**THE HOBO: AN INDIANA CHRISTMAS STORY, 1950**

*I see, sir, you are liberal in offers: You teach me how*

*a beggar should be answered.*

William Shakespeare,

Merchant of Venice

This story actually took place on “Christmas Eve Day,” as they call it down South. Well, we proud, liberal, and erudite Yankees call it the “Penultimate Day before Christmas,” which is somewhat redundant. Oh, well. Part of the story took place on Christmas Day, and the last part on the day after Christmas.

This is of course a true story, though it happened a quaint long time ago, in fact, when I was twelve years old—a sixth grader at Royerton Elementary School. It is both a happy and a sad story. Here is how it goes:

I was now playing baseball on the playground (later called campuses) when I noticed an odd, old man trudging northward down State Highway 3, dressed in a long black overcoat, toting a heavy pack of something on his back, not a contemporary campus backpack. He kept trudging on.

My geographic thoughts urged up: Where is he going? Why north in the snow in the cold of winter? Was he going home for Christmas?

(Later I would know, sadly, that he was.)

His image quickly faded from my mind as I tossed the basketball to the center and cut to my left for the basket.

It was now Christmas morning, 1950, when at a respectful 8:47 that a knocking was heard at our living-room door. My Mother answered the door as my Father had to work on Christmas Day. She first said to us kids, “Clean up the Christmas wrappings.”

It was the same hobo! My mind returned to the previous day.

He said that his name was Patrick McCurrly. He said he had spent the night in the nearby abandoned barn about three quarters of a mile from us, the nearest building from our rural house. He said he had covered up with hay and wore his old black overcoat, as the temperature had plunged into the teens.

My Mother immediately offered him food, as she was just starting to make a fire in our wood-cooking kitchen stove. She said, “Please come in as we heat with coal in the living room. You may sit on the davenport.” He said, “O.K., but before I eat, I need to do some work—that’s the way I was brought up.”

I thought he spoke funny, and that was before I thought people from Michigan and then, later, from Georgia spoke funny. An early geography lesson!

She said, as the four of us children looked around at each other, me being the oldest: “What work would you like to do?”

He said, “Well, my father killed my Mother and the two of my sisters and my brother with a pair of scissors, just about like those over there on the table. May I blunt and snap off the ends of those?”

My Mother did not say anything but responded by jumping over to grab the scissors, and then she said, “We only use them for making dresses for my two daughters and for repairing some ripped clothing. We can’t afford a sewing machine.”

My younger brother Robert, now 54, ran off and hid in the bedroom. And this was Christmas Day, 1950!

The hobo said, “All right, but you can still cut with scissors with blunt ends and they won’t rip your fingers. Don’t be afraid of me—I’m only afraid of my dead Father.”

I bravely watched him take out a rusty pair of plyers and with great strength snap off the scissors’ ends.

Having performed his unique work, he then said, “May we now eat?”

My Mother nodded to me, as the oldest child, to help her in the kitchen. We went in, I closely followed the hobo.

He said, “Do you have bread and milk?” Mother answered, “Yes.” He said, “Good, because I know a recipe from Ireland that calls for bread and milk, and maybe some sugar. Please light up the stove, Mrs. Wheeler.”

He ordered: “Warm up some milk, put out some bread, and 12 plates, if you have that many.”

I snapped a long wooden match to light the stove.

He put bread on all of our plates, then poured over warm milk and had some of us put the extra plate on top of the plate in front of us to steam, as he said a prayer in a language I didn’t know, We all had seconds and thirds, and I think he had more. It was a merry and relaxed conversation. What a wonderful Christmas it was to share with a man from Ireland, wherever that was!

Postscript

The day after Christmas, my Father came home with his usual copy of the Muncie Star. He spread it out over the top of the warm living-room stove and read the headlines aloud: “A Tramp Found Dead on the Muncie-to-Chicago Railroad Right-of-Way: Burned by His Own Bonfire.” He skimmed down the page, as was his custom, to find the noteworthy point: “A nearby diary note said: ‘Thanks to the nearby Wheeler family, I had my best meal in America, as it nastaligically (sic) took me back to my old country and our ways. I forgive my Father for all his sins and hope he is in Heaven and that we all may meet again. Merry Christmas to one and all!’”

Signed: Patrick McCurrly