



# *Christmas Stories Around the Fireplace*

223 E. Blackstock Road  
Spartanburg, SC 29301

p. 864 582 7766  
1-800-277-0025

[asknoel@theprovestperspective.com](mailto:asknoel@theprovestperspective.com)  
[www.TheProvestPerspective.com](http://www.TheProvestPerspective.com)  
[www.ProVestWealth.com](http://www.ProVestWealth.com)

## The Gift of the Magi, by O. Henry

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it in the smallest pieces of money.....pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by negotiating with the men at the market who sold vegetables and meat. Negotiating until one's face burned with the silent knowledge of being poor. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas. There was clearly nothing to do but sit down and cry. So Della cried. Which led to the thought that life is made up of little cries and smiles, with more little cries than smiles. Della finished her crying and dried her face. She stood by the window and looked out unhappily at a gray cat walking along a gray fence in a gray back yard. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only one dollar and eighty-seven cents to buy her husband Jim a gift. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Jim earned twenty dollars a week, which does not go far. Expenses had been greater than she had expected. They always are. Many a happy hour she had spent planning to buy something nice for him. Something fine and rare—something close to being worthy of the honor of belonging to Jim. There was a tall glass mirror between the windows of the room. Suddenly Della turned from the window and stood before the glass mirror and looked at herself. Her eyes were shining, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds. Quickly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length. Mr. and Mrs. James Dillingham Young had two possessions which they valued. One was Jim's gold time piece, the watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the Queen of Sheba lived in their building, Della would have let her hair hang out the window to dry just to reduce the value of the queen's jewels. So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her, shining like a brown

waterfall. It reached below her knees and made itself almost like a covering for her. And then quickly she put it up again. She stood still while a few tears fell on the floor. She put on her coat and her old brown hat. With a quick motion and brightness still in her eyes, she danced out the door and down the street. Where she stopped the sign read: "Madame Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds."

Della ran up the steps to the shop, out of breath. "Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take your hat off and let us have a look at it."

Down came the beautiful brown waterfall of hair.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the hair with an experienced hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

The next two hours went by as if they had wings. Della looked in all the stores to choose a gift for Jim. She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. It was a chain.....simple round rings of silver. It was perfect for Jim's gold watch. As soon as she saw it, she knew that it must be for him. It was like him. Quiet and with great value. She gave the shopkeeper twenty one dollars, and eighty-seven cents was left. When Della arrived home she began to repair what was left of her hair. The hair had been ruined by her love and her desire to give a special gift. Repairing the damage was a very big job. Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny round curls of hair that made her look wonderfully like a schoolboy.

She looked at herself in the glass mirror long and carefully. "If Jim does not kill me before he takes a second look at me," she said to herself, "he'll say I look like a song girl. But oh, what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?"

At seven o'clock that night the coffee was made and the pan on the back of the stove was hot and ready to cook the meat. Jim was never late coming home from work. Della held the silver chain in her hand and sat near the door. Then she heard his step and she turned white for just a minute. She had a way of saying a little silent prayer about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in. He looked thin and very serious. Poor man, he was only twenty-two and he had to care for a wife. He needed a new coat and gloves to keep his hands warm. Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a dog smelling a bird. His eyes were fixed upon Della. There was an expression in them that she could not read, and it frightened her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor fear, nor any of the feelings that she had been prepared for. He simply looked at her with a strange expression on his face.

Della went to him. "Jim, my love," she cried, "do not look at me that way. I had my hair cut and sold because I could not have lived through Christmas without giving you a gift. My hair will grow out again. I just had to do it. My hair grows very fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let us be happy. You do not know what a nice.....what a beautiful, nice gift I have for you."

"You have cut off your hair?" asked Jim, slowly, as if he had not accepted the information even after his mind worked very hard.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Do you not like me just as well? I am the same person without my hair, right?"

Jim looked about the room as if he were looking for something.

"You say your hair is gone?" he asked.

"You need not look for it," said Della. "It is sold, I tell you—sold and gone, too. It is Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it was cut for

you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered,” she went on with sudden serious sweetness, “but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the meat on, Jim?”

Jim seemed to awaken quickly and put his arms around Della. Then he took a package from his coat and threw it on the table.

“Do not make any mistake about me, Dell,” he said. “I do not think there is any haircut that could make me like my girl any less. But if you will open that package you may see why you had me frightened at first.”

White fingers quickly tore at the string and paper. There was a scream of joy; and then, alas! a change to tears and cries, requiring the man of the house to use all his skill to calm his wife. For there were the combs.....the special set of objects to hold her hair that Della had wanted ever since she saw them in a shop window. Beautiful combs, made of shells, with jewels at the edge.....just the color to wear in the beautiful hair that was no longer hers. They cost a lot of money, she knew, and her heart had wanted them without ever hoping to have them. And now, the beautiful combs were hers, but the hair that should have touched them was gone. But she held the combs to herself, and soon she was able to look up with a smile and say, “My hair grows so fast, Jim!”

Then Della jumped up like a little burned cat and cried, “Oh, oh!”

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful gift. She happily held it out to him in her open hands. The silver chain seemed so bright. “Isn’t it wonderful, Jim? I looked all over town to find it. You will have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it.”

Instead of obeying, Jim fell on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled. “Dell,” said he, “let us put our Christmas

gifts away and keep them a while. They are too nice to use just right now. I sold my gold watch to get the money to buy the set of combs for your hair. And now, why not put the meat on.”

The magi were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Baby Jesus. They invented the art of giving Christmas gifts. Being wise, their gifts were wise ones. And here I have told you the story of two young people who most unwisely gave for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days, let it be said that of all who give gifts, these two were the wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

## The Story behind “O Holy Night”

Christmas Eve, 1906. It was a cold winter’s night. Countless ships bobbed up and down on the icy sea, crewed by weary sailors stationed far away from their families. As their heads nodded and their tired eyelids drooped, it probably wasn’t sugarplum fairies that danced in their heads, but visions of home, hearth, and a seat by the fire. But then something happened. Without warning, their radios came alive. Not with the usual Morse code, but a man’s voice.

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.”

Just as the astounded radio operators registered the famous scripture, the voice disappeared. In its place, the sound of a single violin, playing the beloved carol, O Holy Night. Some historians believe this was the first time music had ever been played over the radio, making it the first “entertainment” broadcast in history. It must have been a beautiful moment, as thousands of people hundreds of miles apart were suddenly connected by music.

*“O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,  
It is the night of our dear Saviour's birth.  
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,  
Till He appear'd and the soul felt its worth.  
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,  
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn”.*

But it was not the first time the carol brought different people together. Christmas Eve, 1871. It was not on sea, but on land, not with sailors, but with soldiers, when another sudden voice rang out. The Franco-Prussian War had been raging for almost a year. French and German troops were huddling in their trenches when suddenly, a French soldier stood up and began to sing.

*‘Minuit, chrétiens, c'est l'heure solennelle,  
Où l'Homme Dieu descendit jusqu'à nous  
Pour effacer la tache originelle  
Et de Son Père arrêter le courroux.  
Le monde entier tressaille d'espérance  
En cette nuit qui lui donne un Sauveur.’*

As the story goes, the Germans responded with their own carol. And for the rest of the night and through Christmas Day, the shooting stopped. Christmas Eve, 1855.

If you can read French, you might notice that the lyrics above aren't quite the same as the lyrics that I just read. That's because, in the English-speaking world, the lyrics we know so well were translated and modified by an American minister, John Sullivan Dwight. Dwight was one of the first, perhaps, to see the carol's power to unite rather than divide. A devoted abolitionist, Dwight translated the carol's third verse in this way:

*“Truly He taught us to love one another;*

*His law is love and His gospel is peace.  
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother;  
And in His name all oppression shall cease.  
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,  
Let all within us praise His holy name."*

It's no wonder the song became a great favorite during the Civil War as slavery hastened toward its end.

Christmas Eve, 1847. We end where it began, returning once more to France. The carol was originally created by two unlikely men. Placide Cappeau, a fairly unreligious poet, and Adolphe Adams, a composer of Jewish ancestry. The two had been asked by a local priest to compose something for the Midnight Mass held every Christmas Eve. They responded with one of the most beautiful pieces of music ever written. For a time, some authorities did all they could to ban the song once they learned who wrote it. But their efforts were in vain, as more and more people of countless countries, backgrounds, and philosophies fell in love with it. First performed on Christmas Eve, 1847, the carol soon made its way to almost every corner of the globe, connecting sailors and soldiers, Catholics and Protestants, the enslaved and the free. And of course, it still connects us today.



## The Story behind “O Little Town of Bethlehem”

One of the most charming Christmas carols is, O Little Town of Bethlehem.

*“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.  
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.  
Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting light.  
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”*

The year was 1865 when a man named Phillips Brooks needed a break. A rector for a church in Philadelphia, Brooks was one of the country’s foremost abolitionists. For years, he had preached tirelessly against slavery. During the four long years of the Civil War, he had traveled around the country, advocating for the rights of freed slaves, ministering to soldiers, and paying tribute to those who had fallen serving their country – including his own brother, George, who died of typhoid while fighting for the Union.

Brooks was probably most famous, however, for his legendary eulogy of Abraham Lincoln. A great admirer of the president, Brooks penned one of the most moving tributes anyone would ever write, delivering it to his congregation just a week after Lincoln’s death. Soon after, exhausted from years of war and work, Brooks decided it was time to get away for awhile. So, he decided to visit one of the places he most wanted to see: Bethlehem. After a long voyage across the sea, Brooks traveled on horseback from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. As chance would have it, he arrived at the little town on Christmas Eve.

This is how he described it: “Before dark, we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star. It is a fenced piece of ground with a cave in it, in which, strangely enough, they put the sheep. Somewhere [long ago] in those fields we rode through, the

shepherds must have been. As we passed, the shepherds were still 'keeping watch over their flocks' or leading them home to fold."

That night, Brooks participated in a Christmas Eve service in an ancient basilica built during Constantine's time all the way back in the 300s. The service lasted from 10 PM to 3 AM.

*"For Christ is born of Mary, and gathered all above.*

*While mortals sleep the angels keep their watch of wondering love.*

*Oh morning stars together, proclaim thy holy birth,*

*And praises sing to God the king, and peace to men on earth."*

Moved by everything he saw, Brooks decided to write about it when he returned home, in the form of a poem meant for children. In it, he tried to describe the peace and comfort he felt in that holy place, on that holy night, so that those who would never have a chance to go there could still see it and feel it in their own hearts on Christmas.

A few years later, Brooks decided the poem might make for a good song for his congregation to sing on Christmas. So, he asked his organist, Lewis Redner, to compose a melody for it. At first, Redner could not think of any music to go with the words. According to him: "As Christmas of 1868 approached, Mr. Brooks told me that he had written a simple little carol for the Christmas service, and he asked me to write the tune to it. The simple music was written in great haste and under great pressure. We were to practice it on the following Sunday. Mr. Brooks came to me on Friday, and said, 'Redner, have you ground out that music yet to 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'?' I replied, 'No', but that he should have it by Sunday. On the Saturday night previous, my brain was all confused about the tune. I thought more about my Sunday-school lesson than I did about the music. But I was roused from sleep late in the night hearing an angel-strain whispering in my ear, and seizing a piece of music paper, I jotted down the treble of the tune as

we now have it, and on Sunday morning before going to church I filled in the harmony. Neither Mr. Brooks nor I ever thought the carol or the music to it would live beyond that Christmas of 1868.”

As we know, both the words and music are still sung to this day – and hopefully, will continue to be sung centuries from now. It’s a beautiful tune and a beautiful poem, full of quiet peace for a quiet, peaceful night.....The night Christ was born.

## No Room at the Inn

*And she brought forth her firstborn Son...because there was no room for them in the inn.’ – Luke 2:7.*

Two thousand years later, the humble birth of our Savior still reminds us that Christmas is about more than gifts and traditions—it’s about love, generosity, and making room for others.

It’s still remarkable to think about, that our Savior, the Messiah, the King of Kings, was born in the humblest of circumstances.....all because there was no room in the inn. ‘No room in the inn’. I think about those words and wonder if that’s one of the reasons we focus so much on giving during the Christmas season. None of us could be there for Christ on that night in Bethlehem so long ago, but we can be here, now, for each other.

Matthew 22:37-39 says, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”

In honor of the Christmas season, here are three of those stories

The first story is 'Blankets 4 My Buddies'.

C.J. Matthews is a thirteen-year-old boy from Georgia with a giving heart. Every Christmas for the last few years, he has organized a special flag football game called the Giving Bowl. This game serves as a fundraiser for his own charity that he calls Blankets 4 My Buddies. People donate to provide blankets to children who are struggling in some way. As C.J. puts it, "I know there's a lot of kids in my community who are on the streets or in shelter homes not getting enough food to eat or are lonely." So, C.J. put the word out that he was organizing a special drive-thru donation event. And people responded. 150 blankets were donated, and the money he received will enable him to give away 1,000 more. He is also donating "comfort bags" filled with activities, masks, snacks, hats, gloves, scarves, and more. CJ says, "It feels really good to me because I'm helping another soul, another soul to be happy in life. I want [people] to know that comfort and kindness is something anyone can do any time or any place."

The second story is 'Do Unto Others'

If you rewind back to April 2020, the pandemic was still fairly new, and very scary. In many places, hospitals were quickly overwhelmed. One of those places was in New Orleans. As cases surged and beds ran out, the nurses there put out a call: "We need help."

Hundreds of nurses from other states responded to that call, including 200 from Kansas City, Missouri alone. Those reinforcements helped lower the "nurse-to-patient" ratio.....which had been 6 patients for every single nurse.....down to only 2 patients. And that's critical if you want to maintain a high standard of care.

Now, fast forward to November 2020. This time, it was Kansas City's turn to weather a surge.

Says one New Orleans nurse, “We were asked by our manager if we would be interested in coming to help the Kansas City nurses out. We were helped so much and we knew what they were facing, and it was only right that we paid them back.”

So, the New Orleans nurses traveled to Kansas City. They stayed for weeks, working over the Thanksgiving holiday to ensure their brothers and sisters in arms had all the help they need.

“We just called and asked them for help... [and they responded] without hesitation,” said a Kansas City nurse. “Having a group of people who were willing to drop everything and come help makes me so proud to work here.”

The third story is, ‘Giving to the Giver;

Kazi Manning says, “Giving is a joy” .....That’s why this restaurant owner in Washington, D.C. has always offered meals to the homeless, free of charge, no questions asked. When the pandemic came in 2020, because of social distancing restrictions, business plummeted. Mannan held out as long as he could, but by the summer, he had to face a painful truth: which was that he simply couldn’t afford to continue giving meals away for free and still maintain his business. Even though he wanted so badly to give, he longer had enough to give. So, he did what everyone should do whenever they need help: He asked for it. Before long, the donations started pouring in. Not just from around Washington, but from around the world. People from Bangladesh, Haiti, England, and many other places all donated. \$20 here, \$100 there. Some gave their names; most donated anonymously. All were moved to give to a man who has given so much to others.

It warms my heart to know that, even when times are hard, people are still doing what they can to find “room in the inn” for those who have it even harder.

## Where Love is, There God is Also, by Leo Tolstoy

In the city lived the shoemaker, Martin Avdyeitch. He lived in a basement, in a little room with one window. The window looked out on the street. Through the window he used to watch the people passing by; although only their feet could be seen, yet by the boots, Martin recognized the people. Martin had lived long in one place and had many acquaintances. Few pairs of boots in his district had not been in his hands once and again. And through the window he often recognized his work. Martin had plenty to do, because he was a faithful workman, used good material, did not make exorbitant charges, and kept his word. If it was possible for him to finish an order by a certain time, he would accept it; otherwise, he would not deceive you....he would tell you so beforehand. Martin had always been a good man, but as he grew old, he began to think more about his soul and get nearer to God. Martin's wife had died young and left him a boy three years old. As the boy grew older, a sickness fell on him and he died. Martin buried his son and fell into despair. So deep was this despair that he began to complain of God. Martin fell into such a melancholy state, that more than once he prayed to God for death, and reproached God because He had not taken him who was an old man, instead of his beloved only son. Martin also ceased to go to church. One day an old friend came to visit Martin. After talking with him, Martin began to complain about his troubles.

"I have no desire to live any longer," he said. "I only wish I was dead. I am a man without anything to hope for now."

But his old friend said to him, "Martin, we must not judge God's doings. The world moves, not by our skill, but by God's will. You are in despair, because you wish to live for your own happiness. We must live for God, Martin. He gives you life, and for His sake you must live."

Martin kept silent for a moment, and then said, "But how can one live for God?"

His friend said, "Christ has taught us how to live for God. You know how to read? Buy a Bible and read it; there you will learn how to live for God. Everything is explained there."

These words kindled a fire in Martin's heart. And he went that very same day, bought a New Testament in large print, and began to read. At first, he intended to read only on holidays; but as he began to read, it so cheered his soul that he read every day. At times he would become so absorbed in reading, that all the kerosene in the lamp would burn out, and still he could not tear himself away. And so, Martin used to read every evening. And the more he read, the clearer he understood what God wanted of him, and how one should live for God; and his heart kept growing easier. Formerly, when he lay down to sleep, he used to sigh and groan and always thought of his troubles; now his only exclamation was: "Glory to Thee! Glory to Thee, Lord! Thy will be done."

Once it happened that Martin read till late into the night. He was reading the Gospel of Luke, and finally he came to that place where the rich Pharisee desired the Lord to sit at meat with him; and he read how the woman that was a sinner anointed His feet, and washed them with her tears, and how He forgave her.

He reached the forty-fourth verse and read: "And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment."

Reading this, Martin took off his spectacles, put them down on the book, and thought: "It seems that Pharisee must have been such a man as I am. I, too, have thought only of myself. He thought about himself, but there was not the least care taken of the guest. And who was his guest? The Lord Himself. I wonder, if He had come to me, should I have done the same way?"

Martin rested his head upon both his arms, thinking of how much he would like to see Him, and did not notice that he fell asleep.

"Martin!" suddenly seemed to sound in his ears.

Martin startled from his sleep. "Who is here?" He turned around, glanced toward the door — no one. Again, he fell into a doze.

Suddenly, he plainly heard: "Martin! Martin! Look tomorrow on the street. I am coming."

Martin awoke, rose from the chair, began to rub his eyes. He himself could not tell whether he heard those words in his dream, or in reality. He turned down his lamp and went to bed. The next morning, Martin rose, made his prayer to God, light the stove, and put water in the kettle. While he waited, he sat by his window. When anyone passed by in boots which he did not know, he would bend down and look out of the window in order to see not only the feet, but also the face. Most that passed by were feet he knew, wearing boots he had made. Martin sighed, thinking that the voice he had heard was only a dream.

"After all," he thought, "it is not as though Christ would actually visit me."

A pair of old laced felt boots passed by, belonging to an old man who carried a shovel in his hand. Martin recognized him by his felt boots. His name was Stepanuitch, the elderly servant of a nearby merchant. He was shoveling away the snow.



"Pshaw! I must be getting crazy in my old age," said Martin, and laughed at himself. "Stepanuitch is clearing away the snow while I imagine that Christ is coming to see me. I was entirely out of my mind, old dotard that I am!" But as he watched Stepanuitch, he realized the old man had hardly the strength to lift the shovel.

So, Martin rose and tapped his finger on the glass. "Come in and warm yourself!" he called. "You must be cold." Stepanuitch came in and tried to wipe his feet but staggered.

"Don't trouble yourself to wipe your feet," Martin said. "Come and sit down. Here, drink a cup of tea."

"May Christ reward you for this!" Stepanuitch said, raising the saucer to his lips. "My bones ache." As he drank, Martin glanced from time to time out into the street.

"Are you expecting anyone?" asked his guest. And Martin, rather embarrassed, recounted his dream.

"Would you believe, it got into my head!" said Martin. "I scolded myself, and yet I keep expecting Him."

Stepanuitch shook his head and said nothing. When he finished his glass of tea, Martin filled it again, and when he finished that, he stood up. "Thank you, Martin, for treating me kindly."

"You are welcome, come in again, always glad to see a friend," said Martin. Stepanuitch departed. Martin put away the dishes and decided to attend to his work. But as he stitched, he kept looking through the window. He could not help it; he was expecting Christ. But all he saw were the boots of two soldiers passing by, and the master of the next house, and the baker. Then there came by the window a woman in woolen stockings and rustic shoes. Martin looked up at her from the window and saw it was a stranger, a poorly clad woman with a child. She was standing by the wall with her back to the wind, trying to wrap

up the child, and she had nothing to wrap it up in. From behind the frame, Martin could hear the child crying, and the woman trying to pacify it.

So, he got up and went to the door, ascended the steps, and cried: "My good woman! Why are you standing in the cold? Come into my room where it is warm." The woman was astonished but followed him down the steps and entered the room.

"There," Martin said, "sit down nearer to the stove; you can get warm, and nurse the little one."

"I have no milk for him. I myself have not eaten anything since yesterday morning," said the woman. So, Martin brought out bread and a dish of cabbage soup, and put the child on his lap so she could eat. And when she was done, Martin rummaged through a trunk beneath his bed and produced an old coat for her to take and wrap the child in. "May Christ bless you, grandfather!" she said. "He must have sent me to your window."

Martin smiled and explained his dream and how he heard the voice, how the Lord promised to come and see him that day.

"All things are possible," said the woman, and then she went away.

Martin returned to his work, but each time the window grew darker he immediately looked to see who was passing by. One was an old woman carrying a basket of apples and a bag full of chips. Martin could see that the basket was heavy, so she set it down in the snow while she adjusted the bag on her shoulder. While she was doing this, a little ragged boy came along, plucked an apple from the basket, and was about to make his escape when the woman caught him. The two struggled, the woman shouted, and the boy screamed. Martin lost no time in rushing out into the street. The woman was pulling the boy by

his hair and threatening to take him to the policeman; the youngster was denying the charge. Martin separated them.

He took the boy's arm and said, "Let him go, babushka; forgive him, for Christ's sake." And to the boy, he said, "Ask the babushka forgiveness, and don't you ever do it again; I saw you take the apple." The boy burst into tears and began to ask forgiveness.

"There!" said Martin. "Now, here, take an apple, for you are hungry. And to you, babushka, I will pay for the apple."

"You ruin them that way," said the old woman. "He ought to be treated so he remembers it for a week."

"Ah, that is right according to our judgement, but not according to God's," said Martin. "If he is to be whipped for an apple, then what ought to be done to us for our sins?"

The woman was silent. Then, finally, she said, "Of course, his was a childish trick. God be with him."

She lifted the bag and the basket once more, but the boy, who had been listening, said, "Let me carry it for you, babushka." And side by side, they passed along the street. The old woman even forgot to ask Martin to pay for the apple. Martin returned inside and worked until it was dark. The day was over, and Christ had not come. He tried not to be disappointed and intended to return to where he had left off in the Testament.

But just as he opened the book, a voice whispered in his ear: "Martin, ah Martin! Did you not recognize me?"

"Who?" exclaimed Martin, looking around.

"Me," repeated the voice. "It was I." And suddenly Stepanuitch stepped forth from a dark corner; he smiled, and like a little cloud faded away, and vanished.

“And it was I,” said the voice. And from the dark corner stepped forth the woman with her child; the woman smiled, the child laughed, and both vanished.

“And it was I,” continued the voice; both the old woman and the boy with the apple stepped forward; both smiled and vanished.

Martin’s soul rejoiced. Then, glancing at the book where it happened to open, he saw the words: For I was hungry, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty and ye gave me drink; I was a stranger, and ye took me in. And on the lower part of the page, he read this: Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me. And Martin understood that his dream had not deceived him; that the Savior really had called him on that day, and that he had really received Him

## The Greatest Gift of All

The year was 1952, and a young man named Virgil was very sick, and very far from home. That’s because he was a soldier in the Korean War. Virgil had known much hardship that year. He’d endured freezing nights on sentry duty. He’d patrolled for miles in water-filled boots, hoping snipers couldn’t see him. He’d suffered concussions and persistent ear-ringing from artillery fire. He’d seen friends die. But through it all, his mind always returned to one thing: His mother and two sisters. After his father died many years before, he’d taken care of them, filling the role of both elder brother and surrogate father. It had been almost two years since he’d last seen them, and he worried about them endlessly. His mother was getting older, and her health wasn’t always good. His first sister was working constantly, never having time to dance or do

other thing she loved. His second sister was lonely and scared and had nightmares that her brother wasn't coming home. Even when he'd spent a night pinned down by North Korean machine gun fire, with a bullet actually striking his helmet, he still worried about them. But the only way to communicate was by mail, and it could be months between letters. Sometimes their letters got lost in transit and didn't arrive at all. The only time Virgil didn't worry was when he got sick. There was no time to worry. He was too busy shivering from a raging fever. Too busy vomiting up anything and everything the doctors tried to give him. Too busy being wracked with pain, a pain he'd never known was possible. Too busy watching the doctors discuss him in hushed tones, or check his vitals and frown, or look at lab results and shake their heads. Too busy wondering why God wouldn't just let him die so it could all be over. But Virgil didn't die. It took almost two excruciating months, but slowly, he felt the infection recede and his strength return. By the time Virgil recovered, it was December. A few weeks before, he'd been airlifted to Japan to get better care. To help him recover, the Army granted him some extra R&R. So it was, that he found himself spending Christmas in Tokyo. It was a long way from the small town he'd grown up in. As he took in the sights, Virgil passed by a shop window. Inside, on a rack, was the most beautiful set of embroidered silk stockings he had ever seen. That gave him an idea. Virgil had grown up during the Great Depression. He'd seen his mother sell most of their belongings in order to put food on the table. Christmastime was the hardest. He and his sisters rarely got presents, and when they did, it was usually something that could be bought at a flea market. And his mother never got anything all. So, Virgil decided then and there to get his family Christmas gifts from Tokyo. For his mother, no more threadbare stockings, but silk stockings that would make her feel like a queen! For

his oldest sister, a pair of beautiful slippers she could dance in. For his youngest sister, a gorgeous Japanese tea set she could play with to her heart's delight. The Army had given him a little extra spending money, and he used it all, every cent. He pictured them opening their gifts on Christmas morning. Imagined their looks of delight, their audible gasps, the tears in their eyes. It made Virgil feel so warm inside, he thought that everything he'd just gone through would be worth it if it meant his family could have their greatest Christmas ever. Quickly, he bought the presents and paid to have them shipped. He included a little handwritten card with each, letting them know he'd recovered from his ordeal and wishing them a Merry Christmas. A few months later, Virgil's tour of duty ended. During the voyage home, he couldn't stop thinking about his family's gifts. He couldn't wait to hear their stories of what it was like to open them. But when he finally arrived home, after hugging and kissing his family, he realized his gifts were nowhere to be seen. There was no tea set on the table, no slippers in the closet, no stockings in the drawer. His heart sank. "What happened?" he asked. "Didn't you get my gifts?"

"Of course we did," her older sister said. And they showed him the cards he'd sent, carefully framed and placed on the mantle for everyone to see.

Then Virgil realized the packages had never arrived, only the cards. Heartbroken, he told them about the stockings, the slippers, and the tea set. He told them how he'd tried to make their Christmas the best ever.

That's when his mother put her hands around his face. "My son," she said, "the Army told us you'd been sick, and that you might not make it. But when we got your cards, we knew you were alive. We knew you

would come home to us. It was the greatest Christmas gift we've ever gotten."

That's when Virgil realized the truth: Christmas had never been hard for his family, not in the way he had thought. Because Christmas wasn't about opening presents or boxes under a tree. It wasn't about silk stockings or other riches. It was about sharing a life full of love with your family.....the real joy of Christmastime. That is the greatest gift of all.

Securities offered through Registered Representatives of Cambridge Investment Research, Inc., a broker-dealer, member FINRA/SIPC. Advisory services offered through Cambridge Investment Research Advisors, Inc., a Registered Investment Adviser. Cambridge is not affiliated with ProVest Wealth Advisors or The ProVest Perspective.

Indices mentioned are unmanaged and cannot be invested into directly. Diversification and asset allocation strategies do not assure profit or protect against loss. Past performance is no guarantee of future results. Investing involves risk. Depending on the types of investments, there may be varying degrees of risk. Investors should be prepared to bear loss, including loss of principal.

Examples are hypothetical and for illustrative purposes only. The rates of return do not represent any actual investment and cannot be guaranteed. Any investment involves potential loss of principal.

These are the opinions of Noel Swain and not necessarily those of Cambridge, are for informational purposes only, and should not be construed or acted upon as individualized investment advice.