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Allegheny River Christmas

And Other Stories

By Brian A. Connolly

With Nathan Connolly & Heather Connolly Jerome

Illustrations by Kirsten Wiley



Virtualbookworm.com Publishing
College Station, Texas

About the Author: Brian A. Connolly is the author of *Wolf Journal* (2005), a young adult novel, and *Not Far From Town* (2006), a collection of short stories. His novel was a finalist for the Oregon Book Award. Mr. Connolly was awarded the First Annual Finnegan Award for Poetry from Edinboro University, his Alma Mater. He taught creative writing in New York public schools for twenty-eight years. Mr. Connolly grew up in Port Allegany, Pennsylvania, the setting for all of his stories. He now lives and writes in Bend, Oregon.

About the Illustrator: Creating has been Kirsten Wiley's passion for as long as she can remember. However, she was thirty years old before she thought of herself as an artist. One of Ms. Wiley's great joys is reading a piece of writing like the Christmas stories, and translating the images inspired by the writing into water color paintings. She traces her love of art back to her parents who modeled and encouraged creativity in their children. Ms. Wiley lives with her three children and paints in Barre, Vermont.

Bradley's Christmas Adventure was previously published, in a slightly different version, by Steele Hollow Press, Stanfordville, New York 1989, illustrated by Gina Diamanti.

For additional copies of Mr. Connolly's books, go to www.bconnollybooks.com, or ask for them by title at any bookstore or online service.

Special thanks to Heather Jerome for proofreading the stories.

Cover Illustration by Kirsten Wiley.

This collection of stories is a work of fiction. The characters and events are products of the author's imagination. Any similarity to real characters and events is coincidental.

Allegheny River Christmas & Other Stories by Brian A. Connolly. ISBN: 978-1-58939-992-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2007922863

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

For Sophia & Arlie
& In Memory of Their Great Grandparents, Alyce & Joe Connolly
& In Memory of Jim Steele, a storyteller

BAC

For Erin, Jack & Matt with love!

KW

Author's Note

Many years ago when Nathan and Heather were very young, the three of us were about to experience our first Christmas as a single parent family. Heather was particularly upset because we would be visiting Gramma and Grampa Connolly in Port Allegany, Pennsylvania where many aunts, uncles, and cousins would gather as well. Through tear filled eyes Heather explained that all of the relatives would be giving us presents, but we could not afford to give any in return. Nathan agreed. So I said we could make presents. "How can we make so many?" they asked. I suggested writing a story together which they could illustrate. Once the story was written, typed, and illustrated, we could make as many copies as we needed and bind each in a red or green report cover.

Heather sat on my lap, Nathan sat beside us on the sofa, and we began writing *Peter's Christmas*. It was one of the most beautiful moments in our lives. As the story and details materialized, the kids listed ideas for drawings. We all contributed details to the setting and action of the story. Within a few weeks we had our first Christmas book with a run of twenty-five copies. Both Nathan and Heather beamed with joy as the present they had created was unwrapped by family, friends, and teachers.

The following year we repeated the experience with *Looking for Christmas*. This time the main character would be a little girl named Laura. More people wanted copies so we doubled our run to fifty. The following three years the kids asked me to write the stories and they would do the illustrations. The stories we made were *Bradley's Christmas Adventure*, *Allegheny River Christmas*, and *The Legend of Christmas Hill*. The stories grew in complexity as Nathan and Heather grew older. By the end of the fifth story we were giving out several hundred copies.

In 1989 I teamed up with artist Gina Diamanti who illustrated *Bradley's Christmas Adventure*. Published by Steele Hollow Press, all one thousand copies sold. I recently bought a used copy on the internet, but I had to pay a little more than the original cover price because it was signed by the author, me.

Now, years later, Nathan and Heather are grown with a son and daughter respectively. I am sure that when they read these stories with their own babies on their laps, hearts will swell with emotion. Through the five stories, the young ones will discover the true meaning of Christmas. It is to those babies that this book is dedicated.

For this publication, Nathan and Heather urged me to find a professional artist to create new illustrations for the stories. They felt their original drawings were ones that only a father would love. We sent the stories to Kirsten Wiley whose beautiful watercolors you will see in these pages. Look for the subtle details she has included in each painting. Have a very happy holiday!

BAC

Bend, Oregon

Note: The town Port Allegany is spelled differently from the Allegheny River.

Allegheny River Christmas

& Other Stories

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Peter's Christmas

Peter West loved Christmas. As he sat with his dog Bailey on the front steps of his little house on the outskirts of Port Allegany, Peter thought about last Christmas. He loved the songs the carolers sang. He loved the bright lights and tinsel on the small evergreen his dad had gotten on Old Baldy Mountain. The red Flyer sled he had found under the Christmas tree was his favorite present. Peter remembered the sound of his mother laughing when he and his sled got buried in a snowdrift and how his mother said, "Peter, you look just like a snowman!"

What a wonderful Christmas that was, Peter thought with a sigh. He even thought of the long hug from his dad when Peter had given him that colorful bag of marbles for a present.

"Mom said I should think of what the best present in the world would be. It's hard to beat a bag of marbles, Da!" Peter explained. He often called his mom, Ma and his dad, Da.

A broad smile had come over his dad's face and then that hug as a reward. Peter would never forget that hug. He felt so safe and warm all wrapped up in his father's arms.

Sitting there on the front steps in his snowsuit with the patch on one knee, Peter felt the cold air of winter press against his cheeks. Bailey, a large, black Lab, slept like a bear beside him. The picture in Peter's mind of last Christmas began to fade, and a tiny tear formed in the corner of his eye. Peter knew he wouldn't have a Christmas like that again. He knew there was no Santa Claus, or, at least, he thought he knew because his mom and dad had told him that Santa wasn't real. But Peter kept a little secret in his heart. If they said there was a Santa and then they said there wasn't a Santa, maybe they really didn't know. Mom said that she had bought the sled for him and that because his father did not have a job, this Christmas would be different.

"Very few presents this year, if any," said Mrs. West who looked tired and sad.

Mr. West said, "I'm sorry, son. I've tried and tried to get a job, but there just isn't any work right now. Without work, we don't have enough money to spare for presents."

"Can we have a tree, Da?" Peter asked. "Of course we can, Peter," said Mr. West. "You can climb Old Baldy with me this year and help me pick it out."

"Ma, Da, don't worry about the presents. I'll bet some kids don't even have a tree!" said Peter. "Too bad there really isn't a Santa Claus." Mr. and Mrs. West looked at each other as Peter walked outside to play.

The tear that had formed in the corner of Peter's eye rolled down his pink cheek and dropped in his lap. He wiped his cold cheek with the blue mittens that his mom had crocheted for him last Christmas. An idea began to form in Peter's head, just a tiny spark of an idea like a distant star on a frozen winter night. Gradually the idea grew and grew, and Peter felt warmer.

"I know," he said out loud to Bailey who stretched and yawned, "I'll earn some money to get presents this year! Then we'll have a happy Christmas!" Bailey barked! He seemed to like the idea.

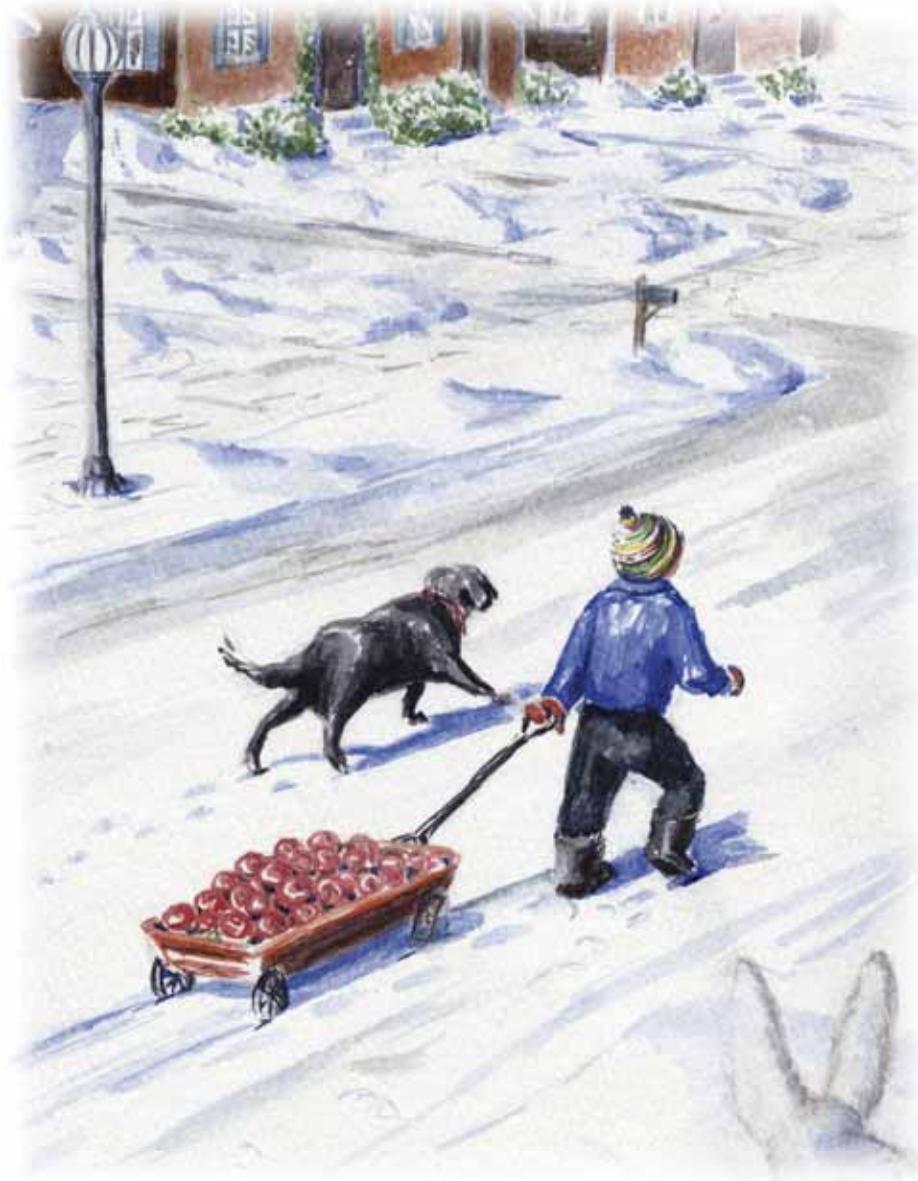
Peter and Bailey walked around to the wooden shed behind the house. Peter pulled out his old wagon. One rear wheel was off. He searched in the shed and found the missing wheel and a small nail to slip through the hole where the cotter pin used to be. Having repaired the wagon, Peter headed for the root cellar where all the vegetables, potatoes, and apples were stored. He used to pretend that below the wooden hatch to the root cellar was a snake pit. Even though it was all make believe, Peter felt a

cold chill as he climbed down into the dark chamber. Bailey barked for Peter to come back from the snake pit. When he came out of the hole, he had a grocery bag full of red apples.

Peter announced, "Bailey, we're going to sell apples to get money for Christmas!"

"Ruff! Ruff!" agreed Bailey who seemed anxious to get started.

Peter dumped the large apples into the wagon. The two friends headed down the street, Bailey with his tail wagging and Peter pulling his old wagon with one wobbly wheel and humming *Silent Night*.



Downtown, the streets were filled with holiday shoppers, and all the windows and lampposts were decorated with evergreen wreathes and bright, colored lights. Peter thought it was one of the most beautiful sights he had ever seen. Bells were ringing and Christmas carols were being sung. Everyone was cheerful, laughing, and wishing each other a Merry Christmas!

Peter picked a spot on a busy street corner to sell his apples. He said to Bailey, "Well, here we go, boy." Peter held the biggest, reddest apple up high where people could see it. "Apples. Apples for sale," he almost whispered.

Bailey barked in his deep bass voice and several people nearby jumped spilling their Christmas packages. "You're right, Bailey," Peter said. "I have to speak louder. Apples! Apples for sale! Only a nickel for a big red apple!"

Peter shouted and shouted. His breath created great smoke puffs in the winter air. His voice strained for almost an hour before he gave in. No one seemed to hear him. No one seemed to see his big, red apple. He sat down to rest his sore throat and aching arm.

Peter petted Bailey, "I guess people don't want apples for Christmas, boy. We haven't sold a single one. I never knew money was so hard to get. I guess we know how Da feels now being out of work and all. Let me rest a minute and we'll try again, old friend."

"Hey, boy?!" a scratchy voice asked. It made Peter jump. "What are you selling there?"

"Oh, nothing," said Peter looking up into a broad face covered with white whiskers. "Just some apples."

"What kind are they, boy?" said the wrinkled old man.

"Why, I don't know, sir," Peter said honestly. "I call them Christmas apples because the money I earn will help Ma and Da have a real Christmas."

"Christmas apples, eh? They're rare, ya know. Almost two dollars for the lot of 'em, huh?" said the old man.

Peter spoke quickly hoping to make a sale, "Oh no, sir! They're just a nickel a piece, but the whole batch would only be a dollar, sir!"

The old man thought a minute, rubbed his whiskers, and said, "If you and your dog here will let me have them for two dollars, you've got yourself a deal! Not a penny more or a penny less!"



"It's a deal, sir!" shouted Peter smiling from ear to ear. The old man handed Peter two crisp, green dollar bills, loaded the apples into his bag, petted Bailey, shook Peter's hand, and disappeared into the crowd.

Peter ran home as fast as he could dragging that old wagon behind him. Following Peter like a cub bear, was Bailey. They both ran into the house, up the stairs, and into Peter's little room. Once the door was closed, Peter sat on his bed that was covered with a multi-colored Afghan and pulled out the two green dollar bills.

"Well, Bailey, should we count our money?" said Peter. Bailey shook his head. "One. Two." Peter counted as he put the bills on the bed. "Let's count them again! One! Two!" he said as he picked them up. We're going to hide them under the pillow until we decide what to get for Ma and Da. Maybe we'll need a little more. We still have two more days before Christmas. We can't earn any money tomorrow because we have to get the tree, but the next day we'll have more luck!" That night with Bailey curled up on the faded oval rug next to his bed, Peter slept soundly.

After breakfast the next morning, Mr. West, Peter, and Bailey climbed Old Baldy Mountain. Mr. West carried the axe. Peter carried the green canvas knapsack with the lunch his mother had prepared. Bailey carried a coil of rope around his great neck.

When they got to the top of the mountain, the three tired hikers sat on a large rock to rest. Spread below them in the valley was the village of Port Allegany. Peter could see the bottle factory and the glass block plant where his father used to work. Peter hoped that his father would be called back to work soon. He could also see the water tower at the far side of town. It had a huge star on it decorated with silver lights that looked like little stars. Toy cars were traveling on the streets, and the houses looked like dollhouses. The tiny ants walking along the sidewalk were people.

"Why do they call this Old Baldy, Da?" asked Peter still out of breath from the climb.

"Well, son, you notice that there are no trees on the front of the hill. This all was pasture just a few years back. Old Man Baker used to graze his goats up here. From down in the village, the hill looks like a bald head compared to those other hills over there." Peter's father pointed across the valley to Brooklyn Side on the far side of the Allegheny River and then left toward Snyder Hill.

Peter said, "From here the river looks like a snake or a ribbon."

"The Allegheny is some river. The Indians used it for transporting furs and supplies. When I was your age, I spent a lot of time rafting on the river or fishing for anything that would bite," Peter's father said.

"Look, Da! It's our house! Right there with the smoke coming out of the chimney. It looks like smoke signals. Maybe Ma is saying 'Hi!' to us."

Peter's father said, "I'll tell you what she's saying. Sometimes these smoke signals are tough to decipher. Let's see. She says, 'Hey, you two! Don't just sit there; get the tree and hurry home!'"

"Oh, Da, she does not," said Peter, and they both laughed.

As Peter and his father approached the pine forest on the windward side of the mountain, Mr. West touched Peter on the shoulder and pointed to a large evergreen at the edge of the dark woods. Below the pine stood three whitetail deer. They were as still as stones. Their dull brown fur blended with the ground that was covered with dried pine needles.

Reindeer! thought Peter.

"When I whistle," whispered Peter's father, "they'll run off and you'll see their white tails go up. Those tails are called flags." Mr. West gave a shrill whistle, and the deer bounded off into the deep woods.

"Wow!" said Peter. "Their tails are whiter than snow!"

Bailey whined. He was anxious to get the Christmas tree.

Unfortunately, most of the trees were over forty feet tall. "How about this one," said Peter leaning against a tree whose top disappeared in the sky.

His father laughed and said, "I was thinking of one a little smaller than that. Let's look around a bit."

They moved deeper into the forest. Peter could see some thin rays of light seeping into the woods ahead. He came upon a clearing that looked like a church. In the middle of the clearing was a perfect Christmas tree! Peter blinked his eyes to make sure he was not seeing things. The tree was still there.

"Da! Da! Over here! I think I found it!" Peter called.

Peter's father and Bailey ran to the clearing. "Oh, yes, Peter! You've found it! We'll have lunch first; then we'll take it home."

And take it home, they did. Mr. West cut the rope into three pieces. He tied each piece to the tree trunk just above where he had cut it down with the axe. One piece was for Peter to pull. One was for his father. The last was tied to Bailey's collar so that he could pull, too. As the three of them hauled the tree down the face of Old Baldy, they were singing *Jingle Bells* at the tops of their voices, even Bailey!



That night Peter talked to Bailey who was asleep on the rug. "You know, Bailey, I decided what we can do tomorrow to make some more money. Today near the bottom of the hill where that old apple orchard is I saw a lot of groundpine, the stuff that looks like little pine trees. Last year Ma taught me how to make wreathes out of it. You stretch out an old wire hanger into a circle, take a bunch of thread or string, and wrap it around the hanger. Every other time you wrap the thread, stick in a piece of groundpine. We just do that all the way around the hanger, boy, until we're back where we started. And there's a wreath! We could even put a red ribbon on it." Peter's voice got softer and softer as he talked about the wreath and Christmas until he fell sound asleep.

The next day Peter grabbed a burlap potato sack from the shed and headed for the orchard. Within an hour he had enough groundpine in the bag for his wreath. At home, another hour went by and his wreath was completed. All he needed was a red ribbon. In his room he found his stuffed bear with the ribbon collar. Now the Christmas wreath was finished!

Many of the houses that Peter passed on Arnold Avenue already had wreaths on their doors. Finally, he came to one large house that had no wreath.

"Let's try here!" he said to Bailey.

At first, Peter did not recognize the white whiskered man who answered the door.

"Good day, sir," said Peter. "I noticed you didn't have a wreath on your...oh, you're the man who bought my apples. I'm sorry, sir. I won't bother you again." Peter turned to walk away.

"Hold on there, young man. I'm not against a boy like yourself trying to make a little money for Christmas. What've you got there?"

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