

# Christmas To Me by Harper Lee

Several years ago, I was living in New York and working for an airline, so I never got home to Alabama for Christmas--if, indeed, I got the day off. To a displaced Southerner, Christmas in New York can be rather a melancholy occasion, not because the scene is strange to one far from home, but because it is familiar: New York shoppers evince the same singleness of purpose as slow moving Southerners; Salvation Army bands and Christmas carols are alike the world over: at that time of year, New York streets shine wet with the same gentle farmer's rain that soaks Alabama's winter fields.

I missed Christmas away from home, I thought. What I really missed was a memory, an old memory of people long since gone, of my grandparents' house bursting with cousins, smilax, and holly. I missed the sound of hunting boots, the sudden open-door gusts of chilly air that cut through the aroma of pine needles and oyster dressing. I missed my brother's night-before-Christmas mask of rectitude and my father's bumblebee bass humming "Joy to the World."

In New York, I usually spent the day, or what was left of it, with my closest friends in Manhattan. They were a young family in periodically well-to-do circumstances. Periodically, because the head of the household employed the precarious craft of writing for their living. He was brilliant and lively; his one defect of character was an inordinate love of puns. He possessed a trait curious not only in a writer but in a young man with dependents; there was about him a quality of fearless optimism--not of the wishing-makes-it-so variety, but that of seeing an attainable goal and daring to take risks in its pursuit. His audacity sometimes left his friends breathless--who in his circumstances would venture to buy a townhouse in Manhattan? His shrewd generalship made the undertaking successful: while most young people are content to dream of such things, he made his dream a reality for his family and satisfied his tribal longing for his own ground beneath his feet. He had come to New York from the Southwest and, in a manner characteristic of all natives thereof, had found the most beautiful girl in the east and married her.

To this ethereal, utterly feminine creature were born two strapping sons, who, as they grew, discovered that their fragile mother packed a wallop that was second to nobody's. Her capacity to love was enormous, and she spent hours in her kitchen, producing dark, viscous delights for her family and friends.

They were a handsome pair, healthy in mind and body, happy in their extremely active lives. Common interests as well as love drew me to them: and endless flow of reading material circulated amongst us; we took pleasure in the same theatre, films, music: we laughed at the same things, and we laughed so much in those days.

Our Christmases together were simple. We limited our gifts to pennies and wits and all-out competition. Who would come up with the most outrageous for the least? The real Christmas was for the children, an idea I found totally compatible, for I had long ago ceased to speculate on the meaning of Christmas as anything other than a day for children. Christmas to me was only a memory of old loves and empty rooms, something I buried with the past that underwent a vague, aching resurrection every year.

One Christmas, though, was different. I was lucky. I had the whole day off, and I spent Christmas Eve with them. When morning came, I awoke to a small hand kneading my face. "Dup," was all its owner had time to say. I got downstairs just in time to see the little boys' faces as they beheld the pocket rockets and space equipment Santa Claus had left them. At first, their fingers went almost timidly over their toys. When their inspection had been completed, the two boys dragged everything into the center of the living room.

Bedlam prevailed until they discovered there was more. As their father began distributing gifts, I grinned to myself, wondering how my exceptionally wily unearthings this year would be received. His was a print of a portrait of Sydney Smith I'd found for thirty-five cents; hers was the complete works of Margot Asquith, the result of a year's patient search. The children were in agonies of indecision over which package to open next, and as I waited, I noticed that while a small stack of present mounted beside their mother's chair, I had received not a single

one. My disappointment was growing steadily, but I tried not to show it.

They took their time. Finally she said, "We haven't forgotten you. Look on the tree."

There was an envelope on the tree, addressed to me. I opened it and read: "You have one year off from your job to write whatever you please. Merry Christmas."

"What does this mean?" I asked.

"What it says," I was told.

They assured me that it was not some sort of joke. They'd had a good year, they said. They'd saved some money and thought it was high time they did something about me.

"What do you mean, do something about me?"

To tell the truth--if I really wanted to know--they thought I had a great talent, and--

"What makes you think that?"

It was plain to anyone who knew me, they said, if anyone would stop to look. They wanted to show their faith in me the best way they knew how. Whether I ever sold a line was immaterial. They wanted to give me a full, fair chance to learn my craft, free from the harassments of a regular job. Would I accept their gift? There were no strings at all. Please accept, with their love.

It took some time to find my voice. When I did, I asked if they were out of their minds. What made them think anything would come of this? They didn't have that kind of money to throw away. A year was a long time. What if the children came down with something horrible? As objection crowded upon objection, each was overruled. "We're all young," they said. "We can cope with whatever happens. If disaster strikes, you can always find a job of some kind. Okay, consider it a loan, then, if you wish. We just want you to accept. Just permit us to believe in you. You must."

"It's a fantastic gamble," I murmured. "It's such a great risk."

My friend looked around his living room, at his boys, half buried under a pile of bright Christmas wrapping paper. His eyes sparkled as they met his wife's, and they exchanged a glance of what seemed to me insufferable smugness. Then he looked at me and said softly; "No, honey. It's not a risk. It's a sure thing."

Outside, snow was falling, an odd event for a New York Christmas. I went to the window, stunned by the day's miracle. Christmas trees blurred softly across the street, and firelight made the children's shadows dance on the wall beside me. A full, fair chance for a new life. Not given me by an act of generosity, but by an act of love. *Our faith in you* was really all I had heard them say. I would do my best not to fail them. Snow still fell on the pavement below. Brownstone roofs gradually whitened. Lights in distant skyscrapers shone with yellow symbols of a road's lonely end, and as I stood at the window, looking at the lights and the snow, the ache of an old memory left me forever.

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