

# The Gab Gift

A short story by Bill Heitland

KNOW WHAT I'D LIKE FOR Christmas—a gab gift.

Oh, if I had one of those, my sentences would be crisp and clear, and I'd shine like never before.

I'd talk about how much I like the lights—the way they blink off and on, the way bright colors come out of the boxes this time of year. First comes red and then green; yellow is next and then  
5 blue. All in a row. They get this special shine power when a black rope goes into the wall and makes them glow. Just like that. Prest-O Change-O!

I'd explain how I like the way the little lights shine on the balls that stick out from the branches of the dark green tree—the same tree that sheds like the dog and drinks lots of water and is topped with a star.

10 I'd grab a microphone and tell the world why I like the silver streamers. I like the way they hang on the branches and look like icicles, but they're not because they don't make puddles. If they made puddles, Mom would send for a mop and be mad nobody told her about it.

I'd talk about my favorite—the baby Jesus scene. It's the one I'm in charge of. That's because, one year, nobody could find it, but I remembered where it was. I was so excited I tried to say  
15 where it was, but it came out all mixed up and sounded like *aaaacckkk*. But my sister Erin can read my mind, and she told everybody what I was trying to say. It was in the attic.

With the gab gift, I wouldn't have to go *aaacckkk* all the time. I could lean back and talk as smoothly as everyone else. And nobody would make a funny face or play twenty questions to figure out what I was trying to say.

20 Erin made sure I got credit for showing her the way to the baby Jesus scene. Then everybody gave up a hoot and holler when they found it. They talked about how special the baby Jesus scene is and how Christmas wouldn't have been the same without it. And the room was bright as Christmas lights. And all the faces glowed.

The smell from this tree reminds me of the songs sung by people who drink the silly juice. They  
25 always get louder when they've had too much of the stuff. But never as loud as when I tried to sing once. That didn't work out so well. I wish I could sing without making folks think a police car or ambulance was on the way. But I can't, so I don't.

When folks have too much of the silly juice, they sometimes yell at each other when someone mentions a few names I remember from the TV news. I think they're talking about a candy date.  
30 Not everyone likes the same candy date, so they argue and make ugly faces at each other and say they want to go home but for some reason don't. Instead, they just drink more silly juice. But by now, it should probably be called mad juice.

The voices screech and roar like a bunch of mad animals running up against the walls at the zoo. Then there is a parting of the room, just like in that movie with Moses. But no one is calling  
35 this parting a miracle.

Somehow the party that is making them roar is not the same as what we're having tonight. If they hate the candy date so much, why don't they find one they like? One that's sweet, not sour. Like candy in a bowl. To the people in this room, all the lights, the tree and ornaments, they just

40 exist. I guess some think that's what I do. Just blink off and on from time to time and wear my silly Santa hat. I didn't really pick it out. It was just placed on my head. It was placed there with a wink and a grin, so I know it's all just good fun.

Some people don't spend the time to get to know me. All they see is my right arm stuck out and my mouth frozen so I can't really give the kind of smile I see from others. I can't control any of that. I just do what I can.

45 If I had the gab gift, I would talk about how I learned a lot of what I know from Cliffy, the dog with the kindest eyes and fluffiest fur. When I run my good hand through all that fluff, he moves closer to me and tells me in his special way to give him more of that. I guess it's special for both of us because I like it as much as he seems to.

50 His fur is as soft as the high grass when the warm weather tames it. I like to lie in the grass at night and stare at the wonderful glitter in the sky. The glitter doesn't make a face or turn away from me. It just looks at me like I'm normal. So I stare a little longer than some folks.

When I do that, Cliffy jumps up and down and tells me he needs more petting. He doesn't want to be left out. Nobody wants that.

55 I don't know what kind of dog he is. Doesn't really matter. What matters is that he gets me, crazy crooked smile and all. He understood me from day one.

My brother Danny gets me too. His real name is Daniel, but he lets me call him Danny. I like the way it sounds when it comes out of his mouth. All smooth and clear. Not like the marbles I can't get out of my mouth.

60 As much as I like Cliffy, I'd say that Danny is a lot smarter. He knew why the kids in the neighborhood wanted to laugh and poke fun at me. When they saw his big bad stare, meaner than theirs, they quit right away. And that day sticks out because Danny grabbed me by the shoulders, serious like, and told me, if anything, I should be laughing at them. I shook my head and bunched my lips, my signal for not knowing.

"Not funny," I try to say. "Why laugh when not funny?"

65 When Danny doesn't understand what I'm trying to say, he knows to read my eyes. Erin reads my mind, and Danny reads my eyes. He understood right away what I meant.

Danny closed his eyes and then said, "No, you're right, Benny. None of it is funny. It's downright trashy and beneath you. It doesn't rise to your high standards of honesty and pureness. That's why you're the prince, and they're the paupers. Never forget that."

70 I gave another head shake and lip bunch.

Danny just smiled and said, "Trust me, buddy. It's true."

When Danny says something, people pay attention. Some big school paid attention enough to say he could learn for no money. I guess that makes him an important person. What could I do to be an important person?

75 I bet the gab gift would be a start. It would help me be more like Danny, maybe learn for no money, like him.

I spent a few days with the older folks last week. They read to me part of the time and then told me I should read to them. I like that. Giving me credit for having a brain. Believing even I have a voice that isn't just for laughs.

80 When we read together, it's like lights going off and on in my head. Sometimes there's so much light and heat I must slow down. If I don't, a light will pop, like one did on the dark green tree one year. I'll never forget the smell that came after the light exploded. Like burnt toast. Yuck.

It just broke in front of us. Never giving us any warning. Puff. Smoke. A hush. Oh, get a new one.

85 Like Cliffy, the older ones, and the ones who brought me here— Mom and Dad—don't look down or away when I'm trying to form my words. They know to give me time, like waiting for the blue flames on the stove to make the food ready for supper.

But the outside world is different. It's sometimes as cold as the worst day in winter. There are people Danny calls wolves in sheep's clothing. When I try to say it, it comes out woofs in cheeps closings. If I had the gab gift, I'd say it without marbles in my mouth.

90 The wolves pretend to be nice and then look for ways to hurt a guy like me. I don't understand why; Danny says it's just how some people are.

At home there's no sadness, no dark circles around the eyes or bunched up skin around the mouth. No let's get this done so we can put me to bed kind of attitude. No sticking me in a corner so I can be invisible. Whether we're outside the house or in, they put me front and center with the rest of the family. I like that.

They seem to understand what Cliffy gets. We all have this thing in our chest that makes a thump, thump, thump when we get excited or scared. It's the thing that teams up with the thing in the head that helps us dream smiles at night. Some folks must dream clear dreams. Mine are all bunched up and going here and there and everywhere—like Christmas lights when they come out of the box. I wish Danny could see my dreams and tell me what they mean.

Better still, I wish I could use the gab gift to tell him what they look and feel like.

100 I can see that, like branches on the tree, the group I belong to is made up of connections we call family. Some branches are weaker than others. I guess I'm one of the weaker ones. Nobody tells me this. I just know it. The man sitting on the couch at this party, the one with the big middle, has eyes darting back and forth. He is what I would call a shifty branch. He doesn't seem to want to be here. He must be waiting for someone to make him laugh or make the thing in his chest move faster.

110 While he's waiting, he's downing plenty of the silly juice. Some of it is dribbling on his chin. Nobody rushes to clean it off like they would if they saw it fall off mine. If part of his sandwich falls to the ground, no one says anything. But no one cuts his meal up for him the way they do for me.

115 If I could walk and talk as smoothly as Danny, I'd go up to Shifty Eyes and tell him to love the people who are nice to him. Without the nice people, you get scared and lonely. Cliffy taught me that. I know Shifty Eyes sees me, but he's pretending that I'm not here. That's OK. I would rather see what Danny's up to at the bottom of the stairs. He's with his new girlfriend. I thought he told me they both want to be doctors. I asked him what doctors do, and he said they fix what's wrong with people. I asked him if he could fix what's wrong with me. I didn't tell him about my wish for a gab gift.

He said, "Fix what? You're already good as new. Pure as the driven snow."

120 I like the way his girlfriend leans into him when he whispers something to her. I asked dad if he could teach me how to get a girl to do that for me. He said that would be easy because he was sure I'd grow up to be a ladies' man. I liked the sound of that. A lady who leans into me, just like Danny's girlfriend, and tells everybody I'm her main man. Sounds important.

When all the presents were handed out, and I saw that there would be no gab gift for me this year, I felt sad. My head dropped, and I wanted to cry. But I held back because big boys don't cry.

125 Erin must have noticed because she lifted my chin with her thin fingers with red paint on them and hugged me.

Then she said, "Every year, I get something nice for Christmas. But nothing will ever be as great as you, Benny. You're the best. You always will be."

130 Then everyone else said some nice words, and I felt silly for being so sad. I did my best to hide the water in my eyes. I even managed a smile that felt as big as my heart going thump, thump, thump. How lucky can a guy get?