

Christmas Elf  
True Story

By Gail Cawley Showalter

“Joy to the World” was playing on the car radio, but I did not feel any joy in my world. It was five days before Christmas – the first Christmas since my divorce and the first one I would spend without my children. They were born like “stair steps” -three babies in 37 months. The older two were in school now, but placing my youngest at three in daycare had crushed my already broken heart.

I was no longer a stay-at-home mom. Working in the home had been a whirlwind of diapers, teething, colic, and allergies. Now, working outside the home was a necessity. I quickly realized that teaching theatre, my first choice, which required evening rehearsals, performances, and weekend competitions, would not be practical with young children. I returned to college and became certified to teach English. . Just one harsh year after the separation, I was commuting 40 minutes to teach in another community. This meant I dressed the children like rag dolls while they were still asleep so that I had enough time to prepare my lunch, drop them off at the sitter, meet a carpool, and arrive at work on time. I felt like I had put in a day’s work before I even arrived at the job.

Each evening there were often stacks of dirty dishes, piles of laundry, children needing help with homework, and my own students’ papers to grade. I fell asleep most nights so exhausted that I barely tucked the children into their beds with a goodnight kiss, much less a story and time to talk about their day.

All these thoughts whirled in my head as I listened to “Joy to the World.” It was Friday and I was on my way to pay the sitter. One blessing I had found was a wonderful woman who kept the children, but my children would not be coming home with *me*.

They would be staying with their dad until the afternoon of Christmas day, and he would be picking them up or so I thought. They were so precious to me, and just the ages that made Christmas extra special. Their eager, wide-eyed expectations had made Christmas morning fun for me the last few years.

I was trying hard not to imagine a Christmas morning without their giggles and squeals of delight when they saw the surprises that had mysteriously appeared under the tree overnight.

When I drove my old station wagon into the babysitter’s driveway, a familiar sleek, black sports car was parked proudly before me. My heart sank. I knew it was my husband’s lady friend coming for my children. Should I stay or go? Confusion gripped me. Before I could decide to leave, my children came out of the house, climbed into her car and waved, “Bye Mommy” to me as if I was an acquaintance beside the road. They were gone.

I paid the sitter without a word. And returned to my car where despair overpowered me. My tension grew until all the muscles in my neck and back clinched into knots and I began to sob. Soon hot tears poured onto the cold steering wheel. *How could this be happening*, I wondered? How could I get through Christmas without *them*?

“Oh God, please, please, please get me through this.”

As I drove home in a blur I remembered my mother’s overcoming spirit. She often quoted Art Linkletter, “In love’s service, only the saddened qualify.” Well-I certainly

must be qualified! I had never known such sadness in all my life. And I was willing to 'serve' in any way to remove the pain.

"What can I do God? What can I do?"

A wonderful idea! Since I have been involved in theatre all my life, I would be a Christmas elf for children who were not as fortunate as my own. It was easy to put together a Christmas elf costume, a green felt skirt, tights, green elf shoes, a green hat made from gift wrapping, and stage make-up completed the 'look.'

I dialed the number of a local hospital.

"Hello, I was wondering if you had children who are still in the hospital, and if they would like a visit from a Christmas elf."

"Yes, we have a few. Are you with a group?"

"No, just me."

"Well, I guess that would be okay," a pause, then, "Yes, come on."

Soon I was on my way to the children's ward in my little green station wagon. There were sure to be children there who would welcome a visit from a Christmas elf. I would get to see eyes filled with wonder after all.

An elf's arrival in a hospital, even at Christmas, attracts quite a lot of attention. Heads turned, and some people grinned, but my goal was so intense that my inhibitions had vanished. I was not even self-conscious. Children still hospitalized so close to December 25<sup>th</sup> are either very ill, or their parents are financially unable to provide a Christmas for them and have opted to keep them hospitalized. Either way, they need a boost.

His eyes light up as I walked into the dimly lit room.

"Hi, Lance. How are you doing?" I asked with an elfish grin.

He did not speak at first, not believing his eyes. I handed him a candy cane and a coloring book.

“Say thank you,” said an adult voice from the dim corner.

“Thank you,” Lance spoke softly.

There were tubes and medical devices all around. But for those brief moments there was no pain and fantasy prevailed.

“Hi, Damon. Merry Christmas!” I said to the older boy in the next room. “I just came by for a quick visit.”

“Are you for real?” he questioned.

“Sure I am,” I replied. “It’s Christmas you know.” I handed him a candy cane. He was alone in the room. Dark circles under his eyes and needles in his frail arms made a clear picture that he would be hospitalized for a while yet. I sat on the edge of his bed and read *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

The last child I saw was a girl. She was very unhappy about being in the hospital and made it clear that she did not get off to elves at Christmas or any other time for that matter. She took the candy and seemed pleased that I treated her with respect, even though I was an elf.

“Christmas is really a birthday celebration, you know?” I said.

She nodded.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Treva,” she said clearly. “That’s Reva with a T in front for Tough.”

I could tell she did not really want to be as tough as she thought she needed to be. I held her hand and she began to relax a little. A faint smile came to her lips.

“Well, Treva,” I said, “I hope that you will remember to celebrate the birthday party.”

I left her smiling with an inexpensive little necklace as a gift.

I did not linger long, with any of them. I hoped to provide each child with a bit of fantasy to tell others about, or just to give them a fond memory. The element of surprise was the best gift. The expression on their faces inspired *me*, too. The spirit of Christmas, the spirit of Christ was coming through. Christmas-the spirit of love, love in action. It was so exhilarating, in fact, that I went on to two other hospitals, without even calling ahead. Walking in, unannounced, added to the drama for me, as well as for the nursing staff.

On the way home, as I sat at a traffic light in my green wagon and green costume with my red-painted cheeks and artificial freckles, I was so wrapped up in the adventure that I forgot about my appearance. I glanced over to the other lane and saw a gentleman in a black suit and tie, driving a huge black Continental, laughing. I looked at myself through his eyes, and my pain was gone. I had completely forgotten my sorrow and my *self*. Christmas was not about me. It was about The Gift, about Christ. I could go back to my empty house now and plan for the after Christmas celebration. When my children returned, I would have a spirit of true joy in my heart - the joy of Christmas – that I would continue to share with others regardless of my current circumstances.