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Christmas Day 16 years ago was a very different thing for me. I will always remember that day. I called home from a red phone booth right in front of Schoenbrunn Castle in Vienna Austria. It was snowing, making the city look even more spectacular than usual. I had attended Christmas Day mass at St. Stephan's Cathedral, and that evening was going to the Christmas performance of the Vienna Boys' Choir at the Vienna State Opera House. I was calling to wish my Dad a Merry Christmas, but also to inform him that just the day before, I had found an apartment! In a few months' time, my position in Hungary would expire, and I had landed a job in Vienna as an English-German interpreter at a secondary school. For all intents and purposes, my life was going exactly as I had planned, exactly as I had hoped and dreamed. Except for one crucial thing, something I did not tell my dad during that Christmas Day phone call.

I was painfully lonely.

During my schooling, travels and work, I had made many friends all across Europe, even some that I considered close friends. But none that I confided in. In fact, I probably had more friends at that time than any other time in my life, and yet, strangely, I never felt more alone. One week later, I even accepted a marriage proposal on the historic Constantine Bridge, as snow fell gently...but even as I accepted, I knew I would not marry this man. Because I knew in my heart I had started to have strange, unsettled feelings...even as all the puzzle pieces fell into place in my life, I wanted to go home. This was to be a completely nonsensical move, and I was aware of that.

Shortly after my phone call home on Christmas Day, I had begun to be aware of this crushing loneliness, and a sort of plan began to flutter inside my head—a plan including moving home, leaving everything behind I had aspired to...my new job, my new apartment, my new fiancé...and to enter the ministry. This was crazy, and I knew it would be a rough thing for my family to deal with.

As the months progressed, my resolve became firmer and firmer. By June, all ties had been cut. I had broken my lease, resigned my job, bid a fond adieu to my fiancé and departed from the Ferihegy International Airport in Budapest, destination, Des Moines, Iowa. I was so excited for this homecoming—finally, to be reunited with my family. Finally, after years of being so far away, of the homesickness...I would finally get to eat peanut butter again, which my dad had been sending by the case since at that time you couldn't find it in Europe. What would that moment be like, I wondered, that moment I had dreamt about for so long, that first embrace with Dad and brothers? It would be magical, I was sure.

After hours and hours of flying, I ran down the jet bridge to the gate and saw my family waiting...I ran up to them! I got to my oldest brother first. What was his homecoming gesture for me after not seeing me for three years? Did he hug me and grab me and swing me around? Did he kiss my cheeks, European style? Did he weep for joy at the safe return of his only sister? No. He flicked me in the forehead and said, "So, what'd you bring me, dufus?" I kid you not.

On the ride home, my youngest brother sat in back with me, and we argued the whole way home...stop touching me...you stop touching me....Dad, make her stop touching me! In my mind, I thought...is this why I came home? This was no refined

greeting. Didn't they realize how sophisticated I had become? Outwardly, I despised their teasing and their jokes...was this what I gave all that up for, what this what I came home for?

Yes.

It was exactly what I came home for.

I had brought with me suitcases full of wonderful gifts and souvenirs for them, but they didn't know that yet. I had decided to wait for an apology for the forehead flick before giving anybody anything.

I had learned no matter how gorgeous the place is, if the people you love aren't there to share it, it doesn't matter. Sometimes you are fortunate enough to have the gorgeous place and the people you love together in one place, but often we are forced to choose, and I made the right choice.

God made a pretty good choice, too, when he decided it was time for him to come home. You do have to wonder why God came to earth at Christmas time. God could have fixed this broken world in a million different ways, all from heaven, remote control-like. But something must have been missing, or else he wouldn't have left heaven behind in order to come to earth.

Ironical, that surrounded by hosts of angels singing his praises night and day, and flanked on either side by the cherubim and seraphim, in a heavenly existence where pain and sorrow and suffering simply do not exist, God chooses to leave that gorgeous place, to seek out the company of the ones he loves.

Was God perhaps lonely in heaven, even with the hosts of angels keeping him company? Maybe. After all, they weren't created in his image. We were. So it makes sense that God would seek us out, we who reflect his image in the same way a baby has his daddy's eyes and his mommy's mouth.

God leaves the splendor of heaven behind, because he wants to have a child, to get on with life, to begin a new age of grace and mercy, even if it means leaving behind the most gorgeous place in the universe.

And so God comes to us. We don't fly up to see God, he comes to us, lives among us, makes his home here...and at first, he gets a fabulous welcome home...he gets singing angels filling the sky and exotic kings bringing him gifts, but pretty quick he gets the equivalent of a flick on the forehead...as he is soon sought after and mocked and crucified.

And you can't help but wonder when he came to earth, leaving behind all that he left behind, did he think to himself, "Is this what I came home for?" Do we give Jesus the welcome he deserves? No, but we give him the welcome he expects. God comes to us, chooses to make his home among us, because we are his beloved, created in his own image. Shepherds and prostitutes and the diseased and outcast are better company than the ranks of angels, because these are God's own kin, made in God's own image, worth leaving heaven behind for. In the end, it's not the place, it's the people that matter. A crowded Bethlehem is better than heaven, all alone. It turns out, a stable is better than a throne. A crown of thorns is better than a crown of gold.

God knows what he leaves behind in order to make his home with us. And God decides it is very much worth it, even worth dying for.