

# JIMMY'S GIFT

## Bill Lee

### (1992)

Come. They told me. Par-rumpa-pum-pum  
A newborn King to see. Par-rumpa-pum-pum  
Our finest gifts we bring. Par-rumpa-pum-pum  
To lay before the King. Par-rumpa-pum-pum.  
Rumpa-pum-pum. Rumpa-pum-pum.  
So, to honor him. Par-rumpa-pum-pum  
When we come.

The strains of “The Little Drummer Boy” drifted from the stereo speakers as my two boys - Nate, who’s three, and Jake, eighteen months – rocked back and forth with each, “Par-rumpa-pum-pum.” As I watched the boys, the music swept my thoughts to another time, Christmas – 1967.....

.....the early December snow had become gray slush. The sky was gray, drab, and threatening. I sat in English class, paying more attention to the grayness of my life, than Miss Hughes` annual reading of Dickens`, A Christmas Carol. Bob Cratchit. Tiny Tim. Scrooge. Who cares?

RINNGGG! Finally, saved by the bell. I stumbled out into the hall. Kids were racing about, slamming their books into their lockers, and shouting about the vacation, that had just begun. I grabbed my jacket and trudged toward home. The slush quickly seeped through the rips in my canvas sneakers and soaked my socks. I followed the path across the field to Prospect Street, wrapping my thin jacket tighter against the Canadian winds which whipped around me. By the time I reached the railroad tracks, my gloveless-hands stung from the cold. Still, I packed and threw snowballs at the passing freight train.

Stick Roberts was on the other side of the tracks, throwing snowballs too. We let go our final shots as the caboose swayed into distance.

“So, whatja gonna git for Christmas?” Stick asked, as he packed another snowball.

“I dunno know.” I lied. But, I did know.....nothing. My family was surviving on welfare. My stepfather hadn’t worked since late August, and even that was just picking tomatoes.

Stick knew I was lying, too. “Well, come on over Christmas. I think my mom got ya a present.”

“Okay. I’m going home, my hands are froze.” I wasn’t lying. I threw my snowball at the railroad sign and ran down Prospect Street, leaping over cold, deep puddles that formed at the sewer drains.

Mom was ironing in the living room and watching a soap opera. “Leave those wet shoes in the hallway!”

“They’re not shoes, they’re crummy old sneakers. Cheap, ripped sneakers.” My hands were so numb, I couldn’t undo the laces. So, I just peeled the sneakers off with my feet. I looked around our apartment. Six rooms and a bath for ten people. Mom and my sisters had hung a garland and some ornaments from Christmases past in the archway which separated the living room from the so-called, “dining room”. We didn’t have a dining room table, so we just called it the “other room”. Three days before Christmas, and we didn’t even have a tree!

I sat on the couch and wedged my feet between the cushions to warm them. Mom turned away from the “Tide” commercial. “You have to go help Jimmy carry some groceries home.”

“Why do I have to go?” I reacted.

“You want to eat don’t you! Just go. He’ll be getting off work at 4:30. Don’t be late!”

“I need some socks. These are soaked.”

“Go in the dirty clothes and get some. I haven’t had the money to go to the laundromat.”

I got off the couch, went into the bathroom, and found a pair of dirty but heavy wool socks and sat on the toilet seatcover to put them on. I really didn’t feel like walking across town and walking back carrying heavy bags of groceries, but maybe I could stop at Williams Bothers` Department Store to visit Santa Claus and his bag of candy canes. And O’Connor’s Toy Store.

I pulled the wet sneakers over the dry dirty socks, put on my jacket, and ran out the door. The wind was stronger and colder than before. I ran across the street, turned the corner, and walked up Park Avenue toward Main Street. The late afternoon sky was growing darker. The lights in the windows seemed to glow brighter. A light snow began to fall as I reached Main Street.

The stores and restaurants were decorated for the holidays. Main Street was a whirl of activity. Cars plowed through the slushy intersections, splashing the hapless souls who hadn’t learn to walk close to the storefronts. Snow swirled through the wreaths, set high on the light poles lining Main Street. A cop stood in the intersection of

Maine and Pine waving through late afternoon traffic with his right arm as he held his cap against the wind with his left. A sudden splash of sludge slapped his bright yellow raincoat. He grimaced. A toot of his whistle and a slight turn to the right halted the Main Street cars and allowed the Pine Street ones to go. I jumped over a puddle and dashed across just in front of the oncoming cars. The policeman glared at me, and went back to directing the Friday night congestion.

The shoes and boots – propped, posed, and lighted, just right – in Endicott-Johnson’s window made me look down at my own soggy, ripped canvas sneakers and I felt colder and grayer than I had ever felt before. I saw those high, green rubber boots with the fur lining flowing over the top like the head on a glass of beer. They just looked...warm. The door was pushed open, and I turned and ran up Main Street, afraid to have anyone see me dreaming over some boots.

Williams brothers` Department Store was the showplace of downtown: especially, at Christmastime. It’s ceilings were crisscrossed with strands of lush green garland and big red bows. It was a place of holiday dreams, and as always, it was packed with those seeking it’s dreams. The elevator landings were six-deep, I snaked through the women’s lingerie section and cut behind the wallet counter to the back staircase. Santa Claus was on the fourth floor, close to the toy department. The back staircase was rarely used by customers, except when all the elevators were down or they were in a hurry; I was in a hurry.

I reached the fourth floor quickly, but just as quickly discovered that my haste was a waste. The lines to Santa and his candy canes were longer than those waiting for the elevators downstairs. The clock showed 4:18. I’d never have enough time to meet Jimmy at 4:30. I turned, and practically slid down the back staircase.

As I left the warmth and dreams of Williams Brothers`, I met the hard reality of the winter storm that had reached its peak. Wind blew snow across Main Street against the storefronts and me. I bent forward, turned my head away from the store, and trudged toward my appointment with Jimmy.

Acme Market was across the street from the local YMCA and the library. The market set back from the street, nuzzled next to the phone company building. It had a large parking lot filled with signs warning:

**PARKING IS FOR OUR LOYAL CUSTOMERS – ONLY  
VIOLATORS WILL BE TOWED**

I scurried behind the phone company building to escape the storm. In the distance, I saw Jimmy wrestling shopping carts from between cars.

Jimmy was seventeen. He wore his familiar white jacket from his marching band days. The one with the green, embroidered “JIMBO” over his left breast. As I moved closer, I saw his blond hair being blown over his red, winter-chapped ears. He pried a cart

from between a truck and a light pole and slammed it into the stack of carts he had formed. He climbed behind the carts and pushed them through the sloppy lot. His apron hung out from below his jacket and flapped in the wind. I called out, but Jimmy didn't stop pushing the stack of carts. I waited by the door, as he steered the carts into the store. As quickly as he entered the store, he returned.

"I have to go get a few more carts. The groceries are on the loading dock. Meet me at the back door." Jimmy shouted as he went back out into the lot to rescue some more carts from the winter wind.

I plodded to the rear of the building, feeling that I could have had least gone in to get warm. I turned back to see Jimmy, pressed up against the back of a big Chrysler, trying to rock it from a snowdrift.

I stood outside the closed-doors of the loading dock and peeked in the window. I saw Jimmy and a guy yelling at him. It must have been his boss. I don't know what Jimmy had done wrong, but the boss seemed to know. The door opened.

"Here!" Jimmy thrust two bags into my chest. I reached out quickly, so they wouldn't fall. Jimmy returned to the door carrying three more bags. The boss followed.

"And remember, I don't pay you to push people out of parking lots." The door closed on his words.

"What was he yelling about?" I asked.

"Nothing. Let's go," Jimmy said, nudging me toward Main Street.

We made our way through the parking lot and headed down Main Street, against the storm. We passed the brightly lit storefronts without saying a word. I kind of knew Jimmy didn't feel like talking, and I hardly had enough energy to walk and carry, let alone talk. We continued home: past the toys of O'Connors', the glitter and dreams of Williams Brothers', and warm, high, green rubber boots with the flowing fur lining perched in Endicott-Johnsons' window. Down Main Street to Park Avenue to Prospect Street and home.

Mom had put the ironing board away, but the black and white Philco television set still glowed. John, Pat, Cathy, Ed, Maryann, Suzie, and my step-father, Dave joined Mom in the living room. Jimmy and I didn't bother to take-off our wet sneakers, but went directly to the kitchen, followed by the whole family. We set the bags on the table, to the orders of Mom.

"If you want supper, tonight, get out of the kitchen!"

We all went into the living room and waited. Mom boiled some hot dogs and warmed some pork and beans. “Cathy! Came a command from the kitchen. It was her turn to set the table. We waited. Finally, the call came. “Come out and eat!”

Supper, or any other meal for that matter, never lasted too long. After the usual bickering about who got more beans, it was done. Then, the clean-up began.

Pat had dishes and Ed had kitchen clean-up, so I found a place close to the television set. The rest of the family joined me. It was rather depressing. No one said anything, and it was easy to feel that this was going to be a poor Christmas. I looked around the living room. Except for the sparse lights over the arch and a few scattered Christmas cards, one could hardly tell that Christmas Eve was only two nights away. We were used to tough times; what family with eight kids and no money wasn't? But, at Christmas, we always had at least a tree and a few presents. Not this year.

I went to bed early. Ed climbed over me and woke me up. He fell asleep. I lay there in the darkness thinking about how sad this Christmas was going to be, tears formed in my eyes and I started to cry. Ed rolled-over and asked me why I was crying. I told him that we weren't going to have a Christmas this year. He was nine. He told me that Santa Claus would come. I grabbed our blanket and turned-over, saying, “Santa Claus, yeah right.”

“Little baby, Par-rumpa-pum-pum,  
I am a poor boy, too. Par-rumpa-pum-pum.”

...1991 tears filled my eyes. The boys continued to rock to the beat of the drum. Jake strolled over with outstretched arms. I hugged his waist as he moved side-to-side. The steady cadence of the drum and the haunting lyrics drove my thoughts back to 1967.....

...it was Christmas Eve. I came from Sticks's house. The family, except for Jimmy, were crowded in front of the old Philco. I found a piece of floor, sat, and watched the evening news with the rest.

Jimmy came in about seven. He appeared to be frozen. His hands and ears were red and raw. He propped himself against the doorway, and looked at us looking at him. Mom sprang from her chair and led Jimmy to the now-empty couch. Mom covered him with a blanket. The rest of the family could only stand and watch. Jimmy moaned. “Get away from me. What are you all looking at?” The family scattered. Ed and I went to our room. We heard Jimmy crying. Ed and I climbed into bed and covered our heads with pillows. Ed went to sleep.

Mom came and told me that Jimmy was going to be all right. That he had just worked too hard and too long the last few weeks. She told me to just roll-over and go to sleep. I heard Jimmy cry out and I cried myself to sleep.

“I played my drum for him. Par-rumpa-pum-pum.  
I played my best for him. Par-rumpa-pum-pum.  
Rumpa-pum-pum. Rumpa-pum-pum

The next morning, Christmas morning, Ed shook me awake. “Santa Claus came! Santa Claus came!”

“What?” I snapped.

“Come on, Santa Claus came, Ed repeated.

I climbed out of bed and stumbled to the living room. Everyone else was on the way, too.

In front of the picture window was a beautifully decorated Christmas tree. And under the tree were presents. Lots of them. There was a used bike for Ed. A tricycle for Maryann, Patty and Cathy got matching jewelry boxes. John got a warm winter coat. Suzie got a doll or two. Mom got a new housecoat and slippers. Dave got pairs of underwear and socks. I didn’t get those warm, high, green rubber boots with fur lining, but I did get a new pair of canvas sneakers, without rips and holes. We had ham and potatoes and nuts and oranges and candy canes. We spent the day together, sharing our best Christmas ever. We sat and watched the lights on the Christmas tree sparkle. We went to bed that night and slept peacefully.

“Then he smiled at me. Par-rumpa-pum-pum.  
Me and my drum.”

...Jake fell over my lap and I was back in 1991. Tears formed in my eyes as I hugged my little one. My wife asked me what was wrong.

“Nothing.” I lied.

I saw Jimmy. I saw him lying on that couch on Christmas Eve in 1967. I saw his face and the memories of that Christmas. You see, Jimmy joined the Army that January. He went to basic training and medic school and then to Viet Nam. He served his thirteen month tour of duty and was killed in his sleep, four hours before he would have left Viet Nam forever.

I saw Jimmy again. This was the Jimmy who saved most of his minimum wage paychecks in his battered pillow back in 1967 and gave his family an unforgettable Christmas. The Jimmy who climbed up from that old couch and dragged in and decorated the tree, put together the bikes, and wrapped the presents, while the rest of the family slept. The Jimmy who never got to unwrap a present on that Christmas morning in 1967; because there was no present with his name on it. The Jimmy who I will teach my boys about. And the Jimmy who gave us all the true gift of Christmas...the gift of love.