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Sara Hilton, Senior Editor
SHINE brightly
P.O. Box 87334
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Dear Ms. Hilton,

Enclosed is my fiction story, *The Perfect Gift*. Jessica had the perfect Christmas gift for her sister, but when it someone else needed it more, she realizes that gifts of love are the best gifts of all.

I am a youth pastor's wife and freelance writer. My work has appeared in *Brio*, *Brio & Beyond*, and *Devo'Zine*.

Thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jill Williamson

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about 895 words
First Rights

THE PERFECT GIFT

The sweater was gone! I got down on my hands and knees and looked under my bed. I saw dust bunnies and my missing shoe, but no sweater. Without the sweater, I had nothing to give Milly for Christmas.

My family drew names to see who to buy a Christmas gift for. This year I drew my big sister Milly's name. I had no idea what to give her. All she talks about is graduating and going to veterinary school.

But I got lucky.

Milly showed Mom a pink sweater at the mall when we had ice cream last week. I saved up and bought it. Since my shopping was done, I could relax and enjoy the holiday.

Until now!

I couldn't wrap a missing gift. I gave up searching my room and asked my mom, my sisters, and my brother, but no one had seen the sweater. Dad had gone to pick up Great Grandma Norman, so I couldn't ask him. I decided to check outside.

It was windy. I searched the fort in the backyard and Mom's car. I didn't see the sweater anywhere. I groaned and slouched against the cold metal car.

Maybe God could help. I bowed my head.

Dear, God. I wanted to give Milly a great Christmas present so she could see my thoughtfulness—that I could pick the perfect gift. Please help? Amen.

Okay, so that prayer sounded kind of selfish. Christmas wasn't about me, and it wasn't about gifts.

The wind died down for a few seconds and everything was quiet.

Yip! Yip!

I jumped and twisted around. The noise had come from the house. The wind picked up again, and I walked carefully in the crunchy snow trying to hear.

Yip!

I froze. There it was again! I ran to the kitchen porch and stopped just as Dingo, our cocker spaniel, trotted up with my favorite t-shirt in her mouth.

“Hey!” I said. “That's my shirt!”

I reached for it, but Dingo slid past me and under the porch.

I crouched down to see where she went. It was hard to see. I blinked fast to get my eyes used to the dark.

Yip yip yip!

Something wiggled on a soft pink surface.

The sweater!

But what was that wiggling thing?

Yip!

Dingo crawled past on her belly, turned in a circle, and lay down on her side.

Yip! Yip yip yip! Yip!

What a racket! I watched that wiggling thing, and a bunch more like it, crawl all over Dingo. They were ruining the sweater!

I moved quick, wiggling like those wiggly things. I squeezed under the porch and grabbed the edge of the sweater.

I didn't pull, though. I suddenly realized something important. Christmas wasn't about gifts; it was about one gift. Baby Jesus.

Here it was, Christmas Eve, and these puppies were newborns, just like Jesus had been. They were born on the cold ground under a porch, where Jesus had been born in a stable and placed in a manger. The puppies needed the sweater more than me.

I wiggled out and ran back to the house.

Mom had the table set. I didn't want to spoil dinner by mentioning the puppies now. Plus, I didn't know what to do about Milly's gift. We all sat down to dinner and Dad gave the blessing. Turkey and potatoes got my mind off things for a while.

Christmas morning came, and I still didn't have a plan. Maybe I could throw the sweater in the wash real quick?

I pulled the blankets over my head, feeling bad for wanting to take the sweater when I knew the puppies needed it.

Guilt would get me nowhere.

I sat up and reached for my Bible. I flipped it open, turning pages until my eyes settled on some words I had highlighted in bright orange. I read:

“Every good and perfect gift comes from above.”

Jesus was born on Christmas and he came from God. But what about Milly?

I read the verse again, gasped, and slammed the Bible shut.

I knew what to do.

My family also drew names to decide what order to unwrap gifts. Milly gave Great Grandpa Norman some old coin. Mom got a set of books from Aunt Beth. Dad got a new fishing pole from Uncle Stewart.

Finally, Mom called Milly’s name.

I stood up. “It’s outside.”

“Did you get me a car?” Milly asked.

“No.”

She giggled. “Rats.”

Everyone followed me outside. I led them to the hole under the kitchen porch.

The family gathered around, staring at me like I was nuts.

“Well,” I said to Milly. “I only know two things you like. One, the pink sweater from the mall—”

Milly shrieked with glee. “You got me the sweater?”

I winced. “Sort of. I also know you like animals and want to be a veterinarian.”

Milly looked confused.

“I got you a gift, but God had a better one.” I brought a finger to my lips. “Shh.”

Everyone got real quiet.

Yip.

Milly gasped. “What was that?”

I smiled. “Dingo had puppies.”

Milly squealed and gave me a big hug. Then I got down on the ground to point out to Milly her new puppies and pink sweater. We watched them wiggle.

Thanks, God, for reminding me that gifts of love are the best gifts of all.