



The Christmas Handkerchief

By **Scott M. Mooy**

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Every year when I was young, I helped my mother wrap the family Christmas presents. I had 5 married siblings and 13 nieces and nephews, so this was no simple task. But even in the colorful mess, I noticed that we seemed to always wrap a handkerchief for my sister. Even if my mother was giving her a nightgown or a blouse or some kitchen gadget, there was that handkerchief for Ann again. I understood that handkerchiefs were practical and inexpensive, but I began to wonder what my sister would think about receiving this gift so often.

One December, I finally commented: “Another handkerchief for Ann? Mom, it seems you give her one almost every year. Have you considered maybe she has enough by now? How many does she need? And another gift makes her family parcel more expensive to mail. I don’t think you need to do this.”

ILLUSTRATION BY SAM LAWICOR

My mother put her scissors aside. “Let me tell you a story. Then maybe you’ll understand. This happened before you were born.

“You know how I came to this country.” (I did. My mother’s family was surprised when she married a widower with four children but shocked it meant she was leaving Holland for the United States.) “But some things you don’t know. When we came here, we had nothing. Life was hard. Your father was working two jobs but with little pay. I took in washing and ironing. Still we didn’t have enough money.

“Ann was 17 then and understood how much money we owed. She decided she could help. She went to work. She found a job in the city at a candy store. She had to take the bus there and stand at the counter all day. She gave us almost all her salary, keeping just enough for bus fare and to buy some lunch, since she couldn’t keep any food behind the counter.

“Ann would tell me she was glad she had a job and that her salary could help us. But she didn’t tell me she worried for her little brothers. Christmas was coming. Their new American friends were talking about the toys they had asked Santa to bring them. What if Santa didn’t bring any presents to our house?

“A few days before Christmas, Ann gave me some money. But it wasn’t

her payday. I asked her where she got this money. She told me she had saved it by not eating lunch. It wasn’t a lot of money, but I knew it meant she hadn’t had lunch for weeks. She told me to take the money and buy Christmas presents for her brothers. She trusted me, the new stepmother, to buy what was right.

“I had to buy little things. But I decided I could make a Christmas for the whole family. Tangerines to eat, teddy bear soaps, crayons, little toy cars, socks for your father. And I bought Ann a handkerchief. It was plain, but I stayed up late at night to embroider it and make it pretty. I was so happy my new daughter was giving us Christmas. I wanted her to have something special for Christmas too.

“Christmas came. We were surprised when our church friends brought us a Christmas tree and a box full of presents. They apologized that it was simple things wrapped up in newspaper, but it was wonderful! There were so many useful things and good food to eat. And then another surprise, Ann’s and my secret surprise: Santa had come to our house! Your brothers were so excited! Soon they were on the floor of that little living room, running cars over and under the newspaper. Newspaper everywhere! And Ann opened her present and found the handkerchief. She cried. I cried a little too.

“We made our Christmas meal. Oh, we had treats we hadn’t had in such a long time! Then we cleaned up. Ann went to put her handkerchief away. But it was gone. We looked everywhere. And then I thought, oh no, your father had thrown the newspaper in the fire. Had the handkerchief gone in the fire? It must have because we never found it. But Ann didn’t complain. What had happened had happened. She said she was happy because her brothers were happy.

“The next Christmas, I gave Ann a handkerchief. I made sure that one didn’t get lost. When she got married and moved away, I mailed her a Christmas handkerchief. I don’t give her a handkerchief now because I think she needs it. I give her a handkerchief to tell her I will never forget what she did for our first Christmas together.”

Several years after my mother told me this story, we were able to celebrate Christmas with our entire family. In the commotion, I watched my sister unwrap a handkerchief. I saw her eyes glisten as she reached over and gave our mother’s hand a squeeze. I understood. It wasn’t just a handkerchief. It was their special remembrance of love, gifts, and sacrifice. And, in its simple way, it reminded me of why we celebrate Christmas—because of a very great and loving gift that required sacrifice. ■