

...kicking through the wet leaves in her shiny new red shoes, she said, "Mommy and Daddy? Can we go back to Christmas sometime?" It was only then that we realized Caeli believed that Christmas was a magical place we'd once visited together. A perpetual party with music, gingerbread, velvet dresses, grandparents, cousins, jingle bells, elves, and candlelight. But how to find our way back? We hadn't thought to bring a map, and our trail of breadcrumbs had vanished, perhaps devoured by hungry winter birds. It was Madeline who broke the spell.

"You don't go to Christmas, Caeli." She pronounced this with all of the authority of her six years on this planet. "Christmas isn't a place; its a time, and it comes all by itself, like Halloween."

"But yesterday we went to Halloween, we did!" insisted Caeli. ("Yesterday" was still her word for any moment in the past.) Then, slyly, "Tomorrow, can we go back?"

"We can't ever go back," said Lauren. "We have to wait for Halloween to come around again."

Caeli's eyes grew wistful. There was no sound except the distant whoosh of traffic and the leaves gently scraping across the weathered tombstones. "But-- but what are they doing underground?" she cried.

"Who?" said Madeline.

"Who?" piped the baby.

"Daddy! Mommy! Calla just said 'Who?'" squealed Madeline. I shifted the baby higher on my hip and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"The dead people," said Caeli.

"What dead people?" said Lauren, whose mind had drifted away to the land of permafrost and flying reindeer. Larry and I sighed. The path to the music school wound through an ancient cemetery, so this was a conversation that came around week after week after week.

"They're resting," I said carefully.

"Are they in heaven?" she asked. "Why aren't they up in the sky? "

"Oh, Caeli, heaven isn't in the sky-- " began Lauren.

"But balloons go up there, when you let go of the string!" Caeli's voice was plaintive. Larry and I did not know what to say.

"Well, is heaven like Christmas?" she asked. "I think heaven is where you want it to be," said Lauren.

"That's right." Larry's eyes met mine briefly, and we continued our journey together down the leafy trail into the misty solstice, singing softly, our six voices rising against the rustling wind. Oh tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, comfort and joy...

Text from Rile Smith Christmas Card, 1995