

'Twas the Night b4 Christmas
from Chicken Soup For The Soul Christmas Treasury

Two Decembers ago my dad called wanting to know what I wanted for Christmas. I mentioned a particular book, then interrupted myself and said, "No, what I'd really like is for you to put *The Night Before Christmas* on audiotape."

There was this long pause and then Dad said with familiar stern emphasis in his voice, "Oh for God's sake, Mary. What in Sam Hill do you want that for? You're forty years old."

I paused, feeling embarrassed yet determined, "Dad, I remember how good it felt when you used to cuddle us all up to you on the couch when we were little and read *The Night Before Christmas*. I cans still remember how strong your voice was, how safe I felt and how well you acted out all the different sounds. I'd really appreciate you doing this, since I live 2,500 miles away and I'm not coming home for Christmas. It would be nice to have you with me."

Dad said, with a little more softness but still incredulously, "You mean you want me to read just like I did when you were kids, with all the bells and whistles and everything?!"

"Yaaaaaah, just like that," I said.

Again, he paused a long time and then said, "I'll get you the book."

I heard the clarity of his decision in his voice and resignedly said, "Okay. Talk to you on Christmas." We said our "I love you's" and hung up. I felt bad but tried to understand. I assumed it was too much sentimentalism for a seventy-six-year-old bear, and that in his mind it was a foolish request for an adult to ask. Maybe. Maybe not. All I knew was that each time I talked to Dad his voice sounded more tired, and I was beginning to accept that it was no longer if, but when, the day would come that I wouldn't hear it anymore.

On Christmas Eve day, a small, brown, heavily recycled padded envelope with lots of staples and tape all over it arrived. My name and address were written out in my dad's memorable architect's lettering with thick black magic marker. Inside was a tape, with a handwritten label, "'Twas the Night b4 Christmas."

I popped the tape in my recorder and heard my father's words come roaring out. "Twas the niiiiiiiiight before Christmas when allllllllllllll through the howwwwse," just like when we were children! When he finished, he went on to say, "And now I'm going to read from *The Little Engine That Could*. I guess Dad had another message in mind when he included one of our favorite childhood bedtime stories. It was the same story we read to my mom when she was dying of cancer three years ago.

He continued with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir singing "Silent Night," our family's favorite Christmas Eve song we sang together before bedtime. And then "Oh Come All Ye Faithful" ...song after song until the tape ran out. I went to sleep safe and

sound Christmas Eve, thanking God for giving me another Christmas miracle with my dad.

The following May, Dad passed away suddenly and unexpectedly. No more phone calls ever Sunday morning, no more phone calls asking me, "What was the Gospel about today, Mary?" no more "I love you's." but his voice lives on...and continues to remind me that I can do what I put my mind to and that I can stretch myself emotionally for someone else, even when it's difficult. That's the power of love.

For Christmas this year I sent my sisters and brother and their children a copy of the tape, which they weren't expecting. My youngest sister called and left a tearful message on my machine that said, "Mary, I just got the tape. Did you know that on the tape he said it was December 19. That's today! When I put the tape on while I was in the living room, Holden [her two-and-one-half-year-old son], came running out from the kitchen full steam, yelling at the top of his lungs, 'Grampa's here, Grampa's here.' You should have seen him, Mary, looking all around for Dad. Dad *was* here."

His voice lives on.

By Mary Mardante

I was moved to share this story with you as I just lost my own father last Thursday.

--Gary