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Kevin O'Hara: Christmas on the Jones wing

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By Kevin O'Hara, *In memory of Christopher E. Doyle*

PITTSFIELD — There was no happier time on the Jones wing at BMC than the Christmas holidays. Staff member John LaValley would literally deck the halls with dazzling murals, while Mickey Goodrich would lead our patients in a spirited medley of Christmas carols. Meanwhile, nurses Joanne Provost would spiff up our elderly women with fancy hairdos, and Nancy Wyman would proudly unveil her festive gingerbread house to the wows of our residents.

But the topper was the sumptuous turkey dinner served up for us by Dietary on Christmas Day, a far cry from the dry "chicken on the bone," served to mark the holiday at the former Northampton State Hospital, as some older patients would bitterly remind us.

When Chris Doyle, my affable boss and longtime friend, would make his morning rounds, he'd marvel at our ward's transformation and say, "This has to be the cheeriest psychiatric unit in the country. Great job, everyone!"

On Christmas Eve, staff and patients alike would gather round to share their fondest Yuletide memories. Sadly, many of our patients were hard-pressed to come up with any tales, though others would ring out as joyously as church bells. One such story, told by a pretty but fragile young woman (I'll call her Holly, in keeping with the holiday), remains with me still. It went something like this:

"I was 20 that Christmas, because my father was still alive. I wanted to buy him an electric razor because he kept nicking himself with his old Gillette. Not that he was clumsy, but he was on a blood thinner due to his failing heart. But when I went shopping, I found that the cheapest one cost \$30, and I only had \$7 to my name.

"I walked home that evening in the dumps. Imagine, here I was, my dad's only child, who didn't have enough money to buy him a decent gift, his last, it would turn out to be. So I said a prayer to the snowy stars above and, sure enough, I shortly heard this click-clacking sound coming from the bottom of my shoe. I figured it was a pebble, but when I stopped to look, I found that a gold earring had stuck itself to the bottom of my shoe, just like a

thumb tack.

"Next morning, I hurried down to a pawn shop, and asked the owner if I could trade it in for cash. 'Well, little lady,' he says to me, 'how much do you think your little trinket here is worth?' So I answered him straight away, 'Thirty dollars, sir.' He smiled back and said, 'If I gave you \$30, what would you do with it?'"

So I told him how I'd buy my sick dad an electric razor, because he came down every morning with bits of tissue dotted all over his face. Next thing I know, he opens up his cash register and hands me \$30, saying, 'Here you go, young lady, and I suggest you buy your father a Remington. A reliable brand, that.'"

BREAD UPON THE WATERS

"If he gave you thirty smackers right off the bat," interrupted a fellow patient, "I bet that earring was worth a whole lot more."

"I might've thought that, too," Holly persevered, her voice quaking. "But as I was leaving, he handed me back my earring, saying it wasn't worth a dime. But the smile that money had brought to my face was worth a million bucks."

"Well, I just stood there, dumbfounded. I mean, really, who hands a nobody like me \$30 for some worthless trinket? When I tried to give it back, he gently brushed my hand aside, saying he was simply casting bread upon the waters."

Wayne, an aged chronic, abruptly spouted, "'Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days.' Ecclesiastes 11:1-2."

Holly acknowledged Wayne's contribution with a gracious nod, and continued. "My dad was thrilled with his gift; a Remington rotary shaver with a snappy brown case. And guess what? He never nicked himself again. Not once, ever."

At this point, Holly began to sob. No surprise, that. In her limited social orbit, I suppose she had never shared this story with anyone. Her roommate, Beatrice, came to the rescue with a warm embrace, and asked, "Do you still have the earring?"

Holly blinked back her tears. "I sure do. And whenever I give it a rub, it always reminds me of three wonderful things: the memory of my loving dad, the goodness of the shop owner, and the magic and mystery of Christmas. That's why it's important for all of us here never to abandon our dreams, because we never know when unforeseen blessings might come our way. Believe me, they can show up at anytime, anywhere, or any place — even at the bottom of an old shoe."

Warm applause followed Holly's inspirational tale, as charge nurse Ceil Roosa proclaimed, "Now I think it's time to dig into Nancy's gingerbread house!"

A great hurrah arose, as Beatrice took Holly by the hand and led the charge. There, the winsome pair picked gumdrops off its rooftop like happy sparrows, and dropped them, one by one, into the eager hands of our elated elders.

Kevin O'Hara worked for 30 years as an R.N. on the Jones wing. This is his 35th Christmas story for The Eagle.