

WARE THE CHILDREN
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As busy as we are in the holiday season, I wonder that you've joined me. Walk with me a moment.

For now, let's ignore the lonely house, on the lonely street, in this city where men walk alone. Let this time remain special.

See the lonely old man, lost in his mind in the world of the past and its pain. The stinging snow has stopped, though he knows it not. He struggles with the weight of the groceries in his arms. Memories and losses endured are even heavier. Like many others, he is alone this night. It is Christmas Eve.

No one should be alone tonight. To understand his present, let us glance into his mind for fragments of his past. Ignore the scorn of his father and the stinging words of his teacher as he quits school at sixteen. Focus instead on his pride, taking Emmy as his bride. Though without diploma, he willingly assumes the role of husband and provider. We fast forward past the birth of two daughters. We want to join with him in his determination to build the best life possible for them.

Excuse his nervousness as he enrolls in adult education. We would be too, had it been that many years between classes. He is chasing the diploma he needs so badly. The one he will never obtain. It is hard to read through tears, while you bury your young wife and your stillborn child. His daughters need him far more than his dreams need completion. He is still a father.

It's late at night in the home we see in his mind. The girls are asleep, but the lights are still on. He sings softly as he irons the clothes his neighbors brought him. His night job pays for more than the bills. It will buy the education to make his children more than he will ever become. He is a father, raising two beautiful girls alone. He sings because he is happy.

Turn away quickly. Turn away, especially if you are a father. Don't listen to educated children tell their ignorant father they no longer inhabit his world. It matters little that he gave them their lives, as well as his own. Just watch as they take down the tacky decorations he put up to welcome them home. Do they remember them? It was their hands that shaped them, while their father's pride shone.

See the new decorations they use to fix Dad's place. Observe the color coordination of the latest in festive décor offered by technology. Just don't peek in the kitchen. That's where tears fall on twenty years of love being packed forever into boxes. You might never take those memories from storage again.

See the lonely old man, resting on a bench at the edge of the park. In a moment, he'll pick up his bags and continue walking home. Pay special attention though, to the gang of boys, also at rest in the park. On this night, when the world celebrates the birth of one baby, they hate their own arrival on this ball of mud. Their homes contain no holiday cheer. Their ornaments are their gang insignia, their frustration, and their anger. Society has already paid a great deal for their pain. The old man has suddenly acquired their undivided attention.

We overlook the sudden fear that grips him. We are not so different, you and I. One boy detaches himself from the group, headed toward him. He calls out as he comes. He asks if the old man could use help with his bags.

Forgive the confusion of this old father. Overlook his doubt that the offer is genuine. If we were being honest, we would admit we too expected different. Perhaps this night is more special than we imagined.

The sadness in the young man is real. He is used to people fearing him. He wasn't going to hurt anyone on Christmas Eve. He just thought the old man needed help.

We try to tell the old man to just walk away. He cannot be so foolish as to bring a gang member to his home. But we have no voice in this story. His children would protest were they there. They are in Cancun this year, celebrating with friends. Last year it was Australia. So no one is there to cry as he admits he could use some help. Who can say what the boy intends? We just know he is not the Boy Scout his laughing friends have labeled him.

The voice of the old man cuts through their laughter. He wonders why they are not with their families at this special time. His heart breaks as the leader speaks into sudden silence. There is no peace on Earth where they live. They do indeed have families. That is why they prefer the park, rather than their homes.

He is a father who finds himself with no gifts to give these lonely children. The best he can wish them is a merry Christmas before he moves on. Silence and one young man go with him.

A lonely young man bears another's burden this night. Perhaps his sudden impulse was a hunger for meaning for his life. If so, that hope dims as he realizes his slowing companion is afraid to show him the location of his home. He is surprised the old man trusted him this far. Listen while he asks if they are close enough that the old man could take it from here. After all, he is needed back at the park. Ignore the bitterness in his voice.

Oh foolish man, to invite one like this into your home. Fear for him, as the boy carefully looks over the contents of the apartment. He sees the many locks installed by worried daughters. He comments only on the missing decorations.

Do you hear how flippant the old man sounds? Those precious children of his did not care for his cheap décor. Since they never came anymore, it seems silly to go to all that bother for no one but himself. No, his ornaments were not inexpensive, just mostly made by hand.

We need to cover our ears for a moment. After all, what would we say if a total stranger declared our children to be fools?

Blame it on loneliness. Blame it on a foolish hope for good will in all men. The invitation extended certainly takes the boy by surprise. Of course he would like to help decorate the apartment. Would his friends in the park be willing to help?

We might want to cover our eyes as well. This boy is much too tough to have tears in his eyes.

The lonely young men come shyly into his home. The snack foods brought as gifts is humbly accepted by their host. Dusty boxes of decorations await their touch. So does a dusty home and a heart laid dormant too long. The old father lays out food in the kitchen as his wondering guests begin their work. We uncover our ears to hear the beginning curses of one boy silenced by a glance from his leader. This is a night in the process of becoming holy.

Hear the singing as it drifts from the kitchen. It is the old man and the bearer of burdens. They fill the silent evening with the softly sung song of another night once holy. Forgive the old man's less than perfect rendition of the carol. It has been many years since he has sung. Overlook the lack of harmony as the other young men join in one at a time. They have not sung in years either.

Turn away with me again for a while. If they see us see them crying, these boys could hurt us. It's okay now. They are smiling as they ask the old man if they can make decorations with him sometime. Maybe next year?

See the lonely old man. He is surrounded by tough and frightening children. Society has learned to fear such as these. Few would have touched the leader's shirt to ask if wrinkles were a new fashion statement. Wince as the boy bristles up to tell the old man that irons are in short supply where they come from. This father cannot be telling these children he will iron their shirts if they bring them to him. That it is something he does well.

Listen with me to the reason for Christmas as He makes a promise. In the last days, He would turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the hearts of the children back to the fathers.

What has happened here is madness and it is folly. But before we take our leave, listen to the sounds of laughter coming forth. It is rare gifts indeed being exchanged here.

In this once lonely house. On this once lonely street. In a city where men walk alone.

