

## THE GIFT

### A Bingo and John Story from Christmas Past

“What’s wrong with you, lazybones? Time to rise and shine.”

But John was having none of it. The bed was warm, it was early and John seemed determined not to participate. Bingo jumped back on the bed and started to pet John excitedly. Then he hopped back up and started hurriedly getting ready. John knew his cause was lost so he said goodbye to the warm bed and hopped down, too. Besides, with Bingo acting all fired up like this John knew he better be around to keep Bingo out of trouble.

“Come on, John,” Bingo said as he gave John a hug. “Today is a very big day. Let’s get going.”

The morning was crisp and clear and fresh. It was a bright and beautiful Saturday morning (which was why John thought he might get to sleep in) the last Saturday before Thanksgiving. This was the day when all the local merchants started putting out all their Christmas decorations and, more importantly, their newest toys for the Holiday season. The local volunteer fire department would be out with their trucks and ladders hanging garland on all the high lines. And then they would mount that big red bow on the front of the courthouse. And the whole town would be lit up with festive lights. What ten year old boy wouldn’t be excited about a day like this? Bingo couldn’t wait to get downtown.

Sure enough, the city was alive with hustle and bustle as everyone was out enjoying the perfect fall weather. There was activity everywhere. Everyone was cordial and smiling and full of good cheer. But most of the people went about their business, paying little mind to the beehive of activity going on all around them. Not Bingo. He tried to catch everything, to take it all in because he knew it only happened one day a year and taking it all down was not nearly as exciting as putting it all up. He constantly shifted from one side of the courthouse to another as he tried to get a good view of the latest flurry of activity.

He was shifting position again when Mr. Heard, the owner of the department store, stepped out on to the sidewalk pushing a shiny new bike. Bingo stopped in his tracks. Mr. Heard took one look at Bingo and laughed. It wasn’t hard to read those big wide open eyes. “What do you think, Bingo?”

“It is so cool! It is awesome!” Then Bingo thought for a second and asked, “how much is it?”

“One hundred dollars.”

“Oh.” Bingo did a no better job of hiding his dejection than he did his excitement. Again, Mr. Heard couldn’t help but notice.

“I wouldn’t give up if I were you,” he gently told Bingo. “This is the Christmas season and the Christmas season is full of miracles.”

Bingo headed on down the sidewalk with his head hung. The excitement of watching everything had completely vanished. He knew there was no chance his dad would buy that bike for him. His family did not even celebrate Christmas. Peace on Earth, Goodwill toward Men was not exactly a central theme at Bingo’s house. Then he remembered something else, something that his dad was always screaming at him, “If you want something in this life, you gotta work for it. Nothing is free.” An idea popped into Bingo’s head. I am going to work to get money and buy that bike! I will figure something out and I will earn enough money and maybe Dad for once, just once will be proud of me.

Bingo turned around and went back to the department store. “Don’t you sell that bike, Mr. Heard. I am going to make enough money to buy it! So don’t you sell it!”

Mr. Heard said, “I tell you what. I have several more just like it in the storeroom. So if you come by and the bike is not sitting here, don’t get dejected. I have more.”

So Bingo and John started home. Now there was a little spring in Bingo’s step again. John watched his human partner carefully. I don’t understand all this people stuff, he thought, but I know I am supposed to be here for Bingo so that is what I will do.

Bingo looked down at his only friend as they walked home. “How am I ever going to earn a hunnerd dollars?” Just then a big gust of wind blew the leaves all over the yard of the house they were walking by. “That’s it!” Bingo exclaimed so loudly that John was startled. “I can go to people and ask them to rake their leaves! All I need is a rake and trash bags. We have that.”

Bingo hurried home and got his supplies then he came back to the yard that had given him his inspiration. He knocked on the door and an elderly woman answered. "I-I was wondering if you would let me rake your leaves?"

The woman smiled, "I sure need my leaves raked. How much are you going to charge me?"

Bingo hadn't even considered that. He had no idea what to charge. He said, "I will do it and then you pay me what you think is right."

She nodded her head and Bingo went to work. John moved off to the side and laid down. His job was to observe. Soon Bingo's excitement faded into tedium. This is harder than I thought he told himself. But he kept after it, that shiny blue bike motivation enough to keep him going. After some time and much effort he went back to the door. The woman came out, looked around and said good job. Bingo felt proud. She pulled a bill out of her pocket and handed it to Bingo. "Here's ten dollars," she said. "Are we good with that?"

Ten dollars! Bingo's heart leapt! Why, I will have enough money for that bike in no time! He could hardly contain his excitement.

The next few weeks were a whirlwind of school, raking leaves, homework, and falling into bed exhaustedly. At least once a week he would go to the department store and inform Mr. Heard of his progress. "I now have thirty dollars," he'd say. "Or \$50 or \$70." Mr. Heard would always smile and say, "Keep it up. You are getting there."

Finally one Friday afternoon a really nice lady gave him twenty-five dollars. He now had \$112, more than enough to buy his dream. But it was too late to go get it that evening so he would get up the next morning and be there bright and early. And tomorrow was Christmas Eve so everything was perfect. That night Bingo could hardly sleep. He couldn't decide which he was more excited about, having the new bike or finally making his dad proud.

Sure enough, Bingo was up almost at sunrise. John had long given up his dream of sleeping in on Saturday mornings so he got up, too, to get with the program. "I hope you are ready to run," Bingo said to John as they walked out the door. "I am going to ride that bicycle home as fast as the wind."

Bingo decided to cut through the alley because it was faster. He was walking so fast John could barely keep up. Then Bingo stopped. There was the widow Givens sitting on her back porch crying. “What’s the matter, Mrs. Givens? Are you ok?”

“Yes. I am ok.”

“Then why are you so sad?”

“I got a Christmas card last night from my daughter. They live far away and I haven’t seen her or my grandkids in three years. She says her family will be here tomorrow and I don’t have any money to buy food. I am going to have to call them and tell them not to come.”

Bingo’s heart broke. Better than anyone he knew what it felt like to be abandoned and alone and if he had a way to prevent it, he knew he had to do so. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his money. “Here.” He said as he offered her his money.

“Oh, no!” She said. “I can’t take that.”

“I was saving it for a Christmas gift. I can’t think of a more perfect gift than this. Please take it.”

She gave Bingo a big hug as the tears flowed down her cheeks.

Bingo decided to go on down to the hardware store anyway and take one last look at the bike of his dreams. As he walked by Mr. Heard came out to meet him, “Are you here to buy that bike?”

“Naw” Bingo said dejectedly. “I didn’t make enough money. I guess it wasn’t meant to be.”

That night was just like any other at Bingo’s house. No tree, no decorations, no mention of the baby Jesus and no presents. Bingo went to bed. He thought of tomorrow. He thought of all the other kids talking about all the wonderful things they got for Christmas and all the great times they had. This would be another year of hanging back and being outside the group because he would be deathly afraid that they would all ask him what he got. Will doing the right thing always be this hard?

As he drifted off to sleep big tears rolled down his cheeks. He looked at John. He looked sad, too, and Bingo wondered if dogs knew how to cry.

Just as he was finally getting to sleep, he thought he heard a gentle tap on his bedroom window. He sat up and looked at John who was awake, too. The lights in the window made it appear like a car was backing out of the driveway. Bingo ran to the front door as a pickup slowly drove away. Then he saw it. Sitting right there on the porch with a big red bow taped to the handlebars was his bike! He looked again at the pickup as it drove further away and then he looked back at his new bike as the words of the poem popped into his head.

“And I heard him exclaim ere he drove out of sight,  
Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night.”

Jim Lewis