

A Christmas Mistake

by Daniel Curzon

A few years ago, this was, I was walking across the Golden Gate Bridge on Christmas Eve carrying my daughter, who was five at the time. It wasn't that late, but already it was nearly dark. And cold. I told my daughter that we should go home because she was sick and needed to rest. "But I've never been *on* the bridge!" she said. "If I don't do it now, when will I?" Tina knew that she had a problem with her spine that made it hard for her to walk and that was going to end her life early. In fact, she died before she turned six.

But that night we were happy, looking all around at the bright lights of the several cities that we could see. Tina was bundled up, as I was, all nice and toasty. Just our faces were cold. We even had muffins, chocolate ones, that we had brought at a store on Lombard Street. "Do you want your muffin now?" I asked Tina.

"I'll wait a few minutes," she said. "I want to make it last."

I gave her a kiss on the forehead, and we walked along a bit more. Just as we were about to turn back and go home and get completely warm, Tina spotted a man up ahead, one leg placed over the railing on the bridge. He wasn't that large a man, nor was he dressed in red, but he did have a bushy white beard. "Look! It's Santa Claus!" Tina cried out. He was probably homeless.

"I don't think so," I said.

"Yes, it is!" Tina insisted. "Can we go see him? Huh?"

Please!"

I didn't know what to do. I felt sorry for the man, who looked like he might very well be getting ready to jump, apparently neither seeing nor hearing us, so concentrated was he on the dark water below.

I made a decision that I have never regretted. About how many things can one say that?

Still holding my daughter, I moved toward the homeless man, who finally heard us and turned his head. The look of abject desolation in his drunken eyes was so searing that I could not come any closer. He looked back down at the water far below and hitched his body in an attempt to get his other leg over the railing.

"What's Santa doing?" my daughter asked. "He looks so skinny. Is he sick?"

My tongue was unable to form any words, and I was about to turn back toward the way we'd come, sure there was nothing I could do to save the man if he was that far gone, and I certainly did not want my daughter to see him commit suicide right before her eyes.

Yet before I could move, Tina called out to the man. "Look what I have for you, Santa!" She was holding out her chocolate muffin, her little hand sticky because the muffin had gotten partly crushed in her coat pocket.

The homeless man looked back, wavering, his eyes bright in the gleaming lights from the cities all around us. He shook his head no.

"But you've got to keep you strength up!" Tina said. "I don't have any cookies and milk right now. But you can have my muffin. My daddy says it'll make you fat." Again she held it out.

"Don't want to anymore," the homeless man mumbled and looked back toward the water. His body was poised.

"But you've got to deliver all the toys tonight, don't you? To all the boys and girls everywhere, isn't that right?"

"No, little girl, I don't."

"Including *me!*" Tina said.

The man's eyes flickered, then met mine, and then he laughed. "Okay, I guess I do," he said. He took Tina's muffin, and I helped him down from the railing. He went his way carrying the chocolate muffin, and I took my sweet, sweet daughter home for that final Christmas.

