

Early the next morning, while the sky was still a black dome of stars, Andy walked over to Janys's mish house to get her bags. Jack had already flown home, and Dan had moved home for the holidays, so no one was around to see them off.

They set out at about 4:00 a.m., praising the Lord for such excellent weather and road conditions. But not far into Canada, it began to snow. Andy chuckled at that, mentioning to Janys how most Americans in the southern states believe that, summer and winter, snow is actually piled up in huge drifts along the border, acting as a natural demarcation of the 49th parallel. He included the story he had heard several times from his mom about Americans arriving in Kitchener during a July heat wave, skis atop their car and obviously packed for winter weather.

"Voltaire wrote, in *Candide*, I think, of Canada as *quelques arpents de neige*—a few acres of snow. Though I doubt many Americans have ever read Voltaire, I reckon they have about the same notion," Andy chortled.

Janys chided Andy for having translated *quelques arpents de neige*.

Conditions worsened rapidly. The thermometer plummeted, and it soon became apparent that a Great Lakes blizzard was brewing. The radio broadcast storm warnings and notices of extreme caution to motorists.

By the late afternoon, traffic had slowed considerably. They passed several stalls. Even with the additional defroster at full blast, the front windshield scarcely allowed a view through it. Suddenly, a fierce

gust of wind whipped snow directly under the rear of the car. The motor sputtered and died. Andy was barely able to coast to the side of the highway.

Andy had looked at car engines about long enough to verify his suspected intense disinterest in—even passionate dislike for—the intimidating pile of metal and hose. He had not even obtained his driver's license until he began to date at the age of twenty when his erstwhile girlfriend had suggested it might be a nice thing to have. It was also she who had suggested it might be nice for Andy to have feelings, he remembered with a pang. So it was purely male ego show that induced him to get out and look at the engine this time. Thankfully, the owner of the car had pointed out that the engine was in the rear. He'd really have looked the fool otherwise.

Andy actually breathed a sigh of relief upon discovering that the motor was sufficiently whitewashed with snow, such that little could be seen of anything. It looked far better that way, he thought.

He tapped on the passenger window, and over the raging wind told Janys to climb into the driver's seat to get ready to try starting the car. "Perhaps," Andy ventured, mustering up all the authority his voice could pretend, "if I clear some of this snow away we can make her turn over." That sounded fairly authentic, he thought. Snow had packed in amazingly solidly under that small lid. He cursed Hitler, who had originated the idea of a little "People's Car," for putting a motor in the rear. "Probably would never have happened had the motor been in the front," he muttered to no one in particular. The wind blew his words right back.

As it turned out, in Andy's vigorous snow-removal activity, he had inadvertently pulled a spark plug wire. Had he noticed, he would have wondered where it

came from and what to do with it. Within minutes of that mishap, a clear diagnosis of the problem emerged: a dead battery. Janys actually volunteered that information just ahead of Andy's observation, which left him a little nonplussed.

It was late afternoon. The wind was wild, the snow horizontal, and the thermometer hovering at about zero degrees Fahrenheit or lower. Daylight was fast retreating. They couldn't even get the news on the radio as they huddled inside under blankets mercifully kept in the front with just such emergencies in mind. Andy had tried for a few minutes to flag down passing motorists. But either they did not see him or feared stopping and getting stuck themselves. He hoped that someone would at least report them. As he retreated beneath the blankets, he wondered why could this not be with Fiona. The thought sprang forth before he could stuff it back down. Why couldn't his mind give it a break?

"Why don't you pray, Andy?" Janys suggested, deferring naturally to his male presence.

Pray? How incongruous, even absurd, it seemed suddenly. To pray! As if his prayer would somehow instantly stop the storm, like Jesus on the Sea of Galilee. Impossible. Then what use prayer? Andy's mind panted furiously. What is prayer? Had he ever uttered an authentic prayer, one that could move a few drifts of snow or make a car motor come back to life? Had prayer ever been more than a rote exercise, like rhyming off poetry or reciting a creed? Had he ever known any answers to prayer beyond the endless rationalizations of ostensibly unanswered petitions?

All this processed through his consciousness in seconds. Evoking a cough as a kind of prelude, Andy proceeded to beseech the Almighty. He felt his

reputation was at stake, even more so than when he had looked at the dead motor. But he was no *thaumaturge*—nor wired to one. Did he really know anything more about God *experientially* than he did about reviving a car motor? Or was he content to be a mere passenger in the Christian enterprise without really looking into the motor itself—the reality, or otherwise, of a God who somehow acted into history or did not?

These questions flooded his mind in the extended silence after his rather perfunctory prayer until Janys broke into his brooding with a spontaneous, passionate plea to God to watch over them and remove them from danger. Thank God women were allowed to pray at GO with men around (brethren assemblies forbade it). Andy couldn't help but laugh inwardly. At least her prayer had a chance of getting above the wild blizzard. He thought he'd heard his bounce off the car roof.

Andy's mood darkened with the sky, leaving an uneasy aftertaste of uncertainty, like the acrid smell of burnt hair. It was tinged with an undefined sense of fear, not so much about the real predicament they were in as that this little experiment might elicit an unwelcome hypothesis, namely that God was just a product of one's religious upbringing cum wish fulfillment. Could he honestly face that possibility? And why could he not have prayed like Janys? Was this his "ugly broad ditch"?

The snow, caught intermittently in the headlights of passing cars, continued to blow mercilessly.

After some discussion of various courses of action, they fell silent, nursing their own fears, having decided that it was best to do nothing except wait. *Waiting for Godot* was culled up from Andy's memory. He recollected the hopeless absurdity of the Samuel Beckett play. It was,

after all, in the “theatre of the absurd” genre.

Godot was obviously Beckett’s variation of God—perhaps meaning a little, ineffectual, and ultimately unreal god. The play had been as bleak as Sartre’s *La Nausée*. Andy remembered that often Beckett would not get out of bed until well into the morning or even into the afternoon, so fatigued was he with life. None of the brave staring down of evil urged by Sartre and other popularizing existentialists. Just the absurd routine of day-to-day living, relieved perhaps only by his creative instinct, like a full bladder was relieved by a satisfying urination, with perhaps no more appreciation of the act or the outcome.

“And if he comes, this little, useless god,” asks Estragon stupidly. “Why, we’ll be saved,” Vladimir assures him as blankly. Otherwise we’ll hang ourselves tomorrow. Why not? After all, what is the difference, if only in the state of consciousness, unless Godot comes? Unless Godot comes...

Suddenly, there was a loud banging on the roof, followed by faint yells over the wind. With great difficulty, Andy pushed open the driver’s side door. He was also amazed at how high the snow had piled in such a relatively short space of time.

A large snowmobile had come up behind them. Andy was amazed they had neither heard the motor nor noticed its light.

“There’s simply no way, lady!” the driver responded tersely to Janys’s question about loading their luggage. “Don’t even bother locking the doors! No fool thief will venture out in this weather, and you can come back in the morning when this blows itself out.”

As it turned out, there was a motel a couple miles further down the road. The snowmobile driver, together with his brother, had been delivering people from other

stalled vehicles for the last hour or so.

When Andy and Janys got there, several people were crowded into the foyer waiting to hear about a room, using the pay phone or simply warming themselves in front of a huge fireplace.

When it was their turn, Janys phoned her aunt first and asked them to contact Susan, who would then let Andy's parents know. Andy wondered if Lorraine was already at Susan's. They should be able to complete their journey the next day, Janys' aunt had said, given the weather forecast of a clear and cold Christmas Eve. Provided they could get their car started, Andy worried.

"One party to a room," the hotel proprietor explained to everyone. "Don't matter how many or who. Just be thankful you've got a warm place at all! Before the night's over, we might be sleeping six deep!"

Thankfully, it didn't turn out to be quite that crowded, but there was some doubling up of strangers. For their part, the two would-be-missionaries were assigned a small one-bed room. "Mr. and Mrs...?" she had asked, and Andy had deadpanned "Norton," before Janys could say anything. Why even bother explaining? They scanned the room briefly—there was only one bed—and then returned to the fireplace where they waited for supper.

Food was in good supply, though there was a hint of rationing certain items such as bread and butter. "Has to last to breakfast," the proprietor explained, "and God only knows how many more will be arriving."

Supper was sumptuous. Someone there knew how to cook! Amazingly, everyone fit into the dining room. All the tables were crowded with extra chairs scrounged from throughout the motel, but no one minded—on the

contrary! The sense of warm, spontaneous community among this group of strangers was palpable. There was excited chatter and loud laughter throughout the supper hour. When had Andy last felt that at church?

Everyone at Andy and Janys' table had harrowing tales to tell, and all expressed immense gratitude. A minister was asked by the owner to say a prayer for the food. It was heartfelt, accompanied by several equally animated "Amen's."

"No atheists in fox holes I guess," Andy could hear Dan say cynically.

"I just hope the car isn't buried under a mountain of snow," Andy said to Janys during a rare lull in the conversation. "Or maybe the plow'll just run right over the little bug! I remember seeing a picture in the *Record* once of just that: a parked car in London had been squashed by an army vehicle doing emergency snow removal. Apparently the driver didn't even know until he'd rolled over it what had happened!"

Janys was not amused. "Just remember it's your stuff in there, too!" she said. Andy heard one of their rescuers report that they had checked every car on both sides of the highway in both directions until the next county, and that all traffic had ceased. Sure enough, guests stopped arriving by the time supper was over.

Afterwards, a spontaneous singsong erupted. Thanks to Eaton's carol sheets, almost all the verses of all the carols were sung, together with a good many of the more secularized kind that were not on the sheets.

Midway through the singsong, the motel plunged into darkness. A voice rang out saying there were lots of candles! Just be patient. Sure enough, soon candles were being lit and distributed for each table.

"My insurance is paid up," the proprietor said, "but please, be extra cautious. No one wants to stand around

a bonfire tonight!” There was loud laughter. She had a spirited sense of humour just right for the occasion. “And can I ask just one thing? PLEASE DON’T FLUSH THE TOILETS UNTIL THE LIGHTS COME ON AGAIN! We’ll hope everything doesn’t freeze solid in the meantime! Now, let’s have some more singing!”

The singing went on for a while longer. Then people began to drift off to their rooms. A final carol was suggested. Someone *had* to call out the all-time favourite, “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas!” The room exploded in guffaws then erupted into a glorious rendition of same.

The landlady wrapped things up. “Goodnight to all, and don’t hesitate to ask for anything. It’s going to be a long night. More candles are on the table up here. Just remember to blow them out! Extra blankets are piled in the lobby. Please take just one per room, and cuddle up with your honey tonight.”

With nothing left to do except go to bed, Andy and Janys picked up their duly assigned blanket and headed back to their room.

Awkwardness. It was unthinkable for Andy to sleep in the same bed with Janys. But where else? The floor was hard linoleum. There was no extra mattress. The rooms weren’t the cleanest. Who knew what might be crawling around? And they’d need all the covers on the bed, and possibly still then some. If the power didn’t come back on, it would be mighty cold by morning.

Janys read Andy’s mind. “Andy, when we were kids, we’d sleep three and four to a bed sometimes, boys and girls. I think we have no choice tonight. We are, after all, ‘Mr. and Mrs. Norton,’” she added flatly, her smile—Was it red-tinged?—expansive. Then impishly, “But we’ll keep our clothes on. It’s gonna

be cold tonight!”

Andy laughed. That smile.

He recalled the Morrisons, former family friends that used to visit the Nortons for a few summers after they'd moved to Michigan. The whole family would move in for a week or so, including three sisters, all around the same age as Susan and Andy. They always pitched their tent in the backyard. One night, a huge thunderstorm streamed water through the floor, and everything was a soggy mess that took two days to dry out.

The night after the storm, the parents all went off to a church meeting, leaving the kids with a babysitter. Two sisters were to sleep with Susan in her bed, but there was not enough room for the third, so she was settled with Andy. They were all of seven or eight years old.

Not long after the sitter told them goodnight, Andy went to his dresser in the dark and, after some discussion with Carolyn, pulled out a pen flashlight he'd won for reciting verses at Sunday School and told her she could go first. Under the covers that night, abetted by the tiny flashlight, they both had repeated hands-on lessons in human anatomy.

Andy wondered about a repeat performance, but he knew candles caught fire under bed covers. He really had no interest in exploring Janys sexually that night. He was a committed Christian. Janys had not attracted him particularly, except her smile. He'd really come to like her smile. What was it he saw? He pushed all further thinking below his consciousness and rubbed his hands together. Already, the wind-battered room felt chilled.

“Well, okay, no toothbrush, Janys. I guess I'm about ready to crawl under,” Andy said, after they'd

tucked in the extra blanket at the end of the bed. “Do you want to use the bathroom first? Remember, there’s no flushing...”

“No,” she said calmly, “you go first.”

“Coast is clear,” he chimed afterwards, “Although a word of warning: The lock on the door is broken.”

He climbed into bed, feeling a little more sexually charged than he’d thought.

“Good thing you have a sister!” Janys said as she stepped into the washroom.

“And you a brother,” he fired back.

They laughed. Was it nervously?

Andy lay wide awake. He was feeling aroused. Yes. That was *le mot juste*, remembering the quip in *My Fair Lady*, “The French don’t care what they do actually, as long as they pronounce it correctly—or have the ‘right word.’” He did have the right word, but he also cared what he did.

It had been a long day. He’d done all the driving, the last two hours or so with taut nerves that still had not relaxed. The room, in candlelight glow, was simply appointed. It had a washroom with sink and shower, a bed, a desk, and a single easy chair he could have otherwise somewhat slept on. He thought of Lorraine. And Fiona. And his mom and dad. Susan! He could just imagine her mocking! Dan. G. E.... Groan, this last was the corker.

Janys came out at last. Andy was surprised to see her hair cascade almost to her waist. When she took off her glasses, he thought, wow, she should wear contacts. Then he thought he’d best stop using the word “wow.” Then he thought he’d best stop thinking. But could not. She blew out the candle and climbed into bed. Two bodies in a single bed. Good thing she was petite and he slim. This was really weird.

Though the storm raged furiously outside, Andy was already feeling cozy warm, almost euphoric in the darkness.

“Janys,” Andy began, “have you already thought of this? What will people say if they know we literally ‘slept together’?”

Janys giggled. “There was a Christian sect in medieval France called the Cathars that used to believe sleeping together without ‘doing it’ was a powerful spiritual exercise. I think we should see how much more spiritual we are in the morning, Andy, then maybe suggest this as a way to jack up the flagging spirituality of some at the Centre that G. E. is so exercised about.”

Andy could sense her grinning in the dark. He felt a tad mortified.

“Seriously,” Andy pursued with a tinge of recrimination, “can we agree we just won’t talk about... this part of the journey?” He felt a slight tingle.

“Okay, my dear,” she said playfully, “if you insist. There won’t be too many asking the details anyway, and mum’s the word! Now, are you going to say a goodnight prayer or shall I?”

This was really no big deal to her at all. Had she been through this before? Andy couldn’t imagine.

“You can do the honours, Janys,” he replied. “But before you do, can I ask one thing? Why don’t you ever wear your hair down?” Where had that come from? His boldness tingled, again.

Janys was quiet for a time. Maybe he’d gone too far.

“Maybe I will sometime, Andy. Okay, I’ll gladly pray.” And she did, thanking God above all for shelter and warmth.

“Goodnight, Andy,” she said at the end.

“Sleep tight, Janys,” he said back. And they each turned sideways, backs to each other.

Not long afterwards, Andy heard a patterned breathing beside him. It sounded a minor key to the furious lament outside. And she could fall asleep just like that, he thought. For his part, he was reviewing every discussion he’d ever had with Jack, G. E., Lorraine, his sister, and much, much more. Throughout it all, Janys slept on peacefully. Well, Andy thought, at least she doesn’t snore....

Minutes later—Or was it hours?—Andy awoke from a dream. His mind reached for it, but it slipped beyond recall. He noticed the wind had stopped. Light from an engorged moon streamed through the window. He had to go to the bathroom. What time was it? He slipped out of bed. The heat must be back on, he thought, uncomprehending. He tiptoed to the washroom door, and without thinking, flicked on the light switch. Light blazed. His eyes blinked, dazzled.

That shock paled before what his blinking eyes suddenly took in: Janys at the sink, in bra and panties only, blouse held in her hands, an utterly startled look emblazoned across her face.

He gaped. She gasped.

“Andy, the light! Turn off the light!” She thrust her arms upwards to spread the blouse across her bosom.

Andy floundered a minute then finally found the switch. Glorious moonlight alone bathed the scene. A shaft fully spotlighted Janys. She stepped sideways instinctively and banged into the sink. “Ouch!”

“I’m so sorry, Janys! Whatever are you doing?” Eyes averted, Andy beat a hasty retreat.

The door shut tightly behind him. Silence. Wow! And again, wow! He didn’t care now. His mind started

doing an instant replay. There was a close-up of her bra, her bare skin, her...

“Andy,” from inside the bathroom, “do you need to use the toilet? I’m done now.”

She stepped out, bath towel draped over her body. He stepped in.

He had to sit down to go pee. Only then did he realize he’d wet his pants. How embarrassing!

Her blouse and sweater were hanging over the towel rack directly above an electric heater, which belted out hot air. The bathroom felt invitingly cozy. Whatever had happened? Andy was still uncomprehending. He took off his pants and wet underpants, quickly ran some water in the sink, and soaked and squeezed them several times. Then he pulled on his pants, very careful of the zipper. He hung his briefs on the same rack. Hopefully they’d be dry by morning. He looked at his watch in the moonlight. It was 3:00 a.m.

Andy crawled back into bed as quietly as he could, trying desperately to take measured breaths. His heart took even longer to slow down.

Janys shifted her weight toward him. “Andy, I’m sorry.”

“No, Janys, *I’m* sorry!”

Deep breath. “In case you haven’t figured it out, it’s my period. I had no tampons. They’re frozen solid back in the car. I should have at least tried to get those out, but that snowmobile driver was not waiting for anything. Besides, I thought I could get some at the motel. Wrong. They were all out. So she gave me... Andy, is this grossing you out?”

“I do have a sister, Janys, remember?” Andy said evenly.

“So,” she went on, “the lady obligingly gave me a wad of paper towels. Now this gets even more

embarrassing. Do you really want to hear? But I've gone this far..."

Andy said nothing. The moonlight outlined everything in the room, including Janys' face. It gave her a pleasant, appealing, soft glow.

"I woke up to go pee and discovered nature had taken its course a bit more than I'd expected. Thankfully, she'd given me lots of those towels. But my panties, and the bottom of my blouse and sweater were... I'll spare you further details. So I poured water into the sink to rinse everything out. I was almost finished when you stumbled in.

A pause, then, "Andy, the look on your face was worth a million bucks!"

Andy said nothing. Outside was utterly, eerily still. The moonscape must be glorious, he imagined. A faint snoring came through the walls.

Ever practical, Andy asked, "So, do you have enough..."

"Paper towels?" Janys completed the query. "I hope so. And yes, before you ask, I had to put those well squeezed wet underwear back on, too. They're feeling a little uncomfortable right now. But they'll dry out by morning I'm sure. Pretty light material, and nice and warm under the covers."

She grinned at the ceiling. "I think you're right though. I won't be talking to anyone about this. 'Mr. and Mrs. Norton' indeed." She chuckled. "If only some of my girlfriends could see me now. Goodnight again, Andy."

He debated about offering to spend the rest of the night in the chair. He was very conscious she was wearing only her underwear beside him. He saw her bosom again in his mind's eye, full light blazing, and then fleetingly in the moonlight. But they had come

this far without mishap. He knew he'd do quite fine until morning. She certainly would. Probably be asleep in just a few minutes. He fell asleep thinking about the Cathars.

Morning sunlight blazed through the frosted window. Andy sat up and rubbed his eyes. Just then, Janys stepped out of the bathroom fully clothed, hairbrush in hand.

“Good morning, sleepy head. Found this under the bed. After I'd cleaned out the hair, the brush works fine.” She stepped back into the washroom. “Oh, and I guess you'll be wanting these.” She threw Andy his underpants. “They're dry. So were my clothes.” She laughed at his look of embarrassment. “Thought we got over that last night... I can guess what happened... No need to explain.”

He didn't.

“Look out the window, Andy.”

He gasped. As fearsome as the storm had been as dazzling was its morning afterglow. If the scene was a painted landscape, the sun was the virtuoso artist, enlivening every square inch with a textured grace that was irresistibly exquisite. Each point of sight was a-shimmer.

“Wow,” Andy said simply, surprised he still found the word usable. He noted her long hair glistening in the dancing sunshine as she looked out the window beside him. Moments later, they headed downstairs to the dining area. All the way, her hair swooshed seductively across her back.

After breakfast, they connected with a tow-truck driver, and Andy accompanied him to their stranded car. The after-glory of the storm evoked associations of a desert traveller's first happening upon an oasis or the

sudden turn in the fairy tale (Tolkien's eucatastrophe) with the sure knowledge that good would ultimately triumph. It was the apotheosis of Bing Crosby's *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas* sung so lustily the night before. If only the world could stay this white, he thought. A sense of deep tranquility settled over him as he praised God inwardly for this glorious Christmas Eve. Surely this must be a taste of heaven, even if there would be no snow up there.

"A mother and her two children are dead, after failing to be rescued last night from their stalled car," the newscaster announced over the truck's radio, "and President Nixon vows more troops for South Vietnam. But first, these messages from our sponsors."

Andy's reverie ended abruptly as his mind turned to the awful tragedy of the night before. How could such radiant whiteness have occasioned such stark misfortune? On Christmas Eve no less? How could anyone near that family sing "Joy To the World!" ever again? Why? Andy's mind spun at the sheer gratuitousness of such evil.

It was not even man-made. Not like Vietnam, he thought further. He remembered Voltaire savaging any Leibnitzian notion of living in the "best of all possible worlds," given the earthquake in Voltaire's lifetime that had killed thousands. How to explain a good God in the face of such a happening? And if there is an omniscient God, mustn't his switchboard be besieged daily by similar events? Yet he failed to lift a finger to prevent even the natural disasters—quite apart from man's inhumanity to man!

An acquaintance had loaned Andy a copy of Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian* while he was in university. Andy read it dutifully. He remembered how airily he had dismissed Russell's

entire thesis since he only treated of philosophical objections. “The Christian faith is not primarily a philosophy but a fact of human history—rooted in the space-time continuum we daily encounter,” he had urged upon his friend. No “accidental truths of history” either, he’d argued forcefully. There had ensued a hot debate, which was halted abruptly by his opponent’s searing words. “If God is so good, damn it, why is my sister, who believes in God, dying of leukemia right now?”

In the face of such raw emotion, Andy had fallen silent. He never discussed faith matters with that person again. He tasted the guilt of his failure once more. He had no answer then and still felt at a loss as he watched the tow-truck driver hitch up the VW, which, thankfully, had neither been buried nor run over by a snowplough.

The driver laughed when he found the loose spark plug wire. “If only all car problems were this simple!”

With the plug in place and the car jump-started, Andy and Janys finally completed their journey. Hasty phone calls arranged for Janys’s brother and dad to pick her up at the Nortons’. Susan would drive to Kitchener, hoping for the best from her Mustang.

Before twilight eased into clear stellar night, they arrived safely in Kitchener. As they neared Andy’s home, he noticed Janys putting her hair up again but said nothing. He really liked it down and made a mental note to tell her that again sometime.

“So good to have met you,” Janys said to Andy’s parents upon departing. Then to Andy: “Yesterday and last night will remain unforgettable!” Right in front of everyone. Andy felt a red rush. But nothing was said, perhaps Janys’s very intention. Though Susan did look at him strangely. With that, Andy finally entered into

the warmth and joy of Christmas Eve celebrations at home, feeling suddenly exhausted...

At the first opportunity, he and Susan slipped into her bedroom, and Andy asked about Lorraine. "Sounds more like I ought to be quizzing you about Janys, Andy," she said, eyeing him sharply.

Andy lay back on Susan's bed and took in the familiar surroundings. Her bedroom was just as she'd left it, including the *Beatles* posters on the wall that her mother had asked her repeatedly to take down, with not a few arguments over such "godless music." Susan had painted the room herself. It was compact, but it had "Susan" written all over it.

"So what happened last night with you guys?" Andy maintained a poker face that amazed him. How could last night seem "normal"? But that's exactly how it felt. Objectively, to sleep in the same bed with a half-naked woman and for nothing to have happened, well... His head cross-examined his heart, and the testimony held with not even an "Objection, your Honour."

"Susan, I really do like Janys. But what happened 'happened.' Pure and simple. Nothing else. Nothing new. Nothing to tell. No regrets but the obvious: *I missed Lorraine!* Now what to do?"

Susan appeared to accept the finality of Andy's tone, dropping her probable temptation to cross-examine. "I told her you'd call as soon as you could. But she knew this would show on the phone bill. Instead, she's agreed to call at eleven tonight, sharp! You or I will grab the phone first, wherever we're at in celebrations. Hopefully we're done and mom and dad are already tucked into bed. In that case, you take the kitchen phone into your bedroom. I will discreetly close the hallway door. And keep your conversation short. The only possibility for a rendezvous is late

Boxing Day evening.

“I ended up taking the bus to Kitchener today. My car was so jittery Dad suggested it. I can now say I have to get back to Toronto a day earlier, and you can drive me, stay the night, and pick up Janys at her relatives’ really early. Then you can drive here, exchange cars, and be on your way.

“This all seems so ridiculously tight, I realize, though I don’t mind cutting out early after you’ve left. It’ll be a bit rough around here with Mom anyway. Can’t you delay returning by one day? It’d be so much better, Andy.”

“Can’t,” Andy said resolutely. He thought that’s all G. E. would have to catch wind of, Congress ‘71 exchanged in part for Lorraine. “I *have* to be back. There’s no give.”

“Okay kiddo! What a sister won’t do for her kid brother.”

“Oh, give me a break,” Andy came back, catching the mirth at the corners of her eyes. She’d proven it more than once: She’d do *lots* for her kid brother, Andy felt so lucky and proud to have her for a sister.

At eleven sharp, the phone rang. His parents in bed, Andy snatched up the receiver. He thrilled at the sound of her voice. Although the Christmas tree was surrounded by gifts, Andy already knew this was going to be the best one.