Henry's Christmas

She had no food to give her son. They couldn't sleep in the car. The cold would come in the night as they clung to each other, and they would wait for death.

By Gary Svee

Naomi pulled her blanket over her head, making a hood. She checked her pouch for the lease money and stepped outside. The cold sucked the air from her lungs, leaving her gasping. How had Henry stood so long in this cold?

"Henry, it's time to go."

The little boy turned slowly, as though the cold had frozen his joints. He walked stiffly to the car, and she helped him climb in. She leaned over, checking his face for any signs of frostbite. None. That was good. She pulled him into the blanket with her, his cold piercing her
warmth. She hugged him to her, willing her body to warm his.

Her lips moved in a silent supplication as she turned her attention to the car. She pulled the choke out and reached forward to turn the key. She was muttering as she reached for the starter pedal above the gas pedal. *Awaken hulking beast. I have performed the rituals prescribed by mechanical law. Awaken!*

Her foot pressed the starter. No growl. No whimper of protest. Nothing.

Naomi turned another page in this rite. Their house was on a hill, the lane stretching down to the main road. She had parked the car, as she always did, facing down that hill and in second gear with the emergency brake locked. It was a long hill. If the lane wasn’t too icy, and if the rear tires found purchase and spun the engine, and if the oil wasn’t too cold, and if she eased the choke in at just the right time, and if she didn’t have to stop before pulling on the road running past their home …

If all those things happened, they would be on their way to Billings.

She loosened the brake and stepped on the clutch. Nothing. The cold had locked the car in place, the wheels too stiff to roll.

She rocked back-and-forth in the seat, willing the cold to free her car. Henry rocked, too, although he didn’t know why. The car groaned with the thought of moving. The cold had turned its oil to glue. She asked too much. But Mother Earth put her shoulder behind the car, and it rolled ahead, shuddering with the cold.

When the car was going fast enough—please God, make it fast enough—Naomi eased the clutch out. The back of the car slewed first one way and then the other. The engine growled, unwilling to suck cold air, but it couldn’t resist Mother Earth. The engine sputtered and caught, the car leaping ahead, and then it died, gravel clattering against the frame.

Naomi depressed the clutch, willing the car to roll again, to roll fast enough to start. Gravity won. The engine caught, and Naomi eased the choke forward, backing off whenever the engine coughed.

No cars were coming, so she swung on the road. They were moving fast enough to keep the car running in second gear. When the moving gears had warmed the oil, she would try shifting into high, but for now, she would drive in second.

She eased one hand under her blanket, willing it to lose the sting of an icy steering wheel. She drove that way, warming one hand and then the other.

The car’s heater was working, the fan scratching its protest. Eventually, the heater would take the sting from the air, perhaps keeping the windshield free of frost. Naomi reached forward, scratching at the windshield with her fingernails, long strips of frost curling off the window. There, the car was running as well as it could, and she could see out the window. Naomi and Henry Wolf Song were on their way to Billings.

Naomi eased back in the seat, sensing for the first time the knotted muscles in her stomach.

"Why does the cold bite?" Henry whispered.

Naomi smiled. "Do you remember last summer when we were in town, and I bought you a root beer, and it was so cold, and it tasted so good?"

Henry nodded.

"I think the winter wind wants to taste us because we’re warm, to see if we taste as good as a cold root beer on a hot day."

"How does it bite if it doesn’t have any teeth?"

"Your grandmother doesn’t have any teeth, but she bites, doesn’t she?"

"But I can see my grandmother, and I can’t see the wind."

Naomi put her hand over her mouth in mock despair. "Oh the shame of it, I have a son who cannot see the wind. How will I ever hold up my head again?"

Henry giggled. "So how can you see the wind?"
"It depends how the wind dresses. Sometimes in the summer, it dresses in the dust it takes from the road. You can see the wind then, can't you?"

Henry nodded.
"And in the fall when it wears the leaves from the trees?"

Henry nodded again.
"And in the winter when it wears the snowflakes?"

"Yes."
"So you can see the wind whenever it's dressed, can't you?"

"Yes."
"But you can't see it when it's undressed, can you?"

"No."
"But you can't see your grandma when she isn't dressed, either, can you?"

Henry giggled. "No."
"So maybe the wind is like your grandmother?"

Henry laughed. "Sometimes my grandma yells like the wind."

Naomi laughed, and that is how they went to Billings that cold day in December.

The two-lane highway from the reservation was snow-packed most of the way, and Naomi's hands were aching with the strain of correcting each tiny slip before it sent them spinning into the ditch. As they reached the Billings city limits, she took first one hand from the wheel and then the other, shaking the ache away.

There, a parking spot. The car slid into the spot, Naomi jerking the wheel to evade the cars parked on either side. Naomi's hands were shaking as she reached down to pull the key from the ignition.

"How would you like a bottle of root beer, Henry?"

He looked up at her, eyes shining. "Could I have some hot chocolate?"

Naomi walked stiff-legged from the department store. The clerk had followed her every step. He knew she was a thief because she was Indian. All Indians are thieves. He didn't want Henry to try on the coat, because all Indians are dirty, lice-ridden.

She didn't want Henry to know that to be Native American is to be hated. He would come to know that, but she wanted him to have a childhood first. She wanted him to know what it is to be loved before he learned what it is to be hated. So she told him they were given paper throwaway cups in the Five and Ten because they were special.

Henry looked up. "Mr. Wind isn't wearing any clothes today," he said.

Naomi smiled. "No, he isn't, but he's certainly having a good time, isn't he?"

A question crossed Henry's face.
"He's running past us on the way to a party."

Henry grinned. "He will eat icicles at his party."

"And snow."

Henry giggled. "He will be so fat he won't be able to run."

Naomi reached tentatively for the starter. Please start. We have no money. There is no place for us to stay.

Naomi smiled, "And snow eater will come and eat all his snow."

"Who's snow eater?"

"Snow eater lives in the Southwest where it is hot all the time. Sometimes he sneaks into Montana and steals the snow from the north wind."

Henry laughed. "I wish snow eater would come today."

Naomi smiled. "Maybe he will."

The car sulked against the curb, apparently piqued at being left alone amidst a crowd of newer, nicer cars.

Naomi opened the door for Henry and slipped her package on the backseat. She whispered incantations to herself as she walked around to the driver's side. Please start. Please start. Please start. Start and I'll ask my brother to change your oil when it warms up.

She opened her blanket as she climbed into the car, inviting Henry to snuggle to her for warmth.

The key resisted going into the ignition. Too cold. Too cold. You ask too much.

Naomi reached down and pulled the choke. Key on. Choke out. Her foot reached tentatively for the starter.

Please start. We have no money. There is no place for us to stay. Please start. Please.

Naomi pressed the starter. ...Nothing. No squeaks. No groans. No clicks. Nothing. She leaned over, pressing her forehead against a steering wheel that burned as though it were red hot and not icy cold. She took a deep breath and tried to put her thoughts in order. A service station squatted across the street. It might as well have been on the far side of the moon. No money, no service. Money stations. That's what they were, money stations.

Maybe a passerby would give her car a push, as the bill outside her home had done that morning. Maybe the car would cough and snort and then growl its rancor at being called to run on so cold a day, but carry them grudgingly to their home on the reservation.

But who would stop on the street to answer a blanket Indian's appeal for help? Naomi's eyes roamed the street. They stopped at the service station. She might go there. Maybe he would give them a push just so he wouldn't have to look at them. Maybe he would give them a push so his other customers wouldn't think that he served Indians in his service station.

Naomi put her hand to her mouth. Asking for help involved great risk. The man in the service station might
call the police. An Indian woman was begging on the street. Didn't the city of Billings have vagrancy laws so good people didn't have to put up with that? That's what he might say to the police if Naomi asked for help.

Henry might spend his first night in jail, then. He might learn what danger lurks in venturing into Billings on a cold winter night. Naomi pulled Henry to her. He looked up at her, the question plain on his face. Always there were questions on Henry's face, but not questions yet about the risk of coming to Billings.

Naomi sighed. She had no food to give her son and no place to stay. They couldn't sleep in the car. The cold would come in the night as they clung to each other. It would shake them to get their attention, and then they would stop shaking and wait for death. Henry was too little to fight the cold. He would go first. She would keen, then, mourning the loss of her son's life. They would see the pain on her face when they found her.

Naomi nodded. Jail was not so bad. She climbed from the car, reaching inside to wrap Henry in her blanket. She stood, coughing as the icy air burned her lungs.

"Stay here, Henry. I'll be right back. Lock the doors, and don't let anyone in until I get back."

Naomi paused, looking both ways before stepping into the street. The street was snow-packed and slick. Cars wouldn't be able to stop if they wanted to—if they wanted to. She drove that thought from her mind, just as she tried to ward off the cold's embrace. She thought of summer days along the creek with Henry, feeling the kiss of the sun on her skin as Henry tried to coax a brook trout to his baited hook. The image almost drove the day away, almost caused her to step into the street. She tried to read the man's face as she approached the station. The station was elderly so she could hide behind her breath. She looked into the man's blue eyes, seeking compassion and finding none. Still, she had to try.

"My car won't start. I have a little boy."

The man stared at her, and her hopes crashed. Words tumbled from her mouth. "I have no money. I have no money to make the car run. I have no money for a place for Henry or me to stay. We have nothing to eat."

The man nodded, leaning over to take a jacket from a coat tree beside the counter.

She looked into the man's blue eyes, seeking compassion and finding none. Still, she had to try.

"You drive. I push. Okay?"
Naomi nodded.
He stopped to open the garage's bay door, and the two of them walked across the street. He opened the car door for her and held it as he gave her instructions.

"Put the car in neutral. Okay?"
Naomi nodded.
"When I push you away from the curb, you turn that way. Okay?" he said, gesturing to the left with his head.
"We do this quick. Okay?"
"Yes, quick."

He shut the door and walked to the front of the car. The sidewalk had been swept free of snow. His feet would find purchase to start the car backward. That would give him time to brace his feet on the curb. With his feet locked, he would shove the car into the street. He would have to put all this strength into that shove or the car could roll back and crush his legs.

He looked through the window at Naomi. She nodded. The car was in neutral. He leaned forward, bracing himself against the bumper. He didn't think the radiator would tolerate the pressure he would have to put against it.

He took a deep breath and shoved, muscles knotting in his legs and back and arms. The car was stiff with the cold. It didn't want to move. A growl built in his throat, and he shoved until he thought his muscles would tear loose from his bones. The car groaned away from its resting place, picking up a little momentum as it moved away from the curb.

The attendant leaped ahead, bracing his feet against the curb and his shoulder against the bumper. He was lying almost parallel to the ground as he shoved with all the strength of his legs and back. Tendons glowed from the muscles in his neck, and the car yielded, picking up speed as it lurched into the street. He chased the car; feet scrabbling to push it farther up the street. Then he stood, hands on knees, sucking great drafts of icy air into his lungs.

"Brakes."

The car stopped, and he walked to the driver's window. Naomi rolled it down halfway.

"Now, I push forward and you drive car into garage. Okay?"
Naomi said, "I have no money."
"Into garage. Okay?"
She nodded.
The street inclined slightly, and when she released the brake, the car rolled reluctantly forward. He chased it,
shoving whenever his feet found purchase. Naomi turned the car into the station, and he used the car’s momentum and his own strength to push it into the garage bay.

He appeared again in the window.

“Chairs in office. I turned up the heat. You would sit there, please.”

Naomi climbed out, Henry following. Two chairs perched near a gas wall furnace, laboring now to warm the office. The two huddled in the circle of warmth around the stove.

The attendant picked up the telephone in the office, speaking in a lilting language Naomi hadn’t heard before. A disagreement. She could understand that from the tone of his speech if not the words. “Det er Jul, Inga,” he said as though the words settled the debate and hung up the telephone.

“You wait here,” he said nodding at Naomi and stepping into the garage bay.

Henry stepped to the glassed floor and peered into the garage. He glanced back at his mother. She was lost in thought. He slipped through the door and along the wall toward the man.

The man was focused on the engine. Still, he heard Henry coming.

“You climb up on bumper. You see what I am doing. This is battery,” the man said. “I am checking battery. You never do this. It has acid in it. It will burn holes in you. Maybe make you blind. You do not do this unless a grownup is there. Okay?”

Henry nodded.

“Good.”

Henry watched the man draw liquid from the battery.

“That’s what I thought. Your battery is no good.”

The door opened between the office and the garage bay. A woman stepped through.

“Good. You are here,” he said.

He looked at Henry. “What is your name?”

“Henry.”

“Good. Henry, you come with me, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good.”

The trio stepped into the office to answer the question on Naomi’s face.

“The battery is no good,” Henry said, eager to share his mechanical expertise.

Naomi’s face fell. “I have no money.”

“Ya, well I would like you to meet my wife, Inga. She brought sandwiches for you. We have some pop in the machine, and some coffee. Okay?”

“I have no money.”

“Ya, well you eat, now.”

“Henry, when you finish eating you come help me. Okay?”

Henry beamed, mouth full of the venison sandwich Inga had given him.
"Yes."
"Okay."
"Okay," Henry said, and the attendant smiled.
"God Jul," he said.
Henry turned to Naomi as she drove away from the station.
“What did he say?”
The road disappeared behind the tears in Naomi’s eyes. She blinked until they cleared.
“I think he was saying merry Christmas. It is a merry Christmas, isn’t it Henry?”
Henry’s thoughts turned to the Tonka truck in the store and the bridge he might have built across the spring if he had that truck, but then he smiled. “We had sandwiches, and I learned to be a mechanic, and now I have a knife, and Uncle Lester can show me how to carve willow whistles this spring when the snow eater comes and takes all the snow.
“I think this is a wonderful Christmas. Okay?”
“I think so, too. Okay.”
Henry giggled, “Okay.”
“Okay.”
Henry’s expression grew serious.
“Did he help us because we are special?”
“No,” Naomi said. “He helped us because he is special.”
“So we are all special?”
Naomi nodded, smiling, and that is how they drove back to the reservation.

One-on-One with the Author Gary Svee

By Shirrel Rhoades

Spur Award-winning Western writer Gary Svee was born to be a cowboy. But maybe he was a century too late.

His fiction—such as Sanctuary, hailed as 1990’s best Western Novel by the Western Writers of America—often takes you back to an earlier time, when men rode horses, wore six-shooters, and traversed the sagebrush trails.

Gary shrugs at the description. “I write about Montana. I guess that makes me a Western writer, but I don’t know what that means.”

It reminds me of a reviewer writing that one of my books is an allegory. I had to look up ‘allegory’ to understand what I’d done.”

True to form, his original short story in this issue has a Western setting, but it’s actually set in the 1950s. And it’s a poignant Christmas story, not a blazing shootout in front of a corral.

“I stepped outside Montana in the books I read,” he says, explaining how he came to write this particular story. “And that led me to step outside a world with signs on saloon doors, ‘No dogs or Indians allowed.’ That’s what drove me to write ‘Henry’s Christmas,’ a Native American mother trying to shield her son from the hatred that palled the Big Sky in the earlier years and resists closure.”

How did he come to be a writer? “I was raised in a family of storytellers,” he grins. “Stories feed stories, like the time a man shoved a pistol into Dad’s back and said, ‘I’m going to blow your guts out.’ When the assailant woke up, he was in jail. My big brother fly-fishing the Madison with a rattlesnake wrapped around his leg. Going down a talus slope with my younger brother, hoping we would make it across before we went off the cliff at the bottom. Tough, soft, mean, glorious, bright, dim, people set like gems in a setting of sego lilies and dizzying mountains and sunsets that shade any artist’s palette. How could anyone resist writing?”

Among his more recent novels are Single Tree (1994), The Peacemaker’s Vengeance (2003), Showdown at Buffalo Jump (2003), and Outcast (2005).

His mentor was Dorothy M. Johnson (1905-1984), known for such classic Westerns as The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, A Man Called Horse, and The Hanging Tree. Many of her short stories were published in the Post back in the ’40s. Svee says, “She was a premier Montana writer, my teacher at the University of Montana School of Journalism, and a friend.”

Gary Svee serves as a fiction advisor to the Post, feeding us ideas, critiquing our selections, and helping us to keep you entertained.

Does he have more Montana stories to tell? You bet. “I’ve been mired in a screenplay,” he reports, “but short stories keep popping into my head.” We’ll share them with you from time to time.

“I write about Montana. I guess that makes me a Western writer, but I don’t know what that means.”
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