



### THREE GIFTS

The snow swirling outside the classroom window seemed to be affirming the children's belief that the winter holiday season is the time for anything but schoolwork.

"Talk about conspiracies," thought Terry Hastings, the first-year third grade teacher, "even the weather's against me. The last day of school before the winter holiday vacation is tough enough without that constant reminder brushing against the windows."

"Thomas, please pay attention up here. There are no math facts written in the snow,"

Terry had to admit that there was more action outside, but she was troubled. Tommy had been a problem all year. He was in class, but his thoughts weren't. Today he was more distracted than ever.

After a home visit with Mrs. Casey, Tommy's mother, Terry understood the meaning of "impoverished." She had seen a house that was certainly clean, but one that had only the barest of furnishings. She remembered that there was a color television, or rather color on the television. The colors on the set in no way represented the real world. The half green faces and flesh colored grass had given a surrealistic appearance to the "ring around the collar" commercial blaring on the television.

"What kind of Holiday will Tommy have?" thought Terry, "I wonder if he's upset because he knows he won't be getting many of the things he is hoping for."

The morning passed (as did Tommy's attention). Now back from lunch, the children were barely able to contain their excitement. Not so for Tommy. As the children readied their presents and snacks, Terry had a private talk with Tommy which proved useless.

After the snacks were passed out, the children decided to exchange holiday gifts. They had written notes home asking if they could either make a gift or spend a dollar for one. Each parent had been agreeable. They had drawn names, and now the big moment had arrived.

Terry sat down and proceeded to let groups exchange their gifts. By the time Charles, the boy who was to exchange gifts with Tommy, reached Tommy's desk, tears were streaming down Tommy's cheeks.

"My mother didn't come home last night..." he cried, almost unable to speak. "... and she forgot to leave any money." Poor Charles was almost crying himself.

"And my brother wouldn't give me any. I'm sorry Charles. I don't have anything for you." By this time Tommy was almost hysterical. He could say no more even if he wanted to.

Charles finally spoke up. "Tommy don't be sad, you don't have to give me anything." There was what seemed like a suspension of time for a few seconds.

“Remember when you gave me some of your lunch when mine got knocked down,” Charles blurted. “And how Miss Hastings tells us stories about sharing..and about how we’re friends?”

Tommy looked up from his desk. On his face were the paths left by the tears streaming down his cheeks.

Charles, apprehensively, handed Tommy a red construction paper card which he had obviously spent much time making. It was beautifully colored, with sparkles, evergreen needles and tinsel pasted on the front.

“Please take my present.” Charles implored.

Just how tears of sadness could at once be transformed to tears of joy was a mystery that only a child’s understanding could have solved.

Terry cleaned up her room that holiday season. She knew the warmth and feeling of togetherness felt by the class as Tommy’s eyes lit up, overjoyed with his gift, would be remembered by them all. Nor would she forget the radiance of his face as he left for home.

Finally, just a few pieces of wrapping paper remained on her desk before she could call it a day. And one last gift...Wrapped in school writing paper no less.

“To Miss Hastings.” She opened the paper...”From Tommy.” In her hand Terry held the red card that meant so much to him. She just couldn’t believe it.

Now in the warmth of a June day, thirty years later, Mrs. Teresa Powel removed the red construction paper card from her desk drawer. It was her last day before retirement. She thought about how the everyday realities of teaching sometimes displaced her belief in the rewards of teaching. Tommy, Charles, and the card had been a reminder of that belief for the last thirty years. She was happy. She had been right.

As she walked to the office to turn in her keys for the last time, she thought to herself.

Thank you, Charles.

Thank you, Tommy.

I’ll never forget.

And she never did.

by Phil Rumore