The Spirit of Christmas

Foreword by Debbie Macomber

Cecil Murphey and Marley Gibson
1. Alone and Broke at Christmas

Cecil Murphey

I chose to do my first year of college at a small school in southern Texas—sixteen hundred miles from home. Shirley was pregnant with our first child and had complications with her pregnancy. That meant we were unable to travel back to the Chicago area for the Christmas holidays. Even if she had been able to travel, we didn’t have the money.

I went to school on veteran’s benefits. By watching our finances closely, we survived. We regularly ate Kraft’s macaroni-and-cheese mixes, bought hurt cans and marked-down vegetables at the supermarket. Neither of us considered it a sacrifice. In many ways, it was an adventure.

Christmas season began on Tuesday and most of the afternoon the campus was a plethora of people rushing from place to place and cars driving out of the campus. The last students left early Wednesday morning. By Thursday, two days before Christmas, the classrooms were empty. They closed the library and locked the student dorms. No one would return for ten days. In the married couples’ dorm we were the only ones still on campus. We didn’t have a telephone and it was long before computers, so we depended on the postal service for connecting with our families.

I had checked out all the books from the library that I thought
I might want during the holiday period. I looked forward to the opportunity to study without pressure.

On Christmas Eve, Shirley and I had a meal that was a mixture of a dented can of corn and an even more dented can of chili. Someone had given us a box of candles that had been “delicately used,” as the person said. Shirley had embroidered my initials on six new handkerchiefs. I had bought her a small bottle of cologne.

The church where we worshipped had a Christmas Eve service and we attended. Normally the church was full, but that night not more than thirty people came to the special service.

Christmas morning would be like any other day except we would have a nicer meal—meat loaf and baked sweet potatoes, food not normally on our diet.

About nine thirty, someone knocked on the door of our two-room apartment. I was shocked that anyone else was on campus. When I answered the door, the man smiled at me. We hadn’t met, but I knew his last name was Willard. He was one of the instructors at the college.

“I heard you two were here for the holidays,” he said.

“That’s right.” I invited him into our kitchen and to one of the four chairs we owned. I offered him a cup of coffee.

“No thanks,” he said. When he came into the room, he had a strange way of walking, almost as if he swayed from one foot to the other.

“I don’t want to stay,” Mr. Willard said. “I’m a bachelor and I want to take you two out for Christmas dinner.”

Shirley could hear us from the bedroom, where she had been lying down. She came into the room and grinned at me as I said, “We’d like that very much.”
“I came early because I didn’t know if you’d be preparing a big meal or had other plans to visit someone or—”

I laughed. “We have no plans.” I would have countered with an invitation to share our Christmas meal, but two small sweet potatoes wouldn’t be enough for three people.

“How about one o’clock? Is that all right?” After we nodded, he said, “I’ll come by and pick you up.”

He was five minutes early and we were ready. He took us to a fine Chinese restaurant. “They’re about the only ones open today,” he said.

I felt genuinely touched that he would take us out for Christmas dinner. We talked and slowly he told us about himself. He was a vet and had lost both legs in combat, which explained the strange way he walked. He shared a sad story about the woman he loved. She couldn’t stand to look at his legless body and broke off their engagement. “It hurt and I loved her,” he said, “but it’s better that she left before we married.”

For almost two hours we sat by the window and talked. I won’t say it was the best Christmas I ever had, but it was a special one.

When we reached our apartment, Shirley was nauseated and hurried inside. I sat in the car and talked with Mr. Willard for a few minutes.

“Thank you,” he said to me. “It means so much that you would spend part of your Christmas with me.”

I invited him to come inside, but he declined. As I walked into the building, I kept hearing his words inside my head. He had made Christmas Day special for us and yet he thanked us.

A few days later I again answered the knock on our door. Mr. Willard was there, this time in his wheelchair and without his
artificial legs. One of his army friends had contacted him and they were going to West Texas for New Year’s.

I thanked him again for our Christmas dinner, and he held out his hand to shake mine. As I leaned down toward him, he embraced me and whispered, “You two made this a special Christmas. I was so depressed, I wondered if life was worth living.”

I stared at him and felt the moisture in my eyes. I don’t remember the words between us, but I do remember he pulled me down to his level and embraced me. He released me, backed up his wheelchair, and left.

I never had Mr. Willard as an instructor and I never saw him again. The following year I transferred to the Chicago area. I can’t even remember his first name. What I do remember is how special he made Christmas for a young, impoverished couple. And to make it even more wonderful, he thanked us.

I’ve learned many lessons about Christmas, but this is one I treasure. He gave to us and yet he seemed to get more pleasure out of the giving than we did out of the receiving. That truly is the Christmas spirit, isn’t it?
“Christmas is canceled,” my mother said sternly, her eyes moist with tears. Only two months earlier she had lost her beloved father to heart disease.

“You can’t cancel Christmas,” I said.

“Yes, I can. Daddy is no longer with us and it doesn’t matter to me this year.”

That shocked me because I’d often thought of my mother as the Queen of Christmastime. She was a church organist, taught carols to the kids, and led the choir in seasonal musicals. She played for her church with such fervor I sometimes wondered if the angels were channeling their choruses through her.

Christmas canceled!

It wasn’t that I was upset about not having presents or toys. I was eighteen, a freshman in college, and I didn’t need those material items. What I wanted was the Christmas tree put up the way my mother did it every year with the ornaments organized exactly right. What I needed was the smell of Christmas turkey as we gathered around the dining room table with many delicious, homemade side dishes. What I yearned for was to hear my mother sit at our piano in the living room and sing about the birth of Christ, the ultimate present God gave to the world that brings us peace, love, and joy all through the year.
Christmas canceled!

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” my sister, Jennifer, said on the phone. “If Mom won’t put up the tree, we’ll do it.”

“I’ll help, too!” my brother, Jeff, yelled.

“I’ll help, as well,” Dad told me. “But your mother isn’t going to be happy about this.”

We even got our grandmother in on the plans, knowing she wouldn’t want to be alone on Christmas Day without Granddaddy.

The decision was made: We would have Christmas.

For me, it felt like a long December, finishing finals at college and coming home to find the house just as it was the rest of the year: No tree. No wreath. No candles. No crèche. Even my cat, Smokey, walked around twitching his nose and tail as if knowing something wasn’t right.

My brother, Jeff, arrived, followed by my sister, Jennifer. She had driven from New Jersey to Alabama with her two cats, Jo and Natalie. We were prepared for a full-frontal, all-family-members Christmas assault on my mother.

While she was out one afternoon, Jennifer, Jeff, and I began to decorate the house. We put the artificial tree together, hung the lights, strung the tinsel, and placed the ornaments in the best way we could to make it look like Mom had done it. I carefully unwrapped each hand-painted item of the crèche and set Mary, Joseph, the wise men, camel, sheep, angel, and, finally, baby Jesus on top of the piano among holly leaves and berries.

Jennifer decorated the mantel with pinecones, Christmas cards, and candles. Jeff put Mom’s wreath on the front door and placed a spotlight in the lawn to highlight it. We were ready to face Mom.
Minutes later, her car pulled up and we waited.

She walked inside, put down her purse, and said nothing. The former Queen of Christmastime went into her room.

While our family drama was going on, a feud had begun. Smokey hadn’t liked having two other creatures invade his space. Jo and Natalie slept in his favorite spots, ate his food, and ganged up on him. He was definitely not full of the Christmas spirit.

We kids bought the turkey and were going to cook it Christmas Day to the best of our ability. It wouldn’t be Mom’s cooking, but we were going to have our Christmas feast.

Christmas Eve, Mom went to church while Jennifer and Jeff went to visit a friend. Dad and I cooked breakfast food for our dinner. As we quietly ate our pancakes and bacon, a horrid screech, like a mountain lion calling out, filled the room.

“Was that the cats?” I asked.

Dad just raised an eyebrow, shrugged, and went back to eating.

Seconds later a cacophony of sounds mixed together as the animals rushed down the stairs. Meows, howls, and hissing filled the house. Apparently Smokey had had enough and was defending his territory from the two females who’d been torturing him the past few days. All of them ran around the house, through the living room, and under the dining room table.

Three flashes of black fur were a blur as Dad and I tried to separate them. Jo bolted underneath the Christmas tree, followed by Natalie. Smokey pursued. The jumbled mess of cat-ness disappeared under the green branches lit with colorful lights.

As the catfight continued, the tree began to shake. The ornaments clanged and shivered. Dad and I didn’t know what to do, so we watched. Just then the tree started to shake and tip forward.
Dad and I did our best to catch it, but the tree hit the living room floor with a loud crack.

Even though Mom wasn’t in her regular Christmas frame of mind, one thing I knew was that she would freak out seeing the tree and her ornaments scattered across the floor. Dad and I only had a few minutes before she’d come home from church.

Without Jennifer and Jeff there to help—Jeff knew how to set up the tree just like Mom—Dad and I did our best to return the tree to normal. Dad tightened the trunk in the base and I toiled over returning the lights and garland to some semblance of normalcy. It took quite an effort on our part, but we succeeded in righting the tree and straightening it minutes before the front door opened.

Mom stared at Dad and me in the living room trying to act as if nothing had happened. We probably had discomfort written on our faces.

“Those damn cats knocked down the Christmas tree, didn’t they?” Mom said.

“How did you know?” I asked.

“Because it’s crooked and everything’s a mess.”

Dad shrugged and looked at me. “We tried.”

I started laughing. Hard. I couldn’t help it.

And so did Mom. It was the first time we’d heard her laughter in a couple of months—in fact, not since Granddaddy’s death.

Finally, she gazed around the living room and took in that we’d decorated for her. Tears filled her eyes and she went over and sat at the piano. She ran her hand gently over the figurines of the crèche and paused over the baby Jesus.

That’s when the spirit of Christmas refilled my mother’s bro-
ken heart and she stretched her fingers out onto the ivory keys. She began to play and sing “Joy to the World.”

Yes, there was joy to the world. Our family was together that Christmas and we would celebrate the most joyous day of the year together. We would miss not having Granddaddy with us, but he was in heaven with Jesus—where he’d always wanted to be. And that only added to our Christmas spirit.

Christmas had been uncanceled.

While Mother continued to sing, I went upstairs to seek out the culprits of our Christmas chaos. There they were. Smokey, Jo, and Natalie were all curled up on my bed in one large kitty ball.

I laughed and shook my head. Indeed, there was joy in the world.
THE SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

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