

MERRY
CHRISTMAS



2005

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THE PARABLE OF MOOSE

by Lois Carlson



There once was a dog named **MOOSE**.

A small, friendly short-haired half-breed who could tackle the world. At least that's what he thought! He wandered the streets, and scrounged for food in unsuspecting places. He didn't have a place you could call home and often slept in alleys or under a stairwell. Any place away from the cold. His owners moved far away leaving him behind to fend for himself.

Then one day, he ventured out of the city and that's where the story begins.

Jill and David Long lived in the country on a sixteen acre ranch where they raised horses. The horses weren't just any kind of horses, but thoroughbreds for racing. The acreage had a lengthy track where they could exercise the animals and the Longs worked hard grooming these stallions, and took great care for their well-being.

One day the pooch found his way to their home and soon enough, wound his way into their hearts and they named him Midget. When Midget arrived, he was a scrawny, dirty brown haired mutt and appeared to be about two years old. Not much to look at but he was friendly and obviously needed a home. After a bath and combing his gnarled fur, the stray looked pretty decent. Jill and David searched the papers and displayed notices of their find, but no one claimed it, so Midget became a member of the Long family. Obedient and a good watch dog, he tagged along behind them as they worked with the steeds.

Then, one day, the livery stable caught fire. One by one Jill and David quickly herded the livestock out of the barn. But they couldn't reach the last one. Bell's Notion, the favorite, was hidden far back in the stable, and the fast-moving flames prevented them from going back into the glaring inferno. The loud whinnying of the petrified animal tore at their souls. But there was nothing they could do.

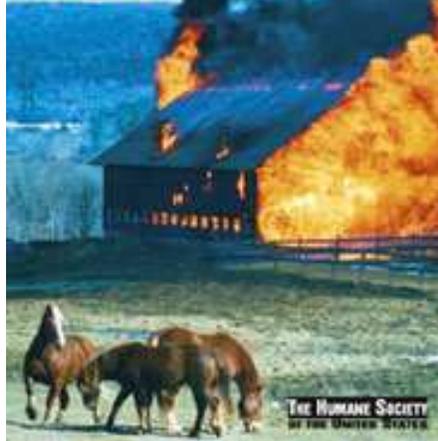
All the while Midget ran wildly, back and forth around the parameter of the crumbling enclosure, barking and clawing the ground. Then spotting a crevice in the wall, he leaped through it and charged down the billowing structure to the terrified beast.

Midget circled the animal and snarled at its feet, urging the horse to move.

The flames were all around them but Midget wouldn't give up and continued to snap at the stallion's hooves, yapping and growling until it backed out of the stall and into an open area. Encouraged, Midget nipped at the creature's legs, moving it forward, little by little until they reached a gap from the blaze and the stallion bolted through the getaway into the fresh air, with Midget close behind.

Jill and David gasped in surprise as Bell's Notion dashed past them and into the paddock with the other horses. How did this huge brute find its way to escape? Jill wondered. Then looking down at her feet, she felt the rapid movement of her precious mongrel, jumping up and down, tail wagging waiting for some attention. Jill bent down and lovingly picked up her furry friend and squeezed her close to her chest. "You little darlin'. You did it, didn't you?" and tousled the dog's ears affectionately. "I knew I should never have named you Midget. You did a BIG job in BIG way, so after today, you're name is going to be **MOOSE.**"

Moral: Just like **MOOSE**, God nips at our feet, and whispers in our ear to get our attention and get us moving away from the enemy who'd like to enslave us in his trap. But **GOD** never gives up. He's always there to set us free from anything that might entangle us and separate us from Him.



THE CHRISTMAS REINDEER

By Tom Allbaugh



My brother tells the story from the last Christmas before we reached the age when we really weren't kids anymore. It started with the first big winter storm of the season. I remember this because afterwards we were sent out to shovel the driveway.

When we were about half-done, Dad came out, his boots unbuckled, and told Cary about getting all the snow off the pavement because otherwise the cars would press the snow into tire tracks that would harden and turn to ice.

Then he went back inside, and my brother bent lower and scraped harder to get all of the snow off the driveway. My brother's named after Cary Grant, but he's really a woman. He followed dad's instructions, but when his shovel hit a raised crack in the driveway, the shock went up through the shovel handle into his arm and the snow powdered around him. He held his arm and leaned over and I could see that it hurt him, but then he picked up his shovel again and scraped up the powder that dad said would turn to ice.

I threw snow in my lazy girl fashion, scattering it across the driveway. Only part of it landed on the snow bank, so Cary would run by and shovel all of the mess I'd left. So I saw this and just stopped shoveling and let him do the rest.

I got bored and tried to wrestle him. Though I'm the baby by two years, I was taller than he was then. As he went by shoveling a row, I elbowed him, and when that didn't stop him, I went over as he reached the end of one of his rows and pushed him into the snow bank and pinned him. When I gave him some room, he just got up, brushed himself off, and went back to shoveling.

When he finished, we got out the basketball. We'd moved from Indiana three years before, and while we did like tobogganing with the neighbors, we'd never learned to play hockey. With the driveway cleared, we could keep our traction. I've got to say, though, my brother played as though the snow banks were scouts or fans with season tickets. It seemed that he wasn't just playing me, his sister, in a game. He was playing against something huge. He was disciplined, and I don't mean that in a good way.

After one game, Cary got bored and said he was going in. So I followed him in, and *Rocky and Bullwinkle* were on, and then we got into a fight again because Cary still thought that Bullwinkle was a reindeer. We argued about it off and on until Sherman and Mr. Peabody went back in time to visit Cossacks,

and we looked out the window and suddenly realized that it was winter and we hadn't gone sliding.

Well, we bundled up again and went out to the garage to get the toboggan down. And then we remembered that we'd broken it last winter. So we had to settle for our snow saucers, which we carried out back to the hill where the snow gleamed smooth and white under the sun.

Cary went first until his saucer sank into the deep snow a few feet down and then he tumbled the rest of the way to the bottom. I followed but stopped completely five feet down.

That's when the great animal stepped out of the woods at the bottom pretty close to Cary, and I sat frozen in silent awe that bordered on horror because I realized how close he was and that he couldn't run away and this was nature in all its towering, uncontrolled majesty, bigger than anything we'd seen on *The Wild Kingdom*. It looked at us, we at it, and then it simply turned and moved back into the woods.

Cary said, in a hushed, religious mutter, "It's a Reindeer."

I had noticed how it had moved with simplicity, and it suddenly struck me that it had probably been bored with us. I said, "It's not a reindeer."

"We saw a reindeer," he said with greater conviction.

"If it's a reindeer, how did it get this far south?"

"It rode on ice flows from the UP."

Now we'd only been in Michigan for three years at that point. Other than wolverines, raccoons, and squirrels, we didn't know Michigan animals. But I doubted that there could be ice flows in the Mackinaw strait that could support an animal that big.

But the rest, as they say, is history, or his story. To this day, Cary tells every Christmas about the Reindeer that appeared to us. He has told and retold the story so many times that around 1980, I stopped trying to correct him.

Today, when we see *The Adventures of Rocky and Friends* on the Cartoon network with his kids, he'll deny that he ever thought that Bullwinkle was a reindeer. We go around about it. His youngest daughter believes me, though, and teases him for it.

But that's as far as I push it now. I really don't have the heart to tell him that what we saw that day at the bottom of the sledding hill behind our house was really a moose.

CHRISTMAS MOOSE

by Lynn Maudlin

December 2005

The moose is a study in contrasts: stately and ungainly; elegant and awkward. And so it is with Christmas: superficial and profound. Cheap plastic nativity sets fail to capture the staggering reality of the Incarnation: the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us. The old stereotype of the office Christmas party where the lecherous boss uses drink and mistletoe as an excuse to accost pretty young things and so it goes down the corporate food chain, power and prestige slaver over pulchritude, each side finding its own specific gravity, down to the boys in the mail room and the middle-aged women in the cafeteria, and blazing against that petty *bonhomie* are the heavens split wide, ruptured by angel voices and the inhuman chord resonating at frequencies far beyond the human ear, "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill toward men!"



We humans seem quite unable to dwell long in that place of real wonder and thus we sink into a commercial mockery, fancying that our flurry and splurge of gift-giving in any way echoes the gift, vast beyond comprehending, of God pouring Himself, His Son, into zygote, fetus, and finally babe, entrusting Himself to the microcosm of a young woman's virgin womb. Fallen Lucifer, outraged and offended, strives mightily to overcome awe with saccharine sentimentality, which in turn can be freely ridiculed by the *intelligentsia*, smugly superior in their cynicism to Tiny Tim's cry, "God bless us, everyone!" sneering down noses at Capra's *"It's a Wonderful Life"* and applauding the rude and profane in its place.

And yet, beyond the glare of flashing Rudolph noses and stiffly animated Santas, the deep truth remains unshaken and holy: the God of Creation has entered creation, the Self-Existent One slips into the time-stream, born of a woman, water and blood and tears, and a young face beaded with sweat laughs in relief that, despite the pitiful conditions, she and her unknown husband have found rude shelter where she labored safely and successfully and now she holds and nurses and comforts this unknown Being, this God Man-Child. What Child is this, indeed.

Our best efforts to honor and remember the event will necessarily fall short. But entering into the school of "too cool for Christmas" is a pitiful reaction that carries the whiff of sulphur. Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will not enter it," and I suspect our simple childhood wonder may be as close as we can manage. The smell of the

tree, pine green and sap, the allure of big glass globes suspended in its branches, the promise of unknown delights in brightly wrapped packages, the warm glow of a room lit entirely by Christmas lights and candles, the songs, sacred and popular, the aromas and the flavors – even as a little child, we know there is something *more* going on here.

The moose is not an unsightly cross between a horse and a camel and a fallow deer, but something quite its own. Here we come a wassailing – peace on earth.



NEW DAY

by Diana Glycer



It was just a delay tactic and she knew it. “Come straight home after school,” her mom had warned. “If you’re quick about it, we should have time to stop in at the mall.” A trip to the mall was one thing, a trip to the mall with her mother was something else. No way her mom was interested in shopping. It was just another excuse for a lecture about her college application. She could hear the litany loud and clear: “Is the application filled in? Did you do your essay? Have you sent in the fifty dollar deposit? Casey? Are you listening to me? Casey? Casey! What are you doing with your life?”

Going home was like walking into a hailstorm. Casey was sick of being pelted with questions. That’s how she ended up at the department store. There was a little strip of stores around the corner from her house. It was not the kind of place you’d hang out with your friends, but it was close enough to provide the peace and refuge she was looking for. Threading her way through the junior department, overpriced shoes, and men’s fragrances, she found herself standing in front of the cosmetics counter. Shiny surfaces everywhere. Trays of tubes and bottles and color sticks. Overdressed women with plastic smiles spritzing perfume on anyone who didn’t move fast enough. It was slick and otherworldly, and escape was exactly what she needed right now.

Her eyes lighted on the Clinique counter. She’d never like the brand: it was way too expensive for her taste. Besides, the pale green packages were definitely uninspired. She started to turn away when she heard a silky voice beside her say, “Have you tried our new complexion mousse?”

Complexion mousse? What in God’s name is complexion mousse?

“Uh, no, Ma’am. That is, uh, no, I don’t think so.” The saleswoman took her hand and gently steered her into a plush chair. “Really, you have to try this. It’s positively *lifechanging*.”

Casey hated the saccharine smile, the fawning, the little girl giggle in a woman twice her age. But she sat down and held out her hand as the saleswoman filled her palm with silky white foam, spread it across her arm, and gently towed it away. “*Lifechanging*,” she said again, her voice almost a whisper.

Casey felt dizzy. “Only \$49.98,” chirped the saleswoman. Shall I ring you up?”

Casey nodded. She pulled out her pen and her checkbook. She looked up for a minute and sighed. Then she leaned over the counter and filled in the numbers, turning her back to the open door.

THE TREE OF LIGHT

By Tim Davis



Christmas evokes different memories for almost every person. The truth is that every family has some unique way of celebrating the Christmas holidays. There are specific traditions, some obvious and some not, which most people will describe as being the key elements that have to be present to constitute a good Christmas. In my family that key element is risk of life and/or limb.

It all started the day my dad decided to string lights from our fifteen-foot tall TV antenna in order to make a tree of Christmas lights (living in the middle of the desert, we relied on UHF antenna as our only link to the outside world). My father dragged both my brother and I out in the freezing cold of a winter's night, and started to string lights from the pole that was attached to the side of our mobile home and held our TV antenna aloft. He then let down the strands of lights to us so we could tether them to the ground. The first year we embarked on this adventure my father was bragging about how the tree would be the talk of the town.

"Just wait," he said as he secured another string of lights. "You will be able to see this tree all the way to the grocery store." This particular business was two miles away and up the sloping foot of the mountain, so naturally it should be easy to see our house from that location (if we had a searchlight).

When dad tried to climb down the ladder, he must have slipped on one of the rungs of the ladder. The next thing we boys knew was that dad was on his butt, in the dirt, looking up at the lights we had strung, and laughing very hard. Of course, he only fell from halfway up the sixteen-foot ladder, so he got up and walked it off like the man he was. It took him a day or two to stop wincing when he sat, but we had had worse happen at our house before and paid it no mind. Dad was satisfied with the accomplishment he had made, and proud of the face he had not needed to go to the hospital.

A few days later my family was driving home from bible study and my brother says, "Dad, I can't see the tree from here." We were, of course, only at the end of our block and driving towards the house.

"Don't worry about it," my Dad's pride seemed to be wounded. "We'll make it taller *next* year."

As soon as I heard those words leave my father's lips, I knew that this was going to be a quest for him. You know, the *National Lampoon's* Clark Griswold kind of quest that can only get worse with the passage of time. He was going to get that tree so high up, and so tall that anyone would be able to see it from

across the whole High Desert if they happened to glance in the direction of our house. Failure was not an option.

The next year, the tree was erected and elevated up an additional eight feet. Dad also bought more lights so that the tree would be brighter and easier to see. Sure enough, a strong wind started to blow while setting it up, and things went horribly bad. Desert winds can blow very strong, and turn the strongest structure into play toy if it is not properly secured to the ground. But my dad was determined to get that tree up. And by the end of the night he, and my brother, and I, all had cuts and rope burns from the effort of getting the tree up and secure. Sure enough, when we woke the next morning, we found the lights had been shattered and smashed when the wind tore the newly extended antenna pole off the house and into a nearby Joshua tree.

“Next year,” my Dad said. “Next year we will do it right, and make it stronger.”

In fact, the next year he did make it better and stronger, but it could still not be seen from the highway. That was the year my brother fell off the top of the roof. If anything the fall only made both my brother and my Dad more determined to get that tree up and make it even bigger. They were men on a mission and would not be detoured.

Eventually I had to leave for college, and this excluded me from a majority of the Christmas decorating chores that started the day after Thanksgiving, as was the tradition at my house. This included the dreaded “Christmas Tree of Light Project,” as my brother had dubbed it. Earlier that year my father and my brother had erected a flagpole. The flagpole had withstood a number of windstorms that summer, and was indeed visible from a good distance away. When the Christmas season came around, my brother took down the Stars and Bars that he flew with pride, and constructed a rig to hoist the Christmas lights up on. This year was going to be different. They had a plan. They had a tested and proven structure, and years of failure had shown them what not to do.

The blessed day finally arrived when it was time to hoist up the lights and plug them in. This was a process that could only be done at night. The logic behind this is that only at nighttime can you see if all of the lights are working. It would be a nightmare to get the lights all the way up the flagpole, only to have to take them down again because a single light was out! So they plugged the lights in and hoisted the rig into the night sky. When the rig reached the top my dad told Stephen to tie off the rope and come see how awesome it looked. Stephen, being only a freshman in high school, and being so excited, must not have tied off the rope very well. As he made his way from underneath the strings of light, the rig fell from the top of the pole, and lights started to *pop* as they smashed into the ground. My brother soon found himself in a shower of sparks and light, and pulled to the ground by descending strands of Christmas lights.

When my brother recounted this story to me, I laughed. I also noticed that the lights were erected on the same flagpole. He and my Dad had waited a few days to get over the shock, replaced the broken lights, and put the tree back up. "It's Christmas," my brother said. "We have to have 'The Tree of Light.' It's not Christmas with out that tree."

Every year my family goes through the next installment of "The Saga of the Tree of Light." This year my wife and I tactfully left Thanksgiving before my brother could rope me into putting up that tree again. But, I know that there will be a tree of light, standing approximately fifty feet high by now, pointing out my parent's home to the whole town.

To some people there has to be the right kind of tree for Christmas to feel right. For some people it's the presence of particular family members, or a movie they all watch during the Christmas season. I personally wish that my family has some sort of Christmas moose or fudge that we looked forward to every year, or even a song. However, and this is the part that really is kind of weird, I look forward to this years story of what went wrong with "The Tree of Light." Somehow, in a sick and twisted way, it wouldn't be Christmas at the Gauldin house without recounting how Dad and Stephen almost killed themselves this year while decorating for Christmas.



THE YEAR THE HOUSE BURNED DOWN

by Joseph Bentz

My story takes place at Christmas time when I was eight years old. It was a few days before Christmas break, and at school that day we had had decorated little stockings by writing our names on them with glue and then covering the glue with glitter. At home I liked to tilt the stocking toward the lamp to see the multi-colored flashes from the glitter. It didn't take much to entertain me.



Nothing much happened that evening until after dinner, as we settled in front of the television to watch a couple of shows before bedtime. Then my mother smelled smoke! I didn't smell anything, but who cares? I was just a kid. Then my sister smelled it. They begged my father to do something before the house burned down!

Dad, whose sole purpose for existence was pretty much to take care of a crisis like this, trudged around the house, not really knowing what he was looking for. Mom thought the smell was getting worse! So did my sister. My Dad didn't smell it. Then he did. But the oven was off. The burners on the stove were off. The furnace looked normal. Mom was hopping around the room in jerky little steps. My sister hopped around after her. What should we do? Evacuate? Call the fire department?

Dad decided the best thing to do was to check every room. We all helped. I could find nothing on fire in my room. I felt silly looking. The smell persisted. Dad, our hero, the man who could solve any problem, was at a loss. To mollify Mom, he decided to call the fire department just to see if they had any advice about how to check out a suspicious smell.

Big mistake. They insisted on paying us a visit. When Dad told us, I could feel the anticipation of embarrassment start to creep through me, even though I wasn't sure exactly what form it would take. My Dad was hoping for one unmarked car with a plainclothes fireman in it. Instead, we got the entire Wayne Township Volunteer Fire Department, not just the trucks, but also an ambulance and the chief's car. I don't know how many vehicles came, but they filled our street, with lights flashing and sirens blaring.

The children of our neighborhood were filled with joy. They all came running, along with their parents. When I looked out on our lawn a little while later, praying to find it empty, all my friends in the neighborhood were there, gathered in clusters like Victorian Christmas carolers. They were lined up basically in order of where they lived on our street. On one end was my friend Chip, who lived on the north end, and at the other end of the crowd was an older boy named Skip, who lived on the south end. It seems funny to me now that two boys with rhyming nicknames lived on my street, but at the time, it didn't seem unusual. Most parents in our neighborhood referred to their kids—especially the boys—by nicknames, and apparently in the Sixties they liked nicknames that ended in “ip.” I don't know what those boys' real names were. Later I heard Skip's real name was Richard, but I don't know how you get “Skip” out of that. Even “Chip” sounds closer to Richard. Maybe both their names were Richard. Anyway, I never heard the name “Richard” spoken on our street except to refer to Richard Nixon, who had nicknames of his own.

Speaking of nicknames, the firemen that night were led by a man named Moose, and his little army filled every room in our house. Every light was on. They crawled up into our “attic,” which was actually just a cramped little storage space. They removed the furnace filter, checked all the vents, stuck their heads in the oven, spied under the beds, peeked in all the closets.

Suddenly, my mother screamed! Billows of smoke filled the kitchen! We all ran in.

There was no smoke. Mom's “smoke” was simply the light reflecting on the kitchen wallpaper. My mother had a vivid imagination. If she could *envision* a tragedy, she could make it come true. When my uncle had a heart attack, for instance, my mother felt terrible heart pains for two weeks. Nothing was wrong with her heart. It is still ticking to this day, thirty years later.

Moose and his men were starting to give each other funny looks. What kind of a nuthouse had they come to, where shiny wallpaper was mistaken for smoke? My fears that our house might burn down were now giving way to an even greater fear: that it would not burn at all, and that we would be the laughingstock of the neighborhood for years to come.

The firemen were now under the floor, which they had reached through the outdoor entrance to our crawl space. This cramped little area under the house, a place that we kids were never allowed into but that we could see through the outdoor grates, was a dark region of plumbing and wires and spider webs. It was also, for children, the most common setting of our nightmares. What lurked under there? Monsters? Bad guys ready to leap out and murder us? Or on this night, a smoldering fire ready to consume our home?

Moose and his buddies found nothing. Dad finally had to go out and tell the

neighbors it was a false alarm. The children slunk away, disappointed. I couldn't face them yet and stayed hidden in my room. The army of firefighters left, and our family sat silent in the living room, exhausted.

My mother still smelled smoke. My sister wandered off toward the bedrooms. I thought the fiasco was over, but then my sister yelled. My parents went running, with me close behind, and we all ended up in my room. There, my sister, taking on her best prosecuting attorney pose, pointed toward my bedroom lamp. My Dad looked on top of the lamp and, to my horror, pulled from the bulb my slightly scorched Christmas stocking that I had made at school that day. It was the stocking that reflected the light so beautifully, especially when it was close to the light, especially when I placed it *on* the light, as I had done just before Mom called us in to dinner.

I was speechless. I had no defense as Dad waved that stupid sock in my face. I wanted to protest against my nosy sister—what was she doing in my bedroom anyway? What an invasion of privacy! What an outrage! Leave it to her to find a way to turn this episode against me. I was as angry as I had been at her the previous winter when, just as we were getting into our play clothes to go outside to enjoy the best snowfall of the season, she spotted the marks on my body that ended up being the chickenpox that kept me inside and away from the fun for days.

I also considered blaming the fire department. Shouldn't they have found that stocking in their investigation? Moose later told my dad they *should* have found it, and he apologized. But that would not help me out of my more immediate jam.

I knew a direct assault on my sister or on the fire department would not work with Mom and Dad. I settled for a lame, "I wonder how that got there?" defense, but it didn't work. I was punished in some forgettable way, but I think they knew the real punishment was the embarrassment that has followed me for a generation, as this story has been repeated at one family gathering after another. I have hated Christmas stockings ever since.



IF YOU BRING A MOOSE TO NIÑOS

by Mike Glycer

If you bring a moose to Niños
He'll want to know the dinner theme.

When you tell him what the theme is,
He'll drive through Pollo Loco anyway.

At dinner, he'll probably ask how Joe's food fits the theme.
After Joe tells him, he'll want you to let him outside so he can see if it's
really the same moon that's in China.

While he's outside he'll hear the nightingales.



That'll remind him it's time for singing worship songs.

Once he sees people get out their instruments, he'll probably ask to borrow a guitar, or maybe a violin, a conga or banjo. Or a CD player.

Once the music's over, he'll be ready to help schedule the next Niños meeting.

He'll ask, "Saturday?" and everyone will cheer.

When the prayer chair is open, he'll be a little shy. You'll have to ask him what his latest project is.

He'll say he needs to finish his dissertation, turn it into a book, and get a teaching job. You can tell him, "A routine night's praying! Ask for something difficult!"

He might get ambitious, and say he wants to write a book as fast as Joe. You'll put some extra anointing oil on his antlers, because that *will* take divine help!

Once he's all prayed up, the moose will be so excited he'll hardly be able to wait 'til the Niños get together again. And right away he'll starting finding a connection between the food theme and Pollo Loco chicken!

