

A Shared Christmas

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“Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Don’t forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!”

Hebrews 13:1-2

❄️ ❄️ December 1952 ❄️ ❄️

Magda had never been so cold in her life.

Not even during that one winter in Amsterdam when the canals froze over. This was a cold she had never before experienced.

She looked over at the crib by the stove, where her nine-month-old son lay sleeping, and cast a glance back to the bedroom where she had just tucked in her three- and five-year-old daughters. She had heard tell of how cold the Canadian winters got, but she didn’t imagine her family would have to wear half their wardrobes to bed with steel hot water bottles wrapped up in socks and tucked under the blankets by their feet. Even now, sitting by the

stove with a hot water bottle in her lap, she was unable to shake off the chill that settled inside her.

Magda knew, of course, the chill wasn’t just due to the snow blowing against the west side of the house. She looked at the clock and prayed, again, that her husband was safe.

In the fall when they had first found themselves in that little town in Alberta, Johannes had told her the drive home from work wasn’t all that bad. As a trained nurse in the Netherlands, his credentials didn’t move across the Atlantic with his family, so the best he could do was find a job as a first aid man in the oil fields – working during the week and making the trek home to his wife and three kids for the weekends. The first time he did that long drive, they had laughed that he was still in the same country. A drive like that back home would

mean you were crossing borders. As the days grew shorter and the weather grew colder, though, their laughter had turned to fear as the men he worked with told him to always travel with blankets, apples and candles in case he found himself stuck in a snow drift.

Now every weekend Magda watched the clock, praying silently that God would keep Johannes safe. And ignoring the voice in the back of her head that wondered if they should've stayed home. Home where family was only minutes away and every Sunday was spent sharing a homemade pot of soup. Home where Johannes could help her tuck the kids into bed and pray over every meal. Home where they could experience the advent of Christmas together, treasuring each moment as they counted down the days until Christ's birth.

December 2016

Teresa could not comprehend how people survived in these temperatures.

Her entire life was spent in Manila. From her parents' house to the one she and her husband, Edwin, moved into a few blocks away, she had loved the home they'd built for their family of five. After staring at the thermometer propped outside the kitchen window, Teresa went to turn up the furnace, telling herself the cost was worth finding warmth once again – even if it was just for a few seconds.

Edwin had told her that until he found a job, they couldn't waste heat. They had only so much savings set aside for their move to Canada and he didn't want to run out.



One of the things she mourned in their attempt to save money was the lack of Christmas decorations. She'd done the best she could by crafting streamers and snowflakes out of paper with the kids, but it all just looked so scant. In the Philippines, their entire home would've been decorated for two months by this point, and Christmas music would already have been playing everywhere they went since September.

But Teresa knew thinking about what she missed would only make this transition harder. After all, there was no turning back. It had taken five years for their papers to be processed, and they weren't about to give up the chance for their children to have more opportunity than they could find back home.

She knew opportunity was important, and when she tucked her two daughters and son into their beds that night, she had prayed a special blessing over their lives. But now, standing in the cold of that Albertan kitchen, she wondered if they'd done the right thing.

December 1952

With the trousers of her second-born sitting her in lap, Magda got to work patching up the knees – yet again. It was as if no one had told her three-year-old daughter that she was, indeed, only three. Forever climbing and falling, running and tripping, Isa was doing her best to keep up with her big sister, Nellie. And Magda was doing her best to keep up with the mending. For a moment, she let herself think back to what it felt like to do the mending at home at this time of year, with her cousins and aunts baking up a storm for Christmas gatherings, and her sister sitting across from her stitching up the clothes of her own rambunctious toddlers. She was careful not to let herself get wistful too often, knowing it would only create a root of bitterness in her heart.

A knock sounded at her door, causing nine-month-old Gerrit to stir and breaking Magda out of her reverie. Putting down her mending, she stood to see who could possibly be on their doorstep.

“Hello!” Before her stood a short woman with rich brown hair, carefully pinned back to reveal streaks of grey at her temples. Wrapped in a coat, scarf and mittens, the woman extended a basket filled with food. “Merry Christmas! And welcome to Canada!”

“Thank you,” was all Magda could manage.

“I'm so sorry I didn't get here sooner,” the woman said

quickly. “I only just found out you’ve been here for several months and I am kicking myself that you went so long without a friendly hello.”

“Yes,” Magda said hesitantly. “Thank you.” For all her studying Nellie’s school papers and practicing English with Johannes, who could easily switch to Dutch when necessary, Magda felt overwhelmed by this woman.

“I’m so sorry,” the woman quickly said. “Do you speak English?”



“A little,” Magda said awkwardly.

“You’re from Germany?” the woman asked. “Belgium? Holland?”

At the mention of her home country, Magda’s eyes lit up and the woman at her door nodded. “Mrs. De Wit is from Holland as well, although she moved here in the ‘20s. We’ll have to get you two acquainted.”

“Yes, thank you,” Magda repeated. Feeling as though she’d missed something, she carefully asked, “Who are you?”

“Oh I’m so sorry!” the busy woman said. “I’m Abigail Johnson, but you can call me Abbie. I’m from the church just down the road. When we found out you hadn’t received a gift basket and an invitation, I knew I had to come say hello. I’m not sure if you like baking, but there are a few things in here to get you started – sugar, butter, flour and the like. And we’d love it if you would join us at our Christmas potluck where we all gather for a meal, each of us bringing something we’ve made. It’s this Sunday after church – you don’t have to bring anything, of course, but we’d be pleased as punch if you’d join us!”

“Yes,” Magda smiled. “Thank you!”

December 2016

Teresa had the house to herself as Edwin was off at his fourth job interview. He was hoping that this would be the one that let them get more than their most basic grocery items and allowed them to take off their scarves in the house. Teresa, meanwhile, was busy emailing their family in Manila, hoping that, somehow, it would let her feel like they weren’t quite so far away.

She was filling them in on how school was going for Katrina, Carlo and Bea – and how often they complained that it was too easy. Even six-year-old Bea was finding herself bored in her lessons, but she could always find a way to entertain herself and her ever-growing group of friends, and find mischief while she did it. The thought of how Bea’s stories would bring a smile to her sisters’ faces spurred her on to write more.

A noise ringing out in the house distracted Teresa, causing her to slip out of her focused writing. The noise



rang out again when she realized it must have been the doorbell.

Going downstairs, she tried to see through the window who could be standing on her doorstep but only saw the glimpse of shockingly white hair. Cautiously, she opened the door and saw an elderly woman standing in front of her with a basket in her hands.

“Hello!” the woman said in an accent Teresa couldn’t place. Teresa responded with a hello of her own. “My

name is Mrs. DeRaadt and I just want to say welcome!”

“Thank you,” Teresa replied. Feeling the need to introduce herself, she added, “My name is Teresa dela Cruz.”

“Lovely to meet you, Teresa,” Mrs. DeRaadt said kindly. “I heard you were new in the neighbourhood – and to Canada – and I wanted to bring you this basket of goodies to help with your holiday preparations. I also wanted to invite you to our church’s Christmas potluck this Sunday. You of course don’t have to feel pressured to bring anything, but we’d love it if you and your family would join us.”

“Wow!” Teresa exclaimed. “Thank you, Mrs. DeRaadt. This is so kind of you. And we would love to come to your potluck.”

“How wonderful!” Mrs. DeRaadt replied. “How many children do you have?”

“My husband, Edwin, and I have three,” Teresa told her. “Katrina, Carlo and Bea.”

“Lovely!” Mrs. DeRaadt exclaimed. “I too came here with three little ones who are since all grown. I just wanted to make sure you felt welcome here. When we first came, all I could think is, *How do people live in this cold? And Did we make a mistake?*”

Immediately Teresa felt a kinship with this woman, and she knew she couldn’t let her go quite yet. “Would you like to come in?”

“Oh, only if it’s not an imposition,” Mrs. DeRaadt replied.

“No, of course not. Please, please, come in. Come out of the cold.”

“I must admit I’m still not quite used to it.”

“When did you come here?” Teresa asked the old woman as she helped her out of her coat.

“My husband, Johannes, and I came here in 1952. My daughters were three and five and my son wasn’t yet a year old. He got very sick on the boat over and we were so worried for him, but soon he was keeping up with his older sisters no problem.”

“And you felt,” Teresa hesitated, not wanting to pry but

also wanting to know she wasn’t alone, “sad?”

“I was so lonely,” Mrs. DeRaadt told her. “I wondered again and again if we did the right thing. Everything felt so different and back in Amsterdam, my family was all so near. And here, there was no family.”

Teresa felt her eyes warm with tears. “I think the same thing,” she told Mrs. DeRaadt. “It’s so hard being away from family. I can email and we Skype as much as we can, but it’s just not the same.”

“All we really had were letters, but I know what you mean. It’s still hard knowing there’s family that’s grown up without me there,” the old woman said gently. “When I got lonely, my mother used to write to me and say that when we had the Lord, we were never really alone.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Teresa said, touching the cross necklace she put on every morning.

“But He also gives us His Church for a reason,” Mrs. DeRaadt added. “The moment this place started to really feel like home was the moment a woman knocked on my door one winter day. She invited me to the same potluck and, since then, my husband, children and I have made that church our new family.” With a smile, Mrs. DeRaadt reached out her hand to cover Teresa’s. “They have been a real gift to us. I hope we can be a gift to you.”

Teresa smiled back at this woman with a tear escaping down her cheek. “Yes,” she responded. “Thank you, Mrs. DeRaadt.”

“Please,” the elderly woman smiled, “call me Magda.”

