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Abstract
A short story on Christmas, faith, and family fellowship.

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The Nightmare of Christmas

BY JAMES C. SCHAAP
“They got laws against that,” Henk said, looking up from *The Banner*, over the top of his half-glasses. “Or I do.”

Henk had started painting houses when he was 16, never finished high school. Soon enough he owned the company and hired six men. They worked all year long, interior and exterior. Things grew. And grew. A furniture business followed, then eight stores throughout four counties, and even some interior decorating, which Mavis, often enough, did herself in those early years, before they hired some prissy professional—and then fired her when Janice showed up and married Sam. Janice had the eye. And she was the only one of the girls who really showed much interest in the church.

Not that the others didn’t go to church—off and on, at least. But Henk and Mavis had often told each other that their kids likely made a point of going to church because of their parents, because they were family and all, and, although no one would say it, they were scared stiff about being left out of the will.

“So what do I tell them, anyway?” Mavis said to him rather quickly, knowing that it wouldn’t take long—*Banner* or not—before her husband began nodding off. “To-day Deb called, “ she said. “‘What can we get the two of you for Christmas?’—same question as Ruth.”

“They got too much money,” Henk told her.

“Well, so do we,” Mavis told him, “and what’s worse, we gave it to ’em ourselves.”

“We go crazy—all of us kids—trying to figure out what to get.”

“A fancy Caribbean cruise, like my globetrotting kids,” her father said from behind the sink, where he stood, apron-bedecked, his hands in the dishwater.

“You’re so full of b.s., Dad,” Ruth told him. “You two wouldn’t go if we paid you.”

“That so?” her father said. “They got beaches there where the women wear nothing on top,” he told them, gesturing with his wet hands.

“They’ll do you a lot of good, old man,” Mavis told her husband.

“I read on Drudge just last week—a man of 90 was just now a father,” Henk told them, nodding his head in affirmation. He half-turned, far enough to see his daughter giggle.

“I’m serious, Mom,” Ruth said again. “And now that Dad has that camera he bought, we can’t give you pictures anymore either—and he doesn’t wear ties,” she said, pointing at him.

“Bubble bath?” Ruth asked.

“I got a drawer-full you can take home right now,” Mavis told her, “or wait until we pass away. Either way you’ll get it.”

“Oh, Mom,” Ruth said, “it’s always the same old song—Christmas is just such a nightmare.”

Christmas is just such a nightmare.

That’s what Henk and Mavis kept telling each other after that Sunday in early December. “Christmas is such a nightmare,” they’d say, even though it wasn’t when they were kids, even though all they got one year in his family up north, Henk told Mavis for the eleventy-seventh time, was an orange, just an orange. “And that was plain wonderful.”

If that Michael Jackson guy proved one thing, Henk thought, it was that Jesus Christ wasn’t wrong about money—it never really did a thing for happiness. And even though he and Mavis had far more than they could count or even spend, for that matter, even though any one of the kids could send their parents to the Riviera, according to their oldest child, Christmas was just such a nightmare.

“I’m not letting you anywhere near those beaches,” Mavis told him one night when they were sitting home alone in the family room. “Only if you let me go topless too.”

“They got laws against that,” Henk said, looking up from *The Banner*, over the top of his half-glasses. “Or I do.”

Henk had started painting houses when he was 16, never finished high school. Soon enough he owned the company and hired six men. They worked all year long, interior and exterior. Things grew. And grew. A furniture business followed, then eight stores throughout four counties, and even some interior decorating, which Mavis, often enough, did herself in those early years, before they hired some prissy professional—and then fired her when Janice showed up and married Sam. Janice had the eye. And she was the only one of the girls who really showed much interest in the church.

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“Well, so do we,” Mavis told him, “and what’s worse, we gave it to ’em ourselves.”

“They don’t know what it’s like to be poor—none of them,” he said.

“Oh, get off your high horse,” she said. “They’re all good kids, all of them, and you love ’em too.”

“Doesn’t mean we didn’t spoil ’em,” Henk told her. »
She didn’t need to look at him because she knew very well where this conversation was going. They’d been there before, and besides, there was never all that much new under the sun when you get high into your 80s, she’d come to think. “So what do I tell ’em?” Mavis said again.

“Well, what do you want?” Henk said.

“What I want is for all of them—up and down the whole family, the whole shooting match—what I want is that each and every one of them loves the Lord,” she said. “And so do you.”

“We can’t give them that,” he said.

“They can, sure as anything, give it to us,” she said.

“What are you thinking—thumbscrews? You can’t wring blood out of a turnip,” he told her.

“Not a one of ’em is a turnip,” Mavis reminded him. “And we’re not talking about blood either, except maybe the Lord’s.”

“The Lord’s blood,” Henk said, “has been given once and for all.”

“Sometimes I wonder if I could still get you into seminary,” Mavis told him.

“I’d get stumped by the Greek,” he said. “We got to think some.” He put down the magazine and sucked, noisily, at whatever little chunks of chicken were still jammed between his teeth. “Let ’em give it to charity—”

“Ten years already they’ve been doing that,” Mavis told him. “Christmas is such a nightmare.”

“No it i’n’t,” he said.

“Wasn’t me that said it,” Mavis said. “It was your firstborn. So what do you need, anyway?—what do I tell ’em when they ask? You got a half-dozen pairs of house slippers—which wouldn’t be half bad if we still lived in North Dakota.”

“How do we get them to give us what we really want?” he said. “That’s the question.”

For a moment, the two of them sat there, sounds of a men’s quartet coming sweetly from the Bose on the shelf—“O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

“Maybe we ought to just do it ourselves,” Mavis told him.

Henk looked up at his wife. “You’re not making sense, woman,” he told her. “Maybe—maybe not,” Mavis said. And that’s how the plot was hatched. It was Mavis’s idea, really, but as soon as she told her husband what she was thinking, he went for it, as if the two were one flesh, which they were. Mostly.

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Ever since he’d retired, his kids let him have an office in the original store, a little one, sort of out of the way, but at least a place for him to go to when he needed to, which was generally at least once a day, sometimes more, because he still liked to talk to customers when they came in, even if the sales itself he gave up long ago.

The way he and Mavis had it figured, they’d need someone else to do the printing because both of them had handwriting their children knew better than their own, most people typing nowadays and writing almost nothing.

So he took the project to a secretary, whom he swore to secrecy. Henk had the feeling, when she’d finished, that she had absolutely no clue what was going on.

When he came home, Mavis had assembled a series of boxes, each a little larger than rest, like those little Russian dolls, one inside the next. The last one was big as a shoebox, one of Henk’s too. When he was 70, Henk used to moan that an old man’s ears—his were floppy as a mule deer’s—like his feet, never stopped growing, even if almost everything else shrank to miniscule. Well, except a prostate.

Mavis packed it all up sweetly, wrapped it like only women can, Henk told her, put a bow around it the old-fashioned way, curling the ribbon with scissors, then anointed it with the name tag the secretary had printed herself: “To Mom and Dad, from all of us.”

Perfect, they thought. Just perfect.

A decade ago already, Ruth started having Christmas Eve over at her place because Mom and Dad’s, she’d said, didn’t hold all the kids anymore—grandkids and their spouses, and even great-grandkids, in fact. Ruth, whose Ben never really stopped working, had this big house down in the valley, a place almost without walls. It was so long and large you could have bowled in the living room. Henk and Mavis couldn’t begin to guess where Ruth got
their tree, so big it was a shame to cut it
down.

And their present to themselves—and
from their kids—wasn’t hard to sneak in,
either, because on Tuesdays, when Ruth
was working at the store, Mavis went over
there to cook supper. Not that she had
to. Mavis just loved to cook. So two days
before Christmas Eve, she simply took
that shoebox over to her daughter’s house,
along with the salmon she was going to
fix, and slipped that gift in with the other
pretty ones, just one of several dozen
beneath that huge pine.

Mavis is right—they’re good kids, all of
’em. Not that they’re not sinners, but then,
as the psalmist says, who can stand before
the throne of God? They show up for
church, which is important, Henk and
Mavis both say, but sometimes there’s no
lights on there, and there should be. They
don’t think like Christians in the business
world, Henk had come to believe, despite
the fact that they were taught not to leave
their love for the Lord somewhere in the
warehouse with the trade-in mattresses.

Ben works hard, not a lazy bone in his
body, but sometimes he doesn’t pay a
dime’s worth of attention to Ruth, who
carries way too much of a load at home
and always did. Deb and Reinder talk a lot
about the Lord, but the others sometimes
want to oust him from the business because
dreamy Reinder has a habit of not show-
ing up for work, then telling the rest of
them that he was doing Habitat work, or
buying hamburgers for the homeless.

Silent Sam isn’t the brightest lamp in
the showroom. What he really loves are
his four-wheelers, and he wouldn’t miss
a race all summer long if Deb didn’t
make sure he showed up once in a while
for church.

Tim and Sarah are the artists, too cool
for their brothers and sisters, both of them
sporting tattoos and an array of earrings
you only see on pirates, Henk says.

Not a bum in the bunch, but Mavis and
Henk just weren’t sure any of them
really loved the Lord, just weren’t sure
the message ever got through, and just
weren’t sure where in this life they’d
gone wrong.

Their present came up when Cami,
Deb’s youngest, delivered the box to them,
third round of presents, the whole ball-
room littered with electronic gizmos and
flat gift certificates or shiny debit cards.
“Says it’s for Grandpa and Grandma,” she
told them, when she handed it to Mavis.

“Well, I’ll be,” Mavis said. “I wonder
who this is from.”

All eyes were on her. Henk didn’t move
his head, just his eyes to make sure he saw
what was going on.

Mavis tugged on the ribbon ends she’d
left accessible and untied the bow as if it
had been dipped in gold. “What have we
here?” she said.

Even Markie put down his giant Trans-
former—that’s how quiet it became in
Ruth’s museum room with the vaulted
ceiling. Maddie sat in her grandpa’s lap with
the cloth doll she’d got in the first round.

Mavis took off the paper, lifted the
cover from the shoebox, and seemed
stunned to find another wrapped box
inside. “Is this a joke?” she said. “Who is
this from?”

The kids looked at each other
sheepishly.

Mavis carefully unwrapped the second
box, opened it, and acted totally shocked
to find another. And another. And another.
And another.

And all this time no one spoke. Henk
kept watching his kids out of the corner
of his eye because no one knew what was
coming down the pike here, at the very
soul of an annual exercise in which the
women knew exactly what was in almost
every last package. What was worse, of
course, was that the drama was building
because all of them must have wondered
who on earth went way over the line and
bought something the rest of them hadn’t
agreed upon ahead of time—and then
kept it to themselves.

“I’m sorry to hold you up this way,”
Mavis told her kids and grandkids.
“There’s always another box.”

And then she got to the last one, a small
white square box that once held a pearl
necklace. She opened it up to a piece of
paper, neatly folded, then brought that
paper up to her eyes, unfolding it slowly.

Even the dog was still.
She took her time, read through what
the secretary had copied from Mavis’s note,
then dropped the paper suddenly and
reached for her eyes, as if what she’d read
had moved her very soul. “What can I say?”
she asked. “What can I possibly say?”

“Read it,” Henk told her. “It’s for me
too.”

“I don’t know that I can,” she said. “I
just can’t begin to thank you all.”

The kids looked quizzically at each
other, eyes ablaze.

“It’s just perfect,” she said. “It’s the best
gift you could possibly give us.”

“What does it say, woman?” Henk
said. »

“You think two old people have
no more tricks
up their sleeves?”

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Maybe it was going too far now, Henk thought.

“Old man?” Mavis said again. “Isn’t this just the best thing we could receive?”

Even Ruth had nothing to say. Deb’s mouth stood open like a cave. Sweet Janice was almost in a swoon, and Sarah, tough-as-nails Sarah, the artist, looked mad—like the men. After all, who had the right to make them pledge to something they hadn’t? Who had the guts to sign all their names on the dotted line?

“This is what we wanted,” Mavis told them, breathing out something huge, as if all her trials were behind her. “This is exactly what we wanted for Christmas.”

Sideways glances veered like bayonets. “And that’s exactly what we wanted to tell you,” Henk said, because he just didn’t know what was going to happen.

But no one understood.

He held his darling granddaughter in his lap. “When you asked, ‘What is it you want for Christmas, Mom and Dad?’—when you asked us that question, we got to thinking that there was nothing our children could give us, nothing at all. Nothing we want or need, but this: a testimony that always in this world—no matter how much money you have—always in this world, our Lord and Savior comes first in your lives.”

No one spoke, until finally, it was Timothy, the youngest, the artist. “You mean you two pulled this whole thing off yourselves?” he said.

“Sarah had a baby at 90,” Henk said. “Read it yourself in the Bible. You think two old people have no more tricks up their sleeves?”

“I don’t know what to say,” Ruth muttered.

“IT’s not something we’re asking you to say,” Mavis told her, told them all. “You asked the question, and we gave you the answer—this is what we want for Christmas, for every Christmas, even this one, which may be our last.”

It was clear none of them knew what to say. What they’d got from their parents was the answer to the question, something each of them already knew.

Little Cami got up and went for the tree because it was time for another present.

“Wait, wait,” sweet Janice said. “I think we ought to pray. I just think we ought to pray and praise the Lord.”

Henk wasn’t so sure, but then, he told himself, there are a lot of things that happen in life you just have to take, so he was the one who said, “The Doxology.” So they sang. Later, Mavis told him he should have picked out a carol.

And then there were more presents. And then apple dumplings with lots of caramel, which some of them shouldn’t have had, Mavis thought. But you only get Christmas once a year, after all, she thought, and really, the whole season can be such a nightmare, if you let it.

And it shouldn’t be. No, no, she thought, it shouldn’t be.

When it was all over and that great room a royal mess, Reinder the Dreamer pulled out some mistletoe and hung it over their heads—Henk and Mavis, who thrilled everyone, even the little kids, with a big fat wet kiss for Christmas.

And it wasn’t a nightmare at all, Henk thought. Not at all.

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Slowly, she brought the paper up to her eyes, looked all around the room appreciatively, her smile itself a blessing, then started in.

“Dear Mom and Dad”—and then she bit her lip, which Henk thought might have been a little too much.

“Christmas can be such a nightmare,” she read, and then added, looking up, “Isn’t that the truth though?” She grabbed Henk’s glasses off his nose as if she couldn’t read without them. “We never know quite what to get you,” she read, “so with this note, we give you our love.”

A little too mushy for their family, Henk thought, but he’d let her have her way, like he’d done plenty often in the past 60 years.

“But even more than that,” Mavis read, “we give you our pledge that no matter what happens in this life, we will always love the Lord.”

There, that was it. Henk watched Mavis’s eyes, clear like morning summer skies as she looked around the room, at each of her children, one at a time.

“From all of us—your children,” she said, and put the paper down.

Perfect silence. Even the grandchildren didn’t move.

“That’s very nice,” Henk said, “but I was thinking it would be that Caribbean cruise.”

“You shush,” Mavis told him. “We could not get a better present.”

Still no one moved.

“There’s nothing we can say,” Mavis said, “—isn’t that right, old man? This is just perfect.”

In the room, even though there was all that wide-open space, you could feel fear and anger like a deep evening fog. Maybe it was going too far now, Henk thought. Maybe this would go somewhere they hadn’t planned, and that wouldn’t be good.