

# *Empty Christmas...*

*A Story*  
*(the first of two)*



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For my mother,  
whose refrigerator was always full!

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## **Christmas Eve**

The cold air swept over him as he stood there with the door ajar. Transfixed by the scene in front of him he found himself unable to move. A sigh escaped as he closed his eyes and listened for echoes of memories that seemed distant but overwhelming. A cacophony of years flashed before his eyes as he remembered the fullness of holidays past.

“Go get the cookies out of the freezer,” his mother said to him. There had always been cookies in the freezer. He wasn’t even sure when she had made them all, but somehow as Thanksgiving and Christmas approached every year the freezer seemed to magically fill to the brim with storage containers filled with cookies for the guests that would come. Even those who could not come to the dinners and parties would receive samplings, delivered by his mother and father.

As a young boy he would often go out to the large freezer in the garage and open one of the containers and just take one or two of the cookies to sneak back into his bedroom, usually hiding them under a pillow for snacks after lights were out and the doors closed. He wouldn’t eat them right away when bedtime came, knowing his dad would come into his room at some point and take the small key and wind the clock that hung on the wall next to his closet. He was always worried his dad would smell the cookies or just know they were there, but he never said anything about them.

Once his dad said goodnight and left the room, he would slip the cookies out from under his pillow and enjoy them. Sometimes he would have a small pang of conscience but most of the time he just enjoyed them. He tried to rotate the cookies he

would take every night so as not to make too big a dent in the number remaining. However, he would find himself drawn again and again to the chocolate crinkles. Many mornings he would awaken to powdered sugar all over his pillowcases and sheets from the crinkles, and would work hard to wipe it all away before his mom came in to wake him up.

As he stood in the cold, the door still open, he smiled as he remembered the one year he had gone to get his nightly cookies only to realize to his horror that an entire container was empty. Worried, he didn't know what to do at first, but then he formulated a plan and took the empty container and threw it into the trash can and put some newspaper on top of it. If his mom asked, he would just tell her that it had never existed.

For a few days he didn't sneak any cookies, but their sweet deliciousness tempted him so a couple days later he snuck into his garage, and opened the door to the freezer. To his surprise the container was in the freezer right where it had been, and it was full with a wide variety of cookies. A note was attached and addressed to him.

*Son, I am glad you love my cookies.  
From now on, this container is yours.  
When you sneak your cookies please  
just take them from this one, as I need  
the other ones for guests. No more than  
two a night, please, and keep the  
crumbs and powdered sugar off your bed.*

*Love, Mom*

Chocolate crinkles, chocolate chips, ginger snaps, snickerdoodles, and more were always there. Years later when he would return home for holidays, he would still find his container in the refrigerator.

More than just cookies though, that freezer and the kitchen refrigerator and the garage refrigerator were always full. The food there wasn't just for the family, after all they were a small, typical family of four. The food there was for anyone his mother wanted to share it with.

Sometimes it was for company invited for a meal, after church, or during a week. Often if was for someone going through a hard time, the loss of a loved one or an illness. Whether it was a pan of lasagna and rolls, or a pot of soup, or a salad, there was always food for someone who needed it. A smile came on his face as he remembered the time the church bus that broke down while passing through town with a group of teens a couple hundred miles from home on a choir tour. The leader of that group had called his church for help.

The church responded and he called his mother to let him know he would be late getting home while they tried to find some food for this group. His mother's response was simple, "Bring them all out to the house."

As the visitor's bus was being fixed, he helped arrange transportation and forty-five strangers made their way to the house on the hill and enjoyed a full meal at his mother's hand. The refrigerator and freezer that were full for any situation fed a multitude of strangers, and afterwards they still struggled to find room to put the leftovers back into the refrigerator.

That problem was one that often confounded them. The struggle to arrange the refrigerator to store everything after each meal was real. After eating it always seemed the food miraculously multiplied and moving things around to find a place for everything was a puzzle that was continuously being undertaken in the house.

As the years passed and he would bring his children to Grandma's house they were never without something they enjoyed, and always pulling things out and putting them back just to see what was in the refrigerator. No empty space ever existed in that refrigerator, and at the same time there was always room.

Opening his eyes for just a moment, he looked at the emptiness in front of him again, but his mind raced back to the Thanksgiving that ruled above all Thanksgivings in his memory. The feast was incredible. Turkey, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, corn mashed potatoes, ham, pickles, deviled eggs, that incredible Jello with the oranges and marshmallows, and rolls were just a small part of the list. The multitude of desserts only added to the feast. Pumpkin pie, chocolate pie, butterscotch pie, all the cookies, fudge, all were on the menu.

His mother spent days in the kitchen preparing. That Yhanksgiving the guests were many. Not just the family of four, but also the exchange student living with them, and her family from Brazil, and the youth pastor and his wife and his wife's parents and their kids all gathered at the table. Some spoke only Spanish, some Portuguese, some English, and some German, and the conversations would go around the table from German, to Portuguese, to Spanish, to English and back. As the words moved so did the platters and the food.

There was no hurry that day, and the afternoon seemed to go on forever without even lasting a moment. The laughter roared, and blessings were felt, and love was shared among people and cultures around the table his mother had prepared. When all had eaten their fill and things were put away, the refrigerator was still full, almost overflowing, awaiting the next time for people to be blessed.

That's what his mother did, she blessed people. She united people. She made people feel special. She was never without something to take to someone. Never was that fact more evident than in the Christmas season. Beyond the cookies there was fudge and peanut brittle and snack mixes and Christmas punch and so much more. Her house was open to people and there was always a Christmas party there for friends.

She never forgot anyone, it seemed. As family members aged and moved into different living facilities, she always made it a point to bless them at holiday times. She would travel to wherever they were, even across states to take them something to remind them they were remembered and loved. He had made many of the trips with her, and it wasn't just to take treats. She would often sit with people for a while and share stories from lives full and well lived.

Even years later, after he had moved far away from his parents, she continued to cross state lines to bless people. For a number of years, he had hosted a Christmas drop-in every year for his church family. Anywhere from one hundred to one hundred and fifty people would come into his home, and his mother would make the seven-hour trip with a carload of all her favorite things to share with people she did not know, but who mattered to her, because they mattered to her son.

As he stood there the memories continued. This Christmas had come, and he was back home with his father for the Holidays. Ever since his mother had passed a few years earlier he had made it a point to still return home to be with his father. The fleeting nature of life made him realize the true joy not in things but in family and in relationships.

He reflected on the love that had filled his life.

He remembered the incredible joy he had found and coming home throughout the years and opening the refrigerator and seeing it full, knowing that his mother had wanted to always be ready to pour into people's lives. Her freezer and refrigerator had always been full. Because of her, his life had always been full of joy and laughter and love and blessings.

He had not been ready for her to leave. Those days during her illness seemed like a unreal dream, but in reality a couple years had passed since she had left. People still told his family how they missed her and all the wonderful surprises she would bring them and how she would bless and fill their lives like she filled that freezer and that refrigerator through the years.

The cold air swept over him as he stood there with the door ajar. Transfixed by the scene in front of him he found himself unable to move. A loaf of bread, some bologna, a few condiments, some left over pizza, some milk and a couple soft drinks were all that sat on the shelves. As the lights on the Christmas Tree in the den surged on, he felt the cold one more time as he closed the door. The refrigerator was empty.