

# MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY CHANUKAH, ALREADY



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by Ed Bell

## THE GIFT

The little boy sighed as the bus carrying him home for the Christmas holidays pulled into the terminal. He had been one of the last to leave the boarding school, and the vague, dispirited emptiness of the buildings had left him depressed. Nor was he much looking forward to his two weeks at his father and mother's . . . this was the longest in the year he was there and, except for the gifts on Christmas morning, he never really had a good time.

Stepping off the bus, he saw his father and mother walking towards him, and wondered if there were any special reason for them both being here . . . it had always been one or the other before. His mother by this time was leaning down to embrace him, remarking as she did that he was thin, and did he get enough to eat at boarding school, and for what they paid the school in fees, the school could well afford to fatten him up a little. His father, who had been standing back uncertainly during this, stepped over to the boy and gave him a hearty, blustering squeeze on the arm . . . too hard . . . and then ruffled his hair, to the son's candid embarrassment. With a matter-of-fact air that the necessary greetings . . . which none of them particularly enjoyed . . . were taken care of, his father picked up part of the luggage and they went to the car. Soon they were driving away in the big black family sedan, a mink jacket and a Harris Tweed overcoat in the front, and a somehow fragile and forlorn-looking son huddled into one corner of the wide back seat.

Late on the afternoon of Christmas day, the son sat trying to read a novel he'd gotten as a gift . . . but it was, like so much of the other gifts, a little too advanced. Looking back wistfully over the day, the boy thought that this certainly had been the worst Christmas he had spent . . . rushed into opening presents of clothing, rushed into Church, rushed into a restaurant for a rushed Christmas dinner, and then driven home and left alone while his mother and father went calling. It was a day very much like the last few . . . too busy and too impersonal. And even today mother had criticized father for drinking too soon . . . and the, "Oh Hell, not in front of the boy!" had hurt him more than if they'd slapped him.

Giving up, the boy went for a walk down around the park . . . as he walked dejectedly along, he saw another smaller boy sitting on the snowbank . . . the little fellow wasn't as well dressed as he was, and the boy struck by the sad look in his eyes . . . he thought that at least he wasn't the only one to have had a bad Christmas. As he walked by, the little one said, "Please, what time is it?" Instead of answering, the boy slowly slipped his watch over his wrist and tossed it to the smaller boy. While the little fellow sat there with a look of absolute amazement on his face, the boy shouted, "Merry Christmas!" and walked briskly away. He still wasn't happy, but at least now he was smiling a little.