

HOLIDAY CHEER



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By Jerrod S. Smelker
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Two days before Christmas...

“Honey, I’m home!” Ryan says as he walks through the front door. He’s had a non-eventful workday and has looked forward to his next three days off work. After all, it’s two days before Christmas. Beth, Ryan’s wife, hears him come home and rushes to greet him at the front door, as do the two dogs. She sees him, smiles and gives him a passionate kiss hello. The dogs, a Labrador named Jack and a Bulldog named Ralphie, are a bunch of lunatic animals that absolutely love people...especially when they come home. “Where are the kids?” Ryan asks. Just then two of the children come running down the stairs to say hello to their father. The third child trots from the kitchen where the scent of spaghetti fills the air. Alex, the 9-year-old reaches his father first and gives him a giant hug and kiss. Hailey, the 6-year-old girl, grabs her father’s leg and squeezes as hard as she can. Finally, Isabelle, the 2-year-old girl, tries to reach up for her daddy to pick up. The kids are all talking at the same time, trying to tell their father what kind of day they all had. Ryan just smiles, stares at Beth and silently communicates to her what a nice greeting he has received.

Ryan gives all of the children a kiss and tells them he loves them. The children then run about doing what projects they were doing moments ago. Ryan hangs up his winter jacket as Beth sets his workbag aside. They hug each other again and kiss like they did on their first date. As they make their way into the kitchen to check on dinner, Ryan

stops, grabs Beth and plants a big kiss on her lips, after all, that's where the mistletoe is hanging. Beth smiles as Ryan points to the greenery above her head. Hailey is sitting at the table coloring in her color book. Crayons are strewn about the table and she is looking at the yellow crayon like she wants to take a bite out of it. The kitchen air is filled with the aroma of tomato, garlic, oregano and pasta. Beth stirs the boiling water filled with spaghetti and checks the sauce. Ryan feeds the dogs and pets them affectionately. He talks to them as if they were his kids too.

Ryan and Beth share stories about how their days were. Ryan tells her about his normal non-stop phone calls and paperwork. Beth describes her day of watching the kids and the dogs play in the snow, building snow forts and having snowball fights. She confesses to joining in the snowball fight. She describes how excited the kids have been about Christmas coming so fast, although to the kids, not fast enough. They have been hanging around the Christmas tree, decorating it and shaking all the gifts. The dogs have been dragging the silver tree tinsel all over the house.

Ryan lends Beth a hand with getting dinner ready. Ryan sets the table and helps Hailey pick up her crayons and color books. Hailey is all smiles and her big eyes sparkle knowing she has a bunch of presents under the Christmas tree. Ryan and Hailey discuss the day's itinerary and what kind of exciting things are in-store for everyone. It shows on

Hailey's face, she is giddy with anticipation; it shows on her father's face as well. Beth calls the other kids to dinner and lights the candles setting about the table. The family then digs into the hot spaghetti dinner.

The talk around the table is obviously Christmas, the day's activities and guessing what each has gotten for Christmas. Beth brings up the fact that Santa Claus has been checking his lists for children that have been naughty or nice. Of course Alex, Hailey and Isabelle are all quick to point out that they have been overly good this year. The dogs circle the table like sharks looking for scraps. The children know not to feed the dogs, but Isabelle always drops bits of food to them. It's no wonder they follow her around all the time.

Dinner comes to an end and the kids go about the house to play. Ryan washes the dishes as Beth dries and puts them away. They continue to discuss the day they've had and talk about what's to come in the next few days. The dishes are done and the kitchen is clean once again. The family is called to the living room and Ryan places the star atop the Christmas tree. Beth places a family ornament on the tree that depicts a special family meaning. Beth reminds the children why we celebrate Christmas and why it's so special.

The night winds down and the kids are ready to go off to bed. They brush their teeth and get into their pajamas. Beth tells a bedtime story and the children are tucked into bed. Beth and Ryan watch a little TV and then they retire to their bedroom. Ryan looks out the window and

comments on how clear the sky is and how bright the stars are. Beth joins him at the window. They hold each other as they stare at the cold winter night sky.

Christmas Eve...

The alarm goes off and Beth and Ryan prepare for the busy day ahead. With the kids already awake, Beth heads for the shower as Ryan prepares a big pre-holiday breakfast. The kids all scamper down to the living room to watch Christmas cartoons on the television. Still in their pajamas and with their favorite blankets and pillows in their hands, they make a comfortable play and TV watching area on the living room floor. Ryan dispenses orange juice to the kids and brings a big glass to Beth in the bathroom. Ryan peeks his head in the shower and kisses Beth good morning.

Ryan prepares a breakfast of French toast, bacon, and fried potatoes. The house quickly fills with its scent. The children are content with the television program, but soon their grumbling bellies cry out for food. Isabelle does her best to help her daddy set the breakfast table as Alex and Hailey just circle the kitchen waiting for breakfast to be done. Beth finishes her shower and joins the rest of the family at the table. The family discusses the day's events as the French toast is passed out and the syrup starts to pour. The kids eat like they have never had

breakfast before. They know that as soon as breakfast is over and daddy takes a shower, a day of holiday fun will begin.

Breakfast is over and dishes are put in the sink for later. Ryan heads for the shower as Beth prepares the children for a winter sledding escapade and the town's annual Christmas parade later. What seems like a hundred pounds of winter clothing poured out of the closet, hats, mittens, coats and boots. The kids are excited and have trouble standing still. Once the kids are dressed, Beth hands off a sled to each child and sends them outside in the backyard. Ryan and Beth start to get dressed. Beth busts out laughing as she sees Ryan putting on his bright red full-length long johns. She calls him a lumberjack and asks him to "go chop some wood!", then yells out "timber!" as she laughs out loud. Ryan just smiles at her and puts on his jeans. Once they are dressed for winter, they head out the door to join the kids.

The weather is nice, about 30 degrees and the sun is only covered by a few clouds. The ground is covered by at least a foot of snow and the wind is creating a slight chill. The backyard is huge and directly in front of a very large hill, perfect for winter sledding. Many of the neighbor kids gather there every winter for their snowball fights, sledding and fort making. In the summer it serves as a common playing ground. The kids are all scattered about the hill and Isabelle is taken under a neighbor girl's wing. Isabelle is a daredevil who has no fear of speeding down the slippery hill. Alex and Hailey are already at the top of the hill ready for

their accelerated ride. Ryan grabs a sled and heads off to join the kids and a few other fathers at the hilltop. Beth stands at the bottom with a few neighborhood mothers. They discuss how crazy some of the kids are... and their husbands.

As the morning turns into the afternoon, Ryan, Beth and the kids are ready to get warm and eat some lunch. They reach the house and shake off the powdery white snow. The door front is piled with wet clothes and icy boots. Beth heads to the kitchen to make some lunch as Ryan makes everyone some hot cocoa.

Ryan and Beth enjoy a blushed, cold nose embrace and kiss while waiting for the hot-dogs to cook and hot cocoa water to boil. They talk about how much fun the sledding was and what is needed to prepare for Hailey's school pageant. As lunch is prepared, the children are called into the dining area to eat. Ryan tells a story to the kids about Santa Claus's visit tonight and how they will have to be in bed early. He tells them how the reindeer will land on the roof and Santa will climb down the chimney. He will leave presents for the kids and fill their stockings. Beth reminds the kids that they must hang their stockings above the fireplace and make Christmas cookies tonight for Santa. The children's excitement grows and smiles fill their faces.

After lunch is over and clean up is completed, the kids take a bath and get dressed for the parade and tonight's school pageant. Beth helps Hailey put on her elf outfit and Ryan supervises the other's baths and

dress. Isabelle is dressed in a velvety type red dress and has a pretty bow tied in her hair, although she keeps trying to pull it out. Alex puts on his good clothes of dress pants and a vest. Ryan puts a snowman pin on him for holiday decoration. Ryan goes to his bedroom and finally has time to get dressed. He looks into the master bathroom and watches as Beth puts on her holiday season dress. He looks at her adoringly and then gives her a big kiss. They smile, hug and convey to each other how much they love each other and how great this Christmas season is. Beth finishes brushing her hair and makes final preparations. Ryan starts the car to warm it up and scrapes off the windows. The kids are piled into the car as they make their way to downtown.

The town is well known for their holiday spirit and decorating style...Christmas is no exception. The streets are lined with thousands of Christmas lights. Reds, greens, blues and yellows shine brightly to light up the entire town. Greenery lines every downtown store and the storekeepers do their part to keep the sidewalks shoveled. Just about every person who lives in the town is here at the parade. The crowd packs the street curbs and shares lots of discussions. Kids are lined up in the front as adults are hidden a bit in the rear. The children are filled with anticipation waiting for Santa Claus to appear and his elves to toss out candy. Ryan parks a few blocks away and the car unloads quickly. Isabelle is gathered up by Beth and Ryan corrals the others.

The temperature has dropped to a chilly fifteen degrees and the

sky is cloudy. There is virtually no wind or breeze and it is dropping snowflakes here and there. The noise from the crowd gets louder as the Smelker family makes their way to the parade route. The sounds of the school band can be heard in the background and the first float is making its way through the streets. Children are waving and laughing, making all sorts of clamor. They ignore the cold weather as they watch and wait for the arrival of the big man in red. Dozens of beautiful colored floats motor past the townspeople decorated with Christmas decor and dazzling characters.

Ryan and Beth find an opening in the crowd on Market Street and shuffle the kids to the front for a better view. Isabelle sits atop Ryan's shoulders using his head for a balancing hold. She has the best view. Beth has brought along a thermos of hot cocoa and passes out a cup to each child. As she hands a small spill-proof cup to Isabelle, Ryan gives her the look of fear. Fear that although the cup says spill-proof, Ryan does not want hot cocoa all over his head. A cloud of haze pours out of the cups of cocoa as it mixes with the crowd's breath that fogs the air.

One by one the scenic Christmas floats go by filled with Christmas decorations and amusing characters. The many school marching bands play stunning music even though the air is so cold and the snow trickles down upon them. The crowd sings along to the Christmas music as they wave and clap their mitten-covered hands. The floats go by and in the distance someone spots Santa Claus. The crowd roars in excitement as

his extravagant float makes its way past everyone. The long multi-level float arrives first with the twelve reindeer lead by Rudolph and his bright red nose. The lower level is loaded with children dressed as elves tossing oceans of candy to the people below. Santa sits high atop in his sled that's covered with flowers. He is a large man with a real white beard and mustache. His green gloves wave to everyone and his snow covered hat flutters in the breeze. Although there are other floats and people around him in the parade, he seems to be the only one people see. Isabelle is waving her hands and yelling trying to get Santa's attention. Luckily her cocoa cup is empty. Alex is preoccupied with picking up candy to notice Santa and Hailey just stares at him. Ryan tries to sip his cocoa while Isabelle is moving about on his shoulders. Beth talks to other parents about the comical antics of the kids when Santa comes through.

The parade comes to a conclusion with the last school marching band bringing up the rear. The candy has been plucked from the street by the children and some adults as well. Now the talk between the townspeople proceeds to the discussion of the school pageant ahead. Most of the grade school students are participating in the pageant and it's now time for everyone to meet at the school auditorium.

As they reach the school auditorium, they remove their coats, hats and mittens and situate the seating arrangements. Isabelle crawls into Ryan's lap as Alex offers a Christmas cookie to her. Beth takes Hailey

backstage for her performance, and then returns to her seat with Ryan and the kids.

The crowd falls silent as the announcer takes the stage. The announcer reads off the programs scenes and introduces the first act. It's a while before Hailey takes the stage so Ryan goes off to get some hot cocoa for everyone. At last, Hailey's big moment arrives as she takes the stage. She is dressed like a little elf that is in charge of the other elves working for Santa. She says her lines flawlessly as she scratches at her pointy ears and rings the bells on her curled shoes. Beth stares at her daughter with a child like grin...a grin of happiness and one of a proud parent. Alex continues to eat his cookies and Isabelle doesn't pay much attention to her sisters performance.

Hailey's roll is over as the curtain begins to close. The crowd roars in claps and whistles. The curtain opens again for the actors and actresses to bow and get their well-deserved applause. Ryan and Beth hug and share their proud moment together. They overrun each other's talk of how great they thought Hailey's performance was.

As the crowd gathers their children and begins to shuffle out the door, Beth heads for the backstage area, finds Hailey and then talks with the teachers involved in the pageant. Ryan picks up little Isabelle and tries to pry Alex from his chair.

Back at home, The Christmas tree lights are glistening and candles are burning throughout the house. Ryan is busy finding more Christmas

music to plays on the CD player and then starts a fire in the fireplace.

Beth makes sure the oven is ready and places the first batch of cookies inside.

As the last batch of cookies comes out of the oven, Isabelle's face is covered in red and green frosting and Hailey is sharing a gingerbread man with Alex.

"Everyone in their pajamas!" Ryan shouts out. The kids go running to their rooms in a hurry knowing that it's time for a Christmas story. Ryan puts a few more logs on the fire and Beth turns out most of the lights. With everyone in their pajamas, including Ryan in his blue and green flannel pajamas and Beth in her fleece robe, it's time for the reading of 'Twas the Night before Christmas. Hailey and Alex crawl up on the couch and snuggle up to their mother. Beth wraps a blanket around them as their ears open up and their eyes look attentively. Ryan sits in the reclining chair beside the couch and takes a sip from his hot cocoa mug. Isabelle crawls up on her dads lap and helps him hold the book. Ryan starts to read the story as the fire crackles in the fireplace. "Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house..." he reads. Before the story is finished Isabelle has already fallen asleep while Alex and Hailey are still wide awake anxious for Christmas morning to arrive. Ryan finishes the story and Beth tells the kids to get ready for bed. She lets them know that if they don't go to sleep, Santa won't stop at their house and leave lots of presents. Beth grabs up Isabelle, takes her

upstairs and puts her to bed. Beth and Ryan tuck the kids into bed and kiss them goodnight.

The kids are fast asleep in their bedrooms, with dreams of the Christmas morning. Ryan and Beth rush to their bedroom closet to fetch the kids Christmas gifts. It takes what seems to be six or seven trips. The Christmas tree is jam-packed with colorfully wrapped presents, all from Santa. The Christmas lights shine bright and the reflection bounces off the ornaments. Ryan brings out a pan of powdered sugar and his snow boots; he then places each boot into it. “What are you doing?” Beth asks him. Ryan explains that he will take the boots with powdered sugar on them and make footprints across the living room floor. It will look like Santa Claus has walked from the fireplace to the tree. It gives the kids the illusion that Santa is real. Beth smiles at Ryan’s imaginative mind and finishes up putting small gifts and candy in the Christmas stockings. The footprints are in place and Beth and Ryan share eating the cookies set out for Santa. They drink most of the milk and set on the couch to relax. Ryan and Beth slowly fall asleep in each others arms exhausted from the day.

Christmas Day...

The silence of sleep is broken by the thunder of three kids

advancing down the stairs; the clock reads 6:45 am. They are filled with excitement and anticipation. As Ryan and Beth try to wake up and gather their thoughts, the kids look around the living room in awe. They spot the foot prints left by Santa, they talk about the cookies and milk that have been eaten and the number of gifts with Santa's signature on them piled under the Christmas tree. Soon they all pile on the couch begging to open all of the gifts. Ryan puts on his Santa hat and hands them their stockings. The kids dig into them as candy and small toys pour out all over the living room floor. The excitement of the stockings only last for a few minutes, then their attention moves to the presents under the tree. Ryan rummages around the bottom of the tree and picks out a few gifts. The kids sit around the tree and await their gifts. Beth grabs her camera and begins to shoot pictures. Ryan hands each child a gift from Santa and wrapping paper starts to fly. The Christmas music is playing on the CD player and Beth brings out drinks and snacks. Isabelle starts to do pretty well at unwrapping until a ribbon stops her in her tracks. Beth has to set a side her camera to give her a hand. The kids are overwhelmed with energy as they open one gift after another. Ryan and Beth also exchange gifts as the kids tear through theirs. The living room is soon filled with crumpled wrapping paper, ribbons and colorful bows. The children have made a gift for their parents. Isabelle has colored a beautiful picture from her Christmas color book, Alex has made a coupon offering to feed and water the dogs for the next few days

and Hailey has made a nice photo album for the family photos. The kids are delighted with all of the gifts they have received and thank their parents with hugs and kisses.

The children gather a few toys and go about the house to play with them. Ryan and Beth sit on the couch and marvel at the mess around the living room. They share a smile and decide whether or not to start the clean-up process. They settle on just relaxing a bit and to watch the kids play with their new toys. After a while, Beth decides to make breakfast and Ryan grabs the trash bag to clean up. The Christmas music is turned up as Ryan picks up the mountains of wrapping paper. The dogs try to help, but only get in the way as they tear the paper and run about the living room. The house quickly fills with the aroma of the Super Surprise breakfast. It consists of hash-brown potatoes with onions, sausage, and melted cheese on top. Beth then prepares scrambled eggs and toast to accompany it and makes a fresh pitcher of orange juice. The living room floor can now be seen and it's time to eat breakfast.

Isabelle is the first to rush to the table and scrambles to her chair; the dogs are quick to follow. The others come soon after and are ready to eat. Everyone digs in and the Super Surprise quickly disappears. The kids talk about their new presents and what they like best about them. The dogs stare at them waiting for one of them to drop some food. It doesn't take long for Isabelle to drop them a slice of toast. Both dogs

dive for it, but only Ralphie gets it. Alex decides to feed Jack who was a bit to slow.

Breakfast is over and the kids are off once again to play with their new gifts. The house is still overflowing with Christmas music and outside the snow starts to fall. The sun is out, but the wind mixed with the new fallen snow creates a blizzard effect. The fresh attractive snow quickly covers neighborhood streets and yards.

Beth and Hailey begin to prepare the holiday dinner of a large ham. She readies the oven and covers the ham with brown sugar, spices and a few pineapples. Once the ham is in the oven she begins to make a fresh apple pie. Hailey stands by and eats the peel from the apples Beth is peeling and of course, shares them with the dogs. She stands on a stool to reach the kitchen island to help her mom roll the piecrust dough. Ryan comes into the kitchen to investigate the aromas whereabouts. He enters the kitchen to find Hailey standing on the stool with an apple peel hanging from her mouth and flour on her nose and forehead. Beth's nose is also covered with flour. Ryan smiles, shakes his head and grabs a few peeled apples. Beth smiles back and continues to build the apple pie. Once the dinner preparations are done, Beth gathers the kids and suggests the family go outside to build a snowman. The kids are thrilled at the idea and dash to the winter clothes closet for their gear.

Ryan swings open the back door and thousands of snowflakes invade the house. His face is quickly covered with the wet flakes. The

wind is blowing forcefully as the kids and dogs charge into the snow covered yard. The snow is about six inches high and rising quickly. A few other families around the neighborhood are also out with their children playing in the snow. Alex decides to do some sledding as the rest of the family starts to build a snowman. Alex reaches the top of the hill and is greeted by other local boys. The dogs like to chase people as they sled down the hill, although they never catch anyone. Isabelle and Beth are rolling snow to build the snowman's head, Hailey is rolling snow for the mid section and Ryan is working on the bottom half. Ryan fashions the large bottom with feet and readies it for the mid section. Hailey tries to lift the large heavy section, but it seems she made it too big for her to carry. Ryan gives her a hand and the snowman is now half done. Finally the head is ready for its body. Beth places the head on the snowman as Isabelle strains her neck to look up at him. Hailey fetches some sticks for the arms and Beth places some buttons for his eyes. Ryan places a carrot on the face for a nose and Beth uses a piece of black licorice for the mouth. Isabelle offers up her stocking cap to keep the snowman's head warm, but Ryan sacrifices his own hat for the frigid snowman. "What's his name daddy?" Isabelle asks. Ryan and Beth think a bit then ask Isabelle what the snowman's name should be. "I think it should be Penguin." She says confidently. Ryan and Beth laugh and ask Isabelle if she's sure about the name. She shakes her head yes, smiles and hugs the new snowman, Penguin. Hailey just shakes her

head as if Isabelle is crazy and walks towards the sledding hill.

The snow has let up and the sun is beginning to set. The temperature has dropped at least another five degrees and the wind is dying down. The neighbor kids are returning to their homes. Ryan slides down the hill one last time with Isabelle in the front of the sled. She screams in delight as they speed down the slippery hill. Beth shares a sled with Alex and Hailey rides her sled next to them. Both dogs are now white covered with snow. The kids are all red faced from the bitter cold and Ryan mentions that his feet and ears are numb. Beth recommends that they go inside for dinner then hot cocoa, popcorn and to watch holiday movies.

The kids put away the sleds and make their way inside the house. They peel off the multi layers of winter clothes and head for their room to play. Beth and Ryan take off their winter clothes as well and pack the closet full. As Beth closes the closet door, Ryan places his icy hand up the back of Beth's shirt. Beth feels the cold hand on her back and shrieks. Her back arches and she lifts up on her tiptoes. Ryan quickly runs from her laughing. "I'll get you back," she cries out.

Beth opens the oven and checks on the big ham. Ryan starts to make the side dishes of mashed potatoes, stuffing, green beans and fresh baked rolls. The ham is done to perfection and smells delightful. The dogs are laying in front of the kitchen soaking up the magnificent smell of dinner. The kids are being quiet and are content in their rooms.

Dinner is ready and Ryan sets the table. He lights some candles and places the food on the table. Beth hollers for the kids to come eat. Ryan carves off a piece of ham and passes it to each child, then serves Beth and himself. Everyone comments on how good the food tastes and how hungry they all were.

As the night progresses, Beth lights candles throughout the house and starts making popcorn as Ryan readies the TV and DVD player. The kids gather on the couch in their pajamas bringing their blankets with them. They know it's time to watch a few of the traditional Christmas movies; Frosty the Snowman, Home Alone, How the Grinch stole Christmas, Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer and daddy's favorite, A Christmas Story. The movies begin as the popcorn and hot cocoa is beginning handed out. Ryan and Beth find a spot on the couch and join the kids. Into the third movie Isabelle is fast asleep. Ryan picks her up, takes her to her bedroom and puts her in bed. The popcorn has been devoured and the cocoa is gone, Beth gets up to make more.

As the credits roll on the last movie Alex and Hailey are both sound asleep. All three children worn out from days of holiday activities. Ryan looks over at Beth and sees that she is also asleep. He shuts off the DVD and television and takes the kids to bed. Once the kids are all put to bed, Ryan lights a fire in the fireplace and fixes a snack for Beth and him. He wakes Beth up to spend some quality time alone with her.

The soft Christmas music is coursing through the speakers. The

fire, a few candles and the Christmas tree lights are the only light shining throughout the house. The snow is falling again outside in the icy dark night. Beth and Ryan sit on the floor in front of the fireplace nibbling on leftover holiday dinner. He pours them each a glass of wine. They talk about how wonderful the holidays have been and how they will always remember them. They toast each other and express how much love they have for one another. Ryan raises his hand and holds up the mistletoe over their heads. They embrace and kiss.

The End