

# THE STUFFED ANIMAL

A CHRISTMAS STORY

JOHN DONALD O'SHEA

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## *My "Thank You"*

*First, I would like to thank my illustrator Jasmine Smith for doing what I couldn't do —illustrating my book. Next I wish to thank Cindy B. for telling me the story of her doll, Sabrina Ballerina. And most of all, I would like to thank my daughter, Erin O'Shea, for letting me be a part of her life and friendship with "Bunny" when she was a little girl, and for proofing and re-proofing my manuscript, and making many valuable suggestions to improve it.*

Once upon a time, in a small town not far from here, there was a small shop called *The Stuffed Animal*. The proprietor was a middle-aged lady named Abigail Grace. She lived alone with her big, furry dog, "Furf"—which was short for "Fur Face." Those people who knew her well, and not many did, said she had but one abiding interest in life: Every Friday morning, no matter how inclement the weather, she could be found prowling the neighborhood garage sales. There, she would search for stuffed animals and dolls—not new ones, not beautiful ones, but shabby old teddies with their ears bitten off, and dolls who had lost their limbs. She would buy them for a nickel, a dime, or a quarter, and take them away.

Her neighbors said she put them in her shop, but they really didn't know because her shop was never open for business. But because they saw her carry boxes and bags into the shop and come out empty handed, that was their best guess. Especially since she called her little shop *The Stuffed Animal*. Perhaps because Miss Grace was such a private person who always kept to herself, the people of the small Victorian town never questioned her

about her activities—that is, until Cindy Kim saw Miss Grace walking Furf, just after dark, one Christmas Eve.

Cindy crossed the street, and as Miss Grace neared the streetlamp just outside her shop, Cindy said, "Merry Christmas, Miss Grace." As she did, Furf gave Cindy his standard sniff-over and decided she meant his mistress no harm. "Merry Christmas to you, Cindy," replied the older lady.

"Miss Grace, there's something I've been meaning to ask you for a very long time ...."

"Yes, dear?"

"Miss Grace, do you remember, about ten years ago, coming to a yard sale at our house?"

"You say it was about 10 years ago?"

"Yes, ma'am. It was a hot summer day. You bought an old doll for a dime."

"Was she," asked Miss Grace, "a ballerina?"

"Yes, a lovely ballerina with beautiful golden hair and a green satin dress."

"No, dear. The doll I bought was missing both her dress and her head."

"Do you still have her? If you do," said Cindy, "I'd like to buy her back...."

"Whatever for?"

"I still miss her. She was my favorite doll."

As she spoke, the warm glow from the Victorian-style streetlamp illuminated Cindy's face. And for the next few minutes, as she told her story, her already soft face shone with the innocence of childhood. "I first saw her one steamy August day, when I was three, down at the Ben Franklin Store. She was in a large box, sitting on the top shelf along the left wall as one came in. The very first moment I saw her, I wanted her. I asked Mom to buy her, but she said it wasn't my birthday, and that we couldn't afford her. I think I stopped at the Ben Franklin every day for the next two months.

“Then one day, she was gone.... I cried my eyes out. But then after a week or so, I forgot her.



"Then, Christmas Eve came. We were poor in those days, and my sisters and I only got one present each. To make Christmas seem longer, I opened my present last. When I tore off the paper, there she was with her beautiful golden hair and lovely green ballerina dress. I called her Sabrina.

"When Mom, Dad, and my sisters were done opening their presents, they went to the dining room for dessert,

but I stayed in the living room alone with Sabrina. The room was dark, except for the colored lights on the tree. I can still remember sitting in Dad's big stuffed chair and taking Sabrina into my arms for the first time.

"For the next two years, I took her everywhere with me. Then one day, as I was walking to my friend's house, a big dog ran up and grabbed Sabrina out of my arms and ran away. I chased him and eventually found Sabrina, but her head was gone, and so was her dress." And then, with just the hint of a tear in her eyes, Cindy finished her story.



"Later that summer, Mom put her in the yard sale without telling me. When I asked Mom where Sabrina was, she told me she had sold her and that you had bought her."

"She was your favorite doll?" Miss Grace asked, with the gentleness of one who truly understood.

"Oh yes, my most favorite, ever."

"I rather thought so...Why don't you come into my shop with me? We'll see if we can find her."

"Do you have many dolls for sale in your store?" asked Cindy.

*The Stuffed Animal* is not a store, my dear. It's .... well, it's rather a retirement home for dolls and teddies that were once the favorite toy of a small boy or girl."

"How do you know when a toy was a favorite toy?" asked Cindy.

"Oh, that's very easy," said Miss Grace, as she opened her purse, found her key, and opened the door of the shop. "Come in, it will be warmer in here."



As Cindy followed Miss Grace and Furf up the single step and into the shop, she noticed that the small front room which they had entered was softly lit by a small, blue-green, Tiffany-style table lamp.

The room had been decorated for Christmas. The most notable decoration was a rather large crèche, set against a backdrop of evergreen branches. The blue Christmas lights that illuminated the crèche, brought to mind the serenity and peace suggested by the familiar carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”



From the next room, Cindy could hear voices softly singing a Christmas carol, which she did not know. As she stood admiring the crèche, she said to Miss Grace, "I hear people caroling." Furf, in the meantime, laid down near the front door, as dogs do, and took a nap.

"Yes, it's Christmas Eve," replied Miss Grace.

As she looked back up, Cindy thought she saw something move in the shadow behind Miss Grace. At first, Cindy thought it might be an angora cat. Then, as she looked closer, she noticed a small toy soldier approach

them. He wore a furry, black, beefeater's hat, a red tunic, and navy pants with a gold stripe. He looked, for all the world, like a Christmas Nutcracker.

"Merry Christmas, Miss Grace," said the toy soldier.

"Merry Christmas to you, Tommy," said Miss Grace.



"Miss Grace," said Cindy in amazement, "the toy soldier talked to you."

"Of course," said Miss Grace as if nothing unusual had happened. "Don't you remember Sabrina talking to you?"

Cindy paused and thought for a moment. "I'm not sure .... It was so long ago."

"At night, when your Mother tucked you in, and when you told Sabrina good night, can't you recall her saying 'night, night' to you? And when you took her in your arms and told her you loved her, didn't she snuggle right in and couldn't you hear her say 'I love you, too, Cindy?'" the older woman asked.

"We never said it very loud," interjected Tommy, "but we always said it. That's why we were your favorite toys. Dolls that don't talk to their friends never become a child's favorite toy and spend their entire lives on shelves or in a toy chest."

"Were you a little girl's favorite toy, too?" asked Cindy.

"Certainly not," said the little soldier in a voice that showed some degree of pique. "I had a little boy named Brian O'Malley. We met on his first birthday. I was a present from his Mother. His Dad was in the army, and his Mom wanted Brian to have a toy that reminded him of his father."

"Tommy was the first doll I found," said Miss Grace.

"He was my best friend," explained the little soldier. "I went everywhere with him. We played *cops and robbers* and *cowboys and Indians* together. He had a great imagination. I really liked it when we played the *Lone Ranger* and had to track down the Cavendish gang. That was neat."

"Then, when he started playing baseball, he took me to all of his games."

"How did you get here?" asked Cindy.



"Brian," Tommy said, "had taken me along to his baseball game. It was a big game. Brian's team won when he hit a homer in the ninth inning. When the game was over, in all the excitement, he left me in the dugout. I waited for him all night. It was the first time in years that we had not spent the night together.

"In the morning, a big red-headed boy with a crew cut found me there. He picked me up and tossed me into the weeds. I never saw Brian again. I always wondered if he came back for me. If he did, he didn't find me."