

A Christmas Present

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At last the school bell sounded and hundreds of little faces emerged from Elwood Elementary. Running through the wide main doors, the mass of children rushed to meet their moms and dads or to clamber noisily into their buses. Excitement radiated as the last day of school before Christmas vacation ended. No one noticed the tiny outline of a boy trudging alone down the street.

Henry walked softly trying to hear his feet crunch in the snow which wrapped the frozen ground in a blanket. With his Chicago Cubs baseball cap placed firmly on his head, he snuggled deeper into his worn brown coat. The coat was two sizes too big and hung tiredly about Henry's skeletal frame. Three buttons remained on its front as if deserted. In his left fist he clinched a torn book bag from which protruded two library books, a math book, and a reading book. He had already done his homework but wanted to do more so his teacher Mrs. Johnson would be proud. Henry thought she was the best teacher in the whole world.

Timmy, Henry's six-year old brother, liked the stories in his reader. Many night's after the moon drifted high into the open sky like a balloon tied to a cord of unmeasurable length and the bird's rested in their nests with their heads below their wings, Henry would stealthily open it and read to Timmy by the thin streams of silver light which slipped through their small window. With the innocent belief and wonder that only a child's voice can hold, Henry would read to Timmy. Timmy would listen enchanted by the enthralling rise and fall of Henry's voice which caused a story no matter how old to become fresh and compelling.

Timmy hadn't been to school for a long time because he had been sick. Henry knew what would make him feel better. Henry had tried for months to get a Christmas present for his little brother and had finally found one with only two weeks before Christmas. Henry felt so warm inside. He knew his brother would be so surprised and happy.

After walking for many blocks, Henry came to the park. It was getting colder now.

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Snow began to fall in a light mist to which Henry paid no attention. He walked along his secret path to the swings, hoping to find someone feeding the pigeons. No one was there and no pigeons could be seen. Sadly Henry passed by the snow covered swings and pulled his coat closer to him. Following his path around the pond which lay frozen in the center of the park, Henry came to a lone oak tree. He peeped around cautiously and then pushed his tiny hand into a small opening formed by the roots of the tree.

Pulling his hand from the tree he held a tiny airplane. As if God had wanted him to have it, he found it one day lying covered by leaves beside the pond he had just walked around. He had been worried someone else would find it like he had, but he needed to keep it somewhere that Timmy wouldn't see it. Henry looked lovingly at it. It was perfect in every way except for a tiny chip in the blue paint on its right wing. Even the bright red bow which Mrs. Johnson had tied to it for him was unblemished. Henry held it tenderly in his hands and began walking.

It was getting late and the temperature was very cold by the time he reached the large house on Fourth Street. In the yard, rising from a dirty drift of snow, was a sign with writing which had long ago become illegible. The house appeared old and decrepit from endless years of use. It stood somehow valiantly despite its condition.

Henry climbed the crumbling concrete step which led to a heavy wooden front door and pushed it open. It moved slowly, almost baleful, upon its hinges. Henry was engulfed as he entered and the door closed. The inside of the house looked and felt much the same as the outside except for the warmth. He hurried past the large desk by the door and hurried to the little room that he and Timmy shared with two other boys. Unbuttoning his coat he pulled out his precious treasure. He knew Timmy would be so happy. Late at night they would often whisper about getting their own plane and flying away. Henry believed someday they would.

As he approached the door of their room he silently prayed Timmy's cough was better. Henry came to the door and tried to open it but the knob would not turn. He saw Mrs. Tellis, the nice lady who washed their clothes and fixed good things for them to eat, watching him with tear-filled eyes. She walked with difficulty to him and put her arms around his small shoulders. Her eyes briefly met Henry's and then looked quickly away,

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finally settling on the blue plane still clutched tightly in Henry's hand. She knew Timmy wouldn't be flying any planes this Christmas.



Photo by Becky Crafts