

The Easter Miracle

Jennifer could not avoid all the happy reminders of spring as she pushed her grocery cart past the gaudy displays of inflatable Easter bunnies and egg-shaped candy of every possible flavor and consistency. She strolled past the ornate floral arrangements heralding the advent of spring and the fast-approaching Easter holiday. The flowers were beautiful but the quantity and combined fragrances were a stark reminder of the funeral just months ago. It was only a few weeks before Christmas that she and her three children had said their goodbyes to her husband and best friend, Steve. Cancer had cut short a life that was destined for better things. “’Til death do us part” was not a phrase Jen had anticipated living until well into her senior years, when she and Steve sat together reminiscing over photo albums of grandchildren.

They had told her that holidays would be the most difficult to bear, and Christmas had obviously not been the same. Even though Steve had been in hospice care for several weeks, she had hoped that maybe death would take a holiday until after Christmas but the cancer had already taken its toll. Valentine’s Day was another harsh reminder of his absence. And now Easter. The most joyful of Christian holidays was about to take on a different meaning this year. While every day reminded her of the gaping hole Steve’s absence made in their family, holidays only served to magnify it even more.

Jen knew that she needed to try and maintain her sense of equilibrium, as well as that of her family. Even though Matt and Sarah were teenagers, Tyler was still young enough to appreciate certain traditions, so she decided that she would still fill Easter baskets for all three. While finishing her weekly grocery shopping, she decided to pick up a few odds and ends to ensure that the Easter Bunny paid his annual visit.

As she rounded the corner for the dairy aisle, Jen noticed a rather large African-American woman in a smock standing next to one of the store’s electric coolers. Next to her was a placard no doubt touting some new product and inviting customers to try a sample. Jen was in no mood to engage the woman so she aimed her cart wide of the display, hoping to escape notice.

This very act seemed to attract the woman’s attention. She beamed when she saw Jen, flashing a huge smile, and called to her in a honey-dripped voice. “Well, hello, sweetness! It’s good to see you! Could I interest you in our special today? One package for only \$1.20. You’d better hurry – they’re almost all gone!”

Jen smiled politely and waved her hand. “No thanks. Not interested,” she muttered, then tried to head in the other direction, only to have one of the cart wheels grab and force her to push the cart back toward the woman.

“Don’t you just hate when that happens,” the other woman declared. “It’s like those things have a mind of their own.”

Jen’s face took on a determined look as she tried to gain control over the grocery cart. The store clerk walked over and gave the cart’s troublesome wheel a swift kick with the side of her foot and then gently pushed the cart back and forth. The wheel ceased to wobble.

Jen looked sheepishly at the cart and then at the woman. “Thank you, uh – Angelique,” she paused, glancing at the woman’s nametag. “I guess I’m having one of those days.”

Angelique smiled knowingly at Jen. “You have those, too? My momma, God rest her soul, used to tell us as children: when you’re having one of *those* days, it’s just the good Lord remindin’ us that He’s in charge and we’re not. The rain falls on both the poor and the rich alike, so we all need to trust God with our troubles.”

“Sounds like you had a pretty smart mother,” Jen replied.

“Oh, she was indeed, ma’am. That she was. But not any book smart if you know what I mean, ‘cept for the Good Book. She used to read to us all the Bible stories from Noah to Moses to Father Abraham. And of course, the story of our Lord Jesus comin’ to earth to live and die for our sins on the cross. The Easter story’s one of my favorites ‘cause even though we know Jesus died on Good Friday, Easter mornin’s just ‘round the bend. So that’s why I don’t put no stock in whether it’s one of *those* days or not. It’s Easter mornin’ everyday as far as I’m concerned. But just listen to me jawin’ away – you need to be on your way. And just for the trouble of listenin’ to me, let me just *give* you one of these cartons. Just tell the cashier they’re courtesy of Angelique.”

Jen looked down at the sign which read: Special Easter-Dyeing Eggs. \$1.20 per Dozen.

“Oh, I – I couldn’t take those,” Jen replied.

“But I insist, darlin’,” the clerk said, handing Jen a bright yellow egg carton. “You can’t truly celebrate Easter without dyein’ a few eggs. You got young’uns don’t you?”

Jen smiled. “Well, they’re not so young anymore, but yes, I do have three *young’uns*.”

“Well, then, it’s settled,” Angelique said, as if there was no further discussion on the matter. “You and your family have a blessed Easter.”

Jen took the egg carton, still somewhat hesitant, then smiled at the clerk. “You, too. Happy Easter.”

As Jen made her way toward the checkout lines, she heard Angelique hailing another customer with “Well, hello, beautiful!” She smiled to herself at how one person could make all the difference by a warm greeting and a few kind words. She silently pledged to herself that she would try to be more like that kind of person.

As she began loading items from her cart on to the checkout conveyor belt, she quickly scanned through her shopping list to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything. The last item she removed was the bright yellow carton of eggs. Funny, she had never heard of Easter-*dyeing* eggs before. What made them any different than regular eggs, she wondered.

When she returned home, Jen found the three kids engaged in their separate activities: 15-year-old Matt was banging away on his drumset in the basement, 13-year-old Sarah was barricaded in her room listening to some pop song blaring from her CD player, and 9-year-old Tyler was in front of the big screen TV playing a video game at some unhealthy volume. She set the grocery bags on the kitchen counter, then carefully removed the Easter treats and hid them in the hall closet. After putting away the other items, she began preparing dinner.

As she chopped some vegetables, Jen was suddenly aware of the lack of noise from the family room and a presence next to her. Looking up, she was startled to see her youngest by her side, watching her intently.

“Hey, Mom. When did you get home?”

“Hey, yourself. About fifteen minutes ago. I guess you didn’t notice me walk in.” She smiled knowing how involved her son got into his video games. A bomb could hit the house and he would be oblivious.

“What’s for dinner?” he asked, not paying attention to her last comment.

“I’m just putting together some stew. Want to help?”

“Sure. Hey, did you buy anything special today? You know, anything in the *chocolate* department?” he said, a look of hopeful optimism in his face.

A secretive grin emerged on Jen's face. "We'll just have to see what the Easter Bunny brings."

"Aw, Mom. That stuff's for little kids. We're not going to hunt for eggs, too, are we?"

Jen felt a little miffed at that comment but controlled her emotions. It was hard to believe that her youngest wasn't so young anymore. Maybe she was expecting too much by holding on to some silly sentimental notions like Easter baskets and coloring eggs. Then she remembered Steve and why she needed to keep his spirit alive.

"Tyler," she said, "What do you say you, Sarah, Matt, and I color some Easter eggs after dinner? We haven't done that as a family for a few years and it would be a nice activity to celebrate the holiday."

"Aww, Mo-om, why do we . . ."

"You can even make an egg with Dad's name on it," Jen added.

Tyler paused for a moment, then his face brightened. "Yeah, that would be cool. Dad would like that wouldn't he?"

Jen smiled and placed her hand on her son's head. "He would love it – guaranteed. Now, let's start some water boiling so we can cook those eggs."

After the dinner dishes had been washed and put away, Jen set out six separate bowls to dye the eggs. She had a hard time convincing the two older kids of her intentions, but they finally agreed, realizing that their mother needed to keep some traditions intact to maintain memories when their dad was alive and a vital part of their lives.

As they each placed individual eggs into separate bowls, the kids' creative juices started to unfold. "Hey," exclaimed Tyler. "I wonder if you put an egg in each of the colors, if it will turn out rainbow."

"No, dweebert," said Matt. "When you mix all the colors together you get black. Who ever heard of a black Easter egg?"

"Actually, black would be awesome," said Sarah, the resident goth fan and owner of at least 15 black T-shirts. "It would really make a statement – you know, the blackness of Good Friday on the outside but white and yellow on the inside representing the joy of Easter."

Jen wore a quizzical expression on her face. "That's a very interesting perspective, Sarah. But why don't we just stick with the more *traditional* colors that came with the package."

"Traditional as in *boring*," Sarah whispered to her brothers.

"I heard that," Jen said. "Be nice to me or I'll make you hunt for Easter eggs out in the front yard in your pajamas tomorrow morning."

"Cool!" said Tyler.

"Oh, Tyler, by the way," asked Jen. "Did you remember to make the *special* egg we talked about?"

Tyler stared at her, not fully understanding her question, then suddenly remembered. "Oops! I forgot. I'll do the next one. Did anyone see the wax crayon for writing with?"

Matt rummaged through the carton. "You're out of luck, little bro'. Nothing to write with."

Seeing Tyler's downturned face, Jen quickly reached over and patted his arm. "It's okay, Tyler. Just use some magic markers to decorate it when it's dry."

"Okay," Tyler said. "I'll make it work."

Within a few minutes all that could be heard was the porcelain clink-clink sound of eggs knocking against the side of the bowls as they were gently turned in their dye baths. Matt was the first to break the silence. "I think mine's about finished. Look at this cool shade of blue. It's . . . hey, it looks like something's written on this one."

Tyler and Sarah looked at Matt puzzled, then leaned closer to inspect his azure-colored egg. As he continued to turn it over in the dye, the outline of white letters, then an entire word seemed to appear before their eyes.

"Love!" shouted Tyler. "It says 'love!'"

Jen walked over for a closer look. "It certainly does say 'love,'" she said. Then smiling at the thought of her encounter with Angelique at the grocery store, she realized what made the eggs so "special."

"Obviously, someone has already marked these eggs so that a word appears when you dye them. Pretty clever when you think about it."

Sarah looked down at the green egg she was dyeing. "Mine says something, too! It looks like h-e-a-v . . . heaven. Heaven with an exclamation mark at the end!"

"Love . . . heaven . . ." thought Matt. "Those are nice words but I'm not sure what they have to do with Easter exactly."

Attention was suddenly drawn to Tyler, who sat transfixed staring down at the purple egg he had lifted from his dye. He uttered not a word but remained still with his mouth wide open.

"What's the matter, Ty? asked Jen. "Didn't your egg have any writing on it?"

Tyler continued to gaze down at his egg but spoke in a low monotone. "No. My egg has writing. It says 'Sarah' on it."

Once Sarah's name had been discovered, the four of them hurriedly retrieved the other three eggs from their bowls to see if they too had "mysterious" writing on them. Indeed, each egg carried a single word, yet these were more ambivalent than the others.

"Well," said Matt. "We have six eggs so far that have writing on them. Three with special meaning – *Love, heaven, and Sarah*. The other three just having ordinary words – *He's, in, and See*. What does it all mean, Mom?"

Jen inhaled, thought for a moment, then exhaled. "I think we need to dye the other six eggs to see if there's any kind of pattern. Maybe the words themselves don't make sense but together they might hold some meaning."

Quickly but gently, she dropped another egg into each of the six bowls. Never had she seen her kids take such an interest in dyeing Easter eggs than she witnessed in the next ten minutes. Rapt attention was given to each egg, making sure they were evenly rotated to gain consistent coloring if or when any words appeared.

Tyler was again the first to shout his news. "My egg says 'you!'" he said.

Sarah chimed in next. "I found 'Matt!' And this other one says 'risen!'"

Matt could barely control his emotions. "Mine say 'Tyler' and 'Jen!' All of our names are here!"

There was one left. The kids all looked at their mother, their eyes coaxing her to lift the remaining egg from the bowl. Jen smiled faintly, walked over, and lifted up the yellow-dyed egg with the wire dipper. Given the pale color, she had difficulty making out the white markings. She

silently mouthed the letters to herself, as if reading a set of ancient hieroglyphics, then gradually repeated them several times, the volume of her voice rising with each repetition. “D – a – d. D – a – d. D – A – D. DAD! It says Dad!”

Jen began to shake uncontrollably, so much that Matt quickly grabbed the last egg from her before she lost her grip and dropped it. She sat down awkwardly in the kitchen chair, her hands plopping into her lap. Both Sarah and Tyler gave her nervous, concerned looks. “Are you all right, Mom?” Tyler finally asked.

Jen nodded, then swallowed. “I’m fine, guys. This is just all a little overwhelming to say the least. It’s not everyday that you discover invisible writing on Easter eggs.”

“That we didn’t put there,” added Sarah.

Matt was now gazing at the eggs. “But what does it all mean. We have four eggs with our names and one that says ‘Dad.’ The other seven eggs are just words.”

Tyler jumped in. “But maybe if we put the words together like Mom said, they’ll tell us something.”

“Sort of like a word jumble puzzle,” said Sarah.

“Then what are we waiting for,” said Jen, more composed. “Start arranging those eggs.”

After trying several groupings of words, they finally hit on the right combination and uncovered the message of the eggs.

It was only then that the true miracle of Easter was revealed.

The first chance she got Monday morning, Jennifer rushed to the grocery store to find the store clerk who had sold her the eggs. After making several futile attempts to scout the cooler section and several aisles, she finally went to the service desk to inquire.

“Excuse me,” she said to a man who appeared to be the manager. “Do you happen to know if Angelique is working today?”

The manager paused what he was doing, looked at Jen for some time, then spoke in a somber tone. “I’m sorry, Ma’am. Angelique no longer works here. Is there something I can help you with?”

Jen tried to hide her disappointment. “No. It’s just that I wanted to thank her for what she did for me and my family. Just a small thing really.”

The manager set aside his work, then leaned over closer to within earshot of Jen. “Ma’am, Angelique passed away about five years ago from liver cancer. She was one of our best employees and is greatly missed. Did you know her?”

Jen hesitated, stunned by what she had just heard, then smiled through the mist starting to form in her eyes. “No, no – I didn’t know her, but my husband does.”

The manager squinted slightly. “You mean did?”

Jen shook her head, still smiling, then with a polite wave of her hand, she turned to walk from the service desk to her car. Her heart was buoyed by this recent revelation, but more so by the memory of the message the eggs had revealed:

Matt, Sarah, Tyler, Jen. See you in heaven! He’s risen! Love, Dad