

The Last Christmas Song

by [Paul H. Yarbrough](#) (December 2023)



I will sing a new song unto thee, O God— Psalm 144:9

There was a song about a reindeer—a reindeer with a red nose. He was not a drinker; not an imbiber. Whoever heard of such? A

drunkard reindeer? *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* simply had a red nose; and a bright one—at least in song. Well, sort of.

Actually, whoever heard of a red light being bright? But a December eponymous Rudolph brought to those of the Christmas belief a Christmas song about brightness of leadership and happiness. And it was *fantastic* and silly and fun to listen to.

And back then, it was even such a thing with those of the agnostic resolve, while sharing the cheerful spontaneity of the season, that “Merry Christmas” might be said by them to the weary, the gruff, the young or old, despondent or glowing. The historical truth of Christmas seemed to even pierce the *lonely* hearts of those who leapt from Halloween over to New Year’s Day.

Gene Autry’s new Christmas song had lit up Christmas like other songs had before. Music surfaced, and seemed more jubilant at Christmas. Like no other event, music started a week or two before Christmas and gradually built to its own crescendo of song until Christmas Eve—when it seemed every radio on every station and every store from every speaker had the songs of Christmas. No other time of the year had this measure. My mother called it ... she called it ... “splendid.”

Some tunes were the Santa Claus songs—those that were for children and the Santa Claus story. And, as a rule, many had little to do with the Christ child whose day it was supposed to be. The standing of the old carols born of the dynamic hymnals always fetched more nostalgia during the Christmas season, and its approach conveyed longing and reminiscences, and those stories and birth of some songs like the original *Stille Nacht, Silent Night*; and the old hymns first established in Latin from the Catholic church like *Adeste Fidelis*; passing finally into the Reformation and the Anglo revelers as *O’ Come All Ye Faithful*. A time, a special time.

They could be heard even distant, as sounds from the church

bells and, as well, carolers singing on the streets—or the regime of department stores loudspeakers bathing their customers in music, infusing in them the commencement of the season that brought Christmas. A few years before *Rudolph*, the magical *White Christmas* brought the mystique of snow and blissful dreams, though *Jingle Bells* was a hundred years before Bing Crosby. All of Christmas music lyrics and musical meter were wonderful to the spirit of the season of Christmas.

But now I am old, and over the past half century the rock and rap music has become a requiem—screed in the absence of *Rudolph* and Bing and *Hark the Herald Angel*—a Christmas dirge of musical clamor. The songs are played, but the meaning wounded and bloodied by the rock and rap of rap-a-doodle, rock a diddle—a charge of: “here come the raise-hell Santas.” Maybe it should be *wrap* not rap. It is as if Halloween hell has been extended, putting on a mask for the Christ Child while the *self* is praised. After Gene, most of the songs, with the exception of one or two, were grist for the secular hole of ashes and switches. And the old stores are mostly gone now. Most of the parades are gone too. Santa’s worldwide flight, ironically, removed “localism.” And from that localism had come many of the songs. Bethlehem was certainly struck by prophecy and truth as small, as local.

But why, I have often wondered with age, was there never a Christmas song about an old Negro man whose knuckles dragged along the sidewalk moving a cart along; the cart that had replaced his legs. Maybe a song for him would have been the last Christmas song. That Christmas back when ... back in 1949 ... I was seven?... eight ...?

We walked into Sears & Roebuck. The heat blowers felt good. It was almost freezing outside and there was a light rain. Christmas was still 9 days away. Which meant it might as well be in July as far as *the wait until...* we suffered.

We didn't have routine access to knowledge of weather radar then; only experience, the radio and *The Farmer's Almanac*. The weatherman at the airport got more than his share of calls from children almost begging *their* question: "Will it snow on Christmas?" His answer never helped the pleading: "Probably not." At least he was kind enough to not blurt out the truth: "No."

Sears & Roebuck had a loudspeaker system whereby music was played throughout the store, and inside we could hear Gene Autry singing a new song:

*Rudolph the red nose reindeer,
Had a very shiny nose ...*

"Oh, there's that new song, Charles," my mother said. "First new song, I can recall in a while. It's a cute little tune. I like it."

"Yes Ma'am." I didn't know much about cute stuff. Mothers and sisters and other girls used that word a lot— "cute." None of the guys I played with ever would use that kind of a word. Things were either good or not good, or bad. Cute was a kind of a sissy word. But mothers had their own language: "stop," "don't," "quit that," "behave," "hush." But they had some others without a sharp edge or a threat: "cute", "pretty, etc." Growing up, during the youthful part of life had lessons.

They also have their own rules. My mother took the occasion while we had stopped to listen to the song to pull out a tissue and wipe my nose. And the follow-up declaration as she wrapped the tissue across my nostrils, "Now blow." I hated that. *What did she think I had a jacket sleeve for*, I thought. I forced a giant blow and a couple of tons of snot filled up

the tissue which she disposed of after asking one of the clerks if there was a waste basket about. I silently prayed through the snot and phlegm that it would snow before Christmas. Snow almost never came this far south ... at least not before January. But then the Red Sea had never been parted before Moses started waving his stick and praying. And I could dream along with Bing Crosby ... about a white Christmas.

“Now meet me at the nut counter in thirty minutes. And be careful if you handle any of the toys. You might break something. Just look at them. If you break something, Santa Claus might give you a switching.”

We were past the fantasy of Santa Claus so we knew that her admonition meant don't break something because I'll have to pay for it and your daddy and I will be very unhappy here at Christmas time.

The nut counter was the only thing that held any degree of competition for us up against toys or games. Warmly toasted nuts were great. All kinds secured behind a glass counter where a clerk would dole out an amount measured in a nickel or a dime or some higher number of pennies counted as *worth*: “Could I have a dime's *worth* of cashews (being the most expensive ones) please?” And they were kept toasty by a bright-heating lamp behind the glass. My mother used the nut counter like a lion hunter might use raw meat. The attraction was irresistible. It would draw me back from the toy department.

However, the toys ruled supreme and to the strains of *Here Comes Santa Claus* I headed for the stairs which led to the basement floor where the crown jewels were kept. Actually, I had learned a couple of years before that Santa Claus was a childhood hoax which, for all the good intensions of the concept, Santa was just a fat, jolly, dream for little people. However, toys were real and, with the right conduct and appeal of a boy or girl, a few highly prized items would be placed

under the Christmas tree, despite Santa Claus being a fraud. Such grand gifts as an electric football set, a catcher mitt and a couple of odds and ends if you were lucky could still be acquired. Once the truth about Santa Claus became known to us, as if by magic we found out everything wasn't free; money seemed like it was really, much, much more important.

Before the revelation of the truth about Santa, parents had to stifle Santa's unlimited ability to spend money on little boys and girls with something like— "I'm not sure Santa wants you to have your own pony yet," as if there were some special way they had to call the North Pole and chat with Santa. Then they would say something like "You might ask him for a cowboy vest—he would like to see you in something like that."

"Why wouldn't he want to see me on a pony?" I had asked my daddy.

"Because ponies don't like the North Pole and all that cold weather. They like places like Texas and Arizona. Now, no more questions. I've got to go to the office."

When I finally got to the lower level where the toys were displayed, there was a crowd, mostly of boys like me. Even if you weren't getting everything you saw in the room it was still fun to prowl about hoping for something extra even if it were a false hope owing to a short money supply due to Santa's having been emotionally vaporized recently.

It was then that I saw two colored boys looking at a red wagon. Its bright red color with the name *Radio Flyer* scripted on the side stood out as it always did in the toy department, Christmas or not—and always red. The *Radio Flyer's* fame covered North to South. The same two colored boys appeared to be talking about the wagon—though I couldn't hear what they said. One of them kept motioning with a wave of his hands as if he were making a study of what the wagon could hold considering its size. For some reason, I hoped they got it if

that was what they wanted. I couldn't tell if they were old enough to be beyond the "Santa hoax" –but, I really didn't care *that much* as I moved on to the electric trains–*Lionel*, the Kingdom of Trains. My lust for personal gain far outweighed their problems.

The Lionel electric train tracks were laid out in a figure-eight outline and the train cars passed tiny plastic trees and a small tin building that had the word *DEPOT* printed on the front. Including the coal car and the caboose the engine pulled seven cars. Through special manufacturing, the sounds of "*whooo, whooo*" could be heard delivering model realism as the train made its trip in the overlapping "eight" pattern on the table. My brother and I would share one of those sets on Christmas morning. We had already put in our order. With the usual clutter of useless items: socks, underwear, shirts and maybe even a belt under the tree, *our* train would be ready to roll by 7:00A.M. the morning of the 25th.

I recalled a Sunday School verse, "God loves a cheerful giver." I was pleased that my mother and daddy who had taken the place of Santa Claus were both cheerful givers so that they got loved by God ... and then would GIVE to me ...

... and of course, my brother, too ... an electric train, seven car and an engine. Truly ... JOY to MY world!

Actually, I had added other things to my list. I had also asked for a football and new football helmet. And there were a couple of dozen other toys that would have fit nicely into my greed for a future stash into my closet. Christmas was like a second birthday party for me. However, I couldn't have them all, I was told–as much so as I desired them. Nor, not as much as I thought I deserved them. After all our Sunday school teacher always had told us that Jesus came for each of us, personally. And I *personally* wanted every toy in sight. I assumed that would make Jesus happy with me. I offered the personal touch, you might say.

But now, with age and *truth*, I had entered the real world of money, no longer a part of Santa Claus's limitless bank account. By a certain age, fantasies began falling away like raindrops in a thunderstorm. Such things as: "There was no Santa Claus," and a close cousin, "Money doesn't grow on trees." I really never could be sure where that second concept came from. As children we simply believed money came with grownups. It was their job to have money. They just had money—and that was just a rule of life. So how could there be a limit to it? They just hogged all of it. Certainly, trees had nothing to do with it.

After a too-short period of observing everything I had dreamt of, I looked at the clock. I was due back at the nut counter in five minutes. I started for the stairs, of course crowded with people walking up and down and I got behind those two colored boys I had seen earlier. I heard one say, "I think that's what he's talking 'bout. But that thing cost more'n \$9.00. It say on the sign, \$8.98. You do the tax stuff and it be more'n nine dollars. That wagon is 'spensive."

I heard them but had no idea what they meant ... though I still didn't really care. I was getting an electric train, even though, sadly, I had to share it, and that was what Christmas was all about—me. And sometimes my brother ... and snow, of course.

At the main floor I moved to the nut counter.

And as I waited, right there staring at me was the possibility of more free stuff! On the "nut" counter was a cardboard sign that said for a quarter you could buy a chance on a gift certificate from Sears & Roebuck. There were three prizes that would be won on the drawing later this week. First prize \$50.00, Second \$25.00 and third a \$10.00—three gift certificates that could be applied to any toy in the toy section of Sears & Roebuck or elsewhere, as it turned out.

Just then, Mother walked up to the counter with a couple of sacks in her arms. Presents probably for somebody—and said I could have 25 cents worth of any of the nuts I wanted. In a moment of a strange lack of hunger, I asked if I could buy a chance on winning one of the prizes.

“Okay, if that’s the way you want to spend your quarter. But, you can’t have both.” She looked at me and cast one of her mother-smiles, indicating my foolishness. “You almost never WIN when you gamble. But maybe this is a chance for you to learn.”

Downtown, the Century Theatre was showing *A Christmas Carol*. My aunt had a record album of the story and my brother and I had listened to it many times, but now there was a picture show of it. A spooky picture show because it was a ghost story, too.

“Six shopping days until Christmas.” That’s what the little cropped cartoon on the front page in the daily newspaper stated. It was a reminder to buy Christmas Seals while at the same time offering the magic number of days before the magic morning. It was like getting up every morning in the summer and checking the baseball standings in the newspaper. The difference was you knew the number of shopping days would always go down. But you still looked. It was if my friends and I thought somehow time might stop. A worry!

School had turned us loose for two weeks of holiday freedom and I went downtown on the city bus with Bucky Turnipseed, a friend of mine. The morning paper had said there were six shopping days left until Christmas. That meant an eternal WEEK before the actual day.

Bucky and I went to school together at Boyduling Elementary and along with a couple of other guys we hung around together and went to the picture show together sometimes. Some of the

older guys played the pinball machines at the drugstore and sometimes at the Trailways bus station when downtown for any reason. But today just Bucky and I had decided to go downtown to look in some of the other stores at the glittering brand-new stuff that packed the stores around Christmas—then to the picture show.

I had Sears' stuff memorized from the catalogue and the visits with my mother earlier in the week. But going into some of the smaller downtown stores somehow added to the glee of new and polished stuff. And it was better to go with a friend who loved getting stuff, too. Greed with a friend didn't seem like greed. It just seemed like fun ... kind of shared greed ... maybe.

And being free from school for two weeks was like summertime but without going barefooted since it was too cold. We could look around the various toy departments most of the day, get a couple of Krystal hamburgers for a dime each and go see the picture show and catch the afternoon bus home.

Christmas and summertime. Why had God even bothered with the rest, I wondered.

Bucky and I got off the bus close to J.C. Penny's which had a decent assortment of toys and sporting equipment, and even had their own Santa Claus, just like Sears & Roebuck had. It was cold, almost freezing, and the overcast cloudy and gray skies probably didn't hold snow, but we hoped, anyway because they looked cold. I wiped my runny nose on my jacket sleeve.

There were a few Santas ringing bells on the street corners, with red pots for some kind of charity, I guess. We had always been told the basic yarn that the reason there were so many Santas was because most were just helpers. Otherwise, parents would have to sell the idea that Santa could be in fifty or sixty places at the same time. Even for four and five years olds that was a weird idea to figure out. So, parents had come up with the "helper" storyline.

"You wanna go eat?" Bucky asked. "Oh, by the way, lets go to the Magic Shop real quick. I wanna see if Mr. Magic has any new tricks. I saw a picture show around Thanksgiving and my daddy said the man who made the story up was always hanging around guys that pulled tricks, like picking your pockets and stuff. My daddy was telling me it was a guy named Damon Runyan."

"Fine with me. Le's go. Mr. Magic's got some pretty good stuff if you jus' wanna be a magician."

"I don't especially wanna be a magician, I just like magic tricks," Bucky said.

"But let's don't eat now, it's only ten o'clock," Bucky was a bit porky and was always eating. But in spite of his bowling-ball look he could play football pretty good, so nobody thought of him as just a fat boy. And he was also pretty funny. My daddy had said that Bucky was one of those people who were just born with a natural wit.

"Well, how long before we do eat? I don't wanna starve," he said. I've got almost a dollar and a eighty-five cents. I'm thinking about getting; maybe six Krystals."

"You could probably eat twenty-six if you had the money."

"Oh, I could eat thirty-six, but my mama would have a heart attack if she found out."

"Well, anyway let's go in Penny's first and look around. They have trains and sports stuff in the same department. I wanna see if they have the same kind of train I'm getting and if there are some other different kinds."

We weaved through the paying customers who were buying various assortments usually of clothing or household items that someone was going to receive somewhere—naturally, with the store-wrapped Christmas paper making them appear exciting.

Mostly stuff like underwear or boots or a picture frame or maybe a vase of some kind, waiting to be broken, probably by a ball of some kind illegally thrown in the house. Really fun stuff like electric trains or football sets or footballs or baseball gloves didn't need any help from a Christmas wrapping. They had their own super vision standing alone.

But even those kinds of presents got wrapped unless they were from Santa Claus. Presents straight from Santa Claus were the only presents that weren't wrapped. He just left his wide open to see. Santa believers didn't care about wrappings anyway; only the fact that Santa's mystical hand had touched them with his North Pole blessing. Nothing like free stuff to feed greed.

"Look, Bucky," I shouted as we arrived at the toy section, "There's the Lionel with eight cars, the same one I'm getting. Got the extra sections of track too."

"Does it come with a dining car?" Bucky seldom got past his appetite.

"Will you quit worrying about eating? We'll go over to the Krystal before the big dinner crowd gets there around noon. We'll go by eleven. Then to the picture show."

The downtown area appeared just as it had since the Christmas parade a couple of weeks ago and as it did all the Christmases I could remember. All the street lights were wrapped in tinsel and green decoration stuff, with multi-colored lights wrapped and hanging across the main street creating what Daddy called a canopy of decorations all the way down Capitol Street. People walked up and down the sidewalks, in and out of the stores, most smiling. Little children had their cold weather runny noses, sniffing and having their mothers wipe them. But they didn't seem to mind much, as many were probably going to sit in Santa's lap at some store. Free-running snot didn't

seem to be a barrier to Santa.

The main street was Capitol Street, so named because it began at the old capitol building and not only ran the length of downtown down to the train station, but out as far as the city limits. But if you stood at either end of Capitol Street downtown you could see the array of Christmas wreaths, holly and lights crossing from one side to the other all the way the length of the street. What Daddy had called the canopy. It was the street where the annual Christmas parade had previously marched after Thanksgiving for thousands of people who loved the time of the year that offered the most important things in the world—presents!

While Bucky and I waited for the light to give us the “Walk” signal, across the street I saw the old colored man whom I had seen before, often, when I had been downtown. He leaned forward on a wooden mallet which rolled along supported by small metal wheels as he pushed down on the sidewalk with his fists which were wrapped with leather around his palms and knuckles so he could push-off the sidewalk without skinning them. He had no legs, just stumps above his knees, and wore a blue apron with front pockets which held nickels and dimes—and quarters maybe. He did not move far in any one direction as his supply of boiled peanuts and newspapers lay beside him next to the light-post. The newspapers were stacked on the sidewalk with a red brick on top of the stack to prevent a sudden gust of wind from blowing them. The peanuts were piled in an old cardboard box with the words printed on the side in boldfaced lettering: “Jitney-Jungle.”

He wore faded blue jean overalls and a brown wool sweater under his jacket, with more than a few moth holes in it. He had gray hair on the sides of his head while the top of his head was covered by an old battered-looking Stetson hat with the brim pulled down just a little bit in front of his forehead. And he smiled. Every time I had seen him before I just remembered, he was smiling. I wondered how a man without

legs could ever smile.

Someone walked by and took a single newspaper the colored man held in his outstretched hand, then handed him a nickel, the daily paper's price. He placed it in the pocket of his apron. There were several shoppers passing by and he would almost surely sell several bags of boiled peanuts today I thought. I wondered how many nickels and dimes he had in his apron pocket. I was always thinking about money at Christmas. I kind of always hoped that everybody had enough—especially me. I wondered about the old colored man. And I really was sorry he had no legs, I guess.

For a brief moment I wondered, where did he live when not out on the street? And did he have a Christmas Tree? I guess I really didn't care that much. My thoughts quickly passed for the old man as the light blinked yellow, and my own interests of the upcoming *magic morning* approaching flooded my mind again. An old crippled Negro man was not at the top of my list. He'd work things out. And I would still keep hoping for him, probably. Besides I didn't have to see him that much. Anyway, the light signaled, "Walk," and Bucky and I walked to the Krystal. We had four legs.

Someone had said that the colored man had lost his legs when he stumbled many years ago on Christmas Eve running to catch a freight train out of Memphis headed to New Orleans. But we never knew for sure. And I learned, for sure, as life moved on that you could never tell what stories were true. Anyway, we were savoring deep belches of Krystal hamburgers and Coca Colas. Now in the continuing spirit of free holidays we were going to the picture show: *A Christmas Carol*.

As we started walking, from across the street Bucky and I saw the same two colored boys whom I had seen in Sears and Roebuck. They were walking up to the colored man, each holding

one end of an old metal washtub which looked a bit heavy—at least for them. Each one was not as big as me and for sure not as big as Bucky. When they put it down, Bucky and I could see a stack of newspapers on top of a load of bags of boiled peanuts. We guessed they were probably friends or something who helped him get his stuff downtown where he could sell it. We kept walking.

The huge clock on top of a building across the street from the Governor's Mansion indicated we had about a half hour before the picture show started. Church bells next to the building chimed *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*; audible down Capitol Street.

There was a store down close to the Century Theatre called the Magic Shop. An old man who used to put on shows for children at the Kiddie Matinee at the Century on Saturday mornings owned it. But he also sold magic tricks. A major rule was that Magicians weren't supposed to tell how their tricks worked, but I guess if you bought one you got to know. He was known around town as "Mr. Magic."

Anyway, Bucky had decided he needed to know about pickpockets, like Damon Runyan, ever since Thanksgiving. My mother had said that she hoped he didn't want to become one.

Bucky said that there must be something magic about the way pickpockets could slip up on you, and without you even noticing, take something out of your pocket. Bucky said he had a theory that most pickpockets must have been magicians once. He got the idea from the movie he saw at Thanksgiving called *The Lemon Drop Kid*. His mama and daddy had taken him to see it and his daddy told him it was one of those stories by some guy named Damon Runyan.

Bucky's daddy said that Mr. Runyan was always hanging around race tracks and pool rooms where there were pickpockets and people like that. That's where he got most of his stories. At

least that's what Mr. Turnipseed had said. Also, *The Lemon Drop Kid*, was also a Christmas story.

Mr. Magic told us he didn't know any pickpocket tricks. He told us that he would show us a couple of free card tricks since it was Christmas and, he had said, card tricks were kind of like picking pockets. You just performed what magicians called: *misdirecting*. But unless we bought a magic trick from him, he couldn't reveal the trick itself. Just a magician's firm rule.

As it turned out, it took about 15 minutes to show us a few card tricks. From the "tricks" and the way they worked—distracting you from the cards—it was clear, if your hands were quick enough that you could remove something like, as an example, a card or a small envelope from someone's pocket, and replace it without him ever knowing. He said that all it takes is a little practice. But, don't do it except as a game with your friends because it's a good way to end up in reform school if you really pick someone's pocket.

We were his only customers when we left as he walked to the front of the shop with us. He paused to adjust the wreath on the door.

"And, don't forget to practice those tricks ... practice, practice. Well, you boys enjoy that picture show. That's a good one. It's a good story." He smiled and waved as we left.

"I hope it's as good as *The Lemon Drop Kid*," Bucky said over his shoulder,

Mr. Magic waved again. "Yeah, I know that one too." He winked, I think.

Three days later I could not believe it. Neither could my mother. I had won the 3rd prize in the drawing at Sears &

Roebuck. Christmas had come early.

Bucky had spent the night at my house. He seemed as excited as I was. We had stayed up late practicing the trick Mr. Magic had shown us. We both—by the time we went to sleep—thought that we could be pickpockets if we chose such a *trade*.

Morning came and with Daddy, we headed down to Sears to claim my prize, the \$10.00 gift certificate. It was still hard to believe I had won a drawing that got a prize. My mother was shocked and was happy for me but still admonished me that it was very, very rare and I shouldn't think it'll happen regularly.

"Don't try to make a living off of it," my daddy had said.

But I couldn't help but wonder how close I came to winning the really big ones, \$25.00 or \$50.00. I guess it didn't matter too much. A \$10.00 prize had made me just about the richest *and* greediest guy in the third grade.

Daddy had driven us downtown and had waited outside Sears & Roebuck for Bucky and me before he dropped us farther downtown. We had gone inside Sears and I showed the lady at the customer service counter my winning ticket stub and with a broad Christmas smile, she gave me my gift certificate for \$10.00. And she said it was a gift certificate sponsored by Sears and Roebuck but was good at *any store in town* who belonged to the Chamber of Commerce.

It was like having my very own ten-dollar bill. Something so rare to my sight that I didn't even know whose face was on it. Washington was on the one-dollar bill and Lincoln was on the five-dollar bill —my daddy said he never kept those, and always immediately exchanges them for five ones. Daddy said that Washington was gentleman from Virginia and the monster, Lincoln, burned cities in the South.

Anyway, my gift certificate had no name. It just belonged to the guy who possessed it. And that was me!

It was cold and windy. Still some gray skies, the wind whipping, and the forecast was for rain-drizzle and cold. But, dang, no snow. Daddy dropped us off across from The Emporium Department store on Capitol Street. The office of his lumber business was downtown by the train station and he dropped us off at the other end. Today was the day before Christmas Eve and he went to the office at noon just to do a couple of things before closing for two days.

"If y'all want to ride home with me, that's fine, but I won't be coming home 'til after five. If y'all want to go home earlier ya'll have to catch the bus"

"Yes Sir," I said. "We're just gonna look around on some things I might buy with my gift certificate."

"Well, you ought to listen to your mother and me. Save it for after Christmas. Prices will be down and anyway you don't have to spend money just because you have it."

The wind gusted now, and Bucky and I leaned into it, turning our heads downward as we struggled down Capitol Street, the wind caused our eyes to water. It blew like a small winter gale. There were but a few people walking and coping with the wind. Then on the other side of the street, we saw the old colored man with his newspapers and peanuts being blown.

No one was interested at the moment in peanuts or newspapers. But at that same moment the colored man lifted the brick that weighted down his papers to readjust it, I guess. But his old arms and hands were too slow and a couple of the newspapers began to blow away and down the street. He tried to lean over and hold them but his old arms slipped and he tumbled slightly out of his cart and fell onto the sidewalk. His hat blew down

the street. Bucky and I did a *Jay-walk* sprint across Capitol Street. Two or three cars honked.

He seemed to tremble as lay on his side when we reached him. "Are you hurt?" I didn't know his name and just called him "Old Man." He looked so pitiful lying on the sidewalk with no legs, in the cold wind which seemed to blow harder now.

"I don't know. I don't feel hurt none," he said.

I thought he might cry. I thought I might, too.

Bucky leaned over him. "You want us to lift you onto your little scooter?" Bucky didn't know his name either. And he called the pushcart a scooter, just because—.

Other people offered to help. I looked at the old legless man and then into his eye. Then for some reason I thought of a story my grandmother used to read to me and my brother; about a look into the eyes of "Roland the Noble Knight," one of Charlemagne's soldiers. I was only a boy but somehow, now I didn't want so much for Christmas. I only wanted for the old man to have legs. It was like the way Roland may have felt when faced with dying for the king. Though I had no idea of where this sudden thought came from. It was just an old story I had been read. I just wanted something for this old man who fell off his "scooter." I wasn't even sure if an eight-year-old was allowed to be a knight. But I felt sad seeing this old colored man lying there with no legs.

"Hey Bucky, you help hold the scooter and I'll help lift him."

A man and two ladies were standing next to us. The man spoke: "You boys hold the scooter and I'll lift him."

"Okay," I said.

We held it and when the man set him down on the scooter. Then I let go of the scooter and put my hands around the old man's waist about where his apron was, so none of his nickels and

times would spill out.

I thought again, for some reason about Roland. Roland the noble knight. He died for the king. It seemed important. Not something minor. I held the colored man as tight as I could. He was a whole lot bigger than me ... even without legs.

One of the city policemen Daddy had served in Burma with during the war told daddy that those little boys helped the old man by bringing him his supply of boiled peanuts and papers in the washtub. It was very heavy for them to carry but they did it anyway. The newspaper owners allowed the old man to sell newspapers which made him a little money and the newspaper sales helped draw people to him to sell extra peanuts. The city allowed him this for a couple of reasons. One, it wasn't panhandling because he was earning money, and two, they figure anyone without legs who still tried to work ought to be able to, white or colored.

His name was Harmon.

Cold and without legs, while selling his peanuts and newspapers the next day, Christmas Eve, Harmon, died.

Harmon knew the two colored boys. They lived a couple of doors down off of Farrish Street close to a place where he stayed with a cleaning lady who worked at the Old Capitol. He gives her most of the nickels and dimes he earns from the papers and peanuts. A few dollars in change but it pays her for the food he eats and the lights and electricity he used when he boards there. That's about all he had, and the cleaning lady probably broke about even. Funny thing was that the old man wanted to get those boys a red wagon that they could use and maybe go into selling papers themselves. Maybe even take over his peanut business. He never could scrape together the cost of a

wagon. He barely got by on what he made and gave to the cleaning lady.

But another offbeat thing was that he left a hand-written note that he called his "*Last Most Knowned Will With Testimony*" The police found it folded and in a pocket of the blue apron. Handwritten were instructions for his *estate*. The gist of it was:

That except for the money and peanuts which was to go to the lady that boarded him everything else including his old broken watch and brass chain would go to the two boys. He said that if he hadn't got them a wagon by the time of his demise, he was sorry, but they could have that old pushcart scooter and maybe they could sell it for a dollar or two at the junk yard. He wished he could have got them a wagon. But they were awful expensive. And he had prayed and wrote down that he knew "the Lord would forgive him for not praying on his knees 'cause he didn't have no knees."

Harmon.

Besides the old stopped-watch and brass chain, the only thing on him besides the nickels and dimes in his apron was a *Ten-dollar gift certificate* belonging to whoever presented it at any store in town. It, too was in an apron pocket.

Sometimes these days, as an old man, I wonder if that Christmas in 1949 was a dream. Or maybe a dreamy day-dream which made me recall what had really happened. I seemed to think as I recalled the past of my childhood that it was real because Gene Autry and his brand-new song was the last song that I had connected with for the *fictitious* Santa Claus time

of my life; that jolly old fat man who gave freely and for free. Money was no object to him, not for Santa Claus. And he had all the help of flying reindeer and an extra red-nosed one who lighted the way to guide as they pulled him everywhere. And, like most of my friends we put out milk and cookies for him.

But the old colored man who sold boiled peanuts and newspapers had had no one to pull him, like Santa Claus had. The old colored man got no free milk and cookies. He had two weary old *old-man* arms and only the stumps of two legs. And, with so little, he *pulled* so much, because he aspired to give something to others. His *Rudolph*—his bright light, was his heart. Eventually that light gave out—at least as an earthly one. Now, I was certain that he has a new one, and new legs and a brand-new life to be lived forever with the King of Christmas.

My mother and daddy fussed at me the day after that Christmas many years ago. They didn't want to fuss at me on Christmas and have everybody in a bad mood. But the day after Christmas they fussed because they had told me not to be in a big hurry to cash in that gift certificate. They had said just think about it and use it when I needed it. If I got too excited, and greedy, I'd fool around and spend it foolishly—or even lose it.

Foolishly, I had *lost* it.

He who gives freely, sings the true, *final* song. But such a song that could be sung for Him, near Him, surely never ends, nor has ever found its place simply in the past tense—by design it is *forever*—eternal. It is a song of the angels, for the One who sent them—for Him. The first, the final. Alpha and Omega? Surprise? No surprises in heaven. Only Christmas.

Merry Christmas, y'all.

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Paul H. Yarbrough has written for The Blue State Conservative, NOQ, The Daily Caller, American Thinker, The Abbeville Institute, Lew Rockwell, and more. He is the author of 4 [novels](#): *Mississippi Cotton*, *A Mississippi Whisper*, *Thy Brother's Blood*, and *The Yeller Rose of Texas*, in addition to many short stories and poems.

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