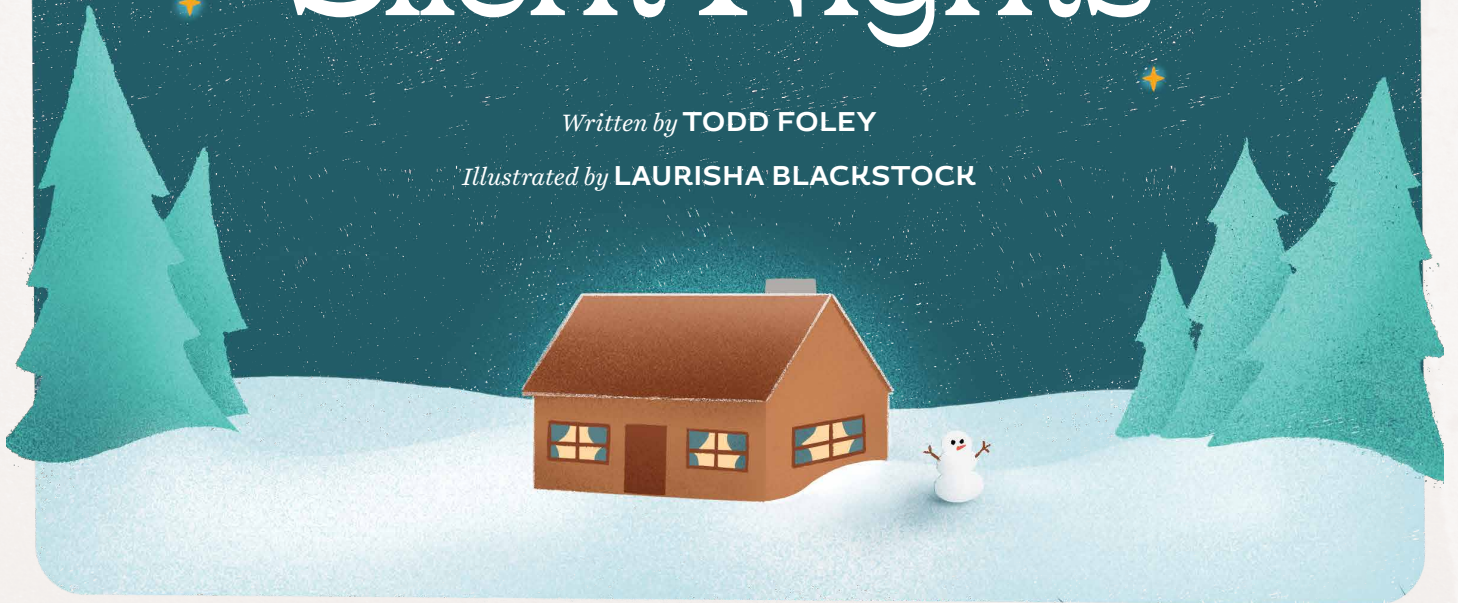


Three Silent Nights

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NIGHT #1: 1992

In the hustle of Christmas Eve, Mark was already in his pajamas at 3 p.m., tucked into his sleeping bag on the living room floor. Everyone else was busy, but at six years old, he could get away with it.

His older brother and sister looked at their presents under the tree, trying to guess what was inside the packages. “Hey,” Dad called, “remember, no touching!” Even with his back to them as he put more wood in the fireplace, he knew their hands were close to the gifts. He smiled to himself.

Mom was furiously prepping food in the kitchen. She mixed grated potatoes, cream cheese, cheddar and green chilis into a casserole dish. She sprinkled salt, pepper and brown sugar on the ham. She tossed the canned green beans

with cream of mushroom soup and topped it with crispy onions. Everything went into the fridge.

Like every year, she ensured the feast was ready to go straight into the oven when they got home from the Christmas Eve service, after which they would all sleep on the living room floor around the Christmas tree.

But Mark wasn’t paying attention to any of this. He looked out the large windows, lined with stockings that Mom had knitted for all of them. His stocking was red and white with snowflakes and had his name on the top.

“Mark,” Grandma said, nestling up to him on the couch. “You certainly look cozy.”

“I am,” he said.

“But as cozy as you look, you know your mom and dad won’t let you wear that to church tonight.”

“I know.” Mark kept looking up to the sky. Grandma followed his gaze. “What are you looking at, dear?”

“Just waiting for time to pass faster,” he said.

“Why?”

“So it will be Christmas morning,” Mark said. “If I wear my pajamas and get cozy in my bed, it should make the sky turn dark. That means it’s getting closer.”

Grandma smiled, gently brushing Mark’s hair. “My sweet boy. I know what you mean. I love Christmas morning. But we’ll just have to wait. I’ll tell you what: How about if I sleep next to you tonight, and we can wait together.”

Mark smiled, nodding in agreement.

The whole family went to church, hugged their friends, sang Christmas carols and shared treats at the dessert potluck. Once back home, Mom got everything in the oven, Dad stocked up the fire with more wood, and Mark got back into his pajamas before they even sat down to eat dinner. The sky was dark, and he beamed with anticipation.

NIGHT #2: 2020

The wood stove roared with heat, warming the house covered in snow. The man and his wife took extra precaution since they lost power for a few days the previous week and wanted to be prepared if they had to cook on the wood stove, which their two feisty young daughters loved and were hoping to repeat. Normally it would be fun for the whole family, but life with a six-month-old baby boy made the idea less attractive to the tired parents. They were thankful they could spend Christmas Eve with the power on.

All are dressed up for the Christmas Eve service, but none wore shoes tonight. Instead, the girls



and their mother dimmed the lights, lit several tea light candles and tidied the living room floor while the dad set up the laptop. Within minutes they were streaming their church’s Christmas Eve service from the safety of their home – digital and distanced like nearly every other activity in 2020.

Strange as it all looked from Christmases past, the family was used to physical isolation and digital social time, but it still felt off.

The baby boy started to fuss, so the dad picked him up, rocking him as the on-screen worship team sang carols. The songs were less triumphant this year. “Away in a Manger,” “O Come O Come Emmanuel,” and, in closing, “Silent Night.”

During the last song, the dad looked out the window, longing for something other than this. Anticipating when they could see people beyond the context of a screen. Looking forward to the things that he greatly missed.

Stability.
Community.
Family.
Friends.
Peace.
Hope.

He longed for people to be able to meet his baby boy, for his own parents to be able to hold their youngest grandchild for the first time. For Christmas to feel like it used to feel, and be.

Yet as he looked around the house, he realized that the very first Christmas, that very first silent night, was probably a lot like this one: cold and isolated with a crying baby boy who wouldn't settle, born in a time of global unrest and uncertainty to a world that was desperate for hope.

And so, he rocked his baby back and forth, trying to watch the laptop screen through tearful eyes.

After the service, he collapsed the futon for his young daughters, the Christmas tree lighting up the room. He set up a mattress on the floor, wife upstairs sleeping with the baby.

He looked out of the window again, lined with stockings for his wife and three children, all knitted by his mother. His was red and white with snowflakes and had his name, "Mark," at the top.

It wasn't quite the Christmas he remembered as a boy sleeping on the mattress on the floor, but the night was silent – silent from festivities, gatherings and rushing around. And in that silence from the noise, the hope of Christ's birth was able to sing.

"Dad," his daughters said.

"Yes?"

"I wish it was Christmas morning already."

"I know, my loves," he said. "But it will be here shortly. It always is. We will just have to wait. Let's all wait together."

NIGHT #3: 2021

The dinner table was covered in evidence of a family feast.

Upstairs, they were changing from casual clothes into church wear. The young girls brushed their hair while pleading to open just *one* present tonight. "It's basically Christmas already," they argued.

The mother reapplied her makeup.

Mark got the boy – now 18 months – all buttoned into a dapper outfit after wiping the cheese off his face. "This is a big night, little man," he said, smiling. "You've got an overdue entrance to make."

After throwing the room-temperature leftovers into the fridge, Mark unplugged the Christmas tree and everyone piled into the minivan. And off they went, Christmas carols emanating from the stereo.



All three kids admired the lit-up houses they drove by, eyes wide with wonder. “Can we *please* get the inflatable Santa? For tonight?”

The parents laughed. “I think it’s a little late this year,” Mom said. “How about next year?”

Mark reached over to hold his wife’s hand. Their eyes met for just a moment. In their silence, they know what the other one is thinking: *It’s happening.*

They pulled into the full parking lot. Countless families poured out of minivans just like theirs. Like an overdue reunion, they all shouted their greetings:

“It’s so good to be back!”

“Oh, we’ve missed this. Doesn’t it feel like it’s been years?”

“This feels like we’re all coming home.”

Mark took a deep breath. He soaked in the reunion, then watched as they all made their way to the building’s entrance.

He held his son facing outward so that everything could be seen for the first time.

“You’ve been waiting for this, buddy,” Mark whispered. “It’s a pretty big night.”

Friendly greeters passed out programs to the adults and candy canes to the kids. “Just one, I’m sure your parents already will have trouble getting you to fall asleep tonight!”

Finally seated in their row, Mark looked around. Familiar faces glanced back at him. They exchanged nods, and smiles.

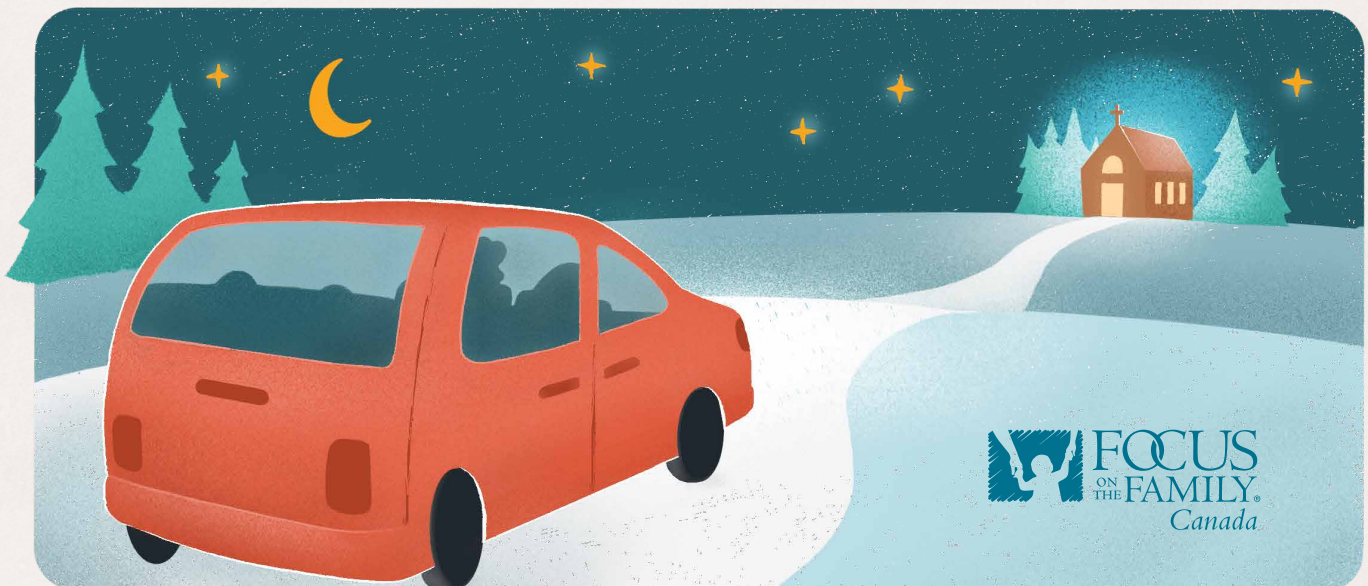
The lights went down. The voices quieted. Nothing but candles on the stage, illuminating a Nativity scene.

The pianist played the opening notes, and the choir started to sing:

Silent night. Holy night. All is calm. All is bright.

The audience joined in. Voices filled the dark sanctuary.

In the safety of the darkness, a tear escaped Mark’s eye. He hugged his wide-eyed son tight and kissed the top of his head. He leaned close and whispered, “I told you it would be worth the wait.”



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