

The Christmas Star

by Brit

*Star Light, Star Bright
The first star I see tonight
I wish I may, I wish I might
Have the wish I wish tonight...*

1952

David Starsky shifted from one foot to the other as he leaned against the frame of his bedroom window, gazing out into the inky darkness. The evening had cooled considerably and his breath delicately fogged the pane. One small hand reached up to wipe the glass so he could see better, and his eyes danced across the Brooklyn skyline, anxiously continuing his nightly ritual.

There...

Not too far off the horizon, the first star of the evening shone brightly in an azure darkness. He smiled to himself, then drew a breath and closed his eyes.

I wish...

The five-year-old repeated the same litany he had since the first of the month, promising the star, Santa Claus, God Almighty, and “anyone else who might be listening” that he’d be good forever if only his wish would come true.

Let Poppa come home for Christmas.

Words like “Pusan,” “Heartbreak Ridge,” “the Thirty-eighth Parallel,” and “Panmunjom” had become familiar to him over the last year, whispered in anxious tones by his mother and the other grownups, and blared from the television set, though no one would talk to him about the fighting. Korea seemed to be a far off place where men were sent to fight a mysterious group of people. Why, he didn’t know. His questions were met with worried smiles and answered with the encouragement that the war not anything little boys should worry about.

Tension in the small brownstone apartment had escalated since mid-August when Rachel Starsky had received word that her husband Michael had been wounded as the Marines captured Hill 122, east of Panmunjom, and taken prisoner. David was wakened by the sound of his mother’s sobs coming from the first floor kitchen one night and crept down the stairs to find out what was going on. He sat undiscovered on the bottom step, listening as his Aunt Rosie tried unsuccessfully to comfort the distraught woman.

POW became another unspoken word added to the five-year-old's vocabulary that night.

But now it was Christmas Eve—the time for five-year-old boys to believe in miracles. David felt a set of pudgy hands wrap themselves around his bare foot as he knelt on his bed. Looking over his shoulder at his two-year-old brother, he smiled and scooped up the toddler to sit beside him.

“You gonna wish on the star with me tonight, Nicky?” David took the drooling grin as an affirmative. “Okay, do like this.” The older boy slapped his hands together as if in prayer and watched expectantly for Nicky to follow suit. Having played this “game” with his older brother before, Nicky clapped his pudgy hands together with an outpouring of a language only he could understand.

“That’s it, you’ve got it!” David nodded and tapped on the glass to focus his brother’s attention on the inky Brooklyn darkness. “Look out here, Nicky. Find the star.” He tapped again on the pane. A small, wet hand joined his and smeared its way down the glass.

“Now we make a wish, Nicky. Make your wish,” he encouraged. Smiling as Nicky became more interested in chewing on his now-cold fingers, David returned his gaze to the skyline and sent up one more fervent prayer. *Please, let Poppa come home for Christmas...*

Rachel felt her heart lodge in her throat as she watched her boys, Nicky already drowsing on his brother’s bed, and David staring earnestly at the eastern sky, just as he had every night since late summer. She suspected he had somehow found out about his father’s capture, but doubted that he had managed to learn of the more recent events. Struggling still with how much to tell her son, Rachel decided not to say anything for fear of ruining her son’s Christmas. Life was full of disappointments enough as it was.



Rachel wasn’t surprised to hear noises coming from within the house at midnight. She probably would have been more surprised if she *hadn’t* heard them, knowing her oldest boy. But what she didn’t expect to hear was the sound of her son’s heart breaking. Gathering up her robe, she hurried out of her bedroom toward the stairway, but was stopped by a gush of cold December air from the open front door.

Still in his pajamas and slippers, David stood on the small stoop, looking hopelessly up and down a dark and empty 84th Street.

“David?”

The five-year-old spun around at the sound of her voice, tears streaming down his chilled face. “He didn’t come, Ma! It’s Christmas, and he’s not here!” David threw himself against his mother and wrapped his arms around her.

“Of course, Santa was here! See the presents are—”

“*Poppa!* Poppa didn’t come home!”

“Oh, David,” Rachel slid to her knees and wrapped her arms around the shaking shoulders. “You know he wants to. You know he’d come home if he could. Oh, sweetheart. I miss him, too.”

The despondent mother drew her son onto her shoulder and carried him back to his bed.



Christmas morning passed quietly in the Starsky apartment. Presents were exchanged early, and David thanked his mother for the new football and sled. He even managed to laugh a bit at Nicky’s attempt to eat the ear of the stuffed bear he’d been given. But when Rachel pulled the last, unfamiliar present out from under the tree, wrapped by childish hands, David fled to his room and slammed the door. The present to his father would remain unopened.

When the five-year-old still hadn’t come out of his room by lunchtime, Rachel brought in a tray with some soup and a sandwich. David was lying on his bed, staring morosely out the window, a few books and comics forgotten and scattered about the floor. She set the tray on his nightstand and sat down next to her son, brushing the curls off his forehead. “Sweetheart, I know you had hoped your father would make it home for Christmas, but it’s just not possible. You know he’d be here if he could.”

Weary blue eyes met hers. “But Ma, he has to come. I wished every night on the star. He has to come home.”

Rachel sighed heavily, at a loss for what to say or do. “I hope you’re right, David. I really hope you are.”



As family arrived later that afternoon, Rachel cringed every time a knock was heard at the door. David’s face would light up in anticipation and hope, then dissolve in disappointment when the opening revealed some distant relative coming to share the Christmas dinner. It got to the point where his mother would hurry to the window and announce who it was before the guest made their way up the snowy landing.

Rachel encouraged David to join his cousins in playing the different board games they had received as gifts, rather than spending the afternoon sitting by the window. Even though her son participated, she knew he was distracted and unusually quiet.

It was quite late when the small crowd left that evening, well past the boys' bedtime. David had taken up his spot by one of the living room windows, gazing out into the darkness. Rachel placed the last of her table service in the scarred oak hutch. "Are you looking for the evening star?"

The boy shook his head. "No."

"David, you can't sit there all night, looking for him. Why don't you get ready for bed and I'll be up in a minute."

"But Ma, its still Christmas. Maybe—"

Rachel's voice was firm, but gentle. "Sweetheart, go get ready for bed."

"Yes, ma'am."

Rachel thought her heart would break as she watched her little man slide down from the chair and slowly make his way up the stairs. She quickly dashed away the tears that threatened to spill over and gathered up Nicky to put him down for the night as well. As she walked down the upstairs hallway, Rachel paused outside her oldest son's room. She was dismayed to find him already under the covers rather than at his usual spot by the window, looking for the evening star.

"David? Aren't you going to make your wish tonight?"

"No, Ma," came the muffled, and rather watery reply. "It's after midnight. It don't come true anyway."

Rachel shifted the sleeping toddler higher onto her shoulder as she eased her way into the room and sat on the edge of David's bed. "I know it's hard to understand, but don't give up hope yet, sweetheart. You never know when your wish might be granted. You've just got to keep hoping."

She could see the unshed tears in the blue eyes that so mirrored his father's. "But he didn't come home."

Rachel felt her own tears returning. "No, honey, he didn't. Not today. But who knows what will happen tomorrow? And if not tomorrow, maybe the day after, or the day after that. I'm not ready to give up yet, and I hope you're not either."

David's voice was smaller still. "I miss him."

Rachel leaned down and kissed his tousled head. “I do, too. And I’ll bet he misses you just as much. Think about what I said, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The bed creaked as Rachel stood and quietly crossed the room.

“Ma?”

Rachel turned back from the doorway expectantly.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, David. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas, Ma.” He lay quietly in the bed, listening as his mother’s footsteps receded down the hallway to her own bedroom where Nicky’s crib was. After a moment, he drew back his covers and moved around to the end of his bed, then leaned once more against the window frame.

I wish...



The sound of a car horn woke David up, and he blinked sleepily against the morning rays streaming through his bedroom window. The horn blared again and he kicked off the covers. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he crossed the cold wood floor to the end of his bed and peered out the window.

A tall figure in army dress was climbing out of the back of a checker cab, his right arm encased in a sling. The driver reached back through the open window of his cab and laid on the horn a third time before crossing to the trunk and removing the soldier’s duffel bag.

The army sergeant removed his cap and looked up the steps of the brownstone with a satisfied sigh. He let his gaze travel up the brick wall to the second-story window, his face breaking out into a huge smile at the widening eyes of the five-year-old looking down at him.

“Poppa!” David hardly dared to believe that the man below him was truly there, and not just the figure from the mists of his dreams. Just as the boy was about to call out again, he saw his mother racing down the steps, slipping a bit on the sidewalk in her haste to reach her husband. Michael Starsky reached out for her with his good left arm, laughing at Rachel’s excitement, and joining his tears with hers.

Behind the couple, the cabby smiled at the reunion. Wiping at his own eyes, he tipped his cap at their backs before driving away unnoticed, never bothering to ask for the fare. David shook himself out of his shock and tore through the house, not even realizing that he had forgotten to put on his slippers as he ran through the snow, and threw himself into his father's outstretched arm.

Rachel wiped at her eyes as she watched David bury his head against his father's chest. She placed a trembling hand on her husband's shoulder, happy just to have that small measure of contact. "Your last letter said you wouldn't make it home until next week! Why didn't you call?"

Michael kissed his son's forehead. "I wanted to surprise you and be home for Christmas. But then there was this snowstorm as soon as we hit Jersey, and the bus broke down outside of Trenton. I ended up hitchhiking into the city, and finally caught a cab, and—" His onrush was interrupted by Rachel wrapping her arms around her husband and son, kissing them both soundly.

Sometimes wishes made on a Christmas star do come true.



1976

David Starsky shifted from one foot to the other as he leaned against the frame of his kitchen window, gazing out into the inky darkness. The evening had cooled considerably and his breath delicately fogged the pane. A smile graced his generous mouth as he thought of the past few days' events. His partner had been his predictably grouchy self due to the upcoming Christmas holiday. Add the "euphoric sentimentalism" that rubbed him wrong on the best of days, and you had one blond-haired, blue-eyed Grinch. This year, it seemed as though Hutch's dismal mood was growing darker yet, and no amount of Starsky's relentless good cheer and holiday spirit could shake it.

Starsky's eyes drifted higher in the midnight sky, grateful that the haze of light that marked Bay City didn't obscure his view. Here, at least, he could see the sky without the dull, florescent glow.

There...

Not too far off the horizon, the first star of the evening shone brightly in an azure darkness. He smiled to himself, then drew a breath and closed his eyes.

I wish...

He wished Hutch could rediscover the wonder of the holiday. He wished the joy of the season would somehow heal the hidden wounds of his partner's heart. He wished that

Hutch would find a reason to believe in miracles, because Starsky knew that sometimes—*sometimes*—wishes made on a Christmas star do come true.



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May all your Christmas wishes come true!