

MRS. STANLEY'S CHRISTMAS
By David L. Harrison

It was Christmas Eve and snowing. Mrs. Stanley's feet hurt but she hummed a Christmas carol as she worked in her kitchen. Little John would be there soon. She hadn't seen her grandson since last summer. The table set for four looked splendid with her best dishes. She hummed as she set out coffee cups.

She stopped humming when the telephone rang.

"Mama?" It was Joyce.

Mrs. Stanley knew something was wrong.

"We're snowed in at the airport."

"Oh no!"

"They've just canceled all flights. No way out before tomorrow. That won't leave us enough time to come."

"Joyce!"

"We can't make it, Mama."

Mrs. Stanley looked at Little John's place at the table. The sofa cushion on the chair was for extra height. Two napkins lay by his plate, just in case. After all, he was only four.

"Mama, I know you've gone to so much trouble. I'm so sorry! I'll call you tomorrow."

Mrs. Stanley put her head down on the table. She knew Joyce was disappointed too but she had her family. Mrs. Stanley lived alone. It was hard not to feel bitter. She steadied herself on the table as she stood up. Her knees ached from too much walking the past week. She had even walked to the grocery store several blocks away.

"Hi Mrs. Stanley," Eddie said as he sacked her groceries. "Haven't seen you lately. Ready for Christmas?"

"My grandson's coming!" she told him.

"Hey, way to go! Got your tree up yet?"

"It's on my list, Eddie. "But I don't know how to get it home."

Eddie paused with a can of pumpkin in his hand. "Kids sure love Christmas trees," he said.

Mrs. Stanley had an idea. "If you'll get my tree home for me, Eddie, I'll bake you a pie. Is that a deal?"

Eddie grinned. "For a pumpkin pie, I'll get it home and put it up for you."

Looking at the pair of pies on the counter, Mrs. Stanley wondered if Eddie might like them both. She no longer felt hungry. She went into the living room to look out the window. Snow swirled down now so thick she could hardly see the streetlight.

Her small Christmas tree looked beautiful in front of the window. Now no one would see it. There was no star on top anyway. She had broken the old one putting it up. She sighed. She sighed again at the packages under the tree. She reached to turn off her porch light.

Was that something outside her door? She listened. There it was again, rather low down on the door. Mrs. Stanley was a cautious woman, but whoever was making that gentle sound didn't sound dangerous. She opened the door a crack and peeked out.

A little boy with a smooth round face smiled up at her. He might be six or seven. Snow glistened on his hair and coat.

"Oh my!" she said. "Who are you?"

"Danny," he said.

Mrs. Stanley looked out into the night. There had to be someone with this child. He couldn't simply appear by himself. What could his parents be thinking! Nothing else moved in the dark except the blowing snow.

Danny was looking around her, past her into the living room. "Ma?" he called. "Ma here?" he said. "Cold."

"Oh! Of course! You must be frozen!" Mrs. Stanley took the little boy by the hand. He wore no gloves and his fingers felt frosty. He followed her inside and stood while she brushed off the snow. In the warm room, small puddles soon

formed on the floor around him. He kept smiling while she took one of his hands and rubbed it.

His other hand clenched into a fist.

"Danny, do you have something in your hand?" She hoped it might be a note, maybe a phone number or address.

One by one his fingers unfolded. He was holding a small seashell bleached white by the sun.

"Pretty," Mrs. Stanley said, not knowing what else to say.

"Pretty," Danny repeated with a happy smile. "My Pretty!"

"Yes," she agreed. "Pretty."

He ducked his head and threw his arms around her. She hadn't expected this. Wet clothes and all, Danny hugged her.

"Feel better?" she asked the top of his head.

"Yeah," he said. "Feel better."

He tilted his head back and looked up at her.

Mrs. Stanley moaned to herself. First, Christmas got snowed out, and now this! She should be holding her own sweet grandson, not this wet little stranger at her door. She had no idea what to do next.

This time the knock was louder. Without taking one second to think, she turned and opened the door. A man and woman stood there. Their frantic faces told the story.

"He's here," Mrs. Stanley said. "Come in."

"Danny!" the woman cried. She rushed into the room and gathered the boy in her arms. The man closed his eyes and hugged them together.

"Ma!" the boy cried. "Dad!"

"Where have you been?" his mother said. "We've been so worried!"

Danny's eyes filled with tears. "Danny sorry," he said.

"He knocked on my door a few minutes ago," Mrs. Stanley said. "I couldn't imagine what to think."

"We can't thank you enough!" the woman said. "I'm Mary Waller. This is my husband, Joe. We've been out of our minds looking for him!"

"I'm Judith Stanley," she said. "May I ask how you managed to lose your little boy on a night like this?" She knew that sounded cross, but she was feeling cross.

Mary Waller didn't seem to notice. "It's a long a story," she said. "Joe got laid off. And Danny has so many bills. We're going to stay with my parents for a while. Until things get better. On the way there tonight our car broke down."

"I can fix it in the daylight," Joe said.

"Somehow Danny got away when we were looking under the hood," Mary said. "He likes to wander. We watch him, but sometimes . . ."

"Pretty!" Danny shouted, gazing at his shell.

"That's his treasure," Joe said. "Carries it everywhere. For some reason that shell means more to him than just about anything."

Mrs. Stanley looked from one face to another. "Have you eaten?" she asked.

Joe dropped his head. "We've been a little busy," he said.

"I was expecting company," Mrs. Stanley said. "But they're not coming. I have all this food."

Danny was seven, three years older than Little John, but the sofa cushion worked well. Joe carved the turkey while Mary warmed the bread and finished getting things ready. Food was soon on the table.

"I can't believe this," Joe kept saying. "This is a wonderful dinner!"

"If I do say so," Mrs. Stanley said, "this is one of my better pies."

Mary and Joe put away leftovers and washed dishes. Mrs. Stanley sat and watched them. They worked well together. Sitting there resting her legs, she started thinking about something. Now she made her decision.

She reached across the table and took Danny's hand. "Ready to open presents?" she asked.

"No way!" said Joe.

"Presents!" Danny shouted. "Presents! Presents! Presents!"

Mrs. Stanley put her arm on Danny's shoulder. Together they led the way into the living room. "Next year," she told him, "I'm going to get a new star for the top of the tree. Won't that be nice?"

"We can't accept these," Mary said.

"It's Christmas," Mrs. Stanley said. "Joe, this is for you. Mary, this is yours. Danny, I saved the best for last. This one is just for you."

With a happy shout, Danny set his shell on the floor and ripped the paper off his present. It was a large box of crayons and a coloring book.

Danny's round face looked puzzled. Mary opened the box for him and pulled out a red crayon. She opened the book and colored a balloon bright red. Danny's smile was magnificent.

"Oh!" he said. "Pretty!"

Joe was a large man like Mrs. Stanley's son-in-law. His flannel shirt was the right size. Mary opened her small box with a gasp. It held one of Mrs. Stanley's own treasures – a dainty ring set with a small ruby. Joyce would understand.

"You've given us so much," Mary said, "and we have nothing for you."

Mrs. Stanley smiled. "You would be surprised," she said.

Danny yawned. Joe looked at his wife, but Mrs. Stanley had already made that decision too. "You're staying here tonight," she said. "Tomorrow you can be on your way."

Mrs. Stanley took the small bed in the extra room and gave her larger one to Mary and Joe. She spread quilts on the sofa for Danny and left the tree lights on because he liked them.

Sometime after midnight Mrs. Stanley got up to check on Danny. He was asleep facing toward the tree.

"Merry Christmas, Danny," she whispered.

When Mrs. Stanley woke up Christmas morning, she scolded herself for sleeping so late. She knew at once that the house was empty. She found the note on the kitchen table.

"Dear Mrs. Stanley," it began.

"We'll never have a better Christmas. Joe can fix the car in the daylight so we're getting an early start. We hope we didn't disturb you."

Mrs. Stanley carried the note into the living room and finished reading it in her chair.

"Danny loves you very much. We all do! We'll never forget you, Mrs. Stanley. Bless you for taking us in.

Mary, Joe, and Danny

PS -- Danny said Merry Christmas."

The phone rang. Still holding the note, Mrs. Stanley picked up the receiver.

"Hi Mama. The snow finally stopped here. Has it stopped there too?"

Mrs. Stanley looked out the window. "Yes," she said. "It's a beautiful day."

"I'm so sorry that Christmas got snowed out this year," Joyce said. "How are you doing?"

Mrs. Stanley had just noticed something. Danny's shell perched on top of her tree. It seemed to her that no tree ever had a more perfect star.

"I'm fine," she told her daughter. "I guess it takes more than snow to keep Christmas from coming."

Joyce sounded puzzled. "I guess so, Mama," she said.

"Hug Little John for me," Mrs. Stanley said. "Tell him I love him. Tell him I said Merry Christmas."