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# Pro Rege

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Volume 34  
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue 2005*

Article 23

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December 2005

## Finding Something

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### Recommended Citation

Schaap, James C. (2005) "Finding Something," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 34: No. 2, 28 - 31.

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# Finding Something

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*James Calvin Schaap*

“We’ve not *found* anything, Mom.”

That’s what Ellen had told her, and how many times hadn’t her daughter said exactly that when she had asked the question? “We’ve not found anything, Mom”—a reply which Jan might have felt hopeful if the words weren’t twisted in the same way every time Ellen said them. “We’ve not *found* anything, Mom.” Emphasis on *found*, as if to say “end of discussion.” That answer always came packaged in a deadbeat tone that carried too much finality, and Jan knew—aren’t mothers supposed to know?—that Ellen wasn’t really looking at all.

So she’d tried once again, Christmas Eve. “Have you found a suitable church?”

The two of them were about to go to bed. She’d come for the holidays. She’d not looked forward to a long plane ride to Seattle, alone, now that Jack had gone. She’d not looked forward to the trip itself, but she’d crossed the days off the calendar because she wanted so badly to see her kids, her smart kids who were making so much money in computers—Microsoft this, Microsoft that. She’d never been to their new place, a flashy condo with windows for walls. But she couldn’t help asking again, as if the topic had never come up before—“Have you found a suitable church?”

“We’ve not found anything, Mom,” her daughter said, in a computer voice. And then Ellen gave her a smile Jan knew was condescending because, after all, she was “Grandma” and the two of them, her son-in-law and daughter, were big shots—corporate jet, power lunch, lots of travel. Ellen and Frank were cutting edge, and her mother was an old oak buffet from Iowa.

She wanted to tell her daughter that the two of them weren’t going to find a church if they sat on their hams or slept in to catch up from work weeks that had them gone more than home, their kids hostage to some pre-school with a big cheery sign with multi-colored balloons.

“Have you been looking, Ellen?” she’d asked her daughter.

They were wrapping presents. It was Christmas Eve, mind you, and they were still wrapping the kids’ Christmas presents. Frank was in his office—they each had one in the big condo—and the kids were off to bed.

“We’ve looked,” she said, fitting a corner on a whole box of electronic games. “We keep telling ourselves we’ve got to slow down,” Ellen told her. “We got to smell the roses, you know? Last summer we were out on the boat only once.”

“Whose fault is that?” Jan said.

“Ours, of course,” Ellen told her.

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“Finding Something” appears in *Startling Joy: Stories for the Christmas Season*

“Are you still in love?” Jan said.

“Mom!” Ellen scolded.

“I’m serious,” she’d said, curling the ribbons across the top of Tosha’s new Barbie.

“Look, Mom—we’re all right, okay? I’ve never stopped thinking that there’s a God—I’m no infidel.” After that first insipid smile, Ellen never once looked up, which Jan had read as a good sign, since there was some guilt there anyway.

“Maybe we ought to go tomorrow,” she said.

Ellen dropped her shoulders.

“I’m just suggesting—“

“I’m 34 years old, Mom,” Ellen told her.

“I brought you into this world,” she said. “I know exactly how old you are.” She flitted with the ribbons, put the gift under the tree, and sat back on her haunches. “I’m serious. I saw this church—”  
“You just got here—”

“I saw this church on the way in—not big either. ‘10:45’ it said, ‘Christmas Service.’” She looked directly at her rich daughter. “You and me and the kids? Frank is your responsibility, not mine.”

Ellen rolled her eyes, threw her bangs back out of her face. She looked down at her fingers, pushed back her cuticles, breathed audibly. “Let me think about it, okay?” she said, grudgingly. “If that’s the way you have to have it, let me think about it.”

And now Jan couldn’t sleep. She lay in a roll-out bed in her daughter’s office, the light from some fancy screen-saver bouncing off the walls because Ellen didn’t have the grace to shut the stupid computer off. That machine is more important than I am, she told herself when she tried to keep out the glimmers. But she knew Jack would have been proud of her. In all those years of their daughter’s unfaithfulness to God and the church, Jan had been the one who constantly begged him to give Ellen space. But Jack was gone now. Just her bringing it up—going to church—was something he’d have been proud of.

But the screen kept shifting images like something that wouldn’t die. She hated it, the lit screen that devoured everything good and right in the lives of her own children. The room was dark, the blinds pulled, and that fiend machine kept turning multi-colored 3-D shapes inside out in some never-ending pattern that seemed to her demonic. The

clock said almost three o’clock when finally she got up, hunted for the plug, and then jerked it. Didn’t hesitate a minute. Just jerked it. Tomorrow she’d plead ignorance, since that was what they thought of her anyway. Jack would have loved it.

The death of the computer didn’t help. Ellen would be more upset, she told herself. Pushing church on them was one thing, but killing computers was a whole new level of sin. She’d be lucky if they didn’t stick her back on the jet. At least it was dark in the room, she thought. At least the walls didn’t jump. Fanciest condo she’d ever seen in her life, too. All sorts of pottery things in shapes she didn’t begin to understand.

It was August when she and Jack had prayed, as they did every night at supper—“bless Ellen and Frank and the kids” and usually something else about helping them find the way because, after all they just hadn’t *found* anything, had they? It was August, and hot, and Jack had insisted on digging up the concrete around the pole he’d put in so their son Tony could shoot baskets when he was a boy, years ago. It was too hot, and it was too much work, but Jack loved sweat, considered himself more of a man if he could soak a T-shirt. They’d prayed for Ellen and Frank after supper, then he’d gone at it again out back, where she saw him an hour later, on his side, not moving. Their last prayer together, like so many before, had been about Frank and Ellen, had featured them, in fact. It was as if they’d never stopped praying.

“Lord,” she said, her neck strained from such a huge pillow beneath her head, “Lord, help me find something for them.” That seemed about right. “Lord,” she said, but she didn’t know how to put it better. “Lord,” she said once again, “crack their skulls, okay?—I don’t mean it really, but stop them in their tracks. Sink the boat maybe—sink Microsoft, okay? Because there’s nothing here, I’m afraid. There’s just nothing here. Something’s got to break—I love them too much, and I love my grandchildren.” In the middle of that prayer, she imagined those kids in a darling Christmas Eve pageant, two sweet kids saying things like “Mary pondered all these things in her heart,” Tosha with a little skirt, Edmund in a sweater over a white shirt or something. There were churches all over Seattle—hundreds of them just waiting for fami-

lies just like theirs. Thousands of churches. “You can lead a horse to water, Lord, but show them you’re here, okay? Make it so that everywhere they look they see Jesus.”

She hadn’t even thought of saying that, but when the words ran back through her mind, she liked it—the idea of seeing Jesus in everything, as if the world was a canvas holding the outline of Jesus’ face, as if the whole world was the Shroud of Turin. “Make them see you, Lord,” she said, “because in this palace of theirs—” she said, “well, I just don’t know if you’re here.”

She didn’t end the prayer. The petitions just sort of fell into silence, like they always did, to be picked up again next time—same chapter and verse. Pray without ceasing, the Bible said. That’s what it was all right, she thought.

When she awoke, she heard the kids stirring at the tree, opening presents, arguing, in fact. She brushed back her hair, pulled on her housecoat and slippers, and opened the door. It wasn’t quite fully morning, but the kids had all the wrappings off of dozens of presents. Too many. It wasn’t pleasant.

She walked into the spacious living room, the blinds over all those windows to the east still closed.

“What’s the deal?” she said.

Tosha said Edmund had taken her Beanie Baby and hid it somewhere and she was mad and she was going to get back at him somehow because it just wasn’t fair and he was a jerk too and he always was. It was Christmas morning. Edmund looked at his sister as if she were a dishrag.

She had enough. “Maybe we ought to go to church,” she told them, out of nowhere at all. “You and me—maybe the three of us should go to church together this morning.”

“Why?” Tosha said.

“Because it’s Christmas,” she told her. “Because it’s Christmas and we’re going to celebrate the birth of our Savior.”

“I’m not going,” Edmund said. “I got these great toys.”

“You’ve got a great Savior,” she told her grandson.

His eyes, blank as clay, hurt her more than a fist because she knew she was speaking a language

he didn’t begin to understand. Their own grandson looked at her as if Jesus were a nobody. That Jack didn’t see it himself was a blessing.

Edmund shoved his glasses up on his nose. “Some other time, all right?” he said. “Look at this, Grandma—*Nimbus Racer*.” He held up an electronic game.

She wanted to pray, right there in front of them, but right then, even though the condo was top floor, she was sure there was nothing but thick cement between her and the Lord. The children didn’t know a thing. They hadn’t *found* anything, all right—they hadn’t even looked.

“I think we ought to go,” she said.

“It’s Christmas,” Edmund chirped. “Why do we got to go to church?”

Her insides felt like that screen saver, turning inside and out again and again, and she realized just then that if she were to open her mouth, there would be no words, only tears—tears that would confuse them. So she walked to the kitchen, fiddled with the coffee maker, got it going, then went to the west windows.

It was Christmas morning, she reminded herself, and she couldn’t help herself but she wished just then that she were with Jack and the Lord. There was too much for her to do here, too much hard work and too much sadness, and she couldn’t do it alone.

She took hold of the strings of the blinds and opened them with a few rapid jerks. Sunlight, Christmas morning sunlight, spilled in like a waterfall, dousing the lights on the tree. Deliberately, she looked away from Christmas in the condo and over the street beneath them, the past the trees, then across the glaze of water west; and when she raised her eyes to the mountains, in a flash, in a moment, the whole fancy condo seemed to disappear—the Christmas tree behind her, the kitchen, the brewing coffee, everything behind her seemed to vanish, the children’s voices dimmed, her own sharp fears muted in the sheer majesty of what she’d suddenly, almost magically, become witness to; because even though the neighborhood beneath the condo was in shadows, the sun, coming up far behind them, stretched its brilliant glory through the crystal morning air all the way across the Sound to hold those monstrous snow-capped Olympics in

its own astonishing splendor. There they stood—those glorifying mountains—as if forever. There they stood like might and power. There they stood, a landscape divinely painted across the darkened world, beaming holiness and majesty in the crystalline dawn of a perfect Christmas morning.

“Oh, my God,” she said, because what she saw was far more than mountain beauty. He was here, all right, she told herself. He’s here sure enough.

“What, Grandma?” Tosha said, coming up behind her. “What do you see?”

She wrapped her arm around her granddaughter.

“Who’s out there?” Tosha said, on tiptoes.

What could she say? “Jesus,” her grandma told her. “He’s always there.”

“Where?” Tosha asked.

She picked up her granddaughter. “Look at

those mountains,” she said. “Just look at them.”

Tosha leaned her face closer to the window. “Is he a ghost?” she said.

“No,” she told her, “he’s alive.”

“I don’t see him,” she said. “I see the mountains and I see the Sound, and there’s a boat out there, but where is Jesus?” She looked at her grandmother almost painfully. “Grandma, I want to see Jesus.”

She already had her granddaughter in her arms, so the hug she gave her wasn’t difficult or awkward. “Amen,” she said, biting her lip, because a prayer she’d never finished was coming to a close maybe, even if it were just for a moment.

“Let’s just you and me go, Tosha, honey,” Jan said. “This time, this morning, just let’s you and me go. I want you to see him too.”