

Christmas Magic

by Caleb Stright

It had started after Jorge checked all the normal places — the closet, under his mother's bed, under the big pile in the garage — and found presents, but not enough for two boys, not enough for both him and his brother.

He didn't blame his brother for that, but when he pushed the Frosty DVD into the player, got down in his bean bag chair, and leaned onto his knees with his fingers on his mouth like he'd seen thinking people do, he meant to do something very important.

He had watched the cartoon about the living snowman each year, each and every year of his life. But all those years it had only been on TV and they played it too fast. He had stood up next to the screen, nose leaving an oil dot on the TV glass. He pried his eyes open with his fingers but all the details blurred. He couldn't tell what he needed to know — how the magic soaked in, where it came from, if it sparked like static from the hat to the snowman's crown.

But Jerry from School had Frosty on DVD and Jorge had pretended to like him enough to be invited over to make snowforts and stole that DVD and this Christmas would finally figure it out, how it worked, how to make his own man of snow to dance, and sing, to teach to curse and hide his brother in his snow belly like a mobile, humanoid jail.

He squeezed the remote tight in his fist, the plastic crinkling and creaking, thumbing the rubber edges of the pause button, ready to rewind and pause and rewind and pause, ready to inspect each Technicolor frame. He knew it was about 20 minutes in, but watched it all, reciting the dialogue of each child and each simple woodland rodent and then the mad magician with a sneer. And when the freckle faced kid sitting on the shoulders of the plump boy with donut dust on his coat collars got the silk hat brim just over the top ball of snow, Jorge was nearly out of the bean bag, hunched over and bent in half with tension.

And just as the hat dropped, just as Jorge felt the magic like fear of heights, like goosebumps, like static, Jorge's brother, Matthew, swooped in, his arm like a hawk wing with a claw. And because the magic had loosened Jorge's grip, his brother, Matthew, his little brother, even, yanked, and the remote came free, and even before Jorge could understand, as he looked beside him and around him hoping to find it, hoping the magic moment hadn't gotten too far, Matthew was sitting on his knees, nose up at the screen, calm. There, now, Frosty gone, a small cartoon boy — made with sharper lines and older colors — with thin cartoon boy hair, drug a blue blanket across a stage and spoke quietly in a darkened theater about shepherds and stars.

Jorge thought of standing, walking to his brother and punching him in his ear. But he had done it before, and still Matthew had done this.

Jorge didn't even yell, just stood and walked to the fireplace, not far behind his brother, and found a long, thick splinter, pulled it out, carried it, carefully out from his body, its flame wavering in the air, to his brother. And because he knew it'd burn a patch down through Matthew's orange hair and to the skin, leave enough pain and much more smell, he did and it did and the horrible stench of it filled the room and brought their mother. Matthew's hand was on his head, over the burn, face scrunched up to fake out some tears, and their mother, who had been washing dishes and brought with her a plate in each yellow gloved hand, raised the plate in her right hand and slammed it to the carpet. It chunked and sprinkled into the shag.

Looking at the boys, and holding the other plate in the air, she pointed out the sliding glass door beside her, and before she could flinch with the hand holding the second plate, the boys had drug their snowpants and coats out the door and outside, and were scrunching up like caterpillars on the cement slab porch to pull the snowpants on, before sneaking glances through the glass at their mother, slipping on their boots and coats, their hats and then dragging their only sled, heavy with wood and runners, down the hill and into the field.

"Why'd you do it," the younger asked. Matthew was rubbing his head but Jorge drug the sled and Matthew followed and Jorge couldn't see. Jorge answered, "I did it for us, Matthew."

"Don't you believe in Santa?"

"You know that I do. And don't you think Jesus brings us all the toys?"

"It might make more sense."

Jorge stopped and turned and looked at his brother.

"Make more sense than what? Just a tiny bit of Christmas Magic helping Santa make all of our Christmas wishes come true? And it just takes a little bit of it, Matthew. And it's just out there." In one hand was the sled rope; the other he threw over his head.

"Somehow this time of year it's out there. And I'm going to prove it to you."

Matthew's head was down. He said, "What I understand is that we're not supposed to hurt each other. Even Santa says that."

"You think Baby Jesus would bring you trucks and video games? And you should see what Mom got us."

"She didn't get us anything?"

Jorge turned and started walking and shook his head, and said, "Not enough."

Matthew shook his head but Jorge didn't see. And the sled's runners whispered through the snow, through the stubbled over cornfield, past the abandoned barn, through the woods, around its downed and rotted trunks, over the shells of puddled ice, rasped against rocks, to the hill above the pond.

"You don't understand anything," Jorge said. He moved the sled by the rope and pointed it, at the top of the hill, down to the ice covered pond. "Santa's just got that tiny sled and can only bring so much. The parents have to buy the rest of the toys. And that's how they say they love you. The more presents you get the more they say they love you. There's magic and there's logic. And this is logic."

"I don't think that's it," Matthew said. "Mom said it's harder with just one."

Jorge held his hand out for his brother to get down on the sled, and when he did, Jorge said, "No, she's saying she doesn't love you." And when he said it, when he thought of what he was going to do, he was telling himself that he just wanted to scare his brother. Into understanding. Jorge bent low, put his shoulder into his brother's back, and pushed and ran behind, and pushed the whole way down the hill, as far as he could, until he was rolling, his head on the ground, his feet in the sky. He hoped the sled's runners would hit the lake ice and be faster than Matthew had ever gone. As fast as an out of control car. So fast that he would go sideways, hold the rope to his chin, shake his head and cry.

And when Jorge found his feet again, rolled onto his knees and looked out to the ice, his brother was sideways, his eyes clenched tight, like having them closed would make him disappear. And then he disappeared. Into the ice.

Jorge breathed in for a minute or more, blinked the cold, dry air and that image away from his eyes, stood and ran. He tumbled in the loose snow around a patch of weeds, lost his glove, rolled and ran. And on the ice, his boots and feet jolted out from under him and he fell to his chest, and knocked the air from himself. He scrambled and pulled with his hands, the nails of his ungloved hand catching on the sharp imperfections of the ice, and he drug himself, another body's length to where the ice had opened up, to a black hole of water. A hole big enough for a boy, his sled.

He tried to look into the black water, moving his head to look past his own reflection, and wondered if his brother was gone. He hated him, sure, he thought, but he didn't want him gone. He was shaking his head with his answer, no, and plunged his hand into the water. Recoiled from the cold, but moved his arm around, hoping to knock into something firm, an arm, even a head, anything to grab onto and pull. But he was only splashing, and used his elbows against the ice, to pull himself closer to the hole, and when he still felt nothing, into the hole, the ice a half-foot above the water, his desperate breaths making hollow sounds in between. He reached and squirmed and kicked and found a hand.

He squeezed and pulled and yanked, and had the arm out, then the head, it wobbling and rolling as he tugged. And his brother's body bent and curved over the lip of the ice as he did. And with his brother out of the darkness of the water, with the blue of his skin marbled in the light, Jorge's eyes were wide and he gasped, and pulled him, his brother's back on the ice, walking backwards with his brother's hands in his. His brother still and his eyes closed. Jorge could see his mother yelling again, louder, the sound coming from her guts this time, and plates chunking. It was his fault.

He had seen things like CPR and mouth-to-mouth on television shows but didn't believe them. He needed to save his brother and to save his brother, he needed something he believed in.

He pulled Matthew to the bank and to the snow and got down beside him and began to pack the snow around his head. Under his jaw and around his ear, over his head and covered his eyes. It made Matthew's mouth obvious. His lips still and blue. Crumbles of snow around it. And Jorge took in a big breath, yanked at the cuff of his hat around his ears, then pulled it off his head. He knelt beside his brother, beside his head, and with his hat in his hands, a blue and black zigzagged stocking cap, he began to stretch the hat, to make it big enough for his brother's snowhead. But it was too large, his snowhead, and Jorge was frantic. He knew you had to breathe and Matthew wasn't. He was tearing at the cuff, the elastic of it, tearing it to fit. Looking from the accordioned elastic to his brother's mouth, pulling and crying.

And as the hat began to give and stretch and reach around his brother's crown, an arm came up, Matthew's, and Matthew's hand knocked away the snow, away from his nose, his mouth, spitting as he shot up, and chunks of snow falling from the top of his head. He sat up and the boys looked at each other. Matthew's teeth began to chatter and Jorge tried to bend his mouth to look angry and not sad, as his tears betrayed.

In his nose and behind it, Jorge was filled with snot, and he snorted and gasped as he tried to clamp off the crying. He rubbed

and wiped, with the ungloved hand under his nose. He said, "Mom's going to be so mad at you."

Jorge stood and grabbed his brother's mittened hand with his still gloved hand, turned toward the horizon, behind which they lived, and without looking again at his brother, began to walk, and pull his brother as they climbed the hill.

It was Jorge who had burned his brother's hair and then killed him, but Matthew didn't ask why their mother would be angry at him, even though Jorge expected the question. Jorge worried that meant there was something still broken in his brother, but because if he began to talk, he would begin to cry, he didn't say anything, till they were past the hill, huffing, and Matthew said, "Do you think Jesus did it?"

"What?" Jorge said.

"Well, you made me die, right? And now I'm alive, right? How else could you explain it?"

Because it seemed obvious to Jorge, he shook his head, and said, "how could it be Jesus?"

"Don't you ever think it's Jesus? Couldn't it, every once and a while have to be Jesus?"

"No," Jorge said and threw the sled's rope down. "No. I packed snow around your head. Didn't you feel the snow? I packed snow around your head and put a hat on your snowman head. How could it be anything but Christmas Magic."

"That's just a cartoon, Jorge."

"If it was Jesus, why didn't he make you float on water? Isn't that what he does? I saved you with Christmas Magic. I saved you by making you a snowman. What more proof do you need? You don't have any poof."

"I have proof," Matthew said, his teeth chattering again, his snow clothes still dripping. "I'm just cold." He looked blue in the dark, even in his eyelids when he closed them, and when he opened them, he looked to the sky, now purple and darkening, and said, pointing, "there! I knew if it was Jesus there'd be a star."

There was one star, high in the sky, still faint with the sun lingering, but one star all the same.

"That doesn't prove anything," Jorge said.

"You're right. We have to follow it."

And they did, until the woods, and looked up through the bare branches and followed it through.

"Where's it at?" Jorge asked.

"Just follow it," Matthew said, and he took the lead. And at the barn, its walls and boards frayed, it dark, Matthew said, "Here. We'll figure it out here," and he shivered. He climbed the hill to the huge door, to its handle, and pulled on it, made it rumble in its track. He grunted and walked it open, tugging in fits till he gained momentum. Jorge slipped in as soon as the door would allow, scanned the dark, the straw strewn across the floor, the work bench, an old lawnmower and said, "nothing here," before his brother had the door open.

There was more light now — the open door letting the moon in — and Matthew walked to the edge of the puddle of light and squinted into the dark.

"There really isn't anything in here," Jorge said.

Matthew turned, his soaked mitten on his hip, his eyebrows scrunched up, and said, nearly yelling, "You haven't proved anything, Jorge."

"I made you a snowman and I saved you."

"Jesus saved me," Matthew yelled, throwing his hands down.

"I could have made you fly like a reindeer or put you up a chimney. I saved you with Christmas Magic."

Matthew was staring into Jorge, but his eyes drifted, beside his brother then to behind him. Matthew pointed and said, "There!"

He shuffled across the light, his snowpants swishing. Jorge had been looking out at the moon, and when he turned, to see what his brother was doing, he couldn't see at first. He leaned forward as his pupils opened and gathered the light. His brother was still in shadow, but he could hear him, tugging on something large, something scraping the wood floor with each tug.

"Come on," Matthew said from the dark. "Help me."

Jorge walked to him, and soon Jorge could see, Matthew's back, and the porcelain tub in front of him. Jorge got behind the tub and pushed. The sound of the tub's feet against the wood constant now and higher pitched, until Matthew jumped back and yelled, "here."

The tub was in the oval of light, and Matthew leaned on its, edge, teetered, got a leg down in, then lay down, too.

"Is this your manger?" Jorge asked.

"We need more straw," Matthew said. Jorge went to the bales of it in the dark, brought two handfuls of it and tossed them on his brother.

"More!" Matthew said, and Jorge found a bale, and drug it over. He tore handfuls out and threw them on his brother, a game now, to bury Matthew.

But still he asked, "What's the point of this?"

"I'm cold," Matthew said. He pulled his head in toward his shoulders and Jorge took what was left of the bale and laid it on him.

"When's your miracle come?" Jorge asked.

And then they heard rustling out in the yard. And then a long shadow, with a long neck, cut into the light. Jorge turned and climbing the hill, was an alpaca.

Matthew was below the lip of the tub and couldn't see out. He asked, "Is it a camel?"

"No," Jorge said. "It's an alpaca. You'd just love to get your nativity, huh?"

"I'm not so sure I won't," Mathew said. He was sniffing and rubbed his sleeve under his nose.

The alpaca walked in to the warmth of the barn and gawked into the dark. It turned and scurried, when coming after it, was a collie.

"Is this one a camel?" Matthew asked.

Jorge turned toward his brother and shook his head. The dog went to the tub, put its paws up on its lip and looked down.

"It may not be a camel," Matthew said, "but I think we'll have our nativity soon."

"And then what? I just don't get the point."

"Of me proving you wrong?"

"Of all those people going all that way for a baby," Jorge said.
"He's just going to die."

"But he was sacrificed."

"But he just got to go to Heaven. That doesn't seem so bad."

Jorge was watching the animals mill about, the dog sniff and snort around the gas cap of the mower, then heard boots scraping on the cement, before stepping on the wood floor, then a boy saying, "You know, I've been thinking about that for a very long time."

Jorge turned and walked toward the boy, not much older than himself.

"Who are you?" Jorge asked, pointing with his chin.

"Are you a wise man?" Matthew yelled from behind.

"Well, I'd like to think so," the boy said.

"Really," Jorge said, his hands on his hips. "Who are you?"

"I'm Bob." He held his hand out and Jorge shook it. Bob leaned around him and pointed to the animals. "And those are mine."

Jorge turned and yelled back at his brother, "See, this isn't a nativity."

"But he's a shepherd," Matthew said and Bob walked to the tub and looked in on Matthew.

"Are you trying to make a nativity?" Bob asked and looked to Jorge.

"Ask him," Jorge said pointing down at his brother.

"Doesn't matter," Bob said and shook his head. "What I was trying to say is, is that I've been thinking a lot about what you guys were talking about. And I've got it figured out."

"You're 12," Jorge said.

"Wanna hear it or not?" Bob asked.

But they both gawked as a light cut through the barn, slipping between the spaces between its boards.

"That's probably the star," Bob said, and they walked back toward the open door.

"What star?" Jorge asked.

"The star you followed," Bob said, but looking out, flipped his hand and said, "Ah, just a car."

But they heard it rolling over the gravel of the drive. And then it climbed the mound to the mouth of the barn. The rattle and wheeze and lights of it filling everywhere the dark had been and Jorge put his arm over his eyes.

The driver door opened, a woman stepped out, and yelled, "Jorge, what the hell did you do to your brother," and she stormed toward him. She clamped her hand down around his arm, her eyes wide and angry, and drug him to the tub, him screaming, "Ow, he's fine."

And they looked down in, Matthew's head turned and his eyes closed.

"He's not fine, Jorge," she yelled. "He's not damn fine. What did you do to your brother?"

Jorge poked his brother's leg through the straw but his brother didn't move.

"He was fine," Jorge yelled, so she could hear over her shaking him by the arm and yelling, "He's not fine. He's not fine at all. What did you do to him?" And she reached down with her palm and put it on Matthew's cheek and yelled, "He's frozen, Jorge." And she was hysterical. Jorge looked into her face and wasn't sure if she was yelling or crying. Or if she was yelling so hard she was crying.

And Jorge was yelling, "He was fine. He fell in the lake, but he was fine."

And his mother scooped his brother up in her arms and tried to run with him, and Jorge was yelling, "He was fine."

She rattled the car's back door with her hands full with the boy, but got it open. She slid him in, was careful with the door as not to slam it on his feet, didn't say anything or look at Jorge as she hurried into the driver's side, slammed the door. The tires tore backward down the hill and it was dark again.

Jorge stood and stared at the wide open mouth of the barn. Into the glow the moon made.

"I was saying," Bob said somewhere behind him. Jorge could hear the hollow steps of the animals on the wood, the shoosh of their feet

pushing straw over it. Bob had both animals on leashes now and had led them into Jorge's periphery.

Bob said, the animals wandering and tugging gently in opposite directions, "I think God doesn't speak English. I had a dream about it. He talked liked an alien. He was trying to tell me something, but I couldn't understand him. It was just weird sounds. So he has to do things instead. That way we understand."

"I don't understand."

"He had to give up something he really wanted."

"Jesus?"

"Yeah. He was his kid."

"But he came back."

"But he made him die first. Your Mom ever make you die?"

"No. But it's not like she's sacrificing for me either."

"You mean the lady who swooped in here and saved your brother?"

"Yeah, and she left me here. I have to walk home."

"What'd she get you for Christmas?"

"All I found was some Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and an Xbox."

"Just an Xbox? You know what parents have to do to get an Xbox?" Bob had twisted his head toward his shoulder, curled up his lip and his voice had changed. "They don't just stand in line and someone hands them an Xbox, OK? That's sacrifice. They have to sacrifice and sacrifice and sacrifice. I mean, I chase alpacas a mile every night in subfreezing conditions, and I will never get an Xbox. Never. Ever. I'll never even see one." He was shaking his head and walking backwards. "Never. I don't get you, man. You just don't get it."

And Bob started walking out the mouth of the barn and toward the road. his animals behind. Jorge watched him for a minute, but knowing Bob would soon be gone and that he'd be going home to a quiet, empty house and he'd have no one else to ask, he yelled, "Will my brother be OK?" after Bob.

"No," Bob yelled without turning. "He was blue, dude."

Jorge thought of crying, felt the pressure of it somewhere behind his eyes. He waited till he couldn't see Bob anymore, till he was sure Bob wouldn't hear, and let it pop out of him, his lips flapping, his tears hot on his cold face.

He rubbed his coat sleeve over his face to get the wet streams then under his nose, and because it was a long walk, he started it. He kicked his way through the stubbled over cornfield, the cold making his feet heavy.

He didn't mean to hurt his brother, he told himself, sure he hadn't meant to, and hoped, because there was a chance, he told himself, that he'd find the lights on when he got to the house. The car in the drive. His brother, unfrozen and breathing in his bed.

But when he peaked the last hill, the windows were dark. And when he went in, just wandering with his boots, his coats, his snowpants still on, hoping to hear coughs or clinks or whispers anywhere, he didn't.

He plopped himself down in the couch, exhausted and frozen, and stared at the dark Christmas tree, the new wrapped boxes under it. Just a half dozen of them. The one Xbox sized box towering over the others. He looked away from it. He wanted to stomp on it and kick it.

He wanted to sit, still, too tired to even lay down. But he looked at the boxes again.

And he stood, pulling the afghan from the couch back with him as he did. He drug it to the tree. Laid it out and stacked the presents in the middle, pulled the edges together, made a bindle and put it on his back. Like Santa, he thought for a minute, then shook that thought off.

He went out again. He trudged through the stubbled over cornfield, past the abandoned barn, through the woods, around its downed and rotted trunks, over the shells of puddled ice, to the hill above the pond, and down to the hole they'd made. That he'd made. And he set the afghan down and its presents beside the hole and sat on his knees next to it. He pulled the smaller packages out first, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, he told himself, and flipped each one

in, poked them till they would sink. Till there was just the big box. He looked from it to the hole, the black that had swallowed their sled and his brother, and then he nudged it in.

