

The Kit-Kat® Christmas
Inspired by a True Story

Part I - Father Ben's Great Idea

There are times when the ordinary fog of life parts for an instant – just long enough for things to become quite clear. And, well, things looked particularly bleak that winter. There was no question about that – it was as certain as the fact that the start of a new year, 1986, was just around the corner. Forget the typical problems of trying to keep the building warm during the fierce Korean winter or the *always* present issue of children needing new clothes – “new” being a relative term as no child ever really had new clothes at the orphanage – just the “goodwill donations” – perhaps more correctly termed “discarded clothes” periodically collected by the nuns. No, those problems were easy. So the orphanage administrator, Mrs. Suh, flatly told Father Benedict A. Zweber that his “great idea” was impossible – especially this year, reminding him the orphanage barely had enough money to feed the children for one more week.

Father Benedict Zweber, affectionately known simply as “Father Ben” by the nearly 1600 children he had cared for through the years, remained undaunted. He simply smiled and reminded Mrs. Suh, “It’s great to be alive!” The issue of trying to get enough money to feed the children was simply something that momentarily took his attention – not a reason to stop being upbeat, cheerful and welcoming – and definitely not a reason to abandon his “great idea.” It was this optimism that allowed Father Ben, not long after his ordination in 1959, to establish a parish, a hospital, and an orphanage on rural Tokchok Island where thousands of Koreans had fled in the aftermath of the Korean War. It was this same courage that helped Father Ben face the controversy of sending Korean children abroad to be adopted by families in the United States when some, less familiar with harsh orphanage life, labeled his efforts “babies for sale” and sometimes even referred to the placed children as abductees.

Indeed, Father Ben had always believed it best for a child to remain with his or her own extended family, or even another Korean family, but in light of the fact that there were not enough Korean families adopting orphans, Father Ben often commented “It’s better for those kids to get into homes in the U.S., than to raise them in orphanages in Korea.” Father Ben did his best to provide for the children – usually with far more love than resources – often calling out to them with open arms in their native tongue “Come here my child!” Indeed, life in the Korean orphanage was sparse at best. And it was this scarcity that had inspired Father Ben with his “great idea.”

It had been a custom to give each of the children at the orphanage an orange on Christmas Day, but this year Father Ben wanted to give something more – something sweet that would take the children’s minds from the cold winter and their harsh reality – something that would catch the children’s attention like the star rising in the East at the birth of the Savior must have caught the attention of the shepherds in their fields so long ago. And it came to him in a stroke of genius: That Christmas he would give the Korean

orphan children a Kit-Kat[®] chocolate bar, his absolute favorite candy bar, in addition to their annual orange!

Faith. That's really the only word that can describe how an aging priest in a foreign land could manage to raise the funds necessary to feed the children in the orphanage that winter and still find enough money to act on his "great idea." And so that year, with perhaps a little help from God and a generous accomplice back home in Minnesota, each Korean child in the orphanage received an orange *and* a Kit-Kat[®] chocolate bar for Christmas.

Part II - SoonHee's Christmas

The tough thing about Christmas for children growing up in an orphanage is that they still go to public school – usually with other children from the community – children with families. Captivated by the stories of the other children about Santa Clause and the gifts he left for them, SoonHee Oh, grew up thinking that she must be "naughty." Not that she didn't try hard to do what was right throughout the year, but because Santa Clause only ever left her an orange each Christmas.

By any measure, SoonHee Oh lived a truly unique life. By age 13 she had experienced more than most people do in a lifetime – unfortunately, most of it not good. Her mother died just a few months after her birth on Tokchok Island in 1973. Unable to deal with the challenges of raising four children alone, SoonHee's father turned to alcohol for comfort – leaving SoonHee and her three older siblings, ranging in ages 9 to 15 to fend for themselves. For a time, SoonHee's 12-year old sister tried to find surrogate mothers to nurse the baby, but often had to resort to feeding her a mixture of flour and water.

Lucky for baby SoonHee, her sister encountered the Catholic parish on Tokchok Island and Father Ben supplied her with containers of life sustaining infant formula. By age two, SoonHee was at Father Ben's orphanage full time. Around age seven, SoonHee's father returned to the scene and she lived with him and various foster families for several years. A family in the United States would have likely adopted SoonHee long before then, but her father refused to relinquish his parental rights.

At age eleven, SoonHee found herself back at Father Ben's orphanage. Life in the orphanage was sparse, but it was definitely better – and safer – than living with foster families. Oh, there had been a couple of incidents at the orphanage, but it was generally a good place to live. Once, SoonHee had received a spanking from a nun for eating toothpaste. Another time, SoonHee and another girl sneaked into Father Ben's kitchen, stole some peanut butter, and ate it in the dark under a pew in the chapel. Feeling badly they went to confess their theft to Father Ben, but were surprised to find that he already knew of their indiscretion. He simply smiled, and said, "I'm glad I could share with you. I'm glad you enjoyed it."

The last several years while living in foster homes, SoonHee hadn't received anything from Santa Clause on Christmas. Convinced she had been "naughty," as December rolled around at the orphanage, SoonHee hoped she had been good enough to receive an orange from Santa Clause that year. She had tried so hard during the past year – perhaps harder than ever before. Things had been pretty tough at the foster homes – a lot of bad things had happened to her there – but she tried not to let those experiences dampen her spirit. Being back at the orphanage and seeing Father Ben so happy had given her hope. Maybe this was the year.

Christmas morning would never come – at least so SoonHee thought. It seemed like forever, but the minutes turned to hours and the hours turned to days and the days became weeks. In the meantime, she tried so hard to be good. Eventually the big day was finally at hand. Christmas morning she jumped up from the makeshift bed on the floor and rushed to the place she had received an orange those earlier years at the orphanage. There was the sweet glossy orange – she was elated – but also confused. "What is that?" she thought as she looked at an oblong shiny orange colored package with English letters on it: "K - i - t - K - a - t ." Perhaps? Perhaps Santa had noticed the *extra* effort?

Carefully SoonHee unwrapped the package exposing a brown colored substance – kind of like a candy that she had seen other children (children with families) at school eat on a few occasions. She tasted just a small bit of it – ever so cautiously. The chocolaty flavor was unlike anything she had ever tasted. The sweet crisp wafer middle made her eyes sparkle as she crunched it. She couldn't believe her good fortune! Over the next several days she tried her best to make the bar last as long as possible, nibbling just a small piece of it at a time – each time ever so carefully unwrapping and then re-wrapping the sweet chocolate prize. Santa had indeed somehow noticed her *extra* effort to be good!

Epilogue

While the author used some artistic license, the *The Kit-Kat® Christmas* is inspired by a true story. SoonHee's father finally relinquished his parental rights in 1986 and a family living in Roosevelt, Utah adopted her – at age 13. SoonHee remembers Father Ben and the real *Kit-Kat® Christmas* fondly. To her the Kit-Kat® chocolate bar was no small gift and it taught her that even small and simple things do make a significant difference – if only in the heart of a child. She also still likes Kit-Kat® chocolate bars.

Father Ben died March 26, 2001. He had served the people of Korea for more than 30 years and later continued his work in Russia. One grateful child placed for adoption in the United States through Father Ben's efforts visited him during the Christmas of 2000 and reminded him of a stone monument on Tokchok Island in a small park filled with ancient juniper trees commemorating his work there. Father Ben simply scoffed in his humble way, "They could have done something else with that money." As

the press release announcing his death heralds, “[Father Ben’s] name is a constant reminder of how much one person’s goodwill and persistence can change the world.”

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