

Christmas 1990

*Silent Night, Holy Night
All is calm, all is bright;
Round yon virgin, mother and child,
Holy infant so tender and mild,*

The comforting old words fall into the stale air of the bus station and are lost in the cries of welcome and the cheerful farewells that accompany each holiday arrival and departure.

*Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.*

The tender words drift down, touching everyone with their grace and hope. They fall unheard on the shoulders of the young couple who lean into each other, seeming to sleep on a bench not made for sleeping. Surrounded by travelers, they are not going anywhere. They have arrived and they are waiting to begin the rest of their lives in this city, in this city where they had hoped to be welcomed.

Their most ordinary needs have made them invisible in a city where others need only to get home for the holiday. These festive needs have made them blind to the silent cries of this man and this woman and the child who is waiting to be born.

Discarded by the city, the young man and woman huddle close to each other. The child, who will be born this night, floats under her breast, sheltered by her arms, well hidden under her coat. They are very young, very tired and very unwanted in this radiant city of Christmas lights and music.

They had arrived early that morning, stiff with cold and exhaustion. They had spent the day going from person to person, helping agency to helping agency, telling and retelling the story of how and why they had come to be in this city, on this day, without money, without friends, without family. But Christmas Eve is no time to tell such a story, no one has the time to listen.

By evening her pains had started and the young woman knew only that she must be still, that she must sit and be at rest. The young man helped her back to the bus station. It was the only place they knew, the only place they were welcome to sit, as long as they looked as if they were moving on.

*Joy to the world,
the Saviour reigns.
Let Earth receive her King!
And heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven and nature...*

The words cut off at the same moment as the Christmas lights. A small man, who appeared to come from an Eastern country, rushes towards them. Pushing a long broom ahead of him and bowing at the same time, he says, "You are excusing me, now you must go, station is closing please. Now I must clean, you go please."

The young man looks up at him and together they look at the young woman and then back at each other. "I am now understanding," says the Eastern janitor, bowing and pushing in nervous excitement, "you are waiting her, I am helping you." He disappears at a run, pushing his broom ahead of him and then getting ahead of it himself and pulling it behind him. "I am helping you," he calls back over his shoulder, "you are waiting."