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# GARBAGE-BAG CHARITY BY SARAH BETH CHILDERS

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Driving home after withdrawing our Christmas money from the bank, my mother and I passed what looked like a teenage girl speed-walking down a street on the west side of Huntington, West Virginia. Her hair, blonde with dark brown roots, hung to the waist of her white jacket—hood and hair flew out behind her hunched shoulders as she walked.

“Did you see that girl?” I asked my mom.

“Girl? You mean lady. She’s got to be old as me. Or close, anyway.”

We stopped at a traffic light next to a decaying warehouse, and I looked through our green minivan’s salt-splattered back window and spotted the petite female powering past the McDonald’s a couple blocks behind us. From what I could tell, her face did look a little haggard for her clothing. She reminded me of a prostitute in tight flared jeans and a puffy nylon jacket my family had unsuccessfully offered a ride one night in a flea market parking lot.

My mom drove a few more blocks toward home before pulling over to the side of the road. We looked at each other. “Sarah Beth, we’ve got to go back. That woman looked like she might need help.”

“Yes, I know.”

We like to rescue people.

**Maybe** my mother always loved to rescue people, but I think the urge got stronger in her mid teens when she donned a heavy wooden cross necklace to show her newfound faith, a symbol her drinking and smoking relatives openly mocked. When choosing her major in college, she found the one she thought would allow her to help people the most—adult social work.

In the late seventies and early eighties, my mother drove up muddy back roads, paying calls on the needy inhabitants of the hollers of Wayne County, West Virginia. Alone, she visited crazy old men guarding shacks with shotguns; bonnet-wearing women over a hundred years old hauling water from pumps; trailers so full of stray dogs that my mother, then pregnant, had to run outside and vomit. Unfortunately, she found herself spending more time fighting bureaucratic red tape than meeting the real needs that she saw everyday, and ended up something of a specialist in putting the reluctant elderly into nursing homes. She was only too glad to quit work when I was born and devote her life to raising me and the three others who followed.

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But she never quit helping people. Throughout my childhood, my mom boxed up tiny undershirts, dresses, sweaters, and short sets, passing on to relatives the clothes that her latest baby had outgrown. When my mom had another baby, the relatives gave most of the clothes back and added a few of their own.

The clothes from relatives we were glad to get, even expected. The clothes were exchanged on a complete footing of equality. My mom considered helping out relatives more of a family duty than a charitable act, and when relatives gave her clothes in return, she felt thankful but not indebted. She knew the relatives felt the same way.

Altogether different were the clothes given to us at church. Perhaps our fellow church members felt the same Christian burning to help people that drove my mother into social work. But when they quenched it by giving black garbage bags of old clothes, even as a child I wondered if removing clutter from their houses was as strong a motivation as helping the deserving poor.

Though I feel it more strongly now than I could as a little girl, those clothes offended my family. We did not consider ourselves deserving poor, or poor at all. I can only assume my family was conspicuous to those with an open heart and an overstuffed storage room because of the four children, a high number in our nondenominational Protestant congregation. We must have seemed likely candidates for a good, soul-satisfying rescue.

Without bothering to get to know us, our fellow church members assumed my parents could not afford to clothe their four young children, overlooking the poorer church families, who included a small clan on welfare. These charitable souls considered us needy, though we were always clean, always had something church-worthy to wear, and always had a vehicle and gas money to get us to church for all regular and special services. My dad had a good job at a pharmaceutical company—we weren't rich, but by no means did we need the castoff clothes of strangers, offered like an expired bag of potato chips to a homeless person.

Years after the bags of clothes, my sister Rebecca visited a friend's Nazarene church. "You've got four kids in your family?" exclaimed a middle-aged woman, narrowing her eyes. "Why, you don't look poor and dirty!" The number four still carried a stigma, but at least the woman actually looked at Rebecca. She did not look poor and dirty.

Multiple families at multiple churches blessed my family with giveaway bags. The process was nearly always the same. A woman who wouldn't talk to my family normally, perhaps the wife of a deacon or prominent local surgeon, approached my mother after the service. She poked her head into the nursery where my mother worked and we kids stayed after children's church let out. "I've got something for you, honey," the woman said. "Could you please move your car over to where I'm parked?"

After the last parents finished socializing and picked up their kids, we moved our car. Then we opened the trunk, an embarrassing step if the bags came during the years of our old Crown Victoria with flat blue paint. Originally equipped with the luxury function of a yellow button in the glove box that opened the trunk from the inside, the Crown Victoria's trunk had a broken latch and had to be lashed shut with red and black bungee cords.

The woman opened her trunk (with a key or a button on her keyless entry), and she or her husband took out several black garbage bags, stretched thin with clothing. She stowed them in our trunk on top of the orange, red, and blue striped beach towel that the car's former owner had used to replace the original carpeting. Then she said something like, "There's all sizes. I'm sure most of it'll fit you or your girls, soon if not now, as fast as they're growing."

Unless I'm projecting my current feelings into the past, those bags insulted me as a little girl. However, like a Christmas present, a mystery-flavored sucker, or anything that I had to unwrap to see the contents, the bags excited me, too. When we got home, I helped my mother drag the bags onto the deck. My sisters and I tore into the plastic, rifling the clothes that spilled over the wooden planks. There were a few exceptions, but the clothes were generally in bad shape—out of style, covered in fuzz, stained, and sometimes reeking of cigarette smoke. Still, every time someone gave us a fresh load of trash bags, I wondered what was inside. At the very least, I might get a new limp sundress for the collection I'd started in the back of my closet when I first found a purple and a yellow one of the same style in a giveaway bag. And, since we weren't rich, and there were four children to clothe, underneath it all I hoped I'd find something I'd be proud to wear to church and school.

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The road with the McDonald's was one way, so my mom turned down a skinny brick street and circled the block to pass the woman again. We slowed when we spotted her, keeping pace with her rapid steps. "Roll down the window, Sarah Beth," my mom said. I had to yell a few times to get the woman's attention.

"Do you need a ride? We'd be happy to take you somewhere," my mom called when the woman stopped and looked at us. Like the prostitute, the woman had heavy mascara and crow's feet around watery blue eyes. Unlike the prostitute, she got in the minivan.

"Thank you. Bless you." She pointed a cold skinny finger down the street.

I reached behind the passenger seat to unlock the sliding door, and the woman got in, sitting behind me on the middle bench seat. My mom started driving again, and the woman spoke after catching her breath. "I'm just heading to the apartments a few blocks from here, but I'm sure thankful to get out of the cold. Sorry I didn't notice you at first. I was so upset I couldn't see anything but the road ahead of me."

Of course my mom had to ask why the woman was upset. And, like all the grocery store cashiers and obstetric nurses who had trusted my mother with their life stories less than a minute after meeting her, the woman told her. Her landlord, a man named Jake, had promised her extra time to come up with her three hundred dollar rent payment, but he hadn't put it in writing. Now he was demanding the money immediately. She was on her way to tell Jake she'd just taken on a second job at the little cigarette place up the road, so she'd have the money when she got paid the next week. The woman directed us as she talked, and we turned behind a used car lot and reached a crowd of green cinderblock buildings on an alley I'd never noticed before.

"Thank you so much. It's good to meet some nice people," the woman said, jumping out of the van.

"Wait a second," my mom called out, opening our white bank envelope, the one that bore the inscription "Season's Greetings" in red. She showed me the top inch of a twenty, raising her eyebrows in silent inquiry. Then she shook her head before putting it back and showing me a one hundred dollar bill. I hesitated—this represented a significant part of my siblings' and my Christmas presents—but then nodded yes.

My mom unbuckled her seatbelt and I cranked down the window on the passenger side. "Here. Please take this. Maybe it'll help tide you over," my mom said, leaning across me to stick the bill out the window.

The woman stared at the money for a moment, her eyes wide, then looked up at my mother. "Really? Are you sure?"

"Yes, please take it." The woman stood still for a second, then snatched the money as if it might melt into the snowy sludge at her feet.

"Then you've got to come in!" she cried. "Please! Just park anyplace. Right there in front of the building. You've got to meet my sister, or I know she'll never believe how I got this money. Nothing like this ever happened to us before. Angels! You've got to be angels."

**We'd** been angels before, though no one had ever called us that. For several years we'd felt like the divine-assigned guardians to one big, ever-growing family at our church.

This family, I'll call them the Taylors, lived on disability checks, pizza, and Mountain Dew. "He can't get enough liquid gold," the dad said, letting his eight-month-old son suckle at a can. The dad, a person my dad called "the man with the skinny head," bowled in a local league in spite of his documented twisted spine. He was enterprising, though; he tried to increase the family income by selling drugs. He got caught and traded time in jail for employment as a nark. When we visited the Taylors, the stench of overflowing toilets, mildew, and rotting food hit me as one of the five tiny children opened the door in a diaper and stained T-shirt. I wondered if this was how the people at church imagined our home life, "poor and dirty."

We'd met the Taylor parents and brood in the church nursery, which somehow led to a stream of urgent phone calls. We helped all we could. We brought diapers when they ran out and jugs of water when their

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water was cut off, comforted the parents when a social worker took the kids away for a couple months. We brought boxes of baby and toddler clothes, still in good shape after being passed down through the four of us kids. To our knowledge, those children never wore those clothes. We assume the shirts, skirts, pants, panties, and Underoos found new homes via a consignment shop.

We also brought Christmas presents so many years in a row that the kids, and the parents, started treating us like Santa Claus, making requests. One Christmas, the dad dropped a large box of toys toward my feet, catching it at the last moment as I handed it through the doorway. "Caught you not paying attention," he said. He leaned his greasy bangs toward my forehead, his grin mischievous, childlike. I backed away quickly and stood in the driveway while my mother and sisters carried in the rest of the boxes. It was our last Christmas delivery. A few months later, the Taylors moved away to be close to the mom's brother in Kentucky, and quit calling.

I admit I was glad to see them go. I think we all were, though my mom occasionally expressed a sincere, if unhelpful, wish that the family was doing well in their new home. They'd become a chore and seemed none the better long-term for our help. Although it is more blessed to give than receive, a spontaneous act of charity, even if it carries a high personal cost, brings the highest immediate blessing. The givers just have to believe the gift is doing the recipient good—they don't have to see it. In this family's case, the giving became constant, a part time job, and I started to wish for tangible results.

At least I expected some gratitude. Late in our relationship with the Taylors, the mother gave us reason to believe that she, at least, was thankful. However, the entire family expected handouts like we had expected baby clothes from relatives, and the kids seemed to believe that all good things came from charity. When my mother drove up in the Taylors' driveway in our new green minivan, after trading in the Crown Victoria with the bouncing trunk, one of the little girls put her hand on the bumper. "Who gave it to you?" she asked.

I'm not sure if other church members approached the Taylors after church and loaded trash bags of clothes into the trunk of their old used car. Maybe not. Giving clothes implied that the recipients were worthy to wear what the giver had worn—to come after them, one firm step behind.

Maybe people did give the Taylors bags of clothes, but I know some members of our church didn't help them. When the Taylors' water was cut off, my mother called their deacon—the man responsible for the needs of church members in that family's part of Huntington. His response was annoyance. He knew about that family, but didn't want to hear the next event in the sad saga of their lives. It was inconvenient in terms of time and expense, but my family headed to Wal-Mart for water.

I can't remember, but I wouldn't be surprised if the deacon's wife was among the women who showed up at the nursery, offering us a trunk-load of clothes. The charitable women probably did notice that we didn't look poor and dirty. It was easy, comfortable to give a bag of old clothes to a family who didn't need help and wouldn't ask for more.

**At** the blonde woman's direction, my mom parked the van in what must have been the tenant parking lot. The pavement was cracked with no painted lines or concrete markers, and, except for a small red sports car, it was empty. The woman noticed the sports car and said nervously, "Oh, good, Jake's here. I'll take you all upstairs, and you can be getting acquainted with my sister while I'm taking this money to my landlord." I looked again at the building's flaking paint, a tie-dye bed sheet serving a first-story window as a curtain. I thought of the Taylors and wondered if I would need to hold my breath inside the apartment.

My mom and I followed the woman up a flight of narrow, concrete stairs built into a recess in the middle of the building, dark in the middle of the day from the cinderblocks that hemmed in both sides. "Sorry about all that trash," the woman said as I stepped over a molding pillow and half a dozen beer cans. "Our neighbors never pick up anything."

She opened the door at the top of the stairs. I didn't need to hold my breath. The apartment looked clean but brown. Brown paneled walls, thin brown carpeting, and two brown folding chairs lit by a small window and a bare light bulb suspended from the ceiling.

"Jill! I had to bring these women up to meet you or you'd never believe it. Something wonderful has happened!" the woman cried. Another woman, thin as her sister, appeared from an adjoining room. I noticed her clothes before her face, tight jeans and a red, long-sleeved T-shirt marked with the logo of a

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brand I'd seen sold in the junior girls' department at JCPenney. When I looked up to answer her shy "hello," I was surprised at how young she looked. Her face was unlined, and her hair was long, light brown, and straight like mine.

"This is Jill, and this is, oh I don't even know your names!" We introduced ourselves, and the blonde woman told us her name was Claire.

"Jill, look what these people gave us!" Claire held up the hundred-dollar bill. "I just got me a new job down at that cigarette place a few blocks from here, and I was on my way to tell Jake, and—oh! I'd better go give him the money!" Claire opened the door and disappeared down the concrete hallway.

"Sit down if you want to," Jill said, waving a small hand toward the folding chairs. "I wish we had something better for you to sit on. We just moved in here last month, and at our last place they rented us furniture along with the apartment."

We insisted the chairs were fine and sat down. I wished almost immediately to stand back up because the way Jill stood, quietly staring at us in our chairs in that empty room, made me feel strangely royal. We were relieved when Claire returned.

"He took the money, and he's giving us three more days. We'll get it somehow," said Claire. She sighed, looking around the apartment like it was worth something, her face pink with happiness and cold.

"Here, you need to sit down more than I do," said my mother. She stood up, and I did too.

"I never sit down. I walk everyplace, and I never sit down. People wonder how I keep so thin. It's because I'm always walking! Jill, I just had to bring them up here to meet you. They're angels!"

"We're not angels, believe me," my mother said, laughing. Jill smiled.

"Well," said Claire, uncertain. "Here's a picture of our daddy." She pointed to an unframed five-by-seven snapshot stuck to the paneled wall with a piece of Scotch tape.

"Oh," said my mom. "Does he live around here?" I walked over to look closer at the photograph of the fat man in a chair with a black, pink, and green afghan tucked around his legs.

"He died," piped up Jill. I took a reverent step away from the picture.

"Yes," Claire said, giving the picture a loving pat. "We lost our daddy last year. While he was alive, we never needed anything."

"And our mother," said Jill.

"Yes," said Claire. "We had a beautiful mother. She died a couple of years before our daddy. I wish I had a picture here to show you. The girls miss their granny. She knew when we were having a hard time, and she'd send stuff to the girls—clothes, shoes, anything they needed."

"That sounds like my grandma," my mom said. "She did things like that, sent me boxes of clothes, and all in style, too. She knew my mother didn't have much money, and since she was an orphan, and a family adopted her to be their servant, she understood what it felt like to stick out from the other kids. Grandma was like another mother to me."

Claire and Jill smiled. "There's my girls' bedroom," said Claire. She looked at me and motioned toward the room where Jill was sitting when we arrived. "One's in high school, one's in middle school. My oldest is maybe about your age." Through the open door I could see two twin-sized air mattresses on the floor, half covered by thin purple comforters. Magazine pictures of male heartthrobs coated the walls.

"You have a beautiful mother," Claire said to me, drawing her eyebrows together as if she were preaching a sermon. "I wish I'd put more value on my mother when I had her. You cherish that beautiful mother."

"Thanks," I said.

"Thank you," my mom said, rolling her eyes, but smiling too.

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I do have a beautiful mother. I did back in the giveaway-bag years, too, even if the women at church often offered to arrange a free makeover. And the giveaway bags weren't just for us kids. They also included clothes for my mother. Most of the family clothing budget went to my siblings and me, so perhaps sometimes she looked like she needed it.

Sometimes the bags were just for my mom, from people who didn't have kids, or kids at ages that made passing on clothes difficult. Once my mom wore a blouse to church she'd found in one of her exclusive bags. During the service, she saw the giver looking at the blouse from across the aisle, a satisfied smile on her face. My mom never wore it again. Or at least she never wore it again in public. Perhaps she gave the blouse to Goodwill, but it might have gone the way of a lot of the clothes in those giveaway bags. We wore them when no one would see us.

The four of us kids came to depend on those clothes. We never had to buy clothes for hiking, sledding, or playing in the woods behind our house. For sledding, there was always a secondhand coat—perhaps hot pink from the last decade—no good for church or school, but great for soaking with melted snow and mud when we crashed into fences or unseen pits. For hiking, we had jeans, fuzzy flannel shirts, T-shirts from beaches we'd never visited. And, when we played, actors in unfiled, unwatched movies, we had plenty of clothes to help us get into character—pioneers, farmers, rock stars.

So, perhaps we did appreciate the garbage-bag clothes. But we didn't do what I presume some of the givers imagined—hang their hand-me-downs with the best clothes in our closets, as treasures that would build our self-esteem.

When we left Claire and Jill's apartment and went home, my mom told the story to my dad, sisters, and brother. Then something struck her—another way we could help. "Girls," she said, "I'm sure that woman's daughters need clothes. They can't have much. It broke my heart seeing how they were trying to make their room a home. Is there anything you can give them?"

I looked through my drawers and closet and found a few shirts and pairs of pants and jeans. The clothes were still nice, but a couple years out of style. I'd already passed down most of the clothes I'd outgrown or no longer wore to my two sisters. My youngest sister, with no one to pass things down to, was able to give the most. My mom bagged up the clothes and drove them back to that small, bare apartment.

When she returned, she said, "Just that woman we picked up's sister was there, but she said she knows the girls will be excited to go through those bags." I pictured the girls opening the bags, as I had done before, hoping to find clothes that would make them feel a little better about themselves at school. I felt sick, wondering if I should have given some of the clothes I actually wore.

I wasn't the only one to regret. Years later, my mom still wonders whether she did the right thing. Should she have paid Claire's rent, the whole three hundred? "But I couldn't. That money was for you kids. It didn't belong to me."

**According** to my mother, sometimes our acceptance of those bags was an act of kindness to the givers. We helped by transferring the clothes to the garbage can in the original black plastic. Sometimes the givers thanked us as they gave us the bags, happy the precious items they'd worn when they were young and thin or their children had outgrown would again see use. A sweater worn in a second grade picture, that first basketball jersey, a T-shirt that came free with participation in a meaningful fundraiser, a dress from dates with an eventual beloved husband, things the owners loved but no longer wanted to store, and in the eyes of anyone else had no business outside a landfill.

Some of our relatives have the same problem, giving us decades-old blouses, threadbare, yellowed, and frayed. "This has been in my closet for years just collecting dust," they'll say. "I'm so glad it'll see some use again!" The relatives with the worst hoarding and donating problems are the oldest, the ones who lived through the Great Depression. I remember my PaPa, my mother's father, a great hoarder and

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donator of old, useless things, lecturing a five-year-old me about the Great Depression when he caught me using more than three squares of toilet paper.

And PaPa hadn't gotten worse with age. When my mother was little, he'd scavenged a rusted metal dollhouse with dog-chewed people from a neighbor's trashcan in a nearby alley. He worked as a railroad engineer and could have bought her a dollhouse easily, but in his mind it would have been a crime when there was one to be had for free almost next door. He also scavenged in his own mother's trashcan, rescuing a cracked glass punch bowl (useful as a dry decoration) and a miniature Nativity scene with chipped resin figurines.

My mother's mother, my Granny, couldn't agree with PaPa enough to stay married to him, but they shared the Great Depression mindset. She did have financial difficulties after the divorce, making the boxes of clothes from her own mother for her daughter especially welcome. But, instead of throwing away the trashy knickknacks her ex-husband had brought into the house, as I imagine I would do, she kept and used them. Long after the divorce, the punchbowl graced Granny's coffee table, and she put out the Nativity scene every Christmas until she quit decorating a few years ago. Like PaPa, she carried her cheapness into old age. She regularly washes and hems forty-year-old drapes, hanging some in her kitchen and offering the rest to us like we'd be wasting money to buy new ones.

"Sometimes," my mom said once, "people need help throwing things away."

**When** Claire said goodbye that day, she promised to repay us as soon as she could. "It's a gift," my mom told her. "You don't pay back a gift." Claire seemed satisfied with that—she suspected she was entertaining angels, after all.

"I've got to thank you somehow, though," said Claire. "I know what I'll do. As soon as we've got the money I'm going to call and take you all out to dinner. You and all your girls." My mom told her it was unnecessary, but when Claire insisted, she asked Claire to promise not to think of it until she was so far ahead financially that there wasn't anything she could do for her family with that money. Claire agreed, but insisted she would definitely buy us a dinner. "You can write that down. You'll hear from me as soon as I can afford it. I'll never forget what you all did for me, my sister, and my girls."

Several years have gone by, and she hasn't called. I hope she's forgotten, but I wonder if that family ever had enough extra money to buy restaurant food for helpful strangers. I think about Claire and Jill, maybe married, maybe still single, living together in a West Huntington apartment, pictures of the now grown girls taped to the paneled walls. I wonder about the girls, the oldest in her early twenties by now. I wonder if they wanted to go to college, and if they were able. I wonder if they live with boyfriends or husbands in small brown apartments of their own, and if they'll end up with kids enough to attract a few garbage bags of clothes after Sunday service. I hope they're doing well.

I also wonder what happened to the Mountain-Dew-drinking family, after they moved to Kentucky and didn't need us anymore, or found someone else to help. Unlike Claire, the Taylors didn't seem surprised by our help, though the mother did wish to show my mother she was thankful. One year, a little before Christmas, when we visited the family's house, the mother reached to a high shelf in her living room and picked up a clear glass plate, holding it above her head out of reach of her children and several newly adopted stray dogs that were running circles around the living room.

"This is for you," she said to my mom, handing her the plate. At first it looked to me like a dinner plate, then I noticed the etched winter scene and the words "Merry Christmas" above a year at least two Christmases past. This woman had been to our house, seen my mother's collection of decorative plates on the walls. My mom felt guilty about it, but she never put the gift up with her other plates, scenes of children from nursery rhymes.

While my mother was thanking the woman for the plate, one of the little girls, a tiny five-year-old with tangled blonde curls, grabbed my hand and led me to the stairs. "Look," she said, pointing to a pile of dog shit.

"Why do poor families always think they need to help all the dogs?" my mom said on the drive home, which led into stories about the dogs she'd seen and smelled as a social worker. I wonder, too, why families like the Taylors with barely enough to care for themselves take in scruffy, homeless animals. People who could afford to care for stray dogs often ignore them or send them to the pound, considering

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them annoyances, as distasteful to deal with as the Taylor family was to their deacon. Perhaps poor families take in dogs because they understand what it's like to be in need. Or maybe it's a way in their power of giving back, of answering their urge to give.

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