

Stories for the 12 Days of Christmas

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STORIES FOR THE 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS

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It's Better to Give Than to Receive

With her right foot on the brake, Kathy Simpson grabbed the passenger-side headrest with her right hand, quickly twisted her body, and looked out of the dirty rear window of her battered, dull-green compact car. No one else was in the alley except for a gray cat prowling on top of a dumpster. Kathy quickly slipped her right hand back onto the automatic gear shifter, threw the car into reverse, looked out the rear window again, took her foot off the brake, slowly moved it onto the accelerator, and carefully backed out of her parking space. The car rumbled and belched like a stock car as she paused and pulled it into drive. Its muffler was just one of many of its components that needed attention, but at least today the old bag of bolts started.

Kathy was already working two jobs to make ends meet. She didn't have money for a new muffler or time for any trouble.

But she had to make time for this.

Yesterday she'd received a call from Martha Bruce, whom she'd

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known since both attended Mainsville Elementary. These days Martha was the school's fourth-grade teacher, and she wanted Kathy to stop by for a "chat" about Kathy's only child, Luke, who was 9.

The school was about three miles from Kathy's apartment above one of only two restaurants in town, The Brown Jug, where she was a waitress.

She'd also been a cashier at Mainsville's sole dollar store since it opened five years ago to serve the rural Indiana town. The locals jokingly referred to the small store as "The Mainsville Mall." The nearest real mall was in Grantville, a 75-minute drive north.

Mainsville was so small it didn't even appeal to Walmart. The only "bright lights" of this town were the lights that blinked on the gas station's soda machine when it ran out of cans.

Being a single mother in a one-horse town like Mainsville wasn't the life Kathy had anticipated, but the gods of destiny had a different plan. It had taken her too long to realize that despite his many charms, not the least of which was a killer smile, Luke's father was a loser.

Luke's father's whereabouts had been unknown for about eight months now. The whereabouts of the alimony checks he was supposed to send monthly had also been unknown going on a year and a half.

Luke had his father's sapphire-blue eyes, his dazing smile, and an upbeat demeanor. Kathy knew that just like his dad, he wouldn't lack for female companions. But Kathy was determined that Luke would have a solid upbringing. Unlike his dad, he'd grow up to be a good person, even if it killed her.

That's if she didn't kill him first for getting into trouble at school.

Martha was erasing the blackboard when Kathy walked into the classroom. Although Martha had no children of her own, she was patient and well suited to the demands of teaching children.

"How are you, Kathy?" Martha asked as she put the eraser on the

ledge at the bottom of the blackboard. She settled her large frame into the chair at her desk and motioned for Kathy to take the chair next to it.

“Oh, you know, just another day in paradise,” Kathy said, smoothing a section of her shoulder-length brown hair behind her left ear as she sat down. Although she’d known Martha almost all her life, she wasn’t sure what to do with her hands, so she just folded them on her lap. Her brown vinyl hobo bag dropped to the floor beside the chair.

“Did he get into a fight with one of the Briggs boys again?”

“No; he’s not in trouble, but there’s something going on that I think you should know about,” Martha said.

“He’s not eating lunch,” she announced. “He’s saving his lunch money for a new Colts football jacket instead.”

Kathy took a few beats to comprehend this revelation. With the school’s federal and state budget allocations, a school lunch cost \$2.40. It would take quite awhile to save up enough money for a \$100 jacket licensed by the NFL.

“I should explain that better,” Martha continued. “He is eating some lunch, because his friends are giving him the parts of their lunches they don’t like.

“He’s probably eating more healthy than they are,” she added with a smile.

“What should I do about it?” Kathy asked.

“For now, I’d say nothing,” Martha advised. “Let’s see how long it lasts. He definitely wants that jacket. But even at 9 he knows it’s a luxury. You have a perceptive boy in Luke, that’s for sure.”

“I got him a new jacket before school started last year, and I bought it in a larger size than he needed so it would last a couple of years,” Kathy thought aloud, wrapping her hands into and out of a knot.

“Kids change their minds easily and go on to something else,”

Martha replied kindly. "I know times are tough. I just wanted you to know what was going on."

"Thank you," Kathy said earnestly.

With that she glanced down at the watch she'd worn since junior high, and realized she only had 15 minutes to make it to The Brown Jug to start her shift on time. She said a quick goodbye and was on her way, but her mind was busy contemplating her meager monthly budget and the unending bills.

She clocked in 5 minutes late, and her shoulders were lower than usual as she put on her tan apron, grabbed her notepad and pen, and headed to her first table. She already had a few Christmas gifts for Luke, but she would return them and concentrate on buying him that jacket. She was determined that Luke would have a great Christmas, with or without his dad.

Kathy knew her mother would help. She cared for Luke each day after school and made him supper more often than not, since Kathy was usually at the restaurant in the evenings.

A few days passed before she could mention it to her mother, though. That same night when Luke came home from her mother's house a few doors down the street he was holding an ice pack over his left eye. When Kathy asked him how he got the shiner, at first he said he fell. Later, when she checked on him at bedtime, he admitted he was on the losing end of an argument with Barry Briggs.

Barry was 11, and this wasn't the first time the two had scuffled.

Although the area around his eye was already black and blue, with a little tinge of yellow, this time his eye wasn't swollen shut.

"What happened?" Kathy asked him gently, wiping the long, blonde hair on Luke's forehead out of the inflamed area.

"He said I was a loser, and I have elephant ears," Luke said, sniffling. "I told him to take it back. He wouldn't, and he said some other

stuff too. He needs to learn a lesson,” Luke added with all the defiance a 9-year-old boy could muster, tilting his chin up for emphasis.

Kathy suspected “the other stuff” Barry had said was worse, but she needed to make a point.

“Fighting doesn’t solve problems, does it?” she asked gently. “I think Barry is a troubled young man. He doesn’t have nearly as many friends as you have, does he?” she pointed out. “We need to try to love our enemies, and be kind to them, as hard as that can be,” she added. “Now try to get some sleep, because it will be morning before you know it!”

After a hug and a quick kiss, she closed his bedroom door, walked down the hall, sat down in front of an old laptop, and went shopping.

The Colts jacket cost \$89.95 on line, with an extra \$4.99 for shipping. It wouldn’t be easy, but she’d make it happen. One of the other cashiers at the dollar store was due to go on maternity leave, so she’d be able to get some more hours there. Hopefully her car’s muffler would last at least until the spring. Kathy wasn’t sure when she’d sleep, and she hated to miss any more time with Luke than she normally did, but he was going to have that jacket.

Kathy never let on that she knew about Luke’s lunch money savings plan, but when Martha stopped into The Brown Jug for a quick dinner two weeks before Christmas, she said it was still in effect.

“He’s eating a lot of beans, stewed tomatoes, and coleslaw,” Martha disclosed with a smile.

Luke finally had enough of that diet a week later, and one night he tried a more direct approach.

“Mom, do you know what I want from Santa this year?” he asked when she checked on him after her mother had already put him to bed. Kathy was bone tired from a busy shift at The Brown Jug after a full day at the dollar store.

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“I thought you didn’t believe in Santa anymore?” Kathy responded cagily, tucking his blue comforter firmly around his body.

“Well, just in case, I’d like a Colts jacket,” he announced. “A black one, with a hood, and ‘Colts’ on the back.”

Kathy had ordered the jacket more than a week ago, but she was good at being coy. The electric bill would be late this month and next, and she’d have to be even more careful than usual when grocery shopping, but the jacket was on its way to her P.O. box.

“Well, it’s better to give than to receive,” she replied. It was all she could think of to say.

Luke’s brilliant blue eyes dove to the bed’s footboard as he avoided his mother’s gaze.

“That’s what I want, anyway,” he said, as his voice trailed off.

The long hours at both the store and the restaurant took their toll. Kathy tried to stay on an even keel, but one night when their building’s old furnace was rattling in protest against the cold while Andy Williams was crooning “It’s the most wonderful time of the year” on the kitchen radio, she snapped.

“Oh stuff it,” Kathy yelled at Williams. It didn’t matter that it was only the radio, and Williams had died in 2012.

Her son looked up at her from the kitchen table, questioning.

“I think I’m coming down with a cold,” she said to explain away her bad mood.

Christmas morning was rainy and overcast, but Luke’s smile was as bright as a Caribbean beach at noon when he tore open the wrapping paper and opened the box to reveal his new jacket.

“Oh boy! Thanks, Mom! Cool! It’s just what I wanted!” he said.

“It’s from Grandma and me,” Kathy noted, happier than she’d been in a long time. Seeing Luke’s grin made all those long shifts worth it.

“Try it on!” she prompted.

It fit fine, with a little room for his always-expanding length.

Luke wore the jacket proudly every day. He watched the Colts get to the playoffs, and then be beaten by one lousy field goal. But he never wavered in his support, and the jacket truly was his prized possession.

One day in February, however, he came home from school without it.

“Where is your coat?” Kathy asked sharply, since it was sub-zero outside.

“I gave it to Barry, because he didn’t have a coat,” Luke replied. “All he had to wear outside this winter was a hoodie.”

“You gave it to Barry?” Kathy repeated, dumb-founded.

“Yeah, Mom; it’s better to give than to receive, you know, and you should love your enemies,” Luke said matter-of-factly. “I can wear my old coat.”

Christmas came about two months late to Kathy that year, but Luke gave her a wonderful gift.

She knew that despite their problems, with a son like that they’d be just fine.