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Author's Note: This story is a response to a 2008 Christmas challenge.

"Let Nothing You Dismay"

by Thompson Girl

"Haven't you read your Dickens?" Littlejohn demanded.

"My what?" Kirby asked.

"*A Christmas Carol.*"

Kirby perked up. "Which one? 'White Christmas'? 'Jingle Bells'? 'Silent Night'?"

"Kirby."

"Annnnh, I know what you mean. It's a story."

Littlejohn sat up straighter. "Kirby, you surprise me."

"Why? I went to school too, ya know. Ol' Ebenezer Scrooge. Ghost of Christmas Past, and all that."

"Do you hear that, Doc?" Littlejohn said.

"I hear it," Doc said, grinning, "but I'm not sure I believe it."

"Whoa, hold on a minute." Kirby took a rapid step back from them both. "This doesn't mean I'm volunteering."

"But you went to school too, you know," Littlejohn said, his tone innocent. "You know all about those Ghosts and such. You just said so."

"I ain't being in any play you're putting on, Littlejohn. Surefire disaster."

"This is for the kids, Kirby," Littlejohn said. "Have you no heart?"

"They don't even understand English. You want to help 'em so bad, give 'em some chocolate bars or something."

"The way you gave Bijou some chocolate?"

"Now, that ain't fair."

Littlejohn frowned at him and shook his head. "You're one of the most selfish guys I've ever met, you know that, Kirby?"

"Annnnhh," Kirby muttered. "You aren't going to guilt me into acting in your stupid play."

"Not even for the kids?" Littlejohn turned his head to look at the cluster of ragged youngsters sitting together, backs against a wall. A couple were wearing oversized jackets and jeep caps given to them by the G.I.s. The rest wore what looked like scrounged civilian sweaters and clothes. One of them held the leash to a grey goat that looked as scrawny and starved as the kids. Kirby thought he'd never seen such a bedraggled, forlorn bunch of kids in all his life. What they needed was a hot meal, a

bath, a warm bed, and a roof over their heads. A play? What on earth good would that do anybody? Why people paid good money for the theater back home was beyond him. He could think of a hundred better ways to spend hard-earned dough than taking in some show. Well, that also depended on the show....

He rubbed at his stubbled jaw and looked away from the rag-tag collection of strays Littlejohn had gathered. "Give 'em to the Red Cross," he said.

"I would if the Red Cross were here."

"You got an answer for everything, don't you?" Kirby complained.

"Except how to get you to pull your weight around here."

"It's a stupid play!" Kirby exploded, jumping to his feet. "It's the dumbest idea I ever heard."

"Would you rather sing Christmas carols?"

"Yes!" Kirby snapped. "At least them kids might appreciate music."

"Not with you singing it."

Kirby glared at him, then shook his head. He picked up his B.A.R. and slung it over his shoulder before stalking away, carefully not looking back. If he'd looked back, he knew he would have seen the kids again, young, homeless. Orphans, the whole lot of them.

And the thought only made him angry again. A play. Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. What in blue blazes did Littlejohn think he was doing even suggesting such a ridiculous thing? What, was the squad aspiring to get transferred to the USO? It was just plain stupid. Kids didn't want to be talked at on Christmas, particularly in a language they couldn't understand. They wanted parents and a tree and presents. If Littlejohn had suggested they round up something closer to that, Kirby might have gone along with it. But not this, and not that particular play.

He didn't know why, but his thoughts turned to writing, to letters he hadn't written. He knew his mother worried, but what was he supposed to tell her? In his mind, he thought:

Dear Ma, we're bivouacked in another town I don't know the name of. I should be keeping score. It might be one way to measure the progress to Berlin... all these faceless towns. So many look alike too. I'm not sure they would if they were in one piece. But blown to bits like this... a few streets of rubble here look just like a few streets of rubble over there.

One of the other guys in the squad found a bunch of kids. Ma, it'd break your heart to see these kids. They got nothing left, just the clothes on their back, and those are scavenged from who knows where. Christmas is almost here, and I keep thinking of that ham you'll be baking. I keep thinking what these kids would do if I could just sit them down at one of your Christmas suppers. I wonder how their eyes would light up. I think they would wait patient-like for their plates to be dished. Maybe not from real patience, but from that fear that it's not real, that this feast is about to be snatched away from them again.

And it would be, Kirby thought, breaking off his thoughts abruptly. Because it was all a fantasy. It wouldn't feed the kids, it wouldn't feed him, and if he really wrote that to his mother, and if it made it past the censors, it really *would* break her heart. He couldn't do that. Not to her, not to Ruthie -- who'd be the one who'd have to comfort her. He'd have to explain his lack of letter-writing later, how he just couldn't put things down

in words. But that kind of explaining was something he'd have to do in person.

Dear Ma, I love you too much to write about what's happening over here...

When he was home again, when he was standing in her kitchen, she'd ask him questions, and she'd understand from the look in his eye and on his face a bit of what he had gone through, and she wouldn't ask any more questions. Ruthie wouldn't understand, but his mother would. She had suffered enough of her own to recognize a kindred spirit. She'd just nod once, purse her lips, and then feed him the biggest and best meal he'd seen since leaving for boot camp. And that night, she'd cry herself to sleep, and he'd hear her muffled sobs through the thin wall and he'd lie there, listening, until he remembered that Joe O'Reilly had written him that he'd opened a bar down on 4th street, and he'd quietly get dressed and head down to check it out.

He kicked angrily at a broken wooden board lying in his path.

Life wasn't that predictable, he wanted to argue, but people were creatures of habit. He knew how it would be when he got home. He knew as if it had already happened.

None of that helped him now. Littlejohn was still chafing at the bit, playing two-bit producer for a scroungy production of a play no one wanted to see. Kirby couldn't avoid him forever, much as he wanted to. He almost hoped something would happen, that orders would come down that they needed to move out immediately. That would put the kibosh on Littlejohn's stupid plans.

He strode away again, reached the end of town, and circled back down another street. He'd already staked claim to a dress shop that had a tiny apartment upstairs. Not just a warm bed with handmade blankets, but a wood burning stove too. He could not only heat his rations until they might actually be edible, but the room would be cozy warm. And he had no intention of sharing. He would just report for duty the next morning, appearing like the rest of the squad, only he would have had a warmer, more enjoyable night than any of them.

You're one of the most selfish guys I've ever met, you know that, Kirby?

Littlejohn's words echoed in his mind as he thought of the apartment he didn't want to share, and he stopped. Were his actions really that selfish? He thought a night alone where he could really get some sleep wasn't selfish, it was self-preservation. He'd been waiting to discover a little hiding place like that for what felt like weeks, waiting for a town deserted enough that there were houses to spare and the squad would be able to spread out, not share crowded floor space in some lousy barn. He wanted some place he could get away from everybody. Not have to talk, to smile, laugh, tell jokes. A place to find himself again. No, it wasn't selfish, he thought. It was necessary if he was going to maintain his sanity. That's all there was to it.

On his way there, he stopped and collected an armful of broken wood. He made sure no one saw him as he slipped back into the dressmaker's shop. Four faceless mannequins stood guard inside. He headed up the narrow staircase to the tiny landing, kicked the door open with a booted foot and stepped into his own private accommodations. The wood went into a box near the stove. He double-checked the room, but found no evidence that anyone had paid him a visit while he was out. The apartment was still his own private billet.

Contented, he pulled the curtains over the windows, then reattached the blanket the previous owner had pinned over it to keep out any light. Some magazine pages,

balled and stuffed under the wood, caught flame instantly when he applied a match, and a roaring little fire crackled to life. He rubbed his hands before it, shut the door most of the way and got comfortable. Jacket, boots, and socks off. Gear and B.A.R. set carefully next to the bed. He opened up his C-Rations and spooned them into a pan on top of the stove. While dinner heated, he took the B.A.R. apart and thoroughly cleaned it. When it was to his satisfaction, he sat on the floor, put his back against the bed mattress, and stretched bare feet out to warm before the fire. It would get too warm in a hurry, but he reveled in it. After the last four nights in a cold, wet foxhole, he thought this really was heaven.

He tried to keep his thoughts from straying to the rest of the squad, and, most importantly, from remembering the faces of those kids. After all, they weren't the first he'd seen, and they certainly wouldn't be the last.

The rations were more edible than normal, and he ate everything. Off a plate out of the cupboard instead of in his mess kit too. He wondered if that didn't make it taste better right there.

He stocked up the wood stove, let its bellied walls radiate heat, then he climbed onto the bed, still in his clothes. His head had no sooner hit the soft pillow, then his eyes closed. He didn't think he'd ever felt something that good before. Between exhaustion, the sheer comfort of the bed, and the too-warm temperature of the room, he was asleep almost seconds later.

An unpleasant dream of smothering, of not being able to breathe woke him. The room seemed too bright. He pushed himself up on his elbows, squinting in the unexpected glare, trying to see what was going on. A girl with white-blond hair stood beside the bed, and he jumped at her proximity. Never mind the fact that she was glowing. And had wings.

He squinched his eyes shut, then opened them again. She was still there, only now she didn't seem so young any longer. Her face was full of a terrible sadness, a lined, thin face that he didn't know how he had mistaken for a young girl's. She was probably old enough to be his mother. Or not... when he blinked, she seemed young again. He gave up trying to decipher it. "Who are you?" he asked.

"I am the Angel of Christmas," she said.

"Angel?" he said. "You're not a ghost? Christmas Past and all that?"

She didn't seem to find the humor in that.

Kirby went on, "Well, the story says... You know, *A Christmas Carol*. My friend Littlejohn's trying to put on that play tomorrow. For the kids. You're part of it, right? In that getup, you gotta be. Your accent's American. You a nurse or something?" He swung his feet onto the floor, but quickly yanked them back up onto the bed again. The floor seemed to be blazing hot. The girl glowed brighter.

"Your friend'..." she echoed. "Is he your friend?"

He squinted at her distrustfully. Had Littlejohn put her up to this? Where would Littlejohn have met a nurse anyway? But to be on the safe side, he said, "Yeah, he's my friend."

"I wonder," she said.

"Why?" he said, angrily. "Sure we have words now and then, but we stick up for each other out there."

"Then why do you mock his play?"

So, she did know about that. "Is it hot in here?" Kirby asked. He unbuttoned his shirt.

"Why do you mock his play?"

"None of your business."

"Why?" Her voice was gentle, but persistent.

"Because he's just wasting our time," Kirby said. "Putting on a play in English for a bunch of French kids? What's the point? What's he going to do, have Cajé stand by and translate everything?"

"Why?" she asked again.

"I just told you--"

"That's not why."

Kirby stared at her. The heat was rolling at him in waves now, almost unbearable. He turned around and reached up to the narrow window, yanked the blanket down, and tried to push it open. It wouldn't budge. He should have thought of checking that earlier. "It's hot in here," he muttered.

"Tell me why?"

"You sound like a broken record."

"Then answer!"

"Because it won't help the kids any, that's why."

She shook her head, her pale straight hair tossing around her shoulders, her wings flaring out to either side, bright, so bright he cringed back against the wall and tried to look away. "No, Kirby. That's not why."

He felt a sudden shiver, even as he wiped the sweat out of his eyes. It was as if she already knew.

"I do," she answered his unspoken thought. "I told you, I'm no ghost. I am the Angel of Christmas. I have *seen* you."

"No," Kirby whispered.

"You were twelve that Christmas Past. Old enough to know better." The last was said softly, almost an admonishment.

He shook his head again. "They *made* me be Ebenezer Scrooge," he said defensively. "In the school play."

"But Scrooge is the star. It was your name on the program above all the others."

"That's not why they did it."

"They thought you'd learn a lesson."

"O! Miss Penniger did. She thought I'd benefit from being Scrooge in the play. I learned all my lines."

"You learned them well," the angel agreed. "But you didn't go through with it."

"I did!" Kirby objected. "Well, until the end. Then I changed the story."

"You made the boy playing Tiny Tim cry with your cruel words. Why did you do that?"

"I didn't think Scrooge would just change like that."

"No," her voice was harsh again. "Why do you lie so much?"

"All right, all right! I didn't want to change like that, awright?" Kirby said. Why was it so darned hot in there? "O! Miss Penniger put me in that role, she wanted me to feel what Scrooge felt, and... I did. And it wasn't fair. I didn't want to feel that. Where I grew up... kindness got you nothing. Oh, I learned her lesson all right. And then I tried

my best to unlearn it."

"And that," she said primly, "is your past. This is your present. What will you do in the play this time?"

"I'm not doing that stupid play!"

"This is your present," she repeated. "You choose which lessons you want to pass on now."

He stared at her.

"I am also your future," she said.

"My future?" For some reason, that took his breath away, made him swallow in fear. "What is my future?"

"You have none," she said. "Unless you believe in your friends."

"Why?" he asked. His throat was parched, dry as desert sand. He couldn't breathe around the lump of fear in his throat. He suddenly dreaded her answer more than anything else in the world.

"Because," she said. "Only they can save you now."

She vanished, and Kirby bolted awake, sitting up on the bed. For a moment, he thought he was still dreaming. The room was brilliant with her glow, and the heat... the incredible heat still seared him. Sweat ran down his body. He blinked again, trying to find her in the glare... and he finally, truly, separated dreams from reality and realized the room was on fire. There was no ghost, no angel, no whatever she was. Just the roar of burning timbers as the apartment burned up around him. He realized why he hadn't been able to breathe in the dream. The place had been on fire for awhile; he'd been inhaling smoke.

His eyes watered. He choked, gasping, coughing, trying to suck in clean air and only inhaling more smoke. He pulled a sleeve over his nose and mouth, to help filter the air. He knew he needed to get lower to the ground, but when he tried to get off the bed, he let out a yell as the floorboards burnt his foot. Heat waves shimmered between him and the apartment door. The throw rug that had been on the wood floor before the stove had gone up in flames. Abruptly, he realized he'd never closed the door to the wood burning stove. Some ember must have sparked out, landed on the rug. The far wall gave in to the roaring flames and collapsed outward, with a terrible creaking and groaning. Fresh air rushed in, but at the same time, the oxygen fed the flames and the fire spread, feeding on the roof and floorboards.

Standing on the bed, he tried to open the small wide window. As in the dream, it wouldn't budge. He coughed again, then hit the glass with his elbow. It took three blows before he shattered it. Glass sliced the back of his arm right through his shirt. He sucked in a lungful of air before shouting for help. The window overlooked an alley, but the dressmaker's shop wasn't too far off the main road. He shouted again, his voice hoarse from the smoke.

It came to him then that he did not know where in the town anyone else had scavenged their lodgings for the night. And that no one knew where he was. Because he had wanted to be alone so badly, he hadn't wanted to share this perfect apartment with another human being. Because he'd felt he'd earned it for himself. Nothing else had mattered. Nothing.

And you're going to die because you wanted to keep this place to yourself.

What had the girl said? Only his friends could save him now?

Why would they want to? he asked himself. Who cared what happened to him? He'd insulted Littlejohn, told him his play was a lousy idea -- not because it was, but because it simply brought up bad memories for him. Why would Littlejohn or Doc or Cajé or any of them come for him?

Still, he shouted and shouted, the heat scorched his back as the roof over his head flared up. He dropped into a crouch on the bed, eyes darting around the room looking for an escape route that did not exist. Only the apartment door, now just a blackened hole in the wall. He'd have to try for it despite the burning floor. It was that or burn up where he was.

He blinked, and when he looked at the doorway again, a man stood there -- Littlejohn. He had one arm thrown up to protect his face and he was peering into the smoke and flames. "Kirby!" he shouted.

"Here!" Kirby shouted back. Part of the roof fell on him, and he pushed the boards off him, burning his hand. The bed caught fire where they landed.

He looked back but Littlejohn was gone. The doorway was empty. Kirby's shoulders slumped. Littlejohn had fled the flames -- rightfully so. Who wouldn't leave to save himself when faced with the burning apartment? Kirby started to sink back onto the bed, then he caught himself. What was he thinking? No, he did believe in his friends. Littlejohn hadn't deserted him, *couldn't* desert him. Littlejohn had never deserted anybody in his life. It was not in his nature. He'd simply gone for help or--

"Kirby!" Littlejohn called, and Kirby wanted to whoop. The big man had returned with a handful of blankets. "I'm going to throw these down on the floor!" he shouted over the noise of the fire. "They'll give you just a couple seconds to cross before they catch fire too."

"Do it!" Kirby shouted back.

Littlejohn tossed them down, and the flaming floor vanished under wool. "Now!"

Kirby didn't need to be told, he jumped off the bed, running. The blankets may have stopped the flames, but they didn't stop the heat, and he cried out in pain as he felt the fire sear the bottom of his bare feet. But the room was tiny, it only took him five steps to reach the door. He barreled into Littlejohn, who stopped his momentum and kept him from going right over the landing. Littlejohn gave him a shove down the stairs and followed right behind him. "Hurry!" he called.

Kirby soon saw why. Locked in the apartment, he'd missed the bigger picture. The fire had spread through the rest of the shop faster than it had his direction. The whole place was going up. Littlejohn had a hand on his arm, to steer him or catch him, Kirby wasn't sure which, but they ran out the door and straight into the arms of the rest of the squad. Cajé had a wet blanket that he wrapped immediately around Kirby, who let himself fall then, trusting them to catch him, not able to stay on his burned feet another second. Doc flung another blanket around Littlejohn, patting out the parts of his uniform that were smoldering. They hurried away from the burning building, down the street where they could see the glow, and hear the voracious appetite of the fire, but could no longer feel it.

"Kirby," Littlejohn said, "you okay?"

Now that he was away from the heat, Kirby realized how much he hurt all over. "How'd you know...?"

"What," Littlejohn said. "that you were in trouble?"

Kirby nodded.

"I don't know. When we saw the smoke rising... I just knew. The fire was so bad I almost couldn't get in the building to search for you."

"Thank you," Kirby said.

Littlejohn looked suddenly embarrassed.

"And I'll do your stupid play," Kirby said.

"No," Littlejohn said. "You were right. It was a dumb idea."

"No, it's not," Kirby said. "I was just talking. I didn't mean what I said. Besides," he added. "I know Scrooge's lines. Or I used to. I can make up the ones I don't."

"You what?" Littlejohn asked.

Kirby laughed. It hurt everywhere to do it, burned flesh chafed against the blanket, and his lungs still ached from smoke. "It's a long story," Kirby said. "I'll tell you sometime."

Doc interrupted, "Well, you'd better shut up if you want to do any talking tomorrow, rest your voice. You're already hoarser than a frog. That smoke didn't do you any good."

Kirby nodded and stayed quiet. He could hear other voices approaching that sounded like Saunders and Hanley, and he realized his problems were just beginning. He'd lost all his gear in the fire, absolutely everything he'd owned, his boots, helmet and jacket, the B.A.R.

"You really okay?" Littlejohn asked.

Kirby looked at him and corrected himself. He had no problems at all. Gear could be scrounged up or requisitioned. It was all replaceable. What wasn't, and what was more important than all the rest put together, was friendship. And he had that. He'd had it all along, he realized. He'd just forgotten.

"Yeah," he rasped, and smiled. "I'm fine."

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