



Charles Dickens

The Second Greatest Christmas Story Ever Told

From its first publication, "A Christmas Carol" has charmed and inspired millions. There have been scores of editions and translations, and many stage, TV and film adaptations, making it one of the best-loved stories of all time. Less well known is the fact that this little book of celebration grew out of a dark period in the author's career -- and, in some ways, changed the course of his life forever.

On an early October evening in 1843, Charles Dickens stepped from the brick-and-stone portico of his home near Regent's Park in London. The cool air of dusk was a relief from the day's unseasonal humidity, as the author began his nightly walk through what he called "the black streets" of the city.

A handsome man with flowing brown hair and normally sparkling eyes, Dickens was deeply troubled. The 31-year-old father of four had thought he was at the peak of his career. *The Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* had all been popular; and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, which he considered his finest novel yet, was being published in monthly installments. But now, the celebrated writer was facing serious financial problems.

Some months earlier, his publisher had revealed that sales of the new novel were not what had been expected, and it might be necessary to sharply reduce Dickens's monthly advances against future sales.

The news had stunned the author. It seemed his talent was being questioned. Memories of his childhood poverty resurfaced. Dickens was supporting a large, extended family, and his expenses were already nearly more than he could handle. His father and brothers were pleading for loans. His wife, Kate, was expecting their fifth child.

All summer long, Dickens worried about his mounting bills, especially the large mortgage that he owed on his house. He spent time at a seaside resort, where he had trouble sleeping and walked the cliffs for hours. He knew that he needed an idea that would earn him a large sum of money, and he needed the idea quickly. But in

his depression, Dickens was finding it difficult to write. After returning to London, he hoped that resuming his nightly walks would help spark his imagination.



The yellow glow from the flickering gas lamps lit his way through London's better neighborhoods. Then gradually, as he neared the Thames River, only the dull light from tenement windows illuminated the streets, now litter-strewn and lined with open sewers. The elegant ladies and well-dressed gentlemen of Dickens's neighborhood were replaced by bawdy streetwalkers, pickpockets, footpads and beggars.

The dismal scene reminded him of the nightmare that often troubled his sleep: *A 12-year-old boy sits at a worktable piled high with pots of black boot paste. For 12 hours a day, six days a week, he attaches labels on the endless stream of pots to earn the six shillings that will keep him alive.*

The boy in the dream looks through the rotting warehouse floor into the cellar, where swarms of rats scurry about. Then he raises his eyes to the dirt-streaked window, dripping with condensation from London's wintry weather. The light is fading now, along



with the boy's young hopes. His father is in debtors' prison, and the youngster is receiving only an hour of school lessons during his dinner break at the warehouse. He feels helpless, abandoned. There may never be celebration, joy or hope again...

This was no scene from the author's imagination. It was a period from his early life. Fortunately, Dickens's father had inherited some money, enabling him to pay off his debts and get out of prison -- and his young son escaped a dreary fate.

Now the fear of being unable to pay his own debts haunted Dickens. Warily, he started home from his long walk, no closer to an idea for the "cheerful, glowing" tale he wanted to tell than he'd been when he started out.

However, as he neared home, he felt the sudden flash of inspiration. What about a Christmas story! He would write one for the very people he passed on the black streets of London. People who lived and struggled with

the same fears and longings he had known, people who hungered for a bit of cheer and hope.

But Christmas was less than three months away! How could he manage so great a task in so brief a time? The book would have to be short, certainly not a full novel. It would have to be finished by the end of November to be printed and distributed in time for Christmas sales. For speed, he struck on the idea of adapting a Christmas-goblin story from a chapter in *The Pickwick Papers*.



He would fill the story with the scenes and characters his readers loved. There would be a small, sickly child; his honest but ineffectual father; and, at the center of the piece, a selfish villain, an old man with a pointed nose and shriveled cheeks.

As the mild days of October gave way to a cool November, the manuscript grew, page by page, and the story took life. The basic plot was simple enough for children to understand, but evoked themes that would conjure up

warm memories and emotions in an adult's heart: *After retiring alone to his cold, barren apartment on Christmas Eve, Ebenezer Scrooge, a miserly London businessman, is visited by the spirit of his dead partner, Jacob Marley. Doomed by his greed and insensitivity to his fellow man when alive, Marley's ghost wanders the world in chains forged of his own indifference. He warns Scrooge that he must change, or suffer the same fate. The ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come appear and show Scrooge poignant scenes from his life and what will occur if he doesn't mend his ways. Filled with remorse, Scrooge renounces his former selfishness and becomes a kind, generous, loving person who has learned the true spirit of Christmas.*

Gradually, in the course of his writing, something surprising happened to Dickens. What had begun as a desperate, calculated plan to rescue himself from debt -- "a little scheme," as he described it -- soon began to work a change in the author. As he wrote about the kind of Christmas he loved -- joyous family parties with clusters of mistletoe hanging from the ceiling; cheerful carols, games, dances and gifts; delicious feasts of roast goose, plum pudding, fresh breads, all enjoyed in front of a blazing Yule log -- the joy of the season he cherished began to alleviate his depression.

A Christmas Carol captured his heart and soul. It became a labor of love. Every time he dipped his quill pen into his ink, the characters seemed magically to take life: Tiny Tim with his crutches, Scrooge cowering in fear before the ghosts, Bob Cratchit drinking Christmas cheer in the face of poverty.

Each morning, Dickens grew excited and impatient to begin the day's work. "I was very much affected by the little book," he later wrote a newspaperman, and was "reluctant to lay it aside for a moment." A friend and Dickens's future biographer, John Forster, took note of the "strange mastery" the story held over the author. Dickens told a professor in America how, when writing, he "wept, and laughed, and wept again." Dickens even took charge of the design of the book, deciding on a gold-stamped cover, a red-and-green title page with colored endpapers, and four hand-colored etchings and four engraved woodcuts. To make the book affordable to the widest audience possible, he priced it at only five shillings.

At last, on December 2, he was finished, and the manuscript went to the printers. On December 17, the author's copies were delivered, and Dickens was delighted. He had never doubted that *A Christmas Carol* would be popular. But neither he nor his publisher was ready for the overwhelming response that came.



The first edition of 6000 copies sold out by Christmas Eve, and as the little book's heartwarming message spread, Dickens later recalled, he received "by every post, all manner of strangers writing all manner of letters about their homes and hearths, and how the Carol is read aloud there, and kept on a very little shelf by itself." Novelist William Makepeace Thackeray said of the Carol: "It seems to me a national benefit, and to every man or woman who reads it a personal kindness."

Despite the book's public acclaim, it did not turn into the immediate financial success that Dickens had hoped for, because of the quality production he demanded and the low price he placed on the book. Nevertheless, he made enough money from it to scrape by, and *A Christmas Carol's* enormous popularity revived his audience for subsequent novels, while giving a fresh, new direction to his life and career.

Although Dickens would write many other well-received and financially profitable books -- *David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations* -- nothing would ever quite equal the soul-satisfying joy he derived from his universally loved little novel. In time, some would call him the Apostle of Christmas. And, at his death in 1870, a poor child in London was heard to ask: "Dickens dead? Then will Father Christmas die too?"

In a very real sense, Dickens popularized many aspects of the Christmas we celebrate today, including great family gatherings, seasonal drinks and dishes and gift giving. Even our language has been enriched by the tale. Who has not known a "Scrooge," or uttered "Bah! Humbug!" when feeling irritated or disbelieving. And the phrase "Merry Christmas!" gained wider usage after the story appeared.

In the midst of self-doubt and confusion, a man sometimes does his best work. From the storm of tribulation comes a gift. For Charles Dickens, a little Christmas novel brought new-found faith in himself and in the redemptive joy of the season.

BY THOMAS J. BURNS

(Originally published in *Reader's Digest*, December 1989)

THE EARLY REINDEER RETIREMENT PACKAGE

The recent announcement that Donner and Blitzen have elected to take the early reindeer retirement package has triggered a good deal of concern about whether they will be replaced, and about other restructuring decisions at the North Pole.

Streamlining was appropriate in view of the reality that the North Pole no longer dominates the season's gift distribution business. Home shopping channels and mail order catalogues have diminished Santa's market share and they could not sit idly by and permit further erosion of the profit picture.



The reindeer downsizing was made possible through the purchase of a late model Japanese sled for the CEO's annual trip. Improved productivity from Dasher and Dancer, who summered at the Harvard Business School, is anticipated and should take up the slack with no discernible loss of service. Reduction in reindeer will also



lessen airborne environmental emissions for which the North Pole has been cited and received unfavorable press.

I am pleased to inform you and yours that Rudolph's role will not be disturbed. Tradition still counts for something at the North Pole. Management denies, in the strongest possible language, the earlier leak that Rudolph's nose got that way not from the cold, but from substance abuse. Calling Rudolph "a lush who was into the sauce and never did pull his share of the load" was an unfortunate comment, made by one of Santa's helpers and taken out of context at a time of year when he is known to be under executive stress.

As a further restructuring, today's global challenges require the North Pole to continue to look for better, more competitive steps. Effective immediately, the following economy measures are to take place in the "Twelve Days of Christmas" subsidiary:

The partridge will be retained, but the pear tree never turned out to be the cash crop forecasted. It will be replaced by a plastic hanging plant,

providing considerable savings in maintenance.

The two turtle doves represent a redundancy that is simply not cost effective. In addition, their romance during working hours could not be condoned. The positions are therefore eliminated.

The three French hens will remain intact. After all, everyone loves the French.

The four calling birds were replaced by an automated voice mail system, with a call waiting option. An analysis is underway to determine who the birds have been calling, how often and how long they talked.

The five golden rings have been put on hold by the Board of Directors. Maintaining a portfolio based on one commodity could have negative implications for institutional investors. Diversification into other precious metals as well as a mix of T-Bills and high technology stocks appear to be in order.

The six geese-a-laying constitutes a luxury which can no longer be afforded. It has long been felt that the production rate of one egg per goose per day is an example of the decline in productivity. Three geese will be let go, and an upgrading in the selection procedure by personnel will assure management that from now on every goose it gets will be a good one.

The seven swans-a-swimming is obviously a number chosen in better

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times. The function is primarily decorative. Mechanical swans are on order. The current swans will be retrained to learn some new strokes and therefore enhance their outplacement.

As you know, the eight maids-a-milking concept has been under heavy scrutiny by the EEOC. A male/female balance in the workforce is being sought. The more militant maids consider this a dead-end job with no upward mobility. Automation of the process may permit the maids to try a-mending, a-mentoring or a-mulching.

Nine ladies dancing has always been an odd number. This function will be phased out as these individuals grow older and can no longer do the steps.

Ten Lords-a-leaping is overkill. The high cost of Lords plus the expense of international air travel prompted the Compensation Committee to suggest replacing this group with ten out-of-work congressmen. While leaping ability may be somewhat sacrificed, the savings are significant because we expect an oversupply of unemployed congressmen this year.

Eleven pipers piping and twelve drummers drumming is a simple case of the band getting too big. A substitution with a string quartet, a cutback on new music and no uniforms will produce savings which will drop right down to the bottom line.

We can expect a substantial reduction in assorted people, fowl, animals and

other expenses. Though incomplete, studies indicate that stretching deliveries over twelve days is inefficient. If we can drop ship in one day, service levels will be improved.

Regarding the lawsuit filed by the attorney's association seeking expansion to include the legal profession ("thirteen lawyers-a-suing"), action is pending.

Lastly, it is not beyond consideration that deeper cuts maybe necessary in the future to stay competitive. Should that happen the Board will request management to scrutinize the Snow White Division to see if seven dwarfs is the right number.

Times they are a changing!

Santa Claus



What did the reindeer say before launching into his comedy routine?
"This will sleigh you."



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Reindeer's Story at Christmas

According to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, while both male and female reindeer grow antlers in the summer each year, male reindeer drop their antlers at the beginning of winter, usually late November to mid-December.

Female reindeer retain their antlers till after they give birth in the spring. Therefore, according to EVERY historical rendition depicting Santa's reindeer, EVERY single one of them, from Rudolph to Blitzen, had to be a girl.

We should have known... ONLY women would be able to drag a fat man in a red velvet suit all around the world in one night and not get lost.

ANSEL'S SPECIAL GIFT



Ansel Nordquist steadied himself against the cold night wind. Tightly gripping his gold-knobbed cane, he stared at the bright and lovely things in the Saks Fifth Avenue window. "What to get?" he asked himself. He needed to buy only one present, but it had to be perfect. Perfect. Just right. And time was running out.

Snowflakes, thick and fluffy, tumbled through the air. In the street beside him, a dapple-gray horse with steaming breath pulled a carriage of young lovers beneath the stars and twinkling Christmas lights.

Busy shoppers scurried by, feet crunching in the new-fallen snow. Faintly, he heard the *ting...ting...ting* of The Salvation Army bell. The air was heavy with freshly cut pine mixed with the smell of hot popcorn from the street vendor's cart.

A gleeful toddler squealed, "Hurry, Mommy! Come on! Come on!" He

tugged hard at his mother's skirt, pulling her from the boring windows filled with gowns and jewels and furs to the exciting windows, down the street, loaded with wondrous toys.

Ansel turned cautiously, steadied by his cane, and shuffled toward the next Saks window, wondering what beautiful things it would hold. His cashmere coat and white silk scarf kept him warm against the chill. Nevertheless, the bitter wind brought tears to his eyes. Or was it the wind? Perhaps, instead, it was the season.

Window after window, Ansel passed. Each was filled with different things that, at various times in his life, he had bought. The diamond ring. The wedding band. The casual and the elegant clothes. The maternity wear and the baby things. The toys. Oh, yes, the toys. Especially the ones that came in pieces and had to be assembled.

How she'd laugh and how he'd curse, trying to put the toys together. She'd bring him coffee. They'd sit and talk of Christmases past. She'd drink the milk and eat the cookies the children had left for Santa. Then, when all the work was done, they'd sit on the floor in front of the fire and pray to the child who had changed the world. They'd pray to the Prince of Peace. They'd kiss. They'd hold each other close. They'd feel the fear of all the world and the safety of each other. Yes, these were the times when they knew

love best. These were the fullest of years.

A smile crept across Ansel's face. "Wonderful, wonderful times," he thought. "But my gift...I must find my gift."

Ansel turned from Saks and walked down the street. Past the haberdashery. Past the bakery. Past the laughter-filled cafe. He came to a stop at the toy store window. He watched the circling electric train running through mountains and villages. The sailboats. Airplanes with gas engines. Mesmerized, he watched them all, losing himself in the ghosts of the past and their hollow, faraway laughter.

Then a shiver ran down his spine. Despite his hat and gloves and coat, Ansel was growing cold. He was growing tired. But nothing...nothing could he find. He could not find his treasured gift.

Then he saw it! There it was! Tucked in the corner. High on a shelf. Up behind the expensive toys. Yes! There it was. The perfect gift. The most perfect gift of all.

Ansel entered the shop and purchased the gift, requesting that it be nicely wrapped. Then he walked back to the street and hailed a cab.

"Where to?" the cabby asked.

"St. Elizabeth's Hospital," Ansel replied.

Upon arriving at the hospital, Ansel paid the driver, tipping him nicely.



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Each wished the other a Merry Christmas. Ansel shuffled through the lobby to the elevator, taking it to the fourth floor -- to Sarah's room.

Once inside, Ansel removed his hat, gloves, and coat. He pulled the chair close to Sarah. He took her hand and gently stroked it.

"Hello, Sarah," he said, not expecting an answer....None came.

Ansel gazed at her beauty. The rest of the world saw her 80-year-old wrinkles, frail white hair, and swollen, gnarled, arthritic joints. But not Ansel. Oh, with his eyes he saw those things, but not with his heart.

What Ansel saw was a woman who had devoted her life to him. She was a young woman high on a ladder, giggling, with paint in her hair. A woman on the sidewalk in front of their house playing hopscotch with the neighborhood kids. A woman with skin like farm-fresh cream -- ripe, round, and aglow with child.

His heart heard her soft lullabies rocking their children to sleep. It heard her laughter as she ran with them on the lawn, jumping into piles of bright autumn leaves.

His heart smelled her scent mixed with salt air when, standing on ships' decks, they'd seen the world with lovers' eyes. And he felt the comfort of awakening in her arms each day.

Yes. This was the Sarah that Ansel's heart saw. Not the Sarah connected to life by various wires and tubes.

"It's Christmas Eve, Sarah," Ansel said softly. "I brought you a gift. Would you like to open it now or save it for tomorrow?"

Knowing that Sarah couldn't answer, Ansel reached for the gift and placed it on the bed beside her. "OK. We'll open it now. See the beautiful ribbon, Sarah? And the paper? Red. Your favorite. I picked it out especially for you. And I watched to make sure they wrapped it right. Just for you." With aged, trembling fingers, Ansel unwrapped the gift. While doing so, he journeyed back through time....

"The cow's gone dry, Ma!" Ansel hollered, walking through the door.

"What'll we do, Pa?" Sarah yelled back, busy in the kitchen.

"Shoot her an' have her for dinner, I guess."

"OK, Pa. Best git out an' shoot her."

This was their greeting each night when Ansel came home from work. How it began, they couldn't remember. Just silliness. Just being young. It certainly had nothing to do with them. They didn't live on a farm. They lived in the city. And Ansel couldn't milk a cow. He was an attorney. All they knew was that it was fun. It was theirs and no one else's. It was their special way of saying, "I love you. Good to be home."

Ansel pulled the last of the wrapping from the box. "Here it is, Sarah. It's all unwrapped. Here...give me your hands." Ansel drew her hands toward

him so that Sarah could hold the gift. Then he placed it in her palms. It was a small, fuzzy stuffed toy -- a brown and white cow that mooed when squeezed. The cow lay in Sarah's limp hands. Ansel reached and squeezed the cow. "Moo...moo..."

In the silence, Ansel heard a sound-- quiet, soft, muffled. Looking from the toy to her face, he saw Sarah's eyes -- open, distant, glassy. Her lips moved slightly. Ansel rose from his chair, standing in disbelief. Months -- months it had been -- since Sarah had stirred.

Gently, afraid of breaking the spell, Ansel leaned toward Sarah, turning his ear to her lips. "What, my dear? What did you say?"

Quiet as wind-driven snow, Sarah whispered, "What'll we do, Pa?"

Never had Ansel felt such joy! These few words from Sarah's lips! What a gift! What a gift! Never had there been such a wonderful gift! Tears welled in Ansel's eyes, falling on Sarah's cheek. Our words! Our special words! he thought, then chokingly replied, "Shoot her an' have her for dinner, I guess."

Into the night, this holy night, Ansel waited for Sarah's response....

But Sarah lay silent. She held her cow. She sailed into the great beyond....



ODE TO JOY

The year our youngest daughter, Shelly, was four, she received an unusual Christmas present from "Santa."



She was the perfect age for Christmas, able to understand the true meaning of the season, but still completely enchanted by the magic of it. Her innocent joyfulness was compelling and catching -- a great gift to parents, reminding us of what Christmas should represent no matter how old we are.

The most highly prized gift Shelly received that Christmas Eve was a giant bubble-maker, a simple device of plastic and cloth the inventor promised would create huge billowing bubbles, large enough to swallow a wide-eyed four-year-old. Both Shelly and I were excited about trying it out, but it was after dark so we'd have to wait until the next day.

Later that night I read the instruction booklet while Shelly played with some of her other new toys. The inventor of the bubble-maker had tried all types of soaps for formulating bubbles and found that Joy dishwashing detergent created the best giant bubbles. I'd have to buy some.

The next morning, I was awakened very early by small stirrings in the house. Shelly was up. I knew in my sleepy mind that Christmas Day festivities would soon begin, so I arose and made my way toward the kitchen to start the coffee. In the hallway, I

met my daughter, already wide awake, the bubble-maker clutched in her chubby little hand, the magic of Christmas morning embraced in her four-year-old heart. Her eyes were shining with excitement, and she asked, "Daddy, can we make bubbles now?"

I sighed heavily and rubbed my eyes. I looked toward the window, where the sky was only beginning to lighten with the dawn. I looked toward the kitchen, where the coffeepot had yet to start dripping its aromatic reward for early-rising Christmas dads.

"Shelly," I said, my voice almost pleading and perhaps a little annoyed, "it's too early. I haven't even had my coffee yet."

Her smile fell away. Immediately I felt a father's remorse for bursting her bright Christmas bubble with what I suddenly realized was my own selfish problem, and my heart broke a little.

But I was a grown-up. I could fix this. In a flash of adult inspiration, I unshouldered the responsibility. Recalling the inventor's recommendation of a particular brand of bubble-making detergent -- which I knew we did not have in the house -- I laid the blame squarely on him, pointing out gently, "Besides, you have to have **Joy**."

I watched her eyes light back up as she realized, in less than an instant, that she could neutralize this small



problem with the great and wonderful truth she was about to reveal.

"Oh, Daddy," she promised, with all the honesty and enthusiasm and Christmas excitement she could possibly communicate,

"Oh, Daddy, I do, I do."

I broke records getting to the store, and in no time at all we were out on the front lawn creating gigantic, billowing, gossamer orbs--each one filled with Joy and sent forth shimmering into the Christmas sun. --

By Ted A. Thompson



Bill and John bought season tickets to see their favorite NFL team year after year. One year, they noticed that the seat next to them was empty. Going to the ticket office, they found that the seat was unbelievably reserved.

Finally, in one of the last games of the season, Bill and John sat down and the seat was full. Of course, they couldn't help but ask him where he had been all season. The man looked at them and said drolly, "Don't ask. My wife bought them for me last year and saved them as a Christmas gift."



THE ULTIMATE GIFT OF LOVE

He could not believe that this was how it was going to end. After everything that he had been thorough in his life it had come down to this. As big and as strong as he once was, flat on his back in a hospital bed with a heart that was giving up.

He thought about everything he put himself through. The broken bones knocked out teeth six years in the military. All the booze, cigarettes and drugs some legal most them not. Here he was paying for the life that he led. All the hours spent on that big two wheeler. Just having to see what was over the next horizon. The wander lust in his heart, who could have put up with that?

He thought about the girl who spent so many miles riding behind him. How he loved that woman now. Twenty-five years of good times and bad. She never left sometimes he didn't understand why she stayed. He was grateful that she did. She was his world. Some days his temper was not to be believed. He could be moody for weeks at a time. By the end of the winter he was wearing a groove in the

carpet waiting on the weather so he could get back outside. How that woman could stand that just amazed him. Then there was their daughter.

What a spitfire she is. Whoever she marries is going to have their hands full. He thought about all the overtime he put in and how much of her life he missed. She is almost finished with college, how wild is that his daughter in law school. Is the world ready for that? He wonders if she knows how proud of her he is. Does she know how much he loves her? Not being there for her is what hurts the most about this.

He was not going to think like that. He'll get a transplant stop smoking and drinking and life will go on as it has in the past. A cigarette sounds good about now he thought. The rare blood type that he has that kept in beer money half of his life, is now going to be the reason that he ends dying on his back in a hospital bed. What a way to go out, where is the blaze of glory he always figured would accompany his departure from this world. No bells or whistle just a slow fading away. That sucks.

He woke up to hearing voices in his room. He looked around and saw that they had brought in another patient and put in his room. No dying alone now even if he wanted too. He saw a woman pass by the end of the other bed. She was huge. She must have been at eight months pregnant. He thought how sad is that to have a

pregnant wife and be in the IC unit of the hospital. He could hear them talking. The man's voice was weak and he was trying to be encouraging to the woman. She told the man that he needed to get some rest and that she would be there when he woke up. He could hear the steady breathing of his roommate and realized that he must have fallen asleep on the woman's command. He could hear the woman mumbling. He thought prayers at this point lady are not going to help. Then her voice got a little louder and he could hear her.

She was praying as he had thought. But what she was praying for sent chills down his spine. "Oh God just a couple of more months. Please let him live long enough to hold our child in his arms at least once before you call him home. Please just a few more days. I know he is dying but let him see his child first."

As he laid there he thought how hard her life was going to be. He thought about the unborn child growing up without their dad. Who would his daughter be if he had died that early in her life? What would happen to his wife. With his quirks she still loved him with all of her being. How would she have survived?

He must have drifted off again.

With the lighting in this place you can never figure out what time it is. His roommates were talking again about how he would never get the transplant



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that he needed in time the list was so long and he was so sick.

The nurse came in and told him we have to get you ready they had found him a heart. It was on its way and they needed to get him ready for the surgery. He looked at her and asked her to get his wife and his daughter for him. She said there was no time. He looked at her and told her to make the time.

He watched his wife walk in. She was so beautiful. Their daughter behind her, her mother's looks and intelligence and her father's pit bull mentality and he smiled as they stood on either side of his bed holding his hands. Was he strong enough for this he didn't know? He done a lot bad things in his life he cut corners and cheated when he could get a way with. But this was different this was where the rubber meets the road. He knew what had to be done. He looked at his wife and said, "I love you more now than I ever did, thank you for the life we have had. I will miss you."

To his daughter he said, "Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think that I could have a child like you. No father anywhere at anytime could be a more proud parent than I am. You are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I will love you until the last star is a memory."

The doctor came rushing into the room and started talking about how they had to get him ready. He looked at his wife and his daughter then he turned

to the doctor and told him " Doc, we ain't doing this. You give that heart to the next person on the list. I have had a good life. Let someone else get a chance at theirs."

He looked at the other woman in the room as said. "How could God not answer your prayer"

He looked at his wife and said " Get me out of here while I still have the strength to leave and before I get scared."

The doctor left the nurse and brought in a wheel chair and he left that hospital knowing he had done the right thing. He didn't particularly believe in God but someone else needed that heart. He died soon after at his home with his wife and daughter at his side, with no regrets.

Back at the hospital the days kept turning. His roommate was recovering from getting his heart transplant. And it looked like he would get to see his unborn child grow up.

The nurse working on the transplant floor took a different position at the hospital no longer able to work with dying people anymore. So she went to OB/GYN department to help bring lives into the world. As things would happen the woman whose husband had needed the transplant months before was there to have her baby. The nurse was not involved in the delivery but stayed to see the child. As she was looking at the baby thorough the window the husband showed up to see

the baby. He noticed the tears that were running down the nurse's face and asked her why she was crying.

The nurse responded pointing at his child she said "That baby has a daddy because of the unselfishness of one man, and because of a mother's prayer of HOPE."

The man asked to explain why she would say this about this child. She told him of a night when she worked in the intensive care unit of hospital. And that a man gave up his heart transplant to the next person on the list. The next person on the list at the hospital with the same blood type was the baby's father. .

True Story



I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round, as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys.

~Charles Dickens

VIGIL OF HOPE



We had made it through a rough October fire season with minimal damage. Christmas was now two days away, and the thought of another brushfire near the Cleveland National Forest was the furthest thing from my mind. But when my husband, Rick, a dedicated firefighter, got the call that a fire had broken out on a ridge about ten miles from our home, my stomach went tight.

I took a deep breath and kissed him goodbye as he went off that day to fight what was being described as a small but dangerous fire. Rick assured me that they would tame the blaze in no time and that he would be home the next day for a wonderful Christmas Eve with our three small children.

As I busily made holiday preparations, I kept the TV on, with the volume low enough so as not to disturb the children playing in their rooms. I occasionally peeked at the TV, grateful to see only one short local news update about the fire, which was now under control. I sighed with relief as the reporter on the scene announced that the lack of high winds made the fight a lot easier.

I was sure Rick would be home for dinner, but he called from his cell phone to let me know that they were having trouble with some hot spots -- and that he would be home late. At least, he said, the fire was almost completely put out.

Four hours later, I put on the 11 o'clock news and was horrified to see that the top story was the fire, now raging out of control. The reporters on the scene described the situation as grave. Apparently, the winds had kicked up that night and were fanning the hot spots into new fires that converged on an area of extremely dense dried brush. Battalions from all over Southern California were called in to assist, and some were even coming from as far east as Arizona.

My children were in bed, so I sat frozen on the couch watching in horror. When the phone rang, I practically jumped out of my skin. I answered breathlessly, expecting to hear Rick's voice, but it was my sister, Jane, concerned about the fire. She lived in the next town and was on her way over, despite my protests.

I spent all night with my sister and two neighbors, who had come over to be with me as we waited for word. Several nearby towns closer to the forest edge were being evacuated, and I began to wonder if I should prepare overnight bags for the kids. My two neighbors left around 3:00 a.m., but my sister stayed as Christmas Eve day broke without a word from Rick.

By now, the local channels were showing uninterrupted coverage of the fire, which was now spreading at a disastrous rate. Water-dropping planes and choppers with fire retardant were flying constantly overhead on their way to the fire site. My kids were stirring, so Jane went in to help them get dressed as I prepared breakfast, my ears glued to the TV.



I got a call from Rick three hours later. He was on a break, and I could hear his labored breathing through the bad connection. He would not be home for a while, he told me, as his command was going to set backfires on a ridge to try to stop the fire from leaving the National Forest area and jumping a highway. "What a way to spend Christmas Eve day," he laughed, but I didn't hear much humor in his voice.

By late afternoon, dozens of friends and family members had converged on my house. I wasn't sure if I felt better surrounded by loved ones or completely alone in my fear and horror. Still, the noise and human bodies alone served to keep me sane and did wonders for my kids, all of whom were now really frightened. They wanted their daddy home, but they knew he was working hard at a



job he loved. For little ones, their wisdom often surprised me, and it certainly gave me strength.

It was a reporter on the local broadcast that broke the terrible news. A crew of ten firefighters had been trapped on a ridge while attempting to set backfires. The winds had changed, and the fire had turned back on them with such speed and fury that flames now surrounded them. I knew in my heart that this was Rick's crew. Jane and I exchanged glances, silently wondering how much worse it could get. I watched the live footage in a state of shock.

A neighbor had thoughtfully taken the kids to McDonald's so they would not have to see what the rest of us were seeing, but I wondered what I would tell them when they returned. How would I tell them that not only was Daddy not coming home for Christmas Eve but that he might never come back at all? The very thought made me ill.

I knew I had to go to him. I knew I could not stand here in my living room, safe and secure, and watch this unfold on TV. I got my purse and coat and headed toward the door. "I'm

going to him," I said. Jane leapt into action, calling our neighbor at McDonald's to bring the kids home right away. Jane would bring them in her car. Several friends grabbed their coats and followed me, not wanting me to go alone.

We made a caravan to the edge of the fire site, where several police cars had set up a barricade point. We were about two miles from the western edge of the flames, and we could see the glow of the fire and feel the heat. The police warned us that if the winds changed, we would need to get out of there fast.

But I wasn't going anywhere. I got down on my knees in front of the barricade, and I closed my eyes and prayed. My friends joined me, praying silently beside me. After a long while, I opened my eyes and just sat there, staring straight ahead, silently pleading with God to bring them back alive.

Someone from behind me touched me on the shoulder. I turned to see a woman holding two lighted candles in cups. She handed me one of them and smiled. I saw a strange glow behind her, and for a second I thought the fire had come up behind us, but my heart leapt with joy when I saw dozens--no, hundreds--of people holding candles. My friends and I rose from our knees in awe as a vigil of hope spread out behind us, with dozens more people joining the group every moment. The police looked a

little worried at first, but then they, too, took lit candles.

I saw Jane edging her way through the growing crowd, and I couldn't help but cry out when my three kids ran toward me, each holding a vigil light. We hugged and got down on our knees, and we began to pray again, this time out loud. It was a simple prayer, just asking God for protection for the men and women caught on the ridge. When we were finished, we heard a massive chorus of voices respond with "Amen."



For the next two hours, the crowd joined my family in silent prayers, each in their own faith. It didn't matter if they were Christian or Jewish or Buddhist. They were all human beings, drawn together in concern and love for others. I believe it was that unity of faith and strength that caused the winds to die down that night and made it possible for surrounding units to squelch the fire around the ridge where Rick was trapped. And I believe it was the power of prayer that gave my husband and his crew the escape route they needed to make their way down the side of a mountain to safety below.

Another two hours passed before we got word that Rick and the others had made it off the ridge, all ten of them. Three were suffering from smoke inhalation, and another five were being treated for exhaustion, but all were alive. A cheer of happiness and relief went up from the crowd, which had grown even bigger thanks to local news coverage describing the ongoing "Vigil of Hope." As we all hugged each other, strangers and friends alike, it occurred to me that none of us were really strangers after all. Tragedies like this fire on Christmas Eve had a way of bringing together people who might never come together over anything else.

And maybe, just maybe, that was God's plan.

When Rick finally came home on Christmas afternoon, after spending the night in the hospital, I knew that my family had been given the greatest gift of all, an answer to our prayers. We were exhausted, but we were alive, together, and grateful. It was the best Christmas we ever had.



THE LETTER FROM GOD

Ruth looked at the envelope once again. There was no stamp, no postmark, only her name and address on it. She

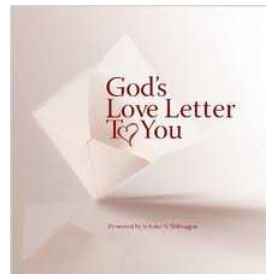
read the letter to herself one more time.

Dear Ruth, I'm going to be in your neighborhood Saturday afternoon and I'd like to stop by for a visit. Love Always, God.

Her hands were shaking as she placed the letter on the table. "Why would God want to visit me? I'm nobody special. I don't have anything to offer."

With that thought, Ruth remembered her empty kitchen cabinets. "Oh my goodness, I *really* don't have anything to offer! I will have to run down to the store and buy something for dinner at once!" She reached for her purse and poured out its contents; Five dollars and forty three cents. "Well, I could buy some bread and some cold cuts, at least."

She threw on her coat and hurried out the door. A loaf of French bread, a half-pound of sliced turkey, and a carton of milk....leaving Ruth with twelve cents left over until next Monday. None- the-less, she felt better as she headed home from the store, her meager offerings tucked under her arm.



"Hey lady, can you help us, lady?", came a shy voice from a nearby alleyway. Ruth had been so absorbed in her dinner plans she hadn't even noticed two figures huddled together in the cold and dirty alleyway she was just passing by.

A man and woman, both of them dressed in little more than rags stared in her direction... "Look lady, I ain't got a job, ya know, and my wife and I have been living out here on the street, and, well, now it's getting cold and we're getting hungry and, well, if you could help us, lady, we'd really appreciate it. Please lady."

Ruth looked at them both. They were dirty, the alleyway smelled of garbage, and frankly, she was certain that they could get some kind of work if they really wanted to.

"Sir, I'd like to help you out, but I am a poor woman myself. All I have is a few cold cuts and some bread which I was planning on serving because I'm having an important guest for dinner tonight. "Yeah, well, OK lady, I understand. Thanks anyway." The man put his arm around the woman's shoulders, turned and headed back into the alley.

As she watched them leave, Ruth felt a familiar twinge in her heart. "Sir, wait!" The couple stopped and turned as she ran down the alley after them. "Look, why don't you take this food. I'll figure out something else to serve my guest." She handed the man her grocery bag

"Thank you lady. Thank you very much!" "Yes, thank you," the man's wife murmured slowly. Ruth could see now that she was shivering uncontrollably. "You know, I've got another coat at home. Here, why don't you take this one."

Ruth unbuttoned her jacket and slipped it over the woman's shoulders. Then, smiling warmly, she turned and walked back to the street without her coat and with nothing to serve her guest that afternoon. "Thank you lady! Thank you very much!", said the man, holding back a tear. Ruth was chilled to the bone by the time she reached her front door, and was worried too. God was coming to visit her and she had nothing to offer Him. She fumbled through her purse for the door key.

But as she did, she noticed another envelope in her mailbox. "That's odd.", she said to herself, "The mailman doesn't usually come twice in one day." She took the envelope out of her mailbox and opened it.

Dear Ruth, It was so good to see you again. Thank you for offering me the lovely meal that you did. And thank you also, for compassionately giving me the beautiful coat that you did. Love Always, God.

Warm tears trickled down Ruth's cold cheeks as she realized what had just happened. There are times during the hustle and bustle of the holidays we forget there are others without and the true meaning of what it is to give of ourselves. And, to remember that

God is in ALL of us! Here's wishing you and yours a truly Joyous Holiday Season!

CHRISTMAS IS FOR LOVE



Christmas is for love. It is for joy, for giving and sharing, for laughter, for reuniting with family and friends, for tinsel and brightly covered packages. But, mostly Christmas is for love. I had not believed this until a small elfin like pupil with wide innocent eyes and soft rosy cheeks gave me a wondrous gift one Christmas.

Matthew was a 10 year old orphan who lived with his aunt, a bitter, middle aged woman greatly annoyed with the burden of caring for her dead sister's son. She never failed to remind young Matthew, if it hadn't been for her generosity, he would be a vagrant, homeless waif. Still, with all the scolding and chilliness at home, he was a sweet and gentle child.

I had not noticed Matthew particularly until he began staying after class each day (at the risk of arousing his aunt's anger so I learned later) to help me straighten up the room. We did this

quietly and comfortably, not speaking much, but enjoying the solitude of that hour of the day. When we did talk, Matthew spoke mostly of his mother. Though he was quite young when she died, he remembered a kind, gentle, loving woman who always spent time with him.

As Christmas drew near however, Matthew failed to stay after school each day. I looked forward to his coming, and when the days passed and he continued to scamper hurriedly from the room after class, I stopped him one afternoon and asked him why he no longer helped me in the room. I told him how I had missed him, and his large brown eyes lit up eagerly as he replied, 'Did you really miss me?' I explained how he had been my best helper, 'I was making you a surprise,' he whispered confidentially. 'It's for Christmas.' With that, he became embarrassed and dashed from the room. He didn't stay after school any more after that.

Finally came the last school day before Christmas. Matthew crept slowly into the room late that afternoon with his hands concealing something behind his back. 'I have your present,' he said timidly when I looked up. 'I hope you like it.' He held out his hands, and there lying in his small palms was a tiny wooden box.

'It's beautiful, Matthew. Is there something in it?' I asked opening the top to look inside. 'Oh you can't see what's in it,' he replied, 'and you can't

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COACHING POINT

touch it, or taste it or feel it, but mother always said it makes you feel good all the time, warm on cold nights and safe when you're all alone.'

I gazed into the empty box. 'What is it, Matthew' I asked gently, 'that will make me feel so good?'

'It's love,' he whispered softly, 'and mother always said it's best when you give it away.' He turned and quietly left the room.

So now I keep a small box crudely made of scraps of wood on the piano in my living room and only smile when inquiring friends raise quizzical eyebrows when I explain to them there is love in it.

Yes, Christmas is for gaiety, mirth, song, and for good and wondrous gifts. But mostly, Christmas is for love.



Blackmail at Christmas

It was coming up to Christmas and Sammy asked his mum if he could have a new bike. She told him that the best idea would be to write to Santa Claus. But Sam, having just played a vital role in the school nativity play, said he would prefer to write to the baby Jesus. So his mum told him that would be fine.

Sam went to his room and wrote, *'Dear Jesus, I have been a very good boy and would like to have a bike for Christmas.'*

But he wasn't very happy when he read it over. So he decided to try again and this time he wrote: *'Dear Jesus, I'm a good boy most of the time and would like a bike for Christmas.'*

He read it back and wasn't happy with that one either. He tried a third version: *'Dear Jesus, I could be a good boy if I tried hard and especially if I had a new bike.'*

He read that one too, but he still wasn't satisfied. So, he decided to go out for a walk while he thought about a better approach. After a short time he passed a house with a small statue of the Virgin Mary in the front garden. He crept in, stuffed the statue under his coat, hurried home and hid it under the bed. Then he wrote this letter. *'Dear Jesus, If you want to see your mother again, you'd better send me a new bike.'*

A Warm Witty Short Christmas Story

It was the day after Christmas at St Peter and St Paul's church in Borden, Kent, England. Father John, the vicar, was looking at the nativity scene outside when he noticed the baby Jesus was missing from the figures.

Immediately, Father John's thoughts turned to calling in the local policeman but as he was about to do so, he saw little Nathan with a red wagon, and in the wagon was the figure of the little infant, Jesus.

Father John approached Nathan and asked him, 'Well, Nathan, where did you get the little infant?'

Nathan looked up, smiled and replied, 'I took him from the church.'

'And why did you take him?'

With a sheepish grin, Nathan said, 'Well, Father John, about a week before Christmas I prayed to Lord Jesus. I told him if he would bring me a red wagon for Christmas, I would give him a ride around the block in it.'

