

## The Christmas That Almost Wasn't

by

Paula Danes

My feet felt frozen as I stood in front of the tiny, anemic artificial tree in the local drug store. The sign perched on a box below it declared, "\$5 special, one day only." I'd hurried us here after picking my children up from daycare, but a tree for this price could already be gone. I lifted a silent prayer to heaven that the store still had at least one left.

Meanwhile, my three-year-old son tugged at my right hand as my baby girl balanced on the left hip my six-year-old punched as he wailed, "We can't get this tree. Everyone in my class has a live tree this year. I want a liiiiiiive treeeeeeee!"

I felt a tear slip down my cheek. I knew what we looked like. We'd left their father in Florida after having had him arrested for child abuse not three months earlier, and I'd started the first job I could get—a secretary making almost nothing—and gotten us settled. Our winter clothes, purchased a short time before at a thrift store, made us look less than flush, I knew. Still, we were together and safe, and at any time of the year that counted for a lot. We would get through this, even if my son didn't believe it.

Shifting my daughter a bit, I reached down to block his repeated punching as I whispered, "If we don't get this tree, Santa won't be able to bring us presents to put under it. Please stop, Davey, please." I closed my eyes, hoping against hope that would stop his hysterics.

I jumped at the female voice behind me. "Is this your first Christmas on your own?"

I turned toward the older woman, fighting back the cascade of tears threatening to fall at the kindness in her voice. This season was hard enough without the combination of compassionate words and pity that shone in her eyes. “Yes,” I heard myself mumble.

“Well, we’re out of these trees here, but my husband works at another store across town. Let me call him to see if they still have one.” I nodded, mumbling a thank you, and she disappeared. A short time later, she reappeared. “He found one, but he can’t get it over here until tomorrow morning. Can you come by tomorrow to get it?”

I took a deep cleansing breath, feeling the mental fog I’d been fighting all day lift to cloud level. “Yes, thank you!” I smiled, corralling my oldest to hold my left hand as we left the store. Back in the car, I lifted my eyes heavenward and said a fervent thank you. I started the car, turning on the heater, and smiled again remembering earlier that day.

The Thursday had already held one miracle when, after arriving at the bank to take out money to put gas in the car, I’d been told my account was too new to take out any funds before my paycheck, deposited just the day before, had cleared. Without enough gas to get from work to my children’s daycare and our home a half hour around the D. C. beltway, I had no idea what I would do. Each step from the bank door to the car a block away had felt like a step on the Bataan Death March. How would I pick up my children? I was failing them as a mother. I’d left for their safety and, even with a good education, I couldn’t manage to take care of them. Then had come the day’s first miracle. A woman had tapped me on the shoulder and, as I turned to her, had handed me a \$100 bill. “This is the joy of Christmas.” She’d smiled.

“What...?”

“Take it, dear. This is my Christmas ritual. This is the spirit of the season.”

“Can I get your name or phone number so I can pay you back?”

“Blessings are paid forward, not backward. When the time is right, you’ll help someone else.” And, turning away, she strode back toward the bank.

Driving home from the drugstore, I began to hope. Even if I only got little presents like a ball and jacks and other simple toys, at least there would be a tree, some semblance of Christmas to keep the spirit of the season alive.

The next day dawned full of hope. My children behaved well when I dropped them off at daycare, and work was quiet. I had enough gas in the car, and I could buy us some groceries until the bank declared my check cleared in four days.

After work, I swung by the drugstore before picking up my children at daycare. Three women greeted me, smiling and laughing. One stepped forward, “Just a minute. We’ll be right back.” They disappeared, returning a few minutes later, now with another ten people in tow. One carried the tree box, while the others each held a wrapped gift. Before they could say anything, hot tears began to roll down my cheeks. A greying, portly woman spoke up. “We’ve all had a rough Christmas some time, dear. We all had someone help us when we were down and out. Now, we want to give the same gift to you.”

“Don’t cry,” said another. “Where much is given, much is expected. This is our chance to pay it forward. You are seen.”

“That’s right,” said another. “You are never alone when you let others be your family. Let us be your family for today.”

As they placed the presents in the car's trunk, their words sank in. I realized family isn't about blood. It's so much more. And during that first Christmas season alone, when we'd needed family so much, we'd received it a hundredfold.