

IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER

**by
Jeffrey C. Eaton**

A cold December rain was pelting the window and the drops were exploding against the glass. It was a miserable afternoon of a miserable day of a miserable week... months. The futility of his efforts was displayed on a spread sheet listing the employers to which applications were submitted along with the dates and status of these submissions. In addition, here were files in hard copy which contained job descriptions and information about the employer, his endlessly tweaked resume and the cover letters composed for each of the applications he had made. When he received a definite notice of rejection, this too was included. More often than not, he heard nothing final until he made further inquiries about the search and whether or not the job had been filled. So far, no one was looking for a phi beta kappa in history with a minor in mathematics from a good school and four years experience and references on request.

Three weeks had passed since he moved back to his parent' house. The invitation had been open, and he made the decision to come home just after Thanksgiving when his part-time job at Lowe's evaporated—last hired, first fired. The move was painful for his mother and father as well as for him. His parents were plainly worried, maybe disappointed, but if so, more disappointed for him than in him. And he was humiliated to be living again under their roof, sleeping in the bed in which he had slept as a child and a teenager, in the room he came back to when he was home from college and which even then seemed too small and not his any longer, and which his mother had since made into a guest room. But with no other options he was back again and lying on top of the

bedspread at 11:30 on a Tuesday morning watching the rain, enervated if not quite defeated. “Got to get up and do something,” he told himself. He was sleeping too much during the day, which he took to be a sign of depression that he must fight. He sat up on the edge of the bed and put on his sneakers, considering his options for the rest of the day. Taking on projects around the house had proved a little tricky. His parents had always been particular people, his mother especially, with very definite ideas about how things should be done. As a case in point, though they admitted—it could hardly be denied—that their garage was a scandal and needed a thorough cleaning and reorganizing, they made it clear that they had to have oversight of the project. Still, he thought if he got things out of the corners and from under piles, perhaps when they got home from work they could decide what should go to the trash and what was worth keeping and in this way he could make enough room for at least one of their cars, maybe both of them if they agreed with him about the ratio of refuse to treasures.

He found the toboggan wedged in a back corner of the garage behind the large wooden cabinet that was full of half empty cans of unused and unusable paint, some of which was almost as old as he was. He had forgotten about the sled, hadn't given it a thought for years, not even when the snow was flying, though it was surely the most extraordinary Christmas gift he had ever received. He carefully lifted the toboggan free of the corner and brought it to the center of the garage, setting it across the top of a large plastic garbage can under a bare 100 watt bulb. Slowly circling, he inspected the sled. The vinyl seat pad was on the verge of disintegration, mildewed and flattened and split in several places. Unfastening it, he peeled it off the length of alternating light and dark slats, probably birch or some other durable, supple wood that would take and hold the

bend at the front. The contrast in stain was more pronounced where the wood had been covered by the pad. Turning the sled over, the bottom was a mass of abrasions and gouges, a legend of rides speeding over stones and roots just below the surface of the snow. After the crash that had split the front of the sled, his father made a bumper brace of oak which he screwed to each board at the fracture line to hold the sled together. The toboggan had endured some hard use.

The first time he laid eyes on the sled was a week before Christmas. It was the year he was in the fourth grade—he remembered that clearly, the year when his teacher was the dreaded Mrs. Wyler—and long past Santa. It was the first and only year he searched the house for stashed Christmas presents. Then again, there had never been a present he wanted so badly as the toboggan. Wanted so badly and doubted so absolutely he'd receive. In the first place, the toboggan was an expensive gift and probably more than his parents could afford. But beyond this, according to his mother, a toboggan was dangerous, an uncontrollable missile, especially when the snow was icy. She had heard of horrific injuries which she did not detail. His father, ever practical, observed for his part that winters where they lived rarely yielded much snowfall and that he might have difficulty getting three other guys to fill the sled.

Their arguments were not the least bit convincing, except to indicate that he was not going to get the toboggan, and he was disappointed before the fact and a little peevisish and self-pitying that year as Christmas approached. When had he ever wanted a particular Christmas present enough to even ask for it? He'd always been content to receive whatever he was given, content and appreciative. But here it was, his heart's

desire, stretched out on the attic floor, half under the bags hanging from the rafters in which their summer clothes were stored.

The memory of that afternoon came back to him with such clarity, standing at the top of the attic steps in the weak winter light filtering through the dusty windows, transfixed by the sight of the beautiful sled, his heart so full of love for parents whose hearts were evidently so full of love for him, but also feeling a little guilty for having snooped. Though just a little guilty. And not guilty enough to account for his ambivalence in the final days before that Christmas, which arose out of the simple fact that he *knew*. He was excited to be sure by the knowledge that the toboggan was his, already anticipating the first snowfall when with his buddies he would pull the new sled out through the woods to the steep hills in the park. But even as he thought about the pleasures of calling his friends to tell them about this magnificent gift and inviting them to be part of his team and considering what would be the first hill they'd ride and anticipating the excitement of folding themselves in line on the sled and mastering the steering, there was a certain emptiness that came of having already seen how Christmas would turn out. The last bit of mystery was gone, and suddenly he wanted to forget that he had found the toboggan. Something had been lost in knowing the sled was lying on the floor above the ceiling over his bed, something had slipped away, and Christmas had become hardly different from any other day. On top of this was the realization that he would have to pretend to be surprised on Christmas morning. He wasn't supposed to know what he knew. The good people who had gotten him this gift and secreted it into the house wanted to surprise him and delight him with the unexpected. They had trusted

him not to peek and hardly attempted to hide the sled. How could he deceive them who were so generous to him?

Things were better by Christmas afternoon. After spending the morning alternately sitting in the front position on the sled, his feet tucked inside the curve, or lying prone on the beige tufted seat pad, his hands laced behind his head, dreaming of the rides he'd be having, he and his father took the toboggan out to the garage and waxed its unblemished underside with paraffin so the sled would be ready for the first snowstorm, which mercifully arrived during the second week in January. He was bothered at first by the scrapes and scratches on the sled that came with the use of it, but once reconciled to the inevitability of these imperfections, there was less to lose speeding down the hills and, so liberated, the rides became more daring and thrilling. The collision with the stump that cracked the front of the sled two years later and which might have caused the sort of injury his mother feared occurred ripping down a steep hill that was studded with trees through which there was no easy path.

He shook himself free of his reverie and went back to the work of uncluttering, his spirits buoyed by the memory of a Christmas when his expectations had been so gloriously exceeded. The Christmas coming seemed suddenly not quite so bleak. He'd find a job. It wasn't as if he didn't have anything to offer. These were tough times but not hopeless. He wasn't hopeless, and it even occurred to him that he might take the toboggan with him when he got a job and a place of his own. Why not?

Returning to the middle of the garage, he began dusting off the old sled and wiping it down. When his folks came home, he'd ask them if for the time being he might store the toboggan up in the attic for safe keeping.

Christmas Day, 2011