



The  
Prodigal Brother  
**COMES HOME**

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A Christmas short story

As I walked—no, as I staggered—in the general direction of my childhood home, I had to shield my eyes from the golden sun as it fell toward the horizon, glinting off freshly fallen snow. There’s nothing worse than having a pounding headache and a swollen, bloody eye while walking toward that blinding heaven-sent light and knowing that the destination would not be welcoming. Especially when you left that place in the middle of the night four and a half weeks prior.

And that was only last month. I’ve come home and left again a thousand times in the last decade. Always staggering. Never staying.

Eventually, I made it to that stoop. How I made it, I will never know. I slumped against the doorframe and tried to concentrate on knocking. After a couple of long minutes, my youngest sister, with her long black strands tied into two braids, opened the door and stared at me with those dark brown eyes.

I gave her a grin and hoped for the best. Her expression didn’t change. I couldn’t fool Violet. She knew where I had been. With a giant heave, I stood upright and stumbled inside. God bless her heart, she grabbed me and led me to her bed. She murmured something I didn’t catch, closed the curtains and left the room. I hoped she told me to rest well, because I immediately fell into a deep sleep.

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Only God knows when I woke up and managed to sit up, running my hand through my greasy hair. My thumb brushed against my face, the rough edges of the bandage grazing my fingertips. Exhausted and satisfied, I sank back into the bed.

Sweet Violet had a heart of gold. At least I could count on her.

Shortly afterward, the door creaked open and the teenager came in, the light from the kitchen streaming behind her along with the sweet scent of ham baking in the oven.

I squinted in the light and smiled at her. “Where’s my birthday present?”

To my dismay, her frown only deepened. Her dark eyes swept over me like razors. “Today might be your birthday, but you don’t deserve a present.”

“I thought that was what a present was—undeserved.” I linked my fingers behind my head and grinned at her again.

She glared at me fiercely. Suddenly I had enough of these games. Was she going to take care of me or not? Shouldn’t she be *happy* that I came home?

Headache or no headache, I sat up. “Never mind,” I growled, trying to untangle the knot of blankets around my torso. “I know when I’m not wanted.”

Violet drew in her breath sharply, “You’re leaving already?”

“What’s the point in staying?” With a final huff and a kick, I freed myself and spun my legs over the side of the bed.

“No...” Violet’s trembling voice made me stop and look up at her. She continued, tears moistening her eyes, “It’s not fair, Manny. Last time...” A tear rolled down her cheek. “Last time you promised to stay! You promised to work and help us out. You *promised!*”

There was something about my kid sister crying and pleading that tugged at my heart. I felt like a worm. If I was one, I’d smash me myself.

My headache escalated to a skull-ripping migraine.

Despite myself, I sank back into the mattress with a hand pressed to my eyes.

Two gentle hands touched my shoulders. “Sleep.” Violet sniffed and shifted away. Perhaps she had wiped her cheeks. Then she added, “Take some rest and I’ll get you something to eat.”

As she walked out, I stretched out on the bed, not bothering with the blankets. I stared at the hazy ceiling, stained in places where the roof leaked.

In the dim light, my headache wasn’t as bad as before and I listened as Violet banged some pots in the kitchen. There was a mumbled voice. Violet answered. The other voice—probably Jo, our eldest sister—spoke again and I heard Violet’s shout. “I won’t let him starve!”

I should be proud of my little sister. She was defending me. But fear rippled through me. She could disown me as well as claim me. And as she had

already told me, I didn't deserve her favor. Not hers and certainly not from the saint herself, Jo.

A pot slammed, piquing my intrigue.

I shouldn't even be here, I knew that—had known when I started for home in a drunken stupor. But I couldn't help myself from sliding out of bed and pressing my ear against the closed door to listen.

Jo was saying, "I'm telling you, he can't stay here."

Violet answered, "He won't." Then, softer, "I'm sure he won't."

A pang of guilt shot through my spine. She was right. I never planned on staying for more than two days. Why they hadn't expected me on the date of my birth to claim what was due me—deserved or otherwise—was beyond me. *Of course* I'd return today. I had last year, after all, and the year before that.

No matter what their financial or material situation was I couldn't stay in the house of my parents. I wouldn't. It just wasn't a place for me. I needed freedom from having to work and having to face being the caretaker. I couldn't manage such a task. Not me!

I folded my arms across my chest as the conversation continued, "You shouldn't have even opened the door for him. Each time he comes back he eats us out of our food, takes whatever he wants for himself, and leaves without paying a dime. He's a parasite, a leech—not a brother."

"Joanna." Violet's loud sigh rumbled through the rotting wood of the door. "Stop that. He's our brother... Oh, I need my Bible." Her voice cut off for an instant and then she groaned. "I left it in the bedroom, I think."

As Jo added another argument to the discussion, I scanned the room. The light filtered through the curtain and rested on the worn-leather Book.

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I had no intention of giving the Bible to her; that would be a bit too obvious on my part. But as Jo reminded Violet about my arrest three months ago and how much I'd cost them to bail me out, I crossed the bedroom, my socks

slapping noiselessly on the carpet. Sweet Violet must have taken my boots off to leave at the radiator to warm up—God bless her.

As I sat in the chair by the window and thumbed through the pages in the moonlight, I thought of her. And of Mom.

Three-quarters of the way through, I stopped flipping and scanned the red-lettered page. Something caught my eye. Jo's retort shook the walls and Violet snapped back, but I ignored them and leaned over the page in case I was imagining the words.

The door of the bedroom suddenly opened and the light from the kitchen filled the room. Guilt shimmied through me. Me, reading the Bible. How pathetic.

But sweet Violet's lips curled up as she drew closer. I froze. Do I slam the Bible shut? Do I make a crude joke about what I was doing?

Neither seemed appropriate. And suddenly I didn't want to be mean. With trembling hands, I held up the open Bible. "Do you remember this passage?" She came to me, the moonlight cresting her face like an angel standing vigil. Then I proceeded to read the Christmas story. How Jesus' mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but when she was found to be pregnant, he decided to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel visited him in a dream and told him to take Mary home as his wife and foretold how the son Mary would give birth to should be given the name Jesus.

"Because He will save his people from their sins." I wiped my eyes because the tears made my vision blurry. But I didn't stop reading. I didn't want to stop. This was the part that had caught my eye and even now a thrill ran through me to be able to say the words out loud. "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son...'"

Here, I stopped and looked up. I knew the rest of the verse by heart. "And they will call him Immanuel, which means 'God with us'."

"Your name." Violet grinned, looking more like the young girl I left years ago. The sweet, innocent one I had left behind.

I nodded. It was true Mom had christened me as Immanuel, but there was something else my sister needed to know. “Immanuel was also Mom’s favorite name of Jesus, especially when she got sick. She would tell me that God was with us.” The moisture in my eyes leaked onto my cheeks. “All we had to do was call on His name and He’d be with us, guide us, provide for us. I had forgotten.” I ran my finger across the edge of the Bible, no longer able to look into the eyes of my dear sister. She must hate me for abandoning her and Jo. She had every right to reject me—even today, the date of my birth.

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Rather than turning away, Violet sank to her knees beside me. The light from the hallway spilled onto her face, making her dark eyes glow with more tenderness than a moment before. “You were my age when Mom got sick.”

I sucked in my breath. I didn’t want to think about it, much less talk about it. But my little sister was being so vulnerable, so sweet, my heart longed to open up. So I did. “Barely fifteen—and scared. So scared. Dad had already left and I didn’t want to bear the responsibility alone.” My headache had settled to a steady throb, but now my heart ached more.

Tentatively, I reached out and touched my sister’s cheek. More than ten years younger than me, she was a happy surprise to our family. Full of smiles and giggles, she had brought so much joy. But even her sunny countenance couldn’t block out the dark clouds of grief. “I ran away, Vi. Ran hard and long, as far as I could without stopping. I thought that by being alone I could be free. I thought—” My voice cracked. The rest didn’t matter anyway.

My hand fell from her pretty face but she found my hand, squeezing my fingers in her grip. I squeezed her back.

Breathing deep, I found the courage to continue. “But by running away I had was worse off. Shackled by regrets. I should have stayed.”

“Yes, you should have.” At the door, Jo leaned against the doorjamb and crossed her arms. Only a silhouette of her was visible, but he heard the scowl in

her words. The disappointment. “Life wasn’t easier when you were gone, was it? By being by yourself—”

“I was lonely. But if I had stayed, I would have been with you.” I finished for her. I looked at Violet and was relieved to see compassion in her glittery brown eyes. “And with God too? He’s here, isn’t He?”

She leaned in, her voice hardly above a whisper in my ear. “Stay. Please.”

“I’ll try.” I drew our clasped hands to rest on top of the Bible in my lap. Seemed fitting I should admit such a deep emotion with us both hunched over God’s Word. “I’ll really try to stay this time. Although I should admit, if I *do* stay I’d likely have to get a job and work hard—two things I hate.” I looked up to catch Jo roll her eyes. I laughed and the lightness in my belly felt good. Felt like hope.

“More than what it would cost me,” I continued, “I also know God promises that He will take care of the rest. I don’t have to depend on my ability or worry if I’m making enough. I just have to put my trust in God.”

My chest swelled as Jesus, the light of the world, shone into my heart. “Violet. Joanna.” I looked from one sister to the other. I had so much to learn, but I could speak from what I had just been convicted of. “I’d forgotten, but I’m remembering now. Jesus died, but he rose from the dead! He overcame the world! Taking care of both of you isn’t all up to me. Jesus is with us—He’s Immanuel. With His help, I will help to support and take care of you.”

Closing the Bible gently, I set it back on the nightstand and then slid to the floor to wrap my arms around my sister. “I’m sorry, Violet. I treated you so terribly. Will you forgive me?”

She lifted herself out of my arms. But she wasn’t looking at me.

Jo joined our duo and wrapped her arms around both of us. “We forgive you, little brother.”

Violet pressed closer to me. “No more? No more running off?”

“No.” I replied, somehow my voice came out stronger than a moment ago. “With God as my witness and my help, I promise to stay.”

Violet’s grin was bright and big. “Our prodigal brother has come home!”

I squinted at her. Then I grabbed the Bible, fumbling through the pages. “What did you call me? That sounds familiar...”

“I’ll explain later.” Violet got up and spun on her heels to run into the kitchen. The sound of pots clattering filled the silence.

I sat dumbfounded. “What does *prodigal* mean?”

Jo just looked at me, a smile spreading on her face.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“Oh, we’ll tell you.” She helped me to my feet. My legs could barely hold my weight, I was so weak. But Jo gripped me around the waist and held me upright. She grunted as we started toward the door and the delicious smells coming from the kitchen. “After we celebrate Christmas.”

“You know, it’s *my* birthday too. What do I get?”

“You said it yourself. Jesus gave you everything—light, love, life. What else could you want?”

She was right. I was being selfish. What else did a guy need when he had the most important family and faith?

Coming to the threshold of the kitchen, I slammed to a halt, my breath escaping me.

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My knees wobbled and Jo’s grip on me tightened as I watched Violet set a giant bowl of cranberry sauce to add to the steamy platters of ham and potatoes already crowding the table. But it was the far end of the table that had caught my attention and had stripped my lungs of air.

The pumpkin pie had been set at the head of the table with two flickering candles sticking out the mound of whipped cream. Probably Violet couldn’t find more candles. Or maybe she had forgotten I turned twenty-four this year, not twenty-two. A stack of party hats was beside the pie.

Regardless of Vi’s mistake, my eyes started to water again. A feast I didn’t prepare, a birthday wish I shouldn’t have demanded.

Everything smelled delicious.

And I wouldn't be around to taste any of it.

I shifted out of Jo's arms. *I don't deserve this.* "You two, eat. Enjoy. I'll be..." My voice trailed. I recognized the tendency, the exact excuse I'd used when Mom was sick. *I'll be right back.*

Of course I would. When it was convenient. When I needed help.

Jo spoke first. "Welcome home, Manny."

"And happy birthday." Stripping a party hat from the stack, Violet snapped it on her head and grinned.

With quick steps she brought two hats to where Jo tightened her grip on me. The rubber band pinched the underside of my chin as Violet fit it on my head. The second hat had been plunked on Jo's head, the shiny silver of the pointed hat gleaming in the recessed lights.

But a lone hat had been left with the pie. I was about to dismiss it as Violet miscounting again when she looked at me. Her braid flopped on her shoulder as she tilted her chin toward the cake, her dark eyes glowing brighter as she grinned. "Happy birthday—to you and Jesus."

Being held up by my big sister was...embarrassing. But the truth was I couldn't stand on my own. And suddenly, I didn't need to. With the smells all around me and both of my sisters looking up at me with such adoration in their eyes and the ridiculous party hats, my stomach growled—loudly.

Both girls laughed. Nervousness melted away and happiness rushed in. Contentment. Satisfaction.

I couldn't leave. I needed to stay. I *wanted* to stay.

At last, I joined in the laughter filling the air and I felt it. Joy, full and free.

And I was home. After so much wandering and searching, I finally found I wasn't alone, not since God was here, with us.

Dear Reader,

Thanks for reading Manny's story!

If this sounds different than my other stories, it's because *it is!* Originally written in June of 2009, only a few years into marriage and before kids entered the mix, it would be another ten years before I'd be published on Amazon. Back then, I used to write because words would flow from me. I wouldn't edit, wouldn't share it. I would just...write.

It's funny to find this story now. Or maybe it's right on time.

I cleaned this little story up and tweaked it as a Christmas story, but the sweet-sounding tone remained the same. I hope you enjoyed this lovely Christmas tale!

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Have a very merry CHRISTmas!

-Cheryl