

Christmas in Charity

By C. Forrest McDowell

In a little town named Charity there once was a broken-hearted man who suffered a tragic loss on Christmas Eve. Ever since that day the man's sadness seemed to increasingly rule the little town during the holiday season. At first a hoary frost began enveloping his house, which stood in the middle of town to every one's view, and then it slowly crept over the rest of the community.

One day, eight years after the tragedy, a woman and her daughter happened to travel through Charity. Something about the quaint little town appealed to them this frost-laded week before Christmas. The first thing they noticed was the hoar-covered house in the middle of town. They imagined it in Spring and Summer with a beautiful garden and children playing all around. They thought it surely was abandoned, but soon learned from the townsfolk the tragic story of the man who lived upstairs in it, who never left his bed during the holiday season, and whose deep sadness for eight years had certainly cast a gloom on everyone's holiday spirit.

The woman thought for a moment and turned to her daughter. "How strange it is that people respond to tragedy in so different ways," she commented. "Some withdraw all hope while others find it anew. Surely this man's loss could not be so great that a whole town should suffer its Christmas cheer." At that moment a sparkle shone in both their eyes.

And so it was that on this, the seventh day before Christmas, the woman and the little girl did something no one in the town of Charity had done for years: they walked toward the broken-hearted man's house right there in the middle of town. As they approached, the frost became thicker on the ground, and the air was heavy and cold. They entered the gate to find the yard and garden disheveled with fallen debris. But this did not bother them, for it was their intent this cold day to tidy up the yard and rake the garden, and having done so they hugged each other amidst a fresh new mist of air.

The townsfolk were astonished at what they saw but said not a word. As for the broken-hearted man, he remained in his bed upstairs during the whole time, brooding. Yet even he could not mistake what he has heard: someone was in his yard doing something he cared little about, and yet a woman's voice and a little girl's song plainly caught his ear. At that moment he wanted to leap out of bed and peer out the window, but a snuffle caught his nose and he merely sunk back into bed depressed.

On the sixth day before Christmas, the woman and her daughter returned to the house and to their delight saw that there was no more frost in the yard or garden. This day they cleared and swept the whole sidewalk that led to the porch, and they tidied the porch as well. Once again, the townsfolk were

surprised to see the woman and child, but not as much as when they awoke and saw that the frost had disappeared from their yards and gardens, too. The broken-hearted man heard again from his bed the cheerful sounds of mother and daughter. He was confused; however, he was determined to continue to sulk in his holiday sadness. Still, he wanted to take just a small peek when they walked away, but at that moment he sneezed and merely sank back into bed, still depressed.

‘Twas the fifth day before Christmas and the townsfolk awoke to find the frost gone from their sidewalks! Immediately they set to tidy up their porches as well, for a small bit of cheer seemed to spark their excitement. Meanwhile, mother and daughter once again visited the broken-hearted man’s house. This time they brought birdseed and nuts and cat food, for they had noticed no birds or squirrels around and hoped to offer them some winter food supply. The empty dish on the porch also suggested a cat nearby needing tending.

No sooner had they scattered the food about did the wild animals begin to come out of hiding and the yard came to life again with all kinds of chatter. The woman and her daughter sat amongst the wildlife singing and laughing, and the townsfolk were once again amazed. The man upstairs heard the commotion, too, and a small little corner of his heart alit with a long forgotten happiness. But it was short-lived, for before he could step to the window to peer out a deep cough erupted from within his chest. He did not feel well and stayed in bed, covered with sadness still.

The fourth day before Christmas found the townsfolk awoken to the winter sound of birds and squirrels foraging in their own yards. A miracle! They thought. They had missed such holiday sounds for eight years and now it was music to their ears. Today, the woman and her daughter went again to the man’s house and were greeted by a beautiful tabby cat. The frost had receded totally from the yard and now only covered the house. On this short visit they only planned to hang a wreath on the front door. The bed-ridden man heard their chatter at the door and was startled, but he was not feeling well at all, for a cold had settled deep within his chest and he shuddered in bed with a chill.

On the third day before Christmas, the little town of Charity awoke to find neighbor helping neighbor hang a welcoming wreath on front doors. Everyone spoke about the miracle that was enveloping their small town with renewed Christmas cheer. They also noticed that, once again, with cheery demeanor, both mother and daughter came to the broken-hearted man’s house this fine day.

Tapping gently on the wreath-covered front door they noticed it was ajar and bravely decided to enter. The large entry room was freezing cold and everything was disorganized. However, with steadfast

cheer they swept, dusted, mopped, and reverently tidied the whole downstairs while the man upstairs sank deeper in his bed ablaze with a fever. Far off, muffled beyond his covers, he thought he could hear some activity downstairs but he was far too weak to get out of bed to inspect. At last, when the activity ceased and he thought he heard the faint closing of the front door, the man buried his head deep beneath the covers. Memories of family cheer began to flood his mind and he began to weep, his broken heart pleading for another chance to find some joy in life. But how, he did not know, for life's strength was oozing out of him through an intensifying fever.

The second day before Christmas arrived with the townsfolk of Charity awakening to great cheer in their homes and kitchens. Men, women and children took pride in tidying up. For each of them, from within the sacred confines of their own homes, what was happening in that house in the middle of town was spreading magically into their own hearts. So, it was uplifting to peer out and see the woman and her daughter once again stroll cheerfully up to the broken-hearted man's house and disappear inside, though none knew that it was not by his invitation.

On this fine day, mother and daughter started a fire in the fireplace, and they proceed to fill the house with luscious smells of baked bread and treats. They laughed and sang Christmas carols and told stories that warmed their hearts. The house became warm and toasty, joy-filled and enfolding, as only women and children know how to do. But the man upstairs lay deeper amongst his quilts, a fever raking his body with mounds of perspiration. Even so, he could faintly smell something familiar wafting through his covers. Could it be so? He thought. Is that the smell of warmth, food, love, and good tidings in my home? And is that not the sound of mother and child? The man could feel his spirit leap to life again through the years of heartache. But he could also feel little life left in him. He opened his mouth to call out, yet no words came forth. He was too weak to speak, and it was then that he fell into a deep sleep.

The day of Christmas Eve had come to the quaint town of Charity unlike any in recent memory. Kitchens were bustling with the smell of freshly baked food and neighbors greeted neighbors with small gifts of gratitude. The town was awake, with no frost to be seen anywhere, save for a little patch of roof above the broken-hearted man's upstairs bedroom. Carolers meandered through the streets and there was a beautiful kindness that permeated everyone's face. None, however, could figure out how all this happened except that it began when the mysterious woman and her young daughter began appearing in town a week ago. Furthermore, no one could figure out what ever happened to the broken-hearted man whom no one saw leave his house for the past eight years, from Thanksgiving to Christmas. Did he

know that the woman and her daughter came to his house everyday? Were they relatives? Did he even still live in the house? The townsfolk had no answers to these questions.

All through the day, the townsfolk handed out holiday cheer to each other. But alas, the whole day had passed without a glimpse of mother or daughter. No one knew that the broken-hearted man lay unconscious amidst his quilts, his house still warm with the Christmas cheer the woman and girl brought the day before. The daylight passed into twilight, and the little town of Charity settled into a peaceful Christmas Eve night. However, no one's thoughts would stay calm. They kept wandering to the window in hope of seeing the woman and the little girl. Never had there been such an overwhelming feeling of collective joy in the town. Families began to huddle together beside their own heart's fire and share in story and song the good tidings and cheer of a holy child born unto Earth this Christmas night.

At evening's end, the townsfolk of Charity one by one turned out their lights in preparation for bed. Their hearts were filled with a universal sense of peace and love. The Earth as manger was ready to receive God's gift this Christmas night. However, by fate or heart's desire, it so happened that every man, woman and child in the sweet small town of Charity decided to peer out their windows at the same moment, their gaze directed towards the house in the middle of town.

Maybe it was a last gesture of collective hope, or a powerful unified prayer for the broken-hearted man. None the less, each person saw the same thing: It was around midnight and the woman and her daughter strolled cheerfully up to the man's house and entered quietly through the front door. Then, to the townsfolk's amazement, the downstairs lights were turned out and a candle was seen lit by the woman and daughter's shadow as they proceeded to ascend the stairs. The community stood mesmerized and thankful that their prayers were answered: the mother and her daughter had returned!

The broken-hearted man lay in a deep coma beneath his pile of quilts. He floated at death's door while a candlelight moved lovingly down a long corridor toward him. The hallway was awash in beautiful pastel prisms as angelic voices sang about a coming Prince of Peace. He saw a procession approaching him and carried within the arms of a mother was a baby with a halo about his head. For one ever so brief moment he caught a glimpse of the child and to his shock it was looking directly at him! A jolt of realization struck his heart and he sank back in an all-surrendering peace.

It was after the procession had passed that the broken-hearted man heard the familiar voices of two angels beckon him. He turned suddenly and found, to his heart's joy, the angelic forms of his wife and daughter standing with candle in hand next to his floating form.

“We have come for you now, my beloved,” said the woman angel. “I have missed you so much, Daddy,” said the daughter. And with great love anew in his soul, the broken-hearted man reached out to hold once again the family he had missed so much on Earth.

Author’s Note

It was during the week before Christmas in 1993 that I fell deathly sick. Thinking it was simply a bout with the flu I lay in bed for days, increasingly chilled while a raging fever racked my mind and body. Finally, when my fever hovered over 105⁰F, my wife decided that we should go to the emergency room at the local hospital. That was when my condition was diagnosed as pneumonia. At one point during my high fever, I remember falling into a lucid state, perhaps induced by my deep prayer to God for healing. It was during this state that this story came to me, almost as if it were spoken as a whisper in my ear. After my recovery, I was able to write the story down in the way I heard it. Of course, I love my wife and daughter dearly, so it makes sense that they are personified by the woman and daughter in the story. Moreover, every holiday season their cheerfulness has permeated our quaint house in the woods. As for me, I am probably best known as the resident Grump during such times, and it is an annual challenge for me to find a deeper place in my heart to embrace all their heartfelt joy and activity that stretches from Thanksgiving to New Year. Finally, I know I would feel a tremendous loss and broken-heartedness if my wife and daughter were not in my life during the holiday season. Therefore, as that mystical angelic voice whispered this story in my ear, and as I lay buried deep beneath my own quilts with a raging fever, I knew that the “broken-hearted” man upstairs in this story was really me. And the little town of Charity was a place in my heart I needed to visit more often.

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