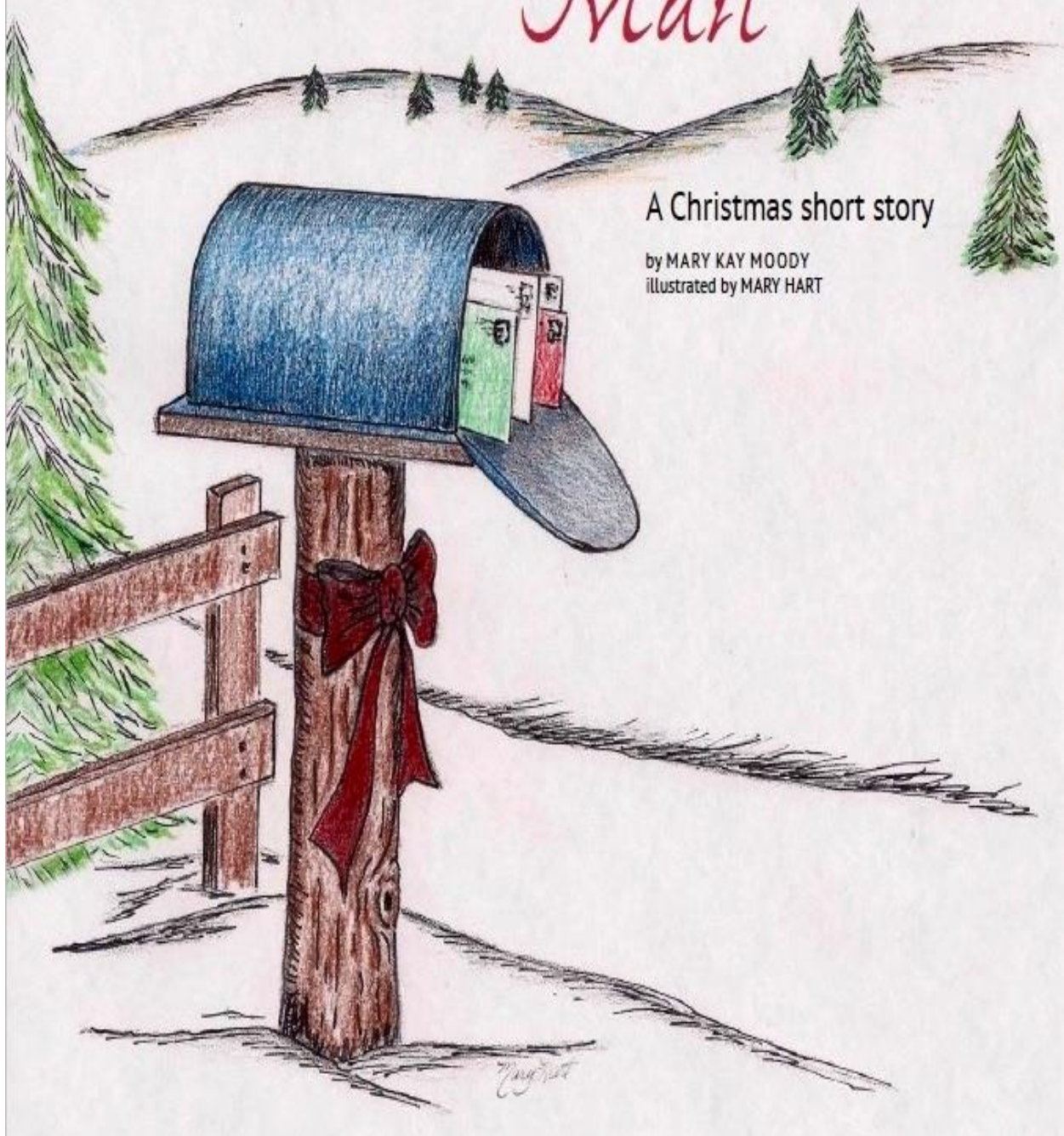


Morning Mail

A Christmas short story

by MARY KAY MOODY
illustrated by MARY HART





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Maggie McKnight clipped seat belts over Jake, 5, and Tyler, 3, then handed them their teachers' Christmas gifts. She swatted snow off the windshield, eager to get going and cross things off her long to-do list. She flung a prayer that their old Chevy would start, turned the

ignition, then smiled in the mirror at the two boys who occupied a large portion of her heart.

"Mail's here, Mom," Jake said as they reached the end of the driveway.

The box overflowed and the flap wouldn't close. "I'd better grab it. It'll get soaked." She stuffed two handfuls into her tote bag and drove off.

"Mommy?"

She checked the mirror.

"How many days to Christmas?" Excitement glittered in Ty's brown eyes.

Those eyes, so like his dad's. "Six, honey. Hard to wait?"

"Oh, yeah."

Selma looked out at the snow, a chill settling around her heart as Maggie and the boys drove by. *On their way to school, no doubt.* She waved, but no one looked her way, so this morning she got no return wave. A tear trailed down her wrinkled cheek. Swiping it on the sleeve of her thin chenille bathrobe, she turned to put on tea.

Robot-like, she filled the kettle, turned on the stove, poured juice, and set butter and marmalade on the table. Winter is hardest she thought. *Always is.* Her breath caught in her throat, her hand suspended over the white enamel table. *But this year's the worst.* The kettle's piercing whistle interrupted her thoughts.

She poured water into the teapot and enjoyed the aroma of orange spice. *Two cups in the morning.* Returning the kettle to the stove, her attention snagged on pictures stuck to the refrigerator. She inhaled a ragged breath, drawing a line along the cheek of the handsome young serviceman in the faded black and white photo.

"Joe, love of my life, do you know how much I miss you? When I shopped last Friday, I remembered our ritual, but I couldn't bring myself to get cocoa without you." Another tear escaped. "Second Christmas without you and this one's even harder. My first alone in 52 years." She rested her fingertip on his lips, then shifted her gaze to a color photo, a young man in a crisp blue uniform. A long sigh quavered. "Joe, do you know young Michael was killed in Afghanistan a few months back?"



Tears streamed. "Losing you was bad, Sweetheart, but we had many years together. Watching our sweet Emily lose her youngest son. Well, it's the hardest thing I ever had to do." She gave another ragged sigh, then straightened her bony frame, tightened the sash on her robe, and ate breakfast, wishing she could spend Christmas with her family—what was left of it.

Maggie dropped the boys at school and drove to the doctor's, sorting mail while she waited. Bills inside her purse, Christmas cards into her satchel, junk mail on the couch to toss in the receptionist's wastebasket.

But that miscellaneous stack tugged at her attention. Solicitations. From the local mission where folks receive food, shelter, job training, and teaching about Jesus. Organizations asking for a monthly commitment to relieve hunger. An agency that rescues children in distant countries from slavery or prostitution. The thought of children in such straits wrenched her heart.

The nurse called, and Maggie shoved the stack of requests into her bag. *Later.* After her check-up, Maggie quickly crossed off three to-do items by picking up puppy chew toys, special chocolates for Christmas Eve, and the new fishing rod she wanted for her husband, Keith. Leaving the mall, she spotted the bell ringer with the red bucket. She reached for her usual donation, then paused. *Should she give more?* Unsure, she dropped a ten in the kettle and went to pick up the boys.

After dinner Maggie settled under a velvety throw and emptied her tote. "Keith, what do you think?" She held up the stack of solicitation envelopes.

He peered over the newspaper. "What about them, Hon?"

"Usually we toss them. I tried that earlier and I just couldn't." She thumbed through glossy fliers. "I feel like we should send a contribution. But there are so many needs, I couldn't pick just one."

"Painful, isn't it?"

Closing her eyes, she leaned back. "Especially the children." A tear trickled down her cheek.

"Honey?"

She kept her eyes closed. "Yes?"

"Have you prayed about it?" he whispered.

"No." She winced at the defeat in her voice.

He folded the paper. "Heavenly Father, thank You for the many gifts You graciously provide. Maggie and I want to celebrate Jesus' birthday in a way

that will bring glory to You. Thousands are in deep need. Please show us clearly where you want us to help. Thank you. In Jesus' name. Amen." She opened her eyes as Keith walked over.

He wiped her tears and flashed a grin. "We should know soon."

"Thank you. And thanks for not making fun of me."

"Maggie, your sensitive spirit is a gift I always appreciate."

"Next to Jesus, you're the best Christmas gift." She stood and hugging him, relished being in his arms.

Next morning while Maggie stirred oatmeal, Keith asked, "Get an answer about where to send money?"

"I feel like God's telling me not to send money to any of them ..." He shot her a questioning look. "Though passing up that child rescue agency will be very hard. I think we're to take that money and make a nice Christmas for Selma. Remember Sunday she said her family wouldn't be coming this year?"

"Because her grandson was killed in Afghanistan, wasn't it?" He drained his coffee mug.

"Yes. The rest of the family is going to his widow and kids' place. It'll be the first time Selma's alone for Christmas."

Selma was surprised when Maggie rang her doorbell. "Hello, Dear. Come in out of the cold."

Maggie entered the foyer and held out a handful of mail. "Morning, Selma. Thought we'd bring this in. The box won't close."

She responded with a grin and a hug. "Thank you, that's very thoughtful."

"You're welcome." Maggie's gaze looked intent. "You mentioned that your family won't be coming for Christmas this year. Please spend it with us."

"Oh, dear, I—"

"Please do. We'd love it. You know the kids think of you as another grandma, don't you?" Maggie held her hands together like a child making a prayer.

Selma grinned. "Well, I'd like that very much. But you must let me help."



"Done." Maggie gave her a quick hug and left.

Selma moved to the door and waved to the boys. This morning she was graced with return waves and went to prepare breakfast with a smile.

After eating, she took her cup of tea to the parlor and sorted the mail into stacks. The mound of requests for aid weighed heavy on her heart, so she prayed about them.

Christmas Eve, cold and snow-dusted, the McKnights took Selma to the candlelight service, then home to celebrate. Maggie put cocoa and cookies on the coffee table, and smiled watching Ty who literally bounced. *A human Tigger.* Lights twinkled on the tree, the fire crackled, and music floated in the background. Selma nestled on the cushy sofa. *Thank you, Lord, for reminding us of Selma.*

"So, boys," Keith's rich baritone blended with the music. "What's your favorite thing about Christmas—besides getting presents?"

"I like you bein' off work so we can do stuff together," Jake bubbled.

"Selma, my dad's takin' us sledding tomorrow before dinner."

"Yeah, sledding." Tyler did an excited dance.

"O-o-h, sounds like fun." Selma matched the boys' grins. "I used to love sledding."

Jake turned to her with big eyes. "You can come with us."

"You're more than welcome," Keith added, choosing a cookie.

"Thanks, but I'm past my sledding prime." Selma giggled.

They shared holiday memories until Keith announced it was time to open Christmas Eve gifts. The boys opened storybooks, a tradition, then new trucks that Maggie knew would hold them until morning.

Maggie gently placed a sparkling package on Selma's lap, setting smaller ones on the couch. Selma appeared speechless, and Maggie, noticing tears pooling in the older woman's eyes, put an arm around Selma's shaking shoulders. "We're sorry you've had so many losses."

"You're such dears," she said, looking at each one. "You've given me much joy. I don't even need to open these to feel it."

"But open 'em," Ty crowed, shattering the sadness.

She grinned. "Want to help, Ty?" They laughed and worked together. She lifted the box lid and sat open-mouthed, her fingers stroking an ivory fleece robe that resembled a cloud. The satin collar and cuffs, embroidered with gold garland, sparkled in the firelight.

"Why, this fluff is softer than Emily's flannel baby blanket. I never ..." Her eyes misted again.

Jake and Ty handed her packages until all were opened. Piled in front of her were matching quilted slippers, afghan, a pewter picture frame, and a basket of teas, honey, biscuits, chocolates, and tea cup and saucer.

"I hope these remind you daily that you're loved," Maggie said.

"They will, dear." Again Selma glanced at each one. "I wonder if you know you're part of God's answer to my prayers."

"How so?" Keith said.

"I love Christmas, but without my family around, this one was going to be hard. I tried not to be discouraged after my surgery, and then Michael's death ..." She blinked away tears. "Then you invited me into your home. And this robe." She held it to her cheek. "It'll be warm as one of my Joe's hugs. Thank you for a wonderful Christmas."

Keith and Maggie exchanged a glance.

Selma continued. "God answered another prayer in a most unusual way. I asked Him what to do with the money I planned to spend on Mike for Christmas." Selma gulped. "I expected He'd tell me to give it to Mike's widow, or maybe a military charity. I was confused—and sure missed Joe and his wisdom." A faint smile appeared, then grew. "But the Bible says God is father to the orphans, husband to the widows—and sure enough, He told me what to do."

Each looked at her expectantly.

"He told me to give it to an agency that sent a solicitation in the mail. They rescue kids." She lifted her eyebrows. "Isn't that strange?"

"Not for God, Selma." Maggie smiled and lifted her eyes to heaven. *Everybody's expecting their best gifts tomorrow. I just got mine.*

~ Mary Kay Moody is a free-lance writer and Licensed Clinical Social Worker with a passion for exploring life at the intersection of our plans and God's purposes. If you stop by her website or blog, www.marykaymoody.com, sit a spell at the crossroads and chat.