

THE GOOD SHEPHERD



Amber Florenza

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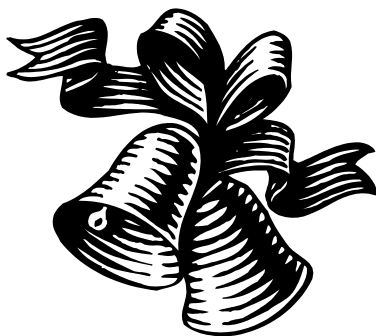
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Truly, the best in life is often free.





The Good Shepherd

The wind was blowing and the air was cold.
Ten year-old Joel Shepherd hugged himself
as he tramped through the silent streets of
Concord.

It was Christmas Eve.

Joel had no home to go to, or any

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parents to love him. He was alone in the world, living wherever he could find a place to sleep.

Sometimes he slept under the feed-mill overhang roof among the stacked bags of feed. Sometimes he slept on the cold floors of empty stores. Sometimes he had no place at all to sleep. He would then sit in the street where the wind blew the least.

Days would go by when Joel had no food. When he was lucky he would find stale buns and old soda bottles with little remains in the city dump. Most days, however, he would work for bits of food. He swept shops

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floors, dusted the bakery's many shelves, shoveled manure in the livery, anything he could do to get a meal.

But today, nobody had any work for him. He would go hungry on Christmas Eve, and Christmas itself. Joel sighed. *What is it like to feel your stomach filled with all the nice things you can eat?* he wondered as he felt his hollow, growling middle.

Joel could not remember when the last time he had eaten all he could eat. Never, perhaps. He sighed again as he began walking again where he had stopped a moment ago when he remembered he would

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have no food for the Christmas days. How he longed for a juicy cinnamon roll that was perched in a pile of rolls on the bakery shelf in the bay window.

Joel walked on, shaking the terrible temptation away. He would never steal...his mother had taught him stealing was only something terrible people did. And he wanted to be a good person so he could join his parents in heaven someday.

At the toy shop a bright red trumpet stared him in the face from its shelf at the glass window, tauntingly. Joel shook his head. Stealing was wrong. And, besides,

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someone would catch him and then he would have to go to jail. He wouldn't want that.

Further on, a new gray wool suit at the tailor shop caught his eye. How he wished he had just that! He glanced down at his multiple patched, threadbare tweed pants and ripped overcoat, and shivered. If only he could have that warm suit in the window...with a nice warm wool coat...and nice warm boots.

His feet below sang the song of the iceberg, feeling like the iceberg itself. They tingled just now, just at the thought of warm comfortable boots on their very icy toes.

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Joel smiled to himself, thinking that all these things were impossible to ever own. *Juicy rolls, a bright red trumpet, a new gray wool suit, a real wool coat, warm boots...this sounds heavenly. Perhaps it means I must join my parents in heaven this Christmas season...the season they did.*

Joel felt something wet trickling down his cheek. He quickly brushed it away, not wanting anything in creation to see him cry.

Joel missed his parents terribly, he now realized...more than he ever had. Perhaps it was because he thought of being with them again. *I didn't forget them*, he thought. *I just*

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forget what it's like to actually be with them.

As Joel tramped through the silent streets of Concord, few passing him as the shops were closing for Christmas Eve, he thought about what heaven was like.

There must be lots of good food to eat, and nice clothes to wear. Mama's probably wearing a pretty white gown with a little ribbon around her neck, singing with her harp. Papa has on a white robe, like the men in the Bible do, with a bright smile for he never has to break his back working like he used to.

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I'd like to wear a robe like Papa, and smile bright like he is now. I wonder how good I have to be before I can go to them. I try to be good, but sometimes I'm bad and do things I shouldn't like not telling the baker I took two rolls instead of one. I know I shouldn't have, but I was so hungry. I didn't think I was stealing, but I guess I did. I'm really sorry I done it for Papa told me to tell the truth always, like Jesus did.

Joel thought all about this as he stopped unconsciously, unaware that he had entered the rich section of town, and that he was now standing in front of a huge beautiful mansion.

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“Miss Shepherd, shall I bring in tea?” Ms. Lowe asked the young heiress of Ease Estate.

“Yes, if you please,” Mona Shepherd smiled upon the young ladies of the parlor, feeling rather fine and gaudy in her dazzling scarlet silk dress trimmed in white rabbit fur.

Ms. Lowe curtsied, “Yes, ma’am. Right away.”

Ms. Lowe walked out of the parlor and was going to the kitchen when she heard a

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stomping just outside the front of the mansion. *Who could that be?* she wondered with a little fury. *On Christmas Eve at that! It better not be a beggar, or he'll hear from me.*

Ms. Lowe jerked the door open, and to her predicament there stood a ragged little boy with a shock of black hair that needed cutting just outside the gate.

“What do you want, boy?” Ms. Lowe called through the doorway in a gruff *uncaring* tone. “Poor trash like you isn’t fit to be seen at the gate of a place as wealthy as the Shepherds! Now, get you gone. Now!”

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Joel was startled at such a rough tone of that maid of the mansion. He turned to the woman in complete shock, hearing the name “Shepherd”. Aye, he thought with awe. *Papa never spoke of a rich Shepherd here in the city. I wonder what these Shepherds are like. All our folks, Papa says, were poor and nice.*

I wonder if these will be nice, even though they’re rich. I think I’ll ask that lady, even though she looks as if she could eat the head of an elephant!

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“Ma’am?” Joel began. “I was wondering... Are these Shepherds nice—even though they’re rich?”



Ms. Lowe stared hard at this urchin with narrowed eyes that were set deep into her fat face.

“How dare you wonder such!” Ms. Lowe snapped, angrily stomping her right foot. “You get off of this property this very minute! If I have to call for the Mistress—”

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Ms. Lowe was interrupted when a dull voice began asking behind her, “What is the commotion, Ms. Lowe?”

Mona Shepherd was clearly annoyed Joel could tell. “Tea will be served *now*.”

“Oh, yes ma’am, yes ma’am!” Ms. Lowe reddened. “Sorry, but I heard stomping at the gate and found this poor trash standing there. I’ve told him twice already to get off the place, but he seems obstinate.”

“Call for Butler Riggs,” ordered Mona in a flat tone. “He can’t be too heavy to throw off my place.”

“Aye ma’am.”

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“Look at his bones,” Mona snickered, sticking her nose high in the air. “He’s what you call a ‘bag of bones’, isn’t he?”

Ms. Lowe nodded, glaring at the boy at the gate.

Mona Shepherd backed away from the doorway and disappeared into the fine mansion. Joel held his doubled fists tightly at his sides, terribly upset at what was taking place. *Poor trash. Bag of bones. They have no right to say those things!* he angrily cried to himself, his feelings crushed.

“You heard!” Ms. Lowe shook her fat fist at him. “Go!”

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Ms. Lowe shook her fist at him again, a bit ruffled in her brain as two big scared eyes stared her in the face, dark eyes with dark circles under them.

Joel shuffled his icy feet to motion, hurrying away from that awful place. Behind, Ms. Lowe shook off any remorse she had silently felt when those eyes were looking at her.

Something about those eyes were disturbing. It was then, after the “poor trash” disappeared into the night, she realized she had been looking into the eyes of Jesus.

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...VERILY I SAY UNTO YOU, INASMUCH
AS YE DID IT NOT TO ONE OF THE LEAST
OF THESE, YE DID IT NOT TO ME.

♥ *Matthew 25: 45* ♥



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Joel Shepherd walked away from Ease Estate, brushing away the tears. He hadn't expected this to happen. Not then. Not on Christmas Eve. Not at such a time of giving. But he had been driven away. No one wanted him. No one cared for him.

As Joel stumbled on into the night he felt more tears slide down his grimy cheeks. His hollowed cheeks.

Snowflakes fell onto his salty wet cheeks and melted. The cold air blew fierce. Joel felt all alone...in this dark wintry night.

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The street lamps glowed hazily between a shower of snowflakes, lighting his way into the street that led to the business section of town. Where he lived. Where his home was, mostly...among the sacks and crates of the city.

Joel grew tired as his dreary walk halted at the corner of a closed book shop. He paused to rest a bit before he would go on. Before he would crawl into his cubby hole between stacked crates, hungry, as usual.

Joel breathed deeply, filling his lungs with brisk fresher air before he would go to

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sleep in his stuffy, dusty bed. The stacked crates just behind the book store had appeared there the few days before and, luckily, no one had ran him off yet.

Joel was just about to make a dash inside his hiding place between the crates when a hand grabbed him from behind.

“Wait, young fellow!” a young man’s voice commanded sternly, pulling Joel out of his hiding place. “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

“Just—just sl-sleeping, sir.” Joel stammered, facing the young man with two big scared eyes.

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“Likely story,” the young man grunted and still had a firm hold on Joel’s arm. “What’s your name?”

“My name is Joel Shepherd. My father was Joel Shepherd, the elder.” Joel added with a huge gulp, “I’m—I’m not a thief, sir! I promise.”

Suddenly, the young man exclaimed, “You’re thin. Quite thin! Why haven’t they fed you?”

“Who fed me?” Joel asked, looking up at the young man with the wool slogger, scarf, and coat.

“The Charity Workers,” the young man

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explained. “They get paid with good money for feeding people like you.”

“They do?” Joel’s brown eyes were huge.

“Certainly,” the young man answered. “I should know. My father pays them. He was the one who founded the institute here in Concord.”

“They never came to me.” Joel shook his head. “Never.”

“Never?” the young man’s brows shot up questioningly. “How long have you lived in Concord?”

“Just before my parents died,” Joel

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lowered his eyes and swallowed, “five years ago.”

The young man’s blue eyes misted as the boy chewed on his bottom lip to keep from crying.

“Ah!” the young man declared. “The very time my father’s brother died. That’s when his daughter took over the estate. Renamed it, too. It *was* called Charity Estate. I’ve heard she’s not exactly living up to her dead father’s good name.”

“What is her name?” Joel wanted to know.

“Miss Shepherd,” was the young man’s

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reply to Joel's astonishment. "She lives on her *renamed* Ease Estate."

"Oh!" Joel's mouth hung open.

Then, he remembered the woman at the mansion a few minutes ago barking about a "Mistress Shepherd".

"Does this Miss Shepherd have a lady who works for her who barks when she talks?"

"That is what she includes in her household," the young man's mouth twitched into a grin. "Have you met her before?"

"Yes." Joel nodded with a gulp. "Both she and the mistress, just a few moments

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ago.”

“What were they like?” the young man asked.

“Not very nice,” Joel frowned. “They almost had the Butler throw me off the place. I was only going to see if they could spare a bun, that’s all.”

“I see,” the young man said slowly.

“Oh, but I wouldn’t have her know it,” said Joel terrifically. “She might would have the police on me.”

“I won’t tell,” smiled the young man.

The cold air blew fiercer and the snowflakes began thickening.

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“Sir, might I ask?” began Joel and swallowed, looking at the back side of the large two-story book shop. “Did you come from the book shop?”

“Yes. I did,” the young man nodded towards the building. “I was taking care of some business late and so I heard a noise when I was just locking up. So I decided to investigate and here I found you—getting ready to run into the pile of crates to be shipped overseas. It’s a valuable shipment.”

“What is it?” Joel turned to stare at where he had slept for a few days.

“Bibles,” the young man squeezed Joel’s

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thin shoulder. “Joel, those crates hold the most valuable shipment the world has ever known or will know...for they carry the Word of God. Remember that, always.”

Joel stared in wonder at the stack of crates...into his cubby hole...and realized what a place where he had slept. When he had laid down to sleep and when he had awoke...he had looked into the heart of God.

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IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD,
AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD,
AND THE WORD WAS GOD.

♥ *John 1:1* ♥



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Joel Shepherd stared up at the young man with eyes filled with wonder. *Am I hearing right?*

“Would you like to live with me?” the young man was asking again.

“Ah—what—but what would your master say?” Joel finally found his tongue.

“I am my own master,” the young man smiled. “I run my father’s business here while he is abroad. Will you come?”

“Thank you.” Joel found his eyes were swimming with tears of joy.

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Never in his entire life had anyone offered their home to him...for him to live in freely. To him...the poor trash from the streets of Concord.

The young man gripped Joel's thin shoulder and steered him down the street...down towards the rich section of town.



“This way, Joel,” the master of his house led the boy past the terrifying borders of Ease Estate.

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They passed other mansions and entered into a lamp-lighted driveway that took them up to the most largest mansion Joel had ever seen.

“This—this is your home?” gasped Joel, stopping at the foot of the driveway that changed into a wide walkway to the entrance of the mansion.

“Yes,” the young man smiled down at surprised Joel. “This is our home, Joel.”

Our home, thought Joel, happy music to his ears. Then he just stood there, awed speechless, gazing at the beautiful mansion before him.

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“Come on, Joel,” the master of the mansion walked the stunned boy up the walkway and into the fine mansion.

“Why, this is—this is fit for a king!” Joel declared, gazing at everything with the hugest brown eyes.

The master of the house chuckled and tussled Joel’s black hair that needed cutting.

“Come along, Joel. Let’s get this hair out of your eyes.

“Butler Love, please have the servants prepare a bath for this child. And buy a new suit of clothes, a coat, wraps, and a pair of boots from the tailor shop.”

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“I believe the shop is closed, Master Shepherd,” Butler Love looked at the grand clock in the entry. “It’s half past six now.”

The master handed Butler Love his hat and wraps with a smile, “I believe this is an emergency, Butler Love. The owner will understand. I know him well. Please attend to this matter. Butler Love.”

“Yes sir,” Butler Love bowed with a flourish. “The matter will be attended to, straightway.”

Shepherd. Joel looked up in surprise at his new friend.

“Sir,” Joel paused and swallowed,

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plucking his courage to ask the fatal question he had asked the Mistress Shepherd's housekeeper.

“Yes, Joel?” Mr. Shepherd smiled warmly. “Say on.”

“Sir,” Joel's eyes were wide and sort of scared-looking. “Are you a good Shepherd—even though you're rich?”

“I'm afraid the rich have a bad name, don't they, lad?” Mr. Shepherd said soberly, stroking his clean-shaven chin. Then, he broke into a merry smile, “Aye, lad. I'm a good Shepherd. Have no worry. Did you know...?”

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Joel's eyes snapped to full attention.

“Did you know your father was my brother?” Mr. Shepherd asked slowly. “By a sad turn of fortune he lost his entire estate and shares with my father’s business.”

Joel stared in shock.

“I was still a boy when he left. I never saw him since.”

Mr. Shepherd lowered his head, and placed his arm around Joel's small shoulders, “I'm so glad I have found my lost Shepherd. Now, let's clean you up and have supper.”

Joel nodded, blinking his fresh tears away.

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Mr. Shepherd led Joel into a large suite where a claw-foot tub filled with sudsy water looked inviting in its bathroom.

“First, a haircut,” a man holding clippers smiled warmly behind a chair. “Please be seated.”

Mr. Shepherd left the man to the cutting and Joel’s haircut began.

After the clippers finally stopped Joel felt like a shorn lamb, free from his wool. The man then cleaned up the hair from the floor and left Joel to his bath.



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By the time Joel had his bath his clothes arrived and the boy never felt so happy before in his entire life.

Scrubbed clean, Joel pulled on his *new* clothes happily and tied his shiny black boots.

He then looked into the mirror above the sink and saw a boy in the gray wool suit he had wanted from the tailor shop earlier that day. The boy also had a scrubbed-pink clean face, sparkling brown eyes with black eyelashes, and was wearing a happy grin, sporting a neat crop of black hair on top of his round head.

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Joel smiled back...and realized it was his own reflection.



With a bursting heart and feeling thoroughly good, Joel followed a servant through the winding corridors of the mansion and into the dining room where Mr. Shepherd was waiting for him at the head of the long table.

“Ah, Joel Shepherd.” Mr. Shepherd motioned the boy to sit down beside him. “You look like a prince.”

Joel took his seat with a nod and said

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quietly, "I only wish to look like a son of a good Shepherd."

"Yes." Mr. Shepherd said thoughtfully. "I shall be a father to you. I shall. And if you'd like I shall adopt you."

"Thank you." Joel swallowed and grinned up at his new father. "Thank you, *father*."

Mr. Shepherd grinned and tussled Joel's newly-cut, newly-washed, wet black hair. "Now for our supper, son."

Then, the servants began bringing the dishes of food for supper.

Joel's plate was piled high and his grin

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stretched from ear to ear. Mr. Shepherd blessed the food as Joel added his own thanks.

When the thanks was over Joel began his delicious supper...and was for the first time in his life...*filled*.



Clean, fed, and content, Joel snuggled under the soft warm covers in his very own bed that Christmas Eve night.

He looked around the spacious room, the moonlight streaming through the gaps of

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the drapes, and listened to the ticking of the clock that was sitting on his very own desk beside the window.

The clock struck eight, followed by eight chimes from the grand clock below.

Joel then heard the sound of the musicians and singers outside as the caroling began. Christmas morning would be in just a few more hours.

This year would be his *first* Christmas present...living in this mansion and having a new father. He would have a home, he would have a father again to love him, he would have new clothes and food...these were the

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greatest presents he could ever wish for.

Joel sank into his soft pillow with satisfaction...with gratitude, and looked up into the dark ceiling...his *roof* over his head.

And Joel was glad he had found the good Shepherd.

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I AM THE GOOD SHEPHERD,
AND KNOW MY SHEEP,
AND AM KNOWN OF MINE.

♥ John 10:14 ♥

The End

