

THE LOST CHRISTMAS EVE

THE BEGINNING

It was the night of Christmas Eve and somewhere on the other side of eternity (which is somewhere after today but before tomorrow) a tear of incredible sadness slowly welled up within the eye of a beautiful young lady. The sorrow within the tear was so great, that though it desperately wanted to stay with her to give whatever comfort it could, the weight of the pain it contained eventually caused it to fall. It fell through eternity, across countless galaxies, star systems and universes until it found itself entering the atmosphere of our own world. There, while falling through the clouds, it was slowed for a moment as it landed on a strand of the Princess of Winter's snow white hair. The tear ran to the end of that strand, where it lingered for a moment, before continuing its fall. The Princess, having noticed her small visitor, had blessed the teardrop transforming it into a snowflake, which allowed it to continue the remainder of its journey in a gentle descent among countless other snowflakes, until it finally landed in front of an old toy store in New York City.

Now, while the snowflake was nestling in amongst its fellow winter travelers, downtown in the business district on Wall Street, all was unusually quiet. The streets were empty of people and cars and a thick layer of still falling snow muffled everything, even the footsteps of dreams on their way to tomorrow. Everyone had gone home early to prepare for all the promised magic of the next day and the lights were out in every office window. Well, nearly every office window. Up on the fifty eighth floor of one massive office building, a single office window was still brightly illuminated in cold fluorescent light. Within that office sat a businessman going through legal documents. He was a gentleman, in his early sixties with graying hair, but still in excellent physical condition. Calling for his secretary, the man was visibly annoyed to have received no response. Getting up, he looked out his office door only to see every desk and cubicle empty. "Christmas," he muttered disgustedly as he realized that everyone had long since gone and he would be getting no other work done this night. Putting on his coat and scarf, he grabbed his briefcase and left. Stepping out to the street, his frustration mounted as he soon came to the conclusion that his probability of finding a cab was extremely low at best. Resigning himself to the situation, he pulled his coat a little tighter and started walking home.

Meanwhile, across eternity, the Lord called before Him His youngest angel and once more requested him to return to the world of mankind and to bring Him the name of the person that best continued the work of his Son on Earth. His mission had to be completed in one night, and unlike all his previous journeys to the world of humans, this time he would be allowed to use his wings twice, once when he descended, and once more when he would leave (not unlike the souls of humans). So, with the nightfall having already started on Earth, the angel quickly unfolded his wings and began his quest, all the while wondering how he would be able to find this individual. Humans were such an extremely varied lot, a seemingly infinite mixture of rich and poor, successes and failures, young and old, that he wondered exactly where he could land that would allow him to see as many of these individuals as possible within his allotted time. As he thought, his mind recalled how on the day his Lord's Son was born that all roads on the Earth seemed to eventually lead to Rome. Every individual or idea of note seemed to make its way to that eternal city. He wondered what was the present day equivalent of that glittering jewel from mankind's past. Then, all at once he found himself whispering the words, "New York." Within moments, he found himself hovering over that city feeling the gentle rhythm of millions of heartbeats, but still unsure of exactly where to land. Suddenly, he noticed an old Grand Hotel, with a toy store on its right, a blues bar to its left and a nineteenth century gothic style cathedral directly across the street. Also in this city that often had guards at nearly every door, this hotel had a sign that said, "*Vacancies. There is always room for one more.*" Thinking to himself how that sign seemed so appropriate for this night, he landed on the roof of the cathedral across the street from the hotel. Within a few minutes he realized that people of every race, creed, and age inhabited this block and he slowly took in the scene.

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First, he saw a young man telling stories to several small children outside the hotel. Many of these children were what we would call "street kids." "Children who had a deep sense of cynicism about everything, even this holiday, but within minutes of listening, every child found all their doubts and disbelief's disappearing, vanquished by the simple words this young man was weaving into enchanted stories about where Christmas came from, where it went and what it did during the rest of the year. As he finished each story the children would

demand another. When he related a tale of how the Wizards of Winter created snow, icicles and frost as nature's decoration for this most special of days, the still falling snow whirled around him following his every gesture as if to confirm the truth of his words.

Through the alchemy of Christmas Eve his voice not only turned children who doubted its magic once again into believers, but the angel witnessed something even far more impressive. He saw adults who were passing by, stop to listen. In their eyes the angel could see them returning to their own childhood, to a time when faith was real and not pretend, and more importantly when they left, a little of that faith was still there.

The angel thought to himself that his Lord's Son had often told stories and was also always very kind to children, but he decided that since he still had time he would continue to look further. He then visited the church where he found numerous men and women of goodwill serving Christmas Eve dinner to the less fortunate. Surely, one of them might be the one he was looking for, but something told him to continue his search. Next he entered the Grand Hotel across the street from the cathedral, marveling at its beautiful architecture. The hotel had an aura of gentle goodness about it. He could feel the shadows of all the lives that passed through these halls as well as souls of the people currently staying there. Behind the doors of the grand ballroom he could hear a symphony still rehearsing for its Christmas concert the next day and of course he went inside to listen. Music always reminded him of the voice of God, for it needed no translation and could reach and renew the soul like very few other things could. But still he was not sure, so venturing once more outside, he noticed several lonely individuals entering the blues bar next door. Following them inside he discovered a slightly overweight, elderly honky-tonk piano player who was brightening the life of everyone who heard him. People who thought their problems too heavy to carry, felt them lighten and then disappear as he combined music and stories in an intoxicating blend served in equal measure to all. The singer's words of hope and happiness slipped into the listeners' minds, carried by melodies that slipped them into their souls as well. The spells he cast seemed to benefit everyone. Well, once again nearly everyone, for sitting at the corner table was the businessman from Wall Street. The happier everyone else became as they listened to the piano player and his band, the more unhappy the businessman looked, as he cast out disparaging remarks with every sip of his drink. Eventually he left, muttering vague expletives regarding his personal misanthropic view of this holiday.

Now the angel had not noticed the businessman in the bar, or even when he had left, but as the angel was leaving to once more return to the church across the street, he noticed a trail from drops of blood in the freshly fallen snow. No one else could see this trail of blood flowing from this wound, for this was a wound of the soul, but fortunately angels' eyes can see what humans cannot. So, though the time for his mission was rapidly running out, the angel decided that he could not abandon this soul in pain and he followed the trail of blood until he reached its source. It was the businessman who had just left the bar. He was cursing the holiday and was now walking through the snow directly in front of the Grand Hotel. Gently touching the man's hand the angel caused him to pause for a moment as he read the man's heart.

It seemed that he had once been a very different individual. Born in the Midwest to a very kind and religious family, he had gone to church everyday of his youth and was brought up strongly believing that *man was made in God's image*. He had an extremely happy childhood and was the pride of his town, being the star pitcher on their baseball team and graduated first in his class from the local high school. Receiving several scholarship offers, he went to an Ivy League college where he met a beautiful fellow student who had come from a similar small town background. They fell in love and shortly after graduating, got married and moved to New York, where he had received a lucrative job offer from a major investment house.

Shortly after they had settled in, she told him the happy news that she was with child, and it was with the greatest of expectations that they arrived at the hospital on the delivery date. Life seemed as perfect as life could be. But then everything changed during the delivery, his wife had started to hemorrhage. From the rush of doctors in and out of the room the father could tell that something was dreadfully wrong. The expression of grief on the doctor's face foretold his words on how the man's wife had passed away from loss of blood. The child however, a boy, had survived. When the nurse placed his newborn son in his arms, the child laid there unusually lifeless and the father could tell that there was still more bad news to come. Demanding to immediately be told all, he was informed that during the delivery the child had been cut off from oxygen for so long that he had sustained severe brain damage. The child would never have a job, never learn to talk and at best, if they were very lucky, he might one day learn to walk. At this point the father broke as he saw the foundations of his entire life collapsing. Looking towards heaven he screamed, "*This is Your image? This! I*

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see *nothing of God in this?*" and with that he handed his son back to the nurse asking if the child could be institutionalized. The nurse, not knowing what else to do said they would see that the infant was taken to a nearby home for the severely mentally disabled where he would receive around the clock care. The businessman then turned and left without even a backwards glance at what would be his one and only child. For the next forty years he worked, paid his bills and returned each night to his empty home. He kept no close friends and even distanced himself from his remaining family preferring to live alone within his wounds.

After the angel had taken in the man's story, he stepped back staggered by the depth of the wound to this man's soul. As his hand pulled away from the man, the man's head seemed to clear and he started once more walking home. The angel not knowing what else to do, said a prayer for the man and then followed him keeping as close as he could. As they were passing the toy store to the left of the hotel, a small girl of about five years old, well-dressed in an Imperial Russian styled winter coat, was backing away from the store's window. She was laughing in delight at a rotating toy carousel lit with hundreds of miniature lights whose horses were going up and down just like the real ones at the amusement parks. Not seeing the man, she bumped into him nearly causing him to fall on the slippery snow. To the child's instant apology he replied with a few inaudible words. Sensing that the man was upset, and believing that she was the reason for his anger, she tried to explain that she had been looking in the store window and had not seen him. When this did not seem to change his hardened demeanor, she reminded him that tomorrow was Christmas and when that did not seem to work, she asked him if he had any children. The man glared down at the child and replied with the first word she could understand, a clear and emphatic, "No!" But for the first time in years his mind thought of the son that he had abandoned all those decades before. The man looked carefully at the little girl, something about her bothered him but he could not articulate what. Was it the fact that she had awakened memories that were better forgotten? But then he heard a clock's bells beginning to chime midnight. Forcing himself back to the moment, he asked the girl in a stern voice what she was doing alone on the street in the middle of the night. She replied that she was staying at the hotel next door with her parents, on the twelfth floor in room twenty-four. The man then told her that she should best get her little self immediately back to that room and without another word, she turned and ran up the steps and back inside.

After watching her re-enter the hotel (for despite his hardened outside appearance, he was truly concerned that the girl got back safely), the man once more tried to discover what it was about the child that bothered him so. However, he could not concentrate on that because the questions regarding his own son that she had awakened in his mind refused to go away. So, standing in front of the toy store with its carousel still turning, he took out his mobile phone and called the state institution where he had left his son over four decades earlier. Asking the operator if his son was still alive and if he was still there, he was told that his son was still alive but that they no longer kept patients in this facility. The sympathetic operator then gave him as much information as she could find in the files. She informed him that his son eventually learned to walk and though he had never learned to speak, he could understand most words. She also told him that at the present time, he was now living in a boarding house hotel, uptown in the Bronx. The man slowly closed his phone and then stepping into the street, hailed down a passing cab (the first empty one he had seen all night).

As the cabbie started the meter, the businessman gave him directions to the Bronx hotel. Arriving there, he went inside and asked the night clerk for his son's room number. The clerk told him that his son was not in because he had not yet returned from work. When the father replied that this was impossible, the obviously tired clerk told him that he was not here to debate the fact. His son, he continued, worked around the corner at the city hospital.

With a mixture of confusion, anticipation and nervousness, the father walked around the corner where the hospital information desk confirmed that his son did work on the seventh floor. Taking the elevator up, he was surprised to find the floor marked, "Maternity." Asking the nurse on duty for his son, she told him that she was just starting her rounds and if the father wished she would be glad to show him the way. After a short walk, she pushed open one of the double doors at the end of a long hall to reveal a large, cavernous, dimly lit and seemingly empty room. As he glanced to the left he noticed several incubators glowing in the darkness, each containing a frail, shivering newborn, each obviously in incredible pain. Seeing the look of shock appearing in the man's expression, the nurse quickly explained that this was the hospital's crack ward. This room was reserved for newborns whose mothers were addicted to this highly potent form of cocaine. These infants were always born premature, underweight and in complete withdrawal from the second they left the womb. Even more

unfortunately, they were unable to give the infants anything to ease their intense pain because they were still so fragile.

When the man then asked what his son did here, the nurse nodded towards the night far corner of the room. Because of the darkness he had not noticed the individual's presence before, but he now saw a large man, whose face looked exactly like his own, only twenty-some years younger. His son was sitting in a rocking chair, holding a trembling, crying infant that he was gently rocking back and forth while whispering soothing "shhh" like sounds to it.

Noticing the slightly confused look in the father's eyes, the nurse then went on to explain how if her work in medicine had taught her anything, it was no matter who you are, if you are rich or poor, weak or strong, we all need to be held at least twice in our lives. Once when we are born and once more when we leave. Holding these infants was his son's job and he was the best they had ever had at this hospital. He had been coming there everyday for years. Everyday he would hold these infants rocking them back and forth until they fell asleep in his arms. He would never leave until each and every child was peacefully resting. In all the time that she had been working there she had never known him to take even one day off. Which was why on this night, Christmas Eve, when nearly everyone who could have gone home for the night, had done so, his son was still there.

The father felt his entire world once again collapsing before his eyes as he stared at the son that he had abandoned for not being born in God's image. He now saw this son, consoling the inconsolable, healing the hopeless. This son so clearly reflecting the infinite compassion and mercy of God was obviously so much more in the image of God than himself, the great athlete, the intellectual, the successful businessman. The nurse could see the father was choking back a flood of emotions. She started to excuse herself so that they could be alone but the father stopped her and asked hopefully if his son could yet speak. Realizing that it had obviously been a great deal of time since this man had last seen his son, she softly whispered, "No, but he is a great listener." Before leaving, she gave the father a gentle look of encouragement to approach his son. The space between the two men which could have easily been measured in yards, now seemed to stretch into infinity. He could not conceive of a way to approach this man, his son, whose existence he had denied for all these years as unworthy of being his son. Would his son recognize him? Would he hate him for having abandoned

him? Then through a window, for the briefest of moments, he thought he saw the outline of his wife's face appear in the still falling snow. Slowly, he started to move across the room.

When he reached the rocking chair, his son looked up at him and then glanced at a picture propped up on the windowsill next to him. It was a picture of his father and his mother at the age of nineteen when they had first met. Next to it was a yellowed manila folder marked with his wife's name and in big bold letters, "PERSONAL EFFECTS OF THE DECEASED." It was obvious that these were the personal belongings of his wife and they had been given to his son. It was also apparent from the wear and tear on the folder that his son had carried it with him his entire life. The picture was also worn and cracked and one could tell that he must have held it countless times. After looking at the picture and then back at his father, the son's face broke into a huge smile, a smile of pure love and forgiveness, a smile that held no animosity or hatred for past wrongs, only joy that his father was there now. The father found himself smiling back and after a few awkward seconds, he turned, went across the room to the incubators and picked up one of the trembling infants. He then went back to his son and sat in the rocking chair right beside him and together they rocked away that entire Christmas Eve.

Watching this entire scene was the angel who now was certain that he had his answer. Unfolding his wings, he swiftly returned across eternity. Standing before his Lord he was about to speak but then he found himself hesitating, like a child in school suddenly unsure of his answer. Slowly he said the name of the businessman's son, and after a slight pause, the names of the storyteller, all the people serving dinner to the poor at the cathedral, the piano player, the musicians, the nurse and even the name of the businessman himself. The angel's voice was gaining in confidence as he said how he now realized that anyone could best reflect the love and compassion of His Son at any time they decided to follow the simple words his Lord's Son had said all those years ago, "To do unto others as you would have others do unto you." The Lord smiled and that night the angel slept deep in the heart of his Lord.

THE END