

## “If You’re Missing the Baby Jesus, Call 7162”

A true story by Jean Jeffrey Gietzen

When I was a child, my father worked for an oil company in North Dakota. The company moved him around to different parts of the State, and at some point between one move and another, we lost our family creche. Shortly before Christmas, my mother decided to replace the set and was happy to find another at our local five and dime for only \$3.99. When my brother Tom and I helped her unpack the set, we discovered two figures of the Baby Jesus.

“Someone must have packed this wrong,” my mother said, counting out the figures. “We have one Joseph, one Mary, three wise men, three shepherds, two lambs, a donkey, a cow, an angel, and two babies. Oh dear! I suppose some set down at the store is missing a Baby Jesus.” “Hey, that’s great Mon,” my brother and I shouted, “Now we have twins!”

“You two run back down to the store and tell the manager that we have an extra Jesus. Tell him to put a sign on the remaining boxes saying that if a set is missing a Baby Jesus, call 7162,” my mother instructed. “I’ll give you each a penny for some candy. And don’t forget your mufflers. It’s freezing cold out there.”

The manager of the store copied down my mother’s message, and the next time we were in the store we saw the cardboard sign that read, “If you’re missing Baby Jesus, call 7162.”

All week long we waited for the call to come. Surely, we thought, someone was missing that important figurine. Each time the phone rang, my mother would say, “I’ll bet that’s about Jesus,” but it never was. My father tried to explain that eh figurine could be missing from a set in Walla Walla, Washington, and the packing errors occurred all the

time. He suggested we just put the extra Jesus back in the box and forget about it.

“Back in the box!” I wailed. “What a terrible thing to do to the Baby Jesus, and at Christmas time, too!”

“Surely someone will call,” my mother said. “We’ll just keep them together in the manger until someone calls.”

When no call came by 5:00 on Christmas Eve, my mother insisted that my father “Just run down to the store” to see if there were any sets left. “You can see them right through the window, over on the counter,” she said. “If they are all gone, I’ll know someone is bound to call tonight.”

“Run down to the store?” my father thundered. “It’s 15° below zero out there!”

“Oh, Daddy, we’ll go with you,” I said. “Tommy and I will bundle up good. And we can look at all the decorations on the way.”

My father gave a long sigh, and headed for the front closet. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” he muttered. “Each time the phone rings everyone yells at me to see if it’s about Jesus, and now I’m going off on the coldest night of the year to peek in a window to see if He’s there or not there.”

My father muttered all the way down the block while my brother and I raced each other to the store. I was the first to press my nose up to the window where tiny lights flickered on and off around the window frame. “They’re all gone, Daddy,” I shouted. “Every set must be sold.”

“Hooray, hooray!” my brother joined in, catching up with me. “The mystery will be solved tonight!”

My father, who had remained several steps behind us, turned on his heel and headed back home. Inside the house once more, we saw that the extra figurine had vanished from the set, and my mother appeared to have vanished too. "Someone must have called and she went out to deliver the figurine," my father reasoned, pulling off his boots. "You kids get busy stringing those popcorn strands for the tree and I'll wrap your mother's present."

We had almost completed one strand when the phone rang. My father yelled for me to answer it. "Tell 'em we found a home for Jesus," my father called out. But the caller was not an inquirer. It was my mother with instructions for us to come to 205 Chestnut Street immediately and bring three blankets, a box of cookies and some milk.

"Now what has she gotten us into?" my father groaned as we bundled up again. "205 Chestnut. Why that's about eight blocks away. Wrap that milk up good in the blankets or it will turn to ice by the time we get there. Why in the name of Heaven can't we all just get on with Christmas? It's probably 20° below out there now. And the wind is picking up. Of all the crazy things to do on a night like this."

Tommy and I sang Christmas songs at the top of our lungs all the way to Chestnut Street. My father, carrying his bundle of blankets and milk, looked for all the world like St. Nicholas himself with his arms full of goodies. Every now and then my brother would call back to him, "Let's pretend we're looking for a place to stay, Dad, just like Joseph and Mary."

"Let's pretend we are in Bethlehem where it is probably 65° in the shade right now," my father would answer.

The house at 205 Chestnut turned out to be the darkest one on the block. One tiny light burned in the living room and the moment we set foot on the porch steps, my mother opened the door and shouted,

“They’re here, they’re here. Oh, thank God you got here, Ray! You kids take those blankets into the living room and wrap up the little ones on the couch. I’ll take the milk and cookies.”

“Would you mind telling me what is going on, dear?” my father asked.

“We have just walked through below zero weather with the wind in our faces all the way...”

“Never mind all that now,” my mother interrupted. “There is no heat in this house and this young mother is so upset she doesn’t know what to do. Her husband walked out on her, and those poor little children will have a very bleak Christmas, so don’t you complain! Oh, and I told her you could fix that oil furnace in a jiffy.”

My mother strode off to the kitchen to warm the milk while my brother and I wrapped up the five little children who were huddled together on the couch. The children’s mother explained to my father that her husband had run off, taking bedding, clothing, and almost every piece of furniture. But she had been doing all right until the furnace broke down.

“I been doing washin’ and ironin’ for people, and cleanin’ the Five and Dime,” she said. “I saw your number every day there, on those boxes on the counter. When the furnace went out, that number kept goin’ through my mind. 7162. 7162.”

“Said on the box, that if a person was missin’ Jesus, they should call you. That’s how I know you were good Christaqin people, willin’ to help folks. I figured that maybe you would help me too. So I stopped at the grocery store tonight and I called your missus. I’m not missin’ Jesus, mister, because I sure love the Lord. But I am missin’ heat. Me and the kids ain’t got no beddin’, no warm clothes. I got a few toys for them, but I’ve got no money to fix that furnace.”

“OK, OK,” my father said kindly. “You’ve come to the right place. Now let’s see, you’ve got a little oil burner over there in the dining room. Shouldn’t be too hard to fix. Probably just a clogged flue. I’ll look it over, see what it needs.”

My mother came into the living room carrying a plate of cookies and a tray of cups with warm milk. As she set the cups down on the coffee table, I noticed the figure of Baby Jesus lying in the center of the table. It was the only sign of the Christmas Season in the house. The children stared wide-eyed with wonder at the plate of cookies my mother set before them. One of the littlest ones woke up and crawled out from under the blanket. Seeing all the strangers in his house, he began to cry. My mother swooped him up in her arms and began to sing to him.

“This, this, is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing,” she crooned while the child wailed. “Haste, haste to bring him laud, the Babe, the son of Mary,” she sang, oblivious to the child’s cries. She sang and danced the baby around the room until he settled down again.

“You hear that, Chester?” the young mother said to another child. “That woman is singin’ ‘bout the Lord Jesus. He ain’t ever gonna walk out on us. Why, He sent these people to us just to fix our furnace. And blankets we got now too. Oh, we’ll be warm tonight. Jesus saves, that’s what He does.”

My father, finishing his work on the oil burner, wiped his hands on his muffler and said, “I’ve got it going, but you need more oil. I’ll make a few calls tonight when I get home and we’ll get you some oil. Yessir, you came to the right place,” he grinned.

When my father calculated that the furnace was going strong once more, our family bundled up and made our way home. My father didn’t

say a thing about the cold weather, and we had barely set foot inside the front door when he was on the phone.

“Ed, hey, how are ya, Ed?” I heard him say. “Yes, Merry Christmas to you, too. Say, Ed, we have kind of an unusual situation here and I know you’ve got that pick-up truck. I wonder if we could round up some of the boys and find a Christmas tree, you know, and a couple of things for...”

The rest of his conversation was lost in a blur of words as my brother and I ran to our rooms and began pulling clothes out of our closets and toys off our shelves. My mother checked through our belongings for sizes and games she said, “might do,” and added some of her own sweaters and slacks to our stack. We were up way past our bedtime that night wrapping our gifts. The men my father had called found oil for the furnace, bedding, two chairs, three lamps, and made two trips to 205 Chestnut Street before the night was done. Our gifts were piled into the truck on the second trip, and even though it must have been 30° below by then, my father let us ride along in the back of the truck.

No one ever did call about the missing figure in the creche set, but as I grow older, I realize that it wasn’t a packing mistake at all. Jesus saves. That’s what He does.