



*A Niños Christmas  
2018*

# ***The Niños Christmas Book***

## **2018**

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## ***After Leaving Al's***

By Tom Allbaugh

With the holidays, we'd all believe it. It just seemed possible then, and we said it almost as much as we thought it: You can get anything.

This only came with the holidays—and only at Al's. Anything. Anything you want. The first three years I worked there were always exciting when the season came. And then that next holiday season at Al's, that was when I first noticed this guy who would sneak in with the lunch crowd. I think now that even he must have felt it. He would stand there in line with a tray for food until his plume of urine stench would foul the air all around him. We would kick him out, after all. He would come back, near Alice's Boutique across the alley, after hours, looking for handouts or whatever he was looking for. He wore too many layers for the cold nights that probably didn't keep him warm and then sweated through them in the day. They didn't keep the smell from the other customers. Chuck the manager was ready to call the cops every time he appeared. All I could say was, This ain't Alice's. That's a boutique, and it's over there, and they don't serve food.

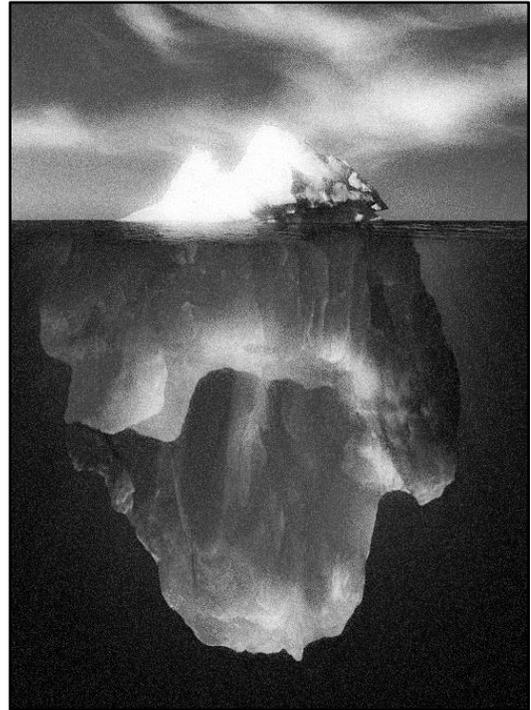
Then he didn't show up.

A month went by. And there was no sign of him. Then another. I forgot about him. Two years went by, and in that time I left Al's, got a different job in a different city where I was going to college, and then, I don't know what did it, but one night I was in an alley and it's funny, he came to me again, the smelly, homeless guy. And it was funny because this nobody—by anyone's standards a nobody—was suddenly somebody. You think differently when you get to new and different places, but you never expect that at the time. How it happened was I was in an alley taking a short cut home, and I saw a trash bin and I started to think about him, the restaurant, and then that maybe he wasn't just after handouts. Maybe he was looking for something just like we all were, and why was I so mad as not to see that and to try to help him? And then it hit me. Was that what he wanted? To go from being a nobody to being a somebody? After all, as I have been prodded and pushed in a thousand movies and sermons, why hadn't I seen my fellow human in this figure of smelly layers, what was to me no more than a rat to be chased out? It really got to me. What if he was looking for his wife? Or worse, his kid? It was bothersome, and was this all that church was good for, not the good deeds but the bad

feelings afterwards? I knew then why people chased people like him away like they were banishing him, not only from the premise but from all premises of thought. Don't allow them to exist. You never know people or what they are about. It's just best not to go there. All you saw was the tip of the iceberg, nothing below. And then your situation changed and what was inconvenient was gone too.

So I thought about going back. That holiday feeling had not come again, that old feeling we all had at Al's, until I thought about the bum. You can get anything you want. It's Christmas. Anything.

I didn't go back. I tell you, though, I still wonder what ever came of it, of him. Nothing ever ends, if you think about it. Nothing. Nada. Zip. It all just keeps going, like the universe, expanding. Like the big bang, which was just the beginning, and in the middle of it all that holiday feeling we all got at Al's, across the alley from Alice's Boutique.



# ***You are My Sunshine***

Lois Carlson

In this time of unrest and uncertainty in our country and the world, re-focusing our attention on things that give us pleasure can bring a person a sense of gladness. Each day we hear about people who are having difficulties, and then we learn about a neighbor or total stranger reaching out to help that person. Watching all those rescue responders helping people and their pets during the awful floods. Humankind reaching out to others . . . bringing a bit of sunshine into their lives.

There are so many things that bring sunshine into my life, but one especially is all the wonderful wildlife, big and small that God has given me to enjoy. We can learn so much from them in their instincts and incredible behavior. Viewing elephants and how they congregate together around a newborn, to protect it; or come to the aid of one that is in distress. A dog staying with an infant that wandered off, keeping it warm until help arrives. Or witnessing the amazing creativity of a little hummingbird putting its nest together in such intricate detail for the perfect fit of her tiny offspring. Only a few astonishing things in God's creation that brings sunshine into my life.

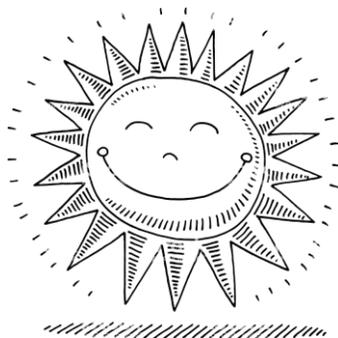
The person who wrote, *You Are My Sunshine*, was a love song to his dearest. But I am thinking about some of the lyrics : "*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray. . .*" My gray day can quickly turn to sunny when my cat curls up in my lap and begins to purr, as if there is no problem in the world. Our pets are so trusting of us to care for them, and in exchange they provide us with love and companionship.

A good friend who surprises me with an unexpected gift, makes me sing *You Are My Sunshine*.

Why would she do something so generous for me? Longtime friends establish a special bond, and often provide a more enduring relationship than relatives.

Having recently gone through knee surgery, a dear friend tended to me daily for several weeks during my recovery, and brought sunshine into my life. She is my sunshine, when skies are gray.

And there are so many more things that bring sunshine into my life. I only hope that I can bring sunshine into the lives of others I meet along my path.



# ***Don't Cry for Me, Argentina***

Joseph Bentz

LA's fine, the sun shines most of the time, and the feeling is laid back. Palm trees grow and rents are low, but what I really want to tell you is about a very bad break-up I had when I first moved to California.

I had bad luck with my first few girlfriends. The first was named Mandy. She came and she gave without taking. But I sent her away because she wouldn't kiss me and stop me from shaking. Can't blame her.

Then I started dating Christine. She was sixteen. Christine. Sixteen. But I was 42 at the time, which seemed a little creepy, so we broke up.

Then I met sweet Caroline, and good times never seemed so good. I've been inclined to believe they never would. She wanted to get married and buy a house. A very very very fine house. With two cats in the yard. Life used to be so hard. I couldn't find anything affordable, so I moved into the Hotel California for a while. They said I could check out any time I liked, but I could never leave. That didn't sound so good, so I got out of there and found a house, and when I asked the realtor whether this was a safe place to live, he said, "Yes, we built this city on Rock. And roll your pants up a little so they don't scrape the floor." Oh, how firm a foundation that house had. I didn't worry about fires or floods because I had blessed insurance, Prudential was mine.

But back to my girlfriend. One day I bought a motorcycle and said to my girlfriend, "Wendy let me in I wanna be your friend, I want to guard your dreams and visions. Just wrap your legs 'round these velvet rims And strap your hands 'cross my engines."

She answered, "My name's not Wendy. It's Caroline. Sweet Caroline."

Oops. And that was the end of that.

It's a heartache, nothing but a heartache. Hits you when it's too late. Hits you when you're down. But as I was standing in the cold rain, feeling like a clown, I met Susannah. Oh, Susannah! And I asked her not to cry for me.

And she said, "Oh, yeah, life goes on long after the thrill of living is gone."

And I said, "But baby, we were born to run."

And she said, "I want to break up with you."

And I said, "Why?"

And she said, "Our conversations are too absurd."

And I said, "Livin' alone, I think of all the friends I've known. But when I dial the telephone, nobody's home. All by myself. Don't wanna be all by myself anymore."

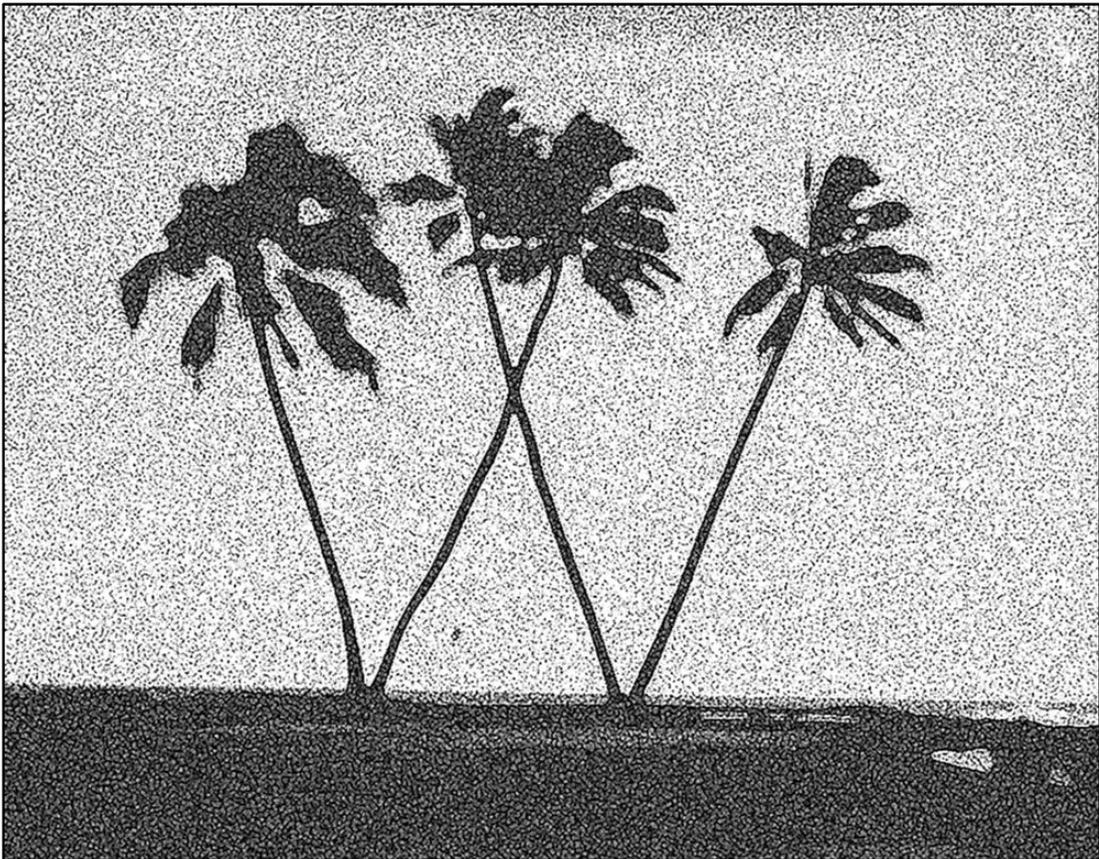
And she said, "The sun was so hot, I froze to death."

And I said, "And you think *my* conversation is absurd?"

And she said, "It rained all night the day I left. The weather it was dry."

And I said, "You make me scream, you make it seem like anything is possible. I can't live without you. I know all about you."

And she looked at me with those big brown eyes and said, "If you can't live without me, then why aren't you dead?"



# ***A starlit, silent night***

Liz Leahy

We light the white candles carefully – passing the light from person to person, wax dripping into cupcake liners that surround the candle base. Moving from silence and darkness to hundreds of beautifully glowing lights, we surround the front steps and entrance of St. Rita’s Catholic Church in Sierra Madre – the church that sits at the highest point on north Baldwin.

We are given instructions in singing by worship pastors and hymn leaders from two other local churches. Wrapped in winter finery of mufflers and mittens and ski sweaters and hats, on this warm California evening we begin a slow procession down the middle of Baldwin toward the nativity at Kersting Court, the center of town. “Joyful, joyful!”...”Hark the Herald Angels Sing!”...”O Little Town of Bethlehem”...and more...’til we arrive at the manger. There, the life-size figurines have been replaced with children wearing the robes of a king, a shepherd, and of a new family seeking shelter with the birth of our Saviour. And we sing

*Silent night, holy night!*  
*All is calm, all is bright.*  
*Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child.*  
*Holy infant so tender and mild,*  
*Sleep in heavenly peace,*  
*Sleep in heavenly peace*

And the girl dressed as Mary fiddles with her baby doll, our “Jesus”...

*Silent night, holy night!*  
*Shepherds quake at the sight.*  
*Glories stream from heaven afar*  
*Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia,*  
*Christ the Savior is born!*  
*Christ the Savior is born*

And the shepherds are distracted and fidgeting...

*Silent night, holy night!*  
*Son of God love's pure light.*  
*Radiant beams from Thy holy face*

*With dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth  
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth*

And as the hymn closes, we are reminded again of a miraculous night long ago.

This has been a beautiful tradition in Sierra Madre for many years, and continues still. Hundreds of people gather from around the community and for too short of time, we reflect on the meaning of our Christmas season and shared faith, sharing hot chocolate and greetings with friends old and new.



# LYRICPALOOZA

Lynn Maudlin

“There’s a song in the air--”

“What?”

“It's like a song I can hear playing right in my ear but I can't sing; I can't help listening.”

“What? What are you talking about?!”

“Doesn’t that ever happen to you? It’s like there’s a soundtrack to your life--”

“You are whacked.”

“Yeah, I’m just a ball of confusion.”

“Great balls of fire!”

“See, now you’re doing it--”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are!”

“No, I’m not; no, I’m not; no, I’m not!”

“Think of what you're saying; you can get it wrong and still you think that it's alright. ...life is very short and there's no time for fussing and fighting, my friend.”

“You’re doing it again.”

“You don’t have a musical bone in your body, do you--”

“Just because I’m not amused by you does *not* mean I dislike music. Look what you're doing, I'm feelin’ blue and lonely-- would it be too much to ask of you, what you're doing to me?”

“Oh, come on! That’s the Beatles! I recognize that.”

“You’re not old enough to know early Beatles.”

“Ha! Who are you kidding? I was raised on robbery! They were like mother’s milk to me.”

“You are mixing metaphors. Or idioms or sources, or something.”

“The history of the world, my sweet, is who gets eaten, and who gets to eat!”

“Broadway?”

“They say the neon lights are bright--”

“Oh, stop it. ...Stop in the name of love!”

“You see?! It’s contagious! Everybody's got the fever!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha, stayin’ alive!”

“Hmmm. So what are we doing here?”

“Caroling.”

“As in, ‘Christmas caroling’?”

“Do you know another kind of caroling?”

“Actually, no. So bring us a figgy pudding, bring us a figgy pudding, so bring us a figgy pudding, and bring it right here!”

“There is no figgy pudding--”

“We won’t go until we get some, we won’t go until we get some, we won’t go until we get some, so bring it right here!”

“Were you born annoying?”

“It’s an acquired skill. I learned the truth --at seventeen. Truth hurts.”

“Love hurts. Love scars, love wounds, and mars...”

“No reply. I saw the light.”

“I gotta go. I really can’t stay.”

“Wait, wait, I thought we were caroling? Caroling, caroling, through the town--”

“Just a song before I go, to whom it may concern: traveling twice the speed of sound, it’s easy to get burned.”



# ***Festival of Illumination***

Teresa Johnston Davis

I woke rather abruptly one Saturday morning to my dad throwing open the heavy curtains in my room and letting the sunlight come crashing in without my consent. The blinding brightness was not welcome, and I covered my head with my blanket.

“Wakey-wakey, eggs and bakey,” he chanted at me. “It’s a big day.”

“Is it?” I mumbled from under the covers.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “Today you are going to help me in the workshop.”

It took a minute for that information to sink in, considering I was basically still sleeping. But then the words clicked in my brain and I peeked out from under the blankets.

“Dad, it’s still October.”

“I know. That means we only have six weeks until Launch Day. We have a lot of work to do if we are going to beat Bob Gunderson this year, and we are going to destroy him. You can count on that!” He tugged on the blankets. “Come on sleepy-head, let’s get going.”

“No! Come back closer to Thanksgiving.”

“Dylan, I told you that I was going to need your help this year. Let’s go, daylight’s wasting.” He pulled my blankets off the bed completely, then grabbed a pair of jeans and a t-shirt off of the floor and threw them at me.

“This right here is why god invented child labor laws,” I groused at him. He just laughed.

“If you’re downstairs in fifteen minutes, I’ll even cook you breakfast first.” He waited another minute just to make sure that I was really getting up and then left me to my own devices.

I dragged myself out of bed, shaking my head. My dad had always been a big fan of Christmas, and that usually manifested in him going a little overboard in the decoration department. He really loved turning our house into a huge festive scene that the neighborhood could enjoy. For the last ten years, our town had held a contest for the best light show, and my dad won every year. That is, until three years ago when Bob

Gunderson moved in at the end of the block. No one could understand why a freshly-divorced, middle-aged man would buy a large house to live in all by himself, until December the first rolled around, and his house lit up like a supernova. His display was so big and complex, it made my dad's carefully created winter scene look like amateur hour. Mr. Gunderson was a shoo-in to win the contest. Dad did not take it well.

For the next two years, Dad tried to up the ante at our house and compete with Mr. Gunderson. We said goodbye to older figures like the polar bears drinking Coke and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, who had served their time and had seen better days. Santa's elves? Donated. Woodstock and Snoopy? Sent to live on a farm. (Or, more accurately, with my cousin.) RIP inflatable Frosty the Snowman, I still miss you buddy. They were all replaced with LED Christmas trees, snowflakes and candy canes. Anything that lit up and could be programmed to flicker in time to "Carol of the Bells" was in. But no matter how many new additions my dad made or how hard he tried, he was still playing second fiddle to Bob Gunderson as the King of Christmas in our neighborhood. Mr. Gunderson had the most visited light display in three counties, and my dad had become obsessed with getting his throne back.

After his third loss in a row last year, he went to bed for two days and didn't get up. Mom said that he was "going through a phase" and that she'd talk to him. I don't know what she said, married people stuff I guess, but after those two days, he snapped out of his funk, and we were able to enjoy the holiday. His eye still twitched every night at six o'clock when the displays switched on, but he didn't say anything.



Mom suggested more than once that he retire his vendetta. She suggested that maybe next year we could go on vacation and get away from the madness. She even proposed that we go on a Christmas cruise and spend the holiday getting tan on a beach

in Barbados. Dad said that he'd think about it, but by the time March rolled around he had the graph paper and this wacky tool called a "slide rule" out, plotting this year's display. (I don't know what to tell you, man. My dad's old school.) He went back and forth with these ancient tools and an actual computer for months until he got things exactly how he wanted them. My mom kept dropping hints about Puerto Vallarta and Walt Disney World, but by the time June rolled around and the packages started to arrive, she gave up the idea of travelling. Dad spent a good portion of July, August, and September down in the basement, or what he calls his "workshop". I don't know what he's been up to down there. I asked Mom about it, but she told me to just let him do his thing, and promised to intervene well before medical professionals were required. So that is how I found myself, a week before Halloween, following my dad to the basement to help him decorate for Christmas.

I froze halfway down the steps. My dad had been *busy*. The basement was chock full of trees, and lights, and cables, and I didn't even know what else. There was PVC pipe and wire frames jammed anywhere they would fit. He had two laptops, six control boxes, and an FM transmitter with a mixer. There was hardly any room to move. He had cleared a tiny space in front of his workbench so that he could still get to his saws and clamps and things, but the basement felt like it was bursting at the seams.

"Whoa Dad, did you *buy* all this stuff? Mom's gonna be pissed!"

"Of course not. I built most of it," he told me, proudly. "What did you think I was doing down here all this time?"

"Did you get an engineering degree while I was at basketball practice and forget to tell me?" I surveyed the contents of the room, impressed. "How did you learn to do all this?"

"It's amazing what you can find on YouTube," he said with a huge grin on his face. "Come here, let me show you the plan. Gunderson doesn't stand a chance."

He booted up one of the laptops and pulled me in for a closer look. He showed me a diagram of the layout he had in mind, and explained what all the components were. I could tell that he was really excited, but it just looked like carefully labeled boxes and squiggles to me, and I couldn't make heads or tails of it. The only thing that was clear to me was that this year's Christmas display had gotten very, very complicated.

“Dad, I’m a sophomore.” I gestured to the mountain of electronics behind me. “I don’t know how to do any of this. What exactly do you want me to do here today?” I could already hear the note of panic in my voice.

“Don’t worry Dylan,” he said in a cheerful tone. “Today is mostly about manual labor. We need to move all of the decorations upstairs and outside so that we can start setting them up. Your mother agreed to start parking in the driveway for a couple of weeks so that we can use the garage as a waystation. We only have six weeks until December. We’ve got to get a move on if we’re going to get everything ready in time.”

“If you say so, Dad.” I sighed, resigned to my fate.

“Our biggest obstacle,” he told me, “will be overcoming Mannheim Steamroller. Gunderson beat us to the music, and we can’t use it.”

“Seriously, Dad?” I asked, skeptically. “That doesn’t seem like much of an obstacle. I don’t even know who that is.”

“Dylan,” my dad said in a serious tone, “Don’t underestimate the Steamroller. We’re talking about major players in the festive rock scene.”

“Oh, of course. I don’t know what I was thinking. Shame. I feel shame.” My sarcasm was turned up to eleven. “So use something else. Maybe some AC/DC or Led Zeppelin. ‘Immigrant Song’ would make a wicked light show.” My dad looked at me like I was crazy. He was a traditionalist, and there was no way he’d go that route. “Oh, I know,” I said grinning. I suddenly had a great idea. “We could do like a Christmas candy scene and play ‘Pour Some Sugar on Me.’” I reveled in the shocked look on my dad’s face.

“That’s it,” he said, throwing up his hands, “I think you were switched at birth.” We both had a good laugh.

“Okay,” I said, “What’s going to beat the Steamroller?”

“I’ve got three words for you,” he said counting them off on his fingers. “Trans. Siberian. Orchestra.” He was obviously waiting for a reaction, but I didn’t know who they were either.



“Ooh. Ahh.” I shrugged.

“You’re killing me, kid.” He just shook his head at me. “Come on, we’ve got work to do.”

My dad worked me non-stop for the next five hours, hauling all of his toys out of the basement and organizing them in preparation for deployment. I saw my mother peeking at us through the living room window a few times, but she wisely stayed out of it. The sun had started to set when Dad finally said that we could call it quits. Exhausted and starving, we headed back into the house, my dad pleased with the day’s work. Sunday went very much like Saturday, with the exception that my mother came out at three o’clock and insisted that I be set free to go inside and finish my homework. Dad started to object, but Mom put on this special look that she has that we both recognized, and he crumbled. We both knew that when Mom wore that look, it was no use to argue. I don’t know if all women have this same superpower or if my mom is special. I tend to think it’s the second option, but either way, it’s effective.

My dad commandeered most of my daylight hours over the next several weekends, putting me to work on his light show. The only time I wasn’t working on the *Festival of Illumination*, as he called it, was when my dad insisted on sending me out on my bike to spy on Mr. Gunderson’s progress and report back with all the gory details. I couldn’t tell if what I saw was good or bad for our cause, but my dad remained confident. On the third weekend of work in a row, I was starting to feel the strain. I did not want to hear about the difference between PVC pipe and high-density polyethylene pipe. I didn’t care about pixel chips or the number of wires. All I wanted to do was go inside and watch Netflix.

“Hey Dylan, come over here,” my dad called to me. “I want to show you something cool.”

I trudged over to the fence where my dad was working, thinking that “cool” was a relative term.

“What?” I asked sullenly.

“This,” he said proudly, “is a pixel matrix grid.”

“Okay,” I said, not really paying attention.

“I can program all sorts of things with the grid. Fireworks, flames, words. There are tons of possibilities. I have eight of them that I plan on hanging along the fence. So what I’m going to do is program them to look like a graphic equalizer in time to the music.”

“You can do that?” I asked. He had caught my interest with this one.

“Yeah. Cool, huh?” I nodded, and he continued. “I can also make it look like it is showing the frequency waves. They took me months to build because you have to get them exactly right, but it’s going to be amazing.”

It did sound amazing, but it also sounded like a ridiculous amount of work. I looked around the yard at his various installations. This whole thing was ridiculous.

“Dad, can I ask you a question? Why do you care so much about this?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, surprised.

“Why is this competition with Mr. Gunderson so important to you?”

“So many times, it happens too fast, you trade your passion for glory,” he told me. “Don't lose your grip on the dreams of the past. You must fight just to keep them alive.”

His words tickled something in the back of my brain, but I couldn’t quite place them.

“Risn' up, straight to the top,” he continued. “Had the guts, got the glory.”

“Dad, are those song lyrics?” I asked him.

“Went the distance, now I'm not gonna stop. Just a man and his will to survive.”

“Dad,” I took a deep, calming breath, “Are you quoting ‘Eye of the Tiger’ at me?”

“It's the eye of the tiger, it's the thrill of the fight,” he started to sing. “Risn' up to the challenge of our rival.”

“I’m not comfortable with this.” I told him.

“And the last known survivor stalks his prey in the night. And he's watchin' us all with the eye of the tiger.”

“That’s it, I’m going back in the house.” I turned to go but he caught my sleeve, laughing.

“Okay, okay. I’ll stop.” He pulled me back to face him. “All right, here’s the real answer. For a good, long while there, I was the only one who really did it up for Christmas. And you know, every year I’d have people coming up to me in the grocery store or the coffee shop telling me how much they enjoyed my Christmas display, and how excited they were to see it each year. It was like my gift to the neighborhood, and I loved that feeling. I loved that something I did made people so happy. And then Gunderson came, and he just took it all away. Now he’s on top, and I don’t have anything to give.”



“That’s not how gifts work, Dad.” I tried to understand where he was coming from, but it just didn’t make sense. “Look, just because the gift you’re giving isn’t the biggest or the brightest, that doesn’t mean it’s not still a gift. And it doesn’t mean that people aren’t still grateful to get it. The people of this neighborhood are twice as happy now because they’ve got two amazing shows to see. You and Mr. Gunderson should be working together, not competing every year.”

“But, the Eye of the Tiger,” he replied.

“All right, fine,” I told him rolling my eyes. “But you know that you need professional help, right?”

“Your mother may have mentioned it.” He gave me a playful punch on the shoulder. “Let’s get back to work. Do you want to help me construct the leaping archways?”

“You want me to build something?” I asked in alarm.

“Don’t worry, it will be easy,” he reassured me.

“How do you know?”

“I saw it on YouTube,” he said with confidence.

“Well in that case, what could go wrong?”

I was not so confident, but it turned out that I underestimated the genius of YouTube. Or maybe the genius of my dad. Either way, after an hour and a half we had

four leaping arches built and ready to be programmed. It was actually pretty fun working with my dad, creating something. I'd never built anything before, and I never would have thought that I could. But my dad guided me through the process and let me do a lot of the work myself. I couldn't believe that he trusted me with his precious display, but by the time we were done, I was really excited about it.

As November progressed, our display really began to take shape, and my dad sucked me in with his enthusiasm. By the time Thanksgiving came and went, I was just as into it as my dad was. I had never worked this hard on anything in my life. For six weekends in a row, I had been side by side with my dad constructing his *Festival of Illumination*, and now we were finally ready to unveil it. It was December First, Launch Day. I had trouble concentrating all day in school. The hours seemed to crawl by, and I felt the passing of every second. I couldn't wait until six o'clock, when we would turn everything on.

My dad had pulled out all the stops. We had six pixel trees on either side of our walkway, the four leaping arches, snowflakes and candy canes, all programmed to dance and flash in time to the music. My dad had mixed a festive rock medley of TSO songs that revved up to the climax of "Wizards in Winter." And of course, the piece de resistance, his pixel matrix grids. Anyone watching this show was going to feel like they had been smacked in the face by Christmas, and it was going to be awesome.

At five minutes to six, our street was jam-packed. Half the town had come out to see what Mr. Gunderson and my dad had to offer. The judges were front and center of the people crowding around both houses. A couple of neighbors banded together every year and served hot chocolate and cider to the crowd who came out for the official Lighting. I could not think of a better way to kick off the Holiday season. At 5:59 the chatter started to die down, the air thick with anticipation. It was time.

The show went off without a hitch. The lights flickered and flared, changed colors and danced as the music rose and fell. The trees almost looked like they were doing pirouettes. The equalizer effect was wicked cool and totally unique. The *Festival of Illumination* was eight-and-a-half minutes of pure Christmas insanity. I stood in the crowd, surrounded by the gasps and delighted laughter of my neighbors, and I felt like all the work we had put in was worth it. When the show was over, my dad was overwhelmed with people wanting to shake his hand and congratulate him on a job well done. He had

really outdone himself, they said. He grabbed me and pulled me over, telling all of them that he couldn't have done it without me and giving me a lot more credit than I deserved. I received a fair share of handshakes and slaps on the back myself after that.

As the crowd migrated, I managed to get a quiet moment with my dad. We wouldn't find out the official results from the judges for another week, but there was no doubt, at least not to me, that the night had been a success.

"Well, Dad, what do you think? Did we do enough to win?" I asked him.

"I don't know, kid. But honestly? I don't care."

"What? What do you mean?" I was shocked and, frankly, a little put out. I had worked way too hard for him to say that he didn't care now.

"Look at what we did, Dylan." He gestured to the magical onslaught of lights and music. "We did that together, you and me. And people *loved* it. I'm so proud of you. I don't care if we beat Gunderson. I had the best time with you, and even if we lose, I wouldn't change anything. Thank you so much for going on this ride with me." He put his arm around me. "I love you a lot, kid."



"Thanks Dad. I love you too. Just don't quote anymore song lyrics at me."

"I make no promises. Come on, let's go get some cocoa," he said, and we turned away from the house to join the steam of neighbors enjoying the festive atmosphere and each other's company.