



Dear Reader, many of you are aware that our resident playwright/poet laureate Charles Neerland regularly contributes a piece for publication by the local newspaper on Christmas Day. The editors had other ideas this year. The staff around here feels strongly that this one is too good to sit on the cybershelf so we submit this with hopes that you will enjoy it as much as we have.

A Christmas Offertory

by Charles Neerland

Rutledge, with music in his head but never in his throat or on his lips, was kvetching again about the evils of modernity as we strolled the Mall in the after-shock of another Holidazzle Parade. He slashed the air with his vile little cigar as we crossed 10th Street.

"It keeps the riff-raff away," he said, sensing my disapproval. "Besides I need something to cope."

And I needed a warm, dark place to listen to the ice cubes tinkle and smell the pine boughs. These things are the advance atmospherics of a possible miracle, of possible change.

Rutledge and I have known each other since we were children, had gone to school together and crossed paths in work and socially for more than 60 years. We were embedded in the city, for good or ill.

"Christmas just makes things worse," he went on. "Once we had spirit and order ... and now civic madness, this conglomeration of the ill-bred and the cell-phoned, even these clumps of beggars are—what's the phrase—'wired-up'."

In his dotage, Rutledge now described himself as a writer and a composer, although I had neither read nor heard his work.

"I used to write poems, parts of things, but they came out as weak-kneed Graduals or flossy Post Communions, never the kind of ass-kicking Epistles to the Galatians or the Philippians. I need inspiration. I've got to get out of here."

What? Inspiration? Out of here?

Here's the deal with my friend Rutledge: He lives in the past in the most strange and sad way. Something back in the day had blocked this pilgrim's progress. His complaining was only a cover for profound unhappiness. He wanted to rewrite the pages of the past. It had become his life's purpose. While most of the rest of us certainly have regrets, we make ourselves move on, adapting as best we can to change. Rutledge stayed put.

I think I know what keeps him locked out of the present. The short version is that an act of dereliction on his part when he was a young man produces now a constant pounding of guilt and shame in his heart. The old liturgy of love and duty makes him a prisoner.

I know more than I want to know about him. Still he functioned. Walked and observed, decrying everything from the Target Store to the Farmers Market, on his daily trudges from 12th Street to the River and back. He felt his Avenue had been usurped by the new and the other. And indeed it had. Sic Transit Gloria, one might say.

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Last week we had met at a party in deepest Kenwood, where white lights sparkled everywhere. The party was a tradition of some standing for both of us. I had once made the mistake of calling it a "Christmas Party." Not so, I was chastened; a "holiday party." Of course Rutledge had overheard and intervened: "Ah, yes, a holiday party, a remembrance of a remembrance of a remembrance."

This year Rutledge was dressed as always: blue wool blazer, grey flannel pants untouched by an iron for a long time, a festive—for him—red cotton turtleneck, scuffed black loafers. His outfit for occasions. And here amid the bright brown whiskey and slightly heaving bosoms, he coped as well as he could without his cigar.

Mellowed by some of the bright brown stuff, I told him he was George Plimpton before there ever was a George Plimpton. "And you think I live in the past," he scoffed, and made a bead for a beautiful woman of a certain age, one of the exotics who always seemed to make an appearance at this party every year. She was from Paris, the hostess explained to me. Her family owned the King David hotel in Jerusalem. Who would have guessed. Rutledge rising?

Rutledge had walked to the party from his condo downtown, but the weather had turned bad, and since he had not bothered to wear an overcoat he asked me for a ride home.

"What's your favorite Christmas Carol?" Rutledge asked, not waiting for my answer. "Mine's 'Sing a Song, Jeanette Isabella,' though I can't think of the words."

Again, what?

On Christmas Day he arrived at my apartment for a brunch I have for a few somewhat lost souls. He was in his party outfit as expected but with the Parisian Princess on his arm. Was her name Isabella? I really don't know, but she reminded me of someone from long ago.

Rutledge repaired to the deck overlooking the Mall for his post-brunch cigar. Then we heard his sweet baritone offering "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen," to all those souls traversing the Mall, the rich and the poor and the others he might come to know, the song in his head bursting from his throat to his lips and into the awful present. Scrooge at his window on Christmas morn ...

"We're traveling to the Middle East next year," Rutledge said, stroking the hand of his new friend. "Maybe we'll spend the holidays in the Holy Land." He winked at me.

I would miss his lamentations, of course. But as he sang, "Let nothing ye dismay," and so I will try to keep the flame of our Avenue burning brightly in the boom and brass of every parade.

Rutledge will return to complete his High Mass in which he will presumably tell the Galatians and the Philippians where to get off. A modern work, he assured me. Such mysteries of the Season.

Yes, I could hear the tinkle and smell the pine in this month of past and present. A Christmas miracle again, the veil between then and now torn apart.

QUARKS and QUOTES...

We received several divergent takes on our take on the Downtown 2025 plan published last issue. We will place them in our next regular publication. Until then, Dear Reader, please accept our heartfelt best wishes for a Happy, Healthy and Vibrant New Year!

