

# Noel

Roger Plemmons

Mrs. Hathaway brought the children downstairs single file and seated them on straight-back chairs around the reception room, boy-girl-boy-girl, seventeen in all. In the corner stood a robust Christmas tree bedecked with candy canes and tinsel tresses. The air was thick with the scent of pine and furniture polish as a phantom choir sang "Noel" to the strains of a vinyl disc orchestra. Mrs. Hathaway was still fussing over their appearance, fixing the boys' neckties and correcting the girls' posture, when the first couple arrived. In hushed tones they spoke with Mrs. Overton at the front desk. "We were thinking about a girl," said the woman. Mrs. Overton smiled broadly and made a sweeping motion with her hand. "We have a wonderful selection of girls," she said. At this the girls came to attention in their places, each freckle blooming on rosy cheeks. And as Mrs. Hathaway presented them, each one stood and curtsied on cue. "Christa is a lovely child, age eight. . . Melinda has a beautiful singing voice for carols. . . Stephanie has an exceptionally sweet temperament. . . ."

The clients turned to Mrs. Overton and quietly indicated their choice. She nodded, poker-faced, and prepared the papers. Money changed hands. The girls eyed each other nervously as Mrs. Overton recited the rental stipulations: "You understand that this is only a 48-hour agreement. The girl must be returned by noon on the day after Christmas or late charges will be assessed at ten dollars per hour and you will forfeit the insurance deposit." When everything was in order she looked over at Mrs. Hathaway and said, "Melinda, please." A little squeak of joy escaped into the room as Melinda jumped up and rushed to join her hosts for the holiday. The other girls watched her go, their hope renewing as another pair of patrons entered the room from the foyer.

Throughout the afternoon they came two by two, childless on Christmas Eve. They were high-rise dwellers and they were pensioners from South Side bungalows. A few were first-timers, uneasy, unable to meet the children's eyes. (The repeat customers, who each year made up a majority of the business, had reserved their "Kristmas Kid" by name, weeks in advance, and had come by in the morning for express pick-up.) Most of those now arriving to browse among the leftovers were last minute shoppers.

The girls were in great demand, especially the youngest candidates in curls. Dimples and bangs, once again, were very popular. And for the boys, missing teeth and cowlicks were favorite features. Considering the irregular inventory, business was good. Of the original lot, only two rather plain-looking lads remained at six o'clock, closing time. Both bore the stigma of a pubescent mustache.

Mrs. Overton finished her filing while Mrs. Hathaway affixed the "Closed" sign on the door, unplugged the Christmas lights, and drew the window shades all around. The boys sat silent, watchful.

Said Mrs. Overton, "I told you about those two pre-teens, didn't I?"

"Yes, ma'am, you did."

"Then why did you bring them down with the others?"

"Well, I was hoping, I guess." Mrs. Hathaway glanced at her rejected charges. They gazed guiltily into their laps. "It did no harm to give them at least a chance."

Mrs. Overton regarded her for a moment, then answered calmly. "I suppose not." She was pleased with the day's proceeds, too pleased to argue over a minor transgression. Anyway, she did not want to discourage a certain degree of compassion, believing it was one of the qualities that made Mrs. Hathaway an effective matron.

Outside it was beginning to snow. Before leaving, Mrs. Overton wrapped herself in a muffler and donned a woollen cap. "I'll see you day after tomorrow then."

"Goodnight, ma'am," said Mrs. Hathaway, then turning to the boys. "Come along."

As they slowly ascended the stairs, one of the boys emitted a peculiar nasal sound, a congested sentiment perhaps.

"Quiet, child," said Mrs. Hathaway.