

The choice of Christmas

St. Matthew – St. Aidan, Buckhorn, ON
W. Glenn Empey 2015

SARAH SAT PERCHED, somewhat precariously for her young age, on a tall wooden stool just behind and to the right of a large reception desk where her father sat as he welcomed the guests. There was a flurry of activity. One family was arriving right after the other.

When there was a moment of quiet, Sarah asked her father, "Da, why are you so busy?"

"It's busy, Sarah, because many people are coming to our town and they need a place to stay. That's what we do."

"Oh," Sarah said after a moment of wondering. But why are they coming to town now?"

"Well, that's kind of complicated."

"Why is it complicated, Da?"

"Sarah, I'm really busy right now. Let's talk about it in a while."

People continued to arrive at the desk. They would check in with Sarah's father and then pick up their baggage and head along.

"Well, you're so busy but you said that we'd have special time tonight."

"Yes, I know, Sarah. Let's see. OK?"

A steady stream continued -- young couples, many with children, a few people on their own. They all looked very tired and very worn. They just wanted to rest; you could tell. You could only imagine what they'd been through on their journey to this place and to this moment in time.

Sarah wondered who all these people were. She hadn't seen any of them here before. They looked different to her. It felt strange. But she did notice that the people seemed relieved somehow once they had landed at the desk. It was a bit odd to Sarah but it also added an element of expectation for her. "This is like a new beginning. How strange," she said to herself.

"How long will this take, Da? It's getting late and you promised. You promised tonight."

She could actually see how busy her father was. He only had time to re-organize his shuffle of papers and the next group would arrive. Some had to line up, one after the other. So he had even less time. She could see that as she twisted and squirmed atop the stool by the desk.

She looked inquisitively into the eyes of these strangers. Every once in a while one of them would notice her and give a smile. She liked that. And when she smiled back she got an even bigger one in return. It made her feel a connection.

"Maybe they're not so different after all. They smile at me," she thought.

When again there was a bit of a lull, she asked her father, "Who are these people who keep arriving at our place?"

"Sarah, honey, these are people who come from far away. It's complicated, my dear, but they have no other real choice than to be here. It's hard to explain."

"Why is it hard to explain?"

"Oh, Sarah, it's about government rules, conflicts, the things many people in power and many nations don't handle well especially when they disagree and can't work out their differences. I know it's not simple. Do you understand that?"

"No."

"Ha, neither do I."

"It's complicated eh, Da," Sarah said slowly managing to mimic almost every syllable properly.

"Yes, honey. In some ways it should really be simple and I really wonder why it's not. That's way beyond my level in all the things that go on."

"What's level?, Da."

"Oh, you mean 'my level'. I mean my place in things. I'm not a person of great importance. I'm not a big official or leader in the town. I'm just a simple, little person. I try my best for you and for your brother. But, really I am not a person of power. And I feel very small in the midst of complicated things that I find hard to understand just as you find them hard to understand too."

"Well, you're a big level to me."

"Thanks, Sarah," her father said softly with a smile.

Another young couple arrived and peaked over the top of the desk to where Sarah's father had been crouched down beside the stool to talk with her.

"Hello," Sarah's father said as he returned to the desk. "Welcome."

He sifted through his papers and looked behind at the mail slots on the wall behind the desk. He looked concerned and Sarah noticed.

"I'm sorry, there are no more rooms. I have no more rooms."

The young man said to Sarah's father, "Sir, we've been to every place in town. They have no rooms either and they all turned us away. It is late. We are very tired. It has been a difficult journey, very difficult, especially for my wife. I know that's hard to understand. Please do not turn us away. We have no choice."

"But, I have no rooms. I am very sorry. What can I do?"

"Please," the young man implored.

With a sigh of resignation, the young man put his arm around his wife and they turned to head toward the door.

As they moved away, Sarah scampered quickly down the rungs of the stool and went over to her father. She pulled on his trouser leg and whispered when he bent down, "Da, I know, I know. We have the extra room out back. That's where you let our cousins stay when they visit and it is so much fun. Nobody's there tonight. What about that? What about that? It's not complicated. You can do it, Da. It's at your level."

Just as the couple were passing the threshold of the door into the dark of the night, Sarah's father said, "Excuse me. Just a minute. I have an idea," as he motioned them back.

"It's not what I normally offer. It's an extra place out back. When this place is full and we have family visit, that's where they stay. It is very simple. It's where we keep our hotel supplies and food stuff for the restaurant. There's an old truck out there and the dog wanders in and out at times. There's a separate part and that's where my family stay. You are welcomed to stay there. I guess there's really no other choice, is there?"

"Anything will be very fine. Thank you," said the young man.

The woman lifted her head to reveal a beaming smile that made her whole face glow with warmth. And Sarah noticed the depth of her smile.

"Can I show them where, Da? I'll take them there and show them. I know the way. OK?"

"Yes, Sarah. And then come right back. We can have our time together as promised and we can check on them later."

Sarah took the young woman by the hand. The woman moved slowly but Sarah led her carefully with her husband to the special place for family who visit. After explaining, in some detail, how she and her cousins often slept in the very same spot, she headed back to her father. Sarah's steps were slower as if she were weighing the impact of what had taken place.

She said to her father, "You know, Da, there's something very special about this night and about that woman. Something very special is going to happen and it will be tonight."

"OK, Sarah, we'll see. Now what would you like to do?"

"I just want to be with you, Da. I want to be at your level."

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