

CHRISTOPHER VENTER
OUR SAVIOR IN THE YEAR 2000
LONG RIVER GRADUATE WRITING AWARD

12.14.99

Dear Lord,

I found this typewriter at Judy's tag sale, down the street. And it was only \$5.00. Works perfect, too. As You know, I'm not in the habit of buying things I don't need. I try to be frugal myself. Dad always told me it was a virtue, and with Maggie and Sarah, I want to make sure they're set before I am. I couldn't stand if they were left here in the cold without me. With nothing to go by and no idea where I went or why I would leave them alone on this planet.

I needed something reliable. I can't trust my computer anymore, with what's coming. You know what you have in store for us, Lord, and some of us have caught on, too. We know what You're thinking. We find it glorious.

I only wish M and S were excited about Your coming glory (You don't mind if I call them M and S, do You?). In fact, I can't even get them to talk about it. Not one bit.

I'm sorry to cut this little prayer short. I have to pick up M from practice. I'll have a talk with her in the car.

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I'm back and even the ice cream didn't help. M likes vanilla chocolate swirl from the Dairy Queen. I'm not much of an ice cream man myself. You made me that way, but I guess you made M a little different. (Ice cream tends to hurt my teeth, actually. It's so cold and the teeth You've provided me are quite sensitive. If You recall, I prayed to You when I was seven-years-old and asked if You could make my teeth able to take the ice cream and then the next day I ran into that parked van on my bike—You know, the blue Ford the neighbors had—while I was thinking about Dad and where Dad was and looked up to see if I could see Dad in the clouds and I was suddenly blessed by Your presence when my two front teeth—which, You'll remember, were loose at the time—shot right out of my head and bounced on the ground like a couple of pebbles. You've always been good to me!) M has never had to pray for her ice cream. Even now that she's got braces she'll bite right into it like nobody's business, which I worry about sometimes because if she gets the cone just right she might pop one of those little brackets clean off. She never listens, though. She just rolls her eyes and shakes her head and her

little pigtales (well they're not so little, anymore) thwap her in the cheeks.

I tried to tell her today that something is coming. She asked if it had to do with the year 2000. I told her, "Yes," and she said that her computer teacher, Mr. Kosgrove, took a whole class to explain why the Y2K bug wasn't going to drop planes on us and set off nuclear bombs or cripple the economy because people had had the foresight to fix things so we'd stop all that. She said she wasn't worried at all. And that's how that went.

I don't want to scare her, You know. But the computers are the least of her problems.

12.15.99

Dear Lord,

It's getting colder and colder down here in the basement. I've had to bundle up in the afghan. The one Aunt Phyllis sent after You re-claimed Mom. It's still in very good shape. I have to admit, though, that I wouldn't have picked orange, green and yellow, myself. (To tell the absolute truth, that has something to do with why it's still in good shape after all these years.) But now, I'm grateful for it. It may come in handy, though I hope not for anyone in our house.

I tried talking to S today. She's usually pretty receptive to talking about things. Especially around 5:30 in the morning after we make love. I'm sorry if I write in fragments sometimes. There's no backspace on this old thing. You know how I value a good sentence. I've always valued a good sentence and by always I mean ever since I was six and Dad told me "Son, ain't nobody going to take you seriously if you can't write for s***. You've got to express yourself like you've got a whole brain in your head even if you've only got half of one and half's all anybody really has nowadays," and I'll always remember that because Dad was under the bus an hour later. Sometimes I wonder if that's why You took him back, so I would remember that last thing he said to me. Only You know.

I wish this old typewriter was Dad's, but Mom sold that in the no-good-dead-husband sale a few months after she got engaged to Ernie. (Not to speak ill of her, You understand.) I wish I'd noticed it was on the lawn. I would have prayed for it not to go. I know You would have listened. You could have made it look bad and not worth a buck or invisible or something.

Anyway, S was not in much of a listening mood today. I said, "Honey, can I talk to you about something?" and she said, "No. I'm going to be late. I've got to take a shower and wash my face. Have you been masturbating in the prone position? You took forever. I've heard that masturbating in the prone position makes it so you guys take forever," and I said "No," and she said "Can you make Maggie's pancakes?" and I said that I could. I think I was just preoccupied and that's why S was late. So in any

event, I made M some pancakes.

I tried talking to her again, too, but she didn't really want pancakes and she was sort of upset about that and asked me why I didn't ask her what she wanted for once, because if I wanted her to start acting like a teenager, I should treat her like one and respect her opinions, and I said I didn't know why I didn't ask her. I was just doing as I was told. So she put the pancakes into a big Ziplock (You know, one of the genius ones with the extra strong purple strips) and poured in some syrup and rolled it up into her pocket and ran out to the bus stop.

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I had an interesting conversation at work, Lord. That is, at the Filter Factory (I didn't mean to imply that I'm not always at work for You). Larry meant well. Really, I think he did. But we just aren't quite on the same page, the two of us. After we got finished fixing the boiler back behind the carbon filter room (Black Magic, they call it. I have to say, I don't approve of the nomenclature.) I asked him if he ever had trouble talking to his family about serious subjects like the Rapture, except I didn't quite mention the Rapture part itself.

Now, Larry's a colorful fellow so I'll have to try and paraphrase.

He said, "Is the Pope's shirt in the woods? Sometimes it's like talking to a wall. Except this wall is fast, very fast, flies out the door like a mother in labor. That's the fruitful married life. Marriage! You know if I had it to do over again I would have married my wife just the same. Darn she was sure attractive when she wasn't pushing fifty. Sometimes we'd stay up and talk all night long. Talking and talking until we were all talked out and then we'd talk some more. Nowadays, she ain't talking. She's all talked out for good. She don't like the sausage no more. Funny, marriage! It starts when she don't want to talk about talking, then she buys a little cot for you in the basement and the kid gets a cell phone and starts running up the good decent bill talking to some guy she's probably talking to all night long when she don't come home which is fine by me but then it starts up the cycle again. Marriage is overrated! I mean you can paint a ship house any color but it's still a ship house, you know?" or something like that.

I told him I knew, which wasn't really a lie since I think Larry's heart was in the right place. He was passionate enough, for sure. (Sometimes I worry about Larry's heart when he gets so red you can see his blood burning up through his hair, which isn't that hard since he's blond and hasn't got too much left on top as it is.) Even if I didn't paraphrase Larry I think You'd like him, Lord. I mean, even if You didn't have to love him as one of Your children.

There was this one time before You and I really became close. Larry really helped me out back then. I'm sure You remember. Please remember later.

12.17.99

My Lord,

I think Pastor Stu is getting a little frustrated with me. It's been over a week since he shared his revelation and I still haven't made any headway in talking with M and S.

After the worship tonight, Stu and I sat down for some tea. He has this fancy new water boiler that's set up to squeal just when he walks back to his office. I thought it was a miracle the first time I saw it. Stu told me it was just technology. We were enjoying the technology the night he told me.

Last Friday night, Stu closed the door with a hot cup in his hand and said, "Malachi, I'm glad that you're here."

And I said, "Thank you. I'm always here. I'm always glad to be here."

And Stu said, "I've got something really important to tell you."

So I said, "I'd like to listen. Do you mind if I have some tea?"

And Stu said, "No. Go ahead, have some tea. Would you like a Bigelow Earl Grey? There's Bigelow Earl Grey in the box there."

And I said, "Which box?"

And Stu said, "The grey box next to the mug tree."

I saw the box, finally. I removed a tea bag and slid it into an old mug. The mug said "The Boss" on it with an arrow pointing up. I poured hot water into it and the tea bag began to bleed brown.

Stu said, "You ought to sit down, Malachi. I'm about to tell you about the Rapture."

I sat down. "What about the Rapture?" I asked.

"I had a dream about it last night." Stu sat down too. His chair is a little nicer than mine. It makes a huff sound when he sits down.

"What happened?" I said.

"I almost fell out of bed," he said.

"In the dream," I said.

"Oh. The Rapture happened. It wasn't like the book, though."

"The Bible?"

"No, Left Behind. It was like the Bible. There were a lot of sevens around and the next thing I knew I was with the Lord."

"Oh," I said. "Was I with the lord?"

"Oh, yes. But...well I don't know if I should tell you," said Stu.

"I don't know either," I said.

"Well...you were there. But you were there by yourself. I mean you were there with me and Anna and Marty and...I think Paulie. But you were by yourself if you catch my drift."

"I don't," I said.

"I mean that you didn't bring any family or friends with you." Stu sipped his tea.

I said, "I thought you said Paulie was there."

Stu said, "Maybe."

I asked Stu if he thought the dream was a message from You and he said he didn't know. But I thought to myself, did I really want to risk my family being around during an especially nasty tribulation with sphinxes and pestilence and all that business? I promised him I would talk to Maggie and Sarah. I promised and I drank his Earl Grey.

"Oh, I almost forgot the most important part," said Stu. He took a sip. "In the dream, the Rapture is on New Year's day."

"This New Year's?"

"Yes. New Year's 2000. You haven't got much time if you really want to tell them."

So that's why Stu was a little angry when I told him about my progress. We sat down again tonight and I didn't have any tea. I was too ashamed to drink it.

12.18.99

Dearest Lord,

I drove Maggie over to Tiff's house tonight. They're having a pre-Christmas party with included sleepover. Tiff is a nice girl, I think. She's a cheerleader. Not the bad kind, though. She cheers for basketball like Mag. I asked M if Brit (that's Tiff's mom) was going to take them all to church in the morning since it'll be Sunday. M said she didn't know. I asked if Tiff's family was religious and Maggie said they don't talk about that kind of thing. She said she heard it was rude to talk about that kind of thing in public since people might get into fights about all the details. I told her I understood. I really did.

S and I got into a big fight over religion when we first got married. She's been a regular Catholic her whole life, which means she has to go to church every week. She takes Maggie with her. I told her I didn't want to go with them because it felt like a fruitful brainwashing. (Have You ever been to a Catholic Mass Lord? You know what I mean). She never asks me to come anymore. Even though I would probably go. She went by herself tonight. I wanted to talk to her all day about the year 2000 but she seemed in a bad mood.

Today, she was eating some mixed nuts and reading the paper. I saw her smile a little bit. I thought maybe she'd read something funny or maybe she'd gotten to a Brazil nut, so I started working up my guts. I tried to get the words straight so as not to sound like an idiot. I had it, finally. I'd say "Honey, can I talk to you for a minute," and she'd say "Sure, love, what is it," and I'd say "You know how I have those seminars a couple times a week. For work?" and she'd say "Yes, cupcake" and I'd say "Well, I've been meaning to tell you

that they aren't really for work. I've been going to the non-denominational Bible church on Center Street," and she'd be taken aback and hopefully not choke on a nut (well maybe just a little choke for effect) and then she'd say "how long have you been going?" and I'd say "a couple years, now. Pretty much after Mom passed," and she'd say "you mean after she killed herself?" and I'd say, "why do you always have to bring that up?" and she'd say, "I'm sorry. Why didn't you tell me sooner," and I'd say "I was afraid. But the reason I'm telling you now is the Rapture is going to happen on New Years day," and she'd put her hand to her mouth and say "Oh my God," and she might start to cry and get a few of her nice brown hairs stuck to her cheeks and I'd go over and hold her and kiss her and I'd get some hair in my mouth but it would be ok cause I love Sarah and I'd say "shhh, it'll be ok. I can help. I know what to do to save you."

She was still kind of smiling from her almond or the newspaper or whatever when I worked this out.

So I said, "Honey, can I talk to you for a minute?"

Her smile went away and she said, "Not right now, love. I'm reading, right now."

12.19.99

Oh Lord,

Christmas is in less than a week, now. When I was a kid, I always thought You would return on Christmas day, since it was Your sort of birthday. What better time to come back down? The trees are up, the lights are up, everything is glowing in Your honor or was originally before the PC's (not the computer mind you) decided we had to say "Season's Greetings." That's why I was always a little scared on Christmas. Not that I wasn't excited. I mean, PRESENTS. But I always had it in the back of my mind that the TV might come on with a special bulletin showing you beaming out of the sky on fire, blowing up the unknown Anti-Christ buildings and compounds with the atomic powers a priest once told me you had and I would sort of tremble a little bit when I was playing with my pen or paper or sweater or whatever I got for Christmas. Come to think of it, you still might come back on Christmas, except I won't be around to see on account of the Rapture being in a couple weeks.

Now speaking of PCs (the computer this time) I'm trying to get the most out of my Apple before it falls out of the sky. I was playing with the Internet. I didn't find much in the way of Rapture discussion strategies, to be honest. It was a little disappointing, really. But I was clicking around and I managed to open up a program Maggie put on my computer called Instant Messenger. Now THAT is something I can get behind. You don't even have to talk to people to talk to them. It's like writing some kind of CyberWeb letter

except at light speed. So I remembered when M put the IM on the PC (is it PC to call an Apple a PC or do I have to call it a Mac?) she gave me her Screen Name so I could IM her whenever I saw her on the Buddy List. And I did see her. She was online at Tiff's place. So I sent her a message.

I said: Hi honey.

M said: Is this Josh?

I said: No, it's Dad. Who's Josh?

M said: Whose Dad?

I said: Your Dad.

M said: Who am I?

I said: Maggie M.

M said: Oh. This is like Jamie, actually.

I said: Is Maggie there?

M said: Yes. I'm just using her SN.

I said: Can you ask her if you guys went to Church today?

M said: Sure...hang on.

M said: No, we didn't go to Church today. Tiff is Jewish.

I said: Oh. Well Mom is going to be upset about that.

M said: Whose mom?

I said: Maggie's Mom.

M said: Oh, ok. I thought you meant my mom.

I said: Does Maggie know what tribe Tiff's parents belong to?

M said: Hang on.

M said: No, why?

I said: Have you ever heard of the Rapture, Jamie?

M said: Is that like when you are really happy?

I said: Sort of. It's the part at the beginning of the end of the world where all the believers and 144,000 Jews are taken to Heaven so they don't have to suffer through the Tribulation that leads to the end of the world. It's in a couple weeks, actually.

M said: A couple weeks?

I said: Yes. On New Years day. The same time all the computers will explode. I think that part is just a clever cover story.

M said: Why would God make up a cover story?

I said: I mean it's OUR cover story.

M said: I didn't make up any kind of cover story.

I said: Well I didn't mean you. I meant politicians and people like that.

M said: My Dad is on the town council. Why would my Dad want to cover up God?

I said: You should ask him. Sometimes we cover things up when we're afraid.

M said: Should I tell Maggie about the End of the World?
I thought about that for a while.
I said: No. I want to tell her. I should tell her in person.
M said: Ok. I'm going to talk to Josh now.

12.22.99

Dear Lord,

I'm starting to think they're avoiding me. Ever since Sunday it's been a string of errands and after-school and women's meetings and old friends in town and new friends at school, and all I have to say is that I know I don't have any new friends or meetings to go to, except the maintenance staff meeting today about what we should buy with the budget next month.

Joey got us all together in his office (us all being Larry and Johnny and Teddy and I). We scooped out some Neapolitan ice cream into the plastic bowls that Joey has hidden in his office for such occasions when we dip into the leftover ice cream from the Silvertown Humane Society fundraiser in September, except that I had to refuse on account of my sensitive front teeth so I just asked if I could put some lukewarm water in my bowl instead and, well...Larry looked at me sort of funny and said I was a real funny weirdo sometimes, but he gave me a bottle of water that he had sitting out on his desk all day. I said thank you.

Now, I have to admit I didn't really pay too much attention to the meeting. I hope you'll forgive me, but I'm a little preoccupied now-a-days and besides I don't plan on needing anything next month so it seemed sort of silly. When Joey asked me what I needed I told him I didn't need anything at all and he looked at me and raised one of his big eyebrows and his moustache puffed up (You have to understand Joey looks a heck of a lot like Frank Zappa if You ask me) and he said, "Are you sick or somethin'?"

I said, "No" and Joey said "You want nothing? You need nothing to do your job next month?" and I said "I'll be ok with what I've got," which was sort of a fib, I guess, but I didn't want him to waste any money on me. And Joey said, "We lose that money if we don't use it," and Larry said that was fairly correct because the scumbags in corporate (can I say 'scumbags' to You?) didn't let us roll over since they were afraid we might buy out the company with the flourishing fortune we might build up if we were smart about it, so I said, "I'll have a wrench, then."

That was the only meeting with friends I got this week and I didn't even have the ice cream. If You really want to know what I think, I'll type it right here: I think that little Jamie told Maggie about what I said and then I think Maggie told her mom about it and now they're selling me bogus lines about party time and overtime and out-of-town-now-in-town coffee time

and community service time with the Key club and this is exactly what I was afraid of, Lord. They got a whiff and now they won't eat the cheese. It's as if I was going to try and make them chow down on Limburger and say, "Thanks, Dad, for giving me the Limburger to eat." Do they think I'm like Ernie?

I don't even know why mom married Ernie in the first place. She never told me, and the next thing you know he's moving in and sitting on the porch with that stinking block saying, "Here son, have a piece of this here and call me Dad," and rubbing me on the head with his stinking hand even though I didn't want to eat his damn cheese or call him Dad 'cause my dad was under the ground someplace and Ernie made a comment once about him being like Swiss cheese by now on account of him not having no insurance enough to buy a proper casket, so the worms got all up in his eyes. I couldn't even look at Ernie and cheese in the same room without tearing up, even if it was a nice cheese like Cheddar or Jarlsburg.

But that's not what it's like, Lord. I just want to be a good dad and a good husband and save my family, and they can even call me Malachi if they really want to (but I don't see why) if it'll get them to be around and listen. But now I know they won't. The time is never right anymore. There's always a whiff of something foul around and if I hold out my hand they'll run off for good and hate me forever.

I think I know what I've got to do, Lord. I'll just have to prepare them as best as I can so they'll be ok without me. There'll be no Ernies for them, Lord, and no aftermath of Ernie either. Not if I can help it.

12.24.99

Good Lord,

The stores are murder this time of year. I never knew. We usually do all our shopping in advance. And we did, except I did a little extra. I haven't got much time. I need to go back to wrapping. The other day, I asked Sarah if I could do the wrapping and she said "That would be great, love. I'm beat. I'm going to bed," so I said, "Don't worry, I'll take care of it for you," and she said "Thanks, Mal, you're the best," which I think might have been a cover because I think they're both afraid of me now. I'm not sure if this is all going to fit under the tree, to be honest. My knees are getting cold from the concrete down here. It goes through the afghan like water through pipes. I hope the heat still works next week. Can I ask You to do that for them? Can You keep them warm?

12.25.99

Dear lord,

i don't want to talk about it now

maybe later
keep them safe in the snow

12.27.99

Oh Lord,

I haven't taken a drink for years, but Larry and I went to Gary Owen's today. We come here whenever Larry really needs to help me out. They have a talent for the rum and coke.

The last time we went was the time Larry really helped me out. Come to think of it, I was having a lot of these same problems, too, except it didn't have to do with presents.

It was more about how You'd just taken Mom back. I know that might not be what happened, Lord, but that's how I like to say it. We've talked about it a lot over the years, You and I, and You've never asked me to change my wording.

I still remember the phone call. They had to page me over the intercom since I don't really have my own desk at the Filter Factory. And besides, we had a bad leak in Engineering so we were all trying to fix that up before the office people got flooded out. So there was my name booming over the intercom and I thought maybe S had some kind of question or M needed me to pick her up from school 'cause she got sick, but instead it was the cops on the line. They asked me if I was who I was. I said, "Yes." And then they said they had some bad news and I might want to sit down. I told them I couldn't on account of I was almost knee-deep in water at the moment. The cops said they were sorry about my being moist but they had some bad news anyway. At this point my heart was almost louder than the phone, so I had to ask them to repeat the bad news, since I thought I'd heard it wrong. But then I heard them again and I knew that Mom was gone. I sat down in the water anyway.

They said she'd been really thorough about it. She'd taken a bottle of tranquilizers with a liter of vodka before she let herself bleed into the tub. I got sick then. I got sick when I thought of her sunk like a tea bag in the tub; her hair floating and looking pink like a flower. I think I dropped the phone right when they told me that Ernie had shot himself out on the patio just before. Then I threw up into the flood.

Nobody noticed right away. They were busy trying to fix the pipe and the drain. But my little puddle floated over to them and they sure noticed then. Everybody wanted to know what was wrong. I couldn't tell them then. I said I just had to go. So I splashed away.

Sarah knew what was going on. They'd called her at work, too, so she'd come home right away. She asked me if I wanted to talk about it and I said that I didn't. That was a lie, Lord. I wanted to talk, but I couldn't. I was

afraid that I'd tell her too much. I was afraid I'd tell her that I hated Ernie and I was glad he was dead. I was glad he was dead and that he hated himself enough to want to be dead. And I still hated him, even now that he was dead. He took Mamma with him just like always. And back then, I hated Mom for letting him. Nobody ever really knew what happened. She never even left a note or anything. So I told Sarah I didn't want to talk about it. And I told her I didn't want to talk to Maggie about it. I told them I'd be ok.

And that's why Larry had to help me out a few days later in the rainstorm. Everything leaks in the Filter Factory. Even the roof. And for all the pipes they've got to handle water pressure, nobody can figure out how to keep their heads dry in a storm.

I've always liked Larry. I know he never lies. That's why some people don't like Larry. We went up in our slickers. (I remember I even took the black one cause I felt like mourning. Larry was always partial to the yellow.) We walked out onto the tar between the HVACs on the roof and it was pouring. I have not seen such a pour in a long time. Maybe never, come to think of it. Little black pools were collecting in the low spots. This was before the re-roofing, when we had the old roof from the 70s. And everything was horizontal. We could hardly walk toward the west and both of us kept falling down on the wet tar. And it was cold as Hell.

We'd found a big old hole right over the metal shop. The wind had ripped a whole piece of the roof clean off and there was a little cataract coming straight down into Sally's welding booth.

I looked down the hole. It was a long way down and I could see the outline of Sally's tools on her workbench under the wet blue tarp she'd put out to keep them safe. And I saw what she was working on: a steel frame for a new Filter Builder. And it wasn't done. The vertical supports came up like spikes. I thought, for a second, that it would be nice to land on those spikes. I could land on the spikes and the tarp would keep Sally's tools dry. They could take down the welding curtains. They were easy to replace, and with all this water coming down, I'd wash right into the nearest drain anyway. And the tar was slippery. It could be an accident and Maggie and Sarah wouldn't even have to hate me for it. I didn't want to be inconsiderate, You see, but I thought, for a second, that it would be nice to join Mom wherever she was. And that's when Larry tackled me to the ground.

"You fucking idiot!" he said. "Get away from that edge. What do you want to kill yourself?"

I said, "Let me go, Larry!" and punched him in the stomach.

He said, "Just 'cause your Mom offed herself and your stepdad blew his brains out, you want to fucking die too?"

I said, "Fuck you, Larry!" and punched him in the face.

Then Larry punched me in the face. After we were both good and bruised, we fixed the roof and went to Garry Owen's.

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We didn't beat each other up today. We just went. I needed to talk. It's not that You aren't enough (don't get me wrong, Lord, I think You're a great guy and a good listener, but You don't say much).

We sat down in the corner, away from the college kids playing the little slot machine and we got our rum and cokes.

Larry went first. He usually does.

"So what's eating you?" he said.

I said, "I had a little...problem yesterday."

"What's the matter, the wife don't like what you got her?"

"Well, kind of," I said.

"Spit it out. How'd you f*** up?"

"Have you ever heard of The Rapture, Larry?"

"Sure. It's from the book, right?" He took a swig of his drink.

I said, "You mean Left Behind?"

"No, the Bible."

"Right. So you know the story, then?"

"Look, Mal. I went to Sunday school like anybody else. Don't insult me."

"Ok, so my pastor, Pastor Stu, had a dream that it's going to happen on New Year's Day and I told him I'd tell my family about it."

"Ok, so did you?"

"Not exactly," I said. "They wouldn't listen to me. They're always busy and I can't just say, 'Hey on your way out the door, here's something to think about,' you know?"

"No, but go on."

"So I figured that I would make sure they were prepared for being left behind. You know, since I'll be gone in a few days, I wanted to make sure they would be ok without me. So I looked at our Christmas presents and saw that we had all these things that will be useless once the Tribulation starts. I mean, there was a new computer, a new cell phone, a stereo, loads of clothes that were too skimpy to be practical, power tools. You name it.

"So, I took everything back. I loaded up the car when nobody was around, which was an easy thing to do, actually, and I got cash back. Then I went to the store with the money, and some money I had saved up since I couldn't take it with me, and I bought plenty of canned food, toilet paper, sturdy dishes, good solid tools and, of course, a couple of Bibles and inspirational books that are on the right track and then I wrapped everything

up in boxes as close as I could find to the ones that we were going to use originally and put as many as I could fit under the tree. Of course, there were a lot that I just left in the basement unwrapped, 'cause they didn't really fit, but I mean, it's the thought that counts, not the wrapping paper. Then I thought, maybe I could do a little subconscious or subliminal messaging or whatever you call it, so I tried to find the little 'To and From' tags, you know the ones?"

"Yup," Larry said into his glass.

"I tried to find some of those 'To and From' tags that had other things written on them like 'Merry Christmas' or 'Joy to the World' or 'Seasons Greetings' or 'Yuletide Cheer' and such and I took a pencil and lightly circled some of the letters and put little numbers next to them, like '1, 2, 3,' and so on so that if you matched them up it would spell something like 'The Rapture is coming, I love you both, and I hope you can join me some day, use these things to help you while I'm gone,' or something like that. And I put those on the presents, 'cause I know they won't listen to me, but maybe they'd listen to a secret message and who knows who put it there, right?"

Larry said, "Malachi, are you f***** nuts?"

And I said, "I don't think so."

Larry said, "Well you're wrong. You are crazier than shit."

And I said, "That's pretty much what Sarah said, actually."

And Larry said, "Sarah is a smart woman."

I said, "She said I needed some time to work out my problems, and Maggie asked if I was the one who scared her friend Jamie. I said, 'I knew that girl was no good' and then there was a lot of ugliness and long story short Sarah drove them both to her sister's place across town and said I should call her when I had my act together. Do you really think I'm crazy?"

"Yes," said Larry. "You should probably be locked up. And by the way, thanks for taking the f***** time to warn me about the Rapture too, buddy."

I said, "I didn't think you'd believe me."

Larry said, "I don't, but you could at least have the decency to warn a guy who's saved your f***** life in the past. You just have no clue how to be, do you? I mean, Jesus, you really need to talk to somebody about your problems. I have to go. I'm too pissed off at you. I'm going to punch you in the face."

Then Larry punched me in the face and left.

I waited a little while to get my wits about me. I figured I should pay the tab, but Garry told me it was all settled.

12.29.99

My Lord,

It's so cold down here among the boxes of food and toilet paper. I

am shivering. I am shaking. I haven't been to work in a couple of days. I called in sick (that is, before I disconnected the phone). I don't think it's a lie. I think Larry's right. I don't do anything all day now, but watch TV under the afghan. This is not how I pictured my last few days on Earth. I need to talk. Are You even listening?

12.31.99

Dear Lord,

This might be my last entry before I see You. I decided I should go out and see some people again. (It might be my last chance). So I went to the New Year's Eve party at the Center Street Non-denominational Bible Church. I at least needed to tell Stu the bad news face to face. I failed him and You. I know.

I was surprised that the party was still on, to be perfectly honest. Seeing as Stu knows about the End of the World getting in gear tomorrow, I figured he wouldn't want to have a party.

Everyone was there, Anna and Molly, and I think maybe Paulie, too. And it was a grand old time. People were singing carols. The whole church hall was decked out in gold and silver and a few of the kids had a rock band going. It was all very nice. But I don't think I could really appreciate it. People kept asking if I was okay and I told them I was. I'm sorry to lie on my last day, Lord.

And then I met up with Stu. He was all smiles in his nice red sweater. He had a big mug of eggnog. To be honest, I think he might have put a little something in the eggnog because everyone was pretty happy.

Stu said, "Malachi! How are you?"

I said, "Well...not so good, actually."

I can never lie to Stu.

Stu said, "Would you like to come into my office?"

I said, "Yes. I really would."

So we sat down. Stu offered me eggnog but I said I wasn't thirsty.

"So, what's on your mind?" he said.

"I failed," I said.

"What do you mean you failed?" he said.

"I couldn't get them to believe," I said.

"Uh oh," said Stu. "I'm sorry they don't share your beliefs. I know that's very hard to deal with. At least you told them."

"Well..." I said. "I didn't tell them in words, exactly. But I think they know what I meant."

"What do you mean?" said Stu.

So I told Stu the whole story and he got so sad I thought he was going to cry.

"I'm so sorry, Malachi," said Stu.

"It's not your fault," I said.

And Stu said, "It is my fault. I shouldn't have pressured you like that. This is a big mess."

I said, "I don't care if they hate me, though. I just want them to be okay. And now I don't know."

Stu said, "Malachi. I have to tell you something. There's not going to be a Rapture tomorrow. I mean...well maybe there will be, but there's no reason to think tomorrow is any different from any other day."

"But you had a vision!" I said.

"Malachi, I had a dream. I have dreams about the Rapture all the time. I'm a Pastor. I read the Bible before bed," said Stu,

I didn't say anything.

"Don't you understand what I'm saying, Malachi?"

"No," I said.

Stu sighed. "I should never have lied to you."

"I don't understand."

"I just wanted you to tell them. You need to tell them what you believe, Malachi. They're your family. I just thought you needed the... proper motivation."

I suddenly got very angry.

"You're a liar," I said.

"Yes," said Stu.

"You're lying right now," I said.

"No. There really isn't going to be a Rapture."

"You've been sent to test me, haven't you?" I said.

"Maybe, but not in the way you're thinking," said Stu.

I stood up and said, "You're a bad person, Stu, and I don't like you and I think you might even be touched by Satan"

And Stu said, "I'm so sorry. Please forgive me."

• • •

Dear Lord, this is my most earnest prayer. The most earnest of my whole life; more than ice cream or Dad's typewriter or all those times that I talked to You about Mom when I had nobody else to talk to and I asked You to forgive her and take her and Ernie out of Hell if that's where they were. My Lord: Please don't take me at midnight. I need to be here. I need to stay for Sarah and Maggie and Larry and Stu. They need me here. I need to be with them no matter what happens. If the planes fall down in ten minutes and the computers blow up and the economy vanishes in the twinkling of an eye, they will need a guide. If you could avert the whole thing (I don't know. I couldn't ask you to avert the whole thing, could I? That's selfish. I'm sorry this thing has no backspace) I'll just ask you this, then: let us stay until we're ready. Please? Amen?

01.01.2000

Thank You for listening.

Thank You. There is still a dial-tone. Thank You!

Amen.