

## A CHRISTMAS STORY

Ronnie sat on the cot swinging his legs back and forth. Back and forth. His mother had told him to stay there for a little while. He wished she were back. No one was mean to him or anything here, but he didn't know anyone.

Next to him an old man lay snoring, still dressed in his clothes with a black plastic garbage sack beside his bed. Ronnie had accidentally kicked it with his foot walking by earlier when he had to go to the bathroom, and the man got mad.

“Stay away from my bag, kid. You hear? It's mine.” He'd leaned over to pull the sack to him possessively, securing the knot in the top of the bag, glaring at Ronnie like he'd tried to steal his dumb ole bag or something.

Ronnie backed away and almost tripped over the cot behind him. A big black man, wearing a frayed flannel shirt, caught him and then patted the bed beside him, encouraging Ronnie to sit down.

The man smiled at Ronnie when he hesitated, a big grin that had a shiny gold tooth right in the middle of it. “Don't worry none about old Jake, boy. He's got problems in his mind. It don't mean nuthin' when he's gruff like that.”

Ronnie sat down on the far end of the black man's cot, lonely and responding to the man's kindness. He wasn't eager to walk back by the cross old man's cot now either. He sat cautiously on the edge of the bed and clutched his book up against his chest.

“What cha got there?” The black man gestured to Ronnie's book.

“A book of stories. It was my Mom's when she was little. She said her Daddy gave it to her at her first Christmas. She gave it to me when I was little.”

“Looks real fine.” The man glanced over to the book that Ronnie tentatively held out toward him. “I bet your Grandad is a real nice man.”

Ronnie hung his head.

“I don’t know him.” His voice was soft and low. “I’ve never met him. And my Mom says he doesn’t even want to know us.”

A tear dripped down Ronnie’s face. He wiped it away quickly with the back of his hand, embarrassed to be crying like a baby in front of this stranger.

“Well, everybody’s got a story,” the man said. He looked around then, over toward the two cots in the corner where Ronnie and his mom had been earlier.

“Where’s your mom, now?”

“She had to go to where we lived before to see if she could get any of our stuff.” He dropped his eyes. “She said maybe since the landlord was gone during the day that she could get back in and get some of our things. He wouldn’t let us get any yesterday. He locked us out. But Mom said his wife is nicer – that maybe she would let Mom go in and get some clothes and things today while he’s gone. He wouldn’t have to know.”

The man gave a knowing nod, seeming to understand. “It’s a hard world.” He held out a hand. “My name’s Cyrus.”

“Nice to meet you, Cyrus.” Ronnie reached out a hand to take Cyrus’s large black one. “My name’s Ronnie.”

“How old are you, Ronnie?”

“Eight. I can read and everything now. I can read almost all the words in this book without any help.”

“That’s real fine.” Cyrus looked thoughtful. “It’s good to know how to read.”

“Mama said she’d try to bring back some more of my books if she could. And some of our clothes.” He looked toward the door anxiously, wishing she would come back soon.

Cyrus followed his eyes. “Well, Ronnie, since both of us have got a little time on our hands here before your Mama gets back, why don’t we get acquainted some.”

“Okay.” Ronnie offered a tentative answer. Cyrus seemed nice. Looking around at all the strangers in the room, Ronnie was glad to have someone to sit next to that was nice. A lot of the people looked angry or sad. Some of them acted weird and smelled funny. He didn’t like it much here.

“You got a daddy, boy?” The black man smiled again. Ronnie knew he was just trying to be friendly but the question still hurt.

“I did, but he died.” The tears threatened again.

Ronnie looked at Cyrus and pulled up his chin valiantly, remembering what his mother said to him. “My mom said it wasn’t my fault, though.”

“Why should it be your fault, boy?” Cyrus spoke quietly, like he was really interested.

Ronnie thought how to answer. “I was supposed to be taking care of Daddy. He was sick again, and Mom was working. She said to watch after him - that he wasn’t supposed to go out. She said to call and tell her if he did.”

He looked down at his feet. “But Daddy said he needed his medicine. Said it worry Mama if she knew he went out to get it. So he made me promise not to tell.”

“I see.” Cyrus nodded.

“And when Daddy got his medicine he felt better. So I thought it was the right thing – that he got it. And I didn’t tell Mama like she told me to.” He looked up with troubled eyes. “She works hard and she always is really tired and sad. I didn’t want to worry her more.”

“You were trying to take care of your Mama.” The black man reached over to pat Ronnie’s knee. “Your Mama looks real sweet, boy; that was good of you to be thinking of her.”

“But I did wrong.” Ronnie looked up at his new friend with anguished eyes. “Later, Daddy kept sleeping and sleeping. He wouldn’t wake up when I made us some soup for lunch. I couldn’t get him to wake up – no matter what I did. And he looked funny. Like, real still and quiet. Different from when you’re just sleeping.”

The tears started again. “I got scared. I thought maybe he was sicker. When he wouldn’t get up again later, I went over to Miss Bonnie’s across the hall. She came to see and then called the ambulance and then my Mom. They took him away and said he was dead. And it was my fault. It was the medicine he took that made him die.”

The sobs started stronger now. Cyrus got up and came over to sit closer to Ronnie. He gathered him up in a big bear hug and let him cry on him.

Ronnie knew it was dumb to be crying like a baby, but it felt good somehow. He’d been too scared to cry before. He had to be strong for his Mom. She was sobbing and crying and all hysterical when they took his Daddy away. Ronnie didn’t want to worry her more and start bawling, too. Besides, he knew he’d let her down not watching out for his Daddy like he was supposed to.

“I made bad things happen to us.” Ronnie pulled away from Cyrus then and swiped at his face. “Daddy took our money to buy his medicine. It was the money Mama needed for the rent. And the landlord said we’d been late too many times. He gave Mama some time to catch up, but she couldn’t. And then one day when we came home he’d changed the locks and told us we had to get out. He let Mama go in and get one bag of stuff, but that was all. He said he was selling the rest to settle the debt.”

Cyrus rubbed his stubbled chin thoughtfully. “Well, now, like I said, life can be hard. But maybe it’ll turn around. Your Mama looks like a nice little thing.”

Ronnie looked across the room toward the thin little Christmas tree with its weak string of lights across the room. It was silver tinsel and not even a real tree. “It’s sad to be here with Christmas coming.”

“Yeah. That it is.” Cyrus followed Ronnie’s glance.

Ronnie sighed. “Once we had a nicer place and a real pretty tree at Christmas. And my Mom was happier and didn’t have to work as hard. But then my Daddy got sicker. We had to move. We’ve moved a lot.”

“I see.” Cyrus patted Ronnie’s knee again.

“Will you be here at Christmas, Cyrus?”

“I was making my way to my daughter’s down in Athens, Georgia, when my old car broke down on me. I came in here for a bit because I didn’t have no way to fix it. But my girl, Celina, she’s driving on up here to get me tomorrow. So I’ll be having a fine little Christmas with her, I guess.”

“That’s nice. Are you going to stay and live with her, too?”

“No. I’m going to move in with my old bachelor brother, Donny Lee. His health is poorly, and I think I can be a help to him. Didn’t see no reason to keep staying up in Detroit after my wife Rosie passed on. So I started heading on back south. Decided to make a change.”

Ronnie smiled. “I’m glad you get to be there for Christmas. I hope you like it in Georgia.”

Cyrus smiled back. “You’re a fine boy, Ronnie. I hope things are going to turn around and go good for you and your mother.” He paused. “And, Ronnie, you need to know that your Daddy dying was not your fault. You’re a big enough boy to have heard by now that the kind of medicine your daddy took was the kind that only makes things worse.”

Ronnie looked down at his feet again. “Miss Bonnie said it was drugs.”

“Drink and drugs can get a bad hold on a man. But that’s not your fault, Ronnie.”

“Was my Daddy bad?” Ronnie lifted questioning eyes to Cyrus. “My Granddaddy wrote my Mom that my Daddy was bad. When my Mama wrote him and asked him for help when we were real behind on the rent, he wrote back a letter that made my Mama cry. He said my Mama had made her own bed and that she would just have to lie in it. He said my Daddy was bad and that he had always known it. He said he’d told her not to marry him and that she’d done it anyway.”

Cyrus was quiet for a minute. “I’ll bet your Granddaddy would change his mind if he could see what a fine little grandson he had.” He smiled at Cyrus and patted his knee again.

“Mama says he lives in a big white farm house outside of Sweetwater, Tennessee. She grew up there. She says there are cows and horses and chickens and everything. I’d like to see it. Is that far from here?”

“Naw. It’s not far from Nashville at all.”

Ronnie looked toward the thin little silver Christmas tree again.

“Mama said every year when she was little, she and her Daddy went out into the woods and cut themselves down a great big cedar tree to decorate for Christmas. She says she can still remember how good it smelled and how pretty it was all decorated with lights and ornaments and icicles.” He grinned at Cyrus. “She told me he used to always come in on Christmas eve carrying a big load of presents, laughing ho-ho-ho, and wearing a big Santa Claus hat.”

“Those are good memories.” Cyrus smiled at Ronnie. “You got a Grandma, too?”

“No. She died a long time ago.”

“So your Granddaddy’s all alone. That’s sad for him, too.”

Ronnie frowned. “He called Daddy a big word I couldn’t read.”

Cyrus looked surprised. “You’ve read this letter from your Granddaddy?”

Ronnie hung his head. “I found it in the trashcan.” He pulled a worn, folded up envelope out of his back pocket and opened it up to take out the letter.

Folding it out, he showed it to Cyrus. “Here’s the word. Do you know it?”

“Yeah. It’s *reprobate* – an old word, usually means hopelessly bad. Not a kind thing for your Granddaddy to say.” He scratched his chin. “Seems to me your Granddaddy

has a little of the ole rebrobate in him to write your mama a letter like this when she was reaching out to him for help.”

Ronnie folded back up the letter and tucked it away.

“Boy, does your Granddaddy know your Daddy is dead and that you and your Mama are in a homeless shelter?”

Ronnie looked up in surprise. “Is that what this place is, a homeless shelter?”

“You didn’t know?”

“No. Mama just said it was a place we could stay for a little while until she could save up for another apartment.”

“Well, it’s a homeless shelter. But there’s no shame in staying in one when you need to for a time. That’s what they’re here for. And there’s some mighty nice folks that work here and live here.”

Ronnie looked around with a puzzled expression.

Cyrus chuckled. “Oh, well. There’s a few troubled souls here, too. But they’re all God’s children.”

“You sound like my Sunday School teacher.”

“So your Mama takes you to church?”

He sighed. “She did until we moved the last time. And until she had to start working on Sundays, too.”

Cyrus suddenly snapped his fingers and grinned at Ronnie. “I’ll tell you what, boy. I’ll bet if you write your Granddaddy a letter and tell him you’d like to meet him and come have Christmas with him,, that you just might hear back from him. Maybe he’ll

take you out with him this year, like he did your mother, to cut down a big ole cedar tree to decorate.”

Ronnie’s eyes lit up. “Do you think he might bring in presents wearing a Santa hat?”

“Maybe so. You can’t know for sure if you don’t write him. I’m telling you, it’s worth a try. I’d say deep down in his heart that your Granddaddy is wishing he could see your Mama again and that he could meet you.” He ruffled Ronnie’s head. “I’d feel that way if you were my Grandson.”

A disappointing thought hit Ronnie’s mind then. “I don’t have any paper to write on. Or any envelopes or stamps or anything.”

“Well, isn’t this your lucky day!” Cyrus pulled his duffle bag out from under his bed, fished around in for a few minutes, and then brought out a zipped up folder. He opened the folder and dug through a stack of envelopes and papers until he found a few pieces of folded paper and a stamped envelope. “Here’s just what you need! Sorry the paper isn’t lined the way a kid likes it, but you’ll have to make do.” He found a ballpoint pen in his duffle, too, and gave it to Ronnie.

Ronnie studied the paper and envelope. “I don’t know how to make an envelope, yet. I’m only eight.”

“Well, I tell you what. You get out the letter from your Granddaddy and I’ll copy off the address for you. And you work on the letter. If you need help in spelling or writing it, I’ll see what I can do to help you. Just don’t go choosing any big words to use like reprobate. Let’s stay with easy things.”

“What should I write to him?”

“Whatever you wish. Anything you’d like to say.”

“Okay.” Ronnie laid the paper out on top of his book, and started to write.

When he finished, Cyrus put Ronnie’s letter in the envelope and sealed it. He looked down at it thoughtfully. “You know, I think I’d keep the fact that I sent this little letter to your Granddaddy a secret from your Mama right now. She’s had a lot to deal with lately. And you’d have to tell her you fished out the old letter from your Granddaddy from the trash to explain how you got the address. She might not like that.”

Ronnie frowned. “No. She might get mad.” He considered that. “I won’t tell her right now. And if Granddaddy writes back something mean, I can just tear the letter up so she won’t have to read it and cry again.”

“Good plan.” Cyrus punched him on the arm congenially.

A little later, Ronnie’s mother found Cyrus and Ronnie playing a game of checkers sitting on Ronnie’s cot. She was carrying two loaded duffle bags and an armload of books with an old teddy bear and a red truck on top.

Ronnie jumped up to reach for the latter. “You got some of our stuff!” he exclaimed.

A smile lit his mother’s face. “Yes. Lilly let me in while George was gone. She said she didn’t see any reason why we couldn’t have some of our personal things. I have some boxes in the car with more packed in them.” She reached down to give Ronnie a kiss, her dark hair falling over his face and tickling him.

She looked at Cyrus curiously.

Ronnie saw her glance. “This is my friend Cyrus, Mom. He’s been nice to me while you’ve been gone. He’s told me all about his family in Athens, Georgia. He’s going there tomorrow when his daughter comes for him.”

“I’m Sarah Bryant,” Ronnie’s mother said, holding out her hand to Cyrus. “Thank you for your kindness to my boy.”

“Cyrus Williams, here.” Ronnie’s friend reached a hand back to take Sarah’s. “And it’s been a pleasure getting to know Ronnie. He’s a fine boy.”

The call for lunch came then, and everyone began to file toward the dining room.

In the days that followed, Ronnie and Sarah moved over to the housing wing for women and children. Ronnie made some friends there with other children who were staying in the shelter with their mothers. During the day times, because school was out for the holidays, the children stayed in a big playroom with a careworker while their mothers worked outside the shelter or doing chores within it. It wasn’t so bad.

Another skimpy little Christmas tree stood in the main living area the women and children shared. It was another silver tinsel tree and not a real tree, either. Ronnie and the other children made paper ornaments for it one day and on another day they put popcorn ropes on it. A volunteer at the center brought a string of lights to improve it. Ronnie liked looking at those in the evening when the room was dark.

“There are no presents under the tree,” Ronnie said to his mother one evening before bed. “Do you think Santa will even find the children here? None of them are at their old addresses. Maybe he won’t remember them here.”

His mother pushed back his hair and leaned over to give him a kiss. “Santa always manages to find children somehow and bring something.” She frowned. “I

probably won't be able to do much with Christmas this year, Ronnie. I'm trying to save everything I make so that we can get another apartment in the New Year. If I buy presents, we will have to wait longer."

Ronnie nodded. "It's okay. I wish I could work and help."

"You help enough just by being you. You're all the family I've got now, Ronnie." She straightened the top of his pajamas. "And whenever I look at you, I'll always remember your Daddy. You look so much like him."

Ronnie felt a niggles of alarm. "Would my Granddaddy not like me because I look like my Daddy?"

His mother gave him a curious look. "Whatever makes you ask a thing like that?"

Ronnie avoided her gaze. "Well, I know Granddaddy didn't like Daddy."

Sarah sighed. "It wasn't your Father's looks that your Grandfather objected to. Your Father was always one of the most handsome boys in town. It was your Daddy's ways that troubled your Grandfather. He'd had some behavioral problems your Grandfather wasn't sure were healthy. He worried that it might bring me unhappiness later. That's what he worried about. It's why he didn't want me to marry your Father."

Ronnie sighed knowingly. "He knew about Daddy's medicine. I know now that it wasn't really medicine, Mom. It was drugs. Some of the kids here talk about their daddies that have problems with drugs. Isaac's daddy is in jail because of drugs."

His mother gave him a studied perusal. "You've had to learn some hard things here. I regret that."

"Well, I don't want to stay dumb and stupid about stuff!" Ronnie felt his anger flare. "If I'd known more ... if I'd known Daddy had drug problems, maybe I wouldn't

have let him go buy medicine. And maybe I could have kept him from taking all our money. Or from dying. And ...”

“Hush!” Sarah put a finger over his mouth. “You’re just a little boy. None of this is your fault. None of this was your responsibility.” Tears ran down her face then. “I couldn’t change your Father and I understood everything. The counselors here have helped me see that none of this was my fault. Your Dad had a problem that had become an illness. He couldn’t handle it. He couldn’t get free. That he died wasn’t our fault, Ronnie. I want to be sure you know that. It wasn’t our fault.”

They cried together then for a few minutes.

She wiped his eyes and kissed him. “You do look like your Daddy – very handsome. But you have your Granddaddy’s blue eyes. And you look like the Norton side of the family, too – not just the Bryants. In fact, you look very much like my brother Charlie that got killed in the war.”

Ronnie frowned. “I forgot your brother died a long time ago. Granddaddy lives all by himself now, doesn’t he?” He looked up at his mother with questioning eyes. “Don’t you think he might want us to come live with him and keep him company? Cyrus was going down to live with his family in Georgia so he wouldn’t have to live alone anymore.”

Sarah sighed. “You would think he might. But he’s a proud man. It’s hard for him to forgive and forget.”

“He doesn’t have anyone to go get the tree with him anymore, does he?”

Tears spilled down Sarah’s face. “No, he doesn’t, Ronnie. Now close your eyes and get some sleep.”

Tuesday dawned clear, fair, and cold. Mrs. Swaggerty showed them on the calendar that it was only two days until Christmas now. She let them cut out Christmas trees from green construction paper that day and color decorations on them. She told them that Nashville was all lit up with Christmas lights now. But it was doubtful that Ronnie or any of the other children at the shelter would get to see them.

At suppertime in the big dining room, the main door suddenly opened and a big tall man came in carrying a huge cut Christmas tree. The tree was thick and green, and its evergreen smell filled the air. Behind him came Mr. Mertz from the front desk of the shelter carrying a big box of decorations and several boxes of Christmas lights.

“Our friend here heard we didn’t have a real Christmas tree in the place.” Mr Mertz laughed. “So he cut one down and brought us one from off his own land. And he brought us a big box of decorations and several packages of Christmas lights. Looks like we’re going to have a decorating party here tonight. Who’d like to help?”

Ronnie’s hand was one of the first to go up in the air. His mother laughed and raised hers, too. But suddenly she stopped laughing and put a hand over her mouth in shock. Ronnie, feeling the tension in her, followed her eyes across the room.

The man who had brought in the tree stood beside it now. He had on a red Santa hat and his eyes were riveted on Ronnie’s mother.

Next, his eyes moved down to look at Ronnie and stopped there for a moment. Then the man started across the room toward them.

Ronnie looked up to see his mother crying.

“Daddy?” she said at last.

He swept her into his arms and Ronnie saw that they were both crying now.

“Is this Ronnie?” He squatted down until he was looking right into Ronnie’s face.  
“You have the Norton blue eyes.”

Ronnie lifted up his chin. “And I have my Daddy’s blond hair and good looks.”

The man laughed. “Yes, you do. Do you know I’m your Grandfather?”

“I thought maybe you might be.” Ronnie wasn’t sure what to say.

His Grandfather swept him up into his big arms. “I got your nice letter. And I agreed with you that you and your Mother should come and spend Christmas with me. I need someone to go out with me to get the tree, after all. And someone has to come and help me open all those presents back at the house.”

He looked over at Sarah with a smile – who looked shocked to hear that he had gotten a letter from Ronnie.

“So, you didn’t know about that, did you?” he grinned. “Pretty smart boy here to figure out how to write me all on his own.”

“Cyrus helped me.” Ronnie felt it was important to be truthful.

“Well, you can tell us about that later. For now, I was hoping maybe the two of you

could get packed up so we could start for home. I’ve got animals to feed at the farm in the morning. It would be best for me if we drove on back home tonight.”

“Can we, Mom?” Ronnie’s eyes were shining.

Sarah nodded, still tearful - but looking happier now than Ronnie had seen her for a long time.

Ronnie’s Granddaddy grinned at him. “You know, I’m hoping maybe your

mother inherited some of her mother's good cooking skills and that maybe she'll make us a nice Christmas eve dinner tomorrow. I'm not very good in the kitchen."

"She makes good turkey and mashed potatoes. And good pumpkin pies, too."

Ronnie told him this with eagerness. "And I can go help you get the tree!"

"Well, that sounds like a deal!"

At his mother's new sweep of tears, his Grandfather swept her into an embrace with them - giving both of them a fierce hug.

A little later, Ronnie stood outside the shelter, ready to climb into the front seat of Granddaddy Bryant's big green farm truck. His mother had said he could ride home with his Granddaddy, while she followed in their battered sedan.

"I hope my little car will make it," she told her father.

"Well, if not, we'll leave it and have it towed home later. You can leave it now if you'd like."

"No. I'll need it to come back after the holiday."

Her father gave her a long look. "I hope you won't want to do that, Sarah. I'd like you and Ronnie to come and stay with me, if you would. I'm getting older and I need help on the farm."

He looked at Ronnie then. "Do you think you'd mind to learn how to do some farm work, boy?"

"No, and I'll work hard. Mom will tell you I'm a hard worker."

Tears trickled down Sarah's cheeks.

"You still remember how to milk a cow and feed chickens, girl?" He asked her this with a twinkle in his eye.

She nodded, too overcome to speak.

“Well, we’ll see how we go along,” he said, boosting Ronnie up into the big cab of the truck then.

“What did Ronnie write to you?” Sarah asked curiously, just before they left. “I didn’t know he’d written you, Daddy.”

Will Norton pulled a faded note out of his pocket and read the words on it to Sarah and Ronnie:

*Dear Granddaddy ...*

*I know you don't want to like us much and that you've been real mad at my Mom but I think it's time for you to stop being an old reprobate. My friend Cyrus told me what that means and showed me how to spell it. He says you are one, too. Anyway, I think you should have us come to your place for Christmas. It would be better than the shelter where we are living since my Daddy died. We could help you go and get the Christmas tree. And you wouldn't have to be all by yourself at Christmas.*

*Your grandson ... Ronnie*

*P.S. The shelter here has a really crummy silver tree. They sure could use a good one like the kind my Mom says you used to have.*

Ronnie spoke up then. “Did I spell everything right, Granddaddy? Cyrus helped me a lot, but he said he wasn’t a very good speller.”

“You did great, Ronnie.” His grandfather leaned up into the truck to hug him again.

He looked over to Sarah who was weeping once more. “I don’t intend to be an old reprobate anymore, Sarah Jane. I hope you and Ronnie will forgive me for being such an old fool for so long.”

Ronnie piped in with a comment. “You have to forgive at Christmas. ‘Cause it’s that time of year!”

“So it is.” His Granddaddy smiled at him. “Let’s all go home now and have the best Christmas ever.”

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