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Season's Greetings to All Our Readers

The gifts of Christmas ~~past~~ ^{are} people who share are gifts to each other

The following story by James McNeill about an Eskimo girl who spent last Christmas away from home is reprinted from North, a publication of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, January/February 1974 issue.

The excitement of the busy week before Christmas ended in hurried good-byes. Suddenly it was very quiet in the student nurses' dormitory at the hospital. Maria fought back tears as she ran down the empty corridor. All the other students, including her roommate, had departed for the Christmas holiday. For an Eskimo girl whose home is at Nutak near the north of Labrador could not get home in so short a time, let alone be back for classes in three days. Her thoughts were of her father and mother, so she took this quiet interlude to write to them.

"Dear mother and father," she began, "it is so lonesome here. The girls in my class have all gone home. It is Christmas Eve and everything is so gaily decorated. Christmas music is on the radio and there is a big fir tree in the cafeteria - it is not like home - I long to see you so much that sometimes I cannot study...."

She could not continue to write, the words would not come.

She had decided to quit her nursing course and go home when she heard a soft knock at the door. She opened the door and there stood a pretty graduate nurse. "I'm Hanna Smith. It is Christmas Eve and we are very short of help on the geriatric ward. We thought you would like to come and assist us."

Maria, gratefully agreeing, put her apron over her uniform and accompanied her new friend to the elevator. In five months at the hospital this was her first appointment to work with old people. While passing through the hospital's corridors, the nurse explained her duties to her.

First she would give supper to an elderly lady. "How strange it is," she thought to herself as she combed the patient's long white hair and propped her up in bed, "that some people become as helpless as little babies when they grow old. I wonder if my great-

grandmother was like this before she died."

Time passed quickly. All was quiet on the ward and Maria noticed that the hands on the big wall clock had just passed midnight. It was Christmas Day.

Maria could not concentrate, her mind wandered to the little chapel at home. At this very moment it would be filled with her family and friends. They would all be happy, singing in Eskimo, singing the old hymns.

"It is late, Maria," the head nurse reminded her, "You may go off duty now." "I would sooner stay here where there are people. I am not sleepy and perhaps someone will need me," Maria replied.

The head nurse understood. "Certainly, I enjoy your company too! I will make us a cup of tea and you can tell me about Christmas in your country."

They sat for some time, just talking and listening to the sounds of breathing, snoring on the ward. From time to time they walked lightly down the hallway.

"Is that someone crying?" Maria asked. The two women paused to listen, Maria went to investigate. She paused outside Room 10 and listened again. It was not crying that she heard but someone singing. She quietly opened the door and listened again. The words were familiar to her. In the dim glow of the nightlight she saw a small old man sitting up in bed, gently rocking back and forth with his singing.

"How can it be," she thought. "He is singing in Eskimo." It was an old sad song about going home.

"Can I help you, grandfather?" Maria spoke softly in her own language as she put her arm around his frail shoulders. When he turned his wrinkled face toward her she realized he was blind. "I heard your beautiful song," she whispered. "Would you sing some more for me?" "I only sing to myself when



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