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A Little Girl Died last Week

The wind drove the new fallen snow in swirls about your face as you stood in the street, thick with faces and coffee cups. A montage of all the people in the world hurried by. There was the construction worker, "Butch" emblazoned with a black magic marker across the yellow of his hard hat, his work pants soaked to the hips; the businessman in his button down charcoal suit, the crease in his tailored pants now just another wrinkle; the police chief in his luminous orange coat, his eyelids heavy with too little sleep; a youth awaiting trial for possession of marijuana, his long hair wet and stringy; a university professor who had forgotten his gloves, his hands were just beginning to turn an ugly purple; high school girls, their short skirts showing off numb and reddened legs; a Member of the Legislature fighting off the sleep he wanted so badly; a sheet metal worker who had not gone to work that day, in his work clothes; an armed forces lieutenant and hundreds of able seamen.

So different, but after fifteen minutes in the snow-soaked bush of Spryfield, they were all the same. They were wet and cold and tired and hungry and frustrated and hoping and fearful.

Locked in their common bond - a little nine year-old girl who most had not met or even heard of the day before - she was lost. Rhonda Graves was her name and she had gone out to play on Wednesday afternoon in the first real snowfall of the season. She had not come home.

Some of those in the dense underbrush searching for her still did not know her name, but it did not matter. She was lost and that was all they knew or cared.

On Juniper Crescent, where Rhonda lived, tired searchers stood in line to get cups of coffee and soup to keep them going through the long night. The lights burned throughout the night in the houses of the people on Juniper Crescent as they opened their homes to the thousands seeking a moment's respite from the biting winds and the thick snow of the dark night.

And then it was back into the woods - into the crevices that caught you unawares as you slipped into holes up to your thigh and you wondered how a little nine-year old school girl who was frightened of the dark and the forest could ever last for two days in that. Using a stick that you had ripped off from some tree, you poked in the snow praying to God that she wouldn't be under there. But still you pushed it into the snow where thousands of other like poles had already dug into the snow, because you had to.

The night slipped into day and still the people stayed, their frustration growing minute by minute, but it became an obsession - you had to go on. Plodding through the wood, two lines of a long forgotten song hammered through your head, driving you further into the wood, hoping. . .

"Can't waste a minute; the minutes won't wait, How would you like if I found her a minute too late?"

But the day dragged into night and still there was no sight of a little girl who nobody knew, but everybody wanted to find. People too old to search made sandwiches and car dealers transported the new supplies and more searchers to replace those who had grown weary of the long search, to Juniper Crescent where the Salvation Army and the Red Cross doled the food to those who remained.

The day faded once again into night but still they came - people who were looking for a little nine-year old girl who they still hoped would be alive. In your mind you knew she had to be dead, but you couldn't help remembering the little protected places where a little girl might have hidden herself from the cold. And so you went on.

But soon the night was day again and you knew you weren't looking for an alive little girl anymore. You were just trying to end the anxiety, the frustration of a mother and father whose ashen faces still watched from the windows of their little brick bungalow at the end of Juniper Crescent - watched and waited - and hoped. But in the eyes of those in the woods, the hope was gone and there was just tiredness.

At a quarter to four on Friday afternoon almost forty-eight hours after Rhonda Graves went out to play in the woods near her home, the radio stations broke into their regular broadcasting with spot news from Juniper Crescent. . . "Rhonda Graves, the subject of an intensive search by hundreds of volunteers was found moments ago, but unfortunately she was found. . . dead. . ." That was all and then it was over and on the radio they played the "Chata-nooga Choo Choo".

In the banks the tellers still cashed cheques and in the stores the people still came and went. On the streets of Halifax, cars continued to travel up and down the streets as they have done for years. In the homes, mothers still went about making supper for hungry children. And life went on.

But a little nine year-old schoolgirl who went out to play in the new snow on Wednesday afternoon never came home.

