

# The Christmas Thaw



**By Kathy Coats**  
(Based on a true story)

*Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me*  
(Matthew 25:40).

**D**oyle pushed the runny eggs across his plate with a fork. They were so different from the eggs his mother cooked.

“Better eat up,” his aunt called from the bedroom. “It’s a long time until lunch.”

Doyle eyed his breakfast again and decided he could wait. Pulling on his worn coat, he plopped a hat on his head and slipped out the back door.

The snow squeaked beneath his feet as he walked up the path to his uncle’s store and service station. Doyle shivered. He couldn’t remember the air ever being this cold back home in Kansas. How he wished he were there now.

Christmas bells jingled as Doyle opened the service

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK ROBISON



station door. “Morning, Uncle Claude,” he said quietly.

“Morning back to you,” his uncle replied cheerily. “Probably won’t be many customers today. Too cold for anyone to be out and about.” Behind his uncle’s desk hung the last page of a 1935 calendar.

Doyle grabbed a broom and started sweeping the floor. He thought about the huge dust storms that had swept across his family’s farm in Kansas, and he remembered his mother’s constant sweeping. Mom and Dad had sent him to live with his aunt and uncle so there would be enough food for his brothers and sisters.

“How about making a deal?” Uncle Claude said.

“What kind of deal?” Doyle asked.

“If you sweep the entire station, I’ll pay you a small sack of candy.”

“OK,” Doyle agreed. His uncle had recently received an order of Christmas candy—boxes filled with colorful hard candy, chocolates, and peanut clusters.

After the sweeping was done, Doyle slid open the

glass door of the candy case and inhaled the rich, chocolaty smell. He filled a small sack with candy and popped a raspberry-filled piece into his mouth.

Out the front window, two cars laden with people and belongings slowed to a stop in front of the station. One car had a mattress strapped on top. Doyle watched as a small hand made circular motions on the car window until a peephole in the frost framed a boy’s face.

The drivers climbed out and walked toward the store. Then Christmas bells jingled and Uncle Claude stood up from his desk. “Hello, folks. What can we do for you?”

One of the men rubbed his forehead and stared down at his rough hands. “Sir, we’re on our way from Oklahoma to Oregon,” he said.

They were Dust Bowlers too! Doyle and his uncle had watched many cars drive past the station last summer and fall, abandoning the dry prairie lands.

“If you could spare some gas, we’d be much obliged,” the man continued.

“It’s awfully late in the season to be moving west with a family,” Uncle Claude said. “Wyoming winters are plenty mean.”

Sliding closer to his uncle, Doyle gripped his uncle’s arm and gave him a pleading look.

Uncle Claude paused. “Well, it’s nearly Christmas,” he said. Then he took two big paper bags from under the counter and began handing Doyle groceries from around the store. Together they filled the sacks with cans of pork and beans, loaves of sliced bread, and a generous slab of bologna cut at the meat counter.

Then his uncle said, “If you men will pull your cars up to the hose, we’ll pump you a little gas.”

Clearing his throat several times, one of the men coughed, then choked out, “This is the best Christmas I ever had.”

While the men shook hands, Doyle reached into his pocket, pulled out the sack of candy, and ran out the door toward the boy inside the car.

As the two cars pulled away, Doyle and his uncle watched from the frozen driveway. Somehow, the icy temperatures didn’t seem quite so icy. ♦