1982

"...and the Greatest of these is Charity"

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by Karin Sue Kempers
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"That's nothin'! I'm getting a Schwinn dirt bike." bragged the freckled red head.
"So, I'm getting the Barbie Beauty Salon."
Puffs of condensed breath. Anxious third graders awaiting Christmas. Each trying to out do one another.
"We're leaving cookies out for Santa tonight." proudly stated the pig-tailed girl in Calvin Kleins and Topsiders.
"Aw, come off it. You know there's no Santa." said the same freckled red head now licking at his upper lip from his runny nose. They pressed their woolen cocooned bodies into the new church van. Royal blue Chevrolet versus mounds of crisp white snow. To the right, propped up against a metal fence, rested a battered tree, freshly cut. Half its mangy branches were missing. The other half cracked off as they hauled it into the van. Not a moment's peace, they whined and complained throughout the entire loading process.
"No one would want these used games. I'm sure, how totally gross!" said the red head, now getting chapped lips from the incessant dripping and licking. Stacks of used games were piled in. Brown paper sacks stuffed with trimmings and assorted foods; mostly canned goods were loaded next. Heaped on the top of the mound were variously shaped and sized packages, carelessly wrapped in previously used paper. They maneuvered themselves into the tightly sardined van. Rev. Wigerink warmed the engine as he cooled his temper from the constant complaining.
"Why do we have to deliver this food anyways?" snapped the girl in pig-tails.
"What do poor people look like, Rev. Wigerink?" probed a slightly plump, extremely blond girl named Rebecca, wrapped both by a scarf and friends.
"Yea, can we talk to 'em?"
Questions rose from all ends of the small group of seven. Rev. Wigerink attempted to answer, but conversation of Christmas gifts prevailed once again.
"I'm gettin' a JVC tape deck. It's a really expensive one.
The van rambled along nearing downtown Grand Rapids from the quaint eastern suburb. They passed the marginal line of Plymouth Road.
"Grandma lives in a teeny house like that." chided the girl in Calvin Kleins.
"Oh, how totally gross! Look at that lady." cried the redhead. Like tourists on the railway through a zoo, they gawked out the windows at a woman in apple green polyester slacks, flourescent orange hunting cap, patchwork fake fur jacket and a metallic gold scarf.
"I bet she got her clothes at K-Mart." Everyone giggled.
Attention shifted to the other side of the van.
"Rev. Wigerink, why is there a couch on the front steps?" asked Rebecca. But before he had a chance to answer, she replied, "They must be waiting for the Salvation Army."

"Where are we? I've never been down this street before." another spoke up.

"Rev. Wigerink, are we almost there? I'm freezein'." Rebecca nearly begged.

"After the bridge overhead." dutifully answered the pastor, relieved that he had temporarily pacified one child. The redhead snatched a can, "Can you believe that they really have canned green beans. I've never even heard of them before."

"Oh my God, here's some canned yams!" chided another.

Parking proved to be difficult as cars lined both sides of the narrow street.

"Nobody here has a garage."

"Silence overcame the group. They had arrived. They cautiously peeked out the windows. This didn't look at all like the two story, three fireplace, five bedroom red brick colonial with black shutters that they had grown accustomed to. Rev. Wigerink calmly broke the silence saying,

"Come on kids. Let's go."

"Oh my God, it doesn't even have a lawn!" exclaimed the redhead.

"So, this is where they keep them. This place is the pits."

The single story cubicle rested in a weed pile. It was smaller than the two stall garages the children had expected. It was gray-brown in color, probably had been white many years ago. Through the peeling paint protruded purple latex. Loose shingles slid off as they proceeded onward.

"Look! Look! There's a poor people in the window." screeched the redhead.

They made their way to the storm door missing the majority of its glass and one hinge. The doorbell refused to assist, so they knocked. A form on the opposite side struggled to sever the warped door open. A small portion of her face visualized from yards of "polyfill" jacket. The now dirt crusted rayon trim, "simulated sheep's wool," encircled an already extremely round face. Her polyester pants bulged at the sides. The woman offered a hearty welcome to the urchins clad in Ralph Lauren's and Gloria Vanderbilt's. The redhead nudged his way front and center,

"Are you a poor people?"

Rev. Wigerink snatched his arm to swiftly stifle speech and escorted them through the warped door. Inside was no warmer than outside.

"It's freezein' in here."

"Somebody turn on the heat."

"I'm totally sure, I'm not staying in here."

"No doubt."

Complaints echoed from the children in disappointment. The woman presented an excuse of the lack of payment for the prior
month's oil bill. She proceeded on in an earthy manner using poor
English skills. She introduced herself as Merna Debussy and her
children as Jacqueline Anne and Steven Warren, aged four and two. She
explained that her husband was out looking for work. As she put it
"gotta git the bread on the table."
The room was sparsely furnished; a small weather-worn couch, an
end table, two lamps and a fold-up aluminum chair with the words
Third Reformed Church spray painted on the back.
Jacqueline took a step back in her snowmobile boots. The girl
in Calvin Kleins pounced.
"I have a pair of boots like those," leaning back she whispered
to Rebecca,
"cept mine are the good ones."
Rebecca helped the others awkwardly arrange the gifts beneath the
new scraggly tree. She touched upon one present that looked vaguely
familiar. One of her birthday gifts had been wrapped in similar
paper. She thought back to her ninth birthday, a prosperous one
at that; a large bulletin board, three Robert Scott sweaters, four
pairs of Levi's, one party dress, a backgammon set, rare coins to
add to an already enormous collection, a set of Grumbacher oils for
the budding artist but best of all was the new Fuji bike. She
craved spring. Tooling around in the basement wasn't really challenging
biking.
"Oh, what a treat, peaches!" Merna exclaimed at the generic
brand can.
"We'll save this for dessert on Christmas Day."
Rebecca reflected back upon the night before. She had eaten
Peach Melba. Her family had dined at the prestigious Penn Club,
Including Kiddie Cocktails, Lobster Newburg and Peach Melba for dessert.
"Look kids, a can without a label. We'll save it for a surprise."
"When are we gonna leave? I'm bored." snapped the redhead now
applying Chapstick to his chafed lips and nose.
As the children heaped into the now spacious van, the redhead burst
into hysterical laughter.
"Wait 'til she opens the can without the label, it's dogfood!
I almost died when she said it was gonna be a surprise."
The children all joined in on the fun, except for Rebecca, who
stared out the window.
"Did you check out the spring comin' out of the couch? Super
comfort." said the girl in pig-tails.
"Yea, and how 'bout the toughskins on the little runt." chided
the redhead.
They again past the marginal line of Plymouth Road, entering the
eastern suburb. As the van entered the church parking lot, Rebecca
recognized her father waiting in his Mercedes 450 SL. She slumped out
of the van and placed herself in the passenger seat of her father's car.
The heater blasted warm air across the front seat.
"Say, listen, let's go look for a new outfit for you. Maybe a
nice new dress. You'll need something to wear at the Christmas dinner at the Club tomorrow." her father said in his usual "nothing but the best for my kids" voice.

Rebecca slouched in the bucket seat,
"No, Dad, I just wanna go home."