

Christmas Chili

The chill in the air may have been enough to welcome the season, but the wind was strong enough to dampen any spirit. Nightly walks alone were not what they used to be. The pain from the loss of conversation with Evelyn was beginning to subside. George knew he would go on, but her memory will remain forever.

Shaking the dampness from his hat and coat, he hung them on the rack by the door. He chuckled as if on cue as he picked up the scarf that never stayed hung over the coat. Draping the scarf and circling the post, he walked towards the Christmas tree in the corner to plug in the lights. Darkness had fallen during his walk, and nothing brought the spirit home quite like the lighted tree and the Mitch Miller album.

As “Hark the Herald Angles Sing,” crackling sounds filled the air; he could not imagine ever trading the 33 1/3 for a compact disc player. The plastic candle illuminated the hallway back to the kitchen until George could reach for the light and proceed to the pantry. The can of tuna was simple, yet George could not imagine tonight, especially tonight, even beginning to cook a meal for one.

Removing the bread from the drawer, pulling a butter knife out, and laying it on the counter, he walked towards the refrigerator when he heard the knock on the door. He answered the call and turned on the hallway light to acknowledge the visitor. Before arriving at the door, George notices the delivery van from Mickey’s parked in the driveway. Maybe the bag boy had left something out of his bag earlier and was dropping it off on his way home. Joey nodded as the porch light brightened the entire yard, unable to raise a hand since both arms were needed to hold the box.

“Good evening, Mr. Phillip,” Joey said.

“Good evening, Joey. What have you got there?” Realizing it was something more than he would have left at the store.

“Well, sir, there is a note attached to the lid of the container, and I believe it will explain everything to you.”

George gave Joey a hand as he placed the box on the table. Not wanting to take any more of Joey's time, George reached into his wallet and gave Joey the five-dollar bill left from his earlier trip to Mickey's.

"Sir, I really couldn't take anything for this. It was on my way home," said Joey. "Nonsense!" exclaimed George. "This is Christmas Eve, and you have done a nice favor for me. I insist."

"Very well, sir, if you insist. Merry Christmas, Mr. Phillip." Joey gasped as he leaped down the front steps.

"Merry Christmas to you too, Joey."

As Mickey's van pulled away, George closed and locked the door. Then he strolled back to the kitchen to find what awaited him in the box.

When George got to ten feet of the kitchen, he froze. That smell...that unmistakable smell. Could it be Evelyn's chili, or was his mind playing tricks on this first Christmas Eve he would spend alone in 46 years? He reached for the white envelope taped to the lid of the glass gallon jar. George opened the envelope and pulled out the letter.

Dear George, I could not imagine you sitting alone at the table and not leaving a gift for you this Christmas Eve. The fact that you are reading this note means that Mickey did precisely as he was instructed to do, and we can still share this Christmas Eve.

Do you remember that day in May when I had asked you to drive me to town to run a few errands? Well, I took care of a bit of present for you that we would share every year until you joined me since I knew we would not be together this year.

For the last 46 years, we have made a pot of chili for our Christmas Eve supper. I laugh when I think about the tough years when we could not afford meat, so we added more beans to give it a little more thickness. You would never complain, even though we knew you would wake up with heartburn and tell me you were putting the toys out for the kids. You would get some Roloids and sit in your chair for an hour or two before returning to bed. I knew you had finished setting out the toys before you came to bed, but you always said you wanted to re-arraign them

under the tree so the kids would see them as soon as they were at the top of the stairs.

Did they deliver the chili at 6:00 sharp? George had not even noticed the time, and as he glanced at his watch, 6:12 stared back at him. Good job, Joey, he thought.

After we finished our sandwiches at noon, I would get out of the chili pot and start putting the ingredients together to allow it to cook for five or six hours. You would always say I was cooking enough for the Seventh Fleet. I would laugh and say it was so irresistible that you would eat the entire pot if I did not take a bowlful first. Then you would say that you would only eat it because you felt sorry for me and that if you did not eat it, all that lousy chili would go to waste.

At 5:45 p.m., I would place the bowls on the table. I would always give you the chipped one, and you would tell me that one of these days, you would get to use the “good China” for Christmas Eve. Can you believe the bowl only chipped when you slipped on the wet floor? I thought I would die laughing when the chili ended on your head and shirt. You were straight out of a Laurel and Hardy movie. The dog thought it was great that he was licking your face, head, and clothes; the only thing you did was laugh. The one year I put out the “good china,” you complained about the dust in the bowls from sitting unused all year in the cabinet, so you better use the everyday dishes.

Then, at 6:00 sharp, I would serve the chili and say grace. By the way, do not forget OLE Mitch Miller. It just would not be the same without him. After your first bowl, you would mention the kindness you felt during the holidays, so you felt obligated to eat a second bowl. We would laugh as you commented, feeding the Seventh Fleet again. At this time, I would speak up and suggest we take whatever was left down to the homeless shelter for lunch on Christmas Day.

“What a great idea!” You would say. “I wish I would have thought it.”

By now, you are probably wondering what was going on. On that day in May, when I stopped at Mickey’s, I gave Mickey the secret recipe for my chili. I told him that if he lived, he would make a pot of chili and deliver it precisely at 6:00 sharp! I also told him to make five extra gallons to take to the homeless shelter

tomorrow at noon. He will expect you by 11:30. Do not worry; the cost has already been paid.

George, you must understand something. Having Christmas Eve dinner with you was one of my dearest memories. But that was not the special memory I have of Christmas. I remember the gracious smiles of those men at the shelter. At a time in their lives when hope seemed to be lost, you allowed me each year to share our blessings with others who had few or no blessings at all.

Do you remember Pete and the orange hunting hat? Colonel Harry only wore the white suits on Christmas Day and told everyone that Colonel Sanders was his brother, and they were separated as children, so he never got into the chicken business. How about Marcus? Was there ever a more exemplary, more polite man you ever met?

I could go on for hours, but you know what I mean. Those people gave me the true feeling of Christmas. They knew how to show thanks and gratitude. Most people go through life avoiding contact with the less fortunate. What a shame. For it is in giving that we receive the many blessings of God.

As you can tell, George, the life I shared with you gave me more happiness than two people should be allowed to have. Nothing can ever change my love for you and how special you made me feel. You told me I was your queen; you were always a gentleman and treated me like royalty. You were my knight in shining armor, and I always knew you would save the day whenever a crisis happened. I will watch you and protect you forever from above. Thank you for giving me 46 wonderful years. Thank you for letting me share our blessings at Christmas. What a wonderful gift you have given me.

Forever your queen and loving wife,
Evelyn

P.S. I did tell Mickey to go easy on the beans and chili powder. Now eat before it gets cold.

As George laid the letter on the table, he reached for his handkerchief to wipe the tears from his cheeks. He got up to get a match to light the candle and turn out the lights. As he reached for the matches on the windowsill, he looked out at the starry night. The crystal-clear sky was woven with a cluster of blinking stars.

George noticed a shooting star and smiled as Evelyn gave him the star for the top of the tree.