

# Jamesy

## A Christmas Story

by James Whitcomb Riley

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(From Yesterday's Daily.)

a cart load of 'em for 75 cents. I'll take yer measure fer one like it fer 15, too quick!" and the little fellow leaned back from his work and laughed up in my face with absolute derision.

I pulled my hat more closely down for fear of recognition, but was reassured a moment later as he went on:

"Wish't you lived here; you'd be old fruit fer us fellows. I can see you now a-takin' wind—and we'd give it to you mighty slick now, don't you fer-git!" and as the boy "newed his work, I think his little, ragged body shook less with industry than mirth.

"Wish't I'd struck you 'bout ten o'clock this morning!" and, as he spoke, he paused again and looked up in my face with real regret. "Oh, you'd 'a' been the loveliest sucker of 'em all! W'y, you'd 'a' went the whole pot yerself!"

"How do you mean?" said I, dropping the cigar I held.

"How do I mean? Oh, you don't want to smoke this thing again after its a-rollin' round in the dirt!"

"Why, you don't smoke," said I, reaching for the cigar he held behind him.

"Me! Oh, what you givin' me?"

"Come, let me have it," I said, sharply, drawing a case from my pocket and taking out another cigar.

"Oh, you want a light," he said, handing me the stub and watching me



"WY, YOU DON'T SMOKE!"

wistfully. "Couldn't give us a fresh

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cigar, could you, cap?"

"I don't know," said I, as though deliberating on the matter. "What was that you were going to tell me just now? You started to tell me what a 'lovely sucker' I'd have been had you met me this morning. How did you mean?"

"Give me a cigar and I'll tell you. Oh, come, now, cap; give me a smoker and I'll give you the whole game. I will, now, honest!"

I held out the open case.

"Nothin' mean about you, is they?" he said, eagerly taking a fresh cigar in one hand and the stub in the other. "A ten-center, too—oh, I guess not!" But, to my surprise, he took the stub between his lips, and began opening his coat. "Guess I'll jist fat this daisy, and save 'er up for Christmas. No, I won't either," he broke in suddenly, with a bright, keen flash of second thought. "Tell you what I'll do," holding up the cigar and gazing at it admiringly; "she's a ten-center all right, ain't she?"

I nodded.

"And worth every cent of it, too, ain't she?"

"Every cent of it," I repeated.

"Then give me a nickel, and she's yours—'cause if you can afford to give this to me fer nothin', looks like I ort to let you have it fer half price," and as I laughingly dropped the nickel in his hand he concluded, "And they's nothin' mean about me, neither!"

"Now, go on with your story," said I. "How about this 'game' you were 'givin' this morning?"

"Well, I'll tell you, cap. Us fellers has got to lay fer ever' nickel, 'cause none of us is bondholders; and they's days and days together when we don't make enough to even starve on. What I mean is, we on'y make enough to pay for aggravatin' our appetites with jist about enough chuck to keep us starvin'-hungry. So, you see, when a feller ain't got nothin' else to do, and his appetite won't sleep in the same bunk with him, he's bound to git on to somepin' crooked and git up all sorts o' dodges to git along. Some gives 'em one thing, and some another, but you bet they got to be mighty slick now, 'cause people won't have 'orphans, and 'fits, and 'cripples, and 'drunk fathers, and 'mothers that eats morphine, and 'white-swellin', and 'consumption, and all that sort o' taffy! Got to git 'er down finer'n that! But I been a-gittin' in my work all the same, don't you fer-git! You won't ever blow, now?"

"How could I 'blow,' and what if I did? I don't live here," I replied.

"Well, you better never blow, anyhow; 'cause if ever us duffers would git on to it you'd be a spilled oyster!"



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"Go on," I said, with an assuring tone.

"The lay I'm on jist now," he continued, dropping his voice and looking cautiously around, "is a-hidin' my box and a-rushin' in, sudden-like, where they's crowd o' nob's a-talkin' politics er somepin', and a-jist startin' in, and 'fore they know what's a-comin' I'm a-flashin' up a nickel er a dime, and a-tellin' 'em if I only had enough more to make 50 cents I could buy a blackin' box, and wouldn't I love to ast no boot o' my grandmother! And two minutes chinkin' does it, don't you see, 'cause they don't know nothin' 'bout blackin' boxes; they're jist as soft as you air. They got 'an idy, maybe, that blackin' boxes come all the way from China, with cokeynut whiskers packed 'round 'em; and I make it sold by a-sayin' I'm on'y goin' to git a second-hand box—see? But that ain't the p'int—it's the Mr. Nickel I already got. Oh! it'll paralyze 'em ever' time! Sometimes fellers'll make up, 75 cents er a dollar, and tell me to 'git a new box, and go into the business right.' That's a thing that always rattles me. Now, if they'd on'y growl a little and look like they was jist a-puttin' up 'cause the first one was did, I can stand it; but when they do to pattin' me on the head, and a-tellin' me 'that's right,' and 'not to be afear'd o' work,' and I'll 'come out all right,' and a-tellin' me to 'git a good substantial box while I'm a-gittin', and a-poinyin' up handsome, there's where I weaken—I do, honest!" And never so plainly as at that moment did I see within his face and in his eyes the light of true nobility.

"You see," he went on, in a tone of voice half courage, half apology, "I got a family on my hands, and I jist got to git along somehow! I could git along on the square deal as long as mother was alive—'cause she'd work—but ever since she died—and that was winter 'fore last—I've kind o' had to double on the old thing all sorts o' ways. But Sis don't know it. Sis, she thinks I'm the squarest muldoon in the business," and even side by side with the homely utterance a great sigh faltered from his lips.

"And who is Sis?" I inquired with new interest.

"Sis?" he repeated, knocking my foot from the box, and leaning back, still in the old position, his hat now lying on the ground beside him, and his frowzy hair tossed backward from the full, broad brow—"Who's Sis?" he repeated with an upward smile that almost dazzled me—"W'y, Sis is—w'y, Sis is the boss girl—and don't you fer-git it!"

No need had he to tell me more than this. I knew who "Sis" was by the light of pride in the uplifted eyes; I knew who "Sis" was by the exultation in the broken voice, and the half-defiant tossing of the frowzy head; I knew who "Sis" was by the little, naked hands thrown upward openly; I knew who "Sis" was by the tear that dared to trickle through the dirt upon her ragged brother's face. And don't you forget it!

O that boy down there upon his knees!—there in the cinders and the dirt—so far, far down beneath us that we trample on his breast and grind our heels into his very heart; O that boy there, with his lifted eyes, and God's own glory shining in his face, has taught me, with an eloquence beyond the trick of mellow-sounding words and metaphor, that love may find a purer home beneath the rage of poverty and vice than in all the great warm heart of Charity.

I hardly knew what impulse prompted me, but as the boy rose to his feet and held his hand out for the compensation for his work, I caught the little dingy palm close, close within my own, and wrung it as I would have wrung the hand of some great conqueror.

The little fellow stared at me in wonderment, and although his lips were silent, I cannot but believe that had they parted with the utterance within his heart my feelings had received no higher recognition than the old contemptuous phrase, "Oh, what you givin' me?"

"And so you've got a family on your hands?" I inquired, recovering an air of simple curiosity, and toying in my pocket with some bits of change. "How much of a family?"

"On'y three of us now."

"Only three of you, eh? Yourself, and Sis, and—"

"The old man," said the boy, uneasily; and after a pause, in which he seemed to swallow an utterance more bitter, he added, "And he ain't no good on 'earth!"

"Can't work?" I queried.

"Won't work," said the boy, bitterly. "He won't work—he won't do nothin'—on'y budge! And I haf to steer him in 'ever' night, 'cause the cops won't pull him any more—they won't let him in the station house more'n they'd let him in a parlor, 'cause he's a plum' goner now, and liable to croak any minute."

"Liable to what?" said I.

"Liable to jist keel over—wink out, you know—'cause he has fits—kind o' jimjama, I guess. Had a fearful old mattress with him last night! You see he comes all sorts o' games on me, and I haf to put up fer him—'cause he's got to have whisky, and if we can on'y keep him about so full he's a regular lamb; but he don't stand no monkey-in' when he wants whisky, now you bet! Sis can handle him better'n me, but she's been a-lostin' her grip on him lately—you see Sis ain't stout any more, and been kind o' sick-like so long she humors him, you know, more'n she ort. And he couldn't git on his pins all last yisterday morning, and Sis, sent fer me, and I took him down a pint, and that set him a-runnin' so that when I left he made Sis give up a

quarter he saw me slip her; and it jist happened I run into him that evening and got him in, or he'd a frose to death. I guess he must 'a' kind o' had 'em last night, 'cause he was the widest man you ever see—saw grasshoppers with paper collars on, and old sows with feather-duster tails—the durndest program you ever heard of! And he got so bad on't he was a-goin' to belt Sis, and did try it; and—and I had to chug him one or he'd 'a' done it. And then he cried, and Sis cried, and I cri—, I—Dern him! you can bet yer life I didn't cry!" And as the boy spoke, the lips quivered into stern compression, the little hands gripped closer at his side, but for all that the flashing eyes grew blurred and the lids dropped downward.

"That's a boss shine on them shoes," I was mechanically telling over in my hand the three small coins I had drawn from my pocket.

"That is a nice job!" said I, gazing with an unusual show of admiration at the work; and I thought, "that I, had two dimes and a nickel there, and was thinking that, as these were Christmas times, I'd jist give you a quarter for your work."

"Honest, Cap?"

"Honest," I repeated, "but the fact is the two dimes, as I thought they were, are on'y two or three-cent pieces, so I have on'y seven cents in change, after all."

"Spect they'd change a bill fer you 'cross there at the lunch counter," he suggested, with charming artlessness.

"Won't have time—there's my train jist couplin'. But take this—I'll see you again some time, perhaps."

"How big a bill is it you want changed?" asked the little fellow, with a most acquiescent expression, and a swift glance at our then lonely surroundings.

"I only have one bill with me," said I, nervously, "and that's a five."

"Well, here, then," said the boy, hurriedly, with another and more scrutinizing glance about him—"guess I can 'commodate you." And as I turned in wonder, he drew from some mysterious recess in the lining of his coat a roll of bills, from which he hastily detached four in number, then returned the roll; and before I had recovered from my surprise, he had whisked the note from my fingers and left in my hand instead the proper change.

"This is on the dead, now, Cap. Don't you ever cheep about me havin' wealth, you know; 'cause it ain't mine—that is, it is mine, but I'm a—There goes yer train. Ta-ta!"

"The day before Christmas," said I, snatching his hand, and speaking hurriedly—"the day before Christmas, I'm coming back, and if you'll be here when the five-thirty train rolls in you'll find a man that wants his boots blacked—maybe to get married in, or 'something—anyway he'll want a shine like this, and he'll come prepared to pay the highest market price—do you understand?"

"You jist tell that feller fer me," said the boy, eclipsing the twinkle of one eye, and dropping his voice to an inflection of strictest confidence—"you jist tell that feller fer me that I'm his oyster!"

"And you'll meet him, sure?" said I.

"I will," said the boy. And he kept his word.

My ride home was an incoherent fluttering of the wings of time, in which travail one fretful hour was born, to gasp its first few minutes boldly; then moan, roll over and kick out its legs and sprawl about; then crawl a little—stagger to its feet and totter on; then tumble down a time or two and knock its empty head against the floor and howl; then loom up awkwardly on gangling legs, too much in



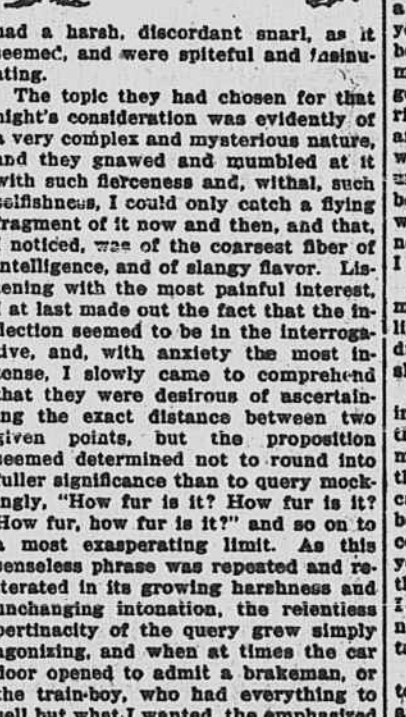
"DERN HIM!"

their own way to comprehend that they were in the way of everybody else; then limp a little as it worried on—drop down exhausted—moan again—toss up its hands—shriek out, and die in violent convulsions.

We have all had that experience of the car-wheels—and then enter into conversation with us as we gaily con-

barke' upon some pleasant trip, perhaps; had them rattle off in scraps of song, or lightly twit us with some dear one's name, or even go so far as to laugh at us and mock us for some real or fancied dereliction of car etiquette. I shall ever have good reason to remember how once upon a time a boy of fourteen, though greatly under-sized, told the conductor he was only ten, and, although the unsuspecting official accepted the statement as a truth, with the proper reduction in the fare, the car-wheels called that boy a "liar" for 20 miles—and 20 miles as long and tedious as he has ever compassed in his journey through this vale of tears.

The car-wheels on this bitter winter evening were not at all communicative. They were sullen and morose. They didn't feel like singing, and they wouldn't laugh. They had no jokes, and if there was one peculiar quality of tone they possessed in any marked degree it was that of sneering. They



"WOULD YOU TAKE THESE PRESENTS?"

had a harsh, discordant snarl, as it seemed, and were spiteful and insinuating.

The topic they had chosen for that night's consideration was evidently of a very complex and mysterious nature, and they gnawed and mumbled at it with such fierceness and, withal, such selfishness, I could only catch a flying fragment of it now and then, and that, I noticed, was of the coarsest fiber of intelligence, and of slangy flavor. Listening with the most painful interest, I at last made out the fact that the inflection seemed to be in the interrogative, and, with anxiety the most intense, I slowly came to comprehend that they were desirous of ascertaining the exact distance between two given points, but the proposition seemed determined not to round into fuller significance than to query mockingly, "How fur is it? How fur is it? How fur, how fur is it?" and so on to a most exasperating limit. As this senseless phrase was repeated and reiterated in its growing harshness and unchanging intonation, the relentless pertinacity of the query grew simply agonizing, and when at times the car door opened to admit a brakeman, or the train-boy, who had everything to sell but what I wanted, the emphasized refrain would lift me from my seat and drag me up and down the aisle. When the phrase did eventually writhe round into form and shape more tangible, my relief was such that I sat down, and in my fancy framed a grim, unlovely tune that suited it, and hummed with it, in an undertone of dismal satisfaction:

How fur—how fur  
Is it from here—  
From here to Happiness?

When I returned, that same refrain rode back into the city with me. All the gay metropolis was robbing for the banquet and the ball. All the windows of the crowded thoroughfares were kindling into splendor. Along the streets rode lordly carriages, so weighted down with costly silks, and furs, and twinkling gems, and unknown treasures in unnumbered packages, that one lone ounce of needed charity would have snapped their axles, and a feather's weight of pure benevolence would have splintered every spoke.

And the old refrain rode with me through it all—as stoical, relentless and unchangeable as fate—and in the same depraved and slangy tone in which it seemed to find an especial pride, it sang, and sang again:

How fur—how fur  
Is it from here—  
From here to Happiness?

The train, that for five minutes had been lessening in speed, toiled painfully along, and as I arose impatiently and reached behind me for my overcoat, a cheery voice cried, "Hello, Cap! Want a lift? I'll he'p you with that benjamins;" and as I looked around I saw the grimy features of my little hero of the brush and box.

"Hello!" said I, as much delighted as surprised. "Where did you drop from?"

"Oh, I collared this old bearnie a mile or so back yonder," said the little fellow, gayly, standing on the seat behind me and holding up the coat. "Been a-doin' circus-business on the

steps out there fer half an hour. You bet I had my eye on you, all the same, though!"

"You had, eh?" I exclaimed, gladly, although I instinctively surmised his highest interest in me was centered in my pocketbook. "You had, eh?" I repeated with more earnestness. "Well, I'm glad of that, Charlie—or, what is your name?"

"Bquatty," said the boy. Then noticing the look of surprise upon my face, he added soberly: "That ain't my sure-enough name, you know; that's what the boys calls me. 'Sis calls me Jamesy."

"Well, Jamesy," I continued, buttoning my collar and drawing on my gloves, "I'm mighty glad to see you, and if you don't believe it, jist go down in that right-hand overcoat-pocket and you'll find out."

The little fellow neded no second invitation, and as he drew forth a closely folded package the look of curiosity upon his face deepened to one of blank bewilderment.

He made no motion to untie the little package, and gradually the expression in his eyes changed to one of suspicion and his lips closed tightly together.

"Open it," said I, smiling at the puzzled little face; "open it—it's for you."

"Oh, here, cap," said the boy, dropping the package on the seat, and holding up a rigid finger, "you're a-givin' me this, ain't you?"

"I'm giving you the package, certainly," said I, somewhat bewildered. "Open it—it's a Christmas present for you—open it!"

"What's your idy o' layin' fer me?" asked the boy, with a troubled and uneasy air. "I've been a-givin' you square business right along, ain't I?"

"W'y, Jamesy," said I, as I vaguely comprehended the real drift of his thought, "the package is for you, and if you won't open it, I will," and as I spoke I began unfolding it. "Here," said I, "is a pair of gloves a little girl about your size told me to give to you, because I was telling her about you, over where I live, and it's a clear case," and I laughed lightly to myself as I noticed a slow flash creeping to his face. "And here," said I, "is a bang-up pair of good old-fashioned socks, and, if they'll fit you, there's an old woman that wears specs and a mole on her nose, told me to tell you, for her, that she knit them for your Christmas present, and if you don't wear them she'll never forgive you. And here," I continued, "is a cap, as fuzzy as a woolly-worm, and as warm as a cap, I reckon, as you ever stood on your head in; it's a cheap cap, but I bought it with my own money, and money that I worked mighty hard to get, because I ain't rich; now, if I was rich, I'd buy you a plug; but I've got an idea that this little, old, woolly cap, with earbobs to it, and a snapper to go under your chin, don't you see, won't be a-bad cap to knock around in, such weather as this. What do you say, now? Try her on once, and as I spoke I turned to place it on his head.

"Omb-ook!" he negatively murmured, putting out his hand, his closed lips quivering—the little frowzy head drooping forward, and the ragged shoes shuffling on the floor.

"Come," said I, my own voice growing curiously changed; "won't you take these presents? They are yours; you must accept them, Jamesy, not because they're worth so very much, or because they're very fine," I continued, bending down and folding up the parcel, "but because you know, I want you to, and—ard—you must take them; you must!" and as I concluded, I thrust the tightly folded parcel beneath his arm, and pressed the little tattered elbow firmly over it.

"There you are," said I. "Freeze on to it, and we'll skip off here at the avenue. Cox-a-vo."

I hardly dared to look behind me till I found myself upon the street, but as I threw an eager glance over my shoulder I saw the little fellow following, not bounding joyfully, but with a solemn step, the little parcel hugged closely to his side, and his eyes bent soberly upon the frozen ground.

"And how's Sis by this time?" I asked cheerily, flinging the question backward, and walking on more briskly.

"'Bout the same," said the boy, brightening a little, and skipping into a livelier pace.

"'Bout the same, eh? and how's that?" I asked.

"Oh, she can't git around much like she used to, you know; but she's a-gittin' better all the time. She got up yisterday, and all day yisterday," and as the boy spoke the eyes lifted with the old flash, and the little frowzy head tossed with the old defiance.

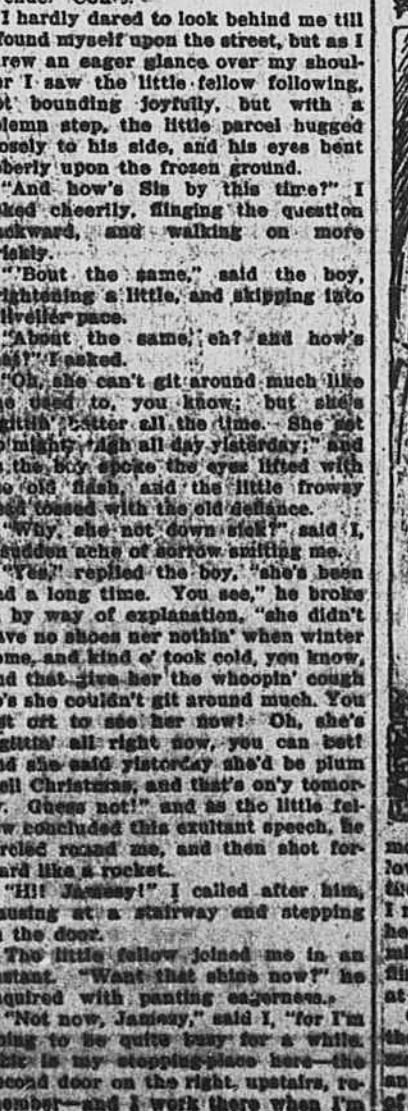
"Why, she not down still?" said I, a sudden ache of sorrow stifling me.

"Yes," replied the boy, "she's been had a long time. You see, he broke in by way of explanation, "she didn't have no shoes her nothin' when winter come, and kind o' took cold, you know, and that—her the whoopin' cough so's she couldn't git around much. You jist git to see her now! Oh, she's a-gittin' all right now, you can bet and she said yisterday she'd be plum well Christmas, and that's on'y tomorrow. Guess not!" and as the little fellow concluded this exultant speech, he circled round me, and then shot forward like a rocket.

"Hi! Jamesy!" I called after him, pausing at a stairway and stepping in the door.

The little fellow joined me in an instant. "Want that shine now?" he inquired with panting eagerness.

"Not now, Jamesy," said I, "for I'm going to be quite busy for a while. This is my stopping-place here—the second door on the right upstairs, room number—and I work there when I'm



"THE BOY MOTORED LIZ TO HOME AND LIZ"

in the city, and I sometimes sleep there, when I work late. And now I want to ask a very special favor of you," I continued, taking a little sealed packet from my pocket: "here's a little box that you're to take to Sis, with my compliments—the compliments of the season, you understand—and tell her I sent it, with particular directions that she shouldn't break it open till Christmas morning—not till Christmas morning, understand! Then you tell her that I would like very much to come and see her, and if she says all right—and you must give me a good 'send-off,' and she'll say all right if 'Jamesy' says all right—then come back here, say two hours from now, or three hours, or tonight, anyway, and we'll go down and see Sis together—what do you say?"

"The boy nodded dubiously. "Honest—must I do all that, sure enough?"

"Will you?" said I; "that's what I want to know;" and I pushed back the dusky little face and looked into the bewildered eyes.

"Solid?" he queried, haltingly.

"Solid," I repeated, handing him the box. "Will you come?"

"W'y, 'course I will, on'y I was jist a-thinkin'—"

"Just thinking what?" said I, as the little fellow paused abruptly and shook the box suspiciously at his ear. "Just thinking what?" I repeated; "for I must go now; good-by.—Just thinking what?"

"Oh, nothin'," said the boy, backing off and staring at me in a phase of wonder akin to awe—"Nothin', on'y I was jist a-thinkin' that you was a little the curiousest rooster I ever see."

Three hours later, as I sat alone, he came in upon me timidly to say he had not been home yet, having "run across the old man jist a-bilin", and had to git him corralled 'fore he dropped down some'er in the snow; but I'm a-gittin' long bully with him now," he added with a deep sigh of relief, "'cause he's so full he'll haf to let go purty soon. Say you'll be here?"

I nodded silently, and he was gone. The merry peals of laughter rang up from the streets like mockery. The jingling of bells, the clatter and confusion of the swarming thoroughfares, flung up to me not one glad murmur of delight; the faint and far-off blare of a dreamy waltz, blown breeze-like over the drowsy ear of night, had sounded sweeter to me had I stood amidst the band, with every bellowing horn about my ears, and the drums and clashing cymbals howling mad.

I couldn't rest; I couldn't read. I couldn't rest; I could only pace about. I heard the clock strike ten, and strike it hard; I heard it strike eleven, viciously; and twelve it held out at arm's length, and struck it full between the eyes, and let it drop—stone dead. O I saw the blood ooze from its ears, and saw the white foam freeze upon its lips! I was alone—alone!

It was three o'clock before the boy returned.

"Been a long while," he began, "but I had a fearful time with the old man, and he went on so when I did git him in I was 'most afear'd to leave him; but he kind o' went to sleep at last, and Molly she come over to see how Sis was a-gittin'; and Sis said she'd like to see you if you'd come now, you know, while they ain't no racket goin' on."

"Come, then," said I, buttoning my coat closely at the throat, "I am ready;" and a moment later we had stepped into the frosty night. We



"THE BOY MOTORED LIZ TO HOME AND LIZ"