Ma’s Cactus

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Mrs. BASCOM dropped her mending in her lap and stared at the red-hot bowl of the heating stove.

"Yes, Pa, it sure will be lonesome tomorrow—and tonight too—the first Christmas we ain't had somebody with us."

Pa nodded and shoved his chair back from the stove.

"Last year when Miss Pulney was with us—my, but she felt bad 'cause she couldn't get home fer Christmas. The year before, Ella was sick and sent Benny to be with us. He was a cute tadger, but he was a little homesick for his ma."

Pa Bascom kicked the draft of the stove shut and spat into the coal bucket. "Ya, and the year before that we was all ta home on the ole farm." He smiled faintly and gazed unseeingly at the dingy ceiling.

"Crackey, but them kids did have a good time. Ben and his wife, jest married—and thot happy. Humm—and Ella and Jim and the two kids and—Paul. Ya know, Maw, sometimes I wish we was still on the farm." And then afraid he had hurt Ma, "Oh, now, this here's nice enough—but—."

Pa and Ma Bascom had moved into town after all the children had left home, to live in the Tailor and Repair Shop—two dark basement rooms below the bank. Ma had hated to cook and sleep in the same room; so she hung the old living room rug across the long shop to make a bed room. They decided

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they could use the shop as a living room and they wouldn’t need a parlor now that the children were all gone. Ma kept her canary and one of the cats and a few of her plants.

“Say, Pa, do you know I talked some of throwin’ my plants away awhile back?”

Pa nodded vaguely and picked up an old farm journal.

“Well, I saved ‘em—and now we’re a-goin’ to have a blossom on the Christmas cactus. I been watchin’ it, put it on the stovetop side of the table, and now I’m purty sure it’ll bloom by mornin’.”

Ma’s eyes twinkled and she picked up her mending. Pa spat again. Pa never cared much for flowers, but Ma was happy over the bud. —It was nice to have something special. They’d given up waiting for some of the children to come. Ben and Ella “couldn’t get away from business,” and Paul was away off there in British Columbia—might as well be in South Africa—never got home.

“Pa, do you remember how that cactus bloomed the last year we was at home? Fourteen blossoms! My, I’m glad it’s goin’ to have jest one blossom this year. —Say, Pa, I think I’ve got enough stuff to bake us a cake—apple sauce, I guess. We won’t need a very big one.

“Well,” said Pa, “call if ya want help.”

Ma hummed shakily as she stirred up the cake. Pa drowsed by the fire—it was good to hear Ma hum, to hear the pans clatter and the spoon hit the old crock. Long time since Ma hummed—she seldom even smiled any more. She was cheerful enough, but she just didn’t get excited and fix things like she used to out home. The trouble was she missed the garden and the chickens. Ma never did stay in the house if there was an excuse to go out.

That night Ma stole out into the shop room to take a last look at the bud. Her pale cheeks flushed. “Law, but that’s a bud to be on such a scrawny plant. It sure is gonna bloom—one petal is already furlin’ out a little.”

She turned the plant around proudly, almost as if in search of another bud.

Sketch
"Think I'll jest move it onto the end of the sewin' machine near the stove so's it'll sure be wram enough. My, but I do begin to feel Christmasy—wish we had—say, now, I have got a bell I saved from the year the children was home. Le's see—where'd I put that now? —Won't it be a surprise to Pa in the mornin'? Right over the stove where he'll see it first thing."

It was still dark in the bed room when Ma crept out of bed the next morning. The snow had drifted over the low window.

"Law, now, I hope I ain't waked Pa. I'll jest slip out and see thet blossom."

Ma tiptoed gingerly over the cold basement floor. "Now—I'm 'most afraid to look fer fear it ain't come clear out." She pulled back the corner of the rug and peered into the bleak shop.

"Why! Why, Pa—it ain't—"

Ma turned the plant around anxiously. She carried it to the half-light of the window and searched every stalk.

"Pa, it's gone—I don't—see—now it must be there somewheres." She lighted the coal-oil lamp and holding it down close to the plant felt the leaves to make sure she wasn't overlooking the bud. The cat, asleep on the cushioned chair by the sewing machine, was roused by Ma's light. He stretched, then playfully pawed the hanging stalk of the plant.

"Why, Pa—it's gone."

But Pa was still asleep. The wind shrieked past the old basement door and left a swirl of snow over the tiny shop window. The crumpled Christmas bell swung in the draft.

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