

Sweet Charity

by Laura McCollough Moss

Troy approached the podium and cleared his throat.

"My wife, Wilhelmina, and I wish to thank you all for attending the dedication of the Steele Center for Childhood Cancer Research this evening. We are delighted to contribute to our community in this manner, and to continue the legacy begun by my grandfather in 1970. The center for Adult Cancer Research has been a tremendous success, and we look forward to making similar advances in honor of the innocent children stricken with this terrible disease. Your support and generosity have made this dream a reality. Together we will improve treatments, increase survival rates, and perhaps put an end to devastating childhood cancers within our lifetime. As has often been said, our children are our greatest natural resource. They depend on us, and our nation's future is dependent on their good health and wellbeing. We rely on private donations rather than those from pharmaceutical and medical supply companies in an effort to ensure that there is no conflict of interest within the organization. Our mission is to provide the highest standard of care, recommended by pioneers in cancer treatment, without bias or ethical constraints. Please enjoy the refreshments, tour the facilities, and make any contribution you can so that we can continue to serve the children. Once again I want to thank you all for being here, and have a wonderful evening."

Troy smiled broadly and strode to Wilhelmina's chair, taking both her hands and kissing them as cameras flashed, and the crowd erupted into applause. She was so proud of him at moments like this. He was a very busy man and his responsibilities weighed heavily on him. She knew this was why he could be distracted and withdrawn at times, even irritable. But on nights like tonight, when he showed such caring and compassion, and used his good fortune and influence to reach out to others, she remembered why she'd fallen in love with him. Troy was mingling with a table of the more

distinguished guests, when Senator Schultz asked if he might make a toast.

As Troy assumed a humble pose, the Senator said, "To Wilhelmina, whose tireless efforts have made this Center a reality. Heaven knows, she wore a path in the carpet to my office! She has stopped at nothing to promote this magnificent achievement, and I want to extend my personal congratulations to her. "

There was another warm round of applause, but Wilhelmina's stomach tightened. Everyone else saw Troy smiling adoringly at her. Only she recognized the subtle clenching of his jaw that she knew all too well. It had clenched in the same way when she'd told him that morning that her mother was coming for Thanksgiving.

"You know we're going to Aunt Clara's for dinner," he seethed. "Your mother doesn't exactly fit in with my family. I thought we agreed to keep our holiday celebrations separate."

Wilhelmina had apologized, "I know, Honey, but she doesn't want to stay home without Daddy there. I couldn't tell her not to come!"

Wilhelmina's father had died in January, and Troy had not only attended the funeral but delivered the eulogy, expertly disguising his distaste for her home, and her relatives.

"You have to tell her she cannot call you 'Willie'. It makes her sound ignorant. In fact, it's probably best if she doesn't say much at all. I'm sure you remember the time she told everyone at the table that she received Medicaid for you when you were young? That was priceless."

Wilhelmina swallowed her sadness and disappointment. "I'll talk to her," she said. "She means well; she just doesn't know enough not to tell the truth."

Unlike your family, she thought. They had no problem overlooking the truth. There was the 'premature' baby born fat and healthy seven months after Troy's cousin Madeline's wedding, and his brother Mitch's 'roommate', Brian. And what was the problem calling someone by a shortened version of their given name? Their circle included a "Buffy", a "Ladybird" and a "Trixie". Ridiculous nicknames were chic and accepted. She'd stopped trying to make

sense of it long ago. Contrary to popular opinion, maintaining the veneer of a perfect family was hard work. Wilhelmina was thankful to have come from nothing.

Troy was quiet on the drive home from the dedication ceremony. Wilhelmina stared out the window into the darkness. How was it that an occasion that should have brought her so much joy only left her feeling hollow? They came near to a Wal-mart, and she asked Troy to stop.

"You're kidding me, right? I mean, it's ten o'clock, we're all dressed up, and I'm exhausted. You know I hate that place."

Wilhelmina stroked his hand. "I'm going to the grade school in the morning, to read to the kids for Veteran's Day. I want to bring them some candy, and I'd rather pick it up tonight. We're going right past, and I'd have to go out of my way tomorrow. Please?"

Troy steered their Lexus coupe harshly into the store lot; griping under his breath. "It'll only take me a few minutes," she promised.

He got out and reluctantly escorted her inside. "Let's make this quick, please. I don't want to run into anyone."

A cheerful, bearded man stood near a kettle at the entrance to the store, ringing a bell. "We appreciate your support this holiday season," he called. Troy waited impatiently at the door while Wilhelmina dug for a few dollars.

"Thank you Sweetheart," the man smiled, and received a genuine smile back from her. She hurried to catch up to her husband. He wasn't smiling.

"Let's find the candy and get out of here. Now what are you doing?"

Wilhelmina stood looking at a Christmas tree that had been placed on the service desk.

"Look, Troy, it's a Mitten Tree! I've heard of these. Each mitten has the name of a needy child on it, and a list of what they want for Christmas. Wouldn't that be fun, to give a few kids a nice Christmas?"

It was a recurrent source of tension in their lives; Wilhelmina's love of children. She was so taken with them, but Troy considered

them a nuisance. As a compromise until he came around (and she was certain he would), she visited the sick in hospitals, volunteered at the elementary school, helped to organize fundraisers and sponsored summer camps. She'd made the best of the situation until her time for motherhood could come along, but she'd begun to despair that it was not to be.

"Earth to Wilhelmina," Troy stood firm and crossed his arms in front of him. "Don't you think we do enough without playing Santa Claus? These people get a free ride for everything, I swear. How will they learn to work for what they have if we keep giving it to them?" This was the opinion of a man who got his first job, as Vice President of his grandfather's company, right out of an ivy-league college. He hadn't so much as worked at an ice cream stand before that. Wilhelmina couldn't blame him, it was all he knew. But she wouldn't stop trying to make him understand.

"Just two," she pleaded. "I'm taking two; a boy and a girl. Oh, look! Sierra and Jeremy! How cute! Look at what they want for Christmas, Troy: a coat, jeans size 6, coloring books, and crayons. He wants plastic army men. Your niece wants a laptop for Christmas, and she's eight! We have so much; it makes me feel guilty that there are innocent little kids who don't understand why Santa doesn't visit their houses. Even if we do this, they're getting gifts from strangers who shopped in a discount store! We have to make them feel special. Give me fifteen minutes, and I can gather everything we need."

Troy sighed and trudged behind her. There was no talking to her when she'd made up her mind, and he didn't want to make a scene. Besides, he had to watch her to make sure she didn't go overboard.

Wilhelmina chose a lavender parka for Sierra, and a navy down jacket with a dump truck stamped on the chest for Jeremy. She got the jeans, and the coloring supplies, and action figures. As she made her selections, she felt her bond to the children strengthen; she felt as if she knew them. She was sure that Sierra would like a box set of Beverly Cleary books, and a musical keyboard; and every boy needed a big metal truck that he could sit on, and a few *Berenstein*

Bears titles. She was headed for the shoe department when Troy put his foot down.

"That's it, Wilhelmina. You're getting ridiculous here. They'll probably ruin the stuff anyway, the way they live. I can't let you spend anymore. We have our own families to think about."

Wilhelmina looked at him with the closest expression to defiance that she could muster. "But they have to have warm boots," she declared. "You know how the winters are here. I have the sizes!" Troy took her arm and pulled her toward the registers.

"You're finished. We've bought everything else. Their parents can buy their boots. Enough already, for God's sake! Do you even remember what you actually came here for?"

"That's right! I need candy," she said. "Thanks for reminding me."

Troy flopped himself onto a nearby bench and waited, fuming.

The holiday season came and went, with its usual flurry of social obligations and family gatherings. They bought Troy's mother a cashmere shawl that she tossed back into the box and pushed under her chair. Wilhelmina knew the gift would never see the light of day. As for her mother, she got her a programmable slow cooker, and you'd have thought the thing was a Mercedes.

"Oh, Willie!" she cried. "You shouldn't have gotten me something so expensive. I can take it back. Should I take it back? Mine still works if I put a plate over it; Sissy borrowed it and broke my lid. Why are you crying, Willie? I'll keep it. I just worry about you kids spending your money."

Troy had rolled his eyes at the ceiling, but he accepted her thankful hug. "You were so lucky to find this guy," her mother said, patting his back.

At a New Years' party, one of the wives brought up the subject of the Mitten Trees. She was saying that they were a lovely idea. Troy heartily agreed. "We took two mittens," he boasted. "We hooked those kids up pretty well! It was great." Wilhelmina helped herself to another glass of wine, and said nothing.

Later that week, they were making their way across town one afternoon. It was snowing heavily, and the cars were crawling along at a snail's pace. The snowplows had left huge, icy piles along the sides of the road and over the sidewalks, making walking very difficult. Children returning home from school had to climb through the deep and treacherous mounds.

Wilhelmina spotted a familiar lavender parka and shrieked "Sierra! Troy, that's Sierra right over there! She's wearing the coat, and the jeans! Isn't she darling?" Troy, frustrated by the slow progress of the traffic, was grouchy.

"Look at the jacket, Wilhelmina. It's filthy. She doesn't look 'darling' to me."

"That's unkind, Troy. They may not have a washing machine. You take so much for granted."

Wilhelmina continued to watch Sierra, concerned about her walking so close to the road. "Look, Troy. She's wearing sneakers with no socks, the poor thing!" She should have had boots, she wanted to say. Just then, Sierra's foot caught in a dirty pile of snow. She struggled to pull her foot free, and her sneaker became stuck. "She's barefoot!" Wilhelmina screamed, suddenly enraged. Why had she let him talk her out of buying those boots? Was she that spineless? A child was suffering because she'd submitted to a pompous asshole.

"Stop the car!" she yelled. "I'm going after her!" All of the suppressed anger and resentment was creating a tidal wave of adrenaline in Wilhelmina, and something like hysteria.

"Take it easy, Mother Teresa," Troy chided her.

That was the last straw. "I said let me out of this car you son of a bitch!"

He stared at her, incredulous, and stopped the car. "What are you planning to do? She doesn't even know you. She'll think you're a weirdo! Frankly, you're acting like one. You're embarrassing me."

interesting," she said bitterly. "You often embarrass me. There's something we have in common."

Troy's temple throbbed, but his voice had a level, measured tone, as though speaking to a lunatic. "I need you to understand that if you get out of this car, in a blizzard in the middle of town in front of probably everyone we know, I'm going to keep right on going."

"You do that," she said, getting out and slamming the door. He hated it when she slammed the door. "This is a luxury automobile!" he'd whine. "You just have to close it, not slam it like a lummoX." Thinking about that made her angrier, and she quickly opened and slammed the door again, just to piss him off. She could see the people in their cars snickering at the calamity, and felt strangely satisfied. Troy was stuck in traffic and humiliated. There was a God, after all.

Wilhelmina leapt across the snow bank and made her way to the hopping young girl. "Can I help you?" she asked, pulling the little shoe out of the snow. "It's all wet, but you'll have to put it on until you get home." She couldn't indicate that she already knew her. "What's your name?"

"Sierra," the girl said shyly. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers, but thank you for helping me." Wilhelmina was delighted to spot a copy of *Beezus and Ramona* peeking from her backpack.

"I'd like to walk you home, to make sure you get there safely. I know you don't know me, but you can trust me, Sierra. I promise."

The child kicked a toe in the snow, and pushed her purple glasses up on her nose with a finger. "If you told me your name, you wouldn't be a stranger, right?"

"You have to be careful about that, but in this case, you're right. My name is Willie."

"That's a funny name," Sierra smiled, "for a girl."

"It is, but it's what my mom always called me, so I like it."

"My mom calls me Sweet pea." Sierra took Willie's hand, and they made their way home.

