

The Christmas Gift

Marianne paused, the flower in one hand, sugar in the other. Was three dozen enough? She smiled. The children loved her chocolate cream cookies. If she made another three dozen, she was sure to have an empty container by Monday.

How they loved her chocolate chip. Almost as much as her sugar cookies. She glanced at the clock, the one with the chirping birds. Had it been three Christmas ago when Andy gave it to her. Of course, he meant it as a joke. In the November, she told him how she missed the songs of the birds.

“You know I can’t have the windows open during the winter.” She said watching her fathered friends flocking to the feeder outside her kitchen window.

“Well, at least you can see them.” Andy said sipping his coffee.

“Yes, it’s nice to see them.” She said watching a cardinal pecking at the birdseed.

That Christmas morning after all the gifts were opened, and the children played with their new toys, he handed her a large package. Carefully unwrapping it, she stared at the clock and its circle of birds.

“It chimes with a different bird every hour” he said, smiling at her. She never grew tired of hearing that clock. Now she enjoyed the songbirds all winter long. Of course, the clock wasn’t all he gave for Christmas. She twirled her diamond ring. Inscribed on the inside band were the words ‘*Andy & Marianne: I love you.*’ 12 years and their love were just as fresh and wonderful as it was on their wedding day. If it could be better, the children enhanced it.

Two weeks ago, Andy and Paul strung Christmas Lights on the fir trees in the front lawn. Each night in the gathering dust, the lights automatically kicked on. The nativity scene outside patio door gave a gentle look to the dormant flower garden. A light snow began falling.

“Alexa, play Christmas hymns.” She said lighting candles. A soft piano rendition of *Silent Night* resonated through the lower rooms.

Plugging in the Christmas tree, Marianne lowered the lights in the Livingroom. Standing at the front window, she watched the falling snow. Perfect. She loved this time of the year. The street lamps gave a cherry atmosphere. The only blite was the tumbled down shack crossed the street. She was about to turn away when she thought she saw a flash of light.

Could it be coming from that house? Surely not, who could live in that mess? The timer beeped. The cookies were ready. As she was setting them out to cool, the children and Andy came in from the garage in a rush.

Paul reached for one. "Ah ah ah not until after dinner." Marianne said from her husband's arms.

"Two." Paul said grinning.

"Three." Charlotte said.

"Four." Paul countered.

"Ok you two you can have your cookies and your mom and I will have the German chocolate cake she baked this afternoon."

"Cookies and cake." Paul said, grinning.

Andy spread his hands in the air. "I can see it now, Wibble and Son attorneys at law."

"And you'll let Paul take care of negations of the difficult clints." Marianne said smiling. "Ok you two wash up dinner in ten minutes." The children ran out of the room and up the stairs.

After dinner, homework baths and bed, Marianne and Andy finally had some time together. As his wife smuggled into his arms Andy said. "The owner of the house on the corner showed up today." Straightening up, Marianne stared at her husband. "I thought he was dead." She shivered, cold chills racing up her back.

"That was the consensus." Andy said. "We couldn't find him, so we assumed he was deceased. He's staying in the house tonight."

"Andy, that old shack is a blite on the neighborhood." Marianne said. "Just standing there it brings down the value of every house on the street."

"I don't even think the house has heat or electrify." Andy said. He glanced out the front window at the building crossed the street. "It must be freezing over there."

"Can't we get him out?" Marianne said.

"And send him where honey?" Andy said.

"I don't care maybe he could go to the mission." Marianne said. "We would be doing him a favor. At least he would be warm and fed. Then the city could tear down that old eyesore."

"Speaking of being fed, I could use another slice of that cake and a cup of coffee." Andy said.

"I'll join you, just don't tell Paul." Marianne said. She smiled. "I think he intends to have a piece for breakfast."

"Better hide it before he wakes up tomorrow morning." Andy said.

After the news, they made their way to bed.

In a deep sleep, Marianne thought she heard sirens. They were becoming louder. She set up in bed. The bedroom flickered with light. "What... what is it?" She said. Seconds later, red flashing lights bathed the front of the house. The siren increasingly loud died away. Andy hurriedly dressed. His shadow thrown against the far wall.

"The house on the corner is on fire." Andy said buttoning his shirt he threw on his coat. "He must have been trying to keep warm."

He ran from the room his feet pounding down the stairs. "Oh, Andy, please be careful." She called after him. Jumping from the bed, she pulled on her robe. She had just stepped to the window when the children appeared at the door of the bedroom. Flames shot fifty feet in the air. Despite the firefighter's efforts, the house was gone. As she watched the roof collapsed.

"What's happening?" Paul ask his voice high almost breaking. Marianne knew he was struggling to keep it together.

"I'm scared." Charlotte said. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She ran to her mother. Paul hesitated, wanting to act brave. Opening her arms, Marianne enfolded her daughter. Paul took a step into the bedroom, then went into his mother's arms.

"It's ok. We're safe. The old shack on the corner is burning." She said smoothing her children's hair.

Paul snuggled out of her arms, a horrified expression on his face. "B... but what about the man inside? Did he get out ok?" He said.

"How do you know there was anyone in the house?" Marianne asks.

"I saw an old man in a ragged coat go in there when I went to school yesterday morning." For the first time, Marianne saw a bundle of what looked like rags laying in the lawn near the sidewalk. As she and the children watched Andy knelt down next to the pile of clothing. Incredibly, the bundle moved. In the flashing light, she saw a hand appear. Andy grasp the hand he seemed to be praying. At that minute, an ambulance roared up the street.

It stopped beside the firetruck. Andy stepped back as two paramedics emerged from the ambulance.

Paul torn himself away from his mother's arms. Dashing to the window, he grasps the sill.

"Is he going to die?" He asks, tears in his voice.

"No, Jesus won't let him die will He mommy." Charlotte said.

"Can we pray for him?" Paul ask turning from the window.

"Of course. That's a good idea." Marianne said.

Paul bowed his head. "Lord help this old man. Don't let him die. He may not have any family or a nice home like we do. Let him live and I'll be his friend. Amen."

The paramedics lifted the man onto a gurney and rolled him to the ambulance. Two minutes later they sped away, siren wailing into the night. The front door opened and closed Andy climbed the stairs. "I'm going to the hospital." He said.

"He's ok isn't he daddy?" Paul asks. Looking up at his father.

"I think he'll be alright He put on all the clothes he had trying to keep warm. He tore down some of a wall and burn the wood in the fireplace that's what started the fire." Andy said. "Funny thing, all that clothing protected him from being burned. They think he just breathed in same smoke."

"The clothing and Jesus." Charlotte said.

"Yes, your right princess that and Jesus." Her father said.

"How long will you be gone?" Marianne asks.

"I'm not sure." Andy said, "Go back to bed. I'll be home as soon as I can."

He kissed Marianne and Charlotte. Paul drew back. "I'm too old for that daddy." He said.

Andy smiled and held out his hand. Solemnly Paul shook it. "I'll be praying for you" Paul said, making his voice deeper.

"Thank you." Andy said.

After her husband left Marianne took the children back to their rooms. She stayed with her daughter until she fell asleep. As she drifted off Charlotte said. "He'll be alright, won't he mommy?" Resentment rose in Marianne's heart. Why all this interest in this elderly man? After all, he was just a hobo. There were hundreds, maybe thousands crossed this country. "I'm sure he will." She said offhandedly.

Returning to bed, she closed her eyes, but sleep wouldn't come. With the fire out, the dark invaded the room. The streetlamps and nightlight down the hallway did little to dispel the darkness.

'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.' The Bible verse run through her mind.

'But he is not my neighbor.' The room was silent with no answering words. Getting up, she stepped to the window. In the glow of the street lamps, the pile of rubble seemed to mock her.

Again, she heard the words of The Lord' love thy neighbour as thyself.'

Marianne returned to bed, gathering her covers around her, closing her eyes. In her dreams, she ran from an army of homeless men. Her legs growing weary, she tripped and fell. Hands reached for her as she fought them off.

"Marianne, wake up your having a bad dream. Everything is ok." she opened her eyes Andy held her in his arms.

"Are you alright?"

"I am now." She glanced at the window. "What time is it?"

“A little after nine.” Andy said.

“Oh, your breakfast, your late for the office, I must hurry.” She said starting to get up.

“This is Saturday, I’m not going to the office today.” Andy said gently taking her by the arms. “Listen, we have a guest.”

“A guest? Oh, don’t tell you invited your mother and forgot to tell me again.” Marianne said, frowning.

“No, it’s not my mother. It’s... the man from a crossed the street.” Andy said, his expression serious. She struggled out of his arms.

“Your joking, please tell me your joking.” Andy just looked at her. Lowering her voice, she said. “He’ll smell up the entire house.”

“He didn’t have any place to go.” Andy said.

“What about the mission? After breakfast, he can go there.” Marianne said.

Andy just shook his head. “They’re full. I checked with them last night.”

“He can’t stay here.”

“We have a guest room.” Andy said.

Tears misted Marianne’s eyes. Her beautiful guestroom was about to be destroyed by this homeless man. She felt sick to her stomach. She became aware of the laughter of her children. Could he be dangerous? Was it safe to leave him alone with Charlotte and Paul?

“Go go go. I’ll be down in a minute.” She said making a sweeping motion with her hands.

“You sure?” Andy said.

“Yes, yes,” She said. Leaping out of bed, she began dressing. She wanted to add and protect our children, but didn’t.

Returning to the downstairs, she heard Andy say, “My wife will join us in a few minutes.”

A discernable mumbling, then Paul proclaimed. loudly, “My mommy makes the best pancakes just wait; you’ll see.”

Marianne rushed down the stairs and slid to a stop at the door to her immaculate, kitchen. Facing away from her seated in her chair was a long-haired, gray headed, craggy, bearded old man. The shirt and the pants he wore looked familiar. To her horror, she realized they were Andy’s. She gave them to him three years ago for his birthday. Well, nothing to do about them now. If he didn’t take them with him when he left, she would throw the pants and shirt away.

“You’re here.” Paul shouted he jumped up from his chair almost tipping it over. “Mommy met Oscar Porter.”

“His house burnt last night. Daddy said we’re going to help him out.” Charlotte said.

“Of course, he did.” Marianne said.

Porter struggled to rise. "Please don't trouble yourself Mr. Porter." Marianne said, forcing herself to smile. Perhaps he would be gone by noon. At least she hoped so.

"I always rise when a lady comes into a room." Oscar said in a gravelly voice. It became apparent he didn't speak much.

"He did that when I come into the kitchen." Charlotte said smiling.

"It's an old southern tradition." Andy said. He leaned against the counter, drinking his morning coffee.

"Yes, not much in use today, I'm afraid." Porter said.

"I hope your hungry Mr. Porter. Saturday morning is pancake day in our house." Marianne said. She looked for her skillet not finding it.

"Your husband was kind enough to fry me several eggs and bacon." Porter said. Then she knew why Andy was leaning against the counter. He was hiding her burnt skillet from her. He couldn't cook anything without burning her utensils.

She almost turned around to go back upstairs. She could hide in her bedroom until Porter left.

The elderly man set back down heavily as if the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. Over the top of the old man's head, she gave her husband an icy stare. He held out her pan to her. Sure enough, it was burnt.

Stepping to the sink, she grabbed her skillet from him. Turning on the water, she squirted dish soap on it and severely scrubbed the frypan.

She prepared pancakes for Oscar, Andy and the children. She had no appetite, nor did she intend to set at her neatly appointed table with this smelly hobo. He must have taken a shower, but it would take more than one scrubbing to remove the smelly odor from him. The light tinge of smoke surrounded him like a funeral shroud.

Breakfast was a difficult affair with Oscar regaling to Charlotte and Paul tales of his life on the road. Even Andy seemed to be taken with the charm of the elderly man's stories.

Finally, Marianne said. "There aren't many places to bathe when your traipsing all over the county are there." She gathered the dishes from the table and depositing them in the sink.

"Oh, you'd be surprised there is always a stream or river to wash up in." Oscar laughed. "One time I took a bath in the ocean. Had to wait until about 2 o'clock in the morning when there wasn't anybody on the beach for that one."

"our mommy makes us take a bath every night." Paul said, his arms folded on the table. Charlotte nodded. "And wash behind our ears too." Marianne shot Paul a look. He took his arms off the table.

"That's good." Porter said. "A person can never have to many baths unless his skin gets all wrinkly." The children laughed as if this was the funniest thing they ever heard. Andy smiled.

"Mr. Porter is going to the mall with us. Isn't that great." Paul said bounding to his feet.

“Daddy can loan you a coat. He has about a zillion of them.” Charlotte volunteered.

Andy just Shrugged. his shoulders. Marianne felt trapped. She wanted to cry, but what good would that do? Not only did Porter invade her beautiful home and disturb her life. Now their family tradition of holiday shopping was in shambles.

Nothing to be done. After she put away the dishes they piled in the car for their trip to the mall. It was all wrong. Oscar set in her place beside her husband. IN HER SEAT. Oscar wore the coat she gave her husband for Christmas five years before. She loved that coat.

At least one thing remained the same. Andy stopped at the entrance to the mall to let her and Charlotte out. Paul stayed with the men. After parking the car in the multilevel parking garage, Oscar Paul and Andy joined Marianne and Charlotte in center court.

What followed was an hour and a half of misery for Marianne. Even her favorite stores bought her no joy. Around them children laughed, running ahead of their parents to look at the toys. They passed the long line for Santa. In the center court, a flash mob sang *the Hallelujah Chorus*. Normally Marianne would have reveled in the concert, gripping her husband’s hand, letting the music wash over her. Not today, not now. She just wished for the day to be over.

The lunch she envisioned gone. Now it became a story hour for their children. It seemed there was nothing Oscar had not done or place he had not been. Paul became so excited he knocked over his open cup of soda. Marianne jumped back to avoid being splashed.

Returning home, Marianne complained of a headache and excused herself. Laying on her bed, she had a good cry. It was all wrong. They ruined her perfect weekend. Why did Oscar have to pick this time to come back to that old house? Why couldn’t he stay away until after Christmas? Why did he have to come back at all?

When Andy came up to check on her, she quietly unloaded on him. She kept her voice low but menacing. He set on the bed beside her, listening as she ranted. When she finally ran down, he stood up stepped to the foot of the bed and said. “What was I supposed to do, Marianne? One of these days you’ll have realize Christmas is not about you and your perfect house. It’s about people. That’s why Christ came and that’s why we have Christmas.”

Before she could reply he walked out of the bedroom and quietly closed the door, leaving her alone. She fumed. Who did he think he was? His tone was the same one he used then when correcting the children. “I am not a child.” She said, her face buried in her pillow. “Let them prepare their own dinner.”

Resentment built in her heart. She closed her eyes, intending to rest for just a few minutes. In her troubled sleep homeless men invaded her beautiful house, making a shamble of every room. She ran after them. cleaning each room only to have it become a mess before her eyes. Exhausted, she threw herself down on the bed, weeping. “I can’t do it, Lord. I just can’t keep my house clean for you.”

She woke with Andy’s words echoing in her mind. “It’s about people. That’s why Christ came and that’s why we have Christmas.”

In the room’s darkness, she felt alone. Beside her, Andy breathed heavily. Pulling her robe around her, she stepped into the hallway and closed the door. In the lamp’s glow from the living room, she made her way down the stairs. She entered the kitchen before she realized Oscar set at the table. A cup of coffee and an old tattered Bible lay before him. Too late to turn around. She stepped to the coffeepot and poured herself a cup.

“Are you feeling better?” He said, his voice gravelly.

“Yes, thank you.” She didn’t want to set at the table with him. She leaned against the counter, sipping from her cup.

“Must be difficult having a stranger disrupt your family, especially at Christmas time.” He said. “Becky that was my wife used to decorate our home starting right after thanksgiving left it that way until New Year’s Day.” He said, staring out into the night. “I want to thank you.”
Was he mocking her? “Thank me for what.” Even to her the words sounded hostile.

If he noticed it didn’t show. “After Becky died, I kind of lost my anchor. We had been buying houses and renting them out for our retirement. The one crossed the street is the last one. I sold the others after her death. Life lost its luster. Being with your family today reminded me of the Christmases with my wife and the love we shared.” He said tears misting his eyes. “We never had children, but the children from our church were a great blessing to us.”

” Your church?” Marianne asks.

“Yes, I pastored a small church just outside of Saint Louis. When my Becky died, I became bitter against The Lord.” He got to his feet. Stepping to the sink, and he washed out his cup. “I want to thank you again for restoring my faith in The Lord and mankind. Goodnight.”

” Goodnight.” Marianne said distracted. A minute later she noticed he had left his Bible. She started to call out to him, but he was already up the stairs. Finishing her coffee, she set her cup in the sink.

Hesitantly, she picked up his Bible, intending to put it somewhere safe. Her eyes fell on the passage he had been reading.

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

The dam broke. Marianne wept. With the tears came healing. She fell to her knees, her head resting on the chair Oscar had just occupied. After a time of prayer and confession, Marianne returned to bed to a dreamless sleep. Up at 6:30, she again read the passage from last night. This time from her own Bible marking the verses. At 7:30, she woke the house frying ham and eggs.

“Oscar’s going to church with us this morning.” Paul said, beaming.

“Yes, he’s going to teach our Sunday School class.” Charlotte said.

“Woo youngster, I only said I have taught Sunday School.” Oscar said.

“I invited him.” And said looking at Marianne.

Turning from washing the breakfast dishes, Marianne smiled at Oscar. “Yes, please come with us. I’m sure Andy has a suit that will fit you perfectly.”

Andy smiled at her. She returned his smile.

While the children ran to get dressed for church Marianne trimmed Oscar’s hair and beard. 45 minutes later they entered the sanctuary. Oscar looked like a handsome grandfather in Andy’s dark blue suit and red tie.

He laughed at the antics of the children during the Christmas play. He sang the hymns heartily, not needing a songbook. Afterward, at Marianne's insistence, he joined them for lunch at her favorite restaurant.

Oscar stayed with the family until after Christmas. Christmas morning was spectacular Andy presented Oscar with a new suit and his own red tie and white shirt. Learning his shoe size, Marianne gave him two pairs of shoes, one pair black and the other brown. Paul and Charlotte gave him homemade gifts. Oscar cherished them as much as the gifts from Marianne and Andy.

In June the family received a wedding invitation. Now pastoring a church in the small village of Hazel Dell, Oscar met a wonderful Christian widow. The next Christmas, Oscar and Kathleen joined the family for Christmas. At Marianne's invitation, of course.

Merry Christmas From Darrell & Connie Case

May our God bless you and your family.

Have a wonderful Christmas.