

Reunion

A short story from The Promise
A collection of short stories by Jeff Lee

- Christmas Eve, 1950 -

Kathryn drained the water off of the apples and put them into the colander. Using a large wooden pestle, she proceeded to mash the apples into sauce, which oozed through the strainer and plopped into a large brown crockery bowl in the sink. As she worked, she looked out of the window and thought about the big kitchen on the McClintock farm with its old wood stove that kept the room warm on late December days like this. A red-coated streak flashing across the snow-covered yard diverted her thoughts.

“Walter Junior’s back, Mother,” she said without turning from her work.

“Lord bless me, I pray that boy doesn’t...”

SLAM!

“Junior!” the grandmother scolded. “You had better learn to close that door quietly, or I’m going to warm your behind!”

The frost-brightened face of a ten-year-old boy, fresh from battles in the snow with friendly foes, looked skeptically at the shriveled woman swathed in afghans sitting in the rocking chair, and then turned his attention to his mother.

“We won again, Momma. Those old Commies just can’t beat us,” he said.

“And who, pray tell, were the Commies today?” Kathryn asked.

“Billy, Tom Harris, Marty and Marty’s little sister.”

“Karen?” asked Kathryn. “What in the world?”

“Ah, she’s been bugging us for days to let her play. We just gave in so’s we didn’t have to listen to her mouth.”

“Probably an important lesson somewhere in that,” said Kathryn with a smile. “Before you take your boots off, I want you to run outside and get the mail. Will you do that for me please?”

Junior was out the door in a flash.

SLAM!

A penitent face immediately appeared in the doorway.

“Sorry, Gramma!”

SLAM!

“Kathryn, I don’t understand why you don’t put a stop to that boy’s antics. I never let you get away with that kind of behavior when you were his age, and I don’t see any reason why you should tolerate it now. I don’t care if it is 1950!”

“The boy’s only ten.”

“Old enough to learn the proper way to close a door, I reckon.”

“He’s just excited that it’s Christmas tomorrow, but I suppose you’re right,” Kathryn agreed grudgingly.

“Of course, I am. I’m your mother.”

Had it feelings, the colander would have noticed Kathryn wielding the pestle with an increased enthusiasm. When all the apples in the colander had been sauced, Kathryn returned to the stove to get another bowl of the cooked fruit. As she turned toward the sink, Junior burst through the door—SLAM!—and ran into his mother’s arm. She dropped the bowl, which broke and sprayed pieces of cooked apple across the kitchen floor. Mother Cookson was so aghast that all she could do was sputter, but Kathryn was furious and would have walloped her son had he not stood before her open eyed and openmouthed with a powerful shield held in front of him.

“It’s a letter from Manny!” he said. “I’m real sorry about the apples. I’ll clean them up.”

“You’re darned right you’ll clean them up,” Kathryn grouched. “Give me the letter. You all right, Mother?”

Grandmother Cookson was still too flustered to muster a word in response, so Kathryn offered to read Emanuel’s letter.

“It’ll perk both of us up,” she said. “What’re you looking at Junior? You know where the rags are. You can listen while you work. I’ll wait till you come back upstairs.”

While Junior scurried down the basement steps in search of rags, Kathryn sat at the kitchen table and opened the flimsy envelope. It was never easy reading Manny’s writing, and this time was harder than ever because the letter seemed to have been written on a rough surface. When Junior returned, Kathryn began reading.

“Dear Ma, Grandma, and Wheezer...”

“I hate it when he calls me Wheezer!”

“I know you do, honey,” said Kathryn, “but Manny’s just trying to get your attention from so far away. He means no harm, so let me finish reading without you interrupting. ‘Dear Ma, Grandma, and Wheezer. I am writing this to you in the few minutes I have left before I go on patrol. I am writing this on my helmet so it will not look probably very neat, but a sloppy letter is better than no letter, don’t you think?’”

“I sure think so,” Junior said.

“I do too,” agreed Kathryn before continuing with the letter.

“You know we’re not supposed to tell where we’re at, but I can tell you this. Where I am is awful cold, and that’s saying something coming from a West Virginia hillbilly. We been told by our Captain that Korean winters are bad, and none of us boys is eager to see any more of it. We think this war is about over. We kicked their commie butts out of the country...”

“I sure don’t understand where your son learned to talk like that!” huffed Mother Cookson.

“He’s a Marine. It probably took him a long time to figure out how to say that in a way that wouldn’t cause you to drop your teeth. Now let me finish the letter, and Junior, you’re supposed to be cleaning up those apples.”

“Sorry Ma.”

“Now, where was I?”

“Commie butts,” said Mother Cookson.

Kathryn laughed and continued, “...and we expect any day to hear we’re going to be coming home. Wouldn’t it be great if I could be home for Christmas? I guess it’s too much to hope for. Has it snowed yet? Has Wheezer gotten out the sled? You better take good care of that sled, little brother, because when I get home, I want to be able to zip down Webster’s Hill in style. I hope Grandma Cookson is feeling better. I was sorry to read in the last letter I got that she was sick with the pneumonia. Sarge is yelling at us to get moving, so I have got to sign off. I will send this and write again as soon as I can. I hope I will be stateside soon. Like I said, we really whipped the commies this time. I miss you all and love you very much. Tell Martha and Celia I’ll write them as soon as I get a chance. I am being careful just like I promised. It would not be so bad, if it wasn’t so cold. Love, Manny.”

“Now wasn’t that a nice letter?” asked Mother Cookson. “And isn’t it just like Emanuel to remember his grandmother? It’s a shame other people in this house aren’t more considerate!”

“If by that you mean Junior,” said Kathryn, “I’ll thank you to keep your comments to yourself.”

“Sometimes I think you care more about that boy than you do your own mother.”

Kathryn clenched her teeth, counted silently to ten, and was relieved when her mother asked, “When did Emanuel write that letter?”

“It says October twenty-eighth.”

“Goodness, that was almost two months ago,” Mother Cookson exclaimed.

Mother Cookson's frailty and frequent bouts of petulance were deceptive. She retained an acute mind, particularly when it came to matters affecting her family.

"Kathryn, when did the Red Chinese attack our boys?"

"I have no idea."

"You have a son in Korea," said Mother Cookson, "and you don't even listen to the radio or read the front page, do you? Pshaw! I'm eighty years old, and I know when it was!"

"Then why did you ask?"

"Don't be smart. It was November the fifth. Poor Emanuel thought he was coming home. I hope he wasn't anywhere near those awful Chinese."

"I hope so too," Kathryn said, "but let's not spend all of our time worrying. We can pray for his safety but worrying all the time won't make him safe."

"You don't know what it's like to be old. If you did, you'd be worrying all the time too... What was that noise?"

"What noise, Mother?"

"There it is again!" said Mother Cookson. "That boy is making rude noises."

"I heard it that time. Junior, what is that noise?"

Junior reluctantly pulled a sizable toad from the front pocket of his bib overalls. It had been residing in Marty's basement since the summer, and Junior had traded a dozen Marvel comic books for the critter. With a quick twitch, the toad escaped Junior's grasp, righted itself after it hit the floor, and frantically hopped in the direction of Mother Cookson, who declared she was about to have a stroke.

Kathryn and Junior gave chase into the dining room where Kathryn eventually caught the amphibian under the table. Some part of her was about to produce a reprimand until Kathryn looked at Junior's face flushed with excitement and realized she was on her hands and knees under a dining room table clutching a toad. She and Junior both started

to giggle, but when Mother Cookson started hollering about having been “left alone at the mercy of that creature!” their giggles turned to howls that were interrupted by heavy-handed knocking at the front door. Kathryn gave the toad to Junior with the instruction to take it into the basement and told his grandmother she could rest easy.

Approaching the door, Kathryn could see visitors through the long panes of window that framed the doorway. Standing ramrod straight with their faces iron hard were two Marine officers in dress uniform. Tears began to flow down Kathryn’s cheeks before her trembling hand touched the doorknob. She had barely the strength to turn it.

* * *

The mourners had been kind to Kathryn, but as she sat rocking by the living room window, she was glad she was alone. She had needed their support, but now she was weary of grief and needed time to be sequestered with her thoughts. The previous days had been a time of unmatched sorrow for her. Manny’s death had devastated her mother’s spirit. Returning with a vengeance, pneumonia took Mother Cookson’s life three weeks after they had received the news. She and her grandson were both buried on the same day, his broken body having been returned to Kathryn the day her mother died.

Manny had taken a direct hit from a small artillery round while on the Marines’ retreat through Toktong Pass. The ordnance performed its duty as designed and left little of Kathryn’s handsome son intact. She had listened to the mortician, who counseled her to remember Manny as he was the day he left for Korea, and did not view her son’s tortured flesh. But not seeing his body had made it harder to accept his death. A voice inside Kathryn kept repeating that there had been a mistake, that the boy inside the casket was some other mother’s loss, not hers.

Kathryn reached for a small double picture frame sitting on a candlestick table. On the left was a picture of her husband on his twentieth birthday. She still believed he was the handsomest man she

had ever met and missed him terribly, but she was glad he had not had to suffer being told his oldest son had been killed. In the right-hand frame was Manny's senior picture. He had been proud of how well it had turned out and so had she. He is, was, such a fine-looking boy, she thought. A knock at the front door interrupted her reflections. She assumed it was another well-meaning friend, but it turned out to be a Railways Express delivery man.

- Christmas Eve, 2010 -

The young woman lowered the manuscript to her lap and looked at the withered old woman strapped to a wheelchair festooned with red ribbons and plastic sprigs of holly.

"That's all the farther I got, Granny...Are you asleep?"

"Celia?"

"No, it's Kate."

"Why, that's *my* name."

"That's right, Granny. I was named after you. Celia's my grandma."

"I didn't *know* that! Isn't *that* the nicest thing? Now what can I do for you, dear?"

"How do you like your story so far?"

"That was *my* story? What am I thinking? Of course, it is, isn't it? You've been writing something for college, haven't you?"

"That's right."

"Well, I think you've done wonderfully well, Celia."

"Kate, remember?"

"Oh, of course. Can you believe how confused I get sometimes?"

"That's okay. Everybody gets confused."

Kate stood up and went to the window, which looked across a broad parking lot filled with visitor's cars and scanned the large pond and the pastured hills that stretched off into the distance. When she turned around, Kathryn was looking at her quizzically.

"Now, who are you again, dear?"

Kate smiled and said, "I'm Kate."

"Why that's *my* name *too!*"

"Yes, it is," Kate agreed with a chuckle, "and when I visited you last time, you told me you'd tell me about what the delivery man brought you that Christmas Eve so I could finish the story. Do you remember?"

"Of course, I remember. He had a small box. I reckon about the size of a shoe box, maybe a little bigger. It was from somebody in the Marines who knows Manny."

A nurse walked into the room carrying a small, battered, cardboard box, greeted the younger woman, and said, "She asked that I look for this in her storage bin. I didn't actually think I'd find what she described, but sure enough, it was right where she said it would be in the cedar chest. Is this what you wanted me to get, Kathryn?"

Kathryn squinted at the box, nodded, and motioned for the nurse to give it to Kate.

"Anything I can get for you dear?" the nurse asked Kathryn. "No? I'll be back in a little while with your medication. See you later, Kate."

Kate smiled, wiggled her fingers in a little wave, and then turned her attention to the box. She tried to keep the brown paper intact that covered the box, but it broke away in pieces, which she carefully piled on the bed. When she lifted the lid, she saw an old envelope on which was carefully scribed the word, *Mother*.

As she gently opened the envelope, Kate asked, "This is from Manny, isn't it?" but there was no response because Kathryn had dozed off.

Kate pulled two letters from the envelope. The first was from one of Manny's buddies, who explained how he and Manny had agreed to take care of each other's effects in the event something untoward happened to the other. It was a sweet letter from a young man who must have liked Manny a great deal. The second letter was from her great uncle:

Dear Mother,

If you are reading this, it means the worst has happened. It was hard at first to think about dying, but since the Chinese attacked, I have seen many

friends wounded or killed. I almost think being wounded is worse. You cannot imagine how some of my buddies have suffered. Now, with our lines collapsing every day, I often think about death. I can feel how possible it is, yet it seems a manly thing to do to keep trying to face the Chinese. I hope I was brave at the end.

Please remember how much I love you, Ma. You and Pa are the world to me. I know things were hard a lot of times, but you always loved us and did the best you could. I could not have asked for better parents. I pray that Pa will be at the Gates to greet me. War is an awful thing. I hope Wheezer never has to do this. He can have the pick of my stuff. If there's anything left, give it to some poor folks. Give Wheezer and Grandma my love. Please don't be mad at me. I tried to be careful.

Love forever, Emanuel

Kate read the letter again and then carefully folded it and returned it to the envelope. She wiped a tear from her eye and lifted up the tissue paper that covered the remaining contents of the box. She found items that must have been important to her Uncle Manny: three snapshots of him at boot camp, and one taken somewhere in Korea, a tiny ivory carving of a dragon, a small prayer book on the inside leaf of which his mother had written a simple prayer, a small stack of letters from home, and a delicate carving of a dog wondering at a baby asleep in a manger. The tears in Kate's eyes made it difficult to see the details of a master's craft, but she recognized the work she had never seen. Walter Thicke, 1917, was clearly etched into the bottom of it.

"Celia? Are you crying dear?"

"It's Kate, Granny."

"I didn't *know* that. Come here and let me dry your eyes."

Kate did as she was asked, and Kathryn gently dabbed a tissue at the young woman's cheeks.

"I think you have the prettiest eyes I've ever seen," said Kathryn.

"Mom tells me I got them from you."

“Isn’t that the silliest thing you ever heard of? Now how would you have gotten them from me?”

“You’re my great grandma, that’s how.”

“I didn’t *know* that. What is it you have there?”

Katie held up the carving and Kathryn smiled.

“My husband Walter carved that. He brought it to me last night.”

“He did?”

“He certainly did, and he asked about you and Martha. ‘How’re my girls?’ he said. ‘I want Celia to have the dog with the manger because she always liked it so,’ he said. I told him my father gave it to Manny for Christmas, but he said it was all right because Manny was a good boy and wouldn’t mind. You know dear, I almost forgot dinner.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. The nurse will bring your dinner in a little while.”

“The nurse? She can’t help. Manny’s going to be coming home from school soon, and I’ve got to get dinner ready. I won’t have dinner ready.”

“I’ll get dinner ready. You just rest now.”

“Why Celia, how awfully sweet of you. You know, I don’t know where your father goes. Do you think he and Manny are off hunting squirrels? The two of them get on so well, don’t you think?”

“I think they get along great. Now why don’t you take a little nap? Tomorrow’s going to be a big day.”

“It is?”

“Today is Christmas Eve.”

“I didn’t *know* that. My goodness, I haven’t even gone shopping yet. How am I ever going to get Christmas dinner ready if I haven’t even done my shopping?”

“Don’t you worry about a thing. I’ll take care of everything.”

“You and Martha are the best daughters a mother could want, but you’ve never had to cook the whole dinner by yourselves. I’ll feel terrible if I can’t help.”

Kate smiled again as she bent down to kiss her great grandmother goodbye, and said, “You stop worrying and relax. Let the family take care of tomorrow.”

“Thank you so much, Celia. If you don’t mind, I think I’ll just take a little nap before I start the slaw.”

Kate waited for her namesake to nod off before she turned out the light and picked up the box of treasures and her manuscript. At the door to the room, she turned and whispered, “Merry Christmas, Granny.”

* * *

Light from the hallway spilled through the partially closed door into the room where Kathryn lay abed in a deep sleep. The midnight silence of the nursing home was audience to the rattling breath struggling in and out of her slack-jawed mouth. Kathryn’s long white hair lay matted against her pillow and bony fingers held the covers against her chin. From far away she heard his voice, sweet as an angel’s, remembered as though time had stood still. It came closer, steadily closer.

“Kate, sweetheart. Kate. It’s Christmas morning and we’ve a lot to do before everyone arrives.”

She opened her eyes and smiled at the man standing at the foot of her bed, the familiar broad smile and thick, black, wavy hair a welcome sight after a long, long night.

“Good morning, Walter. Where have you been?” she asked. “I’ve been waiting for you for a very long time.”

“I’ve been waiting for *you*. Come on and get out of bed. We’ve got things to do.”

She took his hand as she slipped out of bed and graced him with the smile that had won his heart long ago. Love poured from the most remarkable pair of eyes in Preston County as she went to him and held him close.

“I don’t ever want this moment to end,” she said.

“It needn’t if that’s what you want.”

“But we do have things to do, don’t we? It is Christmas after all,” she said as she pulled away and shook the tangles from her long, black hair. “Will we be seeing Manny?”

“Manny, your mom and dad, and mine too,” he said. “We’ll see everyone. I know they can’t wait to see you. Ready?”

“I’ve been ready for a long time, dear. Take my hand and we’ll go. Isn’t it funny how things work out? All I wanted to do when I turned sixteen was go to a silly old Christmas dance. Dancing was all I wanted to do, but I met you and dancing didn’t seem so important anymore. I met you, and the next thing I know, here we are. I love you, Walter.”

“And I love you, Kate. Merry Christmas.”

Walter and Kathryn held each other for a moment, and the surplus of a lifetime of love spilled from their smiles. Kathryn took Walter’s arm and did not look back at the woman lying still on the bed because she was too excited about the adventures that lay ahead.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are the products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The Promise
Copyright (c) 2019 by Jeffrey L. Byrem

All rights reserved.