

## MRS. SPOONER'S SPECIAL DAY

By Bill Baynes

### 1.

Mrs. Spooner sat in the rear, next-to-last seat, scrunched down and inconspicuous as she could be, the whole long way from Third Street to the Upper Mission. She could stay dry. She could watch the world going by.

Despite the cold and wet weather, the streets were crowded. Last-minute shoppers with armloads of packages, brightly wrapped. It was the same all along the route. People bustling, getting on, getting off, the big doors in the back chuffing and letting in the icy wind and then wheezing closed again.

She grabbed a catnap and blinked awake at the next stop. She checked the seats around her in the window reflection. Everyone was smiling as they climbed on, bubbling with energy, eager for the holiday. Mrs. Spooner was a warm and cheerful person, but all that happiness tired her out. It didn't have anything to do with her.

She yawned. To her, it was just another day.

She got off at Geneva, crossed the street and squeezed into the crowded shelter on that side. When the 14 looped back on its return run seven minutes later, rather than pay the new fare, she managed to sneak aboard through the back doors, hidden among a group of high schoolers. One advantage of being short.

She was good at Muni. She'd had a lot of practice. She'd splurged on long rides whenever she could. It kept her out of sight. She felt it kept her in touch with the city, which she experienced in transit as an extended tunnel.

A kid in a green parka slid into the seat, bobbing his head to the tinny beat leaking out of his earpods. He looked like he was amped on something. He stayed as far away from her as possible, probably because of the odor. Mrs. Spooner used her smell as a shield.

As they came back through the heart of the Mission, the little ones were flushed and excited, hanging on their Mamas' arms. South-of-the-border San Francisco, loud colors and Spanish signage on both sides.

A two-year-old stared openly and Mrs. Spooner turned her head away and popped in the upper denture she kept in her coat pocket. She turned back and smiled broadly at the child. The oversized clackers, too white, gave her an odd rodent-like look.

There were crowds near Union Square. Buy, buy, buy. They could never get enough. She had nine toes out of that system, she had so little to spend. She got a little from Ronnie's disability, but she couldn't get other benefits without a permanent address.

Office parties were apparently ending. There were men in suits with open, drunken laughs, women trying to hold onto their hats and keep their coats closed in the gusty rain.

She got off at Seventh, so she could use the rest room in the park two blocks back. She cleaned up as best she could. She took off all four coats and her silly cloth beanie. She used paper towels to scrub her arms and under. She soaped her face and finger-combed her hair. It would be her last running water until morning.

When she was done, before she put all her clothes back on, she carefully wiped up the sink. It looked like she'd never been there.

She'd stashed her house in the clump of trees just across the canal from the Giants ballpark. That was about five blocks east and four blocks south of where she was, but she halved that

distance by cutting through alleys and across parking lots. She kept buildings between her and the wind most of the way, as she scouted for the night's squat.

She kept up a steady pace, not stopping because she didn't want to attract attention, not staring, but observing carefully.

The bins behind the fancy restaurants were overflowing. She helped herself to a few items. Laughter and music seeped onto the street when a waiter tossed an empty box out the back door. It would be noisy in this alley tonight.

The rain slackened to a mist.

Hubie wasn't at his usual spot the next block over. And Mason was absent from his post under the freeway. She could stay there, but she didn't like being a bridge troll. That roar overhead, the dirt sifting down from the high overpass, it made Mrs. Spooner feel uneasy.

Most of the regulars weren't around. The weather must have driven them inside to one of the shelters. Either that or they had families in the area, someone to take them in.

She didn't want to go to a program. It'd be crowded. There'd be people she knew. She didn't want to be a public person tonight. She didn't want to be in a large group, didn't feel like standing in line, everyone snorting and farting and shifting position all night. She didn't want the Jesus served with the supper.

She'd rather be quiet tonight. Sometimes they did that when she was little. They didn't go to Grandma's or Cousin Bob's. They stayed home and had a private celebration. She liked those Christmases most of all.

Of course, she had a family then. That was when she was the favored child, the only daughter, the little darling. That was quite a while ago, before Mama took sick.

Mrs. Spooner thought she might feel a little sorry for herself tonight, soak some in her own sadness.

She saw two figures pushing carts in the other direction. That made her worry about her own belongings and she stepped up her pace, pushing against the stiff breeze for the last few blocks. She got to her hiding place in the trees in a few minutes and whew! Everything was safe.

She waited until no one was watching and wheeled her house onto the sidewalk. It had a little hitch every few feet because one caster was bent. From behind, it looked like Mrs. Spooner was limping

It was dusk as she pushed across the bridge, past the sailboats in the marina behind AT&T Park, the rigging clanking in a rhythmic pattern. San Francisco was as empty as she'd ever seen it.

Where to go? She shoved her load past the big bowling alley, a closed sign on the door. There was no one inside McDees, but three cop cars were parked down the block at the Donut Shoppe. Not much for the man to do.

She trudged into South Park. In the window of an office building, five stories up, well-dressed people were still mingling and drinking. She wished she had a bottle of that sauce.

There were actually parking spots available on the short circular drive around the lawn and benches. First time for everything. She thought about camping on one of the benches, but decided against it. Too open, too much wind.

She headed back down Second and came around the backside of the ballpark, staying out of sight of the cops. It was damper here by the water, but there was a narrow alcove built into the outfield wall of the stadium. People used it to park their bikes during games.

She'd never stay here on any normal night. Too close to the Donut Shoppe. Too much stadium security. And there was only one way out, a situation she had avoided since that night in Golden Gate Park when those boys had cornered her and hurt her in that culvert.

But this was Christmas Eve. There wasn't another soul around. She thought she'd be OK for one night.

She turned her cart sideways just inside the entrance. Anyone who came in would have to get past it to get to her. She fished out the short length of two-by-four she stored at the bottom of the pile and put it on the floor next to her bedding, which she set against the back wall, a good five yards from the opening.

Perfect. Protected. No wind whatsoever. Completely dry.

Mrs. Spooner enjoyed a few crackers with cheese. She'd found both, packages unopened, in the trash beside the Flower Mart. She took a few swallows of bottled water.

She settled onto her coats and blankets. She usually went to sleep fairly early because she had to wake early, so she could vacate before anybody discovered her. It was warm, comfortable. There was no traffic noise, not even the electric trains were operating. She could hear an occasional car on the freeway, but that was several blocks distant. Silent Night.

She chuckled to herself and hummed the carol. She thought of other holidays. When she was young, she'd be at church at this hour, listening to an old priest read about the Nativity.

How there was no room at the inn for Mary and Joseph.

"I would have let them in," she thought.

The alcove was small as a stall in a stable.

She recalled how the wise men brought special gifts to the Christ child.

"I have no gift to give him," she thought. "Well, maybe ..."

She struggled to her feet and shuffled to her cart. She rummaged around and came up with a secret, precious thing, a sealed plastic bag.

She opened it and took out a spotless, spanking new baby blanket, all pastel blues and pinks. She'd found it one day on top of a shopping bag whose owner was using the public restroom. She was saving it for the baby she planned to have one day.

"I could give him this," she muttered to herself. "Swaddling clothes."

She took the blanket back to bed and lay her cheek on it.

It was lonely.

\* \* \* \*

Crazy dreams. Christmas dreams.

*They both get new bikes, but hers has three wheels and it's short. James' is much larger. She wants his. She cries and holds up her arms.*

*"You're too little," Daddy says, laughing. "You can have a big one in a few years."*

*James lifts her up and puts her on his seat. She grabs the handlebars and hangs on for dear life. She looks down and her feet don't come anywhere near the pedals. It's way, way down to the ground, impossibly far.*

*She's afraid she'll fall. She cries for someone to get her down.*

*James is laughing too. So is Mama.*

Mrs. Spooner smiled in her sleep. Her breathing deepened. A gust fluttered the cardboard on the top of her cart and threw rain against it, but she didn't feel it, snug in her hidden bed.

*Mama's happy laughter turns bitter, strained. She's throwing packages, smashing ornaments on the tree.*

*"For Christ's sake," Mama screams, "doesn't he know it's Christmas?"*

*Where's Daddy? He's at the hospital with James. James OD'd.*

*"What does that mean, Mama?"*

*"The little shit, he did it to get even with me!"*

*She hurls another package and the brittle decorations burst and sprinkle onto the floor.*  
*"He did it to spite me! He hates me!"*  
*"He doesn't hate you, Mama."*  
*"Don't lie to me, Clare. I know what I know."*  
*Mama glares at her and her eyes go all bulgy, just for a second, and then she puts her hands over them and pushes them back in.*  
*She is the only one there with her. She doesn't know what to do.*  
*How old is she? Ten?*  
*She tries to hold Mama tight. She'd seen Daddy do that before when she was upset. She squeezes her leg, but it begins to get slippery and Mama bats her daughter away. She begins to yell.*  
*"Get away! Get away!! GET AWAY!!!"*  
*The sound is shrill and awful and gets bigger and bigger. It hurts her ears or maybe that's Mama's slaps. She doesn't know what to do.*  
*Mrs. Spooner coughed. She rolled over, groaning.*  
*Then Ronnie. He's wearing his fatigues, his urban camo, he calls it. Makes him feel like he's still in the Corps. He's in their walk-up out on Balboa. He's hollering too.*  
*"They took my card. In front of the whole line, they took it and cut it into pieces."*  
*"Honey, it don't matter," she says.*  
*"This is what I went to war for? I can't even buy a few Christmas presents."*  
*"It don't matter, baby."*  
*He's only been home a few weeks. He can't get a job, can't talk to people without checking all around to make sure someone isn't trying to shoot him.*  
*"It does matter. It does. Matter."*  
*He's livid, offended to the bottom of his being, ready to erupt.*  
*Mrs. Spooner tossed her covers and came awake. She climbed to her feet and used her tinkle bottle. Then she crawled under her covers and fell back to the other world.*  
*A backlit figure down a hallway. It's advancing toward her, calling her by name.*  
*"Clare? Clare?"*  
*She has no idea who it is. She thinks it's a man, but the voice is distorted. Yet she isn't afraid. Not at all.*  
*"Clare?"*  
*As the person draws closer, he seems to be shining. He looks a little bit like George Clooney on the huge billboard by the fifth street off-ramp, but she can't make out any features.*  
*Is it George Clooney?*  
*Is it Ronnie?*  
*Jesus?*  
*The man speaks softly and the voice raises the hairs on the back of her neck. She doesn't recognize it, but the words cut through her, make her feel happy, make her feel safe and loved. It's not a druggy feeling. It's clear. No fear.*  
*"It will be a special Christmas, Clare. Someone is coming."*  
*The radiance.*

\* \* \* \*

A soft noise, a scrape. A pause, then two short scuffs.  
 She lay perfectly still. She was on her side, facing the cart. She never slept with her face to the wall. She wanted to know what was going on, wherever it was.

Another scratch, very soft. Mice?

She eased one eye open. She could see legs on the other side of her house, gray and spindly, moving forward and back. A dog?

Mrs. Spooner coughed. She threw back her blankets and stood.

The legs were gone.

She put on her sneakers over three pairs of socks and squeezed past her cart. Standing inside the entrance, she scanned outside.

Near dawn, darkness in retreat. No one in sight. A glimpse of gray fur behind the dumpster by the marina. The rain had stopped. It was clammy and smelled of brine.

Mrs. Spooner felt like something had lifted from her. Her mood was lighter. She felt like clear skies, never mind that the fog was drifting a few feet above the pavement.

She turned to her cart and commenced her morning putter. This was her favorite time of day. And it was Christmas day.

She remembered a dream about a visitor. That didn't happen very often. She usually had no memory from her sleep. Maybe it was a prophecy. She played with that idea, just for fun. She wondered what her caller would look like.

She fished out some soap, tipped some bottled water onto a paper towel and gave herself a sponge bath, starting with her face. She stooped over to wash her legs, lifted her skirts to get underneath. The trick was not to do too much, not to get so clean you got cold. Dirt can keep you warm this time of year. The idea was not to let it show.

She heated some water on her tiny sterno. She retrieved a bran muffin and two strips of bacon, both stored in plastic containers, supposedly odor-free. But that had to be what that dog had scented.

She had her whole life in her sturdy pusher, courtesy of Safeway. Her sleeping bag, a tarp, blankets, coats and socks and panties and pants, everything she owned, were all meticulously organized under layers and layers of cardboard and newspapers

Refreshed, warmed by her recent activity, Mrs. Spooner amused herself while she ate. She wondered what her visitor would bring her. She assumed there would be a gift. Why else would he come?

She smiled to herself. It was like waiting for Santa.

What did she need? Ha. Don't go there. What didn't she need? Whatever he brought would be more than she had hoped for.

She poured herself a cup of tea and sipped it as the sun slid silver sheets onto the Bay.

She savored the stillness. It had been a noisy year. Jackhammers had chased her out of a couple good squats. The sirens, the streetcars, the bustle – they never stopped. This hush, this island in a city of noise, was a kind of Christmas present all by itself.

She caught sight of another streak of gray. That wasn't a dog. It was a coyote. He was in the open now. She'd heard there were some in San Francisco. One ran onto the field during a Giants game last season.

Wasn't he something? So quick. So supple. A wild animal right here.

The coyote trotted across the apron over by the bridge. There would normally be a few cars at this hour, but not today. He was watching Mrs. Spooner.

She made kissing sounds.

"Hey, boy. Hey, boy," she called softly, her voice muffled in the mist.

The animal paused and cocked his head. He walked a few steps in Mrs. Spooner's direction.

"Hey, boy. Hey, boy."

Moving slowly so she wouldn't seem threatening, she reached back for the small saucepan. It still had some warm water in it. She put it on the ground and shoved it a few steps away with her foot.

She backed to the alcove, tossed the last bite of bacon next to the pan and made more kissing sounds.

The coyote lowered onto his haunches and edged closer.

"Atta boy. Good boy. Good boy."

He snapped up the bacon and nosed the pan, pulled back. He stood above it and, glancing at the woman, lapped the water.

"What's your name? What's your name, huh? How about Trickster?"

She had a Native American friend, who told her that coyotes were recognized and revered in their culture and that they called them that.

Mrs. Spooner liked to name things. She made up monikers for everyone she knew. She thought she was good at it.

The coyote didn't seem afraid, but he didn't seem impressed either. Probably not his real name.

She slowly held out her hand. The coyote ignored her, turned and loped away.

Mrs. Spooner folded her sleeping bag and blankets. She closed up the stove and painstakingly repacked her cart, rearranging her clothes, cushioning her dishes so they wouldn't rattle. She concealed it all beneath cardboard.

She shook out her coats, shrugged them back on and checked her pockets: teeth, tissues and a black sharpie.

When she was all finished, she examined the floor and used a strip of cardboard to sweep up a few crumbs and bits of lint, which she deposited in the used paper towels.

\* \* \* \*

She no sooner started on her Christmas constitutional around China Basin than she stopped and rewound both scarves tightly around her neck. It was frigid. She could see her breath. Slight gusts brought tears to her eyes.

It had been more protected in the alcove than she'd thought.

She dropped her paper towels in the trash can and tipped her tinkle bottle into the Bay. Then she shoved her house around the corner of the ballpark.

No cops at the Donut Shoppe. It seemed chilly in there too. The waitress wore a sweater. The place threw off a blue glow.

The street was completely empty. A single car humming over the bridge was an event.

A little sadness started to creep in. To counter it, Mrs. Spooner thought of her dream. How would he come? Would he just appear, her visitor? When she turned a corner, would he be standing there?

What would he be wearing? Would he be shining?

She pressed on. Stay in motion. Don't hang anywhere for long. That's how you got along on the streets.

Should she treat herself to a ticket on the moving tunnel? The buses and the light rail left from the Townsend Street station and went all the way across the city. Should she pretend she had somewhere to go?

But then, she thought, how would he find her?

That's silly, she told herself. She ducked behind a broad building, out of the wind, and wheeled toward the train station.

Maybe it would be someone from the City, one of those outreach workers.

Maybe a TV reporter, who would put her on the news and her long-lost uncle would see the segment and find her and give her a million dollars? Wouldn't that be a kick?

Inside the terminal, Mrs. Spooner's squeaky cart echoed over vacant plastic seats. The ticket window was pulled down halfway and a light was on behind it, but the newsstand was closed. She could cadge a cup of coffee, when Lennie the vendor was in a good mood. Sometimes even a torn magazine or book.

She browsed the timetable, posted on the wall. Reduced schedule today. She decided she didn't really want a bus ride. But she might loiter around here for a while, until they roused her.

A young man shoved open the door and let in a stream of cold air. Scrawny but neat, wearing a thin beard, he carried a pack stuffed with gifts.

She knew nothing was leaving for at least 20 minutes, so she approached him.

"Bless you, Mister. Give an old lady a clean Christmas? Watch my cart for five minutes while I go to the john?"

Mrs. Spooner edged her belongings toward the guy and then veered into the nearby rest room. She sneaked a look back. The kid wasn't pleased, but he had his fingers around the metal basket.

She intended to wash up and return quickly, but she sat on the pot for a minute and it was so toasty that she fell asleep.

When she jerked awake – she didn't know how long she'd been there – she was freaked. That was everything she had in the world out there. She couldn't lose it.

She pulled up her pants and hurried out. The cart wasn't there.

She heaved a big breath and hobbled around the corner. There it was. The man was sitting several rows away, where he could watch it without owning it. He was jiggling one foot up and down, perturbed.

"I missed my train."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't look any cleaner."

"My coat is my coat."

She looked down, noticed the stains covering the bottom on the side.

"Your face is your face?"

She ignored the snide tone.

"I'm sorry I left you out here so long. I ... I fell asleep, it was so comfy in there."

"Geez!" He wrinkled his nose. "In the crapper?"

She studied him carefully. Was he the one?

Was that the gift? Grabbing 40 winks on the pot? Can't be.

"The next train isn't for more than an hour," he said. "Where can you get a cup of coffee around here? Everything's all closed up."

"The Donut Shoppe. Two blocks down."

"Show me. It's the least you can do. I'll buy you a pastry."

"You want to be seen with me? Doesn't my smell bother you?"

"Nobody out there to see anyone. And I can't smell shit. I've got asthma so bad I'm lucky to breathe at all."

Outside it was starting to snow, a rare occasion in sea-level San Francisco. A few big flakes spun and danced like pinballs. They dissolved when they hit the ground.

"Let's move it before we freeze to death," the young man said.

Ronnie was like that -- pushy, pretty, needy. She used to listen to him for hours on end. He loved the sound of his own voice. It turned him on. Her too.

He seemed like such a hero back when. He was always bragging about some deal he pulled off, always making big plans. She drank a lot then. Men were always buying her alcohol, weed, powder. Ronnie kept her supplied and kept her safe. Until he found that gun and ate it. What a loss.

She shook her head, shook off the recollection, the pool of gore.

"What do you think you're doing?" the guy asked.

"Nothing."

She stuck out her tongue and caught a snowflake.

"You don't have to go to the store, Mister," she giggled, as they tramped past a closed supermarket. "You can get an ICEE for free."

"Just what we need," he said. Not exactly a bearer of good cheer, thought Mrs. Spooner.

When they got to the Donut Shoppe, she snugged her cart right against the steps and followed the guy inside.

"She's not allowed here," said the waitress, a vast white woman with a reddish face. She pointed at Mrs. Spooner.

"You -- outa here!"

Mrs. Spooner backed out of the building. Her bright mood crashed. She was not good at being shouted at.

The guy was embarrassed.

"I'll bring it to you," he said.

He delivered a cup of coffee-to-go and a cruller. He reached into his knapsack and brought out a fruitcake in a Christmas tin, which he also gave her.

"Nobody wants it," he said. "Merry, merry. Don't fall asleep in the snow."

"Thank you, Mister."

He'd guarded her house and fed her and she appreciated that. Not many would do as much. But it still felt like she'd been tossed out with the trash.

It's definitely not him, she thought. No doubt about that. She still had something or someone to look forward to.

\* \* \* \*

She pulled her cart out and started down the sidewalk. There were a few more cars dropping down from 280 and driving through the neighborhood. She marched down Second with her peculiar, gimp gait.

She noticed there were a few people out in South Park. It looked like neighbors patting each other's backs, exchanging envelopes and small packages.

The snow was coming down a little harder. It settled on the hoods and roofs of the cars. She brushed moist flakes off her eyelids. It was bitter cold.

Maybe she'd go over to Rev. Cecil's, stand in line and get some turkey, rub shoulders with the junkies. Maybe she'd go in tonight.

Meanwhile, she may as well go to work. It would keep her mind off the lousy weather. Maybe the marks will be more generous on the holiday.

She trundled toward a busier part of the city, where the fancy restaurants were. Maybe Mr. Special will be there, she thought. Nothing wrong with helping the fates along.



Sure enough, when she got on the other side of the freeway overpass, it was ho-ho-ho all over. Folks in fancy dresses and long, luxurious coats. Red bows, red ribbons, red scarves. Joyful faces, all forgiven, at least for one day.

It seemed like everyone was wearing a gift. A Christmas tree tie. A woman's full-length coat. That kid's tablet, the way he couldn't take his eyes off it. Others carried colorful presents.

Mrs. Spooner chose a clean piece of cardboard, took out her sharpie and wrote:

**DEAF!!  
PLEASE HELP!  
MERRY XMAS**

She turned over an old Giants cap, set it on the sidewalk and stood in front of her cart, holding the sign with one hand. She looked around in a distracted way, pretending not to hear.

"Look at that poor woman. All alone on Christmas."

"Ugh! She stinks!"

"Shouldn't be allowed."

But she could tell the hat was filling up.

A little girl was watching her, as her folks traded greetings and hugs with another couple. She wore shiny black shoes and held a scarf over her mouth. So cute.

Mrs. Spooner took a step forward. The girl looked at her solemnly, unsmiling.

"Do you believe in Santa Claus?" Mrs. Spooner whispered.

The girl nodded.

"Me too," Mrs. Spooner said and the child smiled.

"Annie, stay away from her," the father said and grabbed the girl's arm.

The girl looked back and waved as her parent hauled her away.

Another drop of pain. Mrs. Spooner was used to it.

She resumed her station, as a big limo pulled up to the curb. A guy in a uniform ran around from the driver's seat to open the back door. A distinguished-looking gentleman climbed out. He looked like he stepped right out of a board game.

"Col. Mustard," she muttered to herself.

He walked through a gently falling curtain of white, coming straight toward her.

This is it, she thought. He's the one. It was like some reality TV show. She glanced around to find the cameras.

The man stopped in front of her. She stood a little straighter and tried to smile, fumbling in her pocket for her teeth.

"Would you mind?" he said with disdain, completely ignoring her sign. "You're blocking the sidewalk."

The man stepped over her hat without putting anything into it.

Mrs. Spooner stared at the gent as he entered the posh eatery. The way he looked at her, his tone of voice, made her think of the judge at Ronnie's inquiry, the way his black robes flapped as he leaned down and announced his finding.

"The war did it to him," he said. "Case dismissed."

She was indignant. That was it? No more than that? She felt that way now. She wished she couldn't hear either man's statement.

She scolded herself. She knew better. She shouldn't have expected anything else.

A squad car parked on the street, its blinkers flashing. Two officers got out and talked with a man in a black apron, who stood in front of the restaurant and pointed at Mrs. Spooner. The cops came over to her.

"Afternoon, M'am," the taller one said. "Can I see some ID please?"

She reached down the front of the cart and located a manila envelope, where she carried various documents -- a shelter card with a recent photo of her squinting at the camera, her benefits card and a ten-year-old driver's license.

"Is that you?" the shorter policeman asked, comparing the older photo with the newer model standing in front of him, looking at the ground.

He wore a thick moustache. He pushed his cap back on his head

"What do you think we ought to do with her, Officer Lugo?" he asked his partner.

"I don't know," the other said. "We probably should impound that grocery cart and take it to the dump."

Mrs. Spooner looked up, alarmed.

"You wouldn't do that to an old lady," she spluttered.

"You're 52 years old," the shorter one said, repressing a smile as he handed back the papers. "And you're definitely not deaf. We ought to take you downtown. Get you out of the cold."

"Oh, please don't do that. Please don't do that."

"Don't you have any place to go?" Officer Lugo asked.

"I do, sir. I do. I'll get out of here right now."

"I don't know ...," he said. "Tell you what. I'm going to look away and, when I look back, you won't be here."

He turned around, grinning at the shorter officer.

Mrs. Spooner tossed her hat and sign into her house and made an awkward, squeaking exit. It almost seemed like she was skipping as he hurried away. The cart nearly overturned as she veered into a nearby alley.

"Merry Christmas, Smelly Lady," the smaller cop called after her.

\* \* \* \*

Mrs. Spooner leaned into it, rammed her house down the pavement, clacking and clattering. Sometimes it seemed to weigh a ton. Other times, like when she was frightened, it was almost an extension of her body. She forgot about it.

Two blocks away, she finally stopped, out of breath, her heart pounding. She was shaky, scattered.

The visitor crossed her mind. He definitely didn't wear a uniform. She was sure of that. Those guys had been making sport of her, picking on her just to relieve their boredom. Public servants, my eye, she thought. Public nuisances was more like it.

Sinatra spilled onto the street from an upstairs loft.

*"Have yourself a merry little Christmas.*

*"Let your heart be light.*

*"Next year all our troubles will be out of sight."*

She'd heard the song her entire life, but this was the first time that "out of sight" made her remember the way the cops treated her, the way people tried not to see her at the restaurant.

Except for that cute little girl.

The thought of her helped Mrs. Spooner regain her composure. The child had accepted her.

The snow was letting up, but it was still chilly and it would soon get worse. Short days this time of year. Mrs. Spooner pushed off toward familiar territory on the lookout for another place to spend the night.

She mused about Christmas. It wasn't so much a religious observance any more. She didn't see many people praying these days. To most, the holiday seemed to be about giving, about stepping out of their personal tunnels and thinking about someone besides themselves.

Why now? Where was all this good will during the hustle and hassle of the rest of the year? That was the mystery to her.

Deep thoughts down a long alley and then Mrs. Spooner heard a tiny cry. She stopped and pricked up her ears.

A puff of wind ruffled her hair and tugged at her faded knit cap. It fluttered a vinyl banner attached to a mesh fence.

She heard the sound again. Was it a squeaking sign? No, it wasn't mechanical. It was too irregular, too ... desperate.

She scanned her surroundings, even as it came again, scarcely audible. There. Under a loading dock, a crushed box, and peeping out of it was a kitten. Days old, its eyes barely open, it was nearly frozen.

She picked it up, quickly checked under the tail, and tucked her under her coats, her shirts, against her skin.

"There, there, little girl," she crooned.

She could feel the kitten's trembling. She could feel its teensy heart beating against her own. She was careful not to push down.

She found a protected place between two cars in an office parking area. She put down some cardboard, so she'd have a place to sit. When she judged the animal to be warm, she extracted her and brought her up to her face. The little creature attempted to mew.

"Look at you, all black and white," Mrs. Spooner said. "I'd name you Domino, except for those four white boots you're wearing. Mittsie – that's what I'll call you."

She fumbled in her cart and found the bacon, two pieces left. She broke one into tiny bits and tried to get the kitten to eat it. She sniffed, but wouldn't put it in her mouth. The same with bread. Mittsie took a little crumbled cheese before stopping and crying again.

Mrs. Spooner put her pinkie in her mouth to clean it, wet it from the water bottle and offered it. The kitten licked halfheartedly. She wanted to suck. She needed milk.

She put the animal back against her chest. How could she keep it alive? She dug around in her cart and located the plastic bag, took out the soft pastel blanket she'd been saving for her own blessed event. She bundled it around Mittsie, then carved out a cave in the clothing and gently placed her inside it.

"Not exactly Baby Jesus," she said to herself. "Close enough, I guess."

As she moved on, she fretted. What would she do when darkness fell and the real cold set in? She knew she couldn't take the kitten to a shelter. That was against the rules. She wasn't supposed to take her onto a bus for the same reason.

Where was her visitor? Maybe he could help her with her new responsibility.

Her life had already changed, she realized. Her choices had narrowed. She should put this little creature back where she found her. She wasn't her problem.

Except that she was. She couldn't abandon Mittsie now. She couldn't do to this helpless kitten what had been done to her. Before she was Mrs. Spooner, before she even met Ronnie, her father had dumped her. She was fourteen. He said he couldn't stand it anymore?

What? Her?

Her brother James was gone. Mama, they sent to the farm, put her away where she couldn't bother them. For an instant, she saw an image of her mother crumpled to the floor, sobbing.

No one to take care of Clare, so they put her in a barracks, two bullies to a row. They put her in plaid skirts and gave her oatmeal for orphans. And looked away when the others taunted her.

She couldn't wait to get out of there.

Mrs. Spooner shrugged off the memory like an extra coat. She checked that Mittsie was firmly in place. She rolled past the mini-market. Closed. She could have gotten some milk there.

She headed toward the train station. There was a vending machine there that might have milk in it. She parked around the corner, down by the tracks, hating to leave her cart after her encounter with the law.

She hastened inside. Nope. The milk was gone. No refills today.

The station was a tomb, empty and echoing, but it wouldn't work for her overnight. The cops patrolled the waiting area on a regular basis.

She used the facilities, holding Mittsie in her lap. She put the kitten on the sink, while she washed up, rinsing the warm water over her face, collecting herself, toweling off.

Then she put Mittsie back in her spot and plodded on. The sky was starting to fade. Better find something soon. About now, she could use an angel with a key to a plush hotel room but none appeared. So much for saviors.

She slowed as she passed the underground garage near Safeway. The metal grate was closed and locked. Too bad. It would be warmer down there.

On top of the dumpster behind the big grocery was a Christmas tree. It was spindly and only about a yard long. It had a dented silver star on top, three or four ornaments and some tinsel. On a whim, Mrs. Spooner deposited it on the top of her cart.

The kitten squirmed out of her blankets, poked her little nose underneath the branches and sniffed. She cried weakly as she folded back into her nest.

\* \* \* \*

Without milk, Mittsie wouldn't make it through the night. Where else could Mrs. Spooner look?

The Donut Shoppe was on the next block, its bluish fluorescents leaking onto the sidewalk. It was the only place open at this hour. Even McDee's had shut its doors.

She didn't want to go back there, especially after the incident this morning.

One cop sat at a table and studied the twilight. Was he one of the ones who roused her?

Normally, Mrs. Spooner would take a quick turn in an alternate direction. She'd be certain she didn't attract police attention. But this was different. Mittsie needed her.

She put in her teeth and got up her nerve. She pushed a little closer and paused, staring hard. No moustache on the young officer's face. And it wasn't Lugo. It was a different guy. That was a break.

She planned to stand by the big window, not to try to enter. She'd hold the kitten against the plate glass and mouth the word "milk." She'd show some money. Surely, they'd understand.

As she drew near, she saw the cop say something over his shoulder to the waitress. It was the same one as before, the big lady with the ruddy complexion. Mrs. Spooner was scared of her.

The woman grabbed something under the counter, said something to the man, hurried out the door and hailed Mrs. Spooner.

Surprise. Freeze.

"Mrs. Spooner," the waitress said, pulling her sweater around her. "My name is Irene and I ... "

"How do you know my name?"

“Everybody knows you around here, Mrs. Spooner.”

“Really? You know my name?”

“You’ve been around this neighborhood for a while.”

Mrs. Spooner didn’t know what to say. She took Mittsie into her arms.

“Anyway, I owe you an apology about what happened before,” the waitress said. “I felt bad about it all day. It wasn’t very Christian of me. I’m working a 12-hour shift and I guess I was feeling sorry for myself and I took it out on you.”

She handed a bag to Mrs. Spooner.

“They’re a little stale,” she added, “but you’re welcome to come inside to enjoy them.”

The bag contained four fat donuts, a large cup of coffee and four small creamers.

Mrs. Spooner grinned so widely that her denture dropped. She clapped her mouth shut –

“Oops!” -- but it was too late to conceal it.

She opened a creamer and held it for Mitsie.

“I need to feed my kitty. She’s real hungry.”

“Awww,” the waitress said, scratching the kitten’s ears. “Where did you get it?”

Mrs. Spooner pointed with her chin. “That alley over there.”

Mittsie didn’t take much from the creamer. She didn’t seem to like it.

“Do you suppose I could get some real milk?” Mrs. Spooner asked. “I could pay for it.”

“Of course, and you don’t need to pay. But I can’t let you bring the animal inside. You understand, don’t you? It being a place where food is served and all?”

Mrs. Spooner nodded and so did the waitress.

Irene walked back into the store, returning quickly with a capped cup.

“Here you are.”

“Thank you so much.”

The waitress shivered and wrapped her arms around her chest.

“Brrr. Well, you have a merry Christmas,” she said. “I’ve got to get back.”

“Thanks again,” Mrs. Spooner murmured, even though no one could hear her.

The cop in the window smiled and waved at her. She waved back, then stood in the bluish glow, dipped her finger in the milk and let the kitten lick it clean a few times.

She shoved her cart across the wide intersection with the electric train tracks down the center, levered the load over the curb and walked past the Giants stadium.

What about those building sites across the canal? Over in Mission Bay? She’d never gone over there before, uncomfortable about loose lumber and construction debris. Maybe this was the night to try it.

She paused, munching a sugary treat. The streetlights came on. So did a sense of well-being. She felt better than she had all day. She wasn’t sure why.

She took a swallow of the hot drink. That made her realize her fingers and nose were numb. Her feelings had been too.

She heard that tiny cry again. Someone wanted some more milk.

She was only a short distance from the alcove. Could she risk another night in there? It was so cozy.

She looked behind her. The cop was a smear in the window back there. And he wasn’t in the mood to hassle her tonight. What the hell. Why not?

Mrs. Spooner steered inside the narrow brick room, turned her house sideways and stuck the tree at the entranceway.

\* \* \* \*

Mrs. Spooner sat in the doorway with her tea. Mittsie peeked from the top of her collar. The sky was clear, the stars bright.

Santa's home in the sack by now, she thought. It was just a dream.

She took a sip. A trace of red in the sky behind a ship in drydock a few hundred yards behind the marina. No wind for the first time in hours.

Then, over by that apple tree, wait ... could it be ... it was. The coyote again.

"Trickster!" she called.

She rose and found some of that fine throwaway she scored the day before and she put it on the pavement, about 10 paces away. She was pleased when the coyote took his meal.

"Good boy, good boy, Mr. Trickster. Good boy."

The coyote made a single lunge, tongue hanging out, like a puppy that wanted to play.

She laughed, reached back and found the fruitcake. She opened the tin and threw the entire thing to him.

"Nobody wants it," she chuckled.

He ate it eagerly.

He seemed to come with this spot. It must be part of his territory. Or maybe he recognized a kindred spirit in her. They were loners, both of them. In her way, she was as free as he was. Free to taste the air, to watch the light show above the Bay.

"C'mere, boy. C'mon."

The coyote didn't budge.

Free to not do what she was told.

Mittsie wiggled higher, up under Mrs. Spooner's jaw. It tickled. She scratched the ball of fur purring around her neck, batting at her hair. The kitten was more energetic after the milk.

In a relaxed kind of way, Mrs. Spooner replayed her day. The dream. The coyote. The nap in the rest room and the kid from the train station. Going to work outside the restaurant. Finding Mittsie and building her nest. Talking with the waitress. Coming home again. Anywhere she stayed two nights in a row was home.

She supposed she'd been silly about the visitor. Nobody had come. Nobody special, as far as she could tell. She was still Mrs. Spooner, still on the street, still the poster lady of nowhere-to-go.

But she did have fourteen bucks and change that she'd earned outside the restaurant. Maybe she'd have her own shopping spree tomorrow at the Safeway. Or maybe she'd pay for a proper shower and a soak.

And she had Mittsie. And Mittsie had her.

She made kissing sounds and stroked the softness under her chin. She'd saved the kitten's life and the little creature needed more looking-after. She didn't mind.

She thought about the guy who missed his train. He really had done his best for her, considering how mortified he'd been at the Donut Shoppe.

Then there was Mrs. Hyde the waitress, who became Dr. Jekyll later in the afternoon. Nobody had spoken with her like that, like she was a regular person, for a long time. Not since she lived on the streets.

Not a bad day, all told. Something of a celebration.

The coyote was sitting and observing her. It occurred to her that coyotes prey on cats, especially helpless newborns. Is that why he was hanging around? Nah. That wasn't it. He felt it too, a fellowship. The animals didn't judge her. They simply wanted to be near her.

She rubbed her chin back and forth on the kitten's head nestled at her throat, made soft smooches. She calmly regarded Trickster, his yellow eyes returning her gaze.

The air was crisp and brittle, quiet. She was glad to be outside, well-fed and warmed, glad to be on her own and to not feel alone.

Looking south past the spars in the marina, gently swaying, past the silhouetted ship in drydock, the planes were lined up to land at SFO like magi in the sky. Mrs. Spooner waited in her little stable.

She sensed something in the night, something greater than herself, something she couldn't name, yet she knew she was part of it. It made her feel very small and at the same time very large.

Softly, like the barest breeze, slowly, like a flower unfolding, peace suffused her.

Maybe he did come, after all.

**THE END**