

A FATHER'S PRAYER

It was Christmas Eve, and his only child might die tonight. Thomas could not shake the feeling of gloom as he drove to the hospital. Snowflakes gently hit the windshield and were quickly smeared by the wipers. *Nothing remains the same for long*, he thought. Here today, gone tomorrow. What was life all about, anyway? Nothing seemed to make sense anymore.

“Storm clouds are gathering tonight, so be careful if you’re out on the road doing your last-minute shopping. Retailers are reporting record sales this holiday season. Sales are already up by six percent over last year. It is expected that last-minute shoppers will make this a banner year for sales,” the newsman reported over the car radio. “The World Mall department stores expect to make sixty percent of their yearly sales during this holiday season alone. So stop by your favorite department store on your way home, and take the time to make that last-minute sacrifice for your loved ones...get out there and buy...buy...buy, and support your local merchants.”

He pushed the button for another radio station, and some holiday music about reindeer came on. He found no comfort or joy in the song and pushed the next button for another station. The new setting on the radio was pulling in two different stations at the same time. They were both playing different songs about Christmas. He

could barely make out the first song but knew it had something to do with the baby Jesus. He found the mixed messages annoying and adjusted the dial to better tune in to the other song that was a holiday classic. He turned the volume up in the hope of gathering some pleasure from the song.

“I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know.”

He recognized immediately that this song would bring him no satisfaction either. His Christmas past was no longer to be recognized. He had decided long ago not to pay any more attention to Christmas, especially to any songs with made-up claims about how great this time of year is supposed to be. He believed that Christmas should be about being with your family and enjoying the comforts of life, taking pride in being able to provide them with an abundance of presents under the Christmas tree. Where was his family this Christmas? He did not want to think about it. He decided not to try and tune back into the other radio station and the song about the baby Jesus. Instead, he turned the radio off and looked out the car window.

As the front of the hospital came into view he saw the towering statue of the shepherd holding a staff, with a lamb in his arms. It was the first thing one would notice when arriving. The lights under the statue made it glow in the darkness. To him, it made the sculpture appear even larger than it was, somehow larger than life. He envied the lamb and how comforted and secure it looked in the shepherd’s arms. He surmised that it was supposed to bring reassurance to the weary. He had seen the statue many times, but he had yet to find any hope in it. Thomas only felt disillusioned by its commanding presence.

He turned his vehicle into the hospital entrance and proceeded up the long, straight driveway. He noticed that it looked like a snowplow had just cleared the snow off the road in anticipation of his return. The snow had been pushed to both sides of the entrance, forming a hedge that was holding back the remains from the latest storm. He reflected that soon the sun would return in its own season and melt away the cold snow, exposing the hidden seeds of the plants that were waiting for another chance to be born again. Thomas

wondered if he would ever be given a chance to start anew, and if he were, would he even want it?

The hospital parking lot was full of cars but vacant of people as he drove through the aisles, seeking a place to park. He wondered how many of the vehicles represented people who were there to welcome a new life into the world or to say good-bye to someone at the end of their journey through life? He was fortunate to find an empty stall near the entrance to the hospital doors. Putting the car in park, he turned off the engine.

A mix of rain and snow lightly pelted his car and was now the only sound that filled his mind. The rhythmic sound made him want to stay in the car and just go to sleep. Sleep: the thought of it made him want to cry. He longed for it but had not been able to obtain it for so long. He could not remember his last good night's sleep.

He pulled the flask of vodka out of his trench coat and took a long, deep drink. The liquid burned his throat, but it felt good and soothing in his stomach. Funny how he couldn't stand the taste of alcohol when he took his first drink years ago; now, he hardly noticed the taste. He did not want to enter the hospital, and reasoned he needed the extra courage the vodka offered. The alcohol would help him through another tough night, perhaps his final night, if his son didn't live to see another one. His heart was breaking, and he believed there was no hope.

Stepping out of the car, Thomas struck a match and lit a cigarette. The nicotine combined with the alcohol helped to steady his shaking hands. It was cold outside, so maybe people in the hospital wouldn't notice his fear. In the distance he could see the glow of the city lights on the clouds. How he longed to escape to the city and to drown his sorrows in the darkness of a crowded bar—surrounded by others, but left alone.

The pain of what he was going through was getting so hard to bear. Too long he had held his pain inside, and now he was afraid he was about to lose control. Yet he had to remain strong for his son, Isaac. He had to be a man, whatever that meant.

He looked up beyond the statue of the shepherd to where his son's room was located. A light was on in his room. Thomas pulled

his wallet out of his coat pocket and opened it. Underneath a plastic cover was a picture of his son. The picture was taken recently, and it showed a young boy full of life smiling at the camera, a moment frozen in time, sealed and tucked away safely near his heart. The portrait did not reveal the pain behind the boy's eyes, and this was how he wanted to remember his son: without the pain. Thomas was afraid of the boy in the room behind the door, because he didn't know how to deal with his suffering.

It was close to this time over a decade ago when Isaac was born at this very same hospital. Thomas smiled as he remembered the joy he felt when he first saw his son being delivered. He was the most beautiful baby, arms reaching out and legs kicking, new to the world. Thomas felt an instant bonding with his son when the nurse gave Isaac to him to hold. Isaac looked up straight into his eyes, and Thomas sensed for the first time his new responsibility as a father. This new child in the world would look to him in faith for all of his basic needs. Thomas was more than eager to step forward and accept the challenge.

However, his joy was short-lived, as the doctor informed them that Isaac had a defective heart. Thomas was powerless to help this new little baby who would look to him for everything. Thomas had to put his trust in the doctors and their abilities. Over the following years and the many hospital stays, Thomas was always there by Isaac's side, but all he felt that he could do was offer support. He didn't have it in his ability to give his son hope, and it was tearing him up inside.

Thomas had come to believe that his son had not been born with a defective heart, but a wounded one that he did not know how to heal. It was through no fault of his, yet it was causing him great anguish and pain. He wondered sometimes if his son had inherited his bad heart from him. Thomas didn't know what to do. He had been prepared to be a father, and now he was unprepared not to be one.

He also believed that Isaac might be in the hospital for the last time if they did not find a heart transplant for him tonight. Thomas was terrified that his son was going to die. The thought of separation from him forever was more than he believed he would be able to bear.

There appeared to be no rescue or hope for his son with the coming of the morning dawn, and, if true, then it may also be his own last night before a new day.

But what a Christmas gift it would make for his son if somewhere out there in the night they could find a new heart for him. However, he knew not to get his hopes up. His heart wasn't capable of believing in the power of miracles.

Fighting back the urge to cry, Thomas closed his wallet, put it back into his pocket, and started walking quickly toward the entrance to the hospital. The wind started to blow hard, and a sign hanging above him swayed back and forth. He slipped slightly on the ice and grabbed ahold of one of the poles holding the sign. In the last of the day's light he made out the words on the sign. It was the hospital's greeting: "Welcome to The Good Shepherd Hospital." Thomas ignored it.

He tossed his cigarette away as he hurried up the few steps to the hospital doors and pushed his way inside. The rush of warm air he felt upon entering the hospital lobby felt good. Thomas did not pay any attention to the security guard, the nativity scene, or other people milling around, but headed straight to the elevators. The hospital was old and had lost any charm it might have possessed in the past. For too many years its presence had only brought back painful memories to him.

He heard the song "Silent Night" playing in the background over the hospital intercom.

*"Silent night, holy night;
All is calm, all is bright;
Round yon virgin Mother and Child;
Holy Infant so tender and mild."*

To Thomas the music was just white noise to mask the ever-present pain in the hospital. He was certain the night would be anything but silent, holy, calm, or bright. He would not be celebrating any virginal birth tonight but maybe the end of a life. He lamented the fact that the only virginal thing about life or death is that they are both once-in-a-lifetime experiences that no one has any control over. In any case, he knew of no one who had ever been born again or died twice.

Upon entering an elevator, he pushed the sixth-floor button and relaxed against the back wall. A young mother and her child entered after him. He ignored them. The mother shouted at the little girl as she pushed several floor buttons and attempted to hit more.

“I’m so sorry,” she apologized to Thomas.

Thomas did his best to smile knowingly.

“How do you expect to receive any presents from Santa Claus if you are naughty?” she asked the girl.

“Are you going to tell him?” the little girl asked with a look of concern on her face.

“I might, so you better behave and act good,” the mother responded sternly.

Thomas looked down at the little girl as she pouted her lips and pretended to be on the verge of tears. The mother looked at the girl and then at Thomas, as if expecting his approval. He felt indifferent to her dilemma.

“That’s better,” she said as she turned her back to the little girl and Thomas in preparation to exit the elevator. The little girl then took her hands, pulled her lips apart, and stuck her tongue out at her mother’s behind. Then she looked up to Thomas, shrugged her shoulders, and smiled as if to imply she knew how to play the game, even at her young age.

After they exited the elevator, he remained still and watched while the door opened and closed each time as it moved up the floors. He contemplated that the world operates in the same manner as the mother and little girl; people behave based upon a reward system and what they expect to receive from it. Once you learn how to play the system, your life should become easier. Then why hadn’t Isaac’s? His son was always good, never complaining, so why was his world so full of suffering? It just didn’t seem fair. Thomas had no answers as the elevator arrived at the sixth floor and he stepped out.

Walking past the nurses’ station he could once again feel his apprehension mounting. Would Isaac be awake, and what would he say to him this time? How many times had he told his son that everything was going to be fine after a hospital visit, only to return again and again? Each time the doctors were getting more concerned

about his condition. Isaac noticed that his body was getting weaker, and that his energy to perform anything was limited; however, Isaac's attitude was always positive. He would apologize when he couldn't perform a simple chore, such as washing their car. Thomas would assure him it was no big deal because it was going to rain soon anyway. The guilt Thomas felt at not being able to make things better for his son was overwhelming.

He wondered what it was like for his son to wake up in the middle of the night alone in a strange bed in a dark room. Was he afraid of the darkness of the room? Did they leave a light on for him? What did he think of when he heard other voices, on the other side of the door, outside of his room? Did he ever wonder why his father was not there with him? He hoped that his son understood that it was better for him that his father was not there with him. He could not offer him any hope of rescue. Sure, his mother was staying with him, but he was positive that Isaac would not want to disturb her. Isaac would want to protect her. Nevertheless, he rationalized that it was better for his son that his mom was there, because she knew how to comfort him.

Thomas stopped in front of his son's hospital room for a moment to gather his composure. He needed help, and he knew it. There was only one option left to him in trying to save his son, one that he had not tried yet. He felt foolish even thinking about doing it, but at the same time he felt compelled to ask. After all, nothing else in this world seemed to be able to save his son. He had nothing to lose in trying it, except for his pride, which he would gladly sacrifice, along with everything else, in an attempt to save his son. He lowered his head in humility.

"Okay, God! If, you really do exist, you know I have never asked you for anything for myself, but this is for my son. Please, just give us a miracle that will save my little boy. Please, Lord, heal his heart. Do this for him, and I will be eternally grateful," he prayed. Looking around to see if anyone had seen him praying, but no longer really caring if they did, he entered the room.

Isaac appeared to be asleep. Numerous tubes and lines were connected to his body, feeding the various monitoring machines that

gave readings on his moment-to-moment condition. The television mounted on the wall was showing a commercial of a red dragon spewing out fire, but the sound was off. Lying so peacefully, he felt a sense of freedom for his son; no way was he going to wake him up.

“He looks like a little angel without a care in the world, doesn’t he?” asked Thomas’s wife, Sara.

Thomas hadn’t even noticed her when he walked into the room. She was sitting in the corner in a chair, resting her head in the palm of her right hand. She was forever by their son’s side, comforting him and staying on top of the latest developments from the doctors. Thomas admired her ability to digest all the medical jargon and to ask all the right questions. It was always the same or more bad news; there was never anything he could do to make a difference. He had resolved long ago to let Sara handle the mechanics of distributing all of the pills, doctor appointments, and asking the right questions. He just couldn’t handle it; the whole situation was just too depressing for him. He had never felt so tired in his life as at this moment. Thomas had given up trying to understand what was going on inside his boy.

“What have the doctors got to say today?” he asked her.

“Pretty much the same; he needs a heart transplant,” she paused for emphasis, “immediately!”

“Oh, is that all. Why don’t they tell us something we don’t know already!” he responded with anger.

Sara understood her husband well enough to know that he was terrified. He had never handled this life-and-death crisis as well as she. She wished he could be stronger for her, but it just wasn’t to be. She didn’t respond to his anger.

“Isaac seems to be in his usual good spirits today,” she said in hopes of steering the conversation toward a more positive result. He was quiet for a second as her comment directed him back to his son lying in the bed so peacefully.

“Yes, he always is...” Thomas tried to find the words, but they just wouldn’t come out of his mouth as he tried to hold back his tears of pain. He took a deep breath and finished, “so...brave and strong.”

Now the tears were freely flowing down his cheeks. Sara walked over and put her arms around her husband. They both had

come a long way to what may be the final night with their son, and she was going to stand by both of her men. They stood still, holding each other until they noticed Isaac stirring in the bed, and then they broke apart.

“Hi, Dad,” Isaac whispered.

“Hey, buddy, how are you doing?”

“Okay, but I’m really tired. It is so hard to stay awake. I’m sorry.”

“That’s alright, buddy. If you feel tired, you go right to sleep. Mom and Dad will understand.”

“Hey, how did you like the Christmas tree and ornaments I dropped off in your room last night while you were asleep?” Thomas turned around and pointed toward the small artificial pine tree, which hosted a selection of various Christmas ornaments, on top of a small table between a chair and the window. He stepped closer to the tree and discovered the ornaments had been changed. His ornaments of cartoon characters, reindeer, elves, and Santa Claus had been removed and were lying on the table next to the tree. In their place were uncolored paper ornaments with outlines of different people who appeared to be Bible characters.

“Hey, what happened to the ornaments I put on the tree last night?” he wanted to know.

“The nurse came in last night and loaned me a book called *Why We Celebrate Christmas*. Together we cut out the ornaments, and the nurse put them on the tree for me. The nurse said that we could use them until you got me my own set of Jesus tree ornaments. Wasn’t that nice of the nurse, Dad?”

Thomas looked at Sara and then back to Isaac. He was disappointed that his gift had been discarded, and he was going to speak to whoever this nurse was. But for the moment he hid his resentment and cheerfully said, “You bet, good buddy.”

“The nurse said you could explain the Bible ornaments to me, Dad,” said Isaac with enthusiasm.

“Well, I don’t know, buddy. I’ve never seen ornaments like these before. What do you know about them, honey?” asked Thomas, still concealing his emotions.

“I didn’t even notice that they had been changed,” Sara admitted.

Sara walked over to the tree and examined the ornaments. The ornaments seemed to be what Thomas had guessed them to be: Bible characters. Each of the ornaments also had what appeared to be Bible verses written on them.

The one that really caught Thomas’s attention was of Jesus on the cross with some kind of tree in the background. *Great*, he thought, *someone in the hospital belongs to a cult and is trying to convert my son*. What kind of nut would put an ornament of a condemned and dying man on a cross on a Christmas tree? What kind of nurse would consider this as “merry” for Christmas? The last thing he wanted his son to be reminded of tonight was death. What celebration could there be in death?

Next to the side of the tree, beside a glass of water and some crayons, was the book *Why We Celebrate Christmas*. The cover had a picture of Jesus standing in a white robe with a tree behind him. Thomas picked up the book, and Sara, who was now standing next to him, read the cover aloud. “*Why We Celebrate Christmas, a Parental Aide and Activity Book Designed to Instill in Children of all Ages a Scriptural Understanding of Christmas*. Plus, fourteen coloring ornaments that will transform your Christmas tree into a Jesus tree and witness for Jesus.”

Thomas and Sara glanced at each other in bewilderment as Sara took the book from him and continued reading the back cover.

“*Why We Celebrate Christmas, Featuring Jesus Tree Ornaments* is a book-product combination that presents scriptural truths in a unique and interesting manner. The book portion, starting with Adam and Eve through the great leaders and prophets of the Old Testament, explains the story of why Jesus was born into the world. Each character or event is explained on one page and has one Bible verse to support its particular message.” She stopped reading for a moment and commented, “Hey, this sounds pretty interesting.”

“The book portion will help you with your children in understanding,” Sara continued to read. “The Christmas story is not make-believe but is an actual, historical, Biblical event—that angels exist, miracles happen, and prophecies do come true. Dad and Mom give them the gifts at Christmas, not based upon whether they were good or bad, but out of unconditional love for them. The greatest gift is from God.”

“The product portions are fourteen different ornaments at the back of the book, which can be colored by your children and cut out to hang on the Christmas tree. Each ornament has a part of the Bible verse taken from the page that explains its specific message. One ornament a day could be hung on the tree as a devotional, with the last one on Christmas Eve or Day. The Christmas tree itself will actually be transformed into a storyteller and witness for Jesus.”

Sara looked at her husband and said, “Maybe you guys could even have your own personal devotional later.” She could tell from the look on Thomas’s face that he was not keen on her suggestion.

Before he could respond, she started reading again. “The book and ornaments, in the privacy of your own home, will help you and your children explain the story of Jesus to all who enter. The Christmas tree will become a showcase for discussion as believer and nonbeliever alike are drawn to it. What better time of year than Christmas are we given an opportunity, with our children, to share our faith? Not by showing the world what is wrong with the way they present Christmas, but what is better about the way we celebrate the birth of our Lord.”

“Wow! This really sounds pretty neat,” exclaimed Sara. “And look, it says you can also get a free printout of the book and ornaments online. I guess you and your dad are going to have to review this book together, Isaac.”

“Can we, Dad?” Isaac asked excitedly.

“Sure, Isaac. However, you are going to have to give me a little time to review this book.” Thomas started flipping through the pages and reading the titles. “I really don’t know what Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets have to do with the birth of Jesus. The second part of this book appears to deal with the events around the time of the birth of Jesus: the angel Gabriel, Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, the wise men, and the star. Also, something about being born again, a gift, and the Tree of Life, I didn’t know that Christmas was about so many things,” he sighed as he flipped through the pages.

“Can we do it now?” asked Isaac.

Thomas looked to Sara for help. She instantly understood

his need to talk to her in private and said to Isaac, “Why don’t you just rest for awhile first, and then you and your dad can go over the book later.”

“You promise, Dad?” asked Isaac.

“Who’s your daddy?” Thomas jokingly asked him.

“You are!” his son shot back.

Thomas smiled back at his son. He then recklessly tossed the book onto the table and knocked over a glass of water. It hit the floor with a loud crash, and the glass shattered everywhere in small pieces.

“Who is the idiot who put a glass of water in here? What ever happened to plastic cups? Now what are we supposed to put the water into?” fumed Thomas.

“Don’t worry about it! They have people here who clean up messes. I’ll see that it’s taken care of and that Isaac is given a plastic cup next time,” said Sara, trying to calm him.

As she walked out into the hallway, Thomas started to follow her but stopped for a moment at the door to look back at Isaac. Isaac looked lovingly back at his dad and smiled as if there was nothing wrong in the world.

“I love you, Isaac,” said Thomas.

“I love you too, Dad,” replied Isaac. “And, oh yeah, Dad, I almost forgot! One of the ornaments was missing. The nurse said it was the most important ornament and called it the gift ornament. When you see the nurse would you ask if it has been found yet?”

“Absolutely, the gift,” Thomas repeated making sure he understood him correctly. “I will look for it myself if I have to. You rest up now, so I can take you home in the morning. I’ll be back in a little while. I promise. Okay?”

“Sure, Dad, don’t worry about me. Everything will be okay.”

Thomas was always amazed at his son’s faith. They smiled at each other in a confident way that only a father and a child could understand. They now had an understanding. The boy could rest easy, believing that his dad would take care of everything. It would be wrong for Thomas to discourage it, but inside he grieved because he did not possess his son’s childlike faith. Besides, his boy’s faith

was the only hope that he still possessed, even if he couldn't claim ownership of it.

Walking out into the hallway, Thomas handed Sara the book and said sternly, "Somebody is going to pay for this."

"Is it really a problem?" she asked. "I mean, Isaac seems to want to know more about the subject. It appears to be short and to the point, and, if it takes his mind off why he's here, isn't that good?"

"Yes, it is a problem. I didn't bring my child to the hospital to discuss the crucifixion of Jesus. What has the death of Jesus on the cross got to do with Christmas, anyway? What good news is there to be found in his death? It's sadistic! That's what it is. Can anybody explain to me or reveal to me the reason why it's necessary? No, they can't, because there is no reason. Why can't people just focus on the positive side of the story instead of always on the negative? Sometimes it's better not to know the whole truth. Why spoil the holiday?"

Sara remained silent. She knew that he was upset, confused, and just needed to blow off some steam. He walked away from the room because he wanted to hide his anger from his boy on the other side of the door. She followed him.

"When I find out who this nurse is, I'm going to give her a piece of my mind that she won't forget. I didn't purchase that Christmas tree and ornaments to be upstaged by her or her god; seems like there is always someone trying to ruin the holiday spirit for everyone else. If I wanted religion for my boy, I would take him to church."

Sara remained silent as Thomas continued with his tirade.

"Who is in control anyway, and where is our doctor? He has been promising us for years that everything is going to be okay. Well it isn't, is it! These guys walk around here like they're gods. Who do they think they are, playing with people's lives like they do? Is this what putting your faith in science gets you? They never keep the promises that they make. It seems the more they claim to know, the more I realize they don't know anything. I have provided the best medical attention that money can buy, and where is the miracle that they promised us years ago? What good has all the time I spent working to earn the extra money that I spent on his care done for our son? Where is the value for my dollar? I can tell you. It isn't going to

happen. There will be no miracle. There is no hope. It was just another deception to hide the truth from us, one lie after another.”

Thomas stopped walking and talking to her for a moment. He now seemed to be talking only to himself. “Is this what following all the rules gets me? Have I been such a bad parent? What has been the purpose to all of this? I thought I was a man of means, but I cannot even save my own son. I cannot offer him any hope.” He looked to Sara with tears and sorrow in his eyes. “Is this my reward for my actions, or my punishment?”

Sara had no answer for him.

“It is strange, but I can’t really remember how life was before he was born. It’s like before him I really didn’t even exist. Without him, I had no value. After his birth, everything changed, and my life became so alive and full of color. I don’t know if I can go back to just existing with no purpose or color in my life! What good have all of our sacrifices been? The path ahead only seems to offer more pain. What will I do if he...” He did not want to say the last word. “I would tear my own heart out and die for him if I could. You believe that, don’t you?”

He looked to his wife for comfort, but she also felt empty and alone. She looked down to the floor and did not answer him. He knew that she was afraid, too, and did not need to hear his complaining. What could he expect her to do about any of it, anyway? He felt terribly guilty about venting. He needed to be alone to sort out his feelings. It was what he was used to doing. He thought that he was good at it.

“Look, I think there is a mall nearby where I can find Isaac another gift, God willing, which might take his mind off this book. I will only be gone about an hour. Tell him I went to get a cup of coffee if he wakes up, so I can surprise him when I get back. Okay?”

“Yes, but please hurry.” Sara answered. She was relieved. She believed the fresh air would do him good. He never was very adept at waiting around for answers. “You will come right back, Thomas. Won’t you?”

Thomas stopped and looked at her. He knew what she meant. No stopping to have a drink. He nodded his head and started to walk away, not sure if he really meant it.

“You do believe that I would give up my life for him, don’t you?” he asked her again, not sure that she really believed in him. It was important to him that she did.

“Yes,” she replied without hesitation.

“Thomas, wait,” someone called out from down the hallway.

Thomas looked and saw his mother approaching. She was quite a sight to view and hear. Long before she reached anyone, they would be drawn to the noise of the small bells that she had sewn all around her favorite holiday sweater. He surmised that she was trying to imitate the sounds of a sleigh ride. All he heard were chaotic jingling sounds that made no sense at all to him. The rest of her sweater was decorated with the usual holiday personalities like Santa Claus, his elves, reindeer, and various cartoon characters. Around her neck she always wore a chain with an extra-large gold cross at the end of it. He always figured if she got mugged and couldn’t convert them, then she could always use the cross to beat them off and save herself. Any other time of the year, the cross would be hard to miss; however, at Christmas it seemed somewhat out of place and hidden next to the other objects of make-believe that she was advertising on her person. The cross was still present, but it no longer held the center of attention that she usually gave to it. To top off her outfit she was wearing a Santa hat with white trim and a furry ball at the end of it. He didn’t understand her transformation at this time of year, but if it made her happy, who was he to question her?

Nevertheless, he did not want to talk to her. She would want to hold hands and have a prayer meeting in the hallway. She would shout hallelujahs in front of total strangers, and he would want to crawl into some dark corner to hide in embarrassment. He was in no mood for her or for praying to her god. He did not want to pretend that God existed or that he believed anymore. Tonight, of all nights, he did not want to be a hypocrite. He wanted only the truth.

“I do not have time for any of her ‘keep the faith’ or ‘all I need is Jesus’ sermons...especially right now! Tell her where I am going and that I will talk to her when I return,” he said quickly to Sara as he headed toward the elevator.

“She means well, Thomas,” Sara responded.

“So do I!” Thomas replied angrily, even though he was not sure what he meant by it.

“Thomas!” his mother loudly shouted out, “Remember to keep the faith. All we need is Jesus.”

Thomas pretended not to hear her and continued to walk away. He did not know why she was always reminding him to keep the faith. If he ever did have any faith, he had disposed of it long ago as a child. Faith to him meant believing in something that was no longer what it used to be and could never be again. He could not afford to have that kind of childhood faith anymore. It would require him to change. Besides, he believed that faith in someone else was nothing more than believing in a lie. Sooner or later everyone fails you, so why put yourself in harm’s way? Better to believe only in yourself, that way if you fail, you have no one else to blame when you take the fall.

As he rushed by the nurses’ station, he thought about stopping and complaining but decided that there just was not enough time. When he entered the elevator and was alone with his thoughts, he remembered praying and asking God for his help before entering Isaac’s room. His anger mounted as he exited the elevator and rushed through the lobby.

This was the first time that he could remember as a man that he had ever asked God for help. And how does God answer him? With ornaments and a book about Jesus and the history of the Bible. What was he supposed to do, give Isaac a crash course in Biblical studies? He was now angrier with God than with the nurse. If this is how God is going to help him, then he was sure he would be better off on his own. What kind of God would do this to his son, and what kind of God puts himself first at a time like this?

“Watch your step, sir; it’s really slippery out there tonight,” advised the security guard to Thomas. “Looks like a real bad storm is heading toward us, so be extremely cautious of where you go... especially if you are going out there alone.”

Thomas glanced at the guard without acknowledging him or his words of warning. Disturbed by the unsolicited advice, he wondered whom this lowly guard standing by the door thought he was

to counsel him. With haste he passed the guard and exited through the door into the darkness of the night.

The cold air mixed with the wind made him even madder as he stepped down the stairs toward the parking lot. Some Christmas Eve; the weather is lousy, and he has to go out in it because God could not provide a decent gift for his son. Now he couldn't even provide him with good weather.

"You know, God, it really isn't about you. I ask for a little help, and you want all the attention. Next time I ask you for help, don't! I will let the women do the praying to you, but I will do the leading. Okay? Now, because of you, I have to go out and buy another gift. Thanks for nothing!" Thomas shouted as he walked away to the parking lot.

Below the *Welcome to The Good Shepherd Hospital* sign, he paused and looked up to the night sky. A full white moon could be seen through the gathering storm clouds.

"So why do we celebrate Christmas, God? What is so special about your son's birthday, anyway? Hello, can you hear my voice? Don't you have any great words of wisdom for me? Is there something significant here that I am missing? Answer me! That is, if you can! This certainly is not your kingdom, anyway, so why should you get all the power and the glory?"

Thomas stood still waiting for an answer, daring God. Nothing happened.

"Yeah, just as I thought, see if I give you a gift for Christmas," he sneered.

Thomas never saw what hit him in the head. All of a sudden a white flash blinded his vision and he staggered backward. He felt like he was dreaming, observing all his mind took in but unable to piece it together. Then, as if in slow motion, his head slid back and his body followed until he felt the impact of the ground. Was he finally going to sleep, he wondered? He sensed the flow of warm air engulfing his whole body before everything went black.