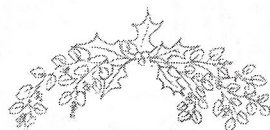


MISTLETOE MADNESS



Illustration by Elizabeth O. Dulemba

Leader of the Band



He was in a trance. Through a heavy fog, he heard the crowd cheering and shouting his name. The thunder of excited feet echoed through a packed stadium as the ball whistled through the air toward him. Eric's bat splintered upon impact. He was certain he had broken records. The baseball rocketed through the frigid air and out of the ball park. Crash! The unmistakable sound of shattering glass ended the daydream and the fog gave way to a field of snow-covered asphalt.

Eric stood, with his jaw dropped open, staring at the gaping hole in the glass door of the Happy Trails retirement home. Neatly hung garlands with bright red bows were still draped across the door frame. For an

instant, he thought about running away, but decided to do the right thing instead. If his grandfather had still been around, he knew what he would say. It was time to pay the fiddler. Eric sulked toward the lobby of the retirement home. His heart raced while nervousness turned his cheeks the same vibrant red as his hair. He crossed the mound of broken glass and immediately looked up to see Ms. Larsen, the plump manager of the home. She was holding one hand over her mouth and the other over her heart as if she'd just escaped a train wreck. One look at Eric's bat and she knew he had been the train. Silver tinsel and broken ornaments littered the floor at her feet where they had been dropped. She repeated the "somebody could have been hurt" speech to him and insisted that Eric call his mother. This was the third window he had broken in as many months.

"Strike three, I'm out," Eric said to himself as he began to pace.

Twenty minutes later, his mother crunched over the broken glass in the doorway and squinted her eyes at Eric, giving him that 'you're in big trouble' look that he had come to know too well.

"Mom," Eric said, "I was just minding my own