When Ernest Believed In Santa

By Jack Burchett

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Every family has some Christmas mishap they can laugh about years later. That's the case with Buster and Martha Smith, an elderly couple who are awaiting the arrival of their children and grandchildren for a traditional Christmas homecoming. Buster and Martha reminisce about the Christmas in 1955 when their youngest son, Ernest, who still believed, hid Santa in their attic. In reality, Santa was a man who had just robbed a bank.

The story flashes back to that Christmas past when the residents of Blackwater, Tennessee, had fallen on hard economic times. Two men wearing Santa Claus suits rob the bank and conceal the money in a manger scene to escape arrest. While one robber keeps an eye on it, the other hides out in Buster's attic after convincing Ernest that he is Santa. The stories he must concoct for a gullible Ernest and three neighbor girls are hilarious as are the family's discussions about the attic noises which they attribute to giant rats. Soon, a rumor that the money is hidden somewhere in town causes the people of Blackwater, including Buster, Buster Jr., and Ernest, to search frantically for it to collect the $1,000 reward.

Buster is disappointed when he doesn't find it since he will be unable to provide a "good" Christmas for his family - until Martha reminds him of the real meaning of the holiday. The gangster, shaken by the recovery of the stolen money and the arrest of his partner, decides to turn himself in and try to start his life over. He offers Buster the reward for his capture - $10,000! The action then returns to the present with a funny update of all the characters' lives and safe homecoming of the children and grandchildren.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 m, 6w, 2 extras)

BUSTER: Country farmer, eccentric but caring; has long white beard in present day scenes.
MARTHA: Buster's wife, practical, keeps Buster in the real world.
ERNEST: Youngest son, a young boy who will believe just about anything.
BUSTER JR: Eldest son, mischievous teen who enjoys aggravating his sister and brother.
SUSAN: Teenage daughter, practical like her mother.
GANGSTER: Bank robber dressed as Santa; got into crime to give his family more.
MILLY: Martha's friend.
NELLIE: Milly's daffy daughter.
BETSEY: Another.
HAZEL: Another.
SID: Bank employee who is more sympathetic than people realize.
ANNOUNCER: Radio voice only
BILLY BOB JR: Grandson (*1 line.*)

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

All of the action takes place in the main room of Buster and Martha's farm house. Their farm is located just outside of the small town of Blackwater, TN.

Scene 1 - Present, three days before Christmas.
Scene 2 - 1955, three days before Christmas.
Scene 3 - 1955, two days before Christmas.
Scene 4 - 1955, Christmas Eve.
Scene 5 - Present, two days before Christmas.

PROPERTY PLOT

Scene 1: Simple meal setting, sweatband, headphones.
Scene 2: Coats and hats for Smith family.
Scene 3: Fence post, coats for Milly and daughters, sandwich and milk.
Scene 4: Note paper and pencil, three wrapped presents, bean pot.
Scene 5: Stop watch.

SFX: Recording of theme music to “Chariot of Fire”; telephone ring; creaks and thumps from the attic.

PRODUCTION NOTES

In order to change the appearance of the stage from the present to 1955, several things can be done. The sofa and table can be covered with a throw and tablecloth respectively; curtains can be changed; lamps and pictures can be replaced; an old-fashioned radio can replace a small TV, and an old-fashioned phone can replace a modern one.

Scene 1

(AT RISE: BUSTER and MARTHA are eating dinner at the dining room table.)

BUSTER: Daggnabbit, Martha!! Look! *(HE suddenly stands up and shows MARTHA his beard*.) My beard's shedding again and a piece of it done went and fell in my beans. *(HE bends over looking down at his bowl of beans*.*)* One thing I can't stand is beard in my beans.

MARTHA: Well Buster, I told you not to pet around on that mangy, old dog next door. Why don't you try some of that dog shampoo I got last year in that yard sale? They say it'll cure you right up!

BUSTER: Don't be silly, woman. I ain't gonna shampoo my beard in no dog shampoo. I know what's wrong! It's fiber! I ain't eatin' enough fiber!

MARTHA: Buster, you ate a whole box of them bran flakes this morning. Just how much fiber does one man need?

BUSTER: But Martha, you know folks have got to have their fiber. Why, they talk about it all the time on the radio and...

MARTHA: Ever since you got that health fitness magazine subscription, you think you're some kind of athlete. Why, you can't even hardly read. All you do is sit and stare at the pictures. My goodness Buster, you're 78 years old!

BUSTER: Seventy-seven and a half I'll have you know!

MARTHA: Buster Bilford Smith! Don't you raise your voice at me! I just think you're carryin' all this fitness stuff too far and you know, Buster, you ain't gettin' any younger. Why...

BUSTER: (*Looking around the room, oblivious to MARTHA'S words*.) Martha, where's my sweatband? Can't do no joggin' without my sweatband. (*HE reaches into his shirt pocket*.) Ah … here it is. You know, Martha, what I really want for Christmas is a new sweatband, you know, the new, extra absorbent kind they advertise. They say it'll soak up the sweat but won't lose it's stretch. Yep, that's what I want.

MARTHA: Buster, I don't know why you wear that old sweatband. Why … you ain't sweated enough in 10 years to fill up a thimble.

BUSTER: Surely you ain't forgot that heat wave just last summer … I thought I was gonna melt plumb away. Besides, you know how I sweat a lot every time I go a joggin'.

MARTHA: You want your ear muffs? *(SHE hands BUSTER the headphones for a Walkman stereo.)*

BUSTER: Gotta have my ear muffs … you know when I was a kid, we didn't have these new-fangled gadgets. These young'uns today sure are lucky, ain't they? Why, who would of ever thought of 'lectric ear muffs?

MARTHA: I don't see why anyone needs ear muffs to go a joggin'. Anyway, them things are so puny they don't even cover your whole ear.

BUSTER: Well, everybody wears them. I ain't got nary idea what they're suppose to do, but they must do something. Well, I better get goin'.

(MARTHA watches while seated in a nearby chair as BUSTER jogs slowly around the coffee table 2 times, the cord from his unplugged head phones swinging freely. The theme music to "Chariots of Fire" plays in the background. Buster falls exhausted onto the couch.)

MARTHA: *(Under HER breath.)* I've got a pretty good idea. (*Normal voice*.) Buster, I'm worried about you. For the last three months, every night after dinner, I've watched you jog around our coffee table with a sweatband on your head and ear muffs on your ears. Don't you think that's a bit peculiar?

BUSTER: Now Martha, don't ya worry about me. I've never felt better in my ...

(The PHONE rings and MARTHA goes to answer it.)

MARTHA: Hello. *(Pause.)* Well, hello. Is anything wrong? I thought y'all would be here by now.

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