A Compilation of Holiday Stories
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Most Christmas stories don’t start the day after Christmas. This one does. On December 26, 2006, after opening presents with her husband and baby boy and then hurriedly packing her bags, my daughter Becca climbed onto a jet and started the first leg of a journey to Stavropol, Russia.

Becca traveled to this former communist stronghold in response to what she described as an aching in her heart. After she and her husband Bruce had adopted a newborn baby boy a year earlier, Becca was left with the impression that there was more to be done. There was something missing. There was someone who needed her.

After scouring adoption agency websites for several weeks, Becca eventually stumbled on the picture of two Russian sisters, ages six and seven. The two rather fragile looking children were currently residing in an orphanage in one of the bleakest corners of the world you’ll ever find. And now, as if a fire had been lit under her, Becca was on a mission to meet the two helpless waifs. Perhaps they would be new additions to Becca and Bruce’s growing family. She didn’t know. She couldn’t know. She hadn’t even met them yet.

Whatever she did, Becca realized that she would have to act quickly because the older of the two would soon turn eight and
by policy would be shipped to a different orphanage, forever separated from her beloved sister.

Twenty-four hours of rather tortured travel later, a stern official led Becca into a room where she met Tatiana and Veronica, the two prospective adoptees. The girls, shy at first, quickly warmed to Becca, and despite the fact that neither spoke a word of English, were soon auditioning for the role of daughter. First they demonstrated dance moves they had practiced for just such an event. Next, they climbed a rickety ladder that leaned against a wall (left from an earlier repair job) and held on by one hand while leaning out precariously and singing Russian folk songs.

The girls had lived in the orphanage for two years, and Becca was the first visitor to call on them—no family members, no prospective parents, not a soul had thought to pay them a visit. Knowing that this might be their only chance to escape a fate that they were too young to even imagine, the two flirted, winked, and did everything in their power to beguile their prospective mother. And just when Becca thought her heart would break from watching the two girls fight for a chance to join her family, Veronica looked into her eyes and promised (through a translator), “If you adopt us, we’ll wash the dishes every day.”

As Becca cried herself across the globe, back to her home in the mountains of Utah, she carefully put together a plan that ended four months later when she and Bruce returned from Stavropol with two little Russian dolls. A year later, after passing through the standard waiting period, the new family gathered before a judge who asked the girls a few questions and signed a few papers. And then, as if writing the script to her own life story, Veronica turned to her younger sister and pronounced, “Now we’re a family.”
It had been a hard journey for the two little girls and still more challenges lay ahead. Abandoned by their father at birth and then one day unceremoniously dropped by their mother at their grandparents’ door, Veronica, the older of the two, taught herself how to beg for food. In the winter, she braced against subzero weather as she knocked on doors, kneeled before strangers, and begged for her and her sister’s life. By the time the neighbors turned the two girls into the authorities, each was more skeleton than girl.

The first time I met the two was at our home a few hours after they arrived in America. Nica (Veronica’s shortened name) rushed to the kitchen counter, grabbed a cookie, and then took another one for her younger sister. “One for Tanya,” she explained through our neighbor who spoke Russian and was helping out as a translator. “One for Tanya,” Nica learned to express in English as she gathered in a new toy or sweet for her younger sibling—always her younger sister’s defender and keeper. Always the protector.

But the gift that started the day after Christmas didn’t end with the signing of the adoption papers. Witnessing the monumental sacrifice, feeling the love, and welcoming two grandchildren into the family—you’d think the Christmas gift would now be complete. But it wasn’t. There would be a second act.

This part of the gift, the surprise part, comes from Nica.

You can’t survive the streets of Stavropol and then be thrown into an orphanage—where you reign supreme as the oldest member of a near-feral mob—without consequence. For years after arriving in the U.S., you’ll act in ways that are out of sync with kids whose greatest childhood tragedy took place when they lost a puppy or tore their princess costume.
Fresh from a life of deprivation and confinement, you’re very likely to be seen as strange, selfish, pushy, or forced. Fighting for your younger sister, who no longer requires or wants a protector, comes off as strange. Pushing your way to the head of the cafeteria line in a primal response to procure food—whenever and however you can—appears selfish. Taking charge of every childhood game seems pushy. Trying too hard to make a friend feels forced.

And then there’s the fact that you’re a Russian immigrant who speaks English with a bit of an accent. As you move into junior high school where being different can be a liability, trying too hard to be accepted practically guarantees you’ll be bullied. Eventually, you’ll learn dozens of swear words—all used as an adjective placed in front of the word “Russian.” And when faced with these challenges, you’ll fight back because, first and foremost, you’re a survivor.

One day, when someone who doesn’t know you or your history observes you verbally attack, take charge, or hoard, it’s easy to see how they might become annoyed. Anyone might become upset as the kid from the streets (now dressed in clothes that belie her upbringing) does something odd or off-putting.

And from all of this comes the surprise gift. Nica has sat beside me on our living room couch and given me glimpses into her heart-breaking story. I’ve imagined her as she faced unspeakable circumstances and have mourned for her, her sister, and everyone who has similarly suffered. I’ve watched Nica step in harm’s way for her sister. I’ve seen her stand strong in the face of adversity.

I’ve also seen her do things that can drive you nuts and would be the first to say that she needs to be carefully instructed. No doubt about it. Just like her American-born cousins, she’s still
young and she needs lots of guidance, and given her history, special assistance. But unlike a stranger who might immediately become upset when Nica commits a social faux pas or inappropriate action, I can’t see her do anything—no matter how untoward—without also seeing a little girl in the streets of Stavropol begging for her and her sister’s next meal.

With this poignant image firmly in mind comes the surprising gift, the gift of compassion. Not compassion for me (which I’ve often received), but compassion within me—something I sorely need. Of course, over the years, I’ve felt sympathy for others. I understand the need to view the whole picture before drawing conclusions. I’ve even used the bromide of looking at both sides of a coin.

But this story isn’t about two sides, it’s about simultaneity. Having felt and mourned Nica’s past, I now see both her missteps and her history in a single glance. This sweeping view fills me with an understanding that makes up the very spirit of this holiday season. It fills me with compassion—a surprising and wonderful gift.
Over twenty years ago, I received the most amazing Christmas gift. Today I share it with you.

It was December of 1984 and my wife, children, and I were eagerly shopping for a teenage boy we had never met. This particular shopping spree was part of a Sub-for-Santa adventure we and four other families were undertaking. This was the third year in a row the gang of us had agreed to help a needy family (this year it was a mother, father, and five children) and we approached the task with our usual mix of joy and anxiety. Could we truly help someone? Would we be a blessing in their lives or would we disappoint them?

Two days later, we nervously gathered presents, food, and clothing, piled into our cars, and drove through a constant drizzle to a small house that sported the address given to us by the local relief agency. “It looks small,” said my oldest daughter as five cars chock-full of parents and children pulled up to the house.

Gingerly we carried the boxes to the front porch. (Later my oldest daughter revealed that you could see four noses pressed against the window as the family’s younger children looked on in excitement.) Not knowing exactly what to do, we eventually all gathered in the freezing rain and started to sing Christmas carols. At the end of the second carol, the father of the clan
took pity on us, stepped out into the rain, and begged all of us to please come in. “In where?” I thought as I looked around at the crowd and figured if we all went inside, we’d explode the house.

Minutes later, as we stood cheek to jowl, the father began to talk. He explained that he had undergone back surgery earlier that year and hadn’t been able to return to work quite yet. It hadn’t been an easy choice, but he had decided that if they were to have any presents for the kids, he’d have to call on one of the local agencies, which he did. He thanked us copiously for answering the call.

“Now, in turn for your presents, I offer you one of my own—in the form of a story,” he continued.

“Eight years ago when we had only two children and I was just getting started in my career, we were facing a rather meager Christmas. We bought my oldest son, who was eight at the time, and his sister who was four, two presents. One was a pair of socks, the other a toy. My son had asked for a basketball, and from the size and shape of his two packages under the tree, there would be no surprise for him that year.” The son, who was now a gawky teenager standing shyly in the hallway, nodded in agreement.

“One evening, two days before Christmas, I came home with an announcement.” The father continued. “A new family had moved in not far from our house, and since they didn’t have two pennies to rub together, they wouldn’t be having a Christmas. They had a boy and girl the same ages as our family and I was thinking that maybe we could share Christmas with them.”

“We could each give them one of our two presents,’ my wife suggested as our two children looked on in suspicion.”
“Finally, after staring at his two presents under the tree for what seemed like ten minutes, my son walked over, picked up the package containing the basketball, and said, ‘I’ll share this one.’ Each of us then grabbed one of our two presents, put it in a box, and carried our gift down to our new neighbors who seemed very grateful.”

As he told the story, I noticed that my own children were fixed on him, their eyes brimming with tears as they thought of how these people had sacrificed so dearly.

“Later that day,” the father continued to explain, “I received a phone call from my local church leader. It turned out that there were a few families in our little church group that didn’t have any money for Christmas that year. A group of generous people had put together several boxes of presents and food for the needy families. Since I was driving a rather large and beat-up station wagon that had a lot of hauling space, he asked if I would be so kind as to drive to the church on Christmas Eve, load up the wagon, and make the various deliveries. ‘Besides,’ my church leader explained, ‘your two young ones will get a kick out of playing Santa.’”

“I immediately agreed to lend a hand. But I knew in so doing I was in trouble. I hung up the phone and explained to my family what I had committed to do, and then shared with them the challenge. We had spent all of our money on Christmas, and the station wagon was almost out of gas. We’d have to find a way to raise some cash to fill the gas tank to make the deliveries.”

“We could collect soda pop bottles,’ my daughter quickly suggested. That’s what she had seen her older brother do in order to raise a few pennies. This, of course, was at a time that if you retrieved a discarded pop bottle by the side of the road
and took it to a local grocery store they’d give you two cents for it.

“So it was agreed. We bundled up against the wind and snow and all day long, the day of Christmas Eve, we hunted for bottles. Finally, just before we were due to make the deliveries, we cashed in the bottles, put a couple of gallons of gas into the old wagon, and drove over to the church.”

“As our church leader loaded box after box filled with beautifully wrapped presents into our dilapidated vehicle, my son and daughter looked on in wonder. They sniffed the air with a look of longing as he loaded in a carton containing freshly baked pies and a ham along with all the trimmings. They squished over to the edge of their seat as the boxes stacked one upon the other until our wagon was filled to bursting.”

“Our church leader handed me an envelope containing a list of the various names and addresses of the people we were to visit, and then thanked us profusely for helping with the deliveries. As he drove off, I opened the envelope to see the extent of the task in front of us. The small piece of paper I found inside the envelope contained but one name and address. It was ours.”

As the humble man finished his story, those of us who had come to help his family were either openly crying or doing a poor job of holding back tears. I was completely humbled as I envisioned this sweet man and woman and their two children bracing against the wind and searching for bottles—doing their very best to help the needy.

What made the story all the more wonderful was that the gentleman telling it did his best to make the church leader and the other generous members of his congregation out to be
the heroes—look how nice they had been to his family, he had explained, just as we were now being nice to them this year.

It had never occurred to the man we had come to help that as thoughtful as his church friends had been to him and his family, our motley Sub-for-Santa gang looked on him and his children with a genuine sense of amazement. They were the ones who shared their Christmas. They were the ones who, as others drank cocoa by the fireplace or stirred fudge in the kitchen, trudged through frozen fields in a quest for two-cent treasures. They were the true heroes and didn’t even know it.

My family and I count this sweet experience as our favorite holiday gift. It’s a present that will live with us forever.
1956 was a hard year for the Patterson family. One evening, Dad came home from work at the lumber mill in so much pain he could scarcely drag himself out of the car. He had tripped at work and hurt his back. Worried about his paycheck at the end of the week, Dad pulled himself to his feet and gutted it out until the end of his shift, despite a pain that (we later learned from a coworker) was so gut-wrenching he almost passed out several times.

Mom tried to heal Dad with a variety of homemade poultices that had such a stench they practically peeled back the wallpaper. But to no effect. Eventually, Dad put himself in the care of a surgeon who cut a piece of bone from his hip and fused it into his spine. The Workers Compensation Fund refused to cover his injury (claiming he had aggravated a pre-existing condition). So two weeks later, when he returned home to heal, all the money we had to live on for the next six months would come from whatever Mom could earn making and selling pastries.

The neighbors soon caught wind of our plight and hardly a day passed without someone dropping by with a slab of venison or a basket of wild asparagus. We quickly discovered that beggars, indeed, can’t be choosers as we learned to dine on everything from goose eggs to elk heart. But it wasn’t all gizzards and duck feet. One day, Walter Kaiser, the retired boatswain mate
who lived across the street, brought by a huge bag of delicious unshelled peanuts he’d won playing bingo at the VFW.

As fall drifted into winter and Dad continued to heal, my thoughts turned to Christmas. Without money for presents I began to wonder if the peanuts would be our only gift that year. What I really wanted was a telescope. I’d found a picture of a swell one in the Sears catalogue, but I knew it would cost too much, so I put in a request for an inexpensive, plastic spy glass.

Mom could tell I wasn’t adjusting well to our newfound poverty and did her best to remain cheerful despite the fact that our financial crisis was exacting a toll on her. Between caring for Father, raising two boys, and making baked goods, Mother scarcely slept. And yet she was our rock. One evening she caught me crying in my room because my weekly allowance had been long abandoned and I suddenly realized I hadn’t saved enough money to buy presents for my relatives. Each year I purchased a gift for my grandparents, parents, brother, aunt and uncle, and two cousins. Now what would I do?

Mom comforted me while she searched for a solution.

“Let’s see,” she muttered. “You don’t have any money. I don’t have any money . . .” Then it came to her in a flash. “Walter’s peanuts!” She shouted with glee. “Walter’s peanuts!”

Mother then explained that she would teach me how to make peanut brittle for Christmas. A box of brittle would make a delicious present—for young and old alike—and we already had all of the ingredients we needed.

For several evenings, I donned my mother’s apron, stood on a stool, and labored happily over the stove. On the last night, after the last batch of candy was finally completed, Mom brought out the end of a roll of newsprint and I colored on
it until it made a suitable wrapping paper. Soon I had a nicely wrapped present for everyone.

But my holiday mood didn’t last. There was no sign of a spyglass anywhere and I was just sure my tenth Christmas was going to be the worst Christmas ever. Once again, it was Mother who came to the rescue. As I sat at the kitchen table, mooning over the Sears catalogue toys that I wouldn’t be getting, Mom gently tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around and there she stood with her arm outstretched and an axe clutched in her hand.

“It’s time for you to go get our Christmas tree,” Mother said with a smile.

I couldn’t believe it. The axe was being passed on to me! Since Dad was house-bound, I would now carry the axe. Drawing myself out of my funk, I carefully took the bucolic scepter from Mom’s hand, hiked into the snow-covered forest that was our backyard, and chopped down a spruce tree.

An hour later, as I huffed, puffed, and hauled the newly cut tree to our home, I ran into Walter.

“That’s kind of a shabby looking thing,” the former navy man barked as he bit down on his pipe.

It was. The good looking trees were too far away for me to haul them all the way back to our home, so I had settled on a tree that was nearby. This tree was decent on one side and pretty shabby on the other.

“I have just the thing,” Walter offered as he disappeared into the shed behind his house. A couple minutes later he returned with his solution to our lackluster tree—a hand drill and several drill bits.
“Every place there’s a gap in the tree, drill a hole,” Walter snapped. I’ll tell you which drill size and where to drill.”

After I finished boring the holes, Walter handed me a stack of limbs he’d cut from a pine tree nearby and stated: “They’re not a perfect match, but they’re close enough for government work.”

Uncertain but hopeful, I began to insert pine branches into the holes I had drilled in the spruce tree. Then, with Walter’s help, I cut the newly affixed appendages to the right length and trimmed a little here and a little there until the tree looked surprisingly full—curiously motley, but full.

Christmas day finally came and all I could think about were the presents I had made. How would my family react? I didn’t have to wait long to get an answer, for soon my relatives were tearing away the homemade wrapping paper and sampling the treasure inside.

“It’s wonderful!” My aunt Mickey exclaimed as she bit into the brittle.

“And you made it all by yourself!” Grandpa Bill enthused.

“Why it’s far better than anything store bought,” shouted my uncle Vic.

“And just look at the tree!” My father proudly said. Then he paused for effect and asked, “Did you know that Kerry is responsible for that tree?”

“I understand you cut it down and then spruced it up.” (Actually I had pined it up.) “Is that true?” Asked Grandpa.
And so, in a flurry of compliments and joyful affirmations, our 1956 came to an end. By mid-January, Dad had returned to work at the mill and things were back to normal.

I hadn’t thought much about that particular season until I started wondering about this year’s bleak economy and the challenge many people will have as they try to bring joy to the holidays. I don’t know what it will be like for others; however, I do know this. In 1956, the year of our poverty, I didn’t get a spyglass. We simply didn’t have enough money.

But you know what? It didn’t really matter. I still found Christmas. I found it in Mom’s irrepressible spirit and endless ingenuity. To this day, I can close my eyes and see her cheerfully toiling over delicious petite fours into the wee hours of the morning. Dad constantly praised me for growing into what he called “a little man.” That was his gift to me. My family complimented the brittle and the goofy looking tree I cobbled together with the same enthusiasm generally afforded a returning hero. That was their present.

During this lean year, several of my family members are taking their lead from 1956. Many are making gifts rather than buying them. My nine-year-old granddaughter, Rachel, has sewn a bunting for her sister who will be born on December 21st. The material for the outfit cost less than a dollar, but the fact that she sewed it with her own two hands makes it priceless. I suspect her gift will get most of the ooohs and ahhhs at the Patterson gathering this year. I also suspect that it’ll be Rachel’s favorite gift as well.

We’re also taking special care to spend as much time as we can together. The time of shared love and caring is the biggest part of any memory we’ll create. And when we gather on Christmas Eve, I plan on reading this story aloud. I’ll give other gifts. I’ll
share other things, but they’re only things. This story, taken from memory and recorded with love, will be my favorite gift.

So there you have it—1956, the year of our poverty. The year my father tripped . . . and I stumbled on Christmas.

THE END