

**THE LIGHT**  
by  
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Ishmael was dying. He had known it from the very instant that his proud stallion had missed his footing on the tortuous winding trail. In that agonizing split-second, when horse and rider hung suspended against the blood-red sun, Ishmael had screamed to Allah, then plummeted to the valley floor.

Accusing eyes burned with an icy fury. Ishmael shrank from their all knowing glare... Wait! Were those not the stars? Allah be praised! God had stretched out His merciful hand. Somehow he lived. It was a miracle. But how? Why?

He felt no pain. Slowly, but with the certain clarity of a dying man, Ishmael understood that he would not move again. As the life ebbed from his broken body, he remembered his scream and began to chuckle. He would proudly take his place among his most revered ancestors- there had been no dishonour. In the surety of facing his imminent end, he had cried out, yes, but not as a cowardly dog whimpering for mercy. Ishmael had screamed as a man; in rage.

He closed his eyes and was gripped in a wave of panic. He had sought the darkness of mortal rest, peace, and found instead a strange new awareness. No, it could not be. The heavens seemed to vibrate in shared amusement. Was God laughing too? Ishmael began to regret his proud scream. Nowhere in the sacred writings could he recall Allah accused of having a sense of humour. Was God punishing him for his impudence by forcing him, Ishmael, richest of all Bedouin kings, to live as a helpless cripple? The awareness retreated and Ishmael again found himself drawn to the brilliant night sky.

Yes, he was relieved to note that it was colder now. Doubt slowly gave way to a resigned sigh of invitation. This time, awareness flooded through him with a comforting urgency. It was not laughter, but joy.

With a start, Ishmael remembered the narrow path to the sleepy Hebrew trading village and thought of the contents of his bulging trader's pack- gold, frankincense, myrrh- enough to buy a dozen of the finest stallions and breeding mares. It was a mere fraction of his family's skilfully acquired fortune. They would not suffer. Already, his three sons were less than a day's hard ride behind and the path was not well travelled. Ishmael smiled with a father's pride. His sons- they had taken leave of their mother as beardless youths. They would return to their tribe as worldly kings.

Once more, his eyes were closed. This time, the welcome awareness brought with it the blessed light of knowledge. Embraced in the soothing glow, Ishmael found understanding- in the mysterious ebb and flow of the tides, the meaning of the seasons, in things so distant and in things so near... and as he reached for the hand of God, the final veils were lifted. In a singular cleansing moment, Ishmael was transformed and it was known... Praise be to Allah, it truly was...



"... a miracle! Unto you, a child is born." In the peaceful Hebrew valley, songs of joy swept through the narrow streets of Bethlehem, while far overhead, a brilliant new star bathed the surrounding hills in Holy Light.

## JUST ANOTHER POOR BOY

by  
Wayne A. Coppin

"I hope you will all have a safe and merry Christmas holiday...", Miss Scrooge, actually it was Miss Skuce but the nickname was inevitable at this time of year, was practically shouting in order to be heard over the excited din. "... and your assignment will be..." The chatter quickly turned to exaggerated groans. Old lady Scrooge waited while the protests subsided, then continued, "Your assignment will be to write a poem, any style, on what this Christmas means to you. Please have it ready to turn in when we return from the break. Class dismissed!"

'Scrooge to the bitter end', thought David as he carelessly stuffed his English notebook into his blue, nylon knapsack. The last of his 'browner' classmates scurried out the door and a sly grin began to spread across his boyish features. David hated homework even more than he hated his snooty, rich classmates.

"What about me, Miss Skuce?", David's black eyes shone in anticipation. "My family is Buddhist. We don't celebrate Christmas."

It was a lie, of course, but old Scrooge would be none the wiser. David's grandparents had left Japan shortly after the holocaust of Hiroshima. His parents, trapped in a succession of menial jobs because of their poor English, had insisted that their son adopt exclusively Canadian customs. Every Sunday, for as long as he could remember, David and his parents had trudged the two blocks to the graffiti covered Christian church in the heart of the ghetto.

Miss Skuce fixed David with a penetrating, yet sympathetic gaze that seemed to draw the lie right out of him. He felt himself blushing and lowered his eyes in disgust. 'So much for that inscrutable Oriental crud.', he thought.

"The assignment specifically asks for what this holiday season means to you.", snapped Miss Skuce. "Perhaps the class could benefit from your unique cultural perspective."

David was not sure if the subtle stressing of the word 'unique' was meant to refer to his Japanese heritage or to the fact that he lived in the seedy Mission district. The rest of the kids came from the 'burbs. One thing was clear- he was stuck with the assignment. In fact, it was now worse. He could not even throw together some junk about Santa Claus, Christmas trees and turkey dinners.

"I've got to catch my bus.", he mumbled as he stiffly retreated. He did not notice his teacher's faint smile.

The bus was not crowded and David was soon lost in his own irritated thoughts. The all too familiar glare of the lights of the strip seemed to suck them inexorably deeper into the city core. David closed his eyes and tried to suppress an involuntary shudder.

With a start, he glanced over at the seat next to his. David had not noticed the old man get on. The fool was muttering to him in Japanese.

David made no attempt to hide his irritation. "You're in Canada now, old man.", he snapped.

"Forgive me, young master. I do not wish to intrude but is Christmas not a Canadian season to express joy?" The old man had turned his angry reply away with such grace that David could not help but feel ashamed.

"Sorry, old man." David could feel his frustrations draining away. "We can't afford Christmas this year. My parents are not well off and Mother is pregnant again."

The old man seemed to be gathering his thoughts and they rode in silence past a number of stops. When at long last he did speak, it was little more than a whisper, "Does the Holy Book not speak of the birth of the Master of Masters?"

"That's what the Bible says Christmas is all about, old man; the birth of Jesus.", David patiently explained.

"Is it not also true, young master, that Jesus was born in the most humble of stables?", asked the old man.

David nodded.

"It has been so long...", the old man's voice had trailed so that David had to strain to hear. "Does not the Bible also say that the lowliest are as the highest in the eyes of the One?"

Again, David could only nod in agreement.

"Ah, then perhaps, young master, you may yet afford to celebrate this Christmas." The old man's slight bow signalled the end of the conversation.

David turned back to the brightly lit stores and smiled ruefully to himself. Santa was not going to drop a shiny new ten speed down his chimney this year. He wondered if his father would even be able to afford a turkey for Christmas dinner.

David closed his eyes and remembered last year's candle lit feast. It had not been a large bird but everyone had agreed that it was the best they had ever tasted. Mother had fussed in the kitchen all day and was barely able to conceal her delight. Father had proudly led the family in the saying of grace.

His stomach gave out an embarrassing growl and David was suddenly aware that he was hungry. To save money, he had been skipping lunches. Perhaps the old man was right after all. There might be enough coin put aside to buy a small turkey. He turned to thank the old man and was surprised to see that he had gone.

David's stop was only a couple of blocks from home but tonight, with the raw December wind in his face, the short hike seemed painfully trying. Taking the stairs two at a time, he burst into the cheerful warmth of what appeared to be a family party. Still numb from the cold, it took a few seconds to finally register.

"Congratulations, my boy..." "... this afternoon... a boy!" Everyone seemed to be talking at once.

In the midst of the joyous chaos stood his father, beaming from ear to ear and proudly accepting the traditional best wishes. Already the small apartment was jammed and still the guests continued to arrive. The kitchen table was laden with turkey and ham as well as more traditional Japanese cuisine. In the living room, the gifts under the small tree seemed to grow with each passing minute. Christmas carols, enthusiastically sung in out of key English and Japanese, were punctuated with saki toasts honouring David's mother, father and new baby brother.

It was well past midnight before David found himself at last alone in his room. In the excitement, he had forgotten the assignment, his irritation, the old man... the strange old man... It was as if he had known.

David began to feel a wave of understanding building inside- Miss Skuce, the old man, his new baby brother. Of course, it had been there all along.

He tiptoed out to the kitchen, borrowed a leaf of his father's rice paper and sat down at the table. Dipping the ancient pen in jet black ink, David carefully began to reproduce the subtle Japanese characters:

