“What makes this night different from all the rest?” Charles asks. His hair is slick with sleep as he follows me from room to room, a crumbling graham cracker in one sticky hand and a glass of chocolate milk in the other. He is five. His brother, Michael, who is eight, is absorbed in the Game Boy he holds in his hands—a series of beeps and distracting sounds. He is also watching cartoons and moving one bare foot under the edge of the rug in a way that flips it and scatters dust and crumbs about every thirty seconds. The other question Charles has asked ten times since waking from his nap is how Santa Claus comes out of a wood-burning stove. “Won’t that hurt?” he asks. “What if he wants to give me something big?” This one got his brother’s attention. He has figured everything out about Santa Claus, you can see it in his eyes, but is not yet ready to admit the truth. Once the truth is admitted, there’s no taking it back, no return to what you once believed in so completely. You would think that those early experiences of disappointment and loss and disillusionment would prepare us for what lay ahead. Things like career disappointments, a parent dying way too young, a marriage that functions the way a mirage does, constantly forcing physical distance so you can continue to see something that isn’t really there.

It is Christmas Eve, our first in this new house, our first in our new family configuration: a single mother and two young sons. Charles has already taken the little figure of Joseph out of the crèche several times and placed him at the far end of the table with a green matchbox car that resembles the one his dad drives. “You live over here now,” I have heard him say, and then nod and giggle as if the little plastic Joseph had just told him a joke. “You’re still my daddy,” he says, a recital of all he has heard during the past eleven months. He has claimed the Jesus figure as his own namesake and a little plastic Spiderman figure as his brother. I, of course, am Mary and keep finding my figure placed outside of the manger, close enough to see what is going on but out of the building nonetheless. “You are working in the yard,” he has told me. “You are at the grocery store and will be right back.”

* * *
What makes this night different from all the rest? Well, the divorce would be the biggest difference. That and the fact that I invited their dad and their dad’s parents and even their dad’s new girlfriend to stop by for drinks in less than eight hours. And now I’m wondering why I ever did such a stupid thing. Because it’s the season of giving and forgiving? Because all the books say that kids need both parents; that if a parent is cut away from the child’s life, it should be because the child decided to do it and not because one parent orchestrates it or poisons all thoughts and feelings? Like all those times I have almost by accident swept Joseph and his little sports car into the garbage only to fish him out, wipe stuff like macaroni and cheese off of him, and place him back before Charles notices.

The boys have told me that the girlfriend, Nanci, has two broken arms and talks without moving her lips. Whether these attributes are related I have no idea, and true to what all the books advise, I have not asked any questions. I am assuming she was in a bad accident. Or maybe she’s a ventriloquist who fell down a flight of stairs. She might not have even broken them at the same time. The second break could have been the result of trying to cater to the first.

When they talk about Nanci, I can’t help but feel responsible. I wished for her, after all. When the marriage counselor, after months of dead-end conversations and stalemates—hour after hour of white noise and Kleenex boxes and that pasture full of dead horses we regularly flogged—asked what I really wanted, I stared out his window where I had watched a weeping willow move from icy tendrils to bright green and back again and thought: out. I just wanted out. And it was at that moment I began wishing that he would meet somebody—anybody—so the path to the exit sign might be a little easier.

I once saw a sign that said: When the horse is dead, get off it. My horse was so dead, rigormortis had set in, leaving me with a kind of paralysis not so uncommon when people know they need a change but aren’t sure how to go about getting it. I was a coward. That day, I told the therapist that what I wanted more than anything was a dog that didn’t pee in the house, a dog who knew to walk right up to the door and beg to get out. My attempt at making a subtle point was lost in inarticulate execution.

So, what makes this night different? It hits me when I open the back door to take out the trash. It smells like shit, literally. The smell of raw sewage fills the air. Charles drops the cracker to the floor so he can hold his nose, which pleases Beau, our sweet but incontinent basset hound, who lumbers over to clean up. “Beau,”
Charles reprimands, and shoves the tired old dog with his foot. “You stink.” But it’s not Beau and I know that. I stare out at the rectangle of dead grass where the thin layer of snow melted as soon as it hit. I have lived here a year and know nothing about the septic tank. Just as I knew nothing about the sag in the foundation that needed to be jacked up or the old termite damage to one edge of the porch or the faulty wiring in the storage room and the dryer vent that did not meet code.

How big could the problem be?

I have come to expect very big. I have come to think that, odds are, it will be every bit as bad as it can be; and if for some reason it isn’t, then I should rush right out and buy a lottery ticket and dash to the frozen food section of the grocery, where they say you are likely to meet nice intelligent and normal people. And who are they? I ask my mother and all other well-meaning advice givers. They also say that church is a good place to meet people. However, they don’t offer to keep your children or tell you what to do with them while you are out going to all these places.

“Do you want some matzo?” Charles asks Beau, and lures the tired soul back into the kitchen. “Do you want some eggnog?” Charles has been hooked on Passover—food and litany—ever since attending a Seder last spring. It was the longest meal of my life. The host asked the children: “Why is this night different from all the rest?” But really, what all the adults wanted to know and weren’t asking was: What really happened to your marriage? The four real questions had nothing to do with why we were eating bread that tasted like cardboard and chewing on bitter herbs, double dipping and reclining while eating. The questions that came to me in hushed whispers or innuendo were: “Is there a chance of reconciliation? . . . Is there someone else involved? . . . Can you afford it financially?” And the most common of all: “But really, how are you?”—sometimes with the stress on are and sometimes with the stress on you, always delivered with great pity.

Elijah’s wine goblet stayed empty because I kept drinking up whatever was allotted the ghostly guest. I figured if Elijah has half a brain, then he knows I needed to do that in order to deliver myself out of an irritating situation of social bondage. Actually, the thought of a spirit sneaking in to guzzle wine right at the table where you sat was the only part of the service that frightened Charles. “I want to see the ghost, but I don’t,” he kept whispering to me. Little did he know he was looking at her, two goblets drained and more coming. Little did he know that he was being introduced to one of life’s most common refrains: I want to know the truth, but I don’t. It’s the substance of the Garden of Eden and Pandora’s Box and every crime that takes place on your street.
The down side of incorporating multicultural knowledge and an open mind and respect for all religions in young children is the blurring of facts. Though I see a kind of sweetness in Easter bunnies hiding matzo, Santa lighting menorahs, and fat Buddha statues donning rosaries, there are also times when I desire absolute clarity. This is good and this is not. Here is a beginning and here is the end. Black/white. Frozen/thawed. Oral/anal. Do I have a major problem worth more money than I possess or can earn in a lifetime or a little do-it-yourself Home Depot job?

I sniff the air and would not be surprised to find that herd of dead horses piled up in my yard. Panic sets in; a chill that I have not felt since waking alone the day after Clark moved out. I knew even then, legs stretched out onto that cool empty side of the bed, that the fear I was feeling was not about what was behind me or regret over where I was, but about moving forward on my own, no one there to share or even pretend to share the responsibility and burden of everyday mishaps and mistakes. There was no far-off promise of the sort people make when trying to patch something broken without looking at what caused the damage: the anniversary surprise, the family vacation, the addition to the house that might take years to complete—pretty pastel Band-Aids applied to a series of hemorrhages. This fear of nothingness is why many people stay put even when unhappy and disillusioned, daily sidestepping the problems and debris. It is why they ask the four questions again and again as they seek their own answer within. No, but really, how are you? Many choose comfort within the known boundaries—old world order as opposed to striking out for new lands and possibly falling off the edge of the earth.

“You invited them for drinks?” My friend Gretchen comes immediately when I call to say I need help. She stands in my driveway in her terry cloth robe, coffee cup in hand, car door still standing open. She is stuck at the very beginning part of my story and thinks this is the tragedy at hand. “What kind of drinks? Arsenic?” She steps close, so invading my space, I look away, into her backseat where I see piles of what is probably much of Santa Claus for her three kids. “Have you lost your mind?”

“You don’t have time for this,” I say, and point to the septic area, but she continues pressing, her hand heavy on my shoulder. “I don’t know why I invited them, except he’s probably going to marry her and I want her to be nice to my children.” I twist away, and for the first time she takes in the stench.
“My God, what died?”

“Jesus,” Charles says from behind me, the little nativity figures all gathered in his hand. “Jesus died for your sins.”

“Well, I’m glad somebody did,” Gretchen says, and finally listens to what is the real problem. She suggests the first thing I do is call and cancel the drop-by, and then go to the yellow pages and start begging. “Cry if you can,” she says. “Play the divorce card. Single mom, young kids. Christmas Eve.”

“And Hanukkah,” Charles adds. “And Kwanzaa and the New Year’s parade. Passover is like Easter.”

“You are all confused,” Gretchen says, and shakes her head. She squeezes my shoulder to emphasize the point, and I nod along with her, making eye contact that she can’t afford to hold too long. She has asked all the questions and more; she has even confessed her envy of my situation on numerous occasions, and then, like most, immediately retreats back into the unspoken realm of financial security where every minute of the day is absorbed into a defined journey marked by shimmering promises that may or may not come to pass.

She catches my glance to her backseat, filled I see now with bags from FAO Schwarz, Neiman Marcus, and Bloomingdales, and looks embarrassed. “Don’t look, your present is in there,” and then she pulls me back into my house and opens the yellow pages on my kitchen table, a table I have carried around with me for over twenty years now, a table that once stood in my childhood kitchen and now is held together by coats of paint, many of them I applied myself over the years. “Here. Just start at the top and work down. Chances are we’re not going to get anybody to come today, but maybe Chad knows someone who can help us.”

“The man always knows,” I say, attempting a light laugh, but it sounds sarcastic and edgy even to my own ear. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Well, I didn’t mean it that way,” she says. “Really I didn’t.”

I should tell her how often I have gone to the phone in recent years to call my father for the missing answer, only to remember halfway through dialing that he is no longer there. It was one of the horses flogged early in the marriage: You go running home for everything. Wouldn’t need to if I weren’t alone. You’re an adult, handle it. You handle it. I work for a living. So do I. And then it quickly spiraled until somebody got tired or too hurt or a child came in.

Now she hands me the phone. “Dial. I’ll stay until something happens.”

I close my eyes and wave one finger around in the air and then zoom in and land on the page. Settle Septic Systems. I get a recording, as I assumed I would; try
to sound as desperate as I feel. I consider the next one, Pete’s Power Pump—what is it with all the alliteration? Pete’s slogan is, “We Suck.” I am debating going with this one, fearful about who might show up—porn star–wannabe or someone content and proud to do lousy work. But before I can decide to dial, the phone rings and I answer to find Mr. M. Morris Settle himself, who says that normally he doesn’t work on Christmas Eve, but he just happened to hear my message while in his office looking for pliers to tighten their tree stand. “Bad luck to have a tree fall,” he says. “Mine fell one year, and everything in my life changed afterward.” He laughs and I hear drawers opening and closing, Christmas music playing in the background.

“You sound a little beside yourself,” he says, and I assure him that yes, I am. I am completely beside myself; any more so and I’d be a town over from myself. And then within minutes, when I give him the address, he is on the case: knows the house, pumped it ten years ago, and can tell me all about who lived here and their septic habits if I’m interested in hearing. They were wasteful people, kept trying to flush things that were bad for the system. “A lot of people think if it leaves the bowl, then everything’s hunky-dory, right? Out of sight, out of mind,” he says, and then keeps going before I can ask when he can come. “It’s a complicated journey from beginning to end. It’s like life that way.” He puts down the phone and yells that he’ll be right there. Brenda Lee is singing “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree.”

“He’s coming,” I finally announce, but everyone except Beau has moved on. I hear Gretchen ask the boys what they want Santa to bring, and I purposefully do not listen for fear they have changed their minds again and my own stash in the attic, aside from being quite a bit more modest than they’ve ever encountered, will also be outdated.

I reach under the kitchen table, as I often do, to feel the thick painted letters of my own name. I was eight when I did that, thinking all the while that I would remember that moment forever. My parents didn’t know I was under there, and I lifted the long tablecloth enough to see their feet rocking back and forth as they hugged there in the late afternoon light. He wore olive-colored Hush Puppies—perhaps why I was so drawn to Beau as a puppy—and she wore pristine white Keds with little tassel socks, her legs tan and muscular, young. My dad had just gotten a new job, and they were filled with ideas and promises about the future: a bigger house, she wouldn’t have to work so hard, a real vacation, I would one day go to college, they would live to be very old so they could enjoy all the rewards of life. I listened
and quietly painted my name with thick old paint, almost paste-like as I went over and over each letter to ensure my existence and the permanence of the moment. My pulse raced with their joy and anticipation. What I wanted then was an Easy-Bake Oven, a sibling, and a dog. But mostly I just wanted it all to last, this heady notion of anticipation.

For most of my marriage I felt all shook up like a can of paint in the hardware store. Activities and projects—one day bleeding into the next. Any average day I was scattered to and fro, a Jackson Pollock canvas; and if there was any rhyme or reason, I couldn’t see beyond the surface color and pattern. Lose your calendar or dare to admit the truth, and the world might suddenly stop. But then the world does stop. You need for it to stop. One day you are shaking and planning, thinking how all you really need is a fresh coat of paint on everything, a whitewash of denial to make it all clean and new and perfect for starting over, and then the next day you lose all traction and have no choice but to call time. *I’m tired. I quit. I can’t do this anymore.* The world stops and the dust settles and there is clarity. The heavy pigment sinks and the oil gathers on the surface; and like a can long abandoned, you can shake until the cows come home but the two will never blend again.

The disagreements, the grievances. They aren’t sudden. They sound so trite and yet there they are. Irreconcilable differences. I envy the people with something big to tell. How wonderful it would be to say: Yes, I walked in on him having sex with the babysitter. That is what made *that* night different from all others. Yes, he had a cocaine habit and snorted up all the money for college. He beat me and I had two broken arms and now wear dentures. Black/white. Dead/alive. Instead you say: We’re just too different, too far apart.

Now I watch Gretchen driving away, with the promise that she will check on me later, that she will definitely call and cancel the evening on my behalf. Mr. M. Morris Settle will be here any minute. He said he first needed to run to the store for apple cider. I’m watching the window while sitting at my kitchen table with a pile of Christmas paper and ribbons, wrapping things that are easily adaptable for the exes should someone hand me a gift: nice bottle of wine, soaps, tea towels, chocolates. Charles is standing there watching me, that glass of chocolate milk still in his hand. He keeps dipping a finger in and dousing out the plagues—clearly the highlight of any Passover Seder. “Toads and boils and blood and lice.” He waits for me to screech and say, “Ooh yuk.”

“Scabs and poop.” He douses again and I can’t help but laugh.
“Ooh, scabs and crap,” I say, and his eyes widen in delight. “Snot and pee and pus and vomit.” He screams with laughter and then runs off to tell his brother.

Mr. M. Morris Settle is tall and lanky, with a shock of white hair he repeatedly smoothes back in a way that has left little flips like wings over each ear. He doesn't look like someone dressed for this kind of work. He's in khakis with crisp, pressed pleats, a white dress shirt, and a bright green and red bolo.

He introduces himself with a firm handshake and then stands, hands on his hips, as he tilts back his head and sniffs the air. “Oh yeah,” he says. “We're smelling something all right.” He looks at me and winks. “But I've smelled worse, honey. I sure have smelled worse.”

“Thanks for coming on such short notice.” Without warning, my eyes fill with tears and it makes me furious, like when I cry over a long-distance commercial or some movie designed to yank my chain. “I . . .” I reach my hands up, stalling so I don't cry, floundering for words.

“And that's just why I'm here,” he says. “No need to say a word. If my Edie called anybody sounding that way, I'd like to think she'd get everything she needed just like that.” He snaps his fingers and reaches in the passenger side of his truck for a crowbar. The truck is enormous with a huge tube snaked around the back. “No sir, I do believe you reap what you sow.” He goes over to the rectangle of grass, steps hard with one foot as he feels around. Then he starts sinking the crowbar until there is a clanking sound. He whistles the whole while he goes back and forth: “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” “Joy to the World.” He pulls some big rubber boots over his dress shoes and starts carefully digging away the grass and setting it off to the side.

“Folks say I can come and go out of a yard and they don't even know I've been there.” He reaches and pulls off the grate and sets it aside. “Nice work. Don't see a thing wrong down here.” He calls me over and I squat there beside him as we peer down into the tomblike hole, brown sludge at the bottom.

“Beautiful sight in my line of work,” he says, and laughs. “The eye of the beholder. Yeah, you got a fine system. Redone since I was last here. Ain't even necessary to pump, but I will, and then we'll have a schedule.”

“But the smell.”

“That's a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.” He shields his eyes and points at a squat silver cap on my roof. “Is that a bathroom right there?”

I nod, immediately picturing the bathroom I all but lifted from the other house, the walls painted a bright blue like a pool and big shiny goldfish on the
shower curtain. I lifted their bedrooms as well, attempting to make the transition as easy as possible, posters placed the same distance from the bed so that when they settled in at night, there was the comfort of what they knew and recognized: SpongeBob SquarePants and World Wide Wrestling.

“You ever been in the wrong place at the wrong time?” he asks.

“Oh yeah.”

“Well, that’s your vent. When your heat comes on in the house, then the air in all the vents is fighting to get out that one.” He does his hands up and down and back and forth as if in battle. “Gotta go somewhere. And if you’re standing here, and the wind is blowing just right over your roof and near that vent, poof, there you go.”

“Wrong place at the wrong time,” I echo.

“Story of my life.” He looks at me and smiles, lines wrinkling around his eyes. “Or was. Before Edie. I’d jump down there and swim in that mess if I needed to for her. Anything at all, I’d do it.” He pauses to make sure I’m listening. “I did not feel that way about Pamela.” He doesn’t even give me a chance to ask who Pamela is. “First wife,” he whispers as if she is somewhere nearby. “Left me right after that Christmas the tree fell. Never thought I’d be divorced, and then I was. Grown kids. House paid off. I’m looking to retirement and the golden years, and then boom.” He stares, blue eyes fixed on mine in a way that makes it impossible to look elsewhere. There are bells on his bolo, and he jingles when he shakes his head to emphasize his disbelief of his experience. His initials are embroidered on the pocket of his shirt, and he wears a button that says BELIEVE. In what? I want to ask, but he continues without missing a beat. “I felt bad, like I done wrong, and I told people I felt I’d done wrong, and friends finally said, ‘Morris, that woman will never be satisfied. You did as much as a human could do. You did more than most humans would do, trying to make her feel happy. But the truth is, you can’t take a miserable person and turn them happy, so you ought to be glad she went on and left you. It’s a blessing, a gift. Flush her, man.’” He laughs. “That’s what this one friend of mine says to me over and over—‘flush her, man’—he’s got a good sense of humor about my business, always has; like he’s always saying to me at a card game—or used to say since now that I got Edie I don’t like late nights out playing cards and those fellas can’t stand that, can’t stand I’m so happy—but he used to always say: ‘A flush beats a full house, don’t it Morris?’” He waits as if to let me catch up on his story, but then I realize he’s still mulling over my system, shining his light from one dark corner to the next. “Run in there and give her a flush.”

“Now? The one upstairs?”
“Yeah sure. Let’s just add some gravy to the stew.” I stand and nod. “So they all said it was a blessing, but I couldn’t listen real good at the time. Part of it was I was thinking, If it’s such a blessing, why didn’t somebody tell me how bad it was? I was unhappy and didn’t even know how much. You get used to the bad and don’t know what you’re missing. Like if you got used to the smell there you’d start to forget what smells good in this world—You’ll see, I can fix that with a length of pole, easy job.—My kids took it better than I did. They weren’t surprised either, and I thought, Well, hell, what kind of idiot am I? Why couldn’t I see what everybody else was seeing so easy?”

I have paused at the door to wait for him to finish. I can hear the television going full blast in the other room. I can see chocolate milk and Cocoa Puffs all over the kitchen counter.

“Go on, now.” He motions. “Go flush, and when you get back, I’ll tell you about those trashy people who used to live here.”

“I just got divorced,” I say, and step in before he can respond. I hear the heat come on and imagine a cloud of air traveling through the pipes up to the roof and open sky. I pass through the small family room, where Charles is about to doze off with his head on Beau’s back. Michael is drawing cars, page after page of cars, while watching cartoons and making racing noises. Upstairs I tiptoe as if it is night and they are both in bed sleeping, as if I am viewing my life from some distant place. I can see Mr. Settle still squatting by the opening. I can tell he’s still whistling, hands patting his thighs. He looks up at the window and smiles though I know he can’t see me there through the tilted blinds. I flush and then hurry back down, suddenly interested in seeing what happens at the other end as well as hearing the rest of his story; eager to reenter my life.

“Perfect,” he says, and motions for me to squat there beside him again. “That smell ain’t new. You just noticed it is all. I’ll get you a length of pipe and swing by after the holidays, then it’ll be high enough to blow away, just the birds will smell it.” I nod, mesmerized by his voice and the swirl of brown water down below. “Still, let’s pump it out—pump out the old and bring in the new.”

“There you go now,” he says when I laugh, and starts unwrapping the big hose and pulls it over to the hole. “I believe there’s nothing like a good hard laugh.” Within minutes that tube springs to life, a motor grinding, as it sucks the very crap from my life. Then he has to talk even louder. “You know, in my line of work you’re reminded that there’s always crap to deal with. I think folks who don’t deal with a little crap on occasion forget how and then they get hit with something big
and fall to pieces. A little crap is good for you; it’s like bacteria down there in your septic or, you know, in a fish tank or your innards. That’s my two cents. ‘Chicken Soup for the Outhouse Set.’” He laughs and untwists a kink in the big hose. “I felt like such a failure back then,” he shakes his head. “I was hittin’ the sauce pretty hard, sitting and staring into pit after pit like this, and thinking, What a pile of shit—pardon my French. But then you know what happened?”

“Edie?”

“Ah yeah, Edie—this world’s best and most beautiful natural air freshener. I went to play bridge one night, and there she was. We neither of us like bridge much; too much thinking so it messes up the talking. The fella having the gathering finally said, ‘Why don’t you two chatty boxes just go on and leave since you ain’t paying attention to anybody else or the game anyway?’ I don’t even know what all we talked about, just that I hadn’t talked and laughed like that in ages. We went to get us some coffee—we both love our coffee—and she told me that she liked hearing me sing. I guess I’d hummed a little here and there and didn’t even know it. Maybe nervous, you know?”

I nod.

“Know why that was a kind of beautiful thing?” He waits until I shake my head. “I can’t sing a note, couldn’t sing my way out of a paper sack, and here’s this sweet good-looking gal asking for more. Six years since I met Edie. I am seventy-three years old and these have been the best six years of my life.” He leans in close, our shoulders touching as we both continue to stare down, the water level already dropped considerably. “Your life is just beginning.” He nudges me, his arm firm against my own. “You’re still wet behind the ears.” He smells like cedar and Old Spice, and I catch myself with a quick image of him and Edie waking and preparing for this day. Their Christmas tree in its stand, coffee perking, bathroom mirror still steamed over as he ties his bolo and promises to be right back. “Dealing with all this crap right now will make everything better and brighter on down the road.”

I wait, unable to look up even though I know he’s staring at me. He puts his hand on my back and rests it there a long comfortable minute, and then he is up and moving. “Edie is waiting,” he says. They have stuff to do before the grandkids arrive; they like to go caroling with a group from the neighborhood. He drives his smaller truck that doesn’t smell like the business, and folks sit in the back on hay and blankets; Edie sits back there a little bit, but mostly she likes to be up beside him. Then before bed, he and Edie like to sit by the fire and talk. “We both like to talk,” he laughs. “Edie can outtalk me on a good day, but I can hold my own.” He
pulls and recoils the huge tube. “You’re fine,” he says, and points to the rectangle of brown grass that looks just as it did when he arrived. “I believe everything’s fine. Make sure your tree’s in there tight. I wire mine up to the ceiling. Not taking any chances on Edie.”

And then he is gone, all the debris of my life sucked away and hauled off in his big silver truck, and I am left wondering if he was even for real. When Gretchen calls to get the report, I tell her all about this incredible visit, how I feel the best I have felt in years. I feel alive, hopeful. I want to say that I feel I’ve been visited by an angel, that whoever is in charge of the great beyond had known that I would never believe in white gowns and shiny wings. My angel would never play a harp and sing sweetly on high; no, my angel vacuums crap and bad odors and worries. My angel talks too much and delights in bad jokes. “He didn’t even bill me,” I say, further proof of the wonder of it all.

“He knows where you live,” she says, desperate to turn the conversation back to what I plan to wear, cook, say at this ridiculous event I’ve planned. “He’ll bill you.” And I am thinking the bill will make it even better, as well as his return to install the long pipe to vent leftover bad air when a rush of warmth blows from the furnace. I will love nothing better than to have that vent firmly in place and to know that he is real.

So, what makes this night different from all other nights?

My tree is wired to a big sturdy hook in the ceiling, and Christmas music is playing from three different sources. Clark’s girlfriend has TMJ and Carpal Tunnel Syndrome. I have to avoid looking at the boys when she first walks in with little wrist braces and a tight jaw. She, like Clark, is allergic to Beau and to the Christmas tree and to the dust mites. My ex-in-laws are cordial and like their soaps and chocolates. It is a little awkward and formal, but easier if we all just focus on the boys and listen as they tell what they hope Santa Claus will bring. They have tied felt antlers to Beau’s head, and he sits looking at me with those big sad eyes as if pleading for my intervention. We both are eager for the visit to end. When Beau rolls over and quits participating, I fill the silence by saying I like my acrylic cookbook holder that keeps food from splashing on the pages, which is a lie. I told him years ago that I didn’t need or want one of these, that I like how my favorite recipes are coated with necessary ingredients. Challah recipe glazed in dried dough and loose poppy seeds, cranberry bread with red smudges, Russian rye with a sticky Karo syrup corner and little caraway seeds. “Thank you very much,”
I say with the practiced clear speech of a ventriloquist, because those words didn't come from me but from some person far across the years who dreams of clear fresh water just up ahead on the horizon. Yet I am here, in my own house, awash with everything new. I am so dipped and bathed and resurrected that I expect to find a puddle on the floor around me.

When it is time for good-byes and I walk them to the door, Clark tilts his head to the breeze and comments that something must be wrong with the sewer system. “You need to get that checked,” he whispers, while TMJ Carpal Tunnel goes to the bathroom.

I smile and say thank you without moving my lips. Now Charles has his brother dousing plagues as well, even though their grandmother keeps pointing out that they are in the wrong holiday. I can tell she wants me to make them stop. “Blood. Guts. Puke.” They fall out laughing and I ignore all the looks. I call out cheerful good-byes and happy holidays. Then I focus on the Nativity scene, where Mary pulls her coat close around her and stares up into the dark night sky. Joseph has driven away in his little green car, and now it is once again just the three of them. She breathes deeply. Behind her, within the warmth of the manger, Jesus and Spiderman are happily talking and laughing. They are swaddled in worn soft quilts while they drink eggnog and rid the world of plagues and pestilence. She ponders this in her heart and it is good. There is no place on earth she would rather be. And that is what makes this night different from all the rest.
It came upon a midnight clear That glorious song of old From angels bending near the earth To touch their harps of gold. Peace on the earth, goodwill to men From Heaven's gracious King The world in silent stillness lay To hear the angels sing. Through the starless night they come With peaceful wings unfolded And still their heavenly music floats Over the weary world. A Midnight Clear is a 1992 American war drama film written and directed by Keith Gordon and starring an ensemble cast that features Ethan Hawke, Gary Sinise, Peter Berg, Kevin Dillon and Arye Gross. It is based on the eponymous novel by William Wharton. Set towards the end of World War II, the film tells the story of an American intelligence unit which finds a German platoon that wishes to surrender. The latest Tweets from On A Midnight Clear (@midnight_clear). A New Christmas Musical Tradition. Oxford, England. The cast of the new Christmas Musical - "On A Midnight Clear" singing the acoustic theme for the 1st time.