

Home for the Holidays

I put another coin in the jukebox and selected F-6. "I'll Have a Blue Christmas Without You" seemed like a good selection to feel sorry for myself by. I had good reasons to feel sorry for myself, too. Christmas was supposed to be about family, gathering around the Christmas tree, sipping eggnog, singing carols and reminiscing about the good old days. It meant smiles as Uncle Henry told the story of "The Night Before Christmas" and giggles as Aunt Mildred struggled to remember all the words to "The Twelve Days of Christmas". It was seeing the faces of the children light up when they saw the presents stacked under the tree. Yes, Christmas meant a lot of things, but a woman sitting in a crummy diner with a group of "less than desirable" people, was *not* one of them. Yet it was Christmas Eve, and that's exactly where I found myself.

I was happy that the weather report indicated snow for Christmas. That is, until the interstate was closed, and I was detoured to this, this place. So far, I had eaten a greasy burger and soggy fries. I drank three cups of brown liquid that the waitress claimed to be coffee. My chair was bumped eighteen times. I was accosted by a burial plot salesman and offered a snort from a man whose belt buckle identified him as "Bubba". This was turning out to be quite a Christmas!

With each glance at my watch, I thought about every detail of the festivities I was missing. It just wasn't fair. I wanted to see the star put on the nine-foot Christmas tree and hang my stocking on the mantel and tuck the children into bed. Yes, the children. My car was full of shiny, ribbon tied packages for my nieces and nephew. It had become an unofficial tradition for each relative to try to outdo the other when it came to gifts for the children. This year I had done quite well, if I do say so myself. A chemistry set for Travis, that Einstein would have been proud of. A computer with all the bells and whistles for Ashley. And for little Sarah, a Suzy doll. She eats and she sleeps, and she talks, and she walks, and she dances. She probably even makes her own bed and does the dishes. I thought about how I would tell the family, how every time I hit a bump, Suzy cried out "Mamma!"

My thoughts were interrupted when the table was jarred. The waitress sat next to me. In a nasal voice, she explained, "Ma'am, I'm sorry to bother you. My name is Anna, and I was hoping you might help me." She stuttered with embarrassment. "You see, my car won't start. I have kids at home. I live just down the road and with it being Christmas Eve, I thought you might... well... give me a ride."

Yes, I knew it was Christmas Eve. I had places I wanted to go, too. Now I was supposed to feel sorry for her?

I took a deep breath and looked around. I determined that risking my life in a blinding blizzard was perhaps less dangerous than staying there and eating anything else on that menu. "Let's go" I sighed.

We drudged through the snow to my car. Snowflakes covered the windows almost as quickly as we brushed them off. Again, I thought to myself, this is not fair. I should be baking cookies with my Aunt Rachel.

We got in the car and inched our way west, hoping we were still on the snow-covered road. The mile we traveled seemed like one hundred. Finally, we saw a light, a beautiful, beautiful light. It wasn't like the huge multicolored light display my sister's yard was famous for. It was just a little candle in the window. Its beauty was merely the fact that we made it.

Anna invited me to celebrate Christmas with her family. Even covered with snow I could tell from the appearance of the outside of Anna's house that it would be nothing like the Christmas I was missing. However, it had to be better than going back to that diner.

When we went inside, we were greeted by her three children. They appeared to be the same ages as my nieces and nephew. That made me miss my Christmas even more. I was right about the house. It was scarcely furnished and wasn't filled with the aroma of baking cookies and warm cider. The Christmas tree, if one would really call it that, stood in the corner. It was adorned with handmade ornaments and banners declaring "Jesus is the Reason for the Season" and an aluminum foil star on top.

Anna took the children to the kitchen to prepare dinner. What a "pleasant surprise". She had brought home meatloaf from the diner. I sat and stared at the pathetic excuse for a Christmas tree and thought about the turkey dinner with all the trimmings, I was missing and wondered if I'd get to have any Christmas at all. I managed to force down a plate of, well, let's just call it food. Then we all gathered around the tree.

The children, like I suppose children everywhere on Christmas Eve, were excited. They sang Christmas carols and spoke of their Christmas dreams. Listening to their innocent enthusiasm made the evening almost bearable.

Anna nestled the children around her on the couch and said, "Now children, let's remember what Christmas is all about." She picked up the bible and read the account of the birth of Jesus. She read about Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem and baby Jesus lying in a manger, because there was no room for

them at the inn. She told about the host of angels that appeared to lowly shepherds announcing His birth. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." She told about the wise men that followed a star, bearing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And how when the wise men found Jesus, they fell and worshipped Him. Then she said with a warm smile, "Remember, Jesus is the reason for the season."

I don't know if it was the feeling from helping Anna tuck the children in bed, or if I was getting too tired to feel quite so miserable. When she offered me a blanket and the couch for a bed, I was appreciative.

Once she was certain the children were asleep, she laid a sheet of Christmas wrap on the table and proceeded to wrap some items. There was a sweater for the oldest girl and a scarf and gloves for the boy, and a doll for the little girl. It wasn't a doll that could cry or talk or anything. It was one of those plastic ones with the hair painted on, wearing only a diaper. Anna put an orange in each stocking the children had hung, thanked me for my kindness, wished me a Merry Christmas and went to bed. I was so choked up, I could barely speak.

I looked at the stockings holding a lonely orange and thought about the candy and presents that would be spilling out of the stockings at home. And the three little presents under the tree... presents... sweaters and gloves don't count as presents. I began to cry as I looked at the meager surroundings. But the people who lived there were not crying. They were happy. They were full of joy.

I thought about the words Anna spoke as she read about the birth of Jesus...Jesus is the reason for the season. I think I've heard those words before, but I finally understood what they meant. Suddenly those things I had been missing weren't worth feeling sorry for myself over. I had that same joy as Anna and her family.

I looked out the window and the snow had stopped. I quickly penned a letter to Anna thanking her and wishing her a Merry Christmas. As soon as I unloaded the contents of my car under their Christmas tree, I headed off to my sister's house.

When I walked through the door, I was welcomed by the sounds of Christmas music and children giggling and packages rustling. The aroma of Christmas cookies and turkey greeted me along with scores of relatives. When we all sat down to dinner, I told my story and explained to the children that I would have to owe them a Christmas present. They seemed to understand. Even little Sarah said nobody should have a doll with painted on hair.

I stayed at my sister's house for a few days, and I enjoyed all the festivities, but in a new light. I knew the day's activities were not the true meaning of Christmas.

On my way back I had to stop and see Anna and thank her in person. When I didn't see her at the diner, I asked the waitress on duty about Anna. The older, heavysset lady told me she was the owner, and no one named Anna had ever worked there. At first, I thought maybe Anna had gotten fired or had some type of problem. However, when she insisted the diner was not open on Christmas Eve, I realized it must be the old woman who had a problem, and headed for Anna's house.

I realized it was difficult to navigate on that snowy Christmas Eve, but I was sure I was in the area of Anna's house. I looked all around, but I was surrounded by fields. Something lying in the field caught my eye. When I walked through the snow to get a closer look, tears filled my eyes. There was a handmade banner that said "Jesus is the Reason for the Season" and a doll with painted on hair.

I don't understand a lot of things and I don't even try. One thing I do know, is Christmas has gotten a lot simpler at my house. I may not have all the glitter and gadgets, and my tree may not be nine feet tall. We try to remember what Christmas is all about. You'll always see a banner on my tree that says, "Jesus is the Reason for the Season" and under it a doll with painted on hair.

Merry Christmas!