

A LIVING IN THE COUNTRY
SHORT TALE

**THE
PRESENT**



HARTLEY STEVENS

The Present

A Living-In-The-Country Short

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A Living-In-The-Country Short Tale

By

Hartley Stevens

This story is about my sister. Let's call her Bethy, because that's her real name. She absolutely loves when I tell this tale.

It was the year of our lord, nineteen hundred and eighty four. My sister was three years old and I was fourteen years older, a senior in high-school. I was crazy about her—she was the best plaything anyone could ever wish for.

Our entire family, Mama, Daddy, and brother Rex, we all felt the same. There was never any sibling rivalry, no jealousy, we all considered Bethy the center of our universe. She was a beautiful baby, a low maintenance toddler and had more personality than a bouncy puppy. We were consumed with her and spoiled her rotten. Still, she never acted *entitled*, she didn't have to. However, she *was* entitled and me, and the rest of the family, made sure everyone knew it.

When I was fifteen with my own money, earned hard on the farm, I bought a bicycle complete with baby seat. I took her on rides daily and I loved every second.

Soda, Coke-A-Cola, Sprite, Root-beer, these were things sampled at special occasions, but they were never in our house on a daily basis. On one particular night, the whole family was gathered in the living room and watching a movie. It was nearly ten o'clock—I never saw that time pass the face of the clock until I was a teenager, by the way. Still, my dad was sprawled on the couch and Bethy lay on his chest.

A Coke commercial came on the TV. Bethy rolled over and looked into the meanest human's eyes I'd ever known, my dad. She said, "Daddy, Bep need a Coke." The curmudgeon fairly hurt himself getting off the couch, dressing and driving fifteen minutes away down the country roads to buy not one, but three different types of soda.

I mentioned we spoiled her, right?

November 1984, I was a senior in my final year of high-school. I'd participated, maybe was the worst of the family *spoilers*. Still, little sister needed to be brought into the constant teasing and good-natured fun of the family.

Christmas was only a month away. I hatched a plan, but told no one. There was store in the local mall which sold novelties. I made the trek on a weekend and found the item I was looking for. It was a picture-perfect fake piece of poop. A completely natural-looking log of nearly three inches. Color, texture and weight were not only accurate, but excellent.

I still remember giggling at every turn. I bought a shiny white box, one foot square and fluffy white cotton, three bags full.

At home I rushed to my room and locked the door. First the box, then the cotton. I removed the faux-log and delicately placed it on top of the fluffy cotton. I smiled to myself and giggled more. I placed the lid and wrapped the box with the most ornate bow I could muster.

Then, I bode my time in silence. Thanksgiving came and went. The family Christmas tree was cut, positioned and decorated. It was all a lavish affair.

Moments after the last piece of tinsel was placed on the tree, I left my room with the first, royally-wrapped present in my hands. I held it close to Bethy's eyes. "You get the first present, Bep. I wonder what it could be?"

"Let me touch it, 'H'." She cooed.

The giggle inside my ribs was doing some heaving damage. But I remained happy, yet stone-faced. Discipline, this *funny* was going to take some long-assed discipline.

"No, you have to wait until Christmas. The present is from me, but if you touch or peek, Santa himself will steal it back for a girl who knows how to wait."

A pouty frown bloomed.

Over the next weeks, I both taunted and demurred. "Bep, look at that big white present. The first one under the tree. What do you think it is?"

Remember she's three. A whip-smart three, but three.

"I'll rub your toes." She'd say.

Toe and foot-rubbing were gateway drugs to anything you wanted in the house.

Discipline.

“It’s the best present ever. Santa can bring the usual stuff, but you know I got you what you really want.”

The night before Christmas, I was visited three times in my bed.

Brother Rex. “Tell me.”

“No.”

“You ain’t gonna sleep too well, if in you don’t tell me.”

At that time of our lives I was still way bigger than Rex. “Screw me on this and sleeping will be the last of your problems.”

The second visit was expected at this juncture. It was Mama. “Darling, heaven above number one, what’s in the box?”

I turned, feigned sleep. “It’s just a *funny*. Love you, Mama.”

The third ghost came in the middle of the night. Two-thirty a.m., I remember completely. Tiny, little soft hands touching at my ears until I was awake. She snuggled close and rubbed my hair the way I always did it to her. “Brother...”

I pretended to sleep.

“Brother... H”

“Sleep sis, you don’t want Santa thinking you’re awake.”

She snuggled in.

The next morning, as always, Rex was the first to awake. He trumpeted and bellowed about the house waking everyone.

I awoke to her small hands framing my face. Deep, searching eyes bore into mine. “What’s in the box, ‘H’?”

“I dunno. Let’s go see.” The writhing pains of mirth were battling to cramp me.

She always wore what I thought of as a white potato-sack to bed. She’d gotten taller, of course, but the sack still hugged her ankles.

We gathered in the den. The tree was ablaze and below it presents I’d not seen the night before.

Daddy was old-school and was hearty in his vigilance to act immune to Christmas morning. Yet, today he seemed giddy, more awake on purpose than normal. He held a video camera aloft. Mama was poised for pictures whether they be canned or impromptu.

Everyone was focused on the darling angel as she sashayed forth in the mock potato sack.

At this time of my life, I didn’t know what ‘busting a gut’ was. But that’s just what was happening.

I slid under the tree and pushed the white, shiny box with the gigantic big ribbon out towards the center of the living room.

She caught it on the slide and sat down with legs splayed on either side of the box.

Daddy mean-ass filmed, Mama took pictures.

I said, “Tear into it, Bep. Merry Christmas.”

Don’t get me wrong. Bethy was low-maintenance, but she understood high-drama.

A slow tug of the ribbon. An aggravated countenance towards me when she hit the knot.

Then she went full on three year old. She tore into that box with the enthusiasm of a bent badger.

Mama took pictures. “What is it ‘honey’?”

Daddy rolled tape. “Show us, Beb. What is it?”

Even Rex looked sleepily across and flicked a booger in my direction. “Say it, sis.”

She toppled the lid to the box and slid her arm in. She grabbed at the contents, holding it aloft. It dangled at the ends of her small fingers.

She looked at me with laser eyes. “Hartley? I can’t belieeeeve you gave me a hush-puppy for Christmas?”

In our part of the world, a “hush-puppy” is a savory food made from cornmeal batter, deep fried rolled into a ball or other shapes—something good to eat.

The family exploded with glee. No pictures actually exist of the moment and, of course, the video was shaky beyond use.

Hush-puppy? Screw that, I'd given her a fake piece of shit. I huffed a laugh. I grabbed her little finger on the hand holding the faux-poop. "It's not a hush-puppy, Bep. It's crap. It's poo-poo."

She was three-years-old, a baby. "Not a hush-puppy?"

In frustration, which my family loved, I shook my head.

The little angel. The three-year-old, spoiled rotten brat—winked.

The End

Before You Go...

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