

The Gift

Christmas Eve was a time our whole family looked forward to. Me, my parents, and my brother spent the night watching Christmas movies, baking sweets, and opening just one present before bed. We all sprawled out around the tree while *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* played in the background. My Dad was standing behind my Mom, sneaking bites and sips of milk and cookies that I had left out for Santa. I rolled my eyes, but still knowing Santa wouldn't exactly mind if my Dad shared. That's what Santa is all about, anyway.

It was a tradition for us all to get a new pair of pajamas on Christmas Eve. My brother opened his, laughed, and thanked Santa when he saw it was pajama bottoms of Mickey Mouse, a character that I was told he used to be obsessed with when he was my age. I laughed along despite not quite getting the joke. My parents opened theirs next, and it was revealed to be simple and boring patterned pajamas.

Next was my turn. My eyes scattered underneath the tree, wondering which one would be the present I was meant to open tonight. Then suddenly, it caught my eye. A small box wrapped in red and gold striped paper, and a bow on the top. Parts of it were black and dirty, as if someone had thrown it into a firepit, then removed it immediately. I leaned closer to it, and the tag on the bow read *To James. From Santa.*

Curiously, I said to everyone, "Can I open this one?"

Everyone around me smiled faintly, "That's the one we want you to open." My mom's eyes glistened with hope as she set her hot chocolate on her lap, gazing from me to the gift, then back to me. Suddenly, her head jerked to the mantle behind the tree. Sitting there was Tinsel, our

elf on the shelf, meant to report to Santa if I was misbehaving. I gulped, wondering if there was any sort of connection.

“Open it! I wanna go to bed!” My brother said to the left of me.

I reached under the tree, grabbed the box, and set it on my lap. As I placed my hand on the top, ready to find out what was inside, a small, high-pitched giggle rang around the room. Startled, I looked up, scanning the room as my family waited impatiently.

“Did nobody hear that?” I asked.

“Yes! Yes, it was Tinsel, now please just open the gift!”

They may have been right because once I peered to Tinsel again, he had placed his one leg over the other, completely opposite to the upright position he was in before. I shuttered but still managed to look into the gift after I removed the top of the box.

I gagged and nearly puked as I threw the box away from me. “Who’s is *that*?”

My Dad chuckled, “You didn’t notice, son? It’s yours!”

I stood up, and slowly lifted my hands, and sure enough, my right pinky was missing. Dried blood had stained my palm and much of my lower arm. I screamed and cried as I scooped back and huddled in the corner of the living room.

“I guess Tinsel thought you were naughty this year,” My Mom smiled delightedly.

I breathed hard, barely able to force words to escape my mouth.

“This must be Santa’s payment,” My brother said, emotionlessly.

I woke up in my own room, the sun shining through my thin curtains, and wind blowing snow through the trees outside. I was dreaming. It was a dream. I took a breath of relief.

I jumped out of bed, ecstatic about Christmas Day finally being here, and before my Mom could tell me it's not time to open presents yet, I practically threw myself down the stairs to the living room where the Christmas tree stood. Then, my celebrating went to a close. Below the tree was a small box wrapped in red and gold paper...

Happy Holidays from me to all of you.

- Ethan