

The Real Heroes of World War II by *****

Hudson danced in the early April puddles as the store leaned into view. The cold water seeped into his holey oxfords, and his socks were wet from the rain.

“I’m going to get a really nice present from Doug from my birthday,” Hudson sang. His birthday was only a week away.

“Very nice, dear,” his mother replied, not paying any attention as she struggled to open the big black umbrella she was carrying. It had begun to rain again.

“He’s going to get me something really great,” Hudson said, “Maybe even a bike!” The little boy’s eyes widened. Bikes were not around nearly as much as they had been a couple of years ago, because of the war. Citizens were turning them in to the government to create war weapons. Just imagine, bullets and guns created out of leisure toys!

“Very nice, dear,” Hudson’s mother repeated, and suddenly held up the open umbrella. “Aha!” she exclaimed, “the blasted thing keeps getting stuck.” She held the umbrella up and pulled Hudson close. Together they walked along the rest of the sidewalk and ducked into the department store.

Hudson always loved to go to the store. The candy counter was right by the door, and it always reminded him of all the times his father had bought him a Butterfinger here. Hudson’s dad always joked with the cashiers as if he had known them for years. But Hudson had no dad with him now, and every day he woke up scared that his dad would not be here at all. It was a terrifying feeling. But the store always cheered him up, even when he was in the lowest of moods. Hudson’s mother drifted over to the ladies section to purchase a skirt for her upcoming

job interview, and Hudson flew over to the display window, his eyes locked on the target: a fire-engine red pair of rain boots. Hudson's mouth dropped open as he pressed his nose against the cool glass. He had been looking for a pair of boots like that ever since he had heard an ad on the radio for a pair of colored boots. He had even imagined them red.

"Mother!" Hudson shouted across the aisle as his mother glanced up from the skirt she was rubbing between her fingers. She held up the price tag and sighed, hanging the skirt back onto the cold rack beside her. "Mother, you'll never believe what I just found in the window!" Hudson said as he bolted across the aisle. He grabbed the tail of her coat in his pudgy hand and tugged her over to the window. Hudson gestured to the glass and puffed out his chest. "Boots!" he exclaimed, "And you said it was just another ad when I heard it on the radio."

Hudson's mother sighed and looked at Hudson with sad eyes. "I'm sorry Hudson, but money's a little tight right now. Did you see the price?"

Hudson glanced behind him into the display case and spotted a small blue price sticker that read: \$5.00 for limited time only! Along the border of the circle. That price tag was crushing his one wish.

"But you said that you were going to get a job and we would have some money for things like this!" Hudson whined.

"First of all, I haven't even gotten the job yet, Hudson. Second of all, they're still much more expensive than I would like to spend on a pair of boots like that. I'm sorry." She seemed to droop. Her husband going off to fight in World War II was an unexpected decision that not even she, the one person closest to him, could predict. It was hard on her, and you could see it in her tired eyes and slumped shoulders. "How about I get you a roll of lifesavers. You'd like that,

wouldn't you?" Hudson's mother was pleading for him to accept.

"Alright," Hudson perked up. The 5 cent candy was delicious, and Hudson barely ever got to have treats like this, not since his dad had left. His mother handed him a nickel, and Hudson skipped to the candy counter to get his Lifesavers. His mother continued to search for an appropriate skirt for her interview.

Hudson approached the counter, where a lady around 60 was tagging clothing for the children's department. The name tag pinned to her light blue dress read *Kathleen*. She lowered the dress she was tagging and turned her attention to the little boy.

"And what would you like today, young man?" she asked in a sweet voice.

"Can I have a package of lifesavers, please?" Hudson asked the lady. She gave Hudson a smile as he clunked the nickel onto the wooden counter. Kathleen tugged a tube of lifesavers from the candy rack and pressed them into Hudson's palm. He immediately ripped the roll open and began shoving the candy into his mouth at an alarming rate.

"I wanted a pair of boots," he managed to squeak through the fruity candy, "but my momma said they cost too much. You know, with the war?"

The lady gave Hudson a sad smile, as if she had heard the same thing before. "You're right, they are expensive boots. I'll talk to my boss about lowering the price."

"Thanks!" Hudson grinned, and ran as fast as his little legs would carry him to the large door, where his mother was walking out with a new skirt. Kathleen followed Hudson and his mother with her eyes until the pair disappeared around the corner.

"Reminds me of little Eddie at that age," Kathleen mumbled, and continued tagging clothes until it was nearly six o'clock. She went home to cook dinner for only one person.

“Happy birthday to you!” The chorus of Hudson’s friends singing the last verse of the song rung in his ears as he blew out the eight stubby candles on his lopsided cake. Inside his head, the words *red boots* rung out as his wish, but out loud he shouted “Cake!” And promptly began to lick the ends of the candles. The other children joined in. Hudson’s mother came over his shoulder with a serving knife and pie slicer in hand, ready to murder the lump of sugary goodness. She began to slice the cake, sliding each one carefully onto a chipped, yellow plate. “So kids, should we open Hudson’s presents when the cake is finished?” She had a smile on her face.

“Yes!” The children screamed in delight. Not many birthday parties had been hosted lately with the beginning of the war, and it was a small sanctuary of happiness for a few hours. Hudson stuffed the cake into his mouth at a rapid pace, sugar overloading his system. Cake was also a rare treat nowadays, with sugar rationing. Hudson’s mother had used up all the stamps for the week to make the cake. She had finally sat down with a piece of cake on her lap, a faraway look pasted onto her face.

Eventually, all the children had devoured their cake, and they rushed to the parlor for the ceremonial opening of the presents. Hudson was the most excited of all, as it meant that his boots could be in one of the boxes being thrown into his lap. Cries of “Open mine first!” filled his ears. He began to rip open the remains of week-old comics and other previous newspaper sections. “A war helmet!” he exclaimed as he unwrapped a toy war helmet, nearly identical to his father’s. Hudson plopped it onto his head, a silly grin on his face.

The next thing he unwrapped was a small, lumpy sweater, no doubt made by one of the girls with much help from their mother. Hudson tucked it into his lap. It would undoubtedly get stuck in the

back of his drawer.

The next present made Hudson squeal with delight: a 50 cent piece. He wondered who had given it to him. *Probably Doug*, he thought, *he has enough money to give everyone at this party one*. Hudson slipped it into his pocket for safekeeping.

Hudson finished opening his presents. All contained nice things from each of his friends, but none were his beloved pair of red boots. They gathered around the sofa for a final photograph, and as the shutter clicked shut on the old brownie, Hudson's first chance to get a pair of boots snapped shut too.

As the days flew past from Christmas, then Valentine's Day, even Easter, Hudson worked hard to attempt at earning money for the boots. He collected tin cans and plastic bottles for collection, earning a whopping \$2.00, which was more than 50 bottles. He asked for money for his birthday, collecting a one dollar bill from his grandparents in New York. Even Doug admitted giving Hudson the 50 cent piece.

"I was at the store when I saw you goggling at them boots in the window," He had said, his teeth slapping against the sticky Fleer's gum he was munching on. The stench of mint wafted out of his mouth. "I wanted to just get you the boots, but I couldn't. My momma said they cost too much, too,"

Hudson had saved up \$3.50, but it just wasn't enough for the boots. He was starting to get desperate.

Hudson's birthday party was rolling around again, and he and his mother were heading to

the department store. Hudson had made a habit of buying a piece of candy whenever they went to the store, and he had gotten to know Kathleen fairly well, or as well as you can know a department store cashier. Kathleen told Hudson about Eddie, her son in the war.

“You look so much like him,” She told Hudson.

Besides telling Hudson about Eddie’s childhood, they talked about sports (mainly baseball), candy, magazines, even the quirky people Kathleen had met during her time working at the store. Kathleen felt like a long-lost grandmother to Hudson, and Hudson felt like a son to Kathleen. Every time Hudson came, he asked her about the boots, which had disappeared from the window. She said that her boss refused to lower the price, even for a long time employee like her.

“He’s obsessed with money,” she said, “Always has been.”

“Not even if someone would buy them?” Hudson had a hopeful tone in his voice.

“You’re smart, kid. I wish you were my boss instead of Mr. Davis. Nope, I begged with him. Wouldn’t budge.”

Hudson hung his head. He didn’t know if the boots had just been moved or if someone had bought them. He had grown very attached to them. All Hudson could do, though, was wait for the next time he and his mother went to the store to ask Kathleen, because his mother was leaving, and fast too.

“See you later!” He shouted above the commotion, but Kathleen was out of sight.

“Happy birthday, Hudson!” the voices of his friends chanted, and reminded him of how much they had all changed. Barbara had moved to Seattle. Jimmy was in a car accident. The

penny candy shop on the corner had closed, affecting everybody's ability to buy a Milky Way bar at a moment's notice for a friend. There were less of them this year at the party.

"Present time!" One of the children shouted, and they all crowded around Hudson on the sofa once again. The presents were a little nicer this year, because everybody was beginning to learn how to save, like their parents had to during the Depression and like their grandparents had to during the First World War. It was a new concept for all the children.

After Hudson had opened all the presents from his friends, his mother pulled a large box out from under the sofa. The wrapping looked expensive.

"It came by post, and I don't know who sent it because there wasn't a return address." She looked puzzled.

Hudson tore open the wrapping and lifted the lid of the box. Tucked inside, as bright as a fire engine, lay...

"My boots!" Hudson was overjoyed. As he went to tug them on, his foot was poked by a small piece of paper in the sole. He pulled it out. It read:

To Hudson, the little boy with a sweet tooth that took time out of each day to visit a little old lady. Thank you and happy birthday, Kathleen.

P.S. You feel like Eddie is alive again to me.

It was the best birthday ever.