

*The
Toy
Home*

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The Toy Home

(The following story is based upon a true event -- the devastating fire at the central St. Vincent de Paul distribution complex in Detroit, just before Christmas, 1995. The little stuffed bear in the story also existed. And the miracles really did happen.)



In the cool darkness, the little stuffed bear awakened. He wasn't sure how long he'd not been awake. It was almost as though he'd come awake for the first time. But he knew that *that* couldn't be true. So he thought a bit, and remembered sunny days, a little golden-haired girl, tea parties, being pulled through a mint garden in a red and white wagon, jays chattering and laughing...

But then what had happened? ...Oh, yes! He remembered being put in a box with many other toys, then a long haze of darkness, and then ... here. But where was here?

He looked down at the light brown fuzz of his tummy. Why, he'd lost a button! How had that happened? And then, in a sudden fright, he quickly searched for and found his two arms and two legs. So he hadn't had an arm or leg pulled off, wasn't ripped and leaking stuffing everywhere -- the most frightening thing that could possibly happen to a little toy bear. He gave a small sigh of relief.

"Oh, they're all there, don't worry," rasped a voice to his left -- a narrow, hard voice, like stones on glass. The little bear looked in the direction of the voice and saw that it belonged to a yellow-suited Punchinello clown. "What is it with you bears, anyway," the clown was saying, "--always worried that you're missing an arm or a leg. What a buncha wimps!" The clown's legs dangled over the edge of the shelf on which it sat. One of the legs was stained with something brown -- chocolate, perhaps. "You want to know what fear is? The person who owned me used to swing me around his head by my legs, let me go, and then laugh when I crashed into the wall! *You* probably just spent your time either tucked in bed or in some tea party! What do you got to be scared about?"

"I - I - I" the little bear began, his voice creaky from disuse.

"Well, at least both of you were played with, dearies!" This time the voice, an old woman's voice, came from the little bear's right. It belonged to a witch on a broken broomstick, who looked as though she was ready to fall from the high shelf where she was perched. "I was brought home and played with for only a little while. Then my little girl forgot all about me and left me for days, just lying on the floor, until a big man stepped on me and broke my broomstick. That's how I ended up here. What'd you do wrong?"

"I--don't think I did any --" Where was *here*?

The Toy Home

“Yah don’t haveta do anything *wrong* to end up here,” the Punchinello clown rasped. “Sometimes you’re made wrong, and sometimes the people you’re with forget about you or even lose you. *I* was lost for *weeks* before I came here. That was the best time of my life, too.”

“I think I’d be scared to be lost,” the little bear said.

“Just like a bear!” the clown snorted. “What’s there to be scared of? Different people pick you up, move you around...I got picked up by one little girl who put me on a train seat and then left me there, and I got to see a lot of the countryside before some man in blue picked me up and tossed my in a basket, where somebody else picked me up and took me to a different house for a while, and then...” The clown voice stopped for a minute. “...I ended up here.”

“But where is *here*?” At last the bear could ask his burning question.

“Don’t you know anything, dearie?” the witch cackled. “This is the Toy Home! It’s where toys end up when their people are through with them. They play with you for a while and then forget all about you. Then, if you’re lucky, they bring you here, where you sit on a shelf like this for a while, until somebody else comes along and picks you up. And off you go, and it starts all over again.”

“What happens if you’re not lucky?” the little bear asked.

“Well...” The witch sounded like she didn’t want to continue.

“It’s like this,” the clown rasped: “Remember how when your little kid stopped playing with you, you sat in a box and got sleepier and sleepier? That’s what happens to toys when they’re not wanted. Worst of all is when they throw you away, which is what happens when you *don’t* get lucky. Then, if you can land on the street, get picked up once in a while, like I was, you’ll stay awake. Just like being picked up and brought here. That’s what woke you back up. ...Otherwise, you go back to sleep.”

“For how long?”

“For forever, dearie,” the witch said.

The little bear began to cry tearlessly. “B-but I don’t *want* to go to sleep *forever*,” he said.

“Ah, don’t be such a wimp,” the clown said: “And besides, it might not be forever, if you haven’t been too beat up or broken. And you never know when you might get picked up and brought here, to the Toy Home.”

The Toy Home

“But I don’t like this place,” the little bear whimpered: “It’s dark, and the way you talk scares me!”

“About time you got scared a little,” the clown sneered: “Didya think it was gonna be one of your teddy-bear tea parties all your life? How’re you gonna learn how to live on the streets if you don’t toughen up a little? How many *kind* owners do you think?”

“Oh, *stop* going on so!” It was a new voice this time, a low, strong and sweet voice. It came from somewhere low down and in front of the little bear.

He looked down. In the shadow of the shelf in front of him, resting on the floor, was a wooden rocking horse. Her large golden eye was fixed right at him. She had a painted red bridle and a brown saddle with only a couple of chips in it, and her body gleamed creamy white in the shadows, almost glowing. Her mane and tail were dark brown -- sepia -- and her legs were frozen in a gallop, attached to two rockers -- but one of the rockers was cracked.

“You need to be brave, little bear that’s true,” the rocking horse said, “but remember that the world has both good and bad in it, and toys have to take what comes their way, enjoying the good and waiting out the bad. You’re a handsome bear. You’ll be back in someone’s arms before long.”

The little bear looked at the cracked rocker. “But what about you?” he asked. “Will they take you, because you’ve got, you’ve got --”

“A broken rocker?” she finished for him. “Maybe. It might take a little longer, too. But that can be even better, sometimes. Because the person who finally picks you picks you because you have the broken rocker and takes special care of you or even fixes you up. That’s what I think will happen to me.”

“Ah, come on,” the clown said, “you make it sound like it’s all sunshine and fun times. Let me tell you --”

Suddenly, the clown stopped talking. All the toys stopped talking, falling into the silence caused by the magic that kept them from talking whenever people approached. And two people were indeed walking down the long aisle of toys, their voices slowly becoming more distinct as they drew near.

“So how long you been workin’ for St. Vincent’s, girl?”

“‘Bout two year, now,” the second woman puffed. She was fat and made the floor creak as she puffed along.

“Lawd, the time sure do fly, don’t it?” said the first. “Think it goin’ snow tonight?”

The Toy Home

“Don’ know. Nineteen ninety five cold enough already without no snow. Don’ need no snow.”

“Hey, lookit this ‘un here.” The first lady picked up the Punchinello clown. “My, but don’t he look rascally! He done been aroun’, ain’t he? Wonder what that brown stuff is on his leg?”

“Don’ know.” The second one chuckled suddenly, a low throbbing rumble. “Look like tobacco.”

“Girl, you crazy!” The first lady made a move as if to put the clown away, then gave the second lady a sidelong glance. “Say, you done all your Christmas shopping yet?”

“No.”

“How ‘bout that niece of yours?”

“Lemme see that doll.” The second lady turned the clown over in her fat brown hand. The other toys waited, hopeful, and time seemed to slow down. But at last she gave it back: “Nah. She prob’ly wouldn’t play with it. She wants one a them, you know, Power Rangers.”

The first lady chuckled as she put the clown back. “I know what you mean, girl, I know what you mean. Say, you know what? It’s almost quittin’ time. Let’s go warm up in the office a bit. Mr. Billings got a ‘lectric heater now.”

“A ‘lectric heater? Where’d he get one a those?”

“Donated, I ‘speck, like everthin’ else.” The voices faded as the two ladies moved down the hall.

When the little bear found he could speak again, he whispered, “Is it really almost *Christmas*?”

“It sure is, dearie,” the witch said, “although that probably won’t help me much: I was built for Halloween.”

“Yeah, you probably have a *long* wait,” said the clown.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get picked,” the little bear said. “I was hoping you would.”

The Toy Home

“Trying to get rid of me, huh?” the clown snickered. “Just kidding.” In a different, smaller voice, he continued, “I didn’t really want to get picked, anyway. I don’t want to just sit on someone’s shelf and doze off.”

“Christmas!” the little bear breathed. He loved Christmas. He remembered waking up to squeals of joy, a little girl holding him close, a warm, brightly-lit room. And it had been Christmas.

“Christmas,” said the rocking horse. “I remember waking up one Christmas ... laughter ... a little boy riding me, then a little girl ... so warm and bright ... I think every toy wishes to wake up on Christmas.”

“Do you suppose we’ll...”

“Be in someone’s home for Christmas?” the rocking horse said. “Oh, I hope so, little bear. I *hope* someone will be able to fix me up so I can rock again, make some little person happy...I miss being able to give what toys can give to people...And I *know* you’ll be taken home, little bear. I *know* it. I can just feel it...”

“Christmas,” the little bear breathed again. He was remembering now, remembering the crinkly blue eyes of the little girl, a glimpse of a dining room table filled with desserts and things to drink; a warm bed; being read stories before being tucked in for the night ... Christmas ... He dozed off, with happy, warm visions floating around him ...



When next he awoke, the little bear struggled to understand how the darkness was not cool any longer but warm, and not the same darkness, either, but pierced with small flashes of light, and -- now the little bear was sharply, confusedly awake, hearing crashing sounds and rumblings. His eyes darted to the witch, the clown, the rocking horse, but -- something kept coming between them and him, something like little clouds, and a roaring sound, the darkness getting warmer and --

“Fire!” the Punchinello clown shouted.

The little bear felt a stab of fear. Fire! And they were helpless! “What do we do?” he squeaked.

“Do, dearie? There’s nothing to do except hope that it passes us by!”

“Boy, it’s times like this I wish I was made of metal, like one of those trains or something,” the clown wailed. “They’ve got a good chance of making it through something like this! We might make it too, though!”

The Toy Home

“How?” the little bear squeaked.

“If the fire doesn’t come too close, we might not get too scorched, dearie! And if it does, well... At least we won’t feel anything!”

“How do you know we won’t feel anything?” The little bear’s voice cracked, and he looked wildly about. The darkness was getting hotter, the smoke thicker. He wasn’t able to see the clown or the witch anymore, and he could just barely make out the rocking horse.

From the smoke the witch’s voice said, “Because I once knew a plastic soldier, a parade leader, who stood straight up with his hands on his hips, until one day he was set too close to the fireplace, and his right arm melted away. *He* didn’t feel a thing! He told me!”

“What happened? Did they fix him?”

“No, they -- “ the witch’s voice could barely be heard over the growing commotion “ -- they threw him away.”

The words sank like stones into the little bear, despite his fear of the approaching fire. To be thrown away. That was the worst thing that could ever happen to a toy. He would rather be burned away.

He could hardly see anything now, the smoke was so thick. All the sounds became louder and clearer, especially since he couldn’t see. He could hear sirens, and people’s voices, a roaring sound. He resolved that he would be brave, brave -- but in spite of things, he felt as though he was going to cry. He blinked, blinked again, hearing through the crashing the clown’s voice as he shouted, “The firefighters are here! The firefighters will save us!” -- blinking yet again, wondering if it was true what the witch had said (because he *could* feel it getting warmer, and if he could feel *that* --); trying to be brave but feeling very frightened and alone --

Suddenly, through all the smoke, he saw a single golden gleam, shining like a beacon, piercing the darkness. It was a golden eye, and it was looking directly, steadfastly at him. It belonged to the rocking horse.

And then the voice, low, sweet and strong, gathered him in: “Be brave, little bear, be brave. And don’t give up hope. Remember what I tell you: I *know* you will be taken home, someday.”

“But rocking horse, what about you?”

The Toy Home

“Be brave, little bear! Set your heart to hope, and remember to wish for things, and wish wisely! This is all that toys can do, but even this means so much. Who knows, maybe we’ll see each other, when -- when -- “

“When will we see each other, rocking horse?” the little bear shouted. But at that moment, he heard a loud CRACK!, and a sudden flash almost blinded him. A huge chunk of flaming wood fell from the ceiling and landed with a crash in a shower of sparks. For an instant, flames seemed to be everywhere, as the smoke was whipped away to reveal both the Punchinello clown and the witch with the broken broomstick glowing eerily in the firelight. Through the fire gleamed the single golden eye of the rocking horse.

Just as suddenly, an even larger crash exploded behind the little bear, followed by a huge and powerful stream of water that roared through what was once the room they were in, snuffing out the fire on the floor and scattering toys in all directions. The little bear felt himself slammed upward by the force of the water, leaving clown, witch, horse in a sudden spinning escape, right through a burning mass that was once ceiling, roof, through timbers and out into a nighttime world full of fire, heat, water, cold, toys, people -- spinning now and falling for what seemed ages, as the spray left him and the firestorm wind carried him down, down to the water-soaked street. He hit with a jarring thud and knew no more.



The little bear awoke to flickering light. He felt cold more than hot: the fire had by now died down, although he could still see lots of smoke -- and a gaping ruined mass of broken glass and charred wood. That, he supposed, was where the Toy Home had been.

He was afraid to look at himself, afraid of what the fire had done to him. Would an arm or leg be burned off, or worse? He didn’t feel any different, but the thought frightened him so much that he shut his eyes tight.

Then, from somewhere inside himself, he seemed to hear the rocking horse’s voice: “Be brave, little bear. Set your heart to hope...” What had become of the clown, the witch? And especially, what had become of the rocking horse? She had been so brave, so strong!

He decided then that he would be brave. Somehow he felt that the rocking horse would know if he behaved like a brave little bear. Yes. He would be brave. He opened his eyes to take a hard look at himself.

Now he had *two* missing buttons. He decided that that wasn’t so bad: almost any spare button would make a simple repair. Then he noticed that his left arm was scorched, and that the once-soft light brown fur from upper arm to

The Toy Home

elbow was now curled and black. This was much more serious. What child would ever want a burnt-up old bear? Still, he resolved to hope such a one existed.

He looked toward the smoldering ruin where the Toy Home had been. On the remains of the front wall, a large and broken white sign, its edges charred, hung at a crazy angle. The little bear could recognize letters -- he had spent lots of time around wooden blocks -- but didn't know what they meant. Still, he said them to himself, one by one:

“S-T-V-I-N-C-E-N-T-D-E-P-A-U-L-S-O-C”

He wondered if that was the name of the Toy Home. He shut his eyes again. He heard the sound of heavy boots. Two firefighters, tall and busy, rushed by. Then, silence.

“Little bear.”

The little bear opened his eyes. Had he been dreaming? That had sounded like the rocking horse! Could it be...? He looked eagerly about. And then he saw her! “Rocking horse!” he squealed. “But what’s happened to you? What happened to your rocker?”

“Oh, I’ll be all right,” the rocking horse said. She was lying off to the left of the little bear, leaning against the curb of the street that ran in front of the Toy Home. She almost looked as though she was ready to ride, propped up as she was, except --

Except that her cracked rocker was gone, torn completely off from the force of the water blasted from the fire hoses. Her two left legs remained frozen in space, and jagged pieces of splintered wood showed where the legs had once joined the rocker. She had lost a bit of her wooden mane as well, chipped off. But her eye still comforted the little bear with its warm, steady gaze. “I suppose it will be a *very* long time before someone takes me home now,” she was saying.

“But we’re on the *street* now!” the little bear protested. “How will we ever be taken home *now*?”

A long, low whistle came from the sidewalk to their right. “Holy smokes! Whatever happened to *you* two?”

It was the Punchinello clown! He was sitting slumped over on the sidewalk, peering impishly at them from under his yellow jester’s cap. “Boy, it sure looks like you caught the worst of it! You all right, little bear? How ‘bout the horse?”

The Toy Home

“I-I’m okay, I guess,” the little bear said. “And the rocking horse’s rocker’s been torn completely off.”

“Wow, tough luck! ...Anybody seen the witch?”

But nobody had.

After a couple of minutes, the clown said, “Well, gee, maybe she got blown to a different part of the street. Or maybe they put the fire out, before...” His voice trailed off.

The three toys were silent now, each thinking its own thoughts. Sometimes, the little bear dozed off, only to be startled into wakefulness by some clatter or other, firefighters and police going importantly about their business, others somehow connected with the tragic fire walking slowly by, surveying the wreckage, shaking their heads. Night had given way to a chilly, grey day, a day of swift-moving clouds and wisps of snow. The toys watched and waited, and eventually dozed off.

Later in the day -- or was it the next day? -- the little bear was startled by a clatter and banging to his left. Men and women wearing hard helmets were driving big pieces of moving equipment -- forklifts, bulldozers, loaders -- and suddenly the air was filled with the sounds of engines, exhausts chugging, people shouting orders to one another. They brought the machinery right up to where the Toy Home had once stood. Then, with a tremendous crunching and crashing, they pushed over the husk of the building. Many times during this work, the little bear was afraid that the big wheels would back right over the Punchinello clown. But they always missed him -- even the big wheels of the trucks that came to haul the debris away.

Then one of the trucks stopped, and a man jumped down. He took off his gloves and threw them into the cab of the truck. “Hey, Neal!” he yelled, as he bent over and picked up the clown.

A big black man lumbered from the far side of the truck. “Watcha got?”

“Aintcher little girl interested in dolls like this?”

“Lemme see it.” Neal held the clown in one huge dark hand. “That’s some kinda Punch doll, I think,” he rumbled, his voice a low warm growl like a friendly mountain. “Yeah, she’d like that, all right. If I clean it up a little bit, I can give it to her for Christmas. Think I can get that stain out, too. Thanks, Ray.” Neal carefully placed the Punchinello clown in the cab of the truck. The two men got in the truck, and the truck rumbled off.

The Toy Home

When everyone had gone and the toys could speak again, the rocking horse said, "It looks as though the Punchinello clown got his wish, after all. It sounds as if he'll wake up in a warm house on Christmas."

"I hope he'll be happy," the little bear said. To tell the truth, he was going to miss the Punchinello clown. Even though the clown was always talking about being tough and about enjoying life on the street, the little bear knew that, deep down, the clown had a giving heart and only wanted the best for everyone. But the little bear was also happy that the clown was going to a bright, warm place. "Maybe you'll be next," he said to the rocking horse. "But if someone comes along and picks you up, I hope they'll pick me up, too. I hope we'll stay together forever."

"*Forever* is a very long time," the rocking horse said. "Toys wear out, get passed from child to child. Even so, we can hope to be together for a little while. I've been with many many toys and with many children during my awake times, and I can tell you that every new toy you meet and every new child who plays with you is like an unopened present, full of new joys and experiences."

"But didn't you have some children who were *bad* to you?"

"Well, what do you mean by 'bad'?"

"You know, who tried to break you, or played rough?"

"Oh, I suppose so. Yes. But toys can only wait and hope for better days. And that's just what I did. And the better days came."

"...Are you very old, rocking horse?"

"Well, yes, I think that I must be. But the odd thing about toys is that, if we're made well and well cared-for, how old we are doesn't really matter. And there are two other things that really help."

"What?"

"The first thing is that, when times are happy, appreciate them. And the second is that, when times aren't happy, look forward to better times to come."

After that, the toys grew quiet again. The sky darkened into an early wintry evening, and a fitful wind swirled bits of snow along the streets and alleys. Then a bit of newspaper, pushed by the breeze, landed on top of the little bear, so that he couldn't see what was happening. He started to call out for the rocking horse, to see if she was still there. Then he thought how silly and unbrave that was: the rocking horse hadn't moved! ...Still -- "...Rocking horse?"

The Toy Home

The rocking horse didn't answer.

The little bear grew worried. He began to call for the rocking horse again, but then he realized he couldn't make a sound. That meant there were people close by. Then he heard footsteps, and the sound of something large and heavy being wheeled on creaky wheels down the sidewalk. And then, for reasons he didn't understand, the little bear became frightened. He was not normally afraid of people, but this time a feeling began to grow in him. He heard the wheels creaking and rumbling closer, closer, until they stopped right next to him. What was happening?

"What about that one?" a man's voice asked.

"Let's take a look," a woman's voice answered.

The footsteps drew close, very close now, it seemed, and the little bear wondered if it was his turn. But instead of feeling hopeful, the little bear instead felt very afraid. He didn't want to stay on the street, but for some reason he didn't want to be picked up, either. The footsteps stopped. "Okay, up you come," the woman said, and the little bear waited. But the footsteps started up again.

The rocking horse!

"Whaddaya think, Billy? Worth saving?"

The silence seemed endless to the little bear. Please, don't let anything happen to the rocking horse!

"Nah," the man's voice said at last. "-- see? Them legs are too far gone. Just throw it in the cart with the rest of the trash an' let's get movin', it's cold out."

No! Not the rocking horse! The little bear began to cry. There was a crunching sound, and the wheels of the cart began creaking again. A bitter gust of wind tore the newspaper from the little bear's face, and he looked, wide-eyed, helpless, as the cart carrying his best friend rumbled slowly down the street, the man pushing and the woman searching here and there, and the little bear felt as though his heart would break as the cart turned a corner and he strained to see a last glimpse of mane, tail -- was that a gleam?

And it was gone.

A great sad emptiness overcame the little bear. He felt too tired, cold and alone to cry, to be afraid, to be angry. He felt himself drifting away from wakefulness and simply allowed it to happen. Nothing mattered any more.

The Toy Home



The little bear awoke to a sharpening of voices. It was nighttime, now. As if from a great distance, the voices reached the little bear, saying:

“Are we ready?” A woman’s voice.

“Okay, okay, three seconds, two, one, and -- “

“I’m standing in front of the remains of the St. Vincent de Paul main warehouse,” the woman began, “and at my feet is a singed teddy bear, perhaps a symbol of the tremendous tragedy that has taken place. Details are sketchy, but it appears as though the fire started two days ago in one of the administrative offices and went to five alarms as it spread throughout three buildings of this huge distribution complex. More than 120 firefighters and 30 trucks from stations throughout the Detroit area battled the blaze all that night and much of the day yesterday, and by the time the fire was finally put out, over a million dollars in clothing and toys for needy families had been destroyed. Now, with barely a week to go before Christmas, it is uncertain how St. Vincent’s will be able to meet the needs of the hundreds of families for whom these donations had been planned. Officials from St. Vincent’s have so far declined comment on any specific plans. Back to you.” There was a pause, during which the woman stood with a hand at one ear, as though she were listening. Then she said, “At this point, the fire chief has made no comment, but there is some speculation that a donated space heater may have been the cause of this terrible loss.”

There was another pause. Then the woman said, “Are we off? ...Good, then, that’s a wrap. Boy, are my feet ever cold! Let’s head back to the station!”



The little bear spent a cold, dark and snowy night, but it didn’t really seem to matter. He had lost the best toy friend he had ever had, and she had gone to the fate all toys dreaded the most: to be thrown away. He thought about what she had said: “Set your heart to hope, and wish wisely!” What did that matter now? Here he was, on the street, a burned-up arm, two buttons missing, forgotten by everyone, not even -- not even noticed enough to be picked up and put in the trash! He wondered how long he would lie there, passed by ... until rains and snows made him fall apart, perhaps, or until some big wheel squashed him. What did it matter?

The world seemed cold and grey, and then the grey became nothing as the bear went to sleep.

Dawn light was barely filtering into the city streets when the little bear awoke. He had felt something. What was it? He heard snuffling sounds, heard

The Toy Home

panting, felt hot moist breath nearby. A dog! The little bear looked in the direction of the panting. A large, black dog! What was the dog going to do? Then all he saw were teeth, tongue, heard loud growly rumbling as the dog grabbed him by his unsinged shoulder and began to lift him.

But he was stuck! His left arm, his burned arm, had been lying in a puddle created by the water used to put out the fire. The water had since frozen, gripping the edge of the little bear's arm fast. The dog growled, strengthened its grip, and shook its head. There was a tearing sound, and the bear felt its arm coming off at the shoulder -- oh, help, rocking horse! -- and then he broke free and was shaken from side to side before being flung up, up, and then down, to land with a soft plop! on the sidewalk in front of the remains of the Toy Home.

For a while he lay there, dazed and despairing. He wondered what else could possibly happen that would be any worse than this. Life on the streets! He thought of the Punchinello clown, and how the clown had said how wonderful life on the streets was -- like a big adventure. What a lie! Something to keep spirits up, maybe, while waiting for better times. The bear looked himself over. Here he was, barely in one piece! His left arm, though still attached, was ripped at the shoulder, and his stuffing had started to leak. *This* was how life on the streets *really* was!

And the clown was on his way to a warm and bright Christmas, too, while the bear and the rocking horse ... It just wasn't fair!

The little bear began to cry out of anger and fear. But then, somewhere deep inside him, he felt a stirring that he couldn't explain. Hope it was, and more, and why it sprang up just now he would never understand.

It began in a small way: his voice -- or might it have been the rocking horse's? -- saying, "Well, at least your arm is still attached. But even if it wasn't, do not give up hope! Because it isn't whether you're all in one piece that matters, but what you give and share that matters most..." The little bear felt the hugeness of the world, dull and cold and full of empty places. "Yes, and there are also places of warmth and light, which are created, little bear, by love. And all the more rare is the love created from nothing, from deep inside, that will create itself even from the depths of despair..."

A small bright light reached the little bear's eyes. The wind had parted the clouds above, and in the narrow patch of sky between the city buildings, the little bear could see a single tiny star.

He understood now. Broken and burned, buttons missing, his stuffing leaking onto the cold cement, the little bear looked up at the star and -- he hoped -- wished wisely:

The Toy Home

“I wish, I wish that by a miracle the rocking horse, and all homeless toys, will have a warm and bright Christmas!”

Then, as if the wishing had overcome him, the little bear fell into a deep sleep.



As it happened, there was not just one miracle, but three that occurred that Christmas. And all three involved the little bear.

The first happened that very morning.

The little bear awoke, feeling himself being lifted very gently. He opened his eyes and looked directly into a pair of dark brown twinkly eyes. The dark brown eyes belonged to a little girl. She was wearing an old blue wool cap and a tattered rose-colored coat, and her cheeks were redder than her coat. “Well, hello, Mr. Bear. What in the world has happened to *you*? We must see about fixing up your arm!”

“Sarah!” a woman’s voice called. “Come on, sweetie, don’t lag behind! We need to drop these things off!”

“K, Mom!” Then, whispering: “C’mon, Mr. Bear, let’s go meet my mom!”

The little bear felt suddenly secure, carried so carefully. Sarah’s mother, a tall, slender lady with a friendly face and light-colored hair that reached her shoulders, adjusted her brown coat as she peered down at the bear. “Why, what do you have *there*, dear?”

“I found Mr. Bear on the sidewalk. His arm is hurt!”

“I should say so!” Sarah’s mother regarded the little girl for a moment, seeing the unasked question. “Oh, honey, I’m not sure what we can do with an old ripped-up bear!”

“Daddy can fix him. Daddy’s good a fixing things!”

“Well...” -- the little bear scarcely dared to hope -- “...All right. Be sure and carry it carefully, so it doesn’t lose anymore stuffing! Now, I wonder where Daddy said we should go to drop off our things...”

Walking along the sidewalk beside her mother, Sarah carried the little bear ever so gently. He could see bits of building, charred wood, scattered bricks everywhere. Sarah’s mother shook her head and clicked her tongue. She was carrying a bulging shopping bag.

The Toy Home

Finally, they reached a small building that had been spared by the fire. Inside was a table with a couple of people sitting at it. Much of the dimly-lit interior was taken up by boxes and bags piled everywhere.

Sarah's mother approached the table. "We heard about the fire on the radio ... We had no idea how bad it was!" She held up the shopping bag. "We don't have very much ourselves, but ... We'd like to give what we can, to help -- to help -- "

One of the seated people, a large black lady, gave Sarah's mother a wide smile. "Gah bless you. Gah bless you. We can surely use it. But if it was a whole lotta stuff, you'd a needed to take it to one of our other dropoffs. We're startin' to run outta room!"

The second person, a thin old black man in a ski cap, looked at Sarah and the little bear. "That's a nice-lookin' bear you have there, young lady," he said. "What happened to his arm?"

Sarah didn't answer at first. Then, suddenly, she held the little bear straight out toward the old man. "Mr. Bear wants to help, too!" she said.

"Help?" the old man puzzled. "Help in what way?"

"I found Mr. Bear on the sidewalk by where the fire was, and he told me all about what had happened and how he'd been burned in the fire and how he wants to help collect toys and clothes by being a, being a "

"Whoa whoa *whoa*, slow down, girl!" the black lady laughed. "Lemme hear it again: You found the bear--"

"*Mr. Bear.*"

"Okay, 'n' now you want to give us the, Mr. Bear, so he can be, like, our--"

"Mascot!" the old man finished.

"Well ... yes, I mean --" Sarah shifted from one foot to the other, and she pulled the little bear back towards her a bit.

"... Well, maybe not *give*," the black lady suggested: "Maybe *lend* it, him, to us?"

"Yes, that's what I mean," Sarah said with relief.

"We could make a sign!" the old man said.

The Toy Home

“How long do you want to lend the bear?” Sarah’s mother asked.

“*Mr. Bear!* Until ... Until Christmas Eve!”

“Christmas Eve!” Sarah’s mother began. “Why -- “

“Because he has to come home with us for Christmas!” Sarah exclaimed.

“Please Help!’ That’s what the sign’ll say,” the old man said.

Sarah’s mother sighed, but she was smiling, too. “All right, until Christmas Eve!” Then, to the people at the table, she said, “Will you be open?”

“Until 2 p.m.”

The little bear felt himself exchanged from Sarah to the old man, who sat him up on the table. “Careful so his stuffing doesn’t leak!” Sarah exclaimed, and the little bear watched as Sarah and her mother left the building, with Sarah’s mother saying on the way out, “That was a very nice thing you did, Sarah...”

And all the little bear wondered was, how had Sarah known so much about what had happened to him?



So the first miracle had occurred: the little bear had been rescued from the street, and by the end of that same day was sitting propped up against a large sign that said, **PLEASE HELP**.

He watched many people come in with all kinds of things, as the community responded to make sure Christmas would be saved for many needy families. One of the St. Vincent volunteers brought in a radio, and the little bear listened as news reports told of people all across the city, the state and even the country sending in money, clothes and toys. “Truly a miracle,” the news reports said. And on one of the days, when a photographer for the *Detroit Free Press* took a picture of the little bear and his sign, the little bear realized that he had been part of the second miracle, too.

Now it was the middle of the day on Christmas Eve, and the little bear was getting anxious. Would the girl come and get him in time?

Suddenly, he felt himself lifted, and the big black woman was looking at him and smiling. “Time for you to get fixed up, Mr. Bear!” she said, and produced a needle and brown thread.

The Toy Home

So it was that, when Sarah and her mother came to pick up the little bear, *Mr. Bear* was waiting for them, his singed arm reattached, and two new brown buttons shining from his waistcoat!

“Mr. Bear!” Sarah held the little bear tightly. “Thank you so much for fixing him!”

“Not a problem,” the big black woman said: “Mr. Bear done a real good job.”

“Gonna miss my mascot, though!” the old man exclaimed.

As Sarah, her mother and the little bear were leaving, the little bear peeped out from under Sarah’s arm for a last look at the stacks of toys and clothing. A man was moving some of the sacks from the front to the back of the room. As he lifted them, something fell from one of the sacks.

Could it be ...? As he was carried out into the cold December afternoon, the little bear carried with him the knowledge that, there on the floor of the makeshift St. Vincent collection center, the witch with the broken broomstick was at least safe and looked after.



What happened during the rest of Christmas Eve was a blur for the little bear. Sarah had insisted that Mr. Bear be wrapped up, so he could be a present to go with all the other presents under the tree (“Even though I know this year we won’t have that many presents,” she had said).

Because he was being wrapped in a present-box, the little bear fell into the kind of drowsiness that all toys feel on Christmas Eve -- all toys that will be unwrapped and wake up to their new lives on Christmas morning. Through his drowsiness, he remembered all the happy times from his past, plus his new experiences with the clown, the witch, and the rocking horse ... The rocking horse ... How the little bear hoped that his wish had come true, and that the rocking horse would wake up to a new life on Christmas day, too! And even if the little bear couldn’t know what would have happened to the rocking horse, he knew he would never stop hoping and believing that by a miracle the rocking horse had been saved.



The little bear awoke to the sounds of rustling and of being carried in darkness.

Christmas Day!

The Toy Home

Although he was being tumbled to and fro in the dark, he didn't mind: this was what every toy dreamed about: the rustling, the shaking, the tearing of paper, sudden brightness, peals of laughter, new children for playmates, and new toy friends ... His eyes were bright with anticipation...

There it was! The burst of light, voices, laughter. He saw a dark-haired man, Sarah's father he supposed, and a fat little baby (brother? sister?) that Sarah's mother was holding, and then Sarah held him up for all to see and said, "Well, good morning, Mr. Bear. And Merry Christmas! Here's my dad, and my mom holding my brother Brian. Later on, you'll get to meet my other toy friends, too!"

Sarah passed the little bear to her dad, who said, "So this is the little adventurer! Let's give him the best seat in the house!" He put the little bear on the threadbare green sofa, between him and Sarah's mom.

From this vantage point, the little bear watched as the joy of Christmas morning unfolded. Because there were only a few presents, they were opened slowly, deliciously, to savor every moment. There was a set of large plastic beads for Brian, a new scarf for Sarah's mother, slippers for Sarah's father, some new shoes for Sarah. When the gifts had all been opened, Sarah's father got a strange look on his face.

"Wait here," he said mysteriously, and he left the room. The little bear heard him go down and then up the cellar stairs, and when he came back in the room, he was carrying a large, wrapped box.

"What's that?" Sarah squealed.

"For you," her father said.

Sarah's mother stood up and gave a troubled look to Sarah's father, who just shook his head, smiling, a finger to his lips. Sarah was already busy tearing off the paper.

The box was taped shut, but Sarah soon had the top sprung open. The flaps kept the little bear from seeing what was inside, but Sarah's squeals told him it was something *very* special. "Let me help," Sarah's father said: "Hold the box."

Slowly, gently, he pulled out what was inside. The little bear simply could not believe his eyes. First, a brown mane with a chip in it -- but the chip had been sanded and painted over. Then tail, creamy body, golden eye and -- little bear felt he would burst with the sheer joy of it -- *two* solid rockers, all four legs

The Toy Home

fastened in a strong and graceful gallop, his friend, his beloved rocking horse, home for Christmas, the third and most wonderful miracle!

“Oh, Daddy, she’s just beautiful!” Sarah exclaimed, taking the rocking horse and holding her gently. “Oh, thank you, thank you, *thank* you, this is the most wonderful Christmas ever!”

Sarah’s father straightened up, saw the meaningful, troubled look on her mother’s face, and by a tilt of his head motioned Sarah’s mother back to the sofa, where she and the little bear heard him say softly, “And it didn’t cost me a penny, in case you were worried. I found it in a dumpster next to St. Vincent de Paul’s, when I went down there to find out if we could drop things off. Found it in a dumpster! Someone had thrown it away, can you believe it? A beautiful horse like that! When all it needed was a new rocker, some touch up paint --”

“A little T.L.C., in other words,” Sarah’s mother said.

“Exactly. A little tender loving care.”

“Well, I’m sure she’ll get plenty of that from Sarah. *And* so will our wonderful Mr. Bear, here. Merry Christmas, honey.”

“Merry Christmas!”



It was evening on Christmas Day, and a little light snow was falling outside. From his warm and cozy seat on Sarah’s bed, the little bear could see the flakes dancing past the window pane. From the kitchen came sounds of dinner. The little bear watched the snow for a while, then rested his eyes on his good friend the rocking horse, now standing proudly in the corner of the room, next to Sarah’s dresser.

“So my wish came true, after all!” the little bear breathed happily.

“What wish was that, little bear?”

“That you would have a warm and happy Christmas.”

“You wished that for me? How wonderful!” the rocking horse said. “But funny, too, you know ...”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you looked so forlorn there on the street ... I made the exact same wish for you!” And they both laughed.

The Toy Home

After a few minutes, the little bear said, "Do you know, I think -- I *know* I saw the witch on the floor of the building I was taken to. So I think she may be all right, too."

"Yes ... Maybe not a Christmas like ours, but at least some place safe and dry, and with other toys to keep her company. I think things will turn out all right for her, too."

The little bear sighed. "And now I have just *one* more wish."

"On this perfect day? What could you possibly wish for?"

"Oh, it's just a *little* wish," said the little bear, "and if it doesn't come true, I'll understand..."

They drifted into drowsy silence.

Presently, they heard the sound of chairs being pushed back. Dinner was over, and they could hear Sarah's light footsteps as she skipped down the hall to her room.

"Hello, Mr. Bear," she said, turning on the light, "it's time for me to take my bath ... You know, you look kind of lonely sitting on that bed all by yourself. Here!" She lifted the little bear and set him on the rocking horse. "Why don't you keep Rocking Horse company for a while!" And she skipped out of the room, shutting off the light behind her.

With a long, contented sigh, the little bear settled onto the back of the rocking horse, happily realizing that even his last wish had come true.

