

## The Best Christmas Present Ever

“Our classroom looks... beautiful,” said a gangly ten-year old boy in a plaid flannel shirt.

He had slipped up to my desk unnoticed by the twenty-three others frantically finishing up assorted assignments before the end of the school day. He was a quiet student who did not come freely to chat unless I spoke first.

The room certainly was a spectacular sight. All hands had put together colorful decorations hanging from every imaginable inch of space. The focal point was a live six-foot spruce tree – it was acceptable school policy in the 70s - shimmering magically while my students struggled with division facts and adverb placement. The tree was loaded with puffy popcorn chains, crafted wooden ornaments and draped in an outer coat of silver tinsel. The yellow paper Mache star perched slightly off-balance on top glistened in the sunlight watching over us like a guiding light.

The date on the calendar –December 19, 1975 - showed school would be over for the holidays in a couple more days the following week. You didn’t need that reminder to sense the excitement brewing in the air, though. I was just like one of my students and I was counting down the hours until a plane flight to visit my parents. I would be spending time enjoying home once more and especially, my mom’s cutout cookies.

During one of my earliest teaching years when I was pretty naïve, I gave out the best Christmas present ever without realizing it.

You see, I had the false assumption that all my students were living in situations where they were anticipating the same holiday trimmings as myself.

I was aware of other faith-based practices and honored them in my curriculum, although there wasn’t a Jewish, Muslim or Buddhist student in the room – there were hardly any in the school district for a matter of

fact - and I went along with the traditional activities of the season like every other classroom in the small rural town where I taught fifth grade.

“What are you going to do with the tree when school is out for vacation?” asked the boy leaning over and looking at me with a serious expression.

“Why, I don’t know.”

I assumed that the custodian would take it away to the dump pile at the back of the school. It wasn’t anything that concerned me, and I hadn’t given it a second thought.

I had missed the real intent of his question.

One day later he came to me and asked the same question. Thank goodness he was persistent.

This time I wised up and realized that he might want the tree. I asked him outright.

“Oh, thank you. My dad just got laid off from his job and things are rough at home. My younger brother and I will take it, but could we wait until the others have gone so no one will know?”

My heart immediately went out to him for his frankness, and we made a plan that the tree would be his with no further questions asked.

The day arrived. Class was dismissed until after the New Year. I began to collect up belongings when the two brothers returned and hauled off the tree. As I watching from the frosty classroom window I had tears in my eyes observing the two boys plodding through the snow-covered side street dragging the tree. I wished them well, and their whole family, too.

“You don’t have a tree for the rubbish pile?” asked the custodian standing in my doorway surveying the room.

“No tree.”

The custodian walked off accepting my abrupt reply. If he had seen the two boys dragging the tree down the back stairs, he never mentioned it; nor, that he had to clean up a trail of pine needles.

I learned a lot as a young teacher that stayed with me – the honesty of children, the kindness of support staff and the possibilities for making my small place in the world a better one.

Excerpted from “*And One More Thing, Volume I, I Brake for Squirrels and Other Thoughts I Have No Doubt About*” by Kay Thomas. Thomas is a freelance writer in the greater Rochester area.