

Christmas Gifts in Disguise

Christmas had just begun to reveal itself in the green origami holly and red paper Santas that shop owners were taping onto their store windows. I grinned back at those chubby, chortling paper grandpas as my siblings and I climbed into the car for a long-awaited Christmas shopping trip. As Dad pulled out of the driveway, my mind was awl with thoughts of what I planned to buy: the fragrant perfume for Mom, the snazzy watch for my older brother, the adorable doll for my little sister ... and on my list went. I was bursting with excitement, and could hardly wait until we'd reach the shopping mall. But we never did.

Halfway there, we were involved in an accident. Although we were unhurt, the young woman whose motorbike had smashed into the rear of our car had sustained minor injuries and was hurried to a nearby hospital. Thoughts of Christmas faded in the blur of phone calls, visits to the hospital and police station, and paperwork that stretched from days into weeks.



By the time all the details had been ironed out, I felt like the accident had devoured the best of my Christmas, leaving only a few “crumbs” to savor before the New Year was upon me. Still, I was determined to enjoy those crumbs to the fullest, so I eagerly joined my mother in preparing our Christmas dinner. My father, brothers, and sisters also joined in, and we enjoyed laughing, chatting, and singing Christmas carols while we cooked. The only damper on my enthusiasm was that my older sister Evelyn was feeling ill and was resting in her room, but she assured us that she would feel better by the evening. At last, it was beginning to feel like Christmas! But again, things did not play out as I had hoped.

In the late afternoon, we were startled to hear Evelyn vomiting in the bathroom. We found her doubled over with excruciating pain in her lower right abdomen. Soon, Dad was rushing her to the nearest hospital. Shock, dismay, and fear flooded me as I watched the car lights disappear into the darkness. Christmas excitement faded like the setting sun; Christmas dinner was left half cooked on the stove. The joy and merriment that I had been so eagerly anticipating had again been snatched from my grasp, and I struggled to find a reason. *Why this?* I wondered. *Why now?* *Why her?*



Mom gathered the rest of the family together and we desperately prayed, asking God to watch over Evelyn. Around midnight, Dad phoned to say that Evelyn had undergone an emergency surgery to remove a ruptured gangrenous cyst, and was out of danger. She was safe! In the darkened living room, we hugged one another; the lights of the Christmas tree sparkling through misty eyes and smiles of relief. As I collapsed into bed, my mind was so full of concern for Evelyn and prayers for her speedy recovery that any thoughts of my "ruined" Christmas were swept away.

But the next morning, a heavy cloud of disappointment and frustration again settled over me. I slipped out of bed and crept into the quiet living room, where I sat by the window gazing at the lights in the dark streets below. Due to the strain of the past weeks and the panic of the night before, Christmas gifts and stockings had been forgotten. *I guess I won't get any gifts this year*, I groaned. I thought of my sister waking in her hospital bed and imagined the pain and shock she must be experiencing.

What a terrible Christmas this has been! I thought gloomily as I picked up a Christmas gift ornament that had fallen from the tree.



Yet as I sat there turning the glittery little parcel over in my hand, new thoughts came to me. Slowly, it dawned on me that I had indeed received many Christmas gifts; albeit, not the kind I'd been expecting. I had gained renewed appreciation for my family, empathy for those who experience automobile accidents, gratitude for how relatively minor our incident had been, joy at my sister's successful surgery ... and on the list went.

I thought about how elated I'd be to see my sister again, and how much more I would treasure her after her close call. I also knew that from now on I'd be grateful each time Mom returned safely from the market, each afternoon I stepped safely off the school bus, each evening Dad came safely home from work. Never again would I take an "ordinary" drive for granted.

My heart lifted, and I began smiling as peaceful joy replaced my gloom and sadness. I found myself praying that in the coming year I would make a greater effort to express love and appreciation to each of my family members, no matter what disagreements or petty clashes might come between us. Instead of perfumes or watches or dolls, I determined that I would strive to give them gifts of kindness, patience, care, and understanding. I also resolved to appreciate my life more and to take good care of my body, for the events of this Christmas had shown me that life and health are treasures too delicate and beautiful to waste or take for granted.



As I watched the golden sunlight spread across the sky, I was reminded of the first Christmas. Perhaps Mary and Joseph had high hopes and loving plans of how to honor their firstborn child with the best accommodations and comforts on His arrival. How Caesar's decree must have disrupted their plans! How discouraged they must have felt, being refused by innkeeper after innkeeper! How their sad and weary souls must have sunk when they saw that dirty, smelly stable! All their plans fell apart one by one, much like my "perfect" Christmas had. Exhausted and frustrated as they must have felt, they may not have realized that their newborn baby would go on to save all humankind and change the course of history. But that night, wrapped in rags and lying in a crude manger surrounded by stinky animals, God's best gift ever came to the world.

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