

## THE NEW MAN

By Joyce Hansen

*Celebrate, Grades 5-6 [Life Signs December 29, 1991] "The New Man" by Joyce Hansen. Used by Permission of Congregational Ministries Publishing, Louisville, KY.*

It was the worst time of my life. Just before Christmas, my father was laid off his job. The change I earned from my after-school job in a shelter for old veterans, plus the little bit of pay my mother made as a waitress, was the only money we had—enough for rent and a few dollars left for food.

What really made me feel terrible was that there'd be no presents under the tree—no *tree* even. I didn't feel so bad for myself, but I know how disappointed my younger brother and sister would be come Christmas morning.

When I began work a few days before Christmas, I started cleaning the rec room as usual. It was a wreck, all right. Old newspapers on the floor, torn-up magazines on a scratched coffee table, and dirty paper cups sure didn't help my spirits. Like always, the television was blasting. The only men in there who were quiet were the two old codgers who played checkers all the time. Mackey, who we called Sleepy Time, because he always slept in front of the television, was dozing. James, who we called Brooklyn because he always talked about the Brooklyn Dodgers, snatched the remote and ran through the channels real fast. Sleepy Time woke up.

"Hey, I'm watching that Sleepy Time shouted.

"You're sleeping!" Brooklyn shouted back and continued changing the channels. "I want to see the Brooklyn Dodgers," he said jumping up off the couch and stomping his foot.

The man we called Honor Bright (because he was always talking about how he took the Scouts Honor when he was a boy), said "There ain't no more Brooklyn Dodgers." He shook his egg-shaped bald head. "The baseball season is over anyway."

"What happened to the Dodgers?" Brooklyn whined.

"Aw shut up," Sleepy Time mumbled, and changed the channels. Poor old Brooklyn started babbling, which meant he'd be crying soon. These men could get on your last nerve. "Come on, Brooklyn, calm down," I said quietly. "The baseball season

is over, remember?” I patted him on his shoulders and sat him down. “The Dodgers live in Los Angeles now, remember?”

He smiled. “Oh, yes, I remember.”

“You made him feel better, son. That was nice of you, a strange voice said.”

I turned around and saw the New Man. He looked like a bum who’s been living on the streets for years. He wore a big dark jacket, and his thin gray hair barely covered his large round head. His eyes didn’t seem like they belonged to him. They looked too young and too lively.

I just grunted. Some of these old guys could be real senile and this one looked like a doozy. I went to the other side of the room to sweep and left the New Man talking to Brooklyn. Then Lou, my boss, poked his head in the door, “Hey, kid, you ain’t finished in here yet?”

I grunted at him too. Always checking on us workers. I picked the papers off the floor.

“No. Don’t touch that. I haven’t finished reading them.” Honor Bright snatched the papers out of my hand. Before I could say anything, Sleepy Time opened his mouth. “Aw, throw those old papers away before they turn yellow.” He yawned loudly.

“You mind your own business,” Honor Bright snapped. “You don’t have sense enough to read a paper and learn what’s going on in the world.”

“Who don’t have sense?” Sleepy Time stood up unsteadily. “I get the news from the television!” he yelled. “Them papers lie anyway.”

“I want my papers,” Honor Bright grumbled as he tried to smooth them out.

“Why don’t you cut out the articles you want to read and throw the rest away,” the New Man said, taking a pair of scissors out of his pocket. Honor Bright quieted down and began to cut away at the newspaper. Brooklyn and the New Man started talking about Christmas, which was the last thing I wanted to hear.

The New Man had the most to say. “We had no store-bought presents. One year I carved my brother a set of trains. We made our own decorations too out of popcorn and paper cutouts. It was a wonderful time.”

Brooklyn closed his eyes and grinned. “I remember the smells—roasting turkey, sweet potato pie, mince pie, the pine tree.”

Brooklyn was making my mouth water.

“The most important thing families had then was love,” I heard the New Man say as I walked out of the room. While cleaning the dining hall I thought about what a depressing Christmas me and my family would have.

A weird thing happened though. Walking to work the next day I passed a guy selling Christmas trees. I thought about what Brooklyn had said about how good

things smelled at Christmastime. The trees had a fresh pine scent. They were expensive. I stood there watching the tall pines and fantasized about my family having one.

I saw a man buying the largest tree. "Cut off that top piece," he said.

The tree was so huge that the top was the size of a small tree. I turned to the man selling the trees. "Could I have that piece you just cut off?" I asked. It wasn't like me to beg for anything.

"Sure, son," the man said. "Won't make much of a tree though."

"Thanks, Mister. It's better than nothing." I figured I'd take it with me to work and bring it home later.

When I walked into the rec room, it was peaceful for a change. Sleepy Time wore a clean shirt and he and Honor Bright watched the news on TV. The New Man talked to Brooklyn about baseball. The checker players were into their game as usual.

Honor Bright was the first one to notice the tree. He jumped out of his seat. "Look what the kid bought us."

"Nice of you," Sleepy Time smiled.

"I always knew he was a good kid," Honor Bright said to the New Man.

"Thanks for the tree." Brooklyn's old tired eyes sparkled. The New Man didn't say anything, just smiled quiet like he knew something no one else did.

"We don't have decorations," Brooklyn said.

Just then Lou poked his large head in the door. "You ain't started working yet?"

"The kid bought us a Christmas tree," Honor Bright announced. "You have any decorations around here?"

How could I tell the Old Codgers that the tree wasn't for them?

"We don't have no decorations in this joint," Lou growled. Then he turned to me. "You better get to work."

"The tree is least important," the New Man said almost like he was talking to himself. "It's not the real meaning of Christmas. Christmas is about Christ's birth and God's love for us."

"Are you a preacher man?" one of the checker players asked. I was shocked because the checker players never said anything.

The New Man's eyes crinkled in a smile. "No," he said, "but I can carve some ornaments for that tree. I brought some of my supplies with me." He rushed out of the room.

Honor Bright stuck the tree in a small wastepaper basket and, believe it or not, one of the checker players left the game to get water for the tree.

The New Man returned with chunks of wood, carving knives and paint. “This is my hobby,” he said.

The Old Codgers watched the New Man begin to carve the wood. Honor Bright started throwing away the old newspapers. The New Man was amazing. He took a small square of wood and started chipping away and almost like magic you could see a figure shaping up.

“Are you an artist?” a checker player asked.

“No. I just enjoy doing this.”

“I used to carve,” the checker player said.

“Help me, then,” the New Man told him.

I couldn’t concentrate on what I had to do for watching the New Man carve the wood. His fingers flew. He noticed me watching.

“You want to learn how to do this? We have a tree to decorate.”

“I gotta work,” I said. “Lou will be on my back.”

Brooklyn walked over to the door. “Don’t worry, kid, I’ll stand here and tell you when I see Lou coming.”

Honor Bright took the broom out of my hand. “I could sweep. I ain’t sick.”

The New Man smiled at me. “What gifts were you planning to give?”

“My sister wants a doll and my brother wants a bike.”

“Well, you can’t carve a bike to ride, but you can carve a doll for your sister. Draw the shape of a doll, then we’ll cut out the figure.”

“I can’t draw.”

“Yes you can,” he said and took a piece of paper and a pencil from his pocket.

He must be some kind of magician I thought. Instead of pulling things out of a hat, he took them out of his pockets.

He sat on the couch and placed the paper on the coffee table and showed me how to draw the shape. “Now we’ll cut out the figure.”

I got so interested in what he was doing that I forgot about the time. But Lou didn’t come to check on me. The New Man handed me the knife and the wood and I carved the figure until it was time to go to the dining hall. The New Man nodded and smiled as he looked at what I’d done. “Not bad for the first time. You’ll have this finished by tomorrow.”

“Maybe I can carve a bike for my brother by tomorrow too,” I joked.

“Maybe you can,” the New Man said.

I laughed and thanked him for showing me how to carve and I turned to Honor Bright and Brooklyn. “Thanks for cleaning the room.” I was happier than I’d been for weeks, and even tried to figure out a way to get my brother a bike.

Walking home from work, I went down the street where the man had been selling trees. I figured he might have another piece from a larger tree. He was gone. Had he sold so many trees already?”

I couldn't wait to get back to work the next day. When I reached the rec room I was shocked. It was so clean that I didn't have any work to do. Guess it was my imagination, but the tree seemed larger. Everybody was creating an ornament. Those Old Codgers must've worked all night. Figures of angels, icicles, snowflakes, Santas. You wouldn't think those Old Codgers could make such beautiful things.

Brooklyn carefully painted his icicle white. I got right to work and, finished the doll. I still had nothing for my brother—I couldn't make a bicycle, but the New Man showed me how to make a train. At times it felt as if my hands moved by themselves. My mind blanked out everything except for what I was making.

By the day before Christmas, I'd made two dolls for my sister and two trains for my brother. It seemed too that the tree definitely was fuller and taller, but I figured it was probably the ornaments that made it look that way.

“This place has really changed,” I said looking around for the New Man. “Where is he?”

“He left,” Sleepy Time said.

“Wish I could've said good-bye to him,” I said. “Where did he go?”

Sleepy Time shrugged his shoulders.

Brooklyn walked over to me. “Let me tell you something in private, kid. He's an angel.”

“Yeah he's like an angel. This place changed when he came.”

“No kid. I mean he's a real angel. Sometimes they come down here and help people.”

I guess Brooklyn could tell by the look on my face that I wasn't buying his angel story.

“I know you think that I'm crazy, kid, but it's true.”

Poor old guy, I thought to myself and didn't pay Brooklyn any more mind.

I took the gifts I'd made and wished everyone a Merry Christmas and walked on home. Even though we didn't have a tree or much food and no gifts except the toys I made, I felt good. Like the New Man told us, the main gift was my family and our love for each other.

When I opened the door to my apartment the kids were squealing and my folks were grinning from ear to ear.

“Guess what happened, Son,” Ma said. “We have a tree and boxes of food—turkey, ham, fruit and your brother has a bicycle—just everything we need and want.”

My sister danced around the room with a fancy new doll. “Look what I have she sang out.”

“At first I wouldn’t take it,” my father said. “I ain’t no charity case,’ I told the delivery man. But he said it was a gift to us from a friend of yours. Said something about you being nice to those guys in the home. Said that you’d know who it was. The New Man at the home.”

I was stunned. “How did he look?”

“Old as Methuselah. Looked like a reformed bum.”

I thought about what Brooklyn had said. But that was ridiculous. Yet, I couldn’t figure it out. First, how did he know that I called him the New Man? Well, maybe that was just a coincidence. I never told him where I lived, though. Well, maybe someone else told him. He’s probably a rich old kook, and his chauffeur helped him get the tree here and another servant brought the food. That probably explains it I tried to convince myself.

Come Christmas morning my sister wouldn’t let her dolls go—the one she got from the New Man and the two that I’d made. My brother claimed that the trains I made him were the best toys he’d ever had, but I know he couldn’t wait to ride his bike.

“There’s a gift for you,” my mother said. I opened the package and saw carving knives, pieces of wood and jars of paint. A note was tucked between two of the paint jars: *For the priceless gifts you’ll give. Remember the real meaning of Christmas and carry it with you always.* No signature, but I knew who it was from.

I never saw the New Man again, but I’ve never forgotten him, either. Was he an angel like Brooklyn had said? I don’t know, but he brought a bit of heaven to us that Christmas.