

The Candleberry Elf

A solstice story of generosity, selflessness, compassion and the gratitude that comes through serving others



In the backyard of an old farmhouse, tucked between a mock orange and a lilac tree, was a candleberry bush. It was planted there years ago by the old woman who lived in the farmhouse with her old husband - she had planted it as a gift to the birds as she had heard that birds liked candleberries - and she liked birds. So she planted it along with hackberry and honeysuckle in hopes to increase the number of birds that visited her backyard. And it certainly worked. The birds came in multitudes to eat and drink from the hackberry and honeysuckle and other flowers and shrubs she had planted. Strangely, however, they did not eat the candleberries.

Year after year the piled fruit remained untouched, fattening and purpling with no disturbance. And then, every year, close to the time of the full moon, the berries would all disappear. They would be gone. The old woman noticed this and wished to find out where they all went. A bird? A creature of some sort? She never found out why - but it became a kind of marker of the year. When the candleberries were gone, that meant that autumn was coming to an end and the darkest night of the year was a few weeks away. This was a special night for the old woman and her husband and they celebrated every year by lighting candles and telling stories. They would make a wide wreath out of pine and fir boughs and place several candles within. They would also place candles around the house in every window. Then once the sun set, they would light each candle to bring their own light to the darkest and longest night of the year. The wreath and the candles were in her picture window and when she lit them they would shine out into the backyard and her sleeping garden.

What she didn't know was that the garden she illuminated on that darkest of nights was hardly asleep. The plants had certainly retreated back into the earth, the trees had dropped their leaves and the nuts and berries had been gathered and stored by the creatures of the wood - but the garden and surrounding forest were still teeming with activity. You see, the fairies were there - pixies, imps, elves, brownies, and gnomes of every variety were spread throughout the garden. For many of them, nighttime was a very busy time indeed and the longest and darkest night of the year was an especially busy night. Many of the flower fairies were busy dancing through the dreams of nearby children. The tree elves were whispering stories to the bare branches of their trees and gnomes were underground crafting magic into brightly colored stones. Every fairy had its task and one of them watched the old woman and her husband light their candles with particular interest. This was, of course, the candleberry elf.

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He sat in his cozy workshop tucked between two thick roots of the candleberry bush and looked to the cottage. Every year he would wait until the old woman and the old man began to light their candles - and then he would light his own candles. You see this was the task of the candleberry elf. He was to make the candles for this festival of lights lit on the darkest night of the year. All the fairies would wait in eager anticipation for the candles to be lit. Every year they would pause from their many tasks - tending their plants, crafting their stones, dancing in dreams, and riding the wind - to be still and quiet and look at the lights. During this long night, the darkest night of the year, the fairies and people would share something together - gratitude for the light. They all offer the light of their candles as a gift to each other and to the world.

But this year something happened.

Everything began as it had always begun since the candleberry bush first produced berries. The birds and forest animals did not eat the candleberries as they tasted like they might taste if one took a bite out of a sour chunk of wax. Not very tasty indeed. So the candleberry bush remained filled with berries even after its leaves had turned rusty red and fallen off in autumn. The candleberry elf waited until the full moon of deep autumn and then began the harvest. Every berry was plucked and brought to his workshop underground between the bush's roots. There he had a chandlery with a big iron pot kept warm by magic blue flames. He tossed several berries into the pot and cooked them until they were melted into a jam. Then he ceased the fire and let the stew cool. In time ample wax from the berries would rise to the surface and harden, while the berry mash remained below. The crafty elf would then pull out the disc of wax and pile it in his workshop. The jam was poured into shallow bowls and put out for the birds. They loved the jam, now devoid of the gummy wax, and gobbled it up every morning. The candleberry elf remained at his chandlery until every berry was boiled of its wax and he had enough to begin candle-making.

He used cottonwood fibers spun into wicks to dip into the blue-purple wax from the candleberries. This took some time and the candleberry elf was a patient fellow. He seldom rested or left his chandlery as he dipped the candles again and again until every drop of wax was used. He always finished mere hours before the eve of the longest and darkest night - and he spent those hours watching. He was watching the window. He was watching to see the old woman and her husband light their first candles. It was this moment when the candleberry elf knew it was time to light his own candles. He lit them all about the yard and they shimmered and twinkled like little stars. The fairies of that area all stopped their tasks and activities to be still for a while, marveling at the lights. In this darkest time of the year, the fairy world became still and quiet - all eyes sparkling with the tiny lights of candles.

But this year something happened. Something the candleberry elf did not expect.

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Hours before the sunset, the candleberry elf sat in his chandlery accounting his work. The workshop was filled with the spicy fragrance of the candleberry wax as he prepared the candles for lighting. Then he perched in the nook of the candleberry bush and looked to the house. He saw the smoke coming out of their chimney and the yellow lights flicker on inside. The sun was beginning to set and the sky darken. Soon, he thought, soon they will light their candles and the festival of lights will begin. He waited. It got darker. He waited. It got darker still. No candles. In fact, he didn't see any movement at all inside. The lights were on so he knew they were home, but no one was coming to the windows or even walking by. He waited. The birch elves stopped by to inquire about the candles. Ice fairies wondered if they should begin to freeze the brook. Gnomes came to the surface to complain. Where were the lights? The candleberry elf told them all the candles were coming, he would light them soon and he looked once more to the house. Nothing. No candles. He heaved a sigh and took out his candles. He placed one at the base of the candleberry bush and readied to light it. He stood over the candle - still, about to light it when a thought came to him.

Go to the house.

He did not light the candle. Instead, he gathered his bundle of candles and made his way to the house. He wrapped the bundle in a twine of dried grass and pulled the bundle behind him as he climbed a sleeping morning glory vine to a window. He looked inside.

At first, he did not see anything but then he spotted a bed by the hearth. The flames were roaring and he saw someone lying in the bed. It was the old man. Sitting on the bed was the old woman. She was tenderly wiping his forehead with a cloth. Her face looked sad and worried.

Then the candleberry elf understood. The old man was sick. The old woman had been so busy caring for him that she forgot the candles. So that was it. The elf climbed back down to the ground.

He looked up at the dark sky and saw all the stars opening and sparkling their night. It was their night - the longest of the year. He smiled at the starlight and then he knew what to do.

He took the bundle of candles over to the small cat door at the base of the back door. He pushed through the door into the house. It was warm and glowed golden in the firelight. He could hear the crackling of the fire and the sound of the old woman speaking quietly. He could not understand her words but could tell she was reassuring the old man.

The elf placed one of his candles in a nearby window. It stood upright and ready. He then lit the candle with his blue fairy fire and it offered a soft magical glow. The candleberry elf placed a candle in every window around the small house. He then slowly and carefully placed a ring of candles around the bed. The old woman was so focused on the old man that she didn't notice the growing ring of lit candles encircling the bed.

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Finally, the elf climbed the fireplace bricks to place one on the hearth mantle. He wanted the old man to see the candlelight from his bed. He slowly and carefully pulled himself up brick by brick until he reached the wooden mantle. Then he looked down at the old man. He looked very tired. He was breathing slowly. The candleberry elf watched him, along with the old woman, for a long time. Then he positioned the candle and lit it. He stood back to look at the flame. Then he heard a noise. It was a low kind of cracking noise. He looked around and saw that it was coming from the old man. He was awake now and he was looking directly at the candleberry elf. And he was smiling. The sound was laughter - quiet laughter.

The old woman started speaking to him and then looked up at the mantle too. She smiled and walked to the candle. She couldn't see the candleberry elf standing right next to the candle - it seemed that only the old man could see him. She picked up the candle and studied it. It was small and beautiful. And the smell. She took a deep breath in. It smelled like a cold mountain forest - minty but also spicy. She held it to the old man. He took a breath and then looked back at the elf. They looked at each other for a while and the old man winked at him. The elf smiled and made his way down the fireplace.

As soon as the candleberry elf was outside he realized he had used all his candles. There were no more for the fairy festival of lights. He wasn't sure what to tell them all - the fairies all looked forward to this night. As he approached the garden, however, he saw something unexpected. Speckling the ground, the branches of the trees and the tips of dried stalks of plants were shimmering little lights. They were sparkling like tiny candles - everywhere sparkling like a thousand tiny candles. As he got closer he saw all his friends. Grass fairies, tree elves, brownies, nymphs, and gnomes were all out and smiling at him. They knew where he had been and what he had done. And they decided together that this year they would bring him the light. After so many years of the candleberry elf bringing light to the fairies on this, the darkest night of the year, they decided this year, it was their turn.

So candleberry elf and all his friends were still and silent together, feeling thanks for lights sparkling around them - and for the friends who bring them.