

# Her last good year

by Ryn Cricket

"Mama?" Annie asked. "Why are we going to have another baby?"

"Because God wants us to." I said with a bit of a sigh.

"Doesn't God know that we are starving?" She said? Marjorie just gaped at her. As did I.

"We are NOT starving!" I stated emphatically. "What ever gave you the idea that you are starving? Honestly, Annie, you are so melodramatic. You have food in front of you right now, don't you?" I said pointing to her plate of potatoes and sour kraut. Marjorie had a look like *I'm glad I didn't say that*. And Rudy remained quiet the whole time with his face close to his plate eating. He wanted no part of it. I repeated once again, "You are NOT starving!"

"Yes, mama." Annie said with her head bowed. Most children wouldn't even think of speaking again for the whole day after a response like that, but no more than five minutes later, Annie said, "Mama, can we name this one Nancy? I just love that name!"

"What if it's a boy?" I replied. "In any case, your grandma Johanna will have it named before I have the energy to fight her, just like she did with you three."

I had been saving money, even if it was a little bit, every week for Christmas.

"John," I said one morning at a breakfast that he showed up to, "we're having Christmas here at this house this year. My mother is coming, and Stephan and Mary and maybe a few more people. We will need a proper tree this year, money for food, and (I went for broke) new dresses for the girls." I could see them swell up with excitement for the dresses, but they new better than to say anything that might annoy him.

He grumbled a bit, didn't really say anything, and left the table. I took that as an "ok." I couldn't contain my joy either. A small victory for me, and now I could use the money I saved for presents for the children. We were going to have a good Christmas this year. I wasn't working this hard for nothing, and we were NOT starving.

The Saturday before Christmas, I bundled each one up in their winter coats, mittens and boots, and we walked to the city train station and took the train downtown to the Halle's Department store on Public Square. My little silk purse contained several dollars, and I planned to let them see Santa Claus while I bought the presents I had in mind for them. They were so joyous about being able to ride the train —especially Rudy. And then taking the elevator up to the seventh floor where Santa Claus and the toys were had them piqued for anything else. I was grateful that I had children who could revel in simple joy. “You can go get in line to see Santa. I'll wait right here. And tell him your mother said you have been very good this year.” I smiled. I hadn't been in a store like this since I was 17, buying that hat and gloves on Michigan Ave. in Chicago, a lifetime ago.

I had been searching the ads in the newspapers. I decided I would get a Raggedy Anne doll for Annie since it was her namesake. When I saw it up-close, I realized I could make the exact same thing, I just had no time for it right now. I was sure I would get Rudy a tin aeroplane. He seemed so interested in these flying machines. Marjorie, I wasn't that sure about. It would either be celluloid circus animals, or a tin dish set with Little Red Riding Hood painted on them. When I saw them, the dish set won. The department store was brilliant. They had a delivery service that would deliver my purchases on Monday while the children were in school.

On December 23rd, John was in jail, so I didn't have to worry about him. This was his fourth or fifth time since we'd been married (that I knew about). I don't know what the charges were. I didn't understand that legal stuff. I just knew that he would be out of my hair for a few days. Luckily, before he did whatever it was that got him locked up, he had bought a Christmas tree, put money in the cookie jar for food, and there were two new dresses hanging in the coat closet. I don't know why he listened to me, but he did. The dresses were a little big and not exactly new, but they looked nice and would last them longer. The girls would be so happy.

“Marjorie! Annie!” I called upstairs. “Look what your father brought for you.” They came barreling down the stairs. “What? What?” They asked.

I held out the dresses and they squealed.

“Can I put it on?” Marjorie asked.

“Oh, please, please!” Annie begged.

“Tomorrow, for Christmas Eve...Although, I suppose you could try them on just to see how they look...as long as you are careful.”

“YES! YES!” And they each grabbed the right hanger and went running right back up the stairs.

I had wrapped the presents the night before and put them high on the shelf in the coat closet. Santa Claus was coming this year. I even bought some candy for their stockings, plus there was fruit from the trees out back, waiting in the cellar. We were not starving! This is going to be a real Christmas.

“Girls, why don't you pick some berries out back? I'll pop some corn and you can string the corn and berries up for the tree.” They could hardly contain themselves, quickly grabbing the wool capes I made them. They didn't need their mittens, it wasn't that cold yet and it would only hinder them. I gave them a basket for the berries. Whatever was left over could be made into jam for the kolachkys.

I popped the corn, had the sour kraut boiling, and was peeling the potatoes as they came back in. “How's this?” Marjorie asked showing me the basket.

“That should do just fine.” I said. I set the bowl of popped corn on the table with two needles and thread. “You girls work on this, while I think of something your brother can do.”

“I can make a snowman, mama.” He said.

“There's not enough snow out there, dear. How about if you....” I looked around for a pen, some ink and paper. “Here, you can draw pictures that we can hang around the house. Marjorie, you can help him spell ‘Merry Christmas.’” She smiled. She knew that it was important that she could read and write.

The baby in me was moving around like crazy. It either really liked or didn't like the smell of sour kraut. Either way it was letting me know.

Mother arrived promptly at five, with Stephan and Mary right behind her. They were right on time and I was just finishing up the babalky.

"Grandma!" The children yelled.

"Oh your house looks ready for Christmas. Did you children decorate?" She asked in a syrupy sweet voice that almost sounded sarcastic. I managed to smile.

"Hello kids." Uncle Stephan said in English.

"Uncle Andrew! Aunt Mary!" They yelled in unison. He bent down and gave them each a piece of ribbon candy.

"Mama, can we?" Marjorie asked.

"I suppose." I said trying to sound reluctant, but what's the harm? It's Christmas.

"Something smells good." Mother said as she walked past the stove in the kitchen. That didn't sound sarcastic.

"Thanks. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.

"Don't hurry." Mother said as she walked through the kitchen into the family room.

"Annie and I picked berries and then we strung them with popped corn and Rudy drew the pictures, but I had to help him with the words, because he hasn't learned them yet in school." Mother just nodded at them with a joy that I don't remember her ever showing me. Then I watched her slip a nickel into each of their little hands.

"Well, I think you did a great job." She said. This was not my mother.

Mary slipped into the kitchen. "Can I help?" She asked.

I looked around like I did when I had to find something for Rudy to do. "Here," I said handing her two bowls and two ladles. "You can put soup in one and potatoes in the other."

She lifted the lid off of the soup pot. "Mmmm" she said. "Smells just like my mother's. More mushrooms than onions —that's the

trick." A girl who knows her soup! There are a few things sacred in this family, but the soup is one of them.

I was glad Andrew married her, but sorry I had to miss the wedding. Andrew was lucky; he got to marry for love. Never mind that now, I thought, just get dinner on the table.

There are two secrets about sour kraut soup that only insiders know. One is that you never eat equal amounts of mashed potatoes and soup. You finish the mashed potatoes and you get more, then you finish the soup, and you get more. This can go on for hours. The other secret is that once the sour kraut and potatoes hit your stomach, they expand. The dishes would have to wait until later, or even tomorrow because my expanded stomach barely allowed me to go from the dining room chair to a chair in the family room.

"Can we open our presents now?" All four children began to ask. I only had the energy to nod.

Andrew had bought them coloring books, wax crayons and new mittens. Mother had bought them new shoes, underwear, and picture storybooks. All of this paled to my ribbons for the girls' hair, socks for Rudy, and a notebook and pencil for each. It didn't matter to them though. They got more presents than they ever got. And John wasn't there to mess it up.

"Mama, where's daddy?" Annie asked the inevitable question.

"He's got business." I said dryly.

"On Christmas Eve?" Marjorie asked.

"Yes, on Christmas Eve."

"When will he be back?" Annie asked.

"I don't know. In a few days I guess." My mother, who arranged my wedded bliss deserved a glare for that, and she got it.

"Enough of this," Andrew said, getting up from his chair. "Who want's to go to Midnight Mass?"

"I do! I do!" All the children got excited.

"Can you put our ribbons in our hair, mama?" Marjorie asked.

"And can we wear our new mittens?" Annie added.

"And shoes?" Marjorie finished.

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" I said to each of them.

They cheered running around putting on all of their new things. I'm sure I never saw them so happy. Next year would be even better. And the year after that.

At the Midnight Mass, I could tell some of the women were whispering about John's absence. I even saw Sylvia's tongue wagging. But I didn't care. My children were clean, well-fed, and had new clothes. They looked like everyone else's children, though a little more well-mannered and we were NOT starving!

I was wear the dress, hat and gloves I wore when Luis gave me flowers. They were my best then, and they are my best now. My chin was up. A lifetime ago, someone loved me. Today, I have my children. This dress has seen a lot.

That night, the children collapsed from exhaustion in their beds. They even forgot their prayers, barely made it past undressing. I didn't mind about the prayers though, since they had just come from church.

I wanted to pass out too, but there was fruit for the stockings in the cellar, candy in the icebox and presents in the closet to gather. Only then could I join them in sleep.

Rudy was the first to wake up, and there girls were just seconds behind, all them up much before I was ready. But I dragged myself downstairs with a promise to myself that I would nap —sometime.

John was lying on the couch and there were more than three presents under the tree. I looked at him puzzled and he just smiled. It was like he only had so much good in him. When he used it up, he had to be bad for while until his storage of good replenished. There was no luke warm for him, he could only run hot and cold.

He had gotten the girls silver brush and mirror sets, and Rudy a little fishing pole. I could think of a hundred more practical things he could have done with money like that, but what had I given them? And they were ecstatic.

