



... AND A CREATURE WAS STIRRING

WRITTEN BY JERRY FORBES

His hair was shoulder length. His youthful face hid behind an abundance of shaggy beard. Over tight, faded blue jeans and an old, bulky knit, he had thrown his pride and joy... a sheep skin wrap.

'It had a hole in the center through which he put his head. It was without arms, fell front and back down past his waist to mid-thigh and was gathered at the waist with a chain. His '68 Chevy moved slowly through the streets.

It stopped, then started again, making a u-turn at the corner where the driver gazed through the darkness of the night to view the street markers. He was in unfamiliar territory.

The houses were one room frame and most were bare of paint. Lights were few and glowed softly behind polythene which substituted for storm windows.

Up on one side of the deserted street, down the other, then on to the next block the old Chevy made its way. It stopped and the door opened, and the young man with the long hair and beard and the faded jeans and the sheep-skin coat got out on the passenger's side and walked to the gate of the house that was a duplicate of all those around it.

He walked slowly up the walk to see the house numbers through the dark. He read them. Satisfied that this was the place, he returned to the car, opened the trunk and removed two large brown shopping bags like they used in the supermarket.

He returned to the front door of the old house and knocked gently... no answer. He knocked again. Then he heard the sound of children. The door opened and, in a brief second, through the dim light inside, he saw poverty at Christmas time.

The floor was bare. Three little children were playing with an old cardboard box. The kitchen table was covered with tattered oil cloth and was surrounded by four, bare wooden chairs. A double bed sat in one corner, sagging but neatly made, and a small electric stove sat against the wall.

A young woman, perhaps in her late twenties, but looking tired and older than her years, came to the door scooping up the smallest child as she did. The other child, who had opened the door, looked at the stranger outside then stepped back, glancing quickly at her mother.

The mother looked a long moment at the long haired bearded youth with the outlandish sheep skin jacket. She took the two shopping bags filled with gaily wrapped Christmas gifts. She set the baby down on the floor again and quickly looked at the bright display of parcels.

Her eyes welled up with tears and she could bring herself to say an almost inaudible... "Thank you".
"You're Welcome Ma'am," the youth said as he turned to go, "and have a very Merry Christmas".

And then it happened. Just as his foot hit the top step of the old porch, as the door was about to close behind him, a small child's voice said, "Mommy, was that Jesus?"

It hit Trip Hammer hard and the young man stopped for the briefest moment. His chin dropped to his chest and an almost overwhelming emotion swept through him.

He walked slowly to his ancient car, crawled in behind the wheel and sat there a moment, trying to get a deep breath. He wiped a tear off his bearded cheek and drove off into the night.

It hadn't happened before. It might not ever happen again, but that small child in that small house on Maple Street gave this strange lad in the sheep skin coat the most beautiful Christmas gift he had ever received.