

Problems with Babysitters

(A Modern Florabunda Christmas Story)

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“Look out below!” called a voice from the top of the stairs. But there was no time to look. An avalanche of dirty clothing rolled down the stairs: jeans, underwear, and dirty socks. A blouse landed on Florabunda's head. Tender Heart quickly stepped out of the way of a falling T-shirt. The clothing was followed by an empty laundry basket.

The basket was followed by Twinkle, a preschooler and Florabunda's second cousin.

“The basket with clothes in it was too heavy to carry down the stairs,” said Twinkle, “so I threw the clothes down first. Then I thought that I might as well throw the basket down, too.”

Tender Heart began picking up the clothing from the steps and Florabunda's head.

“I'm Tenderness Heart, the new babysitter for you and Florabunda. People usually just call me Tender.”

Florabunda stood gritting her teeth. Florabunda did not think that she needed a babysitter at all and Tender Heart was only a few years older than she was.

Twinkle was bouncing around as usual. “You've got it all mixed up,” she said. “I am babysitting you two. I get paid a quarter a day.”

“You're getting paid!” said Florabunda. The injustices were piling up.

“Yes,” said Twinkle, “Mommy said I need to entertain you and Tender, so I thought

that it would be fun to do laundry.”

“The last time you did laundry, you packed the washer so full of clothes that the machine couldn't do anything but overflow water all over the floor,” said Florabunda.

“Let's put some of your clothes in the washer and then find something else interesting to do,” said Tender.

Twinkle lead the way to the washer, and Florabunda followed the other two without enthusiasm. Tender helped Twinkle put the right amount of soap and clothes in the machine and lifted her up to push the buttons.

When they had finished, Twinkle skipped around. “That was fun,” she said. “I knew I could entertain you two. Now let's go outside and play basketball.”

It was a windy, chilly fall afternoon, and Florabunda thought she would rather stay inside. Before she could say anything, Tender answered Twinkle.

“Couldn't we do something else?” asked Tender. For the first time since Florabunda had met her that afternoon, she looked unhappy.

“Don't you like basketball? Mom told me you were very athletic,” said Florabunda.

“Well,” said Tender, “it's a long story.”

“Oh boy!” said Twinkle, “I love stories. Tell it. Tell it. Tell it.”

“It's a little embarrassing, but okay, let's go sit down, and I'll tell you. When everyone was settled in the living room, Tender Heart started her story.

“You know that we just moved here a few weeks ago. Last year I was the basketball star on our old neighborhood team. I really loved the game. Then something happened that got me so upset that I quit basketball forever and started taking ballet.”

Tender stopped talking, so Twinkle stood up and started dancing around saying, “What happened? What happened? What happened?”

Florabunda was sulking a little, but she was also wondering what happened.

“It happened in the last few seconds of a game we were winning by 20 points. I had been scoring all night. Someone passed me the ball and I made one last basket just before the final buzzer. Then everyone started yelling at me. After a while they all turned around and ignored me. The next day at school no one would talk to me at all.”

“What,” said Florabunda and Twinkle at the same time. Then Florabunda remembered that she was sulking.

“How could they be so mean to you, when you were the star?” said Twinkle.

“Well, you see, I scored a goal for the other team.”

“How could you make a mistake like that?” said Florabunda, who was too interested in the story to sulk.

“I didn't make a mistake. I felt sorry for the other team, because we were beating them by so many points. I didn't think it would hurt anything if I made one score for them. Nobody else on the team agreed with me though, so I decided it would be better for everyone if I quit. I took ballet lessons until we moved, so that I would have something active to do. Mom is going to find me a class here. I'm not planning on playing basketball ever again.”

“Oh dear,” thought Florabunda to herself, “I was so mad about having a babysitter that I didn't want to like Tender Heart, but she is so nice that I am going to have to like her. It's not her fault Mom thought that I needed a babysitter while she and Aunt Celeste tried to get their new jewelery making business started.”

“Aunt Celeste” was Twinkle's mother. She was really a cousin, not an aunt, but Florabunda's mother thought that it would be rude for Florabunda to call her Celeste and Aunt Celeste didn't want Florabunda to call her Mrs. Star.

Florabunda had been daydreaming, but now she started paying attention to Tender and Twinkle again.

“If we can't play basketball,” said Twinkle, “I can't think of any ideas for entertaining everybody.”

“I'm sorry, Twinkle,” said Tender, “I don't know what we are going to do. If we play basketball, I'll be sad. If we don't, you'll be sad.”

They both looked so sad that Florabunda had to do something.

“Let's play a board game. Everyone likes that.”

“Yea!” said Twinkle as she left the room to find a game. “I knew that I'd think of some way to entertain you two. I'll try to find my game *Princesses at Boarding School*.”



Twinkle came back with a big stack of board games. The stack was too big and she kept dropping things.

“I couldn't find the game I wanted, but I found all these.”

“Let's play *Trouble* instead,” said Florabunda.

So they spent the afternoon playing *Trouble* and doing laundry. When Twinkle's mom got home, Tender walked back to Florabunda's house with her.

“I'll see you tomorrow,” she said as Florabunda went inside her house.

“Well,” said Florabunda's mom, “was it so bad?”

“Tender Heart is nice enough, in fact she feels like an old friend, but I'm a responsible person and I don't need a babysitter.”

“Florabunda Flowers, we have been over and over this. You have to stay at Aunt Celeste's house while we are getting our jewelry making business started and you and Twinkle can't stay there by yourselves.”

“Tender is just in middle school. She's not that much older than I am.”

“Sorry,” said Mrs. Flowers, “set the table, please. Dinner's almost ready.”

Florabunda liked Tender more and more every day. She had always enjoyed being around Twinkle, even though playing with Twinkle required a lot of energy. Florabunda's problem was embarrassment about having a babysitter. She was also a little indignant about being the only one of the three who was not getting paid.

As the days passed Florabunda resigned herself to being babysat every afternoon. In fact she had lots of ideas for afternoon activities. They made simple snacks like apple slices with peanut butter. She and Tender made Twinkle a workbook of stapled pages full of doodles to copy and color when the two older girls needed to finish their homework. While Florabunda practiced some of her piano pieces, Tender gave Twinkle “ballet lessons.” They danced around the room to the piano music until all three of them collapsed with laughter. Sometimes Florabunda or Tender would read a story out loud.

They were surprised at how well Twinkle paid attention to the stories in their books, especially if they were about princesses.



“You're doing half the babysitting work,” Tender told Florabunda one day.

“Oh, well,” said Florabunda.

Aunt Celeste and Florabunda's mom had started their jewelry business in November to take advantage of the Christmas season. They were doing so well that they were still working on Christmas Eve, so Florabunda spent the morning with Twinkle and Tender.

Tender came into the house with Florabunda that day to tell Florabunda's parents Merry Christmas. Mr. and Mrs.

Flowers were in the kitchen, working on the pies for Christmas dinner. They both looked hot and tired.

“I'm sorry, Florabunda, but it looks like we are going to miss the Christmas Eve service at church tonight. I got behind on my Christmas preparations. I still have cooking to do and a lot of presents to wrap.”

“What!” exclaimed Florabunda, “this is the first year that I can hold a candle!”

At the end of the Candle Light Christmas Eve service, the ushers turned out all the lights. Then the minister and the ushers lit a few candles for some of the members of the congregation. After one person had a lit candle the person in the next seat was able to light a candle. Soon the whole building was glowing with soft candle light.

Unfortunately for Florabunda, their minister was very nervous about open flames (even tiny candle flames) in the building. At the Christmas Eve services, children had to be their late elementary school years before they were given a candle. Florabunda had been looking forward to participating this year.

“Do you think that Florabunda and I could go to the service together?” asked Tender.

“That's a great idea, Tender,” said Florabunda's dad. “I can drop you two off at church and pick you up when the service is over. Ask your parents if you can go. I can pick you up at your house at 6:45.”

“Being babysat does have some advantages,” thought Florabunda, “especially when the babysitter turns out to be a good friend.”

“I'll check when I get home,” said Tender. “If it is okay, I'll see you tonight.”

“Thank you Tender. Ask if you can have some hot cocoa and cookies over here after the service,” said Mrs. Flowers.

That evening, when Florabunda and her dad got to Tender's house, they had a surprise. When Tender came out to get in the car, she was holding Twinkle's hand.

“Twinkle's mother called to see if I could babysit Twinkle this evening. When I told her about church, she said that Twinkle could come with us because she is always well behaved at church,” said Tender.

“Um,” said Florabunda.

During the drive to church Florabunda's dad asked, “do you think that Twinkle will

cause any problems tonight, Tender?"

"Don't worry about a thing, Mr. Flowers," said Tender, "Twinkle will be just fine."

Florabunda was not as optimistic as Tender. As soon as her dad had dropped them off at the church building, she noticed that Twinkle's dress was blinking.

"What in the world are you wearing with your pretty Christmas dress, Twinkle?"

"It's my new Christmas necklace that Mommy made me."

The necklace looked like a Christmas tree ornament. It was merrily blinking as they walked up the steps leading to the church doors.

"It's very pretty. Does it have an off switch?" asked Florabunda hopefully.

"Of course," said Twinkle.

"I'm afraid that you'll have to turn it off for a while," said Florabunda. "Some people might think that it is disrespectful to have a necklace blinking during church."

"Okay," said Twinkle. Her voice sounded sad.

They walked in to the building and the usher handed Florabunda and Tender each a bulletin and a candle.

"Oh dear," thought Florabunda, "She's already disappointed about her necklace. I hope she remembers that she is too young to have a candle."

"Where's mine?" asked Twinkle.

"Rats!" thought Florabunda, "I knew that she would forget."

"You have to be this tall to have a candle," said the usher and she put her hand on Florabunda's head.

Twinkle's lip started trembling and a tear rolled down her cheek. When Tender Heart saw Twinkle's face, tears came into *her* eyes.

"Oh no!" thought Florabunda, "I'm going to have to do something quickly."

"Come on, you two," she said, "they're singing Christmas carols before the service. I don't want to miss any."

"But I want to light a candle," said Twinkle in a shaky voice.

"Don't worry," said Florabunda, "I'll think of something."

The other two immediately cheered up. They both had a lot of confidence in Florabunda. Their attitude made Florabunda realize that she was under a lot of pressure. She didn't enjoy singing the carols at first, because she was thinking about the problem. Then she relaxed and started enjoying the music. Suddenly she thought of a solution.

Florabunda was able to concentrate on the rest of the church service. When it was time to sing "Silent Night" with the lights out, she touched Twinkle on the shoulder.

"Get ready to turn on you necklace," she whispered.

Twinkle looked at her in surprise.

The adult next to Florabunda turned to light her candle. "A light shines in the darkness," he said.

"And the dark has not overcome it," said Florabunda, as she held her lit candle for the first time.

"Say your part and turn on your necklace," she whispered to Twinkle. Then she said, "A light shines in the darkness."

"And the dark has not overcome it," said Twinkle and turned on her necklace.

"Now look at Tender and say the first part," whispered Florabunda.

"A light shines in the darkness," said Twinkle. Florabunda carefully reached across

Twinkle to light Tender's candle.



“And the dark has not overcome it,” said Tender.

When the song was over and the lights were back on, everyone shook hands and said, “Merry Christmas.”

The three girls walked out of church, and Florabunda's dad was waiting for them.

“We are now ready for Christmas,” he said. “Twinkle, your parents are at our house. Tender, did you get permission to have cocoa and cookies with us before you go home?”

“Yes, I can stay for a little while. Mom said she would bring over the decorated cookies I that made this afternoon.” Tender liked to cook in her spare time.

When they walked into the house, the girls noticed that the Christmas tree lights were on and the house had the wonderful smell of Christmas cooking. They sat down and Florabunda's mom passed out mugs of hot cocoa. Tender found the plate of cookies that her mother had brought over and offered everyone a cookie. When Florabunda took her cookie, she noticed a concerned look on Tender's face. When Tender sat down again, she started talking to Florabunda's mother.

“Mrs. Flowers,” Tender said, “I want to tell you about the Christmas service tonight.”

Tender told Florabunda's mom how Florabunda had solved Twinkle's blinking necklace and candle problems. Then she told Mrs. Flowers about the other times Florabunda had helped to entertain Twinkle.

“So you see.” she said, “I think that Florabunda should have half my salary.”

Twinkle had been listening to Tender. She looked confused.

“What does salary mean?” asked Twinkle.

“Tender's salary is the money that she makes babysitting you and Florabunda,” said Mrs. Flowers.

“But I'm the babysitter! I earn a quarter a day.” said Twinkle. “Explain it, Mommy.” Everyone looked at Aunt Celeste.

“It was the easiest way to talk Twinkle into our babysitting plan,” explained Aunt Celeste.

Mrs. Flowers sighed a little too loudly. “Okay, here's what we'll do. Celeste and I will keep paying Tender's whole salary to her. I'll also pay Florabunda to be the babysitting assistant and Celeste can pay Twinkle to be the babysitter apprentice.”

“What's an apprentice?” asked Twinkle.

“That's someone who is learning to do something,” said Aunt Celeste.

“But I'll still get paid?”

“Of course.”

“Then I'll do it,” said Twinkle. “Florabunda, why are you smiling so much?”

“Because I got my best Christmas present a few hours early.”