

The Christmas Queen

Sarah opened the newly arrived batch of Christmas cards and placed them in front of her on the kitchen table. Nothing from Claire! She wondered where she may be and what had happened to her. This was the second year she had not received a card from her.

Sarah and Claire had grown up together and a friendship, begun in their infancy, had lasted beyond school until they both married and Claire's life changed. Following the death of both parents, she and her new husband had moved away up to Newcastle. The girls wrote and telephoned regularly for a while, but then Claire's contacts became irregular and finally broke off all together.

Unknown to Sarah, her old friend's life had fallen apart. Her husband had become a compulsive gambler and when their home was about to be repossessed he left her with his debts. Claire, ashamed and desperate, was soon suffering from severe depression and became unable to support herself. The end result was her alternating between life in a hostel and living on the streets.

As Sarah searched the incoming Christmas cards, she could have no idea how close her old friend was to her then. With thoughts of Christmas, Claire had been drawn towards home, and was preparing to sleep that night in the doorway of Hardwick's shop just around the corner. Sarah would have been horrified if she had known.

Can we go and see if they've come? Liam tugged at his mother's sleeve.
Later. Sarah looked up from the cards. *Grandma will take you. But we told you they won't be there till after Christmas.*

Can I go and see Grandma?

Sarah watched her three year old walk the four doors to her mother's house and go inside. It was good that they were able to live so close in the same terrace just off the town centre. She smiled to herself. For the past three weeks she and her husband Rob had read the story of Christmas over and over to Liam. They watched him excitedly dressing up for his part as a king in the play-group nativity. Then the church which they went to occasionally, on the main street next to Hardwick's store, had put up a large nativity scene in the church porch. Liam was fascinated by the life-sized model characters and animals. Then he discovered there were no kings! The minister at the church had explained that the Kings in the story arrived after Christmas and

would be put in place at *Epiphany*.

But they were all there in the story and in the play, Liam argued.

Epiphany did not convey much to a three year old, regardless of repeated explanations. Almost every hour after that Liam asked, *Will they be there yet?*

Grandma had more patience and discussed with him various things which may have delayed the arrival of the royal visitors. Maybe the camels were lazy or perhaps all this rainy weather meant clouds were blotting out the star.

All that day Liam made frequent trips between the houses and although both Mum and Grandma kept a careful watch it only took a minute or two for him to go missing.

It was dusk and the little boy's attention was drawn first to the bright moon right above him, and then to the equally bright star not far from it. He was sure it was shining right on to the nativity scene just round the corner. It had to be the star the kings were following. They must be coming now. He sped along the street to see for himself, but the nativity was just as before. *They'll be here soon*, he told himself, jumping back down the church steps. He waited in the cold and drawing back from the busy street discovered Claire's bed-roll in the side doorway of Hardwick's. He sat down to wait, pulling the bedding round him for warmth.

It was there, just a few minutes later that Claire found him, nodding and heavy-eyed. She was returning from the Church. One of the helpers at the Christmas party for the elderly had noticed her in the doorway and invited her in.

Now Claire stood in the lights from the store and the street, wearing the bright red long coat she had bought from a Charity shop this morning and with a red paper crown, adorned with a strip of gold tinsel still on her head from the party.

Liam roused as she tapped his shoulder and before she could ask who he was or where he lived, he blurted out. *Are you the queen? Have you come with the kings? Where's your camel?* Claire looked bemused as Liam grabbed her hand and pulled her up the church steps to the Nativity scene. *Are the camels all right? Why are they late? Have you come on to get things ready for the kings?*

Liam! Sarah raced up the church steps closely followed by her mother who looked suspiciously at Claire, pulled Liam's from her and scooped him up in her arms.

He wanted to show me the Nativity, Claire mumbled apologetically. *He's all right.*

Liam struggled from his Grandma's arms to take Claire's hand again.

Grandma! he shouted. *Look! It's the queen! She's come to get ready for the kings!*

Sarah looked hard at Liam's Queen. *Claire?*

The story has a happy ending. Claire had always been a favourite of Sarah's mother who insisted to the great delight of Liam, that she stay in her spare room over Christmas. *And as long as you need to,* she told her. Claire protested but grandma gave her an 'I'm having no nonsense' look while nodding at Liam, and said, *Well, you'll have to stay till Epiphany!*

There were lots of good things about that Christmas, but best of was how Sarah took her part and assured Liam that the King's were really coming. When the Kings were in place in the nativity, Queen Claire donned her red coat and tinsel crown and took him by the hand to meet them.