

## An ET Christmas

By Christine B.

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Gary carefully lifted his four-year-old daughter over his head so she could reach the top of the tree. With reverence, little Christie carefully positioned the angel so that her face could overlook the living room.

“Yeah!” shouted Robin and Shelly as they clapped their hands from the floor below.

Before putting Christie’s feet back on the carpet, Gary brought her down to his shoulders, embraced his young daughter tightly, and then spun her around several times.

“Good Girl!” he said. Christie giggled and clung on to her father as they rotated around the room. As she spun the lights from the tree and the other Christmas decorations in the room blurred as they zoomed past her eyes. The youngster was so happy she could have burst from delight. Gary finally lowered her tiny feet to the carpet and for a few seconds afterwards the room still spun before her eyes. She wobbled around the room on shaky legs until she gave in and sat down to avoid falling over.

The rest of the family chuckled at Christie’s comical movements.

“Okay, Girls,” Robin said after she stopped laughing, “It’s time to go to bed. The sooner you get to sleep, the quicker Santa will come.”

Shelly ran over to Christie and helped her little sister up; and then they both ran into the bedroom they shared. Gary followed his daughters to their room while Robin started to remove the Christmas tree decorating debris from the living room.

Lovingly, Gary tucked his older daughter, Michelle, in her upper bunk. Little Christie wiggled under her covers in the lower bunk as Gary kissed Shelly on her forehead. “Sleep sweet, my Angel Girl,” he said and smiled as he started to climb down the small ladder to the bedroom floor.

Before he reached the bottom Shelly poked her head over the protective rail and said, “I’ve got an idea, Daddy.”

Gary stopped his decent and asked, “What’s that Angel Girl?”

“Why don’t we set up the movie camera and see if we can get a movie of Santa tonight!” She had seen her father take movies with his camera on a tripod before.

“What a great idea! Let’s try that! I’ll set up the camera before Mommy and I go to bed tonight.”

“Yeah!!” both girls yelled. Gary smiled at their delight. After the childhood he had, he would do anything to put smiles on his daughter’s faces. “Okay, now, settle down. You girls need to fall asleep or Santa won’t come.”

“Okay, Daddy,” Shelly said with a smile on her face; and then snuggled back down under her blankets.

Gary continued down the ladder. He moved around it to sit on the edge of his younger daughter’s bunk. “So, what do you plan to do tomorrow, Baby Girl?”



“Oh, I’m so excited, Daddy. I’m going to play with my ET doll all day.”

Gary’s expression changed instantly after hearing his daughter’s response. “What ET doll?”

“The ET doll that Santa’s going to bring me for Christmas.” Little Christie’s eyes danced with anticipation.

Gary swallowed hard. “Oh. Well, you’ll have to go to sleep now so Santa will come.” He quickly kissed his daughter on the forehead and stood up. He left the room quietly. Robin was still straightening up the living room when he entered.

“Did Christie tell you she wanted an ET doll for Christmas?”

“No, I never heard her mention it.”

“Oh Great. I guess I’m going to the store to find an ET doll.”

“What, now?” Robin stopped what she was doing and looked at her husband in disbelief. “It’s eight o’clock on Christmas Eve. Where do you think you’re going to find an ET doll at this time of the night?”

Gary grabbed his coat and picked up his car keys. “I have no idea, but I’m going to try. Christie has her heart set on an ET doll, and I refuse to disappoint her.” Without waiting to hear anything more his wife had to say, Gary left the house.

As he was pulling out of the driveway, he thought, “Where *am* I going to find an ET doll at this time of the night?” He made a mental list of the places that might still be open. His first stop would be the Wal-Mart a few blocks away. If they didn’t have the doll, he’d try the K-Mart across the street from there. The ToyRUs Store was across town, but he would try there if he struck out at the first two places. And, he thought, he’d also hit every open drug store on the way.

Two hours later, exhausted and depressed that he had struck out at every store he had tried, Gary heard his low gas alarm pinging as he stopped at light. That was the first time he has checked the gas gage since he left his house. The needle was a hair above the red warning mark. After expressing a few words that no one should be yelling out on Christmas Eve, Gary began looking for a gas station. He had driven past several that looked closed, so he knew he was in trouble. The only station he thought might still be open at that time of the night was the one at the airport. That station had to stay open 24/7 so the people who rented cars would be able to fill up the gas tanks before bringing the cars back to the rental companies. He made a U-turn and headed for the airport.

As Gary waited for the gasoline to fill his tank a tear fell from his right eye. How was he ever going to be able to explain to his daughter why Santa had not brought her the one toy she really wanted for Christmas? His mind drifted back to his childhood and the many Christmases he had lived though without receiving anything he had wanted. At the children’s home everyone got only one gift, and that was whatever had been donated. He vowed he would never allow that to happen to his children. And now, he thought, there was no way he could avoid seeing the same look of disappointment on his daughter’s face that he had always felt on Christmas morning.

Gary got back into his car and stared out of his windshield. He dreaded going home empty handed. He closed his eyes as more tears welled up in them. He brushed them away with the back of his hand. Before he turned the key in his ignition, he noticed a sign that was on the side of the airport building. “Come In to Enjoy a Cup of Hot Coffee at the Airport Snack Bar.” He hadn’t noticed that sign when he pulled in. It seemed a bit out of focus, but he contributed that to the fact that he had been crying. He pulled his car out of the gas station area and parked it under the sign. “A cup of coffee might keep me from falling asleep on the way home.” He said aloud to himself.

The man who poured Gary a cup of coffee at the snack bar looked familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on where Gary might have seen him before. The man was older, probably retired, Gary thought, a bit overweight and had a full gray beard that encircled his cherub-like face. When he handed Gary the steaming cup of coffee the man pointed to a table and said, "That's a nice table right over there. You'll have a nice view of the Christmas decorations in the window of the gift shop from there." The man smiled, and again Gary had the impression that he knew the man.

"Thank you. Do I know you?" Gary asked, never taking his eyes off the man's smiling face.

"Well, perhaps you've seen me before. I have that kind of a face." Again the man smiled warmly and Gary swore he saw a twinkle in the man's eye.

Gary walked over to the table where the man had directed him and sat facing the airport gift shop. He put both hands around his cup and looked deeply into the steaming liquid, all the while thinking about what he was going to tell his daughter in the morning. When he brought the cup up to his mouth he looked over at the holiday decorations that adorned the shop that was across the aisle from where he was sitting. Before the hot coffee touched his lips, Gary stopped the momentum and put the cup back down on the table. He could not believe his eyes. On a shelf in the front window of the gift store sat an ET doll.



Gary left the coffee on the table and about ran over to the shop. "Is that ET doll for sale?" He asked the young woman behind the counter.

"What ET doll?"

"The ET doll that's sitting in your front window."

"What?" The girl walked up to the window and looked around.

"Well, what a 'ya know," She said. "How did you get in there?"

"What do you mean? Didn't you put that doll in the window?"

"No sir, I sure didn't. This doll has been in the back room for a couple of years. We were going to donate it to the local children's home. Maybe the lady on the day shift thought she would give it one more try to sell. See, there's even a price tag on it now. How weird."

"Well, I'd like to buy it, if I can." Gary held his breath for fear the young woman would take it back to the storeroom."

"Well, I don't see why not. As long as there's a price tag on it, it's for sale."

"Oh, thank you! You'll never know how much this means to me."

"Well, Merry Christmas then!" the girl said as she rang up the doll.

Gary left the shop clinging to the bag with the ET doll tucked securely inside. After he passed the snack bar he decided to go back to thank the man behind the counter. If it wasn't for the fact that the kind man directed Gary to that particular table, he would have never seen the doll in the window.

When he approached the counter of the snack bar he saw a middle-aged woman arranging stock. "Excuse me, but can you tell me where the man is that was working this counter a few minutes ago?"

The woman turned and looked at Gary apprehensively. "I beg your pardon?"

"Well, a few minutes ago there was a man working back there who sold me a cup of coffee and I just wanted to talk to him for a minute."

The woman leered at Gary attempting to determine if he had been drinking. It would not have been the first time that she had to put up with someone who stopped at her counter for a snack after coming from the Airport Bar. "I've been here all night, sir and I don't remember selling you any coffee."

Gary looked disoriented and started to say something else, as he looked over at the table he had been sitting at only moments before. “But you didn’t . . . .” He thought better of continuing the sentence when he noticed that there was no cup sitting on the table. “Did you clear off that table over there?”

“What table?” she asked with a noticeably sarcastic tone in her voice.

“Never mind.” Gary slowly turned and walked away. “How strange” flashed though his brain, but the thought quickly departed as he felt the ET doll under his arm. With a smile on his face and lighthearted step to his gate, Gary walked back to his car. He didn’t bother to look up as he got behind his steering wheel. If he had he would have noticed that the sign advertising the hot coffee at the snack bar he had parked under was no longer there.

He was home by 10:45, tucked the ET lovingly into Christie’s stocking and then set up his video camera on a tripod. He and Robin had fun adding the presents under the tree, one at a time, stopping the camera between each one so it would appear as though the presents just appeared there when viewed on the television screen. He put on the coat and glove from a Santa costume he had worn a few times when volunteering at the children’s home and slowly moved his arm across the camera’s field of vision, thinking that would be enough to satisfy his girls when they watched the tape in the morning. At midnight he and his wife finally went to bed. Gary slept soundly until his daughters jumped on his bed at 6:30 a.m. the next morning.

The first thing Christie saw when she went into the living room was her ET. The look on her face when she saw it was worth all the trouble it had been to find it. She clung to the doll all morning, even setting it on her lap as she ate a pancake breakfast. After breakfast, Shelly remembered her request that they leave the video camera on all night.

“Oh, Dad! I forgot... did you leave the movie camera on last night?”

“Oh, that’s right!” Gary said, acting as though he had forgotten. “Let’s go see if we caught Santa on the camera!”

They all run back into the living room. The girls and Robin sat excitedly on the couch as Gary set up the camera to show on the television screen. He sat next to Christie as it started. The children laughed as they watched their Christmas presents pop up under the tree.

“Dad, how did Santa do that?” Shelly asked.

“Well you know, Shelly, Santa is very magical! He probably knew we were recording him so he didn’t want to show his face in the camera.” Gary looked at Robin with a smile on his face and gave her a wink. “Keep watching; maybe we caught just a little bit of him.”

“There Dad! Look... it’s his arm!” Christie shouted. She and Shelly sat at the edge of the couch as they watched the white glove and the red sleeve pass slowly by the camera. As Gary looked at how excited his girls were, he beamed at the thought of being able to bring them so much joy. When he turned back to look at the television screen there was something showing that he and his wife had not recorded on purpose. For a brief few seconds there appeared a man with a cherub-like face and a full gray beard on the screen. The man winked and they all heard, “Merry Christmas” before the image disappeared. The girls jumped up and down with delight at the prospect of catching Santa on the recorder. Gary sat transfixed at the image of static that appeared on the television screen. He recognized the man on the recording as the man who had poured him a cup of coffee at the airport snack bar the night before. Robin slid across the couch and whispered to Gary, “Who was that?”

Gary smiled and turned toward his wife, “That, my Dear, was Santa Claus. Didn’t you recognize him?”