



My
Mother's Wish
An American Christmas Carol

Jerry Camery-Hoggatt
author of *When Mother Was Eleven-Foot-Four*

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Contrariwise



THE SPANISH POET JUAN RAMÓN JIMÉNEZ ONCE said that if they give you ruled paper, you should write the other way. That's pretty much the story of my life, writing the other way, across the lines, against the grain. I mean this literally. I write my grocery list sideways on the page. I sign my name, Ellee, on the upslope, diagonally across the little boxes they give you on official forms. Ever since the third grade, I've written out my Christmas wish list sideways, running the words up from the bottom, against the grain of the lined paper my mother posts on the refrigerator door. I also write my life story across the lines. I mean this literally too. I write my diary from back to front, too. I hold the book so the pages open from the bottom up, but because I write from back to front, you have to read contrariwise.

A fine word, *contrariwise*. Rolls off the tongue like a marble. It's the best word I know.

I learned it in the seventh grade. I was sitting with my older sister, Susan, next to the entrance to the boys' locker room, watching the rest of the student body mill around like a herd of wildebeests, when that stupid Joey Tyndale rushed up and tried to kiss her. I learned later that he had been taking a dare—things like that happened sometimes to Susie because she's so much prettier than I am—but at the time I didn't know that. Susie almost died of course because Joey Tyndale is a big, lumbering, stupid boy, and in her desperation to get away she knocked my backpack off the bench, and my diary fell out, faceup, on the cracked blacktop of the basketball court.

Miss Buttram, the vice principal, was there in six seconds flat, her first priority to protect Susie (she would have taken a bullet for Susie, she was such a good girl), but I think the real reason was that Miss Buttram loves a good fight on the school grounds. Miss Buttram doesn't have a husband at home to fight with, so she takes her satisfactions where she finds them—the fighting of seventh graders on the playground of the Woodrow Wilson Junior High School, where she has been vice principal since she

was thirteen. Nothing gets a person's vice principal sap flowing like a good playground brawl.

I scrambled for the diary but not before Joey saw it and beat me to it, picking it up and taunting me with it. He danced what he thought was a little jig. It was not. He was too big and lumbering to dance a little anything.

"Eleanor writes backwards! Eleanor writes backwards!"

Joey held the diary high so everybody could see, and I started to jump for it.

"Give it back," I said as forcefully as I could with my teeth gritted so nobody else would hear me.

He held the diary higher.

Susie backed away, afraid of getting into trouble, and the small herd of wildebeests that had crowded around us swallowed her up like the phagocytes Mr. Frazier talked about in seventh grade science. Mr. Frazier lived and breathed phagocytes. Every single spelling test he ever gave had the word *phagocyte* on it.

In the corner of my eye, I could see Miss Buttram checking that Susie had not been hurt. It was like that with Susie. Before each school year, the teachers and playground supervisors at our school had a ceremony where they signed a blood pledge that they wouldn't ever, ever let

anything hurt Susie McKutcheon, she was so pretty and good.

I bumped against Joey's body as I jumped for my diary, which was like belly-bumping a large marshmallow with arms. "Give it, Joey!" I bit my lip to keep from crying.

When Miss Buttram had finished checking on Susie, she waded into the herd of wildebeests, using all four of her arms to windmill her way through.

"Joey!" That was all Miss Buttram said. It was enough because she used her megaphone voice, which could be heard more than a quarter of a mile away on the top of the water tower with the name of the our town, BLACKWATER, painted in large block letters on the side.

Joey stopped.

There's a rumor that Miss Buttram trained for the vice principal's job by doing a stint with the Green Berets, but I don't believe it. The Green Berets still exist, and they still fight, and that wouldn't be true if Miss Buttram had crossed their path. She would have put a stop to *that* too. I can easily picture her windmilling Green Berets left and right, all four arms in action. So maybe the rumor was true. She clomped around the school in saddle oxfords

because they were the closest thing she could find to combat boots.

Joey held the book high, beyond my reach.

“Give. Me. The. Book,” Miss Buttram said.

He handed it to her, reaching past me, over my head, to do it.

“Please, Miss Buttram,” I said. “It’s my diary. It’s private.”

“Joey. Tyndale. Wait. For. Me. In. My. Office,” she said. At Teacher College she had learned to speak in one-word sentences. For her it was a practiced art form, a kind of vice principal’s cement poetry. Literally. The words came out in cement. One of them fell on Joey’s foot, and he limped away, whimpering.

She began turning the pages of the book, slowly examining them one at a time as though it were the Book of Life. She wondered, I’m sure, if her name was written therein. It was not.

“Please, Miss Buttram...” I said.

“You really do write backward, Eleanor,” Miss Buttram said. “Why do you do that?”

“Ellee,” I corrected. Then I said, “It’s private,” to answer

her question. It was a partial answer. Writing your diary across the lines seems to me to be an act of self-preservation. I am a pledged disciple of Rosa Parks, a Full Gospel Suffragette. There was a long pause as she examined the pages. The wildebeests lost interest and drifted away, looking for grass. “It’s my diary,” I said again. “A person has rights.”

“Not on my campus,” she snapped. She moved her lips, trying to read her way past the puzzling secret backward organization of the diary.

“Leonardo da Vinci wrote backward,” I said.

“Not on my campus,” Miss Buttram said again. Honestly, you’d think a Green Beret would understand why people write in code sometimes. “You do everything that way,” she said.

“What way?” I asked.

“Contrariwise, Eleanor,” she said flatly.

The word was wonderful. *Contrariwise*. As it came out of her mouth it took wings. I was so startled I almost gave up on the diary. But not my name. “Ellee,” I corrected. Then, “Can I have my diary back, Miss Buttram?”

She handed me the book. “There’s a right way to do everything, Eleanor, and a wrong way. You always choose the wrong way.”



Eleanor Crumb



BY NOW YOU SHOULD HAVE GUESSED TWO THINGS. First, that the grownups in my life think my name is Eleanor, which is understandable and forgivable because I couldn't talk when I was born so they had to guess. When the nurse came into my mother's hospital room to fill out my birth certificate, my mother got confused and told the woman I was my grandmother, Eleanor Crumb. The nurse raised an eyebrow at the middle name, Crumb. My mother cocked the hammer of her service revolver and the nurse wrote down "Eleanor Crumb McKutcheon." I don't mind the middle name. It's how I feel a lot of the time. But even if nobody else in the whole world knows my first name is Ellee, I do.

The second thing you should have guessed by now is that when it comes to my name, the grownups aren't very good listeners. I think my mother must have been

embarrassed at having reversed our roles, mother and daughter, because she's covered for it ever since. I never met my grandmother—she died the month before I was born—but my father told me once that she wore pearls when she went to the grocery store. I don't even own pearls. My mother covers her embarrassment at the brain glitch by insisting that everybody call me Eleanor.

“If I wanted you to be called Ellee, I would have named you Ellee,” she said to me.

She never listens. You'd think a person would know her own name.

Now, my father's a whole other thing altogether. My father calls me by a variety of names, usually whatever vegetable he happens to be thinking about at the time. “Hand me that wrench, will you, Dill Pickle?” Then in a fine imitation of W. C. Fields he would say, “Ah, yes, my little Kumquat...” or “Ah, yes, my little Cucumber...” He told me once his W. C. Fields voice was so good that Hollywood had tried to sign him for silent movies.

“You're a cucumber too,” I said to him when I was maybe five.

“The tomato doesn't fall far from the vine,” my father replied. Then he called me Tomato for a month.

When he took us with him to kids-and-dads-at-work day, he introduced us to his boss as his daughters, the pride of his life, Susan and Rutabaga. My father spent that night in his recliner.

Miss Buttram calls me Eleanor because my mother visited the school and told her to. When my mother arrived at the school for our intake interview, everybody expected the Clash of the Titans. The school secretary was a mousy-haired woman who wore the uniform of a prison guard. She made my mother write our names on a clipboard, mine and Susie's, and led the three of us down the corridor to the vice principal's office, and I thought I heard her whisper, "Dead man walking," as we passed the little openings where the guidance counselors worked. A panicky-looking janitor came by and unlocked their leg irons, and they quietly left the building on urgent errands in other places. I heard later that Mr. Bartolomeo actually had his class doing duck-and-cover drills, and the English teacher, Miss Houghtalin, took hers to the gymnasium because its walls had steel-reinforced beams that could withstand an atomic blast.

The three of us waited in the dirty oak school chairs Miss Buttram had put outside her office for bad kids, and

as we sat, I watched my mother's blood slow-boil at having been kept waiting. Miss Buttram routinely made new parents simmer for exactly thirty-three minutes, stewing in their juices, to make sure they knew whose school it was. I wondered what I should do if my mother and Miss Buttram did battle. I could dive beneath Miss Buttram's steel desk. Susie was on her own.

It never came. The battle I mean. My mother and Miss Buttram turned out to be cut from the same bolt of 30-gauge camouflage. They sat down there and worked out their differences like two Russian politicians cutting a back-room deal to divide Eastern Europe between them. I didn't catch most of what they said. I don't speak Russian. But I knew they had struck a deal when Miss Buttram slapped her fist down hard on the table and said suddenly, "Done!"

After that, at Woodrow Wilson Junior High School I was called Eleanor.