

A Box at Midnight

by Taryn R. Hutchison

As I unpacked the boxes of new coats in the back room of Atkinson's Department Store, I saw it. *My dream coat*. I'd been poring over catalogs for ages in search of this stunning style that I'd first glimpsed in a magazine. Nothing had been exactly right. Until now.

The fur collar, the princess line, the smell of the rich gold suede – everything was as I'd imagined. I tried it on. It fit perfectly. I wrapped the luxurious softness around myself like a model on a runway, preening in the tri-fold mirror. I looked much more sophisticated than my 16 years. I picked up the price tag, then dropped it as though it burned my hand. *Wow*. I never knew we sold merchandise this expensive. Even with my employee discount, this one coat would use up all the money I'd worked so hard to save.

I knew that I shouldn't buy myself a present at Christmastime, but I'd purchased the gifts for my family long before. Mom and I had discussed me buying a coat at Atkinson's months ago. Besides, I earned this, toiling all last summer and every weekend this fall for this one prize. I couldn't help it that my ideal coat waited until this moment to appear.

Still, I felt just a little selfish. I couldn't get that Bible verse out of my mind that we'd talked about at youth group last week. "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Those words haunted me all day. I had only been a follower of Christ for a couple of

years, but I was learning and growing all the time. I wanted to live my life in a way that reflected my savior to those around me. But I also wanted my dream coat.

The next morning, on the school bus, I noticed my friend Letisha Robinson with fresh eyes. She climbed aboard with her brother, Jerome, who played on the varsity football team with my brother. Two more sisters got on while four other siblings, much younger, waved from their dilapidated stoop. It looked as though a good wind could easily topple their wooden house. Not one of them wore a winter coat, and a chill hung in the air. As a matter of fact, I recognized Letisha's dress as the same one she'd worn yesterday and the day before. Come to think of it, I couldn't remember ever seeing her in anything else.

At dinner, I asked my parents about Letisha's family.

"I hear that her mother worked at the factory. You know, the one that just closed down," Mom said.

"What's her father do?" I asked.

"Not much, honey." Dad looked me in the eyes. "He's an alcoholic. Been in and out of jail. He probably drank up all the money his wife was able to pull together."

"I wonder what Christmas will be like at their house, if they'll even get any Christmas presents at all." My brother, Gary, was much nicer than me. As I plotted buying my dream coat, he thought about others.

I excused myself to do my homework, but really I wanted to exit because I felt uncomfortable. Convicted, even. I didn't want to entertain the idea that was tugging at my mind so I tried to divert myself with geometry. It didn't work.

That night I dreamed about Letisha’s family sitting around a barren tree on Christmas morning. I saw the little kids traipsing through the snow, looking forlornly in our windows and shivering, while we opened gift after gift. When I awoke, I was certain of what I had to do, of what Jesus would want for me.

At breakfast, I took a deep breath and announced my plan to my family. It turned out I wasn’t the only one who was thinking that way. It almost seemed as though they were waiting for me to come around. We mapped out our strategy.

Gary and I were to observe every kid in Letisha and Jerome’s family, noting their age, gender, and approximate size. Christmas Eve was only two days away, so we had no time to waste. After school, we pooled our information and counted out our savings. My brother and I wanted to buy these gifts with our own money.

Gary went shopping on Saturday for a football for Jerome and toys for the younger Robinsons. I bought a basic but warm outfit for each of the eight kids with my discount at Atkinson’s. Eight outfits for the price of one coat. That took some of the sting out of giving up my dream coat. Mom and Dad added mittens and scarves to our stash, enough for the children and their parents, too.

I wrapped the gifts and made them shine, adding tags that read “To Letisha” or “To Toddler Boy.” Each tag was signed “Someone who loves you.” Gary stuffed the gifts into a huge box and loaded it into our station wagon.

On Christmas Eve, we went as usual to our church, lighting our white candles and singing about the “wondrous gift that’s given.” I thought about the precious gift of the baby born so long ago, and I felt that warm and wonderful peace wash over me. Our

gift was puny in comparison, but somehow it seemed holy on this most blessed of nights.

We went home to have hot chocolate in front of the twinkling tree lights, and wait. This time we weren't waiting on Santa. It wouldn't do to go to Letisha's until we were certain everyone would be in bed. At midnight we donned our warmest coats and all four of us piled into our station wagon. Dad turned the car lights off as we approached their house, soundlessly listening for any noise coming from their direction.

It was safe. Gary, the fastest of us, grabbed the box and took off across the yard to deposit it on the stoop. I couldn't see him in the pitch blackness, but I could hear. A dog's sharp bark pierced the air. A big German shepherd started rounding the corner of the house and Gary's footsteps quickened their pace. I held the car door open for him and he slid in just in front of the dog's bared teeth.

The first day back to school after Christmas break, Gary winked at me from his seat on the bus, willing me to keep my poker face as we neared the house of our midnight run. Jerome, Letisha, and the other six kids were all dressed in the clothes we'd given them. Every outfit seemed to fit as though it had been designed with that particular child in mind.

It's been many years now since that Christmas Eve, and I have not forgotten it. I hope I never will. After months of pining over my dream coat, I never missed it after all. Looking back, I can't even remember exactly how it looked. But Letisha Robinson's beautiful smile as she proudly wore her new sweater is permanently etched in my memory. I learned the joy of giving that Christmas.