

### First reading

It was Christmas Eve, and Papa Panov could hear the sounds of excited children playing and smell the festive foods cooking in nearby homes. Everybody seemed to have a family to be with. Papa Panov was all alone and thinking of his wife, who had died many years before, and of his children who had grown up and moved far away.

Sighing to himself, he lit the lamp and took an old book from the shelf. Sitting down in his chair he began to read. He read about a baby, called Jesus, who was born in a stable because there was no other room for Mary and Joseph. "If they'd come here," thought Papa Panov to himself, "they could have slept in my bed and I would have covered the baby with my patchwork quilt."

He read of rich men who travelled across the desert to bring presents of gold and sweet-smelling spices for the baby Jesus.

"If Jesus came here," sighed Papa Panov, "I wouldn't have anything to give him." But remembering something, he took down a dusty old box from the shelf. Inside was a pair of tiny shoes. The finest shoes Papa Panov had ever made. "That's what I would have given him," he murmured as he began to doze in the chair.

Papa Panov was snoring gently when he was woken by someone's voice in the room, calling him.

"Papa Panov" said the voice. "You wished that I had come to your little shop and that you could have given me a gift. Look out into the street, from dawn to dusk tomorrow, and I will come. Be sure you recognise me for I shall not say who I am."

Outside bells were ringing. It was Christmas Day.

"It was him," said the old man to himself. "That was Jesus. I will watch out for him today. But how shall I know him? He grew to be a man, a king; they say he was God himself."

Papa Panov didn't go to bed that night but kept watch, hoping Jesus would come.

At last someone came into view at the end of the road. Papa Panov was very excited, perhaps this was Jesus. But as the figure trudged nearer, Papa Panov recognised the old roadsweeper. Impatiently he turned away. He was waiting for the King.

Opposite Papa Panov's window, the old roadsweeper stopped to blow on his cold hands and stamp his frozen feet. It did look very cold outside and Papa Panov began to feel sorry for the old fellow.

"Hey," he called from his doorway. "How about a cup of coffee. You look frozen."

The old roadsweeper came in and warmed his hands by the stove.

"It's very kind of you," he said, as Papa Panov poured him a mug of coffee.

Papa Panov had returned to his window and was gazing up and down the street.

"I suppose you are expecting visitors?" the old roadsweeper asked.

"Well, I'm expecting Jesus," said Papa Panov and he explained what he had heard that night.

"I wish you the best of luck," said the roadsweeper doubtfully as he went back out to work. Papa Panov looked up and down the street. Families passed by on their way to visit relatives.

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“Merry Christmas Papa Panov,” they called to him. And he waved back but did not stop them. He was waiting for someone else. He was just about to close his door when he noticed a young woman carrying a baby. She looked tired and thin and her clothes were shabby. “Would you like to come in to get warm?” called Papa Panov. The young woman was startled, until she saw his kind eyes. “You’re very kind,” she said. “Not really,” replied Papa Panov, “But you look so cold.” Papa Panov asked the woman to share his bread and soup. She shook her head proudly, but she gratefully accepted some warm milk for the baby.

When Papa Panov noticed the child’s bare feet, the young woman explained sadly that she had no money to buy him any shoes. So Papa Panov took down from the shelf the pair of tiny shoes he’d made. They fitted the baby perfectly. “How can I thank you enough?” asked the young woman. But Papa Panov hardly heard her. He was looking anxiously out of the window, hoping he hadn’t missed Jesus. When the young woman asked if something was the matter, Papa Panov told her he was expecting Jesus. She looked as if she didn’t really believe him but said she hoped his dream would come true. “You deserve it, for being so good to me and the baby.”

Hours ticked by, people came and went past the shop but Jesus did not appear. Papa Panov began to worry that Jesus had come and he had not recognised him. He went to the door for one last look. As he waited, all sorts of people passed by. He greeted them all with a smile or a nod and to the beggars he gave a coin or a hunk of bread. And still Jesus did not come. As dusk fell the old shoemaker sadly lit his lamp and sat down wearily. He took out his book to read again but his heart was heavy. “It was only a dream after all,” he said to himself sadly. “I wanted to believe it so much. I wanted him to come.” And tears welled up in his eyes.

As the night before, Papa Panov started to doze. Through his tears he seemed to see all the people who had passed by his shop during the day, including the roadsweeper and the young woman with the baby. And each seemed to whisper, “Didn’t you see me, Papa Panov?” “Who are you?” cried the old shoemaker. “Tell me.” Then he heard the same voice as the night before. “I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was cold and you took me into the warm. All the people you have helped today – all the time you were helping them, you were helping me!”

The tears dried in the old man’s eyes and he looked thoughtful for a while. Then he smiled and the sparkle came back into his eyes as he said, “So he came after all. Jesus did come after all.”

*Papa Panov’s Special Day*  
*Based on a traditional Russian story*

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