

The Gingerbread Man

1435 words

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It was the gingerbread man that did me in. Somewhere between decorating the ornamental red frosting of the vest with the colorful gumdrop buttons and plunking on the crinkly raisin eyes, my own peepers began to leak. When the first tear fell, I told myself it would soon pass by like a short spring rain.

I was—although I seldom am—wrong.

Perhaps it was because it was mid-December, not spring, that the first tear became a trickle and the trickle became an outright salty downpour. Why, I fair drowned out Elvis on the radio, and him singing my favorite *Blue Christmas*. I'm just saying, that if me and Elvis had been having a contest on blue, I had him whipped like the frosting on those gingerbread cookies. You could pick any color of blue out of the crayon box and I knew down to my wooly socks how that color felt.

And I'm not—because I seldom am—lying.

It had been six months since my husband died and eight months since my mother had passed on to that great place in the sky. It seemed like Christmas should have the courtesy to somehow just go away. Disappear. Instead, here I was, frosting gingerbread cookies just like mom and I had done when I was a child. Like nothing had happened and mom and Ted would just walk in the door at any minute and POOF, life would be normal. I looked that cookie in the eye and

wondered how I was supposed to pull off a pleasant, family Christmas. I swear that little brown man gave me back the fish eye. Damn his gingery, cinnamon-smelling hide.

What was Kami thinking bringing her family home for Christmas? Did my girl not have the sense God gave a carrot? My gosh, at least a carrot starts out orange, stays orange and remains so when you cook it. Orange.

Kami started out with good common sense, went all flighty—flighty—when she met *that man*, married him and moved to France like nobody but she and *that man* mattered bo-diddly. Like having her move to France wasn't like ripping my beating heart right out of my chest. (Which would be quite a job because I'm pretty blessed in that department, just saying.) And now, here she was trotting back at Christmas with a child I never even laid eyes on. After nearly six long years. Not the common sense of a carrot.

Of course, here we were. We three—me, myself and I—frosting gingerbread men for that little boy—a total stranger I never even got to hold when he was born. Or when he had his first birthday. Or his second. Or his...well, you get the picture. So maybe I didn't have the common sense of a root vegetable either. Probably where Kami gets it from.

The upshot of it was, I missed my mom. Here I stood in my bright kitchen with the red-checked wallpaper and country curtains with the hens and roosters on the fabric. (I never quite figured out why there were so many roosters when everyone knows a barnyard only needs one. Some textile designer who didn't know his chickens was getting paid good money for that lack in her education.) And I missed my mom so much it fairly hurt to breathe. Like I couldn't get enough air. I missed her cheerful smile and the sparkle of her eyes. The love she poured out like honey over Sunday flapjacks.

I missed being someone's little girl. And it was Christmas.

I know, I know. You think I should be missing Ted, that louse, that out and out bounder of a big no-good specimen of manhood. Well, you'd be wrong. He'd been as much of a mistake as *that man* my Kami had strolled down the aisle with. Calling my husband a philandering skunk would be a kindness.

And I'm not—because I seldom am—exaggerating.

Frankly, since he's dead and six feet under I don't see a reason to be polite. Politeness and forgiveness and turning the other cheek and all that might be Christian, but it's overrated.

I was at the point of mopping my eyes and giving myself a swift mental kick in the tuckus when the doorbell rang, and I knew—in pilot lingo—that we had lift off. It would be Kami and *that man* and my five-year-old grandson I had never seen. *Never seen*. Like grandmothers weren't important enough to be invited to board a plane and take a trip to France to meet the new member of the family.

I knew that wily gingerbread boy was fairly aching to push me toward the door. If I'd frosted him some lips on his devious little head he'd be yelling, "Answer the blasted door before I go deaf, you crazy woman!"

So I did.

It was the UPS man. You know, he's sort of a jerk, but he's a good-looking, kindly jerk. He's got twinkly blue eyes, dark brown hair not even going grey yet. And well, he's got some muscles on him from hauling around all those packages all day, every day. A whole UPS truck of muscles.

Not that I was *looking*, because I never do.

Along with my package he handed me a Christmas card—my first one of the season. I ran back into the kitchen and snatched a gingerbread boy from the counter and presented it to him with a flourish that—well, flourished.

“Brandon,” I said, not looking at his muscles, “This is for you. Merry Christmas. But if you don’t mind, I wish you’d bite the head off this sucker right now, because I’m in a foul mood and it’ll make me feel a whole lot better. If this cookie had a mouth, it would be one of those backtalkers.”

So he did.

He might have planted a quick kiss on my cheek after he chomped into that cookie, too, but I probably made that up on the spur of the moment just to keep you interested in my story. A little flirtation, you know, gets the reader excited about reading on to the next page.

Not that I make things up, because I never do.

After he left, I looked at the package. It was from my aunt Helen. I tore it open and inside there was a small box wrapped in red and green tissue paper with blue snowmen and on top of the whole gaudy mess was a scrawled note that said:

Christmas might be a might tough this year, dear girl. Especially since Kami’s husband lost his job and they’ll be counting on you to make Christmas a good one for little Jeremy. I thought this photo might brighten your day and help you remember the wonderful time we had when you were small. Love always, Helen

Carefully wrapped in the tissue paper was a framed photo of my aunt, my mother and myself at Christmas. I held a ginger cookie in one hand and had a smear of pink frosting across one cheek. I was about five, the same age my grandson was now. My heart swelled with memories

of those wonderful days when life was simpler. When I was still someone's little girl. And with that memory came the thought that it was now my turn. My turn.

That man had lost his job? Why hadn't they told me? My daughter needed me. That sweet grandson of mine needed me. And so did that man who swept my carrot-brained daughter off her feet six years before. My *family* needed me. In my heart, I knew I needed *them* more.

Running to the bedroom, I pulled on a never-worn hideous Christmas sweater Kami had sent me two years before. Then I bustled around the kitchen putting cider and mulling spices in a pot to simmer and fill the house with the smell of the holiday. I plugged in the tree lights and put a platter of sugar cookies, gingerbread men and gumdrops on the coffee table.

Elvis was singing *White Christmas* when the doorbell rang. And I had on that ugly sweater and an elf hat that looked plum puddin' ridiculous. I thought I heard one of the gingerbread men whisper, sweet as molasses, "So go answer it already, Lady!"

So I did.

That man, that sweet, lovely, generous man, stood on the porch with my daughter and grandson. My family was home for Christmas.