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Worst Christmas Ever (or Was It?)

by

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It was the worst Christmas ever. Dad got a new job in some podunk town, and we had to leave all our friends in Denver. It was awful. I had to say goodbye to my best friend and barely managed to talk Mom and Dad into waiting until school was out for Christmas break.

I'm a big girl. My name is Tessa and I'm in fifth grade. I look like my mother, brown hair, brown eyes. The kids at school say I have a big mouth, but that's just because I have braces and that makes my mouth the first thing everyone sees when they look at me. Mom told me she had braces when she was my age and when they come off in a couple of years, my smile will look just like hers.

My little sister Tammy is only three. She looks more like Dad. She has his blue eyes and cornsilk hair that curls all over her head. My hair is straight as dry spaghetti. My brother, Brandon, is in first grade, and he's blond, too, but he has brown eyes like me. I can tell that he'll need braces also when he's a little older, but I heard Mom and Dad talking about how they may not be able to afford it because Dad has been out of work for months. It feels like forever. Mom even said she didn't know what we would do for Christmas this year. And there's some kind of really bad flu—Dad calls it a virus—going around and we all have to wear masks at school. Mine has little doggies on it, and it's kind of cute. Brandon's has cartoon trucks on it, and he makes noises like a truck when he runs at recess. Tammy is too young to keep hers on so she stays at home with Dad while Mom goes out and cleans houses for people. That's important work. But she worries because she doesn't make as much money as Dad used to.

So we were supposed to be happy when Daddy got a new job. Brandon wanted to make sure Santa Claus knows where our new house will be, and I took him aside and explained that Santa has people who handle that kind of thing. Sort of like the guys that drive around and take pictures of streets for the GPS map in the car. That made him feel better and he started to get happy like Mom about Dad's new job. I had to pretend to be happy, for Brandon's sake, but inside I was so sad because I knew I'd have to change schools—if they even got to go to a real school where we were going—and leave my bestest ever friends behind and maybe never see them again.

Like I said, I'm a big girl. I know how the whole Santa thing works. But my little sister and brother, they believe, and I wanted them to keep believing forever. When I was in third grade, some boy from sixth grade thought he should ruin things for everyone and tell all the kids there was no Santa. Some kids cried, and some of us called him names and told him he was a Grinch and didn't know what he was talking about. But I had this really bad feeling inside, like maybe—just maybe—he knew something we didn't. After all, I'd been asking for a puppy for Christmas every year of my life, and never got one. Mom said Santa had to get the landlord's permission

before he could deliver puppies, and ours said no. That was a really hard year for me, and I swore I'd protect my brother and sister from other dream smashers like that Grinchy kid.

Mom knew I was really unhappy. She always knew what I was truly feeling. She told me it wouldn't be so bad. We'd be living in a house in the country, and Dad's new boss had promised to provide laptops for us kids so we could do distance classes. Okay, I admit, the idea of getting a computer was pretty exciting. But distance classes turned out to be home schooling, and I wouldn't be able to make new friends or meet my new teacher in person. Then she said I'd be getting a very special Christmas present to make up for having to move.

Yeah, sure. I pretended to be excited, but I knew that all she'd been talking about with Dad for weeks was how we didn't have enough money to pay the bills and how she was worried about Christmas.

It's hard being the oldest because you understand a lot more than the younger ones, and I knew what no money meant. It meant no Christmas, not for any of us. Still, I kept pretending for the sake of Brandon and Tammy.

The day finally came when Dad packed us up in the car and Mom crammed all our clothes and toys into old boxes and a suitcase and loaded up the trunk and we drove out of Denver. Dad had Christmas music on the radio and Mom said we didn't have to wear our masks in the car. It was a long drive, and we even got to stop at McDonald's for lunch. We hadn't been able to do that in ages.

Tammy fell asleep in her car seat after lunch, and Brandon was playing with last year's Christmas favorite, a hand-held computer game in need of new batteries. I was staring out the side window, watching open fields with horses and cattle.

I told Mom, "I've counted six horses and twelve cattle so far. Are we going to live near a cattle ranch?"

Brandon perked up and started looking out his window. "There's another horsey," he chirped.

I said, "Seven horses, Mom."

She looked at Dad—he was driving so he couldn't look back—but she had that funny smile she gets when they know stuff we don't know, and she said, "Counting horses and cows is fun, but don't forget to count the reindeer."

I scowled at her. "Very funny."

Brandon bounced up and down on the seat. "Reindeer? Where?"

Mom said, "Keep looking. You'll see."

"Sure, Brandon," I said, trying not to sound too sarcastic. "Let me know when you see your first reindeer."

Mom was smiling now, and that made me curious. "First one to spot a reindeer earns a Christmas cookie for everyone."

Well, that did make it more interesting. Now Brandon was staring out the window with me. I had almost decided that there must be a billboard with a reindeer on it somewhere, when Brandon squealed, "I see it! I see a reindeer! Just like Santa's!"

I leaned toward his side to figure out what he'd mistaken for a reindeer, and my mouth dropped open. It really was a reindeer!

"Mom...?"

She looked in the direction Brandon was pointing. “Brandon wins!” She reached down between her feet and picked up a cookie tin. She took off the lid and handed the tin back to me. “Everyone gets a cookie.”

They were chocolate chip and home-made. “When did you make cookies?” I asked.

“Your last day at school. Oh look! There’s another reindeer.”

She was right. There were two on the side of the hill. No, three! And it had started to snow.

Dad said, “I’m glad we’re almost there. Don’t want to spend too much time driving in a snow storm.”

I didn’t know what was going on or what to say, so I ate my cookie and shook my head in wonder.

“Four!” said Brandon, still counting reindeer.

By the time Dad pulled off the two-lane and onto a long narrow blacktop, the snow was falling faster. Dad had to slow down, and Brandon kept counting. When he reached twelve reindeer, his eyes got really big and he said, “We’re moving to the North Pole.”

Mom and Dad didn’t say a word. They just gave each other that special look again.

By the time Dad stopped the car in front of a small house with a wooden fence around the back, I was starting to think Brandon was right.

Mom said, “Here they come, dear.”

“Mr. Garrison said he’d meet us. They must have security cameras.”

“Who’s Mr. Garrison?” I asked, watching the tall man approach. He was wearing a red down jacket and had a Santa hat pulled down over his ears.

Brandon leaned close and said, “He doesn’t have a beard. He must be Santa’s son.”

“Right, Bran,” I nodded. “That must be it.” I couldn’t hide the sarcasm that time.

Dad left the engine running so the heater would stay on. “You kids stay in the car.”

Mom stayed with us and rolled down the window so we could hear the men talk.

“You made it,” said Mr. Garrison. He glanced at us in the car and gave a little wave. He was wearing red mittens.

“Your instructions were pretty easy to follow,” said Dad. They shook hands.

“My wife spent the morning getting the house ready. She didn’t want your wife to have to clean anything her first day here. I hope you don’t mind, she put up a little tree.”

I looked at Brandon and he looked at me, and we both opened our doors and jumped out of the car. “A Christmas tree?”

Mr. Garrison grinned at us. We yelled so loud, Tammy woke up and started fussing to get out of her car seat. Dad reached in and turned off the engine. Mom got out and pulled her coat closed in front before lifting Tammy out of the car.

Mr. Garrison was heading for the front door of the house. “Let’s get you all inside. It’s supposed to snow for the next twenty-four hours.” He unlocked the front door and handed my Dad the house keys. “Taylor, my wife, she’ll be over later with a crockpot full of beef stew. Meanwhile, you make yourselves comfortable. I put our phone numbers next to the land line, just call if you need anything.”

Brandon and I barely heard the last part because we were already in the living room where a real live Christmas tree was standing so tall it touched the ceiling.

“It smells like the forest,” said Brandon.

“That’s because it’s a real tree, not a plastic one,” I said.

“The lights aren’t on.”

“Let’s ask Mom to plug it in,” I said. Brandon followed me into the kitchen. The cupboard doors were open and full of cans and boxes. There was a small square table with a high chair and four normal chairs around it. Tammy was sitting in the high chair eating a cookie. Mom was sitting on one of the others, weeping into a tissue.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” Was she as sad about leaving Denver as I was?

“Nothing,” she said. “Everything is just right.” She looked up as Dad came into the kitchen.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

Mom smiled as she wiped away another tear. “They filled the cupboards with food, and the fridge, too.”

Dad pulled her out of the chair and gave her a hug. “I told you it would turn out okay.”

Brandon and I hugged her, too, before he started jumping up and down and begged, “Please plug in the tree!”

Mom looked happier now. “Go plug in the tree,” she said to Dad. “I am going to make us all hot cocoa to go with our cookies.”

Later that day, a short lady with blue hair came to the front door carrying a hot pot with large oven mitts. She brought another lady with her who carried a bundle of homemade bread. I stood in the kitchen door and listened to them talk, and it turned out the lady with blue hair was married to Mr. Garrison and the other lady cooked for them. At first, that seemed weird, but then I realized they had just cooked for us, so I guess they must be really nice people. Mom sounded super polite, the way she talks to my teachers, so I knew the blue-haired lady was important, but after twenty minutes they were all laughing and talking like normal friends.

Mom was holding Tammy so I went to check on Brandon and found him looking through the storm door. Dad and Mr. Garrison were talking out front. Dad did a lot of nodding, and Mr. Garrison did a lot of talking and pointing. The snow was already higher than their ankles and still falling. Brandon wanted me to see his bedroom. There were three bedrooms in the house. It was bigger than where we lived in Denver, but not by much. I heard Mom call it a cottage when we were having our hot chocolate. Even so, Brandon and I each got our own bedroom. Tammy’s crib would go in Mom and Dad’s room. I don’t know where she’ll sleep when she outgrows it. She can already climb out of it.

I don’t know where the furniture came from. I guess all houses have furniture waiting in them. But they don’t all have Christmas trees. Brandon and I took a blanket and sat as close to the tree as we could, while he told me all the things he wanted Santa to bring. I just let him talk.

After Mrs. Garrison left, we had dinner—warm bread and beef stew. It was nice and Mom didn’t have to cook. I helped with dishes. Brandon did most of the talking. I think the rest of us were tired.

After the dishes were done, Dad said, “Mr. Garrison wants to show me around the ranch tomorrow, fill me in on my chores, and then he said we’ll go into town to the bank.”

I asked, “Do you start working already? It’s only two days until Christmas.”

Dad said, “It’s a new job, honey. I have to start when the boss wants me to start. But we’ll be together on Christmas. Did you and Brandon make your list for Santa?”

Brandon ran to his room and returned with the short list I'd written down for him. He signed it at the bottom. His "d" was backwards, but I let it go.

"What about you, Tess?" asked Dad.

I looked at the floor. "No point in me doing one, is there? I always ask for the same thing." I tried to make it sound like I was kidding.

"Oh, that's right," said Dad. He looked at Mom and she put a hand over her mouth. "In that case, we'll just use your list from last year. Why don't you kids go watch tv for a while. Frosty the Snowman is on, I think."

I could take a hint. The grownups wanted to talk by themselves. I went with Brandon and we watched an hour of cartoon Christmas specials then went to bed. It took me a while to fall asleep because every shadow looked like it was going to grab me.

When I woke up in the morning, Dad was already gone. Mom had breakfast on the table, three different boxes of cereal. Brandon wanted some of each, of course.

"Why did Dad leave so early?" I asked.

"He's working on the Garrison ranch. Animals need to be fed."

Brandon asked, "Is he feeding Santa's reindeer?"

Mom smoothed his hair. "I'm sure that's part of what he does."

"They aren't Santa's reindeer," I said. "They belong to Mr. Garrison."

"But he told me yesterday that when Santa's reindeer get tired, they come here and harness up some fresh ones."

My eyes nearly popped out of my head. "Really? He told you that?"

Brandon nodded. "You were in the kitchen listening to Mom and the others." He spooned extra sugar onto his Corn Pops and Mom didn't even scold him.

"What are we doing today, Mom?"

"Mrs. Garrison is coming by later. She's going to show us the ranch."

"In the snow?" I was horrified.

"It's just frozen water," said Brandon. "You won't melt."

I poured Captain Crunch in my bowl. Tammy was eating dry Corn Pops with her hands. Mom was having coffee and toast. She seemed happier than I'd seen her in a long time.

"Daddy brought a box of your toys from the old house," she said. "Why don't you and Brandon put them under the tree so you they can enjoy some Christmas, too."

I knew she was trying to keep us busy, but I didn't mind. Setting our old toys under the tree made it look a lot more Christmasy, if that's a word.

When Mrs. Garrison came, she was in a horse-drawn wagon like the old ones in cowboy movies! There were two horses wearing jingle bells and a couple of other people with her. We all bundled up and got onto the wagon. There were hay bales in back for sitting on, and the wheels were attached to great big skis. Only I'm not sure that's what they're really called.

By the time we rode all around the ranch and saw more reindeer and long-necked funny-looking animals called alpacas, I was starting to think that maybe this would be a fun place to live. Then the grownups ruined it by telling us kids we couldn't go in the barn or play with the animals unless one of them were with us. But that's okay. Reindeer look harmless in the movies, but in real life they bump into you and knock you down. And the horses were huge, much bigger than on TV.

We had lunch in the Garrison's house, and I couldn't stop staring. I'd never seen a house that big. They had three Christmas trees all decorated in different rooms. Some day I want to have a house like that. Dad and Mr. Garrison joined us at the very end of lunch.

I said, "Dad! There are lots of horses and alpacas here."

Brandon said, "And more reindeer than Santa will ever need."

Dad went over to Mom and gave her a hug and a kiss and said, "When you're done with lunch, come on outside. Mr. Garrison is going to drive us home in his truck."

I wanted to go on the wagon again, but I didn't complain because that wouldn't be polite. Tammy was playing with Mrs. Garrison's little boy, Jackson. He and Tammy were the same age so they laughed and squealed and spoke half English, half baby talk. It was really cute. Brandon played with them, too. I kind of sat around and ate my third Christmas cookie while the grownups talked. It's funny how they can be perfectly understandable one minute, then all of a sudden they start talking about words that mean nothing to me. I sort of knew what a bank account was, but the rest of it was gibberish.

When we were getting ready to leave, Mr. Garrison snapped his fingers like he'd forgotten something. He came over to me and looked me up and down, like he had a mental list and he was ticking it off. "You seem like a mature young lady," he said. "You could do me a big favor."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Mom was trying not to smile. Dad wasn't even trying, just grinning from ear to ear. I looked up at Mr. Garrison. "What kind of favor?"

"Well, here on the ranch, there are a lot of animals to take care of. More than we can handle, sometimes. Would you mind helping out with that?"

Part of me was excited, but part of me was thinking, sarcastically, *Oh great, I'll have to do chores with Dad.* But I knew how to be polite. "Of course," I said glumly. "I guess so."

He looked at me like he was trying to make up his mind. "You don't look thrilled."

I shrugged, but forced a small smile. "Glad to help out."

Mr. Garrison looked at my Mom and Dad, then said, "I think we've teased her long enough. Taylor? Would you do the honors?"

His blue-haired wife got up and left the room. Brandon asked, "Will we all fit in the truck?"

"Sure, it's a King cab, lots of room," said Mr. Garrison. "You'll sit in the rear seat with your sisters, if that's okay with Tessa."

I couldn't even talk. My mouth dropped open and my eyes tried to boing out of my head because Mrs. Garrison came back into the room carrying a black and white puppy! And she brought him straight over to me.

"We need someone to take care of one of the puppies," she said. "Your parents said they think you'll do a great job." She plopped him into my arms.

"What's his name?" I asked.

"You'll have to name him," said Dad. "He's going to be your dog."

Brandon squealed, "And mine!"

Mom shushed him. "Don't scare the puppy. That's why Tessa will be taking care of him. She'll show you what to do."

I was crying with happiness and hugging my puppy and getting my face licked off, and life was wonderful. "Jingle Bells," I sobbed. "His name is Jingle Bells."

So maybe there is a Santa Claus after all. Maybe that sixth-grade bully was all wrong. And maybe, just maybe, me and Brandon would wait up on Christmas Eve to see if Santa needed to stop for fresh reindeer.

Merry Christmas!

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