

And She Went Snap...

A short story by Susan E. L. Lake

Judith Gaither's hair looked like a commercial for a new shampoo - in the before picture. Her 2.3 children consisted of two boys and a small dog with hair that needed more attention than her own. The boys, six and nine, had spent the morning watching cartoons and littering the den with empty juice cartons and the straws that made them so appealing. She needed to pick them up.

That was the least of her worries. The list of uncompleted tasks went on for days. Actually, that list had begun three years ago when she went back to work. She had vowed when they were born to stay at home with the boys, but money and boredom had driven her back when Abe started first grade. Luke was only three but in pre-school half days. She didn't think he'd miss her much.

Martin hadn't objected. A teacher's salary wasn't great, but it sure made those monthly payments less painful. "Besides," he'd reassured her, "you'll be home in the summers and vacations, so it's not like full time."

At first she was proud of her ability to juggle everyone's needs. She got up in the morning by taking a load of clothes from the dryer and starting another to wash. She took the boy's sandwiches from the freezer which she prepared Sunday afternoons. They hated school lunches, and she didn't want them to feel like they had no choice. She got Martin's coffee started, poured juice for the boys, and placed several boxes of cereal on the table for them to choose. The milk was already in a pitcher in the refrigerator and she'd set the table the night before. It made a pretty picture each morning when she went to wake them.

While they ate, she showered quickly, dressed, and then took a load of clothes from the dryer. She'd put them away when she got home. The boys would get dressed while she loaded the dishwasher and poured Martin another cup of coffee. Generally, she would go in at least once to settle a wrangle between the boys in the bathroom or to urge Luke along. Abe would be finished dressing in time, but Luke was one of those kids who floated off into daydreams unless prodded. She would drop both boys at their schools and generally get to school with a minute to spare.

Her only problem was after school. Abe had to stay at after school care and he hated that. He was always whining at her that it was only for babies. But there was no way to finish up at school in time to get him much before 4:30, so she listened to him complain each afternoon. Luke wasn't so concerned. He liked his friends, unfortunately, because it meant that when she went to get him he was never ready. She always had to wait, knowing that the grocery store would be getting more crowded by the minute.

While breakfasts were picture perfect, dinners had deteriorated. A salad, two vegetables, and a meat with an occasional dessert was now a can of fruit, a frozen veggie, and a broiled chicken breast. However, she still made cookies for Abe's homeroom and school birthday parties, slaved over church pot luck meals, and carried food to families with deaths.

None of this mattered much at the moment. Instead she was trying to sort all the other demands. At the top of her list was Christmas. It was only four days away. School had ended early yesterday, and she had used the extra couple of hours to pick up the last of her gifts. Last night she had stayed up late to put the stamps and notes on the last Christmas cards. They were stacked neatly on the entry table ready to go to the mail box.

However, she needed to make fudge, pick up the fixings for Christmas dinner (the turkey was in the freezer waiting to be defrosted), wrap presents, stop by her aunt's nursing home, call her sister about Christmas Eve, go to the cleaners to pick up Martin's suits, and think of something to take to tonight's annual Sunday School party. "Oh, yes, I'd better call Cynthia to remind her about sitting for the kids," she added to her mental catalog of tasks ahead.

She walked to the back door to let in Snuggles, the ball of fluff scratching to be let back in. She gave him a hug as she absentmindedly emptied and refilled the water bowl and checked for food. Martin came from the bedroom pulling a sweater over his head. "Honey, I'm going to meet Ralph for racquet ball."

She blinked. "I didn't know you were going to play today."

"Why not? I go every Saturday. Can't let that middle age waist catch up with me." He patted his flat stomach and then reached over to tap her slack bottom.

"Uh, will you pick up your suits on the way home?" She was already scratching that from her list.

"Oh, you go ahead. I don't know that I'll get a chance." He headed for the garage. "Do we have all the gifts mailed? I just heard that the post office says they won't get there in time if we haven't."

"Uh, huh, last week. Don't forget the party tonight. Cindy is coming over at 6:30."

He nodded as he went out the door.

The boys came tumbling into the kitchen. "Mom, Abe won't let me..."

"Boys, let's pick up the juice boxes and you can help me make fudge."

"Aw, Mom, it's time for Ninja Turtles." The squabble forgotten, the boys wandered back to the TV.

Judy spent the morning making headway. The fudge was cut and placed in a pretty tin. The casserole was ready for the oven. All she needed to do was run a few errands. However, getting the boys into the car took longer than the trip itself. She got back home just in time to fix a meal for the boys and dress for the party. Fortunately, Cindy showed up as planned, for Judy hadn't

taken time to call to remind her. Martin arrived home whistling as she was putting the boys' dishes into the dishwasher.

"I'll be just a minute. I showered at the club. He pulled on fresh shirt and they scooted out the door waving goodbye to the kids and sitter.

Juggling the casserole on her lap trying not to spill it on her slacks, Judy commented without quite asking, "You sure were late."

"Yeah, we got to talking and stopped for a 'toddy for the body', but I made sure I was on time."

"I could have used some help with the kids."

"Well, why didn't you ask? You know I've told you that all you have to do is tell me."

Judy could feel her voice come out sounding whiny. "Sometimes, I'd just like you to look around and figure it out."

"Judy, you know I'm no good at that. I never know what you want done."

Arrival at the party stopped the discussion that never went anywhere. Judy shrugged to herself. At least, she thought, he doesn't run around or beat me. She pulled out a smile and went in to enjoy the party even though what she really wanted was to be at home asleep.

The next two days whizzed by. She got by the nursing home and promised Aunt Gertrude to come by to pick her up for Christmas Eve services. Her sister had agreed to see that she got back and then to bring her over for Christmas dinner. She was glad dinner was going to be small, just family.

Christmas Eve day was a zoo. The boys were too excited to be controlled. She had to make three last minute trips to the store for forgotten items. The thought of the stores being closed for an entire day she found scary. At one point she wondered how pioneer women managed with no Shopit down the street.

It all began to unravel about 5 p.m. The boys were dancing around the kitchen pretending to be Santa and reindeers when she found herself screaming. "Martin, get them out of here! Now!" All three just looked at her and then scurried from her wrath.

"Boys, why don't you watch TV. Mom's busy. Honey, I think I'll go ahead and get ready for church."

Judy was too tired to even feel guilty about her outburst. She continued to stuff the celery for Christmas dinner wondering if one stalk would be enough. As she had been doing for hours, she continued to add to her list of "musts" and "shoulds" hoping she wouldn't forget anything. "Boys,

it's time for baths. Then we'll eat." She heard them move off afraid to tempt another outburst of anger from her.

"Judy, where's my blue suit?"

"I don't know. Did you leave it in the car?"

"Why would it be in the car?"

Suddenly, she froze in a moment of panic much like those she had experienced as a child in a classroom when she realized she had left her homework paper at home. She could feel the anxiety hit the pit of her stomach. She walked to the bedroom with her hand over her mouth and eyes wide. "I forgot. Oh, I'm so sorry. I forgot. I crossed it off and then didn't add it back yesterday when I asked you. Oh, I'm so sorry."

He just stared at her, and she could see his anger rising. "And whose idea was it to take all my suits to the cleaners? Now, what am I supposed to do? Wear my jogging suit to church?"

Trying to be calm and reasonable, she shrugged. "Can't you just wear a sweater? You have these." She pulled a pair of grey pants from the closet.

"I suppose, but it's not what I had in mind." Sarcasm dripped from every word.

With this calamity subsiding, she detoured by the boys' bath. "Okay kids, put on robes and let's eat. We need to pick up Aunt Gertrude in just a few minutes." She smiled what she hoped would count as Christmas cheer.

The boys squirmed through much of church, but she had brought along some candy canes and managed to keep them quiet enough that no one glared at her. Martin looked just fine in his sweater and several other men were not in suits. Afterwards, she hugged Aunt Gertrude with the promise of a fine Christmas dinner. Judy's sister and husband promised to be over by one as they bundled the elderly woman into the car.

She got Abe and Luke locked into the seat belts for the trip home. The boys were becoming more excited as it came nearer to the minute of Santa's arrival. She smiled at their anticipation and remembered her own childhood when it had been impossible to go to sleep. She wondered if they played the same mental games she had.

Once home, her husband turned on the stereo and picked up a book. Judy started tying on an apron. "Martin, would you get the boys ready for bed while I finish up the dishes."

"Sure. Boys, go get your pajamas on and your mother will read you a Christmas story."

Judy walked toward the refrigerator and stopped. She blinked once and then stood there frozen. "The Turkey. The Turkey. The Turkey. It's frozen. It's frozen. It's still frozen." She stood as

frozen as the turkey she now remembered was still in the freezer. For a moment her mind tried to find a solution. Thoughts of ways to shorten the two or three days needed to only hours slammed through her brain like a rat trying to escape. She blinked again. That's how Martin found her a few minutes later.

"What's wrong Judy? Do you want me to read to the boys?" She just stood there. Her brain was spinning slower and slower like a top that was about to run out of the speed needed to stay upright.

Martin tried to break through by speaking sternly. "Judy, I said what's wrong." He was beginning to look more worried and wondered if there were something he should be doing. She wasn't crying or anything. She just stood there. He hurried back to the boys' rooms and ordered them to bed. Their loud protests were answered with a glare. "Just get into bed. Mom will be here in a minute."

He returned to the kitchen counting on finding Judy busily doing the dishes. She wasn't. Instead she stood just as he had left her. He took her elbow to try to move her toward a chair. She moved in slow motion, but she did move. He was glad of that much. She would occasionally blink, but mostly she just sat as he had placed her.

Somehow he got the boys settled for the night. He got Judy into bed hoping that by morning she would be better. He even washed the dishes. He didn't know what he would do if she weren't any better. After all, he thought, she's got that big Christmas dinner. All those people were coming. He wondered if he should call to cancel. No, she'll be fine. She's just a little tired.