

I'll Be Home for Christmas

a *Back to the Future* story by

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*Let him that desires to see others happy make haste
to give while his gift can be enjoyed,
and remember that every moment or delay takes away
something from the value of his benefaction.*

Samuel Johnson

MONDAY, DECEMBER 23, 1996

9:05 A.M.

It was the same old question year after year, and year after year, it got the same old predictable response. Clara Brown didn't expect anything else; in truth, this year she was expecting even worse, for a variety reasons. Nonetheless, she felt compelled to ask:

"Emmett, what do you want for Christmas?"

She'd lost count of the number of times she'd asked that question during the past few weeks, and she'd yet to get a more definite answer than an evasive shrug or half-mumbled, "I don't know." Normally, she wouldn't've minded much — after all, a lack of greediness was a good example for the children to see in their parents — but Clara had a fondness for traditional Yuletide celebrations. This included the exchange of gifts between loved ones, and while she wasn't inclined toward expensive and showy presents, she wanted it to be something more than a mere standby token. She was fresh out of ideas — a not uncommon problem when one's husband was an inventor, and an eccentric one, at that — and things were getting desperate. It was, after all, only two days before Christmas.

To her surprise, this time she was given something more than the usual nebulous grunts and shrugs and non-answers. "What I want," her husband replied from behind the wash machine he was attempting to fix for the third time that week, "is an answer to what the heck is *wrong* with this thing! That's the trouble with the 'new and improved' junk they crank out today. The idiot engineers have no idea what they're doing! All these stupid bells and whistles they put in 'em are more of a headache than a help. By the time I pin down what's wrong with this contraption, we'd be better off buying a new one!"

He was right, Clara knew — this particular appliance had been prone toward trouble since the day it went off warrantee last June, and the problems were almost always in its supposedly useful special features, which, Emmett claimed, had been designed so stupidly, a speck of lint in the wrong place could make them and the entire machine fail — but this wasn't the sort of response for which she'd been looking. "I'm not buying a new wash machine as your Christmas present," she scolded with a smile, "and an answer to this problem isn't the kind of thing you can wrap and put under the tree."

Emmett's head popped up from behind the machine; one long arm reached out to root through the mess of tools atop the dryer, then he popped back down again when the needed implement was found. "Sometimes, the best presents aren't things you can put in a box," he observed philosophically amid the clanks and clatters of his effort. "One of the best Christmas presents I ever got was a week to myself when my parents went to visit my uncle in Wisconsin and I got left home with a bad head cold."

Clara was amused, but skeptical. "That sounds more like an accident than a gift to me," she pointed out. "And I had something a bit more concrete in mind."

A loud *CLUNK!* was followed by a quiet laugh and the reappearance of her husband's white-maned head. "Why, Clara Louise," he declared in tones of high good humor, "I never would've thought *you'd* succumb to the brainwashing of Twentieth Century Crass Commercialism and Conspicuous Consumerism! Don't you think there're already enough people around who've forgotten what Christmas is *really* about?"

She accepted the teasing in equal good nature, but nevertheless rebutted. "More than enough, but a wish to demonstrate affection through generosity isn't succumbing to commercial brainwashing — unless you run out and buy every foolish product in sight. I know better than to watch those reprehensible home shopping networks!"

"Well, thank goodness you're more sensible than that," he approved as he again disappeared behind the machine. A moment later, a distracted clucking sound indicated his success in locating the most recent trouble. "But really, I can't think of a thing I want or need right now — other than to throw this damned thing on a junkpile so I won't ever have to fix it again! When the Bannings visited last weekend, they brought more than just our Christmas presents; Peter had all the end of the year figures on the licensing sales of my fusion reactor designs. I have to admit, he's been a *very* good lawyer and marketing agent. Even if I never make another penny, we won't have to worry about how to pay the bills or whether we want to spend a ridiculous amount of money on something completely frivolous, ever again."

"I know, I glanced at the papers just out of curiosity — and thank heavens Peter's taking care of filing the tax returns! But just because we can *afford* anything we want doesn't mean I want to stop exchanging gifts. It's the thought and the traditions that count."

Emmett murmured softly, acknowledging the point. "Y'know," he reflected as he removed the failed chip and disabled the particular feature so that it would cause no further shut-downs, "if I were designing a laundry device, I'd ignore all these silly alarms and buzzers and try to incorporate more useful features. Like an automated system connected directly to the chutes to sort the clothes, then load the machine and run the wash when a certain minimum capacity was reached..."

Clara shuddered, remembering the last time he'd made such a suggestion. In that case, it had been with the dishwasher; three days ago, the maiden run of the system had destroyed half their eating utensils. Emmett was sure he could get it to work properly with just a little more tinkering, but in the meantime, they were back to cleaning dishes the old-fashioned way. "Thanks," she said fervently, appreciating the sentiment but unwilling to risk their wardrobes in the middle of winter, "but if I didn't have little things like the laundry to keep me active on a regular basis, I'd turn into a terrible lazybones. And stop trying to change the subject. What *do* you want for Christmas?"

His sigh rushed up from behind the appliances like a gust of the chilly wind outside. One eye peeked around an edge of the washer to both express his amused exasperation and to watch her reaction. "You're not going to let me off the hook, are you?"

"Certainly not." Both her tone and her stance displayed her resolve.

With another sigh, the eye disappeared. "All right, I'll think about it."

Clara knew better than to give in to such assurances. "That's what you said a month ago, and you *still* haven't given me an answer. It's getting a little late to just think about it. Tomorrow's Christmas Eve."

"I'll see what I can come up with, I promise. But I'm not the only one who's running out of time to make up my mind. Have you made a decision about the book yet, or are you going to put it off for *another* year?"

Clara coughed quietly, suddenly uncomfortable. She wanted to pretend she didn't know what he was talking about, but she knew he knew she'd be lying. She knew very well to what he was referring: In November two years before, their daughter Emily — who had been four going on five at the time — suddenly started reading. Pleased and proud of her precociousness (which really came as no surprise, since her brothers had begun reading at similarly young ages), Clara had thought to give her daughter her precious copy of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* as a Christmas gift.

Of course, Emily had been too young to comprehend quite so complex a tale back then, but on every Christmas and birthday and special occasion since, Clara had toyed with the idea. This year, Emily had showed considerable progress in her reading comprehension, thanks to school and the help of her brothers; she had even read *From the Earth to the Moon* on her own, and had enjoyed it. The time might never be more appropriate to pass on the book.

But Clara still had some misgivings. After all, it wasn't as if this was a tome of mere sentimental value. Though it had that, in spades, it was also a first American Edition, in excellent condition. Its appraised value was fairly significant, and Clara had reasonable qualms about giving it to a six-and-a-half year old girl who might not treat it with the respect it was due.

On this point, however, she and Emmett disagreed. Although he certainly appreciated the historical value of antiques and had respect for them as such, he also felt that a thing unused is a thing useless. And a book left unread was perhaps the most useless thing of all.

Clara cleared her throat. "I've been thinking about it," she admitted, "and I still don't think Emily's quite old enough to properly appreciate it."

The sound her husband made was doubt incarnate. "As a story or as an antique?"

Again, Clara coughed. "It *is* a bit difficult for someone her age. There's a lot of advanced material and language in it...."

"Which she'll never learn if she never sees it," was Emmett's considered opinion. "We can help her if she gets stuck. This country's already full of moronic underachievers who were never intellectually challenged as kids. I'm not going to let any of my children add to the problem."

"Neither will I," his wife insisted. "I just don't think Emmy's quite ready for it, that's all."

The inventor knew exactly what that innocent statement *really* meant. "You're afraid she'll destroy the book, aren't you?"

Clara felt this to be a reasonable concern. "Well, she *did* demolish the first few we gave her."

He dismissed it with an airy snort. "That's because she wasn't even two and was still teething at the time. I don't think you have to worry about that, anymore."

Clara lightly sniffed her concession. "I suppose. But I do believe I've come up with a compromise solution. What if I were to buy a recent copy from the bookstore and keep the original in our box at the bank until she's old enough to care for it herself?"

"Then what's the point of giving it to her at all? You may as well just give her the paperback and let her inherit the antique after we're dead. I think she might learn to appreciate it better — both the story and the book itself — if you give her the responsibility of owning it now. Besides," he added with a conclusive grunt as he closed up the back of the wash machine and stood straight, "it's just a book, not a sacred relic. It might be a *shame* if it were ruined, but it certainly won't be the end of the world."

That was, perhaps, a rather cavalier attitude to have toward someone else's possessions, Clara thought, but there was no denying that in principle, Emmett was quite right. If she worried too much about what might happen to the book once she gave it away, she might as well just keep it or it wouldn't be much of a gift, given with strings and conditions. And she did want to actually see the joy Emily might gain from it before she herself was too old to appreciate it, or dead. But....

She was about to promise that she would think about it (even though she knew it was a lame evasion and not much of a promise, given the date), when she was saved the need by the noisy arrival of their three children, clumping in through the laundry room's door to the back yard. If the heavy-footed clamor of their entrance hadn't been sufficient evidence, the looks on their faces were more than enough to convince even the most unobservant person of their unanimously dour mood.

Clara was as puzzled by their apparent unhappiness as by their appearance. "I thought you were going to a party at Nicki Anderson's house," she said as the trio galumphed inside. "What happened? We weren't expecting you back 'til dinner time."

Jules, the eldest at thirteen, provided a glumly succinct response. "The weather's what happened," he said, his pubescent voice cracking on the penultimate syllable. "Nicki's mom was counting on it being a sledding party on that big hill in their backyard. But the warm weather melted that little bit of snow we got last week, and Mrs. Anderson doesn't want us messing up her house two days before Christmas."

Clara sniffed softly, understanding the woman's concern. She'd spent the past week cleaning the house for the holidays, only to find half the things she'd cleaned in need of it again once her children had passed through. "I can see her point."

Verne, the middle child at eleven, was less charitable, but not from a lack of sympathy. "Maybe, but it really stinks. I mean, I was kinda hoping to get a chance to use the skis Marty gave me last year before I outgrow 'em. We've hardly had any snow for the last three Christmases!"

"Global warming?" Jules wondered, in sympathy with his brother.

"More likely just normal climatological variance," their father's seemingly disembodied voice put in from behind the wash machine, where he was busily reconnecting water hoses, power lines, and vents. "The concept of a 'white Christmas' is a popular myth largely based on romanticized images of the Victorian Little Ice Age and a Bing Crosby movie. It's only a relatively small portion of the country that gets significant snow for the holidays, since January and February are more common snow producing months, at these latitudes. Besides, we had more snow than we knew what to *do* with in '92...."

"Get real, Dad," Verne suggested crankily. "That was four years ago! Hill Valley *never* gets snow — 'cept in the spring, when we don't want it."

"Oh we get snow," Emmett assured him, emerging from behind the appliances to lean on the washer top while he spoke. "A lot, sometimes. Being situated in the foothills of the mountains just makes it less reliably predictable. When I was your age, we got buried by storms off the mountains at least once a year. It was a good thing we still kept horses back then, 'cause there were a few times we couldn't get the car out of the garage for days — we could've starved by the time someone dug their way out to us. Once in a while, we even got snow when it's traditionally correct. I remember the Christmas when I was eleven — it snowed heavily for almost a full week. We couldn't get out of the house for five days, and my parents had to go run and do all their holiday shopping on Christmas Eve morning, 'cause that was the first time my father could dig out the garage and get the car onto the highway."

His large brown eyes unfocused wistfully for a few moments while he reflected on the nostalgic recollections of bygone years. "I remember going outside, and thinking how beautiful and perfect everything looked — just like a Norman Rockwell painting." He laughed at his own sappiness. "Of course, I don't have any pictures of it, so I'm probably remembering it as more perfect than it really was. But it *was* beautiful."

"Yeah, well, maybe Mother Nature should've saved a little of that for now instead of dumping it all back then," Jules grumped while the inventor returned to his reattachment of the wash machine. "Every skating and sledding patty we've been invited to for the last two years has been a bust."

Clara understood their disappointment but she failed to see why this should have effected the current affair, which was supposed to have been primarily a Christmas celebration. "Why didn't Nicki just have the party outside, anyway? As you said, it's warm enough...."

Verne grunted his opinion of that suggestion. "Yeah, warm enough for mud. Mister Anderson flooded the whole back yard last night, hoping it'd at least freeze into ice for sledding. It's worse'n tar pits!" As evidence, he held up one mud encrusted shoe.

"Don't you dare go tramping those things into my clean house!" Clara warned, seeing that all three sported similarly muck coated footgear.

"We won't, Mom," Jules promised, wincing at the way his voice cracked on the word *Mom*. "We came to ask Dad if he'd take us to the mall instead."

"What for?" Dad's voice requested from behind the wash machine. "You were just there yesterday with your mother...."

"But, Daddy," Emily, the youngest at six-and-a-half, chimed in sweetly, a tone she knew could work quite well when her father was feeling balky, "you promised you'd take us when we were ready to... uh...." She hesitated, casting a reluctant glance in Clara's direction. "Well, you know," she essayed, unusually reluctant to be more specific.

Emmett's disarrayed white head popped up from behind the machine as he finally finished; his expression was one of puzzlement, until he caught the meaningful looks passing between the three kids. He got the hint. "Oh, yes, quite so! But I don't think the mall managers'll be any happier with those shoes of yours than your mother. Take 'em off and go get clean ones. I should be done, by then."

The kids decided it was a good deal; they were all out of their soiled gear and heading into the house proper before Clara could scold them for tugging off the shoes without untying the laces. "What was that all about?" she asked her husband, collecting the muddy footwear while he maneuvered the wash machine back to its proper position against the wall.

Emmett craned his head to peer out the door and make sure the kids were gone, then grinned. "They don't want to buy your Christmas present with you around, so I told 'em I'd take 'em where they wanted to go once they'd decided what to get."

Clara's brown eyes widened. "And they only first made up their minds today?"

"Like mother, like offspring," the inventor teased. "Actually, this is sooner than I'd expected. I was pretty sure they wouldn't do it 'til ten minutes before closing tomorrow, when we'd have to use the Time Machine to make it. You don't mind being abandoned for a while, do you? It might take most of the morning, if the crowds are as bad as they were the last few days."

She made a show of considering it for a moment or two, then smiled and shook her head. "No, as a matter of fact, this might work out perfectly. I have some errands to run in the opposite direction, and if I go out alone, I might finally be able to come up with an idea for your gift."

"What errands? I thought you had everything finished yesterday."

"Just about. I thought I might stop by the bank, just to make sure we don't get caught short should an emergency come up during the holiday."

Emmett made a sound that, though it seemed to be approval, was coated with a thick frosting of skepticism. "Uh-huh, and I'll bet you were thinking of making a deposit, too."

Clara knew he was referring to the book. She shrugged. "I might. I don't know yet. You'd better hurry and fetch your coat," she diverted abruptly, nudging him toward the inner door. "I hear the kids coming back, and the earlier you get to the mall, the sooner you'll be finished."

He knew she was avoiding the question, but since there was no point in pushing it, he let it drop. He'd just gotten his coat from the closet near the breezeway door when the kids arrived; he sent them on to open the garage while he dressed. He watched them run across the lawn, playfully scuffling with each other as siblings that age do.

A tiny sigh escaped him, remnants of his childhood reminisces. "I wish my parents could've had a chance to meet them," he reflected, turning to Clara as she handed him the gloves she'd brought down from the closet shelf. "And you. I think they were always a little bit worried that I'd end up all alone after they died — and they might've liked to know they had grandchildren."

"Do you want to go back and tell them?" Clara asked, surprised that he might actually consider it.

But he shook his head. "No — I mean, yes, I *want* to go back and tell them, but I know I can't. Look what happened when Marty did nothing but try to follow his father home. He'd barely talked to him, and he almost wound up destroying his very existence. It's too dangerous."

Clara nodded her agreement, but even as she did so, Emmett caught a particular glint in her eyes out of the corner of his own. His hand on the doorknob, he stopped and turned back to her, holding up one warning finger before her pretty face.

"Don't even think about it," he recommended, meaning it. "I don't want to come home and find out I have no home to come back to, no wife or no family — or maybe no me! You are *not* to take that kind of a foolish chance just for an unwrappable Christmas present I can't even be around to see!"

Though she lifted her chin in a how-could-you-even-think-it sort of mild defiance, the quirk of her lips betrayed her knowledge that Emmett was right on the money. "Of course I wouldn't," she vowed. "I was only thinking that I might've liked to meet them, but I'd never take that sort of risk to satisfy a whim. Besides, you know I don't like using the Time Machine alone, either one of them."

That was a truth that did more to convince Emmett of her earnestness than any denial. Relieved, he took the gloves, promised to be back as quick as he could, kissed her cheek, and headed out to join the kids. Clara waved to them as the van pulled out of the garage and headed down the drive; she watched them go until it turned into the woods and was lost from sight.

As she went to collect the book, just in case she did decide to drop it off at the vault, she wondered if Emmett had really thought she'd try something so foolish. What was the point, after all? She might go back and tell his parents about their son's future, but there was no way she could record the event without revealing potentially dangerous things about future technology — and what guarantee was there that she would be believed? From what Emmett had told her, his fascination with time displacement and fourth-dimensional travel had blossomed well after they'd passed away; they would have no reason to accept anything she might tell them. In fact, they would have very good reason to think her insane, and might possibly turn her over to medical authorities, for her own good. No, Clara had no intention of going back in time to tell her departed in-laws what would eventually become of their son.

Her reaction to his thinking-out-loud had really been more generalized in nature. She'd been wracking her brain for something to give her husband as a gift; perhaps a somewhat different tack might be more suitable. As he'd said, not all presents were the sort one could wrap and put under the tree.

This new heading, however, didn't immediately take her to bountiful waters. She was intently turning over the concept in her thoughts when she arrived in her little workroom on the second floor and headed for the bureau in which the precious book was stored. When she opened the drawer, she was still contemplating the matter. Idly, she lifted the things hiding the book; she had put the book in her carry bag and was about to set the largest item back in place when she paused and stared at it in her hand.

"It" was a camera, a compact and deceptively simple-looking device that Emmett had given her as an anniversary present the year he realized how fascinated she was with the ease and beauty possible with contemporary photographic equipment. The notion of snapshots had been unheard of in her day, when photography was a cumbersome, time-consuming,

and expensive process. Once she'd discovered that such was no longer the case, Clara had become an avid amateur photographer, her passion attested to by the collection of albums and framed photos scattered about the house.

Clara had just loaded the device the night before in anticipation of the coming holiday, a prime photographic opportunity. As she stared at it now, something Emmett had said just a few minutes ago echoed through her innermost ears:

"I remember going outside, and thinking how beautiful and perfect everything looked — just like a Norman Rockwell painting. Of course, I don't have any pictures of it, so I'm probably remembering it as more perfect than it really was. But it was beautiful."

Now, there was a thought. She couldn't go back and introduce herself to her in-laws, but perhaps she *could* go and get a few pictures of that postcard-perfect Christmas Emmett remembered so fondly. Not of his family, of course, but of the house and grounds. He'd even mentioned a perfect time to do it: Christmas Eve morning, when they'd be gone to do their delayed shopping. If she went now, she could go and return in plenty of time to finish her own errands, before Emmett and the children came back from the mall, and not run the slightest risk of being discovered, then or now.

It wasn't much of a present, in a monetary sense, but it would have a great deal of personal meaning — which, as far as Clara was concerned, made it perfect. Decided, she slipped the camera into her bag along with an extra roll of film, just in case, went back downstairs to fetch her coat and boots, and headed out to the barn.

Clara hadn't been lying when she'd said she didn't like using either of the Time Machines alone, but if the whole truth of the matter be known, it wasn't *using* the Machine by herself that disturbed her. So long as she avoided using its capacity to travel to other places as well as other times — a complex process she had yet to fully divine — she was fine, and found the experience quite exhilarating. It was the fact that the newer of the two Machines — built around a gold plated high-performance Jaguar automobile rather than a DeLorean, the latter having becoming too rare and expensive since they went out of production well over a decade ago — had been designed with so many security failsafes, she could never quite remember the entire start-up procedure in proper order. With the train, the problem came in the need to fly the great beast from its hangar-barn. Powered flight was in itself a relatively new concept to her; tight-quarters maneuvering, such as that needed to navigate into and out of the barn, still unsettled her fiercely, especially when she was required to do it solo. But this, she felt, was a worthy cause, so she screwed up her courage, bit her lip, and got down to it.

She was very happy it was still morning, partly because she found the maneuvering much easier during the day, but also because her exit from this time was far less likely to be noticed in daylight hours. The intricate light decorations Emmett and the boys had put on the house and yard were so spectacular, they drew curiosity seekers from considerable distances, making an unobserved flight in the Machine virtually impossible at night.

Now, the only audience she had was a flock of birds settled on the washlines behind the house and on the pine trees at the back of the yard. Their interest in the huge flying machine was at best marginal, until its main thrust engines roared to life, scaring the lot out of a more than a few pinfeathers. The birds scattered, cheeping frantically; they were further frightened by three loud, rattling booms — and then, the Machine was gone.

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 24, 1931
10:45 A.M.

Clara arrived at her destination, pleased with herself for having managed a professionally smooth exit. Now, if she could only manage an equally smooth landing, all would be well.

Holographically disguised to blend in against the iron gray clouds still obscuring most of the windy sky, the Machine went all but unnoticed as Clara piloted it across town to her husband's childhood residence. The land below was virtually unrecognizable as Hill Valley, not because so much had changed over the years — which it had, but Clara knew this area in a far more wild state than it was today, so she still recognized most of it — but because of the unusually thick blanket of white covering it. Emmett really hadn't been exaggerating when he said it was beautiful, and it was especially so from this high vantage, with occasional flecks of sunlight peeking through rents in the clouds. It was truly breathtaking, and Clara did not regret having come here to photograph it.

Rather than risk attracting undue attention by landing the Machine too near the house — for all she knew, Emmett's parents had servants who might still be at home, preparing for the holidays — she brought it to earth on the opposite side of the wooded area on the western edge of the property, where she adjusted its holographic disguise to make it blend into a bank of tall snowdrifts. That done, she made sure her camera was ready, slung her bag onto her shoulder, and stepped out.

The only sounds that assailed her ears were the hisses of the cooling Machine and the whistle of wind as it blew powdery snow across the frosted landscape. The snow was deeper than she'd anticipated; she sank into it until it was almost to her waist. Getting anywhere to photograph anything might be prohibitively difficult. Still, she was here, so she had to try. Bolstering herself for the worst and glad she'd had the foresight to wear suitable clothing, Clara selected the path of least resistance, and determinedly forged on.

Happily, she soon encountered what looked to be a popular deerpath in the woods, a trail that while not precisely clear had been trampled down by the passage of woodland inhabitants so that it was much more easily navigable than the untrodden ground. She was able to slough through this merely calf-deep snow and follow the trail to an area near the back of the house, where someone had set out food for the wild creatures so that they would not starve due to the blizzard. Touched by this display of humanitarian concern, Clara set about the task of taking her pictures with a considerably warmed heart.

She carefully avoided getting too close to the house, lest someone inside it spot her and think she was casing the place for a future robbery. Fortunately, the camera came equipped with a telephoto lens, of which she made good use. She caught the house from every angle possible, taking care to focus at least a few of the shots on the window through which the Christmas tree was visible. It was all very picturesque, the mansion's unusual appearance notwithstanding; she even managed to catch a shot of a distant horse and rider galloping across the fields that stretched far beyond the rear of the house — very picture postcard perfect.

After about forty-five minutes of tromping through the snow (hoping, when she noticed, that no one spotted her tracks and became suspicious of prowlers) and snapping pictures, the first roll of film was exhausted. Feeling pretty exhausted herself, Clara exchanged the spent roll for a fresh one, took a final shot of the house from the front when the sun peeked out and lit it quite spectacularly, then decided she had more than enough to have made the trip worthwhile. Pleased with herself and amazed that she didn't feel the least bit chilly, she relocated the deerpath and started back to the hidden Time Machine.

Although her footprints in the snow were revealing of her presence around the house, Clara realized they also had an unexpected benefit: They provided her with a guide to follow back to the too-well concealed Machine, which was completely indistinguishable from the real snow drifts. Her eyes downcast to follow her backtrail and her thoughts preoccupied with just how she should present this gift, she wasn't aware when she reached the end of the wood and stepped out onto the field's edge.

She also never saw the horse bearing down on her until it was actually upon her. Rounding the curve of the wood's edge at a full gallop, the rider didn't see her, either, until she suddenly appeared from out of seemingly nowhere. The rider yelled something and hauled on the reins as hard as he could in an attempt to pull up his mount. Though he just barely managed to avoid colliding with the woman, the startled horse reared back slightly, startling Clara in return.

A soft cry escaped her as she staggered back and lost her already uncertain footing. She fell backward, grateful for the cushion of snow — until the back of her head struck something hard that had been invisible beneath it. A hope that she hadn't fallen on the film and ruined it flitted through her thoughts before consciousness slipped away like a leaf before winter's winds.

When the veil of darkness finally began to lift, Clara was so groggy, she didn't immediately grasp that she was indeed returning to consciousness. She was warm, warmer than she'd recalled feeling when she'd... fallen asleep? Of course, it made perfect sense. She'd been so busy preparing for the holidays, she must've taken a nap without meaning to. She shifted her head and felt the rasp of soft cloth against her cheek. She must have been changing the beds, she decided, and had had the imprudence to sit down for a moment to catch her breath. That must be it. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad idea to stay here for a few minutes more. That way, she'd be bright and full of energy when Emmett and the children returned....

"Mom?" a voice called from out in the hallway. Clara's maternal instincts roused at the sound of the word, shaking off just enough of her fuzziness to wonder who was calling her. Jules? No, his voice was cracking on every other syllable these days, and that particular syllable was one of the crackiest. "I think she's waking up, Mom. Come and see."

She's waking up? Who's waking up? Emily? Had she been down for a nap? It seemed odd that she might be; she'd never liked taking naps, even when she'd been a baby. Who was he talking about? Muzzily curious, Clara forced one of her eyes to flutter open. A sudden ray of sunlight slanting through an uncurtained window dazzled her for a moment, but not before she caught sight of a skinny blond boy standing just beyond the open door. She squinched her eyes shut against the flood of bright light, but called his name.

"Verne?" Her voice sounded terrible even to her own ears. She swallowed to clear her throat, but her mouth was desert dry. The warmth of the sunlight on her face passed as the clouds slipped by; she cautiously let her eyes slip open again. Though there were still shadows from the brief blinding distorting the images, she could see without pain. "Verne, is that you?"

The boy in the hallway glanced in her direction, apparently startled to hear her speak, then turned away, agitated. "Hurry up, Mom, she's awake!"

Confused, Clara wondered why her son was yelling for her down the hall. Perhaps he didn't realize she was here. She sat up, intending to draw his attention, then let herself drop back again when her entire head throbbed like the biggest drum ever made. As she fell back, she suddenly noticed that this didn't look at all like one of the bedrooms in her house, that it didn't even look like any of the rooms in any house in which she'd ever lived. In fact, it looked more like—

"Good heavens!"

This wasn't 1996, this wasn't her house, and that wasn't her eleven-year-old son. It was her eleven-year-old husband — or, rather, her future husband at age eleven. Ignoring the ache pounding behind her eyes, she lifted her head again, wanting to get a better look at the boy out in the hall. But Emmett had moved away while her eyes had been closed, and was now out of sight. She heard voices, muffled by distance and unintelligible, then footsteps, some nearing, some moving away. The movement of shadows against the corridor wall caught her attention; for a moment, she thought Emmett might be returning.

But then, a woman stood in the doorway, entering the room with a cup of water in one hand and a warm smile on her face. She looked to be near Clara's age, perhaps a few years older, and though tall and slender, she wasn't a beautiful woman. *Plain* described her best. Her silvering blonde hair was cut shoulder length, its style not the height of fashion but well suited to her face. Her brown eyes, ordinary features, and simply elegant dress were all unassuming, but she radiated an undeniable kindness that instantly put Clara at ease. The future visitor didn't need to ask who this was; she could see enough of her husband in the woman to know she had to be his mother.

"It's so good to see you awake," Mrs. Brown — what *was* her first name? Clara wondered. Her still fuzzy brain couldn't summon it up — said quite sincerely. Her mezzo voice had a slight back-East accent that Clara felt might be from Connecticut. She took a seat in the wing chair positioned at the end of the sofa on which Clara had been settled.

Prompted by this to take a better look at the place, Clara deduced that it was the room on the first floor which in later years Emmett would use as his library; she recalled it from her only previous visit to this house, two years ago (or twenty-nine or even sixty-five years in the future, depending on your point of view). Now, it appeared to be a study or den of some sort, overlooking the portion of the backyard in which food had been put out for the wild animals.

"I was beginning to fear we might need to interrupt our doctor's holiday to have him attend you," Mrs. Brown went on, drawing Clara's eyes back to her. "Are you feeling ill, dear? Any queasiness or dizziness?"

Carefully, the teacher shook her head. "No, none at all," she assured her hostess, aware from her queries that the woman wanted to be certain this unexpected guest hadn't suffered a concussion. "But I do have rather a splitting headache."

Mrs. Brown's smile was full of understanding relief. "I thought you might. Would you like some aspirin? I brought it, just in case."

Clara accepted both the offered medication and a slight assist in maneuvering herself into a seated position so that she could drink the water without drenching herself. "By the way," her hostess said while Clara sipped the offered water, "my name is Mrs. Eleanor Brown, but it'd be just fine if you called me Eleanor. We've been ever so curious to know who *you* are, these last five hours. My son wanted to go through your things to find out, but I didn't think that would be proper, especially not with what happened and all."

Clara's thanks — which were profound, given what dangerous things they might've learned by looking through her carry bag — came in the form of a smile that had a faint sheepishness about it. "What *did* happen?" she had to ask. "I don't remember a thing after I stepped out of the woods."

Her feelings were echoed in Eleanor's response. "I'm not surprised. I'm afraid my son is what happened, and I do apologize. He shouldn't've been out riding at all, much less behaving so recklessly, but he has so much energy, it's hard to keep him out of trouble when we're at home, and impossible when we're away."

It was difficult for Clara to suppress the laugh that was tickling at the back of her throat. Some things never changed, she mused. "I'm sure it wasn't intentional," she said graciously, knowing more about Eleanor's son than Eleanor herself, at this point. "He couldn't've expected me to be hiking in the woods...."

"Quite so," another voice, much deeper than either of the women's and indeterminate of accent, agreed. Clara looked up and toward the door as the speaker entered. He was tall, with thinning gray hair, dark eyes, and a very forthright manner. When she'd first seen a picture of him (she didn't even try to recall his name, trusting her hosts to eventually provide it more than she trusted her currently short-circuited memory), Clara remembered thinking how very little Emmett resembled his father. Though the traces of his mother in him were not very powerful, there seemed to be nothing of this man in his child, save perhaps in his demeanor. In the few steps it took for Mr. Brown to cross from the door, Clara could see echoes of her husband's habitual carriage.

She tried not to smile impolitely as the man went on. "Has Nora mentioned to you that you were hiking on private property?"

Eleanor waved the remark aside with a brusque gesture even as Clara realized (with belated relief) how her own clothing — which was fairly normal 1990s casual dress — could be interpreted as hiking gear, by 1930s eyes. "No, Everett, I haven't, and I'd no intention of doing so. She and anyone else who likes are perfectly welcome to walk on our property, so long as they don't hurt anything."

She turned back to their guest and patted her arm. "Don't let his gruffness fool you, my dear. Everett wouldn't harm a fly, and we'd no intention of accusing you of trespassing. We're both just ever so glad you weren't seriously hurt by our son's rambunctiousness. Aren't we, Everett?"

His instant agreement supported his wife's claims, and when he smiled, Clara was suddenly able to see his son in him, quite strongly. "Yes, very relieved. Sometimes, that son of ours can be too bright for his own good." He shook his head, more in exasperation than disapproval. "We'd given him reading to keep him out of mischief while we were gone, but apparently, we didn't give him enough."

From the way Eleanor nodded in agreement, Clara received the distinct impression that there was more to this than met the eye. But with no way to broach the subject that wouldn't seem like prying, she had to settle for being patient and hoping that sooner or later, the truth would come out.

Mr. Brown continued, now concerned. "Do you think you'll be all right, Miss...?"

"Mrs.," Clara corrected at his prompting. "Cla—" she continued on reflex, quickly changing in midstream as she realized she was about to spout out her real name. "Clarice," she altered, glancing about for any inspiration to use as a last name. Her eye touched a large potted plant beyond her host. "Potter," she improvised. "Clarice Potter. And yes, I'm sure I'll be just fine as soon as the aspirin's taken effect. I've been told I have quite a hard head, after all."

Her hosts chuckled softly at her self-jest. "Well, Mrs. Potter, you just let Nora take care of you, anyway," Everett suggested, setting one hand on his wife's shoulder and beaming proudly. "She served as a nurse to our returning boys during the Great War, you know. One of the best."

"I didn't know," Clara admitted, for she didn't. "But you've gone to such trouble for me so far, I'd hate to impose."

"Nonsense," was Eleanor's swift response. "It's no imposition at all. Everett, why don't you go see what's keeping Emmett? He should've been here with the tea, by now."

Her husband harrumphed, not unkindly; there was laughter in his dark eyes. "He's probably afraid to come in and face the music," he opined with feigned crustiness, but he was grinning as he left the room.

For an instant, Clara watched him go, her surprise considerable. Somehow, she'd always thought that Emmett must've gotten his eccentric nature from his parents, but other than some scarcely noticeable quirkiness in his father's manner, they seemed to be a perfectly typical couple. When Everett was gone, Clara shook off her reflections and turned to her hostess. "You aren't going to punish your son for this, are you? I'm sure it was all purely an accident."

"I'm certain it was," Eleanor agreed with a small smile, assuring her guest nothing serious would come of it. "And so long as you weren't hurt, we won't be too stern. But he's got to realize this simply *must* stop."

"What must stop?" the time traveler asked, seeing in this the opening for which she'd been waiting. "I don't quite understand. Was he doing something he oughtn't?"

The elder woman sighed. "Not precisely. There's nothing at all wrong with Emmett wanting to learn to ride, but this... obsession of his is getting entirely out of hand! He's such a bright child, and he just *has* to realize there are so many more things in this world that he could be than a cowboy!"

The giggle Clara tried to suppress escaped her slightly before she was able to control it. It wasn't that Eleanor's plaint sounded silly or improbable; indeed, Clara was quite aware that her husband had had childhood dreams about being a cowboy. Of course, whenever he spoke of it, it was in the tones of nostalgic reflection that, with anyone else, would have said that this had merely been another juvenile phase, a typical passing fancy of one's young and foolish years. By age eleven, she'd have thought it would have passed, but apparently, it had not.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, in case her hostess misinterpreted her giggle as ridicule. "I don't mean to be rude, but I *do* understand. I have two sons, and they've both had improbable notions of what they wanted to be that no one on earth could shake. I'm sure with time, your son will see that a career as a cowboy isn't feasible in this day and age, and he'll settle into something more practical." Not *much* more practical, Clara mused, considering how capricious the life of an inventor could be, but certainly more suited to his talents than herding cattle.

Eleanor was wistful. "I do hope so. Emmett's our only child and he came to us rather late, so Everett and I do tend to dote on him a bit more than might be wise, but he really is quite gifted. It would be such a tragedy for him to waste it on cows when he might become a doctor or a teacher or something that could use his gifts to benefit the world."

Clara felt a strong tug at her heart, hearing in the woman's voice the sound of a mother who wanted the best for her child, and saw in him the potential to do much for the greater good. For a moment she desperately wanted to tell Eleanor not to worry, that though it might take another more than sixty years, her son would indeed invent something that would benefit all mankind — but she knew she couldn't. Aside from the danger it posed to future history, Eleanor would probably think the blow to the head had addled Clara's senses, and might insist on sending her to an asylum, or at the very least a hospital.

She settled for a more general assurance. "He's young, Mrs. Brown. I'm sure that before long, he'll discover more interesting pursuits, and this dream of being a cowboy will be nothing but a memory. He might become a teacher or a scientist, or perhaps win the Nobel Prize, someday."

Eleanor smiled. "That's what Everett keeps telling me, but sometimes, I think not even he believes it. How old are your sons, Mrs. Potter?"

"Thirteen and eleven. And I have a daughter who's almost seven."

Her hostess's blonde brows arched slightly. "My son's eleven, too. What a remarkable coincidence! You wouldn't happen to carry a photo of your children, would you? I'd love to see them."

Clara opened her mouth, intending to respond, but it occurred to her even as she drew breath that she had to consider all the possibly negative ramifications if she said yes. For one thing, she wasn't entirely sure she had a picture in her bag — though she was fairly certain she had a snapshot of the three youngsters taken on Verne's birthday in October. Moreover, if her one glance of young Emmett was as accurate as she thought, Verne looked enough like his father at this age to rouse suspicion even in the most innocent mind.

Fortunately, she was rescued from the need to make a hasty decision by a hesitant tap at the open door. When both she and Eleanor looked in that direction, they saw the same blond boy Clara had glimpsed in the hall as she'd returned to consciousness. "Mom?" he asked in an equally hesitant voice, peering into the room from behind the protection of an apparently heavy tray laden with china and other tea items. "Louisa wants to see you down in the kitchen, an' Pop says he's gotta talk to you, right away."

"Got to," Eleanor corrected reflexively, gesturing for her son to come in. He did so, but with dragging feet and an undisguised reluctance to approach the couch and their unexpected guest. "Did they say why?"

The boy shrugged as he almost tripped on the edge of an Oriental rug but managed to save himself and the tray from a fall in the nick of time. "Louisa wants to know somethin' about dinner, but Pop didn't say." He shuddered expressively. "I think maybe he's mad enough at me to cancel Christmas."

"Nonsense," was Eleanor's brisk but sympathetic method of dispelling his worry. "Neither of us are angry, Emmett — though if you'd actually *hurt* Mrs. Potter, we might think differently. You just set the tray here and pour Mrs. Potter's tea. I'll pop out for a minute to see what they want." She excused herself and headed for the door, but paused on the threshold long enough to glance back. "And if there's anything else our guest wants, Emmett, you take care of it, all right?"

"Yes, ma'am." The concession was far too meekly polite to be Emmett in a normal frame of mind, Clara decided, age and social position notwithstanding. The day's events (and possibly a scolding from his father) had definitely put the fear of God in him. He carried the tray to the end table Eleanor had indicated; as he did so, Clara tried not to study him too obviously.

Though the resemblance between him and his second son at the same age was truly remarkable, there were differences Clara easily spotted. For one thing, though his flannel shirt and dungarees were pretty much the standard play-clothes of any child beyond the latter third of the last century (especially one who had aspirations of becoming a cowboy), their cut was distinctly not of the 1990s; moreover, the style of his bright-colored suspenders and the faded bandana inexpertly tied about his throat betrayed not only his current obsession but his temporal residence as well. Emmett was also slightly taller than Verne; his ears were more prominent, his blond hair was curlier, his face was longer, and his dark eyes dominated his entire face like the overlarge eyes of some pathetic, starving waif, giving him an almost elfin appearance.

But he was neither starving nor pathetic, and when he looked back at the strange woman, it was with a very alive and lively (if wary) curiosity.

"I'm Clarice Potter," the time traveler introduced with a smile meant to be disarming. "And you're Emmett Brown?"

He nodded, pouring the tea as his mother had instructed while cautiously eyeing this guest through the rising cloud of steam. Briefly, Clara thought she might have to resort to extraordinary persuasion to get him to talk, but as quickly as the thought popped into her mind, his natural garrulousness asserted itself. He spoke rapidly in a prepubescent treble, his words gushing out intelligibly, but with a relentless energy his future wife knew quite well. "I'm sorry I almost ran over you, ma'am," he said, finished with the need to concentrate while pouring the tea. "I didn't mean to make you fall, and I could've stopped in time if I'd seen you coming, but I didn't even know you were there."

Clara was all sympathy. "I don't know how you possibly *could* have known," she admitted, accepting the offered teacup. "I'm not angry with you, either, by the way. It was nothing but a perfectly innocent accident."

From his expansive exhalation, young Emmett had indeed been worried on that account. "Thanks," he said with heartfelt relief. "I was kinda afraid I might've killed you, or somethin'. Pop said you could've cracked your skull or broken your neck — or worse." From the way he shivered, "worse" was something too terrible to contemplate. "I didn't think you had, and Mom said you hadn't, but Pop says that sometimes, people can be hurt pretty bad and not even know it." He blinked at her with genuine concern, as if looking for some sign of previously unnoticed trauma. "You *are* all right, aren't you?"

The tentative question prompted Clara to respond with as much reassurance as possible. "I'm fine. There's just a little bump on the back of my head, and as soon as the aspirin I took has a chance to work, I'm sure even that will be gone."

A second, smaller sigh marked the end of Emmett's worries. "I'm glad. I don't like to hurt things, 'specially people. How come you were hiking in our woods, anyway? Mom and Pop don't know you, and you don't live in the neighborhood." This was no question; it was a statement of fact.

From anyone else, Clara might have been taken aback by the sudden shift from fretting to inquisition, but from even a boyish Emmett, it came as no surprise. Many were the times she'd wondered just how her beloved had managed to keep his mental gears as intact as he had, given his habit of leaping from one topic to the next with scarcely a pause for breath, much less thought. "Quite true. I'm... a newspaper photographer," she hastily improvised, "from Sacramento. I was coming back from an assignment in Nevada, passing through on my way home for Christmas, and I was so taken by all the beautiful snow and scenery, I simply had to stop and capture it on film. I guess I wandered a little farther afield than I'd intended."

As he digested this explanation, a small frown narrowed Emmett's wide eyes. "So where's your camera?"

Clara tried not to smile. Perhaps her husband had missed his true calling, after all. Maybe he should've been a lawyer, or a detective. "In my bag," she replied smoothly. "Was it brought in with me?"

"Sure. Mom left it near the fireplace with your coat and boots and things, to dry out. You got pretty soaked from layin' in the snow, y'know," he added as he went to fetch the requested item. When he returned and proffered it to its owner, his faint frown had not diminished. Clara wondered why.

She set aside the teacup and brought out the camera as proof. It was only when her young host exhibited strongly startled fascination with it that she realized why he was so intrigued, and why he had frowned. She'd completely forgotten that hers was a technologically advanced camera — a natural mistake, as to the perspective of a mind born in the Nineteenth Century, any portable camera was a source of wonder. The cameras of this era wouldn't have been so small and streamlined; from what she'd seen in history books, they were generally large and clumsy contraptions, much too big to be carried in a bag as small as hers. It was only natural that Emmett should doubt her when she claimed it was in her bag. She wondered if she'd unwittingly done some horrible damage to future history by letting him see it — but it was too late.

"Wow!" young Emmett breathed as he took the device from her and examined all its various switches and knobs and lens controls. "I've never seen anything like it! Does it take good pictures? Is it hard to use? Is this how you focus the lens? When do you put the film and the flash bulb? Back here? What're all these buttons and levers for? I've never seen so many on a camera! Where'd you get it? It must've cost a fortune!"

In spite of her misgivings, Clara smiled at his very characteristic torrent of questions. He may have been fascinated by cowboys at the moment, but the drive to *know* was already there, in full. "It's... experimental," she alibied, hoping that this might satisfy any potentially dangerous curiosity. "My husband designs things like this, and seeing that my job is to take photographs, he's been trying to find ways to make it easier for me." That wasn't exactly the truth, Clara knew, but her husband *had* given her the camera to aid her pursuit of the hobby, so it wasn't exactly a lie, either.

"Too bad," Emmett said, disappointed. "I was kinda hoping you could tell my Pop where to get one. His camera's too heavy to carry around much, so he always makes me and Mom sit like statues so he can take boring pictures of us." He'd already figured out how to open the lens cover and was peering through the eyepiece, aiming it hither and thither at whatever caught his eye. "Can I take a picture with it?" he asked eagerly, praying she'd say yes. "Will you show me how?"

"Maybe later," Clara forestalled, taking it from him with an apologetic half-smile. "If it got damp, too, I have to be sure it's completely dry before I take any pictures, or I might damage it." That was plainly a lie, but he bought it.

She changed the subject before he changed his mind. "Did you bring sugar or honey for the tea? I like mine sweetened."

Successfully distracted by the need to follow his mother's instructions to act as host, Emmett checked the tray he'd brought. "Gosh, no, I forgot. Do you want me to get it for you?"

"Please."

"Honey or sugar? We've got both."

"Honey, if you don't mind. It would be especially pleasant, on a chilly day like this."

He acknowledged the request with a quick nod, and started toward the door. He was already in the hall, headed for the kitchen, when he stopped, backpedaled, and poked his head around the jamb. "I could bring some cookies, too, if you want. Louisa made 'em this morning, gingerbread and sugar cookies an' lots of other stuff. She won't let *me* have any yet, but I'm sure she'll give 'em to *you*."

Clara chuckled softly at this transparent little-boy machination. "That would be nice," she agreed, even though she was certain she'd be lucky to get more than one.

"Great! I'll be right back — so don't go anywhere!" Pleased that she was being so cooperative, Emmett grinned and disappeared again; the sound of his footsteps dwindled as he moved off at a half-run down the carpeted hall.

Clara inhaled deeply, held it for a moment, then let it sigh from her in a rush of air. In just a few minutes, the boy her husband had been had managed to leave her gasping for breath, which didn't surprise her in the least. She'd always known he must have been a rather hyperkinetic child, though she'd subconsciously expected him to be active more in the fashion that Verne was active: a bit more quietly curious, not bursting with questions asked one atop the other.

Smiling reflectively, she reached into her bag to see whether or not the picture of her own children was still in her wallet. Emmett-her-husband had taken it out on the back porch during their celebration of Verne's birthday in late October. She and the kids had been struggling to keep the candles on the cake from being blown out by the capricious wind, a battle they'd been unable to win until they retreated indoors. The photo managed to capture a moment of silly, unpretentious happiness so well, Clara had put it in her pocketbook so that it would always be with her as a reminder of life's small joys.

At last, she found it, tucked away between her library card and driver's license. But when she looked at it, expecting to feel the rush of pleasant warmth it usually elicited, she instead felt a strange and unnerving chill. The photo wasn't at all as she remembered it. The only part of Emily in the picture was her shadow, and the whole thing appeared washed out, its colors dimmed and out of focus.

Had it been damaged by the exposure to snow and cold? Clara wondered. Had it been improperly processed, so that it was deteriorating a mere two months after it had been taken?

No, she realized, there was nothing amiss with the printing process; she'd done it herself, so she was completely sure. The autumn trees in the background were sharply in focus and vividly colored, as were the bright blue sky and green grass. But the rest of the picture was fading, some parts more than others. Clara's likeness was still fairly solid, but Jules was translucent, Verne was fast becoming a wraith, and all that remained of Emily was a faint shadow along one edge of the picture.

Comprehension struck Clara like the coldest wind ever whipped across an Antarctic ice plain. This was a phenomenon she had never before seen with her own eyes, but Emmett and Marty had described it to her in such detail, she knew with bone-numbed, blood-chilled accuracy exactly what was happening:

Something had happened to alter the future, something that was slowly erasing Clara and her children from existence.

Clara's hands began shaking so badly, it suddenly became difficult for her to retain her grip on the photograph. While her thoughts raced to find all the possible ways in which she might have altered the future, her mind's ear kept hearing her husband's voice speaking words uttered but a handful of hours ago, sixty-five years in the future:

"...Yes, I want to go back and tell them, but I know I can't. Look what happened when Marty did nothing but try to follow his father home. He'd barely talked to him, and he almost wound up destroying his very existence. It's too dangerous."

That was certainly the case, Clara's conscience told her with bitter remorse. But she'd been so sure that this would be safe, that nothing could possibly go wrong....

"You are not to take that kind of a foolish chance just for an unwrappable Christmas present I can't even be around to see!"

Well, maybe if Emmett-the-adult *had* been around, none of this would have happened. What had she done? She was more or less certain the alteration didn't involve an untimely discovery of the Time Machine. She'd been very, very careful to keep it disguised, both on the flight here and once it was landed. Also, if anyone other than Emmett or his family had found it, the alterations to the continuum wouldn't necessarily have had such a direct effect on Clara and her children. And if any of the Browns had discovered it, they surely would have mentioned it, by now.

No, whatever had happened must have somehow altered Emmett's future; that was the most logical course of thought to pursue. Unfortunately, the conclusions she reached by following that avenue were as bleak as any other. Whatever had happened either resulted in Emmett never discovering time travel, or not living long enough to do so.

Either way, Clara realized, the result held dreadful repercussions for the integrity of the universe as she knew it. For if Emmett never built his Time Machine, she would never be able to travel to this point in his life and prevent him from building it. A paradox would ensue, the result of which could mean the end of everything.

Oh, how could she have been so foolish?! And how could she set it right again, before she completely faded from the picture and it was too late?

Clara was wringing her brain for an answer to this puzzle when she heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor. Reflexively, protectively, like a child hiding the evidence of her folly, she shoved the damning photograph into her bag before whoever was coming could see it.

She'd been unconsciously expecting young Emmett as the return arrival, but it was Eleanor who entered the room, smiling. "Louisa wanted to know if there'd be a guest for dinner," she explained as she stepped into the study, "so I thought I'd ask if you'd like to — goodness gracious, my dear, are you feeling well? You're as white as a sheet!"

The solicitous tone of her hostess's words reminded Clara that she dared not fall to pieces, not yet. She attempted a reassuring smile, but she knew that as a nurse, Eleanor wouldn't be easily fooled. "I *am* feeling a bit peaked," she admitted, her bravery wan. "It's been a while since I've eaten, and I suppose the combination of a bruised skull and an empty stomach is rather fatiguing."

"Well, then, there's to be no question about you joining us for dinner," Eleanor said briskly, the no-nonsense nurse whose mind has been solidly made up. "Emmett's bringing you some cookies, too, and I want you to eat your fair share — don't let him inhale them before you have a chance. Make sure you drink at least one cup of tea, and water if you're thirsty. And if you're at all tired, you just send my son away and rest, all right?"

Assured by Clara's nod, her concerned frown faded and was replaced by a more encouraging smile. "I still need to see what Everett wants, so I must excuse myself again, but if you start feeling poorly, don't hesitate to call for me. And don't let Emmett exhaust you, either!"

When she was gone, Clara reached for the half-cooled cup of tea and took a few swallows. The unsweetened brew was bitter against her tongue, but not half as bitter as the future might be if she didn't take hold of herself and find a way to fix whatever she had broken. But where to start?

As Eleanor's footsteps were fading beyond audibility, the sound of other shoes scuffing against the hall carpeting strengthened, heralding young Emmett's return from the kitchen. As she thought of the boy and what she knew of the day's events, an approach suddenly came to her.

"What happened after I struck my head?" she asked him after she'd sweetened her tea and had a piece of gingerbread to nibble. "I don't remember a thing, after I fell."

Emmett, who had been interested in devouring the cookies (just as his mother had warned) suddenly appeared to lose all interest in them. He squirmed in the seat Eleanor had occupied earlier; his ears turned red.

Clara understood his consternation at once. "I'm not angry with you, and I'm not looking to lay blame on anyone. But I'm curious to know how I got here. Did you bring me here yourself?"

The blond head shook. "No, though I tried. When Nugget almost hit you—"

"Nugget?"

"That's what Mom named my horse, 'cause she's gold-colored and this is California. Anyway, she almost threw me, but I managed to hang on."

The mention of a near accident caught Clara's attention. What if Emmett had been hurt in some way that hadn't yet come to light? She'd heard of neck injuries resulting from such situations, injuries that didn't manifest themselves until well after the original incident. Perhaps he'd sustained such an injury, which would result in his premature death....

"Were you hurt?" she asked, more terrified than solicitous. "Did you hit your head on a branch, or was your neck wrenched?"

The ease with which he answered was such that Clara knew he was not lying or covering an unpleasant truth. "Nah — though you sound as bad as Mom. She had to examine me, just to make sure. I'm fine. When Nugget settled down, I got off to see if you were all right. There wasn't any blood and it didn't look like you'd broken anything, but I couldn't get you to wake up, and I tried everything I could think of. I was afraid I'd hurt you real bad but I couldn't move you far by myself, so I rode back to the house to get help. Mom and Pop had just come back from shopping when I got there, and Pop dropped everything to come help when I told him what'd happened — left it right in the middle of the driveway. He helped me get you onto Nugget, and we brought you back here."

His sigh was full of the worry which had undoubtedly filled those frantic moments. "When you slept for so long, Mom got kinda scared that you'd been hurt worse'n it looked." He smiled, a charming expression of reassurance Clara knew very well. "I'm glad you weren't."

"So am I." Her attempted smile wasn't as convincing as she would have liked. Nothing he had told her seemed capable of producing catastrophic changes to the future. Of course, what if, like Marty, her presence at that particular place and time had *prevented* some necessary event from occurring? Should Emmett have been at home to answer the telephone, an event her arrival had prevented? Should he have been riding elsewhere, to see something which would inevitably alter the course of his future? What could the answer be — and how could she ever determine what needed to be done to correct the problem?

Her thoughts flitted to the Comparative Temporal Flow Monitor Emmett had installed in the Time Machine some years ago, as an early warning device of catastrophic changes wrought by their fourth-dimensional adventures. She could consult it, but that would require a trip back to the Time Machine, then a return visit to correct whatever had gone wrong. She wasn't sure how she would manage that, not with all the attention being paid her out of concern for her health. Moreover, she wasn't exactly sure how to operate the device, much less interpret the bizarre data it produced. No, there had to be an answer here, and she needed to find it as quickly as possible.

"Do you think your camera's ready to take pictures again?" her young host asked out of the blue, diverting her train of thought. "I really would like to try using it, if you'll let me."

Now, there was a possibility. Had things been put awry by her injudicious display of a high-tech item from the future? Perhaps, though she couldn't imagine how. Cameras were already commonplace in 1931, even if they weren't quite as powerful or streamlined as hers. Its technological predecessors would begin to appear in the marketplace in only a few years, if she recalled correctly, and there was really nothing specific Emmett could have learned about its internal workings without dismantling it or seeing its schematics — and even then, that would not have been enough. Her husband had once told her how the simplest of future electronic devices — a pocket calculator, for instance — would have been indecipherable to the most brilliant scientific minds of his childhood, since it required, even at its most basic level, an understanding of yet-to-be-discovered transistor technology. Though her indiscretion in allowing young Emmett to see her camera may not have been the wisest act in the universe, it was very likely not the source of the cataclysm which was erasing Clara and her children from existence.

Then what *was*?

"I don't know if I should," the time traveler said hesitantly. "The pictures might not turn out if the camera isn't ready, and I wouldn't want it damaged...."

Emmett looked positively crushed by her implication that he was a clumsy, inconsiderate child who would break someone else's things by rude carelessness. "I'll be real careful, I promise," he vowed, as earnestly as any of his future offspring when they wanted something desperately. "Please?"

Just knowing who he was, it was difficult for Clara to say no; when he turned those big brown puppy dog eyes on her in boyish pleading, she couldn't stop herself from melting. As she pulled her camera from the bag, she accidentally pulled the hastily-hidden photo with it. She snatched it from the floor before Emmett could see it, noticing in the process that it was still fading. Emily's shadow was now completely gone; Verne was little more than a shade, Jules was completely transparent, and Clara's own image was losing substance, like a watercolor painting in the rain. She had to find the answer to this dilemma, right quick. She slipped the photo into a pocket and brought out the camera.

If Emmett had even noted the fallen picture, the memory of it was driven from his mind as the visitor showed him the camera and the most basic necessities of operating the device. While Clara instructed him, she surreptitiously disabled the too-advanced and potentially puzzling features, such as the auto-winder and electronic flash (the latter of which wasn't needed, anyway, as she'd loaded the camera with extra-fast film to avoid the possibility of accidental flashes drawing attention during what she'd expected would be a quick and surreptitious trip). She also decided there was nothing more he could tell her that could give clues to correct the current situation. She would have to seek further illumination elsewhere.

"Could I go outside and take a picture of Nugget?" he asked when the lesson was done and he'd been allowed to use the camera once. "I've asked Pop if he would, but he says it's too much of a bother to set up his equipment outside. This would be a lot easier."

Clara had misgivings, and not entirely because of possible future repercussions. "I'm not sure I'd be able to send you the pictures, if I need the rest of this film for my work."

He was remarkably equable. "That's okay. I'd at least like to try."

"Would your parents mind? They didn't seem to think you should've been outside this morning."

The boy grimaced expressively, a timeless depiction of a child's exasperation with his elders. "That's 'cause they don't think I should be interested in playing cowboy. They want me to spend practically all my time studying."

"I'm sure they only want what's best for you."

"I know. They keep telling me I can do anything I want, if I try hard enough."

Clara couldn't help but smile, not only at the way in which he rolled his eyes, but also at the echo of similar words her husband would repeat to Marty and their own children, many times, in the future. "They're right about that. You can be anything you want...."

He made a not quite rude sound of supreme skepticism. "Anything but a cowboy," he grumped. "What's so wrong with that?"

"Well," she began, attempting to offer him the benefit of her years of parental wisdom, "I don't think there's anything *wrong* with it, but you must admit, it's not a very challenging occupation."

"Who says? Did *you* ever try it?"

He was unutterably astonished when Clara said, "After a fashion, yes. And I'll confess, I found it very difficult — physically. But mentally, it wasn't terribly stimulating; it was downright *boring*. And from what your parents have told me, it would be a shame for you to waste your talents on cattle-herding without even *trying* something more demanding first."

For the better part of a minute, Emmett's large dark eyes studied the visitor with marked intensity, apparently giving serious thought to what she'd just said. It had just occurred to Clara that perhaps she shouldn't've said anything, that by attempting to influence the boy-who-would-be-her-husband she might make matters worse, when his face quirked into a whimsical half-grimace. "Yeah, but *somebody's* gotta do it — and I *like* riding, and being outside in the fresh air, with nobody to bother you."

It seemed to Clara as if that last point was most important to young Emmett. "Maybe that's why your parents are against it," she observed, sagely but also gently. "It can be a pretty lonely life."

"So can being a kid whose folks've got money when everyone else's don't," he replied with an unhappy wisdom far beyond his years. Clara understood why. Emmett-her-spouse had told her about the Great Depression, and how his family's financial security during those unpleasant times had made him both an object of misguided interest and jealous rejection, a problem that was only compounded by his intelligence and individuality.

The unhappiness, fortunately — and characteristically — didn't last for more than a moment or two. "I'm used to that. Besides, Mom and Pop just don't understand that I don't *need* to study that much! Heck, school's *easy* for me. I wouldn't already be in the tenth grade if it wasn't."

The former schoolteacher in Clara began to remind him that *everyone* needs to study in order to learn, and that most children don't realize just how much work truly is required to do one's best, but the impulse short-circuited before the first syllable vibrated her vocal cords. At eleven — when most others his age were in the sixth grade — managing tenth grade subjects with ease was already a significant achievement, certainly one worthy of any adult's approval.

Clara could understand his parents' pride and their desire to see him reach his greatest potential — she felt the same about her own talented offspring — but she also understood young Emmett's point of view. All work and no play could make anyone dull or depressed, and when one's gifts and social position resulted in lonely separation from one's peers, denying a few moments of enjoyment seemed no less than criminal, especially on Christmas Eve. Besides, the only objections Eleanor and Everett had expressed to his morning's escapades involved his obsession with cowboys and Clara's injury, not his need for recreation.

She sighed softly. Her logical, pragmatic head told her to say *No, it's out of the question*, but her heart said *Go ahead, make him happy and say yes*. Briefly, she felt torn — but when it came to anything involving Emmett, years of experience told her to trust her heart. She capitulated. "Well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt. But I didn't bring extra film with me, so don't take more than a few pictures."

"Would four be all right?" he asked, all but dancing with excitement.

"That would be fine. And bring it back to me as soon as you're through."

He was unabashedly thrilled. "Yes, ma'am! Thanks, Mrs. Potter. I'll be careful, you'll see."

Clara had no doubt of it. As soon as Emmett was gone, bubbling with energy and enthusiasm, she sat back to catch her breath again. It occurred to her that she should've asked for directions to the washroom before letting him go, but she

quickly realized it was unnecessary. She may have been here only once before, but she recalled the location of one from an urgent need during that visit. Tentatively peeking into the corridor to get her bearings, she headed down the hall and up the stairs to the second floor.

As she moved quietly from the study to the staircase, Clara passed the entrance to the large room at the front of the house that her husband would someday use as an in-house laboratory. At the moment, it was being employed for its originally designed purpose; it was a nicely-furnished parlor, currently bedecked for the holidays. Clara paused at the threshold long enough to take in the sight of the rather large Christmas tree. She'd expected the place to be wholly unfamiliar, given what would eventually become of this house and its contents, but surprisingly, a few of the decorations were quite well known to her. She supposed they must have been stored in the garage and had therefore been saved from the mansion's fiery demise. She smiled to herself, glad to know that she would at least have this small connection to her long-departed in-laws — provided she could find the cause of what was erasing her from existence before it was too late. She hurried on.

She had finished her business in the washroom and was about to return to the study when she heard voices from farther down the upper corridor. "I don't know if there's enough time for it," she heard Eleanor say, her tone one of mild upset, perhaps disappointment. "It's almost four already, and you know how prompt Mister Wynberg is about such things."

"Yes, they do set the clocks by him, don't they?" Everett responded with amused gruffness. "Perhaps if I called, he'd be willing to make an exception."

"Do you honestly think he would?" There was hope in the question, but of the sort that anticipates no fulfillment.

Clara could hear the man's shrug as well as his determined optimism. "No, but what can it hurt to try?"

The tenor of departure in Everett's words dawned on Clara only a fraction of an instant before he stepped into the corridor. Feeling suddenly guilty to have been caught prying into their business, she attempted to adopt a stance of apologetic innocence. Everett, however, appeared unsuspecting of any wrongdoing on her part. "Is there something you need, Mrs. Potter?" he asked, ever the gracious host.

She shook her head. "Oh, no, I was just using the washroom. I was about to return to the study when I heard you and Mrs. Brown talking. I didn't intend to eavesdrop, but... is something wrong? Is there anything I can do to help?"

"It's nothing you need worry about," he assured her. "But if you feel up to it, Nora could probably use a hand. She usually does these things a week ahead of time, but the snow put a crimp in her schedule." His features, as mobile as his son's, gave eloquent voice to his opinions about the past week's persistently rotten weather.

Clara couldn't help but chuckle. "For everyone, it seems. And since I caused another delay, I'd be more than happy to help."

With a broad smile and a broader gesture, he indicated the room to which she should go, then excused himself. As she watched him move down the stairs at a bouncing pace, Clara reflected on how little a photograph could tell you about the real person. In all the pictures she'd ever seen of Emmett's father, she'd never noticed much of a resemblance between them — but now, seeing him alive and quite animated, she realized that he had been a more powerful influence on his son than any photo could have shown. Everett had much of Emmett's energy about him, and, Clara suspected, a good deal of the younger Brown's optimism. If she managed to get out of here without destroying the universe, this was a memory she would always keep close to her heart.

She paused for a moment to check the status of the photo in her pocket. A brief glance at the vanishing images told her she would have to find the answers to this puzzle as soon as possible.

The door to the room Everett had indicated was ajar, but Clara tapped on it politely, announcing her presence before stepping inside. It was the master bedroom, though at the moment, it looked more like the gift wrap department of a large store. Bags and boxes and paper and ribbon were everywhere, but with little sense of order. Eleanor was standing in the middle of it, seeming thoroughly at a loss for where to start.

At Clara's tap, she looked up; the visitor offered a smile of greeting. "Your husband said you were pressed for time and might welcome a helping hand...."

Some people might have resisted the offer out of pride, but Emmett's mother was not one of them. "Why, yes, I could, if you're feeling well enough. Did Emmett abandon you?"

"With my permission, and only for a few minutes. I'm really much better, now that I have something in my stomach, and it looks like you could use a whole workshop full of elves."

Eleanor laughed, but her eyes shone with gratitude. "That might do the trick," she agreed, motioning Clara to a seat at the small table on which she'd set her wrapping supplies. "Of course, some of this is for friends and Everett's business associates, so it needn't be wrapped right this minute, but I'd just as soon get the chore out of the way. Did the snow cause troubles for you, too, Mrs. Potter?"

"I suppose so, in a way," Clara confessed as she settled down to the pleasant task of wrapping gifts. "It's certainly delayed my trip home for a bit."

Eleanor's face became one of study and concern. "That's true, you have a family of your own to get home to. Do you need someone to take you there? Would you like to call them, so they won't worry?"

The time traveler winced at her lack of foresight in making that provocative comment about her family. "Ah... Perhaps later, but I don't think it'll be necessary. They aren't expecting me home 'til tomorrow morning, and though I'd intended to surprise them by coming back early, they won't have cause for concern if I don't show up 'til then. Calling them now will only give them reason to worry unnecessarily, and I'd rather they didn't — especially on Christmas Eve."

Eleanor saw her point and understood completely. "Of course, I wouldn't want to be the cause of such upset, either, especially since you'll be just fine. Emmett tells me you're a newspaper photographer. That sounds terribly interesting, though I can't see how you manage to fit in a job around raising three children."

Clara's half-smiling glance (wakened by Eleanor's abrupt change of subject, as abrupt as any perpetrated by her son) was shaky underneath. She'd gotten so used to the ubiquitousness of working mothers in the 1990s, she'd completely forgotten how unusual they were in this day and age. "The children are all in school, now, and I only work freelance, for a very small paper," she lied as glibly as she could manage while her thoughts raced. Perhaps the camera or her fib about being a photojournalist had been the culprit for disaster, after all. Between his eagerness to use the camera and his mention of it to his mother, Emmett appeared to be more interested in the subject than Clara would have thought. Was it possible she, her camera, and her falsehood had caught him at a particularly vulnerable moment, and would be the catalyst for his pursuit of a career in photography rather than science?

When she tried to swallow to calm her pounding heart, Clara found her throat and mouth bone-dry. "Your son seems fascinated by photography," she essayed, hoping this might induce Eleanor to provide some enlightenment she could use to resolve her fourth dimensional difficulties.

"He always has been," Eleanor agreed, too busy wrapping an awkward package to notice her guest's momentary pallidness. "In fact, Everett and I bought him a camera of his own for Christmas — one of those new little box cameras, of course, nothing as sophisticated as what Emmett tells me you have. He may be disappointed in his gift, after this."

Clara wasn't quite sure if this should make her feel more apprehensive or relieved. Since he already had an interest in the subject and his parents had bought their gift for him before her arrival, it was entirely possible her influence on the matter would be negligible. Then again, it was also possible that what she had done would result in him pursuing the pastime with more vigor than he would have, without her intervention. And there just wasn't any way she could know which conclusion was accurate.

She cleared her throat. "I'm sure he'll be thrilled," she said with as much conviction as she could muster. "I just hope I haven't ruined your Christmas."

"Nonsense, my dear," Eleanor said sincerely. "If anything, you've made the day more interesting. In fact...."

"Mom?" a childish bellow came from the direction of the staircase, sounding so much like Verne that Clara started involuntarily; her heart skipped several beats. "Mom! Hey, Mom, are you up there?"

The elder woman's sigh was full of the exasperation every mother feels when a child displays questionable manners. "Excuse me for a moment," she said apologetically, rising, "while I go see what my son thinks requires raising such a ruckus."

Clara's nod of dismissal was almost as weak as her knees. Despite her best efforts at playing detective, she just wasn't getting anywhere, and she was rapidly running out of both ideas and time. Verne was completely gone from the picture, now; Jules was a mere shadow, and she herself looked no more solid than snowflakes on the wind. Was that what was causing her inability to find a solution? she wondered. Was the process of being erased from existence causing her mind to become as thin and insubstantial as her image in the photo? Would she be capable of recognizing the answer when she saw it?

She was trying as hard as she could to focus her thoughts, to see what pieces of this puzzle might be missing, when the door opened again. Everett's head popped in. "Nora, you were right, he — oh, Mrs. Potter, where's Mrs. Brown? I thought she was still in here with you."

Clara had to deliberately shake herself from her state of intense concentration to answer him. "She stepped out for a minute to see what Emmett wanted. Didn't you pass her on the stairs?"

"No, I came up the back way. Well, when she returns, please tell her I couldn't get a replacement for the book. Wynberg closed at four on the dot."

"The book?" Clara asked reflexively, her mind already returned to pondering this evidently unresolvable riddle. Could she have said something while she'd been unconscious, something revealing about the future that would have been best left unsaid?

Everett didn't notice her preoccupation. "Yes, we always give Emmett a book on Christmas Eve. It keeps him quiet until morning, if you know what I mean."

Clara did indeed. Her husband carried on that very tradition with their own children, not only at Christmas but also on their birthdays. They both found it to be a perfect way to encourage the youngsters to read, as well as a means of keeping their natural excitement under control. It was precisely why the question of giving Emily her mother's copy of *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* came up twice a year.

She thought of the book still in her bag downstairs, and suddenly, a rush of inspiration washed over her like a strong winter's wind. "Did you miss going to the bookstore because of me?" she asked, not daring to hope he would say yes. That would almost be too easy.

He didn't. "No, we went this morning when we were taking care of our other errands." Before Clara's hopes could more than begin a meteoric plunge, he added, "But when Emmett came galloping up, screaming how a lady had been hurt in the woods, I dropped everything to go with him — and I dropped the package with the book in it right into a rather nasty puddle. By the time Nora found it, it was ruined."

"Yes, quite beyond salvaging," Eleanor verified in a low voice, stepping into the room and gesturing for them to keep quiet until she could close the door behind her to prevent their discussion from being overheard by the wrong ears. "I had Emmett put your camera back with your things," she explained to Clara, "and then I sent him on to get ready for supper. I won't have him sitting down to eat with guests looking like an unkempt cowboy, especially not on Christmas Eve."

She turned to her husband. "I was afraid Mister Wynberg would be so prompt, but I suppose we could always give Emmett one of the books from our own collection."

Everett harrumphed. "He's already read every book we own at least twice," he pointed out.

"True. Still, it's the thought that counts."

"What book was it?" Clara suddenly had to know, holding her breath until she heard the answer her instincts somehow already knew was coming.

"Just an adventure novel," Eleanor provided. "We both thought it would suit his current tastes while showing that cowboys aren't the only ones who lead exciting lives. It was by that Wells fellow, I believe...."

"Verne," Everett corrected. "*Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. I read it when I was young, and I thought it might be just what we need to encourage Emmett to find a... ah... a new path of interest."

It certainly was, Clara thought, though she couldn't tell them just *how* successful it would be. A huge smile lit her face, powered by the knowledge that she had at last stumbled onto the problem and already had the solution at hand. "I think I can help," she said, excusing herself long enough to fetch the fateful book from her bag.

"We can't possibly take this," Eleanor declared when she'd glanced inside the covers and fully realized what their guest was offering. "This is an antique — it must be terribly valuable!"

"Not as valuable as a child's mind," Clara replied with a deep fervor her hosts could not have fully grasped, silently adding, *Or his future*. Remarkable how such a minor accident could slam the door to one's entire destiny in a careless instant — for that was clearly what had happened. Without that Christmas present, Emmett would miss the opportunity to read what would become his favorite book at the time in his life when he was most able to be deeply influenced by it. He would never conclude that he had to devote his life and his talents to science, and hence would never build or even dream of building a time machine. He might have gone on to become an excellent doctor or a photographer or even a cowboy, but for Clara and their children, the future would end in a fatal buckboard crash in 1885.

She could not have told his parents how important she knew this to be, even if she'd been of a mind to try. "Please, I insist. The book you bought wouldn't have been ruined if it weren't for me. I was only going to put this in storage, for safekeeping — and something tells me I couldn't find a safer home for it. Somehow, it seems as if Destiny *wanted* for me to have it here for just this reason."

"It does seem to be an amazing coincidence," Eleanor agreed, glancing up at her husband for his opinion and clearly hoping he would accept their guest's generous offer.

"You must at least let us pay you for it," Everett began, reaching for the inner breast pocket of his jacket.

Clara stayed his hand without a second thought. "Certainly not! This is supposed to be a gift, and I want it to remain just that, no buying or selling. But you mustn't tell him you got it from me."

Husband and wife blinked as one. "Whyever not?" Eleanor wanted to know, puzzled. "It's only proper to give credit where it's due...."

"Not this time. It's your tradition, and though I think it's a lovely one, I also think it would be best if Emmett believes it came from you alone." To say nothing of her belief that it could cause incalculable troubles later on if an adult Emmett should happen to make one of his characteristic wild leaps of insight and connect his favorite book's original owner with his wife before they had a chance to be married.

Everett and Eleanor again exchanged glances, then surrendered to her will. "If that's what you wish," he acquiesced, his graciousness wordlessly saying that they were deeply in her debt. Any lingering doubts Clara might have harbored were erased with a quick peek at the photo in her pocket, which once again showed four gloriously solid and happy people.

"Thank you, Mrs. Potter," Eleanor amended with heartfelt appreciation. "If there's anything we can ever do to show our gratitude...."

Clara was about to dismiss the offer when her eyes happened to light upon the carrybag she was still holding. She thought of the camera inside it and of her original reason for coming here; she smiled brightly, secretively, suddenly inspired with the perfect answer to both her gift troubles and her hosts' need to demonstrate their thanks. "As a matter of fact," she said, not quite slyly, "I believe there is...."

It was well beyond midday by the time Clara was finally finished preparing her husband's gift, though she was not made aware of the hour by a glance out the window. The wine cellar that had been built into the basement of the house by its original owner made an excellent darkroom, because it had no windows and they had precious little need for a place to store wine. Emmett's tolerance for anything containing alcohol had not improved with the years. Under the best possible circumstances (meaning if he drank it very slowly on a full stomach), he could manage to consume somewhat less than half a small glassful of heavily watered mild wine before becoming totally silly and falling asleep. Clara recalled with some amusement an occasion on which he'd forgotten himself in church, had drunk perhaps a thimbleful of the strong sacramental wine, and had promptly fallen asleep through the rest of the service. Since it would clearly never be needed for its designed purpose, converting part of the old windowless cellar into a darkroom had been the most logical fate for the place when Clara had begun to pursue photography in earnest.

Upon returning home from 1931, she berthed the Time Machine and immediately hurried to develop and print the film she'd brought back. Her efforts eventually produced more than a mere few images of a fondly remembered snow-covered December morn. What resulted was a journal of that entire Christmas Eve, from her surreptitiously captured pictures of the morning sun against the snow-bound house and the distant shots of young Emmett's marginally disobedient horseback ride, to candid photos of the family at dinner and a carefully-posed picture of them seated with their guest before the Christmas tree, taken with Louisa's help — her requested "payment" in return for the antique book.

The last snapshot in the collection was one Clara had caught by pure luck as she headed back to the Time Machine, a moment glimpsed through a window from the outside: her future husband sprawled before the parlor hearth, reading. She didn't need to see the title of the book to know which it was, and the captive image was the perfect end to the album's story. She wasn't sure Emmett would wholly approve of what she'd done, but somehow, she knew that when he saw the pictures for himself and remembered, he would forgive her unintentional indiscretion without a second thought.

With no window to the outside world and much on her mind, it was neither the movement of the sun nor the signal of a clock that at last cued Clara to the current time of day; it was the sound of her family returning from their expedition to the mall. Remembering how the children hadn't wanted her on hand to witness their purchase, she decided it would be best if she stayed in the cellar and completed her own last-minute work rather than risk an accidental interruption of the kids' top-secret project. She mounted the finished photos in an empty album she'd originally expected to fill with holiday pictures of a more contemporary origin. She debated labeling them, but decided that unless Emmett's memory was completely tattered with age, the photos would more than adequately speak for themselves. She might need to explain how her initial plans had not included face-to-face encounters with residents of the past, but that could be saved for later, when and if any questions arose.

When everything was done, she came up to the kitchen, where she paused briefly to take stock of the situation. She could hear her offspring on the second level, hustling through some noisy enterprise she was sure involved a discussion of which paper they felt would make the most appropriate covering for their mother's gift. Smiling to herself, she left them to their secret business and went to the library, where she'd left her own wrapping supplies.

The library, however, was not unoccupied. As she stepped inside, she found Emmett perched atop a ladder, intently examining one of the volumes on the uppermost shelves. Fortunately, he looked up only briefly to see who had entered; Clara was able to deftly conceal her unwrapped present by slipping it onto the nearest shelf before he noticed.

"Before you say anything," he said, returning his attention to the volume in his hands, "I've been thinking about your book problem, and I may have come up with the perfect solution."

She blinked owlishly, taken aback by the unexpected turn of topic. "You have?" It wasn't a terribly articulate response, she knew, but in the excitement of the day's events, she'd completely forgotten about their morning's discussion and

the subsequent fate of the debated novel. Now, she suddenly realized what book her husband was holding, and any more perspicuous commentary evaporated in her throat, unuttered.

Emmett grinned as he hopped down from the ladder. "Yep. If what really worries you is whether or not Emmy'll understand the story and take proper care of the book, we can get around that by giving *my* copy to all three of the kids. The boys can help her read it — and I know they will; they both loved it — they can share responsibility for it, and if it *does* get ruined, it won't be as big a loss. Mine's not in as good a shape as yours."

That was quite true. The old familiar book— which had been in near-spotless condition when she'd last seen it but a handful of hours ago — now showed evidence of the more than sixty additional years through which it had lived since she'd given it to Eleanor and Everett. The instant of reflex ache Clara felt upon seeing its battered cover, worn pages, and oft-repaired spine was swiftly replaced by the warm knowledge of how it had come to this well-used state.

She couldn't have suppressed the smile that suffused her face in that moment of realization, no matter how hard she might have tried. It was *her* book that had been her husband's childhood favorite, *her* copy that had introduced him to the joy of science, *her* cherished volume that had been all but loved to death and yet had somehow managed to stay with him through fire, relocation, and all the vagaries of his life and his passionate pursuit of knowledge, a grueling course so few of his childhood possessions had survived.

It took so long for her to find her emotion-lost voice, Emmett started to worry that she didn't care for the suggestion, not one bit. "But if you really hate the idea..." he began.

She quashed that notion before it went one phoneme farther. "Quite the contrary! As a matter of fact, I don't think a more perfect solution is possible."

Though she'd spoken with consummate sincerity, her expression, distant as she examined her memories of the day, left him with doubts. "Are you sure? You don't have to do this to humor me. It can still wait, if you want — the book's not going anywhere, after all." His dark eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Or is it? What *did* you decide to do with your copy? Did you put it in the vault?"

Clara shook herself free of the fog of reflection. "No, I finally realized you were right about a thing being useless if you never let it be used. So I decided to let it be used."

"Then you *are* giving it to Emily?"

"Not exactly. I hadn't expected to, but while I was out I found an even better home for it."

The inventor's white brows arched curiously. "The museum?" he wondered. "The public library's rare book collection?"

Clara shook her head, smiling as she stepped back to the shelf near the door through which she'd entered. She took the unwrapped album from its hasty hiding place and held it for a moment, debating. Traditionally, she wouldn't have given this gift until tomorrow evening at the earliest, but all things considered, she knew there would never be a better time.

A strident bellow of, "Mom! Hey, Mom!" put a few cracks around the edges of the moment of perfection and sounded so much like a similar yell she'd heard what seemed both minutes and a lifetime ago, Clara had to wonder for a moment if she was still in 1931. "Mom," Verne continued to holler, "where's the tape? Emmy messed up everything we had—"

"Did not!" came the somewhat more distant but thoroughly-to-be-expected retort from his little sister. "If you hadn'ta tried swipin' it from me, it wouldn'ta got messed up!"

"Get real!" was the disdainful response. "You messed it up *way* before I touched it! I was only tryin' to see if I could save any of it...."

"Were not!"

"Was to!"

"No way!"

"Yes way!"

"No — don't shove me!"

"You shoved first!"

"Did not!"

"Did so!"

"Did — knock it off, Emmy!"

"*You* knock it off!"

"I'm warnin' you — hey, stop it! *Mom!*"

"*Mommeeee...!*"

For a moment or two, both adults looked ceilingward, not only in attention to the typical sibling squabble, but in a comfortable parental exasperation that once in a while requires Divine support to maintain patience. Then, they laughed.

"Sometimes," Emmett observed puckishly, "I'm glad I was an only child."

"I'd better go see what's happening before this escalates into bloodshed," Clara said with an amused sigh, thinking of the happy but lonely little boy she'd met earlier that day, who probably would have very much liked *not* to be an only child.

He blinked. "Aren't you going to tell me what you *did* do with the book?"

She smiled at the plaintiveness in the question, the irrepressible curiosity that simply had to know *now*, not tomorrow or an hour or even a few minutes from now. Yes, indeed, she mused, thinking back over the panorama of the day, some things really never did change, no matter the distance traveled or the time slipped by.

"I think this should explain everything," she said as she handed him the album. "Merry Christmas, Emmett." She kissed him lightly on the cheek, then hurried out as the ruckus from above crescendoed.

She was at the foot of the staircase when from behind her, a thoroughly startled, "Great Scott!" told her that her gift had been opened, instantly understood, and properly appreciated.

Clara grinned with the satisfaction of a delightful job well done, and ran to attend her warring offspring with a warm and happy heart.

To Be Continued....