

George's Christmas Miracle

Only five days to Christmas, George Christiansen remembered. To most people, it would be a joyful recollection, but not for George; the thought only depressed him. For him, the day had no special significance.

That didn't hold true for Joan, however. She loved to see Christmas approach; the commemoration of the birth of the Savior she always talked about—a fact she never let him forget—since the day she went with a friend to that holy roller meeting, just after Cliff ran away.

George couldn't understand why Cliff had left. Oh, he had his rebellious moments, but he had been the pride of George's life. God, how he loved that boy! Every time he thought of the times they shared, it made him cry, cry with frustration over the tears Cliff's leaving had caused. To make things worse, Joan—instead of sharing his sorrow in a decent fashion—insisted on going around like some Pollyanna, spreading joy and a happy, “God will work it out in his good time.” It had gotten to the point where his own *name* got on his nerves: Christiansen ... Christian ... Christ ... Christmas.

The whole subject depressed him.

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“Please try not to be so negative, George,” Joan urged him from across the supper table.

They and their two other children, five year-old Lindy and nine year-old Jill, had gathered to eat.

“I know it's not your thing, but Christmas is supposed to be a time of good cheer, of hope, of the miracle of the Savior's birth. At least try to be a bit more upbeat for the girls.”

“What miracle?” George retorted, feeling rebellious himself. “Why does the whole world go crazy over the birth of some peasant kid, two thousand years ago? And tell me about hope. Here we have all the accessories of the suburban family. We don't want for anything. There's food on the table. A modern, automatic furnace heats the house, but what's it all for? How can I have good cheer, with *that* empty spot at the table!” George motioned to Cliff's empty place.

“But, George—”

“Don't ‘but George’ me!” he shouted. “You go ahead and be happy, trusting in your oh-so-good God. I, for one, have no reason to be happy!”

George got up so quickly, his chair fell back and crashed to the floor. He hesitated, then stormed out of the room. Three pairs of eyes, wide with astonishment, watched him go.

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George saw the first light of dawn streak the sky as he sat in the living room, facing the Christmas tree. His depression had deepened to the point where he found it difficult to sleep. Soon the girls would be coming down, full of the eagerness that Christmas morning represented to them. Deep inside, he felt badly for being such a spoiler. He had left Joan, his longsuffering wife, with all the preparations.

In spite of his disbelief, he usually got involved, since the Christmas season really did embody such a happy time. This year, however, proved different. The horrific argument he and his seventeen-year-old son had had played in his mind in an endless loop. He remembered in vivid detail how the boy's back looked as he left the house. He wanted to call out, to stop him, but his pride prevented it. Now, he wished it hadn't been so proud.

Cliff, Cliff, why did you go? We could have worked it all out.

He heard a small noise in the doorway and turned to see Joan standing there. “Hi,” he said in a small voice. Joan walked over to where he sat on the sofa and took a seat beside him, placing an arm around his shoulders. She didn’t say a word, but just rested her head there. George’s arm went around her and tears welled up in his eyes to find their way down his cheeks.

“Christmas is supposed to be a happy time,” George said through his tears.

“It is. For us. Now,” Joan said softly.

“I’m not happy.”

“I know, honey. God knows too.”

George sat up and looked at his wife. “Always have to get in a good word for God, don’t you?”

“Please, George. I don’t want to argue, but I sincerely meant what I said.”

“You never seem sad that Cliff is gone,” George accused.

Joan drew herself straighter, a stern look on her usually open, friendly face. “Do you think for one moment that you’re the only one who grieves? Do you think you’re unique at this dawn vigil? You just never saw the times I sat here, pouring out my bitterest tears to God, for Cliff, while you slept in the next room. I just haven’t gone around, making life miserable for the rest of the family.” Joan paused, looking intently at her husband. “George, we have two daughters. They don’t understand why their Daddy is so distant. They miss you, but you’re so consumed with your grief, you have no time for anyone.”

George opened his mouth to respond, but closed it and looked at this woman he married. In some ways, she still surprised him. He realized he had not been fair with her at all.

“I guess I had that coming,” he finally said. “I had no right to judge you. I—”

Joan placed her hand on his lips. “Hush. I understand. I know how close you two are. Just try not to let your pain at his absence distort your perceptions. We’re still a family. We have two fine girls and they ... *we* need you, George. Be here with us for Christmas. Perhaps you’ll even come to see what a miracle it is.”

“I sincerely hope so. I could use a miracle about now.”

George took Joan in his arms and held her as dawn turned to full daylight.

The beginning of Christmas day.

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George sat in the rocker with his glass of eggnog, surveying the aftermath of the day’s activities. Here and there, a tatter of wrapping paper decorated the living room carpet. Various items of clothing, gifts from relatives, lay exposed on top of their boxes under the tree. Some toys, forlorn orphans of the “Big Choice” at bedtime, awaited the morrow, when the girls would again put them to use.

He smiled as he remembered how cute the girls looked, all dressed for bed in their new pajamas, snuggled down with the dolls, the objects of their fondest hopes before Christmas. George had to admit he enjoyed himself, watching the excitement and wide-eyed enthusiasm of the girls. Only occasionally had a thought of his son dampened his enjoyment.

The chime of the doorbell derailed George’s train of thought. “I’ll get it hon,” he said, as he went to the door.

When he opened it, his jaw dropped in surprise, for, on the front porch before him, stood his son, Cliff, dressed in military BDUs. Paralyzed with surprise, George could do nothing else but stand there with his mouth hanging open.

“Uh, hi, Dad. I just got into town. I was hitchhiking and the police were kind enough to bring me here,” Cliff said, waving to the patrol car at the curb, which pulled away. “Dad, I realize I have no right to come barging in like this, but I finally saw what a jerk I’ve been. I kept putting it off with one excuse or another but, now, I really felt I should come back home, where I belong ... that is, if you’ll have me.”

That last phrase seemed to bring George around. “Of course. Come in. Come *in!*” As Cliff stepped into the foyer, George called to Joan. “Joan! Cliff’s home!”

Joan came running, and, after a brief moment of astonished hesitation, threw herself into her son’s arms, hugging him fiercely, crying all the while. George heard many a fervent “Thank you, Lord,” from her lips.

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In a few moments, after Joan’s reunion with her son had subsided, George again found himself awkwardly facing him. The three of them stood silently, as if poised on the brink of some momentous event. George finally broke the silence.

“Well, I guess we all have some catching up to do. Welcome home son.” He offered his hand and Cliff took it. As if a silent signal had passed between them, George broke into tears, at the same time pulling his son into his embrace. “Oh Cliff, how I’ve missed you!” he choked out between sobs.

“I missed you too, Dad ... and Mom,” Cliff replied through his own tears.

“I had just about given up hope.” George said, his voice still cracking with emotion. “I never in my wildest dreams expected this.” He relaxed his embrace and stepped back, holding Cliff at arm’s length. He looked at Joan. “This has truly been a joyful Christmas. Thanks for showing me that.”

Joan walked over and joined the two men in her life. The three stood in the foyer, basking in the warmth of reunion, each silently giving thanks. George finally spoke, summing it all up.

“You know, I once foolishly scorned those who put their trust in God,” George said. I thought it was all a fairy tale, pap for childish minds. Now, I see that I was wrong. This day has changed that. I have seen the impossible made possible. Joan, we’re going to have to sit down soon and discuss faith in Jesus, for I’m ready to listen now. If nothing else, I’m convinced of one thing.

From this day forward, I will always consider this day my Christmas miracle.”