

The Swing

a short story by MARGARET MCMULLAN

Catch lit a joint and smoked it as he drove past the Gulf Coast Pak & Ship, which still had its sun-faded WE SHIP FOR THE HOLIDAYS sign up from last year. It was Friday, Christmas Eve, and he was going to fetch his holiday bonus from Mr. Zimmer in the big yellow house, his last paycheck for the week. Squinting from all the light coming off the Gulf, Catch smiled, and his fingers slid along the steering wheel, anticipating those crisp, new bills Mr. Zimmer would count out from his silver money clip.

He passed the old-people's home, and through his open window he could smell the stuffing and sweet potatoes cooking. He always did like mushy food, and he laughed, thinking about what a good old person he would be. He snuffed out his joint, slipping the charred nub into a Ziploc bag for later, and reached into the passenger seat for some cheese crackers and beef jerky. He still had the open box of satsuma oranges and divinity cookies from Mrs. Gimbel and the sugared pecans from Mrs. Anderson. He'd save those for later. A man on a bicycle wearing a Santa hat waved, and Catch waved back.

In the Zimmers' drive, Catch slammed his truck door shut, straightened his hat, and laughed out loud at the Christmas display on the lawn next door: Santa was riding in his sleigh, holding a whip to the reindeer, while two white wire angels with flashlights stood in front of the sleigh, looking like those people who guide planes in for landings. The Zimmers didn't go for outdoor holiday decorations, and this, combined with their last name, had made Catch think at first that they were Jewish, but it turned out they were Lutherans.

Around back the Zimmers' grown daughter was swimming laps in the heated pool, steam dancing off the surface of the water. She slogged back and forth without once stopping or looking up. The daughter's young son sat in a wheelbarrow parked next to the pool, reading a science book bigger than his head.

"Hey, partner," Catch said.

"Hey," the boy said, his mouth going back into the little green scarf someone had wound around his neck. What was his name again? He was tiny and blond, and his eyes were big like his mother's, and his mother's mother's. He looked like he wanted to smile but couldn't; like he thought he had to ask permission.

"Excited about all the presents you're going to get?"

The boy nodded. There was silence, and then the boy asked, "How are you?"

Catch wasn't accustomed to a seven-year-old talking this way, and he had to get used to the boy again. Teddy — that was his name. This kid wasn't stupid and not a bit shy, but if the Zimmers weren't careful, he was going to turn into a wormy, womany sissy. Catch liked to give it to him straight. "How am

I, you say? Could be better. Could be worse. I'm still standing. Still breathing. I call that a victory."

Teddy looked curiously at Catch, then tucked his mouth back into his scarf.

Catch inspected the green yard he'd seeded with rye grass a month earlier. He'd learned to anticipate what homeowners needed. There were a lot of house-proud people in this neighborhood. Catch could fit five trailers like his inside the Zimmers' house. He didn't know where all the money that had landed on this street came from, but he figured either out-of-state sugar or oil. Nobody ever made that kind of money in Mississippi; you had to leave, make your money, then bring it back with you. Some of these folks lived on the Gulf year-round, but there were others, like the Zimmers, who came down for the winter. They needed a local to keep up the house and the lawn. Catch often wondered why the Zimmers kept coming back here, why they didn't get a place in, say, California.

The little porch on the martin house was rotting off. The birdhouse was made to look like the big house, and Catch felt obligated to keep it looking as nice, but Mr. Zimmer wanted him to concentrate on the big jobs: trimming the boxwood around the tennis court and cutting back the line of bamboo. Last Christmas, Mrs. Zimmer had ordered a fancy swing from a catalog, but with so much on her mind, she'd left it outside on the ground for a month, and after several heavy rains, the seat had cupped and split. Catch had told Mrs. Zimmer he could make a better swing himself anyway. Leave it to him; he'd get around to it. He'd even picked the perfect live oak to hang it in.

The Zimmers' kitchen door opened, and oniony smells wafted out; there was Mrs. Zimmer, looking frantic.

"Catch," she said. "Oh, I'm so glad you're here." She gave him an envelope. "That's for the month, and there's your bonus, too. Now, I know it's your day off, but I need you today and tonight. Could you help? Please? The lawn needs mowing again, and we can't put up the tree by ourselves. We've got guests coming over at six. And tomorrow's Christmas. I just don't know if I can manage. Do you want to come in for coffee? Have you had breakfast?"

Mrs. Zimmer wasn't quite like the other retired women. Lady up the street wouldn't even let Catch inside her house; at lunchtime she opened a can of Vienna sausages and dumped them out on a paper plate, then handed the plate to Catch with some saltines, like she was feeding a cat. Catch was a white yard man. He wondered what that woman had fed the black men who'd worked for her before him.

Catch tipped his hat, said he'd had breakfast, and sure, he could take the mower for a once-around.

Riding the John Deere, he lit the rest of his joint: just



enough to make the morning feel like a celebration. The air was cold and hurt Catch's teeth. At least it wasn't August or September, when he would have been sweating into his eyes. Riding a mower and smoking some weed the day before Christmas suited Catch just fine. Pot was the only drug he liked to mess with. His former boss at the lumberyard had had a bad cocaine habit. Catch could deal with just about anything but that. One morning his boss had knocked the cowboy hat off Catch's head and lit into him, yelling and waving a knife. Catch

punched him in the face, good and solid, then picked up his hat and left. That was the end of that job.

After Catch had finished mowing, he went back up to the house to see what else Mrs. Zimmer needed. She stepped outside, holding on to the screen door so it wouldn't slam. Catch thought she seemed to be moving much better after the hip surgery. She had put on a few pounds, but the weight looked good on her. So did the tangerine lipstick and the blue flowered dress. Mrs. Zimmer didn't study Catch the way the

other old women did, the way Catch was used to being studied. He knew what they thought of him. He lived alone; he drank. Some knew about the dope, but most didn't. Everyone knew he was quick to anger. He got into fights. He got kicked out of places. Some might have felt sorry for him. He knew he wasn't *happy* happy. He knew people studied his kind of unhappiness — he didn't want to call it “*unhappiness*” or “*depression*” or “*post-traumatic stress disorder*”: he'd been like this before the two tours in Vietnam.

“I know this is your day off, Catch, but can you help with the tree too?”

“Help” meant put it up. Mrs. Zimmer liked to tell people Catch “helped” with the yard and the gardening when, in fact, he did it all. He never bothered correcting her, of course.

The tree lay on the back porch, or what Mrs. Zimmer called “the gallery,” and Catch knelt on the cold marble and screwed last year's stand onto it. Upright, the tree was small and bushy. He wondered how much the old lady had paid. She'd probably been ripped off.

“Oh, it's perfect,” she said as he hauled it in from the porch.

He would have gotten a bigger one, taller. Why else have twelve-foot ceilings like that?

“Can you put on the strings of lights too? We're only doing red and silver decorations this year.”

Catch opened the lights and colored balls and put them all on the tree. At the last minute, the old woman gave him one more box to hang: twelve sea-glass ornaments, a gift from some woman named Nelia.

“Oh, that's perfect, Catch, perfect. I don't know how you do it.” She handed him a package.

“Thank you, Mrs. Z. You oughtn't have,” he said, thinking the bundle felt too light for a ham.

“I was wondering if you could put it on. For tonight. We're hoping you could play Santa at the party. It just wouldn't be Christmas without a Santa.”

Catch opened the package. It was a lot of red inside.

“You'll be a Victorian Saint Nick,” she said, staring down at the red velvet suit in his hands. “It wasn't a cheapie.”

Outside, the daughter was still swimming laps in the pool. It made Catch's head hurt just watching her. Why did people make their lives more difficult than they already were?

Catch drove home to eat lunch and think. He lived in a trailer park but was saving up for a nice brick ranch house on the bay. He wanted his own dock and a motorboat, so he could go fishing first thing in the morning, maybe take the boat to Wolf River if he had a mind to.

He boiled three hot dogs and, still carrying the Santa package, took a seat on the lone aluminum chair out front. There was no grass, but he kept the ground swept. He didn't mind the passing trains so much anymore, not when he thought of how he would have the boat soon enough. Between his trailer and the train tracks he grew tomatoes and peppers in tires, coffee cans, and milk jugs cut in half. He breathed in the smell of sweet olive, magnolia, and pine, then popped open a beer. He knew he drank too much, because lately he felt old in the mornings. One day he'd quit.

Part of the beard hung from the package, tickling his thigh. He opened the box. The beard was big and curly, but they'd skimped on the boots: vinyl flaps that strapped onto a regular shoe. There were some things that just shouldn't be.

Mrs. Zimmer was waiting for him on the front porch, and when she saw Catch in the suit but still wearing his work boots, she said no, no. She noticed things like shoes. He strapped on the flaps.

Mrs. Zimmer led Catch into the house through the front door. The living room was all lit up, and there were more people there than he'd expected: older people with no kids, neighbors from front and back and sideways. He mowed lawns for many of them, maybe one square mile all together. Shrimp and oysters on the half shell sat for the taking in a big crystal bowl full of ice. He didn't know why the Zimmers put out such a fine spread for people he was sure didn't appreciate it. Why didn't they just do like that old man down the street did? On Christmas Day, he gave any relative who came by a hundred dollars. Catch got fifty and a pie. No fuss, no muss.

“Pardon me,” Teddy said. He had a gap in his smile where his two front teeth were out; the new teeth were coming in crooked. “Are you Santa Claus?”

“You bet, partner. How about you tell me what you want for Christmas.”

“I think you're supposed to sit down first,” the boy said. Mr. Zimmer came into the room with two drinks. “But not in that chair. Grandfather doesn't like for people to sit on that chair. It's from some other century, not this one.”

Mr. Zimmer told Teddy to get Santa some gumbo, and he led Catch to a big leather wing-back chair and put a hot toddy in his hand. Then Mr. Zimmer counted out three twenties, a ten, and a five from the wad of money in his clip. No wallet, this guy. Catch tucked the cash into the pocket of his red velvet suit and sipped the toddy. He overheard a lot of talk about the hurricanes they'd had in Florida that year: Charley and Frances. “They had to gut Emma's condo because of the mold,” one woman said to Mrs. Zimmer. Teddy came with a cup of gumbo. Catch took a taste. Someone in that kitchen knew how to burn a roux good. Lord Almighty! Right now, he could drink up the afternoon.

One wall of the room was all glass, and Catch could see the whole Gulf of Mexico from where he sat. Even though the water was polluted, it was pretty to look at and think on. When he'd been married, he and Linda would spread out a blanket and picnic there on the beach, smoke a little weed, then lie back, close their eyes, and just listen. It was only a drab little spot of sand, but the sound of the water was just the same as it would have been on some Hawaiian island. Those were the best nights in Pass Christian — you all but forgot about the poisons in the water.

(end of excerpt)