



Perspective

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Christmas Eve Pocahontas Park was aglow and alive with lights and people. The strings of multi-colored lights that hung across 14th Avenue gave the entire town a festive appearance.

The seven-year-old boy stood at the base of the rough platform built near the wading pool. He glanced up at the huge tree gaily decorated with holiday lights. Far down the street he heard Santa's fire truck, bell clanging, accompanied by hundreds of children racing down the sidewalks toward the park. The little boy hadn't joined the parade. He wanted to be first in line to receive a bag of candy from fat Santa when he pulled into the park.

It was common knowledge that Mr. O'Malley, of O'Malley's Restaurant, was Santa. He had a Santa Claus stomach even in July and was always ready with a big "Ho-Ho-Ho" for anyone.

Getting his bag of candy, the little boy raced across the park into the shadows between the bear and alligator cages. It was a warm, balmy night and the sky was as clear as infinity. He stood looking up through the branches of the banyan tree wondering if the Star of Bethlehem still shone.

Suddenly he heard a piercing scream above the din of merriment. People were running frantically toward the Community Building and gathering around the corner near the men's rest room.

The little boy ran, too. But he was too small to see over the heads of the gathered adults. Dropping to his hands and knees he crawled through the crowd to the center of the circle. Suddenly he felt his hand slip into something warm and sticky and heard a man shout, "Hey, kid, get out of that blood."

Then he saw him. His face only inches away. An ugly gash on the side of his neck oozed blood. His eyes were wide open, unseeing. The child got sick at his stomach, backed out between the legs and feet and wiped his hand on the cool, damp grass. Stumbling to his feet he ran to his Daddy's car where he cowered in the back seat. It was the first dead man he'd ever seen.

On the way home he caught snatches of the adult conversation. "Killed fighting over a bottle...other man found drunk in a ditch..."

There are some things that stick forever in the mind of a seven-year-old boy—things that never go away. And that Christmas Eve, 30 years ago, is one of them: The big tree. The strings of lights. Mr. O'Malley's laugh. The warm ocean breeze. The crystal sky lit by a billion twinkling stars. And a little boy with dried blood under his fingernails.