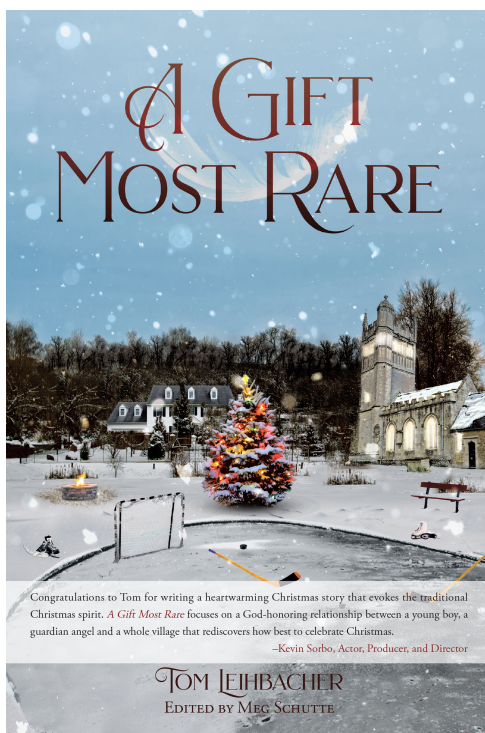


A Gift Most Rare

...ONE CHRISTMAS IN
BRIARCLIFF MANOR



TOM LEIHBACHER

EDITED BY MEG SCHUTTE

ISBN 978-1-0980-3281-4 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-0980-4380-3 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-0980-3282-1 (digital)

Copyright © 2020 by Tom Leihbacher

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods without the prior written permission of the publisher. For permission requests, solicit the publisher via the address below.

Christian Faith Publishing, Inc.
832 Park Avenue
Meadville, PA 16335
www.christianfaithpublishing.com

Printed in the United States of America

*For as you have done it to one of the least of these, my brethren,
so also have you done it to me.*

—Matthew 25:40

Hello and thanks for purchasing a copy of *A Gift Most Rare*. I hope you enjoy the book and that it might even help to enrich your holidays.

There are a few things you might like to know:

Although this is a fictional work, the story unfolds in a real place: my hometown of Briarcliff Manor, New York. Those of us who grew up there enjoyed many shared experiences; the memories of which helped seed the content for various chapters.

Most of the places mentioned in the story are still there today including the Briarcliff Congregational Church, Law Park, Todd School, and Sleepy Hollow Country Club. Others like The King's College and the Briarcliff Middle School have been redeveloped as residential properties.

A handful of the characters you'll meet are based on actual people like Coach Cadman, Mr. Weldon, Dr. Cook, and Reverend Higgins. Others in the cast like Parker Jones, Derrick Marks and Winthrop Smythe are imagined, so any passing resemblances are purely coincidental.

The main goal for this project was to write a God-honoring Christmas story. That's one reason why each chapter opens with a Bible verse, setting the tone for what's about to happen. It's also why the story focuses on caring for the lonely and the less fortunate, which the Bible emphasizes second only to the offer of grace in and through the Christmas event.

Another goal was to write a coming of age story and period piece going back in time to the weird but wonderful days of the early

1970s. For me, that meant anchoring the story in those unforgettable middle school days of discovery.

There are a few people I'd like to single out for heartfelt thanks, starting with my English teachers at Briarcliff High School. In particular, Mr. Kersting, who turned me on to literature and reading, and especially Mrs. Oraby, who told me often that she felt I had potential as a writer someday. Her encouragement stayed with me and helped fuel this effort.

Major thanks also to my fun and talented friend Meg Schutte (a fellow Briarcliff High School graduate), who combed through each sentence of the manuscript, making key edits and providing invaluable input and creative ideas.

I'm also greatly indebted to the kind and generous Shelly Poulton who patiently provided expert guidance from her days in the book publishing business.

Another great friend and accomplished writer, Jamie Malanowski, was always available to dispense advice and words of encouragement over cups of coffee—thank you, sir!

The same goes for Joe Gleason (also a Briarcliff High School graduate), who writes under the name of J. Boyce Gleason and who was very generous with objective thoughts and input.

Lastly, sincere thanks to my wife Rachel and the super-special friends and family who also read the manuscript and provided beneficial feedback. In particular, Bruce Bloom, who was a fantastic sounding board during our frequent evening walks with my rescue dog, Jack.

I pray this will be a fun, enjoyable reading experience for you. Peace and Christmas blessings to you all year long.

Tom

CONTENTS

Prologue.....	13
Chapter 1: Frozen Pond, Melted Heart	15
Chapter 2: Change In The Air	28
Chapter 3: Dreams And Visions.....	34
Chapter 4: Inklings, Instincts, And Intuitions.....	39
Chapter 5: Coming Of Age.....	46
Chapter 6: Soldier Down	53
Chapter 7: Boys Will Be Boys	64
Chapter 8: New York Christmas Amble	71
Chapter 9: Tree Trimming	84
Chapter 10: Best-Laid Plans.....	96
Chapter 11: Je Ne Sais Quoi	102
Chapter 12: Parker And The Park	108
Chapter 13: Carols And Lights	118
Chapter 14: Boys About Town	125
Chapter 15: Christmas Villain	132
Chapter 16: When A Plan Comes Together	139
Chapter 17: The Way The (Bowling) Ball Bounces	143
Chapter 18: County Center Encounter.....	149
Chapter 19: Holiday Field Trips.....	155
Chapter 20: Man About Town	159
Chapter 21: Skating Party	167
Chapter 22: Towering Mistake.....	171
Chapter 23: Out With The Old.....	175

Chapter 24: Library Lessons	183
Chapter 25: Mom Time.....	190
Chapter 26: Home Fires	197
Chapter 27: Trial By Fire	201
Chapter 28: In With The New.....	211
Chapter 29: Christmas Spirit Abounding.....	219
Chapter 30: Christmas Clues	226
Chapter 31: The Christmas Club.....	236
Chapter 32: Let It Be	241
Chapter 33: Goodbye, Sky.....	248
Epilogue.....	253

Briarcliff

Manor



PROLOGUE

*You are the God who works wonders; you have
made known your might among the peoples.*

—Psalm 77:14

Whether we realize it or not, God's celestial intentions are always stirring in wondrous ways that answer prayers and change lives forever.

Such was the case one Thanksgiving Eve in Briarcliff Manor, a pocket-sized village in the pastoral midlands of Westchester County, New York. Heaven-fated happenings were afoot and holy phenomena were set in motion during the still hush of the overnight hours.

The stealth way in which an undetected snowstorm secreted through the great Hudson Valley was nothing short of baffling. To this day, no one has fully explained or adequately described the unusual event.

Flurries began to fly on cue soon after everyone had tucked in for a late November night's sleep. Completely unforeseen by local weather forecasters, the storm seemed to tiptoe in from out of the blue.

The Scarborough section of town stood like nature's rampart, rising up from the weathered edge of the Hudson River. It took the windswept brunt of the storm. Meanwhile, the valley area of the village consented to the lion's share of the whiteout.

Accumulations were mystifying. By the time the bells at St. Mary's Episcopal chimed one o'clock in the morning, a foot of the most pristine, sparkling snow had accumulated with more yet to fall.

The clandestine storm cast a charmed tranquility over Briarcliff's hills and dales. The air took delivery of a fresh, uplifting scent while

powdery snow dusted the evergreens and coated the ground with smooth, unspoiled contours.

Caught completely off guard, people awoke to a holiday scene worthy of the best-ever by Currier & Ives. As preparations for Thanksgiving dinners began in one house after another, everyone was filled with the most curious sense of delight and fascination. Stammering sentence fragments dominated morning conversations between family and neighbors. People greeted each other like giddy school children, unable to fully complete their thoughts on the sanctified incident. Later, as locals gathered for traditional turkey dinners, people bantered on endlessly about the first snow coating of the season.

True enough, it had been colder than normal. In fact, Gooseneck Pond, over in Law Park, had already attracted hordes of skaters and hockey-playing teenagers. Still, no one could ever remember being kept from backyard football games on Thanksgiving Day because of thigh-deep snow.

With the early arrival of this seasonal delight, fireplaces began to glow. Houses that had been craving their families long-lost to outdoor activities, began to come alive with warmhearted goings-on.

Much to its chagrin, the local weather service was completely bewildered by the wintry blast. Some felt the sudden whiteout came as a result of an abrupt change in the wind out of the north. Others saw it as connected to some odd occurrence of the lunar cycle. Most were content to chalk it up to the whims and quirks of winter's prelude.

Even so, a few perceptive people recognized something special was in the air. They sensed God's invisible hand reaching down to stage-manage the beginnings of a simple blessing across their quaint village.

Although the unusual origins of the "Blizzard of '72" could be debated, no one ever disagreed that it seemed to shepherd in a string of events that resulted in an inspired change in the hearts and minds of Briarcliff Manor residents.

These were not just external changes. They were heartfelt and forever altered the ways in which those who dwelled there honored the Christmas event each year.

CHAPTER I

FROZEN POND, MELTED HEART

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.
—Galatians 6:2

Law Park was a beehive of seasonal activity that memorable Thanksgiving weekend in 1972. The air was crisp and bracing, the sky sapphire blue, and the newly whitened landscape seemed to make everything glisten. Friends and families greeted each other with that one-of-a-kind holiday spirit, as the smoky pong of burning logs mingled with the glint and shine of the mid-afternoon sun.

Set in the heart of the snug village of Briarcliff Manor, Law Park occupied a rustic bit of land at the junction of South State and Pleasantville Roads. Eponymously named for the town's founder, Mr. Walter William Law, the park seemed perfectly placed to warm the very soul of the community itself.

The village of Briarcliff hugged the enviable countryside along the eastern banks of the Hudson River. Tucked neatly between Tarrytown to the south and Ossining to the north, it was a handsome setting in central Westchester County, New York. Its unique geography provided far-reaching views across the widest stretch of the Hudson. On clear days, the sightlines opened up all the way north to West Point and across the inland valleys of Rockland County and Northern New Jersey. On clear evenings, the lights of the northern tip of Manhattan came into view. To the east was the Pocantico River, and beyond that, the aptly named town of Pleasantville.

Mr. Law came to America in the mid-1800s in search of work and a future. He started as a clerk in the offices of a carpet and floor-

ing business in Yonkers, New York, and eventually worked his way up to president and owner. Along the way, he made a fortune.

When he first visited what later would become Briarcliff Manor, there were nearly four thousand acres available. He fell in love with the bucolic tract of open farmland and forested countryside—and purchased it all.

His intention was for it to be a place where he could retire with his family. While that was an appealing plan, he soon grew restless. Before long, he was dabbling in a range of hobbies that grew into lucrative businesses and world-renowned brands such as Briarcliff Farms Dairy, Briarcliff Table Water, and the Briarcliff Rose. He was especially known for developing the ultra-toney Briarcliff Lodge, a luxury resort, which became a popular east coast getaway for the rich and famous.

As his businesses grew, he hired more and more workers. They, in turn, needed places to live, so he built homes for them. Soon there were enough people on his payroll and living on his land that he was able to incorporate his property as a village. In 1902, that's exactly what he did.

Local townsfolk always said that Briarcliff had the special feel of an extended family. Perhaps it could be traced to the actual origin of the village itself.

Gooseneck Pond was the centerpiece of Law Park. It was excavated from underground springs so that local residents would have a place to swim on summer days and ice skate during winter months. It usually froze over around Thanksgiving and stayed that way until St. Patrick's Day. Some years, even longer. One side was reserved for families with young children just learning to skate. The other side was the domain of middle- and high-school-age boys who played endless hours of hockey with the rousing brand of passion the sport is known for. Taken all together, it seemed like everyone in Briarcliff took advantage of the simple pleasure of skating on a frozen pond.

A circular bit of stonework in the middle of the pond, created a natural demarcation between pleasure skaters and hockey players. It

was also the coveted spot where sixth and seventh graders labored for their first kiss during Friday night skating parties.

Just off the west side of the pond, near the tennis courts, was a glen of pine trees with unique, orange-tinged bark. They were planted there by Christian missionaries to Japan, sponsored by Mr. Law. They knew he had a keen appreciation for trees so they brought these particular specimens back with them as a gift. These trees were particularly aromatic, and everyone always said it smelled like Christmas in that spot.

That natural dale was where the village recreation department kept a lively fire pit and served donuts, hot chocolate, and warm apple cider. The scent of kindling firewood and the seasonal tastes of the warm drinks made this a very popular place for skaters young and old. Children sat close to each other around the fire sipping and snacking while parents chatted about everything from the Space Race, to the Vietnam War, and an odd, escalating political scandal called Watergate. Briarcliff Bears varsity sports also supplied a steady supply of subject matter for conversation and debate.

From time to time, a spontaneous snowball fight would break out. Usually, it was boys trying to flirt with girls who had come to skate. Families also teamed up to make snowmen and snow forts. Still others would hike through the pine forest on the other side of the park beyond the ball fields. In every direction, it was a lively scene straight out of a rendering by Norman Rockwell.

Henry McBride, director of recreation in Briarcliff, was an avid hockey player himself. He personally tested the ice at Gooseneck Pond for safety. He also took great pride in keeping it cleaned off and ready for smooth gliding. Each year, he strung together a group of helpers that included local college students who were home on school break as well as a few upperclassmen from Briarcliff High School. They were glad to earn a small stipend in the midst of all the outdoor winter fun.

There was a well-oiled system of rotating responsibilities. Some staff hauled logs over to the fire pit, others stirred the huge drums of

cider and hot chocolate as they warmed on the open fire. Some helped novice skaters to get up and go, while others refereed hockey games.

“Keep a close watch on Mrs. Carson!” Henry shouted. “She’s determined to make it all the way around the pond without falling, and she’s pretty banged up already. I don’t want to have to call the ambulance!”

“She’s keeping things lively,” said Matt Gilroy, everyone’s favorite local teenager. “Might be the only person who actually laughs when she falls! Don’t worry, Henry, I got this!”

“My only concern is that she might skate into some of the ankle biters! Those little kids have a way of getting underfoot. Stay close behind her, Matty!”

Meanwhile, the Cliffton brothers were taking care of logs for the fire pit. “That’s the umpteenth log I’ve lugged over from the pine forest, and it will be my last for today!” huffed Tommy Cliffton.

“Yeah? Well, splitting them was no bargain either,” replied his brother, Robbie.

“Can it, you nit! Everyone knows you love to hit things.”

“Keep it up and I’ll be hitting you!”

“You have to catch me first, big boy!” Tommy teased as he faked running away.

In the midst of their razzing, Henry broke in with an urgent tone. “Guys, I need you over with the hockey players. Things are heating up.”

The Cliffton brothers gladly laced up their skates and hustled over to what had become a hotly contested six-on-six contest of hockey staying power. The Clifftons were powerhouse upperclassmen athletes, so they had a lot of say-so with the younger boys, who currently were playing as though the Stanley Cup was on the line.

“Wow, what happened to the ‘no contact’ rule?” asked Tommy.

“Yeah, there’s enough bruises and scrapes here to call the game!” added Robbie.

“Quit stick checking us,” shouted Charlie Riverton, the good-hearted-to-the-core unofficial leader of his small pack of buddies.

“I will when you stop high sticking,” yelled Derrick Marks, Charlie’s blood brother and closest friend. They had opposite personalities and temperaments but were thick as thieves nonetheless.

“That wasn’t a high stick. *This is!*” howled Charlie, skating toward Derrick with his stick positioned in a way that would send him straight to Dr. Rozinsky, the local dentist.

In the heat of a game, even close buddies might need to be separated, so the Cliffton brothers skated in and pulled the two apart. Right then, Henry blew his whistle to clear the ice for the 3:00 p.m. Adult Skate. The boys continued to reach for and poke their sticks at each other as the Clifftons hauled them off like puppies in a headlock.

“Okay, boys, let’s have a time out,” said Tommy as he and his brother deposited Charlie and Derrick, or DMarks as he was known, off to the side of the pond.

“Right on, brother,” added Robbie. “You two need to mellow out! Keep this up and Henry’s going to kick you off the ice for the rest of the day.”

DMarks, a pro at putting his mouth in gear before his brain was engaged, replied with a sarcastic, “No, duh, Einstein!” In response, The Cliffton brothers delivered two swift punches to the outer part of DMarks’s biceps for a perfectly administered pair of dead arms. He practically hyperventilated from the momentary muscle spasms.

Insolent and bad-mannered as he was, DMarks was not backing down. “That’s all you guys got?” *Boom!* The Clifftons cocked their elbows and landed blows to DMarks’s thighs for equally precise Charlie horses. More pain. More spasms.

“Should we top things off with a few wrist burns, Marks?” asked Tommy.

“You guys are real tough when it’s two against one,” grouched DMarks.

“Listen, ding-a-ling, our little sister could take you with a Ping-Pong paddle and a feather duster,” teased Robbie. “Keep it up and you’ll be getting the Briarcliff Bobsled treatment. Catch my drift?”

In those days, there was an age-related pecking order between the younger kids and teenagers. Sometimes, older boys would lay

down the law and give an old-fashioned lesson if needed. A Briarcliff Bobsled was when an offender was dragged through the snow. Shirtless.

“This should be good. I wish I could sell tickets!” said Bruce “BB” Brown, another key member of this close circle of buddies.

“Hey, Marks, you going to take that?” egged on George Palmer, the last of these four musketeers.

“You guys are bogus. I double dog dare ya!” said DMarks to the Cliffton brothers.

Most of the time, the older boys never really did anything. And, truth be told, getting recognized in any way by well-known varsity athletes was a cool mark of distinction. So DMarks knew exactly what he was doing. Or so he thought.

“I’d say this dweeb needs a dose of humility. STET!” said Tommy.

“Roger that, brother.” In an instant, the Clifftons took the law into their own hands. “Hey, Marks, give us some skin.” Off came his sweatshirt, up over his head, leaving him completely shirtless and with a look on his face that suggested he had made a serious miscalculation.

“Yeah, catch you on the flip side!” In an instant, DMarks was on his back in a snowbank with his feet up in the air, as the Clifftons cut him down with his own hockey stick. Tommy grabbed the blade of his right skate like a door handle, and Robbie grabbed the other. From there, they dragged him up the hillside through the frosty snow. Charlie, BB, and George convulsed with laughter as a small crowd gathered to look on.

“Check you later, Marks!” yelled Charlie.

“Keep on truckin’, Marks!” said George, leaning into the others and laughing so hard he cried.

“Don’t forget to write!” shouted BB. Tommy Cliffton looked down to make sure the punishment wasn’t too harsh. “Hey, Marks, who loves ya, baby?” he said.

As they got up to the War Memorial near the library, on the other side of the park, they dropped his skates and began dragging him by his arms.

“Hey, Marks, let’s do the hokeypokey and turn yourself around!” suggested Robbie. With that, they flipped him so that he would return facedown. Back they went, past the town pool and over to the pond.

“You guys are dew droppers! Can’t you go any faster!” DMarks tried to shout in defiance, but his voice was muffled by the snow. “You out of shape or something?”

The Clifftons just looked at each other and shook their heads. The kid talked a good game, but he backed it up. Finally, they made the loop and were back by the hockey side of the pond. The Clifftons dropped him off, handed him his sweatshirt, and then headed back to work by the fire pit.

“You’re a piece of work, Marks,” they said in unison. “Better wise up. Not all the older guys around here are as nice as we are,” warned Robbie.

“Oh yeah? Well, next time make sure you guys eat your Wheaties!” Charlie, BB, and George just shook their heads at their friend.

“Hang it up, Marks!” said Charlie, as he handed him his hockey stick and gloves. “You’re going to get the rest of us in trouble.”

“Listen up, chump. I’m like a Timex. I can take a licking and keep on ticking. Besides, you don’t have to be concerned about those guys. I had them one year as counselors at summer camp. They dunked me in the Pocantico River once, but they’d never let you get hurt. You’ve got to know your onions around here!”

“Yeah, well, that’s good for you, but maybe the rest of us would rather be law-abiding citizens,” said Charlie.

“Tell it to your Ken Doll, you geek. The name of the game is to test the boundaries!” said DMarks.

“Says you. It still doesn’t mean you should rag on the older kids,” George chimed in.

“It’s like a sport! You get your game on and roll into action. Of course, if you’re not up for it, you can always stay on the sidelines like a bunch of popcorn eaters!”

“Oh, shut up, Marks!” said BB.

“Speaking of food, I’m getting hungry. What’s your mom cooking for dinner tonight?” DMarks asked Charlie.

“Steak and rice, want to come over?”

“Psych! I love your mother’s steak and rice! Six o’clock?”

“Yeah. Sharp. And afterward, you can stay around and watch *The NBC Mystery Movie*. I think it’s *Columbo* or maybe *McMillan and Wife* this week.”

“Awesome! I’m in.”

This was the way it was with middle school boys. One moment they were sparring with each other, the next they were acting like family—at all times, they were inseparable. Everyone in town was used to seeing the pack of four together.

Charlie was slightly tall for his age with a sinewy, athletic build that gave him great speed and agility for whatever sport he was playing. He kept his thick black hair neatly combed and fastidiously parted on the left side with generous portions of Brylcreem. His lean, angular face was set off by big, blue, compassionate eyes.

DMarks, on the other hand, was stocky with a low center of gravity. His reddish blond hair was wavy and a bit unruly, much like his personality. He had fire in his eyes all the time and a certain way of gritting his teeth, especially if in the middle of some athletic activity or an argument. Although his growth spurt was still in the offing, he had the look and shape of a future offensive lineman.

George was slightly taller than Charlie but so lanky that his clothes never seemed to fit right, hanging off his long limbs. His blond hair matched his sunny outlook and good-natured demeanor. It was a rare thing to hear him raise his voice or show any anger. During the summer months, when the sun bleached his locks totally white, his nickname was “Cotton.”

With an average, well-proportioned build and long, dark hair that was forever falling in his face, BB rounded out the group.

Although he wasn’t blessed with outstanding size, he was an incredibly skilled and crafty athlete. As a result, the older boys often picked him to play-up with them when they needed an extra body in the game. To his great credit, he never accepted the coveted invitation if it meant the rest of the guys would have an odd number without him.

As they waited for the Adult Skate to finish, Charlie happened to glance up the hillside toward the flagpole in the center of Law Park. There, he saw a sight that pierced him, awakening something vital in his heart.

“Guys, look up there at poor Mr. Olson. Have you noticed how lost and lonely he seems since his wife died?” Charlie knew Mr. Olson well. He cut his grass during the summertime and raked his leaves every autumn. “Is that a handkerchief? I think he’s wiping away tears or something.”

“If you spent your entire adult life with someone who died without warning, you’d feel lost too!” The group could always count on Derrick Marks to size things up in blunt terms.

“Wow. That was cold. Even by your standards. I realize everyone’s allowed to act like a jerk once in a while, but you’re really abusing the privilege,” said BB.

“I can’t even imagine how hard it must be. And it’s so sad! I don’t think they ever had children, so he’s all alone now,” said Charlie. “All alone.”

“Yeah, and you know when it’s really going to hurt? In about a month when Christmas comes around,” added BB. “I wonder what he did for Thanksgiving.”

“Oh, leave him be. He’s a grown man. Fought on the ground in Europe during World War I. He’ll figure it out,” lectured Derrick.

“You’re all heart, DMarks,” replied Charlie. “We should go up and say hello to him. Maybe he might need help with snow shoveling or something.”

“Are you crazy? We only have an hour of daylight left, and Adult Skate is just about over,” said George.

Charlie didn't care, his focus had shifted from hockey to Mr. Olson. His genuinely good and caring heart couldn't just let go. Suddenly, a uniquely warm feeling washed over him. *Where did that come from?* he wondered. It reminded him of those times when he was small and his father would wrap him up in his arms until it felt like he had been swallowed whole. Usually those bear hugs provided encouragement and support. Without thinking about it any further, he got to his feet and hobbled up the hillside in his hockey skates.

"Oh, good night, John-Boy," said DMarks. "There goes Mr. Wonderful. If he doesn't get back in time to restart the game, I say we get Matty Gilroy to fill in for him."

Charlie loved hockey, but at that particular moment, he was carried away with a desire to do something, anything he could to ease Mr. Olson's pain. He slowed down once he got closer and just kind of glanced at Mr. Olson. The gentlemanly old man was just sitting there, all bundled up, quietly weeping, sad as raindrops on a gravestone.

"Mr. Olson? It's me, Charlie Riverton. I wanted to say hello." At first, Mr. Olson was startled as he rallied out of his deep thoughts and reflections. Then, he immediately warmed to Charlie's presence.

"Charlie, you're very kind to visit with me. How are you and your family?" His voice was tired and spiritless but sincere.

"We're all fine, sir. My dad still commutes to Manhattan each day from Scarborough Train Station and my mom still teaches kindergarten at Todd School. We've been talking a lot about you lately." As the words came out, Charlie realized it wasn't the best way of letting Mr. Olson know that he was in their thoughts. Still, he could tell Mr. Olson understood and appreciated the sentiment.

"Thank you, Charlie. Thank you very much. You know, I've noticed lately that it feels like I've been having company, even though no one has visited since Mrs. Olson passed away. It must be your family's kind thoughts and prayers making me feel that way."

"Is there anything you need help with, Mr. Olson? Need me to shovel snow for you? Run errands? Maybe clean up your yard?"

"That's very kind of you to ask, but I'm getting along fine. Besides, those little tasks give me something to do, which helps keep my mind off of things."

"Okay, I understand. But please be careful. There's a lot of black ice and stuff like that out there."

"Right. And the way my driveway slopes down to Pleasantville Road, it can be pretty slippery."

"It must be lonely without Mrs. Olson," Charlie said sincerely.

"She was the light of my life, Charlie. And we were never able to have children. So it feels pretty empty without her. I miss our daily walks up to town."

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Olson."

"Thank you, Charlie. I'm grateful to you. Hey, it looks like your friends are back out on the ice. You better go and rejoin them before they start the game without you."

"Actually, they can't start without me. I have the puck!" Charlie said with a smile as he reached in his pocket and held it up for Mr. Olson to see.

"Ha! You've always got the situation under control, Charlie."

It was a very warm encounter, and Charlie could tell Mr. Olson felt a bit rejuvenated by it. He hobbled back down to the pond. A short time later, Mr. Olson began to make his way across the park and over to his house. As he walked by the pond, he waved to Charlie and made the gesture of a slap shot with an imaginary hockey stick. Charlie mimed a return shot and gave him a big smile back.

About an hour later, moms and dads began to arrive at Law Park to pick up their children. Reluctantly, the boys began to leave the ice, never mind that the sun had long since set over the crest of Elm and Pine Roads and the hills of Briarcliff College.

Charlie slid carefully into the passenger seat of his mom's Volkswagen Beetle, skates, stick, and all. As Mrs. Riverton pulled out of the parking lot, Charlie glanced up at Mr. Olson's house across the street from the park entrance. The entire house was dark, except for one faint light in a room toward the back. It looked so cold and

lonely that Charlie's heart sank and his concerns came right back again.

Charlie and the guys were used to seeing Mr. and Mrs. Olson walking formally, arm-in-arm, each day to Pete's Stationary. Once there, they would pick up a copy of the *Citizen Register* to read up on local news while sitting at the soda fountain for morning coffee. Mr. Olson was always in jacket and tie, while Mrs. Olson donned white gloves and a modest hat with half-veil. As Charlie's mom drove on, he glanced over his right shoulder at Mr. Olson's house with a growing knot in his stomach.

"You seem a little concerned about something, Charlie. Everything okay?" inquired his mom.

"Yeah, fine. Okay if Derrick comes over for dinner and TV?"

"Yes, of course. We have plenty of food."

"Mom, maybe we could invite Mr. Olson over for dinner too? He looked so lonely in the park today."

"Is that what's on your mind? It's a very sad time for Mr. Olson, but I think it might be best if we wait a little while for him to adjust to things. Maybe in a few weeks, okay?"

"I guess. But he seems to need company now."

"You're right, Charlie. But people usually need a little time to themselves after the loss of a loved one. I'm sure Mr. Olson will get back into the things of his life before long."

"I guess, but it really bothers me to see him all alone."

"Trust me, we all feel for Mr. Olson. But the longer you live, the more you realize that this kind of thing is a natural part of life. It's not easy, but then again, God doesn't promise we'll never experience challenges, hurts, or disappointments. What he does promise is that he'll never leave us or forsake us."

"That's such a hard lesson, Mom! Mr. Olson was sitting on a park bench crying. I mean, he was really hurting and he needs help now! What's God waiting for?"

"I know, son, I know. It's a tough one for sure. We won't always have answers to our questions or understand God's ways or timing.

But we also know that we won't face anything he hasn't already experienced or dealt with himself."

"I'm glad that God understands, but I wish he'd hurry up and fix things for Mr. Olson."

"Well, there are a lot of people who have been praying for Mr. Olson. When we pray hard, God answers. I'll bet he's working out a plan right now."

Charlie just listened as his mom talked.

"In fact, Charlie, God likes to work through the lives of ordinary people all the time. Just you watch!"

For some reason, that last comment hit home with Charlie. Instead of saying anything back, he just looked out the window and whispered a silent prayer.