

From the book *Twelve Stories for Christmas* by Scott W Kirk © 2022

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No. 9 PRAYERS: ONE DOLLAR

Brenda held the paperback novel open but hadn't turned a page in five minutes. She had brought it along to help pass the time but, just like other days, had found it hard to concentrate. Her eyes shifted between the sweet face of her six-year-old daughter and the IV bag that dripped the chemo drug into her small arm.

She was grateful that her daughter had fallen asleep during the three-hour infusion of medications to combat the leukemia and the nausea that followed. Leaning towards her daughter, the mom gently smoothed the few strands of hair that stubbornly refused to fall out.

Her cell phone vibrated with a message from her husband at home with the boys. Brenda smiled when she saw his photo of the boys stringing lights on the Christmas tree. It was their determined way of not letting this disease rob their little sister of a normal holiday. Brenda texted back a smiley face and a simple thank you.

The treatment room door opened slowly, and a nurse quietly approached the sleeping girl. She checked the various monitors and made a few adjustments. "How's my girl doing today?" she whispered.

The mom recognized the woman from previous visits to the pediatric cancer center and their brief conversations. Brenda remembered she was from one of the Caribbean islands but couldn't recall which one. Even with no makeup, the tall nurse was beautiful. Her skin, the color of dark chocolate, made the pink uniform she wore look more like designer clothes than mere surgical scrubs.

"She's doing okay," the mom answered, trying to believe her words.

The nurse turned towards the mom and nodded. "She be alright. She gonna' beat this thing."

The nurse studied the mom's face and saw the lines of worry and exhaustion. "How's mamma doin' today?"

Brenda wanted to avoid the woman's question. She felt tired but refused to admit that to anyone, even herself.

“Yeah, she’s a fighter. I wish I had her strength. She’s excited about Christmas coming. The boys are home getting the tree decorated. I’ve got a few more stocking stuffers to buy, and I’ll finally be done.”

The nurse nodded and glanced back at the IV bag. “She’ll be done in an hour. There’s a Christmas bazaar one block over on Fifth Avenue. You should go. My friend Janine has a booth there. Finish your shopping. I’ll watch your baby until you get back.”

Brenda hesitated and looked at her sleeping daughter. She knew from past treatments that it was likely that she would sleep through the whole infusion, her little body’s way of surrendering to the drugs that were invading her cells with the task of kicking out the ones that didn’t belong. Brenda reluctantly accepted the offer, stood, and put her coat on as she walked out of the room.

Because of the holiday, the hospital corridor was quieter than usual, and most of the patient rooms she walked past were empty. Brenda took the elevator down to the main level, turned in a different direction from the parking garage exit she normally used, and walked toward the main entrance.

She kept her head down most of the time, occasionally looking up to read direction signs to ensure she was taking the right hallway. When she saw a sign indicating the door to the chapel, she walked quickly past it. She had no interest in anything religious. “What god,” she thought, “allowed little girls to have cancer?”

She breathed in the fresh, cool air as she exited the building. A faint sound of Christmas music came from the right, so she assumed that must be where the bazaar was. As she approached the area, she saw an entire city block had been blocked off for the vendors. Portable wooden stalls had been set up to make it appear like a German village. White lights crisscrossed overhead, and a giant Tannenbaum tree had been set up in the center of the street.

Brenda slowly walked past each stall and collected ideas for stocking stuffers. She decided to view all the vendors first before retracing her steps to make purchases.

One vendor’s display had all types of sausages, like bratwurst and teewurst, and names she had never seen before. She knew her husband would enjoy some, but the thought of sausages peeking out of a Christmas stocking might make their family dog go nuts.

The next stall had one string after another of imported tree ornaments. Crystal snowflakes of every color and variety hung next to carved clocks and sleighs. The vendor handed an elderly gentleman a miniature nutcracker dressed in a small furry hat and red uniform. Brenda made a note to stop there on her way back around.

The next stall was remarkably stark. There were no ornaments, baked goods, or anything on display. A few feet inside sat an older woman bundled in a warm coat and wearing fingerless gloves. She was typing away at an old manual typewriter perched atop a small portable table. Seated across from her was a young man in his early twenties. Brenda stepped back to read the sign tacked to the top of the stall, “Prayers: One Dollar.”

Brenda was incredulous that anyone would have the gall to commercialize something like prayer. She shook her head that someone could stoop that low to make a buck and pitied the gullible young fool that the prayer lady had hooked. She had seen another example of why she never went to church.

As Brenda walked on, she tried to focus on the task at hand. A quick look at her watch reminded her that she had about forty minutes left before returning to her daughter's room. She paused before another stall and examined various wooden items, all handmade from Olive trees. She glanced at an elaborately carved nativity scene.

Even though she believed the nativity story to be a myth, she was drawn to the expression on the mother's face as she sweetly gazed at the baby in the feeding trough. Brenda knew it wasn't true, but if it was, she wondered what kind of god would want to be born in a messed up, disease-filled world like this one. She sensed the vendor trying to make eye contact, so she glanced over her shoulder at the Christmas tree behind her and moved on.

Once she had viewed all the vendor stalls, she decided on nutcracker ornaments for the boys and the hottest sausage they had for her husband. The crowd had picked up a bit as she tried to find the shortest path back to where she wanted to buy from. Both the sausage and ornament vendors were now packed with people, so she waited in line with the other shoppers.

Glancing to the left, she noticed she was next to the 'dollar a prayer' lady who, surprise, surprise, was without customers. Moral indignation swelled inside Brenda, who hated seeing anyone exploited or taken advantage of.

The lady seated behind the typewriter looked up from the novel in her hand and smiled at Brenda. That self-righteous smile was all the catalyst Brenda needed to step towards her and give her a piece of her mind.

"You have some nerve taking advantage of people; you should be ashamed of yourself," Brenda said through a clenched jaw, and she wasn't done. "You don't know what people are going through. How dare you charge someone for one of your sanctimonious prayers! A dollar a prayer? What a joke! My daughter has leukemia; what do you charge for a miracle prayer, a hundred dollars... a thousand?"

The woman pulled a crisp new dollar bill from the back of her paperback, laid it next to the typewriter, and slowly pushed it toward Brenda. "No one pays for the prayers I type; I do. I have six dollars left, and once I give those away, I'll pack up and go home."

Brenda didn't know what to make of this new information, so she decided to attack from a different angle to prove the woman was a fraud. She grabbed the dollar bill to say "gotcha" and continued her tirade.

"So, how's this work? I tell you some physical ailment I have or that I just lost my job, and you hand me a buck and a one-size-fits-all prayer card that I read aloud ten times a day? And then I'm so moved by your quote "ministry" that I tip you a twenty to pay it forward?"

The woman shook her head. "I don't write the prayer; you do. All I do is type whatever you want to say to God." The prayer lady motioned for Brenda to sit in the chair opposite the typewriter.

Brenda laughed at the thought of spilling her guts out to a stranger and said, "No, thanks."

"Your choice," the woman replied, adding, "That dollar's yours to keep, so do whatever you want with it; won't buy a cup of coffee these days, but it's yours to keep or give away." The woman opened the book in her lap and started reading it again.

Brenda didn't know what to make of this woman but felt a little guilty for tearing into her the way she just did. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the line waiting to purchase tree ornaments hadn't moved. She looked back at the ancient typewriter on the woman's portable desk as a long-forgotten memory floated to the surface, and without meaning to, she spoke her thoughts out loud.

"My grandparents had a typewriter like that. I remember playing with it when I was a kid."

The prayer lady reached into a box beside her, withdrew a clean sheet of ivory-colored Vellum paper, and skillfully wound it into the typewriter.

"It's a Remington Number 12. Finding replacement ribbons is getting harder and harder, but it does the job. Sometimes the G and K get stuck, but it sure beats hauling around a computer and printer."

Something inside Brenda urged her to leave, to run away from this crazy prayer lady, but another part seemed drawn to this total stranger. She glanced at her watch, but there was nothing to give her an excuse to leave; she still had plenty of time. Suddenly, the weariness of the last month caught up with her, and she slumped onto the empty chair.

"I've never said a prayer in my whole life. I don't know what to say to someone who probably isn't real and, if he is, seems to be deaf to all the problems in the world, especially mine."

The woman smiled knowingly at her and replied, "Sometimes I don't know what to say either, but I just open my mouth, and before I know it, the words come tumbling out."

Brenda hesitated for a moment, the words pressing against her lips. "So, how do I start?"

"Just say whatever's on your heart," she answered as her hands hovered above the old keyboard.

"God... I hate you," Brenda heard herself say.

The woman typed those words exactly as she had heard them without reacting.

Observing that her comment was received without judgment, Brenda proceeded to tell God why she hated Him for allowing her daughter to suffer. As Brenda vented every pent-up feeling, the heavy load she had been carrying began to lighten.

The woman hit the return lever when every line was full, and a gentle bell chimed. As one typed paragraph flowed into the next, Brenda also found things to thank God for.

When she realized they were nearing the bottom of the page, she added, "Please show me you love me. The end."

Once the prayer lady finished typing the last words, she pulled a tissue from a nearby box, handed one to Brenda, and kept one for herself.

Brenda wiped away the tears that refused to stay inside, blew her nose, and laughed. "For someone who never prayed before, I almost didn't know how to stop."

The prayer lady laughed as she spun the prayer out of the typewriter. After neatly folding it in thirds, she stuffed it in a matching envelope, handed it to Brenda, and promised to pray for her daughter.

Brenda thanked her, hesitated for a moment, and then gave her a quick hug before leaving. Looking at her watch, she realized she had only a few minutes left to buy some things and return to the hospital. Fortunately, the lines were much shorter now. She quickly bought the gifts she had already decided on and one thing she hadn't planned. With shopping bags in hand, she hurried back to her daughter's room just in time to see the IV being taken out and her little girl starting to wake up.

"She slept like an angel," said the tall nurse. She pointed to the ivory envelope in the mom's handbag and added, "I see you met my friend Janine. Good woman, she prays hard that one."

Brenda nodded and agreed with her.

"You all know the drill," the nurse said to mother and daughter, "you rest for thirty minutes, and then you can leave." As she left the room to check on her other patients, the tall nurse winked at her young patient and whispered, "Stay strong, little one, you too, momma; God hasn't forgotten you."

The girl winked back at her and then noticed the shopping bag her mom had placed on the chair. "Is that for me?"

Her mother laughed, "You have plenty of gifts waiting for you back home. I bought something for all of us to enjoy, and I know the perfect spot on the mantle for it, too."

She could tell her daughter was beside herself to know what was in the bag, so the mom took out one piece at a time, unwrapped each figure, and placed it on the table between them. The girl studied each one and grouped them in a semicircle. Some were shepherds holding lambs, some wore turbans and held gifts in their hands, and two held each other with their heads bowed down.

Brenda handed the last figure to her daughter to unwrap. She carefully pulled back the tissue to reveal a beautifully carved olive wood figure of a baby lying in a manger.

Her daughter stroked the face of the tiny infant. "Hello, what's your name?"

Brenda brushed away a tear and softly whispered his name.

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