

# THE TINY GIFT

A VINTAGE CHRISTMAS SHORT STORY



WILLOWY WHISPER





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## The Tiny Gift

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*To Jesus, with all of my love*



## THE TINY GIFT



*Lower Manhattan,  
New York City  
December 24, 1934*

MAZIE RUSSELL KNEW THE STAKES WELL ENOUGH TO KEEP her mouth shut. Her legs moved stiffly. Her eyes stayed down-cast, focusing on the ice on the sidewalk, the noise of a bell in the distance, and the raucous sounds of vehicles to her left—not on the woman’s laughter.

The high-pitched, grating sound was carried by a cold wind, accompanied by Sam Russell’s amused reply.

Then she was next to them. Shouldn’t there be more people? Shouldn’t the streets be thronged with shoppers, colors, distractions?

But no, it was only the three of them.

Against all her better judgment, against all her training, Mazie glanced up at her husband.

Sam's gaze flicked toward her. His expression didn't alter, eyes didn't shift, smile didn't slacken. In one swift movement, he looped the woman's arm into his. "You're shivering, kitten. Let's go hop into my heap before you freeze."

Another laugh. "I won't even ask where we're going. As long as I'm with you, who cares?"

Heat suffused Mazie's cheeks. She hurried on by before she ever caught her husband's response. *Can't do this.* She hailed a taxi and climbed in with her packages clutched tight to her chest. Tiny little presents were inside—glass dollies with perfect curls, red and green dresses, assortments of chocolate and candies. All presents she shouldn't have to select alone.

*I'm tired.* Her head leaned into the cold, foggy window. *I'm tired of living his lies.*



THE NOTES OF WEEMS' *Winter Wonderland* vibrated from the Victrola, as her guests began to amble inside.

Her father was the first to approach, and for all his scrutiny of the stock market and Singer ledgers, he somehow seemed to overlook her distress. "My darling, how exquisite you look."

Her mother appeared beside him in a mink coat and hat. "I must agree, my dear. You look stunning. And I must congratulate you again for this splendid house party. Where are the children?"

"Upstairs." Mazie offered a half smile. "And do not look so worried, Mother. They are being attended to by Miss Doris."

"Doris? That gangly sort of woman?"

"One and the same."

"Dear me. I heard on more than one account that her family is surviving only by threads."



“Then I, by no means, should cut those threads—now should I?”

“Well, I think it is rather deplorable that you would allow someone like that to attend to your children.”

“There is no evil in being poor. Besides, her grandmother worked here many years for Mr. and Mrs. Russell.”

“Even so.” With a tightening forehead, her mother gave an icy smile and walked away.

Mazie stopped a servant who was passing with a tray of glasses. “Eggnog, Father?”

“Please.” He took a few short sips, commented on the Christmas decorations, then settled into silence. “Is that our cousin over there? So it is,” he said after a moment. “I had better go say hello—”

Mazie’s hand latched onto his coat. “Father.”

The word alone seemed to seize his attention. “Yes?”

“Is he here?”

“Who, my darling?”

“The man you told me of, the one you invited.” She swallowed hard. “From the company.”

“Mr. Murphy? Why, yes, but that won’t do you any good unless—”

“I know, Father.” Mazie released him, letting her fingers curl into wet palms. “Trust me, I know.”



MAZIE LOWERED ONTO THE BEDSIDE, the quiet so soothing, so rich. She stroked the damp curls on Darla’s forehead, then straightened the teddy bear in Effie’s arms.

The twins smiled up at her with their father’s smile.

“Your dress is very pretty,” cooed Darla, snuggling deeper into the blankets. “I wish I could wear it.”

“Me too,” said Effie.

“Maybe when you’re older.” Mazie tucked the blankets closer around their necks, then bent down to whisper in both of their ears, “Do you know who is coming tonight?”

“Santa,” they breathed in unison.

Mazie chuckled. “In his jolly red suit, with his little ol’ pipe.”

“Papa has a pipe,” said Effie. “But not a red suit.”

“That’s because he isn’t Santa,” Darla told her.

Mazie’s insides twisted. If they only knew how right they were. “Now, it’s time for sleep. No whispering, all right?”

Both nodded with sleepy smiles.

When Mazie quit the room, she found Doris awaiting her in the hall.

Her smile was hesitant. “Miss Russell?”

“Yes, Doris, what is it?”

“Well, you see, miss...did I tell you I had taken on two jobs?”

Mazie continued to the stairs. “No, I’m afraid you didn’t.”

“Oh, well, I meant to, of course—but I made certain it wouldn’t affect things here...and I didn’t suppose you’d mind.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Good. I mean, I’m awful glad, Miss Russell, because I like it here a lot and...”

Mazie turned halfway down the steps. “Listen, Doris. It’s been quite the day, what with the Christmas Eve party and all the decorations. Why don’t you go on home? It’s almost eleven, as it is.”

“That’s just it, Miss Russell.” For the first time, the girl pulled a small book from behind her back. She rubbed it with her thumbs. “I’m working all tonight, and I won’t be home at all.”

“I am sorry.”

“Yes.” Tears filmed the girl’s eyes. “So am I. That’s why I was wondering if...if...”

“Yes?”

Doris thrust the book at her. “I found this in the library, miss. You can take it out of my wages, if I might have it.”

“The book is yours.” Mazie handed it back. “Is that all?”

“No...not quite. You see, it’s for my grandmother.” A pause, more tears. “I was wondering if you might deliver it for me... before Christmas.”



MAZIE STOOD by the silent record player. Her finger traced Doris’s small package, even as she heard the door open and shut.

His footsteps announced his entrance into the room. “Fancy trimmings.”

Mazie didn’t turn. Her hands clenched into balls. “We had a party,” she answered. “You know, the one we have every year?” She spun around. “Or didn’t you know it was Christmas Eve, Sam?”

His eyes held hers for a second. No emotion. “Got a cigarette?”

Anger unfurled inside of her, but she said nothing. She crossed the room, pulled a cigarette from a drawer, then approached him.

He tugged it from her fingers. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

With the unlit cigarette in his mouth, he put distance between them and pulled off his flogger. He tossed it across a chair.

Mazie drew in the scent of strange perfume. “Who was she?”

“The dame?”

“Who else?”

He struck a match and lit the cigarette. “She’s no one. Just a cheap canary from a local gin mill. Any more questions?”

“Yes.”

“Well save them. They’re not important.”

“Why not?”

“Because last I saw the canary, she was wearing nippers instead of bracelets and heading straight into the cooler.”

Mazie watched his face. “You arrested her?”

“After I got the information I needed.”

Silence.

Her heart plummeted. Not that she had expected anything different. Even on the street, she had known as much—but it didn’t make it easier. Nothing did.

She snatched the package off the stand without looking at him. “I’m going out. The presents are all under the tree, so don’t worry about playing Santa. He’s already come.”

“Mazie.” He caught her waist before she could get past him. His smoke circled around their faces, a scent that used to invigorate her.

Now, it only represented a love that was going up in flames. “Let me go, Sam.”

“You think for one moment I didn’t know it was Christmas Eve?”

She looked away from him. “I don’t know what to think.”

“Then think what I tell you.” His finger lifted her chin. “Look at me, babe.”

No. Only she did. Her gaze fell into his—the soft brown of his eyes; that tender, probing look.

“I’m telling you to believe me.” He whipped the cigarette from his mouth, dropped it to the ground. “You make me dizzy with love. Think that every time you want to paste me.”

“I can’t go on like this.”

“It has to be this way.”

“No, it doesn’t.” She pressed against his chest, trying to ease away, but he didn’t let her go. “Mr. Murphy was here. He was willing to talk with you, maybe offer you a job with the company—”

“I’m not working with sewing machines alongside your father, Mazie.” His mouth dropped closer to hers. “If you wanted a puppet, you should have picked another lug.”

“I don’t want a puppet and I don’t want a lug—and I don’t want a detective.” She ripped from his hold and stumbled backward. “I want a husband, Sam, and if you can’t give me that...” The sentence trailed into silence.

For once, his face almost winced. He grinded his shoe into the cigarette on the rug. “Don’t forget your coat.” Dry, husky voice. He turned to the mantel. “The snow’s getting heavy out there.”

Mazie blinked against gathering tears. With the package in her hands, she fled from the house and escaped into the night.



SHE COULD HAVE SENT a servant to deliver the package. On any other day she would have.

But it wasn’t any other day, and however large the house might have been, it was suddenly too small for her and her husband.

*He should have wrapped the presents with me. A knot lodged in her throat, so large she couldn’t breathe. She walked faster through the flurry of snowflakes. He should have decorated the tree with me, should have helped me decide which doll was for Effie and which dress was for Darla.*

A sob sputtered from her lips, but she sucked it back

quickly. *He should have danced with me tonight at the Christmas party.*

Instead, he was a gumshoe faking romance with a cheap singer. He was placing his life in jeopardy for the hundredth time. He was roaming the cold streets with a name that wasn't his, with a lie in every word he spoke, with a hidden gun in the pocket of his flogger.

How many more Christmases before the cops brought home his body? How many months, weeks, days?

Her mind reeled with the horror of such a thought. She couldn't bear it. If he should die...

*No.* She halted in front of the small little house she recognized only from driving by. *If he can't put us first, I'll have to.* Leaving wasn't something she wanted. It was a necessity. Not only for her, but for the two little children she'd left asleep in their beds.

Wiping at the moisture on her cheeks, Mazie left the sidewalk and tromped through inches of snow. The porch creaked with her weight, and when she knocked on the door, it rattled against the impact.

When it finally came open, an older woman stood on the other side. Shadows hid her face, then an unsteady voice lifted, "Who are you?"

"Mazie Russell, ma'am."

"Russell." The name was echoed back, as if it summoned some distant memory. Then the door creaked open. "Come in."

Mazie stepped inside of the darkness, the coldness. She followed the old woman through hallways that seemed empty, passed walls with no pictures, and into a room lit only by a small fireplace.

The old woman flicked her hand toward a chair. "Sit down."

Mazie lowered. "I just came to—"

“I know why you came, and I don’t want your pity.”

“Pardon?”

The woman ambled to the hearth and poked at the wood with a fire iron. “I know my granddaughter’s tongue well enough. Probably every one in Manhattan knows by now.”

“Knows what, ma’am?”

“That I’m dying.” The fire iron clattered to the ground, as the old woman straightened. She turned, lips compressed, eyes dry and hollow. “Doctor says it could be a matter of weeks. Heaven knows I wish I were gone already.”

Mazie averted her gaze. “I’m sorry.”

“Well now that you’ve said it, you can leave—”

“That isn’t why I’ve come. Doris asked me to bring you this.” Mazie outstretched the small package.

The woman hesitated. “What is it?”

“A gift.”

“Nothing I need, I’m sure.” Even so, she grasped the package and ripped off the string. When the brown paper fell away, a book opened in her hands. “No.” The word was murmured, just a faint, ghostly sound. She took a step back and sank into the rocker behind her. “No.”

Mazie watched her face. “Is something the matter?”

“I don’t want this.” Agony carved deep lines into the woman’s aged face and plagued her eyes. She hurled the book toward the fire, but it only skittered to the edge without reaching the flames. “You had no right...Doris had no right.”

Mazie stood. She glanced at the book, at the small paper that had escaped from the worn pages. She bent to retrieve it—

“Leave it alone!” The shriek pierced the air. The woman lunged to her feet. “Leave it alone or throw it into the fire—but get it out of my sight.”

“Your granddaughter wanted you to have this.”

“It can’t help me now.”

“But there’s a letter inside. You haven’t even read it—”

“Haven’t read it?” A small, brittle laugh left the woman’s lips. “The memory of that letter has kept me company in this wretched house for decades, and those words have kept me awake more sleepless nights than you’ve ever known.” Tears welled as her lips began to tremble. “God knows I’ve read it.”

Mazie’s soul writhed. Not because she knew the woman, not because she understood about any letter. But because of the pain. It was so tangible, so vivid, that it hovered about the room like a rancid smell.

It was stifling.

“Now get out of here.” The woman sank to her knees on the floorboards. Wrinkled hands groped for the book. “And take this with you. It’s nothing more than useless poems someone should have destroyed a long time ago.”

Mazie took the book and turned it over. She read the title, noted the author. Nothing much significant—except that the pages seemed worn, as if they’d been read countless times.

“I used to read it, if you can believe that. Back in the days when I worked for your husband’s parents, when...” The sentence lingered, as her eyes adjusted on the letter. “Someone should have destroyed this, too.”

“Doris must not have thought so.”

“What does Doris know?” The woman’s eyes snapped up. “What does she know of a man’s love or a woman’s heart or battlefields?”

Mazie didn’t answer.

“Nothing, that’s what.” With quivering fingers, the old woman unfolded the letter. She was silent for a moment or two. Once or twice, she rubbed her cheeks and wiped away tears. Then, with a shuddering breath, she crumpled the letter in her fist. She tossed it into the flames.

Mazie took a step back. She should leave. Perhaps she



should have left before, should have delivered the package and fled—but something had kept her still.

The old woman covered her face. “We had only been married two weeks,” came her tiny whisper. “He tended Mr. Russell’s yard, and I did the housecleaning inside. Then he enlisted without me ever knowing. The first I knew was when he came home with his Union hat and shiny brass buttons, proud as you please.”

Mazie’s throat tightened.

“I swore I’d never speak to him if he left, if he traded our love for a cursed war,” she said. “But he did it anyway.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Letters came, but I never answered them. They piled up on my nightstand or got lost in whatever book I was reading.” A sputtering sound left her lips. “When the last one came, it was in the pocket of his uniform...and all I was left with was his dead body.”

Mazie bent down to where the woman shook, but she didn’t have the bravery to touch her. She only listened, close enough to hear every raspy, choking sob.

“The letter was nothing more than a lot of talk of integrity and honor. A man’s pride, he called it—as if there’s any pride in fighting a war.” She shook her head. “He never did beg me to forgive him. Never even asked if he could come home. But at the end of that last letter, he said how he loved me...and there were tears smearing the ink.”

“I’m sorry.” The useless words again, the only thing Mazie could think to say. Her chest ached. “I’m so sorry.”

“Now you know.” The old woman cradled her white head and moaned. “I’ve wanted to be dead for a very long time.”



MAZIE WALKED into a night that was frigid and silent. From neighboring chimneys, puffs of smoke rose into the air, illuminated only by the pale moonlight.

The cold deepened to her bones. *It wasn't my place to be there.* If anyone should have given the woman her package, it should have been Doris. She should have been the one to read her grandmother the letter, to sit by her side through the night, to hold her hand as she wept.

*Not me.* Mazie drew in air. *I had no right to be there.*

How strange and sad the house had seemed, as if touched by the hand of grief. But then again, so was the woman. She was slight, lifeless, shriveled—with a note of despair in every word, a look of regret in every glance. She was pitiful.

*If only she'd stayed true to him.* A sigh escaped as her mind envisioned what might have been. *If only she'd been as proud as her husband was, when he appeared in his Union suit. If only she'd answered every letter with one of her own.*

But then the body had come. There'd been no time to turn back, to make amends, to grope for second chances.

*How pointless.* Mazie's eyes stung with cold air, even as the snow floated onto her cheeks. *How pointless that she pushed him away, when her heart still loved him so.*

What had her pride gotten her? What had her stubbornness, her anger, her argument ever rewarded her?

In the end, she was left with nothing. She was dying in a creaky old house devoid of memories, with a letter that could never be answered, with a husband that was long dead and buried.

*If only she'd stayed true to him.* The thought again, probing in deep places, accompanied with a face she didn't want to think of.

But she had no choice.

Sam's voice, his laughter, his reckless grin that had been so

scarce of late—they pricked at her memory. She wondered why his eyes hardly ever gleamed anymore. When was the last time he had danced with her?

She didn't know. They'd done it so often before. Not at her father's fancy parties, nor at Mr. and Mrs. Russell's gatherings—but at strange, delightful times when no one else was around. Their only music had been his humming. She still recalled the tunes.

*Oh, God.* Mazie's feet shuffled to a stop as she reached the outside of her home. She stood looking up at the ornate, two-story house. *God, why is it so unclear to me?*

She wanted to leave him. She wanted to protect her children and herself. She was tired of thoughts that kept her awake at night—thoughts that sometime that day, her husband had been holding another woman. She was weary with worrying he wouldn't come home, with the nagging knowledge that any day could be his last.

*I want a husband, God.*

Silence.

She stared at the house through a blur. *I want him to be everything he should be. Is that so wrong?*

No, it wasn't. It couldn't possibly be. She deserved to protect her girls and make a life without him.

Only as she stared at the house, she wondered how it would change in fifty years. She wondered if the paint would crumble and peel, and if the windows would lose their shutters, and if the porch would begin to sag. Would it feel wretched, forsaken, and haunted—just as the house she'd visited today?

Numbness stretched its fingers throughout her limbs. *I wouldn't regret it*, came the words. *I wouldn't be like Doris's grandmother. I wouldn't wither away like that...wouldn't let it eat me alive.*

She wondered what Sam would say. He wouldn't under-

stand. He couldn't comprehend any of her hurts. He only thought she should love him, no matter what his job expected.

*Love him.* The words came back to stab her. *I don't know if I love him.*

Only she did. She'd always loved him. She loved him every morning when she woke up, and all throughout the day, then more so late at night as she waited for him to come home.

*Sam, Sam...*

She wondered how hard it would be to live without him. She wondered if she could survive without the sight of his suits hanging in her closet. How scentless her bedroom would be without the lingering aroma of his cigarette smoke. What would she do with herself, if not for hurrying to the telephone when he called, or watching the front window for the sight of his flivver?

Even now, she wanted to be with him. She wanted to hurry inside and discover if he'd waited up for her. He'd never asked where she was going, but she wondered if he was curious. Did he worry for her, as she did for him?

*God, what do I do?* The old woman's shaking sobs seemed to float across the night air, as if in answer to all her questions.

With the book still in her grasp, Mazie took slow steps toward her home. Tears knotted in her throat, whether in relief or dread she could not tell.

She only knew one thing. It was time to decide whether she loved her husband enough.



THE BEDROOM DOOR had never squeaked open so loudly. She stood in the threshold, aware that the clock on their bedroom stand was ticking closer to one o'clock.

She almost turned and fled.

“Close the door.” The timbre of his voice was low, but not groggy. Had he been awake?

She stepped inside and found her closet in the darkness. When she’d replaced her evening dress with a nightgown, she padded cautiously toward the bed.

He turned in the darkness. She couldn’t see much—only the outline of his firm jaw, his messy hair, and the broad shape of his shoulders.

She peeled back the covers and slipped into bed. “Sorry.” It came out short, shorter than she’d meant.

He must have been used to her cold voice, because he only nodded.

She nestled deeper, aware of the distance between them. *“He came home with his union hat and shiny brass buttons, proud as you please.”*

Sam turned his head toward the ceiling in silence.

*“I swore I’d never speak to him if he left.”* Mazie’s eyes crammed shut as she listened to the sound of her husband’s breathing, but the old woman’s voice echoed still, *“Letters came, but I never answered them...when the last one came, it was in the pocket of his uniform.”* A tremble seized her. *“All I was left with was his dead body—”*

“Mazie?”

Her breath caught. Then, quickly, “Yes?”

“You’re shaking with cold.”

“No.” She rolled to the other side of the bed, catching a sob with her hand. “I’m fine. Goodnight.”



SLEEP ERODED AWAY as the bed began to bounce.

“Wake up, wake up,” cried two little voices. “It’s Christmas!”

Mazie forced her eyes open.

Two little faces stared back at her with disheveled curls and eager grins. “Can we open presents now?” asked Darla.

Effie clapped dimpled hands. “Yes, can we?”

From behind them, Sam reached across the bed and lifted Effie onto his shoulders. “Who said there’s any presents?”

Darla giggled and leaped toward him.

He caught her with one arm.

“Santa always comes,” she explained, “because we were so good this year.”

“Says who?” he quipped.

Both girls dissolved in laughter, until that rare flush of pleasure came over Sam’s face again. Even his eyes sort of gleamed.

Mazie sat up. “I guess we should go see then, shouldn’t we?”

When his eyes drifted back to hers, they changed. Gone was the sweet mirth. In its place, something sad and hesitant appeared. “Yeah.” He settled the two girls back to their feet and took their hands. “You two ready?”

Mazie ran to keep up with their frantic pace, as they dragged their father down polished steps and into the drawing room.

Then they stood, frozen in their places, as they beheld the magical sight of presents beneath the tree.

“He came! He came!” Ecstatic shouts rose in the air, followed by the sound of jumping and clapping.

Sam swooped them toward the tree. He lowered to the floor in his robe, with Effie climbing onto one of his knees, and Darla hugging his neck between every hunt for another present.

On other Christmases, Mazie would have been there beside them—but she stayed planted where she was, watching from the doorway. Everything hurt. Every place inside of her was afraid, weak, numb.

Because she didn't want to lose him. She didn't want the laughter in her home to turn into the silence of regret. She didn't want her children to lose a father. She didn't want her husband to become a stranger.

*I love him.*

With a curl twisted around her finger, Effie glanced up at her father. Her smile widened as he spoke to her.

*It doesn't matter how much he's gone.* Because he was here right now—and that would always be enough. *It doesn't matter if there are other canaries.* Because no matter who he had to woo, she knew his heart was faithful. She trusted him. There was no other woman he'd dance with.

*And if he's killed?* That question burned across her chest with searing heat. She wondered how much easier it would have been when they brought the old woman's dead husband, if she had only answered all of his letters. Would the pain have stretched through decades? Would it have eaten away her happiness, her life?

"Mother, looky what I have." Darla lifted a glass doll from her opened box. "It's my favorite dolly in the world."

"It's lovely." Mazie came forward—slowly at first, as her eyes wandered from the doll to the handsome curves of her husband's face.

He caught her gaze. "Santa's pretty amazing."

Warmth flooded her cheeks. She settled down next to him, catching his masculine scent, hearing the rhythm of his every breath. "Sam." She made it no farther than that.

Effie darted off his lap and ran to retrieve a gift.

Dark, startling eyes held her gaze. "Yeah?"

"If you ever write me a letter, I'll send you one back."

"What?"

"I love you."

His lips moistened. "Never doubted that."

“I want this house to always be happy.”

“Plan on it.”

“I’m so tired of being a stranger to you.” Her hands crept to his neck, then up to his cheeks. “I was so worried about you being a husband, I forgot to be a wife and...”

The words seemed to shake him. He lowered his forehead into hers, his lips lingering at her mouth without touching. “And what?”

“You make me dizzy.” She’d no more than spoke the words when his kiss filled her senses. She tasted something delightful, some sweet mixture of past, present, and future all wrapped into one.

With a grin, he pulled her to her feet. He took her hand in his and placed her other on his shoulder. They danced just as sweetly as they’d ever danced before, with an audience of two little girls to observe them.

Then he began to hum.

And she knew the Russell house would forever be alive with the sound.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



WILLOWY WHISPER is a Christian fiction author, graphic designer, and photographer. She lives in a beautiful place called West Virginia, nestled between mountain and field. She is the author of eleven novels, ten of which are published, and numerous short stories. She enjoys playing the piano, guitar, mandolin, and ukulele. She is also a born-again believer in Jesus Christ, an incurable romantic, and a passionate dreamer.

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