



Christmas Stories for Molly and Julia

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CHRISTMAS STORIES
for
Molly and Julia

Thank you for reading these stories. I wrote them for my nieces Molly and Julia and read them on Christmas morning. It became a tradition. The idea first came to me during a Christmas Eve service, and I went home and wrote the first story. Writing the stories on Christmas Eve also became a tradition. It seemed that inspiration came to me every year to convey a different message appropriate for that year. It was uncanny how well the message reflected life circumstances at the time.

I didn't describe people in detail, so let your imaginations fill the people out. You may even want to substitute names to make it more personal. I hope you enjoy the stories.

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Christmas Kittens

Mr. Warner lived alone in a big house. He was old and very lonely. His wife died years ago, and they had no children. He had no real friends anymore, so he lived alone in a big house.

Since he was lonely, he was not a happy man. He never laughed and seldom went out of the house. Christmas came and went every year, and he never put up a tree or celebrated. He didn't understand Christmas and didn't like it.

This year on the day before Christmas he woke up early in the morning. The sound of something yowling woke him up. He looked out his

window but could not find what was making the noise. It was cold, so he wrapped up and went outside to stop the noise.

He was very angry as he followed the sound to his woodpile. There he found two tiny kittens crying.

"Scat," he yelled, but all they did was cry more.

He tried to catch them, but all they did was run from him and cry more.

He went back in the house and tried to ignore the crying kittens. All morning they cried. He tried to ignore them, but he could not. They cried and cried.

He watched the news on the television and saw that a terrible storm was coming. There would be ice and snow and a cold, cold wind. Mr. Warner thought that the kittens would not live through the storm and the crying would stop.

The kittens cried and cried. Soon Mr. Warner thought he could hear them crying his name, calling for him. He knew that could not be and tried not to listen.

Again he thought he heard them crying his name. He soon began feeling sorry for the kittens. He thought about how tiny they were. He worried that the coming storm would give them no chance to grow up to be cats. He felt sorry he had tried to scare them off.

It was getting dark and colder when Mr. Warner wrapped up and went to the crying kittens. He called for them, but they would not come. He went back in the house and brought a saucer of milk, but they huddled and cried and would not come to him.

He went back in the house and worried and worried about the kittens. He could not make them understand that there was danger. He could not tell them he was their friend. He could not make them understand he wanted to help them. He even wished he could be a cat. It made him feel very sad that he could not make them understand.

Then Mr. Warner understood the meaning of Christmas. He understood why Jesus had come to us to help us.

So Mr. Warner went out to the woodpile and lay down as close to the crying kittens as he could. The storm came and the snow and wind started. He hummed and spoke to them softly with love in his voice. He called them Molly and Julia and kept telling them he wanted to help. He stretched a hand toward them and laid it down. Soon one of the kittens came to his hand and laid against it. Then the other one crawled next to his hand too. They stopped crying.

He rubbed their tiny heads and stroked their backs, trying to keep them warm. One of the kittens let him hold it softly. Then the other one did too. He soon held one and picked it up and opened his coat and placed the kitten inside. The kitten purred against Mr. Warner's warm chest. He picked up the other kitten and put it against his chest too. He carefully got up and went through the snow and wind to his house.

Mr. Warner smiled as the two kittens drank the milk from a saucer. They purred and were safe and warm. Mr. Warner felt a deep warm joy as he said "Merry Christmas" to Molly and Julia.

Christmas Friends

For the first time in many, many years Mr. Warner was happy it was Christmas. It had been a long time since he felt joy in his heart at Christmastime, but once again, he felt happy at Christmas.

He had watched the two Christmas kittens, Molly and Julia, grow up in the last year. He fed them and cared for them all the time. He even made two little beds in his bedroom, although they liked to sleep on his bed with him.

As they got bigger and wanted to be outside more, Mr. Warner built a special door for them. They could go outside or stay inside. It was up to

them. Mr. Warner loved Molly and Julia so much; he would do anything for them

As Christmas got close, Mr. Warner bought a Christmas tree, lights, and decorations. While the kittens played with him and the decorations, he decorated the house and tree. He hadn't done this for a very, very long time. He didn't even get angry when they knocked ornaments off the tree. He only smiled and put the ornament back up. He had to do that a lot, because Molly and Julia liked knocking bright ornaments around.

Soon it was the day before Christmas and Mr. Warner had a surprise for Molly and Julia. He had a Christmas dinner for them. He also had presents for them under the tree.

He had bought a big turkey and a big ham from a special store. He fixed himself some vegetables, but he knew the kittens would love the turkey and ham. He even set the dining table with two special places for them. He tuned the radio to a station that played all Christmas music and sat in his armchair and hummed along with the radio, waiting for the kittens to come home.

He waited and waited. It was dark outside and pretty cold so soon he started worrying about them. He remembered the year before when he first found them and went outside and called for them, but they didn't come to him. He went back in and waited and worried. He even got a little but angry because it hurt his feelings he had everything ready, and they were not there.

Before too long there was a knock on his door and when he opened it there stood a little boy and a little girl holding Molly and Julia in their arms. Behind them, their mother stood smiling.

"Here, Mister. We have been playing with the kitty cats. Mommy said they were yours. We heard you shouting and we're sorry if we got you scared," the little boy said.

"Well, I must admit I was little scared; they are young," Mr. Warner said.

The mother stepped forward. She was young and pretty, but looked tired. "We're sorry, but the kids haven't had much of a Christmas this year. We live just down the block and the kittens were so cute, I let the kids play with them a little too long. I'm sorry. Give the kittens back to the nice man."

The two youngsters step forward and handed Molly and Julia to Mr. Warner. They looked sad and together said, "We're sorry."

"It's okay," Mr. Warner said quietly. He felt funny inside. He watched them turn and walk off. He felt like he didn't want them to leave. He wanted to share his kittens with the children. He wanted to hear them laugh. He wanted to help them.

"Wait," he said. "Have you eaten? I've just fixed a big dinner — more than the kittens and I can eat."

"We shouldn't," the mother said.

"Please. It's Christmas," Mr. Warner said. He smiled and his eyes twinkled when he said "I think they are special Christmas kittens. Please come inside and eat."

The children looked up at their mother with hope in their eyes.

"Thank you," she said. "We would love to."

With that, the children laughed and ran into the house. Mr. Warner found out the little girl was named Mary and the boy was named Tommy. Their mother was named Jennifer. They laughed and played with Molly and Julia. Mr. Warner and their mother had to talk them into eating at the dinner table. Everyone ate a lot of food and had fun talking.

After eating, the mother and children sang Christmas carols. They knew a lot of them and Mr. Warner sat in his armchair and listened. The two kittens were full from eating and maybe a little tired from playing so they curled up and slept. Mr. Warner felt a better happiness than he had before. He told the children and Jennifer about his first Christmas with the kittens and told them how he learned about Christmas when he laid down in the cold trying to make the kittens understand that he wanted to help them.

"And you know, I think Molly and Julia really are special Christmas kittens. They brought me three new friends," Mr. Warner said. And he knew that sharing and caring for others was a special part of Christmas and that Molly and Julia had made this another wonderful Christmas.

"You are all welcome here, any time. And Mary and Tommy, you can play with Molly and Julia whenever you want, because we're all special Christmas friends."

Christmas Homecoming

Mr. Warner and Molly and Julia were having a very good year. The two kittens grew into two beautiful cats. Mr. Warner loved caring for the two cats and they loved him back, sleeping in his room with him. Tommy and Mary came and played with them a lot. They even took them home to their house to play with them. All in all they were having a very good life together.

Then one morning Mr. Warner woke up feeling sick. He felt worse and worse until he got so sick he had to go to the hospital. Before he left, he phoned Tommy and Mary and asked them to take care of Molly and Julia. They promised him they would, and he knew he could rely on them.

Mr. Warner had good doctors so he got better in the hospital, but he was unhappy at the hospital because he missed Molly and Julia and Christmas was almost there. Since he found Molly and Julia, Christmas was his favorite time of year. He wanted to have a big dinner for Molly and Julia and Tommy and Mary and their mother, Jennifer. He wanted to buy presents for everyone and have a big breakfast party opening presents under the tree. He would not be able to do that though because his doctor said he would be lucky to be out of the hospital by Christmas Eve. When he thought that he had not even gotten a Christmas tree yet he cried a little bit because he wouldn't be able to watch Molly and Julia play with the ornaments.

So Christmas got closer, and Mr. Warner got better but he still got sadder. Sadder because he would not be able to give everyone the Christmas he wanted to give them. He would miss the laughter and joy. Mr. Warner got sadder and sadder as he thought about missing Christmas and giving dinner and presents to the kittens and their friends he found in the past year. He also missed everyone. Cats couldn't get into the hospital of course and Mary and Tommy were too young to come see him. Jennifer came once, but she had to work and take care of the two children.

The morning of the day before Christmas Mr. Warner's doctors told him he could go home, but only if he stopped being so sad, because if he got sad he would get sicker. Mr. Warner said he would try to stay happy, but he was still sad when the cab driver came to pick him up.

He hoped the kittens (he still thought of Molly and Julia as kittens even though they were cats now) would be home when he got there. The cab driver was not a very happy man, having to work Christmas Eve, but he still talked about the Christmas he was having with his family. As they talked, Mr. Warner got sadder again, missing being able to give Christmas to everyone.

Just as he was growing sadder and sadder, the cab driver turned the corner and drew near to his house. As they pulled into the driveway, Mr. Warner was surprised to see lights on his house. A Christmas tree even stood in the window. The cab stopped, and as Mr. Warner got out, Mary and Tommy ran out of the house shouting "Merry Christmas." He looked in surprise as Jennifer stood in the doorway laughing while Tommy and Mary helped Mr. Warner walk into his house. As he stepped in the door, with Tommy and Mary each holding one of his hands, he almost started crying.

His dinner table was full of turkey, potatoes, vegetables, and a pie. A Christmas tree stood next to the window, all decorated and beautiful. A few packages were under the tree, neatly wrapped. His house looked absolutely beautiful and perfect for Christmas. Before he could ask where Molly and Julia were they ran to him mewing happily and then rubbed against his legs. He went to his arm chair and sat down. Molly and Julia immediately jumped in his lap, rubbing under his chin with the tops of their heads.

Surrounded by his friends and his cats, Mr. Warner learned even more about Christmas. He learned giving was important, but that to love and be loved was most important. He found that giving and accepting love and care was what counted the most.

As tears of happiness welled in his eyes, Mr. Warner looked at his kittens and the friends they had found for him. This might be the best Christmas of all.

Our Homeplace

The sickness that Mr. Warner had the last Christmas had left him feeling weak. He didn't get around as much as he had before. He couldn't play with Molly and Julia with as much energy as he wanted to either. But he had his young friends Tommy, Mary, and their mother, Jennifer. The two children came and saw him almost every day when they came to play with the two cats, Molly and Julia. Their mother, Jennifer, also made his dinner every now and then which was much better than anything he could fix. He loved watching the cats and children love and play with each other.

Even though he couldn't get around as much, Mr. Warner was pretty happy. He had his cats and young friends and time to read a lot. But he also had time to think, which sometimes was not a good thing. He thought about how much he missed his wife and how the cats, Mary, Tommy, and Jennifer were the only real family he had anymore. He felt lucky and sad at the same time. There was something missing

Christmas was getting close and Mr. Warner, because he didn't get around much, was not able to do any shopping. He worried about getting presents for all his friends. He called Jennifer and asked if she would come and talk to him. When she did, he asked if he could give her the money and have her shop for Tommy, Mary, and herself. While he talked he saw she was getting sadder and sadder until finally she started crying. He was very unhappy seeing this and asked what was wrong.

She told him that the place where she worked was going out of business after Christmas and that she would not be able to keep her house. She told Mr. Warner that she and Tommy and Mary were going to have to move to live with her sister after Christmas.

This news made Mr. Warner so very sad. After she left, he thought and thought. Finally, unhappily, he thought the best thing for him to do was to let Molly and Julia go with them. Thinking about losing all his friends and especially his two Christmas kittens Molly and Julia, he felt sadder and sadder until he went to sleep crying.

During the night, Mr. Warner woke up, feeling like someone was with him. He looked around but saw no one. Still, he felt like his wife and mother and father were there. He felt that they were trying to let him know something. Suddenly the warmest, happiest Christmas spirit filled him. And with that, all his unhappy thoughts about Tommy, Mary, and Jennifer went away. He knew he had the answer to the problem and laughed and went and found Molly and Julia told them. Then he gathered them, purring, in his arms and went back to sleep.

In the morning, he woke up, happy and full of energy. He knew it was Christmas Eve, so he would have to work fast. He fed Molly and Julia. He dressed quickly, got on the phone and took care of everything.

That night, as had become their tradition, Jennifer brought Tommy and Mary to Mr. Warner's house for Christmas dinner. They were sad because they thought this would be the last Christmas with Mr. Warner, Molly, and Julia. When they got to the house, Mr. Warner greeted them at the door smiling. Under the Christmas tree were presents, the dinner table had a Christmas dinner spread on it. The two cats were playing with ornaments and thistle.

Mr. Warner asked the two children if they would play with Molly and Julia while he talked to their mother. Then he went into the kitchen and took her hands in his.

He said, "You and Tommy and Mary are my best friends. You are like my family. I was so sad to think you might be leaving. I have a great big house here with a big, big yard. I use only the upstairs. So you can move

in here for a while. I have some money saved. You love children and are wonderful with them. I have talked to people, and we can have a children's house here. They can come here and be with each other and play and learn. We can have Christmas all year, every day."

Jennifer almost cried she was so happy. She hugged Mr. Warner and ran and told the children they wouldn't be leaving after all. Tommy and Mary looked at each other, smiled and said, "We knew we would stay Mommy. Molly and Julia were not worried. We didn't worry. We knew this is our home. And this is Christmas."

Tommy and Mary then went back to playing with Molly and Julia, who were wrestling with each other and batting packages around. Mr. Warner stood looking on, his family home for Christmas again.

The Perfect Christmas Tree

Mr. Warner, Jennifer, Tommy, and Mary and, of course, Molly and Julia, worked very hard to make the downstairs and the big, big yard at the big house into a place for children to come and play and learn.

They bought small, child sized, tables and chairs. They got toys and tri-cycles and games to play. They got coloring books and small white marking boards for the children to write on. They even got toys for the yard.

Day by day more and more children came to play at their house. Soon everybody wanted to name the house Our Homeplace. It was a very happy place, filled with running, laughing children playing with each other and loving each other. And of course, Molly and Julia always had someone to play with.

As the year went on, there were too many children for Jennifer to take care of. Mr. Warner could help for a little while, but the children would wear him out.

Mr. Warner and Jennifer knew they had to have the right person help them, but they didn't know where to look. They looked but, as Christmas got near, Jennifer had to work harder and harder.

They had another problem. As Christmas got closer, the children all said they wanted a special Christmas tree for the house's first year. Jennifer said she was too tired and busy to search for one, but Mr. Warner said he would take Tommy and Mary to find one. One of the youngest of the new children, Joey, said he and Molly and Julia knew where the perfect tree was, but everybody laughed that Joey was too little to know, and everybody knew kittens didn't know anything about Christmas trees.

So Mr. Warner and Tommy and Mary looked for the perfect tree. They looked at stores and even at the nursery. But the trees were too big, too little, too expensive, or too ugly. So Mr. Warner and Tommy and Mary went back and had to tell everyone they couldn't find the right tree.

"Molly and Julia told me about the tree we should use," Joey said, but everyone laughed and ignored him. Everyone was unhappy because they didn't have a special tree.

It was the day before Christmas and, as everyone gathered for the Christmas party, they were sad. They had not found anyone to help Jennifer. They had presents and decorations, but no special tree.

As they were worrying about what they were going to do, there was a knock at the door. When Jennifer opened it she found an older white-haired lady standing on the porch. She wore a little red hat and gloves and smiled all the time. She said her name was Mrs. Marian and one of the parents had told her Jennifer needed help. Mr. Warner and Jennifer talked with her and saw how much she loved playing with the children. When Molly and Julia crawled up in her lap and nested there, they knew she had to be the right woman to help them.

But they still had no tree. Everyone tried to act happy as they had their party, but knowing they had no tree made the children sad. Mr. Warner was standing alone watching the children when little Joey walked over and tugged his pant leg. "Misser Wanna, can I go outside to say bye-bye to the tree?"

Mr. Warner smiled and said, "Sure, Joey, we'll say goodbye to your tree."

"It's our tree, Misser Wanna, Molly and Julia and me."

"Then let's get them too." Mr. Warner picked up Molly and Joey carried Julia, and they walked out in the backyard. As he stepped out of the house, he looked around the yard and saw lots of big trees. Joey let Julia down and ran to the far corner of the yard to a short scruffy little evergreen tree. Mr. Warner let Molly down and both cats ran after Joey, flicking their tails as they ran. He walked over and started to laugh, but he saw the cats and Joey dancing around the tree.

It was about 4 feet tall. The branches were crooked and pretty bare. But there was something about the tree the Joey and the cats loved. Soon Tommy and Mary followed out with the other children and Mrs. Marion.

"You found our special tree," Mary said.

"Your special tree?" Mr. Warner asked.

"Uhhuh," Tommy said. "We all thought it was gonna die. We felt real sorry for it. But we watered it and talked to it and it grew.

Joey said, "We know it will be happy if we make it pretty."

"I used to work at a nursery until I got too old to do the heavy work," Mrs. Marian said. "I know how we can make this tree big and beautiful."

"It's a lot like a lot of us — it needs some love and friends." Mr. Warner said. The cats both rubbed his legs like they were agreeing.

The Christmas party moved out into the yard and the children all put ornaments they had made on the little tree and sang Christmas carols to it. When the day ended, they said goodnight and Merry Christmas to the little tree.

On Christmas morning, they all opened presents. Then Mr. Warner and Tommy Mary and Molly and Julia went out to the little tree and

were surprised! Santa Claus had brought the tree a Christmas present. A pretty green shawl was wrapped around its trunk to keep it warm

"Now we have a Christmas tree all year long," Mr. Warner said with a big smile on his face.

Christmas for Mary

Another year passed. Tommy and Mary got bigger and bigger. In fact, Mary went to school for the first time. Tommy stayed with Jennifer, Mr. Warner, Mrs. Marion, and all the other children at Our Homeplace where so many children now came to play and learn. Of course, Molly and Julia still loved to play with all the different kids, but they still loved Tommy and Mary the most.

Mr. Warner didn't come out of his bedroom quite as much anymore, but Tommy and Mary went in to see him all the time. And, of course, Molly and Julia found ways to get in to see him a lot.

As Christmas got closer, the two children and Jennifer decorated the house all over, making it look like a Christmas dreamland. All of the children that came to Our Homeplace made ornaments and decorations for the special Christmas tree in the back corner of the yard. That tree, so small and puny last Christmas, had grown so tall that it was now taller than all the children. It was getting to be a truly beautiful, beautiful tree.

On the last day of school before the students went on vacation, Mary's teacher told the children she wanted them to tell her what Christmas meant to them. One by one, each child stood and told the other students what Christmas meant to him or her. Some said it meant Santa Claus would visit. Some of them said it meant Christmas decorations and lights on houses. Some said it meant presents under the Christmas tree. Some of them said it meant big fancy dinners and relatives coming to visit. Someone said it meant a vacation from school. Then it was Mary's turn.

She stood up and looked at the other children. And she looked her teacher. Finally she just said, "I can't really say. It means a whole lot of things." Since the class was almost over, her teacher didn't ask her anymore, but as she dismissed them, Mary was bothered. All the other children had been able to say what Christmas meant to them, but she couldn't.

When she got home, Mary went to the backyard and sat next to the tree. She thought and thought. She remembered Mr. Warner telling them how he found Molly and Julia. She remembered the first Christmas with Mr. Warner. She remembered the Christmas when they almost had to leave, and Mr. Warner helped them out. She remembered the Christmas they had the year before with their own special Christmas tree. She was feeling embarrassed that she couldn't really say what Christmas meant to her and she really did not feel good about asking anyone else.

Mary kept thinking and looking for an answer, but she couldn't figure it out. She saw the special happiness everyone felt. Even Molly and Julia were happier and happier. Maybe that was it - it was a happy time. She saw how everyone enjoyed giving each other presents and love. Maybe that was it - giving - or loving. She saw everyone just seemed to be better. But still, she couldn't decide what really Christmas really meant to her.

All during the big dinner they had on the night before Christmas Mary kept thinking. As everyone laughed and enjoyed the wonderful food, she looked around and saw joy and goodness. Maybe that was it - everyone did good things. Her mother had told her that that, for the first time, they were going to go to church at night. Mother called it a midnight service and said she was old enough to go with her.

The night was cool, almost cold. Mary and Jennifer walked into the crowded church. She had been there with her mother before, but it was always on Sunday during the day. Everyone seemed happier and more dressed up. She could smell the women's perfume and the candles. The warm air in the church made it seem very comfortable. The organ music sounded beautiful and the choir sang like Mary thought angels would sound. She wasn't sure she understood the words of the service or all the sitting, then standing, then kneeling, but she felt something special.

The music gave her a funny feeling. So did the way the people and the minister spoke the words of the service. The feeling was different than she had felt before. She felt happy and serious at the same time. She felt special, but she also felt like she was the same as everyone else. She felt more things all at once than she ever felt before.

The preacher was soon the only one talking and Mary heard him talk about Jesus being born, coming down to live with us for us. She wasn't sure she understood everything the minister was saying, but she began to understand what she thought the minister was trying to say. She smiled to herself and felt warm inside, just like she felt when her mother held her or when she felt the kittens crawl in bed against her.

When the service was over, she left the church with her mother and saw how everyone was smiling, hugging, and lovingly saying nice things to each other. They got in the car, and before Jennifer could start the car, Mary touched her mother's hand.

"Mommy, the last day of school the teacher asked us what Christmas meant to us," she said.

"What did you tell her?"

"I didn't know what to say."

"You could've asked me or Mr. Warner."

"But she asked what Christmas meant to me."

"Well, what do you think it means to you?"

"I think Christmas means different things to people, but it's all the same."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh. Everything is good isn't it?"

"I guess so."

Mary got more excited. "Everything about it is good. Everyone likes everyone else. People give things to other people. People just do good things and are happy all the time doing it. But at church everything else stopped. There was just church, just singing about Jesus and God. We still felt good, but the good was more special. It was like Jesus and God are the reasons for all of Christmas and that we all do good things to thank them for giving us Christmas."

Her mother smiled and turned the car on. "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" was playing on the radio.

Santa Claus

As with past Christmases Mary, Tommy, Jennifer, Mrs. Marion, and Mr. Warner had a busy year, and Christmas came on them suddenly. School and Our Homeplace took up time, but it was good time. Mary really liked school and all her classmates. Tommy had friends from kindergarten. And both of the children liked helping Jennifer and Mrs. Marion at Our Homeplace.

Mr. Warner still didn't get around too well, but even he stayed busy because he had bought a computer to help Jennifer with her business, and he liked to prop up in bed and play games and search for things on the Internet. He would sit with Molly and Julia and play with his computer all day. The kittens at first played with the keys when his fingers would fly over them, but they sure soon learned to just watch — most of the time.

This Christmas something had been bothering Mary. Some of the kids at school seemed to wonder if there was a Santa Claus. How could Santa Claus be in so many places at once? She really worried about it and went to Jennifer.

"Mommy, how can Santa Claus be so many places at once?" Mary asked.

Jennifer took Mary's hand and they sat down on the sofa. "Well Mary, there is a Santa Claus. But he's everywhere in all of us. Santa Claus's Christmas spirit is everywhere, and Santa Claus really does know what you want for Christmas and knows what a sweet girl you are. When you see all the smiles on the children when they line up to tell Santa what they want, when you see people singing together and giving each other smiles and good wishes, when you see a time when there is so much goodness and love around you, then that's when you know that Santa Claus touches us all. If you believe in Santa Claus then there is a Santa Claus."

Mary sat and thought and then said "Okay Mommy." She kissed Jennifer on the cheek. Then she got up and went to her room and took out a piece of paper. She wrote a letter to Santa Claus and asked for a very special present that she hadn't told anybody she wanted. She wrote it down and signed it and folded the letter up. She wrote Santa Claus on the front of the letter and then walked down to the corner where there was a mailbox. She put the note in the mailbox and went back home.

Soon it was Christmas Eve and Mary hadn't told anyone, not even Tommy, what she had asked Santa Claus for. When they went to sleep that night, Mary wondered if she would get what she asked for — and she really hoped that she would.

Before Mary and Tommy knew it, Molly and Julia were jumping on the beds, meowing, and waking the children up. Mary hurried down the stairs and saw all the presents spread under the tree. She saw a bicycle and a lot of the things she asked for, but she wasn't sure if the special present from Santa was there because it would be a little box since it was a little present.

Jennifer came in with coffee cake and was a little surprised that Mary wasn't trying to ride the bike. She knew the bike had been what Mary really wanted. Tommy sure was trying to get on the bike and Mr. Warner had to tell him he had to wait until he got a little bit bigger.

Jennifer sat next to the Christmas tree and handed out the presents. There was one for Mary she could not remember wrapping, but then, there were so many presents maybe she just forgot. She watched Mary

with curiosity so she could see what the present was. Suddenly Mary's eyes got wide and she broke into great big, huge smile.

There it was - just what she had asked for from Santa Claus. It was a special little charm for a charm bracelet that looked like a snowflake. Mary had always loved seeing snow and when Jennifer told her that all snowflakes are different, Mary had always wanted her very own for Christmas to let her think about Christmas all the time. She was so happy.

Mr. Warner had been watching from his big armchair while everybody was opening presents. Jennifer had handed the last one out when Mr. Warner said, with his eyes twinkling like snowflakes, "There is a last little box Santa left, Jennifer."

She turned and looked and Mary and Tommy could see the surprise on her face when he found another box.

"Who's it from, Mommy?" Mary and Tommy asked together.

"It just says 'From Santa Claus' on it."

Jennifer opened a tiny box very carefully and looked inside and gasped. She smiled and smiled until tears came to her eyes.

"What is it? What is it?" Tommy and Mary asked, trying to look over their mother's shoulder.

"It is the most special present I could get — and because it was lost, Santa must have worked extra hard." She held a ring up and put it on her finger. "It's the most special ring I ever had. My mother and father gave it to me for Christmas. I had to use it a couple of years ago to help get food and Christmas when we had that bad year when we lived in that other city. I never thought I'd see it again."

Mary looked at her mother being so happy, happier than she had ever seen her. She thought and smiled. She went over and hugged her mother. "You know Mommy, you are right. Santa Claus is so special. I thought I knew what I really wanted most for Christmas. When he got that for me, I thought it was the most special present I could get."

"But I got a better present and didn't even ask for it. The best present I could get is seeing how really happy you are Mommy. Santa Claus knew what I really wanted better than I did."

Ponies and Angels

It was a very busy year. Mary had a lot to do with school. Tommy still had kindergarten. Jennifer and Mrs. Marion were still running Our Homeplace almost all on their own because Mr. Warner just didn't do much anymore. He stayed upstairs except for most meals. But that didn't stop Molly and Julia from finding their way into his room and keeping him company.

It was such a busy year that Christmas came up on them so suddenly, they were almost surprised. But they still had time to decorate Our Homeplace and especially their special tree in the backyard. It had grown so tall they had to use a ladder to get all the decorations on it. Molly and Julia loved to play around it and jump up and see if they could reach the decorations. They usually could and even made a game of it.

Christmas Eve arrived quickly. Jennifer and Mrs. Marion made a big wonderful dinner with turkey and especially cranberry sauce. Mary and Tommy even got some extra cranberry sauce. Mr. Warner didn't eat as much as usual, but he snuck some of his turkey to Molly and Julia and the kittens purred and purred they were so happy.

After dinner they went out into the dark and cold night to go to midnight service again. It was still hard to understand all the standing and sitting and kneeling and how the people were singing like they were really happy, then be really serious. It was hard for Mary and Tommy to keep up with everything, but they did the best they could.

They fell asleep in the car on the way back home. They were really sleepy and went right to sleep when they got home. On Christmas morning they woke up together and snuck downstairs. Of course Molly and Julia were already awake and playing, pouncing, and chasing among the

packages, and there were a lot of packages. Mary and Tommy made just enough noise to wake up their mother and Jennifer came out of her room rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Are you awake already?" she mumbled. Mary looked at Tommy and Tommy looked at Mary. They laughed. How could their mother ask such a silly question — of course they were up. Soon Mr. Warner came in and sat smiling as he watched them open presents.

As always, they got a lot of wonderful presents. It just seemed like the presents wouldn't end, but eventually they did get to the last of the presents. Then Jennifer walked over to Mary and said to her "Tommy and I have a special present for you. It was really Tommy's idea and he had to be real understanding, I'm going to let him tell you."

He walked over to Mary. "I'm not big enough to ride ponies by myself. You're bigger than me. You can."

Mary looked up from Tommy to Jennifer "Can we? Can we really? Can we go ride ponies?"

Jennifer smiled and hugged Mary. "Merry Christmas."

They finished cleaning up the wrapping papers and got in the car and drove a long way out in the country. They drove up a long drive through a bunch of trees until they went around the big farmhouse to a big red barn with a big corral full of horses and ponies.

An older man, wearing a straw cowboy hat and old dusty boots, walked out of the barn leading a black-and-white spotted pony and a brown pony. A woman came out behind him holding a basket of apples. Jennifer talked to the man and woman for a minute, then the man walked over to Mary and Tommy.

"My name is Gus. This pony, the black and white one, is Patches. She's for you Mary. I'm leading Tommy on Dandy here."

Mary and Tommy laughed with glee, looked at each other, and ran and hugged their mother.

As he helped Mary onto Patches Gus said, "She's the sweetest, gentlest pony I have."

He showed her how to hold on and guide Patches and walked around the field leading Patches so Mary could get used to the pony. Then he let Mary ride Patches around alone. After that, he put Tommy on Dandy and then he led the pony out into the field.

Mary had so much fun riding Patches. She could feel the strength of the pony, but she could control the pony and make her go where Mary wanted. This was fun!

Suddenly three brown birds flew up from a clump of bushes in front of Patches. The pony jumped, scared. She, all of a sudden, took off at a gallop.

Mary couldn't think or see. She just held onto the reins and the horn of the saddle as Patches raced between trees and big bushes. Mary thought she heard Gus yelling, but she couldn't be sure.

Everything was a blur. She wasn't exactly crying but her eyes were watering and Patches was running so fast that everything was just a blur. Mary was so afraid.

Then she thought she saw a boy on a pony running next to her, but she looked again and didn't see anything. Then she thought he was there again, and Patches all of a sudden started to slow down. She thought she heard a voice say "Easy Patches. Nothing is going to hurt you baby. Easy, girl."

But Mary couldn't be sure she heard it because when she looked again she didn't see him. Then, as Patches slowed down, she thought she saw the boy again on a pretty white pony. Then he was gone again. It was like he was there, but he wasn't. She couldn't actually see him, but she felt he was there, and she felt safe, just like when her mother hugged her.

After Patches slowed to a walk she thought a boy said, "Come on, let's go home." And Patches turned around and slowly walked back toward the barn.

She had been breathing so fast she was almost out of breath, but soon everything was back to normal. She didn't see anyone there any more, but Patches was walking easily.

Soon she saw Gus riding a bigger horse towards her. They were galloping then slowed to a trot. She couldn't talk, only nod when he asked if she was all right. He got off his horse and walked Patches and his horse back to the corral.

Jennifer, Tommy, and the older woman came running up to her and Jennifer hugged her and hugged her.

"How in the world did you get the pony back here?" Jennifer asked. "How?"

"A boy helped me, I think."

"Where is he? I don't see him."

"Well he was there. Then he wasn't," Mary said.

"He left?" Jennifer asked.

"Not really. He was there. Then he was gone. Then he was there."

"He ridin' a white pony?" Gus asked.

"Uh huh."

The older woman smiled kind of funny and looked like she would almost cry. "Jacob."

"Who?" Jennifer asked.

"He's, well, he's our angel I guess you would say," Gus said.

The woman smiled. "He was out riding his pony and they were struck by lightning a long, long time ago. He has showed up on other run-aways. He has helped people lost at night. He helped people find their way when they get lost. He's our angel."

"What's an angel?" Tommy asked.

"Well, honey," the older woman said "an angel is kind of a special lucky person that gets to help people forever. Angels take care of people who need them."

Gus leaned over and picked up Mary. "An angel helps special people, people who believe and look for the best and who would do the same thing if they could. Angels are special. So are people who have angels. They don't just come to anyone. It's like someone knocking at the door, you've got to let them in - see good wherever you can. Mary, you had an extra special Christmas present."

The Older People's Place

It hadn't been a very good year there. Oh, it had been good until winter arrived. Our Homeplace was busier than ever. It seemed to Tommy and Mary that they had more clothes and toys than ever. Molly and Julia were still the best cats anywhere. Mr. Warner did all those things older people do — forget what day of the week it is, forget who he told what, but he was still the nicest old man anywhere.

But when it got cold real suddenly, it seemed someone was always sick. First, Mr. Warner got sick. And then Tommy, then Mary, and then their mother Jennifer all took turns being sick. One week Molly was a sick kitty from eating something bad for her. It just seemed someone had to be taken care of all the time.

Then, just when everyone had been well for a while, Mr. Warner tripped over Molly and Julia while they were chasing each other upstairs. He fell and hurt his hip and had to be taken to the hospital. This scared Mary and Tommy.

Jennifer and Mrs. Marion would go up to the hospital all the time to see Mr. Warner. When he was moved to the rehabilitation home they went and saw him there too. That meant that, between running the school, taking Tommy and Mary to all the things they did, and taking

care of Mr. Warner, their mother really was busy. She was so busy that Christmas was getting close and the house and school were not decorated very much.

Of course, Tommy and Mary missed Mr. Warner, and one day they finally promised their mother they would be good if they could go see him and talked her into taking them to see him. It was the first time Tommy and Mary had been in a hospital that they could remember and they walked forever down the halls until they found Mr. Warner's room. They looked in the rooms as they walked and saw lots of people all alone, some watching television, but most all alone.

Mr. Warner was sitting up in bed and had a great big smile on his face when he saw Tommy and Mary. He asked them about Molly and Julia, and the house, and the special tree. They talked until Mr. Warner got tired, and then Tommy and Mary waited outside while Jennifer talked to Mr. Warner. They looked in a couple of rooms, and in one an older lady smiled at them.

Tommy and Mary were both very quiet on the drive back home and that night, while their mom was shopping, Tommy and Mary had a long talk. They had an idea, but Christmas was just a few days away, so they knew they'd need help.

The next morning at breakfast, Tommy and Mary were very quiet. Afraid they might be getting sick, Jennifer asked them if they were okay.

"Yes, Mom. But Tommy and I need some help."

"What kind of help, honey? I'm really busy I'm afraid."

"Well we don't think it's good for Mr. Warner and all those older people to be lonely at Christmas. We know that being sick isn't fun. We are well now, and well, we just think Christmas has always been special for us, and we want it to be special for everyone."

Their mother looked at the two children and smiled. "That's so sweet of you, but we can't get them out of the hospital, and we really don't have enough to give them presents or food."

Mary laughed, "We know that, Mommy. But we have an idea. We just need a little help."

Jennifer listened to their idea, smiled and agreed to help them.

It was early Christmas Eve, and it was starting to snow when all the cars got to the hospital. Jennifer and Mrs. Marion had told the rehabilitation people about Tommy and Mary's plan, so everything was ready.

Tommy and Mary were nervous, even a little scared as they walked up to the first door and knocked.

"Come in," a faint voice said.

The poked their heads in and saw an older lady eating dinner.

"Yes?" She said

"We want to wish you a Merry Christmas.," Tommy said, his voice cracking.

"Okay," she said, with a smile. "Merry Christmas."

"We all do," Mary said and then all the Our Homeplace kids came in and said together, "Merry Christmas."

Then Angela, one of the girls, walked over to the lady "My name is Angela, and since my name comes first in the alphabet, I get you."

The old lady laughed, "You get me darlin'?"

"Yes, here." And Angela handed the lady a Christmas card she made for her and a little sack that was tied at the top with a bow. The lady untied it while all the kids watched. She took out a cookie Angela decorated and a little Jesus doll she made out of a handkerchief.

The lady almost cried when she finished and the children started to sing "We wish you a Merry Christmas... "

Then they went to the next room, and the next room, until they had been to all except Mr. Warner's. They went into his room, and this time Tommy and Mary gave him a package together.

Mr. Warner did have tears in his eyes, but they were mostly from his eyes watering he was smiling so much. He said, "I can't believe you two thought all this up."

Mary said, "Oh, Mr. Warner, we've missed you so much."

"Uh huh," Tommy said. "And Christmas is always so special for us. We always have gotten the best things at Christmas."

"That's what we were talking about," Mary said. "Christmas is the best time and the best feelings. It is the time for everyone to feel good and when everyone's happy it makes us happier."

"Yeah," Tommy said. "I like presents, but you know it feels better to see how you can change someone from feeling bad to feeling good just by remembering them and loving them."

Helping Mr. Samuel

It was kind of a strange Christmas season this year. Oh sure, Jennifer and Tommy and Mary had done all the normal Christmas fun - decorating the house, taking all the Our Homeplace kids to visit their friends at the older people place, and even shopping at crowded malls. They had even gone with Mr. Warner to see the house decorations in a beautiful part of town and looked in wonder at the bright lights and wonderful figures. But the difference was that they had been so busy, it almost didn't seem like Christmas.

It was such a time of going from one place to another and doing one thing after another that they really hadn't had a chance to think about it being Christmas. They always had some place to go or something to do.

Tommy and Mary really didn't realize that the constant activity kept them so busy, but Jennifer had. She was lying awake one night thinking about all she had to do when she had the thought that, "Wow, we're going around here and there — but we haven't really had time to think about Christmas." She stayed awake for a while thinking about it, a little disappointed, but soon fell back asleep.

The next morning, Christmas Eve, Jennifer went down to have a talk with Tommy and Mary about Christmas, but the children already had the TV on and were busy wrapping presents. Molly and Julia were playing in the wrapping paper and chasing the ribbons that Tommy and Mary flipped around. The cats would jump and chase all around the room, having so much fun, they wore themselves out. Jennifer just could not interrupt all the fun.

She was still a little concerned that they were missing out on a real Christmas feeling and went upstairs to talk to Mr. Warner. Jennifer walked over to him as he was sitting in an armchair by the window and took Mr. Warner's hand. "You can't possibly know how much you have meant to us, but... "

Mr. Warner smiled, "Jennifer, say nothing more. It is I who am better by knowing you. You and the children have not only revived Christmas for me, but seeing Christmas through their eyes is the greatest of gifts."

She smile beautifully, "That is wonderful of you to say. I am so glad. But, I'm worried the kids won't appreciate this Christmas."

"I don't worry. Those two have nothing but goodness in their hearts and I know — believe me I know — that Christmas wraps you up in its arms and makes you know it's Christmas and what it means. Just let them find out what all the celebration means."

Jennifer could only smile, otherwise she would have cried. "You are family, better family than anyone could ever hope for." Before he could

say anything, she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," he replied

All through dinner the kids were happy and talked about how they couldn't wait for Santa Claus to come. They were guessing what the presents might be Christmas morning. Jennifer didn't say much, just sat and listened to the kids, and occasionally glanced at Mr. Warner, who smiled.

Soon, it was time to go to church. They were shocked when they when outdoors. The wind had come up, and it had gotten very cold. They leaned over against the wind and got in the car. They drove to church watching papers fly all around blown by the wind. They even saw that branches had fallen from trees.

They came to a street where a big sign had blown off a roof blocking the road. They had to take a side street from the main street they usually took. The children looked out the windows and said that no one had Christmas lights up. The houses were all very small.

"It is probably because they can't afford them," Jennifer said. "We are very lucky we can have decorations and lights."

As they came to the top of a small hill there was little house that did have lights.

"Look at those lights!" Tommy said, laughing.

"Yes, they look silly," Mary laughed.

The two children giggled as they drove by the small house. Some big old fashioned lights were rolled around the trunk of a tree. Two big lights lit the yard and you could see them shaking in the wind. There was a big cardboard snowman that looked like it was square instead of round. There were lights on part of the roof but not all of it. There was a cardboard Santa, but it looked like it was leaning, and Santa was in more of a red robe than a Santa outfit. Squares of cardboard were painted like presents and stuck in the ground around the yard.

Merry Christmas was printed out across a long series of pieces of cardboard tied together with rope. And on the porch was an old cradle that had been painted gold. Straw covered the porch and cardboard wise men who looked more like cartoon characters than wise men looked down at the cradle.

They drove past, and the children continued laughing and talking about how silly it looked. Jennifer started to say something, but remembered what Mr. Warner had said.

The wind blew harder as they walked into church. It blew so hard and it was so cold that the two children had trouble even standing up. As they entered the church, it felt like the church would protect them from the storm.

To the children the midnight service was like a lot of others. Everyone stood up and then sat down and then kneeled over and over. The music was pretty, and the voices seemed like there were almost angels, but the preacher really didn't make much sense to the children, and they fidgeted and squirmed but something happened at the end.

When the service was ending after a long quiet prayer, all the church was totally quiet. The organ music burst out, and everyone started singing "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing... .."

Both children felt chills down their spines. They looked around at all the people and saw how peaceful and absolutely happy everyone looked. They looked at the cross on the altar and the stained-glass picture of Jesus behind it. It seemed to have gotten brighter. The organ music and singing filled the church. The two children looked at each other and smiled. Jennifer looked down and smiled as she reached down to kiss and hug Tom and Mary.

"Merry Christmas, my loves."

"Merry Christmas, Mom," they said together.

When they went out of church the wind was still blowing but not as hard. But there were leaves and papers blown all over everywhere. It

was so cold they ran to the car. It looked like a bad frigid storm had just blown through the town and left.

As they drove back the two children were humming "Hark the Herald Angels." Every now and then they tried to sing it — not very well. The street they usually used still had the sign across it, and they had to take the same side route down the unfamiliar street.

As they drove down the street the children and Jennifer saw that the house with all the decorations had been a victim of the storm. All the cardboard figures were blown over. The straw was scattered all over the yard. The little boxes were everywhere. The lights dangled from the roof.

They had just passed the house when Tommy and Mary said "Stop the car, Mom." Jennifer stopped the car and the children got close to their mother and said, "Can we go pick some of that up? We need to help fix that."

Jennifer looked around at the neighborhood. "This isn't the best area kids."

"But Mom," they replied. Just as Jennifer was about to answer, the door of the house opened and an older little man stepped stiffly out. The man looked around at everything and looked so sad that it looked as if he might cry.

"Please, Mom," they pleaded.

"Well, okay," Jennifer said and unlocked the door.

The two children ran across the yard to the man. "We're so sorry the wind blew everything over. Can we help you pick it up?"

The man looked at them and smiled. His smile was peaceful and happy just like the people in church. "I speak poorly. You should sleep. It is late."

"Please, we would like to help," the children asked again.

He looked around and said, "All the people here like my yard. It is Christmas for some of them. I have no family. They," he said waving his arms at all the other houses, "are my family."

"We can help," the children said. The man looked at Jennifer getting out of the car and smiled.

"It is cold for them," he said.

Jennifer smiled and looked at Tommy and Mary who were squirming and shuffling their feet like they were running in place. "Okay kids, but let's try to be quick."

The children yelped with happiness and went charging around the yard picking figures up, gathering straw, and straightening the porch.

As they were working, Jennifer and the old man went around setting everything up right. As they put Santa back up, the old man leaned toward Jennifer and said, "I am Samuel. I have little. At Christmas I put up one more thing each year." He looked around the neighborhood. "The children love it." He looked at the two children scurrying around repairing wind damage. ""You have two angels for children."

Jennifer smiled and looked at the man, "Christmas helps a lot of us be angels, doesn't it?"

Sam Nichols

This Christmas season was exciting for Tommy and Mary. It was more exciting in a busy, everybody full of energy way. Our Homeplace was full of kids and their mother, Jennifer, seemed very relaxed and happy.

When Tommy and Mary went to the mall to see Santa Claus and all the decorations, everyone was going around with lots of boxes and bags

in their arms. All the stores were full, and it just seemed to Tommy and Mary that everyone seemed excited and happy.

After standing in line with their mother, Tommy and Mary showed their list of what they wanted for Christmas from Santa Claus. Of course, they told him they had been good all year — and it was easy to say, because they had been very good all year, doing well in school, taking care of their special tree, going to the older people's home to see their friends. They even took some new lights to Mr. Samuel, the old man who they had helped out repairing his decorations last year.

So it was a good year for everyone; everyone seemed happy. Even when all the Our Homeplace kids went on Christmas Eve day to take presents and goodies to the older people's place, the older people all seemed a little happier and had more things in their rooms.

This year the Our Homeplace kids did a little more. They got to make cookies, brownies (but Jennifer really made those), Christmas pictures they had made, and a special cassette tape for each of the people at the older people's place. It had been Tommy and Mary's idea after they saw a Christmas special on TV. They wanted to sing Christmas carols for the older people and give them a cassette tape they could play. Mr. Warner said that a lot of people had little players and that the center had tape players to loan, so Jennifer let the kids do the show.

Mrs. Marion had taught music before so she helped the children select the songs and practice. When the day to sing the carols came, all the kids were a little nervous, but it really went better than Jennifer or Mrs. Marion had thought it would.

The kids made a little bag for each of the older people. Each of the kids decorated one for each of the tenants of the older people's place. They unloaded the bags at the front door and each of the children took a couple of bags and found the person the bag was made for. When they found the right person, they wished them "Merry Christmas" and gave him or her the bag. Since they had done this for a couple of years, some of the kids knew the older people, and it was easy to talk to them.

It took a while, and soon everyone had given their bags away. Then every one of the older people who could gathered in a big room, and the

children sang Christmas carols. When they were finished, the older people gushed all over the kids about how wonderful they were.

Tommy had just finished talking to an older lady when he looked down the hall and saw a man in a wheelchair in the corner. He was so big he almost overflowed the wheelchair, and he had long white hair and a beard. His eyes were closed but Tommy didn't think he'd seen the man there before. He motioned to Mary, and they walked down the hall to make sure the man hadn't been left out.

The man was asleep when Tommy and Mary came up to him. He opened his eyes real sleepy like and smiled.

"Well hi, children. I was listening to you sing. It was splendid."

"Hi, Mr. ummmm, did we get you a bag of cookies and stuff?"

"Oh no, but that's no problem. I'm new here."

Tommy smiled and said, "Wait here and talk to Mary. I'll be right back."

With that, he turned and ran back down the hall to find his mother. She was talking to a couple of nurses as he ran up, skidding a bit, and touched the hem of her dress.

"Mom, did we have some more bags we made extra?"

"Yes honey, just in case you missed somebody."

"I need one. Please."

"Well sure baby, take this one," Jennifer said and handed him a bag.

Tommy ran back down the hall to where Mary was talking to the big old man. "Here Mr...." He said holding the bag out to him.

"I'm Mr. Nichols. You can just call me Sam. And thank you so very much. That's so kind of you. So thoughtful."

As he looked in the bag, he looked up at the children and smiled. They were smiling back at him.

"It feels good to give a present and see someone happy does it?" Tommy and Mary smiled and nodded.

"Do you know why giving gifts is such a big part of Christmas, why Santa Claus loves giving gifts, and everyone loves getting gifts?"

"Well, Mommy always said that when you give a gift, it makes two people happy — the one who gives and the one who gets a gift," said Mary. Tommy nodded.

"Very good!" said Mr. Nichols. "That's an important lesson. I'm very impressed that you two know that." He smiled a big broad smile at the children as he spoke.

"You know God taught us all about giving. He gave us his son. He gave his son to us as a baby, knowing love and kindness would have to be given to the baby for it to grow. He knew his gift would create more giving. And He knew that through the eyes of his son as a baby, he would know us and our kindness. And He knew the gift of birth and family is the most intimate and precious of things, so he gave to us to know us and for us to know Him. So you see, giving of yourself to others is one of the most important messages of Christmas. You and your friends must know this. I'm very pleased and impressed to meet you."

Tommy and Mary were a little embarrassed, but felt so very warm and happy with hearing the man's words.

"Wait here," Tommy said, and he took Mary's hand and ran back down the hall to find their mother. She had to meet this nice man.

Jennifer was walking among the different older people talking to them and laughing.

"Mom, Mom," they called to her at the same time. "You need to meet Mr. Nichols. He wasn't on our list, but he's so nice. And he's smart too."

Jennifer laughed and said, "Why, of course, introduce me to your new friend."

Each child took Jennifer's hand, and they led her back down the hall to where Mr. Nichols was sitting. When they got there, the hall was empty. They looked all around but couldn't find him. They went and looked in the rooms. They looked down all the halls. No Mr. Nichols.

Jennifer saw how disappointed the two children were. "Come on, kids, let's just ask and get his room number, and then you can introduce us."

She led them back to the nurse's station. "Tommy and Mary just met a wonderful man and wanted me to meet him," she said to the two nurses. "Can you tell us Mr. Nichols's room number?"

"Hmmm," the nurse said "I don't think I've we have a Mr. Nichols tenant." She looked at the other nurse who raised her eyebrows and shook her head. The first nurse looked at the computer screen.

"Mr. Sam Nichols, they said," Jennifer added.

"Sorry. There is no Mr. Sam Nichols. I don't see anyone who has a name like that or near to that."

Jennifer turned to the children. "Are you sure that was his name?"

Tom looked at Mary. She looked at him. They were silent for a while and thought for a minute. They smiled at each other. Their smiles got really big.

"Yes, Mommy. We are sure. That was Sam Nichols, but we know he had to leave. He has a lot to do."

The Meaning of Christmas

This Christmas was different from the last few. It seemed the other Christmases had been surrounded by so much activity that no one had a chance to think. But this year there seemed to be a lot less going on. Maybe it was because it had been colder and there had been more bad weather this year. It sure seemed that way for Molly and Julia, the cats,

because they were inside a lot more this year, especially when Jennifer lit the fire. The cats would sit in a chair and watch the flames dance in the fireplace, sometimes even rolling over on their backs so their tummies were ready just in case anyone wanted to rub them.

With the colder weather it seemed everyone had just a little bit more time to talk with each other and be with each other. It was more like Christmas should be this year, with Jennifer, the kids, Mr. Warner, and Mrs. Marion able to have everything planned out better. They could get presents and visit the older people's place and all the different families whose children came to Our Homeplace. They went to help Mr. Samuel with his decorations again. This year they took him more lights and a big wooden snowman to go with the snowman Mr. Samuel already had.

Because there was a little more time for everything, Tommy and Mary had more time to talk about and think about Christmas. They were old enough to understand more about what Christmas and all the events that happened around Christmas meant. They talked with each other about a lot of things — about Jesus, about Mary, about Santa Claus, about presents, about the older people and making and taking them presents, and most of all about how lucky they really were.

Tommy and Mary were young, but they knew enough other kids and saw enough other families to realize they had it pretty good. They had a mom who loved them, and they could talk to her. They had a great home and a lot of other kids to play with. They had Mr. Warner and his friendship and wisdom. They knew they were loved a lot. And, of course, they had Molly and Julia.

So this Christmas seemed just perfect. Christmas Eve rolled around and Tommy, Mary, Jennifer, Mrs. Marion, and Mr. Warner had a big Christmas dinner. As always Molly and Julia were able to get little bits of turkey and ham.

Although the big dinner made everyone sleepy, Mary, Tommy, and Jennifer went to the midnight church service. There were not as many people there as usual, but then it was very cold. As usual the children loved the singing and feeling that special feeling when everyone in the church was praying together, all saying the same words.

Sometimes the children didn't hear everything the minister said when he was giving a sermon; it was kind of easy for a mind to wander, but tonight the sermon was really pretty short, and they heard the most important part.

The minister had been talking and then he asked everybody: "What does Christmas mean to you? What is the real meaning of Christmas for you? I can tell you what I think; that is what preachers usually do. But tonight I'm asking you. Of course you all can't answer, but I want you to pause a moment now, perhaps a moment later tonight, perhaps tomorrow morning," he laughed for a moment. "Perhaps all year. But think for just a moment amid all that's going on — what's the real meaning of Christmas for you?"

Tommy and Mary looked at each other. They noticed that everyone was doing the same thing. They were looking at the family or friends they came to church with. And they looked at the other people in church. No one said anything. The minister stood silent in the pulpit and the people looked and thought. The minister started the Lord's Prayer and the service resumed.

After the final quiet prayer and the burst of organ music they left. They stood in line to say "Merry Christmas" to the minister, but tonight everyone was also saying it to each other, even people that didn't know each other.

They got in the car and were sitting for a minute before Jennifer started the car and turned down the Christmas music on the radio.

"Did you two hear what the minister asked?"

"Yes," they said together.

"Well, what do you think?" The kids looked each other and didn't say anything.

"It's not an easy answer, is it?"

Both the children smiled, and said, "No, it isn't. Should it be?"

"Well you know kids, I think we think it should be easy answer, but no, when you think about it, it isn't so easy, because Christmas means so many things." The children nodded. Jennifer smiled as she drove out of the parking lot. "But maybe you all are just a little young to be able to answer it."

Well Tommy and Mary didn't think they were too young. They looked at each other. Mary spoke first, "Well I bet we have ideas."

"I'm sure you do," Jennifer said in just the kind of tone she knew the kids would think she didn't mean it.

"No, I bet we do, Tommy said. "We've already talked about it this week."

"Really?"

"Oh yes. We were talking about all the other Christmases and how good they have been."

"Yes. They were all different," Tommy said.

"Well, yes they have been very different," Jennifer said. "But how have they all been alike?"

"Well presents, of course," Mary said. "But not just getting them, it even feels better giving them."

"And helping people," Tommy said. "And cats and trees."

"And Santa Claus and angels and church," Mary said "and Jesus being born and living like a person and showing us how to be better."

"Okay, so kids what does all that mean to you?"

They thought. "Well it feels good to be good," Mary said. "We feel better making someone else better."

"Yeah, yeah," Tommy said anxiously, "We feel better when we are all happy. That's it - all the other Christmases were best when everyone was happy together."

"Well, I think you're right. Maybe that's what Christmas really does means. It means we all want each other to be as good, as happy and as safe as we can be. We love, care for, and help each other because it's the way we are. We are as good as we can be children, when we see that others are as good as they can be"

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