



Publisher's Note: We hope you enjoy these two very different Christmas stories by new contributing writer Jonnie Garstka. The first story recounts a memorable Christmas gift, and the second is an Irish tale told to Jonnie by her mother.

Mom, Madame Alexander, Mike and Me

The Christmas when I was twelve was a very special one for me. I was the tomboy of the neighborhood. I could climb a tree faster than anybody. I could stand on my bicycle seat and ride down the street and I could hit a baseball as far as my brothers could. All of which were very important to me.



But when my mother asked me what I wanted for Christmas, I looked carefully around to be sure no one heard me and asked her for a doll. She asked, "Are you sure, Jonnie?" I can still see her sitting at the piano, giving me one of those quizzical mother-type looks. When I nodded my assent, still afraid one of the other kids might hear or see us, she let the subject drop.

In the weeks that followed, I was sorely tempted to tell my mom I had changed my mind. Especially nerve racking was the thought of what the other kids would say when I opened up a doll. I looked for a chance to get her alone, but the "small fry", my younger brothers and sisters, were being especially good. They wanted to be sure Mom saw all their goodness so she could tell Santa, so she was never alone.

By the time Christmas arrived, I was a wreck. I wondered if a dumb doll was worth all the anxiety I'd gone through. Then I opened the box. A Madame Alexander Doll was inside and she was beautiful. My mom had made her several extra outfits and I couldn't wait to try them on her. I was rummaging in the box, sifting through the sweaters and skirts when Mike caught sight of me.

He did an exaggerated double take and stage whispered "Well wouldya get a load of that? Jonnie got a doll!" Everybody looked at me. I could feel my face getting red but I couldn't think of anything to say. My mom took over.

She said "I gave your sister a doll because I felt it was time she tried some feminine pursuits. Have you a problem with that?" Of course no one did. Only a fool would cross his mother on Christmas Day. She might take something back.

I'd love to tell you I still have that doll or that I gave her to my daughter Gretchen when she was twelve, but my brothers and I used her as bait to get a huge snapping turtle to walk forward. He clamped down on her head and smashed her eyes in. Too bad. She was a great doll.

A True Christmas Story

My mother and I were sitting on the floor of my brother's closet playing with Puff's kittens. They looked like fat, miniature tigers as they stalked our hands. While I stroked their tiny, furry bodies, my mom told me how the striped cat got the "M" on her forehead.

The Blessed Mother was having a terrible time getting the child Jesus to sleep. She sang him a lullaby, she rocked him in his cradle, she carried him in her arms. But the baby was wide awake.

The animals in the stable gathered around and watched Mary's efforts with interest.

They respectfully asked her if they could help. Warmed by their kindness, Mary nodded.

The donkey reared (stood up on his hind legs) a trick he was secretly rather proud of. The child Jesus was delighted. He cooed and gurgled his baby approval.

The stable dog chased his tail round and round in a circle. This pleased the baby even more. He happily clapped his hands.

The ewes bleated several verses of their own special lamb lullaby but the infant Jesus was more awake than ever.

A rather scruffy barn cat asked Mary if she could help, but the other animals laughed at her. "What makes you think you will succeed where we have failed?" They scornfully asked.

With a loving gesture, Mary silenced them and gave the cat her permission to try.

First the cat perched at the foot of the cradle. She carefully licked each paw and groomed herself, smoothing her fur . . . combing her whiskers . . . patting her ears . . . the child Jesus was entranced.

When the cat was as clean as could be, she gracefully jumped down onto the blanket that covered the little boy and proceeded to circle around and around looking for the perfect place to rest. Jesus' eyelids seemed to be getting heavy. Finally the cat curled up into a ball and began to purr contentedly. With a happy sigh the infant closed his eyes and slept.

To show her gratitude, Mary touched the cat on her forehead. Ever since that day, all striped cats have the letter "M" on their foreheads.

I know this story is true because my mother told me.

Jonnie Garstka lives in Brewster with her husband, a golden retriever puppy named Bridget, and a 16-year-old cat called Sam.

A former humor columnist, she is now working on her memoir, tentatively titled "I Started out as a Middle Child but I'm Working My Way Up".

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