

A STRANGE CHANGE

Lights twinkling in her eyes, the little girl looked up and said, “Grandpa, did you ever want something for Christmas and not get it?”

by CHRIS FABRY

THE QUESTION FELT like it was more about her fears than her desire for a history lesson, but he took it in stride.

“I suppose if I thought long enough I could come up with something.”

“What was your favorite toy when you were little?”

He scratched his chin. “Well, our family was not well-off. A good Christmas was new socks or a pair of gloves. One year I got a football. And then there was Gumby.”

“What’s a *Gumby*?”

“It was a TV show when I was your age. Gumby was ... Well, come to think of it, I’m not sure what Gumby was. He was green, and he had arms and legs you could pose in different positions. And he had a red horse named Pokey.”

“What would you do with them?”

“Play on the floor. Put Gumby on Pokey’s back and pretend they were riding into the sunset.”

“And that’s all you got?”

“I remember when I was 11, I got a bicycle. Banana seat. It was used, but it was new to me, so I loved it. Of course, I had to wait a few months for the snow to melt so I could ride.”

He stared at the fire and the tree. Her questions made his mind spin toward the past, and warm memories surfaced from the troubled years of his childhood. It felt good to have the cherubic-faced girl beside

him. Such an easy conversation. Her mother, his daughter-in-law, had dropped her off while she did some final shopping.

“You know what? I think I remember something now,” he said.

The child sat forward and stared at him. “About a toy you wanted?”

“Right. This was back in the 1960s. We had a little black-and-white TV, and we only got two channels. But there was a commercial that came on about a toy that captured my imagination. I wanted it more than anything.”

“What was it?”

“We called it the Strange Change machine. The commercial on TV made it sound exotic and exciting. The announcer’s voice echoed. I don’t remember what he said, but I begged my mother and father. I just had to have one. I told them it wouldn’t be Christmas without that toy.”

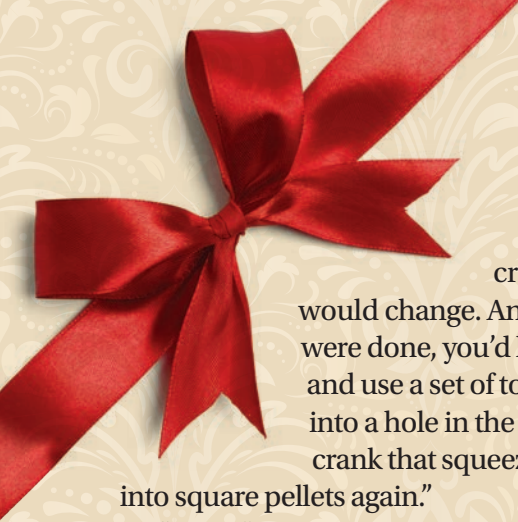
“What did it do?”

He moved his hands in front of her. “It was about this big and made out of metal. Heavy. And

on top was a plastic cylinder you could see through, and there was a sliding door in the front. You plugged it in a light socket, and the mesh material inside the cylinder got hot. And it came with little square pellets that you put inside. And when they got warm enough, they would open up and become animals or insects, all kinds of strange

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creatures. They would change. And then, when you were done, you'd heat them up again and use a set of tongs to stuff them into a hole in the side and turn a crank that squeezed them back into square pellets again."

"Wow!"

"Yeah, it was pretty neat."

"How do you know all that if you didn't get one?"

"From the commercial. And then in January when school started, one of my friends brought his and let me play with it once. I was a little jealous, to be honest."

"If you wanted it so bad, why didn't your mom and dad give you one?"

"Like I said, we were poor. I'm sure they wanted me to have it. My brother used to say we were so poor we couldn't afford to pay attention."

The little girl didn't laugh, but he let out a chuckle, and her eyes danced with amusement. The sweet smell of sugar cookies wafted from the kitchen, and he heard his wife open the oven to check on them.

"Is there a reason you asked me that, Punkin?"

The girl shrugged.

"Is there something you want for Christmas you think you might not get?"

She didn't answer.

"You want to tell me about it?"

A long pause. "I'm not supposed to."

"And why is that?"

The girl sat deep in thought, studying the lights on the tree.

"Are you afraid if you say it, you won't find it under the tree?"

"No."

"Then why aren't you supposed to tell me about it?"

"Mommy said not to."

"Oh, I see. And why did she say that?"

She hesitated, like a child being told to jump into outstretched arms in the dark.

"Because she said you would get mad."

"About a Christmas present? I could never be mad about something like that. Go ahead; you can tell me."

"I promised I wouldn't."

"Hmm. Well, I wouldn't want you to break your promise. But for the life of me, I can't think of anything you could say that would make me mad. I love you more than anything, Punkin. You know that, right?"

She nodded, her head buried in his shoulder. Then she sat forward and looked up, studying his face. He was ready for the secret, ready to hear the reason her mother had said he would get mad. Instead, she said, "Why do you have hair in your ears?"

He rubbed an earlobe. "That happens when you get older. The hair on top of your head wants to take a vacation, and some of it moves down to the ears. I try to keep up with it, but a lot of my hair has needed a vacation lately."

He heard a snicker from the kitchen.

The girl studied his ears and sat straighter for a better look. Apparently satisfied, she turned back to the tree and the presents arranged underneath.

"All of those are for our grandchildren. And I suspect you'll be opening one pretty soon."

She leaned forward, analyzing the size of the presents and the wrapping paper. All the expectation in the world right there beside him.

"Now if you could open anything you wanted on Christmas Day, any present you could receive, what would it be?"

She looked up with wide eyes and smiled, showing all her baby teeth still intact. "Oh, I know the best present ever would be ..." She stopped, as if remembering her promise, and looked away, like she'd been tricked into almost revealing the secret.

"Go on. You can tell me, Punkin. Is it something your parents say you can't have?"

"No."

"Something too expensive?"

"No. It's something only you can give."

"Me?"

"I mean, not give, really. I don't want to say it."

Now she had his interest. He couldn't imagine

what dark secret she might be harboring that had to do with him. "Honey, you don't have to be afraid. Just tell me what you're thinking."

"You promise you won't get mad?"

"Cross my heart and hope ... uh, you can have my sugar cookie if I get mad. OK?"

She nodded and looked into his eyes. "It's not a present I want you to give. It's a present I want you to receive."

"Something you want to give me?" he said.

"No, something God wants to give you."

There it was. Simple words from a child, sneaking up and grabbing his heart. He knew he'd been on prayer lists for years. He'd wanted nothing to do with church or the Bible or anything religious. He didn't need God, didn't need to jump into the dark of faith. But there was something about the girl's words, something about her sincerity that moved him.

"That's what you want most of all, Punkin?"

Still looking at his eyes, she nodded. "I would trade all my presents."

"Cookies are ready!" his wife called from the kitchen.

The girl jumped down and ran through the living room, and he just sat for a moment, pondering what he'd heard, lights twinkling in

There it was.
Simple words from a
child sneaking up and
grabbing his heart.

his eyes, wondering if a strange change might still be available. ☺

CHRIS FABRY is an award-winning author of more than 80 books, including his novelization of the Kendrick Brothers film, *Overcomer*. Look for Chris' new novel, *A Piece of the Moon*, coming in April 2021. If you have a dream to write, find encouragement at heyyoucanwrite.com. Chris is also the host of Chris Fabry Live on Moody Radio.



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