

CHRISTMAS WITHOUT RUDY

As Tommy ran, Rudy darted by him, and then in front of him. Tommy tripped and fell on the luxurious green grass. He rolled over and giggled as Rudy jumped on him and licked his face. Tommy pushed the dog aside and hopped up, then pretended to throw a tennis ball. The sheltie raced in the direction of the throw, but quickly realized he'd been cheated and returned.

“Fooled ya, didn’t I, boy?” Tommy reached down and patted Rudy’s head. Then he tossed the ball down the hill. The little dog chased after it and disappeared into some trees. Tommy called after him. “Rudy? Come back, boy!” He ran down the hill, his cries becoming louder and more urgent. “Rudy! Where are you?” His eyes leaped from tree to tree, bush to bush, desperately seeking some sign of his pal. He shouted, “Rudy! Come—”

“Wake up, Tommy.” He felt his mother’s hand stroking his hair. He opened his eyes and saw her kind brown eyes beaming at him. “You were yelling in your sleep, honey.”

The nine-year-old boy sat up and fell into her arms as his tears flowed. “Mommy, I was with Rudy. We were playing in the park, and then he was gone. I looked everywhere, but I couldn’t find him.”

“It was just a bad dream, sweetie. You know Rudy’s gone now.”

He nodded as he pressed against her chest. “I miss him so much.”

“I know. We all miss him. He was a wonderful dog, and you and Rudy were so close. You practically grew up together.”

He squeezed his mother tightly, as if fearing she might vanish like his dream if he let go. He sobbed into her chest until he ran out of tears.

“Mommy, why did God make Rudy die?”

She kissed his hair. “Oh honey, God didn’t make Rudy die. He just got sick, that’s all. He got sick and he couldn’t get well.”

After another long hug, Tommy sat up straight, wiped his nose on his pajama sleeve, and looked into his mother's eyes. "But God could have made him well, couldn't He? Pastor Mike said God can do anything."

She nodded. "Yes, of course. God can do anything."

"Then why didn't God heal Rudy like I asked—" His voice cracked and tears filled his eyes once more.

His mother pulled him close. "I don't know." Then after a long silence, she said, "Maybe we could ask Pastor Mike after the Christmas Eve service tomorrow. Would you like that?" Tommy nodded. "Now you lie down and go back to sleep, and have happy dreams this time."

His mother stroked his hair until he closed his eyes. After she left, he whispered, "God, why did you let Rudy die?"

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Christmas Eve was Tommy's favorite church service of the year. But not this night. While others sang Christmas carols with loud and joyous voices, Tommy stared at the open hymn book in silence. He paid no attention to the dancing candle flames that usually fascinated him. His eyes remained downcast as his mind drifted between memories he treasured and questions he couldn't answer.

His parents prodded him to get up when their turn came to move forward, take a candle, and join the people forming a square around the edges of the sanctuary. The lights dimmed, the people sang "Silent Night," and the Light of Christ passed from candle to candle. Tommy felt someone nudge him. Looking in the direction of the poke, he saw his dad holding a glowing candle and motioning for him to take the flame and send it on.

After the service, Tommy and his parents waited on the couch in the pastor's office. Pastor Mike entered and removed his robe and stole, leaving

him dressed in khaki slacks and a red sweater with a large snowman. He carried a plate of cookies, which he waved in front of his three guests.

“Would anyone like a cookie?”

“No, thank you,” Tommy said. His parents also declined, and the pastor set the plate on his desk.

Addressing Tommy’s parents, Pastor Mike said, “Jen, Albert, would either of you like something to drink? I’ve got coffee and water.” They thanked him, but both said no. He pulled a chair close to Tommy and sat down. The pastor smoothed his mustache, took a deep breath, hesitated, and then leaned forward.

“I’m very sorry about Rudy,” he began. “It’s always hard to lose a close friend, especially around Christmas time.”

Tommy interlaced his fingers tightly. He gazed toward the floor.

“Your mother tells me that you would like to ask me a question,” the pastor continued. “Is that true?”

Tommy wiped his eyes on his sleeve, then looked up. “Pastor Mike, why did Rudy have to die?”

The pastor put a gentle hand on Tommy’s shoulder. “I’m afraid death is a part of life, son. Everyone and everything eventually dies.”

“But I asked God to heal him. I prayed every night. And God didn’t—”

Tommy sobbed. His mother handed him a tissue from her purse, which he used to wipe his eyes and blow his nose. Pastor Mike sat up in his chair and waited until the room was quiet again. Then he declared, “I’m sorry, Tommy, but you’re mistaken.”

Tommy stared at the pastor for a few moments before saying, “What?”

“I said you’re mistaken. God *did* heal Rudy.”

Tommy could not have looked more confused if the pastor had said Rudy flew to Mars in a spaceship. “But . . . Rudy *died*.”

“Well, yes, and no. You see, Rudy is in Heaven now, and I promise you he is healthy and feeling better than ever.”

A trace of a smile crept onto Tommy’s face. “You really think so?”

“Absolutely.” Pastor Mike leaned forward and looked straight into Tommy’s eyes. He spoke softly as he said, “Tommy, I had a dog when I was your age—a German Shepherd, named for my mom’s favorite actor, Laurence Olivier. She called him Sir Laurence, but the rest of us called him Ollie.”

Tommy grinned at the thought of a dog named Ollie, and Pastor Mike went on. “Anyway, he died when I was twelve, and I’m looking forward to seeing him again in Heaven. I’m hoping he’ll learn to talk by then, because I have a lot of questions for him—like what he thought about being called Ollie.”

Tommy laughed out loud this time, and the others quickly joined in. A short time later, his mother stood up and said, “Thank you, Pastor. I think we’ve taken enough of your time. Have a Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” he replied. Then, grabbing the plate of cookies again, he held it up in front of her. “Sure you won’t have a cookie for the road?”

Tommy quickly spoke up. “Could I please have one?”

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The next morning, Tommy and his parents enjoyed their traditional Christmas breakfast of waffles with butter and maple syrup. Then they moved to the Christmas tree where they took turns opening presents. He

received five books, some clothes, a football, two video games for his PlayStation, a “Veggie Tales” DVD, and a Frisbee.

When the presents had been opened, Tommy tried out one of the new video games. He didn’t notice when his dad left the house. But when his father returned a few minutes later carrying something wiggly in his arms, Tommy exclaimed, “A puppy! And he looks just like Rudy!”

“That’s only because she’s still little,” his father explained. When he set the puppy down, she scampered straight to Tommy, running around him as he laughed and tried to catch her. He rolled onto his back and the little dog jumped on him and over him in a constant blur of excitement.

His dad sat down on the floor near them. “Rudy was a sheltie, and this one’s a collie puppy. She’ll get quite a bit bigger than Rudy when she’s full-grown. But you’re getting a lot bigger, too.”

“What do you want to call her?” his mother asked. “We could name her Gertrude. That’s a girl’s name, and it’s a lot like ‘Rudy.’ ”

Sitting up, Tommy shook his head. He remained motionless as he thought for a moment. Then he grinned and said, “Can we call her Ollie?”