



Christmas Like It Used to Be


By Amy Van Veen
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“**M**OMMY, can you get this sweater on Susie? I can’t do it,” my six-year-old, Michelle, asked the moment I stepped through the front door.

“Yes, of course,” I told her. I dropped my bags on the floor and began to fit the tiny sweater on my daughter’s doll.

“Andrew got mad at Shawn,” Michelle reported, referring to her brothers, aged 11 and 10 respectively. “Then Shawn got mad at Andrew and Andrew stole

Shawn’s truck because Shawn took Andrew’s book and Jessica told Andrew that he should know better and Andrew told Jessica to get lost. But I said that’s not very nice because no one wants to be lost and Andrew told me to be quiet but he didn’t say be quiet, Mommy. He said, ‘Shut up.’ And you said we’re not allowed to say shut up, so I told him I’d tell you and he told me that if I did, he’d take Susie and Jessica told him he couldn’t do that and Shawn, I saw him, Mommy, I saw him stick out his tongue at Andrew, but Andrew didn’t see and then Jessica opened up the flour and found bugs.”



“What?” I asked, suddenly paying a bit more attention. “What do you mean she found bugs?”

“Michelle?” I heard Jessica call. She turned the corner and saw me at the door, buttoning Susie’s last button. “Oh hi Mom,” she said. “Michelle, I could’ve put that sweater on Susie for you.”

“I wanted Mommy to do it,” Michelle responded defiantly.

“But I could have done it. Mommy still has her coat on.”

“It’s okay, Jessica,” I told my 14-year-old. “I’m happy to help Susie,” I added, smiling at Michelle as I handed her doll back. “Now what’s this about bugs?”

“It’s from the Thanksgiving food hamper,” Jessica explained as I followed her to the pantry. “I was going to make Christmas cookies with Michelle and Shawn to distract them, but then I saw this and it’s just so gross. Why are there bugs in the flour?”

I looked down at the bag of flour we had received in a box of donated food and sighed. “How much flour do you need?” I asked.

“Umm,” Jessica turned back to the counter and grabbed the worn recipe card from my recipe box. “Three cups.”

“There’s still a little bit of flour left in our container,” I said, nodding toward the yellow plastic Tupperware. “If there’s not enough, you can divide the recipe. It’ll be good practice for Shawn’s fractions.”



After my husband, Danny, left us several years ago, I applied for the job of an office administrator at a local

accounting firm. During the interview, the HR manager asked me why I thought I’d be a good fit for the position. After all, his question implied, my last job had been before my eldest was born. Unsure of how to answer, I recalled the question I saw in the ad for this position: “Are you a problem solver?”


The truth was, I had told him, that “problem solver” described me perfectly. I had always loved puzzles and math formulas. I loved figuring out how to schedule everyone’s extracurriculars and how to get the best deal on pasta sauce when there was a sale *and* a coupon. Fortunately, the HR manager liked my response and I was hired right away – an answer to prayer for a woman who hadn’t been in the job market for over a decade.

Ever since then, I’d been solving problems all over the place. How to deal with spoiled flour. How to help each of my children find peace. How to sew doll clothes because buying them new was no longer an option. How to give my kids a healthy outlet for their anger and find moments of joy in the midst of pain. Even how to cobble together a Christmas meal with random cans of food from our church’s donation bin.

There were some problems, though, that even I couldn’t solve – like how to bring back *our* family Christmas, not the Christmas so charitably provided to us by others. I was reluctant to get another job just to afford the gifts I wanted to give – I didn’t want to make Christmas about the presents anyway – but it was hard to explain to the kids why we celebrated Jesus’ birthday with toys from strangers that didn’t always interest them and small knick-knacks I picked up at the dollar store.

With each passing year, I wished we could get a semblance of our old Christmas back. What I wouldn’t give to once again feel the excitement of picking out something I knew Michelle would love. Something





that would make Shawn's green eyes shine bright. Something that would bring back Andrew's smile-induced dimples. And something that would give Jessica a chance to be a kid again.

Lord, please, I prayed that night after tucking in each of my kids and leading them in their own prayers. Please, this Christmas, help us to feel less like a charity case and more like a family. Help the kids to feel special. Help them to understand how much I love them even if I can't give them everything they want. Help us to feel whole again.



A couple of weeks later, with the rush of December in full swing, the prayer I uttered that night had completely slipped my mind.

I was rushing to sew a last-minute angel costume for Shawn – a costume he needed the next day and failed to tell me about until I arrived home from work that evening – when Michelle stomped in wearing her snow boots, tracking muddy water through the house in her excitement to declare she had found the perfect gift for Andrew.

Every year the kids would do a gift exchange with each other. Once their dad left, their allowances had to stop, so these last few years I had encouraged them to make each other gifts. And now Michelle declared she wanted to make Shawn a pinecone bird feeder to hang outside his window, just like she'd learned at school.

I set aside the angel halo I was fashioning out of extra tinsel garland and followed Michelle's footprints back to the door, cleaning up the mess she'd brought with her.

"Mom?" Jessica called out, coming in the front door just as I finished wiping up the last muddy boot print. "We got, um, mail."

The way she said it made my stomach flip. Jessica had always been a calm, collected girl, never showing

when she was bothered. But the crack in her voice set me on edge. I stood up as Jessica handed me a stack of envelopes. I recognized the usual phone and utility bills, but atop the stack was an unmarked envelope.

"What's that? Why's it got stripes?" Michelle piped up, standing on her tiptoes. Then, glancing back at my face, she added, "Mommy, what's wrong?" Even Andrew and Shawn looked up from the Lego spaceship they'd been building.

The envelope felt full when Jessica handed it to me. The white, unmarked centre was bordered by red and blue stripes all the way around – an airmail envelope. Hesitant to open it, I turned the envelope over, then back again, carefully checking both sides for any indication of who sent it or what it could be.

"Open it, already!" Andrew nearly shouted. All four kids were now standing around me, looking at the mystery mail with curious anticipation.

I unsealed it, peered inside and nearly lost my ability to stand.

"What on earth?" Jessica whispered.

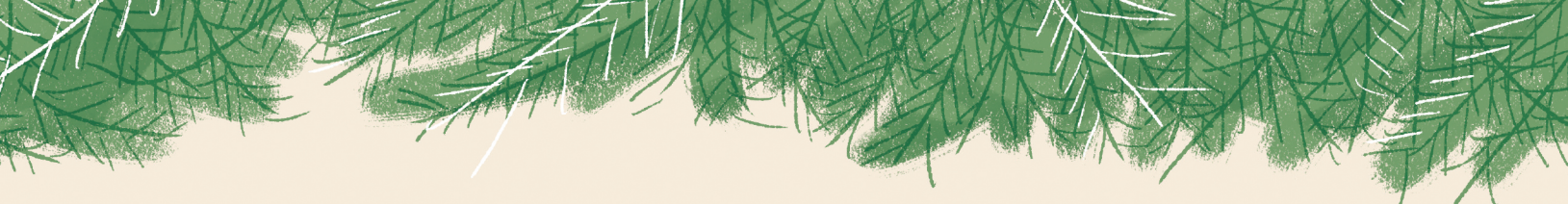
Andrew's eyes got wide. Michelle teetered even higher on her tiptoes, wondering what everyone was looking at. Shawn yelled, "Money!"

Three hundred dollars in crisp twenties sat in the envelope. No message. No explanation. Nothing to tell us who sent it or why it came to us. Just enough, I realized, to give us the Christmas I had prayed for.



As the sun set on Christmas Day, our bellies were full of our Christmas meal – just like the one we used to have.





Opened presents spilled across our living room rug – presents I had carefully selected for each of my kids and was thrilled to give them. I sighed happily.

“What’s wrong, Mommy?” Michelle asked, looking up from the new doll bed and trunk of clothes I had found for Susie.

“Nothing. Mommy’s just happy,” I explained. “Happy having a Christmas just like we used to when Dad was here.”

“What was wrong with our other Christmases?” Shawn inquired.

“I liked those Christmases,” Andrew announced.

“Me too,” Jessica seconded.

“Me three!” Michelle added with an excited jump.

“Really?” I managed to ask, swallowing a sudden lump in my throat.

“Yeah, we got to make Christmas cookies together,” Shawn explained to me. “When Dad was here, we just bought them because he didn’t like the mess.”

“And last year we got to make that gingerbread house,” Andrew said quickly. “And I really like the bird feeder

Michelle made me – even if it was the same as the one she made Shawn last year.”

“Was not!” Michelle countered. “It’s different! This one was bigger because you’re bigger.”

Andrew laughed and conceded before thanking Michelle and giving her a hug.

“And I like how we drive around looking at all the Christmas lights,” Jessica told me. “We never did that before.”

“You really liked our last few Christmases?”

“They’ve been the best!” Shawn shouted.

“I just wish we had made our own gingerbread house this year,” Andrew said quietly.

In all my excitement to bring back our old Christmases, I never imagined my kids would like the homespun ones I’d been cobbling together the last few years. I had no idea my efforts to fill the last few Decembers with simple new traditions like baking and looking at Christmas lights were exactly what my kids wanted.

“Jessica,” I announced with a smile, “get the flour.”

All four of them jumped up and ran to the kitchen, giving me a chance to wipe away my happy tears and whisper a prayer of thanks.

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