

Awaiting the dawn from on high

Christmas can't come soon enough for Tom.

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Photo by Lukas Rychvalsky

Life has never come easy for Tom. His friends have thinned out in recent years, mostly tired of his cheery manner of disguising so many problems. I don't know what his childhood was like, but his successes these days are few. Tom failed at two separate business ventures in ten years, both of them hurtling him deeper into debt. Some people were never meant to be self-employed, but they don't yet know it. Tom's wife knew it for him, just as she understood that one too many broken promises and years of secretly borrowed money do not make for marriage.

Now a divorced and broken man, Tom checks in with me about once a month. It was during these office visits that I learned of his stealing from his father. With power of attorney for Dad, who resides in a memory unit, Tom incrementally removed more than \$150,000 from an account he had no business touching. His two out-of-town siblings are now aware of the theft. While his intent to repay the debt is sincere, the plan to get there could take the rest of his life. Tom is in a dark place and, for the

first time since I've known him, isn't carrying around the hail-fellow-well-met face that has been his trademark.

Christmas can't come soon enough for Tom this year. That's my perspective, not his. As far as he's concerned, Christmas without gifts under a tree and a family to surround them must seem like the most dreadful experience. But I have a plan. I'm going to open our next conversation contemplating that lovely excerpt from the Song of Zechariah (Luke 1:78-79) "In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace." I hope to ruminate with Tom on what it means to cherish a God who spends more energy binding up broken hearts and attending to wounds than crushing the world with an iron fist.

Speaking of tender compassion, I may tell Tom about Willa Cather's story "The Burglar's Christmas." He might relate. It's a story about William, who has failed at everything. Alone and desperately hungry in Chicago, out of contact with his parents for years, he comes to the realization on Christmas night that "he never had the essentials of success, only the superficial agility that is often mistaken for it." The one option left to him, he concludes, is stealing.

Breaking into a house that night, he discovers that he has burglarized the home of his own parents—who, unbeknownst to him, had moved to Chicago. His mother recognizes him rummaging through her jewelry drawers in the dark. She moves in to kiss her wayward son. "Oh, my boy, we have waited so long for this!"

Frightened and shaken, he resists her embrace. "I wonder if you know how much you pardon?" he asks. "Much or little," she says, "what does it matter? Have you wandered so far and paid such a bitter price for knowledge and not yet learned that love has nothing to do with pardon or forgiveness, that it only loves, and loves—and loves?"

That's when she kissed him. It's also when dawn began to break into his life.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "When dawn breaks."