

Christmas Poem

JOHN O'HARA

BILLY WARDEN had dinner with his father and mother and sister. "I suppose this is the last we'll see of you this vacation," said his father.

"Oh, I'll be in and out to change my shirt," said Billy.

"My, we're quick on the repartee," said Barbara Warden. "The gay young sophomore."

"What are *you*, Bobby dear? A drunken junior?" said Billy.

"Now, I don't think that was called for," said their mother.

"Decidedly *un*-called for," said their father. "What *are* your plans?"

"Well, I was hoping I could borrow the chariot," said Billy.

"Yes, we anticipated that," said his father. "What I meant was, are you planning to go away anywhere? Out of town?"

"Well, that depends. There's a dance in Reading on the twenty-seventh I'd like to go to, and I've been invited to go skiing in Montrose."

"Skiing? Can you ski?" said his mother.

"All Dartmouth boys ski, or pretend they can," said his sister.

"Isn't that dangerous? I suppose if you were a Canadian, but I've never known anyone to go skiing around here. I thought they had to have those big—I don't know—scaffolds, I guess you'd call them."

"You do, for jumping, Mother. But skiing isn't all jumping," said Billy.

"Oh, it isn't? I've only seen it done in the newsreels. I never really saw the point of it, although I suppose if you did it well it would be the same sensation as flying. I often dream about flying."

"I haven't done much jumping," said Billy.

"Then I take it you'll want to borrow the car on the twenty-seventh, and what about this trip to Montrose?" said his father.

"I don't exactly know where Montrose is," said Mrs. Warden.

"It's up beyond Scranton," said her husband. "That would mean taking the car overnight. I'm just trying to arrange some

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kind of a schedule. Your mother and I've been invited to one or two things, but I imagine we can ask our friends to take us there and bring us back. However, we only have the one car, and Bobby's entitled to her share."

"Of course she is. Of course I more or less counted on her to, uh, to spend most of her time in Mr. Roger Taylor's Dort."

"It isn't a Dort. It's a brand new Marmon, something I doubt you'll ever be able to afford."

"Something I doubt Roger'd ever be able to afford if it took any brains to afford one. So he got rid of the old Dort, did he?"

"He never had a Dort, and you know it," said Bobby.

"Must we be so disagreeable, the first night home?" said Mrs. Warden. "I know there's no meanness in it, but it doesn't *sound* nice."

"When would you be going to Montrose?" said Mr. Warden. "What date?"

"Well, if I go it would be a sort of a house party," said Billy.

"In other words, not just overnight?" said his father. "Very well, suppose you tell us how many nights?"

"I'm invited for the twenty-eighth, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth," said Billy. "That would get me back in time to go to the Assembly on New Year's Eve."

"What that amounts to, you realize, is having possession of the car from the twenty-seventh to the thirtieth or thirty-first," said his father.

"Yes, I realize that," said Billy.

"Do you still want it, to keep the car that long, all for yourself?" said his father.

"Well, I didn't have it much last summer, when I was working. And I save you a lot of money on repairs. I ground the valves, cleaned the spark plugs. A lot of things I did. I oiled and greased it myself."

"Yes, I have to admit you do your share of that," said his father. "But if you keep the car that long, out of town, it just means we are without a car for four days, at the least."

There was a silence.

"I really won't need the car very much after Christmas," said Bobby. "After I've done my shopping and delivered my presents."

"Thank you," said Billy.

“Well, of course not driving myself, I never use it,” said Mrs. Warden.

“That puts it up to me,” said Mr. Warden. “If I were Roger Taylor’s father I’d give you two nice big Marmons for Christmas, but I’m not Mr. Taylor. Not by about seven hundred thousand dollars, from what I hear. Is there anyone else from around here that’s going to Montrose?”

“No.”

“Then it isn’t one of your Dartmouth friends?” said Mr. Warden. “Who will you be visiting?”

“It’s a girl named Henrietta Cooper. She goes to Russell Sage. I met her at Dartmouth, but that’s all. I mean, she has no other connection with it.”

“Russell Sage,” said his mother. “We know somebody that has a daughter there. I know who it was. That couple we met at the Blakes’. Remember, the Blakes entertained for them last winter? The husband was with one of the big electrical companies.”

“General Electric, in Schenectady,” said Mr. Warden. “Montrose ought to be on the Lehigh Valley, or the Lackawanna, if I’m not mistaken.”

“The train connections are very poor,” said Billy. “If I don’t go by car, Henrietta’s going to meet me in Scranton, but heck, I don’t want to ask her to do that. I’d rather not go if I have to take the train.”

“Well, I guess we can get along without the car for that long. But your mother and I are positively going to have to have it New Year’s Eve. We’re going to the Assembly, too.”

“Thank you very much,” said Billy.

“It does seem strange. Reading one night, and then the next day you’re off in the opposite direction. You’d better make sure the chains are in good condition. Going over those mountains this time of year.”

“A house party. Now what will you do on a house party in Montrose? Besides ski, that is?” said Mrs. Warden. “It sounds like a big house, to accommodate a lot of young people.”

“I guess it probably is,” said Billy. “I know they have quite a few horses. Henny rides in the Horse Show at Madison Square Garden.”

“Oh, my. Then they must be very well-to-do,” said his mother. “I always wanted to ride when I was a girl. To me

there's nothing prettier than a young woman in a black riding habit, riding side-saddle. Something so elegant about it."

"I wouldn't think she rode side-saddle, but maybe she does," said Billy.

"Did you say you wanted to use the car tonight, too?" said his father.

"If nobody else is going to," said Billy.

"Barbara?" said Mr. Warden.

"No. Roger is calling for me at nine o'clock," said Barbara. "But I would like it tomorrow, all day if possible. I have a ton of shopping to do."

"I *still* haven't finished wrapping all *my* presents," said Mrs. Warden.

"I haven't even *bought* half of mine," said Barbara.

"You shouldn't leave everything to the last minute," said her mother. "I bought most of mine at sales, as far back as last January. Things are much cheaper after Christmas."

"Well, I guess I'm off to the races," said Billy. "Dad, could you spare a little cash?"

"How much?" said Mr. Warden.

"Well—ten bucks?"

"I'll take it off your Christmas present," said Mr. Warden.

"Oh, no, don't do that? I have ten dollars if you'll reach me my purse. It's on the sideboard," said Mrs. Warden.

"You must be flush," said Mr. Warden.

"Well, no, but I don't like to see you take it off Billy's Christmas present. That's as bad as opening presents ahead of time," said Mrs. Warden.

"Which certain people in this house do every year," said Barbara.

"Who could she possibly mean?" said Billy. "I opened one present, because it came from Brooks Brothers and I thought it might be something I could wear right away."

"And was it?" said his mother.

"Yes. Some socks. These I have on, as a matter of fact," said Billy. "They're a little big, but they'll shrink."

"Very snappy," said Barbara.

"Yes, and I don't know who they came from. There was no card."

"I'll tell you who they were from. They were from me," said Barbara.

"They were? Well, thanks. Just what I wanted," said Billy.

"Just what you asked me for, last summer," said Barbara.

"Did I? I guess I did. Thank you for remembering. Well, goodnight, all. Don't wait up. I'll be home before breakfast."

They muttered their goodnights and he left. He wanted to—almost wanted to—stay; to tell his father that he did not want a Marmon for Christmas, which would have been a falsehood; to tell his mother he loved her in spite of her being a nitwit; to talk to Bobby about Roger Taylor, who was not good enough for her. But this was his first night home and he had his friends to see. Bobby had Roger, his father and mother had each other; thus far he had no one. But it did not detract from his feeling for his family that he now preferred the livelier company of his friends. *They* all had families, too, and *they* would be at the drug store tonight. You didn't come home just to see the members of your family. As far as that goes, you got a Christmas vacation to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, but except for a few Catholics, who would go anywhere near a church? And besides, he could not talk to his family en masse. He would like to have a talk with his father, a talk with his sister, and he would enjoy a half hour of his mother's prattling. Those conversations would be personal if there were only two present, but with more than two present everyone had to get his say in and nobody said anything much. Oh, what was the use of making a lot of excuses? What was wrong with wanting to see your friends?

The starter in the Dodge seemed to be whining, "No . . . no . . . no . . ." before the engine caught. It reminded him of a girl, a girl who protested every bit of the way, and she was not just an imaginary girl. She was the girl he would telephone as soon as he got to the drug store, and he probably would be too late, thanks to the conversation with his family. Irma Hipple, her name was, and she was known as Miss Nipple. She lived up the hill in back of the Court House. The boys from the best families in town made a beeline for Irma as soon as they got home from school. Hopefully the boys who got a date with her would make a small but important purchase at the drug store, because you never knew when Irma might change her mind. A

great many lies had been told about Irma, and the worst liars were the boys who claimed nothing but looked wise. Someone must have gotten all the way with Irma sometime, but Billy did not know who. It simply stood to reason that a girl who allowed so many boys to neck the hell out of her had delivered the goods sometime. She was twenty-one or -two and already she was beginning to lose her prettiness, probably because she could hold her liquor as well as any boy, and better than some. In her way she was a terrible snob. "That Roger Taylor got soaked to the gills," she would say. "That Teddy Choate thinks he's a cave man," or "I'm never going out with that Doctor Boyd again. Imagine a doctor snapping his cookies in the Stagecoach bar." Irma probably delivered the goods to the older men. Someone who went to Penn had seen her at the L'Aiglou supper club in Philadelphia with George W. Josling, who was manager of one of the new stock brokerage branches in town. There was a story around town that she had bitten Jerome Kuhn, the optometrist, who was old enough to be her father. It was hard to say what was true about Irma and what wasn't. She was a saleswoman in one of the department stores; she lived with her older sister and their father, who had one leg and was a crossing watchman for the Pennsy; she was always well dressed; she was pretty and full of pep. That much was true about her, and it was certainly true that she attracted men of all ages.

The telephone booth in the drug store was occupied, and two or three boys were queued up beside it. Billy Warden shook hands with his friends and with Russell Covington, the head soda jerk. He ordered a lemon phosphate and lit a cigarette and kept an eye on the telephone booth. The door of the booth buckled open and out came Teddy Choate, nodding. "All set," he said to someone. "Everything is copacetic. I'm fixed up with the Nipple. She thinks she can get Patsy Lurio for you."

Billy Warden wanted to hit him.

"Hello, there, Billy. When'd you get in?" said Teddy.

"Hello, Teddy. I got in on the two-eighteen," said Billy.

"I hear you're going to be at Henny Cooper's house party," said Teddy.

"Jesus, you're a busybody. How did you hear that?"

“From Henny, naturally. Christ, I’ve known her since we were five years old. She invited me, but I have to go to these parties in New York.”

“Funny, she told me she didn’t know anybody in Gibbsville,” said Billy.

“She’s a congenital liar. Everybody knows that. I saw her Friday in New York. She was at a tea dance I went to. You ever been to that place in Montrose?”

“No.”

“They’ve got everything there. A six-car garage. Swimming pool. Four-hole golf course, but they have the tees arranged so you can play nine holes. God knows how many horses. The old boy made his money in railroad stocks, and he sure did spend it up there. Very hard to get to know, Mr. Cooper. But he was in Dad’s class at New Haven and we’ve known the Coopers since the Year One. I guess it was really Henny’s grandfather that made the first big pile. Yes, Darius L. Cooper. You come across his name in American History courses. I suppose he was an old crook. But Henny’s father is altogether different. Very conservative. You won’t see much of him at the house party, if he’s there at all. They have an apartment at the Plaza, just the right size, their own furniture. I’ve been there many times, too.”

“Then you do know them?” said Billy.

“Goodness, haven’t I been telling you? We’ve known the Cooper family since the Year *One*,” said Teddy. “Well, you have to excuse me. I have to whisper something to Russ Covington. Delicate matter. Got a date with the Nipple.”

“You’re excused,” said Billy. He finished his phosphate and joined a group at the curbstone.

“What say, boy? I’ll give you fifty to forty,” said Andy Phillips.

“For how much?” said Billy.

“A dollar?”

“You’re on,” said Billy. They went down the block and upstairs to the poolroom. All the tables were busy save one, which was covered with black oilcloth. “What about the end table?” said Billy.

“Saving it,” said Phil, the house man. “Getting up a crap game.”

“How soon?”

"Right away. You want to get in?"

"I don't know. I guess so. What do you think, Andy?"

"I'd rather shoot pool," said Andy.

"You're gonna have a hell of a wait for a table," said Phil. "There's one, two, three, four—four Harrigan games going. And the first table just started shooting a hundred points for a fifty-dollar bet. You're not gonna hurry *them*."

"Let's go someplace else," said Andy.

"They'll all be crowded tonight. I think I'll get in the crap game," said Billy.

Phil removed the cover from the idle pool table and turned on the overhead lights, and immediately half a dozen young men gathered around it. "Who has the dice?" someone asked.

"I have," said Phil, shaking them in his half-open hand.

"Oh, great," said someone.

"You want to have a look at them?" said Phil. "You wouldn't know the difference anyway, but you can have a look. No? All right, I'm shooting a dollar. A dollar open."

"You're faded," said someone.

"Anybody else want a dollar?" said Phil.

"I'll take a dollar," said Billy Warden.

"A dollar to you, and a dollar to you. Anyone else? No? Okay. Here we go, and it's a nine. A niner, a niner, what could be finer. No drinks to a minor. And it's a five. Come on, dice, let's see that six-three for Phil. And it's a four? Come on, dice. Be nice. And it's a—a nine it is. Four dollars open. Billy, you want to bet the deuce?"

"You're covered," said Billy.

"You're covered," said the other bettor.

"Anybody else wish to participate? No? All right, eight dollars on the table, and—oh, what do I see there? A natural. The big six and the little one. Bet the four, Billy?"

"I'm with you," said Billy.

"I'm out," said the other bettor.

"I'm in," said a newcomer.

"Four dollars to you, four dollars to Mr. Warden. And here we go, and for little old Phil a—oh, my. The eyes of a snake. Back where you started from, Billy. House bets five dollars. Nobody wants the five? All right, any part of it."

“Two dollars,” said Billy.

When it came his turn to take the dice he passed it up and chose instead to make bets on the side. Thus he nursed his stake until at one time he had thirty-eight or -nine dollars in his hands. The number of players was increasing, and all pretty much for the same reason: most of the boys had not yet got their Christmas money, and a crap game offered the best chance to add to the pre-Christmas bankroll.

“Why don’t you drag?” said Andy Phillips. “Get out while you’re ahead?”

“As soon as I have fifty dollars,” said Billy.

The next time the shooter with the dice announced five dollars open, Billy covered it himself, won, and got the dice. In less than ten minutes he was cleaned, no paper money, nothing but the small change in his pants pocket. He looked around among the players, but there was no one whom he cared to borrow from. “Don’t look at me,” said Andy. “I have six bucks to last me till Christmas.”

“Well, I have eighty-seven cents,” said Billy. “Do you still want to spot me fifty to forty?”

“Sure. But not for a buck. You haven’t got a buck,” said Andy. “And I’m going to beat you.”

They waited until a table was free, and played their fifty points, which Andy won, fifty to thirty-two. “I’ll be big-hearted,” said Andy. “I’ll pay for the table.”

“No, no. Thirty cents won’t break me,” said Billy. “Or do you want to play another? Give me fifty to thirty-five.”

“No, I don’t like this table. It’s too high,” said Andy.

“Well, what shall we do?” said Billy.

“The movies ought to be letting out pretty soon. Shall we go down and see if we can pick anything up?”

“Me with fifty-seven cents? And you with six bucks?”

“Well, you have the Dodge, and we could get a couple of pints on credit,” said Andy.

“All right, we can try,” said Billy. They left the poolroom and went down to the street and re-parked the Warden Dodge where they could observe the movie crowd on its way out. Attendance that night was slim, and passable girls in pairs

nowhere to be seen. The movie theater lights went out. "Well, so much for that," said Billy. "Five after eleven."

"Let's get a pint," said Andy.

"I honestly don't feel like it, Andy," said Billy.

"I didn't mean you were to buy it. I'll split it with you."

"I understood that part," said Billy. "Just don't feel like drinking."

"Do you have to *feel* like drinking at Dartmouth? Up at State we just drink."

"Oh, sure. Big hell-raisers," said Billy. "Kappa Betes and T.N.E.'s. 'Let's go over to Lock Haven and get slopped.' I heard all about State while I was at Mercersburg. That's why I didn't go there—one of the reasons."

"Is that so?" said Andy. "Well, if all you're gonna do is sit here and razz State, I think I'll go down to Mulhearn's and have a couple beers. You should have had sense enough to quit when you were thirty-some bucks ahead."

"Darius L. Cooper didn't quit when he was thirty bucks ahead."

"Who? You mean the fellow with the cake-eater suit? His name wasn't Cooper. His name is Minzer or something like that. Well, the beers are a quarter at Mulhearn's. We could have six fours are twenty-four. We could have twelve beers apiece. I'll lend you three bucks."

"No thanks," said Billy. "I'll take you down to Mulhearn's and then I think I'll go home and get some shut-eye. I didn't get any sleep on the train last night."

"That's what's the matter with you? All right, disagreeable. Safe at last in your trundle bed."

"How do you know that? That's a Dartmouth song," said Billy.

"I don't know, I guess I heard *you* sing it," said Andy. "Not tonight, though. I'll walk to Mulhearn's. I'll see you tomorrow."

"All right, Andy. See you tomorrow," said Billy. He watched his friend, with his felt hat turned up too much in front and back, his thick-soled Whitehouse & Hardy's clicking on the sidewalk, his joe-college swagger, his older brother's leather coat. Life was simple for Andy and always would be. In two more years he would finish at State, a college graduate, and he would come home and take a job in Phillips Brothers Lumber

Yard, marry a local girl, join the Lions or Rotary, and play volleyball at the Y.M.C.A. His older brother had already done all those things, and Andy was Fred Phillips all over again.

The Dodge, still warm, did not repeat the whining protest of a few hours earlier in the evening. He put it in gear and headed for home. He hoped his father and mother would have gone to bed. "What the hell's the matter with me?" he said. "Nothing's right tonight."

He put the car in the garage and entered the house by the kitchen door. He opened the refrigerator door, and heard his father's voice. "Is that you, son?"

"Yes, it's me. I'm getting a glass of milk."

His father was in the sitting-room and made no answer. Billy drank a glass of milk and turned out the kitchen lights. He went to the sitting-room. His father, in shirtsleeves and smoking a pipe, was at the desk. "You doing your bookkeeping?" said Billy.

"No."

"What *are* you doing?"

"Well, if you must know, I was writing a poem. I was trying to express my appreciation to your mother."

"Can I see it?"

"Not in a hundred years," said Mr. Warden. "Nobody will ever see this but her—if she ever does."

"I never knew you wrote poetry."

"Once a year, for the past twenty-six years, starting with the first Christmas we were engaged. So far I haven't missed a year, but it doesn't get any easier. But by God, the first thing Christmas morning she'll say to me, 'Where's my poem?' Never speaks about it the rest of the year, but it's always the first thing she asks me the twenty-fifth of December."

"Has she kept them all?" said Billy.

"That I never asked her, but I suppose she has."

"Does she write you one?" said Billy.

"Nope. Well, what did you do tonight? You're home early, for you."

"Kind of tired. I didn't get much sleep last night. We got on the train at White River Junction and nobody could sleep."

"Well, get to bed and sleep till noon. That ought to restore your energy."

"Okay. Goodnight, Dad."

“Goodnight, son,” said his father. “Oh, say. You had a long distance call. You’re to call the Scranton operator, no matter what time you get in.”

“Thanks,” said Billy. “Goodnight.”

“Well, aren’t you going to put the call in? I’ll wait in the kitchen.”

“No, I know who it is. I’ll phone them tomorrow.”

“That’s up to you,” said Mr. Warden. “Well, goodnight again.”

“Goodnight,” said Billy. He went to his room and took off his clothes, to the bathroom and brushed his teeth. He put out the light beside his bed and lay there. He wondered if Henrietta Cooper’s father had ever written a poem to her mother. But he knew the answer to that.