

Country Christmas, 1948



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WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED CHRISTMAS, 2011

To Grandma Harshaw

Illustrated By Chad Lewis



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Christmas was coming, and we were excited. Very excited.

Life on the farm in 1948 was a lot different than what you're used to. Not necessarily harder, but unquestionably less comfortable. The war had just ended a few years before, and although Dad had not been called into active duty, the wounds of lost friends, lost family members, and lost opportunities were still fresh.

But for us kids, life on the farm—10 miles of dirt road from the nearest nowhere—was fresh and new and vibrant. Dad had purchased the farm two weeks after marrying his red-headed sweetheart, and a year after that Mom resigned her position teaching all eight grades at the Labette county school so she could raise a family. I was now 5 years old, and knew every inch of that farm like the back of my hand. I had named every cat, knew every chicken, and had become the “man of the house” while Dad labored out in the fields 6 days a week. Kathy and Linda, 4 and 3 years old respectively, were Mom's little tagalongs, already learning how to cook and clean and manage our tiny 3 room farmhouse.

And the home was tiny. It had a small porch with just enough space for a little oak bench Dad had made. Inside, we didn't have a family room, living room, and kitchen like homes now do. The entire downstairs was just one big room—at least it seemed big to us—with the kitchen, the supper table, and Mom and Dad's sitting chairs all within a few feet of each other. The home's two tiny bedrooms were both upstairs; Mom and Dad's bedroom was on the left, and our room was on the right. Downstairs, Mom prepared meals on a wood burning stove that, along with the big stone fireplace, provided heat in the winter. It was my job to haul wood from the woodshed to the porch in my Radio Flyer wagon—once a day in the summer, and twice a day in the winter. Electricity wouldn't light our home for another half dozen years, so we used candles and kerosene lamps in the winter and just went to bed when it got dark in the summer. Television had been invented, but we kids had never seen one; not even in the department store windows in town. A red-handled pump out back provided our water, and an outhouse 20 yards from the back door was the closest thing we had to a bathroom. Even



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the outhouse suggested we were poor; it was a common man's "2 holer," not the fancier 3 and 4 "holers" I found out about later.

Even though our home was lowly and meek, Mom, who had grown up in town, kept it very nice and comfortable. Her collection of white plates with blue designs around the edges was displayed proudly in a glass-front hutch along with a few porcelain figurines we weren't allowed to touch. The walls downstairs were decorated with 4 or 5 framed family photos, an old picture of Jesus Mom said was already there when we moved in, two paintings of a field—one in the winter covered with snow and the same one in the summer with wheat growing—and a red clock that said "Harvester" in the middle. But the thing I remember most about that house was a huge multi-colored rug spread over the wooden floorboards in front of Dad's big brown upholstered chair and Mom's rocker. We used to sit on that rug for hours and hours and listen to Mom read stories from Mother Goose or Arabian Nights or the Bible, or Dad tell us stories about crazy Uncle John.

But what I loved most of all about that beautiful colored rug was lying down and listening to Mom play her violin. We didn't have a phonograph machine, and since we had no electricity, we didn't have a radio. But we did have Mom's violin, and oh how she loved to play it. It was her most prized possession—we had heard the story a thousand times about how it had been grandma Logan's and it was the only thing she managed to save when their farmhouse had burned to the ground when Mom was a still little girl. Grandma had then given it to Mom as a wedding gift, and Mom played that violin almost every night as we kids listened on that colored rug, enchanted, as she played everything from church hymns to Beethoven to fiddle music. And that's what I also remember most about Christmas—Mom played every Christmas song imaginable all through December. Then, on Christmas Eve she would play Silent Night really soft—barely a whisper—while Dad read the story about Jesus's birth from the Bible. After he finished reading, she'd play the song a little louder and we'd all sing together. Well, all of us except Dad—he never sang, even at church. All these years later I still tear up when I hear that beautiful song. Life wasn't always easy on the farm. And it wasn't always comfortable. But it was cozy, and it felt good.

As Christmas approached that year, we could hardly stand the excitement. We had spent Thanksgiving in town at Grandma Logan's house as usual. Then the next Sunday, Dad drove us all out to a pasture 2 or 3 miles east of the farm where a small grove of pine trees grew. That patch of pine trees were the only ones I ever knew about in Labette County, and to this day I have no idea who owned that pasture or if it was legal to



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chop them down for Christmas trees. We carefully selected one that was a little bit taller than Dad that Mom said would still fit under our home's low ceilings, even with the star on top. I insisted on sitting in the back of the pickup with the tree despite the freezing temperatures outside, but she wouldn't let Linda or Kathy. She was always worried that we'd get pneumonia or catch the flu.

Mom loved Christmas and always made a huge production of trimming the tree. We decorated it with home-popped strings of corn and dried cranberries, a collection of 15 or 20 colored glass ornaments Mom had collected over the years, and a long red and green homemade paper chain we had made the day before. There were no lights on the tree since we didn't have electricity, and Mom wouldn't allow candles because she had been terrified of fire thanks to the one that had burned her house down when she was a little girl. She had made a star from some scrap tin she had found the year before though, and Dad proudly crowned the tree with it as Mom served us hot cocoa and fresh-made sugar cookies. As she picked up her violin and started to play *The First Noel*, we sat on that big colored rug listening and dreaming about Christmas morning—still a month away—and the toys that Santa would bring us.

Ah, yes. Santa. In those days Santa was far more loved and revered by children than he is now. We couldn't see him on TV because we didn't have one. We didn't see him in the stores because we rarely went to town. Just about everything we knew about Santa came from the picture books Mom would read us and the songs like *Santa Clause Is Coming To Town*. And most importantly, we learned about Santa from the Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalog. I'll never forget the cover of the catalog that year—it was the first year I could actually read—at least the easy words. The cover was bright red and had a picture of 3 Santas holding hands and dancing around a giant Christmas card that said, "Let's dance and sing and make good cheer, for Christmas comes but once a year."

From the Moment it arrived in October, my sisters and I poured through that catalog for hours on end. But we never made Christmas lists like kids do now. We didn't have to because Mom taught us that Santa sent elves from the North Pole to watch us all year long, and they performed two important jobs: they made notes of what we wanted for Christmas and they kept an eye on us so they could report back to Santa whether we had been naughty or nice. Personally, I was mostly worried about naughty. All year long—not just around Christmas—Mom would constantly remind us, "Do your chores or the elves will tell Santa." Or "Stop teasing your sisters or the elves will send a note to Santa." Mom must've loved those elves because they always seemed to be lurking at the precise Moment when I was being naughty. Like the time earlier that spring when



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a cat named Jack “followed” me into the outhouse; I thought it would be fun to put him down the other hole and see what he would do. Turns out he just got stuck and Dad had to take the holes off the part where you sit and reach down in there to get the cat; Mom didn’t think it was very funny, and gave me a stern warning that Santa would not be pleased when he got the elf’s note. But that had been several months before, and the cat had survived—although we did call him “Stinky” after that—and I hoped that Santa would have forgotten by December.

After all, we were counting on Santa. In those days on the farm, we didn’t get gifts or treats very often. On Easter we would usually get a small chocolate bunny and a few hard boiled eggs. Birthdays were celebrated with cake and ice cream and a nice meal on Mom’s fancy white and blue plates, but we never got presents. Mom and Dad simply couldn’t afford them. Some other farm kids did get modest gifts on their birthdays, but most didn’t. So Christmas was the one time of the year when we could get new toys—glorious toys—and usually a peppermint stick and an orange in our socks. Linda was too little to understand all the Santa and elf business, but Kathy and I knew and assured her . . . on Christmas morning, Santa would make all our dreams come true.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, Christmas Eve finally arrived. Early that morning, the clear skies turned dark with lead gray snow clouds. The weather, which had actually been quite pleasant for a week or more, turned bitter cold by mid-afternoon, so Mom sent me to the woodshed to get some extra firewood. She stoked both the fireplace and kitchen stove then prepared her famous roast beef and potatoes dinner when Dad came in from working in the fields at sundown. You already know what happened next—we bundled up, lay by the fire on that big colorful rug and listed to Dad read the Christmas story from the Bible while Mom played a very silent version of Silent Night. We left fresh milk and a cookie for Santa and hurried off to bed by 7:30.

Because our bedroom was upstairs, we didn’t have the benefit of the fireplace or the kitchen stove to keep us warm. And on that Christmas Eve night, it was freezing cold in our room. We all donned our long underwear, pajamas, and wool socks and bundled under double layers of Mom’s hand-made quilts—a handsome blue patchwork quilt on the top layer of my bed, and a girly pink one on the bed my two sisters shared. But it was still cold enough that we could see our breath in the dim light of the small kerosene lamp Mom left on the small table between our beds because Linda was still scared of the dark.

In order to keep us warm on especially cold nights like this, Mom employed a special trick that I am sure she had learned from her mother, who had undoubtedly learned it



from her mother, and so on. She would fill old canning jars—the kind you normally use for pears and strawberry jam—and filled them up with boiling hot water, wrapped them in old newspapers, secured them with string, and put them by our cold feet under the covers. Even though the jars would sometimes freeze solid by morning, we would be fast asleep by the time they lost their warmth.

Except it was Christmas Eve, and we were too excited to sleep. I was so cold that night I thought the newspaper-covered jar would feel better on my bare hands than on my feet which were already covered with three layers of socks and two quilts. I disappeared headfirst under the covers, retrieved the jar of paper-wrapped warmth, and sat up in bed with it to show off my hand-warming prize to my sisters. It felt like I was holding a tiny bundle of summer sunshine as I rolled the toasty jar on my frozen face and ears and nose. My sisters quickly mimicked my behavior and were soon warming their hands and faces with the jar they had shared for their feet, too.

The trouble started with a simple, innocent question. Kathy wondered out loud what Santa would bring her that night. She was hoping for a Betsy Wetsy Magic Skin doll—with sleeping eyes and real eye lashes. Why anyone would want a doll that wets its diaper is still a mystery to me all these years later, but she had absolutely worn out that page of the Sears catalog. Linda said she wanted a doll too as she cradled the warm jar in her arms as if it already was her very own baby. But she wasn't as picky about the particular kind of doll as Kathy was—as long as its eyes opened and shut when you laid it down. As for me, I confidently declared that Santa would bring me not one, but two presents: The Happi-Time Farm with 16 molded rubber animals, and a real leather football like the “Better” one shown in the Sears catalog with cloth lining and a metal inflating pump.

At least I sounded confident when I said it; I knew deep down inside I was pressing my luck hoping for anything given my record that year. In addition to stuffing Jack down the outhouse hole, I had also blown off a piece of a chicken's foot with a firecracker on the 4th of July, and been scolded more times than I could remember for trying to ride our old, one-eyed bulldog Spike like a horse. Then there was the time I had gotten my head stuck in our bedroom window; I had opened it one night the previous summer to look at the stars after mom had put us to bed and the girls had fallen asleep. Bad luck—the window slipped and caught me on my shoulders—head outside, body inside. My arms were trapped at my side, and I couldn't use them to lift the window back up.



And since my head was out the window, my parents couldn't hear me screaming, at least not for almost an hour.

And now on this night, Kathy, who had become Mom's little "the elves are watching you" parrot, quickly reminded me of the cat, chicken, dog, and window incidences, as well as one involving a frog and her pajamas that I had completely forgotten about. She scolded me that there was no way I was getting a farm or a football or anything else, and I'd have to watch in agony as they opened their presents on the big colored rug. Then she teased me that instead of a football, I'd be getting a lump of coal that I could throw with my friends. After all, she reminded me, the elves had seen everything.

But I knew from years of experience of being naughty that those elves weren't for real. Last year I had cut Kathy's hair with Mom's sewing scissors—a rather sizable chunk—and despite Mom and Kathy's elf warnings, had still received a 28-inch pump action pop gun from Santa. Either those elves didn't exist, had forgotten to tell Santa, or Santa himself had forgotten to put it in his book. Either way, I was almost sure to get my football and farm set under the tree the next morning. And I let Kathy know it. She, of course, disagreed, and in a voice that was half teasing and half convicting: "You're so naughty you won't even get coal in your sock. You'll have play ball with that old jam jar wrapped in newspaper!"

As the angry words left her mouth, I instinctively retorted without thinking, "Oh yea!? Catch this!" and tossed the jar I had been mindlessly holding across the 18-inch gulf that separated the two beds straight toward her face. She simultaneously ducked her head and reached her arms up to grab the jar, but I had failed to realize that 4-year old girls aren't very good at catching jars, or anything thing else for that matter. In a fleeting moment forever frozen in time, I watched in horror as my wayward pass went right over her ducked head, through her hands, landed on the pink quilt on top of Linda's left leg, and rolled off the bed. "Maybe the newspaper will soften its blow," I thought as the jar fell in slow motion to the weathered oak floorboards below. It was my only hope.

The newspapers did not soften the blow. The crash was probably not, in and of itself, all that loud. But in the quiet cold of the tiny farmhouse, the jangle of the shattering glass was deafening. Hopefully Mom wouldn't hear—and hopefully, please God—don't let the elves see this. Not on Christmas Eve.

I don't know about the elves, but mom sure did hear. Even though the jar toss, missed catch, roll off the bed, and crash to the floor incident had seemed to take 15 minutes of slow-motion horror, Mom had somehow sailed up the stairs and appeared



as at the door with a disgusted look on her face in less than 2 seconds. There was no time to corroborate a story. There was no time to create an alibi. Mom just somehow instantly appeared in that doorway before we could react.

Her words were sharper than the broken glass scattered across the floor. “What in Heaven’s name happened!?!” she demanded. “And WHO is responsible for this?” Linda immediately burst into loud, wailing tears. Kathy just sort of whimpered and pointed at me; she was at a complete loss for words. I, in turn, pointed at her and defiantly screamed “It’s HER fault!” After all, she had practically ratted me out to the elves all year long and was single-handedly trying to cost me any chance of getting any presents. Plus, she couldn’t catch a stupid jar. By this time the steaming water had already started to freeze, creating a frozen, glassy, newspaperly mess on the floor next to the girls’ bed.

As mother realized what had happened, and as she recognized based on our blubbering reactions that this had been no innocent accident, she snapped into emergency mode. Both farm life and her previous stint as the only teacher at the eight-grade schoolhouse had taught her how to quickly and calmly deal with emergencies—although in the grand scheme of things, I’m sure this barely qualified. For me, on the other hand, my entire world was about to collapse—I had just perpetrated the worlds’ worst-timed naughty act in the history of kid-dom. As Mom plucked the glass shards and paper shreds from the clutches of the hardening ice and tossed them in a bucket, all I could think about were the words on the cover of the Sears catalog which were now mocking me: “Let’s dance and sing and make good cheer, for Christmas comes but once a year.” That’s right. Once a year. Tomorrow. Mom was not impressed by our crying and finger-pointing and confirmed my worst fears when she solemnly warned that Santa’s sleigh just might now stop at our house that night. And without further discussion, disgusted with all three of us, she blew out the kerosene lamp and slammed the door behind her.

Kathy was now crying too—an entire year of righteous living and impressing the elves would apparently be wasted—and Linda was still wailing. Then I started crying; I couldn’t help it. My face was feverishly hot despite the freezing temperatures and I remember wondering if my tears would freeze on my face. Most of all, I wondered, petrified, if the elves had indeed seen what had just happened. I rationalized that it was



too late and they had probably already returned to the North Pole by the time we went to bed.

Eventually the room fell quiet, and one by one, we all drifted off to sleep.

Despite the late night full of gloom and doom, I woke up at first light and peered out our bedroom's tiny window and found a gleaming, sparkling wonderland. What looked like a foot of snow had fallen overnight and was covering everything as far as I could see. I took that as a good sign. Santa would like having snow to land his sleigh on. I woke up Kathy and Linda and coaxed them out of bed and out the bedroom door. As we crept down the stairs, we peeked around the corner—just like every year—and the first thing I caught a glimpse of was the huge Christmas tree that was so tall that it almost caused the tin star to touch the ceiling. I was afraid to look down; I couldn't bear the thought of seeing coal, or worse—nothing under the tree. But before I could even peek, I knew what blow fate had dealt us. I heard one of my sisters—I don't know which one—scream a scream of bloody horror. All of our worst nightmares had come true: Santa Clause had not come. No presents under the tree. No peppermint sticks or oranges in our socks by the fireplace. Not even a lousy lump of coal. Nothing. Mom had been right. Santa never even stopped at our house. My plans for playing farm all day long on my favorite colored rug were dashed. Then the awful truth hit me: Not only had I single-handedly ruined my own Christmas, I had ruined it for the entire family.

I burst into tears and ran back upstairs. I dove back under my covers headfirst and shamefully hid my face and my tears. In the sixty-plus years of dealing with the routine hardships of life since then, I have never felt such exquisite pain and guilt and heartache as I felt at that moment. I wished I could just disappear off the face of the earth. Meanwhile, downstairs, I could hear my sisters still crying and Mom and Dad shuffling down the stairs from their bedroom to see what was wrong. When they saw what I had done, I would surely be forced to live the hobo life—I'd tie my things in a handkerchief on the end of a stick, hike miles through the snow to the railroad tracks by the highway and hop a train. Nobody would ever love me or want me again. How could they? My tears stopped and I sat up in bed as I resigned myself to the fate I had earned: I would be always be known as the boy who ruined Christmas.

I heard my Mom coming up the stairs, so I turned away to conceal my red, tear-streamed face. Maybe she would hold me in her arms and tell me it was okay and try to comfort me. Maybe she could use her elf connections to get Santa to somehow come



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back. I was wrong. It wasn't my Mom at all—it was Dad, standing in his morning long johns; he was not happy, and he was not there to hold me in his arms or comfort me.

“Get dressed. You and your sisters need to go gather more firewood. It's cold down there and we're out of wood.” He never even mentioned that Santa didn't come; he just looked very, very angry.

Back in those days, kids would never even dream of talking back to their parents. At least I wouldn't. The thought honestly never even crossed my mind. I just obediently changed into my clothes, bundled in my winter coat, hat, scarf, gloves, and boots and headed outside to do my chore. I think Mom was crying as she sat by the fireplace in her morning robe and watched me and my two crestfallen sisters shuffle out the door in to the foot-deep snow to gather the wood. Dad had pulled on his boots but was still wearing his long johns as he followed us out to the frozen wasteland to act, I suppose, as our warden. We had heard stories from the war of frozen Siberia—a harsh, frozen, and unforgiving place in Russia where they sent prisoners of war. And now here we were, on Christmas morning, hobbling off under heavy supervision to our own personal prison camp.

The wagon had frozen to the ground overnight, and I had to struggle to free it from its resting place near the porch. Linda was bundled like a fat grape about to burst and was crying every bit as loud as she been the night before. Kathy had a stunned, defeated look on her face as she trudged through the snow with me, dragging the rusty Radio Flyer wagon toward the woodshed. It appeared as if she had abandoned all hope and every reason for living.

Under normal conditions, it would only take me about 5 minutes to make 3 trips to and from the woodshed to fill the tinder box by the house. But on that frigid Christmas morning in 1948, it seemed to take an hour or more. The hardest part wasn't actually gathering the wood; it was fighting through the snow and trying to corral my sisters into marching behind the wagon. They were absolutely no help at all; they just cried and whined and slowed down the entire operation. When I finally finished the chore, exhausted and frozen and demoralized, Dad announced that because we had also caused him and Mom to miss Christmas, that we were to haul three MORE wagon loads of wood, even though the tinder box was completely full.

I briefly considered running away. But like the Siberian prisoners, there would be no way to make it through the unforgiving cold to freedom and live to tell about it. The snowy conditions were just too harsh. Plus, I was only 5 years old, and woefully unpre-



pared for a long hike. My toes already screamed with pain—I was convinced they were long-since frostbitten. Dad always used to joke about sawing off our arms or legs if we hurt a finger or toe as a way to make us “forget the pain.” Now he probably really would have to saw off my leg. Or at least a few toes. I’d never be able to play football. Not that it mattered, since I didn’t actually own a football. And I never would. My sisters’ faces were starting to turn blue, and the thought stuck in my mind that Dad was literally going to work us to death. After all, who would even want kids that shoved cats down outhouse holes and pulled wings off flies and watched them walk around helplessly. Yea, I did that, too. No wonder Santa hadn’t come. No wonder we were doomed. No wonder my parents wanted me dead. I was hopelessly, irrevocably, inconceivably NAUGHTY!

The second round of wood hauling was actually a little easier since we had already worn a path in the snow with our wagon and shuffling feet the first time around. By the time we finished the sixth load, we were covered with crumbs of bark, our faces were frozen, and believe it or not, Linda had quit crying and assumed the death-march look she copied from Kathy. Dad set us down on the little oak bench on the porch he had made and gave us one final lecture.

“You kids were bad last night, and your mother and I were very angry. Not only did you break the jar by fooling around, you lied about it and tried to blame each other.” He was talking to all of us, but looking directly at me. “We heard Santa’s sleigh last night, but it kept right on going past our house. You’ve worked hard this morning though, and if you’re lucky, one of Santa’s elves might have been here making notes for Santa for next year. But it’s going to take a lot more than hauling wood this morning to get Santa back. You’re going to have to be good for the entire year. Can I count on you to be good this year so we don’t have to go through this again?”

“Yes, sir,” we all mumbled in unison. The words of the Sears catalog cover haunted me once again . . . “Christmas comes but once a year.” And for us, that would now mean NEXT year. For a 5-year-old kid, one year might as well have been a million years. A million years of guilt and shame and sorrow. And a family that would hate me. Even if they didn’t, there was really no way I could guarantee that I could actually even be good for an entire year. Sometimes it’s just too fun to do bad things.

As Dad opened the door, the house felt warm and inviting—even better than the ill-fated jar had felt on my face the night before. As I walked into the house, I kept my eyes down on the floor, too ashamed to make eye contact with my Mom. I could smell



breakfast cooking, but despite my hour of hard labor, I had no appetite at all. I just wanted to go upstairs, hide under my covers, and never be seen again.

Until I heard my sister scream. Just like the previous night, I wasn't sure which sister it was. But this time, instead of a scream of bloody murder, it was a scream of sheer delight and unbridled enthusiasm. The first thing I saw when I looked up was Dad, looking toward the tree, with a big Cheshire cat grin on his face. Then I looked under the huge tree—somehow Santa had come while we were outside hauling wood. I quickly glanced at Mom, who had tears streaming down her cheeks. I couldn't believe it—in an instant my fortunes had changed from castoff to conqueror. From reject to rejoicing. From abandoned to adored. Santa had come and saved me from my sins!

We rushed to the tree, littering a pile of gloves, hats, and scarves along the way. The mammoth tree had lived up to expectations—there must have been twenty presents under that thing. I looked at the fireplace and saw that the socks were all full and peppermint sticks were poking out of the top! We all looked at Mom and wanted to know what had happened? Did she see Santa? Was she there when he came? When did he come? What did he look like?

She explained that she too had been crying that morning. Not because Santa didn't come, but because it made her sad that we had been so naughty... and that we had been so quick to blame each other and try to excuse our misdeed. She said she went upstairs to change out of her robe, and when she was in her bedroom, she thought she had heard something downstairs. By the time she was dressed, and by the time she could make it down the stairs, the socks were already full and the presents were already under the tree. Elves, she told us, must have been talking to Santa.

That was the most glorious Christmas morning I ever experienced in my entire life. As usual, Dad made us eat breakfast and change clothes before we could open our presents. Kathy got her Betsy Wetsy doll, and Linda got a baby whose eyes closed when you laid her down. Santa brought me the Happi-Time farm with 16 molded rubber farm animals and the football I had wanted so badly. Good thing my toes didn't need to be sawed off after all. After we finished opening the presents, I couldn't help but think of the cover of the Sears catalog once again, "Let's dance and sing and make good cheer, for Christmas comes but once a year." It had come, even if it was a little late.

Later that morning as I lay on that big colorful rug playing with the chickens, cows, horses, and pigs, Mom started playing her violin. First she played "We Wish You a Merry Christmas," and "The First Noel." Then she played a song that I had never paid



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much attention to, but since that day has etched itself in my memory: “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.”

When Mom finished playing, she slipped out of her rocking chair with her violin and sat on the big, colorful rug next to me. “Curtis, were you worried that Santa wasn’t going to come this year?” I tried to maintain an innocent, non-petrified look on my face as I said, “I guess so.” If she only knew my runaway-train-hopping hobo plans! Then she assured me, “Santa Clause is kind of like Jesus. They’re both disappointed when we do bad things, and they want us to make good choices so we can enjoy a happy life. At Christmastime we celebrate the birth of Jesus, as you know.” As she continued, she motioned to the old picture of Jesus that hung on the wall of our humble home. “But Jesus didn’t come into this world to be a baby. He came into this world to save us from our sins.”

Once again she put the violin to her neck and slowly drew the bow; this time she sang softly as she played: “Hark, the herald angels sing; glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled.” Then she stopped, put her violin and bow down on the colorful rug next to us and gently repeated the last phrase: “God and sinners reconciled.”

She explained that the word “reconcile” means to forgive and become friends. “Jesus came to earth to allow God to forgive us and be friends with us, even though we mess up. I want you to know that no matter what you do, no matter how bad you mess up, no matter how naughty you are; your Dad and I will still love you. And so will God. He sent his son into this world because we are all sinners. He wants to save us from those sins; he knows that we’re far from perfect. But we have to do our part. We have to try. If we mess up, it makes it harder for us—just like you and your sisters having to work out in the cold snow this morning and wait longer for Santa to come.” By now, her lip was quivering ever so slightly as she finished, “But believe me when I say that Santa will ALWAYS come, and God will always be there for you. I promise. He sent his Beloved Son on the first Christmas morning thousands of years ago to make sure of it. *That’s* why we celebrate Christmas. So God and sinners can reconcile.”

I was only 5 years old, but I swear on a stack of Bibles that I remember to this day what she said, word for word. And you know what, after all these years; after more than 60 years of ups and downs, I still believe.

the end

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