

A Cold For Christmas

by Dale Lerner

Sheldon was just about asleep on Christmas Eve when a tumbling sound from his closet jolted him wide awake. He flipped over in bed and squinted to see through the darkness. The dim nightlight in the corner flickered like an old candle, offering little help. But one thing was for sure—his mother had left his closet door open.

“Good gosh! Look at it! It’s wide open!” he said into the empty air. “Does she *want* me to be eaten alive?”

Something in the closet fell to the floor, and Sheldon nearly jumped out of his cotton pajamas. A small shadow scampered out of the closet and ran across the carpet. Sheldon curled up his legs.

“What do you want?” he said, trying to sound brave.

It stopped.

“I have a special monster bat that will smash you into a million pieces.”

It darted under his bed.

“Oh, great. Thanks, Mom! Now I’ve got a monster under my bed.”

He scooted over to his nightstand and reached for his plastic baseball bat, but it was gone!

“Good gosh! I’ve been set up.” He scrambled over to the middle of his bed and quickly burrowed under the covers.

Suddenly, a breath of cold air passed over his back, and a clicking noise, like metal teeth grinding, followed. Then a yellow light glowed transparent through the covers.

“Sheldon, come out from under there,” his mother said, after entering the room and switching on the lamp. “It’s time for your medicine.”

Sheldon rolled over onto his back and poked his head out from under the covers, and said, “Mom, do you love me?”

“What? You know I do.” She steadied a spoonful of cough syrup over to his mouth. “Now, hold still, and don’t make me spill it this time.”

Sheldon stretched out his neck and swallowed down the medicine. He twisted his face and stuck out his tongue.

“Good gosh, Mom. That’s worse than the other stuff.”

“Sheldon! What have I told you about saying that?”

“What?”

“You know what.”

His mother fluffed up his pillow and tucked the covers around his body like a cocoon, and Sheldon blinked up at her with big caterpillar eyes. She brushed back his messy brown hair and put her hand on his forehead.

“You can give Wade all my Christmas presents when I’m gone?” he said softly.

“Not that again. Sheldon, you’re not going to die. It’s just a cold. You’ll be fine in a few days.”

“It’s all right, Mom. You don’t have to protect me from the truth. I know the Grim Reaper is coming for me.”

“The Grim Reaper! Where did you get that one from?”

“I asked the nurse at school if I was going to die, and she said for me not to worry, that it would be a long time before the Grim Reaper came for me. But then she laughed, like she knew I was really going to die any minute.”

“You’re being silly. Now get to sleep before Santa comes and skips our house because *you’re* still awake.”

“Wait, can you please close the closet door? The monsters are getting out, and I don’t know where my monster bat is.”

“I thought you were too old for your monster bat.”

“Not when I’m *sick!*”

“I’ll get it for you.”

His mother dug the bat out of the closet and closed the closet door. On her way out of the room, she leaned the bat next to the nightstand, clicked off the lamp, whispered, “Good night,” and quietly shut the door.

It was dark again, except for the small glow around the nightlight. Sheldon wriggled free from his cocoon and snatched up his monster bat and kneeled on the bed with his back to the headboard and held the bat out with both hands like a sword.

“All right, Monster. If you’re still under my bed, I’m warning you. I’ve got my monster bat, and I’m not afraid to use it.”

The nightlight sparked and popped and went out. Dull silhouettes of green lights from across the street twinkled in his windows, and tree shadows blew gently back and forth across the curtains. The room was quiet.

“That’s a dirty trick, taking out my nightlight.”

Sheldon sat still and listened.

“Well, Monster, what’s it going to be? Are you going to get back in the closet, or do I have to smash you into jelly?”

“But, I’m not a monster,” a small voice said suddenly.

Sheldon’s eyes widened and a line of ants seemed to run up his back. “Well . . . then . . . what are you?”

“Some people call me the Grim Reaper.”

“Good gosh! The Grim Reaper! I *knew* I was sicker than they were telling me. Where are you? I can’t see you.”

“I could come up there, if it’s all right with you?”

“Okay, but just in case you’re really just a monster lying to me, I still have the bat.”

Sheldon narrowed his eyes and readied his bat. There was a slight tugging at the edge of the covers. Then a small hand came over the top of the bed, and then another hand, and then a complete man stood on the end of his bed. He had on an army green uniform with matching cap and laced up black boots, but he was only about a foot tall.

“Good gosh! You’re a G. I. Joe!”

“I thought your mother asked you not to say that.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry.”

Sheldon put down the bat and leaned on his elbow. “Wow! I never imagined you’d look like a G. I. Joe. I’ve always wanted one, but my dad wouldn’t let me get one because he thought it was a doll. He said only girls play with dolls.”

“Yes, but I’m a soldier, and that makes it different. But this is only one of the many forms I can change into. I chose this one because I knew you wanted a G. I. Joe.”

“Good g—I mean, Wow! That’s great. Can you change into a rabbit, or how about a puppy? I’ve always wanted a puppy.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have time for all that. We have to get going, you know.”

“Oh, yeah, right.” Sheldon pulled his pillow closer. “Is it going to hurt much?”

“You won’t feel a thing.”

“Is my family going to miss me when I’m gone?”

“Yes, very much so. They’ll wish they could have spent more time with you.”

“I’ll bet my older brother, Wade, won’t miss me. He treats me like I’m still a little baby. I think he’ll be happy when I’m gone.”

“Oh, no, on the contrary, he’ll be devastated. He cares a lot about you. He just wants you to be tough. That’s why he picks on you all the time.”

“Oh?”

The G. I. Joe climbed over a pile of crumpled blanket to get closer, and said, “Well, are you ready?”

“I guess so. What do I have to do?”

“Just close your eyes and go to sleep.”

Sheldon’s eyes looked heavy. He yawned and lowered his head onto his pillow.

“I wouldn’t have thought Wade . . . would have missed me. If only I knew . . . maybe I could have gotten over this bad cold.”

“That’s right. Just go to sleep,” a fading voice said.

Sheldon’s eyes closed, and his breathing grew deeper. “I . . . I don’t want . . . to go,” he murmured, and fell asleep.

* * *

Christmas morning arrived bright and crisp. Sheldon's mother crept into his room with a tray of eggnog and glasses. She paused to look at Sheldon sleeping then signaled to the hall for her husband to come in. Older brother, Wade, followed, carrying their baby sister, Maggie.

Sheldon's mother leaned over and shook her son, but he didn't move. She tried again, but he lay silent. Her cheerful smile faded, and she looked concerned. She reached out again, but then Sheldon stirred and slowly sat up rubbing his eyes. He blinked and looked with wonderment at his happy little family.

"Merry Christmas!" they all shouted at him.

"Do you feel any better today, Darling?" his mother said, as she filled the glasses with eggnog.

He sniffed and coughed weakly.

"About the same."

"Since you're too sick to get out of bed," his dad chimed in, "we thought we would have Christmas in here. So wake up and open your presents."

"Hey, open mine first," Wade said, with a big freckle-faced smile. He handed Sheldon a shoebox wrapped in comic strips with a big floppy bow stuck on top. Sheldon tore it open.

"Good gosh! A G. I. Joe!"

"SHELDON!"

"Sorry, Mom."
