



A Surprise Gift

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"But what about you, Dad?"

James looked at his oldest daughter, Miriam, and felt his heart twinge with a mix of pride and grief. His wife, Amber, had picked her name before she was born. "I like that alongside her brothers, Moses and Aaron, Miriam was a leader," Amber told him when she was six months pregnant. "Yes, she made mistakes, but she learned from them. I want our daughter to have that same spirit of leadership."

Now, as a widower and single father of four, James was doing all he could to keep 12-year-old Miriam from growing up too fast and taking on too much.

She was standing next to her 10-year-old twin brothers, Aaron and Michael – Amber agreed "Moses" would be too unique a name for their Manitoba-born children, so she went with another M-name instead – and the littlest sister, Bea. She was their surprise baby arriving five years after her siblings. Amber had learned that "Beatrice" means "blessed one," and to help her older siblings say her name, they shortened

it to Bea. She was only 2 when her mom passed away, and now at age 5, she had no memory of the Christmases Amber would create for her family.

Their first Christmas without Amber had been a blur. James' and Amber's parents lived nearby so they helped out a lot with the kids. Last Christmas he'd possibly overcorrected and bought each of his children a mountain of presents in an effort to make Christmas special. This year he hoped to be a bit more intentional by teaching them to think about each other. They each got \$25, and they picked each other's names to buy each other a gift anonymously. They were sworn to secrecy after he explained the plan at Thanksgiving dinner.

"But we're not supposed to keep secrets," Michael, ever the worrier, had explained.

"Let's not call it a secret, then," James told him, feeling bad about forgetting Amber's "no secrets" rule. "Let's call it a *surprise*."

Aaron chimed in, "But what if I don't know what to get . . ."

"Don't say the name!" Miriam interrupted him. "We're not supposed to know! What if we each make a list of what we want and put it on the fridge? Then everyone can look at it, and no one will know."

James nodded. "That's an excellent idea, Miriam. Thank you."

"But I can't go to the store by myself," Bea chimed in.

"None of you can," James told her. "That's why I'm going to take each of you on your own to the store in a month so you can pick out your presents. Then I'll help you wrap them, and you'll all get something special from a sibling instead of just presents from me." He knew he needed to add more of a life lesson – Amber was always good at that. She'd been an elementary school teacher before they met and decided to be a stay-at-home mom when their twins arrived. "In the Bible, Jesus says, 'It is better to give than to receive.' What do you guys think that means?"

Aaron shrugged. Michael scrunched his eyebrows together in concentration but stayed quiet. Bea stared out the window, always on the lookout for birds at the pine cone bird feeder she'd made in kindergarten. Unsurprisingly, Miriam was the one who spoke up.

She looked at her siblings and explained, "It means that we can get more joy from giving gifts than just receiving them. It means it's better for us to be generous than selfish."

James nodded again, amazed and saddened at how mature Miriam was for her age.

"But what about you, Dad?" she asked again with wide eyes. "Who will get you a present?"

"Don't you worry about me." He gave her his most reassuring smile. "Christmas presents are more for children. My Christmas present is seeing all of you smile in surprise when you open your gifts. That's all I need."

Over the following weeks, the paper James put on the fridge slowly filled up with four different types of handwriting.

Jet Ski was Aaron's first idea, until James had a talk with him about what \$25 can get you. Then he added Hot Wheels cars, a Lego set and a small radio-control car.

Michael's ideas were thoughtfully written and thoroughly researched thanks to some time on the family iPad. A set of kids' binoculars, a set of bug specimen jars and a fossil science kit.

Miriam's list included several books in her favourite series and an oversized fuzzy sweatshirt.

Bea wanted a new stuffie. She didn't care what kind, but she included several suggestions: tiger, leopard, shark, whale, puppy and snake.

He pulled the list down before they sat down for dinner on Dec. 1. He already knew he'd be saving this list in the binders Amber had started for each of the kids' drawings, writings and creations.

They're doing OK, he told Amber as he tucked the list in his pocket and started to set the table. *You'd be proud of them.*





After scooping spaghetti onto each plate and the allotted five meatballs per person, James prayed for their meal.

"So," he said as they tucked in, "is everyone ready to go shopping for presents?" He pulled the list out of his pocket and waved it in the air. "These are some great ideas. Aaron, have you accepted that you won't be getting a Jet Ski for \$25?"

Everyone laughed, and Aaron rolled his eyes with a smirk on his face. "I guess so," he said.

"Tomorrow Grandma Barb is coming over, and she'll stay with you as I take each of you out for your turn," James explained.

Then he watched as his four children made silent but serious eye contact with each other. Michael gave Miriam a little nod.

"Actually, Dad," Miriam said with authority, "I talked to Grandma Barb. And, well, because you said you like to see us smile in surprise, we thought it'd be more fun for you if you didn't know what we got each other. So, um, then it can be a surprise for you too. And more fun. Grandma Barb and Grandpa Jon are going to take us all out, and then we'll take turns shopping and keeping it a secret."

Michael coughed meaningfully.

"I mean a *surprise*," Miriam corrected.

Michael nodded in approval.

"Are you sure?" James asked. "I don't need to be surprised. I can help."

Again, his four children looked at each other, and they all nodded quickly. "We're sure."

For the last three weeks, James was put under strict instructions not to look in any of the kids' closets. Their gifts to each other were supposed to be as much of a surprise for him as they were for them. Even his mom told him not to spoil it and let his kids have this fun.

Getting them to go to sleep on Christmas Eve had been tough. By 11:30 p.m., they were finally all quiet, and he could put out his presents under the tree. As he stepped back and looked at the four different

types of wrapping paper, he eyed each ornament that hung on the branches. All hand selected by Amber. He never cared if they had colourful lights or white lights, glass baubles or felt ones. But she had very firm opinions from the beginning. Ornaments shouldn't be off-limits. She never wanted their kids to be afraid to touch the tree. She never wanted them to feel bad for breaking something just because they tried to hold it. The tree in front of him was covered in multi-coloured lights, felt animals, yarn pom-poms – most of them were DIY projects she did with Miriam, Aaron and Michael. The newest additions were what Bea had made in school with her teacher, and he realized with a pang of guilt that he should have tried to make some with Bea like Amber did with the other kids.

"God," he whispered, "I try so hard, but I know I can't give these kids everything they need. They need their mom. I need their mom. But I am trying to trust you. Even when it's hard. So please, Lord, please be with my kids. Give them what they need. Give them more than what I can give them. Fill in the gaps, God. I want them to feel loved and safe and just *good*. I want them to be good. Help us be OK. Help us find our way."

The next morning, James felt the mattress shift as one, two, three children climbed onto Amber's side of the bed. Rubbing his face with his hands, he peeked through his fingers and saw three eager faces with Miriam standing at the foot of his bed.

"What time is it?"

"Christmas time," Miriam said with the biggest smile he'd seen in a while.

James glanced over and saw 4:58 on the clock.

"No. You did not wake me up before 5 a.m.," he said more to himself than to them, already feeling guilty about his tone.

"We couldn't wait!" Bea nearly screamed. He then noticed she was almost shaking with anticipation.

With a sigh, he sat up and swung his legs off the bed.

"I already made your coffee," Miriam told him as he followed the kids down the hall. She went to the pod machine she'd learned how to use and handed him his black coffee. "Now sit."

She was bossier than usual, but he didn't complain when he took his first sip.

"OK, OK," he conceded. "You know the drill. Before we open presents, what do we do?"

"Sing 'Happy Birthday'!" Michael exclaimed. The five of them then started a loud rendition of "Happy Birthday, Jesus," just like Amber taught them, ending with Bea in a fit of giggles. *Clearly she's excited about Christmas*, James thought to himself.

"Should you start with the gifts you got each other?" James asked.

His four children got eerily quiet as they exchanged glances and smiled broadly.

"What?" he asked.

"About that," Miriam said, sounding like her mom.

She went to the tree and picked up a big box with a fifth type of wrapping paper – brown paper with drawings he immediately recognized as the artwork of his kids. "We got this for you."

"What do you mean?" James asked, putting down his coffee and holding the box in his lap.

Again, his kids exchanged knowing looks, and Aaron stepped forward to explain. "You gave us \$25 each to get presents for each other. But that meant you wouldn't get a present."

"And that's not right, Dad," Michael chimed in.

Excitedly, Bea said, "We got you," before Miriam covered her mouth with her hand.

"Just open it," Miriam told him.

James didn't want to rip any of their drawings, so he carefully peeled back the paper and opened up the box. He took out crumpled-up tissue paper and found a new travel mug that said "World's Greatest Dad" with photos of Miriam, Aaron, Michael and Bea making silly faces. He then found four sets of silly socks – with the same silly faces. A bag of his favourite flavoured popcorn was next and then a bar of extra dark chocolate. At the bottom was a large manila envelope with "To Dad" scrawled on the front. Inside there were four handwritten letters, each titled "My Favourite Memory This Year." As he read through each of them, his vision grew blurry and his throat caught.

Four letters with four memories in four different types of handwriting detailed their favourite moments with him in the last year. Michael wrote about the time James took them to the science museum during the summer. Aaron remembered when James stayed up late to help him repair his Lego car that had smashed. Bea described when James read her favourite story 10 times in a row, doing all the voices. Miriam talked about when he came to pick her up from school when she called him feeling sad and he took her out for ice cream. Simple memories. Their memories. And an answer to prayer.

They were going to be OK.

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