

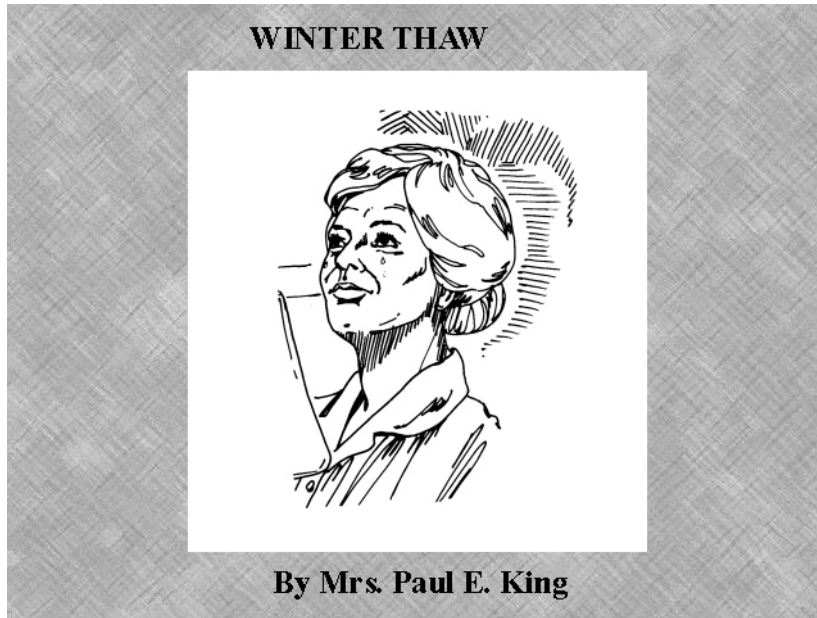
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WINTER THAW
By Mrs. Paul E. King

Maybelle Anniston stepped gingerly off the bus and hurried inside, her petite and very straight figure belying her more than sixty some odd years and her blue eyes still bright and shiny with the same merry twinkle in them that she had when she was "in her prime," as her children often said to her, reminding her that she was not thirty-some anymore and that she should not

be concerned about other people's children, Nolan Kyler Crestwood especially and particularly.

She wasted no time inside the large, busy station but hurried first from one ticket space to the next, her one and only objective that of locating the young man. Suddenly spying him near the window at the last booth, Maybelle rushed forward and called his name, saying, "Don't buy that ticket, Nolan, please. You're going home with me."

Turning quickly, the young man said, "How'd you know where I was? I'm not going home with you. I'm leaving. For good this time."

Eyes blurred by tears, the gentle woman spoke softly, "Don't do it, Nolan. Don't do it. I want to help you. Come now, we'll leave together."

Shaking his head negatively and moving toward the ticket window, Nolan said, "Why should you care when my own mother doesn't? Why? Just leave me alone. I'm old enough to make a life for myself. I want to do it, Mrs. Anniston. Just don't hinder me."

"Please, Nolan, obey me. You'll be sorry if you don't. The broad road is filled with snares and pits and traps and. . . ."

Stepping out of line and pushing his luggage to the side, away from the steady stream of people, Nolan said curtly but in a low voice, "Stop treating me like a juvenile, Maybelle. You're embarrassing me. And all that 'sermon' about the broad road being filled with snares and pits and such, is none of your business. I'm an adult now and nobody's going to stop me. Why are you here? How did you know where I was? I wish you'd leave me alone."

Sighing and brushing tears off her cheeks, Maybelle replied kindly, "I'm here because I care about you; because I love you, Nolan. You know this. And I'm here, doing what your saintly and beloved grandmother would be doing were she still alive. She was my dearest earthly female friend, as you well know, and she and I covenanted together in prayer that we would do everything within our power to help each others children and grandchildren to get to Heaven. Now, let's take the next bus back to my house. You can live with me. I'm sure you'll find work. Come Nolan, please."

Facing the small woman, between clenched teeth, he said, "I'm not going with you. Now don't embarrass me again. Not ever! I'm leaving and I don't ever want you to try to find me. Thanks for your concern." Turning quickly, he stepped back in line and was soon at the ticket window.

Maybelle watched tearfully as Nolan boarded the bus for San Francisco feeling almost like she had failed the boy's grandmother, but knowing that she had done all she could, at the time.

She waited and watched until the crowded bus pulled out of the station and was finally lost to sight amid the busy city traffic. Then, sending a silent but sincere prayer on its journey following the passenger on the bus, Maybelle dried her tears and hurried away, checking the time of her departure for the return trip home.

Sipping a cup of steaming-hot tea and nibbling on her tuna salad sandwich a short time after, the little woman mused silently on the events that had happened to the boy -- Nolan. What a lovely baby he had been and how proud of him was his grandmother, Margaret Crestwood. In the loss of her life's mate, Nolan's arrival was a Godsend. Margaret became the nursemaid to the tiny infant, caring for him while his mother worked at her job in the office of the Stanford Law Firm.

Maybelle sighed, recalling how totally unconcerned Starla Crestwood had been about her son, and how unloving. She wasn't abusive, thankfully, Maybelle remembered; but she had never seemed to have the love for the boy that a normal, caring parent should have had. His father, Maynard Crestwood, was too busy working his way to the top of the corporate ladder to pay much attention to his son or his wife, Starla. Had it not been for Margaret Crestwood -- grandmother, nursemaid and spiritual counselor -- Nolan would have been bereft of love, tender care, Bible story reading times and prayer.

Nolan had seen better days, the woman mused silently and sadly. Time was when he was converted and had known the joy of salvation and the peace of God. It had happened in a revival meeting when he was between ten and eleven years old. His parents neither encouraged nor discouraged him in his walk with the Lord. It was Margaret Crestwood who encouraged and prodded him onward, helping him in scripture memorization and praying often with him and for him and loving him devotedly.

Things went well with Nolan until, at seventeen and wanting his "own money," he got a job in a restaurant. The tips he got were good; so good, in fact, that instead of taking his stand against Sunday work, he succumbed to the owner's wishes and to his "siren" lure that, "the biggest tips are made on Saturday night and Sunday, Nolan."

Making money had become the boys obsession: his god. Immediately after graduation from high school, he plunged wholeheartedly into his work, spending most of his waking hours at the restaurant. There was nothing at home to serve as a magnetic force to draw him there; no parents to love him and communicate with him. He had a house in which to live but not a home, as a child should know and remember a home -- a place where love, kind words, laughter and happiness wove its warm web of allurements around one until it was sheer bliss to be there; a place where prayer, Bible reading and singing and praising the Lord were heard and practiced daily; a place where one felt warm, secure, wanted and needed, wrapped in the bonds of parental love.

Maybelle's heart broke with recalling and remembering the days that were past; days that could never be recalled; happenings that could never be changed or undone, and memories which could never be erased from the young man's mind.

Silent tears flowed down the woman's cheeks. How vulnerable and impressionable was the mind of a child, she thought. Any child. Every child. What a fertile "soil" for imparting and planting holy things -- righteous things; things of God!

Nolan had responded marvelously and wondrously to the teaching and training of his Spirit-filled and godly grandmother. Her death had devastated him: the only one of his immediate family who had sincerely and truly loved him and cared about him was gone. Never again would he have her to turn to when he felt utterly alone; never again would he hear her reassurance that, "You can make it, dear Nolan. You can make it -- with God and through Christ! Now, you just get alone somewhere and, on your knees, plead the Blood of Jesus and inform the adversary of your soul that, in Christ you are more than conqueror and that you are going to make it."

Maybelle sighed, getting in line to board the bus for the journey home. Had she failed Nolan's saintly grandmother? she wondered, as she settled into the seat on the bus. Had her efforts at helping him been in vain, and had her attempts at rescuing him from the clutches of Satan been a failure?

Leaning back against the cushioned seat and closing her eyes, Maybelle prayed silently, realizing that every prayer prayed in the Spirit would, in due time, receive its answer. God could soften Nolan's heart and melt the ice that had frozen around it and in and through it, she knew. And it wouldn't take Him years to do it, either: it could happen in a moment's time. Her job was to be faithful in prayer and intercession and to hold on to God until the answer came.

She would do it; yes, she would. God knew how to work and what to do to bring Nolan's strong will down to the place where he would be willing to change; willing to yield his heart and life to the Lord, from whom he was running and trying to escape.

With faith in God, she settled down for the journey home.

Chapter 2

Nolan Crestwood found a seat near the rear of the bus. He wanted to be alone. To say that Maybelle Anniston's suddenly and totally surprising appearance in the big and busy bus terminal was shocking was putting it mildly. It was humiliating! Totally and completely so. Especially what she had said about the "broad road." And those around him could not have helped hearing, he knew.

Sulking, and angered by the woman's "intrusion" and her incisive statement, Nolan slumped down in the seat nearest the window, hoping he would not have a seat companion, especially not an inquisitive or talkative one. He was in no mood for conversation. Maybelle Anniston had shocked him into mute silence. He didn't want to talk. Not at all.

Where had she come from and how did she know where he was? He hadn't told anyone but Mr. Ronatti about his plans, and where he was going. The verbal run-in he'd had with his parents earlier in the week had seemed

the perfect time for him to take his leave and make a new beginning for himself.

No matter what he did, nor how hard he tried to please his parents -- his mother, especially -- it just didn't work out. She found fault with everything he did. Sure, maybe he should have gone to college and majored in something more prestigious; something more to his parents' "tastes" and desires and wishes; something of greater and "higher" status than his good-paying job as head chef at the restaurant. But he liked what he was doing. It was honorable work. He felt comfortable in the position, like it was where he belonged. In the work force, that is. His boss was a good man to work for. He was a kindly man with an understanding heart -- a true father's heart. This had appealed to Nolan. Greatly so.

At thought of leaving Mr. Ronatti, Nolan's heart felt sad. The man had become like a father to him. More than once he had opened his heart to his boss, who was the father of six children and was kind and gracious to him. It was Mr. Ronatti himself who had trained him and taught him all he knew in culinary art.

Nolan knew he would miss his employer dreadfully. The soft-spoken, kind words of commendation and the gentle pats of approval had endeared Mr. Ronatti to him forever. Mrs. Ronatti was equally as kind and understanding as her husband. In his heart, Nolan had looked upon them as a father and mother. They had made him feel like family, like he was a talented young man of immeasurable worth and great honor. They had brought out the best in him. He delighted in pleasing them.

Nolan reached inside the pocket of the sport coat he was wearing and touched, lightly, the envelope with Mr. Ronatti's written recommendation to a friend of his in San Francisco. Tears swam in the young man's eyes. It was hard on Mr. Ronatti, his leaving, but the man was kind enough to type up the recommendation that he, Nolan, might work for his friend, who also owned a restaurant in the Bay area.

"If things don't work out the way you hope, Nolan," the kind-hearted man had stated as he handed the letter to him, "you'll always have a job back here with me. You've been like one of our own sons. We'll miss you."

"We'll miss you. . . ." The words sang a melody to the young man's heart. He looked out the window and became aware that the bus was speeding along the highway. He hadn't even recalled leaving the terminal, so deep in thought he had been, and now he was on his way to a new life. How he wished the Ronattis would be moving with him.

What a foolish thought! Nolan soliloquized sadly but longingly. Mr. Ronatti had been born in the brownstone house in which he was now rearing his own family. His roots grew deep and firm in the area, the young man knew. Furthermore, the prosperous and busy restaurant was less than a block from the man's home place. Mr. Ronatti seemed to know everybody in the neighborhood. He had many friends and relatives both in the city and its outlying areas. This was home to the jolly and much-loved restaurant owner and his family, Nolan knew. Moving away had perhaps never once crossed the man's mind.

Moving! Nolan thought, as a sardonic smile twisted the corners of his mouth. Yes, moving indeed! His "moving" consisted of three large pieces of luggage. Period. He had a nice bank account, of course, and he could buy what furnishings he would need, if, indeed, he'd be needing to buy. He would look first of all for a small furnished apartment, he had decided. If the cost was within the price bracket he had thought fair and reasonable, he would rent.

A pang of sudden fear tingled through his being. San Francisco was a large city. He had never lived in any place comparable to its size. Worse still, he didn't know a single soul there; not even Mr. Benzoni, the restaurant owner. Would the man be there to meet him when his bus arrived? he wondered.

Nolan sat upright in his seat, feeling worried and fearful. He wished he had asked Mr. Ronatti to please ask his friend if he, or someone else, could meet him at the bus terminal and take him to where the restaurant was located and where the interview was to take place.

He pulled the envelope from his inside coat pocket and opened it carefully, noting the address of The Olive Garden on the written page. Knowing nothing about the city and its many avenues and streets, the location and address meant nothing to him. Still, it was an address; a cab

driver could get him there, he reasoned, wishing he were still working for Mr. Ronatti.

If only his parents and he would have had a good family relationship, he thought, longingly and bitterly. But such was not the case. So long as his grandmother had lived, he had managed to tolerate the aloneness, finding succor and consolation in her company and presence. After her death, however, everything changed. His parent's aloofness and apparent unconcern for him was almost unbearable and intolerable. He had the constant feeling that he was in their way and, try as he may to please them and to get things on center track and create a good relationship, it never worked.

Tears sprang to Nolan's eyes. Quickly he wiped them away. He was a man; he must not cry, even though Mr. Ronatti had told him that real men do cry, too. "Like women, Nolan," the man had told him one time when he had gone into the restaurant office for something and found his employer crying.

It had shocked him, the man's heaving shoulders and his fast-falling tears. He had never before seen Mr. Ronatti weep. Always, he had appeared to be strong and able to cope with whatever assailed him, with the absence of tears. The death of his father, however, had broken the man's heart and he wept unashamedly. It was then that he had opened his heart and said that men cried also.

Closing his eyes, Nolan tried to think what Mr. Ronatti would do were he in his predicament. Then he remembered that the man had often said he never allowed himself to worry over something he could not change, nor would he worry over senseless trivialities, adding that most of the things people worried about never even happened or came to pass.

Remembering the words and Mr. Ronatti's almost constant cheerfulness, Nolan relaxed and was soon sleeping peacefully as the bus rolled smoothly along the busy highway.

* * * *

The sun was sinking into the bay and Nolan, weary and tired from the long day's work, bade Mr. Benzoni good-bye, then hurried outside and up the stairs to his small but neat apartment. He stood for a long while on the

landing at the top of the steps and gazed out across the bay, spectacular now with the sun's fading hues and subtle shades of rose and pink and orange. What a picture! he thought as he sat down in one of the chairs on the wrought iron enclosed landing. What a view!

He watched as boats, their sails open to the breeze, sailed effortlessly over the blue water. Far out in the distance, looking like miniatures, he saw great vessels ploughing the water, going to where or what country, he knew not. What a place of beauty this was! he thought. And all because of a man who cared enough about him and loved him as his own son. "Bless Mr. Ronatti he said aloud.

A lump popped up into Nolan's throat at thought of Mr. Ronatti. How wonderfully kind and loving and caring the man had been, making arrangements for Mr. Benzoni himself to meet him at the busy, bustling and much-crowded bus terminal, greeting him as though he had been a longtime friend, with a voice almost as pleasant sounding and cheerful as Mr. Ronatti's.

"Nolan!" he had exclaimed. "Nolan Crestwood. Welcome, son. Welcome!"

All fear and fright had fled with the greeting. He knew he was among friends. The ride to The Olive Garden composed the interview: in a gentle, skillful and fatherly way, Mr. Benzoni found out all he needed and wanted to know, and for a modest price, one of the two apartments above the restaurant was his. Built on opposite sides of the building, each apartment had its private stairs and landing. The landings were like patios above-ground. Nolan loved the landing. It afforded him spectacular views any time of the day and night -- when the fog wasn't present.

Something stirred inside the young man's heart now as, looking across the wide expanse of water, he realized that all the good things that had happened to him and that had come across his way, were more than mere happenstances and coincidences: Someone bigger and mightier and greater than man was looking out for him. Someone's prayers were following him daily and hourly and, yes, moment by moment. He couldn't get away from the feeling, and inside his heart a gentle warmth was stirring. Very small, but stirring.

Jumping to his feet, Nolan unlocked the door and hurried inside. Reaching for one of the favorite classics on the book shelf, he dropped down on the sofa and began to read. Always, he could forget whatever it was he wanted to forget as he read, or as he immersed himself in his work in the restaurant.

He awakened the following morning to the sound of heavy traffic and singing birds in the trees surrounding the restaurant. The book was spread across his chest. He had fallen asleep while reading it. Closing the book carefully, he got to his feet, noticing that he had slept in his work clothes.

He opened the door and stepped outside just as the sun gave the bay its warm, early morning kiss. Something so awe-inspiring and wonderful overwhelmed him as to bring tears to his eyes. God! he thought. Who could ever deny His existence?

What was happening to him? he wondered, shaking himself. Why all this sudden God-consciousness? He had always believed in Him, to be sure, but he hadn't given Him much or any thought in a long time. So why the many thoughts about Him now?

In disgust, he went inside and showered and shaved. No need to hurry; this was his day off. A ride on the trolley and a trip to somewhere -- anywhere -- might do him good, he thought, as he dressed casually, drank a cup of tea and ate a couple slices of toasted, buttered cinnamon bread before leaving the apartment.

The cool morning air made him feel very much alive and wide awake as he rode the quaint trolley up, up, up the steep hill of the city. He loved the trolleys and their swaying ride. He had used them much and often on his days off work and had thus familiarized himself with the city, wherever they traveled. There was a place at the top of the hill and near the end of the trolley's line that had intrigued him by its antiquity. It was in an older section of the city. It had seemed to beckon him to visit and to rest beneath its ancient looking trees, as he had made the return trip another day.

Glancing ahead now, and holding to the iron rail, Nolan stepped off gingerly at the next to the last stop. the air was briskly refreshing as he walked over to the cemetery. Birds sang joyously high in the trees and in the

distance the sound of seafaring vessels greeted him with their horns. Everything seemed to speak of peace and utter tranquillity.

He paused in front of a very old headstone and read the epitaph. It was barely readable, so long ago had the epitaph been chiseled in. It was a scripture verse, he realized, when finally he could put it all together.

He walked farther on, into the cemetery, fascinated by the epitaphs and the antiquity of the tombstones, some of which leaned tiredly in one direction or another. Beneath a giant and very old olive tree, he paused before a headstone bearing the name of Margaret Anna Crestwood. Gasping, Nolan stepped back. Margaret Anna Crestwood was his grandmother's name! How. . .? What . . .? It couldn't be!

His heart raced wildly. It wasn't his grandmother, he knew. She was buried near the east coast.

How well he knew where she was buried! A part of himself seemed to have been buried with her that day. He thought he could never go home -- to his parents' and his home again -- because she would no longer be nearby to visit him and love him. Her death and burial had been the hardest days of his life.

He stood for a long while in front of the stone, with head bowed. Tears, sudden and warm, ran down his cheeks. "Grandma!" he exclaimed in a broken whisper. "Oh Grandma, how much I miss you and love you!"

Great sobs shook his manly frame as once again he seemed to feel her arms enfold him and pull him close to her comforting breast while she said, "Nolan, don't forget that you have a Heavenly Father who loves you far more even than I. He will be your closest and dearest Friend. Cling to Him, my dear boy. Cling, and never turn loose of His hand. Never!"

He had failed to cling; the grip from his hand to God's had been loosened -- by him. God was gone. Gone. For years now, he had been "steering his own ship." What a mess he had made of it! He had failed both God and his godly grandmother. Oh, how he had failed them!

Suddenly, it was as though Margaret Anna Crestwood was now standing before him in person; as if she was pleading, "It's not too late,

Nolan. You can turn around, dear boy and find Him. He's waiting, Nolan. Here. Right here beneath this tree, in front of this headstone. Come. . . ."

Overcome by the presence of God's Holy Spirit, and overwhelmed by the circumstances of the momentous timing, Nolan, with head bowed, sobbed and prayed his way back to God. The cold, bleak bitterness of winter had had its thaw; his heart responded to the warmth and the gentleness of the sweet Holy Spirit. How blessedly glorious and wonderful it was to be back in God's fold!

Wiping the tears away he stooped and read the eulogy on the epitaph: She loved her God.

Someday, God willing, he would have the same epitaph chiseled on the other Margaret Anna Crestwood's headstone, he decided quickly, as tears of pardon and forgiveness flowed down his cheeks.

The End