

## A FATHER'S WORLD

The neon sign above the entrance caught Thomas's attention. It was flashing on and off in large red and white colors, "Welcome to the World Mall," and in smaller letters below it proclaimed "Where All Your Earthly Needs Are Met." Not looking back, he entered the mall.

The mall was decorated in the usual holiday decor, plenty of colorful lights, plastic trees, frosted windows with water paintings of Santa Claus in his sleigh with his flying reindeer, elves making toys, and other commercial cartoon characters. Advertising, the disposable kind that could be quickly washed away and replaced with the next holiday, nothing serious but nothing of substance either. This was marketing at its finest. He surmised that whoever or whatever gets the masses to spend their money and makes them happy at the same time cannot be all wrong. Inside the mall he was in his element, and he could relate to it. It was all about making money.

People were hurrying in every direction, coming in and out of stores loaded down with their last-minute offerings. Some of them looked stressed out, but then who isn't this time of year? He reasoned that he should join them. After all, had he not just given away all of his money? They had something to show for their money. All he had was a good feeling. Who was smarter, them or him? Who cared, he was feeling better, so why question it.

Because of his good deed, he believed that he deserved a little reward for his charity. He would feel uncomfortable pulling out his flask in the mall for a little sip, so instead he took out a cigarette and his matchbook. There was only one match left in the matchbook, so he took extra care in striking it. It exploded into a small flame of fire as he lit his cigarette and then returned the matchbook into his coat pocket. This little moment of self-indulgence would help him to focus on his mission. With his eyes closed he deeply inhaled on the cigarette and felt an immediate rush of relaxation.

“Hey, you can’t smoke that cigarette in here.”

Thomas exhaled the smoke in remorse. Not because he felt guilty, but because he was enjoying the moment, and now someone was spoiling it. *Who else wanted his attention*, he wondered? He opened his eyes and saw an officer of the law standing in front of him. The lawman looked vaguely familiar, but Thomas could not remember where he had seen him before.

“This is a no-smoking building. If you want to smoke, you will have to take it outside,” said the older man with authority.

“Look, Officer, it is really dark and cold outside. I am barely inside the building, and no one else is even near me. I’m not harming anyone but myself. Can’t you cut me some slack tonight; it’s Christmas Eve for God’s sake!” he whined as he felt his annoyance rapidly turning into resentment.

“Sorry, it’s the law. The smoke from your cigarette doesn’t just stay with you. It travels, and others inhale it and are affected by it. Besides, the law is for your own good and everyone else’s sake, but certainly not for God’s sake,” the officer offhandedly replied.

“Wow! Just what I needed to hear tonight, more do-gooder laws to deprive me of my rights!” Thomas knew he was losing his cool, but he kept on talking. After all, who was this officer to talk to him in such a manner? “Don’t you have better things to do than to harass honest taxpayers? What are you, another bleeding heart in uniform? I have rights, too, you know!” The officer did not respond to Thomas’s demanding questions of his rights, so he tried to accuse him of being insensitive to his needs. “You sure don’t have the Christmas spirit do you?”

The officer seemed taken aback at first by the question but then slowly he asked back, "Are you implying that I'm not a good Christian?"

"What are you taking about?"

"Well, Christmas is a celebration about the birth of Jesus as the Christ child, and I do celebrate that event at this time of year," the officer calmly replied. "So I do believe that I do indeed have the Christmas spirit."

"You know fully what I meant," Thomas snapped back. "You don't have the holiday spirit."

"What spirit?"

"Gee, I don't know!" Thomas mocked him. "Like maybe the reason for the season."

"Like Jesus," answered the officer. He then slowly smiled back at Thomas as if his point had been made. "Now, sir, I will only ask you nicely one more time. Please extinguish the cigarette."

Thomas hated the thought that he had been bested by someone whom he thought should be in a subservient position to him. He stared at the officer for a few seconds, wondering if he meant what he said. Thomas knew that the officer was correct about the smoking ordinance, but he did not want to give in to what he thought was another stupid law that infringed on his rights. In any case, he wasn't hurting anyone but himself, so why should he be penalized, and why should others care about what he did to himself? It was his life.

"Okay! You win. I'm putting out my cigarette just for you. Are you happy now?" snapped Thomas as he dropped the cigarette and ground it into the floor with the heel of his shoe. He hated to give in, but he didn't have the time to argue with the officer about some silly law that might stop him from accomplishing his mission to get his son a gift.

The officer remained silent and just looked at him as if he had heard it all before. This only served to infuriate Thomas even more. He wanted to somehow put the officer into a defensive position.

"Why don't you really do your job and go outside and arrest those people who tried to sell me some drugs just a few minutes ago?" he challenged the officer.

“What people?” asked the officer with obvious concern.

“Just outside the front door, a whole bunch of men and a girl, maybe you can arrest the girl. That is, if you are man enough to do your job,” Thomas smirked.

The officer stared at him, not giving any indication of a reaction to his challenge. All the same, Thomas was sure the officer wouldn't accept his dare and somehow he would come out the winner. He considered this nothing more than a silly confrontation of their wills. He was sure the officer would not seek out those whom he considered were truly the guilty ones. That would be too dangerous. It was much safer for the officer to pick on him for some small infraction of the law than to enforce the tough laws. Anyhow, the officer was treating him like he was guilty of breaking all of the laws, not just one, and he did not think that was fair. He smiled smugly at the officer's dilemma.

“Thank you for the information, sir. I will check on it immediately. And please pick up that cigarette butt,” the officer requested.

Stunned, Thomas stood silently as the officer walked around him and headed to the exit.

“Wait, aren't you going to call for backup?” asked Thomas in disbelief as the smile on his face was replaced with a look of real concern.

“No, sir. I am the only law here.”

Before Thomas could say anything else, the officer was out the door. He stood still as guilt slowly washed over him. What had he done? He had let his anger get the best of him, and now he had put another man in danger. Why couldn't he have just put the stupid cigarette out and kept his mouth shut? He was tempted to walk outside and make sure the officer was safe. However, the thought quickly fled his mind. He was on a mission to get Isaac a gift, and the officer was paid to put himself in precarious situations, not him. Was it not his duty to report lawbreakers? Sure he was breaking a small law, but, compared to those people outside, he was an angel. Furthermore, it is Christmas Eve, and nobody wants to hurt anyone on Christmas Eve; even bad people have a heart during Christmas. Thomas decided to dismiss any responsibility for his actions as quickly as he had gotten angry. He picked up the crushed cigarette and threw it into a trash

receptacle. He figured it was the least he could do. He didn't have time for any more guilt. Guilt was just extra baggage that he didn't need to carry with him tonight.

He looked at the exit one last time, hesitated for a moment, and then headed in the opposite direction, deeper into the World Mall. It was no longer his problem. He was now indifferent to the whole situation. He was more determined than ever to get what he believed Isaac deserved: the best gift that the world had to offer.

Christmas trees were lined up all along both sides of the mall. Their lights cast a soft illuminating glow that was truly beautiful and spellbinding. Thomas felt pulled to the trees in admiration of their ornaments and all of the various decorations surrounding the whole area. It looked like a winter wonderland had been brought in from the outside world. *Now this is what Christmas is supposed to be about, he thought, a time of wonder and awe, where everyone can enjoy the mystery of the season.* Christmas, a time when you can dream about having your worldly desires come true and make sure you and yours receive their share of the fantasy.

A sign above the entrance to a shop read, "The Christmas Store." Thomas entered the store in the hope of finding more of the true essence and spirit of Christmas. He knew that he was a hard sell, but maybe, just maybe, someone could sell him on Christmas tonight.

"Enjoy the forbidden fruits of the Gods," read the first display sign that Thomas approached. Assorted boxes of chocolate strawberries, cherries, and other sweets were on display on a table, exhibiting their potential to help you satisfy your sweet yearnings. *A moment's pleasure, Thomas thought, but probably immediate heartburn compounded with added pounds of guilt to carry around with you forever.* He was unconvinced that he would enjoy the secrecy of the forbidden fruits.

He moved further into the Christmas store to look at their different Christmas trees and offerings. The ornaments on the trees were of things from fairy tales, sports figures, movie stars, wooden soldiers, expensive cars, elves, reindeer, and, of course, Santa Claus. All the things that are supposed to bring happiness into everyone's dreary life this time of year, offering an escape from reality, but at a

price, nothing here was for free. This was a message he was familiar with.

Along the walls were hundreds of other ornaments in little red boxes for sale. “Put your Reason for the Season on your Holiday Tree,” proclaimed a sign in large red letters just above the ornaments. Most of the ornaments appeared to be of the same items that he had seen on the trees. A few of the ornaments had been taken out of their boxes and were hanging from hooks on a display wall. He took particular notice of one ornament of a man dressed in a business suit. Was this what the successful man was supposed to look like? Next to him was a figure of a woman in a tight dress holding up a glass in a toast. He wondered whom or what she was supposed to be toasting, the man or her liberation from him? Next to her were figures of a man and woman dancing, or else they were doing something that shouldn’t be done in public, he wasn’t quite sure. At the end of the line of ornaments was a simple one of a cross. Most of the other ornaments looked nearly sold out, but a whole line of the crosses remained. He did not see any price tags on the crosses. However, when he picked up a few of the other boxed ornaments, he was surprised at how expensive it was to purchase your own reason for the season.

Walking further into the store, Thomas stopped in front of a window display of a picture of a young, beautiful woman. She was dressed only in scant underwear with large white-feathered wings sheltering both sides of her mostly nude body. She had long, flowing hair and was smiling in a seductive and promising manner. The print on the window read, “Tempt Your Angel, Seduce Your Angel, Possess Your Angel This Season; Buy Her Angel Lingerie, and Make Her Glad to Serve You.”

*Yeah, if only I could get Sara to pay attention to me like that, I would be a very happy man,* he thought. Immediately he felt some guilt at this thought when he remembered that Sara, his woman, was at this very moment taking care of his son by herself.

The next table in front of him had an ad that read, “Buy her comfort and joy. Baptize her with our oil and bath products. Make her feel born again.” Numerous bath items decorated in red ribbons were displayed on the table.

Everyone wants to look forever young, probably even his wife, Thomas surmised. A relaxing bath would probably help to take her mind off all the bad events that had been happening in their lives. He would have to try and come back later and pick up some items for her when he had more time. He immediately felt less guilt over his prior thoughts about her.

Thomas advanced further into the Christmas store, observing all of the lights and glitter of the store, while at the same time enjoying the atmosphere of the worldly dreams that it offered at a high cost. However, he wasn't prepared for the next Christmas item up for sale.

"First thing you need to know about the rules is that they were made for others...be an exception...break free from the flock, and make your own rules!" proclaimed the sign. Underneath the banner was the latest suburban sports vehicle on the market. It was huge and situated just above him on a platform. Several other men and women were gathered around the vehicle. The lights from the trees made the polish on the red-colored vehicle shine in a manner that caught everyone's attention.

The vehicle was going to be a lottery prize for some lucky person willing to part with a hundred dollars. Entry forms to fill out to win the vehicle were being completed by members of the crowd. Another sign stated that the proceeds from the drawing were going to a local group purchasing toys for Santa to give to needy children. He agreed that it was important that all children feel included in the holiday spirit by receiving toys for Christmas, and who better than Santa to give them. Thomas then remembered that he had given all of his money away to Joshua. Still he had no regrets about doing it.

He stood admiring the vehicle while imagining himself driving it down the highway of life, leaving everyone else in the dust. If he owned a huge, powerful vehicle like this, he knew that people would pay attention to him. The power that it offered would set him apart from others. People would recognize that he was somebody important. Thomas would take his family with him for rides that they would never forget. They would recognize him as the one responsible for getting them to places where he wanted to go, and that would give him a great sense of pride. Maybe someday his luck would change,

but it was not going to be tonight, of that he was pretty certain. He would just have to work harder to earn and pay for it by himself, just like everybody else.

Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a little light shining down on a small table in the corner, just off to the side of the crowd. Walking around the other people he came to the table. It was not decorated, out in the open, or flashy like all the other promotions of seasonal gifts. The table was more hidden than revealed, placed out of the way as if on purpose, going unnoticed in the mad holiday rush for gifts of personal pleasure.

“Clearance Sale...last chance...will not be restocked” was all the sign on the table read. On the table were little figurines made of plastic. Thomas immediately recognized them as members of the nativity scene. The angels, shepherds, wise men, Mary, and Joseph were all there surrounding the little baby Jesus in the manger. Thomas picked up the little baby-Jesus model to his eye level and just stared at it for a moment.

“So, you are supposed to be the reason all these people are out here tonight? All these beautiful displays, expensive items, and dreams are supposed to be the result of one night long ago. The night you were born. You must be really proud of the way your people are honoring you.” Thomas set the baby Jesus figure down and picked up the price tag for the complete nativity set.

“Wow, do you realize that you are the cheapest item in this store? It just goes to show you where people place their priorities, even at this time of the year on your birthday. Looks to me like the merchants have won. Nothing is for free, not even your message,” he said with sarcasm.

He then had another thought and chuckled at it. “Actually they could probably put a “free” sign up here, and I would bet that nobody would take you home. People’s hearts are just not open to you anymore. Sorry, Baby Jesus, but your message died a long time ago...with you.”

Thomas heard laughing and turned to see some of the young people from the group outside the mall looking and pointing directly at him. The officer must not have done his job, or else why were

they now in the mall? They probably had seen him talking to the baby-Jesus decoration. He felt himself turning red as embarrassment spread across his face.

“He must be a Jesus freak,” a young woman said loud enough for everyone nearby to hear her, “praying to a baby. Can you image how pathetic his prayer life must be? Wonder what he asked baby Jesus to bring him for Christmas?”

“He ought to ask for a new life, if you ask me,” another person laughed.

Thomas tried to ignore the girl and her friends as he rushed past them. He could hear their giggling and wanted only to distance himself from another potential conflict. The issue with the policeman was enough conflict for one night. Better to leave this time than to defend himself. What did he know about Jesus, anyway? Evidently only enough to get himself into trouble again.

Thomas felt somber as he made his way out of the Christmas store and back into the main mall. He stood in the middle of the mall aisle as people rushed by him in different directions, uncertain down which path he should proceed. If he only had someone he could ask for assistance. Which way to go? What gift to seek? His anger was slowly mounting as he contemplated his predicament. He needed more time, but he knew that time was something that was running out. He had to make a decision.

“I believe...I believe...I believe,” Thomas heard a chorus of children shouting and screaming. He turned and saw a group of young children surrounding an overweight man dressed in a red Santa Claus suit. “I believe in you Santa...I have been good...I believe in you, Santa,” the children continued to shout as they waited for their turns to sit on his lap, eager to whisper into his ear what their little hearts desired for Christmas. He wondered what the children would think if they did not receive from Santa Claus the toys that they had dreamed about and begged him for? Would they still believe? Probably not, then they blame and take out their disillusion on their parents come Christmas morning.

A lady dressed as Santa's helper in a tight outfit was collecting money from the stressed-out parents for their children's pictures to

be taken with Santa Claus. An expensive moment captured on a negative that would be duplicated and sent out to all of their friends and relatives as a token of the passage of childhood. *Passage to what*, he wondered. Was there a purpose or foundation in all of this for the children, or was it really just for the adults? Was it just easier for the parents to let the marketplace teach their children about Christmas? But what was it really teaching them, to make-believe in a myth? Were the parents willingly allowing their children to be deceived by all the glitter? Whatever the reason, there was no denying that it was great marketing.

He pondered that this was probably the closest to any kind of sacred moment any of these parents or their children would have this Christmas season. His perception of the hypocrisy of the season made him feel contempt for the parents and pity for their little children. It was all for a price with no guarantee of fulfillment. Yet he really didn't know why he felt this way. Maybe he was bitter, but something just felt wrong about the whole event. *But then perhaps the world does tell a better tale than the real Christmas story*, Thomas thought. *Otherwise people would not bring their kids here instead of...* he had to stop and think for a moment. *Where else do you take your kids for Christmas*, he wondered. *Church? But wasn't Santa Claus at church, too?* Maybe there really was no mystery to the season after all.

He noticed that the young people from the store had followed him out into the mall aisle. They had been joined by more friends and were still looking and pointing their fingers at him. The other young people were now joining their friends in their mocking of him. He was no longer embarrassed but disgusted. Who did they think they were to pick on him? He was not a Jesus follower.

Walking quickly away and passing by the parents with their children, Thomas took notice of one particular young mother. She was wearing a necklace with a gold cross. It reminded him of his mother's cross, only much smaller. She was holding the hand of a small girl. The child was excited and looked innocent like all the other children willing to believe in whatever their parents told them to be the truth. Without giving it any thought, he decided to share his contempt of the season and his sense of indignation about it with her.

“Hi, can I ask you a question?” he asked, smiling as he stopped next to her.

Frightened and taken aback by his unexpected presence, the young mother tightened her grip of her child’s hand and timidly replied, “Yes.”

“I noticed your cross and wondered, is it better to teach your child to believe in that which you know is pretend?” He looked toward the Santa Claus so she would know exactly to whom he was alluding. Smiling all the time, he then continued, “Knowing that someday they will discover him to be a lie, and you will have to tell the child to grow up?” He then looked at her cross and said, “Or is it better to teach your child about that which you know to be true. Then they too can believe in the man who was on that cross, and you can hope that someday they will grow up and discover this truth for themselves and continue to believe in Him, just like you.”

Thomas felt proud of his wit, while the young mother just stared at him in what he was sure to be a sign of utter confusion about his definition of pretend versus belief.

“How dare you? First, my religion is a personal matter and is none of your or anyone else’s business,” she said loud enough so everyone standing around could hear her. “Who do you think you are to judge me and what I do with my child? Who are you to push your morals on me?”

“He is a Jesus-freak,” several of the young people shouted out to the mother. “He does not believe in the holiday.”

“I’m sorry,” apologized Thomas, trying to recover quickly from the verbal assaults. “I saw your cross and just wondered if you saw the irony of the whole season. You know, how it is all just one fantasy versus another fantasy.”

“My cross,” she continued on in anger, “is just a symbol, an ornament. It is not meant to mean anything special to you, but to me. It’s personal, and what business is it of yours, anyway? I thought you Jesus people were supposed to be tolerant?”

Thomas stood silently, feeling like an idiot. The mother had answered him in the same manner he would have if their positions were reversed. But it was definitely not the response that he had expected

from her. He thought that because she displayed the cross on her body she would be made to feel guilty by his observation. His anger was evaporating as quickly as hers was rising. The redness was once again returning to his face. He felt terribly misunderstood and embarrassed. All the other parents in line were now also giving him dirty looks.

“I’m so sorry if I offended you, but I am not a Jesus fanatic,” he stated slowly and firmly. “It is all a mistake. Those young people saw me talking to the baby-Jesus figurine in the store and just came to the wrong conclusion.”

“So you’re not a Jesus-freak, but you talk to baby Jesus and you hate Santa Claus. Right?” she inquired loudly of him.

Thomas stood still without responding, because he was utterly confused on how to respond to her allegations. He felt defenseless. He knew if someone had asked his mother about the huge cross that was always hanging around her neck, they would not be able to shut her up. She would go on and on about Jesus and how much everyone needed him. She would be completely overjoyed to share her beliefs. His mother was the real Jesus fanatic, not him.

“You must be the biggest scrooge of Christmas that there is,” the mother shouted into his face.

“Guilty,” Thomas conceded and quickly turned and walked away from the mother and her child. He could hear some of the other parents clapping for the young mother in her courageous stance against him. Their applause for her bothered him, so he stopped, turned around, and asked her one more question.

“Look, I am really sorry, but please tell me one thing,” he said to her. She was still smiling from the approval of the crowd and stared defiantly back at him. The crowd went silent, waiting for him to make a further fool of himself. “Did your Jesus die publicly on the cross so you could have a private faith?”

The young mother stopped smiling and did not respond to his question. However, the voices from the young people kept yelling out to him as he turned again to walk away. Their voices terrorized and haunted him.

“Unbeliever...Jesus-freak...Scrooge...Santa hater...loser...intolerant hypocrite!”

It was now obvious to him that people did not want to hear from him any more than they wanted to hear from the baby Jesus. He wondered if the cross had any purpose or value to it today or if it was just another ornament. But, if it did have purpose or value, then shouldn't it be shared? Perhaps the cross has lost its meaning in today's pop culture just like everything and everyone else. However, shouldn't Christians believe that they know something about the cross that others don't? He could understand the young mother's position if he had been asking her about how much money she makes. That is personal, but your faith? Is that really something meant just to be personal?

What he did not understand was why such strong hostility was directed toward him by the mother if she was a Christian. Why should the most important person to a Christian not be shared with his or her own child? They are their children, not the world's. And, if Christians don't teach them what to believe in, then who will, the world? What would the world teach them to believe in? He knew the answer. A make-believe story designed so that the sellers of Christmas could profit, a universal deception.

Then it occurred to him that he was not a Christian, so why should he care? He wasn't sure that he did, but it made him wonder what it was that he taught his son about Christmas or anything else spiritual, for that matter. The answer was *nothing*. He did not believe in Jesus or Santa Claus. Yet he was certain of two things. If you excluded Jesus from your child's Christmas, no one would care, because they would consider that your business. But if you suggested that you did not let your children believe in Santa Claus, they would consider it their business, ask "How dare you?" and accuse you of being a child abuser.

He no longer wanted to think about the young mother and her attack against him, his mother, the meaning of the cross, Santa, or Jesus as he continued to hurry away. He knew that he had behaved badly. Now he just wanted to focus on getting on with his mission: finding his son the right gift for Christmas.

A woman's musical voice suddenly announced over the mall speakers, "The mall will be closing in ten minutes. This is your

last chance to purchase that special gift. Make your decision now. Don't delay! Make your final choice, and have a happy holiday, everyone."

Most of the stores Thomas passed by had already closed. However, he noticed many of the people who continued to move by him were carrying red gift bags. Concerned that only one store might still be left open, he quickened his pace. A mysterious gray fog clung low to the ground as he advanced further toward his goal. He wondered if a fog machine was placed somewhere in the aisle, but he didn't see one. It bothered him slightly that he could not see clearly where his feet were leading him. A crowd of people was directly in front of him, and he made his way through them to find out what they were all standing around and gawking at.

Thomas stood amazed at what he saw. He had reached the end of the mall. In a large area, dozens of red bags on the ground surrounded what appeared to be the figure of a huge red dragon. The ominous-looking fog added to the intrigue of the display as it slowly lifted up from the gift bags. The spiked head of the dragon almost touched the cathedral ceiling of the mall. Leathery skeletal wings were attached to its spiked back. The dragon had large feet with massive claws, and the fangs in its open mouth appeared to be razor sharp. The face of the dragon, while appearing menacing, was so symmetric that it had a certain beauty about it. A collar was around the dragon's neck with a chain attached, but it wasn't connected to anything. The last coupling of the chain was torn in half. This gave the appearance that the dragon had broken loose and was free for a short time. The dragon's long tail was half wrapped around its lower torso, giving it a snakelike appearance. He did not know what they were selling here, but to him this was advertising at its best.

The dragon's neck then moved, and its head descended down to his eye level. The eyes were reptilian, like a serpent and completely black. Startled, Thomas jumped back slightly as he was caught off guard by the dragon's fast-descending movements. He assumed that the dragon was robotic and was being controlled by someone watching him from nearby, but that thought did little to help diminish his fright. The dragon's seemingly bottomless black eyes stared at him

and, for one second, flashed red, as a slight smile seemed to crease its lips. The dragon looked so alive he was tempted to flee in fear of being devoured by the beast.

“Looks like you have found a friend in De Dragon.”

Thomas turned to see a man in a red sports coat who had just spoken to him. An emblem of the dragon was on his shoulder with the words “De Dragon” encircling it.

“Wow, with a friend like this, I wouldn’t have to take any nonsense from anyone, would I?” Thomas joked back. He did not want the man to think he had been frightened.

“Exactly right,” responded the salesman with a smile.

“Actually, this looks more like something out of Halloween than Christmas,” Thomas commented.

“Not Christmas, my friend, but happy holidays. You see, you can’t take Jesus out of Christmas, but you can take him out of the holidays,” the salesman corrected him. “After all, we don’t want to offend anyone, do we?” he asked Thomas smugly, as though no one would think of disagreeing with him. “Business is business, and we want everyone to participate in the spirit of the season. That’s why De Dragon is for everyone.”

“Whatever! I actually don’t care one way or the other, but I always thought Jesus was for everyone, too. It looks like you *can* take Jesus out of Christmas, or the holidays,” Thomas corrected himself and then emphasized. “But, I bet you can’t take the devil out of Halloween.”

“You are exactly right, my friend. That’s because Jesus was actually a man who lived, and the devil is just make-believe. Christmas is actually supposed to be about make-believe, too,” stressed the salesman. “That’s why we have Santa Claus and all those elves making gifts for children all over the world. Children can understand the simple message of receiving. This way allows the entire world of children to join together in one great big party to celebrate the holiday spirit of buying and receiving. Now, what could be wrong with that?”

“So we can later tell all the children to grow up and quit believing?” asked Thomas. He knew that this question had set the

young mother off and prepared himself for a possible verbal attack from the salesman.

“Well, you know we all have to grow up someday and quit believing in make-believe.”

“And believe in what?” asked Thomas.

“Why, hell, sir, in nobody but yourself, of course.”

“And here I thought the world is supposed to be throwing this big birthday party for Jesus, but now it looks like if he shows up, he will ruin it. I guess I should have *stupid* stamped across my forehead. But what exactly does this dragon have to do with the holidays?”

“De Dragon,” the salesman corrected him, “is anything and everything a child would want to believe in it to do. I can tell you have not been keeping up with the latest in toys for children. We used to say ‘Thank ya, Jesus’ for the shoppers,” the salesman said with an evangelistic passion. “Then it was ‘Thank you, Santa Claus.’ Now it is time to move on and just say, ‘Thank you for your business,’ and what better way than with De Dragon? You are exactly what the holidays should be all about with De Dragon. The holidays are about you and what you can buy and provide for your loved ones. You do want the best for your loved ones this holiday season, don’t you?”

Thomas just smiled back, feeling like a negligent father.

“De dragon is the latest hot item for kids of all ages,” the salesman continued with renewed enthusiasm. “You are very lucky, because I just got this last shipment in tonight. They are sold out everywhere else. There is already a cartoon series and a movie, soon to be released all about the De Dragon and its exciting adventures from all over the world.” The salesman then emphasized with his fingers the many points to be gained by buying De Dragon. “The stories help children in building their self-pride, self-confidence, self-reliance, and anything else that makes them self-sufficient.”

“What does the ‘De’ stand for in De Dragon?” Thomas asked, unimpressed with the sales pitch.

“It means ‘from the family of the Dragon,’” answered the salesman. “It can also indicate nobility, you know, a little cut above the herd. The cartoon series always features a child joining with the De Dragon to defeat the forces of intolerance and exclusion.”

“Well, it seems nothing is wrong with what you are saying, and I do want the best gift for my son. From listening to you talk, it sounds like this is what all the children want. Funny though, I never heard him mention the De Dragon before,” admitted Thomas.

“Trust me. Kids and parents both love the De Dragon,” added the salesman. “Children spend hours alone fantasizing with the De Dragon, while the parents can get some free time for themselves. What could be better? It’s a win-win situation for everyone.”

“My child’s holiday would be ruined if I had not found this gift tonight,” a man standing nearby joined in on the conversation. “I cannot begin to tell you how many stores I have been to searching for De Dragon. Now I can finally relax, and we can have a great holiday. My child will definitely know how much Santa loves him tomorrow. It is the perfect gift. I suggest you get it at any price while you still can. It is worth every dollar.”

Thomas stood back and watched as other people, similar to the man in his enthusiasm, rushed to purchase the red bags with the red plastic models of the De Dragon inside. They were acting like they had found some hidden treasure.

Time was running out to buy a gift, and no other stores appeared to be open. Could this many parents all be wrong in what they wanted to offer to their children for Christmas? He decided to take advantage of the opportunity, because he was certain that he would not get a second chance with the De Dragon tonight.

“Alright, you have won me over and gotten my complete attention and trust. How much is it to join the family of the De Dragon?” asked Thomas.

“One hundred dollars,” the salesman shot back.

“You got to be kidding,” protested Thomas. “It is just a plastic toy! It’s not even real. Remember?”

“I have plenty of people here who recognize a good value,” responded the salesman. “Nothing is free, my friend. Happiness has a price tag too. I’ll be sold out in five minutes, anyway. The choice is yours. You do want the best gift for your child this Christmas, don’t you?” the salesman pressured him while waiting impatiently for him to make a decision.

“Fine,” Thomas said in utter dismay. “I just didn’t know making someone else happy was going to cause me so much frustration. You do take credit cards, don’t you?”

“Absolutely,” the salesman gleamed. “Happiness on the credit plan, I sell it all the time. Free today so you can pay for it tomorrow with interest.”

The salesman handed Thomas a red bag, took his credit card, and walked away to process his purchase. Thomas pulled the red plastic replica of the dragon out of the bag. He wondered how this gift would actually bring joy to his son. The other grown-ups around him seemed euphoric as other salespeople helped them. He figured the problem must be with him. Maybe Isaac would be familiar with the De Dragon. However, if this was the best gift that the world had to offer his son, he was extremely disappointed in the product.

“If you could just sign here, sir,” requested the salesman.

Thomas took the pen offered him and signed his name for the purchase.

“Here’s your receipt. You have now guaranteed that your son will have a great holiday,” claimed the salesman as he turned and rushed away to assist the next stressed-out parent.

Thomas once again looked at the huge red dragon. Its eyes were still at his eye level. It no longer appeared to be smiling. He had the feeling that the dragon knew that he had just been sold a bill of goods. Then he realized that the dragon was not alive, no matter how real it looked to him. He felt foolish with himself. White smoke then suddenly came cascading out of the dragon’s large nostrils, and the crowd cheered its approval. *It’s all about show*, he thought, *absent of any redeeming value*. He decided it was time for him to leave.

What’s done is done, he conceded. Thomas didn’t believe he had enough time left for a second chance at another gift. He believed that his time had run out, so he turned and quickly made his way back through the crowd of people. Breaking out of the gathering, he resolved to make it out of the mall and back to the hospital as fast as possible.

Still, his thoughts about tonight troubled him deeply. Why was he discussing the meaning of Christmas with so many different people? What was so important about this Christmas Eve? Did it

start when he viewed the statue of the shepherd or with the Jesus Tree Ornaments and the book, *Why We Celebrate Christmas*, back in Isaac's room? Why were these Christmas questions preoccupying his mind? Thomas suspected that he should have some easy answers; yet, for whatever reason, they were eluding him. He felt like a child with a Christmas present, totally intrigued to know the contents of the gift before it was time to be opened. Same as the child, he would have to wait until the morning, the dawn of a new day, before permission would be granted for him to unwrap it, and its mystery would be revealed to him.

"Thomas, I have a gift for you," a child's voice interrupted his thoughts.

Thomas looked down and saw that Joshua was once again standing in front of him. The child still had the big smile on his face. *What a coincidence*, he thought, *that the child would have a gift for him just when he was thinking about a Christmas gift.*

"Sorry, Joshua, but I don't have any more money to buy anything else from you," he answered truthfully.

"It's free," countered Joshua.

"I just found out that nothing is free," said Thomas with a tired look on his face. "Look, Joshua! I really don't have the time for you right now. I have to get back to the hospital to my son."

"But my gift is for you and your son," said Joshua with excitement written all over his face.

Frustrated by the child's persistence, Thomas relented. "Okay, Joshua, walk with me to the exit, and I will listen to your sales pitch. Show me what it is you are trying to sell me. After all, why should I expect you to be any different?"

Joshua skipped beside Thomas in order to keep up with him as they walked out and away from the fog together. At the same time, the boy was reaching into his pocket and was attempting to pull something out. It appeared to be stuck. Thomas had no idea what the child might be selling now, yet he was amused by his youthful eagerness and theatrics.

As they neared the exit Thomas stopped and said, "Alright, lets see what you're trying to sell to me."

Freeing the object from his pocket with a look of high expectation, the boy lifted it up to him. Thomas wasn't sure what to make of the gift. It looked to be some kind of Christmas-tree ornament. He took the gift from the child's hand and examined it closer. It was on flat, hard paper in the shape of a white dove that was flying while carrying a white box with a red ribbon wrapped around it. Printed on the box were the words "the gift." The ornament had been brightly colored in a crude manner such as a child of Joshua's age might have done.

"Wow, Joshua, this is really nice," said Thomas, not wanting to hurt the child's feelings. It looked so innocent. It definitely did not have the visual appeal of the De Dragon. "Did you color this yourself?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Joshua, "I did this just for you."

Thomas didn't know what else to say. He was really touched by the boy's simple offer, and he could tell that the child wanted to hear more from him. But he was confident that Isaac would enjoy the De Dragon more than this simple ornament. What was its value or purpose anyway? If only he had the time to discover its true meaning from the boy. Maybe it would make sense, but Thomas did not want to take any more time. He had to get back to Isaac.

"I don't have any more cash on me, Joshua, so you might want to sell this to someone else," Thomas said gently as he held the ornament back out to the child.

"Oh, no, it's a gift. Free. Really! I did it especially for you to share with your son," protested Joshua as he put his hands behind his back.

"This isn't the way the world usually operates, but thank you very much Joshua," Thomas said, giving in. "I have already purchased a present for him, and I really didn't think that I would have a chance at a free gift tonight. Thanks, but tell me what does it stand for exactly? I mean it is really pretty, but does it have a message?"

"All you have to do is believe in order to receive the gift."

Thomas stood confused and troubled yet intrigued by the child's words.

"Believe in what? And receive what from the gift?"

“Ask and then seek with all your heart,” answered the boy, “and you will find the answer.”

“Help me out here a little bit, Joshua,” pleaded Thomas. “What is it exactly that you really want for this gift?”

“Your pain,” the child answered without pretense. “It is a gift for your pain.”

Thomas was taken aback and totally puzzled by the boy’s response. He felt he and the child had moved on to a different level in their conversation, and he was clueless as to where it was going. A gift for his pain, what was that supposed to mean? What could this innocent child know about pain? Nonetheless, this child was now in the position of being the teacher, and he felt like the student. He was interested and decided he should spend a moment with the boy. He smiled at Joshua as he put the ornament into his coat pocket. He now wanted to know more about this boy and his simple gift.

Thomas’s attention was caught by a sound similar to firecrackers being set off. The sound came from the entrance of the mall and was accompanied by six small holes suddenly appearing in two of the main-entrance glass doors. No more than a few seconds later several more popping sounds were heard, and then all hell broke loose.

Glass shattered everywhere as a large object came crashing through the glass doors from the outside. People started screaming and running in all directions. Thomas at first couldn’t make sense of everything that was happening until he recognized what had exploded through the doors. It was the officer of the law. He was now lying on his back; blood was covering him and quickly spreading all over the floor surrounding him.

Coming into Thomas’s vision on the outside through the broken glass doors was the shooter. He was the leader from the gang selling the drugs. He looked down at the lawman and started laughing. Thomas froze as the leader then looked up at him and smiled. The leader slowly lifted his hand, revealing a revolver, and pointed it straight at Thomas’s heart. Thomas could feel his heart pounding in panic, yet he was frozen in place with fear. He was sure that he was going to die for informing on them to the policeman. He glanced down at the boy who seemed totally unconcerned about the events

unfolding all around them. He just stood between Thomas and the shooter glancing up to him, smiling fondly.

“Fear not, Thomas,” said the boy. The child then slowly turned around and faced the shooter. Holding his arms straight out from his sides with his palms open to show that he was unarmed, Joshua confronted the murderer. Thomas was dumbfounded by the child’s innocent response.

“Leave him alone,” commanded Joshua.

The leader stopped smiling immediately and turned his face into a hateful snarl. Without hesitation, he lowered his aim and fired one shot directly at the boy. The child was rocked back by the force of the bullet and fell into Thomas’s legs. Blood splattered all over Thomas’s clothes as the child slowly crumpled to the floor. The leader then lowered his gun, glanced at Thomas as if he no longer mattered, and took off running.

“Daddy...Daddy...Daddy,” Joshua softly spoke beneath Thomas. He had slipped all the way down Thomas’s legs to the floor and was lying on his back looking straight up. A small hole in the side of his shirt revealed where the bullet had struck him. Thomas reached down to help the boy and in the process got blood on his hands.

“Joshua!” someone screamed from outside the entrance to the mall. A man came running through the broken glass doors, and the shattered glass crackled under his weight as he rushed to the boy. Thomas moved out of the man’s way as he knelt down, cradled the child in his arms, and began weeping.

“What have they done to you, my son?” asked the father.

“Father, where were you?” the boy asked.

“I was outside waiting for you. But I am here now,” the man said, trying to comfort his boy.

“I did as you requested of me, Father,” the son said as he lifted his hands up to touch his father’s face. He smiled one last time, and then his hands fell lifeless to his sides. A deep moan of sorrow flowed from the father’s throat. Chills of fear gripped Thomas. The man looked searchingly at Thomas as tears washed down his face. He had no answer for him. Thomas did not know why the child had sacrificed himself for him.

“Do you know why he had to die?” the father asked of him.

“No. I am so sorry,” said Thomas. He was afraid to tell Joshua’s father about the lawman and the incident earlier with the girl. How was he to know that such a small breaking of the law would get so out of control? It was all too bizarre to be real to him.

The sound of a wailing siren in the distance made Thomas realize that he had to escape. The police would want to question him. He didn’t have the time. Isaac was waiting for him. He was afraid. He didn’t want to get involved.

“I am so sorry,” Thomas apologized again. “I have no idea why he shot your son. Please forgive me, but I have got to go. You see, my son is waiting for me. He is at the hospital. You understand, don’t you? I’m so sorry.”

The father held his son closely and moaned loudly again as he rocked the boy. His eyes stayed on Thomas as he slowly crept backward toward the exit, the glass all the time breaking and crackling under his weight.

Thomas quickly made his way through the broken glass doors without looking back. The front of the mall was completely deserted. He didn’t hesitate as he fled the scene of the crime. Thomas was running away like he was guilty of something, but of what he was guilty, he didn’t know. He had not asked the boy to take his place. But if he were to be found guilty of something, would there be a penalty to be paid?

Quickly reaching the back of his car, he stopped to catch his breath. If tonight didn’t kill him, he was sure that his smoking would, as he struggled to breathe. He suddenly noticed that through all the events he was still holding the red bag with the gift for his son.

He took out his car keys, opened the trunk, and threw the gift in. At his feet he stepped on something that tilted and made a small noise. Looking down he saw one of the poster signs that one of the men at the mall entrance had been carrying when he had first entered the building. The words *The Promise* stared up at him. *I don’t need any empty promises right now*, he thought. *What I need is deliverance from here.*

Taking a last look back toward the broken glass doors, he felt moved that maybe he should say a quick prayer for Joshua and his

father but decided that a quick saying would have to be good enough. "May God be with you," he whispered. He then turned toward the driver's-side door and rushed straight into his greatest threat.

"Well, he sure isn't with you tonight! Is he?" The leader laughed as he pushed the revolver under Thomas's chin and forced his back up against the side of the car. "You look like you're in a real hurry to go nowhere."

"You don't think he tattled on us, do you?" asked the girl.

Thomas glanced out of the corner of his eye and recognized the girl who had tried to give him the prohibited drug earlier. Other members of the gang were now closing in and surrounding his car.

"I never said anything to the policeman. Honest!" lied Thomas.

"Now why should I believe you?" asked the leader.

"He only asked me to put out my cigarette. I was breaking some silly little law. That's all. I didn't say anything about you to him. Please believe me."

"What about me? Did you say anything to him about me?" asked the girl.

"Absolutely not," Thomas lied again.

"I believe him," purred the girl as she grabbed Thomas's head and pulled him down to her eye level, "I bet he is willing to take his medicine now that he's been such a bad boy."

"Weren't you the man I saw walking and talking with that little boy in the mall?" asked one of the other gang members.

"No, it was not me. I'm telling you the truth, I don't know the boy," Thomas lied for the third time. "Now please let me go. I never saw anything. You can believe me. I won't talk to the police."

"You're so cute," said the girl as she pulled the red pill out of her coat pocket and once again held it in front of Thomas's face. "Now take your medicine. If you take it like a man, we will know that we can trust you."

"But I have to get back to my wife and son," said Thomas nervously as he tried to ignore the girl.

"What's your name?" asked the leader.

"Thomas."

“Look, boy, what we have here is a failure to trust. You don’t want us to doubt you, do you? I do want to believe you, but you are making it very hard. Now, if you take your medicine like a good little boy, I will know that I can trust you. You do want me to trust you, don’t you?” asked the leader as he backed away from Thomas, lowering the revolver at the same time. “So take the pill like a man. You do want to see your wife and child again, don’t you? The choice is yours.”

Thomas took the last comment as a death threat. He knew that the revolver carried six rounds in it and that it was possible that all six bullets had already been spent. Did an empty chamber back up the terrorist’s threat, or had he reloaded his weapon? He didn’t want to take the chance to find out if he was wrong, and the thought of not seeing Sara and Isaac again terrified him.

“Okay,” he answered. “I’ll take my medicine.” He looked at the leader and could tell that he wanted to hear more. “Like a man,” he added.

The leader and his followers chuckled at his last comment.

“Then all is well and good,” said the girl in a low, seductive voice. “I admire a man who can make up his own mind. Take your medicine now, and join us.”

Thomas looked down into the girl’s eyes and wondered if he was doing the right thing. He just didn’t know what the right thing to do was, and did he really have a choice? He believed they would kill him if he did not take the pill. What effect would the pill have on him? Would it open his eyes or close them forever? He took the pill slowly from her hand, put it into his mouth, and swallowed it. The girl’s look of seduction quickly turned into a look of contempt as she stepped back laughing.

“Welcome, now you are one of us,” said the leader with a smile. “Tonight you have learned the difference between right and wrong. By doing wrong, you have made yourself appear to do right, and by appearing right, you give the appearance of having done nothing wrong. Only problem with you is that you don’t have a clue what it is that I am really talking about. Do you?” he laughed, and his followers joined him in his mocking of Thomas with their secret

joke. “But I do like your attitude—every man out for himself, and to Hell with everyone else. I think before the night is over the real you will be revealed; nothing personal, right?”

Thomas didn’t know what to make of the leader’s comments or question. How could he know how he felt about anything? Had they not just met? His attention was then drawn to the front of the mall as several police cars pulled up to the entrance and turned off their sirens. The law officers got out of their cars, and several of them ran inside the mall. However, one of them was staring out toward Thomas and the gang. Getting back into his car, the policeman drove out toward their location with his red lights flashing.

“You do realize that he is coming for you?” asked the leader.

“But I didn’t do anything,” protested Thomas.

“You broke the law when you lit up your cigarette,” said the leader.

“Well, yeah! I’m guilty of that. But I hardly think they will put me in jail for it,” laughed Thomas nervously.

“He doesn’t want to put you in jail. The policeman wants to kill you,” the leader responded.

Thomas looked at the leader and could tell that he was dead serious in his answer.

“You are so naïve. You still don’t get it, do you? Appearances are all that matter.” The leader remained silent for a moment to let his words sink in. “The truth is all about perception. There is only one truth, and that truth is nothing more than a lie about another truth. If you only break one of their laws, no matter how small, you break all their laws. How is that for justice?” laughed the leader. “Tell me, are you the kind of man who can look through the window of opportunity and take advantage of it? I think you’re a man who wants to be in on the inside. Tell you what I am going to do for you. Now that you are one of us, I am going to let you turn me in. Maybe that will carry some favor for you with the law, kind of like showing them that you have earned your right to be free.”

Thomas couldn’t believe his eyes as the leader turned the revolver around and handed the gun to him. He quickly took possession of the revolver and pointed it from side to side, directing it at the leader and his gang.

“Everyone back up, now. I mean it. I am not afraid to use this,” he shouted with conviction.

The girl and the other gang members took several steps back, but the leader remained still. He continued to smile at Thomas, nodding his head in approval.

The patrol car screeched to a stop about forty feet from Thomas’s car. The policeman bolted out of the car with a shotgun drawn and pointed at him. The policeman looked straight at Thomas and shouted, “Freeze!”

Thomas looked at the policeman, then at the leader of the gang, and shouted, “He is the one you want. He murdered that innocent little boy in cold blood. I witnessed the whole thing.”

“Boy, look at the policeman again,” whispered the leader to Thomas. “Death has come for you.”

Thomas looked back to the policeman as shivers of fear ran down his spine. The lawman appeared to be engulfed in a dark mass that was slowly transforming his entire body into a much larger figure. He seemed to grow several feet taller, right before Thomas’s eyes, while his uniform lost its tight shape and became a loose, flowing garment with a large hood. Slowly the hood lifted back, revealing a human skull where the face of the policeman had been before. Thomas was confronted by flaming red eyes and a tiger-looking grin. The lawman had been altered into a towering figure of death. The policeman’s shotgun had changed into a large staff that the figure was now pointing in his direction. Thomas wondered if he had lost his sanity.

“Look out, Officer,” yelled the leader. “He has a gun, and he has already killed that innocent little child.”

Thomas looked back toward the leader in total confusion. The leader was running away with the girl and the other gang members. Thomas stammered in disbelief. “What? I didn’t shoot anyone,” he protested. Without realizing his movements he turned and pointed the revolver at the dark figure of death that had replaced the lawman. “Wait a minute, Officer, I can explain everything!” he screamed in panic.

A blast exploded out from the staff held by the figure of death. A circular glow of red light blew past Thomas and destroyed the

driver's-side window and mirror. The sound of the glass shattering behind him filled him with terror. He quickly dropped the revolver and ran away from the car and the menacing figure of death. Thomas could hear the figure calling for him to stop in a deep, echoing voice, as it continued to blast away at him with its mysterious staff.

Running in fear for his life, Thomas could feel his heart beating rapidly inside of his chest. He could now hear nothing else but his own gasping for air. Escaping from the parking lot, he ran across several traffic lanes, causing cars to slam on their brakes in order to avoid killing him.

Making it to the other side of the street, he slogged through the snow in front of Eden Park toward a fence. The main gate was closed, so he threw himself over the fence and started heading in a direction that he hoped would lead him back to the hospital. He had to get away, no matter what the cost, and return to the hospital.

"Turn around, Thomas. Head toward me," a masculine voice called out to him.

Unsure exactly where the voice had come from, Thomas stopped and listened for it again. He saw no one.

"Fear not, Thomas. Listen for my voice."

Thomas still could not see who was talking to him, but there was something familiar about the voice. It seemed to be coming from above him on a slope where some trees were. Having no idea who it could be, but desperate for any help, he decided to trust the voice. Thomas headed in its direction as if the devil himself were after him.