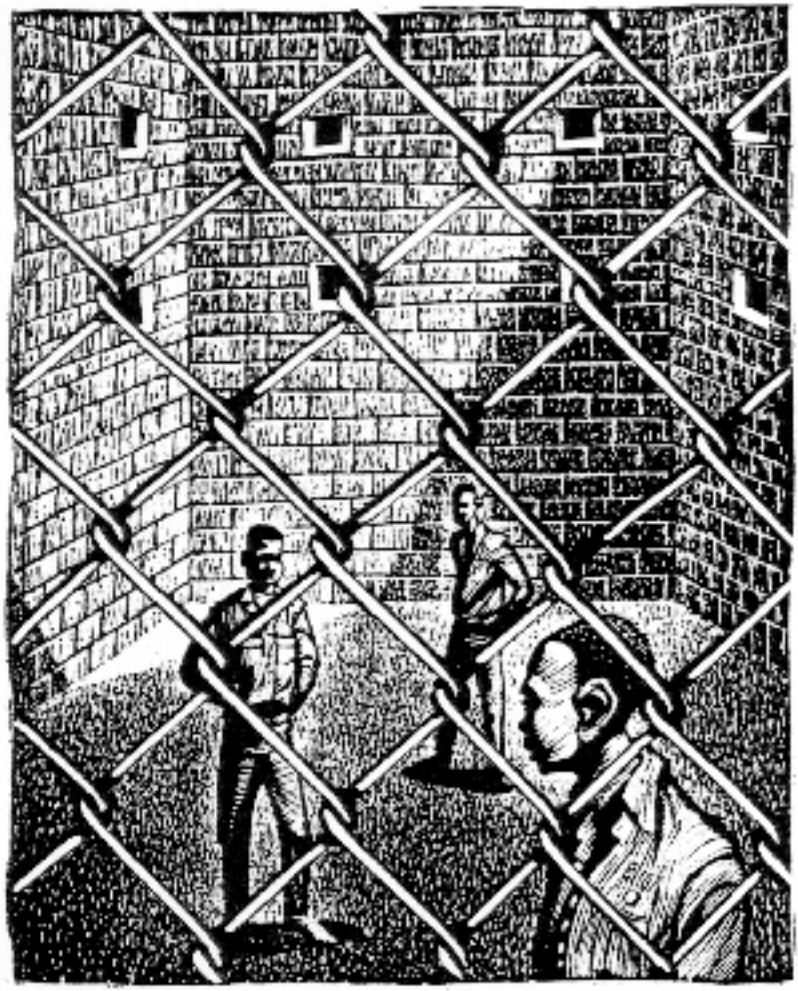
Razor Wire Christmas



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Razor-Wire Christmas

Justin Peters

December 23

From far up in the universe, the sun shone down on the huge humps and ridges of the North Country, on endless miles of leafless forest, bleak and cold. Winter had come, though no snow as yet; but far off a vast snowstorm was blowing eastward.

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Julio Estrada was jogging, his breath puffing out in huge steamy clouds. He looked out across the tree-covered ridges fading, fold after fold, into the distance. He had first seen those hills four months ago, all green. He had watched them turn orange and yellow, then purplish-brown as the leaves fell. He imagined those hills looked beautiful to the natives. But to him they combined with the huge triple fence in the foreground, to make one vast prison.

Julio ran fifteen miles of laps around the prison yard every day - you never knew when being in excellent shape was going to be essential. He finished his run, had a shower, then went to his cell. In half an hour he would be due in the kitchen, where the inmate cooks were extra busy getting Christmas dinner ready. Julio sat on his bed, looked out the four-inch wide window, and pondered. What a year. In January, back in the city, he had married Lola, in a real church wedding. Then he had joined the gospel choir. The church asked him to be their youth minister. Life was full of hope and purpose - as full as it could get in the Wilson-Beckman neighborhood in the city. Then came that night at Easter - a knock at the door - the police - arrested. It had been a big robbery - some judge got robbed - and there were no clues or evidence, but the District Attorney had his eye on the Governor's mansion, and you couldn't leave a crime that big unsolved. Julio had made as good a suspect as any of the other million young black men in the city. The church had rallied, and put up $50,000 for a good lawyer, but what was $50,000 against a DA on a mission? From the start, Julio wasn't going to plea bargain. Everyone told him to take the DA's offer - plead guilty, skip the trial, and get by with a five to ten year sentence. It made sense - but how could he say he had done it when he hadn't? Then there was Lola. One day, visiting him, she told him that by Christmas he'd be a dad. So he went to trial and fought it. The lawyer did his best, but they never had a chance. Ten to twenty for armed robbery.

Julio was tall, 6' 6" and 225 lbs. He was a quiet person, but he had made a few friends here in prison. Mike Howard was #1. Mike was twice his age, coming to the end of a long sentence for homicide. They were opposites in a lot of ways - Mike was jovial, outgoing, always seemed to have a crowd around him, seemed to land friendships like trout in a stream. He even had friends among the guards - many of them seemed to, maybe not like him, but get along with him.

Mike was OK with the guards, but for Julio, there were only two cracks in the white wall. One was Chuck Phillips, a guard in the kitchen and cafeteria. The other was Ms. Norton - assistant

warden, but not a bad person at that. Seemed to respect you, even if she was part of the cold, white prison.

But every hour he thought of Lola and the baby. The birth would be any day now. And would she wait for him for ten years? How often would she take the bus, six hours each way, with the baby, to visit him way up here in Granite Hill Correctional Facility? Julio's desperation grew, and his mind worked as only desperation can make it do.

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Three hundred yards away, Wallace Eppington looked out his office window. He liked the view. The sun glinted on miles of gleaming concertina wire, coiled in huge impenetrable sausages along the tops of the triple fence. Eppington was the warden of Granite Hill. He saw it as his first step up the ladder in the Department of Corrections. Granite Hill had been built ten years ago. For ten years he had been warden. They were ten years of top ratings, ten years of flawless management, ten years without a problem. Wallace Eppington had his eye on the state capital, where the post of corrections commissioner would open up next year. A few more trouble-free months were all he needed. Like a pitcher in the ninth inning of a no-hitter, he was getting tense, and the whole prison was getting his jitters.

Christmas was a tough time of year for a prison. The inmates were depressed and angry - more so than ever. Among the guards, the new hires resented the extra hours as older guards took vacation. And now there was this big storm. Granite Hill CF was in the middle of nowhere, and the twelve hundred guards commuted as far as seventy miles. It had been hard to keep the prison staffed six years ago when eighteen inches of snow had fallen. Now they were talking about three feet. Eppington would have to personally manage the prison through the worst of the storm. It wouldn't be much of a Christmas for his wife, but he wasn't risking his career on anyone else's poor decisions.

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Chuck Phillips looked anxiously out at the sun. Not that anxiety was a strange frame of mind - you were always worried in prison. Plenty of other guards patronized the four psychotherapists in Bensonville, a town of fifteen thousand some twenty miles down Route 487. Anxiety was a way of life for a prison guard, and even good days were bad days. And then Eppington and his big ego trip weren't making life easy for anyone.

Chuck hadn't really wanted to work in the prison. It looked so cold and hard as you cruised below it on 487. He had married Annette on the strength of a good job at the paper mill. Things had been great for three years. Then the paper mill closed its doors - overnight. He tried for logging, but just then the only saw mill in town closed too. So there was nothing left but Granite Hill. Chuck was a small man - 5' 7" - and had barely made the minimum height and weight for a guard. But now he was here, the pay was good, and the job was secure. Job security was important, because now at last their first child was on the way. But there was fear, fear, always fear. White guards, black inmates - and fear.

Chuck had been raised to always look for the best in people. That wasn't an easy thing to do at Granite Hill. But he found that inmates - some inmates - were people too, and slowly he built uneasy, guarded friendships with the best of them. The men in the kitchen, where he was often assigned, were a good group. There was Mike Howard, always exuberant, (seemingly) never resentful, always had an upbeat word. And Julio Estrada - Chuck couldn't figure out how guys like Estrada ever got to prison. The better he knew him, the less he could picture him doing armed robbery.

But this sunny morning bore extra fears to Chuck. As a new hire, he would be on duty for twenty hours straight over Christmas. And judging by the forecast of three feet of snow, when the twenty hours were over, he wouldn't be able to get home anyway. What would Annette do if she needed him? Eppington had made it clear: skip work time at Christmas and you're fired, prison policy. The sun seemed to taunt him, because he knew in a couple of hours it would be gone - you could see the first faint haze over the sun already. But what if he said he was sick? They couldn't stop you from going home sick.

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Michelle Norton hung up the phone. OK, it was settled - the 27th would be their Christmas Day. It made everything simpler, and it was Mom's birthday anyway. Emily, her sister and a state police sergeant, was on duty on the 25th and 26th. Pam, her other sister and a reporter for WBNV-TV in Bensonville, was always working crazy hours and couldn't come on Christmas. And Michelle, assistant warden at the prison, had to work overtime over Christmas.

Prison was a crazy job. Michelle hated it and loved it. The idea had started when she was in college, and her professor had taken them on a tour of a prison. It seemed such a tragedy of wasted opportunity and wasted lives. She decided she would enter the system, and get to where she had the power to make a difference. But it wasn't quite working. Not that she doubted that prison was rampant with wasted opportunity. What stopped her was the politics, and the insistence on killing every program that worked. But she kept her mouth shut, played Eppington's politics, and looked forward to having him out of there.

She climbed into her Chevy Blazer, and pulled out of the drive. The rising sun was bright. There was time for a quick drive-thru breakfast, and then she was due at the prison.

She pulled into the prison lot. Eppington wanted her early for some reason. She walked into his office - there were Jake and Ernie, the two deputy assistant wardens. "Listen," Eppington was saying, "this is going to be the worst week in the history of this prison. Three feet of snow, and Christmas, and bad influenza this winter. We'll have our work cut out for us keeping the prison staffed." The pep talk droned on - Michelle knew the script exactly. Finally they were done. Eppington was heading home.

She stopped by her office, then went out to walk the floor. For the next eight hours, she would be in charge of this big prison of nine hundred inmates. It was like walking a tightrope: being human to real human beings, but still being tough, maintaining control, not taking any fresh talk from guards or inmates. But people respected Michelle Norton.

Late in the day she walked into the kitchen. "Hello, Mr. Estrada. Hello, Mr. Howard."

"Hey, Ms. Norton. What's happening? How are your Christmas plans coming?"

"Mine are coming good. How are yours, Mr. Howard?"

"Well, not so good. Looks like they back-ordered forty-five turkeys. Not sure how that's going to work - turkey for Christmas for six hundred, hot dogs for three hundred? Uh-uh. What are we gonna do?"

"Talk to foodservice, Mr. Howard. We've got to have turkey - too many other problems this Christmas to add that one."

She wished there were more inmates like Mike Howard. How could you always stay that cheerful? What did he have to be cheerful about? Now the chartered coaches from the city, that would have brought dozens of Christmas visitors to Granite Hill, had all cancelled out because of the storm. It was going to be a bad Christmas. Mike went right on humming "Jingle Bells".

She looked out the window. The first snowflakes were drifting down, as darkness settled over the prison. Up the drive came a semi - Sysco Foodservice. Let's hope they had some turkeys! Let's hope they could get through tomorrow, too - she had personally arranged for fresh fruit for everyone on Christmas Day.

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Dan Vittore, the Sysco driver, cleared security. He backed his semi in, and hurried indoors. Sysco was pushing the drivers hard, and with fifteen stops and 280 miles, he'd have had a full day without snow. He had to get out of here.

He kind of enjoyed the prison. He wasn't supposed to talk with inmates, but he liked Mike Howard, and they usually traded a few words. Both were from the city, and were like friends from home to each other. Estrada was there too. He was a quiet guy, but personable.

"Any turkeys, Dan?"

"I hear they're plannin' to send 'em through tomorrow. Not sure how I'm gonna make it in here though." Dan and Mike were pulling skids off while Chuck Phillips checked the items off the packing list. This was no day to hang around, and in five and a half minutes flat, Dan was back on the road. Stop at security, let the guard check the trailer, the tractor, inside and out. Pull the door down, and roll.

December 24

There were thirteen inches of snow by morning - no big deal in itself. But when was it going to stop? Would they get three feet? Even the North Country slowed down under three feet. And now they were upping the forecast higher yet.

Michelle Norton pulled into the lot. She smiled as she looked across it - no sedans, lots of SUV's and four-wheel-drive pickups. Bucky Stuart had come to work in his John Deere skidder, its huge tires looming above the pickups around it. Folks here respected a big storm, and came prepared for it.

It was a tense day. Around noon, a few staff started going home sick. Michelle wasn't surprised - the guards weren't allowed to go home early - unless they were sick. She got on the phone, and started calling in extra help.

An hour later, Michelle left her office to walk the floor. Christmas was tense, and she needed to have her finger on the prison's pulse. There would be the usual Christmas dinner, but with the busses cancelled, there would be nine hundred extra-lonely inmates.

In the kitchen, Mike was his usual cheerful self. "Howdy, Ms. Norton. No turkeys! What we gon' do? Can't back-order Christmas!"

"Mr. Howard, that's why I'm glad I've got you. I'm counting on you to help keep everyone's spirits up. What did foodservice say about the turkeys?"

"Well, Sysco s'posed to bring 'em in this afternoon. But how they gonna get here in this?" He waved out the window.

Michelle put in a call to the Highway Department. "Hey, George, the prison has to stay plowed, I mean plowed well. We've got a tractor-trailer coming in this afternoon that we can't do without. Promise me."

Finally it was four p.m. - shift change. Eppington arrived, and they conferred. The challenge would be getting enough staff. She wished him well, and headed off into the gathering darkness.

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Dan Vittore stopped his semi on Route 487, where the prison driveway branched off and climbed the hill. What the heck was going on? It hadn't been plowed for hours, and there was a foot of snow on the road. He could sit and wait for a plow - or he could just get the job done. He jumped out of the cab, grabbed the chains, spread them out in front of the drive wheels, jumped back in, pulled forward six feet, jumped out, clipped the chains together, and finally jumped back in. Dan was getting angry. Everyone wanted their food, but no one else would do their part. Up the hill he drove. The prison lots were a mess. As he approached the loading docks, he could see the snow was far deeper there - two feet for sure - with a huge ridge where an earlier plowing attempt had been left incomplete.

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Julio and Mike worked hard. Christmas dinner for nine hundred. There wasn't time to stop and think. Julio had been called on for a couple of hours around noon for snow-shoveling duty. You

had to be young and fit for that. For being on shoveling, Julio got new, top quality winter wear - ski goggles, hunting boots, the works. Here in the North Country they knew how to beat the cold.

How were they going to get the turkeys? The driveway still wasn't plowed. And suddenly there was Sysco. Dan must be angry - you could hear the blast of his horn. Now he was cutting the tractor around, backing, backing, a huge heap of snow piling up behind the trailer as he came. Now he had stopped; the tractor was spinning, chains and all. Ten black faces and two white ones watched from the kitchen. Now Dan was pulling forward. Now he stopped, and took a run, backwards, at the huge snowpile. But it was hopeless. The young guard could see that. He called Eppington.

"Mr. Eppington, the food truck can't get in to the dock. Where are the plows?"

Eppington thought. There weren't any plows around - he wasn't sure why. He could hear a truck horn - must be Sysco. This was a moment for action. "Carry the freight in by hand," he ordered.

"What, me? A ton of food through this snow by hand?"

"No, stupid, take some inmates!"

Soon nine men were gathered at the door of the trailer. Dan jumped up into it. Two inmates followed. They made a line and passed the food out, box by box. The line stretched across two hundred feet of parking lot to the foodservice dock.

Julio was on the ground, next to the truck. Mike was next after him in line. Julio's heart was beating like a hammer. You planned things; sometimes they worked, and sometimes they didn't; but how often did everything turn out perfect? "Go for it - now!" Mike muttered fiercely. Julio fell into the snow and vanished. Quickly he crawled around to the side of the trailer, and up onto the spare tire. He curled up and waited. He could hear the yells of the inmates and the guards, and Dan cursing them all. Two minutes later, he heard the cab door slam, and felt the truck lurch forward. He heard the crunch of eighteen big tires packing the snow as they rolled. Now they were at security. Gate security was understaffed now, like everywhere else. Dan yelled, cursed, then gave four long blasts on the horn. Finally a guard showed up, took a quick glance at the semi, hurried back inside, and opened the gate for Dan.

Julio could hardly believe it - they were rolling down the prison drive. He was free! He checked everything over: Thirty sandwiches were sewn into his parka lining. The vital pages of the road atlas were there with them. Maps were contraband in a prison, but some driver had thrown away the ragged atlas in the foodservice dumpster.

Now they were pulling onto 487, the chains jingling in the shallower snow. Now Dan was pulling onto the right shoulder. "What's up?" thought Julio. Dan was climbing out of the tractor, unclipping the chains. Julio held his breath; Dan would be within a few feet of him. Now Dan was back in the tractor - now he was backing. Just then, headlights shone in under the truck from behind. Dan was just picking up the left chain when the plow truck roared past, plastering Dan and Julio. Julio smiled in spite of himself at Dan's tirade of abuse. Dan wasn't spending an extra

second on anything. At last the chains were stowed and they were cruising along 487. More snow flew up and covered Julio, soon concealing him totally. He pawed a breathing hole through the snow.

Julio and Mike had figured it wouldn't take the prison long to figure that the escape had been on the Sysco truck. So they decided that Julio should leave the truck soon. In Bensonville, a secondary road, "Crawford Road", cut northwest, over a mountain. It met another road in the next valley, then crossed the next mountain. The town of Crawford was in the next valley - Julio would get to Crawford, and wing it from there. No one would suspect Crawford - there were no major roads that way, and both the Sysco warehouse in Randall, and the big city were in the opposite direction. The problem would be how to get off the truck.

As they approached Bensonville, Julio could see the snow around him light up from a car following. How could he leave the truck if a car was right behind it? At the first traffic light, the car stayed with them. Suddenly, it was dark again - the car had turned off. This was the moment. Julio broke his way out of the snow, climbed partly off the tire, and let his feet drag just touching the slush. There must be another stop light - Dan was slowing again. When the truck had slowed to a walk, Julio made his move and quickly scuttled out. The same instant, he saw the snow light up green, and heard the roar of the tractor. He slipped, and dived forward. The big deadly right rear tire grazed his boot.

Julio scrambled to his feet The street was deserted. Julio checked the name of the cross street. "Main Street". Crawford must be the cross street at the other light. He headed back three blocks. Sure enough, there stood the street sign - "Crawford Road". Off into the night he plunged. It was easy going while the sidewalk lasted, for a couple of blocks. Then it was just a wild country road. It started climbing soon. No plows had been this way - Crawford Road was too long and too little used to try to maintain while the storm was howling. Up and up, mile after mile, climbed Julio.

He breathed in huge breaths of air, free air! He was free! He was walking where he wished. After eight months behind bars, it was exhilarating. He charged up the hill through the two feet of snow like a champion running back plowing through the line of scrimmage. Nothing could tackle him now! "Lola, I'm coming!"

The snow fell steadily, and the wind began to rise. Twenty minutes after he had passed, his tracks were gone.

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Mike Howard hurried back into the kitchen. So far so good. He called to the new guard, "Excuse me, sir, could you get us a few more guys in here? We need to get these turkeys into the oven." ("Keep 'em busy," he muttered to himself. "Don't let 'em look for Julio.") Next he headed for the public-address booth. "Hey Jermel!" he yelled to a young inmate, "Let's have some music in the cafeteria! Not that weak stuff! We want some action tonight! It's Christmas!" Inmates weren't allowed to run the PA booth, but with all the new and part-time staff covering for the storm, Mike knew he would get away with a lot.

Prisons run on head counts. Eight times a day, every inmate in Granite Hill was counted. The count had to match the up-to-the-minute count from the inmate tracking system. For ten years, every count had been good. As soon as the next count was done, they'd know Julio was gone. Counting nine hundred men with certain accuracy took a lot of care. The prison had to keep everyone still while the count was made.

Supper was served in three sessions, of about three hundredmen each. The next count would take place between the first and second sessions.

The first session began filing into the cafeteria. The men from general population were joined by half of the kitchen staff. Mike joined the line, got his tray with his Christmas dinner, and went and joined the youngest, rowdiest table of inmates. All the inmates looked up to Mike, and these were honored to have him sit with them. Mike was old and system-savvy - with Mike, they would have a great dinner. Mike ate a few bites of turkey, then jumped up. He walked toward the PA booth, jostling and hi-fiving everyone he met. OK, Mike, we're catching on. He caught Jermel's eye - "Crank that volume UP!" he mouthed and motioned fiercely to him. Jermel shrugged, palms up - "Can't!" he was saying. But Mike needed volume, and he was going to get it. Jermel could see that, and he wasn't going to tangle with Mike Howard. Rules or no rules, he would give Mike his volume. Mike heard it start to inch up. By the time he was back at his place, the whole cafeteria was throbbing.

Some souped-up version of "Jingle Bells" was booming out over the three hundred men. Suddenly the whole room burst into intense clapping, sharp as rifle shots, in perfect rhythm. To the guards, it seemed to explode in such unison that they couldn't tell where it had started, or even if it had a starting point. Then men started to rise, to stomp, to wiggle and twist. The cafeteria was suddenly a sea of motion. It was delightful - even the guards were tapping their feet.

But time was running out. They had to get this session out, back to their cells, and get the count. The head guard yelled, "Time!" No one heard him. He yelled again. Jermel was out on the floor with everyone else now, but he had left the console with the volume knob all the way around. Now the guard headed for the mike. Jermel headed for the console. The guard picked up the mike, and yelled into it "Time!" No one heard - the mike was dead. Jermel was catching on too.

The guard was getting desperate. He grabbed the phone and called Eppington. In a few seconds, he hung up. Then he wandered around the room, pleading with inmates to line up for return to cells. No one listened. Christmas was too much fun - this was turning into the best Christmas in years!

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike Howard was watching the main door of the cafeteria. He knew what was going to follow the guard's phone call. He didn't have long to wait. Wallace Eppington entered. A look of ice-cold fury sliced from his eyes across the room.

Two powerful minds were at war. The stakes were high for each. After ten years, Wallace Eppington had met his match. Eppington had a good strong voice, and barked out, "Silence!" The clapping faltered - got confused - then suddenly from somewhere burst out in a new rhythm.

There were cheers. By now everyone in the room knew that this was a contest, not just a celebration. The dance and the decibels continued.

The phone rang. A guard answered, then called Eppington. Everyone was watching him, while trying not to show it, reading his face for the meaning of the call. The uproar was apparently spreading - the count was way overdue now, and six hundred other inmates wanted their Christmas dinner and were getting angry. Eppington knew he'd have to act fast. He called the count office to say they'd have to get the next dinner session in right away, and defer the count until after. Then he called for the swat team.

When the team entered, with stun-guns, masks, and shields, everything got quiet fast. No one was going to tangle with them. The inmates lined up. The guards herded them down the corridor. A group of inmates with a guard would stand at a big barred automatic door. They'd wait for it to open. Then move into the vestibule between doors. Wait for the door to close behind. Wait for the next door to open. Meanwhile the cross-corridors were full of the men in the next session, waiting for the corridor to clear so they could move to the cafeteria. Christmas cheer, or Christmas din, filled the hall. Word of the first session's dinner jam spread everywhere. Under cover of chaos, Mike Howard was busy. "Keep it rolling!" he whispered again and again, whenever there was no guard in earshot. "Don't let me down!"

The second supper session was quieter. The swat team had stayed in the adjacent room. Eppington cut their supper short. The count couldn't wait any longer. But on the way back to the cells, a brawl broke out. Three guys were badly hurt (so it appeared to the guards). When the second session was finally back, the third session supper was almost an hour late. Given the half-hour delay of the count, the third session would turn into an ugly mess. Eppington decided the count would have to wait again.

Finally all three suppers were over and they were counting. The target, the current population, was nine hundred even. The count came in at 897. That was crazy. By now it was almost midnight. "Re-count!" ordered Eppington. The next count was 899. "What's going on?" raged Eppington. "Count again!" The next one came in at 899. The prison was quieting down at last. Wallace Eppington got a horrible sensation in his stomach. This could be real. "Count again!" Half an hour later, here was the count: 899 - not 900 - for the third time in a row. It was twelve-thirty in the morning. Eppington could not escape the truth any longer. He was missing someone. He called the state police.

Mike Howard lay on his cot in the dark. He grinned broadly. This was far better than he had hoped for. He had fought. He had gained Julio five hours. He had won the battle. Now it was up to Julio to win the war.

December 25

Sergeant Emily Norton jerked awake in bed - the phone was ringing. She grabbed the handset before the second ring. "State Police?" The clock said 12:37.

It was the desk at the barracks. "Sergeant Norton, it's an escape - from Granite Hill."

"I'll be right over." Emily was dressed and in her jeep in five minutes. Even for a jeep, the two feet of snow in her driveway was a challenge. Out on the main road, the plows had been by in the past half hour. She was at the barracks in forty minutes. Seven other police were there ahead of her. It seemed that an inmate named Estrada had been missing from Granite Hill since late afternoon. She raised an eyebrow - "And they're calling us at 12:30 a.m.? Were they all asleep?"

Two detectives had already left for the prison. Choppers were coming in from all over the state. But could there be any worse conditions for a manhunt? All the guy would have to do would be to lie down in the snow, and they'd never find him. Old Man Winter would be a lot more likely to get this fugitive.

Word was in from the prison that their best guess for the escape route was a food truck that had left late in the afternoon. Sysco. Emily put in a call to Sysco. No answer. She laughed. "Why should they be working at two in the morning on Christmas day? Only Santa and his reindeer are working now!" She got the State Police in Randall onto the trail. They searched the truck, but found no inmate, and no clues. The driver had parked the truck indoors, and any snow that would have given them a clue had melted.

The police mapped out a search area. If the truck had been the escape vehicle, then Estrada could have left it anywhere between Granite Hill and Randall. The truck had rolled out of Granite Hill at 4:38. Estrada had an eight-hour jump on them. In this snow, that could take him fifteen miles. They drew a line fifteen miles on each side of 487. The search was on.

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At two a.m., Julio was approaching the bottom of the slope down the back of the first mountain. In the densely swirling snow, his first clue that the cross-highway was near was the deep bass rumble of the plow. Perfect timing - he could cross on the freshly plowed surface, leaving almost no tracks, and head up the next mountain. Now he was at the highway. He leaped from the top of the plowed bank down into the roadway, to keep from leaving a furrow. He crossed the road at a run, and dive-jumped up and over the other bank - again no furrow. It took eight seconds. If the police had come on the ninth second, they would have missed him. But the police didn't come - Julio Estrada was twenty-three miles from Route 487, well beyond the search line.

Up the next mountain he went. Those endless miles of jogging had given him the stamina he needed, but now he was flagging. He climbed on, hour after hour. Now the road was leveling out - he must be on top. The swirling snow, invisible in the pitch-dark of night, was starting to show as the dawn filtered through the storm. There was a momentary pause in the blizzard, and for a few seconds, visibility stretched out to a quarter mile. Julio looked around at this strange country. He was in a pass, the road falling away ahead and behind, and steep slopes rising to right and left. A hundred feet above the road, the left slope turned to cliffs and tumbled boulders. He waded into the snow to his left. Five minutes later, in the growing daylight, he had found a tiny but dry cave, under a huge boulder, sealed from the wind by drifting snow. He poked a tiny hole

to watch the road. He lay down. He had never been this tired. In ten minutes, he was asleep. He was thirty-six miles from Bensonville, and forty-five as the crow flies from Granite Hill.

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Mike Howard woke early, and turned on the TV. "There's been a daring prison escape," the anchor was saying. "There are few clues. It seems likely that Julio Estrada, twenty-two, escaped from Granite Hill Correctional Facility on a food truck. People within twenty-five miles of the prison are being advised to be wary and armed. Estrada is 6' 6" and serving ten to twenty years for armed robbery - this is a dangerous man!" Jubilation spread unconcealed through the prison. No one was happier than Mike Howard.

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Chuck and Annette Phillips woke up on Christmas morning, in their mountain home overlooking Crawford. Chuck looked out at the blizzard, then got dressed and went out. Let's hope they didn't need to go anywhere today. Chuck had his pickup mounted way up high over its chassis - but there was a limit to how much snow even that truck could roll through.

Chuck flicked on the news. "... from Granite Hill Correctional Facility on a food truck. People within twenty-five miles of the prison are being advised to be wary and armed. Estrada is 6' 6"and is serving ten to twenty years for armed robbery - this is a dangerous man!" Chuck couldn't believe it. There were several Estradas at Granite Hill, but there could only be one 6' 6" tall. "I know that guy!" he yelled. Annette was startled. Chuck told her all about Julio. She could tell he wasn't sorry he had escaped. But Chuck still checked over his deer rifle, got out a box of ammunition, and set it next to the gun. No harm playing it safe.

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The day wore on. Late in the morning the snow stopped. It was a brilliant, beautiful Christmas Day. The news channels had no new news, just lots of guesswork. Wallace Eppington gave a terse statement that said nothing new. There were lots of aerial panoramas of the North Country, as the news choppers joined the police in the air. The news channels also covered a new storm, coming into the North Country on the heels of the first, with up to two more feet of snow. More conjectures - what would that snow do to the manhunt - or to the man?

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Julio woke with a jerk. Loud, low, and coming closer, he heard the heavy thumping of a chopper. He peeked out of his cave. It was cruising right through the pass, a couple of hundred feet up. He held his breath. Straight overhead it came. The letters "WXYK" showed clear on the chopper's belly. Then he could feel the downdraft. The chopper headed on over to Bensonville. Julio lay there for a long time, his heart thumping. That was scary. But it was just a news chopper. They were obviously looking for him, but had no clue how close they were.

He crawled halfway out of the cave. The sun was shining brightly. He hoped the next storm wouldn't be long coming - he had to get out of here and get to more food within a few days. He ate another sandwich - nine gone, twenty-one to go. He ate some snow. Then he slept again, best to rest since he couldn't move on.

Hours later, Julio woke again. The sun was setting. Two bright sundogs bracketed the sun. That meant snow within twenty-four hours. He thought about Lola. Then he thought about the Church. It was Christmas Day! His mind turned to Christmases gone by. He remembered being Joseph in the Christmas pageant, back when he was a kid. Now here he was, on the run like the Joseph of old. But the chase wasn't supposed to start until he was with his Mary and her baby. Oh well, it sure was a lot easier on them to let him do all the running. And how would he connect up with them? He had focused until now on clearing the prison. But suppose he got to the city - what then? Their apartment would be watched, and their phone would be bugged. Lotsa problems... He dozed off again.

December 26

Michelle, Emily, and Pam Norton met that morning at the Dunkin' Donuts in Bensonville. They had planned to go over last minute details of Mom's Christmas party tomorrow. But the conversation turned to Julio Estrada. Michelle knew him from prison. Emily had to find him - that was her job. And to Pam the reporter, Julio was a gold mine.

Up here in the North Country, news was in short supply. High school hockey games, the weekly bowling league, and the occasional argument at a county commissioners' meeting qualified for news up here. But Julio Estrada had changed that. The eyes of the nation were on Bensonville. Reporters from everywhere converged on the town. Among the throngs of media people, Pam alone was a native. It was the chance of a lifetime.

"Something doesn't add up," Michelle was saying. " 'Dangerous?' I guess so - possibly. There's something about him though - I can't say why, but I can't picture him hurting anyone."

"What do we know about him?" said Pam. "There must be some background we can find on him."

"Not a problem," said Emily. "Come on over to the barracks. Background is a mouse-click away."

"OK, listen," said Pam. "Emily, you get over to the barracks and look Estrada up. Who was his lawyer? Who was his victim? What about his family members? Get me something to work with. Michelle, you go to the prison, find out who his friends are, and arrange for me to come and interview them."

"I can tell you all that right now," said Michelle. "His friends were two - Mike Howard, an inmate. And Chuck Phillips, a guard. Phillips has been snowed in at home since the 24th. And forget the interview - Eppington is so mad at Estrada for ruining his career that he's not getting involved with anything at all about him - except catching and punishing him."

"Fine," said Pam. "Emily, call me on my cellphone as soon as you have the police info. And Michelle, you'll find a way. I've known you for twenty-three years and you're not the kind of person to let Eppington stonewall you. I'm counting on you."

Half an hour later Emily was on the phone. "Hey, Pam, I've got his lawyer - it's James Hutchinson." She gave him a number. "And here's the prosecutor: Mary Camillo, (983) 248-3333."

Pam called the prosecutor first. "Hello, District Attorney's office. How may I direct your call?"

"Is Mary Camillo in?"

"No, she doesn't work here any more. Is there anyone else who could help you?"

"Do you have a number where I could reach Ms. Camillo?"

"Sorry, ma'm, I can't give that out."

Forty-five minutes later, Pam had it. Mary Camillo answered in person. Pam took a plunge. "I'm interested in the Julio Estrada case. I'm a friend of a friend of his. I'm also a reporter in the town where he escaped. I'd like to talk to anyone who worked on his case. Can you suggest anyone?"

There was a long silence. Pam could hear breathing in the phone. Then, "Are you coming down here for your interview, or are you doing it by phone?"

"Well, I'm three hundred miles away. I was hoping to do it by phone."

"I'm sorry, I can't help you."

"Wait! Suppose I said I was coming down?"

"Well are you?"

Now it was Pam's turn to stop and think. "OK, I guess I'm coming down. When can we meet?" She made an appointment for the next day at two p.m. She had just hung up the phone when Michelle called. "Hey, Pam, Eppington is heading home for a snooze. Get over here - fast."

* * * * *

Julio was eager to get moving. It was night. The last car had come through the pass a good hour before. It was now snowing heavily. He decided to go for it.

December 27

By 4 a.m. Julio was on the last long descent into Crawford. The fresh snow was well above his waist. He came to a place where a vehicle had pulled out of a side road into Crawford Road

within the past hour, judging by the depth of the fresh snow in the wheel tracks. Great - he picked up speed, walking in the snow ruts. But he'd have to watch out. Suddenly, ahead in the roadway, he saw a light under a huge heap of snow. He approached quietly (easy to do in deep snow). It was a crew-cab pickup. The snow had gotten too deep, and now the pickup was stuck. Quietly Julio dug his way in to a window of the truck, and peeped in. A woman was lying in the back seat, with a tiny new baby. The baby was breathing hard - something was wrong, that was obvious. Then he looked in the front - there was Chuck Phillips! Fear and desperation were on his face.

Julio stepped back from the truck. "Wow," he said to himself. Snowflakes fell on the peephole. He leaned forward, peered in at the baby again. "Wow. Didn't plan on that." He stepped back again, and pondered. The snow had covered the peephole now. "OK," he said, and headed on down the road. There were no more ruts in the snow, and the drifts came up to his chest.

It must have been five more miles before he came to a highway. In the dawn light, filtering through the blizzard, he read the sign - it said "Crawford", and pointed right. "So much for Joseph," thought Julio. I guess my role changed. Wonder where I'll find any shepherds?" Another half mile and he came to the first building: obviously a public building, but the sign was buried in the snow. This was it - he hesitated. "Maybe it's already dead," he thought. "Quit it," he answered. He plowed his way to the glass entry door. Big bold letters on the glass proclaimed, "State Police." He walked in. There was a big reception desk, where a young officer looked up at him, panic on his face. A buzzer sounded, and in seconds he was surrounded by six police, one of them a woman. He heard the click of hand guns being cocked. They handcuffed him.

"Excuse me, sir," he said to the man putting on the cuffs. "There's an emergency up the road. I need to speak to the officer in charge." Their only response was to read him his Fifth Amendment rights. Now someone was on the phone, reporting on his arrest. He was locked in a cell. Two of the officers, including the woman, began to question him.

"Excuse me, sir," he said again. "Before I answer you, there is an emergency up the road." The male officer began to yell at him, but the woman raised a hand and cut him off.

"Let him talk, Williams," she said. "We're safe."

Julio told them about the Phillips baby. "Sounds like a trap to me," said the man.

"Maybe it is," said the woman. "We'll go armed." She picked up a phone and began making phone calls. "Hey, George," she said, "Get a plow over here on the west end of Crawford Road. The last five miles before Route 53." She hung up.

"Excuse me," said Julio. "That will be too slow. That baby could die any minute."

"Now I know it's a trap," shouted the man. "Sergeant Norton, don't be crazy!"

"Williams, listen. Tell them to get the snowmobiles warmed up. We'll need five officers, with rifles." She motioned for the man to leave.

She picked up the phone again. "Hey, Pete. This is Sergeant Norton at the Crawford barracks. We'll be needing the chopper over here. Armed." She listened. "OK, there was no snow in Vietnam, but there's snow today!" Pause. "Fine. Be there in twelve minutes." She dialed another call: "Hey Pam, get over here fast - west end of Crawford Road." She stood up, checked Julio's cuffs, and walked out, leaving the door open.

Julio could now see a man at a desk across the hall, watching him. So this was where it was all ending. What he had done started to dawn on him. He already had ten to twenty. With an escape, he was sure to get the full twenty. Then the escape was sure to land him with another ten at least. "So we're looking at thirty!" he thought. "I'll be an old man!" He heard the snowmobiles moving out into the storm. Thirty years! It was a huge crushing weight. He thought of the baby in the pickup.

* * * * *

Pam Norton's phone woke her from sleep. She flicked on the TV while she dressed. Yesterday's hockey scores. Then this: "And the escaped convict has just turned himself in...." Pam was out on her ArticCat in four minutes flat. She stowed her snowshoes and camera in the back, and was off across the snow. Crawford Road - that would be fifteen miles. Her snowmobile roared down Route 53, where the plow had come through half an hour before. At Crawford Road, she could see where other snowmobiles had climbed over the bank a few minutes before. She roared up the road, slower now in the deep snow. Soon she heard the sound of a chopper. "Good gracious, what's Emily up to now?" she thought. In the swirling snow, she just noticed where one snowmobile track branched to the right. Then a second branched left.

Suddenly the road was blocked by a snowmobile. Two policemen lay behind it in the snow, aiming rifles over it at some target up ahead. Pam turned off her engine and grabbed her camera. Visibility was under one hundred feet. She panned across the snowscape, picked up the two riflemen on the ground, then focused on a dark blur to the right - another snowmobile with two rifle barrels poking over it. Then up to the chopper, loud but barely visible overhead. Then there was Emily, crouching behind her snowmobile and talking into her radio.

Then she panned over to someone crawling through the snow. Swimming, more like it. She clipped on her snowshoes. There was a big heap of snow in the roadway that the swimmer was heading for. Now he was digging into it. She could sense the tension in the two men lying before her as one of them adjusted the aim of his rifle. For a long pause, nothing happened. Pam counted thirty seconds, then forty, and started quietly stalking forward on her snowshoes. Now the man was emerging from the heap, carrying a bundle in his arms. Pam had him in the viewfinder, as she continued forward. Now someone else was coming forward. She heard Emily yell, "All clear!" Pam came right up to the man, and focused on the bundle. Before she could tell what it was, she heard it - the cry of a tiny baby. Now Emily had the chopper on her radio. It was going to land. "Hey guys!" Emily was yelling to the snowmobile crews, "Pack a landing for the chopper!"

Two minutes later, the chopper descended through the storm onto Crawford Road. A police officer got out, rifle in hand. The baby was first in; the pilot held the baby, while the mother was

ferried over on a snowmobile. The mother got in. Now the chopper was rising again into the wild gray storm. Pam's camera followed it until it vanished, then picked up the fading chop-chop-chop of the rotor.

* * * *

The tale of the convict who couldn't take the cold ran in the news every hour all day. Throughout the North Country, dads breathed easier and unloaded their rifles, moms hugged their children, and the cheer of Christmas spread, making up for two days of lost time. No one said a word about a little baby - Emily's orders had taken care of that.

So Pam's story took the nation by surprise at seven p.m. It started with Granite Hill Correctional Facility, looming threateningly through the snowstorm, and moved on to Julio Estrada, securely handcuffed in his cell. But now he was talking, gentle but confident, about a pickup truck he'd found that morning, stranded in four feet of snow.

The segment moved on to the baby rescue: pickup truck, rifles, chopper and all. A policeman emerged from the buried truck, a tiny baby in his arms. Then it shifted to the neonatal ICU at University Hospital, where a tiny baby, laced with wires and tubes, was struggling to breathe, her tiny sternum dipping a full inch on each breath. A doctor was saying, "It was a close call - another half hour and we would have lost her. Might lose her yet."

Then the scene moved to a state police captain: they had been nowhere close to Estrada's trail; and Estrada was in excellent condition and had no need to turn himself in.

Then the cameras panned the Wilson-Beckman neighborhood as a half dozen of Julio's friends told about him. Then they focused on Lola with her baby, born that morning, in the same hospital as the Phillips baby.

Now Mary Camillo was on screen, telling how, as a lawyer working for the district attorney, she had been pressured into prosecuting Estrada when she knew he was innocent. Tears flowing, she told of sleepless nights, of how she tried to forget the Estrada case by quitting the DA job, how after Estrada's escape she had gotten a phone call from someone claiming to be "a friend of a friend of Estrada" and had decided right then to go public. The story ended with a passionate plea from Camillo for "someone out there" to free Estrada.

December 28

The story ran on front pages of newspapers nationwide. Governor Perry was not a man to leave ripe fruit on the bough. By mid-morning his office had issued a press statement, announcing the official release ceremony for Estrada to be held two days later, outside the main entrance of Granite Hill.

Then the eleven a.m. news had a State Supreme Court judge announcing a hearing the next day, the twenty-ninth, with the intent of releasing Estrada immediately.

Like the third little pig outfoxing the wolf, Perry moved his ceremony up to that afternoon, packed his entourage into his state police chopper, and headed for the prison. In the air, he got a phone call telling him to delay the ceremony until 4 pm for a delegation from Estrada's church. When the church van finally arrived, one of the network's satellite trucks still wasn't there, and Perry wasn't budging without all the networks. While they were waiting for that, the sun went down and the network crews had to scramble to put up lights.

The ceremony finally began around five-fifteen. When Perry actually tried to sign the release warrant, it turned out that the special pens he was going to use and hand out as souvenirs had all frozen solid and wouldn't write. So he turned to the person standing at his elbow and asked to borrow a pen. Wallace Eppington didn't really want his pen used to sign Estrada's release, but the cameras were on him, and protocol triumphed over resentment. People watching the news wondered why he was scowling.

Julio was glad to have it over with. The best part of the ceremony was climbing into the Governor's chopper with the teenagers from the church. None of them had ever been in a chopper before. Seventy-five minutes later, they were landing on the heliport of University Hospital. Julio waved to the media, shook hands with the mayor, then headed into the hospital to find Lola and their baby.

December 23

Mike Howard and Chuck Phillips leaned on the kitchen windowsill, watching the Sysco truck back in.

"Remember a year ago?" said Chuck.

"Of course."

"Our baby sure thanks you for dancing Jingle Bells."

Mike changed the subject. "What are you folks doing for Christmas this year?"

"We're heading to the city tomorrow afternoon - spend Christmas with the Estradas. Our baby girls both got their first birthday coming up."

"Got room for me?"

(Bellvale, Christmas 2002)