

## A RIFLE FOR CHRISTMAS

Once upon a time, long long ago, there lived a little boy called Jimmy. Like most children, Jimmy loved Christmas. He loved playing in the snow, throwing snowballs and building snowmen but Jimmy's favourite was watching the snow flakes as they softly, silently, settled on streets and footpaths.

Jimmy often sat at the kitchen window, staring as each perfect white flake emerged out of the dark night; he thought it was just magical.

Jimmy was an only child and lived with his parents in a small terrace house in the middle of a big city.

In those days before distractions like television, there was little to keep children indoors - the street was their playground. Jimmy and his friends raced up and down, playing games such as hopscotch and football, throwing their coats on the ground to serve as goalposts, the noise of their game echoing up and down the empty street.

Even though his birthday was just before Christmas, his parents always made it special and Jimmy always looked forward to the toy that he knew his father would make for him. One year his father made a farmyard, complete with farm buildings and ploughed fields - another year it was a toy fort.

This year his father had made him a toy rifle. It was made from wood, with a long beautifully finished barrel. "Rat a tat" the rifle went when the trigger was pulled. None of his friends had anything like it and Jimmy loved showing it to them and using it in their games.

It was Christmas Eve and that morning Jimmy was overjoyed to see from his bedroom window that snow had fallen overnight. He couldn't wait to have his breakfast and get outside to meet his friends; they played in the snow all morning, their breath visible in the frosty air.

As the day wore on, Jimmy and his friends made a little fort from snow and played Cowboys and Indians, Jimmy helping to defend the fort with his new rifle.

In his boyish enthusiasm, he pushed the rifle into the frozen snow of the fort and as he pulled it out, the barrel broke off; Jimmy was devastated – his father had spent many hours making the beautiful rifle and now he had broken it on its first day. Even the snow had stopped falling.

He was so upset that he ran off down the snowy street clutching the broken rifle. Dusk was falling and the streetlights were coming on but Jimmy just kept running.

It was getting very cold and most people had stayed indoors. Lights were coming on in the rows of terraced houses, kitchen blinds were being pulled down, tea was being made. Jimmy knew that he should go home; his parents would be worried about him but he was afraid that his father would be angry about the broken rifle.

He soon left behind the familiar streets and realised that he was lost. He was also tired and when he came across a low wall under a bright streetlight, he sat down to rest and decide what to do.

He looked down at the two halves of the useless rifle and began to cry again, the tears cascading down his frozen face. What was he going to do?

"Don't cry little Jimmy," a soft voice said "everything will be alright; don't be frightened". Jimmy jumped up in fright and looked round; no one was there when he had sat down but sitting under the street light, at the other end of the wall, was a funny little man with a long white beard.

He looked like Santa Claus and was wearing one of those comic woollen Christmas hats with tinsel round it; he looked as if he had just left a Christmas party. "Why are you crying?" said the little man.

"I b-b-broke my new rifle" sobbed Jimmy.

The little man took the two halves of the sad looking toy rifle that Jimmy held out to him and examined it. "Oh dear" he said as he looked over his little round glasses, "It's a very beautiful rifle but very broken. Don't worry, Jimmy it was an accident; your daddy won't be angry" and he handed the broken rifle back to Jimmy.

Only now, it wasn't broken! Both parts had been joined together again - Jimmy couldn't believe his eyes - it was a miracle. He was almost speechless. "My rifle is fixed" he managed to splutter.

"It's magic" laughed the funny little man, "now it's time to take you home. I'll lend you my Christmas hat to keep you warm" and taking off his woolly hat, he placed it on Jimmy's head.

When Jimmy took off the little man's hat, somehow he was back in his darkened street, standing outside his house in a patch of light thrown by the kitchen window; there was no sign of the little man.

The front door was flung open and relieved to see him, his parents rushed out to give him a hug and welcome him home. "Where have you been Jimmy? Why did you run off?" they said. Jimmy told them about how he had broken the rifle but when he explained about the little man and how he had repaired it, his parents just laughed.

"That's a good story Jimmy; let's get you inside out of the cold. You can have a warm drink and a bun", his mammy said, trying not to laugh.

"That little man must have been Santa Claus, Jimmy; did you see his sleigh? " added his father, winking across at his wife; Jimmy looked at his father - with all the certainty of youth he knew that he had met Santa Claus.

In years to come, Santa often visited Jimmy but repairing the broken rifle was the best gift that Jimmy would ever receive.

Before following his parents into the house, Jimmy took one last look at the dark sky embroidered with millions of twinkling stars; one of the stars seemed to twinkle brighter than all the rest.

"Thank you for fixing my rifle, Santa," said Jimmy, and he was sure that he could hear a "Ho Ho Ho" in reply.

As he looked up into the blackness, the first flakes of snow began to fall again, settling on Jimmy's upturned face.

Jim Hamilton

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