

John Michael Greer

Winter's Tales*

1. CHRISTMAS EVE 2050

Jane tucked the pie into the oven, wound the timer, and found herself blinking back tears. It was going to be a good Christmas this year, for the first time in too long. For once they'd been able to get a Christmas ham, and though they'd had to hoard ration coupons all year to do it, she didn't regret all those dinners of squash and beans from the garden out back. There were presents for the children, candles for the table, more than enough food for everybody: just like old times.

It wasn't just Christmas, either: life was good, better than it had been since the years before the war. She and Joe had good jobs at the metal recycling plant down the street; she did bookkeeping, and he'd just been promoted to shift foreman. Nothing the plant used was likely to hubbert any time soon, too, so their jobs would be around for a while. Inflation was low enough you hardly noticed it, not much more than thirty per cent a year since the latest currency reform. Food still cost too much, but you could count on getting it, and electricity was cheaper now that the new solar plant was online most of the time.

"Honey?" Joe's voice, calling from the living room. "Everybody's ready."

"I'm on my way." She took off the oven mitts and went out of the kitchen to where Joe and the children were waiting.

Memories from Jane's childhood jarred against the cramped little living room, the one bare light bulb hanging from the middle of the ceiling, the radio playing tinny holiday music in one corner. Back then, Christmas meant snow, colored lights, the balsam scent of a Christmas tree, crowds of relatives from all over, TV and internet entertainment blaring in the background. All of that was long gone, of course. Snow hadn't fallen since the big methane spike in '24 sent the climate reeling. Electricity cost too much to waste, and nobody cut down trees these days, though it wasn't

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a labor camp offense any more, the way it was when fuel ran short during the war. Traveling across country was for soldiers, prisoners, government officials, and the very rich; TVs were too expensive for most people, and the government and the army hoarded what was left of the internet after e-warfare and electricity shortages got through with it. Still, there were cards and decorations on the Christmas shelf, and stockings to hang beneath.

They always opened one special present each on Christmas eve, but stockings had to go up first, and that brought a sad moment. She and Joe hung theirs, then stepped aside for Joe Jr. He had three stockings in his hands: one for himself and two for the children they'd lost. With all the solemnity a twelve-year-old could muster, he put the stockings on their hooks: one for him; one for Cathy, who died age three from drug-resistant pneumonia; one for Brett, who died age seven when the hemorrhagic fever came through in '45. Then he stepped aside, too, and turned to look at the fourth person there.

Molly wasn't Jane's daughter, though it was hard for both of them to remember that sometimes. She was the child of their friends Bill and Erica. Bill was a derivatives salesman who got caught cooking his books in the crash of '41, went to labor camp, and died there. A very pregnant Erica moved in with Jane and Joe, gave birth to Molly, and lived with them until the same epidemic that killed Brett took her too. So Molly had three stockings of her own to hang. She was small for her eight years, and had to stretch to get the stockings on their hooks.

Once all the stockings were in place, Joe crossed the room to his armchair, sat down with a grin, and took four small packages from under the end table with the air of a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Each one was wrapped in a bright scrap of cloth. Jane recalled wrapping paper from her own childhood, used once and thrown away, and wondered why anyone even in those days put up with such waste. Didn't people have better things to do with all the money they used to have? Jane was more sensible; once the family's presents were unwrapped, the cloth wrappings went back to the quilt drawer where they came from.

Joe Jr. got his present unwrapped first. "Sweet," he said in awed tones. "Look at it." The slide rule sparkled as numbers slid smoothly past one another. He had a gift for math, so his teachers said, and he'd won a cheap slide rule in a contest when the government launched a Sustainability Initiative two years back. The government was always launching Sustainability Initiatives, but this one actually made some sense: pocket calculators cost close to a month's wages these days, and word on the street was that some of the minerals needed for the chips were about to hubbert, so Jane and Joe worked extra hours to afford a professional

model. Joe Jr. would need tech skills and an exempt job to stay out of the army; even with the war over, going into the army meant coming home maimed or dead too often to take any chances.

The wrappings of Molly's present came open a moment later to reveal two books with bright flimsy covers. Jane caught the flicker of disappointment before the child put on a bright smile. Molly hadn't tested high enough to get into charter school, and since the war, that meant no school at all unless she could get her scores up next year. She was bright enough, and good at math, but reading was a challenge. One of the old women who kept themselves fed tending and teaching the local children guessed that Molly had dyslexia, but what exactly that meant and what could be done about it, Jane had never been able to learn. She gave Molly a hug, hoping she would understand.

She and Joe opened their presents, knowing that each contained something they already owned—one of Joe's ties and a pair of Jane's earrings, wrapped up late at night so the children wouldn't know. After the slide rule, Molly's books, and the ham, there wasn't money for more luxuries. The rest of the presents, the ones that would wait for morning, were clothes and other necessities. They always were; it would take much better times to change that.

A chime from the kitchen caught everyone's attention. "That's the pie," she said. "First one in to help set the table gets an extra slice." The slice was for Molly, of course, though Joe Jr. made a game of it, racing her into the kitchen and losing on purpose. Jane and Joe followed at a less hectic pace. The four of them had the table set in minutes: ham and applesauce, sweet potatoes, cabbage, mashed carrots, a plate of homemade Christmas candies, and the squash pie steaming over on the counter: more food in one place than Jane ever thought she'd see again during the worst part of the war, enough for everyone to get gloriously overfull for a change. The plates and silver were Bill and Erica's, real 20th-century stuff.

They mumbled their way through grace, an old habit not yet quite put away. Jane and Joe had belonged to one of the Christian churches years back, but drifted away around the time the last traces of religion got shouldered aside in favor of political propaganda for one of the prewar parties, she didn't remember which. These days, you saw a lot of churches lying empty or converted to something else. Most of the really religious people Jane knew belonged to some other faith, Buddhist, Gaian, Seven Powers, or what have you. She'd thought more than once recently about visiting the Gaian church up the street. The Gaians took care of their own, and that appealed to her a good deal.

She loaded her plate with food, glanced at the window. Warm December rain spattered against it, blurred the windows of the apartment building

across the street into vague yellow rectangles and turned the unlit street into pure darkness. Joe Jr. chattered about the slide rule and his hopes of getting an apprenticeship with an engineer someday. Jane glanced across the table at Molly, then, and saw past the taut smile to the too familiar look of disappointment in her eyes.

Somehow that was the thing that brought the memories surging back up: memories of Christmases from Jane's childhood, when her family lived in a sprawling suburban house with its own big yard and the world still seemed to work. She remembered snowmen in the yard and sled tracks down the street; the big Christmas tree in the corner of a living room bigger than their apartment was now, sparkling with lights and decorations; dinners where even the leftovers made a bigger meal than anyone could eat; driving—in a car, like rich people!—to a bright sprawling space called a shopping mall, where anything you could think of could be bought for money you didn't even have yet; gifts that didn't have to have any use in the world except the delight they brought to some child's eyes; all the extravagant graces of a world that didn't exist anymore.

Tears welled up again, but they were tears of anger. *Why, goddammit?* She flung the question at the memories, the bright clean well-fed faces of her childhood. *Why did you have to waste so much and leave so little?*

Joe saw the tears, but misread them. "Beautiful, isn't it? Just like old times."

She kept her smile in place with an effort. "Yes. Yes, of course."

2. SOLSTICE 2100

Bits of windblown rubbish clattered down the street as Molly reached for the doorlatch. She'd been at church most of the day helping get everything ready for the solstice ritual, and had come home now only because the boy would be back from school soon and would need some getting ready himself. For that matter, she had a few preparations of her own to make, and one more than anything else. She opened the door, closed it quick behind her to keep dust out.

Once inside she took off coat and dust scarf, shook out hair the color of old iron, brushed dust off her hands: no water to spare for washing them, not since autumn rains failed this year. Still, the little two-room shack was as clean as dry rags and a meticulous eye could make it. The few furnishings she had—table and two chairs, cooking stove, cupboard, washboard and washtub—glinted in the vague light from the four small windows; not a spot of rust on any of them, and not because the blacksmith who made them used some fancy metal, either. Good plain salvaged iron kept if you

took care of it, and it didn't put a burden on Earth Mother or stray into the extravagance that got Old Time people in so much trouble with Her.

Knowing the boy would be home soon, she went into the bedroom right away, stepped past the two iron bedsteads to the room's far end and unlocked one of the trunks there. Homespun was good enough for everyday but holidays called for better. She considered, chose a dress the color of Earth Mother's own good green, set it on her bed. That would do. A small box inside the trunk gave up a pair of earrings with bright stones—her mother's, worn only on special days these twenty years now. Then, from the bottom of the trunk, she pulled a package wrapped in coarse brown cloth. Her hands shook a bit as she set it on the bed next to the dress.

A few minutes later, dressed for holiday, she came out of the bedroom and put the package on the table. Clatter of the latch told her she was just in time. The door flew open, letting in a cloud of dust and a boy, brown-haired and barefoot, in clothes that had seen many better days.

"Earth's sake, Joe, shut the door!" she chided. "You'll let all the dust off the street in with you."

"Yes'm." Abashed, the boy pulled the door shut, submitted to a thorough dusting with the cleanest of the rags. "There," Molly said. "How was school today?"

That got her a sullen look. "I don't want to go any more."

She said nothing, pursed her lips. "I don't," the boy repeated. Then, in a rush of words: "Pacho doesn't have to go to school any more. He works for his brother the savager."

"Salvager," she corrected.

"Everybody says it 'savager.'"

"You can say it however you want with your friends, but at home we speak good English."

Joe gave her an angry look. "*Sal*-vager. That's what his brother does, stripping metal in the towers, and Pacho helps him. He says his mom's happy 'cause he's bringing money home."

"Because."

Another look, angry and ashamed at the same time. "Because he's bringing money home. I bet I could make as much as he does, 'stead—" He caught himself, glared at her. "Instead of sitting in old man Wu's house and learning stuff that doesn't matter any more anyway."

So, Molly thought, it's come to this already. "It matters more now than it used to, back in Old Time. You look at Pacho now, and you think he's got a trade, he makes money, and that's the end of it. But all he'll ever be is a salvager. You deserve better."

He said nothing, met her gaze with a hard flat look. That angered her more than anything he could have said. "You think school doesn't matter,"

she snapped. “You don’t know how many times I cried because I didn’t get to go to school, or how many times I did without because the jobs I could get without schooling paid barely enough to live on. And I promised your mother—” She hadn’t meant to bring up Linny, now of all times, but no point in trying to unsay it. “I promised your mother you’d get an education and I’m not going to break that promise.”

Joe looked away, his face reddening, and Molly berated herself inwardly for mentioning his parents. That had to sting, though Earth Mother knew there were plenty of families in the same case these days, young and old with no blood relation living together under one roof after plague and famine and two civil wars finished with the people they called family beforehand. At least she’d known Jeff and Linny back when Joe was born, had changed his diapers and fed him goat milk from a bottle often enough to feel like some sort of family.

Only one way to mend things, she decided. She’d meant to wait until after church, but that couldn’t be helped. She went to the table. “Come over here. I want to show you something.”

He came after a moment, still looking away, trying to hide the wetness on his cheeks. Molly unwrapped the package, revealing an old book and a long thin shape in a case of cracked black plastic. “What’s that?” Joe asked.

“Take a look.”

He picked the case up, gave her a wary glance, opened it. The slide rule caught the light as he took it out, numbers still readable on the yellowing plastic. “Hoo! Where’d you savage this?”

She let it pass. “I didn’t. That belonged to my brother Joe. When he died in the war, the army tried to send his things to my mother. We were in the refugee camp by then, but one of the families who stayed behind in our neighborhood kept the package for us until the fighting was over and we came back. And this—” She pointed to the book. “This was just about the only thing that didn’t get looted from our apartment. It’s one of Joe’s schoolbooks, and it teaches how to use a slide rule like this one. You need to stay in school so you can learn to read it.”

“I can read better than anybody in my class.”

“You can’t read this.” Meeting his angry look calmly: “Try it.”

That was a gamble—she couldn’t read more than a few words out of the boy’s schoolbooks, for that matter—but as he flipped through the pages and his shoulders hunched further and further up, she knew she’d won it. “Tom Wu says you’re a better reader than anyone in your class, too. That’s why it’s important for you to stay in school, so you can learn to read this and books like it. Do you know what my brother was going to do with his slide rule? He wanted to be an engineer, before they drafted him. He wanted to make solar engines.”

"Like the old rusty ones by the mill?"

"Yes. Nobody knows how to build them any more, or even how to make the old ones work. Maybe you could figure that out. People would be glad to get electricity again, you know."

She watched his face, waited for the right moment, as dreams collided somewhere back behind his eyes, Joe-the-salvager against Joe-the-engine-maker, Joe-the-bringer-of-electricity. "That's why," she said, "I decided to give these to you." That got a sudden look, wide-eyed, no trace of the sullen anger left. "But," Molly went on, holding up one finger, "only if you promise me you'll stay in school. They would be wasted on a salvager. They should go to someone who'll learn how to do something with them."

Joe opened his mouth, closed it, swallowed. "Okay," he forced out.

"You promise you'll stay in school? All the way through?"

"I promise."

Molly allowed a smile, indicated the book. "Then they're yours. You can keep them in your trunk until you know what to do with them." He picked up the book and the wrapping cloth, gave her an uncertain look, as though half expecting her to take them back. "While you're putting them there," she said then, "you should get something nicer to wear, too, and quickly. We shouldn't be late for church, especially not on solstice day."

"Yes'm." He started toward the bedroom, stopped halfway there. "Didn't people use to give each other presents on solstice day?"

Memories jabbed at Molly: the apartment she'd grown up in, full of soft furniture and the glow of electric light, scent of a big holiday dinner wafting from the kitchen, new clothes every year and Christmas stockings with real candy in them, and the look on her brother's face when he got the slide rule that Christmas when she was eight. People had so much back then! "Yes," she told the boy. "Yes, we did."

His face grew troubled. "But wasn't that wicked?"

"No." Was it? She pushed the thought away. "There was plenty of wickedness in Old Time, all that extravagance, and next to nobody sparing so much as a thought for Mother Earth that gave them life. But I don't think it was wicked for my mother and father to give Joe a slide rule."

Joe took that in. "Then this'll be my solstice present," he announced, and took it into the bedroom.

3. NAWIDA 2150

"Mes Joe? She kee."

The old man looked up from his book, saw the boy's smiling brown face at the door. "Da Manda Gaia?"

“Ayah, en da gran house. Habby Nawida!” He grinned and scampered off. Joe closed the book and rose slowly to his feet, wincing at the familiar pain, as the habits of half a lifetime picked at the boy’s words. Nawida, that was from old Spanish “Navidad.” Ironic that the name remained, when the faith it came from was no more than a memory now. Half the words in Alengo were like that, tenanted with the ghosts of old meanings like some haunted building in the old ruins.

He got his cane and a bundle wrapped in cloth, looked out the open door to make sure the rain would hold off a little longer. Out past the palms and mango trees, dark clouds billowed against the southern sky. Those promised another round of monsoon within a day or so, but overhead the sky was clear and blue all the way to space. He nodded, left the little thatched house and started down the broad dirt path that passed for the little village’s main street.

Ghosts, he said to himself as a pig trotted across the way, heading off into the rich green of the fields and the jungle beyond them. Alengo itself—that had been “our lingo” back when it was a makeshift pidgin born on the streets of a half-ruined city. Half Spanish, half English, half Mama Gaia knew what, that was the old joke, but the drought years turned it into a language of its own. These days people spoke Alengo all along the coast from Tenisi west to the plains, and only a few old fools like Joe kept English alive so that somebody could still read the old books.

He wondered what old Molly would have thought of that. She’d spent most of his childhood bribing and browbeating him into learning as much as she thought he could, and went to Mama Gaia convinced she hadn’t done enough. He hadn’t expected to step into old Tom Wu’s footsteps as the village schoolteacher, either, but somehow things turned out that way. Ghosts, he said to himself again. It wasn’t just the language that they haunted.

Off to the left a stream that didn’t exist at all in the drought years splashed its way between jagged lumps of concrete and young trees. There stood the grandest and saddest ghost of all, the little brick building they’d raised for the waterwheel-driven generator. What a project that was! Dan the blacksmith, ten years in the Earth now, did all the ironwork just for the fun of it, and a dozen others helped put up the building, craft the waterwheel, and wind the coils. Even the village kids helped, scrounging wire from the old ruins.

They got it working, too, turning out twelve volts DC as steady as you please. That was when reality started whittling away at the dream of bringing back Old Time technology, because they didn’t have a thing they could do with that current. Light bulbs were out of reach—Joe worked out the design for a vacuum pump, but nobody could craft metal to those tolerances any more, never mind trying to find tungsten for filaments or gases for

a fluorescent bulb—and though he got an electric motor built and running after a lot more savaging, everything anyone could think of to do with it could be done just as well or better by skilled hands with simpler tools.

Then someone savaged an Old Time refrigerator with coolant still in the coils. For close on twenty years, that was the generator's job, keeping one battered refrigerator running so that everyone in the village had cold drinks in hot weather and milk that didn't sour. That refrigerator accomplished one thing more, though, before it finally broke down for good—it taught Joe the difference between a single machine and a viable technology. It hurt to admit it, but without an industrial system backed with cheap energy to churn out devices it could run, twelve volts of electricity wasn't worth much.

When the refrigerator rattled its last, then, Joe bartered the copper from the wire—worth plenty in trade by then—for books for the village school. He'd done well by it, too, and brought home two big dictionaries and a matched set of books from Old Time called the Harvard Classics, mostly by authors nobody in the village had ever heard of. His students got plenty of good English prose to wrestle with, and the priestess borrowed and copied out one volume from the set because it was by one of the minor Gaian saints, a man named Darwin, and no one else had ever seen a copy. Still, he'd kept one loop of wire from the generator as a keepsake, and left another on Molly's grave.

A voice broke into this thoughts: "Ey, Mes Joe!" A young man came past him, wearing nothing but the loincloth most men wore these days. Eddie, Joe remembered after a moment, Eddie sunna Sue—hardly anybody used family names any more, just the simple mother-name with a bit of rounded English in front. "Íu needa han?" Eddie said. Before Joe could say anything, he grinned and repeated his words in English: "Do you need any help?"

That got a ghost of a smile. "No, I'm fine. And glad to see you didn't forget everything I taught you. How's Emmie?"

"Doing fine. You know we got a baby on the way? I don't know if you got anything in your books about keeping a mother safe."

"Sharon should have everything I do. Still, I'll take a look." Sharon was the village healer and midwife, and all three of her medical books came by way of Joe's school library, but the reassurance couldn't hurt. Emmie was Eddie's second wife; the first, Maria, died in childbirth. That happened less often than it used to—Sharon knew about germs and sanitation, and used raw alcohol as an antiseptic no matter how people yelped about how it stung—but it still happened.

"Thanks! I be sure they save you a beer." Eddie grinned again and trotted down the street.

Joe followed at his own slower pace. The street went a little further and then widened into a plaza of sorts, with the covered marketplace on one side, the Gaian church on another, and the village hall—the gran house, everyone called it—on a third. Beyond the gran house, the ground tumbled down an uneven slope to the white sand of the beach and the sea reaching south to the horizon. A few crags of concrete rose out of the water here and there, the last traces of neighborhoods that had been just that little bit too low when the seas rose. Every year the waves pounded those a bit lower; they'd be gone soon, like so many of the legacies of Old Time.

Another irony, he thought, that what brought disaster to so many had been the salvation of his village and the six others that huddled in the ruins of the old city. It took the birth of a new sea to break the drought that once had the whole middle of the continent in its grip. Another ghost hovered up there in the great thunder-gray billows to the south—the day the monsoon clouds first came rolling up over the sea and dumped rain on the parched and dusty land. He'd been out in the plaza with everyone else, staring up at the clouds, smelling the almost-forgotten scent of rain on the wind, dancing and whooping as the rain came crashing down at last.

There had been some challenging times after that, of course. The dryland corn they grew in the drought years wouldn't handle so much moisture, and they had to barter for new seed and learn the way rice paddies worked and tropical fruit grew. Too, the monsoons hadn't been so predictable those first few years as they became later: Mama Gaia testing them, the priestess said, making sure they didn't get greedy and stupid the way people were in Old Time. Joe wasn't sure the biosphere had any such thing in mind—by then he'd read enough Old Time books that the simple faith Molly taught him had dissolved into wry uncertainties—but that time, at least, he kept his mouth shut. People in Old Time *had* been greedy and stupid, even the old books admitted that, and if it took religion to keep that from happening again, that's what it took.

He crossed the little plaza, went into the gran house. The solemn part of Nawida was over, the prayers said to Mama Gaia and all the saints, and the bonfire at midnight to mark the kindling of the new year; what remained was feasting and fun. Inside, drums, flutes and fiddles pounded out a dance tune; young women bare to the waist danced and flirted with young men, while their elders sat on the sides of the hall, sipping rice beer and talking; children scampered around underfoot, bare as the day they were born. People waved greetings to Joe as he blinked, looked around the big open room, sighted the one he needed to find.

He crossed the room slowly, circling around the outer edge of the dancing, nodding to the people who greeted him. The one he'd come to meet saw him coming, got to her feet: a young woman, black-haired,

wearing the plain brown robe of the Manda Gaia. Hermandad de Gaia, that had been, and likely still was west along the coast where Alengo gave way to something closer to Old Time Spanish; Fellowship of Gaia was what they said up North where something like English was still spoken. The Manda Gaia was a new thing, at least to the Gaian faith, though Joe knew enough about history to recognize monasticism when he saw it.

"You must be the schoolteacher," the woman said in flawless English, and held out a hand in the Old Time courtesy. "I'm Juli darra Ellen."

"Joe sunna Molly." He took her hand, shook it. "Yes. Thank you for agreeing to come."

"For three years now we've talked of sending someone here to see you, since we first got word, so your letter was very welcome." She motioned him to a seat on the bench along the wall. "Please. You look tired."

He allowed a smile, tried to keep his face from showing the sudden stab of pain as he sat. "A little. Enough that I should probably come straight to the point." He held out the cloth-wrapped bundle. "This is a gift of sorts, for the Manda Gaia."

The cloth opened, revealing a battered book and a narrow black case. She glanced at the spine of the book, then opened the case and pulled out the old slide rule.

"Do you know what it is?" Joe asked her.

"Yes." Carefully, using two fingers, she moved the middle section back and forth. "I've read about them, but I've never seen one. Where did you find it?"

"It's been in my family for around a hundred years." That was true in Alengo, at least, where "mi famli" meant the people you grew up with, and "mi mama" the woman who took care of you in childhood; like everyone else, he'd long since given up using Old Time terms of relationship. "The book explains how it's used. I can't claim to be an expert, but I've done some respectably complex math on it."

"This thing is precious," she said. "I'll take it to our mother house in Denva, have it copied by our craftspeople there, and bring it back to you."

"That won't be necessary. I don't think it'll be possible, either." He met her gaze. "Cancer of the bowels," he said then. "Not the way I would have chosen to go, but there it is. It's been close to three years now, and by the time you get to Denva and back I'll most likely be settling down comfortably in the earth."

"Mama Gaia will take you to Her heart." Seeing his smile: "You don't believe that."

"I think the biosphere has better things to worry about than one old man."

"Well, I won't argue theology."

That got another smile. "Pity." Then: "I have one other thing to ask, though. I hear quite a bit about the Manda Gaia these days. They say you have schools in some places, schools for children. For the last twenty years all my best pupils have gone into the church, and there's nobody here to replace me. I'd like to see someone from your order take over the school when this thing gets the better of me. I wish I could say that's a long way off."

She nodded. "I can send a letter today."

"Thank you. You've made a cynical old man happy, and that's not a small feat." The dance music paused, and in the momentary hush he fancied he could hear another, deeper stillness gathering not far off. He thought about the generator again, and the concrete crags battered by the waves, and wondered how many more relics of Old Time would be sold for scrap or washed away before the world finished coming back into balance.