

The Mills of God

Line's school year got off to a bad start. One morning she looked over and saw Clyde staring out the window instead of copying out the answers to the social studies questions. It was a brilliant day, the sun crusting the new snow with its warmth. Outside on the window ledge, a row of green glass coke bottles was stuck in the snow.

The same ten kids were in Line's class as the year before, but they were in a new room with the fourth grade class, and a new teacher. Line didn't like Mrs. Soderberg, who seemed to pick on the same kids all the time.

As Line watched, Mrs. Soderberg, rapped Clyde's knuckles with a ruler to get his attention. Clyde, who wore a Hopalong Cassidy shirt, his hair parted on the side and slicked down, hardly even flinched.

"You can do your social studies questions after school, Clyde," said Mrs. Soderberg, a tiny woman with tightly-permed, graying hair.

Line was outraged. Without even raising her hand, she said, "But, Mrs. Soderberg, Clyde gets up early to milk the cows and has to walk a mile to the bus."

"No back talk, Line," said Mrs. Soderberg.

"But how will he get home?" cried Line. She knew Clyde's dad would be mad if he had to come and get him.

Mrs. Soderberg turned around and stood next to Line's desk. "Not one more word, young lady," she said. Her pearls clicked against the buttons of her cardigan as she summoned up all her importance. "You can stay after school as well."

The whole room, including the fourth grade class, was quiet. Line looked down at her desk and felt her heart pounding and a blush spreading over her face. She knew that in school, Mrs. Soderberg ruled the class. If she didn't behave she would be sent to the principal's office, the principal would call Dad and she would get a bad mark in conduct. She was probably already getting a bad mark in conduct, but she did not want anyone to call Dad.

The school was an old, perfectly symmetrical building which sat in the center of a block at the edge of town. A line of cottonwood trees planted when the school was built marked the edge of the schoolyard. They were tall now, their leafless branches spreading wide under light snow. On the first floor of the school, four large classrooms held two classes each. Upstairs, in one large room which was also used for assemblies, was the high school. The lunch room was in the basement, next to the furnace room.

Line was in third grade, leaving Marty behind in second grade with the wonderful Miss Onstead, who never reprimanded Clyde. Miss Onstead had a different way of involving her students, helping them learn together. But Line would be in Mrs. Soderberg's class for the next two years. She would have to get used to her old-fashioned methods.

Clyde said the same thing after school. It turned out that Clyde's mother was at Ladies' Aid at church. So, after an hour of writing quietly under Mrs. Soderberg's watchful eye, Line and Clyde put on their galoshes, hats, mittens and coats, and left school, walking together toward the church. The sun was low in the sky and their shadows were long, angling in front of them.

"It's okay," said Clyde. "I don't care if she raps me." The sidewalks were mostly shoveled, as it was a few days since the first snowstorm. Clyde picked up a stick and dragged it through the sunlit drifts. The stick dug a line, making a blue shadow. In his other hand was a shiny tin lunch pail, very bright in the sun.

“But Miss Onstead never did that,” said Line, sliding in her boots on the icy sidewalk, as if she were skating.

“School was easy then. All that music and art. I don’t need that,” Clyde sniffed. “Pop says I need to learn arithmetic and reading. He don’t care about the rest of it.” Line knew that Clyde’s dad didn’t come to church, while his mother was one of its most important members. Clyde’s mother came to talk to Dad by herself, but Line didn’t know what they talked about.

“If you stick up for me,” said Clyde, smiling, “they’ll say you’re my sweetheart.” He began to draw his name in the snow with the stick, then added a plus sign and put “Line.”

Line laughed. “I don’t care.” She took the stick and wrote on the fresh snow on the other side. “Line + Clyde”. There it was, for all the world to see, just across the street from the church.

Line felt herself growing warm under her coat. She started running down the long new sidewalk which was shoveled all the way to her house.

“See you tomorrow,” she shouted back at Clyde.

Mother and Dad were still at church and no one seemed to notice that Line was late from school and excited. Ellie was in the kitchen making cinnamon toast, because it would be a while until supper. Marty and Paul sat together on the sofa, their heads bent over the Sears Roebuck Christmas catalog which was splayed between them on their knees.

It was wonderful to see Paul sitting on the couch as if nothing had happened. The months that Paul had been gone had felt very long to Line. Once the novelty of staying at the cousins for the summer wore off, Line felt she was marking time, like it wasn’t her own life. And when school started, Paul was still missing. Finally, things were beginning to feel okay again.

When Paul first got home, he was shy, quiet, very close to Dad. Three times a day he went into Dad’s study and Dad laid a mat on the floor and stretched Paul’s muscles. Paul didn’t want the girls to come in, because it hurt, and he didn’t want them to see. Sometimes they heard him squawking. After physical therapy, Dad got down on the mattress and wrestled with Paul. Line knew because she spied on them. That part looked like fun.

Line helped Paul buckle on his brace in the mornings. It fitted tightly to his leg and flexed at the leather knee caps, ending up in a pair of shoes. He didn’t wear it at night, but he couldn’t sneak around without it during the day. Most people didn’t even notice it under his pants, but Mother and Dad did.

In December, the mornings were bitter cold, but the house was warm. Lying in bed, Line heard Dad get up early and go down to the basement to shovel coal into the furnace. She hugged herself under the covers. Christmas was coming! Nothing could prevent it. All of the preparations for it were beginning.

Line waked up Marty and then got Paul, whose bed was in Ellie’s room. They went downstairs in their pajamas, Paul gimping along behind holding onto the banisters. They wanted to see what was behind that day’s door on the Advent calendar.

The calendar was a gingerbread castle, with snow on its roofs, mullioned windows, and a big gate with deer outside. It came all the way from Denmark. Each day they opened one door and when they had opened them all, it would be Christmas.

Line and Marty let Paul find the next door and open it, because he had been away from home so long. Behind the door marked “4” was a tiny fairy. Line turned on the light behind the calendar. In the darkness of the early morning, light shone through the thin paper where doors had been opened. It was like a castle in a fairy tale, with its windows full of bright elves, toys and fairies.

On Sunday night, Mother said they would have a candle-lit supper. Line put out the candles as Marty set six places in the dining room. In the middle of the table, Line put the painted wooden Advent tree, an evergreen made of two pieces of wood slotted together so it would stand up. At its four corners were red holders with candles in them.

Paul begged to light the table candles, but Line said he was too little. She scratched the match across the matchbox and the small hot flame appeared. She carefully touched it to the wicks of the candles. Once they were lit, Paul didn't move, watching the wax drip down the candles and pool at the base.

Mother made a big plate of toasted cheese sandwiches, and let Line put a marshmallow in each cup of cocoa. After the meal Dad began devotions in a soft, gravelly voice. He was tired, as he had preached and sung two services already that day. His face had an uplifted look, Line thought, as if he had been communing with the saints.

"Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ," he said, in the words of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians. Around the table, the faces glowed in the candlelight as Dad looked at them. "The season of Advent is our anticipation of God's great gift to us, the birth of Christ our Saviour." He moved the little Advent tree with its red candles close to the edge of the table. "Come Paul, stand next to me." He lit a match and handed it to Paul. "You have to hold the flame down," said Dad. Paul touched the match to one of the wicks, holding his breath.

"In him was life; and the life was the light of man. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. John 1:4," said Dad. "Let us all prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child. We'll go around the room and each say a prayer."

Mother began by thanking the Lord that they were all together, and for Paul's recovery and the good health of all of them. Ellie prayed that they all stayed safe, that there wouldn't be any blizzards, the car wouldn't get stuck and they would stay warm that winter. Marty was thankful for the birds, the beautiful world and the food they had to eat, and Paul said his little piece: "God bless us every one."

When it came to Line, she couldn't think of anything more to say. Pictures passed through her mind, of the church, the school, their house in the snow. Horses, the sled they got for Christmas last year. She was thinking of asking Dad if he would take them out on it. There were no hills to use the sled on, but sometimes Dad tied it to the back of the car and dragged them through the snowy streets. It was dangerous, but fun!

The minutes dragged by in silence. Everyone's heads were bent over their folded hands. Line opened her eyes and peeked. She knew they were waiting, but she couldn't think of anything to say.

"Line," said Dad, a little sternly.

Line rubbed her nose with her folded hands, but nothing she thought of seemed to be right in a prayer.

At last, Mother's contralto broke the silence, "Oh, come. Oh, come, Emmanuel," she sang softly. "And ransom captive Is-ra-el, that mourns in lonely exile here." The unfamiliar words rolled around in Line's head to the haunting melody.

Dad's beautiful tenor joined in, and so did Ellie. "Until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, oh Is-ra-el."

Mother stood up and pushed her chair away from the table, clearing cocoa mugs and plates into the kitchen. Everyone left the table, but Line just sat there feeling bad. Dad looked at her, tired and a little hurt. He took Paul into the study to work on his leg. Ellie and Marty evaporated up the stairs, leaving Line to help Mother. She stood rinsing the dishes and putting them into the rack, wiping the glasses and the silverware.

“I just can’t wait!” Line said. “I keep thinking of all the toys and fun we are going to have.”

“You could thank the Lord for that,” said Mother.

“Nooooo,” said Line. “That’s not the Christmas spirit, is it?” She was thinking of all the times Dad told them that there might have been a St. Nicholas, but Santa Claus wasn’t real, didn’t come down the chimney, and that the songs about reindeer were just made up for fun. The presents they gave each other were in honor of the gift God gave to the world, his Son, the Christ child.

“It’s part of Christmas. Gift giving is about love,” said Mother. “Rejoice. Rejoice!” she sang. She smiled at Line.

Line climbed up on the stool to put glasses away, wondering why it was so easy to talk to Mother, but not to listen to Dad’s voice reprimanding her.

“Now, what do you think,” said Mother, conspiratorially. “I’d like to take all the miniature dolls and dress them up as shepherds and wise men, and Mary and Joseph, and the angels of course, and make a manger scene.”

Line looked down at her. They already had one manger scene, made of beautiful colored figures on stiff cardboard. But it would be fun to put rags on some of the dolls for shepherds. “Dad has those stamp boxes, they could be the gold, frankincense and myrrh,” Line said. It was like playing at ranches. “We have those plaster sheep. And there could be horses, couldn’t there?”

“Of course,” said Mother. “Everyone wanted to worship the Christ child.”

“My Indian doll would have to be Mary,” said Line. “Because she’s the only one that can sit.”

It turned out to be a project that occupied them for many days. Robes were easy to cut out of rag pieces, tied with gold ribbon for the wise men and rope for the shepherds. The Indian doll, which was getting slightly bald on one side, was dressed with a blue headdress as Mary. Dad nailed together a wooden stable, and Paul glued on tiny willow sticks for thatch. The crib for the baby Jesus was made of willow sticks tied together with twine. One of Ellie’s blonde dolls, which came wearing a Dutch dress and hat, was dressed in blue and hung in the sky for the angel who sang to the shepherds.

The finished manger scene was displayed on a tall bookcase, with folds of cloth for the hills and blue paper stuck with gummed gold stars for the sky. Dad rigged a tiny light behind the biggest star in the sky that led the wise men to Bethlehem and pricked the paper so light shone through. In a darkened room, it looked like a starry night. The kids were terribly proud of it.

Only two turtles were left by this time. One died and one wandered off, probably under the refrigerator. Line found it very funny to see Paul standing on a chair in front of the manger scene with a green turtle bigger than the Christ child crawling across the hills. “Turtles don’t like deserts,” she said. “I don’t think there was any water for miles.”

“My turtles do,” said Paul. “Maybe they saw the star, just like the wise men did, and came to worship.”

Ellie got to be the star of the best Christmas celebration, though. On St. Lucia’s day, December 13, according to Scandinavian tradition, the oldest daughter put a crown of candles in her hair and carried breakfast up to members of her family, singing carols.

Line was despondent. “I’ll never get to be the oldest,” she told Marty as they climbed into bed the night before.

“Me neither,” said Marty.

“Dad calls me Sparky,” said Line. “I should get to bring light into the darkness.”

“Do you think she’s going to put candles in her hair?” asked Marty. “Her hair might get singed right off!”

“I would,” said Line. “I’d put candles in my hair.” She remembered St. Lucia’s day last year, but didn’t know whether Ellie used real candles or not.

“Never mind,” said Marty. “Let’s play Snow White and Rose Red.” They took tiny dolls to bed to be the characters and pushed the covers down to the bottom of the bed. They humped the covers into folds, making caves for Snow White and Rose Red to live in. The bear, who would become a handsome prince when they were kind to him, lived in another cave. But somehow, planning how they would play always took much more time than actually playing, and it wasn’t long before they pulled the covers up and fell asleep.

In the morning, they heard carols. Ellie was playing them on the record player, turned up loud enough so the songs came drifting upstairs. Eventually they heard her coming up the stairs with a tray full of coffee cups and orange juice glasses. She put it on a dresser in the hall and ran downstairs again.

Line and Marty stood in their bedroom door as Ellie came up the stairs very slowly. She had put a white kerchief over her blonde hair, and pressed it down with a wooden ring with holders for four tall candles. Three of them were lit, but one had gone out. She wore a white robe made from a sheet with a red shawl for a sash. This time she was carrying a tray of frosted buns and another plate with silver things on it, trying not to trip. She was singing along with the record in her thin, reedy voice, “O Holy Night, the stars were brightly shining . . .” She did look like a queen.

Line ached with envy. “One of your candles is out,” she hissed.

Ellie frowned. There was nothing to do about it now. “Go get Paul,” she said to Line.

Line went to wake him. They all trooped in to Mother and Dad’s bedroom and sat on the floor. Dad and Mother poked their heads out of their cocoons in bed and Ellie passed them coffee cups, moving carefully so as not to tip the candles, which were the only light in the room. She had made the coffee herself.

“Pretty good,” said Dad, tasting it.

Ellie took off the wooden crown of candles and put it carefully on the dresser. The kids drank orange juice and ate the rolls Mother made with raisins and cinnamon and brown sugar. The silver things turned out to be wrapped Hershey’s kisses! They could never remember having chocolates at breakfast.

“I think I died and went to heaven,” said Marty, softly.

“Not yet!” said Mother, encouragingly. “Things might get better. You never know.”

They all laughed except Line, who was trying to keep her mouth shut to avoid saying something envious and mean. She did manage to do it, but she could feel a hard little lump of anger in herself. Nothing was fair. Why did Paul get polio, and no one else? She was mad at Ellie because she went on with her own life when Paul was so sick, and because Ellie would always be older. She was mad that she had Mrs. Soderberg for a teacher, who picked on some kids and not others. And she felt, that though Dad was Christ’s representative to people on earth, it was up to her to remind him that he wasn’t perfect. Nobody was perfect.

Line’s bad temper dissipated as she laid her school clothes on the radiator to warm up, corduroy pants under a green printed cotton dress with a white collar. The clothes Mother sewed for her were usually fall colors, golds and greens and browns because of her red-gold hair. Marty minded that they wore homemade clothes, dresses handed down from Ellie and dresses out of mission barrels, but Line didn’t care.

No one in school seemed to know about St. Lucia's day, even though many of them were Scandinavian. It was just an ordinary day, and Clyde wasn't even there. He was probably at home helping his dad. Line realized that it was Mother who knew about these delightful Christmas customs and taught them all to celebrate. It was Mother's ideas that made the house festive with music and light.

After school, Mother said that if Line went to the grocery store and got eggs and some bread, she would make scrambled eggs with bacon for supper.

"Can I come?" piped up Paul. "Can I come?" He had been in the house all day. A light snow was falling in the grey light that was rapidly becoming darkness.

"Of course!" said Line, ready for adventure. "Let's go!" They went out in their coats to the cold entry. Fishing through the sea of black galoshes on the floor, they found their own, buckling them over their shoes. Only Ellie got new ones. Her old ones kept being passed down as their feet grew.

The snow made the sky and earth hardly distinct from each other. Paul and Line were two short figures going down the walk, using the street lamps to see.

Line caught snowflakes on her mittens, but it wasn't very cold out and they melted as soon as she caught them. Her mittens just got wet.

Paul put his tongue out. "The snow tastes dirty," said Paul. "I like it."

"Me too," said Line. She tasted the snow she was mounding up in her mittens.

"Where do hobos go when it's winter?" asked Paul. They walked down the main road, past houses, with the railroad tracks on the far side of the street.

Line knew where hobos had a campfire near the tracks and had seen men walking from the railroad tracks after a train had passed through. Hobos came to the back door to ask Mother for food. They were always respectful, in their caps and extra layers of dirty clothes. They seemed happy when Mother gave them cans of beans and meat. Some of them were quite young, Line thought. But Mother was saddened by them and acted as if she didn't want them to come in the house.

"California or Florida," said Line. "Somewhere warm." She pulled a leafless stick out of a shrub and put it over her shoulder. Though she was willing to play with dolls and fairy tale characters, she much preferred being a hobo. It was one of the many reasons she had Paul so much that summer.

"I saw a movie about a tramp," said Paul. "At the clinic one Saturday."

"Oh?" said Line. They hardly ever saw movies, except sometimes in assembly. "What was he like?"

"His clothes were too big. His trousers dragged around his feet. He wore suspenders to pull them up, and a little round hat, and a mustache."

"I wonder if a tramp is the same as a hobo," said Line.

"He didn't ride the railroad. I just know that the boys around me called him a tramp. And he carried his things in a handkerchief at the end of a stick."

"Maybe for tramping," said Line. "Maybe a hobo rides the train and a tramp walks."

"Yeah!" said Paul. "That makes sense."

"I think I would rather be a hobo," said Line. "It would be fun to go to California on a train."

They passed the gas station, a wide space where cars came at you from almost any direction. Line grabbed Paul's mittened hand and craned her neck to look up at the red and white flying horse fixed to a pole high above their heads. A yellow light shone inside the horse to light it up. She also liked the men who worked at the station. When she walked by with Paul, or even with Marty, the men often teased them, calling out, "Hello, boys!"

Beside her, Paul dragged along, looking into the gathering darkness. Line could see he was struggling. "Is your brace bothering you?" she asked. The metal was wrapped in cotton wadding, and the kneecap was leather, but the metal did run up his leg and it never warmed up. Line knew it just got icy cold, and took a long time to warm up when they went inside.

"Yeah, a little," said Paul.

They passed the bank, the post office and the dark tavern that smelt sour and old, even in the winter. It was four o'clock and the bank was shut, but a colored glowing neon sign saying "Miller" shown in the window of the tavern.

"I think I'd rather be a tramp," Paul said finally. "I'd rather see things. You can see more things when you walk."

At the grocery store, Mr. Ellingson welcomed them, standing at his long counter in a red woolen sweater. He was a church councilman, a good friend to Dad. He was talking to a farmer Line didn't know. The farmer wore overalls with his flannel underwear sticking out and a big parka and chewed tobacco. His stubbly grey beard and the smell of tobacco and tractor grease were so strong, he felt pleasantly foreign to Line. Maybe he was Clyde's dad.

Line and Paul went to the back of the store to get the eggs. They were too warm in their bundled coats and hats, but they were going right back outdoors.

"Well, you know, I'll bet he'll be back by springtime," the farmer was saying slowly to Mr. Ellingson. "The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small." Line froze, listening.

"You're probably right," replied Mr. Ellingson.

Bringing the eggs and a loaf of white bread in a plastic wrapper up to the counter, Line waited while Mr. Ellingson wrote them down, with their prices, on a little yellow tablet with a carbon paper underneath. He put one copy in the cash drawer to put on their bill, and one into a paper sack with the eggs and bread which he gave to Line.

"You kids ready for Christmas?" Mr. Ellingson asked.

"Yes," said Line and Paul together. They were told so often that children should be seen and not heard that they didn't try to talk to grownups.

"How about a piece of candy to keep you warm on your way home," he said. "It won't spoil your supper, will it?" To the farmer he said, "They're the pastor's kids."

"No," said Line. "And thank you." She and Paul each picked a wrapped candy from the bins near the counter. They pulled off the paper and put the candy in their mouths.

"Thank you," mumbled Paul sidling out the door behind Line, released from the alien world of grownups.

Her mouth full of Tootsie Roll, Line savored the phrase she heard the farmer say as they walked home. "The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small." What did it mean? She carried the sack of groceries carefully because it had eggs in it. Paul seemed absorbed too. Line held his hand, feeling his uneven steps as they walked.

In the windows of the houses they could see colored Christmas tree lights. When they got to the corner where they could see their own house and the church, they stood for a minute, looking at the windows. The back porch light was on, and there were lights in the kitchen and dining room, and upstairs in Marty and Line's bedroom. The living room was dark, except that Line could just barely see the tiny lamp above the manger scene on the bookcase that made the Christmas star.

They crossed the road and hurried toward the back porch. In the entry they stripped off their coats and snowy galoshes, their faces glowing from the cold. Line went into the living room and looked at the beautiful manger scene, at the angel, the shepherds in their

rag and the wise men in velveteen robes. One of them was dressed in the same green calico of the dress Line wore to school that day. The gold was in a small bronze stamp box. The myrrh was a tiny glass perfume bottle produced by Mother. Mary looked demure and tender, her arms stretched out toward the tiny pink plastic baby in the manger, the Christ child, with Joseph standing protectively nearby.

It's not up to me, thought Line. The mills of God grind slowly, but we are all in His hands. She stretched out her finger toward the baby, the Christ child, and stroked his little white swaddling clothes. The angry, hard place in her softened and the mantle of responsibility for the world slipped off. "Oh come, oh come, Ema-nu-el," she sang softly to herself. "And ransom captive Is-ra-el."