

THE LAST CHRISTMAS

John Bartholomew shivered inside his winter coat as he stood in the open garage, waiting for his son Matthew to arrive. Matt had promised to be here by ten, and it was already half past. Forty years old already, and Matt still didn't have an ounce of responsibility in him.

Overnight, a dusting of white snow had covered the front yard and frosted the trio of evergreens that stood at the corner of the white two-story colonial that had been the Bartholomew home for forty-one years. The snow wasn't enough to hinder the day's task of setting up the crèche in the front yard, but maybe it had been enough to slow Matt's drive into the city.

John Bartholomew's recreation of the first Christmas was renowned throughout the metropolitan area for its simplicity and its beauty. Created over a span of nearly forty years, its more than four dozen figures covered the entire front yard. It included the Christ Child, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds who came in search of the baby, the Three Wise Men who came to worship him, an assortment of stable animals, and—of course—the angels. All handmade by John Bartholomew himself. All so realistic that people who stood on the sidewalk behind the ornamental split-rail fence swore they could see the figures move. The life in the figures was just an illusion, John knew, caused by the placement of the lights, the wind, and the spectators' own belief.

Every year, one of the daily newspapers or television stations did a feature on John and his crèche. For the cameras, he would demonstrate how he fashioned the life-sized figures out of plaster of Paris and wire, then painted their faces and hands and dressed them in robes he had designed after careful research and sewn himself. He would show how he used inexpensive old hides and fake furs scrounged from junk shops to create the animals, making them feel real to the touch.

After such a story ran, the traffic past the Bartholomew house would be bumper to bumper, night after night. Often times, spectators would park their cars and people would pour out of the tour buses to stand on the sidewalk where they would be closer to the figures. Some snapped pictures with pocket cameras, and others set up tripods for expensive cameras or videotaped the scene.

It was a lot of work year in and year out. But it was all worth it when John threw the master light switch for the first time. When he walked among the figures, he felt as though he had become one of them, standing in the light of God. He felt saved, as the Biblical prophets had promised.

This feeling of salvation was something that John Bartholomew could never explain to anyone—not that he had ever really tried. By everyone's account, he wasn't one to express his feelings. Beth Ann had always understood that, but not the kids. After Beth Ann died, his oldest daughter Carol, in a fit of frustration, had accused him of being a charter member of the Silent Majority. Her frustration had turned to anger when he joked that he paid his dues every year.

There was something else very special about his crèche that he had never shared with anyone, not even Beth Ann. It had all come about long ago, by accident. That Christmas after he and Beth Ann were married, he built the wooden stable and created the figures of Mary and Joseph and the Christ Child. Beth Ann was already carrying Matthew at the time, and the two of them joked about the obvious parallel. The sight of the mother, father, and child positioned in the middle of the front yard and bathed in white light expressed the joy he felt about his own new family but could never put into words. A year later, he was working on an angel, which he planned to suspend over the roof of the stable, when his own mother suddenly died. In his private mourning, the angel had somehow come to represent his mother. When the angel was at last in place above the stable, some of the crushing grief he could not bring himself to talk about had melted away.

Those early figures had set the pattern. Each time a new member came into the family, John Bartholomew created a new human or animal figure. And each time a member of the family was lost, he added an angel. Through the years the yard had filled with figures, representing eight children, an assortment of sons- and daughters-in-law (some now of the "ex" variety), and twenty grandchildren. A multitude of the heavenly host had joined his mother's angel, including Beth Ann's, which rose highest of all.

And now it was all about to come to an end. This year would be the last Christmas for his crèche—his doctor's diagnosis had only confirmed what his body had already told him. Six months, a year at the most. Nothing to do but go on about his business, until he couldn't. He would put up his crèche a final time and once again embrace that moment of salvation when the lights were turned on. Then he would be ready.

John paced about the yard. Of all times for Matthew to be late. There was a whole day's work ahead. Well, there was no use waiting. He walked around behind the garage to the back yard and unlocked the door of the Christmas

shed. Inside, he pulled the chain of the bare lightbulb that swung overhead. The figures, each wrapped in an old sheet or blanket, were stacked carefully all the way to the roof. It was his tradition to carry out the Christ Child first.

While John labored, Matt drove the final few miles toward his childhood home with an increasing sense of dread. He was not ready to do this again. The news—which his father had delivered in that matter-of-fact tone that annoyed him so—had felt like acid running through his heart. There were so many things that he wanted—needed—to say and so little time in which to say them.

For as long as Matt could remember, the two of them had seemed as distant from one another as the earth and the moon. Why, he had never figured out. Invariably, he laid the responsibility like a wreath at his father's feet. John Bartholomew had never really done anything wrong, yet he had never really done anything right. He was always there when they were kids, but at the same time not there. Silent John, they called him behind his back. As a teenager Matt had made a career out of trying to provoke Silent John into saying something, into taking notice. But Silent John was seldom provoked and seldom seemed to take notice. Conversations that never happened had stacked up between them like cords of firewood.

As he drove, Matt wiped his eyes. Now the old buzzard was dying and he probably wouldn't even talk about that. Instead, he would fuss over his beloved crèche, just like he always did.

Matt had avoided this job for years. Growing up, he had envied the figures for the love and devotion that his father had given them. Inanimate figures of plaster and wire that could never love him back. Once when Matt was twelve, he had stolen a robe off one of the shepherds, slipped it on and stood among the figures. That had provoked old Silent John all right. Without a word, his father had grabbed him, stripped off the robe, and returned it to the shepherd. After that, Matt's envy of the figures had hardened into a kind of hatred. Only a plea from Carol had brought him home this time. It's going to be the last year, and I can't help that day, his sister had said on the telephone. He can't do it alone. Please, Matt.

So he had agreed to come home and help, if for no other reason than the opportunity to look John Bartholomew right in the eye and demand, "Why? Why didn't you—? Why couldn't we—?" There seemed to be no words for his pain.

He turned the corner onto Pinehurst. At the end of the block, the trio of evergreens stood against the snow. At least this was the last year. He would vote to get rid of this stuff after his father was gone.

Matt pulled into the driveway and stopped. His father was nowhere to be seen. A half dozen figures already stood in the yard. Matt hurried to the back yard, where he met one of the angels floating along, his father's legs below it. His father looked terrible. Matt felt his resolve shrivel.

"I know, I know. I'm late," he said. "I got a late start."

"Did I say anything?" his father said.

"You didn't have to."

They worked in silence. One by one, they unwrapped the figures and carried them into the front yard. With each trip, Matt could see his father's strength draining away. He waited for him to volunteer something about his health. When he didn't, Matt finally asked.

"I've felt better," his father said. "And I've felt worse."

They were down to the larger animals, the camels and cows and the donkey, which required both of them to carry. As they were carrying out one of the camels, his father suddenly lost his grip and crumpled to the ground.

"Pop, you all right?"