

Gifts

After the tyrant missionary Gambier had decimated the Marulean people in the early 1800s, the survivors faced many hard challenges. One of the most difficult was to reconcile their hearts with Christianity. Gambier had forced the Catholic religion on them in a manner no different than the Jesuits had used in California. The effect on the Maruleans was, at first, almost the same as that experienced by the Chumash. Unfortunately for California's seafaring coastal tribe, the Spanish stayed forever. Fortunately for the Maruleans, the French eventually left them alone.

This gave the sea people, with their heritage of island independence and common sense, a basis to reject formal Christian religion. They could not accept that the Son of God, a living embodiment of love and life, would have to die to save them. They had no use for the image of a vengeful Father who would burn sinners in an everlasting hell if they didn't believe in Him. They could not believe that Jesus had died for their sins – there was no logic to that idea at all. The cross was a symbol of human failure – nothing more. The image of a tortured man dying a horrible death and the Catholic teachings about suffering, guilt and sin, were discarded.

But the Maruleans remained Christians, using love as taught by Jesus as the cornerstone of their faith. And the more David Helmares understood the Marulean version of Christianity, the more he embraced it. When it came to celebrating Christmas, however, David maintained one tradition from his youth, and again this year he made sure the batteries were fully charged on the Morning Light as he strung lights from his rigging and put a set of speakers on deck.

The evening star appeared above the horizon where the sun had set on a hot and windless day, the longest day of the year. On this night the sea people of Marulea began a week of fasting and feasting, of games and solemn ceremonies, to celebrate the solstice – and the birth of Christ.

Taveka was standing in the doorway of his home thinking about the love Jesus had taught and the hope and faith in the goodness of man being celebrated by the Maruleans. He also thought of the next solstice, in June, when the season would change to winter, when he would begin the steps of his final journey to the arms of angels, his ancestors and his wife. Then tears came to his eyes when Handel's Messiah came wafting across the water.

Early in David's apprenticeship Taveka had wanted to learn something from the young Californian that held some special significance from his past.

David had responded by suggesting Taveka listen to the set of CDs he'd made so that he'd always have his entire music collection with him wherever he went. So, over a period of months, Taveka listened with respect to everything from the Allman Brothers to "The Sound of Music", but when David played a special homemade compilation of Christmas songs, starting with a series of classics from the Percy Faith Orchestra, Taveka felt his soul truly touched. That Christmas, Taveka suggested David share the music with the Maruleans. They loved it as much as Taveka did and considered it a wonderful gift and a welcome addition to their celebrations.

The next song was "Away in the Manger", and Taveka thought of the passing of his beloved wife so many years ago. Their new-born daughter had been in his arms when he kissed her mother goodbye. Now that Luan had married his successor, Taveka could look forward to the day he would be with his wife again. He stood smiling as the tears ran down his face, his heart filled with the simple song about a child's birth and what it meant to an old man whose time was coming.

Three children were walking by and one of them noticed the old navigator had not greeted them in his usual friendly manner.

"Uncle Taveka, are you sad?"

"Yes, Uncle," said a little girl, "why are you crying? It's Jesus' birthday and we're going to my auntie's house for stories and then we're going to make gifts for our parents. Isn't anyone going to give you presents?"

"Yes, little one, I already have many presents. Sometimes people cry when they have much happiness inside them."

"So you are not sad, Uncle Taveka?"

"How can anyone be sad if a new year is coming with all sorts of surprises and fun?" he said with a smile on his face.

The music faded to silence for a moment.

"Uncle Taveka, are you going to die soon?"

"Shush, you weren't supposed to say anything to him!"

"No, it is a question I will answer. Yes, I am going away, and it will be before next Christmas. So why don't you all make me extra gifts this year?"

His smile turned to laughter, and the eyes of the children lit up as they felt the joy of giving fill their hearts.

"Yes, we will! We will bring them Christmas morning, Uncle!"

The children skipped off down the path. Taveka smiled in acknowledgement of the endless passing of generations, with the innocence and joy of children being the only eternal constant of life in its every breath. Then he heard the opening notes of "We Three Kings."

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Two thousand miles to the west, the Skyhook was sitting just outside her hangar near the headquarters of the Skyrider Foundation. Victor and Tina Sanchez were dressed up as Mr. and Mrs. Claus. Mac Owens had an elf's costume on. Two dozen high school students carrying brightly colored

packages formed a line at the cargo bay door. Though time and distance made it impossible for the students to go home, the Skyhook was going to stand in as Santa's sleigh on its annual Christmas flight to some of the most remote islands of Polynesia bearing gifts to the students' families and friends.

"Did you weigh this?" asked Mac Owens.

"Uh, yeah, kinda."

"An' how much did it weigh?"

"The scale said forty six."

"Was that pounds or kilos?"

"Uh, I don't remember."

"How much is it 'sposed to weigh?"

"Under fifty, I think."

"Yes, that's right. That's fifty pounds – not fifty kilograms!"

The boy's lip quivered as if he was going to burst into tears.

"You mean it can't go on the plane?"

"I didn't say that, Mister Nathan Bailala. However, you'll hafta pay the excess baggage charge."

"But I don't have any money!"

"Ok," said Owens, "Please print your name, an' the weight, an' then sign right here." He handed a clipboard to the grateful teenager. The young man did as he was told until he stopped and looked at Mac Owens. He had quickly scanned the list and realized that several students, whose gifts for their family and friends were already stored in the *Skyhook*, had submitted packages that weighed as much, or more, than his.

"Hey, these others are overweight too!"

"Look a little closer, young man. Their weights are in pounds!"

"Oh, ok. All right. Well uh - - -"

"Merry Christmas, Nathan!" said Mac Owens. The finality in his tone told the teenager further argument would be useless.

"Uh, Merry Christmas, Uncle Mac. What should I do now?"

"Why don't you go an' see if Mr. an' Mrs. Santa need some help."

Thanks, Uncle Mac! Merry Christmas!"

"Kids these days! They jes' don' pay 'tention when they should!" he said to himself, only to remember NASA had lost an eight hundred million dollar Mars mission because some engineers had confused pounds and kilograms.

"Oh, well," he thought, "What's a little excess baggage?"

The thought reminded him of the load he'd have to deal with on the Wavelife mission, and he began to ponder, as he had for several weeks now, just how he would deal with all their equipment, especially the jetskis, as he positioned the Christmas gifts securely in the cargo bay. He was arranging the packages in reverse order according to the flight plan whereby they would be distributed to the families of the students at rendezvous points outside a dozen barrier reefs, several of which were where the *Skyhook* had rescued sailors and pilots during the war. He remembered how the *Catalina* had been re-fitted

especially for the purpose of those touch-and-go missions by having all the external bomb and torpedo hardware removed since she would no longer be tasked with delivering death.

Mac Owens stopped everything. He climbed up on the *Skyhook*'s wing. He removed a panel, and sure enough, the cable and pulley mechanisms for bombs weighing up to two thousand pounds had never been removed when the *Skyhook* had been converted for rescue missions. He checked the other wing, and suddenly he was in business.

“Well, that solves that problem!”

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The Mother Ocean Shelter occupied a building that had once been the home of Synanon, right on the beach in Santa Monica. Over the years it had been sold and converted into condos, but when the most recent owners went bankrupt, the building came up for sale at a foreclosure price. Aleja Gracellen had seen the sign announcing the sale on her way to Newport Beach for a meeting with Cheryl Corlund. She had an idea, and now the downtrodden once again had a home on the beach.

Gracellen had mastered the surfing mobs at Surfrider Beach and the ritzy crowds of Malibu's restaurants. People were needy, off balance and helpless whether competing for waves or flaunting their wealth. Both experiences were surprisingly relevant when it came to running the shelter.

The tree was tall and green and the presents wrapped in recycled paper. A dozen children were listening to their mothers sing “Silent Night” in the large utility room that was converted to a dormitory every night. When the song ended with hugs and tears all around, Aleja Gracellen thought of Cheryl Corlund and how she had quickly come and gone before the children could give her the Christmas gifts they had made for her.

“Wait a minute, everyone, if you please! Everyone! Just quiet down for a second. I don't know how many of you saw the lady who was here a little while ago - -“

“You mean the one who parked her Escalade over near the pier so we wouldn't know who she was?” said a voice from the back.

“She's the one who is taking care of us, isn't she?” said one of the children.

“Well, there's no getting anything past you guys, is there?”

“You live on the streets and go through hell for years, and you'll be pretty sharp too, Aleja!” said one woman with a laugh that was more rueful than happy.

“Yeah, that's her. Well, even though her company gives us a lot, she stopped by this year with a special gift, though she didn't want anyone to know about it.”

“Is that what anomin – anony – what is that word?” said one of the children.

“Anonymous, dear, and yes, that’s what she is. Our anonymous benefactor. Well, I want us all to bow our heads for a second and give her a gift straight from our hearts.”

Aleja Gracellen touched the envelope in her pocket, containing a Christmas card from Cheryl Corlund and a check for fifty thousand dollars made out to the shelter.

“Can we pray for her? I can do that!” said a little one up front.

“Yes, child, that is what we can do for her. And of all the gifts we could ever give her, I think prayers are the ones she needs the most.”

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The tree was plastered with fake presents, clumps of tinsel, plastic ornaments, and blinking lights. It looked just like last year’s to Cheryl Corlund, standing outside the entrance to Wavelife’s headquarters, as did the “Surfing Santa” party in full swing swirling through the lobby. Her husband had gone over the top, as usual. A dozen models were scantily dressed as Santa’s helpers and helping her husband, dressed as Santa himself, hand out the bonus checks to dozens of happy employees. For the moment she cared not to think about how the glow would soon fade from the bright eager faces once they discovered the checks were less than half of last year’s.

She caught her husband’s eye for a second and then walked across the lobby and hit the button on the elevator. He caught up with her and pulled her to one side.

“There you are – what took you so long?”

“And Merry Christmas to you too, dear! I’m surprised you even missed me,” she said, glancing back at the bevy of beauties handing out the checks, “Can’t you think of something other than eye candy for your party mix?”

“Oh Cheryl, c’mon, it’s Christmas, have a drink! You look like you need one! And there are some people from home I want you to meet.”

“I’ve already met half of Brazil, Roberto. Who are they this time?”

“Buyers from a new chain in Sao Paulo. They’ve got steel mill money behind them.”

“Ok,” she said, knowing Wavelife sales had slipped a little in Brazil, “Give me a minute. Have you heard from Maui?”

“So far, so good. They’re back up in the hills even as we speak. No parties, no women, no nothing. Bruddah and Heath are keeping the pressure on and Sonny-boy is doing quite well from what I understand.”

“Did you talk to Bruddah?”

“Yeah, and if it wasn’t for his friendship with Heath, we’d be sunk. He’s turning out to be the key in all this, Cheryl.”

“Well, if he’s going to be that essential, do we have him under contract?”

“I gave him one with the salary left open. He signed it on the condition that we pay him a dollar a year.”

Corlund was taken aback for a second. The spirit of aloha was one thing, but turning down a blank contract to be a dollar-a-year man said a lot. She wasn't sure if it was a reflection of Bruddah being a proud Hawaiian – or a well-considered decision based on an accurate opinion of what Wavelife did and didn't stand for. Then she knew it was both. The elevator opened and a crowd of employees pushed their way out.

“Merry Christmas everybody!” said Roberto heartily, “C'mon over and get your bonus checks!”

He let himself be swept away while she entered the empty elevator and hit 'ten' to find some peace and quiet above it all.

When the elevator doors opened, Dolly Artensa was standing there, tired and ready to go home. But when their eyes met, Artensa knew her boss could use some company.

“I'm surprised you didn't just stay there,” she said, “After the year we just had, a shelter doesn't sound half bad.”

Corlund nodded silently and Artensa gave her a hug before they walked slowly to the CEO's corner office. For a long time they simply stood near a floor-to-ceiling window and looked out at the lights of the 405 streaming through fields of office buildings that had replaced the groves of orange trees.

The silence was eventually broken by a whisper.

“I parked two blocks away, Dolly, so nobody would see my car, and walking in felt like, well it felt like - - -“

“Like you were coming in off the street and needed some shelter yourself. Honey, loneliness cuts just as deep whether you're driving a Cadillac or a shopping cart.”

Corlund laughed softly.

“And now I've got to get back downstairs and schmooze some Brazilian money. And for what? Flying surfers around the world and fake Christmas trees?”

“Well, don't look at it that way. Aleja and the shelter and those women with their children can use all the help they can get. So turn on the charm and get some business done.”

An hour later the models were in a conga line around the tree and Roberto Mercante was as happy as he could be. He and his wife were getting along famously with the wealthy industrialist and his entourage, regaling them with stories about how Sonny-boy had won at Pipeline and why the “When It Counts” campaign was going to work. Then Mercante saw a sharp-dressed man come through the front door and excused himself for a moment.

“Ian, bro! Merry Christmas!”

“Roberto, nice party! I bet there's no shareholders at this gig, are there?” Clark said with a knowing laugh.

“Ah, fuck 'em! We gotta party sometime! What can I get you to drink?”

“Well, I'm driving, so I'd - - -“

“Ian, c’mere,” said Mercante, putting his arm around the tall Californian, “Listen, I know all about DUI’s an’ corporate liability and all that shit. See those girls dancing around the tree? Guess who they are?”

“Don’t tell me – the designated drivers!”

“See how smart you are? So have a drink, no have two! And let me introduce you to your chauffeurs!”

Soon Ian Clark was dancing around the Christmas tree with his driver and her backup. The Wavelife employees were now long gone, replaced by the Orange County party patrol in their silicone and stilettos, silk shirts and gold chains. Clark was enjoying every second of his new life as a Wavelife insider surrounded by beautiful women, hot-shot surfers, and flashy new money all living it up in the lobby of the surf industry’s number one.

A guy sailed by Clark, did a double-take, and extended one hand in a bro handshake while spilling the rest of his drink with the other.

“The man himself!”

Clark knew the look, generic OC in tinted hair and loose silk shirt, but he didn’t who he was.

“Uh, yeah, hi! My name’s Ian Clark - - -“

“Shit, man, I KNOW who you are! Mr. Ian Clark! I’ve spent a lot of money with Geosurf! Got great waves in the Mentawais! Spent a week at your place in New Zealand! The Azores! Loved the place, man! I’m one of your regulars!”

The party was really loud and the guy had had a few, so Clark didn’t pay too much attention until the guy said something that was not what he wanted to hear.

“Say bro, I hear Santa gave you a pretty bitchen Christmas gift this year!”

“Uh, what? What did you say? Couldn’t hear you!”

“I said, I hear you’ve found a new reef – and you’re gonna sell trips on a seaplane to surf the place!”

“What reef? I don’t know what you are talking about!” stammered a surprised Ian Clark.

“Sure, Ian, no problem,” he winked, “Here’s my card. Just call me when you’ve got the package all wrapped up and ready to go, ok? Merry Christmas, bro!”

