

Stealing Christmas

Bobby looked up and down Lake Street as he waited for the light to change. What was left of the early December snow lay in dirty gray piles. A thick layer of gravel and street trash covered what was once pristine white. Sidewalks bumpy with packed-down snow made foot travel hazardous.

He tugged his stocking cap down over his ears and hunched his shoulders against the bone-chilling wind that sliced through his thin jacket like a razorblade. Walking quickly, he tried not to breath through his mouth because it made his chest hurt. A short, strident horn blasted. His head jerked up and he met the glare of a huge man packed into a car two sizes too small.

Bobby ran the rest of the way to the curb. He hoped the driver of the car didn't have road rage and come after him with a gun. He'd read about an incident like that in the newspaper. He licked chapped lips, remembering the time his mother threw the toaster at his head when he broke a drinking glass. The smallest accident could set some people off.

The man shook his head and gunned his car off down the street as though he were late for the Indy 500.

Bobby drew a breath of relief and freezing air invaded his lungs. He pulled the

collar of his coat up, thrust his hands in the pockets, and hurried down the sidewalk. His mom had promised she would find him a warmer coat and maybe some gloves and a scarf at the Goodwill when she got her check, but after she paid the rent and went out drinking, there was not even enough money left for secondhand clothes. He didn't put any real faith in promises anyway. She seldom kept her word.

He stared in the shop windows he passed, watching his reflection stare back, a blurry prisoner in the filmy glass. Viewing merchandise through barred windows was just a fact of life on Lake Street. He'd never known anything else. Not many shops were open for business anymore. The ones that were looked like they were trying to keep folks out rather than lure them in.

A big department store once graced the corner a few blocks down, but it went out of business before he was born, and they tore it down. His mother spoke nostalgically, usually when she was drunk, of the summer she worked there when she was a teenager, before Bobby came and disrupted her life. At least that's how she told it, and he had no reason to think otherwise.

A dilapidated Barbershop echoed the squalor of the neighborhood. Paint peeled from a sign that read, *Haircuts \$6*. The windows and door had long since been boarded up. He put out a hand and patted the cracked Barber's pole as he passed it.

A group of young men stood huddled on the next corner, puffs of smoke rising from their cigarettes as they joked and laughed. He tried to sneak past without drawing attention, but one reached out and grabbed Bobby by the arm.

"Yo, Bobby boy! How's it going?" Jonah asked. "Think about what I said?"

Bobby jerked away and shook his head. Jonah wanted him to sell drugs at school.

He wished they'd quit asking. He ran to the door of the small mom and pop grocery store, breathing hard. They didn't follow. Jonah just laughed at him and turned back to his buddies.

Lemke's Grocery had stood the test of time. The bars on the windows and the newly replaced steel door were the only changes that had taken place in many years. The old man behind the counter had owned the store as far back as Bobby could remember. Mr. Lemke knew his regular customers by name and never failed to greet them personally.

"Hello there, Bob. What can I do for you today?" he asked. His bushy eyebrows nearly met in the middle and made Bobby think of a bird taking flight. His voice was gruff with age, but his smile was kind.

"I need a loaf of bread." He still had money left in his pocket from his job delivering newspapers on the weekend. At least he could make a peanut butter sandwich for himself. His mother would probably be passed out by the time he got back. She didn't worry about food being in the house because she never ate. She only drank.

The chime of the bell over the door heralded the arrival of another customer and Mr. Lemke turned to greet them. Bobby didn't go directly to the shelf with bread, but walked up and down the aisles, idly passing time in the warmth of the store. It would be a cold walk back to the apartment.

A cardboard advertisement hung above a cooler of fresh turkeys in the refrigerated section. The picture depicted a family sitting down to Christmas dinner, a perfectly browned turkey in the middle of the table, surrounded by all the fixings-- including pies. Bobby never had a real turkey dinner except the time his mother took him

to the Rock of Ages Mission when he was nine. He wondered if people really lived like that.

There were seven turkeys left. It was already Christmas Eve. Mr. Lemke would never be able to sell all of them by tonight. Tomorrow, families like the ones pictured in the ad would sit down to dinner with more food than they could possibly eat, and he would sit beside his mother on their worn, green, velour couch as she drank from her bottle, not even bothering to use a glass, and watch the folks on General Hospital celebrate Christmas in their pretend world. Most days he wished he could live in that world too.

Mr. Lemke was busy ringing up a customer's purchases at the front of the store. Bobby reached curiously into the big, square cooler and pulled up on the plastic netting that surrounded one turkey, checking the weight of it. It was heavier than he'd anticipated.

His brows drew together. A story had been circulated since before he was born that Mrs. Johnson's daughter, Bertha, once stole a whole ham by holding it between her legs and waddling out the door of a store. Of course, she always wore those billowy tent dresses and she had to be at least three hundred pounds. He could never hide a turkey on his thin frame.

He checked the price tag. Twelve dollars and fifty-eight cents. He had less than six dollars in his pocket. He glanced around, but didn't see Mr. Lemke anywhere. It was now or never. The message on the sign said that Christmas came with a Butterplump turkey, and he knew that without one his Christmas would never come.

He hoisted it over the side of the cooler, and carried it slowly down the aisle

closest to the exit door. Did his mom even know how to cook a turkey? He hoped it came with instructions. Before he reached the door, he felt a tap on his shoulder and spun around.

Mr. Lemke's expression didn't betray any inkling of what Bobby was about to do. The old man held out a plastic grocery bag with a loaf of bread inside. Bobby reached out to accept the bag and nearly dropped the bird.

"That's a mighty large turkey you picked for Christmas dinner, son."

Bobby nodded, but couldn't meet the old man's eyes.

"Tell you what. I'm going to take that from you and give it to my wife. She's the best cook in town, you know." He reached out and retrieved the turkey, cradling it like a baby against his white shirt. "You go on home and tell your Mother that I invited both of you to go with us to church tomorrow and then for dinner afterward. Martha is used to cooking for a lot of people, but this year everyone seems to have different plans. We'd be grateful if you'd join us."

Bobby finally met Mr. Lemke's gaze. There was no recrimination there, just kind eyes beneath bushy gray brows. He couldn't help but smile back.

"Does Mrs. Lemke bake pies and everything?" he asked.

"And everything."

Bobby hoped he could keep his mom from drinking anymore before tomorrow. It wouldn't be fair if he missed out on a Christmas dinner with all the fixings. He'd never been to church either, but he supposed that's where the baby Jesus hung out and he'd read on a bumper sticker that He was the reason for the Christmas season. He'd like to find out why. "Can I still come even if my Mom can't?" he asked.

Mr. Lemke settled the turkey under one arm and ruffled Bobby's hair with the other. "You bet you can. Be here at nine o'clock sharp. Now take that bread and go home to your mother. We'll see you tomorrow." He turned toward the rear of the store.

"But I haven't paid for it yet."

"It's a gift." Mr. Lemke waved his hand as though to shoo him out the door. "Go on now. Christmas is stealing up on us as we speak, and I've got a lot to do."

Bobby didn't wait around for the old man to change his mind, but ran out the door into the cold afternoon. It was still icy grey outside, but the walk home didn't seem quite so miserable. He swung the bag of bread at his side and felt the promise of Christmas warm his heart.