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The Trader

The man who walked in from the snow left large tracks behind him, each footstep sinking deep into the powder. The horse who followed behind him carried his gear, mostly all contained in one large bag tied to the saddle horn. The man himself was weighed down enough. He was a large man, bundled in several layers of clothing and a large coat.

He stopped in the clearing, his breaths rising up in small puffs above his head, and took a moment to focus his eyes ahead of him. A small house and barn sat on the other side of the clearing. Smoke rose from the house's chimney. Light beckoned from the windows.

"It's late, girl." He stroked the horse's nose with a gloved hand. "We won't make Doogan's tonight, and we could use a warming up."

He crossed the clearing to the house and let the reins of his horse fall free. She wouldn't stray. Even if she spooked, she'd come back to him.

He stepped up on the porch and he heard movement inside. Someone had heard his heavy tread on the boards. Now they opened the front door a crack to peer out at him.

"Yes? Who's there?"

The man pounded his hands together. They felt especially cold suddenly.

"Just a trader, on his way to a friend's for Christmas. I was hoping you'd let me rest a spell in your barn there. I can pay you for your trouble."

The door opened wider. A fair-haired man looked up at him, and after a moment, gave him a smile. “No need to pay, stranger. Help yourself to the barn. There should be oats and water for your horse inside ... and ...” He paused and turned around, and the trader could just see that a woman behind him had handed him something. “Here’s some biscuits and jerky for you.”

He handed him a small kerchief tied into a bundle.

The trader smiled down at them, the act almost hurting his cold, tight cheeks.

“Much obliged.”

* * *

The trader settled in for the night. His horse ate eagerly from his feed bag and the trader had never tasted biscuits so good. He had arranged some hay for his bed and planned to use his coat for a blanket. His large bag of gear sat at the head of his bed.

He couldn’t wait for old Doogan to see what he’d brought this year. Not only had he made a significant profit, he’d had time to do some whittling. He’d made a flute that didn’t sound half bad, and a top that flipped over if you spun it just right. Strange how the tradition started, but every year, he and Doogan had a little competition between them, as if success was measured by how much time they each had for whittling.

The barn door creaked open.

The trader sprang to his feet. Was it the wind kicking up, or ...?

Two small children stepped into the barn and shut the door behind them, their cheeks and noses red, their blue eyes wide. They were towheads, as his mother used to say, their hair as blonde as corn silk. They stood with their backs planted firmly against the door and they stared

up at him, hand in hand, their eyes as wide as they could possibly be. They appeared to be twins – a boy and a girl.

The trader gave them a half-smile. “Shouldn’t you two be in bed?”

They nodded, in unison. “We wanted to see you,” the boy said.

The trader sat back down on his pile of hay. “Well, here I am. Now you’d best get back to bed.”

They stared a moment longer, and then the girl whispered something into the boy’s ear.

The boy swallowed. “We’ve been good this year,” he said. “Except for the one time –”
The girl poked him with her elbow. “Good. We’ve been good.”

The trader nodded to them. He wasn’t much for talking to children. He wasn’t even sure how old they were by looking at them. Six? Seven?

The little girl whispered to the boy again. Again he swallowed, as if every sentence took a certain amount of fortitude. “Daddy said Christmas might not come this year.”

The trader had finished his biscuits and jerky. His horse had finished his feed bag. The long day of traveling had left him wearier than he thought, and it was getting very late.

“You two run off to bed now. Tomorrow’s Christmas and I’ve got somewhere to be.”

The twins looked at each other, their eyes still wide. When they turned back to look at him, they were grinning. “OK. We’ll go.”

They turned and opened the barn door, and before the two disappeared, the little girl called out, “Merry Christmas!”

* * *

The morning glistened. The snow had stopped falling, at least for now, and the trader lifted his face into the warmth of the sun, breathed in the crisp, clean air. It was a good day to be Christmas.

He had saddled his horse, and now all that he had left to do was tie his bag back onto the saddle horn. But he hesitated. He wouldn't get to Doogan's until way after lunch, and the memory of those tasty biscuits was making him hungry even now. Perhaps, if he gave the woman of the house one of his coins from this year's profits, she'd make him another bundle to take with him. That sure would make it a fine day.

He knocked on the door. The man answered it and smiled at him.

The trader already had his coin pouch in his hand. His large bag of gear sat beside him.

"I was wondering if I could get some biscuits for the trail. I have money to pay for it." He held out the kerchief from the night before, and a coin.

"Nonsense," the woman called from inside the house. "You aren't going to pay for biscuits. Adam, invite him in while I prepare it for him."

The man, Adam, opened the door wider and the trader stepped into the small living room, dragging his bag behind him.

A fire was going in the fireplace. A small pine tree sat in the corner of the room by the windows, decorated with hand-made ornaments. Above the fireplace were two small socks, and above each sock was a picture – one of the boy, one of the girl. A single stick of hard candy poked out of the top of each sock. Under the tree ... well ... there was nothing under the tree.

Adam gestured toward the fireplace. "Warm up a bit before you go," he said. "Would you like some coffee?"

The trader shook his head. “No. I’ll fix myself some down the trail a bit.” He gestured toward his bag. There was a coffee pot in there, somewhere.

He looked up again at the small socks above the fireplace, glanced again toward the tree. When the woman returned with his biscuits, she stood waiting a while before he noticed her.

“Here you go,” she said.

He looked up at her. Now he saw where those wide, blue eyes came from, the corn silk hair. He reached out and took the biscuits, opened his bag to put them inside. Then he paused, straightened slowly. Adam and his wife stared patiently at him.

He swallowed, just as the boy had done last night. “Could I ... leave something for your children?” he asked.

* * *

The trail beckoned to him. He sat atop his horse, his bag of gear riding firmly against his leg. Another few yards and he would be out of sight of the small house and barn, and he hadn’t meant to turn around and look at it, but he thought he heard something.

He turned around in his saddle.

On the porch, waving frantically, were the twins. The little girl held the flute in her hands, the boy held the top.

“Thank you!” He heard them screaming. “Thank you!”

He waved back at them, turned around in his saddle. “You’re welcome,” he said softly.

Then he heard them screaming something else and he turned his head so he could hear it better.

“Goodbye, Santa!”

He was suddenly out of earshot.

Santa? He reached up and scratched his beard, noticed in that instant how white it looked from the snow and cold, realized, too, how his large bag of gear and his own immense size must have seemed to two small children.

He laughed. It was a big, hearty laugh. Tonight, when he sat at Doogan’s table and told him how he had given away most of his profits to a young homesteader and his wife, and gave his whittling away to their children who thought he was Santa Claus, he felt sure he was going to win the tall-tale contest.

What better Christmas could there be than that?

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