



The Meaning Of Giving

It was the longest car ride in Sarah's life. She sat in the back seat, glaring out the window, her long ears folded downward behind her, like a canine's. She didn't even bother to brush her mane, allowing the forelock to fall between her ears and lay between her eyes like a wild colt. She clutched a wrapped box in her arms tight, as if afraid it was going to grow legs and begin to walk away. Her brother Jason didn't fare any better; His elbow sat on his knee, propping up his chin as he glared at the broken sidewalks, cracked streets, and people walking outside to and fro, going from somewhere to nowhere. Some making it to jobs, others to soup kitchens and homeless shelters to find protection from the white powder that had been gathered in dirty clumpy clouds on the street corners and near storm drains. The powder continued to fall since last night with no sign of stopping. Not one tail wag or perked ear, not one single sign that anyone was ever happy there.

"Why are we even here?" Asked Sarah.

"Because," Francis said, holding his head high in an attempt to give a noble air, as he always did with his kids when he felt he was teaching them an important life lesson, "here is where we are dropping off the presents."

"This whole thing is stupid!" Jason growled, a snarl forming on his equine muzzle. "Why don't they buy their own stupid presents. Why do they have to take mine."

“Jason!” his mom snapped. “You better drop the attitude!”

“I’m sorry mom,” he said with sarcasm, “I’m really glad some stranger is getting to take my toys and play with them instead of me.”

Francis could tell Suzanne was ready to pop her son for his disrespectful attitude. He placed a comforting paw on her knee, rubbing it gently in a small attempt to calm her down. She looked at him instead, her own ears back now, brushing the mane from her forehead. “You deal with them.” She said, then looked ahead. He took a deep breath and let it out in a slow sigh, then said, “These are the toys you don’t play with anymore, remember? The deal was, in order to get the expensive things you wanted, you had to give up one thing of equal value for each of them. For the cell phone, you gave up your skate board, for the video games, you gave up action figures.”

“But I like all of those things,” He cried. “I mean, I don’t play with them now, but I still do sometimes.”

He looked all of eight years old then going on five. His father sighed, then came to a stop at the red light. Reaching back, he looked at both of his children. “Look, I tell you what.” He said with defeat in his voice, “after we go to this party, you still want to keep the toys, I’ll let you keep every toy you boxed up.”

Excitement shot through both of their eyes, lighting them up. “You mean it?” They gasped.

He nodded. “But first, you must go to the party. That’s the deal.”

After the red light, they took a right and came down a narrow alleyway. Dirty, ancient buildings crowded them on either side that seemed to reach up into the grey dreary sky. Rusty fire escapes reached down from top floor to the dirty concrete of the alleyway below. A parking lot opened up behind a building on their right. There were three spaces near a dumpster, two of which were taken up

by older vehicles that had cancerous rust spreading out from quarter panels and near bumpers. He parked his new Mercedes next to them, then said with as chipper of a voice as he could muster, "We're here, all kiddies out of the pool!" They all piled out of the car, the kids huddling close to their parents. "Is this neighborhood safe?"

"We'll be fine," Francis said, patting his kids on the shoulder. "Just stay close to your mom and me." They nodded. Each child held their own packages in their paws, a leaning tower of poorly matched wrapping paper and tape, of stuck on bows.

They walked around the side of the building, coming towards an old rusty side door, that sat near two windows that both had iron bars over them. An ancient sign sat above the door that read "Saint Grady's Homeless Shelter".

"Homeless Shelter?" Jason head tilted a bit as he asked the question. Then lifted a knee to lift the packages up better so they didn't slip out of his paws.

"That's right," Francis remarked. "They have no home, so Santa can't exactly visit them this year."

Jason eye rolled at the Santa remark. He was two years older than Sarah and knew that Santa wasn't real. But Sarah just stared at the door, holding her boxes tight against her chest, a look of grim determination on her muzzle. *No one's getting my presents* she thought. Anger and indignation filled her heart. The stale scent of unwashed bodies that washed over her as the door opened did nothing to persuade her.

Jason however looked a bit different. The anger in his eyes had begun to be replaced with a kind of sadness. His tail tucked a bit as he thought of all the kids huddled in beds here in a large open room instead of a room of their own, with no toys to play with. Francis ushered them both inside, directing them down a hallway towards a sad tree that sat in the corner. The decorations upon it where cheap

and old. The tree itself was an artificial one that looked to be even cheaper and older than the decorations. "There," Francis replied, pointing at the few boxes that already skirted the tree. With great reluctance, both Sarah and Jason walked towards the tree to deposit their gifts. Well most of their gifts, Sarah clung hard to the large one in her paws, indignation and defiance still painted on her face. Her ears folded back in anger.

"Sarah honey," Suzane asked, her ears tilting a bit downward as concern washed over her face. "Don't you want to,"

"no!" She cried, clutching the box tighter. "Molly stays with me."

Francis gave his wife a knowing nod, then said, "Okay then, back here we wait. You kids stay here in this room."

Instead of a "to" section, each toy had been listed by the age of the proposed child and gender. Most of the other packages had been hand wrapped with the loving care that only the paid professionals set up in the booth at the mall can provide. Jason's and Sarah's gifts looked out of place amongst them, paper wadded up in certain places. Over taped in others. Wrapped in a vicious fury instead of professional love and care. The room had industrial plastic chairs in neat rows, enough to seat at least twenty-five kids at a time. Large glass windows from the sixties or seventies gave light into the old room, their ancient aluminum frames covered in a thin layer of dirt and dust, the glass showing the everyone a blurry image of the building next door.

Two very over worked individuals walked inside the room, a feline and a canine. The canine was male, his large frame swayed a bit with each step, though his tail still wagged, brushing against the small child seats. Kids began to fill the room after them, taking their seats in the plastic chairs with barely a peep: kittens, puppies, colts, cubs and vermin. All species and ages, some as young as four, others as old as fifteen. They waited as they sat, a look of tired defeat on their faces.

“Alright!” The feline said, pushing as much cheer into her voice as possible. Her black triangular ears sat upright, though her tail twitched from side to side as she spoke. “It’s time to hand out presents! Let’s see if Santa has brought enough this year.”

Sarah and Jason sat back, and watched as the social workers began to call each child up by name and hand them a box. They brought the box back to their seats, and began to tear through colorful paper and ribbons. As they unwrapped the boxes, their faces became alive. Toy cars, dolls, tea sets. Action Figures with heroic poses from the latest comic book movie, one had even been given an Easy Bake Oven. “Still want your toys back?” Francis asked his son. Jason shook his head as one kid, no older than him bounced up and down in joy as he pulled out the skate board. The bear cubs’ arm had no fur on it. The skin had been grafted over and over, leaving a mismatched, rocky, pink and red mountainous mess of the skin on his arm and paw. “No, dad,” he said looking up. “But, can I go play with them?” His father nodded, pride filling his heart.

The wrapping on the box wrinkled a bit in Sarah’s paws, she clutched it so hard. Her heart was at war. These kids had lost so much. Some obviously lost their homes in fires. Others, she had no idea why they were here. She couldn’t yet comprehend the sad realities of economics and job loss, addictions and the terrible toll they played on those around them. These toys that they had become bored with were giving others so much joy. *But why do they have to take mine?* She wondered, anger giving way to cold confusion.

“Daddy? Mommy?” Sarah looked up at her parents.

“Yes, Sarah?” her mom asked.

“Won’t Santa bring them gifts?”

Her father knelt down, placed a paw on the side of her muzzle, where the blaze of white fur ran from her nose to the brown forelock of her hair. "Baby," he said, "Santa can't bring gifts to kids who don't have homes."

"That's not fair," she cried, a little louder than either of her parents would have liked. Their eyes glanced around the room, looking for the prying eyes of anyone whose attention had been caught by Sarah's indignation. No one stirred or cared, the children's attention drawn to the toys in front of them.

"Life's not fair," her mother said rubbing Sarah's ear in that special way she liked so much. "But that's why we're here. We all must do our own part to make it a little fairer for everyone."

"That's all!" The canine social worker cried. One little girl sat in the back, a small equine like Sarah. She huddled herself close, a dark look of defeat on her face. Her ears tilted downward in the sort of pain and depression that no child should ever feel. Her small dress was dingy and dirty, not having been able to have fresh clothing in quite some time. She was used to loss. To losing things and being overlooked. She held her arms close and stared at the floor. Maybe dinner would be served soon. At least she could be first in line for that.

The soft *tap tap* of Sarah's approaching feet was lost in the cacophony of the other kids playing with their toys for the first time. Jason was demonstrating to the bear cub, who he found out was named Brian, what a kick flip was. A deer raced around the room with an action figure in the air, who was out to save all the lost and homeless children in an invisible city in the corner. Sarah approached the little girl, holding the box, her paws shaking a bit, her tail tucked. "My name's Sarah," she said. "This is for you."

The poorly wrapped box glittered a bit in the light from the fancy paper Sarah had chosen. "Hi," the equine said back. "I'm Cailyn."

The box felt light in Cailyn's paws. She shook it for a moment. It wasn't a hard sound. But there was something inside. Something not clothing. Her eyes lit up, tears filling them for just a moment. Paper flew in all directions as she tore through the top of the box, and all of the stuffing the large box had inside. Beneath the newspaper was a small equine doll, wearing a simple dress. It had buttons for eyes, a simple muzzle, and a mane made out of yarn. "Her name is Molly," Sarah said.

Cailyn bounced up and down in her seat, shaking the doll almost as he held it tight then hugged it close. "I'm going to love her forever!" She cried. "Thank you!"

As the two little equine girls raced to a free corner in order to play with Cailyn's new doll, Francis felt an arm around his shoulders. Looking over, Sarah was smiling at him. "I admit I was wrong. This was a good idea. What made you think of this, anyway?"

"Last Christmas." He spoke. "We raced around stores, going down wish lists like check lists, trying to get our kids everything they asked for, just like a million other parents in this city last year. And what did they say?"

"Oh, I remember," Sarah said. *"It wasn't as good as last year, mom!"* She rolled her eyes as she said that last line. "I wanted to kill them."

"We worked so hard, all that pain and sacrifice and it was almost like they didn't care as long as they got stuff. I just kept thinking, 'If there was only some way they could see. Could learn what it meant to share with and care for others.'" He sighed, then put his arm around her. "That's when I came up with this."

She nuzzled him gently, then watched their children play with the other kids. In what felt like only a short time later for them, dinner was called. All of the kids gathered up their toys carefully, holding

them close. “Goodbye,” Cailyn said to Sarah, hugging her one last time. “I’ll take real good care of Molly.”

“And Molly,” Sarah said, leaning into the doll, “Take good care of Cailyn.”

After final hugs and fist bumps, Sarah and Jason ran back to their parents. Outside it was the same dreary weather it had been that morning when they arrived. After everyone carefully climbed in and buckled seatbelts all around, Jason spoke up from the back seat. “Thanks for taking us, mom, dad.” He spoke. “Brian was pretty cool. I hope he gets a house soon.”

“Yeah,” Sarah replied. “Can we do that next year?”

“I think so,” Francis said as he carefully pulled out of the parking spot.

“Can we bring more toys?” She asked. Jason threw in a “Yeah!” at the end of it, adding in his own agreement.

“I tell you two what,” Suzanne said, turning to look at her two children. Their faces beamed with excitement. Her heart was filled with pride and joy at the two of them, right then, and their perfectly upturned ears, the smiles on their muzzles. “You give me and your father some money from your allowance each week, and we’ll all go together and pick out some toys for them, okay?”

Jason nodded.

“Okay,” Sarah said. “After all, Molly’s gonna need a playmate.”