



AND SUNDAY IT SNOWED

A STORY BY
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CATHERINE nursed her baby in the ladies' room between sacrament meeting and Sunday School class. Charlie, the 18 month old, stood solemnly at her knee for a moment or two, then bent over and squirmed under the closed stall door. She lunged with her free arm to grab his shirttail, but the cloth slid beneath her fingers. She could hear him in the next stall over pulling on the toilet paper and flushing the toilet. The soap dispenser rattled and she knew he had moved to the sink. "Charlie!" she called. "Charlie, come here!" Water gushed into the sink and Catherine slumped back on the stool staring at the rust spots on the pink metal door.

Water splashed on the floor and the baby's nursing subsided into restless sleep, his mouth hanging open, head slack against her arm. Fumbling under her blouse, Catherine harnessed herself up with one hand, then pulled her blouse back into place. She opened the stall door and saw Charlie raising dripping hands to smack them hard against the water in the almost-full sink. Trying not to wake the baby, but to move quickly, she hooked her hand under Charlie's collar and jerked him, not gently, against her side.

"Look what you've done," she moaned to no one. Charlie wrapped both arms around her leg and she edged sideways to the wall to pull out a handful of papers towels and dropped them one by one on top of the puddles on the pink tile floor.

The baby wriggled against her shoulder and his eyes blinked open. Catherine stared at the blind unfocused gaze, holding her breath. The lashes drifted down again, fanning out over his rounded cheek, and she allowed herself a long sigh. With her foot she pulled the infant seat out of the stall, carefully settling the baby into the battered plastic frame. His closed lids fluttered as if his eyeballs moved, but he didn't waken. Charlie watched the whole procedure with interest, arms still gripping her knee.

She picked Charlie up and set him dripping on the counter. He swung his legs, weighted by the heavy leather shoes, happily against the empty drop from countertop to floor. She looked at him a moment to make certain he was steady, and he suddenly flashed his dimpled grin. She sighed and, avoiding her harassed eyes in the mirror, knelt to wipe up the water. Dirt smeared across the wet paper towels. The janitor hadn't mopped again. She would remember to tell her husband. His bishopric duties might include keeping track of the inactive, semi-derelict they'd hired to clean the building.

Catherine stood up throwing the paper towels into the waste can. The swinging door pushed open and Sister Sheehan lumbered into the small space between sink and stalls. The bitter lines grooved in the heavy jowls around her mouth softened slightly as she surveyed Charlie, the front of his blue shirt darkened with water, and the flushed Catherine just dropping her hands to her side. Her eyes traveled to the floor, the wetly clean patch of tile, and the sleeping baby. "My, my, what have we got here?" she asked Charlie, heavily jovial. "Been swimming in the sink again, sonny?"

A thin smile touched Catherine's lips. She was the first counselor's wife and it was impossible to be invisible. She reached for another handful of paper towels. "He's a regular Mark Spitz," she murmured, mopping at the damp shirt, inadvertently poking his round little tummy and making him giggle.

Sister Sheehan eased her massive frame into one of the stalls and closed the door. "Enjoy them, honey, while they're small," she said, now unseen, voice rising from behind the pink door. "Won't be long until they're gone and forget you even exist."

Catherine didn't answer. Sister Sheehan said something like that nearly every time they met. She bent down and picked up the infant seat, boosting it high on one arm so she could grasp Charlie's wrist with her other hand. With the tips of her fingers she pulled at the

door, keeping it propped open with her toe while she pushed Charlie through ahead of her and maneuvered the infant seat around the half-open door.

Her Sunday School class had already started. It was held in the cultural hall facing the curtain closing off the chapel. Folding chairs were set up in uneven rows, and the medical student who taught the class nodded in midsentence as she hovered in the doorway. She looked out over the group. Thirty adults sat there in varying degrees of attentiveness while about ten children scrambled on the floor in front of their chairs, eating cheerios and scattering jigsaw puzzles, plastic eggs, and toy trucks. A few had broken away to run back towards the stage. Mothers with babies stood behind the rows of chairs, swaying to an unheard rhythm. Catherine's diaper bag and purse were where she'd left them, in front of two empty seats on the front row. To make doubly sure they would be saved, she had spread a crib blanket across the two chairs.

Propelling Charlie with the flat of her hand on his back, she made her way to the front of the room and sat down, the chair sliding a little with her weight. The baby snored in his infant seat as she set it down on the polished wooden floor. Charlie climbed obediently on the chair next to hers, his absurdly short legs sticking out with the toes of his shoes pointing straight up as he pushed himself to the back of the seat. She dug around in the diaper bag for a book with cardboard pages and handed it to him.

Brother Harrison sitting on the other side of Charlie smiled down at the little boy's earnestness as he flipped through the pages, then lifted his own book to show Catherine the scripture the class was reading. She craned her neck a little to see better, then smiled thanks into the seamed face, noting he looked gaunt. He was losing weight since his wife had been found dead on the kitchen floor in September. She wondered if his home teachers were visiting him as regularly as they should—something else to mention to her husband Joe.

The scripture reference was Moroni 7:6-8. She plunged her hand back into the diaper bag, fumbling through the washrags and diapers, looking for her own triple combination, intending to look it up for herself. But Sister Richmond was already on her feet reading it aloud in her high nasal voice:

"For behold, God hath said a man being evil cannot do that which is good; for if he offereth a gift, or prayeth unto God, except he shall do it with real intent it profiteth him nothing.

For behold, it is not counted unto him for righteousness.

For behold, if a man being evil giveth a gift, he doeth it grudgingly; wherefore it is counted unto him the same as if he had retained the gift;

wherefore he is counted evil before God."

Ed Warren, the teacher, paused to thumb through some notes in his hand, then blinked out at the class again, something he invariably did before asking what he considered to be a thought-provoking question. His round eyes appeared innocent behind the thick glasses, but the freckles and wide mouth seemed forever on the point of laughter. He would make a good obstetrician. Somehow she could imagine him sitting beside her bed as she writhed in labor and saying, "Take it easy, honey. Everything's all right," and sounding as if he meant it.

"Can anyone," he asked, pausing just a moment to make sure everyone was listening, the sound of restless children filling the gap, "give me some examples of that?"

Hands waved and Charlie tugged at her arm. She pulled him onto her lap and looked up again. Ed called on Ramona Hewitt first. She was an eager little sparrow, almost leaping to her tiny feet to give the answer. "That would be like paying your tithing but wishing you could spend it on something else."

Ed raised his eyebrows and looked out over the class for more comments. A smile wanted to widen his mouth, but he captured it just in time and tucked it back in. "Well, maybe," he said. "What do you think?" he asked the class. More hands shot into the air. Ed pointed a finger, and Harv Clark pulled himself to his feet. He was a tall man, ponderously idealistic. "The Lord expects us to give with open hearts and hands. We're supposed to love him above all else." He stayed on his feet briefly, his heavy white face set, daring anyone in the class to disagree.

Charlie wriggled on her lap wanting to get down. Catherine grasped him around the waist with both hands for a moment until he subsided. She looked at Ed Warren frowning. Was he going to let these pronouncements go by without comment or qualification? Or was she the only one who wondered? But Ed was calling on Violet Gray whose hand had fluttered up as if it were afraid of the cold air. "But it seems to me that the Lord ought to give you some credit if you pay your tithing even if you don't want to. I mean, you've overcome temptation after all." She trailed off as if wishing she hadn't spoken up in the first place.

Catherine turned her head and smiled reassuringly at Violet. Violet looked back at her, reminding Catherine a little bit of a rabbit caught in a headlight's glare. Violet, a widow, was only recently reactivated.

"What do you think about that?" Ed asked the class again. "Does Sister Gray have a valid point?"

Ruth Selden raised her hand, and Ed nodded. Catherine turned again to watch as she spoke. Ruth was still slim after five pregnancies. Pale

blonde hair always neatly coiffed, five blonde children always neatly sitting in a row in sacrament meeting. Her life was neat. Right now she was the Relief Society president.

She stood, leaning lightly against the back of the chair in front of her. "I think there's another aspect to this," she said, her high cool voice firm but without heat. "We've all heard about faith without works being dead, but I think there's many instances in this church of works without faith—that is, people just going through the motions because it's expected."

Catherine watched her sit down beside her husband, a short, bespectacled man who taught math at the local junior college and liked to ask provocative questions in priesthood meeting. Joe had told her how sometimes smoke nearly steamed out of the bishop's ears when Brother Selden stood up to ask a question, but he seemed content to sit and watch today.

Charlie was quiet on her lap as if he were about to go to sleep. His round, bowling-ball head felt heavy against her chest, and she shifted, trying to disperse his weight. Her own legs were too heavy to stay comfortably crossed for long. Ed was looking at the class expectantly as if a record needed to be set straight somehow, an account put into balance. She raised her hand. Ed pointed his finger, but she didn't stand up, gesturing to the toddler in her lap. He nodded.

"There's no question," she said, her voice as firm as Ruth's, "that the Lord prefers openhanded giving, but many people haven't reached that stage of perfection yet. What's wrong with doing right things you don't really feel—until you do feel right. What harm can it do?" She looked up at Ed for his approving comment, but hands were waving again. Fingers of all shapes and sizes kaleidoscoped across the vision when she turned around. Incredibly Ed gestured to Ruth for another comment.

Her cool voice, poised in conviction, carried across the heads of the class. "It can do a lot of harm by keeping real problems from being solved—like people who bring over cookies feeling they're doing their required good deeds, when what the family really needs is someone to clean the house."

Catherine looked down at her lap. Charlie's fat legs sprawled across her skirt, but her body was rigid. Two weeks ago when Ruth's daughter had been hospitalized for pneumonia, Catherine had taken Ruth a tray of cinnamon rolls. The discussion went on, but she looked with deep concentration at the imitation leather curtains concealing the chapel in front of her. After a few moments she stood up and left the class, carrying Charlie, leaving her sleeping baby behind her.

Her husband was walking down the hall on some errand for the bishop but seeing her face took her arm and drew her into the coat closet.

"What's the matter?" he asked urgently, as if fearing she'd been excommunicated suddenly without his knowledge.

Tears like warm earache oil were making greasy trails down her cheeks and she looked at the ward's winter coats and jumbled piles of hats and scarves through a wavery blur. Harv Clark's yellow wool scarf was dangling at a crazy angle from the top shelf.

"Ruth Selden. I hate her. She hates me." Her words were indistinct as if muffled by all the clothing around her.

Joe's arm went around her shoulders. "What happened?"

She told him as best she could remember, Charlie a sleeping dead weight in her arms as she leaned against her husband's side. The story came out all garbled and he looked vaguely uncomprehending. He took his arm away from her shoulder and reached down to pluck Charlie out of her arms. "I'll take Charlie," he said, "until you're ready to go home. You'd better go clean up your face before the bell rings."

It was her turn to look uncomprehending. Wasn't he going to say anything? He was checking his watch as if he were late for an appointment, yet his thoughts weren't entirely down the hall. He brushed her cheek with his free hand. "You've had a rough morning, honey. I'll see that you get a nap later." He stepped out of the coat closet.

Catherine watched his retreating back, Charlie's head lolling over his shoulder. A smile, bitter at the corners, turned her mouth up. She knew what he had meant. His offer had strings.

She turned and went back into the ladies' room. Unaccountably Sister Sheehan was still there, washing her hands mottled with liver spots and heavy with dinner rings under the cold water faucet. She didn't appear to notice that Catherine was wiping away the effects of tears as she stared in dissatisfied preoccupation at her own fleshy face.

"We meet again." Embarrassed Catherine had broken the silence as she yanked a paper towel out of the dispenser.

Sister Sheehan patted the puffy white flesh under her eyes. "Seems like when you get old, it takes longer to get in and out of the bathroom." She looked enviously at Catherine. "You're lucky to be young."

Catherine sniffed. "I feel about a hundred years old today."

"Honey, you don't know what old is. Wait 'til you start to feel the miseries of aching bones and a husband who don't care."

Catherine looked at Sister Sheehan with polite sympathy. Most of the ward pitied her husband, though it was Sister Sheehan who did all the complaining. Everyone agreed that all she needed to do was lose a hundred pounds.

Catherine crumpled the paper towel to toss it in the overflowing waste basket. "See you later."

Ruth Selden stood opposite the door as Catherine emerged into the hallway, her gray winter coat buttoned up to her cheek, a snuggle of beaver fur fastened to the collar under her waved blonde hair. She smiled when she saw Catherine, moving closer. "I've been looking for you."

Catherine stood still against the door, one foot backed up, her face politely questioning. "Oh?"

"Yes, my husband saw you go out, and he thought I'd better check to make sure I hadn't offended you."

Catherine studied Ruth. Her pale blue eyes, now narrowed in concern, were set in pale white skin. Up close Catherine could see the fine network of lines crisscrossing Ruth's cheeks and forehead as if at the right note the whole face could shatter like crazed glass.

"Oh no," Catherine said, false laughter trilling like birdsong, "Charlie was acting up. I had to take him out."

Ruth glanced at Catherine's empty hands, hanging open and large at the ends of her wrists. Catherine closed them into loose fists. "Joe's got him now."

Ruth's smile was a sharing grimace. "You're lucky to have a husband who will help you like that. When Allen was bishop, he forgot he had children when he got to Church. I remember once after waiting for him for two hours, I sent the youngest one to stand up next to the bishop's office door and howl."

"Did it work?"

"It got him out of there long enough for him to tell me to take the kids and go home."

Catherine's chuckle bordered on being real this time, though she thought it typical of Ruth to point out her husband had been bishop. She straightened from her half slouching position to speak just as the class dismissal bell sounded. Classroom doors opened simultaneously up and down the hall, children exploding out waving construction paper creations or scribbled pieces of scratch paper. A few adults trickled from the gospel doctrine class, heading for the coat closet or restrooms. Catherine moved aside to avoid being trampled by those intent on leaving early.

"Anyway," Ruth said, her voice rising a little to override the noise, "I'm glad you weren't offended."

Catherine shrugged as if slightly mystified. "Oh no," she repeated. "Thanks for checking though."

Ruth faded away into the throng of children. A pale blonde boy attached himself to her side, holding up a red paper heart for her inspection. She bent down to examine it more closely,

murmuring into his attentive face.

Catherine forced her eyes away, hoping her baby was still asleep while she struggled into her winter coat, wrapping a scarf around her neck. She picked up Charlie's snow suit and headed back to the classroom, wishing Joe had remembered to take it with him.

The baby was just blinking into wakefulness when she found him, mouth working towards a squall. She plunged into his mouth the pacifier she had tethered to his shirt with a string and safety pin. He subsided, sucking ravenously. She picked the baby up to tug him into his own snowsuit.

Joe came in carrying Charlie still heavily asleep in his arms. "Ready to go?"

She tossed him the snowsuit as he laid Charlie across a chair. "Will you wrestle him into that?"

His trapped face almost made her want to laugh in derision as he glanced from her to the door. He laid the snowsuit across Charlie's body. "Can't honey. I've got to catch some people before they leave."

She watched the baby as she placed his bundled body back into the infant seat. "Sure." The baby's pacifier fell out, and he wrinkled his nose. She tried to push it back in, but he twisted away.

Joe bent down to give her a brief kiss on the cheek. "See you at home later."

"OK." The baby was warming up into steady crying now. Picking up the snowsuit from the chair, she shook Charlie awake. His eyes fluttered open looking disoriented and unhappy. She coaxed him into good humor. "Come on, honey. It's time to go home. See, here's your snowsuit. Let's get into it now, shall we? Stand up, now. That's a good boy."

Charlie climbed down from the chair, not resisting as she pulled the thick shiny cloth over his legs, tucking his limp arms through the sleeves, tying the cap under his chin. Sister Sheehan had idly watched the whole procedure. Coming in behind Catherine, she had dropped heavily into a folding chair and now sat with thick legs spread apart, her coat unable to meet across her enormous belly. "Have you seen what it's doing outside?" she asked as if she were about to reveal a personal insult. "It's snowing."

"Oh no." Catherine stepped to the cultural hall doors and stared out into the foyer, through the glass doors. Snowflakes, large and wet, were dropping silently over the gray street, the cement steps, and grimy parking lot. The parked cars looked cold and closed off, mute in the barrage of snow. She leaned against the wall, still gripping Charlie's hand, and considered the day.

She faced a dangerous drive on slick freeways in a battered Chevrolet whose heater had never worked, an empty, too small house, two wide

awake and hungry babies both needing diaper changes, dinner to prepare—scrambled eggs and toast because there was nothing else—and a boring afternoon with no television and no husband because it was Sunday. She wanted to slide down the wall and sit there on the floor until the janitor swept her out.

"Isn't that the bitter end?" Sister Sheehan asked, gravelly voice rising in grievance. "As if this day weren't bad enough already. Where's those headache pills the doctor gave me?" She fumbled through the large black purse she held clutched on her lap.

Catherine turned to stare at the other woman, her words had so closely echoed her own thoughts. And as she watched the coarse fat fingers fumble through the purse for a pill bottle, Catherine felt her own fingers thicken and folds of fat form around her wedding ring. The skin around her clenched jaw seemed to sag and droop as if jowls were brushing her coat collar, while the frown lines in her forehead deepened and became permanent. Her stomach seemed to swell, tightening her coat, straining the buttons across her belly. Frightened, she grabbed Charlie's hand, swept the diaper bag and purse over her shoulder, and hoisted the infant seat onto her hip, the sudden sideways jerk stopping the baby's cry on a surprised gasp.

"Sunday School class was sure good today wasn't it?" Brother Harrison's rickety voice stopped her headlong rush through the foyer door. She was the first counselor's wife, and it was impossible to be invisible. "Brother Warren really gets us going sometimes, doesn't he? I always feel like I've learned something when I come out." Lonely, garrulous, buttoned up to the chin in a great gray overcoat, a red scarf knitted by his dead wife wrapped around his turkey-neck throat, he waited for her comment.

Catherine found a smile, her lips pulling back over dry teeth. "He sure does," she said. "He knows how to stimulate discussion, but he wraps it up neatly at the end."

The old man nodded, satisfied. She looked at him. "Do you need a ride home?"

"No, thanks. Brother Clark is taking me." A horn sounded. "There he is now." He pushed open the door. "See you next Sunday." He walked jauntily out to the waiting van swinging his earmuffs in one hand, apparently oblivious to the sloppy snowflakes pelting his head.

Charlie tugged at her hand and the baby whimpered. She followed Brother Harrison. The snow was every bit as damp and uncomfortable as she had anticipated, and she wanted to reach up and touch the crepey new folds she was sure would be there under her chin.

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