

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Greatest Gift

PHILIP VAN DOREN STERN

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*Unable to find a publisher for “The Greatest Gift,” Philip Van Doren Stern (1900–84) printed 200 copies of this story and used them as Christmas cards in 1943. From this humble beginning, a classic was born. Van Doren Stern’s story came to the attention of film director Frank Capra, who said he “had been looking for [it] all [his] life.” Capra’s adaptation, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, starring James Stewart, was released in 1946, and while the film, which received Academy Award nominations for Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Director, didn’t take home an Oscar, it has secured its as an American holiday tradition.*

Describe George. What kind of man is he? Do you identify with him? Describe the stranger. Who is he? Why do you think he goes unnamed? When George tells the stranger that he wishes he had never been born, the stranger responds, “You’ve solved everything.” Why does he consider George’s wish a solution? In what ways is it one? How does George’s experience demonstrate the ways that he’s important to his friends and family? Does he need them, too? What is “the greatest gift”? Why do you think this story is set during Christmas? How is it a Christmas story?

The little town straggling up the hill was bright with colored Christmas lights. But George Pratt did not see them. He was leaning over the railing of the iron bridge, staring down moodily at the black water. The current eddied and swirled like liquid glass, and occasionally a bit of ice, detached from the shore, would go gliding downstream to be swallowed up in the shadows under the bridge.

The water looked paralyzingly cold. George wondered how long a man could stay alive in it. The glassy blackness had a strange, hypnotic effect on him. He leaned still farther over the railing. . .

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” a quiet voice beside him said.

George turned resentfully to a little man he had never seen before. He was stout, well past middle age, and his round cheeks were pink in the winter air as though they had just been shaved.

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“Wouldn’t do what?” George asked sullenly.

“What you were thinking of doing.”

“How do you know what I was thinking?”

“Oh, we make it our business to know a lot of things,” the stranger said easily.

George wondered what the man’s business was. He was a most unremarkable little person, the sort you would pass in a crowd and never notice. Unless you saw his bright blue eyes, that is. You couldn’t forget them, for they were the kindest, sharpest eyes you ever saw. Nothing else about him was noteworthy. He wore a moth-eaten old fur cap and a shabby overcoat that was stretched tightly across his paunchy belly. He was carrying a small black satchel. It wasn’t a doctor’s bag—it was too large for that and not the right shape. It was a salesman’s sample kit, George decided distastefully. The fellow was probably some sort of peddler, the kind who would go around poking his sharp little nose into other people’s affairs.

“Looks like snow, doesn’t it?” the stranger said, glancing up appraisingly at the overcast sky. “It’ll be nice to have a white Christmas. They’re getting scarce these days—but so are a lot of things.” He turned to face George squarely. “You all right now?”

“Of course I’m all right. What made you think I wasn’t? I—”

George fell silent before the stranger’s quiet gaze.

The little man shook his head. “You know you shouldn’t think of such things—and on Christmas Eve of all times! You’ve got to consider Mary—and your mother too.”

George opened his mouth to ask how this stranger could know his wife’s name, but the fellow anticipated him. “Don’t ask me how I know such things. It’s my business to know ’em. That’s why I came along this way tonight. Lucky I did too.” He glanced down at the dark water and shuddered.

“Well, if you know so much about me,” George said, “give me just one good reason why I should be alive.”

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The little man made a queer chuckling sound. “Come, come, it can’t be that bad. You’ve got your job at the bank. And Mary and the kids. You’re healthy, young, and—”

“And sick of everything!” George cried. “I’m stuck here in this mudhole for life, doing the same dull work day after day. Other men are leading exciting lives, but I—well, I’m just a small-town bank clerk that even the army didn’t want. I never did anything really useful or interesting, and it looks as if I never will. I might just as well be dead. I might better be dead. Sometimes I wish I were. In fact, I wish I’d never been born!”

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The little man stood looking at him in the growing darkness. “What was that you said?” he asked softly.

“I said I wish I’d never been born,” George repeated firmly. “And I mean it too.”

The stranger’s pink cheeks glowed with excitement. “Why that’s wonderful! You’ve solved everything. I was afraid you were going to give me some trouble. But now you’ve got the solution yourself. You wish you’d never been born. All right! OK! You haven’t!”

“What do you mean?” George growled.

“You haven’t been born. Just that. You haven’t been born. No one here knows you. You have no responsibilities—no job—no wife—no children. Why, you haven’t even a mother. You couldn’t have, of course. All your troubles are over. Your wish, I am happy to say, has been granted—officially.”

“Nuts!” George snorted and turned away.

The stranger ran after him and caught him by the arm. “You’d better take this with you,” he said, holding out his satchel. “It’ll open a lot of doors that might otherwise be slammed in your face.”

“What doors in whose face?” George scoffed. “I know everybody in this town. And besides, I’d like to see anybody slam a door in my face.”

“Yes, I know,” the little man said patiently. “But take this anyway. It can’t do any harm and it may help.” He opened the satchel and displayed a number of brushes. “You’d be surprised how useful these brushes can be as introduction—especially the free ones.

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These, I mean.” He hauled out a plain little hairbrush. “I’ll show you how to use it.” He thrust the satchel into George’s reluctant hands and began: “When the lady of the house comes to the door you give her this and then talk fast. You say: ‘Good evening, Madam. I’m from the World Cleaning Company, and I want to present you with this handsome and useful brush absolutely free—no obligation to purchase anything at all.’ After that, of course, it’s a cinch. Now you try it.” He forced the brush into George’s hand.

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George promptly dropped the brush into the satchel and fumbled with the catch, finally closing it with an angry snap. “Here,” he said, and then stopped abruptly, for there was no one in sight.

The little stranger must have slipped away into the bushes growing along the riverbank, George thought. He certainly wasn’t going to play hide-and-seek with him. It was nearly dark and getting colder every minute. He shivered and turned up his coat collar.

The streetlights had been turned on, and Christmas candles in the windows glowed softly. The little town looked remarkably cheerful. After all, the place you grew up in was the one spot on earth where you could really feel at home. George felt a sudden burst of affection even for crotchety old Hank Biddle, whose house he was passing. He remembered the quarrel he had had when his car had scraped a piece of bark out of Hank’s big maple tree. George looked up at the vast spread of leafless branches towering over him in the darkness. The tree must have been growing there since Indian times. He felt a sudden twinge of guilt for the damage he had done. He had never stopped to inspect the wound, for he was ordinarily afraid to have Hank catch him even looking at the tree. Now he stepped out boldly into the roadway to examine the huge trunk.

Hank must have repaired the scar or painted it over, for there was no sign of it. George struck a match and bent down to look more closely. He straightened up with an odd, sinking feeling in his stomach. There wasn’t any scar. The bark was smooth and undamaged.

He remembered what the little man at the bridge had said. It was all nonsense, of course, but the nonexistent scar bothered him.

When he reached the bank, he saw that something was wrong. The building was dark, and he knew he had turned the vault light on. He noticed, too, that someone had left the

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window shades up. He ran around to the front. There was a battered old sign fastened on the door. George could just make out the words:

FOR RENT OR SALE
Apply JAMES SILVA
Real Estate

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Perhaps it was some boys' trick, he thought wildly. Then he saw a pile of ancient leaves and tattered newspapers in the bank's ordinarily immaculate doorway. And the windows looked as though they hadn't been washed in years. A light was still burning across the street in Jim Silva's office. George dashed over and tore the door open.

Jim looked up from his ledgerbook in surprise. "What can I do for you, young man?" he said in the polite voice he reserved for potential customers.

"The bank," George said breathlessly. "What's the matter with it?"

"The old bank building?" Jim Silva turned around and looked out of the window. "Nothing that I can see. Wouldn't like to rent or buy it, would you?"

"You mean—it's out of business?"

"For a good ten years. Went bust. Stranger 'round these parts, ain't you?"

George sagged against the wall. "I was here some time ago," he said weakly. "The bank was all right then. I even knew some of the people who worked there."

"Didn't you know a feller named Marty Jenkins, did you?"

"Marty Jenkins! Why, he—" George was about to say that Marty had never worked at the bank—couldn't have, in fact, for when they had both left school they had applied for a job there and George had gotten it. But now, of course, things were different. He would have to be careful. "No, I didn't know him," he said slowly. "Not really, that is. I'd heard of him."

"Then maybe you heard how he skipped out with fifty thousand dollars. That's why the bank went broke. Pretty near ruined everybody around here." Silva was looking at

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him sharply. “I was hoping for a minute maybe you’d know where he is. I lost plenty in that crash myself. We’d like to get our hands on Marty Jenkins.”

“Didn’t he have a brother? Seems to me he had a brother named Arthur.”

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“Art? Oh, sure. But he’s all right. He don’t know where his brother went. It’s had a terrible effect on him, too. Took to drink, he did. It’s too bad—and hard on his wife. He married a nice girl.”

George felt the sinking feeling in his stomach again. “Who did he marry?” he demanded hoarsely. Both he and Art had courted Mary.

“Girl named Mary Thatcher,” Silva said cheerfully. “She lives up on the hill just this side of the church—Hey! Where are you going?”

But George had bolted out of the office. He ran past the empty bank building and turned up the hill. For a moment he thought of going straight to Mary. The house next to the church had been given them by her father as a wedding present. Naturally Art Jenkins would have gotten it if he had married Mary. George wondered whether they had any children. Then he knew he couldn’t face Mary—not yet anyway. He decided to visit his parents and find out more about her.

There were candles burning in the windows of the little weather-beaten house on the side street, and a Christmas wreath was hanging on the glass panel of the front door. George raised the gate latch with a loud click. A dark shape on the porch jumped up and began to growl. Then it hurled itself down the steps, barking ferociously.

“Brownie!” George shouted. “Brownie, you old fool, stop that! Don’t you know me?” But the dog advanced menacingly and drove him back behind the gate. The porch light snapped on, and George’s father stepped outside to call the dog off. The barking subsided to a low, angry growl.

His father held the dog by the collar while George cautiously walked past. He could see that his father did not know him.

“Is the lady of the house in?” he asked.

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His father waved toward the door. “Go on in,” he said cordially. “I’ll chain this dog up. She can be mean with strangers.”

His mother, who was waiting in the hallway, obviously did not recognize him. George opened his sample kit and grabbed the first brush that came to hand. “Good evening, ma’am,” he said politely. “I’m from the World Cleaning Company. We’re giving out a free sample brush. I thought you might like to have one. No obligation. No obligation at all. . .” His voice faltered.

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His mother smiled at his awkwardness. “I suppose you’ll want to sell me something. I’m not really sure I need any brushes.”

“No’m. I’m not selling anything,” he assured her. “The regular salesman will be around in a few days. This is just—well, just a Christmas present from the company.”

“How nice,” she said. “You people never gave away such good brushes before.”

“This is a special offer,” he said. His father entered the hall and closed the door.

“Won’t you come in for a while and sit down?” his mother said. “You must be tired walking so much.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I don’t mind if I do.” He entered the little parlor and put his bag down on the floor. The room looked different somehow, although he could not figure out why.

“I used to know this town pretty well,” he said to make conversation. “Knew some of the townspeople. I remember a girl named Mary Thatcher. She married Art Jenkins, I heard. You must know them.”

“Of course,” his mother said. “We know Mary well.”

“Any children?” he asked casually.

“Two—a boy and a girl.”

George sighed audibly.

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“My, you must be tired,” his mother said. “Perhaps I can get you a cup of tea.”

“No’m, don’t bother,” he said. “I’ll be having supper soon.” He looked around the little parlor, trying to find out why it looked different. Over the mantelpiece hung a framed photograph which had been taken on his kid brother Harry’s sixteenth birthday. He remembered how they had gone to Potter’s studio to be photographed together. There was something queer about the picture. It showed only one figure—Harry’s. “That your son?” he asked.

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His mother’s face clouded. She nodded but said nothing.

“I think I met him, too,” George said hesitantly. “His name’s Harry, isn’t it?”

His mother turned away, making a strange choking noise in her throat. Her husband put his arm clumsily around her shoulder. His voice, which was always mild and gentle, suddenly became harsh. “You couldn’t have met him,” he said. “He’s been dead a long while. He was drowned the day that picture was taken.”

George’s mind flew back to the long-ago August afternoon when he and Harry had visited Potter’s studio. On their way home they had gone swimming. Harry had been seized with a cramp, he remembered. He had pulled him out of the water and had thought nothing of it. But suppose he hadn’t been there!

“I’m sorry,” he said miserably. “I guess I’d better go. I hope you like the brush. And I wish you both a very Merry Christmas.” There, he had put his foot in it again, wishing them a Merry Christmas when they were thinking about their dead son.

Brownie tugged fiercely at her chain as George went down the porch steps and accompanied his departure with a hostile, rolling growl.

He wanted desperately now to see Mary. He wasn’t sure he could stand not being recognized by her, but he had to see her.

The lights were on in the church, and the choir was making last-minute preparations for Christmas vespers. The organ had been practicing “Holy Night” evening after evening

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until George had become thoroughly sick of it. But now the music almost tore his heart out.

He stumbled blindly up the path to his own house. The lawn was untidy, and the flower bushes he had kept carefully trimmed were neglected and badly sprouted. Art Jenkins could hardly be expected to care for such things.

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When he knocked at the door there was a long silence, followed by the shout of a child. Then Mary came to the door.

At the sight of her, George's voice almost failed him. "Merry Christmas, ma'am," he managed to say at last. His hand shook as he tried to open the satchel.

When George entered the living room, unhappy as he was, he could not help noticing with a secret grin that the too-high-priced blue sofa they often had quarreled over was there. Evidently Mary had gone through the same thing with Art Jenkins and had won the argument with him too.

George got his satchel open. One of the brushes had a bright blue handle and varicolored bristles. It was obviously a brush not intended to be given away, but George didn't care. He handed it to Mary. "This would be fine for your sofa," he said.

"My, that's a pretty brush," she exclaimed. "You're giving it away free?"

He nodded solemnly. "Special introductory offer. It's one way for the company to keep excess profits down—share them with its friends."

She stroked the sofa gently with the brush, smoothing out the velvety nap. "It is a nice brush. Thank you. I—" There was a sudden scream from the kitchen, and two small children rushed in. A little, homely-faced girl flung herself into her mother's arms, sobbing loudly as a boy of seven came running after her, snapping a toy pistol at her head. "Mommy, she won't die," he yelled. "I shot her a hunert times, but she won't die."

He looks just like Art Jenkins, George thought. Acts like him too.

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The boy suddenly turned his attention to him. “Who’re you?” he demanded belligerently. He pointed his pistol at George and pulled the trigger. “You’re dead!” he cried. “You’re dead. Why don’t you fall down and die?”

There was a heavy step on the porch. The boy looked frightened and backed away. George saw Mary glance apprehensively at the door. Page | 10

Art Jenkins came in. He stood for a moment in the doorway, clinging to the knob for support. His eyes were glazed, and his face was very red. “Who’s this?” he demanded thickly.

“He’s a brush salesman,” Mary tried to explain. “He gave me this brush.”

“Brush salesman!” Art sneered. “Well, tell him to get outa here. We don’t want no brushes.” Art hiccupped violently and lurched across the room to the sofa, where he sat down suddenly. “An’ we don’t want no brush salesmen neither.”

George looked despairingly at Mary. Her eyes were begging him to go. Art had lifted his feet up on the sofa and was sprawling out on it, muttering unkind things about brush salesmen. George went to the door, followed by Art’s son, who kept snapping the pistol at him and saying: “You’re dead—dead—dead!”

Perhaps the boy was right, George thought when he reached the porch. Maybe he was dead, or maybe this was all a bad dream from which he might eventually awake. He wanted to find the little man on the bridge again and try to persuade him to cancel the whole deal.

He hurried down the hill and broke into a run when he neared the river. George was relieved to see the little stranger standing on the bridge. “I’ve had enough,” he gasped. “Get me out of this—you got me into it.”

The stranger raised his eyebrows. “I got you into it! I like that! You were granted your wish. You got everything you asked for. You’re the freest man on earth now. You have no ties. You can go anywhere—do anything. What more can you possibly want?”

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“Change me back,” George pleaded. “Change me back—please. Not just for my sake but for others too. You don’t know what a mess this town is in. You don’t understand. I’ve got to get back. They need me here.”

“I understand right enough,” the stranger said slowly. “I just wanted to make sure you did. You had the greatest gift of all conferred upon you—the gift of life, of being a part of this world and taking a part in it. Yet you denied that gift.”

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As the stranger spoke, the church bell high up on the hill sounded, calling the townspeople to Christmas vespers. Then the downtown church bell started ringing.

“I’ve got to get back,” George said desperately. “You can’t cut me off like this. Why, it’s murder!”

“Suicide rather, wouldn’t you say?” the stranger murmured. “You brought it on yourself. However, since it’s Christmas Eve—well, anyway, close your eyes and keep listening to the bells.” His voice sank lower. “Keep listening to the bells. . .”

George did as he was told. He felt a cold, wet snowdrop touch his cheek—and then another and another. When he opened his eyes, the snow was falling fast, so fast that it obscured everything around him. The little stranger could not be seen, but then neither could anything else. The snow was so thick that George had to grope for the bridge railing.

As he started toward the village, he thought he heard someone saying “Merry Christmas,” but the bells were drowning out all rival sounds, so he could not be sure.

When he reached Hank Biddle’s house he stopped and walked out into the roadway, peering down anxiously at the base of the big maple tree. The scar was there, thank heaven! He touched the tree affectionately. He’d have to do something about the wound—get a tree surgeon or something. Anyway, he’d evidently been changed back. He was himself again. Maybe it was all a dream, or perhaps he had been hypnotized by the smooth-flowing black water. He had heard of such things.

At the corner of Main and Bridge Streets he almost collided with a hurrying figure. It was Jim Silva, the real estate agent. “Hello, George,” Jim said cheerfully. “Late tonight, ain’t you? I should think you’d want to be home early on Christmas Eve.”

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George drew a long breath. “I just wanted to see if the bank is all right. I’ve got to make sure the vault light is on.”

“Sure it’s on. I saw it as I went past.”

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“Let’s look, huh?” George said, pulling at Silva’s sleeve. He wanted the assurance of a witness. He dragged the surprised real estate dealer around to the front of the bank where the light was gleaming through the falling snow. “I told you it was on,” Silva said with some irritation.

“I had to make sure,” George mumbled. “Thanks—and Merry Christmas!” Then he was off like a streak, running up the hill.

He was in a hurry to get home, but not in such a hurry that he couldn’t stop for a moment at his parents’ house, where he wrestled with Brownie until the friendly old bulldog waggled all over with delight. He grasped his startled brother’s hand and wrung it frantically, wishing him an almost hysterical Merry Christmas. Then he dashed across the parlor to examine a certain photograph. He kissed his mother, joked with his father, and was out of the house a few seconds later, stumbling and slipping on the newly fallen snow as he ran on up the hill.

The church was bright with light, and the choir and the organ were going full tilt. George flung the door to his home open and called out at the top of his voice: “Mary! Where are you? Mary! Kids!”

His wife came toward him, dressed for going to church, and making gestures to silence him. “I’ve just put the children to bed,” she protested. “Now they’ll—” But not another word could she get out of her mouth, for he smothered it with kisses, and then dragged her up to the children’s room, where he violated every tenet of parental behavior by madly embracing his son and his daughter and waking them up thoroughly.

It was not until Mary got him downstairs that he began to be coherent. “I thought I’d lost you. Oh, Mary, I thought I’d lost you!”

“What’s the matter, darling?” she asked in bewilderment.

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He pulled her down on the sofa and kissed her again. And then, just as he was about to tell her about his queer dream, his fingers came in contact with something lying on the seat of the sofa. His voice froze.

He did not even have to pick the thing up, for he knew what it was. And he knew that it would have a blue handle and varicolored bristles.

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