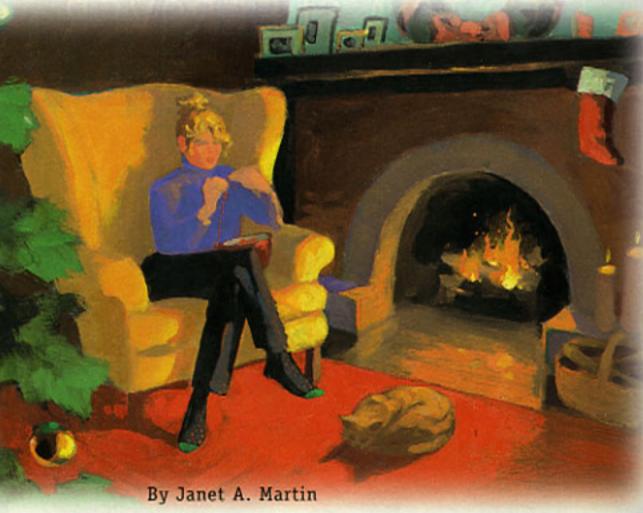
On her first Christmas alone, a single mother learns that reaching out to

Roses for Renée

others can be the greatest gift of all.





alico Cat leaps silently to the piano, charting a path gingerly over the keys. C, B, A, G, she strikes before squirming around the music books to inspect the strings and hammers that once made melodies in our lives. Her notes sound like the beginning of a carol.

I sit in a gray, December dawn sipping coffee before the children awake, wondering if the sun will rise, wondering how I'll get through the next week. It is my first singleparent Christmas, and the children will be away, visiting their father—the fellow I used to know well.

I am in a new town with a new job. In public relations, it's my business to spin joy about the company I work for. Mechanically, I do it from 9 to 5. Other hours, joy is a word I spell backward into nonsense.

There is no joy in my heart. Rather, an anvil sits there a great glob of depression—worst in the mornings.

A thump down the hall signals the beginning of the day as three bodies-my children-squirm into the shower one by one. Moments later, voices of protest rise as the last bit of raisin bran cascades into the middle child's bowl. Youngest child—6—sets up a howl. I mediate with Rice

Krispies, and we haul on our coats and push off down the road.

Where is the sun? I wonder as I let the youngest child off at school. His first-grade teacher, a darkhaired beauty named Renée, opens the car door.

"I've been thinking about you. Do you have your tree?"

> I'm puzzled by the question but say, "No. The children will be away."

"I know," she says. "Your son drew a picture in class."

"A picture?"

"A woman on one side, a man on the other. A big, black railroad track running between them down the middle of the page."

"It's sad," I say.

"Yes," she nods. "But not completely."

"Really?"

"He drew Christmas trees, and both adults are smiling."

Tears push into my eyes.

"If you haven't got a tree, let's go together after school. My girls and I-we know a place where trees are cheap."

Cheap is the operative word. Single parenthood is synonymous with scarce resources. "See you at 5:30," she waves.

At 5:30 the day is dark

once again. My working hours-the hours of the lightare behind a brown metal desk. I lean over a phrase and ponder punctuation. Is the press release accurate? Yes. Good enough? Only my boss knows for sure. She flicks it with her red pen-a word here, a comma there. I revise and send it through machines that print a letterhead over good news.

Only good news. Sigh. I watch the clock, grateful that it's Friday, dreading Saturday when I put the children on the train to head south for the holidays.

At the tree lot, Renée stalks the owner like a smooth panther.

"I've brought you a customer." She smiles. "Someone a lot like me."

The owner is a burly, slow-footed man in a dark-blue jacket. His beard blankets a rather odoriferous cigar, which he shifts as he stares at the children and me. He merely grunts.

"We've got all these children to raise, and >>>>



Janet A. Martin is the wife of F. Charles Carmichael, the mother of three and a writer in Charlottesville, Virginia.

"Magic. My children would want to see magic. So I created

it's December the 22d. You'll give us a good price, right?" Renée's voice is bright. The burly tree man shrugs.

Their voices are visible in the cold air: her high-hearted cheerfulness, his vaporized growls. From the dialogue, two small, but rather satisfactory, green conifers result. Fourteen dollars each.

As we hoist the trees into the back of her antique van, Renée buries her head in the branches. "Mmm, the smell," she croons. "Like roses."

"Roses?"

Renée will tell me about it tomorrow, she says. After I put the children on the train.

"I may not be alive," I warn. For me, there is no after once I send the children south.

It's another cold, gray morning, and I stand on the frozen cement railroad platform with the children, silently shivering.

I do not want to cry.

The train is coming. We hear its heaving wail in the near distance.

"We didn't get to decorate the tree,

Mama," the girl, oldest of the three, says.

"I know, darling. There wasn't time, with the packing and all."

"It will be odd not to see you on Christmas morning." Middle son is reflective.

"Will you see Santa?" Youngest son wonders what I'll do.

"I don't know," I say as the black mass of iron and steel soars noisily past and slows.

It is a special agony to tell children goodbye. I load their things, smile and weep at the same time. I tell the conductor to take care of them: ages 6, 9 and 12. The train whistle blasts the air. It may as well be a machine gun to my chest.

Standing outside Renée's door, I must look like a drowned cat. The air has turned misty. My blond hair droops. Rain covers my black winter coat.

Renée is warm and welcoming. There is fragrant cinnamon apple cider simmering in a blue kettle on her kitchen stove. A red-gold fire heaves and repositions itself in her

tiny den. A puffy, yellow tabby cat snoozes on a faded, flowered sofa.

"What do you do? You pretend." Renée answers my question. Her tone is matter-of-fact. She flounces om the sofa, disturbing the plump tabby.

She takes a threaded needle from the armrest and pulls a ceramic bowl of hard, red cranberries onto her lap.

"The first Christmas I did not have my two girls, I was devastated—like you," she says. "But you know, II was worried about them, as well as myself. They kept saying, 'Whatever will! you do, Mommy? Will you be lonely?"."

"What did you do?" I absent-rmindedly take a cranberry and bitte it, recoiling at the sharp, stinging t taste.

"I had a very private, good cry," she says thoughtfully. "Thhen I thought of what my girls would want to see when they retuurned after Christmas."

"And?"

"Magic. They'd want to see mmagic. So I created it—with a tree wra apped with gifts underneath it."

Renée cocks her porcelain faface to one side. Her black hair gleams is in the

-with a Christmas tree wrapped with gifts underneath it."

firelight. "You know single parents don't get gifts," she says. "You have to buy them and pretend. So, that Christmas, I did. I wrapped little things inexpensive things—in pretty paper and bows. And then I, well, you'll never guess," her eyes twinkle.

"Tell me."

"Roses! One dozen beautiful red roses! I bought them cheap at the grocery store."

"Roses?"

"Of course! And when the girls returned and asked about them, I said, 'Aren't they beautiful? They came from the Most Wonderful Man!"

"'Was it Santa, Mommy?' they asked. 'Was it Santa?' And of course, I rolled my eyes and said, 'I don't know....'"

In spite of myself, I smiled. This dark-haired beauty—creator of magic. How brave she is.

"Stay busy," Renée hands me a package of round, fresh cranberries as I leave her house that day.

Busy, I become. With 10-cent gifts, red and green paper, and gold tinsel ribbons, I create magic to nestle under the tree. On Christmas Day, after a good cry, I go to a new church in the new town where I now live. Coated and crowded, I sit with people strange to me, but who sing with me carols familiar to all ages.

At home I knot round, red cranberries together for tree garlands. I pop popcorn, loving the smell, and lace white, lengthy strands in green tree branches to offset

the red cranberry loops. The fire I've built with scattered yard limbs burns brightly. Cinnamon apple cider bubbles on the stove.

In late afternoon Calico Cat tiptoes a tune on the piano keys. I pick it out: C, B, A, G. "Joy to the World."

On New Year's Day, my children return. They burst in the door, anxious to be home. Yes, it is their second Christmas for the season. But it is special, indeed. For I've beaten the beast of despair, and now I know: I'll go forward. As for the roses...well....

I've bought a second-day dozen at the grocery. They are deep holiday red, circled in a tissue funnel of dark green. Early, early New Year's morning on my way to the train station for

the kids, I stop by

Renée's. The sun is barely winking in the tall pines near her home. Frost glitters the wreath on her front door. Quietly, I nestle the crimson cluster in the doorway, ring the doorbell and hastily drive away.

It's odd, I reflect, delivering flowers—one single-parent woman to another.

But sometimes life's that—odd... inexplicable...magic.

I've signed the roses, From Santa. ■