Grandpa's carvings fashioned bond of undying love

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mussed his hair. "Thanks."

"Do you wanna know what you are getting?" His blue eyes sparked mischievously. "I saw Dad get it out of the trunk of the car. It's really b ... "

"Hush!" she scolded harshly, then groaned. That would wake up everyone for sure. She heard Uncle Cary snort and stop snoring. In Mom and Dad's room, there was rustling, then feet hit the floor. "You did that on purpose, you rat, just to get them up."

Benny grinned with elfin glee. "Big deal. It's Christmas morning. Let's get Uncle Cary up — he's always the slowest." He tiptoed to the guest room and eased open the door as he'd done in Jenny's room. "Hey, Uncle Cary, you awake?"

Cary, though still half asleep, was waiting. "Get outta here, smurf," he growled good-naturedly and threw his pillow at the door. Benny disappeared, and Cary heard him giggling.

"Kids," he thought, reaching for a cigarette. "I love 'em. I could never live with 'em, but I love 'em."

They'd learned to love him, too. Since moving from Boston to Norfolk five years ago, Cary had driven to Richmond each year to partake of the Sisson family's Christmas. His brother had insisted, just as he'd insisted that Dad live with them after Mom died. So, Cary appeared on their doorstep every Christmas Eve with a bottle of wine in each hand and a carload of presents in the driveway. His quick tickles and playful teases had won over the children; his merry toasts and spicy tales entertained the adults. And everyone enjoyed his piano playing, which had led to another tradition — a round of caroling before bed. Cary was more than an uncle — he was part of their inner circle.

Slowly, he'd even been able to bridge the gap with his father. Fifteen years ago, he would've thought that impossible. Cary still remembered the disputes.

"I need you in the business," Dad had argued quietly. "You're good with the help, you're good with the books and you know hardware. Why do you think I opened a second store? Why do you think I taught you about lumber and electricity and ... " He paused. "Why do you want to be a musician?" he asked for the hundredth time.

"Dad. It's just inside of me. I've gotta try it," Cary had argued back. "Jeez, how many kids get a scholarship to Berklee? I'll never get another chance like this."

"I don't know. I just don't know," Dad had said sadly. "I won't say no. But I dreamed of that sign over the store saying 'Sisson & Sons.' Now it'll never happen."

But it did happen. Tom had taken over, the business had flourished and wounds, eventually, had healed.

Someone tapped on Cary's door. "You about ready?" Tom asked. "The kids are

TRISHA PAYNE

dying to open presents."

"Give me a minute."

Cigarette dangling from his lips, Cary rolled out of bed and looked in the mirror. Except for being a little taller and more muscular, he could pass for his younger brother's twin. They had the same thinning brown hair, the same gray eyes (although Cary's were liquid while Tom's were steel) and the same rapier-quick wit, thanks to Dad.

Dad. He would be on everyone's mind this morning. It was the family's first Christmas without him. For Cary, though, the pain was particularly keen. There was a promise, a promise to Dad, to be kept today. He hoped he was doing the right thing. He hoped Jenny would understand. She was at such a delicate age — not girl, not woman — and she'd loved Dad so. Perhaps she loved her uncle, too, at least enough to accept what he'd done. He buttoned his pajamas, threw on his robe, stubbed out the cigarette and opened his door.

"Merry Christmas," the others said in a chorus, and he echoed them cheerily. It was a tradition for the family to wait on the second floor landing until everyone was ready. Cary enjoyed being the last one out. It was like being the flagman at the Indy 500.

"Let's go!" Benny whooped, and he charged down the stairs as if Santa himself were below. Jenny usually was half a step behind him, but this morning she lingered. Tom and Lily glanced nervously at Cary.

"C'mon, Gal," Cary urged, taking her hand. Jenny looked at him and beamed. "Gal" was his nickname for her, a secret they shared. Everybody else thought "gal" was like saying "girl," but once Cary had told her a story about a beautiful elfin queen named Galadriel. She and her husband-king ruled a magical forest that was immune from evil, but her power eventually faded as the world changed and became less innocent. Cary said it was like growing up, but she wasn't quite sure what he meant. Still, she loved it when he called her "Gal," especially now. And his hand felt nice, big like Grandpa's but not as rough.

When they got to the family room, Benny had already turned on the Christmas tree lights and was emptying his stocking. "Oh cool. Look, Jen — Candy snot! Green apple flavor. Thanks Uncle Cary."

"Disgusting," Jenny wrinkled her nose at the viscous candy. Mom and Dad wouldn't buy the stuff, but Cary had sneaked a pack into Benny's stocking. Lily shot Cary a "What's-a-mother-to-do?" glare.

Cary threw his hands up defensively. "Hey, don't thank me. Santa left it." He grinned, then eased himself onto the floor to sit crosslegged, Indian-style. Tom and Lily, eager to watch the youngsters and anxious about Jenny, sat on the edge of their chairs.

Jenny had always — always — gone to her stocking first to get her chess pieces. Not today. She knew they wouldn't be there, and she wasn't quite ready for the disappointment. "I can handle it," she told herself, "just give me a minute."

Benny shoved a box at her. "Here, Jen, this is for you. It's heavy." He immediately turned and ripped into an elaborately wrapped red and green package with his name on it. "A shirt. Wow, thanks," he mumbled.

Delicately, Jenny removed the gold ribbon, set it aside, then carefully unstuck each piece of tape. Last year, she had adopted this less frenzied approach to opening presents because, she told herself, "It's more ladylike. After all, I'm a teen-ager now."

It was a boombox — black, dual cassette player and compact disc to boot. Tapes by Madonna and U2 were stuck on the side. "Just what I wanted," she said, hoping it sounded sincere.

"I picked out the tapes," Benny chirped.

"Yeah, I could tell." She hated Madonna. "This is great. Thanks." She looked at Mom and Dad and smiled broadly.

"Just don't play it too loud, OK?" Dad said from the recliner, the one Grandpa loved to doze in.

"I promise."

"Here, open this." Cary handed her another package. The paper had blue unicorns and elves, and the note said, "To Gal, From Uncle Cary. Look in the first volume, page 368." Her eyebrows went up, questioning Cary, but he just grinned. Inside the wrapping were the volumes of J.R.R. Tolkien's trilogy, "Lord of the Rings." She turned to the page and immediately saw the name, Galadriel.

"Oh, Uncle Cary." She hugged him and felt the tears gather. She fought them back, just barely. "This is really nice." He saw the red in her eyes and touched her shoulder — a year ago he would have mussed her hair.

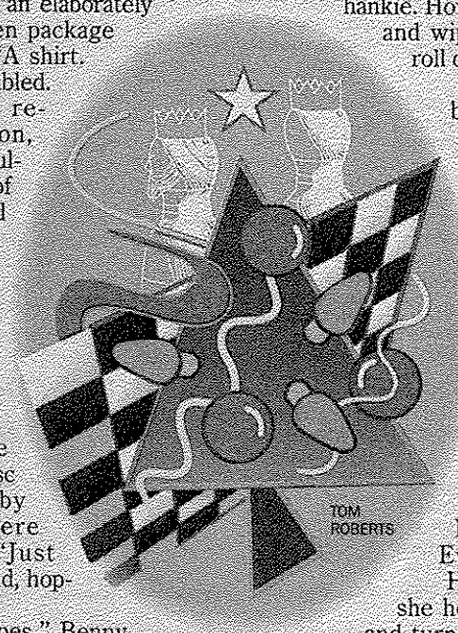
Benny let out a screech of delight at his new robotics kit, and Tom and Lily joined him on the floor. For the moment, Cary and Jenny were virtually alone.

"Look at the titles," he urged softly.

"The Fellowship of the Ring," she read aloud. "The Two Towers. The Return of the King." The word "king" hit her in the chest, and she couldn't breathe. Was Cary making a cruel joke? She searched his face.

"Do me a favor, Gal. Look in your stocking." Cary prodded her gently with his elbow.

Jenny's heart raced. "Oh God, I'm going to cry," she thought as she stood up and walked to the hearth, where there hung the Nutcracker stocking Lily had stitched long ago. She kept her back to the others, who, thank goodness, were occupied, or pretending to be occupied. She felt Uncle Cary's eyes but couldn't face him. She pulled out a brush, two packs of Carefree gum and a lace hankie. How convenient, she thought and wiped the tears starting to roll down her cheeks.



TOM ROBERTS

"Grandpa, I miss you so bad," she thought. She pulled out two more cassettes but couldn't read the titles. "Grandpa, why can't you be here?" Two pairs of earrings, some lip gloss and a candy cane. Another dab with the hankie. "Grandpa, why'd you have to die?" A little vanity mirror and ...

"LOOK!" she screamed and dropped her stocking. "LOOK! THEY'RE HERE. THEY'RE HERE."

Everyone froze.

Hardly believing her eyes, she held up two wooden kings and turned for the others to see.

She couldn't make out their faces through her tears.

"What?" Tom jumped up and crossed to her. "Where'd those come from?"

Jenny was really crying now. "They're my kings. My kings!" She hugged them to her chest, then looked at them again. They were the right size and shape and weight, just as if Grandpa ...

Suddenly, a shadow crossed her face. "This isn't a trick, is it? Where'd they come from?"

She looked at Uncle Cary, half hoping, half fearing. He stood and silently hugged her. The sobs came, and she buried her face in his robe, bawling like she'd bawled after Grandpa's funeral. For several minutes he just held her and patted her back. When the flood of tears ebbed, he sat her in a chair.

"Yes, they're from Grandpa," he said, kneeling so he could be on eye level. "When he was in the hospital, he told me where he kept them. But they weren't finished, and he made me promise to work on them. And he made me promise to use his knife. I did the best I could. I hope it's OK that, well ... " Cary hesitated, then cleared his throat. "I just don't want you to think I'm trying to take Grandpa's place."

Jenny, still sniffling, looked at the figures again. The whitish oak king had a silver robe, a snowy beard and blue dots for eyes.

"That one looks like Grandpa," Benny pointed. "But what's wrong with this one?"

The ebony king, regal in an ermine-lined cape and gold crown, was faceless.

Cary reached into the pocket of his robe. "Well, I thought you might like to help me finish that one." Slowly, he handed her the Barlow knife.

Jenny said nothing. She felt the weight of the knife, which filled her hand. Her fingers caressed the smooth horn, and she felt Grandpa's presence fill her. He was not dead, not in her heart, at least. He was there, like the love in Sir Galahad. He would always be there.

Jenny reached for Cary's left hand. There were scars she hadn't noticed before, scars from carving, scars like Grandpa's. And she knew he had to be careful about his hands, playing piano. Without looking up, she put the knife in his hand. "You keep it. You can teach me how to carve with it." She looked at him. "I think Grandpa really wanted you to have it."

Cary swallowed back the lump in his throat and nodded. "OK. Thanks." He loved the knife and really hadn't wanted to give it to her, but he'd promised. He wondered if Dad knew Jenny well enough to know she'd give it back. Probably. He breathed deeply. "And there's one more present."

It was something all rolled up like a big newspaper. Jenny spread it out. It was a calendar with scenic photographs of Virginia. Inside, Cary already had marked every other Sunday in January, "2 p.m. Chess with Gal." She flipped through the months; every other Sunday was marked.

Cary fidgeted. "You'll have to be patient with me until I'm familiar with all the pieces." He fidgeted some more. "You still don't think I'm trying to take Grandpa's place?"

Jenny brushed away the last of the tears and shook her head. "Nobody could do that. Besides, you have a place all your own." She started to smile, then suddenly knit her eyebrows with a look of harsh questioning.

"Do I get to take moves back?"

"Only if I do." Cary grinned.

"Deal."

They shook hands and laughed. Suddenly, Christmas was much merrier.