

A Christmas Story... Sort of

Okay, maybe this isn't *about* Christmas, but Christmas is the season for sweetness, so I'm hoping you'll let me tell a story that fits, even if it's set so many years earlier in a land that seems ever so far away.

There's a baby in it. It's short a manger and a posse of shepherds; but I can't help thinking this little story is related.

There must be a thousand stories like this—more, in fact, stories about shady first impressions suddenly turned to gold. Here goes.

A woman named Anderson, Mrs. Anderson, was the very first white woman, she says, in the neighborhood of Native people—mostly Dakota. It's 1854. She has a husband and two darling children—a two-year-old, and a baby. They live—as you can guess—in a log cabin, pretty much all by themselves.

Mrs. Anderson claims she'd never seen an "Indian" (that's her language, by the way) and was, therefore, scared to death one day when her husband was gone and she was alone, and a "hideously painted brave" (that's her language too) dropped by for a visit, startlingly unannounced. Didn't knock, didn't ask to come in, just walked in, took a chair, sat down, and looked around as if he were just as amazed as she was.

A huge knife was jammed in his belt. His scary and fearful presence froze her solid, zero at the bone, "overpowered with fright" (that's her language too).

Even though she knew her tiny precious children were close at hand, she couldn't help fear that grabbing them and fleeing would kindle the warrior's wrath. The only out, she determined, in a flashing second, was to go get her husband.

In this memoir of hers, she claims she ran a quarter mile or so toward the place in the field her husband was working, then stopped on a dime because she couldn't help realize, in a flash, that leaving her children alone was a downright terrible thing to do.

Think of her, at that moment, stopping in place, her husband still out of earshot, her children alone with a man with a knife she couldn't help but fear. Her "mother heart," she says, made clear that she had no choice--she had to go back.

Just like that, she turned around and sprinted.

Up the path and through the trees she went, running against her own staggered breath. Not for a moment did she waiver from what her mother heart demanded. She barged through the half-open door of the cabin, mind and heart and soul aflame, and there she saw—I'm not making this up—her two-year-old, a little boy, standing beside the still-seated warrior, playing with the man's tobacco pouch and his pipe and the two furry rabbits, dead, their heads drawn through strings, as well as a couple of prairie chickens hanging from their necks. Awed, that child was. Just. Playing.

"His expression," she says of her visitor, "remained unchanged."

And then this: her distressing visitor "carefully held the baby in his arms."

Mrs. Anderson didn't say what she felt right then, didn't have to because what she felt at that moment is woven into the story she said she'd never forget—first shock, then a massive lifting of her hugely anxious mother heart, and a blessing of abiding peace.

"I gave him bread and milk to eat," she says, "and ever after," she writes, "he was our friend, oftentimes coming and bringing the children playthings and moccasins."

Before the warrior left the Andersons that morning, he reached down to that belt and gave the Mrs. both the rabbits and the prairie chickens.

Okay, I know--there are no shepherds in this story, but there's a baby in the arms of a blessed stranger, and a child fascinated by someone who became right then a friend.

Something there is about that picture Mrs. Anderson draws of her little boy touching the magic softness of that prairie chicken, while the baby lies silently in the man's muscular arms—that blessed tableau suggests at least something of a nativity.

So there--Merry Christmas.