

THE PAPERBOY

It had been a bitterly cold Christmas Eve. After weeks of frantic shopping, wild advertising, lights, and noise, the city was quiet. The streets were covered with slush from snow melted by hurried last-minute shoppers.

Dawn approached, and no one noticed the homeless youth sleeping on a makeshift bed of rags, newspapers, and old tattered blankets beneath the overpass near the edge of the city.

The boy's name was Sean. Sean's only friend in the world was a pigeon that slept in the support structure of the overpass. Several pigeons made their home there, and Sean had affectionately named the bird he most liked Whistler. Sean often shared crumbs from his small portion of food with Whistler and his friends. He appreciated their cooing and company.



Sean had never known his father, Jerry, who had been stationed overseas shortly after Sean was born. Sean and his mother enjoyed a simple but comfortable home life. Sean's mother had loved Jesus, prayed often, and taught Sean to do the same. Nothing could ever happen to unsettle her faith, not even when they received notice that there had been a terrible accident aboard the ship where Jerry was assigned.

In the hard years, and the many moves and changes that followed, Sean and his mother strengthened themselves by reading God's promises in the Bible. They firmly believed that somehow all things would work together for good.

Sean's mother was never very strong physically, however, and as the years progressed, she grew weaker still. The doctors told her that she was dying, and she knew it was only a matter of time until she would join her husband in heaven. Due to her poor health, Sean's mother couldn't work. Because the cause and circumstances of the accident leading to her husband's death were still under investigation, they were not yet receiving a pension from the company, and they soon had to move out of their house and stay in a shabby apartment.



As soon as he was old enough, Sean got a job as a paperboy, delivering newspapers. Every penny he received went toward school and food. His mother had come alone as a teenager to this country, so when she died, Sean was left very much alone.

The social worker at the hospital explained to Sean that he would be taken to live in a state institution for boys. That night, Sean slipped out of the apartment and found a spot under the bypass that was protected from the wind and passersby. From then on, he began living in the streets, keeping out of sight as best he could, learning the hard ways of street life and how to manage around people who were not nearly as kind as his mother had been.



Now, lying under the bridge, Sean could hardly believe all that had happened to him in just a few months. Delivering the morning paper continued to bring in enough money for food, but not enough for shelter.



Above, he could hear a bird he referred to as “Whistler” waking up and flapping his wings. Hearing Sean whistle, Whistler came flapping down, looking for his morning handout of bread scraps. Sean tossed him some crusts. “I need to go to work.” He jumped down the incline to the sidewalk below. Off he ran to the delivery house to pick up his batch of newspapers.

Sean was known as the quickest paperboy in the area. He knew how to throw the papers from the sidewalk so that they’d land neatly on the dry porch near the front door of every house.

Although life was very difficult, Sean remained cheerful. And today was a special day to feel cheerful—after all, it was Christmas Day! As he walked down the street tossing papers on this clear, chilly Christmas morning, he said a short prayer as he passed each house.

“God, give them an enjoyable Christmas day and help them to appreciate all the things they have—their families, their warm homes, the presents and songs.”

Sean slowed his pace as he thought of his mother and the touch of her soft, frail hand on his shoulder as she said: “Sean, when I’m gone, remember to think of all the good things, and thank God for all the years we’ve had together and the life and good health He’s given you.”

Nearing the end of his paper route, Sean whispered a prayer: “Dear Jesus, You have always been a friend and have watched over me these past months since Mom died. I know You hear my every prayer. What I would like is to have a nice place and a nice person to spend Christmas with. It’s cold and not fun being out here alone on these streets. Please, Jesus, if it is possible I would like to be part of a family again. Amen!”



Not far away, a local businessman wearily sat up in bed. He had been very busy these last few months, personally helping to set up new housing facilities for poor families, organizing holiday charity shows, and doing what he could down at the shelter for runaway youth and street children.

The Christmas tree he had purchased earlier still sat undecorated beside a few lights and some tinsel. In a few minutes, he had it up and had scattered cotton at the foot of the tree. He lay a few presents underneath—presents he planned to take over to some children at a nearby shelter later that afternoon. He sat back in the easy chair to enjoy a few more nods.



Sean had reached the last house and hurled the newspaper toward the door. As it left his hand, his heart nearly stopped—the paper flew toward the small window by the door and then crashed through, scattering bits and pieces of glass everywhere.

Sean gaped. He had heard stories from others of their window-breaking experiences and the homeowners' anger. His first thought was to run, but then he felt the presence of his mother telling him to face it like a man. *After all*, a little voice said in his head, *there's no use running away. You're the only paperboy that has this route*. With that, he gingerly approached the front door, hoping for the best.

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Startled awake by the smashing glass at the front door, the businessman had picked up an iron poker from the fireplace and gone to see if someone was trying to break in. To his surprise, a shabbily dressed and very nervous youth stood on his step; the boy now looked all the more fretful, seeing the poker in his hand. The man gave a hearty laugh once he realized what had happened.

"That's okay! Don't worry about it! It's Christmas and you look cold. Please come in."

Sean might normally have said no to such an invitation into a stranger's house, but something about this person was different. The man was somehow familiar. Within minutes they were talking, laughing, and drinking hot chocolate. The man couldn't help but notice the tattered clothes of the boy sitting in his den and wondered what kind of life he led. But not wanting to embarrass the boy whom he had just met, he chose not to ask.

Time passed, and they were both engrossed in their conversation. "I was married long ago," the man said, "but after an accident at sea, I was hospitalized and in critical condition for many months. By a terrible clerical mistake, a message was sent to my wife and child saying I was dead. My wife's English was not very good ... anyway, when I returned, my wife and child were nowhere to be found. I tried to locate them, but I could not find them, so I assumed that ... well ... I guess I couldn't expect them to wait for my return when they thought I was dead, could I?"

"So, after that I chose to dedicate my life to helping others—children, the runaways, the poor, and those who have lost their homes. I have given up on finding my family, but I pray regularly that they are safe and happy wherever they are.

"Perhaps if it weren't for that tragedy in my life, I would never have reached out to others and tried to help those who were less fortunate than I." A tear

rolled down his cheek. Then he regained his composure and laughed. "Well, you're probably not interested in all my ramblings. Oh, and by the way, my name is Jerry Lando. What's yours?"

Sean was speechless, his brain spinning from the man's story. He glanced around the room and his eyes fell upon a framed photo of a young man hugging a woman with a baby in her arms. Sean felt dizzy. The woman in the photo was his mother. Sean stuttered, "I-I'm Sean ... D-Dad? The woman ... the woman in that picture, she looks just like my mother—and the man is the same man that I saw on old photos my mother had."

"Sean? ... You said your name was Sean?" Jerry asked, his face pale.

"Yes, it's me ... Dad!"

For a long moment the boy and the man studied each other. "Could this really be true!?" the man asked. He had searched so long and coped with so many disappointments. It was hard to believe that in this unexpected moment while talking to a young troubled boy, here was his long-lost son.



The man began to cry. Sean was teary eyed too. He reached out and touched the man's shoulder and found himself in his long-lost father's arms. They wept and hugged each other. At last, the man said, "Thank God you are home, safe at last! Tell me everything! How is your mother?"

Sean's thrill at finding his father was dampened. "Mom got real sick. A nice doctor took care of her and tried to help, but she was very weak. She told me she knew she was going to a better place. And then she died." Sean suppressed a sob. "At the hospital, I got scared by all the questions and the police and the social workers, so I ran away and have been living under the overpass at 14th Street since then."

They both wept as Sean told his story. Then they hugged each other close, thankful to be reunited.

"Are you hungry, Sean?"

"Very," Sean answered.

"Then let's go someplace to eat and do some shopping. You look like you could use some new clothes and a nice hot shower."





That evening father and son celebrated all the Christmases, Thanksgivings, Father's Days, and birthdays they'd missed—everything they could think of. And most importantly, they thanked the great God of love who had answered their prayers and brought them back together again.