

JOHANNA

Johanna was a kindly woman and would never pass by if someone needed help. So, when she saw the elderly woman making slow progress on the verge of the A9 at Stainland, weighed down by shopping bags and being blasted by the wind and sleet, she stopped without hesitation and offered her a lift.

The woman seemed hesitant, and Johanna encouraged her to get in, telling her that the weather was getting worse and she really needed to come in out of the cold. The bags went in the back seat and the woman got in beside Johanna.

Johanna realised that the woman was a traveller, and most likely not used to kindness, so she did her best to put her at her ease. She soon learned that the woman was staying in a caravan pulled in on a track off the road on the Causeymire, and that her granddaughter was living there with her. Her car had broken down and she had walked all the way into Thurso to get food. She didn't seem keen to talk about her Granddaughter, but Johanna had noticed one or two items in the shopping bags that made her wonder.....

Johanna was actually heading for Wick, but she had no intention whatsoever of dropping the old woman off at the junction in such conditions and with darkness not far away, so she signalled right and headed out into the wilderness of the mire as the skies darkened and great snow clouds loomed over the horizon. As they neared Spittal, the snow started and the flakes swiftly grew larger, with the wipers only just managing to cope. The woman explained that her caravan was a few miles east of Spittal and Johanna concentrated hard as the road started to fill in with snow, and the Zafira's tyres clogged as the fresh snow built up in the treads. Johanna knew that the Causeymire could be downright dangerous, but she was a skilled and confident driver, and it was far too late to turn back anyway. Eventually, as the weather really closed in, Johanna saw the lights from the caravan windows, just visible through the blizzard, and she turned off the road into the rough track. She managed to get close to the van door and jumped out to help the old woman with her bags. The snow was now horizontal and visibility down to a matter of feet, and Johanna realised she was never going to make it back. She and the old woman got into the caravan and slammed the door as the wind rose to a howl and the snow swiftly covered the windows.

As she wiped the snow off her face and out of her eyes, Johanna saw a young girl - perhaps 16 or 17 years old - lying on the bed, covered with a blanket, which could not disguise the fact that she was obviously heavily pregnant. The old woman was exhausted and Johanna found the kettle, turned on the gas, and started to make tea. She tried to phone home to tell her husband what had happened, but the signal was gone and she realised that, once again, the masts were out. At least it was warm in the van, and they had light and plenty of gas and food, and Johanna decided there was nothing for it but to sit out the storm.

The hours passed and the storm worsened, but Johanna managed to get the old lady talking. Her daughter had abandoned her granddaughter and the old lady had brought her up as best she could, but life on the road was hard, and the girl had missed out on so much that others took for granted. She was a loving girl and simply wanted love in return. She thought she had found it, but the man had vanished as soon as he found out about the baby, and she had returned to her grandmother for refuge. And now, with two weeks to go, they were living in the old van, close enough to Thurso and Wick for medical help when the time came, but far enough away to feel safe from contact with the outside world. Johanna finally got the girl to

speak - her name was Maryanne and she was 17. She was clearly a bright girl, but scared of strangers, and she spoke so quietly that Johanna had to strain to hear her. Soon, the girl realised that Johanna was simply a mother and she started to talk. She spoke of her hopes and fears, of her past happiness and of her heartbreak, but when she spoke about the baby her eyes lit up. It would be hers, she said, the only thing in the world that had ever truly been hers. Johanna put her arm around Maryanne's shoulders and pulled her close, one woman comforting another. And the storm continued to rage.

In the early hours, as the old lady and Johanna dozed, Maryanne suddenly gave a sharp cry. Johanna looked at the girl and - instinctively - she knew. The old lady put on the kettle and got a bowl and towels from the cupboard. Maryanne was terrified, and Johanna knew that this was a bad situation, but she needed to sound strong and appear to be confident. The old lady did all she could, but it was down to Johanna. They got the girl as comfortable as possible, and when the pains really started, Johanna held the girl's hand, whispered words of comfort to her and gently wiped her brow. The pains became faster and faster and the world condensed into the tiny caravan, a pool of light in the darkness, and the struggles of three women, strangers only hours before, but now doing what women had done for millenia. Somehow Johanna just knew what was needed and she did it.

And soon, amidst the great darkness and the howling of the wind, the sound of new life echoed across the muir and Johanna gently placed the baby in the mother's arms. And the old lady and Johanna lay down, one each side of the mother and the baby, protecting them and keeping them warm, and they slept.

And in the morning, when the storm abated, and the ploughs came, help was sent and the newborn, enfolded in Maryanne's arms, was taken safely to hospital. Johanna and the old lady hugged and parted, and Johanna could see her waving until she disappeared in the mirror.

And a couple of days later, in the Thurso Registry Office, the little girl's birth was recorded.

And her name was Johanna.

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