

The Holiday Bus

A story from *Drive-Through Christmas Eve and*

Other Stories for Christmas

by Richard and Elizabeth Raum

Nora shifted into low gear as the yellow school bus began the climb up Turtle Hill Road. The twenty-eight kids already on the bus were quiet, dreaming, perhaps, of holiday parties. Nora noticed the Christmas red of hair ribbons, socks, and shirt collars peeking out from under winter jackets. Lisa Bowman cradled a box of red frosted cupcakes in her lap. Several kids were hauling bags of potato chips or cans of red juice.

Nora appreciated the moment's silence. Once the Ludlows clambered aboard, the bus would become a zoo. "Strength, Lord, and patience," she prayed, "and courage for dealing with the Ludlows." Jesus taught his followers to love the little children, and that included the Ludlows.

As the school year progressed, Nora was finding it increasingly difficult to love the Ludlows. Nora vowed not to lose the battle, not today, the day before Christmas break. God knew she tried. Nora treated the Ludlows like the others -- a smile when they boarded, a friendly word as they unloaded, candy once in a while, and a hug on birthdays. Nora loved kids -- at least normal ones. Why else would she drive school bus? Not the salary. Not the hours. Not the working conditions! Nora looked at the small magnet she's stuck on the dashboard: "If the Lord gives you lemons, make lemonade." God gave Nora Ludlows. What could she make of them?

There was Derek, Dudley, Darla, and Daisy. Two boys, two girls, and she understood that there were four more "D" babies at home. Every one of them got on the bus with hair uncombed, and Nora concluded that washcloths and soap were as lacking as combs and brushes. All four

wore clothes that didn't fit well. Common sense told Nora that Derek's "too small" could have been Dudley's "just right," but the Ludlows seemed unaware of that possibility.

In September, when Daisy had a bad case of school phobia, Nora had given her a small package -- hair ribbons -- something Daisy could show off proudly to classmates. Daisy took the package eagerly, but Nora had never seen her wear the ribbons in her unruly hair. The week before Halloween, Nora handed Derek a bag of apples. He snatched it and quickly ran into the house. Nora kept track of the birthdays of each child who rode her bus, and when Darla celebrated her eighth in early November, Nora had given her a new eight pack of Crayolas and a drawing pad. Darla smiled shyly, but never said a word.

Nora was particularly fond of Thanksgiving. She loved the smells of autumn and the chill in the air that made coming indoors so comforting. It was more than that, though. She loved the very idea of thankfulness. She sang "Come Ye Thankful People Come" so often that all the children on the bus, even the very little ones, could sing along. Gazing at her passengers in the rear-view window, Nora thought she saw Darla singing, but she couldn't be sure. Perhaps it was simply wishful thinking.

The last day before the Thanksgiving holiday, Nora presented each child with a treat: a maple sugar Pilgrim wrapped in orange tissue paper. "Oh," said the children, delighted because most of them had never tasted maple sugar candy before. Nora had purchased the treats on a summer vacation because they reminded her of her own New England childhood. Every single child said, "thank you," except the Ludlows. They just took.

Still Nora tried. She "oohed and aahed" over Derek and Dudley's show and tells. To date: one snake, two frogs, a supposedly uninhabited hornet's nest, and a knife, which they claimed they had "got off a dead man." Nora had admired all from a safe distance and confiscated the

knife.

The bus pulled to a stop in front of the Ludlow house. Nora beeped the horn.

Derek stuck his head out the door. "Hold your horses! We're just finishing somethin'."

A minute or two later all four Ludlows tumbled from the house and ran toward the bus.

"Good morning," Nora said in her most friendly voice. As usual, there was no reply.

Nora closed the door, checked to see that the children were seated, and shifted the bus into "Drive." The bus got noisier, and Nora heard a shrill cry.

"Daisy's bleeding," Dudley yelled. "You better do somethin'."

"She'll be fine," Nora said. "We're almost to school."

"Lots of blood back here," Derek called. "How much blood does a person got?"

Nora pulled the bus to a stop because, with the Ludlows, she was never certain.

There was a tiny trickle of blood where a scab had been pried loose. "You'll be fine," she said to Daisy. "I'll kiss it just to be sure."

Nora kissed the grimy pinky and hustled back to the driver's seat. She put the bus into gear and pulled back onto the highway.

When they arrived at school, Nora parked the bus and the kids piled off.

The Ludlows were last. Derek, Darla, and Daisy walked past Nora without a word.

Dudley pulled up beside her. "There's somethin' on that seat in the back."

"Thanks for telling me," Nora said, guessing that whatever it was smelled.

"Wacha gonna do about it?" Dudley asked.

"I'll check it."

Dudley seemed satisfied. He jumped to the ground.

Nora walked down the aisle. On the seat was a package wrapped in newspaper and tied

together with bailing twine. Nora lifted it gingerly. Every time she received a gift, she tried to guess what was inside, but this time she simply shook her head. She couldn't even be sure that it was a gift. With the Ludlows anything was possible.

She carried the crude package to the front of the bus and used the small scissors in the first aid kit to cut the string. The paper fell open to reveal four pine cones tied together with striped hair ribbons, the very ones she had given Daisy in September. A piece of paper from Darla's drawing pad bore a crayoned greeting:

“We made this pine cone thing for your tree.

Thank you for being our friend.”

Below the message, all four children had signed their names -- four illegible “D” names. Nora draped the pinecone decoration on the rearview mirror so that the children would notice it when she picked them up after school.

As she pulled the bus out of the schoolyard, she glanced in the rearview mirror. Between the dangling pinecones she spotted the Ludlow children trudging up the big stone steps into the school. “Thank you, God, for giving me Ludlows,” Nora prayed, and she meant it.