

# THE BEST CHRISTMAS I NEVER HAD

By MaryJanice Davidson

My sister, Yvonne, was fourteen the year our home and everything in it was destroyed. I was seventeen. Our home was heated by a wood-burning stove, and every fall, my family and I would mark dead trees, cut them down, haul the wood and stack it in the basement. The week before Christmas, the basement was half full of dry wood.

Yvonne and I were home from school, and she did as either of us had done a thousand times before; checked the furnace, tossed a few more logs on the fire and slammed the door shut.

At the time, I was upstairs sulking. I had a sink full of dishes to wash, homework to tackle and my grandfather, after a lonely day at home, wouldn't leave me alone. Stomping around the kitchen, listening to him chatter, I thought about how I couldn't wait to get out of this house, this town. *Lightning could strike this very spot and I wouldn't care.* Or so I thought.

The house seemed a little smoky, but that wasn't unusual. It often became that way after the furnace had a few new logs to chew up. I simply waved the smoke away and kept doing dishes and daydreaming of getting away from my family. My sister's cats were no help; they were as starved for affection as Grandpa, and kept twining around my ankles.

My sister wandered in and said, "Don't you think it's a little too smoky in here?"

I shrugged sullenly and kept washing dishes. But after another minute, we knew something was wrong. The smoke was much too thick. My sister and I looked at each other, then at

our grandfather. He was the adult, but he lived with us because he couldn't take care of himself. If there were decisions to be made, my sister and I—high school students—would make them. The thought was daunting, to say the least.

Without a word to each other, we went outside and opened the garage door (foolish in retrospect) and stared in disbelief as smoke and flames boiled out.

We had no time for tears or hysterics. That would come later. Instead, we both turned and ran up the hill. My sister shot through the kitchen door and raced for Grandpa's coat while I searched frantically for my keys. "There's a fire, Grandpa," I said abruptly. *Where in the world had I put my purse?* "We have to get out."

"Oh, Okay," he agreed. Amiable as a child, Grandpa stood still while my sister jerked him into his coat. She made sure he was warm and tightly bundled, forced warm slippers on his feet and hustled him out the door. I was so busy wondering where my keys were and trying the phone, which was dead, I never noticed that in her great care to make sure our grandfather was protected from the elements, she had neglected her own coat and boots.

I glanced out the window, blinking from the smoke. December in Minnesota was no joke...and no place for two teenagers and an old man to await help. If I could find my keys, I could get back down to the garage and probably, if the flames hadn't spread that far, back the van out of the garage. We could wait for help in relative comfort, and at least my mom's van could be saved.





Memory flashed; I had tossed my purse in my room when I'd come home. My room was at the end of a long hallway, far from the kitchen. Daughter and granddaughter of professional firefighters, I should

have known better. But things were happening so quickly—my little sister and my grandfather were standing in the snow, shivering—I had to get the van. So I started for my room, the worst decision I've ever made.

The smoke was gag-inducing, a thick gray-black. It smelled like a thousand campfires and I tried not to think about what was being destroyed: my family's pictures, their clothes, furniture. I'd gone three steps and couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't breathe. *How was I going to make it all the way to my room?*

I wasn't, of course. I instantly knew two things: if I went down that hallway, I would die. Number two, what was I still doing in this inferno? Ten-year-olds were taught better. My sister was probably terrified, and in another moment, she'd come after me. How stupid could I be?

I stumbled back to the kitchen, took one last glance around my home, then went out into the snow.

Yvonne was sobbing, watching our house burn to the foundation. Grandpa was patting her absently. "That's what insurance is for," he said. A veteran of the New York City Fire Department, I couldn't imagine how many house fires he had fought. For the first time, I could see him as a real person and not my aged, feeble grandfather who took up entirely too much of my time with his endless pleas for me to sit down and talk to him.

"I'm going to the neighbors' to call for help," Yvonne said abruptly. She was wearing a sweater, jeans and slippers. I was in sweat pants, a T-shirt and socks. The closest neighbor was down the length of our driveway and across the highway, about a mile.

"Okay," I said. "Be careful crossing the..." But she was gone, already running through the snow and down the driveway.

Then I remembered Yvonne's three cats, which were, I guessed, trapped in the house. *When she remembered them, I thought, she would go right out of her mind.*

It seemed she was only gone for a moment before I saw her puffing up the driveway. "I called," she gasped, "they're on their way."

"You should have stayed with the neighbors and gotten warm," I said, mad at myself because I hadn't told her to stay put.

She gave me a look. "I couldn't leave you out here in the cold."



"Actually, I'm not that..." I began, when suddenly Yvonne clapped her hands to her face and screamed.

"Oh, no, the cats!" she shrieked, then burst into hoarse sobs.

"It's okay, Yvonne, it's okay, I saw them get out," I said frantically, reaching for her. I could tell she didn't believe me, but she didn't say anything more, just wept



steadily and ignored my fervent assurances—my lies.

As it swiftly grew dark, our burning house lit up the sky. It was as beautiful as it was awful. And the smell...to this day, whenever someone lights a fire in a fireplace, I have to leave the room briefly. A lot of people find fireplaces soothing, but to me the smell of burning wood brings back the sense of desolation and the sound of my sister's sobs.

We could hear sirens in the distance and moved out of the way as two fire trucks and the sheriff pulled in. The sheriff screeched to a halt and beckoned to us. In another minute he was talking to my grandfather while Yvonne and I sat in the back of the police car, getting warm.

After a long moment, Yvonne sighed. "I just finished my Christmas shopping yesterday."

I snorted...and the snort became a giggle, and the giggle bloomed into a laugh. That got my sister going, and we laughed until we cried and then laughed some more.

"I got you the CD you wanted," I told her.

"Really?" she said. "I bought you a new Walkman."

We listed all the things we had bought for friends and family that were now burning to cinders. Instead of being depressing, it was probably the highlight of the evening. The sheriff interrupted our spiritual gift-giving to open the door and say, "Your parents are here."

We scrambled out and raced down the driveway. If I live to be one thousand, I'll never forget my mother's face at that moment:

bloodless and terrified. She saw us and opened her arms. We hurled ourselves at her, though we were both considerably taller than she was and nearly toppled her back into the snow. Dad looked us over, satisfied too that we weren't hurt, and some of the tension went out of his shoulders. "What are you crying about?" he asked, pretending annoyance. "We've got insurance. And now we'll get a new house for Christmas."

"Dad...for Christmas...I got you those fishing lures you wanted but..."

He grinned. "That reminds me. I picked up your presents on the way home." He stepped to the truck and pulled out two garment bags. Inside were the gorgeous jackets Yvonne and I had been longing for since we'd fallen in love with them at the mall.

We shrugged into them, ankle-deep in snow, while the house crackled and burned in front of us. It was a strange way to receive a Christmas present, but neither of us was complaining.

"We'll have to come back here tomorrow," Dad said. "It's going to be depressing and stinky and muddy and frozen and disgusting and sad. Most of our stuff will be destroyed. But they're only things. They can't love you back. The important thing is that we're all okay. The house could burn down a thousand times and I wouldn't care, as long as you guys were all right."

He looked at us again and walked away, head down, hands in his pockets. Mom told us later he had driven ninety miles an hour once he'd seen the smoke, that they both gripped the other's hand while he raced to the house. Not knowing if we were out safe was the worst moment of her life.



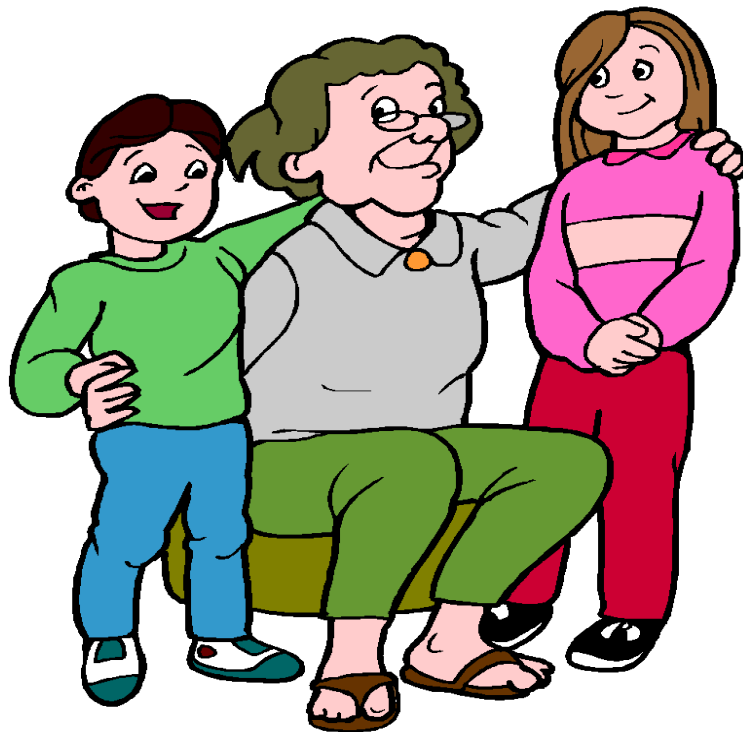
Later we found out the pipe leading from the furnace to the wall had collapsed, spilling flaming coals all over our basement. If it had happened at 2:00 A.M., we all would have died of smoke inhalation. In less than half an hour, our house transformed from a safe haven to a death trap. Asleep, we would have had no chance.

We lived in a motel for more than a month, and we spent Christmas Day in my grandmother's crowded apartment eating take-out because she was too tired to cook. For Christmas, Yvonne and I got our jackets and nothing else. My parents got nothing except the headache

of dealing with insurance companies. All the wonderful things my family had bought for me had been destroyed in less time than it takes to do a sink full of dishes. But through it all I had gained long-overdue appreciation for my family. We were together. That was really all that mattered.

I'll always remember it as the best Christmas I never had.

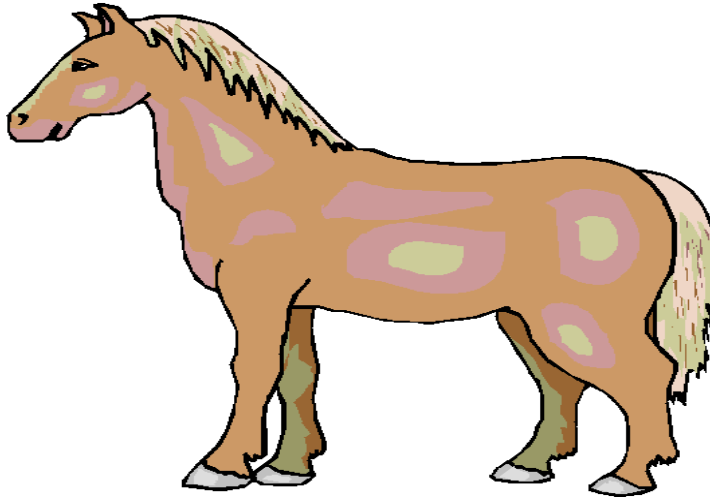
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# FAMILIES THAT CARE, CARE ABOUT FAMILIES

By Rachele P. Castor

My tenth Christmas was one I was not looking forward to. Money was scarce. Dad was a preacher, and preachers for our church don't make much. Mom said we were old enough now to be brave and not count on gifts. Just being together would be enough.



shopping around so that we could give the Walters family a Christmas basket.

"If anyone needs some cheer, it's the Walters," Mom reminded us.

"But the Walters. Mom. I wouldn't be caught dead at their front door."

We weren't the only family in our small community who would have a meager Christmas. But the knowledge that others were going through the same thing didn't help much. One night, as my sister and I huddled together in our shared bed, we had a small pity party for each other.

"How can I even wear that same old dress one more time?" I complained.

"I know," said my sister. "I think I might as well give up asking for a horse, too. I've asked for one forever but it just never happens."

"Yeah, and even if we got one where would we keep it?" I said, destroying her last hope.

I couldn't stop thinking about my sister's long-held dream to own a horse and decided I was willing to give up every gift for ten Christmases if only her dream could come true.

The next day, Mom added salt to my wounds by telling us that she had been saving up and

Mom gave me a dirty look.

But I knew she would have to agree that the Walkers were the strangest people we knew. Looking a lot like a family of hobos, they could have at least washed their hair once in a while. After all, water is free. I always felt embarrassed for them.

Mom was determined. And it was our duty to load up our little sled and pull the basket full of flour and sugar, a small turkey, potatoes, and bottled peaches over to the Walters, leave it on the doorstep and run.

On the way we noticed that Mom had tucked a small gift for each of the children in among the food. I was distraught. How could Mom be so generous with someone else's kids when our own family didn't have enough?

We delivered the package, knocked hard on the door and ran fast to hide behind a nearby bush. Safely hidden, I looked back the way we had come and realized my sister was standing



in plain view. I was so mad. I didn't want them to know our family had anything to do with this.

After the Walters gathered up their basket of goodies and had closed the door, I said in a loud whisper, "What are you doing? I know they saw you!"

"I wanted to see their faces when they saw the gifts," my sister said innocently. "That's the best part."

"Whatever," I said, relenting to the unchangeable. "Did they look happy?"

"Well, yeah, happy, but mostly they looked like, well, like they were thinking, *Maybe we do belong.*"

Christmas morning arrived just a couple of days later. To my surprise, I unwrapped a fabulous-looking dress. I smiled at my parents as if to say, "I can't believe you actually got this for me." Then I glanced at my sister's face, which was full of anticipation. There was only one small package under the tree. She unwrapped it and found a currycomb. *A currycomb? Had my parents totally lost it?* My sister's face was blank and I was thinking, *Is this some kind of a mean joke?*

We hadn't realized that Dad had slipped outside. Just as I was about to speak, he rode up in front of the big picture window atop my sister's new horse!

My sister was so excited that she jumped up and down, then stopped and put her head in her hands, shook her head back and forth in disbelief and screamed, "Oh, my ...oh, my!" With tears rolling down her cheeks, she ran out to meet her new friend.

"Mom, how did you do all this?" I asked. "We were ready for a no-present Christmas."

"Oh, everybody pitched in. Not necessarily trading but just helping each other. Mrs. Olsen at the dress shop let me bring your gift home now, even though I'll be paying for a while. Dad did some marriage counseling for the Millets's son. I hung up Mrs. Marshall's tree lights since her arthritis is getting her down. We were thrilled that Mr. Jones had a horse that needed some TLC, and he was thrilled we had someone to love it. And then for a moment we thought all was lost because we couldn't figure out where to house the horse. Then the Larsens, down the way, offered some of their pasture to keep the horse penned and well fed."

"I thought since you were giving away food to the Walters that we would never have enough. They really don't have anything to give in return."

"They will some day. But there is enough and more to share. Everything's God's anyway. Doesn't matter who can or can't give. If we just listen to our hearts, the right gifts will end up with the right families."

Mom always knew truth.

I glanced out the window at my sister now sitting on her horse, and thought about how she had described the expression on the Walters's faces when they discovered the Christmas basket. That "belonging" feeling was more precious than any of the gifts. And I thought, *Families that care, care about families. All families.*

That was the Christmas that I learned about the magic of giving.

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# A CHRISTMAS GIFT

By Bob White

It was a half-hour before midnight on December 24, 1989. I was a ticket-counter supervisor for a major airline and was looking forward to the end of my shift at Stapleton International Airport in Denver, Colorado. My wife was waiting up for me so we could exchange gifts, as was our tradition on Christmas Eve.

A very frantic and worried gentleman approached me. He asked how he could get home to Cheyenne, Wyoming. He had just arrived from Philadelphia and missed his connecting flight. I pointed him to the ground transportation area. There he could either hire a limousine or rent a car from the various agencies.

He told me that it was extremely important for him to be in Cheyenne for Christmas. I wished him well, and he went on his way. I called my wife to let her know I would be home shortly.

About fifteen minutes later, the same gentleman returned and informed me that all the buses

were full and there were no cars or limousines available. Again he asked if I had any suggestions. The most logical option was to offer him a room in a hotel for the night and get him on the first flight to Cheyenne in the morning. When I suggested this, tears

started running down his cheeks.

He explained that his son was seventeen years old and weighed forty pounds. He had spina bifida and was not expected to live another year. He expected that this would likely be the last Christmas with his son and the thought that he would not be there to greet him on Christmas morning was unbearable.

"What's your name, Sir?" I asked.

"Harris, Tom Harris," he replied, his face filled with desperation.

I contacted all of the ground transportation providers and the car rental agencies. Nothing. What was I to do? There was no other choice.

I told Tom to go to the claim area, collect his luggage and wait for me. I called my wife Kathy and told her not to wait up for me. I was driving to Cheyenne, and I would explain everything in the morning. Something had come up that was more important than our exchanging gifts on Christmas Eve.

The drive to Cheyenne was quiet, thoughtful. Tom offered to compensate me for my time and the fuel. I appreciated his gesture, but it wasn't necessary.



We arrived at the airport in Cheyenne around 2:30 A.M. I helped Tom unload his luggage and wished him a Merry Christmas. His wife was meeting him and had not yet arrived.

We shook hands. As I got into my car, I looked back at him. He was the only customer in the airport. I noticed how peaceful and quiet this was compared to the hectic, crowded airport in Denver. Pulling away, I waved good-bye and he waved back. He looked tired and relieved. I wondered how long he would have to wait for his wife to pick him up. She was driving quite a distance.

Kathy was waiting up for me. Before we went to bed, we traded gifts and then our conversation concerned Tom. We imagined his family on Christmas morning as Tom and his wife watched their son open his last Christmas presents. For Kathy and me, there was no question that driving Tom to Cheyenne was the only option. She would have done the same thing.

A couple of days later, I received a Christmas card with a picture of Tom and his family. In it, Tom thanked me for the special gift he had received that holiday season, but I knew the best gift was mine.

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# A CHRISTMAS DINNER

By Robin Leach

My work calls for me to venture to the farthest reaches of the world, but one of my most memorable encounters occurred while traveling close to home.

A few years ago, a group of my far-flung friends decided to gather in Connecticut to celebrate Christmas.

I was to buy all the soft drinks and a doctor friend would get the turkey and trimmings.

On our way from New York City to Connecticut, my friend and I stopped in for a Christmas Eve party in upstate New York. As we left, I ran into the doctor and casually asked him what size bird he had bought. His eyes widened with surprise—he had bought all the drinks.

So here we were on a snowy Christmas Eve with sufficient drinks to serve a cruise ship but not one piece of food for twelve hungry people! We searched around, but every supermarket was closed. Finally, just before midnight, we found ourselves at a gas station quick-food shop.

The manager was willing to sell us cold sandwiches. Other than potato chips, cheese and crackers, he didn't have much else. I was very agitated and disappointed. It was going

to be a rather miserable Christmas dinner. The only bright spot was that he did have two cans of cranberry jelly!

In the midst of my panic, an elderly lady stepped from behind one of the aisles.

"I couldn't help overhearing your dilemma," she said. "If you follow me home, I would happily give you our dinner. We have plenty of turkey, potatoes, yams, pumpkins and vegetables."

"Oh no, we couldn't do that!" I replied.

"But you see, we no longer need it," she explained. "Earlier today we managed to get a flight to Jamaica—to see our family down there, for the holidays."

We couldn't say no to such kindness. We thanked her and followed her car. The journey seemed endless as we meandered through back roads and dimly lit streets. Eventually, we reached this kind woman's house.

We followed her in and, sure enough, she removed a turkey and all the trimmings from the fridge. Despite our attempt to reimburse her for her generosity, she refused our money.

"This is just meant to be," she said. "I don't need it anymore—and you do."

So we accepted her gift, asked her for her name and address, and went on our way.



The next day we impressed and surprised our friends by presenting them with a complete feast and telling them our amazing story about the old lady's help. Despite the last-minute scramble, Christmas dinner turned out to be a great success.

Before we left Connecticut, we went to a department store, picked out a gift and drove to the lady's home to leave our small token of appreciation.

We searched and searched but we couldn't find her place. We couldn't find the street address on any maps. The name she had given us wasn't listed anywhere. Baffled, we questioned several local store owners, yet no one knew of the elderly lady. Even the gas station manager told us that he had never seen her before.

Every effort we made to locate our Christmas angel failed.

As I returned home, I pondered our bizarre encounter with this beneficent woman. Who was this lady who had appeared just in time to help out two desperate strangers, only to disappear with the night?

Years later, when I look back upon that particular holiday season, I recall the joy of gathering with friends from across the world and an amazing little old lady whose generosity embodied the very meaning of the Christmas spirit.

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