

Mary's Gift

by Seth Sjostrom



Mary looked forward to Christmas more than any other time of the year. The moment it was deemed reasonably acceptable, her tree was up and decorations were out.

Even her neighbors didn't tire of her classic Christmas music, tapping and humming along as they walked by her door.

This Christmas, perhaps more than any other, she was eager for the holiday to roll around. She hadn't seen her family for nearly the entire year. Easter, Fourth of July and Thanksgiving plans had all been cancelled. Even in between visits were ruled out.

Mary enjoyed the phone calls, status updates and Zoom calls, but it was the personal visits she longed for. To see her family's eyes. To break bread with them. More than anything, she missed hugs.

Even her friends had relented to distanced waves and cordial but spaced apart courtyard visits. She was a hugger and the physical connection was a part of the emotional one. Mary wasn't doing well and that was part of the restriction. Her family was afraid to get her sick, even when the edicts weren't in place.

Instead of a week of periodic visits and long but wonderful Christmas Eve and Christmas day gatherings, she was granted only a few family members for twenty minutes. Hugging was strictly forbidden. The thought made her heart drop, but the fact that her family would soon be there raised her spirits.

Staring in the mirror, Mary didn't remember looking so old and frankly, so sad. Straightening herself up, she wore her favorite Christmas sweater and wore the Christmas light necklace her granddaughter gave her last year.

"Not as good as I once was, but serviceable, I'd say," Mary chuckled, turning away from the mirror.

She inspected her tiny apartment. Downsizing from the house she shared with her husband for over forty years, finding room for all of the Christmas decorations she couldn't bear to not put on display, made her place almost farcical.

The knock on her door made her nearly burst with excitement. Shuffling quickly across the floor, she pulled open the door. Her daughter, her son-in-law and their two children stood in the hallway. Hand to her chest, she gushed at them all, her eyes carefully taking in each one, savoring the sight.

Their eyes gave away their smiles, though mouths were veiled.

"Your mask, Mom," Mindy reminded gently.

"Oh, yes. This dumb thing!" Mary snatched her face mask off the counter. Donning it over her head, it's bedazzled 'Merry Christmas' across the front.

"I like it, Grandma!" Marley cooed.

"I do, too!" Jacob exclaimed.

"Mary, it's good to see you," Matthew waved.

“It is so wonderful to see you all. Come in, come in!” Mary waved.

Making their way into the small one room apartment, Mary fought the tears of joy that bubbled up. Suppressing them, she didn’t want to waste a moment.

It was good to have the four family members assembled into her living room. Mary reasoned, her apartment wouldn’t have accommodated many more. She usually made the trek to one of her kids’ houses for the holidays where they could all comfortably be together.

This year, no one thought it was wise for her to travel with her health and the virus. Her physician and her family fought her on even this simple visit. It was one fight Mary was not willing to lose.

“You guys have gotten so big. And Marley, your pictures don’t give your beauty justice. Jacob, you look just like your father. Handsome, the both of you,” Mary declared.

“You look well, Mom,” Mindy said. “I can’t believe you got all this stuff up in your apartment. It looks like a Christmas bomb exploded in the middle of an estate sale!”

“I think it looks like a Christmas wonderland!” Marley said, dancing around the room, taking in every shiny bauble her grandmother had laid out.

Jacob was prone on the floor, hands holding his head up as he studied the Christmas train making its steady loop around the tree.

“You always did like that train,” Mary observed.

“I missed it this year,” Jacob turned and exclaimed. “I missed you, Grandma!”

The words seared into Mary’s heart like a loving brand. “I missed you, too, Jacob. I’ve missed all of you so very much.”

To Mary’s dismay, Mindy was vigilant with their time limit. Rising, she pat her Mom on the back in lieu of a proper hug. Mary’s heart sank, but she stifled her disappointment.

“We’ll video call you tomorrow,” Mindy promised.

Mary nodded. She wanted drop to the floor and hold her arms out the way a grandmother should to hug her grandbabies, but she knew it wasn’t to be. She wanted to hug her daughter and Matthew.

Hugs were something she missed the most.

As she reluctantly walked her family out, their presents stuffed into a shopping bag that they would open in front of the camera phone on Christmas morning, they were gone. Only once the door was shut and Mary ripped the mask off her face, did the tear that had been wavering, finally crest and begin sliding down her cheek.

Her heart was filled and emptied yet again in a span of twenty minutes.

Tidying up, she removed Christmas light necklace and headed for bed.

Light sliced into her window on Christmas morning. Mary woke up alone in her one-bedroom apartment. She snatched her phone and held onto it like it was her most prized possession, because on that day, it was.

Her heart skipped when the phone rang. She heard Mindy's voice sing Merry Christmas to a chorus of voices behind her.

"Merry Christmas, dear," Mary said softly.

"Aw, Mom. You sound sad," Mindy observed.

"I just wish we could spend Christmas together," Mary admitted.

The phone was quiet for a moment as Mindy mumbled something in the background. "Mom, look out your window."

Mary moved past her Christmas tree to the one window in her apartment. Parting the curtains, the sun gleamed off the snow-covered lawn. To her surprise, her entire backyard was dotted with snowmen.

As she looked on, from behind each one, a family member stepped out. Smiling and waving, they greeted Mary with a warm, and heartfelt 'Merry Christmas!'

With a grateful sigh, Mary's heart swelled with joy. She would have Christmas with her family, after all.