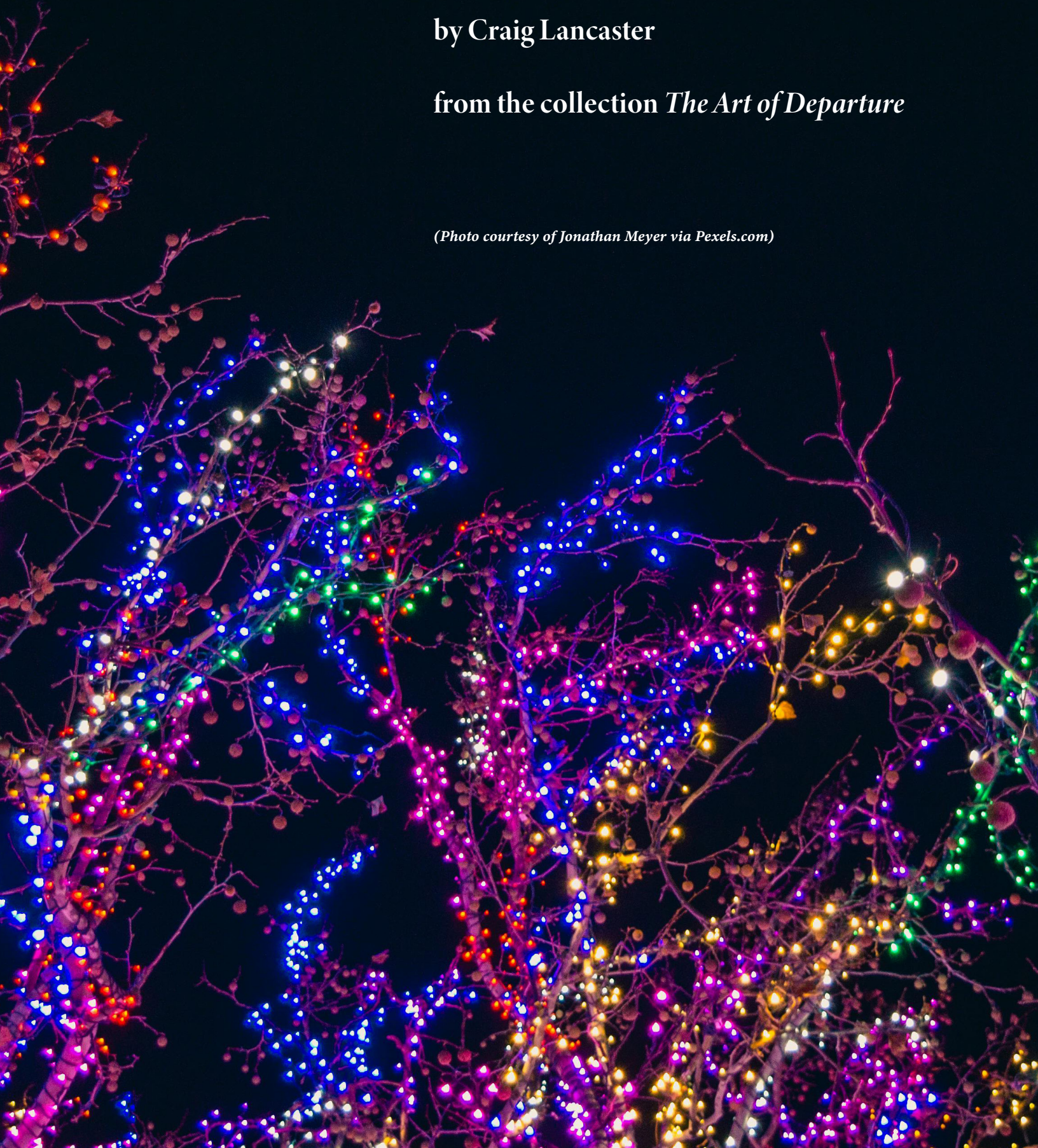


comfort and joy

by Craig Lancaster

from the collection *The Art of Departure*

(Photo courtesy of Jonathan Meyer via Pexels.com)



Through a sliver in the blinds, Frank watched as the crowd gathered on his neighbors' lawn. The numbers had been swelling since that morning, when the newspaper hit the streets. The story was so breathtaking, so sad, so redeeming that people from all over town felt compelled to drive, pedal and walk to the sturdy Craftsman-style bungalow to pay their respects.

Bouquets of roses dotted the yard, put there in multiple, spontaneous gestures of awe and thanks to a man who had left home two days earlier and would never be back. Frank figured the crowd at close to two hundred people now. They lined the sidewalk and stood on the perfectly manicured Kentucky bluegrass of a man who had lived among them for years and had never drawn so much as a second glance. Now, the newspaper called him a hero. Everyone did.

Frank scoffed aloud when he saw the TV news van pull up. The driver rolled the passenger-side wheels onto the curb and into the boulevard, leaving the van to sink into the grass while the cameraman and reporter grabbed their things and scurried into the throng. Had the guy pulled that stunt on Frank's side of the street, leaving ruts in his grass, the old man might have gone out there and ripped him a new one.

Agitated as Frank was, he felt relief at not having to leave the house. That the neighbor he scarcely knew, Kevin Elam, had done a heroic thing was not in question, and Frank resolved to pay his respects in his own time and his own way. When he had read the story that morning, he had marveled at the young pilot's wherewithal in bringing a crippled MD-80 down in a way that saved most of the people aboard. Just thirty-two of the one hundred and thirty passengers aboard perished, among them Captain Kevin Elam, a man Frank had talked to only a couple of times and one for whom he now wished he could buy a beer.

Frank knew the final government report wouldn't be out for months, but he also knew enough about such things to understand how unlikely it was that Kevin Elam could have accomplished what he did. The jet had lost control and come in well short of the runway in Denver, and the pilot—adrenaline surging, knowing that a crash was inevitable and, in all probability, lethal—had put it down about as gently as was humanly possible. Even so, the twisted fuselage and gnarled metal that could be seen in the color newspaper photographs nearly caused Frank to break down. Kevin Elam was a hero. Frank knew it. The people outside knew it, too. They knew that he had saved a mother going home to her own father's funeral, an anxious new graduate headed to Dallas for a job interview, a son who had brought his first guitar as a carry-on and planned to play at a program at church, and dozens of others, including sixteen of seventeen members of the Billings Senior High cheerleading squad on their way to Orlando for a national competition. They would never make it to Florida; a chartered bus would bring them back to Billings in a few days. But they would come home alive, and that's why people stood in Kevin Elam's yard.

The crowds will go away, Frank thought. Then I'll walk over and pay my respects to his wife and that boy. Away from the hullabaloo, I'll be able to say what needs to be said.

He closed the blinds and headed upstairs to see if she was awake, to find out if the pain today would be better than it was yesterday. That was all Frank ever asked for when he found himself on his knees and talking to God.

Not all of the dying on Miles Avenue would bring out the news vans and the public's adulation. Some of it was happening bit by bit, moment by moment, with few people looking and even fewer caring. In his head and in his heart, Frank had been saying goodbye for two years, silently steeling himself for the day when Lucy would slip away and he would no longer carry her regimen of pills in his shirt pocket and a napkin in his back pocket to wipe her mouth after she swallowed them.

Frank knew that day was coming, and it scared him.

The crowds did go away. It took a while. For weeks, flowers and stuffed animals and notes piled up, despite the best efforts of Kevin Elam's wife and son to keep up with them. In the month that followed the crash, Kevin's face appeared on the covers of news magazines, every headline including the same word: hero. The city of Billings declared Kevin Elam Day. The mayor smiled big and gave his wife a key to the city. Frank saw that in the newspaper and thought she looked uncomfortable, and that night, he included with his prayer a new request: peace for the woman and child next door.

As spring melted toward summer, an answer to that prayer arrived. Life next door to Frank went back to some semblance of what it had been before. The woman went to work and came home. The boy went to school and then, as June rolled around and the summer break took hold, he and his friends often hung around the house, tossing a

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football in the yard or playing basketball in the driveway. Frank caught snippets of these things through the window. He would watch and sip his coffee, and then he would return to her.

Frank's other prayer, that Lucy's pain would subside, was a tougher sell with God. She barely moved some days, and Frank would have to pick her up and carry her to the bathroom. The small act of sitting on the toilet would aggravate the cancer that had metastasized in her bones, and in her agony she could barely make a sound, depleted as her lungs were. Frank would hold her close, careful not to hurt her further, and blink back the tears.

When he found the compression sores, he gave in and called for help from hospice, finally admitting that he couldn't tend to her alone anymore. The nurses came in, and there wasn't much they could do, either. They dressed her wounds and tried to make her comfortable.

Lucy died in the early hours of a Wednesday in late July. Nobody left flowers in her yard.

The first week of November brought a prodigious snowfall to Billings, the biggest one in eighty years, according to the TV weatherman. Frank, unshaven for a week, wearing clothes he'd put on two days earlier, stood at his kitchen sink and watched as the boy next door fought with a snowblower. The old man caught his reflection in the glass. His thinning hair had gone fully gray in two years of fighting with Lucy against her cancer, and deep lines dug into his gaunt face. He could smell his own stink. He didn't bathe or shower much these days. He didn't see the point.

His thoughts migrated, again, to the day in 1948 when he married Lucy Andriesen. *Till death do us part* were words that came by rote back then, when he was twenty-one and she was nineteen and they were invincible. Utterly devoted to one another, they never brought children into the world, never imagining that one day, one of them might have to soldier on alone. At eighty-three years old, Frank had drawn that sad duty. He still couldn't believe it, and he surprised himself sometimes when he realized how angry it left him.

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"Dammit," Frank said, hustling into the living room in his long johns and jamming his feet into slippers. He ran out the front door and high-stepped through his blanketed front lawn, shouting at the boy. The kid couldn't hear him above the din of the motor, and just as Frank drew near, the boy turned the machine and sent a blast of snow into Frank's face.

Stung by the barrage, Frank drew back a hand and struck the boy, catching him in the left ear and dropping him.

The boy looked at Frank, wide-eyed and chin trembling. Frank stared back in disbelief at what he'd done.

Both ran for their respective front doors.

Frank spent a half-hour walking the floor, castigating himself. He talked to Lucy and told her how stupid he was, how idiotic. He said she should be happy she didn't see it. Immediately, he felt bad about saying that, and he apologized.

He knew the knock would be coming, and when it did, he still jumped. The rapid beat of his heart moved into his neck and throat, which he cleared again and again as he approached the door and opened it to find the boy's mother, her anger bubbling under her lip.

"You hit my son," she said.

"Please come in," Frank said. "Let's talk."

She stomped past him into the living room.

"I'd be happy to pour you some tea," he said.

She stopped. "This isn't a social call, Mr. —"

"Abrams. Frank Abrams."

"This isn't a social call, Mr. Abrams."

"No, of course it's not," Frank said. He gestured to the sofa. "Please, won't you sit down?"

Her eyes never leaving him, she lowered herself to the couch. Frank sat in a chair opposite her. In different circumstances, he might have been impressed by her bearing. A small woman, she filled the room with her intensity and focus. Now, she intimidated him, and he wasn't a man who was easily cowed.

"How's the boy?" he asked.

"Andy. His name is Andy. He'll be fine. He's scared. He's confused. He doesn't know why a grown man would come out and hit him, and frankly, I don't, either. Can you explain that, or should I just call the police and let them sort it out?"

Frank, who had looked at his feet as the woman's words grew sharper, glanced upward and met her eyes. "I don't know what happened," he said. "I'm appalled, absolutely appalled, at what I did. I ran out to stop him because all the snow he was blowing around out there, it shot right up and cracked my window. So I went down there and that snow, it comes out of the machine so fast and hard, you know? It hurts like hell when it smacks you in the face. I just snapped. Honestly, it just happened so fast, I couldn't believe what I'd done."

She stared at him and said nothing.

"Obviously, if you wish to call the police, I will tell them exactly what I did. And of course I apologize to you, and I hope you'll let me apologize to Andy. I'm just sick about this."

The hard lines of her face fell away slightly, and she chewed on her bottom lip.

"You say your window broke. Can I see it?"

Frank stood and led her into the kitchen. He pointed at the pane, which was crossed by a jagged crack.

"How much do you think it will cost to replace?" she asked.

"Not much. It's not a big job."

"Let me know."

"Mrs. Elam," he said, "I wouldn't dream of asking you to pay for it. I owe you and your son amends, not the other way around."

"OK," she said, "let's talk about that."

Back in the living room, she said, "I'm not going to involve the police."

"Thank you."

"I'm going to send Andy over here tomorrow. He broke your window, and if you won't accept payment, he can do something else for you."

"That's quite unnecessary."

"No, it's not. It's important that he learn responsibility. Besides, you're going to do something for him, too."

"What?"

"I haven't decided. But I'll let you know. He's a good kid, Mr. Abrams. He's had an awful year—we both have—and he doesn't deserve what happened to him today, and you're going to make it right."

"I'm sorry about your husband," Frank said, words that didn't come close to capturing what he had intended to say months earlier.

"Thank you." She stood up. "I'll send Andy over in the morning. Put him to work."

"I don't have anything for the boy to do here," Frank said.

She glanced around the living room, at the piled-up mail and dirty clothes and half-filled glasses of water and said, "I'm sure you can find something."

The boy was prompt. Frank gave him that. At nine a.m. sharp, Frank heard the rap of knuckles against the oaken door. He opened it to find the towheaded young man standing on his stoop in an old pullover sweater and a pair of faded jeans.

"My mom said I have to come over here," he said, casting a wary glance at Frank.

"Well, come on in, then," Frank said. "I'm not sure what to do with you."

Andy stepped inside. "I'd say let me go home, but she'd just send me back over here. So you better find something."

“You’re a mouthy kid, aren’t you?”

“So what? You’re an old man who hits kids.”

“OK, that’s enough. Sit down.”

Andy stared at him.

“I said sit down!”

Andy obeyed.

Frank sank into the chair across from the boy and rubbed his mouth and chin, considering his next move. Having no children of his own, he’d never had to learn how to deal with insolence.

“Is it OK if I call you by your name?”

Andy looked surprised. “Yeah, I guess.”

“OK, look, Andy. I’m sorry for what I did yesterday. There is no excuse for it, and you have every right to be angry with me for it. So I’m putting that out there for you. If we’re going to spend the day together, I’d like to put this behind us. Can we do that?”

Andy looked at the carpet. “Yeah, I guess.”

“That’s not good enough. Let’s try again. Andy, I’m sorry for hitting you yesterday. Can you please forgive me?”

The boy looked up and bit off the words. “I accept your apology, Mr. Abrams.”

With Andy’s help, Frank toted two dozen bags of garbage to the alley for pickup. They folded clothes, vacuumed the house, dusted, cleaned windows, sorted mail and brought the place to a level of cleanliness that Frank hadn’t seen since before Lucy got sick, when together they ran a tight ship, everything in its place.

In the kitchen, Frank poured the boy a second cup of hot chocolate. They had moved around each other stealthily for the first hour or so, but soon enough, the defenses had fallen away and the boy had begun chattering. Frank marveled at what constituted a young man’s world these days—computers and text messages and a whole system of language that Frank couldn’t begin to comprehend—but he also noted that the two primary concerns were the same as they had been when he was a twelve-year-old boy: girls, and the competitive challenges posed by other boys. From what Frank could gather, Andy was on high alert for the former and continually addled by the latter.

“You’re a good worker,” Frank said. “That’s something to be proud of.”

“Thanks, Mr. Abrams.”

Andy pointed at a picture on the dining-room wall, a group photo of the Mission Command engineers in front of the space shuttle Columbia. “Are you in that picture?”

Frank turned and looked at the photo. “Yep, that’s me and some of my co-workers after the first space shuttle went up and came home. It was taken in 1982.”

“Which one are you?”

“I’m at the far left there, in the white shirt.”

“They all have on white shirts.”

“That’s a joke, kid. Go on. Get up and take a closer look.”

Andy walked around to the other side of the table and got close to the frame. Frank peered over his shoulder. It had been a long time since he’d looked closely at the photograph, and he was a little surprised by what he saw. He was so young then, yet ancient by NASA standards. He was well into middle age, fifty-five years old—a decade or more older than most of the men in the picture with him—and yet he was struck by how quickly the years had gone by and how much they had taken.

“What was your job?” Andy asked.

“I was a flight engineer.”

“What does that mean?”

“Different things on different missions. I was one of the guys on the ground helping get the shuttle into space, communicating with the crew and helping them get home safely. When this picture was taken, I was getting close to the end of my career. I actually started with NASA in the beginning, more than fifty years ago. I saw all of it—Mercury, Gemini, Apollo and the first moon landing, the space shuttle.”

“Cool.”

Frank considered the boy’s one-word summation of a long career. He hadn’t thought about those days in a while.

But Andy was right. If there had to be a single word for that part of his life, that extraordinary privilege, “cool” would do the job.

The next morning, as Frank headed up the sidewalk with his morning paper, he waved to Andy and one of the neighbor kids. They were rolling up snow boulders.

“Mr. Abrams,” Andy called to him. “Do you want to help us build a snowman?”

“No, thanks, Andy. You guys have fun.” He saluted the boys with the bundled newspaper and walked on.

“Come on. We’ll let you choose his face.”

Frank stopped. *What possible reason is there to say no*, he thought.

“I’ll be right back, guys.”

Up in the attic, Frank blew dust off a banker’s box that had gone yellow with age, the corrugated walls caving in from neglect.

He began removing artifacts from another era of his life. Aviator glasses, cloth ribbons from his stint in the Air Force during the Korean War, among them a Distinguished Flying Cross and an Air Medal with three oak leaves, a visor hat.

He put everything in the hat and hustled back downstairs.

“That looks awesome!” Andy said.

Before them, a plump snowman—small head upon slightly larger torso upon much larger base—sporting the brim hat, the medals on his chest, the glasses atop his carrot nose and a scarf around his neck and shoulders.

“He looks like a real jock,” Frank said.

“What, like a football player?” asked the other boy, Aaron.

“No, that’s what we pilots called each other in the Air Force.”

“My dad was a pilot,” Andy said, and Frank winced at not thinking before he spoke.

“He was,” Frank said. “A damned good one.”

The three of them stared a while longer, saying nothing. Finally, Frank said, “Well, we’d better not leave that stuff in the weather. You guys can divvy it up and keep it. I don’t need it anymore.”

The boys slapped high-fives and began stripping their snowman bare. As Frank opened the door to his house, he smiled at hearing the horse-trading taking place as Andy and Aaron weighed the worth of a pair of old sunglasses against an aviator’s hat.

Andy’s mother visited Frank that evening.

“I’ve figured out how you can make it up to Andy,” she said when he opened the door.

“Come in,” he said. “It’s freezing out there.”

For the second time, they settled into Frank’s living-room furniture. “It looks like a different place,” she said. “Did Andy do all of this?”

“Pretty much. I helped a little. He’s faster than I am, though.”

“Tell me about it,” she said, laughing. “I’m just glad he still obeys voice commands. I don’t know how I’ll cope when he stops doing that.”

“He’s a polite young man. Maybe you have nothing to worry about.”

“Maybe.”

“So you say you have a task for me?”

“Right,” she said. “Next month, December 7th, Andy’s school is having a career day, and some of the kids are supposed to bring in a guest speaker to talk about different jobs and the schooling needed to get them. This is the kind of thing that Kevin would have done, and he would have been great at it. I’m nominating you to be Andy’s guest speaker. What do you think?”

“Mrs. Elam, I’m flattered, but it’s been a long time since I’ve had a career. I left NASA in 1987. I couldn’t even begin to speak to how things are done there now.”

“Oh, please, Mr. Abrams,” she said. “Andy told me—”

“Frank.”

“Beg pardon?”

“I hate to say this,” she said, “but I still wish sometimes that he’d been off that day, that it had been someone else’s destiny. Even if it meant that fewer people came home.”

“Please, call me Frank.”

“OK, Frank,” she said. “Andy told me what you said about helping with the moon landing and the space shuttle and all that. You’ll be the biggest hit there. Those kids won’t care when you last worked.”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I do. You owe Andy, and this is the payback I’ve decided on.”

“December seventh, you say?”

“Yes.”

Frank considered it, as if trying to remember whether he had a competing engagement, knowing full well that his social schedule was identical for the interminable future: wide open. “As it turns out, I’m free,” he said.

Andy’s mother stood up, walked over and hugged Frank.

Frank poured a cup of tea. “Forgive me, but I’ve forgotten your first name. Old men and their memories.”

“Laura,” she said.

“A lovely name.”

“Thank you.”

“Lucy, my wife, she liked to think about what our children’s names might have been, if we’d had any. She liked that name very much.”

“Why didn’t you have kids?” Quickly, she slapped a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry. It’s rude to just ask like that.”

“No, it’s quite all right,” Frank said. “We just never felt compelled. We had very full lives, even without kids. Then years go by, faster all the time, and you realize that you’re old people and the chances of doing certain things are gone forever. So it was with children.”

“You must miss her terribly.”

Frank nodded. “I do. I suspect you have some appreciation for what it’s like.”

“It’s so hard,” she said. “I can still smell him in our room, and sometimes when I’m asleep, I dream that he’s there with me. It’s hard in the mornings to wake up to the fact that he’s gone.”

She looked at Frank. A quivering smile crossed her face. He picked up a paper napkin and handed it across the table to her.

“Are you getting along OK otherwise?” he asked.

She dabbed at her eyes with the napkin. “We’re making it. You know, I really hated to reduce Kevin’s death to numbers, but for a while there, I wondered how we would make it work. The insurance helped. People have been very nice, but I haven’t wanted to impose. I’m getting back into the swing of things at work. I tell Andy, listen, you need to make good grades and get a scholarship. You know, to hedge our bets.”

Frank picked up her cup and went to the kettle to refill it.

“I have to tell you, Laura, I was a pilot once, and what your husband did was one of the most heroic things I’ve ever heard of. A disabled plane, flying faster than it should—there’s just no way to describe what a hopeless situation that is. Pilots train for moments like that, and they hope they’ll manage to pull off the perfectly imperfect landing if that day ever comes, but the fact is, the human element—fear, indecision, clouded judgment—is powerfully difficult to overcome. He did it. I hope you’re proud.”

“More than I can say,” she said. She looked down at her hands and tugged at a loose thread on her sleeve. “But you know what? I still feel cheated. I didn’t have nearly long enough with Kevin, just eleven years. He was a miracle in our lives. I was a single mom. I’d been left by my first husband while I was still pregnant with Andy. We were barely scraping by after Ross left. I had to sell our house and move into a little apartment. And then we met Kevin, and he fell in love with us.”

“Sounds like he was a miracle for a lot of people,” Frank said.

Laura looked to the ceiling, as if she could see through it to the sky.

“I hate to say this,” she said, “but I still wish sometimes that he’d been off that day, that it had been someone else’s destiny. Even if it meant that fewer people came home.”

On the appointed day, Frank drove to Lewis & Clark Middle School.

“You must be our astronaut,” said the woman who checked him in at the office.

“Oh, no, ma’am. Flight engineer.”

“Oh.”

After a few minutes, Andy came in to collect Frank and walk him to the assembly room for the program.

“You clean up well,” Frank said, pointing at the tie and blazer the young man wore.

“Mom made me.”

“She’s a smart lady.”

Inside the assembly hall, rows of chairs faced a lectern and microphone. Along the walls, students, teachers, administrators and guests talked and ate Christmas-themed cookies. Strains of holiday music played above the chatter.

Andy rocked his head side to side in rhythm with the music.

“Jingle balls, jingle balls, jingling all the way,” he sang-whispered.

“What’s that?” Frank said.

“Jingle bells.”

“It sounded like ‘jingle balls.’”

“It was. My friends and I changed the words.”

Frank laughed.

Frank stared back at two-hundred-some-odd sets of expectant eyes. He wished that the principal hadn’t built this thing up quite so much. (“This will be an experience we’re sure you’ll remember for a long, long time.”) Frank rather enjoyed the speeches by the executive chef, the investment banker and the YMCA director. As he cleared his throat and began to speak, he had little confidence that his words would measure up.

He thanked the school leaders and acknowledged Andy—“my friend, Andy Elam”—and then he launched into remarks that he had been sweating over for weeks.

“I was teaching physics at Eastern Montana College here in Billings in 1958 when one of my Air Force buddies asked me to apply for an engineer’s job with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, which had just been created by President Dwight Eisenhower. I was thirty-one years old. So if I was thirty-one in 1958, you can figure out that I’m older than dirt today.” At this, the assembly room filled with the laughter of seventh-graders.

“Actually, that’s not true. I was a sophomore when dirt was a senior.” More laughs tumbled in, and Frank felt more at ease. He looked over at Andy beaming back at him, and he gave the boy a wink.

One thing surprised Frank: The kids, while mildly interested in things they’d often heard about, like the moon landing, were absolutely entranced by the disasters and near-misses. Frank had seen most of them.

He lamented the loss of Gus Grissom, Ed White and Roger Chaffee on the launch pad with Apollo 1. “We got so many things wrong,” he said. “But that drove us harder to get them right, to keep the program alive when a lot of people on the outside wanted to scrap it.”

He talked about the lifeboat situation in Apollo 13 and how work on the ground—figuring out how to preserve enough power for re-entry, creating impromptu carbon-dioxide scrubbers and relaying those instructions to the crew—was essential to bringing those men back home safely.

He explained how one person, one very smart person, can make all the difference. “When lightning struck Apollo 12 in the first minute after liftoff, it scattered everything. Instruments weren’t working. We couldn’t talk with the crew very well. Telemetry—the way we measured things from Earth—was a mess. This guy I worked with, John Aaron, an EECOM like me, he’d seen those kinds of telemetry readings a year earlier during a test, and he remembered exactly how to reset them so they’d read normally. Nobody else in the room knew what he was talking about, but Alan Bean,

an astronaut up in the capsule, did what John said to do, and everything worked out. If John hadn't been there, if he hadn't known what to do, we would have had to abort that mission. After that, we all called John 'a steely-eyed missile man,' which is just about the best compliment there is.

"And let me tell you something else: John didn't have any opportunity that you don't have right here. He grew up in a little town in Oklahoma, in an area called Booger Hollow." The students tittered. "I'm serious: Booger Hollow. He's just a smart man who has focus and drive and who was constantly looking to learn. Any of you can do the same thing."

By the time Frank reached the end of his remarks, a recollection of the Challenger disaster and how that wore out his emotions and sent him into retirement, he didn't want the day to end. When he said "thank you," the seventh-graders gave him a standing ovation.

Andy and Frank sat at a table in the assembly room, eating finger sandwiches and other snacks and drinking punch during the closing reception for the day's guests.

"You were great, Mr. Abrams," Andy said.

"Thank you, Andy. Thanks for inviting me."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes."

"Those stories about saving Apollo 12 and Apollo 13, they made me kind of mad."

"Mad how?"

"Well, it doesn't seem fair that you can rescue rockets but nobody could rescue my dad's plane. Why is that?"

Frank took a carrot and put it on Andy's plate, which was otherwise filled with french fries. "Do you remember what I said today about logic and reason and how we kept our heads when things were going badly, that it was the only way to overcome the odds?"

"Yeah."

"That was your dad that day. I can't tell you why the plane he was flying lost control. But I know this: Your father was the rescuer for a lot of people on that plane, a lot of people who probably would have died if not for him. Those people, every day of the rest of their lives they will be thankful that they were on a plane flown by your dad. And even though you miss him, I bet one day you'll realize that you're thankful for that, too."

Andy bowed his head, and Frank reached out and tousled his hair.

On the drive home, Frank felt a surge of energy deep inside. He recognized it, remembered it: adrenaline, something he hadn't experienced in years. In combat, in Korea, such shots of power kept him focused on a target even as hell rained down around him. On the job, he could use it to block out everything except the problem on his screen.

Now, all these years later, adrenaline came back to him, and it carried an idea, one he knew he would work on as soon as he got back to the house. He would start with all of the old friends and colleagues whose offers of help he had turned away after Lucy passed on.

"You would have been proud of me today, old girl," he said as he made the last turn for home.

On Christmas Eve, Frank answered the knock at his door and found Laura and Andy standing in the falling snow in matching candy-cane sweaters.

"Trick or treat," Andy said, and his mother jabbed him in the ribs.

"You goof!"

"Come on in," Frank said, ushering them into the living room.

Laura handed him a plate of sugar cookies. "A small gift from a neighbor," she said.

Andy gave him a card.

"From both of us," the boy said.

"Do you want me to open this now?" Frank asked.

"Sure," Andy said.

Frank set the plate of cookies down and carefully tore open the envelope. He smiled at seeing the simple, Rockwell-esque pastoral scene on the front, and inside he found a handful of coupons printed on colorful paper: *Good for five home-cooked meals. Good for 10 games of cards. Good for a chat on the porch, infinitely redeemable.*

“These are great,” he said.

Laura gave him a hug. “You’re such a blessing in our lives.”

“Read the card,” Andy said.

Frank looked at the inscriptions.

Dear Frank, you gave us something that neither of us thought we would find under the tree this year. You’ve given us comfort and joy. More than that, you’ve given Andy a role model when I was so afraid that the best one he would ever have was gone. We’ll never be able to repay you for that. Love, Laura.

Frank: You are a steely eyed missile man! Your friend, Andy.

They said their goodnights on the front stoop, and then Frank remembered that he, too, had a gift. He dashed inside and then came out with a sealed envelope.

“Read it when you get home,” he said, handing it to Laura.

“OK,” she said. “Will you be over in the morning to watch the unwrapping of the gifts?”

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

An hour later, after finally persuading Andy to give sleep a try, Laura slit open the envelope and read the letter inside.

To whom it may concern:

We who are proud to call Frank Abrams our friend—a more ragged collection of flyboys, number-punchers and pencil-necked geeks you’ll never find—are pleased to announce the establishment of the Kevin Elam and Lucy Abrams Memorial Scholarship Fund at Lewis & Clark Middle School in Billings, Montana. Our initial pledge will ensure that the 2010-11 seventh-grade class—every last member of it—will receive a full scholarship to college upon graduating from high school. It is our hope that the community will take up the challenge of matching this effort so that this might be a perpetual gift that bears the names of a true hero and a woman we all dearly loved.

Laura came barreling out of the house, simultaneously crying and giggling uncontrollably. Arms extended, she fell backward into her yard. There, illuminated by a street lamp, she waved her arms and legs and carved a joyous snow angel.

“Thank you, Frank!” she shouted.

A few yards away, watching through the cracked window he never fixed, Frank Abrams toasted her with his coffee cup.