Flair 2

TELEVISION F2
COMICS.....F4

ANN AND ABBY F6

MARTIN RHODES

A FICTIONAL TALE BY TIMES-DISPATCH WRITER LEE GRAVES AND STAFF ARTISTS

The kings of Christmas

Grandpa's carvings fashioned bond of undying love

The house was still. Jenny knew she was the only one awake, which was not unusual. Mornings were her favorite time of day, and she savored moments when she could pull the silence about her like a down comforter.

Now, the house was especially still. No boards creaked, no beds squeaked, no motors hummed, no faucets dripped. It was as if the wood and metal and machines and people were all at peace.

> Twas the morning of Christmas,
> And all through the house
> Not a creature was stirring,
> Not even my bratty kid brother.

Jenny smiled. OK, it didn't rhyme, but what the heck. Grandpa would've liked it. Grandpa. Her smile faded, and Jenny decided to get up. She heard the furnace kick on, and Uncle Cary's bed rustled as he turned over in the guest room next to hers. His snoring cut through the stillness like a muffled chain saw. She'd have to tease him about it later.

Ever so quietly, she turned down her quilted bedspread, swung her feet onto the floor and stood up. Outside, a gray dawn was easing the night away. Light from a street lamp made splinters of ice on her window glisten like etched glass. The crystalline filigrees reminded her of Grandpa's white beard, stubbly in places, lush in others.

Grandpa. Jenny again felt the pain and decided not to ignore it. Over the months, she had learned to keep her memories of Grandpa in a special place inside her. It was Uncle Cary's idea, a way to let go but not forget, he said. So in her mind she had made a box for Grandpa — an ornately carved wooden one with a golden latch — that she could open at various times to remember him. She closed her eyes and opened the latch.

There was his face, the watery blue eyes with snowy brows and crinkly crow's feet. He was smiling, chuckling with that slow rumble that sometimes swelled until his whole body quaked with mirth. She was on his knee, even though she knew she was too big for that now. His flannel shirt, stretched tight over his tummy, pressed against her arm. She smelled the mixture of Old Spice, Prince Albert and coffee. In his left hand, so big and gnarled and scarred, was a block of wood; his right hand held the knife — *the* knife — he'd used to carve her chess pieces.

STEPHEN ROUNTREE

Jenny opened her eyes, tiptoed to her dresser and, in the semi-darkness, examined her chess set. It was her most cherished possession. Every Christmas since she was 7, Grandpa had given her new pieces he had carved and painted by hand. One year the pawns, the next the castles, the next the knights, the next the bishops. They would be waiting in her stocking, down at the bottom, below the candy canes, the new toothbrush, the charms for her bracelet and the barrettes for her hair.

KERRY P. TALBOTT

Grandpa took great care with the characters, and each had a separate personality, a different look. One ebony bishop was stern, his high cheekbones and arched brows making him look like the tall, thin bad guy in the Clint Eastwood movies her dad watched. Facing him, one of the oak bishops smiled benevolently, his face like — well, like Santa Claus without a beard. The red robe, with its white cross, gave him a cheerful countenance.

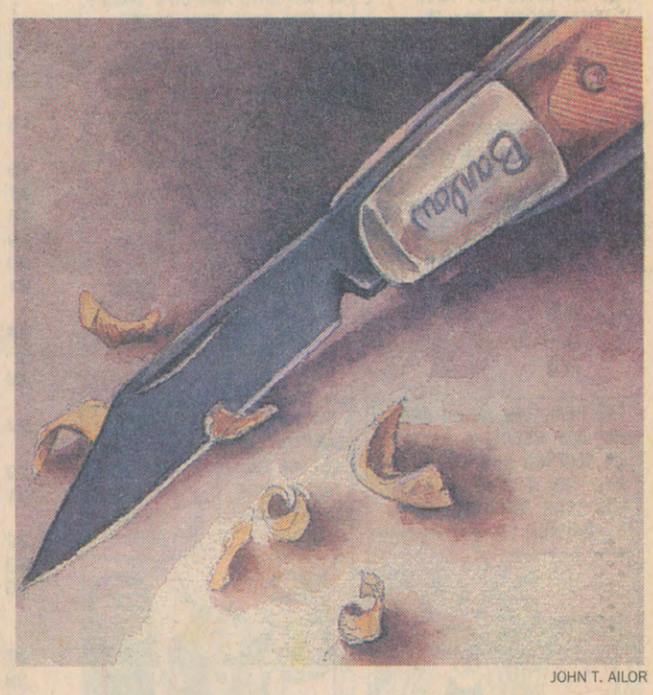
Next to him was one of Jenny's favorite pieces. She called him Sir Galahad, the white knight. One hand holding a shield, the other on the emerald scabbard of his sword, Galahad leaned forward on his charger, which was rearing slightly as if just being spurred into battle. Galahad's visor was up, his face serene.

Grandpa had a story for each piece, and she liked Sir Galahad's best. "He's going into battle." Grandpa's raspy voice was quiet, and, for a moment, distant. "Battles are gruesome things, Jenny. I know. But Galahad isn't afraid. He knows he might die, but he still isn't afraid, sweetie. You know why?" Jenny shook her head slightly. "Because he knows what he's fighting for, and he has love in his heart. As long as you have love in your heart, you can face just about anything." One memory conjured another — Jenny remembered Grandpa's face in the hospital. He'd been like Galahad. She smiled at the recollection.

The kings Grandpa had saved for last, for this year. But now there would be none. The set was incomplete. And no one would be here to play with her. She and Grandpa had set aside one day a month to play, using other pieces where none had been carved. He was so patient and understanding while she was learning the rules. They played just for fun. They took their time, chatting between moves, and if Jenny made a dumb move Grandpa let her take it back. Neither of them was very good, but that wasn't the point.

Her dad had tried to play once last year but couldn't keep the figures straight. "They're all different," he said, scratching his head. "I can't tell them apart." Jenny sighed. Now Dad was so busy at the office, and Mom didn't really care to learn the game. She wished Grandpa had lived long enough to finish the set. She wished Grandpa could have lived forever.

If she had his knife, she thought, she'd make the kings. It was an old Barlow knife with a horn handle the color of swirly butterscotch. He'd used it so much that some of the ripples on the surface had been rubbed smooth. There wasn't anything special about it — not like Jimmy Butler's red Swiss army knife with the tweezers and toothpick and bottle opener. The Barlow had only two blades. But it was Grandpa's knife, and he had used it to carve her chess pieces. Now it belonged to Uncle Cary? "It's a man's knife and should go to a man," her father had explained. In that instant, she'd hated Dad. As much as she liked Uncle Cary, she begrudged him the knife. If she couldn't have the kings, she ought to have the knife. Now she had nothing, not even Grandpa.



JOHN T. AILOR

She heard Benny stirring across the hall. It wouldn't be long before he woke up everyone. Christmas was still a fantasy world to him, even now that he was 8. Closing her eyes, Jenny again envisioned her "Grandpa box." Carefully, she sealed the lid and fastened the latch.

"Are you awake?" Benny whispered as he poked his head through the doorway. Jenny started, then frowned.

"No, stupid, I'm sleepwalking." She reached for a brush and pulled it through her hair. Too mousy-colored, she thought, looking in the mirror. At least Jimmy Baldwin thought she was cute, or so Marsha said.

"Hey, just 'cause you're 13 you don't have to be mean. It's Christmas!" He bumped the door open with one scrawny elbow, making just enough noise so Mom and Dad could hear, then shuffled to her side. Jenny could tell he was trying to act nonchalant, trying to hide the "HURRAY-IT'S-CHRISTMAS-MORNING" adrenalin surge. He flopped both arms on the edge of her dresser and, his chin resting on his hands, stared at the chess set for a long minute. "Sorry."

" 'Bout what?" Jenny asked quietly and stopped brushing.

"That you're not going to get your kings." He rolled his head to the side and looked at her. "I miss Grandpa too."

"You're a twerp," she chided gently and

PLEASE SEE KINGS, *PAGE* F6 ▸