

A Christmas Miracle

Terry didn't think of herself as particularly religious, at least not most of the year, but the one claim she could make is that she had never missed a Christmas Eve service. It had been a family tradition for as long as she could remember to attend the Christmas Eve service at their church, even on that terrible night three years ago after her father had lost his battle with cancer. Three weeks after he died, Terry and her mom and her little sister had sat in the same sanctuary where his funeral had been held and cried their way through the candlelight service. It had seemed so strange not to hear his strong, true voice blending with theirs on the carols. How she had missed him that night.

Slowly the clicking and swaying creaked to a stop. "This is the end of the line, the final stop. Everyone must vacate the train" came the voice from the speakers. Terry knew the routine well by now. She strapped on her backpack and sleeping bag and stepped stiffly out of the subway car. There were only a few other passengers who had continued all the way to the end of the line and they were heading for the exit. Terry walked in the opposite direction to the stairs that crossed over the tracks towards the inbound trains. She knew that in fifteen minutes there would be another train heading back into town and that she could count on another 55 minutes of warmth before she would be roused from her nap again. She also knew that this would be the last train of the night and she had no idea what she was going to do then. "How did I get myself into this mess?" she asked herself for the ten thousandth time. And once again, she thought back over the awful events that had brought her to this moment.

Ever since her dad had died things hadn't been right at home. For one thing, her mother just wasn't the same person. It seemed like when she wasn't crying, she was yelling. And her little sister, Carrie, had just become so quiet and withdrawn; she hardly spoke a word to anyone. Terry had always been a good student and was well liked in school, but over the last year that had all begun to change as well. And then she had fallen in love with Greg. At least she thought it was love at the time. After a couple of very intense months, Greg moved on to another girl and Terry was alone again. The crowning blow had come just before school was to start last September when Terry discovered she was going to have a baby.

This wasn't the way she had planned her life at all, not to be 16 years old at the beginning of her junior year in high school with a baby on the way. She had waited as long as she could before telling her mother, but by the end of October the baby was really beginning to show. She had to say something. Finally, she gathered up her courage and she went into the kitchen where her mother was unloading the dishwasher. She began the speech just as she had practiced it.

"Mother, I have something important to tell you. I think it could turn out to be a good thing for all of us. I'm going to have....I'm going to...It's just that..." She stopped. She had never seen such a look in her mother's eyes.

"Are you pregnant?" her mother almost screamed.

“Yes” Terry said quietly, looking at the floor.

“After everything that we’ve been through, how could you do this to us?” her mother shouted. And with that she whirled around and ran sobbing down the hall to her bedroom.

It was the lowest moment of Terry’s life. She packed up a few clothes and personal items, took her sleeping bag off the closet shelf and headed for the door. She almost ran over Carrie in the hall.

“Where are you going?” her sister had asked.

“I don’t honestly know” Terry replied. “I just know I can’t stay here anymore.” She hugged and kissed Carrie and walked out the door into the October night.

That had been almost two months earlier. At first, she had stayed with friends, a few days at a time, but now, for the last ten days she had been homeless. She had been eating in soup kitchens and church-run meal programs. She spent a good part of the day in the malls and rode the subways in the evenings, thankful for a warm, dry place to be, even if the seats were as hard as a rock. The worst time was from 1:00 to 5:30 a.m. when the subway was closed. Mostly she just kept moving during those hours to stay warm and safe. Sometimes, when she had been able to collect a little money from begging, she would go into Dunkin’ Donuts and make a cup of coffee last for a couple of hours.

As she came down the stairs to the inbound side of the tracks she heard the loudspeakers in the station come to life. “Train service for this evening is terminated. Due to the holiday, there will be no further inbound service.”

“Great” she thought to herself. “Here I am out in the middle of nowhere at midnight and the trains are shut down. With my luck I should have known something like this would happen.” She felt the baby kick and she winced.

“Okay, Casey Jr., enough feeling sorry for ourselves. Let’s make the best of it. At least there’s an elevator in this station and we won’t have to climb all those stairs.” She pressed the button and waited. Nothing happened. “Story of my life” she muttered, and headed towards the stairs.

“Can I help you, Miss?” Terry looked up and saw a young policeman who evidently had been making sure everyone was out of the station. “That looks like a heavy pack to carry up all those stairs. I’d be happy to give you a hand. Least I can do on Christmas Eve.”

His kindness took her by surprise. Her eyes filled with tears, and she turned her head from him. “Thanks, that would be nice” was all she could manage.

He took the backpack and sleeping bag off her shoulders and hoisted them easily over one of his own. "Do you have a place to go tonight?" he asked. "A young girl in your condition shouldn't be out on the streets on a cold night like this."

"I'll be okay" she said, sounding a whole lot more confident than she was.

"Well," he said "there's a church right up in the square that's having a midnight mass. Maybe you could talk to the priest after the mass and he could help you."

"Thanks. Thanks for everything" she said.

She hadn't really thought about going to church that night, but it was an idea, and maybe the young policeman was right. It is possible that the priest might be able to help. Besides, the church would be warm for another hour. It would be at least as good a place to spend an hour as the subway.

She entered the large sanctuary just a few minutes after the mass had started. The priest was reading from the Gospel of Luke. She knew the words by heart.

And while they were there the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

"Just like us, Casey" she whispered to the child within her. "No place in the inn."

The music and the words carried her back to other times and places, times of warmth and safety, and for a few minutes she allowed herself the luxury of thinking everything was going to be okay. But far too soon the mass ended and the candles, one by one, were extinguished by the altar boys. The congregation filed past the white-haired priest who greeted each one with a hearty "Merry Christmas." Terry was the last one to leave, breathing in every warm breath, knowing what awaited her outside.

"Thanks for the service, Father" she said as she reached the door.

"Why, you're a Protestant, aren't you dear?" he asked kindly.

"Yes" she said. "How did you know?"

"That's not hard" he replied. "We call it a mass, that's all. What brings you to a Catholic church on Christmas Eve?"

"Oh, it's a long, sad story, Father" Terry answered. "I wouldn't want to bore you with it."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" the priest asked.

“No more than a lot of folks, Father. I left home a couple of months ago after I hurt my mother terribly. And now we’re kind of between situations.”

“We?”

“I’m expecting a baby, Father.”

Suddenly a strange look came over the old priest’s face.

“You’re not....Terry, are you?”

Terry was stunned. “How did you know that?”

“Wait here” the priest said, and he rushed out of the sanctuary. In two minutes he was back, holding a folded piece of paper in his hand.

“Read this” he said. “It came two days ago.”

Terry took the paper and began to read the letter:

Dear Father or Reverend,

Please forgive me for taking up some of your precious time at this busy time of year, but I have a terribly important favor to ask you. I am writing to all of the churches in the city to see if any of you can help me find my beautiful daughter, Terry. She ran away two months ago after I turned my back on her when she was in desperate need. I am so ashamed of myself. She is expecting a baby and she needs me. I want her to come home more than I can tell you, but I don’t know how to find her. I do know that she has never missed a Christmas Eve service, so I am hoping against hope for a Christmas miracle, that one of you might find her and tell her how much she is loved and wanted at home. And, even if you don’t find her, please, please pray for us...

Terry stopped reading and looked up at the old priest. His eyes were glistening with expectation.

“Can we make it a Christmas miracle?” he asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever been part of a real Christmas miracle. Can I drive you home?”

Casey Jr. gave another kick, but this time more gently. Terry looked down at her round belly and touched it softly. She smiled at the priest. “I thought about Mary tonight when you were reading the Christmas story. I thought about how even though she didn’t have a room at the inn, she had people who loved her and cared about her baby. That’s the real miracle, you know, having people who love you....Let’s go, Father” she whispered.

The priest offered her his arm and together they walked out into the cold clear night.