

# SHELTER



Karen Eisenbrey

Christmas, Anna thought, was like a big cup of Diet Coke. It promised sweetness and abundance and refreshment, but when you finally took a sip, it was flat and artificial. That was the problem: all the stress and none of the sparkle. Christmas had lost its fizz.

Anna remembered Christmas magic from long ago, when she was a little girl. And as a mother, she had made the magic herself. Even after Will died and she had to go back to work at the hospital in order to support three children, all by herself with no help from anyone, thank you very much. Those children were now grown and too mature for magic. They still expected lavish gifts from their mother, though they had yet to present her with grandchildren. There was no one to make magic for.

To battle holiday blues, Dear Abby advised

helping those less fortunate, and then the church bulletin had asked for shelter volunteers for Christmas Eve. Full of enthusiastic good intentions, Anna signed up. She pictured the hospitality and Christmas cheer she would offer, a hostess to the needy young guests in this, her second home. Their gratitude would warm her heart, and just like in a TV movie, she would rediscover the true meaning of Christmas.

Late on Christmas Eve, Anna sat on a metal folding chair, watching people sleep. Rather than joy at sharing, she felt battered by the invasion. They had tromped in, armored with piercings, grimy backpacks, and attitude. Anna soon gave up trying to converse. She didn't know their families (did they *have* families?), disqualifying that small-talk staple. They didn't care that this building was erected in 1927 and nearly lost in the Depression, or that the congregation had been organized over 100 years ago, or that Anna had had her wedding reception in this very room, long before anyone thought of running a thrift shop or hosting a homeless shelter in a church fellowship hall. It was like trying to communicate with members of another species.

Anna was relieved when the lights went out. Streetlamps cast a dim, orange glow through the windows. Against the wall, racks of thrift-store merchandise loomed in darkness. The shiny tile floor was completely hidden now by mounds of bodies and blankets. Anna was grateful for shadows that hid the tattoos, which disgusted her even more than the pierced lips. She was wary of a few guests who sat awake in the corner by the stairs, but they were only talking quietly, as if they, too, were keeping watch.

They were kids, really. Officially, they were “young adults,” between 18 and 25, but with their tough faces relaxed in sleep, they looked childlike and vulnerable. And so many of them! This shelter was open only three nights a week. Where did they go the rest of the time? Where would they spend Christmas Day? What kind of hope did they have? The joyful, uplifting experience Anna had anticipated grew more discouraging with every passing minute.

Upstairs, the distant organ rang out: “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” Anna glanced upward longingly. She loved the Christmas Eve service: the packed sanctuary; the candles; the choir. It was always beautiful and perfect. If she wanted magic and warm spirits, that would have been the place to go.

After a while, the faint voices of the choir carried down from the sanctuary. “The snow lay on the ground,” they sang. “The star shone bright.” Anna strained to listen; this had been her favorite carol, when she still had a voice. She hummed along with the refrain, “Venite adoremus Dominum,” and sighed with regret.

Things had not been entirely grim and hopeless downstairs, of course. There had been a feast—turkey and ham and mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie—to rival any at Grandmother's house. There had been gifts: warm hats and socks, more practical than exciting, but gifts all the same. And there had been music. Anna was surprised how many of these young people had guitars, clinging to a battered case as to a life raft. They had sung a lot of songs that Anna didn't know. Then a girl with blond dreadlocks had started to strum something familiar: “Silent Night,” the one carol they all knew.

They were singing “Silent Night” upstairs, Anna realized with a start. They were lighting their candles, every face glowing in the darkened sanctuary. The most beautiful part of the service.

A loud banging interrupted Anna's meditation. She hurried to the alley door and opened it a crack. Two people stood outside, bundled against the cold in ragged overcoats. Anna regarded the skinny man standing in front with automatic distaste: the shaved head, the snake tattoo slithering over his scalp and under his collar, the annoying little tuft of beard clinging to his lower lip. The other one was shorter, but fatter. Neither wore a hat.

“I won't say there's no room, being it's Christmas Eve,” Anna said, “but we're pretty full.”

“Is it Christmas Eve?” the skinny man asked. “I lose track. Anyway, it's not a bed we need, so much as a phone. My battery's dead and we need to call an ambulance.”

“Oh, is someone hurt?” Anna asked, the nurse in her bubbling to the surface.

“No, it's just ... it's time.” He glanced at his companion, who now looked up at Anna. He wasn't fat, she saw now; he wasn't even he. *She* was very pregnant, and by the look on her face, about to give birth.

“In here,” Anna whispered, ushering the couple into the kitchen. “Helen, call 911,” she said to another volunteer, surprised at her own calm. “We have an interesting situation.”

Helen stared at the young mother-to-be, her eyes wide with alarm. “Here? You want her to have a baby here, in the kitchen?”

“Well, there's lots of hot water,” Anna joked.

She set about making the laboring girl comfortable. “I’ve never delivered a baby by myself before, but it looks like you’ve done most of the work already.”

“You’re not by yourself,” said a voice behind her. Anna turned and saw the three watchful guests standing in the doorway. “What can we do?”

Anna smiled at them. “Do you know where the thrift-store stuff is? See if you can find some baby things—blankets, diapers, clothes—you know. What’s keeping those paramedics?” she added as the three girls hurried away.

“Oh!” Helen cried. “I haven’t called yet, have I? I’ll do it now.”

Meanwhile, the remaining shelter guests slept through the drama unfolding in the kitchen. The other volunteers supplied warm caps and cold sandwiches for the new mom and dad. Overhead, the organ roared “Joy to the World.”

By the time the paramedics arrived, the baby was crowning, and was soon lying in his mother’s arms, blotchy and wrinkled and beautiful. Anna washed the blood from her hands and gazed at the new family. She tried to feel sorry for them; tried to think, “How terrible. What will become of them?” But she couldn’t. Here, right in front of her, was God’s love incarnate. In the child, of course, perfect and fragile and full of promise; but also in his exhausted, enraptured mother, with her gleaming lip-ring and starry eyes; and in his stunned, grinning father, with his gorgeously colored tattoo; and in the shelter guest holding a stack of sleepers and blankets; and in the volunteer clutching a bag of sandwiches; and in the paramedics, those angels in blue; and in Anna herself.

She could only smile, and listen to heaven and nature sing.

THE END

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