

A Christmas Light

It had always been the same. Every December, as the first snows settled over the hills and the days grew short, Emilia would light the little lantern and set it in the window of the old stone cottage. She did it without fail, as her mother had done, and her grandmother before her.

“Why do we light it, Grandma?” she had once asked as a child, her voice soft with wonder.

“To guide the way,” her grandmother had answered. “For those who are lost or alone, for those who are waiting, and for those who don’t yet know they’re searching.”

Emilia hadn’t understood then, but the ritual had stayed with her. Now, many years later, she kept it faithfully, even though she lived alone in the house by the edge of the village.

The days leading to Christmas always felt longer than the rest of the year. Winter deepened, and the world grew still, as though the land itself was holding its breath. Emilia loved this quiet time. It felt like waiting for something wonderful.

She spent her days tending to small things. Dusting shelves, mending old quilts, and baking bread that filled the cottage with warmth. Her evenings were for the lantern. She would polish its glass carefully, trimming the wick just so, before lighting it at twilight and placing it on the window sill.

The little flame danced, its golden glow spilling softly across the snow outside. To anyone walking through the village, it was a beacon—a promise that someone was waiting, even if they weren’t sure for whom.

It was the third week of December when Emilia saw him.

She had stepped outside to gather wood for the stove when movement at the edge of the woods caught her eye—a figure, dark against the snow, moving slowly toward the village road. She stopped, her breath misting the air, and squinted through the gathering dusk.

It was a boy, no more than twelve or thirteen, wrapped in a coat far too thin for the winter cold. He carried a satchel slung over one shoulder, and his footsteps dragged as though he’d been walking for miles.

Something in Emilia’s chest tightened. She stood watching for a long moment, then turned back inside. She didn’t call out to him—not yet.

She set to work instead, as if preparing for a guest. She ladled stew into a pot to warm over the stove and brewed a small kettle of tea. Then she checked the lantern and added more oil to keep the flame strong.

Emilia returned to the window. The boy was closer now, though his head was bowed. He didn’t look up as he passed the edge of her yard, but he slowed when he saw the lantern’s glow. His steps faltered, as though unsure of what he should do.

Then, after a moment, he stopped and looked up.

Their eyes met through the glass.

Emilia opened the door and stepped out into the cold. The boy hesitated, but something about her—perhaps the way she stood so calm and still, her hands clasped before her—seemed to ease his fear.

“Good evening,” she said softly. “It’s bitter cold tonight. Would you like to warm yourself by the fire?”

The boy swallowed, his face pale and wind-chapped, but he nodded.

Inside, he stood stiffly near the door until Emilia coaxed him to sit at the table. She poured him tea, letting the steam curl into the quiet air. “It’s not much,” she said as she ladled the stew into a bowl, “but it’s warm.”

The boy ate tentatively at first, then with a hunger that said more than words.

When he was finished, he looked up. “Thank you,” he said softly.

“You’re welcome.” Emilia sat across from him, her hands wrapped around her own cup of tea. “Where are you headed?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted after a pause. “Just... somewhere.”

Emilia nodded. “Well,” she said gently, “this is somewhere, isn’t it?”

The boy blinked at her, surprised, and a faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. It was small and hesitant, but it was there.

That night, after the boy had fallen asleep on the cot by the fire, Emilia returned to the lantern. She lit it again, even though the hour was late, and set it back on the window sill.

Outside, the snow fell softly, blanketing the world in white. The flame glowed steady in the darkness, as though waiting for someone else, someone unseen, who might need its light.

Emilia stood watching it for a long time. In that moment, she understood what her grandmother had meant all those years ago.

The waiting was not just for Christmas. It was for the lost and the weary, for those who wandered through the cold and the dark. It was for the boy sleeping soundly beside the fire and for the next traveler, who might pass by tomorrow or the next year.

It was for the light itself—for the promise it held, year after year.

And as she turned back to the quiet warmth of her home, Emilia whispered to herself, “To guide the way.”

— *William Zeitler*
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