



THE HAPPY SQUIRE:

MORE

Christmas

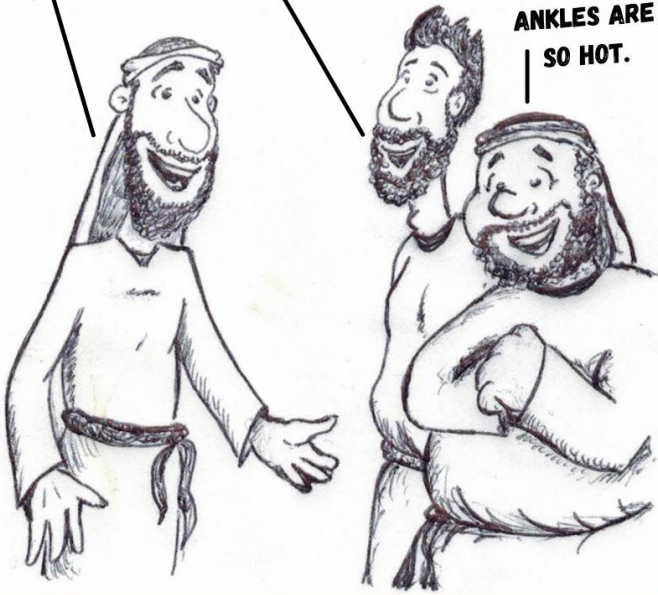
STORIES TO ENCOURAGE & INSPIRE



THE NEW FAD IS FOR BRIDES TO GAIN A LOT OF WEIGHT & LOOK PREGNANT BEFORE THE WEDDING.

THAT MAKES TOTAL SENSE.

MMM, PUFFY ANKLES ARE SO HOT.



Joseph quickly learns the benefits of having dumb friends.



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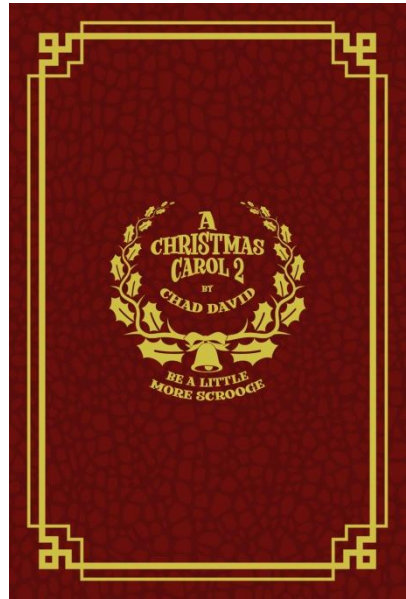
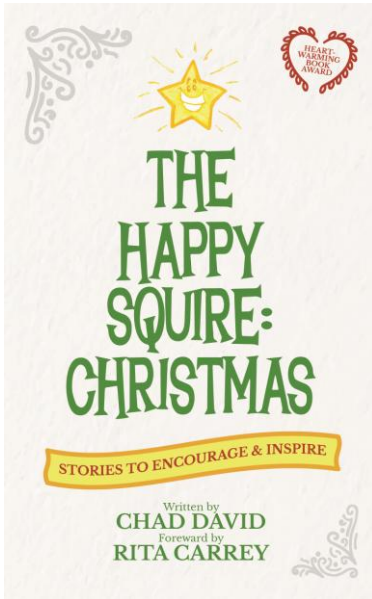
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Dedication

To my beautiful daughters, Gracie and Lucy.
Thank you for helping me rediscover my love of Christmas
through your joy.



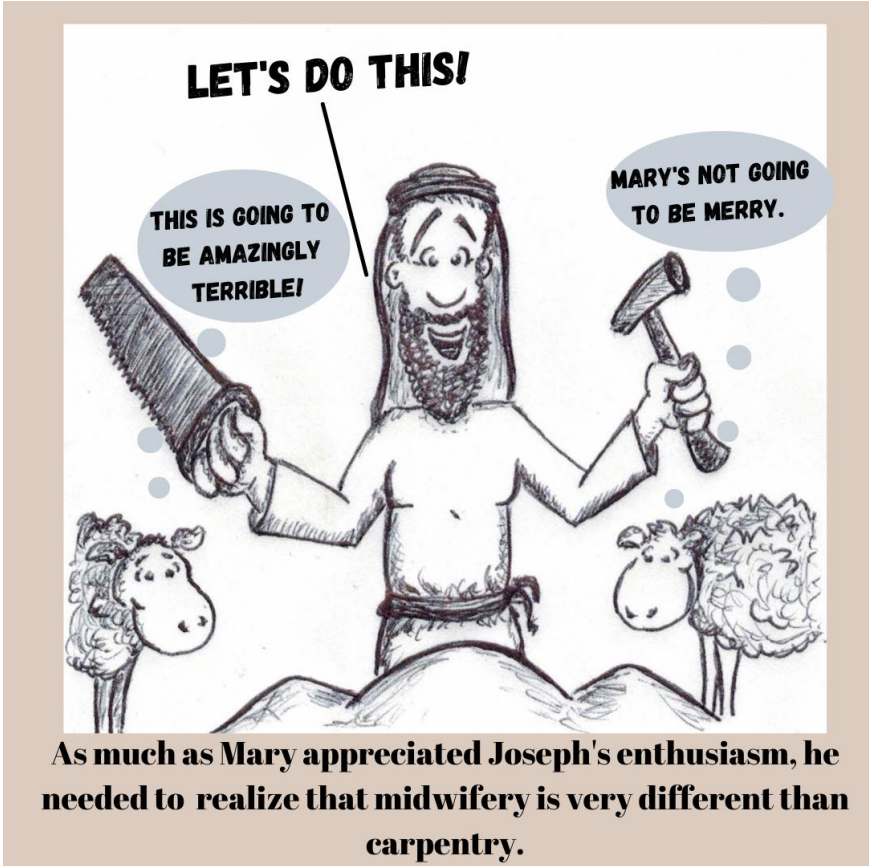


Contents

A) Forward (to be determined)	
B) The Stories	
1) Coalbert the Snowman	p17
2) Why Santa Doesn't Give Pets	p25
3) Jack the Donkey	p33
4) Stop Complaining!	p43
5) Be like 'Tiny' Tim	p51
6) King Herod's Terrible Command	p58
7) The Beautiful Ornament	p65
8) You Can Be Better	p76
9) A Little Christmas	p90
10) That's a Brilliant Question (Santa, God, & the Grinch)	p103
11) Being in the Christmas Mood	p111
12) Don't Underestimate Others	p120
13) The "Perfect" Christmas Party (The Stressed Woman, Pt. 3)	p129
14) Returning Gnome (The Importance of Being Nice, Pt. 2)	p146
15) What Happens to Old Christmas Trees	p179
C) Christmas lessons from my weekly blog	
1) The Danger for Well-Intentioned People	p189

2) How Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer Messed Me Up	p195
3) My Christmas Advice	p200
D) Blessing	p209







Author's Note about the Following Stories

(Yes, I have a lot of author's notes because yes, I like to ramble and make things all about me.)

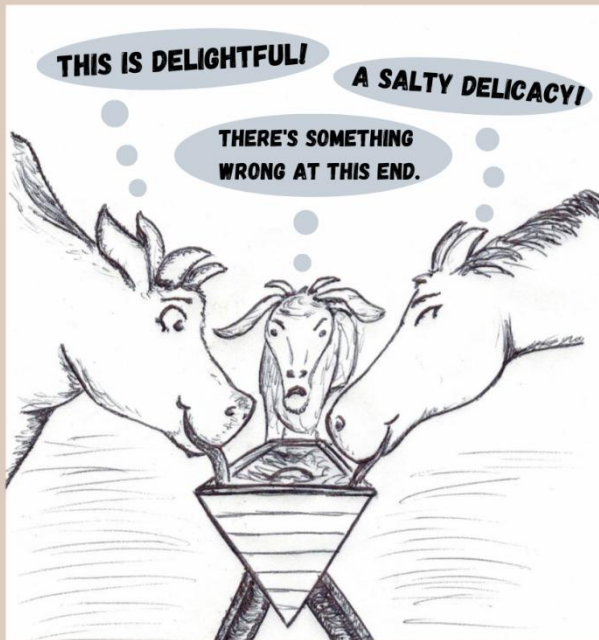
The following stories range in material and subject matter because they were written for various reasons and had different inspirations. For instance, some stories are more innocent in nature while others are more grown up because they were inspired by issues I saw as a therapist or they were lessons I needed to learn myself and remember. Because of this, I suggest you read any story first before sharing it with a small child (or uptight adult). My background is working with teenagers and adults, which means I really have no idea what ages will find my stories appropriate. Considering I had a two year old love the fire breathing dragon at Universal Studios while much older kids were scared, sometimes you really can't guess what will work and what won't. What I do promise is that I never use profanity or include erotic novel inspired moments... and I guess using the word "erotic" makes this section more grownup; my apologies for not warning you, but I trust you're strong enough to survive. The good news is if your child can handle this intro, they can handle anything else in this

book. Actually, the cartoons I included are far racier than anything in the stories, so if those are okay in your eyes, you're set for the rest of the book.

The important thing to remember is that all of these stories were written with love and completed because I had fun writing them. Not every story is my favorite, but every story has value (even if it is just to make the book longer). It's like a parent with their children – not all of them are your favorite (can I write that?), but they all have value; a statement that definitely makes this section edgier than the stories. I possibly even scarred a few people with that line: (reader) “I always thought my parents loved my sister more, but now it's confirmed... this author just ruined Christmas!”

My hope is that reading this book you will be entertained, maybe learn something, and, ultimately, feel a little more Christmas-y.





Mary quickly learned you shouldn't leave a newborn in a stable full of animals lying in a manger unattended.





Coalbert the Snowman

Coalbert was a sad snowman. He didn't want to be, but he was made with a frown, and how he felt was very much attached to his expression.

To make matters worse, he was given a handheld mirror to look in that constantly reminded him that he was sad. There was no escaping it. He wasn't sure why he was sad, but he was. He also found it confusing that he was given the mirror when he was a guy. His guess was the person who made him wanted a sneaky way to blind passersby because when the sun was at a certain spot, the light reflected off it and it blinded anyone nearby. It was clever and mean all at once. This was Coalbert's life. Frankly, he was glad he wouldn't live past the season because what was the point? Life was miserable.

One day, while Coalbert was sleeping, a bird landed on his stick arm and woke him up, which was upsetting. Coalbert wasn't upset the bird woke him. Instead, he was angry that he was awake in general. Every night he went to sleep, he hoped he would melt in the night. Instead, here he was alive and with a bird on his arm with who knows how many bugs and germs – birds aren't known for using antibacterial soap to get clean.

The bird felt bad for disturbing Coalbert... but he wasn't used to snowmen waking up... you know, let alone being alive. Coalbert may have been frowning, but the bird could tell there was something good in him. When the bird eventually let Coalbert get a few words in (he was a chatty bird), he learned that Coalbert was sad and didn't know what to do about it. This information made the bird happy, which surprised Coalbert and made him wonder how mean this bird was. The bird, however, explained how he loved a good challenge and he would help Coalbert figure out how to be happy. Although hesitant, Coalbert agreed to give the bird a chance. After all, he had nothing else to do... except blind people walking by, but he knew he didn't really like doing that.

The bird suggested that what Coalbert needed was a "thing." He explained a "thing" was something someone does that makes them happy because it's fun to do and gives them confidence. A "thing" is what you look forward to doing when the rest of life's responsibilities are done. Since Coalbert had zero responsibilities, he was like an old retired guy without a wife telling him what to do around the house. He was essentially living the dream for many

married men wanting freedom, which didn't make any sense to Coalbert because he was just bored. Coalbert didn't have a wife, but he had a chatty bird who was willing to tell him what to do, so that was the next best thing. It strangely gave him some hope. (There's a reason married men live longer – purpose helps... and so does someone forcing you to go the doctor.)

Since it was snowy out, the bird made a list of winter activities people find fun. He started small and took Coalbert to the local conservation area where they could rent snowshoes.

Unfortunately, snowshoes weren't really an option when you don't have feet. After the park attendant told them this, he kept looking for a video camera as he thought the whole thing was a joke, and someone was going to pop out and say a catchphrase like "You've been Merry Christmased."

Next, the bird took the snowman to the arena. Coalbert tried telling him this was pointless because he couldn't wear skates like the snowshoes, but the bird was a step ahead of him as he signed him up for sledge hockey. Using a sledge was perfect for the snowman... although he was terrible as most people are when they first try it. Coalbert was particularly bad with his little stick arms and sizeable everything else. He ended up just being in the way until the puck got lodged in his stomach. Not sure the rule on that, his team tried to push him into the net while the other team ended up piling on like two teams fighting for a fumbled football. Not only did Coalbert learn he hated playing sledge hockey, he also learned he hated playing football and anything that involved pile ups.

Even though the bird thought this was hilarious, when Coalbert looked in his mirror, he found that he was still frowning.

For the next attempt at finding Coalbert's "thing," the bird suggested they make something. Trying to be open-minded, Coalbert tried making a snow angel, but his imprint just looked like a snowman with giant pirate sleeves that covered his hands. The next thing they tried making was a fort, which went well until after it was built and they didn't know what to do next. Fortunately, some kids were passing by and the bird started a snowball fight. The downside was birds can't throw and when a snowman gets hit by a snowball it sticks to him. This made Coalbert get bigger and bigger, which in turn, made him an easier target and adding to him getting bigger faster. Eventually the kids left and Coalbert was enormous. The bird gently suggested they do some exercising because it helps people be a little happier (or at least lose a few pounds). Working out did not go well, but Coalbert quickly realized snowmen don't have to exercise to lose weight; they just carve off whatever they want off. He gave himself a six-pack and an impressive physique (minus the stick arms), but when he looked in the mirror he was still frowning.

The bird decided to step things up and suggested the biathlon – the most random winter sport. Unfortunately the guy at the store wouldn't give Coalbert a gun without ID. The guy assumed Coalbert was someone in a snowman suit and you never give someone dressed like a mascot a loaded firearm. They were, however, able to borrow a toboggan. It started fun, but going

down the hill was so fast Coalbert couldn't hold onto his head – that was a problem. Then after reattaching it, Coalbert couldn't get back up the hill without help (his fake muscles did nothing), which cut their tobogganing experience short. After getting a ride on the sled behind a snowmobile – an arguably more enjoyable experience than anything else he had tried - Coalbert looked in the mirror and he was still frowning.

Even now, the bird didn't give up as he wasn't out of ideas yet. This time he was able to get Coalbert to a spot that had dog sledding. The bird figured this was brilliant because who doesn't love dogs? Turns out, Coalbert. His distaste for dogs was understandable, however, considering the dogs treated him like a fire hydrant. After that, Coalbert didn't even bother checking his mirror; he knew what his expression was going to be.

Undaunted, the bird brought Coalbert to a coffee shop. When Coalbert was sitting there with a drink, he asked why this was fun. The bird confessed he didn't know, but people loved to do it, so he figured it was a good time – he was wrong. Coalbert didn't mind the taste of his hot cider (he chose cider since the coffee smelled gross largely because coffee is gross). What he did mind was how drinking a hot beverage caused him to have a little puddle form at his feet. The person who had given him a mirror to blind people would have loved it because people kept slipping in his puddle. It would've been hilarious to him, too if he was an observer. Instead, Coalbert was embarrassed, especially since people thought he had

an “accident” and eventually a staff member politely asked him to leave as he begrudgingly mopped up the mess.

Walking away from the coffee shop, the bird led Coalbert to a street full of houses where he got to meet a bunch of different snowmen and snowwomen that had been recently made, but they weren’t alive. It was like there was something magic in the mirror he held that helped him come alive... and be miserable.

After a short break, the bird took Coalbert to a dance club because people love to dance. Coalbert stayed away from the hot beverages, but it didn’t matter because it was so hot in the room that he kept melting and leaving puddles everywhere that caused more people to slip. At one point, the puddle he made tripped a couple people who in turn tripped another couple people who tripped another couple people until there was a giant pile of fallen people. Coalbert quickly moved away before he could be accused of having an accident.

On the plus side, no one at the club was fazed by Coalbert being there. Even though he was a walking and talking snowman, people were okay with it. It was as if everyone thought he was in an elaborate cosplay outfit or they were too drunk to care. That being said, if one more person said to him, “*Cool* costume!” and then laughed like they were clever, he would stuff their mouths with the yellow snow he was still carrying from the dogs.

After the dance club flop, Coalbert told the bird he was done trying. He clearly wasn’t going to be happy no matter what he did;

a statement that after saying left him even sadder than before. Suddenly, the bird looked at him like he had a stroke of genius. Coalbert repeated he was done trying to do anything else the bird suggested, but this time the bird said he wanted Coalbert to do nothing; just hold still. The bird slowly got closer to Coalbert like he was trying to create this dramatic moment, and then one by one the bird moved the stones that were used to make Coalbert's frown into a smile. As the bird flitted back, he asked Coalbert to look at himself in the mirror again. Coalbert didn't want to do it because he was tired of the mirror leading to disappointment, but when the bird continued to urge him, he relented.

Lifting the mirror up, Coalbert didn't feel any different, but then he saw that he was smiling. It surprised him... in a good way.

Coalbert took a moment to stare at himself. He'd never seen himself smile before... and he liked it. He even touched his face with his free hand as if he was trying to make sure it was real.

Coalbert started to feel something different. The bird told him that sometimes you need to feel happy to smile while other times you need to smile to feel happy. Seeing the smile helped Coalbert feel happy and the more he felt happy, the bigger his smile naturally became.

Encouraged by Coalbert's smile, the bird started making jokes about how funny it was seeing people slipping when Coalbert was drinking the cider in the shop and making puddles in the club.

Unlike before, Coalbert actually laughed. In the moment it wasn't a good experience, but afterwards, Coalbert couldn't help but find it

hilarious. Coalbert and the bird joked about everything they encountered that day from people thinking he was a human wearing a costume to the guy who wouldn't sell him a gun because he thought he was a mascot to all the people who fell. Coalbert couldn't believe how much fun he was having. After the joking subsided, Coalbert said that he now understood the importance of doing things even if they don't feel fun at the time. You don't do things because they "feel" fun; you do them because you need to experience life. The really fun part comes after when you get to joke about it with friends. Coalbert thanked the bird for not giving up on him. Most of all, he thanked the bird for helping him smile and then joking about all the crazy things that happened.

The bird then confessed that he really didn't know what made anyone happy. In fact, he had been really lonely before he met Coalbert. The bird had originally offered to help because he wanted a friend. Each time he pushed Coalbert to try something new, it was mostly because he didn't want their time to end. The bird admitted he had never been happier. For the first time, both of them had found what helped them feel happy – someone with whom to experience life. The bird may have changed Coalbert's expression, but Coalbert changed the bird's life. In that moment, the two friends learned that when we take the time to care about others and push ourselves to try new things, we create memories and connection. In the end, as we live, we come alive.

The end.





Why Santa Doesn't Give Pets

The problem with dogs is they never live long enough. That was the lesson, Jimmy learned the month before Christmas. Normally he loved this time of year, but nothing was able to help him get over losing his best friend, Charlie. Charlie had been there since he was born and now that Jimmy was seven, this was the first time he had ever faced the world without his trusted companion. All month he had secretly begged Santa in letters, emails, and prayers that he would wake up Christmas morning to find a new Charlie. Ideally he would look and act like his former pet with all the training already done, but Jimmy understood if that wasn't possible. He knew Santa was good, but he had his limits.

Jimmy always loved Christmas Eve. There was something special about going to a church service with his family where they sang carols and said Merry Christmas to friends. This year, however, was hard for him to really engage in the festivities because in the back of his mind he had doubt that tomorrow would bring him what he truly wished for that Christmas. During the pastor's short holiday message, he taught the importance of having faith and that all things were possible if you believe without any doubt. Jimmy did his best to convince himself that he fully believed without any doubt... but he had a fear that he did, which he wasn't sure was the same or not.

Christmas morning, Jimmy didn't give up hope when he got up and ran to the tree to find there wasn't anyone there ready to jump on him and lick his face. His older brother was there and he would've happily jumped on Jimmy to give him a noogie, but that's not the same. Jimmy didn't give up hope when there weren't any ornaments knocked on the ground by a happy tail. He didn't even give up hope when there wasn't any barking because he told himself that his parents were hiding the new Charlie in another room with a muzzle for a big reveal moment at the end of the gift exchange like Santa had instructed them.

Soon all the gifts were open and Jimmy's parents were in the kitchen getting brunch together because the gift giving portion of the day was over... and there still wasn't a dog. Jimmy's hope was replaced by deep sadness. It was almost like losing Charlie all over again.

Jimmy knew his parents loved Christmas as much as he did, so he tried his best to act normal that afternoon, but while his family was distracted, he went to his room, curled up in his bed, and cried. He was too young to self reflect over what had really upset him whether it was not having Charlie there, Santa not bringing him a new dog, or the new fear that his disbelief caused him to miss out on getting a new dog. Fortunately, he was at least smart enough to let himself have his emotions (something many grownups struggle to do).

Eventually, Jimmy put on a happy face (or an as-happy-as-he-could-muster face) and he went with his family to dinner at his grandmother's house. Part of him hoped the new Charlie would be there, but why would Santa bring him his gift to the wrong house? As he suspected, Santa hadn't, and despite everything in the night being pleasant, it was like a light torture for Jimmy who continued to act like he was happy when he just wanted to cry.

At the end of the night, when everyone was getting ready for bed, Jimmy's mom came into his room and asked, "Is everything okay?"

Jimmy sighed the typical response, "I'm fine."

"You didn't quite seem like yourself tonight," pushed his mom.

"I don't know," replied Jimmy like a teenager trying to avoid an engaging conversation with his parent. He may have been seven, but this response is pretty universal for people who are trying to avoid getting into anything serious.

“My mommy-senses are telling me you have something you need to share,” remarked his mom.

After a short pause, Jimmy blurted, “I asked Santa for a new Charlie and I didn’t get one!”

“Oh,” said a surprised mom. “I didn’t know you asked Santa for a dog.”

“I sent private messages to him,” confessed Jimmy. “I was afraid you would tell Santa it was a bad idea... is that what happened? Did you find out that’s what I wanted and then you told Santa not to bring me a new Charlie?” Jimmy’s tone sounded hopeful because that would cause everything to make sense.

“I’m sorry; that’s not what happened,” confessed his mom. “I’m sure there’s a very good reason though. Santa always has a good reason.”

“Last night the pastor said if we believe without any doubt we will get what we ask for from God. I tried not to have doubt... I think I was able to not have any doubt... is God mad that I asked Santa for a new pet and not Him?”

“I’m pretty sure God doesn’t get jealous of Santa. I hear they like to work together. Although there’s a chance they fight over who has the better white beard,” joked his mom. Charlie kind of smiled at that, but he was too sad to really appreciate her joke. “I didn’t know you wanted a new Charlie. I thought you were still too sad, and that you didn’t want to replace him so soon.”

“It’s the only thing that’s helped get me through losing him – the idea of not being alone anymore,” shared Jimmy as he started to tear up. And with that, his mom’s mommy instincts kicked in as she started hugging him. She held him tight while they both let tears fall down their cheeks. It was one of those sad, but incredibly tender moments.

The next morning Jimmy’s mom woke him up and cheerfully announced, “I have a surprise for you. Get ready because we’re going out!”

When they got in the car, Jimmy’s mom put a scarf over his eyes and told him to keep it on until she said to take it off. Jimmy could see out the bottom of the scarf – like you always can – but even when he lifted his head to see out the window, he couldn’t figure out where they were going.

When they came to a stop, Jimmy’s mom helped him get out of the car and maneuvered him to be standing in a particular spot. After taking a deep breath, she told Jimmy to take off the blindfold. He looked up and saw a sign. Reading it aloud, he questioned, “SPCA? We’re at an animal shelter?”

“We are here to find you a pet,” beamed his mom... at least she beamed for a second. Jimmy’s reaction was not what she had expected as he remained downcast. “What is it? I thought you wanted a new dog.”

“I do, but why didn’t Santa bring me one? Was I not good enough? Did I do something wrong?” questioned Jimmy.

“Right... that,” his mom nodded. “Well, this morning I double checked under the tree and I found this letter. It somehow got tucked under the tree skirt, so we didn’t see it.”

Jimmy reached up and took the letter whispering, “Thank you,” like he was taught. Very carefully he opened it. A letter from Santa was a big deal, so he wanted to treasure it... that, and he was afraid of there being bad news in it. Because of the latter, he read the letter to himself. He wanted to filter anything out in case any of his secret indiscretions were mentioned like sneaking a cookie before dinner.

“Dear Jimmy, I’m very sorry you recently lost your best friend. I’m very old, so I’ve lost quite a few best friends myself over the years, and it’s always very difficult. I completely understand why you’d want another dog, but unfortunately, I learned a long time ago that I can’t give living animals as gifts. Please know this has nothing to do with you. Instead, it’s more about the animals. You see, they are terrible to transport. Some dogs don’t like other dogs and cats are... well, cats. The fighting and playing made the sleigh ride very difficult, and the noise made it hard for me to quietly go from house to house. Plus, dogs might love sticking their head out of the window of a car, but flying on the sleigh really freaked them out, and the cats... well, they’re cats. I got a lot of scratches. Plus, motion sickness was definitely a major oversight on my part. Let’s just say Mrs. Claus was not happy on laundry day after that one Christmas. The bigger problem, however, was many parents were not happy with me. A live animal is a big responsibility and has a

lot of costs that many parents aren't ready to take on. To make life easier for everyone, I needed to make it a universal policy not to give pets. I'm sure you can understand that an angry mommy is very scary, so I take them into careful consideration (for my own safety). I really wish I could help you, especially when you're so sad, but I can't do this thing you've asked because of how it would affect others. Hopefully, your parents will be able to help you with your wish, especially because it's better that you pick out your own best friend. Merry Christmas from someone who cares about you – Santa. PS If your parents won't let you get a new dog, I will make sure they get coal in their stocking next year.”

“What does it say?” asked Jimmy’s mom.

“Santa said he’s sorry, and even though he wants to help me feel better, he can’t give me a pet,” replied Jimmy who seemed to be digesting what he just read. “He also said mommies are scary.”

“He sounds like a very wise man,” smirked his dad to which Jimmy’s mom gave him a joking elbow poke.

“So it had nothing to do with you? That’s good news,” stated his mom. “It’s not like you had feared. So... shall we go in and find you a new best friend?”

Jimmy looked down at the letter and paused. His parents looked at each other wondering what the next move was because they were out of ideas of how to make it better. Suddenly, Jimmy bolted toward the shelter and threw the door wide open as he ran inside. He was about to get his Christmas wish, and it was even better than

getting a dog under the Christmas tree. He got to choose his new best friend, which is the way it should be. Not only that, he also felt privileged that Santa gave his own personalized letter to show he cared and understood Jimmy's pain. He didn't get to read the letter on Christmas Day, but it felt just as magical. And like it so often happens, out of something terrible, something wonderful was born... and adopted.

The end.





Jack the Donkey: You Have Value

“I need a very special animal for a very special mission,” announced an excited yet nervous man who just entered the stable.

All the animals were excited at the idea of being chosen for a special mission... all of the animals except Jack. Jack was an older donkey who had resigned to the idea that his value was basically gone because of his age, and there wouldn't be any more great adventures for him. After all, for the last several years he had been kept as more of a last resort than a preferred option. Even the other animals looked at him as washed up. Donkeys were normally used as protection for a herd because they're territorial, and unlike horses that typically runaway from danger, donkeys stand their ground. They've been known to

grab dangerous animals with their teeth and then stomp them to death with their front hooves. Donkeys may appear docile, but don't mistake quiet confidence with weakness. They are like the secret service of the animal world, but without the sunglasses.

Even though Jack was still able to be a protector, there were other younger, more eager donkeys in that stable that were always chosen while he was brushed aside. That being said, in that stable, Jack was every animal's favorite... for mocking. At times, it seemed like his only role was to be the butt of their jokes. A donkey being the "butt" of their jokes was their favorite joke. (Animals love their word play... donkey and bum share a common word if you're wondering what I'm referring to.) There was a time and place when those who were older were held in high esteem, but not in this stable. The younger animals saw themselves as superior with their youthful ideas, energy, and strength. They dismissed the value of experience and stubborn grit that can come with age. Jack was seen as the weak, old donkey and because of how he was treated, he naturally believed what they said as he became guarded and distant. Why would he let anyone in if they were just going to make fun of him? Jack's life basically consisted of doing his best to be in the background and to avoid drawing attention to himself. That's why when this man made his announcement, Jack quietly retreated into the corner while all the others pushed toward the man wanting to be chosen. While Jack was silent, the others started calling out.

“I’m the fastest!” bragged a horse.

“I’m the strongest!” exclaimed a young donkey.

“I’m the nimblest,” bragged a large goat.

“I’m the tastiest,” shouted a chicken.

“That’s probably not the quality you should be selling,” suggested a cow.

“I can provide breakfast,” tried the chicken again.

“That makes more sense,” the cow agreed.

“On long journeys I’m the best because I have a hump to hold,” announced a camel.

“I have two humps,” arrogantly laughed a second camel.

“I have three humps,” screamed a third camel.

“You should probably get that checked out by a doctor, Alice,” commented the first camel. “So go, Alice, go.”

“You’re probably right,” she agreed.

Of course, the excited yet nervous man didn’t understand any of this. He just heard animal noises: nay, hee-haw, ehnn, cluck, moo, and razzle-dazzle (or whatever noise a camel makes). That being said, he could tell they were excited and wanting his attention.

After looking around the stable and what looked like thinking hard (he had his tongue sticking out, which is the sign of a genius deep in thought), he announced, “I think my choice is pretty clear.” All

of the animals held their breath in anticipation... all of the animals except Jack who gingerly chewed on some hay. "I'm going to go with the donkey."

"I knew it!" called out the young donkey. "I'm amazing!"

When the man started walking toward his choice, however, he was walking in the wrong direction of the young donkey. All of the animals were confused. Where was he going? Maybe he was getting a feedbag or a rope to lead the young donkey. Nope, he was going to the back corner, and the only thing back there was... Jack. Suddenly, the confusion jumped up to a whole new level.

"Why is this guy going to Jack?" asked the younger donkey.

"Maybe he wants to make fun of him," suggested the horse.

"That's always fun."

The man stood in front of Jack. "What do you say big guy?"

Jack just kept eating lost in his own little world of distraction.

"Maybe he's playing a joke?" suggested the camel with one hump.

"Maybe he likes the smell of near dead," laughed the large goat.

Assuming the old donkey didn't hear him, the man gently put his hand on Jack. "You're about to go on a great adventure." Without moving his head, Jack looked at the man with a face that screamed, "I couldn't trust this situation any less if I tried." The man attempted to smile and be motivational as he put a harness on Jack and led him out of the barn.

“He’s seriously picking Jack?” questioned the horse.

“This guy is an idiot,” announced the younger donkey.

“That’s not very nice,” corrected the cow, which was more out of habit than concern for Jack.

“The guy can’t understand us anyway,” pointed out the younger donkey.

“But Jack can,” acknowledged the cow who suddenly burst into laughter because she knew no one cared about Jack’s feelings.

As the cow laughed, one of the goats called out, “Hey everyone, this means Jack’s going to be gone. We won’t have to see him for awhile!” which led to all of the animals cheering.

As the man and Jack stepped out of the stable, the man praised Jack, “They must really love you. It’s like they’re cheering for you being picked for the big mission.” As the man smiled in confidence, Jack shook his head and trudged on wondering what was wrong with this guy or if the great adventure included a meal with donkey on the menu.

Jack had been on many big adventures in his lifetime and there wasn’t anything that could surprise him. He didn’t feel any real emotion about the trip minus an underlying fear that this guy was going to mess him over in some way. As the other animals point out, why would this guy choose him? Maybe there was a discount or the owner tricked the guy into choosing him to get rid of him?

Either way, something in Jack told him that he would never be the same after this trip.

The man stopped just outside of the stable to prepare Jack for the trip. While he was strapping on a saddle and saddle bags, he started saying that Jack would be carrying his pregnant partner for a long journey to Bethlehem. Jack noted the word “partner” and was surprised he didn’t say “wife.”

One of the animals near the door heard this and announced it to the group, which led to an even larger commotion as they all started laughing hysterically over this “big adventure.”

“He has to carry a pregnant woman! That’ll be fun. She won’t complain at all,” laughed the cow.

“I hear pregnant women can be moody,” announced the younger donkey.

“I hear pregnant women can be mean,” exclaimed the horse.

“I hear pregnant women have bad gas,” stated the camel with three humps.

“You have bad gas,” pointed out the camel with one hump. “You should probably get that looked at, too.”

While the animals were laughing at Jack, he somberly took it as he tried to convince himself that at least this journey took him away from those other animals. Even if this was some type of trick, it couldn’t be worse than living in that emotional torment.

Sometimes you just need to leave a bad situation even if the other option isn't that appealing. At least it'll be a change.

Soon Jack was introduced to the man's partner and she was definitely expecting. She looked about ready-to-give-birth kind of expecting, which wasn't overly reassuring to Jack. He'd seen humans give birth before – he really had seen a lot – and human births were nasty. Even worse, if she gave birth while in the middle of the journey, that would greatly complicate things and put them all at risk. Either way, Jack knew his role: do his best to get the woman to Bethlehem as steady and comfortably as possible. If he did anything that scared her or if he bounced her too much, she was at risk of giving birth sooner than they wanted because she was in such a delicate state. He couldn't afford to be careless and he needed to be on watch for anything that could cause him to stumble or be surprised. Suddenly, Jack began to feel pressure to be at his best... and hopefully his best was good enough.

Fortunately, this new focus distracted him from most of his own insecurities and self doubt.

The group walked for about seven days starting with the flatlands of the Jordan River and then over the hills surrounding Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem. While the wolves howled, while the bears and mountain lions roared, and while thunder crashed, Jack continued to be steady. When the roads were wet and slippery, he continued to be steady. When the journey became long and tedious, he continued to be steady. Nothing caused him to waiver from his purpose. As the journey continued, Jack seemed to regain

his old confidence, and as he walked a little taller and held his head a little higher, his better posture continued to add to his strength and stability.

When the three (almost four) travelers arrived in Bethlehem, the couple was exhausted yet excited to have arrived. They were especially excited because they made it to town without incident and now they were in a much better spot for the woman if she needed anything. Unfortunately, something weird must have been going on because the couple was staying in the stable with Jack and the other travel animals used to get to Bethlehem. Jack wasn't sure why the couple was with him, but they certainly weren't very happy about it – as one would expect. The animals weren't thrilled about it either. They liked to have their own space away from people when they weren't working. They did their best to ignore the couple as they chatted about where they were from and what happened on the journey. Jack didn't say anything for fear they would turn on him the way the animals at home did. He might not get to share in the kibitzing, but at least he wasn't the butt of the jokes for a change.

While Jack was eating some hay, the man came up beside him and started talking, "I'm sorry we have to crash in your room. I'm guessing you're not happy having us here." If Jack were honest, he'd have to admit it was unusual, but it was kind of nice having them there. He had grown to trust the couple and he was no longer waiting for some trick to happen. He could now enjoy the companionship. The man continued, "Can I confess something to

you?” Unlike the first time they met, Jack stopped eating and raised his head to look up at the man. Surprised by the donkey’s response because it was like he understood what he said, the man continued, “I have been terrified the entire time you’ve known me. I was given this... job, but I never wanted it. I don’t know why I was chosen. This whole time I’ve been thinking, ‘Why me?’ I doubt you know what I mean because you’re so strong, but man, this has been a struggle for me. When I first saw you, I was intrigued because you weren’t like the other animals who wanted attention. You were fine without it. You didn’t need to prove anything or feel special. You were just you in the back avoiding the commotion. When I took a closer look, something told me you were the one. The crazy thing is I haven’t been sure about anything for months... until you. When I went to the stable, I knew I needed an animal with experience and wisdom, and you’ve been perfect. To be honest, I feel better when you’re around... I know it’s foolish like me talking to you now... but with you, I feel stronger. In fact, part of me is glad I’m in the stable so I can be near you.

“Uh, Joseph,” Mary called, “We have a situation... It’s starting!”

Not sure what to do, Joseph started to panic. “Oh my goodness, this is it... what do I do first? I don’t even have a place for the baby when he comes out to sleep. How can I not have a place for the baby to sleep?” As the man was visibly freaking out wandering the stable talking to himself, he felt a nudge on his leg. He looked down and Jack was looking up at him. Jack nudged him again

before turning his head and nudging the manger. Joseph was confused, but it was like the donkey was trying to tell him something. Joseph looked at the manger and it was full of hay, so the donkey didn't want more food... Suddenly, the man paused and said, "That's perfect! The baby will fit in there. Mary, I have a place for the baby to sleep!" As quickly as Joseph had started to panic, he was back to feeling stronger and in charge. Before running over to Mary, he paused, bent over, and hugged the old donkey whispering, "You were the blessing I needed. I don't know what I would've done without you." And as the man scurried over to his struggling partner, the old donkey who had once thought he had seen everything just witnessed something new – someone who cared about him. He also got to feel something he hadn't felt in a long time – value. The other animals from the stable were wrong. He wasn't so old that he was useless. In fact, his experience made him all the more valuable.

The problem for Jack wasn't that he was old or useless. The problem was he believed he was. Until he was given a chance, he hadn't realized how capable he still was. The only thing his experience hadn't taught him was how important it is to have someone to care for and to be cared for in return. Now that he had this, his life was better, and he knew he could handle whatever came next... even dealing with a baby born in a stable.

The end.





Stop Complaining!

““**W**ould you pleeeaaasssse stop complaining!” shouted the plush snowman whose patience was clearly exhausted. “Every year it’s the same thing. As soon as you’re out of storage, you’re whining about how hard life is for you. It’s killing me!”

“You don’t get it. Being a snow globe is the worst!” exclaimed the snow globe. “People are constantly putting their grubby hands on me. I don’t know where those hands have been, but I do know that most people don’t wash their hands after going to the bathroom. I’m like cootie central.”

“I wish people would touch me,” retorted the snowman. “I dream of one day being hugged and loved by someone.”

“Yeah, well, do you have any idea what it’s like to be constantly shaken up and have everything inside you go into chaos? I want

organization, structure. Keep it tidy, and keep it clean, people!” shouted the angry snow globe.

“That’s nothing. Do you know what it’s like being a stuffed snowman? My very existence is a lie. I may be a man, but I’m not made of snow. I’m a plush toy. I’m a fluffy, flimsy plush-man. I sound like a reject, wannabe super-hero: ‘I’m Plushman, here to do absolutely nothing for you,’” sarcastically droned the snowman.

“On top of this, I hate snow. It’s cold and wet; it’s very uncomfortable. I hate the very thing I’m supposed to be made of.”

“Well, I’m not made of snow either, but at least you’re white like snow. I don’t even have fake painted snow on me. How am I a ‘snow’ globe when I don’t have snow on me?” the snow globe retaliated. “Plus, I’m not a ‘globe.’ I don’t spin or even have an image of the Earth on me. At least one of your titles is true; you’re a man... kind of.”

“At least you don’t have to hold a stupid sign,” retorted the snowman holding up the sign he had stitched to his hands.

“‘There’s *snow* better day for joy than today.’ My sign even has a spelling mistake in it. How did the editors not catch ‘snow’? It’s ‘no!’”

“Um, it’s says ‘snow’ because it’s a pun,” smirked the snow globe. “Did you not realize that?”

“Seriously? I’m a pun? So I’m not dumb; I’m a dork?” complained the snowman.

“I’d say you’re both... and you just proved you are a man,” the snow globe said smiling to herself.

“Excuse me,” interrupted the angel on top of the Christmas tree. “I couldn’t help but overhear your very loud conversation. Can I ask you a couple questions?”

Both the snowman and snow globe were happy to let the angel speak because, being one of the oldest ornaments, all of the Christmas decorations saw him as wise.

“Out of curiosity, who do you think has it worse?” asked the angel.

“I do,” replied the snowman with confidence.

“Snow, I do,” corrected the snow globe smiling to herself again.

The snowman was about to say something mean to the snow globe for her jab when the angel interrupted by asking, “Okay, so let me get this right. You two are competing over who has it worse?” asked the angel. They both nodded. “So you two are essentially fighting over who’s the bigger loser because that’s apparently a title you both want? That seems strange to me because I’d rather be the winner of who has it better.”

“Well, you haven’t suffered the way we have,” defended the snowman.

“Potentially,” conceded the angel, “but while you both think you have it so terrible, is it possible that you both don’t realize how good you actually have it?”

“No,” replied the snowman.

“Snow,” the snow globe quipped while the snowman gave her a dirty look.

“Can I try to prove that wrong?” enquired the angel.

“By all means,” answered the snowman smiling to himself now because he figured he was about to prove the so-called wise angel wrong.

“Let’s begin with Mr. Snowman,” began the angel. “Take a look over there where the dog sleeps. What do you see?”

“I see a bunch of plush toys,” answered the snowman.

“And what kind of condition are they in?” asked the angel.

The snowman hadn’t really paid attention to them before and now looked at them with interest for the first time. After a quick moment, he replied, “They are pretty ripped up or full-on dismembered.”

“Not a good look is it?” smiled the angel. The snowman gave a face that showed he agreed. “You may not get hugged, but you’re also not getting drooled on, ripped apart, chewed up, and then thrown out. You get to stay in pristine condition and be admired by everyone who sees you. Every plush toy I’ve seen that wasn’t a special Christmas decoration ended up the dog’s, which is the highway to the garbage. And that sign you hate is a major reason you don’t end up the dog’s because our owners think cheesy

sayings are adorable, which is why they like showing you off. That's got to be pretty incredible to be so well loved."

The snowman started smiling and responded, "That's snow true," catching on to the "snow" pun. "I guess I am pretty wonderful."

"You're still dorky," whispered the snow globe to herself, "and dumb."

"I guess I am better than the snow globe," smiled the snowman, which bothered the snow globe who didn't appear to want to have it the worst anymore.

"Don't be too quick to judge," encouraged the angel. "She has her own story." The snow globe was starting to look excited to hear what the angel would say about her as she no longer cared about being able to complain. "Ms. Snow Globe, please take a look in that mirror behind you." The snow globe quickly did as she was told hoping to hear something encouraging. "Now give yourself a little shake." Hesitantly, the snow globe began to shake, which caused all her insides to twirl around. "You said it was chaos when you were shaken. I would say that's fairly accurate; there is chaos happening in your glass section, but often it's the chaos that makes life beautiful. You remind people that when things are shaken up, it can be messy, but it can also be wonderful. Life is good when it's calm, but it sparkles when things are shaken up." A smile started to grow on the snow globe's face as the angel continued. "You also remind people that no matter how chaotic it gets, it will always

return to calm. We need to enjoy both times – the crazy and the calm.”

“Whoa...” said the snow globe stunned by what she just heard.

“That’s deep.”

“You really are an angel,” commented the snowman.

“Yes,” smiled the angel in agreement, “I really am.”

“So what you’re saying is that I’m better than the snowman,” stated the snow globe as the snowman gave a disapproving face.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” corrected the angel. “You both have it really good; it’s just different. So often we get competitive over how good or bad we have it, and we miss that there is good and bad in all situations. Sometimes a situation isn’t as good as it could be and we need to do some changes to make the situation better while other times we just need to change our perspective. You both complained so much because you were stuck only seeing the negative and you needed help to see the positive.”

“That’s so true,” stated the snow globe.

“Yeah, I only saw the negative like having to listen to her complain,” shared the snowman as the snow globe looked annoyed.

“Perspective is very important,” stated the angel. “What’s funny is you both complained you had it worse when clearly... I do. Sure there are perks to being an angel at the top of the tree like I get to literally look down on everyone, and that’s kind of fun, but at the

same time, anyone who sees me thinks I'm a girl because my outfit looks like a dress, but angels are dudes. Michael, Gabriel – dudes. Angel of death? Questionable.” The angel took a moment to smile at his self-perceived cleverness, and then added, “But the worst thing is the way I'm placed on the tree because it looks like I'm pooping out a decorated tree.”

At first, both the snowman and snow globe wanted to correct the angel for being negative and complaining... but then they paused. They took a good look at the angel as if they were studying him at the top of the tree. Suddenly, they both started laughing hysterically.

“I never thought of that before, but now that's all I can see,” laughed the snowman. “That's one crappy tree.”

“You must be tired,” started the snow globe. “You look pooped.”

“Okay, and that's enough of that,” the angel said with annoyance in his voice.

“I wonder if Pepto-Bismal can help with that,” laughed the snow globe. “Nausea, heartburn, indigestion, upset stomach, pooping out trees... not quite the same ring.”

“Very funny,” groaned the angel.

“Good thing you're wearing a dress,” laughed the snowman. “You were prepared for the occasion.”

“Maybe he was wearing pants, but the tree ripped through the pants and it made it look like a dress,” added the snow globe.

“It’s going to be a very long Christmas season,” sighed the angel.

The end.





Be Like Tiny Tim

Like every Christmas Eve before, the whole family had gathered to watch one of the many versions of *The Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Everyone was there including the usual handful of aunts, uncles, and cousins who always slept over that night. Everyone was in the living room having fun except Jordan. While everyone was celebrating Christmas Eve, Jordan was in his room playing video games like he did all day every day. He didn't even get out of his room to say hi to anyone, and if they tried saying hi to him, he would mumble something that didn't sound at all welcoming. Jordan was in his early twenties and had a rare disease that meant it was unlikely he would see his thirtieth birthday. In a way, he was like Tiny Tim except no matter how much money someone had to give

to help him, nothing would change his physical situation. Jordan's body was slowly shutting down. He was confined to a motorized wheelchair and it would only get worse for him as death approached. Clearly, just like Tiny Tim, he was going through something terrible. The main difference between them, however, was Jordan was... well, a jerk. The best word to describe him was curmudgeon because he was very... curmudgeony (if that was a word). Jordan was never appreciative of the help he was given or offered any encouragement for his caregivers. Instead, he resented any help he was shown even though he'd be lost without it.

As the evening moved on and everyone was enjoying *The Muppets Christmas Carol* (the best version of *The Christmas Carol*), during the part of the movie when Tiny Tim sings the heartwarming song, "Bless Us All," Jordan wheeled into the living room area and screamed, "Turn that crap off!" He was definitely not Tiny Tim.

Jordan's dad quickly turned off the movie and the room went deathly quiet... until the one cousin's long time boyfriend, Tom, stood up and gently said, "I'm sorry the movie bothers you." Jordan's angry face remained unchanged as Tom continued. "You know Jordan, I've been watching you for a few years now and your situation really sucks. I can't imagine being in your position. I think it's really important that I say that. I also think it's important that I say this." While Tom paused, everyone prepared for a heartwarming Christmas moment. "You've had a tough life, but you're making it worse because you're a jerk. You're the meanest person I've ever met." That was definitely not the heartwarming

moment people expected. It was actually the total opposite of what they thought he would say. Tom continued, “There’s no kindness or warmth to you. Instead, you’re so full of hate and anger you make it hard to want to be near you let alone help you. I’m tired of everyone letting you be so terrible because they feel sorry for you. You can be so much more than this. You could be such an inspiration to people. You could be like Tiny Tim, but you’re settling for being Scrooge. I believe in you. I believe you can be more than this, and I hope you’re willing to be.” The family was aghast. The room was eerily silent before, but it somehow managed to be even more silent now... if that was even possible.

After a pause for shock, Tom’s girlfriend suddenly broke the silence shouting, “Tom!”

Very casually Tom responded, “Yes.” Because he was so casual and not defensive, his girlfriend didn’t know what to say next. He clearly wasn’t speaking in anger. It came from something almost like kindness.

Everyone stared at Tom like they were in a trance until they heard Jordan’s bedroom door slam. At that point, Jordan’s parents snapped out of their stupor and started yelling at Tom. When they took a break from attacking him, Tom asked them in a tone that was unapologetic but warm, “Just so I understand, are you angry at me for saying the long hidden truth or are you angry that you weren’t the ones to say it?” Embarrassed by the frankness even though it was true, Jordan’s parents started yelling at him again because they didn’t know what else to do. What do you do when a

problem that's been swept under the carpet for years is revealed? When the next break in the yelling came, Tom calmly asked, "I'm curious what you think: Is it better to be honest at the risk of hurting someone's feelings or to bottle up the hurt and let it build resentment making it a struggle to love them?" Jordan's parents prepared to start yelling again, but Tom continued, "You've been emotionally abused for as long as I've known you and I care about you and Jordan too much to let that continue without saying something. I'm going to head to bed and will be happy to talk about this in the morning or I can go back to pretending nothing's wrong if that's what you'd prefer. Right now, I need to let you figure out what you're really feeling about this before you continue saying things out of anger." With that, Tom left the room and people were more confused than ever. Who was this guy? What right did he have to say anything? What right did he have to be so calm?

The next morning, things weren't much better. The routine was thrown off and people didn't know what to do. A few people made idle conversation, but no one knew what to do to make it better. What they all agreed on was to avoid Tom who sat in the living room reading his Bible. The family knew what he said the night before was true – Jordan was a jerk – but didn't he have a right to be? Jordan was in a wheelchair and he was going to die soon... but at the same time, no one really liked him. If Jordan died tomorrow, would it be more of a relief or sadness? What they did

know was if he wasn't family, they'd have nothing to do with him because he was such a jerk.

To add to the confusion, Jordan's bedroom light stayed on the whole night, and people were worried about him. They heard noises coming from his room, so they knew he was safe, but when they knocked on the door, he didn't respond. He didn't even yell, "Go away!" like he normally did. He must have been really upset.

Breaking the growing awkwardness, Jordan's dad yelled at Tom, "How can you sit there reading a book when you've ruined Christmas? Last night you drove a wedge into the family that was never meant to be made! We were fine. It wasn't great, but it was better than this! Now, Jordan's locked himself in his room because you've ruined everything!"

For the first time, Tom showed an emotion other than calmness as his eyes glazed over like he was about to tear up. He gently replied, "I'm sorry you feel so hurt. I understand what I did was extreme, but I care about you too much to watch you suffer any longer without trying to do something. I will head out, so you can try to restore what you had." And true to his word, Tom went to his room and grabbed his bag that was already packed like he knew he was going to have to leave. When he got to the front door, he turned and solemnly said, "I really am sorry for upsetting you," but as he turned to leave, a voice from behind everyone was heard.

“Don’t!” It was Jordan. He had come out of his room. Everyone turned and backed up revealing a path between Tom and Jordan. “You’re right. I am a jerk.”

Jordan’s mom interrupted, “No, you’re not!”

But Jordan continued, “Tom was right. Everything he said was true. I don’t think anyone will miss me when I die. How could they? I’m just angry that life has been so unfair to me. Part of me has always wanted to be close to people, but at the same time, I’ve pushed you away because I’ve hated how life is easier for you. My situation sucks and I’ve resented needing help, but this has only made me lonely and even more resentful.” Jordan started to tear up. “I know I’ve been a jerk, but I don’t want to be anymore. I want to be someone that you’ll miss when I die.”

After a few minutes, Tom once again was the first to move in the silence. This time, however, he didn’t say anything; he just ran to Jordan and gave him a hug. And while they were hugging, the others could faintly hear the words “Thank you,” be repeated over and over, but no one could tell if it was Jordan or Tom saying it. After the hug, Jordan handed Tom a card and then he went to each person there, hugged them, and gave them a card he had made in the night that described what he loved most about them. It was the first gift people could remember Jordan had ever given even at Christmas. Something was indeed different.

The last people Jordan hugged were his parents, and when he hugged them, he whispered, “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry. I will

better for you. I will be the son you deserve,” and that led to a rush of tears from both the parents whose tears seemed to wash away all the hurt and resentment they had been harboring toward their son. After they could compose themselves enough to speak, they in turn whispered, “I’m sorry... I’m so sorry. I will be better for you. I will be the parent you deserve.”

And like a real Christmas miracle, Jordan was true to his word. From that day forward, he became a better person. He made it a daily routine to message people when he woke up saying he wished them a joyful day. Instead of just playing video games, he spent most of his time messaging people words of encouragement and trying to get out and meet new people that he could share his new found sense of love and peace. In one moment his life was changed. He went from being Scrooge to Tiny Tim all because someone took a chance out of love.

The end.





King Herod's Terrible Command

Please Note: The following story is based on Matthew 2:16, which is a horrific moment in the Christmas story about babies being murdered. It often gets skipped over when pastors give a Christmas speech – genocide isn't a heartwarming topic, but I like a challenge. Interestingly, this moment is one of many connections between the story of Jesus (found in the first four books of the New Testament) and the story of Moses (found in the second to fifth book of the Old Testament, which means both Jesus and Moses got 4 books written about them in the Bible – you could say they're both kind of a big deal). The comparisons between Jesus and Moses are fascinating (if you're a history geek like me). For instance, Moses was meant to bring the Israelites to freedom after years of slavery. They had originally settled in Egypt as described in the story of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor*

Dreamcoat. Broadway theater fans will know that reference (because they're awesome). Broadway is like Christmas (it's amazing). Similarly, Jesus was meant to bring believers to freedom from the slavery of sin. It's also fun to note that Jesus' dad's name was Joseph and he was told in a dream to go to Egypt for a short period to save Jesus from Herod's infant slaughter (the period of the Jesus story that the following is about), which means both stories include Josephs going to Egypt before the savior comes. See how cool the similarities are? Okay, maybe it's just me who finds that cool, but that comparison is much better than how both stories start with baby murder. Regardless, let's get into some twisted humor.

After the troops had been assembled, the head soldier excitedly announced from his balcony, "We have new orders!"

"Arrrgh," cheered the soldiers.

"It's a red envelope, so we get to kill people!" exclaimed the head soldier triumphantly holding a red envelope above his head.

"Arrrgh," cheered the soldiers.

As the soldiers shouted words of excitement (i.e. arrrgh), the head soldier ripped open the letter and read it aloud. “King Herod has given you a special mission!”

“Arrrgh,” cheered the soldiers.

“He demands that we kill...” the head soldier paused for dramatic effect.

“Arrrgh,” cheered the soldiers.

“All the male babies!” Suddenly, the soldiers quickly went silent. The head soldier was very confused as he reread the letter he had just announced without pre-reading.

From the back of the group, one soldier yelled, “I thought I heard you say all the male babies, but that can’t be right.”

“It says we are to kill all the boys age two and under?” announced a confused head soldier. “That can’t be right.” The head soldier began to read the letter to himself to triple check what he was reading. As he read the letter, his face showed increasing confusion. “Um, King Herod the Great wants us to kill all the boys two and under, and it doesn’t say why.”

“That doesn’t sound very ‘great’ of him,” commented a soldier.

“No, it doesn’t,” replied the head soldier still studying the letter like he was looking for a side note that said, “Just kidding.”

“Do we only kill the sick ones who are dangerously contagious?” asked a confused soldier.

“No, it’s all of them,” replied the head soldier.

“Do we just kill the bad ones that are on Santa’s Naughty List?” asked a historically inaccurate soldier.

“No, it’s all of them, so even the good kids,” replied the head soldier.

“Do we just kill the ugly ones the milkman made with the women while the husbands were at work?” asked a soldier trying to lighten the mood.

“No, it’s all of them,” replied the head soldier still in disbelief.

“What if we have sons that age?” asked a worried soldier.

“That’s not looking good for you and your marriage,” shared an increasingly worried head soldier.

“Are the mom’s supposed to just let us?” asked a concerned soldier.

“I imagine not... unless you catch one whose son has been crying all day,” replied the head soldier.

“Uh, angry women scare me, and I’m thinking there’s going to be some very angry women if we do this,” pointed out one soldier.

“Arrrgh,” chanted everyone else with concern in their tone.

“Can we just invade another land and do some carefree pillaging?” asked another soldier. “That’d be a lot safer.”

“I’m afraid not,” begrudgingly answered the head soldier.

“Uh, I’m calling in sick!” announced a soldier.

“Me too! I have what he has,” yelled another soldier.

“No one’s allowed to call in sick,” corrected the head soldier.

“My carpal tunnel syndrome is acting up, so I’m not going to be able to hold my sword,” announced another soldier.

“I have a headache,” shouted another soldier.

“A headache isn’t a reason not to do something,” corrected the head soldier.

“That’s not what my wife says,” replied the soldier who claimed to have a headache.

“Look, I don’t like these rules either, but this is what we’ve been given to do. I’m sorry, but orders are orders. We aren’t meant to question them. We are merely servants who get to do cool things once in awhile. This is not one of those times. I’m sorry.” With that, the head soldier walked away and left the soldiers to digest what their orders demanded of them. Slowly, the bewildered soldiers left in their squads to follow their orders.

Later, when all of the soldiers came back together, there was a strange mood in the air. When the head soldier came out and asked if everyone had followed their orders, they all agreed. Part of the head soldier seemed sad at this, but also relieved because he knew if his soldiers didn’t follow their orders, he would be responsible for punishing them (aka kill them). Hesitantly, he asked, “So what was it like? I mean, killing in battle is one thing,

but how was this order?” He was a hardened soldier with many years of experience, but he wasn’t a monster. Even he knew King Herod’s orders were pretty unthinkable.

The first squad leader replied, “We were very fortunate. We only met families with girls age two and under. Not a single boy. Some looked like boys, but all of the parents confirmed that they were just ugly girls.”

“We were also very fortunate. We found families only had three year old boys. Some were very underdeveloped for their ages and not walking or talking yet, but all of the parents told us their boys were at least three,” shared the second squad leader.

“Oddly enough, we were very fortunate, too,” announced the third squad leader. “We only found families that had goats and dogs that walked on two legs.”

The head soldier began to smile. “Is this the case for all the squads? No one actually found boys two or under?” All the other squad leaders agreed. “Well then, I guess I should be congratulating all of you for following such difficult orders. I know it must have been very hard, but you have made this town proud. I will make sure King Herod is aware that his orders have been done without any issues. Any questions before you’re dismissed?”

“Can we stop calling him ‘Great?’” asked a soldier in the back.

“I’m pretty sure he won’t want to change that,” replied the head soldier.

“Can we add ‘meanie pants’ after his title?” asked another soldier in the back.

“I’m guessing he won’t want to be called ‘the great meanie pants,’ but who knows, I will look into it,” replied the head soldier smiling. “If I may say, as your leader, I am very grateful you have been so diligent as to make sure you haven’t harmed any innocent children; it would’ve been awful to kill a boy not under two or confuse a girl with a boy. Hopefully our next orders will be easier and we’ll go back to killing grownups because who cares about them?”

“Arrrgh,” cheered the soldiers.

The end.





The Beautiful Ornament

Ariel was one of the friendliest ornaments you could ever meet. She was incredibly warm and welcoming. Everyone loved being near her because of how friendly she was. In fact, every Christmas when the decorations were put up, the ornaments tried different methods to get closer to her on the tree. Some tried to speak to the humans decorating the trees, but the people were too dumb to understand them. Some ornaments practiced Jedi mind tricks, but even the Star Wars ornaments didn't have any luck with that. Some ornaments tried to cling to Ariel when she was taken from her storage box, but they were just separated and wiped with a warm cloth since it was assumed they were sticky from melted candy cane. Either way, the ornaments got a kind of bath, so it was still

a win. Pretending to be stuck together, in general, actually became a thing for a lot of the ornaments who wanted to be given a warm wipe down. Again, the people were too dumb to catch onto what the ornaments were doing.

When the decorations were in storage, they were all pretty quiet. It was like a rest time. The real excitement came when they were put out, which made this a much more important time to be near Ariel who made every Christmas incredible. Her warmth was something only those who met her could understand. Being near her made you feel better about yourself and life in general. She was absolutely incredible, and she was absolutely... ugly – like seriously ugly. She was by far the ugliest ornament on the tree. She was arguably the ugliest ornament on any tree. Ariel was one of those cheap pottery ornaments you buy at a craft store and then paint yourself. Her shape was that of a cat, and not a cute one. She was this kind of scary, ugly cat wearing reindeer antlers. She was painted blue without any consideration for the lines like someone spilled paint on her and smeared it around trying to clean her only to make it worse. All of the other ornaments were purchased on various trips from around the world while Ariel looked like someone was drinking blue Kool-Aid and sneezed. Add in the fact the antlers were painted a mix of pink and purple and she looked like she had been a target at a paintball game and the blue team won, but the purple and pink teams got in a couple good shots. What really added to her ugly appearance was how she had all of these giant cracks because she'd been broken and glued back together a bunch of times.

Out of all of this, the most important thing about her was it was like she didn't understand that she was uglier than all of the other ornaments. Her appearance may have been an artistic abomination, but her heart made her the most beautiful ornament there ever was. She was like the most wonderfully kind grandmother who knew how to make you feel completely safe and loved. Her welcoming spirit was what people crave to experience. On top of this, her confidence was inspiring. It was like she thought she was the top supermodel with her attractiveness.

One December day, a fancy new ornament was put on the tree. She was very sparkly and seemed to be at a higher level than any of the other ornaments. Even as she was being lifted to be hung on the tree all of the other ornaments went, "Ooohhhhhh." This was one impressive ornament, and she was placed near Ariel. Naturally, Ariel greeted the new ornament... but it was as if the new ornament didn't hear her. Again, Ariel tried to say hello.

This time the ornament turned to Ariel with disgust. "Why are you trying to talk to me? Do you really think I want to associate with such an ugly ornament?"

Ariel was very taken aback. She didn't think such rude behavior was even possible let alone be done to her when she was so friendly. Giving the new ornament the benefit of the doubt, she asked, "I'm sorry; are you okay?"

“Seriously, why are you trying to talk to me?” questioned the new ornament with disdain.

“I believe in being warm and friendly,” replied Ariel confused and a bit defensive.

“I guess you have to be when you’re so ugly,” stated the new ornament with a sneer.

Ariel’s confidence was hurt, but she was still standing her ground.

“My friendliness is one of the main reasons why the other ornaments like to be around me.”

“The other ornaments like being around you because you’re so ugly you make them look better. Compared to a beautiful ornament, another beautiful ornament doesn’t stand out. Beside you? They look even better,” smirked the new ornament as she knew that would cut Ariel.

Ariel’s confidence was knocked, but she remained strong. “I don’t know why you’re being so mean, but I’m special. See this?” Ariel pointed to a little sticker that said “China” on her back. “I am fine china. No matter what you think of me or how I look, I know the truth. I am valuable china.”

“Are you serious?” laughed the new ornament. Ariel was confused by this response because she thought it was a good point. “That sticker means you were *made* in China. You thought you were ‘china’ like special dishware? That’s hilarious. And who hangs dishware from a tree? You’re as stupid as you are ugly!” The new ornament broke out into a cruel laugh and a few of the other

ornaments nearby joined in with her. You couldn't know if those ornaments were laughing because they were afraid of the new ornament or if they looked down on Ariel now, but the damage was done. Ariel turned away before her tears could be seen and silently slunk away.

Over the next few days the new ornament had the other decorations praising her and laughing that suck up kind of laugh. Again, you couldn't tell whether it was out of fear or adoration for this new ornament, but the hurt was the same for Ariel. Each day she became a little sadder and distant from everyone. She originally tried to recover, but with each day leading to others appearing to love the new ornament, Ariel slid further into the tree.

What was strange was each day when she slid further into the tree to hide, in the evening the human who decorated the tree would pull her back out. It was as if the human wanted the new ornament to emotionally torture her.

After about a week of this, Ariel was a shell of what she had once been. A few of her real friends had asked her if she was okay, but she said she was fine and brushed them off as quickly as possible. A few of them were hurt by her distance while others were distracted by the shiny new ornament with the stories of where she was from and how it was so much better than this terrible place.

One day, while hiding in the middle of the tree, a gentle voice called to Ariel. She turned away and told the voice she was fine; she just needed to be alone. Unlike the ornaments who did as they

were told, this voice persisted. Finally, Ariel turned and began to speak when she realized there weren't any decorations there. She also realized she was in the middle of the tree. She had never been so close to the trunk before. It was as if she had been helped to get there.

“So when are you going to stop feeling sorry for yourself and return to being warm and friendly?” asked the voice.

“What’s the point?” Ariel asked with a tone that was void of hope. “No one cares.”

“You know that’s not true,” corrected the voice. “Some have asked, but you’ve been pushing them away.”

“The new ornament is right,” confessed Ariel. “I’m ugly! What good am I?”

“That’s interesting,” shared the voice, “That never stopped you from being warm and welcoming before.”

“That’s because I thought I was worth something, and it turns out I’m nothing,” cried Ariel.

“So you were only friendly because you thought you were great?” asked the voice.

“Well, no... but it was easier,” confessed Ariel. “I thought I was special... but I’m not.”

“You thought you were something because you are,” corrected the voice.

“No, I’m not!” Ariel exclaimed as she started to cry. “I thought I was, but I’m nothing! I’m just an ugly, dumb ornament!”

“Are you saying that because that’s what the shiny new ornament said or is that what you really believe?” asked the voice. Ariel remained silent. “Don’t overestimate the value of what shiny and new says. New doesn’t mean it’s better; it just means it’s new. She has no idea how things work.” Ariel liked this point and her guard was slightly lowered as the voice continued, “Every ornament is special in their own way. No matter how beautiful or ugly, you help celebrate Christmas, which is a wonderful privilege. And no matter the ornament, you can bring joy to someone because everyone has different tastes. Sure, some ornaments are more universally accepted as beautiful, but every ornament has a place on the tree because you’re meant to be a team. The truth is sometimes if an ornament is too beautiful, they become arrogant and rude. I’m guessing you can think of an example of that. And if an ornament makes it all about themselves, they actually reduce the overall beauty of the tree. Trust me; what makes a tree beautiful is my expertise.”

“That makes sense,” admitted Ariel, “but can’t someone’s ugliness bring others down?”

“Absolutely,” cheered the voice. “That new ornament’s ugliness brought you down didn’t it?”

“What?” asked a confused Ariel.

“Don’t be deceived by appearances. The surface is a distraction. The heart is where true beauty exists. Haven’t you ever wondered why all the ornaments love you so much? It’s not because you’re ugly and they look good beside you. It’s not because you give them anything or try to earn their love in any way. They love you because you love them and you help them feel like they matter. Your warmth and ability to welcome others helps them feel better. Looks fade. Paint chips. Ornaments fall and break. What truly matters is what’s on the inside.” Ariel was really starting to like this voice because it affirmed everything she had once thought but had forgotten in her hurt. “After all, if every ornament has loved you for you and then this one new ornament says beauty matters more, do you think that maybe that one new ornament is wrong? Either she’s right and everyone else is crazy or she is.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Ariel admitted with hope and a little confidence back in her voice.

“So can you believe in yourself simply because you have a good heart?” asked the voice.

“Yes, I think that’s an important thing for me to do. After all, I never looked down on the other ornaments for their looks, so why should I assume they would look down on me unless they were a jerk?”

“Good point, and that’s important to know, especially for what I’m about to tell you,” started the voice. “Do you know why the human loves you so much and why even when you try to slide away

from sight, she always brings you back out to the front of the tree?” Ariel shook her head. “Have you ever wondered why you’re the only ornament on the tree that has been glued back together – and more than once – while any others got thrown out for a little chip?” Again, Ariel shook her head. “Do you know why you get put in the best spot on the tree?”

“I am?” Ariel had never thought of all this before, and she was very intrigued.

The voice became very gentle. “You are not like the other ornaments.” Ariel was ready to say it’s because she’s so ugly, but then the voice continued, “There’s a reason you’re the only ornament that’s been glued back together and you didn’t just get thrown out. Many years ago when you were first put on the tree, you were plain white. Then one day you were taken off the tree and painted by the human’s daughter.” Ariel started to remember a distant memory of that; she could kind of see the girl’s face smiling as the girl painted her. “You are special because you actually know who your creator is. You are precious. Every ornament is important, but you stand out. I used to think you were so friendly because you knew this, but I guess you either forgot or you never really understood the truth.”

Ariel suddenly felt overwhelmed with emotion. “So... I am special?” Ariel was taken aback at this thought. She had been right about the fact that she was special; she just didn’t have the right reason.

“And knowing that you’re special should encourage you for being more loving and kind to the other ornaments,” added the voice.

“Because what’s in the heart is what really matters and what’s in my heart should be shown through my actions,” continued Ariel.

“Now you’re getting it,” complimented the voice.

“Thanks...” whispered Ariel who paused for a moment. “I guess I have some apologizing to do.” After another brief pause, Ariel slid back out of the tree and started apologizing to all of her friends and promising to be friendly again. While doing that she heard a voice that stung her heart.

“What are you doing out here?” sneered the new ornament.

“I want to apologize... I let you temporarily convince me that beauty is more important than what’s in the heart,” started Ariel.

“That’s because it is. Beauty is the most important thing because that’s what people see, which is why being stuck here with you and this tree is so terrible. You both suck,” complained the new ornament.

Suddenly, the branch that the new ornament was on began twitching and she started moving toward the end of the branch.

“What’s going on?” exclaimed a now panicking new ornament.

Ariel didn’t know, but she continued, “Do you think you could be wrong and maybe the heart is important?” asked a slightly confused Ariel who was trying to use what was happening to her advantage.

“No, that’s stupid. Beauty is what matters!” shouted the new ornament. Suddenly, the hook holding the new ornament ran out of branch and she fell to the ground – smash!

Not sure how to respond, Ariel was silent as were all the other ornaments until a voice only Ariel recognized said, “Let’s see if you’re worth gluing back together, and if anyone misses you while you’re gone.” With a flick of the branch, the new ornament proved that beauty has its benefits, but flight isn’t one of them.

Ariel didn’t know quite how to respond, but she was glad the tree liked her. All the ornaments were silent. It was like they had never considered how their lives were not fully in their own hands. And like the tree pointed out, no one was really sad she was gone.

Breaking the silence (pun intended), Ariel continued to apologize to her friends and promise to be the safe ornament she had once been. She shared that she didn’t need to be beautiful to feel beautiful because it was the heart that mattered, and she was grateful the late, new ornament could teach her that valuable lesson. She also suggested in the future all the ornaments should be nice to the tree, but they were already thinking that.

The end.





You Can Be Better

Michael Jr. was getting increasingly frustrated with humanity (he wasn't the only one). Over his lifetime, it seemed that people were continually growing in selfishness and entitlement while ignoring the importance of community and sharing. It was as if they somehow didn't grasp that you shouldn't yell or eye roll at someone you love because love is about patience, kindness and self-control, and those aforementioned behaviors are the opposite of love. Every time Michael Jr. overheard someone say, "I love you," he wanted to ask, "Do you really love them? Are you patient and kind with them? Otherwise, you're just saying words that make you feel better about yourself." He never actually asked that out loud to anyone, but he wanted to, and everyday he got a little bit closer

because his frustration was steadily mounting. To make matters worse, he was no longer at a younger age when his schedule was full of fun distractions like harp lessons, halo cleaning, and how to keep your robes sparkling white. Now he had more time to think about how bad people were becoming, and he couldn't escape the nagging thought that something needed to change. He wanted people to be better, but he didn't know how to help them... until one day he had the perfect idea... at least it seemed like the perfect idea in his head.

Michael Jr. had always enjoyed the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, but that was normal. Every angel did. It wasn't very often an angel got to be the hero. Sure, it wasn't the most accurate portrayal of angels, but it was nice to be remembered. The biggest flaw in the movie was the lesson that a bell ringing meant an angel got its wings, but it was a cute idea on the surface. At least, it was cute to most angels. It actually added to Michael Jr.'s anger toward people. Whether it was true or not, if this was a belief, why weren't they regularly ringing bells to help angels get their wings? Didn't they care about angels?

One of the things that bothered angels, in general, was that Western culture increasingly ignored the idea of higher spiritual beings. It was like Western culture was only about sparkly distractions, coping with something, serving selfish ambitions, and/or keeping up with self-imposed busy schedules. It didn't make sense to angels, but then again, it was harder for them to be distracted from higher spiritual things when they were themselves

higher spiritual things. Humans struggled to see the bigger picture, especially when their priorities consisted of impressing others and looking happy on social media instead of actually *being* happy people who lived good and caring lives. If happiness comes from being a good person who makes good decisions, there was a reason the world was in short supply of it.

Early in that Christmas season, Michael Jr. was watching *It's a Wonderful Life* and wishing he could be like Clarence (the angel in the movie) because that character was able to make a difference for someone, which is when he had his “perfect” idea. Michael Jr. decided not to tell anyone his plan because he wanted to show all the angels what he was capable of doing on his own. After all, he was the son of the great angel, Michael. He had quite the shoes to fill, and this idea made him excited because he was sure this would help him do that.

Michael Jr.'s plan was officially revealed December first at a typical American city theater that was playing *It's a Wonderful Life* to help get people in the Christmas spirit. At the end of the movie, right before the credits started, what sounded like the snapping of fingers could be heard. The movie paused, and what seemed like a spotlight was shining at the front of the theater, which was strange because the theater didn't have a spotlight. Standing in the light was Michael Jr. dressed in his best sparkly white suit. After a brief moment to let people's eyes adjust, Michael Jr. began speaking in a voice that sounded like he was using a microphone when he wasn't. “Good evening humans who enjoy Christmas movies.”

“What is this?” yelled an annoyed man near the middle of the theater.

Pretending not to hear the rude man’s comment, Michael Jr. continued, “This movie is very uplifting.”

“Seriously, what is this?” yelled the annoyed man. Keeping his cool, Michael Jr. snapped his fingers. The man started rising out of his seat until he was five feet in the air where he simply floated.

“What’s going on?... Put me down!” he demanded. Again, Michael Jr. snapped his fingers. Suddenly, the rude man was wearing a muzzle and could no longer speak as he dangled above his chair.

“He’s Harry Potter!” someone cheered.

Michael Jr. could tell he had lost his audience who was now staring at the floating, muzzled man, so in a commanding voice he exclaimed, “I am speaking, and you will listen!” As he said this, a pair of large, brightly shining wings appeared from behind his back and were now framing his pristine sparkly white suit.

Suddenly, everyone forgot about the floating man and became fixated on Michael Jr.

“Oooh, a light show,” someone announced.

“I love this movie,” started Michael Jr. “It’s encouraging and it gives hope that people have value, and that message... is total crap. If most of you weren’t born, the world would be fine. If some of you passed away today, the world would be a better place. People are given so much potential and freedom, yet you squander it on

selfishness and stupidity. I'm here to tell you a message: You need to change or you will reap what you sow like that guy," Michael Jr. pointed at the man he had muzzled and suspended in the air.

"He's the bad guy from the movie. He's the Mr. Potter of the real world: miserable, mean, and sucking the life out of good people. You can be better! You need to be better! You need to learn how to love by showing patience, kindness, and self-control. You can be like George Bailey and Mary Hatch. If you don't... well, watch out." And as suddenly as Michael Jr. showed up, he was gone.

There was a good five seconds of stunned silence before there was a frenzy of reactions. Some people ran out of the theater terrified. Some people stormed off and demanded free passes from the manager for having their movie disrupted. Some people sat in the seats too stunned to move while others started posting on social media about what just happened. A number of these people had tried to take a photo or video, but Michael Jr. made sure only his voice could be recorded. On a screen, he was a bright blur. When the phone users discovered this, there was a lot of swearing. And everyone seemed to forget "Mr. Potter" who was still floating silently above the seats... until one person took a picture and then everyone left in the theater were taking pictures of him to post as evidence for what had happened that night. People took videos as someone waved their arms around him to show there weren't any strings. Eventually, there was a snapping noise, and the guy fell back to his seat and his muzzle was gone.

As the shock of the experience started to settle, many of the people who saw what happened assumed it was a stunt by the movie theater, but the management and staff adamantly claimed no knowledge of this and were just as surprised by the story as anyone else. Many people who heard witnesses talk about the event assumed they were crazy and dismissed their claims until there were more and more stories of a white suited figure with wings randomly appearing at the end of showings of *It's a Wonderful Life* in the area. Each show had someone who had been rude that Michael Jr. muzzled and dangled in the theater.

The same thing continued over the next three nights at different theaters across America, and no one was able to get more than an audio recording of the same basic speech. People started making artistic renderings of Michael Jr. and they ranged from a gentle angel to a violent one-eyed, one-horned flying purple people eater who swallowed his victims whole as he dangled them in the air with muzzles. Social media and the news exploded with theories and stories about what was happening. Some people prepared for the impending alien attack as tinfoil became in high demand.

With interest skyrocketing, theaters across the country started showing *It's Wonderful Life* in hopes of attracting the hoards of people wanting to see this mysterious visitor who told people they needed to change at the end of the movie. The only problem was sometimes fans would freak out at the end of the movie because they were so disappointed the angel didn't show up, especially as some had seen the movie over and over hoping to see him in

person. After all, the movie is good, but it's not that good a movie to keep repeatedly seeing it.

Michael Jr. wanted to avoid the fanfare, so he started going to remote theaters where there might be people who didn't know about him. Within a few days of his initial reveal, however, it became impossible. News about him was everywhere. At one theater, when he showed up, people started cheering hysterically because they were so excited to see him. At another theater, police tried to catch him as they had been brought in with the chance he would show up, but he easily thwarted their attempt with a snap of his fingers and he had all the police dangling in the air with muzzles – that was a big news story.

By the end of the first week, there were copycats – not angels copying Michael Jr.; people were copying him. They didn't do as well when police were there waiting. The saddest moment was when two copycat angels showed up at the same theater and they got into a fist fight over who got to share the message. Other times, when more than one copycat showed up, they shared the moment and led the theater in everyone reciting the original speech. It was easy for fans to memorize the lecture as it had exploded on social media with various cartoons, music video montages, and remixes being made with it. The city where it first happened became a tourist hotspot for being the first sighting. They had all of the typical souvenirs you'd expect for sale like t-shirts and key chains with sayings like "What is this?" and "Ooh, a

light show,” which led to accusations that they had staged it for publicity.

Unfortunately, as anything that becomes popular, as many people who loved it, there were those who hated it. After a week of social media dominance, there were protestors showing up at movie theaters wanting the showings to stop. People became so passionate about it, whether for or against, that it was common for police to have to break up fighting between fans and protestors.

The main problem with Michael Jr.’s message was it led to a sudden increase in negative behaviors in general. For instance, families were torn apart as passionate opinions led to serious disagreements, couples were breaking up after one or both partners would suggest the other person was Mr. Potter and needed to change while they were innocent, and even suicide rates were higher than usual. The country was a mess... or a bigger mess than usual.

In less than a week, Michael Jr. stopped showing up at theaters because he didn’t want to add to the chaos, but it didn’t matter. Things were already set in motion, and people didn’t even seem to notice that he wasn’t showing up anymore because they had made it about themselves – typical human behavior. Being an angel made it easy to avoid humans, but Michael Jr. was so scared about the ramifications in the angel world that he ended up sneaking home and hiding in his room hoping that the whole thing would be forgotten. Unfortunately (or fortunately), we can’t avoid our problems forever.

After hiding in his room alone for most of a day, Michael Jr. heard a knock at his door. He quickly hid in the closet hoping the visitor would go away thinking no one was there – no such luck. After a brief moment, the door opened and his dad, Michael, came in and sat on the bed – nuts. His dad started talking as if he was talking to someone – he hoped his dad didn't know he was there and was just losing it. “So it seems an angel showed up on Earth almost like in our favorite movie,” shared his dad. Michael Jr. remained silently hidden in his closet pretending that his dad didn't know he was there and just talking to himself. “It caused quite the kafuffle. It was quite the kafuffle indeed. People are now fighting with their families, jumping off bridges, and my favorite, guys dressed as angels wanting to tell others to live better lives are getting into fist fights. Humans are ridiculous. Fortunately, as an angel, I can see beyond the surface level and understand the intention of the angel was to help make the world a better place. People just screwed things up. They're really good at that.”

“I just wanted to help!” exclaimed Michael Jr. who temporarily forgot he was trying to hide. Realizing it was futile, he slowly came out of the closet like a puppy that had made a mess on the carpet.

“Do you think people like being told they're bad?” asked his dad.

With shame in his voice, Michael Jr. responded, “No.”

“Exactly, so it makes sense there'd be some who'd get upset at your speech no matter how true it is. It also makes sense that some would twist what you said because people often hear what they

want to hear and not the actual message – people are dumb,” shared his dad. “Does that mean what you did was wrong?”

Michael Jr. paused. He thought he knew the answer, but he wasn’t sure enough to reply. He already felt bad enough and being wrong would just add to that.

“No,” answered his dad for him. “It wasn’t wrong. What you did is discouraged because we try to let people figure things out for themselves, but you had a good message. People screwing up the point wasn’t your fault – it’s theirs. The truth is if you want to help make positive change, you’re going to upset a few people. Oddly enough, if you never upset anyone, you’re likely irrelevant or a giant pushover. In this case, anyone you’ve upset is dumb, so it’s okay they’re upset.

“The one thing I am curious about is when you did this thing, were you trying to impress me and make a name for yourself in some way or did you do it mostly because you wanted to help the world be better?”

Michael Jr. paused to think about his answer because he wanted to show he took the question seriously, and then replied. “I wanted to make a difference. I don’t care about making a name for myself... especially when making a name leads to this. If I didn’t see it clearly before, I’m sorry, but all I really want now is for people to be less selfish and mean.”

“Good. Now I think it’s time you stopped hiding and do something to help finish what you started.”

“You want me to go back?” Michael Jr. asked surprised.

“Absolutely, you need to finish this because it was a great idea and a good start that needs a big finish. If I can give a suggestion, however,” offered Michael, “you shouldn’t do something like this alone. You have friends and doing something special is always more meaningful when you do it with people you love.”

One week before Christmas, all was calm until what sounded like finger snapping could be heard all across America and a bright light suddenly filled the night sky in every capital of all fifty American states, so no one state could claim superiority over another. These lights resembled the one described to have been in the movie theaters except these lights were high in the sky and large enough for people to see miles away. They were also unique as they became like a floating screen showing a countdown that had started at thirty seconds. Behind the countdown was a scene that was another light glowing over the White House. This light in the county’s capital, however, was huge and dwarfed the White House. If you looked closely, planes were suspended in midair surrounding the light like how the rude guy was suspended in the air at the first theater visit. The planes looked like they had engaged the light as if it was a terrorist attack, but now were useless and just floating.

Even though there was a countdown and crazy people would assume it was a countdown to the end of the world, it was as if they were all “suspended” where they were unable to move unless it was

to see the light better. It was also like they were wearing muzzles unable to talk. All this seemed to be happening to get people ready for something big. After the countdown finished, the light above the White House spoke and that voice was transmitted through each of the lights above the city capitals for everyone to hear. This voice sounded familiar because it was the same one from the theater recordings.

“Two weeks ago I visited a number of movie theaters with the same message: Be better people. To everyone who has tried to be better, thank you. Thank you for listening and helping yourselves and your country be better. If you heard my message and brushed it off, *you* are a Potter. If you heard my message and used it as a reason to attack others, *you* are a Potter. If you heard my message and instead of looking at how *you* can change, and instead told others to change, *you* are a Potter. And when I say you are a Potter, I’m not being judgmental. I am simply categorizing what you’re doing as bad, so you can realize *you* are what’s wrong with the world. Stop blaming others and making excuses – learn to love. Not only are you making *your* life worse, your meanness is making it harder for others to be good and enjoy life. *You* are the kind of people I described in my first message as being someone who will make the world a better place when you’re gone. The reality is everyone needs to make some changes. No one is innocent. If you think you are, you’re deluding yourself. No matter how good you think you are, instead of trying to change others, change yourself. You have the power and the responsibility to change yourself. You don’t have the right to try to change others. Fortunately, if you

change yourself, others will be forced to adapt. That's how you help others grow – grow yourself. You need to consider how *you* can be more patient. You need to consider how *you* can be more kind. You need to consider how *you* can be more self-controlled because that is what love is. It's time to make this world better. It's time to fill it with love. We need to fill it with patience, kindness, and self-control. You have the power. This Christmas, *you* can make the world a better place by *you* being better.

“For the negative people who will want to twist what I'm saying, my goal for giving this speech is to make you aware that you are the problem, so you can stop being so damaging to each other. And if you're wondering by whose authority do I have to tell you this? That's a great question.” And without answering, the light above the White House vanished and after a few seconds, the lights that projected the image in all the capitals disappeared as well. Everything returned to the way it was, at least for a brief moment until there was a national explosion of social media posts and phone calls.

Many things were said about this event. Some were happy with the message while others assumed the worst, but as Michael Jr. had learned, those people are the Potters; they are the ones making this world harder than it needs to be for themselves and everyone around them. We shouldn't focus on changing them; we should focus on changing ourselves. We need to focus on how we can be our best by being properly patient, kind, and self-controlled and do what we can to not let the Potters of the world prevent us from

smiling, laughing, and being welcoming because it's the little things that help make this world better.

And what happened to Michael Jr.? He went back home and celebrated with his friends who had helped him do this national event. His dad was right. It was more meaningful doing such an important thing with friends and it brought them all closer. It was also fun knowing he just messed with all the people's heads leaving them with that last question – and by whose authority do I have to tell you this? Michael Jr. wanted to help people, but he still wanted to have a little fun.

The end.





A Little Christmas

““**Y**ou bought her a what?” Clare couldn’t believe what she just heard her husband, Jason, say. “You bought her a four foot tall elf statue?”

“Four and half,” meekly corrected Jason with his head bowed. Like many well intentioned husbands. Jason’s “good” idea was hated by his wife because it seemed so insensitive.

“Why would you do that?” exclaimed Clare.

Jason mustered a little gumption as he countered, “She’s always at home nowadays. She might be short in stature, but she can be large in greatness with some help. She deserves to have friends. She deserves to meet someone special.”

“So you bought her an elf to practice on?” questioned Clare with an increasing anger.

“Well, I wouldn’t have put it like that,” admitted Jason who seemed to be losing his gusto even quicker than it had sprung up. “It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“How you think blows my mind sometimes,” exclaimed Claire flailing her arms in frustration.

This heated discussion continued, but their daughter, Elisabeth, who had been listening through the door, had something more important to do – find the present that sparked such a heavy discussion. From what she gathered, her dad bought the elf without consulting her mom who just found out about it when the delivery man brought it in the house. Elisabeth had become accustomed to her dad’s crazy ideas and wasn’t even a little bit offended like her mom feared. Elisabeth loved her dad and knew he had good intentions. His actions weren’t always the smartest, but he tried. It’s amazing how a daughter can have more patience for their dad’s mistakes than a wife. Because of the trust she had for her dad, Elisabeth was intrigued by this gift and decided to sneak into his office where he was hiding it.

When Elisabeth got to the office, she slowly opened the door like a child at Christmas excited to see the presents from Santa, yet nervous there wouldn’t be any. She found the elf at the back of the room in a corner behind her dad’s bookshelf, so it couldn’t be easily seen from the doorway. The elf was taller than her, and he

was surprisingly cute and remarkably realistic. He stood on a base that had an engraving on it that said: “I hope you can see yourself the way I see you – you are so wonderful in so many ways.” In a smaller font beneath that read, “Like an elf helps Santa, you deserve a man who will help you achieve your dreams.” Elisabeth smiled when she read the tag. Her dad really did try. It was a little cheesy, but that was expected when it comes to her dad. He was more humorous than poetic.

After taking a moment to appreciate the comment on the tag, Elisabeth’s attention was drawn to the elf itself. Leaning in close to the elf’s face, this statue was incredible. If she didn’t know better, she would swear he was real. If she didn’t know better, she’d swear that the statue was starting to perspire... and his eyes were starting to twitch like it needed to blink.

Elisabeth turned away and started walking to the desk. When she turned back, the statue seemed to feel a little more relaxed... as strange as that sounds. She returned to the statue with a pen in her hand. As she stared at the elf’s face, she raised the pen and slowly shoved it in the elf’s nose. As you’d expect with a statue, he seemed unfazed. She started moving the pen around and it was amazing how skin-like the nose was, but as you’d expect with a statue, he seemed unfazed. She then took the pen out of his nose and started rubbing it all inside his mouth, but as you’d expect with a statue, he seemed unfazed. She then took the pen and aimed it at his eyeball and slowly started moving toward it and stopped just before touching the pupil, but as you’d expect with a statue, he

seemed unfazed... or was he? She then whispered, "I wonder what would happen if I stabbed this pen in your eye." After pausing for several seconds, she said, "Here I go." Instead of touching the eye with the pen, however, she gently blew at it and the statue "came to life."

"Okay, okay," cried the statue stepping away from her, "you got me."

"You're not a statue?" questioned Elisabeth, a question she knew sounded weird.

"Yes... and no," he confessed. "I'm a person who can act like a statue."

"So did my dad buy me a man who pretends to be a statue or are you a man who pretends to be a statue without the customer knowing it?" pushed a very confused Elisabeth.

"It's... complicated," replied the man posing as an elf statue.

"Try me," she further pushed while lifting the pen up to his face again.

"Your dad bought a statue of an elf and I... uh... I am here because my friends are playing a joke," started the elf man, but Elisabeth crossed her arms like she wasn't buying it. "I have really weird friends." Still, Elisabeth wasn't changing her stance. "Fine... look, I design these elaborate statues that rich people buy, and on rare occasions, I pretend to be one of the statues."

"As a special surprise?" guessed Elisabeth.

“If the prize is getting to call your insurance company because you had a few precious valuables stolen including a lifelike almost five foot tall statue,” nervously confessed the elf who seemed surprised by his own honesty as much as Elisabeth was. It was as if there was something about her that made it almost impossible for him to lie.

As Elisabeth processed what she just heard, the elf looked like he was getting ready to make a run for it. “Okay,” began Elisabeth, “I want in.”

“What?” asked a confused elf.

“I want fifty percent of the take,” replied Elisabeth.

“You want me to rob from your parents and give you half?” questioned the elf who was now thinking he was getting tricked.

“My dad has insurance,” stated Elisabeth. “If you’re going to rob him, he’s safe, I’ll make some money, and then you’ll be gone and my mom will be happy, too. It’s a win for all of us.” The elf didn’t know what to say. It was as if he didn’t quite believe what she was saying. “In the meantime, there is a week and a half before Christmas, and you’re going to help me.”

“Do what?” asked a nervously confused elf.

“You said you design fancy statues, and my dad must like them, so I want to make him one,” stated Elisabeth very confidently. Before the elf was able to say no, she continued, “And it’s either that or I go to the cops and tell them about your operation.”

“I guess I have no choice,” admitted the elf still baffled by the situation.

“You have a choice,” corrected Elisabeth, “I just don’t think you want to end up in prison for the holidays and for who knows how many more.” She gave a wry smile and put out her hand for a business handshake and the elf hesitatingly obliged. “So what’s your name or should I call you Marv?”

“Is that a Home Alone reference?” questioned the elf.

“You’re the thief,” poked Elisabeth.

“Let’s go with Harry,” he smiled cautiously.

The two spent the next hour making the groundwork for how the rest of the week and a half would look. They agreed that Harry would have to wait until Boxing Day when her family was out at Christmas dinner before he “borrowed” from her household because she wanted her dad to be able to give her the statue he thoughtfully bought her. From there, Harry would drop off her share of the money on New Year’s Day, and then he’d be on his way.

As agreed, Elisabeth went to her dad and said she would be doing something for his Christmas gift and it needed to be assembled in his office because it would be too big to move in after it was together. When her dad tried explaining that her gift was in there, she promised not to look at it if he covered it up with blankets. After being very persistent, he relented (like all dads do with very persistent daughters). Her dad, however, was adamant that she not

look at it and he promised not to go into his office until Christmas morning. Since he was going to be busy at his work office until Christmas (and avoiding the wrath of her mom), it worked out, and Elisabeth's plan was set in motion. Normally Harry would rob from his victim the day after being dropped off because he could only pretend to be a statue for so long, but with Elisabeth's help, he could last the week and a half since she could get him food, clothes, and arrange for bathroom visits.

The two immediately started Elisabeth's project drawing up plans and then sneaking out to pick up supplies and tools. Soon Harry taught Elisabeth how to make a statue the way his company did with wire and plaster. He then helped her paint her creation, and how to sew to make the outfits she needed for the statue. The two worked long hours, but it was fun. In fact, Elisabeth couldn't remember the last time she enjoyed being around someone so much besides her dad. As they got to know each other better, Harry soon explained that he charged a fortune for the statues because... well, he could. He didn't mind charging so much because they were so much work and they were essentially pieces of art. He had a couple standards he could sell a little cheaper, but a lot of his clientele wanted original pieces that captured various movie or TV scenes. His work was very realistic and better than many wax museums, which is why rich people were willing to buy them. He explained to her that when he was a child, because of his size, he didn't get into sports like most boys. Instead, he got really good at more creative and artistic endeavors. He eventually came up with this statue idea and it did really well. The idea of stealing

eventually developed out of his grudge toward “normal” people. Taking from them gave him a sense of justice for how he was treated when he was young. Since these people were rich and had insurance to cover any costs, he didn’t mind stealing from them – he wasn’t a total jerk. Plus, with the statue that was “stolen,” the insurance would buy a “second” one, so he got double the pay for the same project. It was a win-win as long as he didn’t get caught. This wasn’t something he did all the time, but usually something he did around Christmas since he didn’t have a lot going on because his family situation left him feeling lonely this time of year.

In return, Elisabeth shared with him how she had struggled with being a little person more as a young adult than when she was a child. She used to be full of life and was very social, but for some reason, something changed in her later teens and she became more reclusive and not wanting to talk to anyone. She had gone more the route of computers and technology than art because it allowed her opportunities to escape and pretend she was someone else.

The time working on the statue flew by and as Elisabeth’s statue continued to develop, so did her connection with Harry. She found herself really enjoying herself for the first time in a long while. A couple times while they were out getting supplies, they even got something to eat together, and one night they went to see a showing of *It’s a Wonderful Life* (unfortunately no angels showed up). For the first time, Elisabeth felt understood. She knew her parents loved her, but they could never really get what life was like for her. Harry was different – he got it.

Everything was going perfectly. The statue Elisabeth was making for her dad was close to being finished. It only needed a couple last minute touches that she was now more than capable of doing after her week and a half long intensive art course. When she got up Christmas Eve morning to make the last touch ups, however, she went into the office to find that Harry wasn't there. She first thought he must have had a bathroom emergency, but he wasn't in the bathroom. She wondered if he was risking getting caught in order to have an early breakfast, but he wasn't in the kitchen. She searched everywhere in the house, but it was like he was gone... but how could he be gone? She could have him arrested... or that was the original threat. Did he just try to win her over, so he could escape knowing she was too attached to do anything about it now?

Christmas Eve day felt like an eternity for Elisabeth as she watched the door hoping Harry would show up. All of these thoughts kept spinning in her head. Where was he? Did he get caught? Would he return? What would her dad do if he wasn't there the next morning when he was supposed to give her the statue? Not only were those more practical thoughts going through her head, but she was also struggling with this idea that she thought they liked each other. She had finally started opening up her heart and now he was gone. The one person she thought she could trust because he was so similar to her... left. Not only did he leave, but he left without saying good-bye. What was wrong with her? How could she be open to connecting with a criminal?

Christmas Eve day was a very, very long day. Even Christmas Eve, normally her favorite night of the year was painful. Before she met Harry, she was fine with being alone, but now the loneliness and sense of rejection was overwhelming. She had forgotten what it was like to have a friend, and he abandoned her.

Christmas morning Elisabeth had a glimmer of hope that Harry would be back, but as she went into her dad's office to check on her artwork, like the day before, there was nothing in the back corner. To be sure, she quickly ran to the Christmas tree in case he was put there... but again, no. There were just normal sized presents and nothing large like the statue. Elisabeth didn't know what to do now. How was she going to fake being happy Christmas Day? How would she explain to her parents why she was so sad? Honesty didn't seem like the best policy: "I'm sad because the guy I agreed to let steal from you vanished?" And how was she going to explain the present she made? She hadn't thought of that before, but how would she explain how she learned to sew and paint? All the joy she originally had to give her dad his gift was now replaced by regret and fear.

When her dad walked up to her beside the Christmas tree, he looked like he was in a similar mood as she was. After a moment he began, "I want to apologize. I had bought you a gift that I thought was really special, but it didn't work out quite the way I had hoped."

Suddenly, Elisabeth realized her mom must have made her dad return the statue. She had been against it the whole time. Over the

last week and a half she must have convinced him to get rid of it. Just then, her mom entered the room, and Elisabeth ran to her, “Did you make Dad give back my special gift?”

Surprised at the question, her mom quickly replied, “No, when your dad has his heart set on something, he’s too stubborn for me to convince otherwise.”

Elisabeth turned back to her dad and frantically questioned, “What happened to the gift that was in the office?”

Her dad looked at her and very calmly replied, “I received a call from the company who made it saying I couldn’t give it to you because there had been a recall for some reason.” Elisabeth’s face dropped. Harry did leave her! “I had originally bought that gift for you because I thought it would help you meet someone, but then I learned I didn’t need to do that anymore. You already have someone.” As he said that, he pointed behind her. Beside the tree, standing like a man on the season finale of *The Bachelor*, Harry was wearing a suit and holding a single red rose. Elisabeth took one look, and all hurt vanished while she ran to him and threw her arms around him. Being close to his ear, she whispered, “I was so worried I scared you away.”

In response, Harry whispered, “You did scare me.” Elisabeth suddenly pulled away. “I was scared that when Christmas was over, I would lose you. I want to be part of your life, and I want it to be done right.” With that Harry got on one knee and pulled out a ring case. Elisabeth took a step back with a pose like Joseph in every

cheesy nativity scene. As he opened it, there was a USB key inside. “Will you help me run a better, more legit business?” Feeling great relief – because she may have liked Harry, but she wasn’t ready to marry him after knowing him a week and a half– she once again lunged at him and held him in a tight bear squeeze.

“Of course I will,” she replied and then leaning in she whispered, “But it would’ve been easier to start off with that insurance money.”

Harry smiled and affirmed, “Trust me, that won’t be much of a problem. I still live with my mom and earn good money, so I can...” he then made the gesture of “making it rain.” Elisabeth smiled and squeezed him again. “And so you know, my name is actually Harold... yes, my parents were that mean.” Elisabeth laughed, but she was thrilled that Harry was actually his name the whole time. It helped her feel a little bit closer to him knowing he didn’t lie to her. “Now why don’t you show your dad the project you’ve done. I told him we met because you asked me to help you with it.” Elisabeth took Harry’s hand and then her dad’s and led them to the office.

While walking to the room, her dad began apologizing, “I’m sorry about your gift. I promise to find you something else. I’ll just need a little time to come up with something as great.”

“Dad,” Elisabeth began, “All I care about is that you like my gift.” She then let go of Harry’s hand and led her dad into his office with her free hand covering his eyes. When she had guided him to be in

front of the statue, she announced, “And now you can see why I needed your office, and she pulled her hand away in order to reveal her gift.

Elisabeth’s dad just stared. He was at a loss for words as he looked at the magnificent artwork. The statue Elisabeth made was the backs of a father holding his daughter’s hand walking into the unknown. After a moment to let him realize what she had made, Elisabeth announced, “I know you won’t always make the best choices, but you will always make them with the best intentions. No matter what happens...” and reading the plaque at the bottom of the statue she said, “I know you will do your best to guide me because I will always be your little girl.” Elisabeth beamed as she read that last line because it was normally a sensitive topic, but today she felt empowered. She no longer felt embarrassed about saying “little” because she had found someone who would love her for that very thing. No matter your size, you never have to feel little if you accept that you are loved.

And as her dad grabbed her and gave her a big hug, he whispered, “You are the greatest treasure a father could ask for; I love you.”

The end.





That's a Brilliant Question

““M

ommy,” Lucy started, “does God ever get jealous of Santa?”

Lucy and her mom were waiting in line to see Santa when she asked this question. Half surprised by such a deep question and with her mind being focused on all she still had to do that afternoon, Lucy’s mom was stumped and tried to buy time by asking, “What do you mean?”

“Well, at Christmas Santa is everywhere,” Lucy explained.

“There are all kinds of decorations of him, we sing songs about him, there are all these movies about him, and we line up to ask for things from him, but we don’t do any of that for God.”

Now fully paying attention, Lucy’s mom still wasn’t sure what to say. She was blown away by how smart an observation this

was, especially from her young daughter. This was the same girl who occasionally needed to be reminded to use a tissue and not her brother's shirt to wipe her boogers. All Lucy's mom could come up with to say was about how there are lots of songs about God, too, but how helpful was that? Lucy was right, if there was a God, most people don't spend a lot of time caring about Him, especially compared to Santa, so does that make Him jealous?

Assuming her mom's silence was a sign that she didn't understand what was being shared, Lucy continued trying to explain herself. "At school I get jealous of Alice. No matter how much I try, no matter how good my grades are or how many awards I win, everyone cares more about her. She gets all the attention because she's prettier than me."

"That's not true," Lucy's mom quickly interrupted, "You're very pretty."

"Mom, it's just a fact. Alice is the prettiest girl in the class. It's just the way it is," Lucy bluntly corrected. "If you asked any girl in my class if they could look like anyone else there, they'd all say Alice because she's the prettiest. It doesn't mean we're not pretty. We're just not the prettiest. It's like you married Daddy, but he's no Shawn Mendes."

Again, Lucy's mom was blown away by her daughter's wisdom. That was very true – her husband was no Shawn Mendes; maybe Sean Astin from *Lord of the Rings* if his feet were really as hairy as his hobbit character's (her husband had unusually hairy feet). What

Lucy said wasn't a personal attack; it was just a fact. How did her daughter get so smart? It must be from her side of the family.

“If I can be jealous of Alice for getting all the attention, does that mean God can be jealous of Santa for getting all the attention?” repeated Lucy.

Giving up on cliché or pandering answers, Lucy's mom relented, “To be honest, Honey, I have no idea. That is an excellent question. I'll have to look into that one.”

Even though Lucy didn't get an answer, part of her was happy that she could stump her mom. If she couldn't get a satisfying answer, at least she could feel good knowing she came up with something too difficult for her mom to answer. It helped her feel a little more smart and grown up.

As any loving parent, Lucy's mom took this question very seriously. Later that day, she asked her husband – he had no idea. She asked her parents – they had no idea. She asked her friends – they had no idea. She posted it on her social media, and based on the terrible answers they posted, they had no idea. Lucy's mom Googled it and all she found was a passage in the Bible that said something about God being a jealous God who hates idols. But she couldn't say that. It made Santa sound like an idol – which he wasn't – and it made God sound mean – which He isn't... or so she hoped.

One night a few days later, while Lucy and her mom were watching *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* with Jim Carrey, she suddenly screamed, “I got it!” and she quickly paused the movie.

Lucy asked, “What’s wrong, Mommy?”

“I figured out the answer to your question: Does God get jealous of Santa?” triumphantly announced her mom.

“I asked that?” Lucy replied.

Lucy’s mom smiled to herself. Clearly, when Lucy asked that question, it was more of a passing thought than a deep-seated problem. Regardless, she continued, “Yes, you asked that question and mentioned how you get jealous of Alice.”

“Oh yeah,” Lucy responded starting to remember the conversation.

“Do you think Jim Carrey’s parents would be jealous of him for being in movies and being famous?” asked her mom.

“I don’t know... maybe,” suggested Lucy.

“As a parent, let me tell you – not a chance. A real parent would be proud. That’s *their* child doing that. It’s like everything they had done and been through was now justified because it helped *their* child achieve his dreams. Santa isn’t God’s equal, so God couldn’t be jealous. Santa is God’s child,” Lucy’s mom explained while flushing out her own thoughts on this.

“He is?” questioned Lucy.

“God created Santa, so Santa is His child like you and me.”

“I guess that makes sense,” agreed Lucy.

“Santa is also called St. Nicholas because originally he was a man known for his kindness and generosity and who performed a miracle that gave him the title Saint.”

“I thought the ‘St.’ was his first name,” admitted Lucy.

Her mom smiled at her daughter’s innocence as she continued,

“We don’t really know much about the real Santa. We don’t know if he really wears a red outfit and goes up and down chimneys.

Those are marketing ideas that help make the idea of him fun. One theory is his elves use portals through Christmas trees and nativity scenes to distribute presents, which makes more sense to me (people who read the first *Happy Squire Christmas* will get that reference). Originally, St. Nicholas was someone who loved people and helped change the world. How he became the Santa of today, we don’t really know, but we can know that God isn’t jealous of him.” Lucy’s mom was getting excited as she talked and processed this idea. Her thoughts continuing to drive forward, asked, “Do you think God loves Santa more than Mrs. Claus?”

“I don’t know... maybe,” answered Lucy.

“He loves them the same. They’re both his children,” her mom cheered. “Mrs. Claus plays a very important role with Santa. She’s definitely the brains of the operation. She’s the one keeping him on schedule and making sure he knows where the sleigh keys are like I do for your dad. Mrs. Claus doesn’t get the same recognition, but that’s not why she does it. She does it because, like Santa, she

also loves people. She does all of the background stuff because it helps Santa do his job. God is just as proud of her as Santa. In fact, God would really love that Mrs. Claus doesn't need any attention for what she does and that she doesn't get jealous of the attention her husband receives.

“I would also guess that if Jim Carrey has any brothers or sisters, they wouldn't be jealous of his success either. They'd be proud of him and proud that they were part of his life. In the same way, *he* should be proud of any of *their* successes. Any brothers or sisters would be more background like Mrs. Claus, but they're successes are just as important as his. We can all do things of great importance even if it doesn't mean we get our face on a poster. You smiling at someone and making them feel better is just as important as the comedian who makes a movie that helps people feel good because you're both making the world better. Plus, you asking such a great question like does God get jealous of Santa and making me think is just as important as when you say something silly and make me laugh.

“You should know I never get jealous of you because every success you have reminds me of how much I love you. It's just the same as when people are made happier by Santa. It reminds God of how much He loves Santa and that He wants us to bring joy to the world. God made joy and it's up to us to share it. Both Santa and

Mrs. Claus do that really well and that makes God happy. Does that make sense?”

“So God isn’t jealous of Santa because Santa is His child, and parents are always proud of their children’s successes. Also, brothers and sisters should be proud of each other because we all have successes no matter how small when we bring joy to the world,” condensed Lucy.

“Uh... yes, that summarizes everything I just said,” stammered her mom.

“And you don’t care that I’m not as pretty as Alice; you’re proud of me for who I am,” added Lucy.

“Actually,” started her mom, “I think you’re prettier than Alice, and I have better taste than a lot of people, so that should mean something. But either way, I am maxed out for how much I can love you. There is no more room for love to grow; I love you that much.”

“Thanks mom,” Lucy replied while hugging her.

After a moment to enjoy the embrace, Lucy’s mom clicked the remote to play the movie. Lucy and her mom continued to hold each other as they both watched the rest of their movie. Lucy felt loved because she could trust that her mom was proud of her successes even if the others in her class didn’t care, and her mom was happy because she figured out this very difficult question and could share such a loving moment with her daughter. Continuing

to watch one of their favorite Christmas movies, they both felt like their hearts had grown three times bigger that night.

The end.





Being in the Christmas Mood

Lori couldn't figure out why she wasn't in the Christmas mood. Normally she was ready by Halloween, but this year, she felt zero motivation to decorate the day after like she always did. That, of course, didn't stop her from doing it because she had a schedule to follow, she just didn't enjoy it the way she normally did – it felt more like work. She tried to get into it. She even put on her favorite Christmas music to find inspiration, but it did nothing. It made her sad not to be in the Christmas mood, especially when she knew there was a limited time for her to enjoy the season. Being an early decorator, she wasn't like the weird people who leave up their decorations until February. Her family had always been the ones to have everything up in November to enjoy the anticipation of the

season, and then everything would be put away to start New Year's Day clean and fresh.

Lori wasn't sure what her problem was, but after putting up the decorations, she felt worse. She wasn't sure if it was more guilt for not being in the Christmas mood or if it was just sadness because it was like she was missing out on something she loved. It'd be different if she had a reason not to be in the Christmas mood, but nothing terrible had happened. There hadn't been any deaths or anything even remotely tragic. It was just a normal year except she just wasn't in the Christmas mood... and she hated that.

Every day it was the same thing. She went to bed hoping the next morning she'd feel the Christmas spirit, but she'd wake up every day – nothing. She kept listening to her Christmas music and went to the malls to enjoy the Christmas decorations and do her shopping – nothing. She called friends to join her and she really enjoyed the mall visits with them, but she still didn't feel like her normal Christmas mood. She ended up making a game of giving money to every Salvation Army bucket she came across in her outings to see who the nicest bell ringer was, but in the end, she concluded they were all pretty great. She also realized, as much as she loved Christmas and doing things for others, she had no desire to do that job. She gave those volunteers a lot of credit. She didn't have the patience to stand there and she felt guilt asking anyone for anything even for a good cause. She hated that more than not having the Christmas spirit, but she was grateful others would do it because it was very important.

November quickly passed and Lori still didn't feel any different. She had been telling herself December would change that. She told herself she wasn't in the mood because it was too early even though she normally started feeling it as the stores first put out their artificial Christmas trees in the fall. When it was into the first week of December, she stepped up her Christmas mood pursuits. While wrapping gifts, she watched *Elf*, *Love Actually*, and *Scrooged*, and even though she teared up a bit like she always did at the end of those movies, she still didn't feel in the Christmas mood.

Lori went to her usual parties and they were always fun, but she still wasn't feeling it. She continued meeting up with friends and going for walks in the malls and even started doing drives looking for the best Christmas light displays. With everyone she met, she'd end up asking them about their favorite Christmas memories, and it helped her feel closer to them. These visits were always a lot of fun, but nothing seemed to crack this lack of Christmas feeling she normally had. During the second weekend of December, she spent an evening going through old photo albums and she ended up calling her sister to reminisce about their childhood. She enjoyed it very much, but it wasn't really a "Christmas" thing. The next night she phoned her parents and continued reminiscing with them because it might not put her in the Christmas mood, but it was really enjoyable.

Over the years, she had collected various Christmas shirts and ugly sweaters, and now she had enough for every day of December leading up to Christmas. These were great conversation starters

and she connected with everyone who took a minute to talk about her outfit. It was always a lot of fun, but that too didn't seem to make any difference for "feeling" her normal Christmas mood.

Even though Lori didn't feel Christmassy, she continued doing what she would normally do. She played music, watched Christmas specials, exchanged cookies with friends, went to parties, and kept meeting up with friends while the Cindy Lou Who song from *The Grinch*, "Where are you Christmas?" became her theme song. She listened to it over and over again. It didn't help her feel the Christmas mood she wanted, but it helped normalize what she was feeling.

When Christmas Eve arrived, Lori was feeling pretty low. Instead of getting the feeling she'd been trying so hard to find, she now felt a sense of loss like she had missed out on something. She ended up talking to her dad, a typical older family man who seemed to be void of a lot of emotion. She didn't normally go to him to share her heart, but it was like she knew if anyone could understand her situation, it was him. After sitting with him for a few awkward moments without either saying anything, she cleared her throat and took the plunge. She started by asking him if he ever felt that Christmas feeling. He smiled and told her how he loved Christmas as a child. He'd wake up early before his parents who wouldn't let him go downstairs to see the tree yet, so he'd wake up his brother and they'd share in the excitement together as they waited for the clock to say 7:30am. He confessed he hadn't really felt that kind of feeling since his childhood when he had dreams of Santa and his

reindeer. Her dad admitted that he sometimes wished he could feel that now, but he had come to fully enjoy seeing others get excited. It was strange to hear him say he enjoyed seeing others having emotion when he had so little, but it made sense. She always loved seeing others happy, too. Because he didn't show any emotion, she assumed he didn't care, but it was nice to know she had been wrong. When Lori confessed that this was the first year she didn't feel that Christmas feeling her dad laughed and told her how no one could've known that. She was surprised because she had felt sluggish as she lacked that same inspiration she normally had. He shared with her that she may have felt sluggish, but as an outsider she certainly didn't look that way. He pointed out to her that she actually did more than she normally did that year and how she looked fully immersed in the Christmas spirit. He noted how she was regularly out with friends and always seemed to have a new story to share from an experience she had from doing something festive. If she didn't feel this Christmas feeling, she certainly lived a Christmas filled attitude and lifestyle, which was a wonderful gift to others like him who got to bask in her outward joy.

She admitted that it had been a really fun Christmas season, but it was missing something.

Her dad then shared some wisdom that stuck with her: "Sometimes you just do something because it's the right thing to do.

Sometimes you'll get into the mood while you're doing it like if you start exercising you can sometimes get into it, and other times you won't, but either way, you still did the right thing by exercising, and

that's the important part. Life shouldn't be about doing things because of a feeling. Feelings are more likely to lead to overeating and drinking too much. Instead, we should be doing things because they're the right thing to do. Even if it doesn't 'feel' good in the moment, one day it will lead to a greater sense of happiness, which is a nice word for being content. By directly pursuing a feeling like happiness, it will only elude us. We find it when we stop trying to find it and we simply live the way we should – with patience and kindness.” Her dad admitted he rarely feels like doing things, but he does them because it was the right thing to do (or to avoid being nagged by her mother). It could be waking up in the morning and going to work, exercising, or even going to bed at night. His body for some reason was always fighting against what it knew it should be doing because it wanted something else. He then got a little more personal as he told her, “Feelings can be helpful guides or terrible liars; you need to be careful not to let the lies bring you down. What you need to be particularly careful of is your feelings telling you to feel guilt for something you shouldn't. A lot of good people are tortured by guilt, especially women because you typically have an increased nurturing and empathy side men lack. One of my roles with your mom is to point out how she doesn't have to feel guilty about something because otherwise she'll feel bad about everything even things that are completely out of her control.

“This Christmas season, I hope you stop feeling guilty for not having this feeling you wanted. If anything you should be proud of yourself.” Lori laughed at that thought, but her dad continued,

“You did so many wonderful things and you created so many memories this year whether visiting friends or calling your family to reminisce, and you didn’t do any of that because of some feeling it gave you.”

“Yeah, but I was trying to feel something, so I don’t feel like that counts,” admitted Lori.

“And that was a wonderful example of a lie,” smiled her dad. “I guess you’re more like your mom than I thought.” Lori smiled at getting caught for letting the lie come out. “You may feel that way, but it doesn’t mean it’s should. You need to retrain your brain to be proud of your accomplishments no matter how small. That’s actually part of what it means to be happy – living a life of thankfulness and enjoying what you’re able to do. What you did this past Christmas season, doing something not because of a feeling, but because it was the right thing is the first step toward that. This year may not feel as good as previous years, but it was your most successful year for living with the heart of what Christmas means – love. Doing it for a feeling is actually selfish. One of the things I’ve learned in my old age is that sometimes the worst times bring out the greatest lessons and the fondest memories. For instance, this talk will go down as one of my favorite moments I’ve had with you in your grownup years. I used to love when you were a little girl and you’d come to me for help; it made me feel important. You haven’t needed me for awhile and that’s okay because I know I helped raise you well and now you’re such a strong and intelligent woman. For you to come to me

today, though... well, that's the best Christmas present you could give me. It's good to feel valued, and I don't get to feel that very often anymore. That's the problem with aging. People see you as a source of work instead a source of help.

Lori and her dad spent the next few minutes sitting in silence. She didn't have a lot to say to her dad after that, but she knew she didn't have to. He got what he needed – someone who trusted and respected him enough to ask for his opinion and then listen without defensiveness or complaint. She couldn't remember the last time she had asked him for advice. She remembered she had stopped because she didn't want to be a bother, which led to her forgetting how wise her dad was and not feeling as close to him. Here she was hurting herself by not asking for his guidance when her so-called sacrifice was also limiting her relationship with her dad, which hurt him. She would have to work on letting people who love her help her, and she would begin by being quicker to ask her dad for advice. After all, what better way to make her dad feel respected than asking his opinion? She didn't have to do what he suggested, but at least he got to feel part of her life and able to offer something. On the plus side, she now had a good New Year's resolution.

Years later, Lori recounted that time with her dad at his funeral. She told everyone how that was the first time that she understood him and how wise he really was. He always did the right thing because it was the right thing to do and not because he necessarily enjoyed it. He let his feelings offer guidance, but he was careful

not to follow the lies. That was one of the reasons there was so little drama in his life, and in the long run, it helped him find a sense of peace and contentment that most never find. She added that this taught her that quiet people sometimes have the best ideas; they just need the right opportunity or question to help them share it. And as he shared that night, sometimes the worst times bring out the greatest lessons and fondest memories, so hopefully his death will lead to something amazing because it was one of the hardest things she ever had to face. She was glad she had gotten better at asking him for help, but now that he was gone, when she needed him the most, he wasn't there... but she would cherish his lessons. She would also do her best to share them with others to inspire them to be closer to their own parents. As difficult as it was to lose her dad, it was better to have been as close as they were and miss him now than to not have had that connection and be fine now. Life is better when it's filled with love even if later it leads to loss because love is what makes life worth living.

The end.





Don't Underestimate Others

“Greetings everyone,” announced the Christmas tree angel. “We are officially starting the Christmas season as the tree is decorated, the humans are asleep, and all is well.”

As the angel paused, all of the other Christmas decorations in the room began cheering to celebrate the new Christmas season. After a long time in storage, the ornaments were always grateful to be up and mingling.

“I would like to make one quick announcement before we continue on in our celebrations this evening,” continued the angel. “I recently came to the realization that being at the top of the tree, I am the most important. I would like to say thank you for this honor. It is a privilege being better than all of you.” As all of the

ornaments realized what the angel was saying – something very unangelic – the once cheering decorations began to mutter among themselves. “Yes, the quiet mutters of adulation add to the sense of admiration I feel from all of you,” thanked the angel.

“Actually,” one of the tree ornaments began, “We were discussing how you missed something.” The angel raised an eyebrow to suggest he was partly curious and partly pandering. “The ornaments agree; we’re the most important feature of the Christmas tree and, therefore, the most important. You are so small while we’re a team who beautify the whole thing. We’re the most important, especially because we each represent a different memory whether it’s a family trip, a fun shopping time, or a gift. We are easily the most valuable and would like you to acknowledge you were wrong.” As the ornament finished speaking, all of the other ornaments cheered in agreement.

As the ornaments’ cheering began to settle, the tree began to speak. “It’s nice that you mere decorations can think you’re important; that’s good for you,” smirked the tree. “But I’m clearly the most important because without me, you’re all nothing. The angel and ornaments are just one fall from being thrown out. You’re all dust collectors while I bring a taste of nature to the room.”

This time the angel and the ornaments were in agreement as they started to criticize the tree for his comment and this continued until the Christmas tree lights began to flicker, which got everyone’s attention. “We are in agreement with all of you. The tree is important because he is large, but unfortunately, large doesn’t mean

smart. And the ornaments are right insofar that being a team makes them special, but,” suddenly the lights went out, “clearly you’re not that important since you can’t be seen when the lights are out. Similarly, the angel is beautiful, but mostly because she holds a light.”

“I’m a him,” corrected the angel. “Why did you think I was a girl?” he asked while flattening his dress.

Turning back on, a very confident set of lights in unison shared, “We lights are the obvious choice for being the most important, especially because we can be hung anywhere with or without a tree and we make everything look beautiful.”

While the rest of the tree began to bicker, the tree skirt cleared her mouth, “Ahem.” When the bickering had a pause, the tree skirt spoke, “I think you’re all wonderful, but I have to say as beautiful and wonderful as you all are, my job is the most important.”

“How can you say that?” sneered the angel.

“Because I have to hide the tree stand. No matter how beautiful you all are, if it wasn’t for me, you’d be stuck being overall less attractive because the tree stand’s ugliness,” laughed the tree skirt.

This comment led to all the decorations taking a break from their bickering to make fun of the tree stand. The tree stand could’ve ignored this slander as he was used to being hidden and missing out on the fun, but the tree skirt moved herself to show him to everyone. Being seen while hearing these attacks was too much for

the tree stand. Normally he would remain quiet, but this time he spoke up.

“You know I can hear you?” exclaimed the tree stand.

“What? We’re just being honest,” replied the angel.

“I’ve tried to tell myself that you make fun of me in a playful way,” confessed the tree stand. “But I was clearly wrong and you don’t like me.”

“It’s not that we don’t like you,” corrected one of the ornaments.

“We’re just better than you,” added the ornaments, tree, and lights simultaneously, which led to a chorus of laughter as they realized they all said the same thing at the same time.

“So I guess I’m not needed and can leave,” threatened the tree stand.

“Go for it,” encouraged the angel, “We can handle not having something ugly around here.”

“That’ll make my job easier,” cheered the tree skirt. “My only job will be to accent the rest of the tree and decorations now.”

As screeching noises of loosening screws could be heard, the tree began to wobble.

“Whoa, tree,” commented the angel, “What are you doing?”

“I’m not doing anything,” defended the tree.

“Why are you wobbling?” questioned one of the ornaments.

“Tree, steady yourself,” demanded the angel.

“I can’t,” exclaimed the tree. “Why don’t the lights shine brighter?”

“That won’t do anything,” corrected the lights.

“That’s why I’m better than the lights,” smirked the angel.

“If you’re so great, why don’t you do something about the wobbling?” insisted one of the ornaments.

“Why don’t you use your artificial wings to fly and steady the tree,” joked the tree skirt.

The angel arrogantly smirked and tried to fly only to discover he couldn’t move his wings no matter how much he grunted and groaned.

“Why doesn’t the tree skirt hold up the tree?” yelled the lights

“I’m a skirt,” exclaimed the tree skirt, “I’m a fashion accessory. What am I supposed to do? The only thing I can do is protect the floor from being scratched when you fall”

“We’re too beautiful to fall,” complained the ornaments.

“I’m too beautiful *and* attractive to fall,” grunted the angel still trying to fly.

“Those are the same thing,” corrected the lights.

“I miss the tree stand,” confessed the tree.

“I miss the tree stand and the thing that holds the tree,” announced the angel.

“Those are the same thing,” corrected the lights. “Stop trying to one up everyone.”

“How do we get the tree stand back?” asked one of the ornaments.

“Come back, tree stand,” chanted the lights.

“Come back, tree stand,” chanted the ornaments.

“Come back, tree stand,” chanted the angel. “I love you more than anyone else.”

“You really have a problem,” droned the tree skirt.

“Seriously,” interjected the tree stand. “I’m right here. I just loosened my grips on the tree. I haven’t gone anywhere.”

“Oh good,” cheered the ornaments.

“You’re our hero,” cheered the lights.

“I don’t know if I’d say hero,” grunted the angel still trying to fly.

“You know I haven’t agreed to staying,” corrected the tree stand.

“But you have to,” pleaded the tree. “I can’t stand up without you.”

“Will you treat me with respect and kindness?” negotiated the tree stand.

“What’s respect?” asked the angel in an oddly sincere tone as he stopped trying to fly.

“I think it’s that thing you give others when you want to use them,” replied one of the ornaments.

“No, it’s treating others as equals,” corrected the tree stand.

“That’s hilarious,” laughed the angel. “You think I have an equal.”

“We all have our value,” taunted the tree stand. “The lights brighten things up and the ornaments sparkle, which adds to the prettiness. The angel on top gives the tree a fancy top and the tree itself gives a place for everyone to hang, but you all need me or you’ll fall. We all have our place.”

“How are you so smart?” asked the tree.

“You need to be smart when you’re ugly,” answered the angel.

The tree started to shake again as the tree stand purposely shook it.

“We’re sorry the angel is an idiot,” apologized the tree.

“He sold his brains for better looks,” joked the tree skirt.

“Looks are very important,” genuinely affirmed the angel.

“We promise to be good,” exclaimed the ornaments, “and to try to prevent the angel from speaking too much.”

“So do we,” announced the lights.

“Us, too,” added the tree and tree skirt.

“And I want to thank you tree stand because you really are important,” started an angelic voice. “You remind us that being center stage doesn’t make you the most important. It just makes

you the most visible. And sometimes it's those behind the scenes you don't see that are the most important for making things happen. Individually we have our strengths, but together we are so much more, and that's possible because of you. We are a team and you help unite us all together, which makes you incredibly important. The lights can still be lights, a tree is just a tree, decorations can still be pretty, but we are at our best when we're brought together in this symphony of visual beauty."

"That was very insightful Angel," complimented the tree.

"I said something?" asked the angel.

"You just shared a really great speech about how we are a team," pointed out the ornaments.

"A team? Yeah, that wasn't me," laughed the angel.

"It was actually me," confessed the tree stand. "I've been working on my impersonations."

"Wow, that was really good," complimented the tree. "You were so good, you even made the angel sound smart for once."

"I highly doubt that," corrected the angel.

"I'm glad I can help *some* of you be a little wiser," shared the tree stand. "It really is important to recognize that trying to be more important than others is a very foolish endeavor. We need to recognize the value of everyone around us, so we can share the proper respect because we all have value."

“I liked you better when you sounded like me,” complained the angel.

“And we like you better when you’re not talking,” joked the tree skirt.

“Yes, staring at me really is the best way to appreciate my beauty,” smiled the angel to himself.

And with that, all the decorations being a little wiser and more appreciative of each other, enjoyed the rest of the night celebrating being brought out of storage and the excitement of what the season would bring.

The end.





The “Perfect” Christmas Party (The Stressed Woman at Christmas, Pt. 3)

Please Note: This is Part 3 of “The Stressed Woman at Christmas.” Parts 1 and 2 can be found in *The Happy Squire: Christmas stories to encourage & inspire*, but readers don’t need to be familiar with the first two in order to enjoy this one.

It had been just over a year since Jen lost her dad, and as you’d expect, the level of grief was greatly improved and a new normal was mostly forged.

Time has a tendency to make things better if we let ourselves work through the emotions. Of course, it can also do the opposite if we hide from the pain by doing things like drinking or being too busy to process the hurt needed for

healing. This is particularly a problem if we let resentment set in and take control. Fortunately, Jen was forced to face a lot of her pain head-on when she ran the Christmas Eve party last year, and it did wonders for starting her on a path toward the healing she needed for losing her dad and reconnecting with her husband. It even helped her connect with her older sister, Carol. Jen had struggled with her sister for most of her life because of how perfect Carol was and how everything she touched was pristine. Carol had always held the family Christmas Eve parties, and every year everyone who attended thought they were perfect... except for her husband who was able to convince her to stop hosting them because of what it did to her and their relationship. Hence, Jen was in charge of last year's party, which was designed to be a flavor all her own. Instead of pristine, she went for fun. Unfortunately, what she got was the craziest disaster party possible. Her well-planned Christmas Eve party couldn't have been more of a disaster if she had planned for it to blow up in her face. Everything went wrong, yet in the end, it was everything she could have dreamed. Everyone who attended the party – and there was a lot of people who showed up including neighbors who weren't even invited but stopped by to see the commotion – raved about it for months. Jen felt like she had really done something special the way people talked about it. It certainly was an event no one could forget, but chaos has a way of being memorable, especially when we're able to joke about it later.

Jen could hardly believe it'd already been a year since her dad had passed – a feeling many of us older people have: Where did the time go? On one hand, it felt like forever since she had talked to him, and on the other, it felt like it was just yesterday that she was saying good-bye to him after one of her weekly visits – time is weird that way. Whatever the feeling, the reality was it was a new Christmas season, and she was again put in charge of hosting the annual Christmas Eve party... and she couldn't wait. The previous Christmas, Carol the perfectionist was incredibly impressed with how well Jen handled herself when everything that was out of her power went wrong. As someone who needed to learn not to be so uptight, Carol found Jen to be an inspiration for being calm in the storm. Jen's attitude and how well the disasters were handled (and the disasters themselves) helped the party be the most fun anyone could have dreamed of experiencing at a Christmas Eve party. Her older sister's validation meant a lot to her because even though there was some resentment for Carol's perfection, Jen had always looked up to her – a natural response for a younger sibling. This event was the catalyst to a stronger bond between the sisters and a new found trust. It was like Jen needed to see how much her sister valued her in order to be friends and not just "sisters." As it often is the case with people we care about, they love us more and see more good in us than we see in ourselves because we tend to be blinded by our own self criticism and impossible standards. This is why when we share our insecurities with a loved one, they're often surprised by what's said. To them, we're just us while to us, we're just imperfect.

Because last year was so life changing, Jen couldn't wait for this Christmas. It was going to be even bigger! Jen was particularly excited as people would message her saying how much they looked forward to the party and they asked if they could bring some friends. To Jen, the more the merrier. It was Christmas... and part of her wanted more people to see how incredible her Christmas Eve party was going to be, and it was going to be incredible.

The biggest problem for Jen was she kept having people ask to help – not the worst problem to have. The year before she had been adamant about doing it herself until she was desperate and asked her separated husband to help, which led to their reconciliation. If working with him was so beneficial, Jen started thinking maybe letting others be involved wasn't such a bad idea, so she let certain family and friends join in. The only person who refused to help that Jen would've liked was Carol. Carol would've been happy to help, but she wasn't allowed. She had promised her husband that she'd never get involved in another Christmas Eve party again because it was like her drug – one little taste and she'd lose control by becoming super controlling. Controlling people are funny that way – losing control is becoming controlling. At the same time, Carol was happy to bring her kids over to help because it was good for them to be involved and learn a few things.

With the help of family and a few friends, the house was being decorated in a fraction of the time as the previous year. This led to a cheerful and relaxed atmosphere with new ideas being added. A few were even inspired by *The Great Christmas Light Fight*, which is a

fantastic show. People really enjoyed getting together because it ended up leading to a lot of joking around and some heartfelt moments. It's amazing what people will share when they're given space to talk and the focus is on something like putting up a Christmas tree. It was like they were having little parties before the party.

Jen couldn't help but be in a great mood as she anticipated the most amazing Christmas party ever. It was easy for her to be the leader of both the party and the overall craziness. Unlike the previous year, that December was cold and getting plenty of snow. It was like God, Himself, wanted this to be a great party. Jen was so excited she was even open to the guys setting up a winterized Slip'N Slide that had curves to be like the luge at the Olympics. She was going so wild and crazy, she let the guys set up a slide off of her roof that would shoot them into the yard where curling rings were set up for human curling – it was going to be nuts. Unlike the previous year, for Jen, the nuttier the better.

When the night before Christmas Eve finally came, Jen could barely sleep. She was like a child too excited to close her eyes because of the anticipation for Christmas morning except her excitement wasn't about getting gifts; she was about to blow people's minds with fun. She felt like what she imagined Santa Claus felt as he got ready to fly Christmas Eve.

The one thing that Jen never admitted to people was part of her was excited to see what would go wrong. Not only was she okay with things falling apart, she wanted them to because the party the

year before was largely so magical because of things falling apart and being able to laugh about it later. Since everything had been going perfectly so far, in Jen's mind disaster was just about to hit... and she couldn't wait; she was ready to make some big memories like last year.

The morning of the party, the caterer called and Jen was ready to be told bad news like last year – nope. Instead, they were calling to confirm that everything was going as planned and then they showed up early and were set up with time to spare – that was strange. They even brought extra food because they had leftovers from a fancy event the night before, which meant there was a ridiculous amount of food for the party. She was also surprised with the petting zoo people who showed up early with extra nativity type animals because another event was canceled at the last minute – that was shocking. The set up looked amazing out front with all the extra animals and the decorations Jen and her helpers made. Even later that night, the Slip'N Slide and human curling with a slide on the roof went without a single issue – super shocking. It was like guardian angels were watching over the racers. There was the perfect amount of snow for both of those activities and the temperature was comfortable enough for people to be outside and enjoy themselves without anyone getting carried away. On top of all of this, with all the anticipation for the party, everyone was on time with a large number of people being extra early. When Jen offered for them to come in the house early, they politely declined as they wanted a chance to enjoy the beautiful decorations outside.

The one thing Jen assumed would only have a few participants was the costume contest. Instead, everyone showed up in something even if it was a bed sheet wrapped to make them look like a shepherd or they used a white bed sheet with wings to be an angel. One couple rented a two person donkey costume and spent most of the night wearing it – that was dedication. There were even a few kids with a papier-mâché octopus and lobster costume in homage to *Love Actually*. Even the pets people brought had costumes. There were dogs in wrapping paper to make them look like a present and dogs with more elaborate costumes like elves and reindeer. This made it easier for people to be in a lighthearted mood and mingle with strangers. Everything fell into place and all the guests had a great time.

At the end of the night, everyone who was there cleaned up their own mess before they left – the best gift to give a host – so Jen and her family didn't have a lot to do. It really was the perfect party (unless you're uptight and prefer boringness). If a perfect party includes friends, friends of friends, and a few strangers coming together with warmth and openness, crazy activities that connected people with fun and laughter, and real Christmas spirit, this was the perfect party. Everyone showed up with great expectations and left fully satisfied, which is a feat in itself. Great expectations are rarely met. In this case, however, everyone was happy with that perfect night... everyone except Jen, and that made her feel even worse. She knew she should be grateful everyone was so happy, but she couldn't shake feeling disappointed.

Like any proper host, Jen kept her feelings to herself and put on a good front. When the only people left at the house were her family and those who helped do the original set up and they were enjoying a tea or cider relaxing by the Christmas tree, Jen snuck off to be by herself for a few minutes. She needed a chance to clear her head before putting on her host-smile again. Going to her en-suite bathroom, she shook her arms around like she was trying to shake a bug off. After a few minutes, her husband came in the room, announcing “There she is!” and then he wrapped his arms around her in a celebration hug – a very one sided celebration hug. Feeling her arms be a little limp – or very limp for someone who should be excited – he instinctively asked, “Are you okay?”

Without meaning to, without even wanting to, Jen started to cry, and she continued to cry for a few minutes because she was so embarrassed for crying in the first place. Not sure what the best reaction was, Tom remained silent and simply held her. In his mind, as long as she wasn’t yelling, he was okay (he was such a guy).

After a few minutes, Jen gave him the “it’s time to let go” release, and he obliged. Stepping away from him, Jen turned her back and apologized for the emotion. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she started. “I’m sorry for crying.”

Confused by the tears, Tom asked, “Do you think you’re emotional because this is the emotional crash after planning such a big party or is it something to do with your dad’s passing last year?”

“I don’t know,” Jen said denying her feelings. “I really don’t!”
After a short pause and seeing her husband stare at her completely confused, she continued, “It’s stupid...”

“What is it?” Tom pushed.

She sighed and confessed, “I’m disappointed.”

“How?” blurted Tom. “It was the perfect party?”

“Yeah, I know,” Jen agreed. “I said it was stupid because it was the perfect night, but that’s the problem. There wasn’t anything crazy that happened. Nothing went wrong. It was perfect!”

“And your upset about that?” gently questioned a very confused Tom.

“You know why I liked your crazy Slip’N Slide idea and your slide off the roof? Part of me thought, paramedics having to be called would make for a great story later.”

“What?” Tom asked. “You wanted my idea to fail?”

“Not fail,” Jen corrected. “I just wanted a great story. Last year the best stories happened when things were a disaster, and that’s what I wanted for this year. I wanted to give people some more great stories that they could talk and laugh about together for years to come, but instead of that, it was the perfect night.”

“That’s a very generous yet strange idea,” Tom said while pondering what she said.

With her head bowed low, Jen shared, “That’s why I’m so torn because I’m happy the party was so great, but I’m also sad because it feels like I failed at giving people something bigger than a perfect party... and I feel stupid about it.”

“Well, I’m not sure what to do with this,” confessed Tom. “I’m sorry you’re so conflicted.” Tom trailed off not knowing what to say or do. It was easier when he was hugging her because now he just stood feeling helpless.

Just then, Carol called, “Jen, are you in here?” When Carol found them and the awkward mood in the room, she hesitantly added, “I was wondering if you wanted more tea, but I’m guessing you’re okay.”

Tom took this as his chance to leave, “Actually, this is good timing. I was hoping to play with the kids a little. Would you mind hanging out with your sister for a minute?” Tom said this with a tone of compassion and without any feel of a jab or underhanded intent. As he left, he passed Jen and added, “Thank you for your honesty. I really appreciate you trusting me enough to share that. We can talk later after I’ve had a chance to process this, and hopefully I’ll have something better to offer.”

After Tom left the room and there was a moment of silence, Carol tried to joke as she moved closer to her sister. ““Well, this is fun. This is like our own party.”

“Thank you for all your support,” offered Jen as a conversation starter. “I know it must have been hard for you to let your family help while you gave me space.”

“Are you kidding? It was amazing! It was free babysitting!” laughed Carol. “And the kids had a blast learning how to use tools and paint like Dad taught you. It was a Christmas gift in itself.” After taking a moment to enjoy her own musings, Carol became a little more sincere, “So how is it the Queen of Christmas Eve seems down after the perfect party?”

Not knowing how to answer this without sounding silly, Jen blurted, “Because it was too perfect!”

Carol laughed, “You can never be too perfect.” As someone who struggled with an addiction to perfection, Carol knew the perfectionism trap well, and had learned to joke about it to remove some of its power over her.

“That’s the problem! Nothing went wrong! All night I was waiting for something to explode or for the ambulance to need to be called or some type of calamity like last year.” Jen paused to rethink her point. “After last year’s party, the best stories were about the things that went wrong. Things that go right aren’t as fun to talk about. Tonight was so perfect, I ruined the fun people will have talking about it later.”

“Ruined the fun?” laughed Carol. “Perfection is the best! Perfect is something you can be proud of and rub in other people’s faces... if you’re that kind of person.” Carol laughed at herself, “I probably

should've thought about what I was going to say before I said that last part."

"See? You made a mistake and we can laugh after," pointed out Jen. "If you had said the perfect thing, it would've been... boring."

"Yeah, and boring is amazing," shared Carol with a sigh of relief. "I love boring. There's no drama or sense of chaos. There's control."

"And blasé feelings," added Jen.

"And there's freedom to relax," countered Carol. "Two of the reasons I struggle with perfectionism is for a sense of accomplishment and admiration. I'm working on not needing that second one as much, but ultimately, what really draws me to perfection is to feel free. I want to be free of worry and guilt..." Carol paused as she heard herself. "I guess what I'm looking for is to be more like my husband who's easygoing..." Carol paused again surprised at that realization. "Don't tell him I admitted that," she joked.

"Growing up, I watched how perfect you were, and how effortless you made it look. I knew I couldn't keep up with you, so I always tried to be different. While you were perfect, I learned how to be great at not being perfect."

"First, being perfect is never effortless. It is exhausting," countered Carol. "Second, like this party, you learned to be perfect in your own way." Jen looked at Carol confused. "I have my way of doing things, but there's not just one way to do something... I can't

believe I said that. I'm always telling Frank to do things my way... shoot. I'm not sure I like this conversation," laughed Carol. "I keep correcting my own way of thinking."

Jen smiled at her sister's realizations and appreciated that it wasn't a lecture as much as it was a conversation of discovery for both of them. Jen started, "What's funny to me is I can't believe we're having this conversation. A couple years ago... I wouldn't have been able to stand hearing you tell me what to do."

"And I wouldn't be able to admit I was learning I was wrong," added Carol.

"It's amazing how at our ages, we can still learn things," smiled Jen.

"I think we needed to be at our ages to learn these things," admitted Carol. "I used to feel so much pressure to constantly prove something. I don't even know who I was trying to impress; it was like some made up image of judgmental mean girls. Needing to be perfect, I didn't have very much patience for anyone, especially myself. I really wasn't very nice at letting people share their hearts. I was too busy being so-called perfect."

"I like the new you," affirmed Jen.

"I like the new us," replied Carol who reached over and put her arm around her sister to pull her in for a half hug.

"Do you remember when we were kids and we went to Montreal? Everything went wrong. It was terrible, but we couldn't stop talking about it." shared Jen. "Last year's Christmas Eve party

reminded me of that and it was amazing getting to laugh about it after.”

“And do you remember our trip to Disney?” asked Carol. “It was perfect. Everything went the way it was supposed to go.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t as much fun to talk about after,” pointed out Jen.

“Exactly, but it was still a wonderful trip,” countered Carol. “Both trips had their place. The one trip gave us stories to laugh about after and the other one gave us fun in the moment. If every trip was a disaster, why would we keep going on trips? We need times of both. When things are smooth, they give us a break from chaos. People like me try too hard to avoid the chaos, but as I’m learning, perfect doesn’t have to be ‘perfect.’ And as I learn this, I’m becoming happier instead of constantly anxious.” Carol paused. “This new place I’m in is so much better.”

“So what you’re saying is I shouldn’t be so uptight about wanting things to *not* go well and having chaos and not just because it sounds crazy?” replied Jen.

“That really is who we are isn’t it? You were always chaos and I was always perfection driven,” smiled Carol.

“They say the first and second born are always very different,” pointed out Jen.

“Yeah, because first borns use up all the greatness genes,” teased Carol.

“Or the arrogant genes,” countered Jen with a laugh.

After pausing to enjoy the moment, Carol stood up from the edge of the bed where she was sitting beside her sister. “Well, I’m going to go downstairs, and will let you join the perfect, non-chaos after-party when you’re ready.”

Jen took a few minutes by herself to think about all that had been said. Thinking about the moment she just had with her sister made her smile, and what she said made a lot of sense. Jen wiped her face of any remaining tear residue, and then headed downstairs to join everyone. When she saw them huddled by the tree, she cleared her throat and spoke before anyone had a chance to say anything. “I want to thank you all. Tonight was the perfect night and that was largely because of you. I’m not used to things being so perfect...” Jen took a breath, “But it was a nice change.” She took a moment to look at her sister before she continued, “Last year was... nuts.” Everyone chuckled to themselves. “I did most of it by myself because I felt I needed to prove something, but this year with all of your help, planning the event was more fun than I knew was possible. I took a few chances like I even let Tom make a slide off the roof and nothing bad happened. It remained perfect from start to finish.”

“Next year we’ll make a ramp and have the paramedics on standby,” joked Tom.

“The downside of perfection is there aren’t a lot of stories, so I’m sorry tonight won’t be very much fun to talk about this year, but I blame all of you for that,” continued Jen trying to joke.

“No stories? Are you kidding? Tonight was amazing!” interrupted her mom. “Did you see the costumes?”

“I won the Slip’N Slide luge contest,” cheered her nephew.

“I met some great people,” added her niece.

“You mean you met a boy,” teased her brother who got a punch to the shoulder.

“Sometimes perfection can lead to its own stories,” smiled Carol.

“I guess so,” smiled Jen in return.

“Christmas group hug!” cheered Tom as he started to herd people together.

As the group had a big hug, Jen realized the main driving force behind her desire for the chaos and stories was to feel connected, and in that moment, the one with her sister a few minutes earlier, and all the times in preparing for the party with her family and friends, that’s exactly what she had experienced – connection. Her other desire was for everyone to feel joy. As she felt the warmth of everyone around her, Jen accepted that this Christmas Eve party did just that – it gave everyone joy. She didn’t need chaos; she didn’t even need the perfect food or the petting zoo. All she needed was to give people a space and reason to get together and share their love with each other. Joy is found with those who want

to experience it. And by letting everyone help prepare for the party and getting to spend time with them, she had experienced that same joy, too. Sharing life with the right people is where joy is found.

As everyone was in a group hug, someone screamed. It turned out they had some icing smeared on their leg and a goat was licking it and freaked them out.

“Looks like the event wasn’t completely perfect,” laughed Tom. “The petting zoo people are missing a member.”

“That’s actually my Christmas gift for you,” Jen dryly said. After seeing the panic in his eyes, she started laughing, “I’m joking! I’m not that crazy... yet. Give me a few years, and I’ll have my own petting zoo.”

The year before Jen needed to find peace with losing her dad, and this year she needed to find peace with being good with how life turned out. Whether things are perfect, chaos, or somewhere in between, there is always good to be found when our hearts are willing to see it.

The end.





Returning Gnome (The Importance of Being Nice, Part 2)

Please Note: This sequel was inspired by my Mom’s gentle comment that the original story found in *The Happy Squire: Christmas stories to encourage & inspire* didn’t end in a very cheerful way. Without her sharing, this story would likely never have been written; thus proving honesty (in a nice way) is the best policy. This is a longer story for me, but it gives some great lessons before reaching a happy ending. The best news is ***you don’t need to read the original story to understand this one***, but if you want to go back and read it, I won’t stop you... obviously.

Chapter 1 (of 2): After the End

It had been six months since Scott left his family for another woman. When he was living with them, Scott and his wife, Eleanor, would have such explosive fights their son, Rik, would hide under his bed scared and alone until one day a visitor showed up and changed everything. That visitor was a gnome named Gnick (gnomes don't pronounce the "g"). Gnomes have been very good at hiding the fact that they are Santa's eyes and ears in the world for who's been naughty or nice (so you'll want to be nice to gnomes for goodness sake). They've never received the same kind of fame as the reindeer and elves have largely because they've tried to hide their role in order to be more effective at their job. At one point, people were close to figuring out they weren't just ceramic figures in gardens, and that's when they started pushing the idea of Elf on the Shelf. Gnick, however, had been tired of seeing children grow up to be mean because their parents were; he wanted to break the cycle. One fateful day, Gnick's anger at Rik's parents selfishness for not noticing Rik hiding under the bed left him willing to risk going against the gnome code in order to help. At first, Gnick didn't do anything too drastic; he simply waited under the bed in order to be there for Rik when he hid from his parents' fighting. Soon Gnick took this a step further and became a mysterious voice of wisdom that helped Rik's mom see how she wasn't the innocent victim in her conflict that she wanted to believe she was and that her son needed her.

Even though Eleanor was reluctant at first, Gnick ended up teaching her how to have self-control and be nice to her struggling husband. It's never easy being nice to someone who has been as hurtful as she felt Scott had been, but she managed to be nice to him under Gnick's guidance. Gnick had promised that after a month of being patient and kind, Scott would trust her more and, in turn, be a better husband. This seemed to be working until at the end of the month, instead of Scott confessing his renewed love for her, he confessed that he was seeing another woman. Scott's honesty led to him panicking and leaving the house. Later, instead of returning home to talk about it and face the repercussions for his actions, he stayed with the other woman afraid of losing her. Scott had actually planned on leaving Eleanor weeks before, but her being so nice made him second guess his plan. Being nice has a way of making it harder for the other person to leave a marriage – big surprise (yes, this writer likes sarcasm). Unfortunately, Scott had found himself too entrenched with this other woman to turn back to his wife... or so he thought.

To make matters worse, Scott loved his son, but his new partner had three kids of her own and she wasn't very keen on sharing. With his new partner making it almost impossible for him to have time to see Rik, Scott's visits became fewer and fewer despite his desire to see his son actually increasing. That meant that not only did Scott have to deal with the guilt of leaving his wife when she had become a better person, he had to wrestle with the knowledge he was abandoning his son. To make matters worse, like many people who are embarrassed by their bad choices, Scott had a hard

time even calling or messaging Rik because every time he saw Rik's name, it reinforced his guilt for leaving and the incredible sense of loss he felt. Guilt, shame, and regret, although proper emotions to feel at a time like this, further pushed Scott to hide.

Meanwhile, since the night Scott left, Rik and his mom had become all the closer. Their bond had greatly improved after Gnick helped Eleanor see how scared and hurt Rik was, and she was able to start to help him feel like more of a priority over her own anger and spitefulness. For seven months now, they had been growing more connected and as their relationship grew, their strength as individuals also grew. Despite Eleanor losing her husband and having the first month be filled with heavy grieving and struggling with the betrayal, she was steadily pushing herself to become a better person. (Women tend to be quicker to recover because they're more likely to actually face their pain rather than hide from it like men tend to do.) She missed Scott, but the break from the fighting and her intense struggle to be nice to him every day was much appreciated – being nice to those you live with is hard. Sometimes space can be very helpful. On top of that, with Gnick's guidance, she joined several women's groups where she made friends that added to her self confidence and healing. Between having a life and feeling a stronger connection with her son and other women, Eleanor found a greater sense of contentment than she had previously known. She started to feel like the person she had always wanted to be. Gnick may have been wrong when he told her that if she was nice she could save the marriage, but he was right when he said she would be proud of herself if she was nice.

She liked it so much, despite Scott leaving, she continued to be nice and hold her head up high. She may have originally thought Gnick was nuts for suggesting she be nice to her “enemy,” but it really was the best way to live because holding your head high is always better than having self pity.

Rik had also been doing a lot better. Not only had it been seven months since the last time he had hid under the bed, he was doing better at school. He had made some new friends and he joined a few school teams that gave him something to practice when he was at home looking for something to do. Even more, Rik was much happier seeing his mom happy, and she was happier seeing him happy, which created this wonderful circle of increasing happiness and healing... at least there was happiness a lot of the time now. There were still some terrible moments as Rik really missed his dad.

Scott had never really been the most involved dad, but like most young kids, Rik still had a special place in his heart for his dad. Even though Scott worked a lot, which limited his time at home, Rik still had some special memories like going to the Santa Claus parade together every year. It was always cold and often drizzly, but it was worth it because it made the hot chocolate they had after taste even better. When people disappear from our lives, our brains either flood us with the good memories or the bad ones. In Rik’s case, he only remembered the good, which made his dad’s absence all the harder to bear. Overall, Rik was happier now that he felt so connected to his mom, but it still felt like part of him was

missing. It was the same thing for Eleanor; part of her felt like it was missing with Scott not there.

With Scott's increasing distance over the last six months since he left, Rik couldn't help but feel moments of intense pain no matter how close he was to his mom. If there was a visit with his dad, it included the new girlfriend and she was never very nice to him, especially if she had brought her own kids with her. Rik had always wanted siblings, but when they were all together, there was strong favoritism to the girlfriend's kids and Scott allowed it. If there was any attempt by Scott to be close to his own son, it was met with harsh criticism from his girlfriend that caused him to shrink back and be distant again. Even if Rik understood that his dad was too scared to say no to his girlfriend, it still felt like his dad didn't care enough to fight to be near him. Fear is never a good excuse for not protecting someone you love, especially your child. Every visit with his dad left Rik crying himself to sleep at night. As terrible as that was, however, it was still better than when Scott canceled on him because that just reinforced the feelings of abandonment and rejection.

Whenever Scott disappointed Rik or Rik simply couldn't escape feeling overwhelmed by the sense of rejection his dad caused, Eleanor and Rik would both take turns pounding the punching bag Gnick had encouraged her to hang up in the basement. Gnick had taught her the importance of physically venting out your emotions and not bottling them up, and Eleanor was glad to have a tool to use to help herself and her son deal with the hurt in a practical way.

Initially, when Scott left, Gnick's role as a comforter had been very important. In fact, without a second thought, Gnick retired from his role as a Santa informant in order to focus on helping them. He was also avoiding the repercussions for breaking the Gnome Code of having connected with people, but that was more the bonus to helping Eleanor and Rik whom he had grown quite attached. They were the closest thing he had ever had to a family of his own. That was partly because of his job on the road and partly because he had never found the right partner. Because he had never found love himself, he was a bit of a hopeless romantic and he wanted people in relationships to appreciate what they had because he knew well how lonely life can be.

Gnick had never outright revealed himself to Eleanor and Rik as he never directly talked to them. With Rik, he showed up at needed times and with Eleanor, he was just a voice since he remained hidden. Maybe it was Gnick's training or maybe he was afraid of being that vulnerable, but he always kept a little distance between him and others. He was part of the family, but he felt that he would never really be more than the help, so why set himself up to feel rejection one day.

Gnick's role as a comforter for Eleanor and Rik had been becoming less necessary over the last six months, which was both wonderful and sad for Gnick. He couldn't be prouder of their growth, but he also liked to feel like he had a role in the family. It was like how Mary Poppins or Nanny Mcphee eventually left the families they helped because their job was done. In this case,

however, Gnick was simply needed less because he had taught Eleanor and Rik how to deal with their hurt properly. That being said, the hurt that Scott could give Rik was pretty intense. Gnick wasn't needed as often, but when he was, he was needed in a serious way. As much as Gnick liked to be useful, he hated those moments more than not being needed. There were a few moments where Rik was so devastated by his dad, no amount of punching anything could help. All Gnick could really do was show up wherever Rik went to cry and be beside him with his sack of Smarties.

Like the time Gnick was so angry that he broke the gnome rules to help Rik, one moment pushed Gnick to do something drastic for Scott. It was near the end of the summer and Scott was supposed to have his annual boys' camping weekend with Rik, but at the last minute, Scott canceled and made up some lame excuse that didn't make a lot of sense. After pounding the punching bag and telling his mom he was fine, Rik went to his bed and cried himself to sleep. He actually cried himself to sleep every night for the next week. In front of his mom, Rik had gotten better at acting like he was fine and sometimes he really was because he was distracted from the pain he felt from the rejection. Eleanor had an idea that something was wrong, and she made sure Rik punched the punching bag with her every day regardless if he said he was fine or not, but there was still a sense of sadness that was too strong to erase. Every night Gnick was waiting beside Rik's bed to give him some comfort, but overall, Gnick felt incredibly helpless in this

situation because he was. When someone is in such grief, there really isn't much to do besides be there.

After a week of seeing Rik in such pain, Gnack had a flood of anger overtake his normal self-controlled self. It took a lot to get a gnome angry; it took even more to get Gnack angry because he was so old and he understood things so well, but this was one of those times it was so personal it would be impossible for him not to be angry. It would actually be wrong for him *not* to be angry. Gnack needed to do something drastic, and his anger led him to Scott's new place.

When Gnack got to where Scott was staying with his new partner, it was a nice house that was full of pictures of her and her kids with nothing about Scott. Even the decor was nothing like what Scott was used to or would have chosen. Watching Scott interact with the family, he looked like a scared little boy trying not to get in trouble. He reminded Gnack of Harry Potter with the Dursley's except he was a grown man acting like the weak outcast. Scott's girlfriend talked to him like a child and her children talked to him like he was meant to be at the curb on garbage day. Gnack went into the house angry, but now felt sorry for Scott – his life was terrible. At the same time, Gnack was still angry because Scott was choosing to put up with this. Why would he do that?

Gnack ended up returning home to be with Rik that night at bedtime, but once he was asleep, Gnack left to return to Scott's, but this time it was to stay. Gnack felt bad leaving Rik, but he knew he had to in order to make things better for the family. Afraid of Rik

feeling abandoned by him, Gnick left a note for him to find in the morning: “Even when it feels like I’m not there, I’m working for your good.”

That night, Gnick found Scott in the garage drinking by himself in that way you drink when you’re trying to forget everything. While Scott was slouched in a beat up recliner, he suddenly heard a voice speaking: “Is this really what you want your life to be like?” Scott looked at the beer in his hand like he thought the can was talking to him when the voice added, “You’re not hearing voices in your head or from the booze. I’m a real voice.” Scott started scanning the room looking for who was talking. There was a cat, but his mouth wasn’t moving... obviously. The voice continued, “I’m not your imagination... or the cat. I’m here to help.” It’s hard to say whether Scott was too tipsy to react or if he was that miserable that he wanted there to be an intruder who would hurt him, but there was little reaction.

“Let me guess, tonight I’ll be visited by three ghosts,” scoffed Scott.

“No, you’re being visited by a gnome,” Gnick replied with a laugh.

“A what?” Scott asked.

“A gnome. I’m going to make you a better man,” Gnick assured him.

“You know what, either kill me or leave me alone,” uttered Scott in a defeated way.

“I don’t hurt people,” Gnick corrected.

“Then I guess you need to leave because there’s no helping me,” Scott quipped taking a gulp.

“Wow, you’re really good at that,” shared Gnick.

“At what?” Scott grouchily asked.

“At feeling sorry for yourself,” Gnick observed.

“I don’t feel sorry for myself,” denied Scott without sounding like he believed it himself.

“Yes, you do,” Gnick corrected him. “You don’t think you deserve any better, so you’re accepting this garbage life you have like you can’t do anything about it while moping about it.”

Not really sure what to say, Scott protested, “Leave me alone!”

“There’s little chance of that happening,” Gnick laughed.

“Go away!” yelled Scott.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Gnick said cheerfully and then made a noise like he had closed a door leaving while staying nearby to observe Scott.

Scott started to panic not really sure what had just happened. He was afraid that it wasn’t over... or he was losing his mind. Not sure what to do, he started guzzling cans of beer like a man guzzling water after crossing a desert about to die of thirst.

The next morning, Scott woke up after having passed out drinking to find a note that stated, “The conversation last night wasn’t a dream. I’m going to help you.” On the note was a cute picture of a smiling gnome waving like a friend. Confused and upset, Scott scrunched the paper and threw it in the recycling bin as he got up for the day pretending the note was a joke from his girlfriend. Unfortunately for Scott, that wasn’t going to stop what was about to happen.

That entire day, everywhere Scott went, there was some type of gnome or gnome picture. There was one on the soap in the shower. There was a toy gnome that fell into his breakfast bowl like a prize from the cereal box. There was one hanging from his mirror in the car. When he got to work, he thought he was safe until a man in a giant gnome costume showed up with gnome cookies for everyone at the office. There was even a gnome screen saver on his work computer. Scott thought he was losing his mind. Throughout the day he started getting more and more disheveled like Bill Murray in *Scrooged* when he’s in the restaurant and he thinks someone is on fire. (If you don’t know that reference, you should really watch that movie.)

When Scott got home, he told his girlfriend he thought he had the flu and before he could offer to leave, his girlfriend covered her face and yelled at him to go to the garage and be away from the family; she didn’t want her kids getting sick. She didn’t even offer to make him soup or get him a glass of water.

Inside the garage, Scott immediately darted to the beer fridge that now had a lock on it. On that lock was, of course, a gnome that had a note stuck to him saying, "Not tonight." In a panic, Scott grabbed bolt cutters and cut off the lock; he ripped open the fridge and instead of seeing his beer, there was a gnome holding a sign that said, "I told you 'Not tonight.'" In a rage, Scott grabbed the gnome and threw it across the room and it smashed on the wall as he screamed, "What do you want from me?"

Scott waited to hear a reply from the voice that spoke to him the night before... but there was just silence. Bug-eyed, Scott looked around the room and not far from his feet was another gnome. Scott went to grab it when he noticed it had a sign: "Try the bat," and there was an arrow pointing to a baseball bat beside him. Scott grabbed it and smashed the gnome with it. Before he could feel good about what he had done, he saw another gnome behind that one... and another... and another... and another. The room was full of ceramic gnomes. Scott lost his mind at a whole new level than he'd ever experienced before, and he started swinging in a rage and smashing every gnome he could see. After several minutes of gnome smashing, there didn't appear to be any left, Scott put down the bat panting after his rage fueled Godzilla like attack. As he panted and he started to breathe, he could feel his heart rate dropping to a normal level and he slouched into his chair.

Suddenly, from behind a box, a little gnome walked out to be seen. Scott stared at him like he was seeing a ghost. He was too tired to grab the bat and too scared to care. "I bet that felt good."

Not sure how to react, Scott simply said, “Why are you doing this?”

“Because your wife and son deserve better than what you’ve given them,” replied Gnick with a firm but caring tone.

“What are you talking about? I don’t live with them anymore,” Scott asked confused.

“Exactly,” Gnick affirmed.

“It’s too late for me. I made my choice,” Scott sadly confessed.

“Or you’re finally ready to make the right choice,” Gnick pointed out.

Scott caulked his head, “What do you mean?”

Gnick smiled. “The choice where you return to your family.”

“What?” Scott quipped confused. “They’d never want me back.”

“Not like this... at least they shouldn’t want you back like this or there’d be something wrong with them. But there’s hope if you were more of the person you could be,” Gnick affirmed. “The problem is you’re a hider. You were talking to another woman to hide, you left your wife to hide, you’re not talking to your son to hide, and now you’re drinking to hide from all the damage your other hiding has caused. When are you going to grow some courage and stop letting your fear keep you down?”

“I’m not afraid,” defended Scott with very little conviction.

“Oh yeah? Call your son right now and tell him you’ll take him out this weekend,” challenged Gnick.

“Well, that’s different,” justified Scott in a less than convincing way.

“It’s okay to admit you’re afraid. Fear is a healthy emotion,” taught Gnick. “Having fear doesn’t mean you’re not a man; not facing your fears does.”

“But I’m not afraid!” bellowed Scott in a higher than usual pitch and with eye brows pointing up, which are both signs of fear.

“Even now you’re afraid,” corrected Gnick. “You’re either afraid of conflict or your girlfriend because she owns you.”

“She doesn’t own me,” Scott protested. “I like... uh... doing things... to make her... less mad.”

“Let me guess,” Gnick started, “you started talking to her at work or she was an old high school connection you happened to message one day on social media and you started chatting. It was very innocent at first, but you were looking for some sense of female approval and warmth and she offered it. Soon you found yourself messaging her more and more and every time you saw she messaged you back, your heart skipped. It was exciting and the one positive in your otherwise miserable day. Because of her own situation, recently single with kids, she was very understanding of your situation and you bonded in your complaining about her ex and your soon-to-be ex. Every fight you had with your partner was terrible on one level, but then wonderful on another because it was fodder for conversation with this new girl who helped you feel really cared about. This fueled your ego, which felt particularly

good because it had been struggling with feeling very defeated before her. Eventually, this relationship reached a point where this other girl wasn't satisfied with just being a "friend" you chatted with all day; she wanted more. This was too deep a relationship to have a one night stand and that's not the kind of guy you are. At the same time, you were torn because you didn't want to leave your family, but you were so 'in love' with this new girl, you didn't want to lose her. Because of her persistence and increasing threats, you found yourself being forced into this terrible situation of having to choose her or your wife. To make matters worse, your wife was now being nice and for the month of her being nice, you kept feeling worse and worse with yourself for being in this situation until you snapped and left rather than deal with the fact you were having an emotional affair. Add in the fact, that by being nice, your wife removed the main conversation piece you had with the new woman. Suddenly, you weren't having the same 'deep' connecting conversations, which scared you that maybe this new girl wasn't as perfect as you thought, but your guilt drove you to running away from the improving situation because you would have to face the fact you had been cheating."

"How did you know all that?" Scott asked quite bewildered.

"People aren't that complicated. The other option was you were done with your marriage, and you were looking for any woman who would take you and be an excuse for you to leave. I didn't guess that, however, because you're more of a pushover than a schemer, and your current situation proves the new girl has all the

power while you're pretty pathetic." Scott was at a loss for words. "Guys are simple. They can't be alone whereas women are much more independent; hence, your wife is still single while you left for another woman and you stick around despite being miserable," Gnick pointed out as a matter of fact rather than a jab. "Guys almost never break up... unless the woman is so crazy he can't handle her anymore, but that's like admitting defeat, so guys will typically just suffer a nasty woman. That being said, some guys will do a trade in like a car. Sometimes they trade in because they're tired of the old 'car,' but that's rare. They're more likely to trade in because a new car keeps pressuring them to trade in the old one for them. That's you. I bet you would never have left your wife if that was an option; you would've just had this other woman on the side, but she wouldn't have it, so she pushed you to leave, which is why you're so miserable now and trying to stuff down your emotions by drinking like a coward."

Scott looked at the overflowing recycling bins beside him. "That's not why I drink," he protested. "I like the taste."

"Sure, tell yourself that," assured Gnick. "I'm pretty sure if you were drinking something without alcohol, you would be drinking a lot less than you do."

Scott looked like a deer in the headlights not sure what to say until he stammered, "There are other reasons."

"Like how you're drinking because you hate this new relationship?" Gnick quipped.

“What?” Scott looked scared at the idea that the truth was noticeable.

“When you started talking to this other woman, she was the escape from your miserable world, but now she’s part of that miserable world. She’s no longer the escape, and to make matters worse, her kids are her main priority and you’re an afterthought. She’s probably also very pushy and makes you do things you don’t want to do. She basically treats you like a child under her control and if she hasn’t yet, soon she’ll complain that you’re just another kid in the house and she’ll build resentment toward you even though she’s a major reason you are acting so weak. The other reason you’ll be weak is because in your head you tell yourself you can’t afford to lose this girl as well as your wife because then what was all this for? You have to justify leaving your wife for this new life, so you’re trapped. Add in the fact that if you try to discipline her kids, she’ll rip you apart. You essentially have as much value as a mediocre pet like a hermit crab.”

“How do you know this?” Scott asked.

“Moms can have a hard time letting the biological father discipline the kids because they’re so protective of their kids,” Gnick noted.

“The step dad figure doesn’t have a chance to discipline unless she’s on the weak side, but if she was weak, she wouldn’t have pushed you to leave your wife.”

“What do you mean?” questioned Scott.

“To be the kind of woman who goes for a married man,” Gnick began, “you have to be aggressive with putting your own needs first. She tells herself it’s to help the guy, but it’s really just she wants what she wants, and she likes feeling like the good girl. Add in the fact that she was pushing you to leave your wife and she’s a particularly pushy and selfish person.”

“She’s not selfish,” Scott protested.

Gnick smiled, “What do you call someone who pursues what they want at the expense of the lives of others?” Scott was speechless. “She may have been a good listening ear at the beginning, but a good person doesn’t emotionally invest in a married man. Being the other woman, that’s pretty low.”

“It doesn’t matter. This is the life I chose,” Scott whined.

“So now *you’re* being selfish,” Gnick pointed out.

“I’m not being selfish,” denied Scott. “I’m living the life I don’t want to live!”

“You’re being selfish because you’re choosing to suffer when you can make things right for your family,” Gnick corrected.

“Eleanor won’t take me back,” Scott complained.

“Whether she does or doesn’t, she deserves the choice. You can’t make that for her,” noted Gnick.

Scott paused. “I never thought of it like that before.”

“Even more important, you need to prove that you care about your son,” remarked Gnick.

“Of course I care about him, but how can I try to reconnect with him when I’ve been so absent?” asked Scott with hope in his voice.

“Because he deserves the chance to reconnect with you... or to tell you off,” smiled Gnick. “He’s not a teenager yet, so you have a good chance he’ll be open to letting you back into his life. It might not be right away, but you need to do something to prove that you love him.”

“I do love him,” Scott affirmed.

“Really?” questioned Gnick.

“Yeah,” reassured Scott a bit surprised to be questioned.

“Then you suck at love,” Gnick stated very matter-of-factly.

Scott paused confused. Having learned the gnome was very straightforward and not insulting, he confessed, “I guess I do.”

“Fortunately, there’s hope,” Gnick announced.

“So what do I have to do?” asked Scott.

“When we screw up as bad as you,” started Gnick, “we need to do something spectacular to show how sorry we are.”

“Are you talking about penance?” asked Scott.

“Look at you knowing your Catholic terms. Yes, that’s exactly what I mean,” affirmed Gnick. “Christmas is in four months, so that works perfectly.”

“What am I supposed to do for four months?” asked Scott a bit intimidated.

Gnick coyly smiled, “Become a real man.”

“What?” asked Scott surprised.

“You need to prove you’ve changed if you want Eleanor to take you back,” Gnick blatantly shared. “If she takes you back without you proving you’re different, she’s a giant pushover who’s setting herself up for more hurt, especially when there’s a chance you’ll return to this other woman who has been your addiction.”

“So what does being a real man look like?” asked Scott sounding ready to try.

“First, you need to be single,” claimed Gnick.

Scott seemed to panic, “Why do I need to do that?”

“For the next four months you need to be single and have zero contact with this new woman,” expressed Gnick.

“You want me to break up with her? How?” asked Scott like he was being told to do the impossible.

“You will quietly move all of your stuff out and leave notes to her kids apologizing for not being a better man and role model, and

then when you're out of the house with everything, you will text her that it's over," stated Gnick.

"You want me to break up over text? She'll be furious!" Scott protested.

"Exactly, and that's the point," affirmed Gnick. "Here are the reasons you need to text the breakup. One, you're spineless, so if you try to break up in person she'll say no and you'll obey her. Two, she's your drug and you need to get over her rehab style – zero connection. Three, and most important, you need to text her because she'll be so furious at you, she'd never let you back. That way even if you have a brain disappearing moment like we both know you're capable of having, she won't want anything to do with you." Scott looked like he got it, but was still hesitant. "Then, as soon as you text her, you need delete and block all contact info you have of her to be safe."

"That seems pretty extreme," complained Scott.

"But it's the right way for you," Gnick told him. "After cutting ties with her, you're going to join a cooking class, a running group, a men's group at a church, and, of course, AA."

"Whoa, what?" questioned Scott.

"All of these things will give you something else to do besides drink and over think your mistakes. They'll also help you connect with people and maybe make some friends," continued Gnick. "On a practical level, the cooking class is so you can impress Eleanor with a new skill and exercise will help you get some feelings out... and

hopefully make you look better – beer has a lot of calories. The church group will help you meet some older men who can give you some guidance on how to be a man while AA is needed for you to deal with what’s causing you to drink.”

“You’re serious about all of this?” Scott asked in disbelief.

“Oh, and the other thing you need to do is send child support for the last six months to Eleanor and start texting Rik every day to say hi and good night,” Gnick added.

“I get the money thing; I wanted to send some before, but my girlfriend wouldn’t let me... that sounds really bad. I’ll do the money thing, no problem. Messaging Rik, however... no... I can’t,” Scott protested. “Every time I see his name on my phone I feel all this guilt and shame.”

“Isn’t that exactly what you should be feeling?” pointed out Gnick.

“But... uh... I don’t want to,” Scott admitted.

“You wouldn’t have to if you had been living your life properly,” Gnick told him. “You feel guilt because you’ve been living your life wrong. You shouldn’t hide from it, but use it as fuel for becoming a better person.”

Scott was starting to calm down a little. “What if he doesn’t respond?”

“Did I say anything about conversations?” questioned Gnick.

“No,” sighed Scott.

“You’re not doing this for you; you’re doing it for him. You’ve been absent and he needs to rebuild his trust that you’ll be there in the future, so he needs to see the consistency over these four months of you wishing him a good day and a good night even if he writes nothing back,” Gnick encouraged.

Scott looked at the ground. “You are asking a lot of me.”

“Or am I asking you to be a decent dad and it seems like a lot because you’ve been living so terribly?” asked Gnick as gently as you can ask a question like that.

Scott was a bit taken aback. “You’re very straightforward.”

“I like to see it as fair honesty,” shared Gnick. “Things are going to be hard at first, but in the long run, it’ll make your life so much better. People are drawn to what’s easy in the moment, but that never leaves us feeling good. Sure, watching more TV is appealing when it starts, but after binging a show, you feel lousy because you should. Meanwhile, if you force yourself to exercise, in the long run, you’ll feel a lot better.” Scott was listening intently as what Gnick said made a lot of sense. “You might think you have depression, but you feel exactly the way you should be feeling for the life you’ve been living. Sure, medications can numb some of the pain you feel, but until you start to live your life the way you should, you’re going to feel like garbage. Our bodies are smart. If you live like garbage, you’ll feel like garbage. Your body is trying to tell you to change.”

“It’s that simple?” asked Scott with hope in his voice.

“Yeah, life isn’t that complicated,” noted Gnick. “Live properly and life is better. It’s not necessarily easy in the moment, but in the long run it’s the only way to experience life for all it’s worth.”

“For someone who is supposed to be supportive, you are surprisingly blunt,” pointed out Scott.

“I was no different with your wife,” replied Gnick. “Why do you think she changed?”

“Wait, are you the reason she suddenly became so nice?” asked Scott surprised.

“She did the work, but I gave her the guidance, which is exactly what I’m doing for you. Trust me, she was just as hesitant. The big difference is she had anger whereas you have self loathing. You also have a lot more work to do because you’ve dug yourself quite the hole. Fortunately, we have four months to turn your life around and prove that you can be the husband and father your family deserves, so let’s start packing your stuff and get out of here.”

“But where will I go?” asked Scott.

Gnick shrugged, “Do you have family or a cheap hotel near your work?”

“This is really going to be a long four months,” confessed Scott.

“It’ll be hard, but it’s a lot better living with purpose than drowning your emotions with alcohol,” reassured Gnick.

“I guess we’ll see,” uttered Scott with a lack of enthusiasm.

“The first step is to break the tentacles your girlfriend has over you, so let’s start packing,” Gnick cheered.

Chapter 2 (of 2)

For Christmas Eve, Eleanor and Rik were making pancakes for dinner when there was a phone call. Eleanor answered and the strange voice said, “Put your coat and boots on and go outside,” and then hung up. Scared at the strangeness of the call, Eleanor quickly obeyed, and the two of them ran out the door after getting their coat and boots on. As soon as they were outside, Eleanor and Rik saw an older man in a red sports jacket and a whistle in his mouth and a baton in his hand standing at attention in the middle of their lawn – that was strange. When they stopped on the front porch to stare at this unusual figure, he blew his whistle, turned and started marching off the lawn – that was also strange. When he got to the middle of the road, he then blew his whistle twice and started walking down the middle of the street like he was leading a parade... because he was. Eleanor and Rik looked at each other confused, and then a little way up the street, a small seven piece brass band standing in a line

in the middle of the street started playing Christmas music walking like a marching band who had never been trained how to march and didn't care because they weren't really a marching band. They were wearing Salvation Army uniforms and they played beautifully with the brass sounds echoing throughout the neighborhood. As they sauntered up the street, from behind them, a group of runners holding poles with ribbons flying off the tops of them were running up the street and passed the musicians. While the band played, everyone who was home on the street came outside to see what was going on. After the runners with streamers went by, they turned the corner of the block and disappeared. From behind them, two runners carrying a banner saying "Merry Christmas," jogged past. Next, kids on roller blades with dogs on leashes covered in winter coats with glow sticks attached to them rolled up the street. Some dogs pulled the kids while other kids were trying to drag a distracted dog.

When the "sauntering" band reached a certain spot past the house, they turned around and played in place as the kids with dogs passed them. The last two kids, instead of holding dogs, were holding a sign that said, "Love, Someone..." When the path was clear of roller bladers, a car slowly drove up the street. On top of the car was a twelve foot inflatable snowman attached to a battery generator inside the car to keep it inflated. The driver in the car had a string attached to the one snowman hand and as he pulled it, it looked like the snowman was waving. Right behind him was another car that had three smaller inflatable snowmen on the roof. With what looked like a red and white candy-cane pole with a flag

on top that was covered by a sign reading, “Who Misses You Terribly.”

As the two cars drove by, the runners with streamers ran up the street and passed Eleanor and Rik again. This time the banner the two runners had said, “I’m so…” and as they ran past a stream of cars followed. Some were decorated and others were plain, but all of them had a simple sign on the side of the car that said, “So…” Seven cars ended up driving by and coming up from behind the cars were the runners again carrying what looked like giant lollipops instead of the ribbons like last time. On the face of the circle at the top of the stick were sad faces. Behind the lollipop runners, were the two runners with a banner. This time it said, “Sorry!” As the banner runners passed the house, the brass band had reached the end of their journey up the street, they turned around to play their last note, and then disappeared down a side street. The locals who had stepped outside to see what was going on started clapping for the band. That’s when the song “Christmas (Baby, Please Come Home)” began playing from a loud speaker on a pickup truck slowly rolling up the street. On the back of the truck, holding to a handle on the roof, a guy Eleanor and Rik didn’t know was singing. After a few minutes, they realized someone had changed the words to, “Baby, please let me come home.” The extra syllable was a little awkward, but it still worked like the theme song from *Love Actually*.

The driver of the truck stopped at the house just past Eleanor’s, so they could still hear the music, but it started to be faded out, and

switched to Michael Buble's "Santa Claus is Coming to Town." At that point, two of the cars with the "So" on them from earlier had turned around to have their lights aimed at the next truck coming up the street. This time the vehicle was a pickup pulling a roofer's dump trailer. The truck was decorated to look like clouds with three rows of two reindeer spread across the roof and bed of the truck (they couldn't fit all eight) to make it look like they were flying and pulling the trailer behind them. The trailer was decorated to look like Santa's sleigh. The person dressed as Santa (the real Santa was obviously busy since it was Christmas Eve) was in the sleigh waving at everyone on the street watching the parade. Santa's sleigh stopped in front of Eleanor's house. At that point, a runner past with a sign that read, "It's really him," with a second runner with a sign that read, "Santa's assistant!" After the truck was parked and the runners ran past, the music switched to the *Love Actually* soundtrack when Jamie (played by Collin Firth) goes to the restaurant to ask out Aurelia (played by... someone I've never seen in anything else). As the music played, Santa stood up, turned, and started opening his sack of toys that was behind his chair. This sack was quite large, but Santa pulled out a small box that was about a foot in all directions. He motioned for someone to come forward, so Eleanor sent Rik. When he got there, Santa handed him the package. Rik ran back to his mom and together they opened it. Inside was a familiar gnome holding a sack filled with Smarties and a sign reading, "I promised I was working for your good." After a short moment to admire the present, fireworks exploded above Santa who was now standing in front of his sleigh.

When he had Eleanor and Rik's attention (fireworks will do that), from the back of the sleigh there was a small explosion of smoke and light like a magic trick. As the smoke cleared, it revealed that the sack was gone. Standing in its place, dressed in a suit and holding flowers in one hand and a mic in another was Scott.

"Last winter," began Scott into the microphone for everyone on the street to hear, "I was looking for a solution to the pain I was feeling, and I picked the worst possible option – another woman. I was a classic fool, and I didn't realize it until I found myself trapped. I ended up leaving you and my son for a life I never wanted, but I didn't know how to stop the destructive path I was on. The problem was, without meaning to be, I was a coward."

At that point, one of the runners dashed by with a sign that read, "And a jerk!"

"I was ashamed of what I had done and what I was doing. The only answer I felt capable of doing was to drink myself numb every night because I desperately wanted to come back, but I didn't know how. I also knew you deserved better. Fortunately, everything turned around when I found my own... therapy gnome."

People on the street listening to Scott looked at each other confused – therapy gnome? Was that an APP?

"With his help, these last four months I've been in AA, which met at a Salvation Army Church... that should explain a few things about tonight. I've been attending cooking classes and I joined a

running club.” As Scott said that, a runner sprinted past with another sign that read “We’re pretty awesome.”

“That should explain a few other things.” Scott smiled with a glimpse of pride. “So for the last four months, I’ve been in therapy to deal with my bottle-up-explosive anger problem; I’ve been exercising; I’ve been sober; I’ve started hobbies and made friends as I tried to develop a life and drive to help me be stronger and avoid being a fool ever again. Most importantly, I’ve been single. That other woman was the biggest mistake I’ve ever made, and leaving her was one of the best things I’ve done. Leaving her was like a giant weight was taken off my back that had also been infecting my soul. You both deserve someone special in your life, and I’ve spent the last four months learning how to be the man I should be for you. So on this Christmas Eve, I’ve come to you in the best way I could think of to say, ‘I’m so, so, so, so, so, so sorry,’ and to ask if you’ll let me join you tonight.” After a short pause, Scott added, “I brought some food I made... it’s pretty good.”

In that classic Hollywood pause moment, Eleanor looked down at her son and then at the gnome he had given them. As Scott held his breath and a small bead of sweat trickled down his forehead, Eleanor pulled the gnome out of the box and then slowly started walking toward Scott holding Rik’s hand. After a few steps, Rik burst into a sprint to his dad with Eleanor starting to jog a few steps behind him.

Within seconds, the family was hugging in the kind of way people at airports hug who haven’t seen a loved one in a long time.

Quietly, so only Scott and Rik could hear, Eleanor whispered, “You had me at therapy gnome,” which made Scott laugh.

For Gnick, he never thought he would ever feel like he fully belonged to a family, but in that moment, when he was included in the hug, everything he had ever hoped for felt real... and it was glorious. It felt like he had gone from the help to an equal member of the family.

As the family of four hugged, the singer on the truck to the side started singing “All You Need is Love,” and the Salvation Army band had returned and started playing along. The people who had gathered on the streets were cheering and joined in singing as well. The runners started running in a circle around the group with their original ribbons flying. Dogs barked and cars honked, and after a few minutes for the family to enjoy their hug, “Santa” started letting off more fireworks – he’s the kind of friend you want around for special occasions.

It was the perfect Christmas Eve, especially after such a difficult year. The family was congratulated by everyone who was there as they sang Christmas carols and enjoyed some hot chocolate provided by “Santa” – he really is the friend you want around. Tears were shed, hugs were shared by all, it was a night that reminded people the greatest thing about Christmas is sharing love because that night couldn’t have happened without the collective love of friends.

As everyone started to return home, Scott followed his wife, son, and gnome into the house to reconnect to the family he should never have left. Fortunately, despite his mistakes of leaving and staying away, he ended up learning the lessons that would help him be the man his family needed. As Scott experienced, change is always a single choice away.

The end.





What Happens to Old Christmas Trees

John knew his young daughter, Gracie, loved Christmas, so when he was outside shoveling it didn't really faze him that she was over petting the old Christmas tree that was near the curb waiting to be taken away. He also didn't really think much about it when she moved on and started petting the neighbors' Christmas tree at the curb. When he noticed she was back at their tree pouring water on it and crying, he decided he should talk to her. He assumed she was taking Christmas being over really hard, but he wanted to show he cared, so he knelt beside her and gently asked, "Are you okay?"

"No!" exclaimed Gracie as she started to cry harder. She reached down and started hugging the tree. Unfortunately, she got pricked and started crying even harder because of the pain.

John wasn't overly affected by her saying no because he had a young family and the word no had been a popular choice with his kids for some time now. Not taking that personally was easy. What was harder was not laughing after she tried hugging the tree and got hurt – the thing you'd expect to happen hugging a prickly object. Her innocence always made him smile and physical comedy had always been a favorite.

After being hurt by the tree, Gracie flung herself into her dad's chest and continued to cry. He just held her and appreciated the moment as he loved having a reason to hug his daughter.

After a few minutes, Gracie's crying started to settle down and he asked her, "Are you having a hard time saying good-bye to Christmas?"

Again, she cried, "No!" but this time it was for the hurt of her dad not understanding her.

Now he was confused. "So why are you crying and petting the Christmas trees?"

Gracie took a moment to calm her emotions enough to speak, and then she blurted. "Because no one loves them!" and then she started to sob again.

"Ooohh," said her dad as her reaction seemed to make more sense.

"We used Mrs. Treetums and now we're throwing her away," complained Gracie.

“Mrs. Treetums? I thought this was Mrs. Treenie,” smiled her dad to himself.

“Don’t be silly, Daddy!” scolded Gracie with the seriousness of a disgruntled police officer.

“My mistake,” her dad replied still smiling to himself. “I think the problem here is there’s been a misunderstanding. You see, we’re not throwing Mrs. Treetums away. We’re letting her go visit her loved ones and live a new adventure. Being a Christmas tree is just the first step in her great adventure. She still has some great things to do.”

“Really?” asked Gracie with hope returning to her eyes.

“Absolutely,” her dad affirmed with a voice that almost sounded sincere, but limited by the fact he’s a guy, so it was inherently hard for him not to sound a little sarcastic when trying to be serious. “Can I show you something?” When Gracie nodded, he went in the house, grabbed the car keys, and told his wife he was taking Gracie out for a short trip. (He told her they were heading out because he was a well trained husband who practiced good communication – like the author.)

With Gracie strapped properly in her car seat (he was also responsible – like the author), John drove a short distance to a conservation area where there was already a large number of former Christmas trees dropped off. After parking the car, he helped Gracie out of her restraints and he walked with her around

the parking lot. “See all the trees? They’re getting ready for the big party.”

“They are?” questioned Gracie.

“Of course,” assured her dad. “Humans love Christmas, but Christmas trees look forward to the big party they have after. It’s like how school is fun, but there’s something magical about going home for the holidays. That’s what it’s like for the trees. They love Christmas, but they really love coming here to see all their family and friends. This is where all the trees in the area get dropped off for their own celebration. It’s like their Christmas since it’s their grand celebration before they move onto their next job. This party is typically the happiest time for a tree. It’s even bigger for them than Christmas.”

“Really?” Gracie asked with great interest.

“Trees are like people: They can always be useful,” reassured her dad. “Even your little sister who is a baby is useful.”

“She is?” asked Gracie even more surprised than before.

“She has the same job as you: Being super cute and making your mommy and I happy,” shared her dad, “That’s a really important job. We like being happy.”

“I’m really good at that job,” said Gracie with all the confidence of an Apple CEO.

“You definitely are,” he reassured her. “After the big party, the trees will all be given a different job.”

“Like what?” asked Gracie.

“Well, some trees will be sent to goat farms because the goats love the old trees,” said her dad.

“I like goats,” shared Gracie.

“And so do the trees, which means those ones will be very happy,” confirmed her dad who was thinking he’d hold off on telling her the goats eat the trees because that might not be such a happy thought. “Other trees will go swimming and live with the fish at the bottom of lakes to protect the fish and give them a place to feed and socialize.”

“I don’t like fish,” grimaced Gracie.

“Yes, I know,” smiled her dad, “but some trees love fish very much and want to help them by being their shelter. Other trees get to go to zoos and spend time with animals like the giraffes and zebras.”

“I like the zoo,” Gracie announced.

“Yeah, and so do all of the trees that go there,” affirmed her dad. “Other trees like to spend time at the beach where they help prevent erosion problems over the winter.”

“I wouldn’t want to go to the beach in the winter. That’s silly,” Gracie said shaking her head.

“There are a few other jobs, but the one I like the most is they get to be used in gardens, so they get to be beautiful all over again. They get a second chance to help people be happy. Isn’t that

wonderful?” asked her dad. “That’s definitely what I would choose if I was a tree.”

Gracie smiled at her dad, “No garden... giraffes; yes, giraffes,” she corrected.

Her dad couldn’t help but laugh out loud this time as he hugged his daughter.

After getting home from the conservation area, Gracie immediately ran back to the Christmas tree in the driveway and hugged it (she was careful not to let her face be pricked this time). John was confused and started to get a little concerned. He thought she was happy now, so it didn’t make sense that she would run to the tree to hug it now.

This time when John got to his daughter and saw her face while hugging the tree, there was a giant smile. He instantly felt relieved and instinctively took out his phone to take a picture.

While hugging the tree, Gracie cheerfully said, “You’re going to have so much fun. I saw some of your family and friends. They’re waiting for you, so they can get the great tree party started. You were a wonderful tree. You deserve to have all the fun in the world... and you can tell all of your friends how you got the best hug.” As she let go of the tree, Gracie whispered, “And go with the giraffes. Fish are gross... or you can do the garden. That’s what daddy loves.”

After Gracie said her good-byes to the other two trees, John took Gracie in for hot chocolate as she told her mommy what she had learned.

That Christmas, the best gift came after all the decorations were put away as both Gracie and her dad made one of their favorite Christmas memories. Sometimes the best moments come at the most unexpected times when we take the time to care.

The end.





Please Note: The following are three examples of the weekly blogs I write at www.ChadDavid.ca. I've included them as a bonus to the book because they have some helpful advice... and it's a shameless plug for my website. That being said, my weekly blog is actually the main reason I started writing Christmas stories in the first place because, even from the beginning, in December I wanted to do something Christmas-y, and the stories somehow became a good option.





The Danger for Well-Intentioned People (A tip for Christmas)

The other week, my wife reminded me of the danger well-intentioned people have, especially in the holiday season. Another word for “well-intentioned people” is women because they typically have this need to make everyone happy. Younger guys can be “well-intentioned people” as they try to prove themselves to bosses, parents, friends, or girls (girls are a major motivator), but somewhere after marriage guys get lazy (or maybe that’s just me... and every husband I’ve heard wives complain about). I’m not saying I don’t have good intentions; those I have... sometimes. When I write “well-intentioned” I mean people who try to do more than they can handle and then still offer to help others. That’s not me. I know my limits, and I’m better at not having to impress people by overstretching myself because... well, who cares? I have a wife, kids, and an established career. The three major parts of my life are in

place. My job now is to try not to screw one of those up. From my experience, this is a pretty common husband mindset.

Husbands are happy not offering to help while women take on more than they should and still try to help at their own expense. Together, the differences between men and women can create a balance where a woman's drive can push the guy to do more and the guy's relaxed side can help the woman slow down... or we can drive each other crazy. My wife and I are the former and not the latter... most of the time.

For the following scenario, I should point out that my immediate family was supposed to get together at my mom's for my sister's birthday at the beginning of November, but my brother's kids were all boogery, so we delayed it to the following weekend. That following weekend, my kids were all boogery, so we delayed it again. That third weekend, my brother's kids were boogery again (having young kids is fun). That'll teach my sister to have a birthday in cold season; November was a bad choice. (What was she thinking?) On one of the Sundays of this boogery month, my wife and I had the following conversation:

Wife: I wish we could've had a birthday gathering for your sister here this weekend even if it was just your sister and mom.

Me: No you don't.

Wife: Yes, I do.

Me: That would've been a terrible idea.

Wife: Why?

Me: Because you were exhausted yesterday (Saturday) and needed to nap today to recover. If you had a party to plan, that would've put you over the top.

Wife: I would've kept it simple.

Me: No you wouldn't because you can't. You always go overboard, especially with cleaning. Remember last weekend when we had two very non-judgmental friends over and you went crazy cleaning?

Wife: I would've been more relaxed with your family.

Me: Maybe... for part of the day, but then two hours before they arrived, your guilt and fear would've kicked in and you'd go crazy cleaning. You were already tired and this added stress would've caused you to be snappy at the kids and then angry at me for not stopping them from doing what was making you snappy. Later, you'd feel guilty about this and the house not being perfect enough, so even after doing a good thing for my sister, you'd still feel bad.

Wife: (pausing and looking at me confused) You're probably right.

Me: You have a wonderful heart with very good intentions, but you're terrible for putting way too much pressure on yourself to make things perfect.

Wife: I know. I don't know why I do that.

Me: I do. You're a woman, and women are stereotypically so generous they set themselves up for failure while at the same time being too hard on themselves for not being able to do everything as perfect as they think it should be.

Wife: I don't know if I should be angry at you or not for that comment.

Me: How about instead of being angry, you make a birthday cake for my sister... that we eat ourselves?

This is the issue of well intentioned people: They get excited at helping or doing something special... when they're already stretched too thin. The reality is there is only so much time and energy available, but well-intentioned people get so caught up in the idea of doing something good that they forget they don't have the ability to do it... until it's too late. Thus, instead of feeling good for being considerate, they end up feeling bad for trying to do something good but falling short of their goal of perfection. The other option is they'll feel resentment toward others for putting them in this position. ***Being overwhelmed leads to one of two options: "I suck," or "You suck."*** Neither is good... which I'm sure you already knew, but I feel better pointing it out.

Heading into the holiday season, well-intentioned people are particularly at risk of pushing themselves too hard. In general, these people struggle to say no, but at Christmas, it gets even harder because they feel this need to make everyone happy in a bigger way than usual because "it's Christmas." What's strange to me is my best memories of Christmas are simply having a day without any stress of doing homework. As a recovering workaholic, relaxing guilt free was the best gift of all, especially if everyone else in the family was relaxing with me. Sometimes the best way to enjoy Christmas is to simply *be with* people.

After this situation, my wife thanked me for reminding her having people over wasn't an option, so she didn't have to feel guilt about it. As her partner, that's part of my role – I help her feel less guilt.

She also said that I know her better than she knows herself. I'd say she knows herself pretty well (she is married to a therapist who by nature asks a lot of questions), but she can be blinded by wanting to do something special when she's already too busy and doesn't want to cut anything out. ***She needs to remember that just because you want to help doesn't mean you should.***

Here are four phrases well-intentioned people need to consider using this holiday season:

1. I'm aiming for good enough and not perfection.
2. It's better to be a little messy and happy than perfect and stressed.
3. Perfection and fun rarely go together, and I choose fun.
4. It's better to do a couple things well than a lot of things exhausted and miserable.

And here are three phrases to practice saying to others when they ask to get together or to help:

1. That's a great idea. My schedule is jammed right now, but how about we plan on doing that (give a different day in the future like in January – giving another date is important to reduce the other person feeling rejected or brushed off).
2. Thank you for thinking of me; that means a lot. I wouldn't be able to help until (pick date that's actually doable). I guess if that can't work than I won't be able to help (and then tell any guilt you might want to feel to go away because it's a lie).
3. No (It can be that simple).

Tip for Well-Intentioned People: Keep a paper calendar of everything going on in November and December to mark out when things are happening. This should include set rest times and back up times to do anything last minute that was forgotten. This can help you know when to say no or how to readjust your schedule. A calendar also lets you show your partner what's happening and maybe get them to help do a few things to lighten the load (or they can tell you you're doing too much). It's hard to enjoy anything when you feel overwhelmed or exhausted.

This holiday season may you enjoy yourself more and have less stress, especially when stress lowers our immune systems and can cause us to miss all that we planned on doing in the first place.





How Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer Messed Me Up

Some people watch the movie *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and enjoy it; I call those people normal. I managed to watch this movie as a child and get scarred for life – that’s fun. I should point out that I love Christmas music. My favorite Christmas albums are by Rend Collective, Matt Maher, For King and Country, and Phil Wickham (I’m guessing you’ve never heard of them, but well worth checking out). For a more traditional sound, I really enjoy Harry Connick Jr. and Michael Bubble. (Can you tell I like my Christmas music?) But no matter who sings the song, I can’t handle listening to “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” because it’s a reminder of the damage the movie caused me (I sound so manly right now, I know). I never actually realized how much I hated this song until a few years ago when I was in the car with my wife and the song came on. She got excited and turned it up like a normal person does. My reaction was to tense up and have my eye twitch (that’s not a good reaction to a children’s song that’s supposed to bring joy). When my wife

noticed my rather unusual response, she asked me about it; again, like a normal person. I started by saying the song doesn't make sense because it starts: "You know Dasher and Dancer, etc." and then asks, "But do you recall? The most famous reindeer of all?" If you know the other eight reindeer, the lesser known reindeer, how would you not know "the most famous reindeer of all"? He's the *most* famous of all (written with know-it-all disdain). That's like singing: "You know 98 Degrees and BBMak, but have you heard of the Backstreet Boys?" I probably should've picked something manlier for my example than 90s boy bands, but you get the point. And yes, I used to listen to the Backstreet Boys all the time (I've been to three concerts... not to brag), and I'm very disappointed they don't have a Christmas album.

Looking at the song now, it is confusing: "They never let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games"? What is going on in the North Pole? That is some messed up naughty list shenanigans. How were they able to get away with that? They live *with* Santa. They are like his pets. The only explanation was that Santa thought Rudolph was messed up, too – a red nose? What a weirdo! Was Santa judgmental? Sure, he rewards and punishes kids for their behavior, but did he also have another list: "Cool or Loser"? Certainly in the movie Santa wasn't very nice. He was a grumpy pants. And if he knows if we're naughty or nice, how did Santa not know about the Island of Misfit Toys? Were the toys misfits because they could have feelings like people? Had his elves created artificial intelligence? How were the toys alive? And why didn't

Santa already have a dental plan in place? That seems pretty important if you promote candy canes. Did Santa have false teeth? There are so many things about the movie that are confusing.

Once I got past my desire to make fun of the song with my wife (she is a lucky woman), she mentioned that Rudolph is great because it promotes the idea that no matter what is wrong with us, it can lead to something good. That was a very valid and healthy way to look at the movie and song. I'm guessing that's how the original writers intended them to be interpreted, but it was soooo not how I interpreted it growing up. Yes, I'm admitting to having been wrong (it's something I've become quite good at since being married). For some reason, my interpretation of Rudolph growing up was that you need to be useful for people to like you, especially if you aren't normal. If others don't like you, you need to work harder or find a way to be useful because then they'll like you or at least "let you play the reindeer games." The movie taught me that love is conditional and something that has to be earned. I'm guessing that's not how you interpreted Rudolph... unless you're weird like me. If you're reading this, you must have an acceptance of weirdness (I accept being weird now).

Like a lot of people watching a movie, I internalized the main character's problem, which led to seeing myself as an outcast. Looking back, that doesn't make a lot of sense because I had a lot of friends, and I was never really picked on, but that didn't stop me from finding reasons to think I was a loser and freak. When the song says, "They used to laugh and call him names," I got that

because I was made fun of... at least in my head. Even if people didn't say anything mean, I assumed they were still making fun of me because that's what we do, kids and adults – we're hard on ourselves so we assume others are just as hard even though most people are too worried about how *they* look to be that concerned about how *we* look. The exception is when we need to look down on others to feel better about ourselves, to avoid others making fun of us, or we're bonding with someone at another person's expense. But even then, that's not really about us; it's about the other person.

This needing to earn love came from the end of the movie and song: "Then all the reindeer loved him." Wasn't that the point? You need to prove that you're worth loving? If you're useful people will like you. I thought that if there's a problem, sometimes you need to runaway and find other outcasts who will put up with your weirdness if you can tolerate their weirdness like an elf who wants to be a dentist or a crazy prospector who licks metal in the freezing cold (a traditionally very bad choice that he got away with somehow). For the record, I never said I was a very well-adjusted child, but as an adult, I'm working on it. Even Santa in all of his Santa-ness didn't seem to like Rudolph until he was useful, and Santa is Santa. If he didn't accept Ruldoph for being different, there was a chance he wouldn't accept me either. No wonder he gave coal to bad kids. And guess how that thinking affected how I saw others. If you thought constantly anxious about being good enough, you'd be correct.

When I tried explaining this to my wife and heard myself talking, it was one of those “Oh man, that’s messed up” moments. The unfortunate truth is this was the way I thought into my late twenties: I needed to be good enough for people to like me. I thought that was normal. Fortunately, I eventually learned how unhealthy this was.

I often teach that there is good in all things, and even though I was scarred by Rudolph, it can be seen as a blessing. For instance, it helped me develop a great work ethic and do things I’m really proud of. It also helps me better understand my fellow workaholics, and if you’re going to be an “aholic,” I’d rather be a workaholic than the other options. Even better, I now have self worth and can better appreciate what it takes to get to this spot. It also reminds me of the importance of using the tools I’ve gathered over the years to remain emotionally healthy as it is my responsibility to role model what being healthy means for my family, friends, and those around me. Rudolph may have messed me up in some ways, but at the same time, it was a great blessing because it helped me become who I am today, which includes having a work ethic that allows me the ability to write books.

This week may you see Rudolph in the healthier way and may you enjoy the upcoming holiday season.





My Christmas Advice

Please Note: I wrote this blog over seven years ago before I was married to my wife, so it's the oldest piece in his book, but the story makes me smile, and I hope it can do the same for you.

My advice this Christmas is to laugh. I know it sounds simple, but sometimes we forget to simply laugh at our mistakes and the silly things that happen to us, especially when we're stressed trying to keep up with everything at Christmas. When we're feeling overwhelmed, it's hard for us to be patient, kind, and self-controlled, but instead of getting angry at someone for something dumb they've done, try laughing. This includes yourself – that's right. Being patient with others can be a challenge, but being patient with ourselves can feel impossibbble... argh! I screwed up the spelling... I mean, that's

okay; I'll try again: being patient with ourselves can feel impossible. (Yea, I did it right this time.) This holiday season, instead of getting mad at yourself for making a mistake, try laughing; you'll feel better and the people around you will also have fun and enjoy being around you more. That makes sense when we're typically hard on ourselves to do things so others will be impressed and like us. Besides, our biggest mistakes often make our best stories, which ultimately means mistakes are a blessing... eventually. Laughing is good for us socially, emotionally and physically (e.g. it'll help you burn a few Christmas calories). It also prevents bullying. You can't bully someone who laughs with you as you make the jokes. Unfortunately, it's just not always easy, especially when we're not used to doing it (aka uptight people). The one thing I've learned is always being serious and never laughing doesn't make you intellectually superior; it makes you boring. This holiday season let's share laughter instead of stress. Here's a story to help see how this can work.

Yesterday when I was at my fiancé's house, I was given a good reminder of this lesson. Even though we're engaged, my fiancé and I don't live together (we're old school that way... and there's nothing better than having your own space when your partner is grumpy... I mean, when I'm grumpy). She lives with her mom, and her sister and brother-in-law were over visiting. These are both important facts to this story; I don't share unnecessary information (I just ramble once in awhile because I think I'm funny... emphasis on "I think"; there's a reason my fiancé's not rushing to live with me... she needs a break from me being so

hilarious... or from me thinking I'm so hilarious). Before driving over to join them, I trimmed my nose hair (okay, that's not an important fact to the story, but it's a subtle way for me to tell other guys to do the same: Trim it up, boys; nose hair isn't meant to be brushed into a mustache). While we were visiting, I had to use the washroom to number one, so I guess you could say number one had to number one (that's me trying to sound cocky... and failing miserably. Toilet humor never makes you cool... sexy, sure, but not cool). Another important fact for this story is I'm a sitter. That's right, I sit to wee-wee, like a man. Of course, I don't sit at a urinal; I'm not that weird. I stand to use those (and toilets of people I don't trust... no offence to them), but at home and at my fiancé's, using a toilet I like to hunker down because my mama taught me good – it's cleaner, quieter, and generally very relaxing. The final important fact I need to share is that when I use my fiancé's toilet I don't put a layer of toilet paper on the seat before sitting. I think that'd be rude because it'd be like saying, "I think you have some nasty cootie potential and terrible cleaning abilities." After eight years of dating, I think I can trust my fiancé's toilet seat (you'd hope).

So here's where the story gets going (pun intended); I lowered my pants (enjoy the mental visual) and then sat down, but for some reason it felt like I was squatting lower for the toilet than I normally do (strange)... and the seat felt unusually thin (not good). My first thought was they must have gotten a new toilet seat; a new, very uncomfortably thin toilet seat? No, that couldn't be it... what I was feeling wasn't a new seat. I was feeling the absence of a seat. The

toilet was sans seat. I was on the rim; the very nasty, often pee-splattered rim. The good news for me (trying to be positive) is I have a very large backside. If you're thinking, "Chad, it can't be that big; you're in good shape." Um, yes it is, and thank you; I am in good shape (I'm sure that'll change after marriage... note from future me: It did). I know my butt is big because it's like wearing a backpack in a store; I have to be careful turning around and not knocking stuff off shelves (I wish I was joking about that). I also know it's big because I sat on the seat and I didn't fall in the toilet like a normal person would. If I didn't have a big butt, I would be sitting *in* the toilet like a giant in a bathtub... a disgusting and tiny bathtub. When I realized this, I let out a very loud, "Oh, no!" which is not the noise you want to hear from the bathroom. My fiancé was very kind and asked if I was okay. That's a question you can't call out to someone in the bathroom without some hesitation. Nothing good comes from that: (guy) "Oh no." (girl) "Are you okay?" (guy) "Yeah, I won the lottery." After thoroughly washing the backs of my legs (emphasis on "thoroughly"), I left the bathroom and started joke-attacking the brother-in-law assuming he must have left the seat up causing my bum to kiss the top of a waste disposal system. The strange thing was it turned out he hadn't used the toilet at their house for several weeks (a strange fact for him to know). On the plus side, this meant the rim was clean since there hadn't been a guy to shower it with pee spray – yea for me. But this left all of us confused. My fiancé offered maybe she had done it. I'm not sure if her lifting the seat to go to the bathroom is something to be impressed by or a little terrified: "You

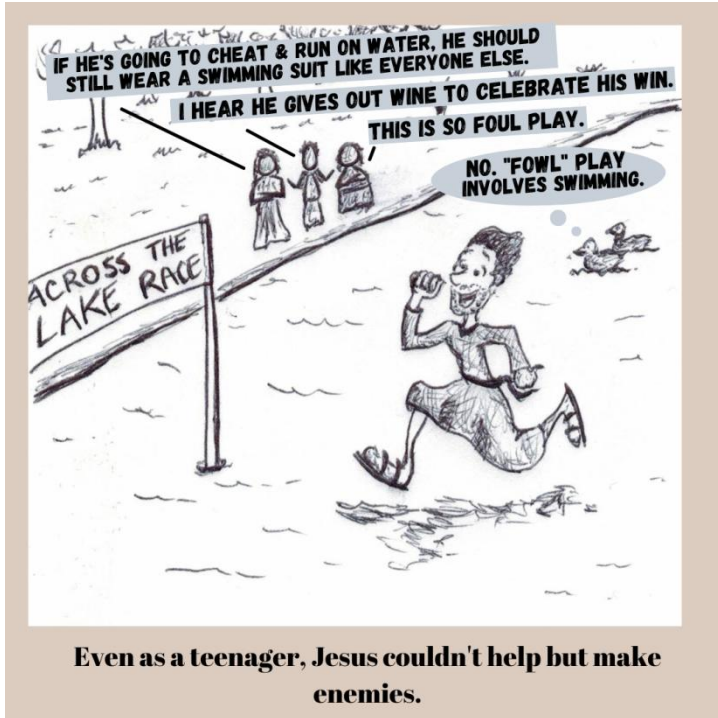
thought distracted teenage boys can be messy using a toilet.” Her reasoning was she had a nap and maybe she was sleepwalking and lifted up the seat. Um, that was a very creative idea, but I think it’s safe to say not the answer. It’s also proof my fiancé made a good choice not being a detective: “I think I know who the murderer is. I had a nap earlier and I do crazy things in my sleep.” Her mom pointed out that she always leaves the toilet cover down after using the toilet, which means I could have lifted the seat up with the cover by mistake. This made a lot more sense than my fiancé’s suggestion. The downside is that means I messed myself over. I basically pranked myself – sucker!

When I learned I was the “jerk” who sabotaged my toilet sitting experience (on top of being the person who didn’t check the seat before sitting), I was thoroughly grateful I had been nice. I had even been able to laugh. Even when I realized I sat on the bowl, I was like “Gross!... but this is hilarious). I didn’t beat myself up and more importantly, I never yelled at anyone – that would’ve been a whole other level of embarrassing: “Who did this to me (expletives)? Oh wait, never mind. I did it to myself. Just pretend I don’t have an anger problem. Merry Christmas.” Instead, from the beginning I was able to laugh and jokingly complain about it (because it really was funny), which made for a very fun conversation and a great Christmas memory. After all, it’s the crazy things that happen that lead to the best memories.

This Christmas may you be able to laugh at the goof ups and mistakes you and others make instead of taking things personally.

And if you have the time, try taping the toilet seat to the lid in hopes that someone will lift both up like I did and sit on the nastiest toilet part. My advice is to laugh and sometimes opportunities need to be encouraged.



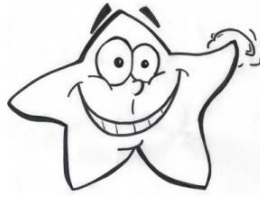




Blessing:

This Christmas, may you find ways to be blessed and to bless those around you as you experience love in an incredible way.





Do
you have
an idea for a
Christmas story or
an inspiring Christmas
memory or tradition you'd
like included in a future Christmas
book? Please submit ideas to the author:

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