

Candy Canes

by David Hampton 11/25

I guess I was pretty infected with Christmas spirit which made me less cautious as I answered the doorbell without checking the window to determine who might be visiting so late. I flicked the lock and pulled the door open. Suddenly, a haymaker to my nose literally knocked me on my ass. Two men who could only be described as thugs stepped in and eased the door shut. They brandished pistols with large suppressors. Instinctively, fear chiseled its way down my spine when I realized neither wore a mask and surmised the implications of that observation. With the wicked smoothness of a snake, the larger of the two put a foot on my chest and pointed his gun at my face.

"Who else is here?" He rasped.

My wife and son were already in bed. I didn't know what to do or say. So, I did nothing. That was the last thing I remember.

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I woke to a darkened room, aroused by beeping noises, and lying in what was obviously a hospital bed. Almost immediately a nurse rushed into the room and turned on an overhead light that seared through my brain like a laser. She checked vitals, made a phone call and left. Sometime later a large man in a suit entered and flashed a badge.

In a matter-of-fact manner, the detective filled me in on what had taken place while I apparently languished unconscious for eight days. My wife and son were both now dead and buried. The incident at my house was a case of mistaken identity. The criminals were really after some guy a couple of streets over. Almost comically, the two thugs walked out my front door still holding their pistols at the precise time a patrol car serendipitously cruised by. They now reside in a prison infirmary. The bullet went through my left eye socket, angled off the skull, then dinged a small section of brain tissue. The doctor said I'm mostly blind in one eye and will walk a bit funny, but that I'm a lucky man.

The next morning there was a candy cane on my bed. When the nurse arrived to check on me I thanked her, but she denied knowing how it got there. The following morning, another candy cane. The third morning I woke a bit earlier than usual and saw a young boy turning away from my bed and heading toward the door. I glanced at another candy cane and smiled.

"Hey buddy," I said, and the boy turned toward me. His blue eyes were striking and conflicted sharply with the sadness that seemed to seep from his soul. I grabbed the candy. "Thanks for the treat. What's your name?"

"Jamie," he replied softly.

"Well, thanks again Jamie, but why the candy canes?"

He looked down and shuffled his feet for a moment. "The nurse told me your little boy is in heaven, so I figured you had no one to give you a Christmas present."

Once more in my life I was speechless as Jamie gave me a little wave and left the room.

My nurse told me the next day about the auto accident. Jamie's mother was killed at the scene and his father lay in a coma in an adjoining room. The boy miraculously survived with a few scratches. The hospital was going to pull the plug on Jamie's father that day...Christmas day. There were no close relatives and Jamie was destined for foster care.

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If I had to admit it, getting married again a year later was primarily motivated by my desire to get Jamie out of the system. Having a wife was pretty much a prerequisite for adoption, and we were successful. The marriage; however, was not. I became the sole parent.

That was twelve years ago. Today, I lost Jamie. He had single-handedly filled the tragic void left by the loss of my first son and two wives. During each of the 4,380 days we spent together his grins melted my heart and made life worth living...a life filled with school projects, soccer, baseball, scouting, birthdays, and of course, twelve Christmases. I walked back to my car in the university parking lot. I could hardly find the stupid thing because my only good eye was so blurred with tears. I got in and saw the note anchored on the dash by a candy cane. I smiled.

"Thanks for my life dad, see you at semester break."