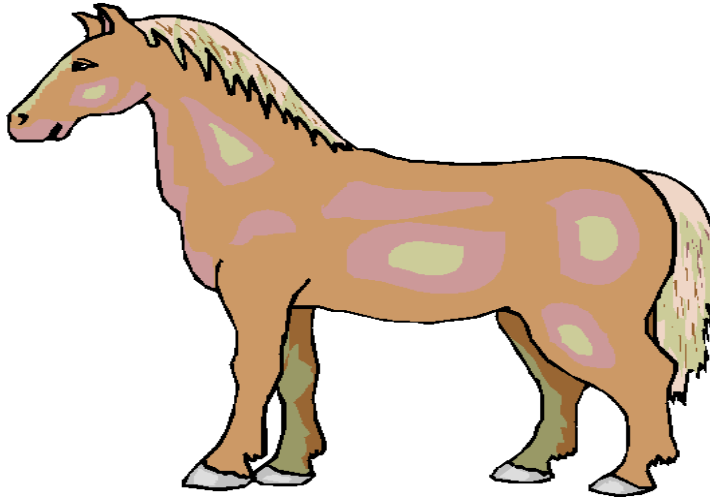


FAMILIES THAT CARE, CARE ABOUT FAMILIES

By Rachele P. Castor

My tenth Christmas was one I was not looking forward to. Money was scarce. Dad was a preacher, and preachers for our church don't make much. Mom said we were old enough now to be brave and not count on gifts. Just being together would be enough.



shopping around so that we could give the Walters family a Christmas basket.

"If anyone needs some cheer, it's the Walters," Mom reminded us.

"But the Walters. Mom. I wouldn't be caught dead at their front door."

We weren't the only family in our small community who would have a meager Christmas. But the knowledge that others were going through the same thing didn't help much. One night, as my sister and I huddled together in our shared bed, we had a small pity party for each other.

"How can I even wear that same old dress one more time?" I complained.

"I know," said my sister. "I think I might as well give up asking for a horse, too. I've asked for one forever but it just never happens."

"Yeah, and even if we got one where would we keep it?" I said, destroying her last hope.

I couldn't stop thinking about my sister's long-held dream to own a horse and decided I was willing to give up every gift for ten Christmases if only her dream could come true.

The next day, Mom added salt to my wounds by telling us that she had been saving up and

Mom gave me a dirty look.

But I knew she would have to agree that the Walkers were the strangest people we knew. Looking a lot like a family of hobos, they could have at least washed their hair once in a while. After all, water is free. I always felt embarrassed for them.

Mom was determined. And it was our duty to load up our little sled and pull the basket full of flour and sugar, a small turkey, potatoes, and bottled peaches over to the Walters, leave it on the doorstep and run.

On the way we noticed that Mom had tucked a small gift for each of the children in among the food. I was distraught. How could Mom be so generous with someone else's kids when our own family didn't have enough?

We delivered the package, knocked hard on the door and ran fast to hide behind a nearby bush. Safely hidden, I looked back the way we had come and realized my sister was standing



in plain view. I was so mad. I didn't want them to know our family had anything to do with this.

After the Walters gathered up their basket of goodies and had closed the door, I said in a loud whisper, "What are you doing? I know they saw you!"

"I wanted to see their faces when they saw the gifts," my sister said innocently. "That's the best part."

"Whatever," I said, relenting to the unchangeable. "Did they look happy?"

"Well, yeah, happy, but mostly they looked like, well, like they were thinking, *Maybe we do belong.*"

Christmas morning arrived just a couple of days later. To my surprise, I unwrapped a fabulous-looking dress. I smiled at my parents as if to say, "I can't believe you actually got this for me." Then I glanced at my sister's face, which was full of anticipation. There was only one small package under the tree. She unwrapped it and found a currycomb. *A currycomb? Had my parents totally lost it? My sister's face was blank and I was thinking, Is this some kind of a mean joke?*

We hadn't realized that Dad had slipped outside. Just as I was about to speak, he rode up in front of the big picture window atop my sister's new horse!

My sister was so excited that she jumped up and down, then stopped and put her head in her hands, shook her head back and forth in disbelief and screamed, "Oh, my ...oh, my!" With tears rolling down her cheeks, she ran out to meet her new friend.

"Mom, how did you do all this?" I asked. "We were ready for a no-present Christmas."

"Oh, everybody pitched in. Not necessarily trading but just helping each other. Mrs. Olsen at the dress shop let me bring your gift home now, even though I'll be paying for a while. Dad did some marriage counseling for the Millets's son. I hung up Mrs. Marshall's tree lights since her arthritis is getting her down. We were thrilled that Mr. Jones had a horse that needed some TLC, and he was thrilled we had someone to love it. And then for a moment we thought all was lost because we couldn't figure out where to house the horse. Then the Larsens, down the way, offered some of their pasture to keep the horse penned and well fed."

"I thought since you were giving away food to the Walters that we would never have enough. They really don't have anything to give in return."

"They will some day. But there is enough and more to share. Everything's God's anyway. Doesn't matter who can or can't give. If we just listen to our hearts, the right gifts will end up with the right families."

Mom always knew truth.

I glanced out the window at my sister now sitting on her horse, and thought about how she had described the expression on the Walters's faces when they discovered the Christmas basket. That "belonging" feeling was more precious than any of the gifts. And I thought, *Families that care, care about families. All families.*

That was the Christmas that I learned about the magic of giving.

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