

Was it too late to take back his wish?

Harry's Hurried Childhood

by ALAN MCCABE

I'm real depressed, Doc," Harry Quickman told his psychiatrist. He seemed nervous and on edge, frequently running his sweaty hands through his hair.

"Let us talk then," replied the psychiatrist, a soft-spoken, calm man who wore a brown suit. The two men sat face to face, the doctor behind a neat and orderly desk, the patient on a cushioned seat. This setup would often become uncomfortable for Harry during the sessions. When those droopy, brown eyes of the psychiatrist began staring into his own, they seemed to be probing his innermost thoughts, boring into his mind and catching everything that was not said. At these times, Harry had to get up and pace about the small, windowless room.

"I'm depressed because I didn't have a childhood," said Harry.

"You told me that before," said the psychiatrist, "but you've never told me exactly what you mean by it." The

eyes probed deeper. "You never had a pet, perhaps? You never had any true friends? Your parents were cruel?"

The eyes probed deeper still with each question. Harry stood up and walked back and forth.

"No, Doc, I never had a childhood! Oh, how do I tell you? I've never explained it to you before because I knew you'd think I was crazy. But I gotta tell somebody. Sit back in that chair, Doc; it's a long and bizarre story . . .

"As a kid, I loved Christmas—I absolutely loved it! But for all the childish and selfish reasons: receiving toys and candy, stuffing myself at Christmas Eve dinner, going out to play in the snow, being the center of attention when all the relatives visited. I would look forward to Christmas all year, always wanting everything else to be over and done with so Christmas would come again. My Christmas list was always written by June. As the months went on, I would make so many revisions and additions that by December it would be at least twenty pages long. Every year it was the same. In January I wished there were some way to speed up the year, just so it would be December 25 again.

"One of my favorite Christmas treats was the annual visit from Uncle Titus. He was a peculiar fellow. He traveled extensively and always came back with odd souvenirs from his voyages abroad. Well, on the Christmas which found me at the age of six, Christmas 1949, Uncle Titus presented to me a souvenir which was perhaps the most magnificent of any he'd ever given me. However, because of my selfish eagerness, it turned out to be the most horrible, for it caused me to be deprived of my childhood.

"I remember it all very vividly. I guess that's because

it's just about the only childhood memory I can claim. We were all sitting around the tree, the whole family; wrapping paper was strewn about the floor. All my new toys were around me like a mighty fortress. Only a handful of unopened presents remained under the tree.

“ ‘Where’s my present from you, Uncle Titus?’ I asked eagerly.

“He took a small wrapped package out of the breast pocket of his plaid pajamas and handed it to me.

“ ‘It’s so little!’ I said.

“ ‘Big things come in small packages,’ my infinitely wise uncle remarked.

“I ripped the brown paper wrapping from the parcel; I then had in my hand a small wooden box painted with bright swirling colors—the spiraling design seemed to be turning round and round before my very eyes. A small metal clasp kept the box shut. I unhooked it and looked in the box. I saw nothing.

“ ‘Uncle Titus, it’s empty!’ I whined.

“ ‘Look again, m’boy!’

“I did. And again, I saw nothing. By this I mean absolutely nothing! It was completely black inside that tiny colorful box; looking into it was like looking through a window to outer space. I was about to thrust my whole hand into that box to see if I could pull anything out, but my uncle grabbed my arm, saying, ‘No! No! You must let it come to you, Harry!’ So I waited quite a while, growing more doubtful by the minute. My mom and dad came to my side. They became as mesmerized as I was by the black void within the box. After many minutes, something began to happen. I could hear a faint whisper, or a hiss—it seemed to be saying something, but quietly and in a foreign language. It grew

steadily louder. I then saw a small speck of blue. It was far away in this blackness I was looking into, but it was steadily approaching. Closer and closer this cloud of blue came, getting bigger and bigger. 'Oh my God,' I heard my father, still by my side, whisper.

"Now the blue cloud was at the very edge of the black void, and it swirled around in circles, just like the design on the box. Round and round it went until it began to rise slowly out of the box, heading right for my face! It became thin and bore a resemblance to a fine blue thread. Suddenly, the string of blue smoke darted toward me. I felt a sudden pang of terror as that blue smoke, now more like blue lightning, shot at my face. I opened my mouth to scream—and into my open mouth went the smoke! I felt it go down my throat.

"Trembling, I looked up at Uncle Titus. I could say nothing. Mom and Dad could not speak either. Their faces showed the same fear I felt. Dad finally found his voice and said to his brother (not at all in a voice of approval, either), 'You've really outdone yourself this time, Titus.'

"Uncle Titus patted my head and laughed and said, 'What'd ya think o' that, m'boy? Heh, heh! Now listen close. That was the Blue Smoke of Jooba. I picked it up in Egypt. Make a wish, Harry, and it will come true! Plus (and this is what makes the Blue Smoke of Jooba the finest of all the wishbringers), the smoke is in you now—it's a part of you! It will always be with you. Anytime you make that same wish, it'll still come true!'

"Every child's fantasy! Make a wish and it will come true! Well, one and only one thought came automatically to my mind about what my one wish would be. In my selfish little head, I came up with a brilliant plan.

Looking at my pile of toys, I pictured it twice as high . . . thrice as high . . . towering up to the sky high! No more would I have to wait for Christmas! I would bring Christmas to me!

“‘I wish it were Christmas 1950!’ I said. Everything became pitch-black around me, and I felt like I was floating through some kind of thick ooze. I heard the voices of my parents, my friends, even myself—but I could see nothing. I then had the sensation of falling, and I landed lightly on our living room floor. The next thing I knew, there was a whole mess of unopened Christmas presents around me. I quickly got down to business! My greedy little fingers dove into the shiny red wrappings, unraveled the rosy ribbons, bit and tore into the papered parcels, making the sounds I looked forward to all year round: *Sssbbhhk! Ffffft! Rrrrip!* Soon there was a pile of paper on one side of me and a tower of toys on the other . . . Teddy bears and bright-colored bouncy balls! Candy canes and Candyland! Chocolate Santas and Chinese checkers! Two toy guns and a talking clock! Everything but a partridge in a pear tree. I was in Christmas heaven!

“My family was there, too, of course; it was just like a normal Christmas at the Quickmans’. After opening my presents, I went outside to play in the snow a bit and showed off in front of my aunts and uncles. When the day was over, I wanted Christmas again. I said, ‘I wish it were Christmas 1951!’

“I again made that strange journey through darkness and landed in Christmas 1951. And once again, we repeated all our family Christmas traditions—except the one in which we danced around the tree while Bing Crosby sang ‘The Little Drummer Boy’ on the scratchy

record player and then all joined in our ‘family hug.’ Mom always insisted we do this before we opened any presents, and it drove me insane with anticipation. As we dipped and twirled beneath the tree, I always became dizzy and could not keep my eyes off the enticing collection of gifts. ‘Open me! Open me!’ they were calling. But all the other Christmas traditions I had no quarrel with: the roast turkey and gravy and mashed potatoes whose delightful aroma filled the house from noon till midnight . . . Aunt Louella telling one of her stories, which were completely pointless and didn’t even have a punch line but were great to listen to just the same. All these things I loved. I truly seemed to think they were the only things I loved. And so I skipped over everything else—over and over again, until Christmas 1959—just to get to these moments. Somehow I just did not realize that similar lovely moments occur throughout life, any time of the year.

“I had a huge pile of toys by now indeed, but I suddenly felt unbelievably tired and sad. I was now sixteen years old, and, in my mind, getting toys and playing in the snow did not mean as much to me. Although all the Quickmans were present at each of the Christmases, I had this feeling of missing my family very much. I felt as if I had lost a lot of time that could have been spent with them. And indeed I had! I yearned, for the first time ever, for all the big and little joys that everyday life brings. So I spent all of Christmas 1959, and every day thereafter, with my family. But I was very confused: my family acted as if I had never been gone—as if I had spent the last ten years with them—but I had no memory of it! To me, those ten years had been spent zipping through time and space—nonexistent to me!

I had no memory of those years at all! And yet, I had the knowledge and sense of a normal sixteen-year-old.

“So there you have it, Doc. Through a selfish, childish whim, I expunged an entire decade of my existence, perhaps the ten most influential, enjoyable years of a person’s life. And I can’t get them back. I want to have—or to have had—a childhood!”

“That’s a very interesting story,” said the psychiatrist.

“But you don’t believe it, and you think I’m a loony-bird,” said Harry.

“Well, it seems to me, Harry, that you have two problems here. You are depressed, and you fear that your peers may think you’re insane. According to your story, though, one action can solve both problems—wish yourself back to Christmas 1949! The smoke is still with you. You said it granted the same wish every time you wished it. By wishing to return to Christmas 1949, you’d be making basically the same wish as you had so many times before: to go to a different Christmas of your life. Make the wish, Mr. Quickman! Go back to Christmas 1949 and change your original wish . . . Find your childhood.”

Harry saw he had nothing to lose. If it worked, he would have his childhood back. If nothing happened, he could laugh and say, “I was only kidding. Had you going there, didn’t I?”

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “I wish it were Christmas 1949!”

“I’ll never forget that Christmas!” proclaimed ancient Uncle Titus at the Quickman dinner table on Christmas

Eve. “Christmas 1949! It was nearly forty-five years ago, but I remember it as if it were yesterday. When I gave you that Blue Smoke of Jooba, Harry, I thought for sure you’d wish for something silly like a certain toy you had had on your list but didn’t receive. Or maybe a million jillion dollars or something selfish like that. But, no, Harry, m’boy, you got philosophical on us, and I’ll never forget it! ‘I wish to live every moment of my life to the fullest,’ you said, ‘by enjoying the love of my family and friends.’ Took us all by surprise, ya sure did, m’boy!”

It had taken Harry by surprise when he had said it, too. Even now, almost forty-five years later, he had no idea how a six-year-old boy could possibly have thought up such a wish. However, he would never take that wish back—not for all the toys in the world—because he had lived a full, enjoyable life, a life full of pleasant childhood memories.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan McCabe lives in West Chester, Pennsylvania, where he attends West Chester East High School. “Writing is my main interest,” he reports, but he’s also a collector of The Wizard of Oz memorabilia. He enjoys tennis and writing and performing rock ‘n’ roll songs.