

The Sleeping Bag

Penny Schlaf Musco

Dear Editor,

There's a boy in my kindergarten class who comes from difficult circumstances. He really wanted a sleeping bag for nap time, and I've thought about finding him one but have never gotten around to it.

Someone else did! When our class came back from lunch Monday, there was a bag with his name on it. Inside was a child-sized sleeping bag—homemade! He was thrilled!

Thank you, Sleeping Bag Lady (I'm assuming you're a woman, because this has the touch of a mother about it). Your special gift has already made a difference in this boy's life.

—Audrey Fletcher

I read the above letter to the editor in the newspaper over my husband's shoulder. "That's Sarah's teacher."

"Is that the boy she's always talking about?"

"Probably." Sarah's account of her day often included Derek. He wouldn't stop talking, he bothered her on the playground, and she complained that he got her sent to the office.

When asked about him at last month's teacher conference, Mrs. Fletcher sighed, "He's this year's challenge. I don't know where his parents are; his grandmother has custody." She smiled slightly. "But he can be very sweet. You should see him at nap

time. He has his own blanket, but he loves the sleeping bag I let him use when the boy who owns it is absent. He snuggles inside and says, 'Zip me up!'"

"A lot of parents must know about him." My husband's voice recalled me to the present.

"Mmm." I wondered what the other children, especially Sarah, thought about the class troublemaker receiving a brand new sleeping bag.

I found out soon enough. Her words tumbled out the moment she set foot in the door the next day. "Somebody made Derek a sleeping bag and it's real nice and he won't even let us touch it! Why would anybody make one for him? I want one. All I have at school is an old blanket."

"You told me you liked it because it was mine when I was your age!"

Now the tears flowed. "Derek made fun of it, and said nobody cared about me because I didn't have something nice like him!"

I pulled her onto my lap. "Honey, you know we love each other in this family, and we do things to show it. What did Daddy do for you last week?"

She sniffled. "Made me a doll bed."

"Then I helped you make a few new dresses for your doll out of fabric scraps." I held her against me. "You know you're loved, but Derek, I suspect, isn't so sure. And I imagine someone wanted him to know it, and showed him by doing something extra special for him."

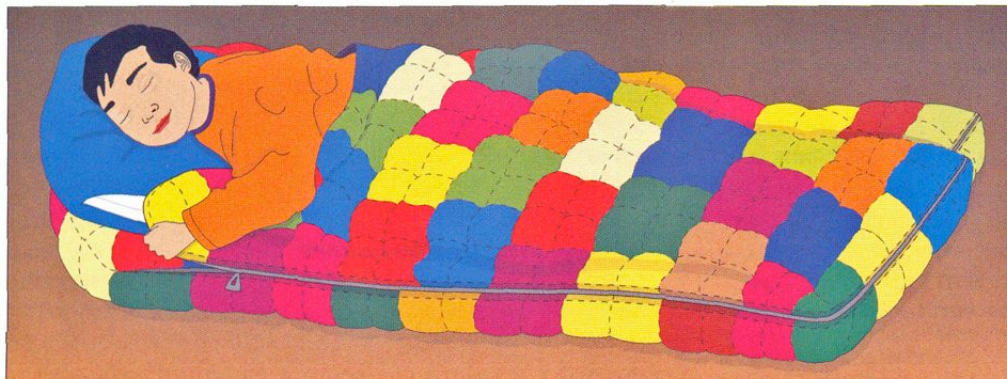
She thought for a moment. "Well, Mrs. Fletcher didn't have to yell at him as much today."

"That's good."

As fall moved into winter, we didn't hear much about Derek, possibly because home got a bit crazier when I returned to work part-time. But trudging up the school stairs one snowy February afternoon, lugging juice and cupcakes for a Valentine's Day party, I was eager to finally meet him.

I arrived at the classroom door just in time to see a boy smack another on the head with a block. While Mrs. Fletcher rushed to the wailing victim, I dropped my bags and grabbed the perpetrator, who I instinctively knew was Derek.

To my surprise, he threw himself into my arms and began to sob. Sarah hurried over and possessively clamped onto one of my legs. I shuffled back into the hall and eased us all to the floor. Derek



sat in my lap facing me, and Sarah leaned against me, sucking her thumb.

Tears splashed onto my jeans. I lifted Derek's chin, noting the hint of defiance mixed with fear in his chocolate brown eyes, and somewhere in the back, a pool of sorrow. "I'm Sarah's mom. Why did you hit that boy?" With a sudden flash of insight, I added, "Did he say or do something to you?"

He let out a long, shuddering breath. "My sleeping bag," he whispered.

I was puzzled. "What about it?"

"He said nobody would give me anything nice because I didn't have a mother!"

I saw Sarah's intense gaze as I groped for a way to respond to this troubled boy to whom even a simple act of kindness brought turmoil. "When you got the sleeping bag, whose name was on it?"

"Mine, I guess."

"Who gave it to you?"

He shrugged.

"If your Grandma, who's just another kind of mother by the way, gives you something, you know she loves you, and you feel good, right?" Derek nodded, and Sarah snuggled closer. "So if someone you don't even know surprises you with a present, doesn't it mean that person cares about you too?"

He frowned in concentration, then nodded again.

I folded his small hands in mine. "And no one can take that, or your sleeping bag, away from you."

"You mean, it doesn't matter what anybody says?"

"Not a bit." I gently squeezed his fingers. "But I want you to promise me something."

"What?" The wariness was back.

"That you won't hit other kids, or call them nasty names, or anything like that. They have people who care about them too. And ... and the person who made your sleeping bag might even be watching!"

His eyes were big as he looked around. "Like Jesus?"

"Well, not exactly," I stammered. Thank you, God, that he at least knows about You. "But I'm sure it is someone who's nearby." Sarah was focused on my every word.

Derek's face broke out into a huge grin. "Okay, I'll try real hard. It makes Granny and Mrs. Fletcher sad when I don't behave, and now I've got somebody else to be good for!"

"Why don't you go and apologize to that boy right now? I'm sure he'd like that." My voice was unsteady.

Derek scrambled off my lap and back into the classroom, and Sarah took his place. "Mommy, you're crying."

I wiped my cheeks. "Don't worry, they're happy tears."

"I hope Derek doesn't bother me anymore." She fingered the zipper on my jacket. "But Mommy, I still wish I had a sleeping bag like his. Can I?"

How did she know? I lifted her off my lap and stood up. "I think it can be arranged." I looked down into the eyes I vowed would never have to look elsewhere for love. "Now let's go have a party." 