

Maizy's Legacy

Chapter 2 *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

On December 17 Maizy drove into town for her annual Christmas trip to the post office. When she started the engine of her 1987 Volvo she noticed that the needle on the gas gauge didn't move. She rapped the face of the gauge with her knuckles even though she knew full well that the tank was nearly empty. Well, no matter. She had a belief that any car could go two miles to town and back even if the needle was on Empty. Fluffy snow fell as she drove down Pringle Road but the pavement was clear.

When she got to the post office Maizy found the lobby full of chattering people, the line snaking back and forth three times in front of the one window where Rawella Johnson sat on a stool in a green wool tent dress printed with red and white candy canes, her bulk overflowing the stool on both sides. Men, women, and children held mounds of Christmas cards and packages and the volume of their conversations was turned to high to be heard over the Christmas hymns that Rawella always piped through a loud speaker at Christmas. Harvey Silverstein, the local dentist, had once written a letter to the *Pickford Republican Journal* complaining that religious music by law should not be played in a government building and had insisted on placing the matter on the agenda of the next town council meeting. Fifty-three people showed up to speak against his motion to censor Rawella Johnson's music. The objections to the motion went on for over an hour. The gist of most of them was that Pickford had traditions that existed before whatever law it was that made Christmas music illegal and that history outweighed Silverstein's minority sensitivities. The words "Christian" and "Jewish" were never spoken, of course. Henry

Whittier, who lived across the road from Maizy, stood up to remind everyone that separation of church and state was so important that it was the very first amendment to the US Constitution. His wife Elsie yanked him back into his chair before he could finish his sentence. Finally Clifford Snyder, the town's attorney, said that it was his understanding that since 1971 the post office was no longer run by the government and so the church-and-state thing didn't apply. Knowing he was out of order, he turned to the crowd and asked, "Does even one person here object to hearing Christmas music in the post office?" Elsie Whittier dug her fingernails into Henry's arm to silence him and he glared at her. The town council voted eight to zero to defeat the motion.

When Maizy entered the post office and took her place at the end of the long line, the buzzing voices and Christmas greetings stopped suddenly, leaving only the sound of "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Heads turned toward Maizy and then quickly away again. People shifted their heavy burdens of cards and packages. One by one, whispered conversations started up again.

Maizy clutched two envelopes: a card for her nephew William in LaPine, Oregon, and a check to the electric company, a payment of \$25 on a bill of \$378, enough, she hoped, to prevent them from making good on their threat to turn off her electricity for nonpayment. Or maybe there was some law that prevented them from doing that at Christmas time. She moved inch by inch around the snaking line toward Rawella. Thirty-five minutes later she placed her two envelopes on the counter. Rawella insisted on weighing them, knowing very well that they didn't exceed one ounce. When the scale confirmed that, Rawella slid down from her stool and waddled behind the partition that separated the counter from the mailroom. She returned minutes later with a

ruler and carefully measured all four sides of each envelope. Maizy endured these indignities wordlessly but people waiting behind her sniffed and clucked at the delay. “Sixty-eight cents!” Rawella barked at Maizy. Maizy took as long she could to extract her wallet from her purse, unzip the change pocket, and count out sixty-eight pennies one by one. She counted them a second time for good measure. Rawella did the same.

By then fifteen more people had come into the post office. “Aw, for crying out loud. Let’s get this show on the road!” someone grouched.

It was five minutes before five o’clock. “May I have a receipt, please?” Maizy asked, provoking grunts of consternation along the line of waiting patrons. Rawella glared at her, slithered off her stool again, disappeared into the mailroom swinging her wide hips back and forth, and returned with a roll of paper, which she loaded into the receipt printer with her sausage fingers. She tore off the receipt with unnecessary force and slapped it on the counter, ignoring Maizy’s outstretched hand.

As Maizy made her way around the line toward the door a voice said quietly, “Merry Christmas, Maizy.” Without turning to see who had spoken to her she replied, “The same to you, Henry.” On the way home the snow fell a bit more heavily and an inch or so lay on the road. Maizy checked the gas gauge. The needle was now below Empty but the car ran just fine.

Chapter 3 *Chipping Away at Fate*

On December 19, a Friday, Maizy stood in her cold kitchen eyeing the snowstorm outside that had been raging for twenty-four hours already and said out loud, “I can’t just stand here. I’ve got to do something. If I don’t I’ll be trapped in this house by snow and die here. Nobody will even

know I'm dead." She sat in the rocking chair by the dead woodstove and drew her LL Bean duck boots over two pairs of wool socks and tucked her wool pants into them. She put on her warmest winter coat, drew the hood over her head, and pulled it tight around her face. Finally two pairs of wool mittens. "People don't appreciate wool anymore," she told Nibs, who wagged his stub of a tail in sympathy.

Maizy was taken aback by the blast of cold wind that hit her when she went out on the porch. The screen door on its one remaining hinge was torn from her hand when she opened it and she struggled to close it. She brushed the snow from the thermometer on the porch post and saw that it read one degree above zero. "That must be about minus forty with the wind-chill factor," she thought. She took the shovel and stepped off the porch into snow well above her knees.

There was not a single person out and about on Pringle Road. Every driveway was packed with seventeen inches of snow. There was no use trying to do anything about it until it stopped snowing, which wouldn't be until midnight, according to Jake Carson, the Channel 9 weatherman down in Manchester. Jake was predicting a total accumulation of twenty-six inches of snow, a lot even by northcountry standards. The road had been plowed a few hours earlier, but so much snow had fallen since then that only a truck with chains could get through it. Raw nature was all Maizy saw: wind-driven snow and freezing cold. Nothing human or animal stirred. Henry and Elsie Whittier's white farmhouse across the road was no more than a ghostly outline as a heavy curtain of snow blew horizontally across their front yard.

Maizy sank the shovel into the snow and tossed the first load to the side of the driveway, paying no attention to the small voice in her head asking what she was doing and if it made

sense. "I have got to get this driveway shoveled," she thought. "I can't just curl up and die here, no matter who thinks I should." When nothing makes sense anymore, there's just no use examining things in great depth, only to come to the conclusion that life is futile. You just put one foot in front of the other and keep on going. Toward what, Maizy did not know. She was completely out of ideas about what to do about anything. And so she began shoveling her driveway, chipping away at her fate the only way she could think of, one teaspoonful at a time.