In December of 1944 the world was at war and my father had left us at home in South Carolina for Officer Candidate School in Hollywood, Florida. He sent my baby sister Caroline and me teddy bears. Mine was a panda almost as big as I was—because I was a big boy, my mother told me. He also sent me a coconut. It arrived without wrapping, stamped and addressed on the outside. My grandfather, Pop, who lived a block away from us, made a ceremony of opening it. In the spacious kitchen of his house he hacked away the hairy husk, punched out the eyes with an icepick, drained the milk into a jar, and cracked the shell. I had never tasted coconut. As he broke the moist white meat and gave me a piece, he said, “This is from your Daddy.” I didn’t like it but because Daddy had sent it, I said I did.
My father had been exempt from military service because of his age—thirty when the war broke out—but in the summer of 1944 he received a draft notice. With the aid of his congressman, he got an appointment to OCS, and all I had seen of him since were the photographs my mother brought home from her trip to his graduation. The uniform must have impressed her. She thought he was the most handsome man in the world, bald head and all. He had since been posted to Norfolk, Virginia. She showed me Norfolk on a map. It didn’t look so far from South Carolina.

“When is he coming home?” I asked for what must have been the thousandth time.

My mother was decorating our Christmas tree. At twenty-five she had great beauty, the kind that is unaware of itself, but her dark hair and blue eyes turned heads when she walked down the aisle at church. I called her Mammy. She had long since given up on trying to explain to me why Daddy could not come home. She picked me up, handed me an ornament to place on the tree, and tried to distract me with a promise of Santa Claus.

At three and a half I was too old to be so easily put off. I had not forgotten my father, as a younger child would have, nor had I learned to abide his absence quietly. I missed him throughout the day but especially at bedtime. Every night I
wanted Mammy to tell me about him, where he was and what he was doing. I asked her to read again his last letter, the part about me. Sometimes she showed me the pictures of him in his uniform. Just before lights out we said my prayers: Keep Daddy safe and make the war stop so he can come back home. Mammy promised me that God would answer my prayers, and with the faith of a child I believed.

With the same faith I believed in Santa Claus. In fact I'm sure I must in some way have associated Daddy with Santa Claus and Santa Claus with God. I could not see any of them, yet they could see me; they all wanted me to be a good boy, and they all had good things to give me. But there were moments when confusing information caused the three to separate into individuals in my mind. God was always with us, Mammy said, just invisible, and Santa Claus was definitely coming to our house in about ten days. I knew that neither of those things were true of my Daddy.

Much of what I have related I actually remember—especially the panda and the coconut—but what happened next I didn't learn until the other day when Mammy was spending the Christmas holiday with my wife Jane and me.
We were talking about the Christmases of my childhood, and she took me back to the very far side of memory, where it shades into the darkness. The next part is her story.

She had not had an easy time of it since Daddy had been away, she said. Neither her parents, who lived in Greenwood, South Carolina, nor her parents-in-law wanted her to remain alone with her two small children in the tiny house where she and my father had started their lives together. Given the choice, she found it more convenient to move in with her husband’s parents. Theirs was a large house one block away, and Pop doted on me, his namesake and first grandchild. But Pop was overbearing. In all matters, from household economies to the care of young children, he knew best. Everything under his roof belonged to him, and his word was law. Mammy was intimidated by him. At night, for example, after Caroline and I were put to bed, he would have her and my grandmother, whom I called Mama, sit down and listen as he read aloud from a novel by Charles Dickens. In those days before television he thought he was providing entertainment, and he did read well, Mammy said. But she could not enjoy the story for fear that one of us would wake up at some climactic moment and start to cry. My crying he didn’t seem to mind, but if the baby caused the interruption he would fuss and fume. It was not an altogether happy situation.
After a couple of weeks Mammy announced that she was taking us to Greenwood, a three-hour drive across the state which Caroline and I made in the well behind the seat of an Oldsmobile coupe. But Greenwood didn’t work out either. Her father—my grandfather Doc—was bedridden with recurring migraines. Caroline had developed an ear infection and cried all the time. After a week of constant stress Mammy packed us up and drove back to Darlington, though not to Pop’s big house. We settled in at home. Mammy pulled our cribs into her room, and with our Dalmatian, Buster, asleep on the floor beside her bed she felt perfectly safe.

It was in that little house that she decorated the Christmas tree; down its chimney that Santa Claus would come.

A week before Christmas Daddy called. He had been given a forty-eight hour leave for Christmas Day. Problem was, he had no way to get home. Mammy had needed to keep the Oldsmobile, and both bus and train would take too long. No matter. Mammy would somehow make it happen. In her joy she picked me up and told me that Daddy would be home for Christmas.

Then she faced the facts. His only chance was for her to drive to Norfolk on Christmas Eve and pick him up and then after a few hours turn right around and take him back. But there were problems with that too. The Oldsmobile
was a two-passenger automobile. Daddy would not allow her to make the drive alone. But if she found someone to go with her, there would be no room in the car for him. The only solution was to approach Pop. He owned a Chevrolet dealership; he had cars.

Mammy summoned all her courage.

"Out of the question," Pop stormed. "John should have known better than even to propose such a fool thing."

Mammy was determined not to cry, but Pop had made her angry. "It was my idea," she said in defense of her husband, "not John's."

She waited twenty-four hours before she approached him again. He was gentler this time but no less firm. "It would take all our stamps," he said, referring to the system of gasoline rationing. "For such a short time, just a few hours on Christmas day, it's just not worth it."

"It is to me," my mother said.

"Besides, even if I had an available car, which I don't, who would you get to go with you? You can't make a trip like that by yourself."

"Why couldn't Marco go?"

Marco Wingate was a black man in his middle years who worked for Pop as a chauffeur and general servant. Pop trusted him completely and valued him greatly. But Marco had other responsibilities—a family of his own and a
country store to run—and with Christmas just a couple of
days away he was too busy to drive to Norfolk and back.
“It’s just not possible, my dear,” Pop said. “I’m sorry.”

Mammy had no time to waste. In fear and trembling she
broached the subject again the next day.

“Even if I could find a car and if Marco had the time to
go—and those are big ifs—you would have to ride all the
way up there in the back seat, you know.”

In 1944 a black man and a white woman could not give
the appearance of traveling together, not in the Carolinas,
but that didn’t bother Mammy. She gave her father-in-law a
big hug. She knew she had won.

In the early morning of a cold, foggy Christmas Eve,
Marco came driving up to Pop’s house in a late model Chevy,
a demonstrator owned by the dealership. The trip would take
twelve to fourteen hours there and back. It would be well
after dark when they got home. Mammy kissed Caroline and
me goodbye at the front door, told us to be good for Mama
and Pop, and promised to bring Daddy back with her.

Pop didn’t like the weather. Having given his consent
and provided car and driver, he was having second
thoughts. The impossibility of changing his mind now had
made him irritable. “You be careful now,” he said to
Marco, “and don’t you drive too fast, you hear? I don’t give
a damn how long it takes.”
Marco, who had long ago mastered the difficult art of getting along with Jim Kilgo, touched the bill of his chauffeur’s cap and said, “Yes sir.” What he did not say was that he had gotten no sleep the night before.

And here is what I remember: Mama and Pop’s house—the house in which my father had grown up. With a swinging door between the dining room and pantry, a great fireplace in the front hall, a wide staircase in the back hall, and mysterious rooms upstairs, it seemed to go on forever. I could play on the floor of the large, warm kitchen, building log cabins with the red and the white corncobs that Pop brought me from his horse farm. With Pop’s help I could slide down the banister of the wide staircase. Mama would set me in her lap and let me spin the globe as she pointed out to me the Pacific islands where my Uncle Bob was fighting the Japanese. On that cold Christmas Eve a fire burned all day in the great fireplace. The house was filled with the smells of good things from the kitchen, and in the corner of the front hall stood a towering Christmas tree, much taller than our little cedar, and the antique lights and ornaments seemed more beautiful.
Pop was always busy. Just because it was Christmas Eve was no reason to stop work. He bundled me up and took me with him to his office at the Chevrolet place, where he let me bang on the typewriter. From there we went to the barbershop, stopping on the way at the Post Office. As was our custom, he asked me to open the little door of his box and reach in for his mail. At Watt Brown's he set me in the booster chair himself then stood by the old black barber telling him exactly how to cut my fine blond hair. “His Daddy’s coming home from the navy tonight, Watt. So make it look good.”

“Oh it’ll look good to his Daddy, Mr. Kilgo, even if I was to shave it clean.” Watt rubbed hair tonic on his palm and held it close over my nose. “What old Santy Claus gon’ bring you tonight, honey?”

“My Daddy,” I said, half drunk on the fumes of the alcoholic tonic.

After the haircut came the best part, the treat I looked forward to every day—a trip to the horse farm. It was our special place, a stable and paddocks and riding rings where Pop kept and trained fine show horses, and only members of the “Jimmy Club” were admitted there. A small room at one end of the stable served as an office. It was heated by a potbellied stove in the middle of the floor. While
Pop worked at his desk, I played with a bridle, snapping and unsnapping its latch. When he was finished and ready to go, I asked if he would take me up to the loft. With me clinging tight to his neck, Pop climbed the ladder. The loft was cold and dark and dusty with hay. Still holding me in his arms, he walked from one end to the other, showing me the openings in the floor through which hay was dropped into the mangers. As we walked, horses moved below us, stamping and blowing, and the smell of horse was strong.

Back at home, we went straight to the kitchen and washed our hands and put Jergens Lotion on them. Mama gave me soup and crackers for lunch, and when I had eaten I went down for a nap.

I woke up an hour later and asked for my parents. When Mama said they weren’t here yet, I tried not to cry.

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Mammy and Marco had not even reached Norfolk. Marco was having trouble staying awake. When they stopped for gas, Mammy told him to stretch out on the back seat and get some sleep, she’d drive.

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By mid afternoon it was raining; by five it was dark. Baby Caroline was fretful and I was whining. We wanted our parents. Pop said they would be here soon then turned on the radio for news of the war. Mama made waffles for supper.

“It’s time those kids were getting back,” Pop said. “I’m going to run down to the office for a while. I won’t be long. If they get here while I’m gone, call me.”

Mama got Caroline to bed and put me in the tub, bathing me with fragrant lavender soap. By the time I had my pajamas on, Pop was back, but he would not stop pacing up and down the hall, peering out the front door window into the gloomy darkness. Mama said, “Don’t you think we’d better go on and hang the stockings and get Jimmy to bed?”

“I was hoping they would be home by now,” Pop said.

The stockings were long, black cotton hose, the kind actually worn by women a generation before. Pop hung them from hooks beneath the mantle, hooks that had been there since my father was a child. Mama lifted me into her lap and read “A Visit from St. Nicholas.”

The scenes evoked in my imagination by the words of the poem lay all around me. This was the house in which no creature was stirring, the bed I slept in the place of sugar plum dreams. We had no snow but at the mention of eight tiny reindeer, I gazed at reindeer figurines on the mantle, and they seemed to move with life of their own.
And when Mama read, “Down the chimney St. Nicholas came with a bound,” it was into the spacious fireplace right before my eyes that he landed. That would happen sometime tonight, after I had gone to sleep. In this very hall the “jolly old elf” would go right to work, filling those very stockings, and my Daddy . . . .

When my mother related the story the other day, she said that John should have driven the car from Norfolk, allowing Marco to resume napping on the back seat, but John wanted the backseat for himself and her. So they rode through the drizzly afternoon, through Rocky Mount and Raleigh, Fayetteville and Laurinburg, down into the early darkness of South Carolina, oblivious of the passage of time. Just outside of Bennettsville, thirty miles from home, Marco drifted off to sleep. At least, that’s one explanation. Marco himself denied it, insisting that the oncoming car swerved into him. In any case, they were jolted awake by a screech and crash of metal on metal, a quick, wild, bouncing ride, and a sudden, teeth-rattling halt. They were in a ditch, still right side up. John made sure that Caroline was not hurt then checked to see if Marco was all right. Retrieving a flashlight from the glove compartment, he climbed out. The other car
had kept going. Marco helped John inspect the damage. The entire left side, front to back, was raked and stripped, the front left fender crumpled into the tire, apparently from impact with the ditch. The car could not be driven.

Caroline was weeping in the back seat. The whole catastrophe was her fault. She saw now how harebrained she had been in begging her father-in-law to get John home for Christmas. And it would be poor John who would catch the fury of his wrath. And maybe Marco too.

Up the road, from the direction they had come, a light was glowing dimly yellow in the mist. It looked like a store. As John started walking toward it, the headlights of a large vehicle loomed before him. It was a bus. John began to wave the flashlight. The bus rolled by, slowing to a stop right in front of Marco. “You want to ride that bus on home, Marco?” John asked.

“Yes sir, I sho’ do if I can, before Mr. Jim gets here.”

John thanked Marco for his help, told him not to worry, and paid the driver his fare. As the bus pulled away, John and Caroline walked through the misty dark toward the dim light of the country store, and John placed the collect call.

Mammy said it was about the hardest thing he’d ever had to do.
While I slept, Pop put on his overcoat and hat and went out into the night. Now fifty-some years later I can only imagine what he was thinking, but as a father who has been called out into the night a time or two myself, that’s not hard to do. My grandfather thought he had every reason to be angry, but anger was not what he felt. His boy might have been killed, along with his beautiful daughter-in-law, who happened to be the daughter of his best friend Bob Lawton. But they were not. They were not even hurt.

As he drove north through the gloom that night, Jim Kilgo had only six months to live. Much of that time would be filled with anxiety and dread—his younger son Bob, fighting in the Pacific, lived in constant danger and so many boys had fallen; John would soon be going to sea, there were bills to pay, and in July a horse show to organize. And he had not been feeling well of late. But that night the anger that might have been, gave way before a flood of gratitude. All the way to Bennetsville he thanked God that his children were safe and coming home.

Mammy said that Pop behaved beautifully, embracing both her and John at once and holding them close. He wanted John to drive. Caroline settled in between the two men, her husband and his father, unable to keep her eyes open. Her head nodded over onto her father-in-law. She jerked it back but only for a moment. Soon sleep overcame
her. With her head pillowed comfortably on his shoulder, she heard her father-in-law say, “This is a sweet little girl you have here, son.”

Such was the love that was busy behind the scenes keeping the promises that made my world: the fierce determination of my young mother, the constant, nurturing warmth of my grandmother, the impulsive generosity of Pop’s great flawed heart, and Marco. What moved that man to leave his family and his store on Christmas Eve and, without having slept the night before, drive a white woman four hundred miles to pick up her husband and bring him home for Christmas? I suppose that Pop offered him a bonus, but this is what I know: often in the years to come, if we were driving out the Mechanicsville Road, Daddy would stop at Marco’s store and take us all inside to see him and maybe buy a little something.

Pop loved the grand gesture. On Christmas morning he lifted me from sleep, picked up my baby sister, and with a grandchild on each arm came down the wide staircase into
the front hall. Imagine how we looked to Daddy. What I saw, wading toward me through the glitter and twinkle of Santa Claus, was the handsome navy officer who was my promised father.