

Nineteen fifty-five had not been a great year for Spoolie and the boys. They were hoping for a holiday haul, maybe even better than what they had on Thanksgiving. It was five minutes to five O'clock; companies would be letting out for the day. Most people had Christmas Day off, so maybe passersby would be in a generous mood. The boys all got coats at Thanksgiving from the local shelter, but it helped little at night.

Off the boys went, all hoping to cadge some coinage and maybe some other treats. Snow was light on the sidewalks of downtown Saint Louis. It enhanced the Christmas beauty of the Famous -Barr and Stix, Baer, and Fuller window displays.

Spoolie had worked at Stix in the Men's Department on the Seventh Floor, but lost his job and slept in the alley behind it now. He couldn't remember the details of why, nor anything of his life before. He remembered fighting in Korea and a lot of blood, but that was about it. He lived as a bum; he was fated to be a bum, so his stars were in alignment.

Spoolie couldn't remember his wife and daughter, nor the accident which killed them. That was, perhaps, better for him. He had two beers, but the other driver had a belly full of gin. He was exonerated at the inquest, but that did little for his self-blame, causing his descent into the gutters. Poor Spoolie couldn't remember his name or how he became Spoolie.

Christmas Eve portended to be a good night. Stores were open late, people seemed in a cheery mood. Fellow bum Charley knew the angles. He would most likely be grilling his catch by the time the rest of the boys returned.

In front of Stix, Spoolie found a few quarters. As he was bending over a voice bellowed, "Spoolie! How are you, man?" Spoolie stood up trying to think who this man was. He said nothing, but the man handed him some cash and gave him the pipe and tobacco he had just purchased. "That'll warm you up, old friend. I'll be back to check on you when I can. I'm on my way to fly out of Lambert in an hour."

Spoolie thanked him and padded off. He rounded the corner going towards the alley. He heard a whimper and looked down. There was a little girl dog with one gimp leg and a shut eye. She was shivering. He picked her up and put her under his coat and proceeded down the alley, by way of Night Mart. He picked up a small bottle of buttermilk with his quarters. He had not looked at the cash. For Christmas Eve he would smoke his pipe and his new friend would have warm milk. All of the sudden he stopped, looked in his coat at the dog and said, "I'll call you Choolie."

Back in the alley, Charley had a fire going on the drum. Bits of pork, beef, and broken hot dogs smelled like a butcher shop to him. Charley asked, "Spoolie, what did you bring? Spink brought the dogs."

"I brought some tobacco, guys." He had forgotten about the money. He divided the tobacco up and filled his pipe while the boys rolled their tobacco.

Spoolie remembered his money and Choolie at the same time.

"Guys, I have some money. I don't really need much. Charley can give me as needed. I have a little dog here that I just want taken care of if something happens to me... and, I could use a few extra scraps for Choolie." He reached into his pocket and handed Charley the money saying that some was for Spink, too.

Charley was a trustworthy sort and agreed. He counted the money at two-hundred dollars. "Geez, Spoolie, you could have spent Christmas in a hotel with room service!"

"Then I might not have found Choolie."

The boys talked, extending Christmas wishes to each other, then retreated to their own spaces.

Spoolie crawled into his paper lean-to, holding Choolie at his breast. He slow-fed her the buttermilk and various meat scraps. Choolie was all attentive with her open eye. He could feel her body warm up.

With the snow still falling he decided to sing a Christmas Carol he remembered: Oh, Holy Night.

The back of his brain taunted him for his cold, shaky voice. Choolie enjoyed it. She fell quietly asleep.

Shortly before Dawn Spoolie woke up to a dog's bark in the distance. It couldn't be Choolie, who was still in his coat. He looked down at her. Both eyes were looking at him, widely yet faded. Her gimp leg was holding onto his heart.

Soft tears fell down his cheeks as he thanked the Lord for the chance to have something to hold so close to his heart. He sat back and thought about Choolie running freely now. He thanked God for the best Christmas he could remember and then fell asleep.

At dawn he opened his eyes to a field of green pasture and a gentle brook, with two familiar faces coming to him. There, within a hug's reach were Julie and Jewel, his wife and daughter. Jewel looked up at him and said, "Daddy, I knew you would bring Choolie with you!"

Choolie had been thrown from the car in the accident that killed Julie and Jewel. It was a loving Christmas Spirit that brought the two together on the last night of Spoolie's life.

Spoolie touched a frozen tear on his cheek and wondered how it got there. He then reached into his pocket and found a pouch of tobacco with a beautiful pipe.