thrift shop was clear downtown.

We saw Sara's yellow school bus making a left-hand turn down at the corner. I urged Sara to walk a little faster, putting my arm on her shoulder so she wouldn't fall. I'd be late for my class. My junior high school was down on Hayes Street. Last year, my private school's van picked me up at our front door.

"So. Your program is Friday?" My voice came out in short bursts. I wasn't used to walking fast in the snow. Or to the cold. We had only moved to Dayton from Encino

last week. Mom had distant relatives here but we hadn't met them yet.

"Ah-huh."

"Does that give you enough time to be the star, Sara?"

"Mrs. Paxton thinks so." Sara watched the snow fall on the street.

"Do you need any help with your lines, Sara?"

She didn't answer right away. "We're doing a song, Petey."

"Oh." Dad had said once that both of us sang like wounded bullfrogs.

"I could listen to you practice?"

"No, Petey, that's okay."

We got the stop just before the bus. Sara's scuffed blue boots shuffled the pavement snow in small circles, the black buckles dusted by large white flakes. Several kids waited. Two girls Sara's age tried to catch snowflakes with their tongues, squealing with delight. Sara glanced over at them, and then slowly looked away. I gave her shoulder a soft pat.

"When Mrs. Paxton made me the star yesterday, Cindy Martin and Susan Woodward, they both wanted to be the star, but Mrs. Paxton picked me." She peeked at the two girls, who purposely were not paying any attention to Sara.

"Well, that's great, Sara," I said. "Being the star is really a big deal, huh?"

"Ah-huh." The bus pulled up, brakes screeching like fingernails on a chalkboard. The bus door folded open and warm air gushed from inside. Sara waited until everyone else got on. When her turn came, she took each step as if resisting a magnet.

"You'll be fine, Sara," I called. The door closed and the bus drove away. I kicked at snow drifts whenever I could as I tramped down the icy sidewalks. Being the man of

the house wasn't nearly as easy as Dad had said it would be.

As the snow fell faster, Mom drove slower. Once in awhile, the tires would slip to the wrong side of the street. Mom's eyes grew wider. Before the divorce, the only blizzards she had ever seen were inside snow globes.

Mom turned left on Walters Street when she should have turned right. She said a word that I hoped Sara didn't know. She tried to turn the car around but instead got us stuck in a snow bank as big as a rhino.

I got out and put my gloved hands on the trunk. "Now, Mom," I called out. The wheels spun loudly but the car didn't move. Again and again, I tried to push the car but we were wedged in too tight.

Mom rolled down the car window. She looked back at me with eyebrows white with snowflakes. "How we doing, Peter?"

"Ah." We were never going to get out. "Almost, Mom," I called back.

Two men came out of the house whose driveway we were blocking. My jaw dropped. They were big Negroes. Both had wide holiday grins that didn't seem to be fueled by the beer I smelled on their breath.

"Need some help, lady?" one called out. "Yes!" I yelled without a thought. I didn't want them to leave. Mom would just say that we're okay.

"Let's give it a try," the other man said. He had a body like a barrel and a beard like a pirate but, right now, he was *The Bionic Man*.

"Give us a hand, kid," he said to me. I nodded eagerly. We pushed the Gremlin forward, let the car roll backwards, and then push it again. Both men laughed with those

deep-felt chuckles that bubble from good-deed doing. It only took a minute or two before the wheels spun free.

They just smiled and said, “No problem” to Mom’s frantic “thank you’s,” and wished us a Merry Christmas as they returned to their warm house. I shook my head and smiled at their backs for a couple long seconds before I got back in the car.

All through the car ride, Sara said nothing.

The lights of the school auditorium shined through the snowstorm like a distant torch. As Mom drove up, she let out a loud sigh.

“Take Sara to her class,” she said with obvious relief. “I’ll park the car.”

My sister took my hand as our boots crunched through the lessening snowstorm. Her eyes stayed down. People stood outside puffing on last minute cigarettes. I guessed aloud to Sara that the program hadn’t started yet, that we had made it on time. Sara nodded slowly. As we approached the auditorium, Sara pointed with her right arm to a side door. I noticed that around her wrist she was wearing a shiny angel charm bracelet. My birthday present to her just before we moved. I had made the final lay-away payment of sixty-seven cents with two days to spare.

“I have to go in that door, Petey.”

“Okay.” I brushed the snow off her brown hair.

“You’ll be great, Sara. We’ll be cheering for you. Remember, you’re the star.”

“I’m the star.” Her little body shook slightly.

“Do you want to go back home, Sara?” I said. “We can just say we got stuck in the snow. It’s kinda true, you know.”

Sara looked up at me for the first time since leaving the car. With puddled eyes, she said, “People are counting on me.”

She turned and faced the door. Snow whirled between us.

“You’ll be great.” The back of her head bobbed in reluctant agreement as she trudged forward. Judging by the amount of snow covering the footprints, all the kids must already be inside. Sara grabbed the door handle with both hands and pulled with some effort. She entered without looking back.

We sat in the last row, even though the auditorium was only about half full. We heard people talk about Cabbage Patch dolls and the Cincinnati Bengals. The cream-colored walls were covered with decorative Christmas banners. One showed smiling elves placing large ribbon-wrapped presents underneath an enormous Christmas tree. Below the tree was written, in crayon colors, *Merry Christmas, from Mrs. Paxton’s First Grade Class*. I pointed to one elf with an oversized smile and wearing a big pointy green hat. Mom followed my hand.

“Sara just loves to draw hats, doesn’t she?” Mom chuckled. It was the first time that whole evening that Mom had laughed.

Thick purple curtains hid the stage. The school band warmed up below, mixing up stanzas from several Christmas songs. We hunched into our coats, trying to stay warm. We said nothing more to each other for awhile.

The band stopped playing. A lady walked out on stage to scattered applause. She introduced herself as Principal De Long. She thanked everyone for coming on such a snowy evening. Claspng her hands firmly in front of her, she told us that the sixth grade band had worked real, real hard for tonight’s program. We applauded them, too.

She reminded us to buy cookies and punch at the intermission to support the PTA. Then she cleared her throat and announced that Miss Leopold's Kindergarten class would start the program with *Up on the Rooftop*. When she left, the purple curtains parted.

The Kindergarten class filed in from the left side of the stage, led by an elderly teacher whispering to them over her right shoulder. The boys wore red shirts and black pants, the girls wore green dresses. A few kids wiped their noses on their sleeves. They formed two lines facing the audience. Pushing back a loose strand of grey hair, Miss Leopold smiled very broadly.

"Welcome," she said in a high-pitched voice. She nodded to the band leader, a man about Mom's age who wore his white hair in a ponytail. He lifted his baton as Miss Leopold raised her hands. When she dropped them, the band and the Kindergarten class started pretty much at the same time.

Up on the Rooftop.
Reindeer Paws.
Down comes good old Santa Claus.

Flashbulbs went off all around the hall.

"Oh, God, Peter," Mom moaned. "I forgot the camera." I said nothing. I knew the Polaroid was packed away in a box labeled "Misc." But Sara didn't need to be any more nervous than she was.

The Kindergarteners sang their song with sober expressions, like kids do when they have to focus. But when they got to the refrains, their throats sang the "Ho! Ho! Ho!"s with unrestrained eagerness. We all laughed. When the song moved back to the

rooftop, the kids calmed down and sang like they were supposed to. But when it was time for the refrain, once more they exploded with enthusiasm.

We applauded their finish. The kids took their rehearsed bow together but one freckled-faced red headed boy clasped his hands above his head and shook them like a winning boxer. Puzzled, Miss Leopold followed the laughter back to its source. She gave him a stern look. The boy lowered his hands, still grinning. He was missing a front tooth.

The purple curtains closed and Principal De Long returned. Smiling, she remarked on how nice the song was. "Didn't you think so, too?" she asked. We laughed.

She glanced at a white index card in her hand. "Now. Mrs. Paxton's First Grade class will sing, *Do You Hear What I Hear?*" She then left the stage.

Mom touched my arm. "Did you know what she was going to be singing, Peter?"

"No. Sara wouldn't tell me anything."

"She gets that from her father."

The curtains parted to reveal Sara's class. Quickly, I scanned the stage from the middle to the ends.

"Where's Sara?" Mom whispered.

"I don't see her."

"Do you think she refused to go on?"

"I don't know, Mom."

"Oh, God, they're not going to *fly* her in, like she was Peter Pan or something?"

"I hope not." When Dad flew us to Orlando last Columbus Day, Sara had gotten terribly airsick.

A woman who must be Mrs. Paxton stood to the right of the class. I was

surprised. From the way Sara described her, I thought that she would have been taller.

The teacher smiled at us and then faced her pupils. The class immediately stood straighter. A wave of her head indicated that it was time to sing.

Mrs. Paxton moved her hands gently through the air, reminding me of a hula dancer. Even with her back to us, I could tell she was smiling.

*Said the night wind to the shepherd boy,
Do you see what I see?
(Do you see what I see?)
'Way up in the sky, shepherd boy?*

“Where could she be?” Mom said. “She’s the star.”

“I don’t know, Mom. I know she went inside.”

My eyes stopped probing the stage. Sara definitely was not there. I did recognize the two girls I had seen earlier in the week at the bus stop. They sang in the front row, wearing matching emerald green dresses with poinsettia patches.

“I better go see if she’s okay.” But as I got up, the class sang,

*Do you see what I see?
(Do you see what I see?)
A star! A star! Dancing in the night.*

From behind the singers, on a long brown stick, emerged an oversized yellow paper Mache star. A thin white piece of ribbon hung down from it. Holding the star-stick aloft was a small hand. Around that hand, even in the back of the auditorium, I could see an angel charm bracelet, shining with the reflected light.

*With a tail as big as a kite!
(With a tail as big as a kite!)*

As I watched, the star, and the charm bracelet, both sparkled in the overhead lights. The star's tail began swaying back and forth, in splendid time with the music.

The snow rested on the ground like a white blanket. There was no wind, the air was clear, and the stars twinkled like distant bonfires in the fresh night sky.

"I'll get the car. Stay with Peter, okay?" Mom's breath came out in foggy wisps.

"Okay, Mommy."

She smiled down at Sara, skipping in place in the snow.

"You did great, sweetheart."

"I was the star, Mommy." Sara's smile sparkled in the lampposts' glow.

"Yes, honey," Mom said. "The best I've ever seen." Shaking her head, Mom left.

Those two girls with the matching green dresses walked by with their parents.

One waved to Sara. "Good night, Sara. Merry Christmas," she said.

"Merry Christmas, Cindy," Sara said, eyes suddenly wide.

The other girl waved. "Merry Christmas, Susan," Sara said.

Sara watched them walk away. She then started jumping up and down in place.

"Mrs. Paxton said I did real good. She told the *whole* class."

The snow beneath her bouncing feet munched into pulp. Her face reddened with the effort but her smile beamed a confident resolve. As she reached up to brush snow from her hair, I resisted an urge to straighten a wrinkle in her coat.

“You were terrific, Sara.”

“Thanks, Petey.”

Sara skipped backwards in the snow. “I’m the star. I’m the star,” she giggled as she flapped her arms like she could fly. Miraculously, she didn’t fall down.