

the last straw

by Paula McDonald



Everyone, unfortunately, was cooped up in the house that typical gray winter afternoon. And as usual, the four little McNeals were at it again. Teasing each other, squabbling, bickering, always fighting over their toys.

At times like this Ellen was almost ready to believe that her children didn't love each other. Even though she knew it wasn't true. All brothers and sisters fight sometimes, of course, but lately her lively little bunch had been particularly horrid to each other. Especially Eric and Kelly who were a year apart. The two of them seemed determined to spend the whole long winter making each other miserable.

"Give me that. It's mine!!" Kelly screamed, her voice shrill.

"It is not! I had it first," Eric answered stubbornly.

Ellen sighed as she listened to the latest argument. With Christmas only a month away, the house seemed sadly lacking in Christmas spirit.

This was supposed to be the season of sharing and love, of warm feelings and happy hearts. A home needed more than just pretty packages and twinkling lights on a tree to fill the holidays with joy.

Ellen had only one idea. Years ago, her grandmother had told her about an old custom that helped people discover the true meaning of Christmas. Perhaps it would work for her family this year. It was certainly worth a try.

She gathered the children together and lined them up on the couch, tallest to smallest; Eric, Kelly, Lisa, and Mike. "How would you like to start a new Christmas tradition this year?" she asked. "It's like a game, but it can only be played by people who can keep a secret. Can everyone here do that?"

"I can!" shouted Eric.

"I can keep a secret better than him," yelled Kelly.

"I can do it!" chimed in Lisa.

"Me too," squealed little Mike. "I'm big enough."

"Well then, this is how the game works," exclaimed Ellen. "This year we're going to surprise Baby Jesus when he comes on Christmas Eve by making him the softest bed in the world. We're going to fill a little crib with straw to make it comfortable. But here's the secret part. The straw we put in will measure the good deeds we've done, but we won't tell anyone what we're doing for them."

The children looked confused, "But how will Jesus know it's His bed?" Kelly asked.

"He'll know," said Ellen. "He'll recognize it by the love we put in it to make it soft."



“We’ll do them for each other. Once a week we’ll put all of our names in a hat, mine and daddy’s too. Then we’ll pick out a different name. Whoever’s name we draw, we’ll do kind things for that person for a whole week. But you can’t tell anyone else whose name you’ve chosen. We’ll each try to do as many favors for our special person as we can without getting caught. And for every good deed we do, we’ll put another piece of straw in the crib.”

“Like being a spy!” shouted Lisa.

“But what if I pick someone’s name I don’t like?” Kelley frowned.

Ellen thought about that for a minute. “Maybe you could use an extra fat piece of straw. And think how much faster fat straws will fill up our crib. We’ll use the cradle in the attic.” she said. “And we can all go to the field behind the school for the straw.

Without a single argument, the children bundled into their wool hats and mittens, laughing and tumbling out of the house. The field had been covered with tall grass in the summer, but now dead and dried, the golden stalks looked just like real straw. They carefully selected handfuls and placed them in the large box they carried with them.

“That’s enough,” Ellen laughed when the box was almost overflowing. “Remember it’s only a small cradle.”

“We’ll pick names as soon as daddy comes home for dinner,” Ellen said, unable to hide a smile as she thought of Mark’s pleased reaction to the children’s transformed faces and their voices now filled with excited anticipation rather than annoyance.

At the supper table that night, six pieces of paper were folded, shuffled and shaken around in Mark’s furry winter hat, and the drawing began. Kelly picked a name first and immediately started to giggle. Lisa reached into the hat next trying hard to look like a serious spy. Mike couldn’t read yet, so Mark whispered the name in his ear. Then Mike quickly ate his little wad of paper so no one could ever learn the identity of his secret person. Eric was the next to choose. As he unfolded his scrap of paper, a frown creased his forehead. But he stuffed the name quickly into his pocket and said nothing. Ellen and Mark selected names and the family was ready to begin.

The week that followed was filled with surprises, it seemed the McNeal family house had suddenly been invaded by an army of invisible elves. Kelly would walk into her room at bedtime to find her nightgown neatly laid out and her bed turned down. Someone cleaned the sawdust under the workbench without being asked.

The jelly blobs magically disappeared from the kitchen counter after lunch one day while Ellen was out getting the mail. And every morning when Eric was brushing his teeth someone crept into his room and made the bed. It wasn’t perfect, but it was made. That particular elf must have had short arms because he couldn’t seem to reach the middle. “Where are my shoes?” Mark asked one morning. No one seemed to know, but suddenly before he left for work, they were back in his closet again, freshly shined.

Ellen noticed other changes during the week too. The children weren’t teasing or fighting as much. An argument would start and then suddenly stop right in the middle for no apparent reason. Even Eric and Kelly seemed to be getting along better and bickering less. In fact there were times when all the children could be seen smiling secret smiles and giggling to themselves. And slowly, one by one, the first straw began to appear in the little crib. Just a few, then a few more each day. By the end of the first week a little pile had accumulated.

Everyone was anxious to pick new names and this time there was more laughter and merriment than there had been the first time. Except for Eric. Once again, he unfolded his scrap of paper, glanced at it and stuffed it in his pocket without a word.



The second week brought more astonishing events, and the little pile of straw in the manger grew higher and softer. There was more laughter, less teasing, and hardly any arguments could be heard around the house. Only Eric had been unusually quiet, and sometimes Ellen would catch him looking a little sad. But the straws in the manger continued to pile up.

At last, it was almost Christmas. They chose, for the final time, on the night before Christmas Eve, new names. As they sat around the table waiting for the set of names to be shaken in the hat, the children smiled as they looked at their hefty pile of straws. They all knew it was comfortable and soft, but there was one day left and they could still make it a little softer, and they were going to try. For the last time the hat was passed around the table. Mike picked out a name and again quickly ate the paper as he had done each week. Lisa unfolded hers carefully under the table, peeked at it and then hunched her shoulders, smiling. Kelly reached into the hat and grinned from ear to ear when she saw the name. Elle and Mark each took their turn and handed the hat with the last name to Eric. As he unfolded the scrap of paper and glanced at it, his face crumpled and he seemed about to cry. Without a word, he turned and ran from the room. Everyone immediately jumped up from the table, but Ellen stopped them. "No! Stay where you are," she said firmly. "I'll go."

In his room Eric was trying to pull on his coat with one hand while he picked up a small cardboard suitcase with the other. "I have to leave," he said quietly though his tears. "If I don't I'll spoil Christmas."

"But why? And where are you going?"

"I can sleep in my snow fort for a couple of days. I'll come home right after Christmas. I promise," he answered.

Ellen started to say something about freezing and snow and no mittens or boots, but Mark who had come up behind her gently laid his hand on her arm and shook his head.

The front door closed and together they watched from the window as the little figure with the sadly slumped shoulders trudged across the street and sat down on the snowbank near the corner. It was dark outside, and cold, and a few flurries drifted down on the small boy and his suitcase. "Give him a few minutes alone," said Mark quietly. "I think he needs that. Then you can talk to him."

The huddled figure was already dusted with white when Ellen walked across the street and sat down beside him on the snowbank. "What is it, Eric? You've been so good these last few weeks, but I know something's been bothering you since we started the crib. Can you tell me, honey?"

"Ah, mom.....don't you see?" he sniffed. "I tried so hard, but I can't do it anymore, and now I'm going to wreck Christmas for everybody." With that he burst into sobs and threw himself into his mother's arms.

"Mom," the little boy choked. "You just don't know. I got Kelly's name every time! And I hate Kelly! I tried, mom. I really did. I snuck in her room every night and fixed her bed. I even laid out her crummy nightgown. I let her use my race car one day, but she smashed it right into the wall like always! Every week, when we picked new names, I thought it would be over. Tonight, when I got her name again, I new I couldn't do it anymore. If I try I'll probably punch her instead. If I stay home and beat Kelly up, I'll spoil Christmas for everybody."

The two of them sat there together quietly for a few minutes and then Ellen spoke softly. "Eric, I'm proud of you. Every good deed you did should count double because it was hard for you to be nice to Kelly for so long. But you did those good deeds anyway, one straw at a time. You gave her love when it wasn't easy to give. And maybe that's what the spirit of Christmas is really all about. And maybe it's the hard good deeds and the difficult straws that make that little crib special. You're the one who's probably added the most important straws this year." Ellen paused, stroking the head pressed tightly against her shoulder.



“Now how would you like a chance to earn a few easy straws like the rest of us? I still have the name I picked in my pocket, and I haven’t looked at it yet. Why don’t we switch, for the last day? And it will be our secret.”

Eric lifted his head and looked into her face, his eyes wide. “That’s not cheating?”

“It’s not cheating.” And together they dried the tears, brushed off the snow, and walked back into the house.

The next day, the whole family was busy cooking and straightening up the house for Christmas Day, wrapping last minute presents and trying hard to keep from bursting with excitement. But even with all the activity and eagerness, a flurry of new straws piled up in the crib, and by nightfall the little manger was almost overflowing. At different times while passing by, each member of the family, big and small, would pause and look at the wonderful pile for a moment, then smile before going on. But...who could really know? One more straw still might make a difference.

For that reason, just before bedtime, Ellen tiptoed quietly to Kelly’s room to lay out the little blue nightgown and turn down the bed. But she sopped in the doorway, surprised. Someone had already been there. The night gown was laid across the bed, and a small red race car had been placed next to it on the pillow.

The last straw was Eric’s after all.

