

And Now the Snow

Clyde Zimmerman, '41

SITTING at my desk in the freight office, I could look out into the yard and the unloading platform. Joe was on top of a flat car shoveling cinders on to the ground. I kept thinking that it was pretty cold for him out there and it would probably snow, and every little while I reminded myself that it was the day before Christmas and in a few hours I would be on the train for home.

I knew Joe pretty well. He and Fred, the freight agent, were the only real friends I had in a strange town where I had been lonely and homesick. Just to look at Joe you might think that he was a Mexican like the rest of the men who worked on the section crew. But Joe was a Filipino. Two years ago he had finished high school, and he had been on the section gang ever since. He was intelligent and honest and deeply religious. He liked to read and we talked about the things we'd read. Right now about all he talked about was his wife, Marie, and the baby she was going to have.

I QUIT thinking about Joe then because some of the truck drivers came in and I had to make out their lading bills. Fred knew I had some shopping to do, so he let me off work a little before noon.

I thought the sky was getting darker when I went out to the loading platform.

"Hi, Joe, I'm leaving."

He stopped shoveling and pulled up his ear-flaps, looking blank.

I said, "I'm going home now."

He grinned, "Your mother will be glad to see you."

"Yes," I smiled back. "How's Marie?"

"She went to the hospital today." His face became serious. "I'm going to stay there this afternoon."

"What do you want, Joe—a boy?"

"Yes, a boy—or a girl," he said and we laughed.

"Well, Merry Christmas, Joe—to you and Marie and the boy—or girl."

THAT afternoon I bought some things to take home and packed. All afternoon a few flakes kept sifting out of the north. With the dusk I stood at my window to watch the lights come on soft and warm in all the houses down the street. The long ache to be home came in my throat. I could see it all. If the train was on time I would get home just a few minutes before midnight. I would come up the walk to our house and there would be a lighted Christmas tree in the front window. In the kitchen my mother and sisters would just be home from the little church where they went every Christmas Eve. We would have a merry late lunch. The ice box would be full of everything for Christmas dinner. We would stand for a few minutes looking at the Christmas tree and watching the fire dying in the fireplace. Then there would be Christmas morning . . . wakening in my own room . . . going downstairs to open the boxes. I saw it all over and over again while I was waiting for eight o'clock to come. When it was time to go I took my suitcase, and before I switched off the light, I looked around the small room.

When I came to the freight office I saw Fred's car was parked by the door. He was getting the Christmas presents which he had been keeping in the office so that his kids wouldn't find them.

"Think you'll make it, Santa Claus?" I said.

"Hi . . ." He stowed the packages away in the back seat. "I think we're going to get some snow before the night is over." We could hear the telephone ringing in the office.

"I wonder who that is," he said. We listened to the shrill ringing and then he unlocked the door and went in. I stood staring at the long dark steel rails, waiting for the headlight of a train to come cutting through the blackness.

FRED came out. His voice was low and even. "That was the hospital. Joe's wife and baby are both dead. They are looking for him."

I went all cold inside. "Why wasn't Joe there?"

"He was there all afternoon, but they told him to go out and get some supper and he hadn't been back yet."

We both knew Joe didn't have a phone.

"I guess there's nothing we can do," he said.

I never realized how much I liked Joe until then. "Look, can I borrow your car for a little while?"

“Sure—drop me off at the house. . . I thought you had to catch a train?”

“I can always catch a train.”

I let Fred and his packages off and drove back to town. On the way back I saw a train pulling out of the station.

I DIDN'T expect to find Joe at home, but I drove out and looked. Then I parked the car on Main street and began to search the restaurants. The last one was a little cafe at the end of the street. Across from it was a wooden church. People were going in and a little group was on the steps singing carols.

“Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright.”

I went into the cafe. A glance around its tiny interior and I was back in the street. I noticed that it was beginning to snow hard and the flakes were fat and fluffy in the yellow light from the cafe window. I stood there wondering if Joe had gone back to the hospital. Then I saw him. He must have been in the church, because he emerged from the group of singers and started down the street. I ran after him.

“Joe!”

HE TURNED around. For a moment I thought he didn't recognize me. His shoulders were hunched a little and there was something in his face I hadn't seen before. His eyes didn't meet mine, but looked past me.

“I've been praying for them,” he said.

We were farther from the singing now, but the voices were still audible. “All is calm, all is bright . . . mother and child . . . sleep in heavenly peace.”

“Yes, Joe.” How could I tell him what I had to tell him?

“It was a boy,” he said.

HE HAD gone back. He knew! Then I knew what it was in his face—how close he was to breaking. His faith and his grief were struggling in his eyes, around his mouth. I stood there with the wet snow brushing my face. All the little details of the time fixed themselves in my mind. At our feet some oak leaves were being buried by the snow. My mind seized upon them while I tried to think of something to say to Joe. They were leaves—going gently, softly as all things that are mortal go. The rain had come to quiet them and now the snow was coming and spreading white peace over them. And the thought came to me

that so it is with love and loneliness and joy and grief, going to live again in some other spring.

I met Joe's tragic eyes. Perhaps if I told Joe this it might help him through Christmas Day and all the other days that were to come. We began to walk in the snow. Somehow, I knew as we walked along the words would come.

Robert Frost

Roger W. Willey

Sci. Sr.

OF THE contemporary poets, I think Robert Frost is the best. Now, I'm no judge of poetry; in fact, a good deal of the time I can't even figure out what the poet is driving at. But, after reading over the produce of the cream-of-the-crop of modern verse vendors, I've come to the conclusion that this Frost fellow tops them all.

I've been wondering what there is about Frost's work that can make it appealing to a guy like me who doesn't know art from apples. One reason, I think, is that he writes in a language that I can understand. You don't have to read every author from Home on down and memorize the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in order to get the drift of his poems. No frills, no abstract phrases, no poetic ornamentation clutter up the paths of his expression. It's the simple language of New England; it's clear, and it's straightforward. Take, for instance, this bit from "Two Tramps in Mud Time."

"Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sake."

SEE? I get some sense out of that. But it isn't just the language that makes Mr. Frost's work great, because almost anyone can write little verses about the bees, birds, and buttercups in much the same sort of simple diction. It's the way he uses that language, the way he combines the words of everyday speech to create a picture that is clear-cut and vivid—a picture that sticks—