

Comfort and Joy
By Glenna Fisher

She heard a hammer. Were those people two doors down pounding something today of all days, Christmas Eve? Eight of them crowded into a two-bedroom apartment, one of four carved out of what had been a lovely old house.

The pounding began again. Not hammering at all. Someone knocking on her kitchen door. It had been so long since she'd heard that sound she'd not recognized it.

Putting down the teacup, she placed her hands on the table and pushed herself up. Just now eight o'clock, too early for her joints to have smoothed out enough to walk with ease.

At the door stood a pretty, slender black girl, very pregnant. Beside her, holding her hand, was a girl of about three in a shiny red coat and knitted hat. She looked up expectantly.

The young woman spoke. "Mrs. Martin, my car won't start. Could I use your phone to call my brother?"

Therese Martin blinked. Didn't all these young people carry cell phones? Was this a trick?

As if reading her thoughts, the woman said, "I left my cell phone at work."

"Mama, I'm cold," the little girl said.

Therese opened the door. "It's there by the microwave on the wall, uh..."

"Ruth. Ruth Hennwood. Thank you so much." She dialed and listened as the phone rang. No answer. She hung up.

"He's already left for work. If you don't mind I'll try my aunt."

Therese nodded.

Ruth hung up again. Now Therese saw that worry creased her face.

Therese softened. "Would you like a cup of tea? Then you might try her again."

"I can't, I'm going to be late to work. I could catch the bus, but I won't be able to drop Opal off at day care."

"Well, dear, I'd offer to keep her here but I have ten women coming for a Christmas lunch and I'm afraid" She let her voice trail off to allow the girl to reach her own conclusion as to how impossible it would be to have a three-year old around all day.

Therese could hear Sandra Dixon, saccharin-voiced, ice-eyed. "Oh, Therese, isn't it wonderful that you took the poor little thing. My, how times have changed. I remember the colored maid we used to have watching me while Mother went out in the afternoon. Of course it'll mean a little extra money for you." Then she'd look around the shabby living room and smile.

Ruth broke in, "Oh, no, Mrs. Martin, I couldn't do that. I'll call work and tell them I'm sick."

Therese thought of the Lincoln Town Car in the garage. She'd not driven it since August, when she'd pulled out of a parking space at CVS and almost hit one of the bag boys at Marsh Supermarket. Since then she'd walked to Dillman's on Central Avenue with her folding shopping cart.

Abruptly she took the keys off the hook by the refrigerator. “Here – go right through the door there into the garage. The car needs to be driven before it expires from disuse.”

Ruth looked surprised, but took the keys. Moments later Therese watched the old boat backing slowly out of the driveway. Across the street four dark-skinned men also watched as the car turned the corner. What were they – Mexican? Middle Eastern?

Therese sighed. How the street had changed! When she and Ed had moved here it was the most enviable address in town, with a lovely view of Sunset Park, where, in the summer, she could hear children in the pool from her kitchen. She remembered the very first Christmas lunch she’d hosted for the Methodist Women’s Circles. Nearly seventy women came, toured the new house, and sat down to the lunch she’d had catered by The Clock.

Theirs was not the first house on Withe Row. That had been the Davis home, a lovely white-columned affair built by an Armco vice-president for his wife, a Virginia socialite. Where had they gone? Therese couldn’t remember. It had passed through several hands before it’s reincarnation as Towne Apartments, where the men outside now resided.

She hoped they would go inside before her friends arrived. Her friends. Were these women really her friends? When did she see them, or talk to them other than to say hello after church or at the few functions a year the Women’s Circles sponsored? But then, people were very busy these days. There was little time for socializing, even among women of her age.

Snow began to fall around ten, just as Therese placed the crystal candleholders alongside the centerpiece on the table. The pink crystal sky that had haloed Ruth Hennwood and her little girl earlier had turned to pewter. The fat flakes covered the hedge in minutes. Therese frowned, thinking she might have to shovel the front walk.

At eleven, Sandra Dixon called. “Oh, Therese, it’s a blizzard out there! I’m so sorry but I don’t think I can come for lunch. I don’t believe I can get out of my driveway, and if I did I’d be scared to death driving back if this keeps up. I’m so-o-o sorry.” Sandra’s voice was a high-pitched singsong. It was hard to tell if she was nearly hysterical or simply amplifying her little speech to increase its veracity.

Uncharitable of me to think that way, Therese thought as she put down the phone.

Well, with Sandra out of the picture, the group might be more relaxed. Sandra’s dictates about everything from food to fashion ruled the group of women, at least as long as she was present.

But by 11:30 all but two of the women had phoned to say they were afraid to come out in the deepening snow. The last two were in nursing homes and were dependent for transportation on other members of the group. Doubtless they’d call as well when it became clear that the outing was cancelled and there’d be no escape from the warren of overstuffed rooms and constantly running televisions.

The casserole would keep, though it would take her more than a week to finish it. She cast a rueful eye at her Christmas cake, a magnificent red velvet with coconut icing and little silver decorations.

But a few minutes later, looking out the front window sipping a cup of tea, she was surprised to discover that she felt not disappointment or sadness, but peace.

She and Ed had often sat quietly like this on snowy days. He'd build a roaring fire in the fireplace and they'd sit side by side, watching first the fire, then the snow falling outside. When they did speak their voices were low and mild. Only after darkness descended and the streetlights flickered on did they disturb the mood, she rising to make dinner, he to attend the fire.

The stroke that claimed Ed came on a hot August day more than five years ago. He'd gone to Woodside Cemetery and cut the grass on Blake's grave. Blake, their only child, had been killed in Vietnam. Ed had visited the grave regularly from the start, even in the early days when she could not face it, could not believe it.

Gradually she had worked through part of her grief, though much of it would cling to her always. Ed, too, she knew. So she'd gone with him most times he visited the cemetery, but on that hot morning she'd asked him to wait until sundown when it was cooler, and he said he wanted to go ahead.

He'd come home and gone up to take a shower. She heard the water running, then the thud, and ran to him. By the time the ambulance arrived, he was gone.

She'd never thought of selling the big old house, though it was far more space than she needed. She'd refused to close off rooms even to save on the heating bills. What little cleaning they required was still well within her ability.

"Oh, Therese, I'm telling you those condos out at The Woods on Riverview are so cute," Sandra Dixon had said.

Yes, of course they were, and maybe in time, but not now. Too much living had gone on at 12 Withe Row, and somehow, Therese felt, there was more living to be done here.

By midafternoon, the snow was nearly a foot deep. When she saw the old Towne Car she was surprised. She'd forgotten about loaning her car to Ruth Hennwood. It stopped in the street, unable of course to negotiate the driveway. Really, so few cars had traveled the street that the snow was nearly as deep there.

Ruth, her coat unfastened over her pregnancy, carried Opal, trying her footing carefully with every step.

Therese held the door open, and took Opal in her own arms.

"Here, let me help you get those shoes and socks off," she told Ruth. "I'll find you some dry socks." She sat Opal on a kitchen chair and untied Ruth's soggy athletic shoes.

Someone was knocking at the door again. Opening it, Therese saw two of the men who had been on the street earlier.

"The car..." one of them said hesitantly.

"We will shovel the driveway and bring it in for you," said the other.

"I can't..." Therese began, and then stopped. She had started to say, "I can't pay you." But the dignity in their stance, the fierce pride in their faces stopped her. She finished, "thank you enough."

They took the shovel from the garage and part of a bag of salt and began work.

Therese turned around to find Ruth standing barefoot on the heat register. She'd forgotten about the socks, and now she hurried off to find them.

Returning to the kitchen she found Opal smiling and talking on Ruth's recovered cell phone. "I love you, too, Daddy. Merry Christmas." Still smiling, the little girl flipped the phone shut.

“My husband’s in Iraq. He’d hoped to be home in time for the baby, but his tour was extended,” Ruth said.

Therese was glad Ruth was bent over pulling on the socks. She didn’t want Ruth to see her flaming face. She’d assumed the young woman wasn’t married, another in a string of uncharitable thoughts, she thought. And what if she had been? What had she become, Therese wondered – one of those stereotypical grumpy old ladies?

The sound of stamping boots brought her to the door again.

“We’re finished, Mrs. Martin.”

“Come in. I’m sorry, I don’t know your names.” She hadn’t bothered to find out when they moved in. She’d just counted the eight dark men from behind the drapes and pursed her lips. Yet they knew her name.

“I am Miguel Ramirez,” said the taller man, the one with the mustache.

“I am Gabriel Gonzales,” said the other.

“Two angels,” Therese said. “Yes, two angels. Please come in.”

The kitchen was full now, and warm. The savory smell of the recently baked casserole lingered in the air.

“I’ll make hot chocolate,” Therese said. “Opal, would you like to help?”

Opal looked up, eyes shining. “Yes. Can I mix the cocoa and the sugar? Mommy always lets me.”

“Of course. My little boy used to do that.”

Ten minutes later they sat in companionable silence around the kitchen table drinking the hot sweet chocolate.

“May I have some more, Mama?” Opal held out her cup.

“Just a little, honey. You don’t want to be awake too long tonight. Santa’s coming – remember?”

“Oh, Mama, I couldn’t forget that.”

Again Therese was brought sharply back to reality. This was Christmas Eve!

She couldn’t let these people go their separate ways now, just as dusk was falling, and leave her to this empty house. There was so much life here now, and she wanted to hold onto it.

“I have this casserole,” she began. They all looked at her.

“What I mean to say is, I have plenty of food for dinner. And it’s Christmas Eve. Won’t you all stay for dinner?”

Miguel looked at Gabriel.

Therese said, “Of course you will want to invite your friends – the others you live with, I mean.”

Gabriel spoke. “They are our brothers and uncles.”

“Ask them to come, please.”

They went out and Ruth stood up. Something flickered in her face.

“Are you all right?” Therese asked.

“Yes, it’s just that I think my water broke,” Ruth said.

“Do you want to go to the hospital?”

“No, it’s too soon. They’d send me home. But I’ll call Dr. Davis.”

After answering a few questions, Ruth hung up. “He told me to come to the hospital when they’re five minutes apart.”

Therese felt amazingly lighthearted. A baby! There would be a baby, right here. Then she felt foolish. Of course it wouldn't be here. This was a fluke, brought on by weather and circumstance. Tomorrow everything would be back to normal.

But tomorrow was Christmas, the day of great miracles. A day filled with hope and promise.

Miguel and Gabriel returned with the other men and began introductions. They all seemed to know Ruth and Opal.

Shooing the men out of the now-overflowing kitchen into the living room, Therese set them the task of getting firewood from the stack alongside the garage and building a fire in the fireplace.

Soon the fire blazed. The men talked softly in Spanish. One took the photograph of Therese and Ed with Blake, taken at Christmastime when Blake was seven, from the mantle, looked at it, then placed it back among the pine and holly decorations.

In the dining room the table remained set with the Christmas china and red tablecloth. Just as it should be, Therese thought.

At dinner, Miguel poured the wine, Opal passed the bread, and Ruth told Therese in a low voice that yes, she would eat, though lightly, because she'd need her strength.

WMUB played in the background, a program of old carols. The cake, with what Opal called "snow icing" brought "oohs" and "aahs" around the table, and a "yum" from Opal.

Around nine the salt trucks crunched along the Row. The men surprised Therese by clearing the table and loading the dishwasher. They left, smiling and formally thanking Therese. It was so simple, really, she thought. Getting to know people. Sharing the things we have in common. Why had she thought so much of their differences?

Miguel remained, insisting on bringing in more wood for the fire. Therese opened the door to the garage from the kitchen so he'd not have so far to walk in the deepening snow.

As she turned back into the kitchen she saw Ruth gripping the door facing on the opposite side of the room.

"It's started then?" Therese asked.

"Yes, I think so."

"Is it early?"

"Only by a week, though Dr. Davis said it could be any time now. I should go home now. I need to get someone to take care of Opal and get my brother to take me to the hospital."

"Where's your mother?" Therese asked.

"She's dead – three years now. My dad died ten years ago. It's just my brother and me. And, of course, my two aunts."

"Would you like to call them from here? Then I could go over and get your things. I can't let you go out in that deep snow." It would be nearly to her knees now.

Ruth's brother said he would come and he'd take Opal to their Aunt Dena's.

Therese donned boots, coat and a knitted hat, and Ruth handed her the key to the apartment. The overnight bag was in her closet.

"And Mrs. Martin, could I ask one more thing?"

"Of course, and my name's Therese, dear."

Ruth shot a look at Opal, drifting off to sleep apparently, on the sofa. She lowered her voice. “On the top shelf of the closet – Opal’s presents – in two big shopping bags – would you mind? Mike can take them to Aunt Dena’s.”

Therese grinned and whispered, “I can’t imagine anything better than playing Santa Claus.”

It took Therese nearly fifteen minutes to traverse the hundred or so feet to the apartment house, placing one booted foot firmly in the snow, extricating the other, and placing it just as carefully a few inches beyond.

Once inside the neat apartment, though, she had no trouble finding the items in Ruth’s closet. She tucked the small overnight bag under her arm and carried a shopping bag, full of brightly wrapped packages, in each hand.

She made her way carefully down the front steps and, head down, nearly walked into Gabriel.

“Mrs. Martin, we saw you from the window. Let me help you. Are Mrs. Hennwood and her little girl alright?”

Therese told Miguel what was happening. They moved more easily now with him holding the shopping bags and supporting her elbow as she trudged once more through the snow.

Opening the door quietly so they wouldn’t wake the sleeping child, Therese and Gabriel found Ruth pacing back and forth through the kitchen and dining room.

“It helps to walk,” she said.

Sliding the shopping bags inside the hall closet so Opal wouldn’t see them before Ruth’s brother put them in the car, Therese removed her things and took Gabriel’s jacket.

“Well, let’s have a cup of tea while we wait.” Therese put the kettle on.

She reached for the box of tea bags just as the phone rang.

It was Mike. She handed Ruth the phone, and saw the anxious look that came over her face.

When she hung up Ruth said, “He can’t get out of his driveway.”

She began pacing again, stopping to grasp the back of a chair in the dining room as a contraction began.

“We still have my car. Gabriel, can you drive?” She had never seen any of the men driving a car.

“Yes.”

“Well, it’s settled then. Opal can stay here with me. Let me get her bed ready and we’ll tuck her in now.” She left to go upstairs before Ruth could protest.

Blake’s room, now the guest room though she’d never in all those years had a guest, was next to hers. Very little of Blake’s things had remained once he’d left for college, then Vietnam. That had made it easier, somehow, a couple of years after his death, to paint the room a cheerful yellow. She’d told herself at the time that if he’d come home with his wife, a wife he was never to have, of course, they would have liked to sleep in this room.

Quickly she made up the bed with clean sheets and added an extra blanket before pulling up the comforter, then folded the corner back and plumped the pillow. Finally, she closed the curtains and plugged in a small nightlight.

Downstairs, Ruth was no longer pacing. She’d gone into the living room and was lying in Ed’s old recliner.

“How far apart now?” Therese whispered.

“I think about ten minutes.”

Therese lifted Opal and carried her upstairs. There was something so restful about holding a sleeping child, she thought as she looked at Opal’s face. Opal’s lips were slightly parted, her brow smooth, her dark lashes like tiny fans.

At the landing, she kissed the small cheek.

Carefully she lowered the child onto the bed, and removed her clothing down to the knit top with a reindeer printed on it and Dora underwear. Covering her, she kissed her again, on the forehead this time and went out.

Gabriel sat in the kitchen, alert but not moving. The living room had now become the women’s sanctum.

Therese began timing the contractions. Seven minutes apart. Dr. Davis may have said five minutes, but he probably wasn’t thinking about the snow. The hospital was only blocks away, of course, but Therese felt Ruth should be on the safe side. Besides, didn’t admissions take awhile? She couldn’t remember, though things had probably changed quite a lot.

She got the car keys for Gabriel, telling him to pull the car out and warm it up and she would help get Ruth in the passenger seat. Once at the hospital, she assured Gabriel, there would be plenty of help.

He left but returned almost immediately. “Two flat tires,” he said simply.

The air momentarily went out of Therese, too, but she quickly recovered.

“We’ll call the ambulance, then.”

A moan arose from the living room. “Nooo,” Ruth said. “Our insurance won’t pay for it and I can’t afford it.”

“But dear...” Therese began.

“No, I’m sorry, Mrs. Martin, but you don’t know what it’s like. How they look at you. Like you’re taking advantage or something, trying to get something free. My baby is not starting out in this world with people looking down on him.”

Therese knelt beside her and squeezed her hand. “It’s just that I’m afraid I don’t know how else we’re going to get you to the hospital,” she said.

“I’ll walk. It’s not far.”

“That’s impossible.”

Ruth laughed briefly. “Maybe Santa can pick me up on his rounds and put me in his sleigh and drop me off at the hospital.”

Sleigh. Sled. Therese thought. Blake’s old sled was still in the garage. It was big enough, she thought. It just might work, for such a short distance.

She found the sled, took it through the front garage door and tested the rope. Still strong.

Inside, she sat with Gabriel and told him the plan. To his credit, he didn’t argue or question. He rose to go.

She found the hot water bottle, filled it, brought blankets, a sweater, and two pairs of sweat pants.

Gabriel and Miguel, along with two other young men, returned.

Sweat covered Ruth’s forehead now and Therese added two towels to the pile beside the recliner.

She began explaining her proposal to Ruth. She would be dressed warmly and could lie down on the sled if she felt like it or sit up, holding her knees if she could. The men would pull the sled. If they went through the back yard and through the gate out to Central Avenue, the trip should take not more than fifteen minutes.

To Therese's relief, Ruth agreed. Therese helped her put on the extra layers of clothing, then walked with her through the garage to the sled, where the four men now waited.

"Call me when you get there," Therese instructed, tucking a piece of paper with her phone number into Ruth's purse.

"Oh, I almost forgot." She ran back inside, returning with the overnight bag, propping it behind Ruth's back like a pillow.

They started off, moving smoothly around the garage and through the backyard. It was cold, but not so bitterly cold as to be dangerous, Therese thought.

Only when they were out of sight did she allow herself to think what kind of reception they'd receive at the hospital. It had been a preposterous idea, but for the life of her Therese could not think how she could have gotten Ruth to the hospital any other way without violating her dignity.

Dignity! Four men pulling an old sled with a woman on it and in full labor, at the door of the maternity ward. What could be less dignified than that?

As she stood in the cold wondering what she had done, church bells began to ring. Midnight. Christmas. St. John's would be celebrating midnight mass. Churches all over town were worshiping on this holiest of nights. She'd planned to attend services.

But that was long ago, in another world. A dry, paper-thin, pale world ago.

And what could be less dignified than the scene she'd put together?

What indeed, said a small voice inside. Perhaps the birth of the Savior in a barn, to a young girl in a very awkward situation with a bewildered husband.

She listened until the last bell had died away, then hurried inside.

There was much to do. Opal's presents must be placed under the tree. She'd need to prepare breakfast for the men. And she'd wait for a most important telephone call.