

That Christmas

Christmas was always just a little more like Christmas at Grandma Nettie's house. It officially began each year the day after Thanksgiving. That's when we would all go to Grandma's house. Grandpa Frank would buy the biggest, greenest tree in the city, and all of us grandchildren carried dozens of boxes down from the attic. Each contained a Christmas treasure. Many of these treasures were from "the old country" as Grandma called it.

One by one each piece brought back a cherished memory of times gone by to Grandma. There were the hand-stitched Christmas doilies made by her Aunt Emma, a Yule log from a tree that grew by her window at her childhood home, and Christmas soldiers hand carved and painted by her Uncle James.

As we decorated the tree, Grandma would share stories with us as each delicate ornament took its place on a branch. When Grandpa climbed the ladder to put on the final touch, a satin angel, the tree seemed a hundred feet tall. But the most treasured moment of all was after the tree was lit, and the windows were trimmed with holly and the big wreath with the red ribbon took its place on the front door, Grandma would carefully open the blue velvet box.

First, she removed a lace table cloth and spread it across the table in front of the big window. Then came an authentic looking stable made of olive wood. One at a time Grandma picked up the pieces of the nativity set and meticulously put them in their proper place. Each piece was hand crafted from the finest porcelain and precise in every detail. There were wisemen, shepherds, angels, sheep, cows, a donkey, and of course, Mary and Joseph. The most beautiful and exquisite piece was the precious Baby Jesus, which stayed in the blue velvet box, and was put in Grandma's closet until the grandfather clock chimed midnight on Christmas Eve. In a long procession all the grandchildren would come from the bedroom with the blue velvet box and one child would carefully lay the Baby Jesus in the manger.

I'll never forget the year when it was my turn to lay the fragile infant in His place. The excitement began on that Friday after Thanksgiving as we carried the boxes from the attic and Grandma Nettie carefully unpacked each one. When the

decorations filled the house and Grandma began to set each piece of the nativity in its place, my heart beat rapidly in anticipation. I was so excited knowing that I would be the one to carry Baby Jesus to the manger as the chimes on Grandma Nettie's antique clock proclaimed that Christmas had finally arrived.

After a full day of festivities, Grandma sat at the piano and began to play Christmas carols. All the children sang, but my mind was on Baby Jesus. I had to have just one peek at the treasured figure. I slipped away without anyone noticing, quietly opening Grandma's closet and removing the blue velvet box. I raised the lid and ever so gently lifted out the Baby Jesus.

He was so perfect, He almost looked real. I held Him in my hands as I thought how proud I would be on Christmas. I'm not certain how it happened, but somehow the unthinkable did happen. It slipped from my fingers. I was filled with horror as I slowly looked down and saw the pieces lying on the floor.

My heart sank. My stomach felt sick. What would happen when they found out? I knew better than to have gone in there and knew I was in big trouble! After a moment of nothing less than total shock, I quickly picked up the pieces and laid them in the box. My hands shook and tears filled my eyes as I put the blue velvet box back in the closet, looking over my shoulder hoping not to get caught. I wiped my eyes and again took my place around the piano with the other children, but I didn't feel like singing.

When it was time for us to go home the others wanted to stay longer. Not me. I wanted to go home and go home fast. At home my mother asked me what was wrong. I just told her I was tired and went right to bed. However, I didn't sleep at all that night. Instead, I worried about what would happen to me. After all, on Christmas everyone would find out Baby Jesus was broken. Then it hit me. They would only see it was broken. They wouldn't know who broke it! That's when I decided to keep it an absolute secret. After all, no one could prove I was responsible.

Over the weeks before Christmas when everyone else went to Grandma's house, I made excuses not to go. I claimed I had a stomachache, or homework, or a holiday surprise I was working on. The thought of facing Grandma Nettie was so frightening I just stayed away. Although I missed the smell of Christmas cookies,

and making popcorn balls, and the music, I could not risk going there. What if she found out?

When Christmas Eve arrived, although I tried, no excuse was acceptable to keep me from going to Grandma's. "You must go," Mother said, "it's your turn this year to carry the Baby Jesus."

On the way, I could only think what would happen when I opened the blue velvet box. Everyone would see the broken pieces.

When we arrived, everyone was there. They were sipping Grandma's special hot chocolate with the little marshmallows in it. The house was filled with the sound of Christmas music, and packages rustling, and children squealing, but as midnight drew closer, attention turned to the nativity set on the table in front of the big window.

Grandma picked up one of the fine porcelain pieces, her eyes filled with tears and her voice quivered as she told how her father had given her the nativity set as a gift so many years ago. Now my fear of being caught was overcome by the shame of just knowing the pain I had caused Grandma. I could stand the burden no longer and burst into tears. Between the sobs, I could barely speak the words "I'm sorry... I broke it... I broke it."

Grandma lovingly put her arm around me and led me into her bedroom. I sat on the bed trembling as she fetched the blue velvet box from the closet and lifted the lid. I could barely speak as Grandma Nettie reached her hand into the box and lifted out a beautiful, whole Baby Jesus.

I was astonished. Was it a Christmas miracle? I was so happy, but my delight quickly fell to disappointment as I moved closer and saw the seams on what was once a perfect complexion. On closer examination, I could see the scars where the pieces had been glued together. "I'm so sorry Grandma," I sobbed.

"I forgive you child," she answered. "Let me explain to you the real meaning of Christmas, the real meaning of forgiveness. At Christmas we see the beautiful little Baby Jesus, and sometimes forget the rest. Jesus grew up to be a perfect man, yet like the figurine, his body too was broken, for us, for our sins. He was nailed to a cross taking the punishment for the things we do wrong."

"Like when I got in the blue velvet box when I shouldn't have?" I asked.

“That right,” Granma answered. “Just like what you did, kept you away from me, our sins keep us away from God. Jesus shed His blood on the cross so when our life here is over, we can have a home in heaven. Just like I forgave you, God will forgive us, if we’re truly sorry and ask Him to forgive us. Now these scars on the baby Jesus will remind us of what Jesus went through for us.”

That day I learned what a wonderful lady Grandma Nettie really was, and I realized the true meaning of Christmas. At midnight I triumphantly carried the Baby Jesus and lay Him in the manger, and Grandma shared the same lesson with the others that she had shared with me.

Now that Grandma Nettie is gone on to her home in heaven, the porcelain nativity scene is displayed on the table in front of my big window, and when I look at the beautiful Baby Jesus, I see the scars and remember the true meaning of Christmas.

Merry Christmas!