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The Greatest Christmas Gift

Dear Dante:

Merry Christmas! In honor of the season, we wanted to share a story we heard recently. To me, it perfectly illustrates what the Christmas season is truly about.

The year was 1952, and a young man named Virgil was very sick, and very far from home. That's because he was a soldier in the Korean War.

Virgil had known much hardship that year. He'd endured freezing nights on sentry duty. He'd patrolled for miles in water-filled boots, hoping snipers couldn't see him. He'd suffered concussions and persistent ear-ringing from artillery fire. He'd seen friends die.

But through it all, his mind always returned to one thing: His mother and two sisters. After his father died many years before, he'd taken care of them, filling the role of both elder brother and surrogate father. It had been almost two years since he'd last seen them, and he worried about them endlessly. His mother was getting older, and her health wasn't always good. His first sister was working constantly, never having time to dance or do other things she loved. His second sister was lonely and scared and had nightmares that her brother wasn't coming home.

Even when he'd spent a night pinned down by North Korean machine gun fire, with a bullet actually striking his helmet, he still worried about them. But the only way to communicate was by mail, and it could be months between letters. Sometimes their letters got lost in transit and didn't arrive at all.

The only time Virgil *didn't* worry was when he got sick. There was no time to worry. He was too busy shivering from a raging fever. Too busy vomiting up anything and everything the doctors tried to give him. Too busy being wracked with pain, a pain he'd never known was possible. Too busy watching the doctors discuss him in hushed tones, or check his vitals and frown, or look at lab results and shake their heads.

Too busy wondering why God wouldn't just let him die so it could all be over.

But Virgil didn't die. It took almost two excruciating months, but slowly, he felt the infection recede and his strength return.

By the time Virgil recovered, it was December. A few weeks before, he'd been airlifted to Japan to get better care. To help him recover, the Army granted him some extra R&R. So it was that he found himself spending Christmas in Tokyo. It was a long way from the small town he'd grown

up in. As he took in the sights, Virgil passed by a shop window. Inside, on a rack, was the most beautiful set of embroidered silk stockings he had ever seen. That gave him an idea.

Virgil had grown up during the Great Depression. He'd seen his mother sell most of their belongings in order to put food on the table. Christmastime was the hardest. He and his sisters rarely got presents, and when they did, it was usually something that could be got at a flea market. And his mother never got anything all.

So, Virgil decided then and there to get his family Christmas gifts from Tokyo. For his mother, no more threadbare stockings, but *silk* stockings that would make her feel like a queen! For his oldest sister, a pair of beautiful slippers she could dance in. For his youngest sister, a gorgeous Japanese tea set she could play with to her heart's delight. The Army had given him a little extra spending money, and he used it all, every cent. He pictured them opening their gifts on Christmas morning. Imagined their looks of delight, their audible gasps, the tears in their eyes. It made Virgil feel so warm inside, he thought that everything he'd just gone through would be worth it if it meant his family could have their greatest Christmas ever. Quickly, he bought the presents and paid to have them shipped. He included a little handwritten card with each, letting them know he'd recovered from his ordeal and wishing them a Merry Christmas.

A few months later, Virgil's tour of duty ended. During the voyage home, he couldn't stop thinking about his family's gifts. He couldn't wait to hear their stories of what it was like to open them. But when he finally arrived home, after hugging and kissing his family, he realized his gifts were nowhere to be seen. There was no tea set on the table, no slippers in the closet, no stockings in the drawer. His heart sank.

"What happened?" he asked. "Didn't you get my gifts?"

"Of course we did," her older sister said. And they showed him the cards he'd sent, carefully framed and placed on the mantle for everyone to see.


Then Virgil realized the packages had never arrived, only the cards. Heartbroken, he told them about the stockings, the slippers, and the tea set. He told them how he'd tried to make their Christmas the best ever.

That's when his mother put her hands around his face. "My son," she said, "the Army told us you'd been sick, and that you might not make it. But when we got your cards, we knew you were alive. We knew you would come home to us. It was the greatest Christmas gift we've ever gotten."

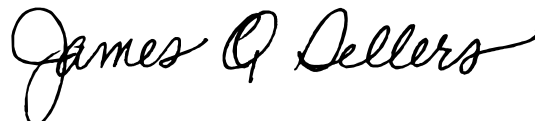
That's when Virgil realized the truth: Christmas had never been hard for his family, not in the way he had thought. Because Christmas wasn't about opening presents or boxes under a tree. It wasn't about silk stockings or other riches. It was about sharing a life full of love with your family. That is the real joy of Christmastime. That is the greatest gift of all.

Dante, on behalf of our entire team, we wish you and your family a safe and joyful holiday season. Merry Christmas!

Sincerely,



Susan A. Brokerman, ChFC
Vice Chair of the Board, Branch Manager



James Q. Sellers, CFP
Executive Vice President, Branch Manager