

A Christmas story

It doesn't have to be cold at Christmastime

By COLIN GIBSON

It was a cold December night. Colder than normal for this time of year. But the two children alone in the house were learning to cope with the cold and the absence of their parents.

Things had been this way for about two months now. Ever since their father had been laid off from work. Laid off from the job he had worked at for 18 years. Laid off from the plant he had entered as a young man with a future only to emerge as an aging and worried unemployed 38-year-old with the responsibility of a young family and the day-to-day reality of trying to make ends meet.

Jennifer, a precocious and sometimes temperamental 12-year-old, had sensed for some time that something had changed in the family's well-being. It went beyond the fact that the thermometer was constantly being turned down; or that her mom was now working nights as a cleaning lady and her dad as a waiter in the local hotel.

Something was missing. There wasn't as much laughter in the house anymore. Oh sure, her mom and dad still laughed at her dumb jokes and her stories about classroom pranks - but somehow, the laughter seemed forced.

She wanted to ask her parents what was wrong and even offer her help. But she felt that would be even dumber than some of her jokes - because, after all, she was only 12 years old.

Still, she wished there was something she could do to bring things back to the way they were. Especially when she heard her mom crying softly late at night.

But for now, she would do her part and that meant looking after her younger brother. A nine-year-old hellion who answered to the name of Michael and who - to her utmost embarrassment and chagrin - was actively engaged in the pursuit of becoming the first true-to-life cowboy on their block.

To state that Michael was a free spirit would be grossly underestimating his capabilities.

He was a young boy thoroughly enamoured with life. His laugh was infectious, his charm all-encompassing and his guile at times even intimidating for one so young.

He was also an intelligent boy who realized that something drastic had altered the family's previous state of harmony. He also realized there was little he could do about the situation so he continued with his devil-may-care attitude and his wholehearted enthusiasm for life.

Jennifer and Michael had just put on their pyjamas and were heading to the kitchen for their ritual late-night snack when there was a knock on the front door.

The siblings looked at each other and the space between them was filled with the question that hadn't even been uttered.

Who could that be? Mom and dad

weren't expected home for at least a couple of hours and they hadn't mentioned that someone would be coming over.

After an uncomfortable several minutes, the knock sounded again and Jennifer took charge.

"I'll see who it is," she said. "Mike, you stay behind me and keep your mouth shut, it's likely just someone looking for directions."

The pair edged somewhat nervously to the door and Jennifer inched it open just wide enough so she could see the source of the knocking.

A young man stood on the front porch and he was smiling down at the apprehensive pair of eyes that looked up at him through the crack in the partially open door.

For the first time in a long time Jennifer was practically speechless

He appeared to be in his mid-twenties, was about medium height, clean-shaven and had light-brown hair that poked out in several directions from beneath his toque.

"Yes?" asked Jennifer tentatively. "Can I help you?"

Then from somewhere behind the young girl another voice squeaked up. "What do you want mister?"

The young man chuckled and said in a quiet, warm voice. "Hi, my name is Jonathan. You must be Jennifer and I'll bet the owner of that manly voice must be your brother Mike. I dropped in to the hotel and your father asked if I would stop by just to make sure the

two of you were alright. Everything's okay isn't it?"

The warmth in the young man's voice dispelled any of Jennifer's worries and relaxing visibly, she replied, "Yes, we're alright. Dad shouldn't worry about us, though, because I can take care of things. I've been doing it for awhile now."

"Well, I'm sure you can," said the young man. "But your dad also sent over some Christmas presents and if you'll let me, I'll get them out of my car and put them under the Christmas tree."

For the first time in a long time Jennifer was practically speechless. Her parents hadn't said anything to her about more presents. In fact, her mother had told her that the meagre few presently resting under the tree in the living room were all that would be arriving this year because, according to her mom, "Times were tough."

She hesitated only briefly before replying. After all, she told herself, the young man had said he was a friend of her dad's; he did seem nice enough and the prospect of more gifts to open on Christmas morning swung her decision in the young man's favor.

"Sure," she said. "You get the presents and I'll make some hot chocolate. Mike and I were just going to have some anyway."

This declaration mobilized the three of them. The young man clomped off the porch for the gifts; Jennifer sped to the kitchen to heat up some milk for the hot chocolate and Michael rushed to his bedroom to retrieve his cowboy hat and set of holsters with the Lone Ranger six-shooters. The better to defend the old homestead, he figured.

A short time later, with what seemed to be a veritable treasure trove of presents tucked hither and thither around the Christmas tree.

the three of them sat cross-legged on the living room floor, their hands cupped around steaming mugs of hot chocolate.

Jennifer had just finished her first sip of hot chocolate when she heard what sounded like a large truck pulling up beside the house. Looking out the living room window, she saw a fuel truck edge by the corner of the house.

'I'm too old to believe in Santa Claus

"That's funny," she mused. "Dad said we wouldn't be getting any fuel for awhile and that's why we have to keep the thermometer down. I wonder what that guy is doing?"

"Oh," said the young man, with a hint of laughter in his warm voice. "your dad likely just wanted the house to be warm for Christmas. Anyway, since the fuel man is here, why don't you turn up the thermometer a bit so we can all be comfortable."

For some unknown reason, Jennifer did as she was bid and returned to her sitting position directly in front of the young man. She did have some questions, though and she felt now was the time to put them to the young stranger.

"How long have you known my dad?" she asked, beginning the in-

terrogation.

"Oh," replied the young man. "I've known both your mom and dad for a long time. They're good people and whenever I get a chance to help them out, I do what I can. Besides, it's the Christmas season and everyone should try just that much harder to help out friends and neighbors. Your mom and dad have had a pretty rough time of it lately and I just want them to know they still have friends who care."

"But where did the presents come from?" asked Jennifer.

"Well, that's sort of a long story," said the young man, sipping tentatively at his hot chocolate. "It might best be answered if I can ask the pair of you some questions. Would that be alright?"

"Sure," Jennifer and Mike responded in unison.

"Okay, do you believe in Santa Claus?"

"I do," piped up Mike. "I mean if

Continued on Page 16

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