

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Wise Guy

JOSEPH BOTTUM

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This 2012 Christmas tale by essayist and fiction writer Joseph Bottum (b. 1959) is another retelling of the story of the Wise Men—in particular, that of Balthasar, who brought the gift of myrrh to the infant Jesus. The Magi’s gifts may seem strange for a baby, but they are believed to carry symbolic meaning: gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense (an incense) as a symbol of deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) as a symbol of death.

In Bottum’s reimagining, Balthasar is a young thief named Bart Sagan, who, at the behest of a powerful criminal overlord, must pull off a series of robberies by Christmas Day. Describe Bart Sagan—what kind of thief and man is he? Why does he agree to take on the “twelve crimes of Christmas”? Describe his encounter with Cicely D’Angelo—why does he tell her the truth about his visit? Does he change as a result of their meeting? Why does he send her the gift of the necklace? Is he “wise”? Explain your answer. Why set this story during Christmas?

I.

It all starts . . . but then, where does anything start? Back at the first moments of Creation, maybe, or down in some long-ago legend, its meanings and purposes faded now into the darkening past. Every story’s opening is a little arbitrary, one way or another. Every beginning is a small lie.

Still, since this particular story concerns a thief named Bart Sagan, we should probably begin where he did—the afternoon of December 18, a week before Christmas, when he fought his way through the icy winds that slice down High Street to meet a friend at the Evergreen Tavern and ask her for some help. Hatch a quick plan with her, in other words. Plot a little crime.

As Bart laid out the story for his friend, it all starts when a drug runner for the local crime lord Harry King gets himself rattled—rattled good and hard, convinced he’s only half a jump ahead of the cops.

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Billy is that runner's name; Billy Euston. And maybe he's right to think the police are closing in on him. Or maybe he's just gone crazy. Who knows? Eventually, all drug runners imagine they hear footsteps, creeping along behind them, and start to twitch in their sleep. But either way, there this scrawny, longhaired Billy character finds himself: abandoning his car on a south-side street to duck down an alley, lugging an old brown-leather suitcase.

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Of course, with twelve three-kilo packages of heroin inside, the suitcase weighs almost eighty pounds. Both hands on the handle just to carry it, wheezing like an asthmatic sheep, even Billy, loopy as he is, begins to realize he's not getting far. But up ahead, midway down the block, he sees a big delivery truck coming out of a gate. And it's then that Billy has the first of his bright ideas: He'll throw off the police by slipping around the truck and hiding in the shipping yard.

Only trouble is, the yard's full of people: paper-baggers finishing their lunches, and smokers taking a nicotine break, and drivers standing around in little knots, shouting back and forth while they drink their coffee and wait for their loads. The place where he thought he could hole up for a while—dodge the police, maybe call Mr. King's people for a pick-up—turns out to be the loading dock of a huge shipping center, a bustling madhouse in the middle of the Christmas rush.

It's not so much a plan as sheer momentum, as Bart explained it, that carries Billy forward into the building—red faced and sweating, jostled by the tide of workers: a scruffy kid in a leather jacket that's practically a sign on his back reading *Arrest Me, I'm a Criminal*, hauling a life-sentence load of uncut heroin and trying to pretend he belongs there.

Inside, the shipping center proves even wilder. The last thing a paranoid, adrenaline-fueled drug runner needs is noise, and this place is *loud*. People shouting, forklifts banging around. An every-which-way tangle of conveyers—you know the kind of thing: those waist-high tracks covered with little wheels to help slide the packages along—all clattering away. The building is like a hundred-decibel pinball machine, and Billy's the ball, bouncing from bumper to bumper, tripping over people, stumbling into boxes, trying to find an exit. He notices a security guard down the aisle giving him the fish-eye, maybe, and talking into a radio, so he cuts back around an assembly line of workers packing up Christmas boxes for mailing and slips through a door.

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Unfortunately, what he's walked into turns out to be a storage room, the shelves piled with empty white gift boxes, pretty gold bows on the lids. And it's there that Billy has his second of his bright ideas. He pulls down a dozen of the boxes, packs a bag of heroin in each, and stacks them on a rolling cart. Then he shucks his jacket and hides it behind the door with the suitcase. He puts on a stray blue apron, to match the workers he's seen, and grabs a dusty clipboard to look even more official.

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A deep breath, and he's ready to go—except, trying to maneuver the cart out of the closet, he runs straight into a square-built woman, as immovable as a linebacker, wearing a red supervisor's apron. "There you are," she says, like she knows him, taking hold of the cart. "Where in the name of all that's holy have you been the last hour?" Billy tries to wrestle the cart away from her, but she's stronger than he is, there's a pair of security guards standing only five feet away, and she's shouting, "Susan, Bob, the rest of you, here are the last of them. C'mon, c'mon, people, the truck's waiting."

Susan and Bob—what looks like the whole assembly-line crew of packers—come running up, and before Billy can say a word, they've grabbed the gift boxes and packed them for shipping. The linebacker in the red apron snatches the clipboard out of his hand, glares at him, and marches off, yelling, "Here are the addresses. Let's go, people. Move, move, move." The security guards give him that sympathetic shrug men share when one of them has just been flattened by a woman, and there we are: Billy watches open-mouthed and helpless, gaping like a fish, while maybe \$10 million of Harry King's property goes floating down the river of conveyor tracks, through a label scanner, and out the door as Christmas presents for God knows who.

He always wants to make it a story, Liz McCally grumbled to herself as her friend Bart paused his tale of misadventures to sip at the hot drink he'd ordered. That's his weakness. Bart's the best of us, maybe: smart, careful, always thinking ahead. Strong, too, with that kind of whipcord strength of a ranch hand who looks like he weighs a hundred pounds, dripping wet, but can master an unbroken horse in an afternoon.

Liz shivered a little, as she watched him across the table in one of the Evergreen's back booths, his long safecracker's fingers stirring his cider with a cinnamon stick. A thin, wiry man with a mop of black hair, handsome in an ugly, Abraham Lincoln way, Bart could be anything. Make a big score and retire, leave us all behind. But he wants it to mean something: to have a shape, reveal some purpose. He needs to turn everything

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into a story—a fable, capped off with a clean little moral—and eventually that’s going to get him killed.

She liked Bart, she knew. Trusted him, would work with him on any parts of a job she understood. Maybe she was even in love with him, a little. But she wouldn’t tell him that, wouldn’t get tangled up with him, because it would hurt too much when the end they all knew was coming for him finally arrived, like a hearse pulling up at the door.

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Swirling her own drink, studying his hands, Liz missed Bart’s explanation of how Billy the Stupid Kid got out of the shipping center and reported back to Mr. King. Not that she cared about some drug runner she’d never met—or Harry King, as far as that went. She’d been a con artist in this town long enough to know the score: Anyone who crossed Harry King ended up knee-deep in the sludge at the bottom of the river, and Liz didn’t figure she could learn water-breathing fast enough to escape with the kingpin’s drugs or money, if she were fool enough to steal them. But apart from that, why should it matter? You didn’t break into one of Mr. King’s cribs, in the same way you didn’t try armed robbery at a police station. Otherwise, you were free to take on any job you thought your luck and skill would carry you through.

“What’s this got to do with me? With you, with any of us?” she demanded, while Bart stared off into the distance as though he were trying to see the end, see what it all meant—the Saga of Billy the Unlucky.

He looked back at Liz across the table, smiled that lopsided smile of his, and answered, “Yeah, well, that’s the second part of the story.”

Turns out, a couple of bruisers had picked up Bart that morning, casually scooping him off the sidewalk like well-dressed trash collectors just as he was leaving his apartment. Mute in the car, they stayed, as they drove him along. Not a word in the elevator and speechless down the marbled hallway, escorting him in silence through the mahogany doors and into the famous penthouse suite of Harry King—Harry King, in all his pomp and glory.

King looks, as Bart described him for Liz, like a pig farmer who’s spent too much time with his animals. Greedy little eyes, quick and suspicious. The shrewdness of someone who knows how to get what he wants, and the impatience of someone who

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wants even more of it. The big, sausage-fingered hands of a man who likes to hold things and squeeze.

“You believe this?” King roars to the room full of people as Bart is shouldered inside, the doors closing behind him. A sycophantic little man in a black suit flinches as King swings a flashing necklace past him to wave above his desk. “A half million dollars, that’s what this little cockroach wants to charge me.”

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The drug world’s unchallenged ruler narrows his eyes and stares for a moment at the flow of silver and diamonds like starlight around his hand. “Still, it’s a pretty thing, and the wife will like it,” he says, in a quieter voice. “All right, I’ll buy it. Frank, take the cockroach outside and give him a check.” He drops the necklace in a clump back into its velvet-covered case and hands it to the man on his other side. “Mike, put this with the other presents you’re having wrapped. I’ll give it to her at the party on the 24th, when all the bigwigs get their gifts. The rest of you, get the hell out of here. I want to talk to this man.”

A thin, longhaired kid—cotton wads in his swollen nose and bruises forming on his face—starts to slide gratefully from his chair and join the exodus, till King jabs a fat finger at him and snarls, “Not you, Billy boy. Oh, no, not you. You stay and have a little conversation with us.”

As the room empties, King comes around to the front of the desk and leans his buttocks back against it, waving Bart to a chair in front of him. “Sorry about that,” he announces in the cordial tone that, in Bart’s experience, usually means somebody is about to point a gun at his head. “Christmas Eve Day—is that how you say it? It sounds wrong, somehow.” He gives Bart a puzzled look, then lets it go. “Anyway, the afternoon of the 24th, I’m throwing a reception for the mayor, the head of the museum, maybe the D.A., a dozen of the real powers in this town. ‘Establishing respectable credentials,’ my lawyers call it.”

He shifts against the desk and stares over Bart’s head at the books like wallpaper on the shelves at the back of the room. “Funny thing about respectable people,” he adds. “You can give them money—you *have* to give them money: lots and lots of it, all quiet and discreet, if you want to buy into their respectable world. But if you try to give them something sensible as a little goodwill gift, a watch or a car or something like that, they lean back all insulted and sniff like a maiden aunt who’s just heard a dirty word.”

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He sneers, “What you can give them, though, is food. It’s the social thing to do, the lawyers tell me: a little gift for the household to show your heart’s in the right place. So that’s what they’re getting from Harry King for Christmas.” He points over at the other side of the room, and Bart twists around to study the long table piled with tins and bottles and half-wrapped presents. “Caviar, truffles, Japanese mushrooms, crap like that. Coffee at \$600 a pound from Sumatra or some damn place. A \$2,000 bottle of wine. \$10,000 a box, that’s what these little house presents are costing me, and none of it worth the pot to piss it away in. But respectable, yeah—oh so *respectable*.”

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Then Harry King shakes his head like a horse chasing off a fly. “I’m talking too much. You’re a busy man, so let’s get down to business. This,” he says, waving his hand toward the kid in the chair, “is Billy Euston, and he’s lost something that belongs to me. He’s my sister-in-law’s nephew, and I’d never hear the end of it if he fell down a flight of stairs and broke his neck. So maybe Billy isn’t going to pay as much as he should for yesterday’s mistake—at least, not if you can fix it for him. Take him with you when you go, and he’ll give you the details about where and how he mislaid my property.”

Bart opens his mouth to ask why he needs any details at all, but King holds up a finger again. “Here’s the point. I know all about you, Bart Sagan. I know you’re maybe the slickest thief in my town. *My* town. I know you’ve got a little crew of friends and helpers that you’d hate to see anything happen to. Little Liz McCally, for instance, as pretty as a picture. Be a shame if she got hurt. The bartender down at the Evergreen who passes messages for you. All the rest of you independents.”

He sneers again. “All the rest of you small-timers. I’ve let you work, let you go about your business, for too long. But now it’s tax day, all over the city, and your bill just came due. Get my property back for me, and we’ll call it even.”

Groping behind himself for an envelope, he adds, “The police don’t know anything yet, don’t have a clue about what’s happened, and I want it kept that way. That’s why I’m using you, instead of my own men, for this job. You have a reputation for being quick and quiet, not making waves—so find my property, quick and quiet. What’s today, December eighteenth? I want it all back before New Year’s.” Then he tosses the envelope into Bart’s lap. “Here’s some money, a few thousand dollars, for expenses. And maybe there’ll be a little bonus, if you get it done right, with nobody ever knowing. But that’s all.”

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Harry King smiles, an emperor surveying the world he owns. “It’s tax day, Bart,” he repeats, rolling the phrase around in his mouth like he’s tasting it for the first time and deciding he likes the flavor. “Tax day, and everybody everywhere is going to pay. Now take Billy here with you and clear out. I’ve got work to do.”

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So Bart rises from his chair and leaves the penthouse, trailed by the hangdog Billy, much as Harry King’s bruises had brought him: never having said a word.

II.

By the time Cicely D’Angelo caught him in her house—by the time he’d danced with her to a scratchy old record on the phonograph and kissed her white hair in the light of a Christmas tree at the record’s end—Bart already knew the job was going wrong.

Not that it hadn’t begun well. The con that Liz ran at the shipping center, for example, proved easy enough. A brown delivery uniform was enough to get her through the door, she told Bart as she handed him the mailing list at noon the next day, December nineteenth. After that it was just a matter of a little strategic cleavage, a few tears welling up in her eyes, and a helpless-maiden tale of a dozen ruined addresses that she was going to get fired for, if she couldn’t replace them. In by 9:00 that morning, out by 10:00, a printout of the list in her pocket.

“The guy who helped me, digging out the names and addresses from their computer system, is some kind of geek genius. Better even than you, Bart, and I always thought you were the best. He’ll end up running the place, if he can learn to keep his paws on his keyboard.” Liz smiled indulgently. “He even discovered where the names came from—the last entries in an advertising campaign from a couple of years ago. He was starting to wonder why they were popping up again, all in the same order, for a Christmas mailing this year, but I managed to distract him.” She smiled again. “He’s already left me two messages, asking for a date.”

Bart studied the list for a moment or two before setting it down on the tavern table. He sighed, staring at his drink as he stirred it with a thin pink-and-white swirled stick.

“What is it?” Liz asked.

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“Hmm? Oh, this? It’s heated schnapps with a peppermint candy cane,” he answered. “I always order hot drinks in December. They taste like Christmas, somehow.”

“No, you idiot,” Liz snorted in exasperation. “Not the drink. The *list*. Did you see the kicker?”

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Yes, Bart had seen it, like a boot to the head. Nine addresses in the city, two in the nearby suburbs. Or nearby enough, anyway, that maybe he could complete the whole assignment in the days he had left before people started opening their Christmas presents. Break into eleven places without leaving a mark, locate the boxes, replace the heroin with something the same weight so the victims never knew they’d been hit, and then slip out again unseen: unlikely, but at least imaginable. But the twelfth address—that was impossible.

“How am I supposed to get all the way out to Minnesota and back in time to steal the rest of the packages?” he asked Liz. “For that matter, where do you suppose it is—this Moriah, Minnesota, place?”

“Up near the Canadian border,” she answered smugly. “Population 2,412. Major industries: timber and mining. Lots of ice fishing. The local high school—the Fighting Beavers—won the Minnesota Division II hockey tournament last winter and are favored again this year, if their goalie gets over his mono in time. Some of the girls on the chat networks think he caught it kissing that cheap, bottle-blond cheerleader from International Falls, but they admit they don’t know for sure. What are you staring at? I looked up the town online.”

Bart laughed for the first time since Harry King had laid down his orders. “The trouble is,” he explained, “I don’t know any good thieves out in the middle of the country. Someone from here will have to go, and it’s almost impossible to get people for a serious out-of-town job this time of year. After the holidays, they’re all broke and hungry, but before Christmas—that’s the one time they worry about being away from their families.”

“I guess,” said Liz slowly, “my cousin could try, if you want. His name is Joey. Joey Jasper. He called the other day, looking for work. He’s steady, even if he is kind of a doob.”

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“A doob? Is that like a dweeb?”

“No . . .”

“A dork? A doofus?”

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“C’mon, Bart. You know what a doob is. It’s a . . . a *doob*. It means—oh, I don’t know. It means he’s unlucky, maybe. Like, if a job falls apart, you just know he’ll be the one who gets caught. But he won’t steal from his partners, and how tough can a small town be? I mean, we’re talking Moriah, Minnesota, here. Not New York or Los Angeles. The only worry is that they’ll mistake the stuff for powdered sugar and use it to bake a cake for him.”

He liked Liz, Bart knew: liked her spunk, liked her quickness. Liked her looks, too, he had to admit. Small, five-two or -three, maybe, and overflowing with all-American cuteness—a cuteness she relied on in far too many of her scams, especially that girl-in-distress routine she would run on anything even vaguely male. But her face: It hinted at something more. Something reaching toward an individual character, an individual beauty. Her bright eyes, her hair . . . He caught himself studying her and jerked his gaze back up toward the tavern’s front windows.

Unfortunately, Bart also knew that working with Liz led to trouble. She’d gotten the lucky bounce so often, she’d come to believe that luck ruled the universe, and it lured her out ahead of herself—hurrying a job, throwing off the timing. Oh, she appreciated competence, even in somebody like the shipping company’s computer guy. But in the end, she divided the world into the lucky and the unlucky, and she pushed too hard. She’s like a tennis player, Bart reflected, with no strategy except to rush the net and take the ball on the volley. You can win a lot of points that way, steal a quick set of games, but you tend to lose the long, drawn-out matches, without ever quite understanding why.

Bah, he thought, this business is making me sour. On any given job, you trusted Liz for what she was good at, and you kept her out of the rest. And why not? She was looking for her path, like everyone else. We’re all stumbling around in the dark, seeking even the faintest glimmer in the sky to follow.

“How much does a kilo weigh?” asked Liz, interrupting Bart’s reverie.

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“A kilo—what do you mean, how much does it weigh? It weighs a kilo. A kilogram.”

“No, I mean how much does it weigh in some normal weight? You know, like a measure we normally use. How many pounds?”

“Oh. Just over two pounds. A kilo is 2.2 pounds.”

“Okay,” said Liz. “Now we’re cooking.” She turned to look over her shoulder at the Evergreen’s bartender. “Hey, Tim,” she called out. “How much does a liquor bottle weigh? Like a regular bottle of wine?”

“Full? Three, maybe four pounds,” he answered. “Depends on how thick the glass of the bottle is.”

“Thanks,” she called back. “So how about that?” she turned again to ask Bart. “Three kilos in each box, 2.2 pounds a kilo, that’s 6.6 pounds. Call it six and a half. Two bottles of wine the right weight, and we’ve got what we need for the swap. Nobody’s going to be too surprised by getting wine for Christmas, right? No more than surprised, anyway, than they are simply by the fact that someone sent them an anonymous present.”

“Yeah, maybe,” answered Bart. “Stop by the liquor store, and see what you can find. Meanwhile, I think I’ll drive out to the suburbs this afternoon. I’ve got to start looking at these places, figure out which ones are going to be hard to break into. See if I can put together a plan.”

“What else do you want me to do?”

“Nothing. Tell your cousin to call me right away, and I’ll fill him in, set him up with a plane ticket, get him moving. But otherwise, I want you out of it.”

“I’m already in it,” Liz snapped. “Harry King put me there when he threatened me and everybody else we know. You can’t protect us. Not from King. Not from anybody.” “C’mon, Bart,” she added, softening. “I know you want to be Santa Claus, bringing comfort and joy to all us little wide-eyed children, amazed at how wise and wonderful you are. But even Santa has his reindeer and those goofy elves helping him out. Let me call around, find out which of our friends are in town, see if I can’t talk one or two of

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them into giving us a hand. At least we can be good little elves and scope out the addresses here in the city for you.”

“No breaking in? No jumping ahead? Just checking on them?”

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“Cross my heart,” Liz swore, drawing an X on the front of her brown uniform blouse, the look of innocence on her guileless face a greater promise of dishonesty than anything Bart had seen in years.

Maybe Liz has it right, Bart was beginning to think. No hesitation, no planning. You just walk in and try to make something happen. At least, that’s the way it worked at the second house he went to check. Wearing a dark green gas-company uniform pulled from his trunk, he’d driven slowly past the first of the suburban addresses—formulating, as best he could, an idea for how to hit the small, green bungalow.

The second address, however, turned out to be up a long drive extending from a quiet suburban street. The previous weeks of ice and snow, piled up by the plows in long hedgerows, masked the property boundaries, and before he fully realized he was on the estate, Bart had come around the curve of the drive, in full sight of the front door.

An old-money kind of house, it seemed, belonging as if by right in this old-money kind of suburb. Maybe it had been a little gaudy, back in the day, but the mainstream of American architecture had long ago flowed past it, and the place now looked almost stodgy—the pretensions of the exposed beams, fancy stucco, and leaded windows softened by the thick ivy slowly enveloping the house and the big trees that had used the years to grow up around it.

Standing on the wide steps, her arms wrapped around herself for warmth, was a woman in a gray dress and white sweater, arguing vehemently in Spanish with a man in a parka, holding a shovel. The housekeeper and the groundskeeper, Bart guessed, with different ideas about what needs to be done. Not even the arrival of a stranger halted their squabble, and as he stepped from the car to offer some spiel that might account for his presence, the woman merely glanced at his uniform and waved him around to the side of the big house where, presumably, the gas meters were to be found.

Much as Bart disliked being seen by his targets, the chance to check out the security system was too good to pass up—and the chance proved even better than he had supposed. A window at eye level, in what looked like a pantry. Visible through the

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window, a white Christmas box with a gold bow on top, sitting in a nest of packing material on the counter next to piles of sorted mail. And a few feet to the right, a side door opening into a deserted kitchen. Unlocked, too, he discovered when he gave the handle an exploratory turn.

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Now, think of that: an open door in what felt like an empty house. It's hard to say what more of a welcome sign a thief could want in this life. A few quick steps down the hall, the bag of heroin lifted out of its box, some jars of fancy foods off the pantry shelves put inside to give a rough match of the weight, and the lid set carefully back on. Out again through the side door, the tape-reinforced plastic bag held against his side. A ducked head and a wave at the still-arguing couple, and Bart had successfully completed the first of the tasks Harry King had demanded of him.

He smiled as he paused his car at the bottom of the drive to tuck the heroin under the passenger's seat and look again at the shipping list. The twelve crimes of Christmas—now eleven, he noted with satisfaction, crossing out the name and address of one Michael Stuyvesant: the victim of a smash and grab so lightning quick and honey smooth that, with any luck, he would never even know he'd been smashed and grabbed.

Hubris was the term Bart later used to describe it: the confidence he felt after the Stuyvesant job, the sense of invincibility that led him to drive straight back to the first of the suburban addresses—the little green bungalow with the drooping eaves that belonged, according to the shipping list, to a woman named Cicely D'Angelo—and try his luck at a second daylight felony.

Of course, since the person to whom he eventually told the story was the battered drug-runner Billy Euston, who wouldn't know the word *hubris* if it slapped him (as his distant relative Harry King had, several times), some of the point may have been lost. But picture it this way: On Bart's first pass down the street in the failing afternoon sun, the house looks quiet and deserted, with no car in the driveway and the white Christmas-tree bulbs through chintz curtains the only interior lights he can see. So he parks around the corner, straightens his gas-company uniform, and walks up to the house, as bold as brass.

There's an odd, threadbare quality Bart could sense, he tried to explain to Billy, even on the front porch. The fading paint, the suet hanging in a rusting wire basket for the cold birds, the aging wood of the window frames—they should have told him something, should have warned him. But the lock on the front door is a museum piece, almost an

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insult to a modern thief trained up on electronic alarms, and a few seconds with his picks is all he needs to tickle it open and slip inside.

Threadbare. It's one of those words that's almost a story, all by itself. The wingback chairs, the patterned rugs on the wood floor, even the parson's table in the entryway, loaded with knickknacks and seemingly designed to trip an unwary thief—they're all a little worn or frayed: not dingy, exactly, or dusty; well cared for, in fact. But they suggest, somehow, that they've seen better days. That the world itself, maybe, has seen better days.

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Peering carefully around the corner, Bart spies in the front room a Christmas tree straight out of an old magazine advertisement. You know the kind: pewter and glass ornaments dangling down. The fat bulbs of old-fashioned white lights, swirled like soft ice-cream cones, clipped on the branches. A bright star on top. And there, among the smattering of small presents on the red skirt around the base of the tree, waits a white box with a bright gold bow.

As he moves toward the tree, Bart finds himself inching past yet another crowded table, this one overflowing with a crèche: shepherds, Wise Men, the Holy Family—joined by a stampede of small wooden, stone, china, and even metal animals. It's as though the remnants of a dozen old Noah's Ark sets had decided, all at once, to go and gaze upon the Infant Jesus. Elephants, camels, giraffes, horses, raccoons, and porcupines. Wildebeests, wolverines, and wombats, for all that Bart could tell. The mass migration filled the table, while from the cliff top of a neighboring upright piano, a second wave of the menagerie looked down in wonder.

"They are rather a jumble, aren't they?" pipes a small voice from across the room, freezing Bart in place. "But each of them was a gift from a student, and how can I have Christmas without setting them out? I'm sorry. I must have nodded off here, waiting. Oh, Johnny, what took you so long?"

III.

Ninety, she must be, Bart told Billy. Ninety, ninety-five, a hundred, who could say? Old, anyway, and white haired, a tiny figure curled up in an upholstered chair across the room, with a faded tartan throw rug draped over her.

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“Forgive me,” she adds. “I’m always a little at sixes and sevens when I wake up, these days. You’re not Johnny, of course. Come help me up, dear, and we’ll put on some tea.”

And so, in a kind of daze, master thief Bart Sagan threads his way across the room and eases Cicely D’Angelo, as fragile as a winter bird, up from her chair and into the kitchen.

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“There we are,” she begins to prattle. “Now, let me put on the water, and if you wouldn’t mind, the cups and saucers are in the hall, in that awful old cabinet of my mother’s. It’s silly of me, I know, to keep the monstrous thing, with the house already crowded. But my mother was so proud of it. Remember? She had it in the parlor, where every visitor could see it, there in the house on Stilton Avenue when I was a girl.”

She turns and smiles at Bart. “No, how foolish of me. Of course you don’t remember that house. You really must forgive me my rambling. A strong young man like you: You’re too busy to know, naturally. But eventually, when life slows down, you’ll find the past survives mostly in old things. Old things and the memories they hold. Cabinets, pieces of jewelry, those Christmas animals: Every one of them has a story it wants to tell. A story it *does* tell, most days. Chatter, chatter, chatter. I tell you, some days I think I will go mad, the house is so full of noise.”

Bart nods and steps toward the front of the house. He intends, naturally—*naturally*, he paused his story to point out the word to Billy: a few moments trapped with the old lady, and he’s already saying things like *naturally*—to slide straight out the front door. But then Cicely calls out, “Don’t forget the creamer and the sugar bowl, dear. We’ll use the porcelain my sister Amelia painted, with all those silly little flowers on them. Anemone, asphodels, and China asters, if you can believe it.”

Which makes Bart stop to look through the upper glass doors of the cabinet at the sets of dishes, and before he quite understands why, he’s picking out the pieces of the fragile tea set and ferrying them to the kitchen. “Leave the teapot here, dear, and arrange the rest on the small table in the front room, if you would be so kind. Napkins in the dining-room sideboard,” Cicely adds kindly.

Of course, then he has to make an additional trip to the dining room for the silver. A journey to the kitchen for a platter of cookies and the hot teapot. Yet another trek to the

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hall for the plates he had forgotten on his first visit, and by the time everything is arranged and Cicely is perched on her needlepoint chair to pour the tea, Bart has begun to feel that maybe he really could use a snack.

“Star-of-Bethlehem, that’s for atonement, isn’t it?” asks Cicely, while Bart tries manfully to get an actual swallow from his delicate cup. “A pink rose stands for grace. Morning glories mean ‘I love in vain.’ Do you know the language of flowers, dear? Our mother taught it to us when we were young, but I can’t quite remember what these painted flowers of Amelia’s are supposed to be saying. Something sad and heartfelt, no doubt. Amelia took such joy in being melancholy. What a beauty she was, the boys swirling around her. But she always danced away, a tragic smile on her face as though they had broken her heart—instead of the other way around.”

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She gazes down at the tea table until at last she murmurs, “*There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies, that’s for thoughts.* Shakespeare knew the language of flowers, of course. *There’s a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died.* Oh, Johnny, do you remember those purple lilacs you brought, the first time you came calling? So sickly sweet, a boy’s fantasy of what flowers should be. I thought they were for Amelia, but no, my father said, a young man had brought them for me.”

She closes her eyes for long enough that Bart starts to make his escape, imagining she’s fallen asleep. But his teacup rattles as he sets it down, and Cicely returns from her memories. “All done, dear?” she asks. “Help me clear these dishes away, then, and you can tell me why you’ve come.”

The funny thing is, he’s tempted to tell her the truth. Oh, while they’re cleaning up—Cicely washing at the sink, Bart drying beside her—he tries out his story of being just a man from the gas company, stopping to read the meter. But Cicely merely answers, “Are you, dear? That seems unlikely,” and sends him back to the dining room to put away the silver.

And by the time they’re settled companionably in the front room, Bart has fallen into a kind of wondering resignation, fiddling with a small bowl of beads on a side table and waiting to see what comes to pass.

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“I can’t think how many years I’ve saved those. Glass beads, nothing fancy, of course, but, oh, I felt so fine wearing them. A young man named Johnny was coming to take me to a ball at the college, and my sister Amelia went out and bought me a necklace to wear. We drove in a taxi—my first taxi ride with anyone except my father—and we danced and danced. Such dances, and he kissed me. But the necklace broke, and those loose beads in the bowl are all I could gather up. I still remember how they looked, glittering there on the polished wood floor of the ballroom. It was just an inexpensive little thing, but I sometimes think I’ve spent the rest of my life searching for the lost pieces.”

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She smiles and meets Bart’s eyes across the table. “And you, dear? What are you searching for? I can tell, you know. There’s something you’re pondering, there in your heart.”

So, almost in a dream, Bart tells her. Tells the white-haired, bright-eyed Cicely D’Angelo the whole thing: the story of Billy, the accident-prone drug runner, and the tale of Harry King, the brutal overlord, making a play for respectability even while he taxed the town’s criminals. The untrustworthy cleverness of Liz McCally, drawn into the plot when she conned the shipping company for the mailing list. Her worrisome cousin, the doob Joey Jasper, heading off to Minnesota to retrieve a distant package. Even the break-in he had committed that afternoon, lifting three kilos of heroin from beside a stack of medical bills in the pantry of Michael Stuyvesant’s empty mansion—Bart explains it all.

“Why would you do that?” Billy interrupted to ask when Bart reached this point in his story. “I mean, that’s crazy. I don’t get it. I don’t get it, at all.”

“I know, Billy,” he answered. “But that’s why I’m telling you all this—because you haven’t been getting it. And the time has come for you to start.”

After Bart finishes describing the world closing in on him like a vise, Cicely nods and says, “It’s a puzzle, isn’t it? Put on some music, over there in the corner, while I straighten a little and see if I can’t think of some advice for you.” She struggles up and adds, “The difficulty is really your friends, isn’t it? Holding them safe? Yes, we have to find some way for you to keep watch over your flock. And that awkward young man who lost the packages, as well. He’s come into your life, the poor sheep, and now you must take care of him, too.”

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So while Cicely putters among the bric-a-brac in the front room, each of the animals in the crèche's long procession receiving a dusting, Bart examines the records on the shelves beside the ancient Victrola in the corner—a stand-alone phonograph player, built in a polished wooden cabinet. The Andrews Sisters and Vic Damone are there. Dinah Shore. Perry Como crooning "Some Enchanted Evening," and Nat King Cole feeling his way through "Nature Boy": *The greatest thing you'll ever learn, / Is just to love and be loved in return.* Peggy Lee, Bing Crosby, the Mills Brothers—a meandering through two decades of popular music. Pulling out a Christmas album almost at random, Bart slides the record from its paper sleeve and sets it carefully on the turntable, the music rising just above the low hum of the tubes warming up in the old machine.

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"That's lovely, dear," Cicely calls. "Now come help me dust while we put our heads together. My father was a lawyer, you know, and I remember some of the gangsters who would come to speak with him. So dashing, my sister and I thought them, in their stylish suits and hats. But not always the brightest of men. Shrewd in their own way, no doubt, with an eye on the main chance, but no, not terribly good thinkers."

Bart beside her, straightening the crèche, she adds, "And that's your problem, isn't it, dear? Oh, you're one of the sharp ones, I can see. But it's not enough to be smart. You also have to be wise." She pauses, and in the background, Bart could hear the soft singing of a carol, *Bearing gifts we traverse afar.* "Not everyone has that chance, you know. Up on the piano, toward the front, do you see a pair of elephants? Carved from some African tree, I believe. One of my students gave them to me—sent them from overseas for Christmas, long after I'd taught him in school. Such a lovely boy."

She studies the small wooden animals Bart has risen to take down for her. "Yes, a lovely boy. Gone now, of course," she sighs. "Every few years, while I was teaching, I would have one of you in my class, you know. Bright boys but distant, their eyes always focused off on the horizon as though they were searching for something to lead them. As though they were watching for a sign."

"Ah, well," Cicely adds, her voice tiring. "Set these back on the piano, dear, and let's finish here. They say elephants never forget, and perhaps that's my problem—not forgetting. I wish I could tell you what to do, but one feels one is not really allowed, these days. Except perhaps for this: Try to be wise. All you bright young boys, so intelligent and lovely—you need to learn to think not only *how* but also *why*. Yes, don't be afraid to

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puzzle it through, finding what it truly means. And along the way, see if you can't find a different star to follow. Your gifts were given you for better things than this." She leans against Bart and murmurs in exhaustion, "Oh, and marry the girl, dear. There will be time enough to be alone. Time enough, Lord knows."

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As Bart guides her back across the crowded room to her chair, Cicely begins to sway in time with the last song on the record, a melody he can't quite remember from the distant edge of childhood. "Oh, Johnny," she whispers, "I knew you would come back to dance with me again. Why did you stay away so long?" And there in the final strains of the soft music, he kisses her hair and covers her gently with the blanket as she falls asleep again, as light as snow.

A step across the room to turn off the Victrola, a reluctant stop to kneel down, removing the bag of drugs from the box beneath the tree, and Bart pauses in the doorway to look back at her. "I wish I could have been Johnny for you," he says quietly. "I wish he had come back."

"I know, dear," Cicely D'Angelo surprises him with a last answering whisper. "But Johnny was lost in the war, ages ago. Ages and ages ago. Be well, my love. Be wise."

IV.

Even at the early afternoon hour when the gray city sky was as light as December would allow it and most of the town had finished lunch, each as each could, in accordance with the money they possessed, or could borrow or steal—even at the moment when the crosswalks teemed with harried salesclerks tardily rushing back to work and money men strolling calmly in their opulent overcoats to what they assured one another were their indispensable professions, while swarms of Christmas shoppers, the season's annual visitors, having stripped bare the shelves and display cases of the downtown shops, lined the curbs and howled for taxis—even, for that matter, while the great bells in the dingy downtown churches rested after their noon peals and gathered strength for the Advent evening's Angelus, and the loud taxis roared by unstoppping, indifferent to the sidewalks dense with shivering people shouting into their cell phones, and the Salvation Army's Santas furiously ringing hand bells above their red donation kettles, and the anxious delivery trucks beeping in a discordant choir as they tried to back into loading zones, like some madman's electronic attempt to render "The Carol of the Bells" in the most irrelevant and irreverent tones he could find; in short, even as all the visible world had

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become a bustling Christmas cityscape straight out of a Charles Dickens story—even then, Bart Sagan sat unmoving on the window seat and stared out at the snowy, busy scene below him.

Three days he had remained there inside his apartment, disregarding the increasingly frantic phone calls and poundings at the door. Three days with nothing gained since he had taken the packages from Michael Stuyvesant and Cicely D'Angelo, with Harry King's deadline—and the probability that the white and gold gift boxes would be opened at Christmas—falling down on him like an avalanche.

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Not that the days had been entirely wasted, although Bart wouldn't know that until finally, early on December 23rd, the fourth morning since his robberies began, he stirred himself—bundling up and heading out into the cold to begin work. And it was down on the corner of State and Main, within sight of Harry King's building, that Bart noticed Toby Veck and his daughter Meg, con artists with whom he and Liz sometimes worked, brushing past the hardcase stick-up man Caleb Plummer and giving him the wink.

Curious to see what could bring the dissimilar criminals together, Bart turned up his collar, pulled down his hat, and settled into a cautious shadow, following them up State Street toward the cathedral. Following them, in fact, till they came to a modern-looking apartment building, one of the addresses—just to be sure, Bart ducked behind a Santa and reindeer display and checked his copy of the list—to which a heroin package had been sent.

In itself, that was enough of a coincidence to set Bart worrying. But then he saw Meg and Caleb take up the places of yet more criminals he recognized: the pickpocket May Fielding and the safecracker Will Fern, who casually slipped Toby their notebooks and strolled off arm in arm, approximating as best they could an innocent pair of Christmas shoppers. Toby nodded to his daughter and the armed robber, pocketed the previous watchers' notebooks, and strolled off himself, turning east on Third.

It took Bart several hours to piece together the operation, and he found himself inordinately proud that he had lost the wary Toby only once—when, after making a call from a pay phone, the old man had suddenly stepped out into the street to hail a taxi and speed off, while Bart argued vainly with a woman, her arms full of Christmas packages, who claimed the taxi he had frantically managed to stop. But Bart picked up Toby again

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when, finding at last another cab, he made a guess and directed the driver to the nearest unvisited address on the shipping company's list.

By the time Toby turned on High Street, hunching his shoulders against the wind, and disappeared into the Evergreen Tavern, Bart had watched him make five stops—visiting, like a policeman's bad dream, as odd a collection of the city's criminals as anyone could imagine. Professor Redlaw, the con man, and the hulking Tetterby brothers (even though Bart was sure he'd heard they were still in jail for everything from attempted murder to aggravated jaywalking). The get-away drivers Milly and Bill Swidger. The pencil-thin fence Ben Britain, of all people, and Clemency Newcome, who had decided long ago never to live up to the name with which her hopeful parents had baptized her. Even blond and blue-eyed Michael Warden, the widows' friend, of whom the best that could be said was that he might not rob an orphanage if he already had some money in his pocket.

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Bart hesitated a surprisingly long time in the vestibule of a used-clothing store down the street, pretending to examine the window display of dated ties, dusty costume jewelry, and the corpses of last summer's flies—a cheap glass necklace blinking at him in the angled morning light. It wasn't fear that made him pause, he decided. It was more a desire *not* to know, *not* to be drawn into, whatever his friends and business acquaintances had gotten themselves up to. He already lacked a plan for deflecting Harry King's threats against the town's minor criminals, and here were those same criminals running around in some crazy effort to make things more complicated.

But he knew, of course, that he had to face up to it, and so at last, with a sigh, his hand on his hat to keep it from blowing away, Bart walked up the block and opened the tavern door—only to be hit by a wave of noise that nearly knocked him back out again into High Street.

There was Gruff Tackleton, a giant goat of a man, shouting across the room while he kept watch on the door. Snitchy and Craggs. Arthur Heathfield. Dr. Jeddler, the sometime surgeon, who would fix up a bullet wound if he was sober enough to see it. Sitting at the bar, having taken over the daily-specials blackboard, was Bart's accountant, the elfin Mr. Filer, preparer of fraudulent tax returns for most of town's underworld. No one knew his first name, and legend had it that he never left his office—sleeping on the couch and cooking his tiny meals on a hot plate out of fear the IRS would slip in and bug the place while he was gone. But here he was at the Evergreen, marking down times and places in yellow chalk.

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“Bart!” shouted Dot Perrybingle from the table where she sat with her slow, lumbering brother John, and like a wave in a stadium the word spread across the tavern. Mad Tilly, tying small, precise knots in a piece of string. Dangerous Joe Bowley. The party girls and occasional burglars Grace and Marion. Thieves and grifters and prowlers; pickpockets, pilferers, and scroungers; housebreakers, heisters, and hijackers. Everyone from highway robbers to shoplifters seemed to be gathered, a larcenous assembly of the town’s crooks. And perched there at the center, as proud as a catbird, was his friend Liz McCally.

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“Oh, Bart,” she cried. “What took you so long?”

“A Tom and Jerry for each of you,” Tim the bartender announced, setting down a pair of foaming Christmas mugs, red with white snowflakes, as Bart sat at Liz’s table with all the calm confidence of a man who suspects his chair is wired with explosives and wants to shoot the people responsible. “Dancing Dan brought in his special recipe. Everybody here has been drinking them, the past few days, while they’ve been . . . um”—he flinched away from Liz’s glare—“doing whatever it is they’ve been doing. I don’t ask questions.” Turning away and striding across the room, he added in a loud voice, “Hey, guys, can you keep it down to a dull roar? The sweethearts need to talk.”

Bart stared down at his hot drink, sprinkled with cinnamon. He glanced up at the Christmas decorations and gazed over at the crowded bar. He turned his head sideways to examine the notebooks from which Liz had been typing information into her laptop computer. He even swiveled to study the tables to the left, to the right, in front, at his back, and only then—as the noise of the bar gradually lessened—did he meet the eyes of the pretty, apprehensive face across the table and ask, in the most reasonable tone he could manage, “What in God’s name have you done, Liz?”

“It . . . well, it got a little out of control, maybe,” she answered. “But really,” she added, gaining speed, “all this is your fault. Okay, I made some phone calls, and everybody I talked to wanted to pitch in. And then *they* made phone calls, and, yeah, the people they called made even more phone calls, and by the end of the first night I had more help than I knew what to do with, and the word was still spreading. You disappeared for days, my cousin Joey called me from Minnesota screaming for advice

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about the job *you* sent him on, and nobody has a clue how to stop Harry King. So what was I supposed to do?”

She was sputtering by this point, her anxiety having transmuted by some mysterious alchemy into anger. “Days,” Liz repeated. “Days, without a word. Days, without telling me what I should be doing. So, I . . . I,” she faltered, glancing around and noticing as if for the first time how full the tavern had become. “I guess I kind of organized things.”

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But as Bart opened his mouth to speak, she started up again. “Anyway, what right do you have to criticize? If you can’t be responsible, Bart, then someone else has to be. Besides”—and her tone grew more wheedling—“we’ve already found where all the packages are. And I’ve talked two of our friends into flying out and helping Joey, but that was mainly because I didn’t know what to do with them, and they said they needed to lie low for a while.”

She held up a finger to stop Bart from interrupting while she gulped at her drink. “There’s plenty more,” she added in a rush. “We’ve got every local place under surveillance, with notes about the residents and alarm systems and even blueprints, where we could find them, everything written down. Plus Harry King’s place. Billy Euston has been helping with that. You remember: King’s nephew in-law or something, the guy who lost the drugs. He came in here the other day, looking for you, so I put him to work. Mr. Filer has been keeping the watch schedules, and Professor Redlaw conned a clerk down at city hall for sewer maps, in case we need them, and everybody has been pitching in, even though it’s Christmastime.”

Liz took another swallow. “But finding the packages, that’s the main thing. And I managed to keep everybody in check, just like you said—even though they were all pushing me to start swapping out the drugs. Oh, and we’ve bought some good wine, a pair of bottles weighing exactly enough. After that, I wanted to send them home, but I couldn’t, because it’s, like, Christmas with one another, you know? Everybody was being so helpful, and we were working together as a team, and you were missing, and I didn’t have a plan. They all want some way to pull Harry King down, but nobody can figure out anything except to get the packages and give him what he wants, and it’s driving them crazy. Crazy,” she said with a choking laugh. “Crazy.”

“They hate King that much?” asked Bart, finally getting in a word.

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“You idiot,” she shouted, the whole tavern falling quiet and turning to look. “They didn’t come to get Harry King. They came to help *you*.”

“How long since you slept?” Bart asked Liz gently in the ensuing silence.

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“I don’t know. A couple days. Things just kind of snowballed, and I had to keep on top of them. I mean, it’s December 23rd already, and we’ve got nothing.”

“No,” Bart answered. “I managed to lift two of the packages, the ones out in the suburbs. So you can call off your watchers there. For the rest, what do we have? Schedules of deliveries? A list of the different locks? Notes on who has access?”

“Everything,” Liz replied, sitting up as she watched Bart look around the room as though weighing up the strengths and weaknesses surrounding them. “We have everything anybody could find out over three days, which”—she gestured down at the pile of notebooks—“turns out to be a lot.”

Bart glanced around the room again. “You don’t even like half these people, Liz,” he said quietly.

“Yeah, well, they’re criminals. What do you expect? But they’re all their own criminals, if that makes any sense. They aren’t sneaks, and they don’t belong to Harry King. Well, except maybe for Billy Euston. I can’t figure out what he’s doing here, day after day, moping around, waiting for you like you’re some kind of guru who’s going to fill him with ancient wisdom. But all I’ve said is that we’re working on what his boss demanded, so what else can he report back to King? I mean, that is what we’re doing, isn’t it? Obeying Harry King’s orders? Unless you’ve got a plan I don’t know about.”

But Bart didn’t answer, looking over instead at the miserable kid hunched in the corner—really looking, seeing for the first time his unhappiness and resentment, his hunger for something more. Then Bart’s fingers began to move on the table, almost as though he were playing unconscious scales on an invisible piano, and he raised his eyes to focus for a long moment on some distant horizon.

“Bart?” Liz called. “Bart? *BART*? Are you listening?”

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“Hmm?” he answered, coming back to her.

“I asked if you have a plan.” He met her eyes and smiled for the first time in days.

“I think I might, sweetheart. I think I just might.”

Bart took a swallow from his Tom and Jerry. “You know, Tim was right,” he said, like a food critic taking time from a busy schedule to savor a morsel. “These are good. Not a breakfast drink exactly, but we have to get Dan’s recipe.”

“As God is my witness,” the red-eyed Liz hissed, “if you don’t tell me, I’m going to shoot you and have everyone here testify it was justifiable homicide.”

“I can’t explain all of it. Not yet. Let me keep one surprise, just in case things go bad,” Bart explained. “But here’s how it starts. I need to have a talk with Billy. Maybe do a little shopping for supplies this morning. Then we’ll hit all of the remaining places either this afternoon or tonight. Nine jobs in a row. This is going to be epic.”

He pulled over one of the notebooks, tore out a sheet, and started jotting down notes. “In the meantime, I need you to put together a schedule for the hits. Which ones in daylight? Which ones at night? Cons or sneak-ins? No strong-arm if you can help it, but one way or another, they all have to be done long before daybreak. By midnight, if we possibly can.”

He underlined something on the page. “Get a few people to help you lay it out. Redlaw, maybe. And Mr. Filer, since he’s here. Meg Veck, too: Time for her to learn how to step up, whatever her father says.”

He studied his notes for a moment and added, “You’ll need one of the real burglars in on the planning, as well. Heathfield, I guess; he’s the best of them. Assign a hard-case or two to each job as backup and protection, but don’t let them take the lead. We want these to go quietly. Make Gruff Tackleton part of your inner group and use him to keep the tough guys in line; he’s a pro and knows how it works.”

Bart made one last note, circled something, and laughed as he looked down at the paper. “And there we are. Set up the jobs so I can join as many as possible, one after

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another.” He laughed again, returning to the high-energy Bart that Liz had always known before. “A kind of rolling hit. A Christmas crime spree. Look at it this way, Liz: We’re going to do a reverse Santa Claus—taking something from everyone on our list, whether they’ve been naughty or nice.”

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He stood up and called across the tavern, “Billy, will you take a walk with me outside? I’ve got a story I want to tell you.” Then he turned back to the table and took a final swallow from his drink. “You know,” he repeated in a wondering tone. “These are *really* good. I’ll call you by noon, one o’clock at the latest, and tell you if it’s on for today.”

Then Bart Sagan, the thief, leaned down and kissed Liz McCally the grifter on the top her head. “Thanks, sweetheart, for everything. You’ve saved us all,” he whispered. And in a swirl of motion, he made his way across the room—smiling, touching shoulders, greeting the town’s criminals. Gathering up the battered drug-runner Billy Euston and sweeping out the door into the cold wind of High Street.

V.

It ends . . . but then, these kinds of stories don’t end. Not really. They only flicker from time to time with small epiphanies and revelations, like the falling of a curtain across the stage to signal a break: the completion of one particular act in the long human comedy.

Think of it as the conclusion of a chapter rather than the closing of a book. The wealthy but ill Michael Stuyvesant, for instance—where will his curtain fall? The panic-stricken Joey Jasper, off in Minnesota, for that matter? And Harry King, the drug lord, and that obsequious jeweler who sold him a half-million-dollar necklace for his wife, sliding like starlight through Mr. King’s thick hands? Cicely D’Angelo, dreaming in her chair. The bruiser Gruff Tackleton. The sneak-thieves Snitchy and Craggs. Everyone has a different chapter. Everyone comes to a different end.

But since this is Bart’s story, more or less, we should probably leave the tale where he set it down—on a table at the Evergreen Tavern on Christmas Eve, wrapped neatly in red paper with a white bow: a small Christmas present, waiting for Liz McCally to arrive.

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Of course, to reach that point, the town's criminals had to retrieve nine of the twelve packages in a single day, and the rolling Christmas crimes began only around one in the afternoon, when Bart finally telephoned to tell Liz the campaign was on.

The details are still a little unclear. Everyone agrees that, in the rush, Mr. Filer emerged as the point man: the tiny accountant in a prim dark suit, balanced on a bar stool as he tracked the jobs, quickly becoming the only one with the whole picture. But since he was also the kind of man who wouldn't tell a nun whether it was raining—wouldn't tell her mother superior and a choir of angels, as far as that goes—no one has ever heard his account of the day's events. Bart stayed in the field, Liz was too antsy not to rush out to join him, and everyone else had only a partial view of how things unfolded. The Evergreen's bartender Tim sometimes talks about it, gassing away to regulars on a slow evening, but it's hard to say what parts of his version are myth, layered on like frosting, and what parts really happened.

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Anyway, as the story goes, only one of the jobs broke down into the kind of strong-arm robbery that both Bart and Mr. King wanted to avoid. The drugs were being held, for an out-of-town tenant, behind the concierge desk of an upscale and surprisingly scam-proof apartment building. After two failed cons (a mailman gag and then an impromptu try by Liz, spilling things from her purse while she asked for directions), the Tetterby brothers had had enough. With a growl, they squeezed out of the watchers' car, marched in, slammed the officious clerk down against the desk when he objected, grabbed the Christmas box, and marched out again—a single Tetterby finger, pointed menacingly, enough to freeze in place everyone else in the building's lobby.

That was one of the drug packages that didn't get replaced with Liz's wine bottles. Other addresses, however, proved more amenable. Two, for example, were straightforward daylight slip-ins—a quiet picking of backdoor locks while the houses' residents were out. Find the boxes (one under a tree, the other unwrapped on an entry table), make the substitutions, and relock the doors: in and out, as graceful as dancers. Will Fern and May Fielding paired up for those jobs.

Professor Redlaw's charts of the storm-sewer lines never did get used. There seems to have been a plan to follow them to an access hatch in the basement of another apartment building, but when the burglary team arrived, they discovered a fire door that hadn't quite latched and decided they might as well keep their clothes clean.

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Unfortunately, once inside, they found the white Christmas box not only unpacked but opened: the tape-wrapped bag of drugs sitting out on the kitchen counter with a yellow sticky note that read, “Bob—Is this supposed to be some kind of joke?” After a series of increasingly acrimonious phone calls, the drunk Dr. Jeddler came up with the answer, shouting it across the tavern to Mr. Filer. So Dot Perrybingle and her brother John carefully slit the package, emptied its heroin into a trash bag, and refilled it with flour, sugar, and baking soda they borrowed from the cupboards. A little wiping up and hiding of the evidence, some re-taping of the package, and the Perrybingles left the apartment pretty much as they had found it—minus, of course, the heroin, a green plastic trash bag, and 6.6 pounds of baking supplies.

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As for the swaps accomplished by the con artists, the first was in a house with a for-sale sign in the snow on the front yard. A visit to the realtor by Grace and the handsome Michael Warden cracked that one open as easy as an egg. Joe Bowley and the grim Clemency Newcome took the two in run-down apartments down by the river—posing as city inspectors on a hunt for violations and bulldozing the building managers into a cooperative frame of mind. The biggest scam involved a fake city-services crew, a real gas leak that started to get out of control, and a 911 call that brought three fire trucks, two police cars, and an ambulance screaming up the icy streets. A half-dozen con artists it took to create that little masterpiece of overkill, leaving three houses evacuated and two fistfights started before they finally managed to slip away with the drugs.

And then there was the last job: a good, old-fashioned, not-a-creature-was-stirring burglary, the family asleep in their beds. Bart and Arthur Heathfield took that one. As Tim tells the story, a little girl caught them, padding down the stairs in her nightgown to ask what they were doing under the tree. To which, naturally, they answered that they were Santa’s helpers, gave her a glass of milk, and sent her back up the stairs to bed. But not even the tavern’s regulars really believe him. Some stories are too much like stories to be true.

Still, this much is certain: It was just after midnight—a few minutes into Christmas Eve Day—that Bart rose to thank the criminals reconvened at the Evergreen. One green trash bag and ten clear plastic packages of heroin safe in a suitcase in the trunk of his car, and nine jobs pulled off in a single day: a heroic, almost miraculous endeavor.

“Marion,” he asked, reaching down and gently tugging from Mad Tilly’s neat fingers the piece of origami she was folding from one of the stray notebooks pages, “will you

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and Mr. Filer make sure all this paper gets burned or shredded? As for the rest of you, if you stop by after 5:00 in the afternoon, there will be Christmas presents here for everybody.” Liz made a noise to interrupt, but Bart overrode her. “I know, I know. None of you did this for pay. But I’m grateful—grateful beyond words—so let me try to express my gratitude with a thank-you gift.”

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“Man, these are good,” he added, sipping at his last Tom and Jerry of the day. “Dan, send me the recipe, and I swear I’ll add a little extra, just for you.” He put a hand on Tilly’s shoulder and said, “Meanwhile, I’ve got one or two more jobs to do tonight. Some presents to fix up. Tilly, you’re good at wrapping things. Will you help me? Everyone else, thank you again. Thank you.”

Gesturing to Billy Euston to join them, Bart shrugged into his overcoat and made his way to the door. “Oh, and one last thing,” he called back. “Sleep in tomorrow, Liz. You’ve done enough for all of us.”

And while the criminals cheered her, Bart and his companions left the warm tavern and ventured out in the cold Christmas Eve morning, following the illumination of a distant streetlight to his car.

“Did you hear the news?” the bartender Tim called out as Liz came through the door of the Evergreen Tavern on Christmas Eve, a little before 5:00 in the afternoon.

“No,” she answered with a smile. “What news? I haven’t heard a thing.” In fact, Liz had slept late—very late—that morning, reveling in what seemed her first peaceful rest in ages. And then, resolutely refusing to check her messages or answer her phone, she’d spent the remainder of the day in a happy haze: puttering around her apartment, doing small chores, wrapping presents, humming softly to herself.

“Oh, nothing much,” Tim said, in his element as purveyor of drinks and the latest word. “Just that Bart is on the run, Harry King is in jail, the police chief is on a rampage, and half the town has gone crazy. Gunfights, I hear, down by the river. Some Yuletide we’re having, isn’t it?”

“Bart’s on the run?” Liz repeated bewilderedly. “Wait, what are you talking about? I don’t . . . I mean . . . King’s in jail? Where’s Bart?”

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“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” said Tim, and, in his account, it all begins earlier that day, when Harry King gives his wife a present in front of his guests at an afternoon Christmas reception. Rich food, a string quartet, an open bar, unctuous speeches about King’s past innocence but future promises not to sully himself “by association with those less concerned” than King “with a moral appearance and the city’s good name.” And then the gift giving, starting with the announcement of a large charitable donation to the city’s cultural foundations and ending with a present for King’s wife.

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Which she unwraps, to the continuation of general applause, and reveals as a velvet-covered jewelry case. A jewelry case, as it happens, that looks as though it’s leaking dust. And when she snaps it open on its spring hinges, it jumps in her hands, spraying fine white powder over the women next to her—one of them the city council’s representative for district three. It’s in their hair, down their cleavage, on their hands: a mess that makes them look like the powdered ghosts of eighteenth-century French courtiers, come back as the revenge of Louis XIV.

Well, the string quartet falls silent, the guests freeze, Harry King is ready to explode, and nobody knows what to do. Nobody, that is, but the district attorney’s recent bride—beautiful, greedy, and empty-headed beyond even the town’s usual standard for rich men’s third wives—who has taken the opportunity to tear open the neat wrapping of her own gift box.

“Oh,” she cries into the silence, and every head turns toward her. “What are we supposed to use this for? Is it expensive?”

Very expensive, as things turn out, for what she’s holding up in her pretty hands for all to see is a taped-up plastic package, filled with white powder and weighing, at a guess, around 6.6 pounds.

Now others in the room start opening their boxes to find similar gifts. The white-powdered councilwoman meets the eye of a senior police official, who nods and uses his pocket knife to cut a small hole in his own package. Touching a tiny portion to his tongue, he spits and starts beckoning wildly for his aide, the young policeman who accompanied him to the party.

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And that was pretty much that. Oh, there were still scenes to be played out: Harry King's bellowing, and his own associates' deciding maybe discretion was the better choice, quietly wiping their fingerprints off their guns and hiding them in napkins as the police came charging through the door. Paramedics summoned to keep the heroin-dusted women from getting drug poisoning. Loud demands from the mayor to be told what was going on.

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But really, everything was determined, the whole drama moving toward its predictable end, from the moment Mrs. King opened the case of what was supposed to be a diamond necklace from her husband. As the police took statements and gathered evidence, Harry King, lord of all he could see, was led from the room in handcuffs. Not, however, before having a whispered but heated conference with his lawyer, in which—rumor among the town's criminals insisted—the name of Bart Sagan was repeated several times.

Liz McCally lowered herself slowly onto the seat of a back booth—the same booth in which had she sat, only six days before, to hear the story of Billy Euston's blunder and Harry King's threats. Bart had come by the tavern, oh, must have been around 1:00, the bartender had said, leaving some things for her and promising to call just after 5:00.

What she found in the booth were a set of thick white envelopes, two dozen or so, lined up between the salt and pepper shakers. Baskets on the opposite bench overflowing like Santa's bag with jars of caviar and truffles—Sumatran coffee at \$600 a pound and expensive bottles of wine. And there on the table, in front of the spot in which she had sat at their earlier meeting, was a small Christmas package with her name on it, wrapped in red and white.

Avoiding touching the present, avoiding even thinking about it, Liz pulled out one of the envelopes and saw on the front Gruff Tackleton's name in Bart's clear handwriting. Unsealed, of course; he's always too trusting, she thought angrily, deflecting the impulse to cry before it overwhelmed her. Too trusting in too many ways, even while he didn't trust her enough to let her in on the plan to get King—to let *her*, his one real friend, help. Mad Tilly and that stupid kid Billy were the people Bart took with him when he left the Evergreen, the ones who must have been with him when he broke into King's penthouse and planted the drugs.

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Inside the envelope she found a half-inch of currency, all hundred-dollar bills: maybe \$10,000. Assuming an envelope for everyone who had joined in the jobs the day before, that came to around \$250,000. A quarter of a million dollars, just lying there on the table, waiting for Liz to distribute it.

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She was finally reaching for the small Christmas present—reaching for it, pulling back as though it had burned her, and then reaching for it again—when her cell phone rang.

“Hello, Bart,” she answered it quietly, at last lifting up the package with her other hand and reading the simple “For Elizabeth Ann McCally” on the label. “Why’d you do it? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to protect you,” he replied in a soothing voice. “King is probably going to be too busy to do much in the way of revenge, but this way, if he does go after anyone, it’ll be just me and not you. Not any of the other independents.” Bart laughed. “Besides, how’s he going to beat a drug rap when he doused some of this city’s most respectable people with heroin? I hear they’re going to hit him with a dozen charges of attempted murder, on top of possession and trafficking. Meanwhile, every would-be gangster in town is out grabbing a piece of his empire, now that Billy has tipped them off.”

“Yeah, Billy,” said Liz tonelessly. “Why did you take him with you last night? And poor, crazy Tilly, too?”

“Ah,” Bart answered. “You mean, why didn’t I take you? I needed Billy to help get me into King’s penthouse, guide me through the layout. And I wanted Tilly because she’s the neatest person I know, and we needed to unwrap the presents, pack them with the drugs, and then wrap them again exactly enough that none of King’s people would notice they’d been tampered with. I didn’t take you because you were exhausted, and because . . . well, because I didn’t want you to get caught with me, if something went wrong.”

Liz felt her tears starting to rise again and began to open her present as carefully as she could, preserving the paper and bow just to show Bart—or herself, at least—that she was every bit as neat as Tilly. “And all these envelopes?” she asked. “I’m supposed to just hand them out? How can you afford it?”

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“Yeah, the envelopes. They cleaned out my emergency get-away fund. Every penny I could lay my hands on, in fact. But I, ah”—Bart laughed again—“I managed to do a little replenishing. You remember when I told you that King said he had to give the bigwigs some quiet money? Well, Billy had overheard the exact amounts. So, while Billy kept watch at the door and Tilly rewrapped the presents, I sat down at King’s desk and booted up his computer. Easiest work I’ve ever done. All I had to do was use the amounts of his last large withdrawals to get online access to his main account.”

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There was a long crackle of static on the line, as though Bart were going through a tunnel, before he continued, “From there I could reach out to all his other accounts. The Cayman Islands, Europe, here in the city. I cleaned him out, Liz. He kept all his information in that one computer, and I transferred his money to banks scattered around the world. He’s never getting it back. This is a big one, Liz. Even after helping Billy set himself up, it’s enough cash to last me a good long stretch.”

She could almost hear Bart smiling. “By the way,” he added, “did you ever hear any news from Minnesota?”

“Just a message last night from Joey, saying he was still working on it.” Liz had finally peeled off the wrapping paper, revealing a small blue box. “Where are you now?” she asked quietly.

“About a hundred, a hundred and fifty, miles away,” Bart answered. “I figured the airport might be watched, so I’m driving to the coast. Then I thought I’d catch a plane out of the country, till things cool down. Tokyo, maybe, or Singapore. Hong Kong. Out on the Pacific Rim, anyway. You knew I grew up out there, didn’t you? My grandparents were missionaries, and . . . I don’t know, I just started to feel that maybe it was time to go visit for a while. Time to head back to the Far East and get things straight.”

Liz lifted off the top of the box and found under the cotton batting a cheap glass-bead necklace, with a price tag still attached from the used-clothing store a few doors down High Street. “And what’s this?” she asked. “This \$12.40 piece of costume jewelry you’ve given me for Christmas?”

“It’s not jewelry, exactly,” he answered, fading as though into the distance. “It’s more like a promise. A promise I’ll come back.” As the cell-phone service dropped the line, replacing Bart Sagan’s voice with a dull buzz, Liz McCally lifted the necklace up to the

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light, where it danced and glittered against the old, polished wood of the Evergreen Tavern's ceiling.

And that's the end of this particular story, the falling of its curtain—except perhaps for one final note. After church on Christmas morning, after the annual phone calls with her great-nieces and nephews, scattered across the country, Cicely D'Angelo laid out for herself in the front room a pot of tea and a plate of cookies from a round blue tin. Perched on her chair, she gazed fondly at the new pairs of animals she had set near her crèche—each of them being greeted, she imagined, by their older companions in the long procession to pay homage to the Holy Infant in a manger. This year's Christmas gifts, sent by her young students, of course. Or, rather, not so young. Grown old now themselves, she had to admit, although in memory they still lived as the girls and boys they had been. Such promise, such hope: new lights just beginning to shine.

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She dozed off for a moment, or perhaps she merely slipped into her reminiscences, hardly distinguishable from dreams. But returning gently to the waking world, she found her eyes focused on the white box beneath the tree, left by that clever and dangerous young man who had come to visit. The poor child with a terrible puzzle to solve.

Clearing away the tea dishes and washing up, Cicely hummed an old dance tune—not terribly Christmasy, she smiled to think, but that's all right, just this once. Back in the front room, the white box in her lap, she lifted the lid to see whether the thief had left her anything when he slipped out, believing her asleep. And in wonder, from the depths of tissue paper, she brought out a brilliant silver necklace, gems flowing like starlight in her tiny hands. Terribly expensive, it must be, she could see, and much too fine to wear, of course. But then, young men are often foolish that way. Such a lovely boy.

With a sigh, setting the box on the floor, she rose from her chair to set the necklace on the table with her animals, as though it were yet another little gift from yet another student—weaving it carefully around the crèche to lie at the feet of Mary as the Wise Men and shepherds approached the manger. Yes, she decided, that's where it goes: there, among the Christmas things.