

THE SHAPE OF A STAR BY MARY DOUTHITT



“IT’S TIME!” MOM calls from the house. We leave the snowman half finished and the sled in the middle of the yard. Our boots are wet, but we run inside anyway. It’s time for Dad to call.

He agreed to call us at lunchtime on Christmas Eve. That makes it just past midnight Christmas morning in the desert on the other side of the world. Where Dad is. Where the war is. But the phone does not ring.

Zach, my baby brother, cries. Mom jiggles him this way and that, then says, “We can eat lunch while we wait. Abby, help me set the table, please.”

I put plates on the table while my sister, Elissa, sits. Mom warms a bottle. I make sandwiches and show Elissa how to use the cookie cutter to create Christmas stars. Dad loves to look at stars. He and I look at them in the night sky through his telescope, so he always cuts our sandwiches into stars on Christmas Eve.

I take my time eating my star sandwich. Elissa finishes hers and licks the crumbs from her fingers. I hand her a napkin. Still, the phone is quiet.



"No sense just sitting here," Mom says at last. "Dad will call when he can. Don't worry." But I am worried. We leave the kitchen, even though we do not want to.

The box Dad sent came two weeks ago. Wrapped in crinkly gold paper, it sits in the corner of the living room. Its ribbon, all flat from the trip, spills over the sides. His Christmas is there, where it is hot. Our Christmas is here, without him.

"Do you think Dad got the present we sent?" Elissa asks me. "Do you think it still looked pretty when it got there?"

"Sure it did," I tell her, even though I wonder the same thing.

"Girls," Mom's voice tries to be cheerful as she comes out of the kitchen, "let's put up the tree!"

Mom and I twist the tall pine into its stand. Then we test the lights: the flickerers, the blinkers, the bubblers, the twinklers. They light up the room. Dad usually wraps them all over himself, then dances around singing, "Oh, Tannenbaum! I'm Dad-enbaum!" Elissa wraps herself in the glowing colors as we sing, "Oh, Elissa-baum!" while she dances, and we laugh.

We unpack the Christmas ornaments and hang them on the tree, then talk about the things they remind us of—last year's Christmas and the year's before.

"Remember making glitter balls and how Abby sneezed?" Mom asks.

"We were still finding glitter in the corners of the kitchen until Fourth of July!" Elissa adds, laughing.

Mom answers a knock at the front door. We run to greet Aunt Lanie and Uncle Harold, who've driven down from the city for Christmas. They give extralong hugs to Mom and Zach and Elissa and me.

As Elissa and I carry their bags to their room, Aunt Lanie lowers her voice, "Any word?"

"Not yet," Mom says.

I get towels for Aunt Lanie and Uncle Harold and put them on the guest bed in Mom and Dad's office. Colored bits of paper and ribbon are scattered everywhere. The office is our present-wrapping room. All the pretty packages are stacked in the corner, waiting for Christmas. I check tags to see if any are for me and find one. It's signed "Love, Mom and Dad" in Mom's handwriting. I sit on the bed and shake it a little. What makes that tinkly sound?



The wall is filled with framed photographs. Pictures of relatives surround the wedding picture of Mom and Dad. She looks like a princess in her wedding gown, and he is like a prince in his smooth uniform. Sometimes I forget Dad's face a little, so I come in here to remember.

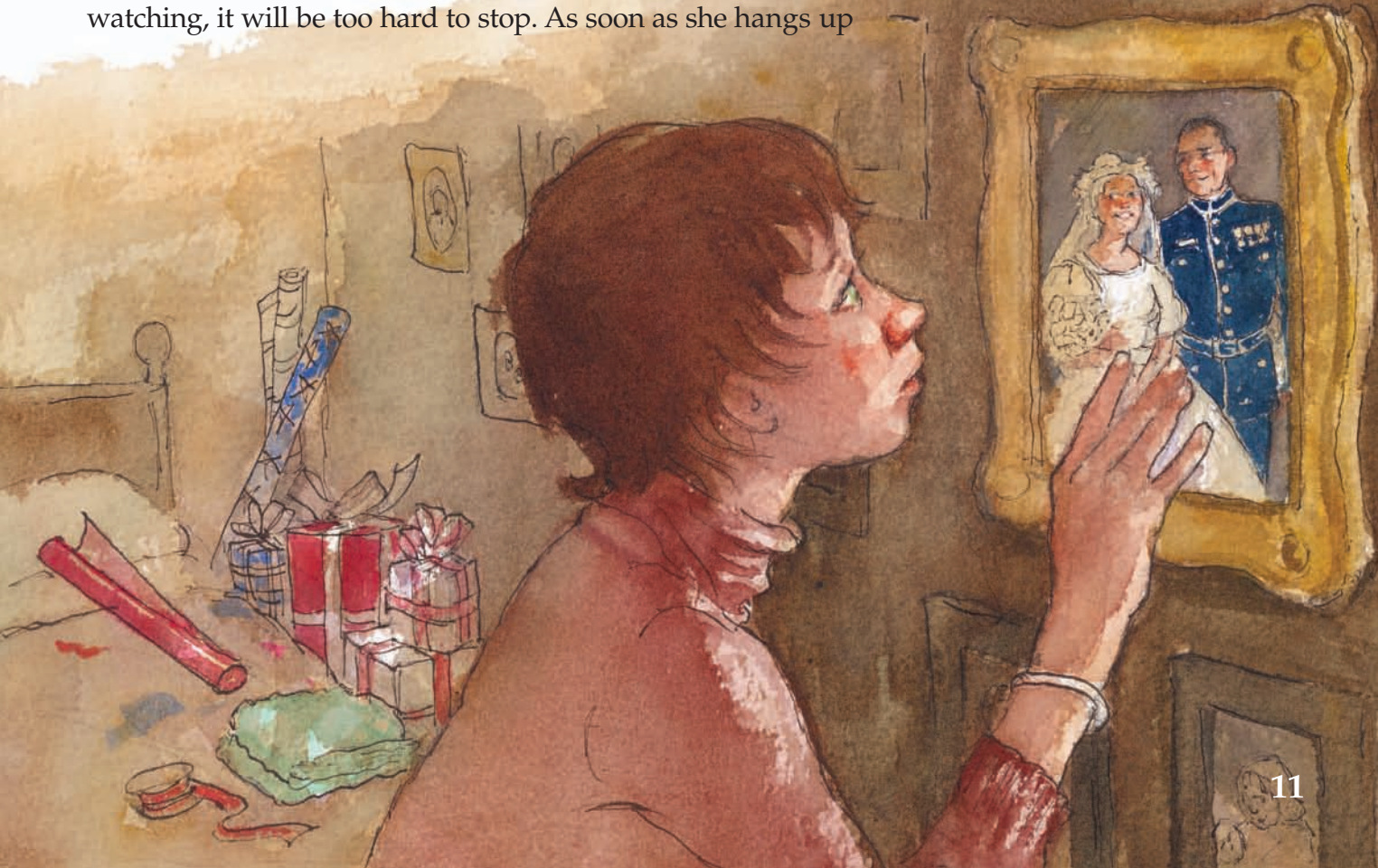
"Please call soon," I tell his picture.

In the kitchen everybody helps with Christmas Eve dinner. I mash the sweet potatoes, and Elissa puts marshmallows on top. Uncle Harold makes his special gravy. A radio station is playing Christmas music all day. Aunt Lanie claps Zach's hands in time to the holiday songs while we sing, "Let it snow! Let it snow! Let it snow!"

An announcer comes on for a newsbreak. There is trouble where the soldiers are. Mom stops checking the ham. Everybody stops. A convoy is under attack. Dad's unit is among those sent to defend it. "People are hurt," the announcer says, "people are missing." Missing phone calls. Missing Christmas.

"Turn it off," Mom says.

The phone rings. Mom rushes to answer. It's a neighbor asking how we are. He saw the news on television. Mom will not let us watch the TV news because, she says, if we start watching, it will be too hard to stop. As soon as she hangs up



the phone, it rings again. Another neighbor. Soon someone is at the door bringing cookies, asking if we need anything. Zach and Elissa and I eat dinner with Aunt Lanie and Uncle Harold while Mom comforts the neighbors. "We're fine. We'll hear soon. I'm sure of it," she tells them.

Next come dishes, then bed. I sit on top of my quilt, and Elissa sits on hers, too. We look out the window, listening to the quiet of the snowfall. We think about Dad, and Santa Claus.

"Do you think Santa will stop by the war before he comes to our house?" Elissa asks.

I shrug my shoulders. "He goes everywhere on Christmas Eve, so I guess he'll go to the war, too."

"I wish I could go back to the department store and talk to him," Elissa says. "I wish I could ask him to check on Dad."

Mom comes in and whispers, "Time for church." I love driving to church on Christmas Eve. The streets are quiet, but the houses are bright with Christmas lights. The snow glows in the moonlight. The world waits for morning.

The snow has stopped falling, and I can see stars in the sky. When I was little, Dad showed me the way stars form shapes called constellations. The zigzag shape is Cassiopeia, the queen. Dad said she boasted that her daughter was more beautiful than any other goddess and was punished for her bragging by being chained to her chair for all eternity, her head pointing at the North Star so that half of every night she sits upside down. Dad told me, "If that's the punishment for bragging about your daughter, I guess I ought to be hanging upside down from my chair, too."

We get to the chapel early. Elissa is a shepherd in the Christmas program. She stands near the altar in her shabby robe, crinkling her eyebrows, trying to look wise. She wanted to be a wise man and wear a shiny, gold-trimmed robe. I told her, last year she was a lamb, this year she's a shepherd, maybe next year she can be a wise man. Unless Dad gets transferred again. If Dad comes home.

Aunt Lanie leans across the pew. "Pray for your father," she whispers. I rest my chin on my folded hands, but I don't know what to pray. I don't know what my father is doing or

CASSIOPEIA IS
PRONOUNCED
KAS-EE-UH-
PEE-UH.



what sort of help I should ask for. Besides, God must already know about the trouble. I imagine He's pretty busy and I don't want to distract Him. So I send a wish to Santa Claus instead: *I don't really need any presents this year, but I was wondering, could you leave me a note? Could you tell me how my father is doing?*

Back at home, Elissa and I lie in our beds.

"Let's just talk for a while—until Santa comes," she says.

"O.K." So far, we've said that every year, but we've always fallen asleep. We swear to each other we won't this year.

The next thing I know, the room is filled with snow-white light. Elissa is shaking me awake, saying, "Christmas! Look! Stockings!" Our fat stockings slump at the edges of our beds where Santa has left them. We scramble to the floor and start ripping away the tissue paper.

"A puppet!" Elissa laughs, shoving her hand into the fuzzy little monkey.

"Chocolate coins!" We eat them, though it isn't even breakfast time yet.

"Socks." We toss them into the corner.

I pull the paper away from a small wooden music box with a camel painted on the lid. Swirling letters that I don't recognize run across the bottom. "Look," I whisper, "it's from where Dad is." Elissa unwraps one just like it, and we wind them. They play a tune we have never heard.

"Do you think Santa saw Dad?"

I pull my stocking inside out, looking for a note, but only an orange and a few walnuts fall to the floor.

Soon everyone in the house is gathering in the kitchen. Elissa and I peer around the corner for a look at the Christmas tree. There are more packages than last night.

"Santa was here!" Elissa squeals.

Could he have left a note under the tree?

"No one goes in the living room until after breakfast," Mom commands. Slowly, she feeds Zach. Slowly, Aunt Lanie puts scrambled eggs in front of us. How can anyone be hungry? Slowly, Uncle Harold reads the newspaper. Not the newspaper! On Christmas morning?

"Bad trouble over there," he mutters.



THE LETTERS ON
THE BOX SAY ...
"SONGS," "BOX," AND
"MUSIC" IN ARABIC.





Mom picks up Zach and pushes down Harold's paper.
"Let's open presents."

We race to the twinkling tree. Dad's crinkly gold box with the flat ribbon faces us from the middle of the room.

"Shall we open Dad's first?" Mom asks. Nobody answers.

The phone rings. Nobody moves.

"Your neighbor?" Aunt Lanie asks.

"Not on Christmas morning."

It rings again. It sounds like a regular ring, but it doesn't feel like one.

Mom answers. We are afraid to look at one another. Mom holds the phone tight to her cheek, and then she cries a little. That makes Elissa cry, which makes Uncle Harold cry, which makes Aunt Lanie cry. I don't know what to think.

Finally, Mom says something. "I knew you would be all right."

I grab Aunt Lanie's arm, and the tears run into her smile. Elissa jumps and punches the air, and Uncle Harold dances around the room with Zach.

"Is he all right? Is he?" I ask.

Mom holds the phone in the air, and we can all hear Dad answer. "Merry Christmas, everyone!" His voice is faint, but it is his voice. "Sorry I couldn't call yesterday," Dad's voice crackles on the line, "but I cut my bread in the shape of a star and thought about each of you."

"We did, too!" we cry. "Merry Christmas, Dad!"

He cannot stay on the phone long because other soldiers need to call their families.

Mom hangs up, then joins us, drying her face with her hands. "Everybody get dressed," she says. "Presents can wait."

We put on coats and boots and march outdoors, singing Christmas carols. Uncle Harold plays his harmonica as we sing. He's not very good at it, but it doesn't matter. All along our street, the neighbors come to their doors in pajamas. They clap and wave, and some even join us.

Pretty soon there are dozens of us, cold and happy, singing in the snow. I forget about presents or Santa Claus. I know Dad is lying on a cot, getting the first sleep he has had in two days. And I can picture his face perfectly. 