Shoemaker Village

Volume 34 - December 1999
Holiday Bonus Issue



1999: The Year in Review: Do you remember this?

Largest installment ever! 13 pages of *The Knights of the Square Table!*





PLUS!

Expanded Humor From the Village Square!

Award-winning *Chicky Run* by Matthew Care!

A comedic look at Thanksgiving in Amanda Dilks's *17 People and a Turkey!*

Two puzzles included inside!

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Editor's Pages

Information you should know

It's finally here! Welcome to the 1999 Edition of the annual Holiday Bonus Issue of Shoemaker Village!

For the past five weeks, the Village editors have been working long hours to bring you this special issue of the Village. By far our biggest issue ever at 57 pages, we also have the largest distribution for this month's issue (37 copies), and the most readers in the two and a half year history of the Village at 100. The former record, 85, was set almost two years ago in April 1998. With the help of reader support, we have been able to make this issue of the Village the best it could possibly be.

To begin, you may have noticed the expanded edition of The Knights of the Square Table. This is the largest installment of the novel we have ever published- 13 pages, instead of the usual six or seven. Two chapters are included in this month's issue, encompassing a large portion of the story. The full edition of The Knights of the Square Table now stands at 265 pages and is growing every day. It is possible that the concluding chapters in the book may be published in the first few months of the new millennium, so keep reading. If you missed out on previous installments of the exciting action, you can download a full edition at our webpages (see the address on the acknowledgments page) or request one directly from us at a nominal fee that only covers the cost of printing.

Secondly, Humor from the Village Square has expanded its boundaries this month to include an unprecedented amount of content. We have included seven pages of seasonal humor, including some actual headlines that happened in the past week! Unfortunately, we were forced to break one promise from last month: we were unable to track down any more Steven Wright humor. We are sorry for any inconvenience that this may have caused you,
but we hope that the other inclusions in our special issue more than make up for the discrepancy.

As we have for the past two years, we have included our annual Year in Review section. This edition, entitled 1999: The Year in Review, details the happenings in the neighborhood and around the area during the past twelve months. Last year, we received rave reviews from our readers on this section, so be sure to check it out.

Unfortunately, while the other sections have been enlarged considerably for this bonus issue, we were unable to gather more than one page of Neighborhood News. While this section was popular and larger in the past, it has suffered a decline over the months until only a fraction of the news that is actually happening is being published. This is simply due to the fact that the workload of homework during the first semester has increased exponentially, and it would be impossible to investigate happenings when they occur. Therefore, as we have mentioned in previous issues, we are still looking for a news correspondent to help us with this incredible task. It would be best if this person lived somewhere in the Willow Grove area and would be asked to contribute happenings

that occur in the immediate Willow Grove area. Since over 60% of our readership has shifted to the Willow Grove area, any help on reporting on events there would be appreciated. Of course, any volunteer would receive a free Village subscription for as long as the Village is in existence.

Though this may have been our biggest issue in our history, it has also turned out to be slightly later than expected. This was due to several of our staff being unable to contribute in time for the due date. Unfortunately, Lori Blickley, our UMHS news editor, was unable to contribute The Bear Facts this month due to lack of a working computer. The Bear Facts should be back in February's issue, however.

By now, you must have noticed that we have included a survey to gauge the reactions of our readers in this month's issue. When we last included a survey, in March 1999, we received a disappointingly low turnout. From the few readers who returned surveys, we were able to make several critical changes in the Village, such as the free issue for contributors idea with which we currently comply. By returning the survey this month, you will be helping us maintain the Village as the quality magazine you've come to expect. At an estimated cost of $101 for this month's publication, we cannot afford to continue publishing the Village without reader participation.

We're sorry, but last month, we goofed up. We forgot to include Mr. Casey, a guidance counselor at UMHS, who contributed $5.00 to the Village. We apologize to Mr. Casey for not recognizing him sooner.

We are proud to announce that we have revamped the Village webpages because of the increased interest in the website over the past month. Since October, the website has been receiving over 25 hits per day and has received five new subscribers to our Internet subscription list. Unfortunately, Matthew Care has elected to resign his position on the webpage design team and remove his page from the website. If you haven't seen the webpages recently, be sure to do so soon to check out the holiday spirit we have added. The pages are available at **http://come.to/ShoemakerVillage**.

In a small note, several of our editors would like to point out that the pictures on the Acknowledgments page have been replaced with this year's school photos. Also, you may have noticed that one of the Discussion Forum articles is on page 57; this is because the article was received after the black and white pages went into print.

That's about all for this month. As usual, we will resume Village publication in February after our holiday break. Thanks for reading, happy holidays, and we wish you a happy new Millennium!

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The February issue of Shoemaker Village will be published on Friday, January 29, 2000.
All contributions for the next issue must be received by Tuesday, January 26, 2000.
*Please note that UMHS Final Exams will be held on 1/22 and 1/25.

Upcoming topics in **The Discussion Forum:**
February 2000: Is the state of the environment better or worse than it was twenty years ago?

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Puzzle Pages

S U A L C A T N A S L O R A C
P N E R B C O A R T Z C L N F
T R O U U S S N S P B H O A A
I I L I C D H G R E Y R M M M
N B D H T H O E L C T I A W I
S B O I D A S L N H S S N O L
E O B C S E R S P T O T G N Y
L N O W N P C O L H R M E S R
I S W T O W L E C K F A R T E
G X S A W E T A M E M S D A N
H S C H R O P E Y B D Q V R N
T W I S E M E N S L E I G H I
S N O S A E S H C N I R G G D
V Q G F T G N I V I G I F T S
B I R T H E L V E S H O L L Y

Angels
Bell
Birth
Bows
Bulbs
Carols
Christmas
December
Decorations
Dinner
Display
Elves
Family
Frosty
Gifts
Giving
Grinch
Holly
Lights
Manger
Mistletoe
No School
North Pole
Presents
Ribbons
Rudolph
Santa Claus
Schrope
Season
Sleigh
Snow
Snowman
Star
Tinsel
Wisemen
Wreath

E L G N I J H O L I D A Y S D
R N R D M E R R Y A S H T T L
A E I E R G H N E A T U H A O
U Z E S K E D A A C N E G H C
Q T R T G A I A R T N P I V Y
S I I R R N M D S O I A N A J
S L F U E K A E E H N V D C O
E B I C I C H L S L E I I A L
M D H T N C N A D I W R M T L
I I F I D R E A N L O D A I Y
T P B O E T B M R U U N G O T
M U I N E L L I M P K A I N R
G C N M R A A Z N A W K C X A
S O O V I X E N E L P P A E P
D C D L R O W Y 2 K B X P H D

Apple
Auld Lang Sine
Blitzen
Bug
Chestnuts
Cold
Comet
Cupid
Dancer
Dasher
Destruction
Donner
Dreidel
Fire
Hanukkah
Hats
Holidays
Jingle
Jolly
Kwanzaa
Late
Magic
Merry
Midnight
Millennium
Minorah
Nativity
New
Night
Noisemaker
Party
Prancer
Reindeer
Time
Times Square
Vacation
Vixen
World
Y2K
Year

Neighborhood News

December 1999

NEIGHBORHOOD MILLENNIUM PARTY SUFFERS SETBACKS

Anticipation has been high since the first flyers for the Neighborhood Millennium Party were distributed in early August. Many neighbors believed that this would be a great way to spend a very special New Year's Eve.

While some of this still may be possible, the plans for the party of the century suffered a setback when only two neighbors showed up for the planning meeting that was held at Henry Sokolowski's house on Tuesday, November 23, 1999.

"Now it looks just like another standard adult party," said one neighborhood youngster when he was interviewed.

At the meeting, it was decided among the three families present (the Sobolefskis, the Spieckers, and the Sokolowskis) that the party would encompass three houses. Original suggestions of spending about an hour at each of the involved neighbor's homes was changed to three homes and a longer period of time when it was realized that people would just be getting comfortable and it would be time to move on to the next house. It was decided to scrap the idea of decorating for a particular decade this century.

Unfortunately, before the party, two neighbors were forced to cancel their participation because of other commitments. This now leaves an enrollment of six families, bringing the estimated total to 25 participants, depending upon how many children attend the now adult-focused gathering.

The Hoffman family was unable to attend the meeting but volunteered their house for the 12:00-2:00AM time slot.

"If anyone else in the neighborhood is interested, give us a call," said Henry Sokolowski, organizer of the party. "We would be happy to welcome anyone in the neighborhood who doesn't have alternate plans."

Another meeting between families is scheduled to be held during Christmas week in order to finalize plans with more neighbors attending, as well as welcome any new people who may be interested in the party.

The party is currently scheduled to be held on December 31, 1999, from 8:00PM to 2:00AM. We'll be sure to include a review of all that happened in the neighborhood in February.

ANNUAL CHRISTMAS BONANZA PREPARATIONS UNDERWAY

The Schrope family, known across the township for their annual Christmas display, is hard at work assembling their extravaganza for this year.

Throughout the final two weeks in November, the Schropes were seen getting together preliminary decorations for their yard.

As you may recall, the Schrope family has been decorating their house as part of a long-standing tradition that has taken place as far back as 1972. During the Holiday season, cars jam Pioneer Road for a chance to get a glimpse of the 10000-light display.

Because of the upcoming Millennium celebration, many houses are expected to triple their decorations in an attempt to outdo one another. Retail sales for Christmas lights have been three times higher than normal in the pre-Thanksgiving weeks.

"Everything's earlier and bigger anymore," said one neighborhood resident when he was interviewed. "This is going to be an exciting year unlike any other."

UPPER MORELAND HOOPS TO START NEW SEASON IN MID-DECEMBER

Upper Moreland Hoops will open its 1999-2000 season on Saturday, December 11. Opening ceremonies are scheduled to begin at 9:00AM at the Upper Moreland Middle School

with a full roster of games. Play will continue until December 22, at which time a season break for the holidays occurs. The first week of January begins the full schedule of games.

This year, there are less referees than last. Consequently, a greater burden has been placed on the fewer number of volunteers. In addition, as a result of a number of problems in past years, the organization has developed a code of conduct which it expects all players, parents, and family members to adhere to.

Good luck to all players and teams for a successful year.

Lost and Found

ANIMALS NOT GONE YET

November seems to have been a month of recurrences in more ways than one. For the first time in months, this rooster was spotted roaming along the Huntingdon Valley side of Pioneer Road.

The rooster was spotted during a Wednesday in early November, while Alfred Muzyka and his grandson, Christopher Sokolowski, were cleaning their yard of leaves. Reportedly, the rooster continued to move toward the leaf rakers while they tried to clean up.



This rooster was spotted roaming the neighborhood.

"This is extremely dangerous," one resident who witnessed the scene unfolds overreacted. "What if that rooster has diseases? Someone could be killed!"

The rooster disappeared several minutes later and hasn't been seen since.

Humor From the Village Square

REINDEER RETIREMENT

The recent announcement that Donner and Blitzen have elected to take the early reindeer retirement package has triggered a good deal of concern about whether they will be replaced, and about other restructuring decisions at the North Pole.

Streamlining is due to the North Pole's loss of dominance of the season's gift distribution business. Home shopping channels and mail order catalogues have diminished Santa's market share. He could not sit idly by and permit further erosion of the profit picture.

The reindeer downsizing was made possible through the purchase of a late model Japanese sled for the CEO's annual trip. Improved productivity from Dasher and Dancer, who summered at the Harvard Business School, is anticipated. Reduction in reindeer will also lessen airborne environmental emissions for which the North Pole has received unfavorable press.

I am pleased to inform you that Rudolph's role will not be disturbed. Tradition still counts for something at the North Pole. Management denies, in the strongest possible language, the earlier leak that Rudolph's nose got that way, not from the cold, but from substance abuse. Calling Rudolph "a lush who was into the sauce and never did pull his share of the load" was an unfortunate comment, made by one of Santa's helpers and taken out of context at a time of year when he is known to be under executive stress.

As a further restructuring, today's global challenges require the North Pole to continue to look for better, more competitive steps. Effective immediately, the following economy measures are to take place in the "Twelve Days of Christmas" subsidiary:

The partridge will be retained, but the pear tree never turned out to be the cash crop forecasted. It will be replaced by a

plastic hanging plant, providing considerable savings in maintenance;

The two turtle doves represent a redundancy that is simply not cost effective. In addition, their romance during working hours could not be condoned. The positions are therefore eliminated;

The three French hens will remain intact. After all, everyone loves the French

The four calling birds were replaced by an automated voice mail system, with a call waiting option. An analysis is underway to determine who the birds have been calling, how often and how long they talked;

The five golden rings have been put on hold by the Board of Directors. Maintaining a portfolio based on one commodity could have negative implications for institutional investors. Diversification into other precious metals as well as a mix of T-Bills and high technology stocks appear to be in order;

The six geese-a-laying constitutes a luxury which can no longer be afforded. It has long been felt that the production rate of one egg per goose per day is an example of the decline in productivity. Three geese will be let go, and an upgrading in the selection procedure by personnel will assure management that from now on every goose it gets will be a good one;

The seven swans-a-swimming is obviously a number chosen in better times. The function is primarily decorative. Mechanical swans are on order. The current swans will be retrained to learn some new strokes and therefore enhance their outplacement;

As you know, the eight maids-a-milking concept has been under heavy scrutiny by the EEOC. A male/female balance in the workforce is being sought. The more militant maids consider this a dead-end job with no upward mobility. Automation of the process may permit the maids to try a-mending, a-mentoring or a-mulching;

Nine ladies dancing has always been an odd number. This function will be phased out as these individuals grow older and can no longer do the steps;

Ten Lords-a-leaping is overkill. The high cost of Lords plus the expense of international air travel prompted the Compensation Committee to suggest replacing this group with ten out-of-work congressmen. While leaping ability may be somewhat sacrificed, the savings are significant because we expect an oversupply of unemployed congressmen this year;

Eleven pipers piping and twelve drummers drumming is a simple case of the band getting too big. A substitution with a string quartet, a cutback on new music and no uniforms will produce savings which will drop right down to the bottom line;

We can expect a substantial reduction in assorted people, fowl, animals and other expenses. Though incomplete, studies indicate that stretching deliveries over twelve days is inefficient. If we can drop ship in one day, service levels will be improved.

Regarding the lawsuit filed by the attorney's association seeking expansion to include the legal profession (“thirteen lawyers-a-suing”) action is pending.

Lastly, it is not beyond consideration that deeper cuts may be necessary in the future to stay competitive. Should that happen, the Board will request management to scrutinize the Snow White Division to see if seven dwarfs is the right number.

STAR TREK CHRISTMAS

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the ship,
Not a circuit was buzzing, not one microchip;
The phasers were hung in the armory securely,
In hopes that no aliens would get up that early.
The crewmen were nestled all snug in their bunks
(Except for the few who were partying drunks);
And Picard in his nightgown and Bev in her lace,
Had just settled down for a neat face-to-face . . .
When out in the halls there arose such a racket,
That we leapt from our beds, pulling on pants and jackets.
Away to the lift we all shot like a gun, Leapt into the cars and yelled loudly, "Deck One!"
The bridge Red-Alert lights, which flashed through the din,
Gave a luster of Hades to objects within.
When, what, on the viewscreen, should our eyes behold,
But a weird kind of sleigh, and some guy who looked old.
But the glint in his eyes was so strange and askew
That we knew in a moment it had to be Q.

His sleigh grew much larger as closer he came.
Then he zapped on the bridge and addressed us by name:
"It's Riker! It's Data! It's Worf and Jean-Luc!
It's Geordi! And Wesley, the genetic fluke!
To the top of the bridge, to the top of the hall!
Now float away! Float away! Float away all!"
As leaves in the autumn are whisked off the street,
So the floor of the bridge came away from our feet.
And up to the ceiling our bodies they flew,
As the captain called out, "What the heck is this, Q?"
The prankster just laughed and expanded his grin,
And, snapping his fingers, he vanished again.
As we took in our plight and were looking around,
The spell was removed, and we crashed to the ground.
Then Q, dressed in fur from his head to his toe,
Appeared once again, to continue the show.
"That's enough!" cried the captain, "You'll stop this at once!"
And Riker said, "Worf! Take aim at this dunce!"
"I'm deeply offended, Jean-Luc," replied Q,
"I just wanted to celebrate Christmas with you."

As we scoffed at his words, he produced a large sack,
He dumped out the contents and took a step back.
"I've brought gifts," he said, "just to show I'm sincere.
There's something delightful for everyone here."
He sat on the floor and dug into his pile,
And handed out gifts with his most charming smile:
"For Counselor Troi, there's no need to explain,
Here's Tylenol-Beta for all of your pain.
For Worf I've some mints as his breath's not too great,
For Geordi LaForge, an inflatable date.
For Wesley, some hormones, and Clearasil-Plus;
For Data, a joke book; for Riker, a truss.
For Beverly Crusher, there's sleek lingerie,
And for Jean-Luc, the thrill of just seeing her that way."
Then he sprang to his feet with that grin on his face
And clapping his hands, disappeared into space.
But we heard him exclaim as he dwindled from sight,
"Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good flight!"

MAN WITH NO EARS

There was a man who was in a horrible

accident, and was injured. But the only permanent damage he suffered was the amputation of both of his ears.

As a result of this 'unusual' handicap, he was very self-conscious about his having no ears.

Because of the accident, he received a large sum

of money from the insurance company. It was always his dream to own his own business, so he decided with all this money he had, he now had the means to own a business. So he went out and purchased a small, but expanding computer firm. But he realized that he had no business knowledge at all, so he decided that he would have to hire someone to run the business.

He picked out three top candidates, and interviewed each of them. The first interview went really well. He really liked this guy. His last question for this first candidate was, 'Do you notice anything unusual about me?' The guy said, 'Now that you mention it, you have no ears.' The man got really upset and threw the guy out.

The second interview went even better than the first. This candidate was much better than the first. Again, to conclude the interview, the man asked the same question again, 'Do you notice anything unusual about me?' This guy also noticed, 'Yes, you have no ears.' The man was really upset again, and threw this second candidate out.

Then he had the third interview. The third candidate was even better than the second, the best out of all of them. Almost certain that he wanted to hire this guy, the man once again asked, 'Do you notice anything unusual about me?' The guy replied 'Yeah, you're wearing contact lenses.' Surprised, the man then asked, 'Wow! That's quite perceptive of you! How could you tell?'The guy burst out laughing and said, 'Well, You can't wear glasses if you don't have any ears!'

MAN SHOWS UP AT OWN FUNERAL (11-29-99)

BANGKOK (Reuters) - Mourners took to their heels and Buddhist monks performing the last rites froze when a Thai man turned up at his own funeral, police said Monday.

A mix-up over a tattoo led the mother of missing 26-year-old odd job laborer Suvicha Saengmanee to retrieve a partly decomposed corpse from a police station thinking it was him.

The funeral, in southern Nakorn Sithammarat, was held on Sunday, only to be interrupted by the real Suvicha's surprise return. ``My mother saw the tattoo of a tiger on the left thigh of the dead man and jumped to the conclusion it was me. Actually, my tiger tattoo is on my right thigh," a police spokesman quoted him as saying.

His overjoyed mother has returned the corpse to police, he added.

AIR-CONDITIONED CONFESSIONAL UNVEILED IN ROME (11-29-99)

ROME (Reuters) - A fully soundproof state of the art confessional was unveiled Friday, offering air conditioning, black leather seats and soft lighting.

Venice-based firm Genuflex presented the spacious new confessional, allowing penitents to regulate the temperature at which they confess, at Rome's major religious merchandise trade fair ArtChiesa.

A red light shows when the glossy box is occupied and a green light when it is vacant. An optional hygienic filter or clear glass separates priests from penitents.

``If it is too hot or too cold inside, we have air conditioning and heating. These are the real novelties of the confessional," Genuflex manager Pierantonio Bellotto told Reuters Television.

The walnut finished confessional, expected to be priced at around $6,250, will cater to some of the 26 million pilgrims forecast to visit Rome in 2000, pushing up demand for confessions.

But some suggested the box was too extravagant.

“The subject of confessions is not a comfortable one and the important thing is the act of confession itself," said Don Rosino Montarelli, a priest from the Montecassino church.

'MILLENNIUM MARTINI' SHAKES, STIRS SAN FRANCISCO (11-26-99)

SAN FRANCISCO (Reuters) - A San Francisco hotel's plan to erect a giant ``Millennium Martini'' glass -- with dropping olive -- for New Year's Eve celebrations has shaken and stirred the city's religious leaders, who will be holding a peace and prayer service directly underneath the monster drink.

``Is this the kind of message to be sending on the new millennium?'' the Rev. Cecil Williams of Glide Memorial Church asked on Wednesday after hearing of the martini proposal.

The seven story, inflatable blue martini glass will be anchored around a flag pole atop the 13th floor of the Westin St. Francis Hotel, which presides over San Francisco's central Union Square shopping area.

The martini will feature an enormous swizzle stick topped by a 10-foot-long olive, which will slide down into the drink at the stroke of midnight in a West Coast version of the famous dropping ball in New York's Times Square.

``This is going to put San Francisco on the map as the 'Big Olive,' just as New York is the 'Big Apple,'" said Marsha Monro, the hotel's director of marketing and communications.

But city religious leaders are now saying that the mammoth martini may overshadow the open-air program of prayer, poetry and dance they have planned in Union Square as a more sober and reflective way of welcoming the New Year.

``I'm shocked. I was dismayed. I was certainly hoping that nothing like that would occur," Williams told one reporter, adding the martini plan was at odds with his hope ``to help people to not feel that the way to celebrate the new millennium is to get drunk, to get intoxicated."

Williams later told Reuters that he and others feared the shimmering glass would prove hard to ignore for the estimated 20,000 people gathered in the square below.

``I'm afraid that what's going to happen when that olive goes down that glass stem will be a distraction . . . I'm speaking about distractions more than anything else."

Munro said the hotel had arrived at its martini glass plan after consultations with the mayor's office and hoped it would become a new city tradition. In the meantime, hotel officials pledged to work cooperatively with any and all other efforts to mark the start of the year 2000.

Indeed, the martini may prove to be one of the few toasts of the town in San Francisco, where earlier plans for a municipal New Year's Eve party at the city civic center and a fireworks show over the Golden Gate Bridge were canceled because of money problems and safety concerns, respectively.

That leaves one, city-sponsored party along the Embarcadero waterfront and the Union Square event, which Munro pledged would be a proper mix of piety and party.

``We are entirely respectful of the interfaith community, but we feel that the martini is an icon of today's world," she said. ``We're all working in sync together. The idea is to promote the great city of San Francisco in a positive vein."

VANDALS DEFACE CIVIL WAR MONUMENTS IN PA. AND MD. (12-3-99)

SHARPSBURG, Md. (Reuters) - The hallowed grounds of two Civil War battlefields were defaced by vandals who used vegetable oil to drench monuments honoring Union soldiers, National Park Service officials said on Wednesday.

The vandals were probably the same people, park officials said. ``We're fairly convinced that the same people were involved," said John Howard, superintendent of the Antietam National Battlefield in western Maryland.

Vegetable oil stains were discovered on

Tuesday on two monuments at Antietam. Last week, 17 monuments at Gettysburg battlefield, 40 miles away in Gettysburg, Pa., were found covered in oil.

All of the monuments were Union monuments. No Confederate monuments were harmed.

The cost to clean the Gettysburg monuments would be about $4,000, officials said.

``It's like spilling oil on your driveway. Once it is on there, it is pretty hard to get off," said Gettysburg National Military Park spokeswoman Katie Lawhon.

Similar assaults were made last year on battlegrounds in the South, although officials said those incidents were probably not related to the vandalism at Antietam and Gettysburg.

Three Indiana men who said they were on a ``mission from God" last year sprayed olive oil on more than 50 monuments at Civil War sites in Tennessee and Mississippi.

The men pleaded guilty to vandalism charges and paid for the damage, which totaled $16,000.

More than 160,000 Union and Confederate soldiers fought at Gettysburg from July 1-3, 1863. About 51,000 were killed, wounded or unaccounted for.

Antietam saw 23,000 casualties in a one-day battle on Sept. 17, 1862.

THE XMAS FILES

Mulder: We're too late. It's already been here.

Scully: Mulder, I hope you know what you are doing.

Mulder: Look, Scully, just like the other homes: Douglas fir, truncated, mounted, transformed into some sort of shrine; halls decked with boughs of holly; stockings hung by the chimney, with care.

Scully: You really think someone's been here?

Mulder: Someone or some THING.

Scully: Mulder, over here -- it's fruitcake.

Mulder: Don't touch it! Those things can be lethal.

Scully: It's O.K. There's a note attached: “Gonna find out who's naughty and nice.”

Mulder: It's judging them, Scully. It's making a list.

Scully: Who? What are you talking about?

Mulder: Ancient mythology tells of an obese humanoid entity who could travel at great speed in a craft powered by antlered servants. Once each year, near the winter solstice, this creature is said to descend from the heavens to reward its followers and punish its disbelievers with jagged chunks of anthracite.

Scully: But that's legend, Mulder -- a story told by parents to frighten children. Surely, you don't believe it?

Mulder: Something was here tonight, Scully. Check out the bite marks on this gingerbread man. Whatever tore through this plate of cookies was massive -- and in a hurry.

Scully: It left crumbs everywhere. And look, Mulder, this milk glass has been completely drained.

Mulder: It gorged itself, Scully. It fed without remorse.

Scully: But why would they leave it milk and cookies?

Mulder: Appeasement. Tonight is the Eve, and nothing can stop its wilding.

Scully: But if this thing does exist, how did it get in? The doors and windows were locked. There's no sign of forced entry.

Mulder: Unless I miss my guess, it came through the fireplace.

Scully: Wait a minute, Mulder. If you are saying some huge creature landed on the roof and came down the chimney, you're crazy. The flue is barely six inches wide. Nothing could get through there.

Mulder: But what if it could alter its shape, move in all directions.

Scully: You mean, like a bowl full of jelly?

Mulder: Exactly. Scully, I've never told anyone this, but when I was a child my home was visited. I saw the creature. It had long white strips of fur surrounding its ruddy, misshapen head. Its bloated torso was red and white. I'll never forget the horror. I turned away, and when I looked back it had somehow taken on the facial features of my father.

Scully: Impossible.

Mulder: I know what I saw. And that night it read my mind. It brought me a Mr. Potato Head, Scully. IT KNEW I WANTED A MR. POTATO HEAD.

Scully: I'm sorry, Mulder, but you're asking me to disregard the laws of physics. You want me to believe in some supernatural being who soars across the skies and brings gifts to good little girls and boys. Listen to what you are saying. Do you understand the repercussions? If this gets out, they'll close the X-files.

Mulder: Scully, listen to me: It knows when you are sleeping. It knows when you're awake.

Scully: But we have no proof.

Mulder: Last year, on this exact date, S.E.T.I. radio telescopes detected bogeys in the airspace over twenty-seven states. The White House ordered a Condition Red.

Scully: But that was a meteor shower.

Mulder: Officially. Two days ago, eight prized Scandinavian reindeer vanished from the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. Nobody - not even the zookeeper - was told about it. The government doesn't want people to know about Project Kringle. They fear that if this thing is proved to exist, then the public would stop spending half its annual income in a holiday shopping frenzy. Retail markets will collapse. Scully, they cannot let the world believe this creature lives. There's too much at stake. They'll do whatever it takes to insure another silent night.

Scully: Mulder, I –

Mulder: Sh-h-h! Do you hear what I hear?

Scully: On the roof. It sounds like . . . a clatter.

Mulder: The truth is up there. Let's see what's the matter.

WORLD HISTORY IN BLOOPERS (PART I)

One of the fringe benefits of being an English or History teacher is receiving the occasional jewel of a student blooper in an essay. I have pasted together the following history of the world from certifiably genuine student bloopers, collected by teachers throughout the United States, from eighth grade through college level. Read carefully and you will learn a lot.

--

The inhabitants of ancient Egypt were called mummies. They lived in the Sarah Dessert and traveled by Camelot. The climate of the Sarah is such that the inhabitants have to live elsewhere, so certain areas of the dessert are cultivated by irrigation. The Egyptians built the Pyramids in the shape of a huge triangular cube. The Pyramids are a range of mountains between France and Spain.

The Bible is full of interesting caricatures. In the first book of the Bible, GUINNESS, Adam and Eve were created from

an apple tree. One of their children, Cain, once asked, 'Am I my brother's son?' God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Montezuma. Jacob, son of Isaac, stole his brother's birth mark. Jacob was a patriarch, who brought up his twelve sons to be patriarchs, but they did not take to it. One of Jacob's sons, Joseph, gave refuse to the Israelites.

Pharaoh forced the Hebrew slaves to make bread without straw. Moses led them to the Red Sea, where they made unleavened bread, which is bread without any ingredients. Afterward, Moses went upon Mount Cyanide to get the ten commandments. David was a Hebrew king skilled at playing the liar. He fought with the Philatelists, a race of people who lived in Biblical times. Solomon, one of David's sons, had 500 wives and 500 porcupines.

Without the Greeks we wouldn't have history. The Greeks invented three kinds of columns -- Corinthian, Doric, and Ironic. They also had myths. A myth is a female moth. One myth says that the mother of Achilles dipped him in the river Stynx until he became intolerable. Achilles appears in the Iliad, by Homer. Homer also wrote the Oddity in which Penelope was the last hardship that Ulysses endured on his journey. Actually, Homer was not written by Homer but by another man of that name. Socrates was a famous Greek teacher who went around giving people advice. They killed him. Socrates died of an overdose of wedlock.

In the Olympic Games, Greeks ran races, jumped, hurled the biscuits, and threw the java. The reward to the victor was a coral wreath. The government of Athens was democratic because people took the law into their own hands. There were no wars in Greece, as the mountains were so high that they couldn't climb over to see what their neighbors were doing. When they fought with the Persians, the Greeks were out numbered because the Persians had more men.

Eventually, the Romans conquered the Greeks. History calls people Romans because they never stayed in one place for very long. At Roman banquets, the guests wore garlics in their hair. Julius Caesar extinguished himself on the battlefields of Gaul. The Ides of March murdered him because they thought he was going to be made king. Nero was a cruel tyranny who would torture his poor subjects by playing the fiddle to them.

Then came the Middle Ages. King Alfred conquered the Dames, King Arthur lived in the age of shivery, King Harold mustarded his troops before the Battle of Hastings, Joan of Arc was canonized by Bernard Shaw, and the victims of the Black Death grew boobs on their necks. Finally, Magna Carta provided that no free man should be hanged twice for the same crime.

In midevil times most of the people were alliterate. The greatest writer of the time was Chaucer, who wrote many poems and verses and also wrote literature. Another tale tells of William Tell, who shot an arrow through an apple while standing on his son's head.

The renaissance was an age in which more individuals felt the value of their human being. Martin Luther was nailed to the church door at Wittenberg for selling papal indulgences. He died a horrible death, being excommunicated by a bull. It was the painter Donatello's interest in the female nude that made him the father of the Renaissance.

It was an age of great inventions and discoveries. Gutenberg invented the Bible. Sir Walter Raleigh is a historical figure because he invented cigarettes. Another important invention was the circulation of blood. Sir Francis Drake circumcised the world with a 100' clipper.

The government of England was a limited mockery. Henry VIII found walking difficult because he had an abbess on his knee. Queen Elizabeth was the Virgin Queen. As a Queen she was a success. When Elizabeth exposed herself before her troops, they all shouted 'hurrah.' Then her navy went out and defeated the Spanish armadillo.

1999: The Year In Review

A look back at the headlines of the past year

CHRISTMAS 1998

Last year, the Schrope family continued their annual tradition, decorating their yard with a bonanza of lights and decorations. The festivities were marred, however, by the theft of two of the Schropes' valuable hand-crafted figurines of Disney characters.

Christmas 1998 was also only the third White Christmas the area has experienced in forty years. Though as much as six inches of snow was predicted to fall, only two inches of powder fell. "This is the way to have a white Christmas, neighbor Bob Altimari said at the time, referring to the small amount of snow that didn't hamper holiday plans but made the area look nice.

The Christmas Eve Luminaria, which former organizer Pat Altimari had discontinued in recent years, was held to a small extent last year. Only four houses were involved, but neighbors hoped that someone else would assume responsibility for the project and the neighborhood would be illuminated in full this year.

One car was involved in an accident in front of the Shropes' Christmas decorations, one of many incidents during the season due to impatient drivers.

UPPER MORELAND SCHOOL STRIKE

As neighbors may recall, the Upper Moreland School District struck in September 1998, forcing students to make up many days throughout the school year.

Three of those days, during last year's Christmas season, disappointed many students who attended UMHS at the time. Even Seniors, who had been forced to attend school during the strike, were required to make up the missed days.

Other missed days were made up during the Easter holiday, when attendance dropped as low as 49%.

In March, a notice was distributed to parents of elementary school students informing them that the school year had been extended until June 21, the previous day being June 18. This was due to an unexpected snow day that had not been incorporated into the calendar because of the strike.

MAJOR ACCIDENTS ALONG PIONEER ROAD

On February 8, 1999, a major accident occurred in front of the Rorviks' driveway, snarling traffic and inflicting minor injuries on those involved.

Fire trucks raced to the scene to survey the accident, which involved three cars. A tow truck arrived shortly after and cleaned up the debris from the cars before the rush hour was over.

This was only the first of many accidents that happened along the road during the following months.

On May 15, a motorist driving a white car lost control while driving along Pioneer Road in front of the Rorviks' house. The car jumped the curb in front of the Schropes' house, knocked a wire off a telephone pole nearby, barely missed a row of large oak trees, skidded back across the street and ended up in the Hoffmans' driveway, creating enormous skid marks that remained for several weeks.

Fortunately, the driver of the wreck was apparently unhurt and walked away from the scene only dazed. This marked the beginning of the push to have the speed limit lowered from its current 35 miles per hour to 25, a debate which is still going on to this day.

Several accidents occurred during the month of June. The first happened on June 4, when a car whizzing by the Shoemaker-Pioneer intersection slammed into a parked Trail Electric truck. Another accident was reported when a motorist did not stop for the stop sign at the Shoemaker-Pioneer intersection and

continued to make a right turn, almost sideswiping a station wagon.

Another car was spotted following too closely to the driver ahead of them later that month. This was responsible for an accident in front of the Schrope property.

The most serious accident of the year, however, occurred on July 23, at about 11:30pm. The vehicle, traveling north on Pioneer Road, hit a telephone pole in front of the Barnes' house, overturned, and skidded along the road.

It was determined that the accident involved two juveniles who had been drinking. The driver, who was drunk and dazed from the accident, managed to escape from the car and run away.

Scott Slousky, resident of the neighborhood, was the hero of the scene, tackling the driver and detaining him until police were able to arrive. The passenger in the car was treated for head injuries.

SEWER PIPE INSTALLATIONS ALONG PIONEER ROAD

During the late Spring months, houses along Pioneer Road were required to have new sewer pipes installed. Though these did not affect neighborhood residents, the installations lasted for several months and tore up many yards.

The houses involved had used septic systems before the improvements were made. The Schrope family, mentioned earlier for their gigantic Christmas displays, had their yard destroyed many times for reinstallment of the pipes.

STRANGE ANIMALS THROUGHOUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD

There were many recurring events throughout 1999, and the animals that were roaming the neighborhood never seemed to go away.

The first incident occurred on January 30, 1999, shortly after 11:00AM. The peacock that was involved was spotted near the Altimari-Sokolowski fence.

Five minutes later, however, the peacock vanished and was never spotted again. It was never determined from where the peacock originated, or who its owner was, if it wasn't wild.

On April 10, an unknown Rottweiler dog was spotted wandering the neighborhood, scaring many neighbors. The dog had never been spotted before. Max, the Rorviks' dog, had been spotted several times during the previous year. When the Rorviks were phoned, however, they reported that Max was still in their yard. It was never determined who owned the dog or where it disappeared shortly after the sighting.

Twice in May, Max was sighted yet again. He lumbered around the streetlight in front of Bob and Pat Altimari's house and went into neighboring yards.

Max was spotted again in June, roaming through the Spieckers' and Sokolowskis' yards. This proved to be the biggest problem with the dog incidents during the month, as there were no reported attacks.

In late August, a cat was spotted roaming around the neighborhood several times. It climbed through flowers and landscaping plants without concern, heightening fears that property could be damaged by the runaway animals or that someone could be hurt.

The unknown dog returned in August, roaming dangerously around the neighborhood. It would not go away when yelled at by angry residents.

In 1998, the area was plagued with recurring chicken attacks, and the chickens returned on September 1 to wreak havoc in the Altimaris' yard. Pat Altimari awoke to find that Jake, her Golden Retriever, had attacked the chickens in her yard.

She instinctively called the police, who arrived with heavy gloves and a steel cage, but decided to simply shoo the chickens out of the yard. It took almost ten minutes to remove the threat. Though Pat was embarrassed, the police showed serious concern in this seemingly unimportant incident that disease transmission

between animals could be possible if owners didn't control their pets.

Chickens were also spotted in the Sokolowskis' yard later that month in some landscaping. Roosters also appeared, but the owner has yet to be determined.

WINTER WEATHER

The 1998-1999 winter was again unusually mild. This followed suit with the preceding year, which set records by recording no measurable snowfall for the first time in history.

Just when everyone had thought that the weird weather would finally end, an enormous snowstorm ravaged the area in March, dumping seven inches of snow on everything around the area. This was the biggest snowstorm of the year and canceled schools for two days.

For the entire winter, the neighborhood received 12 inches of snowfall, instead of the normal 22.6 inches in a usual winter. This marked the third consecutive winter in which less than average snowfall was predicted.

The winter was a season of near misses, where the area was just missed by several snowstorms that would have been much greater.

Unfortunately, the predictions for the 1999-2000 winter season call for the forth year in a row with mild temperatures.

UPPER MORELAND HOOPS

The 1998-1999 Upper Moreland Hoops Season ended on a high note with its annual Championship day ceremonies on March 31. Elections were held in May, and a new board has since taken over, headed by Paul McCarthy as President of the organization. The summer was slow, but in September, registration was held and hit an all-time high with numbers approaching 500 players.

Hopefully, next year, we will be kept informed of UM Little League happenings as well.

THIRD WORST DROUGHT OF CENTURY GRIPS REGION

The major drought last summer began in the first two weeks of May, when virtually no rain was recorded. This was in contradiction to the almost record 13-day rainfall event that occurred the previous year.

Several severe thunderstorms temporarily helped the dry situation near the end of the month, but conditions worsened as the summer continued.

A voluntary water restriction was placed on the area in June as the drought worsened. Though July was traditionally the wettest month of the year at 4.28 inches of rain, less than one inch fell, imposing mandatory water restrictions in late July.

Trees were hit the hardest, as lawns regenerated in the fall after Hurricane Floyd dumped record rainfall on the Philadelphia region.

Though the drought was at its worst in July and August, the water shortage continued into September. The end of the drought finally began on the weekend of August 15-16, when storms rained over three inches of liquid on parched ground.

Hurricane Floyd pounded the area in September, setting a rainfall record. However, for some reason, drought restrictions were not removed until a few weeks later.

HURRICANE FLOYD

The biggest weather event of the year was Hurricane Floyd, which dumped 6.6 inches of rain in 24 hours- a new all-time record for the Philadelphia area.

The storm began on Wednesday, September 16, as winds increased and rain began to fall later in the day. At the peak of the storm, rain was falling at the rate of one inch per hour. Though winds were expected to become the biggest problem, the intense winds proved to be much more damaging.

The retention basin at the end of Butternut Drive was filled to its highest level in

recent memory, almost lapping at the doorstep of the Haggerty family's house, who reside at 2065 Butternut Drive, and flooding the basements of other neighborhood residents.

Byberry road, which floods in moderate thunderstorms, was blocked off due to flooding for most of the day. Several cars were spotted underwater in the area, as if their passengers had to escape quickly.

Floyd created a surplus of rainfall, but did not end the summer-long drought.

THE ADVENTURES OF KLAUS

Klaus, the Hoffmans' dog, led an exciting life throughout the year.

Klaus escaped from his leash in May, surprising the Hoffmans, expecting another normal day at school to follow. However, the dog was spotted down the street and recovered before he could get lost or hit by a car.

However, Klaus was hit by a car while staying with his original owners, Tim and Meredith Hoffman. Klaus managed to either leap over or tunnel under the six-foot tall fence that surrounded the property and ventured out onto the road, to be hit by an oncoming car. Though Klaus received several broken bones and a few stitches, he made a full recovery.

Klaus now spends his days at the Hoffman household, who have agreed to take him back in because Tim works ten-hour days and cannot care for the dog full-time.

HALLOWEEN HAPPENINGS

Though Halloween was one of the warmest on record, with temperatures in the 70's at sunset, an abnormally low number of children turned out in the neighborhood for trick-or-treating.

Though many neighbors decorated their houses the most in recent memory, this was not effective in encouraging more kids to venture out. In fact, an average of less than ten children was reported among houses in the neighborhood.

SCHOOL BOARD ELECTIONS

Another major story this year involved the election of new school board officers to the Upper Moreland School Board. Much controversy was heard over the former school board members and their policies in regard to UMHS.

Skip Lynch, a longtime resident of the neighborhood, was only one of the five candidates elected. He and the others, Karen Houck, David Bender, David Hasiuk, and Ronnalee Colantonio, are set to take office soon.

All of the candidates have questioned the usefulness of Intensive Scheduling at the high school and suggest that certain aspects of the schedule should be modified.

VANDALISM

While the major story in 1998 was the Pioneer Road reconstruction project, 1999 was, unfortunately, marred by rampant vandalism that had residents anxious of future occurrences.

The first reported incident occurred on April 24, when Henry Sokolowski discovered two of his decorative walkway lights had been destroyed. A hose that was draining water from his basement was also moved, an action that could have caused major damage.

The lights were damaged two times before the police were called to report the crime. Officer Peter Ruddell was on the scene to record the destruction, the first of two visits to the neighborhood.

In late May and June, however, the neighborhood was terrorized by relentless vandals who did not know when to stop.

By far the worst incident of the year occurred when the tires of a truck that belonged to neighbor Steven Spiecker were slashed. Spiecker had rented a truck because the one that he normally parked in his driveway had broken down days earlier. He was then forced to pay the entire cost of the damage.

Another incident involved a tree limb

that was felled in front of the Sokolowski household. Since there were no adverse weather conditions the night before, it was determined that the damage was caused by deliberate vandalism.

Also in May, pranksters ordered several pizzas for delivery to the Sokolowski household. It was impossible to determine the source of the phone calls each of the three times this happened.

As stated above, vandals returned in early November to egg the Hoffmans' house. Hopefully, this incredible streak of vandalism will end before anything else is damaged or anyone hurt.

What's Really Important?

When the Holidays approach, as they are upon us now, the world slams to a halt to celebrate the special season. Unlike any of the other holidays of the year, Christmas seems to become bigger and bigger every year and encompasses almost an entire month and a half in preparations and the holiday itself. Whereas other holidays such as Independence Day are celebrated for one day a year and then forgotten, an entire season is dedicated to the Christmas time of year.

People also treat each other differently during this special season. While others may say that this is good, I maintain that this is unfortunate. It isn't because people should kill each other in everyday conversations, but because they should be more considerate of each other during the rest of the year. For eleven months, families heckle and argue among themselves, and then in the twelfth, celebrate the holidays together, and then start the process all over again. This happens in businesses, schools, and just about everywhere. Why do people set aside a separate season for treating each other nicely? Imagine how much of a better place the world would be if people simply had respect for their fellow citizens? Notice that I use the word "respect" here. You don't have to like someone if you have respect for them. I have respect for many people I don't particularly like.

And then, there's the typical department store's version of Christmas. More than half of this country's money changes hands in December in order to purchase holiday gifts. Obviously, big business leaders have conducted studies on this and concluded that the best course of action would be to rip people off with outrageous prices that drop on December 26. The shoppers still go at it, however, fighting over the last expensive gift to give to their children. My parents have never waited in huge lines for overpriced merchandise in order to buy me a Christmas present, and I haven't turned out to be a drug addict who lives on his own at 16 in a slum in center city Philadelphia.

That isn't the important part of Christmas. Some are more concerned with buying out entire store shelves on Black Friday than enjoying the holidays with their family or other loved ones. What's

the point of celebrating the holidays if all that's important to you is buying gifts?

Change

by Amanda Dilks

Things are changing. I don't like it. Things change all the time, of course. I'm talking about family and tradition. "The Holidays" are a great time of year. Near the end of November, families gather together to celebrate Thanksgiving. About a month later they come together again to celebrate Christmas. My family has many holiday traditions.

When I was little, I loved Christmas and Thanksgiving with my family. Don't get me wrong, I still do. But as I get older and my parents and aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents get older, things have started to change. I hate it. I cannot deal with some of our traditions not happening. This sort of change scares me.

For example, this year I joined the marching band. I had to be at the Thanksgiving Day football game. When I got home from the game, the table was set--china, silver, and all. I feel like such a girl saying this (not that that's a bad thing since I am a girl), but I love to set the table with the good china and silver. It is truly something I look forward to all year. I was very upset that this had already been done without me this year. Being able to set the table isn't the only thing that's different, but Stephen said he only needed two more pages, so I'll save the rest of my complaints for another story.

As my cousins and I have been growing up, things have been slowly changing year by year. I'm such a stickler for tradition and detail that I hate to see our traditions broken. When I was younger, I couldn't imagine ever doing anything differently for Thanksgiving or Christmas. This was irritating to me as a little kid. Now, it's changing the routine that irritates me.

17 People and a Turkey

A slight stretch of the actual events of Thanksgiving
by Amanda Dilks

"Where are they? They're late!" was the cry that came from the kitchen at 2:01 p.m. on Thanksgiving afternoon. "They" referred to the fourteen other family members who were coming over to eat Thanksgiving dinner with us. I asked my mom what time she had asked everyone to arrive and she says, "Whenever." So, apparently, whenever is now interchangeable with two o'clock. God forbid anyone should arrive after 2:00. I don't know what magical event happens at 2 on Thanksgiving Day, but it must be grand. So when a knock on the door came at 2:38, (and I do know the exact time because I was watching the clock. I was intrigued by my mother's outburst and was wondering if anything fantastic would happen between 2 and the moment everyone arrived--stop trying to guess, nothing happened.) I watched my mom for signs of a conniption fit. Luckily for all of us, she remained calm.

Dinner was slated for 4:00 p.m. Now, everybody knows that on Thanksgiving, dinner is never served on time. Generally, dinner can be served anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour later than originally planned. This is one of the few generalizations that applies in my home. Fortunately for my two aging grandmothers, dinner was served only a mere twenty minutes late. They don't have all day to sit around just to wait for a turkey, you know.

Dinner included all the traditional Thanksgiving dishes--turkey, gravy, yams, cranberry sauce in the shape of the can, dinner rolls, etc.. Dinner at the Dilks house also included some strange dishes that I did not care to sample. One such dish, affectionately referred to as "stinky cheese" by my immediate family, made by Mommy, consists of zucchini, carrots, and a type of cheese called Grourier, has a particularly strong odor which greatly resembles the smell that often rolls through the halls of the high school. I know many of you know what I'm talking about--the oh-so-pleasant smell of the local sewer authority. It has to be bad when people eat something that smells like that. It's even worse

when the people are your family.

Dessert was another adventure in itself. My grandmother is a wonderful baker. She made us six pies. For all you math fans out there, at seventeen people and 8 slices per pie, that works out to be about 2.7 pieces each. After eating a fairly large amount of turkey and stuffing, I couldn't even handle one piece. On Friday morning we still had enough assorted slices to make 4 complete pies.

Let's talk about Cool Whip, shall we? We bought two containers of it to put on pie. My grandmother brought two more containers with her. My aunt and uncle didn't think they were bringing enough, so they took it upon themselves to pick a container on the way over. My other aunt and uncle brought a can of Ready Whip. My other aunt and uncle brought a half gallon of vanilla ice cream. As I write this article, over a week after Thanksgiving, there is one half-full container of Cool Whip and a full can of Ready Whip in the refrigerator and four containers of Cool Whip in the freezer. What will you ever do with four containers of Cool Whip, you ask? I HAVE NO IDEA! If anyone has any practical ideas for four containers of Cool Whip, I would greatly appreciate them.

After dinner . . . well, what does anyone do after Thanksgiving dinner? The men watched football, my two grandmothers fell asleep in chairs, my little sister played with my little cousins, the women washed the dishes, and I had meaningful discussions about life after high school and higher learning with my cousins who were home from college. Meaningful in this context means talking about doing your own laundry and trying to pass Organic Chemistry. It was funny stuff.

When the dishes were done and the grandmothers woke up, people started going home. We tried pawning off leftover turkey on them. It didn't work. For four days straight after Thanksgiving, I ate turkey for lunch and dinner. One day I even had it for breakfast. I did turkey soup, I did turkey sandwiches, I nuked turkey in the microwave. Then my dad, who by the way is much saner than my mom, remembered that we were not in a contest to see how many straight meals could include turkey. We had real food again on Tuesday night. There was much rejoicing.

The turkey is almost gone now, but the memories from this Thanksgiving are just too strange to

be forgotten.

"When?" he said. He was calmer now. "When . . . I mean, how long . . . no . . . yeah . . . how . . ." And now very certain and very angry. His tone was bitter, like he was pounding Nick's face in with every other syllable. "How long had it been going on?"

Nick stood very still, looking very solemn, trying very hard not to make any exaggerated expressions of thought, as he was prone to make. He didn't know how to answer this. "Bush," he thought. Yes he did! It was remarkably easy . . . *didn't know how*, indeed.

"Well . . . " he started.

"Don't "well" me. How long?" Very impatient.

"Well, I was just gonna say tha..."

"Shut up! Shut up! I don't care what you were just gonna say! Shut up! Listen! How long? How long?"

"Three months."

Eruption.

"Three months! Three months?

"Yeah, man! Three months, okay! Now for Goodness sake, will you shut up! Sound like a crazy person."

With a shocked, questioning look on his face, he looked all around him to an imaginary gathering of people with equally bewildered gapes. A rush of air escaped his open mouth to produce small noise like wheezing. "Crazy? He calls me crazy! The man tells me that he's been going out with my girlfriend for three months. Am I a little upset about this? Hum? Yes, I am upset about it! In fact, I'm *mad as heck* about it! And he calls me crazy! Well, color me crazy, *?!*#&*!"

He looks at the floor. Then the palms of his hands as they come between it and his eyes. He looks up then.

“What, are you still here? You go now!”

“But...”

“Go!”

And so Nick went. He walked home--a short walk, as he lived five houses down the street. Steve lay down on his bed and stared at the ceiling. Could it have been that long? Three months. It must have been while he was in rehab. He came out and she started acting kind of distant. It freaked him out from the very beginning. “You idiot. You stupid idiot,” he scolded himself. “I don’t even know who to blame,” he said aloud, “but for right now, it’s him, the impudent jerk.” He suddenly tensed as the image of mercilessly beating Nick popped into his head. He flung his eyes open and growled, “NO. I’m not crazy. We’re not starting *that* now.” Then the stream of consciousness swept him up, and he started spouting off thoughts. And that’s all the words coming out of his mouth were--thoughts. He did not comprehend a single word until it was actually verbalized. Only then could his ear decipher it and send the impulse to his brain for interpretation. All that in a fraction of a second, until the next complete thought streamed out. He was making implications and refuting them out of impulse alone.

“Her fault. His fault. Couldn’t have been that long. It was. Where was I? One of life’s little ironies. What am I saying? It’s not ironic. It’s bush! This is bush league! Suicide? No, think not. I was never the type. He’s dead. He’s dead. Am I gonna kill him? No. But he’s dead. How? I don’t care how! I’ve gotta do something. What am I going to do? She doesn’t want *me*? What did I do? This is not okay. I have to do something.”

The next day, hundreds of millions of emails were sent around the world. One of which was sent from him to her. It consisted of a song lyric.

He’s everything you want. He’s everything you need.

He’s everything inside of you that you wish you could be.

He says all the right things, at exactly the right time,

but he means nothing to you, and you don't know why.

Following this, it read, "My last thoughts will not be of you," and it was signed, "torturing you from beyond the grave. --Steve."

"Well, isn't that just like Steve?" she thought and deleted the email. "What is this? A cry for attention, or sympathy maybe? Tough break!"

The next morning, Friday, Nick saw Steve walking down the hall and did not move his head, neither looking at Steve, nor averting his eyes as he passed. At the last possible second before moving out of reach, Steve grabbed Nick by the arm, jerking him from the wall where he was precariously anchored. Steve tugged the heavy load awkwardly down the hall to his locker. He released Nick with a push that sent him into the row of lockers, but not hard. Steve opened the locker, hung up his coat, and knelt, opening his bag. After quickly exchanging some binders and zipping the bag, he stood up and looked at Nick for the first time.

"I've been thinking," he said. "I've been thinking about what I can do--what any man in my situation could do. Do you know what I found?"

Nick opened his mouth to let the monosyllable escape, but Steve silenced it with a finger and a preemptive "Eh, Don't answer that. You don't get to speak right now. I'll tell you what I found. Not a whole lot. There's not a whole lot I can do! Am I devoid of ideas? No. I thought about it and came up with a few plans, but nothing just seemed to work. But you know what? I'm not telling you now. It's time for homeroom. SO, I'll tell you after school. I'll find you, and then we'll have a little chat. Sound good?"

Steve walked down the hall and disappeared into homeroom. Nick did likewise.

Nothing much happened that day.

When school was over, Nick went to his locker and waited. He waited five minutes while the

halls cleared out and the busses pulled away from the school one by one. He waited another five minutes. Twenty-three seconds into the third round of five, Steve appeared in the hall, walking toward him. Nick stood up and closed his locker, which he had left open so passers-by wouldn't think he was just sitting there. Steve was now next to him.

"Let's go."

"Where?"

"Home, idiot."

There was nothing particularly strange about anything that had happed in the last eleven minutes. They usually went home together anyway. They walked outside to the parking lot and got into their respective cars. There *was* something strange about that. Nick and Steve got their licenses within a few days of each other and bought cars within of few weeks of each other. They decided it'd be best if they took turns driving to school each day. This had been going on since the first day of school this year. At least it had been until about eleven weeks ago when Steve got busted on some drug charges. He was confined for seventy-five days, underwent a little rehab, and his license was revoked. But he got out and went back to school. Nick picked him up every day since then. Until today. Nick walked up the steps and looked through the screen door this morning. Steve came to the door and shook his head.

"How are you going to get to school?"

"Don't worry about it. Just go."

As Nick was walking away, he quickly added, "Oh yeah, I hate you. You're not my friend anymore."

Steve walked away. Now they were driving home. Nick pulled up in front of his house. He got out and walked up the street to Steve's. The front door was open and he went in and upstairs. Steve was on his bed.

"You could get in a lot of trouble. What were you thinking?"

"You know what? I don't really care. Rules . . . I don't care for rules. And don't pretend you care about what happens to me!"

Nick pulled out a desk chair and sat down facing the bed. Steve looked very tired, but his words were vibrant.

"Now, about this plan of mine. A wrong has been committed and there will be consequences. I submit that there is one way we can settle this. It's going to sound crazy at first, but you'll see it's the only way. Do you know what I'm thinking, Nick?"

"I'm afraid I might. And if I am, you're right. There's no way it's going to happen. Do you mean . . . ?"

"Chicky Run? Yes, I do. Don't you see how perfect it is? We've joked about it all these years. We know all the urban legends, or whatever you want to call them, and now we're gonna do it.
Now, you've got to be thinking that I've totally lost it, and you're right about that, too. Do you know she was the first girl I ever loved? Huh? I really did. But then, you did know that. You must have, since I told you. But you didn't care."

A pause.

"I'm calling you out, Nick. You're going to do this with me. I know you. We are two combatants. We've always competed, haven't we? Here's a new battlefield. We're doing this thing. We're doing it now. Come on."

Steve waited by the door. Nick sat with his head cocked, biting his lip. He thought about it for a few seconds and then simply said, "okay," and followed Steve downstairs and outside.

"See. I knew you couldn't say no. It's just too perfect NOT to finish it this way. Go get your car and follow me. I know a place."

"Yeah, fine. I just have to pop inside for a minute."

Nick obeyed. They drove about a mile and a half and pulled off onto the shoulder. Ahead of them was a cross street and beyond that a "Road Closed" sign. Steve walked back to Nick's car. Nick

put his window down.

"Okay, so here's the plan. Up ahead they're replacing the guard rails on that turn. You get in that lane and I'll stay over here. Pull up past the sign and stop. Then when I give the signal, go. You got it?"

"Yeah."

They pulled into position. Suddenly the depth of what they were doing hit Nick. What were they doing? This was ludicrous! Why was he here? Why did he agree so readily? He was staring down death, and he . . . didn't care. He was stunned by this. How could he not? They weren't even eighteen! All the things they'd never get to do.

Steve yelled from his car, "Are you ready?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"A better question would be why are *you* doing this? You think about that while you're plummeting to the ground. So, shall we? Remember, the first one to bail out loses. Go!"

The cars took off with a start. Each accelerated to about fifty. Ten seconds to live now. Both the car doors were open and all the windows.

Nick took stock of his life in about three seconds. In another two he realized how very inconsequential he was in the universe and also that he didn't want to be a statistic. In yet one more he told himself that those were all valid reasons to live, but...ah, what are ya gonna do, right?

They could see the end of the cliff. They looked at each other. Nick yelled, "I'm doing this for you!"

Steve slammed on his brakes and dove out of the car. Nick did the same with a one second delay. Both cars drove themselves off the cliff.

Both boys hit the ground and rolled, choking on dust and exhaust. The only thought in each other's minds was that they, themselves, would roll right over the side. When each boy came to a stop, they first felt the ground around them to make sure that in fact there WAS ground around them. Steve

walked over to Nick. He was about five feet from the edge. He collapsed next to him.

"You lose," said Nick.

"Are we alive?"

"I think so."

"Then no one loses," said Steve.

"What made you stop?"

"You told me what I wanted to hear."

"Were you really going to drive off?"

"Yes, of course."

"How did you know what I said?"

"Didn't. Just guessed. I know you too well, Nick."

"So you really don't know what I said, huh. It could have been, I regret nothing!'"

"Yeah, it *could* have. Nick, the point is you passed. It was like a test, and you passed."

"So what does this attempted double suicide teach us?"

"Nick, girls will come and go...until one day when you get tied down, BUT you always have your brotha's. See? You were ready to die just cause I said it'd be a cool way to spend a Friday night. You definitely have something! And you know what?"

They stood up.

"What?"

"You can keep her, man. Maybe it's just the near death experience talking, but as long as I've got you in my corner . . . AND I DO . . . I can live with an occasional broken heart."

"You really don't care? I almost followed you off a cliff and that makes it all better?"

"Yes."

"Works for me. Let's go home."

They started to walk. It was only a few minutes past four.

"Well, I really didn't have anything else planned for the day. What do you want to do?" asked Steve.

"Gee, I don't know man...I...sort of want to see her now."

Steve laughed. "Go ahead, man. Hopefully you'll have better luck with her than I did."

They got back to their street and stopped in front of Nick's house. There was a car in the driveway. Small children were riding bikes in the street and playing basketball in the park across the street.

"Ya know, Steve, there's going to be consequences to that dumb stunt we pulled. Fines, counseling, who knows."

"Yeah, Nick, I bet you're right. Do you hate me?"

"No. Do you hate me?"

"No. And you're my friend again."

"Well, then it really doesn't matter."

"No, Nick, I suppose not. One day we'll look back on this day and laugh."

"Not bloody likely!"

"Yeah, you're probably right. This whole thing just makes us a testament to how stupid and irrational teenagers can be."

"And how bad girls can mess you up–don't forget that."

"Wow . . . in that context it doesn't hardly seem worth it, does it?"

"Bye, Steve. Talk to ya later, okay."

"Have a good time with her."

Nick nodded and went inside. Steve walked up the street to his own house. He went upstairs and turned on the television. He didn't really want to watch television right now, but it kept his mind quiet. There would be enough criticism later. He contented himself with the notion that he did have a future, a place in this world, and that suicide was a coward's way out when things got ugly. Then he

let his mind go and watched the glowing screen in the corner of the dark room.

"If Your Hand Gets Tired, Blame Everyone Else"

by Stephen Sokolowski

Mr. Hoffman, my current physics teacher, stood up in front of the class for his daily lecture one day recently. It was a Thursday, I believe, in mid-November (it doesn't matter). That day, the instructor was reviewing some homework he had assigned from the night before. While going over the homework, he had encountered difficulty in eliciting answers from his students. After four problems, he asked how many of the class had actually completed the assignment. To the embarrassment of everyone in the room (especially those who had not finished the homework the night before), only seven or eight who were present in the class of around 25 students raised their hands. Mr. Hoffman then ordered the rest of the class to work on the problems that they should have completed the night before and raise their hands when they had the correct answer. "If your hand gets tired, blame everyone else," he said.

While this quote may be seen as insignificant, it signifies a radical change in philosophy in the school systems of today as compared to when the Baby Boomer generation attended high school. Back then, most people went to schools where they were expected to comport themselves properly at all times. Corporal punishment was common, and in Catholic school, if you did something wrong, you had to answer to the nuns. Not completing homework was a serious offense, no matter what the excuse, and coming home with low report card grades spelled disaster.

Today, however, the attitude (at least in public school systems) seems to be completely opposite of what was true thirty years ago. Thirty years is a long time, and many changes took place during that period. One of the most important was that the economy, which had been counterproductive to everyday life in the depression generation's times, is now on a rebound. When my grandparents brought up both of my parents, they instilled values in them of hard work, which so many of today's youngsters lack. Since they survived the Great Depression, they learned from their mistakes and taught my parents that it was necessary to work hard in order to be successful. Fortunately (or

unfortunately, depending on how you look at it), there were no major catastrophes during many of today's middle-aged people's lifetimes, so the value of honesty and hard work is lost on many of the younger generation.

It is simply unbelievable that over two-thirds of the class would not do their homework on one night. The same was true in my English class. The teacher of that class never gave quizzes because he assumed that his students were mature enough to be completing the required nightly reading on time and to be able to answer any questions that he might ask the next day. Evidently, he was wrong. On one day, while we were reading Huckleberry Finn, Mr. Ferrarello gave a pop quiz to the class. The questions on the quiz were simple; anyone who had taken the fifteen minutes required the previous weekend would have been able to answer them completely without hesitation. I (and he too, I'm sure) was almost shocked when more than two-thirds of the class handed in their papers without even attempting to answer the questions. I was only one of two in the class to receive 11 points out of a possible 10 on the quiz. He even gave an extra credit point for what I thought was required homework. (I'm not complaining).

It seems that anyone today would take the lazy way out if they were allowed. I hate taking literature examinations because the tests are extremely difficult. Even though I've read the entire book or play, some people who don't read it and read the Cliff Notes instead receive significantly higher grades than I do.

Besides the reason listed above, I also believe that society's emphasis on extracurricular activities contributes to the underlying problem. Many students simply don't have enough time to complete their homework or do the extra studying that is needed to be fully successful. Some colleges place more importance in getting involved with activities and sports than trying to be the best student one can possibly be. As most already know, I was not admitted into the National Honor Society this school year because I wasn't involved in enough activities during my tenth grade year and fell a few points short. This wasn't a surprise to me; I had never expected to be let in anyway. After this failure,

I had a tremendous motivation to get involved in enough activities so that the NHS committee would have to laugh next year. Now, I don't know if it's worth it. Sure, it's important to be involved somewhat, but only in what one wants to be involved in. Nobody, even three years from now after you're admitted into college, is going to care about what activities you were involved in high school. My dad was hardly involved in any extracurricular activities, but he is a successful engineer. Obviously, it's more important to get good grades, so why doesn't anyone else realize this?

And no, those good grades should not include physical education. It is simply foolish that teachers should grade physical education on skill levels. The teachers I have had in gym for the past two years were extremely good in that regard, but I received terrible grades in 9th grade due to the grading system of the teacher I had then. It's not that I dislike this teacher. I'm just suggesting that the grading system for physical education in high schools should be changed. As a result of these horrible marks, I fell down to 44th in my class and have now only half recovered since.

Another reason that many of today's less-than-ideal students are the way they are is that there are many more distracting influences than back when today's parents were educated. Television is a major example. I'd be exaggerating if I said I watch two hours of TV a week, but many people (I have a good friend like this) stay up until absurd hours watching a show that's on until then, and they awaken exhausted the next day. They then end up procrastinating what they could have been doing while the program was on, until hours before a project is due.

Something needs to be done soon to correct these problems. The solution isn't to simply assign more work; that would just fail the students who are already keeping up with their studies. Enough work has been assigned; what is needed is strict enforcement of procedures. Teachers could check homework much more often then they do. My calculus teacher has a great way of keeping his students involved: he surprisedly checks homework only once a month, but makes it worth four or five percent of your grade. This is much more effective than simply assigning a quarter of a point for each assignment, because it keeps everyone wondering if the teacher is going to collect their homework the

next day and destroy the grades of those who didn't complete it. These are only a few suggestions, but it is the responsibility of the administration at our schools to implement them. Perhaps it is time to crack down on laziness and discipline problems and make our schools better for everyone.

Millennium Facts

Submitted by Henry A. Sokolowski

The Gregorian Calendar used by most of the world today is not very old. In 1472, Pope Sixtus IV asked an astronomer to reform the Julian calendar, which had been used since 46 BC and was 11 minutes and 15 seconds too long every year. By the 15th century, the true vernal equinox was nine days before March 21. But the astronomer died, and it was not until 1582 that Pope Gregory XIII promulgated a new calendar. By that time, the discrepancy between the vernal equinox and the Julian calendar had increased to ten days, so Pope Gregory ordered them dropped. October 5 became October 15. Italy and the Catholic countries of Spain, Portugal, and France changed to the new calendar at the same time.

Other countries, however, were slower to change. Great Britain, for example, waited until 1752, when the difference between the Julian and Gregorian calendars had grown to 11 days. Parliament decreed that the day after September 2 would become September 14. The people, however, did not understand. Riots broke out in the streets. The slogan "Give us back our 11 days" was shouted at those in authority. Bill collectors, landlords, etc, were confused, not knowing how to charge. People thought they were losing 11 days' salary as well as 11 days of their lives. Resistance continued for years. Russia, in fact, did not adopt the new calendar until 1917.

How much is a billion?

A billion seconds ago, Harry Truman was president.

A billion minutes ago was just after the time of Christ.

A billion hours ago, man had not yet walked the earth.

A billion dollars ago was late yesterday at the U.S. Treasury.

“I Wish I were Young Again...”

How many times have you heard those words? “I wish I were seventeen.” “I wish I were back in school.” “I wish I were able to do everything you can.” The expressions in the previous sentence seem to be a staple in the life of some adults. Before you consider repeating that age-old phrase to someone else inadvertently, you have to consider all the circumstances. While there are many strengths and disadvantages to being a typical American high school student, it is clearly visible that the advantages of being young are far outweighed by the troubles involved.

Many are now wondering what I am talking about. Consider the life of a typical middle-age working adult, whom we will name Bob. Bob awakens around 6:30 to prepare for another day at work at a major corporation. Since Bob loves what he does for a living and chooses this by his own free will, he doesn’t dread getting up for another day at work. Bob leaves his house an hour later, arrives at his job at 8:00, and works a normal eight-hour workday, leaving his workplace at 4:30 and coming home at 5:00 that evening. He then prepares dinner, or his wife has prepared it for him before his return, and they eat together. After cleaning up, Bob settles down to an hour or two of balancing the checkbook, changing the sheets on the beds, and other miscellaneous household chores. Finally, having completed his work before 9:00, he settles down to a few hours of relaxing TV watching, getting to bed at a reasonable time.

To anyone else except you, this would sound like the ideal existence. But since you want to be young again, let me review what a teenager’s life is really like. This entire paragraph could be shortened into one word - school. When a baby-boomer hears that word today, it brings back reminiscences of the good old days when they were in school “without a care in the world”. Perhaps this was true back then, but it certainly isn’t today.

School is getting up before 6:00 every morning, knowing that you have to return for another day of hard work. School is completing five hours of homework a night to the best of your ability,

only to find out that the assignment isn't being collected and your work was in vain. It is depressing to find out that you worked for hours the previous night just to find out that twice as much work is in store for the next. School is learning to spend every minute of your time to the best of your ability so that no time is wasted. School is showing up for your last class on an early dismissal Friday, hopeful for the weekend, to learn that five section reviews have been assigned for the coming week. If you still say "well, what about the weekends?", then consider a typical Sunday - beginning homework as soon as you return from church services and completing it five, six, or even seven hours later, just in time for dinner, and a few hours afterward, time to sleep to get ready for another day of grueling work the next day. School is trying your hardest to get involved in every extracurricular (sorry, I mean co-curricular) activity possible in addition to the homework load that is placed on you. Imagine taking two weeks to get together a Christmas list because you simply have too much to do as it is and can't use anything new. This is all topped just by knowing that you're going to have a social studies teacher who is going to assign a *35-page paper* next semester, along with three hours of homework a night. The catch: it's only going to get worse before it gets better.

Bob doesn't have to constantly worry about keeping his grades up. Bob doesn't have to be anxious about what he is going to do in life or to find the perfect college. Since that's all behind him, he can look back in pride about his accomplishments. Bob doesn't have to spend his Saturday mornings taking four-hour long SAT tests to plan for his future. *Bob enjoys what he does*.

Before you wish you were young again, consider what was mentioned above. Would you rather go through all that again, or live your content life like Bob?

The Knights of the Square Table

Chapter 8

Chaos ensued as the city began to fall. Knights ran around the room in circles, unsure as to what to do. Katie, who had had a close call, slumped back against the wall in defeat The noise was deafening. Above all the screaming and yelling, a low pitch was heard as the island began to accelerate toward the ground.

"Everyone!" Christopher hastily screamed above the racket. "Quiet down! We can't do anything by panicking!"

"Is it possible to use the stones to escape?" Katie blurted out as soon as the commotion had dinned, keeping an eye on the bottom of the glass room at the approaching ground.

"Not here," Chapin said. "There's something in the capital that's blocking our magic. We have to get outside."

"We have three minutes at best," Christopher estimated. "Go! Upstairs!" The knights, forgetting about any orderly fashion, swarmed into the exit corridor and moved up as fast as it was possible to go with all the confusion. Katie and Mike followed behind as Christopher and Dave led the way. The city began to rumble as it descended through the clouds, making it difficult for the group to find their way through the corridor.

Suddenly, without any warning, the lights in the entire building dimmed, and finally went out with a loud pop. The knights ahead let out a scream. Katie and Mike, who had no idea what was going on, ran headlong into a large pileup where one or two had stopped when the lights had ceased to function.

"Hurry!" Christopher screamed redundantly from up above, his voice growing fainter as the distance between him and the others increased. Evidently, he was unaware of what was occurring just a few feet behind him.

"Get up! Stop thinking and just run!" Katie screamed above the noise, unsure if anyone had heard her. The building was shaking so violently that pieces of the ceiling and walls were beginning to litter their escape route. The pile was dissipating rapidly, but it was doubtful that the group had more than two minutes left to travel the rest of the distance. The last of the followers rounded the turn as a rockslide caved in behind them, sealing off the hallway. Had they been two seconds later, they would have not survived, Katie thought.

The perilous ascent (or descent, depending on your point of reference) continued. Christopher, Chapin, and Dave were so far ahead now that Katie wondered how she was going to assist them in casting the spell.

Finally, they reached the top and sprinted across the large entryway, avoiding falling debris. Across from them, one of the side walkways had collapsed, causing the walkways below to also fall. As a result, a large pile of rubble stood blocking the window that Mike and the knights had previously been able to enter. Fortunately, three knights held open the main door. A bright light was shining in from outside, contrasting greatly with the almost pitch darkness within.

As Katie flew through the opening, she was shocked with what she saw. The city was much lower than she had thought. She grappled in her pocket for the stone, but found that it wasn't there!

"The stone! Where is it?" she screamed. Christopher and Chapin, already standing away from the building, poised to perform the teleportation ritual, looked at Katie with wide eyes.

"You lost the stone?" Chapin gasped.

"Where is it?" Dave asked, looking around. He sprinted back into the building, Mike hot on his heels. A few seconds later, they returned, saying, "It's in here! Come on!"

Katie, realizing that they would be unable to pick up the Hadar Stone, raced inside, retrieved the stone from the ground where it rested, and rushed back outside the building. Christopher and

Chapin were waiting in the middle of the knights, ready to cast the spell.

"We have to get as far away from here as possible," Christopher said quickly. The ground was shaking so angrily that it was now impossible to stand. Entire buildings around them fell. One, down the street, sent debris into the air around them. Near the edges of the city, the ground was falling apart, pieces now falling separately from the large island. Papers and parchments that had been inside the buildings seemed to fly upward at an incredible speed, when in reality it was the companions who were falling downward.

Christopher, motioning to Katie and Chapin, quickly said, "You don't need to know the spell. I'll try to reconstruct it from my memory." He then began to chant, and the three joined hands. The ground was now only a few hundred feet away. The city was falling at a fever pitch. Knights braced for the impact. Christopher finished his chanting as the city was less than a hundred feet from the ground. The outlines of the knights and the five grew thin and then vanished.

The inevitable happened. The last moment seemed to last years. The city crashed into the ground at breakneck speed. There was a bright flash of light, and the noise that followed was greater than that emitted by a million bees. The ground shook miles away. A tidal wave of dirt flowed outward from the impact site, enveloping everything in its path. The chaos continued as smaller pieces of the island embedded themselves in the earth around the site of the large disaster.

After a few minutes, the calamity had ceased, and an unnatural quiet pervaded the air. A large crater had formed where the city had impacted the earth, almost a mile wide from rim to rim. A large pile of dirt raised the rim of the crater from the floor of the plains. Papers and other light objects continued to flutter down over the disaster area.

One landed directly on Christopher's head. He brushed it off with his arm. Katie, Chapin, Mike, Dave, and the knights were standing next to him, observing the destruction. They were only a few hundred feet away from the crater, much too close.

Katie picked up the paper and examined it. Indecipherable symbols filled the entire page. She placed it in her pocket. At least it would be good for fire material, she thought. Christopher was now walking ahead of them toward the gigantic crater. In front of him, a large piece of wood that had been projected into the air during the enormous explosion slammed into the ground at terminal velocity, spraying dust over him and his comrades.

Christopher jumped back from the explosion. He was uninjured. There was still quite a bit of debris left in the air.

"Maybe it's better that we stand back for a minute," he said, half to himself. A few minutes later, when things had calmed down slightly, he again moved toward the edge of the crater.

The others, as well as many of the knights, followed suit. Looks were deceiving, because it took about three times as long to reach the crater's edge as they had expected. When the group had reached the edge, they gazed in awe. The crater was enormous. The area was still violent from the explosion, and dust continued to billow from the center of the crater. Eventually, the immediate vicinity around them was so thick with dust that it was impossible for Christopher to see his arm in front of him.

"Let's move out," Christopher said, disgusted with the changing conditions and worried for their safety. The rim of the crater was less than ten feet away, but in which direction? It was impossible to tell the knights.

"Everyone stand where you are," Katie's voice was heard. The sound appeared to be coming from far away, but Christopher knew that Katie was standing right next to him.

"Listen to this rock," Mike said. "We can move away from the sound." There was a grunt coming from an unknown source that could very well have been right next to Christopher, and a loud crash from behind his back.

"Go away from that sound," Mike ordered everyone. It didn't take long for the coughing and choking knights to heed that command. They set out at full speed, away from the disaster area. Christopher and the others followed close behind. For the next few minutes, the knights did not appear

to be a well-trained army, as they simply fled from the dust and debris as fast as they could. A few times, a knight or two fell, causing a large pileup because it was impossible to see what was happening in front of them.

After ten minutes, the well-conditioned knights were almost a mile and a half away from the crater before they began to tire. Christopher and Chapin, being the oldest of the group, struggled to keep up.

When they were at least two miles from the crater, the conditions began to noticeably improve. The dust, which had made it almost impossible to see or breathe, dissipated rapidly. Christopher called to the knights to slow down now that they were out of danger. The knights continued. The going would be tough from now on, because the knights' horses had been annihilated in the explosion or run off. They would have to travel on foot from now on.

Through what remained of the dust, it was possible to see that the sun was now peeking over the horizon to the east. It was agreed that the best course of action would be to keep moving for as long as possible to get away from the crater, because the dust could easily suffocate them. Worse yet, Yavin's forces would no doubt rush to the scene of the crash to investigate. Fortunately, the enemy would use traditional methods of transportation that could take months, but Yavin had magic that was far more powerful and could shorten the journey considerably.

The landscape was sparse. The knights were moving into a forested area. Compared to their journey through the forest twenty-five years ago, it was much easier traveling through without leaves on the trees. It was possible to see for miles. Christopher, using his keen eyesight, was able to spot a grove in the forest as far as a hundred feet away. It was there that they camped out around noon.

When they had settled down to rest, a fire was lit in the middle of the break in the trees with some timber that the knights managed to fell using what few tools they still had in their possession. Christopher, Katie, Mike, Chapin, and Dave settled down to discuss the recent events.

"That was too close," Katie said.

"I agree. From now on, we won't all go together," Christopher suggested. "It's only a disaster waiting to happen. This time, it was an accident, but we should try to prevent something such as this from happening again."

"What exactly did you see up there?"Chapin asked Christopher. Christopher recounted everything that he and Dave had seen to the group, and Mike and Katie did the same.

"So that was why those strange lights kept going out," Katie said.

"Yes, whatever that switch was, it did something to the lights," Dave replied. "But the question remains . . . what was that room?"

"I've never seen anything like it in my entire life," Chapin said. "Is it possible that Yavin was able to construct all of that machinery? I thought that he used magic in his workings."

"Those machines were far too advanced to be created by any normal man. They were either powered by magic or came from somewhere . . . else."

"Where would they come from if not here?" Mike asked, puzzled.

"The only answer I can think of is that they originated from this power that is greater than Yavin that we continue to hear about," Christopher said.

"You're suggesting that he comes from elsewhere," Dave asked.

"I don't know. But what I do know is that we are beginning to run out of time. The floating island just showed us that. The snows will be coming any day now and will only get worse as the season progresses and we move north. We need to make a decision on what to do," Christopher said.

"You're suggesting that we wait until the spring?" Katie asked.

"I'm not suggesting anything," Christopher replied curtly. "But we have reached the point where we must make plans for infiltrating Yavin's kingdom. At this rate, we'll be in sight of the Blackstone mountains in two weeks."

"Why not just go right through?" Dave suggested. "If we arrive during the dead of winter, nobody will suspect us. We can get in, do the job, and leave."

"Yavin has eyes and ears everywhere," Chapin replied seriously. "We would all be killed the instant he finds out."

"Then all we have to do is not be found out," Dave cockily replied .

"It's not that simple, though," Christopher retorted. "If we are found, we won't stand a chance. We need to secure reinforcements to help us, as there's sure to be a huge battle."

"There's not a town for miles up here," Chapin said. "Where would we find these reinforcements?"

"That is the problem," Mike added. "We have to find reinforcements, but where?"

"I wonder," Dave said, "what happened to the troll stronghold that we attacked a few months...I mean, twenty-five years ago."

"Our allies were attacking when we last left," Christopher said. "Nobody has since heard otherwise, nor has any word trickled down over the years about what became of it."

"Yavin was there before," Mike put in. "It is possible that he is there now, and even if he isn't, there could be reinforcements for our group."

"We have no guarantee of either outcome," Katie said. "If we went, we could either find enough force to destroy Yavin or get ourselves killed."

"It's too much of a risk to take," Christopher said.

"I agree," Chapin seconded.

"If we've decided that it would be best to avoid the troll stronghold, then where should we go?" Mike asked.

"The only route is east," Dave replied.

"Either that or go for Yavin right now," Chapin suggested.

"This decision has to be agreed upon by all of us," Christopher said. "We'll go east. Does anyone disagree?" There wasn't a sound. The echo of Christopher's voice reverberated throughout the surrounding area in the clear air.

"We need to continue north as we have been for a while, and then we'll turn east along the mountains. It will be safer and we'll have somewhere to hide in case of an attack," Christopher planned.

"Let's get some rest before we start out again tomorrow," Chapin suggested, and they all lay down to sleep.

The party slept on and off throughout the night. Clouds were beginning to form, and a chill was in the air. Beneath the trees, leaves were rustling as the party awoke at dawn to begin the next leg of their journey.

They set off to the north through the forest. The trees seemed to grow thicker as they moved farther inward. Christopher suggested that the knights and the party move eastward to see if it were possible to avoid the forest altogether.

A cold rain began to fall around noon, soaking the travelers to the bone. The trees stretched far to the horizon, despite Christopher's suggestion that traveling east would solve their problems.

A small, but quick river ran through the forest to the north, and someone suggested partway through the afternoon that they construct boats from the plentiful timber. At first, it was suggested that each group of knights build their own transportation, but the idea was frowned upon by Christopher, who insisted that it would be more efficient to build several larger rafts to float them downstream. From where the group was stationed now, it appeared that the stream ran to the northeast, which was the direction in which Christopher had originally planned to travel.

When it was beginning to get dark a few hours later, the boats were coming along nicely. Using their swords, the knights had managed to cut down smaller trees, a long and tedious process that took several hours.

Around nightfall, the rain changed to a pelting sleet that forced the knights to take shelter and covered the ground with ice. Since it would be impossible to build when it was too slippery to stand, the knights retired for another long November night. Chapin, unable to sleep, attempted to light a fire

with what dry wood she could find, but was unsuccessful.

Midway through the night, the first few flakes of snow began to drift down through the trees. The chill that had been in the air before now turned to a fierce cold. It was all the knights could do to get some sleep. This is nothing compared to what it'll be like in a month, Christopher thought.

In the morning, the snow continued to fall until it was deep enough to reach up to the party's ankles. It was difficult to continue the work of making rafts when ice covered just about everything in sight, but the knights accomplished it somehow. It was decided that ten people would occupy each of the rafts. The five travelers would lead the group, followed behind by the rest of their small army.

The rafts were finally cast away from the shoreline. Christopher quickly discovered that the most pressing problem was how to keep snow from accumulating on the rafts where the passengers were not seated. The river moved surprisingly quickly, faster than they could walk, and without the effort.

By the end of the day, the adventurers were at least thirty miles downstream from where they had started. The river still wound through thick woodland. The snow had stopped around noon, and the air was beginning to warm, signifying a temporary thaw.

During the night, Christopher observed the river and the large amount of debris that traveled along with its current. Large driftwood logs and pieces of unknown material were profuse in the faster waters in the middle, while smaller objects lazily floated by closer to the shoreline.

The source must be up the river, but from where, Christopher asked himself. Yavin must be up to no good somewhere upstream. Would it be worth exploring what was going on up there or continue on? Christopher drifted off to sleep, despite the chilly breeze.

Christopher related his findings to his colleagues. The stream of rubble continued, growing greater at certain times than others. At one point during the morning as they were readying their supplies, the river was so full of unknown material that it would have been impossible to cast off.

"Let's see if we can capture one of these pieces to see what they are," Katie suggested. The others waded out as far as they could stand without being swept off their feet. They managed to pull in one of the pieces of strange material, using a rope that Christopher had assisted them in fashioning using what they had with them. The knights helped them pull the piece of material to the edge of the shore. The article was actually much taller than Christopher had originally thought. The strange carton resembled some kind of a water-tight box. A strange aura emanated from the package.

"Don't touch it," Chapin warned. "This box is enchanted. This isn't just junk - there's probably something inside."

"How do you suggest that we get it open?" Dave asked Christopher.

"I guess I'll have to risk this," he said. "Stand back." The others took a few steps back, leaving a semicircle around Christopher and the box. The outer waves of the river lapped at the edges of the container. Christopher stood up, and then reached down to touch the apparently unopenable box. He screamed out in pain, and a lightning bolt struck straight up into the sky. Suddenly, a blue light surrounded Christopher for a moment. Then all was quiet.

"What was that?" Dave asked Christopher. "Are you all right?" Christopher moved a bit, emitting a grunt. "Yes, I think so," came the reply.

"Look!" Mike said, pointing to the container. The strange aura that had surrounded it was now gone, and a latch was clearly visible on the side.

"That trap must have been meant to kill anybody who attempted to open the box, but the stone protected me," Christopher theorized. "Now, the spell has worn off. Stand back. I'm going to try to open it."

Christopher stood up with a lot of effort and moved over to the box, struggling to maintain his balance. Eventually, his footsteps became firmer, and he was able to stand up straight. He touched the box, and nothing happened. He motioned for the others to come closer as he fumbled with the latch.

The latch gave way without any trouble, and Christopher opened the box in amazement.

The Knights of the Square Table

Chapter 9

"What is it?" Katie asked as she struggled to see over the heads of the knights in front of her.

"Knives - an entire case of them!" Christopher gasped as he reviewed the contents of the case in front of him.

"The whole box is loaded with weapons!" Chapin said.

"This isn't just any trash floating down the river," Christopher pointed out. "Yavin is transporting supplies to his troops from somewhere upstream!"

"They must be preparing a major attack," Mike said in fear. "Forces must be gathering at some point along this river."

"I wonder where it leads to," Christopher said more calmly now.

"How would it benefit Yavin to construct weapons in the south and then float them down river to the north?" Dave asked, puzzled. "Why not do it all in Yavin's territory? It would be harder to defend in the south."

"It would be harder to find for one thing," Chapin pointed out. "Or, they could be planning something secret away from where anybody would look. Notice that this river runs entirely through deep forest. It's an ideal location for such a scheme."

"Let's loot some of their boxes and see what else we can find," Christopher said. "It might be of use to us. I doubt that they'll notice a few missing pieces of equipment. Besides, it would take months for word to reach down the length of the river."

"Good idea," Mike said. "But we need a more efficient way of capturing the equipment; otherwise, it would take days to find what we want, and we don't have that long."

"Maybe we could construct a net somehow to catch the equipment as it travels downstream," Katie suggested.

"What would we use?" one of the knights asked. "It wouldn't be very practical to use wood to make a net."

"We could use the wood to make poles to pull in the loot," Dave suggested. "A net in this case wouldn't be very practical."

"Something like a fishing pole might be adequate," Christopher added. "It would allow us to capture the crates without being swept away in the current."

"How many poles would we need?" Chapin asked. "We should be continuing on before the total onset of winter and can't afford to waste time making poles to capture things from the river."

"Not too many, only about five if they were very strong. Two people could use one pole to retrieve things from the river, and others could unpack the boxes and distribute the contents," Christopher replied.

"It would only take a few hours to construct five poles," Chapin said. "Let's get working." Christopher didn't object, and the knights busied themselves in preparations. Indeed, the majority of the work was finished within two hours, and it was midafternoon when several knights were standing at the river bank to collect what was floating downstream.

At first, many cartons were drifting by on the placid waters of the river, but the supply dwindled as dusk approached. By the time that the group collectively decided to retire, it was a few hours into the night. It was very mild now, and the snow on the ground was turning to mush. They had managed to collect fifteen boxes, each containing 2 pieces of armor or two similar swords. The armor was nothing to get excited about, but the weapons were much better in quality than the ones the knights possessed. It seemed as if it would take a lot of work to prepare the enormous amount of provisions that were floating down the river, and that only made Christopher uneasy about Yavin's future plans.

A few hours before dawn, the party awoke and began to "fish" for equipment yet again. When the short six-hour day dawned, Chapin judged that more poles were needed to get the job done without wasting too much time. The weather was unpredictable in late November where they were, and nobody wanted to take any chances.

By the end of the day, they had collected enough armor and weapons to outfit the one hundred forty- three knights that had joined the group of five on their journey. It was now exceedingly obvious that someone had camped where they were. Trees were missing in a small area and the immediate vicinity was littered with discarded equipment.

Before the sun rose the next day, Christopher ordered the knights to bury everything that was unneeded so the area wouldn't look suspicious from the river, especially to any of Yavin's associates traveling down it. The time-consuming task took several hours and much energy to complete. It was decided that they would continue to travel down the river until the first sign of trouble, as it wouldn't make any sense to travel all the way up to wherever the goods originated. Most likely, the producers had no idea for whom they were making these items.

The details hammered out, the party set out back down the river on November 20. The first day of their journey was uneventful. The weather was almost summerlike, very unusual for that late in the year. It didn't hold out, however. By the second day, a cold rain began to fall again, turning to snow. The river was widening, but the slow current kept the travelers from getting any farther than twenty or thirty miles a day.

This was slightly faster than they could walk, however, and much easier. In fact, the task was so easy that many of the knights became bored spending their entire day sleeping or looking around on the rafts. Fortunately, the knights were able to occupy themselves by practicing with their new weapons and armor when time or weather permitted. Five days later, the same boring forest rolled by, with almost no visible progress on their part.

The only sign that they were actually getting closer to Yavin's territory was that the weather was becoming progressively worse. It was rare that the temperature rose above freezing during the days now. Snow fell every three days on average and began to accumulate on the shores of the river. The former forest that they had been traveling through was now a tangled mess of pine trees that, by the seventh day, were beginning to thin out.

The water beneath them was now beginning to get extremely cold. Christopher had said that they should continue their journey downriver until the water began to freeze, which could be any day now. By the tenth day of their journey, they had traveled two hundred miles to the northeast and still could see no sign of where the weapons and armor were traveling. Behind them, the supply had been thinning out as whoever was upriver was preparing for the freeze.

On the eleventh day, November 30, Christopher awoke that morning to the knights' yelling. The edges of the river were beginning to solidify into ice. Though it was still thin enough to be broken through by anyone walking on top of it, it would present a problem for the knights to land on the shore if it thickened. Christopher gave the signal to head for the northwest shore of the river. The other rafts followed suit, and knights stood up to stretch after the eleven-day journey down the river. After all the rafts had been pulled up onto the sandy shoreline, the five found each other and looked around. Dave gasped in awe and pointed to the northeast, in the direction of the river.

Out of the high clouds loomed the enormous Black Stone mountains. It was a sight that the five found hard to believe. They had traveled for three entire months through all kinds of difficulties and had survived to see what they were now beholding. The knights looked up in awe, their vision glued to the mountains that seemed to split the sky in two. They were almost completely white from snow and looked almost impossible to climb.

"Wow, that's amazing," Dave commented. He turned his view to the river, where ice lined the shores. The snow was almost six inches deep where he stood.

"I never thought we'd make it," Mike said.

"What do we do now? Keep going?" Katie asked Christopher and Chapin.

"We said we wanted to find out where these supplies were headed," Christopher said. "We can't stop now."

"Agreed. We must continue. But if we reach the mountains before we find what we're looking for, we will be forced to turn back," Chapin said in earnest.

"Then we are faced with another problem," Mike pointed out. "We have to find a way to trek through this snow, especially when it gets too deep to travel through on foot."

"We could make snowshoes," one of the knights ventured. "If we scrapped the rafts, which we have no use for anymore, we could use the remains to make skis or snowshoes to get us across the remaining miles to the mountains and beyond if necessary."

"I like that idea," Christopher replied. "It doesn't require any of our other precious materials, either."

"Well, then," Katie said. "Let's get started. Several of the knights moved toward Christopher, who barked out orders to his left and right. The rafts were disassembled within a half hour. By noon, they had the ski/snowshoe combination that they were looking for. With the new footwear, the knights were able to walk easily across the tundra without falling through, as well as shed them quickly in case of an attack.

The party set out at noon toward the mountains. The huge black shapes loomed larger as the day progressed. Three hours after noon, they were forced to stop as darkness fell. During those few hours, the group had made a considerable dent in their journey along the freezing river. The ice now thickened and began to encrust the entire body of water.

The next night was the coldest so far. The snow that covered the land was again beginning to thaw into mush, soaking the knights as they slept. The fire they had made with the remaining scraps of wood had melted the snow around the entire area, creating a sheet of ice that covered everything when it again grew cold the next morning before sunrise. The weak sun barely seemed to peak over the horizon now for the short five-hour days. The slush froze into ice this time, facilitating their journey.

It was possible for the knights to travel twice as fast on the ice as compared to the snow they had traveled on before. They had covered half the distance to the mountains during the first two short days, but it was impossible to tell in the rapidly changing weather.

Bitter winds blew over the plains as they neared the mountains on the fourth day. The river seemed to continue straight ahead even into the foothills. This was proven correct later that day as the travelers began to scale the foothills in front of the giant mountains.

On the fifth day since their departure from the river, the army of knights had almost reached the mountains when they came upon a small shack that had been built along the side of the now encrusted river. Further downstream from the shack, a large building loomed, constructed from enormous logs that stood several stories tall.

Christopher stopped short on the crest of a hill that overlooked the cabin. Down below, several trolls policed the area. They walked back and forth with large swords that were too huge for men to wield.

A large fire was visible between the two structures and had melted the snow between them, exposing bare earth with a few patches of grass. The whole complex was highly guarded and seemed to be out of place for its desolate surroundings.

"Get down," Christopher whispered, and the knights in the front row immediately ducked to avoid being spotted.

"What could they possibly be trying to hide here?" Mike whispered to Christopher. "How many trolls are here?"

"There could be the five we've seen or there could be thousands inside that building over there," Christopher replied. "There's no way to know for sure."

"Yes, there is," Dave said. "We should send in someone to survey the area. If all the knights went in, we would probably all be killed."

"You're the logical choice, Dave," Katie said from behind the group. "You're younger than all

of us and could hide yourself better."

"Thanks for the compliment," Dave said half sarcastically and half flattered by her words.

"She's right," Chapin seconded. "The best course of action would be to send you inside to check things out."

"If I'm captured, they would know that we've survived this far," Dave said.

"They probably already know that," Christopher said. "Besides, we have to ascertain what's going on with these weapons shipments."

"If only it were that easy," Dave mumbled. Ignoring the comment, Christopher slightly raised his head above the crest of the hill to oversee the action below. Troll guards patrolled regular paths around the complex. Since the area had been designed with stealth in mind, it was built in the middle of a valley surrounded by high hills.

"If you went around that hill there," Christopher said, pointing toward the snow-covered rise in the terrain to their left, "you could get in through that small valley. Then it's only a hundred feet to the building. It's up to you to find a way in. Don't try anything spectacular; just stay alive and find out what's going on inside."

"Ok," Dave said unenthused.

"Good luck," Mike told him. "We'll be right here if they get you."

"I hope so," Dave said as he departed. Christopher was able to watch his progress from his position until Dave reached the small valley where he would make his entrance into the camp.

It took Dave five minutes to circle around to the back end of the enormous log building.

As he approached the small valley between the hills, he spotted several troll guards near one of the corners of the building, conversing. It was impossible for Dave to get within fifty feet of them without being discovered. From his vantage point, it was impossible for Dave to overhear the conversations of the guards, but he was able to catch key phrases such as "Yavin", "troll", and "sword". He wasn't able to put these together because of the garbled manner in which they were said.

Dave waited several minutes before a troll who appeared to be in charge came out to disperse the group. They scattered in all directions, leaving nobody standing where everyone had once been.

Dave hurried through the narrow valley and emerged in the camp. Almost instinctively, he hurried to hide himself behind the protective walls of the giant building to spare himself from the eyes of watchful trolls. The trolls seemed to be everywhere except where he was. Dave inched his way along the concealed side of the building, vainly seeking an entrance.

Five minutes later, after having transversed the entire length of the huge structure, Dave was convinced that there was no way inside from the angle at which he stood. Peeking around the corner of the building, he spotted an entrance that stood seven feet tall to accommodate the huge trolls. There was nobody in the vicinity to stop him, so Dave rushed for the opening.

Immediately upon reaching the doorframe, he heard voices from the other side of the wall and stopped dead in his tracks. The noise was growing louder as if the participants in the conversation were nearing his location.

Dave panicked. He could not enter, as he would surely be spotted. He rushed back from where he came, but heard approaching footfalls coming in his direction. Cornered between the wall and the doorway, he had only seconds before he was discovered. He ran back to the doorway. Inside, he nervously listened to the voices as the footfalls from behind the logs grew louder.

"I hope there's no problems here that you aren't tellin' me about," said one of the trolls in rough jargon. "I wouldn't want ta' have ta' inform Potak of any trouble here."

Dave's anxiety increased as the footfalls grew louder. They must be less than fifteen seconds away now.

"No, sir," the other troll said quite formally, which contrasted from the first. Dave thought he could hear his heart beating out of his chest.

Three or four seconds passed, with only the sounds of trolls talking in the distance and the approaching footsteps growing louder.

"Well then," the first troll said. "I see that everythin's in order here. I'll leave you to ya' work." There were footsteps for a few seconds, and Dave peeked inside, looking for an escape. There were several wooden crates stacked against one of the walls adjacent to the doorframe.

Hoping that he wouldn't be seen, he sprinted inside and hid himself behind the crates not a moment too soon. From his vantage point, Dave could see out the opened doorframe, and a particularly large troll, even by troll standards, rounded the corner the instant he looked up. He headed toward the door through which Dave had just come two seconds ago.

Once inside, the troll approached another who, to Dave's surprise, was lifting crates only a few feet away from the door. Fortunately, by sheer luck, he had been looking in the opposite direction when Dave had appeared. The troll who had been circling the building headed for this other one, who promptly turned and saluted.

"Sir!" he said, barking his words like a soldier, which Dave thought he probably was.

"I've received orders that this shipment is to be out first thin' tomorrow," the "officer" said.

"But that doesn't give us enough time," came the agitated reply.

"Get some of those lazy idiots in the fifth squadron o'er here," he roared in reply. Reducing his tone, he then mumbled, "What it takes to get someone to do some real work today!"

"Excuse me, sir?" his subordinate asked.

"Nothing of your concern," he replied. Half of the trolls in the room were now looking his way. Dave remembered that only a few crates stood between them and his capture.

The smaller of the two trolls looked around at the spectators. From where he was positioned, Dave couldn't see many, but the trolls who were watching the spectacle unfold shook their heads in an unusual fashion. The troll turned back to face his superior. "I think it is some of my concern," he said. Several gasps were heard among the silenced room, but the majority of the trolls remained still as statues, showing no reaction to what was just said.

"Could you repeat that?" the taller troll boomed, towering over the other who showed no cowardice.

"I said that it is part of my concern," he replied. "You were complaining about how we can't work as hard as we used to anymore."

"You have no right to question me," the officer boomed in a deafening tone.

Ignoring what was just said, the troll worker rose up to his full height and said blatantly, "Yes, I do. You and the other Bosses have been treating us like wild Veramus. We work twenty hours a day and are given meager rations as a reward. And you still expect more! We will not put up with this any more!"

"I will report this to Yavin himself!" the boss yelled, infuriated. "You will then see how good you have it."

"I don't know what you are talking about," the worker said forcefully.

The officer looked around at the other trolls in the enormous warehouse and screamed at the top of his lungs, "Everyone back to work! What are you looking at?"

A few, intimidated, turned back to their tasks. The large majority, however, continued to face the boss without fear.

"We will not," came a voice from the other end of the warehouse. A worker was standing there next to another set of crates.

"Yeah!" came scattered cries from throughout the facility, until the noise grew so loud that it was impossible to think. The leader was shouting as loudly as he could, but his cries were completely unintelligible.

Pandemonium erupted throughout the building. Hundreds of workers threw down their tools and began to shout, "Down with the bosses! Down with Yavin!" The officer, still glued to the spot from where he entered, turned and rushed out to a chorus of laughter.

"Let's go!" came a voice, and another cheer rose up. The trolls began to throw the crates down onto the floor, spilling more than enough weapons to supply a large army. The trolls scooped them up

by the handful and armed themselves. Dave, still unnoticed behind the unmovable stack of crates, racked his mind for an escape plan. He certainly didn't want to hang around a horde of armed, crazed trolls.

The trolls now rushed for the doorways. A few seconds later, the room was cleared, except for a few in the middle. Outside, the shouts and cries of battle were becoming more numerous as they organized themselves.

The few trolls that had remained in the warehouse struck two of the weapons together. Sparks flew and began to ignite one of the wooden crates. They rushed out as the logs above their heads began to catch on fire.

Dave rushed to the doors, now having depleted his options. Being captured would be better than being killed. After he was outside, nobody seemed to pay attention to him with the chaos that had ensued. Behind him, the log building was becoming a raging inferno, lighting the entire area with a surreal glow. Unable to retreat the way he had come because of the increasing flames, Dave hid himself in an embankment that surrounded the camp to watch what happened next.

Christopher and the others who had remained with the knights were unaware of what was going on until they spotted the huge plume of smoke that was being emitted from the burning building. Several other small fires had erupted. Christopher poked his head above the hill on which they hid and was met with an incredible sight.

The entire valley was afoot. On one side of the river, next to the raging flames, an army of trolls stood at arms. Across the frozen body of water, others had gathered. The first group outnumbered the second by almost three to one, Christopher estimated.

"It's really bad down there," he said. "I wonder where Dave is?"

"We have to try to save him," Katie panicked, looking at the chaos down below. She rose and started over the hill.

"Wait!" Chapin commanded and rushed forward. Grabbing Katie by the shirt, she dragged her back over to their hiding place. "You're going to get us all killed!"

"Dave is down there going to get killed," she half screamed her reply for it to be heard over the din of battle below.

"Let's watch what happens," Christopher said. He peeked back over. The officers on one side of the river had crossed over and were being massacred by the hundreds of trolls on the other. Several buildings were burning down to the ground.

"It may be too late already," Katie sobbed behind him.

"We have a problem," Christopher said, raising his voice. The officers, far outnumbered, were now doing anything to get away from the maniacal trolls. They were now rushing at full speed over the hill where Christopher and the knights were hidden.

Christmas

My life was at stake when I wrote this Discussion Forum entry. Matt told me to write something about the holidays and Steve wanted to get to his 55-page mark by the end of the year. Christmas is one of the few holidays each year where being together is vitally important. Other than Thanksgiving, there is no other holiday I can think of where being together as a family is treasured so much. You don't hear people telling their spouses, "Honey, I won't be home for Arbor Day." Or "I'm sorry, Son, but I won't be home for Abraham Lincoln's birthday this year. I know you were looking forward to that great Lincoln's Birthday feast, but it will have to wait until next year."

Even though I only have a small family whom I celebrate Christmas with each year, it is a wonderful Christmas celebration. My mom, her parents, and I celebrate Christmas together each year. I would rather have a small celebration with the people I love rather than spend it with lots and lots of people who I could care less about. Unfortunately, there are football and basketball games on Thanksgiving and Christmas, which prevent families from spending quality time together. Being away from home during the holidays, especially Christmas, is extremely difficult. Christmas comes but once a year and it must be treasured. If you have old relatives, this upcoming Christmas may be the last Christmas you spend with them.