

The Gift

By Marcin Wojdyna

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The Gift

She wakes before the bell. The dormitory is dark and damp, full of other people's breath. She folds her bedding tight, splashes her face with cold water, and lines up with the others. Today will be like yesterday. And tomorrow. And every day until she can send enough money home.

He wakes to warm light slipping through curtains and the sound of laughter downstairs. The house smells of cinnamon and a turkey that has been cooking for hours. A fake tree glows quietly in the corner of his room.

In the factory, the lights are always on. She files in with the others, hair tied back, masks on. The foreman taps a stick against his boot while reading out quotas. A poster on the wall shows a smiling child holding a toy. She likes the colours.

He scrolls while he eats breakfast. His parents say they probably went overboard again. He shrugs. The pile under the real tree downstairs is bigger than last year. He hasn't counted how many have his name. He doesn't need to.

Her station is a metal table with a crate of plastic pieces. Today's toy is a small robot with a fixed grin. She pushes the legs into the torso until they click. Then the arms. Then the head. Over and over. Her wrists burn. Her fingers sting. The pile beside her grows and never shrinks.

He sits at his desk with a tub of Lego spilled across it, clicking bright pieces together without thinking. A spaceship, a tower. He builds until the pieces click, then pulls them apart, changing nothing except his mind.

At lunch, she eats rice on a metal step overlooking the grey river. She thinks about her little brother at home, who asked for something “from the city” this year. Something only she could bring.

At lunch, he picks at leftovers while flipping through a toy catalogue that arrived too late to matter. He circles things he does not want, out of habit more than desire.

Back on the floor, someone is behind quota. The stick cracks. The line speeds up. She keeps her head down. Safety comes from being invisible.

Back in his room, he complains in a group chat that last Christmas his parents mixed “good presents” with “filler.” Plastic tat. Things for little kids. He jokes that he had to fake a smile.

She finishes her shift one unit over quota. One extra toy on her table. She looks left, right. No one is watching. She wraps it in her spare shirt and slips it into her bag, heart thumping. The guard barely glances as she walks past.

He spends his evening watching videos on his phone, the glow of the screen and the tree lighting his face in alternating pulses. Downstairs, the adults whisper about whether he’ll “still feel excited this year” or if he’s “getting too old for all this.”

The toy’s journey is long and complicated: boxed, sealed, scanned, shipped, shelved, purchased with milk and bread. It never knows any of this.

He opens his gift on Christmas morning.
She gives her gift on Christmas morning.

He thunders down the stairs while his parents film him. He waits because they ask him to, then tears the paper when they finally say go. Socks. Headphones. A game. A hoodie. The robot appears in his hands. He turns it once. Twice. It feels cheap. Plastic for toddlers. He smiles, shrugs and drops it beside the sofa, reaching for something bigger.

She hands her little brother a parcel wrapped in a newspaper. His face lights up when he sees the robot. He strokes the plastic like it might notice. That night he sleeps with it tucked under his chin. She lies awake beside him and listens to him whisper to it.

Weeks pass. The robot in his home moves to a shelf, then a drawer, then a bag marked “charity.” The bag sits in the hallway, then the garage, until one wet afternoon it splits. The robot rolls behind a box of decorations and stays there.

Weeks pass. The robot in her home loses some of its shine but none of its place. Her brother talks to it when he is scared, when he is angry, when she is too tired to speak. When it loses a hand, he cries. When she glues it back on, he thanks her like she saved a life.

By the next Christmas, he remembers none of it. Not the box. Not the toy. Not the brief, distracted look he gave it. His tree is different this year. His problems are different too. Nothing in his room lasts long.

By the next Christmas, she is moved to a different line. She stitches small shirts for stuffed animals. Her brother still has the toy. Its paint scratched. Its grin worn dull. But it is his. Something special. Something she brought him from the city.

One child unwrapped their gift.

Another understood its worth.

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