

KATHERINE PATERSON

A Stubborn Sweetness
and Other Stories for the
Christmas Season

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Exultate Jubilate	1
Star Lady	13
In the Desert, a Highway	29
On the Night of His Birth: Mary's Story	47
Angels and Other Strangers	51
Merit Badges	67
Guests	83
Watchman, Tell Us of the Night	93
Why the Chimes Almost Rang	101
Broken Windows	111
My Name Is Joseph	125
Woodrow Kennington Works Practically a Miracle	137
No Room in the Inn	151
The Handmaid of the Lord	163
A Stubborn Sweetness	175



Exultate Jubilate

Christmas is over. Sally is putting the children to bed, and I am sitting in the living room staring at a rocking horse and trying to figure out what happened to me last night. You must understand, first of all, that I have always entertained a certain sympathy for Scrooge. There he was, going about his business as best he knew how while all around him the world was going mad. 'Tis the season to be jolly? Come, now. What is there to be jolly or merry or even mildly happy about? How can anyone who watches the evening news on a daily basis work up a case of holiday cheer? Frankly, I weary of Christmas carols that start jangling through the malls at Halloween. The decorations on the lampposts that the city fathers drag out every Friday after Thanksgiving have begun to show their age. And so have I.

My wife is another story. She goes into a frenzy of decorating and baking and, since August, has been in a panic trying to decide whether or not to give a present to the Steadmans. I just try to stay out of her way.

I want my kids to be happy, but it's hard to be patient when they pester me for months for junk they've seen on TV that anyone over ten knows wouldn't last out the twelve days of Christmas. Can someone explain to me why, as the days grow shorter, the pitch of children's voices gets higher and higher? Besides, this year business has been, if not bad, certainly not robust, and I simply didn't have the money, not to mention energy and goodwill, to waste on the latest fad.

Still, the only reason I didn't go around literally grunting "Bah! Humbug!" this year was because of the kids. They are only three and six, and I am enough of a hypocrite not to try to ruin their excitement, much as my head aches to tone down the shrill. But somehow I drew the line at going to the Christmas Eve service last night. Once I slid out from under my mother's "Thou shalt nots," I became quite happily an Easter, Christmas, and whenever-my-mother-was-visiting Christian. But this year even Christmas seemed too much.

I told my wife I would stay behind to organize the stocking gifts and put the rocking horse together. Every year it's two or three in the morning before we can get to bed. And then we're too angry with each other to sleep. The year of Mike's tricycle was a low point in Christmases past—one reason Jenny was getting a rocking horse.

"The children will be so disappointed if you don't come," she said.

"Oh, they don't really expect me to go to church."

"But it's snowing, and you know how I hate to drive in the snow."

“Why is it that I have three more years of payments on a certain four-wheel-drive Subaru wagon?”

“But I don’t like leaving you here all by yourself on Christmas Eve,” she said. “You’ll get gloomy and moody.”

“In two hours,” I whispered, lest any little ears be nearby, “I’ll have that rocking horse put together, and all we’ll have to do is stuff the stockings and dream of sugarplums.” That cinched it. She remembered all too well the long night of the tricycle.

“Daddy isn’t feeling up to church tonight,” she told the children. I coughed obligingly and helped her zipper the snowsuits and yank on the boots, and happily waved them off to church.

A half-hour later, I was not so happy. The rocking horse that I had so carefully purchased was proving to be, in my mother’s picturesque phrase, “an instrument of the devil.”

It was not on rockers, but attached to its stand by huge, coiled springs. I had, by the hardest effort, pulled three of the four springs and hooked them into the stand. But every time I got the fourth nearly in place—sweating and straining to make it stretch to the last eye—the spring would recoil viciously, gouging my flesh as it flew through my hand.

I was glumly staring into the living room fireplace with a large brandy in my hand when the doorbell rang. My impulse was to ignore it. Sally had the garage opener. She wouldn’t be ringing the front doorbell, and nobody we knew would be dropping in for a visit. The bell rang twice before I roused myself, put down my drink, and shuffled to the door.

Through the peephole I could see a youngish looking man. He was wearing a windbreaker, but his head and hands were bare. He was carrying a pasteboard box and he looked frozen.

I opened the door about an inch. "Yes?"

He smiled. His lips were cracked and his nose and cheeks raw. "Would you like to buy some Christmas greens?"

The man had obviously not seen the inside of our house. "Sorry," I said, starting to close the door on his smile.

"Well, merry Christmas to you," he was saying when I remembered the stupid horse. Maybe the guy could help.

I opened the door wide. "Come in," I said with heartiness so false any fool would have suspected me of being up to no good. "Come in and get warm, at least. You must be frozen."

He put down his box of greens, stamped the snow off his thin shoes, and stepped in gratefully. "Not many sales tonight," he said. "I expect most people are all ready for Christmas."

"Yeah," I said. "Could I get you something hot? I think there's still some coffee."

"Gee," he said. "That's real nice of you." He followed me down the greenery-festooned hall to the kitchen. "Wow," he said, "you sure don't need more greens. You're loaded."

"My wife's a little bit crazy on the subject of Christmas," I said, pouring out a mug of coffee for each of us. "Milk and sugar?"

"If it's no trouble." He held the mug out for me to put in the milk and then the sugar, and then stick in a spoon. "Thank you," he said, stirring deliberately while he looked around our big kitchen. Sally had wreaths and ribbons even in there. His hands were so chapped they looked as though they'd been bleeding.

"Smells like Christmas," he said.

I hadn't noticed, but in addition to the evergreens the room was full of the warm odor of cinnamon and cloves and the Christmas bread that Sally had baked that afternoon.

“Nice, isn’t it?” he said.

“Well, yes, I suppose so. If you like that sort of thing.” My mind was on getting the horse done before Sally and the children got back, but I couldn’t very well snatch the coffee I’d just given him from his hands.

“I guess you have a pretty tree, too.”

Well, what could I do? He obviously wanted to see our tree. I led him back down the hall to the living room. Our house is not one of these energy-efficient moderns. It’s Victorian with a fifteen-foot ceiling, and the tree scraped it. I think Sally picked out the house so she could have monster Christmas trees. There is certainly no other reason for a ceiling of that height. You should see our heating bill.

The visitor was standing there, his mouth open, his eyes shining like a three-year-old’s. “That’s the most beautiful tree I ever saw in my life,” he whispered. “Yes, well,” I felt almost apologetic. “My wife—”

He turned, his face still full of awe. “She must be a wonderful person.”

“As wives go . . .” I tried to joke, but it wasn’t going to work. The guy was as sincere as a cocker spaniel. “Don’t let your coffee get cold,” I said.

He ducked his head and took a sip, but over the rim he was eyeing my sound system. Oh, dear. Maybe he was casing the joint. I took his elbow to steer him to the family room, where one three-legged rocking horse sat waiting, but he resisted me.

“I know I shouldn’t ask you . . .” He smiled his childlike smile. It was impossible to believe that such a lovely smile, cracked lips and all, belonged to a potential thief. “I mean, you’ve been so nice, but I’m so hungry for real music. Just while I’m drinking your good coffee?”

He looked hungry for meat and potatoes, but how could I refuse such a request? “Okay,” I said, “a bargain. You can choose any music in the cabinet if you’ll help me put together a rocking horse for my daughter.”

His smile broke into a laugh. “I’m getting the best end of that.” He handed me his still almost-full cup and fairly ran to the cabinet.

While he fingered the CD’s and tapes lovingly, I wondered what he might choose. There wasn’t much there that would appeal to a person of his class. There were dozens of recordings of Christmas carols—even one, so help me, of those cartoon chipmunks singing traditional tunes.

“Here,” he said, his eyes glowing. “This one, please.”

“Are you sure?” He was handing me Mozart. The Colin Davis London Symphony recording of Mozart’s sacred music. Now wouldn’t you have been surprised?

“Do you mind?” he asked anxiously when he saw my hesitation.

“No, of course not,” I said.

“I don’t look like a Mozart lover, right?” His smile was on crooked now.

“Well, I mean . . .” There was no way of getting out of that one. I put down the coffee cups and inserted the tape.

I waited for the great “Kyrie in D Minor” to boom out, and after adjusting the sound slightly, picked up the coffee cups and started for the family room and the horse.

“No!” He grabbed my wrist. Coffee sloshed into the saucers from both cups. “Listen.”

“Kyrie Eleison! the voices demanded. *Lord have mercy!* “Christe Eleison!” *Christ have mercy!* I thought I had heard it before, but I realized, as I looked at my visitor, that I had never really heard it. His eyes were closed. I felt distinctly

uncomfortable. “Come on,” I said, slipping my wrist out from under his hand, being careful to keep from spilling coffee on Sally’s rug. “We’ve got to get that fool horse done before my family gets home.”

He opened his eyes and looked at me. I thought he was going to object, but he grinned. “Yes,” he said, “our bargain.”

“It’s in there, too.” I jerked my head at the sound system. “The music goes all over the house.”

“Oh,” he breathed. “That’s wonderful. You can live in music.” He followed me to the den.

There sat, or should I say, sagged the horse with Mozart showering down upon its head. “If you pull that spring,” I said nodding at it with my head, “I’ll try to yank this side in toward you so you can hook it.”

He was listening to the Kyrie and not to me. I hated to interrupt him, but we did have this bargain. “The horse,” I said with a bit more urgency in my voice.

“They’re likely to get home any minute . . .”

He nodded, but I knew he wasn’t paying attention to me. I should have been angry, but somehow, he was forcing me to listen to the music, too. I handed him back his coffee. “Just through the Kyrie, all right?” I said. “Then we do the horse.” I’m not sure if he heard, but he took the coffee and sat cross-legged on the floor, his head cocked toward the wall-mounted speaker.

I sat on the couch, watching him listen, but it was not a stranger’s profile I was seeing but the face of my father singing this very Mozart one Christmastime when the civic chorus had decided against the usual *Messiah*. My father died when I was seventeen, so I must have been a young teenager.

I loved to watch my father sing. Of all the faces in the chorus, his was the one that appeared to be listening rather

than showing off. He always seemed to believe the music that he sang. And although I was an arrogant kid full of questions and resisting any answers, I loved the humble reverence I saw in him. I never told him though. It wouldn't have been cool or neat or whatever our catchphrase was in those days. And then he died.

I went to the kitchen and cut a piece of Sally's Christmas bread and brought it to the stranger—to make up for never having told my father that I loved to watch him sing. "You're too kind," the young man murmured. Me, too kind? Lord have mercy, indeed.

How, I wondered, in some future Christmas would my children remember me? Certainly not as I remembered my father—his face glowing with the glory of the music he sang.

I could almost see a huge festive table with a grown-up Mike and Jenny and their families gathered around. And Sally, white-haired and wrinkled, but still not a bad-looking woman. "I wish your father could be here today," she was saying.

"Dad?" Mike was frowning. "He'd hate it. I mean, the very fact that we are here would mean that civilization hadn't blown itself to bits. You know how he hated to be proved wrong about anything."

"Mike! What a thing to say!" Thatta girl, Sally.

"You remember the news bulletins?" Mike went on.

"Children,"—now Jenny, my sweet little girl, has jumped into it—"children, the minute the tree went up your grandfather would begin reading aloud items from the newspaper to prove how awful the world was—that there was no peace, no goodwill, no hope, no joy—"

"Exultate Jubilate!" the choir sang out. With a chill of relief, I shook off the ghost of Christmas-yet-to-come and turned my attention again to my visitor. His face shone as

his cracked lips moved, mouthing the Latin words of joy and exultation. How could he, with raw face and chapped and bleeding hands, be joyful? How, in fact, could the starving Mozart have known such a moment of exquisite joy? How could a baby born in a barn bring such beauty, such glory into this greedy, self-destructive, cruel world?

Suddenly I heard the clatter of the garage door. I jumped from the couch.

“They’re back!”

“Oh.” The young man hastily picked the crumbs of bread off his windbreaker and jeans and popped them into his mouth. He half rose. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I was lost . . .”

“It’s too late. I’ll get them into the front room. You just slip out when you can, and make sure the door is shut.” He looked puzzled, maybe a little hurt. “The horse,” I explained. “I don’t want the children to see it.” And I slammed the family room door on his confused and embarrassed face.



“What glorious music!” Sally said as I met them in the back hall. “It makes me feel like being jubilant.” She’s a beautiful woman, especially when she’s happy. “I’m glad you’ve been listening to Mozart,” she continued, taking off her hat and shaking out her lovely hair. “I rather pictured a different scenario . . .” She gave me a wry look.

“Okay,” I said to the children. “Let’s take all the boots and snowsuits off in the back hall.”

“It’s cold out here, Daddy,” Mike started. “I wanted to take them off in the family room.”

“Now, now,” I said, “no complaints. Joy to the world, and all that!”

“Cause it’s Christmas!” Jenny shrilled, but her voice didn’t pierce through me as it had earlier.

“That’s right,” I said and bent down to help with her boots but kissed her cheek instead.

“You tickle!” She giggled and put her fat little arms around my neck. I bent closer to the boots so she wouldn’t see my eyes. I was feeling very rich.

We had our family time together before the living room fire. I never heard the stranger leave, but then it must have been sometime after the “Alleluia.” I can’t imagine he would have left before that heavenly “Alleluia.”



“This has been a lovely evening.” Sally sighed as she tied the ribbon on the last package. “The nicest Christmas Eve I can remember.”

“Yes,” I said. “Thanks to you. Everything looks so beautiful and smells so good.”

She laughed. “It’s the same every year. I didn’t think you noticed—except for the bills.”

“Well, I noticed, and I like it.”

“It was your music that did it for me,” she said. “I wouldn’t have thought of Mozart for Christmas Eve, but it’s perfect. You have no idea how it felt to open the door and hear that magnificent ‘Exultate’ come pouring out.” She smiled. “What a wonderful idea.”

Then I remembered the horse and the stranger I’d left in the family room. “Oh, Sally,” I said, rushing down the hall. “I totally forgot . . .”

I opened the door. He was gone. I think I was relieved. I’m sure I wouldn’t have known how to explain him.

Sally was behind me. “You did it,” she exclaimed. “Good work.”

Then I realized that the horse was no longer sagging but stood upright, proudly stretched on all four legs—ready to gallop its way into Christmas morning. The stranger had kept his side of the bargain.

So here I sit trying to figure it all out. Who would believe that a man who is still closer kin to Scrooge than to Tiny Tim would, on a bleak midwinter night, be visited by an angel?

I think I'll go put on the Mozart.