

When an unexpected change of plans caused a struggling mother to get stranded on Christmas Eve, an overwhelming kindness restored her faith.

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I was traveling home for the holidays, from Sacramento to Fort Smith, Arkansas, by bus, taking my two young boys to see their beloved granddad. Sounds like the makings of a Hallmark story, right? It was anything but.

Truth is, I was broke. Flat broke. Dad had wired me \$700—enough for three bus fares and food for my kids and me for the four-day trip to his house. I was afraid to tell him just how bad off I really was, that I wanted to move back in with him for a few months until I could save some money and get back on my feet.

I hadn't seen Dad in more than a year, we lived so far apart. But he had always been my rock. When I was a little girl, I would crawl up on his lap and snuggle against his chest and he'd wrap his arms around me. "Don't worry, baby girl, God will be with you," he'd always say. Dad was a man of faith. A minister, in fact.

Riding through the pitch-dark along lonely Interstate 70 on day four, somewhere in Kansas, I gazed at my sleeping children: Zachary, 4, and Blake, 2. *I could use some of Dad's faith right about now*, I thought.

I checked my watch. Four o'clock in the morning. Two more hours till we reached Kansas City. A short layover, and then we would be on our way to Fort Smith, to Dad. *We're going to make it home*, I thought with relief. *Home to Dad for Christmas Eve*. My eyes closed. I began to relax.

Suddenly, the bus lurched to a stop. I jolted awake. *Where are we?* I wondered. *What's wrong?* The bus driver threw open the door, tramped down the steps and popped the hood. A few minutes later he climbed back aboard. "This bus ain't goin' nowhere," he announced.

By the time we finally arrived in Kansas City, we'd missed our connection to Fort Smith. I checked the bus schedule. Twelve hours till the next bus. I called Dad in tears. "We're not going to make it in time for Christmas Eve," I sobbed.

I hung up the phone and herded the kids to the waiting room. I checked my purse—\$10. Not even enough for a real meal. I slumped in a seat. *Lord, what am I going to do? I'm nearly out of money...and faith.*

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There was a commotion in the bus station. I craned my neck. A tall, plump man dressed in white overalls and a Santa cap was walking around the waiting room, handing things out to people. "Look, kids," I said, "it's Santa Claus."

The man stopped directly in front of me. He smiled and looked into my eyes. It was a kind look, incredibly kind. "Merry Christmas," he said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a one-hundred-dollar bill, handing it to me.

"I can't accept this," I gasped, waving his hand away.

He held out the bill again. "Are these your boys?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out two more hundred-dollar bills, holding them out to me.

My eyes welled up. "Mister, you don't know how bad I need that money," I said, my voice quavering. "But there's no way I can accept it." I looked around. There was a policeman standing nearby with a fire chief. They both seemed to know him.

The man bent down close to me. "I came here in 1971 on a Greyhound bus with everything I owned in one suitcase," he said. "I know exactly how you feel." He reached into his pocket once more and pulled out \$200 more. "Take it," he said gently, placing all of the bills in my hand.

I broke down and told that Santa everything—how I had no money, how the bus had had engine trouble, how we had missed our connection to Fort Smith, how we couldn't make it home to Dad.

The man turned solemn. "I'm going to get you to Arkansas tonight," he said, beckoning to the policeman and the fire chief, "but I think you need something to eat first. Can we take you and the boys out to lunch?"

"Yes, thank you," I said. We were whisked away to a restaurant where Zachary and Blake were given all they could eat, and Santa—he never told me his real name—arranged for a limousine. That's right. A limo. It was the first time I had ever ridden in one, but I think I would have taken a ride in the back of a pickup truck if it would have gotten me home to my dad.

The limo and the money, they weren't what was important. What restored my faith that night was kindness...simple, powerful kindness, kindness that gets you home for Christmas.