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### A Memorable Christmas

It was December 24, and I was four years old. We had been invited to spend the holiday at the home of my aunt and uncle. Since I had had a very chaotic upbringing thus far, the thought of spending Christmas with family was very exciting. My mother and father were separated, and my brother, sister, mother, and I were living in the projects. Christmas with extended family was just the thing we needed. Since my mother had not learned to drive, her brother came from Buffalo, New York, to pick us up, and he drove us to Alfred, New York. This was my favorite aunt and uncle, so I knew it was going to be a fun visit.

Upon arriving, I was swept up into the merriment of the Christmas season. There were hugs all around, with the adults eager to share with each other what was going on in their lives. I remember the huge fireplace roaring as we came in out of the cold. The bubble candles on the tree, the silver icicles, and all the beautiful lights made the perfect Christmas setting. Later that day, my sister and I eagerly waited, glued to the black-and-white television, to see Santa Claus and find out if his elf Forgetful was going to make it off the ladder on the frozen roof in time to go with Santa on Christmas Eve.

When it was time for bed, we put out cookies and milk for Santa, changed into our colorful Christmas pajamas, and headed down the hall. The girl cousins were promptly marched off to one bedroom and the boys off to another. I vividly remember seeing my aunt, who was expecting her third child any day, and her father sitting next to her, both sitting cross-legged on

the floor in the hallway. Her father was one amazing storyteller. He would start off with “once upon a time there was,” and then he would ask the first girl to fill in with a word or two. He would then repeat the beginning of the story with the silly answer the girl had given and go on. After the next line or two, he would have the first boy give an answer and so on until everyone had an opportunity to answer, and what a story it ended up being. We laughed until our sides hurt. When the story was over, it was time for lights out, and it did not take long to fall asleep.

The next morning I was anxious to see if Santa had left any presents. I was not disappointed. When I ran out of the bedroom, down the hall, and into the living room, I could not believe how many gifts there were. Then I looked over on the table and saw that, sure enough, Santa had eaten all the cookies and had drunk all the milk.

As we gathered around the tree, the sense of love and kindness permeated the air. I had never experienced that feeling before. It was such a wonderful feeling to be around family that loved me and cared about me. Then when I opened my present, I saw an absolutely beautifully colored Fisher-Price toy. I had never ever seen anything like that toy before, and I was thrilled.

That Christmas was the best Christmas I ever had because of family and a real sense of belonging and fitting in. In the years following, decisions were made that changed the course of my life, and I never had a Christmas like that again.