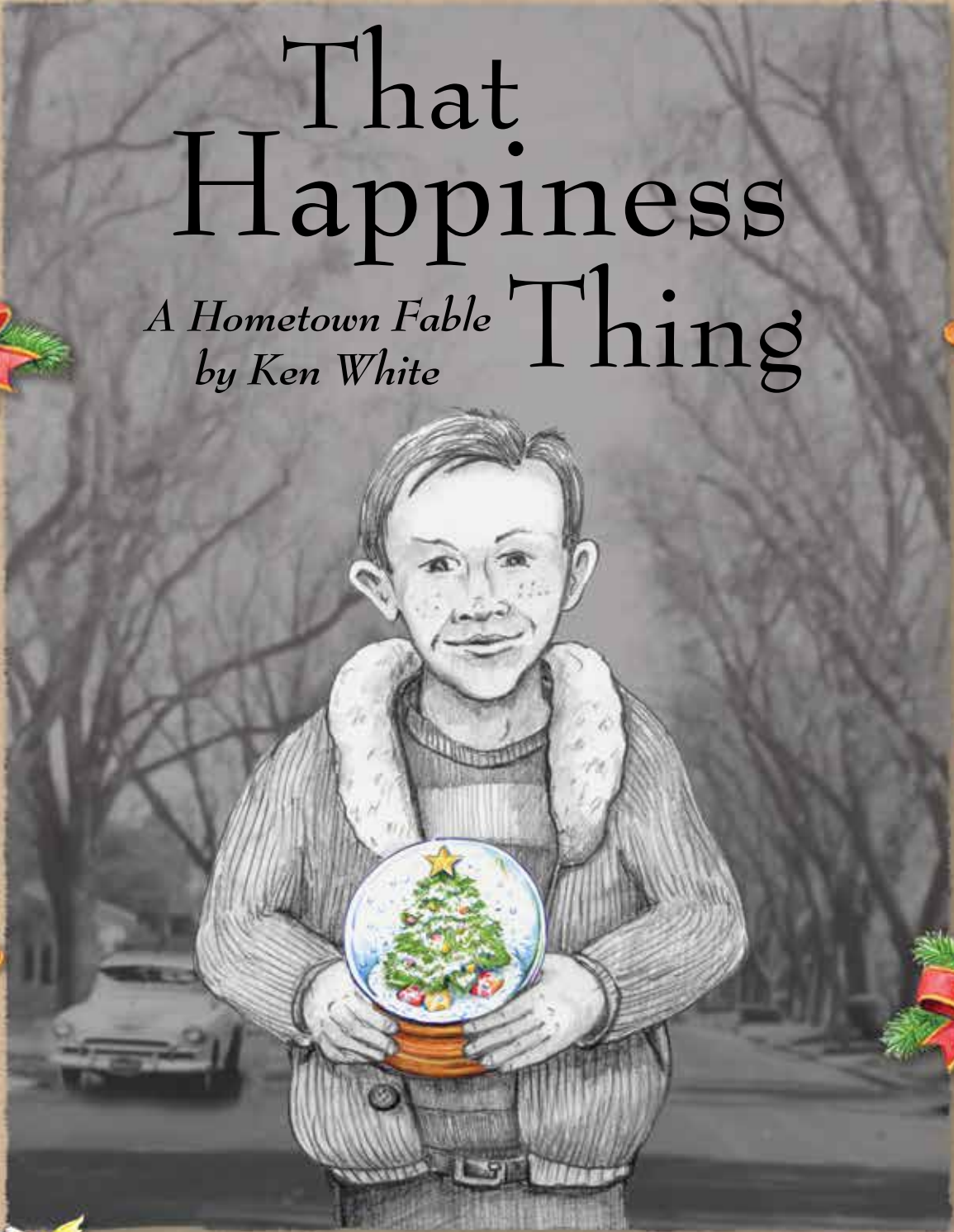




That Happiness Thing

A Hometown Fable
by Ken White



Illustrations by Ron Wilkinson



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White & Wilkinson
Modesto, California
2016



This book belongs to:



What is happiness? That's what a 10-year-old boy from a small California town wants to know.

It's 1958. Christmas is just around the corner. His family isn't happy and he doesn't know why. So he sets out to explore his home town and find out.

With a little help from an elderly gentleman and a magical snow globe, he discovers that true happiness isn't about having the most of everything, but making the most of everything you have.

When his journey is finally complete, he learns *That Happiness Thing* is home and family.



It was the winter solstice of 1958. December 22nd.
The shortest day and longest night of the year.
It arrived every year, like clockwork.
My tenth Christmas was right around the corner.
All was calm, all was bright.
I was in the Christmas spirit.



I could hear, smell, see, touch, and taste all the cheery things that made me happy this special time of the year. The joyous Yuletide carols, the peppermint candles, the colored lights, the soft tree boughs, and the creamy eggnog. I wished this feeling could last all year long.

But something wasn't right.

Christmas was supposed to be the most wonderful time of the year. Filled with comfort and joy. But not this year. Not for my family.





My mother was crying because she wanted to order gifts out of the Sears Christmas Catalog for us kids, but money was tight.



My dad was upset because he was already working two jobs, but still couldn't give Mom what she wanted.

My older little brother was annoyed because he couldn't go outside to play football and didn't think Santa was going to bring him a Baltimore Colts football helmet for Christmas.

My younger little brother was miserable because he had been picked on all day by his two big brothers and wasn't sure there was going to be an official Zorro guitar for him under the tree.

My older little sister was sad because she couldn't help my dad make fudge and was afraid Santa wasn't going to bring her the Betsy Wetsy doll she had put at the top of her Christmas list.

My younger little sister, a few months old now, was fussy because she was hungry and too little to worry about Santa or Christmas.

Nobody in my family was happy. I didn't quite know why, so I went to see my best friend. He was older than me. I figured he'd know what was wrong. He was smart, too. That's because he was always at the library. And that's where I found him.



“I’m just a kid,” he said, as we sat side-by-side at a reading table in the Boys and Girls Room in the basement of the McHenry Library. “I kinda know what makes me happy. I think. But I don’t know what makes other people happy.”

“You’re a big help,” I told him.

“Sorry,” he said. “I can tell you all the Giants’ batting averages,” he added, as he flapped the fingers of his right hand against his right palm.

“No thanks,” I answered, giggling in spite of myself. He always made me laugh with the goofy things he said and did.

I’m only a kid, too, I thought to myself. How do I know what makes people happy? Is it something you say or do, something you find or make? Is it a gizmatchee or a doohickey, a widget or a dealy-bob? Can you hear it, smell it, see it, touch it, or taste it?

Is it a feeling or a place or an idea?

I wanted to give my family “that happiness thing” for Christmas. But, I didn’t have a clue about where to start.





As I pushed my bike away from the library, I was thinking so hard about happiness I didn't see the old gentleman standing in front of the First Presbyterian Church across the street. I bumped right into him with the front wheel of my bike.



"There are as many things that make people happy as there are stars in the sky, or birds in the air," he said in a deep, melodic voice.

He was talking to me, but I hadn't said out loud what I was thinking. I looked at him and frowned. He was kind of plump with a little round belly. His snow-white hair was covered by a

well-worn brown fedora hat. His long white beard was tucked beneath a threadbare blue overcoat.

"Were you talking to me, sir?" I asked.

"Do you see anybody else?" he answered, smiling.

I looked around. I didn't. I shook my head.

"Then it must be you," he added.

"Must be," I replied, still a bit confused.

"It's up to you to find out what makes us happy and share it with your family so they'll be as happy as you are," he said.

"That's a pretty big responsibility," I answered.

"Yes, it is, but I'm pretty sure you can do it. You're ten years old. That pretty much makes you a grown-up."

Not quite, I thought, but I'll humor him. After all, he looks pretty old. At least forty.



“**W**here should I begin?” I asked.

“Why, at the beginning, of course,” he said.

He’s a comedian, too, I thought. A real Jerry Lewis.

“Is it animal, mineral or vegetable? Is it bigger than a breadbox? Is it some kind of thingamajig, whatchamacallit, or gizmo?” I asked. “Is it something I can do or find or learn or buy or make? I’m pretty good with my hands. I’ve built model airplanes and a fort.”

“I guess that’s for you to find out,” he said.

This was not going to be easy, I thought.

“The important things never are,” he said.

“I didn’t say anything,” I replied.

“I know,” he grinned.

“Okay, I’ll do it,” I said. “I’ll find out what happiness is and bring it back.

For my family. For me. For everyone in the whole, wide world.”

“That’s the spirit,” he chuckled. “So, where do you think you might find this thing called happiness?” he asked.

“I’ll start right here in Modesto, my hometown. With what I know. What’s all around me,” I said, stretching my arms wide. “I’ll search, imagine, and maybe even dream about all the things that make us joyful, contented, thankful, pleased, delighted, thrilled, lucky, cheerful, glad, blissful, jubilant, and fortunate.”





“**Y**ou better get going,” he urged. “It’s nearly Christmas,” he added, as he handed me an ancient snow globe.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“A snow globe,” he answered.

Dub, I thought. “Why are you giving it to me?”

“You might need some help.”

“I know my way around town. I live here, you know.”

“I do,” he grinned. “I do indeed.”

The church bell tolled high noon. I looked up at the belfry. When I looked back, he was gone.

Pretty quick for a chubby old elf, I thought.





The globe looked empty. I turned it upside down and then right side up again. It began to snow inside. The shape of something slowly appeared. It was a Christmas tree. I recognized it right away. It was the big Christmas tree in front of the old McHenry place, which was now the Gould Apartments.

I carefully put the globe in my jacket pocket and hopped on my bike. I pedaled like mad a short distance along I Street, passed the lights blinking a bright red and green, then veered left onto 15th Street. I skidded to a stop, flipped down the kickstand, and walked to the very tall pine tree.





“What makes you happy?” I asked the tree, not expecting an answer, but hoping the old guy was right and the snow globe in my pocket might have some kind of magic power like Aladdin’s lamp or Frosty’s old silk hat.

It did.



“Colored lights, shiny ornaments, pretty tinsel, threaded popcorn, and cheery holly berries so I can celebrate the season and bring delight,” replied the Tannenbaum as it gleamed on this bleak midwinter’s day. “That’s what makes me happy.”

I beamed and resumed my search. Eager to find out what happiness meant to all the things surrounding me in my little hometown.

“The moisture in the ground that creates me so I can blanket the valley in

peace and quiet,” whispered the fog as it rolled in, drifting and swirling and blotting out the sun above J Street.

“A song about a White Christmas so everyone will think of home,” crooned singer Bing Crosby as he stared back at me in his Santa hat and holly bow tie from the paper sleeve of the 45rpm record in the listening booth at Records.

“A match to light me so I can brighten the night and make spirits bright,” flickered the three-candle candolier as it burned in the front window of Shoemake Jewelers.



“To have been born so I could be thankful for my family, friends, and community,” drawled Jimmy Stewart playing George Bailey as he winked at me from the poster for *It’s a Wonderful Life* inside the outside display case at the State Theatre.

“Why pipes to play, of course,” piped the eleven pipers as they played “The Twelve Days of Christmas” inside the Modesto Music Store.

“Brand new reels of 8mm film so I can capture all those memorable Christmas moments,” whirred the home movie camera as it waited for the sales clerk to load the film and attach the blinding white light bar inside the Camera Center.

“Boys and girls to ride me so we can spin through the streets on Christmas Day,” swooshed the bright bikes with shiny spokes lined handlebar-to-handlebar inside Weeks Sport Shop.

I petted the lost dog sitting outside Sutton’s Shoes, who looked a lot like my dog Ring, as he scratched at the scarlet bow and ribbon tied around his neck. He grinned a doggy grin, so I knew that’s what brought him happiness.

I continued on my way, zipping into the alley between 11th and 12th Streets and back onto I Street.





“What makes you joyful?” I asked the intricate Christmas card as it rested on top of an envelope about to be mailed at the United States Post Office.

“Mailing addresses so you can stay in touch with family and friends at this festive time of the year,” claimed the card.



“The twenty-four days leading to Christmas so we can enjoy and remember each one,” announced the Advent calendar as it sat on a display table in the L.M. Morris Co. stationery store.

I stopped a moment to watch a gray squirrel perched in a valley oak tree rooted in the front lawn of the old courthouse across the street.

I could hear in her excited squeaking that the nut she held, which was big enough to feed the entire family, made her contented.

“Pretty ribbons and glittery pine cones so I can greet shoppers looking for treasures,” said the spruce tree wreath as it hung on the front door of the Lowery Gift House.

“A bah-humbug Scrooge so we can help him learn the true meaning of Christmas and become as good a man as the good old city knew,” promised the Ghosts of Christmases past, present, and yet to come in the pop-up book version of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* patiently waiting for someone to buy it at Nichol News.

“Lots of large, clean windows so I can spray all kinds of angels and snowmen and trees,” hissed the aerosol can of flocking as it waited for the store manager to position the stencil on the window of the Wherry Furniture Company.



“A rotating colored wheel to reflect off my metallic branches so everyone can see me shine from the street,” shimmered the Alcoa Aluminum tree as it glimmered in the display window at J.C. Penney’s.

“Something unique and fun so I can surprise each child on Christmas morn,” hinted the cactus-embroidered stocking as it hung with care in a row of stockings below the teller windows at the American Trust Bank.



As I passed the carolers standing in front of the Hotel Covell, I could hear in their heavenly voices that singing “Hallelujah!” anthems sweet in praise of the Lord Emmanuel pleased them so very much.

I moved southeast on J Street and turned the corner onto 10th Street.



“**W**hat makes you delighted?” I asked the silver bells as they hung from the gold holiday garlands strung across 10th Street.

“A breeze to tickle me so I can make people smile,” tinkled the bells.

“Two people so much in love they can’t wait to kiss beneath me and bring good luck,” mused the mistletoe as it hung from the fir arbor inside the Loomis Floral Shop.

“A large workshop at the North Pole with all the tools and materials we need so we can make all those fantastic toys,” chattered the miniature mechanical elves in the display window of Woolworth’s as they finished each tiny plaything and placed it on the conveyor belt to be loaded into Santa’s gigantic sack.

Sniffing the soft fudge as it cooled on the chipped serving platter on the counter in the fountain of the Thrifty Cut Rate Drug Store, I could smell that being chock-full of chocolate and walnuts so it could satisfy all those sweet tooths would thrill this delicious candy.



The old gentleman was right, I thought. There are as many things that bring joy as there are stars in the sky and birds in the air. And this was only the beginning. I couldn't wait to find out what else he was right about. Maybe this was actually going to help me find what I was looking for after all.

I parked my bike and went inside our local Sears store.



“A little boy who can’t wait to tear open our box so he can play with us,” shouted the Tudor Tru-action Electric Football Game as it waited on the shelf in the basement Toyland.

Peering into the face of the Raggedy Ann doll, also displayed in the downstairs wonderland, I could see that she would be the luckiest doll in the world if a little girl would take her home and love her so she wouldn’t ever be alone.

“Cookies and milk so I can deliver all the presents to every boy and girl, naughty or nice, on the planet,” ho-ho-ho-ed the life-sized wooden Santa as he sat in his sleigh behind the eight tiny reindeer and Rudolph on the rooftop of the Montgomery Ward department store.

“A shiny red nose so bright I can guide the sleigh on Christmas Eve,” sneezed Rudolph as he got ready to dash away, whizzing like a shooting star.

“Love and forgiveness so I can be human and walk the earth again,” wished Cary Grant playing Dudley the Angel as he magically trimmed the Christmas tree in *The Bishop’s Wife* flickering on the screen of an elegant RCA Victor console television set inside Jack Lee TV and Appliances.

I backtracked up J Street. At the light, I crossed onto the other side of 10th.





“**W**hat makes you cheerful?” I asked the pretty wrapping paper as it lay curled around the cardboard tube stacked high on the shelves at Kress’ five-and-dime store.

“Beautiful bows, colorful ribbons, and lots of Scotch tape so I can wrap each present tightly,” promised the paper.

I could feel in the chomping of the Nutcracker, as he stood sentry on the shelf at the Modesto Toy Store, that having children to believe in him so he could save Clara from the Mouse King and escort her to the Land of Sweets where he was Prince would make him tremendously glad.



“Toll House chocolate chips and peanuts so I can feed all those cookie monsters,” chirped my dad’s favorite cookie as it perched atop a stack of others in the cookie jar on the Formica table of the Post House Restaurant inside the Greyhound Bus Terminal.

“An old silk hat with a little magic inside so I can laugh and play and dance around,” said Frosty as he thump-e-ty thumped over the hills of snow in the pages of a *Little Golden Book* arrayed on a rotating book rack at Turner Hardware.



“Sparkling electric lights so I can welcome Christmasing visitors to our fair city during this holiday season,” added the iron rainbow that was the Modesto Arch as it arced from one side of I Street to the other.

“A cold winter’s night so I don’t melt,” said the long, thin icicle as it hung from the eaves of the Southern Pacific Depot.

“Luminous candles so I can light the way and guide the spirit of the Christ child to everyone’s home on Christmas Day,” tilted the *luminarias* as they lined both sides of the walkway leading to St. Stanislaus Church.



“Good will toward men so we can have peace on earth and mercy mild,” preached the pastor from the pulpit as he practiced his Christmas Eve sermon inside St. Stan’s.

“Many keen eyes and nimble fingers to put me together so I can be assembled quickly,” mumbled the tumbling Santa puzzle as it lay in pieces inside the open box shelved in the toy section at B.F. Goodrich.

“Savory stuffing so I can be so very tasty on Christmas day,” gobbled the turkey as it waited to be basted and baked in the oven at the Lucky market.

Sampling a piece of the soft Gingerbread House as it glistened atop the glass display case in the grocery store bakery, I could taste that lots of penny candy and fluffy frosting would fill this treat with bliss.

I rode my bike northeast along M Street, passing each of the numbered streets I’d already traveled on this winter solstice day.



“**W**hat makes you jubilant?” I asked the Herald Angels as they hovered above the Nativity scene awash in colored lights on the lawn in front of the First Baptist Church.

“The birth of the Christ child so we can proclaim the coming of the perfect, everlasting light,” harked the angels.

“Sheep to watch over and keep so we have wool and food for our families,” prayed the shepherds as they glanced at the angels on high.



“An only son I may deliver so he will deliver us all,” sighed Mother Mary as she gazed upon the Lamb of God.

“A baby boy I can raise into a man who will one day rule the nations,” murmured Joseph as he stood over the Lord of all Creation.

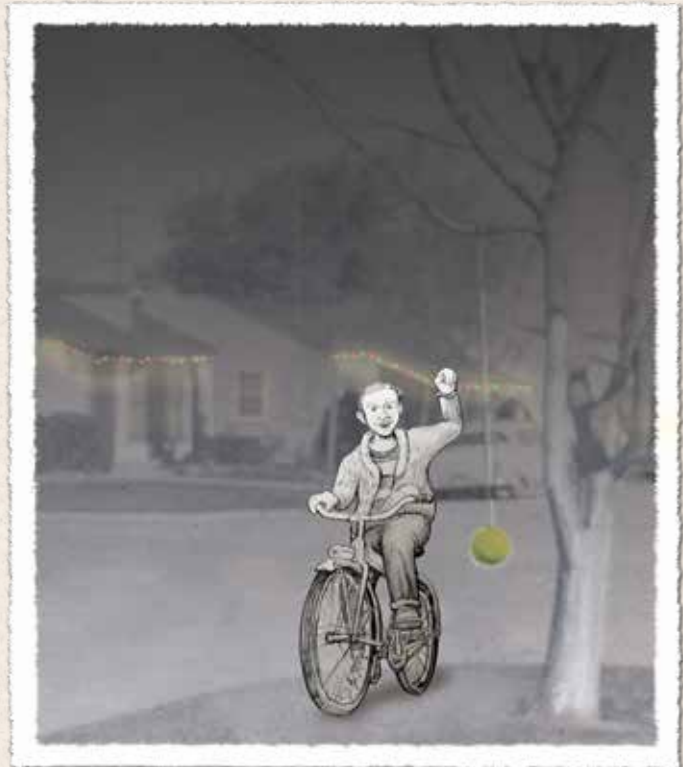
“A star to guide us so we can find the Prince of Peace on this blessed day,” proclaimed Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, the Three Kings, as they offered their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

“A simple drum so I can play my best for the newborn King of Kings,” hoped the little boy waiting outside the manger. “That’s what makes me happy.”



I stared at the solemn scene portraying that sacred night in Bethlehem. It made me think of my own family. I removed the snow globe from my jacket pocket. Inside, the flakes began to fall again. The church bell tower struck the hour. I looked around. It was getting dark. Mom would be worried. It was time to go. I pointed my bike homeward.

I sped up M Street, right onto Needham, through Graceada, Enslin, and Elk Parks, and over the irrigation canal bridge at Nunes Drop. I zoomed past Enslin School, then left on Griswold, streaked across Virginia and onto Princeton, flashed across College and Tully, turned right onto Kearney, and flew by Pike Park to 1500 Del Vista.



I bumped onto the brown front lawn of our corner house. I hit the yellowed tetherball dangling from a limb of the Modesto Ash as I passed. Then tapped the illuminated plastic Santa, sleigh, and reindeer display stuck in the yard. I leaned my bike against the garage door. I looked at the dazzling Christmas lights strung along the roof line. I squinted my eyes so the blazing colors would blur together, like I did every year. I hopped onto the front porch.



Through the large picture window stenciled with frosty images, I could see the green tree all trimmed with hand-made and store-bought ornaments, the colorful presents lying beneath it, and the room merry with holiday decorations. My mom sipped coffee. My dad read the newspaper. My older little brother spun his football in circles. My younger little brother plunked on a toy piano. My older little sister cut out paper doll clothes. My younger little sister lay on the couch between my parents, sucking on her pacifier while visions of sugarplums danced in her head.





“You remember that happiness thing you were looking for?” a kind of familiar voice chuckled behind me. I jumped out of my skin. It was St. Nick, that right jolly old elf.

“I remember,” I replied, after I got over being scared and then thrilled to death that it was really him standing right next to me. The actual, authentic, honest-to-goodness, real McCoy Santa Claus. Talking to me.

“It’s in there, isn’t it?” I added, pointing my thumb over my shoulder at the window.

“It is,” he said. “In all its wonder.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “Happiness isn’t something you say or do or find or learn or make or put on Santa’s list,” he smiled. “It’s something you feel. Right here.” He lightly touched my jacket over my heart. “If you’re happy with yourself, everyone and everything around you will be happy, too. If you’re thankful and grateful for who you are and what you have, you will never have to buy or discover or build happiness. It will always be there. You know, son, the happiest of people don’t necessarily have the most of everything. They make the most of everything they have. Over the years, I’ve found that things turn out best for the people who make the best of the way things turn out. True happiness isn’t about getting what you want, but wanting what you’ve got. I feel sorry for those who don’t understand that. It’s a gift. And you have it, young man. You have it. All you have to do is enjoy it and share it.”



I turned and looked inside the house again, then turned back around.



He was gone. *Boy, he was quicker than that old guy I'd bumped into outside the church, I thought. In fact, he looked a lot like that chubby old gentleman with the white hair and beard hidden under his ancient hat and coat.*



I stepped closer to the picture window. There it was. In all its glory. *That Happiness Thing.* All of it. And it was working. It had been around and running and doing what it was supposed to do from day one. Not always well, but just right. From time to time, it needed tinkering and refining and remembering and appreciating. But, when it was in tune and humming right along, it was comforting and reassuring and safe in its perpetual motion. It was something you could count on. Always, and mostly, when it mattered.



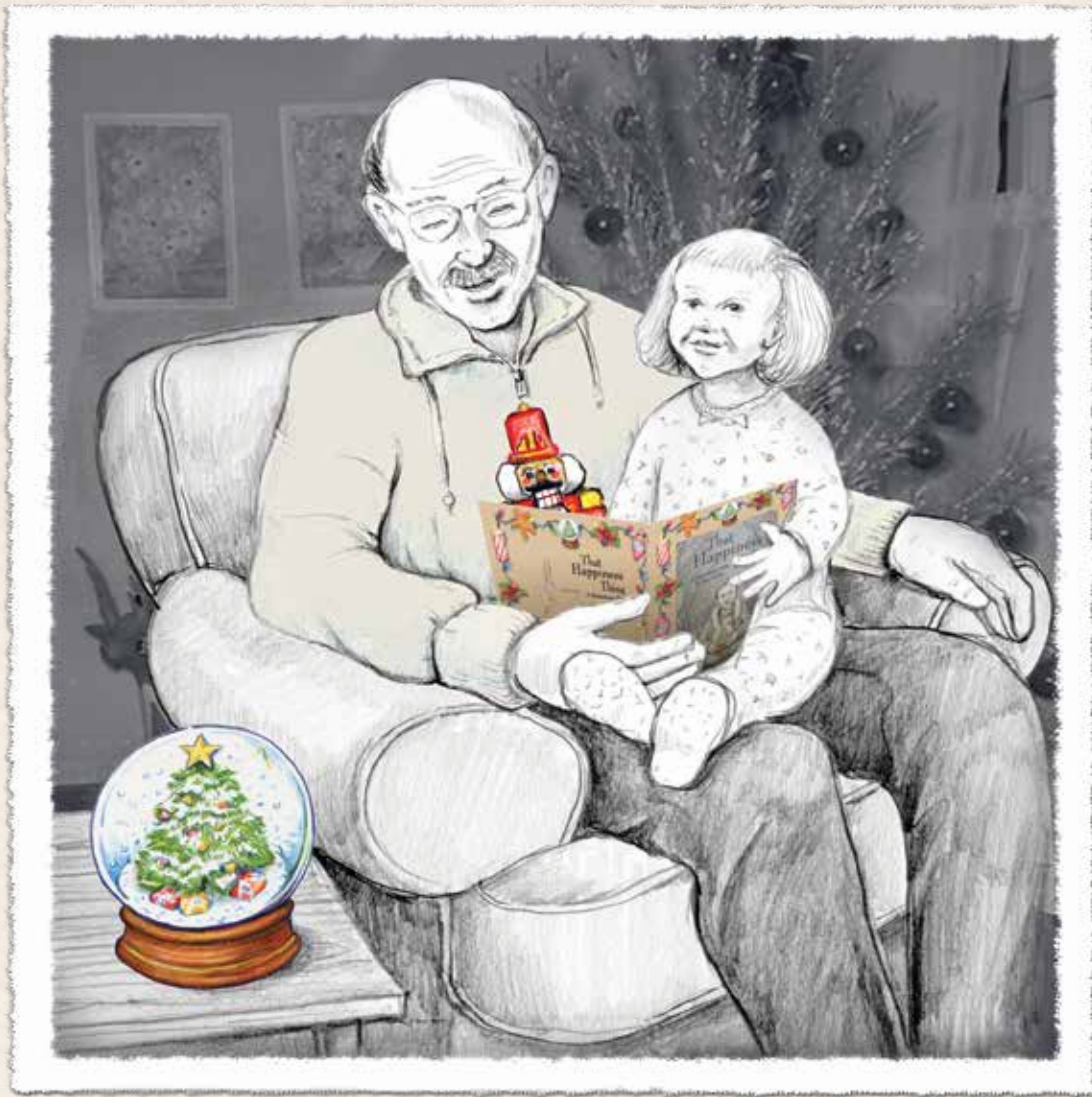
I walked to the front door and went in. I placed the snow globe under the tree. I sat down with my family.

Happy. And glad to be home.





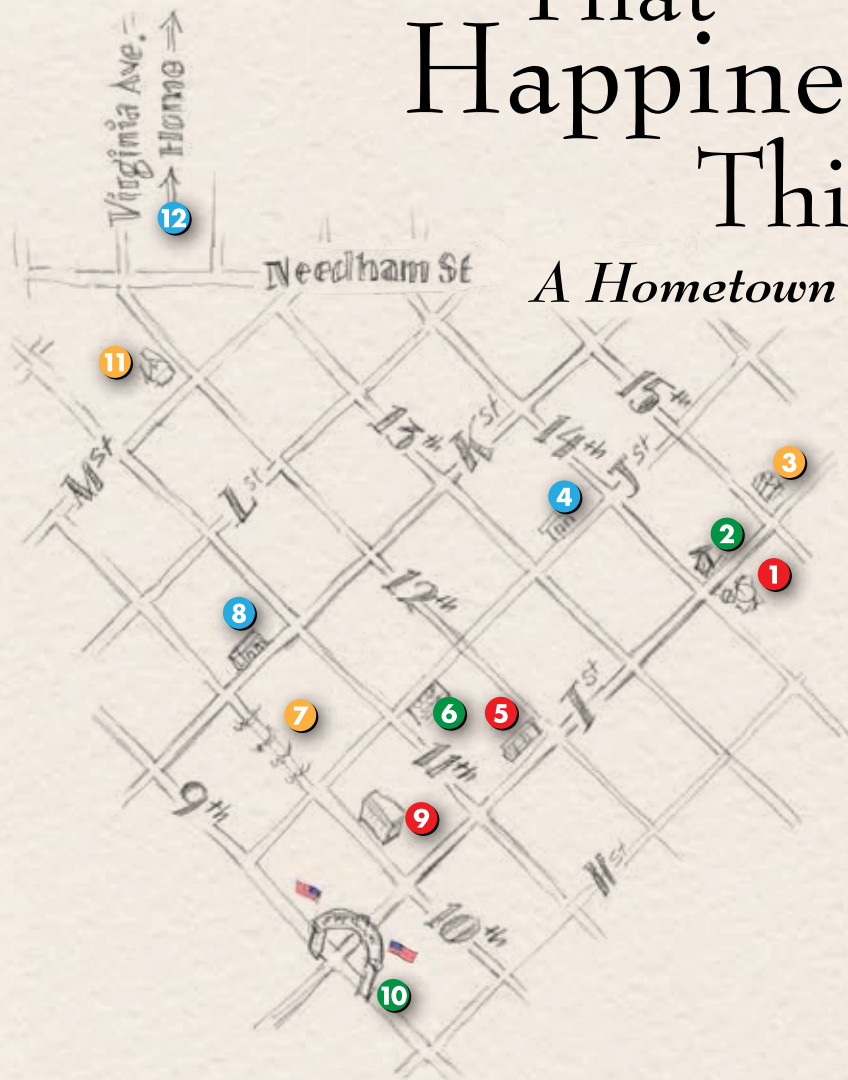
“**A**nd that’s why I want you to have this,” I said, as I handed the snow globe to my granddaughter. “So you can have an adventure of your own like I did.”





That Happiness Thing

A Hometown Map



- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 McHenry Public Library 1402 I St | 7 Street Garlands 10th St/Between J & K |
| 2 First Presbyterian Church 407 I St | 8 Sears (Garden Clock) 10th & K |
| 3 Gould Apartments (McHenry Mansion) 906 15th St | 9 Kress 944 10th St |
| 4 State Theatre 1307 J St | 10 Modesto Arch 9th & I St |
| 5 United States Post Office 1125 I St | 11 First Baptist Church 1309 12th St |
| 6 J.C. Penney's 11th & J St | 12 Home 1500 Del Vista |

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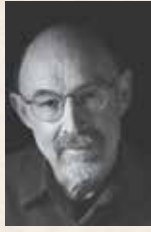
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Summary: It's Christmas 1958. With a little help from an elderly gentleman and a magical snow globe, a 10-year-old boy from a small town discovers that true happiness isn't about having the most of everything, but making the most of everything you have.

[1. Fiction / Children's. 2. Fiction / Christmas. 3. Fiction / Coming of Age. 4. Fiction / General]



Ken White

Photograph by James A. Ewing.

Ken recently retired from the worlds of advertising, corporate communications, and interactive entertainment to concentrate on writing and community service.

He received his A.A. degree at Modesto Junior College, his B.A. and teaching credential at UC Davis, and his M.A. at San Francisco State University. He has taught mass communications and film appreciation at Modesto Junior College.

Born in Lathrop and raised in Modesto, California, he continues to live in his home town. He is married to Robin and has two adult step-sons, Tyler and Eric. He has written novels, screenplays, short stories, stage plays, children's and non-fiction books. Most of his stories are about his home town and the Central Valley heartland.

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Ron Wilkinson

Photograph by Kelly Powers

Ron currently works with his wife at Nishihara/Wilkinson Design, developing brands, designing packaging, and promoting food based business throughout the United States.

He graduated from California State University, Chico, with a degree in fine arts. His skills as a fine artist have led to work in graphic design for over thirty years, including numerous illustration projects.

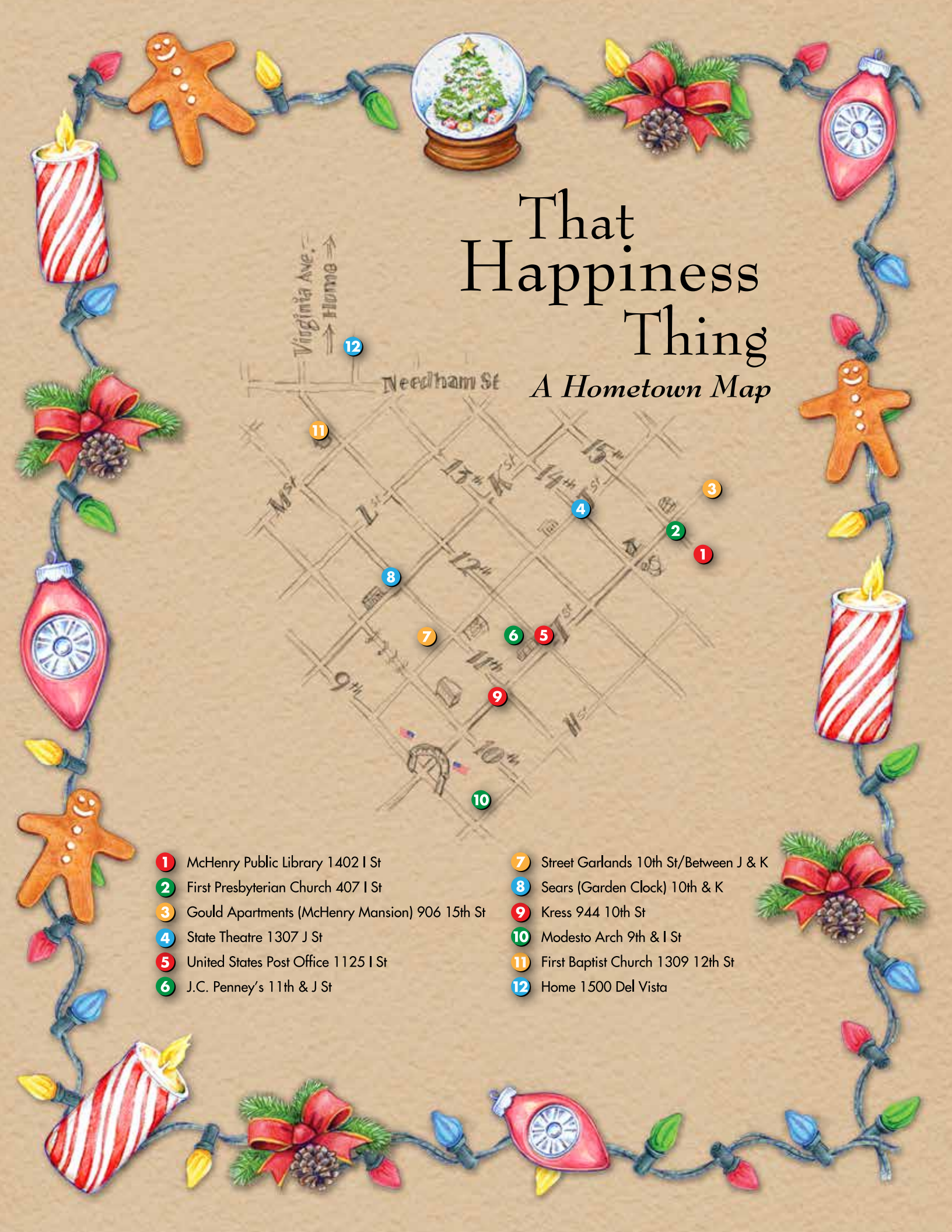
Born in San Diego and raised in Salida, California, he currently resides in Turlock with his wife, Darice, and their youngest daughter, Sammie. He also has an older daughter, Jackie, son-in-law, and two granddaughters. This is Ron's fourth book design, second illustrated, and third commercially available.

Please visit nishwilkdesign.com



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